

EARLY OR LATE MEDIEVAL?

Metal Strap-Decorations That Caused Some Confusion¹

Z B I G N I E W R O B A K 

The paper aims at refining the information about the composition of a ‘hoard’ found by amateur treasure hunters in Dolné Orešany, Trnava dist. in Slovakia. The ‘hoard’ contains 86 bronze decorations and, initially, it was attributed to the turn of the 8th and 9th centuries. Most items are late Avar decorations the origin and chronology of which is beyond any doubt. Several items, however, aroused suspicions. One of the fittings was classified as Carolingian and, unfortunately, was published as such. Further studies revealed that the ‘hoard’ included items that should be dated back to the period between 1300 and 1450 AD instead. This applies to the fitting initially described as Carolingian. The paper also questions the chronology of some well-known finds that have long been considered to be early medieval.

Keywords: Middle Europe, Early Middle Ages, Late Middle Ages, belt, decorations, attire accessories, treasure hunting.

INTRODUCTION

The so called ‘hoard’ from Dolné Orešany (Western Slovakia) contains 86 bronze decorations (*Pieta/Rutt kay 2017*). It was found in 2005 by amateur archaeologists who promptly informed the Institute of Archaeology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences about their discovery. In 2006, archaeologists discovered another part of the ‘hoard’ – six further bronze items on the site indicated by the finders. The items were found in a trench with an area of approximately 3 m². The cleaning of a larger area (of about 8 m²) revealed traces of items removed by amateur archaeologists. This suggested that the ‘hoard’ was not stacked in one spot but rather scattered or spread – intentionally or due to the post-deposition processes – over a small area. However, most of artefacts is of late Avar origin and is attributed to the turn of the 8th and 9th centuries, several items aroused suspicions.

FROM AN UNCERTAIN CONTEXT AND A FLAWED CHRONOLOGY

In 2017, I published a paper in which I presented one of the fittings from the ‘hoard’ as Carolingian (*Robak 2017*). It was a small, rectangular openwork application fastened with two rivets and decorated with a motif of symmetrical vine scrolls. My assessment of the fitting, then, relied on the general chronology of the ‘assemblage’ and the fact that the

ornament seemed to be typical of the Carolingian Renaissance. The only unusual feature of the item was openwork – rare in the Carolingian times. This warning signal, however, did not stop me from publishing the paper. I have ignored the inconsistency of the ‘hoard’ – the presence of a fitting with undoubtedly early Hungarian analogies (*Pieta/Rutt kay 2017*, fig. 10: 10). Conveniently, I assumed that the Hungarian fitting was placed somewhere close to the Avar hoard and extracted by the treasure hunters using metal detectors together with the rest of the finds. I also assumed that the finders described the ‘hoard’ accurately and reliably.

Interestingly, the openwork fitting was not the only ‘bizarre’ decoration in the ‘hoard’ from Dolné Orešany. Five small clepsydra-shaped – or double T – fittings (Fig. 1: 2–6) had no close analogies among early medieval finds. It seems that the fittings decorated a narrow strap and at least three of the five seem to form a set. Generally, all five are very similar to each other. The ‘hoard’ contained also some elements whose function – although related to attire – was difficult to establish (Fig. 1: 7–11).

Paradoxically, after an extensive search, I managed to find a nearly ideal analogy to the ‘pseudo-Carolingian’ openwork fitting in a distant city of Greifswald (*Samariter/Rütz/Albrecht 2016*). Unfortunately, the circumstances of the discovery of this item did not dispel the doubts. On the contrary, they made the context even dimmer. The fitting was extracted from a medieval latrine. However, already convinced that the fitting from Dolné Orešany was

