

The Rhind Lectures 1989–90: a synopsis

The search for the Early Medieval settlement process of the ancient Slavs; a general survey and selected problems

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1 THE ACTUAL STATE OF THE SETTLEMENT ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE SLAVS

Slavic archaeology is a term used for the discipline that investigates, by means of archaeological methods, the early history of the Slavs from their ethnogenesis to the state-forming process, as well as their material culture. Chronologically its limits are from the fifth to the 10th (12th) centuries AD which correspond to Anglo-Saxon England or the early Middle Ages. Slavic archaeology is an integrated part of Slavic Studies, a comprehensive scientific branch that investigates the history and culture of the Slavs. The beginnings of this investigation go back to the so-called National Revival, a period in which those small Slavic nations of Central and South Europe, that had lost their freedom, tried to revive their language, culture and status. Linguistics and archaeology played the key role in the first stage, being later accompanied by history, ethnography and anthropology. Slavic archaeology was created during the last third of the 19th century and the first two to three decades of the 20th century (Niederle, L, Kostrzewski, J, & Virchow, R). After World War II the archaeology of the Slavs was regarded as one of the most important branches in Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, Poland, Bulgaria and the GDR. A special Institute for Slavic Studies existed in Prague from 1928 to 1963; in 1965 The International Union of Slavic Archaeology, as part of UISPP, was founded.

The 'country of origin of the Slavs' is a most complex problem and is of primary interest to scholars. Basically there are two theories; the first supports the idea that the Slavs were autochthonic in Central Europe while the other considers the Slavs as coming to Central Europe from the East only during the Migration Period (fifth–sixth centuries). The latter is now accepted by most scholars.

The Great Expansion of the Slavs was the last stage of their ethnogenic evolution. Since the sixth century, extensive groups of people unknown to them attacked the Byzantine Empire and colonized a large territory south of the Danube. Apart from this southern direction, the Slavs penetrated westwards and eastwards from their homeland; but written documents are very few in number and, as regards Central Europe (the West-Slavic territory), they are relevant only since the seventh century (the so-called *Fredigarius* wrote about the Empire of Samo). Archaeologically the earliest Slavic occupation has been linked with the Korčak- and Prague-type pottery which, in Central Europe, sometimes occurs in a context with pottery that is attributable to the previous German settlement and so the co-existence of the Slavs and Germans in some territories cannot be excluded.

The state-forming process of the Slavs led to the creation of the Great Moravian Empire (ninth century AD), the first state-like organization of the Western Slavs. During the 10th–11th centuries early medieval states grew up in Bohemia and Poland. In the south it was the so-called Bulgarian

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Empire that can be considered a state, arising as a result of the Southern Slavs' and Bulgarians' assimilation and having its climax at the end of the ninth to 10th centuries. The evolution towards the state in east Slavic regions resulted in the rise of the Principality of Kiev, a powerful east-European state which strongly influenced events in that part of the continent (ninth–12th centuries).

2 THE ANCIENT SLAVS' HABITATION SITES: FROM SIMPLE COMMUNITIES TO SOPHISTICATED CASTLES AND URBANIZED CENTRES

Archaeologically the evolution of the tribal society of the early Slavs towards more complex social stratification and state is evidenced by the development of settlement forms. These are reflections of not only human adaptation to environmental conditions but also of the standard of socio-economic relations within society. Apart from similar forms of residential units there are also other characteristic components that are typical of the earliest Slavs inside and outside the Slavic country of origin. These components were once designated 'Slavic cultural unity' (pottery decoration, cremation rite, S-shaped earrings, sunken huts, etc).

The earliest form of settlement unit of the early Slavs (fifth–seventh centuries) was an open rural habitation site. These appeared from the fifth century onwards and they did not differ throughout the Slavic world. In the territories with loess subsoil the most common were rectangular sunken-floored buildings which occurred in rather dry geographical zones of extreme winter–summer temperatures. In the north-west region of the territory colonized by the Slavs, above ground houses of post-built construction dominated, probably due to different environmental conditions (absence of loess subsoil and wet climate). Uniformity in residential units (mostly accompanied simply with storage pits) has been considered as evidence of unstratified family communities. They were arranged both regularly (circles, semi-circles and rows) and irregularly (clusters of ground-plans which may be interpreted in different ways). The earliest sites are mostly found in favourable natural conditions (close to rivers and brooks, below the 300 m contour, fertile soils, etc).

