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## Marek Zvelebil and the Identity of Archaeology

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The life and professional career of Marek Zvelebil (1952–2011) unexpectedly came to an end in Sheffield one year ago. Our journal commented on this sad event immediately in the form of an obituary. We made mention of Marek Zvelebil's important research advances (Beneš, Kuna 2011) as well as certain key events in his life. The scientific impact of his well-known conceptualisation of the agricultural frontier in the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition was also highlighted in another leading Czech archaeological journal (Končelová, Květina 2011), where the authors described the fundamental concepts and professional background in his main books and edited volumes. There is no doubt that the concept of agricultural frontiers at the Mesolithic – Neolithic transition, formulated by Marek and colleagues in 1986 (Zvelebil, Ed. 1986), fundamentally influenced the insights of a number of archaeologists throughout the world. Another challenging topic was the study and explanation of Mesolithic social formations themselves (e.g. Zvelebil et al. 1998; many others). Similar stimulating suggestions can be traced in Marek's research on the study of language, nationalism, culture and, not surprisingly, the topic of food and health (Figure 1). His professional engagement was unusually vigorous. Where did such a wide scope of interests come from? The answer should be seen of course in his personality and professional identity, which was undoubtedly connected with his native country, town, family and education.

Marek grew up in the Czech capital city of Prague, in the Dejvice quarter – a part of the city where many interesting families and persons lived (and still live). His father, the well-known linguist Kamil Zvelebil and his mother, the geneticist Nina Zvelebilová, together with his Russian ancestors, formed him substantially. Marek frequently recounted that his grandmother originated from the old North Russian nobility, never spoke Czech, but decisively commented in Russian on Marek's teenage friends with their subsidised “free” behaviour. Schools, friends, girls, any amount of inspiring people – all formed the basis of his personal identity and later fixed his memory permanently on the sweet and vivid sixties of Czechoslovakia as the best times in his life which would never return again. The dark experience

of the Soviet occupation after “the Prague spring” in the country in 1968 and the subsequent years in exile with his family in the USA and later in the Netherlands dramatically filled out his adolescence, but also gave him a high level of multicultural sensitivity and social empathy. He ended his “gymnasia” secondary studies in Oxford (St. Clare's Hall) and, though he took Dutch citizenship, Marek continued his education in the UK at the vivid and progressive University of Sheffield and later at Cambridge, where he undertook his doctoral research under the supervision of Grahame Clark.



**Figure 1.** Marek Zvelebil in Staré Sedlo, Czech Republic (Photo by I. Kořánová 2010).

He deeply loved England with its specific culture, tradition and countryside; however, his heart remained in his lost homeland of Czechoslovakia. Marek never agreed with the dissolution of Czechoslovakia into a “Czech Republic” and a “Slovakia” after the “Velvet” revolution, despite the arguments of his Czech friends that a friendly separation and independence of Slovakia could stimulate new levels of Czech – Slovak relations.

I (Jaromír Beneš) contacted Marek for the first time in 1988, being encouraged by my school supervisor Slavomil Vencel, during my first trip to Sheffield. Marek introduced me to departmental issues and took me to such events as the intellectually and socially fruitful lunchtimes in the Springfield Tavern on Broomspring Lane close to the old department building.

Another inspiration should be also mentioned. During his university studies, Marek frequently travelled in the democratic part of Europe. He discovered the Montagne Noir region in Southern France on a walking trip. His parents were looking to establish a “home” for the family and he suggested they look there. They then discovered the beautiful village of Cabrespine and fell in love with it. A soft spot in favour of this part of France was manifested in regular summer holidays, when Marek studied the landscape, the wine, the people and the good food with great enthusiasm. When Jaromír Beneš visited him for the first time in Cabrespine in 1995, he was amazed at his depth of knowledge of the

local prehistory, the people and the language of this part of Europe. After retirement, his parents settled permanently in Cabrespine and his father Kamil Zvelebil supported the local people in their efforts to keep their knowledge of the Occitan language developing, as did Marek (Figure 2).

The restoration of democracy after 1989 in his native country and in other Central European countries enabled Marek to develop a new phase of relationships, not only with local archaeologists, but also with old and new friends. Apart from archaeological projects, (the “Ancient Landscape Reconstruction in Northern Bohemia”, the “Vedrovice” project, the “Schwarzenberg lake” project) undertaken with the Institute of Archaeology, Academy of Sciences, Prague or with the Moravian Museum in Brno, he started teaching at several Czech universities (Brno, Plzeň and České Budějovice). In 2009, Marek Zvelebil was acclaimed as doctor honoris causa at the University of West Bohemia, Plzeň. He was an untiring builder of strong and productive relations between Sheffield and countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Marek planned to retire in the Czech Republic. He bought a lovely vernacular house in North Bohemia, in the village of Staré Sedlo, where the family had a summer cottage before the Soviet invasion and where he still had old friends.

