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Jew's harp – a subtle witness of musical culture and daily life in the Middle Ages and early modern times in archaeological finds

ANNOTATION

Jew's harp – a small metal musical instrument widely used in Europe since the High Middle Ages – has become an interesting topic for Western European researchers in recent decades. This article brings the first presentation of Jew's harp from archaeological excavations in Prague. The 4 pieces of this Prague small collection were subjected to micro-analysis by the EDS-SEM method. Also other archaeological finds of Jew's harp from the lands of the Bohemian Crown are presented – 2 pieces from Moravia and 7 pieces from Lower Silesia. The author introduces the interpretation of this small object as a musical instrument into the awareness of the professional archaeological community. Reviewing the similarity of the instrument with construction metal fittings, its material being mainly iron, could (significantly) increase the number of archeologically recovered Jew's harps from the Czech lands.

SUMMARY

This article presents 4 examples of Jew's harp, the subtle metal musical instrument, not quite common in Bohemia today and rather little known. These instruments were found during rescue archaeological excavations in the historic centre of Prague by the Department of Archaeology of Prague National Heritage Institute. The finds come from stratified contexts dated to the periods from the second half of the 13th to the mid-15th century (two examples); the 2nd half of the 14th–16th century and the second half of the 15th–16th century. In addition to Prague Jew's harp collection presented also are archaeological finds in other lands of the Bohemian Crown, i.e. Moravia and Lower Silesia. In Moravia, one Jew's harp dated to the 14th century was found at Rokštejn Castle near Brtnice. The other instrument probably from the 16th–18th century comes from Zábřovice, the quarter outside the historical centre of Brno city. Archaeological evidence of 6 Jew's harps comes from the historical centre of Wrocław, the metropolis of Lower Silesia, which was an integral part of the Bohemian Kingdom from the mid-14th century for more than four following centuries. Five of them are registered in the Muzeum Miejskie Wrocławia (oddział Muzeum Archeologiczne), the location of the sixth find (*cf.* Buško 1998; 2004) is unknown to the author. The last Jew's harp from Polish Silesia comes from the grounds of the medieval Szczerba Castle (14th century–1428) near the present-day Czech border.

In order to determine the material composition, the finds from Prague were subjected to microanalysis using the EDS-SEM method. Unfortunately, the results are limited by the earlier coating of the finds with a thick layer of preservative. According to the analysis the find with inventory no. 2003/01-2883 (Figs 3: d; 6A) was made of an alloy of copper and zinc (brass), with the basic component of this alloy reaching a concentration of over 70 wt. %. However, the composition of the tongue (lamella) is unknown since it was not preserved, having most likely loosened and fallen out. No material could be detected on any part of the sample, which would have a significantly different chemical composition and would indicate, for example, the use of solder in the production of this musical instrument. The other three finds from Prague were made of iron (steel?), also without the use of solder. The carbon content of the metal, which would indicate an iron-carbon alloy, could not be quantified due to the use of a preservative coating (no doubt a high-carbon organic substance). A metallographic analysis of the finds from Wrocław was previously carried out on a single object (inv. no. 454/06; Fig. 5: f; 2nd half of the 13th to 1st half of the 14th century). The frame of this Jew's harp was made of steel, and the hardness of the raw material was comparable to the material from which household knives were made.

In Bohemian Lands the material culture of the Middle Ages and the Modern Age can be studied also from archival references, especially testaments and entries/inventories in town books. For Bohemia and especially Prague, these were reviewed by Zikmund Winter in particular. In a record from the second half of the 16th century, there is a list of goods offered in a Prague shop, where, in addition to hundreds of drawstrings, laces, gloves, caps, stockings, shirts, combs, ribbons, rings, pins, needles and other articles, there were ninety Jew's harps (Winter 1890, 560sq.). Elsewhere, "iron violins" imported to Prague from Nuremberg at the end of the 16th century are mentioned (Winter 1930, 440). In 1598, a manufacturer of everyday iron objects is mentioned, who offers several hundred Jew's harps

in his shop (Winter 1911, 259). The small number of Jew's harps within archaeological finds, despite to their relatively rich offer on the Prague market at the time, can be caused by the misinterpretation or identification of similar finds as staples or another type of construction metal fitting, since this musical instrument is almost unknown in Bohemia today.

