

THE INFLUENCE OF TRADE CONTACTS ON GRAVE EQUIPMENT OF GNIEW COMMUNITY IN THE 14th–18th CENTURY

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Abstract: Richness and variety of grave equipment (silk textiles, scapulars, crosses, rosaries and the other objects), revealed during archaeological exploration carried out in St. Nicolas church in Gniew and in the area of the former graveyard, confirmed trade contacts of local community with Western Europe and Asia. Grave finds (wreaths, various flowers) as well as silk garments give evidence that the town and the area dwellers belonged to wealthy social classes. Close relations with many trade centers and luxurious items imported from them had an apparent influence on preserving rich and ceremonial burial rites against obligatory sumptuary law forbidding splendor. Moreover, these multi-direction trade and social contacts had also an impact on spreading out pathogenic microorganisms and transmissive diseases, syphilis, among the others.

Key words: town, trade, graves, crypts, devotional articles, silk, grave wreaths, syphilis

INTRODUCTION

Gniew is a town, which obtained its Town Charter in 1297, whereas in written sources it had been mentioned since 1229, when Gniew land was the subject of a donation (Labuda 1972a). Its convenient location between Gdańsk and Toruń created possibilities of the development not only of the town itself, but its area as well.

Archaeological explorations carried out inside Gniew St. Nicolas church and within the area of a closed graveyard situated around the church, delivered plenty of interesting information concerning not only mediaeval and modern burial ceremonies, but also Gniew population – its health condition, wealth and contacts with other regions of the contemporary world.

STATE OF RESEARCH

The first year of exploration (October 2009) brought the excavation of the southern crypt, under the chapel of St. Ann, in which the archaeologists expected to find mortal remains of Achacy Czema (1520–1576), who, following the sources had been buried in Gniew (Konopczyński red. 1938). Moreover, the remains of Zofia Agnieszka Radziwiłł (1552–1608), a daughter of Mikołaj Radziwiłł Czarny (1515–1565) (Rostworowski red. 1987), and a wife of Achacy Czema were supposed to be excavated there. The coffins found there are dated from the 2nd half of 18th century and the 1st half of 19th century and they have no reference to the burials of the persons mentioned above. Human remains scattered around together with grave equipment were reported under those coffins. This crypt is their secondary place of rest. They had been taken from under the church floor during clearing this space, which made new place for other burials. The material excavated from under the coffins is dated from 17th and 18th century. It impossible to identify this material as the remains of at least two of the Czema family members.

Nobles community and patriciate representatives tended to demonstrate their social position by showing excess luxury and splendor during various family and church ceremonies, including burials. This situation forced particular social groups (patriciate, nobles) to luxury regulations by introducing sumptuary law, which controlled and strengthened social order established by those classes (Łoziński 1978, Salmonowicz 1994, Grupa 2005).

Many iconographical images, particularly the ones presenting court life, show women weaving narrow bands. Of course those illustrations do not define whether it was a silk or woolen band. Nevertheless, producing various kinds of bands was an important skill in mediaeval world. Colorful ribbons decorated garment edges and hair as elements of plaits. Ornaments of different head cover types – male (Fig. 1), female, and children caps (Fig. 2) worn as circlets or decorative head-bands (Crowfoot et al. 2001, Grupa 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2009b, 2012).

Mediaeval women from royal courts, representatives of aristocracy and nobles competed with each other in ribbon production and their activities were often presented in mediaeval iconography. However, it was of a little significance in comparison with products manufactured by nuns and women used these skills as well as selling the final products earning their daily bread and providing basic existence. Later on, in the period when textile production was taken over by guilds, women did not participate in direct bands

manufacturing processes and basic tools were substantially developed. Written sources of Gdańsk mention two types of band looms – *Bortenmacherstühle* and *Bortenmachermühle* (Bogucka 1956). They enabled the simultaneous production of three bands.

