



Frühgeschichtliche Zentralorte in Mitteleuropa

herausgegeben von
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STUDIEN ZUR ARCHÄOLOGIE EUROPAS 14

Habelt-Verlag · Bonn

Studien zur Archäologie Europas

Band 14

herausgegeben von
Joachim Henning, Achim Leube
und Felix Biermann



Verlag Dr. Rudolf Habelt GmbH · Bonn 2011

Frühgeschichtliche Zentralorte in Mitteleuropa

Internationale Konferenz und Kolleg der Alexander
von Humboldt-Stiftung zum 50. Jahrestag des Beginns
archäologischer Ausgrabungen in Pohansko bei Břeclav,
5.–9.10.2009, Břeclav, Tschechische Republik

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Verlag Dr. Rudolf Habelt GmbH · Bonn 2011

Gedruckt mit Unterstützung der Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung,
der Grantagentur der Tschechischen Republik, Projekt Nr. 404/09/J014 und dem
Forschungsvorhaben der Masaryk-Universität, Nr. MUNI/4/0929/20

Umschlag: Břeclav-Pohansko, Luftbild.
(Foto: Martin Gojda)

ISBN 978-3-7749-3730-7

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The Development of Přemyslid Domain Strongholds in the Heart of Bohemia (A Contribution to the Discussion)

Ladislav Varadzin

Abstract

The text addresses early medieval castles in the central part of Bohemia – the territory connected with the beginning of the Přemyslid dynasty and the origins of the early Czech state. We first deal with the dating of the castles, mostly on the basis of archaeological sources. The chronology of these buildings has been elaborated significantly in recent years. We then use this summarized information to produce a brief sketch of the development of the castles, which we then attempt to place in a general historical framework. The conclusion offers a comparison of this new information with existing concepts of the „Přemyslid domain,“ which, in our opinion, requires substantial revision.

Keywords: Early Middle Ages; early state; stronghold; domain.

From the start of their existence, certain early medieval political formations were based on a system of strongholds; in the eastern part of central Europe this mainly involved a system known as „castle organization.“ We therefore have good reason to investigate, once again, the nature of the situation with respect to early medieval castles in Bohemia, their development in this territory and whether the locations at which they were built reveal some type of coherent system, as well as other matters along these lines. Naturally, these questions are nothing new in Czech archaeology, which today is dominated by the concept of the Přemyslid domain formulated by J. Sláma (1977, 70–75; 1983; 1987; 1988, 71–80), a theory that is widely accepted in archaeological research both here and abroad.

It is unusual for „big events“ to intersect with early medieval archaeology; it is even less common for early medieval archaeology to enrich history with new information of great importance. The Přemyslid domain theory cast new light on the origins of the Czech state: by identifying a specific group of castles in central Bohemia, the theory revealed the original Přemyslid principality located in this territory at the beginning of the 10th century. The crossing of its borders in 936 by Duke Boleslav I (935–972) and accompanied by the subjection of foreign „principalities“ in the other areas of broadly contemporary Bohemia culminated in the origin of the „early Czech state.“ Hence, the „Přemyslid domain“ is a term designating the smaller political unit ruled by this dynasty up until the time that Boleslav I became sovereign prince. While the existence of this domain in the centre of Bohemia can be documented at the beginning of the 10th century by written sources¹, we must essentially rely solely on archaeologi-

cal sources in searching for its specific form. It is our aim to critically summarize these sources in the ensuing text. Our question is not whether the domain actually existed; instead, our goal is to identify it using archaeological resources.

