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A FEW COMMENTS
ON LOOMWEIGHT DECORATION

Abstract: *This short paper aims to provide an overview of the two main types of ornamentation applied to loomweights. This type of artifact, though usually classified in the so-called 'small finds' category, often contains very interesting objects on which we can observe various kinds of ornamentation. The author will firstly identify two main types of decoration. The first of them relates to the application of signs, symbols or letters, while the second is more spectacular as it involves the application of engraved, impressed or painted iconographic representations. The author will then attempt to outline the hypotheses which have been put forward concerning the reasons behind the decoration of loomweights. The author will focus on three main possible causes. The first is the marking of the manufacturer of the weight, the second is the personal desire of the owner (e.g. decorative purposes) and the third relates to the votive and funerary nature of this type of artifact.*

Keywords: *Small finds; loomweight; ornamentation*

Loomweights are one of the most common groups of artifacts which have been acquired over the course of archaeological excavations at Ancient Greek and Roman sites of the Mediterranean Sea region. Objects of this type have been found at settlement sites of both urban and rural character, as well as in cemeteries, where they formed a part of the funerary equipment.¹ At both site types, many weights bear various markings and decoration.

¹ Regarding the interpretation of the contexts in which loomweights are found, see Misk 2012.

According to the nature of the ornamentation, loomweights can be divided into two groups: 1. weights bearing carved or painted symbols, marks or letters; 2. weights with iconographic representations, from simple engraved images to stamped seals.

Both types of ornamentation developed in the eastern Mediterranean as early as the Bronze Age. A pyramidal weight with a carved letter of Cypriot-Minoan syllabary from this period, found in Enkomi on Cyprus (Dikaios 1969, 299), serves as one example. Stamped weights from Troy, Palaikastro (Eccles 1940, 47-48), Zakros, Knossos, Faistos on Crete, as well as a weight with an Egyptian scarab seal impression found in Tel Nami, Israel (Artzy and Marcus 1995, 146) are also known from the Bronze Age.² The introduction of stamping seals with reproductions of numismatic types or gems (Tzouvara-Souli 1996, 498) was a novelty in Greece of the Classical period.

1. It seems that, of all the decorated loomweights, the most common were those bearing engraved characters. These letters occur either singly or in groups, sometimes forming words or abbreviations. We also know of one weight which bore the abbreviation of a city. This was a weight engraved with the ΟΛΘ inscription, which is commonly interpreted as an abbreviation of the name of the city where it was found, Olynthus (Davidson 1952, 151).

Apart from carving, another method used to decorate weights was the application of letters with paint, although it must be acknowledged that very few examples of this practice are known. A specimen found in Heraclea in 1912 is an interesting example of such a weight and the painted letters probably spell out the owner's name (Jeffery 1946, 33). From this period, we also know of a series of painted weights from Corinth. However, it was not a very common method of decoration and, as was the case with painted letters, the practice disappeared rather quickly (Davidson 1952, 149). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that we are presently in no position to assess whether the small number of known painted weights is the result of the low popularity of this type of ornamentation or merely down to the simple fact that the paint has not been preserved.

Apart from letters, other simple symbols were sometimes used, although their meaning is difficult to interpret. Weights found in Faistos and Nea Paphos³ with the sign or symbol of an impressed disk with a convex

² Other examples of loomweights with impressions of scarabs are known from Kabri, Megiddo and Ta'anek (Shamir 2002, 51-52).

³ As a part of his Master's thesis (Jagiellonian University, Krakow 2010, supervised

beam (Pl. 1: 1) are two examples. However, the placement of two nearly identical symbols on weights from two different islands suggests that they had a clear meaning for both the users and manufacturers of these items.

2. Weights decorated with iconographic representations are a very interesting group of artifacts and simple elements with a symbolic meaning are the most prevalent type. Examples include weights found at the Pnyx in Athens, which were decorated with stars, shells, bucrania, trees, flowers, and palmettes (Davidson *et al.* 1975, 75). The way they are presented is usually heavily schematic. Ivy leaves depicted on weights found in Faistos, Crete (Levi 1966, 579, fig. 12) and in Nea Paphos (Pl. 1: 2) are good examples of this. The most spectacular ornamentation of this type appears on weights excavated at the Timpone della Motta temple (Calabria, Italy), which boasted beautifully carved labyrinth representations (Maaskant Kleibrink 2000, 174).

