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Remarks on the Interpretation of Some Ambiguous Greek Textile Terms

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Remarks on the Interpretation of Some Ambiguous Greek Textile Terms¹

Stella Spantidaki

The study of written sources of the Classical period (5th and 4th centuries BC) reveals the existence of a very rich vocabulary related to textile production. There are terms referring to materials, tools, manufacture and decoration techniques, colours, people and places related to textile manufacture. Many terms are quite clearly defined, while others present major difficulties in their interpretation. Usually these concern terms for tools, such as *κερκίς* (pin beater or shuttle) and *ήλακάτη* (distaff or spindle) or terms describing fabrics with some kind of decoration. Among the decorative terms, some refer to specific decorative techniques, such as *κατάστικτος* (embroidered) while others refer to aesthetic results, such as *ποικίλος* (with elaborate and colourful decoration).²

I believe it is quite important at this point to underline a significant characteristic of the ancient Greek language. Although languages are not simply univocal codes and their meaning is the most important dimension, ancient Greek has what may be called an *indivisible* polysemy of words (and grammatical cases). Its semantic richness cannot be compared to modern European languages, such as English.³ In this

context, one and the same ancient Greek term can include more than one meaning simultaneously (*e.g.*, *ώρα* = time, season, youth, perfect moment), in which case the translator *does not* have to choose between the different meanings, because they are all included – or the same term can have different meanings depending on the context (*e.g.*, *όργή* = anger, wrath, but also drive, impulse, temperament, outburst), in which case the translator has to choose the right meaning. This could lead to difficulties in the lexical field of textiles and textile production.

Very often a single term creates semantic harmonics, which produce in the mind of the listener a series of mental associations through its resonances, consonances and connotations. In order to understand a term, one has to clarify its entire semantic potential. Furthermore, each term must be interpreted in relation to its context as opposed to adopting an univocal or unambiguous meaning. This kind of ambiguity certainly does not apply to every single term. For example, terms for weaving tools must have been clearly defined in Antiquity, although they often seem ambiguous to us today.

1. I would like to thank Marie-Louise Nosch and Cécile Michel for giving me the opportunity to participate in the conference.

2. Spantidaki 2016, 97-105.

3. Cf. modern poetry such as the great Shakespeare or Proust and the using of the *developed metaphor* in Castoriadis 1999, 35-61.

In this chapter I am going to discuss the term *μίτος*,⁴ core term of a family of words with many composita, such as *εὔμιτος*, *λεπτόμιτος*, *τρίμιτος*, *πολύμιτος* and derivatives, such as *μιτώδης*, *μίτινος* and *τριμίτινος*. The term *μίτος* is without known etymology as per all recent etymological dictionaries and accordingly without convincing explanation about its original meaning.⁵ In time it came to refer to the thread in general, *ἀγαθὴς μί(λ)τον*,⁶ ‘ball of thread’. The term seems to change meaning depending on the compositum (in the case of *λεπτόμιτος* we are certain that this term refers to a fabric created with fine threads, but in the case of *τρίμιτος* for example, we are not sure of the meaning of the term *μίτος*). From all these related terms, I have chosen to examine the terms *μίτος* => *τρίμιτος* / *τριμίτινος* => *πολύμιτος*. These terms contain the term *μίτος* and, moreover, they refer to multiples of *μίτος*. I think it is important to try to elucidate both the meaning of the core term, and that of its composita.

References of these terms in ancient written sources are scarce. The first reference of the term *μίτος* is found in the *Iliad*,⁷ and there are three more in texts of the Classical period. *Τρίμιτος* and *τριμίτινος* are mentioned four times in Classical literature.⁸ Concerning the last term of the family, *πολύμιτος*, only two references can be found in texts of the same period.⁹ The first one refers probably to dense fabrics and the other is a fragmentary text, where the term is mentioned without a context. The term *πολύμιτος*

then disappears from Greek literature for five centuries to appear again in the 1st century AD,¹⁰ where it has been translated as ‘figured linens’.¹¹ Later, Hesychius, in the 5th century AD, mentions the term *δίμιτος*,¹² which seems to fit perfectly in the family. During the Byzantine period one more related term appears, *ἔζάμιτος*, referring to weft faced compound twill fabrics.¹³

So it appears that *μίτος*, apart from always referring to a simple thread, could also denote a specific type of thread, depending on the context. There are several theories on the meaning of this family of terms, still under discussion.

