

Empowerment Through “Women’s Work”: Textile Production and the Liberation of Greco-Roman Women.

The term “women’s work” has long been deployed as an expression of contempt based on the assumption that female-oriented activity is frivolous, but the historically feminine practices of sewing, weaving, and spinning produced essential goods while opening avenues for expressive displays of female identity. Previous analyses on this subject have focused largely on literary representations of women weaving as an expression of agency or have replicated the tools and techniques used in ancient textile production. While both approaches are valuable to our understanding of the lived experiences of women in antiquity, each provides only a limited image of how the production of textiles affected the lives of women.

This poster combines literary analysis with experimental archeology into a single assessment. This hybrid approach replicates the experience of the textile production process and highlights how the physical production of textiles could and did empower woman in antiquity.

The methods I used to recreate the historical practice of textile production were adopted after an analysis of archeological and iconographic evidence, ancient literary accounts, and epigraphy. I supplemented this evidence with hands-on techniques developed by historical reenactors and modern scholars. The loom replication was made of bamboo, based on representations of looms shown on ancient pottery, and was assembled by hand. Raw wool was hand spun on a drop spindle made of wood and clay, based on extant examples. The spinning process required much practice but produced a fine yarn. Once the yarn was attached to the loom and a set of handmade loom weights, it was woven in the historical manner using a collection of rods and wooden tools, producing a section of textile with a loose weave.

Ultimately, the replication of Greco-Roman textile making techniques proves that creating textiles was a sophisticated and highly calculated process that relied on precision, efficiency, and a woman's knowledge of the salient technologies. On the other hand, my analysis of the ancient evidence, demonstrates that women produced vividly decorated garments and tapestries to enrich ritual and preserve cultural history, and gain a source of socially acceptable economic freedom. Through textile production, Greco-Roman women did indeed gain economic, religious, and cultural freedom that they used to communicate their lived experiences in antiquity.