

**Blurring genders.
A case study from Pruszcz Gdanski
cemetery in Northern Poland.**

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ABSTRACT

Human body has become a crucial arena of investigations in many disciplines in recent years, and the growing interest in its status can also be traced in archaeology, especially in studies influenced by gender theory(-ies). Many scholars agree that bodies should be perceived both as a biological and cultural entity, as there is no purely biological or universal body but only its cultural and social forms. Human beings make their own bodies through body modification, hair styling, clothing or ornamentation. As archaeologists, being left with skeletons only, we are unable to observe fleshed living bodies. Although we deal exclusively with material culture, we are able to discern the ways in which such communicates various visual messages, signs or events. Accordingly, we may only comprehend the body through association with accompanying material culture that understood as an extension of the body. An interesting example of this is how we understand dress as a means by which the flesh is made into particular type of body.

The issues advocated in this paper will be illustrated by an analysis of the Wielbark culture cemetery from the Roman Iron Age at Pruszcz Gdanski, site 10, in Northern Poland. Following Moore (1994) I understand gender as a difference and I postulate to see it as a constitutive element of human social relations which may undergo changes within one's lifecycle and is not rooted in a simple notion of sex dichotomy. My aim is to further examine how clothes can play an important role in the construction of gender differences. My analysis has shown that gender was more closely linked to age of the deceased, changes in lifecycle, status or specific social roles than to the sex itself. Gender was also expressed through the mutual combination of dress items rather than by the simple opposition between sexes. In a few graves, anatomically sexed males were buried with costume items of the opposite sex. Based on my considerations of third wave feminism and queer theory, I used these burials to address cross-dressing practice and

possible reasons for its emergence. It remains debatable whether this practice is to be considered as unnatural and marginal or rather that particular individuals were buried differently in a deliberate way.

INTRODUCTION

The human body has become a crucial arena of investigations in many disciplines in recent years, and the growing interest in its status can also be traced in archaeology. It is widely accepted in the social sciences that the body does not exist as a purely biological entity but is always defined in cultural, social and historical settings. Elizabeth Grosz (1994) claims that there is no natural body but only cultural forms of body and its particular types. Consequently, the human body can be comprehended in ways established and acceptable within particular cultural milieu. In corporeal philosophies two different attitudes towards the status of the body are traceable (Meskell 2000). One follows from the works of Michel Foucault (e.g. 1998), dealing with the notion of the body as a place for and a product of elusive discursive practices, shaped by society and its corrective institutions. Thus the body is understood as inscribed and reinscribed by social norms, expectations, practices or roles. The individual body is seen as a part of broader social body politics which aim to socialize and shape it. Socialization of the body adopts mainly forms of domination, discipline or repression. As influential as his concepts of power are, Foucauldian works have been criticized for dealing exclusively with collectives with no room left for individual existence (Meskell 2000). Alternatively, it has been argued that the body which is constituted by society is not to be seen merely as a place of social mapping but also of constituting selfhood (Meskell 1999; 2000). Gendered body then cannot be treated as an object but should rather be apprehended as lived/experienced subjectively. Merleau-Ponty (2001) claims that lived experience is to be understood on an individual level because knowledge and one's experiences are embodied in particular, individual bodies. It is within our material body that we are subjectively engaged in the surrounding world, that we experience the world, in which our feelings, thoughts, dreams, desires and memories are embodied. Bodily dimension is thus irreducible to experience and praxis (Connell 1995). Our being-in-the-world is directly connected to our body which cannot be reduced to its discursive dimensions only. However, while 'reading' the body we should not fail to comprehend it as a separate, biological entity which has nothing to

do with social reality but rather must be considered along with many constituents of difference such as sex, gender, sexuality, age, class, race, ethnicity, social status *et cetera* (Gilchrist 1999; Meskell 1999, 2000, 2001).

For archaeologists, who are left with skeletons only, it is impossible to observe fleshed living beings (Sofaer-Derevenski 2000: 9). However, boundaries of the fleshed body seem to be unclear. Some scholars argue that the body is enclosed by the outer skin while others are inclined towards understanding it as bounded by the 'technologies' used to treat it (James et al 1998 cited in Sofaer-Derevenski 2000: 9). Accordingly, we may only comprehend the human body through association with accompanying material culture that is understood as extension of the body (e.g. dress). It is of great premise for archaeologists since it is justifiable to apprehend the body through its connection with surrounding artefacts, understood here as a visible manifestation of corporeality.

