

Zdeněk Smetánka (21 Oct 1931 – 4 Apr 2017), a Czech and European Medieval Archaeologist Has Passed Away



Zdeněk Smetánka extraordinarily contributed to Czech medieval archaeology and was a significant figure of European archaeology. He belonged to the generation that laid the foundations of archaeology of the later Middle Ages (12th–15th centuries) as a new discipline. In the former Czechoslovakia, this process started in the second half of the 1950s.¹ The crucial protagonists were Miroslav Richter (1932–2011) and Zdeněk Smetánka in Bohemia, Vladimír Nekuda (1927–2006) in Moravia, and Alojz Habovštiak (1932–2000) in Slovakia. In Bohemia, the emergence of the new discipline was accompanied by a remarkable discussion, in which M. Richter and Z. Smetánka justified and defended the methodological bases of medieval archaeology and its position with respect to other disciplines. In the first case, they built on the connection with the methods of prehistoric archaeology, whereas in the second, they presented medieval archaeology as a field seeking comprehensive knowledge of medieval past. The appearance of M. Richter and Z. Smetánka was characterised by the vigour of youth. Their first public discussion took place just 60 years ago, in 1957.

¹ Smetánka, Z. (1993) Archaeology of the Middle Ages in Bohemia: its past, present and future, in: Andersson H. – Wienberg J. (eds), The study of medieval archaeology. European Symposium for Teachers of Medieval Archaeology, Lund 11–15 June 1990, Lund Studies in Medieval Archaeology 13, Stockholm, 91–103.

In 1954, Zdeněk Smetánka joined the Institute of Archaeology of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences in Prague. His first major topic was medieval stove tiles, a unique part of the culture of the Czech lands. He was well qualified for that, having completed his studies of archaeology and art history at Charles University. He proved himself to be a brilliant systematist and created a solid basis for any further research into stove tiles in the Czech lands.² He never abandoned the topic of stove tiles and gradually devoted several valuable articles to them.

The development of the new discipline necessitated university instruction. From 1964, Zdeněk Smetánka thus systematically worked at Charles University, lectured in medieval archaeology and supervised his students' work. Even in the wider European context, he became one of the first teachers of the new discipline. He was a true professor. He presented a perfectly organised view of medieval archaeology, its craft and sense. He taught even more important things, such as the difference between 'to know' and 'to understand'. He took his work at the university very seriously. He would not allow any compromise by his students, but he approached them as equal partners in joint professional search.

At the Institute of Archaeology of the CAS, Zdeněk Smetánka was destined to conduct research at Prague Castle. The main assignment came in 1972, when research into a burial site of the 9th–10th centuries behind the Riding School was initiated. It was immediately evident that the essential chapter of the beginnings of Prague Castle and the Czech state started exactly there. Perfectly executed excavations were followed by an extremely ambitious publishing project. Zdeněk Smetánka gradually published several valuable studies and a thorough catalogue.³

Already in the 1950s, Zdeněk Smetánka began to deal with the medieval village. It seems to have become his favourite topic, to which he devoted the greatest number of publications. He soon gained a thoroughly informed overview of European research (he was involved e.g. in the excavations at Wharram Percy). His sophisticated approach raised this

² Smetánka, Z. (1968) Technologie výroby českých kachlů od počátku 14. do počátku 16. století (Die Technologie der Herstellung böhmischer Kacheln vom Beginn des 14. bis zum Beginn des 16. Jahrhunderts), *Památky archeologické* 59, 543–578. – Smetánka, Z. (1969) K morfologii českých středověkých kachlů (Zur Morphologie der böhmischen mittelalterlichen Kacheln), *Památky archeologické* 60, 228–265.

³ Frolík, J. – Smetánka, Z. (2014) Pohřebiště v Lumbeho zahradě na Pražském hradě [Lumbe Garden Cemetery at Prague Castle]. Praha.

part of Czech archaeology to an excellent standard.⁴ He was able to use the potential of Czech landscape, with numerous preserved relics of deserted medieval villages, discernible from the surface remains.⁵ A unique example of an effective combination of different cognitive pathways was Smetánka's research into the deserted village of Svídna.⁶

Despite an adverse political situation, Zdeněk Smetánka managed to maintain contacts with a number of European archaeologists – already from the 1960, he was a member of the European archaeological community. These ties made it possible for him to become one of the 'founding fathers' of the association, *Ruralia*, whose first conference was held in Prague in 1995.

Zdeněk Smetánka was always fascinated by public space and a dialogue across narrow disciplinary boundaries. The climax of this part of his work is a true masterpiece – a book on the everyday life of a peasant mentioned in one of the charters of the first half of the 12th century. He was freely inspired by the book *Medieval People* by Eileen Power; his knowledge of the cognitive methods of the Annales School and tendencies towards anthropologising historical research was valuable for him as well. Zdeněk Smetánka was able to use all sources of knowledge – in the given case archaeological and written sources as well as ethnographic evidence. He added something extra – the message of humanism, because he was led by the belief that also archaeology should provide our contemporary society with at least a small part of cultural stability. The first edition in 1992 became a major event; it was followed by another two Czech editions and one German.⁷

Zdeněk Smetánka succeeded in crossing several borders. He was an outstanding archaeologist (an expert in medieval material culture) while fulfilling the requirements of 'histoire totale'. He was an excellent specialist who never compromised on his professional demands but successfully entered the public space. He spent most of his life in a country

⁴ Smetánka, Z. (1974) Die Archäologie und das mittelalterliche Dorf in Böhmen. Rückblick, Gegenwart, Perspektive, Zeitschrift für Archäologie des Mittelalters 2, 121–127.

⁵ e.g. Smetánka, Z. – Klápště, J. (1981) Geodeticko-topografický průzkum zaniklých středověkých vsí na Černokostelecku (Geodetical-topographical survey of deserted medieval villages in the Kostelec-nad-Černými-lesy region), *Památky archeologické* 72, 416–458.

⁶ Smetánka, Z. (1988) *Život středověké vesnice. Zaniklá Svídna* (The life of medieval village. Deserted village Svídna), Praha. – See also Smetánka, Z. (1994) K problematice trojdílného domu v Čechách a na Moravě v období vrcholného a pozdního středověku (A discussion of problems associated with the three-part house in Bohemia and Moravia during the period of the high and late Middle Ages), *Památky archeologické – Supplementum* 2, 117–138.

⁷ Smetánka, Z. (2009) *Die Geschichte vom Bauern Ostoj. Alltag im mittelalterlichen Böhmen*, Rahden/Westf.

isolated by the Iron Curtain, yet he was a respected member of the European research community. Neither can one forget the message of humanism, pervading his magnum opus. He accomplished a lot, and all that he did, he did with a friendly and accommodating approach.

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