

Material culture as a means of social communication. Dress accessories and their symbolism as a part of identity formation in later medieval Central-Eastern Europe

Jakub SAWICKI

Summary

Social communication serves as a critical framework for historians seeking to decode relational dynamics within medieval society. To date, however, archaeological sources have not yet been sufficiently integrated into this discourse. This paper proposes an interpretative approach that positions material culture as a communicative medium, capable of transmitting both the ‘great tradition’ – accessible solely to educated elites – and the ‘little tradition’, legible to broader societal strata. As a case study, the analysis focuses on a hitherto overlooked category of mass media: dress accessories.

A pivotal technological shift in the 13th century enabled the industrial-scale production of these items, with indi-

vidual workshops estimated to manufacture up to 10,000 pieces monthly. While not all such objects conveyed complex messages, their ubiquity demands recognition as a widespread medium of cultural transmission. This study traces the processes underpinning their dissemination, interrogating their accessibility across urban and rural contexts in Central-Eastern Europe. Through this lens, it explores how these artefacts contributed in large measure to identity formation in medieval society, challenging traditional approaches.

Keywords: Dress accessories, social communication, production, popular culture, symbolism

1. Introduction

In recent years, archaeologists specialising in the European Middle Ages and early modern period have increasingly drawn upon various theories from the social sciences,¹ thereby expanding the traditional scope of archaeological research and approaches.² It is exceptionally difficult to summarise these developments concisely from the perspective of Central and Central-Eastern Europe,³ let alone the British and American academic traditions.⁴ A detailed discussion would far exceed the scope of this text; however, I will briefly outline a subjective overview of issues that directly or indirectly influenced the reflections presented here, focusing primarily on work related to the broadly defined field of historical archaeology.

Sociologists and archaeologists have frequently explored the concept of consumption strategies,⁵ which builds on the works of Thorstein VEBLEN, alongside other

archaeological approaches to social differentiation⁶ in both rural⁷ and urban⁸ contexts. Scholars have also actively engaged with various social theories, including Pierre BOURDIEU’s concept of *habitus*⁹ and the broader framework of social practices.¹⁰ The so-called ontological turn¹¹ has gained significant traction, bringing attention to approaches linked to Actor-Network Theory,¹² their critiques,¹³ and their potential interpretative applications in material culture studies.¹⁴ Assemblage thought also continues to draw interest,¹⁵ as its very name seems to appeal even to archaeologists traditionally resistant to theoretical approaches. Keeping in mind those approaches, this text

¹ More on those issues: MEHLER 2013, 11, 17; LOZNY 2011, 212.

² i.e. PIEKALSKI et al. 2022.

³ GRAMSCH/SOMMER 2011.

⁴ Worthy of mention is a recent “handbook” by HARRIS/CIPOLLA 2017; there is further literature.

⁵ HAASE/WHATLEY 2020.

⁶ ATZBACH/RADOHS 2020.

⁷ GOSSLER 2005.

⁸ RADOHS 2023.

⁹ SCHREG et al. 2013.

¹⁰ From an archaeological perspective: CHRISTOPHERSEN 2015; CHRISTOPHERSEN 2023; BRENDENCKE 2015; SCHATZKI 2002.

¹¹ Recent summary from the perspective of the Czech Republic: ČAPEK 2023; see also ANTČZAK/BEAUDRY 2019; longer discussion also in HARRIS/CIPOLLA 2017.

¹² LATOUR 2005.

¹³ HAHN 2015.

¹⁴ JERVIS 2014.

¹⁵ JERVIS 2017.

SPENCER 2010

Brian SPENCER, *Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges*. New ed. Medieval Finds from Excavations in London 7, Woodbridge 2010.

STANDLEY 2013

Eleanor Rose STANDLEY, *Trinkets and Charms: The Use, Meaning and Significance of Dress Accessories (1300–1700)*. Oxford University School of Archaeology Monograph 78, Oxford 2013.

Theophilus Presbyter 1998

Teofil Prezbyter, *Diversarum Artium Schedula*, Średniowieczny Zbiór Przepisów o Sztukach Rozmaitych. Kraków 1998.

