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## Mierzanowice culture material from Spišský hrad

### ABSTRACT

The Spiš Castle (Spišský hrad) hill (632 a.s.l.) is located administratively within the village of Žehra, Spišská Nová Ves district, the northern part of eastern Slovakia, in the historic region of Spiš. Since the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the top of the hill has become the seat of a vast royal castle complex as the seat of the Spiš Komitat (County). It is a multicultural place, that has already been inhabited in prehistoric times. For many years there have been excavation works done here that yielded a substantial amount of archaeological material including artefacts dated before the building of the castle. However, due to numerous reconstructions of Spišský hrad involving repeated earthworks, this material is located within the secondary deposit. These discoveries include a relatively small ceramics inventory with features typical of the Mierzanowice culture groups from the eastern part of the Polish Carpathians. The most numerous in this collection are fragments of ceramics referring directly to the inventories known from the late-Mierzanowice-culture assemblages. This indicates the presence of zonal cord ornaments formed in a wavy line, with negatives of cord imprints inclined to the right, knobs with incisions, presence of the triangle-shaped stamp ornamentation, Besenstrichmuster-type roughening of the belly as well as pseudo-textile ornament. In the ceramics inventory from Spišský hrad, we can indicate pottery fragments, which can be linked with the older phases of the Mierzanowice culture development. This is proven by the presence of carpet cord ornamentation with the negatives of cord imprints inclined to the left and the zonal cord ornamentation inclined to the left as well. The analysis of the Spišský hrad inventory indicates that we can identify here the direct references to the Mierzanowice culture assemblages from the San river valley, i.e. the eastern part of the Polish Carpathian zone as well as the area between the Raba and Vistula rivers, located further west.



In the material of the Mierzanowice culture from Spišský hrad, we do not find any references to the Pleszów group of the Mierzanowice culture, inhabiting the area north of Spiš, in the western part of the Polish Carpathians.

## KEYWORDS

Spišský hrad, Mierzanowice culture, Spiš

The Spiš Castle (Spišský hrad) hill (632 a.s.l.) is located administratively within the village of Žehra, Spišská Nová Ves district, northern part of eastern Slovakia, in the historic region of Spiš (Figs. 1–3). It is located over the small town of Spišské Podhradie (Levoča district), in the north-western part of the Hornád river basin. The hill has a dominant position and towers nearly 200 metres over the neighbouring valleys. Its upper part is built of a travertine masiff, surrounded by steep slopes. This strategic location, protected very well by nature, provided an excellent view of the region. Since the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the top of the hill has become the seat of a vast royal castle complex as the seat of the Spiš Komitat. It is a multicultural site, that has already been inhabited in prehistoric and protohistoric times. The most striking evidence of human activity comes from the Neolithic (Bükk culture), Eneolithic (Bodrogkeresztúr and Baden culture), the Hallstatt period as well as the Púchov culture in the La Tène and Roman period (Fiala *et al.* 1988, Stejskal 2015). In addition to the finds mentioned above, there was also a relatively significant group of artefacts belonging to the late Eneolithic cultural circle (Giertlová 2002). They have been identified in the finds from the earlier archaeological research conducted at the site by the group led by Adrián Vallašek in connection with the reconstruction of the castle in the years 1969–1978. Specifically, these were finds from the southern part of the castle acropolis, right behind the Romanesque entrance gate, leading to the upper castle. In the modern era, there have been substantial landscape changes, especially concerning the Baroque bastion. Besides the artefact from various periods, the aforementioned finds from the late Eneolithic have been found in the vast earthwork in the construction of the bastion.<sup>1</sup> The similar occurrence of prehistoric artefacts in secondary

