Reflecting Peasant Agency in Medieval Rural Milieu Research of East Central Europe*

by Ladislav Čapek, Lukáš Holata

Despite an exceptionally long tradition of research on medieval rural milieu, peasant agency represents a new theoretical approach that has not yet been coherently reflected in East Central Europe. Issues within social archaeology remain on the fringes of the archaeological interpretations. The view of the peasantry was heavily influenced by economic history and Marxist historiography, portraying peasants as a passive, conservative, homogeneous, socially unequal, and subaltern group *vis-à-vis* the upper class/elites. This text represents the very first effort to assess the rich evidence obtained by large-scale excavations of deserted medieval villages by adopting a peasant agency perspective. To achieve this, we introduce seven prospective themes in which the diversity and complexity of rural communities that have taken an active role in historical processes making collective and individual decisions can be illustrated. Our ambition is to offer a new insight into late medieval peasants in East Central Europe, enhance their comprehensive understanding, and stimulate future research directions.

Late Middle Age, East Central Europe, Deserted medieval village, rural archaeology, historiography, peasantry, agency.

1. *Introduction*

Medieval archaeology in the eastern part of Central Europe has a rich and long-standing tradition of systematic investigations into the rural milieu, with a particular emphasis on large-scale programme-oriented excava-

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tions of deserted medieval villages (DMVs), which are unique in the broader pan-European context. These extensive research campaigns have led to the collection of comprehensive evidence and the making of numerous conclusions and insights on a range of rural and peasant-related topics for the Late Middle Ages (in Central Europe in 1250-1550 AD); particularly, these topic include individual settlement structures such as farmsteads, peasant houses, manor houses, material culture and everyday life, agrarian and non-agrarian production, environmental context and topography, settlement patterns, village origin, and abandonment.[1]

Nevertheless, the current state of the art, formulated interpretations, as well as the quality of published outcomes are inconsistent. Much of it has been shaped by historical paradigms and an interest in economic rather than social history. Although many regional and site-specific studies of rural archaeology have been undertaken, there is a lack of broader analytical and comparative assessments of the rural milieu and peasantry that address new theoretical discourse. The contextual approach reflecting the social practice of peasants as social agents is still neglected. Previous research on this subject has only reflected on differences in the social stratification of peasants through the study of architecture or material culture.[2]

Therefore, we aim to bridge this significant research gap with this pilot study; it represents the first comprehensive effort to assess existing outcomes from the perspective of peasant agency. Our objectives are: 1) to revise the existing social interpretations in the literature that implicitly reflect or are close to the concept of the agency, 2) to offer a new perspective on subaltern societies in East Central Europe, and contribute to a holistic, nuanced understanding of them, 3) to stimulate new research avenues and interpretive frameworks for several perspective topics. A separate objective 4) is also to present a different environment to the research community in Spain regarding settlement development and research tradition.

The paper does not encompass the extensive European discourse on the social history and geography of the early modern peasantry.[3] Instead, we intend to draw attention to possible manifestations of peasant agency in archaeological evidence which is particularly rich for the late medieval period in East Central Europe. In contrast, the evidence of written sources for this period is sparse, limited to only a few spatially defined regions.[4] In any case, we will avoid relating interpretations based on early modern written sources back to the Middle Ages.

In the following sections: 1) we briefly outline how peasants have been characterised, understood, and perceived in East Central Europe, then in

[1] Nekuda, "Das hoch- und spätmittelalterliche;" Klápště. *The Archaeology of Prague*, 15-40; Čapek, Holata, "General Overview;" Scholkmann, Kenzler, Schreg, *Archäologie des Mittelalters*, 151-63.
[2] Nekuda, "Sociální skladba;" Goßler, "Gedanken zur sozialen;" Kypta, "Das Lebensmilieu."
[3] Sreenivasan, "Beyond the Village."
[4] Klír, *Rolnictvo na pozdně*.

the main part, 2) we offer an overview of seven themes, providing: a) a short context for the research, followed by b) peasant agency perspectives. For this purpose, well-published evidence from the large-scale excavations of DMVs will be used. Due to the limited scope of the paper, we will refer only to the most relevant synthesizing publications. In conclusion, 3) a pilot characterization of rural communities from peasant agency perspective will be attempted, which we consider as a stimulus for thorough re-evaluations of existing research interpretations or newly designed research.

