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The fortification of Malá Strana since the 9th to the 13th century

ANNOTATION

A brief compilation of knowledge concerning the fortification of the centre of Malá Strana, with characteristics and the dating of individual fortification systems which evolved from the 9th to the 13th century. After the discovery of this fortification in 1994, current perception of the function of this site at the outset of the Bohemian state, had to be completely modified. The fortification was formed for a long period by early medieval timber and clay ramparts, replaced by stone walls latest in the 13th century. This study updates some conclusions from an earlier work published on the same theme by the same author (2001). Results of new excavations are taken in consideration with further details enabling evaluation of Malá Strana in its complete extent.

SUMMARY

Prague historic centre, as we know it today spread on both banks of the Vltava River, originated due to an administrative arrangement resulting from a regulation ordered in 1784 by Joseph II in aiming to join four independent Prague townships. Each had its own history, tradition and fortifications (fi g. 1). One of these towns was today's Mala Strana district. The development of its fortification is the theme of this article.

The best preserved and most familiar part of the Mala Strana fortifications is the developed Gothic stone rampart built in the reign of Charles IV, which is often depicted on historic panoramas of Prague and Prague castle as viewed from the Petřín hill (fi g. 2, 3). The ramparts were built after 1348 on both banks of Vltava as a strong fortification along the outskirts of the town four hundred years before the regulated integration. The high medieval and the later Baroque fortification helped the destruction of the earlier systems (fi g. 5), such as the early Gothic stone ramparts of the royal town from 1257 and the earlier clay-timber fortification, first discovered in 1994 by an excavation in the cellars of house no. 42 in Josefska street (fi g. 6: 7). Since then more evidence of this fortification from the 9th and 10th century has been found at 15 other sites (fi g. 6: 1–13, 16, 17) and possibly at a further two sites (fi g. 6: 14, 15).

The past three decades of archaeological excavations undertaken during building operations has resulted in the recognition of a large settlement area, which existed in the 10th century on the left bank of today's Mala Strana. This settlement was surrounded by a number of small unfortified hamlets, which became the strongly fortified town of Prague associated with Prague castle. According to J. Ludikovsky by 10th century Prague was already referred to as „metropolis“ or „urbs metropolitana“, This town was in the 960s visited and described by Ibrahim ibn Jakub.

With the discovery of a fragment of middle hillfort period fortification at Mala Strana questions arose concerning its line, appearance, development and date. It became apparent that both its line and appearance went through at least a two phased development. The origins of the later phase 2 can be dated latest to the period shortly after 900 and in the densely populated Mala Strana the infill of the ditch dug into the subsoil is generally easily recognised. From the body of the rampart only small fragments can be found integrated with the anthropogenic stratigraphy, identifiable only by the most experienced of field specialists.

Complete profiles of the early medieval fortification have been found at Mala Strana at two locations. The first one, in 1994, was on the line below the northern front of Mostecka street (fi g. 10), where 7,8m wide rampart was identified. At a depth of 3m below the current surface, 0,75 m of the original height was preserved together with a 9,7m wide ditch, 2,7m deep (detail in ČIHÁKOVÁ 2001a, 94–109). In 2004 the second location of the complete fortification composition was found on the line to the north from Hellichova street at Nebovidska no. 459/III (fi g. 11). The rampart body with a width of more than 5,5m, stood preserved to a height of 0,9m and was accompanied by a massive ditch 17 – 19m wide and more than 6,3 m deep (HAVRDA/TRYML 2006a; HAVRDA/ TRYML 2007; HAVRDA 2008, 653–654). Further evidence was found in 2002 at Nerudova street no. 249/III, where the longest preserved segment of 50 m found so far was partially excavated revealing a presumed width of 6 – 8m and a height of up to 2, 15m (HAVRDA/PODLISKA 2003). Also part of the northern edge of the ditch, deeper than 4, 8m (fi g. 12), was excavated with a later destruction deposit of the front wall.

A stratigraphically integrated part of a fortification is the gated entrance into the defended area. For the period of the timber/clay, early medieval, Mala Strana fortification one of them is probably known – at no. 259.

This gate probably served as the entrance from both the southern and western directions. Foundations of a timber structure were found at this site (fig. 15), tentatively described as a “strategic building” (fig. 16), which technologically resembles the rampart foundations at no. 42 (ČIHAKOVA/MULLER 2008, 112–119, 188–190). For building the “strategic building” a pit 1,6m deep was dug and filled by a more compact material for improving the foundations. Then a timber structure was built (fig. 17), which could have served as the basis for a low bridge across marshland with standing water and muddy sediments, which existed here in the 10th century.

At the other end of the marsh excavation (9/91) revealed a sequence of timber laced road surfaces of a low bridge (fig. 18, 19). The chronology of the Early Medieval fortification of Mala Strana is very complicated and the current number excavations do not satisfactorily reveal enough information to clarify the situation. Clearly before the 12th century several fortification systems were built, however it cannot be determined whether they originated gradually over time or some of them existed at the same time, enclosing concurrently functioning areas. The dislocation of the relatively numerous finds locations indicates that the fortified area had a complex development with more than 2 or 3 phases, however the number of points is not sufficient enough for an explicit determination of individual fortification lines. The dating of these phases is still under discussion.

