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## **An iron axe head from historical times discovered in Jaroszowice (Wadowice district)**

### **ABSTRACT**

In the 1970s, an iron axe head was discovered on the banks of the Skawa River in Jaroszowice (Wadowice district). This richly decorated find was brought years later by the finder's son to the Sucha Beskidzka Municipal Museum. According to M. Glosek's typology, the find can be classified as type VIII and dated in a broad time frame of the late medieval and the early post-medieval period.

### **KEYWORDS**

Axe head, late Middle Ages, Skawa, Jaroszowice



A resident of Wadowice, Mr. Zbigniew Szkut, came to the Sucha Beskidzka Municipal Museum at the beginning of August 2024, bringing with him the iron axe head to identify whether it was an article of interest for archaeologists. According to Mr. Szkut, the above-mentioned item was found by the late his father – Adam Szkut – in the 1970s, during a walk along the right bank of the Skawa River in Jaroszowice (Wadowice district), near the water source for the city of Wadowice (Fig. 1). Mr. Szkut, the finder's son, came to the Municipal Museum of Sucha Beskidzka with the axe head, which he found in the basement of the house, some years later.

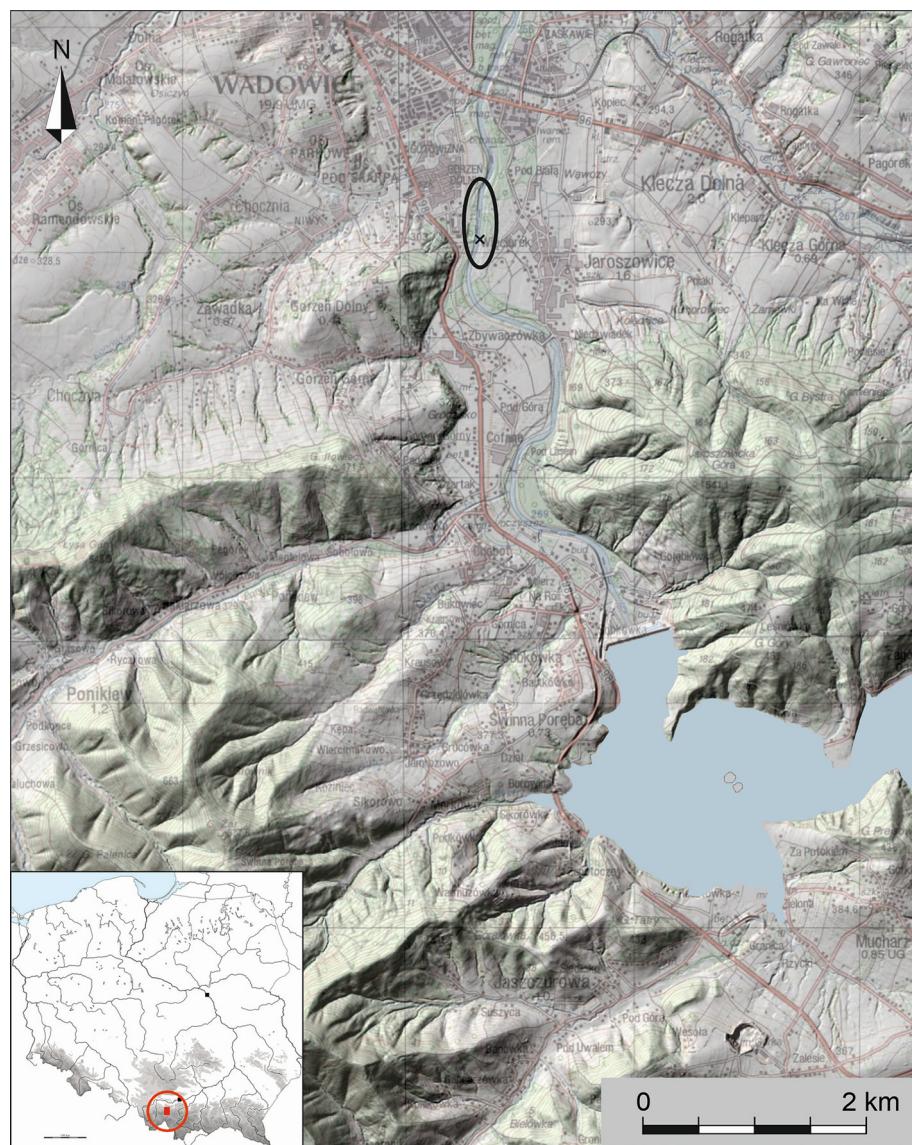
The iron axe head (total length: 21.5 cm, blade width: 9 cm, minimal neck width: 3.2 cm, socket width: 5.5 cm, socket length: 6.5 cm, eye dimensions: 4.2 cm × 3.6 cm, butt dimensions: 4.0/4.6 cm × 5.2 cm, weight: 900 g) is a relatively well-preserved specimen (Fig. 2). It is characterized by a narrow, quite slender, asymmetrical blade and a long neck. The socket is well defined and semi-oval in the top view, as well as its eye. The butt is flat and slightly trapezoidal in shape.

