

The medieval peasant house in Bohemia – continuity and change

Das mittelalterliche Bauernhaus in Böhmen – Kontinuität und Wandel

Maison paysanne médiévale en Bohême – de la continuité et du changement

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To Z. Smetánka with gratitude

The archaeologically resolved theme of the medieval peasant house can be divided into three developmental areas, an understanding of which has various groundings, while yielding diverse results.

1. The Early Medieval rural settlement

In the second half of the 20th century, the Czech archaeology of Early Medieval villages reluctantly and protractedly freed itself from two well established but erroneous ideas. The first opinion to be demolished was that direct relicts of medieval buildings could be sought in the irregular pits discovered during archaeological excavations. It is now generally held that such pits lay outside contemporary structures, and outside their ground plans. A further myth was that an understanding of the Early Medieval village and its homesteads is simply bound up with wide area field excavation. The initial supporting arguments were logical, as even in the 1960's field research into Early Medieval villages in Bohemia was limited to relatively small trenches. Beyond the documentation of these, it was possible to expect that an archaeologically understandable situation lay close to or outside the areas uncovered. In the 1970's, however, several large scale field excavations were conducted (see in particular *Bubeník 1975; Bubeník - Velímský 1986*) which showed that less certain, or indeed entirely unclear, archaeological situations are characteristic of medieval settlement areas as a whole.

Present research into Early Medieval villages in Bohemia finds itself in a somewhat paradoxical situation. Information regarding the earliest development units, the villages of the 6th/7th century and their built culture is relatively good (*Pleinerová 2000*). The main built features were sunken structures, huts, which were sometimes accompanied by storage pits (*Fig. 1*). In later periods these sunken features remained a building type, but formed a lesser proportion of the whole. The appearance of the later village was decisively influenced by buildings erected on the terrain surface, the load bearing structures of which nevertheless did not comprise columns or posts set into the ground beneath. Thus it is that both smaller

and larger excavations of Early Medieval villages result as a rule in the same frustrations. The level of the contemporary ground surface has been ploughed out, and only irregular pits of a function hard to ascribe remain. The simplest determinations can be applied to storage pits of various shapes, separately identified fireplaces or kilns, and of course in the relatively rarely evinced cases sunken houses. At Břežánky, one of the wide-area excavations (*Klápště - Smetánka - Tomášek 2000, Fig. 5:1*) yielded some 51 sunken features from a period covering around 5 centuries, of which 16 kilns, 14 storage pits and 3 sunken houses – all with a kiln within them – could be positively identified (*Fig. 2*). With similar results, the balance of archaeological knowledge regarding the internal structure of the Early Medieval village is very brief: the basis of settlement pattern was a settlement area occupied for a long period. The individual residential and ancillary features had no „permanent“ specific site, but moved after a certain period. This conclusion is drawn from the spatio-temporal analysis of the distribution of archaeological relicts (*Klápště 1994, 115; Meduna 1992, 286*). At the same time, it seems that an understanding of „residential and ancillary areas“ can come only from the excavation of carefully selected sites: a major shift in the information retrieved cannot be expected at those which lie in convex field contexts that have been subjected to ploughing and erosion over long periods. The last remaining hope may be concave contexts, marked by a long-term soil accumulative regime (*cf. Meduna 1996*).

A modest conclusion to this first part: the built form of the Bohemian village of the 8th-13th centuries was determined by structures erected on the terrain surface. Sometimes it is adjudged that these structures were made of logs, but positive evidence for such a conclusion is missing. Virtually nothing is known of the disposition of structures, the original articulation of their layouts etc. The archaeological discussion as to the conclusiveness of individual homesteads follows on closely from field results; as regards the individual husbandry of villagers (and thus homesteads) however, there can be no doubt – it is attested in written sources of the 11th and 12th centuries recording bestowals upon villagers (see most recently *Petráček 1999*).

BŘEZNO
(6./7.)

