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A LATE MEDIEVAL HAMMER AXE FROM L'VIV

Abstract:

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The article discusses an iron hammer axe, which was found inside a medieval well shaft during the excavations at Fedorova St. 23 in L'viv. Similar weapons can be found in the territory of Poland and they are referred to as Type Ig according to the classification by M. Głosek. The cultural context of the discovered artefact dates back to the 15th early 16th century.

Keywords: hammer axe, Late Middle Ages, L'viv, well shaft.

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Finds of weaponry are rare discoveries during archaeological excavations in L'viv (Western Ukraine). The most common are arrowheads, horse tack and equestrian equipment (Miljan et al. 2011, 110-111). Other finds of weaponry were discovered sporadically and in limited quantities. This also applies to blunt weapons and axes. It should be noted that previous archaeological studies in L'viv revealed just a single axe which had a clear military purpose.¹ In this regard any newly found piece of this category causes particular scholarly attraction. Among such exceptional discoveries an axe has recently been unearthed during the archaeological excavations in the plot near Fedorova Street 23 (Fig. 1) in 2018.² The axe is provided with a small hammer on its back so this find should be considered a hammer axe.

The artefact was found inside a wooden well shaft (Feature 29). This structure was made of wooden beams connected to each other with the help of corner joints. The well shaft has a size of 2 × 2 m and reaches the depth of 7.2 m (Fig. 2). Cribbing covered the upper part of the shaft walls to the depth of 3.8 m. In total, there are 19 layers of wooden beams which are 8-10 cm thick and 20 cm wide. The deepest part of the well was cut in limestone clay. Its shaft had a minor tilt and the bottom was thoroughly levelled. The shaft's frame system consisted of vertical pillars in four corners and horizontal crisscross ridgepoles. The original purpose of the well was to supply water, though in the late 15th century it was converted into a garbage pit and in the first half of the 16th century it was completely filled up.³ The hammer axe was found

¹ A battle axe was discovered in 2015 during the excavations in Shevska St. It was found inside a well shaft of the 15th-16th centuries (Feature 4) (Wojcieszczuk 2016, 22; Lazurko, Vojtovich, Shnicar 2016, 43).

² These excavations were conducted by the expedition of the Scientific Research Centre "Rescue Archaeological Service" of the Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine under the author's guidance. The plot was previously part of the Jewish quarter in the centre of L'viv. It is worth mentioning that a substantial amount of weaponry was discovered exactly in this part of the city. Apart from the hammer axe, in the last year we also found another battle axe, a piece of mail together with some torn rings, and a spur. Archaeological excavations of previous years provided several arrowheads. Such a relative surplus of military finds is due to the vicinity (some dozen meters) of this parcel to the municipal arsenal and to the town walls.

³ The chronology of the well shaft was established on the basis of the analysis of pottery and a coin hoard discovered on the bottom of the well. Various types of pottery in different layers indicate a lengthy period during which the shaft was filled up.



Fig. 1. Site of the archaeological excavations in the plan of the centre of L'viv. *Elaborated by M. Shnicar.*

Ryc. 1. Miejsce badań archeologicznych na planie śródmieścia Lwowa. *Oprac. M. Shnicar.*

on the depth of 2.6 m among layers of limestone clay which played the role of so-called “sanitation” covering on the level of 2.5-3.0 m (Fig. 3). This layer in fact separated cultural sediments of 15th and 16th centuries. Since the structure partially served as a trash dump there is a considerable chance that the hammer axe was thrown inside intentionally. Reasons for such a decision are unknown. As there are no visible defects on the axe itself the only reasonable explanation could be the uselessness of such a weaponry type in the 16th century.

The iron hammer axe (Fig. 4) has a bearded blade and a short back hammer of hexagonal cross-section (a rectangular prism whose two panes adjacent to the socket were faceted). The hammer’s peen is covered with a grid of intersecting notches over the whole surface. The blade is asymmetrical with right-sided sharpening. The axe’s shaft-hole is made as a socket with six

facets, and its upper cap has a nail hole meant for better shaft fixing. The right lug of the socket was engraved with just partially preserved ornaments – repeating Y-shape stamps, arcs, and tripled punctures. Between the socket and the neck of the blade there is a decorative inlaid strip of non-ferrous metal. Duplex blacksmith’s marks with escutcheons were placed beneath this strip. Unfortunately, only one of the marks is fully legible – a star and a crescent with some punctures. Another one retained just the outlines of the escutcheon. On the heel of the axe’s bearded blade three jagged rings and a crescent are punched. The beard’s butt under the heel is provided with three shallow gouges. The central part of the blade is ornamented with a cross-shaped mortise whose arms are made of three-leaf clover.

