

MEDIEVAL LEATHER FOOTWEAR FROM TALLINN

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Abstract

Finds of footwear in the excavations in Town Hall Square and Vene, Vaimu, Sauna and Roosikrantsi streets reflect the medieval footwear fashion of Tallinn as well as of the whole of northern and Central Europe. Strap shoes, low laced shoes and high laced shoes might be considered as fashion footwear. The respective chronologies of northern Europe demonstrate the existence of thong, strap and low laced shoes and high laced shoes through many centuries, but the peaks of use – the period of the fashion – of these types do not exceed 70 to 80 years. Since Tallinn belonged to the Hanseatic League, the cultural phenomena occurring here were probably the same in Central and northern Europe.

Key words: footwear, shoes, Tallinn, Medieval.

The large number of finds from urban excavations and the possibilities for different interpretations of written sources have induced researchers to use archaeological finds to explain social and cultural phenomena. Thanks to the discussion in archaeological theory about a single find group as a possible reflection of society, which enables us to seek answers to a constantly widening variety of questions, the rather illustrative role of leather finds in excavation reports has begun to change towards exhaustive analysis. In earlier excavation reports, most attention was paid to construction remains and the analysis of pottery, the first expressing some structural development, the other supporting it chronologically. The Dutch archaeologist Groeneman-van Waateringe stresses three criteria which make the typochronology of footwear vital for archaeology. First, footwear is the only category of clothing of which the development is known starting from the Neolithic period. Second, since footwear is a part of clothing, it has a direct connection with human culture, from the aspect of fashion. One can express oneself through clothing, and distinguish oneself from others, to demonstrate one's belonging to a group, or to single oneself out individually. Third, footwear provides information about the health of individuals (Goubitz, Driel-Murray, Groeneman-van Waateringe 2001: 393). During the past two decades, rich find material has been recovered from archaeological excavations in Tallinn. In several sites, quantities of leather artefacts and fragments of them have been discovered, thanks to the good preserving qualities of the cultural layer. Investigations of archaeological leather have been rather modest up to now. In local archaeological literature, only a couple of universal articles have been published about leather

finds from Tartu and Tallinn (Valk-Falk 1984, 1985), but also a more thorough analysis of leather footwear from the excavations in Pärnu in 1990 (Rommot 1990). In recent years, a review has been published of the medieval leather footwear found in the excavation of Sauna Street 10, Tallinn (Sarv 2000), and an analysis of the leather finds from Roosikrantsi Street, Tallinn, written by A. Kurbatov, an archaeologist from St. Petersburg, is going to be published.

The present article sets out to give a survey of the footwear of medieval townsmen, on the basis of footwear found in various archaeological excavations in Tallinn.

Material

The leather footwear discussed in the article comes from four sites inside the medieval town wall: Town Hall Square, Sauna Street, Vaimu Street, Vene Street, and Roosikrantsi Street in a medieval suburb outside the town wall (Fig. 1).

Single examples of footwear have also been found at some other sites in Tallinn, but these five excavations were selected for their larger area and the better documentation of the finds. Besides, the material from Town Hall Square and Vene Street deserves special attention, since the location has been suggested as the general residence of shoemakers and the footwear trade (Kapinski 1995: 23). The excavations in Sauna Street were the most extensive, a whole dwelling complex was discovered together with outbuildings and fences. From these excavations, the largest and most interesting col-



Fig. 1. Location plan of the excavation areas

1. Town Hall Square
Excavations: 1952–1953, 510 sq. m
Leather finds: 331 pieces of footwear
2. Viru 1/Vene 2 and 4
Excavations: 1996–1997, 20 sq. m
Leather finds: 49 pieces of footwear
3. Roosikrantsi St. 9 and 11
Excavations: 1996, 2,294 sq. m
Leather finds: 49 pieces of footwear
4. Sauna St. 8 and 10
Excavations: 1998–1999, 650 sq. m
Leather finds: of nearly 10,000 pieces of leather, 5,638 came from footwear
5. Vaimu 2/Pikk 47
Excavations: 2001, 68 sq. m
Leather finds: 168 pieces of footwear

lection of leather finds was recovered, 59.6 % of which is fragments of footwear. Owing to its diversity, this collection forms the basis of the typology of medieval footwear of Tallinn. The material from Roosikrantsi Street is especially interesting for being found in a suburb, thus providing comparative material for the finds from within the town wall.

