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Late La Tène and Early Roman textile tools from Dorno, Italy

Abstract

This paper presents late Celtic and Roman textile tools from the territory of Dorno, a small town in northern Italy. Sheep shearing and spinning are very well documented activities at this site with 21 pairs of iron shears and 88 clay spindle whorls recorded. These implements come from burial contexts dating from between the second century BCE and the first century CE. The spindle whorls show a great variety of shapes and weights, and, with their large number, they contribute to an understanding of the local economy. The association of textile tools with other burial goods, in both men's and women's graves, provides further information not only about the role of the textile industry within this community but also about social organisation and burial rituals.

Keywords: Celtic textile tools, Roman textile tools, Dorno, Po Valley archaeology

Introduction

This paper presents all late Celtic and Roman textile tools found in the territory of Dorno, a small town in Lomellina, in the province of Pavia between the river valleys of the Ticino, Po and Sesia in Italy. The modern centre corresponds to the Roman Duriae, a post village between Ticinum (Pavia) and Laumellum (Lomello) along the so called "via delle Gallie", a Roman route retracing a Celtic pathway towards France (fig. 1). This route is well documented by several written sources dating to the second, third and fourth centuries CE (Banzi Mirella 1999).

This region, Lomellina, was inhabited by a Celtic group of La Tène culture with unique cultural characteristics, evident from at least the third century BCE (Arslan 1991, 461-464). Examples of typical local objects are provided by some pottery vessels, such as the *vaso a trottola*, and by the local diffusion of *fibula pavese*, a characteristic large brooch. Further cultural features can be found in other sites in the same territory (Arslan 2007, 131; Grossi & Luliano 2010, 26-27; Poletti Ecclesia 1999). The main economic activities were possibly vine cultivation, wine production and animal husbandry.

The funerary practice was to cremate dead bodies and then collect the ashes to be buried in trench graves, sometimes in ossuary bowls. The grave goods were put on a funeral pyre near the corpse or directly in the grave. These objects suggest an agro-pastoral society, headed by a warrior elite: in this area, local chiefs had the right to bear arms until the end of the Celtic phase (Arslan 1991, 461; Arslan 2004, 145-153).

From the second century BCE, a general impoverishment of the area is recorded. Weapons were less frequently included in burials and the pottery shapes were simpler and showed less variety (Arslan 1991, 467; 2004, 152). The Roman settlement in the Po Valley entailed a gradual assimilation of foreign customs. This integration process had already come to a conclusion in the Augustan age (by end of the first century BCE) (Arslan 2002).

Although the territory of Dorno was investigated by several archaeological excavations, undertaken in different sites, textile tools were only recorded in the cemeteries of Cascina Grande (west of the river Terdoppio) and San Materno (east of the river Terdoppio). They come from 65 burials in total.



Fig. 1: The site of Dorno in northern Italy and the position of Cascina Grande and San Materno (Image: Courtesy of MIBACT - Polo Museale della Lombardia)

At San Materno a group of 15 burials was excavated in 1972 (Antico Gallina 1985), while another six burials were found in 1980. The extended necropolis of Cascina Grande, composed of more than 200 burials, was excavated in 1984 (Allini 1985). Overall, most of these archaeological findings date to between the second century BCE and the first century CE. The first phases of textile manufacture are the best documented, with 21 pairs of shears and 88 clay spindle whorls, although weaving is only represented by one loom

weight. All burial goods from Dorno are held at the Museo Archeologico Nazionale della Lomellina in Vigevano (Pavia, Italy).

