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Building a Reference Database for Textile Imprint Studies: Challenges and Potentials

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Textile imprints on clay constitute a notable form of textile survival in archaeological record. Preserved as impressions on a non-organic matrix, imprints provide crucial evidence for textiles and textile production, particularly in the earliest periods, where textile finds are extremely limited, and in regions where environmental conditions prevent the survival of organic materials. Although informative about the qualities of the impressed products, as well as diverse contexts of textile consumption in the past, textile imprints have only recently received more focused attention from archaeologists. As a result, the range of applied methodologies to study textile imprints, as well as the resulting interpretations are not consistently comparative.

A new research project funded by National Science Centre of Poland, titled ‘*Exploring Textile Imprints on Clay from the 3rd and the 2nd Millennium BCE*’ (ExplorTIC, ID 2023/50/E/HS3/00094), aims to establish best practices for addressing key challenges in the study of textile imprints on clay. These include the fragile nature of imprints, their high three-dimensionality, alterations caused by the impressing process and clay shrinkage, the identification of raw materials and production techniques, and the inconsistent use of terminology and analytical methods.

In this paper, we will discuss both the challenges and the potential of implementing comprehensive standards in studies of textile imprints. In particular, we will focus on the development of an open access, digitally documented, and searchable reference collection of modern samples representing various raw materials and production techniques. Our experimental approach involves collecting a variety of raw materials over a full vegetation year, processing fibres using diverse techniques, producing a range of textile products, and creating their imprints on flat and three-dimensionally reconstructed clay matrices, such as vessels and sealed objects.