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Spindle and Thread as Markers of Cultural Identity: The Role of Spinning Traditions in Ritual and Magical Practices of Ancient Civilizations of Asia Minor and Mesopotamia *

The aim of this paper is to analyze the symbolic significance of the spindle and woolen threads in the magical, religious rituals and beliefs of the Hittites and Mesopotamian peoples. It should be noted that the paper equally presents Greek, Roman and Armenian beliefs regarding the dual nature of the spindle, wool and threads, which have given room for comparisons between Hittite and Mesopotamian beliefs and ideas.

The paper has adopted an interdisciplinary approach, which includes archaeological data (artifacts, inscriptions, iconography), analysis of ancient texts, and comparative methods, drawing parallels between ancient Asia Minor, particularly Hittite and Mesopotamian beliefs and rituals.

Numerous clay whorls have been found in the former Hittite Empire, Palestine, Greece, Egypt and other areas. Clay whorls have been found in a well-preserved state, while spindle whorls and distaffs have been damaged, as they were made of perishable materials. Similar clay whorls are preserved in the Folklore Museum in historic Nauplion, Greece.¹

In addition to their main meaning, the spindle, wool, and threads had an allegorical and symbolic significance as well. They were often used by witches (old women) in various ritual ceremonies, to heal the sick, to settle family disputes, and to curse, and in one of the Armenian rhyming proverbs, we also encounter the following use of the spindle: "*Some spindle, some evil spirit, some simpleton, some woman*"², covering a wide geography from Asia Minor to Mesopotamia.

Spindle as a symbol of femininity

In the Hittite state, as well as in the Middle East countries, the spindle was considered a symbol of femininity, a gender marker. In some Hittite texts on rituals and myths, the spindle is mentioned together with the mirror, which apparently also symbolized femininity and served as a symbol of womanhood.

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¹**Bausum D.**, Threading time : a cultural history of threadwork, TCU Press Fort Worth, Texas, 2001, p.17.

²Armenian Ethnography and Folklore, vol. 3, Yerevan, 1972, p. 124.

This is illustrated by the Hittite "women's clothing", which consisted not only of a headdress and a full-length dress, but also a spindle and a mirror.³

The spindle was a symbol of femininity not only among the Hittites, but also among the Akkadians and Sumerians.⁴ Archaeological evidence of the use of the spindle in Mesopotamia has reached us; for example, a female burial was discovered in the Mesopotamian city of Kish, and spindle was among the numerous discovered artifacts⁵. As an indicator of femininity, the spindle can be found in Mesopotamian birth rituals. In Mesopotamia, preparing for childbirth involved great ritual consisting of three stages: during the first, before giving birth, the woman was anointed; the second stage was the delivery, and the last was the most symbolic: if a boy was born, a weapon was placed in his hand; if it was a girl, it was a spindle⁶.

We encounter the spindle as an important attribute in Akkadian mythology, where the spindle and the comb were among the attributes of Lamashtu, a demonic figure who caused diseases and tormented children⁷.

The spindle is seen as a symbol of femininity not only in Asia Minor and Mesopotamian societies, but also in Greco-Roman societies.

In Greek mythology, the goddess of human fate, Ananke, spins a spindle, and the axis of her spindle is considered the axis of the world⁸.

An example of the use of the spindle as a sign of femininity is found in Roman tradition as well. During a Roman wedding, the bride was escorted to the groom's house with torches (which were considered symbols of the wedding; people believed that torches would prevent evil spirits from approaching the bride), a spindle, and a distaff⁹.

In the Mesopotamian hymn dedicated to Inana, a hymn to Inana for Išme-Dagan (Išme-Dagan K), the spindle is seen as a feminine symbol, where a man becomes a woman, "... *to make young men dress as women on their left side, to put spindles into the hands of men*"¹⁰, using the symbolism of the spindle both in

³**Yakar J.**, The Spiritual Connotations of the Spindle and Spinning: Selected Cases from Ancient Anatolia and Neighboring Lands, Istanbul, 2007, p.3.

⁴**Johnston S. I.**, Religions of the Ancient World guide, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 2004, p. 293.

⁵**Zwitser N.**, The Mesopotamian Netherworld through the Archaeology of Grave Goods and Textual Sources in the Early Dynastic III Period to the Old Babylonian Period, Universiteit Gent, 2017, p.47.

⁶**Johnston S. I.**, Religions of the Ancient World guide, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 2004, p.440.

⁷**Tokarev S. A.**, Myths of Nations of the World. Encyclopedia, Electronic edition, Moscow, 2008, p.574.