The hammer axe weight is 1128 g and its length is 21.5 cm. Other dimensions are: blade’s width – 14 cm, length of the socket – 12.0 cm, inner

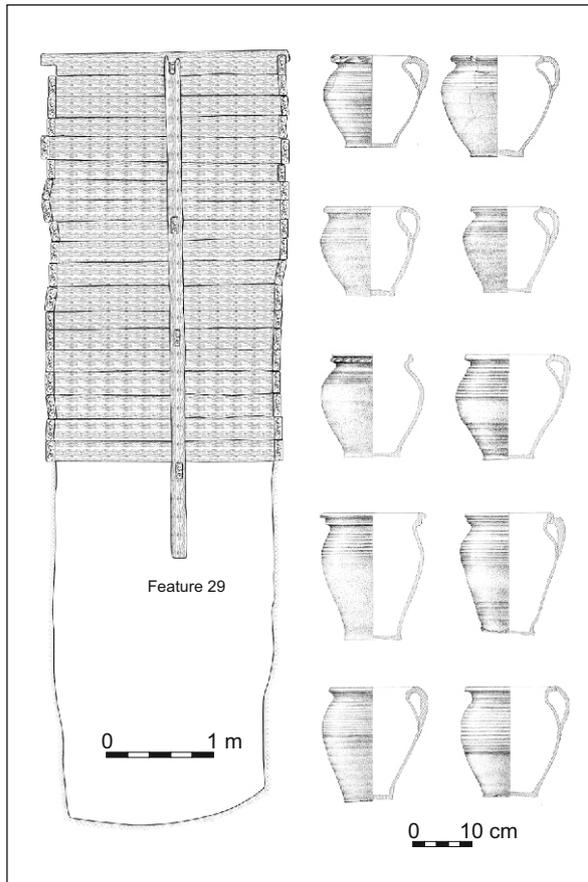


Fig. 2. Well shaft and the pottery found inside. *Drawing by M. Shnicar and I. Prynada.*

Ryc. 2. Drewniana studnia i znalezionej w niej materiał ceramiczny. Ryc. M. Shnicar i I. Prynada.



Fig. 3. Well shaft at the level where the hammer axe was discovered. *Photo by M. Shnicar.*

Ryc. 3. Szyb studni na poziomie odkrycia czekana. Fot. M. Shnicar.

size of the hole – 2.8×3.8 cm, height of the hammer – 0.7 cm. The artefact is preserved in a more or less good condition with some minor corrosion blemishes on the right side, between the socket and the neck of the blade. Regrettably, the same spot encompasses the ornaments, the non-ferrous metal strip, and the duplex blacksmith's mark.

A majority of analogous weapons were found in the territory of present-day Poland, though many other similar axes are known from other countries of Central Europe (Głosek 1996, 30). A distinctive feature shared with the most of existing analogies is the cross-shaped mortise in the central part of the blade. Similar mortises were a quite common element on late medieval axes. According to M. Głosek, their function was to enable the suspension of the axe on the wall or at the belt. The mortise could have also been used as a nail drawer (*ibidem*, 31). Such an interpretation was opposed by L. Marek who considered these mortises an element of Christian symbolic

decoration (Marek 2004, 52). He denied any practical use of this element because of its complex and inconvenient form. As an additional argument, this author gives examples of the same adornments placed on swords and halberds. A battle axe which was found in 2015 during excavations in L'viv is also provided with this distinguishing element. However, as recently noted A. Michalak, we couldn't exclude the much easier feature of such holes. They could be also a nail drawer element, which is convincingly supported by ethnographic sources (Michalak 2019, 166).

