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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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