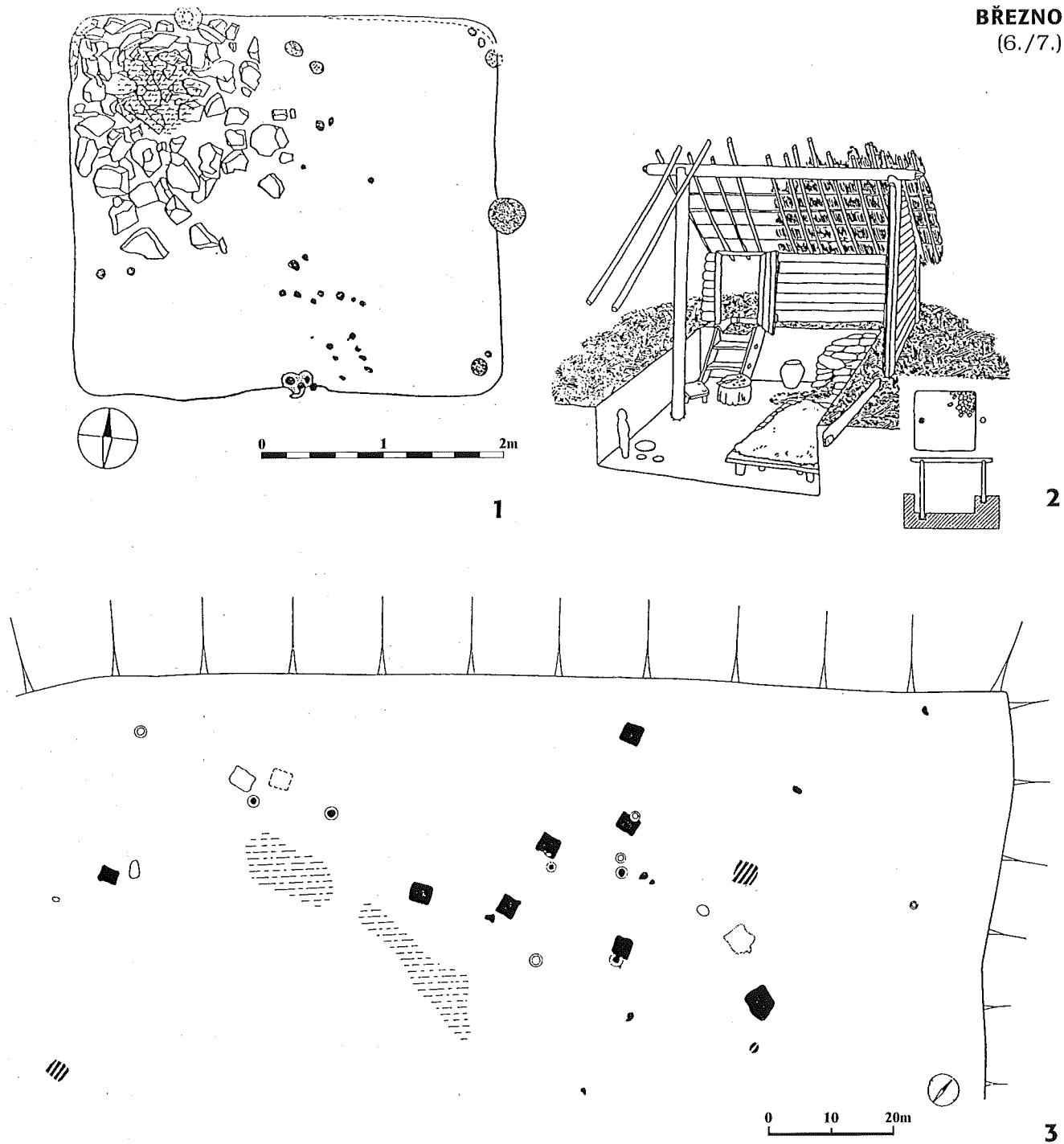


Fig. 1. Březno, 6./7. centuries (NW Bohemia). 1 - one of the sunken houses according the archeological excavation, 2 - drawing-reconstruction of the image of the sunken house, 3 - ground plan of the early medieval village. After I. Pleinerová.

2. The High Medieval transformation of the village milieu

In searching for a common denominator in the multi-faceted changes brought to the Bohemian milieu by the 13th century, one invariably comes to the new qualities of spatial behaviour. Retention of properties which were from this period onwards demarcated was linked to specific, long-term obligations. It was this

that in principle opened the way to stabilisation in village homesteads, the stabilisation process manifesting itself in many mutations and variations.

Attempts at a clear explanation delight in considering contrasts. Alongside the plans of several early medieval settlements, which could be compared with the lunar landscape, the ground plans of several 14th-15th century deserted villages are available. Given the marked differences, such a comparison will be well understand-

