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Ancient clay spools unearthed in the Central Peloponnese and their role in textile production

Introduction

Despite being found frequently throughout multiple Mediterranean settlements, sanctuaries, and necropolis, as well as in countless other European sites, spools represent a less known class of textile implements in archaeology. In the past, they were seldom published, so that until recently no standard definition of spools was established in the literature, even if the majority of specialists in the field agreed that they must have been connected with the textile crafts.

Spools are occasionally mentioned in publications under more general sentences like “small cylindrical objects, often with concave shaft and flaring ends” (Gleba 2008, 140), “spool shaped or cylindrical objects” (Rahmstorf 2015, 8) and “oblong and cylindrical objects” (Longhitano 2021, 13). However, it should be noted that spools with rectangular, triangular or flattened ends (the so-called eight-shaped spools) are known in the Aegean space. They are either considered to be “in some way associated too with textile production” (Gleba 2008, 140), textile multifunctional tools (Siennicka and Ulanowska 2016) or a controversial type of loom weight (Rahmstorf 2015, 8).

In the majority of archaeological literature, especially excavation reports or site monographs, spools are also named bobbins (see also *bobines* in French), reels or cylinders, and they are sometimes differentiated in perforated (pierced or drilled) or unperforated. Even if most of the time the authors do not provide images with their full form, including the waist and both ends (which may show a high diversity even when it comes on the spools unearthed on the same site), with various occasions, one of their ends bearing a mark is illustrated. Beside this basic information, we rarely find out more about their morphological features, while their exact functionality remains either a matter of debate or it is not approached at all. The functional

parameters of spools (dimensions, weights and form) are omitted in the majority of publications or are given only partially or – even more confusing – only average values are given in the case of larger collections (Waldstein 1905, 44 on the important collection of spools discovered in the Heraion of Argos, which meanwhile seems to be lost).

Fortunately, over the past few decades, clay spools from Greece have drawn more interest leading to some studies that have established the methodological fundamentals of spool research, increasing awareness of their significance for comprehending the very intricate textile crafts practiced by the ancient artisans.

The up to date archaeological and iconographic evidence summarised in these pioneering studies showed that even if clay spools were never systematically investigated in archaeology in the past, they constitute a significant type of prehistoric and ancient textile tools in the Mediterranean space. The notable efforts that were made to better understand the chronology, distribution and the role of clay spools (see especially the studies on the Bronze Age spools – that arouse the interest of more specialists, since other evidence, like iconography and written sources, do not offer so much data on textile techniques practiced by the artisans in prehistoric times) were essential in establishing the main aims of the research undertaken during this doctoral research.

Therefore, in the context of the last progress in the field of textile archaeology and taking into consideration the remarkable results brought by experimental studies which offered additional data on the functionality of prehistoric and ancient spools, this thesis focused on several key goals, including:

- To compile a comprehensive survey of Peloponnesian sites where ancient spools were recorded, with a special focus on the contexts and

specific date of each object or cluster of spools identified during this initial step – a helpful stage for identifying the patterns of spools distribution through time and space in this area of mainland Greece;

- To undertake a careful examination of the morphologic features of the Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic spools with the aim of better understanding the ways in which their form evolved in time and how exactly spools were manufactured by toolmakers (potters or maybe weavers themselves);
- Subsequently, to propose a typological classification of spools based on the diverse forms of the spools recorded across the Peloponnesian sites starting with the Archaic period onwards. This might become a useful tool as the form of spools show evident development in time and can help to date objects without context and observe how various spools types became popular on wider areas;
- To set up an inventory of marks and symbols observed on the ends of spools and to analyse the possible marking patterns that characterised the production of clay spools during the

Archaic-Hellenistic periods in the Peloponnese, including the custom of impressing spools with ring seals, earrings or marking them with circles and incisions when the clay was still crude;

- To inquire which was the functionality of spools according to their functional parameters, taking into consideration their strongly standardised form and the fact that these implements often appeared in archaeological contexts related to specific stages of textile crafts (for example weaving).

By fulfilling all these aims, I argue that this research project brought a meaningful contribution to the study of textile production in ancient Greece, helping to better understand the high complexity of textile crafts practiced in one of the most textile dynamic regions of the Greek mainland.

