

# Where Did the Spherical Hollow Buttons Come From? Comparing Great Moravian *Gombíky* with Examples from the Preslav Treasure

In 1978, the ploughed-up remains of gold and silver artefacts inlaid with precious stones and enamel were discovered at the Kastana site, just short of four kilometres from the town of Veliki Preslav, the former metropolis of the Bulgarian Empire. There was no doubt it was an exceptional assemblage of finds connected to life in the nearby early medieval court, possibly even that of Tsar Peter I of Bulgaria (927-969). Most of the sumptuous artefacts – gold diadem plaques decorated

with enamel, a two-sided necklace, an assemblage of gold earrings whose large size and high quality attests to excellent workmanship, pearl and gem medallions, a golden ring and a gold-set seal made out of rock crystal – are deemed to be of Byzantine origin.

Spherical or spindle-shaped gold pendants and gold buttons form a specific group in this assemblage. Especially remarkable are the spherical hollow pendants with a spectac-

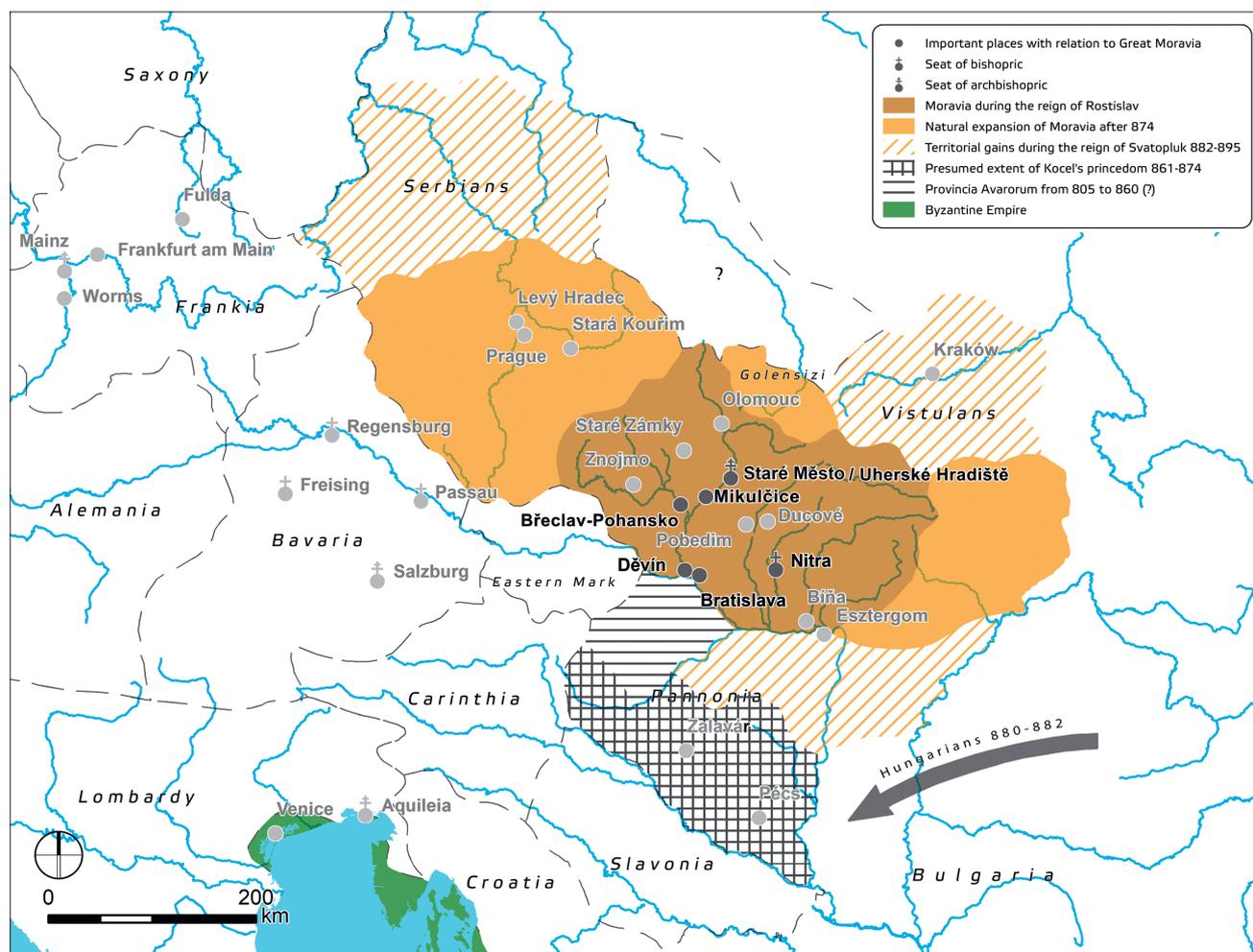
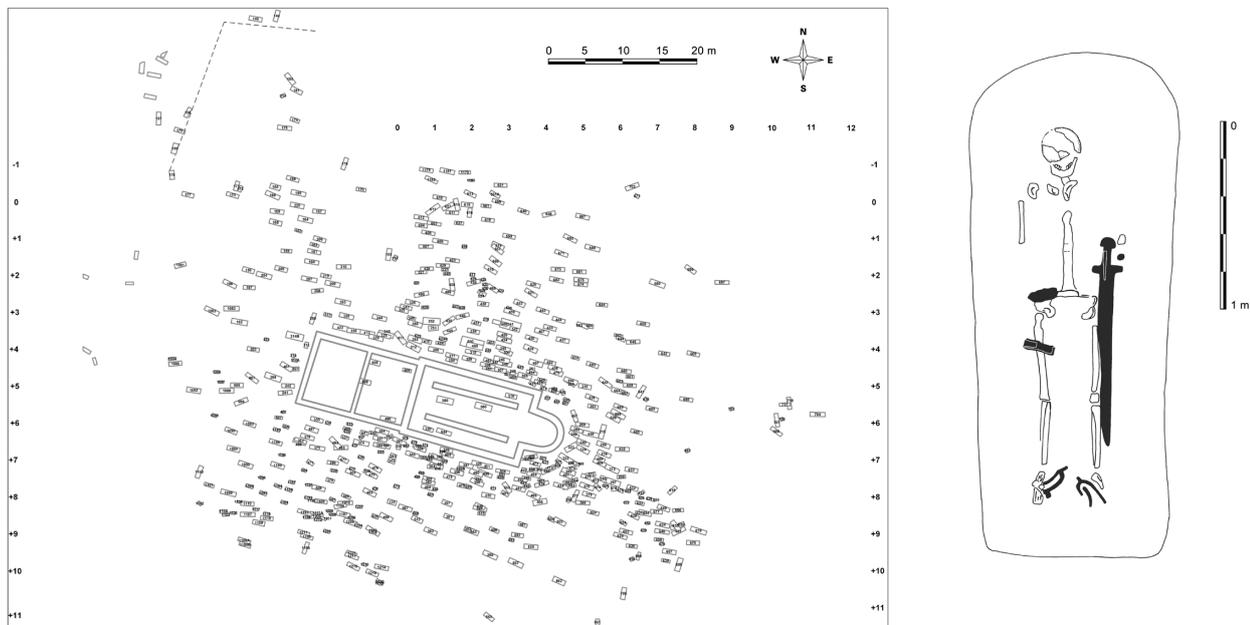


Fig. 1 Great Moravian area, territorial transformations and important places in the ninth century. – (After Kouřil, Great Moravia 12-13; graphics M. Vlach / L. Zahradníková).



**Fig. 2** Great Moravian burial rite, an example from site Mikulčice/Czech Republic: Church 3, grave no. 375. – (From Klanica et al., Mikulčice Basilika 219 and main plan).

ular size of c. 3 cm and a weight of over 20g each, which are decorated with the complicated technology of *cloisonné* enamel<sup>1</sup>. A third such artefact of identical appearance and size, but unknown origin, is in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York since 2003<sup>2</sup>. The character of the group of Byzantine pendants or buttons in the Preslav Treasure is exceptionally close to the finds of spherical hollow buttons called *gombíky* that were found more than 1000km away and were a typical element found in the graves of the Great Moravian social elite.