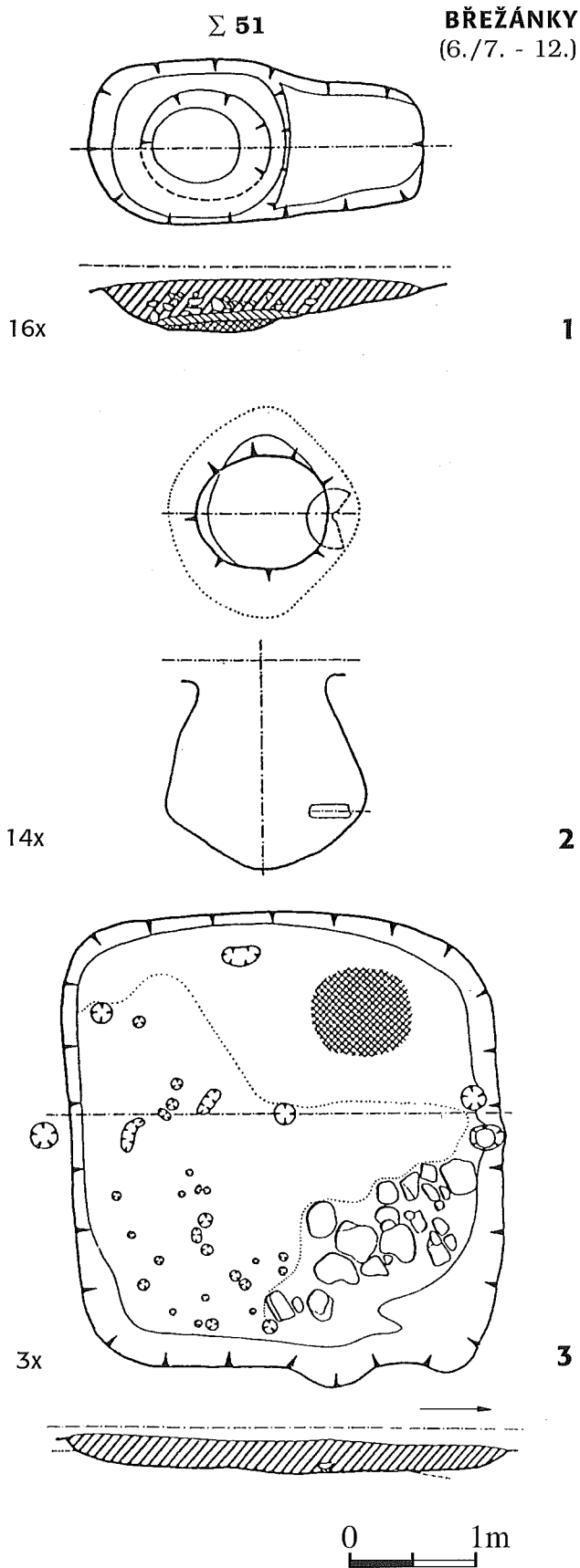


Fig. 2. Břežánky, 6./7. - 12. centuries (NW Bohemia), kinds of the sunken features excavated in the settlement area of the early medieval village: 1 - kilns (16 cases), 2 - storage pits (14 cases), 3 - sunken houses (3 cases). After J. Bubeník.

dable, but in and of itself misleading, as it considers only one facet of the medieval reality. - Even here, *didactic contrasts* cannot be avoided, but we will attempt to relativize them quickly.

Very distinctive example of a later medieval village is provided by deserted Svidna, excavated between 1967 and 1973 by Z. Smetánka (1988). Although in Central Bohemia, it lies in a landscape not settled until the 13th century, on a site offering an inexhaustible supply of high quality building stone. According to the archaeological sources, Svidna's life stretched from the end of the 13th century to the period around the year 1500. Subsequently, the entire area was reclaimed by forest.

The picture revealed by the identification of relicts of lost Svidna, hidden away in a mature forest, is something of an archaeologist's dream. The geodetic documentation of the surface structural relicts alone shows the entire plan of the village, including schemes of individual homesteads and houses (Smetánka 1969; Klápště - Smetánka 1996, Fig. 2). The core of the village, covering some 4.1 hectares, comprised 14 homesteads (Fig. 3). The social structure is reflected in differences in the widths of individual parcels of land. Six parcels had widths of around 21 metres; three homesteads were associated with 1.5x greater widths, and a further three with double widths. A four times greater width was staked out for what is presumed to have been the local manor. Below the 21 m criterion, a single parcel was found with a width roughly three-quarters that of the standard module. Within the individual homesteads it is possible to distinguish yards, basic communications and ancillary spaces, facing at the edge of the plot a multipartite house. In the larger parcels in particular, specialised outbuildings appear, such as granaries, cowsheds, stables or barns.



Fig. 3. Svidna, 1300 - 1500 AD (Central Bohemia), plan of the surface features of the deserted medieval village. In the identified 14 settlement units is indicated different width of the plots, the basic module was approximately 21 m long. After Z. Smetánka.

