

DISCOVERY OF A FRAGMENT OF A LATE ANTIQUE *MISSORIUM*(?) IN THE CADASTRE OF THE VILLAGE OF PUTIM, DISTR. PÍSEK, SOUTH BOHEMIA

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Abstract: The fragment of the silver sheet, discovered in Putim, South Bohemia, represents probably a part of the Late Antique liturgical dish, *missorium*. This is supported especially by the fragment of the central relief depicting the part of the face of the emperor with a diadem and the high purity of the silver alloy. Among the known preserved examples of these Late Roman prestige vessels the *missorium* of Kerch with a depiction of emperor Constantius II represents potentially the best parallel. In this article the economic and symbolic aspects of this fragment of a very rare and highly prestigious object will be explored.

INTRODUCTION

The territory of South Bohemia is not rich in discoveries of precious metals, dated to Late Antiquity. Therefore, any new discovery provides very important insight into the material culture of the inhabitants of that time. The find of the fragment of a silver *missorium* in Putim, South Bohemia, Czech Republic, represents, however a unique discovery in the context of finds from all over Bohemia. Decoration of the fragment, which is most likely a portrait of the emperor, opens several of important questions about the origin of the item and how it reached the final place of the discovery.

CIRCUMSTANCES OF DISCOVERY

In August 2020 Karel Podhorský handed over to Prácheňské muzeum v Písku a find of the fragment of the silver sheet, which he found several months earlier in the southern vicinity of the world-known village Putim, district Písek, South Bohemia.¹ The site was already known for various finds, dated within Late Roman and Migration Periods. These findings will be focused separately within the planned study.

Object description

A rectangular fragment of silver sheet with dimensions of 34 × 12 × 1 mm with a torsal fragment of the figural decoration (Fig. 1). Weight 4.84 g. A preserved part of the face, an eye, an eyebrow, a part of the nose, and hair divided into two horizontal parts by a diadem consisting of a stylized trio of arches (two smaller on the side, one larger – probably central). The decoration was probably achieved by a combination of two discharge techniques; on the one hand, plastic punching of larger surfaces (e.g. tiara and probably also the nose) and further punched out details using punches of various shapes (segments, semi-circles, circles, points) on the details of the face, hairstyle and tiara (Fig. 2–4). Possible traces of gilding or niello are not clear. The fragment was cut from the artefact with metal scissors in two narrow longitudinal parallel and two narrower transverse linear cuts (Fig. 5).

¹ Those who enjoy literary fiction will easily find the wider context of the location in the following work: Hašek 1922.

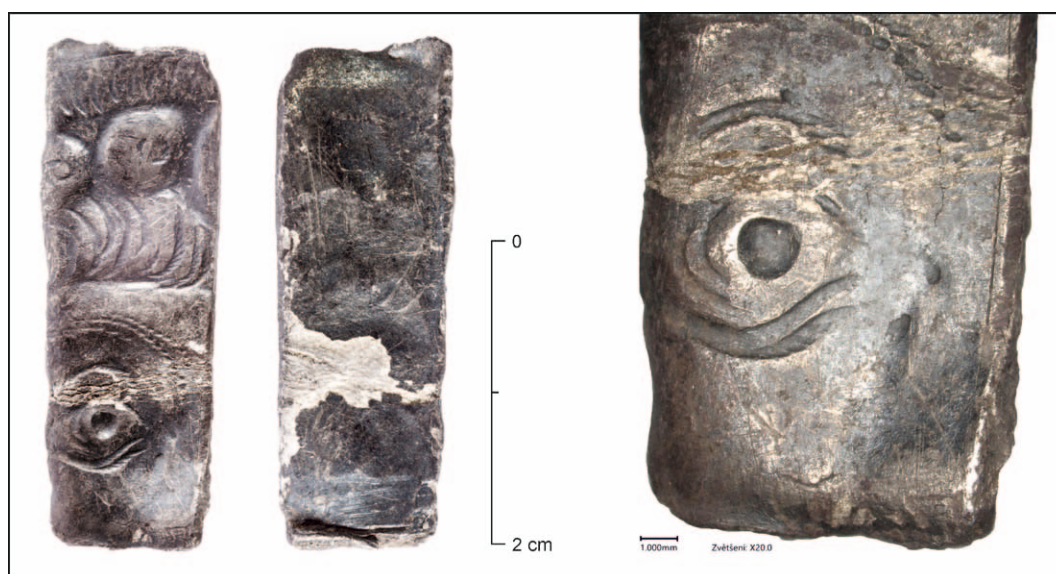


Fig. 1. Putim, fragment of a silver liturgical vessel (photo T. Droppa).

