

Textile bedding in the late Middle Ages

A reconstruction proposal

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Birth of Mary, 1470/80s, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen - Alte Pinakothek Munich

Apart from the persistent fairy tale that in the Middle Ages everyone slept on a straw sack lying on the floor and at most covered themselves with their cloak, the question of what a late medieval bed looked like does not really arise. Hundreds of illustrations in medieval manuscripts provide information. So there is no question! Is there? Because if you look closely, past the colourful, often patterned pillows and quilts, you can occasionally see white edges and tails of ... what? Of a mattress? Of a bed sheet? Or of a feather bed? Hard to say! After all, the illustrations only show us what a medieval bed looked like on the outside. But what did people lie on? What did it look like underneath? How was it built, constructed, so to speak?

Quite different types of written sources provide us with information about this. Inventories and testaments. In a matter-of-fact and sober way, they document not only what is visible, but also what belongs to a bed, hidden under the pillows and blankets.

Sources

The reconstruction proposal made here is based on information from a dissertation on material culture in Lüneburg testaments between 1323 and 1500 (1). This is mainly because among the testators in Lüneburg there were also, albeit few, servants and craftsmen and those who were generally described as inhabitants (residents of a town, but without civil rights) (2). Likewise, among the beneficiaries were, as one might expect, servants and maids, in addition to family members and friends (3). The Lüneburg wills thus also give us a glimpse into the chambers and parlours of the lower and lower middle classes of a late medieval town (4) and show us that sleeping in bed, with all that entails, was the norm in all social classes. They tell us, on the subject of the bed, and this is important for this reconstruction proposal, what textile equipment belonged in the beds of bourgeois households of the time, with straw sack, feather bed, cushion, pillows, sheet and blanket. Occasionally even its material, quality and colour (5).

But they do not tell us what usually had its place where in the bed. There is no question about blankets and pillows. There, one could say, everything is still the same today. The illustrations show us that. And it goes without saying that the straw sack has to be at the bottom. But where to put the sheets and the feather bed? Endres Tucher, "Baumeister" (builder) of the city of Nuremberg from 1464 to 1475, tells us. In his "Baumeisterbuch der Stadt Nürnberg" (Builder's Book of the City of Nuremberg), he describes how the emperor's bed in his "'Grüner Kammer" (Green Chamber) was prepared in 1471.

« item in des keisers grün kamer des keisers groß spanpet, 1 strohsack, 2 federpet ob einander, 4 leilach dorauß gepreit, von golcz 1 polster, 2 küßs überzogen mit golcz und tolden von weissen garen an den zipfelen, dorüber gedeckt ein roten seiden golter; umb das pet was ein furhang von ploben scheter gemacht, und 2 nider penck auf den peden seitten desselben spanpez. (...) »

In the emperor's large bed in the emperor's "Green Chamber", there was a straw sack at the bottom. On top of that, two feather (under)beds. On top of that again a cushion and two pillows. Four (2 pairs) of linen sheets were spread over it and finally and at the top, a blanket. Around the bed was a curtain and on both sides were low benches (6).

But it is not only the emperor's chamber that Tucher describes in his master builder's book. He inventories almost the entire imperial castle. Among them are over a dozen other (sleeping) chambers, along the corridors and stairways. Among them are also chambers assigned to the servants. In all of them, besides tables and benches, there are always beds, with low benches along the sides. In them there is always a straw sack, at least one underbed, a pair of sheets, a cushion, two pillows and a blanket (7).

Regarding the pair of sheets, it is assumed that one sheet was used to cover the lower bed, the other as a cover sheet for the blankets (8), so that the resting person could lie between the two linen sheets.

So the emperor, but also his servants, just like burghers, servants, maids, slept in similar beds. This is confirmed once again by the Nuremberg poet and „Meister-singer" (master singer) Hans Folz (1440-1513) in his "Hausratsbüchlein". He also reports of straw sacks and mattresses, blankets, pillows, cushions and linen cloths in the shavings beds of the Nuremberg citizens (9). Only the quantity of underblankets and pillows and the quality of the materials used differed.

Reconstruction

Here is a brief summary of the construction of such an ideal-typical bed, as it might have stood in the bedchambers of late medieval burghers' houses (10).



Straw sack and underbed

A straw sack lay at the bottom of the bedstead, on a grid made of wooden slats or taut ropes (also belts). Above the straw sack there was usually an underbed. This probably meant a „mattress" filled with down/feathers.

The reconstruction shown here consists of two rectangular covers made of densely woven linen. One in heavy quality and filled with straw for the straw sack, the other in medium quality and filled with feathers, for the underbed.

Sheets

The sheets were spread over the straw sack and the underbed. Two linen sheets (belonging together in pairs). It is assumed that one of the sheets was used as a cover for the bed base and the other as an overlay for the blanket.

The sheets, made of medium-weight linen, are cut here from a sheet about the width of the bed and are accordingly hemmed only at the two ends.

Cushion

This term refers to more or less bed-wide cushions that were placed at the head end of the bed and thus under the upper back of the person resting in order to create an elevated lying position. So that one could almost speak of a kind of sitting.

However, in the 15th century this angle began to become flatter, so that an increasingly horizontal position became possible. Depending on the width of the bed and the desired lying height, the quantity of cushions varies.

The cushion used here is a long rectangular ticking made of strong linen, firmly filled with feathers. The cushion is enclosed in a linen cover with a woven pattern. The cover is closed on one side with a nestel cord.



Pillows

The pillows, which were smaller than the cushions, lay on top of or in front of the cushion. Pillows of different sizes were used, the smallest of which were placed on top and served as so-called head or cheek pillows to support the head.

This position, above all the other pillows, also enabled the head or cheek pillows to have a representational function.



The three square cushions used here are made of dense linen and are in covers that are also made of linen. The two large cushions are in plain covers made of white linen that are closed with a few stitches. The cover of the smaller cheek cushion is embroidered with wollen yarn on one side and has tassels on the four tips. It is closed with a nestel cord.

Blankets

This probably meant one or more blankets protected by a linen overlapping sheet. Mostly made of wool, more rarely also of silk, fur or, similar to the underblanket, filled with feathers.

The blankets filled with feathers probably served primarily to protect against the cold, while the blankets made of wool or silk were also objects of representation.



The blanket used here is made of pure virgin wool dyed with rose madder in plain weave.

Reconstructions: Claudia Zimmermann

Picture:

Master of the Life of Mary, Life of Mary - Birth of Mary, 1470/80s, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen - Alte Pinakothek München <https://www.sammlung.pinakothek.de/de/artwork/XR4M7qVLQ1/meister-des-marienlebens/marienleben-geburt-mariens>. Stand: 10.06.2022
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- 4) Ebd., S. 29
- 5) Ebd., u.a. S. 151
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