

LUDEK GALUŠKA

SILVER DISC-SHAPED PLAQUE DEPICTING A RIDER WITH A BIRD FROM THE EARLY MEDIEVAL PERIOD FOUND AT STARÉ MĚSTO (MORAVIA, CZ)

In 1955, while research was being carried out at the remnants of an early medieval (9th century) church in Staré Město na Moravě (CZ), one of the best known artefacts and also symbols of Great Moravia was found – a silver disc-shaped plaque with a figural motif featuring a rider on a horse with a bird of prey sitting on his arm. This rider became known as “the falconer”. Since the comprehensive evaluation of the disc by K. Benda in 1962, several important researchers have expressed their opinion on the interpretation of the disc, particularly in recent years. Our study pays greater attention to two of them, namely the Hungarian archaeologist Cs. Bálint and the Czech zoologist J. Mlíkovský, after which a conclusion is provided by the author.

KEY WORDS: Staré Město, grave, disc-shaped plaque, figural motif, falconer

Many remarkable archaeological findings are known from the period of the existence of Great Moravia – an early medieval state structure whose 9th century core lay in Moravia, the eastern part of what is today the Czech Republic. One of the best known finds is the so-called Falconer, a small silver disc-shaped plaque with a hammered motif of a horse rider who has a large bird sitting on his left arm and is clutching an indeterminable object in his right hand (Fig. 1.). It comes from the “Špitálky” locality in Staré Město na Moravě, i.e. from the territory of what was the Great Moravian seat of power: the Staré Město – Uherské Hradiště agglomeration of Veligrad. It was found during the excavation of the remains of a Christian centre which consisted of a church with a narthex of the byzantine type (Fig. 2.), a ritual

well/baptistery, burial grounds with more than 50 graves containing skeletons, and a cult fence (Pouлік 1955, most recently Galuška 2011). During the modern period of its existence, the Staré Město disc has experienced an interesting series of changes, having been restored and supplemented repeatedly, and therefore doesn't always have an identical shape in photographs and other images from different times over the past 60 years. The last conservation work to date was carried out by A. Šilhová from the Institute of Archaeology of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague, who first cleaned the disc in 2000, and then removed all “additions”, stabilized it and subsequently placed it on a moulded polyester base (Šilhová 2003). The disc is currently deposited in this form at the Moravian Museum in Brno.



Fig. 1. Staré Město “Špitálky”: Silver, disc-shaped plaque depicting a rider with a falcon, 9th century.
Photo: S. Doleželová

The disc from Staré Město relatively soon became the subject of an erudite, specialised study (Benda 1963, 41-66), as well as many other essays and catalogue entries, being a unique exhibit which has been requested for many exhibitions on the early Middle Ages. It can also be found on the jackets of several prestigious scientific and popular books, including foreign publications (e.g. Talbot Rice 1965, 145, Fig. 14, Benda 1966, 15, Dekan 1976, Herrmann 1986 and Klanica 2005, with the last appearance being Galuška 2013, 164). It is also the symbol of the Magna Moravia international project and can be seen, e.g. on the covers of books on Great Moravia produced by the Institute of Archaeology at the Czech Academy of Sciences in Brno, or the

Institute of Archaeology at the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Nitra. Simultaneously, it needs to be stated that today a variety of opinions are held on the provenance and chronology of the disc, mainly its importance and the origin of its figural motif. Two studies in particular, written by representatives of specializations as different as archaeology and zoology, deserve greater attention, specifically those of Csanád Bálint (2004, 31-34, 2010, 337-341) and Jiří Mlíkovský (2005, 185-196). However, observations by other researchers such as art historian Ján Dekan (1979) or archaeologist Zdeněk Klanica (2005, 62-64) are also deserving of consideration. Before we give them closer attention, let's review what we know about the circumstances of the dis-



Fig. 2. Staré Město “Špitálky”: Reconstruction of a Byzantine-style church from the second half of the 9th century, after Luděk Galuška and Radek Míka. Photo: S. Doleželová

covery of the Staré Město disc as they were presented by its finder Josef Poulík (1955, 320, 328, Fig. 19) more than 60 years ago.

