

A small piece of a jigsaw-puzzle. On Early La Tène figural brooches from Bohemia

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents a relatively recently discovered bronze brooch from Církvice (Kutná Hora district), which is clearly related to the Early La Tène art style. Its discovery is all the more interesting because no other finds from the beginning of the La Tène period were detected either during the rescue excavation that yielded it, or in the site's immediate vicinity. The newly discovered unique piece of personal ornament augments the existing collection of Early La Tène brooches. Moreover, it fits well into the distribution pattern of figural brooches in which the northeast quarter of Bohemia stands out with a series of characteristics of its own.

KEY WORDS

Mask brooch; Early La Tène period; LT A; metal finds; Celtic art; Církvice.

INTRODUCTION

A fragment of a unique small bronze brooch was brought to light during a large-scale rescue excavation related to the construction of a road bypass at Církvice, Kutná Hora district. The decoration of the object is clearly related to Early La Tène figural brooches. Equally interesting is the context of the find. The artefact was found on the surface of a feature (a pyrotechnological structure, no 87/2021) demonstrably dated to the Recent and Late La Tène period. No other evidence indicating either settlement or burial component of the LT A phase was recorded within the whole area of the excavation, or in its immediate vicinity.

A little more than two dozen distinctly shaped mask or zoomorphic Early La Tène brooches are currently known from Bohemia. Until recently they were concentrated mainly in western and southern Bohemia and in the adjacent parts of Central Bohemia while in the northeastern quadrant of Bohemia¹ these finds were documented only sporadically. However, the picture is slowly changing thanks to new large-scale excavations and to metal detector surveying. The Církvice find is a significant new entry into this small collection and contributes to the knowledge of these unique ornaments.

FIND CIRCUMSTANCES

LOCATION AND NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

The rare small brooch was found during a rescue excavation in the location of the newly constructed bypass of the I/38 road (**Fig. 1A**). The excavation took place in the territory of Církvice in Central Bohemia, about 5 km east of the centre of Kutná Hora.

1 This term, as used by the authors, corresponds to the area east and northeast of Prague (the districts of Nymburk, Poděbrady, Kutná Hora, Mladá Boleslav in Central Bohemia, and East Bohemia).

