

The Treasure: Women, Halakha¹ and Jewelry in Medieval Northern France and Germany²

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The Colmar treasure display in Cluny Museum in Paris was missing with one of its most important items, a key, made of silver. This key was rediscovered in June 2014. This paper describes its rediscover and the reason of its importance. Based on medieval Jewish sources, it appears to be a unique key-jewel, a key that was exclusively designed and worn by Jewish women on Shabbat (Saturday). By that women changed the Jewish rule, to date. The Colmar key is the only tangible sample of a key converted into Shabbat jewelry piece; the story of the key also reveals the special relations between Jewish women and Jewish sages and between Jewish women and Christian women in medieval northern France and Germany.

Keywords: Jewelry, keys, Jewish women, Jewish sages, Halakha (Jewish law), Christian women, medieval era

Introduction

In 1863, a medieval treasure containing many jewelry and other valuables was discovered in Colmar. Decades later, the treasure was transferred to the Cluny Museum in Paris. It was researched and catalogued, and has been since on permanent display in the museum. In June 2014, I discovered that the display of the treasure items was not complete and that one of the most important items was missing. Before disclosing the identity of this item and comprehending its importance, it is necessary to reveal its historical roots.

The Colmar Treasure

The Colmar treasure is among the most important medieval treasures discovered to date. It comprises jewelry, coins, and other valuables (Descatoire, 2007, pp. 56-89).³ It is thought to have belonged to Jewish owners for two reasons: One of the objects was a Jewish wedding ring typical of that period, carrying the Hebrew inscription “Mazal Tov”, and the coins found were dated to the mid-14th century. During the mid-14th century, the house was Jewish, and it stood near the synagogue, in an area that was the heart of Colmar’s Jewish quarter (Descatoire, 2007, p. 39). The large number of jewelry pieces found, including 15 rings, gave rise to the assessment that the Jewish owner was a pawnbroker (Hanawalt, 2007).

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¹ The Jewish law.

² Current northern France was called [צַרְפַּת] “Tzarfat”. Germany, also called “Ashkenaz” roughly covers the Rhine communities.

³ A photo I took in June 2014 shows the treasure display in Cluny museum without the key, nor was the key included in the catalogue of the Cluny exhibition “Treasures of the Plague”. I found a picture of the complete treasure with the key in an article written by Michael Toch (2000), “Medieval Treasure Troves and Jews”. In I. Shagrir, R. Ellenblum, and J. Riely-Smith (Eds.), *Laudem Hierosolymitani: Studies in Crusades and Medieval Culture in Honor of Benjamin* (p. 276). Smith, Burlington: Ashgata Press.

Dating the treasure to the mid-14th century was essential to uncover the circumstances that led to its caching. In 1348-1349, Europe fell prey to the Black Plague, which killed about one third of the total population. The Jews were accused of spreading out the disease by poisoning the water wells. This led to pogroms, in which many members of the Jewish communities of northern France and Germany were murdered. In Colmar, the majority of the Jewish community members were burned at the stake in a place currently known as “The Jews’ Pit” (*Judenloch*). The researchers have consequently concluded that the owners cached the treasure during those pogroms, with the intention of eventually retrieving it (Cherry, 2000; Toch, 2000, p. 277).

The researcher Michael Toch argued, however, that the treasure might have been hidden in other circumstances. He claimed that the Jewish pawnbrokers of the period commonly used to hide their valuables inside the cellar wall, where the Colmar treasure was found (Toch, 2000, p. 290). Whatever the case, the owners never came back for the treasure and it remained in the wall until it was accidentally discovered in 1863 by the Christian owners of the house. The treasure remained in the hands of the family until 1923, when one of the descendants handed it over to the Cluny Museum in Paris, France’s national museum of the Middle Ages, which is now its legal owner (Descatoire, 2007, p. 39).

The Missing Key

As mentioned, the treasure was researched and catalogued in the early 1980s and has been on display since under the assumption that its research had been completed. In June 2014, however, I found out that one significant item was not included in the permanent display. Its shape and presence shed new light on the life of Jewish women in medieval France and Germany.

I discovered this item during a research regarding Halakhic prohibitions on wearing jewelry on Shabbat, in which I compared the Colmar treasure jewelry with jewelry descriptions in Halakhic texts of the period. I was pleased to discover that most of the objects corresponded to those descriptions, as did their names.⁴ Initially, however, the Colmar treasure display did not include a sample of one item that was described in great detail in medieval Halakhic sources. To my surprise, I found that the item was actually found in the treasure and was listed in the complete catalogue of the treasure items. The item was a key (Taburet-Delahaye, 1989, p. 241).

The picture of the key in the catalogue matched all the medieval Halakhic descriptions: It was small (5-centimeter long), made of silver and designed as a piece of jewelry, and had a small hole in its middle for a chain or a pin. Not only is it the only key of its kind discovered so far, its discovery has significantly enhanced our understanding of the Colmar treasure.⁵

Before expounding on the importance of the key, let me describe the circumstances that led to its discovery. Following a conversation with the Colmar treasure curator, Mme. Descatoire, the key was discovered in the museum vault, in a box that contained other keys.⁶ In that moment of discovery, it ceased to be one of many keys kept in the museum vault. It became the only tangible testimony so far to a key-jewel that

⁴ The names used by Jewish medieval commentators corresponded to the medieval French names. The issue is further discussed below.

