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Austria

Bras in the 15th Century? A Preliminary Report

In the course of extensive reconstruction, starting July 2008, at the Castle Lengberg (Municipality Nikolsdorf, East Tyrol, Austria) archaeological investigations of several parts of the building were carried out under the direction of Harald Stadler (Institute of Archaeologies, University of Innsbruck). During the research a filled vault spandrel was detected in the south wing of the castle in room 2.07 on the 2nd floor. The backfill was taken out by workers of a local construction company and stored for subsequent sieving which took place in summer 2009. The fill consisted of dry material in different layers, among them organic material such as twigs and straw, but also worked wood, leather (mainly shoes) and textiles. The building history, according to notes in the itinerary of Paolo Santonino 1485 A.D., as well as investigations on construction techniques performed by Martin Mittermaier and Walter Hauser (Landeskonservatorat Tirol) and the archaeological feature heavily suggest a dating of the finds to the 15th century. It may be assumed that the vault spandrel was filled with waste during the addition of the 2nd storey in order to level the floor.

The textile finds consist of some hundred fragments as well as of few almost completely preserved pieces. Amid them were several nearly complete linen bras and fragments of corselettes, some rather coarsely made others more elaborately decorated with plaited borders and sprang worked parts. One of the bras even has a rather modern look. As there seems to be no clear evidence on the existence of bras in the 15th century other explanations of them being among the finds were sought for. But none of them proved completely satisfying. On the contrary – a closer examination of the pieces in question showed that no textile techniques were used in their construction that would not fit to the time period. All applied techniques were common during the 15th century and none of them developed later. Besides - all other textiles from this find, like fragments of dresses, shirts, trousers, laces etc., fit well to the 15th century (except for a few very small pieces that could easily have fallen through gaps in the wooden floor). In addition, the shoes being found together with the textiles in the same layer are all of types in fashion from the end of the 14th to the first half of the 15th century.

So far no radiocarbon dating has been carried out on the textiles that would prove or disprove the age of the objects as taking samples would cause irreversible damage however slight. Instead all other options of investigation, like searching for comparable finds, will be applied first.

This lecture wants to provide first information on the new finds from Castle Lengberg and discuss the existence of lingerie in the (Late) Middle Ages.

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