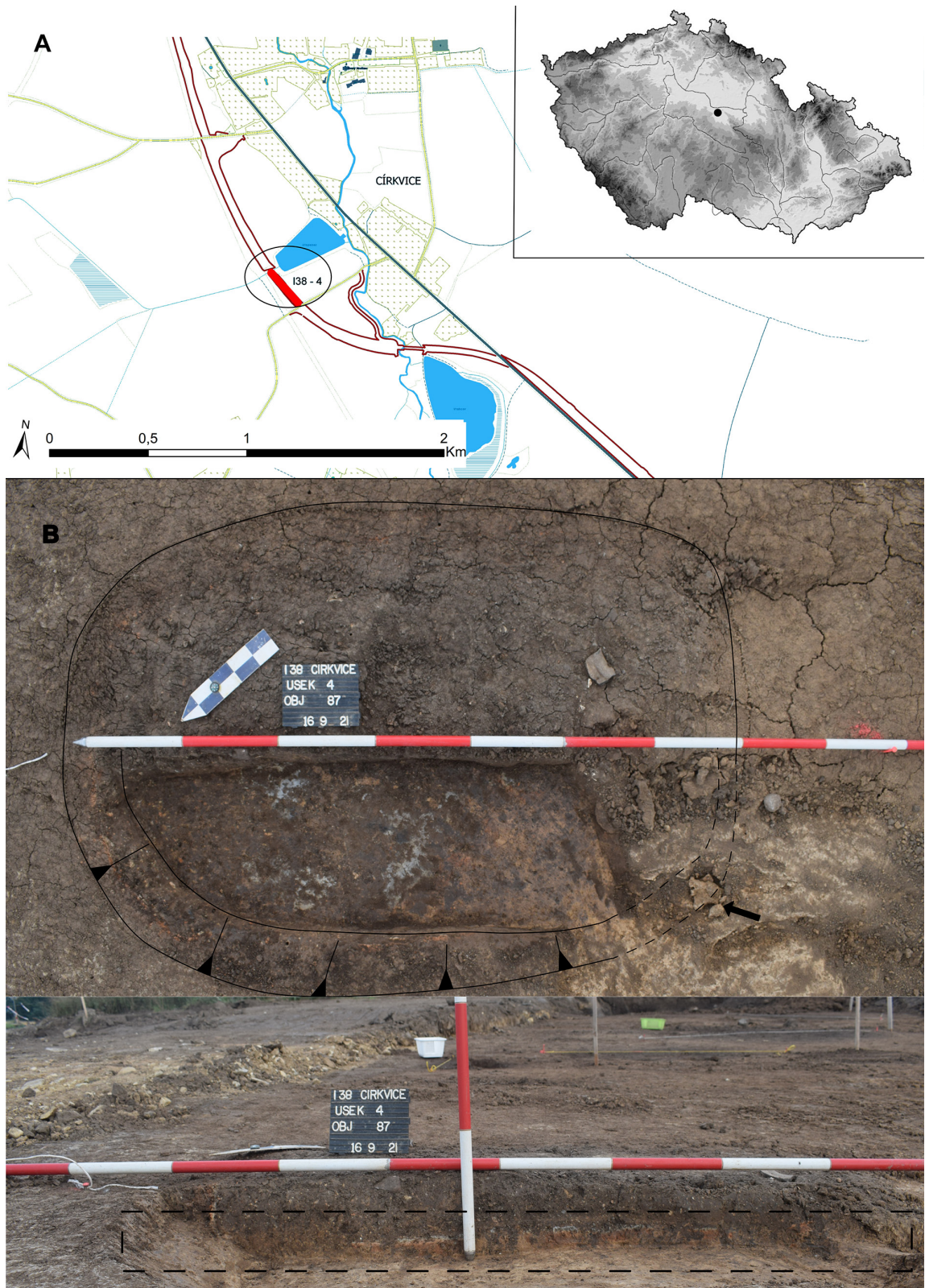


Fig. 1: A - Location of the findspot of the figural brooch in Církvice, Kutná Hora distr. B - The feature 87/2020 - plan, and section. The arrow indicates the area in which it is disturbed by a later feature; hatched - strongly burnt layer. Photos by M. Bartoš-Dvořáková, adapted by T. Jošková.

The excavated site is located in the fertile agricultural area of the Central Bohemian Basin (sub-unit Církvice and Vinaře basin), at the altitude of 218–220 m.a.s.l.² The Křenovka stream and Klejnárka River (with its tributary the Olšanský stream), which is a left side tributary of the Elbe, flow nearby. Loess and loess loam, with overlying chernozem and Cambysian soils, provide ideal conditions for agriculture; fluvial loamy sands and gravel sands or micaceous occur in the Křenovka catchment area.³

The favourable natural conditions are also confirmed by the relatively rich and dynamic evidence of anthropic activities here, from the beginning of the agricultural prehistory. From earlier excavations we know burials of the Únětice culture of the Early Bronze Age, funerary and settlement evidence from the Hallstatt Period (VELÍMSKÝ 2003; 2012), as well as settlement activities from the La Tène Period and Roman Iron Age in the location of Netřeba (ŠUMBEROVÁ 2021; VELÍMSKÝ 2011). A La Tène period cemetery may be inferred from the find of a bronze annular ornament (FILIP 1956, 67, 337, 367).

THE SITE AND FEATURE NO. 87/2021

Altogether, 123 positive archaeological features – including 116 settlement features, 4 pyrotechnological structures, and 3 graves – were recorded during the exploration of section 4 of the I/38 road (**Fig. 1**). It should be stressed that the vast majority of features can be dated to the stages LT C2–D1.⁴ With a single exception – the brooch, which is the subject of this paper (**Fig. 2**) – no Early La Tène feature or artefact was recorded. The brooch was found by a metal detector during the removal of the topsoil by a mechanical excavator in the topsoil on the surface of feature number 87/2021⁵ (**Fig. 1B**).

Feature 87/2021 was rectangular with oval corners, its sloping walls transitioned into a flat, slightly uneven bottom, its long axis was oriented in the NW–SE direction. Its dimensions were 120 × 106 cm and it was preserved to a maximum depth of 16 cm. Its SW edge was damaged by another feature. Already during the excavation, its fill featured a distinctive dark (burnt) colour mixed with charcoal and fragments of pottery. The fill consisted of four layers (**Fig. 1B below**). The upper one (in which the brooch fragment was found) was a solid dark grey-brown sandy clay with pellets of ochre loess and occasional crumbs of daub with a diameter of up to 1.5 cm. Between this deposit and the pit wall there was a brownish-red clay 4 cm thick, which was interpreted as the mortar of the structure. A 2 cm thick light grey layer was intercepted above the bottom. It was probably a burnt base of the structure. The deepest stratigraphic component was a brownish-red layer corresponding to the burnt bedrock. The fill contained pottery datable only to LT C–D1, as well as small animal bones and daub crumbs.

THE CÍRKVICE BROOCH – DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Only a part of the original (two-piece) bronze figural brooch is preserved: a bow terminating in an eyelet for the spring axis on the one end and a small catch-piece on the opposite side (**Fig. 2**). The foot, the pin, and the spring are broken off. The brooch is preserved to a length

2 Based on: ags.cuzk.cz/geoprohlizec

3 Based on: <https://mapy.geology.cz/geocr25/?extent=-750239.9299%2C-1081772.5024%2C-650707.2908%2C-1017188.3012%2C102067>

4 A handful of features can be attributed to the Middle Neolithic Stroke-ornamented ware culture; chamber graves of the Bylany culture of the Early Hallstatt period were present in the adjacent excavation sector (DVOŘÁKOVÁ 2022).

