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Archaeological evidence of luxury textiles from Late Antique *Serdica*

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ABSTRACT

Evidence of archaeological textiles from antiquity, and in particular of luxury textiles, has long attracted the interest of researchers. Clothing in every historical period is among the clearest markers of prestige and social status. Unfortunately, we have very little published material from modern day Bulgaria. This paper presents some finds from the Eastern and Western necropolises of *Serdica*, which shed some light on the spread and use of gold-woven textiles in late antiquity. There are 17 examples of gold-woven clothing and funerary textiles. Most of them have only the golden threads preserved, but in some cases organic threads are also detected, which are subject to forthcoming interdisciplinary analysis. In addition to the archaeological finds, some pictural evidence are presented to complement the visual reconstruction of the luxury textiles in late antiquity.

KEYWORDS

Archaeological textile, gold woven textile, late antiquity, *Serdica*

Introduction

Throughout much of human history, textiles have been among the clearest markers of social status, wealth, prestige and power. From the Bronze Age onwards, purple and gold have been recognised as status symbols (Gleba 2008, 61; Wild 2013, 171). The Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East emerge as the area where a tradition of producing gold woven fabrics was established during the Classical and Hellenistic periods, which would later spread throughout the Roman Empire and beyond (Benda-Weber 2013). Literary evidence, as well as archaeological finds confirm the directions of the distribution of luxury textiles (Gleba 2008, 69).

In academic literature, by "luxury textiles" traditionally are meant silk, gold and shellfish purple dye (Wild 2013, 171). In this combination silk is the main fabric, in which purple dyed wool and spun gold threads could be woven, combined in various decorative motifs (Wild 2013, 172). As we shall see below, it is also possible that fabrics made from other materials fall into this category.

Textiles, as is well known, are rarely preserved in the archaeological records of the temperate climatic zone, unlike gold threads. Some authors are convinced that the presence of any of the high-value components (gold, silk, purple dye) serves as evidence of the existence of the other two (Wild 2013, 172).

In the world of the living, luxury textiles take the form of expensive attire and furnishings as

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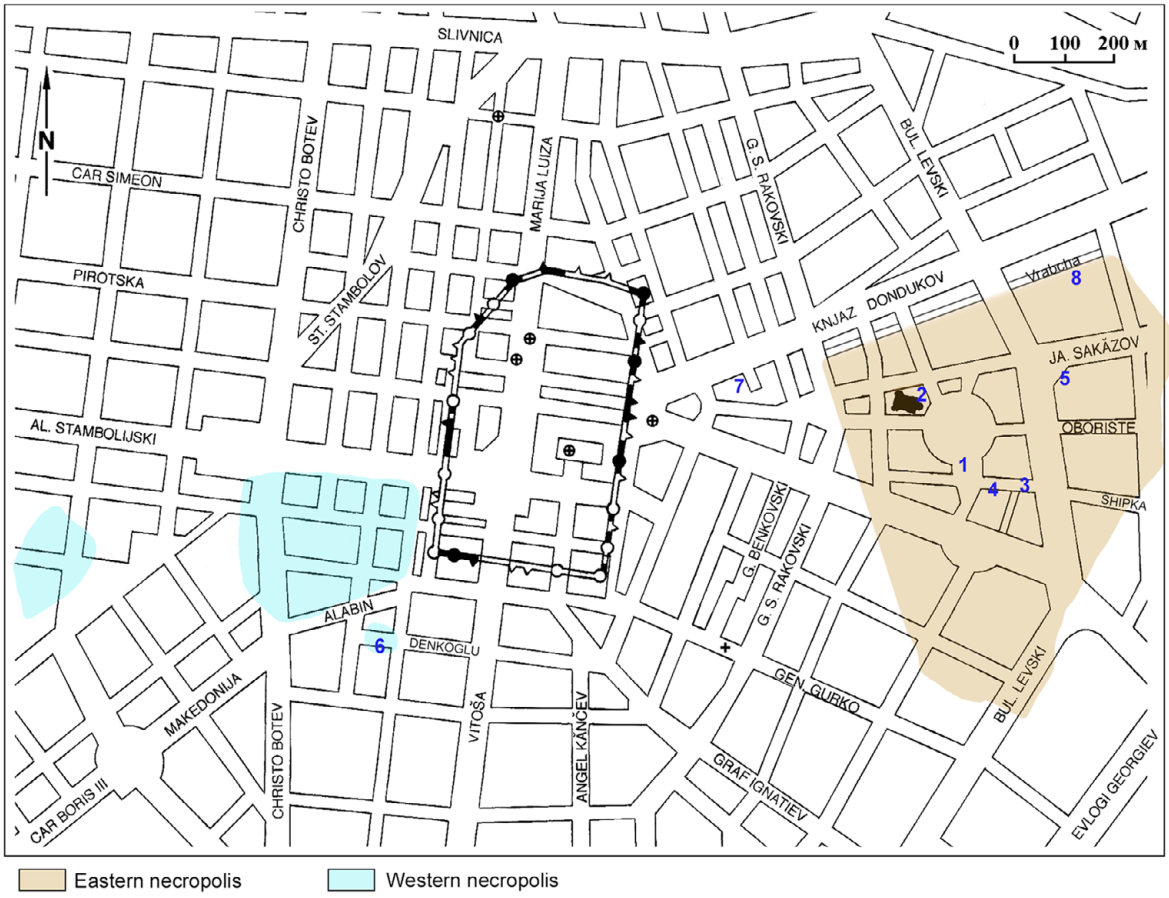


Fig. 1. Map of Serdica with location of the finds (after Dinchev 2014, 7, obr. 1 with additions by the author): 1. National Assembly Sq., tomb XXI; 2. The basilica of St. Sophia; 3. Masonry tomb on Shipka Str. and February 19 Str.; 4. Multi-chamber tomb-mausoleum, behind the building of the National Assembly; 5. Vasil Levski Sq. (Hyatt Hotel); 6. Tomb at 6 Dencoglu Str.; 7. Serdica Amphitheatre; 8. 22 Vrabcha Str.

furniture covers, carpets, curtains etc., and in the world of the dead – again as clothing for the dead and as expensive grave furnishings.

Some of the most remarkable examples of archaeological gold-woven textiles originate from late antiquity (Gleba 2008, 70 ff., Table 1, with ref.). A favourable condition for the preservation of a larger number of textiles remains in late antiquity is the inhumation rite in coffins, sarcophagi and tombs, usual for this period.

In general, the research of archaeological textiles from antiquity in Bulgaria is still in its initial stage. Although material is not lacking, it is rarely studied and analysed in detail. The evidence of luxury textiles from *Serdica*, are presented here and an attempt is made to outline the possibilities for their analysis and their potential as an archaeological source of information. A presentation with the same title was presented at a conference “Shifting Powers. Political, Urban, and Demographic Changes in Late Antique Balkan Provinces” – 10–12 September 2021, Silistra, Bulgaria.

Archaeological luxury textiles from the late antique *Serdica* (Table 1, fig. 1).

The Eastern necropolis of *Serdica*, features the most mentions of textiles (both ordinary and gold-woven) from the city (Shkorpil, Shkorpil 1890, 55; Filov 1913, 67–84; Shalganov 1989, 75;



Fig. 2. Finds from a tomb near the National Assembly Building. a–b – fabric fragments; c – gold threads (photo I. Borisova-Katsarova)

Ivanov 2007, 126; Boyadzhiev 2009, 20; Meshekov, Stoyanova 2018, 423–426; Ivanov, in press; Stoyanova, Meshekov, in press).

The textile remains have not been subjected to specialised analyses and for this reason it is not possible to say with certainty what fibres were used, what manufacturing techniques were applied, what was the type of weave and what was the function of the textile products.

During the levelling of the terrain near the National Assembly building in 1880, the Shkorpil brothers reported traces of leather shoes decorated with "golden tinsel/ goldthread with a spiral ornament" (Shkorpil, Shkorpil 1890, 55). In 1888 in the collection of the National Museum (now National Archaeological Institute with Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, NAIM–BAS) were recorded "leather pieces covered with remnants of gold layer on which there are painted ornaments", "remnants of fabrics embroidered with gold wire" (inv. no. 53) and "mouldy and rotten remnants of goldthread cloth" (inv. no. 54). An older inventory book of the museum, from the time when it was still part of the National Library in Sofia, under no. 87 of the same year (1888), reads "dust from silk slippers". Whether this is the same find mentioned by the Shkorpil brothers is difficult to say, but it is very likely (Table 1, no. 1). Future research into the museum's collections and old inventory books is likely to shed additional light on this issue. The finds under inv. nos 53 and 54 revealed interesting details, which will be presented below.

During the study of the necropolis around the basilica of St. Sophia in the early twentieth century, traces of textiles were found in nine tombs, and in two of them, there were gold threads (Filov

1913, 67–75), but only one is from the late antiquity (Table 1, no. 2). In another tomb with the same date, fragments of fabric, determined as silk were detected (Table 1, no. 3). To these examples is added a tomb-mausoleum near the building of the National Assembly (Shalganov 1989, 75) (Tabl. 1, no. 6), a tomb on Shipka Str. and February 19 Str. (Shalganov et al., unpublished) (Table 1, no. 7), two more tombs under and in front of the church of St. Sophia (Ivanov 2007, 125–126; in press) (Table 1, nos. 4–5), Tomb no. 4 and five more graves from the section of the necropolis at Vasil Levski Square (Meshekov, Stoyanova 2018, 423–426) (Table 1, nos 8–13), and two recently investigated graves at 22 Vrabcha Str. (Table 1, nos 14–15) (Stoyanova, Meshekov, in press).

