

THE UNIQUE FIND OF A GILDED SPUR FROM LIPOVNÍK (TOPOĽČANY DISTRICT)¹

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In the Považský Inovec hills, which hide several interesting sites from various historical periods, a gilded spur with slightly curved arms was discovered. It is an exceptional artefact, since we did not know about any such spurs from our territory before. Although it is an accidental find which might have been lost during a hunt or while crossing the mountains, it can point to importance of certain families settled in our territory in the more stable Kingdom of Hungary.

Keywords: Slovakia, High Middle Ages, gilded spur.

INTRODUCTION

The Považský Inovec mountain range hides several unique sites in their forests. From the side of Nitra, we can mention for instance the early medieval hillfort of Valy near the village of Bojná or the hillfort on the hill of Marhát settled as early as the Bronze Age and the Rotunda of Saint George nearby, in Nitrianska Baltnica. The village of Lipovník is located near the above mentioned sites which can be dated – based on the discovered finds – to various chronological periods. At the territory of Lipovník in particular, settlement from the Eneolithic and Hallstatt or Early Post-medieval periods has been detected so far (*Pieta 1982*); however, settlement from the Early and Late Middle Ages is absent. Despite this, the village or a small settlement existed in the area then, which is suggested by the first written document from 1283 (*VSOS 1977, 164*). It belonged to the property of the Branč-Lipovnický family as early as the 12th c., together with the villages of Blesovce, Vozokany, Hajná Nová Ves and partly also Krtovce and Lužany in the nearest vicinity of Lipovník (*Lukačka 1994, 105; 2015, 139*). Can the discovery of this gilded spur be associated with this family prospering mainly in the 12th and 13th c. or is it an accidentally occurring unique artefact lost for instance during a hunt or while crossing the Považský Inovec hills?

Description of the find

An iron spur with slightly curved arms (Fig. 1; 2).² The arms' terminals are damaged, but they

were probably ended with plates with two holes (on one arm in particular, a central spoke has been preserved). The spike is shaped as a double pyramid, bent down and located on a short neck. The upper part of the spike has convexly curved edges with an elongated point. On the arms and the spike, the spur was gilded, however, only on the visible upper side. In the lower part of the spike, a triangle copying the spike's edges was indicated. The spur is damaged at several spots, the terminal plates are not preserved and some parts of the spike are also seriously damaged. The gilding has not been evenly preserved either; it is visibly reduced towards the arms' ends.

The total preserved length is 107 mm, arms' distance is 82 mm, the spike is 32 mm long, its maximum thickness is 12 × 11 mm, arms' width is 0.4 mm, their thickness is 0.4 mm and their weight is 29.5 g.

THE TYPOLOGICAL-CHRONOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE SPUR FROM LIPOVNÍK

In the territory of Slovakia, we come across spurs with slightly curved arms from the mid-11th c., although spurs with straight arms still prevail in this period (*Koóšová 2004, 527*). They are more frequent in the 12th c. and their arms are ended mainly with vertical transverse loops, less frequently with simple round loops or a pair of loops. Later, other variations of arms' terminals are added, however, double loops start to prevail

