

Swedish Army and the marbles from Warsaw

In August 1656, a group of boats filled with marbles looted by the Swedish army from Villa Regia sailed from Warsaw.³³ After about two and a half kilometres the boats ran aground due to the low water level of the Vistula River. This fact – as well as the risk of attack by King Jan Kazimierz's troops marching into Warsaw during the Second Northern War (the Deluge) – contributed to the decision to sink the load. Part of the marble load was thrown into the water; the remaining part was unloaded on sandy islets. Only a few days after the event, the representatives of the Warsaw authorities began to secure the load. Wherever possible, the objects were retrieved from the riverbed and buried on the banks. Most of the rescued decorations and sculptures remained at the bottom of the Vistula River until the end of the war. In 1663, columns lying in the shallows were recovered and transported to Oranienburg, in Brandenburg, Germany. The remainder of the load stayed in the river until the early 20th century. In the summer of 1906, sand miners from Warsaw located the site where objects from the 17th century had been buried and recovered several tons of architectural marble ornaments, including the sculpture of a putto sitting on a dolphin. Tsarist authorities halted the works and, as a result, the sand miners were not allowed to recover more objects.

Following enquiries in Polish archives, the Vistula riverbed project was initiated. The project led to the rediscovery of the areas of both the sand miners' works from 1906 and the sinking of the boatloads in 1656. The area under examination was delineated on the basis of both 17th-century accounts and archival sources from the time of the marble recovery in the early 20th century. The research was concentrated within a one-kilometre area along the Vistula, centred on the river's 51⁷th kilometre.

The research conducted over the subsequent three years brought first the discovery of six tons of marble decorations located at the exact site of their original sinking. Following archival enquiries, it was clear that the majority of these were looted by the Swedish army, taken as plunder from Villa Regia and other Warsaw palaces. The second period of the research, from June till August 2012, also led to the discovery of architectural ornaments and nearly 40 cannonballs. In 2012, the water level in the river dropped below 60 centimetres. This record-low level of the Vistula River revealed other historic objects in the examined area. Aside from marble decorations from the sunken Swedish load from Villa Regia, hundreds of Polish cultural heritage objects were found underwater. Researchers retrieved four floor frames of a

33. Villa Regia is now called the Kazimierzowski Palace and houses the University of Warsaw Rectorate.

boat within an area of 200 square metres, located a dozen metres from each other. They probably belonged to a vessel from the 18th century. Apart from fragments of the shipwreck, the researchers also found four pieces of boat bottom plating. The longest piece (14 metres long), with nails still attached to it, dated from the late 17th or early 18th century.

In sandy backwaters 20 oak cannon wheels reinforced with iron fittings and pieces of three carriages were uncovered. These were the remains of 17th-century wagons used to transport cannons. Together with the wheels, a rain guard from a weapon of a 17th-century infantryman was also found, along with a ceramic head of a putto. It is worth noting that the Polish Army Museum houses numerous objects that were recovered from the Vistula River in the beginning of the 20th century at the exact site of the aforementioned excavations. The inventory cards of some of the items mention that they had been found in the riverbed during a construction of a bridge. A bardiche blade bears an inscription: "Found at the bottom of the Vistula River, presumably 7 metres below the water level (?)". Moreover, a very intriguing fragment of a quarter cannon (*kartouwe*) carriage from the mid-17th century, currently part of the Polish Army Museum collections, was recovered in 1913 from the Vistula riverbed near its east bank, in the Warsaw district of Praga. We can safely assume that the wheel with a piece of a Dutch-style gun carriage was found near the 517th kilometre of the Vistula River as well.

The drying river also revealed a group of several marble objects from the sunken Swedish transports, including portrait frames, a fountain pedestal, bases of columns, a balustrade fragment, a lintel etcetera. The presence of these relics at the site can be linked to an attempt to hide them at the request of King Jan Kazimierz in September 1656. A letter to the Mayor of Old Warsaw indicates that the king urged him to conceal the items to protect them from being retaken by the Swedish army. The distance between the elements recovered in 2012 and the items found one year earlier indicates that the most valuable marble pieces were moved and then buried in the sandy bank. The fact that a number of fragments of decorations emerged by water could be linked to the change in the Praga riverbank at the location. In the mid-17th century the riverbank must have been situated several dozen metres to the west, partly covering the shallow area that now appears whenever the water level of the river drops.

Until today, a total of nearly 20 tons of architectural sculptural ornaments have been recovered during the works. The items have been pulled out from the riverbed within an area of several hundred square metres. Due to the rescue operation conducted after the sinking of the marble load in 1656 aimed at transporting the objects from the site of their sinking to the river bank, it can be assumed that in the area marked for excavation there are

still hundreds of priceless artefacts. Based on the shape of the bottom of the studied area, we can assume that a number of items are hidden at a depth ranging from several dozen centimetres to several metres. The research area overlaps with a natural coral stony reef and loam-and-stone rapids, which means that part of the sunken load is located in this very layer, mixed with stones, gravel and sand. The examination conducted so far has shown that the location of the aforementioned items requires technologies which, alas, are not yet available. The recovered individual marble elements allows for large-scale reconstructions. There are several hundred pieces of marble that once constituted a monumental outdoor staircase of the Kazimierzowski Palace.

We hope that this short description of our project will stir a debate on the need for interdisciplinary and international research on war-booty, based on our new discoveries. Scholarly cooperation between Sweden and Poland is crucial in this case.

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