Decomposed remains of gold-woven fabric, probably a garment, have also been found in a masonry tomb of the Western necropolis of *Serdica* (Meshekov, Borisova-Katsarova 2020, 1055–1060; Meshekov et al. 2021, 30–33) (Table 1, no. 16).

From *Serdica* we have a very rare example of gold-woven textile, originating from a settlement context (Table 1, no. 17), found in a late antique dwelling located above the ruins of *Serdica*'s amphitheatre.

Eastern necropolis of *Serdica*

Ironically, some of the best-preserved examples of luxury archaeological textiles from *Serdica* come from the earliest studies of the Eastern necropolis conducted by the Shkorpil brothers as the terrain around the future National Assembly building was lowered at the end of the 19th c. (Table 1, no. 1). In their publication, they reported preserved leather slippers with a gold spiral ornament (Shkorpil, Shkorpil 1890, 55). In fact, in addition to the leather sole, a piece of fabric and many gold threads have also been preserved. Apart from the sole, only small pieces of leather have survived from the slippers, on which a gold leaf was applied in a linear ornament.

The fabric, although in small fragments (about 1 x 1 and 1 x 2 cm), is in remarkably good condition (figs 2 a–b, 3 c–d). The threads from the warp and weft are clearly visible, as well as the golden threads spun around an organic core, now missing (figs 2 c, 3 a–b). The warp is made of very fine white threads, while the weft is made of thicker, dyed threads, some with a more intense purple colour, others with a more reddish tinge. Unfortunately, it is not clear whether the gold thread and the piece of fabric belong to the same textile. The warp threads diameter is *ca*. 0.022–0.032 mm, no twisting visible, and this of the weft is *ca*. 0.06–0.075 mm, with a very loose z twist. The diameter of the gold threads is *ca*. 100–120 μm. The fabric seems very dense – 26–30/50 threads per cm^2. The weave is difficult to determine. A kind of twill is possible and/or tablet woven starting border and/or extra weft threads. The fineness of the threads also suggests the use of weaving tablets or a kind of weaving device smaller than the warp-weighted loom for producing such sophisticated fabric. Preliminary observations with a light microscope and microchemical examination point to fibers of plant origin, probably flax (at least in one of the systems)[1]. Further analysis is forthcoming.

For the sake of objectivity, it is necessary to mention that no detailed information has been preserved about the circumstances of the discovery of these finds. The inventory book of the National Museum states that they were "found in a tomb at the National Assembly by workers who dug canals at this place". When the Shkorpil brothers published the results of archaeological research, they specified that tomb no. X contained traces of a garment enveloping the body from the neck to the knees, and in tomb no. XXI, on one of the three skeletons, "leather slippers decorated with gold wire (one ornament in the form of a spiral) were found" (Shkorpil, Shkorpil 1890, 55). The Shkorpil brothers erroneously date the tombs they discovered to the Middle Ages. However, it is known that the place

1 The research was conducted by Ekaterina Stoyanova (National Academy of Arts, Sofia), to whom I express my gratitude.

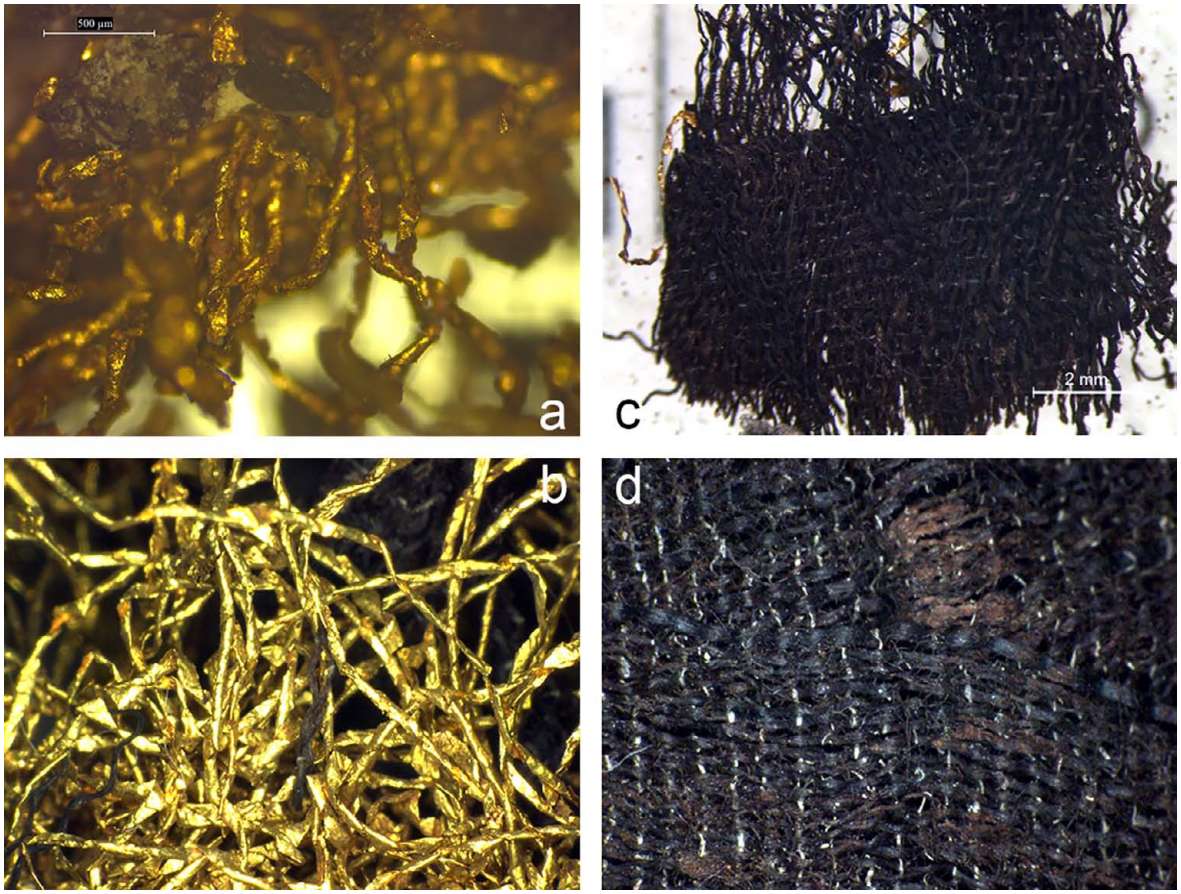


Fig. 3. Finds from a tomb near the National Assembly Building. a–b – gold threads; c–d – fabric fragments (photo I. Borisova-Katsarova)

was used for burials during this late period. Without additional information, there is a shadow of doubt about the exact date and identification of the textile remains discussed here.

We have more information about the tombs under the church of St. Sophia (fig. 4).

In two of the cases, it seems that the textile remains were in better condition and we have a more detailed description. Five individuals were buried in an arched tomb no. XVI, dated to the 4th c. AD (Filov 1913, 79–80) (Table 1, no. 3). Remains of three types of fabrics were mentioned. One was defined by the author as a silk fabric, registered on three of the skeletons. On the fourth and fifth skeletons, "unusually thin, almost transparent fabric" was observed, as well as another, thicker fabric, with patterns (Filov 1913, 80). In the absence of other information, we can only assume that the silk fabric (if any) belongs to clothing, while the almost transparent fabric may be a loosely woven shroud. It is more likely that the thicker fabric is also clothing made in complex weaving techniques and with dyed wool. Although there are no preserved gold threads, the described fabrics can undoubtedly be classified as luxury textiles. The "colourful stripes" are undoubtedly dyed yarn. Gold and multi-coloured threads were used to create decorative patterns in intricate weaving techniques, facilitated by a loom, which allows multiple sheds to be opened (Wild, Droß-Krüpe 2017, 304–305).

Remains of "thin silk fabric without patterns" and two types of gold-woven fabric of different quality were found in tomb no. XX (Filov 1913, 82–83), but it belongs to a grave from the Middle Ages, that disturbed the late antique tomb (Chokoev 2019, 363). The first fabric was described by Filov as "rough, with golden threads", and the other as "better goldthread fabric with colourful stripes on it". It is possible that the difference in appearance of the fabric is due to different types of threads used, but also to different weaving techniques. The "gold" threads were actually gilded silver,

