



Penny Walsh

# The Medieval Dress and Textile Society Meeting, London, 5 March 2011

The Medieval Dress and Textile Society (MEDATS) was founded in London in 1991 with the aim of providing a forum for all those interested in European clothing and textiles secular or sacred - roughly from the end of the Roman Empire in western Europe until about AD 1600.

The study day and themed workshop 'Making it: Textile Technologies in Medieval Europe' held at the Museum of London on March 5<sup>th</sup> 2011, explored the technical knowledge and practical skills required to produce yarn and textiles in north-west Europe during the period from the 5<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century AD. The day was planned to be an interdisciplinary exchange of research between experimental archaeologists, historians and practitioners and the MEDATS was delighted to welcome 11 speakers and demonstrators from Britain and also from Holland and Scandinavia where there has been extensive study of this aspect of textile history.

In her opening overview Gale Owen-Crocker outlined the series of technological changes to textile tools and machinery during the period and each subsequent speaker, in chronological sequence, dealt in greater detail with these changes to textile technology.

A PowerPoint presentation in the Activity Centre showed eight stages of woollen cloth production from the 15<sup>th</sup> century stained glass panels of the Cloth Worker's chapel of the collegial church of Notre Dame, Semur-en-Auxios.

In their respective papers Ruth Gilbert and Alan Raistrick outlined the technological changes in yarn spinning during the medieval period. Ruth also demonstrated fine thread spinning on a distaff and a drop-spindle using both linen flax and combed wool. Alan Raistrick, a retired engineer, explained the technical advances of spinning wheel components which enabled enormous increases in yarn production in the subsequent period. The 'Great Wheel', demonstrated by Ann Markwick, was an

important step in this development. The obvious massive size and weight of the machine meant it required great strength and control.

The lost skills and extended processes of fibre preparation were explained by Anton Reurink in a paper describing a project to recreate medieval broadcloth. He explained how wool comb warmers, replicated using contemporary illustrations, improved the speed at which the fibres could be prepared. It was therefore interesting to see Katy Owens demonstrating wool combing using similar combs. Medieval weaving technology was outlined by three papers and demonstrated by Jo Wexler, a tablet weaver who has researched and made several looms to create the structure and patterns of tablet-woven bands, and Glenys Crocker, who has graduated from weaving tabby to four-shed twill on her impressive warp-weighted loom.

Three speakers outlined developments in loom technology: Anna Nørgård who has completed several practical research projects at the Viking Ship Museum in Roskilde, Denmark using the upright loom; Kathrine Brandstrup (who also demonstrated naalbinding or knotless knitting) who charted the development of the loom from AD 1100 to 1500; and finally Nat Alcock, who described a project in Coventry to recreate a weaver's house, loom and weaving tools from evidence in local wills and records from AD 1540, by which time the loom was horizontal as evidenced by pulleys and treadles found on the site.

The final question and answer session as well as discussions throughout the day had stimulated questions about the exact details of the way in which medieval textile tools might have worked. The demonstrations stimulated discussion about the level of craftsmanship and an assessment of how labour intensive the production of the highest level cloth would have been.