In general, our knowledge of the rural settlement sites of the eighth–12th centuries is much poorer. This is probably caused by the fact that in this period above-ground buildings were preferred to the sunken ones; thus it is difficult to trace their ground-plans in those landscapes which have been extensively ploughed. These settlements are mostly known from plough-walking (pottery fragments coming from destroyed floor levels of buildings and various pits).

From the seventh century (sixth in Poland?) hillforts become a new phenomenon in early medieval central and east Europe. Some 3000 of them have now been identified. These units reflect new relationships and movements within the existing society: they served not only as fortified centres but also as nodal 'tribal' points of significance in administration and economy. They are typical of almost all Central and East European territories settled, since the Migration Period, by Slavic ethnic groups. Their occurrence south of the Danube is rare: the Slavs arriving in the former Roman provinces reoccupied old urban centres, more or less destroyed by various tribes in the course of the Migration Period, or built specific vast units different to those in west Slavic countries.

Finally, urbanized centres appear throughout the Slavic territory from the ninth century AD. Some of them were extensively excavated in the northern regions (Alt-Lübek, Wolin, Gdańsk, Szczecin and Opole), in the east (Novgorod, and Kiev) and in the Balkan Peninsula (Plinska and Prjeslav in the territory of the Bulgarian Empire).

It is possible to conclude that the development of settlement forms was conditioned by the internal socio-economic evolution of the Slavs and dynamically influenced from the outside, from the Byzantine and Frankish Empires, the Viking world etc.

3 EARLY MEDIEVAL CASTLES – HILLFORTS – AND THEIR ROLE IN THE STATE-FORMING PROCESS OF BOHEMIA

In the early Middle Ages fortified settlement units were a dominant element of the Czech landscape. They were often situated on strategic hill-top sites and for this reason they are commonly called hillforts (*hradiště* in Czech=a deserted castle area: the Czech denomination of these early medieval forts comes from *hrad*=castle). As nodal points of territorial units (both tribal and administrative) and cultural life of the then society these sites have always been in the forefront of scholarly attention. Even now, in the post-war period, this has become a crucial category in the research strategy of Slavic archaeology in Bohemia. Of about 130 Czech hillforts c 35 have been more or less extensively excavated. These sites, referred to in early medieval documents as *civitas* (*metropolis*), *urbs*, *oppidum*, *castellum*, *castrum*, must have played a key role in a later stage of the early Middle Ages in connection with the creation of the state. Lately the exclusive research orientation on the hillforts has been criticized: some scholars point to the fact that rural settlement sites in the castle hinterlands should also be investigated since these units were closely connected with castles and mutual links between these two categories must be taken into account when trying to understand the operation of the whole settlement system.

In Bohemia three stages in the evolution of the hillfort have been distinguished. 1, End of the seventh–mid ninth centuries. Small centres with simple fortifications (earthen and wooden walls, stockades, ditches, no stone) serving as crop depositories (a number of storage pits – granaries – were found at the site of Klucov) and probably as a protection for people from surrounding hamlets. 2, Beginning of the ninth–10th (12th) centuries. ‘Tribal’ hillforts, mostly large in area (20–40 ha) and divided into sections (acropolis, 1–2 bailies); include cemeteries and cult precincts. 3, Small princely administrative centres of the newly introduced castle-territorial system of the Přemysl dynasty; internal divisions, absence of craft activity (apart from coining), advanced types of fortification (the so-called Přemysl wall) with masonry-fronted walls (end of the ninth–13th centuries).

From the geomorphological point of view we meet castles built on promontories (the most frequent type), and also fortified areas of ground and hill-tops, and forts situated in the bog regions.

As regards the genesis of hillforts in later times there are sites that ceased to exist during the 11th–13th centuries; (in central Bohemia, even in the ninth century); some others were converted into stone feudal castles, others lost their significance and were converted into villages or hamlets. Of great importance are those that in later times developed into urban units.