2. *Understanding peasants: A research framework in East Central Europe*

The eastern part of Central Europe is geographically defined by the areas east of the rivers Elbe and Saale (the *Germanica Slavica* area) and north of the Alps. This territory includes countries such as East Germany (former GDR), Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Austria, and Hungary. These countries are generally characterized by a similar settlement-historical development with specific regional variations and socio-economic and demographic divergences.

The beginnings of systematic interest in the medieval rural settlement are associated with historical discourse on the Late Medieval Crisis and village desertion.[5] Historical geography and settlement archaeology (*Siedlungsarchäologie*)[6] have had an exceptional tradition. These approaches inspired extensive surface surveys of DMVs.[7] A characteristic feature of medieval archaeology in the second half of the 20th century was systematic open-area excavations of settlements. However, they have been prompted primarily by the need for heritage-oriented archaeology rather than academic interest. Research on DMVs has been more descriptive and empirical but lacked theoretical depth. The outcomes of excavations were more oriented towards contextualizing the material evidence in culture and economic (agrarian) history. Medieval archaeology has long been under the umbrella of cultural history, heavily influenced by economic history and Marxist historiography.[8] A significant impact, albeit on a limited group of scholars, was also made by the French Annales school of history with its concept of 'total history' and its interest in structural processes and changes viewed from *longue durée* perspective.[9]

A significant change in existing approaches occurred after the fall of the Iron Curtain, which resulted in 1) the gradual termination of systematic,

[5] Schreg, "Die Krisen des späten Mittelalters."
[6] Denecke. "Die historisch-geographische Landesaufnahme;" Jankuhn, *Einführung*.
[7] Čapek and Holata, "General Overview;" Michl, *Wüstungforchung in Deutschland*.
[8] E.g., Klápště, *Archaeology of Prague*, 15, 20.
[9] Schöttler, "Zur Geschichte;" Klápště, "Studies of structural changes;" Klápště, "Změna – středověká transformace;" Schreg, "Dorfgenese und histoire totale."

state-subsidized open-area excavations, 2) an increase in rescue archaeology alongsite a gradual decline of interest in rural settlements, and 3) the development of landscape archaeology with the integration of new non-invasive methods and other disciplines. The response of processual archaeology found little resonance in general, often being considered 'anti-historical'.[10] Only questions concerning the adaptation of rural communities to the natural environment were discussed. Rather than theory, the approaches of processual archaeology were integrated into the methods of archaeological survey. Post-processual archaeology, with its emphasis on the interpretation of context and social practice, had virtually no influence on medieval archaeology in Central Europe.

The study of peasants and peasantry (peasantology) and their social stratification differs between Western and Central Europe.[11] According to economic historians, the Central European peasantry can be generally defined as a group of primarily agricultural producers living in a subsistence model of production. They utilized their own family labour and cultivated the land they held in hereditary tenure based on a contract with the landlords; they aimed to optimize the use of land, capital, and labour within local economic and ecological conditions, allowing them to generate a 'surplus' for fiscal income within the market economy system.[12] The status of peasants was legally anchored by the purchase right or declaration of customs (empytheutical law), which remained almost unchanged throughout the Late Middle Ages.[13]

Peasants generally emerged in older literature as a homogeneous, passive group whose life destinies were determined by historical events such as wars, epidemics, and crop failures, as well as by structural and environmental processes, including climatic factors. The conservatism, stability, and immutability of the rural communities were highlighted. Peasants were depicted as 'locked in time', bound to the seasonal cycles of agriculture between sowing and harvesting, without the ability to influence their irreversible fate in life. Due to the scarcity of written sources, medieval peasantry was considered as 'timeless' or 'historyless'.[14] Marxist historiography considers peasants a subaltern group (low classes, serfs) dependent on the elites. The relationship between the peasants and the elites (the socially upper class) was seen confrontationally regarding power, subordination, and the principles of 'class struggle'. Peasants were studied hierarchically in terms of dominance and subordination from a top-down perspective. The peasants' voices were 'muffled' or 'obscured' by the ruling classes of society, and peasants had minimal

