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### **Evaluation of Mgr Ivo Štefan's doctoral dissertation „Selected Issues of the Early Medieval cemeteries”**

The presented manuscript (173 standard pages of text + 21 pages of annexes with details of the “Na Týnici” cemetery + bibliography + 45 illustrations) consists of four main parts, which all deal with the burial customs in Bohemia presented against the broad panorama of the neighboring areas. According to the author, the chapters are “independent studies interconnected by the subject of the Early Medieval burials”.

Quite naturally, Czech Middle Ages are in his focus. Following fundamental studies by Z. Krumphanzlova, he intends “to open space for new views and attitudes” (p. 4). Of his special interest are: transition from the cremation to the inhumation viewed as a cultural reflection of transformation from traditional “tribal” societies to the new Medieval structures; potential of studies on Early Medieval temple rings for the reconstruction of social stratification; reflection of the parish network formation in changes observed in localization and organization of cemeteries; and historical interpretation of a mass grave discovered at the “Na Týnici” site near Budeč.

The first of the main chapters deals with “**The change of Early Medieval burial rite as an archaeological and anthropological problem**” (pp. 7-40). There was a general trend in Europe between the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD, in result of which the Early Medieval differentiated picture of local burial practices was replaced by a uniform pan-European rite. This is commonly interpreted as an effect of the spread of Christianity, which banned cremation of dead bodies, introduced Church burial monopoly and forbade furnishing graves with items of daily use.

This simplistic vision is challenged by the fact that many Germanic groups (Saxons and some Scandinavians) observed bi-ritual customs already in the Roman Age. In addition, the Bible does not directly forbade cremation and there is only one

early written source, which bans burning of dead bodies. Therefore, the problem must be put into a chronologically and geographically broadened context, which shows that the situation in various parts of the “barbarian” Europe was different. Facing the situation of scarce or non-existent written evidence, one must turn to archaeology as the main source of relevant information.

Looking back in time, one may notice that already after the mid-second century AD, in the centre of the Roman Empire, cremation was replaced by inhumation (Chpt. II.1.2). This change, influenced by the Hellenic tradition, might have been initiated by the burial of Emperor Hadrian in 138 AD. The imperial example was soon followed by the Roman elites, which resulted in the expansion of the new burial practice over all European provinces already in the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Such an early chronology does not allow to look for a decisive Christian influence. It is suggested that, that Christianity “inherited” Roman burial rite, which fit well the concept of resurrection.

Unfortunately, this interesting hypothesis is not supported by a necessary analysis of the function of Christian eschatology that has surely influenced changes that took place during the later phase of the Roman Empire. It might have been the feedback of meeting the changing Roman “fashion” with the Christian expectations based on the Jewish traditions that overlapped with new socio-cultural development that “promoted” changes in treatment of dead people. Pinpointing the primacy of either factor would, however, need extensive study of the early Christian written tradition and the spread of new religious doctrine viewed against the spread of new burial rite and their cultural contexts. Such a work, planned on a continental scale, is still ahead of us which leaves us with speculations.

In Czech lands (Chpt. II.2.1) archaeologists have placed the appearance of the new burial rite at the turn of the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. This chronology is questioned by Ivo Štefan, who suggests to start the transition period after the mid-ninth century when the oldest unburnt bodies were buried in result of an obviously Great Moravian influence. This phenomenon may be explained, either as a result of a mere cultural imitation, which took place without introducing Christianity, or as a follow-up of the baptism of the fourteen Bohemian princes in Regensburg in 845. Unfortunately, there is no data to decide which alternative was the real one. However, traditionally the beginning of Christianization in Czechia is connected with the baptism of Bořivoj in 885.

