Cultural discontinuity and the migration hypothesis. The 6th-century Slavic migration in the light of new archaeological finds from Bohemia

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Abstract

The problem of discontinuity between the archaeological cultures of the Migration Period and the Prague-Type Pottery Culture (PTPC) applies to a large area of Central Europe, including Bohemia and Moravia. The PTPC developed in the 5th century in Ukraine and southern Belarus. About a century later, it had spread over a large area of southeastern Poland, Slovakia, Moravia and Bohemia. This paper discusses the similarities in archaeological remains from Ukraine and Bohemia from this period, using evidence from the sites of Rashkiv and Roztoky. Another important conclusion is that in Bohemia, continuity can be observed between the PTPC and later phases of the early medieval period (8th to 12th centuries).

Keywords

migration hypothesis, Prague Type Pottery Culture, early medieval period, Slavs, Bohemia, cultural discontinuity, settlement

1 Introduction

During the 6th and 7th centuries, Central Europe, including southern Poland, Slovakia, Bohemia and Moravia (Fig. 1), underwent cultural discontinuity and complex transformations that have been attested archaeologically. Traditionally, these processes are described as ‘the arrival of Slavs’; however, in the last decades serious reservations towards this explanation have appeared. The discussion extends to the appropriateness of the term Prague-Type Pottery Culture (PTPC Culture), the archaeological culture that is regarded as the material manifestation of these processes.

The PTPC culture emerged in the 5th century in the region of Ukraine and southern Belarus, developing out of the Kiev culture and partly out of the Cherniakhov culture. In the course of the 6th century this culture replaced the later phase of the Migration Period (the Merovingian culture), known mainly from cemeteries, in Bohemia and Moravia.

The cultural complex with Prague-type pottery was originally characterised only by its hand-made pottery of vase-like shapes with low necks (Fig. 5: 5). Gradually, further ceramic types typical of the PTPC have been determined, such plates (Fig. 5: 17), and pot-like bowls. For the later phases, attested at least at Roztoky, non-transferable large rectangular pans (Czech: pražnice) are known. Specialised types are represented by the so-called small casting pans/melting ladles (Fig. 5: 2), which are abundant in Ukraine (Bernashivka, Rashkiv, Korčak VII and Semenki); however, their occurrence in Bohemia (Fig. 5: 2, Roztoky, Kadaň) and Moravia (Věrovany, Bořanovice and Pavlov) remains rare. Small casting pans are also known from the settlement at Krakow-Nowa Huta and probably from Žukowice in Silesia.

So far, among the most significant non-ceramic markers determining the independent PTPC are the following:

- Types and organisation of settlements such as along river banks (Figs. 2, 3) and with the dwellings arranged in a circle.

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2 Zeman 1976.
3 See Brather 2006; Curta 2001.
4 This research was funded by the Czech Science Foundation, No. P 405/10/2289: Záhada raně středověké sídelní aglomerace v Roztokách. Krajin, ekonomika a vzorce sídlištního chování/ The puzzle of Early Medieval settlement agglomeration at Roztoky. Pattern of land use, economics and a site formation.
5 Baran 1988; Terpiolovskij 2005.
6 Svoboda 1965.
7 Kuna & Profantová 2005, Fig. 61.
8 Profantová 2009, Fig. 5.
9 Jelineková, Šrein & Šťastný, v tisku (in press).
Certain types of dwellings/houses: a sunken dwelling with a stone oven in the corner (mainly NW corner); the best examples come from the Roztoky settlement, Fig. 4C, cf. 4 A, B).

Certain funerary customs: the cremation burial rite (Prague-Loretánské n., Ždánice, Zvinjach I at Ukraine12).

Certain structures of settlement patterns, e.g. presence/absence of strongholds (in Central Europe these are mostly absent); the spatial relationships between settlements and burial grounds, etc.

The main elements of the material culture such as undecorated hand-made pottery, costume ornaments (fibulae, necklaces, Fig. 5, 6), etc.

However, usually only two or three of the above-mentioned markers can be observed simultaneously at individual settlement units (i.e. sites), such as the settlement location, house types, pottery types, and funerary customs. Only the best-known sites also provide data for the other markers, e.g. settlement organisation (Roztoky, Březno, Mutěnice, Břeclav-Pohansko).