[10] Fehring, *Die Archäologie des Mittelalters*, 194.
[11] Several synthetic works have been published: Graus, *Dějiny venkovského lidu*; Abel, *Geschichte der deutschen Landwirtschaft*; Rösener, *Bauern im Mittelalter*; Rösener, *The peasantry of Europe*; Čechura, "Rolnictvo v Čechách."
[12] Klír, *Rolnictvo na Chebsku*, 36-7; cf. Cerman, "Social structure."
[13] Čechura, "Rolnictvo v Čechách;" Rösener, *Grundherrschaft im Wandel*.
[14] Cf. critically Aparisi, "Fractures in the Community;" Van Oyen, "Rural time;" Schreg, "The Eternal Peasant."

opportunities to resist or develop alternatives to the dominant structures. There was no recognition that peasants, as active social agents, also had the potential to influence historical processes.[15]

However, such a view overlooked several essential aspects, as demonstrated in new studies that have emerged in recent decades.[16] (1) The internal hierarchy was not reflected; in fact. a large group consisted of hierarchically lower sub-peasant groups referred to as 'sub-villagers', which included 'smallholders' (gardeners, cottagers) and landless people that were not exclusively agricultural producers.[17] (2) Not all inhabitants of villages can be described as 'farmers', as some had other sources of income (craft, mining, etc.). (3) Although peasants were personally unfree, they were granted a certain degree of autonomy.[18] From the 14th century onwards, the status of peasants improved, and their land rights were strengthened. (4) The life of the late medieval peasantry is characterized by significant horizontal and vertical social mobility, manifested in considerable property flexibility, which allowed peasants to acquire possession of the land as well as to leave it. The right of hereditary tenants to buy and sell their land (i.e., to effect property transfers between peasants) brought considerable mobility in land ownership.[19] (5) During the 15th century, peasants became more involved in the market economy. They may have been actively participated in the real estate and land market in some regions of Central Europe, as recorded in land registers.[20]

Although archaeology has offered great opportunities for the study of medieval peasantry from the mid-20th century onwards, the research framework (and interpretations of archaeological data) has been predominantly influenced by historical discourse and economic history; the topics such as agriculture, craft production, rural architecture, and material culture have been prioritized, highlighting the disparities in living standards between rural and noble 'classes'.[21] Archaeology has been primarily supposed to prove historical interpretations, even though the evidence obtained contradicted traditional ideas of continuity, stability, conservatism, or even rigidity. These are demonstrated in the transformation of settlement and field patterns, various village layouts or peasants' house architecture, and striking differences in material culture indicating internal social differentiation. Despite this evidence, however, the active role of peasant communities has not yet been given much consideration. The influence of the Annales in Central European archaeology meant that collective agents and structured human behaviour were more like-

[15] Schreg, "Eternal Peasant," 66-7; Quirós-Castillo, Tejerizo García, "Filling the gap."
[16] E.g. Carocci, "Social Mobility;" Van Oyen, "Rural time;" Klír, *Rolnictvo na Chebsku*.
[17] Čechura, "Rolnictvo v Čechách;" Mitterauer, "Formen ländlicher;" Cerman,v "Mittelalterlichte Ursprünge;" Ghosh, "Rural Economies."
[18] Čechura. "Rolnictvo v Čechách;" Rösener, *Grundherrschaft im Wandel*.
[19] Klír, *Rolnictvo na Chebsku*.
[20] Cerman, "Social structure," 57-67.
[21] Nekuda, "Zemědělská výroba v období feudalismu;" Nekuda, "Sociální skladba;" Jannsen, "Gewerbliche Produktion."