Also extremely important was the role of the Czech early Medieval castles (hillforts) in the process of state formation connected with the Přemysl dynasty. In the first stage the princes of this family (which acted as the ruling dynasty of Bohemia until AD 1308) tended to gain leading positions in central Bohemia and force single tribes outside this area to pay *tributum* to them. Later they started to widen the territory outside their original domain and change the dependence of surrounding tribes into total conformity. In the 10th century many tribal hillforts ceased to exist, being replaced by a network of new fortified units (the castle territorial system). It is apparent that the latter are situated close to the former (a typical feature of settlement pattern in territories occupied by the Romans, also apparent in Britain). It is also their setting in the landscape which shows the intention of this system’s builders. Following not only archaeological evidence but also reports of early documents (legends, chronicles and annals) conclusions have been made that around the mid 10th century a number of criteria characteristic of early medieval states in Central Europe (duty-bound village organization, collection of taxes and Christianity among others) emerge in Bohemia. Thus, the long term process towards the State was finished by the creation of a central political power represented by the Prince and his great retinue.

4 THE EVOLUTION OF THE CZECH AND MORAVIAN VILLAGE SPATIAL ARRANGEMENT: THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC EXPLANATION

The evolution of spatial distribution of rural settlement sites and their internal arrangement is of primary concern to those archaeologists dealing with the problems of rural settlement. In dealing with changes in layout and topography in rural habitation sites we attempt to explain some of the tendencies noted by archaeologists in socio-economic and environmental rather than in ethnic terms.

From the geomorphological viewpoint Bohemia is considered a model country for the study of the settlement (or colonization) processes of an early and late medieval territory since it is a unit naturally bounded with mountain frontier ranges protecting the country from the outside and having various conditions more or less suitable for settlement activity.

The early Slavic (sixth–seventh century) habitation sites were often linked by water courses (mostly with the rivers Elbe, Vltava and Ohře and were also close to the upper courses of brooks and stream confluences). They were mostly situated on fertile soils, although some of them have been detected in higher altitudes, often in places later transformed into fortified settlement units – hillforts. Traces of settlement activity are found almost exclusively in those areas where oak/hornbeam forests or riverine groves may have occurred originally. The residential units (almost exclusively sunken-floored buildings) were organized either irregularly or more or less regularly (in rows, in semicircles or in circular layouts) having different inter-spacing distances. It has been generally assumed that one house was inhabited by one family.

In the late Middle Ages population growth and land demand respectively made people leave the river basins and lowlands – the regions of best land – and colonize new territories. In Bohemia we can distinguish two principal stages of this process, namely the Internal and External (German) Colonization. The former involved people from abroad (from Germanic countries) who were summoned by the King and named *locatores* (nevertheless, even in this period the colonization process was complemented by peoples from the Czech heartland). It was the late phase of Internal Colonization and the whole External Colonization which, step by step, changed the landscape and settlement structure. The natural village types disappeared at the turn of the early medieval stage and were replaced by the normative villages (with streets, roads or central rectangular/circular ground plans). Generally speaking, the system not only of village plans, but also of the field and land use that had been created during the late Middle Ages persisted until the 19th century with only slight changes in some regions.

The concept of concentrating the settlement pattern and the introduction of regular tract and belt field types in the 13th century had close connections with the general economic and technological changes in agriculture. These changes were accompanied by the desertion of earlier hamlets. Such changes did not progress regularly throughout the whole territory of Bohemia: the strongest was probably in the fertile wheat-producing regions and newly colonized areas.

5 ROZTOKY: THE INVESTIGATION OF THE MOST EXTENSIVE WEST-SLAVIC SETTLEMENT ACCUMULATION (SIXTH–SEVENTH CENTURIES)

Since 1980 extensive excavations of an early medieval settlement area in Roztoky near Prague have been carried out. This started as a rescue project but in the second half of the decade it changed into a research project aiming at answering fundamental questions on spatial distribution of single settlement cores and their economic hinterland, and of the relations between human communities and their environment.

We are attempting to discover the settlement activity of the first Slavs in this area in connection with other evidence on the landscape use and colonization of the Prague region in the early medieval period. We are attempting to evaluate the settlement topography in relation to the basic components of the surrounding environment. We are focusing our attention on the reconstruction of the past habitat and the range of internationally produced plants and domestic animals. In other words, we are attempting a regional analysis of the territorial unit to which the site of Roztoky belongs.