State of the art

Spools were found on many sites across Greece, and their presence was frequently reported randomly in excavation reports and archaeological monographs, but they hardly ever received special attention, as their functionality was considered for a long time a puzzling matter. However, with rare occasions, these objects were meticulously described and benefited of a special consideration. See, for example, the case of the prehistoric spools from Lerna, published in 1967 by Elisabeth Banks and the ancient spools from the same site recently published in greatest details by Brice Erickson (Banks 1967, pl. 19; Erickson 2018), or the prehistoric spools from Nichoria discussed in a note by Jill Carington Smith in 1983 (Carington Smith 1983, 290–291). A few more studies about spools by Lorenz Rahmstorf brought important insights into spools distribution and evolution through time in the Aegean space (Rahmstorf 2003; 2005; 2015), while a paper by Malgorzata Siennicka and Agata Ulanowska inquired their functionality in greater details (Siennicka and Ulanowska 2016). Additionally, a technical report on experimental weaving with spools undertaken at CTR in the framework of the *Tools and Textiles – Texts and Contexts* project proved that they could have been used successfully in the past for weaving (Mårtensson et al. 2007), while a section on spools in the Mediterranean space integrated spools into the larger picture of textile crafts (Andersson Strand and Nosch 2015, 370–371). The ancient clay spools from Peloponnese, in particular, were hardly ever explored in detail. There are only a few studies that can be counted here: see the excellent work of John E. Coleman on the spools unearthed at Pylos in Elis (Coleman 1986), an important discussion on the dating and functionality of the spools from Olympia by Jürgen Schilbach (Schilbach



Fig. 1: Cypriot plate showing a depiction of a warp-weighted loom with spool-shaped weights tensioning the bundles of warp threads (Cypro-Geometric period) (Photo credits: Akademisches Kunstmuseum Bonn. Image: Jutta Schubert)



1999), the above-mentioned study of Brice Erickson on the spools from Lerna and some recent papers by the author of this thesis focusing on their potential role(s) (Iancu 2020a; 2020b). Beside these, only a few other authors gave short interpretations on the role of spools, generally based only on minimal observation of the objects themselves, which occasionally led to erroneous assumptions about how were used in the past (Penttinen 2005, 30, 72, 74–75, 77, interpreting spools as potter's marks).

The evidence

Literary sources are generally silent when it comes about spools, so there is still a lot of uncertainty about a possible Ancient Greek term designating this class of objects. However, in the past some Ancient Greek words have been traditionally rendered as 'spool', despite the fact that they seem to refer to some other tools or instruments: see *πήνη* (it could be any implement on which thread can be wound, and even if sometimes it was translated as 'spool', often it seems to refer to the shuttle of the loom, as it is shown in Hom. *Il.*, 23.740; Eur., *Hec.*, 471; Eur., *Ion*, 197) and *τό ἐξέλικτρον*, a term referring not to textiles but to an instrument which was part of ancient war machines – the pulley, see Ph. Bel. 67.38).

There aren't many iconographic representations of spools either. Only one bichrome Cypriot plate of the Cypro-Geometric III period explicitly shows what seem to be clay spools used to tension the warp threads in a warp-weighted loom (fig. 1), while other scenes on the painted vases occasionally considered to be representations of spools, are less compelling in this regard (Houby-Nielsen 2020, 463, fig. 196 a–c).

Archaeological sources remain the most consistent body of evidence for the study of clay spools from Peloponnese consisting either of substantial collections of spools that include dozens or even hundreds of pieces or isolated finds, all of them recorded in many sites around the Central Peloponnese in Elis, mainly southern Arcadia, and in various sites across Argolido-Corinthian region. However, despite this generous evidence, it is very hard to get access to all the collections due the difficult and time-consuming administrative procedures. Beside the administrative issues, it should be noted that some old collections are considered to be currently lost or their exact location is not known anymore (see above the case of the spools from the Heraion of Argos).