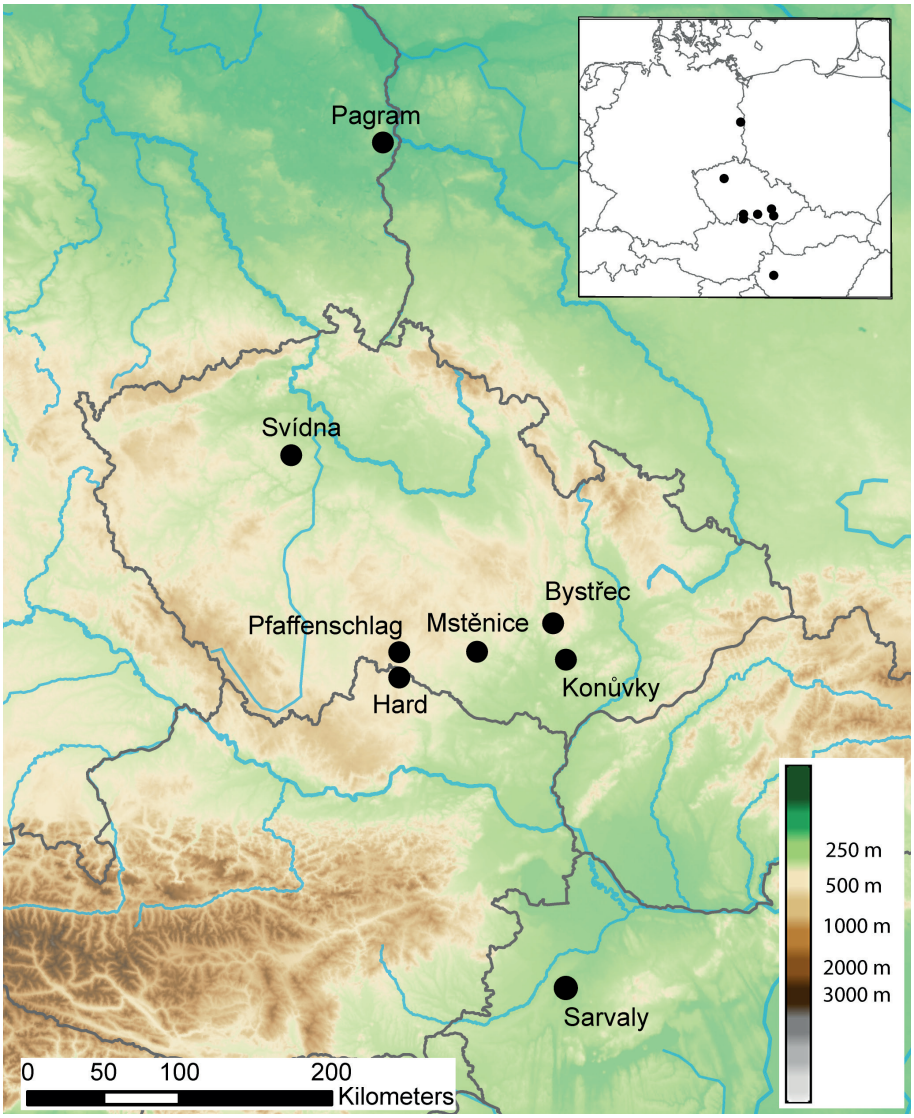

Figure 1. The location of deserted villages explored by extensive excavations in central Europe, which are the subject of detailed assessment.

