

EARLY MEDIEVAL  
ELITE CULTURE  
IN SUPRA-REGIONAL  
PERSPECTIVE

society  
centres  
artefacts

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**Early medieval elite culture in supra-regional perspective:  
Society, centres, artefacts**

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Šárka Krupičková, Rudolf Procházka, Šimon Ungerman et al.

Czech Academy of Sciences, Institute of Archaeology, Brno

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# Introduction

The topic of the monograph *Early medieval elite culture in supra-regional perspective: Society, centres, artefacts* loosely builds thematically on the longer research tradition of the former Centre for Slavic and Early Medieval Archaeology (now the Centre for Historical Archaeology) of the Institute of Archaeology of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Brno. Given the nature of the main field workplace at the Great Moravian stronghold in Mikulčice, the Centre is naturally directed towards researching elites from the end of the first millennium AD. The stronghold at the Mikulčice-Valy site, to which in recent decades the settlement on the Slovak side of the border in the cadastral area of Kopčany has also been inseparably included, represents the most significant monument of the Great Moravian period due to the number of discovered stone buildings, especially churches, the number of graves with extraordinary furnishings, and the total number and variety of other immovable and movable archaeological finds. From the very beginning of local archaeological excavations, there has been no doubt about the connection of Mikulčice to the highest social classes, and the designation of the site as the central location of Great Moravia appears to be a very likely interpretation even from today's perspective (Pouлік 1975; Poláček 2020, 143–147; Hlavica 2023, 50). The importance of the site is also underscored by its relatively good state of preservation, without significant disturbance by modern settlement activity (for more about the state of preservation see Poláček et al. 2014).

The systematic processing of local finds associated with the elite has its own significant publication platform in the series *Studien zum Burgwall von Mikulčice*, which has been published since 1995. Of the 14 volumes published to date, several were entirely or partially dedicated to finds or find contexts that have a clear connection to the Mikulčice Great Moravian

elites; this is especially true for the publication of the burial site around the largest Great Moravian church (Klanica et al. 2019), the processing of grave finds of swords (Košta, Hošek 2014) and the analysis of Mikulčice spherical buttons (Krupičková 2024). Additional categories of elite finds were processed within other editorial series or individual publications and articles, e.g. editorial series *Internationale Tagungen in Mikulčice* dedicated to the publication of contributions from the International Mikulčice Colloquia, and also the Czech-English monograph *Great Moravia and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Kouřil ed. 2014) with detailed photographs of characteristic Great Moravian finds associated with the elite from Mikulčice and other locations.

Many of these publications have an editorial and/or authorial association with Lumír Poláček, who headed archaeological research in Mikulčice for 30 years (1992–2022) and made a fundamental contribution to the gradual and systematic multidisciplinary processing of local finds and the revision of key field situations. Lumír Poláček's greatest achievement to date, summarising knowledge of the Great Moravian social elite residing in Mikulčice, was the archaeological-anthropological project of the Czech Science Foundation (*Lifestyle and Identity of the Great Moravian Nobility: Archaeological and Bioarchaeological Analysis of the Evidence of Mikulčice's Uppermost Elites*, GA17-01878), which his team successfully implemented in 2017–2019. In addition to a number of individual studies, collaboration between 35 authors, experts in the fields of archaeology, history, physical anthropology, archaeozoology, and paleobotany, resulted in the comprehensive publication *Great Moravian Elites from Mikulčice* (Poláček et al. 2020), which, at the request of the authors and readers, was also published in Czech as *Velkomoravské elity z Mikulčic* (Poláček et al. 2022).

The early medieval elite is a highly complex subject addressed by numerous publications, though a cursory overview of research itself would take up an entire book, albeit one that would not be simple to write, due in large part to the long tradition of study, the diversity of available sources, and the range of scientific disciplines dealing with these sources. Simplifying the situation considerably, we can distinguish between written sources dealt with by historiography and auxiliary historical sciences, and material sources that are acquired and analysed by archaeology in close cooperation with a whole range of ‘collaborating’ scientific fields. In the text below, we reflect briefly on both groups of sources (or scientific disciplines).

