

# The Helmet from Bojná (?), Slovakia

## One of the biggest mysteries of Slovakian Early Medieval archaeology

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### 1. Introduction

When I heard about the helmet for the first time (September 2014), I could not believe. My friend, Russian military expert Sergey Kainov, asked me whether I had any information about "*a helmet found during excavation of the hillfort Boyna in Slovakia*", and I had to admit that I did not. There was something surprising for me in this question, because I considered myself to be aware of all Early Medieval military finds from Czechoslovakian area. Besides, I visited the site of Bojná hillfort two times until then and I was not told about this find. That's why I believed that "*a helmet from Bojná*" is rather false information. After all, it turned out that the information was right and I was wrong. Therefore, the helmet from Bojná will forever be a synonym for limits of my knowledge.

Right in the beginning, I have to say that the infamous fate of the helmet is the result of the serious metal detecting problem that occurs in Central and Eastern Europe. After the Velvet Revolution and fall of the Iron Curtain, metal detectorists started to buy more professional equipment and to sell their discoveries to the richer West. Of course there are laws prohibiting illegal excavations (very strict in some countries). However, there is no actual power to protect all the sites. Thanks to police activities or to close connections between some metal detectorists and archaeologists, we are at least aware of some objects.

### 2. Discovery – the official version

According to Dr. Karol Pieta from SAV (*Slovak Academy of Sciences*) in Nitra, the helmet was found by an amateur in Bojná I (Valy) in 1997, before official excavations started in 2007. To my best knowledge, the helmet was given to an auction and sold to Germany. As far as I know, the helmet was mentioned three times in the literature:

#### "2.7.11. Bojná

*I consider it necessary to mention the discovery of early medieval helmet, that was discovered in Bojná (dist. Piešťany) in the Slovak Republic. This helmet has not yet been published, as well as chain mail fragments from this site, and therefore it will be appropriate to wait for its upcoming publication in specialist press."*

(Bernart 2010: 51)

*"An exceptional find is an iron helmet with chain mail nape protection."*

(Turčan 2012: 20)

*"The most important part of the protective armour found in Bojná I fort is the helmet, supposedly discovered by amateurs in the centre of the fort in 1997 (Fig. 17: 1). The find was unfortunately sold to a private collection. The finder showed the site, where the helmet was found, handed a photo and two components – aventail fragments of bronze and iron rings (Fig. 17: 2). According to the photo, the helmet had a two-pieced dome connected with a center crest and a brim connected by extensive riveting. In the picture, one can see fragments of aventail of bronze rings in the back part of the brim. The closest analogies*

*represent two similarly designed examples from Prague-Stromovka (Hejdová 1964, Profantová 2011, 77)."*  
(Pieta 2015: 27–29)

### 3. Discovery – the unofficial version

In last three years, I have contacted a lot of people involved in the case. I myself had the chance to discover many discrepancies. For example, Mr. Pieta told me there is no find of the helmet at all in 2015, but he admitted the find in 2016, when he told me the find was discovered in 1999. According to him, the helmet was digged by an elderly, skinny man from Partizánské, who was travelling to Bojná by bus; the very same person is said to discover famous gold plaquettes, an iron kettle and a sword. My friend, archaeologist Miloš Bernart was told this version in 2008 as well, plus the information that the person was already dead at that time. In 2016, Pieta told me that the object was found in the centre of the fortress and archaeologists were able to get a picture of the helmet in situ; according to his words, the dome of the helmet was placed upside down in the hole, with the chainmail aventail placed inside the dome. In the same dialogue, Pieta asked me whether I could find more information about the fate of the helmet, using my contacts on the Internet. In his book, Pieta wrote that the helmet was found in 1997 by a known person that showed the place of the find and handed over the picture, while in his speech in 2017, he told the find was digged by an anonymous person in 1995. According to Pieta's colleague, docent Matej Ruttkay, the picture was found on the Internet (RTV television, July 2017).

