

Weaving in Mythology

Weaving in Mythology:
Women's Agency and Portrayed Character

By

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Abstract:

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Although weaving would have been a daily activity for many people in the ancient Greek world, the nature of the practice remains somewhat unknown to the modern view. The archaeological record contains loom weights and spindle whorls, but the looms and textiles themselves have almost entirely decomposed. Scholars have attempted to reconstruct what weaving looked like in the ancient world through a combination of literary sources, archaeological methods, and visual representations. Based on this research, and in order to better understand the process and difficulties of ancient weaving, I have constructed and woven fabric on a model of an ancient upright warp-weighted loom.

Recent scholarship notes the gaps in our understanding of ancient textile production, citing a lack of writing on the topic in both ancient and modern times due to weaving being considered the work of women and slaves. One place where depictions of weaving are more frequent, however, is in mythology. The mythological record, while preserved somewhat by sculpture and on pottery, mostly comes down to us through written records; while these records only preserve individual points in a long oral tradition, they capture moments in history where weaving is a central focus. Notably, Helen's weaving of the battle in book three of Homer's *Iliad* has been compared to a bard weaving a story. Penelope's weaving in Homer's *Odyssey* is one of her key characteristics, and it is the act of weaving and unweaving which preserves her position in the household. Later Roman depictions of Greek myths, notably in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, depict women's weaving as playing a key role in their storylines. Arachne's weaving is her method of challenging the authority of the gods, and Philomela uses weaving as her voice to communicate with other women and to combat the injustice done to her by a man. In all of these stories, weaving provides the characters with agency. I aim to investigate the differences in how these mythological figures are portrayed in respect to spinning and weaving, and how those differences align with other aspects of their characters.

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Introduction

In modern times, the growth of mass textile production has ensured that in many parts of the world people don't have to think about where their clothes are coming from or how much effort went into producing them. This has certainly not always been the case, however. Before the industrial revolution entirely changed the way we understand textile production, textile production was a prime example of what technology was about. Even the roots of the word technology are related to weaving: the English word technology comes to us from the Greek *τέχνη*, meaning art, skill, craft.¹ The Latin *texo*, *texere*, meaning to weave or construct, may share this same Proto-Indo-European root.² In any case, the ancient words for weaving are connected to this idea of crafting and building.

While textiles used to be the ultimate example of industry, we certainly don't think about it like that today: representations of pre-industrial societies in the media often ignore what would have been a ubiquitous aspect of life. Despite numerous television shows about life in the ancient Mediterranean world, when was the last time weaving played a prominent or even background role?³ Modern depictions of ancient life would lead us to believe that cloth materialized out of thin air, or was somehow mass-produced out of sight, but evidence suggests otherwise.

In order to produce the amount of cloth needed for a given household, a number of hours would have been required to shear, clean, card, spin, dye, and weave wool. It was a lengthy

¹ LSJ, 1940

² EDL, 2018. de Vaan mentions the uncertainty of the exact PIE root, mentioning **te-tk-* (to build), **tek-s-* (a root which the Greek *τέχνη* comes from, or **tek-s-* (to fashion) as potential roots. Meiser (2003, as cited in EDL 2018) discusses the PIE formula "weaving words" as a potential link to **tek-s-*.

³ Virginia Postrel, 2021, mentions in her recent Opinion piece in the New York Times specifically that even in 'feminist' retellings such as the History Channel's series "Vikings," weaving work goes unmentioned; historically, however, weaving was hugely important to the content of the show as the sails of each viking ships took over a year's worth of work just to spin.

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process, but someone would have had to do it. Such a monumental task would have taken many many hours per piece of fabric, and this job traditionally fell upon women.

In ancient Greece, the evidence remaining to explain the ancient art of weaving is varied in scope but lacking some key details. These sources, which we will examine, include archaeological, visual (e.g. pottery, sculpture), and textual. Archaeological evidence preserves some aspects of weaving technology but not others: in many museums showcasing ancient Greek findings, there are displays of loom weights and spindle whorls. Loom weights and spindle whorls tended to be made of stone and terracotta, meaning they have survived rather well in the archaeological record. Other aspects of textile production we'd expect to find, however, are lost to time due to disintegration of natural materials. Natural fibers such as wool and linen that made up garments and other textiles have long decomposed in the intervening years, and the wood composing the frames of the looms and shuttles and spindles has likewise worn away. While some of these objects in other materials have survived the centuries, the vast majority of what we expect was used daily has not. Finding tiny scraps of textiles that have survived in airtight places is extremely rare and exciting.⁴

In other climates, evidence for ancient weaving has been much better preserved. In the bogs of Denmark, low oxygenation delayed the breakdown of organic materials enough that entire outfits have been preserved.⁵ Textile patterns and traces of color were even preserved, allowing for modern attempts to reconstruct the garments. On the other side of the spectrum, deserts in Egypt also preserve fabric through the ages, most famously the linen used to wrap

⁴ I once had a professor who described how, on an archaeological dig in Eleftherna, Greece, he opened a pot and found a tiny scrap of linen only to watch it partially disappear in front of his eyes due to oxygen exposure.

⁵National Museum of Denmark, 2021

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mummies. In Greece, though, scholars have to piece together other evidence to unravel exactly how textile production occurred in ancient times.

In order to examine the daily life of the ancients, one helpful type of site to analyze is those that are “frozen” in time. Sometimes this looks like cities that have been covered in ash, preserving what was a normal day (Pompeii, Herculaneum, etc.). The city of Olynthus on the Chalcidic peninsula in northeastern Greece provides a different type of preservation: in 348 BC it was abandoned by its residents after Phillip II of Macedon’s army swept through. This abrupt fleeing of the city leaves a unique town behind: houses were left full of objects which can tell us about daily life.⁶ Loom weights were found scattered on the floors, but their positioning serves to refute some previously held theories about the role of weaving in the household. The question of gender division in ancient Greek society is a complex one, and one explanation of their cultural norms is that women would have kept to themselves in complete privacy throughout the day. The idea that there would have existed a women’s room, a *γυναιχωνίτις*, to match the common male room of the *ἀνδρωωίτις*, is one that is quoted in ancient sources.⁷ However, how common of a division would this have been in the everyday household?

Nicholas Cahill’s analysis of the loomweights found at Olynthus suggests a different conception of daily life, one where women and slaves conduct their weaving out more in the public areas of the private household. The distribution of the weights suggests that large looms were located in areas of natural light, and even that some of the weights were concentrated in such a way that might indicate a more business-oriented weaving process.⁸ While the exact

⁶ Cahill, 2002

⁷ Cahill (2002) cites both Lysias and Xenophon’s *Economics* as mentioning the *γυναιχωνίτις*. Xenophon’s mention in particular uses the division of the two rooms to create social control: a bolted door is between the rooms to prevent theft and “so that the slaves would not breed without our permission” (trans. Pomeroy, qtd. in Cahill 149).

⁸ Cahill (p. 252) notes in particular one set of houses that share their pastas (central hallways). There were a disproportionate number of loom weights found in these rooms, the uniformity of which Cahill

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nature of the cultural conception about women and weaving in ancient Greece remains a mystery, this process of interpreting archaeological evidence is a valuable one when trying to understand the worldview behind their mythology. How gendered was the act of weaving, and was it seen as a laudable practice? Perhaps other types of evidence can further shed light on these questions.

One type of archaeological evidence that tends to survive through the ages is that of tombs. Because they are often not torn down and rebuilt, like houses generally are, the objects within them can tell us valuable information about the people who chose to bury them. One common grave good found in Iron Age Greece was spindle-whorls.⁹ Even one of the most famous collections of grave goods, the so-called “Tomb of the Rich Athenian Lady,” contains spindle whorls among the list of fancy jewelry and pottery.¹⁰ What do these findings indicate about the culture of weaving, then? The presence of spindle whorls in grave goods could indicate that spinning was such an important part of life that women would want to bring it with them even in death, but it could also have been an old tradition. It could even have been a standard sign to signal womanly virtue, so it is hard to determine exactly what these grave goods would have meant within the context of the time period. However, the fact that spindle whorls were so present at least suggests that spinning was an important enough activity that it was worth sending into the grave with the departed souls.

Another medium on which weaving is depicted is on pottery. Leaving aside mythological depictions for the moment, there are a few remaining vases which contain scenes of the

potentially ascribes to the buildings housing a textile business. In addition, the presence of houses with few loom weights may indicate a level of wealth where textiles could be purchased and not woven at home.

⁹ Langdon, 2005

¹⁰ Smithson, 1968

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textile-making process. Probably the most famous example of this is an Attic black-figure lekythos from the mid 6th century BCE attributed to the Amasis Painter. Figure 1 contains the main frieze of the vase, displaying the process of textile development including spinning, dyeing, and weaving.



Figure 1: Terracotta lekythos, ca. 550-530 B.C.E, depicting spinning and weaving process¹¹

This painting, depicting a series of women completing the whole textile-making process, seems to suggest that this structure would be the norm for producing woven goods. However, it would be remiss not to consider that this represents an idealized version of events. These women all seem to be clothed in a rather fancy manner, indicating a higher status. And who but the upper class would have been able to commission a vase such as this? Therefore, the vase provides invaluable insight into the process of weaving in ancient Greece, but should not be used to make generalizations about who exactly would have performed these tasks in an average household.

