The Great Moravian territory of Nitra. Cultural manifestations, territorial scope and the ethnic and social-political identity of its population

Tomáš König

Mgr. Tomáš König, PhD.
Comenius University in Bratislava
Faculty of Arts
Department of Archaeology
Gondova 2
814 99 Bratislava
Slovakia
e-mail: tomas.konig@uniba.sk

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The main objective of the article is to determine the territorial scope of the Great Moravian territory of Nitra based on an analysis of archaeological sources. Specific cultural manifestations identified in the focal area of the Danube lowland delimit the studied territory from the settlement of adjacent regions of Slovakia and from the central settled territory in the Morava River basin. An interpretation of the results, supported by a comparison with written sources and linguistic data a new view of the social-political identity of the Nitra population.

Key words: Great Moravia, territory of Nitra, inhumation rite, Christianisation, social-political identity

The territory of Nitra as a distinct administrative unit of the Great Moravian Empire is a widely accepted historical phenomenon. Based primarily on information from written sources, it has become the subject of further research. Although the development of archaeological research over the past century produced a relatively large number of new sources, they have not been widely utilised thus far to address basic questions such as the territorial scope, the particularities of cultural manifestations or the ethnic and social-political identity of its population.

Theoretical and terminological foundation

Due to the inconsistent language of period sources and the specific reality of conditions at the time, descriptions and definitions created using modern means of expression require repeated efforts to find a path toward understanding the original terms and consequently toward an explanation comprehensible to people today. Three of them are key for the chosen questions in this case: *ethnos* (people, ethnicity), *gens* (tribe) and *regnum* (administered territory, state).

In agreement with the definition by C. F. Keyes, an ethnic group can be regarded as a human community which, regardless of actual genetic ties, derives its origin from a common ancestor or ancestors.[1] Linguistic uniformity in this case is often an encouraging albeit not clearly mandatory phenomenon. Based on the concept originally developed by R. Wenskus,

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[1] KEYES, C. F. Towards a New Formulation of the Concept of Ethnic Group. In: *Ethnicity*, vol. 3, 1976.

D. Třeštík[2] identified the term *gens* as a population that, forming a separate social unit, was the bearer of independent political power.[3] Early medieval *gens* was inextricably linked to paganism, always had its own name and inhabited bounded territories to which it had ancestral claims.[4] All of the mentioned attributes of *gens* can simultaneously be regarded as factors which, in the presence of additional favourable conditions, could lead to the emergence of a new ethnic group.

The question of the proper definition of Great Moravia as a political unit is still a subject of discussion.[5] Although there are reservations about labelling Great Moravia as an early state[6], it differed in one basic trait from early medieval *gens*. Great Moravia was a political unit governed by a Christian ruler.[7] Christianity, as an ideology rejecting pagan principles, brought universalism to the spiritual world of the central European Slavs.[8] As it is also described in *Žitije Mefodija* (*The Life of Methodius*), a period written source of domestic origin, the Christian ruler was no longer bound by the borders that demarcated the living space of the early medieval *gens*.[9] This opened a path to expansion, and under his rule he could also integrate other populations. The unification of the diverse population under a single crown later led to the emergence of a *political nation*.[10]

Written sources

Despite the fact that the name 'territory of Nitra' does not appear in written sources, several brief mentions provide information on the existence and character of this specific territory forming part of Great Moravia. These references can be thematically divided into three categories.

The first contains references describing the expansion of the Moravian prince to the east of Moravia. The treatise *Conversio Bagoariorum et Carantanorum* is the only written source to capture the event leading to the expulsion of Prince Pribina from the location called *Nitrava* by Moravian Prince Mojmir.[11] Nevertheless, exactly whom Pribina ruled and whether (as

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[2] TŘEŠTÍK, D. *Počátky Přemyslovců. Vstup* Čechů *do dějin (530-935)*. Praha, 1997, pp. 59-61; TŘEŠTÍK, D. *Vznik Velké Moravy. Moravané, Čechové a střední Evropa v letech 791-871*. Praha, 2001, p. 134.

[3] In a number of his works, D. Třeštík placed early medieval *gens* on the same level as the social-political and ethnic identity of its members. See TŘEŠTÍK, 1997, ref. 2, pp. 59-60 and TŘEŠTÍK, 2001, ref. 2, pp. 131-132, 134. However, based on the example of Great Moravia, he later took a slightly different view of ethnicity among the Slavs, and he began to carefully separate the political level. E.g. TŘEŠTÍK, D. *Mýty kmene* Čechů *(7.-10. století). Tři studie ke „starým pověstem českým"*. Praha, 2003, p. 53. J. Steinhübel understands *gentes* in the Slavic environment in a similar manner. See STEINHÜBEL, J. Slovanské *„gentes"* a ich vladykovia, kniežatá a kagani od sťahovania národov po Svätopluka. In: *Slovenské dejiny v dejinách Európy. Vybrané kapitoly*. Dušan Kováč et al. (eds.). Bratislava, 2015, p. 262.

[4] TŘEŠTÍK, 1997, ref. 2, pp. 59-60 and TŘEŠTÍK, 2001, ref. 2, pp. 129-130, 134.

[5] MACHÁČEK, J. O Velké Moravě, archeologii raného středověku i o nás samých. In: *Archeologické rozhledy*, vol. 67, No. 3, 2015; ŠTEFAN, I. Mocní náčelníci od řeky Moravy? Poznámky ke struktuře raných států. In: *Archeologické rozhledy*, vol. 66, No. 1, 2014.

[6] MACHÁČEK, J. „Velkomoravský stát" – kontroverze středoevropské medievistiky. *Archeologické rozhledy*, vol. 64, No. 4, 2012, p. 778; MACHÁČEK, ref. 5, pp. 465, 486.

[7] TŘEŠTÍK, 2001, ref. 2, p. 130.

[8] PLETERSKI, A. Slované a Vlaši u bran Itálie v souvislosti s etnogenezí Slovanů. In: *Archeologické rozhledy*, vol. 65, No. 3, 2013, p. 634.

[9] MMFH II, pp. 133-134, Chapter 10.

[10] TŘEŠTÍK, D. Král Muž. Slovanský etnogonický mýtus v Čechách 9.-10. století. In: *Nový Mars Moravicus aneb Sborník příspěvků, jež věnovali Prof. Dr. Josefu Válkovi jeho žáci a přátelé k sedmdesátinám*. Bronislav Chocholáč – Libor Jan – Tomáš Knoz (eds.). Brno, 1999, pp. 72-73.

