

Velim – Skalka and the Middle Bronze Age.

Archaeological excavations in 1984–2014

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Abstract: *In 1984–2014, archaeological rescue research (construction site of family houses; 3.4 hectares) has been carried out on a small hill Skalka at Velim in the Kolín District. The excavation has unearthed one part of a strongly fortified power and economic centre in the Middle Elbe region, extending over an area of more than 73 hectares. The site was already known since 1885 due to several hoard finds. The fortification was largely rebuilt at the end of the Middle Bronze Age and the layout of the central part of the hill fort was altered (Br C2/D). The fort was destroyed by a devastating attack and its inhabitants were slaughtered. Their unburied bodies and disintegrated remains are scattered within the destruction horizon in all settlement features that were open at that time.*

Key words: Middle Bronze Age – Tumulus Culture – hill fort – violent decline of settlement – scattered human bodies – fortification and buildings destroyed by fire

Archaeological rescue excavations induced by the construction of family houses on the hill Skalka at Velim (Kolín District) in 1984–2014 have yielded an extraordinarily large collection of human and animal bones. The assemblage comprises many thousand scattered bones and about 60 variously preserved predominantly human skeletons. Distinct traces of fire and ruined buildings were mainly found nearby the detected entrances to the fortification. Eight ditches, dating from the Middle Bronze Age and from the beginning of the Late Bronze Age, were detected on the construction site alone. All uncovered features were accompanied by numerous ceramic finds, less frequent bronze objects or their fragments and sporadically even by golden coils. How can we explain the above-mentioned find context? In the course of the last rescue excavation, the situation with the small hill and its neighbourhood has been interpreted in various different or even contradictory ways ranging from a cultic site to a profane area, from a violent ritual to a military conflict.

History

The first known archaeological finds from Skalka come from 1885 and they still provide a lot of valuable information to this day. At that time, an almost 4 metres high rampart from red and yellow soil was still visible on the former site Šance at the south-eastern edge of the hill. In the nearby quarry, Jan Hellich (1885; 1913) noticed a rock-carved ditch, which also contained yellow soil. As we have found out, both colours emerged from the burnt wood-and-earth defensive wall near the fortification gates. The first detected hoard of golden coils also was found within the burnt soil. From a comparison with

our knowledge follows that there also was an entrance gate (south-eastern) at the end of the Middle Bronze Age. The gate was first destroyed by fire and finally by modern-day stone mining.

During the interwar period, archaeological trenching on Skalka was carried out by museologist MUDr. František Dvořák from Kolín, who foreshadowed the site's significance for the Middle Elbe region (Dvořák 1936). He introduced it into professional literature as a wealthy and well fortified Bronze Age town, devastated by an armed conflict in which the inhabitants were slaughtered. During the holidays of 1948–1949, the site has been explored for a short time by Václav Spurný (2002) from the State Archaeological Institute in Prague, who mostly verified the places examined earlier by MUDr. František Dvořák. Archaeological activity in the following years was suppressed by a military training area, which lacked any professional scientific supervision, so that important find contexts in the uniquely preserved sunken parts of the fortification were severely damaged.

When the north-western slope of the hill was ultimately threatened by the construction of family houses, the Institute of Archaeology of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague conducted here a rescue excavation directed by Jiří Hrala, which started in 1984 (Hrala – Šumberová – Vávra 2000). The Kolín Museum and the Anthropos Institute of the Moravian Museum participated in this excavation from the very beginning. British colleagues led by A. F. Harding (2007) worked here simultaneously in 1992–1995.

The hill fort at Velim – Skalka in the Middle Bronze Age

In the beginning we must remark that the construction site of family houses (3.4 hectares), where the rescue research took place in 1984–2014, represents only a small part of the whole fortified area enclosed by ditch K (more than 73 hectares). About one half of this area on the plots Horní Nouzov and Dolní Nouzov is overlaid by modern buildings of Velim, the rest is covered with fields. The area of the hill encompasses a settlement with 25 family houses, an orchard, two backfilled sandpits, one large open quarry and at least two other smaller defunct quarries.

The evidence for the oldest settlement on the north-western slope, especially for the Eneolithic, is sporadic. The Early Bronze Age is represented by partly uncovered foundations of several post-built longhouses (W–E) and one inhumation grave of Únětice Culture. More finds from this period occurred in the nearby built-up area of the village on the opposite bank of Nouzovský Brook (Tylova Street).

