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CLOTH AND CURRENCY: ON THE RITUAL-ECONOMICS OF EURASIAN TEXTILE CIRCULATION AND THE ORIGINS OF TRADE, FIFTH TO SECOND MILLENNIA BC

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CIVILIZATION AND THE ORIGINS OF TRADE

The meaning of “trade” and the understanding of its role in human societies lies at the root of – at least to the modern observer – one of the most confusing paradoxes in the relationship between objects and people. The recognition of this puzzle was touched upon by Marx and his comments on the “commodity fetish” (Marx 1906). Under capitalism, objects (or rather commodities) are collected, made, or worked upon by human labor in certain social spheres (of “production”) and then wrenched and transported into totally different spheres (of “consumption”). The “value” of these objects is realized primarily in the consumption sphere: authenticity and social credit accruing to the judicial buyer, whilst the skills and aura of the laborer are effaced through the transition between spheres. To use Weber’s borrowing from Schiller, most acts of production in capitalism are “disenchanted” (Greisman 1976) and rational, except perhaps for certain ring-fenced and strictly regulated fields of labor, bounded under the label of “art” and created by specialist “artists” who are

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often required to live slightly outside the conventions of normal society to draw on aspects of the sublime or divine.

Lingering ambiguity about the consequences of the separation of spheres of production and consumption remain embedded in our everyday discourse on consumerism. This ambiguity of meaning is best understood through a concrete example of uncertain authenticity: How is it that an object of mass-produced clothing – bought off the shelf from a branch of the high-street clothes shop H&M, whose raw materials may have come from Central Asia, Egypt, or the United States, whose assembly may have taken place at any number of textile mills across the Third World, alongside thousands or perhaps even millions of identical or near identical copies – can nonetheless come to play a central role in personal, “individual,” or group identities and their resulting human relationships by its adornment on a human body? Whether this kind of use of commodities is “authentic” is essentially a moral question (to which we will turn later), but important here is the clear implication of this paradox: that there is an alternative model, one in which the spheres of production and consumption are not separate (e.g., knit-your-own jumper!) and where the producer accrues authenticity and social credit.

On close inspection, this autarkic alternative is rather unrealistic, at least if you see producer and consumer as representing the same individual (taking the literal implications of “Man Makes Himself,” cf. Childe 1941); there is almost no part of human activity (especially relating to objects) that is not dependent on “exchange” and “interaction” with others. Indeed, how exactly would one measure “social credit” without the change in behavior affected by fellow human beings toward an individual? One should take care, perhaps, with making the division between “production” and “consumption” in any case; many economic acts could be classified as either (or both) depending on your perspective: By presenting a gift, are you “producing” value or “consuming” it?

Perhaps the more distinctive thing that Marx captures in his analysis of capitalism, then, is its associated disconnect between networks of people and networks of things. In a hypothetical noncapitalist small-scale society, everyone is known to everyone and hence, production and consumption spheres are intervisible: The flow of objects closely mimic the flow of people. Under capitalist large-scale societies, by contrast, producers and consumers are most often strangers: Objects can flow along totally different networks from those traveled by humans.

This somewhat abstract preamble allows us to construct a different definition of “trade,” one that does not irrevocably associate it with “bulk” trade so important to Wallerstein’s analysis of the modern world system (cf. critique from Schneider 1977; Sherratt and Sherratt 1998), but nonetheless sets it aside as a distinct kind of activity. In this definition, trade is the exchange of materials, objects, or services in which, hypothetically at least, the participants

are of equal (legal) status and in which the items exchanged are judged to be in some sense of equal value (or that each participant feels they are gaining profit from the transaction), whereby, again in theory, once the ritual of trade has been completed, the relationship between participants may also be terminated with no loss of face. This contrasts with other types of exchange (tribute, gift-giving, sharing) in which the status is clearly unequal (e.g., between gods and mortals) or where to end a relationship after the transaction would be tantamount to a slap in the face or a declaration of war, for example if one were to accept or give a present to a family member and then refuse to speak to them again.

To clarify further, it may be useful to instead ask what trade “does” rather than what it “is”: Trade offers a set of abstract social rules, which allow the exchange of materials between strangers and, thus, over long distances. It facilitates social life in an anonymous sphere by being generalized (or at least imagined to be so) for many different communities (cf. the imagined communities of nations, Anderson 1983), and for this reason, it is particularly associated with “large-scale” or “complex” societies, although such stranger-to-stranger connections should not be considered exclusive to the urban environment. “Gift exchange,” by contrast, is precisely designed to build ongoing relationships using culturally specific rituals, usually amongst those who know each other well or are directly reliant on each other. Of course, in practice, most exchange relationships cannot be neatly fitted into either ideal; in commercial situations, ongoing relationships are often strong – for example, when returning to the same seller or buyer, or when giving preferential prices to friends and relations – and, in ostensibly personal networks, certain types of transactions may be read as profit oriented. Additionally, the same objects can be passed along human networks using a mixture of different modes of exchange (cf. Kopytoff 1986).

The implication of this definition is that “trade,” as a mode of exchange between strangers, arose with the first cognitively modern humans and remains an aspect of all human economies. The “origins” of trade, let alone capitalism, should not be thought to emerge as some radically different new behavior at any one moment. Nonetheless, a regular need to transact with strangers probably formed a relatively small part of the overall concerns of individuals and groups in the small-scale societies that were typical of most parts of the world until relatively recently. With the rising density of human settlement associated with agricultural and then urban revolutions, social networks moved beyond the cognitive limits of human sociality, typically, if controversially, cited at about 148 individuals (following Dunbar 1992). This created a growing necessity to interact with a greater number of strangers. The prominence of trade therefore seems to increase through time – both within settled groups and with more traditional mobile ones – starting gradually in the Old World from the ninth

or eighth millennium BC especially around the so-called Fertile Crescent, but expanding and deepening into the following centuries, perhaps rather dramatically during the Eurasian Bronze Age, circa third and second millennia BC, by which time large interregional and perhaps even intercontinental trade networks may have been in existence (Frank 1993; Kohl 1978a; Ratnagar 2006). This chapter aims to look precisely at the run-up to this expansion (or intensification) of trade between the fourth and second millennia BC.