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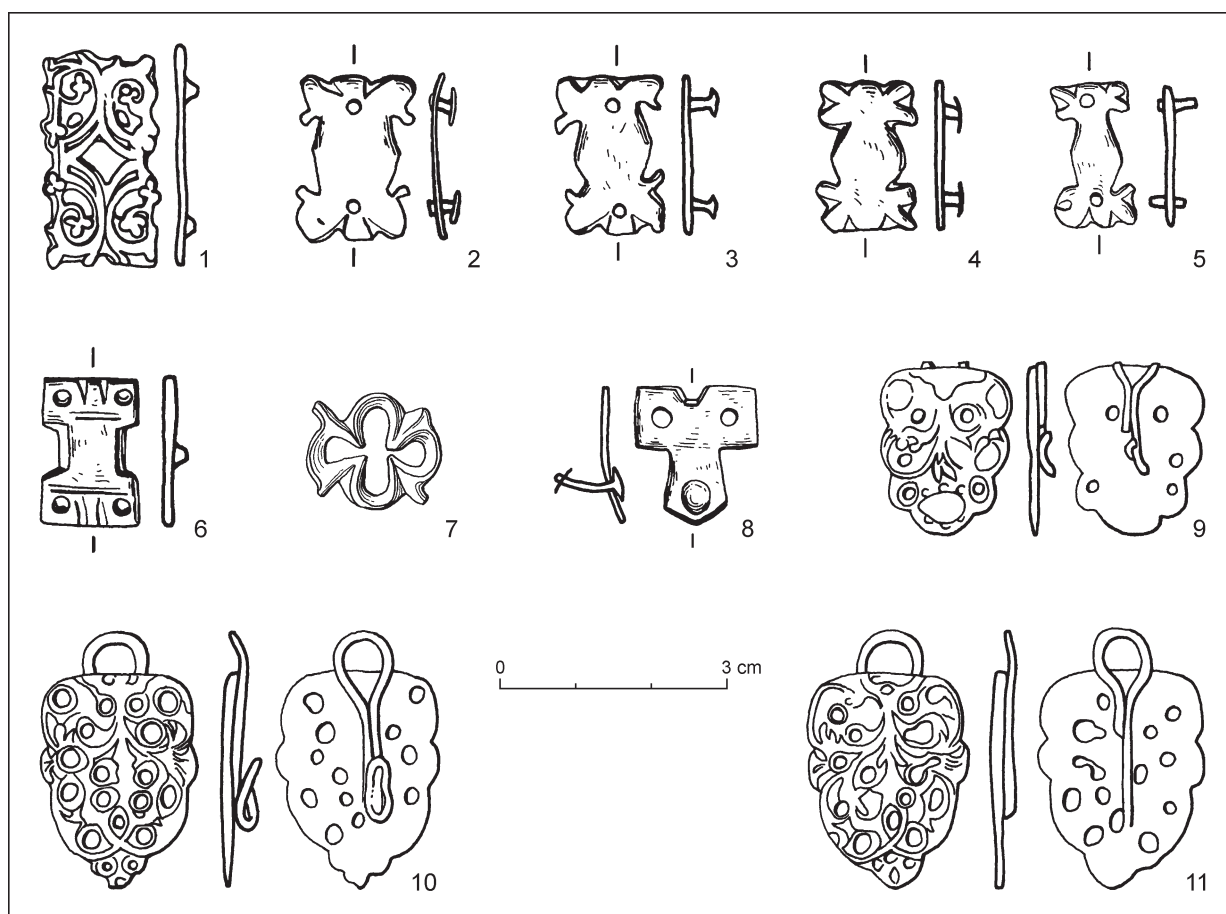


Fig. 1. Non-early medieval parts of the deposit from Dolné Orešany, Slovakia (after *Pieta/Ruttkay* 2017).



Fig. 2. Late medieval belt mounts from various sites in Netherlands. 1–8 – unspecified sites, approximately real size; 9 – Bois-le-Duc, scale approximately 2 : 3 (after *Willemsen/Ernst* 2012).