The history of Great Moravia, an early Slavic political power unit with its centre covering what is today southeast Moravia and southwest Slovakia (fig. 1), dates back to the ninth century. In 822, the Moravians entered history for the first time when their envoys attended the Imperial Diet of Frankfurt. The Moravian Mojmirid dynasty became extinct in the early tenth century as a result of Old Hungarian attacks, and so Great Moravia disappeared from written sources. Thus, the material culture of Great Moravian society – firmly datable to a relatively narrow span of one hundred years – comprised both elementary artefacts of local origin and elite items imported from, or inspired by, the Frankish and Byzantine Empires.

Typical Great Moravian elite grave goods, such as weapons (swords, axes, spears), spurs with fittings, buckles and strap ends made from precious metals, pendant crosses, metal plaques, as well as numerous kinds of jewellery, such as

earrings, rings, pendants, beads and necklaces, were found in central cemeteries near churches (fig. 2)<sup>3</sup>. Important for this paper is that among the finds were also hollow spherical buttons – so-called *gombíky*.

## Great Moravian Hollow Buttons

### Typology

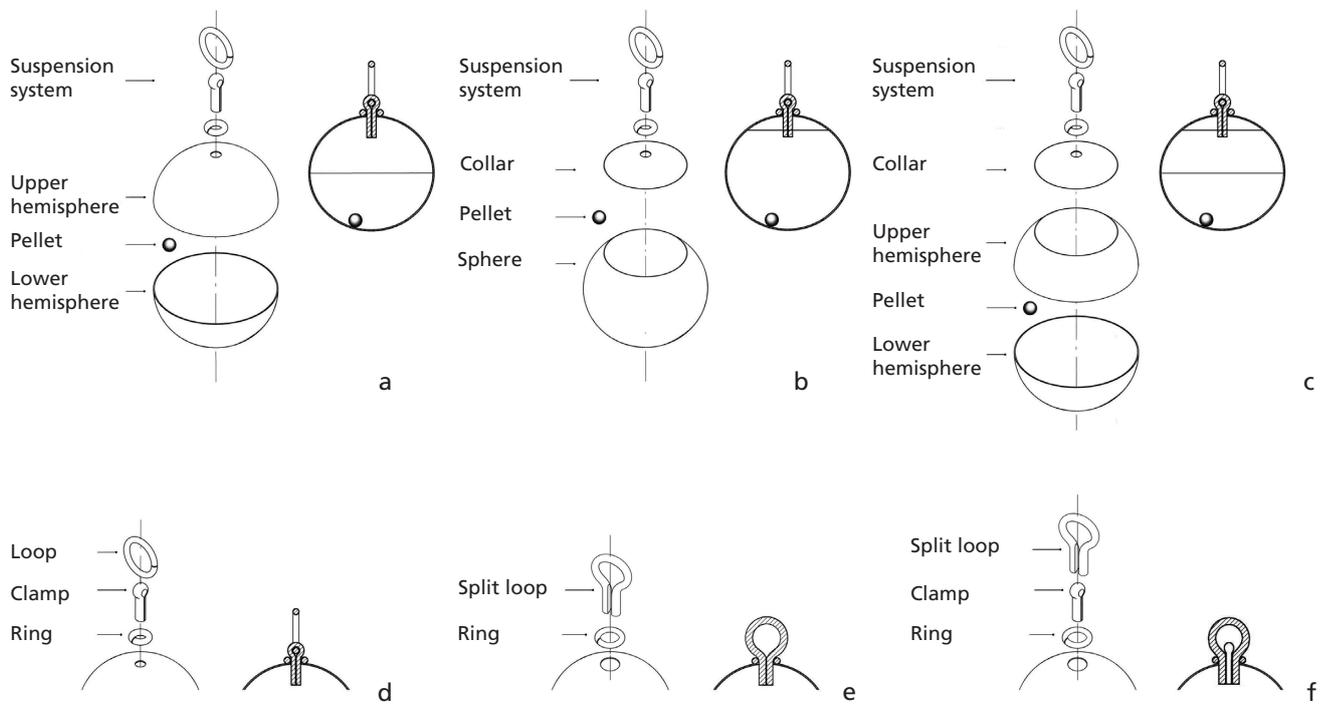
These small decorative metal artefacts typically consist of several construction parts – two hemispheres, a loop, a clamp and a ring (fig. 3a). Some are a button types made of a single piece of sheet metal covered with a collar (fig. 3b). The third variation of construction is a combination of those two types (fig. 3c). Similarly, the attachment system has three variations. A round loop secured with a clamp may have originally been movable within the clamp (fig. 3d). The other two attachment systems were designed to be immovable by nature, consisting of a split loop firmly attached to the sphere or the collar (fig. 3e-f). Of particular interest are those buttons with a pellet inside, which make a rattling sound when moved. Typologically, the buttons can be divided into three main categories depending on the decoration: without decoration (fig. 4a), decorated with chased ornaments (figs 4b; 5-6), and decorated with soldered granulation and filigree (figs 7-8)<sup>4</sup>. They were most often made of gilded copper sheet metal, but also

1 Based on Totev, Preslav Treasure esp. 58-75; Bosselmann-Ruickbie, Byzantinischer Schmuck 18-40, for pendants and buttons see esp. 24-25. – Recently, Aladjov, Le trésor de Preslav 52. 57-58.

2 The circumstances of discovery are unclear, unpublished in the context of the Preslav Treasure, available from [www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/473435](http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/473435).

3 For more details about Great Moravian material culture, see Kouřil, Great Moravia; Poláček et al., Great Moravian.

4 For classical button typology, see Hrubý, Staré Město-Na Valách 203-214; Dostál, Slovanská pohřebiště 60-65; recently Krupičková, Gombíky from Mikulčice 19-24.



**Fig. 3** Construction schemas of spherical hollow buttons (*gombíky*). Sphere: **a** Type with two hemispheres; **b** Type with a collar; **c** Combined type. – Loop: **d** Loop-clamp-ring type; **e** Split loop-ring type; **f** Split loop-clamp-ring type. – (Partly after Ottenwelter et al., *Technical study of jewellery 171*; drawing G. Plítková; graphics L. Zahradníková).



**Fig. 4** Selected Great Moravian spherical hollow buttons (*gombíky*). Typological group of undecorated buttons (**a**) and of buttons with vertical ribbing (**b**). – (Photos J. Foltýn, Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Institute of Archaeology, Brno, Moravian Museum and Department of Archaeology and Museology, Masaryk university; graphics Z. Pavková. Sites: Mikulčice [a1, a2, b1, b2], Staré Město – Na Valách [a3, b3, b4] and Uherské Hradiště – Sady [b5]). – Scale 1:1.

of silver or gold. They range in size typically from 2 to 3 cm in diameter, but many specimens exceed 3 or even 4 cm in size.

The typological group of buttons decorated with simplest chased decoration are buttons with vertical ribbing, which are hammered up to two-thirds of the height from a single piece of sheet metal, and therefore their production required the extraordinary skill of the goldsmith (**fig. 4b**). The most characteristic type of Great Moravian buttons is the one with two hemispheres richly decorated with chased plant, zoomor-

phic or geometric ornament. The most widespread among the chased decoration are plant ornaments in many forms of palmette motif (**fig. 5**); stylised birds dominate the zoomorphic motifs, while other zoomorphic motifs are rare (**fig. 6**).

Similar ornaments featured on finds from the Sassanian Empire, especially silver gilded Sassanian vessels, which could be the forerunner of comparable Chinese, Sogdian or Byzantine silk motifs<sup>5</sup>. These ornaments could have arrived in the ninth-century Central Europe region by long-distance trade,

<sup>5</sup> For more information, see Masia-Radford, *Luxury Silver Vessels*; Bier, *Sassanian Textiles*; Gyul, *Sogdian Textile Design*; Chen, *Fashion in Tang Dynasty 150*. 154. –

Overview related to *gombíky* by Klanica, *Velkomoravský gombík 434-444*, recently in Krupičková, *Unique Symbols 299-301*.