Another vase, attributed to the Brygos painter, depicts a woman spinning with a drop spindle and distaff (Figure 2).

¹¹ Terracotta Lekythos, ca. 550-530 BC. Attributed to the Amasis Painter, The MET 31.11.10 <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/253348>



Figure 2: White-ground oinochoe, ca. 490-470 BC, figure of a woman spinning with a drop spindle¹²

Yet again, the image is of a well-dressed woman who is working on a textile-making task. It is interesting that she is depicted as spinning, here; was spinning an everyday activity for upper class women, or was this vase depicting the woman in an “idealized” form or special state?

While these questions are hard to answer given the evidence available, the presence of these

¹² White-ground Oinochoe, ca. 490-470 BCE. Attributed to the Brygos Painter, The British Museum 1873,0820.304 https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1873-0820-304

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vases displays that spinning and weaving were, at least, important enough to be featured on well-produced pottery.

Aside from physical archaeological evidence, another important source for our knowledge of weaving in ancient Greece comes from textual sources. Even the earliest forms of written Greek contain reference to textiles and weaving; Linear B, which mostly survives in lists and financial records, contains numerous logograms and syllabograms relating to textiles. Terms include ones for different fibers, spinning tools, and workers.¹³

Ancient poets include mention of weaving in their works; Sappho, a lyric poet from Lesbos, mentions weaving in a poem which reads, with my English translation:

γλύκηα μάτερ, οὔτοι δύναμαι κρέκην τὸν ἴστον πόθῳ δάμεισα
παῖδος βραδίναν δι' Ἀφροδίταν.¹⁴

Sweet mother, I really cannot strike the loom; I am overcome with
yearning for a youth, thanks to slim Aphrodite.¹⁵

In this poem it is hard to distinguish meaning given the lack of context, but it seems as though Sappho is describing weaving as a task she ought to be doing but cannot due to her preoccupation. Sappho is known mainly as a poet, but the implications of this poem are that she knows how to weave and possibly does so on a daily basis. It is also interesting that the terminology in this fragment seem to refer to weaving itself, rather than spinning: the noun *ἴστον* refers to the loom, generally, or the vertical threads,¹⁶ while the verb *κρέκην* may be related to the word *κερκίς*, meaning the rod with which weavers would push the weft threads close together.¹⁷

¹³ Nosch et al., 2010. Included is a discussion of terms for spinners, including records of both men and women, along with children, involved with various textile tasks. This distinction provides interesting context in light of the usual assumption that women would do the brunt of textile tasks.

¹⁴ Sappho, Fragment 102

¹⁵ In this thesis, translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

¹⁶ Autenrieth Homer, 1891

¹⁷ Ibid.

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Another ancient poet, Erinna, refers to weaving in her most famous fragmentary poem the *Distaff*.¹⁸ While reminiscing on childhood to lament her friend Baucis, she recalls:

δαγύ[δ]ων τ' ἐχ[όμεσθα νεαν]ίδες ἐν θαλάμοισι
νύμ[φαι]σιν [προσόμοιοι ἀκηδ]έες· ἅ τε πὸτ ὄρθρον
μάτηρ, ἃ ἔ[ριον νέμεν ἀμφιπόλ]οισιν ἐρίθοις....¹⁹
As girls in our bedrooms we held our dolls, resembling brides,
taking no care. And once at dawn mother, who was allotting wool
to attending servants....

Erinna begins with a reminiscence about how as children they pretended to be brides, and then segues into a memory of how her mother ²⁰ used to distribute wool to the servants in the early morning. This excerpt paints a picture of what life may have been like, and how weaving may have functioned in a household. Interestingly, *ἐρίθοις*, meaning hired servants, can be masculine or feminine;²¹ it is unclear, then, exactly what the gender roles would have been in this house. The mother appears to be in charge of the weaving process, and directs the servants, but it is unclear exactly who these servants would have been.

Literary works also make mention of weaving; notably, Plato's *The Statesman* contains a section with an extended metaphor comparing governing to the art of weaving. Plato lays out an argument, the first half of which discusses which parts of the textile making process can be considered "weaving".²² What is interesting here is that Plato seems to have a fairly in-depth knowledge about the textile process. *The Statesman* is set up as a dialogue between Socrates and

¹⁸ There is much discussion over whether this was a title chosen by Erinna intentionally, or just later chosen by readers who picked out a word. Scholars in favor of Erinna choosing it herself mention the connection between spinning and the fates; the poem is a lament of her friend, with death at the forefront of the imagery. Specifically, mention of the fates who spin out the wool of life: the distaff could be reference to their spinning process which took Baucis and would eventually take Erinna herself at age 19 (Cameron and Cameron, 1969).

¹⁹ Erinna *The Distaff* 8-10

²⁰ There is some debate about whether this was Erinna's actual mother or whether this mother figure was one that Erinna and Baucis were acting out with their dolls: see Balmer (2012)

²¹ LSJ, 1940

²² Plato *The Statesman* 279B-283B

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a stranger: where the stranger seems to know a lot about weaving, and Socrates rather less, it still requires a basic understanding of weaving both on the part of the author and of the general reader. Even though weaving is seen most traditionally as a feminine art, this example shows that at least some men in ancient Greek society had a fairly good understanding of the mechanics of the process, and recognized it as complex enough to compare to the more masculine area of statesmanship.

Plays, too, mention weaving in various capacities; Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* also uses wool-working as a metaphor for matters of state, this time in the context of urging the men of the city to find a diplomatic solution to the war. Lysistrata compares the cleaning and untangling of wool to untangling the messy politics through embassies.²³ In this passage she describes the whole process of cleaning and spinning wool, meaning that Aristophanes must have had at least a basic understanding of textile production. In the play, however, wool-working is very much still presented as being in the feminine domain, contrasted through this metaphor to matters of state. The use of textiles in these plays indicate that the practice was common enough for it to be a useful metaphor to the people watching. The use of weaving in these works is a theme continued in the mythological tradition, including with Attic plays.²⁴ One particular case which incorporates many different types of evidence is that of the Panathenaic festival in Athens.

In Athens, various important religious rituals involved weaving. The Panathenaic festival, occurring every year with every fourth year as a "greater" festival, had an important ceremony dedicated to the *peplos* of the sacred statue of Athena Polias. The *peplos*, a dress-like garment, would be ceremonially washed every year, and a new one woven for the goddess. Each year, a dedicated team of women were in charge of fashioning this new cloth. The process began with a

²³ Aristophanes *Lysistrata*, 567-586

²⁴ Author mmbright (2017) mentions that textiles would have been a common prop in ancient plays, including in the "tapestry scene" from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*.

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team of two to four young girls called *arrephoroi*, who were chosen from among Athens' aristocratic families by the *Archon Basileus* and whose duties included living on the acropolis (for an unknown amount of time) and setting up the loom along with the priestess of Athena. This was done during the *Chalkeia*, a festival of Athena in her domain as the goddess of handicraft.²⁵

The *arrephoroi* themselves stem from a long mythological tradition, beginning with the story of the mythical king Kekrops. According to some genealogy, his daughters were given a gift basket, or *kiste*, by Athena and told not to open it; Aglauros and Herse, disobediently, opened the *kiste*. When they saw the contents, a baby Erechthonius cradled possibly in snakes and other goods, they died for their folly.²⁶ Their other sister Pandrosus, however, was rewarded for listening to the goddess, and the Athenians dedicated a shrine to her on the Acropolis. The *arrephoroi* were tasked with recreating aspects of this myth, along with their other weaving duties; each year, they brought a *kiste* down from the acropolis to a secret sacred sanctuary. Scholars have pulled from various sources in order to try and understand this mysterious rite: topographers have examined the acropolis to find traces of the path the young girls would have taken and analyzed Pausanias' accounts²⁷ of visiting Athens to try and determine the importance of the *arrephoroi*.

This mythological foundation, supported by reconstructed archaeological and textual evidence, provides the basis for a series of rituals which together put on display important parts of Athenian culture. The mention of the ancient mythological figures emphasizes Athens' autochthony, and the snake aspects of the *arrephoroi*'s duties as implied by the myth further add

²⁵ Haland, 2012

²⁶ Some accounts say that they were so frightened by the sighs in the *kiste* that they hurled themselves off of the acropolis. (Burkert, 1985, p. 229)

²⁷ Pausanias 1.27.3.

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to the chthonic nature of the ritual.²⁸ In addition, agriculture is also tied into this myth; the timing of the panathenaic festival is centered around agricultural seasons, and the suspected presence of grain in the *kiste* as well as potentially phallic symbols create a possible tie between agriculture, puberty, and fertility.²⁹

On the Parthenon on the Athenian Acropolis, the inner ionic frieze depicts a procession of people culminating on the eastern side wherein figures present a folded cloth to seated deities (Figure 3).



²⁸ Erichthonius, a central figure in this myth, was supposedly born when Hephaestus, lusting after Athena, ejaculated on her thigh; Athena, wiping it off with a cloth, tossed it onto the earth and it was from that earth which Erichthonius sprung (Burkert, 1985, p.229). Erichthonius ties in both snakes and coming from the earth into Athens' foundation myth.

