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Textile Tools, Significant Markers of Gender? The Case of the Cremation Cemetery Tell Shiukh Fawqâni (Syria)

Aline Tenu

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TEXTILE WORKERS

SKILLS, LABOUR AND STATUS OF TEXTILE CRAFTSPEOPLE
BETWEEN THE PREHISTORIC AEGEAN
AND THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

PROCEEDINGS OF THE WORKSHOP HELD AT 10TH ICAANE
IN VIENNA, APRIL 2016

SONDERDRUCK

LOUISE QUILLIEN
KALLIOPE SARRI (EDS.)

Louise Quillien – Kalliope Sarri (Eds.)
Textile Workers

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Louise Quillien – Kalliope Sarri (Eds.)

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Picture on the opposite page:
Peruvian weaver working on her back-strap loom with coloured warp (photo: K. Sarri)

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Textile Tools, Significant Markers of Gender? The Case of the Cremation Cemetery Tell Shiukh Fawqâni (Syria)

*Aline Tenu*¹

Abstract: For a long time, sexual identification of the dead was exclusively based on the material associated with them. Jewels would have characterised the graves of females whereas weapons were reserved for men. Spindle whorls, for instance, were systematically considered as belonging to the graves of females because the link between textile work and women seemed obvious. The aim of this communication is to address this issue with data provided by the cremation burials excavated at Tell Shiukh Fawqâni (Syria) and dated from the Late Bronze Age to the beginning of the Iron Age. After a presentation of the textile tools and the difficulties of identification raised by some of them, I will discuss their association with the graves of females (established on the basis of bone analysis) and finally review their possible meanings. Are textile tools markers of gender, do they reflect the main occupation of the deceased during his/her life or do they have a symbolic significance?

Keywords: Syria; graveyard; cremation; textile tools; gender

In her paper ‘Constructing masculinities through textile production in the Ancient Near East’, Agnès Garcia-Ventura pointed out the systematic association made between women and textile work and she criticised archaeologists who rely on funerary gifts, rather than on skeletal remains to determine the gender of the dead.² Basically, if the dead person was buried with weapons, he was a man, if the dead person was buried with jewels or spindle whorls, she was a woman. This rather harsh criticism of the work of archaeologists is not unjustified, but in some cases the choice of grave goods seems to have depended on the gender of the dead person. One good example is provided by the cremation graveyard excavated in Tell Shiukh Fawqâni. Other cremation cemeteries are known: three were identified around Karkemiš, about 10km north of Tell Shiukh Fawqâni. One of them, the Yunus cemetery, yielded 128 deposits excavated by Sir Leonard Woolley before the First World War.³ In Hama, more than 1600 burials were found by a Danish team⁴ and, more recently, 54 graves were discovered near Hama in Nasriyah.⁵

General overview

Tell Shiukh Fawqâni was first excavated by an Italian-French mission led by Luc Bachelot and Mario Fales, then from 2000 onwards by Luc Bachelot alone. The cemetery is located on the outskirts of the site, about 70m from the tell base. It was discovered in 1997 and excavated in 1998,⁶ 2000⁷ and 2003.⁸ It yielded about 150 cremation graves as well as five or six older inhumations that were badly preserved. Graves are dated from the end of the Late Bronze Age until the 8th century BC at the latest.

Cremated remains were always placed in urns of different shapes and sizes, close to a cup or a potsherd. Kraters and, in six cases, large bath tubs were inverted above the cinerary jar. Grave offerings – small vessels, animal figurines, or basalt mortars – were sometimes placed against

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² Garcia-Ventura 2015.

³ Woolley 1939.

⁴ Riis 1948.

⁵ Tenu – Rottier 2014.

⁶ Al-Bahloul et al. 2005.

⁷ Bachelot et al. 2001; Bachelot et al. 2002; Bachelot et al. 2003.

⁸ Tenu – Bachelot 2005.

