

Four Tools Used by Kleaineta of Olynthus in Preparing Thread for Her Mother

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I. ὁ κτεῖς

The Wool-Comb

We are wealthy, here in our house set against the hill. There is hardly need for me to take the basket that Aristippus brings in from the wool-seller, but mother says that the weaving is not enough for a wife, not even one with a half-decent dowry. Besides, to know the feel and twine of the thread is to allow the shuttle to sing as it passes through the warp, building rows of fine fabric. This is what she has told me, sitting half-gauzy in the bouncing sunlight catching in the hung threads on her loom. So, I take the willow-basket, already feeling the reaching pricks of the thistles caught in the clumps of wool. I sit on the edges of the courtyard, nestled in the cool shade between the columns that support the upper floor, and I begin to comb. I thank Aristippus, who has been of the household longer than I have been, and who is now gnarled like the cane he uses to walk. I am fairly sure he has nursed a long flirtation with Thrasylla, who tends the cooking fires, as I have seen ash dusting his shoulders.

The comb I hold is a heavy thing, made of wood stuck through with nails, making the work surface echo the bristling canopy of a spear battalion. The wood grain is worn smooth by the use of many palms, and I am happy for it, as breaking in a new comb risks splinters. I pick a clump of matted white wool from the cone of the basket, and yank, teasing it through the comb. The thick tines pull and catch the heaviest debris, although this wool is mostly clean by the time it has reached me, and the detritus mingles with the dust on the ground. Euclida joins me soon after, chiding me for not waiting for her. She starts in on her own basket, although I occasionally see her discretely pull a clump from the basket nearest me. I say nothing, for all that I am almost-no-longer a child, the quiet coddling sits warmly in my chest. We swap stories softly, as our courtyard is not so big as others, and voices carry easily to the workmen that bring their jugs of lime to the entrance. They are meant to start updating the tiling on the front room today, with rich hues and fine lines. Soon enough they will move their attentions to the workroom, and I can already hear my mother's complaints of the sand settling upon her loom. The teeth of my comb snag the fibers of the clump I am working on and pull them aligned.

II. τό ἐπίνητρον

The Thigh-Thimble

In the workroom my mother stands at her loom. The beams are set against the side wall, hanging threads catching the light brought in by the adjoining open roofed space. In the faint breeze, the loom weights knock gently against each other, adding a distant rhythm to the low tones of my mother's voice as she speaks to Euclida, who stands spinning. From my angle,

they are framed by the row of idol figurines and cups that line the wall and seem like hens surrounded by their miniature brood. I catch myself before I laugh, as I would then have to explain that I have cast our clay goddesses as hatchlings.

The sun is warm on my back where I sit on the low ledge separating the room proper from the light-well; the warmth is tempered by the chill seeping from the bedrock that forms the far wall. The terracotta guard on my right thigh is an ill-fitting weight, made for someone larger than I, and the closed cone shifts and knocks onto my knee with each roll of the wool along the surface. The fiber rasps between the abrasions on the clay and the palm of my hand, snagging parallel strands together until they sit as a comfortable roving. I pull from my pile of combed wool, rolling in more until it spools like the discarded skin of a snake.

My own actions are echoed in tableau on the terracotta. The small white faces of women holding their own wool are flanked by black decoration, similar to the borders on the fabric my mother weaves. And, on the other arced side of my thigh, a battalion of Amazons march onwards, reminding me of the warriors in the stories my mother sings. Lately however, my mother has not wished to speak of war, with her eyes growing tense at the corners, but I find there is a comfort in the braced shield and spear of the leading soldier. The small shifting of the thimble gives, for the briefest unfocused moment, the impression that she is moving too.

III. ἡ ἡλακάτη

The Distaff

It does not take long to wind roving on the smooth stick that is my distaff. It is not engraved Ivory like I have seen Philania use as she strolls the spinning from her own house to the house of her brother, which flanks us up the hill. Her mantle winds heavy around her head and arms, and it is such a delicate show to balance the folds of fabric alongside her full hands and gentle stride. She does not hold her own parasol, and I secretly doubt the intricate weave she wears was made with thread she spun. Her father was Heron, her dowry was grand, and the roll of her hips and lines on her eyes speak of a life comfortably lived. She smiles when she sees me watching through the fluttering curtain that guards from the dust of the street. She dips her head toward our courtyard altar and carries on.

Envy is uncomfortable and stings like the salt on my blue-stained hands when they have rubbed woad leaves to wool. My mother tells me I am young, and to not rush from maiden to matron, as she loops a glass bead around my neck that glints indigo in the sunlight.

IV. ὁ ἄτρακτος

The Spindle

The workmen have begun their work in the back room, and their amphorae of pigment and sand crowd out the easy standing room. Mother still works there on her loom, stubborn amidst any sort of chaos, her shuttle flying unimpeded through the warp threads. I stand beside her, feeling vulnerable with my left arm holding the distaff aloft and the other adding twist to the spindle.

