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Based on an analysis of written sources, in particular the Royal Frankish Annals, the Canadian historian Sébastien Rossignol compiled a list of Latin terms used in Carolingian sources in reference to Slavic strongholds and hillforts from East-Central Europe. Medieval chroniclers mainly opted for *civitas*, *urbs*, *castrum* and *castellum*. However, those terms are not synonymous. *Castri* and *castelli* were linked to various fortifications and military conflicts, both in the Slavic regions and within the territory of the Frankish Empire. By contrast, in the Frankish Empire *civitates* fulfilled a number of important functions, while its strategic and military significance was rather secondary. In other words, a *civitas* was a genuinely complex centre, a mirror of a traditional Roman town. However, in the eastern borderlands of the Empire – that is in the Slav territories – the situation was different. According to Rossignol, Carolingian sources appear to have made no clear-cut distinctions between the notations *civitas* and *castellum*. In the annalist’s imagination, the *civitates* of the Slavs were nothing more than small forts, similar to the Frankish frontier *castelli* with limited functions. Was this indeed the case? Rossignol admits that any realistic idea of what the Slavic hillforts actually looked like can only be derived from the archaeological evidence.

In this paper I will elaborate on the problem using as examples early medieval sites from the area of the so-called Great Moravia (fig. 1), where the imperial annalists situated a number of Slavic *civitates* and *urbes*. Were those sites just military strongholds or were they genuinely complex centres of the Moravian Slavs? What were their practical function, their social significance and symbolic meaning in the local society of the early Middle Ages?

**DEFINITION OF AN EARLY COMPLEX CENTRE**

Let us first ask for a definition of an early medieval complex (or pre-urban) centre. According to existing opinions such a place should fulfil the essential central functions and should be surrounded by a so-called
hinterland. Central places should also be nodal points of networks made up, for example, of long-distance trade routes.

According to Eike Gringmuth-Dallmer complex centres should integrate five basic functions, namely 1) power, 2) protection, 3) crafts and raw materials, 4) cult and 5) trade. Settlements failing to provide all of the listed functions he considers as centres of a middle or lower order holding the lower ranks of the settlement hierarchy.

If the centres are an integral part of the settlement structure and do not originate as just one of the nodal points in the long-distance trade network, they must have their rural hinterland – a territory with clear boundaries, which can be formally defined. In practice the purposes of the delimitation of realistic territories are best served by mapping the density of known archaeological sites within the given territory.

Specialized trading places, which could also develop into complex centres, are not necessarily existentially dependent on their environs. They rely much more on the interaction with other, even very remote, trading places interconnected within a single network.

**CENTRAL EUROPEAN SLAVS AND GREAT MORAVIA**

Let us return to our original question: Were Slavic early medieval hillforts in Central Europe mere strongholds, that is, centres of a lower rank with limited military functions (as could be derived from an analysis of the written sources), or were they fully-fledged complex central places? A clear answer to this question results from more than half a century of excavations in the Czech Republic, as well as Poland, Austria, Hungary and Slovakia. Important data come from the area of the so-called Great Moravia, the core of which is mostly located in the south-eastern part of the Czech Republic – between the lower courses of the Dyje and Morava rivers.
In the 9th century Great Moravia, which could be described as an early state or rather a cyclical chiefdom (in Richard Hodges’ terminology), was the dominant power in eastern Central Europe not only in terms of politics, but also in cultural ways. To the west, the Frankish Empire was a powerful factor Great Moravia had to deal with in various ways. The strife for cultural independence culminated in the adoption of the Slavic liturgy and thus to the opening of Great Moravia to the Byzantine mission. The short-lived existence of Great Moravia ended in the early 10th century, when the Magyars began to settle in the Carpathian Basin.

Written reports of Great Moravian centres are found mainly in the imperial annals: an *urbs antiqua Rastizi* or *ineffabilis Rastizi munitio* for instance is mentioned in the *Annals of Fulda* and in the *Annals of St. Bertin*. Dowina at the confluence of the rivers Danube and Morava is labelled as *civitas*, as are some places temporarily taken by Engelschalk and William, commanders of the Bavarian duke Karlmann (*duces Karlmanni*) during an episodic East-Frankish occupation of Moravia.

Only on rare occasions it is possible to localize the settlements mentioned in the Frankish annals. Dowina, for instance, is the modern Devín (Bratislavský kraj/SK), while Neutra is nowadays the city of Nitra in Slovakia. However, though the most of the places mentioned in written sources elude localization, we assume that they refer to some of the rich archaeological sites explored by archaeologists over the last 50 years in the Czech Republic. The most important of those are Mikulčice (okr. Hodonín/CZ), Staré Město (okr. Uherské Hradiště/CZ) and Pohansko near Břeclav (okr. Břeclav/CZ) (fig. 2).

