

Review articles

A Bohemian paradise

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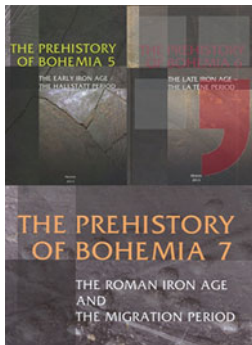
NATALIE VENCLOVÁ (ed.) with M. CHRYTÁČEK, P. DRDA, D. KOUTECKÝ, J. MICHÁLEK & V. VOKOLEK. *The prehistory of Bohemia 5. The Early Iron Age—the Hallstatt period*. 196 pages, 94 figures, 16 colour plates. 2013. Prague: Institute of Archaeology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic; 978-80-87365-58-8 hardback €40.

NATALIE VENCLOVÁ (ed.) with P. DRDA, J. MICHÁLEK, J. MILITKÝ, V. SALAČ., P. SANKOT & V. VOKOLEK. *The prehistory of Bohemia 6. The Late Iron Age—the La Tène period*. 183 pages, 73 figures, 16 colour plates, 8 tables. 2013. Prague: Institute of Archaeology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic; 978-80-87365-59-5 hardback €40.

VLADIMÍR SALAČ (ed.) with E. DROBERJAR, J. MILITKÝ, J. MUSIL & K. URBANOVÁ. *The prehistory of Bohemia 7. The Roman Iron Age and the Migration period*. 240 pages, 113 figures, 16 colour plates. 2013. Prague: Institute of Archaeology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic; 978-80-87365-60-1 €50.

Series editors: Luboš Jiráň & Natalie Venclová.

It is true that in Europe when it comes to writing broad-based surveys of their archaeology



the major European languages, commencing with three slender but well-illustrated volumes with texts

some countries have been more equal than others. The United Kingdom and Ireland probably hold the record, closely followed by the Low Countries. The Czechs also have a long tradition of publishing surveys in one or other of

in French by the prehistorian Albín Stocký (1924, 1928, 1933). Then in 1961 appeared *Czechoslovakia before the Slavs* (Neustupný 1961), the English edition of the overview written by the father and son team of Evžen and Jiří Neustupný and published in the previous year (Neustupný & Neustupný 1960). In 1978 appeared a massive single-volume prehistory of Bohemia with a brief summary and captions to the illustrations in German (Pleiner & Rybová 1978). Most recently, from 2007 to 2008 the eight volumes of *Archeologie pravěkých Čech* appeared—and then disappeared; in a matter of months the entire print run had been sold.

The complete revised and enlarged English edition of the latter has now appeared, serviceably translated and checked by a number of native English speakers and lacking only the first volume of the Czech edition, which is devoted to theory and method. The general editors are Luboš Jiráň, the current Director of the Prague Institute of Archaeology, whose main field is the Bronze Age, and Natalie—Nataša to all who know her—Venclová, a former Deputy Director and internationally known specialist on the Iron Age and especially on ancient glass.

The publication is a largely in-house production of the Prague Institute. Comprising the largest group of professional archaeologists in the Czech Republic, the Institute is ideally situated to undertake such an ambitious task as *The prehistory of Bohemia*. With the aid of a few colleagues outside the Institute, the seven-volume compendium aims to present the current state of research and includes an overview of sources, questions and interpretations. The series offers a systematic outline of the separate periods—from the Palaeolithic to the Migration period. The volumes are largely comparable in editorial coverage, dealing in turn with the history of research, sources, chronology, natural resources, subsistence, domestic and specialist production, ritual activities and portable artefacts. As

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far as individual authors are concerned, however, they have been given their head as to their handling of the theoretical points of departure, methodological approaches and emphasis on specific subjects, which therefore reflect the views of the individual editors and teams of authors. In terms of the proportion between the quantity of information and the extent of the territory investigated, there is no doubt that *The prehistory of Bohemia* represents one of the most detailed overviews of prehistory devoted to a particular region in Europe.

Narrowing our focus and leaving a review of the four earlier volumes to others, let me now turn a spotlight on some 1500 years of the archaeological record.

Volume 5, *The Early Iron Age*, begins with a clear outline of the period to be covered and the history of research, with a valuable, if necessarily selective, gazetteer of sites that demonstrates the ever-expanding attention that since the 1960s has been devoted to settlement studies. Equally useful are the chapters on dating and natural resources and their exploitation. After these introductory sections follows the core of the study, two chapters dealing respectively with what is termed, a touch stiffly, the “culturally specific characteristics”: Chapter 7 on the earlier Hallstatt phase or Ha C to D1 (Ha C1–D1 chronologically equating with the local Bylany culture) and Chapter 8 on Ha D2–LT A. Both sections are largely descriptive accounts of the material culture, Chapter 8 dealing with a more homogeneous culture but breaking down the settlement archaeology into enclosed farmsteads, unenclosed and enclosed hilltop areas (incidentally, fig. 61 in Volume 5 is particularly opaque, lacking a key to the shaded areas, let alone the numbered sites). The chapter ends with some remarks on ritual activities in which, of course, the Závist, okr. Praha-západ, Ha D2–LT A hillfort is centre stage—even if the interpretation of the site’s stratigraphy may be open to discussion; La Tène art—note, not Hallstatt art!—offers a brief and unexceptional coda.