Additionally, it should not be ruled out that other spools unearthed across Peloponnese exist but were never published, so they could not be incorporated into



Fig. 2: Spools from Elean Pylos, grouped according to their form, dimensions and weights, during the study that the author undertook in the Archaeological Museum of Olympia in 2018 (Image: Alina Iancu)

the current study. Even so, a total of 23 archaeological sites (from which more than 400 individual spools were described in the thesis, while many other collections are mentioned in more general terms) were included into the research presented here – forming the core of the PhD catalogue and representing a relevant body of evidence that allowed detailed observations on their evolution in time and their distribution across Peloponnese from the Archaic until late Hellenistic period.

Research methods

The rich archaeological evidence included in the thesis was inventoried through a detailed search into the literature, many visits in the local museums and actual study in museum's deposits (for example at the National Museum of Archaeology in Athens or the Archaeological Museum in Olympia, see fig. 2). A rich corpus of material stays at the core of a consistent catalogue illustrating and describing in detail all the sites where spools were found in Peloponnese.

Cartographic materials (for example, maps showing the presence of spools across the Peloponnese) helped for a more efficient representation of the widespread presence of spools that dominates the central part of the peninsula. When more information was available or direct access to the material was possible, each object was described in detail: the functional parameters (weight, dimensions, form), the clay features, use wear, marks, state of preservation, context and date are given for each spool/cluster of spools recorded in the catalogue.

The catalogue represents the central part of the thesis and it is the main instrument on which the interpretation (consisting of eight chapters) is based. It enabled the integration of archaeological data with the results of experimental archaeology, leading to the creation of a typological taxonomy of spools.

The interpretative section includes an introductory chapter discussing the textile crafts in ancient Peloponnese, a chapter about the widespread presence of spools in the central part of the peninsula and the absence of these implements in Achaia, Laconia and Messenia, two other chapters on the production of spools (including the custom of spools marking), while the last chapters are dedicated firstly to a typology of spools, and secondly, to a technical discussion on their exact functionality – a complex analysis based on their features, use wear, archaeological context of discovery etc.

Main results

The up to date archaeological evidence shows that in ancient Greece, spools prevail in the Mainland,

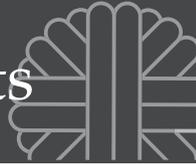
Peloponnese being one of the richest region in such finds. Here, they were often unearthed in domestic contexts or in textile industrial workshops located in city centers, rural settlements, sometimes in modest and isolated farmsteads, but also in sanctuaries, and graves – a fact that confess not only about their longstanding use in textile production, but also about their use as votive offerings and grave goods (fig. 3). This suggests that spools, like loom weights and spindle whorls, were important domestic implements desirable to accompany the dead in the afterlife or to be dedicated to feminine deities, as we see in the case of the spools which were unearthed in Heraion of Argos or in the Sanctuary of Athena Akraia and Limneia of Perachora (Waldstein 1905, 44, nr. 286–287; Payne 1940, 248, nr. 268).

Regarding their widespread use in this region of Greece during Antiquity, one of the most important conclusions was that the presence of clay spools can be archaeologically attested only in four regions of Peloponnese: Elis is well known as a space where spools were widespread, being attested on sites like Olympia, Pylos and Makrisia (Papathanasopoulos 1970, 191–193; Coleman 1986, 100–104; Schilbach 1999, 70–151). The same is Argolid – one of the most prolific regions in spools. Such objects were found in Argos and its surroundings, at Pyrgouthi, Lerna and many other sites (Waldstein 1905, 44; Blegen 1939, 423; Roux 1956, 386–387; Bowkett 1995; Wells and Runnels 1996, 189–259; Pentinnen 2005, 29–77; Barakari-Gleni 2015, 417; Erickson 2018). Spools were also found in Corinth and Perachora, though the finds are less generous in this region (Payne 1940, 248; Davidson 1952, 178; Stillwell 1952, 271).

Despite the fact that Arcadia, located in the central part of Peloponnese, was considered for a long time an area where this type of textile implement was never popular, various spools were unearthed across the southern part of the region, in Archaic to Hellenistic settlements, showing that here spools are more than simple intrusions from the surrounding regions (see the sites of Asea, Tegea, Gorthys, Lavda, Phigalia and Kyparissia; Forsén and Forsén 2003; Voyatzis 2004, 234; Ginouvès 1959, 139, fig. 162; Goester and van de Vrie 1998, 119; Loy 2007; Loy 2010).