[11] MMFH III, pp. 271-273, Chapter 10-11.

was originally also the case with Mojmír) his reign was connected with the existence of a distinct *gens* is not clarified in this source.[12] The authors of a grievance letter from the Bavarian bishops[13] linked the area of jurisdiction of Nitra Bishop Wiching[14] to a territory that Great Moravian ruler Svatopluk annexed to his empire. Albeit likewise mistakenly, the dean of the Prague Chapter, Cosmas, also attributed the subjugation of the territory stretching all the way to the Hron River to Svatopluk.[15] In any case, the authors of these two documents regarded the territory of Nitra as having been additionally annexed by Great Moravia. According to the *Anonymi Bele regis notarii Gesta Hungarorum* (*The Deeds of the Hungarians*), the space vertically demarcated by the Váh and Hron rivers was to have been seized by Bohemian prince[16], though they probably meant Moravian prince.[17]

The second category of references includes those that provide direct or indirect information on the independent rule of one part of Great Moravian territory. The *regnum Zuentibaldi* mentioned in *Annales Fuldenses*[18] is already traditionally associated with the territory of Nitra.[19] The existence of this territory is also indirectly suggested in a document from Pope John VIII, which lists *sancta ecclesia Nitriensis* as the area of jurisdiction of Bishop Wiching.[20] It is difficult to imagine that the borders of this newly established diocese were not the same as the administrative borders of Great Moravian Nitra.

Although the two references in the third category are not unambiguously interpreted, both suggest a certain dissimilarity in the population ruled by the Great Moravian ruler. Among *gentes* occupying the land north of the Danube recorded in the *Geographus Bavarus* two similar names are mentioned – *Marharii* and *Merehani*.[21] According to D. Třeštík, the Nitra population could fall under the term *Merehani*.[22] The grievance letter from the Bavarian bishops emphasises the fact that the population of the Nitra diocese headed by Bishop Wiching had only recently been Christianised.[23] Considering that he took office in 880, this information could hardly

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[12] On the fact that this wasn't necessarily always the case, see АЛИМОВ, Д. В поисках «племени»: посавское и нитранское Княжества в контексте этнополитической ситуации в славянском мире в ix веке. In: Исторический Формат, No. 4, 2015; TŘEŠTÍK, 2001, ref. 2, p. 96; WOLFRAM, H. Liudewit und Priwina (ein institutioneller Vergleich). In: *Interaktionen der mitteleuropäischen Slawen und anderen Ethnika im 6. –10. Jahrhundert. Symposium, Nové Vozokany, 3.-7. Oktober 1983*. Nitra, 1984, p. 292.

[13] MMFH III, p. 202.

[14] JAN, L. Stará Morava mezi Východem a Západem. In: *Svatý Prokop, Čechy a střední Evropa*. Petr Sommer (ed.). Praha, 2006, p. 254.

[15] MMFH I, p. 209, Chapter I/14.

[16] RADY, M. – VESZPRÉMY, L. Gesta Hungarorum – The Deeds of the Hungarians. In: *Anonymus and Master Roger. Central European medieval texts, vol. 5*. János M. Bak – Urszula Borkowska – Giles Constable – Gerhard Jaritz – Gábor Klaniczay (eds.). Budapest – New York, 2010, pp. 76-77, Chapter 35.

[17] KÖNIG, T. Nitriansky Slovania a zánik Veľkej Moravy. In: *Od Bachórza do Światowida ze Zbrucza. Tworzenie się słowiańskiej Europy w ujęciu źródłoznawczym. Księga jubileuszowa Profesora Michała Parczewskiego*. Barbara Chudzińska – Michał Wojenka – Marcin Wołoszyn (eds.). Kraków – Rzeszów, 2016, p. 182.

[18] MMFH I, p. 103, r. 869.

[19] TŘEŠTÍK, 2001, ref. 2, pp. 116, 131-135.

[20] MMFH III, pp. 169-170.

[21] MMFH III, p. 249.

[22] TŘEŠTÍK, 2001, ref. 2, pp. 132-134. It should be noted that there are also entirely different interpretations of this similarity. E.g. GIESLER, J. *Der Ostalpenraum vom 8. bis 11. Jahrhundert. Studien zu archäologischen und schriftlichen Zeugnissen. Teil 2: Historische Interpretation*. Rahden, 1997, pp. 10-11; RATKOŠ, P. Územný vývoj Veľkej Moravy (fikcie a skutočnosť). In: *Historický časopis*, vol. 33, No. 2, 1985, pp. 213-214.

[23] MMFH III, p. 202.

have applied to Great Moravia as a whole. In fact, it is reasonable to assume that there were considerable differences in the Christianisation of the empire's territory.

The current state of research in Slovakia

Issues related to the territory of Nitra had a particular resonance in domestic professional historical writings. Scholars were also interested in its territorial scope, especially in the period prior to its subjugation by the Great Moravian Empire. The territorial scope of Nitra following its annexation was no longer of any special research interest.

Various opinions on this issue were published following the Second World War, and both the conclusions and the sources that were interpreted changed. Agreement remained only on the western and southern borders of the territory of Nitra, which were regarded by all scholars as the ridge of the Little and White Carpathians and the Danube River.

Working with Cosmas's *Chronica Boemorum*, J. Dekan set the Hron River as the eastern border of the territory of Nitra.[24] In the absence of written sources, Dekan refrained from defining the northern border. Based on the assumption that Bulgaria shared a border with Great Moravia and referring first to *Boc þe man Orosius nemned*[25], P. Ratkoš localised the eastern border of the Great Moravian Empire in the eastern part of the Carpathian Basin.[26] He later documented the local presence of Great Moravia with finds of hooked-spurs.[27] However, Ratkoš thought that Prince Pribina could already have moved into the Tisza region, as is suggested by his contacts in Bulgaria.[28] Ratkoš defined the northern border of Great Moravia on the basis of the existence of a natural barrier – the Western Carpathians.[29]

Unlike the aforementioned authors, R. Marsina put the territorial scope of the territory of Nitra, more precisely (identical to the scope of the territory) of the Great Moravian Nitra Diocese, into direct context with a later historical phenomenon – the Esztergom Archdiocese.[30] However, he did not support the definition of the borders of Great Moravian Nitra with evidence.[31]

Somewhat surprisingly, J. Steinhübel demarcated the territorial scope of Pribina's Nitra solely on the basis of archaeological finds.[32] Accepting their dating to the pre-Great Moravian horizon from literature, Steinhübel delimited the territory ruled by Pribina by early medieval hillforts. The eastern border was localised in this manner by hillforts at Detva and Spišské Tomášovce, the northern border in Vyšný Kubín. Nevertheless, the author did not explain the close ties between specific hillforts and the Nitra political-power environment.

Cultural manifestations

It is essentially possible to state that the potential of available written sources for addressing the issue have already been exhausted. On the other hand, archaeological sources have not

[24] DEKAN, J. T. Príspevok k otázke politických hraníc Veľkej Moravy. In: *Historica Slovaca 5 – Eisnerov sborník*. Jan Filip – Branislav Varsik – Vojtech Budinský-Krička (eds.). Bratislava, 1947, pp. 203-204.

[25] MMFH III, p. 298.

[26] RATKOŠ, P. K otázke hranice Veľkej Moravy a Bulharska. In: *Historický časopis*, vol. 3, No. 2, 1955, pp. 213-214.

[27] RATKOŠ, ref. 22, p. 212.

[28] RATKOŠ, ref. 22, p. 206.

[29] RATKOŠ, P. *Slovensko v dobe veľkomoravskej*. Košice, 1988, p. 53.