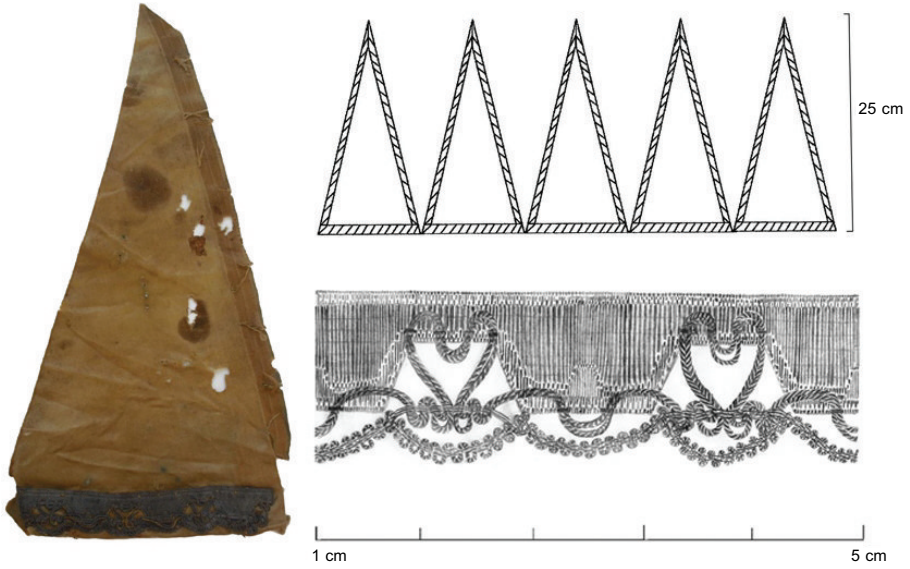


Fig. 1. Male head cover ornamented with lace made of silk thread coated with metal wire (drawn by E. Brzuska)

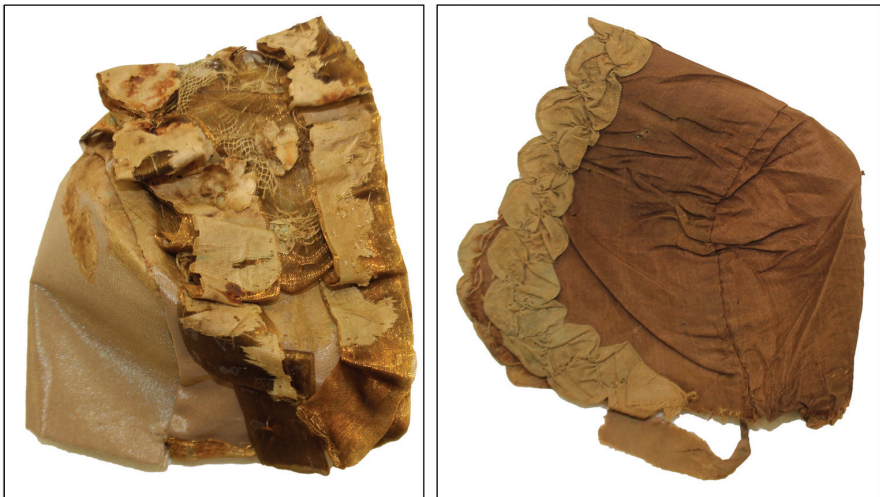


Fig. 2. Children bonnets ornamented with silk ribbons (drawn by M. Majorek)

Because of thread type (wool, silk, silk thread with metal braid) used for production, band prices varied. Up till 16th century various bands production was mainly women's trade. However, similarly to other processes connected with textile production, band manufacturing became with time rather male activity, and men occupied with their making were called haberdashers (Bogucka 1956). In 1636 a law was passed banning daughters and wives of Gdańsk haberdashery masters to work with looms (Bogucka 1956). Haberdashery (*Posament- und Bortenmachen*) as a separate craft appeared in Gdańsk relatively late, at the end of 16th century First information concerning a craftsman of that branch (Hans Huberdt) appears in the town president's book in 1585, in 17th century their number grew quickly (Bogucka 1956).

Various widths of silk, woolen, cotton, hemp or linen ribbons and bands (haberdashery, laces) were tabby woven or made using special ribbon looms (Grupa 2012).

The second half of the 17th century brought new inventions in this sphere of industry in Europe. However, as it usually happened, introducing those new ideas into markets of European towns met with resistance. The situation was analogous in Gdańsk guild, where brutal attack towards ribbon manufacturing machinery's inventor took place earlier. In 1589 in Gdańsk, Anton Möller – the inventor of a device weaving simultaneously 4–6 bands, was drowned in the Motława River by his opponents (Turnau 1979, Grupa 2005), although all those negative actions delayed introducing those new machines into practice only for a short period (15–20 years).

