

In the middle of nowhere. Unique sword scabbard chape from Niepołomice Forest

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IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE. UNIQUE SWORD SCABBARD CHAPE FROM NIEPOŁOMICIE FOREST

ABSTRACT

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Detector recognition carried out in Lesser Poland in last few years deliver a wealth of movable historical artefacts. One of them is a sword scabbard chape made of a copper alloy discovered in the middle of Niepołomice Forest. The paper subjected this artefact to typological classifications, comparative analysis, dating and ethno-cultural characterization. Sword scabbard chapes in this type are very rare finds and most of them were discovered in southern and eastern Europe in Bulgaria, Ungarn and Ukraine, and are dated to the second half of the 10th and the 11th century. Specimen from Niepołomice Forest was presumably created in one of these areas and ended up here via one of the trade routes that intersected in Cracow.

Keywords: Lesser Poland, Niepołomice Forest, Early Middle Ages, trade routes, sword scabbard chapes, palmette

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Niepołomice Forest, located in the western part of Sandomierz Basin in Lesser Poland between the River Vistula and the Raba, is today a densely forested area about 30 km east of Kraków covering an area of almost 110 km². However, originally the forest was much bigger and it was first mentioned in a document issued by Konrad, Duke of Kraków and Łęczyca, in 1242, in which he confirmed the borders of the village of Mszczęcin owned by a monastery and had renewed old boundary markings on the border with *Kłaj*, the duke's forest (Kodeks 1886, no. 421). In 1393 the forest is mentioned in sources as *Las Niepołomicki* (Niepołomice Wood) and in 1441 the name *Puszcza Niepołomicka* (Niepołomice Forest) is mentioned for the first time. Between the 13th and the 17th centuries the forest was the property of Polish kings and its location close to Kraków, which was the capital city at that time, made it their favourite hunting ground (*cf.*, Sadzewicz 1952; Smólski 1981, 12-15). A dense forest does not favour archaeological survey or excavations hence archaeological digs, if any, are located in its buffer zone (Fig. 1). Hence random finds, which enrich our knowledge about the exploitation of this area, are even more worthwhile. This article discusses such a discovery, made almost in the heart of the Niepołomice Forest, in the village of Poszyna. The find was uncovered on 26 March 2023 during an archaeological field survey using a handheld metal detector subject to a permission issued by the Voivodeship Cultural Heritage Conservator (No. ZA.I.5163.17.21 in Forest District Niepołomice, forest area No. 116 – forestry Chysne, commune Kłaj, district Wieliczka).

The chape, namely a protective fitting at the bottom of a scabbard for a sword, was made of an copper alloy. The analysis of chemical composition carried out in the Bio- and Archaeometric Laboratory of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw (analysis No. CL 28751), in two different parts of the object showed that the alloy is composed of copper (Cu – 79.60-79.99%), lead (Pb – 12.01-12.88%), zinc (Zn – 4.77-5.65%) and tin (Sn – 1.61-1.75%). The total share of other elements in the alloy is no higher than 1% (Fe – 0.35%, Sb – 0.01-0.04%, S – 0.33-0.60%, Ag – 0.04%) (Gan 2023). The artefact is slightly damaged – the upper part of one of the sides is missing. In its present state, the artefact measures 91.38 mm in height, it is no wider than 43.55 mm and 15.66 mm thick. The fitting is solid and the cast itself is massive: the thickness of the walls ranges from 1.0 to 1.4 mm. The chape weighs 61.05 g. The surface shows marks of use, but the decoration is deep enough to be seen. The upper edge of the chape is marked with a flat rim 3-4 mm wide, clearly rising in its central part and topped with a decorative thickening marked with three strands arranged in a herringbone pattern (a stylised animal head?). Below, a trefoil pointing downwards is to be seen, of which the central lobe is lengthened, and the two other ones at each side are shorter, volute-like. The mirror reflexion of the motif rising from a bigger, flat trefoil can be seen in the lower part of the fitting, with a clear spur at the bottom (Fig. 2).

