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Annemarieke Willemsen

Medieval Children's Toys in the Netherlands Production, Sale, and Trade

Summary

The author is working on a PhD-thesis on Children's Toys in the Netherlands, 1100-1550, in which archaeological finds are combined with depictions in medieval art and written sources. In this paper, an overview is presented of children's toys found in Holland and Flanders and dated before ca. 1600. Although many finds are unique, the focus is on toys of which series of examples have been found, for they provide hints as to the way these things were produced and traded. The help of iconographical sources is called in for the sale of toys. As a conclusion, both the quantity and quality of excavated toys point at a relatively joyful position of children in medieval society.

Introduction

Children at play must have been a common and daily sight in medieval times. However, the present information on toys and games is very limited, mostly because this aspect of culture has never been subjected to an interdisciplinary investigation. The objects themselves have never been studied thoroughly, and neither have pictures of play and references to it. In medieval texts and pictures, toys and play are used to characterize childhood. Therefore toys, being material culture directly related to children, can be used as a valuable key to both the culture of play and the position of children in medieval society.

With this general goal in mind, research on medieval children's toys has been carried out since the beginning of 1994 at the Department of Art History of the University of Nijmegen (The Netherlands)¹. In this research, archaeological, iconographical and textual sources are explicitly combined, in order to arrive at a broad and differentiated view of children's toys in the Northern and Southern Netherlands from the 12th to the 16th century. This view is

then used as a way to come as close as possible to the child in this region and period.

The archaeological half of the inventory was carried out mainly by visiting almost every archaeological service and depot in the main (medieval) cities of Holland and Flanders, along with a number of private collections, asking for any find that may have been a toy. The material thus collected was then sorted, and relevant find-places were studied in greater detail. Among the main results is the grouping of series of objects, most of which were considered unique by their excavators or possessors. Within these groups, finds from professional excavations which have repeatedly been dated reliably can provide a global date for the rest of the group, including the many objects for which no additional information whatsoever is available.

In this paper, a representative part of these groups is presented, as they play a leading part in studying aspects of production and trade. The ways toys were produced, sold and traded in turn give important information on the time, energy and money that was spent by adults in providing toys for the children; therefore, they also give an idea of the position of those children and the relation between them and adult persons in society.

Medieval Toys from the Netherlands

Because this paper will focus on groups of objects, it is important to note that many of the children's toys from medieval times were unique, having been made spontaneously (for instance carved from wood or sewn together in textile or leather). It must also be realized that most toys which existed at the time will not have been preserved, for they were indeed made of wood, leather or textile, materials that are suitable for toys – easy to get hold of, easy to work, not very expensive, not very fragile – but which usually perish easily. The present image of medieval toys is therefore strongly biased in favour of those made of earthenware and metal. Indeed, the fair

¹ Supervisor: Prof. dr. A.M. Koldeweij.

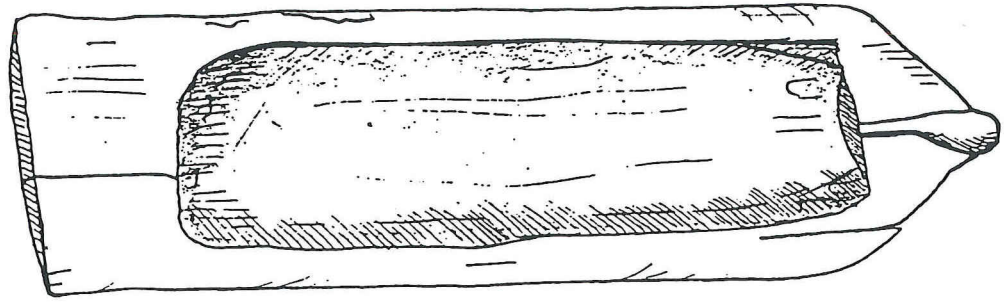


Fig. 1. - Wooden boat found at Hoorn, 16th century, $l=13$ cm. Hoorn, Westfries Museum (no inv.nr.).

