



# ANALECTA

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ARCHAEOLOGICA RESSOVIENSIA

VOLUME 14 RZESZÓW 2019

14





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VOLUME **14** RZESZÓW 2019



**FUNDACJA**  
RZESZOWSKIEGO OŚRODKA  
ARCHEOLOGICZNEGO



Uniwersytet Rzeszowski  
Kolegium Nauk Humanistycznych  
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WYDAWNICTWO UNIwersYTETU RZESZOWSKIEGO

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marta.pb@archeologia.rzeszow.pl

ANDRZEJ ROZWAŁKA  
arozwalka@archeologia.rzeszow.pl

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magda@archeologia.rzeszow.pl

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Abstracts of articles from *Analecta Archaeologica Ressoviensia* are published  
in the Central European Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities

*Analecta Archaeologica Ressoviensia* is regularly listed in CEJSH and Copernicus

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Graphic design, typesetting

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Cover design

JULIA SOŃSKA-LAMPART

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Rzeszów 2019

Our journal has qualified for  
the „Support for scientific journals” programme.



Ministry of Science  
and Higher Education  
Republic of Poland

**ISSN 2084-4409    DOI:10.15584/anarres**

1673

Editor's Address

INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY  
RZESZÓW UNIVERSITY  
ul. Moniuszki 10, 35-015 Rzeszów, Poland  
e-mail: iarch@univ.rzeszow.pl  
Home page: www.archeologia.rzeszow.pl

THE UNIVERSITY OF RZESZÓW  
PUBLISHING HOUSE  
ul. prof. S. Pigoń 6, 35-959 Rzeszów, Poland  
tel. 17 872 13 69, tel./fax 17 872 14 26  
Home page: http://wydawnictwo.ur.edu.pl

RZESZÓW ARCHEOLOGICAL  
CENTRE FUND  
ul. Moniuszki 10, 35-015 Rzeszów, Poland  
email: froa@froa.pl  
Home page: www.froa.pl/

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Kateryna Valentyrova

DOI: 10.15584/anarres.2019.14.8

Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Ukraine; e-mail: ksd1096kv@gmail.com; ORCID: 0000-0002-5213-8218

## A Medieval Ships Crew and their Weapon: from Archaeological Material to Interpretations

### Abstract

Valentyrova K. 2019. A Medieval Ships Crew and their Weapon: from Archaeological Material to Interpretations. *Analecta Archaeologica Ressoiviensia* 14, 99–107

Comprehensive research of artefacts has become the norm for modern archaeology. Archaeologist must pay attention to all aspects of the investigating problem and analyze material by means of methods from different branches of science. The Center for Underwater Archaeology of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv have been researching finds from a medieval Italian shipwreck since 1999, with a very interesting group of artefacts consisting of baselard type daggers. At the stage of interpretation, we decided to use methods which are characteristic of historical science, with a reconstruction of medieval people's' perceptions of baselards forming the basis for it. The combination of data about the material object itself and its image (the concept of it) turned out to be useful for ensuring a clear interpretation of archaeological finds and even for the verification of some social reconstructions.

**Keyword:** baselard, medieval trade galley, personal belongings, perception, comprehensive research

**Received:** 25.03.2019; **Revised:** 10.09.2019; **Accepted:** 07.10.2019

### Introduction

The study of archaeological material helps researchers to reconstruct the past.

When an archaeologist researches an excavated material culture, by and large he/she reconstructs its creators' life. At the same time, it is very important to understand the worldview of these people to ensure the correct interpretation of material traces of their activity. Ideas, motivations, and imagination were and are the basis of the human material world. There are a lot of different methods and approaches for analyzing archaeological material today. Comprehensive and interdisciplinary research of finds and its context (Hodder and Huston, 2003, 156–173) has become a necessary norm for modern archaeology. Gradually, the artefact is becoming something that unites the methodologies of different branches of science. It also makes it possible to extract a lot more information than we had been possible before (Viduka 2015, 8–15). Thus an archaeologist must pay attention to all possible aspects of the problem he is investigating and involve a wide range of specialists to help solve it.

