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6. The Beginnings of Clothing Experiments in Near Eastern Archaeology

▼ **ABSTRACT** Textile archaeology and the related field of experimental textile archaeology have been represented to varying degrees in different European countries. While Scandinavia started to explore these fields very early based on local archaeological textile collections, France developed a suitable approach only much later. Within the more specific field of Near Eastern archaeology, research is even more complex because textiles, like other organic materials, have rarely survived in archaeological contexts. Archaeologists and historians therefore need to use all other available sources such as archaeological artefacts, texts, and iconography. This chapter analyses the pioneering but largely forgotten research of Léon Heuzey, who as a teacher at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris at the end of the nineteenth century tried to reconstruct Sumerian costume by using modern textiles and live models.

▼ **KEYWORDS** Léon Heuzey, costume, live models, Mesopotamia, experiments, École des Beaux-Arts, sculptures

Understanding textile production and consumption is crucial when considering ancient societies. The craft is still alive today, and many techniques invented in antiquity remain in use. Eva Andersson Strand is one of the very few academics in the world to devote her teaching to textile archaeology. We had the chance to conduct a research project with her on spinning and weaving on the two-beam loom in the Bronze Age at Kültepe, a loom that is still used in contemporary Central

Anatolia.¹ Her methodology combines archaeological artefacts, hands-on experience, theoretical science and, when relevant, ethnographic comparisons. It is our great pleasure to dedicate this modest study on the pioneering works of Léon Heuzey on Sumerian

¹ Andersson Strand 2019, and the project Kul-Text (Les passés dans le présent). See also the documentary film *Bronze Age Textile Production (Kültepe-Kanesh)* (Michel and Tubiana-Brun 2021).

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costume to our friend Eva Andersson Strand, one of the founders of the Center for Textile Research (Copenhagen) and its current director.

Costume and the art of dress have evolved greatly. However, both the use of traditional textile crafts and experiments can add interesting elements to its understanding. The Hellenist and later Near East expert Léon Heuzey, who died in Paris just over a century ago, was one of the founding fathers of Mesopotamian studies in France. Criticized and sometimes even hated, Heuzey was a pioneering figure in the study of ancient costumes. He began to develop his original methodology and spectacular reconstructions at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris between 1863 and 1864.

Introducing Léon Heuzey

Léon Heuzey was born on 1 December 1831 in Rouen. He was admitted to the *École Normale Supérieure* of Paris in 1851 and entered the *École française d'Athènes* in 1854, where he stayed until 1859. His interests were diverse, and he completed his education by studying classical languages, art history and monumental archaeology, the history of Greece, and several other ancient civilizations. During his time in Athens, he met the Orientalist Émile Burnouf, who had an important influence on the brilliant student (Schwartz 2010). In 1863, Heuzey was appointed lecturer at the *École des Beaux-Arts* (Martin 2020, 13), where he developed his innovative methods in creating an antique costume course by using live models. He was employed as assistant curator at the *Musée du Louvre* beginning in 1870, appointed curator in 1875. There, he worked on a catalogue of Greek, Etruscan, Phoenician, and Anatolian terracotta figurines from the museum's collections, using artistic analysis and material typology to build chronologies. This work resulted in a system of categories with archaeological introductions for each (Cagnat 1924; Heuzey 1882).

After Ernest de Sarzec's discovery of the Sumerian remains at Telloh, the ancient capital of Lagash, in Iraq, many artefacts were sent to the Louvre collections. A *Département des Antiquités Orientales* was created in 1881, which also assumed responsibility for the conservation of ceramics previously kept in the Department of Greek and Roman antiquities. Though not a Near Eastern specialist by training, Léon Heuzey became the curator of this new department.

In searching for the origin of Greek art, he also became a specialist of the ancient Near East and studied Mesopotamian art (Heuzey 1886). Applying his methodology to ancient Near Eastern statuettes, he looked especially at garments and fashion and was able to establish different phases of Mesopotamian

art (Cagnat 1924, 204–05; Heuzey 1891–1915; 1902). He suggested that the first female nude figurines were Sumerian and proposed an evolution of the different artistic types during this early period.

Despite Heuzey's important contributions to Mesopotamian history, his works were poorly received by Assyriologists, as he was unable to read cuneiform texts and did not pursue stratigraphic archaeology. Henri Pognon, the French Consul in Baghdad, did not hesitate to call him a 'certaine notabilité scientifique plus influente que compétente' because he belonged among the specialists of Greek archaeology who were involved in Near Eastern studies (quoted by Parrot 1946, 369)!