In the northern and southern part of the peninsula (Achaia, Laconia and Messenia), spools seem to miss almost completely in ancient times, even if we have clues that they were used by the BA craftspeople (we know, for example, about BA spools at Nichoria in Messenia or Helike in Achaia).

On the basis of this very rich evidence, a typological classification of spools was proposed, consisting of



seven types, some of which were further divided in more subtypes. There is a great variety of forms which leads to a great diversity of profiles. Each form was defined based on those morphological features of the spools that tends to show variations: firstly, the form of the ends and secondly the curbure of the waist:

- Type I: spools with round simple ends or round ends forming a border, having short of high concave waist (fig. 4 with explicative scheme)
- Type II: spools with rounded ends and concave waist
- Type III: spools with domed (convex) round ends and concave waist
- Type V: spools with round, deepened ends and concave waist
- Type VI: spools with rectangular ends and concave or cylindrical waist
- Type VII: spools with triangular ends and concave waist
- Type VII: eight-shaped spools

This typological classification, described here in short, helped to observe the prevalence of certain types in time and space, showing how the preferences of

craftspeople evolved or changed from the Archaic period until the late Hellenistic times. For example, one of the most popular form includes the spools classified in the thesis as type 1, having round simple ends or round ends forming a border and short of high concave waist. They were spotted in all regions of Peloponnese where spools are known, in Archaic up to Hellenistic contexts, while some of the rarest types of spools are the ones with triangular ends or eight-shapes spools, known so far only from Elis and Arcadia.

Another aim was to understand how spools were made – and therefore to gain additional information about how they were used. A detailed investigation was undertaken in order to record all the manufacture traces, use wear traces, finger prints retained by each object and to observe their state of preservation. This meticulous process was useful to identify the main techniques of manufacture of spools (hand modelling, potter's wheel and mould made objects were documented; Iancu 2020a) and to find out more clues about their practical functionality (an extended discussion on this matter is provided in a study to appear in *Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of World textiles*, see