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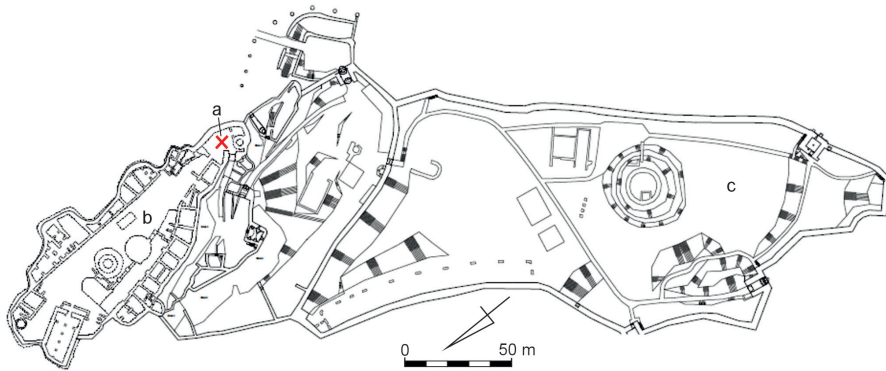
1 Pieces from this period were also occasionally found during research conducted in different parts of the castle in 2010 and 2018–2020 performed by SNM-Archaeological Museum in Bratislava, SNM-Spiš Museum in Levoča and Museum in Kežmarok.



**FIG. 1.** Spišský hrad (Spiš castle), Žehra municipality, Spišská Nová Ves district. Aerial view of vast castle complex (Photo: SNM-Spiš Museum in Levoča)



**FIG. 2.** Spišský hrad, Žehra municipality, Spišská Nová Ves district. Aerial view of the upper castle and the middle courtyard (Photo: SNM-Spiš Museum in Levoča)



**FIG. 3.** Spišský hrad, Žehra municipality, Spišská Nová Ves district. Ground plane of the castle, a - place of discovery of analysed ceramics, b - upper castle, c - lower courtyard (Drawing: M. Janovská, M. Dzurilla; edited by M. Stejskal)

layers, from younger periods, is characteristic of the site. It often constitutes the only source of information about the prehistoric settlement at the site. Already during the construction of the hillfort, during the Púchov culture period at the peak summit and the surrounding slopes, significant landscaping has been done, which destroyed the older occupational layers. The building of the medieval castle and its numerous reconstructions additionally altered the landscape. Enormous amounts of soil were required to level the area and create embankments. Because of the complicated transport in this mountainous area, the soil was most likely obtained directly from the castle area and the closest vicinity. The prehistoric artefacts discovered on the castle hill in secondary layers undoubtedly come directly from this location.<sup>2</sup> This does not only concern the highest plateau of the hill. Traces of prehistoric settlements occur as well within the adjacent slopes, predominantly in the area of the lower courtyard, which was more suitable for the construction of dwellings due to the gentler decline of the terrain. In this collection of artefact material from the secondary deposit, there is a distinctive group of pottery fragments with a characteristic relatively uniform technology containing a predominant

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- 2 The exploitation of soil directly at the site is documented by the stratigraphy in numerous places within the castle, where natural sequences of layers are missing vast chronological sections. On the other hand, some significantly distant horizons occur next to each other.

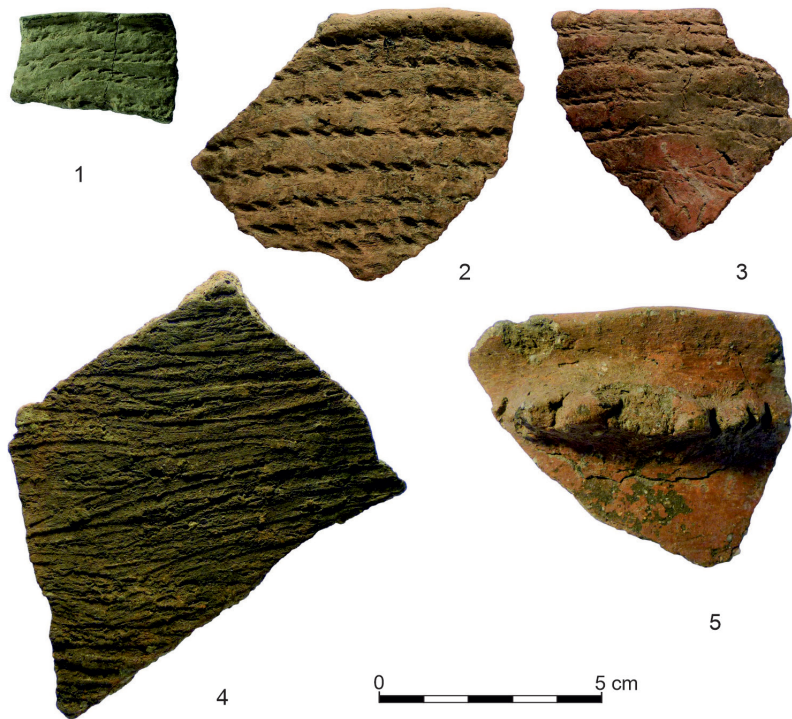
admixture of white granite and mica. The structure of the ceramic mass is dense and the surfaces are mostly smoothed.<sup>3</sup> After the typological-stylistic analysis of the inventory, an argument may be put forward, that these artefacts are related to, or in some cases simply identical to the ceramics known from the Mierzanowice culture of the Carpathian Vistula river basin (Madej, Valde-Nowak 2020).

