



Urban violence harnessed or unleashed?

*The role of arms and armour as everyday objects in the daily life of a medieval and early modern port town
The example of Gdańsk*

edited by Lech Marek



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Wrocław-Gdańsk

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Reviewers:

Dr Arkadiusz Michalak, Anonymous expert of the National Science Centre

English translation:

Joanna Ewa Markiewicz

Proofreading:

Gniewomir Drewnicki

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Introduction

Traditional arms and armour studies have focused on the objects' evolution, production, origin, and technical details. Based on archaeological evidence collected during several decades of excavations in the historical area of Gdańsk, this project departs from the mentioned scheme. It is not aimed at creating a catalogue of fragmentarily preserved artefacts – the so-called “dry bones of archaeology”. Our main goal is to investigate the relationship between objects and their owners, to place the archaeological record within a rich and colourful world of a medieval, multicultural port town society, and finally, to reconstruct, to the possible extent, the biographies of artefacts and their owners. Such an approach enables us to research how the personal weapon became a dress accessory and an emblem of an individual's self-identity and to what extent it has been perceived by the contemporaries following his original intent. Another question that emerges is whether the customization of an object was limited to the social upper classes or extended to the less wealthy representatives of the urban society. These problems refer only to one category of weapons worn during peace to the civilian dress within the town walls: the side arms (German: *Seitenwehren*). The latter was a range of arms permitted to be carried by citizens according to legal regulations specific to each medieval town (Marek 2014, p. 11). Generally, it consisted of daggers, falchions/fighting knives, and swords. This privilege was sometimes limited to free burgesses, patricians, and master craftsmen. It stemmed in the chartered town of Gdańsk, out of the medieval Lübeck and Kulm municipal law codes, which required those who applied for civic rights to acquire bladed weapons and personal armour to keep them in their houses, in case of war (Kaczor 2017, p. 129). In early modern times, the obligation was extended to possessing “weapons of war” and firearms among them (Ibidem). Master craftsmen in other towns were sometimes legally obliged to carry their side-arms when planning to walk through a dangerous neighbourhood (Marek 2008, p. 45). On the other hand, there were certain situations in which they were banned from bringing weapons into guild meetings or taverns to avoid brawls with the use of dangerous objects (Marek 2008, pp.15-16). Sometimes, certain individuals were excluded from the group of weapon bearers, such as all those not entitled to enjoy privileges as citizens by descent in a chartered town (Ullmann 1961, p 2). There were instances in which the carrying of weapons was banned, or the blade length of daggers or swords was limited within the town area. It would be interesting to examine to what extent the town's law influenced the inhabitants of medieval and early modern Gdańsk in their choice of personal arms. Another problem to solve is how those prohibited from carrying certain types of weapons within the city attempted to override the