The disc-shaped plaque with the “falconer” comes from grave No. 15 found south-west of the church in Staré Město at “Špitálky” (Fig. 3). The grave, the top parts of which were probably heavily damaged by mechanical excavators, was examined in two stages during 1949 and 1950. It had almost certainly belonged to a non-adult female individual but there was no sign of the skeleton. Four iron clinches suggest that its 80 cm deep burial pit had originally been lined with wooden boards. Several opulent pieces of gold and silver jewellery of the Veligrad type were found in the earth that filled it, which consisted of “yellow sand slightly mixed with darker clayey sand”. At a depth of 56 cm, 2 smaller silver *gombíks* (spherical decorative buttons of a style almost unknown outside Great Moravia) were found with a surface covered completely with coarse granules, along with one gold *gombík* with a smooth surface furnished with groups of four granules that create rhombuses. Together with the *gombíks*, 1 gold earring was also found with a lower arch fortified by

fine granulation, complemented by a double-sided grape cluster put together from coarser granules. Just above the bottom of the burial pit, at a depth of 70 cm, lay a gilded bronze *gombík* decorated with plant ornamentation, and at the same level, in three places, there were the remnants of an indeterminate leather object plated with silver and bronze strips and decorated with a round silver plaque. The handle of the object is a flat wooden stick on which there are visible imprints of fabric. This bar-like handle was probably inserted into an oval socket made from bronze sheet metal to which it was attached with 10 mm long bronze nails. The round plaque made from a silver metal sheet (diameter 4.3 cm) with an etched decoration is related to the described objects. Within the frame, and with not very high relief, there is a bareheaded horse rider with an elongated face (facing left). He has a bird of prey (a falcon?) on his stretched out left arm and holds an indeterminate object in his right hand, which is clearly depicted as being larger than normal size. The face and the top part of the body are in the en face position, while the head and body of the animal is in strict profile. The concept of the image is naturalistic and only slightly

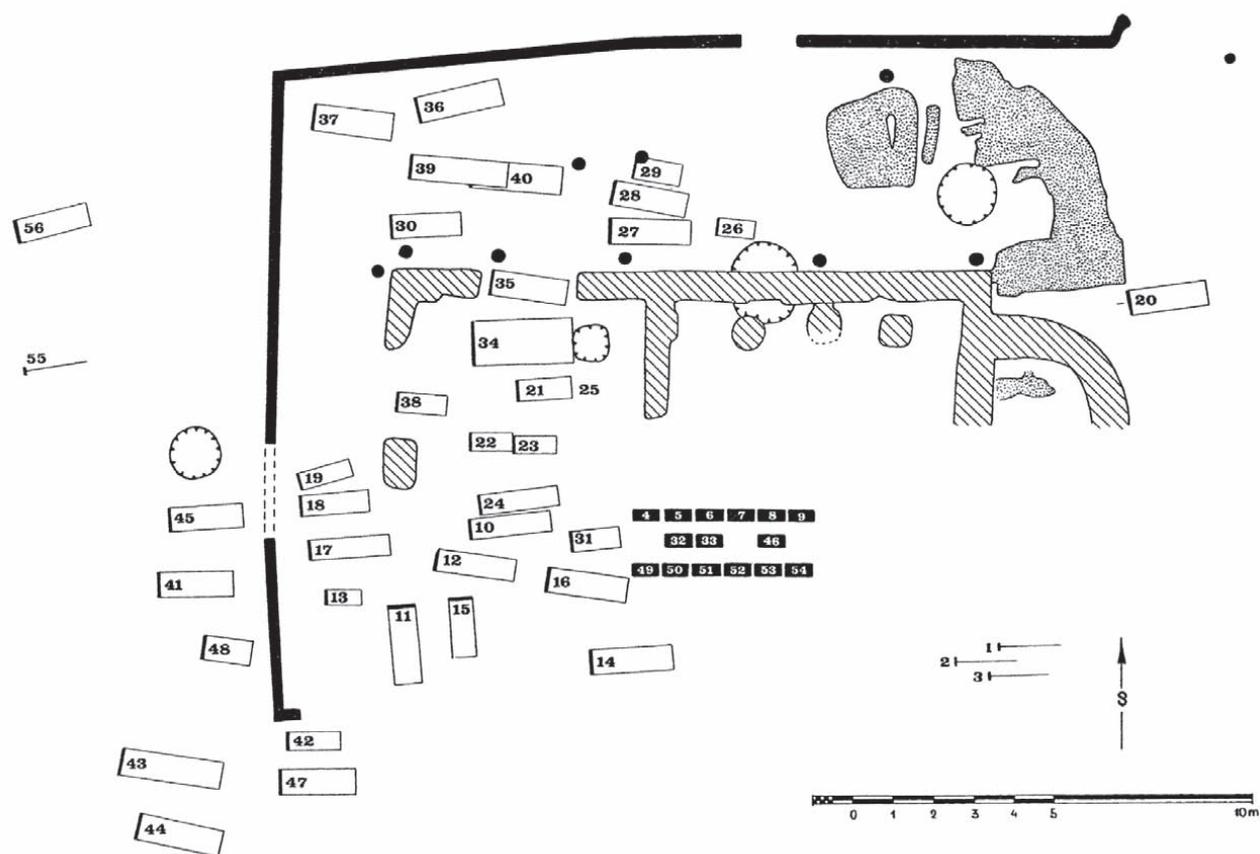


Fig. 3. Staré Město “Špitálky”: Plan of an excavated church from the time of Great Moravia, after Josef Poulík (1955)