The earliest ditch 1 existed for a longer period since it was cleaned out at least once in the 9th century (fig. 22: the green coloured layers). Before the subsequent fortification was built with “ditch 2”, around 900, ditch 1 was, after cleaning, already gradually filled with natural sediments. The development of the fortifications at today's Mala Strana has to be viewed in conjunction with the Prague castle fortifications, at least in its earliest phases. But the comparison of their mutual age and function is not feasible yet due to the incompatible state of current knowledge on both sites.

The further development of the fortifications since the 2nd half of the 10th century to the mid 13th century is not clear and it cannot be stated whether any of the fortification systems – for example the line north from Hellichova street – were in existence during this interval. Also there is no evidence how the two month siege of Prague castle in 1142 influenced the settlement and the urban structure of Mala Strana.

In 1257 the royal town was founded with stone ramparts (fig. 25), which were revealed at several sites during rescue archaeological excavations. Comparison of the results shows clear technological differences between the stone rampart on the southern line of the Gothic fortification, which runs close to the Early Medieval southern boundary of the historic centre, and the eastern boundary (fig. 26), built in a Romanesque ashlar masonry technique with plaener stones on the inner face of the wall facing the town (fig. 27). On the outer wall face ashlar masonry was used in the gate surround discovered at no. 158 (The Palfy palace) to be viewed by the arrivals to the gate and towards the Castle (fig. 28, 32). In the section along the wolds orientated not towards the visitor of the town, but to any attacking force, the face was built from rough quarried stone. Providing that the eastern wall built in the Romanesque technique really originated in the Romanesque period (12th – beginning of the 13th century), the Romanesque “Judita's” southern tower of the bridge could have terminated the eastern line of the Romanesque rampart (fig. 26: 5). According to the written evidence the ditch along the eastern line of the town's boundary did not originate until 1278 and according to radar measurements in the Valdštejn Palace a curtain wall also may have originated at the same time as the ditch. This building activity could have been connected with the later building phase, noticeable in the development of the eastern town's rampart wall.

Dating of the earlier wall phase to the 12th or the beginning of the 13th century corresponds to the gate fragment in the Palfy Palace and can be compared with the gate in the Black tower of the Prague castle, which was standing already in the 1167 (fig. 34). Both gates have a cordon made of red sand stone at the foot of the vault and they are of the same size. From an archaeological point of view there are no arguments to doubt the building of the eastern fortification of today's Mala Strana centre to sometime in the Romanesque period at the very end of the Early Medieval period. Also the historic arguments appear to support a Romanesque date for the ramparts. In the vicinity of the gate entrance there was a sequence of pavements from the 10th to the 13th century, which is evidence that this route was used for several centuries and was eventually integrated into the newly founded Early Gothic town. A part of the eastern line of the rampart is also the area known from the 13th century as a bishops' manor house. It contains earlier Romanesque stone structures with an unusually articulated and elongated ground plan when compared to other Prague residential dwellings. Completely unusual is its disposition, clearly standing out in front of the Romanesque (?) face of the rampart with the northern side outlet into the space in front of the gate. In my opinion such a disposition does not correspond with a residential function of a house/palace, which this building has so far been interpreted as (fig. 33). More acceptable is an interpretation of this building as a small fort, serving not only for the protection of the bridge, but also for collecting toll and other functions, which later were moved to the Old Town's Ungelt court in the neighbourhood of the large new market.

Fortification of the newly founded Early Gothic town in the 2nd half of the 13th century on its southern and western side is longer and better known since some features, mainly gates, were preserved above ground until late Post-medieval times. Nevertheless no complete section of the Early Gothic fortification line has so far been seen on any of the sides of the settlement; we do not know the ditch, nor the curtain wall parameters nor the chronology of this fortification phase. The Early Gothic at the southern and western side is considered as a single building undertaking however indications occur suggesting that the fortification building activity was of a more radical character in the first half of the 14th century than just a necessary maintenance. I suggest a hypothesis that Mala Strana was so devastated by the war of the Premyslid inheritance in 1306 – 1310 that traditional routes could have been transformed and new gates established (fig. **25**: 8, 9). The ancient gates within the traditional Early Medieval routes did not disappear though, but they became second-rate in positions of a wicket (fig. **25**: 5, 6). The support for this hypothesis is the contradiction between the usual importance of a wicket and the unusual large doorway, which in no. 259 still, even after 450 years, is open for wagons.

A similar situation, where the previous town gate became a side outlet within the fortification described as a wicket with a new gate built in the vicinity, is also at the north – east of the town. In the north eastern corner of the Palfy Palace no. 158 a wicket is named until 1595 on a site where archaeological excavations revealed the deserted Romanesque gate mentioned above (fig. **25**: 6). Both wickets were most probably used as gates in the 2nd half of the 13th century and both of them stand on the sites of the traditional Early Medieval entrances through the timber clay fortification. When they did not comply with their sizes (fig. **35**), they were replaced by gates, which later entered the written record.

Recognition of the medieval structure of Mala Strana is a gradual process, enabled by the continuous increase in building activities in the area, which allow archaeological excavations to bring more information and surprises to the theme of the medieval and mainly Early Medieval fortification systems. Obviously the picture is not final and will have to be adjusted according to the new finds.

English by Linda and Patrick Foster