

“PANDORA’S BOX”: A TEXTILE TOOL SET FROM A SCYTHIAN BURIAL IN UKRAINE

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Abstract: Textile tools made of perishable materials such as wood are extremely rare in the archaeological contexts of ancient Mediterranean, but numerous complete and fragmentary boxes containing textile tools and other materials have been found in Scythian burials of the 5th-4th centuries BC in southern Ukraine. The boxes are found exclusively in female burials and are clearly of Hellenic craftsmanship. The paper presents preliminary observations about a 4th century BC female burial 2 from Kurgan 5 at Bulgakovo, which was accompanied by a wooden box containing three wooden distaffs, a spindle whorl made of an amphora fragment, a wooden comb and two smaller wooden boxes, one of which stored a set of at least 19 wooden weaving tablets with four holes each, an iron needle and some yarn.

Keywords: Wooden box, textile tools, Scythian, Ukraine, wooden distaffs, wooden tablets, Bulgakovo.

Resumen: Los *instrumenta textilia* confeccionados con materiales perecederos como la madera son extremadamente raros en el contexto arqueológico del Mediterráneo antiguo, pero han sido encontradas numerosas cajas (completas o fragmentos) conteniendo instrumentos para el trabajo textil y otros materiales en enterramientos escitas de los siglos V-IV a.C. en el sur de Ucrania. Las cajas son encontradas exclusivamente en enterramientos femeninos y son claramente de producción helenística. El trabajo presenta observaciones preliminares sobre el enterramiento femenino 2 de Kurgan 5 en Bulgakovo, del siglo IV a.C., que iba acompañado de una caja de madera conteniendo tres ruecas, una fusayola hecha con un fragmento de ánfora, un peine de madera y dos pequeñas cajas de madera, una de las cuales almacenaba un juego de al menos 19 plaquitas de madera para tejer con cuatro orificios cada una, una aguja de hierro y algo de hilo.

Boxes with textile tools

Textile tools made of perishable materials such as wood are extremely rare in the archaeological contexts of ancient Mediterranean, but numerous complete and fragmentary boxes containing textile tools and other objects have been found in many Scythian female burials of the 5th-4th centuries BC in southern Ukraine.⁴ During this time, Scythian populations interacted extensively with Greek settlers who established colonies on the northern Black Sea littoral a century earlier. Based on their technology of manufacture and decorative elements, many of the surviving boxes and the objects they contain appear to be of Hellenic craftsmanship, thereby providing information not only about Scythian but also ancient Greek textile craft and practices associated with it.⁵ While box elements are well known and classified,⁶ their contents have never been a subject of detailed investigation. Boxes – usually small containers with lids – have served as repositories of various useful and treasured objects (jewellery, toiletry items, expensive trinkets, tools etc.). In a special category are boxes containing textile tool sets, which accompanied a woman not only throughout her life but also in death, providing us with new and valuable information about Scythian women’s habits.

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⁴ See a more detailed study in Daragan and Buravchuk 2013.

⁵ Cherednichenko and Fialko 1988, 161.

⁶ Fialko 1987; Bidzilia and Polin 2012, 392.

Box from Bulgakovo

A late 4th century BC female burial 2 from Kurgan 5 at Bulgakovo in southern Ukraine (Fig. 1) was accompanied by a wooden box containing three wooden distaffs, a spindle whorl made of an amphora fragment, a wooden comb and two smaller wooden boxes, one of which (Fig 2) stored a set of at least 19 wooden weaving tablets with four holes each, an iron needle and some yarn.⁷ The second box had a painted lid depicting a seated woman (Fig. 3); the style and technique of the painting are of Greek origin.