The focus of Western European historiography from the very beginning has been political history and the closely related emphasis on the study of ruling dynasties and the nobility. Interest has continued over roughly the last quarter of a century – especially in German-language historiography – in questions related to the nature of statehood in the Early Middle Ages, decision-making and governance mechanisms, etc. (e.g. Pohl, Wieser Hrsg. 2009; Epp, Meyer Hrsg. 2017; Depreux, Patzold Hrsg. 2023), along with an unprecedented flourishing of research on the elite itself, the ‘showcase’ of which is the entire series of publications in the *Collection Haut Moyen Âge* edition from Brepols Publishers. The most prominent historians from Western and Central Europe met at conferences, the resulting anthologies from which are each dedicated to a selected topic: the definition of the lay and ecclesiastical elite and its internal hierarchy (Bougard, Iogna-Prat, Le Jan eds. 2008; Bougard, Goetz, Le Jan eds. 2011), games, competition and rivalry within the aristocracy (Bougard, Le Jan, Lienhard eds. 2012), the mobility of elite members and their relationship to space (Depreux, Bougard, Le Jan eds. 2007; Bühner-Thierry, Patzold, Schneider eds. 2018), the relationship to property and ownership (Devroey, Feller, Le Jan eds. 2010), the question of ‘high’ culture and education as largely ‘elite products’ (Bougard, Le Jan, McKitterick eds. 2009), etc. Naturally, there have been many other monographs and collective works by other publishers that address some of the aforementioned topics; we also consider it important to mention research on queens and noblewomen (e.g. Garver 2009; Dailey 2015; Santinelli-Foltz 2022), on the phenomena of gift-giving (e.g. Davies, Fouracre eds. 2010), and inheritance or *memoria*, which are largely associated with the elite (e.g. Bougard, La Rocca, Le Jan eds. 2005).

Comparable publication efforts in the field of early medieval archaeology focused on specific phenomena associated with elites have not yet been produced, and while at first glance this does not sound entirely flattering for archaeology, it is in fact greatly influenced by the nature of the available sources. A significant part of Western and Central Europe in the Merovingian and even larger part in the Carolingian periods was occupied by the Frankish Empire, in whose territory established types of written sources were used. Moreover, numerous collections of similar written sources have also survived from areas located outside the borders of the Frankish Empire, allowing historians to create regional and supra-regional studies and, for example, in the Carolingian period, to directly compare documents of the life of the ruling class in the area between Brittany, Catalonia, and Lower Austria. In contrast, the archaeological image of elites in early medieval Europe is much more disparate due to the fundamental chronological and geographical differences in the nature of archaeological record. Whereas from the Merovingian period we have thousands of row cemeteries, which contain, among other things, very richly furnished graves and where members of the elite appear ‘as if served up on a silver platter’, in the Carolingian period in the territory of the Frankish Empire, with only a few exceptions, any richer furnishings disappear from the graves, so that identifying traces of the elite in archaeological sources is suddenly much more difficult (cf. graves in the interior of churches, graves with tombstones, fragments of luxury items in settlement layers, opulent secular stone buildings). In other words, if the collections of skeletons are largely devoid of individuals demonstrably attributable to the elite, the most important source for archaeological research into this social group is absent.