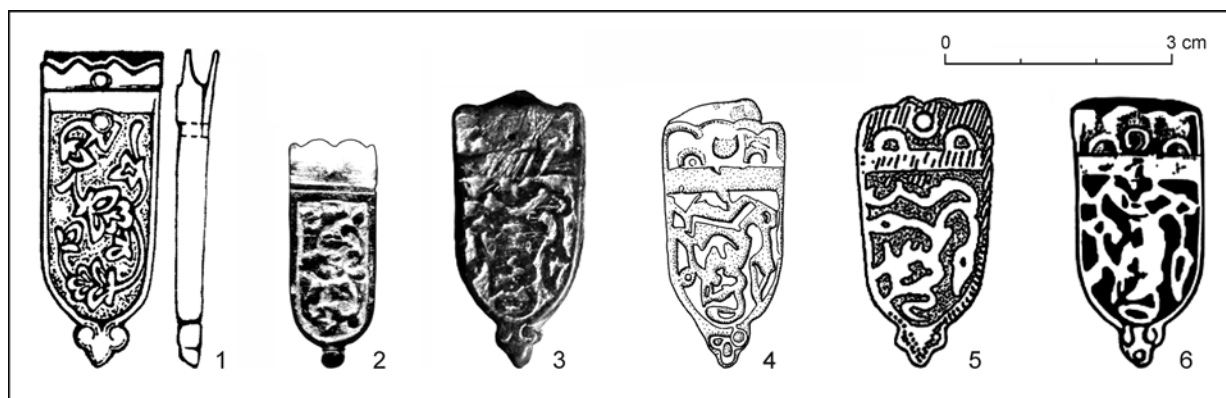


Fig. 3. Early or late medieval? A group of the multi-part strap-ends with characteristic plant motif. 1 – Tismice/CZ, surface find (*Profantová 2011*, fig. 8: 4); 2 – Perugia/IT, museum collection, unknown origin (*Schulze-Dörrlamm 2009*, fig. 31); 3 – localization unknown, internet auction (*Robak 2018*, fig. 6: 4); 4 – Cristuru Secuiesc/RO, medieval manor (*Prohászka/Nevizánsky 2016*, fig. 1: 2); 5 – Petronell/AT, surface find (*Stadler 1989*, fig. 1419); 6 – Kraków-Wawel/PL, mixed Renaissance-time layer (*Zoll-Adamikowa 1998*, fig. 2: a).

Carolingian, I accepted the idea that also the one from Greifswald came from that period (*Robak 2018*, fig. 12: 9). Instead of delving deeper into the (latrine) context, I convinced myself that the fitting could get there when the latrine was dug out or filled up. I ignored the idea that it was exactly where it should have been. As a consequence, I generated a fictitious find from an area abundant in Carolingian artefacts in north-eastern Germany. Still, however, the uniqueness of the fitting and the lack of close analogies among early medieval artefacts bothered me. After all, Carolingian fittings were not openwork! And so, I decided to delve deeper (*sic!*) into the Greifswald latrine trail.

The dendrochronological analysis supported the dating of the latrine from Greifswald back to the second half of the 14th c. and the layer in which the fitting was found to the period between the end of the 14th c. and the second half of the 15th c. Consequently, I focused on artefacts from excavations in medieval Hanseatic cities. This turned out to be the right move, although, of course, late. Similar fittings, in larger quantities and even a fragment of a belt decorated with such fittings, were found in the Netherlands (Fig. 2; *Willemsen/Ernst 2012*) where they were dated back to 1350–1450, i.e., similarly as the layer containing the Greifswald fitting. It seemed, thus, that the mystery of the openwork fitting was solved. But there is more to the story. The review of late medieval and early Renaissance finds corroborated the view that small, clepsydra-shaped decorations (Fig. 1: 2–6) have a similar chronology. In this case, the analogies turned out to be less geographically distant (*Furman 2020*, 136, 138, fig. 2: 7; *Loubal 1938–1939*, fig. 4: 4–10; *Ruttkay 1989*, 367, fig. 4: 1625) because such decorations were known from

Western Slovakia. However, the Dutch collection contained similar artifacts (Fig. 2: 7, 8). It seems they were popular all over Europe in the 14th c. (*Fingerlin 1971*, 80, 85; *Sawicki 2021*, 168).

The presence of late medieval/early Renaissance openwork fitting and the other decorations in the ‘hoard’ from Dolné Orešany suggests that, in fact, the ‘hoard’ contained elements of a belt or a couple of belts. It would be now difficult to determine whether all the elements came from a single set. Presumably, the items were accidentally lost close to the site where the Avar bronzes were deposited – similarly to the already mentioned early Hungarian fitting. It is also possible that some other artefacts, resembling brooches (Fig. 1: 9–11), should be rather linked with the same period as the belt or even younger. The chronology of the brooches had seemed dubious before and now the doubts seem even more reasonable.

Consequently, considering the ‘hoard’ as an assemblage loses justification. We are unable to unambiguously identify the composition of the original deposit (if any). It should be strongly emphasised that the collection, thus, is of no value for the chronological and typological analysis. Otherwise, this interesting collection could be petrified in the literature as an assemblage and used as the Blatnica collection as a foundation for far-fetched research hypotheses (*Robak 2017*).

HOW COULD THIS HAVE HAPPENED?

