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Medieval jewellery: archaeological finds from South Moravia : summary

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Medieval Jewellery

Archaeological Finds from South Moravia

The phenomenon of body adornment has accompanied humans from their origins to this day. It has developed depending on the aesthetical standards of specific time periods, traditions and social customs and, last but not least, on material possibilities of the society. The evolution of jewellery was in many cases influenced by religion and policy, which gave additional functional connotations to individual objects. Personal ornaments played an important role in the life of medieval people. Similarly as today, they were often regarded as gifts, collector's items or precious objects of high aesthetical value. But, first of all, they were primarily used to decorate the human body or to accumulate wealth.

The paper presented deals with medieval jewellery stored in museum depositories, art galleries and archaeological institutions in South Moravia. Herewith it addresses the absence of a comprehensive publication on this type of material evidence, which has been treated only marginally, often as a mere enumeration in the text, without any illustrations or other documentary supplements. The fundamental part of the paper thus consists of a catalogue of objects which are documented by drawings or photographs, together with detailed descriptions. In the analytical part, individual ornaments are evaluated from a typological and morphological perspective, including a comparison with finds from other sites, and they are set into the period context with regard to their function, aesthetic value and symbolism.

The vast majority of these objects were acquired during archaeological excavations of medieval rural and urban settlements or aristocratic residences. The spatial extent of the studied objects was thus determined by the territorial scope of these institutions. The selection was limited to the High Middle Ages, i.e. the 13th – 15th centuries, with partial time overlaps to previous and subsequent periods. These overlaps are mentioned for three reasons. The first among them is creation of a more complex look at continuous development of a given type of

ornament. The second reason is in some cases a complete analysis and evaluation of finds from a given site (that is, in cases where a strict separation of older medieval or modern-day finds makes no sense). The third reason is motivated by the effort to disprove several erroneous theories traditionally presented in literature. The assemblage in question primarily contains either entire specimens or objects which are fragmented but which still allow identification of the type of personal ornament. However, partly preserved fragments, semi-finished products and raw material for production of ornaments also were included. Objects which have been restored at the time of collecting the material, or those which were inaccessible for some other reasons, were borrowed from already published works.

Comparative material was mainly acquired from neighbouring regions – Slovakia, Bohemia, Poland, Austria, Germany, and in justified cases even from more remote countries, such as the Netherlands, France and England. Of crucial importance for acquiring the analogies to individual items were the published catalogues of museum and gallery collections, exhibition catalogues, and monographs or articles about finds from archaeological excavations. Also important is the information acquired from iconographic sources. Among them are various depictions, mainly portraits, book illuminations, graphics, but also tombstones. These sources reveal not only the appearance of a personal ornament, but mainly how it has been used and worn, or other secondary functions. Archaeological sources are particularly important for dating of ornaments, and the subsequent analyses of applied materials can be used in an ideal case as a base for determination of origin of the material used.

Written sources could only be used in a limited extent. Last wills and testaments inform us about many personal ornaments, which belonged to movable assets in individual households. Nevertheless, among archaeological finds we are able to detect only a fraction of their real original amount. Pieces of jewellery often succumbed to destruction because their precious metals were hoarded in turbulent times of changes, or they were used as means of payment, pawned or recast into some other ornament in a more modern style.

The low number of preserved artefacts is only one among many problems in research on this topic. Other problems are represented by the absence of a broad spectrum of published finds, analyses of artefacts and their inclusion into a wider context. Long temporal gaps between typologically identical objects and, the other way round, different characteristics in chronologically parallel specimens (for example fede rings from Rokštejn) generate problems in creating typological series and chronologies for specific types of objects. An indisputable classification of individual artefacts is also complicated in the case of items from “antiquarian” collections, stray finds, finds collected on the ground surface and

metal detecting finds. The comparison between preserved personal ornaments and iconographic sources also has many limitations, among them non-historicity of depictions or copying of models according to older specimens. The work therefore contains the above-mentioned catalogue part, which makes the objects accessible to the widest possible professional community for the purpose of comparison with already known or recently found artefacts.

The survey carried out in several dozen depositories in Moravian or Silesian museums and institutions yielded a collection of more than seven hundred objects, which provide insight into the life and times of medieval people in Moravia. The collection comprises objects from 79 localities in total – 45 areas inside towns, 11 sites from castle excavations and 23 sites from excavations in existing and deserted villages or multicultural localities.

For most of the described ornaments we can find analogies at other localities, which enable a more detailed temporal and spatial classification or determination of the function and usage of individual objects. Thanks to combination of all of the above-mentioned approaches it was possible to identify or redefine some of the objects mentioned here, either from the aspect of practical use or from a chronological point of view. Several personal ornament types have completely disappeared in the course of history or vanished for a long time and then reappeared again some centuries later. Others exhibit continuous development, but a limited chronological sensibility (undecorated finger rings, ring buckles). Some others, on the other hand, are absolutely significant for a given period (for example the so-called gimmel rings).

