
Recycling for the Dead: Deposition of Textiles in Iron Age Graves with Two Case Studies from Croatia

Julia Fileš Kramberger*^{†1}

¹Department of Archaeology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb – Ivana Lučića 3, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia

Résumé

Textile is itself a perishable material, so its functions within a society and the process behind its production with all its possible social dimensions are all the more elusive. Although plenty textile production tools are found on Iron Age sites throughout Europe, textile fragments themselves are a rare find. Thankfully, the textile can be and often is preserved by the corrosion of metal objects deposited close to them, especially in burial contexts. By analyzing these mineralized fragments in some cases we are able to determine the general properties of cloth, such as weave, pattern, thread diameter, raw material, etc., but also, depending on the stratigraphy, the function of said textile. Although not all Iron Age graves yield as many textile finds as the famous princely burial at Hochdorf, Germany, many grave goods made of corrosive material help preserve textile pieces.

As an example, preliminary results of analyses carried out on mineralized textile finds from a Hallstatt period elite Tumulus 6 at Kaptol-Gradci and from several graves at the Middle La Tène cemetery of Zvonimirovo, both in Croatia, will be shown here. Although general characteristics of these textile fragments were determined and a change in textile production that happened between the Early and Late Iron Ages is visible on these fragments, their function is more difficult to identify. Many studies have shown that textiles within graves served not only as clothes for the deceased but also as shrouds, furnishing and various types of containers used for wrapping and covering human remains and burial goods. For now, it would seem that these textile fragments originate from pouches, containers and wrappings of burial goods, as on both these necropolises the burial rite was cremation so all clothes of the deceased would have burned on the pyre with the remains.

The question that remains is whether these textiles were originally intended for the dead or if they were recycled from already existing garments that no longer served their purpose for the living. Recycling of textiles is difficult to determine if there is no trace of sewing or the context itself does not imply it, as can be said for textile fillings of La Tène hollow bronze bracelets and anklets. Probably the most famous finds of recycled textile come from the Iron Age salt mines in Hallstatt and Dürrnberg where it was discovered that textiles were intentionally torn into strips or sewn together to fashion makeshift bindings for tools or sacks for hauling salt in the mines. As mineralized textiles from graves are commonly smaller fragments, evidence of recycling is rarely visible. Nevertheless, based on other objects from the burials and the pattern of the ritual, it might be possible to hypothesize the origin of textiles as well.

*Intervenant

[†]Auteur correspondant: jkkrambe@ffzg.hr

Mots-Clés: recycled textiles, mineralized textiles, burials, Iron Age, Kaptol, Zvonimirovo