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HIGH MEDIEVAL FISH-SHAPED NEEDLE CASE FROM WOLIN. FROM THE STUDIES ON THE CULTURE OF THE ELITE

ABSTRACT

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The article presents the case study of a needle case discovered in 2013 during excavations on the medieval harbour in Wolin, Pomerania, Poland. This rare artefact is made from antler and has a fish shape. A literature search revealed only a six analogical objects in Central and Eastern Europe – three in Poland and another three in Russia and Ukraine. All were discovered on important sites and strongholds of this specific territory, and all are elite products of 12th century craftsmanship.

Keywords: Pomerania, Wolin, High Middle Ages, bone and antler, needle case

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Needle cases are a group of objects that are used for keeping sewing needles and pins and protecting them against damage or loss. Such objects have been known from various regions in Europe and Asia since prehistory. They were made from a variety of materials: wood, metal, sometimes precious, bone or antler, quite rarely from leather. Most of them are straight, tubular in diameter, a few centimetres long and closed with a removable lid at

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the end. Some of them, especially in modern times, were in fancy shapes and richly ornamented (for example, Golubeva 1978; Firszt 1983; Wachowski 2002; Beaudry 2007, 70-79; Krylasova 2007, 236-247; Meacham 2007; Sergejeva 2012; Sytaya 2019; Kuznetsova 2020; Dementeva and Lebedeva 2021). Needle cases are rare objects among archaeological finds excavated in regions populated by Slavs. In Poland, only a dozen or so have been uncovered, hence it should come as no surprise that there are only a few independent publications on the subject (Zielonka 1951; Firszt 1983; Wachowski 2002; Kuczkowski 2010a; 2010b). A group of objects of this function made from antler or bone and in the shape of a fish clearly stands out from the general pattern of straight tubular needle cases. One of these is the fish-shaped artefact from Wolin discussed here that was uncovered during archaeological excavations during the building of a marina on the western bank of the River Dziwna in 2013 (Janowski 2014, photo 37; inv. No. WS/2012/O/25). The artefact is in the collection of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Szczecin). The site from which it came was located directly to the south of the Old Town, in an area marked as site 3 (AZP 21-06/34).

The needle case from Wolin was made from antler. It has survived down to our times in a very good condition, only the lid is missing (Figs 1 and 2). Its shape clearly displays paired pelvic fins, and dorsal, adipose and tail ones. The whole surface of the needle case is covered with irregular, deep incised ring-and-dot ornamentation (measuring about 4 mm in diameter), which imitates scales. On each side, by the gills there were diagonal slits imitating rays, which made it possible to feed a string through and close the needle case with a lid. The edge of the lid opening was decorated with incisions and there were three circular grooves. The object is 74.2 mm long and weighs 11.14 g. The cross section of the needle case is oval-shaped but variable: it is widest at the centre: (13.6 × 14.8 mm) while the size at the opening and the tail part are respectively 13 × 11.7 mm and 8.2 × 11.8 mm. The depth of the needle socket is 50.6 mm.

The needle case from Wolin is not the only example of such a shape and preliminary research has revealed that there are at least six more (Figs 3-5). The first one is an unpublished earlier find uncovered in Opole-Ostrówek in 1949 (Fig. 4: 1; Inv. Number. 11/49). The artefact is in the collection of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Wrocław). The artefact was found during excavations in the north-western part of the site, in square 341, layer 3, whose timeline goes back to the castle which was built on the remains of an earlier stronghold in 1228. The needle case was probably made from antler, it is about 90 mm in length and its diameter is about 16 mm. Not only paired pectoral fins and dorsal, adipose and caudal fins are marked, but also the anal fin. Its shape is more ovoid than the one discussed above and the decoration imitating scales is much denser and more regular. There are three rays on the caudal fins. There are two circular incisions around the lid opening. The opening through which a string would have been fed for fastening the lid is in the shape of a vertical cut. It is not known whether it was originally made like this or whether this is the result of some damage to the find.



