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Stella Spantidaki

Hellenic Centre for Research and Conservation of Archaeological Textiles

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Spantidaki, Stella, "Remarks on the Interpretation of Some Ambiguous Greek Textile Terms" (2017). Textile Terminologies from the Orient to the Mediterranean and Europe, 1000 BC to 1000 AD. 14.

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Stella Spantidaki, Hellenic Centre for Research and Conservation of Archaeological Textiles

In Textile Terminologies from the Orient to the Mediterranean and Europe, 1000 BC to 1000 AD, ed. Salvatore Gaspa, Cécile Michel, & Marie-Louise Nosch (Lincoln, NE: Zea Books, 2017), pp. 202-211.

doi:10.13014/K26T0JS4

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Remarks on the Interpretation of Some Ambiguous Greek Textile Terms

Stella Spantidaki

The study of written sources of the Classical period (5th and 4th centuries BC) reveals the existence of a very rich vocabulary related to textile production. There are terms referring to materials, tools, manufacture and decoration techniques, colours, people and places related to textile manufacture. Many terms are quite clearly defined, while others present major difficulties in their interpretation. Usually these concern terms for tools, such as κερκίς (pin beater or shuttle) and ἡλακάτη (distaff or spindle) or terms describing fabrics with some kind of decoration. Among the decorative terms, some refer to specific decorative techniques, such as κατάστικτος (embroidered) while others refer to aesthetic results, such as ποικίλος (with elaborate and colourful decoration).

I believe it is quite important at this point to underline a significant characteristic of the ancient Greek language. Although languages are not simply univocal codes and their meaning is the most important dimension, ancient Greek has what may be called an indivisible polysemy of words (and grammatical cases). Its semantic richness cannot be compared to modern European languages, such as English. In this context, one and the same ancient Greek term can include more than one meaning simultaneously (e.g., ὥρα = time, season, youth, perfect moment), in which case the translator does not have to choose between the different meanings, because they are all included – or the same term can have different meanings depending on the context (e.g., ὀργή = anger, wrath, but also drive, impulse, temperament, outburst), in which case the translator has to choose the right meaning. This could lead to difficulties in the lexical field of textiles and textile production.

Very often a single term creates semantic harmonics, which produce in the mind of the listener a series of mental associations through its resonances, consonances and connotations. In order to understand a term, one has to clarify its entire semantic potential. Furthermore, each term must be interpreted in relation to its context as opposed to adopting an univocal or unambiguous meaning. This kind of ambiguity certainly does not apply to every single term. For example, terms for weaving tools must have been clearly defined in Antiquity, although they often seem ambiguous to us today.

1. I would like to thank Marie-Louise Nosch and Cécile Michel for giving me the opportunity to participate in the conference.
3. Cf. modern poetry such as the great Shakespeare or Proust and the using of the developed metaphor in Castoriadis 1999, 35-61.
In this chapter I am going to discuss the term μίτος, a core term of a family of words with many composita, such as εὔμιτος, λεπτόμιτος, τρίμιτος, πολύμιτος and derivatives, such as μιτώδης, μίτινος and τριμίτινος. The term μίτος is without known etymology as per all recent etymological dictionaries and accordingly without convincing explanation about its original meaning. In time it came to refer to the thread in general, ἀγαθῇς μί(λ)του, ’ball of thread’. The term seems to change meaning depending on the compositum (in the case of λεπτόμιτος we are certain that this term refers to a fabric created with fine threads, but in the case of τρίμιτος, for example, we are not sure of the meaning of the term μίτος). From all these related terms, I have chosen to examine the terms μίτος \(\rightarrow\) τρίμιτος / τριμίτινος \(\rightarrow\) πολύμιτος. These terms contain the term μίτος and, moreover, they refer to multiples of μίτος. I think it is important to try to elucidate both the meaning of the core term, and that of its composita.

References of these terms in ancient written sources are scarce. The first reference of the term μίτος is found in the Iliad, and there are three more in texts of the Classical period. Τρίμιτος and τριμίτινος are mentioned four times in Classical literature. Concerning the last term of the family, πολύμιτος, only two references can be found in texts of the same period. The first one refers probably to dense fabrics and the other is a fragmentary text, where the term is mentioned without a context. The term πολύμιτος then disappears from Greek literature for five centuries to appear again in the 1st century AD, where it has been translated as ‘figured linens’. Later, Hesychius, in the 5th century AD, mentions the term δίμιτος, which seems to fit perfectly in the family. During the Byzantine period one more related term appears, ἔξαμιτος, referring to weft faced compound twill fabrics.