This discussion lacks an important argument, i.e. very precise chronology of all early skeleton graves, which might correlate them with known historical events. Even after achieving this stage of our knowledge, we will be still faced with the phenomenon of the delay in putting in practice expectations of changing eschatology and with extremely scarce historical information. Misleading may be even evidently Christian grave goods like the liturgical chalice found in a 9<sup>th</sup> century "princely" burial in Kolin. As archaeologist I do not support turning to the few recorded political events as the main explanations for culture change. Available means and expected needs of the rather weak pre-/early state centers make dubious their decisive impact in the short-range perspective (cf. the Polish case). Thus, during the evidently Christian period elements of earlier burial customs were still observed even in the centre of the state. Evidence of heathen practices were identified at the cemetery of the princes' warriors in the Gardens of Lumbe in the northern bailey of Prague Castle. This phenomenon is also well attested by the grave gifts (animal bones and eggshells) and trunk (dugout) coffins excavated in the graves of the members of the ruling dynasty buried in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11th century at the Prague Castle Hill.

In the middle Danube region (Chpt. II.2.2) one may identify the change of burial practice with the formation of collective identity that took place in the border zone between the Avar Qaganate (where inhumation was common) and Slavic settlements in contemporary Moravia. Despite the infiltration of Avar material culture elements (especially adornments), the Slavs for a long time kept their cremation tradition. Only ca. 800 AD inhumation was introduced there which, however, could have resulted from imitation of the Frankish elites during the state building process already before Christianity was officially introduced.

Again, we are faced here with questions which cannot be univocally answered. The current state of our knowledge with its lack of chronological precision and difficulties in identifying directions of decisive cultural influences leaves us with speculations. Future analyses of the problem must involve broad anthropological discussion of the characteristics of border zone societies and of possibly concrete historical contexts, but still with no guarantee for final answer.

The Polish case (Chpt. II.2.3) is commonly considered exemplary for interdependence of the state-promoted Christianization and the change in burial tradition. The symbolic date of 966 when Mieszko I converted does not, however, coincide with such a change because the oldest skeleton graves are dated to the end

of the 10<sup>th</sup> century and they were all in-church burials of the ecclesiastic and stately elite. As long as to the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century cremation was still practiced in the centre of the officially Christian state. First cemeteries with skeleton graves are dated by the author to only the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

In Poland we also lack reliable sources reporting chronology and spread of possible “pre-baptismal” penetration of Christianity. Regarding the later period, I do not question the strangely long delay in introduction of the Christian burial rite in the early Piast state. This archaeological fact supports my doubts about the effectiveness of the control of the early state centers over the vast masses of inhabitants who were culturally indifferent to political developments. What I miss is the discussion why the early southern influences, confirmed by the 10<sup>th</sup> century skeleton burials in Niemcza and in Przemyśl, had not resulted in faster adaptation of the new trend.

Christianization of the hard-to-reach areas and the political peripheries was much slower. In such areas syncretism and pagan elements seem to have survived quite long during the Christian period. Various orientations of the skeletons; partially burned skeletons; bi-ritual cemeteries with both cremation and inhumation burials, or even bi-ritual graves; special objects put into the graves (for example amulets made of animal teeth, rattles of various shapes, animal bones from the best edible parts, eggs, whole pots, bells, coins, half-moon pendants); and mutilations of dead bodies (so-called anti-vampire practices). In the eleventh- and twelfth-century cemeteries in the north-eastern Poland necklaces combined of crosses and pagan amulets were still in use. In eastern Poland the openly pagan cremation ritual survived locally even until the thirteenth century! Therefore, there is no one explanation for the whole Polish territory.

A region where the change in burial rite took place before imposed conversion was Saxony (Chpt. II.2.4). There, despite the cruelty of wars led by Charlemagne, the Frankish burial type (with northern orientation of body) was adopted already in the 780s. In the south this change preceded Christianity by as much as half a century. This transformation was surely eased by the fact that some Saxon societies had been already earlier bi-ritual. Thus, the phenomenon of the *imitatio imperii* meant just disappearance of cremation and southern body orientation.

