

YURAS BOKHAN

THE SALLET TYPE HELM FROM MSCISLAV

At the beginning of the summer of 1994, a helm was found in the town of Mscislav (Mogilyov oblast, Belarus). It was netted by a fisherman and pulled out of the loamy layer at the bottom of the Vikhra River, in a place called Zarachansky Most. On November 4th, 1994 the find was taken to the Historical and Archaeological Museum in Mscislav. Thanks to that it has stayed in loam, the helm is well-preserved. On the outside, it is covered in a thin layer of corroded metal

and a rough surface coating. The metal has been damaged by corrosion only in some places. There is a zigzag crack with slightly corroded edges in the front and back parts of the helm. This damage seems to suggest that the helm had been hit hard before it got to the river bed.

According to typology, the helmet falls into the category of the so-called «German sallets», which were characterized by a deep skull with sights,

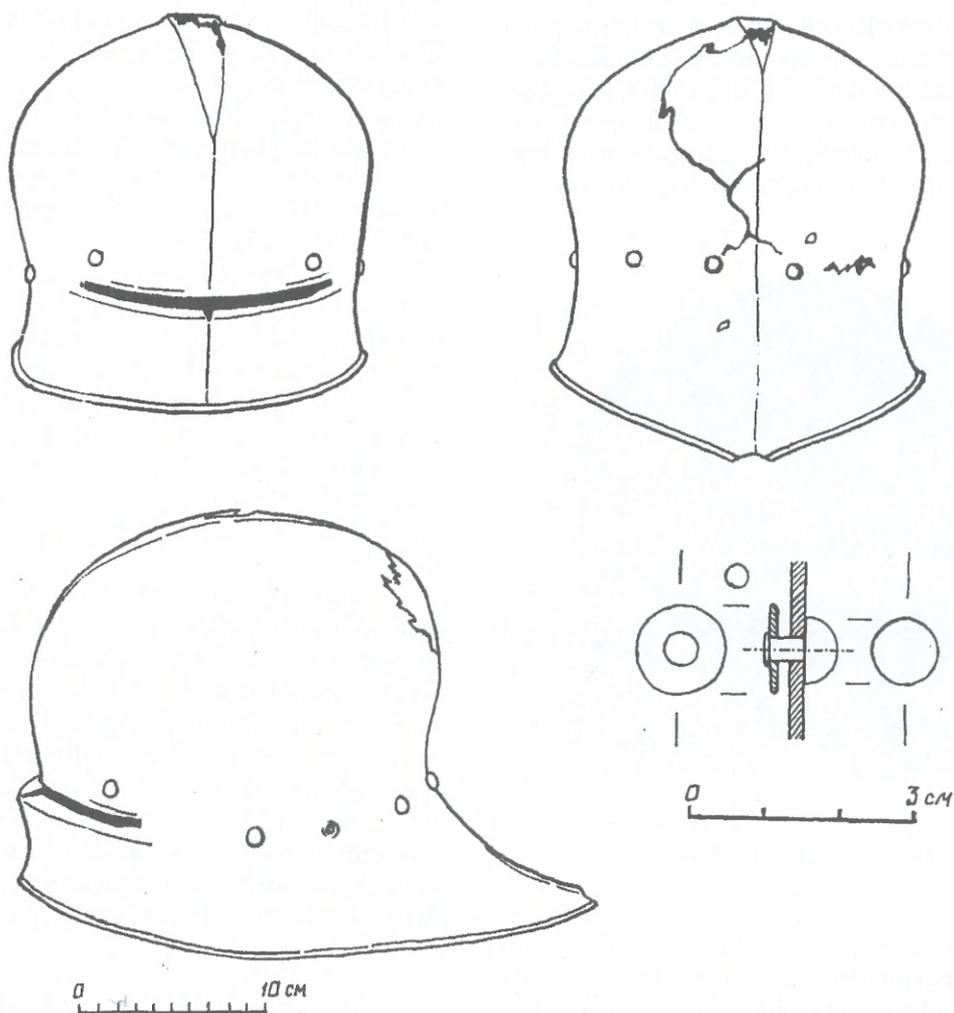


Fig. 1. Helm from Mscislav.



Fig. 2. Helm from Mscislav after finding.

that is, visors, which covered the upper part of the face, and a long, curving neck-guard¹. Similar helmets were the most popular head covering in Central Europe in the middle and the latter part of the fifteenth century.

Before it was cleaned, the helm weighed about 2100 g. It was made from one piece of iron. The skull is characteristically rounded. On the sides, the edges are turned upwards to form a roll, which seems to be slightly bent to the outside, while the rear part smoothly changes into the longish neck-guard (Fig. 1).



Fig. 3. Helm from Mscislav. Front view.

¹H. Müller, F. Kunter, *Europäische Helme aus der Sammlung des Museum für Deutsche Geschichte*, Berlin 1984, p. 31; Z. Żygulski Jr., *Broń w dawnej Polsce na tle uzbrojenia Europy i Bliskiego Wschodu (Arms in Old Poland against a Background of the Arms and Armour of Europe and the Near East)*, Warsaw 1975, p. 103.