⁵ Note that a picture taken for the catalogue of a 1999 temporary exhibition of the treasure in Colmar, lists all the items, including the key (see Note 1). As mentioned, it was never included in the permanent display, nor was its uniqueness explained in the temporary exhibition.

⁶ I sincerely thank Mme. Taburet-Delahaye and Mme. Descatoire for their generous cooperation. Mme. Taburet-Delahaye, director of the Cluny Museum and editor of the Colmar treasure catalogue, for making possible the meeting that led to the key’s discovery. I thank Mme. Descatoire for her help in finding the key, and for sharing with me the different stages the key went through after we found it from cleaning to permanent display, and for including my explanations in the permanent display.

is repeatedly mentioned in medieval Halakhic sources, a key that was exclusively worn by women on Shabbat. Its discovery strongly substantiated the thesis that the medieval owners of the Colmar treasure were Jewish.

The Prohibitions on Wearing Jewelry

The importance of the key becomes clear as we follow the Halakhic debates regarding the prohibitions on wearing jewelry in public on Shabbat,⁷ a topic that was constantly debated between the 11th and 14th centuries. This topic had already been discussed during the Mishnaic and Talmudic eras (2nd-5th centuries) and in the era of *Geonim*, and the debate went on in 11th century France, the time of Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, Rashi. More often than not, the sages tended to restrict wearing jewelry on Shabbat, and some even rejected it altogether. But in Rashi's France, a change is noticed in the way the sages viewed jewelry wearing on Shabbat.⁸

To understand this change, we should first investigate the reason for which jewelry wearing was restricted on Shabbat. Underlying it was the prohibition on carrying objects on Shabbat in public—commonly known as *tiltul*, for fear it would stand for *melahcha* (work). The very carrying of any object is defined as work.⁹ Because jewelry pieces are objects, wearing them on Shabbat is forbidden. However, jewelry is worn on the body and may be regarded as part of it, much like clothes or hats. Between the Mishna and Talmud times (2nd-5th centuries BC) and the 13th century, some Jewelry pieces were an essential part of the clothes (Lightbown, 1992; Cohn, 2014).

This situation of regarding jewelry as an integral item of clothing gave rise to a controversy about the type, size, and shape of jewelry that are permitted for wearing in *reshut ha-rabim*, a specific public sphere (not all public spheres are *reshut ha-rabim*), on Shabbat. The Mishna (Eretz Israel, 2nd century BC) already quoted lenient Halakhic sages who permitted wearing jewelry in *reshut ha-rabim*, as long as those jewels were attached to the clothes or to the body and could not be removed. This ruling applied to men and women alike, as men used to wear jewelry as well (Rosen-Zvi, 2010).¹⁰

But in the *Jerusalem Talmud* (*Talmud Yerushalmi*, Eretz Israel, 5th century BC), another element enters the discussion. In addition to the technical issue of the jewelry's size, the debate now focuses on a question related to gender: Are women allowed to wear jewelry on Shabbat in *reshut ha-rabim*? Some sages explicitly prohibited wearing jewelry on Shabbat, arguing that women might remove them from their bodies during Shabbat and carry them in their hands. This prohibition is based on the argument that certain vain and irresponsible women would choose to take the jewelry off and show them to their friends.¹¹

In the era of *Gehonim* (Babylon, 8th-9th centuries), the sages allowed wearing rings in public on Shabbat. This attitude addresses another issue related to wearing jewelry on Shabbat—that of wearing jewelry during immersion in a ritual bath (*mikveh*) on Shabbat.¹²

⁷ “*Reshut ha-rabim*” is a Halakhic term that means an open public space frequented by passersby. It is distinct from an area surrounded by a wall or a fence, which is not defined as “*reshut ha-rabim*”, or from an open site in nature, where people do not pass. BT, Shabbat, 71a. Moving objects from a private space to “*reshut ha-rabim*” on Shabbat is forbidden as a rule.

⁸ This point is further discussed below.

⁹ Mishna, Shabbat 1:1. See also Mishna, Mikva'ot 9:1; Tosefta, Mikva'ot 6:8.

¹⁰ In the Mishna, we find permission to wear head ornaments sewed to a hairpiece or to a net that holds the hair together. See Mishna, *Shabbat* 1:5. On jewelry worn by men and women in the Mishna and Talmud eras, please see Rosen-Zvi, I. (2010). *Male Jewels/Female Jewels: A New Look at The Religious Obligations of Women in Rabbinic Thought*. *Reshit*, 2, 55-79 (with Dror Yinon).

¹¹ PT (Vilna), Shabbat 1. See also BT, Shabbat 57a.

¹² Mussafia, J. (Ed.). (1864). *Teshuvot ha-geonim*. Lyck: Mekitze Nirdamim. No. 73: Wearing rings in public is prohibited, but wearing rings in a yard (*reshut ha-yachid*) and in *carmelit* (open areas frequented by few people), which were mostly out of town, is permitted.

Women were not allowed to immerse with their jewelry on. However, the day of a woman's immersion is determined by counting the days of menstruation and might fall on Shabbat. The question therefore came up whether women were allowed to take off the jewelry they were wearing before immersion. Since ritual immersion is meant to purify women of any trace of impurity, anything that comes between the body and the water might prevent complete purification. Any jewelry that remains on the body is considered an interposition (*hatzitzta*).

