

Near Eastern Turned Bone Spindle Whorls: Part 1

by Evelyn Simak

Bead collectors and jewellery designers often buy unusual 'beads' which may not originally have been intended as beads. Here are some examples (Fig. 1).

According to Dr. R. Liu (pers.comm. 2005), the first spindle whorls of this type to be seen in recent years could occasionally be found in the USA during the mid to late 1970's. They appear to have reached the bead-collecting communities of the West via the largest bead market in the western hemisphere, held annually in the city of Tucson, Arizona, USA, where the first strands were noticed during the late 1990's. According to eye-witness reports, similar strands were available at markets in Pakistan during the mid-1990's, typically in strands of 50 pieces approximately – just like at Tucson. A small number of strands were for sale at Tucson in 2000, 2001 and 2002, approximately 10 strands were observed in 2004, and in 2005 approximately 15 strands were counted from altogether 6 dealers. It has been noted that condition has somewhat 'deteriorated' over the years.

Understandably, dealers both in Pakistan and Tucson are reluctant to divulge information regarding the origins of their merchandise. The consensus is that the spindle whorls originate from Iran (with reservations) and Afghanistan, ie. 'Bactria'. It is not clear whether the latter refers to ancient Bactria, or to the north western portion of present-day Afghanistan. However, "many artifacts attributed to Afghanistan actually are brought by dealers directly or indirectly from Iran" says Robert K. Liu (pers. comm. 2005). In all probability, all of these whorls had been found by locals in many different locations, were passed on to 'runners', and eventually to a small group of dealers who sell antiquities on the world markets.

Although spindle whorls are known to have been found in great numbers, and are documented from many ancient sites excavated in licenced operations, they do not usually merit closer examination. Whilst they can be found in most inventories, so-called 'Minor Objects' (smallfinds in the UK) lists, no further attempts appear to have been made to study them in greater detail since the day when they were put away for storage in the basement of some museum. Carved bone spindle whorls are documented from the medieval cities of Hama (Syria) (cf. Fig. 2a-b), Qumis (Iran) and Samaria-Sebaste (Palestine).

The 'Minor Objects' volume of the Corinth (Greece) excavations lists a number of ivory or bone 'buttons', the great majority of these appearing to be, in fact, spindle whorls. In a report covering the Iranian Expedition of the Metropolitan Museum (New York), mention is being made of 'beautifully decorated spindle whorls' which were excavated 'by the hundreds' at Nishapur, an oasis and city situated in the eastern Iranian province of Khorasan. What material(s) these are made of is not mentioned, but Robert K. Liu, in his article on spindle whorls, writes that the Islamic galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art display many examples of small bone whorls from the Islamic period, originating from Iran (1978). In the Ghubayra/Iran report, seven bone or ivory 'buttons' that are later described as (in all probability) being spindle whorls are depicted and described (Bivar et al 2000).

One specimen, a disc-shaped whorl described to be ivory and dated from the 1st century BCE to the 2nd century CE is on display at the Jewish Museum in Washington, USA. No further information is available. Also, there are several accounts of carved bone whorls having been found on shipwrecks, one of these being the Serce Liman1, a Byzantine merchant ship that ran aground on the southern coast of Turkey and was excavated

by a team of archaeologists from the Institute of Nautical Archaeology (Bodrum, Turkey) and Texas A & M University.

The timeframe for archaeologically documented carved bone spindle whorls of similar type and decoration patterns ranges from pre-Islamic (700 CE) Iran to Medieval – 11th century CE Palestine, Turkey, Corinth in Greece, Iran, Iraq and Syria. See Fig. 2c-e for examples. Bone spindle whorls were very popular from the Iron Age onwards (if not before) and continued to be made and used in Iran throughout the Medieval period (pers. comm. Dr. St.

John Simpson, British Museum,

London 2005). He continues to state that "reports of ivory are usually optimistic and misplaced, and I have personally only seen bone examples" (Ibid).

