

Non-invasive research of the deserted enclosed medieval villages in South Moravia (Czech Republic)

Michal Vágner  ^{1*}

¹ Department of Archaeology and Museology, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

* Corresponding author: E-mail: vagner@phil.muni.cz

Abstract

The combination of non-invasive methods and written historical and map sources brought a lot of new information about the phenomena of enclosed medieval villages in the region of South Moravia. The research revealed how the village's ground plan looked like, how it evolved, what the possible function of the village's ditch enclosure was, what it may have looked like, or how and from where this type of settlement got into this region. The magnetic survey also indicated from what materials the individual village houses could have been built. The research also resulted in new information on the transformation of the settlement network in the investigated region in the Middle Ages.

Keywords

deserted medieval villages; enclosed areas; geophysical survey; remote sensing; settlement structure

Introduction

Thanks to aerial photography carried out in the South Moravian Region (southeastern part of the Czech Republic) at the beginning of the 1990s, a few medieval villages were discovered that were, in the past, enclosed by several meters wide ditch (Bálek and Unger 1996). In recent times, the same type of enclosure in other deserted medieval villages has been identified by remote sensing as well as analysing historical maps (Vágner et al. 2020). A total of 35 settlement units (originally villages, some of which later evolved into towns) were identified within the investigated area, which exhibited some form of the external enclosure during the Middle Ages (Fig. 1).

In 2021, the previous research was extended and summarised in the author's doctoral thesis (Vágner 2021). The work aimed to extend our knowledge regarding the overall internal layout of the deserted villages, on the form and character of the individual components – rural houses, ditches, sacral buildings or feudal residences. Another task was to answer questions about where and how this type of site could have reached the region of southern Moravia.

Materials and methods

In order to elucidate the presented questions, non-destructive archaeological methods were used – primarily geophysical prospecting accompanied by remote sensing and the study of historical maps and written sources. The magnetic prospection was carried out at nine selected sites and covered a total area of 98.25 ha. Where it was necessary from the point of view of solving specific questions, other geophysical methods were also used – ground penetrating radar (GPR) and electrical resistivity tomography. In particular, the magnetometry survey allowed for an effective investigation of the large settlement area; the targeted GPR survey provided different points of view on selected features identified by the first method. Aside from GPR, electrical resistivity tomography was also used to estimate the depth of the ditches.

Results

The most frequently represented ground plan type in the set of investigated localities was the communication village (lined around a road or a watercourse) or the village common type with a regular or planned geometrical/stan-