As a rule, women who immerse on weekdays must take off any piece of jewelry to prevent it from interposing between the body and the water. However, the permission to appear in public on Shabbat with jewels worn close to the body created a Halakhic dilemma for women immersing on Shabbat, as these jewelry pieces came between the body and the water. Consequently, some sages sweepingly prohibited all women to wear in public any jewelry whose removal is forbidden on Shabbat, for fear it would interfere with immersion.¹³ The prohibition also included ornaments and ribbons women wore on their hair. During immersion, the hair had to be completely loose and thoroughly combed to avoid tangling that would prevent full contact of the hair with the purifying water. Any jewelry or ribbon was an interposition that prevented the women from letting their hair fall loosely and combing it. It would appear that these restrictions did not stop the women of the Jewish congregations from wearing head and body jewelry on Shabbat in public. These customs of the women were not in keeping with the Halakha (Ta-Shma, 1996; Har-Shefi, 2007).¹⁴

Debating Women's Customs of Adornments

Between the 12th and 14th centuries, Halakhic discussion in Provence, Spain, and the Holy Roman Empire (roughly Germany) indicates that these female customs mostly originated in the Île de France and Champagne regions. Several sages testified that women of their congregations in Provence, Spain, and the Holy Roman Empire were imitating the customs of the women of northern France and were in fact ignoring the Halakhic prohibitions.¹⁵

Rabbi David Bar Levi, who lived in 12th century Provence, expressed dissatisfaction with the custom of women to adorn themselves on Shabbat and said that those customs do not originate in Provence: "And now this custom has spread over most of our places, where women go out wearing all those things they use to braid their hair with, and no one scolds them, including all other jewelry".¹⁶ The protests against similar customs among women of the Rhine communities are reflected in the words of Rabbi Yitzhak Or Zaru'a (13th century):

¹³ The issue is broadly discussed by sages in northern France and Germany. The sages of northern France were the first to allow immersion with jewelry on. Rashi (northern France, 11th century) allows using hair ornaments that can be loosened. Rabbi Eliezer of Worms (1165-1240) allows wearing a ring during immersion if it is not tight (as mentioned, this had already been permitted by the Gehonim).

¹⁴ On the issue of the relations between women's customs and sages see: Ta-Shma, I. (1996), especially the chapter "Women are wearing jewelry in public on Shabbat" (pp. 130-148); Har-Shefi, B. (2007). See her specific discussion of the custom of jewelry wearing and immersion on Shabbat, *Ibid*, 241-248.

¹⁵ See the quote of Rabbi David Bar Levi: "וכתב ה"ר דוד ב"ר לוי ז"ל וזה לשונו, ועכשיו פשט המנהג ברוב מקומותינו להיות הנשים יוצאות בכל , ואין מוחה בידן, , ואילו הדברים שקולעות בהן שערן, ואפילו בדברים שחוצצין בטבילה, ואין מוחה בידן, , *Hilchot Shabbat*, Max Schloessinger (Ed.) (Berlin, 1901) No. 261. (The book *Orchot Haim* was written in Provence in the 13th century); Rabbi Moshe Ben Nachman (Ramban-Nachmanides, Spain, 1194-1270) gives his interpretation to the Mishnaic prohibition on "Going out on Shabbat wearing woolen or flaxen threads" Ramban, *Hidushei Ramban al ha-Talmud* (Bnei Brak, 1949) Ramban on BT Shabbat 57, 71.

¹⁶ *Sefer Orchot Haim*, Part 1, *Hilchot Shabbat* No. 261. Rabbi David Bar Levi, who is quoted by Rabbi Jacob ha-Cohen of Lunel, is probably the father of Avraham Ben David ha-Levi. He was born in Toledo around 1110, and died in 1180. Rabbi Jacob of Lunel quotes him in the 13th century to show that this situation had existed since the 12th century.

“I do not know on what the earlier sages (*Rishonim*) relied when they did not forbid their wives to go out wearing jewelry, and in our time this prohibition has spread everywhere, and it is unheard of unbelievable that such permission was given” (Isaac ben Moses of Vienna, 1977).¹⁷

Since they disagreed with this custom, it is hard to understand why the sages of Provence and Germany did not stop it. One reason may be that it had been permitted by the most venerated sages of northern France, or, as Rabenu Tam noted, they may have realized that resisting the custom would not stop it.¹⁸ Among the French sages who approved those customs were Rashi (late 11th century), Rabbi Simha of Vitry (1963), and Rabbi Baruch Bar Yitzhak (author of *sefer ha-terumah*) (Baruch, 1959).¹⁹

But why had the sages of northern France not prohibited these customs in the first place? The Halakhic debate in France reveals that their permission relates on the socio-economic circumstances behind the custom of wearing jewelry in public on Shabbat, the place of jewelry in the lives of women, the relations between Jewish and Christian women, and the relations between women and sages.

The late 11th and 12th centuries, sages of northern France might have been expected to react to the clear deviation of the women’s customs from the accepted rules. However, not only did they endorse those customs, but they also showed understanding and appreciation for them.²⁰

Medieval Fashion Revolution

There appears to be a connection between changes that occurred in the dress and adornment customs of Jewish women in France and the far-reaching changes in fashion in the Christian society of that time (Newton, 2012). In fact, that was the time when fashion was revolutionized. During the 12th and 13th centuries, Champagne and Île de France were important trade centers. The city of Troyes in the Champagne region (where Rashi lived in the late 11th century) was on its way to become an important trade center as early as the 11th century. In the 12th century, it already was one of the most important commercial centers in Europe, a commercial crossroads between different parts of Europe and with places outside Europe. Over the 12th and 13th centuries, it was the scene of the most important European fairs. Its markets were famous trade centers for gems imported from the East, and high-quality materials produced locally (Jordan, 2001).