Terminology

Among the parts of archaeological leather footwear, soles and uppers prevailed. Whole shoes were few, and no pairs of shoes were found. Other smaller details of footwear were also numerous: connecting pieces of uppers, edgings, heel-stiffeners, seam margins of soles, fastening parts and lace-hole reinforcements.

In the article, the terms “shoe”, “boot” and “soft peasant shoes” are used to specify footwear more accurately. Shoes are footwear with soles and uppers cut separately from a piece of leather. Shoes are either with or without fastenings. Shoes can be divided into three categories by the length of the leg: low, with the leg ending at the ankle; medium-high, the leg ending above/on the ankle; high, the leg reaching at least halfway up the fibula. A boot is footwear without fastening, with a separately cut upper, leg and sole, and with the leg covering the fibula. A soft peasant shoe is slipper-like footwear made of a single piece of leather, fastened with a cord or thong(s) running through slits cut in the edges of the piece. Considering the above, archaeological leather footwear can be divided into the following types: thong shoes, strap shoes, laced shoes, pumps, laced boots and soft peasant shoes.

Medieval footwear in Tallinn

Thong shoes are low, medium or high shoes, fastened with leather straps over pairs of slits in the front and rear parts of the shoe. By the length of the leg and the type of fastening, thong shoes are divided into several groups.

1. Low shoes fastened with one leather strap: footwear with the upper consisting of a single piece of leather, or sometimes also having one or two connecting pieces (Fig. 2: 1). Characteristic were the pairs of slits, up to six in number, immediately below the upper edge, for the fastening straps. This type had two versions: a) thong shoes with a V-shaped incision on the instep; b) thong shoes cut very low on the sides, and the uppers rising sharply from the middle of the side towards the toe. The seams on the top edges of the uppers of both suggest an edging of a leather strap, or per-

haps a fastening of the lining. Numerous finds of edging straps seem to support the first. 2. Medium-high shoes fastened with a single leather strap (Fig. 2: 1.1). Besides the height, this type is discernible by the upper consisting of two parts, the toe and the heel cut together, and a separate connecting piece for the (inner) side. An exceptional specimen of this type (AI 6332: 122) was found at Sauna Street: its toe and heel parts are cut separately. The two pairs of slits for a leather strap were usually located at the ankle and by the lower edge of the upper. An important characteristic is the Y-shaped incision on the instep. 3. High shoe fastened with a single leather strap. This is distinguished from the thong shoe fastened with a single strap only by the length of the leg and the fact that the top edge of the upper lacked traces of sewing. The rest of the technical details are the same. Uppers with a Y-shape incision on the instep prevailed.

By the length of leg and the mode of fastening (4) (medium-)high shoes fastened with two leather straps and (5) high thong shoes fastened with three leather straps could also be distinguished (Fig. 2: 1.2 - 1.2.1).

The thong shoes found in Tallinn were simple in their construction, and relatively modest. Decoration on footwear was observed only on a couple of low shoes from Sauna Street. The toe part of the upper of one