In contrast, in the regions just beyond the borders of the Frankish Empire in the Carolingian period, the situation can be entirely different. A typical example is Great Moravia, about which only relatively few contemporary written sources (i.e. from the 9th century) have survived, which, moreover, are not of local provenance but represent a ‘view from the outside’. The main focus of the reports – especially those from East Frankish annalists – is the ruling Moravian princes and their actions, but it is not possible to form a more definite idea about other members of the elite (e.g. Kalhous 2014). The nature of archaeological record is considerably more favourable, especially in the territory of present-day

I Society

# Did iron come from the Moravian *utmark*? Reconsidering the economic and political context of early medieval iron production

Michal Hlavica

## 1. Introduction

In the chapter on the Great Moravian economy written for Lumír Poláček's volume *Great Moravian Elites from Mikulčice*, R. Procházka and I (Hlavica, Procházka 2020a) highlighted iron as one of the regionally distributed commodities with the potential to shed light on the configuration of the contemporary economy. At that time, however, we were unable to form a complete picture of iron production and distribution, or of the role elites played in these production-distribution networks. The preserved relics from 9th-century Moravia include no written records addressing this topic, and archaeological research up to that point had yielded only a fragmented and incomplete understanding, isolated from any broader economic model.

Since then, the situation has gradually become clearer. Owing to L. Poláček's strong support for junior scholars researching the Great Moravian economy during his directorship of the Institute, a new generation of archaeologists has begun to revise earlier interpretations of early medieval iron production areas in Moravia. They are also examining previously unanalysed assemblages of artefacts related to iron production, originating both from Moravian hillforts – the principal economic and political centres of the 9th-century Mojmirid polity – and from rural settlements.

The main aim of this paper is to provide a comprehensive overview of current knowledge on early medieval iron production in Moravia, with particular attention to recent evaluations and a specific focus on the Great Moravian period (9th century) and peripheral mining landscapes. It also outlines preliminary steps toward constructing a coherent model

situated within the economic and political framework of Great Moravia, as defined in my previous research (Hlavica 2023). For heuristic purposes, I employ a tripartite division of early medieval iron production in Moravia, even though this framework may be somewhat misleading, as it rests on our still-incomplete understanding of iron production in the Moravian Karst.

The first phase corresponds to pre-Great Moravian production in the 8th and early 9th centuries, when the systematic exploitation of iron resources in peripheral areas likely began. This phase is particularly problematic, as the precise onset of Moravian unification remains uncertain, and absolute data to verify the relative chronology of 'pre-Great Moravian' smelting sites are still lacking. Furthermore, the distinction between this phase and the subsequent 'Great Moravian' phase is based almost solely on technological differences. Although a different smelting technology was employed during this period, it does not necessarily indicate a different socio-political structure.

The second phase encompasses the 9th century, when central places in Moravia flourished and demand for regionally distributed commodities presumably reached its peak. A more intensive exploitation of outlying resources appears to have occurred, accompanied by some technological advancements. As I attempt to illustrate, this phase may have seen the consolidation of customary rights in the exploitation of peripheral woodland areas near Great Moravian centres and the stronger integration of elites who resided in these centres.

The third phase follows the collapse of the Great Moravian polity and its central places in the 10th century. Available data suggest that the exploitation of

