

The King and fashion – Comments on discoveries of cup heel spurs throughout Central Europe, from the second half of the 15th century

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Around the middle of the 15th century a very interesting group of spurs appeared in Europe. The shape of preserved specimens, as well as their decoration, makes them some of the most attractive Gothic creations in the realm of arms and equipment of the medieval knight. Several dozen of these artefacts have reached European museums, in various states of preservation mostly dependent on their provenance. This is because they were found during archaeological excavations, or accidentally during earthworks. Several of them, doubtless the most magnificent ones, were retained in armouries and collections.

These spurs are characterised by relatively long, upturned shanks which terminate in a six- or eight sided rowel, as well as a heel plate which shields the rider's entire heel. The heel plate, in its most extreme, most developed form may have, while shielding the bottom of the rider's heel, caused some difficulty while walking. The differences between the individual specimens mainly concern the construction of the heel plate (usually the design of the strap plate), the length of the shank, and most importantly the decoration. The latter particularly seems to divide the discussed artefacts into those of higher and lower value. It also facilitates the formulation of hypotheses regarding the social status of their wearers, and likewise their influence on the culture and fashion of the late medieval knights.

The most famous of these spurs is a pair preserved together with stirrups, kept at the Waffensammlung in Vienna (Fig. 1,1). They are connected with the person of the Polish king Casimir Jagiellończyk (1427–1492). It is thought that they were a wedding gift for the king from Elisabeth Habsburg (1436/37–1505,

daughter of the Czech king Albrecht II Habsburg), who wed him in 1454. The spurs have etched, openwork heel plates, very slim shanks with a fish scale motif, terminating in a six-sided rowel. There is an inscription on the heel plates, stylised almost to the point of illegibility. It states: POMNY NA MYE MA MYLA WYERNA PANY (REMEMBER ME MY FAIR, FAITHFUL LADY). The monogram "K" is inscribed in the buckles underneath a crown and three lilies. The inscription is mysterious, as it may be either Polish or Czech, and its sense may concern the worship of Mary, or may be a secular declaration of love. These spurs are considered to be pieces of special, ceremonial armour (Żygulski, Jr. 1975, 141, fig. 36; Thomas, 1971, 51–54). Other richly decorated examples are kept in the museum collections of Prague (Koula 1892, 620–624, fig. II, III; Denkstein 1969, 10–14, fig. 5–9), Budapest (Nicolíč 1956, fig. 2, 6), Kraków (Fig. 1,3), Turin (L'Armeria 1977, 83, fig. 8) and London (Laking 1920, 168, fig. 974). In 1991, the total number of richly decorated spurs increased due to several new discoveries made at the castle in Puck, near Gdańsk (Milewska u. a 1997, 55). They may have been owned by Karol Knutson Bonde, king of Sweden who resided at the castle from 1457 to 1460 (Fig. 1,5).

Curious is the fact, that in literature on armour two similar, richly decorated spurs may be found. It may be that it is the same spur, or a separated pair, which differ from the above only by the terminus of the shank – instead of a rowel they possess a strange form of a prick point. These spurs are kept at the armoury of the Kremmünster in upper Austria (Thomas 1963, fig. 11), and the royal armoury of Turin (L'Armeria 1977, fig. 85).

