

Jan Jarosz¹, Małgorzata Grupa²

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¹ Institute of Archaeology, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Szosa Bydgoska 44/48, 87-100 Toruń, Poland;
e-mail: jaroszjas@wp.pl; ORCID: 0000-0001-5965-1711

² Institute of Archaeology, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Szosa Bydgoska 44/48, 87-100 Toruń, Poland;
e-mail: m.grupa@wp.pl; ORCID: 0000-0001-5128-9754

Kontush Sashes from the Northern Crypt of the post-Bernardine Church of the Elevation of the Cross in Łuków (Lublin Province)

Abstract

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An archaeological exploration conducted in 2019 in the crypts of the post-Bernardine church of the Elevation of the Cross in Łuków brought various finds of burial goods, excavated in fragments, probably transferred together with human remains in the 19th century to ossuaries located in the crypt. The artefacts included fragments of three kontush sashes, being the most indispensable and splendid element of the Polish national costume. The analysis of these objects, both in terms of ornamentation and technology, helped us to estimate their probable manufacturing location.

Keywords: kontush sash, Polish costume, silk, modern period, Łuków

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Introduction

In the course of the excavation season conducted in 2019 exploring the crypts of the post-Bernardine church of the Elevation of the Cross in Łuków (Fig. 1), various artefacts related to the persons buried there were found, together with other valuable insights. Unfortunately, our finds also consisted of numerous pieces of rubbish deposited in ventilation holes and on the floor (Michalik *et al.* 2020, 230). However, the unique finds included three kontush sashes located in survey trenches 1 and 2 in the northern crypt situated under the presbytery (Fig. 1). The sites contained ossuaries probably created during the cleaning of the crypts in the 19th century (Michalik *et al.* 2020, 236–237).

Kontush sash construction

From the end of the 15th century, textile, leather and metal sashes were regarded as the most signifi-

cant elements of the Polish national costume (own research carried out on Polish costume – Małgorzata Grupa). Each of them had its own history – a place of production, purchase, sale, or transfer in a will. In the 18th century, a textile sash was regarded as the most readable element. They were imported both from Persia, Turkey, and France (Mańkowski 1959, 105; Wasilkowska 1967; Taszycka 1990; 1994; Grupa 2005, 58–59). In the middle of the 18th century, sash manufacture also began within the territory of the Polish Republic, namely in: Słuck, Grody, Kobyłka, later also in Gdańsk (Żelewska 1962; Kałamajska-Saeed 1987; Grupa 2012, 120–123; 2018, 36; Majorek 2013, 199–209). There were solid sashes or semi-solid, or soft, a matter depending on whether a weft of gold or silver thread covered the background surface completely, partly or did not occur at all (Taszycka 1994, 15, 17, 23). The unique kind of these textile products depended on wool, silk yarn quality and the type of metal thread mentioned above which was