This approach also helps us to clarify the relationship of trade to “civilization.” It is an uncomfortable word to the modern archaeologist, at least when “civilization” appears to imply totality (i.e., civilization against barbarism) or multiplicity (in the Howardian sense of “clash of civilizations,” cf. Rowlands, this volume). But “civilization,” like trade, is perhaps best understood not by what it is, but what it does. Civilization organizes and structures very large groups of people: As such it can be seen as a set of generalized social rules, of which trade – that is, exchange with strangers, though not necessarily long-distance or bulk trade (cf. Earle, this volume) – is one important aspect. In the case of Near Eastern and European “civilization” – and if one accepts that there is a degree of continuity to “Western” economic structures down to the modern day – one of the most important trades with strangers was in dress or textiles. This fact takes on added significance when one considers one of the priorities of European imperial expansionism in its self-conscious “civilizing” missions in the New World, Africa, and Asia, was the creation or at least elaboration of the Janus concepts of nakedness and clothing (Comaroff 1996). The same mission, of course, also had the effect of sustaining and expanding European cloth manufacturing industries (see e.g., Riello 2010). Since our first written records of commerce began in Mesopotamia, the textile industry has played a pivotal if not dominant role in urban and market economies. The textile-related etymology of the word “investment” – which, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, entered the English language from Italian merchant parlance during the era when merchants of Venice and Genoa were critical agents in the trade of textiles between Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean and beyond – is telling, reminding us of the deep relationship between capital and cloth. This chapter will attempt, at least partly, to explore this relationship, arguing for a particular role for textiles as agents of change, allowing the establishment of state-based societies and what could be called “metal ritual-economies.” If the evidence for trade is occasionally scant and circumstantial for our period of interest, the particular focus on textiles exaggerates this problem further. Nonetheless, pursuing this oft-invisible material provides precious insights over more archaeologically accessible categories.

Finally, the term “ritual-economics” in the title also needs some explanation, to help shed light on the approach taken here. What is referenced by this phrase – borrowed from D. Wengrow’s interpretation of metal hoarding and

deposition zones in Bronze Age Eurasia (see Wengrow 2011) – is the anthropological assertion that “economic” activities are always ritually and morally constituted, based on a set of contingent and sometimes conflicting transactional or cultural rules. This approach contrasts with orthodox economic theory dating back to Adam Smith, in which economics is treated as a separate sphere of human interaction that can be studied in isolation from morality, ritual, or other culturally contingent factors. At some level, ritual-economy refers to the same kind of field as, what used to be called in Marxian accounts, “ideology.” Ritual-economy is a more helpful term, however, because it reflects the necessity of active performance of social and moral ideas through physical ritual and ritualized contexts of production, exchange, and consumption and involving physical ritually created objects: That is, it is not that ideology is “materialized” through objects, but that objects *are* material ideas. This term also has the benefit of linking economics to religion and to discourses on morality (i.e., on what is good and bad) whose relevance, if not already self-evident, should slowly become clear through the course of this chapter.

“TRADE” IN PLAIN LIGHT: OLD ASSYRIAN TEXTILE CIRCULATION

It is common to associate the beginnings of commercial exchange with the fourth millennium BC and the emergence of the world’s first urban or state systems, that is the world’s first “civilization” (Trigger 2003; Ur 2010). But on any informal definition, including the one outlined in the preceding text, long-distance circulation of small quantities of exotic materials in Eurasia (particularly in the Near East) goes back considerably further. One well-known example is the widespread distribution of obsidian between the highland sources and communities in Iran, Anatolia, and the Levant, which dates back to the Neolithic (Cauvin 2002; Healey 2007) and continued well into the Bronze Age (Frahm and Feinberg 2013). During the fifth millennium BC – the so-called ‘Ubaid era in Mesopotamia – an even wider circulation network is evidenced especially by the distribution of “precious” colored stones (in the form of beads, including copper) and shared cultural ideas about architectural space and food production (Stein 2010: 28–30), even if the political orientation of these groups might have been based primarily on control over local resources (Stein 1994). What is interesting about this era is the absence of urban architecture or social structures – whether systems of standardization (of weight, volume) or of recording (i.e., systematic writing) – that would otherwise facilitate larger-scale agglomeration and/or elite differentiation. The exceptions to this are the nascent sealing practices identified at certain sites in the Late ‘Ubaid or end of the fifth millennium BC (see, e.g., Değirmentepe, Esin 1990; Tell esh-Sheikh, Aruz 1992; Tepe Gawra, Rothman 2002: 81–83; Tal-e Bakun B, Alizadeh 2006: 5, 83–90), which presumably document a rising

need to create systems of trust in the context of a growing need to interact with strangers. In this sense, northern 'Ubaid communities may have created the first generalized conceptual framework for "trade" over long distances.

So far, there is little indication, technological, or even iconographic, of any role for textiles in these fifth millennium circulation networks. Admittedly, this impression may be due to preservation bias that obscures a vital invisible flow. But on present evidence it seems plausible that industrial-scale textile production and circulation only really began in the fourth millennium. Indeed, Guillermo Algaze has for some time argued for a major role for textiles and the textile industry in the creation of the expansive Late Uruk phenomenon. Southern Mesopotamia's unique advantage was partly geographical access, partly a successful elite socioeconomic strategy of value multiplication, converting cheap "imports" into expensive "exports" (Algaze 2001, 2005). His characterization of northern Syro-Mesopotamia as backward compared to the south may now be considered unbalanced in terms of extent and complexity of urbanism (Oates et al. 2007), but his basic model of a "Sumerian take-off" is still interesting to consider. In Algaze's view, textiles represented the pinnacle of added-value exports; and its production, all but invisible in direct terms, may have been the driving force behind a "labor revolution," including the rise of slavery or bondage, documented by the high number of references to signs that we believe mean "female slave," "laborer," or "male slave" within the Late Uruk, or so-called Archaic, corpus of texts (Algaze 2001: 212; Englund 1998).

Algaze's suggestions are provocative and intriguing even if their consequences for the mode of exchange are difficult to explore in detail given the limited nature of the early texts. To see the range of potential relationships between trade and textiles in a plainer light, it is easier to review the sources from some much later periods, namely in the second millennium BC of Anatolia, set against recent ethnographic accounts of cloth circulation. Those interested in the topic of trade and especially of ancient textiles are very familiar with the Old Assyrian Trade Colony System through their revealing textual record. Though representing a very narrow chronological period – effectively the great majority of the 23,000 texts so far unearthed date between 1895 and 1865 BC (Barjamovic, Hertel, and Larsen 2012) and come almost exclusively from the site of Kültepe – they document a snapshot of an impressive ongoing system of commodity circulation administered by expatriate Assyrians from northern Mesopotamia (see Barjamovic 2011; Barjamovic, this volume). Besides metals (tin and copper are mentioned most frequently as commodities, plus silver and gold as currencies), the major manufactured commodities mentioned by these texts are textiles. The extant texts presumably represent only a partial proportion of the trade, but nonetheless record huge quantities of cloth being

shipped from Assur to Kültepe at a profit measured in silver (Barjamovic, this volume). Besides numbers, the texts record variations in cloth qualities, geographic and stylistic origins, materials and colors, and their relative costs (Michel and Veenhof 2010).

Despite these fascinating details, it remains unclear exactly what these fabrics looked like, precisely how they were made and exactly what their ultimate destinations and their contexts of consumption were, especially because direct archaeological evidence of any cloth is almost completely absent. Clues may be sought from studies of specialist textile production, for example the distinctive use of twill or twill-like patterns implied by crescent-shaped loom weights and clothing patterns shown in glyptic images (see Lassen 2013) or from the rise of painted pottery and wall paintings associated with this period (Wilkinson 2014a).