stylized. These are the words of Josef Poulík, who only added that “there is nothing like the Staré Město disc in the Moravian Slavonic inventory so far” – which is true even today – and that the jewellery from grave 15 dates back to the beginning of the 10th century at the earliest.” This dating was subjected to criticism and rejected as being too late (Dostál 1990, 39–41, most recently by Galuška 2013a).

For a long time, the most comprehensive and convincing interpretation of the Staré Město “falconer” was the one introduced by an expert in medieval art, Klement Benda, in 1963. He labelled the object as a “disc” and added that with regard to the opening which had later been punched above the right arm of the rider, it was probably last worn hanging from the neck. It was most likely originally sewn onto clothes or a leather belt, which Benda believes the presence of several small openings punched along its perimeter suggests. The disc-shaped plaque lined with spiral grooving was hammered out on a negative matrix, and so the relief of the scene stands out 1.5 to 2.0 mm above the level of the background, which is punched

with a ring die from the front side. The figural motif of the scene consists of a dominant rider sitting on a robust horse depicted walking from right to left (Fig. 4., Fig. 5). He has long hair which hangs loosely around his smooth, elongated face, a belt girds his decorative coat and he has high boots on his feet. He is unarmed, and without spurs or any other insignias; the stirrups of the horse harness are missing. A bird of prey is sitting on the rider’s left forearm, which is pointing backwards. “We can recognize that it is a falcon based on iconographic analogies rather than characteristic features.” The rider is clutching the “bridle rein” in the greatly enlarged fist of his raised right hand. According to K. Benda, the “overall concept of the scene is rather static: the slow trot of the horse as well as the frontal turn of the head and the top part of the rider’s body approaches heraldic stylization.” The stateliness of the composition is in contrast with the contents of the scene itself, i.e. with the simple depiction of a man hunting with a falcon.” After mentioning several possible analogies of the described motif, such as an image found on a tex-



Fig. 4. Staré Město “Špitálky”: Detail of the silver disc-shaped plaque with a depiction of the upper part of a rider and a bird. Photo: S. Doleželová

tile from St. Cuthbert’s reliquary coffin in Durham, North England, K. Benda arrived at the conclusion that the character of the scene on the disc-shaped plaque from Staré Město “suggests a connection with triumphal scenes, whether late Hellenistic or Sasanian ones, rather than hunting scenes. It thus ranks among such scenes in which hunting has become merely part of a complex courtly ceremony: the real purpose of hunting has dissolved into numerous ethical rules.” This was K. Benda, according to whom the iconographic model of the scene reached the centre of Europe as a part of a non-extant, lost object.

At the very end of the study he added that with regard to some of the decorative elements used which are related to the late Avar and Great Moravian cultural environments, the disc-shaped plaque from Staré Město could have been created in a local Moravian workshop around the middle of the 9th century (if not even one century earlier), which would make it one of the oldest existing depictions of a male rider hunting with a falcon (Benda 1963, 61-63).

Many other researchers agreed with the main features of Benda’s conclusions. One of them was Ján Dekan, an important Slovak specialist in the art



Fig. 5. Staré Město “Špitálky”: Detail of the silver disc-shaped plaque with a depiction of the upper part of a rider and his right upper limb. Photo: S. Doleželová

of the early Middle Ages. He considered the disc-shaped plaque from Staré Město to be a masterpiece of Great Moravian toreutics with a profane theme which has features of “post-Sasanian Islamic art with a wittily emphasised contrast between the realistically modelled figure of a horse and the extremely stylized dress of the rider.” However, he considered the disc to have been influenced by the style of the medallions found on the silver and gold vessels of the Sinnicolaul-Mare/Nagyszentmiklós treasure hoard rather than by oriental silk materials where images of a similar style and composition can also be found (Dekan 1976, 175).