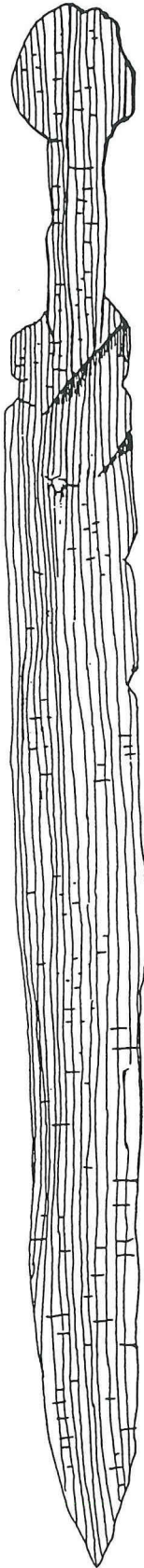


Fig. 2. - Wooden sword, found at Vlaardingen, 14th century, $l=65$ cm. Vlaardingen, Archaeological Service 1.2-006. Scale 1:3.

Drawing: Archaeological Service, with thanks to Jeroen ter Brugge.

number of wooden toys that have been preserved – although the preservation circumstances throughout the whole process of use, deposition, excavation and conservation have then been highly favourable – proves that very many wooden toys must have existed.

Compared with other sources, archaeology always gives a 'low' impression of the studied society, for in most cases we are dealing with medieval waste. Thus, the finds give only a fragmentary picture of the objects in use. But this also means that archaeological finds provide a view of all layers of medieval society, whereas art and written information in many cases only account for the highest social classes.

Wooden toy-boats and small wooden weapons like swords and bows are presented here as examples of toys that were made quite spontaneously, maybe even by a child, and were not part of any organized production (Fig. 1 and 2)².

Spinning Tops

Also made of wood, and one of the most frequent types of toys, are spinning tops. The numbers in which they are found not only prove that they were a popular pastime – this is also indicated by the large amount of depictions of tops, mostly in medieval manuscripts – but also that they were produced on a reasonably large scale. Most of the tops are turned on a lathe, easily traced by the horizontal ridges around the base. Afterwards, an iron pin was hammered into the end of the top. The two main categories are pegtops (Fig. 3) and whipping tops (Fig. 4). The first is used when – while turning – trying to kick another top out of a circle drawn on the ground. It is a high top with a long pin. The second is to be kept turning as long as possible, and has to come with a whip, although a whip is sometimes also used with the pegtop. The whipping top has a more thick-set shape and the pin is usually shorter and blunter. The measurements of excavated tops vary from 2 to 11 cm in height, but most are between 5 and 7 cm high and 4 to 5 cm in diameter. Whips are found seldomly,

² Drawings by author, unless mentioned otherwise; all on scale 1:1 except nr. 2 and nr. 14.

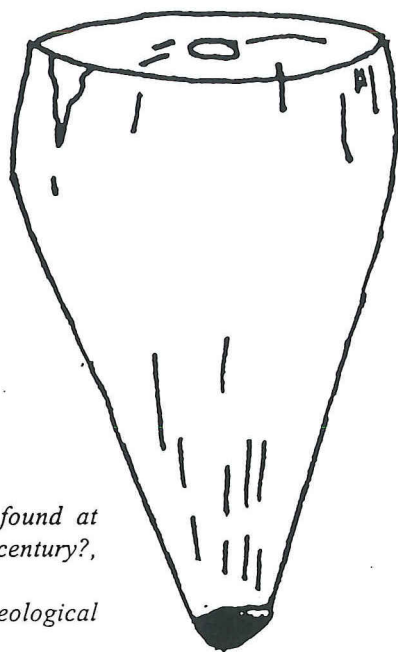


Fig. 3. - Pegtop, found at Amsterdam, 15th century?, h=8.2 cm. Amsterdam, Archaeological Service Wey-34-1.

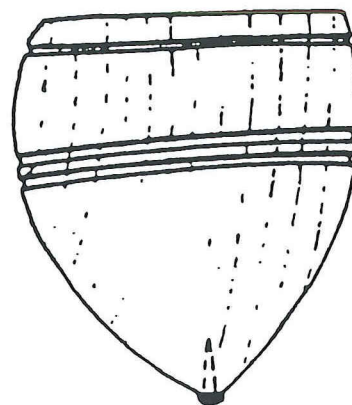


Fig. 4. - Whipping top, found at castle of 'De Voorst', before 1362, h=5 cm. Zwolle, Provinciaal depot. Drawing from: A.D. Verlinde, *Archeologische kroniek van Overijssel over 1982-1984* (ROB-overdruk nr.269) p.219.

but a 16th-century top and whip were found together in a ditch in Langweer near Leeuwarden (Friesland)³. The presence of the top was the reason why the quite ordinary looking stick was also preserved; a closer look at the stick revealed a clear narrowing at one end, with traces of cord bound around it, and a hole pierced through it at the other end; at the latter end a cord or wire could be used to attach the whip to the wrist.