**Fig. 5** Selected Great Moravian spherical hollow buttons (*gombíky*). Typological group of buttons with chased plant ornaments. – (Photos J. Foltýn, Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Institute of Archaeology, Brno and Department of Archaeology and Museology, Masaryk university; graphics Z. Pavková. Sites: Břeclav-Pohansko [a11] and Mikulčice [a1-a10]). – Scale 1:1.

for example, with silk, where we can observe the same bird or plant motifs set in a circular field<sup>6</sup>.

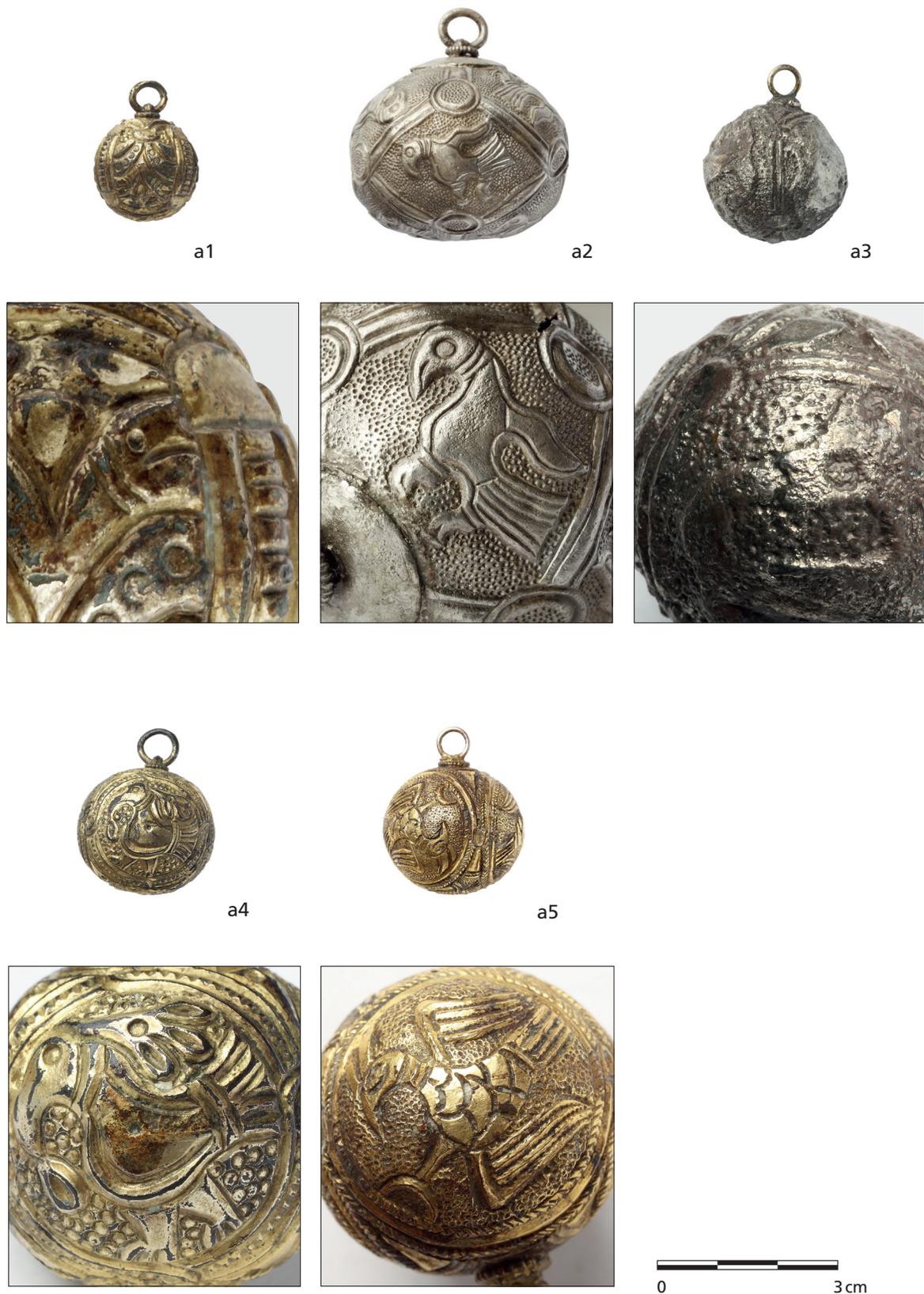
Another type of jewellery technique applied on buttons from Great Moravia is soldering of filigree and granulation. It could be fine poppy-seed granulation arranged into various motifs (fig. 7a), but most often it is full-surface granulation soldered onto underlying wire rings (fig. 7b). Other button types are decorated with applications of filigree made of twisted or beaded wire (fig. 8a). Another type of button with soldered decoration consists of specimens featuring applied bosses (fig. 8b) or two-layered buttons (fig. 8c) with more complicated decoration consisting of corrugated strips made from hammered filigree wire or other elaborate metal parts.

Except for the dominant spherical shape, we know of others, such as polyhedral, pear-shaped and oval specimens (fig. 9).

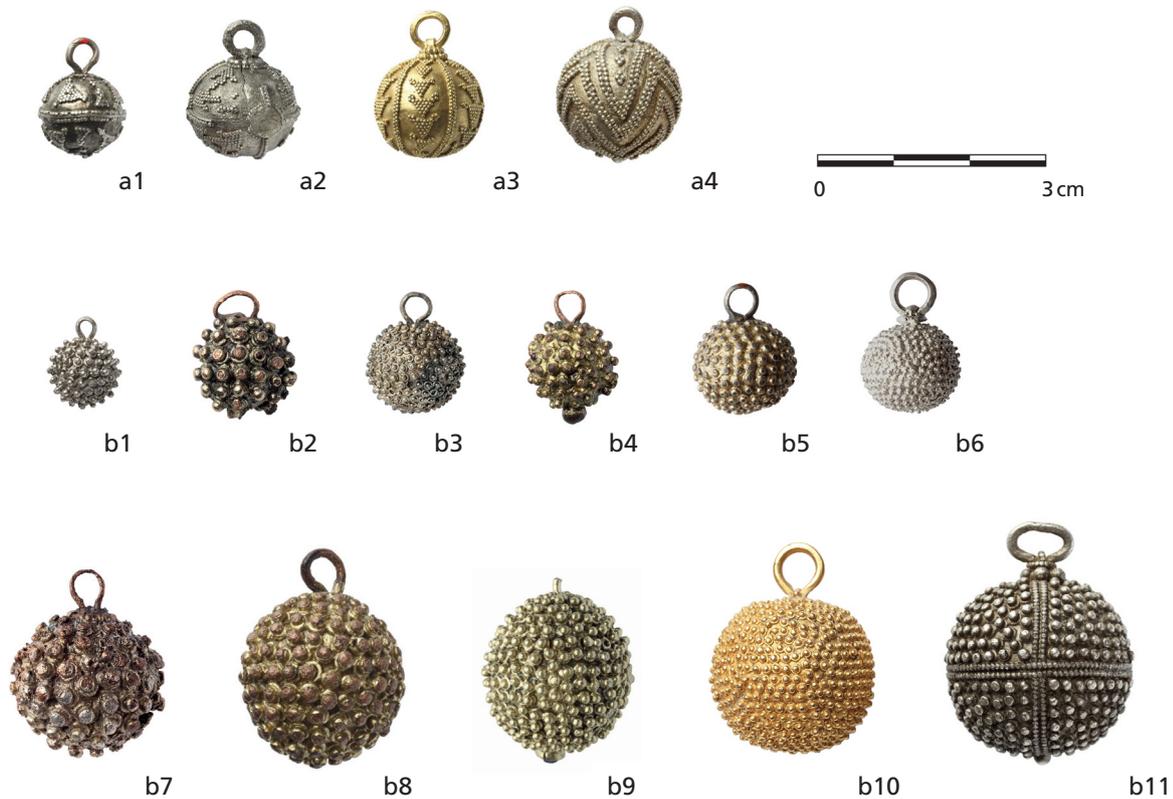
Typologically close to the hollow metal *gombíky* are glass buttons (fig. 10). These are small plain pieces with a diameter of 1-1.5 cm with glass fused to the metal loop. These usually occur in rural burial grounds, where spherical hollow buttons are found only exceptionally. Two glass buttons with setting of copper or gold bands were also found in the central area of Great Moravia (Břeclav-Pohansko, Staré Město – Na Valách). Those artefacts are similar to the bound rock crystal pendants known from the early Anglo-Saxon and Merovingian periods<sup>7</sup>.