As we can see, there are different variants and it is obvious some of them were not true. People cooperating with Pieta and other workers of SAV Nitra confirmed that two pictures of the helmet exist, made by the finder – the picture of the helmet standing on table and the picture of the discovery in situ. They also told me that the helmet was sold in an auction house near München – *Hermann Historica* comes to mind, but Dr. Robert Weis from the company denied the possibility ("*I am also pretty sure that it has never been offered to me or been part of one of our auctions.*"). A source from SAV Nitra indicated Pieta was in contact with the buyer and tried to buy the helmet, the price was too high however. He also pointed to the information that the finder was probably of the Czech origin. Another source revealed he was told the helmet was found "*in mud by a rivulet, where rings were found afterwards*". Given the fact there is no stream in the fortress, we have to ask what version is right and what is false information.

After I spoke with these sources, I contacted two archaeologists from SNM (*Slovak National Museum*) in Bratislava. They proposed a totally different version. In the second half of 1990s, there was a party of metal detectorists in the region of Horná Nitra in Slovakia. This party consisted mostly of older men (60+) who were looking for treasures in their free time. The party had own rules and promoted their own mythology of the creation of the Slovakian state. They were searching mainly in hills on both sides of the valley, since there were many hillforts dated to Great Moravian period. Sometimes, they had some problems with policemen and archaeologists, but they lied about the find place, about the finder and about the context. Generally speaking, they were saying that all their finds come from Bojná, as Bojná was known already for maybe 20 years, the site was renowned and they did not want to reveal their secret places. It was an honour to own any object from Bojná. That's why, according to sources from SNM Bratislava, less than 50% of objects signed as "Bojná" do not come from the place.

I was told that in that time we are speaking of, two detectorists (one from Piešťany/Partizánské, the second from Bratislava) found the helmet and took photos of the digging. The first of them, contacted by SAV Nitra, revealed the helmet came from Bojná. However, the second finder claimed it came from Vyšehrad, a Great Moravian hillfort that is located ca. 55 km far from Bojná. They both independently had the same photos and described the same details – the helmet laid in the ground, the dome was heading down and there was an aventail inside the

helmet. The fate of the helmet was such: for some time, it remained in the private collection of a man who was given the helmet by detectorists. It is not known whether it was a bargain, a gift or something different. The man was an owner of a building company in the Czech Republic, a car selling company and a brothel. The helmet was allegedly displayed in the brothel above an oven. Then it appeared in an auction in Germany. What happened then, nobody knows.

The mayor of Bojná thinks the helmet was found in his village. His points are legitimate – Bojná was a very important place and there are very rich finds, so the helmet would be logical. Locals confirmed that metal detectorists were visiting Bojná even before the Velvet Revolution. On the other hand, I do not trust the leading workers of SAV Nitra who lied to me. Sceptics among veteran reenactors and archaeologists expressed their fear that the helmet could be falsely placed to Bojná, because of local patriotism and (more importantly) gaining finances for further excavations. That is the reason why the theory about Vyšehrad should not be discarded.

#### **4. Bojná<sup>1</sup>**

Bojná (Topoľčany District; the name is related to Slavic *boj*, "fight, battle") is located on the strategic point between Váh and Nitra river basins, on the southeast foot of Považský Inovec. The pass near Bojná was guarded by a system of hillforts, consisting of Bojná I (Valy), Bojná II (Hradisko), Bojná III (Žihľavník) and Bojná IV (Nové Valy). The hillfort Bojná I was protected by massive walls as high as 6 meters with ditches and gates. In the 9th century, the hillfort was densely populated and belonged to one of largest Great Moravian agglomeration in what is now Slovakia.

Several workshops (mostly smithies) and thousands of artifacts were excavated at the site. Along with artisanal and agricultural tools, a large amount of weapons including typical battle axes, large knives, fragments of swords and seaxes were found. The presence of elite warriors can be documented by spurs, chain mail fragments, gold-plated parts of military equipment, gold-coated and silver-coated adornments and other luxury objects. The religious items belong to the oldest Christian articles in Slovakia. The most important findings are a bronze bell of Canino type, fragments of other three bells and six gold-coated plaquettes with angels and Christ dated to 780–820, many years before the mission of Saints Cyril and Methodius. Two short inscriptions in Latin alphabet are the oldest evidence of writing in the Slovakian history.

A large amount of weapons can be related to the violent destruction of the hillfort, probably by the old Hungarian troops. According to radiocarbon data and other dating methods, the hillfort could be used less intense in the 10th century, later settlement is not documented.