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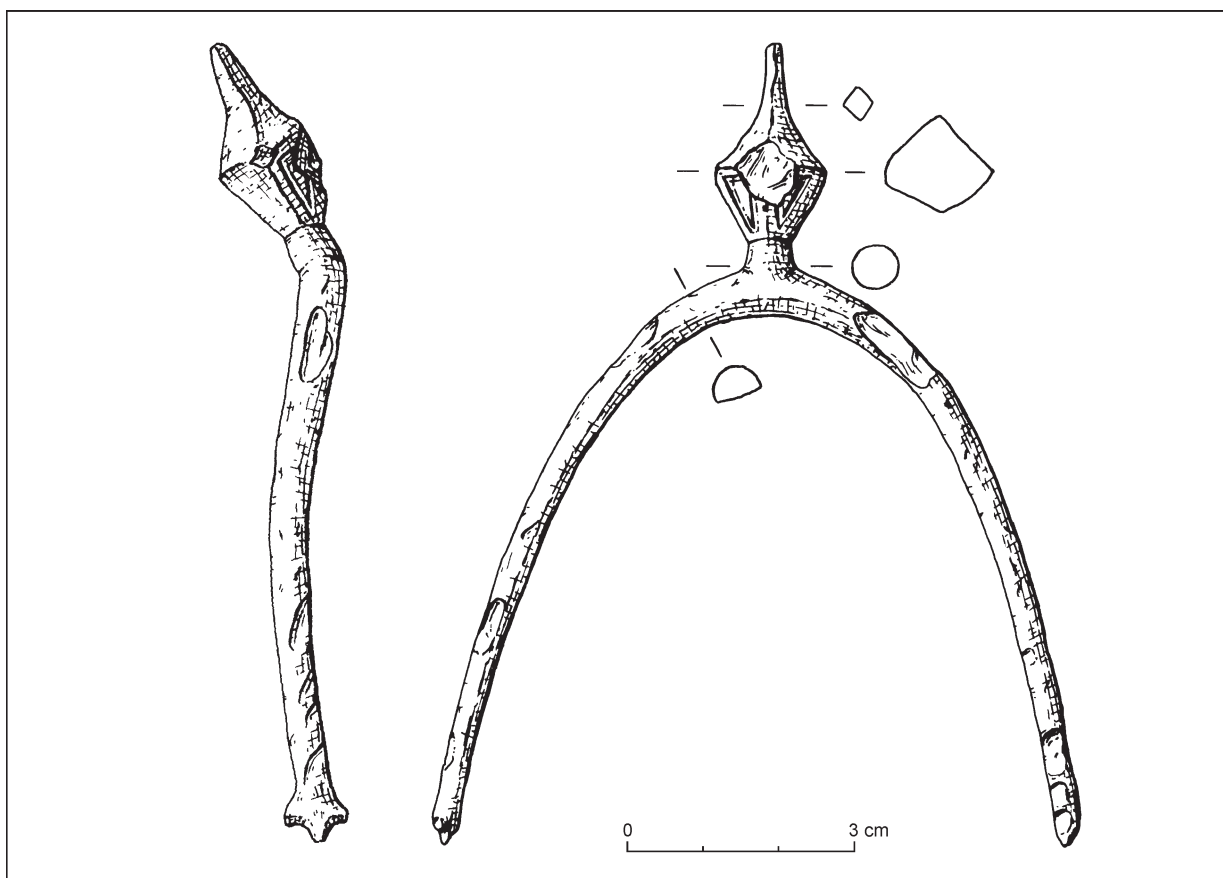


Fig. 1. Lipovník. The gilded spur (sketch by Ž. Nagyová).

(Koóšová 2004, 530, pl. 1; 3; Ruttkay 1976, 348). The spur from Lipovník has the arms' terminals considerably damaged, but on one arm, the central spoke between two loops has been preserved. It is obvious that the arms were terminated with one of the variations of double loops, although it is not clear what shape is present. According to the classification by Z. Hilczerówna (1956, 35–39), the exemplar from Lipovník can be classified in her type II, variant 3. This type includes spurs with short spikes, arms of the heel band are slightly curved and terminated mainly with plates with two holes (sometimes shaped as a 'horizontal figure eight'). The author dates them from the mid-11th c. to the 12th c., although they might have survived in the beginning of the 13th c. (Hilczerówna 1956, 52, 53). When processing spurs from the territory of Germany, N. Gossler (1998, 503–510, 551) also states that the curve of the heel band appears in general in the 11th c., its middle at the latest, and in the course of the century, the arms become more curved or rounded (spurs with slightly or weakly curved bands and short spikes are classified into his group E). He classifies termination of arms with double (horizontal, quadratic) loops – based on

finds – as exemplars with straight arms, although he does not exclude its use on slightly rounded arms either. They prevail mainly in the eastern part of the studied area and are more significantly represented in southern and eastern parts of central Europe (Gossler 1998, 579). This type of spurs occurs with various shapes of spikes. Spikes usually have short necks with a point on their ends. The point is chiefly shaped as a pyramid or cone. Some spikes have quadratic plates or small balls (Koóšová 2004, 527, 530, pl. 1). A. Ruttkay (1976, 348, 349) classifies a similar type of spurs into type B – the spike is terminated with a conical or pyramidal point (variant 2) or decorated with a thin (quadratic or round) plate (variant 3) or a massive small ball (variant 4). Spurs with spikes in shape of double pyramids have not been mentioned from the territory of Slovakia so far (Koóšová 2004, diagram 1; Ruttkay 1976, 348). Their occurrence has been documented in the territory of Poland, Germany or Bohemia (Błoński 2000, fig. 3: b; 5: e; Dresler/Macháček/Měchura 2015, 249, fig. 265; Gossler 1998, 586; Hilczerówna 1956, pl. V; Novotný 1979, pl. 5: 4, 5; Wachowski 1984, fig. 28: a–f; Zápotocký 2018, fig. 51: 16; 65: 3). Z. Hilczerówna (1956, 18, 35–39, fig. 6)



