Near Eastern Turned Bone Spindle Whorls: Part 2

by Evelyn Simak

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Bead collectors and jewellery designers often buy unusual 'beads' which may not originally have been intended as beads. This is true of carved bone spindle whorls probably dating from the 7th to 11th centuries CE with various types, designs, patterns and colours which I presented in the last newsletter (Simak 2005) e.g. Fig. 1. This is the second part of the study.

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Photo: Evelyn Simak

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.

A group of carved bone whorls representing 4.5% of the total number of examined pieces (475) appear to have been incised with characters that might have symbolic meaning (Fig 2). The oldest inscriptions found on spindle whorls date back 7000 years and have been interpreted as possibly representing ritualistic formulas for expressing devotion, a request, or gratitude, or vows to the patroness of spinning. In Egypt, spindle whorls were found amongst the objects that were inscribed with hieroglyphs, the "Speech of the Gods", and were often used as temple ornaments. In ancient Europe, the acts of weaving and spinning are full of allegorical and sacred force and spindle whorls are amongst the most significant votive offerings found in cult centres and burial grounds. However, most ancient symbols depicted on spindle whorls remain unidentified and little is known about what they might represent.

A small number of whorls was grouped together due to its unique decoration, depicting stylised birds which distinguishes it from all others (Fig. 3). The bird design was executed as circles and dots which have been connected by straight saw-cut lines. On Pakistani markets, where dealers ask the same price for carved bone spindle whorls, regardless of their size, shape, colour or decoration, 'bird whorls' are always more expensive (pers.comm. J. Busch, 2005). In mythology and symbolism, birds are frequently used to symbolise human souls, some of the earliest examples being found in the art of ancient Egypt. The interpretation of the bird as symbolic of the soul is also very commonly found in folklore all over the world. In general, birds – like angels – are symbols of thought, imagination, and of the swiftness of spiritual processes and relationships. In Hindu tradition birds represent higher states of being (Cirlot 1971). Of the eight whorls examined, one is believed to originate from ancient Greece (Fig. 3, bottom right). It measures 7 x 10mm and weighs less than 1g.

All other 'bird whorls' were described as originating from 'Bactria', ie they are of the same uncertain origins as all other whorls described here. A similar whorl (described as a button) is documented from Byzantine Corinth (Davidson 1952, image 2572). Two 'bird whorls' are documented from Saminid, ie early Islamic Ghubayra (Bivar 2001):

• K2/72-241: conoid bone, a row of incised birds around the side. Traces which remain show that it was originally coloured red. The item is currently untraced in London and may have been misplaced.

• K2/72-319: decorated with two small birds with long tails. The specimen was forwarded to the Iran Bastan Museum in Tehran.

All birds depicted on these (documented as well as undocumented) spindle whorls face left. One plausible explanation might be their use in spinning, ie their direction of spin. For some as yet not fully understood reason most spinners all over the world spin their threads in clockwise direction (Z-twist). Handedness has been suggested to be the most likely explanation for this phenomenon. Most people are right-handed, and the easiest and most natural direction for a right-handed spinner to start off a spindle results in a clockwise rotation of the tool (Barber 1991). Further, it has been established that the most commonly used type of handspindle in the Near East was the top-whorl spindle. The whorl is positioned near the top end of the shaft and its decorated convex side is facing upwards. The spinner looks down onto the decorated side and can observe the birds rotating in the direction they are facing.

The example of the 'bird whorls' yet again serves to emphasise the geographical distance of documented finds, and a timespan of 400 years – both indicative of the wide range of distribution throughout the Near East and parts of the Mediteranean, and the continued manufacture of the same type of spindle whorls over many centuries. None of the documented pieces appears to have been C14-tested.

Due to the absence of documentary evidence, a total of 30 spindle whorls which are incised with what appears to be script, were subjected to close scrutiny, in the hope of determining possible origins of their manufacture and use. The style of script was found to be consistent on all whorls, and to be of similar type as script depicted on one of the Ghubayra whorls. The letters appear to be of the same script, and to have been applied in either the same sequence, or in a different constellation, on all whorls although various degrees of craftsmanship were noted. Whilst expertly executed on some pieces, others appear to have been applied by less skilled hands (see examples in Figs. 4 & 5).