Fig. 1. High medieval needle case from Wolin (photo A. Janowski)



Fig. 2. High medieval needle case from Wolin (photo A. Janowski)

A damaged fragment found in 1951 during archaeological excavations at the site of a stronghold in Ostrów Tumski in Poznań is most probably the remains of a similar needle case (Fig. 4: 2). It was found in layer IVa in trench at Wieżowa Street 2-4 dated between the 12th and the first half of the 13th century (Dymaczewski 1961, 162, pl. 14: 29). The artefact is 80 mm long, its oval diameter measures 18 × 13 mm and it is decorated with an irregular pattern

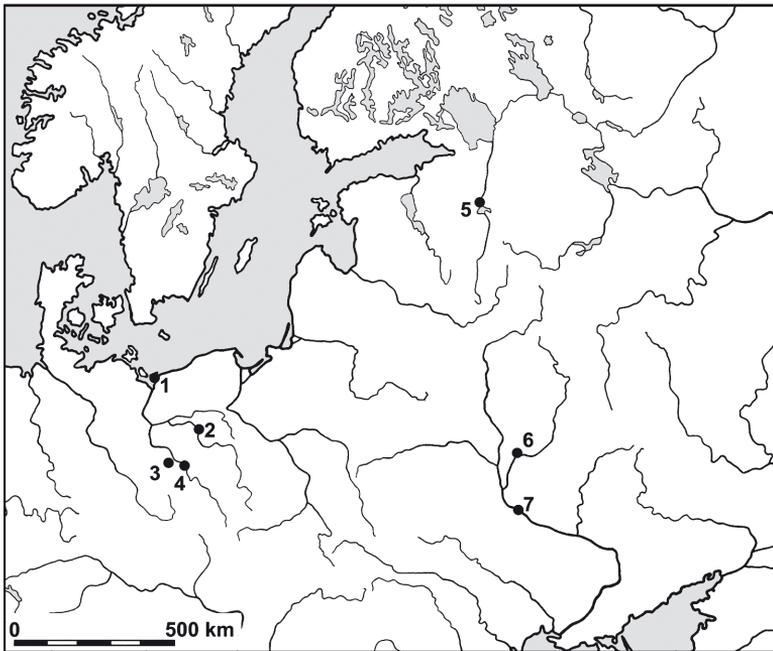


Fig. 3. Location of finds: 1 – Wolin, 2 – Poznań, 3 – Legnica, 4 – Opole, 5 – Novgorod, 6 – Chernigiv, 7 – Ivan Gora (elaboration by A. Janowski)

of incised circles similar to the ones which decorate the two finds discussed above. Except for the unclear caudal fin (?) the other fins are missing. A lid was uncovered one year later in the same layer might be part of the same object. In both cases the raw material used was bone (Dymaczewski 1961, 162, pl. 14: 32).

The last fish-shaped needle case (Fig. 4: 3) found in Poland was uncovered in 1962 during excavations on Castle Hill in Legnica (Kaźmierczyk 1975, fig. 43; Lasota 1980, 228-229; Firszt 1983; Stolarczyk 2014; the artefact is in the collection of the Museum of Copper in Legnica (Museum Number ML/A 1458. I wish to express my sincere thanks to Tomasz Stolarczyk PhD, the Head of the Department of Archaeology in this Museum, and Magdalena Kołacińska from the Museum Library for information about the artefact and assistance in gaining access to the 1983 article by Stanisław Firszt). The artefact was found in strata of the stronghold that preceded the construction of the stone stronghold, and which date to between the end of the 11th and the first half of the 12th centuries (Trench I, layer C1, square 1). The needle case is a unique find: it is the smallest and the thinnest of all. The fish body is compressed (laterally thin), the fin plan is also different. There is a single, long dorsal fin located on the back. On the ventral surface there is a single pelvic fin (?) and an anal fin; between them there is a herringbone decoration – a sequence of three angular