Marek’s capacity for all kinds of diversity and interest regarding the local traits of various European regions is substantially reflected by the scope of his books and articles. His interests in the Baltic region, Finland and Russia are generally known and add another dimension to his personality. All these elements influenced his approach to ethnicity, individual agency and collective identity.

In the following few paragraphs, we shall comment on a number of the perhaps less well-known concepts of Marek’s archaeological thinking, in particular those connected with Central Europe. We focus particularly on his thoughts on landscape archaeology, the personal biographies of individuals in prehistory and finally his approach to archaeological identity.

### Landscape and landscape archaeology

At the beginning of the 1990s, after the fall of the totalitarian regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, Marek (with Martin Kuna and Jaromír Beneš) initiated a large research field programme (financed by the British Academy) entitled “Ancient landscape reconstruction in Northern Bohemia”. There were several reasons for setting up such a project at that time. The Communist regime had fallen and the social and political climate was one of hope, optimism and a desire to establish new links, or to develop old ones with Western Europe, these having been tenuously maintained despite the official disapproval of the Communist government of the previous 40 years. From the British side, the focus of interest was on the application of landscape archaeology to the archaeological record in Central Europe, on the development of the cultural landscape, on the investigation of



**Figure 2.** Marek Zvelebil with his parents Nina Zvelebilová and Kamil Zvelebil in Cabrespine, Southern France (Photo I. Kořánová, 2007).

the Mesolithic – Neolithic transition in Bohemia, and on the potential contribution that landscape archaeology can make to the reconstruction of landscapes destroyed by modern mining activity. From the Czech side, interest focused on the enrichment of settlement archaeology, already well developed in Czechoslovakia, by cross-fertilisation with approaches current in Western Europe, on the development of field survey and other techniques for recording of spatial data and on the implementation of palaeoecological research (Zvelebil et al. 1993).

The project was designed as a set of various survey methods, field techniques and natural science-based approaches. For example, a series of lowland pollen cores were taken for the first time specifically engaging with archaeological problems and questions. Environmental studies were combined with an integral holistic approach in landscape interpretation, resulting in the development of the concept of the “historical interactive landscape”, describing environmental and social landscape dynamics as well as the typical character of the Czech landscape (Beneš, Zvelebil 1999). Thanks to Marek’s input, we characterized the typical ordering of the Czech enculturated landscape: “It is our view that the Czech idea of the structure of the rural landscape is a rather feminine, enclosing notion. As a simple abstraction, it consists of the cultivated core around the settlement, enclosed by woodland and wilderness. The role of the forest in this picture, although alien, is not necessarily threatening: rather it provides a reassuring boundary to the cultured social world, a background of otherness, and a temporary haven from social control” (Zvelebil, Beneš 1997, 28–29).

It should be noted that not every Czech archaeologist at that time understood him fully and a number of them simply rejected his “British” and “alien” approach. His anthropological archaeology, which is now more accepted than twenty years ago in Central Europe, seemed to be too general, speculative, non-artifactual, alien and not sufficiently respecting the cultural- historical mainstream of the majority of Czech professional archaeologists. On the other hand, his approach was followed by a minority from the young generation, particularly in the perception of landscape as a socially interactive phenomenon and later in the area of archaeogenetics.

### Identity and personal biographies in prehistory

The second extremely important research activity of Marek Zvelebil over the last decade was connected with Moravia, an area in the Czech Republic. Together with his colleagues, he developed the Vedrovice Project (Lukes et al. 2008), fundamentally reflecting the increasing influence of archaeogenetics in archaeology. The sources of this interest should be traced back to the chapters of several edited volumes of the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, University of Cambridge. In his chapter “Who were we 6000 Years ago?”, Marek answered himself: “So it cannot be assumed that language, ethnicity, material culture

and gene pool will co-vary in the past, and we have no clear idea how such co-variation might work. Gene exchange, though not unrelated, is different from linguistic and cultural exchange. So there are at least three different identities: genetic, linguistic and cultural – and we are all a mix of all of these” (Zvelebil 2004, 42).

The Vedrovice project can be seen as the central focus of Marek Zvelebil’s professional career in this direction. One of the largest Linienbandkeramik (LBK) cemeteries in Central Europe was of course a stimulus for many kinds of bioarchaeological analyses and interpretations particularly concerning the human gene pool origins, the local and long-distance links of the buried individuals, their social ranking related to their biological and artefactual contexts, and many others. Marek and his colleagues founded a comprehensive international collaborative research programme focused on the human skeletal remains recovered there (see the paper on contextualization in this issue, by Divišová 2012), with the aim of establishing a comprehensive and holistic bioarchaeological research programme.