Léon Heuzey, a Visionary in the History of Ancient Costume

French archaeological scholarship has largely neglected the history of costume. Textiles have rarely survived in archaeological contexts. They are not included in the major or minor arts of the French academic organizations. Iconography is not fully reliable as it uses depiction rules. Even in the context of the beginnings of Near Eastern field archaeology, Heuzey was aware of this situation, but took advantage of his great knowledge of antiquity and of his position at the *École des Beaux-Arts* to transcend the limits of his own original field of study. He was not only interested in the depiction of costumes or textiles, but also in fashion in the broadest sense, that is, in garments, their evolution, and their role in history. He understood that through costume one would have immediate access to the people of the past. His lectures at the *École des Beaux-Arts* were intended for art students who drew the models during his classes as if they were in an artist's studio (Lemaistre 1889, 151–57). Costumes, especially Sumerian and Assyrian, were also evoked by the antique sculptures as depicted in drawings and photographs shown in the classroom: of Gudea, ruler of Lagash, and his wife, the 'Femme à l'écharpe' and some Assyrian anonymous figures. The objective of using living models was to show a living antiquity (Léon 1923, 13):

Nous voulons nous retrouver face à face avec les hommes d'autrefois, les voir tels qu'ils étaient, dans la diversité de leurs usages et de leurs costumes (Lecture at the *École des Beaux-Arts*, Chair of Archaeology).

(We wish to find ourselves face to face with the humans of the past, to see them as they were, in the diversity of their practices and their costumes.)

During these years, Heuzey wrote a great number of articles on Mesopotamian costume, some of which provided major contributions (Heuzey 1893; 1907; 1925; 1926). Most of these, however, are less well known than his two books on the topic, the last of which was revised and republished by his grandson, Jacques Heuzey (1896–1986).

Histoire du costume dans l'Antiquité Classique, published in 1935, is a comprehensive work. It follows Heuzey's previous book, *Histoire du costume antique d'après les études sur le modèle vivant*, published in 1922, just after Heuzey's death, to which Edmond Pottier, a well-known curator of the Département des Antiquités orientales in the Louvre Museum and Heuzey's assistant at the École des Beaux-Arts, provided a preface. The 1922 book is devoted to the classical world, except for a few pages on ancient Near Eastern costume presented in an evolutionary perspective (pp. 6–8). In contrast, the comprehensive book of 1935 considered the oriental civilizations as a whole, including Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria, and Phoenicia. The structure of this work is more balanced: royal and civil clothing, costume for men, costume for women, headgear. When deemed necessary, Jacques Heuzey added several paragraphs or sections, clearly identified by his initials.

In these two books, illustrations are comprised of black and white drawings made by Léon Heuzey's students: Marcelle Baud for Egypt, Jacques Heuzey as JHZY for the Orient. In addition, photographs depict the statues or reliefs and draped fabrics on models. Where numerous photographs are included, images depicting the reconstructions on live models in sculptural pose were limited. Illustrations of some major pieces of art are however missing (Heuzey 1926, 298).²

Léon Heuzey's Methodology

Some methodological principles underlying the first experiments in recreating costumes can be derived from these publications. These are not explicitly stated as part of a scientific protocol but apparently formed the basic framework for Léon Heuzey's work throughout his career within the specific context of the École des Beaux-Arts (Martin 2020, 13). The first step was to inspire an interest in antiquity among students of the arts and to make antiquity come alive through a live model (Heuzey and Heuzey 1935, 7):

Les artistes ne sauraient se contenter de l'ensemble des faits et des preuves qui constituent l'histoire et qui suffisent aux historiens. Il faut arriver à leur reconstruire l'antiquité dans ses formes extérieures et vivantes par l'étude du costume antique.

(Artists cannot be satisfied with the set of facts and evidence that constitute history and that are sufficient for historians. They must be able to reconstruct antiquity in its external and living forms through the study of ancient costume.)

According to Edmond Pottier (1911, 283):

Chaque été, le maître résumait ses leçons de l'année en faisant paraître sur l'estrade et en drapant lui-même de ses doigts habiles et légers, soit un Égyptien, un Chaldéen, un Assyrien, soit un soldat grec ou une Tanagraëenne, un légionnaire ou un sénateur romain.

(Every summer, the master would sum up his lessons for the year by having someone appear on stage, be it as an Egyptian, a Chaldean, an Assyrian, a Greek soldier or a Tanagran woman, a Roman legionary or a senator, and arranging the clothing himself with his light and skilful fingers.)

