



Vestnik **XXVII**

SLOVANI, NAŠA DEDIŠČINA

Uredili Judita Lux, Benjamin Štular in Katharina Zanier

OUR HERITAGE: THE SLAVS

Edited by Judita Lux, Benjamin Štular and Katharina Zanier

OUR HERITAGE:
WHERE THE PAST
MEETS THE FUTURE

2018
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Zavod za varstvo
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Early Medieval Hillfort in Divinka, Northwestern Slovakia¹

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Abstract: A hillfort with an area of 12 ha is situated on the top and slopes of the high hill called Veľký vrch with relative elevation of 200 m above the river Váh. Individual functional parts of the hillfort (acropolis, peak area and suburbium) are separated by ramparts. The oldest written source concerning the locality is from the first half of the 18th century, and first detailed description is from the second half of the 19th century. Small archaeological excavations in this area were made at the beginning of the 1970s and proved the settlement of the Lusatian culture from the late Bronze Age, of the Púchov culture from the late La Tène period, as well as of Early Medieval times from the Great Moravian period. In the last four decades the hillfort was intensively looted by amateurs using metal detectors. The subject of this paper is the recent excavations and finds from the Early Medieval period.

Key words: NW Slovakia, hillfort, Great Moravian period.

Zgodnjesrednjeveško gradišče v Divinki na severozahodnem Slovaškem¹

Izvelek: Gradišče s površino 12 hektarov leži na vrhu in pobočjih hriba, imenovanega Veľký vrch, ki se dviga 200 metrov nad reko Váh. Posamezne funkcionalne dele gradišča (akropola, zgornje mesto in spodnje mesto) ločujejo obrambni zidovi. Najstarejši pisni vir o tej lokaciji je iz prve polovice 18. stoletja, prvi podrobnejši opis pa iz druge polovice 19. stoletja. Manjša arheološka izkopavanja na tem območju so potekala na začetku sedemdesetih let 20. stoletja in so dokazala naseljenost lužiške kulture iz pozne bronaste dobe, puchovske kulture iz poznega latenskega obdobja in zgodnjesrednjeveške kulture iz velikomoravskega obdobja. V zadnjih štirih desetletjih so gradišče močno izropali nestrokovnjaki z uporabo detektorjev kovin. Tema tega prispevka so nedavna izkopavanja in najdbe iz obdobja zgodnjega srednjega veka.

Ključne besede: severozahodna Slovaška, gradišče, velikomoravsko obdobje

¹ To delo je podprla Slovaška raziskovalna in razvojna agencija skladno s pogodbo št. APVV-15-0330.

A large hillfort in Divinka is situated on a hill called Veľký vrch (Eng. Big Hill), 200 m above the Váh river valley in the mountainous environment of north-western Slovakia (Figure 1). Its ramparts were clearly visible on the bare hill in the past (Figure 2). Today, the hill is covered by a thick forest (Figure 3). The hillfort is almost unknown to the international archaeological community, and is therefore described in this paper as a whole, while current knowledge on its early medieval Slavic settlement is also presented.

The first, although unclear mention of the hillfort occurs as early as the first half of the 18th century, when Matthias Bel wrote about a pile of stones on the hill: "*Olim arce etiam insidebatur, altissimo vertici, supra Divinkam, instructa, cuius tamen hodie, preter inane rudus, nihil superat*" (Bel 2011, 171). One and a half centuries later, Alexander Lombardini published the first description of ramparts on Veľký vrch and mentioned the find of an iron spear and golden wire from the 1820s (Lombardini 1885, 526–527).

Anton Petrovský-Šichman was the first archaeologist to deal with Veľký vrch systematically. In his articles, he used the knowledge

that he had obtained from a surface survey in the 1940s and 1950s. He published a map of the hillfort, and by the pottery shards he found, dated its beginnings to the Hallstatt phase of the Lusatian culture. Its renovation falls in the period of the Púchov culture, and it was also used in the early Middle Ages (Petrovský-Šichman 1957; Petrovský-Šichman 1960). Rescue excavations were carried out on the settlement's acropolis in 1972–1973 because the opening of a quarry was considered there, which in the end did not take place. A complicated stratigraphic picture was uncovered: the lowest horizon is represented by finds of the Lusatian culture from the 9th–8th century BC. The most intense settlement is documented by settlement layers and finds from the 1st century BC belonging to the La Tène phase of the Púchov culture; this disappeared in the early Roman Period. The latest, early medieval settlement was then documented by the find of a spur and a wide decorated metal sheet ring from the Great Moravian period (Moravčík 1978; Moravčík 1980, 19, 30–31). Since the 1980s, the hillfort has been the centre of attention for looters with metal detectors. Three early medieval hoards came to museums from such illegal activities. One of them was acquired

¹ This work was supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency under contract No. APVV-15-0330.

by the Archaeological Museum of the Slovak National Museum in Bratislava in 1997, however, no details of its find context are known (Turčan 2012, 25–26, pl. LXIX). Two other hoards are in the collections of the museum in Žilina today. One of them, reportedly discovered in the spring of 2010, has not been located more precisely within the hillfort (Majerčíková 2013). The second one, from 1993, was obtained from the finder in 2016 (Figure 4). He had found it in the peak area of the hillfort. An extensive collection of various farming and crafting tools thus came into the hands of experts. From the cultural-chronological aspect, six Silesian bowls found in Divinka hillfort must be emphasized.