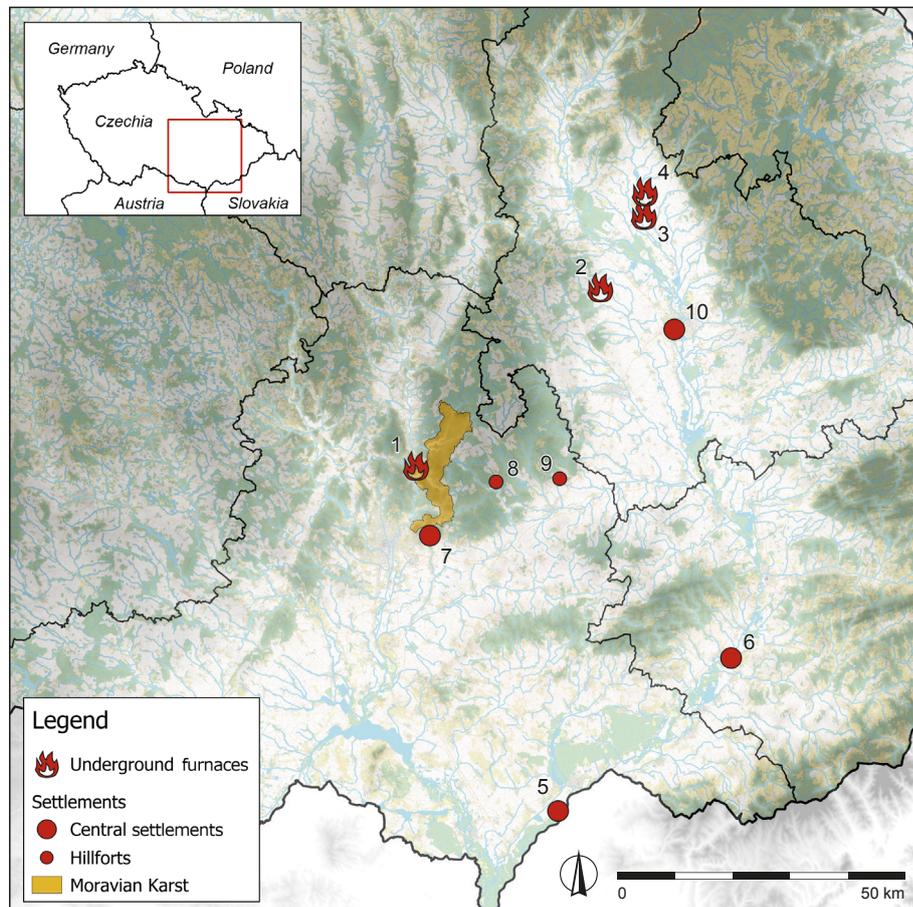
peripheral resources underwent a qualitative shift, along with changes in production technology. The disintegration of the Great Moravian market system appears to have decentralised peripheral resource exploitation, possibly reflecting a transition from a surplus-based economy to self-subsistence among surviving communities. This shift may also reflect the dissolution of customary land-use restrictions in outlying areas.

In the discussion section, where I attempt to model the dynamics and broader economic context of iron production during this period, I introduce the Scandinavian concept of *utmark* into the analysis. I argue that this concept corresponds well to the available archaeological evidence from Moravia and offers valuable insights into the region's past. Moreover, it has the potential to enhance our understanding of elite economic agendas, regional market systems, and the function of contemporary central places as market nodes. Through this comparison with other regions of Europe, I aim to emphasise that the environmental changes resulting from this exploitation were a key factor in determining the eventual permanent colonisation of these areas.

## 2. Beginning of Moravian iron production (8th and early 9th centuries)

The economic and socio-political background of iron production in the 8th and early 9th centuries remains rather obscure. The current understanding is based solely on a few sites located in two areas, which provide insight primarily into the technological aspects of early iron production. These regions include the Moravian Karst and the area surrounding the present-day cities of Uničov and Litovel (Fig. 1.1).

The earliest smelting workshops in the Moravian Karst were identified in its central part, within the cadastral area of today's village of Olomučany (Souchopová 1986, 15–23; Souchopová, Stránský 2008, 137–139). Evidence of smelting activity was recorded in densely forested areas lacking permanent settlement, specifically within forest units 98/2 and 98/3 (Fig. 1.2). These sites are notable for their use of underground furnaces capable of producing high-carbon steel (Pleiner 1958, 217–220; 1969, 485; 2000, 190–194). Direct analogies for these furnaces have not yet been identified



**Fig. 1.1.** Iron smelting sites with underground 'Želechovice-type' furnaces documented up to the date of publication, and Great Moravian centres with evidence of 8th-century settlement mentioned in the text. 1 – Olomučany; 2 – Senička; 3 – Želechovice; 4 – Dolní Sukolom; 5 – Mikulčice; 6 – Staré Město (Uherské Hradiště District); 7 – Staré Zámky (Brno-Líšeň cadastral area); 8 – Černov (Ježkovice cadastral area); 9 – Zelená Hora (Vyškov District); 10 – Olomouc-Povel. Author M. Hlavica.