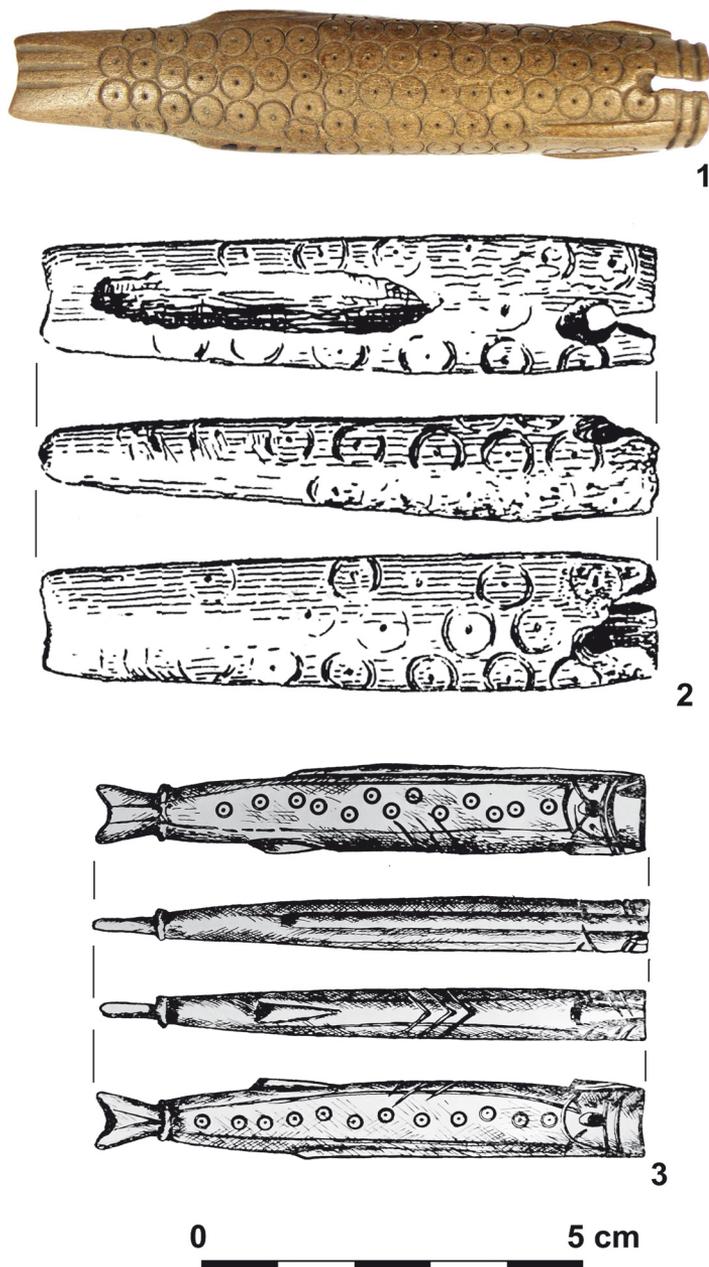


Fig. 4. High medieval fish-shaped needle cases from Poland. 1 – Opole (after Archive of IAE PAS in Wrocław), 2 – Poznań (after Dymaczewski 1961, tabl. 16: 29), 3 – Legnica (after Firszt 1983, Fig. 3) (elaboration by A. Janowski)

