

Prague Castle - 70 Years of Archaeological Excavations

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In the history of Bohemia, Prague Castle has always played a very important role. Since its foundation in the 9th century, the Castle has been a centre of Czech principality, later of the Kingdom of Bohemia, then, since 1918, of the Czechoslovak republic and since 1993 Czech republik. Its suburbium developed gradually into one of the most important early medieval agglomerations in the eastern part of central Europe (FROLÍK - KLÁPŠTĚ 1991, BOHÁČOVÁ - FROLÍK - HRDLIČKA - SMETÁNKA 1992).

The beginnings of Prague Castle as the centre of the Czech state have so far been dated, generally, to the last third of the 9th century AD, on the basis of the analysis of the earliest Czech legends (SMETÁNKA 1982). Duke Bořivoj I, the first known person of the Přemysl ducal family, captured the area of the later castle, which probably served as the assemblage field (TŘEŠTÍK 1981, 1983, 1985), in the interests of the Great Moravian ruler Svatopluk after he had been baptized in Moravia (882-4). He built a church, which was dedicated to the Virgin Mary, at that place and fortified the entire area. This was the first step to the foundation of the early Czech state.

In view of the latest uncovered terrain situations, especially in the NW part of the castle, according to new pottery finds and stratigraphical evidence, the foundation of Prague Castle can now be dated to the first half of the 9th century (BOHÁČOVÁ - FROLÍK 1991, FROLÍK 1994). The exact dating is complicated by problems in our knowledge of contemporary pottery. The presence of intensive settlement layers of the first half of the 9th century in western (FROLÍK 1986, 1988, forthcoming a) and southern suburbs (ČIHÁKOVÁ - DRAGANOVÁ 1992, TRYML - ZAVŘEL 1992) demonstrates the role of the castle as a certain centre in this period. The next excavations have to complete this undetermined picture by new details.

However, political and cultural contacts with Christianised Great Moravia played an important role in the beginnings of the Czech state and Prague Castle as well. This is evidenced by the find of an inhumation cemetery in Lumbe Gardens, in the close vicinity of the Castle (SMETÁNKA - HRDLIČKA - BLAJEROVÁ 1973, 1974, SMETÁNKA - DURDÍK - HRDLIČKA 1980, SMETÁNKA 1992a, SMETÁNKA 1992b). Finds of gold and silver jewellery of a direct Great Moravian provenance, or local products influenced by Moravian production (SMETÁNKA - ŠTVERÁK 1992), have been uncovered in graves dating from the end of the 9th and from the beginning of the 10th century.

The report of the Arabian merchant, Ibrahim ibn Jacob, about Prague (AD 965) who calls it "a town built of stone and lime", is sometimes associated just with the Castle and with the stone front wall of its rampart fortification. In the earliest period the proper built-up area of the hillfort included timber houses. Sacred buildings were the only constructions made of stone, and these would have been the church of the Virgin Mary (c. 882-884) (BORKOVSKÝ 1953, SMETÁNKA - HRDLIČKA - EISLER 1983), the church in the Benedictine monastery of St. George (c. 920) (BORKOVSKÝ 1975), and the rotunda of St. Vitus, with the grave of St. Wenceslas (c. 930) interred therein (Guth 1934). The form of the ducal residence from this period is not known. After the year 973, the castle also became the seat of the Bishop. His residence is the earliest stone building of a secular character known so far from the castle.

The foundation of the first stone house and the adjacent chapel of St. Maurice can be archaeologically dated before the year 1060 (BOHÁČOVÁ - FROLÍK - CHOTĚBOR - ŽEGKLITZ 1986,