[30] MARSINA, R. Nitrianske biskupstvo a jeho biskupi od 9. do polovice 13. storočia. In: *Historický časopis*, vol. 41, No. 5-6, 1993, p. 535.

[31] MARSINA, ref. 30, p. 531.

[32] STEINHÜBEL, J. *Nitrianske kniežatstvo. Počiatky stredovekého Slovenska*. Bratislava, 2004, p. 69.

been fully utilised thus far. One of the ways to identify a distinct political-power environment is to work under the assumption that its population differed from others not only by its social cohesion but also by its cultural manifestation. On the basis of such reasoning, I. Štefan identified the centre of Great Moravian Moravia of the 9th to the beginning of the 10th century as the space in which evidence of inhumation burials is found.[33] A spatial analysis of the occurrence of this type of cemetery in Slovakia could therefore serve at least as one indication of the territorial borders of the territory of Nitra.

The beginnings of burials at flat inhumation cemeteries of the Great Moravian type as a new cultural manifestation is recorded roughly simultaneously from the beginning of the 9th century in Moravia and in southwest Slovakia.[34] As the inventory of Slovak find sites compiled by M.
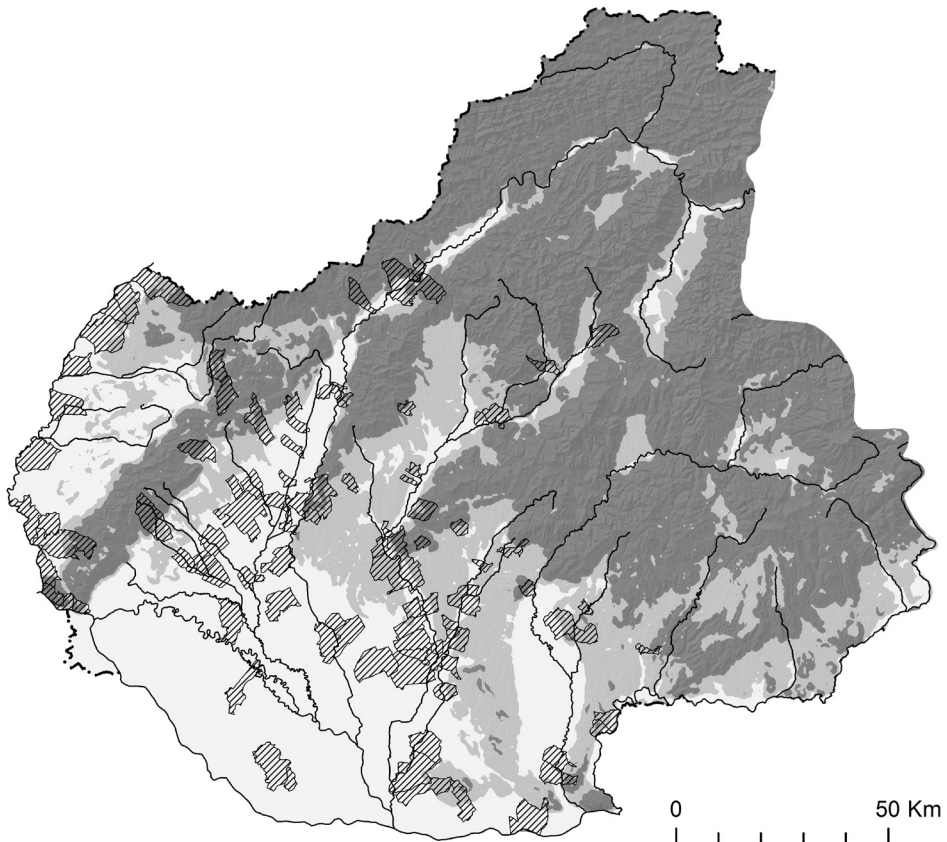

Fig. 1: Flat inhumation cemeteries of the Great Moravian type in southwest Slovakia. Cadastral territories with evidence of their presence are hatched.

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[33] ŠTEFAN, I. Great Moravia, Statehood and Archaeology. The 'Decline and Fall' of One Early Medieval Polity. In: *Frühgeschichtliche Zentralorte in Mitteleuropa*. Jiří Macháček – Šimon Ungerman (eds.). Bonn, 2011, pp. 336.
[34] UNGERMAN, Š. Tzv. předköttlašský horizont a počátky velkomoravského kostrového pohřbívání. In: *Archaeologia historica*, vol. 31, 2006.

Hanuliak indicates, with the exception of nine graves uncovered in an isolated enclave in Spiš, burials at these cemeteries is recorded only in southwest Slovakia.[35] During the compilation of the database of cemeteries used in this work, only those from M. Hanuliak's inventory dating to period A, i.e. the Great Moravian horizon, were chosen.[36] In an effort to work only with data with a higher testimonial value, isolated graves, individuals thrown into settlement features, cemeteries with graves without inventory, cemeteries at which the only inventory was a knife and finds designated as problematic were not included. For the purpose of a clear cartographic depiction of the occurrence of this type of site, only the cadastres of towns or villages where they were recorded were illustrated on the map, not the individual sites.

An analysis of the occurrence of flat inhumation cemeteries in Slovakia showed that 157 are recorded to date. Apparently reflecting a geomorphologically distinct landscape, with the Little Carpathians clearly serving as a natural barrier, the distribution of these cemeteries indicates (Fig. 1) that the Slovak part of the Morava River region and the Bratislava Gate were part of the Moravian settled territory. The Bratislava Gate was geographically distinguished from the other parts of the Danube lowland primarily by the southern and relatively elevated part of Trnava Hills, which was a less popular location for the establishment of settlements during the entire Early Middle Ages.[37] The approximate centre of the rest of the territory is Nitra. Not counting Žitný ostrov, this includes the entire Danube lowland and stretching into the Trenčín and Upper Nitra basins.

In addition to the distinct burial rite, the defined geographic area of southwest Slovakia has also revealed another specific cultural manifestation – the presence of 'castle towns', a new type of settlement linked today in Moravia to the emergence of Great Moravian culture.[38] Castle towns are characterised by the following description. The site chosen for the establishment of a castle town is strategic from the perspective of the possibility of the settlement of a greater number of people, the administration of the specific territory or the course of routes – not for defensive purposes. Castle towns were founded on lowlands or, more precisely, on flat land in their lowest parts. Each castle town was dominated by a vast hillfort with an acropolis fortified with a wood and earth rampart, often with a fortified annexe. The settled area, already without fortifications and commonly referred to as a 'suburb', was located just outside the fortified parts of the hillfort.[39]

Based on the listed criteria and not including the Slovak parts of the Morava River region and the Bratislava Gate, two sites in Slovakia can be reliably identified as castle towns – Nitra[40]