This article is an attempt to use the phenomenon of perception for the interpretation of archaeological material and for further social reconstruction. In psychology, perception is the organization, identification, and interpretation of sensory information in order to represent and understand the presented information, or the environment. It is not only the reception of elements of the surrounding reality, but also some analysis of it. When a person is aware of something, they use the knowledge and experience he/she possesses to make a representation of it in their minds. In this context we are talking about perception as the basis of the idea or image of things which are found in historical sources. Generally, this kind of research include the analysis of an artefact and its image (how their creators and users perceived it). Studying by means of perception help us to understand what the artefact meant for the people who interacted with it. Therefore, the *main goal* of the article is to combine the analysis of archaeological material, its perceptual image and use it for the interpretation and verification of some social reconstruction.

## The site

In our research we used archaeological materials from a medieval shipwreck. The site is located in Sudak Bay near the modern settlement of Novy Svet (Ukraine, Crimean peninsula) (Fig. 1). Researchers think that it was a Pisan trade galley. Written sources have provided the opportunity to say that it sank on 14 August, 1277 as a result of a fight with a Genoese ship (Zelenko 2008, 143). The site had been investigated by the Center for Underwater Archaeology of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv (CUA) headed by Dr. Sergiy Zelenko since 1999 (Morozova 2008, 330). The site is not easy for investigation since the ship has not been preserved and archaeologists have only found some small, separate parts of it. As a result, archaeologists have estimated the location of the ship's sinking based on the archaeological material available. The depth of the excavation

area is 11–14 m and not only archaeologists but professional divers took part in the expeditions.

In the Middle Ages (from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century) the Northern Black Sea was a region of interest to Italian maritime traders. There were some trade colonies and settlements controlled by the Italians, and the modern settlement Novy Svet is situated near to one of them – the medieval fortress of Soldaia (now – Sudak). The Northern Black Sea region has been of interest to southern traders from Antiquity. At the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Italians began to settle in this area since an unstable political situation forced Italian traders to find new maritime routes and markets. The thorough and systematic invasion of the area began in the second part of the 13<sup>th</sup> century after restoration of the Byzantine Empire. Generally, it was Venice and Genoa who competed in the region, with the Byzantine emperor Michael the Palaeologus awarding rights to free sailing