Roztoky is the largest known PTPC settlement in Central Europe, with the highest number of excavated dwellings (335) (Fig. 213). It is estimated that originally, the entire Roztoky settlement on the Moldau River bank comprised 600 to 700 houses14. Březno, near Louny, represents a different type of settlement (attributed to the PTPC culture), with approximately eight houses15 arranged in a circle.

The best examples of these two main types of settlement organisation (circular and longitudinal) known from Bohemia are found in western Ukraine. The closest parallel for the longitudinal arrangement is seen in the large settlement at Rashkiv on the river Dnieper (98 houses and 80 later houses; 8th century; cf. Fig. 316); the circular arrangement was attested at the eponymous site of Korchak VII17. A substantial number of similar occurrences of carefully arranged dwellings can be found in Ukraine (Fig 4 A, B, C). Moreover, the Rashkiv settlement in Ukraine shows another common detail known from Roztoky, namely the occurrence of vessels placed next to stone ovens and sunken into the floor. The same detail is known also from the site of Luka Kavetschinskaja (House No. 218). Likewise, the deep silo pits with tapering necks that have been attested not only at Roztoky19 but also at Prague-Liboc and other sites, have parallels at the Rashkiv settlement20.

The archaeological evidence of the PTPC known from Ukraine and Belarus is dated to as early as the 5th century21; thus, it chronologically precedes the Central European finds. This is why it is traditionally accepted that the PTPC spread from the Ukraine and Belarus.

2 The PTPC concept

The PTPC concept was obviously created with the help of markers borrowed from everyday life. On the other hand, the costume ornaments are evidently of a general or trans-cultural nature, and their repertoire continuously shifted according to the broader political and cultural context in which the PTPC existed.

12 Baran 1972, 166.
15 Pleinerová 2000.
18 Vakulenko & Prichodnjuk 1985, Photo 10.
19 Kuna & Profantová 2005, Fig. 115.
20 Baran 1988, Tab. 24: Silo Nos. 9, 51, 52.
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Fig. 2 Plan of the site of Roztoky, on the bank of the Vltava river (Bohemia), the largest PTPC site. Only houses (335) are indicated on the plan. After M. Kuna.

Fig. 3 The very similar to Roztoky is the situation in the earlier part of the PTPC site Rashkiv III in western Ukraine. Section A2 is adjacent to the north of section A1. After V.D. Baran.
FIG. 4  A: Detail of the stone oven in Luka Kavetchinskaja, H. 23. After L.V. Vakulenko & O.M. Prichodnjuk 1985, photo 10; B: Typical house of PITPČ, a pit house with stone oven in the corner, house 14 in Raškov III, Ukraine. In front of the oven, the lower part of a vessel lies on the floor. After V.D. Baran; C: Plan of House 926 in Roztoky near Prague, a similar example with an oven with inset vessel (detail on the left), a typical oven in SW corner, After M. Kuna & N. Profantová 2005.
Several significant types such as spiral-shaped necklace elements with decorated plates and the so-called radiate-headed bow fibulae (found at Dřevíč, and Liteň in Bohemia: Fig. 5: 3), which can be linked with both the western Ukraine region and the Early Avar culture, occurred in the costume ornaments assemblage from the beginning, while others appeared only after the arrival of the PTPC into Central Europe, and are absent on the Ukraine sites. This group of finds consist of single-sided combs (Fig. 5:4), iron strap ends (the influence of Lombards and Baiuvars\(^2\)), and Early Avar beads with eyelets, etc.