In spatial terms, the closest analogies were discovered in Radymno, Podkarpackie Voivodeship and Swarzędów, Lubelskie Voivodeship (Poland) (Głosek 1996, 30, kat. 9, tabl. VII:E, XXXIII:C; Kuśnierz 2010, 221-222, ryc. 9-10). Hammer axes are grouped as Type Ig according to the classification by Marian Głosek (1996, 30). The L'viv hammer axe is almost identical in form and size to other known samples, with a reservation that the height of the hammer head is lower than that

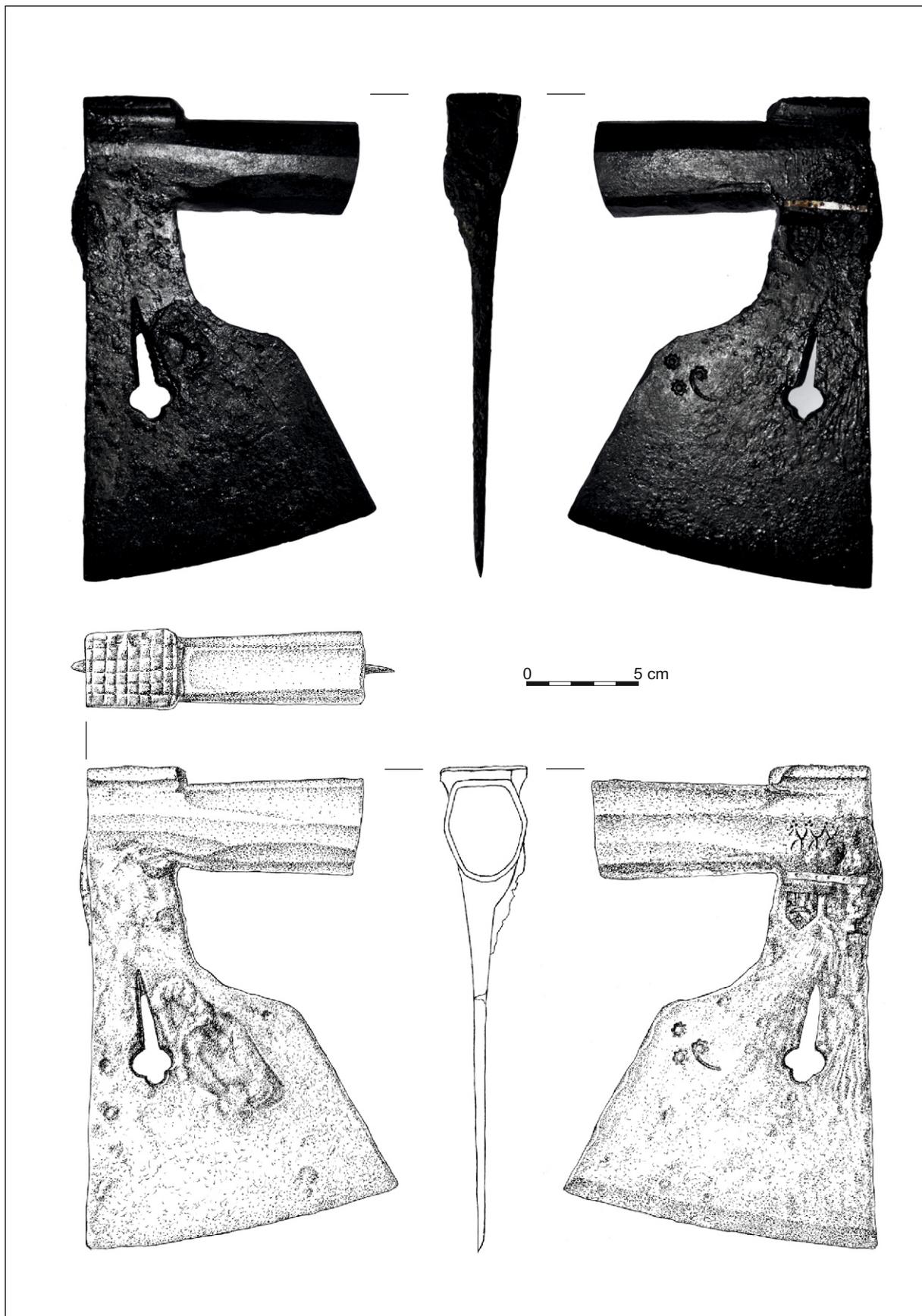


Fig. 4. Hammeraxe head. Photo by M. Shnicar; drawing by I. Prynada.

