

THE SPIRITUAL CONNOTATIONS OF THE SPINDLE AND SPINNING:  
SELECTED CASES FROM ANCIENT ANATOLIA AND  
NEIGHBORING LANDS

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*This paper is dedicated to our longtime friends, colleagues and distinguished scholars, Professor Dr. Ali M. Dinçol and Professor Dr. Belkıs Dinçol. Through their masterly command of Hittite and Urartian history and languages, matched by their intimate familiarity with the Bronze and Iron Age geography and archaeology of Anatolia, they have contributed considerably, both individually and as a couple, to the scholarly advances made in these two principle fields of research in the last four decades. We believe that this Festschrift, far from signaling the end of their successful academic careers, will only prompt them to continue with their uncompromising research activities that deserve much admiration, respect, and affection.*

This paper speculates on the symbolic significance of metal spindles found among the funerary deposits of cultic significance recovered from the late third millennium BC “royal tombs” at Alacahöyük and Horoztepe<sup>1</sup>. At Horoztepe, the EBA inhabitants used the area immediately outside the flat settlement as a cemetery. In addition to the disturbed and partly robbed extramural tomb in area A, a closer investigation around the small site revealed traces of few more pillaged tombs<sup>2</sup>. This badly damaged tomb in area A failed to reveal architectural features relating to its construction technique. Moreover, the insignificant skeletal remains consisting of two arm bones and a small skull fragment were clearly not sufficient to provide a gender identity of the person or persons buried in the tomb<sup>3</sup>.

A large proportion of the funerary deposits (Group No. I) in the tomb seems to have been placed at or near the feet of the deceased (Özgüç and Akok 1958:52, 41, Plan 3; Pl. II, 1-2). These included, a bronze table(perhaps a stool) with human-shaped feet; a large bronze fruit-stand; beak spouted metal jugs; a

two-handled large metal jar, two one-handled small jars with concave bases; a large folded bronze platter enveloping to cups, two large bowls, a fruit-stand, to discs and a cast-metal spindle (Özgüç and Akok 1958:43-44; Pl. V-VIII). In order to ensure their disuse, prior to their deposition, some of the metal objects including spindles, table shaped altars or stools were twisted, bent and crushed before being placed in the tomb in a disorderly stacked up pile. On the other hand, figurines, weapons, and musical implements (sistrum), probably used in incantations, were not broken or bent out of shape<sup>4</sup>.

The pile of metal artifacts stacked up in a disorderly fashion, also contained a small stool-like bronze table, a large bronze bull figurine, a statuette of a woman nursing her child, and large fragments of a sun-standard, as well as broken metal mountings of wooden furniture, and attachments of a canopy, scepters or staffs. Obviously, these artifacts too were intentionally bent and flattened before being placed with the deceased.

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<sup>1</sup> The EBA site of Horoztepe in the Erbaa district of Tokat was excavated fifty years ago by the late Prof. Tahsin Özgüç and Mahmut Akok (Özgüç and Akok 1958). For the ‘royal tombs’ of Alacahöyük see particularly, Koşay 1944 and 1951.

<sup>2</sup> On September 28<sup>th</sup> 1954 the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums in Ankara received number of objects from Horoztepe. Local villagers while preparing a grave in the village cemetery found them. It is likely that the Horoztepe bronze figurine exhibited in the Louver also originated in this, or in one of the pillaged tombs.

<sup>3</sup> The position of the surviving bones suggested that a body was deposited at the center of the southern half of the tomb, with the head apparently pointing to the east and the feet to the west.

<sup>4</sup> For details see, Özgüç and Akok 1958:52.