5 WGS 84 coordinates of the centre of the feature (±1 m) are 49.9371139N, 15.3355136E.

of 44 mm, the diameter of the oval body varies between 2 and 5 mm, the height of the bow 15 mm. The spring was originally held on an axis, the rest of which is still preserved in the eyelet (wire diameter 1.5 mm). Distinct lens-shaped eyes are sculpturally represented on the top part of the bow, consisting of the upper and lower eyelids and eyebrows, which are bordered by a worn V-shaped engraving. The face looks backwards – towards the spring – where there are two more oval-shaped bulges (a second pair of eyes? a moustache?). The very small catch-piece (6×3 mm) is hooked inwards and decorated on the outside with fine non-intersecting vertical and horizontal incised lines. The brooch continued with a foot that is not preserved; the breakage suggests that it may have been cut off. This part is visibly flattened. The weight of the preserved part of the brooch (after conservation) is 3.35 g. The object is covered with an inhomogeneous patina and its surface is partially damaged and worn away.

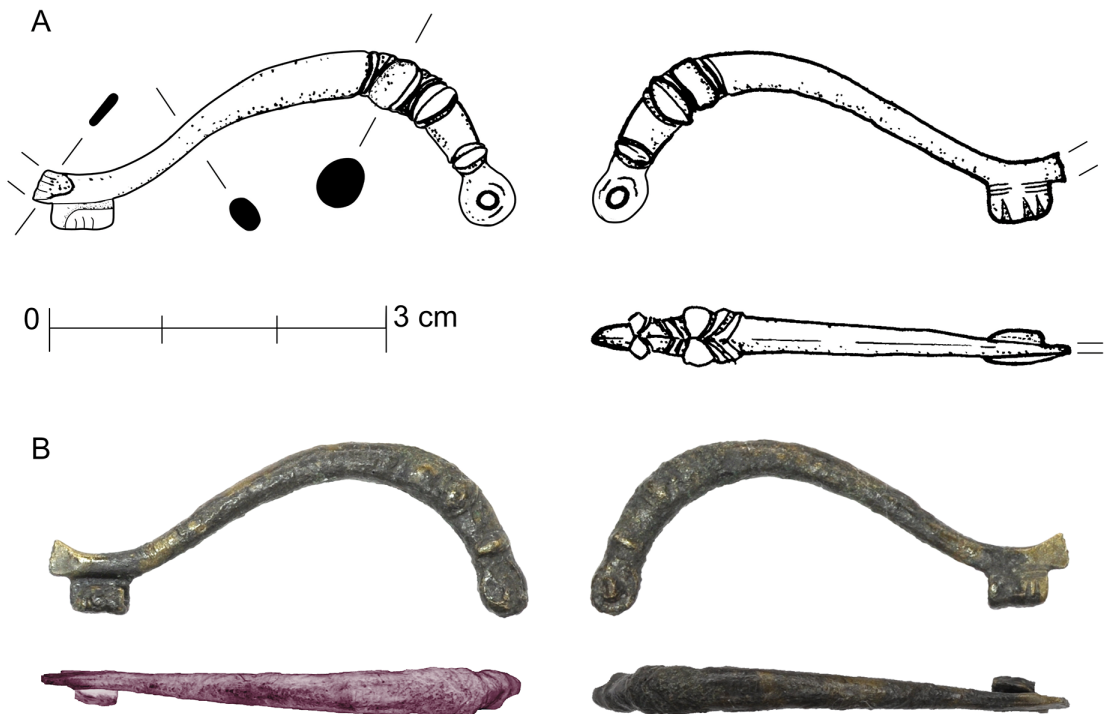


Fig. 2: The Early La Tène brooch from Církvice. Drawing and photo by T. Jošková.

The absence of a foot does not allow one to unambiguously conclude whether there was another mask on it. Still, the representation of a face on the bow looking towards the spring is almost always accompanied by a mask on the foot in Early La Tène brooches (cf. BINDING 1993; ČIŽMÁŘ 2012, Abb. 1; MEGAW 2012). The brooch is of a two-part (cross-bow) construction with a slightly thickened bow body. It is similar, e.g., to the recent find from Hradištko, distr. Nymburk (WALDHAUSER 2014, figs. 2–3), and very close to the find from Rottenburg, Ldkr. Tübingen (BINDING 1993, Taf. 5:7). In terms of U. Binding's typology, it is closest to the group 5 – mask-shaped brooches with anthropo- and zoomorphic head on the foot and bow (BINDING 1993, 143).

As far as decoration is concerned, the brooch shows an affinity to the find from Horné Orešany (PIETA 2007, Abb. 7:10), the anthropomorphic brooch from Mikulovice (SEDLÁČEK – SANKOT 2013, pl. 1, 2:1), or the brooch foot from Weissenbrunn (BINDING 1993, Taf. 7:1). The absence of a nose, and on the contrary the elongated pointed shape of the head (beak?) transitioning into an eye for the spring axis imply a zoomorphic rather than anthropomorphic mask, perhaps that of a snake or a bird of prey (cf. KRUTA 1975, 11–13; PARE 2012, 154–165, fig. 6; BAGLEY 2020, 375). However, given the strong stylization, the interpretation is not unequivocal.