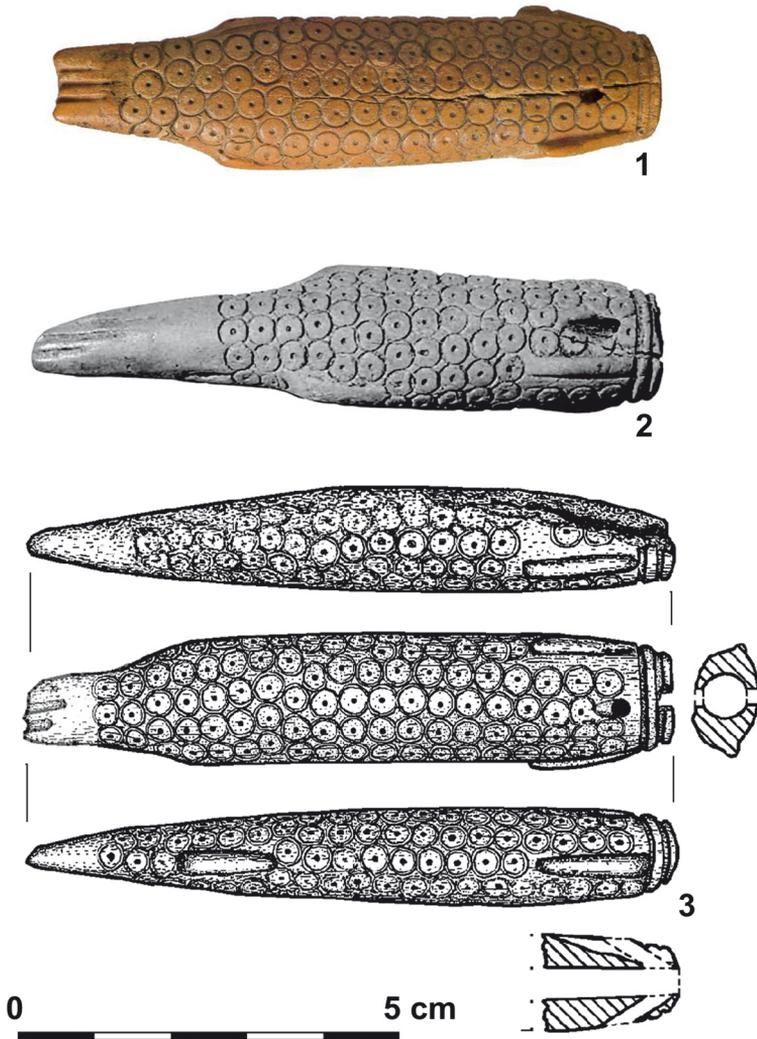


Fig. 5. High medieval fish-shaped needle cases from Russia and Ukraine: 1 – Novgorod (after Kolchin, Yanin and Yamshikov 1985, 94, no. 178), 2 – Chernigiv (after Chernenko, Kazakov and Rizhiy2010, Fig. 1), 3 – Ivan Gora (after Sergeyeva 2017, fig. 2: 1) (elaboration by A. Janowski)

lines, which might have been an attempt to mark pelvic fins. The caudal fin is symmetrical, clearly triangular and separated from the rest of the body with a protruding ring. The body is decorated with an incised ornament in the shape of a single series of circles with a point in the middle which form a line running parallel to the edge of the object. Semi-circular gills are clearly visible. Openings used to fix the lid simultaneously imitate the eyes. The

total length of the find is 72 mm. The needle socket is 55 mm long and at the moment the artefact was excavated, a fragment of one of them was inside.

The needle cases described above exhaust the list of finds from the territory of Poland; three other ones come from the territory of Russia and Ukraine (Fig. 5). In 1961, such an artefact was excavated on the Nerevsky site (Russian: Неревский раскоп), in the northern part of Novgorod, in layer 18 which dates from 1130-1140 (Fig. 5: 1). Interestingly, the artefact was initially considered a knife handle (Kolchin 1956, fig. 17: 6; Bocharov 1969, 99; Bocharov 1983, 114; Kolchin *et al.* 1985, 94, no. 178). The find was almost identical to the one from Opole, but it was a bit wider and shorter, measuring 80 mm in length. On the body of the fish there is an identical set of fins: pelvic, dorsal, adipose, anal and caudal. Around the lid opening there are two circular incisions and the ornament imitating scales is very dense.

In the same year, a find was uncovered in the Ivan-Gora (Russian: Иван Гора) hillfort in Rzhyschiv, Ukraine, about 80 km to the south of Kiev (Fig. 5: 3). The needle case is similar to the ones from Opole and Novgorod with regard to its shape, the layout of the fins and the decoration on the surface. Its length 85 mm, and the needle socket is 55 mm deep. The find dates from the middle of the 12th century (Sergeyeva 2012; 2015, 250-251; 2017, 121-124, figs 1: 1 and 2:1).

The last of the fish-shaped needle cases was uncovered in 2009 during excavations in the Peredhoroddyia district in the western part of Chernihiv in northern Ukraine (Chernenko *et al.* 2010, 461, ris. 1; Sergeyeva 2015, fig. 6: 1v). It was found in strata dating to between the end of the 12th and the beginning of the 13th centuries and the published picture shows that its length is about 80 mm and the diameter about 17-18 mm. The picture shows pelvic, adipose, anal and caudal fins. The dorsal fin is not visible, but it is possible that it was marked too. The imitation of scales is very dense and covers the body down to the caudal fin (Fig. 5: 2).

