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Medieval marks of the bellman of the Czech King and of a Eucharistic guild discovered in Nysa, Silesia

Abstract. The most recent field study in Nysa revealed two previously unknown leather identification marks, namely, the mark of the bellman of the Czech King from the 14th century and the emblem of a Eucharistic guild from the 15th century. The bellman's name, unknown in written sources, was successfully identified (Veick) and the abbreviation on the guild emblem was deciphered (nar = Nahrung), which allowed the artefact to be linked to the guild of the Body of God operating in Nysa. Both these objects were likely created at an artisan's workshop in Nysa that was open between the 14th and the 16th century. Owing to the latest discoveries, the number of these intriguing finds in Central Europe rose up to about 50, though a leather artisan workshop has been confirmed only in Nysa.

Keywords: Silesia, Nysa, late Middle Ages, bellman of the Czech King, Eucharistic guild.

Although medieval leatherwork is a common find, the number of items that can be deemed artisan-made goods is not outstanding in Poland. Some of them, such as the pattens unearthed in Gdańsk (Ceynowa 2005) that bear Netherlandish inscriptions are unquestionably imported goods. However, the matter gets more complicated when it comes to inscriptions in German, a language that dominated towns and cities located in the area of its influence as a result of colonization. It was particularly popular among merchants and craftsmen, whereas the court found it quite fashionable. Bear in mind that as a *minnesinger*, Duke of Silesia Henry IV Probus authored two poems in German that were included in the famous Codex Manesse from the 14th century. Therefore, we can talk about the local manufacturing of leather artisanal products only as regards the location of the workshop, which has been successfully done only in Nysa, as yet (Wachowski, Krawczyk 2019). The most recent archaeological studies were conducted under the supervision of Mariusz Krawczyk, MSc, from 4 October 2021 to 30 September 2022 at the junction of the

streets Karola Miarki and Kramarska in Nysa, on plot no. 44/2. The excavation area covered 27 ares. These studies yielded, among others, three more leather artisanal products (1 specimen completely destroyed), most often referred to as amulets, which constitutes 20% of all the finds from Central and Eastern Europe. To this, one should add products of the artisan's workshop in Nysa unearthed outside that city, which gives the astounding figure of 25%. As for Central and Eastern Europe, we know about 50 leather items that are identical in terms of shape, structure and manufacturing technique, yet carry different ideological content that determines their function (Wachowski, Krawczyk 2019 – previous literature specified therein). As for now, the most recent finds from Nysa are the only marks of this sort.

The identification mark of the bellman of the Czech King

What made bellmen stand out was their garments with the coat of arms of the country or the province (*Tabart* or *Tappert*), while a staff served as a signifier of their office (Kuczyński 1997, p. 331). In works on heraldry, however, there is no mention of any individual identification marks of bellmen, probably because there are no mentions of them in written sources. Nonetheless, in the course of the archaeological research in Nysa, one of the objects found in a latrine near the Marketplace (Fig. 1) was a leather item identified based on deciphered inscriptions as a personal identification mark of the bellman of the Czech King (Fig. 2).

The individual mark of the bellman of the Czech King belongs to the 14th-century “coat of arms” series of amulets. In this series, one can distinguish a group of identification and anthropic marks with coats of arms of commanders of the Teutonic Order and Marian inscriptions that belonged to the commanders' messengers. These artefacts do not occur outside the extent of the Teutonic Order. The other group in this series is made up of identification and apotropaic marks of messengers of the dukes of Opole with coats of arms of the Przemyślida family and the dukes of Opole, most likely Władysław Opolczyk, with a heraldic courtesy and apotropaic (on the side with the duke's coat of arms) and homage (on the side of the Czech coat of arms) inscriptions. One of such marks, though without inscriptions as an exception from the rule, was found in Prague, Czech Republic (Bravermanová, Otavká, Wallisová 2016, Fig. 11). This group includes also marks containing the coat of arms of the dukes of Masovia on both sides, though without the inscriptions.