These issues aside, what is important to learn from the Old Assyrian texts is the high degree to which international trade in textiles was developed – in both political and legal systems and physical infrastructure – in a way that would be broadly recognizable to recent historical or modern traders. The suggestion, which has been made very explicitly and convincingly by Barjamovic (this volume), is that the overall trading system was already established for a few hundred years, even if the exact frameworks and partners had changed over time. One additional feature that is striking relates to the role of local states and particularly the use of cloth as tax (Larsen 1967). According to numerous contracts, local Anatolian rulers at cities where the Assyrians traded, or at least their representatives, were entitled to choose a certain percentage (*išrātum* or tithe) from the stock of the newly arrived caravan shipment, then levy an excise tax (*nishātum*) as the goods were cleared for sale (Veenhof 1972: 85–86; Veenhof and Eidem 2008: 83; with regard to wool, see Lassen 2010).

By way of example, regarding imported textiles:

Out of 42 textiles (from) the house of Aššur-malik: 2 ½ textiles are the nishatum-tax; x+½ shekels of silver will be paid; x+5 textiles for pre-emption; 1 textile is lost; 40 textiles /...; 3 ½ textiles the karum-authority will take. (Harvard Art Museum 1983.98; translation: D. Ragavan)

To the Kaneš Colony from the Hurama Colony. The king of Hurama has issued a decree, saying ... The king can deduct 10 textiles from your textiles. (Kt m/k 134: 11–21; translation: G. Barjamovic 2011: 184)

And, regarding local textiles:

From every 10 parakannum-textiles you will take 1 parakannum-textile (as) your nishātum-tax. If the textile is taken in the city-gate, the textile will cost a fixed price. (Kt 00/k 6: 169–72; translation: A.W. Lassen 2010)

Whilst in some cases these kinds of transactions were couched in the language of gifts (Barjamovic 2011: 310) – given to the authorities as a kind of social lubricant or, perhaps more cynically, as a bribe – it is also clear that, at least in this particular context, textiles can also act as a type of taxable currency within the Anatolian milieu. Though it is unclear what happened next to the textiles collected as *ešrātum*, it seems reasonable to assume that such objects were accumulated and periodically distributed amongst the faithful dependents of the king or deposited in sanctuaries for the gods – much like the metal bullion whose accumulation “incentivized” the Assyrian traders – or else exported again to the next trading circuit in exchange for silver. In itself, the idea of commodities being siphoned off as tax rather than their equivalent in metals is not unsurprising if they were so valuable to Anatolian elites, but what is the significance of this pseudocurrency role for textiles?

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES ON TEXTILE CIRCULATION AND TEXTILE CURRENCY

Before considering this further, it is important to ask: What exactly is a “currency” (or money), and why would it be important to this story? It is rather difficult to provide a concise definition, but at the simplest, currency is simultaneously both a physical token of “value” and an abstract symbol for “valuation” (Maurer 2006). It is a material system of organizing the transfer of rights: that is, who is or – perhaps more importantly – who is *not* entitled to certain resources; and it mediates the exchange of other objects and duties. Currencies can veer between an emphasis on their “physical” and “virtual” nature through time – as the relationship between modern currencies and the “Bretton Woods” gold standard illustrate (Corbridge and Thrift 1994). Before the invention of coinage in Anatolia, India, and China around the mid-first millennium BC (Schaps 2007a, 2007b), currencies were not, of course, always represented by pieces of stamped or molded metal (indeed, in most parts of the world they continued not to be). However, cuneiform accounts imply that silver had become a near-universal measure of value in Mesopotamia during the third millennium BC (Moorey 1999: 237), and still functioned this way for the Old Assyrian merchants and their associates (Dercksen 2005).

The historical and ethnographic literature refers to many different types of objects or materials being used as “currency”: including bangles, beads, cowrie shells, feathers, cattle, axes, or blankets (Einzig 1949: 29–307). As David Graeber has pointed out (Graeber 2001: 91–94), what is common to many currencies, with the exception perhaps of examples like salt, is their role in adorning the body in some way. In this light, it is not insignificant that, if one thinks of the very earliest use of metals in the Old World (e.g., at Çayönü, see Stech 1990),

it is not as “tools” to replace stone ones but as beads and jewelry to adorn the body. Woven textiles are simply one of a number of elaborated forms of body adornment techniques, and it is therefore not surprising that they should sometimes have been used as “currency.”

Some classic ethnographic case studies of textiles as currency, or textiles as wealth, are worth exploring here. All of them can be found discussed, to differing depths, in the excellent collection of essays edited by Jane Schneider and Annette Weiner, *Cloth and Human Experience* (1991).

Lele and Raffia Cloth

Perhaps the best-known case of cloth as currency is that of the Lele of West Africa, studied by Mary Douglas in the 1950s (Douglas 1958). In this region, the young men of Lele communities devoted a large proportion of their time to the production and circulation of *raffia* cloth, made from the raffia palm. The cloths were required as gifts at key events: particularly to wives after a birth; or on evidence of fidelity; to parents of the bride upon marriage; or to other men as recompense for an acknowledged adultery with the other man's wife. But they were also given informally to smooth all social relations. Although they could be worn, *raffia* clothing only survived for around four months in full-time use, which together with their requirement as dues for entering new status or relations, created an endless demand for new cloth. Their status as garments or body ornamentation was thus almost secondary, and their primary purpose was as a tool for organizing relationships, particularly between men and women. Despite their role in exchange, they never formed a “universal” convertible currency, as demonstrated by Douglas's own futile attempts to purchase *raffia* cloth using francs. Instead, they remained built into *particular* social networks of obligation and relatedness.

Trobrianders and Banana Palm Bundles

Amongst the Trobrianders – famous in anthropological studies of exchange by the ethnographic account of their *kula* circuit brought to light by Bruno Malinowski (1922) and famously reinterpreted by Marcel Mauss in his canonical *Essai sur le don* (Mauss 2002) – Annette Weiner highlighted an aspect of activity completely ignored by Malinowski in favor of the male-orientated *kula* trade, namely the production and dissemination of banana palm bundles and skirts (Weiner 1991; cf. Weiner 1992). Immense amounts of women's labor time were devoted to bundle production, to be given away on the rituals associated with a death. These “funerary” gifts represented tokens of wealth but also a kind of post-mortem balancing of the books, as “replacement of all that has been given by members of other matrilineages to the dead person during

her or his life” (Weiner 1991: 39). The bundles were short-lived expendable items, used on the occasion of the disseminating funeral and associated rituals but not designed to be curated. Significantly, the prestige of a male chief was regulated by his wives’ ability to distribute this cloth-wealth to kin as indirect exchange for political support, thereby providing a balance to a chief’s political domination.

