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Conference Review: Fibres in Early Textiles, Glasgow 2019

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The 16th conference of the Early Textiles Study Group was held at the University of Glasgow, Scotland, from 6th to 7th June, 2019. The theme for the biennial conference, *Fibres in Early Textiles from Prehistory to AD 1600*, was attended by almost sixty enthusiastic participants, and there was a strong international feel to the gathering. Attendees came from a diverse range of backgrounds, including university academics, postgraduate researchers, independent researchers, commercial archaeologists, textile foundation representatives, and museum and craft specialists.

> The latest gathering of the Early Textiles Study Group provided thought-provoking papers, posters and demonstrations. New, innovative, experimental work was presented, showing the breadth and depth of current textile research.

The scientific programme included twenty-four papers divided across six sessions over a two-day programme, with opportunity at the end of each session to ask questions to the presenters. Another seven poster presentations were accessible during the session breaks throughout the programme, as well as a number of practical demonstrations giving participants the opportunity to get hands-on with different fibres and techniques.

Dr Susanna Harris from the University of Glasgow opened the conference on behalf of the Early Textiles Study Group, after which Katrina Finch (Independent Researcher) paid a beautiful tribute to the work of her late mother, Karen Finch. As a master weaver and conservator, Karen championed the development of professional standards in research and training within conservation by establishing the Textile Conservation Centre in 1975.[1] Katrina communicated the development of a website dedicated to disseminating Karen's valuable personal archive for use by researchers worldwide. This was followed by a presentation of Karen's research on gold thread, by Philip Sykas from the Manchester School of Art. Penelope Walton Rodgers (The Anglo-Saxon Laboratory) then opened the theme for the conference with a presentation via a live-feed entitled 'Fibre identification: why does it matter?' Several case studies were presented to show the impact of Fibre ID beyond the textiles themselves and into the wider research field.

The first morning consisted of two sessions, split respectively into plant and animal fibre identification. Christina Margariti (University of Copenhagen) discussed her database (fibranet) of prehistoric to Roman period fibres found in Europe, including experimental research involving the burial, burning and mineralisation (Cu) of fibres to assess deterioration levels. Jenni Suomela (University of Helsinki) presented her research on late Iron Age Finnish textiles, exploring the evidence for the presence and use of indigenous nettle fibres from the site of Ravattula. Session one closed with Hana Lukešová (University of Bergen) discussing the little-known use of hop fibres for textiles, instead of their usual affinity with beer! *FibraNet*, in particular, demonstrated the application of experimental research and how the results of this are informing our understanding and interpretation of the fibres we find on archaeological sites.

In session two Natalia Shishlina (State History Museum Moscow) presented important new research on the application of C^{14} to date Northern Eurasian Bronze Age wool aimed at tracing the movement and spread of wool routes. Hailing Zheng (Chinese National Silk Museum) shared ground-breaking on-site application of enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay in identifying protein fibres, and Bing Wang (Zhejiang Sci-Tech University) discussed the

identification of silks using proteomics and immunological methods. These experimental new techniques being trialled in textile research in China, provide a new facet to the textile researchers toolkit. Enzyme analysis and its application for the study of protein fibres in silk and wool in archaeological fieldwork has huge potential in future textile research.

After a thought-provoking morning and a tasty lunch, there was the opportunity to view the poster presentations for the first time. Themes as diverse as Nalbinding, to sourcing barkcloth, to analysis of the first cowl of St. Francis of Assisi were presented in a wonderful selection and provided much ongoing in-depth discussion throughout the conference.

Session three centred around the theme of wool procurement and processing. Carol Christiansen (Shetland Museum and Archives) neatly laid out the history and practice of plucking verus shearing sheep and their implications for wool yield and processing. Polina Medvedeva (South Ural State Humanitarian-Pedagogical University) shared about textile production developments in the Ural-Kazakhstan region during the Late Bronze Age through analysis of textiles and ceramics with textile impressions. Krista Vajanto (University of Helsinki) brought to light the fine wool, naturally pigmented fibres and the presence of brown bear and possibly red squirrel hairs discovered in a chieftain burial at the site of Snartemo in Norway. Krista's presentation highlighted the application of Scanning Electron Microscope (SEM) to determine the fineness of textile material, which has posed cultural questions over the textiles significance.

