STORIES THAT MADE THE IRON AGE

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STUDIES IN IRON AGE ARCHAEOLOGY DEDICATED TO NATALIE VENCLOVÁ
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Natalie Venclová has been shaping Czech Iron Age archaeology for several decades. Already her master thesis defended in Prague in 1969 and synthesised for Archeologické rozhledy four years later foreshadowed the advent of a particular personality. The thesis was supposed to cover ‘the origins of Germanic culture in Bohemia’ but the 24 year old student (and new mother) refused to play the games characteristic for the culture-historical approach then ruling in Czechoslovakia and after an impeccable analysis of the archaeological data on the Podmokly and Kobyly cultural groups she simply said: there is no way of telling ethnicity from the archaeological record.

In the sick and surreal atmosphere of Czechoslovakia in the 1970s, Natalie with both her politically precarious family origins and firm moral attitudes (a very unfashionable characteristic at that time) first roamed around for some time through the Museum of the City of Prague (1973–74) and Czechoslovak Archaeological Society (1974–76) before being finally accepted to the Institute of Archaeology of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences in 1976, first to the Archive and then as a full research fellow. And even there the problems did not end – for example when her doctoral thesis was suspended for several years for reasons which we could broadly term ‘political’.

Regardless of all this she was diligently working on a theme that remained hers for the decades to come: the Celtic glass. In 1985 she could finally defend her CSc. (=Ph.D.) thesis. Published in 1990 as Prehistoric Glass in Bohemia this work remains the essential reference on (mostly though not only) La Tène glass in Central Europe and inspiration for similar studies appearing sooner or later in all the surrounding regions.

By that time, another project was under way and about to demonstrate what a remarkable scholar Natalie Venclová is: the excavations in the quadrangular enclosure of Mšecké Žehrovice in 1979–1988. It could have been simple – to dig the site, to reconstruct the architecture, to agree on its function as a sanctuary as was universally believed at that time and perhaps to mention some saponelte fragments in a side-note. Not so for Natalie: Mšecké Žehrovice became just a departure point for a series of studies and projects as thorough and innovative in their nature as they were mutually diverse. Her rejection of the straightforward interpretation of the enclosure as a cult area opened a new chapter in considerations concerning these sites; the current opinion on them as multifunctional elite residences is largely due to her involvement in the international debate and to her meticulous analysis of the site in all its numerous guises. However, far from being a stubborn functionalist, Natalie dedicated special studies to the ideological dimension of the site as well as combining excavation evidence with an original iconographic analysis of the famous stone sculpture. Perhaps most importantly, the excavation spurred further studies in saponelte jewellery and principally saponelte working, iron smelting and specialised production in general. As a natural extension of the Mšecké Žehrovice excavation, her attention turned to the potential of raw reources in the landscape and La Tène settlement patterns in general. The project ‘Struktura laténského osídlení ve středních Čechách’ (The Structure of La Tène settlements in Central Bohemia, GA AV 1993–1995) culminated in a definition of the concept of an ‘industrial zone’ that was further developed in the survey project of the Lodečíky stream region. A monograph Výroba a sídla (‘Production and settlements’) published in 2001 included an extensive theoretical introduction to all aspects of specialised production. Namely for this work Natalie was awarded the highest scientific degree of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic – DrSc. and this publication (as well as international
papers based on this topic) is widely cited to this day. Her study of the organisation of (both basic and specialised) production is based not only on the actual artefacts but mainly on the spatial structure of production in the landscape and on the settlement areas’ relationship to the landscape.

We have gone ahead in time – the Loděnice survey took place already in a very different social and scholarly environment than the early years of her career. After the fall of the Iron curtain in 1989, Natalie immediately received the full acknowledgement and the rôle she so much deserved. She became one of the leading figures of the processual movement establishing itself in the Prague Institute in the early 1990s and one of the most prominent personalities of the newly founded Department of landscape archaeology directed by Evžen Neustupný. In 1990–1993 and 1999–2007 she was vice-director of the Institute and in 1993–1998 chairman of the Scientific Council. In 1998–2005 she lectured at the University of Western Bohemia in Pilsen. She held lectures at the universities of Oxford, Edinburgh, Durham, Sheffield, Southampton, Dublin, Galway, Adelaide etc. Up till now she still supervises Ph.D. theses and is regularly called to international Ph.D. defence committees. In 2008 she edited and co-authored two volumes (the Early and the Late Iron Age) of the new synthesis of Bohemian pre- and protohistory, re-published in English in 2013. Her scientific rigour and enormous personal integrity
made her one of the most respected personalities of Czech archaeology and equally highly appreciated abroad. In 2002 she was awarded the European Prix Evelyne Encelot for female scholars, between 2014 and 2015 she was a member of ERC expert panel.