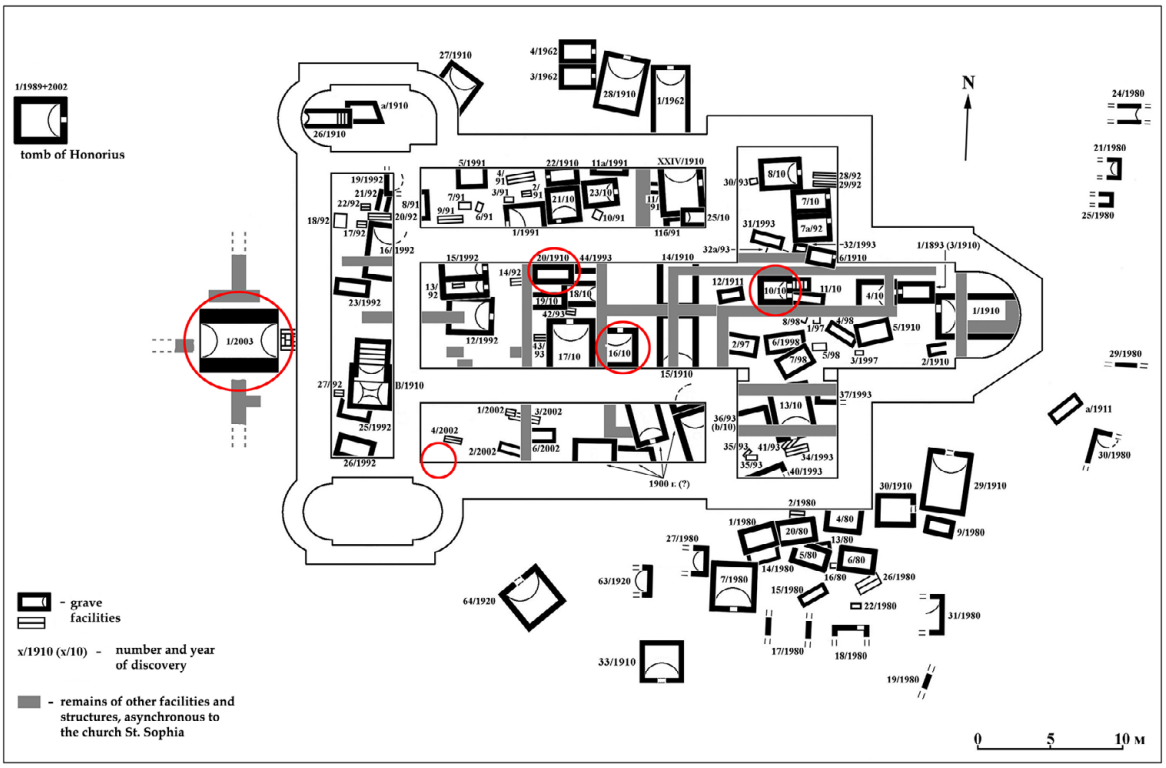


Fig. 4. Basilica St. Sophia – location of the finds
(plan after Dinchev 2014, 40, obr. 5 with additions by the author)

and their diameter is considerably larger than those of late antique date – *ca*. 0.35 mm. The same is valid for the organic fibres which are double s-twisted z-spun thinner threads. They were certainly identified as silk (Chokoev 2019, 364). These differences suggest that the finds of the Shkorpil brothers (Table 1, no. 1) still belong to late antiquity.

In tomb no. X (4th c. AD) at the St. Sophia church was laid a child. "Numerous gold threads" were found, which were supposed to be from a gold-woven garment (Filov 1913, 76) (Table 1, no. 2).

In 2003, in a family tomb located in front of St. Sophia, golden threads were discovered, probably from a garment of a child (7–16 years old). The tomb was dated to the end of 4th c. AD – the middle of the 5th c. AD (Ivanov 2007, 125–126) (Table 1, no. 4). In the same year, in the south-western part of the south nave of the basilica, in a partially destroyed brick tomb, between the human bones, many gold threads of a "gold-woven or gold-embroidered garment or shroud" were found (Table 1, no. 5). Suggested date is the end of 3rd – beginning of 4th c. AD (Ivanov, in press).

Remains of a dark brown fabric with woven gold threads were found in a multi-chamber tomb-mausoleum located behind the National Assembly building and dated to 4th or 5th c. AD (Shalganov 1989, 75) (Table 1, no. 6). According to some researchers, the brown colour in such cases could be an indication of degraded purple (Wild 2013, 174).

In the tomb at the corner of Shipka Str.t and 19 February Str., gold threads of at least two different diameters spun around an organic core were found, together with thin, flat gold ribbons and cylindrical golden beads (Table 1, no. 7, figs 5–7). The proposed date is 5th – beginning of 6th c. AD (Shalganov et al., unpublished).

The preserved gold threads are up to 20 cm long and extremely fine – the diameter of the thinner ones varies between 0.06 mm and 0.1 mm (60–100 μm), the width of the strip from which they were spun is approx. 0.25 mm (250 μm) (fig. 6).

The thicker threads have a diameter of 0.16–0.18 mm (160–180 μm), with a strip width of up



Fig. 5. Golden threads and beads from the tomb at the corner of Shipka Str. and 19 February Str. (photo RHM–Sofia)

to 0.64 mm (640 µm). The individual gold ribbons are approx. 0.67 mm wide. The beads were cut from a thin tube with a diameter of 0.35–0.5 mm and a length between 1.8 mm and 2.15 mm (fig. 7).

In tomb no. 4 and five more graves from the necropolis section at Vasil Levski Square (Meshekov, Stoyanova 2018, 423–426) gold threads spun around an organic thread and separate thin flat ribbons were also found (Table 1, nos 8–13; fig. 8). Radiocarbon dating suggests that they are dated to the 5th–6th c. AD.

The diameter of the spun gold threads is approx. 120.5–130 µm. The flat strips are a little wider. They were found mostly in the area of the forehead and around the temples of the buried, so it has been suggested that they decorated head coverings of the dead, in all cases women. In all examples, only the gold threads were preserved, without any traces of organic matter[2].

In 2023 excavations were conducted in the current northernmost section of the eastern necropolis of *Serdica*, at 22 Vrabcha Str. (Stoyanova, Meshekov, in press). Gold threads identical to those described were found in two graves (nos 13 and 14) (Table 1, nos 14–15), but no flat stripes were detected.

They were z-spun, with diameter *ca*. 120.5–130 µm. They were found in small amounts on the forehead and temples of the deceased. Some threads look crossed. In grave no. 13, a calcified deposit was found on the long bones, which under microscopic observation revealed an impression of degraded fabric on the inside.

The weave appears to be tabby, quite sparse, with about 10/20 threads per cm. Unfortunately, it is not possible to ascertain the type of fibre or the direction of spinning. The fabric would have been part of a garment or funerary shroud.

2 I thank Polina Stoyanova for the information.

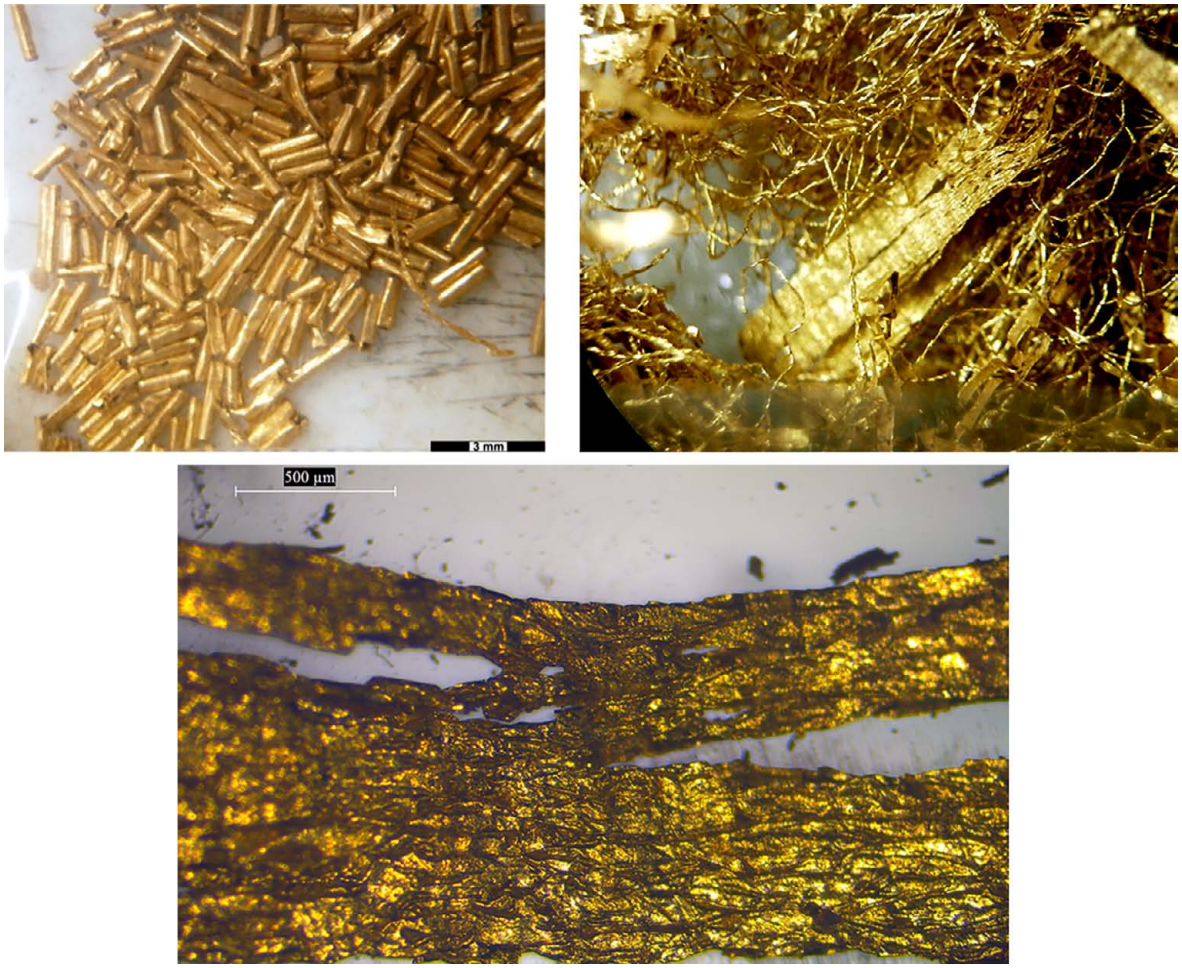


Fig. 6. Golden threads and beads from the tomb at the corner of Shipka Str. and 19 February Str. (photo RHM–Sofia)