A double handled solid cast bronze mirror, measuring 20 cm diameter, and an electrum spindle found not far from it are particularly relevant to our discussion (Fig. 1i-j). The Horoztepe mirror has a 2.6 cm high rim. Each of the two thin ribbon handles at opposite sides, extensions of the rim, have two small perforations. The perforations suggest that it would have been hanged horizontally using threads, and once properly balanced would have been filled with a liquid substance, probably water, to produce a desired reflection, or in the context of magico-ritual acts, perhaps a rippled reflection. The 16 cm long flat spindle, which has a lentil-shaped head was folded and crushed, probably with the intention to neutralize its presumed magic power! The tip of this spindle is covered with gold, and the whorl nearer the top measures 7 cm in diameter (Özgüç and Akok 1958:Pl.VIII, 1-2; Fig. 26). This rather unusual spindle is larger than a second and also intentionally bent bronze “middle-whorl-spindle” found inside a folded platter<sup>5</sup>.

The Horoztepe mirror is not a unique object. Two slightly different bronze mirrors were recovered earlier in the Alacahöyük “royal tombs” of the late third millennium BC<sup>6</sup>. It is assumed that such mirrors were probably kept highly polished, and once placed horizontally on a stand they could have been filled with water to provide a good reflection<sup>7</sup>.

The Alacahöyük and Horoztepe mirrors were clearly part of the cult paraphernalia deposited in the tombs. Moreover, at Alacahöyük too, like at Horoztepe, one of the tombs (Tomb L) produced a silver “middle-whorl-spindle”, with a golden tip. It was found among the rich repertoire of metal objects (Koşay 1944:84, 1951:Pl. 197, 1). The scarcity of human remains in this tomb, consisting of a single tooth and part of lower jaw, made it impossible to reveal the identity, age or number persons buried. However, the presence of both a bronze mirror and a silver spindle, objects symbolizing womanhood, could be indicative of a female

gender concerning the identity of at least one of the persons buried here, if not the principal one.

Such precious metal spindles are not unique to the late third millennium BC. Literary sources occasionally describe the existence of such specially manufactured spindles in the second millennium BC. For instance, spindles made of gold, silver, lapis lazuli, alabaster, etc. occur in the list of gifts presented to the Mitannian king Tušrata (EA 25 iii 70-72). There can be little doubt that in this case too, spindles made of precious materials were not only status symbols. They could have been intended for ceremonial or ritual use. In this context it is important to point out the ivory “middle-whorl-spindle” found in a late 13<sup>th</sup> century BC house at Troy VIIA (Balfanz 1995:107, figs.1-3).

In the Near Eastern iconography, implements such as mirror, distaff and spindle are occasionally encountered as attributes of well-known goddesses. In the procession of deities of the Hittite pantheon represented at the Yazılıkaya sanctuary, Ninatta and Kulitta, the divine musicians and servants of the Goddess Šaušga (Ištar) are depicted holding each a mirror.

The Neo-Hittite Goddess Kubaba at Carchemish, also holds a mirror. It is not unlikely that the object in her left hand apparently held by its rod is a distaff. The holding of a distaff and mirror, one in each hand, occurs in one of the Maraş burial stelae. The simplest explanation would be that the woman in question is holding the two principal attributes of womanhood. There could have been cases, however, that a female figure holding a mirror and/or a spindle and/or distaff, was a priestess (oracle) acting as a medium for divine advice (Fig. 2 b).

**Spindle and its assumed symbolism:** Spinning and weaving are two of the oldest and related crafts, which in Near Eastern rural societies are traditionally pursued by women. In view of the fact that spinning and weaving are monotonous, tedious and unending activities with their particular complexities, it is no wonder that

in the Ancient Near Eastern iconography, tools of these crafts symbolized womanhood, in other words affinities usually associated with mature women, such as wisdom and endurance. It is generally maintained that in view of women’s natural ability to absorb the creative intricacies of weaving, this craft as well as spinning became the epithets of women’s wisdom, loyalty and housekeeping since prehistoric times.