In the High Middle Ages, the lock-rings and earrings with S-shaped loops disappeared from South Moravian finds and from other localities as well. Unfortunately, in our collection we cannot demonstrate whether they were replaced by some other form of head ornaments (for example hair rings) or whether they disappeared completely without any substitute. Earrings did not reappear until the onset of the Renaissance. Direct evidence of decorating the head with wreaths and garlands or of using bonnets is missing in the collection in question. Sparse finds of fine wires might indicate such headdresses, but find contexts which would allow unequivocal identification of the type and shape of the ornament is missing. We can imagine “how they looked” on the basis of preserved pictorial materials. Other ornaments also are known from visual and written sources rather than from archaeological contexts. Among them are bracelets and rosaries, even though these objects were certainly common in the Middle Ages. The low number of preserved artefacts is undoubtedly caused by the popularity of organic materials (bone, bladdernut), from which medieval rosaries were usually made. The situation with chains and necklaces is more favourable, as their depiction in documents and occurrence in archaeological collections rises again

in the Renaissance Era. They often included various types of pendants. Among the most frequent motifs were various crosses associated with the worship of Christ or the Holy Cross. A unique example with a figure of the Crucified Christ and with an inscription asking for protection of Virgin Mary was found in Panenská Street in Brno. A unique find was also made in Pekařská Street in Brno – the crossbow-shaped pendant found at this place probably belonged to a member of the shooters' guild. Also remarkable is a pilgrimage badge of St. Stanislaus discovered in a deserted village near Černá Hora. Iconographic analysis proved that the plaque is among the oldest types of depictions which were produced in connection with Stanislaus' canonisation. It shows how fast the cult of this saint has spread over Central Europe and the intensive impact of the Church on various spheres of life at that time.

Among the most frequent garment fasteners were brooches, which were often decorated with floral and geometrical ornaments or with inscriptions. They had religious, amorous or magical-protective meaning. Medieval garments were also fastened with the help of a system of hooks and eyes sewn on the clothes, or separate large hooks for fastening clothes. An integral part of clothing was also represented by pins and fibulas, whose variegated use is illustrated by numerous paintings. They also show us the so-called aglets which prevented the ends of laces or ribbons from unravelling. Another category of garment fasteners is represented by buttons. In our collection there is a special specimen from Pekařská Street in Brno, which bears a female portrait depicted with a richly decorated headdress. Exact analogies to the bonnet can be found among numerous pictorial materials, which allowed specific archaeological dating of the object.

An independent category is represented by jingle bells, which were used not only with clothes, but also with horse harnesses or in falconry. The jingle bell fashion experienced rises and falls during the Middle Ages – in several periods jingle bells were applied to every piece of clothing, they decorated the top of the hennin as well as shoe tips, whereas in other periods they were completely rejected and since the end of the 15th century they have been seen as a sign of foolishness. In Modern Times they were applied to children's garments to protect the children from plague. Individual types of finger rings fulfilled many functions. They were mainly intended to demonstrate social status or prestige, express love, or seal marriage vows. Fede rings with a motif of joined hands, which are well exemplified by the skilfully decorated ring from Rokštejn Castle, were quite popular pieces of jewellery in medieval Europe. These rings were exchanged among friends, and medieval people often used them as wedding and engagement gifts. Among popular motifs also were love knots or so-called gimmel rings composed of multiple hoops. However, any decorative ring may have

served as a wedding ring, which is evidenced by a golden ring from Mstěnice with engraved letter “k” – probably the initial letter of the female owner’s name. Rings were decorated not only with letters, but also with various symbols and marks identifying the artefact’s owner, as it is indicated by the ring from Pekařská Street in Brno. Finger rings played an important role in protective magic and healing. The colours of stones or glasses, inscriptions asking for protection of the saints or inscription abbreviations represented an integral part of the magical effect of these objects.

Unlike finger rings, the finds of other rings represent a very problematic group among archaeological materials. Small rings are often classed among finger rings, large rings are usually identified as ring buckles or loops. The determination of their function thus depends on find contexts, in which they probably existed at the time of their usage. In this collection we were able to distinguish small rings with rivets from a non-ferrous metal with a diameter smaller than 1.5 cm, which most probably were parts of chain mail. On the other hand, large rings above 6 cm in diameter were probably used as horse harness components.