Analogous medieval and early modern instruments are known from many locations in Western and Northern Europe, most recently from Tyrol. At the same time, they were also played on in Eastern Europe, where the two oldest finds come from (9th–mid-11th century Moldova). The abundance of names for the Jew's harp in various parts of Europe, including Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia (almost 20 names have been noted), allows us to reasonably assume the occurrence of this musical instrument even in those regions and areas where it has not yet been professionally registered. In this context, there is no doubt that high potential is to be expected both in the Carpathian region and in the eastern states of Europe.

This article expands the material evidence of the Jew's harps with six new, as yet unpublished artefacts from Bohemia and Moravia and fills the hitherto empty space on the map of the distribution of this musical instrument in Central Europe.

Fig. 1. Leopold Kupelwieser, 1809 (?): Johann Georg Albrechtsberger, Austrian organist, musician, composer and teacher (Vienna, Gesellschaft Der Musikfreunde; adapted from sine 2004 online).

Fig. 2. Prague, the historic centre within the boundaries of the Prague Heritage Reserve. The location of the Jewish harp finds: **1** – Křižovnická No. 1040/I, P.No. 84, 85 (Clementinum); **2** – intersection of Vodičkova and Jungmannova Streets, P.No. 2381 and P.No. 2379; **3** – Vodičkova, P.No. 2381; **4** – Republic Square, No. 1079, P.No. 461, OC Palladium (into the current map downloaded from <geoportal.cz> depicted by S. Babušková, 2023).

Fig. 3. Jewish harps from Prague. **a** – Prague 1-Old Town, No. 1040/I, P.No. 84+85, Křižovnická (Clementinum); inv. no. 2012/35-B7-14; **b** – Prague 1- New Town, P.No. 2381, Vodičkova; inv. no. 2004/04-26-30; **c** – Prague 1-New Town, P.No. 2381 + 2379, intersection of Vodičkova and Jungmannova; inv. no. 2004/06-147-180; **d** – Prague 1-New Town, P.No. 461, Republic Square; inv. no. 2003/01-2883 (Photo a–c: F. Flek, 2023, photo d: M. Kalíšek, 2023; drawing by S. Svatošová; graphic editing by S. Babušková.)

Fig. 4. Jewish harps from Moravia. **a** – Rokštejn Castle, cadastre of Brtnice-Panská Lhota, Jihlava distr.; inv. no. Rokštejn A 5321 (taken from Bajer et al. 2016, 217); **b** – Brno-Zábřehovice, P.No. 653, 654, 674, the gap between Koliště and Vlhká Streets; inv. no. A060/2013/375/16 (photo L. Sedláčková, 2023).

Fig. 5. Jewish harps from Silesia. **a** – Wrocław, Rynek; without inv. no. (taken from Buško 2004, 41, Fig. 13); **b** – Wrocław, Nowy Targ; inv. no. 7209/11_MAW/A/V/275 (drawing by I. Gomułka; photo by T. Cymbalak, 2023); **c** – Wrocław, Nowy Targ; inv. no. 3982/11_MAW/A/V/275 (drawing by I. Gomułka; photo by T. Cymbalak, 2023); **d** – Wrocław, Nowy Targ; inv. no. 8254/11_MAW/A/V/275 (drawing by I. Gomułka, 2018); **e** – Wrocław, Plac Dominikański; inv. no. 54/93/F_MMW/A/Dp/8 (photo by T. Cymbalak, 2023); **f** – Wrocław, Szewska Street; inv. no. 454/06 (drawing by N. Lenkow, Konczewski/Piekalski 2010, 256, Fig. 176; photo by T. Cymbalak, 2023); **g** – Gniewoszków, Szczerba Castle; Jewish harp inv. no. 7/90_MAW/9/1991/A (taken from Borkowski 2016, 188; graphic editing S. Babušková, 2023).