Clothing is of crucial importance in constructing gender identity. Eicher and Higgins (1992: 12) have outlined its role both as a repository of meanings regarding gender roles and a vehicle for perpetuating and rendering changes in these roles. Dress can be comprehended as an individualistic expression of a person, shaped by the complex interaction of culture, symbolic systems, life experience and individual needs (Sørensen 1997; 2000). Dress conveys visible messages related to one's sex, gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality, wealth or social status (Eicher and Roach-Higgins 1992; Sørensen 1997, 2000). It carries information about social worth of the individual or can be conditioned by magical-religious conditions, social rituals or politics. The symbolism of clothing and jewelry thus conveys clear and legible messages concerning not only sex or gender of the person, but also her/his position within community, social and family hierarchies (Lyons and Koloski-Ostrow 1997: 3-4), communicates different categories or events, taking on a role or may even be used as a means of transformation. Comprehending dress in the light of phenomenon of *emergence* (repeated, performative acts conducted by people in specific place and time) allows us to consider it as being directly connected to issues of identity

The word gender as used here, following Moore (1994), as a difference and I incline to see it as a constitutive element of human social relations that is subject to change within an individual lifecycle rather than rooted in a simplistic notion of sex dichotomy. Gender identity may be more closely linked to age of the individual, changes in lifecycle, sexuality, status, wealth or specific social roles than to the sex itself (Meskell 1999, 2001). Its flexible rather than fixed

status allows us to apprehend it as a performative act created, tested, validated or manipulated according to the needs of individuals or communities (Butler 1990; 1993), that is, as a process of becoming or acquiring social personae. Since the nature of gender is fluid rather than stable, the possibilities of its reconstruction are inherent.

A CASE STUDY

The subject matter of this paper will be illustrated with a case study related to the material from cemetery of the population of the Wielbark culture at Pruszcz Gdański, site 10, Northern Poland, from the Roman Iron Age (1-250 AC) – see Figure 1. It is an attempt to re-interpret data that is already available. The cemetery was excavated completely, although a third part of it had been previously destroyed (Pietrzak 1972). Both cremation and inhumation burials are represented in the cemetery, although a radical decline of cremation burials over the course of time is observable. Only burials containing sexed human remains were selected for my analysis. The results of the archaeological investigation have been confronted with the results of anthropological research. There are also some burials which contained anthropologically sexed individuals but which could not be chronologically determined due to the lack of any grave goods. These burials however were included in my analysis since they may yield clues to understanding the way gender was organized.

The Wielbark culture was an area of crucial changes in modes of burying their dead. Communities of the Wielbark culture practiced both inhumation and cremation rites in burying their dead. Wielbark culture grave goods did not include weapon or tools; in this respect, elements of costume took precedence. Absence of specific tools and weapons among grave goods should not be associated with a decline of production but seen rather as changes in the symbolic sphere and mode of burying (Kempisty 1968; Sajkowska 1981). Another characteristic is the predominant use of bronze for making ornaments and dress accessories (silver and gold being used less often while iron was rarely used). The lack of diagnostic grave goods for both sexes – the so called ‘female’ way of furnishing the dead - causes many problems for archaeologists due to the fact that the sexing of burials by artifacts over anthropological sex is more common (e.g. Hjørungdal 1994), and has a long tradition in Polish archaeology. Many prior analyses have been primarily centered around selecting the sex purely on grave goods and considering the results of

anthropological research as having fulfilled archaeological data used to assign the sex of the deceased.

Many scholars have already been attempting the (re)construction of the costume in the Wielbark culture with a special emphasis on that of women; (Sajkowska 1981; M_czy_ska-Tempelmann 1985) however; it has been mostly its usefulness for chronological determinations that has attracted the attention of researchers. My approach differs from such attitudes and seeks to find out whether any relationship between sex, gender or age in modes of dressing existed and examines how clothes may have played a role in the construction of gender differences.