#### **5. Vyšehrad<sup>2</sup>**

Vyšehrad (Prievidza and Turčianske Teplice Districts; literally "upper castle") is located on the strategic point on the pass between Nitra Region and Turiec Region. The hillfort was used from prehistory to 15th century, but it gained the biggest fame during the Great Moravian period, when the fortress probably formed a border hillfort of the Great Moravian Empire and a place where taxes were collected. The area is not suitable for fields, so supplies had to be imported. Even though no building are detected from the period, walls, deep ditches and two gates are still visible. The most common finds are fragments of pottery, woodworking and agricultural tools and small pieces of military equipment. The hillfort was almost abandoned in 10th –11th century.

#### **6. The picture of the helmet and its description**

The picture below is the only published photo available at the moment. The quality of the photo suggests it was taken by an amateur, probably the finder (see Fig. 2). The original picture

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1 Turčan 2012: 18–21.

2 Turčan 2012: 80–83.

was edited and published by Pieta (2015: Obr. 17; see Fig. 3). The photo depicts only circa two fifths of the helmet (see Fig. 1). In the text below, we will try to describe the helmet more precisely, even though we are not able say anything about sizes and thicknesses. According to the sources, helmet was probably rather small.

The dome of the helmet consists of two parts, that are connected with a central crest that has two rows of small, evenly spaced rivets. At the picture, we can see circa 30 pairs of rivets, making the total amount circa 60–70 pairs. Rivets are placed by the edges of the central crest. The central crest is distinctive by its continuously tapering profile that is maybe more then 1 cm high. The dome is high and conical. My colleagues suggested that there could be lateral profiles in the middle of both halves of the dome, but this cannot be accepted nor refused.

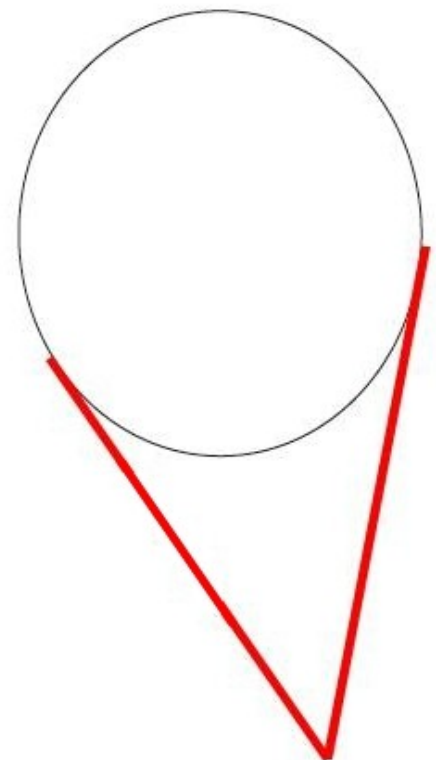
To such a tripartite dome, a brim is riveted. The brim probably consists of two plates that are riveted together on the rear side of the helmet. Again, small and evenly spaced rivets are used, applied at the edges of the brim. We can see some 40 rivets; the total number could be around 100. It is probable that 6 rivets go through the central crest that disappears under the brim. The same solution could have been used at the rear side as well.

At the face side of the helmet, there is a narrow T-shaped nasal riveted by five bigger rivets to the bottom side of the brim. The nasal is partially broken and bent inwards. The eyebrows are slightly tapering at the lower side. The nasal is slightly extended by its pointy end. The nasal seems to have a decent profile in the central part.

The rest of the bottom side of the brim is filled with the U-shaped aventail holder that is riveted by a row of small rivets. The holder fits tightly to the tapered ends of the nasal. The aventail holder is made of folded and pierced strip of metal. Inside the holder, a wire is placed from which rings can hang. Rings protruded from the rectangular slits in the holder. The holder is narrow and well riveted; rivets are placed between slits. At the picture, we can see 15 of them. The total number could be around 60–70. One more detail can be mentioned – the holder is not riveted vertically, but it copies the declivity of the dome and the brim.