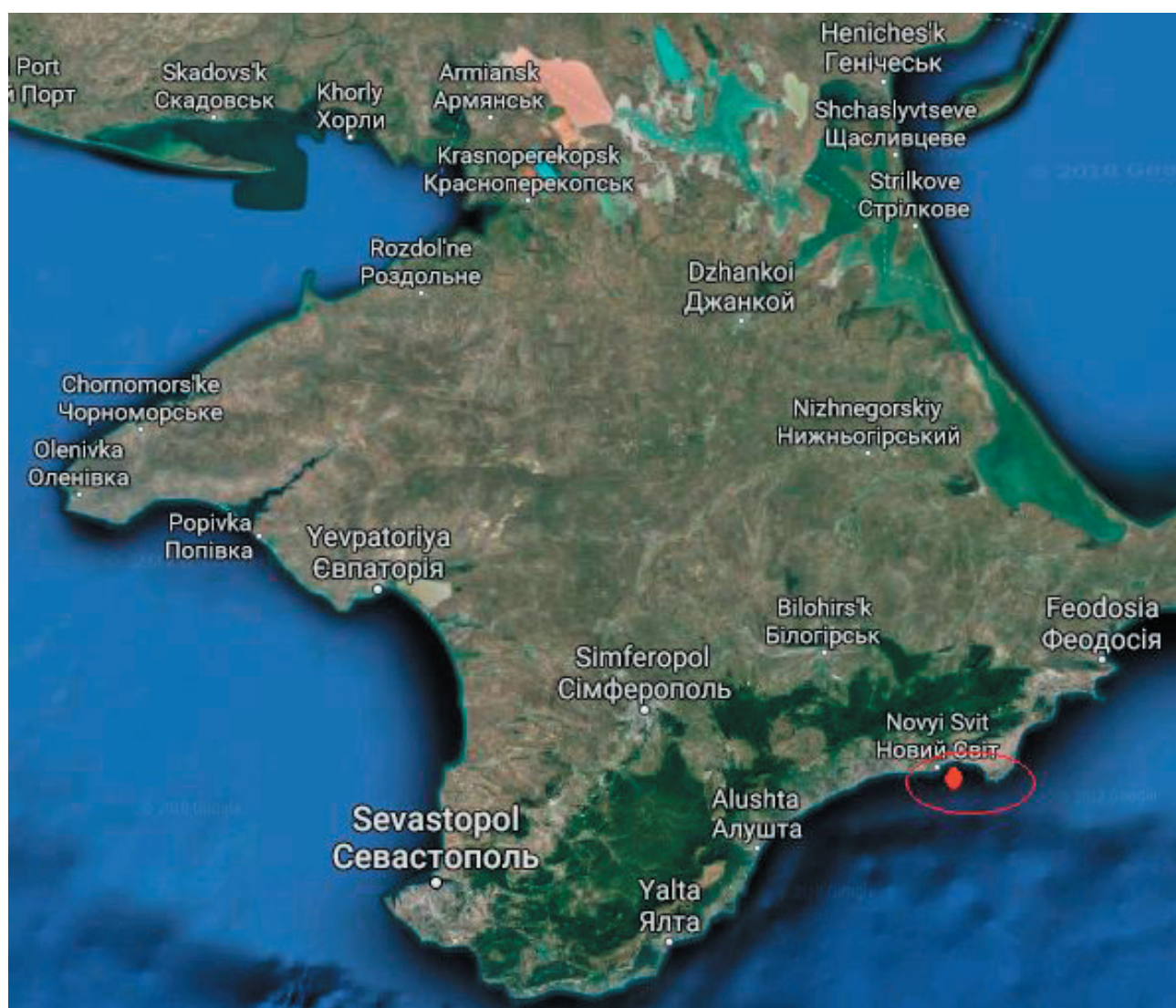


Fig. 1. Location of the Novy Svet shipwreck (Ukraine, Crimea peninsula); <https://www.google.com.br/maps>.

in the Black Sea to Genoa in 1261 and late, in 1265, to Venice. Occasionally, armed conflicts between the Italians broke out, with a good example being the war of 1294–1299. At the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottomans begun to crowd out the Italians and gradually the Italian economic interest in the region fell (Karpov 1990). Thus the historical context and written sources explain the shipwreck's location. The site is very informative and unique for Ukrainian territory.

## Material

The excavations in Novy Svet provided a lot of material, with different types of ceramic, metal, glass and even wooden things. These have Mediterranean, Middle Eastern and European origins and provides the basis for many directions of scientific research. Ceramics are the largest group of material. Whilst some things were used by the crew, most of the pottery on the ship was cargo. The decoration, graffiti and dipinti on it can be used not only for historical and archaeological purposes, but also for art analysis. Glass (fragments of glassware) and wooden (spoon, combs, etc) findings are not as numerous, but are unique and very interesting. The assortment of metal things is diverse. The group is presented by vessels, coins, buckles, decor elements, lead cases, buttons, rings, sinkers, undefined items.

One of the main groups of metal artefacts are weapons and are represented by diggers, knives (which could be multifunctional), fragments of scabbards and one sword pommel (Valentyrova 2014, 65–72). In our research we have focused on daggers, of which there are six (Fig. 2). All of them are broken, with three having all pieces, two fragments of daggers in scabbards and one instance represented by three separate fragments. The daggers are all massive, with the length of the complete ones being 53, 56 and 60 cm respectively. The cross-guards are straight and grips are I-shaped. The blade cross-sections are double-fuller or lenticular.

The environment of the Black Sea is very aggressive to black metals and thus the daggers are badly preserved (Conservation of underwater archaeological finds 2011, 47–48). In fact, they are now oxidized artefacts, with the blades' shapes being fixed by organic layers. The thickness of these may sometimes reach up to 3 cm. The daggers need extensive research by chemical and physical methods and it may be interesting to analyze both the metal and organic layers. X-ray analysis of the daggers provided a lot of important information, above all it allowed us to see the specific morphology of the daggers. Also, X-ray analysis showed spots on the handles of two daggers and a unique ball-shaped ending of one scabbard (Fig. 3).

The daggers have specific morphology that allowed us to identify them as baselards ("baselard" from Basel, the German medieval town which was a famous center for the production of these weapons (Peterson 2001, 18). It is type of a medieval long dagger or short sword widely used in Western Europe from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. There were a lot of different variations of this type (Boccia, 1996, 37–38) and some experts think that it is incorrect to attributed ones that were used in the 15<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries to the baselard type. Generally, this type of weapon had some distinctive features. The baselards handle was the narrowing of a metal blade with holes for rivets. It had organic or, less often, metal brackets. The cross-bar was a monolithic construction with a grip that could be straight or curved. The blade was triangular-shaped with two or three fullers stretched to ½ or 2/3 of it. In the Middle Ages, baselards were made of different qualities of iron (still) or bronze. They also varied in size, with the smallest specimens reaching 30 cm and the biggest 100 cm. Baselards rarely had some incrustation or decoration. It was normal to wear a baselard on a belt but scabbards were sometimes used. There are a lot of baselards in European museums. The earliest one was found in the Thames (London) and dated to the first part of the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Laking 1920, 9–11).

