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EARLY MEDIEVAL SWORDS FROM MIKULČICE

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Editors' Foreword

In the tenth volume of the series of publications entitled *Studien zum Burgwall von Mikulčice* we return to the systematic publication of selected categories of the movable finds from excavations of the early mediaeval stronghold of Mikulčice. This time it is a particularly important category – swords. The set represents all the specimens found so far in Mikulčice – a total of 16 complete swords from grave units and 5 fragments from settlement contexts. As with other previously published systematic categories of movable finds, these are predominantly finds from the phases of large-scale excavations carried out between 1954 and 1992; the set has now been expanded to include one new find: the sword hilt found using a metal detector in 2011. All the finds were obtained during systematic archaeological excavation carried out at the site since 1954 by the Institute of Archaeology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Brno.

The swords from Mikulčice form a unique collection, the quality of which depends primarily on the find circumstances. The fact that all 16 swords belong to specific graves at particular burial sites in a single locality make this set a unique source for studying social and cultural relations in Mikulčice and Great Moravia. The sword is not only a weapon and a masterpiece of the metal-worker's craft, but is a particular symbol of the social status of the highest-ranking elites in early mediaeval society. The relatively narrow dating, limited to the 9th century, also makes this

collection unique in terms of the comparative study of European weapons of the Early Middle Ages. The swords from Mikulčice are mostly products of foreign provenance, and therefore the study of these finds raises a number of questions concerning political, cultural, economic and social relations within Central Europe as it existed back then. They are excellent proof of contact with the Frankish environment.

The systematic evaluation of the swords from Mikulčice commenced back in 2002, when Jiří Košta began preparing his Master's thesis in Mikulčice. This meant that the basic documentation work was carried out before the tragic fire at the Mikulčice site in 2007, which seriously damaged most of the specimens. Prior to 2007 samples had also been taken for exact analysis, which later served as the basis for team work with Jiří Hošek. Both researchers – Jiří Košta as the archaeologist and Jiří Hošek as the metallographer and archaeometallurgist – then returned to the collection damaged in the fire, supplemented their work with further analyses, and prepared this comprehensive evaluation.

Around 50 years after the discovery of most of the Mikulčice swords, a fully-fledged assessment of these finds is now being published. Obviously, the information value of old finds is very limited considering the excavation methodology used at the time and the standard of documentation compiled. Information has also been lost due to the sheer amount of time that has passed.

This, however, is the fate of most of the archaeological sources from excavations carried out at the Mikulčice stronghold. On the other hand, this is still a valuable collection that requires processing in a comprehensive manner. This publication is the funded result of many years of detailed analytical work performed by both authors. It is also a good example of how 'old' material can be worked with and what results can be obtained, despite the limitations described above.

The editors of the *Studien zum Burgwall von Mikulčice* series have always striven to give each volume in the series a specific theme; these were initially in the form of anthologies. After

anthology publications were degraded by the Czech system of evaluating science and research to less than fully-fledged scholarly publications, a change needed to be made to the form of the various volumes. They will now be increasingly published as monographs, and will be more frequently in English. However, the essence remains the same: *Studien zum Burgwall von Mikulčice* will continue to be primarily a critical source-based publication focusing on the topic of early mediaeval Mikulčice and intended for the international scholarly community.

Lumír Poláček, Pavel Kouřil

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Introduction

The Early Medieval stronghold of Mikulčice (Fig. 1) was one of the main centres of Great Moravia. This, the first Slavic state to the north of the Danube River, was established during the first two thirds of the 9th century and came to an end at the beginning of the 10th century as a consequence of internal economic and political crises following the invasion of the Hungarians into the Carpathian Basin. Thanks to extensive archaeological excavations since 1954 within the fortified complex as well as within the settlement agglomeration have uncovered an area of more than 4.6 ha. Among others, approximately 2500 early medieval inhumations scattered over a number of cemeteries have been unearthed here. The Great Moravian stronghold consisted of an inner bailey (the so called *acropolis*) which covered an area of 7.7 ha and an outer bailey (2.4 ha). During the Great Moravian period, an extensive settlement agglomeration formed around the fortified area.

A total of 16 swords have been discovered in graves at the site, and parts of a further four swords were identified in the settlement material. The significance of this set of swords lies not only in the number of items, but also in the very informative archaeological context in which the swords were found. Within Frankish territory, a burial rite which included deposition of weapons into graves began to decline during the course of the 7th and 8th centuries and we generally know about swords from the 9th century only from riverbed finds or

other finds without any detailed context. The finds from Moravia and Slovakia, together with those from other territories bordering the Frankish Empire – such as Croatia and Schleswig-Holstein – thus form the basic evidence for describing the development of swords within the territory of the Frankish state itself.

As a whole, the Mikulčice finds can be quite accurately dated to the Great Moravian period, which correlates with the course of the 9th century and the beginning of the 10th century. The latest Mikulčice swords were probably buried not later than the first decade of the 10th century, because the tragic events of that period in Moravia had fatal consequences for the Mikulčice settlement. In many cases, however, the stratigraphy of those graves with swords or other grave goods allow even more precise dating.

The main goal of the study presented here is to describe in detail the swords and sword-parts discovered in the Mikulčice settlement. For the assessment of the swords we focus on metric descriptions, typological determinations, and metallographic assessments as well as descriptions of the remains of scabbards, straps and wrappings preserved in the corrosion layers of swords. Special emphasis is laid on the description of swords excavated from burial contexts, accompanied by detailed descriptions of the graves and their grave goods. A detailed investigation of individual swords is followed by an assessment of the Mikulčice set as a whole. This study also includes

a presentation of the fundamental historical and archaeological frameworks, into which the swords may be ranked.

There are brief introductions to the archaeological site, early medieval Mikulčice, and the political unit known as Great Moravia. The issues of burial rituals and the ranking of burials with swords within the Mikulčice cemeteries are also briefly introduced here. An overview of the present state of research into early medieval swords is carried out in this study, including the state of publication of finds from the territory of the Czech Republic and a brief characterisation of the early medieval swords discovered in Moravia.

The third, synthetic part of the study includes an assessment of the Mikulčice set as a whole. There is some space devoted to the typology of the swords as well as to the dating of the archaeological contexts in which the swords were found. Similarly, in the chapter devoted to the construction of the Mikulčice swords there is a synthesis of all the findings from research into both blades and hilts, as well as a brief summary about the scabbard, wrappings and straps of swords. At the end of this chapter we comment on the issues of provenance of the Mikulčice swords. In the last chapter we present a basic outline of the social status of the men buried with swords in Mikulčice.