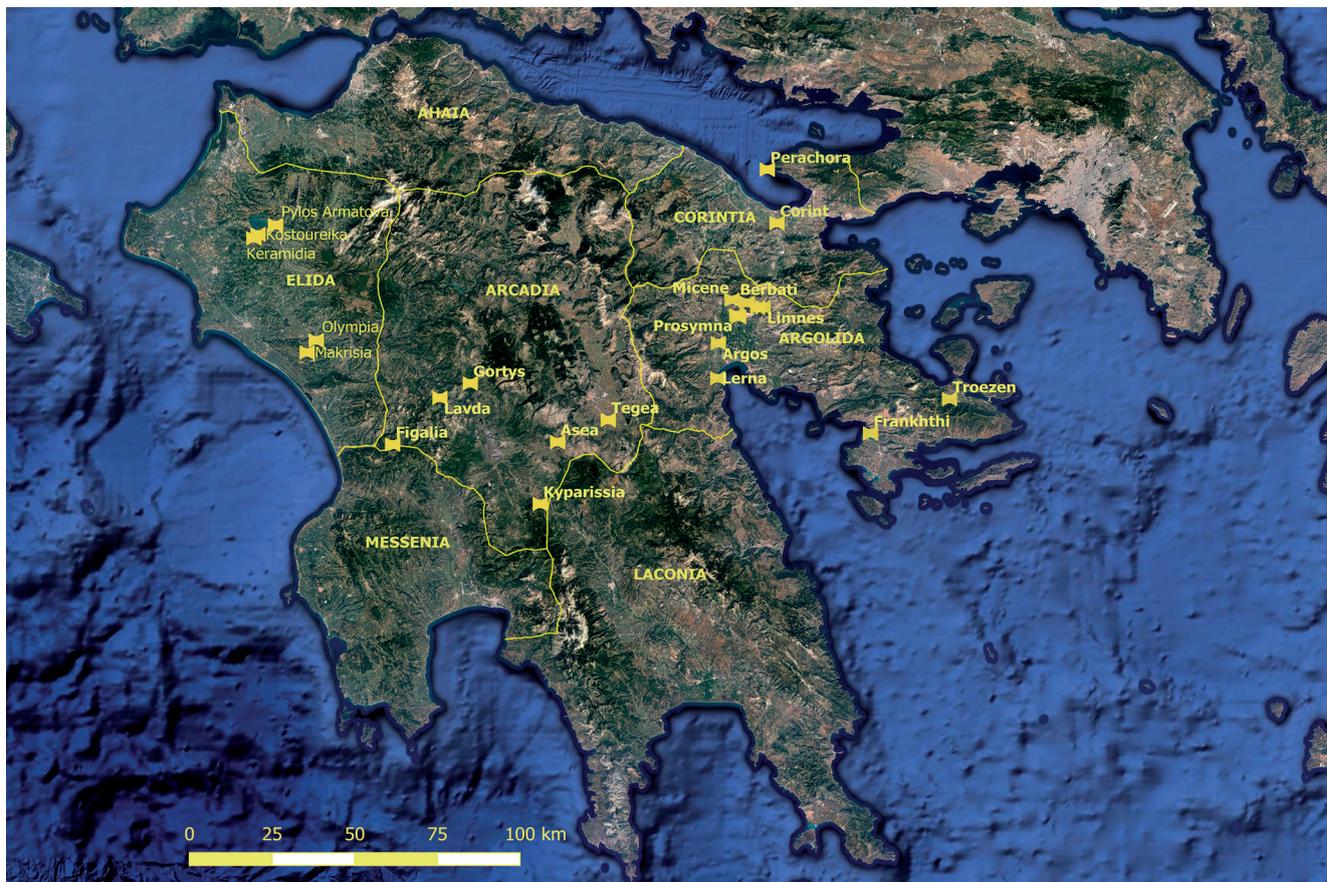


Fig. 3: Distribution of clay spools in Archaic-Hellenistic contexts across Peloponnese (Image: Alina Iancu)

Iancu and Ulanowska, currently under print). Additionally, an inventory of marks showed a strong connection with the custom of loom weights marking, as the spools follows the same marking patterns as discoidal, conical and pyramidal loom weights (for example, ring-impressed motifs, graffiti, and impressed accessories like earrings were recorded). Finally, their functionality was discussed in relation with the contexts of discovery, the use wear traces that they retain, their form, weights and dimensions, including intricate matters like how much thread can store on their waist were approached – a complicated discussion since it is not so clear how much thread was *enough* for various functions. The results brought by this complex analysis tend to suggest that spools should be seen as highly multifunctional textile tools, as it is also supported by some important archaeological experiments, with the additional observation that many of the Peloponnesian spools denote a high standardisation indicating the possibility that they have been mainly employed as loom weights.

Future research

The PhD research presented here focused on the investigation of ancient clay spools from Peloponnese. However, in this thesis I argue that spools from Peloponnese cannot be understood if they are studied without taking a look at what is happening outside the peninsula, since the archaeological evidence demonstrate that the use of spools for producing textiles was not an isolated phenomenon limited only to this part of Greece. Ancient clay spools were occasionally reported from other Greek regions: see the Archaic spools from

Chalkis in Aetolia (Houby-Nielsen 2020), Koroneia in Boeotia (Meens 2011, 96), Halai in Locris (Goldman 1940, 507), Delphi in Phocis (Perdrizet 1908, 199), Kallithea and Philia in Thessaly (a huge amount of more than 1500 spools were found here; Karapanou 2001; Karagiannopoulos 2018, 123, 125), and a very consistent collection of spools from Olynthus in Central Macedonia (Robinson 1930, 128).

All these evidence confess about the popularity of spools in mainland Greece and, studied comparatively, they show great similarities informing us that Peloponnese was well integrated in the main textile trends that marked the Greek space since Archaic period until late Hellenistic times – a period after which spools seems to lose ground.

Generally, these objects show a great standardization, they are never pierced and seem to appear either on sites where conventional loom weights (pyramidal, conical and others, depending on site) either are missing almost completely (see Pylos in Elis; Coleman 1986, 102) or they are bigger in size (see the evidence from Olympia – personal observations during the study undertaken in the Archaeological Museum of Olympia). Even if those observations could be redefined in the context of future comparative research on spools versus conventional loom weights, up to this moment the lack of comparative studies and extended discussions on the morphologic features of all textile tools unearthed in each region discussed in the thesis did not allowed to have a more nuanced view of the relation between spools and weights of more conventional forms.