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Fig. 2

The distaffs are of different shapes but have all been made on a turning lathe and are presumed to be of Hellenic manufacture (Fig. 4). Other examples of wooden distaffs are known from Burial 3, Kurgan 2 near Kairy,⁸ and Burial 2, Chamber 2, Kurgan 2 near Zelenoye.⁹ During the 4th century BCE, composite spindles made of bone or luxury materials such as silver also appear in burials.¹⁰

Fig. 4

Another Greek connection is indicated by the spindle whorl made of an amphora fragment (Fig. 5), since amphorae were not produced by the Scythian populations. Ceramic spindle whorls appear on the territory of Ukraine from the Neolithic onwards. Spindle whorls are very numerous on all Scythian settlement sites.¹¹ At the same time, they become ubiquitous in female burials.¹²

Fig.5

The 19 wooden rectangular tablets have holes in each corner and can be divided into three types according to their size and shape (Fig. 6): 4.45 x 3.21 cm, 3.99 x 2.28 cm and 4.48 x 1.97 cm. A very similar set of at least 20 wooden tablets measuring 4.1 x 2.1 cm was found in a small wooden box, which was among the objects placed in a larger box accompanying a woman buried in late 5th century BC burial near Frunze.¹³ The large box also contained a wooden spindle, a lead spindle whorl, a bronze mirror, a black-figure kylix, a wooden pyxis and some other wooden objects.

Fig. 6

Both sets of tablets were likely used in tablet weaving.¹⁴ Their rectangular shape may have facilitated pattern weaving, while their relatively small size suggests that they may have been used for the making of integrated tablet-woven borders.¹⁵ Tablets made of wood are only rarely

⁷ Grebennikov 1996.

⁸ Kubyshev, Kuprij and Kovalev 1999, 144.

⁹ Fialko 2012, 228.

¹⁰ Gavriliuk 1987, 2-24. Sets made of bone were identified in Tarquinia; see Colivicchi 2007, 210-211, fig. 50.

¹¹ Radziyevska 1979; Gavriliuk 1987.

¹² Gavriliuk 1987, 119.

¹³ Gavrilo 1993, 201-205.

¹⁴ See Collingwood 1982.

¹⁵ Ræder Knudsen 2010.

found in archaeological contexts and sets are particularly few.¹⁶ A charred set of 4 or 5 tablets contemporaneous with the Bulgakovo find was found in Tomb 200 at El Cigarralejo, Spain, dated 400-375 BC; the tablets measure 3 x 3 cm and are made of boxwood.¹⁷ A set of 25 tablets found most likely at Antinoë in Egypt and dated to the 4th-5th century AD is currently in the Musée du Cinquenaire in Brussels, Belgium, and another one in the Louvre, France.¹⁸ The tablets measure about 4 x 4 cm and are made of sycamore wood. Later in date and slightly larger in size (4.7 x 4.7 cm), are 52 tablets still attached to a linen warp found in the 9th century AD Oseberg ship burial in Norway.¹⁹

Fig. 7

The comb is too fragmentary to ascertain whether it would have been used for coming wool or in the weaving process (Fig. 7), but fragments of similar combs made of bone have been found in other contemporaneous burials.

Conclusions

Weaving tablets found among at least two Scythian textile tool sets indicate familiarity of the Scythian populations with tablet weaving at least since the 5th century BC. To date, no tablet-woven textile has been identified among Scythian archaeological textiles, but we must keep in mind that very few of them have been analysed and their study is only beginning.²⁰

Boxes containing sets of textile tool must have been common possessions of Greek women, although they do not survive in Greece due to the perishable nature of the materials of which they were made. However, thanks to the popularity of such sets among the Scythian women, we have an opportunity to have a glimpse of these very personal female objects. Furthermore, they demonstrate that these high-ranking Scythian women were not only “Amazon warriors”, - a role indicated by the sets of weapons found in their burials, - but were also skilled in textile crafts as demonstrated by sets of textile tools which also accompanied them into the afterlife. Future investigation of these finds promises to open a veritable ‘Pandora’s box’ of information about the Greek and Scythian textile craft and textile makers.

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¹⁶ See overview in Ræder Knudsen 2010, 151-152.

¹⁷ Hundt 1968, 192-193.

¹⁸ See Crowfoot 1925, 100 and Collingwood 1982, 14 and 24.

¹⁹ Christensen and Nockert 2006, 243.

²⁰ Gleba and Krupa 2012.

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