We need to notice that some late medieval fittings could be easily taken for early Carolingian items. Particularly when a researcher is preoccupied with

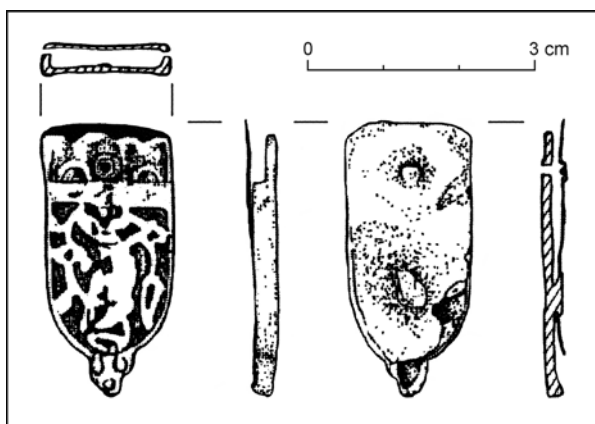


Fig. 4. Construction of problematic strap-ends on an example from Kraków-Wawel (modified after Zoll-Adamikowa 1998, fig. 2).

the Carolingian period. The literature is full of items arising heated debates about the chronology (e. g. *Profantová* 2011, 81). Why? Both of the periods used classic decorative patterns (such as vines) and similar forms of decorations. This is particularly true of various types of fittings. For instance, in both periods, tips of long narrow fittings were often decorated with a small knop.

Mistakes are particularly likely when items are atypical or have no close analogies. Similarly, a series of nearly identical artefacts without any archaeological context could be misattributed. For instance, small fittings with a knop, decorated with a vine scroll motif (Fig. 3), used to be considered as undoubtedly early Carolingian. The fittings have a corrugated, or wavy, upper edge, one visible rivet (the second one can be seen only on the back-side) and a terminal, usually resembling a trefoil. The fittings are multi-part. The front side consists of a plate with raised edges and the backside is a matching plate. The fitting resembles, thus, a small box with a strap inserted from the top (Fig. 4). The plant decorative motif on all those fittings is nearly identical. Although only recently the motif was deciphered (*Robak* 2018, fig. 6).² Today, I am not certain whether their early medieval chronology is correct anymore. All features of such fittings can be considered typical of both early and late medieval

fittings. Although some of them i. e. the corrugated edge and one visible rivet seem to be more common in the later period. The same applies to the multi-part construction of the fittings virtually absent in the Carolingian times (Fig. 5; see *Egan/Pritchard* 1991, fig. 82).³ Furthermore, when taking a closer look at better-preserved examples of small fittings, the terminals seem to resemble the gothic lily (Fig. 3: 3).⁴ Notably, all similar finds come from mixed late medieval or modern layers. In the worst-case scenario, the fittings come from 'surface surveys' (i. e. found using a metal detector). Unfortunately, we can expect the number of the latter type of finds to increase rapidly.⁵

CONCLUSION

I could write that only the one who does nothing makes no mistakes. However, it seems likely that mistakes are made by those who stick to one research area. The Slovak archaeologist professor Titus Kolník once said that a researcher should shift to a different research area every seven years to avoid becoming a 'professional fool'. Those words beautifully summarise my feelings. Obviously, it taught me to delve deeper into 'awkward' or atypical patterns and certainly avoid fitting finds into the period central to my research interests. Research conclusions need to be confronted with the extant literature beyond the period we investigate.

The situation also shows how cautious we need to remain when assessing finds made during field surveys and metal detection. Particularly, when archaeologists have no control over the excavation process. I do not assume, in this case, that the finders were driven by ill will. Still, we cannot expect them to be fully familiar with the field methodology or the literature.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the Slovak law still offers no efficient legal solutions allowing archaeologists to cooperate with amateur treasure hunters. I do not mean thieves who plunder and destroy archaeological sites but history enthusiasts who are eager to contribute to the current knowledge. Generally, in Slovakia (as of the end

² It was long considered a stylised animal motif (see *Prohászka/Nevizánsky* 2016; *Stadler* 1989; *Zoll-Adamikowa* 1998). Now, it turns to be a plant.

³ For this reason, it would be worthwhile to take another look at the copper-alloy fitting from the early medieval site no. 62 in Kraków-Nowa Huta-Mogiła (*Poleski* 2013, fig. 97: 6; *Robak* 2018, fig. 7) to check if it is or not a plate from a multi-part late medieval belt-end (cf. *Egan/Pritchard* 1991, fig. 93). The plate has been found out of any feature.