On the other hand, Moravian archaeologist Zdeněk Klanica, an expert on “Eastern and steppe” art, based his research on motifs found on materials, as well as other depictions (Klanica 1991, 181-193, 2005, 63). He writes about the image on the Staré Město disc that “we know it from the first pages of various grand publications: the image of a great nobleman who is ‘hunting’ with the help of a falcon.” “And why not,” he adds, “as a form of entertainment it really was only for the privileged.” Immediately afterwards, he poses the rhetorical question as to whether such “so-called falconers aren’t rather a personification of one of the most important mo-

ments in the lives of the people at that time – the election of a ruler, prince or king... an event which had an influence on life throughout the whole country.” To this he gives a positive answer, referring to similar age-old traditions which are preserved even today in the case of some nations in Central Asia, e.g. the Tajiks, but also to apparent domestic analogies. Z. Klanica and historian Dušan Třeštík find the most crucial analogy, which is when an animal co-decides on the election of a ruler, in the work of Dalimil, the Czech medieval chronicler. At the beginning of the 14th century, Dalimil recorded how Princess Libuše’s horse “found” a ruler for the Czechs, i.e. the ploughman Přemysl, in the mythical period of Czech history. Přemysl became the mythical founder of what later became a principality and royal dynasty of the same name.

Jiří Mlíkovský (2005, 185-196), a zoologist from the National Museum in Prague who encountered the disc in 2000 during the aforementioned conservation work at the Archaeological Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague, took the research into the “falconer” issue in a completely different direction. First, J. Mlíkovský dealt with the depiction of both animals, i.e. the bird and the horse. In the case of the bird, he investigated its significant outer features first, such as the size of the beak, the shape of the lower jaw, claws and head, the length of the wing and tail, the position of the legs and the overall size of the depicted bird. Based on the evaluation of these signs, he arrived at the unambiguous conclusion that it isn’t a bird of prey, e.g. a falcon, that is depicted on the Staré Město disc, but rather an ornamental bird, namely a parrot. According to Mlíkovský, it should be an individual from the *Psittacula eupatria* species, i.e. the Alexandrian parrot. Even though its closest natural habitat is in Africa – in the forest savanna zone south of the Sahara – and in South Asia – east of Afghanistan – its presence e.g. in the Roman Empire was mentioned by some ancient authors, e.g. Pliny the Elder, Martial and Ovid, as early as in the 1st to 3rd centuries A.D. As far as the horse is concerned, J. Mlíkovský says that it is a cold blooded horse of the West European type, which was alien in Moravia in the 8th and 9th centuries: only the bones of lightly built horses – so-called East European warmblood horses similar to Przewalski’s horses – are known in that region from the pre-Great Moravian and Great Moravian period. He also notices other strange aspects of the Staré Město disc, which is the absence of e.g. stir-

rups and spurs, i.e. riding aids which are necessary to control the horse while hunting, as well as the fact that no other animal (such as a hare, rabbit, or dog) is depicted as is common in hunting scenes. This makes Mlíkovský believe that the Staré Město disc doesn’t depict a hunting motif but is rather some kind of “documentary photograph of the period with a realistically depicted man, horse and parrot.” From this he concludes that the disc was probably created in Great Moravia itself, and was based on live “models”: an important person – a nobleman who had his portrait made with a large parrot, perhaps a precious gift transported to Central Europe through existing long-distance trade routes from the far Orient, and a robust horse, again brought from abroad but this time from the European West.

The last person to date that has dealt with the Staré Město silver disc in greater detail – particularly with regard to its figural motif – is Hungarian archaeologist Csanád Bálint. He did so in two places, and in the Slovak and German languages (Bálint 2004, 31-34; 2010, 337-341). He emphasises right at the start that “it cannot be questioned that the image on the Staré Město disc is not a local, Moravian product... and that its origin cannot be sought in Asia. We therefore have to consider Byzantium as the prime possible source” (Bálint 2004, 31). He is also surprised that K. Benda (1963) didn’t consider this option, suggesting that “he perhaps looked to the East and West of Europe too much”. Otherwise, Cs. Bálint praises Benda for his restraint in avoiding “panhistoricism”, i.e. the outreaching overestimation of the historic interpretation of archaeological sources which is common in Central and Eastern European archaeology.”

What he means by this is that Benda doesn’t consider the rider with a falcon to be “a Moravian/Slav”, as is apparently common in some popular science works. As far as the provenance of the Staré Město disc is concerned, Cs. Bálint assumes that the typology and production technique used, as well as some other features, “unambiguously confirm that the examined beautiful decorative object has to be considered to be a local Moravian product” (Bálint 2004, 32). Subsequently, Cs. Bálint presents two archaeological findings with motifs featuring riding falconers, namely a castellated disc-shaped plaque depicting a rider from the Avar burial grounds in Zámardi, Hungary, and cast belt fittings of an Avar character from an unknown, perhaps Burgenland locality showing a rider sitting on some kind of