Belts were undoubtedly an ordinary part of the typical medieval outfit. Straps from organic materials were supplemented with metal fittings – a buckle, sometimes also with chape, the strap end, and belt rings or belt loops. Their surface was often decorated with metal appliqué. Buckles count among the most frequent archaeological finds of jewellery. Their variability is underlined by many different ways of their use with garments, weapons, belts, straps, horse harness and book bindings. Even the seemingly monotonously shaped ring buckles can be divided into several categories, which differ from each other in their dimensions and the method of use. Small buckles up to two centimetres in size were probably used as shoe buckles or fasteners of spur straps. In the mid-sized category there is an interesting group of buckles found in graves, always in pairs on both sides of the pelvic bone. This phenomenon has been explained either by wearing leggings which were laced to the belt, or by the widespread fashion of wearing multiple belts at once. Another category of ring buckles sized over 6 centimetres is primarily supposed – as it was already mentioned above – to have been used with horse harness.

While ring buckles occurred in large quantities since the 13th century, oval buckles were more typical of the 14th and 15th centuries and often survived until Modern Times. They also were used with belts, shoes or horse harness. Many multiple-part buckles also were intended to be used with weapons or horse harness.

D-shaped buckles already appeared since the 13th century. They also were divided into several categories: simple forms, buckles with multiple length of the frame, specimens with width/length ratio of 1:1 or, the other way round, buckles

whose width exceeds their length. A separate group is represented by buckles with a frame extension for fixation of the prong, which were used with sword belts. Another large group consists of profiled buckles with relief decoration on the frame in the form of ribs, bulbs, stretched corners, etc. These buckles are found in many variants throughout Europe and it seems, unlike the other forms, that they are relatively sensitive as regards the chronology.

Among rectangular buckles, similar to D-shaped buckles, we can distinguish a category of small square or oblong buckles, which were often applied on shoes, armour straps and spur straps. Various possibilities of use were also offered by variants with a central bar, which were identified with all the above-mentioned categories except D-shaped buckles. The group of trapezoidal buckles also has several categories; most frequent among them are buckles with deflected frame which were used both with waist belts and with horse harness. Buckles with hooks, on the other hand, were mostly used with spurs.

A disproportion can be observed between the quantities of preserved buckles and the relatively low number of buckle chapes and terminals intended to reinforce the end of a belt. Moreover, some of the strap ends evidently belonged to book bindings and the same is also true of several parts of Renaissance metal fittings which are usually classified as belt components.

The collection comprises a large group of metal appliquéés, among them metal studs and round or rectangular mounts. The appliquéés also had the form of flowers – mostly rosettes – quatrefoils, lilies, or letters. In this group we also find a mount in the form of a crowned human head, coat of arms, and various geometrical shapes. Among all the above-mentioned jewellery, these metal accessories had the widest use. They were applied on garments, belts, bags, sword scabbards, shields, gloves, headdresses, horse harnesses, furniture, dog collars, books or religious textiles.

Although it seems at first glance that semi-finished products, sheet metal fragments and metal fittings do not have any major informational value, they are important for material analyses. Identification of an accurate proportion of individual metals in the composition of used alloys can be a good source of information about production techniques and dating of artefacts. Casting of metals and of the objects themselves represented one of the most frequently used production procedures. As regards the material composition, the collection mostly includes alloys of non-ferrous metals, some of them showing traces of gilding and silvering. Whole silver and gold pieces occurred only sporadically.

An important role in acquisition of individual personal ornaments was undoubtedly played by their symbolical meaning. Therefore it is in no way surprising that the walls of the Old Brno monastery contained a finger ring depicting the mythical phoenix bird, which symbolised the belief in resurrection, chastity

and innocence. The burnt layer of Rokštejn Castle contained a buckle with chape engraved with a male figure, reminiscent of knightly symbolism.

The paper presented attempts to show various ways of decorating the body and clothing of medieval people in South Moravia on the basis of the analysis of archaeological finds stored in South Moravian museums and institutions. At the same time it also sets them into the chronological and spatial European context of that time. Of crucial importance for future research are material analyses of the largest possible amount of artefacts, which will help to identify in more detail the production procedures or the materials used, and to specify the dating and origin of individual artefacts. Valuable knowledge might also arise from detailed analyses of medieval testaments and last wills, which would primarily focus not only on the clothing fashion, but also on individual personal ornaments or garment accessories. Despite all efforts the monograph still contains many unanswered questions, which hopefully will inspire other researchers. The paper was not intended to address the whole extensive and complicated problem in its complexity. Within an exactly defined topographical unit it tries to bring together all hitherto known preserved pieces of jewellery and contemplate on their appearance or transformations in medieval times. It is evident that further archaeological finds will bring continuous extension of this collection. The quantification overviews mentioned in the text thus must be understood as a mere reflection of current state of research and not as comprehensive research results, while interpretation of several artefacts, often very fragmentarily preserved, is very problematic. If the collection of artefacts in the annex of this work will help colleagues in their future search for analogies or a correct interpretation of finds, it will meet one of its fundamental objectives.