Theories on the definition of *Μίτος*

Μίτος = warp thread

In the first theory, the term is defined as the warp threads of the loom. This is mainly based on the Homeric passage, where the term *μίτος* has been translated by several scholars as warp.¹⁴ Additionally, a passage from the *Anthologia Graeca* seems to refer to threads divided by the pin beater, the *κερκίς*, thus pointing to the warp threads.¹⁵

Μίτος = single thread

According to the second theory, if *μίτος* signifies thread, the terms *τρίμιτος* and *τριμίτινος* could refer to three-ply yarns, in contrast to single threads. Three-stranded cords have been discovered in Akrotiri,

4. E. Fr. 369.1 (Nauck 1964); Pherecr. Fr. 156 (146).7 (PCG VII); Lyc. *Alexandra* 584 (Budé 2008).

5. Frisk, Chantraine, Beekes, s.u.

6. Pherecyd. Fr. 106a.5 (Müller 1975).

7. Hom. *Il.* 23.762 (Monro 1963).

8. For *τρίμιτος* see: Lysipp. Fr. 3 (3) (PCG V 1986); A. Fr. 44A 713a.1, 44A 713b.1 (Mette 1959). For *τριμίτινος* see: A. Fr. 44A 713b.1, 44A 713a.3, Fr. 365.1 (Mette 1959); Crates Com. Fr. 41 (34) (PCG IV 1983).

9. A. *Suppl.* 432 (Page 1972); Cratin. Fr. 481 (436) (PCG IV 1983).

10. *Periplus Maris Erythraei* 39.7 (Casson 1989).

11. Schoff 1912, 37.

12. Hesychius, *Lexicon* D1480.1 (Latte 1996).

13. *Typica Monastica* 33.1733 (Gautier 1984); *Acta Monasterii Lavrae* 17 (Guillou *et al.* 1979); *Acta Monasterii Xeropotami* 2.29 (Bompaire 1964); *Acta Monasterii Iviron* 179.37 (Kravari 1990); Joannes Apocaucus, *Epistulae et acta* 21.14 (Pétridès 1909); Nicetas Choniates *Reign. ManI*, part 2, p.98, line of page 23 (Dieten van 1975); *Bellum Troianum* 6521 (Jeffreys 1996); *Achilleis Byzantina*, line 409 (Agapitos 1999); Nicolaus Artabasdos Rhabdas, *Epistula* 35.2 (Tannery 1920).

14. Schröder 1884, 171; Blümner 1912, 141, 149.

15. A. G. VI 174.6 (Beckby 1965).



Fig. 1. Woman possibly plying threads into a cord. *Lekythos* in the Museum of Syracuse. After Lang 1908, 51, fig. 20.

Thera, dated back to the 17th century BC, more than a thousand years before the Classical period.¹⁶

In the context of this theory, the more recent term *δίμιτος*¹⁷ would refer to two-ply yarns. The term *πολύμιτος* would refer to multiple plying, threads or ropes created by more than three different yarns. Fragments of rope dated to the Classical period have been recently discovered in Piraeus, but they have not yet been studied. There is, however, a Classical iconographic scene, which could perhaps be associated to the process of plying and the term *πολύμιτος* (Fig. 1). Margarete Lang agrees with Eugen Petersen that the

scene depicts a woman twisting together a large number of threads, creating a thick thread or rope forming a large ball.¹⁸ Petersen remarks that small weights are attached to the threads in order to keep them taut during the plying, although this cannot be seen on the drawing.¹⁹ Lang comments that in sail-making the number three was important and remarks that the second of the finer threads seems to be a three-ply one.²⁰

The two Classical terms, *τρίμιτος* and *τρίμιτινος* may also refer to fabrics created with three-ply yarns, and the later term *δίμιτος* to fabrics created with two-ply yarns. Fabrics with two-ply yarns have been discovered in Greece, but all belong to earlier periods, as for example in Akrotiri, Thera (17th century BC),²¹ Mycenae (13th century BC),²² Aghia Kyriaki on Salamina (Mycenaean cemetery),²³ Lefkandi (around 1000 BC)²⁴ and Corfu (7-6th century BC)²⁵ (Fig. 2).

The *Tractate Sheqalim*²⁶ of the Jerusalem Talmud refers to priestly vestments and the veils and curtains of the Tabernacle with their respective textile requirements. Among them, it mentions six-ply and multiple-ply (32 and 48-ply) threads, which could correspond to the Greek terms *ἑξάμιτος* (six-ply) and *πολύμιτος* (32 and 48-ply). Although the elaboration of the Jerusalem Talmud was finished in the mid-5th century AD, this passage could reflect techniques of much earlier periods.

