

Demonstration – Spinning With Period Tools

Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Distaff

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What tools were used and when?

Hand spinning dates back to neolithic times, with spindle whorls discovered at archaeological sites across the globe.¹ There are variations in size and shape across the ancient world, but the basic round shape with perforation in the center remains easily recognizable. These were tools made to serve a purpose while being relatively cheap, easy, and quick to make, and their appearance changed little over time, as illustrated by these images of spindles with 3,000 years of age difference:



A late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age (2200-1800 BC) clay whorl from Germany²



Stoneware whorl with salt glaze, 16th century CE³

The other main tool used for hand spinning is the distaff, a shaft for holding the prepared spinning fiber and allowing the spinner the use of both hands. These range from the Roman ring distaffs (left, c. 1st

¹ Wayland Barber, Elizabeth, *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years – Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times* [W.W. Norton & Co], 1996.

² Image c Keith Lloyd (2016) retrieved from <http://kcl-antiquities.co.uk/a-large-rare-and-impressive-late-neolithic--early-bronze-age-pottery-spindle-whorl-from-germany-1994-p.asp>

³ Image from site cataloging personal finds. Retrieved from <http://wf4.nl/Engels/paginaSjoerd/espinsteen.htm#spinloodeng>

century CE, image from the Met Museum)⁴ held by a finger ring at one end, to a simple wooden stick held in a belt, between the knees, or under an arm (right, from St. Mary Church in Martham, Norfolk, 15th c)⁵, to distaffs attached to chairs or stands so they don't have to be held (next page, Grimani Breviary, 15th century)⁶.



⁴ <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/244570>

⁵ <http://vidimus.org/issues/issue-28/panel-of-the-month/>

⁶ <http://library.princeton.edu/news/2012-10-09/grimani-breviary>



Spinning wheels began to appear in the 14th century⁷, but they were simple spindle shafts attached to a wheel turned by hand. The modern flyer and spinning wheel system was not designed until the later 16th century. One such design appears in the sketches of Leonardo DaVinci.⁸

What was made with these tools?

Modern spinners predominantly spin to create yarn for knitting or crochet, or occasionally for weaving. Some reenactors do spin embroidery thread or even sewing thread as well. We must recall that in the medieval period, all textiles were handmade. This included everything from sailcloth to fine clothing, sewing thread to yarn for nalbinding. I have been a spinner since about 2004, and in that time have become fairly fast. That said, it still takes me about two hours to spin an ounce of wool, enough for about 100 yards of embroidery thread. My period garments (primarily dresses and cloaks) weigh between two and five pounds. When we start to consider these numbers, the sheer amount of time spent creating textiles is staggering. Elizabeth Wayland Barber estimates that across history, humans have spent twice as much time creating clothing as they have producing food.

How important was this?

Though spinning is primarily depicted in medieval sources as a women's activity, it is likely that children

⁷ Barber, 1996

⁸ *ibid.*

and the elderly, anyone whose hands were free, could and would spend most of their free time spinning. The Grimm Brothers collected several tales about the figure known as Frau Holle (who they connected to the Germanic goddess Holda) who rewarded a good daughter for spinning diligently while punishing her bad stepsister for throwing her spindle into a well.⁹ Additionally, the twelfth day after Christmas has long been known as St. Distaff's Day, the day when women and children were expected to go back to their spinning after the holidays had ended.¹⁰ Though it is hard to document folk traditions and fairy tales, it seems likely to me that these traditions stretch back to the middle ages when clothing a family would have been a full-time job.

Technique

I purchased my first medieval spindle because I wanted to spin at events and portray that spinning in a way appropriate to my period (primarily 12th century Britain). Period spindles, with their small removable whorls and tapered shafts, look very different from the modern spindles I had learned on. I should not have been surprised that I could not use my period spindle the same way I used my modern one, but it took a lot of time spent breaking yarn, dropping my spindle, tangling my threads, etc. before I realized that I could learn something from the images of spinners in the middle ages. By and large, spinners are depicted with one hand feeding fiber from the distaff around shoulder-height, and the other hand on or very near the spindle, usually around hip-height on the other side. As I began to perfect my technique I realized that in addition to being ergonomically comfortable for all-day spinning sessions, this posture was the only way period spindles seemed to work. The small medieval spindles tend to wobble if suspended while spinning. They spin much more rapidly, but for much shorter periods of time, than their modern descendants. If the modern tool is known as a drop spindle because it is suspended, the period version should properly be called a hand spindle, because it must be used in the hand in order to work efficiently. Once I realized that the medieval images showed not just the use of the tool but how to use it, my spinning improved rapidly. I am now able to spin just as quickly on a period spindle as I do on a wheel or drop spindle, and the distaff allows the tool to be exponentially more portable, essentially acting as an extra hand for the spinner who has to use one to control her tool, or pause in her work to do something else.

Why is this important?

The SCA is a non-profit educational institution. When we attend events or demonstrate our skills, we are saying to the public, "This is, to the best of our knowledge and ability, how it was." I recognize that we are merely reenactors. I sew my garb with a sewing machine and spin on a spinning wheel at home. However, if I brought my sewing machine or spinning wheel to an event, and told members of the public that "This is how it was," I would not truly be fulfilling our educational mandate. It is important to do our best to represent our crafts and period well.

I chose to spin on a period spindle to take my persona to the next level of accuracy. What I learned by actually using a period spindle was far more valuable. I learned that medieval images of spinning are accurate depictions of the fiber-processing activities they illustrate. I learned how ubiquitous spinning was in period. Finally, I learned that our medieval ancestors were smart, clever, and efficient, not stuck using difficult tools because it was all they had. Period spindles are easy to use with the proper technique.

⁹ <http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/diamondstoads/stories/holle.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.thebookofdays.com/months/jan/7.htm>

Future Projects

I am currently working on hand-processing a fleece from a primitive sheep breed (Icelandic), which my husband, my Laurel, and I sheared ourselves. The wool from this fleece is similar to what would have been available in the medieval period, and I am using period tools and techniques to process the wool. I plan to hand-spin this wool and weave it into cloth for a garment, using period tools for each step of the process. I look forward to sharing the results of this project when it is finished.