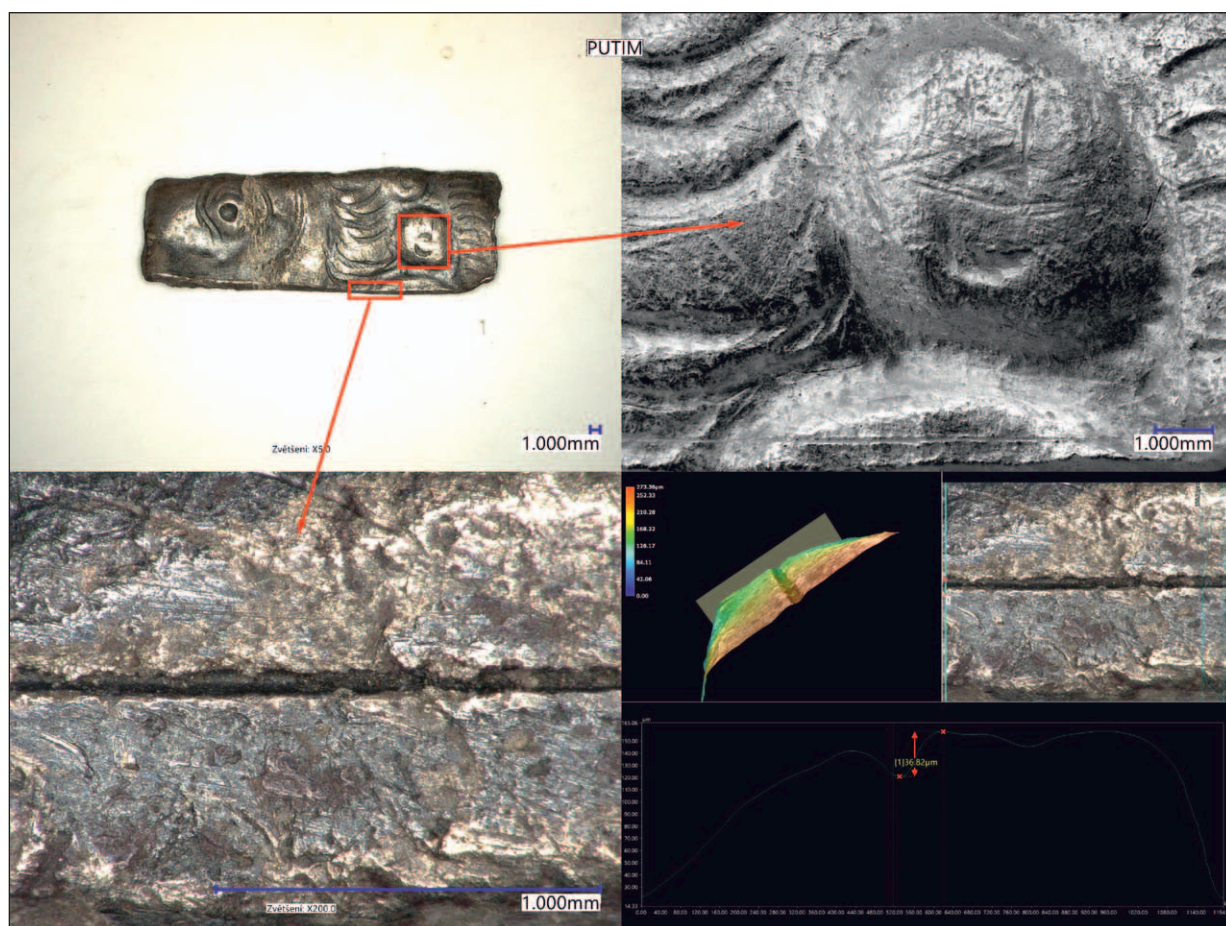


Fig. 2. Area map documented with digital microscopy using VHX-7000 series (www.keyence.eu/cscz/).

