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# Can archaeologist find the poor?

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## ABSTRACT

Archaeology is sometimes perceived more as a searchings for treasures. It is way easier to detach objects that can be related to elites from all found relics. But separating articles which had their connection with poor and the lowest society group is much harder than this. Findings of clothes made of worse fabrics, pieced out and repaired, could be a potential source for the plebs's material culture. However, we also know examples of clothes meant for the elite, made of many smaller pieces of fabric sewed together for the economy. There are some findings of decorated shoes, spoiled, then patched. Many objects used for the next time have been found during excavations in elite's houses or converted from elite's weapon. Researches of towns' buildings bring examples of houses built in low quality, placed in poorest parts of the towns or on the backgrounds. The character of those archaeological material let us being sure which ones of those buildings were inhabited and, mostly, by the poors. From the other hand, a confrontation of sociotopographic analysis with precise archaeological studies do not bring an unequivocal proof for efficacy of this method. Even if many written sources describe some areas as poor, there were a lot of expensive objects found there. It all shows difficulty or even impossibility of reliable archaeological searchings for relics of medieval poverty.

**Keywords:** archaeology; beggars; pauper; towns; medieval

## 1. INTRODUCTION

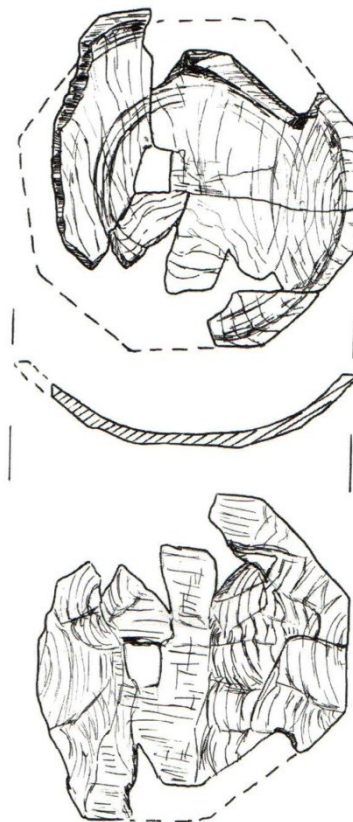
Society has that deeply rooted imagine of the archaeologist as a gold-digger. It is sure that the beginning of this discipline has more to do with the robbery of ancient treasures than a science [1]. What is more, archaeologists of today definitely prefer publishing relics which are effective and rich, not plain or simply poor. This is why it is hard to find anything that can be connected to the marigin of onetime societies. All we know about them comes from historical treatises [2-3], but our knowledge about their material culture is still scarce [4].

This short article is a result of the attempts of creating a medieval poverty image seen by the archaeologist. It is not a try of making a synthesis at all, but only marking of some opportunities and problems to be appear. Since we will be searching just for some hints, not specific determinants and solutions, unequivocal outlining of the examined group seems not to be necessary [5].

With regard to the state of the researches, I will stay focused on the poors from medieval cities, in spite of that I realize exisitng of the poors in village environment as well [6].

Poverty reduces people's normal needs. In the eye of paltry purchasing powers, the only aspects of a product that count are its usefulness and price. Aesthetics, ornamentations or good quality are those kinds of features that make the price higher and, because of that, are needless.

This is why, when looking for society economic margin, it is vital to look especially at badly made products. Higher price is obvious when the object is made by more skilled craftsman. We can find many different artefacts in the archaeological material – made in a better way or not, and also objects that were intentionally made not so neatly. Wooden bowls, grinded on their inner part and just hewn outside could be a good example of such [7]. Reduction of time needed in a production process could probably decrease object's price. Even so, we don't know how big that decreasing price was. This is the reason why we also don't know for which exactly social group those products were made.

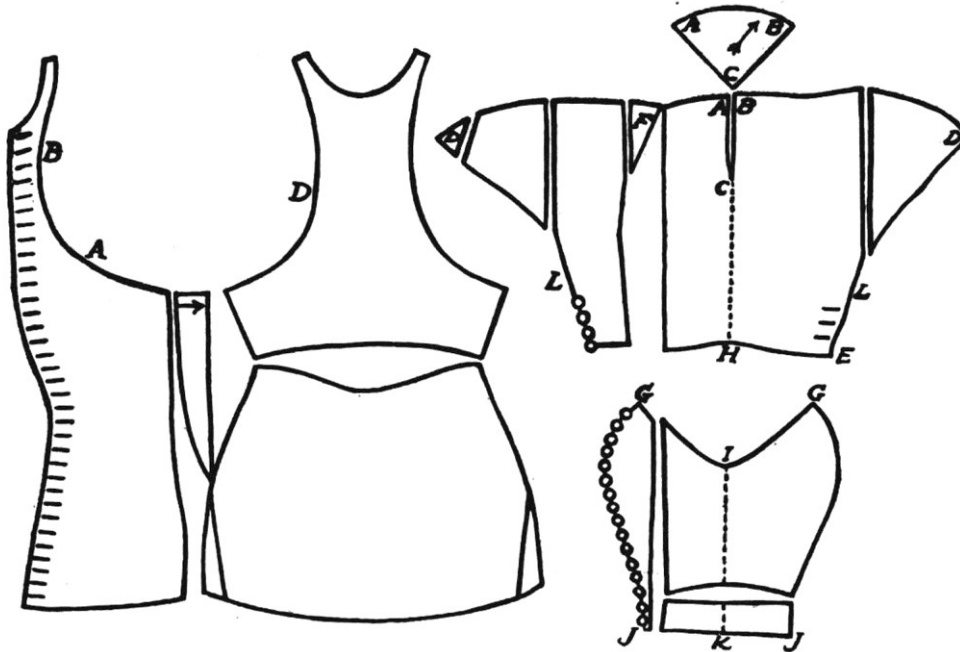


**Pic. 1.** Wooden bowls from Stargard [6].

I assume the best way to define man's life standing is to look at his cloth. And a cloth is what I have focused on. There is a saying „Cut your coat according to your cloth” - it is quite good starting point in analyzing textiles. According to that sentence, all structural elements of the cloth could be made of just one, but also a few smaller parts – which enabled saving the fabric. There are some proper examples of such work, known from late medieval findings of Bocksten swamp (Sweden) and Herjolfsnes (Greenland). It is said that the man of Bocksten was not a poor, but sleeves of his tunic varied one another [8].