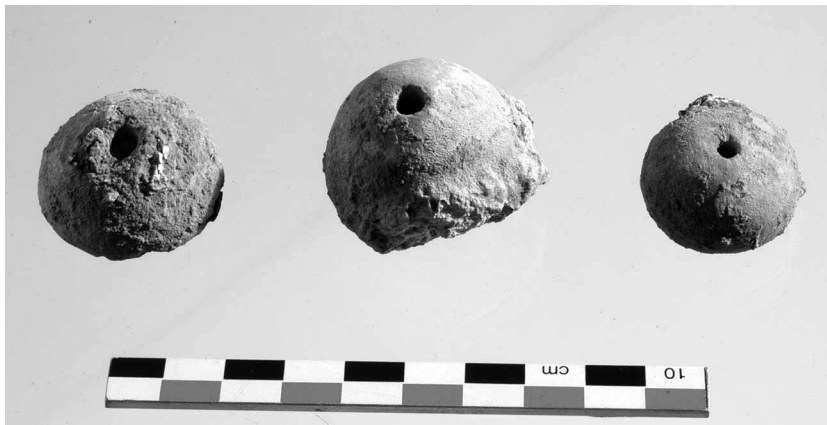


Fig. 1 Spindle whorls in soft stone from grave 2588. The one in the middle has been damaged by fire (Mission archéologique de Tell Shiukh Fawqâni)



Fig. 2 Two spindle whorls from grave 2635.5 (Mission archéologique de Tell Shiukh Fawqâni)

the side of the urn. None of these objects show signs of fire meaning they were not placed on the pyre with the dead.

Generally speaking, human remains were well burnt, then carefully and extensively put in urns. For some individuals, more than 3kg of bones were thus deposited. This wide array of bone data allows anthropologists to obtain a good identification rate of the skeleton parts. However, sexual diagnosis of burnt bones is a tricky problem because the hipbone was often fragmented during cremation or broken to get it into the jars (their necks are usually narrow, c.

10cm in diameter). Other hints may be used: clear masculine or feminine features and the gracility or conversely the robustness of the skeleton. These elements are less decisive than the coxal study but they may provide a general trend. No sexual determination is possible on children.

At Tell Shiukh Fawqâni, the anthropologists, Isabelle Le Goff and Sandrine Lenorzer, identified men, women and very young children. Graves contained four individuals at the most.

Identification of textile tools

About half the jars yielded material deposited with the cremated bones: goblets, animal figurines, beads, bone objects, astragals, seals, iron tools and weapons. Two categories are more represented than the others: spindle whorls (49 items) and arrowheads (60 items).

Spindle whorls are, of course, linked to textile work, but other objects may also be linked to textile production. We found ten spindle whorls at the most in the same grave.⁹ It could not be a coincidence that a necklace and a pendant, which are among the finest objects discovered in the necropolis, were unearthed in the same jar.

Spindle whorls are usually conical, hemispherical, or dome-shaped and rather small. Their diameter fluctuates between 1.9 and 3.5cm and their height between 1.2 and 2.5cm. The perfora-

⁹ Tenu 2009, 86, fig. 3.



Fig. 3 Spindle whorl 2478.1.6. Its elongated shape is unusual in the necropolis (Mission archéologique de Tell Shiukh Fawqâni)



Fig. 4 Spindle whorl 2441.3.1.6. It was found with 9 others in a cinerary urn. It is the only one that displays such a mark (Mission archéologique de Tell Shiukh Fawqâni)

tion is between 0.3 and 0.6cm.¹⁰ Some were made of soft stone (Fig. 1), others in black hard stone, others were in vitreous material. Some were decorated with incised parallel lines (Fig. 2). One spindle whorl (2478.1.6), heavily damaged by fire on the pyre, presents a unique and atypical elongated shape (Fig. 3).

Several spindle whorls have an off-axis perforation, which may have limited their use for spinning.¹¹ No domestic levels contemporary with the cremation graves have been excavated so far at Tell Shiukh Fawqâni. As a result, we cannot compare the exemplars found in funerary contexts with others, which were undoubtedly used. The presence of possibly unusable objects in the grave is meaningful: they may not have been genuine tools of textile production, used during the lifetime of the deceased. We may suppose those spindle whorls were either faulty objects, placed in the grave where their inefficiency for spinning did not matter, or they were made without care on purpose. If so, they were not actual textile tools but have a symbolic meaning (see below).