The most recent find from Nysa unearthed in the latrine (feature 63) is an artefact bearing the coat of arms of the Przemyślida family on one side and the coat of arms on the other, sadly utterly destroyed; in terms of iconography, it is almost identical to the amulets of the dukes of Opole, yet the inscription is completely different, making it an exceptional find in this series. The border around the

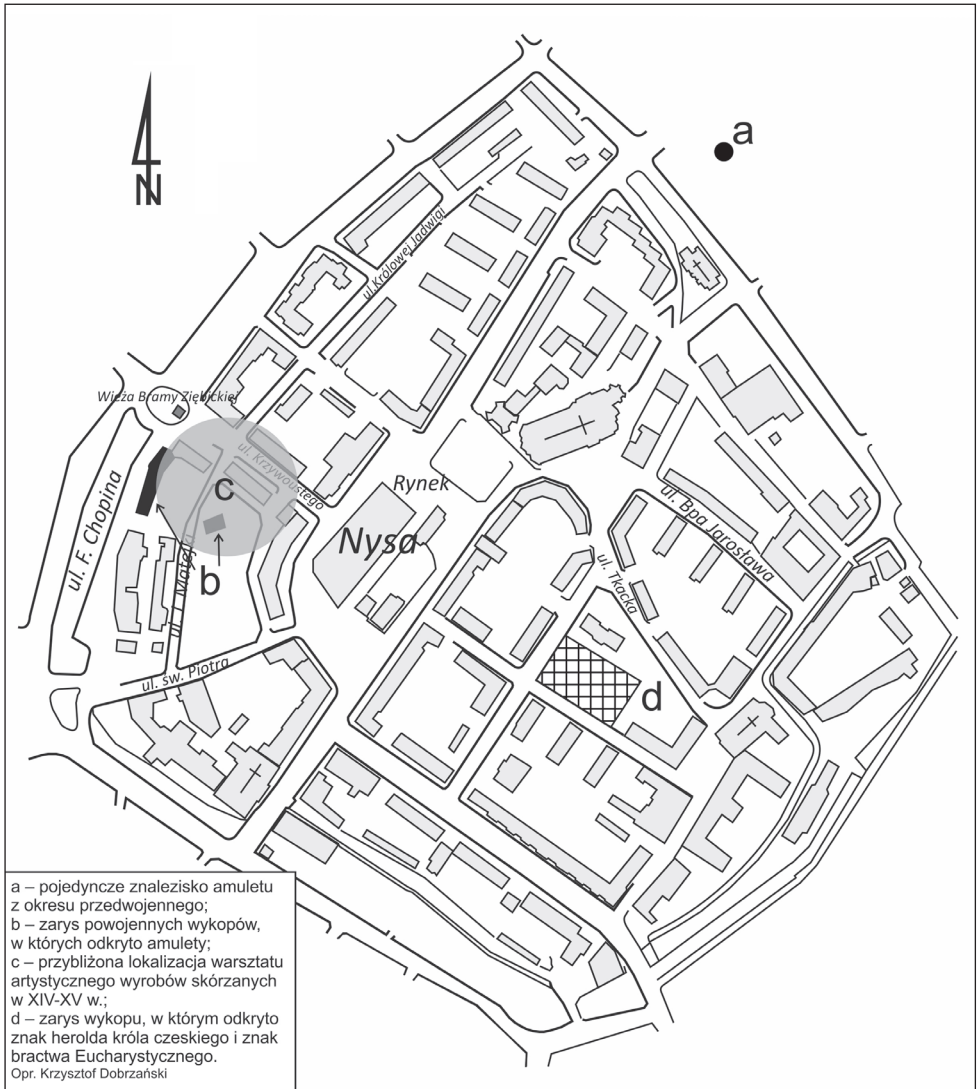


Fig. 1. Nysa, layout of the historical city centre: a – single find of an amulet (from the pre-war period) from before 1945; b – outline of (post-war) excavations from the second half of the 20th century, where the amulets were unearthed; c – approximate location of the workshop where leather artisanal goods were made in the 14th–15th century; d – outline of the excavation where the mark of the bellman of the Czech King and the mark of the Eucharistic fraternity were found (drawing by K. Dobrzański)



Fig. 2. Nysa. Leather emblem of the bellman of the Czech King. Second half of the 14th century: a – side with the inscription + WITERKANT BEMERLANT • HOCH KNEMMT +; b side with the inscription + HERLIC...LGE...ILDICH VEICK (the collection of District Museum in Nysa; photo by K. Dobrzański)