According to Joan Evans and Margaret Scott, this was also the region where significant change processes occurred in the design of medieval materials and clothes, which eventually created a highly significant change—the clear distinction between the way men and women dressed and led to designing women’s dresses as we know them today (Evans, 1952; Scott, 2011; Goddard, 1927).

Developments in the region’s textile manufacture and trade in prestigious eastern materials gave clothing great importance in the lives of the region’s women, Jewish and Christian alike. Garments acquired economic and emotional value of their own. They were among the assets a woman received from her husband and her

¹⁷ No. 64.

¹⁸ In Spain, *Ramban* explicitly protested against the ruling of the French sages, *Hidushey ha-ramban* (Bney Berak: 1959) on BT, Masekhet Shabbat, 57a.

¹⁹ No. 240, Northern France, 12th-13th century.

²⁰ The book *Shibolei Haleket* (13th century, Italy-Germany) gives in-principle permission to wear jewelry on Shabbat, as indicates the title “The ruling concerning women’s jewels that are permitted for wearing on Shabbat”. This is followed by a reference to the explicit permission given by Rabenu Tam, see in Zedekiah ben Abraham Anav (1969), *Shibolei Haleket, Inyan Shabbat*, Menahem Zeev Hasida (Ed.) (Jerusalem) No. 106; Eliezer ben Yoel HaLevi of Bonn, *Ra’avyah* (Germany) also mentions the comprehensive permission, justifying it by saying that cities whose gates were closed at night were not defined as a public space, *Ra’avyah*, Shabbat, No. 349

own family before she married. Clothes were also a symbol of status, and among the most commonly pawned artifacts (Shatzmiller, 2013).²¹ Possessing many jewelry pieces and high-quality clothes was female status symbols. Women of the upper class made a point of wearing their best clothes and jewelry when they appeared in public. In the Jewish communities, these outings included weddings (Rabbi Eliezer Ben Natan, 1984)²² and visits to the synagogue on Shabbat (Samson ben Zadok, 1974).²³ Similar customs existed among Christian women going to church (Scott, 2004).²⁴ Significantly, at that time, jewelry was mostly regarded as part of the dress and not as an ornament in itself.

“Shabbat Jewelry”

Along with these changes, a new terminology began to be used by Jewish sages of the time in that region. One of the new terms is “Shabbat jewelry” (Hebrew—*Takhshitim shel Shabbat*). It coincides with the increased importance of jewelry in the lives of women in and around the Champagne region (Rabbi Eliezer Ben Natan, 1984).²⁵ Before anything else, the term indicates a need of the community members to distinguish between weekday jewelry and Shabbat jewelry. It is not clear whether the need to make this distinction sprang from an esthetic wish to associate certain jewelry with Shabbat—perhaps the more expensive, better designed or more festive ones, or whether those jewelry pieces matched better with the Halakhic rules associated with Shabbat, namely, they were worn closer to the body and could not be easily removed. Whether the reason was esthetic or Halakhic, there is clear indication of a need to distinguish between these two groups of jewelry, meaning that jewelry worn on Shabbat had to have distinctive features. This newly emergent need may also testify the increasing amounts of jewelry, and the resulting needs to tell them apart for use on various festivities and in everyday life. As mentioned, sages used the term “Shabbat jewelry” to differentiate between weekday jewelry and jewelry worn by women on Shabbat in public.

The increasing importance jewelry and dress had in the lives of Jewish women in northern France during the 12th century was also manifested in repeated allusions to the habit of loaning clothes to other women. *Sefer Mitzvot Gadol*, written in the 13th century in northern France, mentioned that lending clothes to women was a common custom in Paris.²⁶ The higher quality of clothes and their increasing importance are also indicated in contemporary pawn lists. Clothes were among the most frequently pawned items, and their value was determined by the quality of the material and the design.

Women Fighting the Theft

How does the increasing importance and quantity of jewelry and clothes relate to the silver key found in the Colmar treasure? The growing number of jewelry and valuables possessed by the Jewish women of that time and region called for changing the way they kept them secure. In the medieval era, goods were normally

²¹ Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg (*maharam*) mentions the pawning of clothes (Germany, 13th), in Meir ben Baruch of Rothenburg (1986), *Shelot U Teshuvot, Part III*, Cremona, 1558, Jerusalem, No. 252; Natalie Zimon Davies (2010), *Gifts in 16th c. France* (p. 51). Jerusalem: The Israeli Historical Society. In the list of pawn items mentioned by Joseph Shatzmiller, clothes occupy an important place as valuable items.

²² No. 205.

²³ No. 397.

²⁴ See Margaret Scott’s description, where she explains that the clergy prohibited women going to church with their necks uncovered, and they therefore covered it with a small scarf. Driven by the urge to appear in their best clothes, the women adorned the scarf, turning it this way into a fashionable item. In fact, that is how the small scarf came to be a fashion item with a specific use.

²⁵ No. 348.