6 E. g. silk from Sogdiana: Ierusalimskaja/Borkopp, Von China nach Byzanz 31. 63. 75.

7 E. g. Kornbluth, Merovingian Rock Crystal 54-55; Kornbluth, Transparent, Translucent 67-77.



**Fig. 6** Selected Great Moravian spherical hollow buttons (*gombíky*). Typological group of buttons with chased zoomorphic ornaments. – (Photos J. Foltýn, Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Institute of Archaeology, Brno, Moravian Museum and Department of Archaeology and Museology, Masaryk university; graphics Z. Pavková. Sites: Břeclav-Pohansko [a5], Mikulčice [a1-a3] and Staré Město – Na Valách [a4]). – Scale 1:1.



**Fig. 7** Selected Great Moravian spherical hollow buttons (*gombiky*). Typological group of buttons with soldered decoration: **a** With poppy-seed granulation. – **b** With full-surface granulation. – (Photos J. Foltýn, Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Institute of Archaeology, Brno and Moravian Museum; graphics Z. Pavková. Sites: Mikulčice [a1-a4, b1-b9, b11] and Staré Město – Na Valách [b10]). – Scale 1:1.



**Fig. 8** Selected Great Moravian spherical hollow buttons (*gombiky*). Typological group of buttons with soldered decoration: **a** With filigree wires. – **b** With bosses. – **c** Two-layered buttons. – (Photos J. Foltýn, Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Institute of Archaeology, Brno and Moravian Museum; graphics Z. Pavková. Sites: Mikulčice [a2, a4, b1-b5, c1, c2], Staré Město – Na Valách [a1] and Uherské Hradiště – Sady [a3]). – Scale 1:1.



**Fig. 9** Selected Great Moravian spherical hollow buttons (gombíky). Other shape of buttons: **a** Polyhedral shaped. – **b** Pear shaped. – **c** Oval shaped. – (Photos J. Foltýn, Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Institute of Archaeology, Brno and Moravian Museum; graphics Z. Pavková. Sites: Mikulčice [a1-a6, b2, c1, c2] and Předmostí u Přerova [b1]). – Scale 1:1.



**Fig. 10** Selected Great Moravian glass buttons: **a** Small glass buttons. – **b** Bound glass buttons. – (Photos J. Foltýn, Archives of the Moravian Museum and Department of Archaeology and Museology, Masaryk university; graphics Z. Pavková. Sites: Břeclav-Pohansko [a1, b2], Staré Město-Na Valách [b1]). – Scale 1:1.

## Use and Importance

As their name suggests (*gombíky* means buttons), the Great Moravian hollow spherical buttons have been traditionally considered to be garment fasteners that attached different pieces of clothing<sup>8</sup>. There is exact proof of this. At the Great Moravian stronghold in Mikulčice, a pair of *gombíky* were found with knitwear eyelets corroded onto them, indicating they had been attached to a garment, along with eyelets sewn onto the corresponding textile through which the buttons had been fastened (fig. 11)<sup>9</sup>. It is thus evident that at least some of the Great Moravian *gombíky* were used as garment fasteners. The fact that *gombíky* were frequently found in graves near the collarbones of the deceased, mostly in pairs, supports this hypothesis. The natural conditions in Great Moravian graves, in which only small fragments of textiles that are secondarily attached to metal artefacts are usually preserved<sup>10</sup>, makes the evaluation of the garment designs difficult. It can be only assumed that some of the *gombíky* were used to fasten the necklines of tunics or other items of clothes, as is documented by early medieval finds from other regions, such as Egypt, the Caucasus and Scandinavia<sup>11</sup>.

However, other uses of *gombíky* cannot be ruled out, which is suggested by the find of buttons corroded onto necklace beads, which was discovered at a rural Great Moravian burial site in Dolní Věstonice. In this case, the buttons were obviously a decorative part of the necklace. These are not typical hollow spherical buttons, but specimens of a simpler type made from copper alloy and glass (fig. 12)<sup>12</sup>. Other similar finds are described by V. Hrubý for the Staré Město-Na Valách site, where in some cases the buttons could also be part of the necklaces<sup>13</sup>. There are no documented cases of sewing *gombík*-like pendants onto garment hems, decorative stripes or chains affixed to headwear, headdresses and crowns. This use is only documented in Byzantine iconography<sup>14</sup>. The analogies might also be relevant for the material from Great Moravia<sup>15</sup>. Another interpretation based on Byzantine analogies is the use of buttons as appliques on the garment hem<sup>16</sup>.

In any case, hollow spherical buttons play a specific role in the Great Moravian material culture due to the number of excavated specimens and the elite context of these finds. Over 600 hollow buttons dated to the Great Moravian era are

known<sup>17</sup>, mainly from central cemeteries, where they were often found in richly equipped graves. The percentage of graves with buttons varies between 6 and 15% at the central cemeteries<sup>18</sup>. Only a few graves with spherical hollow buttons were excavated in the hinterland of strongholds or rural areas, although the number of glass buttons excavated there was larger<sup>19</sup>. It is clear that the occurrence of hollow spherical metal buttons coincides with the presence of the Moravian elite, thus they can be categorised as elite artefacts. Moreover, these buttons are often found together with other elite artefacts, such as precious metal earrings and other jewellery, spurs with fittings and weapons.

As for the age and sex of the deceased next to whom the buttons were found, they are mostly girls – more precisely, the buttons are mostly discovered in children's graves together with other grave goods that are typically related to female burials. The second most frequent occurrence was in adult female burials, although they also occurred in smaller numbers in graves of adult males and boys. The lesser numbers in the graves of boys could be also related to a methodological problem. The archaeological interpretation of gender differences in the funerary display of children's graves is challenging, as the male gender is conclusively indicated only rarely by accompanying finds such as spurs or weapons<sup>20</sup>, which are typically associated with male burials. A higher proportion of adult men with *gombíky* appears at the central elite burial grounds, which can be interpreted as a social and chronological indicator<sup>21</sup>. Considering that some of the buttons contained a metal ball and made bell-like sound, the high occurrence in children's graves might hint to an apotropaic function. This is the usual interpretation of the finds of rattles, whose largest concentrations occur in children's graves<sup>22</sup>.

## Early Medieval Buttons: Europe and Asia<sup>23</sup>

### Bohemia

The nearest area, which is considered a cultural follower of Great Moravia, is the Bohemian region. Similar material culture reflects the historically documented dependence and dynastic ties between both regions in the Great Moravian period, as well as after the fall of Great Moravia<sup>24</sup>. This is

8 Interpretation first by Niederle, *Slovanské starožitnosti* 678. The term *gombíky* first by Eisner, *K dějinám*. The use of buttons is usually dated back to the High Middle Ages: e.g. Owen-Crocker et al., *Encyclopedia of Dress and Textiles* 106-107.

9 Krupičková et al., *Exact Evidences* 59-64.

10 E.g. Březinová, *Luxury Textiles* 340-343.

11 Thomas, *Medieval Egypt* 11-28. – Ierusalimskaja/Borkopp, *Von China nach Byzanz* 18. 20-21. 25. 39. 44. 46. – Arbman, *Birka I* pl. 93; Geijer, *Birka III* 143. 150 pl. 33.