Przemysłida family coat of arms involves an imprint that reads, + WITERKANT BEMERLANT • HOCH KNEMMT +, which can be deciphered as, “wiederkannt *Behemerland* hoch genehmt”¹. The inscription serves unequivocally for identifying a specific bellman. Nonetheless, what is of key importance is the element that specifies who it pertains to, namely, the word BEMERLANT – which is the official title of the bellman of the Czech King. Stefan Kuczyński writes that in general, bellmen named their office after the duchies and kingdoms they served; in this respect, the term *Behemerland*² occurs; the Author goes further to say that the marshal of the coat of arms of the Czech King was referred to as *Karlstein* (Kuczyński 1997, p. 331; also see Brzustowicz 2010). This shows indisputably that the identification mark we discuss here belonged to the bellman of the Czech King, though he was not a top rank official. This seems to be confirmed by the depiction of a Czech bellman on

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² In the German lexicon of heraldry, the entry *Behemerland* shows that this term stems from *Böhmerland* (Oswald 1984, p. 58).

a playing card from ca. mid-15th century. The garments are quite modest with no heraldic marks and the coat of arms is somewhat pinned to the clothes (Fig. 3: a). On Nowy Targ square in Wrocław, a metal and leather appliques were found (Fig. 3: b, c), possibly belongings of the king's messenger (*bott*). The other side of the artefact on question is severely damaged, unfortunately. Only part of the writing is decipherable, which reads, + HERLIC...LGE...ILDICH VEICK. The meaning of the first word can be identified as *herrlich*, which corresponds to the official nature of the text on the other side. In turn, VEICK is a German name. This family originates in Saxony and its coat of arms is well-known³. It is thus likely that on the other side of that individual identification mark, there was an impression of the family's coat of arms of the bellman of House Veick. Perhaps, "...ILDICH" is the ending of that name. In written sources, the official title of the bellman of the Czech King, *Behemerland*, does not appear until 1433, when the emperor appointed Johann of Mausdorf to this office (Krejčík 1978, p. 46, footnote 20).

In written sources, the Nysa tournament is recorded to have taken place in 1284. Organized by Henryk IV Probus, it attracted many Silesian dukes, among others (Witkowski 2010, p. 4). However, this event cannot be associated with the leather mark of the bellman of the Czech King, which we date back to ca. mid-14th century.

As regards the entire series of marks with coats of arms, we applied the term "amulet", as justified by the apotropaic writings. Nonetheless, the identification mark of the bellman of the Czech King lacks such an inscription. The stylistics of the discussed artefact allows us to date it back to the second half of the 14th century. The form – a rectangle with a trapezoidal extension – is identical for all the amulets. The specimen from Nysa is 10.8 cm tall and 6.4 cm wide.

Marks of religious fraternities

Researchers agree that in Poland, fraternities (hospitallers) first appeared in Silesia, as early as in the 13th century. Nonetheless, religious fraternities remain unconfirmed in sources until the 14th century. In the 15th century, particularly in its second half, a rise in the newly-founded religious fraternities in Poland is observed, mainly Marian and Christological ones (Kumor 1967; Wiśniowski 1969; Litak 1997; Wólkiewicz 2014).

Christological fraternities. The 14th century provides marks depicting Agnus Dei unearthed in Wrocław and Gdańsk (Wachowski, Krawczyk 2019, Fig. 11: c; *Targ Sienny* 2016, cat. no. 173). In both these cases, the writings made in capital letters are of apotropaic nature. The stylistics of these marks and the inscription allow us to

³ <https://www.houseofnames.com/amp/veick-family-crest/German>.



Fig. 3.
 Playing card and appliques with the Czech coat of arms: a – playing card depicting the bellman of the Czech King, mid-15th century (the collection of the History of Arts Museum in Vienna, Austria – CC BY-NC-SA; <https://www.europena.eu/item/15502/KK5104>); b – metal applique with the coat of arms of Czechia; Wrocław, Nowy Targ square (after Sawicki 2014, Fig. 19: a; photo by R. Szczerek); c – leather applique with the Czech coat of arms; Wrocław, Nowy Targ square (the collection of Institute of Archaeology Wrocław University; photo by J. Sawicki)