Obviously, the great number of rivets is a significant feature of this helmet. My guess is that we can find 285–315 rivets on the helmet. The advanced design is one of the best that can be seen at Early Medieval helmets. Even though the helmet is not decorated, the production of such a helmet is really complicated and even modern armourers with their tools cannot fully replicate the final product. This gives evidence to how skilled the original masters were.

As stated above, there are chainmail fragments from Bojná that are interpreted as aventail or neck protection belonging to the helmet. Even though it is sure that the helmet had such an addition, we cannot be sure that the fragments truly belonged to the helmet. Miloš Bernart, who had the chance to study the fragments, told me that they vary in diameter. The fragments have been published by Bernart (2010: 73–74), Kouřil (2014: 330) and Pieta (2015: 27, Obr. 15:5, Obr. 17:2). Rings are said to be made of iron and "gold"/ "yellow metal" (Bernart), "brass" (Kouřil) or "bronze" (Pieta). Rings that are made of a non-ferrous metal form at least five rows, probably placed on the edge of the chainmail or the aventail. The same situation can be seen in case of the possible aventail of St. Wenzels helmet, chainmail fragments from Mikulčice, fragments from Birka and four finds from Old Russia. After discussing the rings with a professional chainmail maker, I can say that the rings are very carefully made and riveted, having the inner diameter around 7 mm and the thickness of wire some 1 mm. Rings connected to analogical helmets are smaller. The fragments appear to come from an excellent product.



**Fig. 1: The angle of the photo.**





**Fig. 2. The original version of the only available photo of the helmet.  
Gained from the source that is close to SAV Nitra.**





Fig. 3: Edited version of the photo with chainmail fragments. Source: *Pieta 2015*: Obr. 17.



## 7. Analogies

The depicted helmet is very well preserved. Although it is a detector find, it is highly probable it comes from a Great Moravian fortress, making the helmet the first example of Great Moravian helmets. The connection to Great Moravian period helps us to understand the other similar helmets, as well as the analogies offer the comparison to what we think about the Slovakian helmet.

Two helmets, one complete and one fragmented nasal, metal fragments and mail fragments were found in Stromovka – Královská obora in Prague, Czech Republic in 1938, allegedly by workers digging there (see Fig. 4). Objects were given to the National museum. The contexts is not known and the literature dates them to the period between 7th to 12th century. They are in rather bad condition, the metal "is peeling like an onion". Archaeologist Miloš Bernart wanted to put the helmets to some tests and X-ray, but he was not given the permission. The objects were published by Hejdová in 1964. Interestingly enough, they separated afterwards and Bernart was first to realize the one is missing. While the second helmet from Stromovka was exhibited in the museum, the first one was discovered in a wardrobe, where it probably stayed for decades. They were gathered together and from that period, they are both located in Terezín depository. Hejdová stated that every second rivet of these helmets is false and solely decorative. However, detailed examination showed this is not true, as she probably misinterpreted the rusted heads of rivets.

The first helmet from Stromovka, Prague (known under inventory sign H2 60.752 or depository sign 1146) remains in such a bad state it needs a metal matrix as a support. The helmet is 16 cm high, 22.7 cm long and 17 cm wide (*Hejdová 1964*: 49–51). According to Bernart, the current circumference is 58 cm. Rivets are spaced roughly 1 cm from each other. The central crest is not profiled. A fragment – an arm of a nasal – can belong to the helmet (*Hejdová 1964*: 51).

The second helmet from Stromovka, Prague, is slightly different. As the dome is high and the central crest is profiled, this helmet strongly resembles the helmet from Bojná. It is 19.5 cm high, 21.5 cm long and 15 cm wide (*Hejdová 1964*: 51). The width of the crest is 2.5 cm, the width of the brim is 5.2 cm (the brim overlaps the dome by ca. 1 cm), the width of the aventail holder is 1.4 cm. Rings that form the aventail have outer diameter of ca. 7 mm (inner diameter 4.5–5 mm). The circumference of the helmet is 56 cm, according to Bernart. A tapering nasal belongs to the helmet (inventory sign H2 60.754, depository number 1149). It has sizes of 18.5 × 7.9 cm and was riveted with 5 rivets.