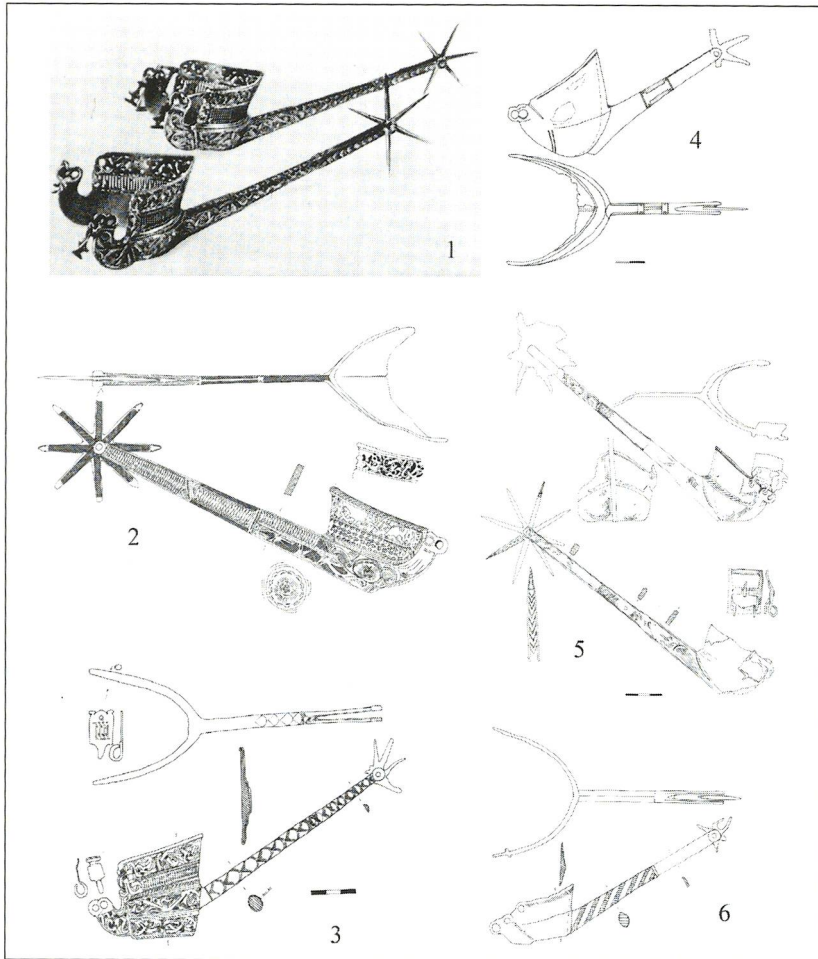


Figure 1. Spurs of an identical construction, though less striking and without the rich decoration comprise the majority of this group of artefacts. They are kept at the Hungarian museums of Budapest (Kalmar 1972, fig. 60a) and Vac (Terenesvary 1984, 167–168, fig. 178). One example was found during the archaeological examination of the village of Saravaly, southwest of Budapest (Holl u. a. 1982, fig. 34; 35). The museum in Split (Vrsalovic 1963, table XI, fig. 38; 39) contains several spurs found in the village of Deverskie, near Skradina. One spur, from the territory of 19th century Germany, and two from Linz (Austria) are published in the monograph by R. Zschille and R. Forrer (Zschille u. a. 1981, Tab. X, 4, 5, 6). They are also to be found in the Stibbert museum in Florence (Il Museo, Cat. No. 202, fig. 192), as well as Brussels (Drugmand 1990, 37, fig. 13). One specimen was found in the archaeological investigation of a German castle in Latvia (Latwijas 1974, fig. 79,3). Polish collections also possess a number of spurs of this type. These include examples

kept in the museums of Legnica (Fig. 1,4), Wrocław, Kraków (Kołodziejewski 1985, fig. 9,1–2), Warsaw, Malbork (Grabowska 1970, 73–74, fot. 2), Grudziądz and Toruń (Fig. 1,6). Several of them, often only partially preserved, were found during the archaeological investigations of Frombork, Gdańsk, Pukarzew, Inowódz (Augustyniak 1992, fig. 81) and Mierzanowice. In total, from European collections, the author is aware of 43 spurs of this type, preserved as a whole or in fragments. It seems significant that the artefacts were found within the bounds of Central Europe, mainly encompassing the former kingdoms of Poland, Czech and Hungary. Although the exact location of their discovery is known only for some, the possibility cannot be excluded that they are kept near the place where they were found.

Unfortunately none of the mentioned spurs are accurately dated, except for the pair connected with Casimir Jagiellończyk (1454), and to a lesser degree the ones found at Puck (second half of the 15th century) and Inowódz (likely the second half of the 15th century). The chronologies assigned to them in literature is based on iconography and typology. Wendelin Boeheim tried to demonstrate the usage of these spurs, and the type of armour they accessorised, in the “Handbuch der Waffenkunde” (Boeheim, 1890, fig. 163) in an illustration portraying the armour of Archduke Maximilian (emperor-to-be) made in Nuremberg *circa* 1475. It is true, though, that we cannot be sure whether the spurs actually belong to this armour, or the curator of the Viennese collection, impressed by the spurs attributed to Casimir Jagiellończyk, has created a compilation. We do know, however, of several original iconographic representations in which we can recognise the pertinent type of spur. The earliest, and the most controversial of documented (clear) iconographic examples is in the scene portraying the battle with the Tatars and the death of Henryk Pobożny (Henryk the Pious) from a wing of the triptych of the Legend of St. Jadwiga made by the Master of the Triptych from Wielowieś (Silesia), dated 1430–1440. One of the methods of mounting of this type of spur is clearly visible in the representation of St. George battling the dragon in a copper etching by the Master of Passions from Nuremberg, dated *circa* 1450.

The next illustration is also of St. George battling the dragon, from the cycle of the life of St. George, from a wing of the altar at Nowy Sącz, dated 1452.

The next, maybe the most interesting example, is also of St. George battling the dragon from the painting at Słowita, near Złoczów, currently resident at the Museum of Ukrainian Art in Lwów, which was painted by a Polish panel painter *circa* 1453 (Fig. 2b). It is seen by historians as an example of the rapid acceptance of western fashion in the region of Little Poland (Gadomski 1981, 119). It is based on a copper etching by the Master of Playing Cards (Nuremberg region) dated *circa* 1440/50 (Fig. 2a). Interesting to us, though, is the difference of the representation of the spurs. The painter from Little Poland changed their shape in relation to the German original, giving them the appearance, though not ideal, of the spurs in question.