The increasing intensity of settlement on Velim – Skalka is evidenced by finds from the Middle Bronze Age (1600–1300 BC). The beginning of that period is represented by isolated settlement pits and ground plans of two buildings delimited by foundation trenches. Traces of fortification from this phase were not found. They occurred later, in the late phase of Tumulus Culture, which is associated with three almost circular ditches A, B, F. Ditch A was backed by a defensive wall from two to three rows of wooden posts. A palisade trench from the front of another defensive wall was detected behind the ditch B. More detailed dating and relationship between ditches A+B are not yet reliably clarified. Archaeological research on the construction site and geophysical survey beyond its borders have found out that the above-mentioned two ditches were interrupted by four gaps oriented in cardinal directions, which served as entrances to an almost circular fortified area. Traces of this middle phase, which was terminated by a burnt layer with isolated human bones in ditch F and in the depression behind it, were later overlaid by the final period of settlement activity. This period, in particular its destruction phase, caused that the most recent finds, such as numerous human and animal bones, shattered pottery or worked and unworked stones, have also occurred in the upper layers of ditches A+B. They also contained isolated metal objects and fragments, in several cases also deposits of bronze tools and jewellery or hoards of golden coils from the so-called endless wire.

During the final phase with Late Tumulus pottery (Br C2/D), the older circular fortification was largely rebuilt and replaced by newer defensive structures. The two latest defensive zones with pairs

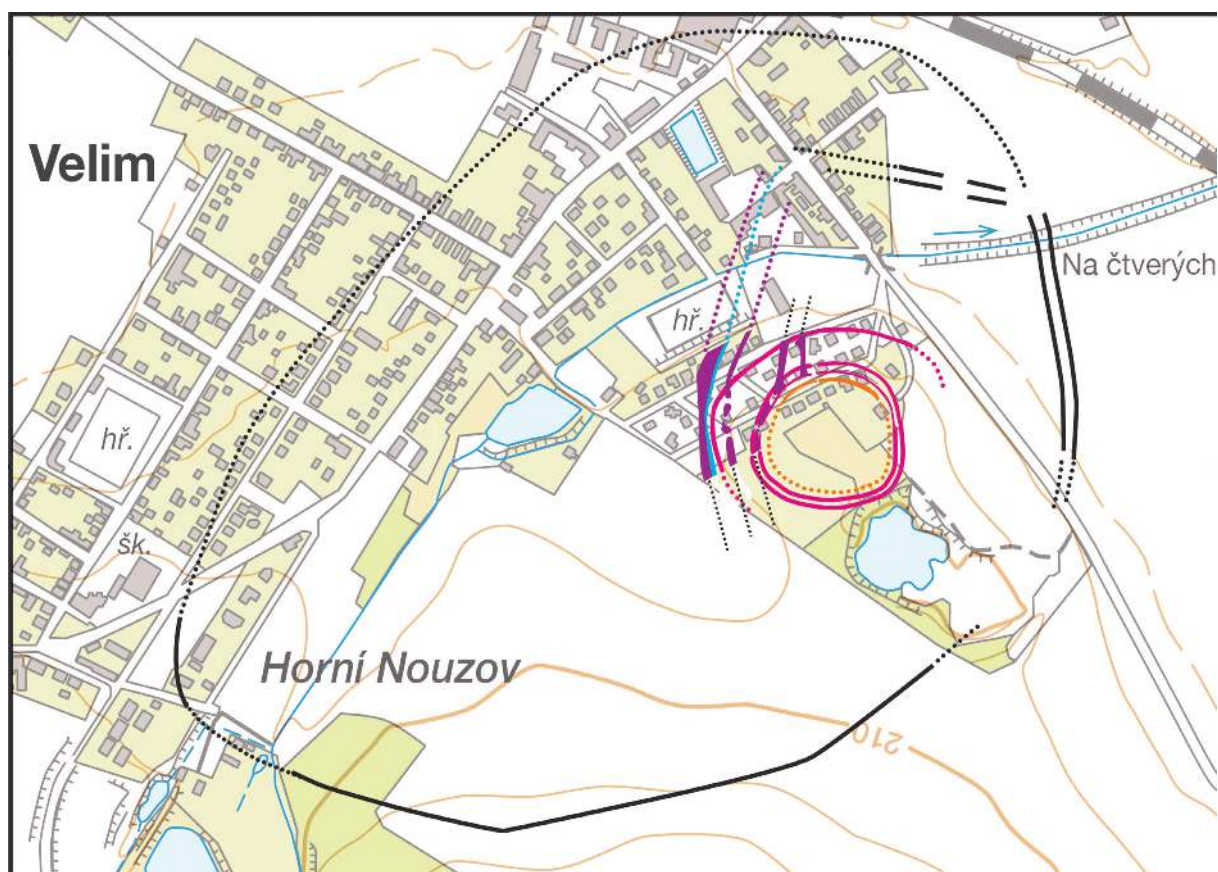


Fig. 1. Velim. Total extent of a Bronze Age hill fort with its centre on the hill Skalka; after R. Šumberová (2019), modified by M. Vávra.

of ditches formed a moderately pointed arch running from south to north across the examined area to beyond its borders. For the time being, we can connect them only indicatively with ditches in the Elbe floodplain near the railway (plots Koňské pole and Na čtverých), where they were detected by aerial photography and geophysical survey (**Fig. 1**).

