

# Addenda to “Ceremonial Arrowheads from Bohemia”

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AS A CONSEQUENCE of the publication of my article about decorated arrowheads of the fifteenth century in volume 1 of the *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, twelve more examples have been brought to my attention. While a comprehensive article dealing with the entire complex has been published in the *Acta Musei Nationalis Pragae* of the National Museum, Prague,<sup>1</sup> a short outline of the new findings will be given here, in order to complete the material compiled in volume 1.

Though the arrowheads—also twelve in number—published in volume 1 were unquestionably of Bohemian origin, as proved by inscriptions in medieval Czech, strangely enough not a single one of them came directly from Czechoslovakia: seven were preserved in Hungarian collections (Budapest, Keszthely, Pécs, Veszprém), three in Austria (Innsbruck, Schloss Kreuzenstein, Vienna), and one in Germany (Munich); the one acquired by the Metropolitan Museum came from an English private collection.

However, among those recently come to light eight are in various museums in Czechoslovakia (four in the National Museum<sup>2</sup> and one in the Museum for Decorative Arts in Prague, two in the East Bohemian Museum in Pardubice, and one in the Town Museum in Smiřice), two more in Hungary (Győr and Nyiregyhaza<sup>3</sup>), one in the Tower of London, and one in the Museum of the Turkish Army in Istanbul.

Their distribution—with the exception of the one in the Tower—follows a pattern. They are usually found

in locations where Bohemian mercenaries—very much sought after, particularly as crossbowmen—have fought. One of the four specimens in the National Museum in Prague is known to have come from the field of a battle fought in 1436 (Plačice). The one in Keszthely, Hungary, was found near a castle (Sümege) repeatedly besieged by the Turks during the fifteenth century. The one in the Turkish Army Museum in Istanbul must have been captured and brought there as a trophy, and the same must be true for the one in the Metropolitan Museum, which bears the “Turkish arsenal mark.”

All these arrowheads have in common unusual size—on the average twice the length of an ordinary head of a crossbow bolt—and decoration by engraving and inlay of brass. The engraved decoration consists of characteristic scale patterns, floral scrolls, short inscriptions, and emblematic monograms, though several are in such a corroded condition that only the brass inlays still show engraving (Figure 1).

Of the better-preserved specimens among the newly found, the one in the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague has a decoration very similar to that on the piece in the Metropolitan Museum—a large monogram *ar* surmounted by a crown on one side, and a crowned *S* on the other, an inscribed scroll (*marya pany?*), and similar foliate scrollwork. Monograms surmounted by ostrich feathers are the characteristic decorative motif on most of the other arrowheads with still recognizable decoration: letter *S* (National Museum, Prague), letter *a* (Győr) (Figure 2), letter *k* (Pardubice) (Figure 3), letter *m* (Pardubice) (Figure 4), and two illegible letters under feathers (National Museum, Prague). The inscription *marya* twice repeated, and the monograms *d* and *a* combined with crown and ostrich-feather designs, are to be found on the piece in the