The baselards from Novy Svet were dated by the second part of the 13<sup>th</sup> century (based on the archaeological context). Baselards were very popular in Italy in this period (Kiseleva 2002, 47).

## Perception of baselards: textual and visual sources

We cannot analyse how medieval people perceived the baselard as a phenomenon by using only archaeological sources (Aleksic 2007, 13). For a reconstruction of the image of a baselard we forced to use textual and visual sources dating from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. As a result, this reconstruction will have general character.

There are numerous mentions of baselards in medieval texts. Textual sources typically formed two groups:

- poems and narratives
- legal documents

There are overviews of them in "Costume in England: a history of dress to the end of eighteenth century" by Frederic William Fairholt (Fairholt 1896, 30–31) and in the "A record of European armour and arms through seven centuries" by Guy Francis Laking (Laking 1920, 9–11). "Costume in English" is glossary by its



Fig. 2. Baselards from Novy Svet (Ukraine, Crimea peninsula); photo by Kateryna Valentyrova.

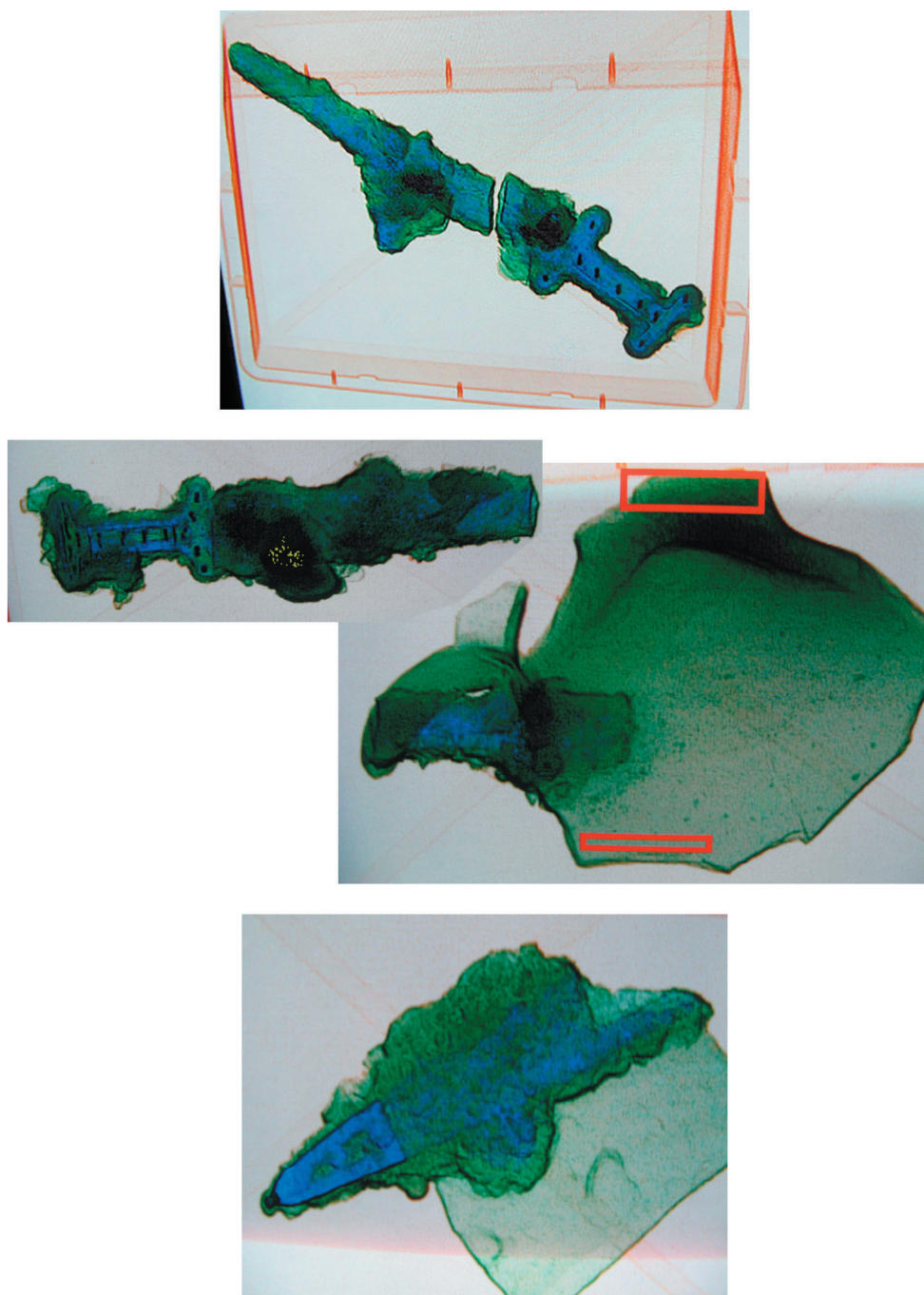


Fig. 3. X-ray photo of baselards from Novy Svet (Ukraine, Crimea peninsula); photo by Serhiy Zelenko.

content whilst Laking's work is more of an encyclopedia of weapons. The style of these books is characteristic for the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A lot of material and sources were analyzed and the authors used textual sources not only for the correct description of baselards but tried to show it in the historical context. For example, Fairholt writes about a passage from the "Vision of Piers the Plowman", in which priests were condemned by the author because they had baselards and other inappropriate things.