⁸**Ibid.**, p.62.

⁹**Johnston S. I.**, Religions of The Ancient World guide, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 2004, p.449.

¹⁰**Asher-Greve J. M., Westenholz G. J.**, Goddesses in Context: On Divine Powers, Roles, Relationships and Gender in Mesopotamian Textual and Visual Sources, Academic Press Fribourg, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Göttingen, 2013, p.76.

Hittite texts and in the Hittite military oath, which we will address further in the paper.

As a symbol of femininity, the spindle is also reflected in iconography and inscriptions. One Hittite inscription depicts a queen wearing a full-length cloak that covers her hair. In her right hand the queen is holding a spindle, a symbol of femininity in Hittite and Neo-Hittite art¹¹.

Azatiwada's inscription found in Karatepe¹² may serve as important archaeological evidence of the significance of the spindle as an object, an attribute in Asia Minor. The inscription states that during Azatiwada's reign, the borders of the country were expanded, people could walk freely, and women walked with spindles: ". . . *And in those places which were formerly feared, where a man feared to walk the road, in my days even women walked with spindles*"¹³. We can interpret the last part of the inscription as Azatiwada's success, where even the weak and vulnerable segment of society, meaning women, can now move around fearlessly and engage in their daily activities; here the spindle can be interpreted as a symbol of femininity, a feminine attribute.

We would like to note an interesting fact here: the Romans, and before them the Greeks, believed that a witch could harm a person and wish evil upon them while spinning a spindle, which is why women were forbidden from spinning spindles in public¹⁴. Comparing Roman society with the Hittite one, we notice contrasting ideas about the spindle: in the former, women were forbidden to spin it in public, whereas in the latter, as we have already noted above, when referring to the Azatiwada inscription, women would walk with spindles in their hands.

The spindle and the mirror had not only magical, but also cult significance. We learn about this from the royal burials found in Horoztepe and Alacahöyük, dating back to the 3rd millennium BC. Spindles and mirrors were found in royal tombs, placed at the feet of the deceased¹⁵. Hittite royal burials used gender-specific attributes to mark the king and queen: the bow and arrow for kings, and the distaff and spindle for queens¹⁶. It should be added that in Cyprus, spindles have also been found in Bronze Age burials, just as in Hittite female burials¹⁷.

¹¹**Moore M.**, Hittite Queenship: Women and Power in Late Bronze Age Anatolia, University of California, Los Angeles, 2018, 198 p.145.

¹²**DeGrado J.**, Azatiwada's Empire: Adapting Assyrian Imagery in the Bilingual Karatepe Inscription, News from the Lands of the Hittites Scientific Journal for Anatolian Research, vol 5-6, M Italy, 2021-2022, p.22.

¹³**Stone D.**, The Hittites Lost Civilizations, Reaktion Books Ltd, London, 2023, p.24.

¹⁴**Yakar J.**, The Spiritual Connotations of the Spindle and Spinning: Selected Cases from Ancient Anatolia and Neighboring Lands, Istanbul, 2007, p.5.

¹⁵**Yakar J.**, Presumed Social Identity of the Occupants of Late Third Millennium BC Alacahöyük and Horoztepe "Royal Tombs", The Journal of Archaeomythology, vol. 7, Institute of Archaeomythology, 2011, pp.1-9.

¹⁶**Stone D.**, The Hittites Lost Civilizations, Reaktion Books Ltd, London, 2023, p.128.

¹⁷**Douglas S., Muti G.**, A Case of Identity Investigating the Symbolism of Spindle Whorls in Early and Middle Cypriot Tombs, Sympozjum Egejskie (Papers In Aegean Archaeology), vol. 2, Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw, University of Warsaw Press, 2019, p.26.

Some tombstones depict the complete bodies of the deceased, as in Zincirli 91; more often, family members are depicted at the burial site, especially the deceased person's husband and/or son. Such tombstones depict objects and animals that are suggestive of the burial ceremony. Some tombstones have clear gender markers: women are often depicted holding a mirror and a spindle, while men are depicted holding an ear of wheat and a bunch of grapes¹⁸. As we can see, the feminine symbolism remains unchanged, spindle, while in this text, the masculine marker was the ear of wheat and the bunch of grapes, and in the other text mentioned above it was the bow and arrow.

Interestingly, during archaeological excavations in the Varna cemetery in Bulgaria, a spindle was among the items found, symbolizing regeneration and life¹⁹. This may suggest to us the geographically wide distribution of the spindle as an item with symbolic significance, and, most importantly, show that the spindle bore the same semantic meaning: by connecting the meanings of life and rebirth with a woman, the spindle also clearly carried feminine symbolism here.