²⁹ Haland (2012)

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Figure 3: Frieze segment from the east side of the Parthenon, ca. 447-433 BCE, figures holding a large cloth³⁰

The most common explanation for this scene is that it depicts the annual panathenaic, or perhaps quadrennial greater panathenaic festival. The giving of the cloth, therefore, may represent important members of the Athenian cult giving over the new peplos to the goddess Athena. If this explanation holds water, then the focal point of the ceremony as depicted on the Acropolis' biggest building is a presentation of woven material to the goddess associated with textiles. Given the panathenaic festival's general goals of displaying dominance, particularly their military strength, it seems telling that there is such a focus on the weaving aspects of the festival, and particularly how the weaving itself brings in mythology supporting the idea that Athenians had ancient ties to the land of the city. Just as memory and legacy are displayed in the very walls of the Acropolis,³¹ reminders of Athens' connection to the earth are more subtly displayed through the weaving rituals which invoke ancient mythological ties.

Through these various archaeological and textual analyses, we can partially reconstruct what weaving may have looked like in the ancient Greek world. One other key source that may reveal nuances of culture, however, is mythology. Given that the mythological tradition in ancient Greece was primarily an oral one, we can't know for sure how weaving was portrayed. However, in analyzing myths that have since been written down (in the contexts of their time periods) we can gain a better understanding of how weavers were viewed. It is important to note that, aside from Sappho and Erinna mentioned earlier, most of the writing done on this topic was

³⁰ Parthenon East Frieze Segment ca. 447-433 BCE. Attributed to the Pheidias. Displayed in the British Museum. Image from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Peplos_scene_BM_EV.JPG.

³¹ Post 480 BCE after the Persian destruction of the Acropolis, the Athenians built parts of the destroyed temples into the walls of the Acropolis. They took care to re-assemble parts of the columns and friezes in the wall such that people in the city would be able to look up and be reminded of the history of the city (Hurwit, 1999).

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by men. Therefore, the presentation of women in these stories was not from a woman's perspective, and it will be important to notice the lenses from which these authors are writing. Important, too, will be the historical and cultural contexts that these works were written in. While people generally think of greek mythology as a general canon of stories, the way each story plays out varies between authors, regions, and time periods; therefore, analyzing author perspective will be hugely important to contextualizing the agency that the women in these stories display.

Technology of Weaving

While recreating what weaving was like on an upright warp-weighted loom in ancient Greece is a tricky task, given the decay of evidence, scholars have hypothesized about how they worked. The larger process for weaving would have involved many more steps, including the shearing of sheep, picking, cleaning, and dyeing the wool, and spinning the fibers into thread. Spinning was an essential part of this process, with seven spinners needed to provide thread for one weaver.³²

Just focusing on the technology needed to weave, however, is still a big feat. Looms in Greece, as far as we know, were primarily upright and warp-weighted. *Warp* refers to the threads which hang vertically down; the weight attached to the threads, usually in bundles, provides the tension necessary to weave in the horizontal threads, or *weft*. In a simple pattern the weft would be woven in under-over each thread, creating a crisscross pattern. Doing this by hand, however, would take a long time, and so technology was developed to lift every other thread at a given time. The state of half the threads lifted is called a *shed*; the shed is the space between the threads where a *shuttle*, a rod holding the warp thread, could be passed through.³³

The complication, though, comes where the other set of threads must be lifted. If a shed bar is attached to the front set of threads, then something must attach to the back set which allows them to in turn be pulled in front of the shed bar. This creates a *heddle*, allowing the shuttle to go under-over the threads in the other orientation. Susan Edmonds lays out various proposals for how heddles may have worked in ancient Greece, modeling different ways that they may have functioned.³⁴ In the Northern European model, the heddle bars are shorter and

³² *Text and Textile*, 2004

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Edmonds, 2020

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flimsier, and paintings have multiple rows of loom weights which are hard to interpret functionally. In the high-warp tapestry loom model, found in France, the weft is beaten down. There are a number of other sorts, but Edmonds refers to heddle-looped or alternatively looped heddles as a model for the ancient Greek style, at least how it is commonly depicted in artwork. In this model, the individual heddle threads are tied to a heddle bar, which when pulled out pulls each heddle string, not disturbing the other set of strings and creating the second shed. Each time the shuttle is put through a shed, the shed is then switched and a rod, a *kerkis* in ancient Greek, is used to beat up the weft thread to create a tight pattern.

Based on a guide from Susan Edmonds, Gregory Nagy, and Prudence Jones at Rutgers University,³⁵ I constructed my own loom, which I will walk through the process of in the conclusion.

³⁵ *How to get Started Spinning and Weaving, n.d.*

Greek Mythology

Possibly the figure in Greek mythology most associated with weaving is Athena, goddess of wisdom and war. In the earliest written sources, such as Hesiod, she is described mainly in her roles as a battle goddess and goddess of wisdom.³⁶ She is described as a craftsman moreso, however, in the descriptions of how Pandora came to be created.³⁷ She is also referenced in her aspect as goddess of craftsmanship in agriculture, helping the plow.³⁸ She is described again in association with crafts in the Homeric Hymn to Hephaestus,³⁹ and gives skill to maidens in the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite.⁴⁰

In later times, however, she very much came to be associated with weaving and the arts. Her connection is evident in the Panathenaic festival rituals in Athens, and in textual sources such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* she weaves directly. Athena is hugely important to understanding weaving in mythology, and will be further discussed in future sections.

Athena is not the only deity associated with weaving, however. The Fates are remembered for spinning the thread of life, allotting life to each person. Hesiod's *Theogony* outlines the three fates, or *Moirai*, and their roles: there is Clotho, the spinner, Lachesis, the assigner, and Atropos, the unavoidable one.⁴¹ Later depictions include the three of them together, spinning, measuring, and cutting the thread of fate. The fates play various roles, with varying degrees of autonomy, throughout different myths: their association with spinning and the textile arts, however, seems to remain fairly constant.

³⁶ Hesiod's *Theogony*, lines 14, 575, 579, 899, 929.

³⁷ Hesiod's *Theogony*, 575 and 579; Hesiod's *Works and Days*, 83

³⁸ Hesiod's *Works and Days*, 483

³⁹ Homer, *The Homeric Hymns*: Homeric Hymn to Hephaestus, Line 2

⁴⁰ Homer, *The Homeric Hymns*: Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite, Line 12

⁴¹ Atsma, 2017

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Another mythological figure associated with textiles is Ariadne. On Theseus, Plutarch remarks, “most historians and poets tell us that he got from Ariadne, who had fallen in love with him, the famous thread, and that having been instructed by her how to make his way through the intricacies of the Labyrinth, he slew the Minotaur and sailed off with Ariadne and the youths.”⁴² Ariadne, the daughter of Minos, king of Knossos, decides to help Theseus in his mission to survive the Labyrinth and slay the half-man half-bull creature who has been devouring the Athenian youths for so many years.

Her method, as many versions of the myth include, is to give Theseus a string with which to find his way through the labyrinth; in laying it on the ground as he walks, he can retrace his steps and escape the maze. This version, while not directly tied to weaving, provides an example of a woman in mythology using textiles and string arts to accomplish a task where they otherwise would not have power. While the outcome of Ariadne’s actions are much disputed in mythology, in this circumstance she is successful and Theseus is able to escape the Labyrinth.

Aphrodite has also been connected with spinning, including on a number of ancient vases. Brittany Myburgh discusses the associations between spinning and fertility, one of Aphrodite’s main domains. Myburgh compares spinning to “creating the thread of life,” and so argues that it is well within Aphrodite’s domain.⁴³ Further related to Aphrodite’s domain are prostitutes, who are consistently pictured as spinning on pottery and in poetry. Marina Fischer describes how prostitutes would work on small spinning or braiding projects as they solicited customers, or to supplement their income and provide for themselves. Depictions of these prostitutes with baskets of wool, and with specific small weaving projects such as hairbands, further link them visually to Aphrodite. It is important not to forget these women in discussions

⁴² Plutarch, *Theseus*, 19.1 trans. Bernadotte Perin

⁴³ Myburgh, 2020

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of culture; while queens in great households were depicted as weaving, so were women of all social classes because it was an essential part of domestic labor.⁴⁴

Weaving was an essential part of ancient Greek life, and so is ever-present in many of their myths. Beginning with Homer, it appears as essential to the plot in the stories, and can tell us about the culture of the people who included it.

⁴⁴ Fischer, 2013

Homer's Odyssey

Homer's *Odyssey* is one of the most well-known works from the ancient world. Commonly thought to have been written down for the first time around 750 BCE, it describes the even more ancient bronze age Greece. The *Odyssey* describes primarily Odysseus' journey home from Troy, but along the way describes a number of other civilizations and monsters that he encounters. It also describes the situation back home in Ithaca, and his son Telemachus' own mini-odyssey to find news of his father. Perhaps most important to discussions about weaving, however, is the story of Penelope. Figure 4 shows an ancient vase depicting Penelope weaving, accompanied by Telemachus.