Fig. 2. Lipovnik. The gilded spur with indication of measurement locations (photo by P. Červeň).

divided individual spikes into five shapes. Type d represents shapes of double pyramids occurring in several variants of type II. More precise classification was elaborated by K. Wachowski (1984, 33, 34, 45, fig. 18) for finds from the site of Opole. He classified similar shapes of spikes into his type III1, type IIc1 in particular (spikes with inverted edges, out curved points). This type of spurs was found in Opole in layers dated from the beginning of the 12th c. to the first half of the 13th c. (Wachowski 1984, 44). It occurs together with pyramidal spikes in the period between the 11th and the 13th c. They are frequent also on exemplars with straight arms, however, they are most frequently used on spurs with curved arms (Gossler 1998, 586, fig. 14).

As for the territory of Slovakia, we have only a minimum number of decorated exemplars from this period. Iron (simple) spurs are clearly prevalent. Decoration is rather rare, for instance copper tausia, plastic decoration or bronze spike; silvering or gilding has been recorded from later periods (Košíšová 2004, 527, 530, 533, 536, diagram 1; 4; 7; 10; 2007, 266). The fragmentary state of the assemblage can be one of the reasons. Similar situation is observed in other countries. Iron spurs are clearly prevalent, they are

often simple, undecorated; decorated exemplars are less frequent and they are usually made of other metals, mainly bronze (Gossler 1998, 594, 595, tab. 12; 13; Hilczerówna 1956, 109).

SYMBOLISM OF GOLD, SYMBOLISM OF SPURS

Gold has always been particularly important. Since the oldest times until now, it has represented wealth, power and status. Jewels and artefacts made of gold or decorated with it have brought joy and happiness to many people, but it was often 'only' a sign of prominence, power and – in a way – great possessions. In Slovakia, we find traces of occurrence of gold more or less in each historical period since the earliest times. It culminates mainly in the Middle Bronze Age and the Late Iron Age and the later increase is associated with the expanding exploitation of gold in the Middle Ages (Kolník 2005, 87, 102). Processing of gold in the Middle Ages as well as its exploitation in Slovakia are definitely associated with minting of coins in the more stable conditions of the Kingdom of

Hungary. First attempts to obtain gold, however, are associated with panning in water streams (Ruttkay 1979, 17, 18). After the fall of Great Moravia, the territory of Slovakia slowly gains its position and with more intense onset of Christianity, fewer grave goods were put in burials. Generally lower numbers of weapons as well as golden or gilded artefacts are recorded from this period (Kolník 2004, 102; Ruttkay 1978, 16, 62).

The spur from Lipovník was made of iron, but part of it was strongly gilded (Fig. 2). Gilding is present only on the top part which was visible and presented to the public. It is not unusual. A similar method of decoration (although it was plastic decoration) was also common in the 9th c. For instance, we know several spurs from the hillfort of Valy which bore decoration located only on a half of the spur, i.e. probably the part visible to other people (Jakubčinová 2018, 67). As it was already mentioned before, spurs were not often ornamented with gold or other type of decoration in described period in our territory or in surrounding countries, so they are rather unique finding. Analogous spurs (to our artefact) were discovered at the hillfort of Berlin-Spandau near the eastern bridge.³ They are two gilded spurs discovered in situ on leather boots, fastened by buckles, together with a gilded shield boss (see von Müller 2000, fig. 201). A similar spur with the spike containing a point in shape of a double pyramid with partly preserved gilding comes from the hillfort of Kalisz-Zawodzie. It is a damaged exemplar missing termination of both arms, similarly to the exemplars from the hillfort of Spandau (Błoński 2000, 67, fig. 5: e). A complete artefact was found in Wrocław-Ostrów Tumski,⁴ with arms terminated with two round loops, the so-called figure eight shape (Kaźmierczyk/Kramarek/Lasota 1974, 265, fig. 10: c). A fragment of a spur was also discovered near the site of Břeclav-Lanžhot. Only the upper part of the heel band with the spike bearing traces of decoration has been preserved (Dresler/Macháček/Měchura 2015, 60, fig. 30). They are definitely exceptional finds. Nevertheless, decorated spikes were not found on any of them – unlike the spur from Lipovník. However, not only iron spurs were gilded. Bronze artefacts (rarely also silver ones) were often decorated like this, sometimes in combination with plastic decoration. The group includes exemplars with curved as well as straight arms (Gossler 1998,

Tab. 1. Lipovník. Chemical composition of the spur.