Meaning of spindle in magic and curses

In ancient societies, the spindle was not only a symbol of femininity and a gender marker, but also a means used to harm, weaken, and curse the enemy.

In the Hittite military oath, we find a curse where the spindle is used as a curse for disloyal soldiers: *"Now whoever violates these oaths and harms the king, the queen, and the king's sons, these oaths shall turn him from a man into a woman; his soldiers shall turn him into woman, dress him in women's fashion, and put a ^kuressa²⁰ on his head! Bows, arrows, and other weapons he shall break in his hands, and distaffs and spindles shall be placed in his hands."*[translated from German].²¹ Another work describes the same military oath in more detail: They bring women's clothing, a turban and a spindle (symbols of femininity) and break the arrow (a symbol of masculinity). And they address the troops: *"Whoever breaks these oaths and does evil to the king and the queen and the royal princes, let these oath-gods change him from a man into a woman. Let them change his soldiers into women. Let them dress them like women and cover their heads with kerchiefs. Let them break their bows, arrows and (other) weapons in their hands and put in their hands distaff and spindle."*²²

In Nineveh's prayer to Ishtar magical rituals performed to harm the enemy's masculinity are mentioned done with the help of a spindle and a mirror. We have

¹⁸ **Gilbert A.**, Syro-Hittite Monumental Art and the Archaeology of Performance, The Stone Reliefs at Carchemish and Zincirli in the Earlier First Millennium BCE, Volume 2, Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG, Berlin/New York 2011, p. 126.

¹⁹ **Gimbutas M.**, The Living Goddesses, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, California, 2001, p.55.

²⁰ Women's hat.

²¹ **Haas V.**, *Materia Magica et Medica Hethitica*, 1, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin New York, 2003 p.618.

²² **Meyer M. Mirecki P.**, *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, Brill Academic Publishers, Inc., Boston, Leiden, 2001.pp 63-65.

already noted above that the spindle and the mirror were considered symbols of femininity. It is obvious that the text of this ritual-prayer was pronounced with one purpose only: to harm the fighting ability of the opposing enemy troops. The spindle and the mirror were considered symbols of femininity that could take away the masculinity of a man. The prayer-rite said: *“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 kureššar²³. And take away from them your favor.”²⁴*

The following is another prayer addressed to the goddess Ishtar. The Assyrians used to pray to her: “Let the spindle of Ishtar grow here.” This indirectly indicates one of Ishtar’s divine attributes. The magical power of the spindle was used during curses: *“Let the gods spin you like a spindle.”²⁵*

Wool and threads in magic and healing

There were necessary objects for magic, rituals, and spells, among them clay, wax, animal fat, animals for sacrifice, and wool which had its special place in witchcraft.²⁶

During rituals, magic, curses, and prayers, witches used colored threads and wool in addition to the spindle, with each color having its unique meaning.

The use of tricolor (color triad) and five colors is notable in Hittite rituals. The tricolor - white, red, and blue (or black) - symbolized the vertical structure of the *cosmos*²⁷: heaven, earth, and the underworld. The tricolor was used in the Hittite milieu during the ritual of summoning spirits²⁸.

During the Šarrena ritual, the Hittites used a doll made of red, blue, and white wool, with the doll symbolizing figurines used in ancestor worship²⁹. The purpose of this ritual was probably to establish contact with the ancestors.

During Hittite rituals, red, blue, black, and white wool was used, while during purification rituals, the witch used white, yellow, and green wool³⁰. A striking example of this is the marriage ceremony of King Tudhaliya III and Queen Nikal-

²³Women's hat.

²⁴**Yakar J.**, The Spiritual Connotations of the Spindle and Spinning: Selected Cases from Ancient Anatolia and Neighboring Lands, Istanbul, 2007, p.784.

²⁵**Yakar J.**, Presumed Social Identity of the Occupants of Late Third Millennium BC Alacahöyük and Horoztepe “Royal Tombs”, The Journal of Archaeomythology, vol. 7 Institute of Archaeomythology, 2011, pp.1-9.

²⁶**Bryce T.**, Life and Society in the Hittite World, Oxford University Press, 2004, p.202.

²⁷Cosmos (κόσμος) is a Greek word meaning universe, world, people.

²⁸**Ardzinba V. G.**, Rituals and myths of ancient Anatolia, Moscow, 1982, p. 213.

