

# Concealed Leather and Fur Finds from Kempten/Allgäu (Germany)

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*Kempten (Allgäu/D); Postmedieval; shoes; clothing; craft; Bauforschung*

## Introduction: The find situation in the 'Mühlberg-Ensemble' in Kempten

In the centre of the former Reichsstadt Kempten (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 the parish community of St. Mang church, which has been its owner for 500 years, started to renovate the ensemble. In the cellar, the Stadtarchäologie Kempten (Department of Urban Archaeology) conducted a conventional excavation and at the same time the buildings were surveyed architecturally. During reconstruction works the Stadtarchäologie screened ceiling fillings by sifting, originally searching for lost coins and other small objects which had fallen through gaps in the floor covering. In nearly all rooms of the Mühlberg-Ensemble houses the space between the ceiling and the floor was filled, mostly with straw and chaff, bricks or rubble. It was very surprising to recognise, that in between the ceilings older floor layers and plenty of everyday objects from the late medieval period up to about 1920 were enclosed: one of the youngest objects is a grenade from World War I – which was luckily without explosives.

The oldest layer was discovered in the house Mühlberg No. 8. According to the enclosed objects it dates from about 1470 to 1550 AD. A second, slightly younger complex was found in the space between the walls of the houses No. 8 and No. 10, it contained finds from the second half of the 16th century and later. One speciality of both assemblages is the excellent

conservation even of late medieval finds: all objects look as if they have been left lying for only five years on the loft – but in fact they have been there for 500 years. Seams are completely intact, street mud is still sticking on shoes and textiles show the rest of pigmentation (fig. 1). Thus, since autumn 2000, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) has granted a common research project of the Stadtarchäologie Kempten (Dr. G. Weber), the Chair of Medieval History, University of Constance (Prof. Dr. H. Maurer) and the Chair of Medieval and Post-Medieval Archaeology, University of Bamberg (Prof. Dr. I. Ericsson) in order to inquire into these unique finds (first results published: Atzbach 2001; Kata 2002).



*Fig. 1: A new source group: Although the finds from Kempten layed for about 500 years in ceilings and behind walls, the children shoes, wooden spindles and balls are nearly uninjured (photographers: R. Mayrock and B. Kata).*

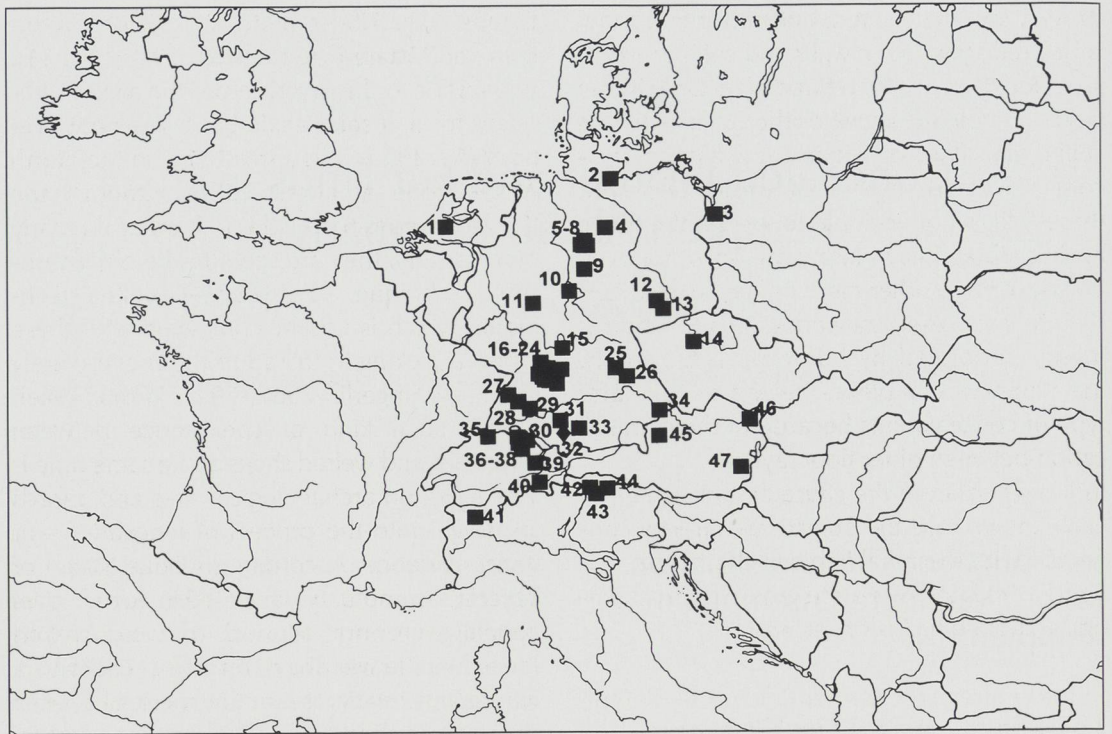


Fig. 2: Finds concealed in buildings – without British Islands (map designed by K. Westermann/ F. Feuerhahn).