12 Ungerman, *Dolní Věstonice* 131. – Krupičková et al., *Examples for Using gombíky* 93-97.

13 Hrubý, *Staré Město-Na Valách* 203. 262.

14 *Cat. Magdeburg 2001*, 490 (A. Bosselmann).

15 Hrubý, *Staré Město-Na Valách* 203.

16 Chorvátová, *K problému terminologie* 211-212.

17 Pavlovičová, *K vypovedacej schopnosti gombíka* 95.

18 Krupičková, *Gombíky from Mikulčice* tab. 38-40.

19 Krupičková, *Gombíky from Mikulčice* tab. 41.

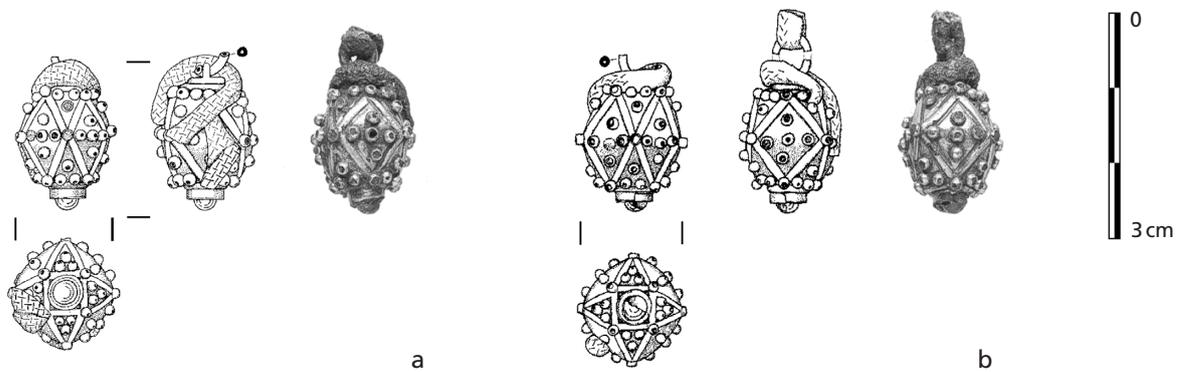
20 Krupičková, *Gombíky from Mikulčice* 96.

21 For more, see Krupičková, *Gombíky from Mikulčice* 95-96.

22 Smetánka, *Archeologické etudy* 11-16. – Ungerman, *Amulety v dětských* 231.

23 For the traditional interpretation of the Great Moravian influences to other lands, see Dostál, *Vordringen* 361-416; reinterpreted recently by Ungerman, *Frühmittelalterliche Ohrringe* esp. 63. For an overview of early medieval button finds, see also Krupičková, *Unique Symbols* 299-301; Krupičková, *Gombíky from Mikulčice* 68-71.

24 Historical sources, e.g., in Kalhous, *Anatomy of a Duchy*. Archaeological context, e.g., in Boháčová/Profantová, *Bohemia and Great Moravia*.



**Fig. 11** A pair of spherical hollow buttons with corroded-on knitwear eyelets. Mikulčice, Church 3, grave no. 498. – (Photos Archive of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Institute of Archaeology, Brno; drawing after Klanica et al., Mikulčice Basilika 264; graphics L. Zahradníková). – Scale 1:1.

also the case of spherical hollow buttons finds: we know of more than one hundred specimens from Bohemia<sup>25</sup>, including those made with chasing. In both regions, we have evidence of similar manufacturing processes and decorations, however, recent research has shown a different technological and motif-specific group of *gombíky* from Bohemia that can be classified as products of the so-called »Prague workshop«<sup>26</sup>. They show a remarkable material diversity between *gombíky* from the Moravian and Bohemian central strongholds Mikulčice and Prague Castle; in Mikulčice, the alloys often contain a higher amount of gold, which could be a chronological aspect<sup>27</sup>.

### Frankish Empire, North and East Europe

Garment fastenings in the Early Middle Ages drew on the traditional use of fibulae that had been known in Europe since the Bronze Age and were used in a number of variants in the Roman Era and the Migration Period. This is the direction taken by the development of garment fastening in western and northern Europe<sup>28</sup>. Fasteners that are typologically close to buttons with loops occurred, for instance, in Birka (Sweden) in grave 1074, but there they were linked with the burial of an individual dressed in a caftan, which points to contact with the area of Central Asia<sup>29</sup>. In the Frankish Empire, hollow spherical pendants/buttons with a chased decoration were apparently rare. Only one pair is known to me from Matzhausen (Bavaria) and this has an atypical design



**Fig. 12** Spherical hollow buttons used as a decorative part of the necklace. Dolní Věstonice, grave no. 485/49. – (Photo Archive of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Institute of Archaeology, Brno; graphics L. Zahradníková). – Scale 1:1.

25 E. g. Profantová, Klecany 198-99; Krupičková, Gombíky from Mikulčice tab. 43.

26 Krupičková, Gombíky from Mikulčice 77-81.

27 More about this research in Ottenwelter et al., Technological characterisation.

28 See Kleemann, Grabfunde 94-99; Martin, Schmuck und Tracht 40-50. 56-57; Martin, Early Merovingian 226-230.

29 Arbman, Birka I pl. 93. – Geijer, Birka III 143. 150 pl. 33.

with stylised human(?) faces<sup>30</sup>. In contrast, pendants and beads, with a similar appearance to the Moravian buttons made with similar technologies and decorated with soldered components such as granulation and filigree, were found in the context of north-eastern and eastern Europe («hacksilver» hoard horizon in Poland and finds from Russia and Ukraine)<sup>31</sup>. However, these artefacts are dated to later periods.

### Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary

Early medieval buttons/pendants have not been found regularly to the west and north-west of Great Moravia. However, similar in shape and technology to finds excavated in east/north-east Europe date as late as post-Great Moravian times. A slightly different picture is presented by archaeological finds from the territories south of the Great Moravian borders, for example, in Hungarian Pannonia, Croatia, Romania and Bulgaria, where buttons that are sometimes similar to the »Great Moravian style« have been excavated.

The finds of hollow buttons from what is today Croatia are often discussed in the literature. Twelve types have been published, especially those excavated from graves dated to between the eighth and eleventh centuries. Buttons from Trilj and Brestovac are possibly among the oldest. Later button types from Croatia are more prolonged and egg-shaped<sup>32</sup>, tending to resemble pendants with loose loops from the Preslav Treasure that were iconographically pictured as sewn-on elements of Byzantine garments<sup>33</sup>. It should also be mentioned that there are no hollow spherical buttons with chased ornaments among the published Croatian finds. If decorated at all, they feature solely granulation, filigree or glass inlays.

The situation in Romania is well mapped from the tenth century, when small spherical or mushroom-shaped buttons became fashionable<sup>34</sup>. Exceptionally, *gombik*-like pendants dated as early as the ninth century have been published, such as those with enamel applications from the Alba Iulia site that are described below<sup>35</sup>.

Recently, many buttons/pendants have been found in Bulgaria independently of the Preslav Treasure. They include hollow sheet-metal buttons with two hemispheres soldered together, with a loop, or small cast types. Bulgarian finds tend to be undecorated or decorated with a simple engraved geometrical design, which is only exceptionally made using other techniques. A wealth of examples was discovered during excavations at the Pliska burial site<sup>36</sup>.

Large numbers of buttons were found in the Carpathian Basin. Hungarian researchers have thought that their roots date back to the eighth century and that they can be related to the Avar culture, and the steppe culture in general. However, their occurrence is quite exceptional in Avar graves. Only a few pieces of small, undecorated buttons or glass types were found<sup>37</sup> there. It was only some decades later, in the second part of the ninth century, that large, spherical hollow buttons started to appear in the Carpathian Basin as well. Apart from Great Moravia and Bohemia, this is the only area with finds of large spherical hollow buttons with chased decoration. They were found there in the context of the Slavic population, mainly in the Priwina and Chezil (Kocel) Mosapurc (Blatnograd) area (today Zalavár in Hungary)<sup>38</sup>. Their occurrence can be related to close ties between the local ruling class and the milieu of Great Moravia. Another group of such Pannonian buttons found in the Old Hungarian context dates back to the tenth century. It is assumed that they were taken there from the Great Moravian area as spoils of war or by trade<sup>39</sup>. A large amount of small cast spherical or mushroom-shaped buttons comes from Old Hungarian graves. Those buttons seems to have been a regular part of some types of garments of Asian origin<sup>40</sup>.