On the community level we are revealing the general and specific tendencies in the spatial arrangement of the habitation sites, or better, their cause. According to the present evidence these consisted of units composed of four to 10 residential buildings representing a single building phase existing during the life of one generation or so. Hypotheses have been tested regarding the spatial distribution of structures and features which may help in solving the question of the relationship between economic practice and social structure.

The excavations are important in the study of one of the most frequently encountered types of medieval features, the sunken dwelling: the residential character of these features in Roztoky is without doubt. On the other hand, intensive ploughing and other agricultural activities in the area have resulted, on this site, in the poor survival of shallow and above-ground features.

Of primary importance is the question concerning the ethno-archaeological explanation of what we find today. Many problems dealing with the interpretation of such findings, for example, some houses were abandoned but the inhabitants did not remove pottery (and occasionally even other components of their possessions – quernstones, etc). All the questions mentioned above are being solved in co-operation with specialists. Apart from archaeological methods and geophysics, we are interested in the pedology and geology of the area investigated. Some of the archaeological finds were spectrographically analysed and pottery tested in order to find the firing temperature, technology, composition of the clay, etc. Of great importance in our approach to the investigation of the site is the analysis of ecofacts. The sources for this study have been collected by flotation and screening of the filling of house occupation levels and the contents of preserved pottery vessels. Analysis of plant micro-remains, carbonized wood and cereal grains are carried out by palaeoecologists involved in the project. Pollen analyses have also been carried out, but unfortunately the soil conditions of the site are unfavourable to pollen preservation. The investigation of animal bones is in progress at present. Samples for C14 and geo-magnetic dating have been submitted to the laboratories concerned.

The excavations at Roztoky were fortunate in revealing a settlement of unprecedented density, the largest concentration of settlement remains of sixth–seventh century date in Central Europe (the territory of the west Slavs). The excavations have raised a number of questions pertaining both to the settlement topography of the Prague region in those times and to the character of the economic sources and hinterland of early medieval rural communities.

6 OLD-SLAVIC SETTLEMENT INVESTIGATION AND ITS FUTURE DIRECTION

At present it is the complex (or total, holistic) approach towards settlement study that has been preferred. This does not mean that we focus exclusively upon the whole. The point being that the role and position of a structure's components may be grasped better if it is considered from the angle of the whole system in which it operates and of which it is an integral part. From the methodological viewpoint this means that preference is given to the deductive rather than to the inductive approach. In this regard the archaeology of the Medieval period is in close co-operation with other disciplines, especially geography. As an expression of such a symbiosis a special branch – settlement geography – has been constituted. Apart from archaeology and physical geography it is also involved in place-name studies, church dedication, art history, etc.

The objectives of the settlement geography study can be summarized in the following manner: A, The determination of the spatial arrangement of a settlement's microstructure (the community and catchment area, including the field systems). B, Regional analysis: reconstruction on the '*Siedlungskammer*' (or other naturally bounded region which later might have become an administrative unit) level. C, The understanding of a macrostructure: the determination of general evolutionary trends in the process of creation of larger territorial units in which early historical states were constituted.

The approach mentioned above has lately been preferred in those countries which traditionally have a reputation for archaeological research. The differences are obvious not only in financial conditions but also in the capacity of project chiefs. Considering that the present landscape changes radically and, implicitly, its original character disappearing gradually through the progress of civilization, our primary goal must be to choose the right research strategy. This means that archaeology must be focused on a carefully considered combination of research and rescue excavations, and the survey of those landscape units which still contain residues of their prehistoric (or medieval) character and which used to be densely populated in centuries gone by and are threatened by the future activity of present-day society. By the mobilization of all accessible means we have a chance to find at least some basic models of prehistoric and medieval settlement and regularities in mutual relations among single communities, and appreciate their dependence on the landscape types; in other words, we should try to decipher the principal laws of the creation of cultural landscape in history and to actualize the information gained for the evolution of modern trends in the Man/Nature relationship. Thus the study of history becomes meaningful.