The fortification system with ditches H+E, which is up to 55 metres wide, had two gates (north-western + western). The access to each of these gates was protected by a two-winged massive outwork (barbican) reinforced with a regular network of three rows of large and deep postholes. The foundations of the front wall in the north-western gate consisted of a row of postholes placed close to one another. Ditch H (feature 45A), which is elsewhere up to 12 metres wide, was narrowed below a wooden bridge to about 7 metres. The bridge construction, which was destroyed by fire, left some traces in the burnt subsoil on the scarp of the ditch. The way then sloped up an inclined berm and passed through a large wood-and-earth defensive wall faced on both sides with natural stones. Behind the defensive wall, there was a narrow neck, which interrupted the ditch E in the axis of the gate (feature 27; **Fig. 2**). The western gate between ditches H+E had approximately the same shape. Moreover, the wall behind ditch H and the great defensive wall were built from many natural stones (**Fig. 3**).

In the western gate of the inner defensive zone, we also reliably detected a passage through the fortification across ditch D with scorched supporting posts of a wooden bridge in the place of an older entrance, which interrupted here the ditches A+B. A large system of interconnected pits (feature 27), comprising the pit 1 and a smaller pit 3 (**Fig. 4**), was recessed into the bottom of ditch D north of the above-mentioned passageway. The southern arm of ditch D on the opposite side was bent in the form of a turned letter L. The foundations of the late defensive wall consisted of large postholes filled with

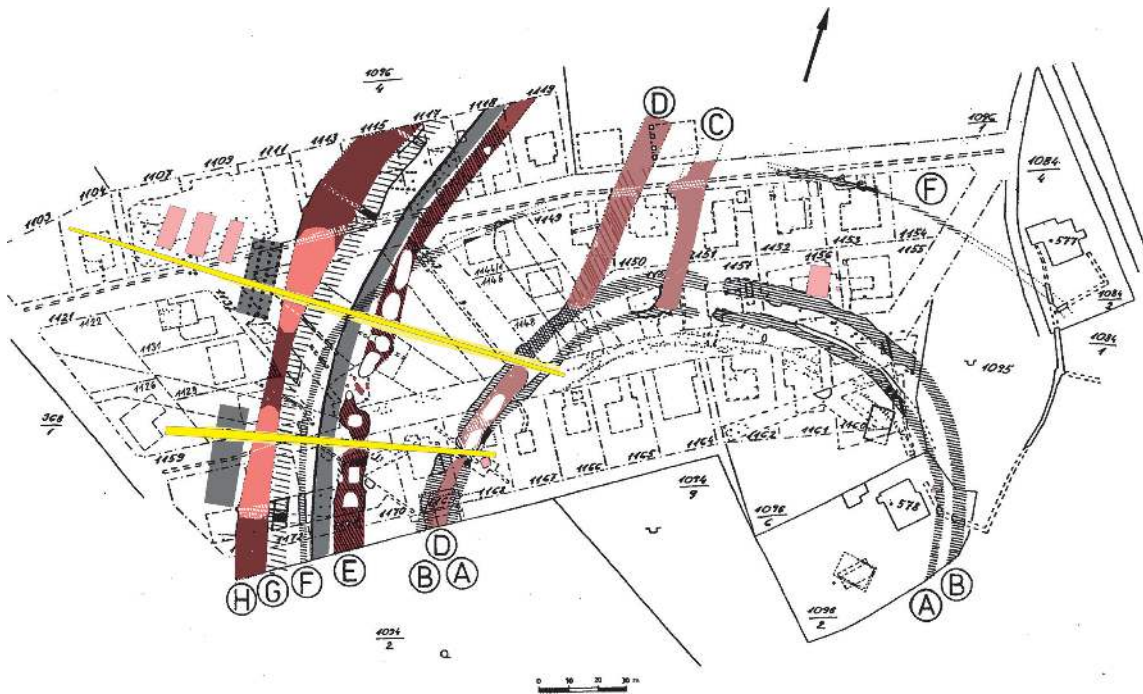


Fig. 2. Velim – Skalka. Construction site of family houses with the latest fortification and gates (north-western and western foregates in front of ditch H + defensive wall + ditch E; ditches D+C) and detected houses (pink).

