

## Ancient History of the Spinning Wheel

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In the rare volume by Ph. J. Rehtmeier, "Chronicle of Brunswick-Lueneburg, or Historical Description of the Dukes of Brunswick and Lueneburg" (Brunswick, 1722), there may be found in the second part on page 879 the oldest record of the spinning wheel, namely that it was invented by a wood carver by the name of Juergen from Watenbuettel in Brunswick. The chronicle reports, "It is said that at that time (1530) the spinning wheels which are used by the women have been contrived and brought here by a citizen and skillful stone mason and wood carver, Master Juergen, who lived in an inn beyond Oelper whence said inn still retains its name, Spinning Wheel Inn."

While working on an "Encyclopedia of Inventions," the historian Zimmerman of Brunswick was addressed for further particulars concerning the invention of the spinning wheel.

A copy of the historical journal, "Brunswick Magazine," 1896, p. 103-104, was received, which contains a review by Prof. Richard Andrée of Munich about the book on "Types of Spinning Wheels" of the Viennese Prof. Hugo Edler von Rettich. In this review Andrée remarks in regard to the alleged Brunswick inventor of the spinning wheel that he would suggest "that the question of Brunswick's share in the invention of the spinning wheel be investigated thoroughly by an authority." An attempt has been made in this article to determine the time of the invention and the inventor of the spinning wheel. Unfortunately, the result of the investigation deprives Juergen of the honor of being the inventor and the year 1530 of the honor of being the year during which the invention was made.

The development of the spinning wheel can be followed chronologically: From the ancient

distaff (Latin: fusus), of which examples from ancient Egypt are known, the spinning wheel was developed as soon as the develop-

ment of mechanical technology began during the 15th century. After the introduction of gun powder into medieval warfare, the gun experts of the 15th century became the exponents of the newly developing mechanical arts. If the wealth of manuscripts left by these ancient engineers once is digested by technologists, a much clearer knowledge will be available of the

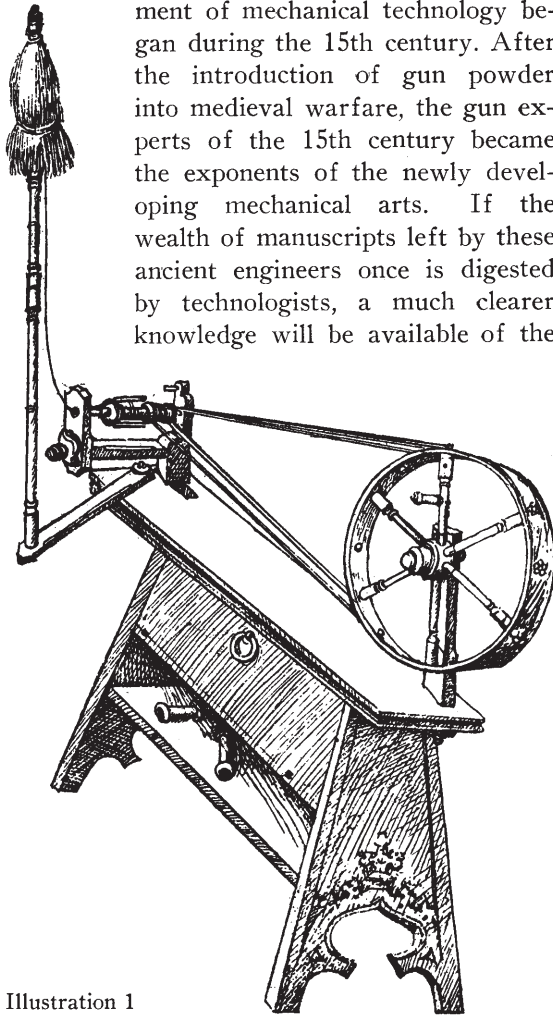


Illustration 1

origin of many inventions than is obtainable today.

In a large manuscript written by one of these unknown masters, there are shown many illustrations of diverse and curious arts of war—and peace-time—and among them is a very complete picture of a spinning wheel. This manuscript later on received the very misleading title of “Medieval House Book” and is now in the possession of the family of Waldburg-Wolfegg. In 1887 it appeared as a publication of the Germanic National Museum in Nuremberg. The origin of the “Medieval House Book” undoubtedly falls in the last third of the 15th century, about 1480.

