

Wool and the Wanax: An Examination of Garments

While much recent discussion has appraised craft specialization and markets in the Late Bronze Age (LBA) Aegean, there has also been a call for the closer examination of individual areas such as chariot production, pottery, and the distillation of scented oils. This paper seeks to contribute to that conversation by surveying the role aristocratic women played in producing highly skilled textiles used to help maintain diplomatic palace relationships. In this paper, I argue that the woolen garments made by these women served a vital role in the *quid pro quo xenia* relationships necessary for maintaining palace control during the LBA. An examination of Linear B administrative records and grave goods of wealthy women from the Peloponnese, Crete, and the Near East will be compared to the accounts of wealthy women presented in the Homeric Epics to better understand the context and environment of the age. The points of consideration in understanding the impact of specialized craft production as elucidated by Costin will be followed; context, concentration, scale, and intensity (1991). Grave goods from the burials of aristocratic women containing textile-related items will be examined, and other archaeological artifacts relating to weaving and textile production such as loom weights will be considered. These associations will help to illuminate the scale of the wool industry as well as the participation of women. By exploring these activities, a more robust view of the economic and political situation that resulted from the highly skilled work of aristocratic female weavers will be gained.

During the last few decades, scholars have reevaluated the level of control Bronze Age palaces had over the economy. While it was previously believed that the LBA Aegean was highly centralized, attention has now shifted to the likelihood that dispersed localized markets

provided a means of distributing many common goods like pottery (Parkinson, Narassis, and Galaty 2013). However, the palace created a near monopoly in some lucrative economic sectors such as the manufacturing of exceptional woolen items. Palace authorities supervised the entire process of clothing production, from the maintenance of flocks to the finalizing work of highly skilled finishers, and these authorities were then able to redistribute value-added goods to an exclusive group of recipients (Schon 2011). This careful monitoring also led to innovations in breeding and wool collection that resulted in a finer, more comfortable fiber. Economically, this was a dynamic time with localized markets competing against centralized control for distribution, and the palace gravitated towards offering highly finished luxury goods that were impossible to create without the scale available to a centralized authority.

An example of such centralization is depicted on the island of Ionia. Disguised as a stranger, Odysseus recalled the marvel of a purple woolen cloak made by Penelope twenty years before that showed a dog holding down a fawn (Murray, 1919, lines 192-203). This passage describes Penelope as someone who had the time, ability, and education to produce such an intricate garment. Though the descriptions of LBA society in the Homeric Epics are easy to dismiss as they looked backward across several generations, archaeologists have uncovered spindles made of precious metals among the grave goods of wealthy women at several locations in Turkey and Greece (Barber 1994). These discoveries help elucidate the connection between this literary portrayal of ancient aristocratic women and the tangible evidence that was buried with them. The quality of wool produced through these centralized methods combined with the talent and time that would have been available to few but the wealthiest of women led to the production of the finest clothing of the age, and these highly desirable goods helped fortify diplomatic relationships.

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