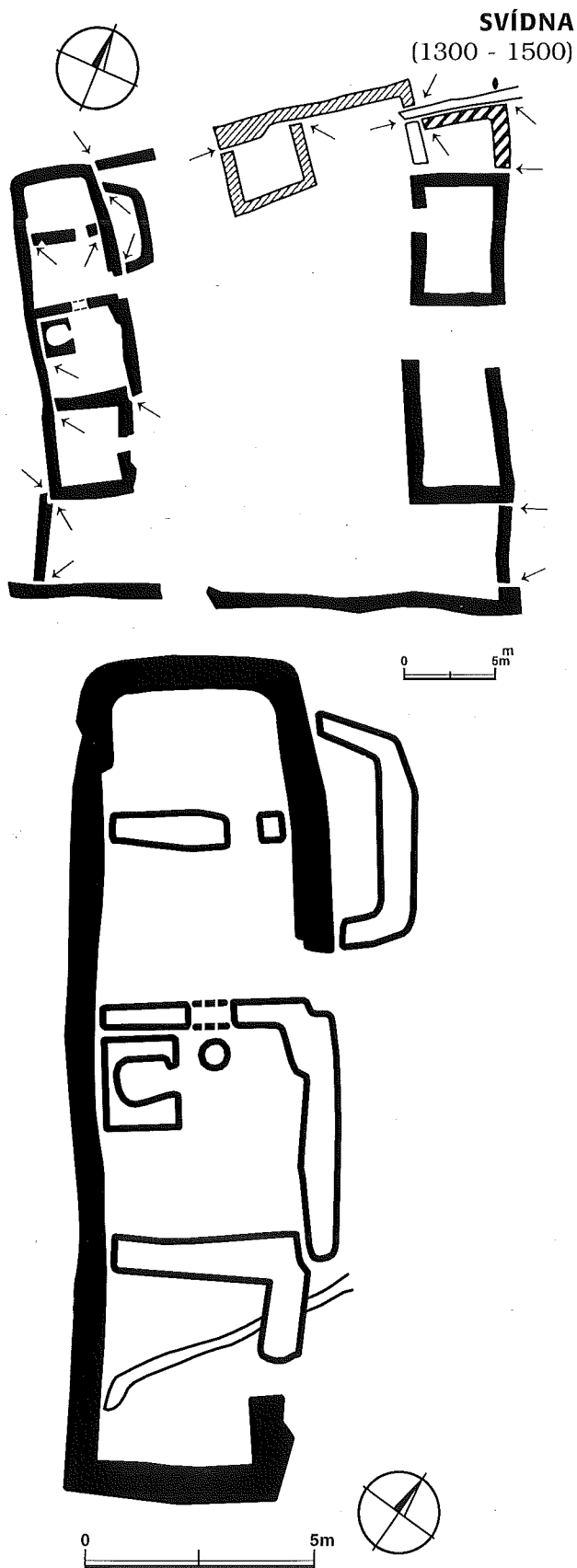


Fig. 4. Svídna, 1300 - 1500 AD (Central Bohemia). 1 - one of the farmsteads, the analytical plan of the relative buildings periods. The cracks in the surviving masonry are indicated by the arrow heads. 2 - three-part living house with additional room. After Z. Smetánka.

Three total excavations also made contributions to a closer understanding of the homesteads (Fig. 4). One of the key questions related to the origins of the multipartite residential houses. A critical indicator was the analysis of cracks in the surviving masonry: these walls, 60-80 cm broad, were made of stones held together by clay, and originally reached a height of around 2 m. Generally speaking, the cracks might have two meanings: they may have originated in a very short space of time for structural/technical reasons, or they might reflect gradual building taking place over a long period. The conclusive differentiation of these two possibilities may be very difficult; for this reason, particular importance is attached to a tripartite house with a projecting fourth room, the perimeter wall of which was erected once only, without any division whatsoever in its structural cracks (Smetánka 1994, 120). For this multipartite house, therefore, an origin owed to gradual additive growth can safely be ruled out. Moreover, given the absence of any further structural relicts, it can be presumed that this house as a whole was established at the foundation of Svídna around the year 1300.

Every treatment of knowledge from Svídna has its own magic. The appearance of the later medieval village is presented here in a particularly expressive form, and the site is noteworthy even in a broader European context. Only infrequently can some phenomenon from the Czech Lands serve as an external example of regular ordering.

Variability in the ordering of homesteads and residences is shown by comparison with the lost village of Ostrov, which lay about 3 km from Svídna (Fig. 5; Smetánka - Klápště - Richterová 1979). Along with ground plans comparable to those from Svídna, here there is a rather different disposition. One of the homesteads identified from surface relics is a bipartite house, attached in the shape of the letter L to outbuildings that probably included a granary; other outbuildings stood at a short distance.

The conceptual range of medieval village houses in Bohemia must also include the very simple structures of the 14th and 15th centuries. A house at Kravín in South Bohemia can also be mentioned here, the sunken and walled part of which contained a tripartite heating system, attached on the surface to a room with a hearth and bread oven (Fig. 6; Smetánka 1972). This site provides an example of the pitfalls in the archaeological understanding of medieval rural housing: in one of the lost houses, surface relief traces were first geodetically documented. Archaeological excavation followed, but even this was unable to provide unambiguous support for a reconstruction. The interpretation thus included five possible variants (Fig. 7, 8; Smetánka - Škabrada - Krajčic 1988).

Simple and – compared to Svídna – far more modest examples could be expanded upon here, as even within the fairly small area of the Bohemia there is multiformity that again and again causes astonishment. Despite the apparent differences, certain features do link the settlements of the later Middle Ages: the basic building area is relatively stable, and „enduring“, and the residential house generally comprises a multipartite layout.