*But if many preest beere, for hir baselardes and hir broches,  
A peire of bedes in hir hand and a book under hir arme.  
Sire Johan and Sire Geffrey hath a girdel of silver,  
A baselard or a ballok-knyf with botons overgilte.*

(Lengland 1978, 15.118–15.127)

Fairholt noted that baselards "were strictly forbidden to be worn by priests". He reinforces it with other links (Fairholt 1896, 31). But Fairholt did not analyse all of the mentions from the poem. English poet Wil-

William Langland wrote the allegorical poem “Vision of Piers the Plowman” in the second part of 14<sup>th</sup> century (Ruud, 2006, 388). Generally, he used term “baselard” three times in two episodes and Fairholt wrote about the second of these. In the first, a baselard is mentioned in the list of weapons which people had to reforge into “peacefull” tools in an imaginary future:

*Alle that beren baselard, brood swerd or launce,  
Ax outhet hachet or any wepene ellis,  
Shal be demed to the deeth but if he do it smythyne  
into sikel or to sithe, to shaar or to kultour*

(Lengland 1978, 3.305-30)

It is very important that there is a word “baselard” in the text. Author used not generalizing, but a specific term. He highlighted it by this way. Definitely, this is a significant fact.

A medieval satirical song dated from the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century is a known source in which the term “baselard” is mentioned. The text is as follows:

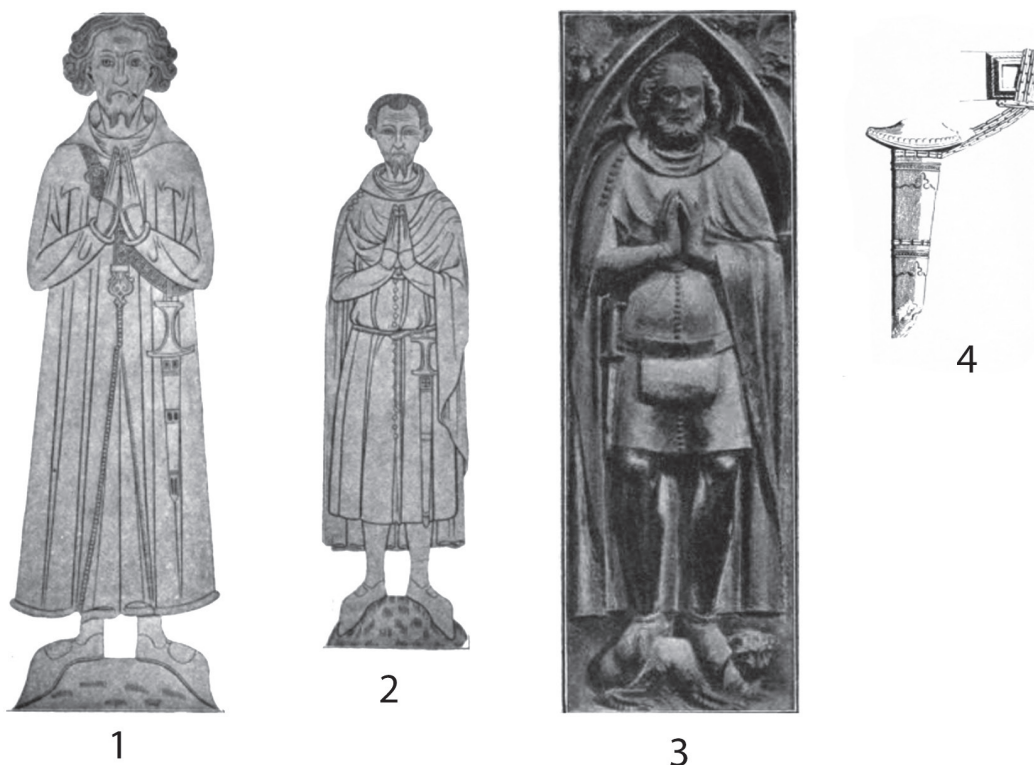
*Listen, lordings, I you besek:  
There is no man worth a leke,  
Be he sturdy, be he meke  
But he bere a baselard.  
My baselard hath a sheath of read,  
And a clean locket of lead;*

