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Archaeological excavation of “Jáma” in the New Town of Prague

ANNOTATION

This article concerns the archaeological context of the water logged area called Jáma (The pit) or Louže (The puddle), discovered during the excavations prior to the construction of collectors in the Vodičkova Street to the west from the Wenceslaus square in Prague. After the foundation of Prague New town this natural depression with fluctuating water level was used as an almost bottomless dump for the rubbish produced by the medieval town. Numerous finds of textile fragments along with other artefacts of organic and inorganic material were recovered illustrating the daily life from the 14th to the onset of the 16th century. This site with conditions enabling preservation of artefacts from organic material is unique within the historic centre of Prague.

SUMMARY

The excavation undertaken during the digging of the entrance shafts for the New Town collector in the area of the crossroad of the streets Vodičkova and Jungmannova provided a unique possibility to view the spectrum of daily life culture from the 14th to the onset of the 16th century. This was enabled by a Pleistocene natural depression below the edge of Vltava river terrace filled by mud and water, situated in this area. After the foundation of Prague New Town this water logged area was used as an almost bottomless dump for the rubbish produced by the medieval town in its vicinity and perhaps also in its wider surroundings. Damp conditions, unique within the area of the New Town, enabled preservation of numerous artefacts of organic material illustrating the daily life. Unusually large amount of artefacts of organic and inorganic material, recovered by the excavation, exceeds the research capacity of an individual or a single institution. A grant project was awarded to analyse the outstanding assemblage of textile fragments by specialists H. Březinová and M. Bravermanová.

This grant project *The medieval textile and dye technologies – archaeometry of textile finds* (GA ČR 14-06451S) required the definition of the archaeological context of the waterlogged area called Jáma, presented as the principal part of this article by the leader of the excavation. Evaluation of the geological and geomorphological conditions was based on the results of geological documentation by J. Zavřel. The attention concentrated on detailed evaluation of morphologic and geologic anomalies (the existence of the ground depression filled by sediments and anthropogenic refuse), enabling preservation of archaeological organic artefacts even in Prague.

The muddy depression called Jáma developed below the edge of the upper river terrace of The Charles square, by waves of water running down into it during heavy rainfalls. Waves rebound from its bottom churned the muddy fill of the basin including the artefacts, thus being chaotically jumbled up. Since the naturally formed stratigraphy has not preserved, the muddy sediments were extracted by a mini digger in mechanical layers, and transported to a disposal site, where the content was excavated. The ca 8,5 m deep collector shafts revealed complete vertical sections, reaching below the bottom of the muddy depression. The bottom most fill of the depression is formed by Pleistocene sandy layers. The span of the muddy sediments is 3–5 m.

Combining the archaeological research and historic description of the area capturing the development of the properties, the author attempted to relate the thick waste stratigraphy from the New Town with the craftsmen in the closest surroundings of the site. Beside a large amount of usual artefacts from various materials also luxury items were revealed (silk textile, incised and painted leather). Large amount of luxurious products indicates presence of rich inhabitants (or ecclesiastic institutions) handling the surroundings properties, and using the precious artefacts, which reflects prosperity and social economic status.

Fig. 1. The site in the centre of Prague to the west from the Wenceslaus Square (graphic depiction S. Babušková, 2016).

Fig. 2. The only reconstruction of the waterlogged area (8) and topographical relief of its surroundings from 1973 after Vilém Lorenc. **1** – the town hall of Prague New Town with a tower – **2**; **3** – meat stores; **6** – Jewish cemetery cut

by a newly built street in the 16th century – **7**; **8** – waterlogged area (puddle, in a pit); **9** – Jewish houses (copied from Lorenc 1973, 176).

Fig. 3. Map of archaeological documentary items in the area of interest (Hrdlička 2009) presents the state of research until 2008 (S. Babušková, J. Hlavatý, 2016). Houses marked with house numbers.

Fig. 4. Reconstructed extent of the „Jáma“ (Pit) waterlogged basin with organic sediments of stagnated waters in **grey** (after Chmelař/Síla 2006; Zavřel 2003). **1–12** – archaeological trenches – shafts of the collector in **red**, canalisation shafts in **blue** (accidents in general), waist pipe for a drinking fountain in **yellow**, shallow trenches in **green** (K. Kozák, M. Ďurica, 2016). For numbering of trenches see the table in the Fig. 5. Buildings marked with house numbers.

Fig. 5. Table with the identification of archaeological trenches and elevation parameters (current surface, surface of consolidated muddy sediments, subsoil surface, bottom of the trench).

Fig. 6. Vodičkova Street, excavation 2004/04. Cleaned up paving (photo V. Wallis, 2004).

Fig. 7. Vodičkova Street, excavation 2004/04. Extraction of the muddy sediments with artefacts mainly from the 14th and 15th centuries from the natural basin in the collector shaft (photo J. Zavřel, 2004).

Fig. 8. Vodičkova Street, excavation 2004/04. Documentation and sampling of the sedimentary stratigraphy (photo J. Zavřel, 2004).

Fig. 9. Vodičkova Street, excavation 2004/04. Section 6. Red line separates the bottom of the Holocene sedimentary infill (layer 64) of the waterlogged area and the Pleistocene stratigraphy underneath it (photo J. Zavřel, 2004).

Fig. 10. Vodičkova Street, excavation 2004/04. Combined section (section 2 above and 6 below) presents the fill thickness of the sedimentary basin called „Jáma“ (Pit) until the 16th century. In **green** the surface of organic refuse deposited on the firm surface of the waterlogged area, marked as horse dung; in **red** bottom of Holocene sediments with Pleistocene stratigraphy below the red line (redrawn by N. Prášková from the field documentation, editing 2016).