Gradually acquiring additional symbolic values and allegoric aspects, it is possible to encounter the spindle in ancient literary sources and art, as a tool and weapon used by soothsayers, divinatory, sorceress, healers, midwives and priestesses in certain curative as well as punitive magico-rituals and prayers.

In Hatti, as in the rest of the Near East, the spindle was considered a symbol of womanhood. In certain Hittite texts relating to certain rituals and myths, spindle symbolizing female sexuality is mentioned in conjunction with mirror, which apparently was also a symbol of womanhood. Indeed, the Hittite “feminine attire”

(TÚG.NÍG.MUNUS) consisted not only of a head gear and a full-length body veil, but also of a spindle and a mirror<sup>8</sup>.

A later illustration of such “feminine attire” is found in a Neo-Hittite period stele at Maraş, which depicts two women holding a spindle and mirror (ANEP, no. 631).

Other Hittite texts inform us that these tools were used by experts in popular magico-rituals also for healing purposes. For instance, a Hittite sorceress by the name Paškuwatti used them on one occasion to cure the sexual impotency of a male patient. The procedure dictated the removal of the spindle, the mirror and women’s clothing given to the patient earlier, and presenting him with a bow and arrow that symbolized manhood (KUB IX 27; obverse 20 ff, ANET, 349)<sup>9</sup>.

Another Hittite text, a ritual and prayer to Ištar of Nineveh (KBo II 9 I 25-30), provides details of a magico-ritual performed to impair the enemy’s masculinity

(sexual potency) with the help of a spindle and mirror. Obviously, this ritual-prayer text was recited with the sole purpose of hurting the masculinity, and therefore the battle prowess of the enemy confronting the Hittite troops. Here too, both the spindle and mirror are treated as the powerful attributes of womanhood capable of taking away one’s manhood when used in the context of punitive magic:

“Take from (their) men masculinity, prowess, robust health, swords (?), battle- axes, bows, arrows, and dagger(s)! And bring them to Hatti! Place in their hands the spindle and mirror of a woman! Dress them as women! Put on their (heads) the *kureššar* (woman’s headgear)! And take away from them your favor (Hoffner 1966:331, notes 33-34).

In the lands beyond Anatolia too, the crafts of spinning and weaving carried rather similar symbolic values almost in every ancient society. In Canaanite mythology, the spindle as the powerful feminine sexual symbol is attested in relation to Ašerah<sup>10</sup>.

According to this myth, when her amorous advances to Baal were not reciprocated, Ašerah threatened to destroy him: “With my word I will oppress you; with my spindle I will pierce you!” This passage might reflect the existence of a popular belief that the spindle at the hand of a vindictive female with supernatural powers could be used as a lethal weapon.

In Ancient Mesopotamia too, the association of spinning and weaving with certain deities is well on record. For instance, in the Sumerian myth of “Enki and Ninhursag”. Uttu is depicted as the goddess of weaving. The sign for her name was also used for the word ‘spider’ which may have a connection to her tutelage of weaving<sup>11</sup>.

After raped by Enki, Uttu cursed him and became protective of her virtue. Later, in ‘Enki and the World Order,’ Enki gave Uttu charge over everything pertaining to women. As a result of learning from her experiences, Uttu became a model for Sumerian wives, and

<sup>5</sup> Özgüç and Akok 1958:44, Pl.VII, 1; Fig.19. The mirror was found ca 1.50 m northeast of the main pile.

<sup>6</sup> The one from Tomb A is a large mirror, 31.3 cm in diameter, 0.39 cm in length including handle, and 4.1 kg in weight. It has a slightly oval shape, flat smooth back, and the front has a raised rim set back from the outer edge (Mellink 1958:52-54, Pl.IV, fig.6 left, Pl V, figs.7-8). The mirror from Tomb A’ is much smaller and lighter, 21.2 cm in diameter, weighing 0.5 kg.(Mellink 1958:52, Pl.IV, fig.6 right; Koşay 1936:108, 121).