**ARCHAEOLOGY OF GREAT MORAVIAN CENTRAL PLACES**

Let us attempt to evaluate how the excavations on Great Moravian sites can help to answer the aforementioned question concerning the existence of complex centres in the Slavic part of Central Europe. First, we have to ask for archaeological proofs that the places were able to serve as central places in terms of power, that is, that they were able to provide shelter, fulfilled central functions with respect to craftsmanship and the production of, or provision with, raw material as well as with respect to trade and, last but not least, that they also served as religious centres.

Indicators of political power are artefacts which are known to have been considered as symbolic, but very important attributes of power, in particular weaponry and warrior equipment such as swords, military and garter belts (respectively cross-gartering) used to attach stockings or long trousers to the leg. Western European iconographic sources such as the image of a Carolingian lord in a fresco from the Church of St. Benedict in Mals (prov. Bolzano/I), or the illuminations in the *Codex Aureus* from the Abbey of St. Emmeram in Regensburg (ca. 870), the Vivan Bible (845-846) or the Sacramentary of Charles the Bald (ca. 869) clearly show that these objects were worn by members of the social elites (fig. 3A).

Asking for the presence of such artefacts in Great Moravian sites we can report an amazing number of 19 Carolingian swords from Mikulčice: 16 of them have been found in burial assemblages, while three others belong to a settlement context. Five swords can be reported for the site of Pohansko near Břeclav (fig. 3C), another five for the cemetery at Na valách in Staré Město. Metal fittings from belts and cross-gartering of high quality standard and artistic value are found at all of the sites mentioned above. An example is a gilded buckle made of bronze which was part of a garter belt from burial 193 at Pohansko near Břeclav (fig. 3B).

But it is not the artefacts alone that prove that we have, in fact, places of power. Excavations uncovered palace buildings in Mikulčice and in Staré Město, and at Pohansko near Břeclav the so-called Magnate
Court was completely excavated. On the basis of analogies it is regarded as an imitation of the residential quarter of an imperial Pfalz – a so-called palatium (fig. 4). According to Eike Gringmuth-Dallmer complex centres should also provide shelter in times of danger. Great Moravian strongholds provided passive and active protection as well. Passive protection was connected with the construction of fortifications which, mainly in the last quarter of the 9th century, attained the form of massive earth-and-timber ramparts with stone facing walls. These fortifications ran along large sections of extensive agglomerations. For example, at Pohansko near Břeclav roughly half of the total inhabited area of 60 ha was enclosed.

Fig. 3 A symbolic attributes of power (swords, military belts and garter belts) in iconographic sources of Carolingian provenance from the 9th century AD: 1 Codex Aureus from St. Emmeram’s Abbey in Regensburg; 2 St. Benedict Church in Mals in South Tyrol; 3 Sacramentary of Charles the Bald; 4 Vivian Bible. – B Pohansko near Břeclav (okr. Břeclav/CZ), grave no. 193 with the metal fittings from garter belts (9th century). – C Pohansko, grave no. 257 with sword (9th century). – (A drawings A. Radvanová; B after Kalousek 1971; C photograph Ústav archeologie a muzeologie, Masarykova univerzita, Brno).

Fig. 4 Pohansko near Břeclav (okr. Břeclav/CZ). – Magnate Court (palatium). – (Oilpainting painted by L. Balák, concept by J. Macháček).
Active protection consisted of concentrating military troops within the Great Moravian centres and this, too, can be proven by archaeology. At the bailey in Mikulčice about 70 above-ground houses have been excavated and it is estimated that the total number of these houses could rise up to 250. Their floors consisted of rammed sand and clay, but what is most important is, they often contained iron spurs and metal belt fittings. A similar spectrum of finds comes from the southern suburb at Pohansko near Břeclav, where the local inhabitants lived in sunken-floored dwellings. Here, about 100 houses have been excavated; the total number of houses could have been up to 300. There has been some domestic production, but there is no evidence of professionalized craftsmanship that might have taken place in these quarters.

On the contrary, specialized craft production was identified in some other parts of the extensive settlements. An example of a craftsmen’s district is the so-called Forest Nursery inside the fortified enclosure at

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Fig. 5 Great Moravian jewellery: earrings (9th century). – (After Dostál 1966).
Pohansko near Břeclav, where three metal working workshops were detected based on the dispersion of blacksmithing slag. The workshops were used for making or repairing chain mail and other parts of the equipment or the weaponry of Great Moravian warriors.