Future research projects that can bring new data to enlarge our understanding of spools phenomenon

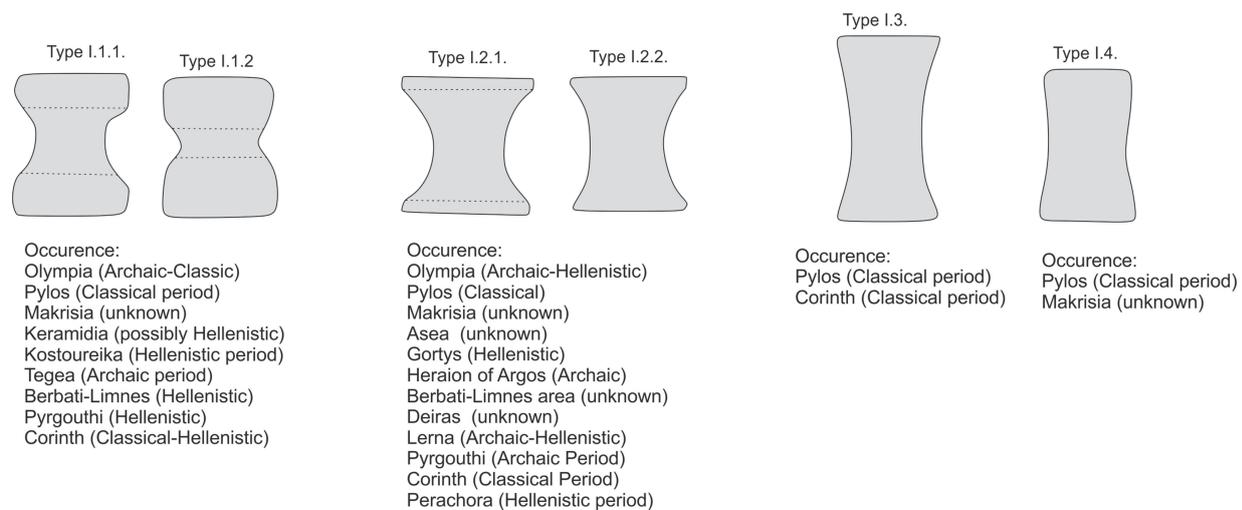


Fig. 4: Scheme showing the typological classification of clay spools of Type I from Peloponnese and their occurrence in various sites across the peninsula (Image: Alina Iancu)



in Greece during Antiquity should include first of all spools surveys in all the Greek mainland space to identify as much spools as possible and update the distribution map of these objects. Furthermore, the morphological examination of the spools from each region and close comparison with other consistent collections (for example, spools from southern and central Greece could be compared with material coming from northern regions of mainland Greece, like the one from Olynthus) could say a lot about how various spools forms circulated through time and space. For example, clay spools having rectangular ends, popular in some areas of Peloponnese, can also be found in northern Greece, such objects being exhibited in the Museum of Byzantine Culture in Thessaloniki, suggesting the high popularity of certain types across all Greek space in Antiquity. But how exactly these forms travelled or were reproduced locally is still to be discovered. On the other hand, collections that are currently lost or simply unpublished and future discoveries might bring a more nuanced image of the presence of spools both in Peloponnese and across all the Greek space.

Furthermore, a more systematic publication of spools in Greece will definitely help in the future to integrate spools into the general studies on textile production in this part of the Aegean world and it can become an example of good practice for other regions, as spools were also found in wide areas across Europe and Orient. Finally, comparison of spools and with loom weights and spindle whorls on same sites could bring new data on how spools were used in relation with other textile tools and can indicate how they reshaped the crafts and changed the preferences of textile artisans in ancient Greece.

Acknowledgments

This PhD research would not have been possible without the support given by the following people and institutions whom I kindly thank: Dr. Reinhard Senff and The German Archaeological Institute at Athens (DAI) – for granting me with the study of Olympian spools; the Ephorate of Antiquities of Ilia – for accepting my request of study on the spools from Elean Pylos and Makrisia; The National Institute of Archaeology in Athens for accepting my request of studying some of the spools from the Argive Heraion; the Romanian Institute of Archaeology in Athens – for supporting my research in Athens.

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