The most common way of marking or embellishing loomweights was the stamping of seals onto the surface and this was also often carried out in the production of engraved gems or rings (Davidson 1952, 152). This type of marking can be found at most major Greek sites of the Classical and Hellenistic era. The group also includes stamps of numismatic type, on which we can see images identical to those known from ancient coins. Examples of such weights were found in Kasope (Tzouvara-Souli 1996, 499) and Nea Paphos (Pl. 1: 3).

The seals stamped on weights consist of a wide range of figures and objects of varying meaning. On weights from Corinth, we can find images of satyrs, men, women, Eros and animals, as well as centaurs, sphinxes, the city of Athens, a tripod and the picture of a loomweight itself (Davidson 1952, 153). A weight from Nea Paphos is another interesting example, as it depicts a woman standing during weaving, maybe Arachne herself (Pl. 1: 4).

Unfortunately, this article is too short to be able to present all the hypotheses that have arisen concerning the question of why loomweights were decorated. However, they can be classified into three main groups:

a) Manufacturers may have indicated the weight of the loomweights with engraved characters or letters (Davidson *et al.* 1975, 74) and this

by Prof. E. Papuci-Władyka), the author analyzed loomweights from the Maloutena, Nea Paphos, Cyprus excavations held by the University of Warsaw; this material is currently being prepared for print. The author wishes to thank Dr. H. Meyza, head of the excavation, for providing the material for analysis and publication.

could have been an important part of the process of holding and tensioning the threads. Manufacturers could have also marked weights in order to identify the workshop or the artisan who made them (Levi 1966, 583). Consecutive series of weights produced in a given workshop may have been thus marked (Davidson *et al.* 1975, 74).

b) Users might have ordered craftsmen to include the markings for personal identification or decoration. Simple characters or symbols could have indicated that a particular set of weights belonged to a given individual. Rare names painted on the surface of the weights are usually interpreted as an indication of the owner (Jeffery 1946, 33). Seals in the form of prints of gems or rings could have been more decorative (Wallrodt 2002, 184) and this would be supported by the rather feminine character of the representations found on weights used by women (Davidson 1952, 153).