This conclusion lacks support by references to the achievements of the historical anthropology with its experience in studying the border-land societies, results of prolonged wars and processes taking place during evolutionary or

revolutional transition to the statehood. Once more, looking for single explanation may be misleading because, usually, culture change results from complex processes of transformation where both, external and internal factors played their role.

In the lands of contemporary Estonia (Chpt. II.2.5) archaeology shows that the earliest skeleton graves were dug already in the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, when the region was already bi-ritual. This surely eased transition to the new burial practice when Christianity was militarily enforced in the third decade of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The post-conversion burial rite change took place faster in the areas where survived local elites promoted the new trend.

According to Ivo Štefan, these examples indicate that a form of a burial was not *a priori* connected to a given religious system because the treatment of a dead body itself is of neutral value and only in concrete cultural contexts it acquires a specific semantic meaning. Rather, a change in this sphere has been often connected with a change of identity (e.g. Christianization) but it also could have expressed cultural orientation (e.g. *imitatio imperii*). Such changes were introduced by social elites and were later copied by others. Unfortunately, the vague archaeological chronology does not allow precise correlation of the burial change with historic events.

I find this argumentation rather simplistic because burial customs offer insight into the otherwise hardly accessible sphere of eschatology, i.e. beliefs referring to the final destiny of the world and humanity and to the post-mortal transition of people. They also include interpretations of the ways leading to the “world of the dead”, concepts of the post-mortal judgment and eventual reward or punishment. All known religions include such elements which find indirect expression in the reactions provoked by death. Death rituals, treatment of dead bodies and burial practice are all indicators of this intimate sphere of beliefs that is crucial for the placing of an individual within a social context of the collective reaction to death. The form of the “last service” given to a dead man reflects the collective eschatological vision of those who had to react to death rather than the dead person’s beliefs.

The decisive position of a burying collective makes death rituals and burial customs important aspects of the social practice. These rituals and their symbolism were crucial for sustaining collective identity and, therefore, for promoting social order by recalling eschatological elements of the dominating ideology. Thus, medieval rituals applied in the situation of facing death and treatment of dead bodies were not

only forms of human actions but had their important religious dimension. Collective cultural practices, such as death rituals and burial customs integrate members of particular communities and, at the same time, differentiate such populations one from another. They are not simple reflections of eschatological ideas but, also, factors that actively create and reinforce communities. Therefore, in many areas Christianization of burial rituals took very long time despite vigorous promotion by Christian rulers.

Chapter III **“The contribution to the chronology and interpretational potential of the s-shaped temple rings”** (p. 42-64) deals with the most typical Slavic female head decoration which was in fashion during the 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries. They are often the only dating element in the generally poorly equipped graves of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. Such a chronology made some scholars to suggest their connection to Christian symbolism.

The fashion to wear this specific ornament spread among all Slavic societies from the Baltic to the Balkans. And typically they become bigger and bigger with the time passing. Identification of their meaning depends on introducing a possibly precise chronology. In Czechia their introduction is correlated with the Great Moravian horizon of the third decade of the 10<sup>th</sup> century and they subsequently displace earlier types of temple rings. However, in Great Moravia itself the s-shaped temple rings became the standard element of the female dress a little bit later.

Their early chronology may be precised thanks to the co-appearance of coins in some graves. Unfortunately, the custom to place “obols of the dead” in graves disappeared in both Czechia and Moravia in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century. Statistical analysis of the temporal and geographical trends, as well as possible correlation with age categories, indicated that during the “younger stronghold period” (*mladohradištni*) the s-shaped temple rings dominated in the burial equipments and they were most often placed in the graves of immature girls. This indicates their role in burial rites which followed death of the members of the society who had not yet achieved full membership rights.

This interesting conclusion lacks theoretical support of the discussion on function of material symbols in the manifestation of the social position of an individual. Such analyses dealing with various types of arms (e.g. swords) and both, male and female dress decorations are available. There will be also a future need to further confirm and compare the chronology and presence statistics with situation in the neighbouring areas – especially Poland.