Figure 4: Chiusi Vase, ca. 430 BCE ⁴⁵

⁴⁵Attic Red Figure Skyphos ca. 430 BC. Displayed in the Museo Civico, Chiusi: Drawing from Furtwängler-Reichhold, *Griechische Vasenmalerei: Auswahl hervorragender Vasenbilder*, Tafeln 141-150. München: Bruckmann, 1921. pl. 142, 1921 (print); 1993 (rescan). Accessed from Perseus.tufts.edu as Chiusi, 1831. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/artifact?name=Chiusi+1831&object=Vase>

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Penelope, queen of Ithaca and wife of Odysseus, uses weaving in a very particular manner in this story. In three separate passages in the story, Penelope's weaving scheme is described. In order to fend off suitors, according to her main suitor Antinous,

“She came up with a special trick: she fixed
a mighty loom inside the palace hall.
Weaving her fine long cloth, she said to us,
‘Young men, you are my suitors. Since my husband,
The brave Odysseus, is dead, I know
You want to marry me. You must be patient;
I have worked hard to weave this winding-sheet
To bury good Laertes when he dies.
He gained such wealth, the women would reproach me
If he were buried with no shroud. Please let me
finish it!’ And her words made sense to us.
So every day she wove the mighty cloth,
and then at night by torchlight, she unwove it.”⁴⁶

Once her scheme has been found out, revealed to the suitors by one of the work-women in the house, she is forced to finish weaving the shroud.

Telemachus, well aware of his family's predicament, describes Penelope's conundrum: “She does not turn these awful suitors down,/ nor can she end the courting. They keep eating,/ spoiling my house—and soon, they will kill me!”⁴⁷ Penelope's schemes have worked for a while, but once they have run their course Telemachus decides to take things into his own hands. Even though Penelope has taken care of the situation for so long, Telemachus has decided to step into his role as the man of the house. He tells her, “Go in and do your work./ Stick to the loom and distaff. Tell your slaves/ to do their chores as well. It is for men/ to talk, especially me. I am the master.”⁴⁸ Telemachus mentions the loom and distaff as things that women ought to be doing, instead of participating in the ‘important’ world of men. This mention of weaving is meant to

⁴⁶ Homer's *Odyssey*, 2.98-2.107, trans. Wilson

⁴⁷ Homer's *Odyssey*, 1.249-1.251, trans. Wilson

⁴⁸ Homer's *Odyssey*, 1.356-1.359, trans. Wilson

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diminish Penelope, and so it is especially interesting that she uses the loom elsewhere as a source of power when to men it seems to represent her inferiority and powerlessness.

While this insistence from Telemachus that he is the master of the house in some ways makes him seem younger and less in control, Penelope does listen: she goes upstairs and cries herself to sleep. Penelope's character, in many ways, is a big dichotomy. She is intelligent, and wise, and has held things together in Ithaca for the twenty years that Odysseus has been away. On the other hand, though, by the beginning of the story she has fallen apart and begins to rely on Telemachus, retreating upstairs to cry a number of times.

Weaving is central to Penelope's agency in this story. When she is describing her trickery to Odysseus later in the story, she says "I spin schemes."⁴⁹ The spinning is directly referencing her weaving, but the idea of schemes and scheming is one that connects her to her husband. Odysseus is consistently described as wily and scheming, and so in this way they are a well-matched couple. This connection also is reminiscent of Athena's domain, as goddess of wisdom. Just as she favors Odysseus for his craftiness, that favor appears to extend to his family, and Penelope shows a good reason why it should. Penelope is almost a model of Athena, in this story, bringing together wisdom and weaving. While Athena is nearly omnipotent, however, Penelope's mortality causes her to struggle and not be able to handle things on her own. The men in Penelope's life also make this especially difficult; just as Telemachus told her to leave things to the men, it seems like her suitors won't recognize her authority on its own, instead wanting to defer to her parents, and eventually when they do meet their demise it is to her husband. Penelope is wily, but she is still limited by her cultural surroundings.

Penelope appears to be the model of an upright and moral woman, and so it is interesting that she is portrayed as simultaneously displaying agency to preserve her character but also

⁴⁹ Homer's *Odyssey*, 19.139, trans. Wilson

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deferring to the men in her life once they have proved themselves. Unlike Odysseus' various dalliances throughout the epic, Penelope makes every effort to be loyal and not to stray from Odysseus, even when he has been gone for 20 years. At the end of the poem she even waits for confirmation of Odysseus' identity, testing his knowledge of their shared history (and a demonstration of his own craftsmanship) before she finally lowers her guard and joins him in bed. In Homeric times, would Penelope's chastity and loyalty make her a model for other women, and therefore extend her connection with weaving to a metaphorical model of her devotion? One very notable comparison in this story are Penelope's slave women.

These women are mentioned in the context of weaving more than once: they are instructed in book 18, "Slave girls! Odysseus, your master, / has been long gone. Go back and sit beside / the queen and comfort her. Spin yarn or comb / the wool."⁵⁰ They, in their connection with Penelope, are associated with the weaving tasks. However, some of them diverge from this weaving: as Eurycleia describes to Odysseus,

In this house we have fifty female slaves
whom we have trained to work, to card the wool,
and taught to tolerate their life as slaves.
Twelve stepped away from that honor...⁵¹

Their "stepping away from honor" in this story is not only a step away from their weaving duties, but a moral and sexual wrongdoing according to Odysseus. He condemns them for sleeping with the suitors, seeing it as a betrayal to the house. In stark contrast to Penelope's narrative reward for her chastity, these women are strung up and hanged for their 'promiscuity'. That this morality is metaphorically connected to their weaving provides evidence for the connection between weaving and moral purity.

⁵⁰ Homer's *Odyssey*, 18.312-18.315, trans. Wilson

⁵¹ Homer's *Odyssey*, 22.421-22.424, trans. Wilson

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Aside from the goings-on in Ithaca, other women in the *Odyssey* are also depicted as weaving; in analyzing their characters we may have more of an answer to the connection between weaving and moral worth. Arete, the queen of Phaeacia, is consistently associated with weaving. Our first introduction to her is through her daughter Nausicaa: “Her mother sat beside the hearth and spun/ sea-purpled yarn, her house girls all around her.”⁵² Indeed, when Nausicaa later describes her mother to Odysseus, she says: “You will find my mother/ sitting beside the hearth by firelight,/ and spinning her amazing purple wool.”⁵³ It seems that Arete’s character is intrinsically connected to her spinning. The descriptions of weaving in Phaeacia are much longer than they are elsewhere in the epic. Later, a description of the Phaeacians describes that

“The king had fifty slave girls in his house;
some ground the yellow grain upon the millstone,
others wove cloth and sat there spinning yarn,
with fingers quick as rustling poplar leaves,
and oil was dripping from the woven fabric.
Just as Phaeacian men have a special talent
for launching ships to sea, the women there
are expert weavers, since Athena gave them
fine minds and skill to make most lovely things.”⁵⁴

The comparison between the men’s craft of sailing and the women’s craft of weaving is one that has been made before. The ancient Greek word *ἰστός*, which Homer frequently uses to refer to the loom, also means the mast of a ship.⁵⁵ Homer’s description of the women as having “fine minds and skill” further reinforces the idea that weaving is connected in this poem to positive traits.

⁵² Homer’s *Odyssey*, 6.60-6.61, trans. Wilson

⁵³ Homer’s *Odyssey*, 6.303-6.305, trans. Wilson

⁵⁴ Homer’s *Odyssey*, 7.105-7.112, trans. Wilson

⁵⁵ LSJ, 1940

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Some antagonists of the story, however, also weave. Both Circe and Calypso, who trapped Odysseus on their islands and prevented his *nostos*, are depicted as weaving on their looms. The description of this weaving, however, is different; Circe's weaving, for one, is textually tied to her immortality:

They stood outside
and heard some lovely singing. It was Circe,
the goddess. She was weaving as she sang,
an intricate, enchanting piece of work,
the kind a goddess fashions.⁵⁶

Circe's weaving in this passage is tied both to her identity as a goddess and her nature of "enchanting," reflecting the enchantment that she puts on Odysseus' men when they come to the island. She is described as singing as she weaved, which is not included in descriptions of most other women in the *Odyssey*. The connection between weaving and singing has been studied in various aspects, including the similarities in language to discuss the two (e.g. *κρέκειν* referring to both plucking the strings of a lyre and hitting the weft of the loom). Another similarity is the motions of playing the lyre versus plying the loom, and relevantly, Homer tends to use weaving as a metaphor for intelligence similarly to a poet's.⁵⁷ Weaving and singing might also go together practically:⁵⁸ Gregory Nagy points out evidence of girls singing Sappho's poetry while weaving in Posidippus' Epigram 55, indicating that this weaving and singing may have commonly gone together.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Homer's *Odyssey*, 10.219-10.223, trans. Wilson

⁵⁷ Snyder, 1981

⁵⁸ Anthony Tuck (2006) discusses evidence from various Indo-European traditions suggesting that singing may have provided a way of remembering specific patterns for weaving. The songs might contain information about the patterns, or a metrical way of remembering when to switch colors or how many rows to weave. This possibility indicates that singing may have been instrumental for some types of patterns, and makes a direct link between singing and weaving in terms of practicality.

⁵⁹ Nagy, 2016

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Calypso too is described as singing: “Inside, she was singing/ and weaving with a shuttle made of gold.”⁶⁰ Calypso’s golden shuttle is reminiscent of the golden spindle that Helen received as a gift from Alcandre of Thebes, Egypt.⁶¹ Whether this gold is meant to symbolize richness, foreignness, or something of their personality is unclear, but it provides an interesting parallel between the women of this story. Calypso’s weaving, though originally symbolic of her powers on the island keeping Odysseus hostage, eventually also provides the means for escape. Odysseus, being crafty and building his own raft, is given fabric for a sail from Calypso. This is an important reminder that weaving provides an essential part of ships, perhaps making the comparison of the Phaeacian men and women’s talents less of a comparison and really an indication that the women are contributing to the same economic practice.