Sheep shearing

Spring shears, the shape of which does not change over centuries, appear in Switzerland and in Lomellina – at Garlasco, for example – in rich male inhumations dating back to La Tène C, possibly as a symbol of power and wealth (Rast-Eicher 2012, 391-392; Arslan 2002, 127; 134-135), and they are widely documented in the whole Celtic area. All shears from Dorno are of the same design with two triangular blades on a simple U-shaped spring. Although these tools could have had a wide range of functions, all the shears from Dorno may be connected with livestock, because their blades are between 11.3 cm and 16.3 cm long, and they are between 19.5 cm and 28.5 cm long in total. Caution is necessary in interpretation, however, a blade length of about 15 cm is indicated as the ideal for sheep shearing (Gleba 2008, 94; Spangiarì, Francisci & Busana 2019). The number of shears found at Dorno (21) is quite high; in the whole Venetia region, for example, only 18 pairs of Roman shears suitable for shearing have been recorded. They all come from the province of Brescia (Busana et al. 2012, 413-417). With the exception of one tool from San Materno, all the Dorno shears were found in the necropolis of Cascina Grande (fig. 2). There was one pair per burial in both rich and poor graves, mostly in late Celtic burials, but also in three Roman graves: Cascina Grande, burial 75 (with *terra sigillata*), burial 34 (with an Augustan coin) and burial 192 (with Roman pottery). About half of the shears have mineralised textile remains on one or both sides (Scansetti 2018) and similar textile fragments are also present on razors, sickles and knives. Altogether, these have been recorded on 27 objects from Dorno. Among them is a pottery bowl with some mineralised textile



Fig. 2: Iron shears, Cascina Grande, burial 118 (Image: Courtesy of MIBACT - Polo Museale della Lombardia)



fragments adhering to it. Flax is the most common fibre but wool is also documented (Castiglioni & Rottoli 2019).

In the 27 textiles from Dorno, the most common weave is tabby, in some examples it is dense and in others loose, but there are also two twills. Where it has been possible to determine it, both warp and weft threads are single and Z-spun. Single Z-spun tabbies are also predominant in the Roman cemetery at Solduno (Tessin, Switzerland) and in Late La Tène finds from Switzerland, where twills were more common during the Early La Tène period (Rast-Eicher 2012, 388). All the textiles are central parts of the cloth: they do not have selvages or irregularities that suggest the warp direction. However, in one linen tabby fragment (Cascina Grande, burial 95, La Tène D1), there is a regular space between two threads. This could be a mistake or a decorative feature made intentionally by the weaver. A 2/2 wool twill is recorded on a metal brooch from an inhumation of the Augustan period (burial 8bis) from Cascina Grande. A small wool fragment on a brooch from burial 186 (La Tène D2) could also be a 2/2 twill.

Since the dead bodies were cremated, it is possible that most of these textiles (except perhaps the two examples on the brooches) were not parts of clothing. They could have been scrap cloths in which some precious objects were wrapped. In some cases, the fabric is on one side of the object, as if it were a covering; in other cases, it is present on both sides, as if wrapped around it. The fabric is single or double-layered, and in some cases, there are traces of different tabbies wrapping the same object. The wrapping of particular objects is widely documented in several European Iron Age sites: for example, in some sites of southern Italy, in Austria, and in the cemetery of Třebusice, in Bohemia (Belanová-Štolcová 2012, 322; Gleba 2008; Grömer 2012, 49). In Switzerland, during the Halstatt period, the wrapping of metal objects was a common practice, which continued during the La Tène period and into the Early Middle Ages (Rast-Eicher 2012, 385, 390).

In central and southern Italy, cremated bones were also wrapped in textiles, according to a practice adopted from Greek colonists, which spread among the Etruscan and Italic elites (Gleba 2008, 88; Gleba 2012, 231-233). By then, shears were not buried with the deceased at Dorno but wrapped in textiles or enclosed in fabric bags before they were placed inside the graves. They played a significant role in the identification of the dead: they showed his occupation and his particular abilities. Animal shearing requires specific skill: it could be carried out by the owner of the flock (*magister pecoris*) or it could be entrusted



Fig. 3: Set of spindle whorls, San Materno, burial 3/1980 (Image: Courtesy of MIBACT - Polo Museale della Lombardia)



Fig. 4: Set of spindle whorls, San Materno, burial 5/1980 (Image: Courtesy of MIBACT - Polo Museale della Lombardia)

to skilled relatives or to itinerant professionals, the *tonsores pecorum* (Busana et al. 2012, 413-414). Still today, in some Italian regions, sheep shearing is carried out by travelling professionals.