Volume 6 follows the same basic pattern as the preceding volume. In the later La Tène phases a preference for large-scale excavation during the early part of the twentieth century resulted in a marked increase of finds, many of which, it is surprising to read, have not been systematically studied or evaluated. This includes the Hradiště u Stradonice, okr. Beroun, first excavated by Jaroslav Píč in 1894 and 1902 followed by Stocký in 1929, while it was Joseph Déchelette who famously compared the finds

from Stradonice with what were then termed *oppida* in France, Germany and Hungary (Déchelette 1927: 475–79, fig. 404). Chapter 5 offers a thorough review of the different types of settlement that can now be identified. This expansion in settlement studies indicates that previously held views as to a reduction in population in LT B1 may be incorrect, while on the question of enclosed and unenclosed sites, Venclová—editor of Volumes 5 and 6—has defined two types of the former: local sites located as components of residential and manufacturing areas, and supra-community sites with marked enclosures, although these may have indicated their ritual, rather than military, importance. On the other hand, it is pointed out that although still retained, the term ‘oppida’ is very difficult to sustain as an all-embracing label, with open sites such as the Moravian centre of Němčice nad Hanou, okr. Prostějov, clearly carrying out the tasks of coinage and glass-making once thought to be the hallmark of the *oppidum*; the pages dealing with this issue are some of the most valuable in the volume. While the figure of Jan Filip, teacher of several of the contributors to *The prehistory of Bohemia*, is ever present (Filip 1956), an interesting omission in general is reference to the work done under the Communist regime; an example would be Radomír Pleiner’s essay on state formation in Gaul, a study where the influence of Engels is patently clear (Pleiner 1979).

Chapters 6 and 8 on production areas and their products and portable artefacts, respectively, bookend—slightly uneasily—Chapter 7 on ritual areas and activities. This last includes a summary of the development of cemeteries in LT B1b–C1b and what is termed “the sociology of La Tène cemeteries”, in which there is a timely critique of Jiří Waldhauser’s division of grave groups into four, starting with male warriors and ending with graves without grave goods. Chapter 9 by Jiří Militký on coinage and Chapter 10 by Vladimír Salač on cultural groups on the periphery of the La Tène culture are both brief but valuable summaries of the current state of knowledge, the former summarising the arrival of the first imported coins and the first local issues, while the latter will be invaluable for those to whom the Podmokly and Kobyly groups are but names—and perhaps not even that. The volume concludes with a broad-based review of economy and society in the La Tène period, in which there is emphasis on specialisation of production for social formation and supra-regional contacts. The transformation that can

be seen in LT C2–D, despite the absence of graves, is reflected by a variation in settlement types suggestive of a stratified society.

Finally comes the vexed issue of the end of La Tène culture in Central Europe, traditionally associated with the coming of the Germans and the diverse groups of the north of Bohemia, which was clearly a contact zone for a number of communities. As far as chronology goes, the earliest phase of LT D2 marks the end of the oppida, the latter coinciding with the beginning of the Roman period. The last section manages to compress some of the most discussed issues into a few paragraphs. On the question of ethnicity and archaeology, “[a]rchaeology is unable to distinguish the ethnicity of its sources” says it all (p. 155). Previously, the question of migration was used to explain the decline in population in LT A, and the beginning of the period of flat cemeteries was subsequently considered by the Neustupnýs (1960; also Neustupný 1961) as being due to long-term local development. In general, the authors of *The prehistory of Bohemia* favour only small group movements rather than the large-scale population migrations described in the Classical sources. Another sacred cow of past overviews of the European Iron Age, ‘the civilisation of the oppida’ quite clearly varies between regions and, as already noted, trade and manufacturing centres are not restricted to oppida. Likewise, there is a timely warning against Czech archaeologists using Classical sources—for example, Julius Caesar’s campaign notebooks are concerned with Western, not Central, Europe, although Tacitus’ account of the defeat of the remnants of the Boii by the Germanic Marcomanni deserves more credence.

The last paragraph of Volume 6 is worth quoting in full:

“Although connecting the archaeological manifestations of the La Tène culture with the Celts, i.e. with a linguistic and historical entity, must be regarded as un-scientific, it can have a positive effect on the popularisation of archaeology. If the Celtomania witnessed in recent years increases public interest and support for archaeology and other scientific disciplines, it can function as something of a trademark. The common traits connecting La Tène Europe (in reality quite diversified) can be a model for today’s Europe, an entity in dire need of unifying elements” (p. 156).

