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Presumed Social Identity of the Occupants of Late Third Millennium BC Alacahöyük and Horoztepe “Royal Tombs”

Jak Yakar

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Marija Gimbutas whose work on Near Eastern prehistoric iconography remains a source of inspiration in my continuous quest in trying to understand the meaning and functionality of certain cult objects found in the late third millennium “royal tombs” in north-central Anatolia.

The bronze spindles and mirrors found among the funerary deposits of cultic significance in the late third millennium BC “royal tombs” at Horoztepe and Alacahöyük probably had a spiritual significance.¹ The loci of most of the funerary objects in the rescued Horoztepe tomb suggested at the time that the cult paraphernalia rested at or near the feet of the deceased.² The metal objects consisted of a

bronze stool or altar with human-shaped feet, a large bronze fruit-stand, beak spouted metal jugs, a two-handled large metal jar, two one-handled small jars with concave bases, a folded large bronze platter enveloping to cups, two large bowls, two discs, and a cast-metal spindle.³ Prior to their deposition in the tomb, some of these objects, except for the cast figurines, weapons, and musical implements (*sistrum*) were probably used in incantations, but, including the spindle, were twisted, bent, and crushed.⁴ The Horoztepe double handled solid cast bronze “mirror” (20 cm diameter) has a 2.6 cm high rim and two thin ribbon-like handles at opposite sides, extensions of the rim, each with two small perforations (Figure 1, i-j). The perforated handles suggest that it would have stood hanging horizontally using threads. Once filled with a liquid substance it would have transformed into a mirror-like tool, perhaps used in magico-rituals to produce rippled reflections.⁵ Two slightly different bronze mirrors recovered earlier in the late third millennium Alacahöyük “royal tombs” most likely served the same purpose. The one from

¹ The EBA site of Horoztepe in the Erbaa district of Tokat was excavated fifty years ago by the late Tahsin Özgüç and Mahmut Akok (Özgüç and Akok 1958). Due to the disturbed and partly robbed state of the extramural tomb at Horoztepe, its architectural features or construction technique could not be reconstructed. For the “royal tombs” of Alacahöyük, see Koşay 1944, 1951; Yakar 2011: 460-469.

² The few skeletal remains in the excavated tomb, which consisted of bones and a skull, left the question of the number of its occupants or their gender unanswered. The position of the surviving bones suggested that the body was placed at the center of the southern portion of the tomb, with the head facing the east and the feet to the west. The burial ground outside the small settlement revealed traces of few more robbed tombs (Özgüç and Akok 1958: 52, 41, plan 3; pl. II, 1-2).

³ Özgüç and Akok 1958: 43-44, pl. V-VIII.

⁴ The pile of metal artifacts stacked up in a disorderly fashion, also contained a small stool-like bronze table, a large bronze bull figurine, a statuette of a woman nursing her child, and large fragments of a sun-standard, as well as broken metal mountings of wooden furniture, and attachments of a canopy, scepters or staffs.

⁵ Özgüç and Akok 1958: 44, pl. VII, 1; fig. 19.

Tomb A is a large mirror, 31.3 cm in diameter, 0.39 cm in length including handle, and 4.1 kg in weight. It has a slightly oval shape, flat smooth back, and the front has a raised rim set back from the outer edge.⁶ The mirror from Tomb A is much smaller and lighter, 21.2 cm in diameter, weighing 0.5 kg.⁷ It is important to point out that the raised rims on these mirrors are parallel to the so-called Cycladic “frying-pans.”⁸ As for the 16 cm long and flat spindle from Horoztepe, its lentil-shaped head was folded and crushed, probably to neutralize its presumed magic power! The tip of this spindle is gold plated, and the whorl nearer the top measures 7 cm in diameter.⁹ This rather unusual spindle is larger than a second and intentionally bent bronze “middle-whorl-spindle” found inside a folded platter. Tomb L in Alacahöyük produced a silver “middle-whorl-spindle” with a golden tip found among the rich funerary deposit of metal objects.¹⁰