The deceased individuals, sometimes placed in plank-built coffins, were interred with dress accessories or ornaments, i.e. fibulae, bracelets, bead necklaces, pins, pendants, belt clasps and bronze belt fittings. Although during the Roman Iron Age dress was subject to certain changes, from a simple model in the initial phase to a period of decorative ‘baroque’ to considerable reductions of its elements in the Cecele phase (see Figure 2), a general trend is observable.

Let us examine the particular elements of dress and their relations to sex and age of the deceased. (see Table 1, 2).

	Female (n. 58)	Male (n. 21)	Children (n. 22)
PARTS OF A COSTUME			
fibulae	18	6	7
more than 1 fibulae	22	6	3
pin	17	3	-
belt clasp	19	5	-
belt fittings	12	7	-
belt end’s fittings	5	3	-
ADORNING OF CLOTHES			
necklace of beads	9	2	2
‘S’-shaped clasp	8	1	-
beads	19	2	2
necklace	1	-	-
pendant	6	2	1
bracelet	13	3	2
bone comb	8	1	-
spindle whorl	17	2	1
hook-headed pin	17	1	-
needle	11	1	-
metal fittings from wooden trinket boxes	3	-	-
vessel	17	9	6
no grave goods	7	6	8

Table 1. Distribution of grave goods by sex.

	newborn (n. 0)	0-6,9 yrs (n. 8)	7-14,9 yrs (n. 3)	15-19,9 yrs (n. 7)	20-29,9 yrs (n. 20)	30-39,9 yrs (n. 6)	40-49,9 yrs (n. 15)	50- yrs (n. 4)	adult (no estimation of age) (n. 41)
PARTS OF A COSTUME									
fibulae	-	3	-	-	4	2	3	1	10
more than 1 fibulae	-	2	-	3	7	3	5	1	4
pin	-	-	-	1	4	1	2	-	11
belt clasp	-	-	-	-	5	4	-	1	2
belt fittings	-	-	-	-	5	1	1	1	1
belt end's fittings	-	-	-	-	1	1	1	1	2
ADORNING OF CLOTHES									
necklace of beads	-	1	-	1	4	1	-	-	1
'S'- shaped clasp	-	-	-	-	2	1	1	-	2
beads	-	1	-	-	6	-	3	-	8
necklace	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-
pendant	-	1	-	-	2	1	1	-	3
bracelet	-	1	-	-	3	2	1	-	2
bone comb	-	-	-	-	3	1	1	-	4
spindle whorl	-	-	-	1	4	1	3	-	7
needle	-	-	-	-	2	1	2	-	5
hook-headed pin	-	-	-	1	4	1	3	-	5
metal fittings from wooden trinket boxes	-	-	-	-	2	-	1	-	-
vessel	-	2	1	2	9	2	-	1	3
no grave goods	-	2	2	2	1	1	3	2	9

Table 2. Distribution of grave goods by age.

Two or three fibulae were usually found accompanying each burial, thereby becoming the most common artefact among the grave goods. These were interred with people of both sexes who died in early childhood. The composition of two or three fibulae indicates female burials (Sajkowska 1981) while men's costume consisted of one. The fibulae were found in pairs, positioned at shoulder height, with the third brooch securing the robe at the chest. Pins, typical elements of adult women's costume, in two graves were also found with males but never with non-adult individuals. Usually pins were localized at the chest of the deceased, probably securing garments, however in a few graves showed pins that were localized next to the head of the deceased and may have served as decorative elements for the hair. Belt clasps do not appear neither as an element of child's dress nor among juvenile individuals but were exclusively associated with adults. Yet, belt garments were not found in all graves containing belt clasps. These items do not distinct clues as to sex since they appear among men as well as women.