[35] HANULIAK, M. *Veľkomoravské pohrebiská. Pochovávanie v 9.-10. storočí na území Slovenska*. Nitra, 2004, pp. 255-280.
[36] HANULIAK, ref. 35, pp. 30-31.
[37] KÖNIG, T. *Vývoj včasnostredovekého osídlenia dolného toku Váhu. Dizertačná práca – rukopis*. Bratislava, 2007, Annex 5.
[38] FUSEK, G. Die Nebenareale in der Struktur der großmährischen Burgstadt von Nitra. In: *Burg – Vorburg – Suburbium. Zur Problematik der Nebenareale frühmittelalterlicher Zentren. Internationale Tagungen in Mikulčice 7*. Ivana Boháčová – Lumír Poláček (eds.). Brno, 2008, p. 276; RATKOŠ, P. Naše sídliskové útvary v latinskej terminológii 9.-12. storočia. In: *Archaeologia historica*, vol. 3, 1978, pp. 247, 249-251.
[39] FUSEK, ref. 38, p. 282.
[40] FUSEK, ref. 38.

and Pobedim[41]. And although it has not yet been extensively archaeologically investigated thus far, Majcichov could also belong on this list.[42] All three are located in the Danube lowland, two in the Váh River region and one in the Nitra River region. As is the case, for example, with the fortified annexe at Mikulčice[43] or the hillfort in Pohansko near Břeclav[44], the phenomenon of the late building of massive wood and earth ramparts is also seen at Majcichov and Pobedim, sites classified as castle towns within the territory of the assumed territory of Nitra, in the advanced stage of development of Great Moravian culture.[45] However, while the beginnings of Moravian castle towns in Mikulčice and Staré Město-Uherské Hradiště are indicated by finds of Avar bronze cast fittings[46], the concentration of which is dated at Mikulčice dominantly to the latest phase of the Late Avar period[47], they are known from the mentioned Nitra sites, albeit in very small numbers, only from Pobedim.[48] It is therefore possible to consider that their intensive development occurred only after a certain period of time later in the 9th century.

Written sources indicate the significant military and political impact that the Frankish Empire had on Great Moravia. Archaeological finds provide information on other influences. Distinct residential complexes, courts, are a specific cultural influence from the Frankish environment. These rather small settlements fortified with a simple palisade were very similar to one another. Their inner space was further divided by the palisade into three functional-spatial units.[49] The ruler and his family lived in the residential part with palace buildings. The part with a church and a cemetery served a sacred function, while the part with a larger hall building was used for formal purposes. The fortified settlement excavated in Ducové can be positively identified

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[41] BIALEKOVÁ, D. Zur Bautechnik der Befestigungsmauer des Burgwalls in Pobedim, Bez. Trenčín. In: *Frühmittelalterlicher Burgenbau in Mittel- und Osteuropa*. Joachim Henning – Alexander T. Ruttkay (eds.). Bonn, 1998; RUTTKAY, M. – HENNING, J. – FOTTOVÁ, E. – EYUB, E. – MILO, P. – TIRPÁK, J. Archeologický výskum a geofyzikálna prospekcia na včasnostredovekých hradiskách v Majcichove a v Pobedime. In: *Ve službách archeologie VII*. Vladimír Hašek – Rostislav Nekuda – Matej Ruttkay (eds.). Brno – Nitra, 2006, pp. 105-109; VENDTOVÁ, V. Slovanské osídlenie Pobedima a okolia. In: *Slovenská archeológia*, vol. 17, No. 1, 1969, p. 121, Fig. 2.

[42] FOTTOVÁ, E. – HENNING, J. – RUTTKAY, M. Archeologický výskum včasnostredovekého hradiska v Majcichove. In: *Bojná. Hospodárske a politické centrum Nitrianskeho kniežatstva. Druhé opravené a rozšírené vydanie*. Karol Pieta – Alexander Ruttkay – Matej Ruttkay (eds.). Nitra, 2007, p. 227; HENNING, J. – RUTTKAY, M. Frühmittelalterliche Burgwälle an der mittleren Donau im ostmitteleuropäischen Kontext: Ein deutsch-slowakisches Forschungsprojekt. In: *Frühgeschichtliche Zentralorte in Mitteleuropa*. Jiří Macháček –Šimon Ungerman (eds.). Bonn, 2011, pp. 264-266. Despite the fact that numerous artefacts connected with the social elite and Church life come from the Bojná-Valy hillfort, the site is lacking additional traits of a castle town. Their presence at this hillfort situated on hilltops is apparently related to the violent demise of Great Moravia. See KÖNIG, ref. 17, p. 186.

[43] HLADÍK, M. Severozápadná brána a opevnenie na predhradí hradiska Mikulčice-Valy. In: *Přehled výzkumů*, vol. 53, No. 2, 2012, p. 63.

[44] MACHÁČEK, J. – DRESLER, P. – RYBNÍČEK, M. Dendrochronologische Datierung der frühmittelalterlichen Agglomeration in Pohansko bei Břeclav und der sogenannte Blatnica-Mikulčice-horizont. In: *The Early Slavic Settlement in Central Europe in the light of new dating evidence*. Marek Dulinicz – Slawomir Moździoch (eds.). Wrocław, 2013, pp. 158, 161.

[45] HENNING – RUTTKAY, ref. 42, pp. 265-270.

[46] ZÁBOJNÍK, J. Zum Vorkommen von Gegenständen „awarischer" Provenienz auf den slawischen Burgwällen nördlich der Donau. In: *Frühgeschichtliche Zentralorte in Mitteleuropa*. Jiří Macháček – Šimon Ungerman (eds.). Bonn, 2011, p. 205.

[47] ZÁBOJNÍK, J. Mikulčice – awarische Stadt? In: *Die frühmittelalterliche Elite bei den Völkern des östlichen Mitteleuropas mit einem speziellen Blick auf die großmährische Problematik*. Pavel Kouřil (ed.). Brno, 2005, p. 103.

[48] VENDTOVÁ, ref. 41, p. 157, Fig. 30: 3.

[49] MACHÁČEK, J. Pohansko bei Břeclav – ein bedeutendes Zentrum Großmährens. In: *Velká Morava mezi východem a západem*. Luděk Galuška – Pavel Kouřil – Zdeněk Měřínský (eds.). Brno, 2001, pp. 279-281.

as a court from the Great Moravian period located in the territory of Nitra.[50] Uncertainty is caused only by a masonry sacred building with a semicircular apse, the location of which[51] does not speak in favour of a direct spatial relationship with a group of Great Moravian graves.[52] However, even if it is a later structure, there is no need to re-evaluate the classification of the site as a court. A wooden structure originally could have fulfilled the function of a sacred building. This situation is at least assumed, for example, at the Lower Austrian hillfort with a court in Gars-Thunau.[53] Great Moravian courts are also considered in the case of two other Nitra sites. However, while a positive dating of finds from the area surrounded by a palisade in Nitrianska Blatnica[54] to the Great Moravian period has not yet been made, in Skalka nad Váhom[55] all of the significant components enabling the interpretation of the site as a court remain undocumented.

Christianisation is a spiritual, cultural and social process that always left behind certain traces in material culture and in other manifestations of human life preserved in the form of archaeological finds. As one of the written sources indicates, compared to Moravia, Christianisation could have occurred to a lesser extent or at a later date in the territory of Nitra. For now it seems that the results of archaeological research do not contradict this information.

