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Children's Pastimes in Past time – Medieval Toys found in the British Isles (with observations on some excavated dice)

Introduction

Exhibitions in London in 1996 and Stratford upon Avon in 1997 have provided an opportunity to draw attention to what is probably the largest single collection of excavated medieval and later toys (i.e. miniatures intended for children's play) with an assessment of the significance of these finds, which are mainly from London, against the wider picture in Britain and continental Europe (Egan 1996). This particular collection comprises over 75 identifiable playthings from c.1300 to c.1600, the three-hundred year period considered in the present paper, as well as many more from the 17th and early 18th centuries. Spinning tops are included below, on the grounds that they are more likely to have been for children than adults (the same claim cannot be made for balls, marbles etc., which were probably used for recreation at any age). Whereas on the Continent medieval toys have long been recognised in publications (e.g. Gay 1887), translated German and Dutch books (Gröber 1932; Verster 1958) have been prominent in what was up to quite recently a very limited literature on the subject available in England, and the result was that there has been little expectation that toys of medieval date would turn up on excavations in that country (cf. S. Keene 1990).

Since the archaeology of childhood seems currently to be a popular subject, it is intended in this paper to look at medieval toys and possible toys of wood and bone that have been found in the British Isles, as well as those of metal, which, in England at least, are now beginning to be more widely recognised. The London collection, along with other finds of early toys from formal excavations in the same city, is heavily biased towards metal miniatures, and medieval toys in England are so far overwhelmingly concentrated in the capital. Some likely differences in the production, distribution and survival of playthings of the various categories will be discussed.

Individual Manufacture versus Mass Production

Mass production of multiple, identical goods, while possible for toys of bone, antler and wood (particularly lathe-turned tops) is clearly attested in England by mould-produced playthings of lead/tin from at least c.1400. The labour invested in cutting the moulds, usually of stone for lead/tin products, presupposes repeat production. Towards the end of the middle ages a very limited range of copper-alloy playthings also seem to have been mass marketed (no moulds are known for these, but clay would probably have been used). Wooden toys might be expected to decay in many soils apart from where there has been continual waterlogging – the conditions which are also most conducive to the survival of playthings of lead/tin.

Ceramic toys, which would not have decayed, seem markedly underrepresented in Britain, and although it is possible to suggest at a general level where some could perhaps be identified among excavated finds, it remains surprising that this easily worked material does not include a series of recognised playthings produced as sidelines by the ceramic industries.

Toys of pottery may be represented in Britain by a series of small jugs, as has long been suggested for similar finds on the Continent (e.g. Herteig 1969, pl. 59: finds from Bergen in Norway). In clear contrast to the situation on mainland Europe, virtually no figures of humans or animals have been identified in Britain as the equivalents of the many miniature horses, men and women toys known from Scandinavia and Russia, through Germany and Switzerland, to the Czech Republic and Hungary (e.g. *ibid.*; Schutte 1982; Oexle 1992; Petényi 1994, 86-104). Toys of bone, too, are remarkably elusive for a readily available and easily worked substance that usually survives well, with only one possible category from the very end of the period considered so far identified, and one other possible plaything in antler is the earliest discussed here.

Apart from an apparent three-dimensional representation of a house in chalk, found in a medieval pit

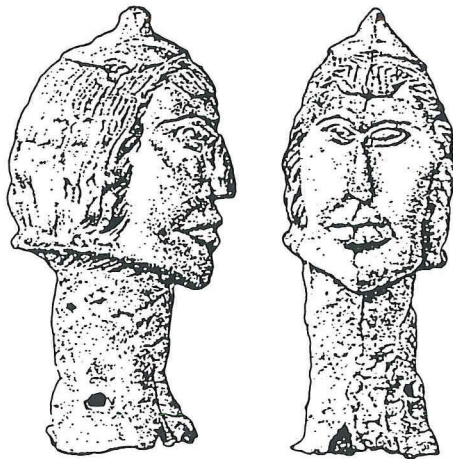


Fig. 1. - Lead/tin head for a doll or puppet, slightly enlarged (from Museum of London 1986; MoL acc. no. 1984.240/4).