Circe and Calypso provide a conundrum in terms of the discussion about weaving women and morality. Both of these deities keep Odysseus trapped, away from his home, but eventually at the prompting of the gods both do aid Odysseus in his return home. Perhaps the weaving is indicative of this eventual mortality, or perhaps as deities, or as women, weaving was such an essential part of life that it seemed incorrect not to include it. Other non-humans in the *Odyssey* are also depicted as weaving, adding credence to the idea that weaving on the loom was an activity for the immortals; when the Phaeacians deposit Odysseus at the harbor of Phorcys on Ithaca, they see that “There are looms,/ also of stone; the Nymphs weave purple cloth,/ sea-purple—it is always marvelous to see.”⁶²

The other notable figure in the *Odyssey* related to weaving is Helen. When Telemachus goes to visit Sparta searching for news of his father, he encounters Helen sitting with a sewing basket on wheels which is filled with yarn, with a golden spindle on top. We are told that this

⁶⁰ Homer’s *Odyssey*, 5.61-5.62, trans. Wilson

⁶¹ Homer’s *Odyssey*, 4.130-4.132, trans. Wilson

⁶² Homer’s *Odyssey*, 13.106-13.108, trans. Wilson

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was a gift from Polybus' wife Alcandre of Thebes, Egypt, and this gift is listed after the riches which Polybius gave to Menelaus. We never see Helen weaving directly in the *Odyssey*, but, as she tells Telemachus, "Sweet boy, I also have a gift,/ crafted by my own hands."⁶³ Melissa Mueller describes this gift in the context of women's *kleos* in the Homeric world: while the men showed off their *kleos* through song and storytelling, woven *kleos* was a realm that women had which wouldn't be in competition with men.⁶⁴ Mueller also argues that, in giving Telemachus a garment "as a monument to Helen's hands," she puts herself into the network of Ithaca: she specifies that Penelope hold onto the garment until Telemachus' wedding, as the garment is meant for his future wife. Helen here uses this textile as a form of communication and *xenia* between women.⁶⁵

Helen is often ridiculed in this story, blamed for the Trojan war, so perhaps this disconnect between Penelope and Arete's weaving and virtue is contrasted to Helen's manipulative and disloyal nature. Helen's weaving is more direct and instrumental in the *Iliad*, which has its own distinct pattern of weaving as agency.

Maria Pantelia argues that the differences between weaving and spinning that are displayed in this poem reflect different needs to keep domestic order in the household. Penelope weaves at the beginning of the poem, but once Telemachus matures and Odysseus returns, she turns to the spindle instead. Helen, too, is described with a spindle, as she has control over her home and stability in her marriage, as does Arete who is never described directly as weaving on

⁶³ Homer's *Odyssey*, 15.123-15.124, trans. Wilson

⁶⁴ Mueller, 2010. Mueller further explains how cloth, to women, provides an essential form of communication. Citing Electra's recognition of her own weaving on Orestes in Aeschylus' *Choepori*, Arete's recognition of her own weaving in the clothing that Nausicaa has given to Odysseus and later Penelope's recognition of Odysseus' description of her handiwork in the *Odyssey*, she argues that textiles are a tool between women for facilitating communication.

⁶⁵ Mueller, 2010. She describes the *xenia* in the *Odyssey* in more depth, citing also the gift that Alcandre of Thebes, Egypt gave to Helen independently of the gifts exchanged by the men.

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a loom. Circe and Calypso, however, Pantelia argues, weave because they are dependent on the men around them.⁶⁶ This is an interesting look into the differences in the *Odyssey*, and certainly seems to reflect the positions that the characters are in.

⁶⁶ Pantelia, 1993

Homer's Iliad

Homer's *Iliad* is an epic about war, following various heroes as they battle for *kleos* and their comrades. It also, however, contains the stories of the women of the nations at war. In the palace at Troy, where the noblewomen are living, weaving is a frequent occurrence. Most notable is a passage in Book 3 wherein Helen weaves the story of the Trojan war:

τὴν δ' εὖρ' ἐν μεγάρῳ: ἦ δὲ μέγαν ἴστων ὕφαινε
δίπλακα πορφυρέην, πολέας δ' ἐνέπασσεν ἀέθλους
Τρώων θ' ἵπποδάμων καὶ Ἀχαιῶν χαλκοχιτώνων,
οὓς ἔθεν εἵνεκ' ἔπασχον ὑπ' Ἄρηος παλαμάων.⁶⁷

[Iris] found her in the palace: she was weaving on the great loom,
a double-folded mantle, gleaming purple; she was weaving in the many contests
of both the Trojan horse-tamers and the bronze-clad Achaeans,
who on account of her suffered at the hands of Ares.

In representations of Helen's story, one factor that is important to look at is how the blame for the Trojan war is represented. The men of the stories often blame her for the war, either by calling her beauty the cause or blaming her for her disloyalty in leaving her husband. This particular passage is relatively unspecific: it mentions that the Achaeans suffered on account of her, but does not mention at whose initiative. In having the Achaeans in the subject of an active sentence, this particular passage seems to include the Achaeans as the ones making these decisions, or at least that it was not Helen's decision; Helen, in weaving, is simply narrating what has happened.

Others have suggested that Helen's weaving of the tale of the war is meant to represent the weaving of the narrative that the author of the *Iliad* does.⁶⁸ Just as the narrator of the poem

⁶⁷ Homer's *Iliad*, 3.125-3.128

⁶⁸ This is a fairly natural conclusion to come to, and many authors have discussed this comparison of Helen to the bard. George Kennedy (1986) discusses, however, the differences in perspective between

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describes the happenings on the battlefield, so Helen weaves in the struggle between the Trojans and the Achaeans. Iris comes to get Helen, and bring her to the ramparts of Troy where she is asked to point out all of the different warriors for king Priam. In this way, Helen goes from weaving the players in the Trojan war to verbally describing them quite quickly. Scholars have used the term *ekphrasis* to describe the art of storytelling through a described piece of artwork, and while Helen's tapestry is not described in great detail this passage certainly accomplishes the function.⁶⁹

Helen is not the only woman in the *Odyssey* depicted as weaving within the palace at Troy. Andromache, an important figure in the palace household, is described thusly:

ἀλλ' ἢ γ' ἰστὸν ὕφαινε μυχῷ δόμου ὑψηλοῖο
δίπλακα πορφυρέην, ἐν δὲ θρόνα ποικίλ' ἔπασσε.

But she was, at any rate, weaving on the loom in the innermost chamber of the lofty house,
a double-folded mantle, gleaming purple, on which she was embroidering many-colored flowers.⁷⁰

This description is remarkably similar to Helen's weaving, down to the same “δίπλακα πορφυρέην” phrase at the beginning of the line. They weave the same cloth, but with very different subjects. Helen weaves the battle, but Andromache weaves flowers. Andromache plays a very different role in the narrative to Helen: while Helen has eschewed many of the typical female roles by forsaking her original husband and child, Andromache is depicted in the text as being a loving and devoted wife to Hektor, the prince and heroic man of Troy. She even is depicted in her role as a mother, greeting Hektor with her son Astyanax as the three of them

Helen and the bard of the *Iliad*: they come to different conclusions about the cause of the war, and Helen's writing has a different motivation (dealing with guilt rather than entertainment).

⁶⁹ Kennedy, 1986

⁷⁰ Homer's *Iliad*, 22.440-22.441

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share a touching moment. Despite this domestic bliss, however, Hektor is actively fighting in a war, something that Andromache tries to persuade him out of but over which she ultimately has no control.

Pantelia argues that Andromache's weaving represents her attempts to keep the house stable. While she waits for Hektor, she does what she is supposed to as a woman and weaves; that is her duty while Hektor's is to fight, and perhaps as long as she keeps weaving, Hektor will keep fighting. This idea is emphasized by how she drops the shuttle upon hearing the news of his death:⁷¹

κωκυτοῦ δ' ἤκουσε καὶ οἰμωγῆς ἀπὸ πύργου:
τῆς δ' ἔλελίχθη γυῖα, χαμαὶ δέ οἱ ἔκπεσε κερκίς:

She heard wails and lamentation from the tower:
her limbs trembled, and the shuttle fell from her to the ground.⁷²

This striking depiction of the fallen shuttle marks Andromache giving up on her attempt to keep order, knowing that her husband has died.

The Trojan palace is not the only place in the *Iliad* where weaving is mentioned. In contrast to the royal women of the Trojan household, in the first lines of the poem Agamemnon mentions weaving in a threat to Chryseis, a slave woman whose father is attempting to free her. Agamemnon says,

πρὶν μιν καὶ γῆρας ἔπεισιν
ἡμετέρῳ ἐνὶ οἴκῳ ἐν Ἄργεϊ τηλόθι πάτρης
ἴστων ἐποιχομένην καὶ ἐμὸν λέχος ἀντιώσασαν

And *I* will not free her before she comes upon old age,
in our house in Argos, far from the fatherland,
plying the loom and coming to my bed.⁷³

⁷¹ Pantelia, 1993, p.496

⁷² Homer's *Iliad*, 22.447-22.448

⁷³ Homer's *Iliad*, 1.29-1.31

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Agamemnon directly mentions the loom as a domestic task that Chryseis will be forced to do until she is old, followed directly by a mention of the sexual services she will be required to perform. Does Agamemnon reference the loom because it was a typical duty that a slave would have to perform, or is it meaningful in that it is a reminder of an activity that she should have been performing in her homeland, but would have to perform in Argos instead? Regardless, this scene is an important reminder that weaving is not only relevant to the noblewomen of the story, and represents a task that all classes of women would have performed.