The direct link between the emergence of inhumation burials at flat cemeteries of the Great Moravian type and Christianisation was already challenged some time ago, and the practice is seen first and foremost as a reflection of efforts to emphasise the distinct social standing of the deceased.[56] This even applies to graves whose inventory includes military gear and vessels or remnants of meaty food. These graves say nothing concrete about the faith of the community that practiced this specific burial rite. Burials customs were not regulated over the long-term by Frankish powers in their own territory[57], and they evidently were also not controlled in Great Moravia. In contrast, one article in *Zakon sudnyj ljudem* (*Law for Judging the People*) addressed punishments for grave robbers[58] and hence even legalised the practice of depositing valuables in grave.

Unlike inhumation graves at flat cemeteries, Christian shrines clearly speak in favour of the presence of Christianity. If the dating of the rotunda in Ducové is challenged, direct archaeological evidence of the presence of Great Moravian sacred architecture is unknown

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[50] RUTTKAY, A. T. Frühmittelalterliche gesellschaftliche Eliten im Gebiet der Slowakei und ihre Sitze. In: *Die frühmittelalterliche Elite bei den Völkern des östlichen Mitteleuropas mit einem speziellen Blick auf die großmährische Problematik*. Pavel Kouřil (ed.). Brno, 2005, pp. 230-243.

[51] RUTTKAY, ref. 50, p. 232, Fig. 12.

[52] VANČO, M. Funkcie veľkomoravských kostolov vo vzťahu k pohrebiskám. In: *Bratia, ktorí menili svet – Konštantín a Metod. Príspevky z konferencie*. Branislav Panis – Matej Ruttkay – Vladimír Turčan, V. (eds.). Bratislava – Nitra, 2012, pp. 106-107.

[53] HEROLD, H. Der Schanzberg von Gars-Thunau in Niederösterreich. Eine befestigte Höhensiedlung mit Zentralortfunktion aus dem 9.-10. Jahrhundert. In: *Archäologisches Korrespondenzblatt*, vol. 38, No. 2, 2008, p. 294.

[54] RUTTKAY, ref. 50, p. 245.

[55] HANULIAK, M. Včasnostredoveká sakrálna stavba zo Skalky nad Váhom. In: *Velká Morava mezi východem a západem*. Luděk Galuška – Pavel Kouřil – Zdeněk Měřínský (eds.). Brno, 2001, p. 165.

[56] ŠTEFAN, I. Změna pohřebního ritu v raném středověku jako archeologický a kulturně-antropologický problém. In: *Archeologické rozhledy*, vol. 59, No. 4, 2007, p. 814; ŠTEFAN, ref. 5, pp. 148-149; UNGERMAN, ref. 34, pp. 362-363.

[57] EFFROS, B. *De partibus Saxoniae* and the Regulation of Mortuary Custom: A Carolingian Campaign of Christianization or the Suppression of Saxon Identity? In: *Revue Belge de Philologie et d´Histoire*, vol. 75, 1997, pp. 270, 279.

[58] MMFH IV, p. 169, no. 27; PAULINY, E. Zakon sudnyj ľudem. In: *Na písme zostalo. Dokumenty Veľkej Moravy*. Bratislava, 2012, p. 112–113, no. 27.

from the territory linked to the territory of Nitra. In the past, the dating of the sacred buildings in Nitrianska Blatnica[59] and Skalka nad Váhom[60] to the period of Great Moravia was based only on indirect evidence relying primarily on parallels observed at the court excavated in Ducové. While parts of the original masonry above the foundations of a medieval rotunda were recently identified in Nitrianska Blatnica, including preserved window[61], the church cemetery is missing graves with inventory containing Great Moravian finds.[62] The masonry church in Kostoľany pod Tribečom apparently had a wooden predecessor that could possibly have dated to the Great Moravian period.[63] However, it is not possible to reliably specify the type of settlement to which it belonged.

Therefore, it seems that the determined archaeological image of the results of the Christianisation of the territory of Nitra provides only a small amount of compelling evidence of its large scope. These are essentially limited to the level of individual artefacts, although in certain cases even direct evidence of devotional or liturgical objects either directly related to Christianity or with decoration containing Christian symbolism.[64] Apart from the masonry foundations of the sacred building excavated at the Gars-Thunau hillfort,[65] a very similar situation is also found in a Lower Austrian space north of the Danube.[66]

Ethnic identity

Although primarily the issue of the political organisation of the population living in the territory of Nitra in the period shortly before its forced subjugation by Great Moravia resonated in professional writings in the not too distant past[67], the issue connected with its ethnic identity

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[59] RUTTKAY, ref. 50, p. 245.

[60] HANULIAK, ref. 55, p. 165. On the reconstruction of the structure in Skalka nad Váhom, see BOTEK, A. *Veľkomoravské kostoly na Slovensku a odraz ich tradície* v *neskoršom období*. Bratislava, 2014, pp. 144-147.

[61] RUTTKAY, A. Najstaršie sakrálne stavby na Slovensku ako odraz christianizácie a budovania kresťanských inštitúcií v 9.-11. storočí. In: *Bratia, ktorí menili svet – Konštantín a Metod. Príspevky z konferencie*. Branislav Panis – Matej Ruttkay – Vladimír Turčan, V. (eds.). Bratislava – Nitra, 2012, p. 92.

[62] RUTTKAY, ref. 50, p. 244. The dating of the building to the 9th century is also cast into doubt by a chronometric analysis of the masonry conducted by the 14C measurement of the anthropogenic calcite of the primary mortar. See BÓNA, M. – BARTA, P. Príspevok k datovaniu vzniku rotundy sv. Juraja v Nitrianskej Blatnici. In: *Archaeologia historica*, vol. 40, No. 2, 2015, p. 687.

[63] BAXA, P. – MAŘÍKOVÁ-KUBKOVÁ, J. Die älteste Phase der Kirche St. Georg in Kostoľany pod Tríbečom. In: *Frühmittelalterliche Kirchen als archäologische und historische Quelle. Internationale Tagungen in Mikulčice 8*. Lumír Poláček – Jana Maříková-Kubková (eds.). Brno, 2010, p. 157. The most recent interpretation of the wood construction was outlined by M. Bóna. See BÓNA, M. Výsledky umelecko-historického a architektonicko-historického výskumu r. k. kostola sv. Juraja v Kostoľanoch pod Tribečom. In: *Zborník Filozofickej fakulty UK – Musaica*, vol. 28, 2014, pp. 139, 141. On the dating of the earliest (masonry) phase of the church based on the 14C dating of collected samples, see BARTA, P. – BÓNA, M. – KELEŠI, M. Chronometrický výskum murív kostola sv. Juraja v Kostoľanoch pod Tribečom. In: *Archaeologia historica*, vol. 40, No. 2, 2015.

[64] HANULIAK, M. – PIETA, K. Odraz christianizácie v hnuteľných prameňoch z 9. storočia vo východných častiach Veľkej Moravy. In: *Cyrilometodějská misie a Evropa. 1150 let od příchodu soluňských bratří na Velkou Moravu*. Pavel Kouřil (ed.). Brno, 2014.