Sample	Fe	Au	Ag
Measuring 1	42.16	27.78	26.09
Measuring 2	90.36	4.52	3.72
Measuring 3	77.61	3.11	16.61
Measuring 4	72.42	11.99	11.39

594, 595; Koch 1982, 75, 76, 80; Schulze-Dörrlamm 1995, 53–55; Zschille/Forrer 1891, 23, pl. V: 2, 9). Richly decorated spurs are also found among grave goods of rulers. They include for instance a pair of beautiful gilded spurs from the grave of (probably) Henrich III (ruling in 1039–1056), which have been, unfortunately, lost (Schulze-Dörrlamm 1995, 55, fig. 24), silver gilded spurs from the grave of Béla III (ruled in 1173–1196) found together with other royal insignia (Kovács 1969, 7, fig. 4) or bronze gilded and richly plastically decorated spurs from the grave of King Sancho IV of Castile (ruled in 1284–1295; Oakeshott 1960, fig. 10: b). Naturally, the number of gilded exemplars increases in later periods and most of the exemplars are spurs made of another metal (Žákovský/Vich 2019, more literature there).

Such decorated spurs had a high material and symbolic value, therefore presentation of social status was certainly a priority of the spurs' owner. One of other positives (although secondary ones) was that use of another metal (including gold or silver) was also better prevention of corrosion (Szymczak 1997, 277). The described spur bears almost identical trace amount of gold and silver. First, the spur was silvered and then gilded. On some spots – on the arms' terminals – the amount of gold is smaller compared to silver (Tab. 1).⁵ It is probable that the triangles on the spike were created additionally after gold had been applied (Filip 1997, 76). Decoration (Au – 46.64%, Ag – 36.97%) was partly preserved on the spur from the hillfort of Kalisz-Zawodzie. The author assumes that the proportion of silver made the 'coating' brighter (Hensel 2000, 96, 97, tab. 3).

In the Early and often also High Middle Ages, a warrior was usually a member of a group gathered around some eminent nobleman accompanying him or protecting his seat (Cardini 1999, 71). The basic elements of optimum equipment of

³ The last reconstruction of the bridges at the hillfort based on dendrochronological dating is set in the period around 1162 (von Müller 2000, 281).

⁴ The spur was found in the layer dated to the 13th c.

⁵ Chemical composition of spur was determined on several places of spur by spectrometer Thermo Scientific at the Archaeological Institute SAS in Nitra. I wish to thank Mgr. V. Mezey for measuring and interpretation of results.

a medieval knight included not only horse-riding gear but mainly a sword, a spear and a shield, metal armour and a helmet. Individual parts of the defensive as well as offensive armament were variously changed in time because of different methods of fighting. This can be observed also on the shapes of spurs which were accustomed to an armoured rider and his new way of riding (*Ruttkay 1978*, 15, 58). Since the equipment of a rider or a knight was expensive and the costs increased in time, not everybody was able to become a warrior or a knight. Because of the expenses, knighthood was maintained mainly in various elite groups, princely or royal company. The initiation ritual became a certain kind of entry of young noblemen in the world of power and politics (*Cardini 1999*, 71, 84, 94).

Spurs, together with a belt, became symbols of warriors (knights) as early as the Early Middle Ages. They represented a certain privilege, favour of the king or prince, they were symbols of vassals (*Szymczak 1997*, 280). Luxurious spurs played an important role in coronation ceremonies as well as various ceremonial rituals, for instance knights' accolade. This ritual consisted of several acts and one of them was girding the knight with a belt with a suspended sword and fastening of spurs (*Slivka 2013*, 160–162). The whole accolade process was a remarkable act indeed, and although the fastening of a belt and spurs was not the most important point in this ceremony, it definitely belonged to the essential and visually attractive moments (*Graus 2010*, 5). Those who wore golden spurs (*equus auratus*, as such knights were called), but mainly knights, gradually became members of various knightly societies or orders (*Slivka 2013*, 162). A knight was declared by the emperor, Pope and even some princes had such privilege. The right to wear golden spurs was probably associated with the accolade as well. Being given such spurs or acceptance in such society was not easy and sometimes it took a very long time (*Szymczak 1997*, 280, 284). Many researches in Slovakia as well as abroad have been dealing with the symbolism of spurs and accolade. Nevertheless, it is obvious that luxurious spurs, mainly gilded exemplars, were used at this ritual (e.g. *Graus 2010*; *Košíšová 2005*; *Slivka 2013*, 154–165; *Szymczak 1997*; *Žákovský/Vích 2019*, 91–95). As we have stated above, gilded spurs are not very numerous at the territory of Slovakia. Preserved exemplars are known rather from the younger periods (*Košíšová 2007*, 273–275), so the finding from Lipovník is an exceptional artefact. Similar situation is in the surrounding countries, where gilded spurs with mildly bent arms also represent rare findings (*Gossler 1998*, 594, 595, tab. 12; 13; *Hilczzerówna 1956*, 109).