A highly sophisticated craft in Great Moravia was the making of unique Great Moravian jewellery (fig. 5). A number of Jewellery workshops were uncovered in Staré Město. They yielded both semi-finished products as well as various tools for the production of jewellery, for example a doming plate with round depressions made of an elk antler and used in the production of round hollow metal buttons, the so-called gombiks (fig. 6). The concentration of jewellery making in the leading centres of Great Moravia is supported by numerous occurrences of crucibles, which have been found e. g. at Mikulčice. Analyses of the crucible inner surfaces showed they were used to melt non-ferrous and noble metals, such as silver.
The existence of Christian churches clearly shows that the places discussed here have been religious centres, too. In Great Moravia churches were built almost exclusively in important centres⁴⁴, often in remarkable clusters (fig. 7). Thus far, at least ten churches are known at Mikulčice, in addition to two other structures of uncertain function⁴⁵. In Staré Město and its environs four churches are dated to the 9th century, whereby the complex at Sady (okr. Uherské Hradiště/CZ) is often assumed to have been the seat of Archbishop Methodius and of a church school⁴⁶, as suggested by the finds of metal styli used for writing on wax tablets. At Pohansko two churches were excavated⁴⁷. The ruins of some religious buildings contain preserved fragments of plaster with remains of fresco⁴⁸. In most cases all that is left from these early churches are fundaments and construction debris. The only exception is the small church in Kopčany (okr. Skalica/SK) which exists even today. It is situated about 1 km outside Mikulčice on the eastern (Slovakian) bank of the Morava River⁴⁹. Finally, it should be mentioned that the Great Moravian centres were not only nuclei of the new Christian religion, but have been places of worship in the pagan times, too⁵⁰.

The fourth criteria we should ask for is the role of the sites discussed above in the system of trade. In comparison to the specialized emporia of e.g. the coastal regions of northwestern Europe, the quantity of import goods at Moravian sites is relatively low⁵¹. However, its qualitative spectrum is quite comparable. Glass vessels from the German Rhine region and glass smoothers from Northern Europe have been found at Mikulčice (fig. 8)⁵², Frankish metal fittings decorated with enamel are known from Pohansko and Staré Město⁵³. Weapons and horse gear, in particular swords⁵⁴, spears⁵⁵ and stirrups⁵⁶, have been imported from the Frankish Empire or from the Baltic-Scandinavian area. From east or south came brocade or silk⁵⁷ and glass lamps⁵⁸. Apart from luxury import goods the central Great Moravian localities also imported raw materials and artefacts of everyday use from more or less remote places, more likely through the so-called inter-regional exchange than through long-distance trade. Typical examples for this category of artefacts are quern stones made of different types of rock brought in from various directions. In particular, a large group of quern stones from Great Moravian sites was made of rhyolite quarried in the mountains of Central Slovakia (Kremnica – the Štiavnica Hills), at a distance of between 130 and 150 km to the east⁵⁹.

It is certain that some of the Great Moravian centres were nodal-points in the networks of long-distance trade or inter-regional exchange. This is supported, for example, by the distribution of Byzantine coins, delimiting the corridor between Venice and Moravian sites along the ancient Amber Trail⁶⁰, which was interrupted at latest around 700⁶¹ and ended very likely in Moravia in the 9th century. The involvement of Great Moravian central places in long-distance land route trade is also supported by the latest finds of mule bones (Os metacarpale II and III) at Pohansko near Břeclav⁶². They have been interpreted as evidence of the trade contacts (mule caravan) with the regions in southern or southwestern Europe. The presence of foreign merchants in early medieval Moravia, especially Jewish Radaniya and Venetians, is confirmed by
written sources. The Custom Regulations of Raffelstetten (Bz. Linz-Land/A), dating to 904, and some Muslim sources mention »the main Moravian market« 63, but thus far it has not been possible to localize this place. It might well be one of the Great Moravian sites discussed above.

In the 9th century settlement structures formed around the important Great Moravian sites which can be interpreted as the hinterland or territory of a particular site. This is the result of the archaeological survey in the area between Pohansko near Břeclav, Mikulčice and the stronghold in Nejdek (okr. Břeclav/CZ), covering an area of 532.5 km². 64 The results of the survey were superimposed over the previously known early medieval sites from the investigated area both in the Czech Republic and the adjoining parts of Slovakia and Austria (fig. 9). In this way, a total of 122 early medieval settlements were identified. The settlements concentrate in the environs of the Great Moravian central places within a walking distance of one and a half hours from the centre. The territory belonging to each of the centres covered an area of about 110 km². It is obvious that contemporary agricultural settlements were not randomly located in the surrounding area. The peripheral areas on the interface between the hinterlands of two neighbouring centres remained only sparsely settled. They were probably de-populated due to the dislocation of the population which provided for the needs of the centre: in addition to producing the fundamental food-
The settlement structure fully subordinated to the needs of the centre was established in the 9th century in the immediate surroundings of Pohansko or Mikulčice. Judging from the model created by Zofia Kurnatowska for early medieval Great Poland the settlement structure was formed by an enforced centralization process rather than by a natural evolution. It is quite an archaic model of territorial organization typical for early medieval societies standing on the threshold of statehood. Its characteristics are the concentration of large fortified agglomerations with a densely populated hinterland into an area which may be considered the core of the early «states».

