

Commercial Signs on the Surfaces of Historical Wood Constructions

During realization of the program on the research of roof frames carried on by KOBDiZ in Warsaw in 2007 interesting signs were found in a seminary church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St Joseph the Bridegroom. They were found on the surface of wooden elements of the roof construction. These signs consist of sequence of letters and Arabic numerals separated by small signs of 'v' shape. One complete sign was found in the roof construction over the transept / from the southern side/, others were located over aisles / one in the southern side and four in the northern/ and on the truss of the roof construction.

The roof construction over the nave was assumed to originate from the period of the construction of the church which was confirmed by dendrochronological studies. However as a result of the examination of the construction in 2013 the wooden beam with the sign was described as an element added later as a form of reinforcement of the earlier original construction. The remaining signs probably originate from the middle 19th c. when the roofs above the aisles were repaired. Discovered signs have common, characteristic features like: the size of letters and numerals /130-140mm/, shape of letters, spacing, location / by the edge of an element/. They all start with a letter N and end with capital letters BB. Probably the same tool was used to make these shallow marks on the already finished surface of the timber.

In the photos we can clearly see the digits used in the signs:0,1,2,3,4,5,6,8,9. /7 is missing/. It is difficult to interpret the sign following digit 4 / in two signs/ and digit 9 / in one sign/. It looks more like fractional representation. We can clearly see on two elements digit 4 and 'unknown value' and on another one - digit 9 and 'unknown value'. Digits make three numerals, separated by little signs of 'v' shape. The first sign Nv306v4?v10vBB³, the second Nv45v4?v9vBB and the third Nv108v5v9vBB the following ones are Nv246v5v9?vBB, Nv358v5v8vBB. We can see the letters N / at the beginning/ and BB /at the end/, although in letter B there is unusual way of separating elements by large spaces between them. The shape of letters and digits

¹ National Heritage Board, Warsaw

² eng. architect

³ mark '?' used for unrecognized signs

is simplified – the tool which was used, did not allow for making round elements of letters and numerals, although we can see that it was used in a very skillful way. Letters and digits are elaborated very carefully. They were cut on the hewn surface of the wood. Visible cracks of the wood caused by drying separate two consecutive signs. We can deduct that the signs were made on fresh timber, which was processed before drying. This make us think that wood was not processed in a form of a balk on the building plot, but it was prepared earlier in the woodyard. We can presume that processed and signed wood was transported to the building plot, where processing was continued to obtain required length and making carpentry joints before inserting a wooden element into the construction.