Preserved fabrics from the Classical period are always created with single yarns. However, it is clear that the technology of plying yarns existed in Greece during the Classical period. After all, the city of Athens alone needed huge amounts of roping for its numerous ships²⁷ and surely for countless other

16. Unpublished study, ARTEX.

17. Hesychius, *Lexicon* D1480.1 (Latte 1996).

18. Lang 1908, 53.

19. Petersen 1892, 182.

20. Lang 1908, 53.

21. Spantidaki & Moulhéat 2012, 187, 188, fig. 7.1, 7.2.

22. Spantidaki & Moulhéat 2012, 192, fig. 7.4-7.6.

23. Moulhéat & Spantidaki 2009, 16, fig. 3.

24. Moulhéat & Spantidaki in press.

25. Metallinou *et. al.* 2009, 42, fig. 41a and b.

26. Jerusalem Talmud, *Tractate Sheqalim*, Ch. 8, p. 51. I am grateful to Nahum Ben-Yehuda for kindly providing me this information.

27. The Naval Inventories of Piraeus of the 4th century BC, which mention the parts of the ships stored in ship sheds make reference to different kinds of rope, *ἑξδάκτυλον* (6-finger) and *ὀκτωδάκτυλον* (8-finger) (*e.g.*, IG II² 1627.471). The term *δάκτυλος* is an Attic unit of length measuring ca. 2 cm. These different size ropes would have been produced with different numbers of finer cords, but the numbers in their description do not necessarily correspond to the number of the smaller cords, but only to their thickness.



Fig. 2. Detail of the weave and the two-ply threads of the fabric of Aghia Kyriaki on Salamis. Photo ARTEX.

purposes. The question is whether we can connect the technique of plying with the family of the term *μίτος*.

Μίτος = heddle

According to the third interpretation theory, the term *μίτος* refers to the heddles of the loom that is the group of threads connecting the heddle bar to the threads of the warp.²⁸ In a passage of the *Partitiones* of Aelius Herodianus (2nd century AD), the term *μίτος* is explained as *μιτάριον*, the term that gave the Modern Greek term for heddle, *μιτάρι*.²⁹ It would be plausible to assume that in the 2nd century AD the term

had at least the meaning of heddle. Several references from later periods point to an interpretation of the term *μίτος* as heddle.³⁰

The warp-weighted loom has a natural shed formed by a shed bar at its bottom, so the Greeks could create a plain weave using only one heddle bar. The Modern Greek term *δίμιτος* is an Ancient Greek term that has survived in Modern Greek and refers to every type of twill. In Ancient Greek, *δίμιτος* could refer to a weave using two heddle bars, the twill 2:1 (Fig. 3). Unfortunately, there is no written evidence to this term until the 5th century AD. The Classical terms *τρίμιτος* and

28. Barber 1991, 267, 268.

29. Ael. Herod., *Partitiones* 84.4 (Boissonade 1963).

30. Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 24.257 (Keydell 1959); Hesychius, *Lexicon* K681.1 (Latte 1996); Eustathius 1.265.19 (Stallbaum 1970).

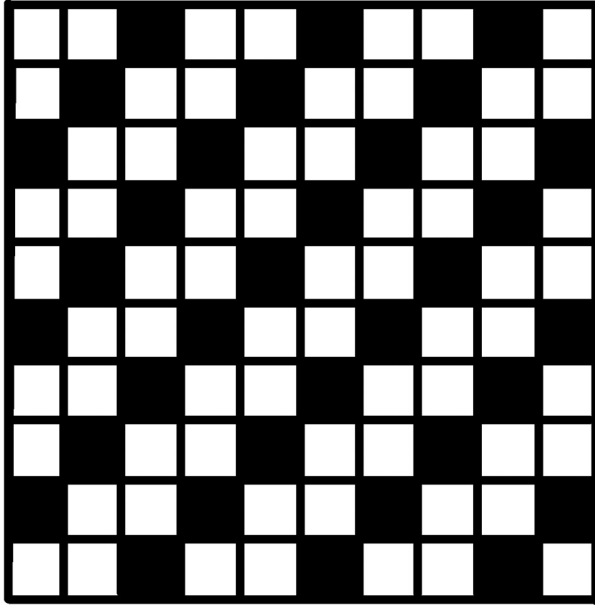


Fig. 3. Drawing of 2:1 twill, z, weft-faced. Drawing S. Spantidaki, after CIETA, 1997.