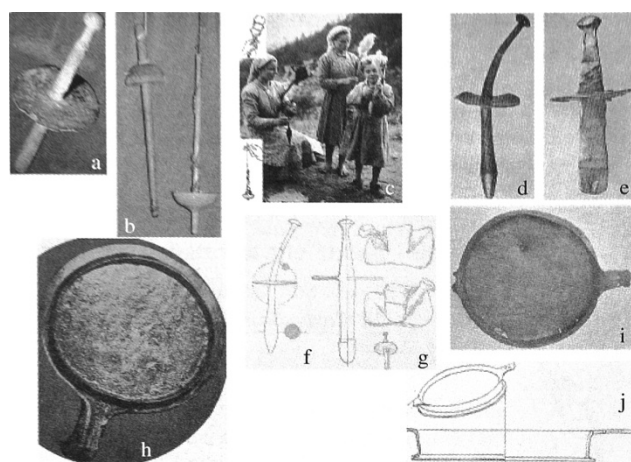


Figure 1: a) silver spindle, Alacahöyük; b) traditional wooden spindles; c) traditional spinners, spindles and distaff—northern Greece; d, f) bronze spindle, Horoztepe; e, g) electrum spindle, h) bronze mirror, Alacahöyük; i, j) bronze mirror, Horoztepe (after Yakar and Taffet 2007).

⁶ Mellink 1956: 52-54, pl. IV, fig. 6 left, pl. V, figs. 7-8.

⁷ Ibid.: 52, Pl. IV, fig. 6 right; Koşay 1936: 108, 12.

⁸ Mellink 1956: 52-53.

⁹ Özgüç and Akok 1958: pl. VIII, 1-2; fig. 26

¹⁰ Koşay 1944: 84, 1951: pl. 197, 1.



Figure 2: a) *The Ephesus Lady*, a priestess/oracle? holding a spindle and distaff, 7th century BC; b) *Ninatta and Kulitta behind the goddess Šaušga*, Yazılıkaya; c) *Bronze mother and child figurine*, Horoztepe; d) *Maraş funerary stele* (after Yakar and Taffet 2007).

In this case too, despite the lack of significant human remains, the presence of both a bronze mirror and a silver spindle, objects symbolizing womanhood, could be indicative of a female gender concerning the identity of at least of one of the persons buried here, if not the principal one.

Precious metal spindles are not unique to the late third millennium BC, since some second millennium literary sources mention specially manufactured spindles—such as spindles made of gold, silver, lapis lazuli, alabaster—presented to the Mitannian king Tušratta.¹¹ There can be little doubt that in this case too, spindles made of precious materials were not only status symbols—possibly the case with the ivory “middle-whorl-spindle” found in a late 13th century BC house at Troy VIIA¹²—but also for use in rituals ceremonies.

¹¹ Yakar and Taffet 2007:2.

¹² Balfanz 1995:107, figs.1-3.



Figure 3: Goddess Kubaba, Carchemish (after Yakar and Taffet 2007).

In Near Eastern iconography, implements such as mirror, distaff, and spindle are among the attributes of well-known goddesses (Figure 2). In the procession of deities of the Hittite pantheon represented at the Yazılıkaya sanctuary in north-central Turkey, Ninatta and Kulitta, the divine musicians and servants of the Goddess Šaušga (Ištar) are depicted holding each a mirror (Figure 2b). The Neo-Hittite Goddess Kubaba at Carchemish, also holds a mirror (Figure 3). It is likely that the object in her left hand held by its rod is a distaff. A Maraş burial stele depicts a woman holding a distaff and a mirror, one in each hand, which obviously symbolized among other things, the two principal attributes of womanhood. There could have been cases, however, that a female figure holding a mirror and/or a spindle and/or

distaff (Figure 4) was a priestess (oracle) acting as a medium for divine advice.