It is worth noting that so far neither the most archaic shapes of pottery, dated to the 5th – early 6th century AD (Gavrituchin’s phase \(^0\))\(^{23}\), nor assemblages featuring 5th-century fibulae have been attested in Bohemia or Moravia. Moreover, finds assemblages that can be securely dated to the first half of the 6th century AD were found only in southern Poland\(^24\) and in southwestern Slovakia\(^25\). Even though the earliest Bohemian assemblage, including metal finds (a necklace with decorated plates, probably of Byzantine origin) remains so far unpublished (Fig. 6:2, Houses 1717 and 1708 from Roztoky\(^26\)), several sets dating to

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**Fig. 5** PTPC: A typical simple, undecorated hand-made pottery vessel (with cylindrical mouth), plates and some other artefact types (melting ladle, small bow fibula, a quernstone and a single-side comb – attested for Central Europe). 1 Prague-Bohnice, house, 2 Roztoky (Prague-west), house 1034, 3 Dřevíč, Rakovník distr., 4 Roztoky (Prague-west), house 911, 5 - Roztoky (Prague-west), f. 191. After J. Zeman 1976 (1) and M. Kuna & N. Profantová (2, 4-6), and Profantová 2008 (3).

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\(^{22}\) Profantová 2008, Abb. 5, 105, 7.  
\(^{23}\) Gavrituchin 1997.  
\(^{24}\) Parczewski 1988, 102-104, Fig. 21.  
\(^{25}\) Fusek & Zábojník 2010.  
\(^{26}\) Profantová 2009, Fig. 8; Profantová in press.
the final decades of the 6th century are known from Bohemia (for example Fig. 6:227). The occurrence of single-sided combs (Fig. 5:4), their local manufacture (Mutěnice 28), and the adoption of a particular type of pottery decoration, the filled stamps (Prague-Běchovice 29), seem to confirm a certain amount of contact between the Slavs and the Lombards that could only have taken place between 540 and 560/567 AD. The radioarbon dates for the PTPC remain mostly unpublished; as far as the Roztoky settlement is concerned, only a general date of the late 6th/early 7th century is available (calibrated 570 – 680 AD at 1 sigma confidence level, House 1264). The radiocarbon dates from the Prague-Liboc are very similar 30.

However, justified doubts can be raised. Individual markers such as hand-made pottery, sunken dwellings or cremation graves have been also attested for other cultures dating to the Migration Period; therefore, only the simultaneous occurrence of those markers can be characterised as typical of the PTPC. The key question, then is: would culture lacking its specific articles with symbolic and statutory values determined at all if the ‘early Slavic culture’ had not been looked for?

The likely answer is: no, such a culture would not be determined. Discoverer of PTPC, Ivan Borkovský, had been looking for the earliest Slavic material culture. And he found it. Thus, from a methodological point of view, the origin of the PTPC clearly lies on ‘the wrong side of the blanket’ as is the case with any other Migration Period cultures.

The migration hypothesis cannot be tested with the help of the natural sciences. It is worth noting that cremation burial rites and the small number of graves hamper any serious research based on isotope analysis 31 or other modern methods.

On the other hand, a supposed connection between the weakly determined archaeological culture and historical assumptions regarding Slavic tribal migration to Central Europe enables meaningful interpretation of transformations occurring during the so-called ‘dark’ centuries. This mainly comprises the following phenomena:

- The PTPC represents a combination of regression (e.g. in variability and quality of pottery) and economic and technological innovations, such as the widespread use of rotary querns (Fig. 5:6, Roztoky), the introduction of common wheat instead of the previously cultivated emmer wheat 32, and stone ovens. Hort-term innovations which vanished after a while, like the occurrence of metal casting pans which, for a certain period of time, replaced melting pots (crucibles) carry a high measure of significance in this aspect. This trend, which appears irrational or illogical to us, may perhaps be better explained by the presence of bearers of a certain culture than by cultural diffusion and/or cultural interaction.

- Transformation of settlement dynamics: according to the current state of knowledge, the PTPC’s emergence in southern Poland and Saxony (up to the Elbe and Havel rivers) had been preceded by significant depopulation (this settlement hiatus may extend to several decades). The PTPC’s arrival could be associated with the emergence of intensive settlement. However, in the case of Bohemia, estimations of population decrease preceding the PTPC’s emergence are much lower.

- Continuous development of the PTPC: settlement and cultural continuity between the PTPC and the later phases of the early medieval period, i.e. the Early and Middle ‘Hillfort’ periods (8th – 10th century; with well-attested Slavinity based on written sources), well documented from Bohemia and Moravia, represent another important aspect in the subsequent development. The best attested examples of settlement continuity can be found on the sites of Prague-Liboc 33 and Prague-Hloubětín in Bohemia, and Pavlov and Mutěnice 34.
in Moravia. As far as cemeteries are concerned, continuity is best attested at Přítluky and Břeclav-Pohansko in Moravia, and Čakajovce in south-western Slovakia.