### Byzantine Empire

The typology of buttons found in the territory of the Byzantine Empire was studied by R. M. Harrison's team on the basis of the finds from Saraçhane in Istanbul. Team member M. V. Gill classified the metal buttons into three basic categories based on their shape. In terms of technology, they were hollow artefacts made from two hemispheres soldered together and fitted with a loop. Most of them were undecorated, while only two examples were made with engraved reliefs in the form of radiating lines, straight lines and petals. All the buttons excavated were small bronze specimens, about 1 cm in diameter, with only a few pieces up to 1.7 cm in diameter. Interestingly, one of the buttons had a bronze pellet inside, similar to some finds from Great Moravia. It would be difficult to agree on a date for these clothing fasteners found in the long-inhabited area of the town: the oldest was found in a grave dated to the sixth century, and the youngest dates to the High Middle Ages<sup>41</sup>.

Similar buttons were discovered in the Turkish site of Sardis, which were described by J. C. Waldbaum who used the imprecise term »biconical beads«. He dated them as late as

30 Stroh, Die Reihengräber 30 pl. 1, 1-2, recently Hasil et al., Dubious Early 1-13.

31 E. g., Nezdovo: Puškina, Puť iz varyag 49; Rjabceva, Contacts 174-175 fig. 2, 18, 20.

32 Petrinec, Gräberfelder 160, 294. – Sokol, Medieval Jewelry fig. 10. – Bühler, »Schatz« von Brestovac 24-25, 191-192.

33 See Bosselmann-Ruickbie, Byzantinischer Schmuck 28.

34 Oța, Medieval Banat 142 fig. 19 (except for no. 25 that comes from the tenth and eleventh centuries).

35 Ciugudean, Necropoli de la Alba Iulia 28-29 nos 23, 25.

36 Važarova, Bogatoje pograbenije 305 figs 1-2 (more buttons fig. 6); Henning, Pliska 694-695, 697-698 pl. 16, 18. Summary in Važarova, Slavjani i Prbulgari (e. g., figs 122, 127, 129, 142, 149, 164-165).

37 Szóke, Das birituelle Gräberfeld 100.

38 E. g., Szóke, Mosaburg/Zalavár 35-43 esp. 38. More detailed overview in Krupičková, Gombiky from Mikulčice 81-83.

39 Mesterházy, Nagymorva díszgombok 211-227.

40 Réka, Fülesgombok tipokronológiája 153-175.

41 Gill, Small Finds 263-264 pl. 397.

the period after 1000, some of them even to the Late Byzantine/Turkish periods<sup>42</sup>. These also are small specimens made of copper alloys with a diameter of c. 1 cm. Other similar finds of buttons/pendants come from the Byzantine trading stations in Crimea, e. g., former Sugdaia (today Sudak, Ukraine). However, dating these finds is again considerably vague – from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries. It is interesting that those pieces were often used as pendants in necklaces<sup>43</sup>. The undecorated metal or glass pieces known from Great Moravian non-elite strata were used in the same way<sup>44</sup>.

A gold button with vertical ribbing discovered in the area of Thessaloniki is one of the few decorated buttons made of precious metal to have been published. The occurrence of buttons was summed up in A. C. Antonaras's article on Middle Byzantine jewellery from this region: »Although buttons are known from earlier centuries, it appears that they were not very widespread, at least not the metal ones«. The author also mentioned that fibulae gave way to buttons during the Middle Byzantine era<sup>45</sup>.

Disc-shaped bone buttons might have been used in Byzantium at the same time<sup>46</sup>, while textile-covered buttons with an organic core and a loop were seemingly an interesting alternative<sup>47</sup>. Excavations in the territory of Byzantium-period Egypt, where a textile-covered button was discovered, yielded many pieces of well-preserved clothing, allowing a detailed examination of their designs. The tunics found there have different cuts that sometimes require small button-like fasteners. In some cases, clamps attached to the garments were preserved, while their counterparts are often missing. Small buttons and clamps were placed in the neckline area, often asymmetrically on the side on a single part of the garment<sup>48</sup>.

### Caucasus, Central Asia and Other Asian Regions

Analogies to the buttons dealt with in this study can be found in Asian countries. The North Caucasus is yet another centre of well-preserved medieval textiles. Excavations at the Moshchevaya Balka burial site yielded 132 pieces of textile, which are now part of the Hermitage collection. Some pieces of silk textile from north-east Persian workshops, known as Sogdiana silk, included well-preserved fasteners. According to the published images, these were mainly textile buttons with loops that were run through clamps on the fastened part of the garment, as well as small copper-alloy buttons<sup>49</sup>. As to their design, these finds were usually narrow caftans with more buttons along the torso down to the waist. This

is a typical Asian garment type, widespread from the Near East to China. The cut with a close-fitting upper part and wide »skirt« was adapted for horseback riding. The dating of this garment type goes back to Parni and Sasanian times<sup>50</sup>. The early medieval fashion is represented by a wide range of caftans with front or left/right-sided fastening, sometimes hidden under the fabric. The small buttons were used as fasteners and they were made from different materials – fabric coated over a solid core, textile knots or simple undecorated metal buttons<sup>51</sup>.

### Comparison of the Preslav Treasure and the Great Moravian Finds

Among the pendants/buttons discovered in Veliki Preslav that have typological/technological equivalents in Great Moravian finds, are two large gold items decorated with enamel, two spherical gold pendants with full-surface granulation on rings, an egg-shaped pendant with full-surface granulation with a threaded pearl on the lower hemisphere, and three small, undecorated gold buttons (fig. 13). The other three oval pendants from the Preslav Treasure, which have loops attached by a hinge-like mechanism, differ in both shape and technique and could not have served as garment fasteners, which is why they were not included in the category described below.

The two largest pendants/buttons from the Preslav Treasure are unique due to their decorative technique. While their construction is made by the standard method of two soldered hemispheres, one of which is crowned by a collar with split loop and filigree ring, the *cloisonné* enamel is unprecedented in *gombiky*. The only other published find of an enamel button/pendant was discovered in the cemetery of Stația de Salvare in the former ancient metropolis of the province of Dacia<sup>52</sup>, now Alba Iulia in central Romania. It is a rather small spherical *gombik* (1.2 cm in diameter), decorated with circular enamel applications on the surface, which is otherwise undecorated. It is dated approximately to the ninth century<sup>53</sup>. None of the Great Moravian *gombiky* are decorated with enamel; generally, artefacts decorated with enamel have only rarely been found in Great Moravian sites and are considered to be imports<sup>54</sup>. It is the manufacturing technology and shape mentioned above that links the Preslav finds to the Great Moravian artefacts. The Great Moravian *gombiky* with vertical ribbing (sometimes referred to as melon-shaped buttons) are typologically closest to those from the Preslav

42 Waldbaum, Metalwork from Sardis 126 pl. 46.

43 Majko, Nekropoli Sudakskoi doliny 125-144.

44 Krupičková et al., Exact Evidences 64-69.

45 Antonaras, Byzantine Jewellery 121. 124 fig. 3.

46 Gill, The Small Finds 262-263. – Antonaras, Byzantine Jewellery 124. – Ierusalimskaja/Borkopp, Von China nach Byzanz 50.

47 Aben, Een koptisch kinderjurke 12-13.

48 Thomas, Medieval Egypt 9-27 fig. 16. – Thomas, Designing Identity figs 2-4.1; 2-5.5.

49 Ierusalimskaja/Borkopp, Von China nach Byzanz 18. 20-21. 25. 39. 44. 46.

50 Ierusalimskaja, Cafetans aux Simourghs 203-210.

51 Ierusalimskaja, Cafetans aux Simourghs 203-210. – Peck, Clothing in Sasanian 739-752. – Peck, Clothing in Persia 760-778.