The uniformity in the forms of tops, clearly divided into a limited number of favoured types, indicates that woodworkers turned series of tops apart from their regular production. Spinning tops are found relatively often in places where there used to be water, like ditches, canals⁴ and castle-moats⁵. They share this feature with finds such as balls and knucklebones, which are objects that were also thrown. Therefore, they got lost – at a distance – more easily than 'on site'-toys such as dolls and miniature utensils. When found in cess-pits or other concentrations of waste, pegtops in many cases are split in two fragments or miss a segment, which identifies them as loser's pieces.

Rattles

Among the most usual attributes for small children is the rattle, of which two groups of ceramic ones have been identified. Rattles were among the production of the 'early' ceramic centres at Brunssum-Schinveld (Limburg, Netherlands)⁶ and Andenne (Belgium), and may be regarded as the first mass-produced playthings. The specimens from Limburg are more or less spherical in shape with a handle (Fig. 5); they measure 7 to 12 cm in length and 3 to 6 cm in diameter. They are produced in white-firing clay and are decorated with strokes of coloured paint. They are found mostly in Limburg, as the production of these centres was quite local/regional in scope. This is not the case with the so-called Andenne-rattles (Fig. 6), that have been turned – as can be seen from the ribs – from white clay and lead-glazed in a light or vivid yellow colour characteristic of the production in the region of Andenne. They measured ca. 8 to 12 cm, with ca. 3 to 5 cm for the handle. Examples have been found at for instance Antwerpen and Gent⁷, but also at Leiden and Geldrop⁸, which is con-

³ Top and stick, length 6,2 and 22 cm resp. Leeuwarden, Fries Museum inv.nr. FM 1981-IV-6a and b.

⁴ E.g. the excavation near the Sint Olofspoor in Amsterdam. See: J.M. BAART & L.H. VAN WIJNGAARDEN-BAKKER, *Spelen bij de poort*, in: H.H. VAN REGTEREN ALTENA, *Vondsten onder de Sint Olofskapel*, Amsterdam, 1972, 28-33.

⁵ E.g. at the castle of Eindhoven. See N. ARTS (ed.), *Het Kasteel van Eindhoven, Archeologie, ecologie en geschiedenis van een heerlijke woning 1420-1676*, Eindhoven, 1992.

⁶ See A. BRUIJN, *Die mittelalterliche keramische Industrie in Schinveld*, *Berichten ROB* 10-11, 1960/61, 462-507; A. BRUIJN,

Die mittelalterliche keramische Industrie in Südl limburg, Berichten ROB 12-13, 1962/63, 357-459; A. BRUIJN, *Nieuwe vondsten van middeleeuws aardewerk in Zuidlimburg*, *Berichten ROB* 14, 1964, 133-149; A. BRUIJN, *Een middeleeuwse pottenbakkersoven te Nieuwenhagen, Limburg*, *Berichten ROB* 15-16, 1965/66, 169-184.

⁷ See T.OOST, *Rammelaars in z.g. Andenne-aardewerk*, *Stadsarcheologie* (Gent) 4-3, 1980, 9-14.

⁸ See H.L. JANSSEN & W.A.B. VAN DER SANDEN, *Middel-euws aardewerk uit Geldrop (11e-12e eeuw)*, *Brabants Heem* 37-4, 1985, 151-159, ill. 2 (p. 156).

Fig. 5. - Rattle found at Schinveld, 11th-12th century, l=7 cm. Present location unknown (probably at Amersfoort, ROB).

Drawing from: De Bruijn 1964 (see note 5) p.148.