Roman Mythology

Roman mythology was not identical to Greek mythology, but it had many similarities and co-opted many of the gods and tales for its purposes. Many of the gods changed names: Athena became Minerva, Zeus Jupiter, Hermes Mercury, et cetera. The gods had some differences in personality, like Minerva's shift from primarily a war goddess to one associated with crafts.

Roman history also plays an important role in understanding the literature of the era. Roman politics play into the decisions of the authors, who are often pressed to talk about certain subjects or discourage other behavior. Augustan family values shaped the authorship of his era; authors were bribed or threatened with exile to encourage the youth not to stray from his ideals. Augustus himself was known for encouraging his family to display weaving; according to legend, his own garments were woven by members of his household, and he took care that his female descendants would learn weaving. Indeed, anecdotally, passerbys would be able to see Livia and the other women of the household engaged in weaving as they looked into the atrium.⁷⁴ Augustus seems to connect weaving to the ideal of a moral woman, so it would be interesting to see how the mythology reflects this notion.

Weaving in the Roman world was not necessarily entirely a female-dominated industry. Epitaphs from the Roman world have references to guilds of men who worked in the textile industry, using the term *lanarius*.⁷⁵ While these epitaphs do not give us the full scope of the trade, commonalities among these inscriptions reveal the communities to be tight knit; they often are providing for their communities even posthumously. The women referenced in inscriptions relating to *lana* are mentioned in a different light. Some are mentioned in the context of the larger industry, under various titles, and may be included in the larger groups with the men; the

⁷⁴ Suetonius' *Augustus* 64, as cited in Freisenbruch, 2010, p. 49

⁷⁵ EDH 007100, EDH 024979, EDH 019688

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grammar can be unclear.⁷⁶ Others, however, primarily noblewomen, are entirely different; in these inscriptions, the women are listed as spinning wool as a positive character trait, often in the context of other moral virtues or beauty standards.⁷⁷ While these also range in their meaning, making it hard to fully understand the social context for these mentions, we get the sense that, in Roman times, weaving was at least a historical/cultural holdover indicating virtue for women.

The question, then, is whether that association is displayed too in the mythology. Given that the Roman myths would have drawn from the Greek ones, we can interpret that some of their mythological doings and morals would have been drawn from the Greek versions, with archetypes like Penelope as the morally upright weaver. In examining Roman versions of old myths, or their new stories, however, we can get a sense for how their morals shaped the work.

⁷⁶ Lovén, 2013

⁷⁷ CIL VI.15346, CIL VI.34045, EDH 030715, CIL VI.10230, EDH 027069

Ovid's Arachne

The earliest record of the full story of Arachne comes to us from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which Ovid lays out a tale of hubris and not heeding the gods. Ovid's account is the first account which tells the full story as it is commonly known: Arachne is mentioned earlier in Virgil's *Georgics*, but not by name: just as "invisa Minervae laxos in foribus suspendit aranea cassis": "spider, hateful to Minerva, suspended in the doorway in a loose web."⁷⁸ Others have ascribed depictions to Arachne's story, such as in Figure 5. Though the museum interprets this vase as the story of Arachne and Minerva, the only evidence is that there are two figures weaving, one taller than the other and so therefore must represent a god and a mortal. I would argue that there may be other explanations for this vase, but that even if it does represent an early version of the myth we cannot say with any concreteness whether the myth still retained similarities by Ovid's era. Exactly what sources Ovid had for the story are lost to us, but the way in which he depicts it can reveal some interesting aspects of his time.

⁷⁸ Vergil's *Georgics*, IV.246-247



Figure 5: Corinthian Aryballos (580-560 BCE). Located in the Archaeological Museum of Ancient Corinth, which describes the vase as depicting the contest between Arachne and Minerva.⁷⁹

Arachne, described particularly as being from ordinary origin with no special birth, is special entirely due to her own skill with the textile arts. Ovid describes Arachne's pride, for Arachne insisted that Minerva had no hand in teaching her the skill for which she was so renowned. Arachne challenged Minerva to a contest, and the two set up their looms. The process of this action, as well as Arachne's previous spinning and needlework, is described in depth:

Haud mora, constituunt diversis partibus ambae
et gracili geminas intendunt stamine telas
(tela iugo iuncta est, stamen secernit harundo)
inseritur medium radiis subtemen acutis,

⁷⁹ Corinthian Aryballos (580-560 BCE). Located in the Archaeological Museum of Ancient Corinth, CP 2038.
<https://www.corinth-museum.gr/en/collection-item/aryballos-with-a-representation-of-the-myth-about-the-battle-between-arachne-and-athena/>

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quod digiti expediunt, atque inter stamina ductum
percusso paviunt insecti pectine dentes.⁸⁰

Without delay both place twin looms on opposite sides and stretch thin warp threads on them. (The web was joined to the cross-beam, the rod separates the warp). The weft is inserted in the midst by the sharp shuttles, which fingers prepare, and having been led between the warp threads, having been thrown, the teeth of the divided comb beat.

Ovid's particular description of their process is interesting in a few ways. One is the vocabulary he chooses to use, in that many of the words invoke imagery of violence. *Tela*, in a different grammatical context, could mean spear. *Percusso*, outside of a specific weaving context, means to strike; *paviunt* is directly a violent word. The question, then, is whether these terms were commonly associated with violence, whether weaving was seen as an inherently violent action, or whether Ovid chose this language specifically to fit the story of Arachne. If the former, the parallels between weaving and warfare as women's and men's domains, respectively, fall into place. Is weaving a way that women can exercise their own violence? If this language is specifically chosen to represent the contest in a violent light, however, we may gain a better understanding of Ovid's presentation of the events. The violent imagery of the weaving then invokes imagery of ancient sporting contests, with perhaps the subtle mention of the javelin and throwing terms leading the reader to imagine the contest in the light of an athletic game.⁸¹ Minerva and Arachne compete, on the surface, in a way which draws on their skill as craftsmen. Just as Minerva has double aspects as craftsman and war goddess, perhaps this contest is meant to remind us of Minerva's warlike nature and prowess with both the shuttle and the spear.

⁸⁰ Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, VI.53-58

⁸¹ If this contest is meant to parallel an ancient athletic game, like the homeric games in the *Iliad*, perhaps Ovid is trying to say something about the power dynamics of the event. In the homeric world, honors were automatically bestowed to the highest-ranking officials. If intentional, maybe Ovid is invoking this knowledge as a reminder that Minerva had won the contest long before it had begun simply due to her status.

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This concept of violence as an underlying theme ties in especially to the content of their tapestries. Each tapestry contained stories of gods and mortals; the natures of those stories, however, depicted opposite characteristics of the Olympians. Minerva chose to depict her own victory over Neptune for patronage of Athens, displaying the gods in all their splendor. She also included scenes of the gods smiting mortals (or rather, because it is the *Metamorphoses*, transforming them).⁸² Arachne chose a different route. She chose to weave on her tapestry scenes of the gods assaulting mortals, among them Europa and Medusa. To punish Arachne for her insolence, Minerva strikes Arachne repeatedly with her shuttle. Arachne attempts to hang herself, but at the last moment Minerva transforms her into a spider, forever attached to her thread.

The stories that Arachne depicts are inherently violent acts. There is something to the imagery of her fiercely beating the weft into the tapestry, building up the image of the assaults the gods have committed. This creation through violence seems like a Roman ideal: Arachne is not passive in her actions, but through her violence things are made. Minerva, in the end of the poem, also uses violence to destroy this tapestry that Arachne has created. She physically tears the tapestry, removing the scenes of wrongdoing from the record. As readers, we never see the result of this action, whether the mortals agreed with Minerva or were inspired by Arachne's rebellion; imagining this story in the context of the socio-political climate of Ovid's time, however, may provide some insight.

There is depth to this story, which is complicated by the historical context of the author. Ovid, born in 43 BCE, lived through great political turmoil. He came at the tail end of the Augustan poets, and so looking to leave his mark had to distinguish his work from theirs. The *Metamorphoses* was written between 2 and 8 CE, after the death of Virgil and the other

⁸² This foreshadows Arachne's own impending transformation.

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‘greats’.⁸³ Alan Griffin points out that while other epic works of the generation focus on the glorification of the Roman state, the *Metamorphoses* is more focused on the everyday life as viewed through mythology; for example, Jupiter lives on the Augustan Palatine hill, and Circe oversees a factory much like a Roman lady would.⁸⁴ Given this context, it is interesting to examine the presentation of Arachne’s story through the lens of Augustan Rome.