[65] This involves the Untere Holzwiese site located in the northeast part of the hillfort, which is quite distant from the excavated area with remnants of the court (the Obere Holzwiese site).

[66] NOWOTNY, E. On the confessional situation between the Frankish Empire and Moravia in Carolingian times. Focus on archaelogical sources from Lower Austria. In: *Rome, Constantinople and Newly-Converted Europe. Archaeological and Historical Evidence. Vol. I.* Maciej Salamon – Marcin Wołoszyn – Alexander Musin – Perica Špehar (eds.). Kraków – Leipzig – Rzeszów – Warszawa, 2012.

[67] STEINHÜBEL, ref. 32, pp. 67-88; TŘEŠTÍK, 2001, ref. 2, pp. 112, 131-135.

is again beginning to appear.[68] This question was addressed in detail particularly by M. Lysý, who, however, unlike this article, worked with a different assumption that saw no difference between any early medieval ethnic group and *gens*, i.e. a political unit.[69]

The answer to the issue connected with the ethnicity of the population living in a specific territory is often sought in the results of archaeological research.[70] According to the methodology of K. Godłowski[71] and M. Parczewski[72], the identification of any archaeological culture with a specific ethnic group presumes the existence of written sources. Since no written source exists for Nitra that state a concrete ethnonym or *gens* tied specifically to this territory, searching their reflection in archaeological sources is inconsistent with the chosen method of research. However, there is one written source that makes it possible to assume that neither the population of Nitra nor even Moravia was ethnically distinct.

As modern ethnological research suggests, ethnic identity is by no means an arbitrary individual matter. The sense of belonging to a community is based primarily on common practices and representations (*habitus*) that individuals adopt unconsciously as they are being raised.[73] At the same time, this feeling creates a sense of closeness that a person typically experiences in the family environment and hence is often explained as the result of mutual biological affinity[74] and results in the creation of said collective identity.

The derivation of one's origin from a common, albeit evidently fictive, ancestor or ancestors of larger human societies, like those of individual ethnic groups, is known through written sources. They have been preserved in the form of myths – stories explaining their beginnings.[75] Myths not only explained but also helped maintain awareness of a common origin – of belonging. A myth that apparently explained the common origin of the Slavs was still alive during the existence of Great Moravia; a fragment was preserved in the *Geographus Bavarus*.[76] Hence, this awareness was also alive. Numerous scholars have repeatedly pointed this out[77], and it is even confirmed in the *Žitije Mefodija*, a document unique in the fact that it comes from the domestic environment. Although Great Moravia is referred to in this work as *моравьска область*[78], the people governed by the ruler are called Slavs (*словѣни*)[79], not Moravians. In

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[68] LYSÝ, M. *Moravania, Mojmírovci a Franská ríša. Štúdie k etnogenéze, politickým inštitúciám* a ústavnému *zriadeniu na území Slovenska vo včasnom stredoveku*. Bratislava, 2014, pp. 82-107; MARSINA, R. K problematike etnogenézy Slovákov a ich pomenovania. In: *Etnogenéza Slovákov. Kto sme* a *aké je naše meno. Archeologické, historické a jazykovedné štúdie*. Richard MARSINA – Peter MULÍK (eds.). Martin, 2009, pp. 15-16; ŠALKOVSKÝ, P. *Stredné Slovensko vo včasnom stredoveku*. Nitra, 2011, pp. 103-104.

[69] LYSÝ, ref. 68, pp. 43, 144-146.

[70] BRATHER, S. *Ethnische Interpretationen in der frühgeschichtlichen Archäologie. Geschichte, Grundlagen und Alternativen. Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde. Band 42*. Berlin – New York, 2004; JONES, S. *The Archaeology of Ethnicity. Constructing identities in the past and present*. London – New York, 1997.

[71] GODŁOWSKI, K. Spór o Słowian. In: *Pierwotne siedziby Słowian. Wybór pism*. Michał Parczewski (ed.). Kraków, 2000, pp. 350, 354.

[72] PARCZEWSKI, M. Podstawy lokalizacji pierwotnych siedzib Słowian. In: *Archeologia o początkach Słowian*. Piotr Kaczanowski – Michał Parczewski (eds.). Kraków, 2005, p. 68.

[73] BENTLEY, C. G. Ethnicity and Practice. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol.. 29, No. 1, 1987, pp. 28, 32.

[74] BENTLEY, ref. 73, p. 33.

[75] ASSMANN, J. *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization. Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge, 2011, p. 61.

[76] TŘEŠTÍK, ref. 3, pp. 51-53.

[77] E.g. PLETERSKI, ref. 8, p. 619; TŘEŠTÍK, ref. 3, p. 53.

[78] MMFH II, p. 134, Chapter 10.

[79] MMFH II, p. 124, Chapter 5.

this clearly two-step identity, 'Slavic' seems logical for the ethnic one. Therefore, despite its distinct social-political standing, the population of Great Moravia was most likely not ethnically differentiated.

Social-political identity

In addition to written sources, another source, oikonyms, were used in certain works by Slovak historians to evaluate the Nitra territory of Great Moravia. This specifically involved the types *Moravane*, *Moravci* and *Morava*[80], which represent three sites in the studied territory – Moravany nad Váhom (1348, *Marwan*), Hontianske Moravce (1135, *Morout*) and Zlaté Moravce (1113, *Morowa*).[81]

Inspired by the period interpretation of the results of archaeological excavations conducted at the hillfort in Pobedim, M. Kučera expressed the thought that these toponyms could be a remnant of the forceful annexation of the territory of Nitra by Mojmír's Moravia and evidence of the presence of foreign military units stationed throughout the conquered territory.[82] M. Marek later interpreted these oikonyms as ethnonyms.[83] While he explained the presence of Moravany nad Váhom in the same way as M. Kučera, Marek connected Zlaté and Hontianske Moravce with the need for defence against the ancient Hungarians.

P. Ratkoš provided an entirely different interpretation of these local names.[84] Based on the meaning of the words *Moravania* or *Moravci* (Moravians) in period written sources, he interpreted the roots of these oikonyms on the social level. Like L. Havlík[85], for example, Ratkoš worked under the assumption that in the time of the existence of Great Moravia these names served in general to designate the domestic elite or free population.

Putting the interpretations of historians aside, oikonyms have always been the domain of linguists. Although without providing the results of analyses, R. Krajčovič classified all of the aforementioned local names as ethnonyms.[86] For the territory of the Carpathian Basin he linked them to the activity of the population of Moravian origin, putting them into context with Great Moravian space marked by a distinct economic and military importance.[87] The sites were to have been situated near central hillforts, along key trading routes and in economically significant areas. With the exception of Moravany nad Váhom, he listed no sources used to reach his conclusions from the other sites. Hence, his findings remain purely on the speculative level.

The issue of the mentioned oikonyms is obviously more complicated than assumed some time ago by R. Krajčovič. The role of suffixes is no less important than the root of words in their interpretation.[88] Based on this, *Moravany* and *Moravce* could represent settlements whose

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[80] KRAJČOVIČ, R. Sprachwissenschaftliche Probleme des frühen Mittelalters. Die Ethnonymen Sloveni und Moravania im Karpatenbecken im 9.-12. Jh. In: *Ethnische und kulturelle Verhältnisse an der mittleren Donau vom 6. bis zum 11. Jahrhundert*. Darina Bialeková – Jozef Zábojník (eds.). Bratislava, 1996, p. 423.