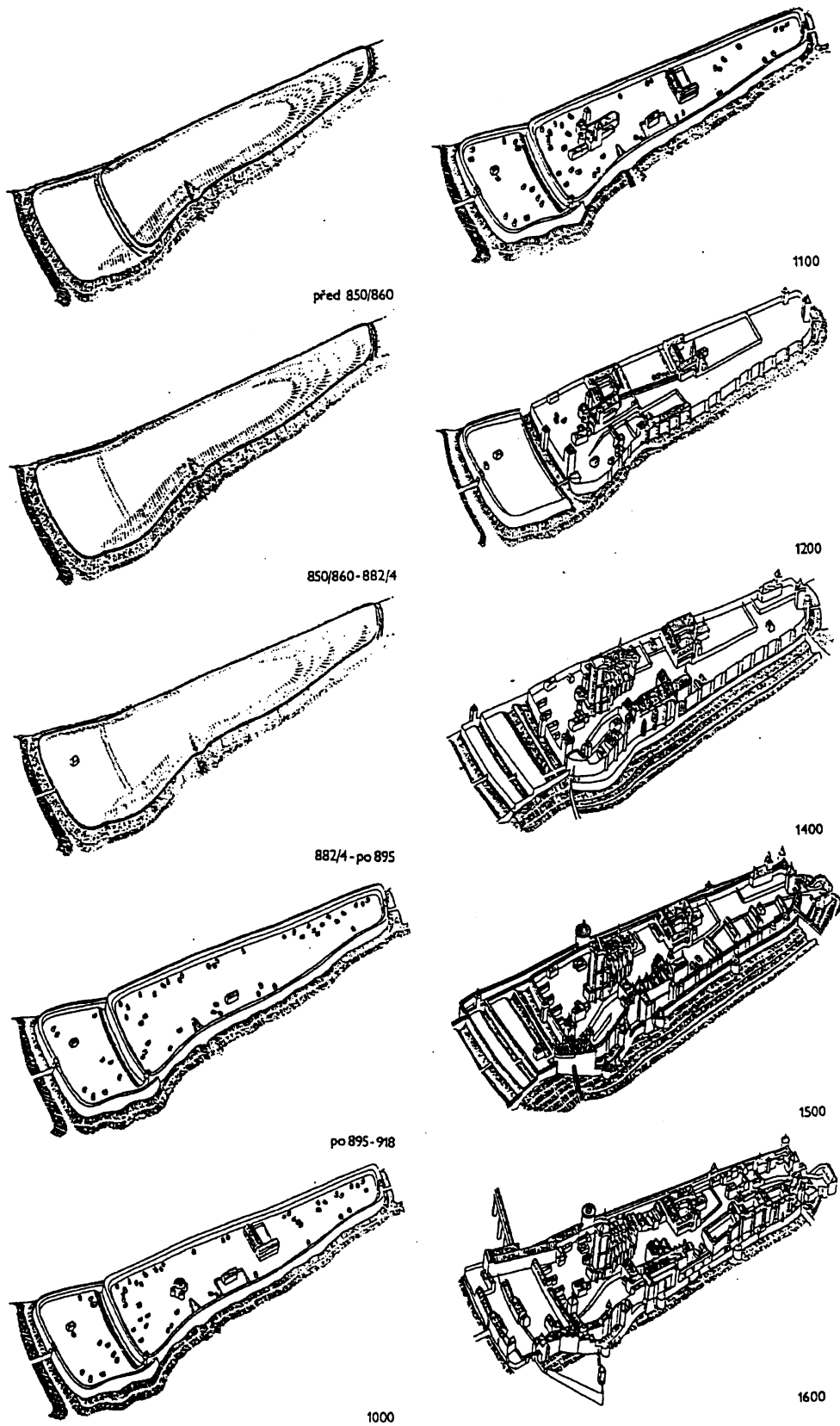


Fig. 1: Prague Castle. The development of Prague Castle since first half of the 9th century till 1600 based on the archaeological and building history researches. Drawn by P. CHOTĚBOR.

FROLÍK forthcoming b). Fragments of the perimeter walls (9 x 9 metres), built from stone, have been uncovered of the oldest bishops residence. After a fire about the year 1090, a wing consisting of two rooms, constructed in the above-ground part from regular ashlar, was added to the house. The residence was destroyed by fire in 1142. It was later rebuilt in the form of a palace in the classic Romanesque style. The extraordinary status of the bishopric can also be seen in the structure of the finds assemblage. Specific finds of imported pottery occur sporadically, and sheet and hollow glass in this assemblage date to the 11th and the first half of the 12th century, which is about 150 years earlier than commonly known in Bohemia. Also the composition of osteologic material is specific. Entire skeletons of rodents indicate a very low state of hygienic conditions in the vicinity of the residence (BOHÁČOVÁ - FROLÍK - PETŘÍČKOVÁ - ŽEGKLITZ 1990).

