

Textiles and War in Europe and the Mediterranean from Prehistory to
Late Antiquity



TEXTILES AND WAR IN EUROPE AND THE MEDITERRANEAN FROM PREHISTORY TO LATE ANTIQUITY

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Cover: Archaic Greek male warrior and female spinner (Helen?), reworking by Liviu Mihail Iancu of the drawing of a scene on a sixth-century BC Argive shield-band from Olympia, published in Emil Kunze, *Archaische Schildbänder. Ein Beitrag zur frühgriechischen Bildgeschichte und Sagenüberlieferung* (Olympia Forschungen 2), Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1950, pl. 20, V b.

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Introduction

The idea of a conference and a volume on the general topic of textiles and war emerged early in 2021, during one of the first meetings of Working Group 4 ‘The Fabric of Society’ of the research network *Europe Through Textiles: Network for an integrated and interdisciplinary Humanities (EuroWeb)* (ID Grant n. CA19131), established between 2020 and 2024 with financial support provided by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology), a European funding agency for research and innovation networks. Despite the group members’ many distinct approaches to the field of prehistoric and ancient textiles, there was consensus that the topic is still largely unexplored and even more so from a systematic perspective.

As a military historian interested in the numerous and complex connections between ancient armies and the world of textiles and as an archaeologist who worked extensively with ancient textile production tools containing references to martial themes, we set out on this endeavour meant to bridge the gap between scholars specialised in the venerable yet somewhat quiescent academic field of war and warfare studies and those with expertise in the more recent but fast-developing and vibrant area of textiles research. Besides deepening knowledge in both domains, our main aim was to explore the opportunity to establish a new and well-defined direction of academic investigation.

Certainly, there are a few previous contributions that led to significant results in the area of the use of textiles (and sometimes leather)¹ in prehistoric and ancient warfare. We could mention, for example, *Roman Military Dress* (2009), by Graham Sumner, based on three previous smaller volumes, and *Wearing the Cloak: Dressing the Soldier in Roman Times* (2011), edited by Marie-Louise Nosch, which focused on – but were not restricted only to – the use of textiles and the martial costumes in the historically unique military organization that was the Roman army. These volumes are just the tip of an iceberg of independent papers that dealt with different series of data out of the large amounts still recoverable mainly from the time of the Empire, often concentrated conveniently in the pages of the *Journal of Roman Military Equipment Studies*,² and whose results were partly synthesised throughout M.C.

¹ For the use of leather in pre-modern warfare, see Mould 2017, which includes only two papers about leather items from the ancient Roman Empire out of 17 contributions.

² van Driel-Murray 1990; Coulston 1991; Bishop 1992; Aurrecochea Fernández 1999; Hoss 2016; Ivleva 2016; Pásztókai-Szeőke and Paetz gen. Schieck 2016 etc.

Bishop’s and J.C.N. Coulston’s *Roman Military Equipment: From the Punic Wars to the Fall of Rome* (1st ed. 1993, 2nd ed. 2006).

Of note is also Susan Möller-Wiering’s *War and Worship: Textiles from 3rd to 4th-century AD Weapon Deposits in Denmark and Northern Germany* published as well in 2011 in the Ancient Textiles Series. The expansion beyond the Mediterranean, in Northern Europe, and the emphasis on archaeological textiles as sources for recreating various aspects of ancient war and warfare can be counted among the merits of this work that opened a new path in studying ancient military textiles and dress.

Beyond these examples, and excluding works focused on the specific issues of linen corselets as pertaining more to the field of arms and armour,³ most contributions to this research topic are in fact represented by scattered information in publications dealing with military history and archaeology,⁴ studies of ancient dress that sometimes touches on the costumes used by the military,⁵ technical analyses of archaeological textiles, published without having as their primary focus the evaluation of their connection to warfare,⁶ and miscellaneous epigraphic and philological works.⁷

Our attempt to incentivise the more autonomous research of the textiles items used or manipulated by prehistoric and ancient armed groups revolved around two main directions. The first direction was to delineate the main sources and methodologies susceptible to providing significant results, starting by sketching a map of the current state of the research in the field. The second direction was topical and dealt with highlighting a few relevant themes that could be tackled, such as particular studies on specific textile items used in the military field (e.g. sails for warships and metal armour linings), the systems of production and acquisition of garments and other textile materials

³ E.g. Aldrete *et al.* 2013.