in London (Egan forthcoming a, frontispiece) no possible toy miniature of stone has been suggested in Britain (for another miniature stone house thought to be from the late 11th century, excavated at Saint Denis, see Meyer 1979). It is probable that this generally refractory material was only exceptionally used for playthings (miniatures), apart perhaps from occasional stones in which the natural shape might have suggested the form of an animal etc. – recognition of such a phenomenon in the archaeological record would be a matter for unresolvable debate in each case. A rare instance (not strictly of toys in the sense used in this paper) notable for their isolation among finds published in England is a group of four small flint balls and one of clay, which are described as marbles, attributed to the late 13th/early 14th century, from Alsted in Surrey (Opie 1976). These could be children's playthings, but their apparent uniqueness at

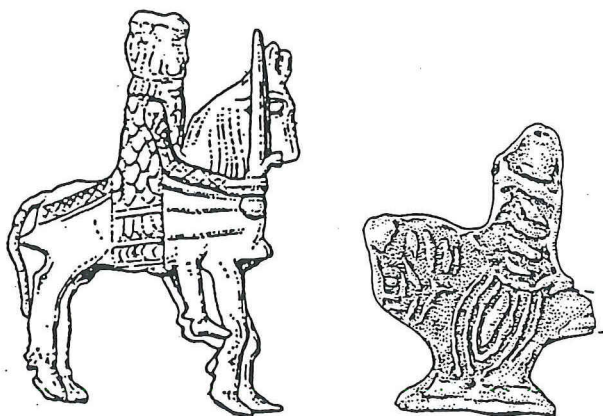


Fig. 2. - Lead/tin & ceramic mounted knights, 1:1 (private collection & MoL acc. no. 84.408/1 - drawings Nick Griffiths and from Pearce & Vince 1988, fig. 103).

such an early date remains worrying (Courtney is probably right to suggest that similar dating put forward for another of ceramic found at Beeston Castle is unreliable and the object was intrusive in the deposit to which it is attributed; 1993, 156, fig. 107, no.25).

The new branch of manufacture of mass-produced lead/tin toys seems likely to have developed from the casting of pilgrims' souvenirs and secular trinkets like brooches of lead/tin. Ampullae (containers for holy water), which had been available from at least the 12th century at various pilgrim shrines and which were necessarily cast hollow, may well have furnished the production technology that first made cheap, three-dimensional metal playthings commercially viable. Many of the earliest toys of lead/tin could have ended up being recycled in the melting pot.

Medieval Toys, mainly from London

An incomplete figure of a bearded man of antler, making clever use of the tines as limbs (and overall, presuming an original symmetry, similar in some ways to the peg dolls of the recent past) may be the earliest of London's medieval playthings. It was excavated in a building from the mid 11th / mid 12th century (MoL GYE92 site acc. no. 3942)¹.

A male head of lead/tin, 54 mm high and with attachment holes in the neck, may be part of a puppet (Fig. 1) perhaps for mounting on a stick or a more-realistically carved wooden body. Since the headgear could perhaps represent the characteristic funnel-shaped cap worn by Jewish men in Europe (Metzger & Metzger 1985, 145-146), this object need not have been intended only for children (who manuscript illustrations suggest were a major audience for some puppet shows – e.g. *Romance of Alexander* 1933, fols. 54v. & 76r., the latter showing adults too – from the late 14th / early 15th century). It might instead have been used in religious or morality plays, possibly representing a specific character such as Judas Iscariot. Whether or not this was for children, it is the earliest mould-produced candidate for a toy so far recognised from medieval London. It can probably be attributed probably to the 13th century, right at the beginning of the mass market in metal playthings. A second possible puppet head from a late 13th / early 14th-century context in London has spiky hair and is slightly more grotesque (Egan 1996, fig. 7; *idem* forthcoming a, no. 930).

¹ MoL = Museum of London (accession numbers refer to MoL items unless indicated otherwise).