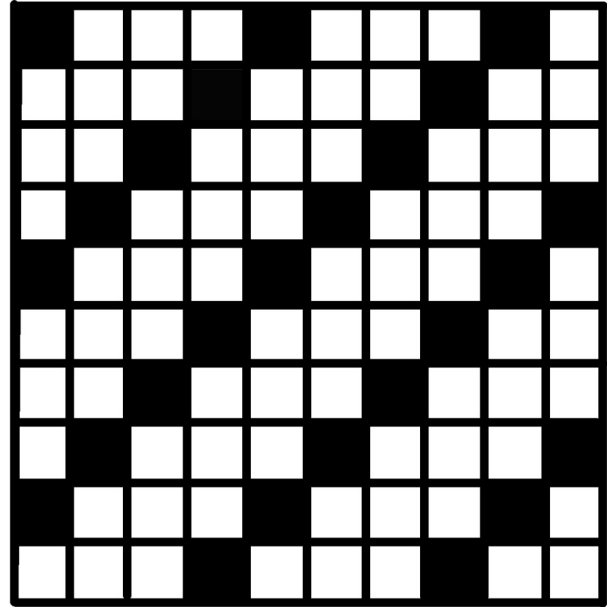


Fig. 5. Drawing of 3:1 twill, z, weft-faced. Drawing S. Spantidaki, after CIETA, 1997.

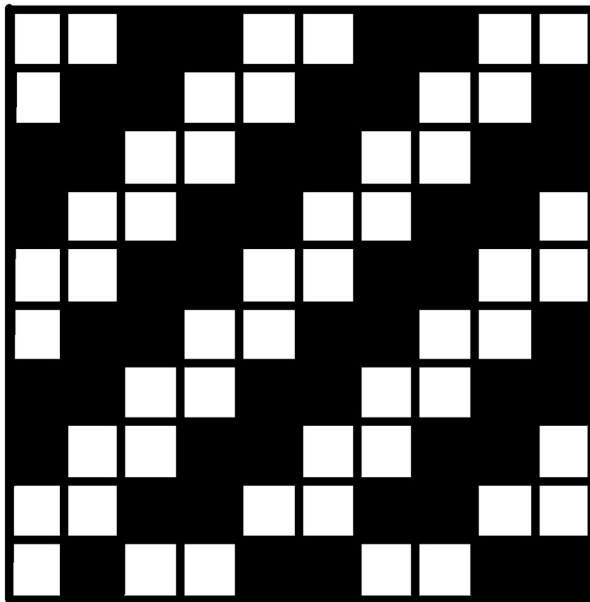


Fig. 4. Drawing of 2:2 twill, z. Drawing S. Spantidaki, after CIETA, 1997.

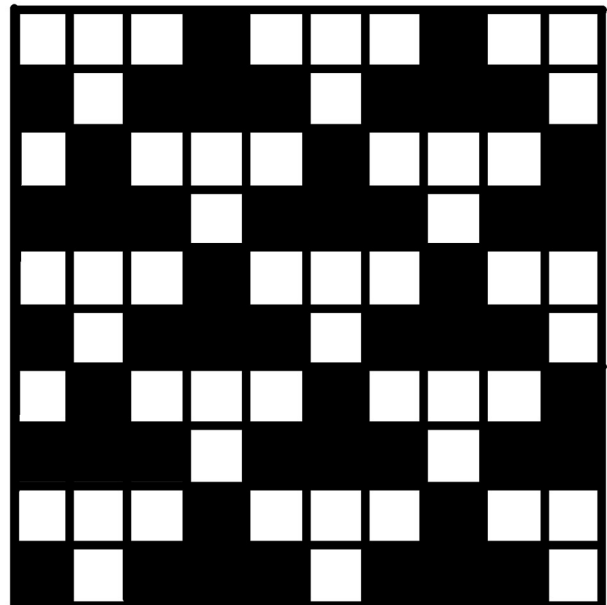


Fig. 6. Drawing of weft-faced compound twill. Drawing S. Spantidaki, after CIETA, 1997.

τριμίτινος, could refer to a weave using three heddle bars, the twill 2:2, or 3:1 (Fig. 4 and 5). The medieval term *έξάμιτον* refers to samite - weft faced compound twill (Fig. 6).