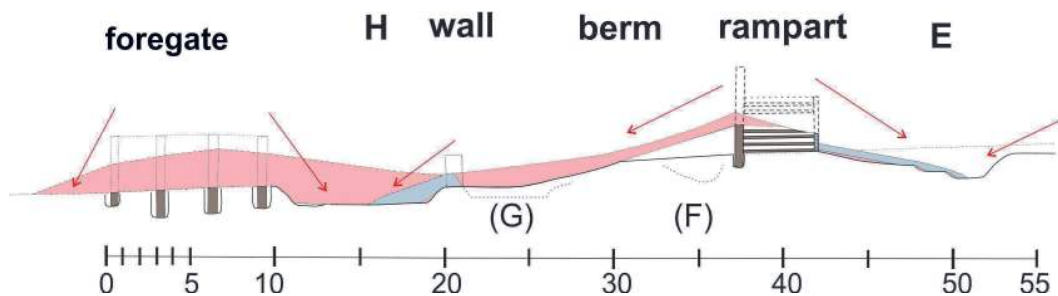


Fig. 3. Decline of the late fortification between ditches H+E near the western gate (older and already defunct ditches G+F are marked with a dotted line).

burnt soil. Behind them, sunken features occurred on both sides of the entrance (features 58, 188). We interpret them as relics of residential buildings (sunken-featured dwellings), which were only partly uncovered (**Fig. 8**).

Both the gates in the latest fortification zone with ditches H+E and the gate in ditch D were affected by severe fire. The high heat was caused by a large amount of construction wood from aboveground defensive elements (barbican, gate, gallery, bridge, grate construction of the defensive wall, its facing and posts). After fire, the bodies of the defensive wall collapsed to both sides. The heavily burnt-through external part slid down the rose-burnt marlstone berm into ditch H. The inner stone wall and one part of the gallery fell inside, into ditch E (**Fig. 3**). Similar shapes of cross-sections and an identical burnt fill in the ditch were detected by J. A. Jíra (1899) in Horní Šárka on the elevated site at St. Mathew (Prague 6–Dejvice), where a large hill fort extended at the same time as in Velim. Recent rescue excavation detected some more ditches on the site and extended Jíra's knowledge about the character of fortification. Older ditches belonged to the Eneolithic period and the red-burnt ones are dated to the Tumulus Culture (Kacl 2018).

