

Archaeological finds from the "Český kras" (Bohemian Karst) caves – three times in a different way

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In the long time period between the Neolithic and early Middle Ages, the frequency of archaeological cave sites in the Bohemian karst region varies considerably within the individual pre- and protohistoric periods. This phenomenon is paralleled over a series of both karst and non-karst areas of central Europe. Up till now, correlation of archaeological and natural history data was employed to interpret this observation as a specific manifestation of the dependence of cultural development on the history of climate. This hypothesis assumes the occupation of central European caves to have taken place more markedly during periods of dry climate (cf., Bouzek 1993 or Ložek 1994, and references therein).

In this paper we intend to put this natural history determinist model to a debate. We base our assumptions on the observation of the extraordinary human adaptability in view of the natural conditions and the interconnected perception of culture as a specific and, in a certain sense, markedly successful adaptation tool. We also suppose that humans are not biologically predestined to dwell in rock hollows – in their case, the occupation of caves represents a cultural, rather than biological, phenomenon.

In studying the varying intensity of emergence of archaeological sites in rock hollows, we rely on evidence from the Bohemian Karst. This is one of the best known regions of central Europe from both archaeological and natural history points of view and lies at the center of the area of interest. The frequency distribution of varying numbers of archaeological sites may be evaluated at three regional levels:

1. that of the Bohemian Karst and its closest proximity, i.e., a few km²;
2. that of the Bohemian Basin, i.e., approximately 40,000 km²;
3. and finally, in terms of the whole of central Europe, i.e., over an area of c. 600,000 km².

Our scope of investigation is perhaps best at the broadest, central European level. At this level the time segment under study may be divided into two phases:

1. Neolithic to Middle Eneolithic. The extraordinary quantitative growth of the number of archaeological cave sites matches the spatio-temporal burgeoning of the major cultural complexes of Linear Pottery Culture, Lengyel Culture and Baden Culture. The bearers of these cultural complexes ascended the caves regardless of the natural differences among individual cave regions or of the kind and size of rock hollows. The chief motivation appears to have been a general interest in rock hollows as such. The reflection of general natural conditions such as the climate by a higher measure of interest in caves cannot be entirely ruled out. It does nonetheless seem that climatic conditions might have stimulated general cultural development rather than any of its components such as interest in rock hollows.
2. Late Eneolithic to early Middle Ages. The variation in the emergence of archaeological materials from

this period in caves represents a hopeless maze of individual cave regions without any traceable relation to any common element, cultural or biological. One single exception exists for the Urnfield cultural complex which unified under its influence a sizeable segment of central Europe, much as the preceding Neolithic and Eneolithic complexes. In all the other time periods, the varying intensity of interest in caves may reflect local cultural phenomena such as proximity of a cultural centre or, on the contrary, isolation and retardation in a culturally marginal area.

The true picture of cave exploitation is reduced to the number of sites in which artifacts from respective periods of time have been found. In most of the central European sites, archaeological remains consist of pottery vessels and their fragments. In this connection it seems highly probable that the storage, processing, and consumption of foodstuffs in the past represented a by-product of various other activities which left no recognizable traces in the caves. This is the reason why the specific purposes for which the caves were used by the ancients are, with some exceptions, archaeologically irretrievable. We thus fail to determine in a retrogressive fashion how the general cultural climate was transformed into local cultural conditions and why singular time periods and singular regions saw more visits to the caves (or rather left behind more archaeological traces) while others witnessed fewer of them (or rather deposition of fewer archaeologically retrievable traces). The level of both quality and quantity of exploitation of rock hollows seems to have been determined to a considerable degree by a general interest in rock hollows and, indeed, by the very existence of rock hollows. The kinds of such hollows, the types of landscapes, and the prevalent climatic conditions probably represented second-rate factors endured by human beings with recourse to cultural adaptation mechanisms.

References

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