As to its chronology, the figural brooch can be fairly clearly attributed to the Early La Tène period, the LT A stage, and dated to around the middle of the 5th century BC (cf. JACOBSTHAL 1969; MEGAW 2012; 2014). Although the presence of the crossbow design is associated by some scholars (WALDHAUSER 2014, 169) to the earlier stage of LT A, they likely persisted throughout that period, with rare continuity to the beginning of LT B1 (BINDING 1993, 69).

THE BROOCH IN ITS CONTEXT

The distinctively shaped figural brooches represented a unique category of personal object with a great symbolic value (BAGLEY 2020, 395–396, 400; PARE 2012, 169). They were not widespread and the overall picture of distribution of this specific piece of jewellery⁶ (**Fig. 4**), based on the current state of knowledge, seems to show Bohemia divided into several zones. Traditionally, the occurrence of zoomorphic or anthropomorphic brooches has been associated with burials under mounds in southwestern Bohemia (**Tab. 1**; cf. SOUDSKÁ 1994; SANKOT *et al.* 2019). Other finds from barrows come from the adjacent Louny region (Panenský Týnec: KUČERA 1894; Cítoliby: WIEHL 1909). In the surroundings of Prague, we observe a mixed picture with finds coming both from cremation graves (e.g. the barrow at Libčice Chýnov: FELCMAN 1903) and from settlements (Praha-Dejvice: HLAVA 2013, 677).

In contrast, east of Prague⁷ and in eastern Bohemia these brooches were absent until recently. In the last two decades, however, their number has been increasing, thanks to metal detector surveys and new large-scale excavations (**Fig. 3B: 11, 12, 14–16, 18, 20–21; Tab. 1:14–25**). In this part of Bohemia, however, figural brooches occur in completely different contexts, as they usually appear neither in burials under mounds, nor in richly furnished flat graves, both of which are basically absent here.

The region of eastern Bohemia and its ‘border zone’ – i.e. the area in which the Bylany and Platěnice cultures bordered each other and intermingled in the previous Hallstatt period⁸ –

6 Some bird-headed brooches are also sometimes counted among them in Bohemia (groups 16 and 19 after BINDING 1993, 27–37; cf. KRUTA 1975, 11–28, fig. 3), but those are all characterised by clear and unambiguous animal forms, the presence of a face, and low degree of schematization. They always represent an individual and unique piece of jewellery to which there are no direct analogies. This speaks of their importance to the owner (symbol, amulet) and they can be seen as an elite a prestige object (BAGLEY 2020, 395–396, 400). There is thus no reason to exclude them from the group of ‘mask-like-figural’ – i.e. zoomorphic and anthropomorphic – brooches (cf. PARE 2012, 154–166; JACOBSTHAL 1969, 25–27, 30, pl. 154–156). They differ markedly from the very schematic bird-headed brooches, of which dozens can be found and almost seem to have been ‘mass-produced’ pieces (cf. BINDING 1993, Taf. 22–42). They would ultimately develop into the classic type of Duchcov brooch.

7 An exception is the burial mound with the urn grave in Bylany, distr. Kolín: Píč 1898; a pin with an already schematized bird head from a rich grave with a chisel from Přerov nad Labem, distr. Nymburk (SANKOT 2014) is not included in the collection under study.