strict regulations, e.g., by commissioning objects that might have resembled tools at first sight but had the cloaked quality of a lethal weapon simultaneously. We believe that the medieval custom of wearing a set of tools in a common scabbard, such as bodkins, consumption by-knives, files, and hand saws along with a fighting knife or a dagger, might have been a cunning way to conceal the fact of carrying a weapon restricted by law. We may suspect that edged weapons from the collection of the Archaeological Museum in Gdańsk, with blade lengths reaching average dimensions of contemporary swords but hilted with enlarged dagger or falchion-hilts might have been worn by townsmen to avoid accusations of illegal possession of a sword. On the other hand, it might have also resulted from competition between craftsmen. The guild organization usually strictly prohibited cutlers from stealing customers from sword-makers by grinding, hilding, and selling swords, as such work was usually reserved for the latter. Double-edged blades were supposed to be the domain of swordsmiths, whilst the grinding of single-edged blades was done by cutlers (Keller 1981, p. 101). Sword elements, such as pommels and blade fragments, are also well represented in the archaeological material from Gdańsk. We are convinced, based on several examples, that in the late medieval period, a sword ceased to be the exclusive attribute of a knight in a symbolic sense. In pictorial sources and written accounts, we often find them in the hands of burghers or even peasants (see f. e. Müller 2002, pp. 64-65, Fig.60). Attempts at limiting the right of bearing swords to the knightly class since the 12th century at least had been notoriously unsuccessful (Marek 2008, p. 15). There were instances when townsmen and even peasants were girded with swords during an accolade ceremony (Bumke 1992, pp. 340-341). In our opinion, such a striking occurrence, which marked the time of social changes within medieval society, was connected to the rapid increase in economic growth. Prosperous medieval towns played an important role in the process. Gdańsk, in particular, is a good example of an environment where, since the 12th century at least, the increase in wealth led to the emancipation of an elite of tradesmen-patricians, who emulated the knightly class in their way of life and among other habits, also in the use of arms and armour (on the definition of an urban elite see: Radohs 2023, pp. 39-44). One of the most remarkable phenomena characteristic of the Hanseatic towns in the late Middle Ages is the custom of building an elite hall for the meetings and leisure activities of the most prestigious and wealthy patrician family members. Its name, the Artus Court, was inspired by knightly literature, i.e., the Arthurian Legends. Gdańsk is fortunate to possess many preserved original furnishings and works of art from its medieval Artus Court. Among them are fine tournament suits of armour dated to the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries, used by the local patrician jousting fraternity for the so-called *Gesteck* type of tournament (see: Chodyński 1994). Therefore, it seems not unreasonable to imagine such patricians emulating or maybe even exceeding contemporary knights in their lavish appearance, girded with swords worn to their civilian dress. We believe that the emulation process of the elite lifestyle, within the boundaries of the law, of course, descended further down the social ladder. Such a process may be confirmed by the participation of peasants in tournaments held at Artus courts in the Hanseatic towns (Chodyński 1994, pp. 26-27). We need to find out whether the sumptuary laws so common in medieval towns were respected by townsmen in treating weapons as dress accessories in Gdańsk. The question is whether the symbolic language of materials used to produce a side-arm, the level of art and craftsman's skill involved in decorating the object, and technical qualities of the blade – i.e. the practical aspects or the mere fact of bearing arms accentuated one's social status within the urban community. We are curious whether an armed man's dress code was observed in old Gdańsk. Was there any weapon perceived as an emblem of luxury and status similar to the dagger called a *pook* – in many instances, a patrician's dress accessory rather than a weapon (Ullmann 1961, p. 4, Figs.1-3) worn by the urban elite in Lübeck and other German Hanseatic towns? Regarding the

abundance of archaeological evidence, the frequent use of personal weapons among all representatives of the old Gdańsk society seems remarkable. Based on careful archaeological analysis, we need to determine the main reason behind discarding such a large quantity of personal weapons in the investigated period. Was it only the result of damage and wear, of an unintentional loss, of a violent situation, of a production process in which spare, invaluable, or damaged parts were discarded, or maybe of confiscation and intentional damage by the representatives of the authorities? On the other hand, the profusion of personal weapon finds may originate in the fact that in the streets of Gdańsk, carrying such objects, treated almost as if they were dress accessories, was very common among all representatives of the urban community. Maybe the carrying of weapons was not only meant to communicate the privilege of bearing arms within the urban environment but, at the same time, was a necessity in an insecure and potentially violent environment of a port town full of strangers. We might suspect that violence in the streets of a medieval town, in general, must have been a more common occurrence or even an everyday situation than in our times.

As mentioned, the privilege of being armed was also the obligation of townsmen resulting from the municipal law – the obligatory participation in the civil guard (*Bürgerwache*). Every citizen had to procure basic military equipment at his own expense. A common practice of the authorized city officials was to periodically list the quality and quantity of weapons kept at each house (Marek 2014, pp. 13-14). The armour used to be more meticulously described in those documents, probably because it was the most expensive military equipment and one of the most relevant during the war. Armour is well represented in the archaeological records from Gdańsk. We find excellent mail and plate armour examples, which were examined based on metallurgic specialist analyses to learn more about their origin and quality. We believe that most armour pieces in Gdańsk were of a practical, munition standard related to fulfilling military duties and not intended for pageantry. From the late 15th century onward, fine-quality armour has become an official dress used by the nobility or patricians for special ceremonial occasions. In the early modern period, monarchs' visits to Gdańsk required patricians to greet the ruler fully armed under municipal banners. Unfortunately, we cannot learn what armour was used on such occasions. There seems to be, however, excavated evidence for the use of specialized tournament armour, similar to the *Stechzeuge* kept at the Artus Court (see Downen in this volume and Chodyński 1994). Hence, performing complete archaeometric analyses of the available material is most relevant in observing its importance and quality.