On the other hand, it should also be emphasised that the logistics of the Vedrovice project were somewhat complicated by a number of inconveniences, in particular during the initiation of the research project. Certain local researchers hesitated to make anthropological material available for sampling and study but, thanks to Marek’s hard work and diplomacy, all of the obstacles were overcome and



**Figure 3.** Marek Zvelebil in the archaeological landscape of South Bohemia, the area of the former Schwarzenberg lake (Photo M. Lillie 2010).

subsequent researchers have since benefited from the efforts of the Vedrovice project organisers.

One of the main results of the Vedrovice bio-archaeological project is undoubtedly the assignation of individual biographies to buried individuals within the framework of the current knowledge of the Neolithisation process in Central Europe. Marek Zvelebil and Paul Pettitt wrote, for example, of Individual 102/81: “This female died as a mature individual aged 40–45 between 5300–5040 BC. Despite her relatively advanced age, she led a healthy life: no pathology was recorded on the postcranial skeleton. She was born in an area to the north or north-west of Vedrovice, in the uplands of the Bohemian Massif, where older regions of geology, granites or gneiss, generate a specific strontium signature. She might have joined the Vedrovice community in young adulthood, coming either from the last hunter-gatherer communities living in the uplands of that area, or from the first farming settlements that were just becoming established in eastern Bohemia. A double perforated *Spondylus* pendant was placed around her waist or hip, and her head was covered with red ochre. The lack of ceramics, together with a health condition free of farming dietary stressors is thought-provoking: was she born a hunter-gatherer, turned farmer upon joining the Vedrovice community, with her liminal identity symbolised by the exclusion of ceramics: the most standard in the range of grave goods typical for Vedrovice females?” (Zvelebil, Pettitt 2008, 210).

Such an approach could be viewed as slightly heretical from the hard science perspective due to the juxtaposition of various fixed scientific arguments, but in fact, this form of discourse provides archaeology with its explanatory power. Marek Zvelebil and his colleagues have defined new frontiers of archaeology, pinpointed by hard scientific facts originating from a combination of methodologies rooted in the natural sciences and “softer”, hermeneutic modes of thought. Such an integrating approach is fruitful: we can at any time in the future remove a hermeneutic interpretation from the scientific skeleton, but the scientific (factual) core will still remain.

### The identity of archaeology

It is almost impossible to indicate the full extent of Marek Zvelebil’s professional interests in this short editorial paper. The anthropological archaeology of the British tradition, where Marek was intellectually anchored, is still not common in Central Europe. The most important benefit stemming from his activity in Central Europe, and in the Czech Republic in particular, is the enduring transmission of a concept of archaeology which combined bioarchaeological analysis and a social explanation. Bioarchaeology in particular, was a crucial approach for Marek, which fundamentally enriched research in the present, and which will be, with the highest probability, a leading methodological approach in the near and distant future. Marek Zvelebil took part in a silent revolution in archaeology when he strengthened the role of biological methods, particularly genetics. He

revealed that archaeologists need a deeper understanding of such disciplines, because without this knowledge we cannot obtain a deeper understanding of (pre)history. In other words, Marek contributed to archaeology by extending our discipline within the area of biology. Such an extension has resulted in major changes in the identity of archaeology, which today incorporates artefactual, contextual and a new biological prehistory of human beings.

Although Marek Zvelebil’s life ended too early, he had already finished a number of extremely important activities, starting with the education of his students and ending with studies on the highest academic level. A testament to Marek’s engagement with his students and his enthusiasm for field archaeology, lies in the observation that despite the fact that illness had already begun to take its toll, Marek was actively engaged in fieldwork up until the end. In 2010 he was working at Lake Švarcenberk undertaking fieldwalking and woodland survey (Figure 3) with Malcolm Lillie and Rob Smith, who were investigating the possibilities for undertaking in situ studies of the waterlogged environments around the lake margins. Only two weeks prior his death we were discussing the next stage of fieldwork at Švarcenberk. In addition, during the 2010 field season Marek was constantly ensuring that the Erasmus students from Sheffield, who were working in the waterlogged areas on the south side of Lake Švarcenberk, were being given every opportunity to experience the archaeology and culture of the Czech Republic. The students were quickly caught up in Marek’s enthusiasm and also with the experience of meeting and working with new colleagues; for young aspiring archaeologists the opportunity to undertake this work was clearly the sort of memory that would stay with them and influence them throughout their careers. Marek Zvelebil was an inspirational individual who inconspicuously contributed to changes in archaeology by helping to create an integrated, and richly structured science with a new identity. In this sense, Marek was the true founding figure of the IANSa Journal.

### Note and acknowledgements

The list of Marek Zvelebil’s publications is not finished. Two articles have been accepted by the *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 2012. The Cambridge University Press and colleagues in Sheffield are preparing Marek Zvelebil’s edited volume “A Social History of the Mesolithic”. We would like to thank John Chapman, John Moreland and Marketa Zvelebil for the text revisions and comments.

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