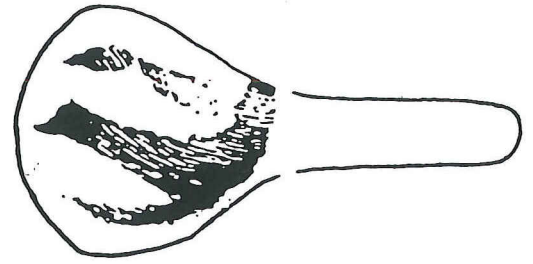
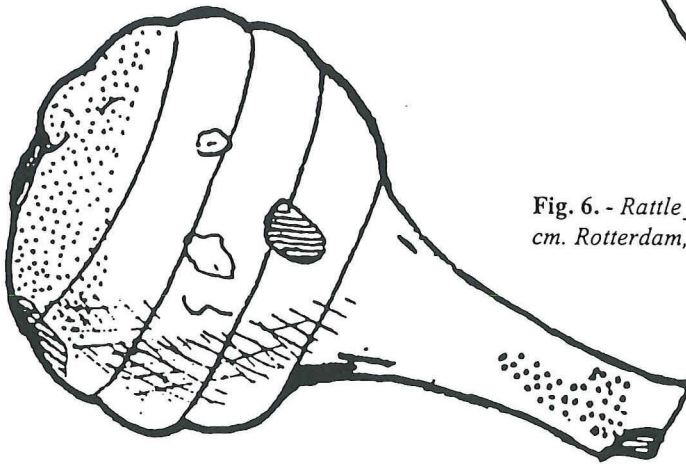


Fig. 6. - Rattle from Andenne, found in Leiden, date unknown, l=8 cm. Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen F537.

sistent with the broad market of the other products in Andenne ceramics. The popularity of these rattles is not only indicated by the large number of pieces and fragments found and the distances that they crossed to be bought, but also by the imitation of such rattles in local earthenware as found in Utrecht⁹. In passing it may be mentioned that complete rattles are rare and usually fragments are found in form of only a sphere or a loose handle, which shows that the major reason for their disposal was the breaking off of the handle, which made the rattle unusable.

Apart from these, open-work circular rattles, made of lead-alloy and with bells inside are also known¹⁰. The 16th century came up with lots of bone 'tinklebells' with a flute at one end and a piece ('teat') for nibbling at the other, with bells attached in the middle¹¹. The gold and silver rattles that would become very popular on 17th-century paintings and in highly valuable collections are found for the first time in excavations of 16th-century sites. These were occasionally imitated in less expensive materials like again lead-alloy¹², and an occasional wooden rattle¹³

corresponds with images of rattles in paintings of the late Middle Ages¹⁴.

Dolls

A few wooden parts of dolls with moveable arms and/or legs have been found¹⁵, as was an occasional moveable arm made of the soft alloy of pewter and lead¹⁶ used for most miniatures.

A group is formed by some ten small doll's heads made of baked clay, hollow at the back and with a hole in the neck, which shows that they could be placed on a stick (Fig. 7). Sometimes they also have a small hole in the top of the head, making it possible to place head-gear set on a small pin there. A few of the heads also came with the upper part of the torso, with a usually crude indication of breasts. They measure ca. 5 to 6 cm maximum; the hole is ca. 1 cm in diameter and tapers upwards. Showing clear similarities in form, they were found throughout the Netherlands, including discoveries from the flooded land in Zeeland¹⁷ and the

⁹ Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, inv.nr. F8756. See: A. WILLEMSSEN, *Kinderspeelgoed in de Middeleeuwen, het combineren van verschillende soorten bronnen*, *Ex Tempore* 41, 1995, 89-102, ill. 2 (p. 93).

¹⁰ E.g. Brugge, Archaeological Service inv.nr. BR90/WI/L.V. and Middelburg, Provinciaal Depot van Bodemvondsten inv.nr. Mdb-kou-92-374.

¹¹ E.g. collection of Stichting H. Keijser, Amsterdam. See: Ch. DE MOOIJ *et al.* (red.), *Kinderen van alle tijden*, Zwolle, 1997, 100.

¹² Eindhoven, Archaeological Service inv.nr. EHV-RD-92-21.1.

¹³ Den Haag, Archaeological Service inv.nr. BIR94-126.2.

¹⁴ E.g. the rattle held by Judas Thaddeus in the Holy Kinship by an anonymous South-Netherlandish Master, dated ca. 1510. Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum inv.nr. 416.

¹⁵ E.g. Amersfoort, Rijksdienst voor het Oudheidkundig Bodemonderzoek inv.nr. DVR 51-7-10 (missing).

¹⁶ Diksmuide, Instituut voor het Archeologisch Patrimonium, no inv.nr. (from Damme).