According to medieval law codes, the burgesses might have kept the so-called murderous weapons (German: *Mordwaffen*) at home, but the rules prohibited them from being used in the streets during peacetime. This category includes polearms, crossbows, firearms (Marek 2014, p. 11), and sometimes specific blade weapons. The extent of the citizens' military duties depended strongly on their wealth and possession of a house within the town's walls. A document of the Gdańsk council, the so-called *Willkür*, dated to the end of the 15th century, specifies that every man whose wife wears a specific type of head ornament (*des weib bundt treedt*) is obliged to keep in his house a good armour for man, a handgonne or a crossbow (*zu haben in synem house cyn gutte manne harnasch cyne lothuchse oder cyn armbrost*) (Baltzer 1893, pp. 6-7). In another part of the same document, it is mentioned that every citizen who is wearing a silver belt worth at least 11 marks and has a wife who wears an analogous silver belt is obliged to keep a fine armour for man, and his wife is additionally required to keep an armour for a man (*Ibidem*). The quoted source shows clearly that the town's council must have ordained the mentioned sumptuary laws in medieval Gdańsk. It is interesting to note how attire and dress accessories must have designated a man's wealth and social status within the urban environment. The question is whether

such rules were strictly respected or overridden by the Gdańsk townsmen. What is worth accentuating here is that armour was required to be kept at a private house armoury by those who used it personally for military service and generally by the wealthy and the land owners. We can imagine that the strong relation of munition armour to a plot rather than a specific owner must have important implications for the proper interpretation of archaeological contexts. In the 15th century Wrocław, f. e., a house owner was required to possess at least a set of weapons and armour for one man and fire extinguishing equipment (A.B.L. 1862, p. 366). Both were sold along with the entire property whenever a plot changed its owner. Therefore, medieval or early modern sets of armour ascribed to specific plots were still kept in private armouries in this town until they were sold in the 19th century to antique dealers (Neugebauer 1876, p. 31)

To adequately fulfil its military duties, the civil guard had to practice with crossbows periodically and later on with firearms. In Gdańsk, very much like in other medieval cities, there was a marksmen fraternity (see Downen and Maciakowska in this volume). The founding of such organizations in Prussian towns was inspired by the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order, Winrich von Kniprode, who, concluding the new developments in military tactics of his period, recognized the importance of crossbowmen (Gehrke 1895, pp. 3-4). The grand-master participated in the founding of awards (called the *Herrengabe*) in the annual shooting contests held in May, in which the winner was honoured as the shooting king until the next competition (Gehrke 1895, pp. 3-5). In the Prussian towns, such a prize was either paid in money or, more often, a practical reward such as a fine crossbow (Gehrke 1895, p. 5). The existence of a similar organization in Gdańsk is not well documented in the earliest written accounts (see Gehrke 1895, pp. 1-8). We suspect it might have been founded in the 14th century (see Downen and Maciakowska in this volume). The share of ranged weapons in the content of private house arsenals of the citizens of Gdańsk, their quality, and the intensity of use-wear were problems to address during the presented archaeological and archaeometric investigations.

During the study, an attempt was made to use as many iconographical sources as was possible. The most important question concerns their usefulness for our research in Gdańsk, and the extent to which they reflect the actual popularity and appearance of arms and armor in this cosmopolitan town. Among the panel paintings many were commissioned abroad by wealthy Gdańsk citizens and guilds before finding their way into the local churches – especially the most important one – St. Mary's church. Moreover, ideological reasons, symbolism and convention may have influenced the presence or absence of certain types of objects in particular biblical scenes. Thus, there are some possible inaccuracies between archeological records and works of art including the time lag between objects in current use and those depicted. On the other hand, the town's multicultural character as proven at many points in this study is also mirrored by the archeological evidence. Every work of art was subject to multilayer analysis and interpretation of represented arms and armour with necessary reservations and criticism. Stunning is the accuracy and chronological consistency of so many pictorial sources with the archeological records.