<sup>7</sup> Considering the relatively rough interior surface of the large mirror, it is likely that it originally contained a reflective surface perhaps obtained by a particular procedure. The raised rims on these mirrors are paralleled to the so-called Cycladic “frying-pans”(Mellink 1956:52-53).

<sup>8</sup> KBo VI 34 obverse ii 42; Hoffner 1964:333).

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed discussion on the subject in the Ancient Near Easter context see Hoffner 1966.

<sup>10</sup> According to Hoffner, the tale of Ašerah and Elkinirsa, known in its Hittite version, clearly has a Canaanite origin (1964:330; 1965).

<sup>11</sup> In one tradition, Uttu was the daughter of Enki and his great granddaughter, Ninimma. See Kramer 1981, 142.

was regarded both as ‘The Faithful Wife’ and ‘The Skillful Weaver.’ In Marduk’s great É.sagil Temple at Babil, Uttu had a shrine called the E.eshgar, ‘House of the Work Assignment.’

Assyrian texts occasionally mention spindles but in slightly different contexts. For instance, “May the spindle of Ištar sprout forth” refers indirectly to one of Ištar’s divine attributes. Moreover, the curse “May the gods make you whirl like a spindle” insinuates the familiarity of additional deities with the craft of spinning and its envisioned magic power<sup>12</sup>.

In pre-Dynastic Egypt, *nt* (Neith), protective deity of the Red Crown of Lower Egypt before the two kingdoms were merged, later became a goddess of weaving/spinning, this in addition of being a goddess of hunting, war and wisdom. Her emblem included the loom’s shuttle, with its two hooks on each end figured upon her head<sup>13</sup>. Much later, the Greek goddess Athena is said to have absorbed the weaver entity of the Egyptian Goddess Neith. In the Egyptian pantheon, in addition to Neith, the goddess Isis was considered a teacher of spinning, and Tayet, a goddess of spinning and weaving.

A Biblical passage (Proverbs 31) describes the ideal ancient Israelite woman as:

13 “She seeketh wool and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands”

19 “She layeth her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle”

Although not directly connected, a number of funerary stelae from Maraş, depicting spindle/distaff holding West Semitic Aramaic women of high standing in the Neo-Hittite kingdom of Gurgum, seem to illustrate the above passage of Biblical Proverbs.

The deep-rooted allegoric aspect of weaving, and the yarn, the product of spinning, as the thread of life, are occasionally encountered in the Bible. The story of

Rahav and the spies of Joshua at Jericho (Joshua 2: 3-49), is one such instance. Rahav, although referred to as a prostitute was obviously a professional weaver. According to the story, she hides the Israelite spies on the roof of her house, amongst the large heap of flax she stored there. When the time comes, she helps them flee by letting them down the wall using a rope. Subsequently, she hangs a red rope outside her house. Marking the house with “the red thread of hope”, is her assurance that she will be protected when the Israelites eventually storm Jericho.

In the Aegean world of the Classical period too, the craft of weaving was often referred to in literary work as a medium for women to express their inner thoughts, secrets and grievances. Outstanding female personalities in the Greek mythology are often associated with their remarkable weaving skills<sup>14</sup>.

Penelope of Odysseus was regarded an ideal wife because she preoccupied herself with weaving during her husband’s long absence. The story of Phylomena, as told by Sophocles, illustrates the telling of a secret by way of weaving. Phylomena was a young woman raped by her brother in law who cut her tongue so that she could not reveal the identity of her assailant. However, she wove the story of her rape into a tapestry, thus revealing the secret to her sister who took revenge upon her husband.