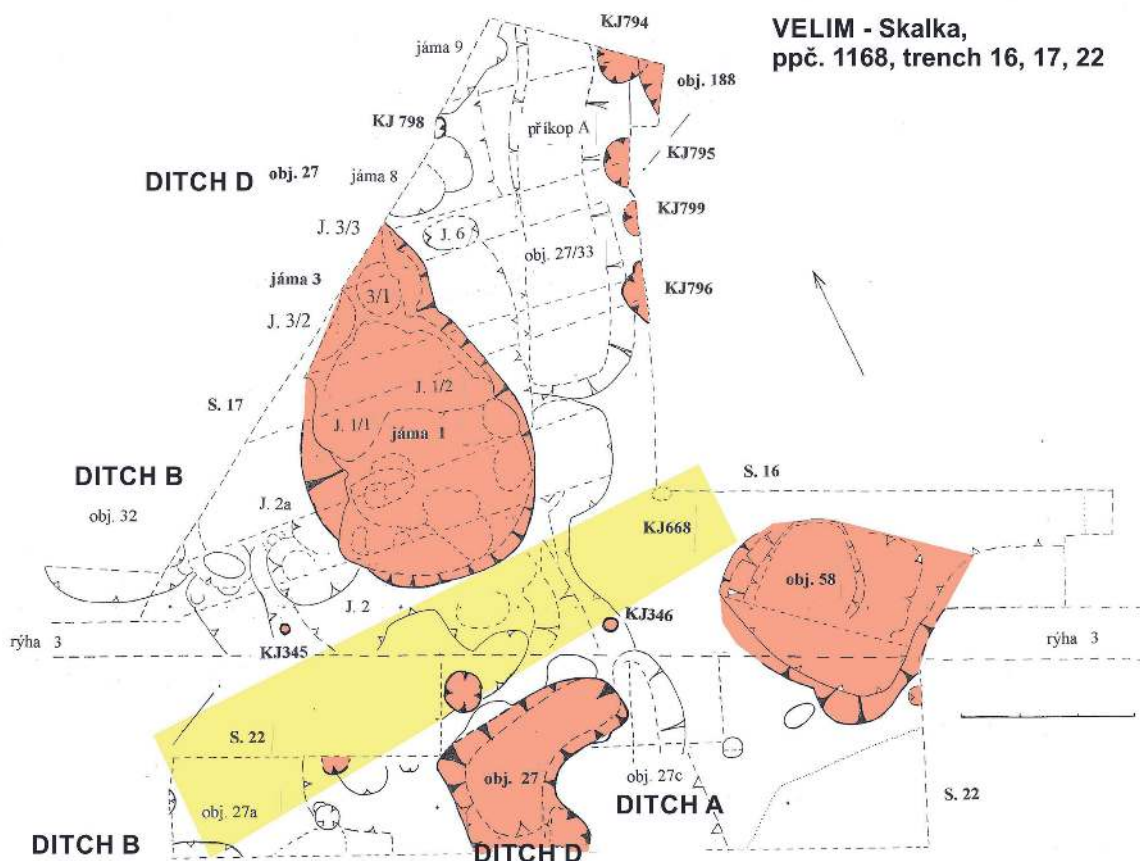


Fig. 4. The late inner fortification on Skalka (plot No. 1168), western gate with a gap in ditch D. Eleven human bodies were found thrown into a large system of interconnected pits (feature 27, pits 1+3) north of the passageway; an accumulation of five other individuals was found in the southern bent arm of the ditch. House foundations (pit dwelling feature 58+188) were detected inside the fortification, behind the defensive wall.



Fig. 5. The late inner fortification on Skalka (plot No. 1168), ditch D at the western gate. A child (K40) was found lying above the bottom of a shallow pit 3 north of the large and deep pit 1 (feature 27). The upper part of the infill contained a lot of human and animal bones.

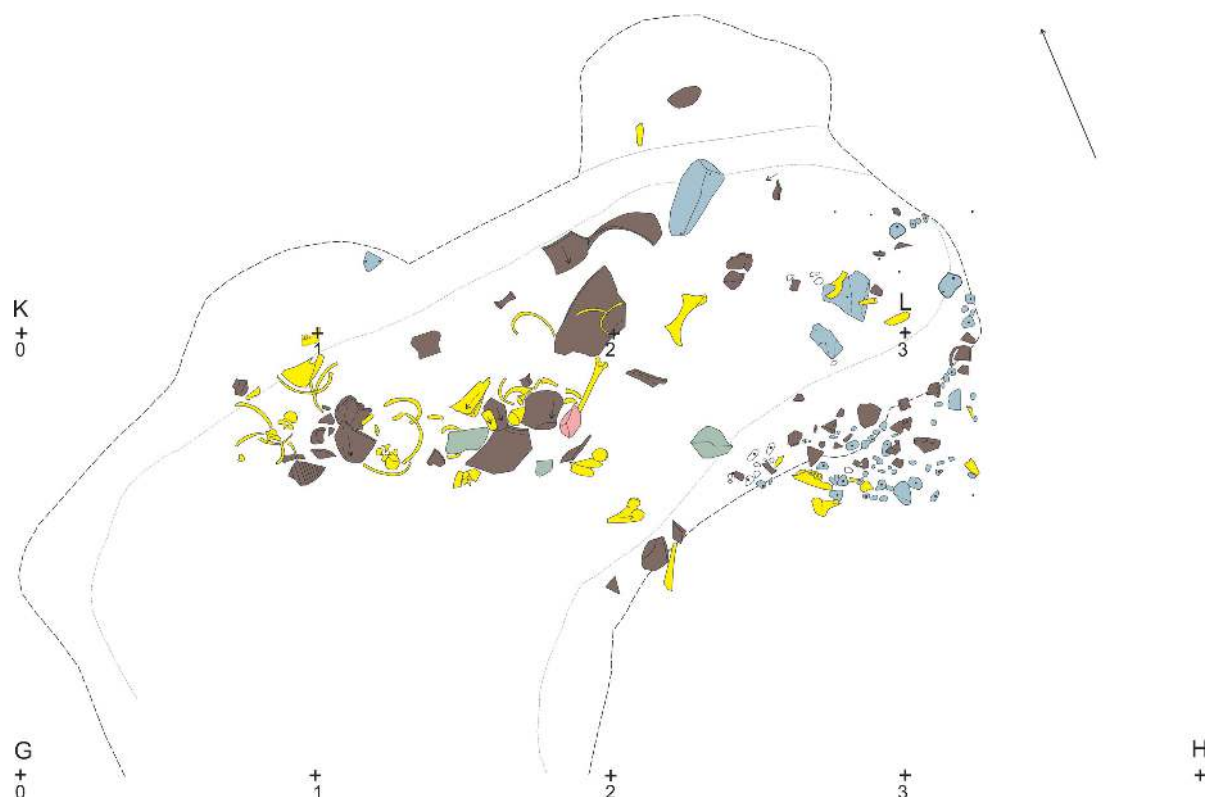


Fig. 6. The late inner fortification on Skalka (plot No. 1168), western gate with ditch D, southern bent arm of the ditch (trench 22D, feature 27). The upper part of the infill contained scattered human and animal bones, ceramic fragments and isolated stones.