Fragments of thin-walled vessels with bifurcated spouts with horizontal elliptical knobs placed on their necks, which are either incised (Figs 4:5, 5:5) or decorated with imprints of a triangle-shaped stamp (Fig. 6:7) indicate the connection of this ceramic material with the late Mierzanowice culture groups existing in the Polish Carpathian zone in the first half of the second millennium BC. Such ornamental features are among the markers of the late phase of the Mierzanowice culture in all groups of the Mierzanowice culture (except the Pleszów group) occupying the Carpathian basin of the Vistula river, and both in the east, in the San river basin (Madej, Valde-Nowak 2020: Tables LII:3, LIV:3, LVII:1, 2; LVIII:1), as well as in the west, between the Raba and the Vistula rivers (Górski 2015, Table 44:7). It is also common in such assemblages to roughen the lower parts of vessels with a pseudo-textile ornament and a smearing it with a broom (*Besenstrichmuster*) (Madej, Valde-Nowak 2020, 80-81, Tables LIV:6,7, LV:1, LIX:1, LXXVIII:1-3, 4, Górski, Jarosz 2022, 235). Pottery fragments with such a surface are also included in the collection from Spišský hrad (Figs. 4:4; 5:4; 6:1; 6:4-5,6:9-11). Typically, vessels decorated on their necks with zonal cord ornament, grouped in double-thread motifs with negatives of cord impressions inclined to the right, also in the form of a wavy line, are found in the late-Mierzanowice assemblages (Madej, Valde-Nowak 2020, Tables XLIX:6, LIX:1). A ceramic fragment decorated in this manner was also found in the described inventory from Spišský hrad (Figs 4: 1, 5: 1).

Apart from the fragments of ceramics in the collection analysed above, which can be attributed to the Mierzanowice culture, there are two fragments of vessels with cord ornaments inclined to the left. With regards to the Mierzanowice culture, thriving in the Vistula river basin the direction of the cord imprint negatives is a chronological marker. This type of ornamentation, where the cord imprint on the surface of a vessel is inclined to the left, is connected with the

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3 The materials analysed in this paper were already published twenty years ago, however due to the state of the research at that point in time it was impossible to pinpoint their cultural affiliation (Giertlová 2002).

