A lost medieval garment?

Abstract

The meaning of the word *katela*, used by rabbis the Middle Ages, is in question. The search for its meaning revealed an unknown breast cover, used by women to emphasise their breasts. This has led to a fascinating new perspective on Jewish women’s life in the Middle Ages.

Introduction

A *katela*, an unknown garment, was worn by Jewish women in medieval France. I found it described in Jewish legal sources, where it was the focus of rabbis. As of now, I still have not found any other evidence of its existence. In this article, I seek to characterise this garment, explain why it was the subject of rabbinic discussions, and suggest that it may be the missing link in the chain of medieval women’s attire.

The earliest surviving description of the mysterious garment was authored by Rashi (Rabbi Shelomo Yitzĥaki; 1040-1105; Troyes, Champagne), one of history’s most prominent rabbis and the preeminent Jewish exegete of the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud. Commenting at the end of the eleventh century or the beginning of the twelfth on the word *katela*, encountered in the Talmud, he defined it thus:

A distinguished garment hung from the neck over the heart so that what she eats will not fall on her clothing. It has a section for laces like that made for pants. One inserts in it a wide strap, and she wraps it around the strap, because the garment is very wide, and she ties the strap around her

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2 The Talmud is a corpus of Jewish law completed in Babylonia during the fifth century AD. See n. 7.

3 The correct pronunciation of the Hebrew word is unclear. Although it can be vocalised as *katla*, I prefer *katela*, since this word first appears in works of the second to the fifth centuries AD, apparently referring to an ornament called a *catena*, as discussed below. See Simpson 2018, 620-623.

4 Printed editions read *u-molalto*; British Library MS Or. 5979 [409] has *ve-golalto*. There appears to be no difference in meaning.
neck and fastens it tightly around her neck so that her flesh will protrude and she will appear buxom. Since the strap is smooth and wide, it does not injure her.⁵

According to Rashi, the *katela* was worn over other garments. It served as an apron covering the chest and thus keeping the wearer’s clothing clean while she ate. In addition, the *katela* was a decorated breast cover. Rashi therefore terms it “a distinguished garment,” probably in contrast to a regular apron. He adds in a subsequent gloss that there were laces attached to the main piece of fabric, which was decorated with gold motif.⁶

The presence of gold ornamentation on the *katela* makes clear that it was no ordinary apron, but in fact a most expensively decorated item. This garment in particular was decorated, I presume, for a practical reason: since it was a small piece of fabric, it was easier and cheaper to decorate than the entire garment worn underneath, and it could be easily removed, cleaned, and worn over a different lower garment (FIG. 1). In his later treatment of the garment, Rashi uses two Old French words. According to his description, the *katela* consisted mainly of *pedanz*, meaning “strips,” and *mostnic*, meaning “a piece of fabric.” The use of these two non-Talmudic words suggests that such a breast cover was used in Christian society as well.

The *katela* is first mentioned in the Mishna, the first broad corpus of Jewish law composed in the Land of Israel during the second century AD, and later appears in the fifth-century AD Babylonian Talmud, much of which is a commentary on the Mishna.⁷ In both the Mishna and the Talmud, *katela* clearly refers to an ornament,⁸ specifically a piece of jewellery that women wore on their chests to accentuate their breasts, in the manner of Greek and Roman women—originally called a *catena*.⁹ However, by the eleventh or twelfth century, Rashi clearly understood the word as signifying an item of clothing, as evidenced by his use of the Hebrew word *beged* (“garment” or “piece of cloth”).

How, then can we read this change? Was the purpose of Rashi’s garment to emphasise the chest and specifically the breasts? The design of the main items of clothing worn by women in eleventh-century Europe had changed little since the Roman era; it was still loose and retained a similarity to the Roman garment. It appears from Rashi’s commentary that just as women had used the *catena* as jewellery during the Roman era, in his day they wore accessories on top of their garments to emphasise the chest, which indeed is the function that he describes.¹⁰

Other medieval rabbis’ works indicate that Jewish women in the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries wore the *katela* every day and that it was an essential part of their attire. The To-