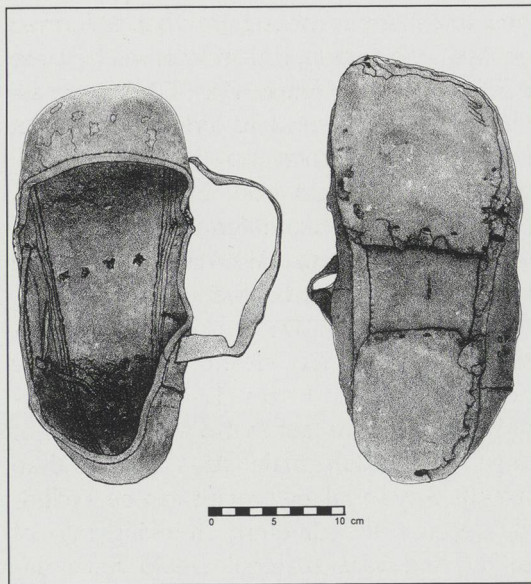


Fig. 3: Low cut ankle shoe with a buckle type A7 (inv. no. 15696).



Fig. 4: Ankle boot with wrapover front type A3 (inv. no. 16287).

### The phenomenon of finds concealed in buildings

Since 1914, finds concealed in buildings have been discovered throughout the whole of Central Europe (fig. 2), but no monographic oversight has been published yet. Such complexes are similar to the so-called mass finds (Janssen 1988) as far as amount and range of objects is concerned. There are different reasons for putting objects into walls or ceilings: some complexes appear to be planned as depots, i.e. valuable or appreciated things were meant to be hidden for a while, but they simply sunk into oblivion (Fingerlin 2001; Walcher von Moltheim 1914). Also magical practices could be involved: June Swann is collecting information especially on concealed shoes. They seem to concentrate on the British Isles, where it was usual to immure shoes or other 'spiritual middens' in order to protect the house and its inhabitants against witchcraft (Swann 1996; Easton 1998). On the Continent, suspicious rituals might play a role in a few cases as well: Petra Schad is recording intentionally immured animals (fig. 2, No.16, 19–23).

Nevertheless, most of the concealed complexes were filled in the ceilings for constructive purposes. Firstly, it is necessary to isolate heated rooms for retaining the warmth. The

'*Stube*', the only heated, but smoke free room is isolated by wooden walls and ceilings which are filled mostly with refined clay. Only in the case of rebuilding activities the space between ceiling and floor or within the walls is a welcome place to dispose of waste. Secondly, these fillings are essential to weight the floors against vibrations, in historical times stones or bricks, but also other more or less heavy material has been used, nowadays this function is mostly performed by burnt sand. Obviously, the Kempten complexes belong to the latter type of concealments because of their stratification between older floor layers.

Independent from the cause of concealing, in each known case the objects are directly connected with the inhabitants of the house. Evidently, this is a new source group for archaeology and building history as well.

## The range of finds in Kempten

In the oldest layer of the 'Mühlberg-Ensemble' a wide range of objects was enclosed. Beside 'common' archaeological finds, such as ceramics, iron and remarkably sparse amounts of glass, it contained 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.

### Shoes

About 60% of the leather finds are shoes or parts of them. All of the shoes were badly worn out or show cutting marks, which is typical for the Kempten complex. Moreover, there is a lot of cobbler's waste in this assemblage. The Kempten assemblage contains eleven shoe types defined by their fastening method in different quantities (graph 1).

