

Evidence for hawking in early Medieval Czechia

Doklady sokolnictví v raně středověkém Česku

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ABSTRACT. Archaeological and historical evidence for hawking in early Medieval Czechia was assembled. The data indicate that hawking was known in this period in both Bohemia and Moravia, that it was associated with nobility, but that it was probably not practiced in all strongholds. Raptor species most frequently used for hawking were Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*) and Common Buzzard (*Buteo buteo*).

INTRODUCTION

Hawking or falconry, also called „ars venandi cum avibus“ (FREDERICK II. ca. 1245), has been evidenced in Europe from the 3rd or 4th century AD onwards (EPSTEIN 1944, LINDNER 1976, MÜLLER 1993, PRUMMEL 1997). It is still a matter of debate, however, how widespread was its knowledge, whether its practice was limited to certain social groups and which bird species were used. In the present paper I summarized main evidence on the hawking in the early Middle Ages, relevant to the territory of the present-day Czech Republic. Three types of evidence are recognized here: (1) raptor bones excavated at early Medieval human sites, (2) artifacts illustrating raptors and/or falconers, and (3) literary reports.

For the information on archaeological sites see LUTOVSKÝ (2002), references cited therein, and references cited in KYSELÝ (2000) and MLÍKOVSKÝ (2003, 2004a,b).

OSTEOLOGICAL RECORD

Several archaeological sites yielded samples of avian bones, which included bones of raptors. They are listed below.

(1) Mikulčice - „Valy“: stronghold in southeastern Moravia (48°49' N, 17°03' E). Bones originated mostly from the 8th and 9th centuries. Overall, 64 bones of wild birds were identified (MLÍKOVSKÝ 2003), of which 14 bones (21.9%) belonged to raptors, incl. *Accipiter gentilis* (two bones), *Buteo buteo* (two bones), *Buteo rufinus* (two bones), *Buteo lagopus* (one bone), and *Falco peregrinus* (6 bones). Remaining bones belonged mostly to a variety of small-sized birds, incl. ducks (*Anas* spp.), gamefowl (*Bonasa bonasia*, *Tetrao tetrix*, *Perdix perdix*, *Coturnix coturnix*), pigeons (*Columba* spp.), and corvids (*Garrulus glandarius*, *Corvus* spp.). All of them could be prey of raptors.

(2) Rubín: stronghold in western Bohemia (50°05' N, 13°08' E). Bones of wild birds were found in deposits from the 7th-12th centuries, but most were probably deposited in the 9th century. Overall, eight bones of wild birds were identified (KYSELÝ 2000), of which two (25.0%) belonged to raptors, particularly to *Buteo buteo*.

(3) Stará Boleslav: Přemyslid stronghold in Central Bohemia (50°11' N, 14°40' E). Bones of wild birds were limited almost exclusively to the acropolis and to the early phase of the stronghold development (10th-11th centuries). In sum, 24 bones of wild birds were identified from that period (MLÍKOVSKÝ 2004a, see also MLÍKOVSKÝ 2004b), of which eight (33.3%) belonged to raptors, incl. *Falco tinnunculus* (6 bones), *Accipiter nisus* (one bone), and *Buteo buteo* (one bone). Most of the remaining bones of wild birds belonged to small birds, such as ducks (*Anas* spp.), gamefowl (*Perdix perdix*, *Coturnix coturnix*), pigeons (*Columba* sp.) and crows (*Corvus corone*). These birds are suitable as a prey of raptors.

(4) Budeč 1: Přemyslid stronghold in Central Bohemia (50°12' N, 14°15' E). Bones were collected in acropolis and originated mostly from the 10th-12th centuries. Overall, 68 bones of wild birds were identified (PEŠKE 1985), of which 21 bones (30.9%) belonged to raptors, incl. *Accipiter gentilis* (14 bones), *Accipiter nisus* (three bones), *Falco peregrinus* or *F. cherrug* (one bone). The remaining assemblage of avian bones was dominated by those of *Perdix perdix* (32 bones), which could be prey of these raptors. PEŠKE (1993: 55) mentioned - without any details - also *Falco subbuteo* from this locality. This record is not considered in the following text.

(5) Hradsko: stronghold in Central Bohemia (50°27' N, 14°38' E). Bones originated mostly from the period from 11th-12th centuries. Only six bones of wild birds were identified, of which one (16.7%) belonged to *Accipiter gentilis* (PEŠKE 1985). Non-raptor bones belonged mainly to small-sized gamefowl, incl. *Perdix perdix*, *Tetrao tetrix* and *Bonasa bonasia*.