The second step consisted in observing and carefully describing the sculptures in particular detail, photographs of which were pinned on the blackboard. Heuzey understood that ancient art, especially in Mesopotamia, was subject to conventional rules that were much more difficult to break than the Egyptian or Classical ones. Their description was not only a matter of art history. Three aspects had to be combined: the shape of the fabric, usually simple; the layout on the body; the final effect produced by the garment on the human body (Heuzey and Heuzey 1935, 7). The descriptions included some structural or technical observations on knots, overlays, drapery, and the distinction of fringes *vs* borders, based on occasional references to more specialized books on weaving (Heuzey and Heuzey 1935, 47, 49). However, the aim was not to reconstruct the *chaîne opératoire* but to demonstrate the role the fabric played for the ancient body. Heuzey understood that ancient clothes were not tailored — that is, cut and sewn — but were draped around the body (Figs 6.1 and 6.2). Even if the resulting reconstruction is still debated, the way he draped the toga on Gudea remains highly plausible (Figs 6.1a, b).³ The third step was to choose the model.

2 For instance: Gudea himself, the 'Femme à l'écharpe', an Assyrian soldier and the Assyrian King, see Heuzey and Heuzey 1935, pl. XXXIII, XLIIXLIIbis, XLVIII. As Jacques Heuzey made a selection, it is difficult to have a good idea of what Léon Heuzey has reconstructed

3 Spycket 1981, 188 suggests the use of pins.

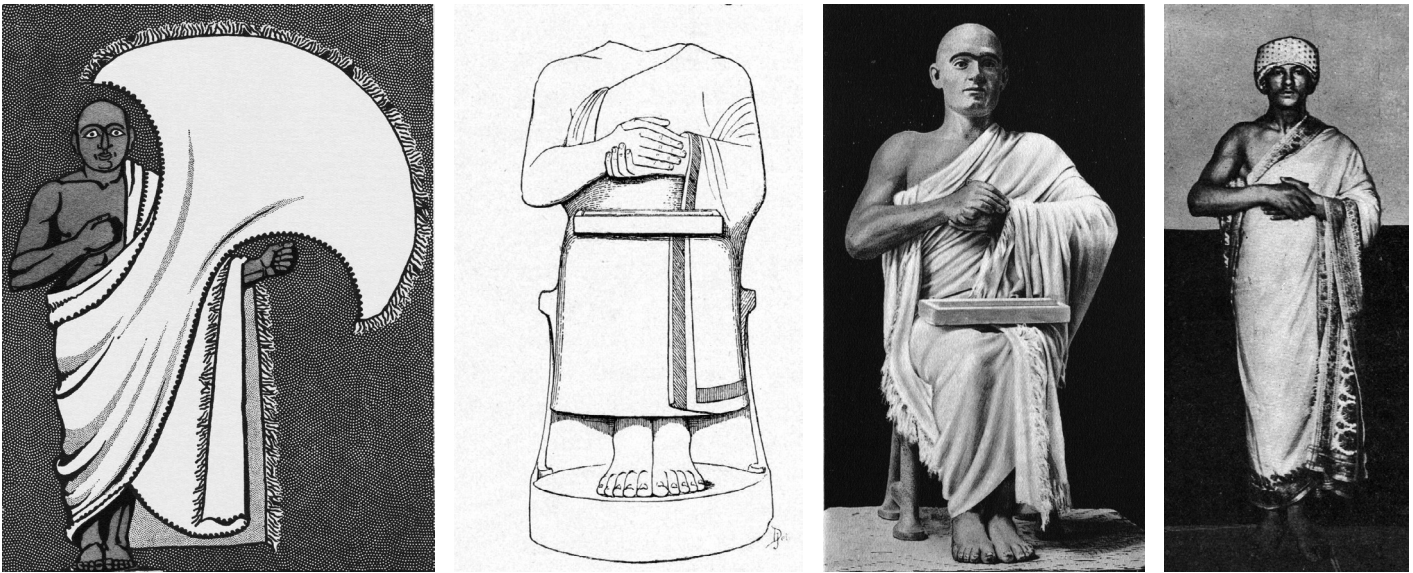


Figure 6.1. Men: Gudea's dress. A) The way the toga was draped on the body. Redrawn by the authors after Heuzey and Heuzey 1935, pl. XXX. B) Gudea, statue B said 'L'architecte au plan' (Louvre AO 2), Telloh, c. 2120–2110 BCE, h: 0.93 cm. Drawing by the authors. C) Wax model used for the Exposition Universelle of 1889. 'Histoire du Travail et des Sciences Anthropologiques. Section I, Anthropologie, ethnographie, archéologie'. After Heuzey and Heuzey 1935, pl. XXXIII. D). The live model in 1926. (After Heuzey 1926, 298.)