**“The archaeological view on the beginnings of the parish organisation in Central Europe”** is discussed in Chapter IV (p. 66-103). In Czechia the relatively long contact with the Christianity was limited to the social elite, leaving inhabitants of the countryside within their traditional mental framework. The main reason for this was the lack of extensive church network. Its slow formation took place from the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century until the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The written sources suggest growing founding activity of the local noble men in the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

Archaeology may contribute to these studies by identifying changes in the localization and topography of the Early Medieval cemeteries. With the introduction of skeleton burials in the 9<sup>th</sup> century each village had its separate necropolis traditionally called a “row cemetery”. The majority of the excavated sites of this type were abandoned in Czechia and in Moravia at the turn of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, which indicates that already in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century there was a substantial number of parish churches. Such an early chronology may be supported by Kosmas’ information about Břetislav’s II decree of 1092 when he banned burrying dead bodies in “the fields and forests”. That political decision might have speeded up local church foundations which happened within a relatively short period.

In Western Europe cemeteries concentrated around churches already in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, when the lay elites organized religious life within their domains. Only sometime later Church institutions begun to coordinate the process of building ecclesiastical network. Ivo Štefan questions the dominating opinion that in the Western Europe the church burial monopoly took place as late as in the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries and argues for an earlier chronology.

In Central Europe the introduction of churches in the countryside took place later. Hungarian rulers were the main initiators and executors of building the lower-level churches already around the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century. Written sources suggest existence of a relatively dense network of village churches at the turn of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, which corresponds well with Ladislav’s I ban of non-church burials issued in 1092 and with the chronology of coins which indicates abandonment of the “row cemeteries” from the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century until the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century. In Poland the lack of relevant written sources and the state of archaeological studies do not allow clear conclusions, but there is a regional differentiation. In the south the “row cemeteries” were abandoned around the turn of the 11<sup>th</sup> and the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries

which may indicate the presence of a network of village churches. Elsewhere, it took place later.

This review, indicates a period of “accelerated changes” after 1000 AD in the West and in the 12<sup>th</sup> century in the West-Slavic areas and in Hungary. This important suggestion to push back the origins of the parish networks on Central Europe is interesting but needs further confirmation by the archaeological material and theoretical discussion.

Pagan hierophanies (elements of environment believed to represent the sacred) connected to characteristic landscape formations must have posed a serious challenge to the Church because they were important parts of local collective identity. In Christianity even the most extraordinary elements of the landscape (e.g. a mountain or a peninsula) cannot be holy by themselves. Sacral dimension must be imposed by specialists performing consecration rituals, which clearly separated the profane surrounding from the chosen space, which consisted of several zones: cemetery, yard, a church/chapel and the *medio ecclesiae*. Burying dead body within such a space should have fulfilled all the need for sacrality. Sometimes pagan sacred localities were Christianized in order to retain control over their symbolic power. In most cases condemnation and placing a cross was sufficient but some cases needed more substantial interventions, e.g. building of a church or a monastery.

Burying a dead body within a sacred locality itself guaranteed fulfilment of eschatological rules, which offered a powerful tool of social control. Therefore, the monopoly of the burial rights was politically important, which found its direct expression in erecting parish churches. Formation of the local church networks marked the final stage of taking control over the subordinated territory by the Christian power centre.

Chapter V (p. 105-175) offers analysis and interpretation of **“The Early Medieval settlement, a mass grave and a cemetery from Na Tynci, near the Budeč stronghold”** which is followed by a **“Catalogue of the graves”** (p. 175-194). The aim is to study **“The relation between archaeology and the ‘event history’”**. It is well known that Budeč belonged to the most important footholds of the Přemyslid power organization. Therefore, the mass grave, in which 33-60 people were buried, needs special attention. Excavations revealed that the nearby small settlement (ca 40x50 m) emerged in the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, when Budeč was already an extensive and well fortified stronghold. For an unknown reason the settlement ceased



to function already at the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Archaeologists discovered there pottery and three concentrations of sunken houses which may be interpreted as individual households (Chpt. V.5).