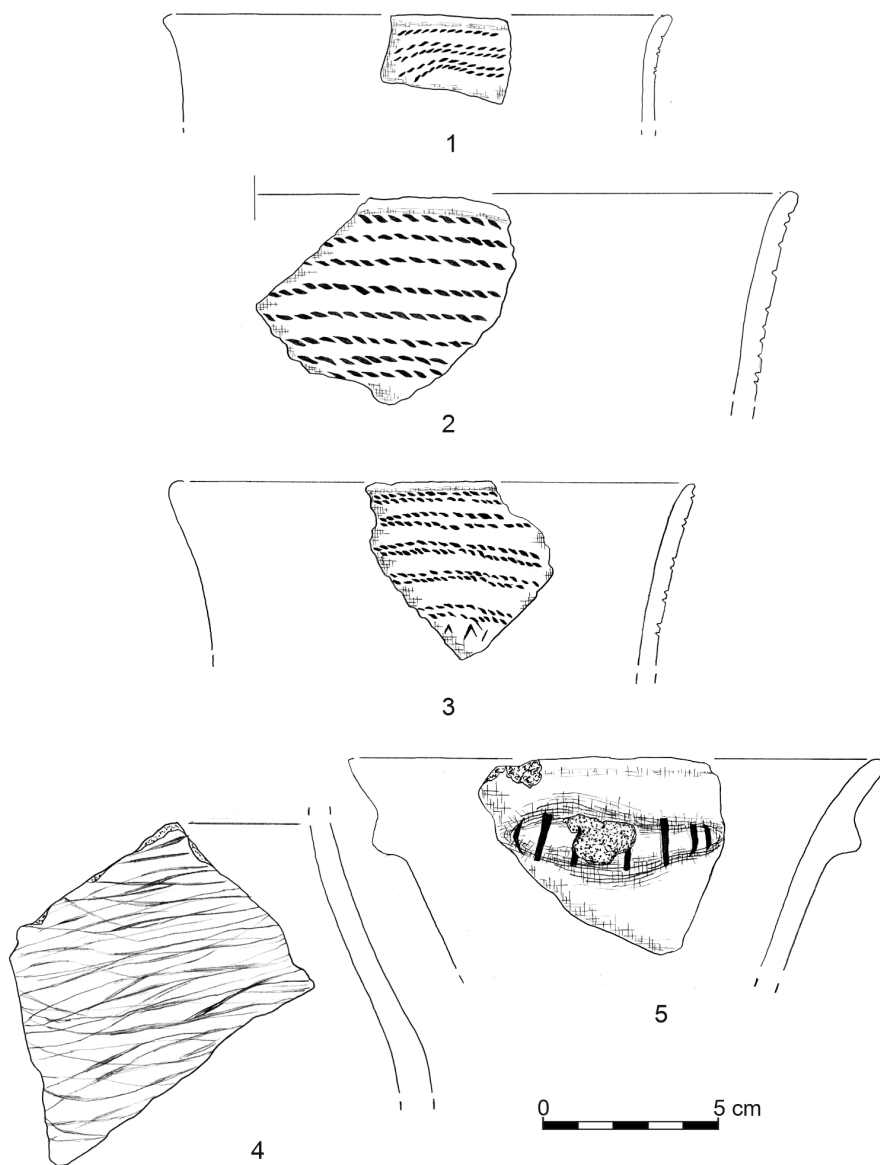


**FIG. 4.** Spišský hrad, Žehra municipality, Spišská Nová Ves district. Selection of ceramics (Photo: M. Stejskal)

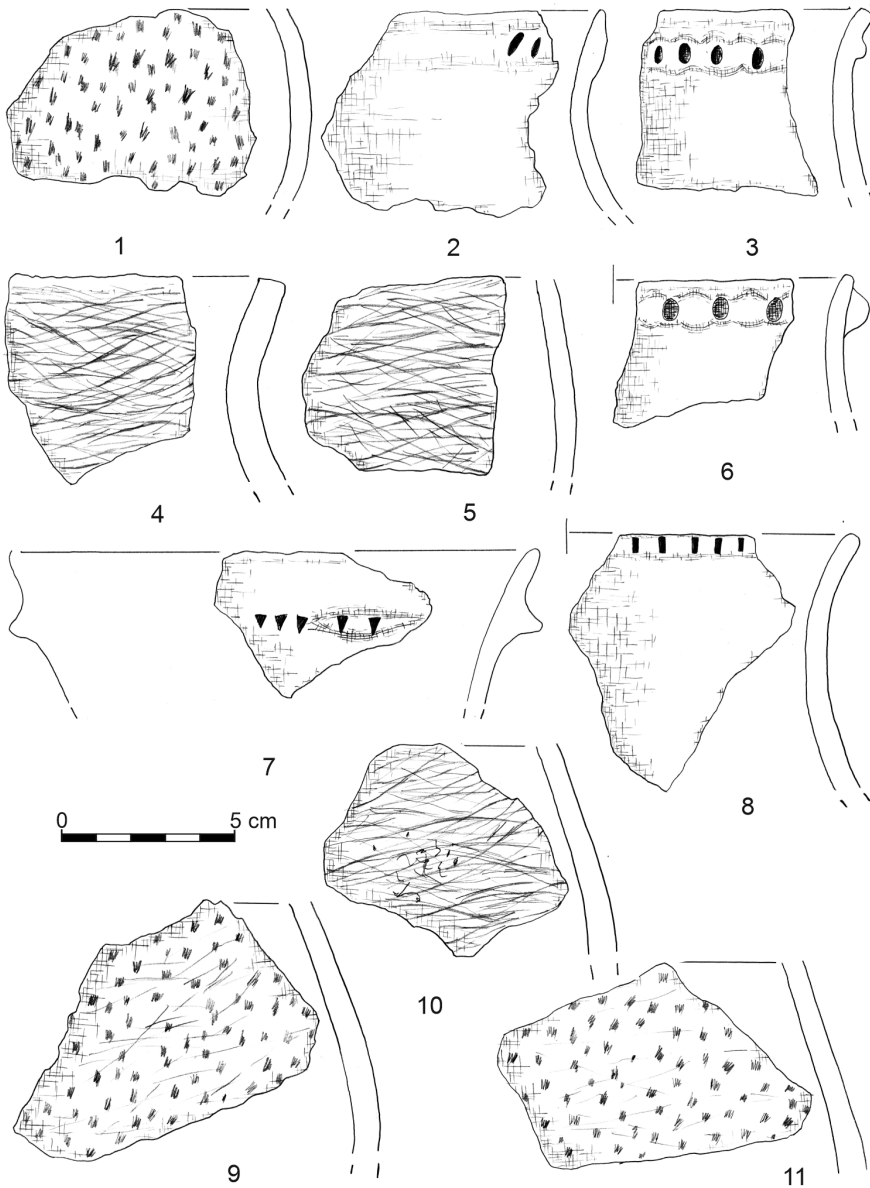
older phases of the Mierzanowice culture from the turn of the 2nd millennium BC and the subsequent centuries (Madej, Valde-Nowak 2020, 121).