RESULTS

The explored crypt contained identified material consisting of about 250 kinds of silk bands, 20 textile types of grave robes and coffin upholstery. The historical material found inside the crypt indicated people belonging to social town and area elite. This conclusion was drawn basing first and foremost on the relics of silk garments coming from grave clothes and various elements of the grave equipment. Silk has always been the most expensive fabric of the world. Dressing the dead in silk clothes defined univocally that the individual belonged to the elite, rich merchant or a craft family, which could afford to pay fine-tax for burial in prohibited textiles, which was the evident sign of wealth. The material obtained during exploration is precious source of information on manufacturing techniques, old culture, fashion, customs; it also met our needs of contacts with beautiful and luxurious objects.

The most probably, a part of bands excavated in Gniew crypt had been produced in Gdańsk. Some of them are laces of various widths in plain weave 1/1, with plain edges. The others had sides ornamented with edgings of various compositions. A big group consisted of bands with different floral ornaments completed with wavy lines. Ribbons also served for decorating garments made of wool, linen or silk. Significant decomposition

of woolen and linen fibers does not allow more detailed description of grave clothes made of those fabrics. However, a big number of silk ribbons and bows preserved speak for a deep need of ornamenting garments with silk elements.

Silk textiles used for sewing grave robes and żupan from the crypt are rather the 17th century production of French and Italian weaving workshops. Textiles with floral ornaments (Figs 3, 4), geometrical figures, velvets or beautiful satins reached Gdańsk from the West and travelled farther along the Vistula River to Tezew, Malbork, Gniew, Toruń and other towns situated along the route. Gniew was one of the main Vistula ports, what brought significant profits for the town and the area.



Fig. 3. Silk damask with floral ornament
(drawn by M. Grupa)



Fig. 4. Scheme of silk textile report and its microscope photo (drawn by M. Grupa, phot. D. Grupa)

Garments made of silk were divided into two categories. First concerned clothes worn during life time, the other referred to robes made specialty for the last way to eternity. First category included, among the others, zupans and chasuble relics. The other category referred to robes plain and simple in construction, made of rectangles, with gathered textile at neck opening and wristbands. The robes might have been completed with white shirts having a lace collar and cuffs, but these elements have been decomposed totally. Archaeologists, basing on iconography and the last will lists can only suppose the existence of particular garment elements made of fabrics other than silk.

Apart from textiles, other most beautiful items made in Gdańsk and distanced towns of Europe also reached Gniew. They include, for instance, grave wreaths (Fig. 5) and artificial flowers (Fig. 6), which were placed not only in children graves, but also in coffins of young maids and boys. Flowers were arranged in small bunches. Subtle completing of every detail confirmed high skills and mastery of craftsmen. Various elements' construction in wreaths and flowers found in Gniew crypt indicates Gdańsk craftsmen circle, as some of them resemble the ones which were excavated in graves explored in Gdańsk churches (Trawicka ed. 2011) The wreaths found in Toruń churches (St. James church, The Assumption of The Holy Virgin Mary church) are clearly inferior in quality and material used for wreaths production to the ones from Gdańsk and Gniew. Toruń wreaths are coarse and the material is deprived of delicacy and sophistication in comparison to Gniew products, although it is difficult to state without any doubt, where they had been made. In the 18th century Gdańsk craftsmen occupied with gold wire production belonged to the group of the richest town dwellers. Due to that reason The City Council announced sumptuary law for this group twice – in 1714 and 1736 (Grupa 2005). Therefore, it can be assumed that the need for wreaths, artificial flowers and metal laces increased every year. These products were the elements building the craftsmen wealth. In Gniew graves wreaths and artificial flowers

were found on children heads, they were placed directly on grave robes inside a coffin or on coffins' covers. The crypt in the northern chapel revealed two children coffins with numerous relics of objects listed above. Children bodies buried there were covered with artificial flowers which fact indicates their death in winter period. On the base of excavated elements, reconstructions of one of the wreaths (Fig. 5) and one of the flowers (Fig. 6) were performed. Apart from brass wires coiled in small springs imitating gold, there were beads of various colors, artificial and natural flowers, small pieces of glass, silk threads, ribbons and frequently flexible hazel, birch, willow trees and other soft wood strips).