Samoa and 'Ie Toga/Pandanu Mats

In Samoa, by contrast, Weiner noted the curation and hoarding of “inalienable” cloth as dynastic treasure was one of the main features of the female production of decorated mats, made from fibers of the *pandanu*. After completion, mats were given either away by their makers, on the occasion of key social rituals (births, marriages, deaths, and dynastic *investitures*) or stockpiled in matrilineal family caches: in both cases to “emphasize association with ancestors and events of the past, as well as legitimate claims to title and rank” (Weiner and Schneider 1991: 5). A women’s relationship to her brother(s) played an essential role in the circulation of this cloth. While production of new mats was important, even more essential was the ability of participants to keep mats within their descent group as a reflection or demonstration of the group’s strength.

Each of these cultural contexts illustrates the way textiles are used in so-called small-scale societies to form and organize persons and their relationships in rather different ways. In the case of the Trobrianders, cloths (or bundles) are produced rapidly as short-lived expendable items to be dispersed rapidly on death as a way to measure and renegotiate rank in a relatively unstable distributed power system. In the case of Samoa, mats are produced slowly and circulated or curated very carefully to ensure that the most valuable items remain wedded to their matrilineal communities, mixing “contradictory yearnings – for circulation and permanence” (Weiner and Schneider 1991: 6). The Samoan use of cloth recalls, to some extent, the carefully orchestrated circulation of Chilkat blankets as part of the potlatch ceremonies of the northwest coast of North America, such as the Kwakiutl, in which rights and duties were also organized around houses (cf. Lévi-Strauss’s concept of “house-societies,” Lévi-Strauss 1983; Joyce and Gillespie 2000). For the Lele, *raffia* cloth, produced exclusively by men, can only be circulated within certain networks because it is required to achieve certain social goals or create social relations. In all these cases, the value of cloth has a direct bearing on power relationships between men and women, and on the relative rank of the producers and/or receivers. In some cases, producers are superior, in some cases receivers, and in others it is a third party who can “cash in” the associated status life produced by the exchange. A commonality is the generation of “benevolent spiritual or ancestral involvement” in the production of cloth, which facilitates the transfer of other

goods and duties between people (Weiner and Schneider 1991: 11). Other examples also show this aspect includes the Sakalava of coastal Madagascar, among whom the dead are wrapped in specially produced *lamba* cloth (Feeley-Harnik 1991); or the Kodi of Indonesia, amongst whom the dyeing of textiles and associated smells are likened to putrefying flesh and linked to a system of prohibitions and taboos between birth, death, and menstruation (Hoskins 1991). Schneider argues further, in fact, that one of the key effects of a capitalist mode of textile production is the disenchantment of the production end of textile activity, replaced by a cultural emphasis on the enchantment contained, instead, within the ability to acquire and consume cloth (Schneider 1991).

What textiles do not seem to do, at least in these case studies, is to transform into a *universal* abstract currency, or even, for that matter, a universally tradable commodity. Instead, they seem to stay embedded in social relations of obligation and kinship. Why is this the case? Annette Weiner draws on a distinction between “hard” and “soft” currencies: bones, metals, and stone on the one hand, and cloth and flesh on the other (Weiner 1992: 59). Such materials are commonly treated as oppositional symbolic qualities, and we might emphasize the effects of this materiality on potential modes of exchange (or nonexchange). Whilst hard, metal, of course, is additionally especially “liquid”: It can be melted down and remade infinitely and split perfectly into a continuous range of proportions. These material qualities facilitate its use as a semiotic sign (symbol/index) for the abstract quantitative nature of value. By contrast, the substance of cloth, while it can be produced in an infinite variety of forms and even cut and recombined on occasions, tends to resist this kind of biographic erasure and reinvention of form. In fact, the myriad heterogeneity of cloth and the often-unique forms individual cloths can make it difficult to use cloth as a symbol or measure of universal abstract equivalence because (unless we are talking about mass-produced cloths) textiles are more easily ranked *qualitatively* not *quantitatively* or *proportionally*.

Textiles as valuables tend toward inalienability (in the sense described by Weiner 1992) and biographic specificity (cf. the object biographies described by Kopytoff 1986). Even when exchanged, it is difficult to strip a cloth of its narrative or biographic associations, thus some “spirit” or “aura” of the producer or the giver is retained. Additionally, while valued cloths, clothes, and rugs may be accumulated and curated through time, their life cycle is finite and hence temporally less redeployable. Indeed, under modern capitalist tradition, the value of cloth is generated through a “fashion system” that elevates and exaggerates this short life cycle to a process of rapid and obligatory obsolescence (Barthes 1983). In some sense, cloth also “wants” to be looked at (cf. Mitchell 1996), certainly more so than other materializations of social value that are less powerful visually and hence more appropriate to caching (Graeber 2001: 91–115). Of course, textiles can be cached and hidden away

for some while (“accumulated” in capitalist terms), as they are in the Samoan example, but to maintain value and meaning they must be periodically seen or circulated before being rehidden. Thus, in economies where evident wealth and high visibility, as opposed to hidden potential, forms the dominant mode of value assessment (a sort of materialism of “bling”), cloth can play a more important role.

Returning to the Old Assyrian texts, there appear to be traces of overlapping modes of exchange applied to textiles. Given the endless profit listings tallied against cloths by these merchants, textiles were often convertible, in a commercial sense, into hard currency or debt promises with distant agents that are recognizable as typical of modern trade. By contrast, the tithe or tax on textiles hints at the use of cloth as a kind of social currency in certain specific social contexts (in obtaining rights to trade or in rewarding service), some of which were not directly convertible into other forms of wealth. It is interesting to note that certain types of textiles in the Kültepe texts are given geographic designations (*nisbe*) that do not necessarily seem to be simply about place of manufacture, whereas metals (or at least silver and tin) are given no such linguistic distinction. If the Old Assyrian evidence documents an already elaborate and extensive system of trade in textiles from the Near East to Anatolia that cross-cut and interfaced with other forms of exchange (representing only one particularly well-documented example from a number of contemporary such trading systems), the question becomes one of scale: Where and at what point in time did “open” circulation – that is, long-distance trade with strangers facilitated through metal-based *currency* (whether actual bullion or virtual debt notation) – become culturally significant, and why?

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF TEXTILE CIRCULATION IN THE FOURTH AND THIRD MILLENNIA BC

Let us turn to the archaeological evidence from the two millennia before the Old Assyrian trade, and in particular to a significant junction in the history of textile innovations, namely the start of exploitation of sheep wool fibers across the Near East (Sherratt 1997: 180–181) and the increasing, perhaps related, popularity of the vertical loom (Barber 1991: 82, 213, 250–253). On current evidence, sheep’s wool seems to have been first used during the fifth millennium BC (Good 1999, 2006; Sudo 2010), but the major period of adoption (at least in Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Iran, and Transcaucasia) lies in the fourth millennium BC (Barber 1991: 24–25). Even after widespread adoption by the third millennium, it is difficult to say what proportion of clothing or cloth-type wrappings was made from wool as opposed to vegetable or bast fibers such as linen, or even, alternatively, from animal fleece, skin, or leather.

