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Materials

Cutting willows near Oath Hill, Somerset on a bed owned by PH Coate & Son, January 1988. Photo: RJ Whittick

Esparto grass growing on hillside in Andalucia, Spain, 1998

Bundle of dried esparto grass, Andalucia, Spain

Almost all basketry has been created by weaving plant fibres, so the naturally-occurring vegetation might be expected to be the major determinant of the materials originally employed in different regions. These materials need to be pliable to permit any of the basic forms of weaving. They also need to have strength appropriate to the article being made, and preferably to grow as straight pieces sufficiently long to avoid excessive joining, which both slows the work process and may weaken the article.

Some materials conform well to these requirements in their natural form. Thus, one year-old willow rods can be up to 4m in length, almost straight, with a diameter between 2-20mm though normally less in cooler climates, and are extremely supple and pliable when green or after appropriate soaking of dried material. Some creepers, such as cane from SE Asia, clematis in Europe, and certain tree roots (pine, spruce) are even more extreme since they may produce much longer lengths of more or less uniform diameter, although, because of their greater flexibility, they do not hold a shape as well as willow. Many other materials may appear less suitable at first sight, but by appropriate manipulation can be made to conform. Thus, individual stems which are too fine, short and weak, like grass or straw, may be combined together by binding or plaiting to form continuous lengths and then woven. At the other extreme,

Maria Raimonda Pinna using fine rush to weave a shallow bowl, San Vero Milis, Sardinia, 2003

Left: 'Cane' before splitting, Malta. Photo: Geraldine Jones

Mediterranean cane (*Arundo donax*) growing wild near Nijar, Andalucia, 1998

branches or trunks of trees which obviously have length and strength may be successively split longitudinally until the pieces acquire the necessary pliability for weaving. The splitting may be helped by soaking, boiling, or dry heating.

Climatic regions

Over half a million years the northern part of western Europe and the Alps and Pyrenees were covered with ice masses several times. This period gradually ended some 15,000-7,000 years ago. During these first post-glacial millennia, the path of the moist Atlantic winds shifted northwards with the result that the rainfall which previously watered north Africa and southwest Asia was now deposited in central Europe. This roughly coincides with the start of the Neolithic era and hence the earliest evidence for basketry in Europe. Since that time the pattern of climates has been very broadly as we see it today.

Asphodel plant growing wild in Sardinia, 2002

Left: Lidded bowl using dried asphodel stems to stitch bind the coils, Bosa, Sardinia

Five or six regional types may be distinguished according to rainfall regimes and winter temperature[1].

- The maritime or oceanic type of the British Isles, and a coastal belt from Norway to the Bay of Biscay: mild, humid, with usually maximum rainfall in autumn
- The arctic of the northern coastlines
- The sub-arctic with a growing season of fewer than 120 days followed by temperatures below freezing for a least six months and mainly summer rain
- Mediterranean with hot dry summers and light winter rains
- The continental, east of Warsaw, with a large range between summer and winter