²⁹**Bachvarova R. M.**, From Hittite to Homer: The Anatolian Background of Ancient Greek Epic, Cambridge University Press, UK, 2016, p.183.

³⁰**Dardeniz G.**, Significance of Colour in the Second Millennium BC: The Perception and Use of Glass at the Centre and Periphery of the Hittites, The Value of Colour. Material and Economic Aspects in the Ancient World, Berlin, 2019, pp. 102-103.

mati, dating back to the Middle Hittite period, during which blue, white, and yellow wool was used³¹.

Wool was used in various rituals, for various purposes, such as medicinal. It was used to treat or alleviate the pain of a patient; for example, the Hittites used blue wool to treat a patient's headache³². Here is another example, where the witch (old woman) touches the ritual patient with white, blue, yellow, and green wool, after which she wraps the woolen threads around a clay figurine, which symbolizes the enemy witch, and in this case the patient's pains were supposed to be transferred to the enemy's witch³³. Another similar example is when an old woman spreads black wool on the patient's knees and above the head and says: *"I am taking it away from him/her: I am taking from his/her twelve body parts the evil, the uncleanness, the sorcery, the spell-casting, (and) the anger of the deity"*; the old woman would then go on to take the black wool thread and wrap it around the figurine³⁴. As we can see from the examples mentioned above (similar examples are many), blue and black wool, or threads made from them, were used for healing or magical purposes. An important accessory of such rituals was also the figurine, around which the woolen threads were wrapped.

In another ritual, an old woman had to heal a paralyzed child. During her spell, the witch used the wool she had wrapped the patient in, and it was believed that the wool could absorb pain and disease³⁵.

It was also customary among Armenians to heal the sick with the help of wool. Here is an example of the most common practice among the people (such a practice can still be found in our days) of treating back pain with wool. Note that the wool had to be unwashed (according to oral tradition).

There was a widespread superstition among Armenians related to thread. According to it, they did not measure the height of a healthy and living person with a thread, as measuring height with a thread symbolized imminent death, since only the height of the dead was measured with a thread³⁶.

The Hittites performed a number of rituals and spells, which were intended to appease the anger of the offended gods. We find the following against the plague: if people died, at the hands of an enemy god, the Hittites twisted blue, yellow, red and white wool, tied them and wove a crown from them. The woven crown was placed on the head of a ram. The ram was chased along the road, accompanied with these words: *"Whatever god of the enemy land has caused this plague—see! We have now driven up this crowned ram to pacify thee, O god! Just as the herd is strong, but keeps peace with the ram, do thou, the god who has caused this*

³¹**Ardzinba V. G.**, *Rituals and Myths of Ancient Anatolia*, Moscow, 1982, p. 213.

³²**Charekishvili N.**, *Symbolism of numbers and colors in Hittite and Ancient Georgian world*, Tbilisi, 2021, p.344.

³³**Marcuson H.**, *"Word of the Old Woman": Studies in Female Ritual Practice in Hittite Anatolia*, Chicago, Illinois, University of Chicago 2016, p.63.

³⁴**Ibid.**, p.253.

³⁵**Taracha P.**, *Religions of Second Millennium Anatoli*, Harrassowitz Verlag Wiesbaden, 2009, p.154.

³⁶**Armenian Ethnography and Folklore**, vol. 24, Yerevan, 2007, p. 156.

*plague, keep peace with the Hatti land!"*³⁷ At the end of the ritual, the crowned ram was chased towards the enemy "*...They drive the ram on the road leading to the enemy and while doing so they speak as follows*"—a long prayer follows to appease "*whatever god of the enemy land has caused this plague*"³⁸.

Consider another Hittite ritual: wool was used in magic to protect and heal the army from epidemics. At night, the leader of the army would hang a braid or necklace woven of colored wool - white, red, green or yellow - from the neck of a ram, the ritual animal. It was believed that after this the gods would heal the sick³⁹. This ritual also demonstrates the healing and ritual significance of wool.

Even night spells are associated with the magical properties of wool and spindles. In Mesopotamia and Asia Minor, they believed that the night had special power, which is why in order to be more effective, spells were performed at night. For example, such spells were performed during the Wattiti ritual. They took black, green, yellow, and blue wool, tore it apart, put it on ordinary bread, and at brought it to the roof at night, leaving it there overnight. While putting the bread and wool on the roof, the witch addressed the moon god with words of magic. The next day, the witch took the enchanted wool and bread from the roof. Shaking them over the child's shoulder, they would say the following: "*...Just like the whorl of the spindle turns, may the evil entrails turn away from the child likewise!*"⁴⁰.