Because direct textile remains from our period of interest are far from common, the most indicative evidence for this wool-textile expansion lies in two main fields. First, changes in sheep-husbandry practices, gleaned predominantly from kill-off curves in faunal assemblages, appear to support the idea that wool was one of the primary aims of sheep breeding (Payne 1973; although see also Marom and Bar-Oz 2009).

Second, there is a dramatic leap in scale of evidence relating to textile production from the fourth millennium BC onward, particularly spinning and weaving. Some identifiable technical changes associated with this leap, it has been argued, may directly index a change in fiber to wool: for example at Tell Kosak Shamali (Sudo 2010) or at Arslantepe (Frangipane et al. 2009). Joy McCorrison (1997) described the transition to wool in Mesopotamia as a “fiber revolution” and linked the emergence of wool with an “extensification” of lowland labor organization, with new forms of gender division and the freeing up of valuable agricultural land. This allowed, in her view, the resulting “surplus” to fund the labor needed to produce and export textiles to peripheral regions in exchange for exotic materials such as copper, silver, and gold, which represented charged symbolic items to Uruk and subsequent urban economies. Her intriguing, if speculative, explanation for why this fiber revolution should have taken place in southern Mesopotamia, noted in a public comment on a paper by G. Algaze (McCorrison 2001), is that Sumer was geographically positioned to exploit the sources of various important colored dyes – one of wool’s main technological advantage over linen being its relative ease of dyeing compared to bast fibers – in a way that no other cultural region could exploit at that time.

A nuanced picture is slowly being gleaned from parts of the Near Eastern “periphery.” Ulf-Dietrich Schoop’s (2014) recent analysis and interpretation of the western Anatolian evidence for textile manufacture (e.g., loom weights and spindle whorls) from the late fifth to the early third millennium seems to document an intensification of production and wool husbandry at many sites during the fourth millennium. He highlights the apparent continuation of flax production and stability of sheep herd sizes to suggest that there was no “extensification” process in Anatolia. He takes this to mean that, while textiles became a central medium of social relations in fourth millennium Anatolia, the basis of the associated social economy was one predicated on and limited to producing and circulating cloth to maintain an essentially unstable social status, not on accumulation and maintenance of (putatively) permanent hierarchies. Here Schoop makes a direct comparison between this reconstruction and the Lele example mentioned previously. Though we have no direct evidence that would indicate the actual distances such textiles were circulating, if Schoop’s analysis of the west and central Anatolian textile landscape is accurate and comparisons with the Lele appropriate, it would be difficult to call this “trade.”

The geographic footprint of any particular textile product is likely to be rather small because the purpose in giving and receiving is to obtain direct social capital and obligations from known relations, not accumulating an abstract wealth whose deployment of “value” can be delayed. In local terms, that is using the Lele comparison, it would be senseless to do otherwise: Who wants to produce such valuable items for people you will never meet and with whom you will never form an advantageous long-term alliance?

By contrast, a different set of dynamics may have been playing out in the steppes west and north of the Caspian. In certain late fourth millennium graves (related to the Maikop–Novosvobodnaya, 3300–2900 BC and Yamnaya/Pit-Grave, ca. 3300–3000 BC), a number of actual textile remains have been preserved and recovered (Shishlina et al. 2003), some of which hint at long-distance movement of textiles. Possible cotton fibers, for example from Kurgan 2 at Tsarskaya/Novosvobodnaya, might represent a deposition of valuable “imported” fibers or cloth likely grown as far away as Iran or the Indus – the Iranian connections with Maikop perhaps being as important as those with the Late Uruk communities of Mesopotamia (Ivanova 2012). Can these possible exotic finds be characterized as the result of “trade” or some other circulatory mechanism? The very small number of preserved samples and thus their unrepresentative nature makes it impossible to compare with Renfrew’s classic fall-off pattern characteristics for us to comment on the possible mode of exchange behind such distributions (Renfrew 1975). Given the relatively weak cultural similarities between the Caucasus, the possible fiber source and the intermediate regions, some form of “down-the-line” mechanism seems more plausible than a bulk (albeit high-value) commodity system like the Old Assyrian one. Nonetheless, we should probably assume that such flows were concentrated along certain regular lines and not dispersed evenly across the landscape. At the very least, it does imply that, in some regions at least, “foreign” cloths or raw fibers could, on occasion, travel very large distances. Communities of the steppes at this time were clearly engaged in differentiating strategies (documented in rich burials), which are not seen explicitly in Anatolia until the mid-third millennium (e.g., at Alacahöyük). Although elites of this region were obtaining exotic materials, it seems likely to be through very personalized networks of obligation – not dissimilar, perhaps, to the chiefdoms of Hawai’i (cf. Earle, this volume; Earle 2002).

Key to understanding the density of these flows, and thus likely mechanisms, must be the available transportation technologies, and it is certainly relevant that wheeled vehicles, donkeys, and horses appear to have played an increasing role in Mesopotamia (Sherratt 1983: 95–97), Transcaucasia (Sagona 2013), and the Caspian steppes (Anthony 2007: 300–339) at around this time. Somewhat mysteriously, the Transcaucasian zone lying directly between Mesopotamia and the steppes and typified in the late fourth and most of the third millennium

by the so-called Kura-Arax, Karaz, or Early Transcaucasian phenomenon (see Palumbi and Chataigner 2014; and other contributions in the same volume), represents a curious blank as far as discussion of textiles and textile circulation goes. The Kura-Arax role in metal procurement is a matter of debate (Wilkinson 2014b), but contemporary evidence for textiles has never been seriously examined. It is possible they avoided woven textiles completely, relying instead on animal skin or leather products, as part of their apparently deeply conservative cultural outlook. There are many dress pins (including the famous double-spiral-headed variety, cf. Huot 2009) and bone awls, but it is not clear whether these could have been for leather instead. On the basis of pseudomorphic impressions on ceramics, it seems that some Kura-Arax-related pottery was formed using rough cloth; however, so far, the nature of the cloth used has not been examined in detail (Heinsch and Vandiver 2006).

