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Headdresses of 15th century Moscow: Archaeological and historical evidence

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Abstract

This paper introduces new archaeological findings from the territory of the Moscow Kremlin and focuses on the study of three 15th century headdresses. Two of these are men's hats (one felted and one silk) which were excavated in 2007. The third is a woman's silk cap from the burial of Maria Borisovna, the first wife of the Tsar Ivan III. These headdresses offer a unique insight into the materials, cut, construction, and size of 15th century caps and hats worn by the inhabitants of the Moscow Kremlin. The comparison of written and pictorial sources with the objects provides the opportunity to clarify the terms used in the written sources.

Keywords: Medieval Rus', headdresses, felt cap, silk cap

14.1. Introduction

The collections of the Moscow Kremlin museums include a significant number of textile fragments found during archaeological excavations. Three of these are headdresses dating from the 15th century. Two of them are caps found in 2007 during the excavations in the Taynitsky Sad of the Moscow Kremlin, while the third is a headdress that was unexpectedly found in 2011 in the burial of Grand Princess Maria Borisovna.

It should be noted that in general, finds of clothing fragments dating from the 14th–15th centuries in the territory of Russia are even rarer than in Western Europe. Felt objects (including caps) are slightly more numerous, while no cloth headdresses have been found until now. One of the earliest examples of a headdress from the territory of Russia is a cap from the burial of Sophia Palaiologina, dating from 1503 (Панова 2014). A hat made of tree roots was also recorded in Novgorod (researchers currently tend to classify this item as a vessel lid) (Арциховский 1966: 284–285). The use and production of headdresses in Early Modern Western Europe has been widely discussed (Dahl and Grølsted 2012: 72–78; Malcolm-Davies and Davidson 2015: 223–232; Malcolm-Davies 2018: 187–195; Ringgaard 2018: 34–41), but archaeological materials from the territory of Russia are much less known to researchers on an international scale.

This study of three headdresses found in the centre of Moscow considers the following questions:

1. How and where were these headdresses made?
2. Who owned them – the ordinary population or the privileged strata of society?
3. Were the headdresses typical for 15th century Russians?
4. What historical terms can be used to describe these particular objects?

14.2. Pictorial sources

Pictorial sources that depict 15th century Russians give a general idea of the attire worn during that time period. Most of these sources are book miniatures that include a significant number of cap images. According to Artemiy Artsikhovskiy, who has analysed ancient Russian miniatures (for example the Nikon Chronicle), “[...] for Russians [...] a hat with a cuff is almost obligatory, other peoples are usually marked with other headdresses” (Арциховский 1966: 292). He also states that it seems that the authentic old Russian hats of the 14th–16th centuries were also similar to the hats from the miniatures.

Miniatures from the Radziwill and Konigsberg Chronicles, both dating from the 15th century, also provide information about Russians’ costumes during the 15th century. In numerous images, it is the Russians who are shown wearing rounded-elongated hats, with cuffs that differ in colour. Headdresses of a similar shape can be found in a number of miniatures from 14th century documentary sources: for example, in the Tver manuscript of George Hamartolos, in the Kiev Psalter of 1397, and in the 14th century Sylvester collection, just to name a few.

14.3. Written sources and terminology

Special attention should also be paid to the historical terms, since these can be used to describe the headdress types in this study. Written evidence from the 14th–15th centuries is not very abundant. However, birch bark letter no. 141, dating from the last third of the 13th century (*Древнерусские берестяные грамоты*), mentions a *‘shapka’* headdress, along with other types of clothing. In the texts of the wills and spiritual letters of the Grand Princes, caps are constantly mentioned, starting with Ivan Kalita (14th century) (Бахрушин and Черепнин 1950: 7, 16, 25, 36, 59). It should be understood, however, that the phrase “golden hat” meant a crown symbolising royal power and not an ordinary headdress. Moreover, in these cases neither the material nor the cut is clear.

