

Medieval Recorder Found in Tartu

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recorder player and maker

A 14th century recorder was found at an archaeological dig in Tartu, in the cesspit of a backyard privy on Ülikooli street 15 on August 10, 2005 by Andres Tvauri.

Based on accompanying finds, the recorder was dated as originating in the second half of the 14th century. At the time, Tartu was a quite important Hanseatic town situated on a trade route between East and West. The instrument was found in the heart of medieval Tartu, in the place where the land must have cost a small fortune. The other finds support the assumption that the recorder belonged to a wealthy household. Walnuts were at the time luxurious merchandise and so was a thin, clear soda glass beaker embellished with blue glass threads – the last item was only a part of all glassware finds. A 14 cm tall stoneware jug was the easiest to date accurately and it pointed clearly to southern Lower Saxony.

The recorder was extraordinarily well preserved thanks to an oxygen-poor environment. When exposed to atmosphere, the instrument developed a small crack, which luckily did not affect its musical characteristics, but emphasized the need for prompt conservation. The recorder is turned of maple and the block is made from birch wood. The exact wood was determined by Regino Kask from the Estonian University of Life Sciences. The instrument has bone-like shape and two turned ornamental rings near the head. After photos were taken, the recorder was boiled in paraffin, which changed its parameters a little. Despite the loss of original condition, the range of the instrument is still two octaves plus one tone. It is approximately 25 cm long and, in regard to contemporary recorders, is comparable with a little lower F-sopranino (a=440Hz). The 7th finger hole seems to be for a half, not a whole tone as is usual nowadays. The blowing end of the recorder is not beaked, but flat. Finger holes are positioned in one row and drilled at an angle towards the mouthpiece. The last hole is not doubled. The bore is almost cylindrical and narrows slightly to the bell. The block is conical and so is the block taper. Through the instrument and the block underneath the windway there was a hole, at one time probably pierced by a metal pin. The latter has not survived, but its existence is proven by metal traces on an x-ray photograph. Most likely it was meant to keep the block in a certain position, but given the small measurements, a hook for wearing the instrument around the neck is also not excluded.

So far the oldest preserved recorder more or less complete is the one found in Dordrecht, dated in several publications as originating in 13th or 14th century. The other well-known medieval recorder is the 14th century instrument from Gottingen. Both instruments are missing the block and have other damages. Recently there was found a recorder in Elblag, but much data on that instrument is missing, and it is likely a 15th or even 16th century instrument. Therefore the Tartu recorder is the oldest entirely preserved and sound-making instrument. Certain specific details in its construction indicate that it is a very professionally made quality recorder, which has no relation to instruments used in folk music.