So it appears that μίτος, apart from always referring to a simple thread, could also denote a specific type of thread, depending on the context. There are several theories on the meaning of this family of terms, still under discussion.

**Theories on the definition of Μίτος**

**Μίτος = warp thread**

In the first theory, the term is defined as the warp threads of the loom. This is mainly based on the Homeric passage, where the term μίτος has been translated by several scholars as warp. Additionally, a passage from the Anthologia Graeca seems to refer to threads divided by the pin beater, the κερκίς, thus pointing to the warp threads.

**Μίτος = single thread**

According to the second theory, if μίτος signifies thread, the terms τρίμιτος and τριμίτινος could refer to three-ply yarns, in contrast to single threads. Three-stranded cords have been discovered in Akrotiri,
Thera, dated back to the 17th century BC, more than a thousand years before the Classical period.16

In the context of this theory, the more recent term δίμιτος17 would refer to two-ply yarns. The term πολύμιτος would refer to multiple plying, threads or ropes created by more than three different yarns. Fragments of rope dated to the Classical period have been recently discovered in Piraeus, but they have not yet been studied. There is, however, a Classical iconographic scene, which could perhaps be associated to the process of plying and the term πολύμιτος (Fig. 1).

Margarete Lang agrees with Eugen Petersen that the scene depicts a woman twisting together a large number of threads, creating a thick thread or rope forming a large ball.18 Petersen remarks that small weights are attached to the threads in order to keep them taut during the plying, although this cannot be seen on the drawing.19 Lang comments that in sail-making the number three was important and remarks that the second of the finer threads seems to be a three-ply one.20

The two Classical terms, τρίμιτος and τριμίτινος may also refer to fabrics created with three-ply yarns, and the later term δίμιτος to fabrics created with two-ply yarns. Fabrics with two-ply yarns have been discovered in Greece, but all belong to earlier periods, as for example in Akrotiri, Thera (17th century BC),21 Mycenae (13th century BC),22 Aghia Kyriaki on Salamis (Mycenaean cemetery),23 Lefkandi (around 1000 BC)24 and Corfu (7-6th century BC)25 (Fig. 2).

The Tractate Sheqalim26 of the Jerusalem Talmud refers to priestly vestments and the veils and curtains of the Tabernacle with their respective textile requirements. Among them, it mentions six-ply and multiple-ply (32 and 48-ply) threads, which could correspond to the Greek terms ἡξάμιτος (six-ply) and πολύμιτος (32 and 48-ply). Although the elaboration of the Jerusalem Talmud was finished in the mid-5th century AD, this passage could reflect techniques of much earlier periods.

Preserved fabrics from the Classical period are always created with single yarns. However, it is clear that the technology of plying yarns existed in Greece during the Classical period. After all, the city of Athens alone needed huge amounts of roping for its numerous ships27 and surely for countless other

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16. Unpublished study, ARTEX.
18. Lang 1908, 53.
19. Petersen 1892, 182.
20. Lang 1908, 53.
22. Spantidaki & Moulhérat 2012, 192, fig. 7.4- 7.6.
23. Moulhérat & Spantidaki 2009, 16, fig. 3.
24. Moulhérat & Spantidaki in press.
25. Metallinou et. al. 2009, 42, fig. 41a and b.
27. The Naval Inventories of Piraeus of the 4th century BC, which mention the parts of the ships stored in ship sheds make reference to different kinds of rope, ἕξδάκτυλον (6-finger) and ὀκτωδάκτυλον (8-finger) (e.g., *IG* II1 1627.471). The term δάκτυλος is an Attic unit of length measuring ca. 2 cm. These different size ropes would have been produced with different numbers of finer cords, but the numbers in their description do not necessarily correspond to the number of the smaller cords, but only to their thickness.
purposes. The question is whether we can connect the technique of plying with the family of the term μίτος.