As the highlight of the course was the performance of a live model appearing on the classroom stage, Heuzey paid great attention to his choice. It is likely that he selected his models after 'auditioning' them on their physical ('racial') characteristics, which were supposed to be close to the ancient original. According to Henri Lechat (Lechat 1897, 9):

Avec quelle intelligence et quels scrupules de goût choisissait-il ses modèles, hommes ou femmes, afin que, par leur physique, leur port, leur allure, ils s'accordassent de façon juste à l'œuvre d'art qu'il allait reproduire! [...] Lorsque, sa reconstitution terminée, M. Heuzey se reculait un peu pour juger de l'ensemble, puis, revenant, tapotait légèrement du bout des doigts ici un pli, là une surface, ces quelques attouchements, à peine marqués, mais tellement justes, semblaient communiquer la vie, une vie harmonieuse.

(With what intelligence and what scruples of taste did he choose his models, men or women, so that, by their physique, their bearing, their appearance, they would properly match the work of art he was going to reproduce! [...] When, after his reconstruction, Mr Heuzey stepped back a little to judge the whole, then, returning, patted lightly with his fingertips here a fold, there a surface, these few touches, hardly noticeable, but so appropriate, seemed to communicate life, a harmonious life.)

The last step consisted of choosing the right fabric, to which again Heuzey paid great attention. He had an excellent personal knowledge of ethnic fabrics. From his travels he brought back textiles with qualities as close as possible to antique textiles. For instance, Heuzey used two different fabrics in his reconstructions of Gudea's dress (Fig. 6.1B): a plain Indian wool shawl known as a Shoudda (Heuzey and Heuzey 1935, 47 and 69), embellished with fringes (Fig. 6.1C) and palm ornaments on silk (?) borders (Fig. 6.1D, Heuzey 1926, 298). The first textile had been exhibited on a wax model at the 1889 Exposition Universelle.⁴ If no ethnic textiles were available, Heuzey selected modern fabrics for their characteristics: raw material, especially wool, suppleness, drape, etc. We can observe the same effort with the 'Femme à l'écharpe' (Fig. 6.2a). Two fabrics were tested (Fig. 6.2b, c) (Heuzey and Heuzey 1935, pl. VII and XLII and XLII bis):

Dans ce genre d'expérience, la nature des tissus employés est un des facteurs essentiels de la réussite.

(In this kind of experiment, the nature of the fabrics used is one of the key factors of success.)

The fabrics made by the Maison Rodier played an important role. Indeed, the Maison Rodier was among the best

⁴ The wax model was exhibited in the Galerie d'Histoire du Travail, as Gudea was depicted as an architect with his tools on the sculpture. See for instance Chevalier 2020, 18, fig. 7.