Considering the entire collection of the investigated objects kept at the local Archaeological Museum, it would be tempting to determine whether the distribution of finds conforms to the social topography of the medieval and early modern Gdańsk. Another relevant question is whether the quality and quantity of arms and armour differed in time and mirrored the turning points in the town's history. Our objective would also be to crosscheck our research results with conclusions already drawn from the analysis of other archaeological evidence. Ceramics, for example, were recognized as markers of ethnic diversity at the time of foreign colonist's settlement in Gdańsk in the 12th – early 14th centuries (Pluskowski 2013, pp. 219, 223). Greyware and stoneware

dominated in districts inhabited by German guests (hospites) in this period, while in areas of Slavonic settlement, the percentage of such ceramics was lower (Pluskowski 2013, p. 223). We aim to find out whether similar patterns might apply to arms and armour evidence or other explanations for the presence of particular objects in certain areas of the town. The investigations concerned the archaeological record from a prolonged period in the turbulent history of Gdańsk, ranging between the 13th and the 17th century or, in a few instances, even beyond this period. Although other finds from Gdańsk are also used as references, the collection's core consists of 372 artefacts from 60 sites within the city (see catalogue). The primary value of the discussed evidence is that it is predominantly well-dated based on archaeological methods. Firearms and firearm projectiles are excluded from the analyses since most evidence comes from the period's end or may be dated later. The use of firearms by the Gdańsk townsmen is an intriguing subject but requires a separate monograph, especially concerning the rapid developments in firearms from the 16th century onwards. The bulk of evidence suggests that most analyzed objects originate from house armouries or should be regarded as relics of local production or far-distance trade. As such, they form invaluable evidence closely related to the everyday lives of the inhabitants of Gdańsk. Arms and armour are treated here as a medium that gives a glimpse into certain aspects of the townsmen's mundane activities and provides the planned study with an anthropological quality.

The state of the art

No extensive study has been devoted to Gdańsk's entire collection of medieval and early modern arms and armour. Published in the literature so far are works following the traditional current of arms and armour studies. Moreover, extant publications are not devoted to Gdańsk's entire collection of arms and armour but a sample of such objects. Monographs of general character including records from Gdańsk should be mentioned here (Głosek 1984, Świetosławski 1990). A few case studies on single artefacts found in Gdańsk were published in the early research stage. Among them are a well-researched paper on the early medieval sword scabbard by A. Nadolski (1955) and an article on a questionable early medieval slingshot find (Wiklak 1957). Other papers are focused on objects from specific sites. A good example is a brief text published by A. Rapiejko (2011) listing arms and armour finds from Tartaczna Street in Gdańsk. Not all of the evidence published there seems to be correctly interpreted, and the miniaturized captions are difficult to use. The paper by P. Świątkiewicz (2012) represents a detailed study of the typology and chronology of weapons based on well-dated archaeological evidence collected during several excavation seasons in the area of the early medieval stronghold and its suburbium. The Slavonic settlement in this part of town had developed from the 11th century until 1308 when partially destroyed by the Teutonic Knights (Zbierski 1978, p. 336), and afterwards until ca 1410 (see: Kościński, Paner 2005). The mentioned paper's focus is limited to this part of the town, which is justified for such a case study. Another project narrowed down to a defined area is the catalogue of military objects found during excavations in 2008 and 2009 in the southwestern area of the building block between the Szafarnia-, Angielska Grobla-, Św. Barbary- and Długie Ogrody - Streets (Litwiński 2013). The deficiency of the two quoted works (Świątkiewicz 2012, Litwiński 2013) is the lack of deepened arms and armour and anthropological studies, which would help the authors to analyze artefacts within a broad European cultural context and to learn more about people who used or produced the objects. The historical literature on the military duties of the Gdańsk townsmen has not been used in those works to its full extent (f.e. Baltzer 1893, Gehrke 1895, Hahlweg 1937). On the other hand, the military activity and regulations referring to Gdańsk are more patchy than in the case of other Prussian

