

# An Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Tablet Weaving Loom

*Notes on a tablet weaving loom collected in Tunisia in 1914 and currently on display in the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford*

*Shelagh Lewins, July 2015*

## 1 Introduction

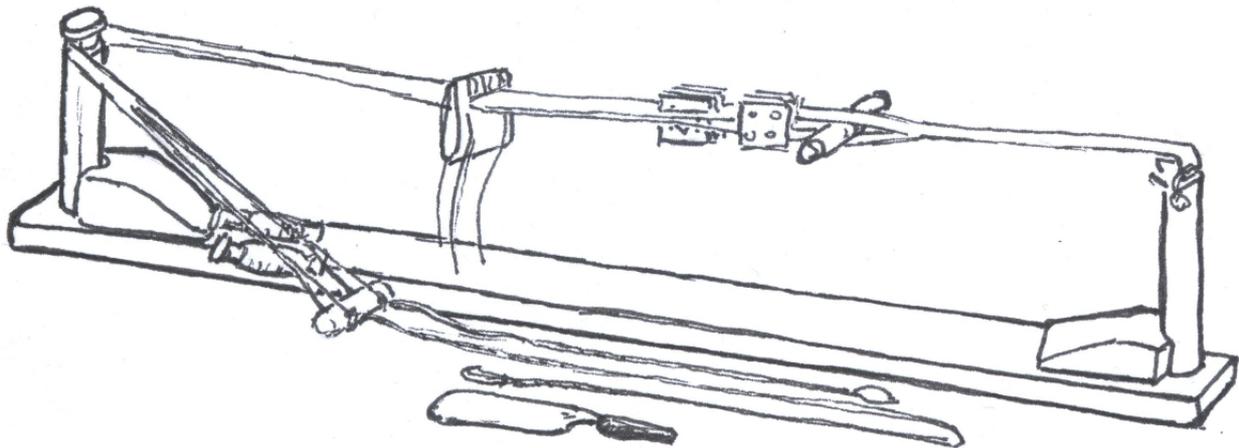
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This complete tablet weaving loom was bought from a Jew in Tunis in 1914. It appears on page 33 of *The Techniques of Tablet Weaving*, Peter Collingwood (1996 edition). It is set up to weave a band much longer than the loom, and displays ingenious methods of attaching and tensioning the warp threads.

The loom comprises two vertical posts set at opposite ends of a plank, with a short horizontal post sticking out of the plank sideways near the unwoven end of the band (Figure 1). The unwoven warp is fastened to the horizontal post by thin cords. Additionally, two wooden wedges act to brace the vertical posts.

Collingwood shows two looms from Africa, this one and another from Morocco, also used by Jewish weavers and now in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. The Moroccan loom incorporates a long base but is otherwise quite differently constructed and tensions the warp in a different manner. One common factor is that the excess unwoven warp is wound onto a bobbin.

Indeed, all the looms Collingwood shows<sup>1</sup> are different and this may suggest that while tablets, shuttles, warp spreaders and so on are relatively consistent in form, there was no standard method for attaching and tensioning the warp threads and craftspeople in different areas devised their own solutions.



**Figure 1: the loom as shown in *The Techniques of Tablet Weaving***

I saw the Tunis loom in the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, where it is on display in a glass box set up high on top of a glass case. By standing on a chair I was able to make out some details not

1 All seem to be late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century and include examples from Burma, Czechoslovakia and the Caucasus.

apparent in Collingwood's photograph. I was not able to see the lowest part of the loom, as I was still looking from below. All measurements are approximate.

The loom is approximately 140 cm long and 20-25 cm high. The base, posts, wedges, bobbins, shuttle and warp spreader are made of wood. The warp and weft threads are very pale, fine, smooth thread. I could not distinguish any pattern in the band, so perhaps the design is purely textural. A metal beater is shown in Collingwood's photograph lying next to the loom, but I was not able to see this.

## 1.1 Online Information

The Pitt Rivers Museum's website<sup>2</sup> gives the following information about the loom:

**Object reference:** 1914.76.83.

**Place:** Africa. Tunisia. Tunis.

**Cultural Group:** ?Jewish.

**Materials:** Brass Metal / Cotton Textile Plant / Wood Plant / Cardboard Paper Plant / ?

**Field Collector:** Melville William Hilton-Simpson

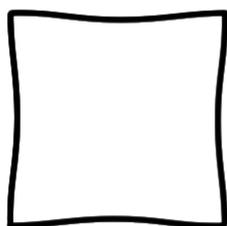
**When Collected:** 1914.

**Related Documents File** - Handwritten manuscript: 'List of Specimens Aurès Mountains, Algeria 1914. [Added] Collected by M. W. Hilton-Simpson, 1913 - 14. Purch. 1914.' Entry, page 18: 'Card weaving loom. Jew: Tunis. The parallel bunches of cards are twined together one-quarter turn (alternatively forward and back) the central bunch is turned one quarter turn (7 consecutive times in each direction). The three bunches are thus turned before the weft is put through each time.' [MOB 6/11/2001]

**Old Pitt Rivers Museum label** - Card-weaving loom (tissage-aoux-cartons, brettchenweberei), used by the jews in Tunis. Before passing passing the weft-thread, all three sets of cards are given one quarter-turn by hand, in the following serial manner: sets A & B are turned together forward & backward alternately; set C is turned alternately 7 times forward & 7 times backward. The weft is passed after each quarter-turn, which forms the "shed", and is beaten home with the metal knife-blade. Collected by M.W. Hilton-Simpson. Purch 1914.