Figure 4: Relief of a seated woman holding a spindle; funerary stele from Maraş (after Yakar and Taffet 2007).

Spindle and its assumed symbolism

Spinning and weaving which are monotonous, tedious, and unending activities are two of the oldest and related crafts, which in Near Eastern rural societies are traditionally pursued by women. Women's natural ability to absorb the creative intricacies of weaving, this craft as well as spinning became the epithets of women's wisdom, womanhood, and endurance perhaps since the EBA. Gradually acquiring additional symbolic values and allegoric aspects, it is possible to encounter the spindle in ancient literary sources and art, as a tool and weapon used by soothsayers, divinatory, sorceress, healers, midwives and priestesses in certain curative as well as punitive magico-rituals and prayers. In Hatti, as in the rest of the Near East, the spindle was considered a symbol of

womanhood. In certain Hittite texts relating to certain rituals and myths, spindle symbolizing female sexuality is mentioned in conjunction with mirror, which apparently was also a symbol of womanhood. Indeed, the Hittite female attire for women consisted not only of a headgear and a full-length body veil, but also of a spindle and a mirror.¹³ A later illustration of this in a Neo-Hittite period stele at Maraş depicts two women holding a spindle and mirror (Figure 5). Other Hittite texts inform us that these tools were used by experts in popular magico-rituals also for healing purposes. For instance, a Hittite sorceress by the name Paškuwatti used them on one occasion to cure the sexual impotency of a male patient. The procedure dictated the removal of the spindle, the mirror and women’s clothing given to the patient earlier, and presenting him with a bow and arrow that symbolized manhood.¹⁴

Another Hittite text, a ritual and prayer to Ištar of Nineveh,¹⁵ provides details of a magico-ritual performed to impair the enemy’s masculinity (sexual potency) with the help of a spindle and mirror. Recited in battle was presumably believed to reduce the prowess of the enemy confronting the Hittite troops. Here too, both the spindle and mirror are treated as the powerful attributes of womanhood capable of taking away one’s manhood when used in the context of punitive magic:

Take from (their) men masculinity, prowess, robust health, swords (?), battle-axes, bows, arrows, and dagger(s)! And bring them to Hatti! Place in their hands the spindle and mirror of a woman! Dress them as women! Put on their (heads) the kureššar (woman’s headgear)! And take away from them your favor.¹⁶

¹³ KBo VI 34 obverse ii 42; Hoffner 1966:333.

¹⁴ KUB IX 27; obverse 20 ff, ANET, 349. For a detailed discussion on the subject in the Ancient Near Eastern context see Hoffner 1966.

¹⁵ KBo II 9 I 25-30.

¹⁶ Hoffner 1966: 331, notes 33-34



Figure 5: Relief of two women holding spindles and a mirror on a Neo-Hittite period stele at Maraş. (<http://www.hittitemonuments.com/maras/>).

In the lands beyond Anatolia too, the crafts of spinning and weaving carried rather similar symbolic values almost in every ancient society.

In Canaanite mythology, the spindle as the powerful feminine sexual symbol is attested in relation to Ašerah.¹⁷ According to this myth, when her amorous advances to Baal were not reciprocated, Ašerah threatened to destroy him: “With my word I will oppress you; with my spindle I will pierce you!” This passage might reflect the existence of a popular belief that the spindle at the hand of a vindictive female with supernatural powers could be used as a lethal weapon. In Ancient Mesopotamia too, the association of spinning and weaving with certain deities is well on record. For instance, the Sumerian myth of “Enki and Ninhursag,” depicts the deity Uttu as the goddess of weaving. The cuneiform sign for her name denotes the word “spider,” which may have a

¹⁷ According to Hoffner (1966:330, 1965), the tale of Ašerah and Elkunirsa, known in its Hittite version, clearly has a Canaanite origin.

connection to her tutelage of weaving.¹⁸ After being raped by Enki, Uttu cursed him and thereafter became protective of her virtue. Later, in the literary work of “Enki and the World Order,” this supreme deity granted the goddess Uttu charge over everything pertaining to women. Her life experiences made this goddess revered as both “the faithful wife” and “the skillful weaver,” and therefore a good model for Sumerian wives.