⁴ There are also doubts about an allegedly Merovingian fitting ended with a rather 'gothic' *fleur de lys* from Kalisz (*Baranowski* 2003).

⁵ In recent years, at least three similar items were offered at British internet antiquity auctions. Unfortunately, we cannot verify their origins.

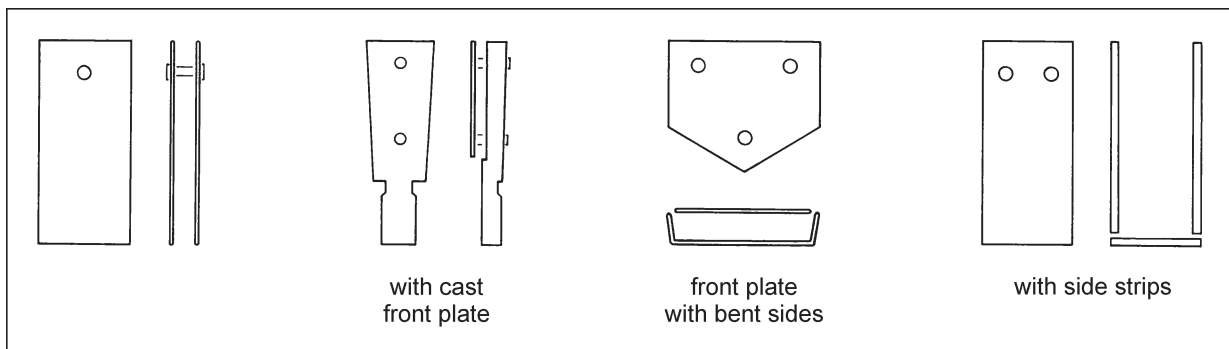


Fig. 5. Some technical solutions of late medieval two-part fittings (after Egan/Pritchard 1991, fig. 82).

of 2021), an archaeologist who wants to oversee or supervise amateur treasure hunts, for instance by a local history society, risks being accused of several offences and faces more serious punishment than the amateurs themselves. Personally, I am against such amateurish excavations because they often lead to the destruction of archaeological sites and the damages are often more serious than the benefits. However, I am also aware that we are unable to stop the treasure hunts. Amateurs will seek archaeological finds with or without professional supervision.

There are good practices that could be used to at least reduce the damages. For instance, in Germany, there are regulations allowing to control the amateur archaeology and private collections that otherwise could remain carefully hidden. Usually, such collections have little scientific value but, occasionally, they contain real gems. And I do not mean so much the finds themselves – let's be honest, museums and repositories are full of old axes and spurs – as the information about sites and the context of discovery that could be vital for the scientific progress. Also, some of the amateurs' finds,

if known, could be borrowed by local museums and shown to the local community interested in the history of their region. Unfortunately, despite numerous attempts to shift the legal landscape to the 21st c. (instead of petrifying the 19th c. *status quo*), central institutions ignore the problem.

The current penalisation is ineffective and stops virtually no one. A determined private collector, possibly balancing on the verge of the Slovak law, can legalise the collection becoming, thus, its sole owner. And then, we obtain scarce, often fabricated pieces of information about 'random passers-by' and 'ploughed finds' while actual contexts and sites remain meticulously hidden. The damages are done to the science and, ultimately, the Slovak history enthusiasts. Therefore, we should be glad that finds, as the 'hoard' from Orešany, are passed to the archaeologists at all and could be analysed (although not without mistakes) and presented to the public. However, how much more knowledge we could obtain if only the amateur treasure hunters were not afraid to disclose the full details about their finds remain an important, yet unanswered question.

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Translated by Magdalena Adamus

Mgr. Zbigniew Robak, PhD.
Archeologický ústav SAV, v. v. i.
Akademická 2
SK – 949 21 Nitra

Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum
Leibniz-Forschungsinstitut für Archäologie
Ernst-Ludwig-Platz 2
DE – 55116 Mainz
zbigniew.robak@savba.sk

Včasno alebo neskorostredoveké?