Among the Greek Goddesses, Athena stands out as the inventor of weaving and spinning<sup>15</sup>. Later, the Roman goddess Minerva acquired many of her attributes, including that of spinning and weaving. One of Athena’s epithets was the “Fate Weaver”. The worshippers of this goddess believed that she wove the world, or spun it on her distaff, along with human consciousness. Therefore, all tools and plants associated with weaving and spinning were considered sacred, including the blue flowered flax plant and the mortar and pestle used to process the flax for spinning. Sheep were

sacred to Athena because they provided fiber for spinning. It is said that after their wedding, young Athenian women cut their hair and wound it around spindle whorls for dedication to Athena. Distracting Athena’s spinning was considered the cause of chaos. Archaeological evidence seems to corroborate Athena’s epithet as the “Fate Weaver”. The large amount of loom weights and spindle whorls recovered in the Temple of Athena at Troy is significant. Indeed, their presence in the temple compound could have been connected to cult related rituals carried out in her honor (Wallrodt 2002:187).

In the Greek mythology, the story of a weaving contest between Athena of Olympia and Arachne, the weaver from Lydia, further reflects the popular belief that weaving and spinning were essentially divine crafts<sup>16</sup>. Athena may have originally been a Solar Deity, and her sacred bronze mirror may have symbolized this particular divine aspect<sup>17</sup>. But she was not the sole goddess of fate mentioned in the Greek religious philosophy. The 5<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century BC Greek Philosopher Plato had a vision of an additional goddess, Anake, spinning the universe. Although not exactly a mistress of spinning and weaving like Athena, in Plato’s vision the sun, moon and planets were her spindle whorls. With them she wove fate, and souls moved through the woven strands on their way to and from death and rebirth.

Additional divine figures of weaving and spinning in the lesser Greek pantheon included Lina, goddess of flax weaving and Klothos, goddess of spinning. In the Greek Mythology, Lachesis, Clotho and Atropos are the three divine sisters of destiny having the power to decide on human fate. They were known as the

Moerae, The Fates. Being the eternal daughters of Zeus and Themis, they were believed to be more powerful than most of the Gods. They were considered to be the goddesses who determined the beginning and the end of life, and the events in between. Among them, Lachesis was responsible for the “things that were”, Clotho for “those that are”, and Atropos for “things that are to be”. According to the philosophical perception at the time, these sisters of fate were responsible for allotting men at their birth their designed share of evil and good. They were equally capable of punishing the transgressions of both men and divine figures. In this context Clotho is described “the spinner” and Lachesis responsible for apportioning the lots to men. The perception was that when these three sisters set to work together, the thread of life spun upon Clotho’s spindle was measured by the rod of Lachesis and finally snipped by the shears of Atropos, the inevitable one. The priests and ministers in the service of these sister goddesses of fate were in fact oracles, seers and soothsayers<sup>18</sup>.

### Spinning thread and weaving as expressions of magical creation

Twirling wool or linen fiber into almost limitless lengths of yarn might have been perceived in the past a craft bestowed with magic, since a spindle creates something from almost nothing. Indeed, in the popular conviction that existed among the Romans, and the Greeks before them, imbedded superstitions existed vis-à-vis the processes of spinning and weaving. This was probably because, the conviction that a spindle at the hand of a sorcerer with evil intentions could have cursed a person and cause him ill fate. In many

<sup>12</sup> See Wiseman 1958:76.

<sup>13</sup> This particular aspect of the deity is a topic of controversy. In the New Kingdom this goddess becomes god mother and creator, and later on she assumes the role of a mortuary goddess, responsible to weave mummy wrappings (Pyramid Text 606). For details see, Lurker 1974:85.

<sup>14</sup> Pliny mentions that in bridal processions a spindle was carried with the wool and thread attached to it, remarking that weaving implements were given to the goddess Pallas, patroness of spinning, by women at old age (Plin.H.N.viii.74) This goddess was sculptured with a distaff and spindle in the Trojan Palladium (Apollod. iii.12.3).

<sup>15</sup> She was also a Goddess of science, architecture, art, crafts, horses, oxen, intellect, reason, wisdom, purity and war.

