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## The Biology Curator

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## Notices and requests

### Project Sea-silk (byssus)

Natural History Museum Basel, Switzerland

With a view to an exhibition at the Natural History Museum of Basel, Switzerland, I am making an inventory of all objects in sea-silk still existing in European Museums and private collections.

Sea-silk is the product of the beard of the *Pinna marina* (*Pinna nobilis* L). With a length up to one yard it is the biggest shellfish of the Mediterranean Sea. It fastens itself in the sand and on the rocks along the coast with the byssus, which consists of very fine, very strong filaments. These fibrous tufts - they can be up to eight inches (200 mm) long - are the basis product for sea-silk. The tufts cut from the mussel have to be washed in soapy, then in clear water, dried, combed and spun like silk. The result is a most fine, iridescent brown-golden textile material, very resistant yet very supple.



It is not yet proven if sea-silk was already known as textile material in the ancient world. The oldest object found up to now is a cap dated 14<sup>th</sup> century found in St Denis near Paris, France. In the 17th and 18th century there existed a lively production of sea-silk in the southern parts of Italy. Taranto and Sardinia were important centres of manufacture, made mostly by home-workers or in convents and orphanages.

Sea-silk was highly appreciated as a very rare, very luxurious textile material, often given as a gift to royalty and noble persons. Many English and German

travellers mentioned it in their books, and some of them brought an object home: small knitted textiles like gloves, stockings, cravats - or some sort of fur, unspun sea-silk sewn on fabric: caps, collars, handbags. Objects were also shown at international exhibitions such as the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London.

Many of these objects found their way into private collections as curiosities. This may be the reason, why most of them are kept today in natural history museums and not in textile collections.

I would like to know the following:

Do you have any objects fit the above description?

Do you know how it came into your collection?

Do you have any written information about it?

I would be grateful for any information - your help will be very much appreciated. Thank you in advance!

Please contact:

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### Any comments?

I have come across three situations now in which the larvae of *Stegobium paniceum* beetles have been associated with damage to wood and wonder if any members can add to this body of evidence. In all cases the ID of the beetles was confirmed, in one situation by NHM staff, but both they and staff at the Forest Authority Research Station at Alice Holt insist that they have no record of such damage being caused by this species.

In truth the damage is not that severe - the larvae seem to "graze" along the surface of the wood, forming open, meandering galleries as they go. These are certainly as noticeable as bark beetle galleries. *Stegobium paniceum* is closely related to the notorious "woodworm" and, I imagine, could well have the necessary cellulose digesting enzymes as part of its make-up.

Jan Dawson, Deputy Curator (Biology)  
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