

## Articles

### Literature and Linguistics

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#### The Woman with Spindles in the Luwian-Phoenician Inscriptions from Karatepe

##### Abstract

The Karatepe inscriptions contain an intriguing image of a woman walking fearlessly with spindles. This image builds on the symbolism of the spindle in the ancient Near East as an emblem of femininity and highlights the gendered language of the passage in which it occurs. In the context, the figure of the woman with spindles is contraposed with the image of the fearful man. The contrast between them portrays the magnitude of the positive changes accomplished by Azitawada, the ruler who commissioned the inscriptions.

##### Keywords

Karatepe Inscription, *KAI 26*, Phoenician, Gender Roles.

Bilingual inscriptions found in 1946 in Karatepe (Anatolia, modern Turkey), contributed much to the study of Luwian and Phoenician languages.<sup>1</sup> Thanks to the efforts of several generations of scholars, they are generally well understood and their translations are agreed upon. However, because of cultural distance, which separates the ancient authors of these texts from their modern readers, some images and expressions require further elucidation. One of these is the image of the woman walking fearlessly with spindles.

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<sup>1</sup> For the basic information on Karatepe and the inscriptions, see Bron 1979: 1–11. For their full edition, see Çambel 1999.

Throughout the history of research, the Phoenician text that contains this image has been subjected to much debate because of several linguistic difficulties it presents. The passage in which it occurs reads:

<sup>1</sup>[...] *wkn bymty bkl* <sup>2</sup>*gbl* *'mq 'dn lmmš* *'šmš* <sup>3</sup>*w'd mb'y wbmqmm* *'š kn* <sup>4</sup>*lpnm*  
*nšt m* *'š yšt* *'dm llkt* <sup>5</sup>*drk wbymty* *'nk* *'št tk lhḏ*<sup>6</sup>*yl plkm b'br b'l w'lm.*<sup>2</sup>

The discussions concerned in particular the root of the word *tk*, the form *lhḏy*, and the meaning of the word *plkm*.<sup>3</sup> For the latter, early scholarship opted for “districts” while the meaning “spindles” prevailed later on. The translation of Schade presents well the consensus that has emerged:

“And so it was in my days, in all the borders of the valley of Adana, from the rising of the sun to its setting, in places that were formerly feared, where a man would fear to walk the road, that in my very days a woman could walk by alone with spindles, by the grace of Baal and the gods” (Schade 2006: 39).

Because scholarly attention focused on philological difficulties, the meaning of the image of the women with spindles has remained at the margins of the discussion. The present note aims at elucidating it further by answering a seemingly simple question: why does the author speak specifically about “spindles”?

The recent study by Ilan Peled (2016) is very helpful in answering to this question.<sup>4</sup> As justification for its relevance, let us observe that our passage employs gendered language. It obviously occurs in the use of gender explicit terms *'š* “man” and *'št* “woman.” Even more important is the exploitation of stereotypes based on gender: strength and bravery in the case of the man,

<sup>2</sup> For the Phoenician text and its division, see no. 26 in Donner and Röllig 2002: 6–7 (= *KAI* 26). For the delimitation of the passage and its structure, I follow Schade 2006: 39–41. The alternative structure and translation proposed in Younger 1998: 17–18 miss the parallelism between the male and female figure in this passage. Röllig 1999: 53 connects lines 1–2 with the preceding phrase. For him, they describe the extent of the region in which Azitawada settled Danunians. At the same time, he links lines 3–6 into one unit.

<sup>3</sup> For a synopsis of early proposals, see Younger 1998: 33. Based on his philological considerations, Lipiński translates the passage as follows: “in my days a woman was able to rejoice in spinning the spindles” and comments on its content: “this was obviously an image of a peaceful country” (Lipiński 1974: 48). In spite of the lack of a wide acceptance, one should also mention an interesting interpretation of the passage by van den Branden (1983: 169): “en mes jours, j'imposais soumission par mon glaive, parcourant les provinces, sur l'ordre de Ba'al et des dieux.” For an overview of scholarly discussions on the problematic words, see Bron 1979: 77–85. That the passage indeed speaks about “spindles” is supported “by the pictographic nature of the logogram” (Hawkins 2000: 62) in the parallel passage of Luwian version. The sign in question is no. 305 in Payne 2010: 182. It represents a spindle or an object similar to it.