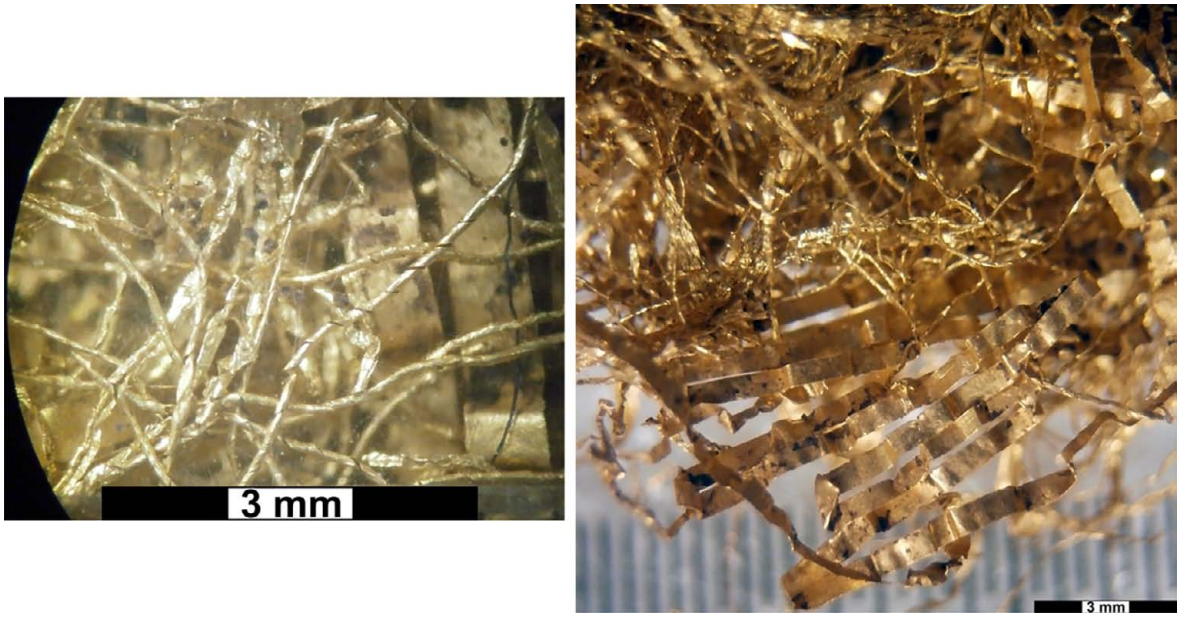


Fig. 7. Golden threads and stripes from the tomb at the corner of Shipka Str. and 19 February Str. (photo RHM–Sofia)

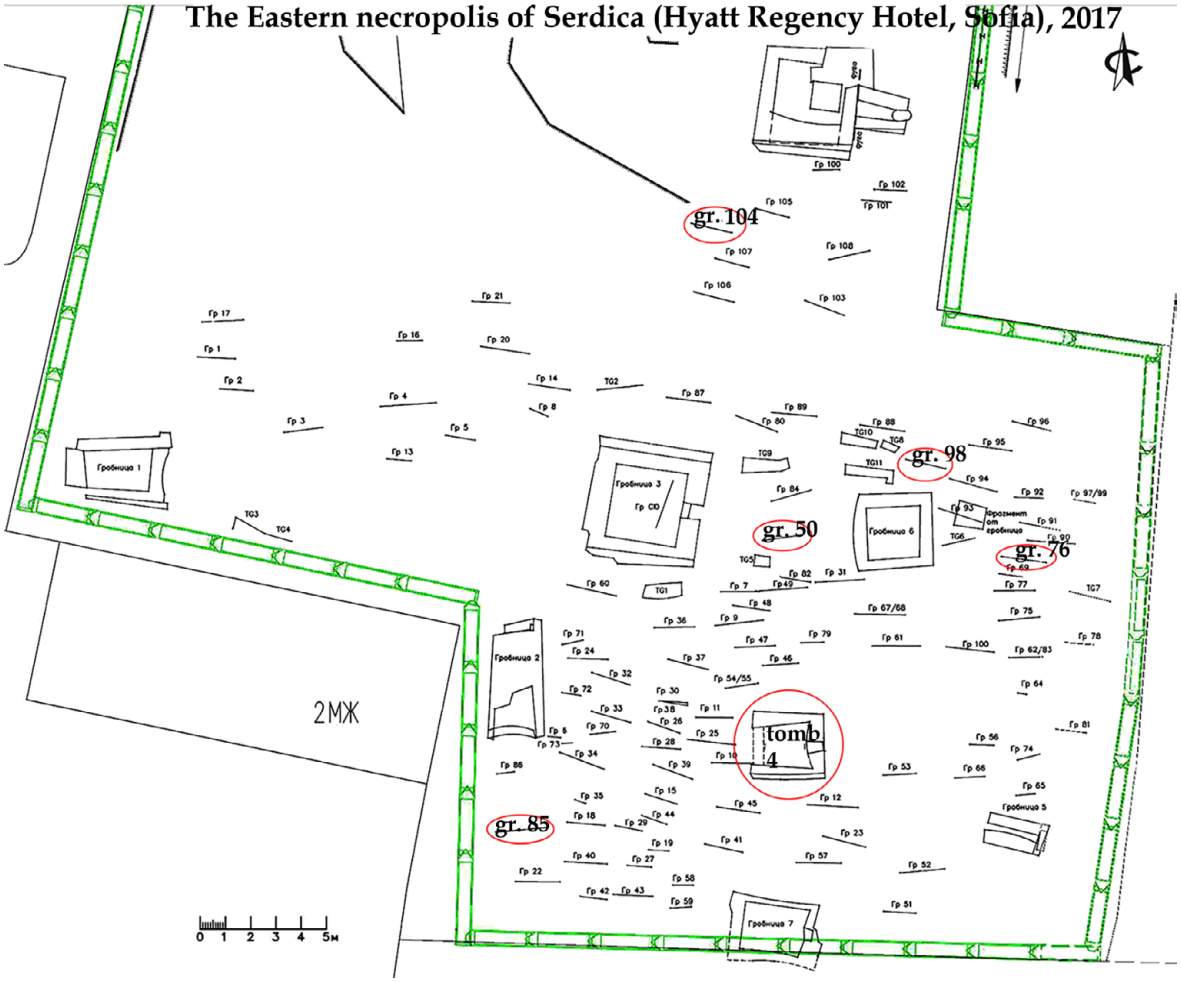


Fig. 8. Vasil Levski Square, location of the finds
(after Meshekov, Stoyanova 2018, 424, fig. 1 with additions by the author)

Western necropolis of *Serdica*

Decomposed remains of gold-woven fabric, probably a garment, have also been found in a masonry tomb in the Western necropolis of *Serdica*, at 6 Denkoglu Str. (Meshekov, Borisova-Katsarova 2020, 1055–1060; Meshekov et al. 2021, 30–33) (Table 1, no. 16). The proposed date is in the 4th c. AD. The tomb was looted in antiquity, most likely in the Middle Ages, and the anatomical order of the bones was disturbed. In addition, the tomb was found flooded because of rainfall. Gold threads were seen all around the bones, below and above them. Presumably when the body was originally placed, this was the area from the neck to the calves (fig. 11).

Apart from the golden threads, separate fibres of organic origin have been preserved (fig. 12).

Microscopic observation showed that thin gold ribbons, with a flat cross-section, were twisted around a thread, with unknown characteristics so far. Both gold and organic threads were z-spun. The diameter of the gold threads is *ca.* 0,12–0,13 mm (120–130 μm) and the organic ones – *ca.* 0,07–0,08 mm (70–80 μm). Preliminary observations under a light microscope and microchemical analyses (with phloroglucinol and Herzberg reagents) point to a thread of plant origin, possibly cotton. Further analyses are forthcoming. The soil around the threads was dyed purple and rusty brown. Unfortunately, no textile fragments have been preserved.



