

## **An object in focus: a knee or shoe buckle from early modern Oulu**

*Prepared by: Tiina Kuokkanen, University of Oulu, Finland.*

This 31 mm high and 24 mm wide buckle consists of an iron frame and a pewter double tongue, which is 12 mm long. About one quarter of the frame is missing. Possible the frame may originally have been double-framed, as the small overhangs around the tongue could be part of another loop. Alternatively the small overhangs could be decoration and corrosion around it. The buckle was discovered from urban archaeological excavations at the NMKY (YMCA)<sup>1</sup> site in the center of the town of Oulu.<sup>2</sup> In the early days of the town this area didn't belong to the richest part of the town, but it was located just next to the cathedral. The reputation of the area improved in the next century; the oldest known inhabitant of the area Klaus Klaunpoika Jederjan, who died in 1704, was the richest merchant in the town. At the eighteenth century the nearby church block included the town hall, market place and the most houses of the most significant persons of the town. Most artifacts in the assemblage have been dated to the seventeenth century, but some artifacts are also dated to the eighteenth and to the end of the nineteenth centuries. According to the building remnants, artifacts and old maps, the area has been settled from the beginning of the seventeenth century.<sup>3</sup>

If the buckle is vertically orientated, then the orientation and the size are typical to early modern knee buckles, although the material is not and the shape is also unusual. In this buckle it consists only of double tongue, which is attached directly to the frame. The item does not have a roll or pin, so one typical feature of knee buckles, the anchor roll, is missing.<sup>4</sup> Another interpretation is that this is a

---

<sup>1</sup> NMKY: Nuorten Miesten Kristillinen Yhdistys (Eng.: YMCA or Young Men's Christian Association).

<sup>2</sup> Oulu is a small town in northern Finland, on the shore of the Bothnian Gulf. It has been founded in 1605, when Finland was part of Sweden. The buckle discussed here (no. 1470 in the NMKY assemblage) belongs to the collections of The Northern Ostrobothnia museum.

<sup>3</sup> Virkkunen, A.H.: *Oulun kaupungin historia 1*. Kirjola Oy, Oulu 1953, p. 259, 492; Mäki vuoti, Katrimaija ja Mäki vuoti, Markku: *NMKY:n tontin kaivaus, kortteli N:O 24 1986–1987. Kaupunkiarkeologinen tutkimus*. Museoviraston rakennushistorian toimisto, Pohjois-Pohjanmaan museo ja Oulun yliopiston historian laitos 1990; Mäki vuoti, Markku: "Oulun NMKY:n korttelin kaupunkiarkeologinen tutkimus". *Faravid 14*, Oulu 1991, p. 24, 40–43; Mäki vuoti, Markku: "NMKY:n tontin pelastuskaivaukset". Kallio, Titta & Lipponen, Sanna (edit.) *Historiaa kaupungin alla: kaupunkiarkeologisia tutkimuksia Oulussa*. Pohjois-Pohjanmaan museon julkaisuja 16. Pohjois-Pohjanmaan museo, Oulu 2005, p. 84–90.

<sup>4</sup> White, Carolyn L.: *American artifacts of personal adornment, 1680–1820: a guide to identification and interpretation*. AltaMira Press, Lanham 2005, p. 45.

double-framed eight-loop shoe buckle from the first half of seventeenth century, in which case the orientation would be horizontal and the tongue would have been attached to the pin. This kind of a shoe buckle shape is really uncommon both in European and American contexts. What makes it so special is the oval loop; early modern double-framed shoe buckles were usually rectangular.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the first shoe buckles were quite round. When it became more common to use them at the end of the seventeenth century, their form was small and oval. Little by little the size increased and reached its peak in the 1770s. Shoe buckles developed from little ovals to big angulars, although baroque brought soft lines and smaller sizes appear also during the fashion peak. They are usually curved and thus fitting better onto foot.<sup>6</sup> Although shoe buckles are usually horizontally and knee buckles vertically orientated, distinguishing a small shoe buckle from a large knee buckle is challenging<sup>7</sup> and that is the case here as well. This item is so damaged that it is impossible to determine if it has been curved to fit on the foot.