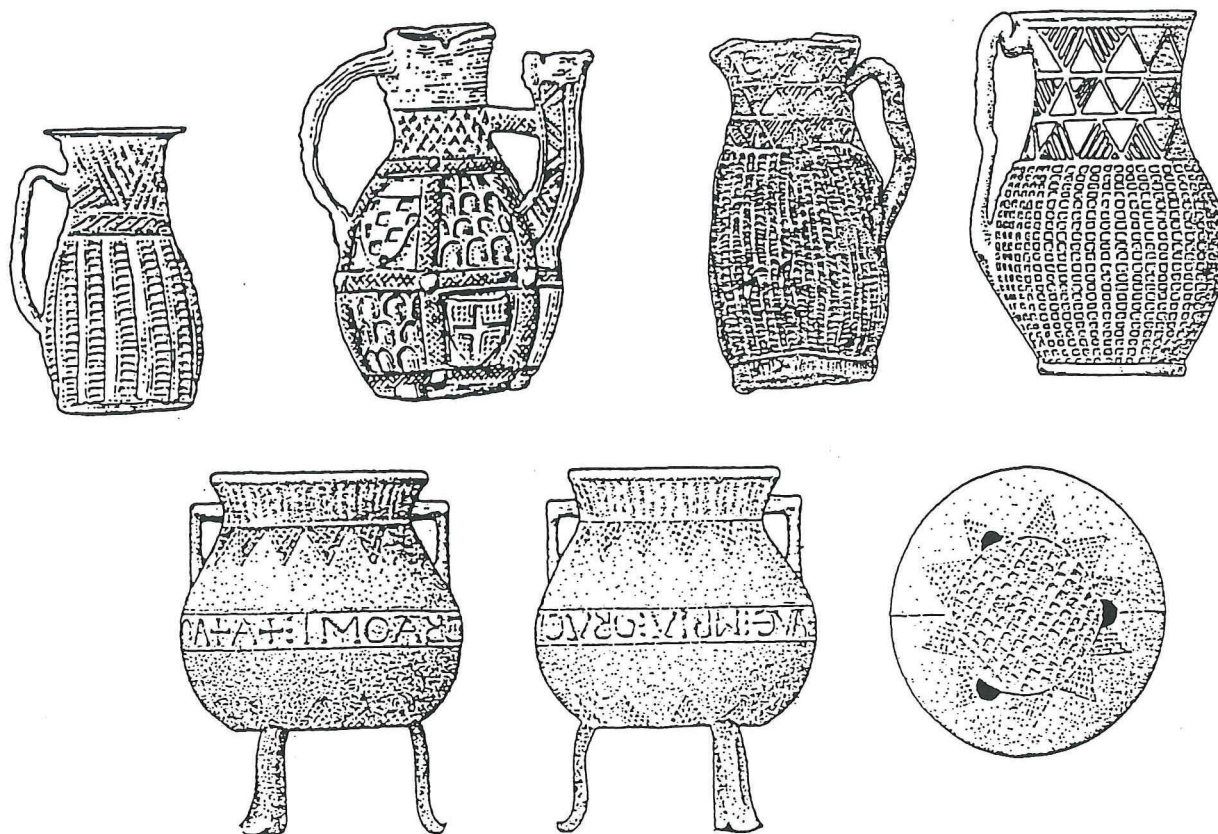


Fig. 3. - Lead/tin miniature jugs (drawings: two at left Nick Griffiths, second right Tracy Smith, all private collection; right distorted vessel restored to shape - Humber Archaeology Partnership, copyright reserved) and cauldron with legend inverted (drawing Ralph Mills; MoL acc. no. 90.245) all 1:1.

The earliest definite toy of this broad category is a lead/tin mounted knight (Fig. 2 left) datable according to staff of the Royal Armouries within ten years either side of 1300. This was followed by a series of miniature versions of table jugs, the most decorative full-sized vessels in most homes at that time (Fig. 3). Few of these toys are from very closely datable contexts in Britain but a London find is from a deposit attributed to the late 14th century (Egan forthcoming a, no. 932). One part of a stone mould for casting toy jugs has been excavated in Hereford (Shoosmith 1985; Egan 1996, fig. 4); although this is a cathedral city, it has never been anywhere near the economic first rank of English towns. That playthings were mass produced there says much about how widespread demand for them had become. Another important indicator in the form of a single find is a miniature jug from Sigglesthorne, a small village in the rural north of England (Didsbury 1989) – this toy parallels one from London (the two on the right in Fig.3).

Further knights are known in the capital from the 14th and 15th centuries. Some of them are hollow – these include a rare instance at this date of exact duplicates – and others were cast in a T shape and folded out to give three dimensionality (Egan 1996,

figs. 5-6), but what is so far lacking in England is any ‘flat’ version, like those of which three are known on the Continent – one found in Paris, one excavated in the Netherlands and another in a collection in Belgium (Gay 1887, 62 & 69; Baart 1988, 102; Garratt 1971, 25, fig. 6). It was the flats which, being produced from less metal and simpler moulds than three-dimensional versions, came to dominate the more developed mass market by the end of the medieval period (e.g. the ship in Fig. 7).