On an angle, through the two doorways that separate the workroom from the courtyard, I can see Euclida place down the water she has brought in for washing. The amphora tilts and stains the courtyard stones a darker shade. Aristippus hustles from the kitchen to help her right it, and again there is a smear of ash on his cheek. The rough clay whorl that weights my spindle clatters against the ground and I turn back, stooping to pick it up. My mother raises a critical eyebrow, then reminds me that it is important I become accustomed to keeping eye on refurbishment work—that the decoration in this room of all places is of the utmost importance since it is where our weaving happens. I draw out freshly twisted thread, and I wind it on my spindle.

The decoration here in the weaving room may be second only to the colourful fresco of the receiving room, just on the other side of the wall. The painter's back is to us, as he kneels mixing red pigment on a tray, and the tiler sorts his stones of blue and black. Their heads bent together, I catch stray words that speak of warlords and fallen cities. Mother shifts to beat up her weft rows, the colour condensing on the web of the loom, and she begins her own tale of an ancient queen who wove within the walls of her fine house, and who kept her home standing by will and luck. My mother's song is almost enough to drown out the worries of the workmen, such things feel far away from our house set against the hill.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Fig. 1. Terracotta epinetron (leg guard used in wool preparation). Potentially from Thebes, ca. 510–500 BCE. This one seems to portray a group of musicians, with a hanging wool basket on the wall. Common scene types include scenes of wool work and mythological episodes.

Fig. 2. Terracotta spindle whorl. Attica, 6th–5th century BCE. These whorls were used to add weight and spin to a drop spindle, with a shaft likely made from wood or bone.

Fig. 3. Terracotta lekythos (oil flask). Attica, ca. 550–530 BCE. This flask depicts a scene of wool work. The central figure uses a drop spindle with her distaff held aloft, and the right-hand figure prepares roving from a wool basket.

Table 1. Artifact list summarized from David M. Robinson's Excavations at Olynthus XII (The Johns Hopkins Press, 1946), 183-205.

Room	Object Finds from The House of Many Colours
(a) <i>Northwest Workroom</i>	A large stamnos, two grinders, red and blue pigments, vase that held red pigment, bronze handles, a boss, two spikes, a leap clamp, bronze tweezers, two slingbullets, a bronze coin of Amynta III, two Chalcidic bronze coins, forty-one loom weights, potsherds, blue pebbles, a spindle whorl, two black-glazed jugs, part of a fish plate, parts of a hydria, a small unpainted square tray, five miniature scyphi, four saucers, a squat lecythus, two stamped plates, vase fragments, part of an epinetron, part of a larynx, a red-figure lekythos cover with running and seated women, a terra cotta female bust with yellow on the hair and red on the lips.
(b) <i>Light Well</i>	Potsherds, lime, wall plaster, a stamnos of cement, mosaic pebbles, pot of red pigment, an iron spike, a fishhook, a bronze Corinthian coin, two Chalcidic bronze coins, a coin of Perdiccas III, thirty-four loom weights, a small pyxis, a small bowl, a small lecythus, a black plate, part of an animal figurine.
(c) <i>North Room</i>	Pithos rim, a silver Chalcidic tetrobol, two iron spikes, two pieces of bronze.
(d) <i>Northeast Andron</i>	Two bronze bosses, an iron spike, two iron spearheads.
(e) <i>Pastas</i>	Two large amphoras, two small painted marble altars, bell crater, a loom weight, ten bronze bosses with carbonized wood, three spikes, a slingbullet, a miniature cup, a stamnos, pieces of black jugs, a saucer, three small black plates, a plate with four fish represented on it.
(f) <i>Andron Anteroom</i>	Eighteen bronze bosses, a bronze bead, a bronze spike, two loom weights, a large black stamped plate, a small saucer, a small vase cover, parts of a crater.
(g) <i>Bathroom</i>	Pieces of a bathtub, two lamps, four loom weights, a two-handled jug, a saucer, the head of a female figurine.
(h) <i>Kitchen Flue</i>	Cooking debris, potsherds, bronze pot lid, a fibula, a bronze nail, a bronze wire spiral ornament, a slingbullet, a Chalcidic bronze coin, four lamps, two asci, a larynx, seven saucers, a stamnos, a one-handled cup, a spit, a terra cotta female figurine
(i) <i>Courtyard</i>	Stone pilaster capital, two iron dowels, three loom weights, a bronze tack, two bronze bosses, two iron spikes, guttus with relief of a seated lady, a bronze reinforcement, a wire spiral ornament, mouth and stamped handle of an amphora.
(k) <i>Kitchen</i>	A bronze arrowhead, a bronze coin of Aphytis, two Chalcidic bronze coins, a loom weight, a lead disc, a lead clamp, a lead mesomphalic patera, two black saucers, the leg and shoulders of a figurine.
(l) <i>Portico</i>	Two stamni, pieces of mosaic.
(m) <i>Storage Room</i>	Rims of four large pithoi, two pithoi, iron nails, a bronze bodkin, iron spikes, part of a draped figurine.

Artist's Statement

The preceding imagined work is based on artifact finds excavated from the House of Many Colours at Olynthus. The city was razed by Philip II of Macedon in 348 BCE, leaving many quotidian tools close to their potential locations of daily use. Included on the following pages is an account of object finds from the House of Many Colours, and images of artifacts from other sites that serve as visual representations of the tools used in thread preparation and would have been handled by women and girls throughout their lifetime. Further accessible reading on textile history may be found in Elizabeth Wayland Barber's "Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years."