OSTROV

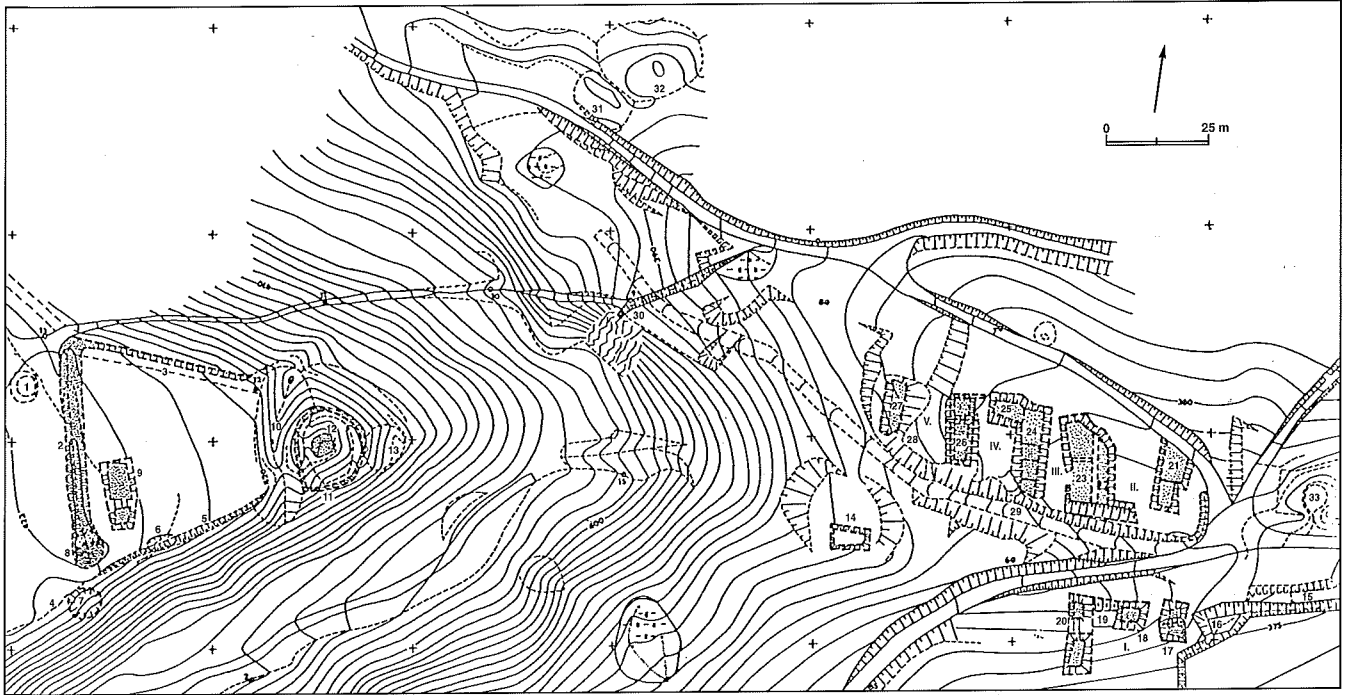


Fig. 5. Ostrov (Central Bohemia), plan of the surface features of the deserted medieval village. After Z. Smetánka et al.

KRAVÍN
(cca 1420)

KRAVÍN
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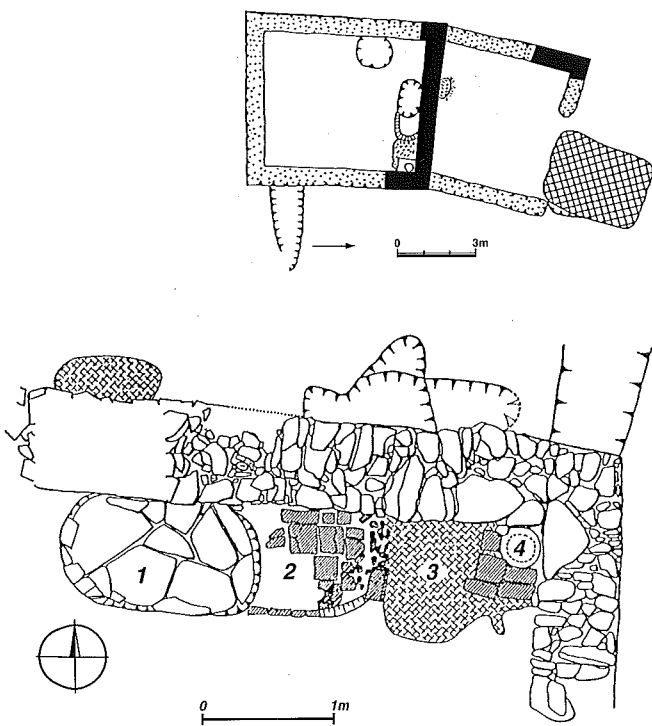


Fig. 6. Kravín (S Bohemia), 1 - ground plan of a two-part house, 2 - detail of the tripartite heating system. After Z. Smetánka.