towns, e.g. Elbląg (Kwiatkowski 2019, p. 39). An arms and armour specialist has at his disposal last-will inventories of their personal belongings (compare: Klonder 2000, Możejko 2010, Kubicki 2010) and the Gdańsk Teutonic castle armoury inventories (Możejko 2006, pp. 151-164; Żabiński 2013). Świątkiewicz's (2012) paper is based exclusively on raw archaeological context and typological data. Nevertheless, the remarked weaknesses cannot devalue the authors' thorough work. They could be easily excused by the preliminary stage of research on arms and armour finds from Gdańsk and the need to make evidence collected during several archaeological excavation campaigns led by different institutions and excavation supervisors known to the public. Against the background of the abundant and well-researched publications on the archaeology of Gdańsk (f.e. *Archeologia Gdańska* – series edited by H. Paner and B. Kościński, Vols. 1-8 (2006-2021), Kurkowska, Krzywdziński (eds.) 2016, Krzywdziński (ed.) 2016, Pudło, Ossowski, Trawicka – eds. 2018; Blusiewicz, Starski 2022), state of the art on arms and armour appears sketchy. Information on the investigated subject is scattered around publications not exclusively devoted to arms and armour (f.e. Kochanowski 1999). Fine medieval gauntlet scales, ballock daggers, bolts, and a rapier guard fragment, for example, have been found in the Hay Market in Gdańsk and published in the fine catalogue of objects excavated on the site (Kurkowska, Krzywdziński - eds. 2016). An interesting unpublished MA thesis on medieval and early modern personal, edged weapons found during excavations on the Hay Market in Gdańsk was defended by M. Nowak (2017) at the University of Gdańsk. The author went further from the basic artefact analysis and attempted to interpret the meaning of finds in their historical, archaeological, and cultural context. Archaeological evidence from the Gdańsk Hay Market, an area located outside the town walls, will be referred to but not included in our project to the full extent due to the planned separate publication on the subject. Interesting published comparative material also comes from the underwater wreck site of the so-called Copper Ship, which sank in the early 15th century at the entrance to the port in Gdańsk. Among other personal belongings of the crew, an interesting collection of armour elements and crossbow bolt-heads and bolt-shafts have been recovered during underwater excavations (Ossowski 2014, pp. 346-356). Armour elements from the wreck find analogues among artefacts from the historical part of Gdańsk. In our project, we plan to go beyond typological matters in our conclusions. As opposed to the extant publications on the subject, in our work, arms and armour finds from Gdańsk would only be a starting point for further discussion on the mentality of the inhabitants of the town and would allow us to learn about the sources of their behaviours stemming from human psychology, social status, law regulations within the urban area, customary habits and the general cultural backgrounds of those who lived in the city. To recognize differences in the social topography of old Gdańsk, we cannot limit ourselves to investigating a single district.

Our work is an anthropological study in which the investigated objects are treated as a mirror of life in old Gdańsk. As such, regarding the present state of the art, we believe it is ground-breaking, innovative, and a significant step forward in the knowledge of the archaeology of this medieval and early modern port town.

Methodology

Our project mainly concerns human-artefact relations in old Gdańsk in the context of cultural norms regulating citizens' use of arms and armour. We shall examine the intentions of those who produced the investigated objects and the post-acquisition biographies of the artefacts until they must have been discarded for some reason. The methodology used in the project could be generally described as characteristic of cultural anthropology using a broad spectrum of sources.

Specialist methods

The essential part of our project is specialist investigations to determine the quality of the objects and the technology involved in their production process. Beata Miazga from the University of Wrocław – one of the contributors, did archaeometric investigations of metal objects for this work. To perform metallographic analyses, we applied two basic methods. Only non-invasive investigations were conducted concerning the best-preserved objects of high historical- and exhibition value. Such artefacts were subject to chemical analysis of their surface using the Energy Dispersive X-ray Fluorescence (EDXRF) Spectrometry method. For this purpose, we used the equipment already utilized at the Institute of Archaeology, University of Wrocław – the XRF Spectro Midex Spectrometer with a large measuring chamber to take artefacts of considerable dimensions. The mentioned method enabled us to evaluate the quality of raw material used in the production process and to find traces of the original surface decoration of the objects, e.g., silvering and tinning. The additional technological analysis concerns the artefact's micro-hardness measuring using the portable micro-hardness tester without cutting out a sample. The second, more invasive method was applied to selected finds from the collection. In such cases, full-scale metallographic investigations of the objects take place, which include sampling, precise micro-hardness testing (with the use of Zwick Roell ZKV 10 hardness tester), inner microstructure analysis, microscopic structural observations, i.e. everything which allows us to draw proper conclusions on the production technology and the influence of the later conservation process on the analyzed evidence. Essential for evaluating the quality of the interpreted artefacts were also technical 3D CT - scans of selected composite objects to learn as much as possible about their internal structure (e.g., dagger hilt construction) without the need to dismantle them. These were commissioned at the Wrocław Technology Park and carried out by Piotr Wilk.