With Volume 7, the Roman Iron Age and the Migration period, we are, as the editor Vladimír Salač points out, not only dealing with a period when ethnic labels are a reality but also, in contrast with the periods covered by the earlier volumes, confronting periods that have been virtually stagnant in terms of research. Indeed, this volume seems firmly rooted in the cultural-historical paradigm.

Notwithstanding, to have this bridge between the strictly prehistoric period and the beginnings of history, with the coming of the Marcomanni and the defeat of the Boii, is valuable. There is, however, a need to realise that use of the term ‘Roman’ does not imply that Bohemia was ever under Roman control, far less occupation. The Römische Kaiserzeit of German archaeologists is not helpful for the Bohemian situation, so that for the final period of La Tène culture, LT D2 is preferred to R A (following H.J. Eggers’ scheme) and the Roman Iron Age is extended from 50/30 BC to c. AD 575.

Following the pattern of the other volumes, Chapter 3 on the early Roman period begins with a gazetteer of sites followed by the historical sources—in which, it may be noted, Salač puts more faith in Caesar than Venclová—and Militký on coinage of the early and late Roman period, in which the widespread use of Roman coins by Germans is demonstrated. Chronology follows and, as in every volume, the evolution of research is set out (particularly useful is colour plate 1, showing the comparative chronology of early Roman-period Bohemia and Central Europe as compared with historical events). Quite unacceptable to the authors is the mixing of archaeological and historical nomenclature; the arrival of Maroboduus and his Marcomanni and the material culture of the period are regarded as independent phenomena.

Next comes a survey of settlement and economy, including trade, in which it is shown that Roman imports occur in much greater numbers than previously thought. After settlement archaeology comes a review of Germanic society, followed by a detailed survey of Roman imports and trade routes, and then a review organised by Eggers’ periods R A to B2. In the historical context, it is accepted that Celts were living in the area at the beginning of the first century AD, although it is difficult to prove that the Boii were present in the area that bears their name. Equally, ‘Germans’ consisted of many tribes of various sizes and importance. With the Romans

and the Marcomannic wars of AD 166–180 we are on surer ground.

One detail: colour plate 10:5, illustrating a disc brooch of gold on an iron background from a multi-period site at Rubín u Podbořan, okr. Louny, has nothing to do with the Roman period, far less later ones, but rather belongs to a class of LT A brooch found in Switzerland and Germany, as well as in Bohemia.

With Chapter 4, on the late Roman period, and Chapter 5, we are guided by Eduard Droberjar and we come to the end of this mammoth project. Chapter 4 follows the usual pattern for the period ending AD 380/400 with a new social élite developing around AD 300. The end of the Roman period was marked by new settlers from the Danube, which heralded the Migration period of the fourth to sixth centuries. The sixth and seventh centuries mark the migration of the Slavs. The section dealing with historical sources is succinct, with all the changing aspects of this complex period clearly set out. The by-now-familiar succession of sections on numismatics, chronology, settlement history, artefacts, burial, society and evidence for external contacts ends with one last summary paragraph in which the absence of written documents has put more than usual emphasis on archaeology. South and west Bohemia were raided by nomads and Huns, while in the sixth century Bohemia became a through route for Thuringians and Langobards. With the later sixth century the first of the Slavs arrived—the so-called Prague culture. But this was still far removed from medieval society, whose study must await another multi-authored project.

In many ways *The prehistory of Bohemia* offers a paradise for those, professionals and others, who wish to study the past of a key area of Europe. There are a few blemishes to which attention needs to be drawn, the absence of an index being a major one. Surely there was room, even if only for a list of sites to aid the reader? The bibliographies, on the other hand, are generous and by no means restricted to titles in Czech. There is a generous allowance of clear line drawings and distribution maps—albeit not always with an indication of what sites are being plotted—and photographs, including a 16-page colour section

in each volume, even if the captions do not necessarily provide sufficient information and the selection of some of the colour subjects could have been a bit more colourful.

One other point applies to both Iron Age volumes. Volume 5 of the English edition, *The Early Iron Age*, is subtitled 'the Hallstatt period' but in fact also includes the early La Tène or La Tène A phase, while Volume 6, 'The late Iron Age—the La Tène period', covers La Tène B–D. This seemingly contradictory terminology, as the editors point out in their respective Introductions, reflects the fact that La Tène art—or 'art'—appears first as a feature within an unchanged Hallstatt culture, an interesting view that deserves further argument.

The 1000 copies comprising the Czech edition of *The prehistory of Bohemia* sold out in a matter of months. As only 500 sets have been printed of these attractive and informative English-language volumes priced at an almost derisory price, no one with any interest in Europe's pre- and proto-history should pass up the chance to make a purchase.

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