A few attempts have been made in the archaeological literature to provide a classification of sword scabbard chapes; they were developed on the basis of source materials which varied both in terms of quantity and quality, and on the basis of criteria of typological divi-

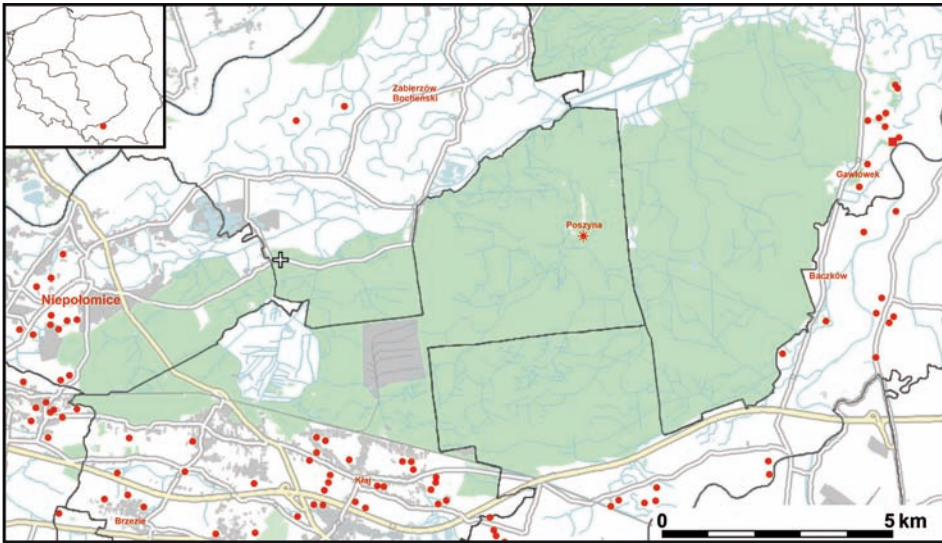


Fig. 1. Location of find in the context of medieval archaeological sites inside and bordering Niepołomice Forest. Prepared by A. Janowski

sion which were often at variance (cf., Janowski 2006, 23, tab. 1). As a matter of fact, it is only the classification developed by Peter Paulsen (1953) that provides an overarching European outlook on this category of finds while the remaining ones, such as the ones developed by Gala Fiodorovna Korzukhina (1950), Vytutas Kazakevičius (1998) or Przemysław Sikora (2001; 2003) are more or less territorially restricted and as such they include fewer formal and decorative solutions. Considering the shape and the decoration, the Poszyňa chape can be classified as Paulsen's (1953, 59-96) type III, in which the underlying principle is an oriental style palmetta motif (German *Ortbänder mit orientalischer Palmette*). Differences in the way fittings were made, construction details and decoration and the way the major decoration motif was cast inclined the scholar to make further divisions into four sub-types. The find would be classified as type III.1 (the so-called Varangian Group – German 'eine warägische Gruppe' – Paulsen 1953, 59-67) (Fig. 3). According to the classification by G. F. Korzukhina (1950) such fittings can be classified as type V; in the typology by P. Sikora (2001, 112; 2003, 24-25) they fall into type IV.a.2.; they were not included in the classification by V. Kazakevičius as they did not occur in the area which he studied. The group, even despite a few newly published finds (Shpilev 2021), including from the territory of Poland (Chudziak *et al.* 2009, 102, fig. 5: j), is relatively scarce: seven finds were uncovered in Bulgaria, a further three in Ukraine and Poland each, two in Russia and one in Hungary and Belarus each (cf., Janowski 2006, 30, 31, fig. 8, with corrections and additions). Hence the finds come mainly from southern and south-eastern Europe (Fig. 4).



Fig. 2. Sword scabbard chape from Poszyna, gm. Kłaj. Photo A. Janowski

The find in the group that shows closest analogy to the Poszyna chape is a fitting uncovered in a closely undefined circumstances in Bilär, today the Republic of Tatarstan, Russian Federation (Fig. 5). The object is a part of the collection of Vasiliy Zausaylov (1845-1913), a banker, collector of ancient artefacts and an honoured resident of Kazan. After the outbreak of the Japanese-Russian war in 1904 and the bankruptcy of the trade house of which he was the president, the rich collection was sold to the State Historical Museum in Helsinki (today the National Museum of Finland – from 1809 to 1917 Finland was part of the Russian Empire), where it has been a part of the collection of Vasiliy Zausaylov until today (catalogue number KM5385:Z 4664; *cf.*, Tallgren 1910, av. 3; 1918, 30, pl. IV: 29; and <https://rt-online.ru/kupets-bankir-kolleksioner-metsenat/>, accessed 27.04.2023). The fitting is slightly damaged in its lower part and a bit bigger: it is 100 mm long (100 mm – according to Paulsen 1953, 63; 101 mm – according Izmaylov 1997, 199; 103 mm – according to Khuzin 1985, 174), 50 mm wide and about 20 mm thick. The decoration on the surface of the chape is composed in an identical way and there are slight