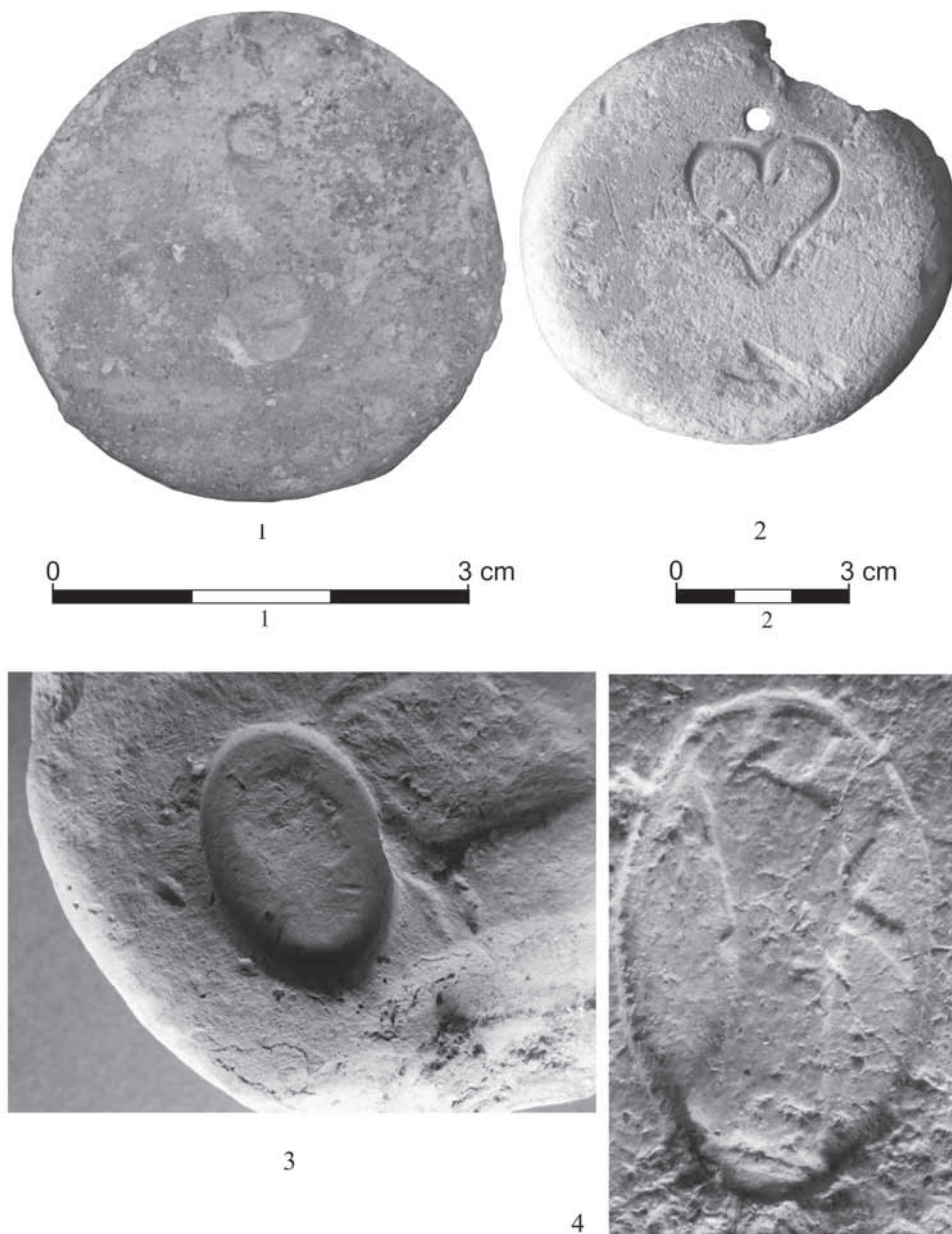
c) The loomweights may have been placed in tombs or temples as votive and sepulchral offerings. For example, weights marked with seals bearing ΓΑΥΚ, ΜΕΑΙ and ΜΕΑΙΣ inscriptions from the Pnyx in Athens were meant to symbolize cookies and were placed in the graves (Davidson *et al.* 1975, 77). Weights found in Roman period wells in Troy, which bear ornamentation which could be interpreted as images of the local goddess, could also indicate the votive nature of these seals (Wallrodt 2002, 183). A similar example is known from Ephesus, where one of the weights bears the name of a local deity, which could also indicate the artifact's votive character (Levi 1966, 583). Votive weights were also found in Athens (Davidson *et al.* 1975, 77) and at Greek sites in Italy, including Francavilla Maritima (Maaskant Kleibrink 2000, 174). The marking of weights as a votive function could have been to connect them either with the deceased or with the deity to whom such items were being presented.

The above summary of different types of loomweight decoration does not fully cover this broad issue, which is a subject of increasing interest to researchers. However, it does indicate the differing natures of decoration, as well as touching on the wide range of hypotheses still encountered in scientific discourse on the subject. Loomweight ornamentation is an area that offers us great research possibilities and it is necessary to continue research into the issue.

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Pl. 1. 1 – Ovoidal loomweight with a sign or symbol of an impressed disk with a convex beam. Nea Paphos. Photo by the author

2 – Ovoidal loomweight with a depiction of an ivy leaf. Nea Paphos. Photo by the author

3 – Ovoidal loomweight with a stamp of numismatic type. Nea Paphos. Photo by the author

4 – Pyramidal loomweight with a seal stamp depicting a standing woman during weaving. Nea Paphos. Photo by the author