

The Silver Hoard of Žatec

by Radmila Holodňáková

Žatec, 85 km north-west of Prague, is best known for the the top quality of the locally grown hops. Less known however is an event of immense historical significance that took place in 1937 - a treasure was unearthed that helped transform understanding of early Czech medieval history. It took until January this year before the treasure in its entirety has been presented to the public for the first time.

An amazing find on 27th April 1937

Four days after work started in Žatec on the construction of a hop-packaging plant at what is today Chmelářské náměstí, Josef Weigert, one of the workers on site, unearthed a ceramic pot filled to the rim with silver and gold. A fairy-tale treasure!

The ceramic vessel held a unique hoard of Bohemian, Bavarian, Swabian and Saxon pennies, silver ingots, ornaments, small crosses, silver and golden jewellery and wire, with a total weight of 2.7 kilograms.

The hoard comprised 357 coins, of which 191 are pennies of the Dukes of Bohemia Boleslav II (972–999) and Jaromír (1004–1012), and 146 German pennies - of King and Holy Roman Emperor Henry II (1002–1024) from the period up to 1009, Duke Henry of Schweinfurt (1003) in Bavaria, Bruno the Bishop of Augsburg (1006–1009), and older 'Otto Adelheid Pfennigs'. But what makes the hoard really special is the presence of components other than the coins. In addition to refined raw materials (such as silver ingots and gold and silver wire), it contains mostly undamaged and some broken jewellery, among which a silver toiletry set (ear scoops and additional instruments) and a gold ring with an almandine garnet stand out.

Who could mint coins in Bohemia?

In the late 980s and early 990s, the minting system in Bohemia was booming, not only in terms of the volume of coins minted but also with respect to the administration of these activities. The coins featured the names of new mints and increasingly the names of the mintmasters themselves. Independently they were issued not only by Duke Boleslav II, but also by his wife Emma, and by Soběslav and Bishop Vojtěch (Adalbert), who were the sons of the Duke's sister Strězislava and her husband Slavník. During the crisis of the Duchy of

Bohemia in 1003, coins were minted by Bishop Thiddag, in addition to the ruler of the day. During Duke Jaromír's later rule (1004-1012), coins were minted by his younger brother Oldřich; under Duke Oldřich's rule (1012-1033) by his son Břetislav, who succeeded his father in 1034.

In the beginning there was silver

In early medieval society, silver had special importance as a material for the production of coins, jewellery, vessels, reliquaries and liturgical implements. This is reflected by some of the items from the Žatec hoard. Silver ingots, together with silver from no-longer-used or damaged artefacts melted into wire and metal sheets, represent raw material from which a variety of jewellery and other luxury items were created in workshops, or which was turned into coins in mints.

The part of the hoard which includes refined raw materials in the form of silver ingots and silver wire, as well as ornaments with complete sets among them, suggests that these and other items were designed for sale. As such the hoard illustrates the long path from manufacturer to consumer.

World of luxury

Gold has always been connected with the world of the powerful. This world of luxury is represented by rings – simple finger rings and a ring with an almandine.

The Žatec hoard contains a toiletry set on a chain, with a central silver bead decorated with filigree and granulation, from which other chains holding different instruments branch off, e.g. a tool to clean nails, an ear scoop, and fragments of instruments whose function cannot be determined. This set represents an extraordinary luxury item and a rare archaeological find.

The Spiritual world

Kaptorga pendants and small crosses from Žatec permit a look into the spiritual world of early medieval man. Protective objects such as plant fibres, textile scraps, beads or other items could be inserted in the pendant's hollow space. Perforations in the sides of the pendants allowed them to be suspended from the neck as part of a necklace or as a solitaire.

Kaptorga pendants with hammered decoration are most likely products that imitate more luxurious models. Although kaptorga pendants are usually perceived at the level of positive magic conferred



Above, golden ring with an almandine. Below, earrings with three baskets: silver filigree wire and granulation are used for the structural or decorative elements





The Silver Hoard of Žatec

Clockwise from above: jewellery and semi-finished products in the Žatec hoard; S-shaped temple rings; Kaptorga pendant; cross



by the content, it is possible the decoration of some of them refers to Christian motifs.