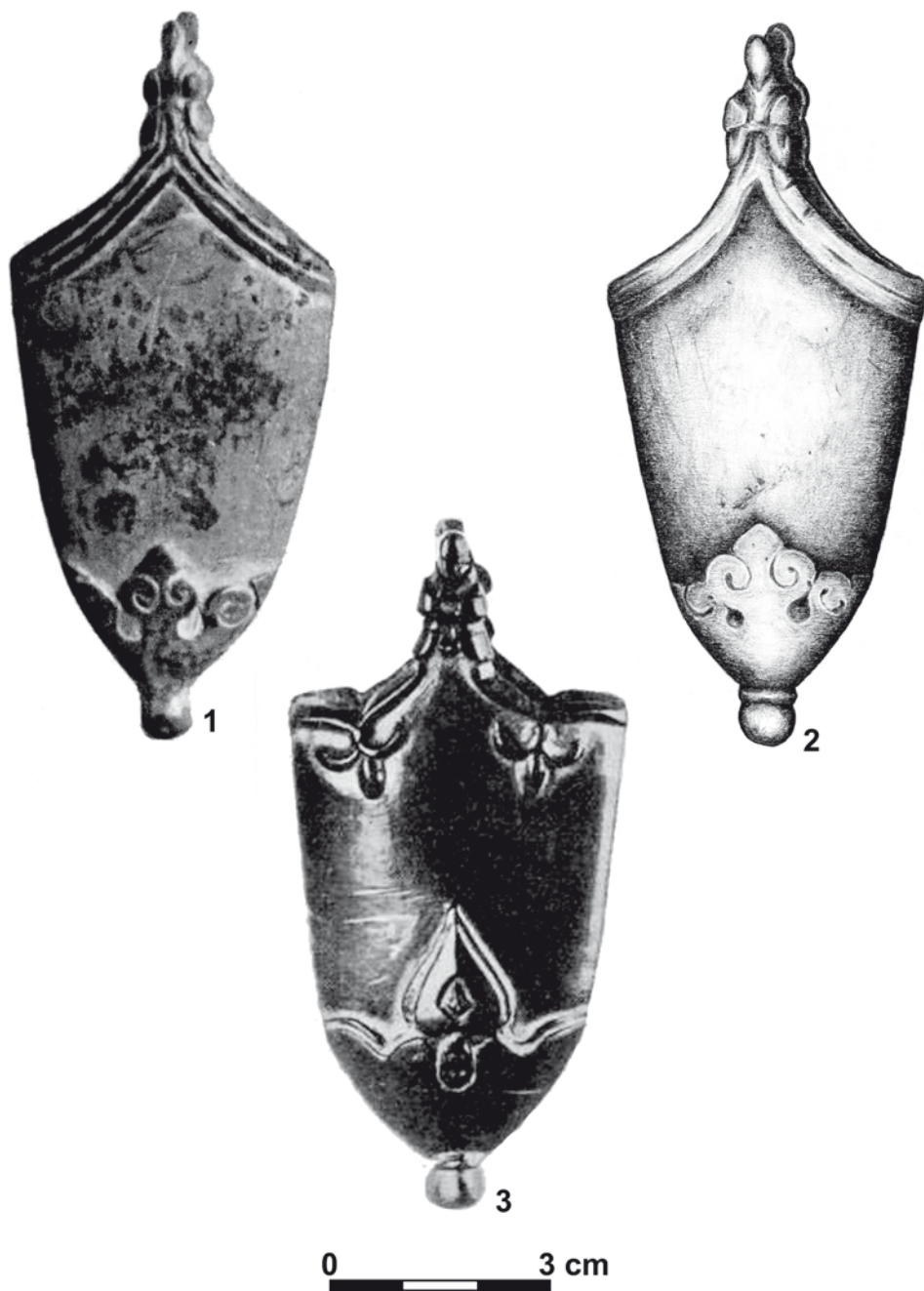


Fig. 3. Some examples of sword scabbard chapes of Paulsen type III. a: 1 – Madara; 2 – Bobięcino, 3 – Plovdiv (1, 3 – after Paulsen 1953, Abb. 67, 69; 2 – after Chudziak et al. 2009, 102, fig. 5: j)



Fig. 4. Map showing the distribution of sword scabbard chapes of Paulsen type III.1. According to Janowski 2006, with supplement

differences only in its top part (*cf.*, Paulsen 1953, 63, Abb. 70; Khuzin 1985, 174, pl. 57: 2; Izmaylov 1997, 199, fig. 25: 1).

