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STUDIEN ZUM BURGWALL VON MIKULČICE

# GOMBÍKY FROM MIKULČICE AND THEIR REGIONAL AND SUPRAREGIONAL CONTEXT



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CZECH ACADEMY OF SCIENCES, INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY, BRNO

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## Introduction 9

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### 1. Current state of gombík research 13

- 1.1 Research overview of Great Moravian gombíky 13
  - 1.2 Development of terminology 13
  - 1.3 Applied terminology 13
  - 1.4 An international research of gombíky 15
- 

### 2. The processed assemblage of gombíky and their basic typology 19

- 2.1 Gombík typology based on production technology 20
    - 2.1.1 Glass gombíky 21
    - 2.1.2 Cast 'gombíky' 22
    - 2.1.3 Sheet metal gombíky 23
- 

### 3. Theoretical models and their application to Great Moravian gombíky 25

- 3.1 Theoretical research of early medieval cemeteries 25
    - 3.1.1 Intentional and functional parameters of grave goods (Heinrich Härke) 25
    - 3.1.2 Diffusion of ideas and their mapping in time and space (Sebastian Brather) 26
    - 3.1.3 Burial as a form of social performance (Guy Halsall) 27
    - 3.1.4 Description of the spread of fashion trends (Šimon Ungerman) 28
    - 3.1.5 Clothing is more than just textile (Sebastian Brather) 28
  - 3.2 Interpretive possibilities of gombíky based on archaeological theory (Evžen Neustupný) 29
  - 3.3 Initial hypothesis and purpose of Great Moravian gombíky in living culture 29
- 

### 4. Analysis of gombíky 33

- 4.1 Technical and technological parameters of sheet metal gombíky 33
  - 4.1.1 Jewellery-making techniques 34
  - 4.1.2 The complexity of jewellery-making techniques 40
  - 4.1.3 The quality of jewellery-making techniques 41
  - 4.1.4 The construction of the shell and attachment system 41
  - 4.1.5 Material 43
  - 4.1.6 Dimensions 44
  - 4.1.7 Shape 46
  - 4.1.8 Objects inside gombíky 47
  - 4.1.9 The detection of textile remnants in connection with gombíky 48
  - 4.1.10 The contribution of research of technical and technological data of gombíky and the definition of their elite nature 49
- 4.2 The find context of gombíky in graves 50
  - 4.2.1 The number of gombíky in graves 50

4.2.2	The position of gombíky in graves	52
4.2.3	Joint occurrence of gombíky and beads in a single grave	53
4.2.4	Possibilities for interpreting gombík on the basis of intentional data	54
4.3	Sex/gender and age-at-death of individuals buried with gombíky	55
4.3.1	Analysis of the occurrence of gombíky by the sex/gender and age-at-death of buried individuals	56
4.3.2	Jewellery-making techniques applied on gombíky in connection with sex/gender and age-at-death	57
4.3.3	Difficulty of jewellery-making techniques on gombíky in connection with sex/gender and age-at-death	58
4.3.4	Gombík material in connection with sex/gender and age-at-death	63
4.3.5	Gombík size in connection with sex/gender and age-at-death	65
4.3.6	Number of gombíky in grave in connection with sex/gender and age-at-death	65
4.3.7	Gombíky as identifiers of social status	66
4.4	Localisation and chronology of gombíky	68
4.4.1	Gombíky as representatives of ideological fusion	68
4.4.2	Central agglomerations of Great Moravia	71
4.4.3	Local centres, the countryside and periphery of Great Moravia	73
4.4.4	Southwest Slovakia	75
4.4.5	Bohemia	77
4.4.6	Western Hungary	81
4.4.7	The regional and supraregional occurrence of gombíky	83
4.4.8	Modeling of the relative chronology of Great Moravian gombíky	85
4.4.9	Chronology of gombíky based on the superposition of graves at church 3 in Mikulčice	86
4.4.10	Transformations of gombíky in space and time	90