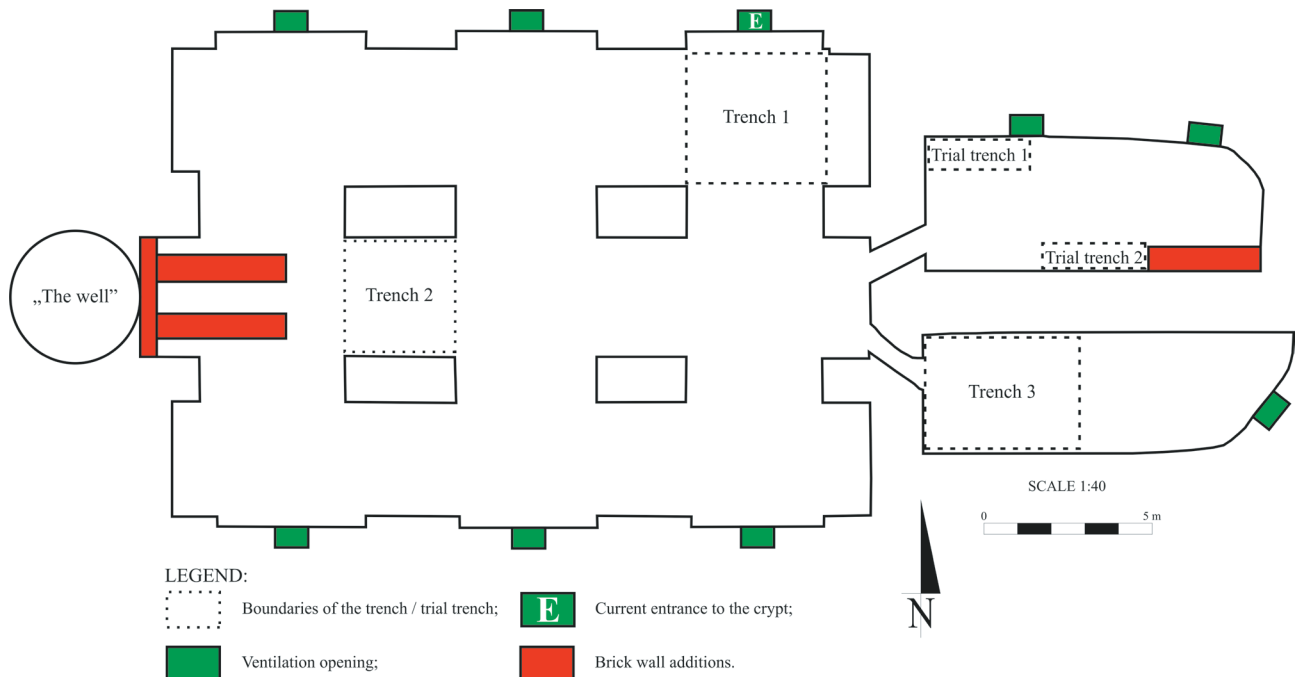


Fig. 1. Łuków. Plan of the crypts of the church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (drawn by J. Michalik).

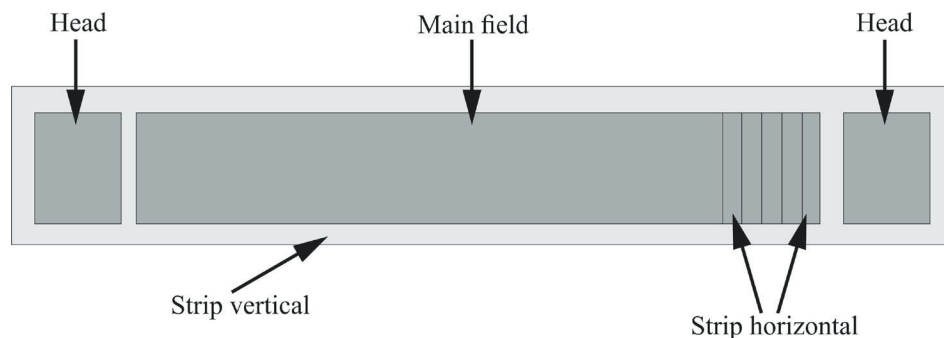


Fig. 2. Plan of a kontush sash (after Kałamajska-Saeed 1987).

used for production (Grupa 2005, 58; Drązkowska 2008, 221).

In its construction, a Persian sash type, followed by Armenian, Polish, Russian, Venetian or French types, is divided into three parts, two of which are at both ends and are called heads (on the surface of the heads there was usually a composition of twin floral arrangements growing out of clods of earth or placed in vases; depending on the manufactory, the composition could also consist of three or five bushes), while the third, being the central element is called the “wciąż” (continuation of a small pattern) (Fig. 2). It consists of dozens of small fields with the homogenous central field. Sash edges, being the most decorative elements, are called “szlaczek” (strip) – respectively – horizontal or vertical.

They could be one-sided, with only one decorative side, two-sided or four-sided, when the fields inside a sash were symmetrically separated along the whole textile length (Kałamajska-Saeed 1987, 10). Four-sided sashes are undoubtedly of Polish provenance, and original Polish contribution to their manufacturing sophisticated technique (Bartkiewicz 1974, 224). They were of various lengths and widths, depending on their origin. Persian sashes were from 4 to 5 m long, about 60 cm wide, while other European and Armenian – about 3–4 m as rule, and around 30 cm wide. These differences were so characteristic that it was easy to estimate at a glance if it was a Persian item or a European one, although we cannot forget that Persian weavers sometimes produced belts with Armenian proportions, and European craftsmen pro-

duced sashes according to Persian measures. In such cases, only careful raw material and technological analysis could answer the question, of attributing an object to particular centers or countries.

