

A Stitch in Time?

On a recent episode of Robin Hood on BBC America, Maid Marian stitched Robin's wounded arm with a metal sewing needle retrieved from her sewing supplies. Was that action historically accurate? Would the average seamstress in Medieval England even possess a metal sewing needle?

The answer is "Probably not". While needles made of metal were available in some parts of the world during the period of time covered by the SCA, they weren't readily available in Europe during this time. Needles used in Medieval Europe were primarily made of bone or wood.

The Romans had used bronze and ivory needles. It is believed the credit for the art of manufacturing steel needles goes to either China or India. During the Abbassid Era (750-1258, according to www.nature.com/news/specials/islamandscience/timeline/index.html) Arabs carried on extensive trade to obtain metals. They imported iron alloy and crafted various items, including needles. In 641 C.E. the Arabs captured Alexandria, and acquired a vast library of medical writings. These writings were then carried into Spain. In the fifteenth century the Arabs were driven out of Spain, taking with them most of their collection of books. By this time the Arabs had mastered the art of needle making and the art of using those needles in surgery, and they began trading the needles with people in different parts of Europe. The Arabs kept the art of making Steel needles a secret until 1650. Steel needle making in England began soon afterwards. At first the needles were made by hand, thereby making it a laborious process. Later, machinery was invented which allowed the manufacture of large volumes of needles in less time, thereby making steel needles more accessible to the average seamstress.

While steel needles were made for centuries throughout Asia and the Middle East, they were used primarily for surgery, and not generally available to the average seamstress in Medieval Europe until well into the Seventeenth century. Even though BBC America's version had Robin fighting for the Crown in the Crusades, which seems to fly in the face of most common Robin Hood tales, it's doubtful he or Maid Marian would have possessed a steel sewing needle in Twelfth century England.

Sources:

<http://www.alshindagah.com/janfeb2006/history.html>

www.nature.com/news/specials/islamandscience/timeline/index.html

Camilla Rupp is married to Jeff and is a mother of three unique kids. She works as a legal secretary.

Her persona, Bantiarna Brighid ingheam Chonchhobhair uinheill, is living in Tulaigh Mhor, Ireland, in the mid Fourteen century.

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