A single, rather poorly made mounted knight found in London but made at a Surrey kiln probably in the 14th century (Fig. 2 right; Pearce & Vince 1988, 51-2, fig. 103, no. 402) so far seems from what

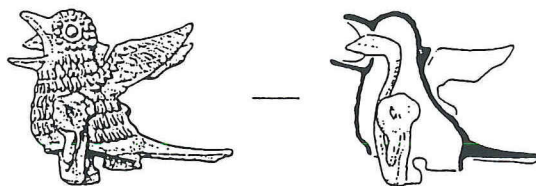


Fig. 4. - Lead/tin bird, originally pivoting, 14th century, 1:1 (MoL BWB83 acc. no. 136, drawing Nick Griffiths).



Fig. 5. - Lead/tin female & male dolls, 16th century, 1:2. (Private collections, drawings from Terry Shiers).

has been published to be the sole response by potters to the developing market in medieval toys in England. This very crude figure (which has erroneously been suggested to be a chess piece) is from a two-part mould – a further contrast with most Continental ceramic toys, which appear to have been modelled freehand – and though the workmanship is feeble, multiple production must have been envisaged. Possibly a few of the fragmentary figures usually thought to be from knight jugs and aquamanili will on re-examination prove to be parts of freestanding playthings. Some ceramic animals (e.g. stags), humans and also representations of trees found in Southern England are from elaborate if enigmatic lobed cups made in Surrey (*ibid.*, 50 & 66-67, figs. 33-34, 100 & 119, nos. 388 & 514-518) but there is scope for potential toys among other figures. By the mid 16th century a variety of stoneware and pipeclay human figurines from Germany, presumably toys, were coming into London, as a small number of finds illustrate (e.g. MoL BIG82 acc. no. 2190; Ward Perkins 1940, 293, pls. 91-92).

Animals, apart from horses with knights on, are, from a modern standpoint, surprisingly unusual among medieval toys in Britain. A hollow-cast bird or fledgling from a late 13th / early 14th-century deposit in London (Fig. 4) is an exceptional plaything in several ways at such an early date (Egan forthcoming a, no. 931). It is the first surviving English toy to have had (originally) moving parts – the body rocked on a pivot and the tongue, which was fixed to the legs, would have appeared with the motion to go in and out.

Food preparation came into the toy ambit in England perhaps in the late 15th century, with a series of cooking-cauldron miniatures in pewter and also, for the first time in popular playthings, in copper alloy too (Egan 1996, fig. 14). From around the same time are a couple of mazers or 'flat cups' for drinking (*ibid.*, fig. 13). Fish on griddles are known in several versions from the 1500s (*ibid.*, fig. 28).

There is also a range of standing hollow-cast human figures, both male and female from the late 16th century (Fig. 5), several with their dress repre-

sented in some detail. These are among the most immediately prepossessing of all the early playthings. At least three versions each of the men and women are known of what must have been very desirable toys. They vary in quality from accomplished, accurate representations to perfunctory, derivative copies, the latter having, in the case of the men particularly, highly improbable vital statistics. These could be the 'babies' (i.e. dolls) listed at six shillings and eight pence customs import duty per gross in the Books of Rates (1582, 6 and (?)1609, unpaginated – cf. Egan 1996). The pleated dresses of the female dolls are similar to fashions in south Germany, a hint that these toys may perhaps have been imported from there (Nuremberg is the most likely manufacturing centre) or based on originals produced in that area. Appropriately for the location of the conference for which this paper is written, a published reference to the import to London of one gross of babies in 1568 reveals that they were shipped from Bruges (Dietz 1972, 78, no. 491). Furthermore, this consignment was liable for a very heavy import duty of £11. 10 shillings (almost one shilling and eight pence each) – desirable toys indeed if they were taxed at that level, and virtually certainly much more elaborate than the pewter ones as in Fig. 5 (the expensive dolls could have been the ones dressed in fashionable clothes, reproduced using appropriate fabrics in precise detail – the 'fashion dolls' sometimes depicted in the hands of aristocratic girls in contemporary paintings, e.g. Arnold 1973, 95).