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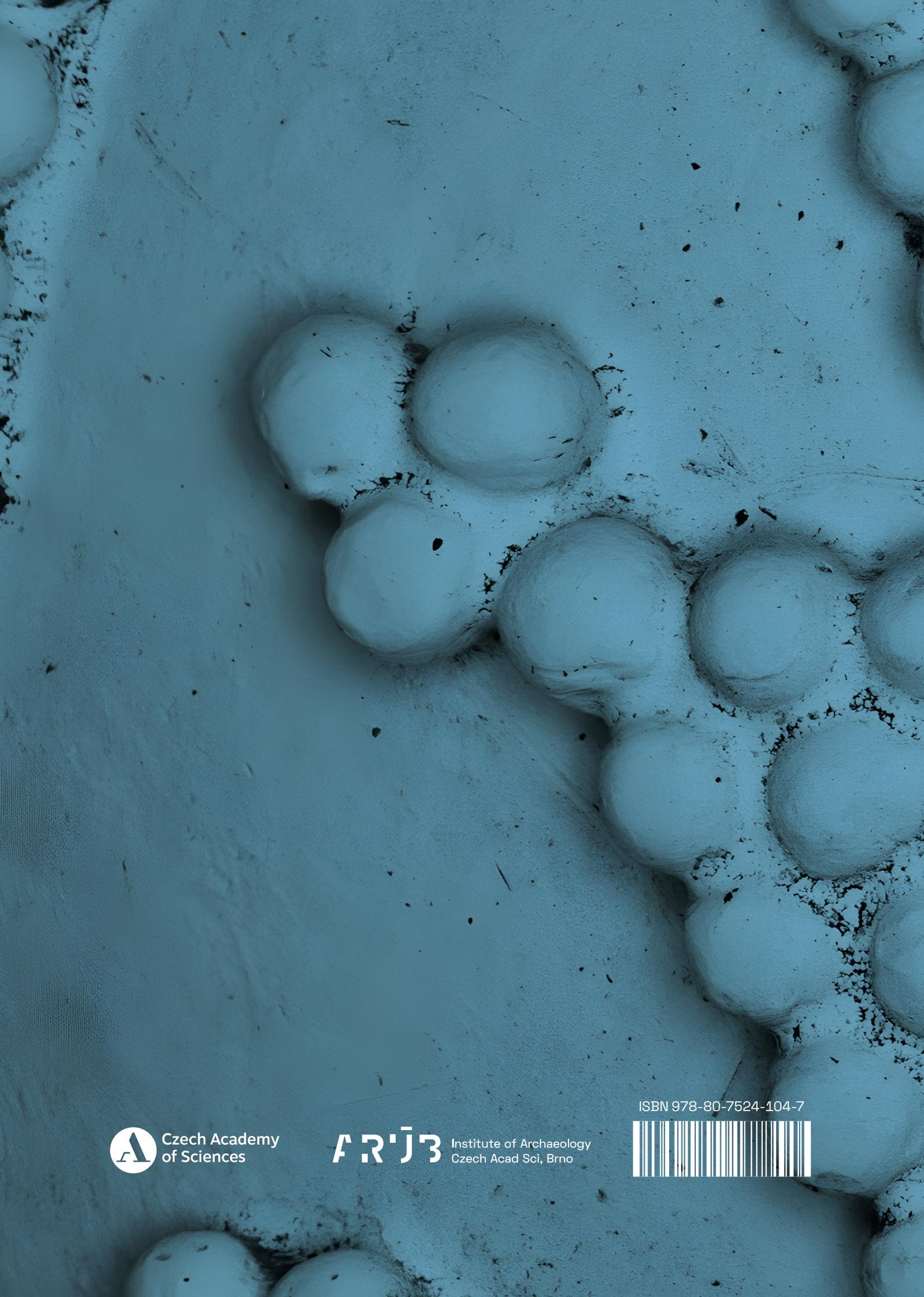
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