Despite all this, she never gave up or even relented in her actual work. In the 2000s she directed several projects in which she brought to full fruition all her experience and savoir-faire from her earlier works. In two projects dedicated to the iron smelting region of Říčany: ‘ Železo a sídla: region Říčanska’ (The Iron and Settlements: the region of Říčany, GA AV 2002–2004) and ‘Říčansko jako železářský region’ (The iron-smelting region of Říčany, GA AV 2006–2007) she further developed the studies on industrial zones whereas in the projects ‘Sklářství v pravěku a středověku: kulturní a technologi cké proměny’ (Glassworking in prehistoric and medieval times: cultural and technological transformations, GA AV 2009–2011) and ‘Archeologie, archeometrie a informatika: pravěké a středověké sklo v České republice’ (Archaeology, archaeometry and informatics: prehistoric and medieval glass in the Czech Republic, GAČR 2014–2016) she orchestrated a broad multidisciplinary team of specialists on pre-modern glass in all its researchable aspects and within its framework she herself published several essential studies on the subject. Her, so far, last monograph on glass artefacts from central La Tène sites Němčice and Staré Hradisko appeared only last year.

Natalie has the enormous gift of being able to work on all levels of what is and can be ‘archaeology’. Her work is always based on a detailed knowledge of material culture whether it is glass or sapropelite jewellery or settlement pottery (it is once again she who established the classification system of pottery in Central Bohemia, it is she who – together with Jarmila Valentová – published the half-forgotten material from the Stradonice oppidum and made of it the most sense that could possibly be made). At the same time, she always takes great care about the correct contextualising of the finds, whether the context is stratigraphical, typological, historical or interpretative, and she is also most able at abstracting her notions into theoretical schemes on the level of systems theory. On none of these levels (from artefact through context to theory) does she ever lose track of the other ones, never yielding to any form of archaeological l'art-pour-l'artism, always a matter-of-fact person, always remembering that archaeology is not an end on its own but just a means for understanding the past reality. From the first stages of her career she worked in close cooperation with the natural sciences. Reliance on multidisciplinarity has always been a characteristic trait of her approach.

She is a restrained and silent person but she has never been shy to raise her voice in discussion and even polemics when the situation called for it. Poignant and logical in her arguments, and decisive and firm in her attitudes she is respected not only as a scientific authority but also as a kind of moral compass of Czech archaeology.

And with all this, Natalie remains a modest, kind and loveable person, a dear friend, with whom it is always a pleasure to spend time and speak about anything. Though quite a private person by nature, the crowd of her friends and colleagues spans the whole world and across all ages and levels of the scientific hierarchy, and for each of them she has a fair portion of her kindness, attention and advice.

To say that Natalie Venclová is an exceptional person is neither a rhetorical flourish, nor an exaggeration. We feel privileged to call her our colleague and friend and are glad to have been given the opportunity to dedicate this volume to her.

Whoever does a bit of addition and subtraction may come to the conclusion that this volume is somewhat untimely: such collections should be offered at round birthdays which was two years ago for Nataša... It may be so but not quite. The core of the volume is constituted by papers presented in 2015 at the 16th annual Czeczlo-Slovak-Moravo-Austro-Polish La Tène encounter (a most pleasant event among whose founding members and driving powers Natalie – along with Karol Pieta and the late Miloš Čižmář –
obviously holds a firm place). It was this delightful conference in Zvíkovské Podhradí in the hearth of lovely Southern Bohemia that we dedicated to Nataša in the first place. This volume is its logical (however belated) extension. We hope and believe Nataša will forgive us...

‘Nataša is certainly not the sort of person to make up stories’ was a fair objection to the title of our volume. That is the truth. If stories are played out by humans and follow dramatic plot schemes then it is absolutely the truth. But what if stories were reluctantly narrated by pottery sherds, sapropelite waste and droplets of blue glass...? Then Natalie is the master of reading these past stories from their taciturn witnesses and the master in retelling them to us. They are these countless stories of being, making, breaking, losing, finding and (mis)understanding which make up the picture of what we call the Iron Age. And here, there are the thirty-four stories that we want to narrate in honour of Nataša.

The single stories are grouped into five chapters. ‘Stories in making’ introduces studies on theoretical and methodological issues. In ‘Stories of making and exchanging’ we approach both from the theoretical perspective and in several case studies the topics – so dear to Nataša – of production, its specialisation and organisation as well as circulation and exchange of goods. The most numerous contributions herded together in ‘Stories of things – stories of people’ deal with specific objects, assemblages or find categories – glass, sapropelite and pottery are of course all represented among others. Natalie has never been a keen burial archaeologist but our three ‘Stories from the nether world’ rather than with burials as such deal with specific social practices and phenomena observed through burial records. On the other hand there is no reason to explain the presence of ‘Stories of regions and sites’. This last chapter includes some of the most important contributions to the book, for example those presenting some newly identified sites whose significance may fully unfold only in the years to come.

We commend the volume to the hands of readers and of Natalie above all and wish her to live happily to see all these studies gradually becoming obsolete.

The editors
In Prague on 28th October 2017