The mass grave (Chpt. V.6) was incurred in the re-excavated fill of one of the abandoned sunken houses located near the settled area. It contained large number of human body fragments. Their positions indicate that bodies were substantially decomposed when buried, which implies that some time passed between the deaths and burial. Anthropological analysis indicates that buried bones belonged to at least 33 but probably closer to 60 individuals, among whom were only three women and no children. The men, mostly of a robust type, died in their *adultus* age in result of cuttings, piercings and/or decapitations. Radiocarbon dating and pottery typology placed this grave between the third decade and the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

Around this unusual burial an Early Medieval cemetery with 114 graves was uncovered. It was in use between the turn of the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries and the mid-10<sup>th</sup> century until the early 11<sup>th</sup> century. There is no regularity in the organization of the cemetery or in orientation of skeletons, of which many were buried in unusual positions. They were mainly women and some children with unexpectedly few men, which allows a conclusion that they were family members of the men buried in the above mentioned mass grave.

There are no written sources which could allow identification of the military conflict that brought death of so many men of war but it is highly possible that they belonged to the Přemyslid princely retinue. Suggested chronology of the mass burial allows to suggest a bloody conflict that took place after the murder of St Vaclav in 935 when his brother removed by force all political opposition. That action could have also included Budeč where the opponents of the new regime were slaughtered and buried nearby.

This persuasive interpretation shows some weak points. First of all, the chronology of burials is very vague, which makes looking for relevant historical events a rather speculative endeavor. Only accelerator dating (the AMS method) of all skeletons may allow serious conclusions of this type. Also DNA confirmations of the blood relations between buried people would furnish strong argument for the proposed interpretation. Otherwise, results the traditional "text-driven" archaeology, i.e. looking for connection of finds with historical records, may be easily questioned.

I read this dissertation with great interest because the subject is very important for understanding of one of the key processes connected to the emergence of the Early Medieval Central Europe. State formation, Christianization and transformation of eschatology must be all considered when trying to understand the changes observed in burial rites identified by archaeologists over vast areas of the region. The problem is complex and simple arguments do not render convincing answers.

Despite these difficulties Ivo Štefan decided to face the challenge and to explain some of the uncertainties and he arrived at interesting conclusions. He realizes that attaining “a socio-religious picture of a concrete historical society by reference to the archaeologically available burial finds” is a difficult task which calls for theoretical discussion (p. 4). However, there is a painful lack of a broader theoretical discussion of the function of burial practice as a rite of transition and of the possible meaning of the observed changes. Four short paragraphs (p. 1-8) of very general references to only a handful of relevant books makes me worried whether the author is really prepared to launch a serious dispute that is much more complex than suggested in this dissertation.

The recent tendency has been to explore the dialectic aspects of the “acceptance versus resistance” attitudes and to expose the confrontation and the continuation of the “old” and “new” religion-driven socio-political systems. The research perspective has been broadened by both including studies of longer periods “before” and “after” the official conversions, and by looking for details that might shed light on the reality observed at the regional, local or even individual level. This results in picture that is far from uniformity and leads to the conclusion that there was not a single Christianization process but in fact many different Christianizations. For example, the Eastern Church tolerated the old tradition of burying dead bodies under the mounds. It was probably a conscious strategy to ease the confrontation of two different eschatologies by acceptance of some elements of the old burial rituals. This tolerance for syncretic behaviour lasted until the beginning of the thirteenth century and makes archaeological observation of the progress of Christianization difficult.

The type of the survived written evidence makes us to look at Christianization through the eyes of the successful Christianizers because, unfortunately, no other “eyes” are available. Medieval authors left us a vision of the process that was quick, historically necessary, and politically effective. They concentrate on those who were especially active in spreading of the Faith. Thus, we have to deal mostly with

accounts that refer to the social elites, of which the ruling dynasties are obviously in the focus. Therefore, historiography of Christianization does not differ much from the political history.

