Textile Production in Early Etruscan Italy: Working Towards a Better Understanding of the Craft in its Historic, Social, and Economic Contexts

Margarita Gleba
University of Copenhagen

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/etruscan_studies

Recommended Citation
Gleba, Margarita (2007) "Textile Production in Early Etruscan Italy: Working Towards a Better Understanding of the Craft in its Historic, Social, and Economic Contexts," Etruscan Studies: Vol. 10 , Article 1. Available at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/etruscan_studies/vol10/iss1/1

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Etruscan Studies by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.
Textile Production in Early Etruscan Italy: Working Towards a Better Understanding of the Craft in its Historic, Social, and Economic Contexts

by Margarita Gleba

The Villanovan and Orientalizing periods in early Etruria witnessed the development of large urban centers with social stratification and specialized production.¹ This process of urbanization was accompanied by significant technological transformations, recorded qualitatively and quantitatively by the excavated artifacts. Organization of production intensified significantly during these periods, as did exchange throughout and beyond the Etruscan sphere. The ways in which the social and economic conditions of a cultural unit adapt to new production methods offers an important opportunity for understanding the organization of an ancient society.

Publications dealing with economic and political transitions in early Etruscan Italy often mention the technological development as a fact, but the understanding of the underlying steps is incomplete.² Studies discussing specific technological processes are few and are usually based on a description of archeological evidence without consideration of the broader economic phenomena. A notable exception is work published by Nijboer concerning the crafts of pottery and metalworking, which uses excavated industrial structures and waste products as primary evidence.³ Discussions of textile production however have been practically absent from all studies of the technology and economy of settlements in ancient Italy. This is a significant gap considering that, throughout antiquity, textile manufacture was one of the most labor-intensive of occupations.⁴ As such, it was an industry of great cultural and economic importance and has to be factored into any balanced assessment of the ancient economy. By giving textiles the attention they deserve, I hope that the technological development of early Etruria will be considered in a more complete fashion.

Unlike many other specialized crafts that appeared in Italy during this period, textile manufacture was not a new craft and was practiced at all levels of society. The manner of its progression was that part of the production shifted from making subsistence products to the manufacture of non-essential or luxury goods and, eventually, to surplus production. As such, textiles present a special case in the production system of early Etruria.
To date, most studies of Etruscan textiles have focused on the investigation of artistic representations. The Bologna tintinnabulum and the Verucchio throne are of great value for our understanding of textile-making activities, especially the phases of the production process. The depictions of clothing in the painted tombs of Tarquinia and artistic representations in other media have been analyzed by Bonfante and give an idea of the appearance of Etruscan textiles. Apart from this material, however, we are left to rely solely on archaeological finds in attempting to learn about textile production in Villanovan and Etruscan Italy.

The reason for the absence of studies on Etruscan textiles is due in part to the extremely poor preservation of fabrics. In contrast to the products of other crafts, such as pottery production or metallurgy, textile materials and products rarely survive in the archaeological record of ancient Italy. The few textiles that remain come predominantly from burial contexts. Some of the most spectacular finds are known from Sasso di Furbara and Verucchio. The recent discovery of textiles in the Orientalizing cemetery at Casale Marittimo adds significantly to our knowledge about the textiles of early Etruria. Many of these textiles are of high technical and aesthetic quality, as attested by the variety in their fineness and design, as well as their polychromy. The majority of Etruscan textile fragments survives in the form of minute pseudomorphs and these often go unnoticed and unpublished. This lamentable situation partially accounts for the absence of any comprehensive work on Etruscan textiles, which, in turn, makes it difficult to study the craft in its cultural and economic context.

Apart from the actual fabrics, however, there is a much larger body of archaeological material that can be used to study their production although, for the most part, it has been ignored. These are the implements used for textile manufacture, such as loom weights, spindle whorls, needles, etc. A study of the quantity, distribution, and morphology of these and other textile implements can provide information about raw materials, techniques used to make them, and final products, as well as the location and scale of their manufacture.

Investigation of textile production in ancient societies through implements is a fairly recent development in archaeology, John-Peter Wild’s Textile Manufacture in the Northern Roman Provinces (Cambridge 1970) being the first extensive treatment of the subject. Recently, several important studies have been done for some prehistoric sites in Switzerland. In Italy, however, typologies of implements for individual sites have been based on shape and decoration, but their technical aspects have often been overlooked.

Ethnographic studies have been of great use in determining the function of certain tools. For example, the work of Hoffmann on the use of the warp-weighted looms in modern Scandinavia has been pivotal in understanding the ancient use of looms of the same construction. Experimental archaeology has also been helpful in reconstructing the function of certain instruments, such as the so-called spools (rocchetti), which were in fact, most likely utilized as weights during tablet weaving.