Assyrian texts occasionally mention spindles but in slightly different contexts. For instance, “may the spindle of Ištar sprout forth” refers indirectly to one of Ištar’s divine attributes. Moreover, the curse “may the gods make you whirl like a spindle” insinuates the familiarity of additional deities with the craft of spinning and its envisioned magic power.¹⁹

In pre-Dynastic Egypt, the protective deity *nt* (*Neith*), of the “Red Crown of Lower Egypt” before the two kingdoms were merged, later became a goddess of weaving/spinning, this in addition of being a goddess of hunting, war and wisdom. Her emblem included the loom’s shuttle, with its two hooks on each end figured upon her head.²⁰ Later, the Greek goddess Athena is said to have absorbed the weaver entity of the Egyptian Goddess Neith. In the Egyptian pantheon, in addition to Neith, the goddess Isis was considered a teacher of spinning, and Tayet, a goddess of spinning and weaving.

A Biblical passage (Proverbs 31) describes the ideal ancient Israelite woman in 13: “She seeketh wool and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands”; 19: “She layeth her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle.” Although not directly connected, a

number of funerary Maraş steles depicting spindle/distaff holding West Semitic Aramaic women of high social standing in the Neo-Hittite kingdom of Gurgum seem to illustrate the above passage of Biblical proverbs. The deep-rooted allegoric aspect of weaving, and the yarn, the product of spinning, as the thread of life, are occasionally encountered in the Bible. The story of Rahav and the spies of Joshua at Jericho (Joshua 2: 3-49), is one such instance.²¹

In the classical Aegean world, the craft of weaving was often referred to in literary work as a medium for women to express their inner thoughts, secrets and grievances. Outstanding female personalities in Greek mythology are often associated with their remarkable weaving skills.²²

Penelope of Odysseus was regarded as an ideal wife because she preoccupied herself with weaving during her husband’s long absence. The story of Philomena, as told by Sophocles, illustrates the telling of a secret by way of weaving. Philomena was a young woman raped by her brother in law who cut her tongue so that she could not reveal the identity of her assailant. However, she wove the story of her rape into a tapestry, thus revealing the secret to her sister who took revenge upon her husband.²³

Among the Greek goddesses, Athena stands out as the inventor of weaving and spinning.²⁴ Later, the Roman goddess Minerva acquired many of her attributes, including that of spinning and weaving. One of Athena’s epithets was the “fate weaver.” The worshippers of this goddess believed that she wove the

¹⁸ In one tradition, Uttu was the daughter of Enki and his great granddaughter, Ninimma (see Kramer 1981, 142).

¹⁹ Wiseman 1958: 76.

²⁰ This particular aspect of the deity is a topic of controversy. In the New Kingdom this goddess becomes god mother and creator, and later on she assumes the role of a mortuary goddess, responsible to weave mummy wrappings (Pyramid Text 606). For details, see Lurker 1974: 85.

²¹ Yakar and Taffet 2007: 4.

²² Pliny mentions that in bridal processions a spindle was carried with the wool and thread attached to it, remarking that weaving implements were given to the goddess Pallas, patroness of spinning, by women at old age (Plin.H.N.viii.74). This goddess was sculptured with a distaff and spindle in the Trojan Palladium (Apollod. iii.12.3).

²³ Yakar and Taffet 2007: 4.

