

Martin Musílek — Anna Žďárská

## "From Venice to the end of the world". The story of the glass cup from the Prague house No. 379/I

### ANNOTATION

There is an interesting set of high medieval glass dated to the period from the late 13th to the early 14th century that has come from archaeological research on the present parcel of house No. 379/I on the street Na Můstku in Prague's Old Town. Attention was focused in particular by one cup, painted with enamels and gold and probably originating from the glass factory in Murano near Venice. This article is an attempt to answer the questions of who ordered the cup, and how this item came into Bohemia. The most important clue to its identification is a trio of depicted coats of arms which would hypothetically refer to the cup's customer, perhaps originating from middle England. The article is intended primarily as a topic for discussion on the possibilities and limits of customers and owners of luxury items based on fragmentarily surviving written sources.

### SUMMARY

Archaeological research carried out in 1970–1971 on the site of today's house No. 379/I on the street Na Můstku in Prague 1-Old Town produced an interesting collection of high medieval glass dated to the period from the late 13th to the first half of the 14th century. Unfortunately, more detailed documentation on the terrain could not be traced, and the situation of the building within the parcel remains unclear. The collection contained 304 glass fragments from eighteen containers which, due to their determined dating and in comparison with other urban locations, is a relatively high number. What is also striking is the shape variability of the represented items which included, among others, a wide variety of drinking glass, and the high quality of enamel used.

Attention was aroused in particular by one cup, painted with enamels and gold and probably originating from the glass factory in Murano near Venice. The most important identifying clue in seeking out the circumstances of its origin is a trio of depicted coats of arms. Given the fragmentary character of surviving sources we can rely only on a fraction of credible data or assumptions which suggest that the person who ordered the cup might perhaps be, based on an identical coat of arms which differs probably only in color (substitution of silver for gold), the English nobleman Simon de Pierpont sometime in the second half of the 13th century. Whether the cup was made to order, or in connection with Simon's assumed participation in the ninth Crusade between 1270 and 1272, can not be decided. The luxurious cup apparently found its way into Bohemia through long-distance trade, which was flourishing between the Czech lands and Venice in the second half of the 13th century. It was found in a water well in a prestigious part of the Prague conurbation on the plot of house no. 379/I. In the 14th century, which is the time of origination of the site where the cup was found, this house did not exist yet. The house was founded later, after filling of town trench. The water well was lying near an important route by one of the important entrances to Old Town behind the house No. 404. The owners of this one and the other neighboring houses at Havelské tržiště were belonged to the city elite. Due to their affluence and trade contacts, often extending into the Mediterranean area, this elite could have afforded to purchase this luxurious cup. A more serious consideration may be that the discovery of this luxury object becomes another piece in the mosaic of European trade of the High Middle Ages. Once more, it becomes clear that the world of the medieval individual was not as closed as we have imagined until recently. Similar findings of luxury goods intended for the households of the Prague mercantile elite are clear evidence of this.

**Fig. 1.** Prague 1-Old Town. Section of the cadastral map of Prague showing the position of today's houses No. 379/I and 380/I on the street Na Můstku in brown, stone bridge across the fortification moat in green, fortification moat yellow, presumed extent of house No. 404/I at the time of location in pink. Red lines indicate the hypothetical line of the municipal fortification walls, black No. 401/I shows its intact remnants, a – a tower-like shape before city wall fortifications, later attributed to plot No. 404/I.

**Fig. 2.** Prague 1-Old Town, Na Můstku No. 379+380/I. Gold and enamel-painted goblet; 2nd half of the 13th to middle 14th century.

**Fig. 3.** Prague 1-Old Town, Na Můstku No. 379+380/I. Illustrated documentation of the gold and enameled painted goblet. Gold lines often reconstructed based on negative imprints on the glass surface on the interior side of the goblet body (drawing M. Procházková, 1970's).

**Fig. 4.** Prague 1-Old Town, Na Můstku No. 379+380/I. Drawn documentation to the glass findings accompanying the painted cup (1) – selection: 2, 3, 4 – pruned beakers; 5 – beaker with spiral trails; 6, 7 – beaker with pointed trails; 8 – bottle with tubular body-ring.

**Fig. 5.** Prague 1-Old Town, Na Můstku No. 379+380/I. Gold and enamel-painted goblet; 2nd half of the 13th to middle 14th century. Detail with figure of the rider. The larger areas were applied with blue and red paint from outside the cup. The smaller areas, here the rider's face and hand and the horse's head, were painted from the inside. The gold contours of the characters, details (heads, harnesses, feathers etc.), and ornaments were also drawn from the inside. From the gold painting on the glass surface, only negative impressions survived as opaque lines, more distinct in special lighting.

**Fig. 6.** Glass goblet painted with gold and enamel from Basel. Taken from Baumgartner/Krueger 1988.

**Fig. 7.** Seal of Oldřich Babka of Kvasejovice (coat of arms used in 1389, 1397). Taken from Sedláček/Růžek 2002.

**Fig. 8.** Seal of Vaclav Šatný of Brodce (coat of arms used in 1487, 1495). Taken from Sedláček/Růžek 2002.

**Fig. 9.** Dering Roll, 1270 to 1280. Taken from <<http://www.pinterest.com/pin/340795896775701937/>>.

**Fig. 10.** Coats of arms of Robert and Simon de Pierpont on the Dering Roll, 1270 to 1280

**Fig. 11.** Coat of arms of Hamon Bonet on the Dering Roll, 1270 to 1280

**Fig. 12.** Flag of Wessex.

**Fig. 13.** Schematic lineage of English noble family de Pierpont (the likely client of the goblet, Sir Simon de Pierpont, marked in red), listed years refer to evidence in sources (compiled by M. Musílek).

**Fig. 14.** Josef Daniel Huber 1769: orthographic plan of Prague – section: view onto the plot of the original house No. 404/I Na Můstku in Prague's Old Town showing the localization of the finding (blue); a tower-like shape before city wall fortifications, later attributed to plot No. 404/I (red). Line drawing (original: Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, copy: NHI documentation funds).

*Translated by Bryce Belcher*