Accounts written by foreigners about Russia include that of Guillebert de Lannoy, who while describing his journey through Eastern Europe in 1421, speaks of hats several times; the following passage is directly related to Russia:

*[...] qui luy vinrent présenter plusieurs présens merveilleux, en baisant la terre, devant sa table, comme martres crues, robes de soye, soubes, **chapeaux fourrez**, draps de laine, dens de couraques, qui estpoisspn, or, argent, bien de soixante manières de dons, et reçeut ceulz de la grand Noegarde, mais ceulz de Plesco non... Et me donna au partir deux robes de soye, nommées soubes fourrées, de martres sebelins, quatre draps de soye, quatre chevalz, quatre chapeaux spichoult de sa livrée, et dix **coeuvre-chiefz broudez** [...]*
(de Lannoy 1840: 36–37).¹

¹ [...who came kissing the ground before his table to present him with several marvellous presents like raw sables, silk dresses, soubes (fur coats), *fur caps*, woollen fabrics, couraques’ teeth, which is fish, gold, silver, about sixty of kinds of gifts, and received those from the great Noegarde, but not those from Plesco... And when leaving, he gave me two silk robes, called soubes (fur coats), martens, four silk fabrics, four horses, four helmets of his livery, and *ten embroidered caps*...]

Two things mentioned are extremely important: firstly, the mention of fur caps, and secondly, the reference to embroidered caps. Embroidery can be considered indirect evidence of the textile material from which they are made, since it is pointless to embroider a fur cap, and embroidered felt is extremely rare. In any case, it can be assumed that the term '*shapka*' was most often used for a man's headdress.

Unfortunately, women's headgear remains unidentified in written sources from the 14th and 15th centuries. In sources dating to the 16th–17th centuries, there are a number of names that can denote a round sinciput textile headdress. A rich number of mentions of headgears are found in the probate inventories, such as those describing the property of Princess Avdotya, wife of boyar Vasily Vasilyevich Golitsyn (Жабрева 2016: 288, 293). Among these sources three names can be found:

- '*tafia*' which was, as a rule, richly decorated, made of expensive fabric, and embroidered;
- '*podubrusnik*' (direct translation 'under headscarf') which was usually made of taffeta and comprising the lower part of a multi-layered women's headdress; and
- '*volosnik*' a type of sprang or later bobbin lace cap.

According to the written sources, we can conclude that all these types of headdresses coexisted.

14.4. Object descriptions and interpretation

14.4.1. The felt cap

Simple Russian caps can be divided into two groups by shape: simple caps and caps with a crease and cuffs. In 2007 in building 96 (Inv. no. Apx-2631; Figures 1 and 2), a felt cap dating from the first half of the 15th century was found. The size of the item is ca. 26.5 x 19.6 cm and it belongs to the first group – simple caps without any additional details. The cap was crafted from raw materials of average quality. Such hats could be worn by both ordinary citizens and noblemen. Simple caps have been recorded in archaeological sources. One of the earliest felt headdress finds is a cap discovered in the Berezovetsky burial ground in the Tver region (Успенская 1993: 115). Felt caps are well-known from the materials of Berestye, where the felt object originates from layers dating to the 13th–14th



Figure 1. Felt cap. Inv. no. Apx-2631. Front. (Image: Moscow Kremlin museums)



Figure 2. Felt cap. Inv. no. Apx-2631. Back. (Image: Moscow Kremlin museums)

centuries (Лысенко 1985: 374) and Staraya Russa from the second half of the 14th century (Старая Русса). Felt caps have also been found in the cultural layer of Oreshek (Кирпичников and Савков 1979: 26). From Novgorod, there are eight known caps, dating from the 13th to 14th centuries, five of which were found during recent excavations: in 2015 (one cap), 2017 (three caps), and 2020 (one cap) (Сабурова 1997: 93–102; Зубкова and Сингх 2018; Тарабардина et al. 2021).