⁴ We provide two random examples. First, Launey’s monumental book on ancient Greek Hellenistic armies unexpectedly features two valuable pages on the hair and sinews strings used for the Athenian torsion artillery in the 4th century BC (Launey 1949-1950: 830-831). In a similar manner, but much more recently, a comprehensive study on the adoption of the *lorica hamata* by the Roman troops includes a helpful overview of the textile *subarmalis* worn underneath (Devereaux 2022: 154-155).

⁵ E.g. Lee 2015: 110-111, 126.

⁶ E.g. Beck *et al.* 2014.

⁷ See for example the aetiological and terminological discussions in Roussel 1941 and Gauthier 1985: 154-158.

for the armies, the expression of military rank and status through textile items, the economic and cultural effects of military campaigns in the field of textiles acquisition and consumption.

Unfortunately, several colleagues who attended the conference held in Bucharest at the Institute of Advanced Studies in Levant Culture and Civilisation in May 2023 were unable to send their contributions for publication. Nonetheless, the 12 papers collected in this volume out of a total of 18 bear evidence, in our opinion, supporting the validity of the view that we put forward in the beginning. Even more so, we were thrilled that quite a few other scholars rallied to our initial call after the event, expressing their interest in this academic endeavour. Ultimately, we were able to add to this book a thirteenth study written by Maureen Carroll.

The volume opens with Margarita Gleba's helpful review of archaeological textiles used for war, starting chronologically with the Chalcolithic Iceman Ötzi's equipment and ranging geographically from the British Isles to Northwest China and from Northern Europe to Egypt. Her paper not only demonstrates that prehistoric and ancient warfare was inconceivable without the wide variety of military textile and leather items, but also sows the seeds of hope that through a more systematic and thorough study of the constantly expanding corpus of archaeological textiles, new facets of military activities of the past will emerge.

A strong example of this point is provided by the next two papers, focused on the archaeological evidence for the organic components – primarily textiles and leather, but also basketry items – employed together with or attached to metal armour.

Based on a detailed survey of pre-Roman Mediterranean and Pontic cuirasses, gorgets, armguards, greaves and helmets, Raimon Graells i Fabregat aptly shows that the effectiveness of armour greatly depended on such items as skins, linings and paddings, whose existence can most often only be deduced from the preserved metal remains. However, the quest for adequate protection did not result in unique solutions: the variability of local technological and cultural factors led to an equally diverse range of responses to the general issues of providing comfort to the wearer and maximal resistance to the armour.

Similarly, in their paper on Imperial Roman helmets, Fabio Spagiari and Elisabetta Malaman reach the conclusion that different padding systems were employed at various times and in various places – sometimes even at the same time and in the same place, as shown by the finds from Mons Claudianus – for these essential protective pieces of military gear. Based on

the various organic remains preserved to this day, they are also able to plausibly hypothesise about the main raw materials used for padding and lining, as well as the important role that reuse and recycling played in their manufacture.

The effectiveness of another archaeological approach, based on a different set of data, is tested in the paper co-authored by Francisco B. Gomes, Teresa Rita Pereira, Carlos Pereira and João Pimenta. By closely examining the spindle whorls and loom weights discovered in several Late Republican sites from Western Iberia with varied military functions – from Roman military camps and militarised indigenous settlements to small forts and newly founded settlements with a strong military presence – this team of researchers is able to demonstrate how pervasive can be the impact of military needs over the human communities established in a certain region in the field of textiles production and acquisition. At the same time, they add valuable insights on the wide range of solutions adopted by Late Republican Rome for supplying its military units stationed far abroad with suitable clothing.

Equally informative are the remnants of textiles from different archaeological sites in the fortunate cases when they are preserved. Orit Shamir's paper discusses such finds from a broad array of archaeological sites in the southern Levant: on the one hand, the last pockets of resistance of the Jewish rebels from the Judean desert during the revolts against the Romans of AD 66-73 and 132-135, on the other hand, the thriving Nabatean way-stations on the trade routes that linked the Arabian Peninsula and the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. The comparison of the textile fragments from these two types of locations reveals once more that military activities may heavily impact the textile production and consumption behaviours of human communities. Whereas the textiles found in the peaceful Nabatean sites only rarely show traces of patching, similar items from the Masada, the Cave of Letters and other places in the Judean Desert exhibit repeated patching and several forms of reuse, unmistakable signs of the hardships endured by the besieged.

