

THE TABLE CULTURE IN THE LATE MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN SILESIAN TOWNS ON THE EUROPEAN BACKGROUND

I. INTRODUCTION

The aim of the work is to present selected issues related to the culture of Silesian burghers' table in the late Middle Ages and Early Modern Era, by analyzing artifacts made of materials commonly used at that time, such as ceramics, wood, metal and glass. Objects that are used by feasters in the dining space are material determinants of table culture, which I define as a combination of rules, customs, behaviors and rituals, i.e. established standards related to food consumption as well as the choice of foods and drinks.

The choice of chronological range was dictated by the possibility to analyze tableware that was functioning long enough to enable observing their typical and atypical features, as well as the transformations in production reaching beyond the framework of a single historical period. Moreover, the study covers nearly 500 years, embracing the culture-forming events important for Silesia that also had an impact on customs and items of everyday use. In the case of the beginning of the selected period it was colonization from the West that reached the studied region in the thirteenth century, and consequently, the formation of proto-towns and later towns, along with their further development in the fourteenth century. Another important period was the transition from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era, dated to the early sixteenth century, when the flow of technological achievements and humanistic approach of the Renaissance that reached Silesia from South-

ern and Western Europe became more and more intense. The analysis of items dated to the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century allowed for posing questions on the possibility to observe the changes, their duration and possible evolution of standards in the used tableware introduced at that time. It also enabled investigation regarding the cultural influence of the Reformation on the issues discussed. On the other hand, the adopted chronological range excluded from the research area a number of issues more relevant for later periods, including, for instance, the use of stimulants, such as coffee, chocolate and tea, new for the Europeans yet undetected in Silesia at that time, at least in archaeological material.

The analysis was based mainly on archaeological sources, which were described in detail in the catalog that includes 587 positions and illustrated on 138 tables. Written and iconographic sources were also helpful in the study. The first category includes testaments lists of the burghers of Wrocław, Świdnica, Kraków and Lüneburg, as well as pledges and lists of property of Wrocław Jews requisitioned after the pogrom in 1453. The second category of sources, however, include art: paintings and sculptures showing, among others, feasts and tableware. An important iconographic theme – both due to the context of eating a meal, and also symbolism – is the Last Supper.

The presented work is an archaeological study conducted basing on methods adopted by this scientific discipline.

The analysis of a major part of the artifacts was carried out during surveys in museums and scientific institutions. When possible, the context and chronology of the material were defined on the basis of documentation in archives, analysis of other finds from the same taxonomic units and available source literature. Apart from the macroscopic analysis of the material whose aim was to distinguish and classify the items related to tableware and hygiene, some objects were subjected to specialist analyses. On the basis of microscopic dendrological analysis, material composition of selected wooden artifacts was defined. In the case of several metal objects elemental composition was also determined using X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy. The analyses allowed for complementing the existing source base and comparing the results with written sources.

2. EATING AND DRINKING – CHANGES IN TABLEWARE USED IN SILESIAN TOWNS

In the second chapter, an attempt was made to outline the transformation of tableware from the thirteenth to the first half of the seventeenth century, described in three subsections, separated due to factors important for the history of Silesia. The beginning of the changes resulted mainly from the influx of colonizers from the West, who brought with them new types of tableware and contributed to the spread of a new different method of making various types of dishes, mainly ceramic. In the layers that date back to the thirteenth–fourteenth century, the proportion of new forms of utensils increased noticeably and some of them were unknown in the previous century or used only to a small extent.

They include jugs, bowls, cups, rare amphoras, beakers and goblets which were fired, mainly in a reducing atmosphere, to a gray color. In the case of turned and stave wooden vessels, we can notice both a continuation of the patterns of the latest phase of the early Middle Ages and a gradual spread of the model characteristic of the time of breakthrough. This is manifested, for example, by abandoning the production of bowls tied with two bands made of plant shoots, typical for the early Middle Ages, in favor of bowls bonded with only one rim. Most stave tablewa-

re obtained from Silesian towns bear traces of sealing in the form of discoloration or tar residue in the place where the bottom and wall were joined. In thirteenth-century Wrocław, we can observe a new method of making shallow wooden vessels using a lathe and manual bottom hewing, which accelerated production.