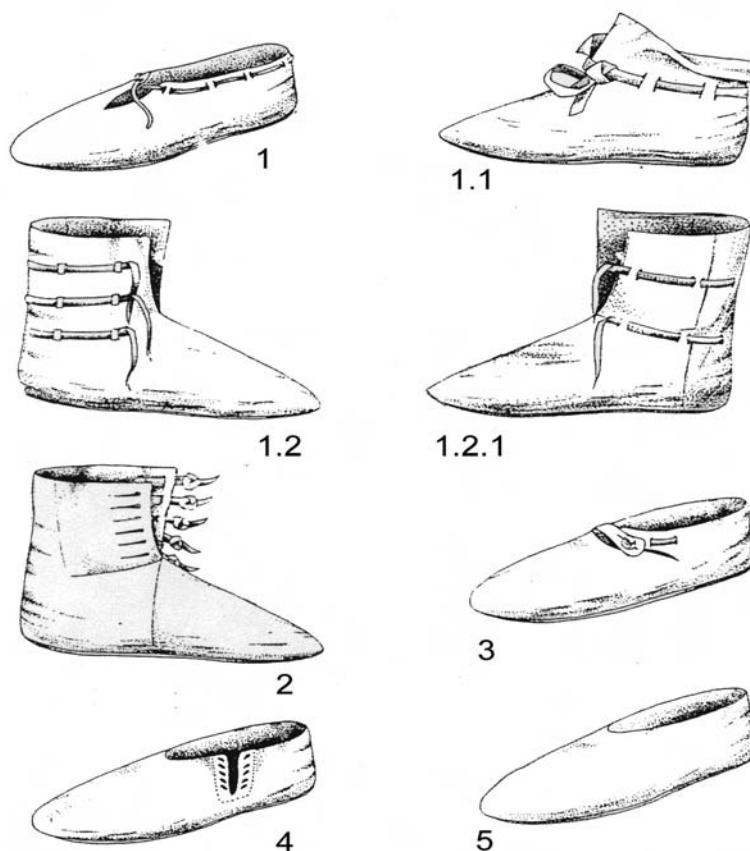


Fig. 2. Some examples of shoes from Tallinn. (Drawn by Sofia Pantelejeva)

thong shoe (AI 6332: 511) was decorated with three oval incisions, made in an openwork technique, with a leaf-shaped middle part. Two of the uppers found (AI 6332: 181, 263) had incisions in the shape of a willow leaf in the toe part, evidently meant as decoration. The irregular perforation on the toe part of one upper (AI 6332: 208) might also be a decoration.

The parts of strap shoes found (Fig. 2: 3) belonged to the low and light type, fastened with two straps cut together with the upper. On the uppers found, two different fastening constructions could be observed: one type had the straps cut together with the heel part, the other's strap on the inner side of the footwear was cut together with the connecting piece. Two different modes were also used for fastening strap shoes. The most common was a fastening where the straps were connected by a thong pulled through the holes at the ends of the straps and tied. Among the strap shoes found in Town Hall Square, a fastening where the straps were held together by a knotted thong, which was fastened to the middle of the instep, prevailed. Some of the uppers had heel-stiffeners, or seam traces suggesting such details. The heel-stiffeners found in Sauna Street were either trapezoid or triangular. Among the archaeological finds in Tallinn, there is an upper of a strap shoe (AI 6332: 49), probably dating from a later period, the heel part of

which consisted of two parts sewn together in the middle of the heel. Of the 38 fragments of strap shoes, only one part of a child's footwear (AI 6332: 407) was decorated. The main decorative element was a leaf-shaped slit reaching almost to the toe of the shoe, with a piece of leather in the middle connected to the rest of the upper by narrow radial straps.

The low laced shoe (Fig. 2: 4) used in medieval Tallinn was low footwear, its upper consisting of one or two parts. The fastening was a narrow U-shaped incision at the side, with two pairs of holes at each side for the leather thong fastening. Seam traces at the top edge of some uppers found at Sauna Street suggest edging or lining. Six fragments found at Sauna Street have a narrow V-shaped incision on the instep. The U-shaped lace-hole reinforcement and the triangular heel-stiffener belonged also to laced shoes as complementary details.

One upper of a laced shoe (AI 6332: 16) found at Sauna Street had two slits on the instep, cut towards the toe. It was not necessarily decoration, it might also have been deliberate damage to the shoe. From the excavation at Town Hall Square, a fragment of a laced shoe came to light with an incision on the toe in the shape of an oak leaf.

The high laced shoe (Fig. 2: 2) was footwear with the leg up to 23 centimetres high and the upper consisting of two or three parts. Toggle-holes were cut in the outer edge of the leg, and on the opposite side toggles were fastened on thongs of a length of about three centimetres. The boot was fastened with the toggles pulled through the toggle-holes. Among the finds from Sauna Street, three varieties of high laced shoes could be distinguished, differing from each other by the number of parts. A) Two-part uppers: the toe part and leg were cut together, and the fastening with the knotted straps separately. Trapezoid and triangular heel-stiffeners occurred as complementary details. B) Three-part uppers: the toe and a part of the leg were cut together, the upper part of the leg and the fastening with the straps were separate. For the heel-stiffener, a very wide triangular piece of leather was used. C) Three-part uppers: toe, leg and fastening parts were all cut separately. Reinforcing parts in the shape of a high triangle or a high lozenge also belonged to the heel part of the upper. Among the finds from Sauna Street there was a piece of a leg, which, based on the seam traces, came from a laced boot with the two-part upper (leg and toe) cut separately. Among the finds is footwear decorated in an openwork technique. One of the best-preserved legs of a child's/woman's laced boot (AI 6332: 165) is decorated over its whole length with a belt in a T-shaped pattern, consisting of three rows of four-mil-