Kovové ozdoby opaskov, ktoré spôsobili nejeden zmätok

Z b i g n i e w R o b a k

SÚHRN

V roku 2005 Archeologický ústav SAV v Nitre zaznamenal informáciu o náleze „depotu“ bronzových predmetov amatérskymi archeológmi v Dolných Orešanoch, okr. Trnava. Predmety boli odovzdané a uložené v depozitári AÚ SAV a na mieste nálezů sa vykonal menší zisťovací archeologický výskum, pri ktorom sa na skúmanej ploche zaevidovalo niekoľko ďalších artefaktov. Na základe získaných informácií sa dospelo k záveru, že „depot“ nebol pôvodne uložený na jednom mieste, ale nálezy z neho boli roztrúsené po okolí na ploche asi 8 m², odkiaľ ich nálezcovia pozbierali (Ruttkay/Pieta 2017).

Zbierka pozostáva celkovo z 86 bronzových ozdôb a predbežne bola klasifikovaná ako depot, datovaný na prelom 8. a 9. stor. Väčšinu nálezů tvoria neskorostredoveké ozdoby o ktorých pôvode a chronológii niet pochyb. V prípade niekoľkých predmetov (obr. 1) sa však vyskytli pochybnosti o ich klasifikácii. Jedným z nich je aj kovanie (obr. 1: 1), ktoré bolo určené, a žiaľ, aj chybné publikované ako karolínske (Robak 2017).

Ide o malú obdĺžnikovú prelamovanú aplikáciu, zobrazujúcu symetricky usporiadaný motív vínnej révy. Tento motív je veľmi typický pre karolínsku renesanciu, až na

jeho vyhotovenie v podobe prelamovanej platničky. Musím priznať, že pri publikovaní tohto predmetu som bol silne ovplyvnený všeobecnou chronológiou náleziska a úplne som ignoroval indicie, že orešanský „depot“ nemusí byť uzavretým nálezovým celkom, čo naznačovala už prítomnosť jedného kovania staromaďarského vzhľadu.

Zaujímavé je, že „pseudokarolínske“ prelamované kovanie nebolo jediným „neobvyklým“ predmetom v analyzovanej zbierke. Nedostatok blízkych analógií medzi včasnostredovekými artefaktmi bol badateľný aj v prípade piatich malých kovaní v tvare presýpacích hodín, resp. tvaru dvojitého T. Okrem nich sa v „depote“ nachádzalo ešte niekoľko predmetov s ťažko určiteľnou funkciou, hoci zjavne súviseli s odevom (obr. 1: 9–11).

Keďže aj po publikácii „depotu“ ma stále trápila vágnosť určenia prelamovaného kovania, rozhodol som sa vrátiť k hľadaniu analógií a rozšíriť ho o nálezy z neskorého stredoveku, ako naznačovalo datovanie veľmi podobného nálezu z Greifswaldu. Definitívny výsledok poskytl až hľadanie v katalógoch s neskorostredovekými nálezmi z oblastí hanzových miest. Ukázalo sa, že „pseudokarolínske“ kovanie je v skutočnosti neskorostredovekou alebo včasno-renesančnou opaskovou ozdobou, rámcovo datovanou do rokov 1350–1450. Vďaka vykonanému rešeršovaniu sa podarilo určiť podobnú chronológiu aj pre skupinu drobných ozdôb v tvare presýpacích hodín (obr. 1: 2–6), ktoré tiež od začiatku nekorešpondovali s celkovým charakterom „depotu“. Vo všeobecnosti tieto predmety môžeme datovať do 14. stor., kedy boli rozšírené po celej Európe. Jediné, čo sa spätne nepodarilo určiť, je datovanie troch spôn. Tie však nepôsobia dojmom, že by boli včasnostredoveké.

Na základe novo zistených argumentov už nesmieme hovoriť o nálezovom celku z Orešian, pretože nie sme schopní oddeliť pôvodné zloženie prípadného depotu. Tým, že niektoré predmety sa do „depotu“ dostali sekundárne – buď neopatrným zhrnutím z povrchu počas amatérskeho zberu, alebo boli z „dobrej vôle“ odovzdané nálezcami – hodnota uvedenej zbierky pre prípadné chronologické a typologické analýzy klesla na nulu. Táto, inak veľmi zaujímavá zbierka, by sa teda nemala stať v budúcnosti základom pre vytváranie nereálnych vedeckých hypotéz.