Felt production has not been widely studied in Russian archaeology. However, a brief consideration of felt production in the territory of Moscow is relevant to understand whether the hat was produced in the region. Despite an excellent record of the wet cultural layer of many ancient Russian cities and a huge number of artefacts, only a few papers are related to felt, including a paper by Engovatova, Chernova, Yakovchik, and Orfinskaya which addresses material from Yaroslavl (Энговатова et al. 2020: 305–323). During the archaeological studies of the Kremlin, felt objects were registered in 1979, 1994–1995, and 2007 (unpublished reports about archaeological research in the Moscow Kremlin). The number of artefacts is small, and most of these items consist of shoe insoles, which became relatively popular after the second half of the 15th century in both Moscow and at other sites: for example, in Pereslavl (Фатюнина 2012), Vologda (Ганина 2000), Staraya Russa (Старая Русса), and Berezovo (Визгалов and Пархимович 2010: 394).

A study of the database of finds indicated that the wet layer of Staraya Russa included a larger number of felt finds, sometimes up to 90–100% of all textile finds in a year (Старая Русса). This illustrates the wide use of felt and, probably, its local production. The same conclusion was made by Yakovchik, Engovatova, Orfinskaya, and Chernova on the Yaroslavl materials (Энговатова et al. 2020: 321).

There are no direct references in written sources about the felting process in Moscow. Nevertheless, due to the materials from archaeological excavations in 1979, we can affirm that the population of the Moscow Kremlin was familiar with felt objects as early as the pre-Mongol period (before 1237). Obviously, with the arrival of the Mongols (Tatars) in 1237, the number of felt products used increased significantly, with new types of clothing appearing in the archaeological record. Archaeological evidence for felt production in the territory of Moscow has not yet been identified, because it is easy to confuse tanning waste with the remains of felt production (Осипов 2014: 140). That activity can be traced archaeologically as accumulations of wool and ash. In practice, the only reliable evidence of the presence of a tannery are the remains of tanning vats, as well as tools for leather processing. In any case, additional research is necessary to further address this question.

14.4.2. The silk cap

In the inventory of objects from building No. 127, confidently dated to the beginning of the 15th century based on the ceramic complex data, there is also a fabric fragment (Inv. no. Аpx-2515; Figure 3). In fact, these five textile fragments and a certain amount of bast appear to have constituted a single object. Three fragments are damask silk, measuring 32.0 x 18.3 cm, 16.5 x 1.5 cm, and 22.7 x 1.5 cm. Two fragments are linen tabby, measuring 21.2 x 11.0 and 11.7 x 4.2 in size.

This garment was made of silk. Similar fabrics were produced in the second half of the 15th century both in Italy (Mola 2000) and in the East. The presence of constant contacts with both Europe and Asia during the period under study makes it impossible to determine the place of fabric production accurately.

Nevertheless, the percentage of silk fabrics originating from Italy in the second half of the 15th century is much higher. Italian silks are also mentioned in written sources, as are silk fabrics of oriental origin. Thus, in the inventory of the dowry of the Grand Duchess Helena Ivanovna, daughter of Ivan III, oriental fabrics prevail (Хорошкевич 1984: 29–34). The document lists, along with Venetian velvets, damasks from Siria, Caffa (Crimea), and Yazd (Iran). It seems that the Italian origin of fabrics is statistically more probable. While the woven pattern can help localise the place of production, no



Figure 3. Silk cap, Inv. no. Apx-2515
Five fragments. (Image: Moscow
Kremlin museums)