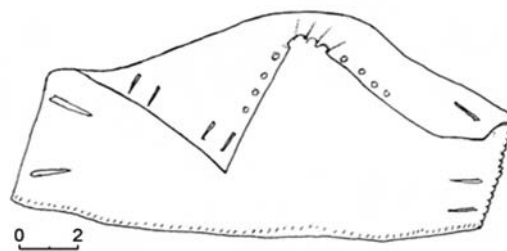


Fig. 3. Part of the back of a soft peasant shoe, Sauna St. 10 (AI 6332:370). (Drawn by Krista Sarv)

limetre crosses on a 20-millimetre-wide belt, incised with a stamp and lined on each side with two-millimetre-long lozenge indentations. At the ankle, the same pattern forms a circle with a diameter of 15 millimetres, with a cross consisting of smaller crosses incised in the middle. The same pattern, in a triangular design, also covers the toe part of the upper.

Among the finds from Town Hall Square, there is a toe part of a high laced shoe (AI 4061: 4995) with decoration applied in the same technique. The decoration consists of three stylised blossoms in small holes, located in a triangle at the end of the toe part of the upper. Another decorated high laced boot from Town Hall Square had a toe of a sandal shape: on each side of the toe a jagged slit had been cut, and between them is a leather strip, a couple of centimetres wide, tapering towards the toe, with very jagged sides. At Roosikrantsi Street two very elegant legs of boots (AI 6109: II/473, II/718) were found, with an indented top edge above two horizontal rows of small holes.

The boot was footwear without a fastening, with a leg probably slightly higher than that of a high laced shoe. The upper presumably consisted of separately cut toe and leg parts.

Among the archaeological finds from Tallinn, there are some plain uppers of a single piece of leather which might belong to a slipper-like pump (Fig. 2: 5). This is a very plain slip-on shoe. One piece of such an upper, found at Sauna Street, bore sewing traces, suggesting a triangular heel-stiffener.

The last type of footwear is soft peasant shoes, made of a rectangular piece of leather with holes or slits at the edges for the fastening laces. In the excavations discussed there are few of these (15 in total). Of the nine peasant shoe fragments found at Sauna Street, eight were children's footwear, and only one poorly preserved specimen belonged to an adult. The children's soft peasant shoes were usually made of two parts: the heel and toe were cut separately. Two of the shoes of this type had the back part joining in the middle of the heel. Based on the relatively large holes, the heel was

sewn with a leather thong and the front and back parts with thread or with bass (Fig. 3).

The fastenings of soft peasant shoes were different: four of them had slits in the sides for a coarser leather thong or a bass band; three had smaller holes in the sides, evidently for a finer leather thong. The soft peasant shoes of adults, found at Tallinn, were all similar, made of thicker leather and fastened by a leather thong running through holes in the edges.