Systematic excavations have been carried out by a team consisting of employees of the Institute of Archaeology of the SAS in Nitra and Považské Museum in Žilina at Veľký vrch since 2013. In the first stage of works, ramparts were measured and localized with GPS, a map was created (Figure 5) and a nomenclature of its individual parts was elaborated. The hillfort comprises three functional components which are separated by massive ramparts. The narrow peak area is situated on the southern slope of the hill's ridge. The acropolis around the highest point of Veľký vrch is the smallest of the parts. It is situated in the northwest of the peak area of the hillfort and is a part of it. The north-eastern slope of the hill is occupied by an extensive suburbium. The total area exceeds 12 ha; the suburbium is the largest part. Part of its area above the rock cliff is not fortified by the rampart. One of the tasks for the current excavations is dating the fortification, since it is not known whether it was all built in the Lusatian culture period and later adjusted or whether the hillfort gradually grew or, on the contrary, it was reduced.

Revision excavations were carried out at the acropolis. These were focused on a ditch through the rampart lacking any drawn documentation, and were conducted in 1972–1973. According to our findings, the inner rampart separating the acropolis from the peak area of the hillfort was built in the Púchov culture period. It was not rebuilt in the early Middle Ages, although the acropolis was still settled in the Great Moravian period. This is documented by dwellings with stone foundations discovered in 1972–1973 as well as by some small objects, particularly the above-mentioned spur found on the rampart and the ring from the cultural layer (Moravčík 1978).

Investigation of the fortification in the lower part of the suburbium took two years. The presence of two destroyed ramparts in superposition was detected. Before the older one was built, the bedrock was levelled and the excavated soil and rocks were used to build the rampart's body. Its inner wooden construction cannot be characterized more precisely as only scattered charcoals have been preserved in the destroyed layer. The presence of chambers is suggested by the visible dividing line between the fillings. While the lower part of one of these chambers was partly filled with soil and stones from the bedrock, the other one's in-fill was only earthen (Figure 6). A pole pit from a column supporting the inner wall of the rampart was discovered on the rampart's inner side. Since the rampart was not clad with stones, we assume that the walls had the form of an unspecified horizontal wooden construction which was statically secured by vertical poles standing at appropriate intervals. A quite long period passed between the extinction of this rampart and the construction of the later one. During this period, a brown humus layer was created on its surface by erosion of the soil from the older rampart.

While the soil of the earlier rampart's body was mostly compact, sticky and containing clay and tiny disintegrating charcoals, soils of the later rampart's body contained more air and fragile and lumpy charcoals creating layers; the charcoals were bigger, compact, sometimes creating regular clusters, even fine compact layers from which large parts of beams could have been extracted. Before the later rampart was built, remains of the earlier rampart had been partly dug out, and in the area thus prepared, a rampart with a wooden chamber construction was built. Two beams in superposition have been preserved from it; they were oriented along the slope line and were surely used as transverse beams of the chamber (Figure 7). Longitudinal parts of the wooden construction were preserved at ends of the transversal beams, mostly in the form of charcoal clusters. It was possible to identify only one longitudinal beam like this. Chambers comprised complexes of layers with clays of various colours and stones. This rampart had not been clad with stones either and a narrow berm was identified at its foot.

Dating by means of classical archaeological methods is not possible since no relevant artefacts have been discovered. Two samples for radiocarbon dating were taken from the remains of the later rampart's wooden construction. The result of combined calibration on the probability level 1σ is represented by intervals 896–928 (35.1%) cal AD and 942–971 (33.1%) cal AD; interval 2σ spans between 888 and 984 (95.4%) cal AD. As the horizon of the late 10th century is not known from the hillfort, we prefer dating the rampart's construction in the later phase of the Great Moravian period. The age of the older rampart remains undetermined, since charcoals suitable for radiocarbon analysis have not been obtained from it.