<sup>4</sup> A succinct overview of the evidence is also available in Peled 2014.

weakness and vulnerability in the case of the woman. The passage plays on these stereotypes by reversing them. It portrays the man, naturally destined to be the fearless hero, as scared of certain places to the extent of being unable to walk there. On the contrary, the woman, who by nature requires help and protection, strolls in the same places peacefully. Given that these associations are invoked already by the terms “man” and “woman”, the imagery employed in the Karatepe inscription II: 3–6 would be understandable even without mention of the spindle. It follows that its mention must have had a special significance to the author of the inscription. In order to fully appreciate the piece, it is necessary to take cognizance of the symbolism of the spindle in the ancient Near East, especially among the Hittites.<sup>5</sup>

Being used in spinning, an activity performed in traditional societies by women, the spindle evokes femininity in general. This association explains the occurrence of the man carrying it in Mesopotamian lexical lists together with male cultic personnel of ambiguous sexual identity (*assinnu*, *kalû*, *kurgarrû*, *pilpilû*, *parû*, and SAG.UR.SAG).<sup>6</sup> Because these lexical texts involve lists of terms, it is impossible to further elucidate the nature of this association on their basis. Nevertheless, a Neo-Assyrian Nanaya Hymn of Sargon II seems to attest to a ritual use of the spindle by members of one of the aforementioned categories of the cult attendants: “The *kurgarrûs* ease her heart with spindles” (Livingstone 1989: 13). The association of the spindle with femininity may also explain why Akkullānu, a male, wears it with the intention of obtaining divine favor for the king. In a letter to the king, probably Assurbanipal, he says:

[G]ood health to the king, my lord! May the gods Nabû and Marduk bless the king, my lord! It is my duty to praise them; I do it for the sake of the life of the king, my lord. Perhaps the king, my lord, says, “What is (this) praise?” It is a spindle (symbol); I wear (it) three days for the goddess Venus (Parpola 2007a: 263).

Given that in Mesopotamia Venus had a bisexual nature because she changed sexes depending on the position of the planet in relation to the sun, it is probable that Akkullānu’s behavior involved a ritualistic gender manipulation. However,

<sup>5</sup> The Hittite sources are the most relevant because the Karatepe inscriptions come from the Iron Age Anatolia, the region whose population and culture display some continuity with the Late Bronze Age Hittite world. See Bryce 2012: 30–31. The reference to the Karatepe inscription (and other relevant texts treated here, too) in the context of Hittite rituals was made already a half century ago by Hoffner. However, he did not perceive its gender symbolism and interpreted the spindle as a part of imagery of peace and security, as well as a fashion choice: “Asitawanda gives us the impression that in times of domestic security a well-dressed woman might even have a spindle in her hand as she took a stroll, just as a well-dressed American woman fifty years ago would carry a parasol” (Hoffner 1966: 333). This reference was ignored in the subsequent scholarship on the Karatepe inscriptions.

<sup>6</sup> For the references to the sources, see Peled 2016: 273–274.

I doubt that it consisted in “partaking in orgiastic ceremonies of the Ištar cult,” as it was stated by Parpola (2007b: 315), without adducing additional evidence.<sup>7</sup> Another instance of the use of the spindle in a ritual appears to occur in an Old Babylonian letter, but its tenor and content do not contain any clue to its meaning.<sup>8</sup>

That the spindle is the symbol of femininity is most explicit in Hittite rituals. In one of them, performed “if some man has no reproductive power or is not a man vis-à-vis a woman” (Hoffner 1987: 277), Paskuwatti describes the actions that she undertakes in order to cure the afflicted man:

I build gates of reeds. I tie them together with red and white wool. I place a spindle and a distaff in the patient’s [hand], and he comes under the gates. When he steps forward through the gates, I take the spindle and distaff away from him. I give him a bow (and) [arro]w(s), and say (to him) all the while: “I have just taken femininity away from you and given you masculinity in return. You have cast off the (sexual) behavior expected [of woman]; [you have taken] to yourself the behavior expected of men! (Hoffner 1987: 277).

In the Paskuwatti’s ritual, taking away the spindle magically removes femininity. The spindle can also serve to transfer femininity to males as in the following ritual curse in which the officiant asks Ishtar:

Take away from the (enemy) men manhood, courage, vigor and *māl*, maces, bows, arrows (and) dagger(s), and bring them into Ḫatti. For those (i.e., the enemy) place in the hand the distaff and spindle of a woman and dress them like women. Put the scarf on them and take away from them your favor (Collins 2003a: 164).

The use of the spindle as the symbol of femininity is also evident in the Hittite oath ceremony of the new soldiers who should lose their virility in the case of treachery:

They bring a woman’s garment, a distaff and a spindle and they break an arrow (lit., reed). You say to them as follows: “What are these? Are they not the dress of a woman? We are holding them for the oath-taking. He who transgresses these oaths and takes part in evil against the king, queen and princes may these oath deities make (that) man (into) a woman. May they make his troops women. Let them dress them as women. Let them put a scarf on them. Let them break

<sup>7</sup> For the nature of Venus and additional comments on Akkullānu’s letter, see Koch-Westenholz 1995: 125–127.