1. Helmut Nickel, “Böhmische Prunkpfeilspitzen,” *Acta Musei Nationalis Pragae* ser. A, 23 (1969) pp. 101–163.

2. J. Koula, “České šípy z XV. věku,” *Památky Archeologické a Místopisné* 16 (1893–1895) pp. 139–142.

3. János Kalmár, “Számszeríjász parancsnoki jelvény-nyílhegyek,” *Arrabona* 1962, part 4, pp. 71–84.

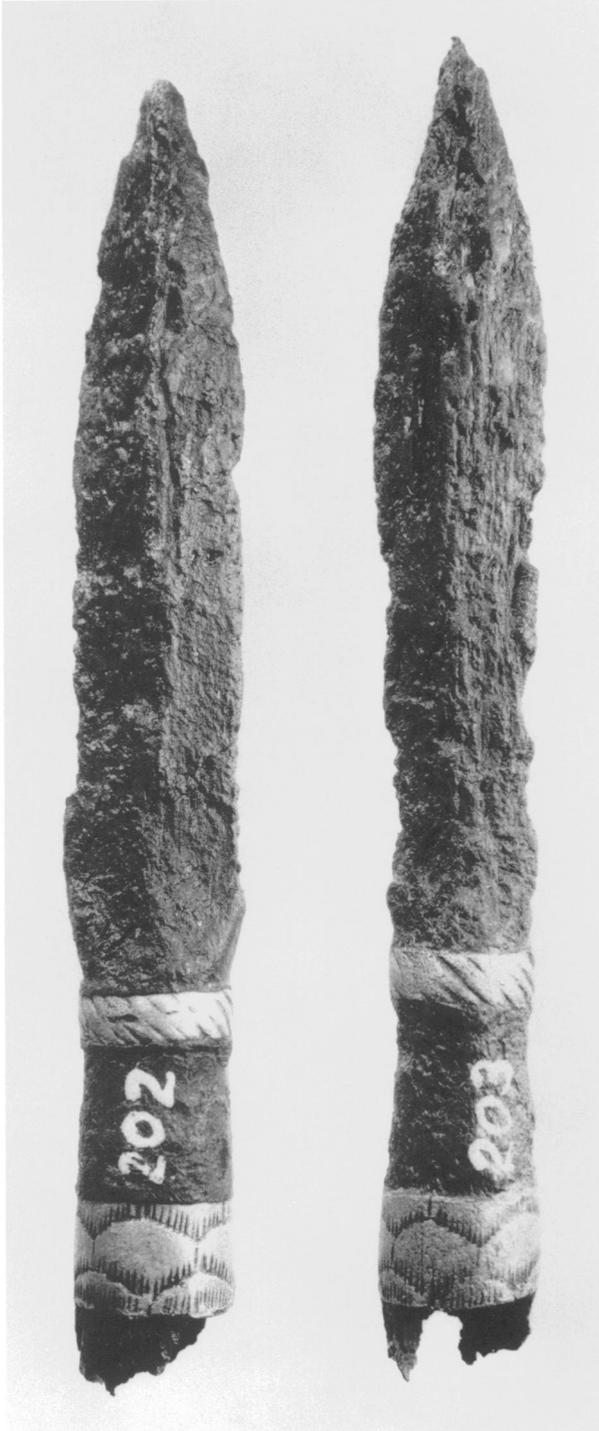


FIGURE 1  
Arrowheads with engraved brass decoration.  
National Museum, Prague, Inv. nos. 202, 203

Tower of London. All these motifs are also found in the decoration on Bohemian pavises—shields for crossbowmen—a circumstance that confirms the assumption that these arrowheads were military objects, and not, as has been suggested, insignia for sports guilds.

Most of these letters can be interpreted as the royal monograms of kings of Bohemia—Sigismund (1419–1437), Albrecht (1437–1439), Kasimir (1457–1459)—while *m* probably stands for the Virgin Mary. The letter *m* surmounted by crown and ostrich plume was an emblem used on shields by the revolutionary Hussites; apparently the royal Bohemian badge of a monogram combined with a crown and an ostrich feather was by that time considered to be a national Bohemian cognizance, and therefore was used even by the rebels against the royal authority, who as a rule only substituted monograms of a religious nature for those of the king.

The use of ostrich feathers as emblems in Bohemia brings to mind the legend of the origin of the badge of the Prince of Wales. It is said that Edward the Black Prince, after the Battle of Crécy (1346), adopted the three ostrich feathers that formed the plume on the helmet of the slain John the Blind, king of Bohemia. The ostrich feather, used by several members of the Plantagenet family during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (the Black Prince, however, seems to have been the first one), was a symbol of steadfastness and unruffledness, because it never gets disheveled, no matter how hard the wind blows. On the other hand, the ostrich in medieval lore was credited with an all-digesting stomach. Usually shown with a nail, a horseshoe, or an arrowhead in his beak, he was a symbol of endurance and the power to overcome obstacles. Besides this, it was fabled that his extraordinary eyesight was sharp and “hot” enough to hatch his young just by his looking at the eggs for three days. Even the conception of the young was thought to be the result of the sharp look of his eyes; for reason of this form of immaculate conception the ostrich became—already in the thirteenth century—incorporated in the iconography surrounding the Virgin Mary.<sup>4</sup>

4. Bury Palliser, *Historic Devices, Badges, and War-Cries* (London, 1870) pp. 356–368; Lord Howard de Walden, *Banners, Standards, and Badges From a Tudor Manuscript in the College of Arms* (The De Walden Library, 1904) p. 4; W. R. Staehelin, “Der Vogel Strauss in der Heraldik,” *Archives Héraldiques Suisses* 39 (1925) pp. 49–57.



FIGURE 2

Device on an arrowhead, letter *a* surmounted by an ostrich feather. Xántus János Muzeum, Győr



FIGURE 3

Device on an arrowhead, letter *k* surmounted by an ostrich feather. Východočeské Muzeum, Pardubice, Inv. no. 1217



FIGURE 4

Device on an arrowhead, letter *m* surmounted by an ostrich feather. Východočeské Muzeum, Pardubice, Inv. no. 633

All the above-mentioned qualities of the ostrich, and *pars pro toto* his feather, could be applied to explain the use of ostrich feathers as decoration on Bohemian pavises and arrowheads. Though it is doubtful whether King John the Blind ever had a badge of ostrich feathers, in view of the miraculous powers of its eyesight the ostrich certainly could have had a deep significance for him. Steadfastness, endurance, and sharp eyesight are virtues generally desirable for a fighting man and particularly for an archer. Therefore, the use of the ostrich-feather device on arms—pavises and ceremonial arrowheads—worn by crossbowmen was very appropriate. The arrowhead in the Metropolitan Museum even bears the inscription *waruy/woka* = “beware my eye”! A connection with the cult of the Virgin is indi-

cated by the repeated invocations of Mary on these arms. Finally, during the fifteenth century St. George was often represented wearing a distinctive headdress sporting a plume of ostrich feathers; perhaps the ostrich feather was also meant to symbolize this knightly saint, patron of warriors.

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