deem them products of an artisan's workshop from Nysa. In turn, the depiction of Agnus Dei shows that they belonged to some Eucharistic fraternity, most likely the fraternity of the Body of God (Bożego Ciała). Though marks of Marian fraternities are relatively numerous in Central Europe, the most recent find from Nysa, from framework foundry rubbish tip (feature 4), is exceptional (Fig. 4: a). The writing "nar" (nahr = *Nahrung*) on the obverse can be interpreted as "spiritual food", that is, the Holy Sacrament, which allows us to consider this artefact a mark of some Eucharistic fraternity from the 15th century, such as the fraternity of the Body of God. On the reverse, one can read the letters c b k s or e b k s (Fig. 4: b). Perhaps this is a short for *Christliche Bruderschaft*, whereas e b stands for *Eucharistische Bruderschaft*. According to written sources, the fraternity of the Body of God was founded in Nysa on the initiative of a cloth makers' guild at a convent of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre in 1493 (Wólkiewicz 2014, pp. 183, 205, 281). The artefact in question is 12.0 cm tall and 6.5 cm wide.

In the Wrocław diocese, the Corpus Christi holiday was introduced in 1326 by Bishop Nanker (Drabina 1998, p. 157), though traces of the cult of the Body of God had been recorded somewhat earlier (Wólkiewicz 2014, p. 281). Amulets with



Fig. 4. Nysa. Leather emblem of the Christian fraternity; 15th century: a – side with the inscription “nar”; b – side with the letters c (or e) b k s (the collection of District Museum in Nysa; photo by K. Dobrzański)

the emblem Agnus Dei are dated back to the 14th century, both from Wrocław (Wachowski, Krawczyk 2019, Fig. 11: c) and Gdańsk (*Targ Sienny* 2016, cat. no. 173), which most likely served also as marks of the Eucharistic fraternity. When it comes to the cult of Eucharist as part of domestic piety, we have the most of archaeological sources from the 15th–16th century. As for the 15th century, these are mainly small Hansekanne-type tin jugs with a medallion inside depicting the scene of the Crucifixion, while as for the second half of the 16th century, these are clay jugs that also include the scene of the Crucifixion made in the overlay technique, albeit on the outside surface of the vessel. The latter aside, in Nysa, one can encounter vessels bearing a likeness of a male silhouette and the inscription DAS ISTZ LAMB GOTT. The discussed jugs from the modern era were used in Protestant rites (Szajt, Wachowski 2013, Fig. 11: a, b).

Marian fraternities. The region that the mentioned workshop was identified in Nysa is where the previously found 15th-century leather amulet bearing a minuscule letter “a” (ave) comes from; damaged back in the manufacturing process, it was left pulled over a slat (Wachowski, Krawczyk 2019, Figs. 1: f, 9). The only iconographic analogy comes from southern Czech Republic where in an altar painting from the 15th century in a town named Vyšší Brod, the scene of Visitation was shown. Maria visits Saint Elizabeth who has at her waist an amulet with letter “a”, which we read as ave (*Česká malba* 1950, Fig. 233). We presume that, as in the case of the amulets with the inscription “maria”, this artefact was a mark of a Marian fraternity. In Nysa, however, there were as many as three Marian fraternities, namely, the fraternity of the Saint Jacob’s Church (*fraternitas de missa beate et gloriosissime dei genitricis virginis Mariae*) mentioned in 1372; the fraternity of the Saint John’s Church, an account of which was made in 1435 (basically a guild of leather-dressers) and the fraternity of the Assumption of the BVM of the Franciscan monastery a record of which was made in 1462. The most numerous and the most elitist was the first one of the listed confraternities, whose members spoke Latin (Wólkiewicz 2014, pp. 195–204). Probably this very fraternity is the one we can associate the mentioned emblem bearing the letter “a” with.