Medieval Christian 'historiographers' tried to dichotomize the past into two distinctive categories separated by decisive events which introduced divine order into the ungodly chaos. Therefore, we also tend to think in terms of sharp contrasts between "what is Christian" and "what is not-Christian" and thus counter-facing the two "worlds" in order to achieve better focus and typological clarity. For, it is easier to think in terms of contrasts instead of struggling with variable forms of transition.

Christian eschatological anticipations of the whole body resurrection, of the Final Judgment being equally strict for everybody and of the approach of the eternal Kingdom of God determine attitude towards the death. It strongly influenced treatment of dead bodies, which must be well prepared for these unavoidably expected future "events". Strictly uniform eschatology had to be met with strict death rituals and did not leave much freedom for the choice of a burial practice. This orthodoxy was under institutional control of the Church supported by the executive power of the Christian monarchs. Therefore, Christianization must be archaeologically observable because of its reflection in the ways of the dead bodies treatment.

Such expectation is fundamental for archaeologists dealing with the Middle Ages. Its clarity, however, makes us looking for clear typological and chronological distinctions in order to neatly separate the two different eschatological realities. This helps to build a clear-cut periodization but may result in simplified interpretations. Such straightforward conclusions are based on the conviction that discerning "pagan" and "Christian" burial is rather unproblematic and that there should be a clear threshold. In addition, it is typically assumed that the pagan period was characterized by eschatological uniformity equal to the Christian one. This helps to build a clear-cut opposition, which is probably far from the complex Early Medieval reality.

Further studying of the Christianization demands complex multi-disciplinary studies that must include precise accelerator (AMS) dating of every(!) burial. Only a skilful combination of text and material evidence studies, supported by linguistics, theology, numismatics, history of art and historical anthropology may ensure a real progress in our understanding of the fascinating process of Christianization.

The text presented for assessment provokes some criticism regarding its structure. Being myself the tutor of such a work, I would suggest to organize it differently. There would be much more space for theoretical discussion, better fit of the problems presented in the four chapters and broad conclusions in order to raise the effects on a more general level of the early history of Central Europe. This will be necessary to consider when possible publication of a one volume is planned. In such a case the title must be changed because the actual one suggests a collection of only formally integrated "essays". Alternative solution is to publish four separate papers – each reinforced with an anthropological attitude. Whatever the final form, I will wait for such publications with great interest.

I would prefer to see the discussion of various cases described in Chapter II organized in chronological, rather than geographical, order: Roman Empire, Saxony, Moravia, Czechia, Poland and Estonia.

I found the English translation of the Abstract not a very good one.

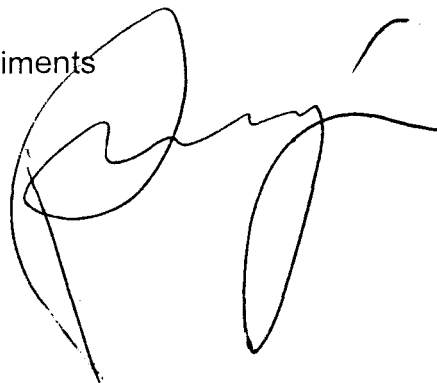
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### **Conclusion:**

Considering all the above-mentioned comments, I find Ivo Štefan's dissertation important in his ambition to question the well established concepts which refer to the crucial period in Czech but also to Polish early history. He proved possession of substantial knowledge of archaeological data and ability to critically analyze them. His conclusions are important for broadening of our knowledge of that time, even if they will need further confirmative studies with a broader observation scale.

Therefore, I think that he deserves the title of PhD.

With compliments

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Ivo Štefan', written in a cursive style. The signature is positioned to the right of the text 'With compliments'.