"Such everyday artifacts are very difficult to date because their forms and even their decoration can remain constant over long periods" (pers. comm. Dr. J. Lerner, Advisory Board Sasanika Project 2005). There are, however, a number of known facts which might help to determine a somewhat more accurate timeframe. The whorls under discussion were lathe-turned, their decorations were in all probability executed using a combination of scribes, gravers and awls, knives and saws (Fig. 2f-h). It has been established that the earliest known representation of a lathe capable of making these spindle whorls comes from an ancient Egyptian tomb of the 4th century BCE (pers. comm. Dr. Carole Morris 2005).

Whorls are known to have been manufactured from a great variety of materials. People in general used what was most readily available to them, stone, clay and wood whorls being the most commonly used especially in the earliest periods. When an area moved ahead economically people often began to make spindles of

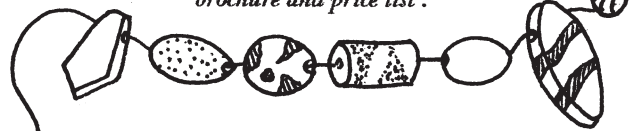
Fig. 1 Representative group of carved bone spindle whorls from the author's collection.



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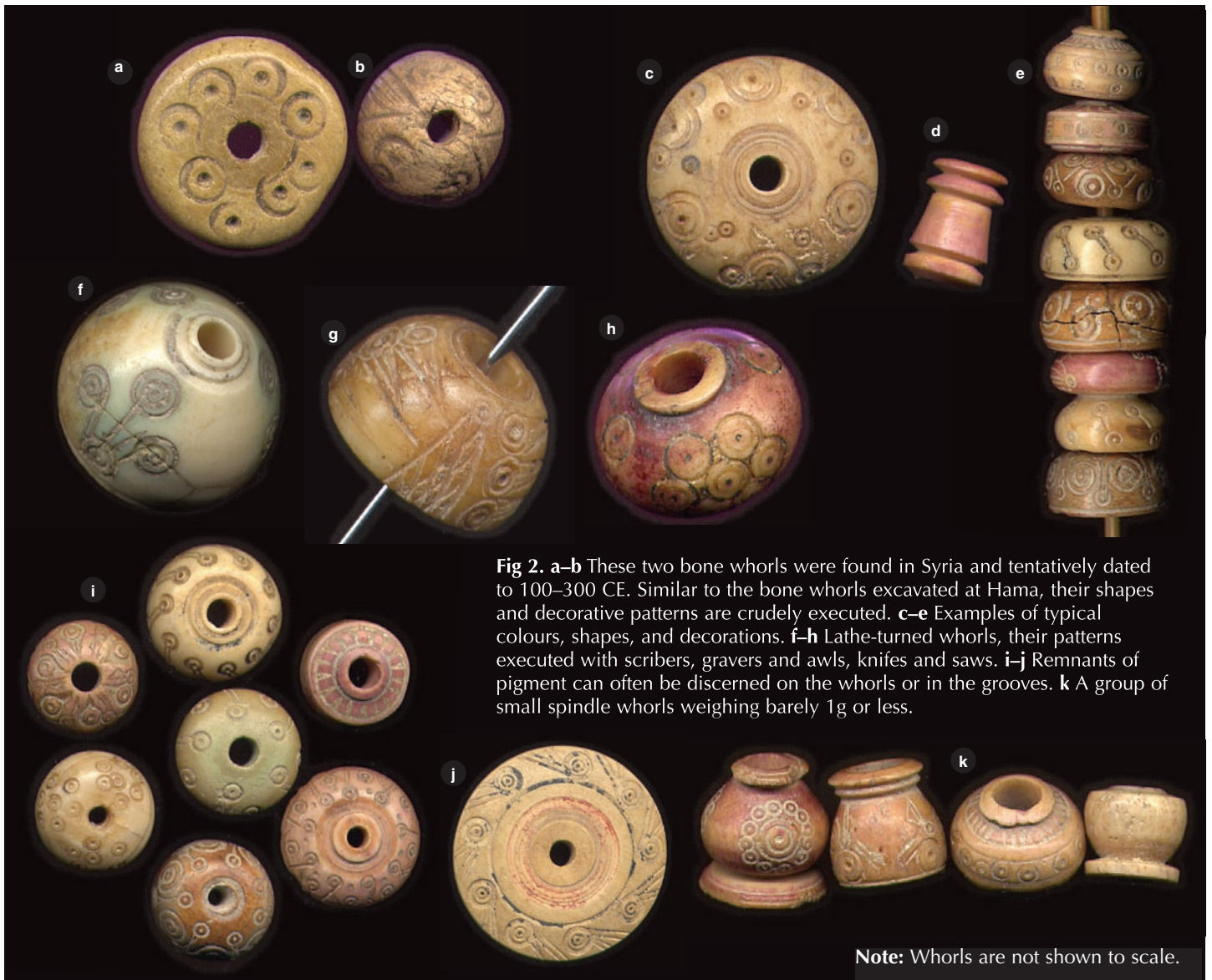