It is interesting that in at least two cases shears were deposited in rich burials together with weapons: in burial 77 and 144 of Cascina Grande, they were associated with a large knife and a spear cusp. Shears were also present in burial 116 and 118, together with two large knives in each; these could however be butler utensils for carving or food preparation, and not weapons. This association is also documented elsewhere in Lomellina (for example, at Garlasco Bozzole and Valeggio, Tessera, burial 189) and in the Roman world (Arslan 2002, 127; Gleba 2008). This practice seems to indicate that – at least for some people – war was an elitist but not exclusive activity. Military practice was perhaps an occasional occupation, and in other periods, animal husbandry was a possible alternative.



In two other burials from Cascina Grande, shears are associated with female objects (three glass beads in burial 10 and a bracelet in burial 74). Without bone analysis, it is impossible to determine whether these objects were burial goods belonging to a female shepherd or a man's burial goods with a funerary gift from a beloved woman. Similar associations are also documented in other Iron Age Italian sites, such as at Murlo, Rome, Narce, Rocella Jonica. In these cases, spindle whorls were interpreted as offerings deposited by female relatives of the deceased man (Gleba 2008, 173).

Many sheep bones with evidence of slaughter have been found in a late Roman context at Lomello (Pavia) and were analysed by A. King (Blake et al. 1987, 5). Most of them came from adult animals, indicating that sheep were not just farmed for meat but possibly for milk and wool too.

Together with archaeological records, written sources show that wool was not the only textile fibre known in the territory. Flax cultivation is documented by Pliny the Elder (*Naturalis Historia*, 19, 9), who describes the production of quality flax fibre in *regione Alliana*, corresponding to modern day Lomellina.

Spinning

Spindle whorls, small clay objects that were placed at the end of the spindle to help their rotation, are very common tools among women's burials in Lomellina, and, given the large number of them, they contribute to the understanding of the local economy. Finds of spindle whorls are not so common in other regions of northern Italy during the Roman era. The University of Padua's *Pondera* project analysed the spindle whorls

from the Veneto region (Busana, Cottica and Basso 2012; Busana and Tricomi 2016). Only one has been found in the province of Vicenza (Zentilini 2012, 575) 50 come from the province of Brescia (Paderno 2012), 19 from the province of Verona (Gottardi 2012, 568; Marella 2012, 601-602) and 85 from the province of Rovigo (Tricomi 2012, 588).

No human bone analysis has been carried out at Dorno, but the presence of spindle whorls in many burials is taken as a gender indicator, since spinning is traditionally associated with women. This interpretation is supported by archaeological and iconographic evidence in Italy, where the placement of spindle whorls in women's burials as a way of expressing the owner's prowess in spinning textile fibres and hence her useful role in the community was a common practice from the Late Bronze Age. This particular significance of spindles continues in the Roman period. According to Pliny the Elder (*Naturalis Historia*, 8, 194), Roman brides carried spindles and distaffs during wedding processions (Gleba 2008, 173-174; Larsson Lovén 1998, 85-110; 2007, 229-236; Poletti Ecclesia 1997; Rossi 2018, 381-393).

The distribution of the 88 clay spindle whorls found at Dorno is not uniform across the two necropolises. At Cascina Grande they come from 31 burials among more than 200, and 81% of them (24 spindle whorls) are present as a single item per burial, together with other objects: only three burials contained three or more spindle whorls (burial 207/8 with three spindle whorls; burial 8 with four and burial 37 with six). In the smaller San Materno necropolis, 37 spindle whorls were found in 13 of 21 burials. Here burials with a single spindle whorl comprise 30%, while the