²⁶ *Sefer Mitzvot Katan*, Ms. BNF Heb. 380, fol.60.

stored in lockable chests, and this also applied to valuables and jewelry. Different size chests were used to store different size objects. Jewelry was stored in purpose-made Jewelry caskets. The mistress of the house was in charge of the home assets' safety and also kept safe her personal belongings, namely the dowry that she had brought with her. Each chest had a key, and carrying keys was a sign that a woman was indeed the mistress of a house, that is, was married. Whether visibly hanging from belts or, if they were smaller, hidden in a purse attached to the belt, keys were the identifying sign of married women (Czarnecka, 2010; Hanawalt, 1998; Coulson, 2003; Mitchell, 2007; French, 2008). Keys were a status symbol for both Jewish and Christian women.

But the fact that women carried the keys of the storage chests in public (*Reshut HaRabim*) created a Halakhic problem on Shabbat. In the matter of carrying objects in public on Shabbat, the Halakha distinguishes between three categories: The first is clothes, which are perceived as part of the body. The second is jewelry, which may be worn on Shabbat if it is attached to the garment or the body and cannot be easily removed. The third category is that of objects, whose carrying on Shabbat is sweepingly forbidden. Keys belonged to the third category, they were objects and could not be carried in public on Shabbat. This meant that women were forced to leave behind all the keys when they left home.

The problem seems to have become crucial in 12th century Champagne. Contemporary Halakhic discussions mention frequent thefts from Jewish households on Shabbat, specifically theft of jewelry and other valuables by household servants. When the family left home for the synagogue, the servants, alone in the house, took the keys and stole valuables and jewelry from the chests. It appears that in medieval northern France the entire family used to go to the synagogue, women included.

Rabbi Baruch, who lived in the Champagne region in the 12th century, testified that the problem existed in his time. That was also the time when the wealthy women of his community began wearing keys as jewelry: "...and so do the wealthy [women] on Shabbat for fear their male and female servants would steal the keys of their chests while they are at the synagogue".²⁷ He added that he and other sages gave Halakhic permission for this custom of the women. The main point of his statement is that the key had entered the category of jewelry: "We have now permitted various kinds of jewelry."²⁸ The 13th century author of *sefer ha-neyar* (the book of paper) from northern France elaborated on the need of all women to keep the assets safe on Shabbat. He mentioned thieves in general, and not specifically house servants: "...gold or silver keys women use to protect the house from thieves" (Gershon, 1994).²⁹

In the 12th century, Jewish women of northern France, specifically those of the Champagne region, used to place the keys of their different chests in one especially made small chest. When they went to the synagogue they wore the small key of this chest as a piece of jewelry, a brooch or a pendant on a chain, attached to their body (Cosman & Jones, 2009, p. 593).³⁰ The brooch fastened the dress or the cape (Lightbown, 1992).³¹ The

²⁷ *Sefer ha-terumah, hilchot Shabbat*, No. 240.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ No. 2. The problem of jewelry thefts by servants is also dealt with by Rabbi Eliezer Ben Natan—He describes a servant stealing the earrings of the daughter of the master of the house in her sleep. Rabbi Eliezer Ben Natan, Questions and Answers, *bava metzia*: "... as she was sleeping the gentile servant stole the earrings from her ears and left".

³⁰ The book refers to a silver casket currently on display in the Israel Museum, titled "Bridal casket". This is how it is described in the Museum's website: Bridal casket (*cofanetto*), Northern Italy, second half of the 15th century, Cast and engraved silver, niello, partly gilt 6.6 × 13 × 6 cm, Gift of Astorre Mayer, Milan, ICMS_IMJ_247320131/30; B51.04.0207 http://www.museumsinisrael.gov.il/he/items/Pages/ItemCard.aspx?IdItem=ICMS_IMJ_247320.

³¹ Rabbi Simha of Vitry (1963), *The Vitry Mahzor, hilchot Shabbat*. Shimon Orovitz (Ed.). Jerusalem, No. 32. Brooches were used to fasten medieval garments as buttons were rarely in use.

keys were always made of silver or gold.³² That way, the women changed the category of the keys. Keys made of silver or gold and worn as brooches or on chains became jewelry de facto. Those specific keys transformed from objects forbidden for carrying on Shabbat to jewelry permitted for wearing in public on Shabbat. Because women regarded the key as jewelry and as such wore it close to their bodies, it was possible for the sages of their communities to endorse this custom and permit it. Notably, the brooch was indeed part of the garment, namely, if it opened or was removed, the garment would unfasten.

The Unique Attitude of French Sages

The sages of northern France approved the women's solution to the Halakhic problem and supported their arguments by relying on an earlier Halakhic sage. In the 1st century BC, Mishnaic sage (Tana)—the Sanhedrin president Raban Gamliel, used to wear a golden key (probably a key ring) when he went out on Shabbat.³³ This was also the habit of Rome's wealthy women, who carried the keys of their jewelry boxes in this way. Roman women wore key rings on their fingers in public, mainly as a status symbol. Jewish men and women copied this Roman habit and made it an exclusively Jewish Shabbat custom (Yadin, 1966).³⁴ The medieval sages concluded that if Raban Gamliel thought it right to wear a golden jewelry key on Shabbat in public, this also applied to the women of their time, as long as the key was originally designed as a jewelry piece and was made of silver or gold. Interestingly, Raban Gamliel was allowed to carry the key as a ring on his finger, but in the Middle Ages wearing a key ring became prohibited, and permission was only given to wear a key as a brooch or a pendant on a chain.³⁵