Just as in other works, Ovid’s *Arachne* has been compared to the process of “weaving words”; Byron Harries interprets Arachne as fitting the model of a poet rather than a weaver. To begin, he points out the use of *ekphrasis* which he describes as modeled after a Virgilian passage of a woman leaving with her seducer.⁸⁵ Aside from that, Harries compares the story of Arachne’s self-made fame, and non-noble birth, to that of Ovid’s own. The process of judging Arachne’s work also mirrored Ovid’s own experiences with criticism.⁸⁶ Mostly, however, there is a relevant comparison regarding their relationship with authority. Ovid, soon to be exiled by Augustus for his poetry, displayed many of the same hubristic qualities that Arachne did. Harries compares this to Ovid’s depiction of Calliope, which encourages careful flattery; it seems in the end, though, that Ovid fell into the same patterns as the weaver.⁸⁷

The material of Minerva and Arachne’s respective tapestries provides a narrative point of contention and, in Minerva’s case, a warning to Arachne. In addition, however, Arachne’s tapestry is her main form of expression in the poem; she uses it to display the injustices she sees in the world, which mostly revolve around the gods assaulting humans. This is particularly

⁸³ Griffin, 1997

⁸⁴ Griffin, 1997, p.62

⁸⁵ Harries, 1990, p.68. The virgilian passage, a description of Aeneas’ cloak, is said to be modeled after passages from Theocritus and Appolonius. The use of textiles specifically for ekphrasis, however, seems reminiscent of Helen’s weaving in book III of the Iliad.

⁸⁶ Harries, 1990, pp.74-75. The discussion of Livor, specifically, ties this passage to Ovid’s own experience.

⁸⁷ Harries, 1990, p. 77

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interesting when taken in the context of women in mythology using their weaving as a form of agency. Arachne is self-made, and weaving and textile arts are what have gotten her attention and a platform. That she is using this platform to point out the cruel nature of the gods, then, is significant. Penelope's use of her weaving gave her agency in a direct way, but Arachne's tapestry seems more of a statement than an act designed to save her. Using tapestry to point out injustices seems more of a Roman theme, like in the case of Philomela.

Ovid's Philomela

Philomela's story, like that of Arachne's, comes down to us most famously in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Ovid weaves a tale of a pair of sisters, named Procne and Philomela. Procne gets married to a man named Tereus, and once she has journeyed to her new home she requests a visit from her sister. Tereus goes on a journey to collect Philomela, and once he has collected her he begins to bring her back to Procne. On their way back, however, Tereus becomes overcome with lust and brings Philomela to a remote cabin in the woods. He rapes her, and when Philomela begins to berate him for his actions he grabs her tongue and cuts it off. He leaves her in the cabin under guard, and returns to Procne with tales of Philomela's untimely death. Philomela, alone in the cabin with no voice, has no method of communicating to her sister what has happened. Eventually, she devises a strategy; she begins weaving a tapestry that tells the story of what had happened. She entrusts the tapestry to an unwitting servant and has it sent to Procne.

Procne, upon receiving the tapestry, looks over it and understands what her husband has done. She immediately goes to the cabin to retrieve her sister, and the two of them return to plan revenge on Tereus. They decide on Procne and Tereus' son, Itys, as the best form of revenge. They chop him up and dismember him (Figure 1) and put his flesh into a stew which they feed to Tereus. Tereus, when he understands what has happened, chases Procne and Philomela to a cliff until the gods take pity and turn them all into birds. Procne and Philomela become a nightingale and a swallow respectively, and Tereus a hoopoe.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Ovid *Metamorphoses*, VI.504-675



Figure 5: Philomela Procne preparing to kill Itys.: 490 BCE Attic Wine Cup⁸⁹

The myth itself is much older than Ovid's time, with the earliest record of the nightingale appearing in Homer and Hesiod. A version of the full story, however, was said to be contained in Sophocles' *Tereus*. Only fragments remain of that play, and even those are of uncertain origin.⁹⁰ However, those lines can provide some valuable insight. While there is much debate over a number of aspects of the fragmentary work, the weaving scenes are of most interest to this discussion. David Fitzpatrick brings up the idea of the prop of the tapestry, or embroidery, and whether this would have been a visual or textual piece. Arguments for a textual tapestry include that it would have been less likely to lead to Philomela getting caught, and that it may have provided an interesting juxtaposition between Philomela's Athenian literacy and Tereus' barbaric nature. In addition, words would require less graphic detail than a tapestry depicting what had

⁸⁹ Attic Wine Cup, c. 490 BCE.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Philomela_Procne_preparing_to_kill_Itys.jpg

⁹⁰ Fitzpatrick, 2001

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happened to her.⁹¹ The lack of direct evidence, given the fragmentary nature of the work, raises yet more questions about whether the details of the story were Ovid's invention or whether they came from an earlier time.

Philomela, in Ovid's retelling, shares similarities with other stories in the *Metamorphoses*, namely Arachne. Their tapestries both depicted the crimes of males, specifically sexual assault. While the intended purpose of these tapestries was different (Arachne's to prove a point, Philomela's to expose her attacker) they both contained violent scenes of a similar nature. Another interesting point of comparison is the women to whom they show their weaving. Procne immediately feels for her sister, and goes to find her so that the two of them can plot revenge on Tereus together. Athena, however, scorns Arachne's own version of events. Perhaps it is that Arachne dared to insult the gods, who play by different rules than the mortals. Perhaps Athena reacted to Arachne's insolence rather than the specific sexually violent nature of the pictures on the tapestry. The comparison is unmistakable, still; Athena rips up the tapestry and beats Arachne with a spindle for her daring.⁹²

In light of this reaction, perhaps Procne's own reaction is meant to be a juxtaposition. There is no moment of doubt, only an immediate call to action to retrieve her sister and comfort her. Given that Procne's whole world would have been turned upside down with this knowledge, she doesn't ignore what is in front of her.

As with the other tales of weaving in mythology, Philomela is using her tapestry as a voice with which to speak. In this version, however, she has no other option. With her tongue cut out, she has no other way of communicating with her sister; the act of weaving in this

⁹¹ Fitzpatrick, 2001

⁹² Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, VI.129-133

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circumstance is her only form of speech. Given the “weaving words” metaphors utilized in previous myths, this adaptation seems a direct comparison of the two acts.

Ovid’s description of Philomela’s weaving emphasizes a few important themes in the story. The scene where Philomela weaves and sends her fabric is as follows:

...Grande doloris
ingenium est, miserisque venit sollertia rebus.
Stamina barbarica suspendit callida tela
purpureasque notas filis intexuit albis,
indicium sceleris; perfectaue tradidit uni,
utque ferat dominae gestu rogat: illa rogata
pertulit ad Procnen, nec scit, quid tradat in illis.⁹³

There is great genius in grief, and cleverness comes from miserable things. She hangs the warp, practiced, on the foreign web, and weaves purple marks into white thread, proof of wickedness; having accomplished this, gave it to a servant, and she asked with gestures that she might bear it to her mistress. The servant, having been asked, conveyed it to Procne; she did not know what she carried in it.

The beginning of the passage discusses grief, which is a motif underlying the whole story of Procne and Philomela. Their father was grieved to lose his girls, Procne and Tereus’ marriage was underlied by omens of loss, and Procne and Philomela are grieved by Tereus’ actions. Ovid’s rather poignant quote about how genius and cunning can come from grief are also reminiscent of other stories, in particular Penelope’s in Homer’s *Odyssey*. Penelope, in a perpetual state of not-quite-mourning,⁹⁴ uses weaving as a cunning method of saving herself. Her cunning is comparable to Odysseus’, and therefore Athena’s. Ovid’s description of Philomela’s cunning here is reminiscent of the Homeric variation, even if their reasons for grief are different.

⁹³ Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, VI.574-580

⁹⁴ Penelope refuses to proceed as if Odysseus has died, using her unweaving as a way to fend off her potential new husbands. Aside from establishing her as a loyal and morally upright wife, the theme of grief is inherently connected to her act. She laments frequently, prompting her son Telemachus to berate her for her crying. Even the subject matter of her weaving relates to grief; she weaves a funeral shroud for her father-in-law Laertes, preemptively. Penelope’s weaving is a way of staving off grief, on multiple counts.

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The depiction of the weaving process itself is remarkably shorter than Ovid's descriptions in his story of Arachne. Ovid mentions the *stamina* and the *tela*, like in Arachne, but doesn't describe the loom or details of the piece. Instead, he uses the term *barbarica*. The line is somewhat vague, but the idea of barbarism does also appear earlier in the tale. Tereus is constantly described as foreign, hence his baser and more grotesque instincts. Perhaps this mention of a foreign loom is in reference to the faraway land that Philomela finds herself in, or perhaps the weaving technology itself is different. Philomela's weaving is described as "purple marks into white thread." The word *notas* is used for marks; the question, then, is whether these are drawings or written language. If it was meant to indicate words, it adds credence to Fitzpatrick's theory of Sophocles' *Tereus*.⁹⁵ The later description of Procne's reception of the tapestry as a "*carmen*" also supports this idea.