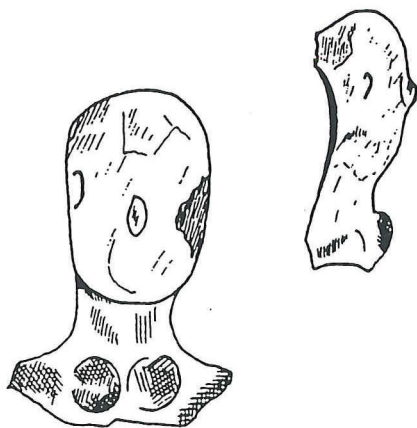


Fig. 7. - Doll's head with torso, found at Delft?, ca. 1500, h=5.4 cm. Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen F8745.

Scheldt¹⁸. Finds from Eindhoven¹⁹ and the castle at West-Souburg (Zeeland)²⁰ date the group in the 15th and the first half of the 16th century.

Reconstruction leads to interpreting them as dolls on sticks, with a ceramic head with sometimes part of the torso; they were to be completed with a garment tied to this head and – if so wished – with a hat put on top of it. Maybe the garment was equipped with hands and feet made of wood or ceramics, but there is no certainty about that. Some of the heads show traces of paint, which also explains the very superficial way the face is modelled. As to their function, all characteristics point to these dolls on a stick to have been used as puppets – whether or not as the medieval predecessors of Punch and Judy – known from depictions²¹.

Miniature Utensils

Utensils such as like kitchenware, dinner-services and furniture in miniature, form a large part of the excavated objects regarded as toys. Their function has been – and still is – the subject of discussion at all levels, but may be summarized as follows²². Miniatures were certainly also used as toys. It is not clear to what extent some of these objects functioned as

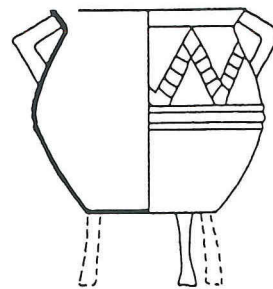


Fig. 8. - Cooking pot, found at Eindhoven, 1225-1275, h=3.8 cm. Eindhoven, Archaeological Service EHV-HE-89 sp 14.72.1. Drawing from: N. Arts (ed.), *Sporen onder de Kempische stad, Archeologie, ecologie en vroegste geschiedenis van Eindhoven 1225-1500*, Eindhoven 1994, 233.

decorative items on display or had a place in private dealings with religion, for instance in domestic altars.

Miniatures of wood and glass are known but scarce²³. Miniatures of earthenware and metal are, however, abundant throughout the Middle Ages, peaking in the second half of the 16th century and leading to a real hype in the 17th and 18th centuries up to the present day. The ceramic miniatures mostly represent cooking and dinner type objects, whilst they pewter and lead alloy ones cover the whole known range of daily life, from plates, strainers and pots over chairs, boardgame-tables and scissors to chalices, shrines and monstrances. Both the ceramic objects and the metal ones were clearly mass-produced. While the ceramic objects may still have been a side-product of potters, the miniatures in lead-alloy must – considering their sheer quantity – have been a specialization on the part of pewterers. For most things 'loosening' moulds have been used, which shows that their way of production is closely related to that of badges. Even larger and three-dimensional objects are composed of parts cast in flat moulds, parts that are ingeniously folded and put together.

A few examples of groups within these categories of metal objects have been selected for presentation. A quite early example is the three-legged miniature cooking pot with angular handles and linear deco-

¹⁷ E.g. Zierikzee, private collection. See: F. BEEKMAN & H.J.E. VAN BEUNINGEN, *Het verdronken Westenschouwen*, Zierikzee, 1995, cover photograph.

¹⁸ Antwerpen, Archaeological Service inv.nr. A103/21/W1.

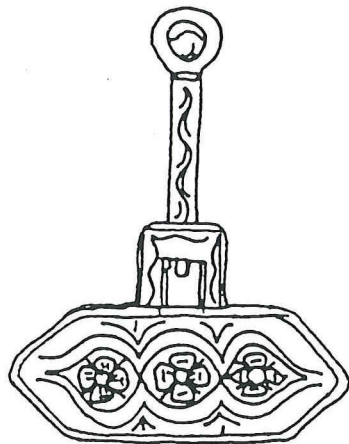
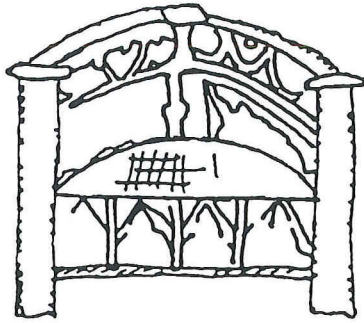
¹⁹ Eindhoven, Archaeological Service inv.nr. EHV-RD-90 sp. 19.1.176.