While sages found support in Raban Gamliel's authority, it is doubtful that the Jewish women of Champagne were thinking of him when they wore their key-jewelry. It would appear that much like the women of Raban Gamliel's time; medieval Jewish women adopted the customs of wealthy Christian women and adorned themselves with jewelry on Shabbat. For that custom they receive compliments from contemporary sages. Rabbi Eliezer of Metz (1962) wrote in the 12th century: "Our Women ... are important and are used to having beautiful jewels, they don't think that it is appropriate to show them off".³⁶

The Spreading of Women's Customs

The Halakhic discussion of the 12th century mainly concerns the custom of wealthy women. It would appear that those women had two uses for the key-jewel: as a status symbol and as a Halakhic solution. While they imitated the habits of wealthy Christian women of similar social status, namely, used the key-jewel to demonstrate their wealth, they wore it on Shabbat, to resolve a Halakhic problem. It should be pointed out that fastening a brooch at the throat or wearing a pendant on a chain prevented any movement of the key, affirming that it was a piece of jewelry worn close to the body and could be seen as part of the body. Christian women also used to carry gold and silver keys in a pouch hanging from the belt or on a chain attached to the belt, but

³² *The Vitry Mahzor, hilchot shabbat*. No. 32.

³³ PT, Shabbat, 1:1.

³⁴ The picture on p. 150 shows a key ring. See also the Masada Museum catalogue: Gila Hurvitz, "The story of Masada", in *The Yigael Yadin Masada Museum, Catalogue* (p. 48). Jerusalem: Old City Press. The picture shows five key rings that were found on Masada. I thank Dina Hermon, manager of the Masada Museum, and Malca Hershkovitz, head researcher of the Masada jewelry, for their help in finding key ring examples from the Roman Empire among the rings found on Masada.

³⁵ Raban Gamliel's ring is also mentioned by Rabbi Simha of Vitry, *The Vitry Mahzor, hilchot shabbat*. No. 32.

³⁶ No. 274, 12th century. The city of Metz is located in the Lorraine region, which was part of the Holy Roman Empire. It is geographically close to the Champagne region, which was under French rule.

these solutions were, as noted, forbidden to Jewish women on Shabbat.³⁷

The following quote originating in 13th century Provence teaches us that people chose to take their belt off on Shabbat in a symbolic act of replacing an everyday custom with one that honored Shabbat: "...and changes everyday clothes and wears Shabbat clothes in honor of Shabbat, to remember that it is a holy day and prohibited for work, and unfastens his belt to take off whatever hangs on it".³⁸

By sanctioning the custom of their community's wealthy women, 12th century sages in France, including Rabbi Simha of Vitry and Rabbi Baruch, turned this custom into a Halakhic ruling for future generations to abide by. Their rulings were disseminated and accepted by other sages in various regions and were also followed by other Jewish communities and women of different social classes in the next centuries. That was how the 12th century custom of wealthy women of Champagne in northern France acquired the status of a Halakhic rule all women had to abide by. But this generalization created a problem, as it did not specify what women would do if they could not afford silver and gold keys.

The sages agreed that the key had to be made of silver or gold and worn close to the throat, as part of the clothing, but two questions remained open: Whether it was permitted to wear a gold or silver key on the belt on Shabbat, and whether a key designed as jewelry but made of materials other than silver or gold could be defined as a piece of jewelry and worn as such.

In the 12th century, women from European Jewish communities other than those of northern France, appear to have strictly observed the ruling that the key should be made of silver or gold and be attached to the garment or hang on a chain to make it part of the clothing. But during the 13th century, the sages slightly changed the rules. They gradually permitted carrying the key on the belt, as long as it was made of silver or gold. Some sages even permitted carrying a copper key, if it was designed as jewelry.³⁹ Rabbi Asher Ben Yehiel of the late 13th century indicated the option of making the chain alone—and not the key itself—of silver. This Halakhic discussion also sheds light on the contemporary definition of jewelry. Designing an object to be "beautiful as jewelry" was no less important than the material of which it was made.⁴⁰

Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg (*Maharam*), one of the most venerated sages in 13th century Germany, objected the wearing of any kind of key on the belt on Shabbat. He permitted wearing a key in public on Shabbat only if it corresponded to the permissions issued by sages in northern France a hundred years earlier, in the 12th century, namely, if the key was made of silver and worn at the throat. His words indicated that this was anyway the custom of the women of his time: "They are not used to carrying keys on the belt itself".⁴¹

³⁷ The picture of Michal daughter of King Saul in the *Morgan Bible*, Morgan Libraries, 13th Century, Medieval Illuminated, Bible, Paris. The picture from the *Roman de la Rose* also shows a woman wearing a belt with an attached pouch-purse (Bodleian Library MS Bodl. 264, a mid-fourteenth-century edition of the Romance of Alexander).

³⁸ *Sefer kol bo* No. 31.

³⁹ Rabbi Eliezer Ben Natan, *Sefer Even ha-ezer*, *Sefer Ra'avan* Shabbat, No. 349 (Germany, 12th c.); Rabbi Isaac of Corbeil (1987), *Sefer Amudey ha-gola*, *Sefer Mitzvot Katan* (Jerusalem) No. 282 (Northern France, 13th c.); *Sefer Tashbez Katan*, No. 49 (Germany, 13th c.); *Shehelot ve teshuvot*, *Rabbi Asher Ben Yehi'el*, No. 21, No. 11 (Germany and Spain, 13th c.); *Maimonides*, *Hilkhot Shabbat*, No. 19 (Germany, 13th c.).