The temporary transfer of the ruler to the second Prague centre of Vyšehrad in the second half of the 11th century is not distinctly reflected in the archaeological sources at Prague Castle. Distinct changes can be seen after the changes signifying the end of the Early Middle Ages in the area of the castle started shortly before this date. After 1135 the rampart defenses were replaced by a stone Romanesque wall made of regular marble ashlar joined with mortar. The previous dating of this wall to the 11th century has not been confirmed by the current excavations (BOHÁČOVÁ 1994). The most important new building was the two-storeyed princely palace with All Saints' Chapel. The southern wall of the palace represented at the same time an integral part of the stone fortification. This wall was fringed by pentagonal towers which enforced the defence power of the whole complex. Wooden buildings are less frequent. The castle area was gradually divided into smaller complexes, some sort of courtyards, enclosed by stone walls (BOHÁČOVÁ - FROLÍK - TOMKOVÁ - ŽEGKLITZ 1988). The example of this small complex shows in the excavated area in the present St. George Square. The area is adjacent to the St. George monastery. It is separated from the rest of the castle by a Romanesque corridor, 80 metres long, which connected the St. Guy and St. George basilicas. The building of the St. Guy Chapter House neighbored with the excavated area in the west. In the second half of the 12th century, the area served as a building site (there were finds of mortar, split stones, and lime) probably for the renewing of the castle buildings after the big fire in 1142. It was levelled and then newly built around c. 1200 (ŽEGKLITZ - BOHÁČOVÁ - FROLÍK 1988, BOHÁČOVÁ - FROLÍK - ŽEGKLITZ 1989).

A road paved with gravel, which entered the gate of St. George monastery, was skirted on both sides by plots enclosed by wooden fencing. One plot included two timber houses built on base walls. The other one contained a sunken-floored house which replaced an earlier post-hole building, and a timber house associated with metalworking production; further, a rectangular cellar and a cistern. The abandonment of this settlement can be dated to the middle of the 13th century, in its second half the area served merely as a rubbish heap, dated to the 1st half of the 13th century.

However, the basic arrangement as well as the functions of individual components of the area did not change and lasted over the entire Middle Ages. The transformations of the 13th century influenced particularly the settlement outside the castle; in the political centre of the Czech state they were already reflected and finished in the preceding century.

This brief outline of the history of Prague Castle in the Early Middle Ages is based on the results of archaeology. The chronological range of the castle includes the little known prehistoric period, the high medieval period and post-medieval stages too. *Archaeological excavations* are made by specialised working groups for excavations of the castle. This group was formed in 1925 on the initiative of a renowned specialist in Slavic archaeology, Professor Lubor Niederle. The reason for establishing this group was the building undertakings, accompanying the transforming the castle into the seat of the president after the creation of Czechoslovakia (SMETÁNKA 1985, SMETÁNKA - FROLÍK 1986, SMETÁNKA - FROLÍK 1988). This group, as a specialist and small department, has been active without break up to the present day, being the bearer of one of the fundamental research projects of the Institute of Archaeology of the Academy of Sciences at Prague.