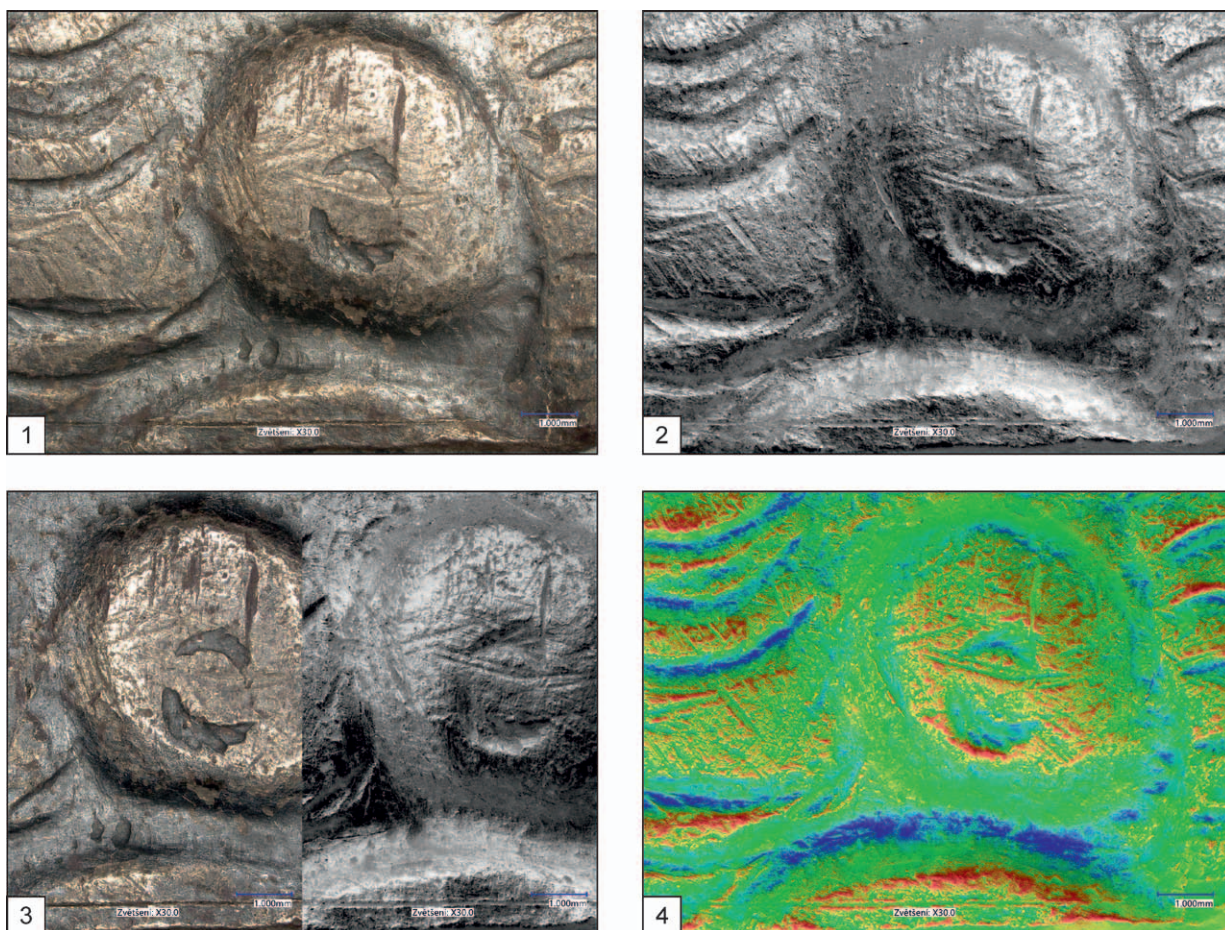


Fig. 3. Digital microscopy using VHX-7000 series (www.keyence.eu/cscz/). 1 – detail of the diadem; 2 – traceology of the detail of the surface; 3 – comparison of the methods of display; 4 – displaying the above detail in false colours.

INTERPRETATION

It is most likely that this described fragment represents a Late Antique silver liturgical dish or bowl, the so-called *missorium*. Similar vessels, although decoration not always represents the portrait of the emperor, are known from several deposits, for example the large dish at Mildenhall in England (*Painter 1977*, 35–40, here scientific examination; *Painter 1997*, 97, fig. 1) or Kaiseraugst in southern Germany (*Guggisberg 2003*, 111–170).