²⁴ She was also a Goddess of science, architecture, art, crafts, horses, oxen, intellect, reason, wisdom, purity and war.

world, or spun it on her distaff, along with human consciousness. Therefore, all tools and plants associated with weaving and spinning were considered sacred, including the blue flowered flax plant and the mortar and pestle used to process the flax for spinning. Sheep were sacred to Athena because they provided fiber for spinning. It is said that after their wedding, young Athenian women cut their hair and wound it around spindle whorls for dedication to Athena. Distracting Athena's spinning was considered the cause of chaos. Archaeological evidence seems to corroborate Athena's epithet as the “fate weaver.” The large amount of loom weights and spindle whorls recovered in the Temple of Athena at Troy is significant. Indeed, their presence in the temple compound may have been related to cult rituals carried out in her honor.²⁵ In Greek mythology, the story of a weaving contest between Athena of Olympia and Arachne, the weaver from Lydia, further reflects the popular belief that weaving and spinning were essentially divine crafts.²⁶ Athena may have originally been a “Solar Deity,” and her sacred bronze mirror may have symbolized this particular divine aspect.²⁷ However, she was not the sole goddess of fate

mentioned in the Greek religious philosophy. The 5th-4th century BC Greek philosopher Plato had a vision of an additional figure, the goddess Anake, responsible for spinning the universe. Although not exactly a mistress of spinning and weaving like Athena, in Plato's vision the sun, moon and planets were her spindle whorls, and through them she wove the fate of humans whose souls moved through the woven strands on their way to and from death and rebirth.

Additional divine figures of weaving and spinning in the lesser Greek pantheon included Lina, goddess of flax weaving and Klothos, goddess of spinning. In the

Greek mythology, Lachesis, Clotho and Atropos are the three divine sisters of destiny having the power to decide on human fate. They were known as the Moerae “the Fates.” Being the eternal daughters of Zeus and Themis, they were believed to be more important than most of Gods having the power to determine the beginning and the end of life, and the events in between. Among them, Lachesis was responsible for the “things that were,” Clotho for “those that are,” and Atropos for “things that are to be.” According to the philosophical perception at the time, these sisters of fate were responsible for allotting men at their birth their designed share of evil and good. They were equally capable of punishing the transgressions of both men and divine figures. Clotho was the spinner and Lachesis's task was to apportion the lots to men. The perception was that these three sisters set to work together, spinning the thread of life. Clotho's spindled yarn measured by the rod of Lachesis was snipped by the shears of Atropos, known as “the inevitable one.” The priests and ministers in the service of these divine sisters of fate were in fact oracles, seers, and soothsayers.²⁸

²⁵ Wallrodt 2002: 187.

²⁶ See P. Ovidius Naso (*Metamorphoses*, Book 6, 5-54, 129-145). According to one version of this myth, the contest was to settle Arachne's claim that she was a more skilled weaver than the goddess. The contest ended with Athena acknowledging Arachne's higher skill. Yet, she punished her for the insolence she demonstrated to Zeus by destroying her loom. The grief stricken Arachne hung herself, but to be saved by Athena who took pity on her. The loosened rope on her neck became a cobweb, and Arachne herself became a spider.

²⁷ Monaghan (1994) suggests that bronze mirrors were sacred to Athena from an early date, as they were to many other Sun Goddesses, from the Egyptian Ma'at to Amaterasu, the Japanese Shinto goddess of Heaven. However, it is important to point out that the Greeks never referred to Athena as a Sun Goddess. Monaghan (1994:178) assumes that in addition to her possession of a sacred mirror and a glowing necklace, and her association with the invention of weaving, her companion Iambe is the smith and shaman goddess.

²⁸ These three sisters remind us of the three semi-goddess sisters by the name of Urd (fate), Verdande (becoming) and Skuld (necessity) in Nordic Norse mythology responsible for spinning the “Thread of Life” for all living beings, gods, men, giants and dwarves. Urd, the oldest of the sisters, is associated with the past. Urd refers to those actions that have already taken place. Verdande refers to



Figure 6: “Elamite woman from Susa,” 8th century BC (after Yakar and Taffet 2007).