Based on available information, the following options were examined in more detail. According to dealers, the spindle whorls are said to originate from 'Bactria' Provided that these statements refer to ancient Bactria (and not to a region in present-day north western Afghanistan that once used to be part of ancient Bactria) they define a province of the Persian Empire (522–486 BCE). When Alexander the Great invaded and subdued the Bactrians in 328 BCE, they adopted Greek culture, and their written language was a variant of Ancient Greek – Kharosthri, also known as Bactrian or Kabuli, which was developed during the 3rd century BCE and is possibly derived from Aramaic. It was widely used in north west India and central Asia until the 4th century CE.

Looking further to the east and to a geographical area generally called Mesopotamia – encompassing present-day Iraq and parts of Syria and Turkey – ancient cuneiform was the only form of writing until about 1200 BCE, when the Phoenicians developed symbols which in time became the first real alphabet. Its successors were widely used over a vast geographical area surrounding the Mediteranean Sea until approximately 200 CE. One of

the languages derived from Old Phoenician is Aramaic which replaced Assyrian cuneiform and was widely used from the 7th century BCE to the 7th century CE, holding a position similar to that occupied by English today. Aramaic was used by the conquering Assyrians as a language of administration, and following them, by the Babylonian and Persian empires which ruled from India to Ethiopia and employed Aramaic as the official language. Aramaic survives as a spoken language in small communities in Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey. Other languages developed as locally spoken Aramaic dialects such as Parthian and Pahlavi, both in use during the Parthian and the Sasanid eras of the Persian empire. After the Islamic conquest of the Persian Sasanid empire in 642 CE, however, Arabic became the language of government, culture, and especially of religion. One of the first Arabic scripts to gain wide popularity was known as the Kufic script. First developed in the learning centres of the city of Kufa (in present-day Iraq) it reached perfection during the late 8th century CE and was the official script for the Qur'an until the 11th century CE.

Fig. 2 Spindle whorl inscribed with characters of possibly symbolic properties.

Fig. 4 Inscribed spindle whorl.

Further south, evidence suggests that writing might have developed on the Arabian Peninsula from the early Sinatic script around 2000–1500 BCE. Of the two families that emerged, the South Arabic script (Musnad al-Janubi) was primarily used in the Sabaean and Minaean kingdoms in the south and could also be found along the ancient trade routes. The North Arabic script (Musnad al-Shamali) spread throughout northern Arabia in form of various dialects. Arabic script developed from Aramaic and Nabatean sripts. With the rise of Islam, Arabic spread all over the region – both north and south – replacing the old scripts.

Fig. 5 Inscribed carved bone spindle whorl.

Despite in-depth research of all of above options, as well as consultations with experts in relevant ancient languages, the script depicted on the carved bone spindle whorls could not be identified. One explanation might be that the letters do not represent any of above mentioned documented scripts but are, in fact, sequences of magical symbols, so-called Sigils. Sigils are symbols designed for magical purposes, the term being derived from the Latin *sigilum* (seal). Sigils do not represent an alphabet but are created to form a glyph that is composed of a variety of symbols or concepts. They may have abstract or pictorial forms and can appear in any medium, physical or virtual, or only in the mind. Visual symbols are the most popular form. As different cultures and individuals created their own sigils, understandable only to them, it is impossible to interpret the meaning of sigils without knowing relevant contexts. Interestingly, script discovered on a Middle Eastern folded glass bead that has been dated to the Islamic Era (Fig. 6), resembles the script found on the carved bone spindle whorls under discussion (e.g. Fig. 5).

Photos: Evelyn Simak

Fig. 3 Carved bone spindle whorls decorated with birds.

Fig. 6 Middle Eastern folded glass bead from the Islamic Era.

The one remaining option of establishing age/origin would be to submit specimen(s) for C-14 testing, but that is a very expensive option and perhaps something for a future research project.

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