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Late Medieval Bone Saddles

PhD dissertation - Thesis Booklet

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1. Research Background and Problem Statement

My dissertation focuses on wooden saddles decorated with carved bone plates, primarily dating from the 15th century, which are now preserved in museum collections across Europe and the United States. Despite their curiosity, these objects have received only marginal attention in previous research, which has typically focused on individual examples and lacked comprehensive analysis. As no written sources survive regarding the original owners, makers, exact time and place of production, or original function of these saddles, my research began with the aim of addressing these questions. Earlier studies could only approximate the origins of the bone saddles, generally associating them with early 15th-century Central Europe, particularly the court of Emperor Sigismund.

The historiographical overview begins in the 19th century, when Hungarian scholars—primarily in connection with the three saddles of the Hungarian National Museum—first started to study these objects. The first more detailed dissertation was undertaken by Julius von Schlosser in 1894. He compiled a catalogue of the examples known to him, interpreted their iconography, and attempted a stylistic classification. He introduced the terms *Bocksättel* and *Krippensättel* to distinguish between types of bone saddles based on their form and construction.

In the early 20th century, a new interpretive approach emerged: several scholars, including Géza Nagy, Kornél Divald, and Henrik Horváth, proposed that the bone saddles could be connected to the

court of King Sigismund and may have been gifts to members of the Order of the Dragon. This theory was supported by the dragon emblem found on one of the Budapest-3 saddle. The idea was widely accepted for some time, but later research from the 1970s and 1980s began to examine the connection to Sigismund more critically. Among the critics were István Genthon and János Eisler, who questioned the direct link to the emperor. Nevertheless, at the 2006 exhibition *Sigismundus Rex et Imperator*, organized in the Hungarian Museum of Fine Arts, the saddles were still presented within the context of Sigismund's court. The accompanying catalogue, included the most up-to-date list and analysis of the saddles, authored by Mária Verő.

By the end of the 20th century, scholarly interest in bone saddles increasingly focused on iconographic, stylistic, and workshop identification questions. In the 21st century, research gained new momentum with the discovery of additional, previously unknown examples. New interpretations also emerged—for example, Benedetta Chiesi proposed that some bone saddles may have been used in wedding ceremonies. These objects have also become more visible in temporary exhibitions across European museums. In parallel with my dissertation, Maria Schröder's 2024 monograph, *Die Beinsättel des 13. bis 17. Jahrhunderts* was released, analyzing not only 15th-century examples but a broader corpus of bone saddles dating from the 13th to the 17th century, accompanied by a detailed object catalogue.

2. Structure and Methodology

In previous scholarship, bone saddles have primarily been studied from an art historical perspective. The most common questions concerning bone saddles focused on their place and time of origin, the interpretation of their iconographical programs, and the identification of the workshops. However, bone saddles are inherently complex artifacts that go beyond their carved decoration. Because of this complexity, comprehensive interdisciplinary research is necessary. This dissertation, therefore, offers a complex interpretation of these objects, examining them from multiple perspectives, including equestrian, art historical, and cultural historical approaches.

The first part, entitled *Late Medieval Bone Saddles as Horse Equipment*, examines the bone saddles as horse equipment. In this part, I examine their technical aspects and attempt to reconstruct their structure based on late medieval written and pictorial sources, as well as surviving saddles from the period. In addition to these sources, I also employ experimental archaeology, drawing on knowledge gained from historical saddle-making traditions.

The second part, *Late Medieval Bone Saddles as Works of Art*, follows a traditional art historical approach, focusing on the carvings and offering new interpretations of their visual program. For this, I apply stylistic analysis and examine analogous artworks from the late medieval period. The main research questions concern the identification of workshops, the interpretation of the motifs, and the possibility of establishing a coherent iconographical program on the

saddles. This chapter also interprets and contextualizes the inscriptions on the bone saddles within the framework of late medieval literary traditions.

The third part, *Bone Saddles in Cultural History*, approaches the objects as cultural artifacts and aims to contextualize and interpret the saddles within their original historical environment. It also attempts to establish the topographical and chronological framework within which the bone saddles can be situated. Furthermore, it discusses their original use and function, with particular attention to their potential role in late medieval ceremonial contexts.

The final chapter, *The Reception History of Bone Saddles*, explores the 19th-20th century reception of the objects, with special emphasis on their appearance in the art market. This part also addresses a marginal but significant subcategory: 19th century copies of bone saddles. The methodology in this section differs considerably from that of the earlier chapters, as the period under examination is much richer in written sources, offering an abundance of documentary evidence such as auction catalogues, correspondence, and journal articles.