Formulated in the 1970s and 1980s, Sláma's theory of the Přemyslid domain can be summed up in the following manner. Nearly twenty early medieval strongholds of various ages are known today in the central Bohemia (Fig. 1; the map section is artificially chosen). J. Sláma noticed that five of these strongholds (Mělník, Stará Boleslav, Lštěň, Tetín and Libušín) shared a regular distance from Prague (26 to 34 km) and formed something of a pentagon around the centrally located city (cf. Fig. 1). A characteristic feature of these fortified sites is a location at the edge of a settlement enclave and near a supra-regional road running out of Prague. In J. Sláma's opinion, these facts suffice to make it possible to attempt to explain the existence of the castles by means of a single common reason (e.g. Sláma 1977, 71, note 7). The Ludmila and Wenceslaus legends suggest that the oldest Přemyslid history played itself out approximately in the very space demarcated by these five strongholds (the legends even include stays by Přemyslids at two of the sites – Stará Boleslav and Tetín), a suggestion which J. Sláma used to conclude that they were built on the perimeter of the oldest Přemyslid principality; they were intended to protect as well as effectively administer and exploit this territory. In this way, a specific notion of the territorial size of the Přemyslid domain was born. In addition to the peripheral strongholds and the centre of the domain (Prague Castle from the end of the 9th century, as documented in written sources), the system included another two strongholds – Budeč and Levý Hradec, which, on the basis of information from the 1980s, are regarded as older. According to J. Sláma (1988, 79), this entire system of fortified centres was built around the turn of the 10th century, most likely under Duke Spytihněv I (895–915). The final common and important characteristic of all of these fortified sites, according to this researcher, is the presence of churches; at the same time, these also represent the oldest known sacred buildings in Bohemia². Their existence prior to the reign of Boleslav I can be documented by written or

ritories inside the Czech basin not ruled by the Přemyslids was summarized by J. Sláma (1988, 72, 74), who lists Wenceslaus's clash with the Kouřim duke, information on the origin of Ludmila from a different province of Bohemia, a mention of other dukes present at Wenceslaus's tonsure, Widukind's plural form in a mention of duties imposed on Bohemia by Henry I in 929 and the legend of the Lučané War.

2 The information used is derived from written sources on the close connection between Christianization and the seizure of power by the first historically known Přemyslids.