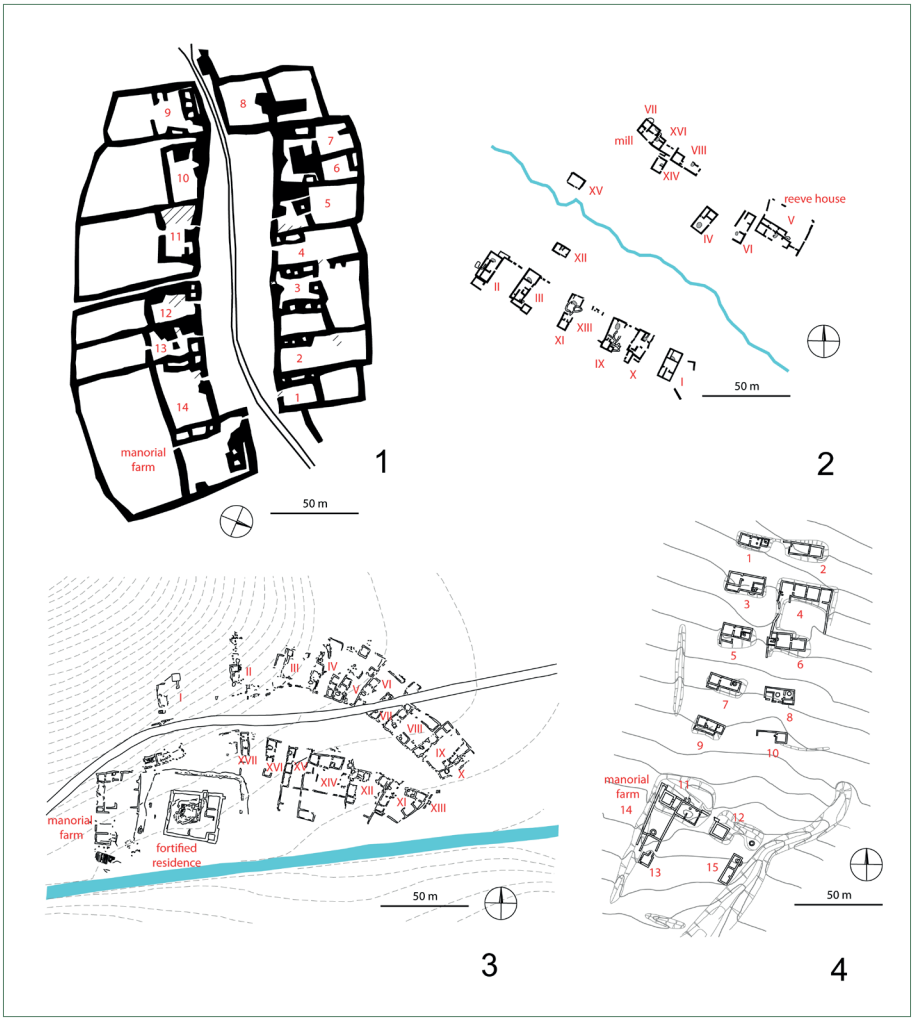

Figure 2. The plans of excavated deserted medieval villages with large-scale excavations – 1. Svídna (schematically), 2. Pfaffenschlag, 3. Mstěnice, 4. Hard (all on the same scale).