The regional distribution of shoe types displays how the inhabitants shared in European fashion: The most frequent shoe type is the low cut ankle shoe with a buckle (A7, fig. 3); this one is often shown on Renaissance style naturalistic paintings and engravings as typical mercenary footwear (e.g. Grimm 1994, 183). Archaeological and museal records reveal that this type was fashionable in the late 15th and early 16th century throughout the whole of

Europe (e.g. Fingerlin 2001, 793 or Groenman-van Waateringe/Krauwel 1987, Typ 11). In contrast to this stylish type, the second frequent form, a solid ankle boot with wrapover front (A3; fig. 4) was spread only in the North Alpine zone at about 1500. Although the Kempten shoes follow the fashion of the early 16th century, they are sewn in the older turnshoe technique. The younger welted technique, which is usually connected with these types, is lacking in the adult shoes completely (fig. 5, cf. Fingerlin 2001, 792; Volken/Volken 1996). Such kind of coexistence between turnshoes and welted shoes at the same time is a rare fact on archaeological sites and affords an insight into the process of innovation – or social evidence. According to Duke Max. I of Bavaria's sumptuary law (1626) lower class people were not allowed to wear welted shoes, i.e. the wearing of turnshoes could be a sign of lower social status. The thesis of a lower class group using these shoes is supported by the wear marks on soles and uppers; they show that many of the last users had deformed feet (detailed pedological analysis will be done at Tomas-Bata-University, Zlín CZ). The measurement of shoe sizes tells further facts about this specific population (graph 2).

In contrast to series from Bergen, London, Constance or Lübeck, in Kempten the share of infant shoes (up to size 35) is remarkably large (Larsen 1992, fig. 75; Grew/de Neergard 1988, 39; Schnack 1994, 37; van den Berg/Groenman-van Waateringe 1992, 361). Especially the share of smallest sizes (17–27) is quite astonishing as is the fact that the upper end of range lacks adult male sizes (bigger than size 40). Any shrinking process can be excluded, because the different shrinking rate of leather and yarn material would have destroyed the seams. Evidently, the Kempten shoes were mainly worn by women and children.

### Fur clothing

Parts of clothing are the second largest group of objects. Most of them were made of alum tanned sheep fur. On conventional archaeological sites fur is extremely seldom preserved. Even under the good conditions of the 'Mühlberg-Ensemble', the hair was almost completely eaten by moths – only roots are still visible under a microscope.

A large percentage of fur objects can be identified as headgears: there are few fragments of berets, which belonged to the decent dress of men and women in the 16th century. It might cause stir that about 70 parts of fur hoods were recognized. Fragments of hoods are known from Northern Europe, according to pictorial and written sources they were fashionable in the 14th and early 15th century. Later they were only worn by several branches: miners and peasants kept on wearing them as a protection against dirt and weather. Moreover they belonged to the traditional mourning or nunnery dress (Nockert 1997; Zander-Seidel 1990, 233; 271).

In the cold winters of the Allgäu region mittens and gloves are an essential part of the dress, so

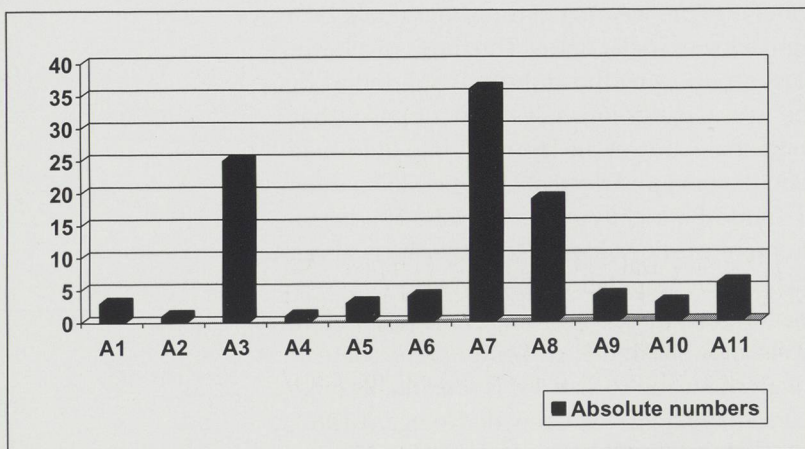
it is not surprising to find 21 fragments among the 'Mühlberg' objects. Like the shoes, many of them have small sizes – obviously these were also worn by women and children.