However, the figural rendering, i.e. the torso of the face with a diadem, refers us to examples of ancient liturgical vessels, on which the Roman emperor was depicted. Of these, the most famous is the *missorium* of the emperor Theodosius (now Madrid) from the end of the 4th century AD, the *missorium* probably of the emperor Valentinian II from the vicinity of Geneva (*Depeyrot 2009*, 439, 440; *Guggisberg 2003*, 73–75, Abb. 179; *Leader-Newby 2004*, 36–38) and *missorium* of the emperor Constantius II (2nd half of the 4th century) from Kerch (Fig. 6; *ibid.*, 178, Abb. 49–54). One of the problems, which can be however, solved only with difficulties, is the identification of the concrete ruler in the case of the Putim fragment. In the case of above mentioned *missorium* of the emperor Theodosius, the positive identification of the emperor was enabled by the fact that portrait is preserved in its entirety, and furthermore the rich iconography, including the statues of the Late Antique rulers offers good comparable material (*Meischner 2000*, 248, 249, fig. 30–34). The determination is also complicated by the fact that a diademed portrait of the emperor appears on Roman coins from the time of Constantine I until the fall of the Western Roman Empire (*RIC 8–10*). The stylized diadem, in reality made up of a gold corps, decorated with gems and pearl pendants, which divides the hairstyle into two halves, and the further discharge of the details clearly shows that the find from Putim was, however closer to Constantius' *missorium* from Kerch. This specimen,

with a diameter of 24.9 cm, was published by *L. Matzulewitsch* in 1929 and was obtained as one of the grave goods from the rich tombs in Kerch, Crimea (*Guggisberg 2003*, 166, fig. 178). The Kerch *missorium* is further richly decorated in the form of gilding and niello. The application of these decorative techniques is not documented or preserved in the case of the small fragment from Putim. However, this decoration is not, as evidenced by a specimen from the vicinity of Geneva, completely conditional. Furthermore, the plasticity of the figure, on the other hand, makes the find from Putim technically closer to Theodosio's *missorium*, using similar production tools (*Rovira et al. 2000*, 133, 147–149; fig. 13, 20–23).

A large *missorium* with a theme of Agamemnon was published from Avignon in France (*Depeyrot 2009*, 386). Well-known are also the discoveries of the silver vessels in the British Isles. The 1942 discovered silver hoard, together with large dish with a depiction of Oceanos, and the Bacchic scene from Mildenhall, Suffolk County should be noted (*Painter 1977*). Another large silver dish, originating from a hoard of Roman silver vessels from the 4th century, was found in 1942 in Mildenhall, Suffolk. Fourteen vessels together with thirteen spoons made up an exceptional table service. At first glance, the tray impresses with its rich, extremely elaborate decoration with a Bacchic theme. Along with the find from Scotland's Traprain Law, where a hoard of fragments of 110 silver vessels and other objects dating back to the early 5th century, and the Hoxne depot in Suffolk were discovered, the Mildenhall Hoard is one of the most important in the British Isles. Its importance is close to the famous silver finds from Kaiseraugst, Carthage or Esquiline. The Mildenhall hoard was found outside of its original settlement context and was most likely part of the furnishings of a prosperous villa that belonged to important landowners on whose land the colony settled. The pagan scenes on the large dish, as well as the supposed method of its use, may be to some extent a guide in the search for an answer to the question of why the Mildenhall treasure, which is not alone in this region, was deposited. The large dish has a diameter of