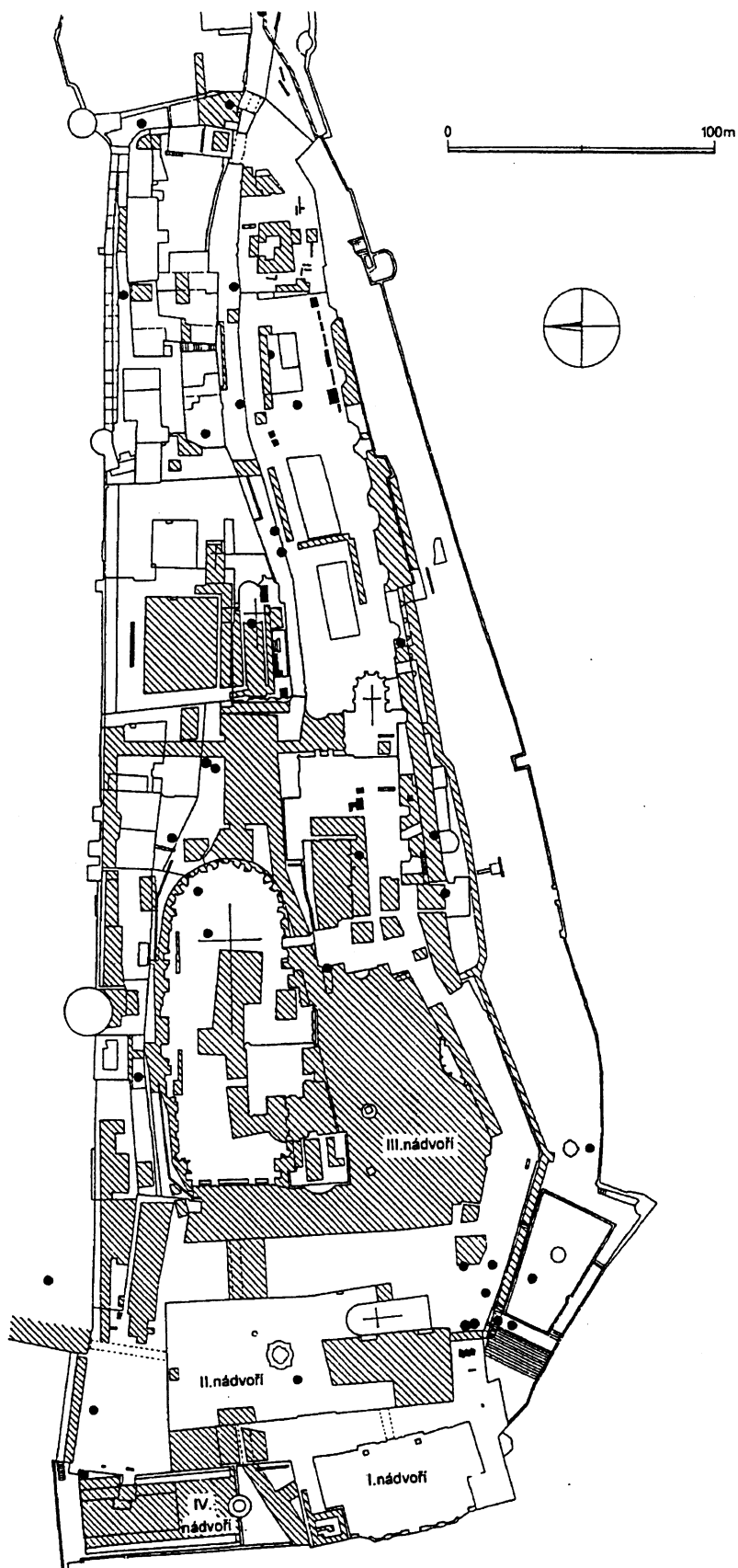


Fig. 2: Prague Castle. Archaeologically investigated areas since 1876.

The beginning of archaeological activity lies in the second half of 19th century. It assumed the character of rather simple building excavations carried out in connection with reconstruction and completion of the gothic cathedral church of St. Guy. The way in which these investigations have been conducted and documented has been extremely meticulous in comparison with the standards of the day.

The peak of archaeological activity up to the present is represented by large-scale excavations of the accessible space of the third court of the castle, which were conducted between 1925 and 1928, and consequently after the forming of the archaeological group. The main result was the establishment of outlines of the most ancient layout of the castle, independently of written sources (GUTH 1934, BORKOVSKÝ 1969). The excavation of the third court of the castle is the site where the modern stratigraphical method of archaeological work was introduced in our country. The quality of archaeological work is fully comparable with excavations in other early medieval hillforts of 60s or 70s.

The character of excavation was changed shortly after 1929. It became the line of minor rescue actions throughout the castle area, initiated by numerous rebuildings and reconstructions, and this activity produced dates before the high middle ages. It is necessary to mention the work of the second group interested in archaeology led by a castle master builder. This group collected all the archaeological material from that time, archaeologically unattractive digs like repairing of pipes. The quality of the documentation is without exception very low. On the other hand the result of the work of this group is the greatest collection of post-medieval pottery and the grounds for establishing post-medieval archaeology in Bohemia in the 80s (SMETÁNKA - ŽEGKLIZ 1990).

The second period of the archaeological excavations started shortly after the end of World War II. The archaeological investigations of the castle were integrated into the "Protection of Ancient Monuments" of the whole site and its closest proximity. More intense attention paid to the "Ancient Monuments" concept of works at the castle resulted in considerable intensification of investigations of some major features in addition to "Rescue" operations in connection with building activities. The typical examples of these excavations is the discovery of the earliest Christian church at the castle, the church of the Virgin Mary (BORKOVSKÝ 1953), and the excavations of the basilica church and monastery of St. George (BORKOVSKÝ 1975). All excavations accompanying reconstructions of these protected monuments have made very important contributions to the history of the castle. The price for these results was paid by less care in minor rescue activities and the waste of some probably important archaeological sites.