A mark was engraved on the surface of one of them (2441.3.1.6) (Fig. 4). Three items originating from Ugarit also display marks. V. Matoïan and J.-P. Vita do not rule out the possibility they may have been ‘purely decorative.’¹² This kind of mark could also be interpreted as an ownership mark, but we may also assume they were made to differentiate an item endowed with specific qualities.

Some spindle whorls were obviously burnt, whereas for others it is not possible to know whether this was so. It seems, however, that burnt and non-burnt spindle whorls were sometimes deposited in the same grave, revealing they were involved at different times in the funeral ritual.

Generally speaking, spindle whorls found in the same cinerary urn were of different sizes (Fig. 5), which could correspond to their use for various textile fibres. However, we have not been able to identify a ‘kit or a set’ with spindle whorls of standardised shapes and dimensions.

¹⁰ Unfortunately, we did not weigh them. It is regrettable but we did not know at that moment that this was the best way to identify the fibre type they could spin.

¹¹ E. L. Ochsenschlager conducted an ethnoarchaeological study of the textile workers in the village of Al-Hiba, located in southern Iraq. He observed that the spindle was usually a long reed shaft with a whorl. Its perforation was ‘almost never dead center, and the whorl never in perfect balance’ (Ochsenschlager 1993, 43). According to him, minor imperfections in the balance of spindle whorls did not impair their usefulness (Ochsenschlager 1993, 54). One may, however, suppose that it could have affected the quality (thinness, regularity, etc.) of the yarn. I am very grateful to Catherine Breniquet for this reference.

¹² Matoïan – Vita 2014, 319.

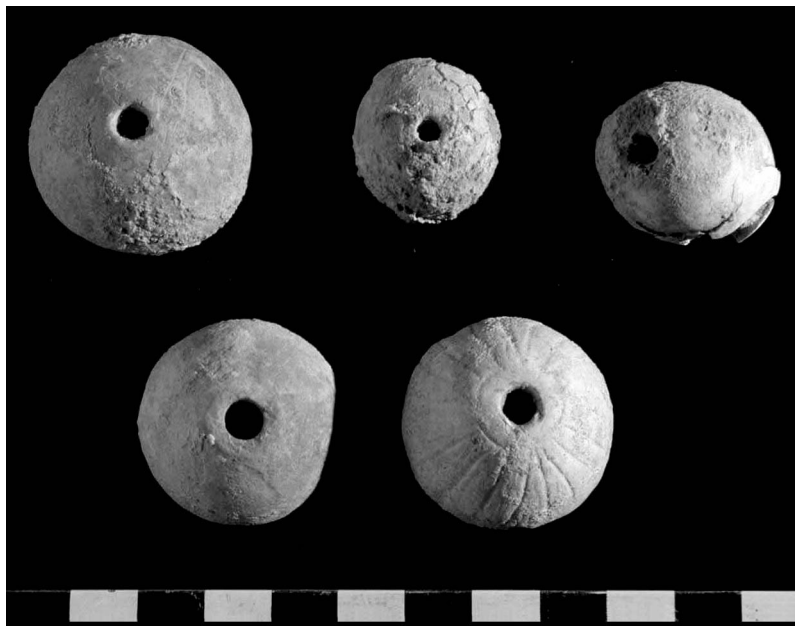


Fig. 5 The complete 'set' of spindle whorls found in 2478
(Mission archéologique de Tell Shiukh Fawqâni)

The analysis of the bone remains excavated at Tell Shiukh Fawqâni has not yet been completed. As a result, sexual determination is known for a limited number of burials, but no spindle whorl has been found so far in connection with a man. Conversely no woman was found buried with iron arrowheads. If we consider that data already obtained on the sexual identity of the deceased are representative, we may suppose the choice of funerary equipment depends on the sex of the dead. In Hama and Yunus, no analysis was made on the bones proper and the sexual determination relies on the grave goods, but we can, however, observe the same trend.¹³ In Hama, as in Tell Shiukh Fawqâni, the funerary equipment seem to be mutually exclusive. A single grave in Yunus (YC 50) contained iron arrowheads, several plates of scale armour, numerous beads and some steatite spindle whorls (their exact number is not given). Woolley¹⁴ considered a child and an adult were interred together but, to me, the discovery of spindle whorls may reveal the presence of a woman.