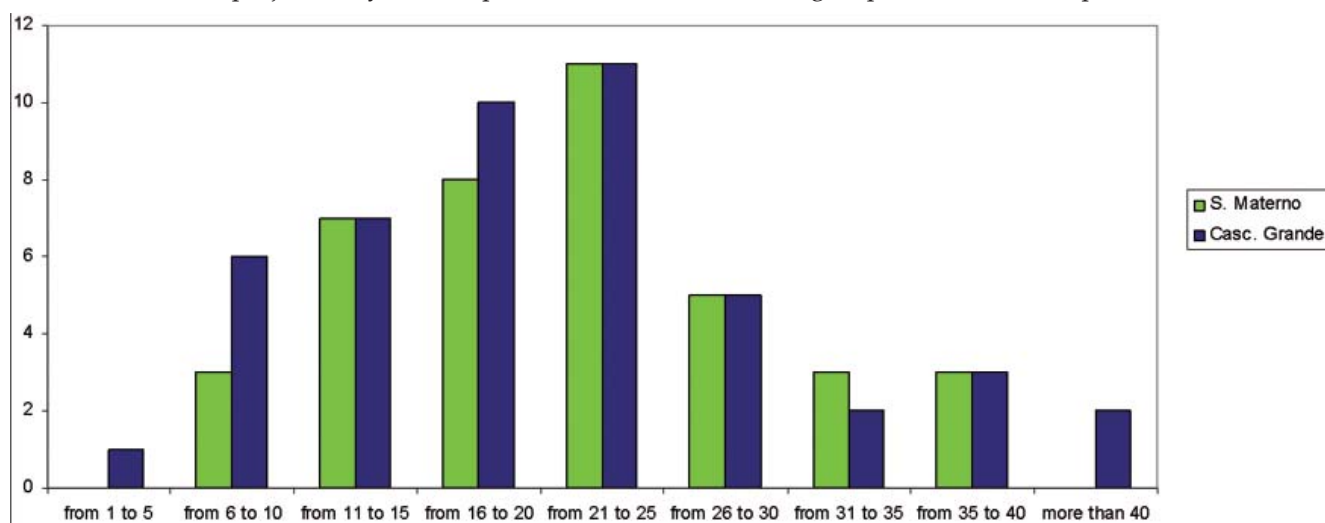


Fig. 5: Spindle whorls - weights in grams (Image: Serena Scansetti)

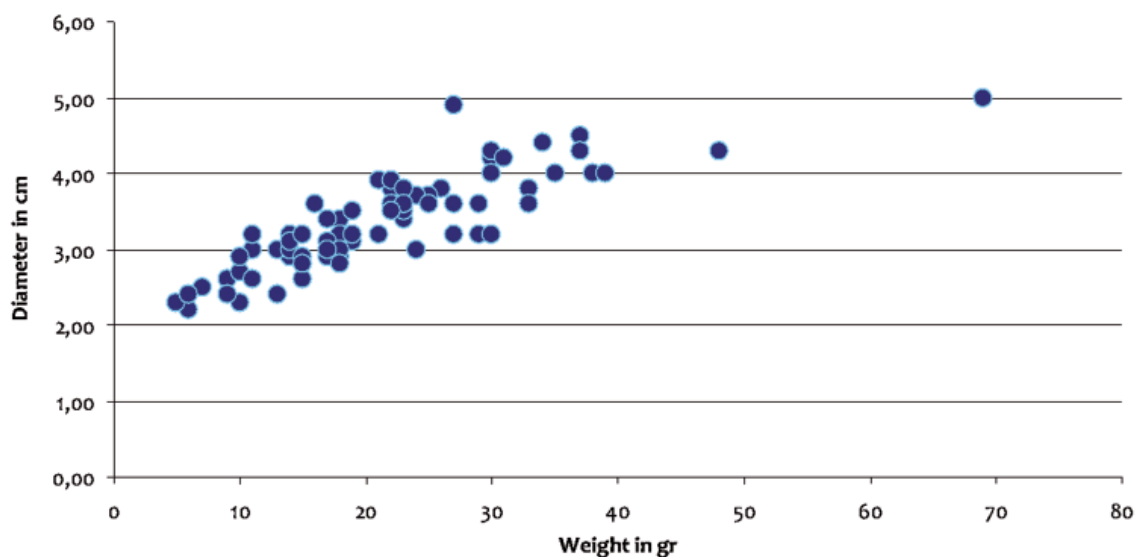


Fig. 6: Spindle whorls' diameters and weights (Image: Serena Scansetti)

sets are more frequent, and they reveal a significant weight variety (fig. 3 and fig. 4). Burial 1980/1 had three spindle whorls; burial 3 had four spindle whorls; burials 4, 5, 1980/3 and 1980/5 had five spindle whorls each.