The sewing techniques of clothing parts and shoes are different, although for both flax yarn was used: the most important seams of shoes (main seam sole, rand, upper) 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 parts of clothing were sewn together with fine whip stitched butted or closed seams (Goubitz 1984). Especially the hoods were sewn out of up to 50 small fur patches, some of them only as small as a finger nail. Moreover, this patchwork is lined or quilted in two to eight layers. The seams, which are visible on the fur clothes, correspond to the types which are used by a tailor for textiles (Crowfoot/Pritchard/Stani-land 1992), although the fur material itself is more similar to leather. Consequently, the Kempten find displays that furrier's techniques are quite distinct from shoemaker's ones.

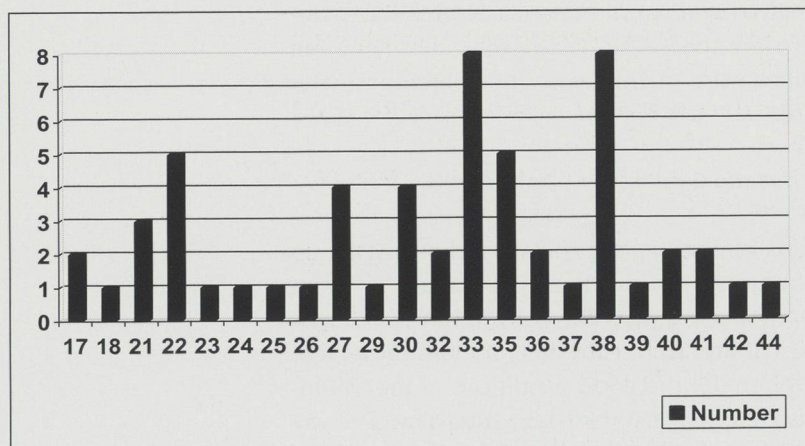
### Who concealed the objects?

There are only few records about the inhabitants of the 'Mühlberg-Ensemble', because the largest part of medieval and post-medieval sources was burnt in the Thirty-Years-War: until 1501 a community of pious women was housed in No. 12, since then the site has been in ecclesiastical ownership. The house No. 10 has been used as a sexton's office or a preacher's accommodation. In the 17th century the sexton was explicitly allowed to 'work furtherly as a cobbler' (Kata 2002).

The material itself reveals additional information: on the one hand the shoes and the gloves could only be worn by women and children. The fragments of hoods might be interpreted as parts of a nunnery dress. So the finds could be the remainders of those pious women who lived there as beguines. For such convents it was quite usual to earn their living by doing craftsmen's work or taking care of children (Fößel/Hettinger 2000). In 1501 this convent managed to convert into a regular Franciscanian nunnery. The women moved and changed into a new housing, but the right of cobbling stayed back with their former house and was practised by the sexton further on. On the oth-



Graph 1: Shoe types according to fastening method. A1 laced leather pattern; A2 slip-on mule; A3 ankle boot with wrapover front; A4 ankle boot with drawstring; A5 ankle shoe with frontal toggle; A6 ankle shoe with strap; A7 low cut ankle shoe with buckle; A8 front laced ankle shoe; A9 front sewn up laced ankle shoe; A10 side laced poulaine; A11 side hooked boot.



Graph 2: Range of shoe lengths in French size.

er hand, the 'Mühlberg-Ensemble' contained relicts of several crafts (cobblery, tailory, weavery, turnery, chancellery etc.), which were working in these houses – and it is impossible to imagine the beguines to 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 Kempten – are a new source type for organic and other everyday objects. The archaeological and 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 could ever provide.

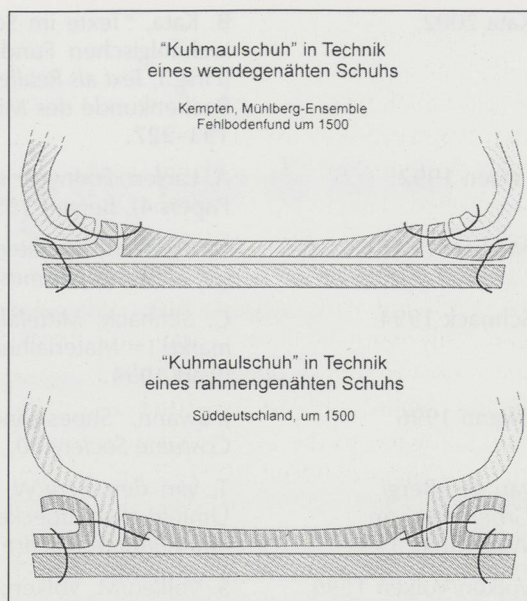


Fig. 5: Two different ways of construction: turnshoe (top) and welted shoe (bottom).

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