Beads, made mainly from amber, glass or silver, accounted for the greatest quantity of burial finds. Separate beads (sometimes up to four) that were not grouped as a part of a necklace were found in graves of individuals of both sexes, including those of children. Necklaces of glass and amber beads were predominately attributed to adult women although in some cases accompanied also graves of children and men. These necklaces were fastened with silver 'S'-shaped clasps, sometimes very skillfully decorated. 'S'-shaped clasps - exclusively attributed to adult females - quite often were found with no accompanying beads, and so it may be inferred that the rest of the necklace might have been made with organic materials and therefore did not survive (M_czy_ska-Tempelmann 1981: 239; 1985: 56). Necklaces were used to adorn the costume, yet in grave 168 (female aged 30-39 years) a necklace of beads was localized by the head of the deceased. This placement may be interpreted as a deposit but it may also have served as a decorative element of hairs (M_czy_ska-Tempelmann 1985: 57). Pendants occur predominately in graves of adult women although some were also found in the graves of men and in one grave of a child. Although in Polish archaeological literature pendants are said to be amulets of people who died prematurely or unmarried women (e.g. Czarnecka 1990: 67), in all likelihood they were used as a decorative element and were added to a costume. Other artefacts, namely bronze and silver bracelets, often with finials in the shape of stylized snake's head, were found predominately in graves of adult females, but again in some graves they were accompanying male burials (graves 130, 210) and one of a child. Toilette equipment as bone combs were also attributable to adult individuals, mainly women. Combs usually were localized by the legs of the deceased but in one case (grave 211) a bone comb was found by the head of a woman, probably used to fasten her hair.

Clothing in the Wielbark culture points to the presence of many ornaments without any 'practical' function (beads, bracelets, pins *et cetera*) which, in my opinion, can shed light on the importance attributed by those people to dress, garments and in general to external appearance. Moreover, occurrence of toilette equipment in graves such as bone combs or hair-pins strengthen such line of interpretation. Jewelry was an element of clothes characteristic of both young and old women as well as men and children and we can observe only general tendencies in style and use. Despite some existing correlation between sexed bodies and artifact associations in graves, many categories of finds are not strictly associated with gender. Gender boundaries may have been renegotiated as evidenced by the fact that a set of three fibulae, generally an indicator of females,

was found in a grave of male. We can assume that differences could be displayed on the level of color, shape, *et cetera*, but unfortunately fabrics did not survive. Thus gender and external appearance might have been expressed not in the presence-absence of particular artefacts but rather in mutual combinations of elements of dress (Sørensen: 1991; 1997); moreover, it proceeded with age. The age of the person is relevant in relation to the character of the artifacts found within a grave. Some items (composition of three brooches, beads, pendants) accompany people throughout the whole lifecycle, while burials of children and non-adult individuals were found without certain types of goods such as belt garments, pins or spindle whorls. Similarly, the graves of the elderly were devoid of spindle whorls, needles, bracelets or beads necklaces. Nonetheless, skillfully decorated belt clasps are specific for this stage of life. The greatest complexity of elements may be observed in the graves of adult women. This probably reflects the crucial changes which took place for women at this life stage. In general femininity, was emphasized in a costume by more elements, as compared to masculinity or childhood, and their mutual combinations. Furthermore, some graves contain both jewelry and items connected with productive processes ('sewing' kit - spindle whorls, needles and hook-headed pins) while others contain exclusively clothes and jewelry. The findings point to complex factors which helped to define the place and role of a person in society. Differences in the use of particular types of dress and jewelry may also have resulted from desire to emphasize social differentiation and the wealth of the deceased, and was displayed in the quantity and quality of grave goods. The findings of amber in graves (especially beads that are part of a necklace) further supports this idea. It is widely accepted that Pruszcz Gdański at that time was an important center of amber trade (Wielowiejski 1980: 124-5). Amber was too expensive for common people to put into their grave and it was only in the cases of rich elite males that their graves were furnished with amber items (Reszczyńska 1997:95-6). However, at the cemetery subject of this study, amber was found predominately in graves of adult females. Only in two graves (graves 210 and 218) were amber bead necklaces found with males and two graves of children. To assume that that richly furnished female graves reflect merely male prestige and wealth (e.g. Czarnecka 1990: 109) may be inappropriate and erroneous. On the contrary, the occurrence of amber in graves of women might posit that females had symbolic, if not actual, control of this branch of production. Furthermore, such a hypothesis is consistent with the interpretation applied to male burials. Mortuary data alone does not allow us to claim possession of symbolic or actual power by one members of one

gender versus another, yet it is undisputed that richly equipped female graves point to increase in wealth and differentiation between kin groups (Sajkowska 1981: 261). Additionally, we may consider other criteria of differentiation, apart from sex, such as the status or wealth of the person. Moreover, richly furnished graves contrast with graves of individuals of both sexes that did not contain any artifacts. Instead of claiming that they were graves of the poorest group of people we may suggest that gender in those cases was organized along different rules or with no connection to material culture (Lucy 1997: 163).