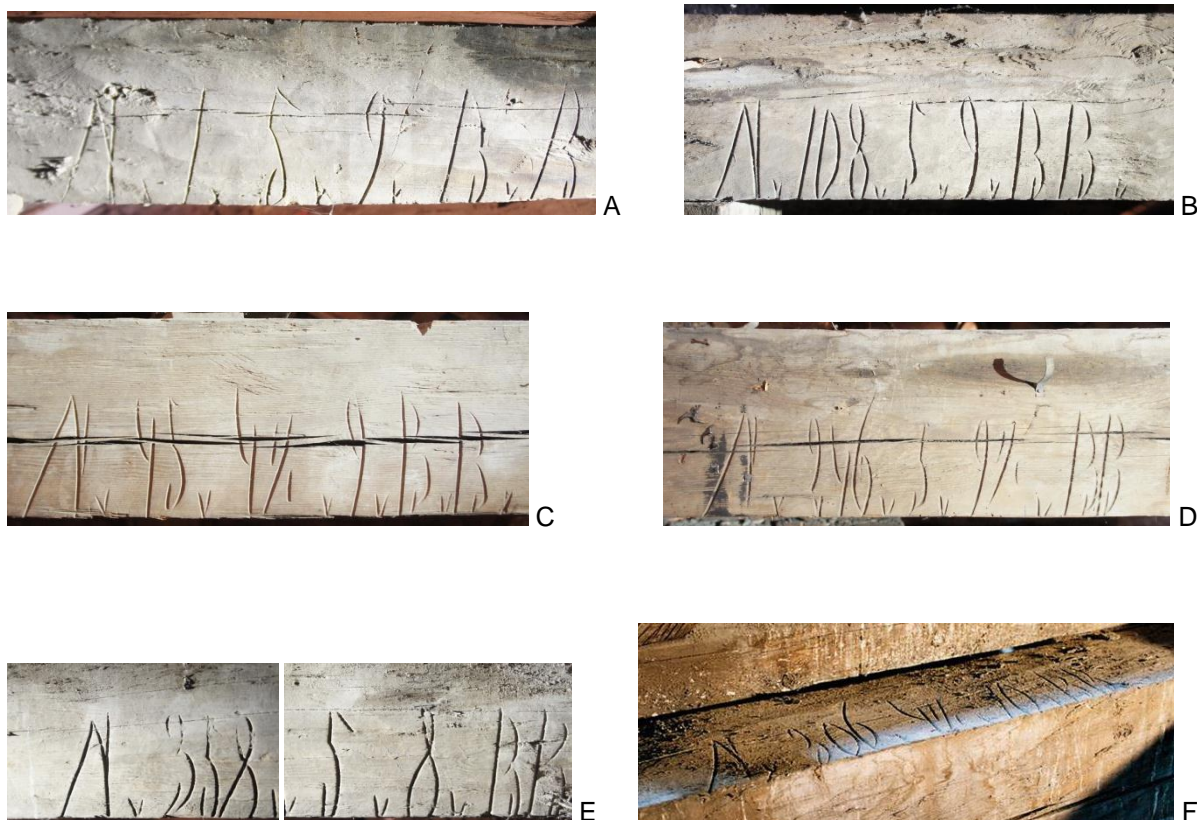


fig.1 Commercial signs on the elements of roof construction in a seminary church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St Joseph the Bridegroom in Warsaw / photo D. Maczynski/. A-E girder beams over the aisles, F a beam added to the construction of the roof frame over the transept.

Other sequences of digits and letters were found in the building of a Calvary in Wazytki Nunnery in Warsaw. They were localized on the elements of roof construction

/rafters/ and on a part of a stud wall. They are probably from middle 19th c and were made during a renovation of the building. The inscriptions are longer than those in the church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St Joseph the Bridegroom in Warsaw. These inscriptions contain additional symbols in form of sets of little strokes. We can see these marks in fig. 2



Fig.2 Marks on the rafters In a Calvary of Wizytki Nunnery In Warsaw - photo D. Sliwinska (the photo was rotated to see the marks more clearly)

We can see here the sequence of marks: SKC N 70 39 5 |I|I , N 239 20 8/6 730 JG, N 243 18 |II 730 JG.

We can observe a similar shape of letters and digits, location of the signs near one edge of the element and repeatability of some parts of the inscription. The height of the letters and numerals is estimated to 100 -105 cm.

On a post of the stud wall one more sign was found and documented /fig.3/



Fig.3 Inscription on a post of the stud wall / in the picture shown horizontally/, reproduced in two parts / no technical possibility to show the whole inscription/ - photo D Sliwinska

In Warsaw in St Jacobs Church in Tarchomin, in the roof construction over the nave two commercial sings on two different parts of the construction were found. Both begin with letter N, which is followed by a sequence of digitals /fig. 4/



Fig.4 Signs from the collar beam later added to the construction in the roof frame of St Jacobs Church in Tarchomin, Warsaw

In Mazowsze region churches In Kołacinek and Grodziec similar inscriptions were found. In Kołacinek an inscription is on the element added to the original 18th c construction probably in the 19th c. / fig.5/. In Grodziec two inscriptions were found on the roof frame on the top truss beam from the 19th c. / fig.6,7/



Fig.5 A mark in a church in Kołacinek (photo M. Warchoł)



Fig.6 Marks in a church in Grodziec on the top truss beam of the construction.