<sup>8</sup> See letter no. 89 in van Soldt 1990: 75–77. For other occurrences of the spindle (GIŠ.BAL) in Mesopotamian texts, see Roth 2005: 371–373.

the bows, arrows, and weapons in their hands and let them place the distaff and spindle in their hands (instead) (Collins 2003b: 166).

The symbolism of the spindle occurs in the Hebrew Bible, too. In the famous poem that extols the virtues of the ideal woman (Proverbs 31: 10–31), the same pair of objects as in the Hittite texts occur: the distaff and spindle. It is with them that “the women of valor” occupied her hands:

יָדֶיהָ שִׁלְחָה בְּכִישׁוֹר יְכַפֵּיהָ תִּמְכּוּ פָלָה:

She put her hands to the distaff, and her hands held the spindle (Proverbs 31: 19).

By attesting to the same word-pair as the Hittite texts, this verse confirms that the use of the spindle and distaff as the symbol of femininity belongs to common imagery, based on human experience rather than a culturally specific topos.<sup>9</sup> The importance of this verse lies also in confirming the meaning of the word פָּלָה in Hebrew, which occurs only twice in the Bible.<sup>10</sup> Because in the above verse it stands in a synonymic parallelism to the word כִּישׁוֹר “distaff,” it stands to reason that it indeed means “spindle” rather than “crutches,” the meaning proposed for another occurrence of this word in 2 Samuel 3:29.<sup>11</sup> The latter verse appears to use the spindle in the context of cursing, like the Hittite texts above. Denouncing Joab’s responsibility for killing Abner, David pronounces this course:

<sup>9</sup> The Karatepe inscriptions and the biblical poem of Proverbs 31: 10–31 are similar not only because of the mention of the spindle but also because of the image of the independent and confident woman. The spindle may evoke the women status related to their crucial role in the production of textiles. This status is evident, for example, during the Old Assyrian period. In this time, by producing cloths and managing business at home, women played a vital part in commerce, which depended on textile industry. Their participation in entrepreneurship is evident also in other periods of Mesopotamian history (Stol 2016: 381–387). According to the portrayal of Proverbs 31: 10–31, the wealth and prosperity of a family depended on the input of the women, including the production of textiles. This picture conforms to what is known about the women in ancient Israel (for this topic, see Meyers 2016). Seen in light of the economic importance of textile industry, the mention of the spindle in the Karatepe inscriptions may additionally depict the woman as financially secure and independent because of her occupation and income associated with it.

<sup>10</sup> There is also a homonymous word פָּלָה “district” that occurs only in chapter 3 of Nehemiah. It is generally considered a loanword from Akkadian. See Mankowski 2000: 129–130. Given that the word פָּלָה has existed in the Hebrew vocabulary, its use with the meaning of “district” technically constitutes a case of loan shift, not of loanword. On loan shifts in general, see Hock and Joseph 2009: 251. Additionally, the word פָּלָה is written in the Hebrew script on the handle of a krater found in Tel Malḥata. The meaning of this epigraph and its relation to the object itself are obscure. See Beit-Arieh 2015: 502.

<sup>11</sup> For an exhaustive discussion on Proverbs 31:19 and its terminology, see Wolters 1994. According to him, כִּישׁוֹר is a doubling spindle, hold with both hands, while פָּלָה is a generic term for the spindle.

יְהִלֵּךְ עַל־רֹאשׁ יוֹאָב וְעַל כָּל־בֵּית אָבִיו וְעַל־יְכָרְת מִבֵּית יוֹאָב וְעַל־צַדִּיק  
 וְעַל־חַיִּיק בְּפִלֵּךְ וְעַל־בְּחָרָב וְעַל־חֶסֶד־לֶחֶם:

May it fall on the head of Joab, and on all his father's house; and may never be absent from the house of Joab one who has a discharge, or who is leprous, or who holds the spindle, or who falls by the sword, or who lacks food! (2 Samuel 3:29).

The mention of the one “who holds the spindle” is contextually meaningful, assuming that the spindle had the same derogatory connotation of effeminacy, as known from the Hittite texts and maybe implied in the Akkadian lexical lists.<sup>12</sup>

The acquaintance with the symbolism and range of associations evoked by the spindle in the ancient Near East sheds further light on their use in the Karatepe inscription.<sup>13</sup> The spindle is not merely a picturesque image that the author of the inscription added for its poetic dimension. It builds the picture of the woman in question as a typical female that stays in her household and is busy with weaving, typically a feminine vocation.<sup>14</sup> Symbolizing femininity, the spindle focuses various associations and connotations related to the female gender construct.<sup>15</sup>

This image portrays the woman as following her gender role, while at the same time violating gender norms. The act of holding the spindle associates her with the traditional gender imagery by representing her as being busy with spinning, an occupation linked to home and performed mainly by women. Seen in this light, the spindle evokes home and family, as well as safety they provide. The addition of the adverb “alone” modifies this picture dramatically: the woman is outside of her house and unaccompanied, yet not afraid. The presence of the