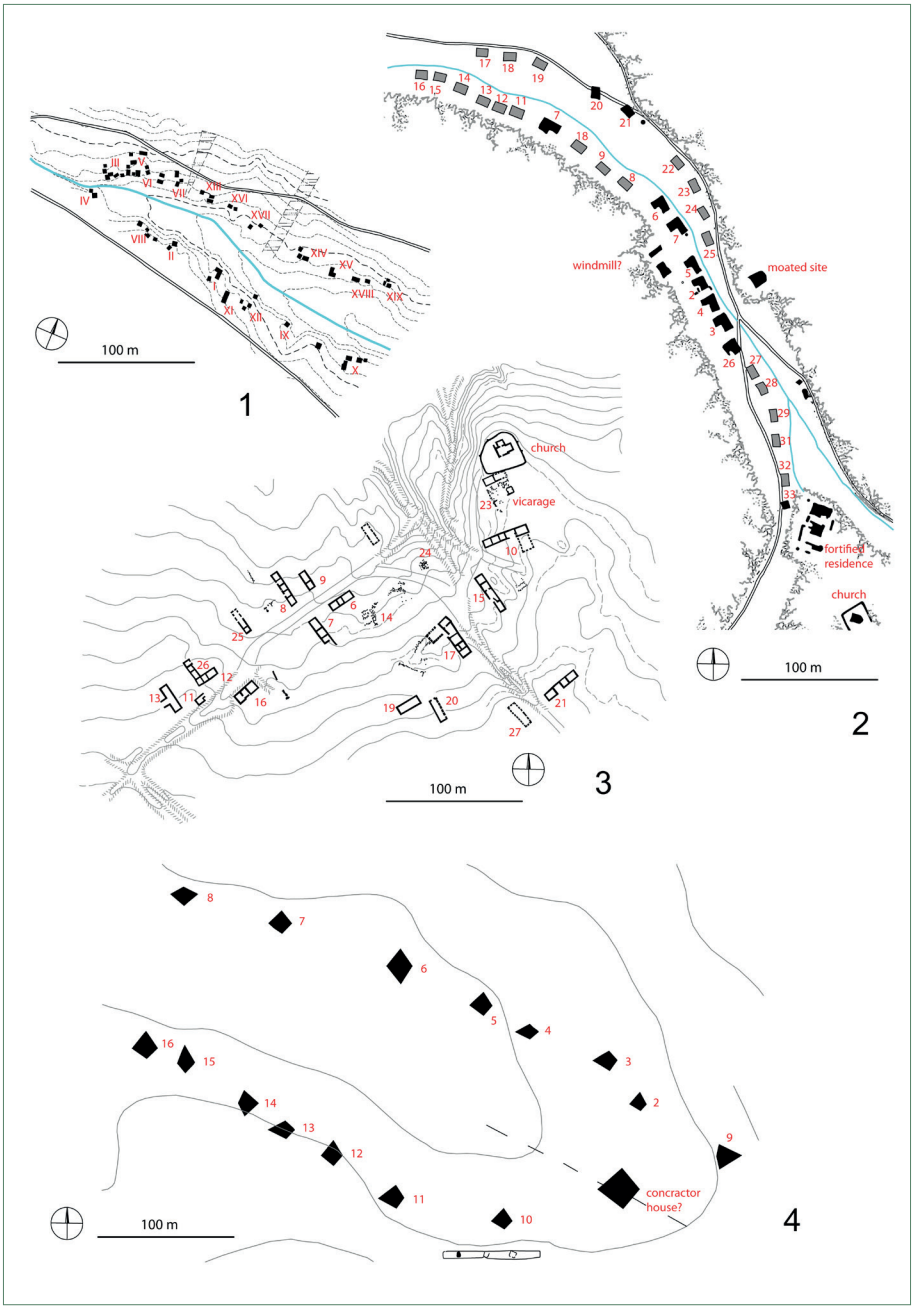

Figure 3. The plans of excavated deserted medieval villages with large-scale excavations – 1. Bystřec, 2. Konůvky, 3. Sarvaly, 4. Pagram (all in the same scale).

ly to be seen as the 'maker of things/events'. The peasant habitus, the social identity of peasantry, and their capacity for agency are still poorly reflected in the literature, partly due to the scarcity of written sources from the late Middle Ages.[22] Consequently, peasant agency has not even become part of the archaeological discourse.[23]

3. *Assessing selected themes from an agency perspective*

In the main, we present seven topics[24] that we consider highly relevant for further research from an agency perspective. Each topic is sufficiently supported by the evidence, which is primarily based on the open-area excavations of the DMVs; thus, we draw mainly on summarising publications on the village excavations from Pagram[25] (Germany), Svídna,[26] Mstěnice,[27] Pfaffenschlag,[28] Bystřec,[29] Konůvky (Czech Republic),[30] Hard (Austria),[31] and Sarvaly (Hungary).[32] At this initial stage, contextual analysis and reinterpretation are not our ambition – that must be the task of further research. Here, we only reflect on some of the facts through the prism of peasant agency.

4. *Spatial reorganisation of settlement, changes in the layout of the ploughland, and the formation of the village*

Field surveys and archaeological excavation have confirmed the dispersed character of early medieval settlement patterns in the 11th-12th century, consisting of spatially isolated farmsteads or small clusters of them ('hamlets'), each surrounded by their fields and communal pastures.[33] These settlements were predominantly constructed using low-durability structures with a significant proportion of wood and clay.[34] A characteristic feature is their spatial

[22] Schreg, "Eternal Peasant," 55.
[23] An exception is the work of R. Schreg in relation to ecological impact (Schreg, "Ecological Approaches"); implicitly, the concept of peasant agency appears in Klír, *Rolnictvo na Chebsku* dealing with the social mobility.
[24] Quirós-Castillo, "Inequality and social complexity;" Schreg, "Eternal Peasant," 66.
[25] Theune, «das *dorff pagerem*».
[26] Smetánka, Život *středověké vesnice*.
[27] Nekuda, *Mstěnice 1*; Nekuda, Nekuda, *Mstěnice. Zaniklá středověká ves u Hrotovic 2*; Nekuda, *Mstěnice. Zaniklá ves u Hrotovic. 3*.
[28] Nekuda, *Pfaffenschlag*.
[29] Belcredi, *Bystřec*.
[30] Měchurová, *Konůvky*.
[31] Felgenhauer-Schmiedt, *Hard*.
[32] Holl, Parádi, *Das mittelalterliche Dorf Sarvaly*.
[33] Klápště, "Změna – středověká transformace," 44; Klápště, *Archaeology of Prague*, 22; Scholkmann, Kenzler, and Schreg, *Archäologie des Mittelalters*, 155-6; Nowotny, "Changes in Rural Settlement;" Schreg, "Eternal Peasant."
[34] Zimmermann, "Pfosten, Ständer und Schwelle," 50.

displacement within a settlement area (the predecessor of a cadastral territory) after a certain time interval. The reasons for the frequent shifting of the settlement are not yet well understood; there are increasing indications that these shifts are primarily related to land management.[35]

