

Concealed Leather and Fur Finds from Kempton/ Allgäu (Germany)



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1. The find situation in the "Mühlberg-Ensemble" in Kempton

In the centre of the former Reichsstadt Kempton (Allgäu) the so-called "Mühlberg-Ensemble" is located. This group of three citizen's houses (Mühlberg No. 8, 10 and 12) was built between 1289 (d) and 1354 (d). In 1996, during reconstruction works the urban office for archaeology screened ceiling and wainscoting fillings by sifting. In these fillings a plenty of everyday objects from late medieval period up to about 1920 were enclosed.

In the house Mühlberg No. 8 (cf. section below) the oldest complex was discovered, according to the enclosed objects it dates from about 1470 to 1550 AD. A second, slightly younger complex was found between the walls of the houses no. 8 and no. 10, it contained finds from the second half of the 16th century and later. All objects are extraordinarily well preserved: Seams are completely intact, street mud is still sticking on shoes and textiles show the rest of pigmentation.

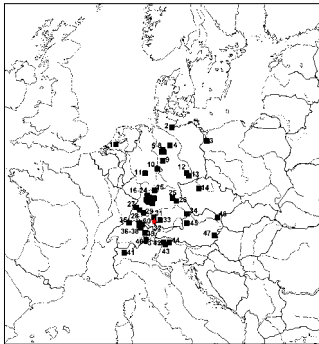


Since autumn 2000, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) has granted a common research project of the Stadtarchäologie Kempton (Dr. G. Weber), the chair for medieval history, University of Constance (Prof. Dr. H. Maurer) and the chair for medieval and postmedieval archaeology, University of Bamberg (Prof. Dr. I. Ericsson) in order to inquire into these unique finds.

2. The phenomenon of finds concealed in buildings

Finds have been concealed in buildings throughout the whole of Central Europe (cf. map) for different reasons: Some complexes seem to be planned as temporary depots, but evidently sunk into oblivion. Also magical practices could be involved: On the British Isles, it was usual to immerse shoes or other *spiritual middens* in order to protect the house and its inhabitants against witchcraft. On the continent, suspicious rituals might play a role in a few cases as well: Petra Schad is recording intentionally immured animals (below, nos.16,19-23).

But most of the concealed complexes were filled in together with clay or brick stones simply for constructive purposes: either as insulation or in order to weight the floors against vibrations - so does the Kempton complex.



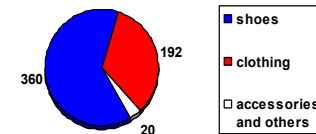
Concealed finds in Central Europe (British Isles are not mapped). Kempton marked by the red asterisk.

3. The range of finds in Kempton

The older complex contained beside "common" archaeological finds (ceramics, iron and remarkably few glass) lots of dry stored organic objects: charters, writing exercises, a love letter, playing-cards, textiles, woodwork and last but not least about 600 leather and fur objects, which are the topic of the author's doctoral thesis.

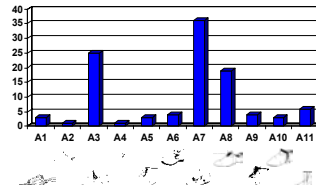


The Kempton complex concealed in the ceiling between the first and the second floor and behind the wainscoting contained a wide range of extraordinary well preserved organic finds such as clothing e.g. shoes, hoods, hosiery, mittens, gloves, accessories, e.g. bags, straps, three balls, textiles, wood, e.g. waste from a turnery, written sources, e.g. a love letter, playing-cards and arms, e.g. knives, sheaths and even a fragment of a jack of spade.

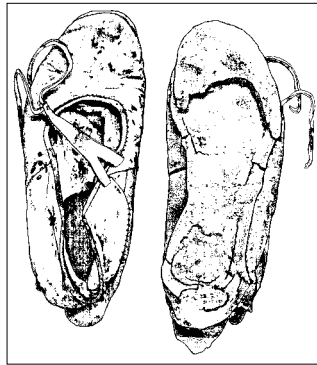


3.1 Shoes

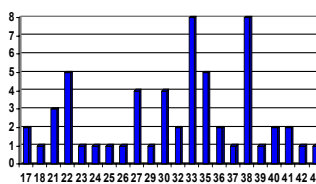
About 60 % of the leather finds are shoes or parts of them. The Kempton assemblage contains eleven shoe types defined by their fastening method often showing cobbler's work.