*Me thinketh I my bere up my head,  
For I bear my baselard.*

Fairholt and Laking used this song to show that people from different social groups wore baselards. This song is very interesting because it touches on the problem of inequality and its vision in the first decade of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. A baselard appears here as a symbol of the power that exists without nobility and dignity. Baselards were also used by knights (together with a long sword). In the second part of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, it was used by Italian infantrymen but it was primarily popular with non-aristocratic men and those not connected with the army. Obviously, this circumstance became decisive in composing the image of the baselard.

The second group of textual sources is represented by legal documents. There are a lot of medieval legal documents about the use of a baselard in the committing of crimes, in particular in attacks on people for the purpose of robbery being frequent. Laking said that they were banned in some European countries in different periods of the 14<sup>th</sup> century as a result (Laking 1920, 10).

Visual sources point to the fact that the baselard was popular and used by people from all estates. Guy



**Fig. 4.** From “A Record of European Armour and Arms through seven centuries” by Guy Francis Laking: 1. From the brass of John Corp. Stoke Fleming Church, Devonshire, 1391 (vol. 3, p. 10); 2. From a brass of a franklin. Shottesbrook Church, Berkshire, 1370 (vol. 3, p. 9); 3. Effigy of Johann von Holzhausen, Frankfurt-am-Main (tombstone of the patrician Johann von Holzhausen (+1393) and his wife Gudela (+1371) (vol. 3, p. 10); 4. From the effigy of Sir Hugh Caveley. Bunbury Church, Cheshire, About 1390 (vol. 3, p. 9).



Fig. 5. Heidelberg University Library, “Codex Manesse”, miniature “Herr Heinrich Hetzbold von Weißensee” p. 451 – CC-BY-SA 3.0.



Fig. 6. Heidelberg University Library, “Codex Manesse”, miniature “König Wenzel von Böhmen”, p. 15 – CC-BY-SA 3.0.

Francis Laking supplies an example of three pictures from the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 4). Two of them are pictures of franklins with baselards while on the third picture there is a knight’s baselard (the author takes it from the effigy of Sir Hugh Caveley). It is necessary to pay attention to the fact that the freeholders’ property status is not the same. This is indicated by their clothing and hairstyle. In particular, one of them wore baselard on the belt. More wealthy men have a baldric passing around the neck. The author also highlights the effigy of the patrician Johann von Holzhausen (a tombstone of the patrician Johann von Holzhausen (+1393) and his wife Gudela (+1371), Frankfurt-am-Main). There are pictures of the baselard in “Codex Mannese”. “Codex Mannese” or Große Heidelberger Liederhandschrift is the medieval illuminated manuscript, which is a corpus of minisinger’s poetry (was written in 1305–1340). The pictures are typical episodes from medieval life and we can see both servants and noblemen (Fig. 5, 6) with baselards. One more example is represented by the picture from the manuscript “The Regia Carmina”. The Regia Carmina is a poem of praise for Robert of Anjou, King of Naples (1278–1343) from the town of Prato in

Tuscany. It was written in 1335–1340. Contained in it is a picture of an infantryman with a short baselard and a long sword (Fig. 7).