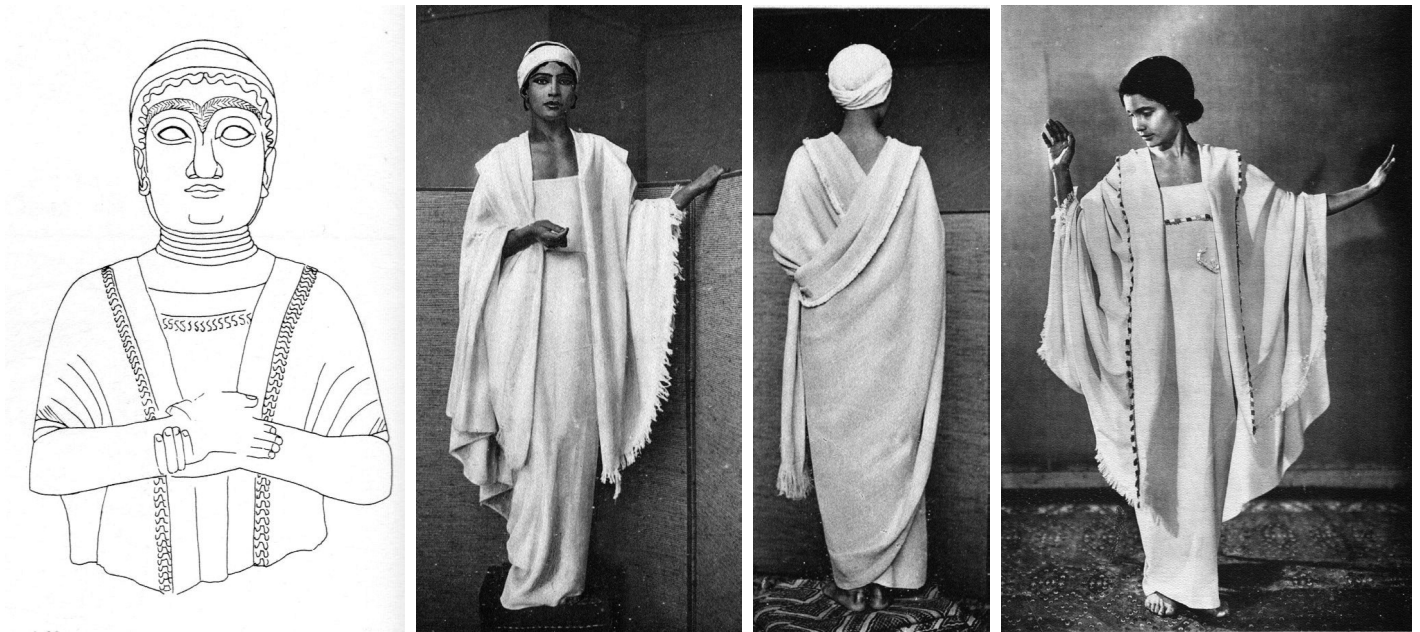


Figure 6.2. Women: the 'Femme à l'écharpe' dress. A) The 'Femme à l'écharpe' (Louvre AO 295), Telloh, c. 2120–2110 BCE, h: 17.8 cm. Drawing by the authors. B) The first live model, as seen from face and back. After Heuzey and Heuzey 1935, pl. XLII. C) The second live model. (After Heuzey and Heuzey 1935, pl. XLIII bis.)

French weaving factories, working for the *haute couture*; it was renowned for its innovative Jersey weaving (knitting in fact), said to be produced by master weavers, inspired by ethnic and colonial cloths (Doy 2002, 241, n. 72).

Experimental Archaeology or Hands-on Experiments? And Why Is This Important?

Despite some first attempts during the nineteenth century, experimental archaeology only gained ground in France in the 1980s–1990s, when archaeology became an independent discipline. The idea of the experiment to re-create and test, if possible with ancient tools, artefacts found during excavations (pottery, architecture, flint, metallurgy, etc.), was borrowed from the natural sciences. The protocol aims to reconstruct the complete *chaîne opératoire* from a technical point of view. These procedures could potentially open a wider perspective for understanding social behaviour. The first enthusiastic attempts, however, made clear that results were limited to the material side of the past. Nevertheless, experimental archaeology is a good tool for testing a technical hypothesis and for reaching a wide audience (Andersson Strand and others 2010, 160–65).

Heuzey's performances are not experimental archaeology. He did not ask for specific samples provided by Rodier to test specific prototypes. Heuzey was also not a fashion designer but remained a specialist of

classical and antique cultures. No experiments were conducted on weaving techniques themselves. This fact contrasts with other studies on ancient fabrics, where weavers from industrial factories worked hand in hand with archaeologists to reconstruct and understand ancient fabrics. In France, industrial designers such as Joseph Déchelette (both archaeologist and textile manufacturer) and Charles Pagès were at the origin of textile archaeology (Breniquet and Grömer 2021).

Heuzey selected (too) many parameters, especially aesthetic: elegance, graciousness, both obvious in women's depictions, etc. (Fig. 6.2b from face, and 6.2c) and combined them into a personal reading of the past, both antique, ethnic, and industrial. For the purpose of formulating a hypothesis, however, he claimed (Heuzey and Heuzey 1935, 7):

Nous ne pouvons émettre que des hypothèses, fournir seulement des indications, sans prétendre à expliquer dans tous leurs détails, avec une exactitude rigoureuse, les images qui nous servent d'exemples et de modèles.

(We can only put forward hypotheses, only provide indications, without claiming to explain in all their details, with rigorous accuracy, the images that serve us as examples and models.)

Heuzey did not take the data of the cuneiform texts into account. This is easily explained by the fact that the

philology of these texts was still in its infancy: Akkadian had only recently been understood and Sumerian not yet deciphered. Lexicographic studies remain an extremely complex field of study, especially when words cannot be compared with archaeological artefacts (Gaspa and others 2017; Michel and Nosch 2010).

Until World War II, the French *haute couture* was inspired by the draping dress of antiquity, of which M. Vionnet and Mme Grès' dresses for women's fashion are obvious reminders. Both were probably aware of Léon Heuzey's lectures at the École des Beaux-Arts (Doy, 2002, 39, 91, 241), even if they did not attend them themselves, as they were open to a wide audience. Until textile archaeology opened new fields of research, Heuzey's work was an indispensable part of a forgotten field in France, the study of costume.

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