[81] The year in parentheses states the first written mention and its concrete form in the period document. For Moravany nad Váhom, see CSÁKY, p. 99; Hontianske Moravce, see CDSl 1, pp. 71 (no. 74/50) and 72 (no. 74/2); Zlaté Moravce, see CDSl 1, p. 66 (no. 69/45).

[82] KUČERA, M. Veľká Morava a začiatky našich národných dejín. In: *Historický časopis*, vol. 33, No. 2, 1985, p. 184.

[83] MAREK, M. *Cudzie etniká na stredovekom Slovensku*. Martin, 2006, pp. 394-355.

[84] RATKOŠ, ref. 29, p. 32, 35.

[85] HAVLÍK, L. Svatopluk Veliký, král Moravanů a Slovanů. Brno, 1994, p. 70.

[86] KRAJČOVIČ, ref. 80, p. 423.

[87] KRAJČOVIČ, ref. 80, pp. 424, 426.

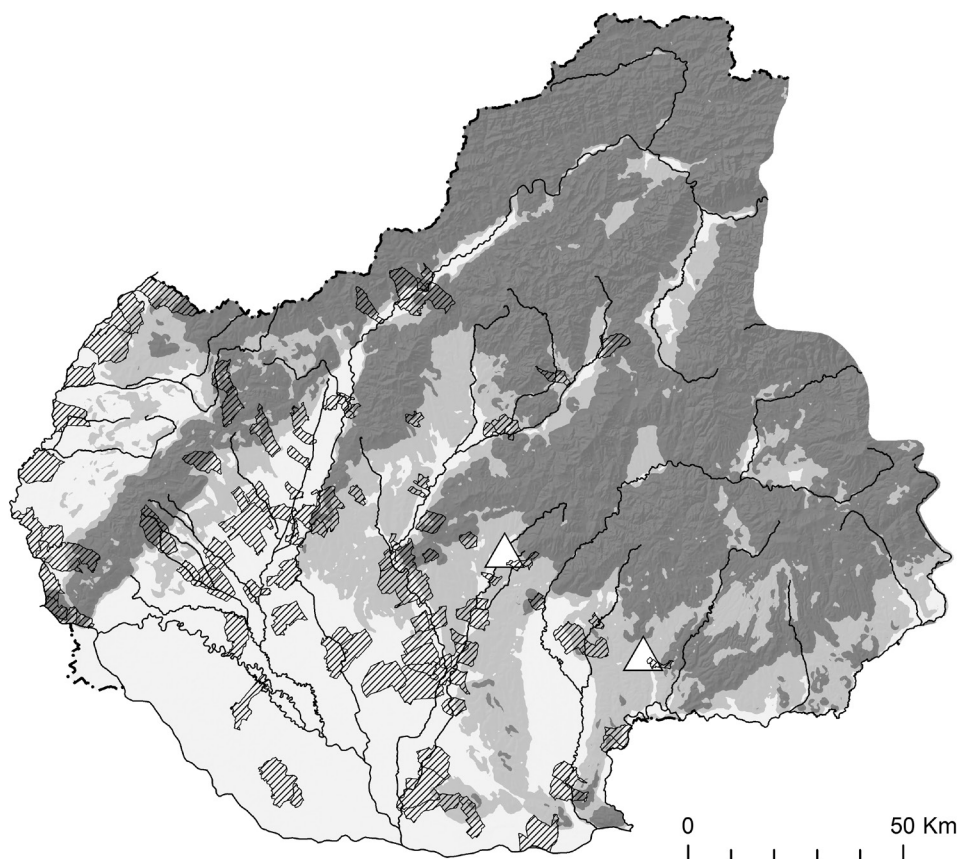[88] ŠRÁMEK, R. Úvod do obecné onomastiky. Brno, 1999, pp. 38-41.

Fig. 2: Flat inhumation cemeteries of the Great Moravian type in southwest Slovakia and local names of the Moravce type. Cadastral territories with evidence of these cemeteries are hatched, while the localisation of local names of the Moravce type are marked with white triangles.

names have distinct origins and which in fact needn't be related at all to the migration of the population.[89] In the case of *Moravany*, especially Moravany nad Váhom, it cannot be ruled out that the location was named after the waterlogged soil near which the settlement was surely founded.[90] R. Šrámek interprets the motivation behind the naming of *Moravany* in Bohemia in this manner.[91]

The name *Moravce* is more important from the perspective of the studied topic. The ending of the word suggests that the motivation behind the name of this settlement could have

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[89] On the question of differences in the forms recorded in high medieval documents and the endings of words today, see MAREK, ref. 83, pp. 394-395 and KRAJČOVIČ, R. Z lexiky stredovekej slovenčiny s výkladmi názvov obcí a miest (36). In: *Kultúra slova*, vol. 46, 2012, pp. 351-353.

[90] ONDRUŠ, Š. Slovak hydronyms. In: *Slovaks in the Central Danubian region in the 6th to 11th century*. Matúš Kučera (ed.). Bratislava, 2000, pp. 197-198.

[91] ŠRÁMEK, ref. 88, p. 39. His interpretation differs considerably from the one published earlier by archaeologist J. Sláma, who thought that the names *Moravany* in Bohemia were related to the forced movements of the population that were to have occurred during the existence of the Přemyslid state. See SLÁMA, J. K některým ekonomickým a politickým projevům raně středověkého přemyslovského státu. In: *Archeologické rozhledy*, vol. 37, 1985, p. 339.

been the social standing of its population. It should be noted that P. Ratkoš reached the same conclusion, albeit based on different sources.[92] However, there is one other source that could be used for an interpretation that advances knowledge of the subject. Due to their nature, oikonyms have one of the two clearly observable qualities of archaeological finds – a direct link to space.[93] As such, there is the possibility to verify the connection between them and the archaeologically determined image of settlement of the chosen time period.

A comparison of the distribution of flat inhumation cemeteries of the Great Moravian type in southwest Slovakia and the localisation of the local name *Moravce* (Fig. 2) reveals an apparent spatial relationship. Both phenomena meet at the peripheral line of the distribution of Great Moravian cemeteries, i.e. at the assumed eastern border of the Nitra territory. And while the randomness of this phenomenon cannot be ruled out completely, it can also be interpreted as a correlation. Located on the Žitava River, Zlaté Moravce is situated near two peripheral sites with the occurrence of cemeteries of the Great Moravian type – Vieska nad Žitavou, also situated on the Žitava, and Čierne Kľačiany situated on the Širočina.[94] Hontianske Moravce is located in the immediate vicinity of Dudince, a town in which graves also classified as Great Moravian have been documented.[95] If the Great Moravian population was referred to in general as 'Moravians' in written sources of foreign origin[96], it is necessary to ask whether the Slavic population in neighbouring territory (including in the land adjacent to the territory of Nitra) could also have referred to it in the same way. As such, local names of the *Moravce* type could in fact be a relic of the period perception of the border territory, where a population with distinct cultural manifestations and political and social standing could have lived in close proximity.