To resolve family disputes, the Hittites again used multi-colored woolen threads, mainly red, black, and blue. To resolve a family dispute, the witch (also known as the old woman) would take the black wool and wrap it in sheep fat, this was called *tššatwa*, and show it to those that would be sacrificed. She would put the red and blue braids on their bodies, make hands and tongues out of dough, wave them over them, and then cut off the prepared tongues and hands and throw them into the fire

¹, firmly believing that family problems would be resolved through this magic.

We encounter a ritual involving the thread, the origins of which are linked to the Old Testament Day of Atonement ritual, during which two goats were sacrificed. According to Mishnah tradition, a red thread was tied to the horns of one of the goats being sacrificed, and then thrown down a gorge². It is noteworthy

³⁷Ferguson D., *I Never Did an Evil Thing": An Examination of Hittite Sin and Religious Sensibility*, vol 8/1, 2010, p.57.

³⁸Burkert W., *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual*, University of California Press, Berkeley Los Angeles London, 1979, p.60.

³⁹Mouton A., "Dead of Night" in *Anatolia: Hittite Night Rituals*, Religion Compass 2/1, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2008, pp..2-3.

⁴⁰Mouton A., "Dead of Night" in *Anatolia: Hittite Night Rituals*, Religion Compass 2/1, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2008, p.8.

¹*Bulletin Of The Middle Eastern Culture Center In Japan* ,Essays On Anatolian Studies In The Second Millennium B.C., Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1988, p.67.

²Burkert W., *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual*, University of California Press, Berkeley Los Angeles London, 1979, p.64.

that the expression "scapegoat"¹ (*Atonement goat* in Armenian), having Jewish origins, has been preserved in the Armenian milieu to this day. The aforementioned ritual has cultural and ritual connections with Hittite, Greek, and Roman rituals.

Greco-Roman societies had their own idea of the thread. Consider the following example: the concepts of "life" and "thread" carried a symbolic meaning and were interconnected. The Greek origin of this expression is of interest. Three sisters, Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, held human fates in their hands. Clotho spins human fates with a spindle in her hand, the other sister Lachesis determines the length of the thread (i.e. the duration of life), and the third sister Atropos cuts the thread with scissors in her hand², that is, the thread of life is cut and the person dies. It is noteworthy that to this day, the expression "the thread of life is cut" has been preserved among Armenians, which means to die³.

It is noteworthy that in the beliefs of some regions of Armenia customs related to colored threads were preserved until the 19th century. During the wedding ceremony, a multi-colored ribbon made of red and green threads was tied around the neck of the bride and groom, where red symbolized life and fertility, and green stood for youth⁴. In relation to this, in Armenian, *tying green and red* was an expression used as a synonym for getting married.

Conclusion

In sum, considering the archaeological finds, preserved texts, Mesopotamian and Greek myths, Hittite, Mesopotamian, and Greco-Roman rituals, Armenian superstitions, customs and proverbs related to the spindle, wool and thread, we may conclude the important and diverse significance given to the spindle. The latter was endowed with a dual effect. In one ritual, the spindle, wool and thread could heal and resolve family problems, and in another they could serve as raw material for evil magic. The spindle was used both for healing and for cursing, and also a gender marker, particularly among the Hittites. The beliefs mentioned in the paper clearly demonstrate the complex relationship between the spindle and magic in the ideas and beliefs of ancient societies. During the Hittite rituals, as can be seen from the examples given above and from the rituals left outside the scope of the paper, red, white, and blue wool or threads were mainly used. This study allows us to conclude that the societies of Ancient Asia Minor, its adjacent territories and Mesopotamia shared similar ideas and beliefs. Interestingly, these beliefs, with minor changes, have been preserved in the beliefs, traditions and superstitions of Armenians to this day.

¹ **Aghayan E.**, Explanatory Dictionary of Modern Armenian, Armenia Publishing House, volume 2, Yerevan, 1976, p. 1557.

² **Bausum D.**, Threading Time: A Cultural History Of Threadwork, TCU Press Fort Worth, Texas, 2001, 38 p.

³ **Sukiasyan A., Galstyan S.**, Phraseological Dictionary of the Armenian Language, Yerevan University Publishing House, Yerevan, 1975, p. 323.

⁴ **Nahapetyan R.**, Traditional Customs and Rituals of Childbirth and Childcare among Aghdznik Armenians, YSU Publishing House, Yerevan, 2011, p. 26.

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