Further east, in Iran, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, and the Indus, textile evidence is similarly understudied. One hint as to the possibility of a system of textile circulation is the efflorescence of a cultural zone with painted polychromatic patterned wares, whose patterns are remarkably like those of woven textiles, especially the Namazga III/Geoksyur era wares (ca. 3300–2800 BC). A close range of similarly painted schemes are found distributed over a vast region from Turkmenistan to Seistan, prompting the idea that they record the ceramic fossil of a large-scale cloth circulation network preceding the Old Assyrian one by a thousand years (Masson 1992: 231; Pinner 1982; Wilkinson 2014c: 277). Western Iran is also characterized by a large number of painted pottery traditions, at least some of which are very textile-like in composition (for references, see Majidzadeh 1981). The growth of settlement sizes in this period and the clear rise in circulation of other materials, such as metals and precious stones, certainly suggest long-distance “trading” networks, perhaps of the low-bulk variety, but there is little direct evidence for strong vertical hierarchies associated with Mesopotamian urbanism and its cultural inheritors, or indeed with the “barbarian” form of wealth concentration seen north of the Caucasus. On current evidence, and if we exclude those areas in the southwest (e.g., Susiana) that were closely linked to developments in Mesopotamia, it seems plausible that the situation in much of fourth millennium Iran represented something between that of Anatolia and Mesopotamia, where textiles were playing an increasing role as tokens of social value, perhaps over increasing distances, but that regular full-scale commodity exchange was not yet established.

If the situation is complex and heterogeneous in the fourth millennium BC, the (later) third millennium seems to represent an era of convergence, at least for certain regions discussed in this chapter. Curiously, in the distribution of actual textile remains in the archaeological record, there is a shift from a north-south orientation of the finds from the fourth millennium (Figure 2.1),

2.1. Distribution of archaeological textile fragments in the Near East/Eurasia, fifth and fourth millennium BC (for key to numbers see https://gitlab.com/tcwilkinson/threads-of-eurasia-figs/blob/master/b/TABB-3_sites_reducedprecision.xlsx (accessed November 15, 2017); cf. Wilkinson 2014c: 397–398).

to an east-west one from the third millennium (Figure 2.2). This pattern could easily, of course, be an artifact of archaeological research interests rather than an index of any shifting emphasis on textile circulation (because it is far from clear if any of these are “imports”/“exports”), but other proxy evidence does give an overall picture of rising industrialization of textile production and an increasing emphasis on east-west-orientated over north-south interaction. To begin with, the earliest systematic texts from Mesopotamia of the late third millennium (e.g., in Ebla and in Ur III archives) record the production and administration of vast amounts of woven, probably mostly woolen, cloth in factories (e.g., see Biga 2010; Waetzoldt 2010). Though impressive in the scale of the enterprise they record, especially the numbers of people and animals involved, these texts, like the later Old Assyrian ones, give little information about the eventual destination or context of use for the final cloth products. Instead, the focus is almost entirely on production and occasionally on the immediate recipients of the stock (e.g., officials, royalty, ambassadors). Again, it is impossible to say whether most items were garments or other types of cloth.

It seems, however, on the basis of a number of clues, that at least some classes of textiles were being distributed very widely. First, hints in the Mesopotamian texts of transfers to merchants, or to visiting “ambassadors” suggest circulation

2.2. Distribution of archaeological textile fragments in the Near East/Eurasia, third millennium BC (for key to numbers see https://gitlab.com/tcwillkinson/threads-of-eurasia-figs/blob/master/b/TABB-3_sites_reducedprecision.xlsx (accessed November 15, 2017); cf. Wilkinson 2014c: 397–398).

at least on an elite level if not also at a middle entrepreneurial rung (Biga 2010: 148, 163), and in practice being calculated in terms of trading “equivalence” and exact monetary reckoning. Second, proxy evidence of material culture convergence over a very large area makes the likelihood of systematic “trade” relationships extremely high. For example, in Anatolia, a very obvious expansion of commonalities in material assemblages from Syria to the Aegean can be documented during the EBII/III period (i.e., 2400–2000 BC), which includes distinctive common pottery shapes including *depa*, tankards, and Syrian bottles (Rahmstorf 2006b; Şahoğlu 2005). The simultaneous rise of shared or interconvertible systems of weighing from the Aegean to the Indus suggest intensive contacts, presumably transacted in metals (Rahmstorf 2006a). Weighing systems imply a need for establishing trust between strangers; an abstract metal economy requires weights for exact comparisons of money and/or commodities to create that trust. Simultaneously, there is a deepening set of material relationships between Mesopotamia and other groups arranged around the Persian Gulf, represented by items such as the “intercultural chlorite vessels” (Kohl 1978b), and other eastern features, as seen in the items from the Royal Cemetery at Ur (Tengberg et al. 2008). Thus although international textile trade is documented textually only in the early second millennium

Kültepe texts, the earlier material connections make it seem very plausible that the textile “trade” between Syria, Anatolia, and the Aegean – and perhaps also in a mirror image to the Persian Gulf, Iran, and Central Asia – began some centuries earlier, at least as early as 2500–2300 BC, and expanded widely on the network first explored by the earlier Uruk expansion. Additionally, the secondary urbanism of Syro-Mesopotamia starting around 2800–2600 BC, and the subsequent intensified urbanization of central Anatolian towns (2500–2300 BC) – perhaps itself documenting the emergence of local textile industries – seems to coincide with the reemergence of painted pottery traditions. This trend begins in the upper Tigris with early third millennium Scarlet Ware then in the Upper Euphrates (around 2600–2500 BC); followed by various forms of monochrome and polychrome painted pottery such as the Nuzi, Khabur, Levantine, Transcaucasian, and Aegean Kamares and Mycenaean painted wares emerging onto the scene between 2500 and 1200 BC. There is no obvious “genetic” relationship between most of these traditions, but they share decorative schemes recalling woven or embroidered patterns, and a popularity for geometric bands on otherwise plain burnished wares that may even represent the fossilization of textile bands around metal or ceramic vessels, and, thus, a new elaboration of drinking rituals (Wilkinson 2014a).

The circulation of textiles as “gifts” for neighboring elites recalls the maintenance of “house” or “lineage” reputations as seen in the Samoan case, albeit at an international level rather than a local one. If the items given in exchange were characteristic of the offering city or of particular heritage, it is also not difficult to imagine that their presentation still played on an appeal to the inalienable identity of the cloth and its biographic associations. What is different (and is confirmed by the size of sites, their location along corridors of movement, the indications for variable social ranks, and the suggestion of craft specialization) is the displacement of production labor from the realization of its social value in circulation. This represents a decisive shift toward “commodity fetishism” across a huge area of the Near East. All this suggests that whatever moral restrictions (or objections?) to the circulation of textiles between strangers had been overcome in much of this area by the middle of the third millennium BC, further systematized and expanded into monopoly treaties, palace production, and colonial trading outfits during the late third and early second millennium BC.