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⁵ Rashi, BT Shabbat 57b, s.v. *katela askinan*.
⁶ Rashi, BT Shabbat 59b, s.v. *menakta pe’erei*. See also Rashi’s previous gloss, as well as Steinsaltz 1989.
⁷ The Babylonian Talmud (BT) is paralleled by the Jerusalem Talmud (JT; c. 400), which was compiled in the Land of Israel. The Babylonian Talmud proved far more popular, and it was on this Talmud that Rashi and his successors wrote their commentaries. The term “Talmud” is used here for the Babylonian Talmud unless otherwise noted.
⁸ See, e.g., Mishna Shabbat 6:1: “With what may a woman go out and with what may she not go out? She should not go out … with a *katela*;” BT Shabbat 57b: “Here we are dealing with a *katela*, since a woman fastens [it] tightly around her neck, since she wants to appear buxom.” (The latter passage is paraphrased in part by Rashi; see above.)
⁹ Concerning the *catena*, see Ewing 1978, 14-15.
¹⁰ On Roman dress and particularly items that women wore on their chests, see Kopytoff 1986, 67-68.
safists, a group of twelfth- and thirteenth-century rabbis in France and the Holy Roman Empire who carried on Rashi’s exegetical work, wrote that women did their best to avoid taking off the katela: “One should not be concerned that she might take it off, because she does not remove it since she would not appear buxom.” Women, according to the Tosafists, would not take off the katela without thinking, since they would not wish to look as if they did not have large, firm breasts.

Taking his lead from these French and German rabbis, the preeminent thirteenth-century scholar Rabbi Asher ben Yehiel (1259-1327; Holy Roman Empire and Spain) claimed more specifically that a woman would not take off the katela on Sabbath, “since she would be embarrassed to remove [it], because then she would not appear buxom.” From the thirteenth century onward, rabbis wrote that the katela was not entirely comfortable, which I take as evidence that its main use was to fashionably emphasise the chest, rather than as an apron. Rabbi Yitzḥak ben Moshe of Vienna, also of the thirteenth century, stated in his book Or Zarua that the katela “is not so comfortable to wear as other clothing,” a claim that he shared with his audience as if drawing on the experience of a man living with women who wore it. It may be that the design of the katela became less comfortable during the thirteenth century, but I have found no further indication that this is true.

Although we have no knowledge of how the design of the katela changed, it is clear that this was an essential garment, worn by women even when uncomfortable. Yet why would women and rabbis be so concerned that a woman might take it off while out? The answer is that on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, wearing the katela was prohibited under Jewish law (the halakha).

The katela and the Sabbath

The prohibition on wearing the katela on Sabbath was the result of two conflicting rules. First, women were generally permitted to wear accessories attached to their garments on Sabbath. Second, women were prohibited on Sabbath to wear any accessories that had to be removed before immersion in a ritual bath (mikve), which usually was inside a building and thus in a private space (reshut hayahid), defined as one surrounded by a wall or comparable barrier. The katela was defined as an attached accessory, and as an accessory it had to be taken off before immersion. Since the katela was an accessory and not an integral part of a garment, there was concern that after taking it off, women might forget to refasten it to their clothing and carry it into or within a public space (reshut harabbim), defined as an open area frequented by large numbers of passersby. This posed a problem because such an action was considered a type of work or creative labor (melakha), which was prohibited on Sabbath day.

11 Tosafot, BT Shabbat 57b, s.v. hakha be-katela askinan.
12 שמתביישת להסיר לפי שלא תראה אז בעלת בשר. Rabbi Asher ben Yehiel, Tosefot ha-Rosh, BT Shabbat 57b.
14 Carrying was forbidden if the distance covered amounted to at least four cubits (about two metres). Regarding public and private spaces on Sabbath, see BT Shabbat 6a. There also was an intermediate type of space (karmelit), such as an open site in nature not used as a thoroughfare.
15 See Mishna Mikvaot 9:1; Tosefta Mikvaot 6:8 (והשירים והנזמים והקטלאות והטבעות אוצין חוצצין, רפין אין חוצצין). See also Cohn 2014, 22-24; Marzel, Stiebel 2015, 6-9.
Since the Mishna and the Talmud regard some jewellery as integral items of apparel, there were debates about what types, sizes, and shapes of jewellery were permitted on Sabbath. Since the *katela* was attached to a garment, it could be defined as part of that garment and thus permissible on Sabbath. The Mishna quotes scholarly opinions that permit wearing jewellery as long as it is attached to clothing or to the body and cannot be removed, such as an ornament sewn to a hairpiece or hairnet.¹⁶

The Jerusalem Talmud, however, introduced another element to the discussion. In addition to the technical characteristics of the ornament, the debate now came to focus on a question of gender: can women be trusted to wear jewellery on Sabbath? Some sages argued that vain and irresponsible women might take off jewellery in order to show it to a friend.¹⁷ This Talmudic argument was denounced by medieval rabbis, who claimed that the women of their era were respectable and would not do such a thing. In the words of the twelfth-century Rabbi Eliezer Ben Shmuel, “our women … are distinguished, and they are used to beautiful jewels.”¹⁸