FINAL REFLECTIONS

After the fall of Great Moravia, the territory of Slovakia was found in a kind of military turmoil. It was gradually incorporated in the newly established Kingdom of Hungary, but the neighbouring powerful states also made claims to it. Western and southwestern Slovakia in particular often turned into a battlefield in the 11th and 12th c. Not only power struggles inside Hungary took place there, it was also attacked by the neighbouring rulers (*Marsina 1993*, 119–121). The nobility being formed in our territory often helped the ruling class in the Kingdom of Hungary and its basic duty was to support the king militarily and show their political loyalty to him. For these services, the kings of Hungary generously rewarded the most active knights – financially, with properties, land or other rights (*Uličný 2013*, 440, 510). Despite the new situation in our territory and in the new Kingdom of Hungary, we can speak of several strong dynasties in Slovakia as early as the 11th c., in Nitra County in particular (*Lukačka 1994*, 102). The Hont-Poznan family was one of the oldest. They owned numerous territories and properties or villages as well as the upper Radošina river basin with the centre in the area around Nitrianska Blatnica. The Branč-Lipovnícky family also ranks among the oldest ones. They owned today's Lipovník (*Lukačka 1994*, 102, 105). We do not know the exact location of the spur and the current cadastral areas of villages are not necessarily identical with the areas of the then properties. However, it is sure that gilding of the spurs was associated with the social status of their owners and were a symbol of a certain class (*Koch 1980*, 80–82). Who was so exceptional to deserve something like this? Where was he from and how did he deserve the spur? Could he get it (or them, if we assume, he owned a pair) himself or did he get it (them) as a unique gift? To answer these questions, we could create several hypotheses and it is not easy to identify this artefact with a historical event or figure. The sources mention the fact that the noblemen from the Hont-Poznan family helped Stephen I a lot in the beginning of his reign, which earned them his gratitude and favour later shown by his successors (*Lukačka 1994*, 102). Nitrianska Blatnica is known mainly thanks to the Church of St. George situated in the forest, near which a cemetery and two farmsteads were studied. The building of the church itself attracts our attention and points to a certain significance of the sites. The oldest phase of the cemetery is clearly documented (9th c. is assumed), however, burials were carried out there in the 11th c. as well, with overlap in the 13th–14th c. Men were buried in more graves (55%; *Ruttkay 2010*,

15–20). Nobleman Stojslav, son of Čanád, the oldest ancestor of the Poznan family, is associated with this village. When he returned from a military campaign of Béla III in 1185, he bequeathed his property in Blatnica (Sarfew) to his mother and after her death, to the Benedictine monastery of St. Hippolyte on Zobor (Lukačka 2010, 29). Spurs from the 12th c. occur mainly in towns, castles or hillforts, less frequently in the village environment, near churches or monasteries, while in the 13th c., the number of spurs increased at castles as well as in villages, but their numbers in towns decreased (Koóšová 2004, 530, 533, diagram 3; 6). The spur from Lipovník does not fit clearly in any of the above mentioned categories. It was probably accidentally lost due to torn straps or

damaged garniture fastening the spurs. Was it lost by a nobleman or a knight during a hunt or when he was crossing the Považský Inovec mountain range? Hunts were a kind of social entertainment at that time, events attended mainly by higher noble classes. Even entertainment like this might have brought adventure in everyday life, involving hunts for large game or other wild animals living in our forests (Cardini 1999, 86; Uličný 2013, 162). It is also one of the possible occasions when the spur might have been lost. Despite the numerous questions brought by the above described spur, it certainly belongs to the remarkable artefacts which enriched our collection of artefacts from the period of the High Middle Ages in the territory of Slovakia.

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