---

## 5. The original purpose of gombíky in the living culture of Great Moravia 93

5.1	Practical function of gombíky	93
5.2	Social meaning of gombíky	95
5.3	The symbolic significance of gombíky	97

---

## 6. Summary and thoughts on the future research 101

---

## 7. Long tables 105

---

## 8. Catalogue 157

8.1	Catalogue introduction	157
8.2	Catalogue text	158

---

## References 241



## Introduction

The focus of this book is a single artefact of Great Moravian material culture – the *gombík*. The term *gombík* (*sg.*) was introduced into Czech archaeology more than 70 years ago (EISNER 1947, 146). Spherical hollow metal buttons with a loop, as traditionally denoted by this term, have been known from early medieval Moravia since the beginning of the 20th century. The excavations of the first churchyards at Moravian sites brought the discoveries of many exclusive *gombíky* (*pl.*), and the artefact soon became a characteristic attribute of Great Moravian archaeology. *Gombíky* have been oft-debated and in their own way contradictory artefacts of Great Moravian archaeology for decades, a controversy with a great number of ambiguities at its root. These are essentially ‘dead’ objects that no longer occur in living culture, and we do not know their original designation (name) at the time they were actively used. And while we are aware that they formed part of clothing, it is not possible to define their exact function. Although a great deal of energy was put into collecting models for the exotic motifs that appear on *gombíky* decorated with chasing, the search for exact analogues of *gombíky* from graves outside the territory of Great Moravia has been rather unsuccessful. An aura of Great Moravian cultural exclusivity has formed around *gombíky*, supported by their heavy occurrence in the cemeteries of Great Moravian centres. The idea was born of *gombíky* as a status symbol of Great Moravian elites, linked preferentially to certain age groups and sex/gender, which are general traits that have been associated with *gombíky* for several decades. However, the mechanisms of the emergence of *gombíky*, their own Great Moravian development and subsequent disappearance, as well as the verification of their purpose in the living culture of Great Moravia, have not yet been described in sufficient detail on specific material and argued in detail – research that is the goal of this publication.

Methodologically, I consider the theoretical modelling of the possible use and development of *gombíky* within a defunct society to be important. This modelling is based on the theoretical works of Anglo-Saxon archaeologists, through which I refine my own method for analysing Great Moravian

*gombíky*. The book begins with a short overview of our current knowledge and then continues with the characteristics of the actual artefacts and the processed assemblage and the specification of methodological starting points. The most extensive part of the text is my own analysis of empirically obtained data, a combination of the technical and technological data of the *gombíky* with the basic demographic information of the individuals buried with these artefacts. The analysis also includes a comparison of the Mikulčice assemblage of *gombíky* with other artefacts discovered at Great Moravian cemeteries of a different character and location. The book includes a relative chronology of *gombíky* from selected graves in superpositions from church 3 in Mikulčice. I subsequently interpreted the analysis by evaluating the practical function, social meaning and symbolic significance of the *gombíky* (NEUSTUPNÝ 1993, 5–159). Before this evaluation, I asked myself a number of specific questions related to the interpretation of the *gombíky*. What was the purpose of *gombíky* in the living culture? Did they serve a practical function as clothing fasteners? Are they typically Great Moravian? Or are they unknown from other areas due to different burial customs? Were they perceived by Great Moravian society as a symbol of social status? Can we designate them as objects of a redistribution strategy? Or were they apotropaic objects? Children’s amulets? What types of *gombíky* were at the beginning of their development and how did *gombíky* continue to evolve? These are some of the basic and also crucial questions that can be asked about *gombíky*. All of them are aimed at uncovering the purpose of *gombíky* in the former Great Moravian culture, which was the objective of this book.

The research of *gombíky* as an artefact typical of the Great Moravian elite has the potential to provide information on specific issues of the production and distribution strategies of the highest levels of society. This assumption is related to the possible use of *gombíky* as prestigious goods, which could have formed an important part of the economic and political strategies of the Great Moravian elites. *Gombíky* could possibly also facilitate the tracing of supra-regional contacts between elites, which can be



reflected in visible influences in the production of regionally specific prestigious artefacts. To this end, the book offers some general trends observable on the basis of the processed material. In the future, it will be appropriate to support the indicated trends with a detailed study of production technology using special instrumentation and also to verify the results with experimental production. This follow-up research is partly integrated within the framework of the already ongoing project *Into the Great Moravian Jewellery. Interdisciplinary Research, Analytical Conservation and Documentation of Jewellery Production from the Mikulčice and Staré Město sites* (project No. DH23P03OVV020, NAKI III programme of the Ministry of Culture, head of the project PhDr. Lumír Poláček, CSc.), as well as in the framework of interdisciplinary research on early medieval jewellery implemented with the support of the programme *Strategy AV21: Europe, the Roots of Integration, the Formation of Local, National and European Identities* (Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic), the results of which could not be integrated into the current work.