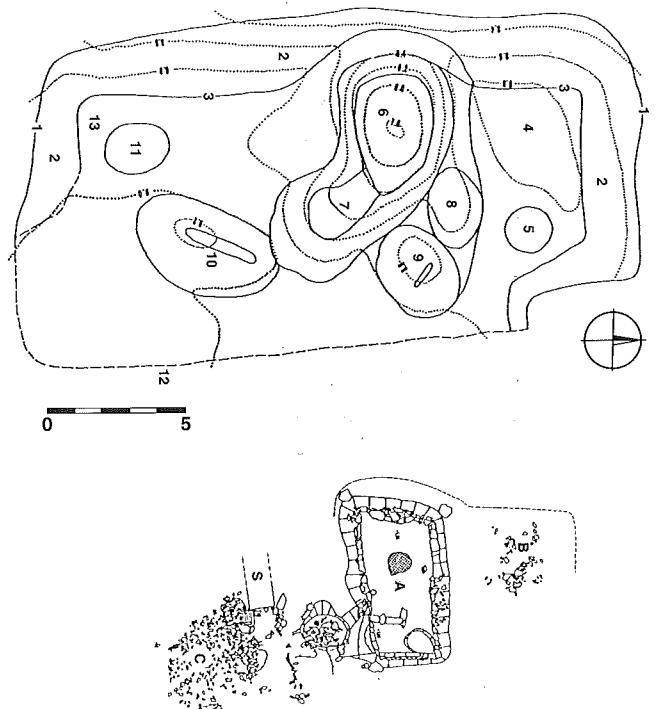


Fig. 7. Kravín (S Bohemia), 1 - surface relief traces of the lost house, 2 - ground plan of the excavated structures. After Z. Smetánka et al.

3. Homesteads of the Late Medieval and Early Modern periods

The major role in acquiring knowledge relating to rural dwellings of the Late Medieval period is played by historic buildings surveys of standing or partially preserved structures. It is clear that the earliest surviving village buildings were among the most soundly built of their time. A reflection of social differentiation in the village *milieu* can, however, be sought in the architectural detail and the outfitting rather than in the basic, broadly applicable structure of the house. An important place is held by the remains of late medieval structural solutions that have survived into the industrial period.

An important cultural watershed in the development of the village house, which came about in the 16th century under the influence of more advanced urban and elite environments, was a change in the heating regime. Fireboxes were sited exclusively in residential rooms. From as early as the turn of the 16th century comes evidence of a smoke uptake system based on heating in fireboxes within residential spaces, where they were serviced. Warm air massed above the heads of the occupants, and smoke escaped through an aperture in the front wall. During the 16th century rapid advances were made: the firebox remained in the residential quarters, but its mouth turned to face the hall, from whence the fire was maintained and where smoke too was released. Stove finds from the 16th century in many villages (Fig. 9; see e.g. *Hazlbauer - Špaček 1986*), as well as period written sources, testify to the intensive setting up of tiled stoves. Changes in structural parameters, however, followed on only later behind these changes in heating. The traditional spatial layout, the characteristic element of which was a high ceiling (some 4-5 m above the floor) and the aperture in the front wall above the level of the windows, often despite the realisation of the principle changes in heating, survived unchanged, and in remote areas even persisted in rudimentary form into the industrial age. The high living room prevented storeys being added, and these developed only above lower, non-residential parts of the home – the halls and pantries (Fig. 10; *Edel 1992*).

Traces of the changes described can be found in preserved residential buildings of the 15th-16th centuries, both wooden and stone. Choice of building material was not dependent solely on local natural conditions: in an area of stone buildings in an agricultural landscape with a characteristic shortage of woodland and easily accessible stone north-west of Prague (*Škabráda - Smetánka 1974*) lay the mentioned village of Saky, where is the oldest known example of a log structure known in Bohemia to date. The wood from which its 4.5 m high walls were created was felled in 1496 (Fig. 11; *Anderle - Ježek - Závřel 2000*). Other known log structures from the 16th century are known from across Bohemia, generally in remote areas in the foothills of mountains, with sufficient straight coniferous wood and a harsher climate. On the other hand, several forested, infertile areas became, for reasons unclear, areas of stone houses, the expression of which