The link to “morality” may seem strange here, as modern economic theory places “economics” or “economic systems” outside the field of morality to justify the logic of capitalism as transcendental or universal. From an anthropological perspective, morality and economics in all societies are intimately entwined even if denied (Bloch and Parry 1989). This realization allows us to recognize the moral ambiguity posed by abstract measurement systems such as weighing systems and metal or numeric currencies to “traditional” attitudes

to rough equivalences and balancing of favors. To put it more concretely, one can simply think about everyday conversations about who is particularly mean or who is overly generous, which form common informal discourse in the public house, the teahouse, or other local gathering points across the world. Equally, we can point to the common caricature of a person who “knows the cost of everything, but the value of nothing.” Between family and friends (and other equals), being overly careful about the exact amount being spent by each party is considered rude and tantamount to transforming one’s relationship to that of stranger. From this view, giving every object an abstract, accounted value would be morally problematic in a well-functioning community and thus the principles of impersonal “trade” were potentially abhorrent. This is not to say that “traditional” or “preurban” economies were morally superior, merely that a clash of coexisting and overlapping human moralities around sharing, ranking, and exchange laid the foundations for the transformation of small-scale networks of circulation based on mutual obligations, into large-scale networks of trade based on mutual profit or, sometimes, exploitation.

TEXTILES AND METALS: A CONTAGIOUS NEXUS FOR URBAN TRADE?

The Near Eastern model of urban civilization has been described as a “contagious process” (Sherratt 2005), slowly incorporating communities and territory through the expansion of trade networks driven by the need for exotic raw materials. It is also one that creates a great deal of inequality that fits poorly with the kind of everyday morality of mutual help typical of small-scale exchange relationships. Intensive research devoted to the so-called Uruk Phenomenon and its expansion over the last twenty-five years has established beyond reasonable doubt the extensive reach of trade in raw materials (including metals, lapis lazuli, and wood) during the fourth millennium from the Sumerian “heart-land” to the Levant, Egypt, northeast Iran, and the Caucasian steppe. This first urban system was extremely successful, facilitating a semicolonial expansion of cultural practices (Stein 1996, 1999). However, the direct geographic footprint of Uruk material culture was limited to the lowland plains of Syria and Iraq, with a few hybrid outposts in the Anatolian and Iranian highlands (Figure 2.3). The wide distribution of Bevel-Rimmed Bowls as far east as Baluchistan seems better explained as part of a spreading bread culture – still significant, but for different reasons – rather than as a complete adoption of a Urukian urban society (see Potts 2009). Urukian forms of urbanism, and indeed pre-Urukian northern variations (Lawrence and Wilkinson 2015), do not seem to have been particularly “contagious.” In fact, until around 2600 BC (when we also see a secondary urbanism in much of northern Mesopotamia), most peoples of Anatolia, Transcaucasia, Iran, and the Levant continued to live lives in smaller settlement systems, seemingly organized around, to use D. Graeber’s

2.3. Textile production and circulation zones, fourth millennium BC; with Late Uruk settlements and associated finds.

terminology (Graeber 2014: 130), “human economies” that emphasized the organization of personal relationships (many of them kinship based) rather than the organization (and accumulation) of goods and abstract communities. This is despite the fact these peripheries had access to the exact same craft technologies as the urban groups; indeed, in many instances (especially wool extraction and metallurgical techniques) the primary innovators in these technologies were located in these “peripheral” areas (e.g., on metallurgy, see Thornton 2009). Viewed from this crude social evolutionary perspective, it seems that conservative systems of social organization, or resilient ritual economies, nonetheless prevented the incursion of the Mesopotamian state model.

In the mid-third millennium, however, the urban model suddenly spills over into a whole range of different new regions: including parts of Anatolia,

Central Asia, and the Indus. Each region has its own characteristics of course, and the exact trajectory of and specific reasons for urbanization must be different in each case. In some regions, such as Central Asia and Anatolia, the preceding centuries are often characterized as a “proto-urban” phase. Aside from the implication of inevitability and unilinearity of social evolution – an assumption that should be used cautiously – the use of the prefix “proto” may hide a complex of rather different responses. If a prefix is necessary at all, perhaps “pseudo-” or “para-” would be better. Leaving aside local characteristics, it seems likely nonetheless that some “global” mechanism must account for the more-or-less synchronized contagion of urban life in the mid-third millennium to the wider Near East. An explosion in metal consumption in Mesopotamia, perhaps associated with the emergence of a bourgeois class or perhaps the beginning of the use of silver as regular medium of exchange, may have driven the incentive to neighboring metal-rich communities to intensify their interaction with Mesopotamia, and hence, through emulation and the incipient effects of handling and attempting to control metal flows, began to adopt the tenets of an urban and metal-oriented economy. While such quantitative thresholds in the scale of metal flows for the third millennium may have played a part, it is generally agreed that large quantities of metals were already flowing during the early to late fourth millennium (Stech 1999: 63) and in small amounts in the northern Mesopotamia/eastern Anatolia region from the late fifth millennium (Stein 2010: 28). Why then did the overall urban model not spread earlier, beyond the Mesopotamian basin and a few outlying settlements, such as Arslantepe and Godin Tepe, in the nearby highlands?

As discussed previously, a metal-oriented economy enables the abstract “liquid” valuation system we associate with modern money to quantify and measure equivalence between goods and services (with relative costs determined by the resistance to being obtained, to follow Simmel 1990). This type of economy facilitates a mobility of wealth and increasing international “trade” between strangers, and increases social complexity, population density, and the geographic reach of interaction networks. The other consequence of a metal economy is precisely in its abstraction from social relationships facilitated by its liquidity and biographic erasure – described sometimes more emotively as the “dehumanization” of economics – or less emotively, as I suggested before, the growing disjunction between the circulation of people and the circulation of objects. Seen from a nonmarket perspective, the tenets of trading in a metal economy appear “immoral” against competing values of distribution such as sharing or *xenia* hospitality to strangers. This view helps to explain the ongoing critique and moral discourse on money, debt, and hospitality as far back as it can be followed it into philosophical history (see Graeber 2014, esp. 73–126, 223–250). Many cultural groups around the Near East will have recognized this moral ambiguity, so that even while the Uruk “center” was gaining pace,

these “peripheries” instead integrated the technology of metal and textiles used by their urban neighbors in ways that prevented long-term accumulation of capital by temples, kings, or individuals. The metal economy was not easily exportable because it relied, to some unknown degree, on culturally specific organization with ritual and “moral” constraints at that time unique to Mesopotamia.

It appears plausible that the key scalar threshold toward an emphasis on a certain mode of circulation, namely trade, was crossed sometime between the late fourth and mid-third millennium, a threshold that relied on the unique role of textiles in exchange relationships. Before this time, fine textiles of various sorts may have “escaped” from Uruk contexts in small numbers into the surrounding nonurban societies, sometimes over very large distances, for example to north of the Caspian, and textile production technologies were also shared across cultural zones. Such long-distance transfers did not facilitate ongoing interdependence, however. A small number of foreign textiles could easily be inserted into restricted networks of circulation and community relationships without an apparent contradiction with traditional moralities. Low-intensity trade into nonurban spheres is what A. Sherratt emphasized when he talked about Europe being a “margin” of the world system during the Bronze Age: a cultural zone in which, to use P. Kohl’s phrase, “transferable technologies” were shared (Kohl 1987), and thus were indirectly inspired or influenced, but no systematic economic interdependence was created (Sherratt 1994).