Many gowns known from Greenland were also made of smaller pieces, sometimes even patches that, sewn all together, created big parts of a dress [9]. The entirety of absolute solutions here has no constructional meaning but it is just an economy. The most striking instances of such are courtly cloths of Charles I [10], Duke of Brittany and Charles the Bold [11], Duke of

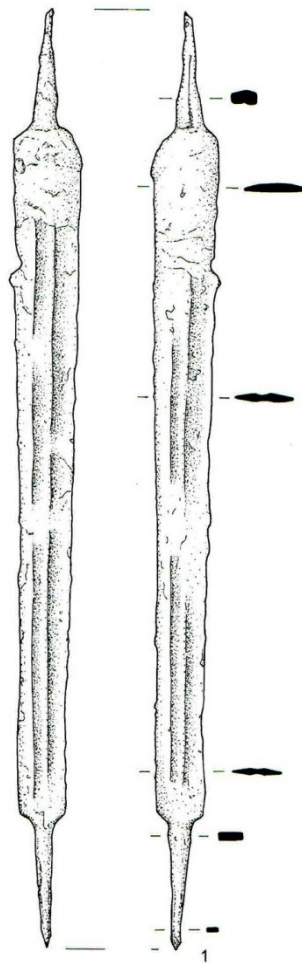
Burgundy. A sleeve of Charles's quilted jacket has been made of 10 elements even if its construction required only three. Charles the Bold's jacket's *basque*, wide and falling into folds, has been sewn from small patches [12]. This fact can suggest quite big costs of silk, even for such high-level elite.



**Pic. 2.** Pourpoint of Charles the Bold [12].

Products which could be repaired are a different matter here. Written sources give us patch-makers [13] and junk dealers [2]. As an examples of their work we can mention old shoes soles replaced by new ones, soles which were piece out or enlarged shoes as well [14]. Some people even tried to repair shoes ineptly with a straps. Probably the finding from Gdańsk, dated to 11<sup>th</sup> century, can be another instance of reparation pursued with home resources [15]. But the proportion of luxurious shoes which were repaired is something important too [14]. Value of that kind of product was high enough to make an efforts of reparation to continue its utilization, not caring about them being a little bit used and disfigured by this mending.

Next aspect that could point the poverty is connected to using again damaged, worn-out products. For example, a spokeshave from Świebodzin has been made from broken sword's pommel [16]. It is not so easy to say if something as exclusive as the weapon could ever get from elite's hands into economic margin's. But, of course, common things were often altered too. During excavations on a motte in Orłów by Bzura river a polished fragment of a ceramic vessel's bottom has been found. It was probably used as a whetstone [17].



**Pic. 3.** Spokeshave from Świebodzin [16].

Whereas, there were another excavations on a motte in Włoszczowa where researchers found an old horseshoe, grinded down and used as a solid staple [18]. There are many findings from Bytom's market square as well; leather things with traces of preceding usage and cut-out patch-like parts are one of them [19]. This is an undeniable proof that the material was exerted again which enabled saving funds.

Activity like this seems to be a thrift but not always induced by destitution. All those object that had been used again were found both in knights' seats – exclusive, elitist ones – and on towns' squares, which were places of living for rich and poor at the same time. It is difficult to tell precisely if given object was used by a pauper or someone thrifty. But this phenomenon can be defied to modern thinking about things we own – throwing them out after wearing or going out of fashion; it is result of last few decades and caused, probably, by rich communities pride.

Writting sources we know nowadays, especially bills and tax registers, enabled creation of plans of districts where the poor or rich people lived and, also, street maps [13]. In theory, confrontation of a sociotopography and results from an archaeological researches could bring

some interesting effects. Many researches run in Wrocław together with deep historical studies [13] give quite full look on this question. However, an outcome of those two types of sources collation is not so straightforward. Sources mention the poorest occupied properties on streets Nożownicza [20], Mikołaja [21], Bernardyńska [22], Nożownicza and Kuźnica crossroad [23]. But objects that had been found there showed higher financial standing of people who lived there. On the other hand, buildings analysis are really surprising. The smallest and the most shoddy built houses were placed on the area of Nożownicza, Wita Stwosza and Odrzańska streets [24]. This dissonance is very interesting, though, not easy to explain in this very moment.

## 2. CONCLUSIONS

As a recap, it is vital to say that archaeological researches on the poverty do not bring unequivocal and simple answers. As it was said before, most of all those objects of bad quality, broken, fixed, are not determinants of poor financial status. There is much more separated areas for the rich people and houses of the elite in the archaeological material. Even the smallest amount of expensive things shows bigger financial capabilities, just the opposite to those „poor” objects. All this means that to find any signs of poverty we need to look at the wholeness of found relics – absence of elitist ones and big amount of bad ones gives clear picture in this case. But none of isolated, single, picked out of context premises should be taken under consideration on their own and treated as a proofs for poverty, because even a king could have been wearing a patch on his hoses' knee.

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