8 Along the line of Nymburk – Kolín – Kutná Hora.

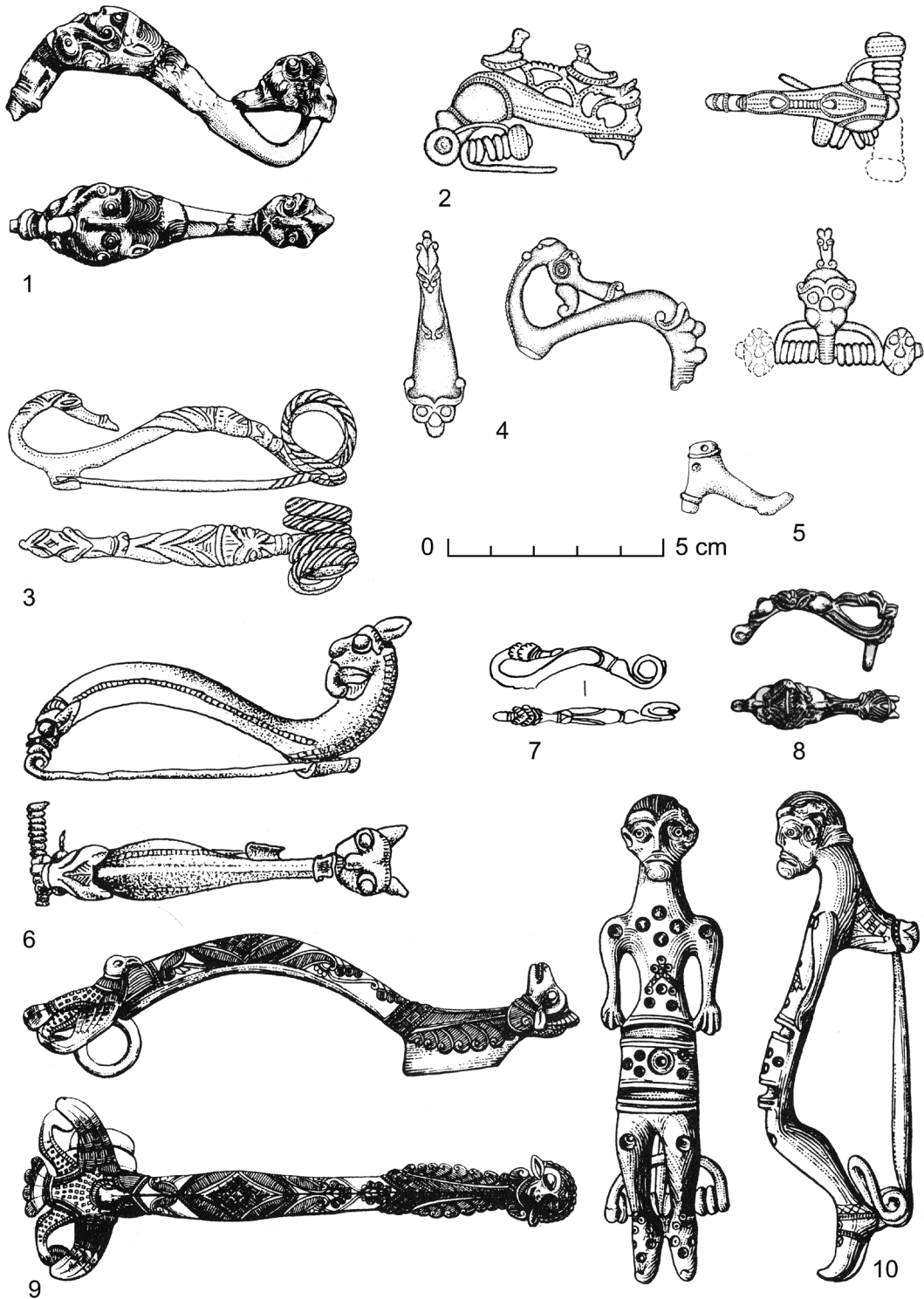


Fig. 3a: Figural brooches from Bohemia. 1 - Kyšice; 2 - Radětice; 3, 5 - Hradiště u Kasejovic; 4 - Zahradka u Mirkovic; 6 - Libčice-Chýnov; 7 - Tajanov-Husín; 8 - Háj u Nové Huti/Dýšina; 9 - Panský Týnec; 10 - Manětín Hrádek. Sources: 1, 5, 6, 8-10 - BINDING 1993; 2, 4 - SANKOT *et al.* 2019; 3 - SOUDSKÁ 1994; 7 - KRUTA 1975; adapted by T. Jošková.