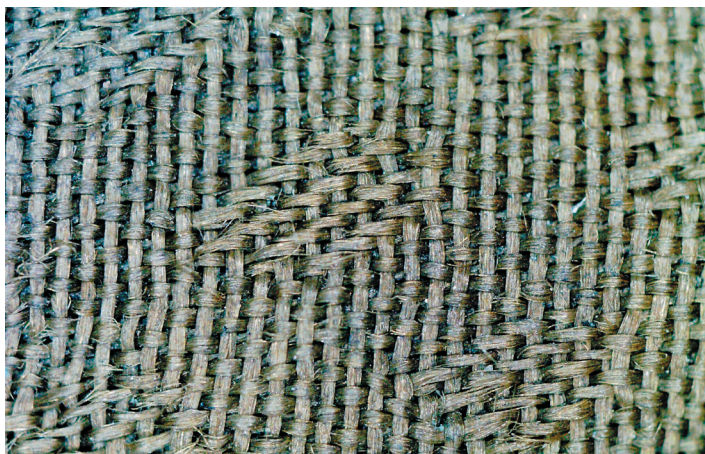


Figure 4. Silk fragments, Inv. no.
Apx-2515. Damask. (Image: Moscow
Kremlin museums)

analogies for the fabric have yet been identified. At the same time, the damask with a combination of 1/2 and 2/1 twill weaves (Figure 4) is very typical for Italian fabrics since the 13th century (Becker and Wagner 1987).

The biggest question is how this item was used. All of the above characteristics make it possible to assume that the initially investigated fragment was the lining, while the item also included a rigid frame made of bast. The closest analogies are the following items, dating to the 14th–15th centuries:

- a kind of a container (lining of a bast vessel; a textile bag like an *aumoniere*);
- a headdress-type cap.

The object's shape, as well as the presence of a seam, suggests the possibility that the item was a kind of container, for example, the lining of a bast bag or box (woven lining under the openwork patterns of wooden boxes are known from ethnography, Вишневецкая et al. 1956: 121–136). However, despite a large number of identified birch bark bags and boxes in cities with a wet cultural layer, a woven lining has never been recorded. Apparently, this is a more recent tradition for birch bark vessels.

The object could also be a cloth handbag like the European *aumoniere*, a belt pouch used to hold money. In museum collections around the world, a fairly significant number of these items dating back to the 14th–15th centuries have been preserved. However all the waist bags from the territory of Russia are leather (Курбаров 2015: 283–291) with iron fastenings. While it is possible that

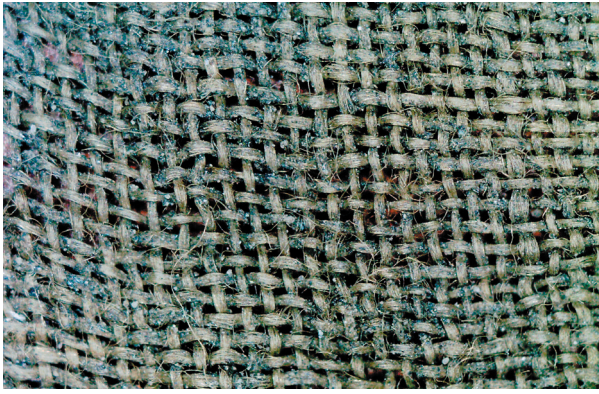


Figure 5. Linen fragments, inv. no. Apx-2515, tabby. (Image: Moscow Kremlin museums)

the woven bags were not correctly identified by researchers, at present we have no direct analogies. According to the pictorial sources mentioned above, it is much more likely that the object is a cap type headdress.

The shape of the object is not fully preserved; however, it can be assumed that the total length of the cutting edge was approximately 55–60 cm. This data corresponds to the average head circumference of an adult male, 54–61 cm. The study of the remaining textile fragments allows us to propose a possible version of the reconstruction of the headdress. Fragment 1 is a lining; fragments 2 and 3 could be cuffs,

based on pictorial sources. The bast, enclosed between two layers of textiles, helped to maintain the hat's shape. Fragments 4 (Figure 5) and 5 (tabby 1/1, linen) could be from the top layer.

The find from building no. 127 represents a type of headwear that has not yet been studied archaeologically at the beginning of the 15th century. It could be called '*shapka*' like the previous object studied, as it is the most popular name for a man's cap in the written sources. Headdresses of this kind, made of expensive textiles, could have belonged to a person occupying a privileged social position, like the third headdress.