Eżbieta Myśkow from the University of Wrocław and Beata Zagórska-Marek did specialist wood-species analysis. The belief of medieval people about wood as a living being, even when converted into an object (see Pastoureau 2006), was an essential factor in the choice of material used for edged weapon hilts, apart from practical matters. The medieval assumption about the evil or good nature of different species of wood and their medicinal, apotropaic, and symbolic attributes were probably even more significant in many instances than the technical properties of utilized materials. Piotr Kuropka from The Wrocław University of Environmental and Life Sciences identified leather species of selected samples, and Daniel Makowiecki from the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń did bone /antler- analyses. Most of the specialist reports could not be included in this work. They are available at the Institute of Archaeology, University of Wrocław, to all researchers who want to verify the information in this work.

Complex data is used here to draw proper conclusions on the level of craftsmanship within the spectrum of the examined objects or even their aesthetic quality to reveal which would be regarded as luxury goods and which represent the standard of mass production. Large-scale archaeometric analyses are still uncommon in Poland's arms and armour studies. Their value lies in the possibility of determining the quality of the object. Still, they can also give a glimpse into the mentality and intentions of the person who produced it. Examinations of the metallurgy of armour undertaken by A. Williams, for example, have revealed how armourers used scrap iron to take shortcuts in the production process, guarded their secrets while working in a foreign kingdom or even cheated on the quality of their final products depending on the circumstances in which they worked (compare Williams 2003, Williams, de Reuck 2002).

Theoretical debate

The most recent theoretical discussion on the quality and interpretative potential of archaeological evidence from urban sites in defining social stratification and its relation to the town's topography is of paramount importance for our conclusions on the role of arms and armour in the society of medieval and early modern Gdańsk. At the same time, regarding the advanced state of the art, we feel relieved from the duty of re-quoting older works, and we may focus only on the most recent publications on the subject. In an important study, K. Haase and S. Whatley discussed how archaeological records can reflect the negotiation of social identities in the medieval urban environment through consumption patterns and consumer choices. The authors utilized Thorstein Veblen's (1915, pp. 68-101) definition of "conspicuous consumption" as the basis for their theoretical model to analyze the relationship between material culture and social identity. The latter is supposed to be characteristic of people with a surplus of money and is "non-productive, economically irrational and beyond necessity". Haase and Whatley (2020, p. 122) claim that differentiating oneself through the consumption of goods was not only a phenomenon of the 19th century but was also present in medieval urban society (Ibidem, p. 123). They defined five categories of design features that can be categorized as specific consumption strategies – each reflecting a way of producing or reproducing social identity (Ibidem, p. 124 table 2.). The objects related to the mentioned categories are: 1. Conspicuous objects without functionality, 2. Conspicuous objects with functionality, 3. Conspicuous objects through functionality; 4. The standard setters, or inconspicuous; 5. Religious or magical objects with no practical function and low economic value. Military items Haase and Whatley (2020, p. 133 and table 2) classified in the second category of consumption strategies as "conspicuous objects with functionality". It is worth stressing that the model focuses on artefacts' functional and aesthetic aspects rather than their symbolic meaning (Ibidem, p. 124, Table 2). Therefore, their theoretical model seems to be based on the 19th century and modern concepts of pragmatism. However, in dealing with the meaning, quality, and value of objects in medieval society, we cannot separate functionality from the spiritual and symbolic culture (for an extensive discussion, see Marek 2025, forthcoming). What seems economically irrational might have been perfectly reasonable and practical for medieval people. L. Radohs (2023, p. 23) convincingly discussed similar weak points in the presented model. Gaining great economic value after becoming touch relics is confirmed (Spencer 2010, pp. 17-18, 20) in the case of base metal pilgrim badges, classified in the 5th of the mentioned object categories. Similarly, the standard Carolingian winged spearhead of low-quality steel (see: Mehofer et al. 2005, pp. 171-172, 180) known as the Holy Lance of the German Empire from the Weltsche Schatzkammer in Vienna, after turning into a powerful relic (*lancea victorifera*) was bought at an enormous price by the German king Henry I from the Burgundian duke Rudolf II (see: Wolf 2005, pp. 27, 42-43). Moreover, weapons were not necessarily only visible signs of their owner's wealth but also emblems of one's legal status or allegiance recognized by other members of the society (see: Böhner 1949). They symbolized the obligation of a vassal to defend his sovereign and be faithful to him at all costs (see Davidson 1958, p. 214). In this sense, the lord only lent weapons that remained in his possession (see: Evison 1967, p. 63; Mauss 1973 pp. 281-283, 285-287). The symbolic meaning of the discussed objects ranges beyond the limits of their economic and practical value and the direct relationship of an object to its owner. Even humble representatives of medieval society might have spent more money on an item of high quality or one believed to possess supernatural virtues than their means allowed. From a purely pragmatic point of view, it would be irrational to save money on weapons when life is at stake. Similar pragmatism of the less wealthy was observed in the case of tin and copper alloy vessels