The presence of raptor bones in archeological sites does not automatically mean, that the raptors were used for hawking (PRUMMEL 1997, CHERRYSON 2002). However, high proportion of raptor bones among bones of wild birds and the presence of bones of suitable prey species found in the localities listed above indicate, that the osteological record listed above can be accepted as evidence for hawking (cf. PRUMMEL 1997, CHERRYSON 2002).

ARTEFACTS

A silver plaque with a motif of a rider with a medium large bird on his hand was discovered in 1955 in a grave in the Great Moravian cemetery „Špitálky“ at Staré Město near Uherské Hradiště (POULÍK 1955, BENDA 1963, ŠILHOVÁ 2003). The motif was interpreted as that of a falconer (BENDA 1963, KLANICA 1991, BERANOVÁ 1992, GALUŠKA 2000), but the bird was re-identified as a parrot (MLÍKOVSKÝ 2000, in press).

Another silver plaque with a motif of a large mammal, probably a deer, with a medium large bird sitting on its back, was found in a burial mount at Želénky near Teplice (see BENDA 1963). It originated in the 9th century and the motif has been traditionally interpreted as a hunting scene with a raptor (BENDA 1963, BERANOVÁ 1992). Unfortunately, the bird is not identifiable even at the family level (MLÍKOVSKÝ, unpub. results).

I am not aware of any other relevant artifact. Hence, no artifacts seem to be available as a support for hawking in early Medieval Czechia.

LITERARY SOURCES

The only relevant report known to me is a brief comment in the Annals of Fulda, written in the early Middle Ages. The Annals reported that Moravian king Svatopluk (†894) went hunting with „falcons“ in 870 (see RATKOŠ 1964: 100, BERANOVÁ 1992: 137).

Although the identity of the birds cannot be deciphered from the text, there is no reason why to doubt that it referred to falconry.

DISTRIBUTION OF HAWKING

Hawking was certainly known both in Great Moravia and in Czech tribal domains, incl. the Přemyslid one, in the early Middle Ages. However, it seems that the knowledge was not ubiquitous for the following two reasons:

First: All records are limited to important strongholds, which indicates, that the practice of falconry was associated with nobility. Unfortunately, this conclusion is weakened by the fact that samples of avian bones from early Medieval towns and villages are insufficient for positive confirmation, that falconry was unknown or at least not practiced by social groups, which inhabited these types of human settlements. Nonetheless, raptor bones were found almost exclusively in the acropolis of Stará Boleslav in the period studied, while they were almost missing in bone samples from the outer bailey (MLÍKOVSKÝ 2003), which makes it probable that falconry was associated with nobility at least in the Přemyslid domain. In spite of this hint, more data are needed to achieve a clear answer to this question.

Second: No raptor bones were found in Břeclav - „Pohansko“ among 48 identified bones of wild birds (KRATOCHVÍL 1968). Considering the fact, that raptor bones represented ca. ¼ of all wild birds bones in the sites cited above, it is probable, that raptors were not kept in captivity in this locality.

SPECIES USED FOR HAWKING

The following raptor species were recorded from the early Medieval sites listed above (in decreasing order of importance): *Accipiter gentiles* (17 bones from three localities), *Buteo buteo* (six bones from three localities), *Falco peregrinus/cherrug* (seven bones from two localities; of which six bones from one locality belonged to *Falco peregrinus*), *Accipiter nisus* (four bones from two localities), *Falco tinnunculus* (six bones from one locality), *Buteo rufinus* (one bone from one locality), and *Buteo lagopus* (one bone from one locality).

It is not surprising, that *Accipiter gentilis* was among the most frequently used raptor species. On the other hand, *Buteo buteo* is usually not considered suitable for hawking. Nevertheless, bones of *Buteo buteo* were frequently found in early Medieval Czechia (this paper), England (DOBNEY & JACQUES 2002), and the Baltic area (HEINRICH 1997). However, no bones of this species were found in graves in early Medieval Sweden (STEN & VRETEMARK 1988, TYRBERG 2002). It is thus probable, that *Buteo buteo* was frequently used for hawking in some parts of early Medieval Europe (see also DOBNEY & JACQUES 2002: 15), but not in other ones.

SOUHRN

Sokolnictví je v Evropě známé alespoň od 3.-4. tisíciletí n. l. Doposud však není přesně známo, jak bylo rozšířeno a které druhy dravců se k sokolnictví používaly. Archeologické a historické doklady svědčí o tom, že sokolnictví bylo v raném středověku známé i na území dnešního Česka, a to nejpozději od 9. století. Sokolnictvím se tu pravděpodobně zabývaly jen vyšší společenské vrstvy, a to zřejmě jen na některých hradech. K sokolnickým účelům byli nejčastěji používáni jestřáb lesní (*Accipiter gentilis*) a káně lesní (*Buteo buteo*).

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