This publication belongs to a series of books that has been devoted for three decades to various archaeological phenomena associated with the early medieval fortified settlement of Mikulčice and with the hinterland of this settlement. But as it is possible that the book will fall into the hands of a reader unfamiliar with the early medieval development of Central Europe, I also include at the beginning of the work a short presentation of the cultural context of the occurrence of gombíky. The cultural horizon dealt with in this book is related to the development of the political-power entity referred to in modern historiography as Great Moravia, a term encompassing manifestations of archaeological material culture in the territory of Moravia and partly also in contemporary Czech Silesia and southwestern Slovakia connected on the basis of historical reports to the 9th century (see POLÁČEK ET AL. 2020; KOUŘIL ED. 2014). Great Moravia can be described as a power-political unit on the periphery of the Frankish Empire (KALHOUS 2020B, 15–21). The 9th century was marked by the adoption of Christianity in the Great Moravian region. An important role in the establishment of the Church organisation was initially played by the area of the Bavarian episcopate (WOLFRAM 2014, 28–33), but at least from the middle of the 9th century, the influence of the Frankish Church organisation was disrupted by the arrival of the Byzantine missionaries Cyril and Methodius, and the process of Moravian church autonomy was soon completed by the creation and later also the recognition of its own Slavic liturgy and the emergence of the Pannonian bishopric (MĚŘÍNSKÝ 2006, 540–554; KALHOUS 2020A). The blending of Frankish and Italian-Byzantine influences is evident in the surviving material culture (PROFANTOVÁ 2011; TURČAN 2011; UNGERMAN 2020A; 2020E). Some archaeological finds also reflect the Avar cultural tradition of the Carpathian Basin in the 8th century (CF. BENDA 1978;

SZÖKE 2010, 38–41; GALUŠKA 2014, 132–133; UNGERMAN 2018, 509; 2021, 29–30). The backbone of Great Moravian core territory was represented by the Morava River, near which the three central agglomerations were situated, among them Mikulčice, which is traditionally regarded as the main residence of the ruling Mojmir dynasty (E.G. POULÍK 1975, 153–159; POLÁČEK 2020, 91–103). Support for this theory is the high concentration of preserved masonry architecture and the breadth and wealth of material culture at the actual site as well as the extensive early medieval settlement in the area surrounding the stronghold.

The book provides a detailed study of gombíky from the Mikulčice site and its surrounding area (Fig. 1) and places these unique artefacts into the broader context. The early medieval settlement of Mikulčice is regarded as a former centre of Great Moravia, and like other Great Moravian central sites, it was situated in the valley of the Morava River on today's Moravian-Slovak border. The former residential area had a relatively large area, one that can be divided into several parts.<sup>1</sup> The fortified *acropolis* was the core, in the northern part of which stood the most important buildings in the entire agglomeration: researchers have identified the foundations of the 'palace', four masonry churches, as well as several burial areas with church cemeteries with over a thousand graves in total. A fortified *outer bailey* was attached to the west side of the acropolis but contained no stone buildings or cemetery; instead, the area provided an image of densely built wooden houses. The inhabited unfortified area surrounding the fortified core (at a distance not exceeding 700 m from its centre) is referred to as an *extra-mural settlement*. In addition to settlements, this space also contained stone churches (churches 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10) surrounded by cemeteries with more than a thousand additional graves. Those central parts are traditionally defined in the literature by the local term Mikulčice-Valy Stronghold. Together with the newly defined *peripheral part*, which continues from the extra-mural settlement and ends at the border of the river valley, with these parts forming the *Mikulčice-Kopčany*<sup>2</sup> agglomeration (POLÁČEK 2020C, 107–111; POLÁČEK ET AL. 2021, 13, 51–52; HLADÍK, MAZUCH, LÁTKOVÁ 2022). Elevated edges of the floodplain and the adjacent landscape on both sides of the river valley within a radius of approximately 10 km from the stronghold are interpreted as the *economic hinterland* of the agglomeration. Documented at the periphery of the agglomeration and its hinterland are dozens of settlements and cemeteries from the 9th century, as well as a church – the Church of Saint

1 For more on the Mikulčice-Kopčany agglomeration, see, e.g. POLÁČEK 2007, 499–524; 2008, 257–298; 2010, 31–55; 2020a, 139–147; 2020b, 107–112; POLÁČEK, VELEMÍNSKÝ 2013, 405–422.