<sup>12</sup> For the interpretation of this verse, see Layton 1989. The history of its interpretation shows the relevance of the correct understanding of the mention of the spindle in the Karatepe inscription for a broader field of ancient Near Eastern and biblical studies. For example, ignoring the symbolism of the spindle, McCarter proposed as self-evident that *plkm* in the Karatepe inscription must refer to “crutches.” On this basis, he translated מְחַזְקִים בְּפִלֵּךְ in 2 Sam 2:39 as some who “clings to a crutch.” See McCarter 1984: 118.

<sup>13</sup> Based on the discussed evidence, it is safe to conclude that a similar symbolism of the spindle was shared by the Hittites and Semitic speaking peoples. Therefore, Amadasi Guzzo and Archi (1980) are correct in not including it in their discussion about the details of the Karatepe inscriptions that help to determine the primary language of these texts.

<sup>14</sup> On the textual and iconographic evidence on women-weavers in the ancient Near East, especially in Mesopotamia, see Stol 2016: 344–349.

<sup>15</sup> It appears that these associations played a role in linking the etymology of the North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic *baxta* “women” with the Syriac *bāḳettā* “weaveress.” However, see Krotkoff 1985: 131–134 for the difficulties with such etymology. In spite of this, both Mutzafi 2005: 99 and Khan 2008: 98 favor the derivation of the word *baxta* from the earlier Syriac designation for a “weaveress.” I thank prof. Eleanor Coghill for bringing this word and the relevant literature to my attention.

spindle in her hand further contributes to the complexity of the entire image. Not only is the woman lonely, but she holds the spindle in her hands and, in this way, she is not ready to defend herself in case of an attack. Nevertheless, she walks fearlessly in the places that are dreaded by men. The presence of the spindle excludes the possibility of assigning her lack of fear to her own abilities: the spindle hints at her being a typical woman rather than a heroine; additionally, she keeps it in her hands and in this manner she is further portrayed as defenseless.

This manner of portraying the woman has a clear goal within the context. It emphasizes the magnitude of the positive changes that took place during Azitawadda's reign. The passage under the discussion characterizes these changes as revolutionary thanks to the reversal of the gender roles. The changes that Azitawadda accomplished were so great that they resulted in an unthinkable alternation of the human nature: women became fearless more than men. The sole author and promotor of this was Azitawadda himself as is clear from the structure of the passage.<sup>16</sup> At its center, there is the royal "I" of Azitawadda in the form of both suffixed and independent personal pronoun, the latter being added to emphasize the former: *bymty 'nk* "in my days, mine." Ultimately, the author constructed this multidimensional image of the scared man and the calm woman with the spindle not as a historical record of his time, but as a piece of royal propaganda. He aimed at extolling the ruler and his deeds rather than narrating events. The mention of the spindle might seem a minor detail of this long inscription. Acquaintance with its symbolism in the ancient Near East leads us to conclude that it constitutes a conscious and meaningful choice by the author of the inscription. The spindle renders the gender imagery of the passage more explicit and, in this way, it helps the reader to decode its richness.

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<sup>16</sup> At the end of the passage, there is the prepositional phrase *b'br b'l w'lm*. As far as I know, the compound preposition *b'br*, which occurs at the beginning of the phrase, is found in Phoenician only in this inscription. The meaning given to this preposition in various translations implies a remote divine agency, for example: "by the grace of Ba'al and gods" (Younger 2003: 150), "per la grazia di Ba'al e gli dèi" (Magnanini 1973: 55) or "grâce à Ba'al et aux dieux" (Bron 1979: 24). Based on the usage of the preposition in the Hebrew Bible, I would like to take issue with this interpretation. Rather than implying agency, in Biblical Hebrew this preposition has a nuance of finality: "on account of, for the sake of, because of" (Clines 1995: 234). I see no reason to propose a different meaning in the Karatepe inscription. This meaning has been proposed for Karatepe A II 10–12 by Krahmalkov (2000: 110) who translated these lines: "Baal and Rasap-ŠPRM commissioned me to build <this city>, and I built it for the sake of [or at the behest of] Baal and Rasap-ŠPRM to be a place of protection." It appears that the scholars who translate the preposition *b'br* as "by the grace of" or "thanks to" proceed on assumption that the mention of gods by itself entails the recognition of their supreme agency. Such an interpretation runs against the genre of royal propaganda that, although recognizing the role of the gods, puts the ruler in the center of the events. An understanding of the preposition with a final meaning reconciles the seemingly opposite positions of the ruler and the gods: the ruler remains at the center but his actions are directed toward the gods.

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