

Urban violence harnessed or unleashed? Arms and armour as everyday objects in the daily life of a medieval and early modern port town. The example of Gdansk.

The project, based on evidence from several decades of excavations in the historical part of Gdansk departs from the traditional scheme of arms and armour studies. Our goal is to investigate the relation between objects and their owners, to place the archaeological record within the context of a colourful multicultural port town and to reconstruct the biographies of artefacts and biographies of their owners. Such an approach enables us to research how the weapon became a dress accessory and an emblem of self-identity within the urban community. Another question is whether the customization of an object was limited to the social upper classes or extended to the less wealthy. These problems refer to the range of arms permitted to be carried by citizens according to legal regulations. In Gdansk, the privilege stemmed out of the Lubeck and Kulm municipal laws, which required those who applied for civic rights to acquire arms and armour to keep them at home, in case of war. On the other hand, citizens were banned from bringing weapons into guild meetings or taverns, to avoid dangerous brawls. There were instances in which the carrying of weapons was either banned or the blade length limited. In the latter case, not uncommon were announcements on the restrictions accompanied by weapon-templates which met the blade standard to be respected. It would be interesting to examine to what extent the inhabitants of Gdansk were influenced by law in their choice of arms. Regarding the abundance of archaeological evidence, the frequent use of weapons within the old Gdansk community seems remarkable. On the basis of our analysis, we need to assert, what was the reason behind discarding such a quantity of personal weapons in the period between 13th and 17th centuries. Was it only the result of damage/wear, of an unintentional loss, of a violent situation, of a production process or of confiscation and damage by the authorities? On the other hand, the profusion of finds may originate in the fact that in the streets of Gdansk such objects, were treated as dress accessories among all representatives of the urban community. At the same time, being armed might have been a necessity in an insecure and violent environment of a port town. Considering the collected evidence it is tempting to learn whether the distribution of finds conforms to the social topography of Gdansk. Another relevant question is whether the quality and quantity of arms and armour differed in time and mirrored the turning points in the history of the town. Our project concerns human-artefact relations in the context of cultural norms which regulated the use of arms and armour by the citizens. The carrying of weapons by civilians within the boundaries of an old town, must have been far more complex matter than nowadays. Apart from its more obvious associations, strongly related to symbolism, behavioural economics, ostentation, self-identity within the local community and emulation of the higher social classes. Hence, weapons cannot be exclusively treated here as implements of violence. Old Gdansk due to its extraordinary wealth and power resulting from the location on long-distance trade routes at the mouth of the Vistula River is an ideal environment in which all of the cultural contexts of weapon use may be observed to the fullest extent. Even conflict situations should be treated as cultural phenomena. According to research results published by historians, there was no such thing as unlimited and excessive violence in the middle ages, and the modern period. It always must have been governed and harnessed by ethical, religious and legal norms. The essential part of our project is focused on specialist investigations aimed to determine the quality of the objects and the technology involved in their production process. Planned are metallographic-, wood-, leather- and bone /antler- analyses of the archaeological evidence. Hard data would be used in this case to draw proper conclusions on the level of craftsmanship within the spectrum of the examined objects in order to reveal which should be regarded as luxury goods and which represent the standard of mass production. Arms and armour are treated here as a medium which gives a glimpse into certain aspects of the townsmen's mundane activities and provides the planned study with an anthropological quality. Therefore, we are convinced that the monograph resulting from our research project would reach a broad audience far beyond the academic community. F. e., it would be very useful for historical reenactors and amateur historians as it is planned to provide the reader with knowledge based on hard evidence and scientific methods but published in a comprehensive manner.