The specimen has a double-sided ornament. It is decorated with a group of small stamped concave points, most of which are connected by straight lines. In some cases, the concave dots are clustered in groups of three or four, forming the shape of a triangle. The design in question does not bear any traces of nonferrous inlaid.

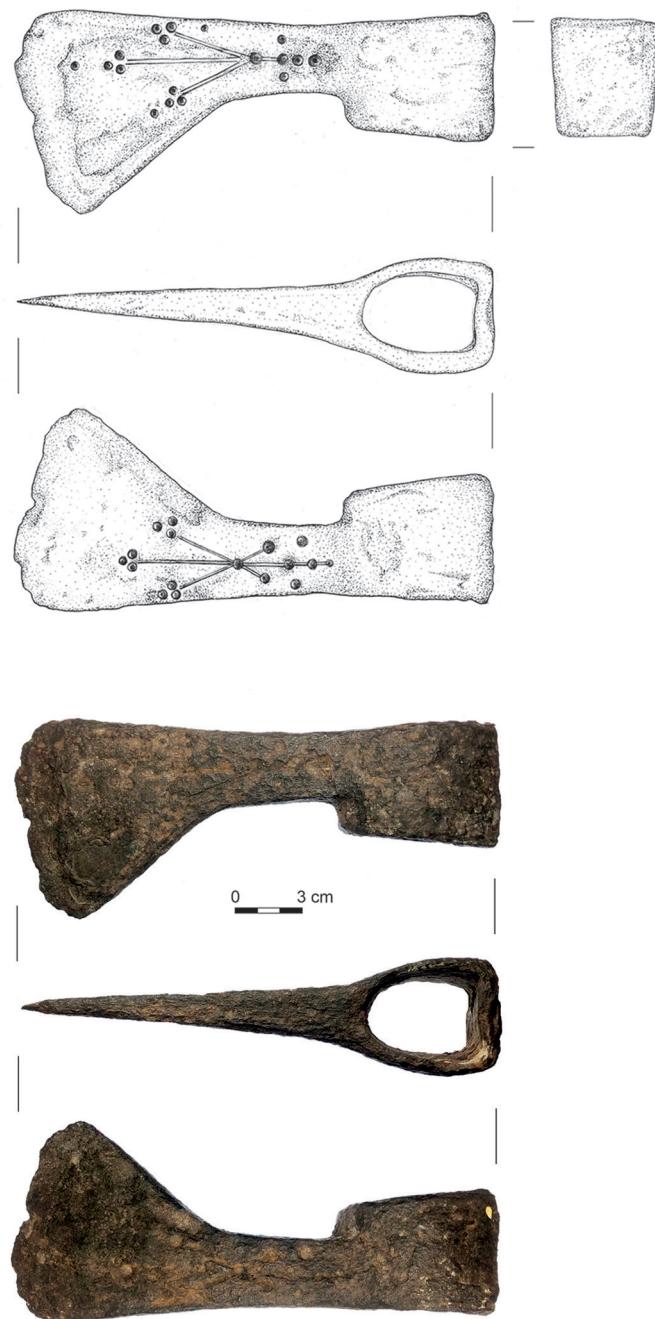
Although at first sight the decor on both sides slightly differs from each other, it may as well be resulting from a state of axe head surface preservation (Fig. 2). Similar reservations have to be expressed about the so-called blacksmith marks (Głosek 1996: 63–70), which were not observed on either side of the axe head.

The find discussed here can be classified as type VIII by Marian Głosek (1996: 38–39; 114–115, Tabl. XIII–XIV), which is characterized by lozenge or trapezoidal sockets, long and narrow blades, and poorly defined beards. In terms of dimensions and form, the type VIII (and the similar subtype VIIIa, with asymmetrical blades terminating in beards) does not differ much from the highlander hatchets used until today in the Podhale region in SE Poland (Głosek 1996: 40), and although according to some researchers these axes were used mostly for wood processing, they could occasionally serve as weaponry (Głosek 1996: 40; Marek 2008: 137).