Additionally, the dissertation includes a supplementary chapter in the *Appendix*, introducing a new research method: the application of photogrammetry and the creation of 3D models, which serve as an innovative tool in the study of bone saddles.

3. New Findings

The dissertation challenges the traditional theories established around bone saddles and introduces new directions for interpreting their structure, iconography, and original context.

Typology, Technique, and Workshops

In the dissertation, I argue that the traditional typologization of bone saddles—and their classification into artificial categories such as *Bocksättel* and *Krippensättel*—is misleading, as visual, textual, and material sources all point to functional diversity. I also demonstrate that the analysis of the saddle layers and other technical details suggests that even seemingly unfinished pieces—such as the Budapest–3 saddle—were used in their intended function. Furthermore, I conclude that bone saddles were produced through the collaboration of craftsmen from different workshops—saddlers, carvers, and painters—whose contributions sometimes complemented and at other times contradicted one another

Style, Iconography, and Inscriptions

Based on stylistic analysis, I conclude that the Budapest–1 and Budapest–3 saddles originate from the same workshop and represent the highest level of craftsmanship. The majority of the carvings reflect secular visual culture, with a focus on themes of love, fidelity, and marriage. While traditional motifs of courtly art—such as unicorns and falcons—are present, new iconographic elements and meanings also emerge, including wild men symbolizing marital fidelity. I also

highlight that the inscriptions on the saddles—whether romantic, proverbial, or even vulgar in tone—contributed to the personal character of these objects and offer valuable insight into the worldview of the period. Through iconographic analysis, I challenge the earlier interpretation that the visual programs of these saddles are arbitrary, and argue instead that the recurring motifs related to love point to a deliberate conceptual framework in at least fifteen cases.

Chronological and Geographical Framework

Contrary to earlier theories—which associated bone saddles with the court of Sigismund of Luxembourg and the Order of the Dragon—I argue in this dissertation that the majority of these objects can be dated between 1430 and the end of the 15th century. I propose that their production area may have extended from the Rhineland to Transylvania. Based on bone saddle fragments recovered as archaeological finds, Vienna and Tata also emerge as possible centers of manufacture. Although several saddles were once in the possession of Hungarian aristocratic families, the precise identification of the workshops involved remains an open question.

Original Context

Although no written source confirms it, several arguments presented in the dissertation support the assumption that bone saddles may have been associated with wedding ceremonies. In two cases, it is possible to link specific bone saddles to royal marriage contexts: the Modena–1 saddle can be contextualized within the 1473 bridal procession of

Eleonora of Aragon, fiancée of Ercole I d'Este, while the Vienna–1 saddle may be connected to the planned—though ultimately unrealized—1457 wedding of Ladislaus the Posthumous and Magdalena of Valois, which was cancelled due to the king's sudden death. While the motifs and attributes appearing on the saddles support these assumptions, in the absence of concrete evidence, they must still be regarded as hypotheses.

Reception History and New Digital Solutions

The reception history of bone saddles has received little attention in previous scholarship, despite the abundance of written sources from the 19th and 20th centuries. Their active presence on the art market, along with the replicas produced in the 19th century, clearly reflect their popularity among collectors of the time.

One of the most innovative developments related to bone saddles is the creation of 3D models of the objects. These models not only support scholarly research and help promote broader awareness of the saddles, but also serve as valuable tools for future reproductions, applications in experimental archaeology, and educational use.

Publications Related to the Topic

Traditional Publications

Somogyvári Virág. „Késő Középkori Csontnyergek Háromdimenziós Digitalizálása Fotogrammetriával.” In *Opus Mixtum. Tanulmányok a Fiatal Művészettörténészek VIII. Konferenciájának előadásaiból*. Szerk. Árvai-Józsa Kitty et al. Budapest: HUN-REN Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont Művészettörténeti Intézet, 2023. 49–61.

———. „Saint George on Horseback on Fifteenth-Century Bone Saddles.” In *Saints and Sinners on Horseback*, vol.1. (Rewriting Equestrian History 5.1.) Szerk. Miriam A. Bibby. Budapest: Trivent Publishing, 2023. 73–101.

———. „Three-Dimensional Digitization of Late Medieval Bone Saddles by Photogrammetry.” *HUN-REN Research Centre for the Humanities*. <https://abtk.hu/en/news/3235-three-dimensional-digitization-of-late-medieval-bone-saddles-by-photogrammetry> (utolsó letöltés: 2024. 02.01.)

———. „Késő Középkori Csontnyergek Háromdimenziós Digitalizálása Fotogrammetriával.” *HUN-REN Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont (Ismerettár)*. <https://abtk.hu/ismerettar/ismeretterjesztes/3229-keso-kozepkori-csontnyergek-haromdimenzios-digitalizalasa-fotogrammetriaval> (utolsó letöltés: 2024. 02.01.)