The contribution of written sources to the study of military textiles and leather items is emphasised in Liviu Mihail Iancu's chapter, who tackles the issue of clothing, tents, ship sails and cables taken as booty or paid as tribute by the Greek and Roman armies in the first millennium BC. Despite the scarcity of evidence, it is shown that loot and tribute were deemed significant supply sources of such items even for the small raiding parties of the Dark and Archaic ages. Their importance did not cease to increase as the complexity and duration of military operations grew in the later part of the first millennium, marked by large hegemonic wars between major Mediterranean powers.

Starting as well from written sources, more precisely from a well-known passage where Livy recounts the establishment of the Samnite *legio lintheata* in 293 BC, Gianluca Tagliamonte assembles a compelling dossier of literary, archaeological and iconographic evidence showing that linen played a significant role in Samnium both in equipping troops with clothing and well-lined armour and in religious and civil contexts. Therefore, he plausibly hypothesises that the inhabitants of ancient central Apennine Italy were major growers of flax and producers of fine linen.

Three more papers deal with pre-Roman central and southern Italy, gradually shifting the focus in the second half of the book from archaeological and written sources to the iconographic evidence for the military use of textiles.

Francesco Meo's discussion of the garment wrapped around the seven belts found in the early fourth-century BC Tomb 382 in Ortona against the visual evidence provided by earlier anthropomorphic Daunian stelae erected both for men and women provides significant arguments for rejecting the interpretation that this part of the funerary assemblage was meant to emphasise the martial prowess of the deceased. Instead, it is regarded as a symbol of the high status of the individual buried at Ortona, following deeply entrenched Daunian traditions.

On the other hand, Maureen Carroll's diligent study of the fourth-century BC tomb paintings from Campania and Lucania featuring the motive of the *ritorno del guerriero* reveals just how important clothing was for expressing the martial ethos of the Italic elites in these regions. As the diverse colours and patterns of the short tunics worn by warriors were seemingly important means for expressing their identity, triumphantly carrying back from the battlefield such blood-splattered garments, together with the stripped enemy armour, was a crucial symbol of success in war and became worthy of being visually recorded in funerary representations.

Garments were masterfully employed as polysemic details in vase painting in southern Italy, decisively contributing to conveying meaning in battle scenes, as demonstrated by Carlo Lualdi in his paper devoted to the analysis of a proto-Lucanian red-figure *hydria* from Tomb 2/1994 of Gravina-Botromagno, in Peucetia. The attire of the ten warriors depicted on the large battle scene on the upper register of the vessel serves not only to better discriminate between the opponents, but also to draw a connection between the depicted heroic figures and the Peucetian elites, thus playing a part in celebrating the values of the local aristocracy.

The last three papers in this book also take different approaches to the interpretation of iconographic

sources, but focus instead on the military dress in the Roman Empire.

Adrián Gordón Zan employs the evidence of visual representations of third-century AD emperors, projected on the background provided by literary sources such as Cassius Dio and *Historia Augusta*, to describe and explain the gradual adoption of military clothing, such as long-sleeved tunics, trousers and *paludamentum-sagum*, in the public images of the *Augusti*. Not surprising at all given the crucial role that the army played in the election of emperors during this troubled century and their constant need to cultivate the troops' loyalty, this phenomenon whose inception can be traced back already to the end of the Antonine period and is fully accomplished under the Tetrarchy would have still remained largely elusive without the precious evidence brought by several numismatic issues.

A more specific study is the one devoted by Philip Kolev to a set of 21 funerary stelae from the Middle Strymon Valley, in the Roman province of Macedonia, dated to the 3rd century AD. The people depicted on the stelae, dressed in short-sleeved chitons or long-sleeved tunics, animal skin cloaks fastened with circular rings and leather boots and holding axes, pickaxes, rods (or bars), spears and javelins, have long been thought of as Roman soldiers or Thracian warriors, but the author concludes, based on the singularity of their clothing and the predominance of the tools over the weapons that they were instead professionals of a yet unidentified kind who may have also secondarily functioned as guardsmen.