52 L. Niederle mentions findings of enamel buttons from Kievan Rus' in evidence of N. P. Kondakov, see Niederle, Slovanské starožitnosti 679.

53 Ciugudean, Necropoli de la Alba Iulia 28. 117.

54 See the parts of the iron knife found in Staré Město-Na Valách: Kouřil, Great Moravia 379; Hrubý, Staré Město-Na Valách 174.



Fig. 13 Spherical hollow buttons/pendants from Preslav Treasure. – (Photos S. Steidl, LEIZA; graphics L. Zahradníková). – Scale 1:1.



Fig. 14 Hollow spherical buttons with vertical ribbing: **a** Preslav Treasure. – **b** Staré Město-Na Valách. – **c** Uherské Hradiště-Sady. – (Photos a S. Steidl, LEIZA, b-c J. Foltýn, Czech Academy of Sciences, Institute of Archaeology, Brno and the Moravian Museum; graphics L. Zahradníková). – Scale 1:1.



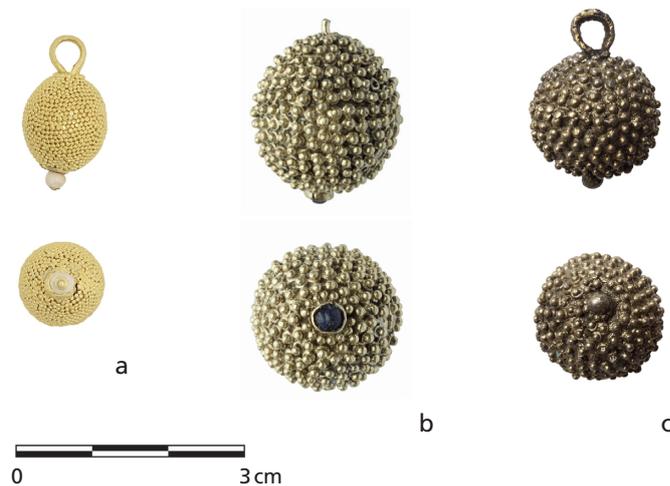
Fig. 15 Hollow spherical buttons with full-surface granulation: **a** Preslav Treasure. – **b** Mikulčice. – **c** Staré Město. – (Photos a S. Steidl, LEIZA, b-c J. Foltýn, Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Institute of Archaeology, Brno and Moravian Museum; graphics L. Zahradníková). – Scale 1:1.

Treasure (fig. 14). A total of eleven gold pieces were discovered at central Great Moravian sites. Other examples of a similar shape were made of gilded silver, gilded copper alloy and non-gilded copper alloy, which makes the total number of artefacts of this type 36<sup>55</sup>.

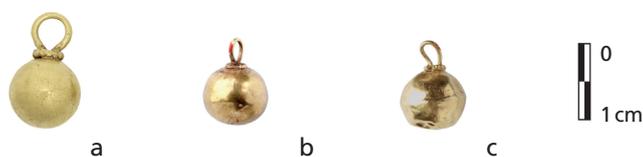
The Preslav Treasure also contained two hollow spherical buttons fully covered with granulation. Each of the individual granules were embedded in metal rings. Their shape and the technology used to make these small gold artefacts

are identical to a number of Great Moravian finds (fig. 15). However, a different material dominated the production in Great Moravia. While only four Great Moravian buttons were made of gold, over forty of them, fully granulated, were made of silver that was sometimes gilded. The collection is then completed with pieces made from gilded copper alloy. A total of 60 Great Moravian *gombíky* of this type have been published. This number includes special examples that are similar to another hollow spherical button excavated in

55 Total numbers of published *gombíky* from Moravia and Slovakia are based on Krupičková, *Gombíky from Mikulčice* tab. 38-42.



**Fig. 16** Hollow spherical buttons with full-surface granulation and decorated apex opposite the loop: **a** Preslav Treasure. – **b** Mikulčice. – **c** Uherské Hradiště – Sady. – (Photos a S. Steidl, LEIZA, b-c J. Foltýn, Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Institute of Archaeology, Brno and Moravian Museum; graphics L. Zahradníková). – Scale 1:1.



**Fig. 17** Undecorated hollow spherical buttons: **a** Preslav Treasure. – **b-c** Mikulčice. – (Photos a S. Steidl, LEIZA, b-c J. Foltýn, Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Institute of Archaeology, Brno and Moravian Museum; graphics L. Zahradníková). – Scale 1:1.

Preslav: a slightly egg-shaped artefact with a pearl at the apex opposite the loop (fig. 16). The use of pearls has not been documented in Great Moravian *gombíky*, but there are cases where the pole opposite the loop was accentuated by a glass inlay (Mikulčice) or a massive central granule (Uherské Hradiště – Sady or Přerov-Předmostí). However, while the pearl on the Preslav piece was threaded on a wire, the Great Moravian glass inlays were inserted into a metal sleeve and the massive central granules were soldered onto the background. Another important difference is that the button/pendant from Preslav Treasure was made using a specialised technique for applying the granulation. The granulation fully covers the surface, yet the individual granules are not embedded on wire rings. Every granule was soldered directly to the background of the artefact. This is again something unknown among Moravian finds. The only published analogy was found in above mentioned Zalavár region in Carpathian Basin<sup>56</sup>.

The last type of hollow spherical buttons associated with the Preslav Treasure are small buttons made of undecorated sheet gold (fig. 17). They also have counterparts in Great Moravian finds – the 46 published artefacts were made using

the same technology for soldered hemispheres. About quarter of the items also were made from gold, while the remaining three quarters were identified as copper alloy, most of them gilded. Apart from those, rare cast buttons that are visually similar have been published<sup>57</sup>.

## Conclusion

The present study describes the parallels between pendants/buttons from the Preslav Treasure and the so-called *gombíky* from ninth-century Great Moravia. It is clear that these artefacts are closely related on many levels: both groups show an identical production technique using components of the same shape, the same type of fixed attachment system (split loop, ring), and sometimes also very similar granulation and filigree technologies. However, in the Bulgarian finds, it is possible to observe decoration techniques that are not typical of the Great Moravian milieu: *cloisonné* enamel and the use of pearls. In contrast, Great Moravia yielded a much wider typological range of buttons, as evidenced by hundreds of finds, many of which are unknown in Preslav.

<sup>56</sup> A pair of silver *gombíky* with full-surface granulation without background rings comes from grave 123 in Zalasabár, Borjúállás (former island in the river Zála near Zalavár, the remains of a nobleman's court with a wooden church

building were discovered there; unpublished find – see Krupičková, *Gombíky* from Mikulčice tab. 44, footnote 185).

<sup>57</sup> Krupičková, *Gombíky* from Mikulčice 22-23.

The search for similar artefacts in other areas has provided evidence that hollow hammered pendants and buttons with two hemispheres soldered together and fitted with a loop were generally widespread in early medieval Europe from the Byzantine Empire through the Balkans to Central Europe. Undecorated items, as well as some of the decorated pendants/buttons, were found throughout the aforementioned area. Jewellery decoration techniques used in the wide area include granulation, filigree and chasing the surface into vertical ribs of varying width. Enamel and inlaid pearls were exceptions in the Balkans, as the Preslav examples show. In contrast, the decorative surface chasing of the buttons or pendants is unique for Great Moravia and regions of its cultural influence<sup>58</sup>.

The concentration of *gombiky* finds in the Great Moravian territory is unusual. Excavations in this small Central European territory unearthed more hollow spherical buttons than in all the other areas taken together. This can be linked with the sumptuousness of the Great Moravian burial rite, at least compared to trends in the Byzantine Empire and the Frankish Empire, where the need to demonstrate social status in this way had diminished. In Great Moravia, *gombiky* had become a status symbol and, as such, they likely became widely used objects that underwent significant innovation. Based on the research presented here, we can even study quite complicated social transformations, although the time of Great Moravian prosperity was relatively short, as was the heyday of *gombiky* fashion<sup>59</sup>.

