

Late Medieval and Early Modern strap-ends from archaeological excavations in Gdańsk

– abstract

The late Middle Ages saw significant changes in clothing. The attire began to fulfil a function far beyond mere practicality, becoming a carrier of information about social status, professional and cultural affiliation, as well as faith and beliefs. Ideas and tastes underwent transformations, driven by changing material living conditions, technological advances, and trade contacts.

One of the most characteristic features of the changes occurring in the 14th century was the tailoring of clothing to the figure. The belt began to play a key role, giving the silhouette a slender line. It acquired not only a shaping, decorative, and practical function but also became a source of information about the wearer. It represented their social status, wealth, and professional affiliation, and the metal strap-ends took various forms and decorations, often carrying symbolic meaning. The belt was an indispensable element of both women's and men's attire. While ordinary belts were worn by the general public, ceremonial belts were donned during various ceremonies.

This paper presents an analysis of the largest collection in Poland (and perhaps in Europe) of 516 strap-ends made of non-ferrous metals, which were recovered from 41 archaeological sites in Gdańsk. They were found in all three urban centers—the Old City, the Main City, and the Young City—though their distribution and percentage varied by area.

A strap-end is defined as a metal element attached to the end of a belt, hanging freely from a leather or textile strap equipped with a buckle, sometimes with a boucle plate, and decorative rivets or mounts. Despite its common occurrence in archaeological material, this artifact is often misinterpreted, and research on it remains relatively underdeveloped. Previous literature has focused primarily on strap-ends of richly decorated knightly belts, while data on strap-ends that may have been part of the attire of urban dwellers has remained scarce. Meanwhile, the diversity of forms and decorations of these artifacts makes them a valuable source for research on material culture.

The impetus for this research came not only from the extensive collection of strap-ends, but also from the location where they were acquired. Gdańsk was an important commercial and cultural center, strongly linked to European exchange networks, particularly within the Hanseatic League. The city served as a space where fashion trends from other regions of Europe were adopted. Therefore, it was worth considering the extent of adaptation of fashion patterns in the local environment.

The work consists of five chapters. The first utilizes iconographic sources, which allow us to place the strap-ends within the context of the entire garment and to match individual types of fittings to belts worn during the period under study. The second chapter discusses the contexts and briefly describes the archaeological sites from which the artefacts analyzed in this work were recovered. The third chapter is devoted to terminology and existing proposals for the typology of strap-ends, pointing to the lack of a unified classification system. Based on this, the author adapted and expanded existing classifications, incorporating new types observed in the Gdańsk material. The fourth chapter analyzes the fittings in terms of form, raw material, and decoration. Metallographic analysis (XRF) was also used to determine the composition of solder alloys used to connect strap-end's pieces. Based on stylistic analysis, a new classification of fittings was proposed, allowing for their association with specific types of belts. Special attention was given to decorations and inscriptions, including Gothic letters, which could have symbolic, religious or personal meaning. The fifth chapter concerns the production of strap-ends. Due to the lack of local sources, analogies from other European cities and available historical records are used. The analysis indicates the possible operation of metal workshops in Gdańsk and potential places for selling these products. The work concludes with a catalog of artifacts organized by archaeological site and the numbering system (SAZ) adopted by the Archaeological Museum in Gdańsk, enabling their precise connection to the context of their discovery. The entire work constitutes a significant contribution to research on the material culture of late medieval and early modern Gdańsk, demonstrating strap-ends as an important element of attire, with significance not only practical but also social and symbolic.

The recurrence of forms in the Gdańsk collection allowed the author to connect specific types of strap-ends with specific types of belts, a topic that had previously been only partially explored. At least two types of belts were observed in iconographic sources that can be linked to the strap-ends analyzed in this work. This is also confirmed by examples of preserved complete leather belts recovered during archaeological excavations at urban sites.

The first and longest-serving type of belt were narrow, long belts that hung down to the knee, or in women's clothing, sometimes down to the hem of the dress. In literature, these belts are called overlong belts. These belts were used from the 13th century, most likely until the end of the 16th century. This type of belt most often featured oblong strap-ends. They were worn by both women and men.

The second type of belt, with which we can associate quadrilateral strap-ends are wide belts, which appeared in French fashion in the 14th century, but their greatest popularity occurred in the 15th century. They are known from iconographic sources from the early 16th

century. They were distinguished by their width, reaching approximately 5-6 cm. They were worn primarily with the dress modeled on the French *houppelande*, which dominated European courtly fashion for both women and men around the 1360s.

The most difficult part is identifying the type of belt that circular strap-ends were attached to. They were not only part of main belts worn around the waist, but also found on auxiliary belts used for securing weapons, bag straps, and leather elements of horse equipment. Iconographic sources indicate that these strap-ends could have been the ends of main, narrow, short leather belts worn around the waist primarily by men. Available archaeological sources indicate that circular fittings appear in the early 15th century, although they are visible in iconography from as early as the mid-14th century. These fittings were still used on belts in the first half of the 16th century.

Research shows that the strap-end, as a small element of clothing, appears to be an object whose appearance must have been significant to the wearer. It was a carrier of various meanings, often symbolic. It could serve as a kind of amulet protecting the wearer from bad accidents or as a gift for a loved one, playing a significant role in late medieval courtship. This element also signaled the wearer's financial status and could be a sign of belonging to a specific social group. At the same time, the strap-end is an accessory that, along with the belt mounts and the brooches that connected the garments, constituted the most decorative metal element of late medieval and early modern clothing, as confirmed by the analyzed collection. The belt end fittings obtained in Gdańsk fit into broader European trends while retaining their own stylistic and technological characteristics.