## 2 Tablets

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The tablets are approximately 4 cm on a side. They are almost square, but each edge curves in slightly, perhaps to make them easier to handle. The central pack of tablets is made from playing cards, the visible face showing diamonds. The two border packs of tablets are made of some black material that might be cardboard or leather.

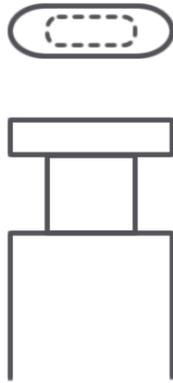
**Figure 2: Shape of tablets**

<sup>2</sup> [http://databases.prm.ox.ac.uk/fmi/webd#objects\\_online](http://databases.prm.ox.ac.uk/fmi/webd#objects_online), search for "card loom"

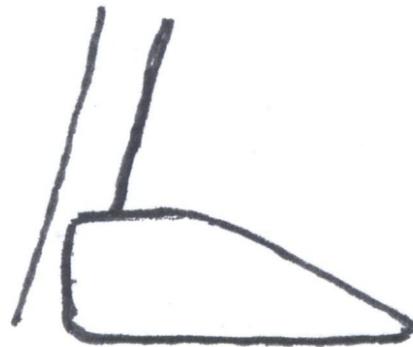
### 3 Vertical Posts

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Each vertical post has an oval cross-section and a carved profile which allows the warp to be attached to it (Figure 3). The posts are set into wooden wedges which are attached to the base. In Collingwood's photograph, the posts appear more or less vertical but they now lean in at an angle (Figure 4). I could not see how the posts are fixed to the base.



**Figure 3: Profile of posts**



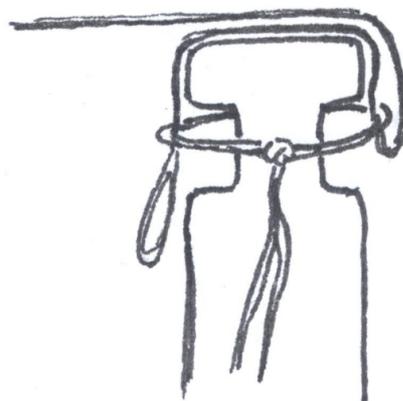
**Figure 4: Present angle of post against wedge.**

### 4 Start of Band

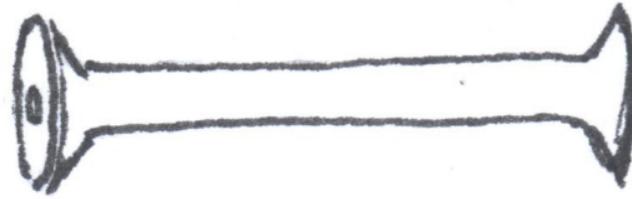
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The start of the band looks like a woven loop with no visible ends. Starting loops are made by starting to weave in the middle of a long warp using half the deck, then folding the ends round and weaving with all tablets together. The woven cloth has been folded over a thick cord and then laid on top of the post and tied firmly with the cord (Figure 5). The band can be moved along the loom by untying the knot in the cord, refolding the band over it further along and then tying it back down.

The unwoven warp splits into two between the far vertical post and the horizontal post, and there are two bobbins of unwoven warp fastened to the warps near where they are tied to the horizontal post. This supports the idea that the warp was initially laid out, perhaps on posts, the centre woven and the two ends wound onto the two bobbins before forming the loop and then moving the work onto the loom. These bobbins are perhaps 10 cm long and have narrow holes in the middle which would allow them to be set on a spike (Figure 6).



**Figure 5: Schematic of band start**



**Figure 6: Bobbin on which unwoven warp is wound.**

## **5 Shuttle**

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The shuttle is a slender dumb-bell shape 6-8 cm long made of wood with rounded ends, and is wound with a significant amount of thread which appears to be the same pale fine thread as the warps.

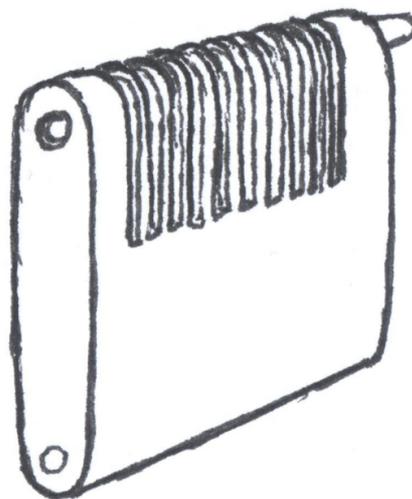


**Figure 7: Wooden shuttle wound with weft thread.**

## **6 Warp Spreader**

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The warp spreader is beautifully made of wood and Figure 8 does not do it justice. The top central part is cut like a comb, very evenly and finely. There appears to be a hole with a long narrow peg through it at the top to keep the spreader on the warps, but I could not see how it is attached. There appeared to be another hole or mark at the bottom but I could not deduce its purpose.



**Figure 8: Wooden warp spreader.**