Fig. 5. Wreath reconstruction
(drawn by M. Nowak)



Fig. 6. Flower fragments relics and its reconstruction
(drawn by M. Nowak)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The trade road to Poland ran across the sea and the land from Italy, France, Turkey and Asian countries (Grupa 2005). Pomerania had been for a long period the area of transit trade penetration. Initially, they had been important trade routes leading from central parts of Poland towards the coast, with particularly significant road from Poznań and Gniezno to Wyszogród and farther – along the Vistula via Świecie, Nowe to Gniew, Stargard and Gdańsk. In written sources it appears as “merchants road” (*via mercatorum*, 1198; *publica strata*, 1276) (Labuda 1972b). Silk as luxury textiles had been known in Poland since early Middle Ages (Maik 1991, 1997, Grupa 2007, 2009a, 2009b). They were used for sewing liturgical vestments, court garments and every day clothes. Quality and quantity of textiles introduced into Polish market was very big. The market was evidently receptive; therefore the variety of fabrics was enormous. Technological studies concerning silk textiles give the evidence that identical textile report repeats very rarely. For one hundred ornamented textiles, the same decorative motif did not repeat even once (M. Grupa’s own research). Nobles travelled to Gdańsk, Toruń or Gniew in order to sell the production from their local properties (grain, potash, fleece, linen or hemp), in return of which they bought with this money various, not only necessary objects and tools, but also luxurious items.

Direct contact of Gniew and the neighboring areas’ inhabitants with strangers as well as reported intense trade exchange was a significant factor influencing also the risk of infectious diseases. Gniew trade center itself was presumably visited by masses of merchants, itinerant craftsmen and possibly pilgrims, travelling along this important route, along which the town was situated. On the one hand, it contributed to the local people’s wealth and prosperity growth, improving their life conditions. On the other hand, it created a real risk of spreading out pathogenic microorganisms and transmissible diseases, for which a human is an important reservoir (with e.g. syphilis caused by the spirochete bacterium (*Treponema pallidum*) transmitted mainly by sexual contacts. An infected woman being pregnant can pass over the disease to fetus (congenital syphilis). Quétel (1991) even claimed that the process of “syphilization” of human society progressed together with “civilization” processes. Therefore it can be assumed that presence of that sexually transmitted diseases’ observed in a particular population can be treated as a kind of indicator illustrating the level of population urbanization and its development, but also as a sign of the intensity of interpersonal relations together with all their consequences – possibilities of casual sexual contacts (e.g. with prostitutes). Following this reasoning, it can be stated that since 16th century syphilis in its initial spreading phase in Polish territories concerned mainly urban centers and nobles representatives (Piotrowski 1995).

Syphilis must have been present in Gniew and its vicinity population, which confirmation can be reported on the examples of skeletons excavated inside St. Nicolas church. Identifying on bones features like: signs of gummas (bone defects) and *carriessicca* (lesions in cranium bones in form of crater cavities in outer tables of the skull and the part called

“diploë”), are regarded as highly characteristic osteotype of syphilis (Aufderheide & Rodriguez-Martin 1998, Ortner 2003). A skull and ulnas of adult persons with this type of lesions were excavated in the crypt under St. Ann chapel. Congenital syphilis is recognized by, among the others, so called “mulberries” – teeth with crowns in shape and fracture reminding mulberry fruit, with numerous small tubercles on the enamel surface (Aufderheide & Rodriguez-Martin 1998). These types of teeth were reported in children mandibles found in ossuaries excavated in the church graveyard.

Riches and variety of the grave equipment (silk textiles, scapulars, crosses, rosaries and others) revealed during archaeological exploration in St. Nicolas church in Gniew and in the closed church graveyard, confirmed trade contacts of local community with Western Europe and Asia. The town localization was determined by the landscape physiography, in particular, by the vicinity of trade land routes and water ways. Grave equipment and silk clothing found with the burials confirm the fact that the town and area inhabitants belonged to rich social groups. Close relations with various trade centers and luxurious objects imported from them had influence on preserving splendor in burial ceremonies against obligatory sumptuary law. Unfortunately, as it was discussed earlier, these contacts were also the reasons of transmitting various diseases, confirmed by syphilis presence in explored Gniew population.

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