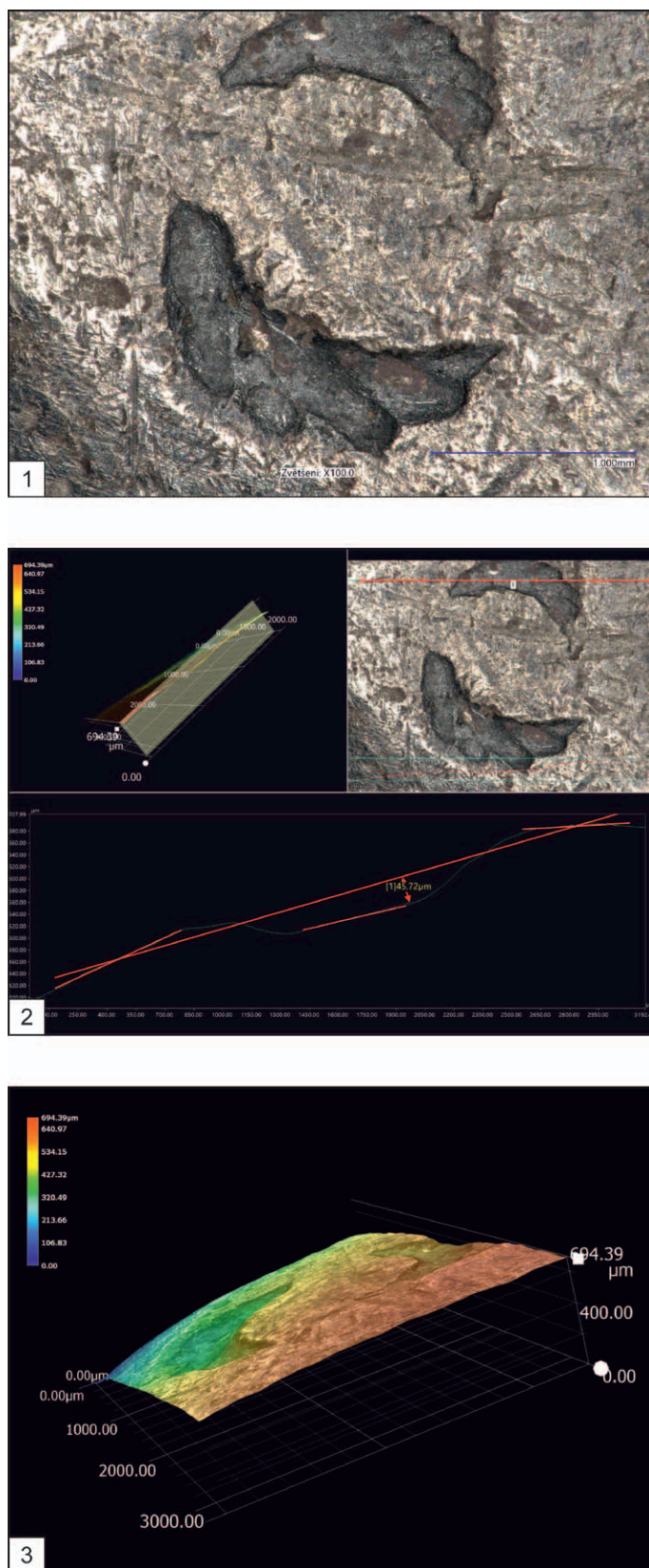


Fig. 4. Digital microscopy using VHX-7000 series (www.keyence.eu/cscz/). 1 – detail of the punched decoration of the gem from the emperors' diadem; 2 – “elevation chart”; 3 – “elevation chart” (side view).

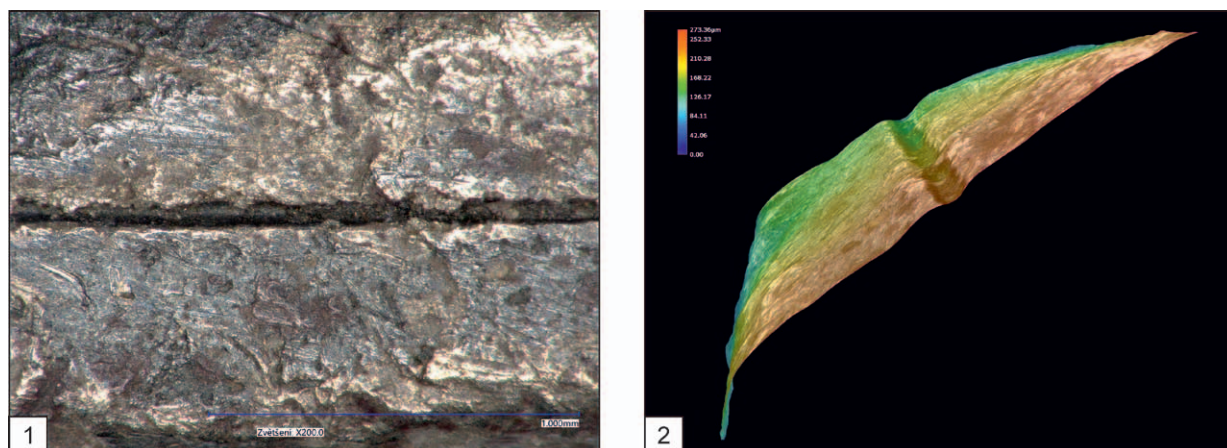


Fig. 5. Digital microscopy using VHX-7000 series (www.keyence.eu/cscz/). 1 – detail of the scissors marks; 2 – “elevation chart” (side view).