1 Written circumstantial evidence for the existence of additional ter-

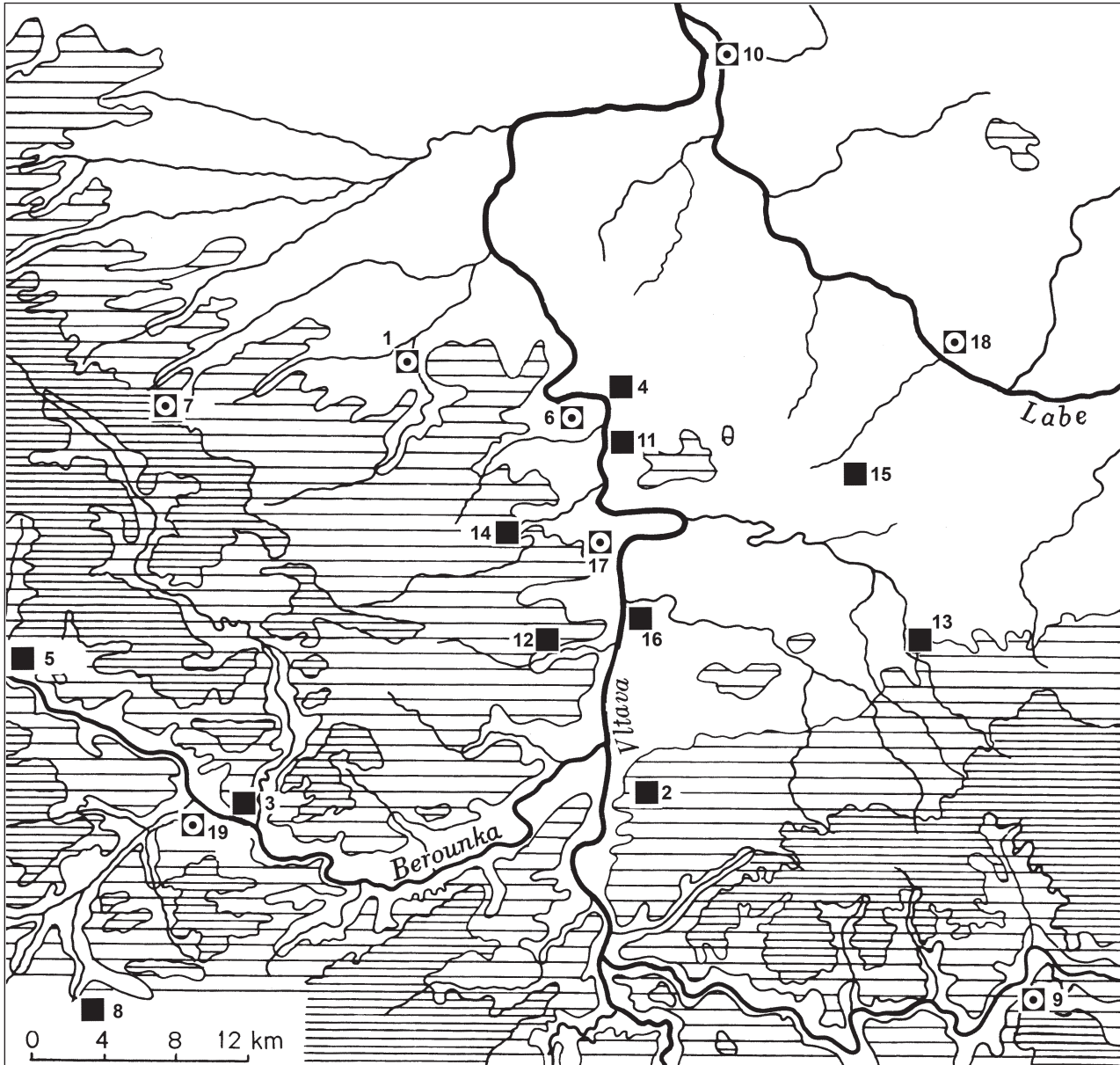


Fig. 1. Map of the strongholds discussed in the text. The circles highlight Přemyslid domain strongholds as conceived by J. Sláma. 1 – Budeč, 2 – Dolní Břežany, 3 – Hostim, 4 – Klecany, 5 – Křivoklát, 6 – Levý Hradec, 7 – Libušín, 8 – Lochovice, 9 – Lštění, 10 – Mělník, 11 – Prague-Bohnice, 12 – Prague-Butovice, 13 – Prague-Královice, 14 – Prague-Šárka, 15 – Prague-Vinoř, 16 – Prague-Vyšehrad, 17 – Prague Castle, 18 – Stará Boleslav, 19 – Tetín (after Sláma 1988, modified).

archaeological sources at Prague Castle, at Levý Hradec, Budeč, Tetín and Stará Boleslav. Nevertheless, it is necessary to add that a similar dating of churches at the remaining castles in Mělník, Lštění and Libušín cannot be proven, even though J. Sláma also assumes that churches existed at these sites in this period.

The main importance of the presented theory lies in the fact that it forms one of the key building blocks of today's notion of the political geography of Bohemia at the end of the 9th century and in the first third of the 10th century.

The decisive binding element and core of the entire construct is the idea of the intentional building of a system of five peripheral strongholds and, at the same time, their dating to the period before the reign of Boleslav I. We shall focus on this line of reasoning in the ensuing text.

We must first point out that the dating of the origin of one of the peripheral strongholds (Lštění) was not known at the time Sláma's theory was formulated, and therefore it was only assumed that it belonged with the others. As

there have been no new sources from Lštění since that time, this site cannot serve as an argument either for or against the Přemyslid domain theory. However, there have been some changes in our knowledge of the strongholds in the central part of Bohemia under study since the time Sláma's theory was advanced. Recent excavations of the fortifications at the stronghold in Mělník led to the revision of the assumed date of origin from the original dating to the time of Spytihněv's reign to a dating deeper into the 9th century (Meduna 2003). A change also occurred in the case of Budeč, considered before as an older element among the central Bohemian fortified sites; according to the original theory this stronghold was rebuilt for the later Přemyslid domain. However, new processing of the excavation data of the local fortifications shifted the origin of this stronghold from the beginning of the 9th century to the period between the final two decades of the 9th century and the beginning of the 10th century (Bartošková 2004, 783–786; Bartošková – Štefan 2006, 728), a fact that casts the original function of Budeč in a different light. Although changes in the dating of Budeč and Mělník do modify certain interpretive passages of Sláma's theory (cf. Sláma 2005, 54), they aren't enough on their own to force a re-evaluation. Much more consequential knowledge was produced by the new processing of archaeological finds from another of the domain's assumed peripheral strongholds located near *Libušín*.