The world of early medieval jewellery

Two different production and art traditions met in Bohemia – decorative jewellery with filigree and granulation, and simple jewellery made from wire and rods. Both appear in the Žatec hoard. A counterpart to the unique gold ring with an almandine is a simple gold finger ring. Silver filigree wire and granulation are used for the structural or decorative elements of earrings with three baskets, earrings with three cylindrical pendants, and star-shaped earrings which had the most complicated construction.

S-shaped temple rings were made in Bohemia from simple silver wire. Although their first specimens appear already at the turn of the 10th century, they became common and their fashion also spread to other central European areas during the course of the 10th century. The sets of interconnected S-shaped temple rings from the Žatec hoard, like the sets of earrings with three baskets, create the impression of new products intended for trade. This testifies that at the time of the hoard's deposition at the beginning of the 11th century, these items were highly fashionable.

The Žatec hoard is indeed exceptional not only for its relatively high share of S-shaped temple rings, but also for other interesting curiosities. For example, the hoard contains some defective items, documenting the process of jewellery-making that could also end in failure as a result of hidden material defects.

Dating of the hoard

The Bohemian coins of the hoard make it possible to date the treasure to the year 1012, the earliest time it could have been buried in the earth. Due to the absence of coins from the time of Oldřich, after 1012, it could not have happened much later.

The owner of the hoard

The coin section of the hoard shows that the owner's fate copied the fate of the Duke of Bohemia, Jaromír, who, along with younger brother Oldřich and his father's widow Emma, was expelled from Bohemia by his elder brother Boleslav III in 1002. He took refuge at the court of King and Holy Roman Emperor Henry II, who, in 1004 installed him on the Bohemian throne, and to whom he remained loyal and obliged to provide military assistance during his entire reign.

In 1012, Duke Jaromír was deposed and expelled from the country by his brother Oldřich. It was at this time that the assembling of the Bohemian coins in the hoard ended, which dates the hoard's deposition to the year 1012. We don't know who buried the treasure but the individual who assembled the hoard could therefore be a person in the narrowest circle of Duke Jaromír's entourage.

This assessment however does not exclude the possibility, provided by other components of the Žatec hoard, that the owner could have been a craftsman – a jeweller. The top craftsmen often shared the fate of their masters and benefactors, which was at least reflected in their access to resources and finances.

The value of the hoard

The silver items in the unique hoard found in Žatec had immense value at the time of their deposition. It represents roughly the equivalent 2,700 pennies, the cost of nine slaves at the time. According to the traveller and scholar Ibrahim ibn Yakub, in the 960s it would have been possible to buy 27,000 hens on the Prague market for this huge sum of money (one hen for every day for 74 years), wheat for a person for 225 years, or barley for a horse for about 300 years. The hoard represents a fabulous and unusual treasure which could have ensured its owner and his family a luxurious living standard for their entire lifetime.

The Žatec hoard is so rare in its composition that it cannot be compared to any other contemporary treasure found in Czech lands. It is the heaviest and most varied Czech hoard deposited before 1050 and contains gold rings and gold wire, silver ingots, ornaments and a unique toiletry set. It is also the only buried treasure found with kaptorga pendants and crosses in it. Since its discovery the hoard has been kept in the museum in Žatec. In the 1950s the coins were studied by the National Museum in Prague and returned to Žatec in 1999. Finally in 2015 a team of experts was assembled to analyse the entire content of the hoard and, as a result, in 2020 it was decided to put the hoard on permanent exhibition.

Radmila Holodňáková is the Director of the Regional Museum of K. A. Polánek in Žatec.

The new, permanent exhibition of the Žatec Hoard is in the Regional Museum of K. A. Polánek, Husova 678, 438 01 Žatec, Czech Republic www.muzeumzatec.cz