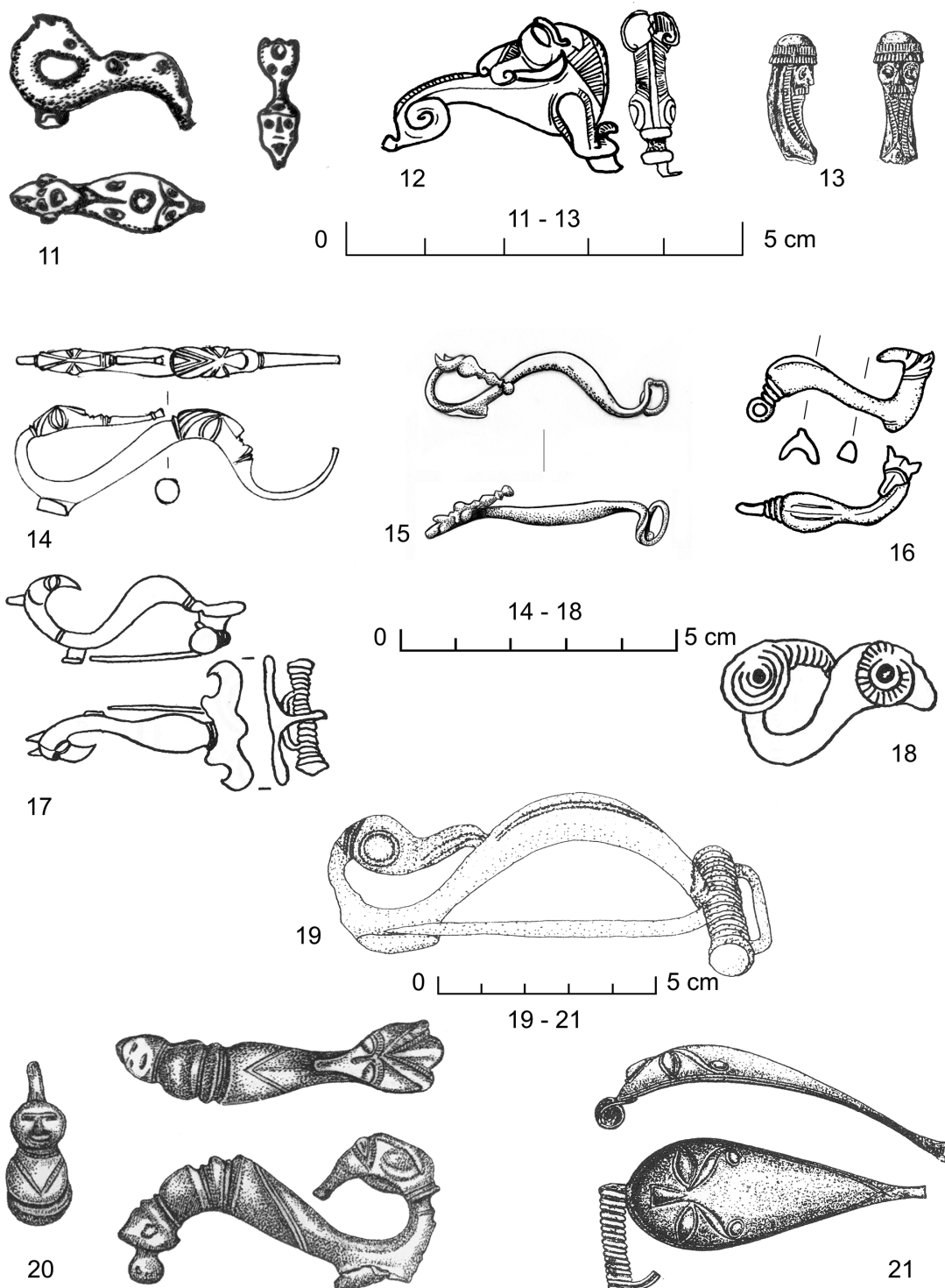


Fig. 3b: Figural brooches from Bohemia. 11, 15 - Žehuň; 12 - Hlušíčky; 13 - Kšice; 14 - Mikulovice; 16 - surroundings of Dobruška; 17 - Cítoliby; 18 - Bylany, Kolín distr.; 19 - Kralovice; 20 - Hradiště, Nymburk distr.; 21 - Prague-Dejvice. Sources: 11, 15 - DANIELISOVÁ et al. 2018; 13, 19 - BINDING 1993; 14 - SEDLÁČEK - SANKOT 2013; 17-18 - KRUTA 1975; 20 - WALDHAUSER 2014; 21 - HLAVA 2013; 12 and 16 drawing by T. Jošková; adapted by T. Jošková.

Tab. 1: Selected figural brooches in Bohemia. By T. Jošková.

Ser. num.	Site	Kontext	Construction	Rite	Var.	Detail	Fig.	Publ.
WEST REGION								
1	Kralovice , dis. Plzeň Sever	GRAVE	Barrow	Cremation	ZOO	bird	3b:19	FRANC 1896
2	Kšice , dis. Tachov	GRAVE	Barrow	Cremation	ANTRO	man	3b:13	FILIP 1956, 82
3	Manětín Hrádek , dis. Plzeň Sever	GRAVE	Barrow ?	Cremation	ANTRO	man	3a:10	SOUDSKÁ 1968
4	Tajanov-Husín , dis. Klatovy	GRAVE	Barrow / ?	unspec.	ZOO	bird	3a:7	SCHRÁNIL 1928, 215
5	Kyšice , dis. Plzeň Město	GRAVE	Barrow	Cremation	ANTRO	myth man	3a:1	KŘIVKA 1883, 296–300, 354, 370–371, tab.XVI:51
6	Hradiště u Kasejovic , dis. Plzeň Jih	GRAVE	Flat	Cremation	ANTRO	shoe	3a:5	SIBLÍK 1907, 346–348
7	Hradiště u Kasejovic , dis. Plzeň Jih	GRAVE	Flat ?	Cremation	ZOO	bird	3a:3	SOUDSKÁ 1994, Abb. C3/10
8	Háj u Nové Huti -Dýšina , dis. Plzeň Město	GRAVE	Barrow ?	Cremation ?	ZOO + ANTRO	gryphon	3a:8	FILIP 1956, 83, tab. IV:1
SOUTH REGION								
9	Závišín (Bělčice), dis. Strakonice	GRAVE	unspec.	unspec.	ZOO	dog	X	unpubl.; stored in the Prácheň Museum
10	Radětice u Běchyně , dis. Tábor	GRAVE	Barrow	unspec.	ZOO	gryphon + birds	3a:2	MICHÁLEK 2017, 341, tab. 405
11	Zahrádka u Mírkovic , dis. Český Krumlov	GRAVE	Barrow	unspec.	ZOO + ANTRO	gryphon	3a:4	SANKOT <i>et al.</i> 2019
NORTHWEST REGION								
12	Cítoliby , dis. Louny	GRAVE	Flat ?	Cremation	ZOO	gryphon	3b:17	WIEHL 1909, 74, tab XXV:12
13	Panenský Týnec , dis. Louny	GRAVE	Barrow	Inhumation	ZOO	ovicapra + bird	3a:9	KUČERA 1894
CENTRAL REGION - W								
14	Libčice-Chýnov , dis. Praha Západ	GRAVE	Barrow	Cremation	ZOO + ANTRO	cat? + myth man	3a:6	FELCMAN 1902/3, 42, obr. 2
15	Praha-Dejvice , dis. Praha	SETTL.	X	X	ANTRO	man / face	3b:21	HLAVA 2013
CENTRAL REGION - E								
16	Benátky n. Jizerou , dis. Mladá Boleslav	DET	X	X	ZOO	myth. man	X	infra
17	Bylany , dis. Kolín	GRAVE	Flat	Cremation	ZOO	bird	3b:19	PÍČ 1898, 224, tab. XXIII:8
18	Hradištěk , dis. Nymburk	DET	X	X	ZOO + ANTRO	ovicapra	3b:20	WALDHAUSER 2014
19	Církvice , dis. Kutná Hora	DET	feature	X	ZOO	beast / face	2	infra
20	Vyšehořovice , dis. Praha Východ	DET	X	X	ANTRO	man face	X	unpublished.; stored in the Institute of Archaeo- logical Heritage Care of Central Bohemia Prague