Kontush sashes from Łuków

Istanbul sash (Armenian)

In the soundings (1, 2) carried out in the northern crypt under the chancel of the church, fabric fragments measuring 1–2 cm and 29.5 cm wide (80 fragments) were found that were very similar to each other. Our suggestion that it might have been a kontush sash was confirmed by another fragment about 100 cm long, found on the crypt earthen floor. Upon assembly of these fragments, we obtained an object



Fig. 3. Łuków. Istanbul (Armenian) sash (photo by J. Jarosz).

measuring approximately 240 cm long and 29.5 cm wide. Sash ornamentation composition is in accordance with manufacturing rules, distinguishing three elements (unfortunately, the heads were not identified in the excavated material – therefore its origin is not readable on the base of a signature, placed usually in bottom head corners). The central long part is filled with two kinds of fields, sized 23 x 1.5 cm, composed alternately. Vertical strips measure 2 cm each (Fig. 3).

We are able to identify only two colors at present: ecru and silver-grey. Although the ecru color is one of the most frequently used colors in Armenian sashes, we cannot exclude that in this case, it can be a result of post-depositional conditions in the crypt, and its original color was different. The silver-grey color, on the other hand, results from the high silver content in the metal thread alloy, and it served for ornament motif shaping. These motifs include geometrical compositions and tendrils placed alternately. The length of one field is always composed of three flattened, hexagonal medallions, ending on both sides with three, small leaf. The center of each medal is filled with an image of an eight-petalled flower, or a rosette. These pattern elements are separated from two neighboring fields with a simple motif of the single-line checker. Another pattern is composed of tendrils with turned four-leaf motifs, symmetrically joined, using big diagonal leaves with tiny serrated edges. Tops of flower calyxes are finished with two symmetrical leaves. The ornament of the massive sash body is separated from the vertical strips with two triangle columns of 0.6 cm. Identical ones are along the textile edges, but asymmetrically – on one side there are two columns, on the other – only one. Vertical stripes are composed with flower tendrils with regular semicircular twists. Semicircles made in this way contain single flower motifs of two kinds. The stems have flowers, single leaves and buds.

Analyzing the ornaments and taking up comparative studies with archaeological materials and museum deposits (sash collection of the National Museum in Kraków), we can assume that it is an example of an Armenian sash (Majorek 2013, 204; Grupa 2019, 169–172).

Persian sash (?)

The second belt found in Łuków is actually part of the lining in an Armenian belt (described above) fastened, using a long straight stitch, about 6.5 cm. Its length corresponds with the longest part of the sash discussed above – 94 cm (Fig. 4) and was the first discovery of its kind to date. There seem to be two pos-



Fig. 4. Łuków. Persian sash (photo by J. Jarosz).

sible explanations for lining the Armenian sash with another one. First – the lining served as the other sash filling, being an additional element making the sash thicker. The thickness of both textiles is a counterargument to that explanation. The Armenian example is a solid sash, and it makes the textile much thicker than the soft analyzed sash (the sash might have originally contained a significant amount of metal thread, which was completely destroyed due to prolonged usage). On the other hand, contrary to what we can observe on 18th-century portraits, sashes in everyday use were folded many times (width of 6–8 cm). Signs of folding are observed on every intensely used item, and this is the case with these two sashes. The folding width is about 6.5 cm. Even thin textiles folded several times give an impression of thickness. The other explanation is very practical – the user wished to protect

a very worn-out Armenian sash from further damage by lining it with another textile, however, the real effectiveness of that treatment remains unknown. Nevertheless, it is certain that for the 18th-century user of the Armenian sash, the one used as the lining was not of great value.

The sash was cut to 27 cm in width and the edge was finished with an overhand stitch. It can be supposed that originally it had been twice as wide. However, some reservations should be made since only the central long part has been preserved, without its heads. Analysis of that fragment proved to be difficult because the original colors have not survived. Only by using proper light were we able to observe a red glow every second field (at present it is light beige color). The fields are 23 cm long and wide – 2.7 cm and 3 cm. In some sections, sizes differed due to substantial bulging and loosening of the fibers. Looking at the first narrower field pattern, we can see a geometrical ornament with a motif of flattened oval medallions, made by stylized branches and a rosette in the center, built on an X-letter plan, with small isosceles triangles between its arms. Every second geometrical field is moved, and they are separated from the ones with branches with simple single-line checkers. Tendril fields contain two kinds of floral motifs. S-shaped sections have a reversible flower motif from their profile with a calyx emerging from a leaf base. The other element consists of a flower presented frontally, with symmetrical short branches. Geometrical fields are the axis of symmetry for fields with branches. A vertical strip 2 cm wide is decorated with a branch ornament and three kinds of flowers (Fig. 5), two in profile and one in frontal projection. The frontally shown flower is equipped with four symmetrical branches. Two of them have buds of calyxes turned apart from each other, with single leaves touching branches growing from the frontal projection flower tops. The tendril goes through calyxes to the last flower motif with two short branches with trifoliate bunches. Branch fields and strips as far as floral motifs appear are in a sequence: 1, 2, 3, 2, 1. The ornament decorating the sash length is separated from vertical strips with a simplified motif of a medachyl, sized 0.8 cm. It appears analogically on the other side of a vertical strip, at the textile edge.