Fig. 11. Vodičkova Street, excavation 2004/04. General section combined from sections 2, 3, 4, 5. Surface of horse refuse in **green**, surface of muddy sediments in **blue**, bottom of Holocene sediments in **red** with Pleistocene stratigraphy below the red line (redrawn by N. Prášková from the field documentation, editing 2016).

Fig. 12. Vodičkova Street, excavation 2004/06. Stratigraphy showing the development from the muddy sediment (layer 13 on cleaned trench bottom), followed by layers or lumps of horse manure (layer 11) from the period when the sediment was firmed up by refuse, finished by paving layers (photo V. Wallis, 2004).

Fig. 13. Školská Street, excavation 2005/22 (Fig. 4: 3). Documented southern side of the shaft, the furthest from the waterlogged area. On the left view of the section with the use of photo documentation, on the right continuous drawing documentation. **Grey** bedrock, **red** line the border between Pleistocene and Holocene, **light brown** soil, **blue** firm highly organic soil (continuous line of the surface, bottom in dots), **green** layers with horse dung (photo K. Kozák, drawing after the field documentation and graphics by N. Prášková, editing 2016).

Fig. 14. Vodičkova Street, excavation 2005/28 (Fig. 4: 5). The lowest part of the trench for canalisation repair in sandy stratigraphy. Layers 33, 38, 39 belong undoubtedly to Pleistocene period.

Fig. 15. Vodičkova Street in the neighbourhood of Jungmannova, excavation 2004/06 (Fig. 4: 2). Elevation of the natural sedimentary basin – surface of the horse refuse in **green**, border between Pleistocene and Holocene in **red** – bottom of the basin (N. Prášková after the field documentation, editing 2016).

Fig. 16. Vodičkova Street in the neighbourhood of Jungmannova, excavation 2005/30 (Fig. 4: 6). Elevation of the natural sedimentary basin – **green** the surface of the horse dung, **blue** dots bottom of the muddy sediments, **red** the border between Pleistocene and the Holocene bottom of the basin (N. Prášková after the field documentation, editing 2016).

Fig. 17. Vodičkova Street in the neighbourhood of Jungmannova, excavation 2005/30. Reality of the excavation in the lowest metres of the collector shaft (photo J. Zavřel, 2005).

Fig. 18. Vodičkova Street in the neighbourhood of Jungmannova, excavation 2005/30. Dark grey black organic fill of the Jáma depression (photo J. Zavřel, 2005).

Fig. 19. Geomorphology of the site in the geological past. Bedrock surface in **brown**, in **orange** surface of fine soil sandy sediments of flood character (infill of hollowed Pleistocene river bed, in blue surface of pure sandy gravels and sands of Pleistocene geological subsoil. After Šimek 1970 and personal documentation by J. Zavřel (2014, map appendix 1 on the p. 16; graphic design M. Ďurica, 2016).

Fig. 20. Prague, Vodičkova Street, excavation 2004/04. Leather five fingered glove Nr. 2004/04-76-82 (photo K. Kozák, 2010).

Fig. 21. Prague, Vodičkova Street, excavation 2004/04. Shoe (single) composed of fragments discovered during the excavation at the disposal site (2004/04-116-128, 143-154). Photo M. Kalíšek (above) and K. Kozák (below).

Fig. 22. Prague, Vodičkova Street, excavation 2004/04. A case decorated by engraving, probably a scabbard of a dagger Nr. 2004/04-76-82 (photo M. Frouz, 2016).

Fig. 23. Prague, Vodičkova Street, excavation 2005/32. A case with heraldic decoration – Bohemian Kingdom and Silesia coats of arms –, after Polish analogies an amulet Nr. 2005/32-3 (photo M. Frouz, 2016).

Fig. 24. Prague, Vodičkova Street, excavations 2004/04 and 2007/25. Three fragments of wool 2/2 twill – fragments 10_V31_83; 10_V31_168; 43_B6_10 (photo Z. Kačerová, 2015).

Fig. 25. Prague, Vodičkova Street, excavation 2004/04. Silky samitum with lion pattern of Spanish provenience – fragments 1_V31_80 (photo Z. Kačerová, 2015).

Fig. 26. Prague, Vodičkova Street, excavation 2004/04. Knife with a preserved wooden handle 2004/04-103-115 (photo M. Kalíšek, 2016).

Fig. 27. Prague, Vodičkova Street, excavation 2004/04. Metal lock and a key, both 2004/04-68-75 (photo M. Kalíšek, 2016).

Fig. 28. Prague, Vodičkova Street, excavation 2004/04. Mail armour 2004/04-26-30 (photo M. Kalíšek, 2016).

Fig. 29. Anonymous, about 1450: Roman de Renaud de Montauban. Shoes with long tips on a cut-out of an illustrated manuscript. Downloaded from <<http://www.akg-images.co.uk/archive/Roman-de-Renaud-de-Montauban-2UMDHUW4TOJ7.html>>.

Fig. 30. Praha, Vodičkova Street, excavation 2007/25. Leather scabbard for a knife Nr. 2007/25-4-29 (photo Z. Kačerová, 2016).

Fig. 31. Praha, Vodičkova Street, excavation 2008/21. Decorated leather from a garment or a bag. Nr. 2008/21-3 (photo Z. Kačerová, 2016).

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