²⁰ Middelburg, Provinciaal Depot van Bodemvondsten inv.nr. 1972-WS.

²¹ E.g. in the border of page 54 r of '*Li Romans du boin roi Alixandre*', Oxford Bodleian Library ms Bodley 264, illuminated in Bruges in the 1340s.

²² See A. WILLEMSSEN, *Kinder-spel en poppe-goet, 17de-eeuwse miniatuur-gebruiksvoorwerpen en hun functie*, *Antiek* 28-9, 1994, 392-399.

²³ Wooden plate: Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen inv.nr. F5821; glass basket: Eindhoven, Archaeological Service inv.nr. EHV-19.1.79.



²⁴ See *Het kasteel Voorst, Macht en val van een Overijsselse burcht circa 1280-1362 naar aanleiding van een opgraving*, Zwolle 1983, ill. 16a and 16b (p. 43).

²⁵ Ieper, Stedelijk Museum (no inv.nr.) and Zellik, Instituut voor het Archeologisch Patrimonium inv.nr. 93-IVW-31B/180.

²⁶ Diksmuide, Instituut voor het Archeologisch Patrimonium inv.nr. 92-IVW-11.

²⁷ E.g. Amsterdam, Archaeological Service inv.nr. Rok1-23 and Rok1-43.

²⁸ See: A.J. GUIRAN, *Sporen door het verleden: archeologisch onderzoek tijdens de aanleg van de Willemsspoortunnel door Rotterdam*, *Westerheem* 38-6, 1989, 265-273; E. VAN GINKEL, *Waar Rotta ophield*, begon Rotterdam, *Scarabee* 2, 1992/93, 6-10.

²⁹ See J.M. BAART *et al.* (red.), *Opgravingen in Amsterdam, 20 jaar stadskernonderzoek*, Amsterdam, 1977, 61-66.

³⁰ See R.M. VAN HEERINGEN *et al.* (red.), *Geld uit de belt, Archeologisch onderzoek in de bouwput van de gemeentelijke parkeerkelder en het belastingkantoor aan de Kousteensedijk te Middelburg*, Vlissingen, 1994.

³¹ Most examples are now at the Stedelijke Musea in Ieper or in the Instituut voor het Archeologisch Patrimonium, Zellik and their depot in Diksmuide.

³² E.g. on page 3 of the *Trachtenbuch* of Matthäus Schwarz, Braunschweig, Herzog Anton Ullrich Museum inv.nr. H27-67a.

ration (Fig. 8). It measures ca. 3.5 cm in height and 3 cm in diameter and can be dated between 1250 and 1350. This group date is based mainly on reliably dated finds from for instance the castle of 'De Voorst' near Zwolle²⁴ and the *Verdronken Weiden* ('Flooded Meadows') site at Ieper (Ypres, Belgium)²⁵.

Another example is the chair with semicircular back and seat (Fig. 9), a good example and indicator for the way three-dimensional objects were made out of a flat mould. These chairs measure ca. 3 by 5 cm and can be dated in the 14th century, a chronology again based on dated finds from reliable contexts such as the Ieper site²⁶ and those from the town-centre excavations at Amsterdam²⁷.

Groups of drippers (Fig. 10), plates (Fig. 11) and jugs (Fig. 12) be regarded as indicators of the really large scale of production of these items in the later 16th century. For that period, sites such as the tracks of the railway-tunnel in Rotterdam²⁸ and the Amsterdam underground²⁹ and the municipal waste-belts as found in Middelburg (Kousteensedijk)³⁰ produce masses of hundreds and hundreds of these small metal miniatures, which closely imitate every single item known in 'adult format'.