Fig. 9. 22 Vrabcha Str., Grave 13, golden threads (photo I. Borisova-Katsarova)

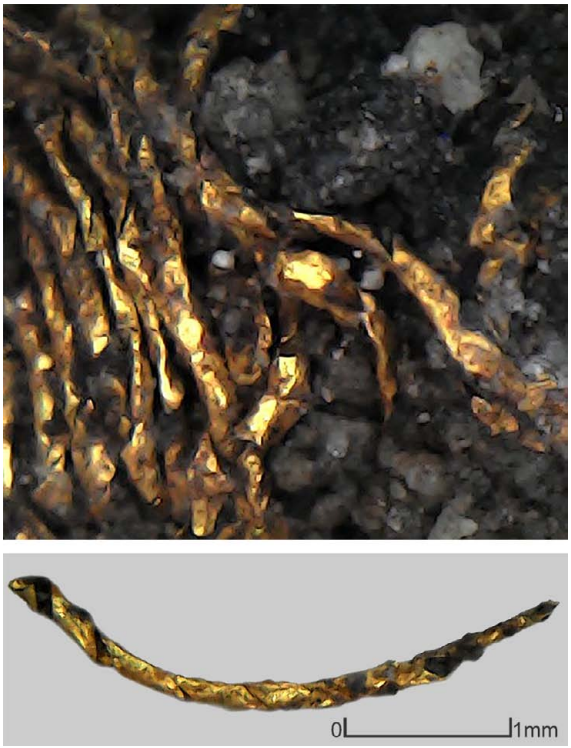


Fig. 10. 22 Vrabcha Str., Grave 13, golden threads (photo I. Borisova-Katsarova)

Settlement context

In 2006, a late antique dwelling located above the ruins of *Serdica*'s amphitheatre was excavated (Velichkov 2009, 59). Scattered gold threads were found covering an area of approximately 0.50 x 0.30 m in a layer with coal, debris, household pottery and animal bones (Field records of the archaeological research of the Amphitheatre, 29. 05. 2006, 06–08. 07. 2006; catalogue of photos nos 36–38, 40– 42, unpublished). The finds from the house were of late antique period, and most of the coins were dated to the second half of the 5th c. AD. The discovered bone objects and semi-finished products were the reason why the room in question was interpreted as a workshop for processing bone and horn, which functioned in the 5th–6th c. AD (Velichkov 2009, 59). Unfortunately, nothing points to the type and function of gold-woven textile, defined by the researcher as a "gold-woven cloth" from which only gold threads have survived.

Production techniques

Gold threads can be incorporated into textiles through several techniques. They can be used in the warp and in the weft or in only one of the systems. They can be simply woven or added to intricate patterns in tapestry weaving. Embroidery also may have been used, but most of the examples were woven on the loom. The gold threads can also be used on their own to make nets in sprang technique or for cords and fringes by twisting several gold threads together. The association of gold threads with purple dyed silk fibers is common (Gleba 2008, 68). Unfortunately, our finds do not provide such fibre identification at this stage (Table 2).

The gold threads in antiquity were produced in several ways:

1. Gold wire or ribbon. The first one is forged/hammered and has a round cross section. The second is hammered and cut. They are usually not associated with textile fibres.

2. Golden wire twisted around a thread. Round section, the core is often silk.

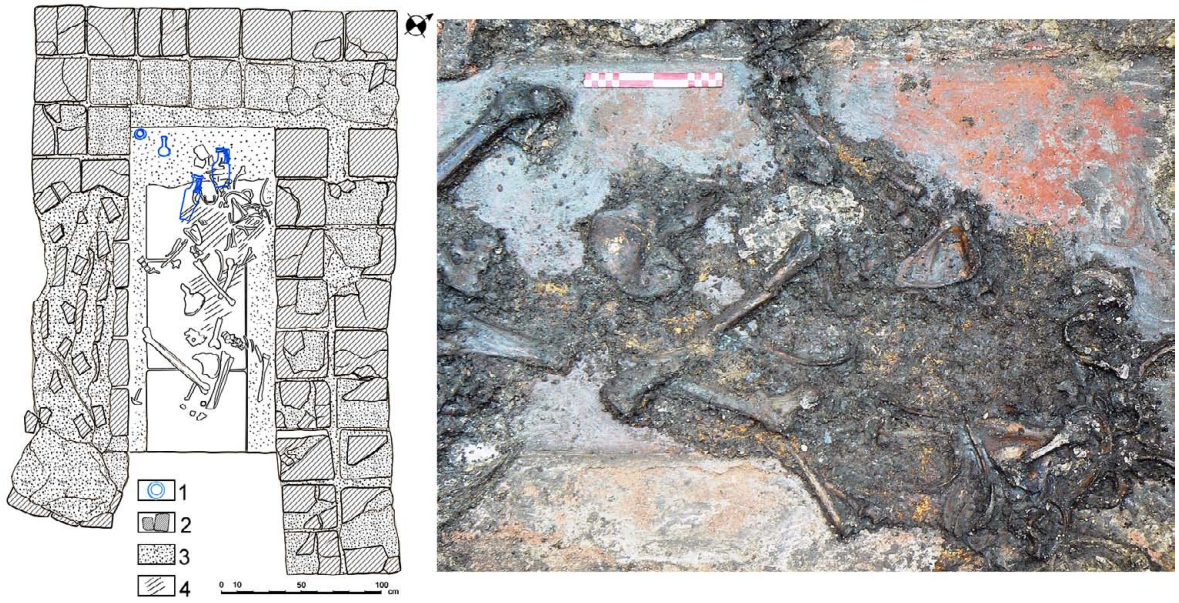


Fig. 11. Tomb at 6 Dencoglu Str. (after Meshekov et al. 2021, 23, obr. 7 with additions by the author and G. Katsarov). 1. Glass vessels. 2. Bricks. 3. Mortar. 4. Area with gold threads.

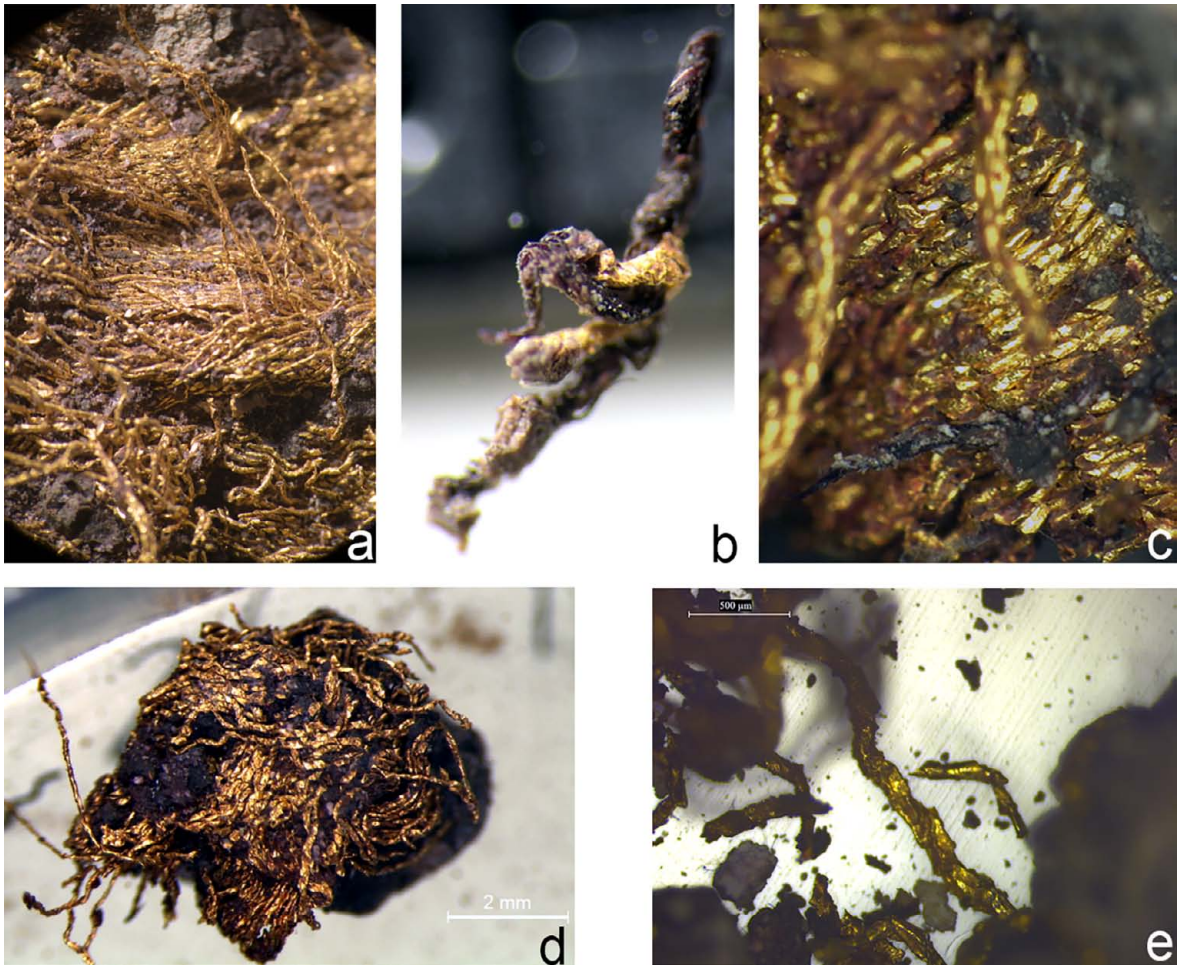


Fig. 12. Gold threads and fibres at 6 Dencoglu Str. (photo RHM – Sofia)

3. Gold ribbon twisted around a thread. It is a flat narrow strip; the core is silk, wool, plant fibre or animal sinew. Gold can be drawn or hammered, or both, to make a ribbon. Most of the surviving examples are in this technique, which is optimal in terms of material, cost and final product. Depending on how tightly the gold ribbon is twisted around the core, we can talk about "open" gold thread, or "closed" when the core is completely covered with metal (Gleba 2008, 68, with ref).

As mentioned above, most of the gold threads found in *Serdica* (that I had a chance to examine personally) were spun as thin strips twisted around an organic core clockwise (in z direction) and are extremely fine. This, of course, cannot be used as an indication of origin, but it is quite similar to most examples found in Europe (Gleba 2008, 70, Table 1). In two of the examples from Vasil Levski Square (tomb no. 4 and grave no. 85) and those from the tomb at Shipka Str., some of the gold threads are flat thin strips that do not show twisting but folding along their length, probably suggesting that they were incorporated into the fabric as weft.