At Tell Shiukh Fawqâni, no spindle whorl has been found on a spindle. We cannot exclude the possibility they were made in wood and were thus completely destroyed on the pyre. Two objects, however, show clear similarities with examples studied by Caroline Sauvage.¹⁵ Heating probably deformed both. Unfortunately, 2435.3.1 (Fig. 6) was found between the graves. It is broken but belongs to the category of pomegranate shafts interpreted as spindles. The other one (2635.4.1.7) (Fig. 7a) shows



Fig. 6 Fragmentary spindle 2435.3.1
(l. 3.2cm, d. max. 0.35cm)
(Mission archéologique de Tell Shiukh Fawqâni)

¹³ See, for instance, the complete material retrieved from two burials, supposed to be male graves, on the one hand and, on the other hand, the complete material from two other cinerary urns, considered to be female graves, discovered in Hama (Riis 1948, figs. 19–22).

¹⁴ Woolley 1939, 31.

¹⁵ Sauvage 2015.



Fig. 7 Bone objects discovered in several graves (Mission archéologique de Tell Shiukh Fawqâni)

horizontal grooves for attaching thread.¹⁶ It was found in the same grave as three spindle whorls and a very intriguing iron object. It is badly corroded but its general shape is reminiscent of distaffs.¹⁷ Unfortunately the complete analysis of the bones by Isabelle Le Goff is still in progress, so we have no information on the sexual identity of the deceased. Graves from Yunus¹⁸ or Hama¹⁹ yielded comparable bone or ivory shafts which can be interpreted as spindles or distaffs.

On the issue of textile production, spindle whorls, spindles and distaffs only document one step, namely, the spinning, of the *chaîne opératoire* described by Catherine Breniquet.²⁰ But other objects probably pertain to other steps of textile craftsmanship.

In grave 2511, we discovered, mixed with the cremated bones, two spindle whorls and two bone objects. We may assume they may have been used as weaving tools: a shuttle (2511.1.1) and (2511.1.5) a beater used to push the weft yarn into place (Fig. 7 b–c, Fig. 8). Woolley discovered



Fig. 8 Funerary material from grave 2511 (Mission archéologique de Tell Shiukh Fawqâni)

¹⁶ A bone shaft with similar horizontal grooves has been found in a tomb at Ialysos (Rhodes), Sauvage 2015, 204, fig. 9.12.

¹⁷ Tenu 2007, fig. 7.

¹⁸ Woolley 1939, pl. XXI.13 (grave YC 13A).

¹⁹ Riis 1948, 173–174, fig. 217.

²⁰ Breniquet 2008.

similar bone stylus at Yunus,²¹ both were associated with spindle-whorls.²² Perhaps they were also beaters linked to textile work. A bone spatula of a different shape, discovered in 1998, may have had the same function.²³ In that case, the anthropologist, A. Canci, supposed the dead person was a woman.²⁴ The identification of another item is not obvious (Fig. 7d). The deep groove may have been aimed at attaching yarn, but this hypothesis remains speculative.

A last category of bone objects is represented by three tubes: one is decorated with criss-cross ornament, the second one is plain (Fig. 7e–f) and the third one is rather smaller. It was discovered in 1998, associated with spindle whorls.²⁵ The necropolis at Yunus and the one at Hama both delivered the same type of items, usually interpreted as kohl-pots.²⁶ We may wonder to what extent all of these objects belong to a unique functional group. In Tell Shiukh Fawqâni, no analysis has been made to identify the possible remains of kohl or cosmetics. From a morphological point of view, the smallest bone tubes are actually very similar to bobbins.