The continuation of early medieval traditions in wood turning can be seen in the results of the analysis of raw material used for production. Ash wood was still most often used, while for more precisely made products, such as thin-walled bowls and plates, lids, cups and jugs, craftsmen preferably chose maple wood. Despite the similarities, a gradual decrease in the number of wood types preferred by craftsmen has been observed since the thirteenth century, which can be associated with the emerging guild specialization. Such a trend, however, is not seen in the manufacturing of wooden spoons, which were planed from many types of wood, most likely mainly from locally occurring raw materials. In Wrocław, juniper wood was used relatively often for this purpose. It is more difficult to indicate precisely the typical features and formal changes of wooden spoons, because these accessories were characterized by the unification of design solutions throughout the entire analyzed period. The division of knives is more clear, for which inbound solutions can be distinguished, thus indicating possible imports or local products manufactured in the western style. These include, for example, so-called serving knives with blunt edges.

In the fourteenth century, glassware, which was first imported from the west and south of Europe, was then also produced in Silesia, for example in the Sudetes. Fine objects from this raw material, dated to the first half of the fourteenth century, are relatively rare, thus providing a premise of their high value. In the following centuries, the share of glassware increased, covering the demand for drinking utensils. Archaeological research has shown considerable popularity in the fourteenth and fifteenth century Silesian towns of tall glass beakers, known as flute beakers or beakers of the Czech type. Smaller glasses, for example decorated with melted knobs and spiral threads, were less frequent.

Only thanks to written sources we know more about the presence of craftsmen who produced pewter vessels in the fourteenth century, having their workshops in major Silesian towns. However, the oldest preserved artifacts are dated back to around the mid-fifteenth century, when pewterers became an important supplier of tableware items such as jugs, bowls and plates. In the fourteenth century, proto-stoneware and stoneware vessels also reached Silesia. We may assume they were luxury products. Even in the fifteenth century, these products, which were imported, among others, from Rhineland, Saxony and Lusatia, still had a marginal share among the ceramic vessels used.

The turn of the sixteenth century was a period of accelerated development, which was largely a continuation of the processes initiated in the late Middle Ages. At that time, turning of vessels made of clay and covered with glaze became widespread. Firing of ceramics in a reducing atmosphere was completely discontinued, replaced by highly oxidizing firing, which gave the products colors from yellow to reddish. First of all, far-reaching commercial contacts, correlated with the humanistic ideas of the Renaissance, were of great importance for the transformation of tableware. They found reflection mainly in luxury ceramics and artistic glassware, which were decorated using Renaissance patterns and motifs.

In archaeological materials dated to the seventeenth century, more and more often two-tooth forks occur, which indicate changes in the way of eating meals. Excavations in the area of the town moat in Wrocław provided a large number of brass and pewter spoons, knives with decorative handles as well as two-tooth forks. Basing on decoration analogies, we may assume that some of the items formed sets. In the Modern Era, the demand for pewter vessels also increased significantly, as written and iconographic sources indicate. Thanks to them, we also know that wealthier burghers usually owned a couple of tableware elements made of more precious metals, such as gold and silver. Unfortunately, archaeological excavations conducted in Silesia has not provided any objects of this kind so far.

3. WASHING OF HANDS – ABLUTION VESSELS

The third chapter, which is devoted to utensils related to hand washing, presents in a coherent manner both their specificity and issues associated with their use. These include the elements of a lavabo: aquamaniles and bowls, which – found in the urban context – are undoubtedly elements of table culture. We know only a few medieval bronze bowls and ceramic aquamaniles from Silesia, discovered mainly in Wrocław. The bowls, apart from one example decorated with engravings, are not ornamented, referring to the so-called Hanseatic style artifacts. Aquamaniles, in turn, take the shape of various animals, including fantastic dragons. Due to the level of craftsmanship and precisely defined context, a unique vessel discovered in Wrocław should be mentioned. It depicts a horse with a rider and is dated to the mid-thirteenth century.

In town, aquamaniles can be associated with the adaptation of courtly and church customs. Their use referred to the symbolism of purification, known even from the biblical story about the judgment of Pilate on Jesus. In medieval paintings, the governor of the Roman province of Judaea was depicted during the washing of hands with an aquamania and a bowl. In the literature, there is a view that more impressive vessels of this type were treated by the townspeople as furnishings emphasizing the high social status. Written and archaeological sources indicate that their use was discontinued at the end of the Middle Ages. Unlike aquamanilas, the use of lavabos consisting of a set of bowls was more practical. In the late Middle Ages, advanced washrooms were installed in dining rooms, in which the bowl served as a vessel for collecting water flowing from a wall-mounted tank. A towel was often placed next to such a set. Lavabos and hand towels were mentioned in both late-medieval and early-modern testaments.

