

Tracing Population Movements in Ancient East Asia through the Linguistics and Archaeology of Textile Production

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The words for textiles and for the process of their manufacture, along with physical archaeological evidence showing the locations of spinning, weaving, and sewing, can provide clues to the movements of peoples in Ancient East Asia. Archaeologically, fragments of fibers in worked form, such as rope, thread, and textiles, are easily overlooked among other human debris, and are extremely rare. but Indirect evidence of textile production is frequently collected. Indicators of textile processes occur with impressions of cord or cloth in which can be traced from the earliest known pottery found at Gasya, in the Russian Far East, dated to the early Holocene. Actual fragments of rope and string have been found at Angangxi in Manchuria, while rope belts are depicted on figurines in the Hongshan period. Jomon pottery is even named for its cord-marking. Firm archaeological evidence of woven cloth begins later than rope and twine, but production tools provide an avenue to assessing textile production. Ceramic disks described as spindle whorls are often listed in site reports. Thus, we can assume that some kinds of fibers were being spun, although wool-bearing animals (other than some dogs) are unknown in those cultures. Hemp is a likely source for both rope and simple woven cloth. Furthermore, stone weights are common in the Neolithic period, usually reported as “net sinkers.” However, these objects were arguably loom weights, as they are more often found in houses rather than on shores where nets are kept. Where bone is well preserved, objects described as needles (with eyes) and knitting needles were also collected. Although such artifacts may be inadequately described and often simply noted among the small finds in a survey or excavation, the weight of the evidence from Manchuria, the Russian Far East, the Korean Peninsula and the Japanese Islands suggests household production of textiles. A map of such finds in Bronze Age Korea shows that virtually every site contains spindle whorls as well as weights. Tracing words for the tools and products of textile production will aid in understanding the movements of early peoples in East Asia