Kempton shoe types according to fastening method: A1= laced leather pattern; A2= slip-on mule; A3= ankle boot with wrapover front and drawstring (=Bundschuh); A4= ankle boot with lateral fastening; A5= ankle shoe or boot with frontal toggle; A6= ankle shoe with laces; A7= low cut ankle shoe with buckle (=Kuhmaulschuh); A8= front laced ankle shoe; A9= front seam (so called ankle shoe); A10= side laced (posterior); A11= side hooked boot



The study of reference finds distinguishes European fashion forms (as *Kuhmaulschuh* A7, above) from more regional "Alpine" types (as *Bundschuh* A3, below).



The shoe lengths (in French sizes) reveal additional information: Evidently, the Kempton shoes were mainly worn by women and children - any shrinking can be excluded because of their dry stored conservation.

3.2. Fur clothing and accessories

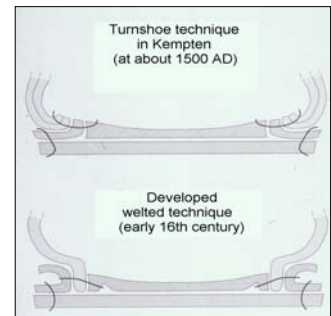
Parts of clothing are the second largest group of objects - made of alum tanned sheep fur. Their hair was almost completely eaten by moths - only roots are still visible under a microscope.

About 70 parts of fur hoods (below) were identified. They are sewn of up to 50 patches and lined or quilted in up to eight layers. At about 1500 AD, hoods were out of fashion and only worn by miners, peasants, nuns or as part of the mourning dress.



3.3. Sewing techniques

Although the Kempton shoes follow patterns and style of the early 16th century, they are sewn in the medieval turnshoe technique. The welled technique, is lacking in the adult shoes completely. Such kind of coexistence between turnshoes and welled shoes at the same time is a rare fact on archaeological sites and affords an insight into the process of innovation - or social evidence.



The most important seams of shoes were fixed with two threads in closed seams, the linings and edge trimmings in lapped seams with a single thread. In contrast to these, the clothing were sewn with fine whip stitched butted or closed seams. This corresponds to the types, which are used by a tailor for textiles, although the fur material itself is much more similar to leather. Consequently, the Kempton finds display that furrier's techniques are quite distinct from shoemaker's ones.

4. Who concealed the objects?

According to the few written sources, until 1501 a *community of pious women* (i.e. beguines) was housed in No. 12, since that time the site has been in ecclesiastical ownership up to now. The finds themselves reveal on the one hand that they were worn by children and women for the most part. The fragments of hoods might be interpreted as parts of a nun's dress. On the other hand, "Mühlberg-Ensemble" contained relics of several crafts (cobblers, tailors, weavers, turners, chancellery etc.), and it is impossible to imagine the beguines work in all of these. Probably, the beguines' remnants were only the "substrate", which was mixed on occasion of rebuilding activities with other inhabitants' objects, who might have been their neighbours or successors.

In any case, the concealed finds - not only from Kempton - are a new source type for organic and other everyday objects. The systematic research of this barely known source will open a new window to more coloured and more differentiated Middle Ages than the mere interpretation of written sources or conventional excavations could ever provide.

Further information:

R. Atzbach, Die Leder- und Pelzfinde aus dem "Mühlberg-Ensemble" in Kempton, Promotionsvorhaben am Lehrstuhl für Archäologie, Universität Bamberg, <http://www.uni-bamberg.de/~ba5am1/artikel/zlin/>; e-mail: rainer.atzbach@ggeo.uni-bamberg.de

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