

What is a Spindle, Anyway?

UHP Staff

Sleeping Beauty pricked her finger on one. The Greek Fate, Clotho, used one to create the lifespan of each individual in the ancient world and the Norns of Norse mythology employed them to spin the threads of fate.

We frequently read about them in fairy tales and mythology but do we really have any idea what spindles look like or what they are for?

Once a common item in every household, the spindle is now a rarity, replaced first by the spinning wheel and then by its power-driven, factory-based counterpart.

One of the earliest tools devised by man, a spindle transforms fiber, such as cotton, flax, or wool, into yarn that can then be woven or knitted to produce cloth.

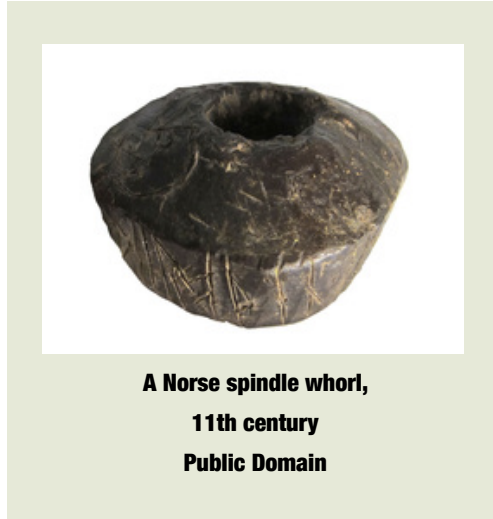
History of Spinning

Evidence of spindles in the form of shell, stone, clay, and metal spindle whorls can be found in Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas.

Archaeologists have uncovered spindle weights at sites dating back to the Neolithic period in Syria and Mesopotamia. Illustrations of women, girls, and even men, all spinning diligently appear in Egyptian

frescoes, on Greek vases, and in the 16th century Aztec Codex Mendoza.

Before industrialization and mechanization, the manufacture of



**A Norse spindle whorl,
11th century
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textiles was the single most time-consuming and labor-intensive human activity. Historically, people spent more time spinning and weaving than they did in procuring food through farming, hunting, and gathering.

The term spinster, used for a single woman, derives from the constant activity of these young women as they worked to supply the family with cloth. Spinning yarn was so vital that children typically began to learn to spin while still toddlers.

In fact, a spindle is very like a child's toy top, both in appearance and in the way it works. Some historians speculate that toy tops developed in part to teach children spinning. Like a top, a spindle has a shaft with a weight or whorl at one end.

Sometimes the weight is a separate piece added to the shaft, other times it is just a bulbous part of the shaft.

It is probable that the first spindles derived from simple sticks. Yarn can be created without a tool, by pulling fibers out of a bundle (called the sliver) and then twisting them tightly together. However, the work is simplified when the yarn can be stored by winding it around a stick or rock. It is easy to imagine that someone decided the yarn would twist faster if the stick itself was twirling. The added weight (the whorl) allowed the stick to twirl still faster, producing yarn more quickly. Eventually, the spindle as we know it developed.

The spindle is used in one of two ways: as a drop spindle or as a supported spindle. The supported spindle is just that, a spindle that is twirled or spun on a surface as the spinner draws out the fiber and 'drafts' it into the thread. The twirling of the spindle creates 'twist' which travels up the fiber, twisting it into a single strong thread or yarn. With a drop spindle, the spinner flicks the shaft and allows it to spin in mid-air while she drafts her fiber and allows the 'twist' to travel up the length of the fiber.

Once the spindle stops spinning, the spinner wraps the thread she has made around the shaft: the stored thread is called the "cop." Once that is done, she flicks or twirls the spindle and creates more yarn. For the practiced



*Sleeping Beauty, Alexander Zick
a German painter (1845-1907)*

Fairy tales that highlight the use of the spindle are common in many cultures, in part because the spindle was such a common household item.

the motions are smooth and automatic: the more experienced the spinner, the better able she is to control the thickness of her yarn.

It is the twisting together of the fibers that adds strength to the thread and allows for yarn that is significantly longer than the actual fibers of flax, cotton, or wool.

This first twisting of the fibers is called a single ply and while it is strong, most spinners ply it again by spinning two "singles" together in the opposite direction of the original spinning. The new thread is

substantially stronger than either individual yarn.

This simple stick with a weight filled a huge need: the need for a continuous supply of yarn to weave and knit.

For thousands of years, every household had at least one and usually many spindles to create a variety of yarns.

But the invention of the spinning wheel, probably in Asia, spelled the beginning of the end for this simplest

of tools. By 1257 there is written evidence that the wheel had made its way to Persia and by the late 13th century, the wheel reached Western Europe. Slowly, the spinning wheel displaced the hand held spindle. By the 19th century, the spinning wheel itself had been replaced by power driven spinning machines.

For thousands of years, however, the simple spindle supplied people everywhere with the yarn they needed to clothe themselves.