2 The agglomeration is located in the cadastres of two contemporary municipalities: Mikulčice on the Moravian side of the river, Kopčany on the Slovak side. For this reason, the early medieval settlement area is referred to by the names of both municipalities.

Margaret - the lone church still standing in the cadastre of Kopčany.

This book is a slightly modified English translation of a Czech dissertation defended in 2022 at the Institute of Archaeology and Museology of the Faculty of Arts of Masaryk University (Krupičková 2022). Compared to the original work, this book has some

partial data updated and it includes a catalogue of gombíky discovered at the central parts - the acropolis and extra-mural settlement of the Great Moravian stronghold of Mikulčice-Valy. All standard gombíky photos in the whole book, including the catalogue, are shown approximately at a scale of 1 : 1 (unless otherwise stated).

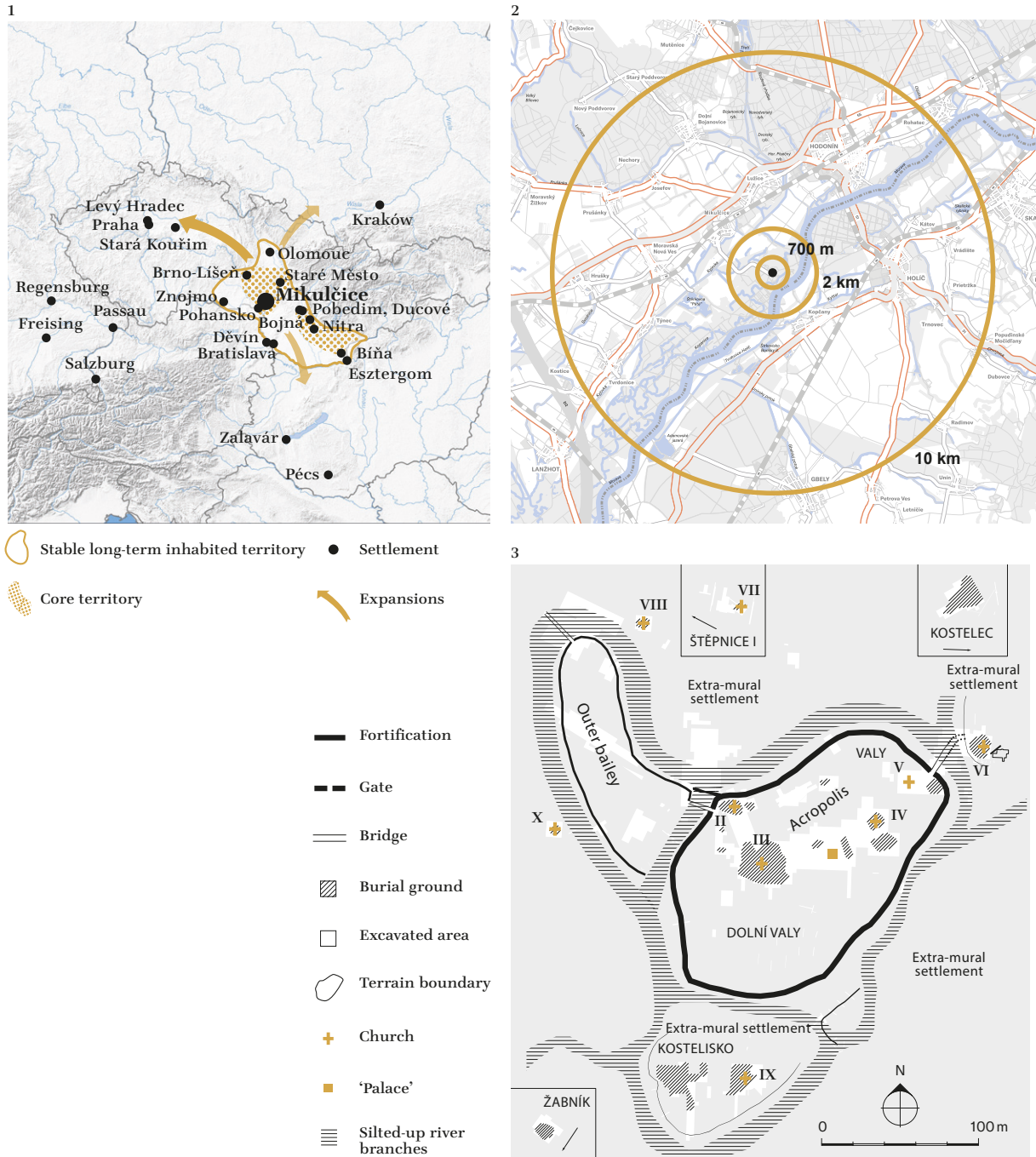


FIG. 1 | Location of Mikulčice site. 1 - Mikulčice and Great Moravia within the Central European region; 2 - spatial definition of the Mikulčice site: Mikulčice-Valy Stronghold (from the centre to 700 m), Mikulčice-Kopčany Agglomeration (from the centre to 2 km), economic hinterland of the agglomeration (from 2 km to 10 km); 3 - Mikulčice-Valy Stronghold in detail.

There are several people who helped me while I was writing my dissertation and during the course of its transformation into its current book form, and I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to them here. The first is my patient supervisor, prof. Mgr. Jiří Macháček, Ph.D., head of the Institute of Archaeology and Museology of the Faculty of Arts of Masaryk University, who provided me with methodical guidance and stimulating discussion on the chosen topic during the preparation of my dissertation. I also warmly thank the former director of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Institute of Archaeology, Brno, PhDr. Lumír Poláček, CSc., who gave me the opportunity to process the largest set of Great Moravian gombíky originating from the Mikulčice-Valy site and helped me with suitable working conditions and, in particular, gave me his trust during the writing of the dissertation. In the preparation phase of the dissertation, my former colleagues from the Mikulčice Research Base team, Ing. Zdeňka Pavková and Petr Čáp, provided great assistance in processing the