In south-eastern Poland, the finds representing Głosek's types VIII (and VIIIa) are known from more than 20 specimens (Głosek 1996: 38–39; Nowakowski 1998: 19, 51–52, tabl. 6.3, 7.1; Tyniec-Kępińska 2005: 145–146, ryc. 2;



**FIG. 1.** Approximate location of the find



**FIG. 2.** The axe head from Jaroszowice (drawing and photo by J. Chowaniak)

Pradzieje 2005: 333–334; Ławrynowicz, Strzyż 2001: 260, ryc. 2.8; Glinianowicz 2005: 159–160, tabl. XIII; Kloss, Kuśnierz 2021). Understandably, they appear also in the rest part of Poland (Głosek 1996: 38–39; see recently: Bis 2015: 265, Fig. 9.2; Janowski, Chmiel-Chrzanowska 2019; Michalak 2019: 162–163), as well as abroad, e.g. in Czechia (Novotný 1956: 339, Obr. 4; Žákovský 2011: 128–129, Obr. 20.b, d), Hungary (Holl 1982: 61, Abb. 16.1, 5), Romania (Croitoru 2016: 341, Fig. 8.1–3, 8; Husár *et al.* 2019: 134, Fig. 6), Ukraine (Birulina, Kuśnierz 2007), Lithuania (Malonaitis 2014: 18, il. 5) and Latvia (Brūžis 2016: 189). What is interesting, however, is that their distribution is rather not confirmed west from Oder River (Janowski, Chmiel-Chrzanowska 2019: 156; cf. Heindel 1992).

In most previous research on type VIII axe heads, the specimens in question were dated broadly to the late medieval period and, eventually, to the early stages of post-medieval times. Marian Głosek, the author of the most comprehensive work on medieval crushing and bruising weapons from the Polish collections, was inclined to date them to the mid-13<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, although with the possibility of extending their use into the 16<sup>th</sup> century, particularly to its first half (Głosek 1996: 38–41, 80)<sup>1</sup>. However, as indicated by the results of more recent research, some of his observations require updating. There are strong indications to consider the lower chronological boundary of the axe heads in question at least already in the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century (see Kotowicz 2018: 119–121, 258, Pl. XIV.1), as evidenced by the find from Wrocław, which is dated by a stratigraphic context to the turn of the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Marek 2018: 642, 644, Fig. 503a). Similar reservations must be made in the case of their upper chronological boundary, as due to some researchers it is possible to recognize a longer duration of these objects than previously expected, as is indicated by the find from Vilnius castle, discovered in the cellar dated to the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Kuncevičius *et al.* 1991: 48, after: Michalak 2019: 163; see also: Konczewska, Konczewski 2004: 90).

The axe heads of Głosek's subtype VIIIa may be seen in similar time frames. Although by the most of researchers they are dated to the mid-13<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> centuries (Głosek 1996: 80; Nowakowski 1998: 19; Szmoniewski, Tunia 2016: 684; Janowski, Chmiel-Chrzanowska 2019: 157), there are grounds to extend their datation to the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Michalak 2019: 163), as evidenced by the find from Krzyczew (Kryčaŭ, Mahilioŭ raён, Belarus), discovered in

<sup>1</sup> In other publications these items are sometimes dated to the mid-13<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> centuries (Kloss, Kuśnierz 2021: 256, 258–259; Florek 2022: 92).

the 17<sup>th</sup> century stratigraphic context (Mâcel'ski 2003: 78, 84, Mal. 74.5), as well as the specimens from Beresteczko (Berestečko, Volhynia oblast, Ukraine), where several axe heads corresponding to subtype VIIIa were identified in the area regarded a swamp crossing point during the battle that took place in 1651 (Svešníkov 1993: 214, rys. 50.4, 6; 215, rys. 51.1, 3-4; 217, rys. 52.3-6; cf. 52.7). What is worth noting is that some of these axe heads bore traces of blacksmith marks (Svešníkov 1993: 214, rys. 50.6; 215, rys. 51.3; 217, rys. 52.3) or even a decoration (Svešníkov 1993: 217, rys. 52.3, cf. 52.7). According to Igor Svešníkov, the items in question served as weapons for the peasant insurgents from the Bohdan Chmielnicki's troops (Svešníkov 1993: 212-219).