<sup>16</sup> See P.Ovidius Naso (*Metamorphoses*. Book 6, 5-54, and 129-145). According to one of the versions of this myth, the contest was to settle Arachne’s claim that she was a more skilled weaver than the goddess. The contest ended with Athena acknowledging Arachne’s higher skill. Yet, she punished her for the insolence she demonstrated to Zeus by destroying her loom. The grief stricken Arachne hung herself, but to be saved by Athena who took pity on her. The loosened rope on her neck became a cobweb, and Arachne herself became a spider.

<sup>17</sup> Monaghan suggests that bronze mirrors were sacred to Athena from an early date, as they were to many other Sun Goddesses, from the Egyptian Ma’at to Amaterasu, the Japanese Shinto goddess of Heaven (1994). However, it is important to point out that the Greeks never referred to Athena as a Sun Goddess. Monaghan assumes that in addition of her possession of a sacred mirror and a glowing necklace, and her association with the invention of weaving, her companion Iambe, the smith and shaman goddess (1994:178).

<sup>18</sup> These three sisters remind us the three semi-goddess sisters by the name of Urd, Verdande and Skuld, in Nordic Norse mythology responsible for spinning the “Thread of Life” for all living beings, gods, men, giants and dwarves. Urd, the oldest of the sisters, associated with the past. Urd means “Fate”, and refers to those actions that have already taken place. Verdande means “Becoming”, and refers to those actions in the process of taking place with the present, and Skuld means “Necessity”, and refers to those necessary actions that drive the whole process.

parts of the Roman empire, laws banned women from holding a spindle in public: should anyone lay eyes on such a woman, it could mean exceptionally bad luck, even lead to the failure of the harvest<sup>19</sup>.

The presence of metal spindles and bronze mirrors in the Horoztepe and Alacahöyük “royal tombs” should revive the debate on the social identity of some of those interred in them. The fact that at both sites, spindles and mirrors were found in the proximity large quantities of cult objects raises the possibility that they too were originally implements used in divination and rituals. Considering that in Near Eastern art and literature in general, and in Anatolia in particular, the spindle, distaff and mirror occasionally occur as attributes of certain goddesses and their deified companions, we could presume that priestesses in the service of such deities would have carried out cult rituals using such objects, perhaps preferably made of metal. An 8<sup>th</sup> century BC bitumen slab illustrating an Elamite woman sitting on a lion footed stool and spinning seems to illustrate this. Since, a spindle and distaff can hardly be used in a sitting position, at least not in order to produce a yarn, the Elamite bitumen slab may well be depicting an oracle prophesizing with the help of a spindle while sitting on a stool, and facing a fish placed on a small altar-like table (Fig.2e).

The bronze mirrors and spindles made of various metals and found in the Horoztepe and Alacahöyük “royal tombs”, in association with various other cult objects, might have been implements used by priestly oracles. Further expanding on this hypothesis, one can presume that spinning and weaving were considered crafts

acquiring their own secret mythical forces, especially at the hands of the divine and the initiated. In fact, local myths relating to divine spinners and weavers in most cultures of the Ancient Near East, in Old Europe and beyond, leave no doubt that this would have also been the case in Proto-historic Anatolia. Reviewing the cultic context of the bronze mirrors and spindles, both at Alacahöyük and Horoztepe, one should perhaps try to see some sort of a link between them and the bronze stool and tables at Horoztepe, or the so-called bronze “sun discs” at Alacahöyük. The former brings to mind the Elamite woman spinning her spindle sits on a stool in front of a low table, or table-like altar (Fig. 2e). Perhaps the bronze female statuette from Horoztepe sitting on a stool depicts a local goddess or a priestess at the service of one (Fig.2a). The “sun-discs” may have been connected somehow to bronze mirrors and spindles. Perhaps in its enigmatic symbolism, a bronze mirror was meant to be a sacred instrument used in order to catch the divine sun rays in the performance of certain magico-rituals. Hypothesizing its connection to a certain solar deity, we may further presume with extreme caution that bronze mirrors and metal spindles from Alacahöyük and Horoztepe could well have been tools of divination in the possession of certain shaman-like priestesses at the service of a local goddess of destiny. Could we assume that the bronze mother and child figurine found in the Horoztepe tomb represents a divine figure determining the fate of (or anointing) a newborn, much like the later instances encountered in Near Eastern mythologies, as well as in the Classical Period?