A commonality in the worship of particular gods (Perun, Svarožič) can be observed on the study area, as well as concurrence of certain rituals, and last but not least the existence of a particular group of identical toponyms in this vast territory, such as river names: Donau/Dunaj, which also occurs in Belarus, Morava (Moravia/Serbia), and Bystrica (Slovakia/Romania), as well as names of castles or towns: Krakow (Silesia/northern Hungary), Děvín (Slovakia/Bohemia), Melnik/Mělník (Bohemia/Bulgaria), to name but a few.

3 Conclusions

The 6th- and 7th-century Central European cultural transition, often called the 'Slavic expansion', cannot be interpreted as the arrival of a population group held together by a well-defined and functional political and cultural identity, with characteristics that remained unchanged for several centuries, as some of its critics have attempted to. After all, such an idea falls well below the standards set by research at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, carried out for example by L. Niederle (1923). Even then, the contrast between the diversity in Slavic tribes, all with their own etnonyms (mentioned by Prokopios and Jordanes), and the relative uniformity in language and customs was taken into consideration. As far as the PTPC is concerned, the work by the chronicler Fredegar (ca. 650 AD) is of great importance as he applied the term 'Slavic' as a kind of catch-all denomination into consideration. As far as the PTPC is concerned, the work by the chronicler Fredegar (ca. 650 AD) is of great importance as he applied the term 'Slavic' as a kind of catch-all denomination when referring to the two tribes/gentes, Wends and Serbians.

The Fredegar Chronicle provides more interesting insights than the simple process of a unified people becoming more sedentary. The creation of new collective, tribal identities, or rather the redefinition of the old ones, occurred in a context of intensive power struggles and cultural interaction between the Slavs and the Avar Khaganate. The archaeological evidence confirms and builds on the chronicler’s testimony, and stresses the Byzantine influence on Avar-Slavic co-existence. From the outset, cultural interaction between the Slavs and the Germanic cultures is equally intensive. Even though they are not mentioned in the written sources, such interactions are attested not only by the presence of common toponyms and hydronyms (including the name of the sacred Czech hill ‘Říp’, deriving from Germanic ‘Repp’ but also by the occurrence of production innovations (such as single-sided combs, etc.). The intensity of this linguistic process is illustrated by the cemetery at Grossprüfening near Regensburg (late 6th, early 7th century) an exceptional example of syncretism.

The connection between the PTPC and the “Slavic expansion” is less significant for the identification of the place of origin of the cultural change and the diffusion of Slavinity across Central Europe than for the interpretation of archaeological finds dating to the period of which the final phase was characterised by the biographer of Charlemagne in the 9th century with the following words: “Wild and barbarous tribes dwelling in Germany ... all of which speak very much the same language, but differ widely from one another in customs and dress. The chief among them are the Welatabians, the Sorabians, the Abodriti, and the Bohemians...” (Einhard 1880, cap. 15). And it was exactly during this particular period that a new political and ethnic map of Central Europe emerged, which subsequently determined the entire early medieval development of the region.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Houses with stone oven / Nos. of sites</th>
<th>Storage/ pits with narrowed neck</th>
<th>Cremation graves</th>
<th>PTPC vessels, plates</th>
<th>Smelting pan</th>
<th>Bow fibulae</th>
<th>Little bread/ chlebec</th>
<th>Mills-rotary querns</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bohemia</td>
<td>*/43</td>
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<td>Bohemia 8th cent.</td>
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<td>Moravia 8th cent.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

36 Rejholcová 1990.
38 Curta 2008.
39 Niederle 1923.
43 In his list of significant Slavic tribes, Einhard completely omitted the Moravians, of whom the first mention in the written sources is not until 821 AD.
Resumé

Kulturelle Diskontinuität und Migrationstheorie. Die slawische Migration (6. Jh.) im Lichte neuerer Funde aus Böhmen

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