frequently preferred by medieval and modern villagers as the most durable and practical objects, as compared to their counterparts made of perishable materials, despite their higher cost (Jervis 2014, pp. 41, 44-45). Regarding the complicated multilayer problems of formation processes behind such artefacts (see Schiffer 1996, pp. 3-23), metal vessels are underrepresented in the archaeological record as opposed to preserved possession inventories of the mentioned peasants (Jervis 2014, pp. 41, 44-45). The presented introductory discussion makes us inclined to treat the symbolic meaning of an object equally relevant as its aesthetic character to its evaluation in terms of functionality by medieval people. Everything depends strongly on given artefact's cultural context complexity.

Recently, an interesting method based on the number of artefact types and the use of relevant statistical data on archaeological evidence from medieval Stralsund and castle sites in the territory of Denmark was presented (Atzbach, Radohs 2020). The theory was backed by the idea that social status is shown by the availability and use of a broad spectrum of material culture rather than the presence of outstanding individual objects (Ibidem, p. 128). It was also believed that weapons belong to the so-called barometer objects that could reflect the military or aristocratic lifestyle of the inhabitants of a given settlement site (Ibidem, p. 150). The idea of barometer objects was elaborated in an inspiring work recently published by L. Radohs (2023, p. 51) on the Aristocracy and Civic Elites in Sea-Trading Towns of the Southwestern Baltic. With reservations that such items cannot be exclusively linked to the elite, she states that "in the archaeological record, riding gear and weapons particularly seem to function as barometer objects indicating aristocratic status" (Radohs 2023, pp. 51-52). Further, in the course of the presented debate, they are treated as high-status artefact groups (Radohs 2023, pp. 310-311, 323), partially because of their frequency in castle contexts, which was already stressed many times in the literature (Goßler 1998, p. 490). Considering a significant increase in the number of spurs found in historic town centres and the fact that castle archaeology has a longer tradition than the history of urban archaeology, the above statements may be debatable to a certain extent. L. Radohs (2023, p. 323), in her case study of Denmark, pointed out that of the total number of 126 spurs, most of them (65) come from castles and hillforts and "thus show a direct connection to the aristocratic sphere". The first question is whether the number of finds from the entire country may be treated as statistic relevant when we compare it, f. e. to the total number of 130 spurs and their elements excavated only on one site at New Market (Nowy Targ) Square in Wrocław, Poland (Marek 2018, p. 565)? Worth elaborating on is the other important statement by L. Radohs (2023, p. 323) that spurs are, first and foremost, related to traffic and transport. It explains why so many spurs were lost in places such as markets, dwellings, storage compartments, and streets within the town, and their abundance in castles, which were communication nodes –administrative centres sometimes guarding critical trade routes and custom houses. The bulk of the evidence presented in the discussion below shows that most spurs found in archaeological contexts can be treated neither as related to aristocracy nor as belonging to the group of militaria. In exceptional cases, the elite character of such objects may be indicated by the materials used to produce them or their specific form. Not convincing is the suggestion that numerous spurs recorded in tertiary deposits, such as levellings and back-fillings, may be treated as relics of recurrent armed conflicts within the town (Radohs 2023, p. 127). If such a rare situation occurs, it would be expected to find numerous crossbow and firearm projectiles and other elements of arms and armour alongside riding gear and traces of fire in such layers. In our work, we will attempt to convince the reader that weapons, armour, and spurs were functional objects and dress accessories charged with various meanings used in social communication. The personal, emblematic, or even medicinal and apotropaic qualities in their form and decoration make such

