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Textiles and Textile Production in 11th Century Troyes from Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki's Exegesis to the Talmud

The late Eleanora Carus-Wilson, in her monograph *Haberget: A Medieval Textile Conundrum* (Medieval Archaeology, 13 [1969], 148-66), quoted Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki's description of the horizontal treadle loom, a written record which documents the apparatus used for textile manufacture in 11th century Troyes¹. This description has no parallel in other medieval European literary sources².

Written records such as these are valuable for corroboration of archaeological material remains, and all the more so when such remains have not been found.

Actually, this loom description furnished by Yitzhaki (affectionately referred to by his acronym – *Rashi*) is only the tip of an iceberg, and his exegesis to the Talmud is a veritable treasure trove of invaluable information regarding contemporary European material culture in general, and textiles – their production and use – in particular. Among the textile topics covered by Rashi in detail, we find raw materials such as wool and silk, production processes such as combing fibers and warping the loom, implements such as the weaving shuttle and the sewing needle, post loom treatment such as laundering and ironing. The field of garments and their ornamentation is also well represented.

The foundation which enables us to glean data on contemporary material culture from Rashi's literary work is the understanding of the nature and purpose of his exegesis to the Babylonian Talmud³. The Talmud itself was redacted in the 6th century CE in Babylonia, and it encompasses abundant material from earlier periods and from the Land of Israel. The focus of this work is Jewish law and ethics and Bible exegesis, not historiography. Therefore, any mention of material culture is ancillary, serving the text's primary context and in that particular connotation.

In turn, Rashi's exegesis is not, as a rule, historiographic in nature, i.e. the explanation of the historic background of the Talmudic period, but rather focuses on the contemporary application of Talmudic legal principals. Here we have the key to the documentation of European medieval material culture as it appears in Rashi's work.

¹ Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki was born in Troyes, Champagne in 1040 CE, was educated in Worms and Mainz, Lorraine and returned to Troyes until his decease in 1105 CE.

² Rabbi Hai Ga'on (939-1038 CE Pumbedita, Babylonia) in his commentary to the Mishna, Order of Purities, Tractate Kelim, Chapter 21, 1 describes a similar loom.

³ Rashi is generally considered the preeminent commentator of both the Hebrew Bible and the Babylonian Talmud. In this paper, we are dealing with the characteristics of his work on the Talmud, which may differ in part to those of his Biblical commentary.

This material often appears as a gloss which translates an unfamiliar word from the Talmudic text into Rashi's contemporary tongue, a dialect of Old French⁴. In other (and numerous) cases, he will furnish a description of the contemporary material culture which matches the Talmudic intention. Rashi will often identify this approach by wording to the effect of "this (as opposed to the Talmudic description of something) is how 'ours' looks". That is exactly what he did when he described the horizontal treadle loom in the context of activities prohibited on the Sabbath. Indeed, that loom did not exist in the Talmudic period.

My presentation will offer preliminary examples from each of the following fields: textile materials (the use of hemp), processes (the pleating of garments), and utensils (small "forks" for spinning gold).

Selected bibliography:

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⁴ Apart from these glosses which are **transliterated** into Hebrew characters, Rashi's commentaries are written in a mixture of the Hebrew and Aramaic languages.