In general, early medieval agriculture can be characterized as extensive, conducted on a large scale with few inputs, little crop diversification, and no indoor animal housing.[36] Farming practices were more individualistic, without the need to synchronize the work with the rest of the community.[37] Moreover, land ownership was not yet firmly and legally established, which could also contribute to frequent spatial changes.[38]

Subsequently, three significant changes occurred during an exceptionally complex process referred to as the medieval transformation. It unfolded differently and gradually in various areas of Central Europe but culminated in the 13th century. It can be summarised in three most significant manifestations regarding the form and layout of the village: 1) Stabilization and nucleation of the dispersed settlement pattern begun ('village origin') across the territory of East Central Europe.[39] Stable village layouts (Pfaffenschlag, Svídna, Hard) consisting of farmsteads situated around a church, village green (Svídna, Mstěnice, Sarvaly, Pagram), road, or stream (Bystřec and Konůvky) emerged. Additionally, more durable construction materials, including stone, became widely used in architecture. 2) In parallel, a village cadastre was being created. The nucleation process was closely tied to changes in legal regulations and land ownership rights, which led to new land remeasuring and redistributions. Consequently, regulated field systems emerged[40] with the land divided into approximately three equally sized open-field complexes. These were cultivated using a three-field crop rotation system, with farming occurring in regular rhythms in the autumn and spring, interspersed with one-year fallow periods. The height of serfs' rents and other obligations were calculated and paid to landlords based on the size of the farmstead and cultivated fields. At the same time, there was 3) an expansion of settlement into higher altitude areas, associated with the so-called 'improvement of the land' (known as *Landesausbau* in German).[41]

The medieval settlement expansion, associated with the founding of normative village layouts according to the laneus system in East Central Europe, has often been interpreted as an institutionalized colonization of previously sparsely populated or climatically marginal landscapes directed by rulers and

[35] Schreg, "Eternal Peasant," 56.
[36] Schreg, "Ecological Approaches," 97.
[37] Klápště, *Proměna Českých*, 188.
[38] Schreg, "Eternal Peasant," 57.
[39] Klápště, "Změna – středověká transformace," 44; Schreg, "Mobilität der Siedlungen."
[40] Schreg, "Eternal Peasant," 57; Klápště, *The Czech Lands*, 253.
[41] Biermann, Mangelsdorf, *Die bäuerliche Ostsiedlung des Mittelalters* 7; Gringmuth-Dallmer, "Die hochmittelalterliche Ostsiedlung;" Krause, Kühtreiber, "Hochmittelalterliche Transformationsprozesse."

elites. The process was viewed within the context of lordly power dominance over the peasantry.[42] However, the role of the peasant agency in settlement reorganization has been largely overlooked.[43]

Historical literature tends to emphasize the role of seigneurial agents – enterpreneurs (*locatores*), who were responsible for attracting settlers (peasants) while overseeing land measurement and tenant plot allocation. These agents represented the emerging village community in negotiation with local authorities, determining the terms and conditions for village establishment, including the amount of serfs' rents to be paid and other obligations.[44] This is well described and illustrated in the German-language legal book known as the 'Saxon Mirror' – *Sachsenspiegel*.[45]

However, the role of peasants was even broader than traditionally attributed to them. Within the 'bounded space' of the colonized area, peasants seemed to have had the free choice to select an appropriate place to establish a village. This choice could have been influenced by various social-economical, ecological, and even spiritual factors that determined the success or failure of the settlement and its future development. Peasants were very sensitive to the perception of the landscape.[46] The optimal location of ploughland as the primary economic base of peasant farmsteads, was therefore crucial for them, among other factors. Peasant communities arriving on new land (or in a new country) had to assist each other, both with the construction of farmsteads and cultivating open fields. Collaborative efforts in village establishment significantly shaped peasant communities and strengthened their social ties. Undoubtedly, they had to make numerous collective and individual decisions, some of which may be evident archaeologically, such as the choice of a suitable site for the village, determining settlement's layout, distributing field plots, meadows, and pastures, and implementing of new land management practise, e. g. the three-field system (similar considerations applied to the reorganisation of existing settlements). Additionally, individual agency played a role in designing farmstead layouts and determining cultivation practise.