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## 4. Analysis of gombíky

The creation of a theoretical model is followed by the analytical part of the work, which can be defined as four interconnected blocks. In the first block I analyse the actual artefacts – sheet metal gombíky from acropolis and extra-mural settlement – in terms of their technical and technological parameters (to this analyses were included also the settlement finds). In the second block I introduce the context of gombíky find situation in the grave, again based predominantly on the graves from the acropolis and extra-mural settlement. The third block compares data from the artefact analysis with physical anthropology data linked to the individuals buried with the gombíky. This third block is related to the grave finds from acropolis and extra-mural settlement of the Mikulčice-Kopčany agglomeration and also from its hinterland.

The final block is devoted to the localisation of cemeteries and chronological aspects of the distribution of gombíky and is expanded to the entire Central European territory demonstrably influenced over the long-term by Great Moravian culture while mapping the occurrence of sheet metal and cast spherical clothing components in the Eurasian space (Tab. 5).

### 4.1 TECHNICAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL PARAMETERS OF SHEET METAL GOMBÍKY

In the past, the technical data and manufacturing technology of gombíky were studied to a limited extent more through external supplied analyses without clear interpretive conclusions on the development of the artefacts themselves.<sup>1</sup> Instrument analyses of a large number of Mikulčice gombíky were conducted in recent years under the supervision of archaeologist and technologist E. Ottenwelter from the Czech Academy of Sciences, Institute of Archaeology, Prague. This research primarily had a material-analytical focus, later supplemented by a production-technological approach. A total of 35 sheet metal gombíky, i.e. 11% of the total number of finds from Mikulčice, were analysed in this

TAB. 5 | Overview of the analysis type applied to gombíky from Mikulčice and from other sites.