CONCLUSION

The archaeological results clearly show that the most important archaeological sites from the core of Great Moravia meet the generally recognized criteria for complex centres of a higher order. They fulfilled all the basic central functions, they were nodal points in the networks of long-distance trade and inter-regional exchange and they were situated in the middle of densely populated territories which formed their hinterland. In the early medieval society of Central Europe these central places performed not only a specific fun-
tion, which emphasizes the practical point of view, but also had a special significance which is given by the social environment and reflects people’s relationships to other people, and a special meaning, which reflects the spiritual life of the early medieval society. Their practical function was mainly related to the local professionalized craft production, which provided specialized products both for the local community and the inhabitants from the wider surroundings. A practical function is also attributed to the massive fortification of the centres, which together with the concentration of military troops ensured protection in times of danger. Social significance is manifested particularly by the presence of the elite. They built their residences in the centres and also buried their dead there. The central places took part in long-distance trade and inter-regional exchange, hence the Great Moravian elite had access to prestigious objects. The earliest Christian churches, just like the pagan shrines, had an essential symbolic meaning for the Great Moravian society. Their accumulation in Mikulčice, Staré Město and Pohansko is a clear proof that these settlement agglomerations have been religious centres. Research carried out over the past 50 years in Moravia have brought essential data on the early medieval settlement hierarchy in East-Central Europe. Today we know vast agglomerations formed the top of the settlement hierarchy. They were much more than just strongholds with limited military functions – they have been genuine complex centers – civitates or urbes.

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Notes

1) Rossignol 2009.
2) Curta 2009.
4) See e.g. Neustupný 1993, 160. – According to him, the patterns of living material culture are expressed by categories of living culture. In contrast to archaeological records, they are not limited by having only a material structure. They also possess function, which is a manner by which a specific fact of material culture is generally used in practical life, significance, attributed to the fact within social relationships among people, and a meaning, which a material fact can acquire in the mental world of people and which can be substantially different from its function and significance. The material structure is the form of the categories of living culture while their content is function, significance and meaning.
5) Steuer 2003, 161-162.
14) Ibidem 257-261.
16) Pohl 1997, 72-75.
19) Ibidem 309.
20) Plachá / Hlavcová / Keller 1990.
23) Galuška 2008a; 2008b.
25) Wamers 2005, fig. 5. 9. 18. 32.
Zentrale Orte und zentrale Räume des Frühmittelalters

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Zusammenfassung / Abstract / Résumé

Großmährische Zentralorte – ihre praktische Funktion, gesellschaftliche Signifikanz und symbolische Bedeutung


Great Moravian Central Places and Their Practical Function, Social Significance and Symbolic Meaning

This paper focuses on practical function, social significance and symbolic meaning of early medieval central places from the East-Central Europe, in particular from the area of so-called Great Moravia, which was a important (pre-)state formation on the eastern periphery of the Frankish Empire. It is argued that the vast local agglomerations were not mere military forts, but very complex centres – genuine civitates or urbs of Moravian Slavs as they are mentioned in Royal Frankish Annals. Only rarely can we identify the settlements known from Carolingian written sources with specific places. Although the majority eludes localization, we assume that the place names given in the written sources refer to some of the rich archaeological sites explored by archaeologists over the last 50 years in the Czech Republic. The most important ones are Mikulčice, Staré Město and Pohansko near Břeclav.
Les places centrales de Grande-Moravie: fonction, importance sociale et symbolique
Les fonctions pratiques, la signification sociale et la portée symbolique des places centrales du haut Moyen Âge d’Europe centrale constituent l’objet de cette contribution, tout particulièrement pour la région dite de Grande-Moravie, qui représentait une manifestation (pré-)étatique significative à la périphérie orientale des royaumes francs. De l’avis de l’auteur, les nombreuses agglomérations de cette région n’étaient pas de simples établissements à fonction militaire, mais des centres complexes et, par conséquent, les vraies civitates et urbes des Slaves de Moravie, dont on trouve mention dans les Annales du royaume des Francs. Il est toutefois rare de pouvoir identifier des sites précis aux localités citées dans les sources textuelles. Bien qu’une telle identification soit impossible pour la majeure partie d’entre eux, on doit partir du principe que les noms de lieux se réfèrent à certains des sites exceptionnels étudiés au cours des 50 dernières années par les archéologues tchèques. Les plus importantes de ces places centrales sont Mikulčice, Staré Město et Pohansko près de Břeclav.

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