Pietrzak (1971: 78; also Sajkowska 1981: 250-1) has pointed out that archaeological determinants of sex do not conform in all cases to biological sex assignments. In grave 210 costume items exclusively attributed to female gender – see Figure 3 (two silver bracelets, three fibulae, gold pendant, necklace of amber beads, ‘S’-shaped clasp and a hook-headed needle) were found with a male aged 50-60 years. Three fibulae and two bracelets were found with a male aged 40-49 years in grave 130. Similarly, 218 contained the skeleton of male of age 15-29 years who had been buried along with a necklace of amber and glass beads, a belt clasp and fingering. In grave 104 a male aged 40-49 years was buried with two fibulae and a needle. In grave 151, a male of age 30-39 years was buried along with three fibulae, needle, hook-headed pin and a spindle whorl, that is, the accoutrements of a sewing kit which were therefore most often associated with females.

DISCUSSION

How are we to interpret these data when well-established and long-lasting tradition of archaeological ways of classifying burials into ‘male’ and ‘female’ are to be problematized? If individuals with traits of one biological sex are associated with grave goods linked with the opposite gender, how should such be understood? Shall we always in such cases attribute these “inconsistencies” to the imprecision of anthropological ways of determining sex or rather should we question the relationship between biological sex and socially assigned gender (Gilchrist 1997: 55-6)? Gender as a social category is fluid, flexible and thus ambivalent. It is a construct achieved rather than given (Lesick 1997: 34), perceived and organized along with different factors such as social role, stage in a lifecycle, sexual preferences, age, ethnicity or religion. Many other factors then can outweigh biological sex in constructing gender identity (Moore 1994; Gilchrist 1997: 50, Meskell 2001) thereby requiring that gender be separated from them or

treated as merely defined by biological sex (and consequently grounded in the bipolarity of the sexes).

As a consequence of comprehending gender as a complex and multifaceted matter, the existence of several possible genders has been suggested (Nordbladh and Yates 1990; Gilchrist 1999; Meskell 1999). Queer theorists, third wave feminists, anthropological observations or other examples from history, point to the existence of a multiplicity of sexes and genders, and provide us with alternative ways of interpreting cases of incompatibility between sex and gender assignments (e. g. Herdt 1994). Many reasons are to be considered as causing shifts in gender categories. They can be caused by disturbances in 'normal' development of the human body (androgyny, hermaphroditism) or considered along with socio-economic factors. For example, in the Balkans, when the family is lacking a male heir, it is not uncommon for a daughter to dress in men's clothes, take on his duties and be treated as a male by her family (Gilchrist 1999: 58). Individual pragmatism may also play a role in developing gender as was seen among early Christian communities, when women cross-dressed so that they could undertake exclusively male vocations (Gilchrist 1999: 58). Shifts in gender, as exemplified in the case of Egyptian eunuchs or in a Byzantine court, may have also resulted from certain political, ceremonial or religious functions ascribed to certain people. The adoption of such roles secured prestige for the individuals performing them (Gilchrist 1999). Well known are the *berdaches* among North American Indians or the *hijras* in India as examples of people who belonged to an ontological status beyond the male/female dichotomy, which was marked by a distinguishing costume, cross-dressing practices or specific burial rites (Gilchrist 1999: 59). From these few examples we can see that they reflect not only the body (sex), but rather individual choices or preferences, as well as social or economic factors. Furthermore, they are a consequence of the social roles that people had/have decided to undertake and are crucial to defining their status well beyond simple male/female definitions.