The third analogy is the helmet from Gnezdovo, Russia (see Fig. 5). So-called "Gnezdovo I" was found in the mound nr. 86 (18) in 1901, together with a chainmail, a sword, a long knife and a spear (*Sizov 1902*: 97–100; *Kirpichnikov 1971*: 21). Dated to the second quarter of the 10th century, the helmet is deposited in GIM (*The State Historical Museum*), Moscow. The helmet is conical and the crest is similarly profiled as crests of the second helmet from Stromovka and the helmet from Bojná. Modern reconstructed look is not so well made, but the older drawings and photos of the helmet show it was similar to Stromovka II helmet. There is, however, one interesting feature – both halves of the dome have small lateral profiles. The helmet is 18 cm high. The diameter of the basis is 22 cm, the width of the crest is ca. 3.5 cm, the width of the lower rim is 4.5 cm, the thickness of the metal sheet is up to ca. 1.5 mm (rather 1.1–1.3 mm, according to Sergey Kainov). Aventail rings have the outer diameter of 6 mm (inner diameter 4 mm, wire 1 mm thick). The total circumference of the helmet is 64 cm.

To sum up, we have 4 examples of very uniform and technologically well made helmets in the Central and Eastern Europe. Two of them are stray finds, one of them comes from a grave and the last one was found in a fort. The dating could be set to the end of the 9th and the beginning of the 10th century. They could be ancestors of conical single-pieced nasal helmets. Helmets help us to understand how the period trade worked and what kind of gear the elites wore during the centralisation of the states in mentioned countries.