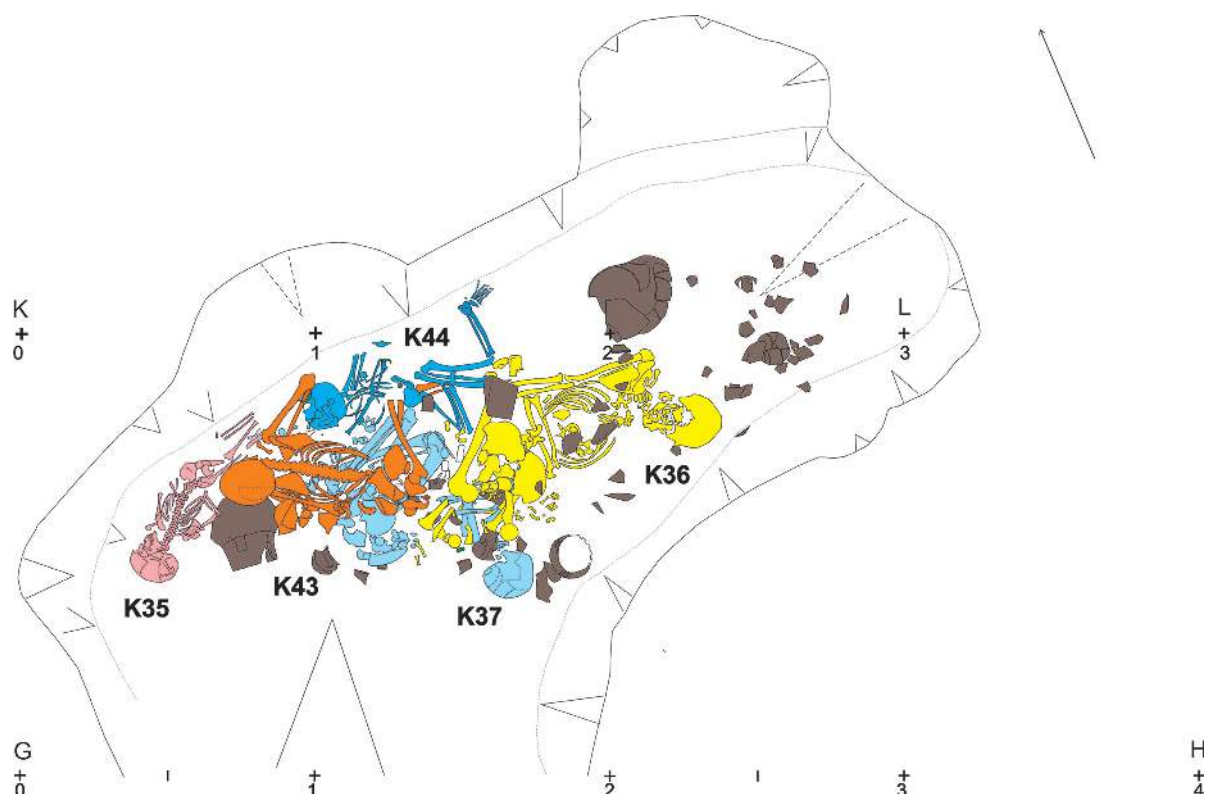


Fig. 7. The late inner fortification on Skalka (plot No. 1168), western gate in ditch D (feature 27), southern bent arm of the ditch (trench 22D, feature 27). An accumulation of five skeletons (2 men – K36, K37; 1 woman – K43 and 2 children – K35, K44) and damaged ceramic vessels were found above the inclined bottom of the feature.



Fig. 8. Velim, trench 16. The upper part of child's skeleton K8 at the edge of a pit dwelling (feature 58) near the western gate in ditch D, with other scattered human bones and ceramic fragments in the surroundings.