Although the spun gold threads have been found in remarkable quantities, no decorative patterns have been detected. Some appear grouped close together, forming horizontal bands or vertical stripes. Unfortunately, nothing suggests how they were incorporated into the fabric.

Some of the beads from the tomb on Shipka Str. and 19 February Str., that were cut from a gold tube, have a transverse perforation (with hole diameter 0.15 mm). They were most likely strung on a string, and the openings suggest that they were additionally sewn to each other to form a decorative motif, after which they were attached to another fabric.

Origin

Written, epigraphic and archaeological evidence suggests that the origins of luxury gold-woven textiles should be traced to the Eastern Mediterranean, Asia Minor, and the Middle East (Gleba 2008, 61 ff., 69; Benda-Weber 2013, 181–182). It was made in specialised workshops by highly qualified workers (Benda-Weber 2013, 173 with ref.). Within the Roman Empire, many centres for production of expensive fabrics coexisted, and the art of making and using gold-spun threads passed from one large city to another, with the direction of distribution from east to west and from south to north (Gleba 2008, 69). According to some authors, in late antiquity (from the second half of the 4th c. AD onwards) luxury textiles were made only in the emperors' personal *gynaecea*, although there are indications of the existence of private workshops that worked with silk (Wild 1967, 661–662 with ref.; Dimitrijević, Whitehouse 2022, 125). The materials discussed here do not allow to determine the origin and place of production of expensive textiles found in *Serdica.* Given the traditional trade routes and contacts of the Balkan Roman provinces, we can assume that at least some of the luxury gold woven products in our lands originate in the Eastern Mediterranean. Future interdisciplinary studies would shed light on this issue.

Pictorial evidence

Unfortunately, in *Serdica* there are too few synchronous images that might help in the reconstruction of the products discussed here. A figural composition with "four waist-length images arranged around a table covered with drapery" was found in a two-chambered cist tomb. The palette is represented by ochre, red and green, with microscopic traces of blue (Meshekov 2018, 313–314, obr. 13). The severe damage of the fresco does not allow general conclusions about the clothing of the figures presented, but it seems typical of the era, consisting of a tunic, dalmatic, chlamys. The drapery on the table is difficult to determine. The suggested dating is in the 5th c. AD (Meshekov 2018, 315). The colours, although undoubtedly changed by time, hint at the colour of textiles. A similar scene in remarkably good condition, dating between the beginning of the 4th c. and AD 379, was discovered in a tomb from the necropolis of Tomis (Constanţa, Romania) (Lungu 2014). The clothes of the partici-

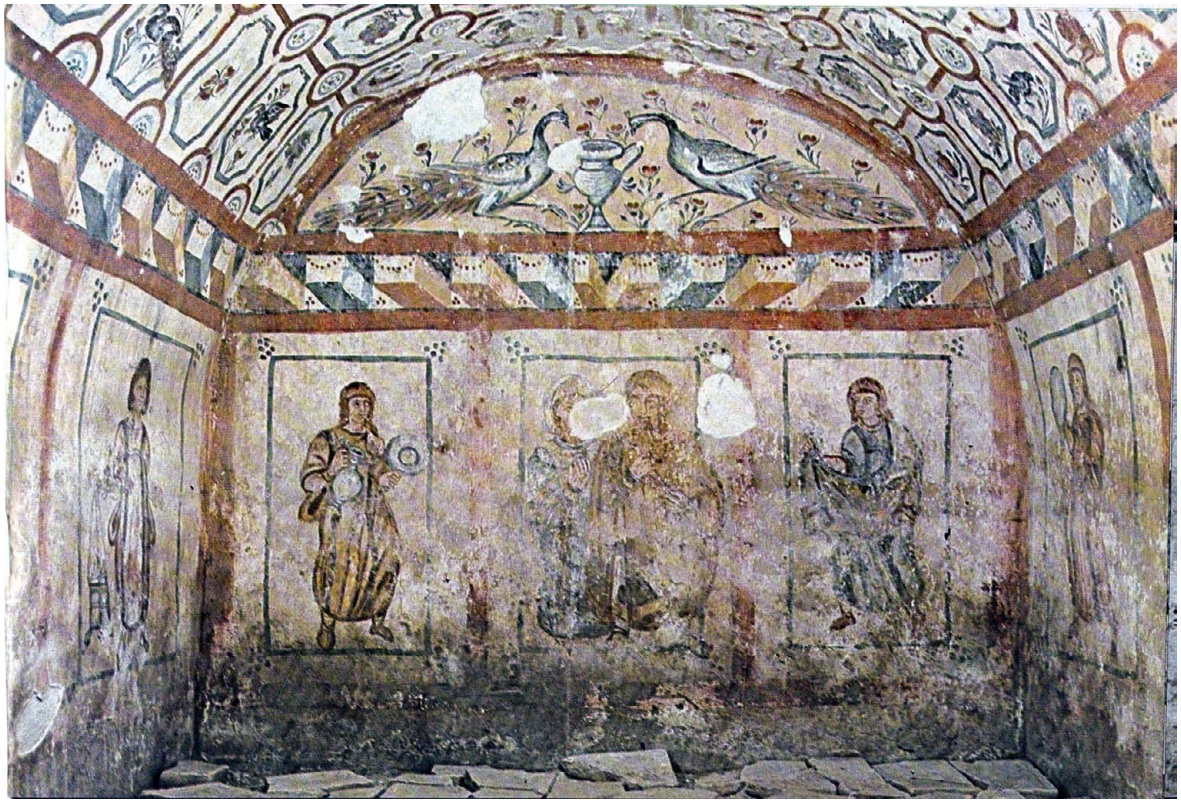


Fig. 13. Silistra tomb (after Angelova 1976, fig. 1)

pants in the ritual feast[3] are typical of the era. Outer garments (cloaks) and tunics are decorated on the shoulders with decoratively woven *orbicolae*; the tunics also show *clavi* and decorative stripes on the cuffs of the sleeves and probably around the neckline. The couches are covered with colourful woven coverings with geometric motifs. Similar scenes were found in the catacombs of Rome – those of San Callisto, Priscilla, Pietro e Marcellino (Krauze-Kołodziej 2012, figs 35–36, 39).

Given the sparse pictorial evidence from *Serdica,* it is worth presenting here a remarkable Late Antique monument from *Durostorum*, present-day Silistra, Bulgaria (Dimitrov 1961; Angelova 1976; Popova-Moroz 1999). This monument clearly displays both the representative garments of a high-ranking couple and the clothing of their servants and reveals the role of clothes in demonstrating the social status of those depicted in the tomb. Ten full-length figures in various garments were depicted on its walls. At the centre of the composition, both spatially and semantically, is a married couple, no doubt the owners of the tomb (figs 13–14).

Despite the fading and the change of colours over time, we can still get an idea of the colour of the clothes. The central male figure is dressed in a long-sleeved tunic, probably white in colour. This shirt is probably of the type mentioned in the Edict of Maximum Prices as *strictoria*, which is believed to have become part of the uniform of the Roman army and civilian services and has been common in art since the late 3rd c. AD. It was made both of linen and of wool (Erim et al. 1970, 128; Morgan 2018, 16). The dress is decorated on the shoulders and cuffs with dark stripes. At its lower end, there is a round ornament in now grey-blue colour (*orbicola*). Over the tunic is a mantle, fastened on the right shoulder with a fibula. The garment now has a pale ochre colour. At the bottom, inside(?) and outside, it is decorated with squares (*tablion*) in a dark colour. It is possible that in this

3 The interpretation of the scene is not a subject of the present study, thus omitting the different variants of its significance (for the development of iconography, see A. Krauze-Kołodziej 2012).



Fig. 14. Silistra tomb, details (after Angelova 1976, figs 5, 7, 9–11)

case we have an example of double-faced fabric. Around the neck, at the lower part and at the vertical edges, dark stripes are visible, which probably once had a deep red colour. Undoubtedly, this colouring can be associated with purple – the most highly valued dye in antiquity, reserved only for people of the highest rank in the empire. The cloak is probably a *paludamentum*, a long outer garment worn by superiors, military or civilian. Although there are disagreements about the shape, it is generally accepted that this garment has a curved lower edge, as it appears in the mural. It was made of fine wool and often was decorated and/or dyed or bleached (Cleland et al. 2007, 137–138 *paludamentum*; Morgan 2018, 16, 137 ff.).

The central female figure wears a white head covering of transparent fabric tied at the nape of her neck. Reddish and grey-blue stripes appear on the headscarf, but whether they show decoration or are an artistic technique for adding volume and light shade is difficult to judge. The woman is wearing a light long-sleeved tunic with red striped cuffs. Over the tunic she wears a dalmatic (Dimitrov 1961, 13), now greenish in colour. Clearly visible are two horizontal ochre/yellowish stripes on the sleeves and only one visible vertical on the front of the garment (*clavus*)? with additional decorative floral motifs. In my opinion, there can be no doubt that these stripes demonstrate gold-woven decoration on the garment. The rest of the garment also has darker patterns, which suggest a decoratively woven fabric.