Type of analysis	Mikulčice acropolis and extra-mural settlement	Mikulčice agglomeration with hinterland	Other sites
Technical and technological data of gombíky	Yes	No	No
Grave context	Yes	No	No
Sex/gender and age-at-death of the deceased buried with gombíky	Yes	Yes	No
Location of the burial grounds and chronology of the finds	Yes	Yes	Yes

research. The research revealed significant differences in the technical data of gombíky (e.g. in the purity of metals, in reaching the eutectic point between the soldered metals, etc.), which support the assumption that they were produced in different workshops by craftsmen of varying skill and experience.<sup>2</sup>

In this book, the study of the technical and technological parameters of sheet metal gombíky is designed to effectively and simply follow these parameters in a large number of artefacts and then use these results for the interpretation of gombíky. As such, I deemed the method of macroscopic analysis without special instruments to be sufficient. The basis of the analysis was the assemblage of artefacts from the acropolis and extra-mural settlement of the Mikulčice agglomeration. Artefacts from the peripheral part of the agglomeration and from hinterland were not described equally detailed as those from the central parts of the agglomeration, as a large number of them were not physically available to me. Specifically, I therefore processed 316 sheet metal gombíky found in both funeral and settlement context at the Mikulčice acropolis and extra-mural settlement in this chapter about technical and technological parameters (some gombíky from the peripheral part of the agglomeration and hinterland were used only as illustrative examples for a specific typological group in the figures).

1 The first analyses of ornaments in general compared the parameters of artefacts from Moravia and from Bohemia (SMETÁNKA, ŠTVERÁK, 1992, 418–430; SMETÁNKA, STAŇA 1996, 137–142; PROEANTOVÁ, FRÁNA 2003, 47–58). Blanka KAVÁNOVÁ processed fourteen gombíky in a study of the composition of Mikulčice gold (2009, 127–135); for other analyses of Mikulčice ornaments, see KAVÁNOVÁ, ŠMERDA 2010, 151–162; KAVÁNOVÁ 2011, 23–29. The most recently published works include analyses of metal artefacts from graves from the Church of Saint Margaret in Kopčany (BAXA ET AL. 2010, 492–513).

2 Summarised (with additional categories of ornaments) in OTTENWELTER 2022, 127–186. For separately published results, see OTTENWELTER ET AL. 2020, OTTENWELTER 2020B; KRUPÍČKOVÁ ET AL. 2021.



#### 4.1.1 Jewellery-making techniques

The jewellery-making techniques applied on sheet metal gombíky can generally be characterised as hammering the entire parts making up the body of the gombík or its components (e.g. bosses); chasing of the ornamental decoration of the surface of the sheet metal parts; and application of granulation, filigree and glass inserts soldered to the surface of artefacts.<sup>3</sup> Based on the jewellery-making techniques employed in shaping the surface (or on their absence), I divide the gombíky into the following three groups (see Tab. 6 for their numbers):

TABLE 6 | Overview of the sheet metal gombíky from the acropolis and extra-mural settlement of the Mikulčice-Kopčany agglomeration (including settlement finds).

Type of sheet metal gombík	Number	% of the total
Undecorated	15	5%
With chased decoration - vertical ribbing	13	4%
With chased decoration - plant ornament	121	38%
With chased decoration - zoomorphic ornament	13	4%
With chased decoration - anthropomorphic ornament	2	1%
With chased decoration - geometric ornament	23	7%
With chased decoration, total	172	54%
With soldered decoration - full-surface granulation	28	9%
With soldered decoration - coarse sparse granulation (including polyhedral shaped)	15	5%
With soldered decoration - 'poppyseed' granulation	22	7%
With soldered decoration - filigree wires	13	4%
With soldered decoration - with filigree strips (two layered)	4	1%
With soldered decoration - filigree bosses	15	5%
With soldered decoration, total	97	31%
Indeterminable	32	10%
Total	316	100%

1. undecorated: no decoration is applied to the hammered shell; some specimens have a ring of beaded wire (Fig. 9);
2. with soldered decoration: additional decorative components are soldered to the hammered shell, including granulation (with or without underlays), filigree and smooth wire, bent filigree

3 For a description of technologies, see e.g. TÄUBL 1976.



FIG. 9 | Undecorated gombíky.

1 - Mikulčice, church 2, grave 71, photo by J. Foltýn; 2 - Mikulčice, Panské, grave 61, photo by M. Bárta; 3 - Mikulčice, Panské, grave 96b, photo by M. Bárta.