Spurs comprise a part of the complete plate armour represented on the late Gothic sandstone grave cover of Jan from Grabów, of the Sulima coat of arms (dec. 1454), located in the parish church of Koło (Great Poland).

The next two iconographic examples are the most popular ones as portrayed in Polish literature on armour. The first presents St. George battling the dragon from the triptych of the Coronation of the Madonna from Wieluń. It is dated 1450–1460 (Fig. 3). The next – really the next several examples – come from the Triptych of the Holy Trinity (the Wawel Cathedral in Kraków), founded in 1467. The reverse sides of the wings portray the “Conversion of St. Paul”, “St. George Battling the Dragon”, “St. Eustace Hunting”, and “St. Secundus Crossing the Pad”. This is a whole gamut of objects of interest by the creator of the Triptych, Master of Choirs, in different perspectives, and from different sides.

From the Czech kingdom, from the village of Stráž near Nežárkou (near Jindřichův Hradec), we know of another example, seen on the gravestone of Jindřich of Stráže. On the gravestone, made of red marble and located at the church of St. Peter and St. Paul, dated to 1466, there is a representation of a knight in full armour with attached spurs, whose shanks are upturned, and the heel plates are likely bowl-shaped (Umělecké 1980, 442).

Around 1470 the Triptych of the Sending of the Angels in Mikuszowice (Little Poland) was



Figure 2a.

created. One of the quarters represents the conversion of the treasurer of the queen of Kandaka and the treasurer's peon dragging his wagon, by St. Philip, mounted and wearing cup heel spurs.

The newest of the presented examples is a portrait of a field captain (Feldhauptmann) from the Tournament Book of Ludwig von Eyb the

Figure 2b.





Figure 3.

younger, dated to 1519 and kept at the City Library of Munich (Reitzenstein 1966, fig. 4).

The last of the representations known to me, in which a cup-heeled spur with an upturned shank may be seen is a representation of St. George battling the dragon in an icon from the Orthodox church of St. Joachim and St. Anna in Stanila (Ukrainian 1976, fig. XVIII). It is the most problematic, however, due to the chronology. While the authors of the publication date it to the 14th century, its composition and artistic presentation show it to be from the 16th century.

At the end of the examination of iconographic sources, it is worth mentioning that, firstly, though their time of creation stretches from 1430 till the 16th century, a great majority comes from the middle to the seventies of the 15th century. Secondly, the spurs are worn by saints, particularly by St. George (the patron saint of knighthood), lords and wealthy knights, but also, though less often, by poorer knights (maybe pages as in the Triptych of the Holy Trinity – The Conversion of St. Paul) and even serfs (the Triptych of the Sending of the Angels). Thirdly, not always are the persons wearing the spurs also presented in full plate armour. And lastly, in many of the representations the painters have decorated the spurs in gold or yellow, showing the decorative aspect of this item.

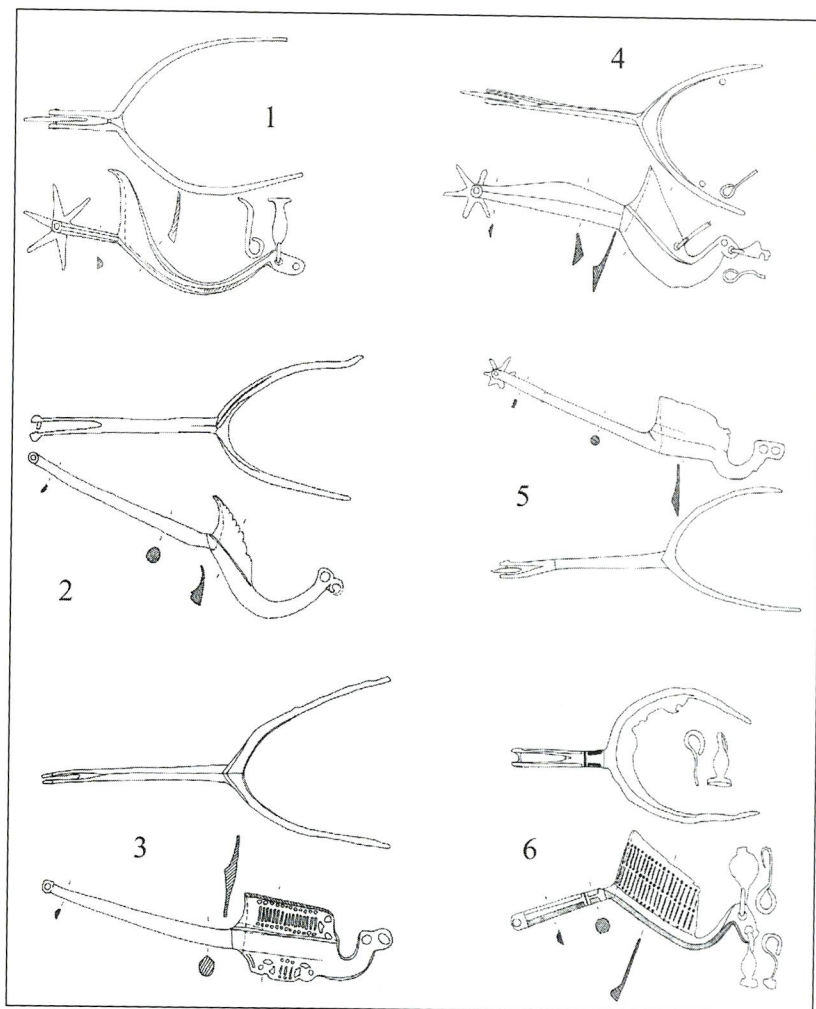
It is also interesting that the presented iconography has mostly been created in the Kingdom of Poland (Little Poland, Great Poland, the Wieluń Territory). Notice the convergence with the findings of the original artefacts, which also may be connected with the territory of Central Europe.

