



A Brief History of Children's Toys

By Baroness Kaleeb the Green Eyed

Children's toys can be classified by age, by gender or by materials that they are made from. They can be as simple as a rock and a stick or as complicated as the silver Noah's Ark made for Prince Charles. Very few children's toys have survived the rigors of childhood, from being worn out, outgrown or hidden by a sibling. Those toys are inherently made from materials which do not survive the rigors of time. Having said that, it is still possible to find evidence of toys in graves, backyards, household inventories, paintings and the margins of illuminated

manuscripts. The evidence which is slowly coming to light is beginning to change the modern view that Medieval parents did not cherish their children as we do today. It is my goal to present a selection of toys which have stood the test of time and can be enjoyed by today's children, at an event, without looking out of place. Many of these toys are simple to make or can be bought from a local store, if you know what to look for. Many of the toys gone over in this lecture could be expounded upon for hours on end and will only receive a brief mention, enough to get your imagination going. Isn't that how a toy is supposed to work?

Balls are great for running energy out of all children. I am not quite up to a pig or sheep's bladder, which was inflated as a toy. In our house we use balls made from felted wool or strips of cloth.



Wool balls are lighter in weight than linen balls and hurt less when you get hit. A whimsy is a ball with long tails sewn on it. It makes it much easier for a young child to learn to catch, but in the hands of an older child it can be a weapon. In recent years they were sold as comet balls.

Tops are great fun. A number of whip tops or the simple twist with your fingers styles have been found in archeological digs. There is some evidence that the tops were painted, but most tops were plain. The dirndl top from Hanukah has been around for hundreds of years and can still be found in stores today. I have found that tops are a good court toy, as they are quiet.



Rattles or corals can be found in any number of paintings. It was thought that coral would scare off evil spirits and was used as a teething ring. Be careful of any rattles made from willow, as that is where aspirin comes from.

Blocks are a basic toy. I have not found any references to blocks in the Middle Ages. I just cannot believe that children did not stack things or build with chunks of wood. It is too basic of an idea not to have been in use. I made my son a set of alphabet blocks with different calligraphy letters on them (half uncial, several runic texts and a modern alphabet, so he could learn his letters.)

Unfortunately games are only going to receive the briefest of mentions in this lecture. Most medieval board games were played by both adults and children.

They can be loosely grouped into two categories, games of skill or games of chance which involved gambling. For ease in transportation I have embroidered most of my game boards, for pieces I use glass rocks (as they are cleaner than coins) and modern dice. The only solitaire game I have found is shut the box. At our house we gamble for chores.

Puppets are a simple and entertaining toy. They can be found in all shapes and sizes from simple hand puppets to elaborate shadow puppets. They are universally found in all cultures.

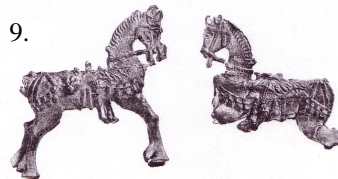
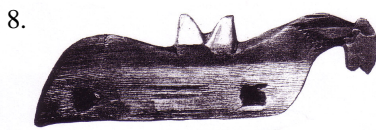




6. Religious toys were seen as educational tools for a population, which was largely illiterate. Children love to play with animals, so it seems logical that Noah's Arks would have been a popular toy. The earliest reference which I found was from 1642 on a sign outside a toy shop. Noah's Arks can easily be found today. 3 years old seems to be the perfect age for children to play with an ark, as they love to line up the animals in pairs and put them in their stalls. They seem to understand the biblical story by that age.

Horses can be found in every culture and in every age. They are generally made of wood in earlier periods or from metal in later periods, but they can also be made from clay. They can

be found with holes drilled in their noses to pass a string through and make them into a pull toy or holes drilled into their body or legs to add wheels to them.



There are a lot of references to hobby horses and stick ponies.

They can be found in paintings and in several illuminated manuscripts. Some of the hobby horses are designed to be ridden on a stick. They appear to have cloth or carved heads, complete with reigns. There is a second style which fits around the child's waist, some of these have a fabric skirt. A smaller version of the hobby horse can be made as a stick pony. The Barony of Tir-y-Don has made lots of dolphins and Spikes in this style.



Windmills are a simple toy which can be made from a stick with a stiff piece of paper attached to the end. They are operated by running around like a hooligan. This seems like a good toy for a young energetic child. (A regular challenge at our house.) A variation on a windmill is a stick with a ribbon attached to the end. A popular toy to hold in a parade.



12. Hoops can be found on Greek vases and Statues, as well as in the Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painting Children's Games (1559.) The hoop appears to have a universal appeal as it is still around today and used regularly for exercise.



Yo-yos are believed to have originated in China. The first surviving Yo-Yo is from Greece in the year 500bc. They were made from wood, metal or terra cotta. They were called disks and were brightly painted. They do not appear to be too common in Europe, but were used as a weapon in the Orient.

Stilts are another toy which has stood the test of time. When learning to use stilts start with a pair which are fairly close to the ground and easy to fall off of. As you become more accomplished with this toy graduate to a taller pair. Do not strap your feet into the stilts, as the ground will come up much faster than you thought.





Dolls have been around as long as children have been there to play with them. Early dolls were probably cloth or rag dolls. Very few have survived. Dolls made from clay are a little more referred to as Babies and were intended as teaching aids. It depends on the age of the child, as to how realistic a doll needs to be. Dolls tend to be considered toys for girls, as seen in many late period paintings. (All children were dressed alike until they were reliably toilet trained. The way to tell the gender of a child in a painting is to look for a toy which they are holding.) If your child has a favorite modern doll which must be brought

to an event for comfort and entertainment, try dressing it in garb. common, as are wooden dolls. Most dolls were



21.