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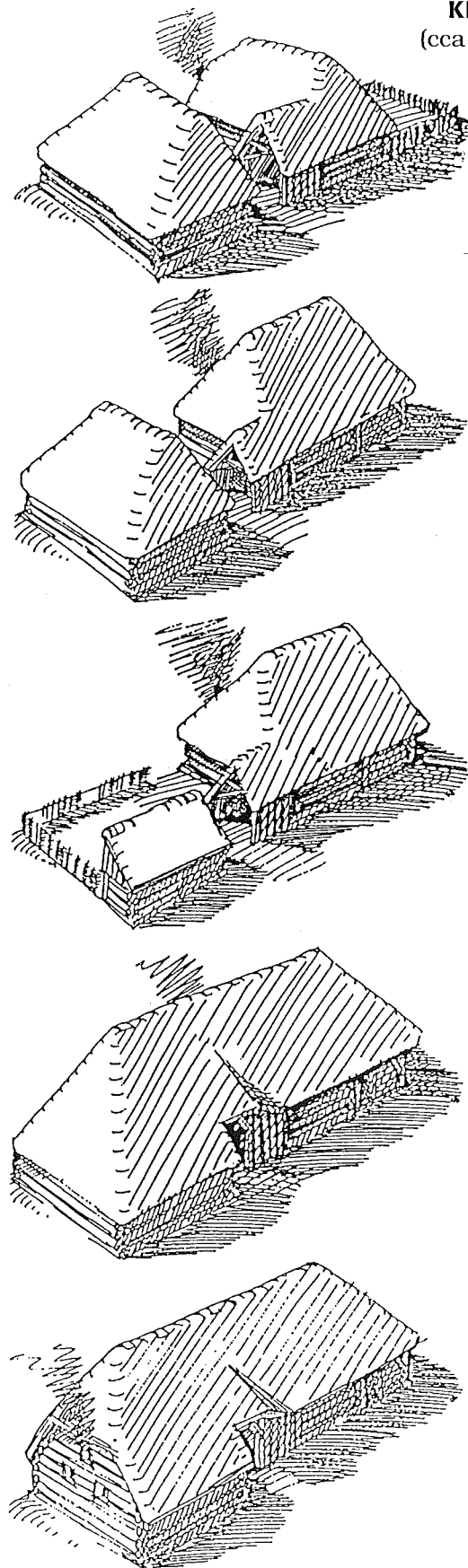


Fig. 8. Kravín (S Bohemia), an example of the pitfalls in the archaeological interpretation, different possibilities of the reconstruction of the archaeological remains. After Z. Smetánka et al.



Fig. 9. Trněný Újezd (Central Bohemia), stove tiles from the area of one of the homesteads, the beginning of the 16th century.

could reach notable quality (Ernée - Stejskal 2001). Alongside areas of timber construction in rural Bohemia, areas developed in which half-timbered architecture was employed. To a certain extent, these differences correspond to ethnic maps, with the divide falling between predominantly Czech areas (with timber buildings) and predominantly German areas (with half-timbered buildings).

4. Conclusion

„The peasant house in Bohemia, from the 6th to 16th century“ is a particularly complex theme with several constituent parts, to which archaeology has made markedly varied contributions. As well as its own tasks, this theme has led in recent years to a clearer definition of a more general question: the relationship of continuity and discontinuity in historical development. The course of the discussion to date has shown that searching for answers too quickly leads to a conflict of opposing paradigms.

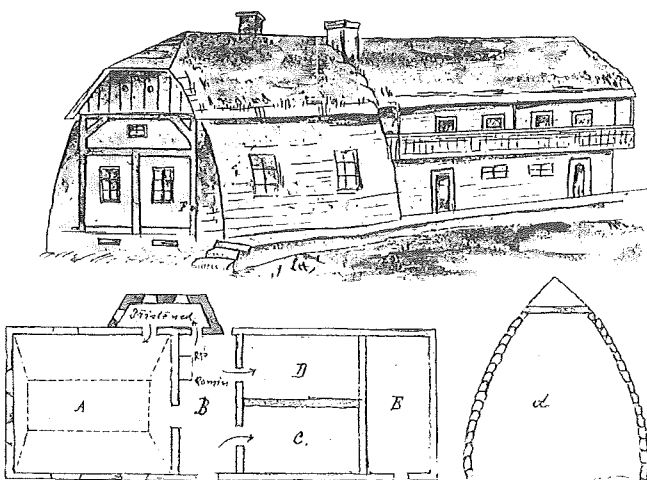


Fig. 10. Sezemice (NE Bohemia), vernacular house with archaic high living room.

SAKY
(1496)