mythical being or a lion. Based on their existence and chronology, he demonstrates that the archetype of the examined depiction has to be looked for in Byzantium, or in the environment of the late ancient world. The motif may have transferred from there into Islamic art – and not vice versa as is quite frequently assumed – just like it could have got to the Avar Khaganate. However, he doesn't know for sure how the motif with a riding falconer could have reached Moravia, whether via the Avars or as a result of assumed direct contact between Byzantium and the western periphery of the Carpathian basin (via Italy) which can be observed as early as at the end of the 8th century (Bálint 2004, 34; with reference to Daim 2000). Bálint also isn't sure why the disc with the riding falconer was even made in Moravia. He asks: "What could 9th century Moravians have been doing with such a type of picture whose iconography and theme were alien to them?" He goes on to answer this question himself: "If we don't have even a minimum amount of historical, archaeological and ethnographic sources concerning hunting with falcons on horseback in the forested region of the Northern part of the Carpathian basin before the classical feudal period, we have to state that the Moravian smith created at the very beginning an image whose topic and iconography were foreign in the environment where the given object was used. The smith took the character of a falconer on a horse from a source to which no formal and content relationship existed, and for which there was no associative base in the cultural environment itself!" (Bálint 2004, 33; 2010, 341).

It is obvious from this brief summary that even after more than half a century since its discovery, the "falconer" is still keeping specialists occupied. When dealing with the issues raised by the disc, all of them present their own view, their opinion based on various research approaches: these are sometimes even questionable in nature, and thus connected with rather problematic conclusions. This is at least how we understand the above-quoted part of Cs. Bálint's article where he states that there is a minimum amount of historical, archaeological and ethnographic resources available in Moravia about hunting with a falcon on a horse in the period before the classical feudal period and so for 9th century Moravians it was theme that was unknown, foreign and not understood. Of course, no grave from the 9th century with the remains of a nobleman, horse and a bird of prey has yet been

discovered on the territory of what used to be Great Moravia. On the other hand, I am not aware of anything like that having taken place within the given period on any other territory in early medieval Europe either, and that includes Hungary. The custom of burying a person with a horse, which was kept by some nomad ethnicities including the Avars, wasn't followed in Moravia in the 9th century. But falconry as such? A highly-regarded written source, the Annals of Fulda (*Annales Fuldenses*), contains a well-known story which took place on the territory of Great Moravia in 870. It tells the story of how *Rostislav's nephew Svatopluk, looking after his own well-being, gave himself together with his dominion (Nitranisko – note by LG) which he possessed, to Karloman. So Rostislav gets very angry with his nephew, makes plots secretly and decides to murder him during a feast without him suspecting anything; however, Svatopluk got up from the feast.... when someone who knew of the plot informed him about it, and he escaped from the waiting trap by pretending that he wanted to go to talk with falcons (cum falconibus)* (MMFH 2008, 104). Of course, it doesn't say here that he "sat on a horse" during his escape – but it must be allowed that it would be very hard for Svatopluk to escape from a trap on foot. Let's also admit that if rulers and other Moravian princes owned and controlled both trained birds of prey and their own horses, they would certainly be able to use them simultaneously, too. In this context, it seems highly improbable to us that Prince/King Svatopluk would go out with other noblemen to hunt small animals with his trained falcon while leading a horse by its bridle, and it's hard to imagine Prince Rostislav going for a hunt on a horse and a falconer rushing behind him on foot, carrying a bird of prey on his arm. These are very improbable fantasies. I am also not sure about the legitimacy of another of Bálint's arguments, namely that falconry "on a horse" also wasn't known in the northern regions of the Carpathian basin because these areas were forested until the period of classical feudalism. It was perhaps like this in higher-lying regions of today's Slovakia. However, the fertile areas of Moravia (which aren't part of the Carpathian basin geographically) were already deforested to a large degree, especially those areas in the hinterland of central strongholds. These areas were covered in fields, pastures and fallow land, and were steppe-like in places. This means that suitable conditions existed for hunting

on horseback with a bird of prey, and also that suitable prey was available, i.e. game birds such as the grey partridge, black grouse, wood grouse, common wood pigeon, stock dove, rock pigeon, and also representatives of small species of duck in wetland areas (Petříčková 2000, 486). Despite this we have to admit that we don't have any palpable archaeological sources connected with "hunting on horseback with a falcon" – unless of course we consider the subject of this article, the disc-shaped plaque of a "falconer" from Staré Město, to be such a source.