Somogyvári, Virág. „The ‘Unicorn Group’: The Possenti Saddle and its Nineteenth-Century Copies.” In *Engraving, Plaster Cast, Photograph. Chapters from the History of Artwork*

Reproduction. Szerk. Papp Júlia. Budapest: Research Centre for the Humanities, 2021. 41–62.

———. „‘Nevess, Szerelmem, Nevess.’” In *Opus Mixtum VI. A CentrArt Egyesület évkönyve*. Szerk. Isó M. Emese et al. Budapest: CentrArt Egyesület, 2020. 11–22.

———. „‘Laugh, My Love, Laugh:’ Mottos, Proverbs and Love Inscriptions on Late Medieval Bone Saddles.” *Annual of Medieval Studies at CEU 24*. Szerk. Gerhard Jaritz, Kyra Lyublyanovics és Drosztmér Ágnes. Budapest: Central European University, Department of Medieval Studies, 2018. 113–128.

———. „The Art of Love in Late Medieval Bone Saddles.” MA diplomamunka. Budapest: Central European University, 2017.

———. „Zsigmond-Kori Csontnyergek a Magyar Nemzeti Múzeumban.” MA diplomamunka. Budapest: Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem, 2016.

3D Models

Somogyvári, Virág. „Bone Saddle, The Wallace Collection (A 407).” (3D modell) Research Centre for the Humanities Feltöltés ideje: 2023. július 10. <https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/bone-saddle-the-wallace-collection-a-407-699ff41c4d6b47c7866b48ca9d0e5aff>

———. „Bone Saddle, The Wallace Collection (A 408).” (3D modell) Research Centre for the Humanities Feltöltés ideje: 2023. július 10. <https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/bone-saddle-the-wallace-collection-a-408-3c73a9270fc74ee1bd897ca151e023e8>

———. „Late Medieval Bone Saddle, Glasgow Museums.” (3D modell) Research Centre for the Humanities Feltöltés ideje: 2023. július 10. <https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/late-medieval-bone-saddle-glasgow-museums-8355787135ec47aca7b101af0db00d3d>

Conference Presentations

2024 October 14 Scientific Workshops in Komárom-Esztergom County XII, Kuny Domokos Museum, Tata

Joint presentation with Bianka Kovács (HUN-REN BTK RI): A Fragment of a Medieval Bone Saddle from Tata

2023 June 9 – *Work in Progress: The Path Toward the Artwork*, PPKE BTK Danubianum, Budapest
Presentation title: *From Saddle-Maker to Bone Carver – The Production of Late Medieval Bone Saddles within Guild Structures in Light of Contemporary Sources*

2020 August 27 – *Engraving, Plaster Cast, Photograph – Chapters from the History of Artwork Reproduction*, Lutheran National Museum, Budapest
Presentation title: *The 19th-Century Copies of Late Medieval Bone Saddles*

2020 August 25 – *Historical Practices in Horsemanship and Equestrian Sports*, Riga (online conference)
Presentation title: *Love on Horseback – New Directions in the Research of 15th-Century Bone Saddles*

2019 June 18 – *The Legacy of the Middle Ages – Chapters from the Afterlife and Reception History of Medieval Monuments*, Workshop Conference, PPKE BTK Doctoral School of History, Budapest
Presentation title: *Budapest, London, New York: The Journey of Sigismund-Era Bone Saddles from Aristocratic Collections to Museums*

2018 April 17–21 – *26th Historian Students Congress in Łódź*
Presentation title: *Couples, Falcons and Nudes: Love Iconography on Late-Medieval Bone Saddles*

2017 October 27–29 – *6th Conference of Young Art Historians*, Esztergom
Presentation title: *Late Medieval Bone Saddles: A Unique Group of Artifacts in Light of Recent Research*

Individual Lectures

2023 May 6 – *The Rossfechten Symposium*, Lauchröden, Germany
Lecture title: *Late Medieval Bone Saddles*

2022 November 9 – *Celebration of Hungarian Science*, Research Centre for the Humanities, Budapest
Lecture title: *In Search of Bone Saddles Around the World – Research and Digitization of a Late Medieval Object Group*

2022 October 24 – *3D Digitization of Decorative Arts*, Museum
Science Forum, Museum of Applied Arts, Budapest
Lecture title: *3D Digitization of Late Medieval Bone
Saddles by Photogrammetry*

2020 December 7 – *Lecture Series of the Hungarian Hagiography
Society* (online)
Lecture title: “*Forever Yours in the Name of Saint
George*” – *Representations and Inscriptions of Saint
George the Dragon Slayer on Late Medieval Bone
Saddles*