4. ORNAMENTATION AND IDEOLOGICAL CONTENT OF SELECTED TABLEWARE ELEMENTS

Chapter four analyses the decorations of individual types of vessels and cutlery in order to draw attention to the fact that some of them served as carriers of ideologi-

cal content. In four subsections, sacred images are discussed, with particular emphasis on the Crucifixion, as well as secular, mythological and fantastic motifs. In the late Middle Ages, decorations on tableware with symbolic meaning were rare. One of the exceptions are the so-called Hanseatic jugs, containing plaques showing crucifixes and occasionally other religious motifs. Their use by townspeople can be associated with domestic devotion, including the sacralization of fluids.

In modern times, the range of tableware containing extensive decorative elements has increased. Due to the Renaissance, secular and mythological scenes began to be depicted on vessels along with still popular religious images. Among others, ludic motifs and ceremonies, such as weddings, can be distinguished. In this context we may assume that some of those items could have served as gifts. An interesting yet rare motif known from only one jug from Brzeg is a depiction of Cronus with little Zeus and Amalthea.

The products on which the discussed motifs were used are primarily ceramic utensils decorated with sprigged applications and cone painting, as well as glasses and goblets covered with enamels and gilding. Among religious motifs, one can even point to some differences between the items that were used by Protestants and Catholics, an example of which are vessels from the episcopal Nysa and the ones from Brzeg and Wrocław, the towns that had been overtaken by the Reformation. On a jug discovered in Opole, which had been produced probably in Brzeg or Wrocław, Crucified Christ assisted by John the Baptist pointing to the Savior was depicted. The scene could have been based on the pattern copied from the Protestant altarpiece made by the workshop of Lucas Cranach for the Church of St. Wolfgang in Schneeberg.

Cutlery decoration details, including knife handles and spoon endings with figurative depictions, were discussed separately. Special attention was paid to medieval knives with bone handles that took the shape of human figures or animals. The majority of handles of this kind from the area of Europe, usually dated to the thirteenth-early fourteenth century, are damaged. In Silesia, ones depicting dogs, a lion, a falcon, an animal with a human head and a human figure, presumably a monk, were discovered. Fully

preserved examples, known e.g. from Będzin, Elbląg and Szczecin indicate that at least some of this type of knives could have functioned as serving cutlery.

Medieval spoons with figurative handles are extremely rare in Silesia. From Wrocław come two wooden objects, one of which was topped with a figure of a dog or a bear and the other one with a schematic face. More frequent human depictions in the form of heads, busts and whole figures can be found on late medieval and early modern metal spoons.

5. TABLEWARE AS AN INDICATOR OF TRADE CONTACTS AND SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION

The results of studies on the style and decorative motifs of the described products were also used in chapter five, for example to locate hypothetical workshops for the production of early modern ceramics decorated with relief applications. The main goal of this chapter, however, is to show a group of artifacts that go beyond the standard of living as a useful source for studying the differentiation of urban communities and trade routes. It should be noted that the concept of standard and luxury has changed with historical development, and glassware can serve as an example of this. Initially, vessels were imported and later, at least since fourteenth century, their share among tableware was quite considerable. Proto-stoneware vessels from the area of Loštice in Moravia, stoneware and pewter Hanseatic jugs were used to analyze these phenomena. The result of the analysis may be the view that the elements of luxury were available not only to the wealthiest burghers, but to a limited extent also appeared in the homes of less wealthy people. The fifteenth-century Falke-Group stoneware can be an example. Exclusive vessels revealed the townsmen's desire to improve their living conditions, and partly indicate borrowings of customs from courtly culture. The same products, often imported from distant regions, discovered in towns, castles and residential premises also point to the ongoing cultural unification and the growing role of far-reaching trade.

6. CHANGES IN CUSTOMS IN TABLE CULTURE

The last chapter is an attempt to summarize and present changes in customs in table culture against the European background, based on the analyzed archaeological material in connection with written and iconographic sources. Selected texts related to table behavior were analyzed. The attention was also paid to social functions of shared meals that went beyond the purely biological sphere. Examples of guild and fraternity rituals, as well as places for common feasts, which included taverns and public baths, were used.

Late medieval and early modern Silesia, located in the area a cultural borderland, is an example of the coupling of the western way of living with local traditions, dating back to the time of the formation of Slavic settlements, which later transformed into regular towns. Progressive unification and occidentalization of the lifestyle left its mark on the table culture, which in archaeological material is traceable in the transformation of tableware, while in written sources in the changeability of morals.