Ser. num.	Site	Kontext	Construction	Rite	Var.	Detail	Fig.	Publ.
21	Žehuň, dis. Kolín	DET	X	X	ZOO + ANTRO	bird + face	3b:11	DANIELISOVÁ <i>et al.</i> 2018
22	Žehuň, dis. Kolín	DET	X	X	ZOO	beast	3b:15	DANIELISOVÁ <i>et al.</i> 2018
EAST REGION								
23	Mikulovice, dis. Pardubice	SETTL.	feature	X	ANTRO	man / face	3b:14	SEDLÁČEK – SANKOT 2013
24	Hlušičky, dis. Hradec Králové	DET	X	X	ZOO	gryphon	3b:12	infa
25	Dobruška surr., dis. Rychnov nad Kněžnou	DET	X	X	ZOO	beast	3b:16	unpublished

was considered to be largely peripheral and the original Hallstatt population was believed to have survived here for a long time (FILIP 1936–1937, 145; VOKOLEK 1962, 22–24; VOKOLEK 1999, 17), far from the regions to the southwest in which a new Early La Tène style was taking shape among the local elites in the 5th century BC (MANGEL – DANIELISOVÁ – JÍLEK 2013, 29; VENCLOVÁ *ed.* 2008, 84). However, as some scholars⁹ have pointed out, recent excavations and ‘isolated’ finds may change this picture. It seems that the situation in this area is greatly influenced by its cultural specificity, in particular the absence of the conspicuous funerary monuments, the barrows. Already Věra Šaldová (1971) stressed that even in the area of the densest distribution of figural fibulae in western Bohemia (cf. **Tab. 1** and **Fig. 4**), these prestigious ornaments are

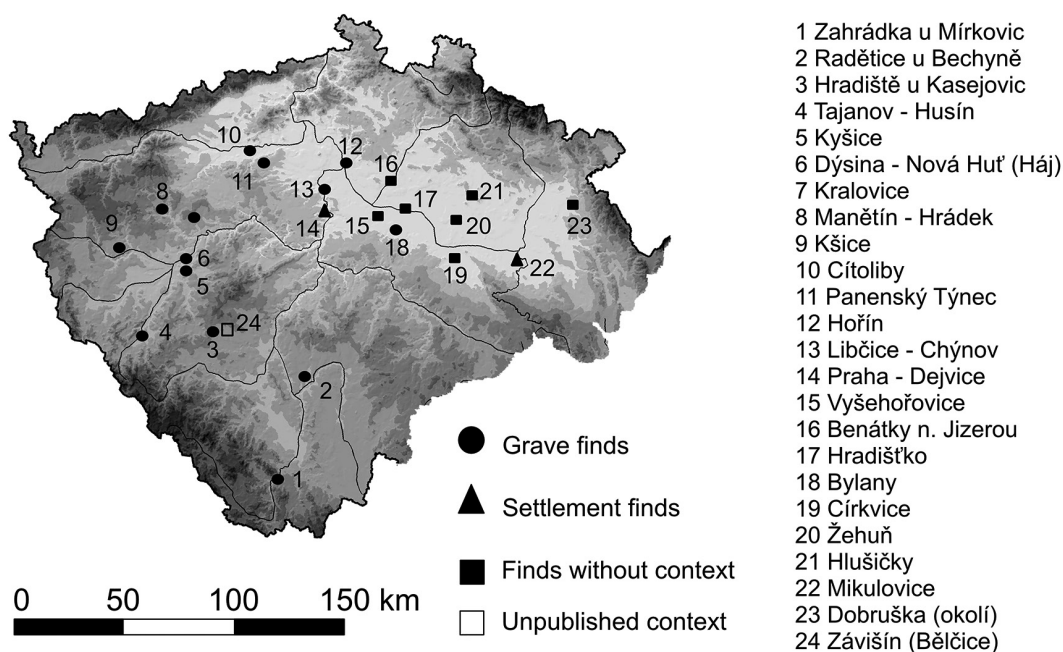


Fig. 4: Distribution of figural brooches in Bohemia. By T. Jošková.