Horsemen

Among these miniatures, one type still stands out. I refer to the many small horsemen in metal (Fig. 13), found for the major part at the Flooded Meadows site in Ieper³¹. They vary in height between ca. 3 and 5.5 cm. There are no two identical riders, but they clearly form a functional group. The one characteristic they have in common, apart from representing riders, is that they have some form of a (foot-)stand, which shows that they were meant to be set up in some way. It is not certain that these are the medieval – indeed, 14th-century – predecessors of the later tin soldiers. However, it is known from depictions in medieval art that small tournaments were put out on tables³², and

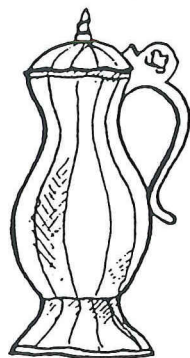


Fig. 12. - Jug with lid, provenance unknown, 15th-16th century, h=4.8 cm. Delft, Private collection.



Fig. 13. - Knight on horseback. Ieper, before 1383, h=3.6 cm. Ieper, Stedelijke Musea (no inv.nr.).

the small tin horsemen may well have been elements of this, whether or not with tin spectators like in the small 'gallery' also found at Ieper³³ and whether or not watched by children. It is encouraging that a group of ceramic horsemen, with adjustable weapons, as found in the region of Konstanz (utmost south of Germany) in combination with many female statuettes, led to the same hypothesis³⁴.

Production, Sale and Trade

Although some 'once-in-a-lifetime' unique objects occur among the most beautiful of the excavated toys, a reasonable part of the inventory consists of objects produced on a larger scale. This production has two 'faces'. One is the series of ceramic rattles made aside by potters at Andenne and traded along with their other products, and the other the pewter-and-lead drippers, mass-produced in 'fast' moulds and obviously sold and traded in an organized way. The production methods of these objects is revealed by the characteristics of their form, and thus detectable by a close look at them. Of great help here are occasional finds of production waste *in situ*. The way toys were traded is betrayed by the places where they were excavated, which allow us to identify trade contacts and export systems.

The way these objects were sold is less easily detected, at least when using only archaeological sources. Here, we need help from texts and iconographical sources such as the depiction of a stand with items for sale in a painting by Pieter Aertsen, dated ca. 1550³⁵ (Fig. 14). In this painting, showing a feast on occasion of the return of a few of the villagers from a pilgrimage, the artist painted a small stand covered with cloth. In it, everything that was popular on such an occasion is put up for sale: vanes with an image of the saint for pilgrims and supporters, household utensils such as plates, personal items such as knives, and toys for the children. Small wooden cross-bows, painted red and white, are hung from the tarpaulin, as are wooden drums, and before



Fig. 14. - Stand with cross-bows, drums, windmills and a hobby-horse. Detail from Pieter Aertsen, *Return of a pilgrimage to St. Anthony*, ca. 1550. Brussel, Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten 7542.

³³ See M. DEWILDE & A. ERVYNCK (eds.), *De thuishkomst van Michiel Quaetjone*, *Archeologie in de Verdrongen Weiden van Ieper*, Ieper, 1995, p.16 (bottom right).

³⁴ See J. OEXLE, *Minne en miniature - Kinderspiel im mittelalterlichen Konstanz*, in: *Stadtluft, Hirsebrei und Bettelmönch, Die Stadt um 1300*, cat. Zürich/Stuttgart, 1992/1993, 392-395.

³⁵ Pieter AERTSEN, *Return of a Pilgrimage to St. Anthony*. Brussel, *Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten*, inv.nr. 7524.

the stand a basket is shown with windmills and hobby-horses for sale. None of these sorts of toys have yet been excavated. At this fair market, they were sold – and also bought – for in addition the painting shows a woman who has just bought one of the child-size cross-bows, and a woman leading two small boys by the hand. One of the boys is holding a toy windmill, the other got a vane and a hobby-horse. Both are not really playing with these things, but merely holding and showing them, which indicate their newly-received status. Depictions like this give hints as to the frequent selling of toys at markets and fairs, and of them being used as presents for children. Moreover, they give information on the nature and look of toys not preserved in an archaeological way, as depictions and texts always do.

Conclusion

The quantity of found medieval toys, along with the organized production, sale and trade, prove that toys were a recognized need or wish of children in this period, and that adults were ready to put time, energy and money into handling this special feature of children. This is one of the many indicators that the position of children in medieval times was much more favourable than has been thought. This idea is supported by the quality of unique items made so carefully, the quantity of depictions, and the way toys are used in the works of medieval artists and writers.

It all goes to show that sitting in an archaeological depot, with a worn and half-decayed wooden top in hand, might be the closest we will ever get to a common child in a medieval town.

(Drawings by author, unless mentioned otherwise; all on scale 1:1 except nr.2 and nr.14)

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