14.4.3. The silk headdress

The third headdress (Inv. no. Apx-2825) was found under the sarcophagus of Maria Borisovna of Tver, Grand Princess of Muscovy and the first wife of Ivan III (Figure 6). She died in 1467 and was buried in the Ascension Convent. In 1929, the Convent was destroyed and the tombs of the Grand Princes and Tsarinas were transferred to the underground chamber of the Archangel Cathedral (Панова 2009).

The headdress of Maria Borisovna is 37.0 x 14.0 cm in size, made of silk taffeta. The item consists of several silk fabric fragments, stitched in a checkerboard pattern with silk thread. It probably originally had a round shape. The main part was cut while the fabric was folded in half. Its central part is quilted (Figure 7) in eight rows (stitch width is ca. 3 cm). The length of a stitch does not exceed 1.5 mm, with three stitches per 1 cm.

From above, the fabric is gathered on a silk cord, using the casing created by folding the fabric in half and passing the cord along the fold. On the bottom edge of the headdress there was a double backstitch seam; additionally, the bottom edge of the headdress was reinforced with an overcast stitch. The embroidered side consisted of two parts: the main part, and additional textile stripes sewn to one another.

The round cord is S-twist plied from three Z-twist threads (Figure 8). Similar cords are known in many of the burials from the Ascension Convent, where they were used very widely (for example, in late 17th century headdresses or in the decorations on sleeves and collars) (Юрьева 2010: 449–455).

The fabric of the headdress is taffeta (plain weave 1/1) (Figure 9). Similar fabrics were produced in the second half of the 15th century, both in Italy and in the East. As with the case of the silk cap (Inv. no. Apx-2515), it is not possible to identify the origin of the fabric. It is also impossible to determine the origin of the threads from which the round cord is made. However, it is important to mention that the checkerboard pattern decoration resembles the woven pattern of the second headdress (see above).



Figure 6. Silk head-dress, inv. no. Apx-2825.
(Image: Moscow Kremlin museums)



Figure 7. Silk headdress, inv. no. Apx-2825. Central part. (Image: Moscow Kremlin museums)



Figure 8. Silk headdress, inv. no. Apx-2825. Round cord. (Image: Moscow Kremlin museums)

The headdress from Maria Borisovna's burial should be called '*podubrusnik*' and it represents the earliest example of such headwear. This type of headdress has not previously been identified in museum collections before, making samples rather limited. Headdresses of this type are also known from the burials of Tsarina Natalia Kirillovna Naryshkina (1694) and Agafya Semyonovna Grushetskaya (1681) (Панова 2021). The two centuries difference is not surprising, as Russian costume did not change a great deal.

14.5. Conclusion

The materials, cut, dimensions, and decoration of three headdresses originating from 15th century Russian contexts have been described in this paper. Two of the items are from archaeological excavations and one was found under the sarcophagus of Maria Borisovna of Tver, Grand Princess of Muscovy. The items compared here were found during recent archaeological excavations in the Moscow Kremlin. This material was considered in context with the written and pictorial sources from 15th century Russia.

The study of the written sources made it possible to clarify the terms used for men's and women's headdresses – most likely, the word '*shapka*' was used for men's caps while the silk round sinciput women's cap was termed '*podubrusnik*'. Moreover, these headdresses were made from different materials. Fur or fabric could be used, along with felt.

This study expands our knowledge both about the production of textiles during this period, and about Russia's international trade during the reign of Ivan III. It can be considered that silk (from Italy or some Eastern countries) as a material for a headdress could be used for both men's and women's headdresses, and could be used by the privileged strata of society. However, felt represented the most popular material in Late Medieval and Early Modern textiles. Its wide distribution, likely due to local production, makes it impossible to determine the social position of the felt cap's owner.



Figure 9. Silk headdress, inv. no. Apx-2825. Taffeta. (Image: Moscow Kremlin museums)

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