The exceptional precision in drawing, rich ornamentation, and the original sash width, being about 60 cm, all indicated that we should attribute the analyzed object to Persian production.

Despite large-scale queries, we did not find analogical designs for the geometrical fields. Similar me-



Fig. 5. Close-up of the string of the Persian sash (photo by J. Jarosz).

dallions, although not identical, were detected on two sashes from The Metropolitan Museum of Art with no MMA 33.18.80 and MMA 15.70.02, on an artefact from Centralne Muzeum Włókiennictwa [Central Museum of Textiles] in Łódź with no CMW 944/Z/156, and in a sash from Tokyo National Museum with no TI 510. All these four examples of Persian sashes' medals are almost identical, and they present the same four-petal motif in the center, surrounded by dense plant branches. In comparison with the analyzed object, that motif replaced a rosette which is also circled by plant branches that do not touch the rosette directly but only surround it. Branches in geometrical fields are also less sophisticated in their form, shaping only the general outline of the medallion.

Lyons sash from Łuków

A silk Lyons sash is the last artefact of that type excavated in Łuków (Fig. 6). It was found under the coffin planks in the ossuary located against the western wall of the northern crypt under the presbytery. It was deposited there together with other historical textiles, like silk gallons, and fragments of silk fabric rimmed with plaited string with small geometric patterns, which turned out to be the relics of a classical czechman coat.

The Lyons sash was preserved in the best condition compared to the two others excavated in the crypt, which may have resulted from the shortest period of its use. In spite of the unfavorable post-depositional conditions, causing numerous spots (microorganisms decomposition) and torn fragments (Grupa 2007, 209), the sash has been preserved practically with unchanged colors in many places, consisting of four distinguished colors: brown, beige, red and blue. This two-sided object presents only three colors on one side, because if the background on one side of the geometrical field is red and the ornament is beige, on the other side the ornament is blue and the background beige. A similar situation is observed in the case of other fields and branch strips – on one side the background and the field filling are beige with ornament contours shaped in brown, and on the other side, it is the other way total. The total length of the preserved sash is 368 cm, although, despite three longer fragments, the others are loose pieces of various sizes. One part, including the object's head, is lined with tassels (Fig. 7). A 10 cm long tassel is the only sash element made of metal threads with silk core, therefore the object can be classified as a soft sash. Its width was estimated as 31.5 cm. Signs of folds running along the length evidence that it was folded for the width of about 8 cm. Each field has sizes of 24 ×

2.2 cm, while the strips are 2.2 cm wide. In horizontal strips situated near the tassels, signs of repairing (darning) are visible.

Similarly to other examples of sashes, we are able to distinguish two kinds of fields – geometrical and branch ones, appearing alternately. Geometrical fields include four pairs of isosceles triangles arranged symmetrically to one another, separated by small rhombi which mark the lengthened axis of these fields. Each triangle with the longest arms includes three smaller isosceles triangles inside. The triangles separate the main ornamentation motif of these fields, which is a four-petal flower surrounded by six teardrop shapes. These elements are surrounded by sharp arches joined together, which – together with their background create a shape of a medallion. Similarly to the Armenian sash analyzed earlier, geometrical fields in this example have their constant position as follows: half of a medal, three medals, and half of a medal. The pattern of branch fields includes a simple vegetal ornament, which also appears on vertical and horizontal stripes. They are trapezoidal bent branches with two floral motifs placed alternately – carnations and geometrically stylized roses. All edges of fields and strips are matches the simple motif of a zigzag.

In contrast to the other two sashes, in this case we were able to observe the ornamentation composition of heads. Although a relatively small fragment of the



Fig. 6. Lyons sash (photo by J. Jarosz).



Fig. 7. Head of the Lyons sash (photo by J. Jarosz).

head has been preserved, compared to a collection of PRELLE, a complete reconstruction of the ornament was possible (Taszycka 1994, 7–32). Sample no 3128 (a product of the PRELLE manufactory) demonstrates a motif of two geometrically transformed shrubs set on small mounds, covered with symmetrically placed flowers. The composition is based on ornaments from Persian sashes.