Fig. 6. Front and back side (with eyelet for hanging) of *missorium* from Kerch, Ukraine (courtesy: The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, after Guggisberg 2003).

605 mm, its weight is 8.256 g. The hoard entered the collections of the British Museum in 1945 (Painter 1977; 1997). For the examples from the Central Europe see for example G. Depeyrot (2009, 180–189).

Similarly, we can date the fragment of Putim to the second half of the 4th century, or the first half of the 5th century. In the territory of South Bohemia, this is a completely unique find, which proves the “travel” of these liturgical vessels, or rather their parts in the form of fractional silver from the imperial soil to our territory as well. If we search for the cultural connections of that period, by dating, this specimen is related with the settlement of the so-called Přešovice group.

Composition

For the silver alloy of the fragment of the silver vessel from Putim is characteristic a high purity (Table 1).

The high standards of the silver alloy are characteristic also for other examples of the silver vessels of the Late Roman group. In the case of vessels from Kaiseraugst, the silver content fluctuates between 97.5% and

Table 1. Measured spectra of the silver fragment (EDXRF analysis M. Kmošek, ElvaX spectrometer made by Elvatech company).

Spectrum	Cu	Zn	Ag	Bi	Pb	Fe	Au	Co	Ni
Ag fragment	0.7	0.05	98.5	0.1	0.20	0.05	0.30	0.03	0.02

98.6% (Lang/Hughes/Oddy 1984, 375). Similar values are published also in the case of *missorium* of Emperor Theodosius in Madrid, and other related vessels (Rovira et al. 2000, 149, compare also tab. 1 on page 150). Use of high-quality silver material for the producing of the liturgical vessels was confirmed in the cross-cultural context among the Late Romans and Sassanians (Hughes/Hall 1979, 321–344).

Fragmentation

The very fact that in our case it is a small fragment of an originally magnificent silver vessel is interesting. This reflects the fact that the object lost its original function during the Late Antiquity and, regardless of its former aesthetic aspects, became a mere source of precious metal. However, this is not a completely unique example, cut-up *missorium* (including one specimen with the image of the emperor) are known from the treasure from Gross Budungen in Thuringia (Fig. 7), which is dated based on the coins of the usurper Constantine III at the beginning of the 5th century. The mentioned hoard, however, contains the fragments of the more examples of the silver vessels (Grünhagen 1954, pl. 2–6). Another destroyed *missorium* is known from the hoard in Rülzheim, Rhineland-Pfalz. The assemblage is dated by the items within the 1st half of the 5th century (Himmelmann/Petrovsky 2018, 7,8, fig. 5; 6). Also, in the case of the silver treasure, 23 kg of battered, crushed and chopped up artifacts, mainly silver vessels, from Traprain Law in Scotland indicate that economic necessities can be attributed for the fragmentation of large ornate objects. According to the authors, the hacking was a “deliberate Roman police” to create bullion out of the valued vessels, used originally as elite tableware, at times of economic crisis (Hunter/Kaufmann-Heinimann/Painter 2022, 215–242).

The thesauri of the hack-silver are, however, a common feature, known from various parts of the Barbaricum. In Hostentorp, Denmark was discovered another example of a hoard containing fragments of jewellery and other silver artifacts and vessels. According to the presence of the fragments decorated in the 1st Salin style it is possible to date the assemblage within the 6th century AD (Grünhagen 1954, pl. 15).

In a settlement at Klein Köris, (Dahme-Spreewald district, Germany), is the best proof of a jewellery workshop from this period. Located within a semi-sunken hut, this workshop was identified by metal imported objects and scrap. The identification of the workshop was made possible by more than 2,040 pieces of mostly small portable finds, including fragments of metal vessels and glass shards, indicating the application of a polychrome decorative style. 7% of non-ferrous metals and 80–85% of bronze were found in the workshop in addition to dismantled artefacts intended for recycling (Gustavs 1998, 218–228). The tools of a jeweller were also found in a craftsman’s depot in the forested part of the Weinviertel in lower Austria in the 4th and 5th centuries (Szameit 1997, 235–239).