A brief remark on the term *έξάμιτος*. The weaving

unit of weft faced compound twill is 6:1; so it appears that this weaving term has been named after its number of floating warp threads, which in this case, are six. We could assume that the meanings of the terms *δίμιτος* and *τρίμιτος* and *τριμίτινος* are in the same



Fig. 7. Bed covering, or mattress, depicting a diamond twill pattern with a white dot in the centre. Crater of the Laodamia painter, British Museum, Museum no. 1870,0710.2. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

direction. In this hypothesis, the term *δίμιτος* could refer to twill 2:1, while the terms *τρίμιτος* and *τριμίτινος* to twill 3:1. In this case, the term *μιτος* refers to floating threads, not the heddles of the loom.

Finally, I can only associate the ancient Greek term *πολύμιτος* with complex weaves using several heddle bars, such as ‘taqueté’ (weft faced compound tabby).³¹

There is no material evidence of twill textiles in Greece: none of the discovered fragments of Greek archaeological textiles is woven in twill. Furthermore, depictions of weaving looms in Greek iconography do not show traces of mechanical shedding; at best, one can recognize one heddle bar, *κανών*, which was necessary for weaving a tabby.

Classical depictions of clothing on vases and sculptures usually show plain fabrics with stripes or small-scale geometric patterns, or fabrics decorated with complex designs. Diagonal lines that possibly

represent twill variations are rare and they seem to be more common on depictions of furniture (Fig. 7). In contrast to this, Archaic iconography (6th century BC) depicts more often garments decorated with patterns that may refer to twill.³² If these depictions can actually be connected to twill, they indicate that twill was known in the ancient Greek world.

What does this linguistic information mean for the use of twill in Classical Greece? All surviving textiles from Greece derive from funeral contexts, consequently, their corpus is not characteristic of the textile production in this period. We are not familiar with the real variety of garments and utilitarian textiles used, only with those chosen to accompany the dead in the grave. Yet, the absence of terms connected to twill garments in Classical literature and in catalogues of dedications of textiles, such as the Brauron Clothing Catalogues, may indicate that

31. Barber 1991, 268, n. 7; Pl. *N. H.* 8.196; Wild & Dross-Krüpe 2017.

32. As an example, see Archaic attic vases in the British Museum, Museum numbers: 1843,1103.77; 1843,1103.100.x; 1867,0508.949; 1868,0610.3.

twill was not commonly used in Greece during this period.

Mitos = relation to felt?

Lastly, in Classical literature there seems to be a connection between the terms *τρίμιτος* and *τριμίτινος* and felt. Two in four known mentions of *τρίμιτος* and one in three references of *τριμίτινος* are indeed related to felt products, hats or shoes.

ἀλλὰ τρίμιτος ἔστι πῖλος³³ - *trimitos* felt

ὕμεῖς δ' ἐὰν ἰπίσκον ἢ τρίμιτον ἔχητε³⁴
(πῖλον;) - if you have a head ornament or
a *trimitos* felt

καὶ δὴ ποδεῖα τριμίτινα³⁵ - *trimitina* felt
shoes indeed

A *τρίμιτος πῖλος* (felt) would have been a sort of felt created either with three *μίτοι* or with a *τρίμιτος* / *τριμίτινος* fabric. In view of that, according to the third theory the terms *τρίμιτος* / *τριμίτινος* refer to twill fabrics, a *τρίμιτος* / *τριμίτινος πῖλος* would refer to a felt created from a twill fabric.³⁶ According to Elizabeth Barber, this felt could also have three (perhaps decorative) loops on it.³⁷ According to a third interpretation, it could be a sort of felt created with three different layers, either by different coloured felts or by different fabrics. Additionally, the term *δίμιτος* also seems to be related to a felt hat.³⁸

Conclusion

The above hypotheses show that the various meanings of the term *μίτος*, both synchronically and diachronically, reflect the characteristic polysemy of Greek. They also underline the fact that semantics and production techniques evolve and change through time. So each term of the *μίτος* family could, during the same period, have more than one meaning simultaneously. Yet at the same time, a meaning could replace

another, as the semantics changed. In other words, the interpretation theories could coincide in certain periods, with the term *μίτος* having more than one meaning at the same time. But they could also replace one another, as the meaning changed through time. Hopefully, new finds will narrow down the semantic field and help elucidate the meanings of this family of terms.

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34. Cratinus *Fr.* 5.1 (Kock 1888).

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36. Barber 1991, 197.

37. For discussion see Barber 1991, 268, note 7.

38. Barber 1991; LSJ, s.u.

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