In light of the above comments, the dating of the find from Jaroszowice is a challenging endeavor. The main problem with precise dating of type VIII (and VIIIa as well) axe heads results from the fact that most of specimens at our disposal are stray finds (cf. Glosek 1996: 84-95; Kloss, Kuśnierz 2021: 255-260). Precisely dated objects are strictly rare. Therefore, of particular value is a small type VIII axe head dated to the 14<sup>th</sup> – early 15<sup>th</sup> century from Plemięta, Grudziądz district (Kola 1985: 151-152, Tabl. XX.3; cf. also Tabl. XX.6), a fortified site that was probably ruined in 1414 (Nadolski 1985: 10), as well as the type VIII find from Krosno Odrzańskie, Krosno Odrzańskie district, which was discovered in a stratigraphic context dated to the last quarter of the 13<sup>th</sup> – first quarter of the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries (Dziedzic 2007: 494, Abb. 13; Michalak 2019: 163, 387, Pl. 78.1). Since these examples do not fundamentally alter the prevailing view on the 'long chronology' of the type VIII axe heads, in the search for a basis for a more precise dating of the Jaroszowice find, one should refer to evidence other than typology alone. It would appear that some information is provided here by the ornamentation. Although decorations composed of concave straight lines and concave dots are not unusual on axe heads<sup>2</sup> (Novotný 1956: 337, Obr. 2; Glosek 1996: 115, Tabl. XIV.E, 117, Tabl. XVI.C, 124, Tabl. XXIII.D; Tyniec-Kępińska 2005: 146, Fig. 2; Kuśnierz 2010: 222-223, ryc. 11; Kloss, Kuśnierz 2021: 239, Tabl. II.H), there are grounds to link them to the late medieval or, eventually, to the early post-medieval period (see Glosek 1996: 53; Marek 2008: 357, ryc. 184). According to Marian Glosek, such a chronology may be ascribed to the ornamentation of the find from Bieżuń, Żuromin district, which, to some extent, is stylistically close to

<sup>2</sup> Their function is, however, unclear (Szmoniewski, Tunia 2016: 685; Glosek 1996: 63-70).

our specimen and which – due to the aforementioned author – is not earlier than the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Głosek 1996: 53, 132, Tabl. XXXI.A). Worth noting is that similarly decorated (although with a decor covered with brass) axe-heads from Praha-Podskalí, okres Praha-východ, Czechia, were dated by Bohuslav Novotný to the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> – the early 16<sup>th</sup> century (Novotný 1956: 346). It needs to be stressed, however, that all of these finds were discovered beyond the stratigraphic context. Taking into account the above remarks, we believe that it would not be incorrect to date the find from Jaroszowice in wide time-frames of the mid-13<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> century, with an emphasis, however, on the 14<sup>th</sup> – the early 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Medieval axe heads are often found in a water environment, and it is worth mentioning that a couple of type VIII or VIIIA objects were also discovered in riverbeds or river banks, such as finds from Dunajec river in Ostrów, Tarnów district (Głosek 1996: 88), Skawa river in Smolice<sup>3</sup>, Oświęcim district (Reyniak 1986: 319, ryc. 3; Tyniec-Kępińska 2005: 147–150, ryc. 3–6) or San river in Radymno, Jarosław district (Koperski 1980; Kotowicz 2005). According to M. Głosek, it is possible to consider such finds as markers of communication, trade or war routes, primarily following river valleys (Głosek 1996: 38; see also: Kotowicz 2005: 167–168). Whether it is true in the case of the Jaroszowice find (Fig. 3), is an open question, especially given the fact that the military role of the axe head in question cannot be proven – it may as well be a wood processing tool (Głosek 1996: 40; Michalak 2019: 163)<sup>4</sup>.

The village Jaroszowice, situated on the right bank of the Skawa River at the foot of *Jaroszowicka Góra* in the Wielickie Foothills (Kondracki 1998: 321–322) has a long history. It was mentioned in written accounts as early as 1317, when the head of the village was mentioned in a privilege issued by Władysław, the duke of Oświęcim (Leszczyńska-Skrętowa 1989: 242). It should be noted that from the late 13<sup>th</sup> century the area in question formed part of the Duchy of Oświęcim, and it was not until 1440 that it was acquired by the Kingdom of Poland (Prokop 2002). In 1441 the village Jaroszowice, together with castle Barwałd and villages Stronie, Leśnica, Zakrzów and Barwałd Dolny, has passed into the hands of a famous nobleman from Krakow, Mikołaj Serafin, and until the end of Middle Ages belonged to the Barwałd castle as a tenure

<sup>3</sup> Ca. 20 km north from Jaroszowice, as a crow flies.

<sup>4</sup> Worth noting is that the ornamentation cannot determine the military function of the find, since similar decorations are known from items linked with wood processing, such as adzes (Měchurová 2013: 626, Obr. 5).



**FIG. 3.** The right bank of the Skawa River, the area where the axe was discovered, view to the south (photo by J. Chowaniak)

(Leszczyńska-Skrętowa 1989: 242; Żurek 2024: 226)<sup>5</sup>. Thus, it is fair to say that although a stray find, the axe head from Jaroszowice not only extends the list of currently known specimens of Głosek's type VIII, but it is also a small but interesting piece of rich local history.

<sup>5</sup> Last but not least, the close vicinity of Jaroszowice holds a number of archaeological sites (Dryja 2024: 100, table 1). Although most of them are related to the Stone Age and come from archaeological research conducted in connection with the construction of the Świnna Poręba reservoir, which is located nearby (Foltyn, Foltyn 2001), some are of medieval origin, such as an open settlement site in Mucharz (site 12), situated only 6 km from Jaroszowice (Valde-Nowak, Tarasiński 2010).

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