

Margarita Gleba

Great Britain

Textile Fibre in Italy Before Roman Empire

Ancient literary sources indicate that by the beginning of the Common Era, different qualities of wool were available to Roman consumers and many of the best fibres were produced in Italy, from where they spread throughout the Roman Empire in the form of sheep, raw materials or finished textiles. Until now however, the research has focused on archaeological textiles from the periphery of the Roman Empire: to the south, textiles, papyri and ostraca found in Roman Egypt have made the textile industry of that province the best known in the Roman history; to the north, archaeological textiles of Central and Northern Europe have been scrutinised and provide some understanding of textile production in Northern Roman provinces and beyond. Data obtained from these archaeological textiles indicate an appearance of new fibre types with increased Roman influence in these peripheral areas. Yet the heart of the Roman world and the focal point where all influences met – Italy itself – is still a relatively blind spot on a European textile and fibre map.

This paper presents some of the results of the project FIBRE (*textile Fibre in Italy Before Roman Empire*, 2009-2011), which aims to build on the achieved knowledge by focusing, for the first time, on Italy through a systematic collection of data and analysis of fibre samples obtained from archaeological textiles found on archaeological sites throughout Italy. The endogenous development of textile fibres in ancient Italy is investigated on a macroscopic, microscopic and molecular level through targeted application of fibre analysis, isotopic tracing, DNA analysis and other methods. Material included in the project ranges from the Bronze Age textiles from the North Italian sites Castione dei Marchesi and Lucone di Polpenazze, to the Early Iron Age items found at Verucchio, Sasso di Furbara and Casale Marittimo, to the Roman period fibres from Rome and Vesuvius area. The data collected will give a much clearer and more elaborate picture of the development of textile fibres used and their profound impact on technology, agriculture, animal husbandry and society in Italy from prehistory until Roman period.

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