The find of the fragmentary preserved silver Silberschale from Tépe (Kom. Hajdu-Bihar, Hungary), together with other silver sheet fragments clearly shows that *thesauri* of the precious metals was practiced further during the Avar-Period (Wamser 2004, 242, 243).

SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FRAGMENTING OF THE DISH?

Portraits of the emperors were everyday part of the live of the Roman society and were used especially for power and political purposes (in connection with a destructive act see esp. Gregory 2015, 88–98). Altering or destruction of the representation of the emperor usually took place, when the “bad” emperor was overthrown or assassinated. E. R. Varner in his comprehensive study brings the overlook of the altered (damaged) portraits of the emperors since the times of Caligula to the rulers of the 4th century AD. Post-mortem punishment *damnatio memoriae* of the picture of the emperor was practiced “... when a tyrant is destroyed, his portraits and statues are also deposed”, as describes St. Jerome. The author describes the *damnatio* as cancellation of the bad identity of the emperor and his posthumous reputation as one of the fundamental aims in the imperial



Fig. 7. A cut silver *missorium* depicting the emperor from the Gross Bodungen hoard (after Grünhagen 1954).

period (Varner 2001, 45–47; 2004, 2). We meet for example the pursuing of the *damnatio* from the side of the new emperor against his predecessor (Varner 2004, 214). In the Roman world was a common physical interaction (such as “regular” like ritual decoration or washing, or irregular such as sexual and violent contact) with the gods through the cult of their statues (Weddle 2010, 182–185; for worshiping of the emperor see p. 21). Therefore, *per analogiam* the physical altering of the portrait of the emperor represents a manifestation which is physically addressing the ruler himself. According to M. Stachura, the hostility towards the Roman community may also be pointed by terms designating the individuals held to be in opposition: *barbarus* (barbarian), *tyrannus* (tyrant), *latro* (robber), *haereticus* (heretic) or *paganus* (pagan). As heretics were viewed also the followers of Arius and the Nestorians (Stachura 2018, 117–142). If our association of the fragment of *missorium* from Putim with the emperor Constantius II is correct, it should be noted that although he banned pagan sacrifices, he promoted Arianism. For that reason, he was later reckoned as a heretic who arbitrarily imposed his will on the church and become one of the best-known target of the followers of the Nicene Credo, for example Julian the Apostate (Jones 1964, 118; Stachura 2018, 34). Furthermore, insultation is part of the Late Roman legal system (Codex Theodosianus), which refers to the several subcategories of such an act (Stachura 2018, 79).

Insultatio Imperatori was intentional hostile aggression, which was addressed to the emperor especially by the Barbarian rulers, which is for example the case of Hunnic ruler Attila (Meier 2015, 635). In the same way, Constantius II was insulted from the site of the Persian king Hormisdas (Kelly 2003, 600, 601). In a similar way altering of the coin portrait using counterstamps or even erasure can be considered (Göbl 1978, 145, Taf. 32 – here esp. cat. no. 398, 399). In the northern Barbaricum is the earliest event, connected to the destruction of the portrait of the emperor a destruction of several equestrian statues in life size, probably depicting the emperor Augustus, in the area of the unsuccessfully founded Roman city of Waldgirmes (Lahn-Dill-Kreis, Hessen). The destruction of these statues is attributed to two possible events, either in the aftermath of the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest in AD 9 or in the context of the uprising of legionnaires and veterans on the Rhine in AD 14 when Tiberius ascended the throne (Rasbach 2014, 16–20).

Destructions of the statues is among the symbols of the Migration Period and the raid of king of Vandals, Genseric, on Rome in AD 455, and according to this event John Dryden gave the common term – vandalism – to the act of the destruction of the art in 1694. However, it is necessary to add that this act has its own endemic Roman variant.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WEIGHT OF THE ARTIFACT?