*Immersing with accessories on Sabbath*

As a rule, Jewish women were obligated to immerse monthly in order to purify their bodies after menstruation. The day of immersion was typically based on when menstruation ended, and sometimes the day of immersion was the Sabbath. Since ritual immersion was intended to purify the body, an intervening thing (*ḥatzitzat*) between the body and the water might prevent purification, and any jewellery or accessory that remained on the body was considered to pose such an interposition. Thus, women needed to remove their clothing, jewellery, and accessories to keep anything from interposing between the body and the water. In some cases, when they could not remove their garments, they were authorised to immerse while clothed. In such an instance, women were required to first loosen their clothing, including items considered essential in Roman or medieval times.¹⁹

On Sabbath, the rabbis’ grant of permission to appear in public with well-attached jewellery or other accessories created a dilemma for women.²⁰ On one hand, the *katela* was tightly attached to a garment, and in this respect, it was suitable for wearing on Sabbath. On the other hand, it was tight and needed to be taken off before immersion so that it would not act as a barrier. Since the *katela* had to be taken off, it was feared that women would forget to put it back on and accidentally carry it out of the *mikve* and into a public space, as noted above.

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¹⁶ במה אשה יสาขา ובמה אינה יสาขา? לא תצא אשה... ולא י練 עליה חותם לא בקטלא ולא ב наукית ולא במרשא שלוה נוזה. Mishna Shabbat 6:1. The ruling applied both to women and to men. On jewellery worn by men and women of the era, see Rosen-Zvi 2010.

¹⁷ תכשיטין למה והן אסורין א"ר בא על ידי שהנשים שחצניות היא מתרתן לחבירתה והיא שכוחה ומהלות בהן ד' אמות. JT (Vilna) Shabbat 6:1 (33b). See also BT Shabbat 57a, 59b.

¹⁸ Rabbi Eliezer ben Shemuel 1962, no. 274. He was a disciple of the prominent medieval French scholar Rabbi Yaakov ben Meir (Rabbenu Tam), and his city of Metz is located in Lorraine, then part of the Holy Roman Empire, and near the Champagne region, then under French rule. See also Apple 1961, no. 240.

¹⁹ Lightbown 1992; Cohn 2014, 25.

²⁰ This issue was extensively discussed by the sages of northern France and Germany. The former were the first to permit immersion without removing jewellery. Rashi allowed hair ornaments that could be loosened.
How did Jewish women respond to the prohibition on wearing the *katela* on Sabbath? Contemporary rabbinic writings indicate that they refused to part with the *katela*, which after all they considered a vital part of their attire.\(^{21}\) What was the rabbis' reaction to the women’s practice? Rashi and his French followers authorised immersion with the *katela* on but asked women to loosen the *katela*’s strap to allow direct contact between their bodies and the purifying water.\(^{22}\) Ultimately, Rabbi Barukh ben Yitzḥak, who lived in northern France in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, solved the problem for most regional Jews by ruling that since cities in his time and place were encircled by walls with gates, the entire area of the city was tantamount to a private space. Therefore, Jews were permitted to carry things on Sabbath as well as to remove any clothing, including the *katela*, when immersing and even to take it out to what otherwise would be deemed a public space.\(^{23}\) His position was accepted by the German rabbis,\(^{24}\) and it appears that from then on, medieval Jewish women in the walled cities of France and neighbouring lands could go out on Sabbath while wearing the *katela*.

The evolution of breast covers in the Middle Ages

Why was Rashi, who authored his commentary to the Talmud at the end of the eleventh and the beginning of the twelfth centuries, the first known scholar to define a *katela* not as an ornament or an item of jewellery, as the word was originally intended, but as a garment? Was this item, perhaps a lost medieval garment - a missing link in the chain of historical breast covers?

In antiquity, in addition to clothing that covered the torso in general, there were two types of items that women wore on their chests. One was a wide strip of fabric, which they wound around their breasts and wore under other garments. The second was the *catena* (FIG. 2), an ornament that images from classical antiquity depict as consisting of narrow strips of fabric or a chain (Latin: *catena*) placed over loose clothing to emphasise the chest and specifically the breasts.\(^{25}\)

What breast covers did women wear in medieval Europe? Until 2008, fashion historians claimed that the only medieval breast cover was a white linen *chemise* that may have been, but was not necessarily, tightly worn around the chest and used to support the breasts. Although the *chemise* served as underwear until the twentieth century, it was not commonly used for breast support after the fifteenth century. It was during that century that women, mainly in Europe, began wearing corsets, which shaped their waists and supported their breasts. The wearing of corsets ended in the early twentieth century, when the

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\(^{22}\) Rashi, BT Shabbat 57b; Tosafot, BT Shabbat 57b.

\(^{23}\) Rabbi Barukh ben Yitzḥak 1959, no. 240: “Since there is no outright public space here, she is permitted to do so”.