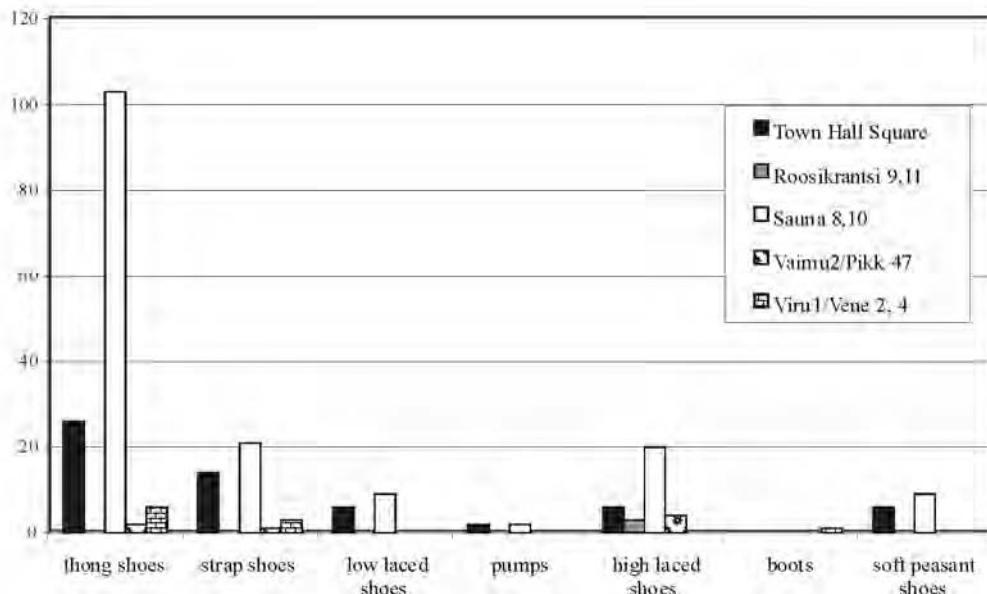
Dating

The context of the footwear found at Town Hall Square, and Vene, Vaimu, Sauna and Roosikrantsi street excavations covers a wide time scale from the 13th to the 15th centuries. Most of the footwear from Vene Street came from the cultural layer of the 13th and 14th centuries (Jaanits, Smirnov 1998). Based on radiocarbon dating of the samples from the excavation on Roosikrantsi Street, the footwear cannot be dated to later than the mid-14th century (Ševeljov 1997: 19). The cultural layer is too heavily mixed, so a more accurate dating of the finds is not possible. Stratigraphically, the discerned types of archaeological footwear in Tallinn are distributed quite evenly, all types are represented in almost all archaeological layers. Only at Sauna Street was it observed that the first strap shoe was found 0.5 metres higher than other types of footwear. The somewhat later spread of strap shoes, with its peak in the 14th and 15th centuries, is also confirmed by the respective chronologies of Pärnu, Estonia (Rommot 1990: 3), Stockholm, Sweden (Zerpe, Fredriksson

1982: 223), and Schleswig, Germany (Schnack 1992: 96) material. Substantial help and chronological support for the more accurate dating of the finds can be found in the chronologies of archaeological footwear of other medieval Hanseatic towns. Since the finds at Tallinn generally resemble strongly those from Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Norway (Cinthio 1976; Koch 1988; Larsen 1992; Schia 1977; Zerpe, Fredriksson 1982), chronological support should be sought from the northern shore of the Baltic Sea. Although these chronologies cannot be applied directly to the Estonian finds, they give the “lifetime” of the shoe types in these geographically relatively close areas. The use of Scandinavian chronologies is also based on the fact that in medieval registers of artisans, shoemakers’ names of Scandinavian origin occur quite frequently (Kaplinski 1980).

Based on the very well-dated burning layers of Bergen, the peak of the use of laced shoes was the period 1170 to 1248, when all height varieties are represented. After 1248, this type of footwear does not vanish, it just occurs less frequently. From 1476 to the 18th century, only the high variety of laced shoes is used. The low ones do not occur among archaeological finds. Thus we may say that lace shoes were used in Bergen for more than 500 years, but low laced shoes were used for only 300 years. The absolute peak of the laced shoes lasted for 75 to 80 years only. Strap shoes were used in Bergen for nearly 450 years, with the peak in 1332–1413, when it prevailed in local footwear traditions for over 80 years (Larsen 1992, Fig. 54). In Swedish towns, strap shoes became predomi-