The 16th century also saw the introduction of miniature furniture in England – benches, chairs and chests, with at least four varieties of display cupboards available perhaps by 1600 (Egan 1996, front cover & figs. 21-23). The latter are very elaborate miniatures – they were presumably children's toys despite their flimsiness. They are made of flat panels fastened together with tabs put through slots and folded, and some parts were soldered in place. The cupboards have openable doors, a display of rich vessels – plates and ewers – on the top, and probably brass foil inside to help show up the openwork (Fig.

6). Freestanding jugs, which by this date imitated full-sized ones of metal rather than ceramic, had openable lids (*ibid.*, inside front cover). Separate toy plates, starting probably around 1500, were almost certainly imitating real tableware of pewter and brass (both of which were becoming much more commonly available); the elaborate cross and a little later rosette designs on the playthings bear no obvious relation to decoration on full-sized plates (*ibid.*) – this tendency for toy flatware to have an entirely different repertoire of motifs continued for more than two centuries.

Miniature warships, of which two datable to the late 16th century have been found in London, seem also to begin in this century (Fig. 7; see Egan 1988). These are the first known versions of a line of playthings which continued essentially little changed into the 20th century, though the details were of course kept up to date. Their earliest appearance in the Tudor period seems to echo the transfer of the status of pre-eminent contemporary fighter from the dry-land mounted knight to the maritime vessel of war at just this time.

Four miniature carved-bone blades, three found in London and one excavated in a 17th-century deposit at Norwich (Fig. 8), despite minor differences in detail, are sufficiently similar to be recognisable as a single basic type of object (MoL acc. nos. A582, A26775 & private collection; Margeson 1993, 70-1 fig. 38 no. 445). All of them have the handles broken off at the narrowest point just above the blade. These are almost certainly what are described in contemporary Books of Rates as 'daggers of bone for children' (1582, 21 & (?)1609, unpaginated). Although the triangular section of the blades does not conform with those of weapons of the time, which were flattish-diamond in shape, the overall form and details such as a representation of the ricasso on a couple of the playthings fit well with English and Continental dagger styles of c. 1600 (Graeme Rimer, Royal Armouries, pers. comm.). Although these might look at first sight to be unlikely products of mass manufacture, their flat section represents economic use of the cattle longbones from which they were made, and this may well be put in perspective by the large scale of production implied by the Books of Rates, which list the toy daggers at 10 shillings import duty the gross in 1582 and 12 pence the dozen in the early 17th century. Such playthings were presumably imported by the hundreds in the late 16th century, with a decline by the end of the first decade of the 1600s. Their place of origin has still to be established, as has whether there was any response in the form of local manufacture from bone carvers in England – this would be one explanation for the sug-

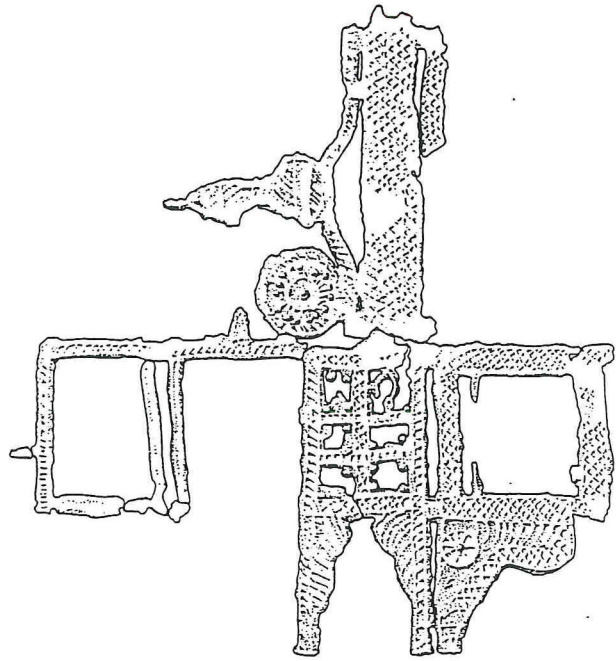


Fig. 6. - Lead/tin miniature cupboard, incomplete & in unfolded state - plate & (?)ewer on top, parts of back, side & (with pivots for door) front below, 16th century; 90%; (private collection; drawing Helen Bridson)