Some other inscriptions and signs probably of the middle 19th c were localized in three tenement houses in 3rd of May street in Gdansk. In the buildings 21 a and 21 d they are situated on the tie beams in the cellar and on the rafters of the roof construction in the building 21 c. We can also see them on the purlin, upward braces and posts of the roof frame as well as on the stud walls of the building in the attic. The signs are only on one side of the beam / with the exception of the tie beam in the cellar of the building 21d/. Smaller elements like rafters have different surfaces, which can mean that their size was changed.

The signs differ in style, and height of letters and numerals depending on the height of the beam. Moreover some of them are written in italics / slanted to the right or left side/. Sometimes different styles of inscriptions appear on one element. The longest sequence has 351 cm / tab 1 fig 9/. We can clearly distinguish several types of sequences of signs.

The first one resembling an arrow with one 'x' or more above it. In case of large tie beams in the cellars a vertical arrow separates two sequences of signs written in two lines. In the first line on the right side there are single digits / usually 3 or 4/. In the second line to the left: the sequence starts with capital N separated by a sign 'v' from 4 to 5 digits forming a numeral ended by one of three possible types of signs: 'v', 'x', or '^'. On the right side of the arrow there are two digit numerals. In the photo No 4 we can see the following signs:

$\begin{array}{c} \updownarrow 3(\\ \times \\ \times \\ \times \\ \times \\ \downarrow \end{array}$	$\begin{array}{c} \updownarrow 4 \\ \times \\ \times \\ \times \\ \times \\ \downarrow \end{array}$	$\begin{array}{c} \updownarrow 3\backslash \\ \times \\ \times \\ \times \\ \times \\ \downarrow \end{array}$	$\begin{array}{c} \updownarrow 4 \\ \times \\ \times \\ \times \\ \times \\ \downarrow \end{array}$
Nv1223 _l 19	Nv6625 _x 12	Nv1520 _x 18	Nv2,909 _v 18

On the narrow beams there is only one line of signs of one of two possible types. After the arrow we can find bar coding eg. II x^{ll l) l)} or numerals similar to these in two line signs (tab.1 fig 1-5)