While creating the classification of needle cases, Krzysztof Wachowski (2002, 235, fig. 1) distinguished a separate type of fish-shaped ones (type IV, variety c). He also wrote that they come from the 12th century, they were most probably invented in Scandinavia and went on to state that they were known from Western and Eastern Europe. Unfortunately, he did not make any reference to relevant sources and I have no information of which finds he had knowledge. While one could agree with the first part of the statement and date the finds to the 12th or, more precisely, to the period between the second half of the 11th and the middle of the 13th centuries (the find from Wolin was erroneously dated to the 10th century – Janowski 2014, 28), there are no premises to prove their Scandinavian origin. I do not know of any fish-shaped needle cases from that region. During the Viking period, *i.e.* until the middle of the 11th century the majority of needle cases was in the shape of horizontally suspended tubes made mostly of bronze (for example, Petersen 1951, 325-328; Mälärstedt 1984; Thunmark-Nylén 278-279). Examples of a shape like those of interest here cannot be found in the later period either (see, for example, Øye 1988, 109-111). Michał Kara

(2019, 145, 146) has recently suggested that the needle case from Wolin could have been the work of Frisian craftsmen. However, looking at the distribution of finds that have been excavated until today (Fig. 3) it seems that it needs to be assumed that they were of Slavic origin. Ukrainian scholars had no doubts the finds were of local origin; they also pointed to similarities between the artefacts from Novgorod and Ivan-Gora hillfort suggesting they were made in one workshop (Sergeyeva 2015, 250). It is possible that the needle case from Opole, almost identical to the other two, was also made in the same workshop. Of interest is also the fact that all these finds were excavated in major strongholds of that period and this is relevant not only for Wolin, Poznań, Opole or Legnica, but also centres in the territory of the Rus'. The Nerevsky site might be the oldest part of Novgorod, and it was definitely mentioned in the letopises as its first part as early as in 1067 and again in 1172 (Arcikhovskiy 1956, 13). Ivan-Gora hillfort was mentioned in the Ipatiev Letopis before 1151 as a stronghold and the place of assembly of dukes, who took part in fights against Yuri Dolgoruky under the command of Iziaslav II Mstislavich (Goncharov 1964, 129). The story continues under Chernihiv because Peredhoroddyia district is mentioned for the first time in 1152 during the siege by the army of said Yuri Dolgoruky (Chernenko *et al.* 2010, 461; Motsia and Kazakov 2011, 118-139). Hence, fish-shaped needle cases were excavated on sites of historical significance. Beyond doubt their appearance also made them stand out from simple shapes and caused them to be esteemed as cultural objects of aesthetic value. The representations are quite realistic, the fins and scales are clearly visible. Russian scholars (Kolchin 1956, fig. 17: 6; Bocharov 1969, 99; Bocharov 1983, 114; Kolchin *et al.* 1985, 94, no. 178) have suggested that the fish represented is the lavaret (*Coregonus lavaretus*; Russian *cuza*). Considering some flaws in the representation, I am of the opinion that it is not possible to establish which species of fish is represented. In the case of the find from Wolin, the anal fin is missing; the find from Legnica has no adipose fin and there is only one pelvic fin and actually there are no pelvic fins on any of the needle cases. It could be assumed that it was not a specific species of fish that was represented, but a general image. More expression and naturalism in the representation of fins would change little with regard to the symbolism of the object; on the contrary, they could make everyday use of the object considerably more difficult. The shape itself and the rough representation of a few fins sufficed to identify the object as a fish and modern fish-shaped needle cases are even less viable images (*cf.* Meacham 2007, fig. 19). Then the question arises as to why such an object of everyday use would be given such a shape if a straight tubular one would serve its purpose perfectly. Was it for some extra utilitarian purposes? According to Genrich Nikolaevich Bocharov (1969, 99, fig. 70), the shape of needle cases refers to the illuminated initial "O" in old Russian psalters which date back to the 12th century, while Leonillia Anatolevna Golubeva (1997, 156) is of the opinion that some needle cases could have been used as amulets. The image of the fish, especially in European culture, is very strongly connected to religious symbolism. The fish was the symbol of birth and immortality, but also wisdom and resurrection as well as baptism and the Eucharist (Forstner 1977, 255-258;

Matáková 2006; Sztych 2011). Therefore it is possible that apart from aesthetic considerations, it was the need for religious manifestation which was behind the making of such needle cases.

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