\(^{24}\) See Rabbi Yitzḥak ben Moshe 1977, no. 64; Rabbi Asher ben Yehiel, *Tosefot ha-Rosh*, BT Shabbat 57b. In thirteenth-century Spain, Nahmanides (Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman) explicitly protested the ruling of the French Rabbis; see Nahmanides 1959, BT Shabbat 57a.

\(^{25}\) Ewing 1978, 14-19. For the metal *catena*, see the articles by Berg and Nelson, this volume.
modern bra was invented. A discovery made in 2008 changed this understanding. During an excavation in Lengberg Castle in Austria, archeologists discovered a fifteenth-century garment that looks very much like a modern bra or brassiere, although it also may be the upper remnant of a chemise (FIG. 3).

I would like to argue that Rashi’s katela may have been a medieval over-garment that served as a breast cover. As stated above, the garment is described only in medieval Jewish sources: elsewhere there appears to be no trace of it, whether written or illustrated. Assuming that the Lengberg bra is not part of a chemise, we can argue that in addition to the chemise, there were at least two types of breast covers in medieval Europe: the one described by Rashi in the eleventh or twelfth century, which was worn over a loose item of clothing, and another attested by the Lengberg bra, which was worn as an undergarment.

Why were two types of breast covers needed in Europe during the Middle Ages? According to historians of medieval fashion, the need for breast covers emerged from changes in European clothing. Joan Evans and Margaret Scott argue that between the end of the eleventh century and the beginning of the fourteenth century, northern France—especially Champagne, where Rashi’s home city of Troyes was a major centre—and the Île de France were the centre of the fashion revolution. This was thanks to economic and cultural developments, the emergence of new textile markets, and the textile industry in these regions, which were located along major trade routes and had direct commercial contact with the East through the Crusader kingdoms.

The fashion revolution had two main outcomes: the emergent distinction between women’s and men’s clothing and a design transition away from previous, loose garments. Most of the new, fashionable garments made for women were tight and revealed the outline of their upper bodies. For the first time in European history, women’s clothing was precisely cut and designed to fit them, giving rise to fitted dresses and new underwear: the familiar chemise and the bra. Rashi’s breast cover may have first been worn at the beginning of this period of fashion changes, at the end of the eleventh century or the beginning of the twelfth.

The precise origin of the katela garment that Rashi describes is unknown, as is its relationship to the Talmudic ornament of the same name. Why was it first mentioned in his city, Troyes? Was it designed there or brought by merchants to the local market? I have not found the answers to these questions. However, although its origin remains a mystery, I would suggest that this garment was worn by both Jewish and Christian women. During the Middle Ages, Jewish and Christian women lived in close proximity in cities. They had daily contact, making purchases in the same shops and trading in the same markets. Such contact also included Christian women’s lending and pawning dresses and other clothing to Jewish women and directly affected the appearance of Jewish women: they wore the same jewellery, the

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26 Steele 2001, 1-32. A bra is defined as “a woman’s undergarment to cover and support the breasts;” Merriam-Webster 2020.
27 Smith 2014, 39.
28 Nutz 2013, 221-225.
29 Nutz 2013, 221-225.
31 Evans 1952, 78-80; Scott 2011, 13-9, 44-35; Goddard 1927, 6.
33 Taitz 1994, 30.
same clothes, the same shoes. Christian and Jewish women in wealthy families could afford a variety of costly jewellery and fabrics, and women wore the best they could afford as a sign of social rank—not least Jewish women on Sabbath.\textsuperscript{33}

This social reality, I argue, influenced the rabbis of these communities. They responded positively to the norms and tastes of their women, and quite often they even expressed appreciation of the women’s Sabbath adornments, even when these were not in keeping with established Jewish law.\textsuperscript{34} These rabbis’ halakhic (legal) discussions show that they understood the importance of fashion in women’s lives and respected the needs of women in their communities and families. This was the case not only with the breast cover but also with other fashionable clothing, jewellery, and even a key-jewel that Jewish women independently designed and wore on Sabbath.\textsuperscript{35} From this discussion emerges a hitherto lost and unknown garment of the Middle Ages: the katela.

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\textsuperscript{33} Baumgarten 2011, 85-104.  
\textsuperscript{34} See n. 19.  
\textsuperscript{35} Schnitzer 2017, 717-729.
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Fig. 1 – Rashi’s garment, as understood and rendered by the author.

Fig. 2 – Romano-British body chain or *catena*, fourth century AD, from Hoxne, England. British Museum, no. 1994.0408.1. Photograph courtesy of Mike Peel (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hoxne_Hoard_body_chain.jpg). Shared under CC-BY-SA-4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).
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Fig. 3 – The Lengberg bra.
(https://www.uibk.ac.at/urgeschichte/projekte_forschung/textilien-
lengberg/mittelalterliche-unterwaesche/index.html.en).