At the very least, archaeology has something to say about the presence of birds of prey in the Great Moravian environment, as their skeletal remains have been found. Aside from falcons, the bones of several other raptor species have been found. Quite a few of them are from the filling of structures at the Great Moravian settlement which was uncovered at the "Zbrod" locality in the cadastre of the South Moravian village of Mutěnice, which once lay on the territory of one of the centres of Great Moravia, the fort at "Valy" by Mikulčice. According to an analysis by zoologist Lubomír Peške, the bones of the following birds were found just in structure No. 15: peregrine falcon, northern goshawk, short-toed snake eagle, European honey buzzard and rough-legged buzzard (Klanica 2008, 149-150, 148-172). With regard to this fact the archaeologist Z. Klanica even hypothesised the existence of "medieval settlements near centres of power whose inhabitants specialised in hunting with the aid of birds of prey" (Klanica 1987, 131). Let us add that the presence of raptor bones has also been determined in 9th century settlements in what is now Bohemia, e.g. falcons at the Budeč and Hradsko forts, along with sparrowhawks, tiercels (or heirofalcons) and hobbies. Of course, it cannot be ruled out that some of the skeletal remains of raptors could be the result of their killing by people trying to protect their poultry, though it naturally seems more likely that they represent evidence of falconry, i.e. the breeding and training of birds of prey for hunting (Peške 1985, 216).

In connection with archaeological evidence we'll remain with Cs. Bálint's article for a little while longer and take a rather closer look at two items of Avar provenance mentioned in the text above. Based on these objects it is possible to "clearly state that the depiction of a falconer on a horse was known even to the Avars as early as in the 8th century" (Bálint 2004, 32; 2010, 338, 340,

Abb. 125:3, 125:4). The first is a bronze castellated disc-shaped plaque from the Zámardi locality. The circle contains a very roughly-styled, imperfect and merely schematic depiction of a rider on a horse with his body turned *en face*, holding the head of an animal (perhaps a horse?) in his left hand and with his right hand directed backwards and ending in the rim of the "disc". The whole conception of the motif and particularly the quality of the rendition of the Zámardi disc is far removed from the majority of examples of Avar artistic craftsmanship, and that's without even mentioning the absence of any kind of bird of prey! The second item is a two-part moulded metal belt ornament with an upper shield-shaped part, which comes from an unknown site, possibly in Burgenland. On the shield-shaped part "a person can be seen riding a mythical being or lion. In his right hand he is holding a forward-pointing spear (?), while a bird with a big beak and long tail is sitting on his left shoulder." In our opinion, the use of both objects as arguments for the existence of falconry among the Avars is very problematic. In the first of these no bird of prey can be found at all, while the second one lacks a depiction of a horse. As far as Cs. Bálint understands them, however, they are clear evidence for the depiction of "falconers on horseback" in the environment of the 8th century Avar Khaganate. Whether the Avars would have understood such a depiction or not isn't mentioned.

The main novelty in J. Mlíkovský's study of the disc-shaped plaque from Staré Město is his determination that the bird it depicts is not a raptor but a large, ornamental parrot. It is the first time such a possibility, which of course rules out the whole "falconer hunting" conception of the figural scene, has ever been mentioned. From the perspective of the author's profession the chosen zoological approach is logical; the appearance of the bird on the disc is the most realistic of all depictions of birds on artefacts from the Great Moravian period (compare Klanica 1991, 181-193, Pavlovičová 1996, 108, Šmerda 2004, 142, Galuška 2009a, 159-166; Galuška 2009b, 167-173.). J. Mlíkovský used 13 taxonomic indicators to determine the species of the bird, and he also believed that our ancestors – if the creators of this disc can really be found among them – were not only skilled craftsmen but also careful observers of their surroundings, so they were able to capture the smallest of details as they produced the disc. And why not – it isn't possible

to a priori rule out either this approach or the interpretation of the bird as a parrot, particularly when, for example, several discovered Moravian *gombíks* feature images not only of “local” cockerels and falcons but also of “foreign” pheasants (Galuska 2009a, 159-166; 2009b, 167-173). On the other hand, we can of course hold the opinion that, e.g. when it came to depicting the beak as a certain symbol connected primarily with a predatory nature, the creators were primarily concerned with accentuating its overall appearance – perhaps by exaggerating its size – rather than recreating every individual detail, such as the shape of the cere, the lower jaw or nasal openings, as J. Mlíkovský claims they did. In our opinion, the same applies to the size of the bird itself. Its length from the tip of its beak to the end of its tail is estimated as being “of the order of 50 cm,” which is supposed to entirely agree with the same dimension of the Alexandrian parrot, which on average reaches lengths of 58 cm. However, if everything in the figural motif on the silver Staré Město disc were truly depicted to scale, i.e. with dimensions comparable to those found in real life, as J. Mlíkovský supposes, and the bird was 50-60 cm long, then e.g. the limbs of the horse would be approx. 30-40 cm in length, and the total length of the horse would be only just over 1m. Of course, this could not really have been the case, particularly if the horse on the disc was a robust East European coldblood – as it is generally considered to be – and not a “lighter-built” and smaller warmblood of the type known from Avar and Great Moravian sites (see Dvořáková 2007, 28-29, 33). We therefore assume that when creating the figural motif for the disc the craftsman mainly tried to make best use of the circular space it afforded him. He of course attempted to create a very realistic representation of his subjects, but also clearly tried to accentuate several of their important parts – here we are referring to, e.g. the man’s head, his right hand, which is holding an object or bridle, the frontal parts of the horse, and finally of course the bird itself. For this reason we believe that in the case of the Staré Město disc, determining the species of the bird it depicts on the basis of chosen characteristic indicators isn’t such a problem-free exercise as J. Mlíkovský thinks.