What exactly such Late Chalcolithic textiles looked like, and how they were used in a social context is, of course, difficult to say. One clue may come from the survival of wall paintings dating to Period VI A (late fourth millennium BC) at the site of Arslantepe. Here, the geometric abstract style of the figures depicted (Figure 2.4) strongly recall embroidered textile patterns. If the wall paintings represent stand-ins for wall hangings, it is easy to see how such textiles were, almost literally, woven into social architecture to create suitable spaces for ritual action in which significant exchange relationships were enacted. In this case, given the context of the paintings – at doorways in a building apparently used to administer surplus food stores (Frangipane 1997) – the exchange acts included the moments of collection and distribution of agronomic wealth, including human labor, as a chance to reinforce the nature of relations at different ranks or as equals between different groups occupying Arslantepe. We cannot be sure whether such representations recall “local” Chalcolithic or “Uruk”-style cloths, of course, or if such cloths were imported or locally manufactured. Frangipane argues that the nature of the depictions (especially the ceremonial threshing scene), which is also seen in Uruk-period seals, is a local interpretation on a southern/Urukian symbol (Frangipane 1997: 65–66). As such, these images can be seen as referring to a transferred Urukian social

2.4. Photograph of one of the wall paintings from Arslantepe, period VI A (i.e., Late Chalcolithic 5), likely to have been inspired by textile designs (adapted from Frangipane 2004: 54; see also Frangipane 1997: 66, fig. 16). Reproduced with permission of the Archive of the Italian Expedition in Eastern Anatolia, Sapienza University of Rome.

practice, which facilitated the organization of agricultural labor to enable ever-larger urban networks of exchange.

Those rare and exceptional textiles being circulated in the late fourth to early third millennium and their aura of personal relationships would have slowly become a kind of “gateway drug” into an urban metal-based economy. If individuals or groups wanted to increase their social standing by assembling and distributing more foreign cloths – that is if foreign cloths increased in “value” – then the easiest means to engage Mesopotamian traders was on their own terms: that is by conducting exchange business in metals. Once integrated into this circulation of metals, it would only take a few individuals and groups to undermine the traditional balance of power within a community and instead to emphasize accumulation and transform the basis of the economy.

It remains to be explained why this system should have emerged at this particular chronological juncture. It is possible that it was the ability to dye wool in multiple colors and, hence, to elaborate decorative schemes that boosted the social uses to which cloth could be put, as argued by McCorriston (1997, 2001) following Barber (1991: 21, 236). Perhaps it was a quantitative increase in the intensity of movement facilitated by new social institutions or new transport technologies, for example, the donkey, cart, or horse. Wool is said to preserve less well in the archaeological record than linen, due to its chemical makeup, resulting presumably in an underrepresentation in samples of actual early textiles. Whether lower durability was also recognisable within human life spans is unclear, but it is tempting to speculate on whether short cloth life

spans played a role as tool to accelerate the obsolescence of commodities as they did in the Lele *raffia* circulation; such obsolescence is characteristic too of the modern fashion system. Ultimately, beyond any technical or cultural advantage held by the urban societies, the key process would have been the scaled-up *systematic* insertion of foreign textiles into local networks of power and obligation, starting perhaps between 2800 and 2500 BC. This systematic insertion may have functioned not dissimilarly to the stimulation of trade effected by European-manufactured “trade beads” in West Africa from the fifteenth century AD onward (DeCorse 1989), in this case exchanged more-or-less directly for kidnapped locals who were then exported as slaves to the Americas. The “trade beads” mimicked materials valued by local groups, members of which apparently took the lucrative opportunity offered by the slave trade to expand their own status in a process of opening (i.e., creating) markets.

The direct evidence for textiles and textile trade is, as outlined here, rather sparse for the fifth, fourth, and third millennia BC. However, as explored in the preceding text, there is also a growing body of indirect or proxy evidence, including production evidence comprised of whorls, weights, pseudomorphs, and skeuomorphic patterns, which call for greater synthesis and more careful examination as a whole. My main hypothesis here, which clearly requires further investigation and testing, is that the success of “contagious urbanism” and the spread of societies organized around a state, relied precisely on changes in a *metal-textile circulation nexus*: Certain groups were able to take advantage of the contradictions between different moral logics regarding exchange of precious objects already present within nonurban human relationships. Both metals and textiles were used from very early on to ornament the body and thus materialize social roles on the body before the rise of urban or state societies. As human dress or “decorations” for houses, floors, and other “property,” both materials allowed the comparison of ranks of human beings and their labor without abstracting them to quantitative values, unlike values given by weights in silver. In nonmarket contexts, even weaponry may have had as much a symbolic role – at least in the mortuary contexts in which archaeologists find them – as a “technical” one. As with clothing placed with the dead, the presence of a weapon in a grave sends a message in an abstract but vivid way: “this is the *kind of person* who might kill or maim you,” whether the individual buried there was indeed a warrior or not. These symbols, although widely shared geographically, were nonetheless deeply dependent on locally contingent networks of rights and obligations.

TRADE AS CENTRIFUGAL FORCE OF CIVILIZATION

As metal became the default symbolic repository of value for the earliest urban groups in western Asia during the fourth millennium, an opportunity

was opened for the expansion of the kinds of “disembedding” traditions first tested by ‘Ubaid groups, into more mobile and universal forms within Mesopotamia and its immediate hinterland. In contrast to other forms of currency, the use of metal as bullion allowed an abstraction of power from older networks of rights and obligations and facilitated the accumulation of redeployable wealth in physical form. As wealth became more mobile, investment in industrial production, associated at this early stage primarily with woolen textiles, became possible, simultaneously creating new demand-and-supply dynamics.

Despite this, outside of this zone, most groups in Anatolia, the Levant, Transcaucasia, and Central Asia initially resisted the new social logic, or at least deemed it irrelevant, instead appropriating new technology and objects (both metals and textiles) for purposes suitable to their own social structures. In the third millennium, an increasing trickle of imported textiles began to allow select groups in these regions to reconfigure the older networks of obligation. New “dressing” rituals, which were focused on public performance of rank, could shift or mobilize the temporality of authority, just as “wealth” was made more mobile in metal economies, to justify permanent differences. Cloths were no longer locally produced (or appropriated from outside) as wealth to be distributed in closed networks, only to *create future status*, but obtained and conspicuously consumed for the purpose of dressing bodies, vessels, and homes in generalized rituals performed in an open context that were designed to materialize and justify *already created status*. The desire for these visual tools of social manipulation expanded the need for metals and enabled the widening adoption of the metal economy and state/urban system. The result of this centrifugal process was the fitful, ultimately inexorable interdependence of an ever-wider area of the Old World and, thus, the expansion of Near Eastern “civilization” through trade.

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