To finish this review of the textile tools in funerary contexts, I would propose the following identifications as textile tools for several objects found by Woolley in Yunus. A bronze pin discovered with a spindle whorl might be a spindle with a hanging system.²⁷ ‘A number of small rectangular plates of polished bone with a hole in each corner’²⁸ found with a steatite spindle whorl in grave YB 41 could have been used as cards for weaving tablets. Indeed, the weaving technique with tablets is easy to learn, and allows to obtain belts, straps, or garment trims decorated with multi-coloured patterns.

By following the idea of a link between textile production and the grave of a female, an iron shaft found in the burial (201) of a gracile individual in Nasriyah could also be a tool for textile work: perhaps a spindle, a distaff or a beater.²⁹

Textile tools: indicators of textile work?

Data conveyed by the cremation cemeteries of Tell Shiukh, Hama and Yunus would show that textile tools characterised female burials.³⁰ But do they pertain to the economic activities of the dead during their lifetime or do they instead have a symbolic meaning?

The presence of textile tools in graves may betray the pivotal role of textiles in socio-economic life. The deposits of astragals with textile-related objects (Fig. 9) (a single grave yielded 35 astragals!) may also reflect the importance of wool.³¹ Astragals may be interpreted as gaming pieces, amulets or instruments of divination,³² but they could also be considered as symbolic representations of owning a flock, and thus the owner’s prosperity.³³ In that case, female textile workers would also have possessed sheep. Little is known about society at the transition of the Late Bronze Age

²¹ Woolley 1939, pl. XXI.11–12 (graves YB 9 and YB 25).

²² Woolley 1939, 21 (grave YB 9) and 23 (YB 25).

²³ Al-Bahloul et al. 2005, 1011–1012, pl. 2 (grave 892).

²⁴ Canci 2005, 1110.

²⁵ Al-Bahloul et al. 2005, 1013, pl. 9 (grave 1466.4). No sexual diagnosis was possible on the cremated bones (Canci 2005, 1110).

²⁶ See Woolley 1939, pl. XXI.22 (grave YB 17); Riis 1948, 179–180, figs. 230A–B.

²⁷ Woolley 1939, pl. XXI.14 (grave YC 12).

²⁸ Woolley 1939, 25, fig. XXI.25.

²⁹ Tenu – Rottier 2012, fig. 8.

³⁰ This trend is confirmed by renewed excavations in the Yunus cemetery by a team directed by N. Marchetti. Communication at the 10th ICAANE by Rula Shafiq during her presentation ‘Ritualistic Cremation at Karkemish – Turkey’.

³¹ See also Tenu 2013, fig. 12.

³² Affani 2008, 83–85.

³³ A similar case is provided by the Mongols who grant a peculiar importance to *astragalii*, used as game pieces, but also as tokens of friendship. In addition, astragals represent wealth in herds.



Fig. 9 Funerary material from grave 2520 (Mission archéologique de Tell Shiukh Fawqâni)



Fig. 10 Concretions on fabric which wrapped jar 2528.2 (Mission archéologique de Tell Shiukh Fawqâni)



Fig. 11 Fabric on jar 4026.2 (Mission archéologique de Tell Shiukh Fawqâni)

and the Iron Age,³⁴ but one cannot exclude the possibility that textile production was so important that it gave women a high social status. This hint could show that even if the working environment of female workers was mainly at home, they also had activities outside the house. This hypothesis remains highly speculative but not absurd. Another explanation relies on discoveries made in Neolithic contexts in the Danube Basin. Bovine astragals were used there as loom-weights;³⁵ sheep or goat astragals are smaller and lighter, but they may have been used as spools.

More generally, textile work was not limited to the wool industry. At Tell Shiukh Fawqâni, five graves contained fabric remains. In two cases, concretions precluded sampling for analysis (Fig. 10), but Catherine Breniquet and Antoinette Rast-Eicher studied the three other fabric remains. They are fine plain-weaved fabrics, one with vegetal fibres, the other with animal fibres; no identification was possible for the third one (Fig. 11). The preservation of fabrics is rare: in Yunus, Woolley mentions one cinerary urn wrapped in linen³⁶ and, in Hama out of the 1600 graves, Riis only identified one case: also a plain-weaved fabric.³⁷ Fabric is so unusual in funerary contexts

³⁴ Tenu 2013, 434.