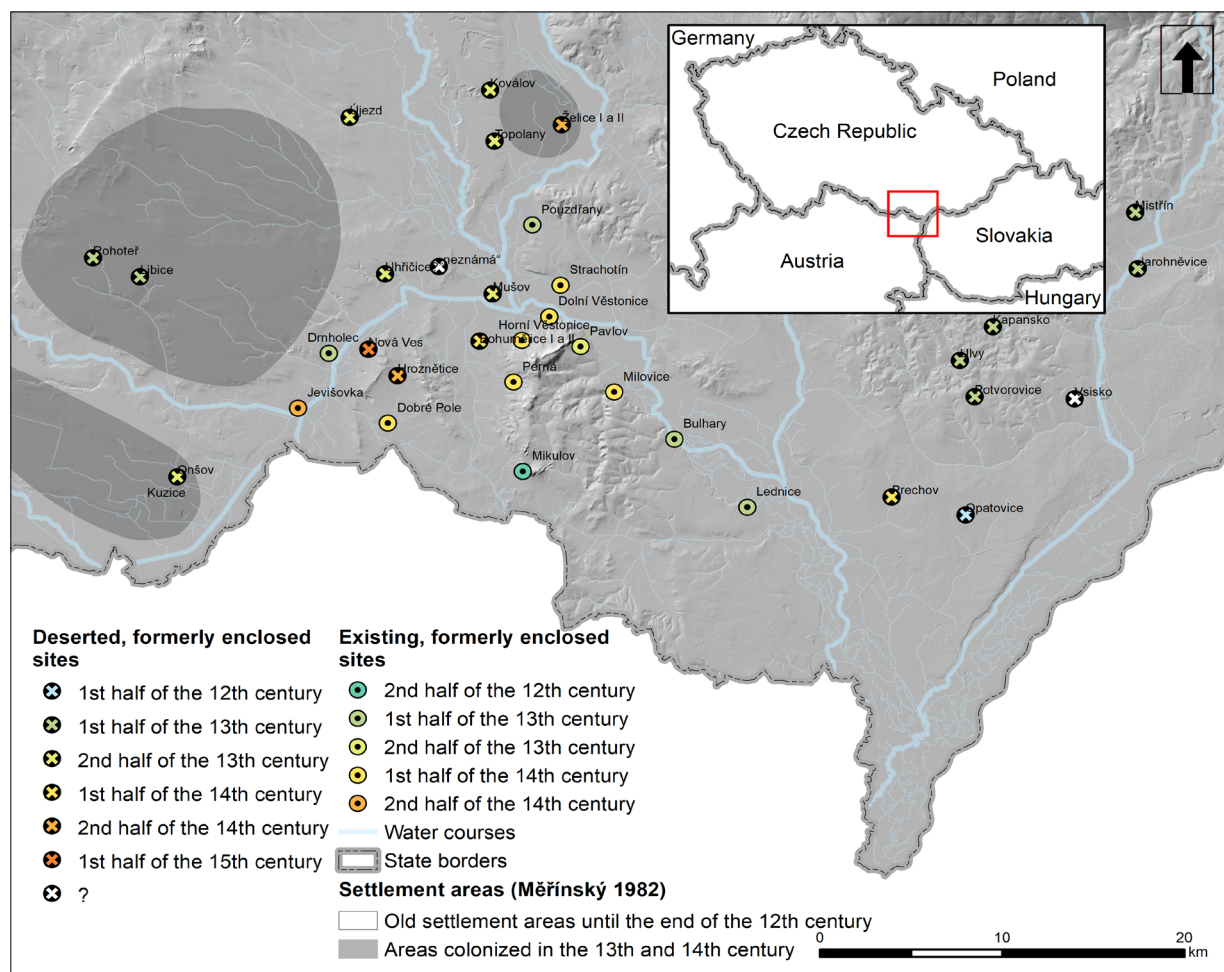


Fig. 1: Deserted and existing, formerly enclosed settlements (villages, towns, cities) in the South Moravia Region (base map: ČÚZK; DIBAVOD).

dardised ground plan. This type of appearance is probably a matter of the second half of the 13th century and corresponds to the first mentions from written sources of the individual investigated sites. At the two locations investigated, two almost identical, side-by-side fenced areas were captured, which can be explained by the relocation of villages to new areas. This phenomenon was then best documented and described for the case of the deserted medieval village “Bohumělice” (Fig. 2).

In the vast majority of cases, the identified settlement features tended to cluster in strips oriented perpendicular to the central element of the village – a communication area or a watercourse. Based on their concentration, shape, size and orientation, it was possible to determine the hypothetical locations of individual homesteads in most of the investigated locations. Stone was not used to a greater extent to construct residential and other buildings. It can

be assumed that the prevalent construction techniques for individual houses had been based on using clay, wood or a combination of both. The stone was used only for the construction of functionally distinguished buildings – churches or feudal seats. The primary function of the outer enclosure was a legal function. The external enclosure clearly defined its scope concerning property rights when the village was founded or rebuilt. The question of the genesis of this type of settlement is closely related to the legal function of enclosed villages, i.e. how (and with whom) the walled villages could reach the territory of South Moravia. Based on the gathered information and parallels from abroad – especially from Germany and Lower Austria (Vágner 2021; Biermann and Mangelsdorf 2005; Civis 2015; Filzwieser 2018; Kühtreiber 2015; Scharer-Liska 2007), the origin of these locations can be linked to the spread of German law in the followed territory.



Fig. 2: Results of magnetic prospection on the deserted medieval village Bohumělice. The original establishment of the village most likely reflects the more westerly enclosed area «Bohumělice II». Based on ceramic fragments, it can be dated to the second half of the 13th century/14th century. The younger complex «Bohumělice I» can be dated to between the second half of the 14th century and the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries (base map: ČÚZK).

Discussion and conclusion

The combination of remote sensing and geophysical methods, as well as field walking and studying of historical sources, showed that a large amount of information about deserted medieval villages can be quickly and efficiently obtained in the flat and long-term agriculturally cultivated landscape of South Moravia. According to the obtained information and analogies, it can be assumed that the fenced village settlements are related to colonisation processes, the beginnings of which are generally placed at the turn of the 12th and 13th centuries. Several parties were involved in the transformation of the settlement network in the area of South Moravia. In addition to land-lord activities, which at that time consisted rather than in the establishment of village settlements in the founding of new towns, in this respect, one can think about secular power in the form of lower nobility, as well as ecclesiastical authority. In the first case, the family of the Sirocti, followed by

the Schenks and the Lichtensteins, is the most likely. The second category most likely included monasteries.

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