

THE USE OF BOXWOOD IN MEDIEVAL VILNIUS

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Comb
03/04 SRK-9355;
H 78, L 15, T 12
Ornament: lines



Comb
08 I Of-108;
H 83, L 28, T 10,3
Ornament:
lines, row of small
circles (D 4)



Comb
08 I Of-Md287;
H 80, L 39,
Ornament: lines,
rivets



Comb
07 SRK-88;
H 99, L 40,
Ornament: lines,
concentric circles (D
10)



Comb
07 SRK-Md118;
H 85, L 45, T 12
Ornament: lines



Comb
08 SRK-575;
H 77, L 55, T 12
Ornament:
lines, tin (Sn)
rivets



Comb
06 Tr3-24; H 58, L 77,
T 15
Ornament: no



Comb
07 SRK-Md105;
H 84, L 80, T 12
Ornament: lines



Comb
07 SRK-Md341;
H 88, L 85, T 11
Ornament: lines



Vilnius Castle complex consists of the Upper Castle located on the Gediminas (Castle) Hill and the Lower Castle in a valley on the confluence of Neris and Vilnia rivers at the foot of the Hill.



The cultural layer of the Lower Castle site has been accumulating since the 13th century and is 8 meters thick in the deepest places. Bottom layers of about 4 meters thickness are saturated with ground water and are rich with organic artefacts and wooden infrastructure objects (Pukiene, 2009).

A set of wooden finds of the 14th-18th century consisting of 1700 items has been collected during the excavations conducted in the course the last two decades. Wood species of about one third of the collected artefacts was investigated and identified using standard microscopic methods and identification keys. A total of 18 wood species was found (Pukiene, 2011).

Among the wooden artefacts of the Vilnius Lower Castle there were some made of non-native wood species. Main alien species are the common box tree (*pyxos* or *pyxinos* in antiquity) and the silver fir growing in the south of Europe. Nine combs and handles of four knives made of boxwood were found. All of them are from the 14th – 15th century layers.

Boxwood combs are double-sided, rectangular with lentoid/romboid profile and similar to that found in medieval Konstanz (Müller, 1996) and Novgorod (Smirnova, 2007). The height of the combs ranges from 80 to 99 mm. The Vilnius combs are not very much ornamented: 11,1% has no ornament, only horizontal lines (44,5%), lines and circles (22,2%), lines and rivets(22,2%).

The use of boxwood knife handles is known in medieval English cutlery and is mentioned in Ordinances for cutlers by Richard II from 1380. At least two handles of knives found in Vilnius seem to be made of valuable box-tree root (*dudgeon*?) wood.

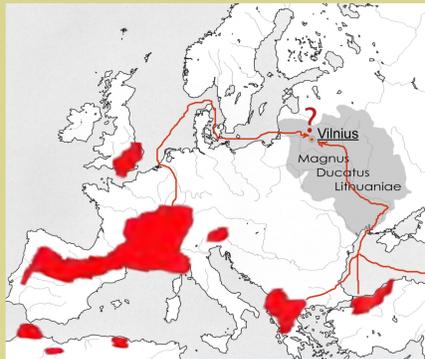
Boxwood items testify long – distance trade in wooden goods from the boxwood tree natural distribution areas.

References:

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Pukienė R. Dendrochronological investigations on the development of Vilnius' Lower Castle. In: The Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania and its restoration (comps. V.Dolinskas, D.Steponavičienė). Lithuanian Art Museum, Vilnius, 2009: 85-97. ISBN 978-609-95074-0-8.
Smirnova L.I. Wooden combs in the light of the history of comb-making in Novgorod. In: Wood use in medieval Novgorod (eds. M.Brisbane, J. Hather). Oxbow Books, Oxford, 2007: 298-334. ISBN 978-1-84217-276-6.



Retrospective reconstruction of the Vilnius Castles at the beginning of the 15th c. by N. Kitkauskas.



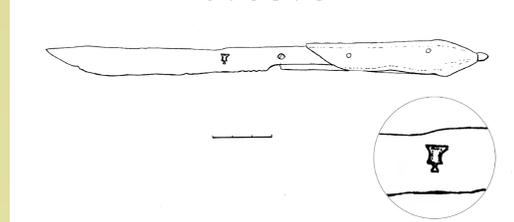
Great Duchy of Lithuania in the first half of the 15th c. and the natural distribution of boxwood. Arrows indicate possible trade routes.



Knife
07 PilVart-4478 (end of the 14th – beginning of the 15th c.). Handle H22, L 103, blade L 84.



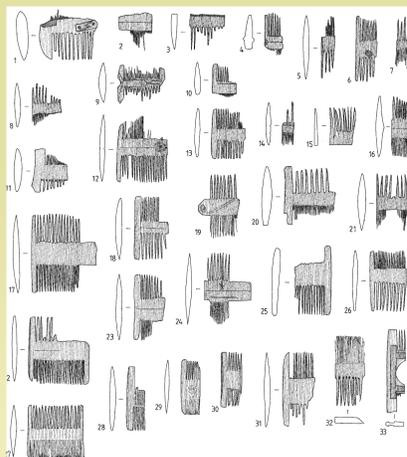
Knife
07 SRK-1731 (end of the 14th – the 15th c.). Handle H 18, L 70.



Knife
08 I Of-1059 (first half of the 15th c.). Handle H 21, L 104; blade L 118. Drawing by M. Mieliauskas.



Knife
08 I Of-954 (first half of the 15th c.). Handle: H 21, L 110. Left: photo before conservation.



Examples of boxwood combs from Konstanz and Freiburg, end of the 13th - 15th Cs. (from Müller, 1996, Taf. 33).