

Make Your Own Drop Spindles

Drop spindles were such a common part of daily life up through the early Middle Ages, that many spindle whorls have remained as part of the archaeological record. It is not uncommon for digs to uncover hundreds of whorls at a site.

Whorls can be made of almost any material – stone, lead, clay, bone, glass, and even amber whorls have been found. The purpose of the whorl is to provide tension for the growing thread, and stability for the shaft. The material was a secondary consideration.

Even a quick overview of spindle whorl shapes over time will show that they were very different from modern commercial spindle shapes. While they came in many shapes – sphere, cone, bi-cone, disc, etc, they were almost always smaller than modern spindle whorls. This is not surprising when one considers that most spinning was done to create thread to weave fabric.

The thread produced by a spindle is affected by both the shape and the weight of the whorl. The heavier the whorl, the thicker the thread it will make. A heavier whorl will also keep the spindle spinning for a longer time.

The closer the mass of the whorl is to the shaft, the faster the spindle will spin, resulting in a greater amount of twist in the thread. (Think of an ice skater who pulls her arms in to spin faster.) A barrel shaped whorl will produce a thread with a greater angle of twist than a disc shaped whorl of the same weight.

When deciding what shape of whorl you want, consider what you will be doing with the thread you make. Will you be knitting? A disc shaped whorl will make a soft yarn. Will you be nålbinding or tablet weaving? A heavy barrel shaped whorl will produce a yarn with enough twist to stand up to the process. Are you making warp thread? A lighter barrel shaped whorl, or bi-cone will make a sturdy thread. For weft thread, a cone or bi-cone can make a softer, but still sturdy thread. I have found that spheres are good for spinning embroidery thread.