The second period finished in 1980 with the written agreement which secured all aspects of the investigations. This agreement started the third period in the history of excavations of the castle. The next ten years belong, scientifically, to the second peak in the archaeology of the castle. The undertakings of extraordinary intensity in close connection with building and Ancient Monuments traffic provided the rare possibility for large scale excavations, as well as the acquiring of new material for testing old hypotheses and the formulating of new ones (BOHÁČOVÁ - FROLÍK - TOMKOVÁ - ŽEGKLITZ 1988, FROLÍK 1991, FROLÍK - BOHÁČOVÁ 1992). Results of these actions demonstrated that more than sixty years of investigations of very complicated sites is not enough for equable knowledge of the history of this type of site. For instance, the re-dating of the beginning of the castle is based on archaeological activity of the last six years.

On the other hand, extremely high archaeological activity was not accompanied by replying conditions in technical background of this activity. The bad situation culminated at the end of the 80s by wilful destruction of several sites. It is very simple to find the answer in the political system at that time but behind every ruling there was a concrete single person who destroyed the archaeological sites. There was no possibility for the archaeologists working at the castle to change the causes of this state.

The fourth and last period started in 1990. It is very difficult to give an evaluation of this short time. All conditions are changed and the excavation of Prague Castle is looking for its rightful position. It is impossible without the responsible approach of the developer. The first experiences showed the complications of this task.

70 years of excavation of this very complicated site make it possible to formulate some basic requirements for the successful procession of archaeological research, starting with site activities and finishing with publication of their results. Some of them are not very scientific but without these conditions long term excavation is impossible.

The basic condition is the *stability* of the seat of archaeological research. Every moving of offices with archives means the loss of part of the knowledge from archaeological activities. The removing of the stores with archaeological material is still worse. The seat of the excavations of the castle was moved minimally seven times during seventy years and stores minimally three times.

The clear *research strategy* is of the same importance. This strategy has to take the long-term tasks and every day conditions into account. Carrying out archaeological research in actual practice is defined by opportunity delineated by the present functions of a representative centre of the state and by the traffic following out of these. Consequently, the overall research strategy rests on a mosaic of evidence outlining a more consistent sequence of historical developments at the site only from a long-term perspective. Most of the local excavations are opened in connection with building undertakings, carried out in advance before the building work. The small part of excavations has a character of rescue excavations during the building activity. Our aim is to protect the archaeological grounds from all kinds of disturbance as the source of archaeological knowledge for future archaeologists. If it is impossible to protect the archaeological terrains against building activities we aspire to excavate the site before the start of building work. I do not hide the fact that it is sometimes a complicated and frustrating affair. The mosaic character of the evidence and the necessity to count on long-term perspectives in forming a general idea of the site are conditioned by another fact.

The whole area of the Castle is built over rather densely. In this very limited space, buildings have clustered ever since the early Middle Ages and every bit of this territory has been rebuilt many times. The result is the considerable growth of the elevation of ground so that in excavating ancient soil surfaces we frequently have to sink our soundings very deep. This, in turn, places high demands on the technical side of the works and breaks ancient layers and finds contexts plagued by repeat intrusions into a maze of evidence in which local spatial and chronological connections may have been demolished wholesale. This is another reason for making the mosaic strategy the only possible and plausible approach, practised continuously over long periods of time. The excavation of all types of sites including the very young, without preference to the particular period or particular features, is an inseparable part of our scientific strategy.

The using of the most modern *excavation techniques* is the next basic condition of the success of the long-term investigations. Only the excavations made by methods corresponding with the level of contemporary archaeology are for elaboration after a long time.

The weakest point of the whole archaeological process is *elaboration of the material* from the excavated site. The archaeology is in its substance "slow" science. The process starting by the site activity and finishing by the publication is very slow compared with other related scientific branches. But the main source of the problems in elaborating of the huge quantity of the archaeological material is in the lack of time. The period between the end of one site activity and the beginning of the next one is too short for whole finds processing. To say it another way, there are not sufficient numbers of archaeologists working on this long-term project. The group for excavation of Prague Castle has consisted of one archaeologist for the majority of its existence. Six archaeologists are working at the castle today. But it is not enough for the growth of new material and the elaboration of the old. There seems to be only one emergent solution. It is necessary to finish elaboration of the site documentation (plans, sections, sheets and site notes), to prepare perfect evidence and storage of the acquiring material and totally to elaborate only the chosen sites.

The significance of Prague Castle and its position in the history of this country cannot be overestimated. That means the responsibility is a big one for archaeology.

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