Fig. 4. Helm from Mscislav. Back view.

Now the helmet is 355 mm long (part of the neck-guard's edge, about 10 mm long, has been broken off), the gap between the edges is max. 225 mm wide. The helmet is about 220 mm high². The crest of the helm, clearly visible on the front and flattened in the rear part, runs along its axis. It divides the helm symmetrically into two parts. The protection is about 655 mm in length. At the top of the helm, the crest changes into a flattened, segmented comb, 250 mm long and 27 mm in width.

In the front part of the helm, 55 mm above the edge, more or less at the level of the border between the skull and the neck-guard, there is a sight 180 mm long and 6 mm wide. It separates the reinforce part of the skull from the immobile half-mask, which protects the upper part of the face. The half-mask projects outwards (it is longer by 10 mm). There is a notch in the upper edge of the half-mask, which curves horizontally, so that a little hood is formed over the sight.

Originally, the helmet had a lining, which was fastened to the skull with ten rivets. Eight rivets were placed at sight level (two of them have not been preserved) and the others just above its ends. The heads of the rivets are 9 mm in diameter; the round washers which were placed on the mandrels of the rivets from the inside are 12 mm in diameter. They clamped the lining directly to the skull. The outline of one of the missing rivets, 3 mm in diameter, has been preserved. A corroded opening with uneven edges can be seen in the place of the other missing rivet.

²The data concerning the height of the helm is inaccurate; all the measurements we have at our disposal were taken when the helmet was found, without use of special equipment; thus, many factors cannot be fully explained.



Fig. 5. Helm from Mscislav. Left side view.

Such a sallet was first found in Eastern Europe. A sallet with a full skull can be found in neither East-European nor even Polish iconography³. Some closer analogies can be seen in the collection of Museum für Deutsche Geschichte in Berlin⁴. The helm, dated at the 1470s, was made in an armourer's workshop in Nurnberg, as evidenced by the municipal and the armourer's signs placed on the neck-guard.

We do not know anything about the circumstances in which the Mscislav sallet sank to the bottom of the Vikhra River. We do not know when the helm got to the water, either. It seems probable that the accident happened at the end of the fifteenth or at the beginning of the sixteenth century, during the fierce fights between Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Moscow state, as a number of encounters took place in the vicinity of Mscislav at that time (in the years 1500, 1502, 1514, etc.)⁵. The passage of Moscow voivodes led by Duke S. I. Mozhaysky in 1502 attracts the researcher's attention: «the voivodes arrived by the stronghold of Mscislav on Thursday, November 4th, and were noticed by Duke Mikhaylo Izhe-slavsky, son-in-law to Duke Yuriy Lugvenevich, and Voivode Ostafey Dashkovich, son-in-law to Alexander, Grand Duke of Lithuania, who were staying there with the Grand Duke's court, banner and warriors. The regiments clashed and, God willing, the regiments of Grand Duke Ivan Vasylevich Moskvyya won

the battle. They slaughtered many of the Lithuanians (a thousand and seven warriors) and captured many of them and took away their banners. Duke Mikhaylo hardly managed to escape to the stronghold.' We do not know exactly where the battle occurred, but the text of the chronicle seems to suggest that it took place in the vicinity of the castle. If one takes into consideration the character of the terrain, one will come to the conclusion that the most probable place of the encounter was a bend in the Vikhra River near Zarachansky Most. Of course any conclusions regarding the event mentioned in written sources and directly connected with the Mscislav find seem to be untimely. However, the type of damage (the crack in the forehead part and the neck-guard) leads us to believe that the helm might have been lost in battle.

We do not know whether the owner of the sallet belonged to the Grand Duke of Lithuania's levy or was one of the mercenaries who defended some of the fortresses in White Russia even in the time of peace. They were also the front line troops of the Grand Duke's army⁶. Because of this, it seems highly probable that the helmet belonged to a mercenary warrior. A supposition that the head covering was lost by an enemy soldier seems groundless, as the arms and armour of the contemporary Moscow army did not show any strong western influences.

³ *Polska technika wojskowa do 1500 roku (Polish War Technology to the Year 1500)*, vol. 1, ed. A. N a d o l s k i, Warsaw 1994, p. 233.

⁴ H. Müller, F. Kunter, *op. cit.*, p. 258, Fig. 31.

⁵ *Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisey*, vol. 6, St Petersburg 1853, p. 47; *ibid.*, vol. 12, St Petersburg 1901, p. 257; *ibid.*, vol. 13, St Petersburg 1904, pp. 20-21.

Translated by Zuzanna Poklewska-Parra

⁶ M. L u b a v s k i y, *Litovsko-russkiy seym. Opyt po istoriyi učr ždenya v svyazy s vnutrennym stroyem i vnešney žiznyu gosudarstva*, Moscow 1900, p. 176.