⁴⁰ "And in Ashkenaz the custom is to make keys for the women to hang around their necks on silver chains or colorful strings and wear them in public". Rabbi Asher, Shabbat, Chapter 1 (Germany and Spain, 13th century). In the 14th century, the *Maharil* (Rabbi Yaakov Ben Moshe Levi Moelin) mentions that men were also permitted to carry an ordinary key on Shabbat: "And the habit has spread to permit, as not everyone is able to make it of silver". *Maharil*, *Shehelot ve teshuvot*, No. 157 (Germany, 1360-1427).

⁴¹ *Maharam* of Rothenburg, *Shehelot ve teshuvot*, Part 4 (Prague edition), No. 532. See also "As for your question if it is permitted to use iron or any other metal as an ornament on a belt as is customary (in belts), and then carry a key on it to use for opening and closing? In my opinion this is forbidden" (Ibid.).

The emphasis the *Maharam* of Rothenburg placed on the custom of women raises another question: Why did the discussion turn specifically around women and keys? Did men have no need to carry keys on Shabbat?⁴² Between the 11th and 14th, most sages agreed that only women should carry their keys on their upper body.⁴³

Jewish and Christian Women's Fashion

With regard to Jewish women imitating Christian women in using the key-jewel, we should keep in mind that the two communities lived in close vicinity to each other (Baumgarten, 2011).⁴⁴ In the cities, Jewish and Christian women lived near each other, were in daily contact, and sometimes were next-door neighbors. There is evidence that Christian women sometimes lent dresses to Jewish women (Taitz, 1994, p. 30). In illuminated Jewish and Christian medieval manuscripts, there is no clear distinction between Christian and Jewish women, as the artists depicted them identically.⁴⁵ In fact, it is not known whether Christian and Jewish women could be told apart by their clothes.

Illuminated manuscripts also show that Jewish women wore the same kinds of jewelry as Christian women. This is also supported by Rabbi Eliezer Ben Natan (12th century), who described Jewish women trading in jewelry with Christians.⁴⁶ These contacts emerge also from the names of Jewelry pieces used by Jewish women. *Sefer ha-neyar* (13th century France), used the medieval word to describe a brooch. The author called the brooch *fermail*: “and a *noshka* (נושקא) of silver and gold known in our language as *fermail* (פרמאייל)”.⁴⁷ In medieval French, the final *L*, which nowadays is mute, was actually pronounced, which is indicated by the Hebrew spelling of the word.⁴⁸

Another interesting linguistic point that comes up from this quote is that in mentioning “our language”, the author actually meant French, which he considered his language rather than Hebrew. Similar use of medieval French terms for jewelry also appeared in Rabbi Moshe of Coucy (13th century) Halakhic discussion. Rabbi Moses of Coucy named the pin used to fasten the dress *Eshpingel*. Other jewelry pieces mentioned in Halakhic sources—brooches, clasps, and keys, were given medieval French names, and their description is identical to

⁴² The Book of Hassidim clearly indicates that keys were in fact carried by men in the synagogue, and that women had to ask the men for them: “One woman left the synagogue before the worshippers were through praying, and sent her servant to her husband for a key. When he left the synagogue, he asked his wife: ‘What do you need the keys for?’ She said that gentiles came to exchange their pawns because they had to go to the church. Said the husband: ‘You have sinned by leaving the synagogue, and then sent for the keys so that they could get back their pawns and go to church. By this you rejected the sacred and favored abomination’”. Yehudah bar Shmuel, *Sefer Hasidim* (The Book of the Pious), Judah H. Wistinetzki (Ed.). (Berlin, 1891), 133, No. 485 (Hebrew).

⁴³ Notably, sages based the permission they gave women to wear ornaments on the custom of a man—Raban Gamliel. On storing objects in chests see “...and they place the keys of all her chests in one casket” Mahzor Vitry, *hilkhot Shabbat*, No. 32.

⁴⁴ On the close contact and similar customs see Elisheva Baumgarten (2011), “*veyafeh hen ossot* (and they are right to do so): A new perspective on the custom of women not to go to the synagogue during menstruation in medieval Ashkenaz”. In Avraham Reiner (Ed.), *Ta Shma, Jewish Studies in Memory of Israel M.* (pp. 85-104). Alon Shvut: Tevunot Press.

⁴⁵ See for example: St. Louis Psalter, 13th Century France, Rebacca. (Ms lat. 10525. BNF). In this Psalter, Rebacca is depicted as a contemporary Christian woman. See also “London Miscellany” Jewish manuscript, Northern France, 13th century. Here Esther is depicted as a contemporary woman, wearing the same clothes women used to wear. This is one of many examples of identical illustrations of Jewish and Christian women in illuminated manuscripts. These illuminated descriptions match written descriptions by Rashi and other sages of the era. A similarity is also noticed between the Halakhic written descriptions and archaeological finds of such jewelry.

⁴⁶ “And a gentile came and brought two silver jewels [*batei nefesh*] weighing three quarters and brought them to the house of Reuben and his maid bought them...” Rabbi Eliezer Ben Natan (Ra’avan), *Responsa*, No. 113.

⁴⁷ *Sefer ha-neyar*, G. Apfel (Ed.). (1995), Jerusalem, *Hilchot Shabbat*, No. 2.