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<sup>19</sup> Plin.*H.N.*xxviii.5. A similarly superstitious belief is later found in the Germanic Mythology: “If, while riding a horse overland, a man should come upon a woman spinning, then that is a very bad sign; he should turn around and take another way.” (Jacob Grimm *Deutsche Mythologie* 1835, v3.135). In the Germanic mythology, Holda is a goddess with many aspects. She controls the weather: she is a source of women’s fertility and the protector of unborn children. Moreover, she is the patron of spinners, rewards the industrious and punishes the idle.

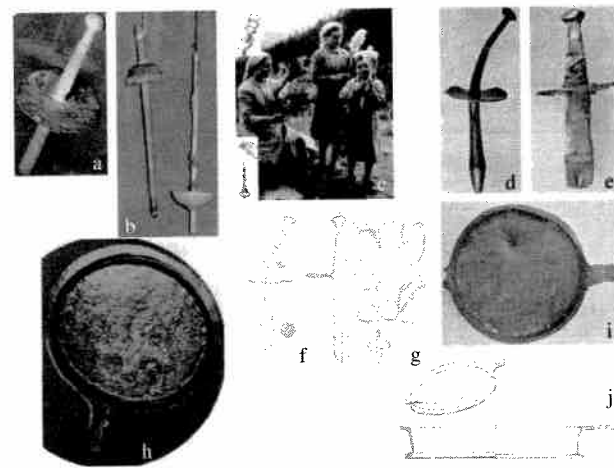


Fig. 1 a) silver spindle, Alacahöyük; b) traditional wooden spindles; c) traditional spinners, spindles and distaff-northern Greece; d, f) bronze spindle, Horoztepe; e, g) electrum spindle, h) bronze mirror, Alacahöyük; i, j) bronze mirror, Horoztepe.

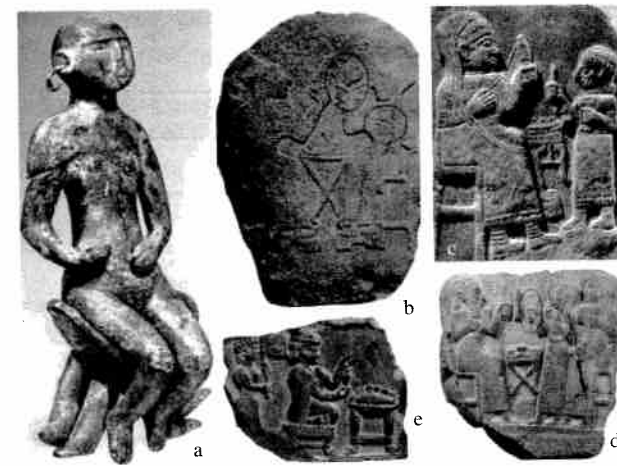


Fig. 2 a) Bronze sitting statuette from Horoztepe; b, c, d) Funerary stelae from Maraş(after Darga 1992); e) Elamite woman from Susa. An 8<sup>th</sup> century BC relief, molded and carved from a mix of bitumen, ground calcite, and quartz (the Louvre).



Fig. 3 a) The Ephesus Lady, a priestess/oracle? Holding a spindle and distaff, 7<sup>th</sup> century BC; b) Ninatta and Kulitta behind the goddess Šaušga, Yazılıkaya; c) Bronze mother and child figurine, Horoztepe; d) Maraş funerary stele; Goddess Kubaba, Carchemish (after Darga 1992).