Ovid's depictions of the characters provide an interesting look into their reflections of culture. Tereus, of Thrace, often has his foreignness associated with his negative character traits. He is mentioned in an animalistic and base sense, not in control of his own impulses.⁹⁶ He is also depicted as upsetting the proper order of things,⁹⁷ and in his moment of eating Itys he is described as lounging on his foreign throne.⁹⁸ His barbarism is emphasized in the story, providing a contrast to Philomela's Athenian virtue. Is this another example, then, of an association between virtue and weaving? Philomela would fall into the pattern, then, of upright Roman women who weave. The comparison to Lucretia is especially apt: Livy depicts Lucretia as weaving with her ladies, in opposition to the Etruscan women who go out partying.⁹⁹ The later rape of Lucretia further serves a parallel between her and Philomela as virtuous women who

⁹⁵ Fitzpatrick, 2001

⁹⁶ Ovid *Metamorphoses*, e.g. VI.459-460, 515, 533, 550

⁹⁷ Ovid *Metamorphoses* VI.581

⁹⁸ Ovid *Metamorphoses* VI.650-652

⁹⁹ Livy, *History of Rome 1*, I.LVII

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were done wrong by men of foreign descent.¹⁰⁰ This story, of Philomela's virtue, upholds the Augustan ideal of weaving as a pious act¹⁰¹ and creates an "othering" dynamic with foreigners, in a time where Rome's expansion was sure to be causing strife about nationality and who was considered to be "Roman."

It is also important to analyze Ovid's writing style in how he chooses to depict these instances of violence against women. David Libatique,¹⁰² in analyzing Ovid's writing in the context of the "Me Too" movement, mentions a few crucial aspects of Ovid's writing. Analyzing the story of Tereus, Philomela, and Procne through the lens of power and privilege, he analyzes the language Ovid uses to describe the dynamic between Tereus and Philomela; Philomela is depicted as an object which Tereus sees, with narrative focus on her body as he sees it. However, Philomela also has narrative power; she gives a speech, unique in its reminiscence as a tragic heroine, while Tereus' direct speech is limited to two short phrases. Amy Richlin also notes the tongue as a stand-in for women's experience; in the scene where Tereus grabs the tongue and cuts it out, the object of the tongue is not revealed till the end of the sentence, leaving it ambiguous until that point.¹⁰³ Libatique mentions Philomela's eventual reclamation of her voice through the tapestry as one that mirrors the aims of the modern #MeToo movement, and so in that sense it is interesting that Ovid displays the case like this.

Overall, Philomela's weaving supports her larger character distinctions of being a clever and virtuous Athenian woman. She is concerned about the mores of her culture, calls on her own gods, and wants her own family dynamics to be unmarred. Her use of weaving serves to support these traits. Her methods are initially in line with these values, too. Weaving as a method of

¹⁰⁰ Sextus Tarquinius, who raped Lucretia, was said to be of Etruscan descent.

¹⁰¹ See Augustus' insistence that his female descendants learn to weave, and anecdote about Livia weaving, Freisenbruch, 2010, p. 49

¹⁰² Libatique, 2021

¹⁰³ Richlin, 1991, on Ovid *Metamorphoses* VI.555-556

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talking to her sister supported her trying to fix their family dynamics. Their actions after that fact, however, were far more violent. The story is filled with violence, from Tereus' rape and subsequent tongue-cutting to Procne and Philomela's murder of Itys. The weaving itself doesn't have violent language, in contrast to Arachne's story, but the rest of the myth certainly carries these themes.

This myth is possibly the clearest example of a woman using weaving in order to further her agency. Philomela has no other way of communicating with the outside world to free herself from her prison, and to get revenge on her attacker. It is also interesting that her use of agency was to communicate with another woman, rather than to appease men like in Penelope's case. The bond between the sisters, as women, is the focus of this story.

Conclusion

Both the Greek and Roman myths reinforce the idea that weaving was important to the ancient world, specifically in displaying how women used weaving as a form of agency. From Penelope's woven scheme to Helen's woven story to Arachne's storytelling of the gods' misdeeds to Philomela's communication about her trauma, these women used weaving to accomplish things for themselves that they otherwise would not be able to do. The use of weaving in these stories seems to reflect a larger understanding of weaving as a woman's domain, reflecting historical records of everyday ancients.

As I was reading these accounts of weaving, I became very curious about the process of weaving in the ancient Greek style. In order to better understand the descriptions of the technology in the ancient texts, I decided to build an ancient Greek style upright warp-weighted loom. I used, as the basis for my construction, the guide written by Susan Edmonds, Gregory Nagy, and Prudence Jones at Rutgers University.¹⁰⁴ The guide laid out exactly what materials were necessary to construct a model loom, and I followed those instructions closely.

To begin, I assembled the frame of the loom, taking two 6ft 2x3s and laying them parallel to one another.¹⁰⁵ I then tied, with twine, two 4' 1.5" diameter dowels to the top and middle, completing the frame of the loom (Figure 7).

¹⁰⁴ *How to get Started Spinning and Weaving, n.d.*

¹⁰⁵ The process to get them to be 6 ft long was more of an adventure: the lumber store assured me they could cut the beams from 8 ft. to 6 ft., but their saw broke halfway through the first one. I was able to finish sawing them on my living room floor, which was an experience.

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Figure 7: Loom Frame

Next, I created the heading band. The heading band is designed as the starter fabric, to get all of the warp threads in order, but is not itself woven on the loom. As seen in Figure 8, initial weft threads are tied together with tension created, separated from each other with a shedding device (the brown cardboard with holes in it in Figure 8). Then, the warp threads (white, in Figure 8) are drawn through and measured to a given length (7 feet) and tied off in bundles.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ My method of measuring was to loop the white warp threads around a coffee bottle to keep them in place: the ancient method, I'm sure!!

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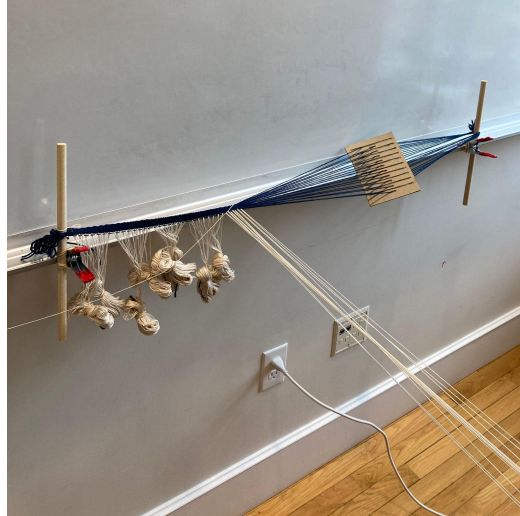


Figure 8: Heading Band

The heading band is then sewn onto the uppermost beam of the loom, with the white threads hanging down (Figure 9).



Figure 9: Heading Band Attached to the Loom

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From there, the strings are divided in two, and half are sewn onto the bar (Figure 10), and the other half are tied with individual threads to another bar, called the Heddle rod (Figure 11).



Figure 10: Threads Attached to Shed Bar



Figure 11: Threads Attached to Heddle Rod

The strings are tied to weights, which provide the tension for weaving (Figure 12).



Figure 12: Warp attached to the loom weights¹⁰⁷

Eventually, the loom was functional, and I and my friends were able to weave some rows (Figure 13)

¹⁰⁷ As is visible in the image, I began by constructing clay loom weights, but they were not heavy enough to create the sheds. Instead, I transitioned to water-filled bottles which provided enough weight to successfully weave.



Figure 13: Woven Fabric

In its neutral position, the shed was open to allow the shuttle to pass through (Figure 14). When the heddle rod was pulled out, opposite strings were in front allowing the shuttle to cross over the other set of threads (Figure 15).

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Figure 14: Open Shed



Figure 15: Other Shed, created by pulling the heddle bar

This model, although taller than me, was scaled down from what an ancient loom probably was like. Because of that, I was able to weave by myself. I did, however, find that the process was so much faster when there were two people working together, which makes sense given that that was the ancient custom. Having completed this process, I found myself in a much more understanding position when translating the ancient texts. The terminology made more sense, and I was able to picture the actions of the women setting up and weaving at the looms. It was a very valuable experience, and put me in the mindset of an ancient weaver.

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Figures

- Figure 1: Terracotta Lekythos, ca. 550-530 BCE. Attributed to the Amasis Painter, The MET 31.11.10 <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/253348>
- Figure 2: White-ground Oinochoe, ca. 490-470 BCE. Attributed to the Brygos Painter, The British Museum 1873,0820.304 https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1873-0820-304
- Figure 3: Parthenon East Frieze Segment ca. 447-433 BCE. Attributed to the Pheidias. Displayed in the British Museum. Image from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Peplos_scene_BM_EV.JPG.

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Figure 4: Attic Red Figure Skyphos ca. 430 BCE. Displayed in the Museo Civico, Chiusi: Drawing from Furtwängler-Reichhold, *Griechische Vasenmalerei: Auswahl hervorragender Vasenbilder*, Tafeln 141-150. München: Bruckmann, 1921. pl. 142, 1921 (print); 1993 (rescan). Accessed from Perseus.tufts.edu as Chiusi, 1831.
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/artifact?name=Chiusi+1831&object=Vase>

Figure 5: Corinthian Aryballos (580-560 BCE). Located in the Archaeological Museum of Ancient Corinth, CP 2038.
<https://www.corinth-museum.gr/en/collection-item/aryballos-with-a-representation-of-the-myth-about-the-battle-between-arachne-and-athena/>

Figure 6: Attic Wine Cup, c. 490 BCE.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Philomela_Procne_preparing_to_kill_Itys.jpg

Figures 7-15: Taken by Molly McLeod