The final session of the day examined plant fibre procurement and processing. Hero Granger-Taylor (Independent Researcher) explored splicing in bast fibres, looking at both past practices in Egypt and Western Asia and current practices in the Far East to aid in our understanding of production methods, examining the terminologies of splicing, spinning and plying. Susanna Harris (University of Glasgow) and Margarita Gleba (Cambridge University) took us through the exceptional UK Bronze Age textile remains from Must Farm, including twined fabrics and knotted nets and the evidence for fibre preparation methods such as retting and splicing. Johanna Banck-Burgess (Landesamt für Denkmalpflege im Regierungspräsidium) discussed Neolithic production strategies through the textile remains from Hornstaad-Hörnle IA, aided in part by experienced craftspeople creating new comparative material. These presentations highlighted the chaîne opératoire of the production process, particularly through discussions concerning the retting process and its implications for the splicing of fibres and the identification of this technique in threads.

Day two explored New World fibres. Camila Alday (University of Cambridge) presented evidence of preceramic hunter-gatherer plant fibre technology in the coastal desert of Atacama in Peru by means of an Archaeo-botany approach. This was followed by presentations by Thomas Connolly and Elizabeth Kallenbach from the University of Oregon Museum of Natural and Cultural History. They discussed a collaborative project between

government, universities and museums to C^{14} the basketry traditions of the North American Desert West and knotted netting from the North American Great Basin. Liz Hammond-Kaarremaa (Vancouver Island University) drew our attention to some of the more unusual Pacific Northwest fibres, including evidence for the use of dog hair and swan feathers. This session highlighted the application of polarised light microscopy and SEM in understanding the wider plant-fibre technology in Peru, while fibre identification using microscopy and C^{14} analyses to aid our understanding of ancient basketry fibre technology in North America.

The second session explored fibres of the Middle Ages and began with Riina Rammo (University of Tartu), who discussed the fibres used in textile production in the eastern Baltic from the Late Iron Age to the Middle Ages and questions that have arisen over their processing. María Martín Seijo (Universidade de Santiago de Compostela) shared about the application of analytical techniques in the fibre ID of waterlogged and mineralised textile remains from Pambre Castle in northwest Iberia. Git Skoglund (Fellow Agnes Geijers Nordic Textile Fund) then assessed quality through the use of male and female hemp crops and the use of juvenile male hemp plants for fine textiles, and how hemp quality was graded on thickness of the stocks. The final two papers explored ethnographic fibres. Via a live-feed from New Zealand, Catherine Smith (University of Otago) shared her research team's recent analysis (including polarised light microscopy, micro-CT analysis) on Māori textiles, exploring the use of native fibres by the Polynesian settlers of New Zealand. Chris Buckley (Independent Researcher) presented an overview of the variety and use of bast fibres across East and Southeast Asia and their processing methods, which was enhanced by actual examples of finished textiles being available for observation and handling. Particular attention was drawn during this final session to the application of a range of analytical techniques to aid in fibre identification, chemical characterisation and dye analyses. The use of High-Performance Liquid Chromatography (HPLC), SEM-Energy Dispersive X-ray Spectroscopy (EDX), Pyrolysis-Gas Chromatography-Mass Spectrometry (Py-GC-MS), Polarised Light Microscopy (PLM) and Micro-Computed Tomography (Micro-CT) demonstrated the experimental and multi-disciplinary nature of current textile research.

The second day concluded with a site visit to the Centre for Textile Conservation at the University of Glasgow. Research students shared their various projects, which ranged from the analysis and conservation of archaeological textiles from Egypt to a 19th century British army jacket with connections to the famous Scottish poet Robert Burns.

All that was left to do by the end of the conference was to meet in the pub for a debrief after a thoroughly informative and enjoyable conference. The latest gathering of the Early Textiles Study Group provided thought-provoking papers, posters and demonstrations. New, innovative, experimental work was presented, showing the breadth and depth of current textile research. New and old discussions within textile research had been visited with new

networks and collaborations being fomented, all with the purpose of expanding our understanding and interpretation of fibres from around the world.

1 Karen Finch, OBE, founder of the Textile Conservation Centre 1975-2018

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