As was already mentioned, the site where the silver disc was obtained was a girl’s grave, No. 15, found to the south-west of the early medieval church at the “Špitálky” location in Staré Město na Moravě.

It isn’t possible to responsibly decide whether or not this grave by the church had already been constructed before the narthex was built, or was created afterwards. However, with regard to the character of the filling of the grave pit, which is formed from more-or-less homogenous backfill without any presence of mortar, we are inclined towards the first possibility. This would of course enable the grave and the items found within, including the disc with the “falconer”, to be dated to the earlier Great Moravian period. We again do not know for sure what the object was that the disc was attached to. J. Poulík used the term “indeterminate” to describe the object, and added that the handle was a 10.4 cm-long, flat wooden bar set in an oval, sheet bronze socket, to which it is attached by centimetre-long bronze nails. Leather remnants on which 2 mm-wide and 2.8 mm-long silver strips were attached by small rivets were also supposed to be part of this object (Poulík 1955, 328. Fig. 19:5-16). Poulík’s description doesn’t seem to correspond very well with K. Benda’s conclusion that the decorative disc was “probably last worn hanging from the neck, though perhaps it was originally sewn onto clothing or a leather belt” (Benda 1963, 42). I recently put forward another possibility in this connection, this being that the disc-shaped plaque could have been a decorative component of the end of a wooden staff covered with leather and silver strips, which at least to a certain extent corresponds to the above description of the characteristics of the found item. A similar item, though it is more of a stick than the reins of the bridle of a horse harness, is another of Poulík’s “indeterminate objects”, and can also be seen in the large closed right fist of the Staré Město “falconer” himself. It seems to me from the depiction that the object has the cross-sectional shape of a stick which seems to be stretched into a disc with a noticeable central hollow. The absence of a bridle isn’t actually all that exceptional even in real hunting scenes, even though it would seem to be a necessity if one wishes to control a horse (see e.g. Maguire 2006, 261). It also isn’t the rule even in the case of other equestrian scenes; it is enough to remember the famous bronze equestrian statue of the Frankish ruler Charles the Great which dates back to the end of the 8th century (see e.g. Pijoan 1978, Fig. 296). The statue shows Charlemagne sitting upright on a slowly walking horse. He has a crown on his head and is holding an orb in his left hand and a drawn sword in his right. The reins of the bridle are merely

suggested at, i.e. they are loosely hanging over the horse's neck, and the horse is unsaddled and without stirrups, just as Charles is without spurs. The statue depicts the Frankish monarch as a powerful ruler and king with the main visible insignia of his power (he ruled from 761-814).

Returning to the staff as a possibility for the item held in the rider's right hand – this wouldn't necessarily be a unique occurrence. In at least one case a wooden staff would seem to have been part of the furnishings of a relatively significant man's grave discovered at the burial ground from the Great Moravia period at the "Na Valách" locality in Staré Město. The wooden staff found in grave 291/51 was originally around 80 cm long and was wrapped in fabric and furnished with a bronze end fitting and an iron socket (Hrubý 1955, 279, 535-536, Tab. 83:3-7). It should not be forgotten that a "turned wooden staff" considered a symbol of kingly power, i.e. as some kind of sceptre, is also known from the richly furnished grave of a boy that was found beneath a house in Cologne and is linked to the 6th century Frankish royal family (James 1997, 150-151). Also significant is that a staff terminating in a circular head is wielded in various illuminated miniatures – often depicting someone sitting on a throne – even by later Frankish rulers from the Carolingian dynasty (see e.g. Porcher 1969, 141, 147, 149; Wamers 2005, 36).