- Some conclusions can be drawn based on the information provided:
- Medieval people distinguished the baselard from among different types of daggers and bladed weapons. This term is found in sources in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.
- The baselard was not an aristocratic type of bladed weapon. Everyone who was a free man had the right to wear one.
- It was an available and effective weapon.
- The baselard was quite popular and this has been confirmed by the material sources. The finds are very different in terms of quality and cost and this was in line with the owner’s financial capabilities and desires.

In our opinion, the medieval perception of the baselard had a set of relatively stable features:

- «Knightly» features were not inherent to a baselard (in contradistinction to the sword)



Fig. 7. British Library Board, miniature from “Regia Carmina”, p. 53 – Royal Ms. 6 E IX.

- Sometimes the baselard was associated with criminal and marginal elements of society
- The baselard was perceived as a weapon that was between “worthy” and “unworthy”
- The baselard was not tied to one social group but was generally associated with third estate.
- The baselard was an armament, but to wear it one did not require a particular status, virtues or special physical training. That is why there is an image of a baselard as a “fashion accessory”.

It can be argued that the formation of the baselard’s image was influenced by the medieval image of the dagger – as an insidious, unaristocratic weapon. In addition, associations of accessibility, extracurricular, “non-prestige” were very important. Nevertheless, the baselard was primarily perceived as an effective weapon. Also, the baselard’s image reflects the changes in the social hierarchy which occurred during the Late Medieval period in Europe. To some extent it can be seen as a symbol of the degradation of the “old” aristocracy and the strengthening of the third estate. These thoughts are very general but are evidence of the idea of the baselard which began to form in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

## From archaeological material and perception` analyses to social reconstruction

Now we have the opportunity to compare data about archaeological finds and their reconstructed perceptual image. The baselards from Novy Svet are massive but not very long and so they are perfect for use on a warship. In addition, both sailors and merchants could wear baselards, regardless of their social status, and therefore we can venture the hypothesis that the items from Novy Svet represented the personal weapons of the ship’s crew.

In 13<sup>th</sup> century sailing, the maritime trade was especially associated with high risks. On the one hand, the sea was a terrible environment. Jacques Le Goff describes what the sea meant for medieval people. Like the desert, it was a mysterious, hard to understand place which might represent trials, suffering and temptation (Le Goff 1988, 27). It aroused superstitious but also quite realistic fears, since piracy had been prevalent in the Black Sea since ancient times. In particular, this phenomenon was fixed by the ancient textual sources. The trade routes attracted pirates in large numbers and, in the 12<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> centuries, piracy was a large-scale and multi-layered phenomenon in the region (Sniukov 1995, 42–48). was not only a socio-economic, but also a political phenomenon. During the Middle Ages piracy did not differ significantly from “legal” military activity. Secondly, there were Turkish, Slavic, Italian and other European pirate groups. Textual sources (Italian, Greek and Byzantine) retain many references to the activities of pirates. Thus, maritime trade was not safe in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and a ship’s crew always had to be ready to fight.

We think that the baselards from the Novy Svet shipwreck were the personal belongings of the crew members (Morozova 2009). This type of weapon was handy and available for sailors. Data about the perception of baselards in the Middle Ages gives an idea of the social structure of the crew since this type of dagger could have belonged to both a wealthy merchant or a free sailor. We know that crew numbers depended on the type and size of the ship (Kleinherz 2004, 1029–1030). The crew consisted of both free and dependent people who had different work and roles to perform. Since the ship sank not far from the coast, perhaps members of the crew and other persons who had been on board managed to escape. As a result, we do not have a lot of information about these people but, by conducting comprehensive research on the personal belongings which remain, we are able to form more complicated impression about them.



## Conclusions

The aim of this article was to use analysis of archaeological material and its perceptual image for the interpretation and verification of its social reconstruction. The reconstruction of the medieval perception of a baselard created the opportunity to:

- confirm the dating of the artefacts (the last decade of the 13th century);
- find out why there were baselards but no other type of bladed weapon on the ship;
- verified a modern vision of the social structure of a medieval ship's crew;
- better understand the phenomenon of a baselard.

Therefore, we can state that research of perception is very helpful for ensuring the correct interpretation of archaeological material and securing an understanding of the past.

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