CHAPTER THREE

TEXTILE TOOLS IN ANCIENT ITALIAN VOTIVE CONTEXTS: EVIDENCE OF DEDICATION OR PRODUCTION?¹

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From the earliest times, people brought offerings to their gods as tangible evidence of their belief. These votive gifts could be simple and derived from daily life or more elaborate and produced specifically for the purpose. Their place of dedication could be a natural landmark, such as a spring, cave, or tree, or an artificial construction, the latter becoming more elaborate with time with a precinct clearly marked off as a dwelling place of a deity.

Spinning and weaving implements have been found frequently in Italian votive deposits and sanctuaries, which range chronologically from the Early Iron Age to the first centuries BCE.² These finds not only add another dimension to our view of ancient religious practices but are also important for our understanding of the development of social values and traditions associated with textile production. Unfortunately, contexts for votive material are not always clear and it is not always easy to differentiate textile implements that served as ex voto from those used in the actual textile production process (Bouma 1996, 24–30). Nevertheless, on the basis of the published material it is possible to distinguish three groups of contexts differing in both intent and composition of material: actual votive deposits, foundation deposits and sanctuary workshops.³

¹ This article stems from my doctoral dissertation Textile production in pre-Roman Italy: Archaeological Evidence, written under supervision and guidance of Jean M. Turfa. Many a loom weight cited here has been spotted by her in publications consulted for entirely different purposes. This humble offering is for her, my teacher, mentor, colleague and friend.

² On Etruscan votive religion, see Turfa 2006, who briefly reviews similar practices in other regions of Italy as well as in Greece. Also see Bouma 1996 and Bartoloni, Colonna and Grottanelli 2001.

³ On the problematics of votive terminology, see Hackens 1963; Bouma 1996, 43–51. In the following discussion, all assemblages of votive offerings will be referred to as ‘votive deposits’.
Spindle whorls, spools and, especially, loom weights are common dedications in Etrusco-Italic sanctuaries, as well as in the south of Italy and in Sicily, where the practice was probably also influenced by Greek votive practices. For the most part, textile implements are present in deposits that are related to real cult sites with a wide chronological range, as opposed to deposits which were created on a particular occasion. Table 1 summarizes information about textile tools from various votive deposits of Italy. While it is far from exhaustive, it illustrates the importance of textile implements in votive ritual. In an effort to be as comprehensive as possible, sites are listed at which textile tools have been reported, even when the precise number of tools has not been published.

The examples in Table 1 illustrate that, while frequently present in votive deposits, textile tools are never very numerous. More substantial quantities are noted in large sanctuaries, which were frequented for many centuries or in contexts for which other explanations can be suggested, as will be discussed later.

It has been often assumed that the presence of textile implements in votive deposits indicates a connection of the cult to divinities regarded as protectors of women and domestic activities (Mastrocinque 1987, 111). In the Greek world, for which we have not only archaeological but also literary evidence from early on, Athena and Hera were, of course, the two most important recipients of women’s gratitude: the first as the goddess of the loom, the second as the patroness of marriage and domestic activities. Textile implements are also common in sanctuaries of Demeter and Kore, Aphrodite, Artemis and Herakles. Local divinities were common recipients of textile implements as well.

4 See discussion on different kinds of votive complexes in Pascucci 1991, especially 469–471.
5 Textile tools and clay kalathoi, special baskets for storage of wool and food, are ubiquitous offerings at the sanctuaries of Hera at Perachora, Argos; see Baumbach 2004, 34, 91.
6 Herakles was venerated in connection with transhumance and pastoral activities, and hence wool production (Santillo Fritzell 2004, 82). For this reason he is occasionally depicted with the spindle and distaff (Di Giuseppe 1995, 141). Gem impressions representing Herakles appear on some unprovenanced loom weights (Ferrandini Troisi 1986, 97). The importance of sheep husbandry and transhumance between Samnium and Tiati is suggested by votives in the form of loom weights, found in the 3rd–1st century BCE sanctuary at Coppa Mengoni (Antonacci Sanpaolo 1995, 87–88).