Conclusion

Despite dating to a historical period from which there are already a relatively large number of written sources, very few are connected to the Great Moravian territory of Nitra. In fact, not even the name of this territory was written enough times to permit the preservation of at least one mention. In the absence of Church documents recording Nitra, first as the location of Pribina's consecrated church and later as the seat of Bishop Wiching, it would be difficult to localise the territory. From the perspective of Frankish secular power, compared to Moravia it was apparently not a territory of strategic military importance. Looking at the map of the scope of the Great Moravian territory of Nitra reconstructed on the basis of archaeological finds (Fig. 3), one fact is readily apparent in this context. The territory of Žitný ostrov was settled so sparsely that it is hard to refer to it as a border area. Without trying to find an explanation for this situation, the first impression is that it was a type of buffer zone between Great Moravian and Frankish territory. First and foremost, the territory of Nitra was geographically located away from the main interest of Frankish expansion aimed toward the east. Hence, it could not have been of great concern to the Frankish royal court and its analysts.

Thanks to the activities of Prince Pribina, the territory of Nitra found its way onto the map of the Christian world relatively early. The link between the consecrated church at his *proprietas* and the later location of the bishop's seat at this site is obviously not random. Nevertheless,

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[92] RATKOŠ, ref. 29, pp. 32, 35.
[93] NEUSTUPNÝ, E. *Metoda archeologie*. Plzeň, 2007, p. 32.
[94] HANULIAK, ref. 35, pp. 260, 279.
[95] HANULIAK, ref. 35, p. 261.
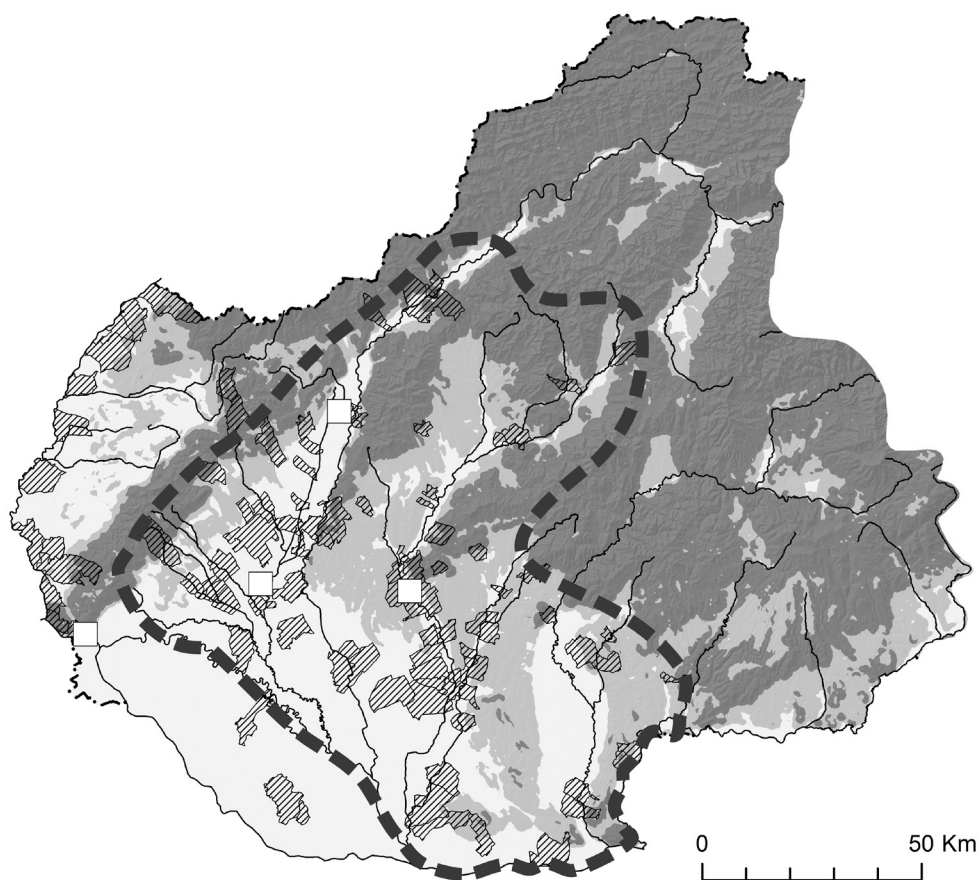[96] LYSÝ, ref. 68, p. 79.

Fig. 3: Territorial scope of the Great Moravian territory of Nitra. Borders are marked with a thick broken line. Cadastral territories with evidence of flat inhumation cemeteries of the Great Moravian type are hatched, while the localisation of castle towns are marked with white squares.

and again in comparison with Moravia, clear and direct archaeological evidence of missionary activity or of functioning Church activities is missing. However, this situation is not entirely inconsistent with written sources, which in fact speak about how at the time of the founding of the Nitra diocese the territory had only recently been Christianised. And although this view could be exaggerated, the local document entitled *Žitije Mefodija* also speaks of gradual Christianisation.[97] One trait that differentiates the Great Moravian territory of Nitra from Moravia was perhaps a lower intensity of Christian missionary activity.

Manifestations of burial customs corresponding to the situation known from the Morava River region are also documented east of the Little and White Carpathians. Even without a precise quantification of the studied manifestations it is possible to state that the number, scope and character of sites with evidence of burials is different. At the same time, the territory of Nitra is distinguished by an overall smaller number and size of cemeteries, an absence of church cemeteries and less evidence of graves with inventories indicating that the deceased belonged to the highest social class of the population. Nevertheless, graves with military

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[97] MMFH II, pp. 132-134, Chapter 10.

and equestrian gear deposited in agrarian settlements also document the existence of a free population in these areas.[98] In Great Moravia the free population was identical to the *omnes Moravi* mentioned repeatedly in sources in different variations.[99] M. Lysý recently confirmed that based on written sources of foreign provenance, the population of the territory of Nitra also ranked among these.[100] Domestic sources are still missing on this subject.

Although oikonyms of the *Moravce* type, the oldest of which is documented in written form only from a different historical period, will never have the same weight as period sources, they cannot be completely ignored as a source. Their occurrence on the border of the distribution of cemeteries of the Great Moravian type (Fig. 2) can be an indication of concurrency and hence probably also a causal relationship. Hence, if the free Great Moravian population continued to identify ethnically with the Slavs and politically acted as Moravians with the Franks[101], the spread of political identity to the bearers of Great Moravian power living in the territory of Nitra – Nitra Moravians – cannot be entirely ruled out.

Translated by David Gaul

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[98] ŠTEFAN, ref. 5, p. 152-155.
[99] STEINHÜBEL, J. Veľká Morava na polceste od kmeňa ku štátu. In: *Forum Historiae*, vol. 8, No. 2, 2014, pp. 71-73.
[100] LYSÝ, ref. 68, pp. 101-106.
[101] TŘEŠTÍK, ref. 3, p. 53.

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