gested decline in imports, unless the toys themselves were for some reason becoming less popular. These bone daggers and a toy sword of copper alloy (below) seem, in the absence of wooden toy swords as on the Continent (e.g. Herteig 1969, pl. 58) to be the earliest identifiable playthings of a category new, at least in England – an implement to be wielded by the child (specifically a boy) in the way adults used the real thing. Previous toy swords had been held by toy knights, as in Fig. 2 left; a few miniature tools of copper alloy from London may be earlier, but it is not certain that these actually were toys, and their dating is not yet established beyond doubt (Egan 1996, fig. 46). The incomplete state of all four of these finds so far recognised is unlikely to have resulted directly from rough dagger play, which might perhaps show up in knocks on the edges of the blades. One of the

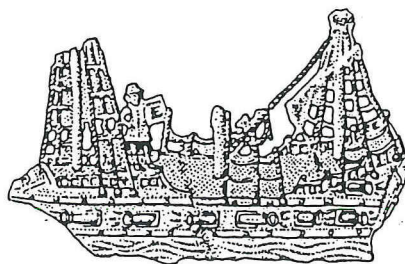


Fig. 7. - Lead/tin Elizabethan warship, 1:1 (private collection; after Egan 1988, drawing Nick Griffiths)

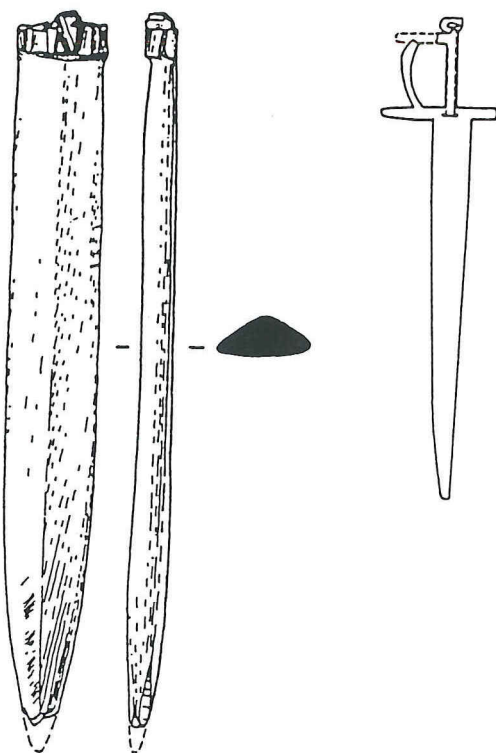


Fig. 8. - Left: bone dagger, (?)late 16th/early 17th century, 1:1 (from Margeson 1993, fig. 38; Norfolk Museums Service copyright reserved).

Right: sheet copper alloy sword, found crumpled - represented straightened out (the separate, dashed piece is presumed originally to have been arched), 16th century; 1:1 (Herbert Museum & Art Gallery collection; from Woodfield 1981, drawing by Paul Woodfield).

London finds has had the point resharpener, probably after the tip broke off (acc. no. A582). This is one of the very few recognised instances (despite the fragility of the majority of the surviving pieces) of making good a damaged medieval plaything.

Toys made of cut metal sheeting are unusual throughout the period considered. They were probably only made on a one-off basis, for children related or at least known to the producers. A possible example is a lead figure of a bird with a central hole, perhaps so that it could be put on a stick, excavated in a late 12th-century deposit in London (Egan 1996, fig. 1). A miniature sheet copper-alloy sword from a 16th-century school building in Coventry (Fig. 8 – Woodfield 1981, 96-97 & fig. 6, no. 97) uses tabs and folding to make (before crumpling) a three-dimensional hilt of a form known from the early 1500s. The only other possible early sheeting toy known to the writer from an English milieu is a very rough human figure in lead from the frontier of the 17th-century world, in a fort in north-east Canada (Kenyon 1986, 38 & 118, pl. 68). There the remoteness of the

community may perhaps explain such a plaything's otherwise anomalous existence at a time when the toy market in Europe had become quite sophisticated in its products (it is alternatively possible that this object owes its existence to the recycling of European materials by native Americans – cf. Jacobs & Dickinson Shattuck 1995, 106, cat. no. 61).