Another analogous find was unearthed in 1984 during archaeological excavations in the north-eastern part of quarter VI in Chersonesos (today Sevastopol in Crimea, Ukraine). Preserved only in part and reassembled from a few pieces, the artefact is 70 mm high, 46 mm wide and 17 mm thick (Fig. 6). In this case the composition of the decoration is also identical, but the band on the edges creates a circular lining (Vizantiyskiy 1991, 102)

The find from Bilär is a random one, without any archaeological context, hence it is difficult to point out the date when it was made; however, the Chersonesos chape is dated to the period between the end of the 10th and the beginning of the 11th century. The remaining fittings of type III.1 are of quite a similar chronology. Three out of seven Bulgarian finds have a context which allows them to be dated to the 10th-11th centuries (Yotov 2004, 54, catalogue). The Székesfehérvár chape (Hungary) was unearthed in Grave 33 in a burial ground together with a type S sword (according to Jan Petersen) and a set of weaponry



Fig. 5. Sword scabbard chape from *Bilär* (Finnish Heritage Agency, Resource ID 3033324, CC by 44, after <https://museovirasto.finna.fi/arkeologia/Search/Results?lookfor=4664&type=AllField-s&limit=50>; access 15.09.2023)



Fig. 6. Sword scabbard chape from Chersonesos. After Vizantiyskiy 1991, 102

(stirrups and a bit) dated to the period between the 10th and the beginning of the 11th century (cf., Bakay 1966, 51, 52, 73, 74). When it comes to finds in Poland, then, according to Jerzy Antoniewicz (1955, 260), the fitting from the “Castle” in Zawada Lanckorońska needs to be dated to the 10th century. The find has no stratigraphic context, however, we know, on the basis of more recent research, that it was already in the 11th century that the fort in Zawada Lanckorońska ceased to exist (Poleski 2004, 372). The Bobięcino fitting was uncovered in 2007 in the remains of a bridge (Site 3) which connected the stronghold and the ancillary settlement on the island with the mainland. Dendrochronological analyses indicate that the crossing must have been used from at least the 1020s until the 1180s, however, the fort was built as early as in the middle of the 10th century and ceased to be

used at the beginning of the 12th century (Chudziak *et al.* 2009, 102, fig. 5: j; Chudziak *et al.* 2020, 91-95). Here it needs to be mentioned that also chapes of other sub-types of type III according to Paulsen are dated mostly to the period between the middle of the 10th until the beginning of the 12th century (*cf.*, for example Paulsen 1956; Janowski 2006; 2011). In view of the above considerations, it does not seem unjustified to establish the chronology of the Poszyna fitting to the period between the second half of the 10th and the 11th century.

The location of finds of chapes of the type discussed in this paper including their concentration in southern and south-eastern Europe suggests it was that particular region in which they were made. Peter Paulsen (1953, 65) was of the opinion that they were made in Rus' and he considered their presence in southern Europe to have been the result of an expedition of the Rus' duke, Sviatoslav to Bulgaria in 969, which was inspired by the Byzantine Empire. According to Iskander Lerunovich Izmaylov (1997, 46), the Bilär chape was made in a local workshop but copying Rus' patterns. Jerzy Antoniewicz (1955, 260) also advocated the Rus' origin of the chape while Jan Žak (1954, 728) considered it was of Hungarian origin. This was due to the fact that according to G. F. Korzukhina (1950, 68), whose work he used, Hungary and Bulgaria were the places in which a whole collection of chapes decorated with the palmette motif were produced. In the most recent study on the weaponry from the territory of Bulgaria, the hypothesis that chapes of this type were produced in the regions on the lower and middle course of the Danube was upheld (Yotov 2004, 51; Yotov *et al.* 2016, 110-113).

