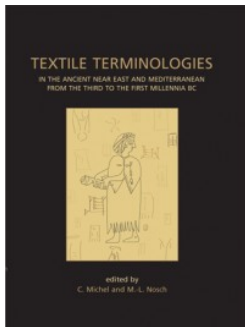


Review of the book:



Textile terminologies in the ancient near East and Mediterranean from the third to the first millennia BC

Cécile Michel and Marie-Louise Nosch (eds.)

Oxbow Books. Oxford. 2010. 444 + ixi p.
<http://www.oxbowbooks.com>.

ISBN : 978-1-84217-975-8.

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This title in the Ancient Textile Series is a collection of twenty-two papers in English and French on textile terminologies in the Semitic and Indo-European languages. It focuses on the written records of the Eastern Mediterranean area from the 3rd to the 1st millennia BC. The papers result from a workshop jointly organized in 2005 by the center for textile research of the Danmarks Grundforskningsfond in Copenhagen and a research laboratory on archeology at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique in Nanterre, France.

The editors' interdisciplinary approach is creative (they bring together archeologists, philologists, terminologists.), and the book gives a good overview of the terminological problems encountered within the investigation of ancient languages' specialized vocabularies. Although this is not stated explicitly, the book is indeed a substantial collection of examples that show how hard it is to grasp a concept from a term alone: a basic problem of terminology. The practical difficulties encountered during the investigations provoke the reader's attention and illustrate only too well that terms cannot be studied in isolation from the concepts they denote. Throughout the book, tiny bits of information are brought together with the general aim of solving a perplexing puzzle—i.e., reconstructing concepts from terms. At times, puzzle pieces appear to be oddly shaped, and too often, a piece will not interlock with the other to complete the overall picture.

Let us introduce a few illustrative examples from the book. Michel and Veenhof (paper 12) underline the lack of transparency of terms as well as the difficulty of deciphering a term's meaning from its etymology alone. The term *ṣubātum* is derived from a verb meaning “to seize, to grasp,” and it denotes a fabric that holds the body or is attached to it. However, this “guessed” meaning holds true for most garments, and one does not know whether the term *ṣubātum* designates a garment that is untailored (textile) or one that is ready to wear, or both. Further evidence against the reliability of etymology is provided by Wisti Lassen (13). She



mentions a possible shift in meaning of the term *ktn/kutānum*, which could have been originally used exclusively to refer to a type of textile made of flax (*kitū* in Akkadian and *ktn* in Aramaic), but later denoted other types of textiles with the same weave, color, and texture, as shown, for instance, by the Hebrew term *kuthnoh* (not meaning “flax,” but “cotton”). Similarly, in Modern English, the term *linen* has undergone a shift of meaning and only rarely refers to a textile that is specifically made of flax. Luján provides another example of misleading transparency (18). In ancient times, groups of workers were identified thanks to a personal name in the genitive case, a place name, or the name of the item produced by the group. For example, the *ko-u-re-ja* was a group of workers that produced *ko-u-ra* items, the *te-pe-ja* group *te-pa* items, and the *e-ne-re-ja* group *e-ne-ro* items. But, interestingly, the *ko-u-re-ja* and the *te-pe-ja* groups also produced *tu-na-no* items. This clearly shows that there is not necessarily a univocal relationship between a term and the concept it denotes.

The major issue the readers encounter as they wander throughout the book, however, is that linguistic items seem to have survived better than referential ones. (Terms, or texts, have survived better than concepts, or textiles.) Many excavations have yielded little or no archeological remains (see, e.g., Michel and Veenhof, 12; Lassen, 13; or Villard, 19). Therefore, researchers have no choice but to adopt a corpus-driven approach to terminology. “When most of the primary evidence is missing...we must be creative in order to reconstruct the past. We must tease out bits and pieces of information from different sources and put them together with the hope of getting the broader picture” (Lassen, 13). Often, a term is the first piece of the puzzle. Domain experts then proceed step by step to collect information on the concept. Interestingly, if researchers do succeed—even if only partly—in unraveling the meaning of a term and its concept, they still face a major challenge: How can a concept from ancient times be expressed using today’s vocabulary? Finding an equivalent term or wording in our modern languages sometimes amounts to untying the Gordian knot. Joannès (20) gives the example of the Akkadian term *lubāru*, which can mean a fabric, a cloth, a garment, or a dress or suit. According to Beaugeard (14), the current textile vocabulary refers to concepts that are so different from those that existed in ancient times that each translation endeavor raises more problems than it provides solutions.

I hope the reader will have by now a good sense of the ground covered by the book, although I have elucidated only a few of the numerous issues it addresses. This title is a blueprint for a close collaboration between experts of several domains. Through it, it becomes immediately clear that experts of ancient times can benefit from collaboration initiatives, and that teamwork is necessary in order to assemble a complete puzzle.

Having mentioned the positives of the book, I would be remiss not to mention the drawbacks. Michel and Nosch’s general aim was to attempt a comparative and diachronic study of ancient textile terminology. In this, they are taking a big step forward in the march toward integrative interdisciplinary approaches, although they certainly do not fully succeed. The book is for the most part a collection of descriptive corpus-based studies of terms at different periods of time and in various cultures, languages, and geographical areas. The assemblage of papers has a coherent structure and starts with an introductory contribution to the discipline of terminology, which is followed by background papers dealing with essential concepts of textile production. These first papers are extremely useful to the terminologist who is not acquainted with ancient textiles. Nevertheless, I would have expected an overview both of the languages and of the alphabets and other writing systems at stake (non-historians are left to unlock the mysteries of, e.g., Linear A, logograms, and graphemic classifiers). There is an



introductory paper on terminology for non-terminologists; given the interdisciplinary perspective of the editors, there should have been a short introductory paper or an appendix on ancient languages and writing systems for non-historians as well. Furthermore, while the editors' introductory thoughts provide an accurate summary of the contents, they suffer from a lack of overt reference to the respective chapters and thus fail to help the reader contextualize the papers. I was also disappointed to see no convincing conclusion, but all in all, I found the book incredibly stimulating, and a worthy addition to the terminologist's bookshelf. When one considers the (thousands of) hours spent looking for a concept on the basis of a term and bits of contextual information—hunting for clues to support the supposed definition of the concept—it is simply astounding. It can only be a further incentive not only to reconcile text and textile but also to enhance the collaboration between domain experts and terminologists.