For the Preslav items, the Byzantine Empire appears to have been the main influence, especially concerning the use of production techniques foreign in Central Europe. The large pieces from the Preslav Treasure, decorated with enamel and ribbing, is exceptionally close to one of the Great Moravian types of *gombiky*. This phenomenon is interpreted as evidence of the import of ribbed buttons to Great Moravia from the Byzantine sphere<sup>60</sup>. This theory can be supported by another find, a densely ribbed golden button from the Byzantine Thessaloniki region<sup>61</sup>. A more detailed study of the spherical pendants/buttons found in the Byzantine territory might help to make these conclusions more precise. But it is evident that Byzantine elite fashion provides us with analogies: decorated pendants used as sewn appliques on garments, although these typically have an elongated oval shape and are known as *pendilia*<sup>62</sup>.

The question remains how the hollow chased buttons are related to the occurrence of small spherical or mushroom-shaped buttons that were mainly cast<sup>63</sup>. The small and less often decorated specimens are known from the fitted caftans that were narrow around the body and wider around the hips<sup>64</sup>. In order to open and close the tight-fitting top part, buttons were essential. Caftans with a central or left/right fastening<sup>65</sup> are connected to the Asian style of clothing, thus this dress type could mark the origin of the buttons with a loop. This style probably made its way to Europe, the Byzantine Empire and Coptic Egypt by means of trade contact linked to the silk trade (which included the inspiration for cloth designs), and the migration of nomadic ethnic groups. For example, remnants of caftans from several Scandinavian graves were interpreted as the garments of Varangian merchants trading along the Silk Route and with the Byzantine Empire<sup>66</sup>. A common occurrence of different types of cast buttons in Old Hungarian graves represents the further possibility of spreading Asian fashion to Central Europe with newly arriving ethnic groups.

Based on the current state of knowledge, we can conclude that the occurrence of spherical buttons in the Central European region is a result of cultural trends coming from the Byzantine Empire and Asia. These influences led to the emergence of Great Moravian *gombiky* in their specific use, shape, size, decoration and production technology. The combination of undecorated »Asian« spherical hollow buttons, Byzantine *pendilia* with filigree and granulation, and the knowledge of the chasing technique using motifs popular at that time are the main inspiration sources for *gombiky* production. In this sense, the proximity between the Moravian *gombiky* and the Byzantine Preslav Treasure is not a coincidence, but evidence of intensive supraregional contact among the early medieval elites.

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58 I. e., the Carpathian Basin, further isolated finds from Ptuj/Slovenia (Korošec, Nekropola na ptujskem 115 pls 35. 37); Matzhausen/Bavaria (Stroh, Die Reihengräber 30 pls 1, 1-2, recently Hasil et al., Dubious Early 1-13); Dolni Lukovit/Bulgaria (Važarova, Slavjani i Prbulgari 208-209).

59 Krupičková, *Gombiky* from Mikulčice 95-97.

60 Galuška, Uherské Hradiště-Sady 100; Profantová, *Byzantské nálezy* 93-96.

61 Antonaras, *Byzantine Jewellery* 121. 124 fig. 3.

62 Bosselmann-Ruickbie, *Byzantinischer Schmuck* 24-25.

63 Detailed typology of Old Hungarian finds published in Réka, Fülesgombok tipokronológiája 153-175; see also Krupičková, *Gombiky* from Mikulčice 22-23.

64 Ierusalimskaja/Borkopp, Von China nach Byzanz 18-21. – Geijer, *Birka* III 149-150.

65 Ierusalimskaja, Cafetans aux Simourghs 203-210. – Peck, *Clothing in Persia* 760-778.

66 Birka: Arbman, *Birka* I pl. 93; Geijer, *Birka* III 143. 150 pl. 33. – Silk trade and Vikings: Vedeler, *Silk for the Vikings*, e. g., 23-47. 67-80.

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## Summary / Zusammenfassung / Résumé

### Where Did the Spherical Hollow Buttons Come From? Comparing Great Moravian *Gombiky* with Examples from the Preslav Treasure

The study discusses a possible connection between spherical hollow buttons with a loop called *gombiky* (ninth-century Great Moravian elite artefacts) and similar finds that were part of the Preslav Treasure, dating to the era of the First Bulgarian Empire in the tenth century. The typology of these gold garment parts in the Preslav Treasure is discussed, especially the pendants with enamel and those with an all-over granulation decoration, but also undecorated specimens, which all testify to a high technological standard. These artefacts show close analogies to the Moravian material, although differing in technological details. Finds from both Preslav and Moravia were placed in a broader context of buttons and button-like pendants from Europe and Asia. For these comparisons, the focus lay on the technology of the artefacts, i. e., the production and decoration methods. As a result, we can determine that the artefacts from Preslav and those from Moravia are part of wider cultural phenomenon of spherical garment parts with clamps, with varying fasteners, pendants and decorative appliques. The trend of *gombiky* is likely to have originated in Asia and the Byzantine Empire.

### Woher stammen die kugelförmigen hohlen Knöpfe? Ein Vergleich der großmährischen *Gombiky* mit Exemplaren aus dem Preslav-Schatz

In der Studie wird ein möglicher Zusammenhang diskutiert zwischen kugelförmigen hohlen Knöpfen mit einer Öse, den so genannten *gombiky* (großmährische Eliteobjekte des 9. Jahrhunderts), und ähnlichen Funden aus dem Preslav-Schatz aus der Zeit des Ersten Bulgarischen Reiches im 10. Jahrhundert. Die Typologie dieser goldenen Gewandteile aus dem Preslav-Schatz wird erörtert, insbesondere der Anhänger mit Email und derjenigen mit einem vollflächigen Granulationsdekor, aber auch der undekorierten Exemplare, die allesamt von einem hohen technologischen Standard zeugen. Diese Artefakte weisen enge Parallelen zum mährischen Material auf, unterscheiden sich jedoch in technologischen Details. Die Funde aus Preslav und Mähren wurden in einen breiteren Kontext von Knöpfen und knopfähnlichen Anhängern aus Europa und Asien gestellt. Bei diesen Vergleichen lag der Schwerpunkt auf der Technologie der Artefakte, d. h. auf die Herstellungs- und Verzierungsverfahren. Eine Schlussfolgerung ist, dass die Artefakte aus Preslav und die aus Mähren Teil eines breiteren kulturellen Phänomens von kugelförmigen Gewandteilen mit Klammern sind, die in Verschlüssen, Anhängern und dekorativen Applikationen variieren. Die Entwicklung der *gombiky* nahm vermutlich in Asien und im Byzantinischen Reich ihren Anfang.

## D'où viennent les boutons sphériques creux? Comparaison entre les *gombiky* de Grande Moravie et des exemples du trésor de Preslav

Cette étude examine un lien possible entre les boutons creux sphériques avec boucle appelés *gombiky* (objets élitaires de la Grande Moravie du IX<sup>e</sup> siècle) et des objets similaires qui faisaient partie du trésor de Preslav, datant de l'époque du Premier Empire bulgare au X<sup>e</sup> siècle. La typologie de ces pièces de vêtement en or du trésor de Preslav, en particulier les pendentifs avec émail et les pendentifs à décor granulé, mais aussi des objets non décorés, témoignent tous d'un haut niveau technologique. Ces objets présentent de fortes analogies avec le matériel morave, bien qu'ils diffèrent par des détails technologiques. Les trouvailles provenant de Preslav et de Moravie ont été confrontées à un corpus plus large de boutons et de pendentifs en forme de bouton provenant d'Europe et d'Asie. Pour ces comparaisons, l'accent a été mis sur la technologie des artefacts, c'est-à-dire sur les méthodes de production et de décoration. En conséquence, nous pouvons déterminer que les objets de Preslav et ceux de Moravie font partie d'un ensemble culturel plus large de pièces vestimentaires sphériques avec des pinces, des attaches diverses, des pendentifs et des appliques décoratives. Le développement des *gombiky* aurait probablement commencé en Asie et dans l'Empire byzantin.