Fig. 6. **A** – part of the open frame of Jewish harp inv. no. 2003/01-2883 from Republic Square (see Table 1); the point after the missing tongue in the centre; **B** – Jewish harp fragment inv. no. 2004/06-147-180 with locations of analysed points Nos. 64–66; in the centre, the place where the tongue was attached to the frame; **C** – part of the surface of the Jewish harp inv. no. 2012/35-B7-14 with the locations of the analysed points Nos. 70–72; the tongue was attached to the frame in the centre; **D** – part of Jewish harp inv. no. 2004/04-26-30 with locations of analysed points Nos. 67–69; in the centre of the micrograph, evidence of attaching (forging) the tongue (photo J. Zavřel, 2023).

Fig. 7. Angel/Cupid playing the Jewish harp, wood carving on the foot of a mechanical prime harp from the end of the 18th century (National Museum, Prague, taken from Buchner 1956, 255, Fig. 298).

Fig. 8. Pieter Bruegel the Elder (drawing) / Pieter van der Heyden (engraver) / Hieronymus Cock (publisher), Basel, 1562: Merchant robbed by monkeys. Engraving, 227 × 294 mm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Drawings and Prints, inv. no. 26.72.25; available at MET 26-72-25 s. d. online).

Fig. 9. Pieter Bruegel the Elder (drawing) / Pieter van der Heyden (engraver) / Hieronymus Cock or Aux Quatre Vents (publisher), Basel, in 1570–1585: Feast of Fools. Engraving, 323 × 431 mm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Drawings and Prints, inv. no. 2013.452; available at MET 2013-452 s. d. online).

Fig. 10. Hans Burgkmair the Elder, 1516–1518: Natural Fools: Gylyme, Pock, Gülschich, Caspar, Hans Wynnter,

Guggeryllis (Die natürlichen Narren: Gylme, Pock, Gülschich, Caspar, Hans Wynnter, Guggeryllis). Woodcut, Der Triumphzug Kaiser Maximilians series, No. 21, 437 x 378 mm (Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig, sign. HBurgkmair WB 2.26,30; available at HAUM s. d. online).

Fig. 11. Dirck Jaspersz van Baburen, 1621: The boy with the Jewish harp (Jongen met mondharp). Oil on canvas, 65 × 52 cm (unframed), Centraal Museum, Utrecht, inv. no. 11188 (retrieved from CM Utrecht s. d. online).

Fig. 12. Sites with finds of Jewish harp in Europe. **Green** – sites from the 13th–15th centuries, in Moldavia 10th–11th century (taken from Kolltveit 2009, 44); **blue** – finds from Tyrol up to and incl. the 17th century (Schick/Riedmann et al. 2023 online); **red** – finds from Bohemia, Moravia and Lower Silesia up to and incl. the 16th century contexts analysed in this article (see Fig. 3–5); **black** – other Central and Eastern European finds up to and incl. the 16th century (Gniew: <<https://archeportal.pl/fotografie/296131>>; Gdańsk, Vilnius: Romanowicz 2016, 129, 131; Muszyna: <http://muszyna.pl/mfiles/1232/28/0/z/Sadeczanin_01122013.pdf>; Puszcza Białowieska (Białowieża Primeval Forest) : <https://rcin.org.pl/Content/237040/WA308_273281_PDF_archeologia-puszcza_l.pdf>; Russia: Markov 2016 online; FB RAN 2020a online; FB RAN 2020b online. **A** – 1–3 finds, **B** – 4–9 finds, **C** – 10 and more finds.

Obr. 13. The smallest Prague Jewish harp (Republic Square, see Fig. 3: d (foto T. Cymbalak, 2023).

Tab. 1. Results of analyses of various points on the surface of the Jewish harps (J. Zavřel).

Translation by Linda Foster