The few medieval wooden toys identified so far in Britain are confined to less than a handful of categories. Remarkably, not one has been identified from the extensive excavations along the London waterfront. There are two spinning tops, both with iron spindles and one painted red, from 9th/10th century deposits at Coppergate in York (Morris forthcoming; the identification of a medieval object from Winchester published by D. Keene 1990 as a top is doubted by Carole Morris – pers. comm.), a toy sword of Viking form and a 'toy horse' of the early 11th century both from Dublin (Lang 1988, 33 & 79, fig. 51, no. DW 88, and 34 & 79, fig. 54, no. DW 90), and also three miniature boats from Viking to (?)early 13th-century and also from Dublin (Christensen 1989, 19-21, figs. 8-9 & pl. 4; Lang, 79-80, fig. 94, no. DW 91), with a long hiatus to another from the (?)late 17th century found at Poole in southern England (Heal 1992).

Conclusions & Further Work

Although the numbers of recognised survivals are at this stage few, it has been established that there was a popular market for mass-produced toys in England from c.1400. This market extended beyond the towns, as the discovery of a jug in a village in northern England shows, and a mould for the manufacture of another version at Hereford suggests a significant level of customer demand from a fairly small local population. Even so, most of the finds so far noted are from major urban centres. Each century seems to have added more to the available repertoire of mass-produced playthings, with entirely new categories like workable firearms and watches coming in during the 17th century, after the period considered in this paper. Only contemporary or very near-contemporary objects and people seem to have been reproduced as toys, which were responsive to major changes in society at large – thus mounted knights apparently vanish from the repertoire at the time when the institution of men in armour fighting from horseback was declining in military importance. A hint that rival makers may have been copying successful products comes with the different versions of the late 16th-century male and female dolls.

International trade in mass-produced toys is suggested by closely comparable if not precisely similar

medieval finds in England and on the Continent. It remains to be established whether in the 14th and 15th centuries this was actually due to the movement of traded goods or it simply represents the influence of popular lines in producing imitations in new locations. Trade from the Continent in toy dolls and daggers is documented in the late 16th century and both categories have arguably been identified in the archaeological record (the latter only during the preparation of this paper). Several categories of miniature vessels and furniture seem on present evidence to begin slightly earlier in the Low Countries than in Britain (Annemarieke Willemsen pers. comm.) – further closely dated playthings may help gauge the accuracy of the present view.

Now that early English toys have begun to be published as such it is hoped that more will be recognised and a fuller picture built up of this aspect of past childhood.

Observations on Some Excavated Dice

Dice are not uncommon among finds on medieval excavations, and some effort has been put into categorising varieties, based on the placement of the number dots on each face relative to the others. An important division between what will here be termed 'regular' dice (that is, those in which the numbers on opposite sides total seven) and 'non-regular' ones (those in which there are different arrangements) has been established (e.g. Brown 1990, 192-194, his types A & B). This brief excursus is primarily intended to draw attention to a contribution originating in the antipodean scientific world (Potter 1992) that should help achieve a clearer understanding of the range of varieties of regular dice (there are 16), and also to suggest from some finds in England how this may lead to further inference about the past perception of these gaming pieces on the part of some contemporary users. The three faces with dots that make numbers having symmetry on two rather than four planes (i.e. the 2, 3 & 6 rather than the 1, 4 & 5) determine which of the 16 variants a particular dice is (Fig. 9).

The convention of showing all six sides unfolded remains useful for publication, but there has hitherto been a wide diversity of orientation and placement of the numerals in illustrations. Sometimes two dice of the same variety have been orientated and opened out differently from each other on the same page, so that detailed comparison leads to the presumption that they are different (see Margeson 1993, 216-217, fig. 164, nos. 1767-8, both of which are variety 16 in Fig. 9 in this present paper). Brown's system confronts the problem of trying to make illustrations consistent