3. strips, bosses (small sheet metal hemispheres), beds with glass inserts;
3. decorated with chasing: the decoration is laid out by engraving (with the use of a compass, ruler, template),<sup>4</sup> the gombík is reinforced with a soft and easy to melt material (jeweller's pitch), the decoration is then made by chasing with the use of a set of punches. In exceptional cases, a gombík decorated with chasing also has glass inlays; otherwise, soldered decoration is not usually combined with chasing.<sup>5</sup>

The last two categories can be broken down in greater detail based on the artistic-craft rendering of the decoration, a division that can also be understood as a basic gombík typology.

Based on the combination of metal components, I divide gombíky with soldered decoration into: gombíky with full-surface granulation on an underlay of smooth (rarely filigree) wire (Fig. 10: 1), gombíky with sparse coarse granulation on an underlay of smooth wire (Fig. 10: 2), gombíky with 'poppyseed' granulation without an underlay forming ornamental decoration (combinations of triangles, lines, sometimes in the shape of a cross) (Fig. 10: 3), gombíky with filigree wires (most often rope twist and beaded wire), often in combination with granulation (Fig. 10: 4), gombíky with bent filigree strips (in combination with bosses and granulation) - 'two-layered' (Fig. 10: 5), gombíky with sheet metal bosses (in combination with 'poppyseed' granulation) (Fig. 10: 6).

I divide gombíky decorated with chasing further on the basis of the form of this chasing.<sup>6</sup> The simplest chasing is found on groups of gombíky with unified decoration - with vertical ribs (Fig. 11: 1), with a surface divided into eight fields (Fig. 11: 6a, 6b) and with spiral decoration (Fig. 11: 2). For more complex decoration, we designate the basic units of chasing as components, i.e. simple forms that we divided into lines typically converging at 'neuralgic points'

4 Traces of pre-engraved decoration appear on some gombíky.

5 Exceptions are polyhedral gombíky with glass, chasing and sparse coarse granulation (including 'lantern' gombíky). On the majority of gombíky, filigree wire was also used as a ring to secure the loop.

6 The following paragraph was reworked from the dissertation in Czech; for a detailed look, see KRUPÍČKOVÁ ET AL. 2023, 76-80.

## 8.2 CATALOGUE TEXT

**CHURCH 2**

- G 1
1. Inv. No. 4428/57; Church 2, Grave 1
  2. Paired with Inv. No. 4504/57?; total number of gombíky in grave: 2; situation: in the fill of the grave
  3. Dimensions: 20.9 × 15.3 × 16.7 mm; material: silver
  4. Sphere: a; attachment system: a; type: chased decoration, ornament: plant, scheme: arcade
  5. Sex (anthropologically): female; age-at-death: juvenis
  6. Poulík 1957, 292, 366, obr. 74: 3; inventory book 1957 (MInv 57-2\_0433)



- G 1
1. Inv. No. 4504/57; Church 2, Grave 1; not preserved
  2. Paired with Inv. No. 4428/57?; total number of gombíky in grave: 2; situation: in the fill of the grave
  3. Dimensions: -; material: silver
  4. Sphere: -; attachment system: -; type: -
  5. Sex (anthropologically): female; age-at-death: juvenis
  6. Poulík 1957, 292, 366; inventory book 1957 (MInv 57-2\_0460)



- G 4
1. Inv. No. 4505/57; Church 2, Grave 4; not preserved
  2. Non-paired; total number of gombíky in grave: 1; situation: in the torso area
  3. Dimensions: -; material: silver
  4. Sphere: -; attachment system: -; type: -
  5. Sex (anthropologically): -; age-at-death: -
  6. Poulík 1957, 366; inventory book 1957 (MInv 57-2\_0460)



- G 44
1. Inv. No. 4430/57; Church 2, Grave 44
  2. Paired with Inv. No. 4431/57; total number of gombíky in grave: 2; situation: under the lower jaw
  3. Dimensions: 29.3 × 21.8 × 23.3 mm; material: gilded copper alloy
  4. Sphere: a; attachment system: a; type: chased decoration, ornament: plant, scheme: cordate meander
  5. Sex (anthropologically): male; age-at-death: maturus I
  6. Poulík 1957, 298, 334, 366-367, obr. 76; Kouril ed. 2014, 424; inventory book 1957 (MInv 57-2\_0433)



