Research of archaeological and historical textiles in the Czech Republic

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Textile production represented an important component of the economy, and textile material, as well as all products made from it, formed a significant part of the material culture of all periods of historic development. When examining the historical development of textile production, finds of textile remains and tools and equipment that were used in the lengthy process of making textiles – from acquiring the raw materials to the final product – provide a good source of information.

The detailed processing of preserved prehistoric organic material, therefore, fabric remnants are scarce, but appearing finds. Small textile scraps from medieval town waste layers and objects, remnants of fabric structure in corrosive products of metal objects coming from grave finds of the younger prehistoric age and early middle ages can be encountered most frequently of all. Relatively well preserved fabrics also appear together with human remains in tombs and crypts of the medieval as well as modern age. Imprints of textiles on ceramic or pumice are rare, finds of carbonized textiles are unique.

The detailed processing of preserved prehistoric and medieval textiles provides valuable information on the growing of cultural crops containing textile fibres, on the level of technical advancement of equipment and tools, the level and organisation of textile production, variability of textile techniques, the diversity of products, distribution, trade and the share of domestic production and imported goods.

Archaeological textile finds represent a unique and, thanks to their organic nature, a rare source for learning about an important component of material culture, that was part of the daily life of people in the past. Thorough research, analyses, processing and the evaluation of preserved textiles provides an overview of the development of used materials and their working, as well as of the method, level and organisation of textile production and all related crafts.

The professional processing of archaeological textile fragments is based on a study of textile technology and detailed documentation, which provide technical information on the method of processing and production of textile products. Optical microscope and SEM, are used to track and evaluate the following parameters: textile type; the number and dimensions of fragments; current colour; utilised textile materials; fibre morphology; weave; thread count on a 10 mm area of fabric; surface finish by fulling; the direction of thread twisting; thread thickness; another description recording decorative elements, faults, fixed edges, stitches, etc. Along with an evaluation of the find circumstances and an analysis of analogies and historical contexts, the textile technology study is the basis for interpreting the original function and method of use of the individual textile fragments.