The question of how these people were treated within their societies must also be addressed. Were they perceived in a different way than the rest members of society? Were they considered unnatural and marginal since they did not conform to social order or accepted norms? Or quite opposite, if we know for example that hermaphrodites among Greeks were believed to possess divine power and were endowed with respect and that *berdaches* were treated similarly among Native Americans, were they highly evaluated? As the analysis of the cemetery in

question has shown, these people were not subject to more careful and special treatment during the burial rite distinctive from the rest members of community. There are no premises allowing us to claim that they were stigmatized or esteemed in some particular way. As far as grave superstructures are concerned, no significant differences are observed. Construction of graves were similar in that no traces of different treatment are noticeable in a layout of the corpse within a grave. These graves were not distinguished deliberately on the ground or by any specific – marginal or otherwise – localization of graves within the cemetery. Graves of these individuals were furnished in the same manner as the others. Moreover, no specific items related exclusively to them were observed among grave goods. Thus, all aspects of the burial rite including orientation, positioning, grave structure and furnishing were the same. Difference was noted only in the fact that graves of anatomically sexed males consisted of grave goods (elements of costume and in a case of a grave 151 ‘sewing’ kit) attributable to female gender. Not only was the adoption of elements of costume of the opposite sex by particular individuals noted, but also no evidence of sex-influenced division of labor was found. With respect to the practice of cross-dressing, such might have resulted from fulfilling some religious or social functions. Although only a fragmented and very limited number of written sources alluding to Poland during this period exist, Tacitus in ‘*Germania*’ (20) quote that certain religious ceremonies among Germanic tribes were performed by a male priest who was wearing feminine dress. Assuming that society is a whole, man in some situations (e.g. rituals) may dress in women’s clothes, thus carrying symbolic and social messages. We cannot exclude migrations and the absence of men. Noteworthy is the fact that male burials at the Pruszcz Gdanski cemetery occurred rarely, according to the archaeological determinants of sex the figure is only 4%, whereas according to the anthropological determinants 23% (Sajkowska 1981) of those buried there were males. This finding may also be substantiated as a wider phenomenon observable at numerous Wielbark culture cemeteries during that period of time. Several interpretations of this fact have been proposed. One of the most influential is that men took part in wars which at that time went on within the Roman Empire (Kempisty 1968). During the absence of men and the increased predominance of women within the social structure must had to be reorganized. Richly equipped graves of females suggest that the position of women in the Wielbark culture was high and may be supported by the occurrence of amber in female graves, exclusively. Although I am far ___ from suggesting the dominance of women over men since human relationships are more complex

and relational, I do propose that the heightened position of women within the society may suggest that men in some circumstances attained a new status and were consequently equipped with artifacts not typical for them.

Whether practices of adopting elements of women's clothes was a consequence of fulfilling a social or religious function by some people, taking on a role of the opposite sex, individual preferences or if it was determined by physicality remains subject to debate. Unfortunately, the biological evidence that might support the interpretation is not currently available. To further complicate the issue, we must also consider funerals as areas of display of social structure and that objects in graves can comment more on mourners than on the dead (Lucy 1997). Particular individuals may be given specific post-mortem treatment in burial rites, grave assemblages or in a distinctive costume. Thus we may be dealing exclusively with artefacts not belonged to the deceased but chosen by the living to convey information about their dead. From this point of view, dress should be understood as the costume of the dead (way of dressing the corpse) rather than the dress of the living (Sørensen 1997). But the fact that such practices existed, whether on postmortem treatment or while the deceased was alive, reveals that they were part of a wider social structure, socially recognized, practiced and accepted.

CONCLUSIONS

It is expected that many archaeological studies convergence between anthropologically sexed human remains and gendered artifact associations. If this were not the case, burials would be incorrectly categorized with regard to sex assignments and no further possibilities would be explored. However, material culture may be employed by people in a variety of ways to express social identity, gender systems or convey different messages. As the analysis has shown, the population of the Wielbark culture from Pruszcz Gdanski cemetery recognized gender divisions beyond a simple notion of sex duality. The differentiation of grave equipments may have resulted from the contamination of many factors. The differences observed between genders at the cemetery do not support the hypothesis that the burial assemblages depended on the sex of the buried individual but the artefacts show that that gender was more closely bound to the age of the person, wealth, status, social role or a stage in a lifecycle. The binary oppositions of elements of the costume as male versus female were not of primary importance but rather the multiplicity and

complexity of the elements in the mode of dressing were at play. External appearance was expressed through the addition or removal of accessories and in mixed patterns of their associations, which was subject to change during the life cycle. Flexibility in gendered dress and tasks is understood as a way to transgress the set “rules”, as evidenced by the existence of cross-dressing practices.

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