9 Recently discussed in MANGEL – DANIELISOVÁ – JÍLEK 2013, 30; SEDLÁČEK – SANKOT 2013, 577–579.

almost absent in flat (urn) graves (ŠALDOVÁ 1971, 98–99). Jiří Waldhauser (2014, 170) pointed out a similar problem years ago in the more westerly Central Elbe region. Therefore, it is necessary to pay particular attention to the context of new finds of these brooches.

The Církvice brooch comes from a site in which no other evidence of LT A anthropic activities has been detected. This is in stark contrast to the abundance of finds from later stages of the La Tène period, LT C–D1 (DVOŘÁKOVÁ 2022). The nearest reported, though not easily verifiable,¹⁰ Early La Tène artefacts were mentioned at the site of Kutná Hora-Sedlec ‘Mokřiny’ (VALENTOVÁ 1995, 316). An unquestionable Early La Tène artefact is the fragment of a disc brooch from Kutná Hora-Karlov, about 5 km away (VALENTOVÁ – SANKOT 2000, 265–270, Abb. 2:a–b). It was discovered during the rescue excavation of an earlier Hallstatt period necropolis and (as in our case) a large LT C–D1 settlement (ŠUMBEROVÁ 1996, 482–483). Similar to Církvice, no other activities from LT A (or Ha D2–3) have been documented, despite extensive research. Isolated finds, with no evidence of other Ha D2/3–LT A structures or artefacts, also come from other sites (Hradiště: WALDHAUSER 2014, 170; Žehuň – two pieces: DANIELISOVÁ *et al.* 2018; Hlušičky: SANKOT – ČECHÁKOVÁ 2023; and some others: **Fig. 4** and **Tab. 1**). For these finds it should be noted that the sites in question have, in most cases, so far been investigated only by means of surface surveys.

In the northeastern quarter of Bohemia these brooches thus seem to be currently associated either with the Ha D2–LT A settlements (e.g. Mikulovice – **Fig. 3B: 14**; Prague-Dejvice – **Fig. 3B: 21**) or with sites in which other LT A finds are (not yet?) known (**Fig. 4**). The possibility that they come from disturbed graves is rather unlikely, or, given the nature of their find contexts, difficult to prove. Moreover, East Bohemia is notorious for the difficulty of identifying funerary activities from Ha D2–LT A, which are almost completely absent with only a few isolated exceptions (VOKOLEK – SANKOT 2001; more recently MANGEL *et al.* 2023 with bibliography; MANGEL – DANIELISOVÁ – JÍLEK 2013, 37). This situation contrasts markedly with the higher number of funerary monuments from the earlier phases of the Hallstatt period (most recently Kunětice and Dražkovice; summarized in VOKOLEK 1999; further e.g. Chýšť: SIGL – VOKOLEK 2004; 2005).

The completely isolated finds of figural brooches in the ‘border zone’ thus imply a loss of the object on a road (?), or its deliberate deposition within ritual activities as documented in other areas of Central Europe (cf. FREY 2002, 178–179). In the case of finds from the LT C–D settlements, we cannot rule out the possibility of their secondary use (as an antiquity piece, or material for recycling) in the later La Tène periods.

In any case it is clear that the originally postulated rarity of this ornament category in the northeast quarter of Bohemia only reflected the insufficient knowledge of the region.

CONCLUSION

Figural brooches rank among important phenomena of the Early La Tène period not only in Bohemia, but also in wider Central Europe. Until recently, the anthropomorphic or zoomorphic brooches occurred only in single digits within the northeastern quarter of Bohemia. This collection of individual and probably prestigious ornaments has recently been enriched by the discovery of a small mask-brooch from Církvice, Kutná Hora distr. (**Fig. 1–2**).

Thanks to the increasing collaboration in the field of metal detecting and large-scale rescue excavations, the general picture of the occurrence of these ornaments is changing signifi-

10 The collection and its context cannot be verified, it is part of a private collection.

cantly (**Tab. 1; Fig. 3A-B**). The overall distribution of figural brooches (**Fig. 4**) shows distinct areas of their occurrence: while in western and southern Bohemia and in the adjacent Louny region they are mostly found in mound burials (**Figs. 3A, 3B: 13, 17, 19**), in the northeastern quarter of Bohemia their find contexts differ. The prestigious fibulae are not known here from graves, but on the contrary from settlements or sites with a complete absence of other LT A finds. This situation is due to the different (East Hallstatt) cultural substrate and the difficult recognizability/preservation of funerary activities from Ha D2/3-LT A. A provenance from burials is thus rather unlikely for most of the new finds. Some finds may indicate losses on routes or deliberate ritual deposition (?), while secondary use cannot be ruled out in the case of occurrences within the Recent and Late La Tène period settlements.

Current developments in this field suggest that a further increase in the number of specimens of these unique ornaments (and other prestigious objects) can be expected in the future, even in the area to the northeast of the traditional zone in which the Early La Tène art style took shape. This will inevitably lead to a reassessment of the overall view of the distribution of Early La Tène occupation in Bohemia.

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