Spinning thread and weaving as expressions of magical creation

Twirling wool or linen fiber into almost limitless lengths of yarn might have been perceived in the past a craft bestowed with magic. After all, the spindle creates the yarn for weaving a variety of textiles even from a handful of sheared wool. Indeed, in the popular conviction that existed among the Romans, and the Greeks before them, imbedded superstitions existed vis-à-vis the processes of spinning and weaving. This was probably due to the conviction that a spindle at the hand of a sorcerer with evil intentions could have cursed a person and cause him ill fate. In many parts of the Roman empire, laws banned women from holding a spindle in public: should anyone lay eyes on such a woman, it could mean exceptionally bad luck, even lead to the failure of the harvest.²⁹

those actions in the process of taking place with the present, and Skuld refers to those necessary actions that drive the whole process.

²⁹ Plin.H.N.xxviii.5. A similarly superstitious belief is later found in Germanic Mythology: “If, while riding a horse overland, a man should come upon a woman spinning, then that is a very bad sign; he should turn

Going back to the presence of metal spindles and bronze mirrors in the Horoztepe and Alacahöyük “royal tombs,” this paper has tried to revive the debate on the social identity of some of those interred in them. The fact that at both sites, spindles and mirrors were found in the proximity large quantities of cult objects raises the possibility that they too were originally implements used in divination and rituals. Considering that in Near Eastern art and literature in general, and in Anatolia in particular, the spindle, distaff and mirror occasionally occur as attributes of certain goddesses and their deified companions, we could presume that priestesses in the service of such deities would have carried out cult rituals using such objects, perhaps preferably made of metal.

An 8th century BC bitumen slab illustrating an Elamite woman sitting on a lion footed stool and spinning seems to illustrate this. Since, a spindle and distaff can hardly be used in a sitting position, at least not in order to produce a yarn, the Elamite bitumen slab may well be depicting an oracle prophesying with the help of a spindle while sitting on a stool, and facing a fish placed on a small altar-like table (Figure 6).

The bronze mirrors and spindles made of various metals found in the Horoztepe and Alacahöyük “royal tombs,” in association with various other cult objects, might have been implements used by priestly oracles.³⁰

Further expanding on this hypothesis, one can presume that spinning and weaving were regarded as crafts capable of acquiring their own secret mythical forces, especially at the hands of the divine and the initiated. In fact, local myths relating to divine spinners and weavers in most cultures of the Ancient Near East, in Old Europe

around and take another way” (Jacob Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie* 1835, v 3.135). In Germanic mythology, Holda is a goddess with many aspects. She controls the weather, is a source of women’s fertility, and protects unborn children. Moreover, she is the patron of spinners who rewards the industrious and punishes the idle.

³⁰ Yakar 2011: 472-473.



Figure 7: Seated bronze statuette from Horoztepe (after Yakar and Taffet 2007).

and beyond, leave no doubt that this would have also been the case in EBA Anatolia. Reviewing the cultic context of the bronze mirrors and spindles, both at Alacahöyük and Horoztepe, one should perhaps try to see some sort of a link between them and the bronze stool and tables at Horoztepe, or the so-called bronze “sun discs” at Alacahöyük. The former brings to mind the image of the Elamite woman who spins

while her spindle sits on a stool in front of a low table, or table-like altar (Figure 6).

Perhaps the bronze female statuette from Horoztepe sitting on a stool depicts a local goddess or a priestess at the service of one (Figure 7). The “sun discs” may have been connected somehow to bronze mirrors and spindles. Perhaps in its enigmatic symbolism, a bronze mirror was meant to be a sacred instrument used in order to catch the divine sun rays in the performance of certain magico-rituals. Hypothesizing its connection to a certain solar deity, we may further presume with extreme caution that bronze mirrors and metal spindles from Alacahöyük and Horoztepe could well have been tools of divination in the possession of certain shaman-like priestesses at the service of a local goddess of destiny. Could we assume that the bronze mother and child figurine found in the Horoztepe tomb (Figure 2c) represents a divine figure determining the fate of (or anointing) a newborn, much like the later instances encountered in Near Eastern mythologies, as well as in the classical period?

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