⁴⁸ Léon de Laborde, *Glossaire français du Moyen Âge: à l’usage de l’archéologue et de l’amateur des arts. (précédé de) L’inventaire des bijoux de Louis, duc d’Anjou, dressé vers 1360* (Reproduction en fac-similé), (Paris, 1872), p. 312.

the Jewelry found in the Colmar treasure.⁴⁹ This was the case with the key of the Colmar treasure. Does finding a key among the objects that belonged to a Jewish pawnbroker indicate that the key was used by a Jewish woman?

The Pin Jewel

A silver key that appeared on a list of pawned objects owned by a Jewish woman in Manchester, England (13th century) suggests that the key of the Colmar treasure was not necessarily used by a Jewish woman, but might have been pawned by a Christian woman (Shatzmiller, 2013, p. 48). Although this could be possible, another object included in the Colmar treasure supports the assumption that the key was in fact used by a Jewish woman. This object is a medieval French *Eshpingel* or *Épingle* in modern French, a silver pin (and not an eyed needle) with a square head (Taburet-Delahaye, 1989, p. 241).⁵⁰ This type of pin is repeatedly described in Halakhic sources next to the key⁵¹ as an item exclusively used on Shabbat. It is also said to attach the key to the garment on Shabbat: “And there is a pin and she uses it to fasten her dress around her neck or her outer garment (written *cota* [קוֹטָא])”.⁵² Such a pin is also described in detail by Rabbi Moses of Coucy: “But it is permitted to go out with a pin without a hole that has a head on one end, a kind of Eshpingel in the foreign language, which is called jewelry”. Rashi, who lived in Champagne in the 11th century, was the first to use this French word for the pin. This is the medieval French word.⁵³ Rashi also used the French word of his period—*fermaille*—to describe the brooch: “Fermail, [בת נפש] called *nushka* used to fasten the edges of a dress”.⁵⁴

The Halakhic sources underline the importance of the pin in connection with wearing jewelry on Shabbat, as it keeps the Jewelry, specifically a key, attached to the garment and prevents it from moving: “... and any jewelry worn on a garment must be fastened to the garment by a pin”.⁵⁵ “... and the same goes for a silver or golden key that has a pin stuck in it, making the jewelry permitted”.⁵⁶ The Colmar treasure is the only Jewish jewelry collection that includes both a key and a pin. The shape of the Colmar treasure key and the pin matches in every detail the written rabbinical descriptions of the period, increasing the probability that they were both worn in the Middle Ages by Jewish women.

Conclusions

Other than being the first archeological evidence of women’s jewels worn on Shabbat, the discovery of the key and the pin is important for another reason. Until now, the only evidence that the treasure’s owners were Jewish was the location of the house where it was found and the Jewish wedding band found among the objects. The discovery of the key and the pin, both made of silver, further affirms that the treasure owners were Jewish and that it was probably in use by Jews. Even if the treasure objects were pawned, it is quite possible that Jews

⁴⁹ A picture of a brooch similar to the one found in the Colmar treasure also appears in the *Psalter of Blanche of Castile, France, Paris, c. 1230*, BNF. Ms. lat. 1186. Fol. 41.

⁵⁰ Eshpingle (Épingle) Colmar treasure 14th century, H 6.1cm, Silver Cl. 20679.

⁵¹ *Sefer Even ha-ezer, Sefer Ra’avan*, Rabbi Eliezer Ben Natan, Shabbat (Jerusalem, 1984). No. 349.

⁵² *Sefer shibolei haleket*, Shabbat, No. 106. France, 12th c.; *Mahzor Vitry, Shabbat*, No. 32, 12th c. France. Additionally: *Sefer ha-trumah, Rabbi Barukh, Shabbat*, No. 240, Metz-Lorraine, the Holy Roman Empire, 12th c.

⁵³ A golden Eshpingola, that is, a pin that has no hole, and one of its sides is thick, and fastens the (garment) at the neck of a scarf. *Shibolei Haleket*, Shabbat, No. 106 (12th century, northern France). Also *Sefer mitzvot gadol* [לאורי], No. 65.

⁵⁴ Rashi, BT Shavuot, 6b.

⁵⁵ *Sefer ha-neyar, hilchot Shabbat*, 2, France, 13th c.

⁵⁶ *Sefer kolbo* No. 31, Provence, 13th c.

pawned them with a Jewish pawnbroker.

In summary, I argue that the key is a distinctively Jewish jewelry. Its definition as such is based on the circumstances and the way it was worn, and not on a specific Jewish design, such as that of the wedding band found in the Colmar treasure.⁵⁷ In the case of the key, Jewish women used materials and designs that were common among Christian women of their time and adapted them to suit their specific Shabbat needs. They took the key that served on weekdays as a useful object, a piece of jewelry, or an amulet and adapted it for use on Shabbat. To date, the Colmar key is the only tangible sample of a key converted into Shabbat jewelry piece that originated in women's customs. This is a key that was rediscovered in the spring of 2014, was cleaned, and is currently on permanent display at the Cluny Museum, with a scholarly description of its role among Jewish women and its importance within the treasure.

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⁵⁷ The wedding ring with the engraved words "mazal tov" is an example of a specific Jewish design. Another example of a jewelry designed with Jewish symbols is a signet ring from the 1st c. CE found in Masada. While seemingly a regular signet ring, it carries the form of a chalice typical of Jewish coins from the Jewish-Roman War. I thank Malka Hershkovitz for calling my attention to this detail.

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