As with most Lyons sashes, this object is made using the technique of classical lampas with upholstery. It is a textile with a double warp and many weft compositions. The pattern is obtained by interlacing additional wefts with a binding warp, the background is made by combining the basic weft with a figurative warp. One of the wefts creates a pattern, which in the obverse is seen solely in small elements, and the pattern outline makes it in reverse of the background surface. In the case of the Lyons sash from Łuków, we can observe this by comparing the obverse and reverse geometrical fields. Identical branch fields are detected in sample no 5246 from the collection of PRELLE, and very similar ones in the object from the collection of the National Museum in Kraków, inv. no MNK XIX-8259. Branch fields in the latter are only different in terms of the color of the sash half, as it is four-sided. In both, geometrical fields are identical and present motifs of “szelązek” coins against the background of lengthened, flattened hexagons, between which there are isosceles triangles of the same construction and place as in the Lyons sash found in Łuków, having only broader bases and joining with one another with their tops.

Unfortunately, to date no other sash with identical geometrical fields has been excavated. We have similar examples with sequences of flattened hexagonal medallions filled with symmetrical stylized plant ornament, composed on a crossed axis with four-leaf forms in the middle, which are in turn placed inside rhombi. Between these medallions, there are, like in the Lyons sash from Łuków, motifs of isosceles triangles, but they stick to one another with their tops. The fields described above were observed on an unmarked sample from the collection of PRELLE, presented by M. Taszycka (1994), and the sashes from the National Museum in Krakow with inv. no MNK-2499, MNK-2487, and MNK-2320 (Taszycka 1994, 30). On each of them, there is one of two kinds of ornament: vertical and horizontal strips of significantly stylized branches. Besides the geometrical fields described earlier, each of the sashes has fields with the same branch ornament, with two kinds of axis floral motifs joined symmetrically with branch sections and a leaf in the middle.

Heads, strips and branch fields' ornaments, presence of gold thread limited only to tassels, using red and blue colors creating a base surface of obverse and reverse, identical with samples from the collection of PRELLE indicate the origin of the examined sash as coming from the workshop from the Company of Guyot, Germain and Dechazelle (Taszycka 1994, 11).

Summary

The kontush sashes presented in the article were divided into three types, defined by their manufacturing technique and ornamentation patterns used, which helped indicate their supposed origin and the trade routes through which they had been transported to find their final destination in the northern crypt in the church of the Elevation of the Cross in Łuków. Despite the differences in ornamentation motifs, they all (three) used the Persian division into heads, fields and strips (Mańkowski 1938, 114–117; Grupa 2005, 94–95).

The item defined as of Istanbul/Armenian origin presents characteristics typical for that group of sashes; it is a double-layer textile, where patterns were introduced using a technique called “taqueté réversible”, hence the color used on one side is the reverse of the other side. Moreover, characteristic patterns were used, with popular axis four-leaf motifs joined by big diagonally situated leaves with serrated edges. Despite one sash being used to line another sash, the only element distinguishing it from similar ones is an absence of moving every second field with geometrical ornament.

In the case of the “Persian” sash, estimating its univocal origin is impossible; it may have had original possessed Persian sizing and characteristics: the high precision of the art and rich ornamentation directly imitate Persian patterns. However, the object's condition interferes with and limits the complete analysis of the ornaments used and the technique of manufacturing.

The last presented object was estimated as being of Lyons origin thanks to the comparison with the PRELLE collection discovered in 1972, including samples of sashes manufactured by the Company of Guyot, Germain and Dechazelle. The studied artefacts have identical head ornaments, strips and branch fields, the presence of gold threads is limited only to tassels, and the use of red and blue creates surfaces with an obverse and reverse, which indicates that the analyzed material comes from that workshop.

The kontush sashes coming from archaeological excavations are perfect additions for museum collec-

tions. The objects confirm in every case the way they were used since regardless of their original width, every example was folded to obtain a 6–8 cm belt, which enabled free movement of the person wearing it and was convenient for joining other leather belts for hanging sabres, being used both in combat and as an element of ceremonial national costume. Nobles and members of the aristocracy were very careful about these details, which emphasized their belonging to the leading social group in the Polish Republic. The Sarmatian idea treasured for centuries was also affirmed by this special attire, and a kontush sash was one of the indispensable elements of Polish national costume.

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