Furthermore, pits of various size and depth were recessed into the ditches E and D+C in Velim. The pits were separated from one another by transverse ridges from the marlstone bedrock. They originally served as mining pits and the extracted white calcareous marlstone was used to build the defensive walls. The upper infill layers in these pits contain fragments of thick-walled and fine pottery, human and animal bones together with natural stones and broken grinders (**Fig. 6**). The layer underneath, particularly in the immediate neighbourhood of entrances to the fortification, contains human skeletons in irregular positions (**Fig. 7**). In the course of thirty years of our excavations at Skalka we found more than 50 human skeletons and thousands of bones from other hundreds of individuals across the whole age spectrum of local population, from babies to the oldest men and women. Two heavily scorched male bodies were found lying directly under the bridge inside the narrowed ditch H (north-western gate; **Figs. 9–10**). At the top of the hill, human skeletons were already uncovered earlier, during the interwar period, in the sandpit of Mr Kyselka (Dvořák 1936) and another damaged skeleton was found by V. Spurný (2002) in his archaeological trench II/1948.

The above-mentioned spectrum of finds together with bronze arrowheads, other collective deposits and golden hoards in the late ditches H+E, D+C and in other contemporary features (also in depressions after defunct older ditches F, B, A) resulted in various different interpretations of the function and purpose of the fortified area on this site (Hrala – Vávra 1996). Unlike the theory by MUDr. F. Dvořák (1936, 49) about the conquest “of a well fortified town”, other interpretation rather considered a dominant role of cultic practices which have taken place inside the fortification. The latter theory was based on a high proportion of human remains and broken or split bones (or even ritual cannibalism; Hrala – Šumberová – Vávra 2000; Hrala 2000; Dočkalová 2000).

Our recent findings in terrain more and more confirm the original opinion of MUDr. F. Dvořák (1936) on the existence of an extensive fortified settlement and its violent destruction. The centre