The clothing of the other characters, interpreted as servants, though more common than that of the masters, can in no way be called poor. The women are dressed in the same way. They all wear a long-sleeved garment of a lighter colour, probably of a finer fabric, and a long outer dress like dal-

matic, with wide and long sleeves, leaving the sleeves of the undergarment visible. However, as far as these clothes are fastened under the chest, it may be more correct to talk about a tunic, as dalmatics are mostly worn without a belt (Cleland et al. 2007, 46 *dalmatic*; Morgan 2018, 17). Stripes of a darker colour are clearly visible on the maid's sleeves on the left of the central stage. The outer garments of the girls are ankle-length, leaving a small part of the feet visible. The tunics are in a darker colour (initially probably pink-red, red, yellow-brown) and have vertical stripes along the entire length (*clavi*), with different colours – grey-blue, red-brown. On the visible part of the legs, there are one or two horizontal darker stripes, probably hinting at socks. The men are dressed in long-sleeved tunics to the knees, fastened at the waist, in different colours – blue, red, brown, white. Most tunics are monochrome, except the white one which is decorated on the shoulders and at the lower part with *orbicolae*, and on the shoulders – with blue *clavi* and additional red threads. There are also red and blue stripes on the cuffs. The servants are probably wearing tight-fitting trousers (see east image of the north wall) (Angelova 1976, obr. 9). The human figures from the hunting scenes depicted on the vault also wear short long-sleeved tunics and have bare legs or wear tight-fitting trousers.

Of particular interest are the clothes that the servants carry in their hands. The longhaired blond servant with a gothic fashion hairstyle is holding a cloak in his left hand, identical to the one worn by the noble deceased depicted in the central field (fig. 14, b). The decorative blue squares at the lower part of the garment are clearly visible here, in which an additional reddish motif can be seen. The first maid to the right of the central field carries in her hands a garment defined as a white cloak (Dimitrov 1961, 13). The image still clearly shows two parallel red stripes symmetrically at both ends of the garment, which could be a covering for the mistress's head. The garment offered by the servant from the north wall is also defined as a cloak. This is again a white garment, with *orbicolae* (fig. 14, e). The garment appears to be short and made of a finer fabric and may be a tunic (with or without sleeves). Of particular interest are the trousers with a belt held by one of the servants. They have a cut in which steps are sewn to the legs (fig. 14, d). The belt goes through wide loops. Such trousers have been archaeologically attested in Torsberg, Denmark (Croom 2010, fig. 74.2; Morgan 2018, 74).

The cuts of the presented types of clothes have been commented many times in the literature and have been the subject of a number of reconstructions (Croom 2010 with ref.; Morgan 2018 with ref.), but they are not a subject of the present study.

The couple's attire undoubtedly defines them as belonging to the local provincial elite. It is not my intention here to discuss the interpretation of the images, but as far as the man holds a scroll in his hand and not a sword, I think that the man was probably a senior magistrate, possibly with a previous successful military career. Although after the middle of the 3rd c. AD the crossbow fibulae spread among the civilian population, they remain the insignia of the Roman military or civilian employee (Gencheva 2004, 89). Some of the textiles and the belt (fig. 14, c) worn by the servants could be expensive gifts that the master received for his merits from someone higher in the social or military hierarchy, and why not from the emperor himself. One detail that is not related to clothing deserves attention. All the women wear jewellery – earrings and bracelets and two of the men wear torques with pendants on their necks. If these are really servants and not members of the household of the depicted married couple, then their clothing and appearance further emphasise the importance, prestige, and capabilities of the masters. The tunic of the so-called Goth servant, though shorter, is very much like the master's robe. It is noted that in late antiquity the love of colour, decoration and display was not limited to the elite; murals and mosaics show whole families and their servants wearing brightly coloured clothes and jewellery (Morgan 2018, 30).

The way in which the clothing is used to emphasise the prestige of the owners of the tomb is remarkable, regardless of whether they ordered and purchased it by themselves, whether it was

a gift from a superior or donated by the master of his servants and/or heirs. Undoubtedly, textiles demonstrate the social status and capabilities of the whole household (Popova-Moroz 1999, 25–27; Raff 2022).

Discussion

The subject of archaeological textiles from the Roman period in the present-day Bulgaria is still not well developed in the scientific literature. The emerging discussions are multi-layered and multi-faceted. Regarding the chronology of luxury textiles, two chronological groups clearly emerge, belonging to the 1st–2nd c. and the 4th–6th c. AD respectively. In *Serdica*, the finds of gold-woven fabrics from late antiquity available for analysis are not yet sufficient to assess whether specifics can be derived to aid more precise dating and interpretation. It is noteworthy that the gold threads dated to the 4th c. AD seems finer than those dated to the 5th–6th c. AD, and those with a medieval date are even thicker. However, material is too scarce to determine whether this is a reliable trend. In addition, the metal threads of medieval examples are in most cases of silver with gilding (Chokoev 2019). In this context, the gold threads from Tomb XXI behind the National Assembly building (Table 1, no. 1) should be of late antique date. Such certainty is lacking for the fabric fragments, although the weft threads are single, z-spun, while in the medieval fabric examples from *Serdica* there is evidence of plied S2z threads (two z-spun threads plied in s-direction). Despite mentions in the literature, so far, we have no confirmed example of silk fabric or threads, nor of shellfish purple dye from late antiquity in *Serdica*. It is possible that some of the products, although gold woven, represent cheaper versions of expensive products available only to the highest social strata. Comparing with pictorial and other evidence suggests that luxury textiles were also available to members of the late antique "middle class".

The concentration of gold-thread textiles in the Eastern necropolis of *Serdica* is notable, and this is hardly due to the state of research alone. The Eastern necropolis also has the largest concentration of late antique tombs, indicating it has been favoured by the wealthier strata of *Serdica*'s society, often referred to as the "main necropolis" of *Serdica* (Stancheva 2009, 93; Dinchev 2014, 5, 10).

Can these finds tell us more about the people to whom they belonged? It has been repeatedly emphasised that gold-woven textiles are a luxury item available to few. Despite the existing discussions, the prices of spun gold, silk and purple dyes preserved in the Edict of Maximum Prices of Emperor Diocletian, as well as the wages of the craftsmen who made them (*barbaricarii*), were remarkably high (Caputo et al. 1955, 111; Erim et al. 1970, 121, 141; Doyle 1976, 82–84, 96; Crawford, Raynolds 1979, 195–197). Those who could afford such products were representatives of the highest strata of late antique society (Wild 2013, 170–171). From the end of the 3rd c. AD *Serdica* was the capital city of the province of Dacia Mediterranea. This presupposes the presence of high-ranking officials in the city, and after the establishment of Christianity as the leading religion in the Empire – also representatives of the high clergy. Emperors often resided in *Serdica* (Dinchev 2014, 50 with ref.). In this sense, the concentration of luxury goods in the town, including textiles, is hardly surprising. At the same time, it is noted that members of the "middle class", especially in late antiquity, also had access to expensive goods. Luxury textiles reached their consumers as diplomatic and other gifts (Gleba 2008, 62; Morgan 2018, 29–30 with ref.).

At least three of the tombs in the Eastern necropolis of *Serdica*, where traces of luxury textiles have been found, are family tombs. As these tombs were intended to serve different generations of the same family, we may assume that the owners were representatives of the local provincial elite. Insofar as in the early Christian period the church's attitude towards the manifestations of luxury was condemning (Wild 2013, 172), the richly dressed deceased were rather secular aristocrats. Of par-

ticular interest is Tomb 10 under St. Sophia, where a child was laid. It is noted that in antiquity, there were no significant differences between the clothing of children and adults, and children wore what their parents wore (Croom 2010, 163 ff; Cleland et al. 2007, 32, *children's clothes*). The child's gold-woven garments suggest that he belonged to a family with very high positions in late antique society.

Anthropological analysis of the bone material from the tomb from the Western necropolis showed that the deceased was a man aged 40–50 years, and the condition of the bones suggest that he did not have much physical activity (Meshekov et al. 2021, 36–39). A quadrangular base has been preserved near the tomb, probably for some kind of a monument. Although the tomb was looted in antiquity, several glass vessels were found in it (Meshekov et al. 2021, 26–30). All this, together with the remains of gold-woven textiles (Table 1, no. 16), leaves no doubt that in this case we have a very affluent and prominent person.

A group of finds from the Eastern necropolis of *Serdica* (Vasil Levski Square) is of special interest (Table 1, nos 8–13). Spun-gold threads and ribbons were found in tomb no. 4 (family tomb), around one of the skulls (Table 1, no. 8). Similar finds were also observed around the skulls of those buried in five more graves, which are ordinary burial pits (Meshekov, Stoyanova 2018, 423–426). Other archaeological material or traces of textiles are missing. Apparently, the deceased were buried in modest attire and in modest burial structure (except for the family tomb). All buried were adult women, the one from tomb no. 4 is the eldest – 50–60 years old. The gold threads were woven into the women's head-covers/scarves. This similar decoration hints at some form of "uniformity" – simple, but also sophisticated, demonstrating a certain social prestige. An initial possible interpretation was that members of some female religious monastic community were buried in this sector of the necropolis. But recent discoveries may question this suggestion. In two of the graves from 22 Vrabcha Str., which are 250–300 m north of the section under the Hayat Hotel, identical gold threads were found, arranged in the same way. The deceased were both women. The one in grave 13 was 20–30 years old, and the one in grave 14 is difficult to determine due to the condition of the skeleton but falls into the group of *Adultus+*. It is obvious that we do not have enough information for a certain interpretation. There is clear evidence for a particular type of women's head-dress adorned with gold thread, although at this stage we cannot propose a certain suggestion about the identity of the women who were buried with it.

Clothing is one of the markers of identify ethnic, social, age, gender, financial status. Although the archaeological finds of luxury textiles from *Serdica* are too insufficient for detailed conclusions, they show the undoubted high social status of the buried.