This difference in distribution could be attributed to personal choice in the selection of grave goods or it could emphasise a particular specialisation in the San Materno community, compared to that of Cascina Grande. Each set is composed of spindle whorls of different sizes, shapes and weights: these differences suggest the skill of the owner in spinning different kinds of yarn. Spindle whorls were found in both rich and poor graves. In some cases, they were the only female component of the grave goods, while in other burials they are associated with mirrors, *unguentaria* (small perfume bottles) and other female objects. In burial 8 of Cascina Grande, for example, four spindle whorls (weighing 9, 14, 15 and 19 g) are associated with a razor, usually considered a male object. Pliny the Elder (*Naturalis Historia*, 19, 18) states that spinning flax is a respectable occupation for men but these spindle whorls seem too small and light to be used for flax (Gleba 2008, 193). As already indicated for shears, they could have belonged to a female relative and became a last burial gift for the deceased.

Considering the weight of the spindle whorls, it is possible to speculate with caution on the kind of yarn that was produced (Gleba 2008, 106; Walton Rogers 1997, 1743-1745). At Dorno, the weights range between 5 g and 69 g, with a significant percentage between 10 g and 30 g. These values are particularly suitable for spinning fine or medium-fine animal fibres (Gleba 2008, 106). The two heaviest spindle whorls (48 g and

69 g) could be used to spin flax or hemp, which have longer fibres and need more weight (fig. 5 and fig. 6) or they could be used for plying threads. However, mineralised textiles from Dorno show just regular, plain, Z-twisted and not too thin yarn (Castiglioni & Rottoli 2019). In the surviving examples, there is no evidence of plying. Evidence from Austria shows similar weights. During the Hallstatt and La Tène periods, spindle whorls range from 5 g or 8 g to 40 g or 50 g, with the majority weighing 10 g to 30 g (Grömer 2012, 51).

The most common shapes at Dorno are biconical, cylindrical, truncated conical, lenticular and ovoid but there are also two star-shaped spindle whorls (fig. 7) from Cascina Grande, burial 207/8 and from San Materno with no context. A discoid whorl, carefully removed from the bottom of a black glazed vessel (fig. 8) comes from Cascina Grande, burial 188 (second half of the first century BCE). This is a unique



Fig. 7: Spindle whorls from Cascina Grande: Left: Star spindle whorl from burial 207/8. Right: Spindle whorl possibly cut from the bottom of a black glazed vessel, burial 188 (Image: Courtesy of MIBACT - Polo Museale della Lombardia)



find in the territory but the reuse of pottery shards to make spindle whorls is very common in the La Tène cultural area and it is attested in many examples from Old Virunum/Magdalensberg in Austria (which flourished from 50 BCE to 50 CE), where only 36 of 902 whorls are not made from recycled pottery (Gostenčnik 2012, 68). All these shapes are also present in Austria, where the biconical shape with a hollow top is typical for the Urnfield culture and the Hallstatt period, while the La Tène period whorls are mostly spherical in shape (Grömer 2012, 54). At Dorno, however, there does not appear to be a chronological evolution.

Seven twisted glass rods were also found at Cascina Grande: burial 129, green-yellow glass with white thread; burials 220 and 231, light blue glass; burial 237, amber glass with white thread; burial 239, a yellow rod and a light blue rod; and another one in light blue glass with white thread, plus many more in Lomellina. If found unbroken there, these rods have twisted bodies and flattened ends. In other regions, plain versions have been found too. The only complete one, among those found at Dorno, comes from burial 231 of Cascina Grande and it is 22.5 cm long. The length of such intact rods found in Italy ranges between 15.6 cm and 26 cm. This type is especially common in northern Italy from the Augustan age to the beginning of the second century CE (Larese 2004, 43).