objects especially valuable for studying the relationship between the object and its owner. We believe that the abundance of spurs and edged weapons in urban archaeological contexts highlights the everyday use of such items among all representatives of the burgher's community rather than their relation to the aristocracy. It seems that not the mere fact of owning an edged weapon or a set of spurs was an indicator of social status but the quality of craft, the decoration, and the material of which such elements of everyday attire were made according to the strict sumptuary laws that defined the rank of a person. It is essential to discuss broadly as many case studies as possible. Such an approach may sometimes be exhausting for the reader, but we believe drawing proper conclusions on the character of selected categories of artefacts is essential. The archaeological record also seems dependent on many variables that hardly fit a theoretical scheme. In the following discussion, we intend to present the pitfalls of the interpretation of weapon finds in medieval urban contexts according to Sir Guy Francis Laking's opinion that "A theory is an excellent thing; but unless it is controlled by practical knowledge of the subject on which it bears, it is apt to be extremely misleading" (Laking 1920, Vol. 3, p. 175).

Considering several problems mentioned earlier, we may perform a multilayer analysis of cultural contexts. The first level of investigation involves the traditional archaeological methodology. At the next stage, we must support ourselves with a broad spectrum of evidence drawn from literature, religion, law, history, art history, behavioural and sociological studies. To achieve this objective, we should free ourselves from our modern anachronistic views of people living through the researched historical periods. Worth investigating, for example, is the attitude of burghesses towards carrying weapons by civilians within the boundaries of a medieval town. It must have been far more complex than nowadays and, apart from its more apparent associations, also strongly related to symbolism, behavioural economics, ostentation, self-identity within the local community, and emulation of the representatives of higher social classes. Hence, referring to old societies, weapons cannot be treated exclusively as implements of violence. Due to its extraordinary wealth and power resulting from the town's convenient location on long-distance trade routes at the mouth of the Vistula River, old Gdańsk is an ideal environment where all of the cultural contexts of weapon use may be observed to the fullest extent.

Acknowledgements

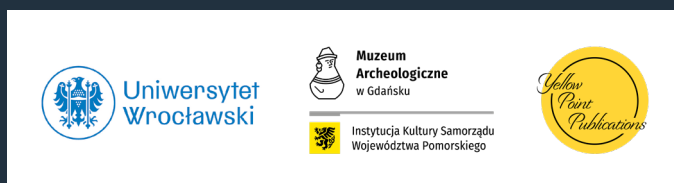
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¹ The abbreviated name of this institution used further in the text and figures is: the MAG.

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This publication explores the role of arms and armour in medieval and early modern Gdańsk through an anthropological lens, departing from traditional studies focused solely on typology, origin, and production. Drawing on archaeological evidence from over 60 sites and a collection of 372 artefacts, the study investigates the social significance, ownership, regulation, and everyday use of side arms (such as daggers, falchions, and swords) within the urban context of a multicultural port town. It examines how weapons functioned as personal accessories, status symbols, and tools for self-identification, while also addressing the legal and social constraints on weapon ownership and display. The work analyzes how patricians and other urban groups emulated knightly customs, the implications of sumptuary laws, and the overlap between civilian and military obligations. It also incorporates iconographic sources and metallurgical analyses to understand the origins and usage of armour. Ultimately, the study aims to reconstruct the biographies of artefacts and their owners, placing arms and armour within the broader social, legal, and cultural fabric of historical Gdańsk.

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