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CLOTHING IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

Garments are a civilisation fact in ancient Mesopotamia. Made of linen, then wool, it is highly dependent on the development of agriculture and animal husbandry, born and developed from the 9th millennium on. Textiles rarely survived in Mesopotamian soils. In their absence, specialists are concentrating their efforts on different sources: mineralised fabric on metal objects, textile imprints on clay, textile tools such as spindle whorls and loom weights, iconography, and cuneiform texts. All these sources are incomplete and do not necessarily overlap. Analysed all together, they make it possible to reconstruct the “chaîne opératoire” of textile production from fibre to cloth, and to understand regional varieties.

→ The raw material: vegetable and animal fibres

Flax is cultivated since the 9th millennium, and the very first imprints of woven textiles discovered in Jerf el Ahmar (Middle Euphrates) and Jarmo (Central Zagros) date back respectively to the 8th and 7th millennia.¹ Linen, widely used for garments in the 4th and early 3rd millennia, is less common at the end of the 3rd and 2nd millennia and mainly imported. In the 1st millennium, it serves for clothing god statues. Other vegetable fibres, as bark, are less documented.

During the 3rd millennium, wool becomes a basic element of the Mesopotamian economy, and new techniques linked to this fibre are developed.² In early 2nd millennium southern Mesopotamia merchants market the surplus produced by the palace's herds. Wool varieties are linked to the age, diet or origin of the animal, the natural colour of its fleece, or the period when it is collected. Cotton, appears in the annals of King Sennacherib of Assyria (704-681), under the expression 'wool-bearing trees.'³

1 Breniquet *et al.* 2012.

2 Völling 2008, Breniquet & Michel 2014.

3 Quillien 2019.

→ From fibre to fabric: the textile chaîne opératoire

During the 3rd and 2nd millennium, sheep are plucked by hand in spring as it is the moulting period. From the mid-2nd millennium on, the wool is sheared with a knife on the animal as it is by then continuously growing. An animal produces yearly from 500 g to more than a kg of wool.



➤ Fig. 1. Warp weighed vertical loom reconstructed from the loom weights found at Kültepe. Reconstruction by Eva Andersson Strand, Fikri Kulakoğlu and Cécile Michel within the project *The fabric of memory: Kültepe, a test laboratory for interdisciplinary research* (dir. C. Michel), LabEx Past in Present.



➤ Fig. 2. Imprint of textile on the inner side of a clay sealing, Kültepe, 19th century BCE, Anadolu Medeniyetleri Müzesi. Photo: C. Michel, ©Kültepe archaeological mission.

The many spindle whorls discovered in houses and graves of women suggest extensive spinning activities done with a spindle, and a distaff to store the fibres to be spun. The spindle whorls have different shapes depending on their material: bone, clay, stone, or metal. The spindle whorls from late 4th millennium Arslantepe⁴ were used for archaeological experiments⁵: depending on the quality of the fibre, the weight and the diameter of the spindle, the yarn obtained is more and less fine.

Wooden looms, horizontal or vertical, have not survived, but many weights of vertical warp-weighted looms have been found on sites dating to the 3rd millennium and on. They show a great variety of shapes: pyramid-shaped, discs, tubes, crescents, etc. The vertical loom with two beams

4 Turkey *et al.* 2009.

5 Andersson Strand & Nosch 2015.



➤ Fig. 3. Letter of an Assyrian merchant to his sister in which he gives her technical advices to improve her textile production, Kültepe, 19th century BCE, Musée du Louvre, from <https://cdli.ucla.edu/dl/photo/P357584.jpg> reproduced with the kind permission of Marielle Pic.



appeared later. Textile imprints on clay provide data on the woven techniques, mainly tabby and twill.

Miniature scenes engraved on cylinder seals from the Uruk and Archaic Dynastic periods (3700-2330) illustrate the entire “chaîne opératoire”: weighing the wool, stretching, spinning with spindles and distaff, twisting, warping, weaving, folding the fabrics.⁶

Text from the late 4th millennium on document increasingly complex administrative practices controlling both livestock, raw materials, and manufactured products, and from the mid-3rd millennium on, large textile workshops linked to institutions. The 21st century textile manufactures employ thousands of women to spin and weave wool.⁷ Texts give the quantity of wool delivered and the number of working days needed by a worker to produce a fabric of given dimensions. Men, at the head of teams, are responsible for finishing the fabrics. Private houses also provided cuneiform archives from the beginning of the 2nd millennium on, and document a domestic production of textiles. 19th century Assyrian women send their textiles to be sold in Anatolia, thus participating to the international trade. A *kutânum* textile, measuring 4 × 4.5 meters and weighing 2.5 kg is sold 120 g of silver in Anatolia. A wealthy household of ten women send some 20 of such textiles per year, earning as gross income 1.75 kg, the price of a little house in Assur.⁸

Yarns and textiles can be dyed with vegetable or animal dyes. Red, the colour of the elite, and blue, reminiscent of lapis lazuli, are the dominant colours. Purple obtained from murex – 8000 murexes for one gram of dye – appears during the 2nd millennium on the Levantine and Persian Gulf coasts.

Neo-Babylonian temples texts from the 6th century BCE document the different stages from flax to textile. After harvesting, the flax is exposed to the air, steeped, combed and supplied to specialised craftsmen who spin and weave it. Linen cloths are then entrusted to the launderer who boils it to guarantee its whiteness. The thinness and white colour of a piece of linen makes its great value.

→ Garments, gender, and symbolic use of clothing

The great variety of Sumerian and Akkadian terms for textiles and clothing highlight important regional particularities.⁹ Iconography forms a first-rate documentation of clothes and gives an idea of their form at different times. Texts and images do not necessarily coincide.

6 Breniquet 2008.

7 Quillien & Sarri 2020.

8 Michel 2020, 255-338.

9 Michel & Nosch 2010; Gaspa *et al.* 2017.



➤ Fig. 4. The Assyrian King Sargon welcomes a high dignitary. Relief with the remains of some colour paintings, from the palace of Khorsabad (710 BCE), in: Botta, P.-E. & Flandin, E., 1849: *Monument de Ninive*, tome 1, Paris, pl. 12.

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The Uruk vase (4th millennium) suggest that clothing is reserved to the elite, servants being naked. Until the 2nd millennium, it is made in one piece. First, as a simple skirt made of fleecy material, it becomes more diverse during the Akkad period (24th century) with drapery made from a large finer textile. During the 3rd and early 2nd millennium, men and women wear tunics over which they wrap around their body a rectangular piece of fabric. Women close it with garment pins while men tight it with a belt.¹⁰ The earliest complex garments are made for the king of Mari (Syria, 18th century): a coat with sleeves covered with gold ornaments.¹¹ It is the beginning of tailored garments. At the 1st millennium Assyrian court, kings wear colourful and elaborate garments consisting of a sort of long-sleeved tunic covered by a coat decorated with metals and precious stones and embroidered scenes, girded at the waist with a belt and a turban on the head.

Clothes have a special symbolic value. Brides bring garments and furnishing textiles as part of their dowry. Luxurious garments are exchanged as royal diplomatic gifts. The dead are wrapped in a shroud, and their relatives tear off their clothes as a sign of mourning. The garment's fringes, serves as a social bond and may be imprinted on a clay contract as a signature. In the 1st millennium, the king sends his mantle to represent him.

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10 Harlow et al. 2020.

11 Durand 1997, n. 136.

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