Shoe buckles came to Sweden from England in the middle of seventeenth century. They were first mentioned in Swedish probate inventories in 1670s, but the golden age of both shoe and knee buckles took place later in the next century, culminating in the 1780s.<sup>8</sup> Shoe and knee buckles were often worn together.<sup>9</sup> Breeches came into fashion during the seventeenth century, but on larger scale they replaced trousers during the eighteenth century.<sup>10</sup> At first breeches' legs were fastened by buttons, but around 1735 knee buckles came into fashion and in the 1750s buttons were usually replaced with knee buckles. But buttons continued to be used in some numbers. One reason for this is that everyone could not afford buckles. The object discussed here is a little bit smaller than the most documented knee buckles at the Ethnographic collection of National Board of antiquities, which may indicate an old

---

<sup>5</sup> White 2005, p. 40.

<sup>6</sup> Jäfvvert, Ernfrid: "Skomod och skotillverkning från medeltiden till våra dagar" *Nordiska Museets Handlingar: 10*. Stockholm 1932, p. 66; Hazelius-Berg, Gunnel: "Dräktsmycken". Brynolf, H. (toim.) *Smycken I svensk ägo*. Nordiska museet, Stockholm 1952, p. 102; White, Carolyn L.: "Knee, Garter, Girdle, Hat, Stock, and Spur Buckles from Seven Sites in Portsmouth, New Hampshire". *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, Vol. 13, No 2, 2009: 239–253.

<sup>7</sup> White 2005, p. 45.

<sup>8</sup> Pylkkänen, Riitta: *Barokin pukumuoti Suomessa 1620–1720*. Weilin+Göös, Helsinki 1970, p. 386–387; White 2005, p. 31.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. Hazelius-Berg 1952, p. 102.

<sup>10</sup> Sirelius, U.T: *Suomen kansanpukujen historia*. Suomalais-ugrilainen seura, Helsinki 1915 (1990), p. 181; Vuorela, Toivo: *Suomalainen kansankulttuuri*. WSOY, Porvoo 1977, p. 572; Kaukonen, Toini-Inkeri: *Suomalaiset kansanpuvut ja kansallispuvut*. WSOY, Porvoo 1985, p. 225.

age, given that the first buckles were small. On the other hand, the form of this item does not point to the earliest models, which were small and square. Instead, it points to the end of the eighteenth century when the model had developed into large oval.<sup>11</sup>

Buckles were made of varying materials, which were connected to the class. Wealthy people showed their class status also through adornments in clothing.<sup>12</sup> According written sources Swedish knee buckles were usually made of steel, but the most valued pairs were made of brass or silver. Shoe buckles, however, could be made also of iron.<sup>13</sup> In the Ethnographic collection the most common materials among both knee and shoe buckles are different copper alloys (including brass) and tin. Shoe buckles are also made of steel and iron and a few knee buckles of silver. The upper classes adopted the new accessory at first, but common people also used buckles later on.<sup>14</sup> In those geographical areas in Sweden where breeches were in use, they were used not only in special occasions but also in daily life.<sup>15</sup> Because knee buckles were part of common people's clothing in Sweden, it is possible that they could have been produced also from affordable materials like iron and pewter. In contrast, in France as in America buckles were strongly associated with the dress of the elite. By rejecting buckles the French revolutionaries expressed their ideas against aristocracy. This rejection expanded rapidly in Europe and in America. So it can be said, that the French revolution marked the end of the buckle fashion.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> White 2005, p. 43–45.

<sup>12</sup> White 2005, p. 33.

<sup>13</sup> Sirelius 1915 (1990), p. 183; Lehtinen, Ildiko ja Sihvo, Pirkko: *Rahwaan puku: Näkökulmia Suomen kansallismuseon kansanpukukokoelmiin*. Kolmas, uudistettu ja laajennettu painos. Museovirasto, Helsinki 2005, p. 261–263.

<sup>14</sup> E.g. Lehtinen ja Sihvo 2005, p. 222.

<sup>15</sup> Sirelius 1915 (1990), p. 183; Vuorela 1977, p. 572.

<sup>16</sup> Jäfvert 1932, p. 66; Vainio-Korhonen, Kirsi: *Kultaa ja hopeaa mestarien työkirjoissa. Suomen kultasepäntö Ruotsin ajan lopulla valtakunnallista taustaa* vasten. Historiallisia tutkimuksia 182. Vammala 1994, p. 271; Mann, Rob and DiPaolo Loren, Diana: "Keeping Up Appearances: Dress, Architecture, Furniture, and Status at French Azilum." *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*. Vol 5, No 4, December 2001: 281–307, p. 298; White 2009, p. 246.