Unfortunately, metal analyses of the Poszyna chape do not offer much support in establishing of its provenience. The number of samples for this category of finds keeps growing, however, it is still limited and among them there are no finds of the type of interest to us (*cf.*, Janowski *et al.* 2019). On the other hand, however, considering the observations to date it can be concluded that the producers did have knowledge about the properties of alloys and made attempts at producing mixtures of certain properties to give the finds desired features. They could also use the raw material available at that time, even if it did not meet fully the required characteristics.

The features of the decorations which can be seen on the group of chapes discussed here support the hypothesis of an origin on the Danube. The decoration has been described as an oriental style palmette. The motif resembles symmetrical, fan-shaped leaves of a palm tree. Its origins in decorative art reach ancient Egypt but then it was subsequently developed through the art in the whole Mediterranean region, in ancient Greek and Roman and later also in Byzantine and Islamic art (*cf.*, Zahra and Sharif 2022). In period between the 9th to the 11th centuries the palmette was one of the major motifs in Hungarian art, where it developed into a characteristic form which was even called 'the Hungarian palmette' in which the multiplied plant motif created a net-like pattern. According to some scholars, the mutation occurred due to the influence of Islamic art in which leaves in the palmette do not spread out separately; instead the leaves are interwoven in an intricate

pattern of spiralling tendrils. The motif is ubiquitous and appears *inter alia* on fittings of exclusive weapons: swords and sabretaches (flat bags or pouches used for carrying small objects which were worn suspended from the belt together with the sabre) and belt fittings (*cf.*, for example, Bérczi 1987; Fodor 1996; Mesterházy 1997; Minaeva and Holmquist 2012; Virágos ed. 2022). The palmette is also to be seen on belt fittings in Bulgarian art (*cf.*, for example, Stanilov 2006, 90-189; Pletniov and Pavlova 2000; Minaeva and Holmquist 2012). This statement definitely does not exhaust the discussion on the provenience of chapes decorated with the palmette motif, however, considering the limited number of finds and lack of new arguments they need to be considered conclusive. Finally, their production in Byzantium cannot be ruled out, considering the use of the palmette motif in this area and the strength of the empire's influence.

It therefore needs to be considered with a high degree of probability that the Poszyna chape is not of local origin. It is difficult to decide whether it came from eastern or southern Europe, but it was in Kraków that major trade routes from both regions crossed. One of them ran from as far away as from Regensburg via Prague and from Kraków it ran east via Volodymyr to Kyiv and from there further to Volga Bulgaria where Bilär was located (*cf.*, Khalikov 1992; Morawiec 2009, 89-97). Ibrahim ibn Yaquub, a Sephardi Jew, who travelled to Central Europe in 965-966, gave a clear account while describing Prague (Kowalski 1946, 49) of the Rus' and Slavs carrying goods who came from the town of Karākō (=Kraków/Cracow). The precise route between Kraków and Volodymyr and Kyiv is subject to supposition only; however, it could have run towards Przemyśl bypassing Niepołomice Forest in the south or ran along its northern edge along the River Vistula to Sandomierz. The third solution is the route led through Niepołomice Forest. The place where the Poszyna chape was found is located along the so-called Royal Route which, since at least the second half of the 14th century, had led from the castle in Niepołomice to a small royal hunting palace in Poszyna and further east to Baczków and Gawłówek (Sadzewicz 1952, 31, 32; Smólski 1981, 15). However, it cannot be excluded that the route, though narrower and less comfortable, existed earlier. Literature on the subject mentions that a majority of early medieval chapes were uncovered away from settlements which existed at that time, which can be explained as a loss while travelling and hence it cannot be ruled out that the places in which they were uncovered mark trade routes or the paths of marching armies (*cf.*, Janowski 2006). In Kraków the route from Kyiv crossed the route which ran south to Wieliczka and Košice to Hungary and further to the Danube. Although sources confirm the route no earlier than in the 13th century, however, its earlier origin can be assumed (Kutrzeba 1902, 58-72; Weyman 1938, 109-111; *cf.*, also Naprawca 2014).

The sword scabbard chape uncovered in the Niepołomice Forest is but one of several such artefacts in Europe. As luck would have it, the find which was probably made on the River Danube or Volga or Byzantium between at the end of the 10th and the end of the 11th century, reached Kraków to be found one thousand years later in the middle of nowhere.

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