Right next to the original path – the access route leading from the Váh river valley to one of the hillfort's gates – a small, low barrow-like object is situated on the steep slope (Figure 8). In 2015, excavations started there and in its closest surroundings, and are still being conducted today. Their aim is to establish whether the hill is of anthropogenic origin and if so, what the original function of the structure was. It was possible to confirm so far that it is an artificial mound with an original diameter of approximately 9 m. The original about 2 m wide pathway, partially cut into the steep rocky slope, was also uncovered. Two pole pits approximately 1 m from each other were situated on the interface of the barrow-like mound and the pathway. A niche was cut in the rock opposite of them, with a pole originally fixed in it (Figure 9). The whole area was covered by a massive destruction layer that slid from the mound and from the slope above the path. Besides clay, it contained compact layers of charcoals and stones. The context situation is preliminarily interpreted as follows: the access route to the hillfort was barred by a gate with a more than 1 m wide bridge construction. A wooden structure protecting this entrance to the hillfort was built on the mound itself. It was either built right next to the gate or it was separated from the gate by a stone wall with a wooden support construction. A wall with similar structure was also situated on the inner edge of the pathway or higher, on the flatter terrain above the steep slope, where no excavations have been carried out so far. The bridge construction above the gate enabled passage from the supposed structure to the upper edge of the slope. The compact layers of charcoals suggest that the wooden construction of this defensive feature was massive.

Not even this fortification feature protecting the entrance to the hillfort has provided artefacts suitable for traditional dating. Six samples for radiocarbon analysis were taken from the destruction layers and from the pole pits. According to the combined calibration of the samples from the pole pits, there are two balanced time intervals on the probability level $\sigma 1$ – 804–842 (26.3% probability) and 860–893 (29.2%). The oldest interval of 778–792 (12.6%) is the least probable. As for level $\sigma 2$, samples come from the years 772–900 with a probability of 85.0%; the interval of 922–949 has a probability of 10.4%. Part of the samples from the destruction layers provided even older data. However, the multi-phase extinction of the feature has not been documented. Thus, all the analyzed charcoals come from one destructive event. According to the above-mentioned data, the gate with the defensive structure was built during the 9th century using wood from older, even 200-year-old trees.

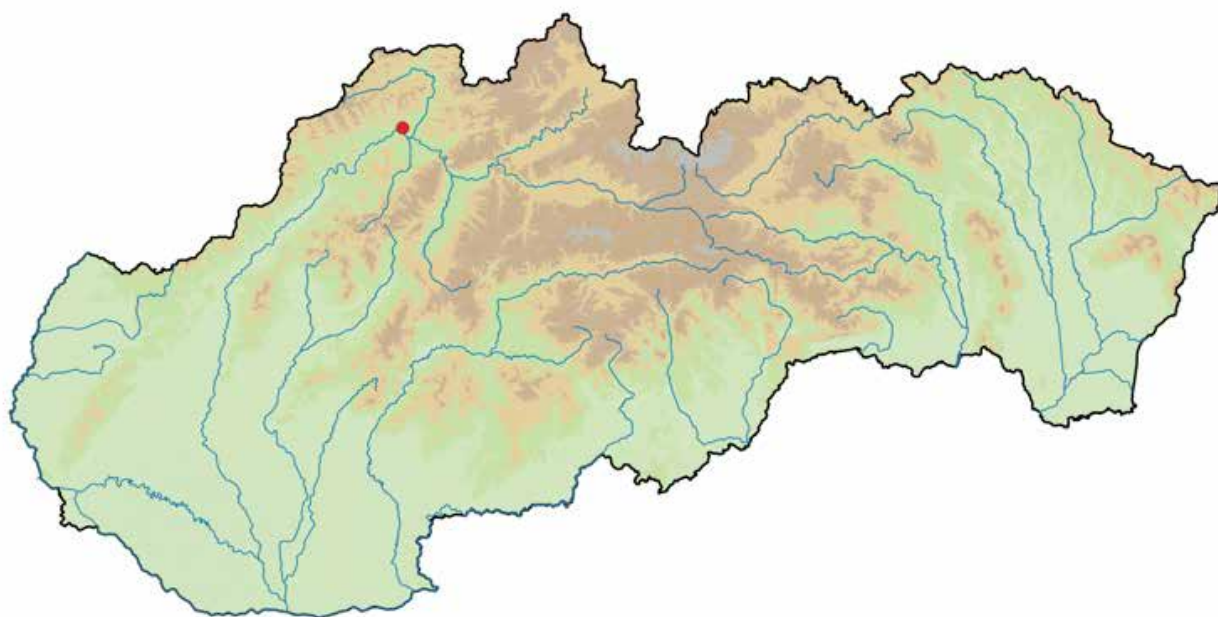
Two trenches were opened near the rampart above the suburbium in the peak area of the hillfort in 2016. They were used to investigate the adjacent area of the settlement and one also cut the rampart. In the current state of the terrain research, there is only a little that we can say about the rampart – it had stone walls built on both sides with a large amount of stones and earth between them. It is not possible to specify its construction yet, and it has not provided artefacts or ecofacts which could help us with the dating. The area of the settlement near the rampart was covered by the cultural layer containing pottery shards from all three chronological phases of the hillfort's settlement. Two settlement pits were also discovered there; one comes from the Lusatian culture period and another one from the Great Moravian period. In comparison with the investigation at the acropolis in the beginning of the 1970s, a smaller proportion of the Púchov culture finds is obvious. Numerous pottery finds and

small objects from the cultural layer inform us of intense human activities in this area in the Great Moravian period; judging by the find of a spur and a fitting with a neck, it was its later phase (Figure 10).