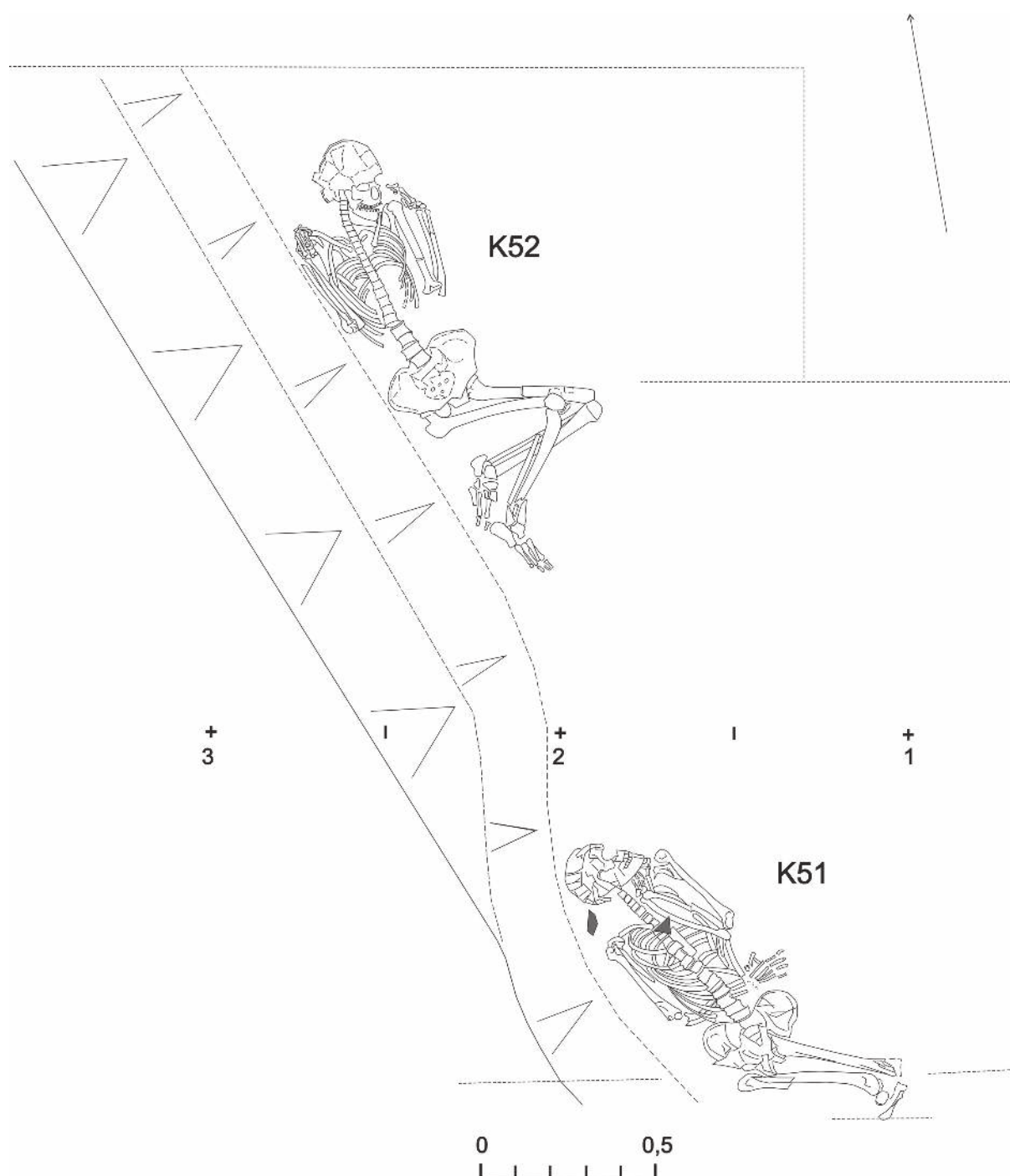


Fig. 9. Velim, trench 12B, north-western gate, western edge of ditch H. Two scorched male skeletons (K51 + K52) were found lying at the bottom of the ditch under a burnt bridge.

had a significant power-administrative role at the eastern edge of the Middle Elbe region and oversaw the trade roads, the Elbe traffic route and river fords of that time. The defensive walls also protected craftsmen and their specialized workshops producing bronze artefacts and other articles, and the storehouses of merchants. The nearby agricultural hinterland supplied the inhabitants with foodstuffs and their diet comprised besides domestic animals also game, fish and freshwater mussels.

The rebuilding and repairs of the massive multiple fortification, which have been made to the very last moment, were meant to protect the local people of Late Tumulus Culture from an enemy attack. The outcome of an armed conflict was an exterminated, plundered and burnt-down hill fort. This



Fig. 10. Velim, trench 12B, north-western gate, the lower black burnt layer under the outer edge of ditch H contained two scorched male skeletons (K51, K52) overlaid with red-fired soil. Pictured is skeleton K51.

event took place around 1300 BC. Unburied bodies of local defenders and other people, including refugees from the surroundings who probably joined them, were left lying in the place of fight, on the defensive walls and inside the fortification between ruins with unnecessary equipment and shattered objects. Several captives may have been massacred after the fight was finished and their bodies were probably thrown into the inner ditches and other depressions inside the fortification (**Figs. 5, 7**). Some of them exhibited intentionally inflicted fatal injuries, mainly on their skulls.

As we detected in 1987, unburied human remains also occur in the surroundings of Skalka, still inside the outer fortification (ditch K). Their secondary postmortal disintegration and dispersion were predominantly caused by animals, birds and natural processes. Defensive walls and ditches were left to their fate and the hill fort suddenly ceased to fulfil its functions. Distinct height differences in the fortification have gradually diminished until they completely vanished due to agricultural terrain alterations in Modern Times at the latest.

The same picture of a violent destruction was also visible in the later phase of the fortification on the hill Cezavy near Blučina in South Moravia (Tihelka 1969; Salaš et al. 2012). This site can, in our opinion, be regarded the same way as Velim. The settlement in Stará Kouřim (Šolle 1980) and the hill fort in Prague 6–Horní Šárka (most recently Kacl 2018) were also destroyed in approximately the same time period. This situation was thus by far not exceptional at that time. It represented an outcome of more complex events and a culmination point of social and ethnic pressures, conflicts and unrests, which have gradually developed from plundering raids to the extermination and exchange of population.

In our concept we elucidate the origin of find contexts in the examined segment of Skalka more complexly than only by referring to cultic ceremonies, for which we do not have reliable evidence. The accumulations of human bodies or bones in the given context cannot be considered relics of ritual practices, as was also confirmed by British anthropologists and osteologists (Knüsel – Outram – Knight

2007). The fortified power and economic centre of the Middle Elbe region abruptly perished at the time of onset of a new archaeological period – Late Bronze Age, which is associated with civilisation of the Urnfield people.

We believe, after all, that the term “Velim type” (a variant of the name “Velim Culture”, which was used for the first time by MUDr. F. Dvořák in 1936) is still well justified today, at least in two areas. In the Central European archaeology it refers to material culture of a period, in which the Late Tumulus pottery almost completely merged with the oldest Lusatian pottery. In Bohemian prehistory, the example of Velim can demonstrate a uniquely preserved group of “non-standard or non-ritual burials” in a fortified settlement. The collection of finds contains human bodies of all age categories and of both sexes at various degree of decomposition and disintegration, which are found inside a sequence of destruction layers and underneath. At the same time, it also points to the problem of information possibilities and ability of our own and related disciplines to produce a whole spectrum of interpretations and hypotheses concerning one and the same find context.

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