For our purposes it is enough to summarize only the most important results (published in detail elsewhere) from the study of this site (Varadzin, in press). Although written sources do not provide any information on the dating of the Libušín stronghold, the relatively extensive archaeological excavations performed there helped resolve numerous questions, including the dating of the structure. The original dating of the stronghold to the end of the 9th century, published at the beginning of the 1970s (Váňa – Kabát 1971; Váňa 1973, 62–68, 71–72) and used by J. Sláma, was based on a combination of historical deliberations and the dating of several artefacts. However, from today's perspective we can label these very artefacts as insufficiently sensitive from a chronological perspective. In contrast to this, a newly presented dating is based on more chronologically sensitive pottery with calyx-shaped rims from the wood and clay fill of the rampart and from the foundational layer beneath it, where the pottery was retrieved from two separate trenches. Since the pottery was present at the site during the construction of the rampart (we can rule out intrusion with a high degree of probability), and since this rampart represents part of the oldest fortifications at the site, these finds provide a *terminus ad/post quem* for the chronological categorization of the origin of the Libušín stronghold. The beginnings of the production of pottery with calyx-shaped rims (a common manifestation of early medieval pottery in central Bohemia) fall, according to contemporary knowledge, into the second third of the 10th century³. These finds also include

3 We have two sources of support for this dating. (1) The stratigraphic situation at Budeč – Na Kašně, where calyx-shaped rims do not appear until the second settlement horizon, dated by the find of a spur to approximately the second half of the 10th century (Bartošková 1997, 112–113). (2) The production of this pottery follows the end

more advanced forms of this pottery; it is therefore possible that the construction of the rampart occurred even a little later. In any case, the Libušín stronghold could hardly have been founded earlier than under the reign of Boleslav I (935–972), when the Přemyslid domain ceased to serve its original purpose. This means that the Libušín stronghold cannot be used as one of the building blocks for identifying the domain, as attempted by J. Sláma.

We can thank advances in the dating of early medieval pottery made over the past two decades for this discovery⁴. This finding also calls into question the accuracy of the chronology of the other strongholds in the central part of Bohemia, whose origin can mostly only be dated using archaeological finds. For these purposes an inventory of the finds published to date from all nineteen of the early medieval fortified sites was conducted, with the main emphasis on determining the date of origin and demise of the rampart, settlement activity and the oldest sacred buildings. The results are summarized in Fig. 2. The dating of the ramparts (which we identify with the dating of the stronghold) was carefully distinguished from the chronological classification of the remains of the early medieval settlement, which – it turns out – exceeded the period of the existence of several strongholds in both directions. Left unanswered for now is the question of the nature of these settlements before they were transformed into fortified sites. Their common feature is mainly an elevated or other strategically situated position near terrain crossings, over which ran important land or water routes, as later reports indicate. It is therefore possible that these sites were used to guard the routes. Circumstantial evidence for this thesis is the fact that interest in these positions stretched substantially deeper into the past, as the remains of prehistoric settlement at thirteen of the nineteen studied strongholds indicate (Fig. 2).

Concerning their development, castles in the centre of Bohemia can be divided into several groups on the basis of their origin and demise. The oldest layer includes Bohnice, Butovice, Šárka and Hostim (Fig. 2), dating at the latest to the 9th century. It cannot be ruled out that also Mělník or even Levý Hradec belonged to this group, though we are especially lacking certainty in the latter case. However, the dating of the listed castles (with the exception of the last two) is based only on pottery evidence from settlement finds, since excavations of the

of the production of collar-shaped rims, the occurrence of which falls into the period after the building of the oldest wood and clay ramparts at Prague Castle (the source of a series of dendro-dates) between the years of 908 and 917, or immediately afterwards (Boháčová 2001, 264, 275).