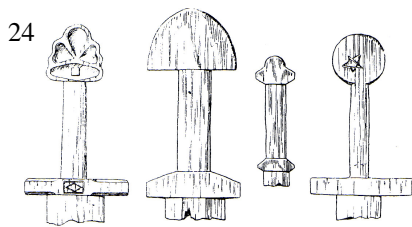


22.

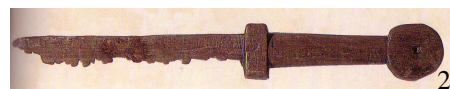


23

Toy dishes for dolls and other miniature household items have been found in abundance. They tend to follow the styles of the day. For example when ceramic pitchers are in style they can be found in miniature, they are faded out by pewter pitchers which start to show up in miniature around the 14th century. One of the theories for miniature household items is to train girls in housewifery tasks. I find it very interesting that there are no records of doll houses until the tale end of the 1500's or the early 1600's. How were all of these tiny objects used, because they are made in a scale for dolls and not just small children? The debate then becomes were children allowed to play with these toys or were they for adults only. (In 1572 the Princess of Saxony got a completely furnished kitchen and poultry yard.)

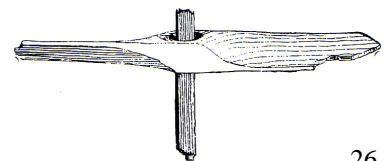


24



25

I was very surprised to find a propeller in a Russian archeological book.



26.

Wooden toy swords are common archeological finds. They were often made by the children who played with them, so the swords tend to have a crude style.

Ball and cup, Toy soldiers and Pea shooters have not changed in style since the Middle Ages. They can be easily found in a toy store. Please do not get my son a pea shooter for Twelfth Night.



27.



28.

Every culture which was near water had some form of toy boats. They follow the technical innovations of their times.

29.



1. A glove-puppet show watched by 3 young girls, from the Jehan de Grise's Romance of Alexander.
2. Orme, pg.150
3. Fraser, pg.65. Two coral rattles, might not be medieval.
4. Probably from Orme.
5. Kolchin, pg.461. Most common mechanical toy found. Novgorod collection has 450. Usually undecorated.
6. Noah's Ark illuminated Manuscript from the 1350's.
7. National Museum of Germany, Nurnberg 1301-1400
8. Kolchin, pg.457 Sculpted horse from levels dated to 1320's. It should have a flat platform and wheels.
9. Egan, pg 3. probably from the 16th century, most of the riders are missing, probably a knight.
10. Fitzhugh, pg. 163. The horse was found in Kvivik., Norway.
11. Dersin, pg. 117. Bibliotheque nationale de France Paris.
12. Oliver, pg.1. terra cotta disk, in the National Museum of Athens, Greece
13. Fraser, pg. 53. Greek terracotta statuette of a young girl with a hoop.

14. Illuminated Manuscript from the Morgan Library, c. 1350
15. Roman rag doll in the British Museum.
16. National Museum of Germany, Nurnberg 1301-1400
17. Fraser, pg 74. An English Puritan doll carved in oak.
18. Fraser, pg. 73. Charitas by Lucas Cranach, painted shortly after 1537.
19. Grober, figure 31. Spanish doll; end of the 17th century, height 30 3/8 inches
20. Ives, pg.1. Toy chair made out of tin, found in the Thames River in London.
21. Very similar to pictures in the Lead Alloy Miniature Artefacts.
22. From the excavations of the Carmelite Friary
23. Dersin, pg. 117. Bibliotheque nationale de France Paris.
24. Kolchin, pg.462. Sword hilts from 10th or 11th century through the mid 14th century. The star is a craftsman's mark.
25. Dersin. Pg.117
26. Kolchin, pg. 462. Propeller from a level dating 1281. It is 16cm.
27. Probably from Fitzhugh.
28. Fitzhugh, pg. 308. wood 22.2 cm from the 11-14th century in Uumiviarssuk, Western Settlement, Greenland.
29. Kolchin, pg.461.50 swords were found in the excavations.

Dersin, Denise, *What was Life Like in the Age of Chivalry*, Time-Life Books, Alexandria Va.,1997.

Egan, Geoff, *Playthings From the Past: Lead Alloy Miniature Artefacts c. 1300 - 1800, Exhibition Catalogue*, London, Jonathan Horne Publications, 1996.

Egan, Geoff, *Miniature Toys of medieval childhood*.

Available on the internet at <http://www.britarch.ac.uk/ba/ba35feat.html>

Excavations at the Carmelite Friary, Available on the Internet at
<http://home.bawue.de/~wmwerner/essling/english/karmel08.html>

Fitzhugh, William, *Vikings The North Atlantic Saga*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000.

Fraser, Antonia, *A History of Toys*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966.

Grober, Karl. *Children's Toys from Bygone Days: A History of all Peoples from Prehistoric Times to the Nineteenth Century*, (trans. P. Hereford) London, Batsford, 1928

Ives, Sarah, *Medieval Toys Found in London River*, National Geographic Kids News, May 12, 2004.

Available on the Internet at <Http://news.nationalgeographic.com/kids/2004/05/medievaltoys.html>

Kolchin, B. A., *Wooden Artefacts from Medieval Novgorod*, (trans.) BAR International Series 495, Parts 1 (text) and 2 (illustrations), 1989.

Oliver, Valerie, *History of the Yo-Yo*, Spintastics Skill Toys, inc.,1996

Available on the Internet at <http://www.spintastics.com/HistoryofYoYo.asp>

Orme, Nicholas, *Medieval Children*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2003.

Tuttle, Kinberly (Margritte of Ravenscroft), *Toys in the Middle Ages*, published on Stefan's Florilegium, 1999.
Available on the Internet at <http://www.florilegium.org/>.