In Etruria, spinning and weaving implements appear in three types of archaeological contexts: funerary, votive, and settlement. Implements found in graves and votive deposits may inform us of the social implications of spinning and weaving activities. The primary, technological function of spinning and weaving tools, on the other hand, can be inferred only from the habitation sites.
The implements in question include, but are not limited to, the following: spindle whorls, loom weights, spools, and needles. The data necessary for statistical analyses of these tools at a given site include presence, distribution, and physical parameters, such as preservation, size, weight, use wear, and decoration.

One of the most important parameters for many implements is their weight, which can provide much information about the type and quality of raw fibres, yarn, and finished cloth. Unfortunately, weight values have been published only rarely for loom weights and virtually never for spindle whorls and spools. Even more important is stratigraphic information since, textile craft being conservative by nature, the most reliable way of dating the implements is through their association with other material. Because concentrations of implements reflect the areas of activity, artifact distribution maps are invaluable for a complete understanding of textile production at any given site. When found in situ, objects can provide specific information about the location and the size of tools, parts of which were made of perishable materials and thus do not survive in the archaeological record. For example, when a loom happened to be set up at the time it was destroyed, the loom weights are often found in distinctive rows, having fallen to the ground when the warp threads to which they were originally attached perished. The configuration of weights permits reconstruction of the exact orientation and width of the loom, which, in turn, can be used to speculate about the size of the textile being woven.

The physical parameters of tools also reflect the technical expertise of the spinner/weaver, which touches upon a cognitive aspect of the technology. The concept of chaîne opératoire or the logic of production process is prevalent in studies of stone tools and ceramics and should be applied to textile production. The manufacture of textiles requires both “conceptual, abstract knowledge” and “practical or procedural know-how”. Through an understanding of the techniques associated with the making of textiles, the tools can be related to human actions and present a means of looking at the underlying cognitive processes.

The woman’s role in early Etruscan society has been a focus of many recent studies, and her economic role as a spinner and a weaver has been definitively shown on the basis of burial evidence and representational material. Because of this association, textile production equipment may present a way of tracking movements of women, while the diffusion of different techniques in some cases may be explained as a consequence of intermarriage.

Some of the issues connected to craft production in general concern the specialization and the social position of craftspeople in ancient Italy. It is important to consider the case of textiles here since, as noted above, they entered the sphere of specialized production after a long existence as a part of the subsistence economy. The workshop mode of textile manufacture, as defined for pottery production by Peacock, seems to have come into existence in Italy by the end of 7th century BC. This is suggested by the appearance of an inordinate quantity of textile implements at certain sites, such as Poggio Civitate and Acquarossa. The existence of such specialist production sites also raises the issue of sedentary craft specialization. Here again, it is important to look at textile production as an activity specifically associated with women. In small-scale societies, gender is one of the pri-
mary variables of the overall labor process and thus, must have an important role in studies of craft technology.24

The evidence for textile industry in Etruria includes representations of this process, its ultimate products — actual surviving textiles — and implements used in their production. Implements associated with textile production constitute by far the most numerous and the most understudied material. Later literary evidence and data about raw materials that can be obtained from palaeoethnobotanic and archeozoological studies, are further sources of untapped information.25 Once each class of evidence has been examined in its own terms, a more integrated study of textile production in Etruria will become possible.

Margarita Gleba

The National Danish Research Foundation’s Centre for Textile Research

The SAXO Institute

University of Copenhagen

Njalsgade 102

2300 Copenhagen S

Denmark

mygleba@yahoo.com

NOTES

* This paper was completed in 2003 and presents a methodological summary of my dissertation “Textile Production in Pre-Roman Italy: Archaeological Evidence” (Oxbow, forthcoming 2007). I am grateful to Judith Swaddling of the British Museum for inviting me to participate in the Etruscans Now! conference and I thank the Institute of Classical Studies for a grant, which enabled me to travel to London for the event. My deepest gratitude goes to Jean MacIntosh Turfa, who has been supporting and encouraging me in this research and has read numerous versions of this paper. I also thank Linnaea Preissler for her help during the editing process.

2. See, for example, Bartoloni 1989, or Cornell 1995.
5. For the Bologna tintinnabulum see Morigi Govi 1971; Kossack 1999, 67-68. The Verucchio throne has been recently the topic of several studies, among which are Torelli 1997, and von Eles 2002.
8. Traces or actual textiles have been found in tombs 16, 17, 18, 31, 47, 54, 85, 89, 92, 96, 111, 113, 116, 118, 119, 122; see Gentili 2003. The site boasts the only surviving, practically
complete Etruscan garments, which currently are being studied and conserved. For the analysis of the textiles found in the Tomb 89 see Stauffer 2002, 192-220.

11. See, for example, Bocquet and Berretrot 1989; and Médard 2000.
18. For an analysis of the Osteria dell’Osa necropolis see Bietti Sestieri 1992; on representational evidence see Morigi Govi 1971; von Eles 2002.
25. Carbonized flax seeds and sheep bones constitute examples of such evidence.

B I B L I O G R A P H Y