We do not know for sure who exactly is depicted on the disc-shaped plaque from Staré Město. Hypothetically, if the disc was brought to Moravia as a completed artefact from the Orient, Byzantium or perhaps southern Europe, it may depict a real mounted falconer or a magnate/ruler engaging in an entertaining pursuit. Alternatively, it is a depiction of a "ruler chosen by the will of a bird of prey", a motif which the 9th century Moravian Slavs no doubt did not understand (or did they?). The disc ended up as a decorative item in Staré Město-Veligrad in the grave of a girl who'd been a member of the Moravian social elite. A second hypothesis is founded on the idea that first a "source of inspiration" from abroad, e.g. some silk material with the motif of a rider with a bird, was introduced to the Moravian ruling elite. This motif must have then appealed to an important member of that elite – certainly not just to a craftsman/jeweller – and to such an extent that he or she had it embossed into the surface of a silver disc. Whether that member of the ruling class saw any deeper meaning behind the

motif of a horse rider with a bird, or simply liked the image for one reason or another, we have no way of knowing. We also don't know if the disc-shaped plaque was just sewn onto clothing as some form of ornament, used as part of a necklace or fixed onto a staff – perhaps as a still unknown symbol of social standing – on which it ended up in the ground. Then there is still a third hypothesis, again assuming the origin of the disc in one of the local Great Moravian workshops, though with a scene reflecting the local Moravian realia of that time: a noble had it embossed in order to "immortalise" himself with some of his valuable possessions – a horse and an ornamental bird. In this case the disc would truly be some kind of "documentary photograph of its time". It isn't possible to a priori reject any of the above hypotheses, or indeed to accept them, and each has its supporters. In our opinion, though, there is yet one more, fourth possibility. It is based on the assumption that the disc is not an import but really was manufactured at one of the Moravian workshops that developed their activities during the 9th century right within the cadastre of today's Staré Město. The figural motif of the disc could of course have been based on some material or vessel from another land, so in other words it was copied just because somebody liked it. This seems unlikely to us, however, and all the more because the breeding and handling of horses and birds of prey were skills that were well known in Great Moravia. Two generally well-regarded written sources and a fair few archaeological finds support this. So, we may assume that the Staré Město disc depicts a Moravian noble with a bird of prey, and not with a parrot. However, the image does not show the animals being used for entertainment, i.e. for hunting, but rather as a symbol of the man's social standing. It thus isn't a typical hunting/falconry scene, even though at first sight that's what it seems to be. It is a scene with the dominant image of an important noble, possibly the then-current ruler himself, portrayed in a manner that comes close to heraldic stylization. In this way it is possible to explain the certain "contradiction between the grand composition of the disc and the content of the scene itself, i.e. the depiction of a man hunting with a hawk" (Benda 1966), a man who isn't actually hunting on the disc at all. In our opinion, with its overall conception the Staré Město disc is much more similar to the equestrian statue of Charles the Great, i.e. other general official representations of the powers of that age, than to (for

example) the motifs of horse-riding falconers found on late Hellenistic embroidery from Egypt, or hunting scenes known from plates and materials from Byzantium, or from Seljuk art (see Benda 1963, Fig. 5; Meguire 2006, 183).

We suppose that this was also the case with the depiction of “riding falconers” on coins used in Moravia and Bohemia in the 12th and 13th centuries. In the earlier (12th century) case, it was Prince Bořivoj II’s Czech denar, which dates back to the third period of his rule - the years 1118 to 1120. On the front side of the denar there is a motif which is almost identical to the one on the silver disc from Staré Město, only the horse is walking from left to right. The horse’s legs are arranged in the same manner and there is a bareheaded rider with one upper limb aiming backwards on which a bird of prey stands in a resting position. The reverse side of the coin features a bust with a shield and banner, with the inscription S.WENCEZLAVS. It is completely clear from this that the rider with

a bird of prey on Bořivoj II’s denar is no one else but his famous predecessor, a Czech prince from the first third of the 10th century who was canonized after his violent death and is the present patron of the Czech lands, that is St. Wenceslas. A similar equestrian motif appears again in Moravia during the 13th century on the coins of another important Czech ruler, King Přemysl Otakar II (I thank D. Grossmanová, the head of the Numismatic Department of the Moravian Museum, for this information). It is obvious that the depiction of a socially important rider with a bird of prey didn’t disappear from the Central European environment even after the fall of Great Moravia. On the contrary, it was present here until at least the 13th century, and not only as a random, misunderstood motif but as one which is specifically associated with an important member of the social elite, the ruler. The silver disc from 9th century Great Moravian Staré Město is thus probably the motif’s oldest known representative.

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Author's address:

Doc. PhDr. Luděk Galuška, CSc.
 Centre of Slavonic Archaeology
 Moravian Museum
 Zelný trh 6
 659 37 Brno
 Czech Republic
 e-mail: lgaluska@mzm.cz