4 The development of pottery in the period in which we are interested can be divided into four phases: (1) pottery of the 'Middle Hillfort' period datable in general to the 9th century; (2) pottery comparable to finds from the first settlement horizon in the foregrounds of Budeč, falling in general between the last quarter of the 9th century and the first third of the 10th century; (3) archaic pottery with calyx-shaped rims datable approximately to the second third of the 10th century and (4) classic pottery with calyx-shaped rims from the subsequent period up to approximately the middle of the 11th century. For more on these phases and dating see the previous footnote and Varadzin, in press.

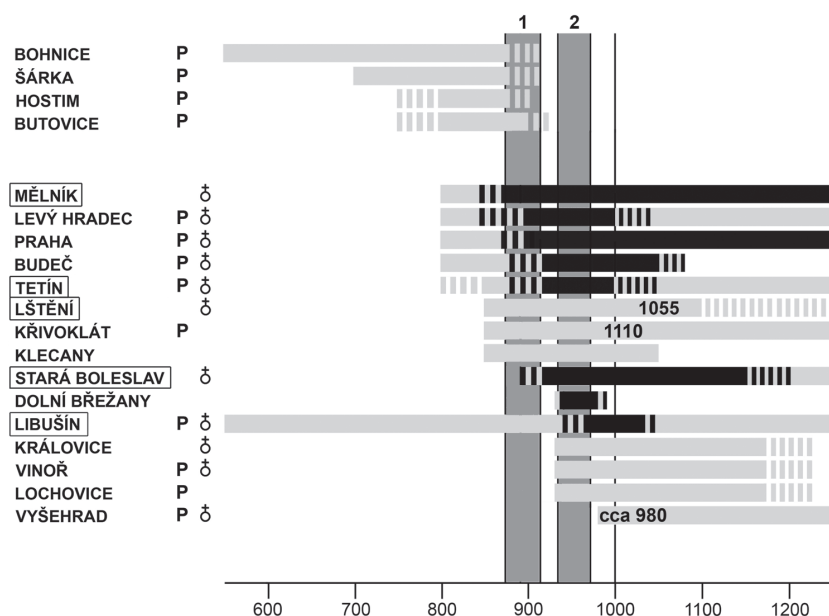


Fig. 2. Dating of strongholds in the centre of Bohemia; the sites are listed from the oldest to the youngest according to the origin of fortifications or the beginning of settlement. Light horizontal stripe: dating of settlement at site; black horizontal stripe: dating of fortifications; vertical stripe 1: reign of Bořivoj I (872–888?), Svatopluk (888?–894) and Svytlahněv (894–915); vertical stripe 2: reign of Boleslav I (935–972); name of site in frame: peripheral domain stronghold as conceived by J. Sláma; highlighted presence of church and prehistoric settlement (P).

fortifications failed to produce conclusive results at all of the sites. While settlement finds can only provide a general picture for the chronological classification of the strongholds, this evidence is important all the same, as it represents the maximum timeframe in which the stronghold was used. Whereas the dating of the oldest early medieval finds differs substantially between the listed sites (in a broad period between the 6th and 9th centuries), the dating of the latest artefacts falls, in four cases, into the uniform interval of the final quarter of the 9th century to, at most, the first third of the 10th century. Therefore, the fortified areas at the listed sites must have been abandoned in this period, at the latest⁵. The relatively narrow final time period appears so significant that we can join J. Sláma in regarding it as circumstantial evidence of sweeping changes in the political situation occurring in central Bohemia at the time.