Μίτος = heddle

According to the third interpretation theory, the term μίτος refers to the heddles of the loom that is the group of threads connecting the heddle bar to the threads of the warp.28 In a passage of the Partitiones of Aelius Herodianus (2nd century AD), the term μίτος is explained as μιτάριον, the term that gave the Modern Greek term for heddle, μιτάρι.29 It would be plausible to assume that in the 2nd century AD the term had at least the meaning of heddle. Several references from later periods point to an interpretation of the term μίτος as heddle.30

The warp-weighted loom has a natural shed formed by a shed bar at its bottom, so the Greeks could create a plain weave using only one heddle bar. The Modern Greek term δίμιτος is an Ancient Greek term that has survived in Modern Greek and refers to every type of twill. In Ancient Greek, δίμιτος could refer to a weave using two heddle bars, the twill 2:1 (Fig. 3). Unfortunately, there is no written evidence to this term until the 5th century AD. The Classical terms τρίμιτος and

τριμίτινος, could refer to a weave using three heddle bars, the twill 2:2, or 3:1 (Fig. 4 and 5). The medieval term ἑξάμιτον refers to samite - weft faced compound twill (Fig. 6).

A brief remark on the term ἑξάμιτος. The weaving unit of weft faced compound twill is 6:1; so it appears that this weaving term has been named after its number of floating warp threads, which in this case, are six. We could assume that the meanings of the terms δίμιτος and τρίμιτος and τριμίτινος are in the same
direction. In this hypothesis, the term δίμιτος could refer to twill 2:1, while the terms τρίμιτος and τριμίτινος to twill 3:1. In this case, the term mitos refers to floating threads, not the heddles of the loom.

Finally, I can only associate the ancient Greek term πολύμιτος with complex weaves using several heddle bars, such as ‘taqueté’ (weft faced compound tabby).  

There is no material evidence of twill textiles in Greece: none of the discovered fragments of Greek archaeological textiles is woven in twill. Furthermore, depictions of weaving looms in Greek iconography do not show traces of mechanical shedding; at best, one can recognize one heddle bar, κανών, which was necessary for weaving a tabby.

Classical depictions of clothing on vases and sculptures usually show plain fabrics with stripes or small-scale geometric patterns, or fabrics decorated with complex designs. Diagonal lines that possibly represent twill variations are rare and they seem to be more common on depictions of furniture (Fig. 7). In contrast to this, Archaic iconography (6th century BC) depicts more often garments decorated with patterns that may refer to twill. If these depictions can actually be connected to twill, they indicate that twill was known in the ancient Greek world.

What does this linguistic information mean for the use of twill in Classical Greece? All surviving textiles from Greece derive from funeral contexts, consequently, their corpus is not characteristic of the textile production in this period. We are not familiar with the real variety of garments and utilitarian textiles used, only with those chosen to accompany the dead in the grave. Yet, the absence of terms connected to twill garments in Classical literature and in catalogues of dedications of textiles, such as the Brauron Clothing Catalogues, may indicate that

32. As an example, see Archaic attic vases in the British Museum, Museum numbers: 1843,1103.77; 1843,1103.100.x; 1867,0508.949; 1868,0610.3.

Fig. 7. Bed covering, or mattress, depicting a diamond twill pattern with a white dot in the centre. Crater of the Laodamia painter, British Museum, Museum no. 1870,0710.2. © The Trustees of the British Museum.
twill was not commonly used in Greece during this period.

**Mitos = relation to felt?**

Lastly, in Classical literature there seems to be a connection between the terms τρίμιτος and τριμίτινος and felt. Two in four known mentions of τρίμιτος and one in three references of τριμίτινος are indeed related to felt products, hats or shoes.

33. Lyssipp. Fr. 3 (3) (PCG V 1986).
34. Cratinus Fr. 5.1 (Kock 1888).
37. For discussion see Barber 1991, 268, note 7.
38. Barber 1991; LSJ, s.u.

**Conclusion**

The above hypotheses show that the various meanings of the term μίτος, both synchronically and diachronically, reflect the characteristic polysemy of Greek. They also underline the fact that semantics and production techniques evolve and change through time. So each term of the μίτος family could, during the same period, have more than one meaning simultaneously. Yet at the same time, a meaning could replace another, as the semantics changed. In other words, the interpretation theories could coincide in certain periods, with the term μίτος having more than one meaning at the same time. But they could also replace one another, as the meaning changed through time. Hopefully, new finds will narrow down the semantic field and help elucidate the meanings of this family of terms.

**Ancient Sources**


11. Interpretation of Some Ambiguous Greek Textile Terms


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