THOMAS 2009

Nicolas THOMAS, *Les ateliers urbains de travail du cuivre et de ses alliages au bas Moyen Âge: Archéologie et histoire d'un site parisien du XIV^e siècle dans la Villeneuve du Temple (1325–1350)*. PhD dissertation Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2009.

WACHOWSKI 2013

Krzysztof WACHOWSKI, *Emblemata mediaevalia profana: przykład Polski*. Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis 3509, Wrocław 2013.

WACHOWSKI 2007

Krzysztof WACHOWSKI, *Mon Cor Plesor*. Symbolika przedstawień i napisów na średniowiecznych wyrobach kultury materialnej. In: Stanisław ROSIK / Przemysław WISZEWSKI (eds), *Cor Hominis*. Wielkie namiętności w dziejach, źródłach i studiach nad przeszłością. Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis 3049, Wrocław 2007, 254–279.

WILLEMSSEN 2012

Annemarieke WILLEMSSEN, "Man Is a Sack of Muck Girded with Silver": Metal Decoration on Late-Medieval Leather Belts and Purses from the Netherlands. *Medieval Archaeology* 56/1, 2012, 171–202. <https://doi.org/10.1179/0076609712Z.00000000006> [Access: 22.05.2025].

WITKOWSKI 2001

Jacek WITKOWSKI, *Szlachetna a wielce żałosna opowieść o panu Lancelocie z Jeziora: Dekoracja malarska Wielkiej Sali Wieży Mieszkalnej w Siedlęcinie*. Wrocław 2001.

Figure credits

Fig. 1a, c–e: Jakub SAWICKI and Martin KALÍŠEK; b: after SAWICKI 2014, 122, fig. 36a.

Fig. 2: after Muzeum Państwa Polskiego w Gnieźnie, www.muzeumgniezno.pl, CC-BY-3.0.

Fig. 3a: after Muzeum Archeologiczne w Gdańsku, www.archeoportal.pl, CC-BY-4.0; b, c: after PAVLÍK/VITANOVSKÝ 2004, fig. 343, 344.

Fig. 4: after CARRERA 2019, 136, fig. 8.

Fig. 5: Krzysztof DOBRZAŃSKI

Fig. 6, 8: Martin KALÍŠEK and Jakub SAWICKI

Fig. 7a–c: after SAWICKI 2014, 98, fig. 12 a–c; 7d: after BERGER 2015, 66, fig. 2.

Materielle Kultur als Mittel sozialer Kommunikation. Kleidungsaccessoires und ihre Symbolik als Teil der Identitätsbildung im spätmittelalterlichen Mitteleuropa

Soziale Kommunikation dient Historiker*innen als zentrales Konzept, um Beziehungsdynamiken in der mittelalterlichen Gesellschaft zu entschlüsseln. Bislang wurden archäologische Quellen jedoch kaum systematisch in diesen Analyserahmen integriert. Dieser Beitrag argumentiert für eine Interpretation materieller Kultur als Kommunikationsmedium, das sowohl die „große Tradition“ – allein gebildeten Eliten zugänglich – als auch die „kleine Tradition“, verständlich für breitere Gesellschaftsschichten, vermittelte. Als Fallstudie steht eine bisher vernachlässigte Kategorie massenhaft verbreiteter Objekte im Fokus: Bekleidungszubehör.

Eine technologische Wende im 13. Jahrhundert ermöglichte deren serielle Herstellung, wobei einzelne Werkstät-

ten Schätzungen zufolge bis zu 10.000 Stück monatlich produzierten. Auch wenn nicht alle Stücke komplexe Botchaften trugen, fordert ihre Allgegenwärtigkeit eine Anerkennung als Massenmedium kultureller Übermittlung. Die Studie untersucht die Verbreitungsprozesse dieser Objekte und ihre Verfügbarkeit in städtischen wie ländlichen Kontexten Ostmitteleuropas. Darüber hinaus beleuchtet sie, wie diese Artefakte zur Identitätsbildung beitrugen und tradierte Dichotomien zwischen elitärer und populärer Praxis hinterfragen.

Schlagworte: Kleidungsaccessoires, soziale Kommunikation, Produktion, Populärkultur, Symbolik

Dr. Jakub SAWICKI
Institute of Archaeology of the Czech Academy of
Sciences, Prague
Letenská 123/4
118 00 Prague
Czech Republic
sawicki@arup.cas.cz