Specificity of the leather artisan’s workshop in Nysa

Due to the lack of analogy, it is difficult to compare the workshop in Nysa with those of other craftsmen making artisanal leatherwork in Poland. The Teutonic amulets, most likely serving as the model for the forms manufactured in Nysa, were the only ones that could be considered artisan’s work, produced in the workshops of the Teutonic Order for commanders’ messengers. However, the assortment and thus the function of the products made in Nysa was much more extensive, particularly in the 14th century (Table 1). The mentioned amulets aside, other items that were made

there included large cases for dukes' documents (Wachowski, Krawczyk 2019, Figs. 3, 5), which can be compared to the so-called chest with the coats of arms of the Reich and the Przemysłda family, manufactured at a workshop in Prague (*Karel IV* 2006, cat. no. 54). In this respect, it is worth mentioning that as early as in the 13th century, Nysa was already an important hub for leatherworkers, as evidenced by an account from 1310, according to which the local townsmen were granted the licence to build a *ledyrhaus* to sell leather goods in (Sachs 1982, footnote 32).

Speaking of the specific characteristics of the workshop in Nysa, an effort should be made to consider the workshop from the 14th century and the one from the 15th century separately. For the former of the two mentioned periods, the most distinct characteristic is the making of identification marks of the bellman of the Czech King, messengers of the Duke of Opole, and messengers of the Bishop of Wrocław. The unearthed failed marks of the Duke of Opole (Wachowski, Krawczyk 2019, Fig. 1: a, c, d) show that the workshop in Nysa was under strict supervision when the specific "identity documents" were made. Another thing typical of the 14th-century manufacturing are love amulets. Interestingly, we can observe the biggest assemblage of these in Upper Silesia and not in the "love hub" that Lower Silesia operated as with paintings in the duke's residential tower first and foremost (Witkowski 2002; Wachowski 2013, pp. 11–83). An individual phenomenon in the 14th century are devotional amulets with the likeness of Agnus Dei, which we carefully identify as marks of an Eucharistic fraternity. In general, in the 14th century, inscriptions are relatively extensive, always in the surrounding border. Architectural motifs are popular, particularly Gothic arcades. In the 15th century, the assortment of products at the workshop in Nysa was substantially limited. We know but two products from that timeframe, namely, the emblem of a Marian fraternity bearing the latter "a" and the emblem of the fraternity of the Body of God with the inscription "nar" and letters on the other side. The letters are made in Gothic minuscule. The inscriptions were thus visibly shortened and became symbolic.

Summary

Given the 50 so-called leather amulets known as yet from Central and Eastern Europe, the most recent finds from Nysa stand out in several ways. The artefact with the coat of arms of the Przemysłda family and the inscription is the first identified individual mark of the bellman of the Czech King, as evidenced by the use of the official term BEMERLANT. In turn, the inscription VEICK is the last name of a specific bellman from the 14th century (Fig. 2). The mid-15th century is the dating determined for a likeness of a bellman of the Czech King on a playing card (Fig. 3: a), whereas excavation studies provided the coats of arms/appliques with the Czech lion that were likely worn by royal officials.

The other amulet with the inscription “nar”, short for “Nahrung” (Fig. 4) meaning (spiritual) food, has been identified with a Eucharistic fraternity from the 15th century, most likely the fraternity of the Body of God, an account of which was taken in Nysa in 1493. In the 16th century, an extraordinarily intense home cult of Eucharist was identified in Silesia, which is visible also in the archaeological finds. Previous studies provided also leather amulets that we identify with Marian fraternities.

As yet, the workshop in Nysa is the only artisan’s leatherwork shop in Central and Eastern Europe that was successfully identified based on unearthed failed products and a high number of completed amulets (Fig. 1). This is because the Nysa finds account for 20% of all the artefacts of this sort; to this number, one should add the products found outside of Nysa, e.g., in Bydgoszcz or Lviv. In the 14th century, the workshop in Nysa was offering a wide selection of the so-called amulets with an elaborate inscription in Gothic majuscule and a rich artistic programme. In the 15th century, only emblems of devotional fraternities were manufactured, sometimes with a single word or an abbreviation in Gothic minuscule (Table 1).

Table 1. Types of leather marks manufactured in Nysa between the 14th and the 15th century

Type of a given mark	Identification	Identification and apotropaic		Love	Devotional
Issuer	king	duke	bishop	knight	fraternity
User	Bellman	messenger	messenger	minnesinger	Messenger
Distinguishing feature	coat of arms, inscription, name	Coat of arms, inscription	emblem, inscription	scene, inscription	emblem, inscription
Dating	2 nd half of the 14 th century	2 nd half of the 14 th century	2 nd half of the 14 th century	2 nd half of the 14 th century	the 14 th –16 th century

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