The weight of 4.84 g of the part of the silver dish is probably more or less coincidental result of the fragmenting of the original object. However, it is noteworthy that the weight of the object more or less corresponds to the measurement units used at the time, which are reflected, for example, in the weight of late antique coins: the weight of gold *solidi* was 1/72 of a Roman pound (i.e. 4.55 g), in silver it corresponded the weight of the *milliarensis* coinage (silver coins were not so important in practical circulation). The weight of 1/144 of a Roman pound should also correspond to the so-called *exagia solidi* (Alföldi 2001, 134–141, 338). The fragmenting of the silver dish to the pieces with the weight “moving around” the weight of the gold *solidus* can be possibly seen as a kind of the intention. Codex Theodosianus (XIII, 2, 1) states the ratio between gold and silver as 1 : 14.4; i.e. 1 *solidus* corresponds to 1/14.4 pound of silver (= the number of 12 *milliarensia*), when buying silver. In the reverse transfer, 15 *milliarensia* or 30 *siliquae* would have to be paid for one *solidus* (Hahn 1989, 15–17). Our fragment could be theoretically part of such semi-monetary exchange system, which means that 15 such shards of the vessel potentially roughly corresponded to one *solidus*.

CONCLUSIONS

The find of the fragment of the silver dish from Putim in Bohemia can be hardly considered as a deposit. Rather it is an isolated find which is probably more or less connected to the recycling of the precious metals. We can draw a theoretical concept that the weight of the artifact “around” one *solidus* can be a signal of the import of the fragment in this form via network of the exchange of the hack silver and other goods. Therefore, the direct fragmenting of the silver dish in Putim can be disputed. The importation of the silver fragment(s?) to South Bohemia can be seen perhaps as a result of the Barbarian looting on the soil of the provinces, especially in AD 402 (for example: Jiřík/Pinar Gil 2019, 426–452), but not necessarily. The reasons for the fragmenting of the dish can be seen in the economic sphere, as a source of precious metal, perhaps connected to the workshop of a jeweller. But the act of the fragmenting itself could had another reason, which can be rather described in the symbolic terms of *Insultatio Imperatori* or *damnatio memoriae*. The symbolic and economic reasons are not in this case in the contradiction, the loss of the original function of the prestige dish within the elite *niveau* allowed the new economic function of the silver material. Finally, it cannot be excluded that the original dish with the portrait of the emperor came into the hands of the Barbarians already destroyed and fragmented.

Language Correction by Gregor Jiřík

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Nález fragmentu neskoroantického *missoria*(?) v katastri obce Putim, okres Písek, Jižné Čechy

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Súhrn

Fragment strieborného plechu, objavený v juhočeskej Putimi, predstavuje pravdepodobne časť neskoroantického liturgického misy – *missoria*. Potvrďuje to najmä úlomok centrálného reliéfu zobrazujúci časť tváre cisára s diadémom a vysoká čistota striebornej zliatiny. Spomedzi známych zachovaných príkladov týchto neskororímskych prestížnych nádob predstavuje najlepšiu paralelu *missorium* z Kerču s vyobrazením cisára Konštantína II. V tomto príspevku sme sa venovali pohľadu na ekonomické a symbolické aspekty tohto fragmentu, ktorý predstavuje príklad mimoriadne vzácneho a vysoko prestížneho predmetu.

Obr. 1. Putim, fragment striebornej liturgickej nádoby. Foto T. Droppa.

Obr. 2. Mapa oblasti zdokumentovaná digitálnym mikroskopom série VHX-7000 (www.keyence.eu/cscz/).

Obr. 3. Snímky z digitálneho mikroskopu série VHX-7000 (www.keyence.eu/cscz/). 1 – detail diadému; 2 – traseológia detailu povrchu; 3 – porovnanie metód zobrazovania; 4 – zobrazenie detailu vo falošných farbách.

Obr. 4. Snímky z digitálneho mikroskopu série VHX-7000 (www.keyence.eu/cscz/). 1 – detail dierovanej výzdoby drahokamu z cisárskeho diadému; 2 – „výškový graf“; 3 – „výškový graf“ (bočný pohľad).

Obr. 5. Snímky z digitálneho mikroskopu série VHX-7000 (www.keyence.eu/cscz/). 1 – detail strihacích značiek; 2 – „výškový graf“ (bočný pohľad).

Obr. 6. Predná a zadná strana (s očkom na zavesenie) *missoria* z Kerču, Ukrajina (zdroj: The State Hermitage Museum, Petrohrad, podľa Guggisberg 2003).

Obr. 7. Strieborné *missorium* s vyrezávaným vyobrazením cisára z pokladu v Gross Bodungen (Grünhagen 1954).

Tabela 1. Merané spektrá strieborného fragmentu (EDXRF analýza M. Kmošek, spektrometer ElvaX vyrobený spoločnosťou Elvatech).

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