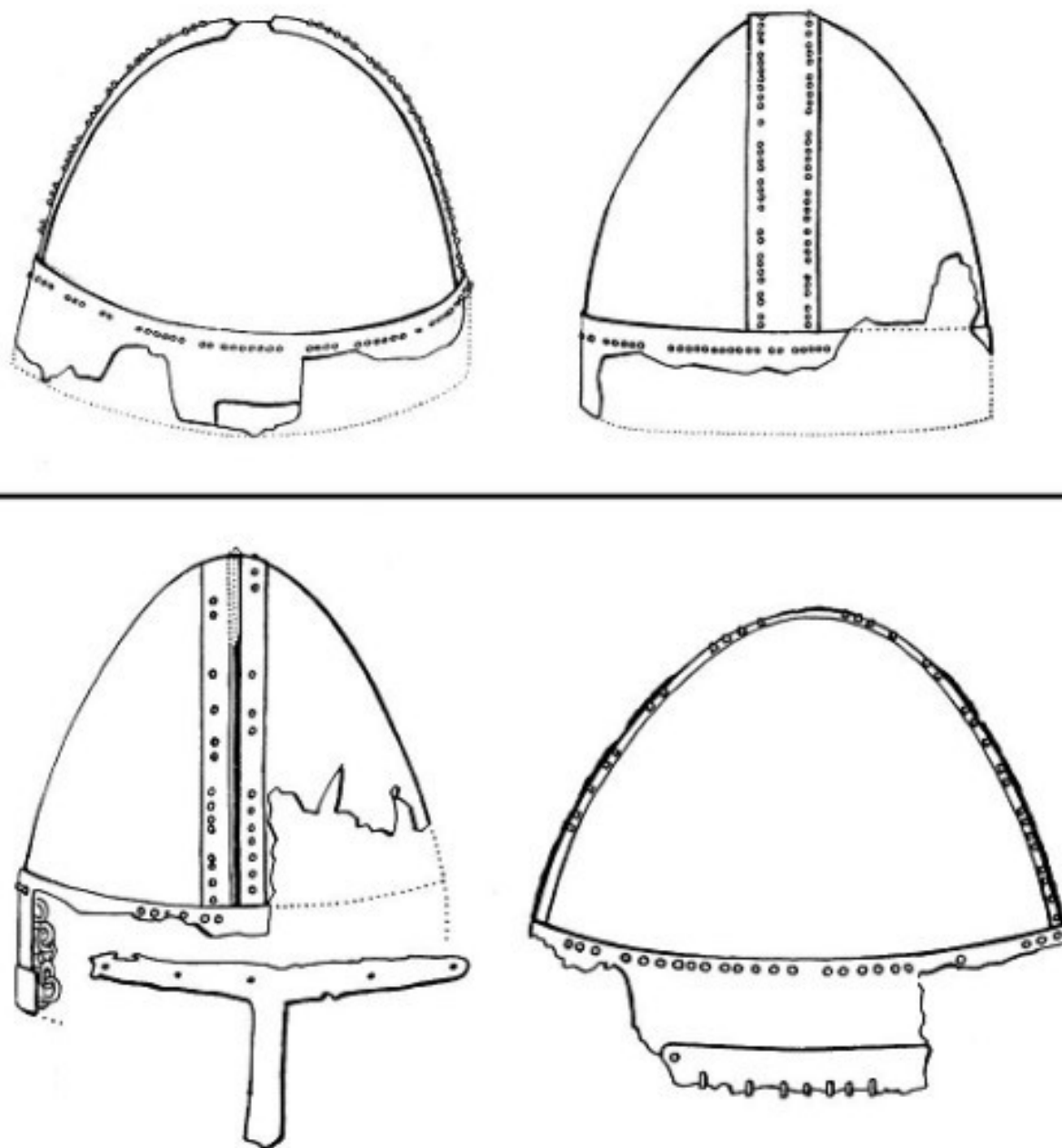


Fig. 4: Both helmets from Stromovka, Prague, Czech Republic. Source: *Hejdová 1964*.