The first fragment is the top of a vessel with a lightly widened spout and the neck covered with a carpet cord ornament inclined to the left (Figs. 4: 2; 5: 2). This type of cord ornament is known from the Sietesz group, developing within the Rzeszów Foothills in the San river basin. (Madej, Valde-Nowak 2020, 36–47, Tables III–V).

The second example is the lightly protruding spout, which, for a change, is covered with zonal cord-impressed ornament, but the cord imprints are also inclined to the left (Figs. 4: 3; 5: 3) This type of ornamentation was widely used in the older phases of the Mierzanowice culture inhabiting the area of the Carpathian interfluvium of the Vistula river basin (c.f. Madej, Valde-Nowak 2020, 61–74, Tables XXIII–XXVIII).



**FIG. 5.** Spišský hrad, Žehra municipality, Spišská Nová Ves district. Selection of ceramics (Drawing: J. Chowaniak)



**FIG. 6.** Spišský hrad, Žehra municipality, Spišská Nová Ves district. Selection of ceramics (Drawing: J. Chowaniak)



To sum up, it has to be underlined, that the analysed ceramics collection is indeed small and has been discovered in the secondary deposit, its value with regards to the cognition of the beginnings of the Bronze Age, not only in the Spiš region but the whole Polish and Slovak Carpathians, cannot be underestimated. It is because the Mierzanowice culture materials from the Polish Carpathians are known predominantly from settlement sites, whereas in the Slovak Carpathians, they come mainly from cemeteries.<sup>4</sup>

An important conclusion that can be drawn after the analysis of the Mierzanowice culture from Spišský hrad is the statement that this ceramic material possesses the features of several phases of the Mierzanowice culture and it is similar to the ceramic inventories of the Mierzanowice culture developing both in the San river basin as well as in the foreland of the Carpathians, between Kraków and Bochnia. Surprisingly, there are no references to the Pleszów group of the Mierzanowice culture, known from the area of the Polish Carpathians located directly north of Spiš.

All these observations, developing our knowledge about the Mierzanowice culture in the Carpathians, have to be verified in the course of further archaeological excavations within the Spišský hrad hill.

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4 From the sites of sedimentary type in Spiš, collections of ceramics referring to the Mierzanowice culture materials are known, however they are very rare. The multicultural site of Velká Lomnica-Burchbrich can be mentioned as an example (Novotná, Soják 2013). From Spiš, however, we know of a number of early Bronze Age cemeteries, linked to the Košťany culture (Bátora, 2018, 83), one of which is located very close to Spišský hrad in the village of Spišské Podhradie (Novotná, Soják 2016).

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