An opaque white glass thread twisting around the body of a glass rod (as is the case for many of these) may suggest an actual thread twisting around a distaff. Nevertheless, the function of these objects is still debated. They have been interpreted by different Italian scholars as hair pins, ointment mixers or symbolic distaffs specifically made for the funerary context (for a summary of the different interpretations, see Isings 1957, form 79 "stirring rod"; Roffia 1993, 206; Gostenčnik 2012, 70).

In other areas, such as Austria, similar glass rods with ring endings are considered distaffs, and the luxury material of which they are made suggests the high social status of their owners (Gostenčnik 2012, 70). In Italy, glass rods with ring endings have been found at Montebelluna (intact, 15.6 cm long in Casagrande and Ceselin 2003, 18-19; 122; tav. V, catalogue number 136) and Aquileia, where other broken glass rods with traces of mortar had been used as wall decorations (Mandrizzato 2008, 20; 54). Distaffs made in precious materials such as bone, amber, silver and bronze were already well known among the female elite in central Italy during the ninth to the seventh centuries BCE. Despite their high value and their fragility, they could be used in everyday practice, as experimental

archaeology has demonstrated (Caufield 2018, 521; Gleba 2008, 174).

Weaving

Weaving is only represented by a single loom weight which was used together with other similar weights, to keep warp threads under tension on vertical looms. This single example comes from "burial" 3 of Cascina Grande. It is possible however that this "burial" was a Roman rubbish dump, rather than a grave. The clay loom weight has a cylindrical shape and only half of it is preserved. The lack of implements associated with weaving, despite the many spindle whorl finds, should not be attributed to the fortuity of the discoveries. In the territory of Dorno, only necropolises have been found, and in funerary contexts spinning instruments are usually much more common than weaving tools. A similar situation is documented in the Roman Venetia region (Busana & Tricomi 2016). This difference between the number of spindle whorls and loom weights is also quite common in Lomellina, where settlements have been found with very few loom weights. However, it is not possible to completely exclude the possibility that other varieties of weaving looms were used, such as two-beam looms (Grömer 2016, 139-140). Another hypothesis suggests that weaving was a less common activity than spinning, and that homespun yarn was woven in specialised workshops, locations for which have not yet been identified.

Conclusion

Among the productive activities carried out in the territory of Dorno between the Late Celtic and Early Roman Imperial Age, flax cultivation, sheep husbandry and textile production must have played a primary role in the local economy. Archaeological evidence demonstrates that sheep shearing and spinning were common activities for this community. The presence of a relatively high number of spindle whorls in a large number of burials, suggests that wool or flax spinning must have been a widespread skill. The production was probably organised on a household level, either for their own consumption, or for trade. This model has been recognised in Austria, and at Magdalensberg, where spinning was carried out on a large scale in the countryside, and textile tools were often found mixed with household refuse (Gostenčnik 2012, 68-71). The presence of groups of spindle whorls of different shapes and weights in many burials of San Materno seems to indicate a higher degree of specialisation and mastery among some women in this community. In the Roman period, twisted glass rods were found in



a few women's burials: their function is still debated but it is very likely that they were symbolic distaffs expressly made to emphasise the high status and the good qualities of their owners. Spring shears were not so common. Sheep shearing was a seasonal activity carried out by a small number of skilled men, some of whom were probably also warriors. These precious objects played a significant role in the identification of the deceased, demonstrated by their being wrapping in textiles before placement in the graves.

Mineralised textiles found in the cemeteries at Dorno are uniform and not very fine. These characteristics, also present in La Tène graves of Austria and Switzerland (Grömer 2012, 56; Rast-Eicher 2012, 392-395), may represent a standardisation of weaving techniques, or – more likely – could be specific to the burial fabrics. Such fragments are mostly not parts of real garments but simple cloths in which precious objects were wrapped. Weaving is only documented by one single loom weight. It is hoped that further studies will aid a greater understanding of this phase of the textile manufacture.

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