Conclusions

Although at first glance the archaeological evidence of luxury textiles in the city are scarce, compared to other places in Europe, they are not insignificant (Table 2). So far 17 samples have been found that can be defined as "luxury" textiles. In 16 cases gold threads are present. The same number of finds come from funerary contexts, all but one from the Eastern necropolis of *Serdica.* Most of them can be assumed to have been part of the clothing of the buried. In addition, we may mention the only example of a gold-woven textile originating from a domestic context – from a dwelling that appeared on the ruins of the amphitheatre of *Serdica* in the 5th c. The occurrence of such an object in a non-representative context raises many questions of interpretation that remain unanswered at this stage of research.

The availability of luxury goods, including luxury textiles in the city is not surprising, since *Serdica* was the capital of the province of Dacia Mediterranea in late antiquity. In the Balkans, evidence of gold-woven textiles has been found in the necropolises of other provincial capitals,

№	Location	Context	Date	Product/function	Description	Bibliography
	Eastern necropolis of Serdica					
1.	National Assembly Sq., tomb XXI	inhumation	N/A	silk? slippers	Fabric fragments. Z spun. Wrap diam. *ca.* 0.022–0.032 mm (22/32 µm); weft diam. *ca.* 0.06–0.075 mm (60/76 µm). golden threads Z spun, diam. *ca.* 0.10–0.12 mm (100–120 µm)	Shkorpil, Shkorpil 1890, 55
2.	St. Sophia Vaulted tomb X, central part, below the dome	Inhumation, one person (child)	4th c. AD	garment	Multiple golden threads	Filov 1913, 76
3.	St. Sophia Vaulted tomb XVI, in the central nave	Inhumation, Five persons	4th c. AD	1. garment? 2. shroud? 3. garment?	1. fragments of rotten thin silk fabric. 2. fragments of rotted unusually thin almost transparent silk fabric. 3. fragments of thicker rotten fabric with patterns.	Filov 1913, 78–80
4.	St. Sophia Multi-chambered tomb-mausoleum, in front of the Western facade of the basilica	Inhumation, three persons, in wooden coffins	The end of 4th c. AD – the middle of the 5th c. AD	garment?	Numerous golden threads.	Ivanov 2007, 126
5.	St. Sophia Masonry brick grave / tomb 11, in the SW part of the south nave of the basilica	Random accumulation of bones from more than one individual	The end of 3rd– beginning of 4th c. AD	garment or shroud	golden threads	Ivanov, in press
6.	Multi-chamber tomb-mausoleum, behind the building of the National Assembly	Inhumation, Unspecified number of individuals, more than three	4th c. AD (possibly in the 5th c. AD)	?	Dark brown fabric with woven gold threads	Shalganov 1989, 75
7.	Masonry tomb on Shipka Str. and February 19 Str.	Inhumation in a wooden coffin; disarticulated; unknown number of individuals	5th– beginning of 6th c. AD	?	1. Golden threads wrapped around organic thread; Z spun; d_1=0,06–0,1 mm (60–100 µm); width 0,25 mm (250 µm); d_2=0,16–0,18 mm (160–180 µm), width 0,64 mm (640 µm). 9.07 g 2. Flat golden strips folded lengthwise; width 0,67 mm (670 µm) 3. Golden beads, length 1,8–2,15 mm; d=0,35–0,5 mm. 0.77 g (total)	Shalganov et al., unpublished Museum N МИС А 7872 а–ж
8.	Tomb no. 4, Hyatt Regency Hotel, Vasil Levski Square	Inhumation; family tomb Female	5th–6th c. AD	Gold woven decoration of head covering	1.Golden thread spun around organic core; Z spun; d=0,1205–0,13 mm (120,5–130 µm), 1,240 g 2. Flat strips folded lengthwise.	Meshekov, Stoyanova 2018, 423–426

№	Location	Context	Date	Product/function	Description	Bibliography
9.	Hyatt Regency Hotel, Vasil Levski Square, Grave no. 50	Inhumation Female	5th–6th c. AD	Gold woven decoration of head covering	Golden thread spun around organic core; Z spun; d=0,1205–0,13 mm (120,5–130 µm), 0,012 g	Meshekov, Stoyanova 2018, 423–426
10.	Hyatt Regency Hotel, Vasil Levski Square, Grave no. 76	Inhumation Female	5th–6th c. AD	Gold woven decoration of head covering	Golden thread spun around organic core; Z spun; d=0,1205–0,13 mm (120,5–130 µm),0,006 g	Meshekov, Stoyanova 2018, 423–426
11.	Hyatt Regency Hotel, Vasil Levski Square, Grave no. 85	Inhumation Female	5th–6th c. AD	Gold woven decoration of head covering	1. Golden thread spun around organic core; Z spun; d=0,1205–0,13 mm (120,5–130 µm), 0,594 g 2. Flat golden strips folded lengthwise.	Meshekov, Stoyanova 2018, 423–426
12.	Hyatt Regency Hotel, Vasil Levski Square, Grave no. 98	Inhumation Female	5th–6th c. AD	Gold woven decoration of head covering	Golden thread spun around organic core; Z spun; d=0,1205–0,13 mm (120,5–130 µm), 0,108 g	Meshekov, Stoyanova 2018, 423–426
13.	Hyatt Regency Hotel, Vasil Levski Square, Grave no. 104	Inhumation Female	5th–6th c. AD	Gold woven decoration of head covering	Golden thread spun around organic core; Z spun; d=0,1205–0,13 mm (120,5–130 µm).	Meshekov, Stoyanova 2018, 423–426
14.	22 Vrabcha Str. Grave no. 13	Inhumation Female	5th–6th c. AD (?)	Gold woven decoration of head covering	Golden thread spun around organic core; Z spun; d=0,1205–0,13 mm (120,5–130 µm).	Stoyanova, Meshekov, in press
15.	22 Vrabcha Str. Grave no. 14	Inhumation Female	5th–6th c. AD (?)	Gold woven decoration of head covering	Golden thread spun around organic core; Z spun; d=0,1205–0,13 mm (120,5–130) µm.	Stoyanova, Meshekov, in press
	Western necropolis of Serdica					
16.	Tomb at 6 Dencoglu Str.	Inhumation one person, male	4th c. AD	Garment	1. Golden thread spun around organic core; Z spun; d=0,12–0,13 mm (120–130 µm) 2. Fibre diameter 0,07–0,08 mm (70–80 µm)	Meshekov et al. 2021, 30–33
	Serdica, settlement context					
17.	Amphitheatre of Serdica	dwelling	5th c. AD (?)	Towel/tablecloth (?)	Numerous golden threads	Archive RHM – Sofia, unpublished

Table 1. List of sites where traces of luxury textiles have been found and their characteristics

e.g. Viminacium (Golubović 2002, 632; Raičković, Milovanović [2010] 2011, 86) and Thessaloniki (Tzanavari 2012; Karapanagiotis et al. 2018). At present, such a find with a late antique date from Bulgaria is known only from the necropolis of the town of Sandanski (Pishtalov, Petkov 1996, 80–81) and it has not been subjected to further analyses[4]. These examples show that the finds from *Serdica* are hardly an isolated phenomenon. However, I attribute the lack of similar discoveries from other

4 The find is now held in the Archaeological Museum – Sandanski. I thank Svetla Petrova (AM Sandanski) for the information.

	Location and context	Spun golden threads	Flat strips	Golden beads	Fibres	Purple
	Eastern necropolis of Serdica					
1.	National Assembly Sq., tomb	x			x silk (?) flax	x (?)
2.	St. Sophia Vaulted tomb X	x				
3.	St. Sophia Vaulted tomb XVI				x silk (?)	x (?)
4.	St. Sophia Multi-chambered tomb-mausoleum	x				
5.	St. Sophia Masonry brick grave / tomb 11	x				
6.	Multi-chamber tomb-mausoleum, behind the building of the National Assembly	x			x silk (?)	x (?)
7.	Masonry tomb on Shipka Str. and February 19 Str.	x	x	x		
8.	Hyatt Regency Hotel, Vasil Levski Square, Tomb no. 4	x	x			
9.	Hyatt Regency Hotel, Vasil Levski Square, Grave no. 50	x	x			
10.	Hyatt Regency Hotel, Vasil Levski Square, Grave no. 76	x	x			
11.	Hyatt Regency Hotel, Vasil Levski Square, Grave no. 85	x	x			
12.	Hyatt Regency Hotel, Vasil Levski Square, Grave no. 98	x	x			
13.	Hyatt Regency Hotel, Vasil Levski Square, Grave no. 104	x	x			
14.	22 Vrabcha Str., Grave no. 13	x				
15.	22 Vrabcha Str., Grave no. 14	x				
	Western necropolis of Serdica					
16.	Tomb at 6 Dencoglu Str.	x			x cotton	x (?)
	Serdica, settlement context					
17.	Amphitheatre of Serdica	x				

Table 2. Type of the gold-woven textile remains and their distribution by sites

places in Bulgaria to the state of the research and publication activity. It is very important to realise that archaeological textiles survive, even in the temperate zone, and the presence of gold threads is undoubtedly evidence of the presence of a luxury textile product. The recognition of the potential contexts that could contain such finds and the development of research methodology, as well as the application of modern interdisciplinary methods, will undoubtedly expand our knowledge of both textile products in general and luxury textiles in particular, that existed in antiquity.

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