- G 44
1. Inv. No. 4431/57; Church 2, Grave 44
  2. Paired with Inv. No. 4430/57; total number of gombíky in grave: 2; situation: further south from the right foot
  3. Dimensions: (loop is missing) × 21.6 × 23.5 mm; material: gilded copper alloy
  4. Sphere: a; attachment system: a?; type: chased decoration, ornament: plant, scheme: cordate meander
  5. Sex (anthropologically): male; age-at-death: maturus I
  6. Poulík 1957, 298, 366-367; inventory book 1957 (MInv 57-2\_0434)



- G 50 **1. Inv. No. 4511/57; Church 2, Grave 50; not preserved**  
 2. Non-paired; total number of gombíky in grave: 1; situation: near skull  
 3. Dimensions: -; material: silver  
 4. Sphere: -; attachment system: -; type: chased decoration, ornament: plant, scheme: net  
 5. Sex (anthropologically): -; age-at-death: -  
 6. Poulík 1957, 307, 367; inventory book 1957 (MInv 57-2\_0462)



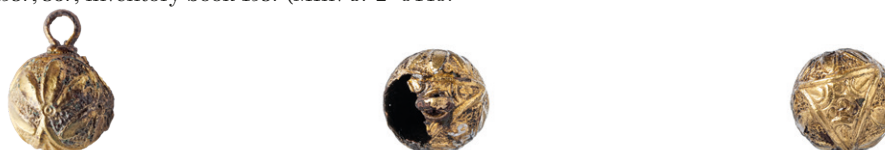
- G 51 **1. Inv. No. 4440/57; Church 2, Grave 51**  
 2. Non-paired; total number of gombíky in grave: 1; situation: between the upper and lower jaw  
 3. Dimensions: 17.7 × 12.2 × 13.1 mm; material: silver  
 4. Sphere: a; attachment system: b; type: soldered decoration, ornament: with bosses  
 5. Sex (anthropologically): female; age-at-death: senilis  
 6. Poulík 1957, 299, 367, obr. 83: 6; Kouřil ed. 2014, 432; inventory book 1957 (MInv 57-2\_0439)



- G 54 **1. Inv. No. 4443/57; Church 2, Grave 54**  
 2. Paired with Inv. No. 4444/57; total number of gombíky in grave: 2; situation: under the lower jaw  
 3. Dimensions: 19.1 × 13.3 × 14.2 mm; material: gilded copper alloy  
 4. Sphere: a; attachment system: b; type: chased decoration, ornament: plant, scheme: unclassified  
 5. Sex (anthropologically): -; age-at-death: infans I  
 6. Poulík 1957, 367; Kouřil ed. 2014, 424; inventory book 1957 (MInv 57-2\_0440)



- G 54 **1. Inv. No. 4444/57; Church 2, Grave 54**  
 2. Paired with Inv. No. 4443/57; total number of gombíky in grave: 2; situation: 15 cm from the first gombík in the torso area  
 3. Dimensions: 19.0 × 13.3 × 14.2 mm; material: gilded copper alloy  
 4. Sphere: a; attachment system: b; type: chased decoration, ornament: plant, scheme: unclassified  
 5. Sex (anthropologically): -; age-at-death: infans I  
 6. Poulík 1957, 367; inventory book 1957 (MInv 57-2\_0440)



- G 64 **1. Inv. No. 4514/57; Church 2, Grave 64**  
 2. Paired with Inv. No. 4447/57; total number of gombíky in grave: 4; situation: on both sides of the skull  
 3. Dimensions: (loop damaged) × 14.3 × 14.2 mm; material: gilded copper alloy  
 4. Sphere: a; attachment system: b; type: chased decoration, ornament: geometric, scheme: of eight fields  
 5. Sex (anthropologically): -, gender (archaeologically): female; age-at-death: infans I  
 6. Poulík 1957, 300, 367; inventory book 1957 (MInv 57-2\_0463)



Studien zum Burgwall von Mikulčice  
Band XIV

Šárka Krupičková  
Gombíky from Mikulčice and Their Regional and Supraregional Context

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