The phenomenon of the enlargement of the back part of the heel plate can be seen earlier, at least from the middle of the 14th century. Was the intent to protect a larger part of the rider's heel, or was it to strengthen the construction, due to the elongation of the shank and enlargement of the rowel, or was it done in order to increase the decorative quality of the object? It is difficult to give an unequivocal answer. Several examples from Poland which illustrate the occurring changes are portrayed in Fig. 4 (Toruń – 1, Warszawa – 2, 5, Sieradz – 3, Malbork – 4, Kraków – 6). Of course we may not treat the presented individual examples as an evolving sequence, since some may have been used concurrently. It seems, though, that parallel to the development and popularisation of armour, spur-makers from different cultural and production centres also tried to adjust their products to the current requirements of armour. The type of spur in question, with a full heel plate enclosing and protecting most, or all of the rider's heel, whose upper portion may have matched the lower end of the greave may have been a final form, fulfilling all requirements. It is most likely, though, that the spur of interest was most often used as an accessory of an incomplete suit of plate armour. As an example we may take the representation of St. George from Wieluń, who has, in addition to chain-mail armour, greaves and spurs with a full heel. It is also possible that this type of spur, used as a foot (heel) protector by less wealthy knights, was also a substitute, both protective and symbolic, for a full suit of plate armour, along with greaves, elbow protectors and epaulets.

Some of them, though, richly decorated like the spurs belonging to Casimir Jagiellończyk described above, were most likely of a special, ceremonial character, which was most significant to the persons exchanging the gift. They were used occasionally, and due to the persons wearing them and the ceremonies of their presentation they had to influence the feudal culture of the times.

After analysing the inscriptions, initials and the type and method of decoration, many experts of armour, taking into account specimens found in the Czech area and the spurs belonging to Casimir Jagiellończyk, believe that all of the most decorative cup heel spurs are creations of Prague armourers of the middle of the 15th century (Nickel 1969, 144–146; Denkstein 1969, 187). Of course this is debatable, since many examples of similar construction – but decorated differently – were found. The techniques used indicated the possibility that many workshops may have created them, not only Czech ones. As to the Prague production centre, though, is it really possible that it had such great influence on knightly fashion that it reached almost one third of Europe and was mirrored in works of art? Albeit possible, it is most likely that it started a trend, and a cultural phenomenon, which was a fashion for richly decorated, interestingly shaped spurs.

Looking at all of the elements of the said phenomenon (the appearance of this type of spur in Central Europe in the middle of the 15th century, the dating of the iconography above a majority of which was made in the years 1450–1470, and the places where the iconography were created) a certain hypothesis becomes tempting. This is, that the spurs attributed to Casimir Jagiellończyk, presented to him during his wedding in Kraków in 1454, were the reason these spurs became popular in the area directly connected with the king (the Kingdom of Poland), as well as indirectly (Gdańsk Pomerania, Warmia [related to the war against the Teutonic knights], the Czech Kingdom, and the Kingdom of Hungary). This may have been a sign of imitation, as well as an attempt to match a person standing on the highest rung of the knightly and courtly ladder



(not only in Poland). This would be an interesting example of the effect of a historical personality on his current knightly fashion.

Lastly, the author would like to state that the above hypothesis is formulated on the basis of source materials available in literature on the subject and a query in Polish museum collections, and may change with the appearance of new finds and publications.

Figure 4.

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