Distribution of shoe forms



nant in the 13th and the 14th centuries (Groenman-van Waateringe 1993: 505). The pieces of strap shoes from the layers of the 14th century from the excavations of Vene and Vaimu streets, and the respective finds from Sauna Street on a wider time scale, mark the spread of strap shoes here also. How widely they were used, and whether strap shoes belonged to the paraphernalia of a common townsman, cannot be said yet. The use of the laced shoe was stable, without any rise or fall to speak of, in northern and Central Europe for a long time in the 12th to the 16th centuries (Larsen 1992: Fig. 54; Schnack 1994: Abb:8). In the archaeological material from Tallinn, the period of their use is also hard to identify. More concrete is the dating of high laced shoes. In Germany the peak of their use falls in the first half of the 13th century and the mid-14th century (Schnack 1993: 65). In Denmark the peak of their use falls into the period 1323 to 1365 (Koch 1988: Table 1). The low laced shoes found at Roosikrantsi Street come from deposits of the mid-14th century. The chronology of boots is desultory, only in Bergen has it been possible to date this type of footwear to the period 1198 to 1413. The rest of the footwear types cannot be dated with any accuracy, owing to the scarcity of finds.

Fashionable or everyday footwear?

A quantitative analysis of footwear finds from Tallinn proves the prevalence of thong shoes (see table). These shoes were most numerous among the finds from Sauna Street and Town Hall Square, while in the material from Roosikrantsi Street this type of shoe was missing. Such a long "lifetime" and abundance among archaeological finds, as well as the bad state (sometimes completely worn out) of the thong shoes found in Tallinn, and the frequently occurring rough patching, do not allow us to connect this type with fashion. It seems rather that this was easily made and probably also quite cheap everyday footwear. The next by number was strap shoes. All strap shoes found and the pieces of them came from within the Town Wall. In Roosikrantsi Street in the suburb such finds were missing. The third quite large type of footwear was the high laced shoe, which was more or less equally represented among the finds from Vaimu and Roosikrantsi streets and Town Hall Square, and slightly more in the material from Sauna Street 8 and 10. All finds from Roosikrantsi Street were elegantly decorated. These decorated pieces from Roosikrantsi and Sauna streets, and the not so frequent occurrence, suggest that high laced shoes were the footwear of wealthier townsmen.

Finds of boots were remarkably few. This does not necessarily indicate their low popularity or rare use. Numerous finds of waste leather have shown that boot

legs of stronger leather were often used again, and the frequent finds of toe parts from uppers of strong leather, of no specific type, may belong to boots. Boots were meant to protect the feet from water, mud and extreme temperatures. At the same time, they would also protect the feet from injuries at work. Boots were made of tougher leather than other footwear, the sewing of their multi-layered soles was complicated. Although shoemakers could also make boots, special guilds of boot-makers existed everywhere in Europe (Goubitz, Driel-Murray, Groenman-van Waateringe 2001, 229). The scarcity of boot finds may also be caused by their belonging to the category of special footwear, eg for builders.

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ODINIS VIDURAMŽIŲ APAVAS IŠ TALINO

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Santrauka

Archeologinių tyrinėjimų Talino Rotušės aikštėje metu Vene, Vaimu, Sauna ir Roosikrantsi gatvėse aptiktas apavas atskleidžia viduramžių apavo madas ne tik Taline, bet ir visoje Šiaurės bei Vidurio Europoje. Dirželiais suvarstomas apavas – žemais ir aukštais aulais suvarstomi batai gali būti skiriami modeliniam apavui. Tuo pat metu odinis apavas, atrodo, buvo naudotas ir vidutinių miestiečių kiekvieną dieną. Auliniais batais turėjo būti avima dirbant sunkius darbus. Mažai rasta minkšto valstietiško apavo. Minkštas valstietiškas apavas buvo nešiojamas, kaip manoma, žemiausiam socialiniam sluoksniui priklausiusių miestiečių. Tačiau, atrodo, šis požiūris yra paviršutiniškas. Minkštas apavas buvo lengvas ir lengvai apsiaunamas, jis buvo labai patogus. Įvairių tipų modelinio apavo nešiojimo chronologiją nustatyti yra sunku dėl komplikuoto kultūrinio sluoksnio stratigrafijos. Reprezentatyvios Šiaurės Europos chronologinės sistemos rodo, kad įvairių modelių batai buvo dėvimi daugelį šimtmečių, tačiau pavieniai modeliai išsilaikydavo ne ilgiau kaip 70–80 metų. Talinui tapus Hanzos miestu, kultūriniai reiškiniai ėmė nebesiskirti nuo Vidurio ir Šiaurės Europos.

Vertė Vytautas Kazakevičius