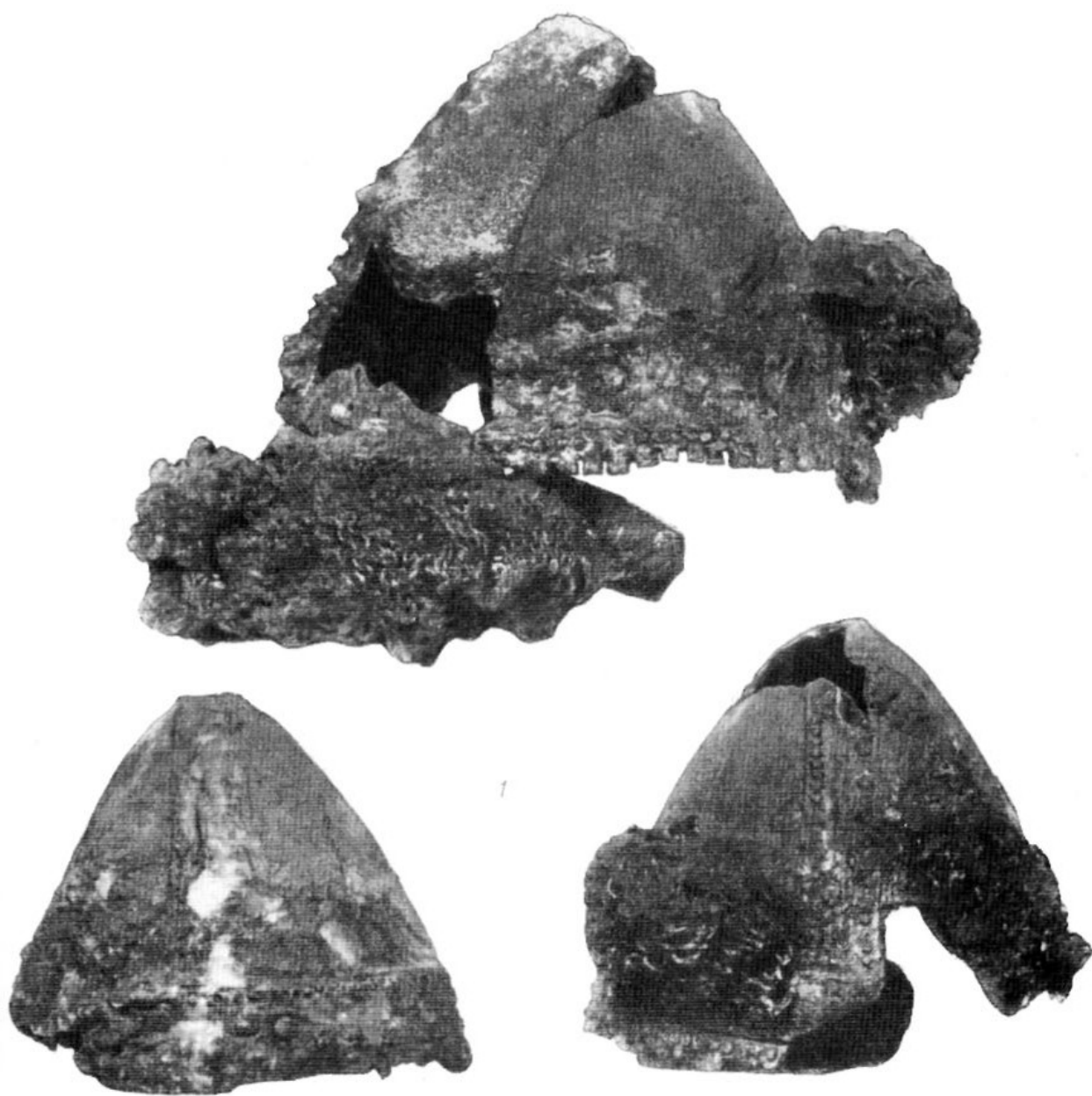


Fig. 5: The helmet from Gnezdovo, Russia. Source: *Kirpichnikov 1971: Tab. X:1.*

## 8. Publication and reaction

The work on this project was breathtaking. Generally speaking, this was a rare example of international cooperation and demonstration of how influential can reenactment be. In the beginning, me and my colleagues knew literally nothing and we did not have the access to the picture. As soon as the picture was available, we started the discussion what we can actually see. Some drawings and 3D models were made and published during this phase.<sup>3</sup>

As the helmet gained some popularity, reenactors started to replicate the helmet. Nowadays, the helmet is probably the most frequent type that can be seen at Great Moravian reenactment events in Czechoslovakia. I also started a crowdfunding project that collected some finances from 7 contributors coming from 5 countries.<sup>4</sup> A replica of the helmet was ordered and given to the Great Moravian museum in Bojná, where it is exhibited to the present day. During the symbolical handover in early September 2016, a video with an interview was recorded and some pictures of the replica were taken (see Fig. 7).<sup>5</sup> Thanks to his contacts, the mayor of Bojná was able to promote the information about the interesting find in printed and online newspapers.<sup>6</sup> That has drawn attention of the public; some articles were shared more than 100× times. The helmet was officially published by Mr. Pieta in late September 2016, but the book had rather limited impact to reenactment community and the public.

Current Early Medieval reenactors are well aware of the helmet – let's name few examples. Slovakian enthusiasts uploaded the photo and reconstructions to Pinterest. Swedish reenactors included the helmet to their costume rules. Russian reenactors proved to be very interested in the helmet. One of the best version of the helmet from Bojná was created by a reenactor from Chile. In February 2017, the story of the helmet was presented at FVS (Early Medieval Forum) in Bratislava. The presentation was spoken in front of more than 25 people (scholars and reenactors) from 4 countries. In summer 2017, Mr. Pieta presented the replica I gave to the museum to public during the official launch of his book, resulting in a weird tension that remains until this day.



**Fig. 6. The author admiring the beauty of helmet from Gnezdovo, Russia. GIM, Moscow.**

3 I am very indebted to Jakub Zbránek, who made nice reconstructions ([here](#), [here](#), [here](#)), as well as to Tomáš Cajthaml for a schematic graph ([here](#)).

4 Michal Bazovský, Ondrej Godál, Sergey Kainov, Oleg Kozlenko, Peter Raftos, Johan Sandmark, Philipp Scheide.

5 The video can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqGqtOmyVGQ>.

6 Sme (September 2016), Nový Čas (September 2016), Nový Čas (October 2016), Sme (July 2017).



**Fig. 7: The mayor of Bojná receives the replica of the helmet.**

## 9. Acknowledgements

I would like to express my thanks to all people who helped. First and foremost, my mentors and friends Sergey Kainov and Miloš Bernart have to be named, as the project would have not existed without their knowledge. Secondly, I would like to express my thanks to reenactors Michal Bazovský, Radomír Jelínek, Roman Král, Peter Kocúr and Lukáš Šprlák. My special words of thanks go to Jozef Stankovský, the mayor of Bojná. Jakub Zbránek and Tomáš Cajthaml deserve my eternal praise for their graphic skills, as well as all the contributors to the crowdfunding project. Thank you!

## 10. Literature

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