Fig 2. a–b These two bone whorls were found in Syria and tentatively dated to 100–300 CE. Similar to the bone whorls excavated at Hama, their shapes and decorative patterns are crudely executed. c–e Examples of typical colours, shapes, and decorations. f–h Lathe-turned whorls, their patterns executed with scribes, graters and awls, knives and saws. i–j Remnants of pigment can often be discerned on the whorls or in the grooves. k A group of small spindle whorls weighing barely 1g or less.

Note: Whorls are not shown to scale.

more precious materials. The material used for the whorls under discussion is bone (with possibly a small number being ivory) that is most likely derived from sheep and goats. No in-depth analyses appear to have been undertaken. Circular, plano-convex whorls with one flat or concave end are most common. There are many variants of this basic shape, however, achieved by changes in proportion, circumference, perimeter and angles of the sides. The great majority of whorls have been decorated with concentric lines, straight saw cuts, and/or with incised circles and dots – the circle-dot motif dating back to 3000–2500 BCE. Their grooves were often inlaid with pigments such as ochre in various natural shades, or lampblack, remnants of both can be observed on a number of pieces (Fig. 2j). Besides their purely decorative patterns, some whorls were incised with possibly mythological symbols, others were inscribed with what appears to be a script that to-date has not been identified and there is a small group of whorls that is also characterised by their decoration which depicts stylised birds (see part 2 in a future newsletter).

It is not known when or where handspindles were first used although both India and the Near East are believed to be the most likely candidates (Hochberg 1977). In her abstract *A Woman of Substance*, Christine Roy-Yoder writes that “a woman’s industry is the spinning and weaving of textiles, work symbolic of woman’s skills throughout the ancient Near East. Even queens and wealthy women are described or depicted holding a spindle” (2003). The most common fibres spun by these women were silk and cotton, the colourful products of Near Eastern spinners and weavers reaching ancient Greece and from there northern Europe via various trade routes of the time.

Generally speaking, the finer the fibres and threads intended to be spun, the more light-weight the whorls used for spinning them. The smallest spindle whorls on record are those which were used in parts of the Near East, weighing under a gram (Liu 1978) (Fig. 2k). The weights of the whorls under discussion range from under 1g to up to 7g, the great majority weighing between 3–5g. With the added weight of the spindle shaft, their combined total coincides with the ideal weight for top-whorl spindles intended for spinning fine fibres such as cotton or silk, which is 8–16g. Perforations vary greatly and range from 4–10mm. They are either very slightly tapered or straight.

Many whorls have been dyed, the range of pinks, reds and purples being the most favoured (28%), followed by tan (19.8%), black (5.5%), grey (2.7%) and green (1.9%) (Fig 2i). Of the 475 whorls examined, 200 (42%) were undyed. In the absence of analyses of potential dyestuffs used, the origins of described colours are wide open to speculation. It has been suggested that the local green staining that can be observed on some whorls was caused by having been buried in proximity to copper bearing compounds (Liu 1978).

Bibliography

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