Na tomto mieste je tiež nutné poznamenať, že nie je ťažké si zameniť niektoré neskorostredoveké opaskové kovania s včasnokarolínskymi, najmä ak bádateľ intenzívne hľadá tie druhé. V oboch obdobiach sa používali klasické ornamentálne motívy (nie nadarmo sa hovorí o karolínskej renesancii), napríklad motív vínnej révy a liany, a tiež sa používali podobné tvary niektorých ozdôb. V literatúre sú už roky publikované predmety, ktorých chronológia je medzi bádateľmi sporná. To sa týka najmä rôznych tvarov nákončí.

Celá táto situácia tiež poukazuje na skutočnosť, ako je nutné byť opatrný pri analýze nálezov, ktoré boli nájdené detektorom kovov. Hlavne v situáciách, kedy archeológ nemôže priamo dohliadať na proces získavania nálezov.

V tomto konkrétnom prípade nepredpokladám *a priori* zlú vôľu alebo úmysel detektoristov (možno by som mal?). Taktiež od nich nemôžem požadovať odbornosť, metodickú aj vedeckú, akú by som očakával od seba alebo od profesionálnych archeológov vo všeobecnosti.

Na záver tejto sebakritiky je potrebné spomenúť, že slovenská legislatíva stále neponúka efektívne riešenie spolupráce medzi archeológmi a amatérskymi vyhľadávateľmi pamiatok (v tomto prípade nenarážam na „primitívnych zlodějov“, ktorých jediným cieľom je vykradnúť a zničiť archeologické nálezisko). Na základe slovenskej legislatívy v súčasnosti vo všeobecnosti platí, že archeológ, ktorý by chcel akýmkoľvek spôsobom dohliadať na amatérske vyhľadávanie pamiatok, ktoré vykonáva napríklad miestny historický klub (a ktoré by sa pravdepodobne aj tak uskutočnilo, či už s jeho prítomnosťou alebo bez nej), sa vystavuje riziku, že bude obvinený z viacerých trestných činov a bude čeliť vážnejším dôsledkom ako samotný amatérsky hľadač. Hoci osobne som zásadne proti takejto amatérskej činnosti, pretože nesporne vedie k ničeniu archeologických nálezísk a škody, ktoré takýto „výskum“ spôsobuje, prevažujú nad prípadným prínosom, uvedomujem si, že tento trend sa nedá zastaviť. Avšak aj takéto amatérske aktivity sa istým spôsobom dajú kontrolovať, a tým pádom by boli prípadné škody obmedzené, ako ukazuje aj prax z Nemecka.

Podobne je to aj so súkromnými zbierkami, ktoré amatéri starostlivo ukrývajú. Väčšinou nie sú z vedeckého hľadiska príliš zaujímavé, ale aj medzi nimi je možné nájsť „perly“. A pritom nejde ani tak o samotné predmety. Povedzme si úprimne, že sklady AÚ SAV a slovenských múzeí sú plné napríklad starých ostrôh a sekier. Pre bádateľov a pamiatkovú inštitúciu sú dôležité informácie o existencii takýchto zbierok, ktoré by mali byť oficiálne evidované. V prípade predmetov by bolo potrebné vyžadovať evidovanie miesta nálezu a jeho nálezových okolností. V budúcnosti by možno mali múzeá dokonca záujem o zapožičanie si niektorých artefaktov zo súkromných zbierok.

Žiaľ, napriek opakovaným pripomienkam inštitucionálnych archeológov a ich ochote spolupracovať na vypracovaní riešení zodpovedajúcich realite 21. a nie 19. stor., zákonodarca a byrokratické centrálné inštitúcie tento problém jednoducho dlhodobo ignorujú. Neúčinné penalizovanie amatérskeho vyhľadávania, ktoré takmer nikoho nezastaví, sa dá ľahko obísť. Odhodlaný majiteľ súkromnej zbierky bude môcť, balansujúc na hrane slovenského práva, svoju zbierku zlegalizovať a stať sa jej výlučným vlastníkom. A potom my, vedecká obec, dostávame zvyškové vykonštruované informácie o „náhodných okoloidúcich“ a „vyoraných nálezoch“, pričom skutočné okolnosti (kontext) a miesto sú zatajované. Jediný kto na tejto situácii stráca je veda a v konečnom dôsledku slovenská spoločnosť. Môžeme byť teda radi, že aspoň takéto nálezy, ako je zbierka z Orešian, sa dostanú do rúk archeológov a tí ich môžu neskôr preskúmať (ako vidíme, nie bez chýb) a prezentovať verejnosti.