In this book was found the picture reproduced here as Figure 1, a complete spinning wheel 50 years before the alleged time of its invention. The pulley and the spindle can be recognized readily. Two cards can be distinguished easily running from the lower circumference of the big fly wheel to the spinning mechanism where they drive the pulley and the quicker moving axle of the spindle. The entire apparatus appears well built. It is interesting to note the arrangement for tightening the cords by provisions for moving the support of the spindle in a slot in the further end of the table. The apparatus is put into motion by turning the fly wheel by means of a handle on one of the spokes. We have here a complete spinning wheel. The fact that a driving mechanism which is operated by foot is lacking has no bearing on the mechanically sound and complete construction of this spinning wheel. Pulley and spindle, driven at different speeds, and not the treadle, constitute the essential part of the invention. How old the latter is, is not known. It is said that the earliest record of it is on an antique cameo which pictures Cupid at a grindstone. There is no proof whatsoever that this cameo is genuine. The distaff also is fastened to the spinning wheel. Previously the distaff was held by hand. A distaff maker is mentioned in Nuremberg’s “Little Chronicle” as early as 1419.



Illustration 2

The second oldest picture of a spinning wheel is in the manuscripts of Leonardo Da Vinci, famous for his painting "The Last Supper," and the greatest engineer of the 15th century. Leonardo's manuscripts are available today in a magnificent photographic reproduction.

A picture of a spinning wheel is reported to be in the so-called Glockendon bible in the ducal library at Wolfenbuettel. This manuscript dates from 1524, about from the time of the pretended Juergen. The present libra-

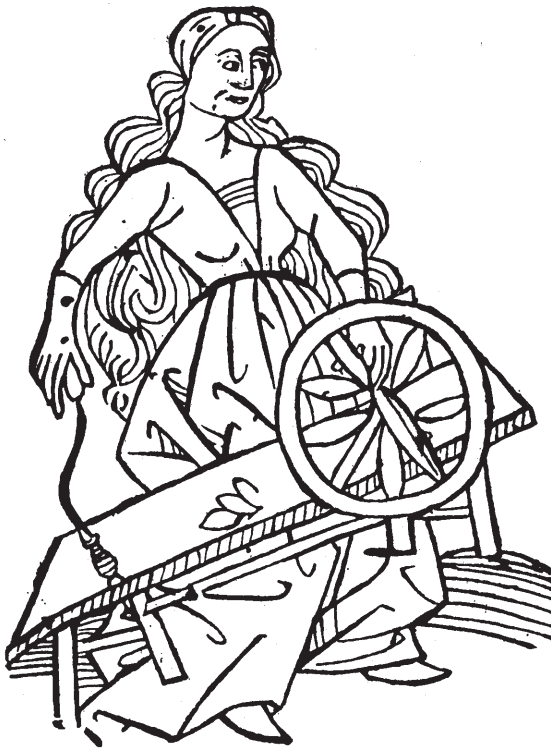


Illustration 3

rian has written the following concerning it: "On page 1963 (in the second volume of the bible) there are two small pictures of which the lower represents a housewife and her servants, spinning. While the maids still are holding the ancient distaff, the mistress is seated at a contrivance of such a form that it is difficult to determine whether it represents a reel or a spinning wheel. There certainly is no treadle on it. Whether this stand may be considered a spinning wheel is doubtful." This picture, which already has been cited by

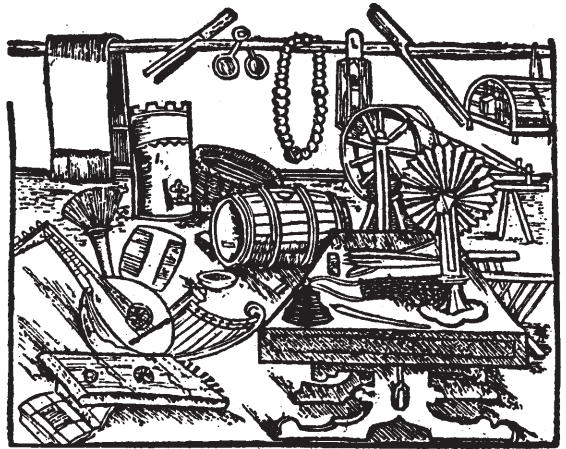


Illustration 4

William Goerges in his "Patriotic Histories" volume 1843 against the priority of Juergen, itself has little historical support. Considering that it has not been possible to produce an older record about Juergen than the one mentioned in the beginning of this article, dated 1722, he must be left out of consideration as the inventor of the spinning wheel in one of the pictures in the "Medieval House Book," and the drawings of spinning wheels by Leonardo Da Vinci. It is quite possible, however, that a man of that name may have been influential in the introduction of the spinning wheel in that vicinity at that time. However, he must be disregarded as the inventor in 1530 because Rehtmeier's record is less reliable than the exact drawings dating from 1480 and 1490.



Illustration 5