Another microregional study, signed by Ergün Laflı and Maurizio Buora, discusses the peculiarities and the northern Mesopotamian commonalities of the military garb of the elites in Edessa during the Roman rule over the kingdom of Osroene in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, starting from six statues preserved in the Archaeological Museum of Şanlıurfa. It is shown that the various cultural contacts in the area between the Parthians, the Arabs, the Greeks and the Romans are reflected in the local military costume and that despite a certain regional uniformity in the representations from Edessa, Hatra, Dura Europos and Palmyra, specific details were determined by the existence of local fashions in these important regional centres.

It would be inappropriate to assume that the present collection of papers offers a fully comprehensive map of the approaches that can be taken and the topics that can be dealt with in the study of the intricate relationship between textiles and war in prehistory and antiquity. If we merely recall the regrettable absence from the book of a few papers read at the conference in Bucharest, it becomes obvious of how much larger and promising is

this field for whose more autonomous research we are advocating; Emil Nankov examined the varied evidence for the plant fibres and leather components of slings; Kerstin Droß-Krüpe and Iulia Dumitrache demonstrated how much precious information on the public and private supply of clothing to the Roman Imperial army can be extracted from the unparalleled epigraphic and papyrological corpus dealing with the Roman military; Paulina Lebedowicz aptly showed that iconography is a precious resource not only for studying military costumes, but also for the reconstitution of more technical issues, such as aspects related to the sails and cordage of ancient Greek ships; Alina Iancu brought to attention the existence of quite numerous war-related motives and representations on ancient textile tools such as spools, loom weights and *epinētra*; Amine Hadj Taieb detailed some of the modern analyses that could be used for making more accurate assessments of the technical properties of the ancient textile items employed by the Carthaginian army.

Nevertheless, it is not too hazardous to state that the current volume is representative of the main research trends that contribute to the expansion of knowledge in this field. Iconographic studies, mainly of military dress, still represent the majority of scholarly attempts to explore the use of textile items in the war-related sphere of human existence. Nonetheless, the rapid developments in the recognition, recovery, preservation and research of archaeological textiles and textile tools, coupled with the expanding array of available scientific analyses for the study of archaeological artefacts and particularly old organic remains, determines a steadily increasing number of valuable contributions mainly based on archaeological sources. When available, written sources are extremely precious for contextualizing and supplementing the iconographic and archaeological information, but their overall scarcity lead to a lower share in the total number of studies pertaining to the topic of textiles and war. Of course, discovery and reading of new relevant epigraphic and papyrological documents can always bring a surge of information of invaluable significance.

In the end, we are certain that this field will continue to grow quickly. At the same time, we hope that the present book will serve as a stepping stone for this research direction to be expanded even faster and more systematically.

There are many people and organizations which contributed in various ways to the final outcome represented by this volume. We think that appropriate credits should be given in the first place to Marie-Louise Nosch, the main aggregator of the EuroWeb interdisciplinary research network, an initiative that stimulated the inception and development of numerous

projects like ours. Our gratitude goes as well to Agata Ulanowska, the chair of EuroWeb, as well as to all the members of the Management Committee of the network who agreed to support the organization of the 'Textiles & War' conference in Bucharest, that benefitted of generous funding from COST. We are thankful to all fellow researchers who positively answered our call for papers and consequently participated in the conference and/or contributed to this volume. Margarita Gleba and Raimon Graells i Fabregat deserve special mentions here as they agreed to prepare engaging keynote lectures.

The organization of the conference in Bucharest would have never been possible without the tremendous dedication of our colleagues from the Institute for Advanced Studies in Levant Culture and Civilisation and the steady support of its founder and president of its scientific council, Professor Emil Constantinescu, former president of Romania between 1996 and 2000. We are indebted to all of our colleagues who were involved in the peer review process and the proofreading of the papers, as they brought highly welcome improvements to the book. It is needless to say that the full responsibility for any shortcomings belongs to the contributors and the editors. We are immensely thankful as well to Gabriel Grigore and Trident Pharma Ltd. for their financial support of the conference and the book, to Marian Stoian and the Eurocentrica Association for the management of these funds and to Archaeopress for their patience and willingness to assist this editorial project.

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Liviu Mihail Iancu, Francesco Meo

Abbreviations

Throughout the volume, abbreviated references to texts from classical Antiquity follow the guidelines of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (4th edition, 2012).

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