Ryc. 4. Żelężce czekana. Fot. M. Shnicar; ryc. I. Prynada.

of other known finds. Apart from a metrical proximity and a shape resemblance, weapons of this type have additional similar features, like the cross-shaped mortise, the non-ferrous metal strip and the duplex blacksmith's mark. Blacksmith's marks on medieval weapons are usually preserved in poor condition making it impossible to establish their comparative classification. On our hammer axe just the right part of the duplex mark has been verified. The lower part of the escutcheon contains images of the star and the crescent. Such components are not known on any marks from discovered finds, though the image composition itself is similar to some blacksmith's marks on hammer axes, like the artefact from Swaryczów which is provided with an image of the cross instead of the star inside the escutcheon (Kuśnierz 2010, ryc. 10). Likewise the ornaments on the heel of the axe's bearded blade share the same motifs with the hammer axe from Radymno (Głosek 1996, tabl. VII:E, XXXIII:C).

Both important and unclear is the question of the function of hammer axes. Usually, arms and armour researchers consider all types of axes as a kind of weapon because most of them could be equally efficient as a weapon and as a craftsman's tool. This fact is confirmed by many iconographic images which depict the same forms of axes in the hands of warriors and artisans alike (Marek 2008, 135). Even such axes which were originally intended for purely economic activities like woodcutting or carpentry, could become militia's weapons in time of need. In this respect, the axes and hammers constituted the main portion of the burghers' arsenal as armament of infantry troops. Much less commonly they became a chosen weapon of knights (Marek 2004, 42).

The discussed artefact has traits which are conventional of both weapons and working tools. Particularly interesting is the one-sided sharpening of the blade, which is the most characteristic trait of carpentry tools. According to J. Kuśnierz, the asymmetry of the blade not only facilitates crafting function, but also improves fighting qualities of battle axes. He assumes that asymmetrical

sharpening could have been adjusted to the fighting style (right-handed and left-handed), as in this case the axe's blade is less likely to slide down and ricochet when struck against the enemy's armour (Kuśnierz 2010, 222).

Rich adornments and non-ferrous metal inlays could be seen as special traits of the discovered hammer axe. Exactly this technique of non-ferrous metal incrustation is considered by arms and armour researchers, M. Głosek for instance, a distinctive trait of weapons, as in the case of crafting instruments this inlay would quickly fall out in the process of use (Głosek 1997, 163). Therefore, considering our previous statements, our find of the hammer axe should rather be classified as a weapon than an artisan's tool.

A chronological assessment of such kind of weapon is also complicated, as most of the discovered finds do not have well-defined archaeological contexts. Analogous hammer axes are generally dated back to the 15th century, though their early forms may have originated in the 14th, and later examples may have been in use during the 16th century. As for the hammer axe from L'viv, its documented discovery in a compact archaeological assemblage essentially supplements the chronology of such a weaponry type. Our artefact was unearthed in the sediments under the layer which is dated to the early 16th century on the basis of the analysis of the pottery. This fact supports the dating of this hammer axe back to the 15th century. It also demonstrates the loss of functional usefulness of such a weaponry type in the early 16th century, though some individual artefacts could have still been used during this period.

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PÓŻNOŚREDNIOWIECZNY CZEKAN ZE LWOWA

Streszczenie

Podczas archeologicznych badań ratowniczych prowadzonych w 2018 r. w obrębie dzielnicy żydowskiej średniowiecznego Lwowa odkryte zostało żeleźce czekana. Zabytek wystąpił w nawarstwieniach drewnianej studni, która od połowy XV w. wykorzystywana była jako dół śmietnikowy. Przedmiot ten wydobyto z głębokości 2,6 m, z warstwy margła, datowanej na przełom XV i XVI w.

Najbliższymi analogiami do omawianego żeleźca czekana są okazy z terenu Polski, zaliczane do

typu Ig w typologii M. Głoska. Ten typ czekanów znany jest również z innych terenów Europy Centralnej. Egzemplarz ze Lwowa charakteryzuje się asymetrycznym ostrzem i stosunkowo bogatym zdobnictwem. Połączenie tych cech nieco utrudnia interpretację funkcjonalną. Kontekst znaleziska świadczy, iż znalezisko było w użyciu w XV wieku. Możliwe, że czekany takie wykorzystywane były również w XVI stuleciu.