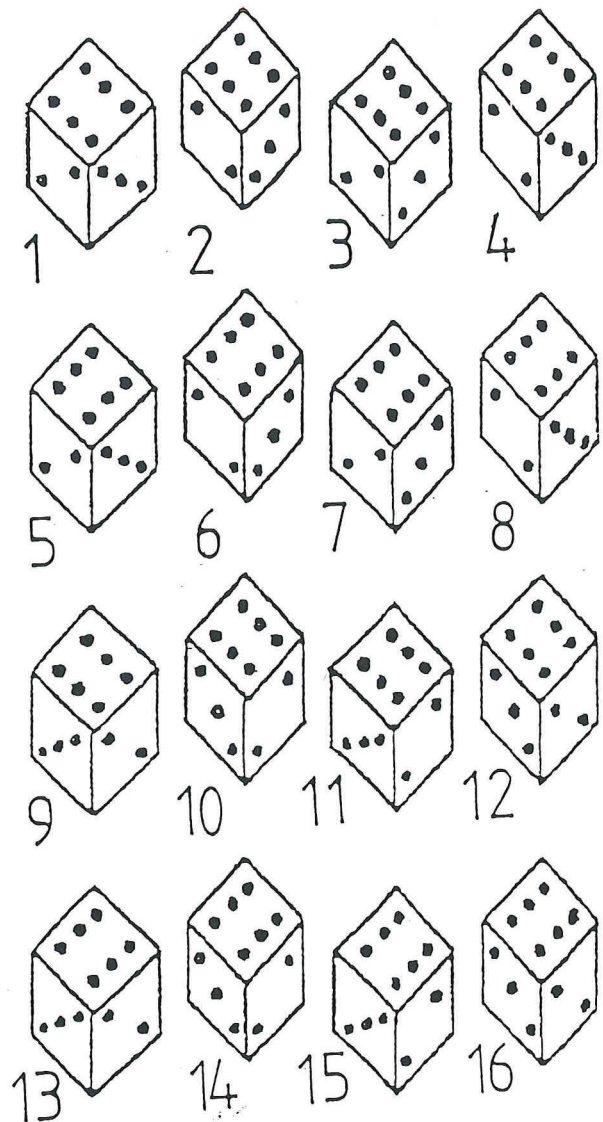


Fig. 9. - The possible varieties of 'regular' dice (from Potter 1992).

(1990, 692-693 & 700, fig. 193). His convention for categorising regular dice has two subdivisions, Ai and Aii, but these respectively combine Potter's varieties 13 with 14 and 1 with 3. That is, although the former's convention for unfolded drawings of dice with the 4, 6 and 3 always running vertically downwards on the right brings a measure of consistency, it does not take account in these pairs of variants of different orientations of the 3s and 6s.

As has been noted elsewhere, both regular and non-regular dice are found in the medieval period. Although the number of excavated dice for which the appropriate information is readily available is small, a rapid survey of those to hand or with sufficiently detailed illustrations to allow them to be categorised as above reveals some unexpected points of interest. In London a significant change apparently comes in

during the 16th or early 17th century, with non-regular dice virtually disappearing. Furthermore, some 90% of later excavated ones from the metropolitan area are of just one of the varieties in Fig. 9 – number 16. A similar chronological pattern is emerging among finds from several other English towns. The apparent move, with sixteen variants possible, towards a single format in parts at least of that country can hardly have been mere coincidence. No explanation has been located in contemporary written sources. What could have been happening, with more people taking gambling seriously, as legislation against dicing suggests, was a new demand for reliable dice that could be immediately recognisable as true, as opposed to the false ones with biases for falling on one side or duplicated numbers, which occasionally turn up (e.g. Spencer 1985 for a late medieval group from London; others are known on the Continent – de Boer & Franssen 1990 on 14th-century dice from Amersfoort). The writer unconsciously developed the ability immediately to recognise regular dice of variety 16 through handling a range while researching this subject. It seems plausible that habitual users of dice in the 16th/17th centuries too would have acquired this skill, and insisted when stakes mattered on a trusted, standard format.

Potter's definitive system now allows variations and repeated patterns in layout in groups of regular dice readily to be pinpointed. It is recommended that all publications of dice should include full, unfolded illustrations with the six centrally positioned (if one tries, with three dimensions shown in two like this, to keep the sixes' dots consistently orientated vertically some variants will have definable differences blurred); for regular dice an accompanying sketch of the appropriate variety as per Fig. 9 seems to be the readiest way of clarifying the configuration.

Points raised here are discussed further in Egan forthcoming b. It seems unlikely in view of the extent of possible diversity that quite as simple a system as Potter's could be devised for defining varieties of irregular dice, and though a cumbersome and complicated rehearsal of every last possibility is feasible, it is improbable that this would produce significant new information.

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