The archaeological excavations on Veľký vrch have confirmed that a large early medieval hillfort was situated there. An extensive collection of pottery, iron working tools and several luxury items were obtained from it. Several fortification features are being investigated; an unusual type of solitary gate situated on the access route outside the line of the ramparts must be emphasized. The excavations will continue but it is clear now that this is the most important Great Moravian hillfort in the region.

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1. Map of Slovakia with marked location of Divinka



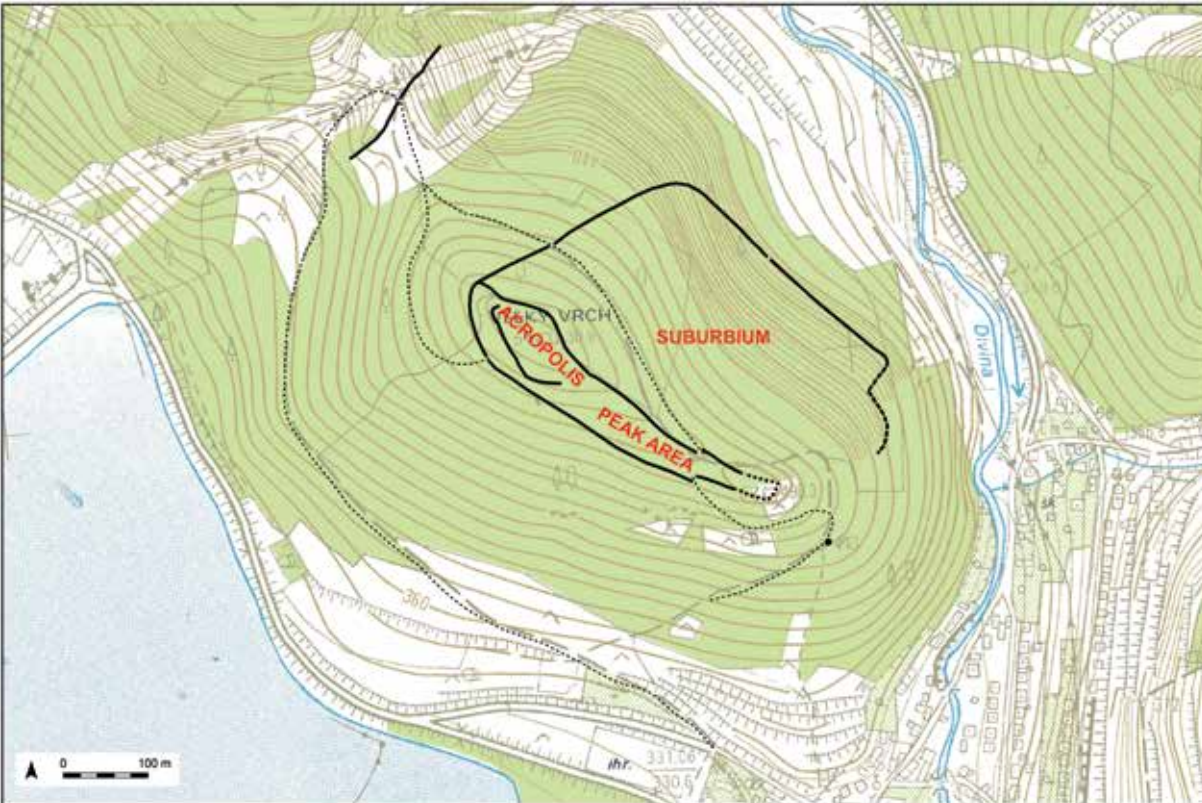
2. Divinka. View of Velký vrch from the Váh river valley in the 1950s



3. Divinka. Velký vrch today



4. Divinka. Hoard of iron objects found in 1993



5. Divinka. Plan of the hillfort on a map in the scale 1:10000



6. Divinka. Chamber filling in the older rampart in the suburbium



7. Divinka. One of the beams of the wooden chamber of the early medieval rampart in the suburbium



8. Divinka. Barrow-like structure near the access route to the hillfort



9. Divinka. Uncovered early medieval pathway with remains of the gate



10. Divinka. The Great Moravian spur and fitting with neck from the peak area of the hillfort