³⁵ Jovanović 2011, 128–148. I thank Agata Ulanowska very warmly for this reference.

³⁶ Woolley 1939, 31 (YC 50), fig. XXb.

³⁷ Riis 1948, 149 ('morceaux d'une toile simple (deux-pas) recouvrant une coupe de bronze').

dated to this period that it is quite difficult to discern trends in its uses, but the thinness of the yarn (0.3mm) shows the spinner's dexterity. Vegetal and animal fibres were woven which could explain the different sizes of the spindle whorls we found in graves.

At Tell Shiukh Fawqâni, the textile worker's skills are obvious, but the presence of textile tools in graves may actually have no connection with actual wool work. Indeed, several scholars have pointed out the symbolic value of spindles and distaffs as attributes of femininity. Syro-Hittite funerary monuments, extensively studied by Dominik Bonatz,³⁸ show female figures holding spindles and distaffs whereas men were equipped with weapons.³⁹ The sexual division of roles in society was represented by the close association of women with spindles and distaffs, and of men with bows and arrowheads. Because of their high symbolic value, these objects were thus involved in different rituals: for instance, a soldier who had betrayed his oath would receive a distaff and a spindle instead of his weapons, which would be broken.⁴⁰ They were also used in rituals against impotence.⁴¹

Finally, one may underline the eschatological value of spinning. Elena Rova recalls: 'Spinning, a typical female craft, thus becomes a powerful metaphor of the female control over man's destiny, as primarily represented by women's capability of giving birth.'⁴² Textile tools would be used as gender indicators but would not pertain to textile production in itself, and to women's labour. The yarn was a metaphor for the thread of life.⁴³

These interpretations are not mutually exclusive. The placing of spindle whorls on the pyre or directly with the cremated bones, the discovery of at least one unusable spindle whorl and the standardisation of grave goods may indicate that textile tools retrieved from graves have not necessarily been used during the lifetime of the dead person but certainly during her funeral.⁴⁴

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank the organisers, Kalliope Sarri and Louise Quillien, for inviting me to take part in this workshop. It was a good opportunity to expose some of the numerous questions raised by the cremation cemetery of Tell Shiukh Fawqâni and to obtain the views of the 'textiles workers' group' on them.

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³⁸ Bonatz 2000.

³⁹ The Hittite royal funerary ritual mentions that the effigy of the queen received a spindle and a distaff, that of the king a bow and arrows: Van den Hout 1994, 63.

⁴⁰ Garcia Ventura 2015, 171.

⁴¹ Van den Hout 1994, 63–64. See also Rova 2008, 560; Garcia-Ventura 2015, 169–174, both with a bibliography.

⁴² Rova 2008, 560.

⁴³ See also Bacceli et al. 2015, 117–118.

⁴⁴ Tenu 2013, 434–435.

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This volume aims at opening up new perspectives in archaeological textile research, focussing on a comparative analysis of textile workers in the Aegean and Near-Eastern world from the Stone Age to Late Antiquity. While archaeological remains such as textile tools, fibres and fabrics have been widely analysed for the technological information they contain, they have not been adequately studied for their potential to provide valuable data about the workers involved in textile production. What can archaeological remains, combined with the iconographical and textual data, tell us about the prehistoric and early historic textile craftsmen and craftswomen? Using all available sources, the contributions of the volume set various questions about those involved in textile production. What was their gender and social status? What type of labour did they perform: domestic or professional? What was their specific working space – a house or a workshop area? How were they organised: working alone or in teams? What was the position of their body and what were their movements while working? Could they choose freely between different patterns, colours, materials or techniques? What specialised skills and intellectual knowledge did they apply during their work? Thanks to this collective work, we will be able to explore whether in all the fields and circumstances mentioned above we can detect exact parallels, similar patterns and mutual influences or, instead, major differences between Near-Eastern and Aegean worlds.