The second group is made up of strongholds built approximately from the second half or final quarter of the 9th century to the first third of the 10th century (demonstrably Prague-Castle, Budeč, Stará Boleslav, Tetín); unlike the previous group, we can also verify this dating in written sources. Since we have the presence of Přemyslids at these castles documented in written sources in the first third of the 10th century at the latest, it is possible to label them without any problem as support points in the Přemyslid domain as theorized by J. Sláma. Their origin could in fact be tied to the abandonment of the previous group of fortified sites, from which only Mělník and, possibly, Levý Hradec survived into the “Přemyslid” era (however, their beginnings in the period before the final quarter of the 9th century are not guaranteed). We can

⁵ Calyx-shaped rims are virtually non-existent at these sites and in the case that we have numerous assemblages of pottery finds, they reveal the end of settlement during the course of the occurrence of pottery comparable to finds in the first Budeč – Na Kašně settlement horizon, i.e. approximately between the final quarter of the 9th century and the first third of the 10th century.

only speculate about potential causes. There is an assumption that Levý Hradec was the original Přemyslid family residence (according to hagiographic sources Bořivoj built a church there before he did so at Prague Castle); there is conjuncture that Mělník was the residence of the legendary Slavibor, who was related to the Přemyslids through his daughter Ludmila. However, it is not clear whether Mělník became Přemyslid property through this “dynastic” connection or if it remained in the hands of Slavibor, especially since we do not have conclusive proof of a Přemyslid presence at this castle until the end of the 10th century.

The third group of strongholds includes Dolní Břežany, Libušín, Královice, Vinoř and, with certain reservations, even Lochovice (from which we have a smaller number of finds). The fortifications at these sites could have been built at the earliest in the period of the circulation of pottery with calyx-shaped rims, i.e. during the reign of Boleslav I (935–972) or later, when the Přemyslid domain, as conceived by J. Sláma, no longer existed. We can prove this dating at only two of the sites on the basis of excavations of fortifications (Dolní Břežany, Libušín); in the other cases we work with finds obtained from surface collections, among which pottery with calyx-shaped rims represents the oldest element. In addition to a later date of origin, the castles in this group have one other common characteristic: none of them appear in written sources. Otherwise, in terms of location and size they do not differ in any special way from the castles in the previous group. Why were these castles built? In our opinion it is necessary to take into consideration the radical change in Přemyslid politics under Boleslav I, who was attempting (successfully) to subjugate neighbouring territories by forcible means. Certain facts suggest that at this time it was necessary to more thoroughly secure family lands for the purpose of military and economic expansion. We can already assume Boleslav’s efforts at internal security due to the fact that at the beginning of

his expansion he could not foresee the early death of his potentially most dangerous adversary, the king of East Francia, Henry I⁶ († 936), and the internal struggles under his successor, Otto I (e.g. Keller 2001, 23–28). It is apparently no coincidence that the relatively large-scale reconstruction of the ramparts at Budeč and Stará Boleslav likely occurred under Boleslav⁷. It is possible to hypothetically place the origin of the strongholds at Dolní Břežany and perhaps even Libušín into these contexts. The question of whether the strongholds at Královice, Vinof and Lochovice were built during Boleslav's reign must remain open for now.

The only castle whose origin can be placed, without greater reservations, into the second half of the 10th century (in all probability no later than the 980s, when the minting of coins began) is Vyšehrad, which represents the fourth and final phase in the development of strongholds in the studied territory. By this time the Přemyslids already directly controlled at least a substantial part of today's Bohemia, and attempted to consolidate this territory, according to our current ideas, by building a castle system based on newly founded fortified sites. Due to its proximity to Prague Castle and with regard to the presence of a mint, the origin of Vyšehrad can be tied to the economic and population boom of the Prague agglomeration. Vyšehrad was therefore built in more peaceful times than the majority of the fortified sites mentioned above.

Three other strongholds in central Bohemia – Lštění, Křivoklát and Klecany – cannot be placed in any of the groups due to insufficient information. Nevertheless, settlement remnants and, in two cases, written sources demonstrate or at least suggest that their existence overlapped the period in which the Přemyslids ruled Bohemia.

The demise of some of the castles built by the Přemyslids in central Bohemia occurred in the 11th century: we can use archaeological sources to conclude that the ramparts of Libušín and Levý Hradec began to crumble in the first half of the 11th century, at the latest, and at Budeč no later than the second half of the same century. Likewise, the founding of the chapter in Stará Boleslav around the middle of the 11th century connected with the generous donation of local property can be viewed as an expression of the duke's lack of interest in this stronghold. One possible explanation for the release of these sites is the loss of their original function tied to the reorganization of the Přemyslid administrative structure in Bohemia in the first half of the 11th century.