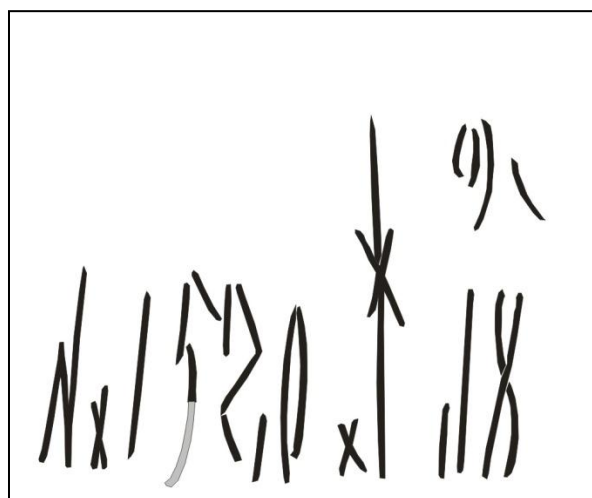



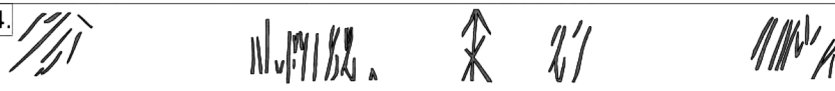



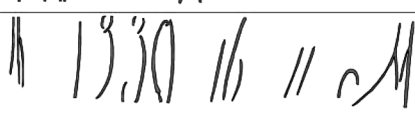
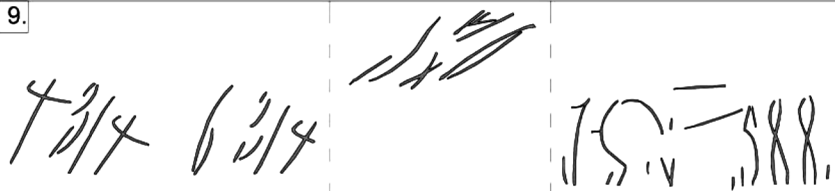
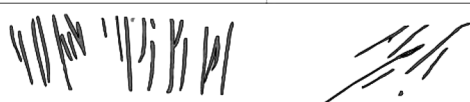



Fig.7 Signs on the rafters in tenant houses at 3rd of May Street in Gdansk
 - photo M. Jedlikowska

Signs beginning with letter 'N' May occur without arrows and may be ended with letters as in the first two examples (fig.8-AB) NvJ2I | III | J 9R, Nx3267x16 R4B. In some cases digits are also preceded by numerals (fig. 8 CD): JS 1009, JS v 588. Among all identified signs we can find letters B, J,M,R (tab.1 fig 7,8) It is difficult to interpret repeated signs /v/ or /^/ (tab 1, fig 4-6) and the whole sequence of 101vv in some cases ended with a letter which we may identified as R (tab 1 fig 9-11)



Fig. 8 Signs on the rafters of tenant houses at 21a,C,D 3rd of May Street in Gdansk (photo M. Jedlikowska)

A TABLE OF SELECTED SIGNS IN TENANT BUILDINGS AT No 21 A,C,D 3 MAY ST. IN GDANSK		
1.		Building 21c a rafter 13,5x11,5 cm ' ') (' v *
2.		Building 21C an upward brace 15x13,5 cm ‡ " ' ')
3.		Building 21D a tie beam 13x13 cm * ‡ 18 Nv6833v
4.		Building 21C a rafter 13,5x13,5 cm * Nv1'4182 ‡ 2'1 10* R
5.		Building 21C a rafter 13x13 cm * Nv158'48 ‡ 2'4 10* R
6.		Building 21C an upward brace 15x13 cm 10 *
7.		Building 21C an upward brace 15x13 cm 116 R
8.		Building 21C a timber frame's bolt /?/ 15x15 cm 16 1330 16 11 M
9.		Building 21A a tie beam 37,5x22 cm 4314 6314 * J * 588
10.		Building 21C un upward brace 14x14 cm *
11.		Building 21C a tie beam 35x22cm *
<p>* signs difficult to interpret</p> <p>— — line of cut actual length of signs</p> <p>0 10 50 cm</p>		

Tab.1. Table of selected signs in tenant buildings AT No 21 A,C, D 3 May St. in Gdańsk, with kinds of elements their dimensions and interpretation - developed by M. Jedlikowska

Basing on the presented examples we can make a following hypothesis: signs on the surface of the wooden constructions are the commercial marks of a batch of partly processed wood delivered to the building plot. 'N' the letter usually at the beginning of the sequence probably stands for the number of the batch. The numerals may define number and size of the elements (size is in old units), the last

part of the inscription - letters are usually initials of the owner of the woodyard. In some cases we can find symbols of different types of wood. If we assume that it was the way of marking a certain batch of wood for sale it is possible that the material delivered to the building plot contained elements from trees cut in different years and from different parts of the country. In that case some elements may have been stored for shorter or longer time in the timber yard.

Very interesting signs from the middle 19th c were found in Belgium (in historical buildings in Brussels) Some of them in their form, shape of letters and symbols resemble the signs found in Gdansk. The Royal Institute of Artistic Heritage, University of Liege and Ministry of Brussels Capital Region started a common research program making an attempt to decipher these signs at the end of 2013.



Fig . 9 Commercial sign on the roof frame of middle 19th c tenant house in Brussels (photo: ©MRBC-DMS; CEA/ULg; KIK-IRPA).