



## INTERDISCIPLINARIA ARCHAEOLOGICA

### NATURAL SCIENCES IN ARCHAEOLOGY

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#### Obituary

### Professor Marek Zvelebil (9. 1. 1952 – 7. 7. 2011)

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Marek Zvelebil was born in Prague in January 9<sup>th</sup>, 1952. His father, Prof. Kamil Zvelebil, was a well-known linguist who specialized in Dravidian languages, and wrote seminal works in the field including *The Smile of Murugan* and *The Irulas of the Blue Mountains* about ancient Tamil literature and mythology. Marek's mother came from the milieu of the Russian post-revolution emigrants to Czechoslovakia strongly contributed to the intellectual climate of Prague. The Zvelebil family left Prague shortly after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. During their time in the Netherlands Marek obtained Dutch citizenship, but later continued his studies in the USA and the UK.

Marek read his BA in archaeology at the University of Sheffield in 1974 and completed his PhD in Cambridge in 1981 as one of the last students of Prof. Sir Grahame Clark. Marek's research subject was the socio-economic prehistory of southern Finland and the East Baltic, with an emphasis on the transition from hunter-gatherers to farmers. After a short visiting fellowship in the University of South Carolina (1980–1981) he returned to Sheffield in 1981 as a Research Fellow, later holding the positions of Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Reader and finally Professor of European Prehistory. Overall he spent thirty years at Sheffield with spells as a visiting professor at several institutions across Europe and North America.

Over the course of his career Marek wrote or edited more than a hundred scholarly works. His first academic success was the well-known Cambridge monograph *Hunters in Transition* which he edited and published with colleagues in 1986, presenting an alternative explanation of the origins of the European Neolithic. Their approach was in direct opposition with the then prevailing theory of the origin of European agriculture and also influenced some Czech archaeologists. Its proposals were broadly debated in the Bylany Centre of the Institute of Archaeology and the first direct contacts between Marek and his Czech colleagues were established.

With the collapse of the communist block in 1989, Marek was able to extend his research to look at early farming cultures in eastern Europe and Siberian hunter-gatherers. His



Marek Zvelebil 19. 6. 2011 in Sheffield (Photo Jaromír Beneš).

field research also included a co-directed major project in southeastern Ireland, as well as the Sheffield Department of Archaeology's long-running project in the Outer Hebrides.

Immediately after the fall of the totalitarian regime in Czechoslovakia Marek visited his native country and started an intensive collaboration with Czech archaeologists. The first joint research project was the *Ancient Landscape*

*Reconstruction in Bohemia* (ALRB). This project aimed to collect archaeological and environmental data on the prehistoric and medieval landscape in Bohemia using modern tools of archaeological survey and landscape archaeology. Within the project Marek also stimulated an interesting debate about the social dimension of the Czech landscape.

The second major contribution to central and east European archaeology made by Marek was his effort to understand the bioarchaeological base of the earliest Linear Pottery Culture (LBK). His research was focused on questions of the cultural contribution made by ancestral cultural groups (earlier Neolithic and Mesolithic), the initial distribution of LBK, the archaeological features of the earliest cultural horizon, inter-generational transmission of cultural traditions, social organisation, land use and economy, demography and the subsequent dispersal into adjacent regions, together with the problems of dating. Marek Zvelebil and his colleagues conducted extensive analysis of the key cemetery of the earliest LBK culture in the CR, at *Vedrovice*. This interdisciplinary international project involved archaeological and biological analyses, using the latest biomolecular and biochemical techniques, and resulted in several research publications.

The last, unfortunately incomplete, research activity Marek undertook in the Czech Republic was connected to the investigation of the Mesolithic occupation in the area of former postglacial Lake Schwarzenberk in south Bohemia, where an extensive settlement site with wetland deposits was discovered. He was working to develop a large research project integrating every environmental aspects on local Mesolithic occupation. It was also part of his research activity connected with bioarchaeology of Mesolithic and Neolithic communities and the agricultural transition in Europe. The aim of this unfinished research was to integrate information forthcoming from recent excavations, with new approaches in the study of material culture analysis and the analyses of human biological remains (gross and microwear pathologies, biochemistry and DNA) to carry out a comprehensive study of agricultural origins and the development of farming in Europe during the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods.

In the last decade Marek extended his teaching activity in the Czech Republic, and arranged many international

student exchanges. His readings in universities of Plzeň, Prague, Brno and České Budějovice (Budweis) were visited by a large numbers of young students as well as professional archaeologists. And many of us, in turn, frequently visited him. His beautiful vernacular house in Ventnor Place, Sheffield, offered hospitality to many Czech and Slovak students, turning it into a small homeland in a beautiful part of the city. His vivid and agile mode of life, love of good food and wine, as well as his social empathy attracted colleagues and friends. All of his friends were shocked and deeply moved to hear that Marek passed away at the relatively young age of 59. Czech archaeologists have lost a colleague, advocate and friend who will be sorely missed.

### Main works of Professor Marek Zvelebil

- 1981: *From Forager to Farmer in the Boreal Zone*. Vol. 1–2. Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, International Series, 115.
- 1986 (editor, contributor): *Hunters in Transition. Mesolithic Societies of Temperate Eurasia and their Transition to Farming*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 1991 (co-editor with Helen Bush, contributor): *Health in Past Societies. Biocultural Interpretations of Human Skeletal Remains in Archaeological Contexts*. Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, International Series, 567.
- 1994: *Plant Use in the Mesolithic and its Significance for the Transition to Farming in Europe*. *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 60, 35–74.
- 1997 (co-editor with A. van Gijn, contributor): *Ideology and Social Structure of Stone Age Communities in Europe*. *Analecta Praehistorica Leidensia* 29.
- 1998 (co-editor with D. R. Dennell and L. Domanska): *Harvesting the Sea, Farming the Forest: The Emergence of Neolithic Societies in the Baltic Region and Adjacent Areas*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- 2001 (co-editor with K. Fewster): *Ethnoarchaeology of Hunter-Gatherers*. Conference held in Sheffield in 1999. BAR Oxford.
- 2004 (co-editor with Alena Lukes): *LBK Dialogues*. British Archaeological Reports, International Series 1304.
- 2008 (with Alena Lukes and Paul Pettit): *Biological and Cultural Identity of the First Farmers: Introduction to the Vedrovice Bioarchaeology Project*, *Anthropologie* 46/2 (Brno). Co-editor of Vedrovice bioarchaeological studies.
- 2009 (co-editor with Peter Jordan, contributor): *Ceramics before farming: the dispersal of pottery among prehistoric Eurasian hunter-gatherers*. Publications of the Institute of Archaeology, University College London.