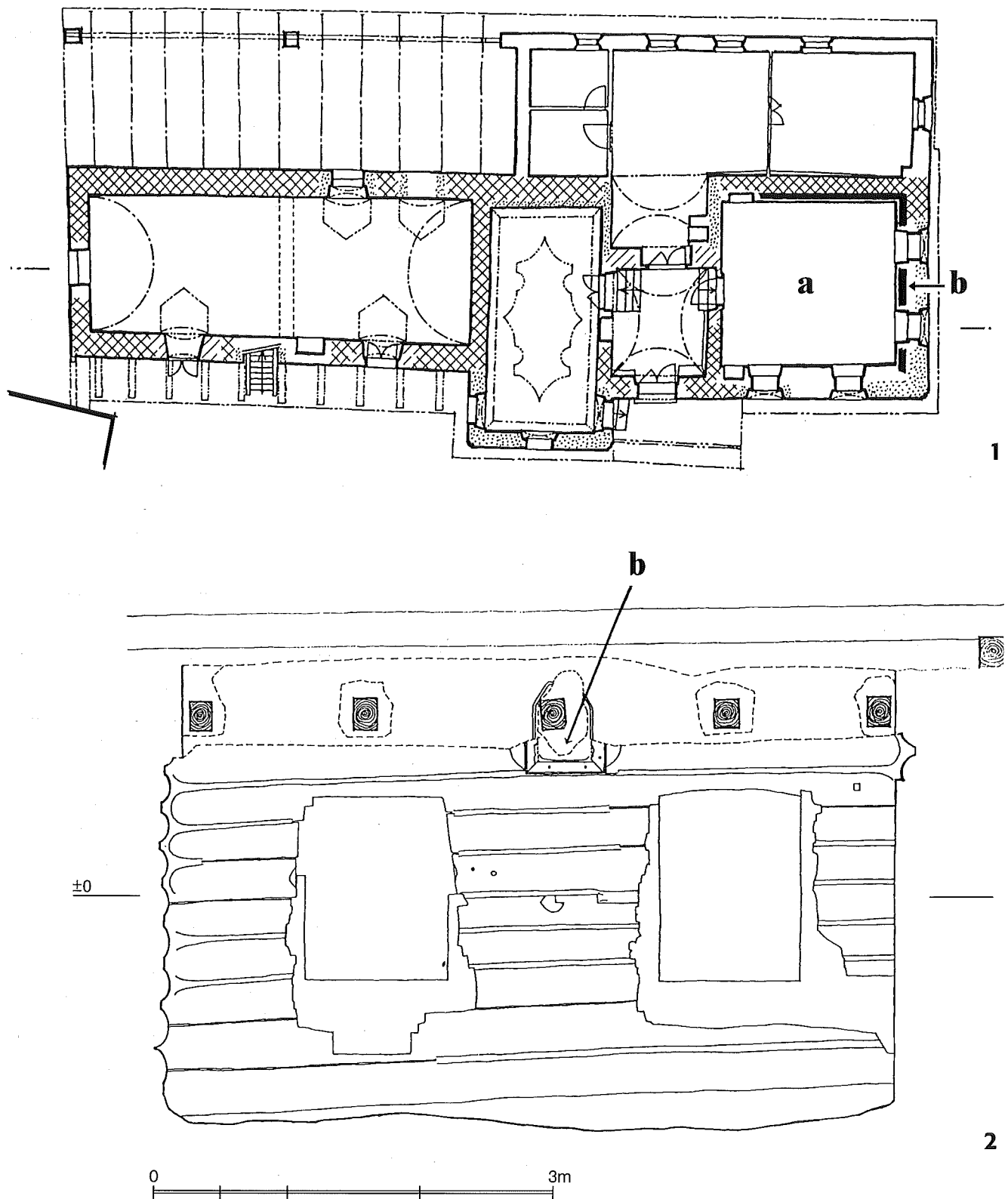


Fig. 11. Saky (Central Bohemia), vernacular house, 1 - ground plan of the house with the main living room (a) constructed of the logs felled in 1496. Indicated in the small aperture in the front wall (b), 2 - inside of the front wall.

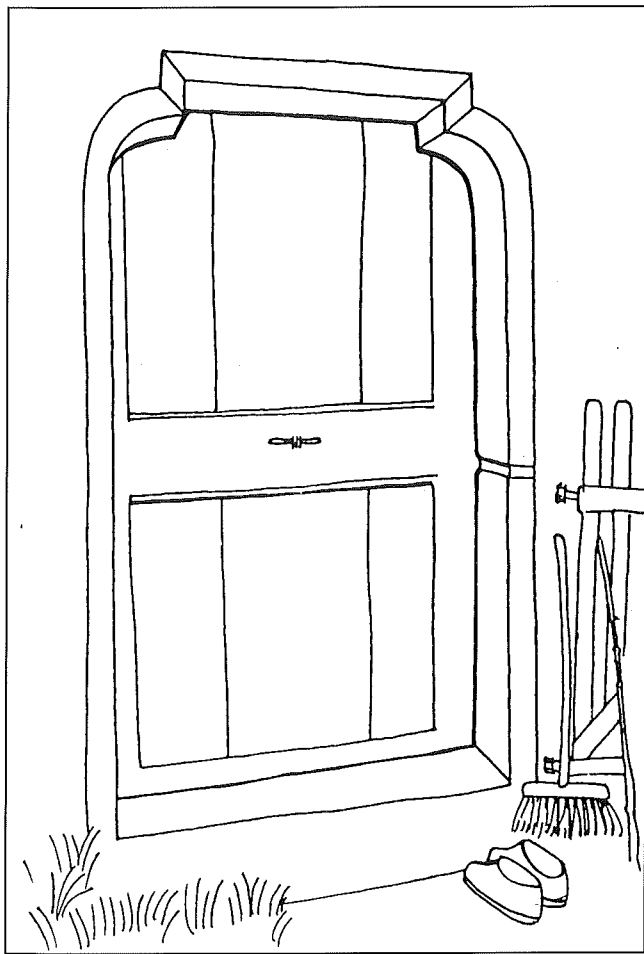


Fig. 11. ...still standing and inhabited buildings.

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