6 Henry I rose up in the name of an unknown *vicinius subregulus* attacked by Boleslav in 936.

7 The second phase rampart at Budeč covered a cemetery next to the Rotunda of St. Peter; on the basis of the numerous objects found in graves, the end of the use of the cemetery can be dated to around the middle of the 10th century. Pottery finds from the fill of this rampart are dated to the same period (Bartošková, in press). At Stará Boleslav a wall built in the "Roman" style can be dated to the period of Boleslav I, not only on the basis of Cosmas's narrative, but also on the basis of an evaluation of archaeological finds, according to which the solid stone wall with lime mortar was "probably built during the rise of pottery with calyx-shaped rims" (Boháčová 2003a, 138–140; 2003b, 436).

We can now return to questions surrounding the study of the Přemyslid domain. Having removed Libušín from the group of five archaeological sites considered by J. Sláma as peripheral castles of the dynasty, we can also question whether Lštění, whose date of origin we do not know, actually served such a function. Certain doubts can also be raised in the case of Mělník, whose ownership by the Přemyslids we cannot document through most of the 10th century. We therefore regard the regularity of the placement of the peripheral castles around Prague as an imaginary phenomenon that has no evidentiary weight given the current state of scholarship. This opens up a second alternative in which the Přemyslid principality was never regularly demarcated and was composed of settlement enclaves of various sizes that were added on or territories that ran out in greater distances in a linear manner along important routes. In reality, the domain could have been much smaller or even substantially larger than suggested by J. Sláma. It could even have exceeded the studied territory in Fig. 1.

As already mentioned, Sláma's theory considered the presence of sacred buildings as another indicator of castles in the Přemyslid domain. However, the presence of a church at a stronghold can be a useful criterion only if the building is dated to the period prior to the reign of Boleslav I. On its own, the presence of sacred buildings at castles does not have great importance without knowledge of its age, since their origin could also fall into a later period (as at Libušín, where the church was built under the reign of Boleslav I, at the earliest). J. Sláma used the absence of a church as an additional argument – this time for the negative specification of Přemyslid castles. But this argument can only play a role if we accept the claim of the First Old Slavonic Legend of St. Wenceslaus, according to which churches in the time of Wenceslaus (the predecessor of Boleslav I) were found at all of the Přemyslid castles (Sláma 1986, 24). It is necessary to point out, however, that the other legends, including those written earlier, do not contain the same information. In the end, not even the criterion regarding the location of castles on important routes has unambiguous relevance, since the majority of fortified sites in central Bohemia occupied such a position, including those that were verifiably not part of the domain.

Hence, a cautious attitude to the presented criteria brings us back to the primary question of how we can define the actual size of the Přemyslid domain on the basis of archaeological sources. Naturally, the first criterion is dating the origin of the relevant strongholds to the period prior to the reign of Boleslav I. At the same time, it is clear, however, that not every castle built in this period had to belong to the Přemyslids, especially those located a greater distance from Prague. We can consider Přemyslid ownership only if the presence of a church can be verified at the fortified site and the origin of the church can be dated no later than to the first third of the 10th century, when the building of Christian places of worship by other elites is regarded as unlikely. And finally, in the case of the relevant castle being founded before the end of the first third of the 10th century, its survival into later times could perhaps suggest Přemyslid origin since, in the case

of other ownership, the castle would probably have succumbed to Přemyslid expansion in the second and third thirds of the 10th century, as in other parts of Bohemia (Sláma 1988). However, such an argument has only the value of circumstantial evidence.

We must unfortunately conclude that the current state of archaeological scholarship with regard to numerous sites does not permit the application of the proposed criteria. It is entirely clear that the resolution of the issue of early medieval fortified sites in central Bohemia, connected directly or indirectly to questions of the origins of the Přemyslid reign and therefore also the origin of the Czech state, will require future, special-purpose terrain excavation of fortifications and sacred buildings at these sites. We can only hope that Czech archaeology will one day manage to undertake a terrain project similar to the one conducted at the oldest Piast castles in Poland.

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