The new arrangements – stable, nucleated villages and tightly demarcated land – must have entailed a transformation of the peasant community and social relations within the village, leading to the emergence of municipal and neighbourhood rural society (which were internally stratified, as demonstrated in material culture, see below).[47] Living in the villa neighbourhood facilitated the creation and maintenance of closer interpersonal ties among peasants. These ties were based on residence, solidarity, obligations, property, and

[42] Saunders, "The Feudal Construction of Space."
[43] Schreg, "Eternal Peasant," 61.
[44] Klápště, *Proměna Českých zemí*, 204-7.
[45] Schmidt-Wiegand, *Text-Bild-Interpretation*.
[46] Altenberg, *Experiencing landscapes*.
[47] Lalik, "Organizacje sąsiedzkie."

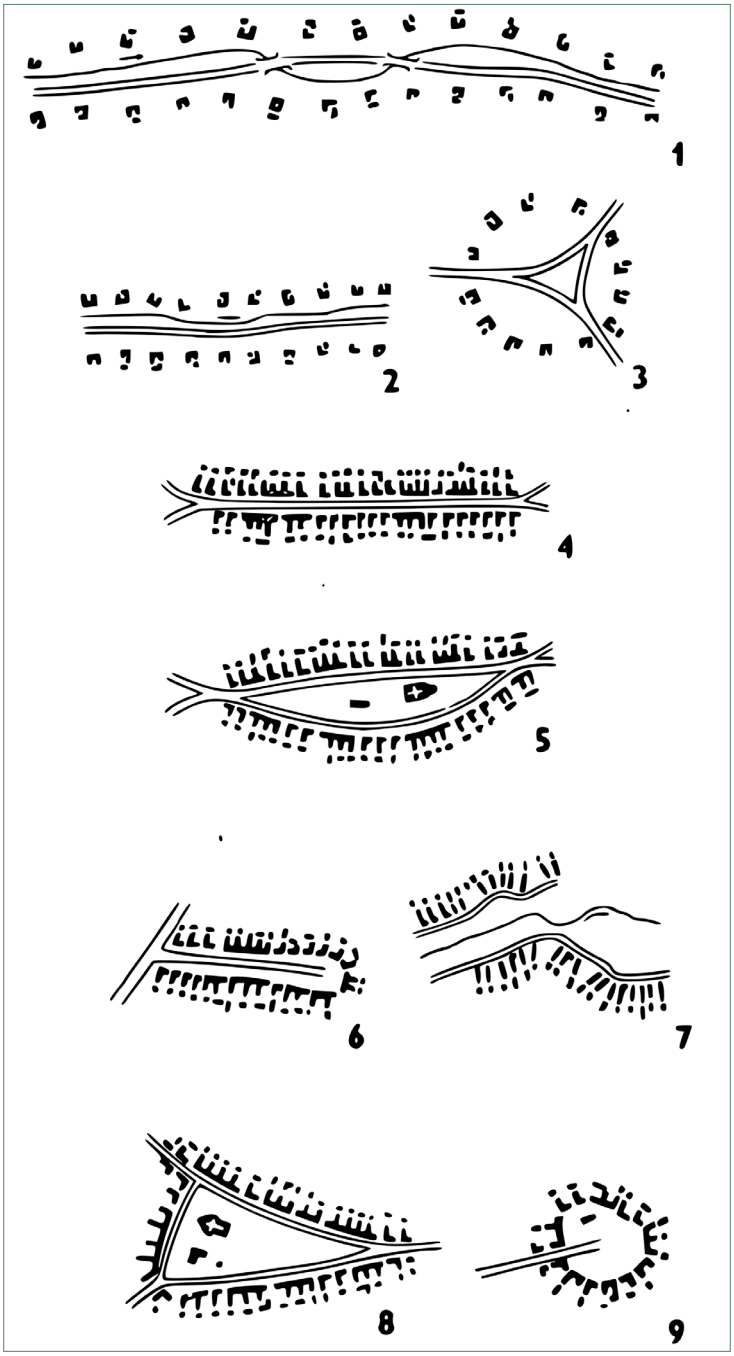

Figure 4. General typology of normative settlement layouts (according to E. Černý): 1 – 3: forest field villages; 4, 6: villages along a road, 5, 8 – 9: villages with a village green; 7: a village along a stream.

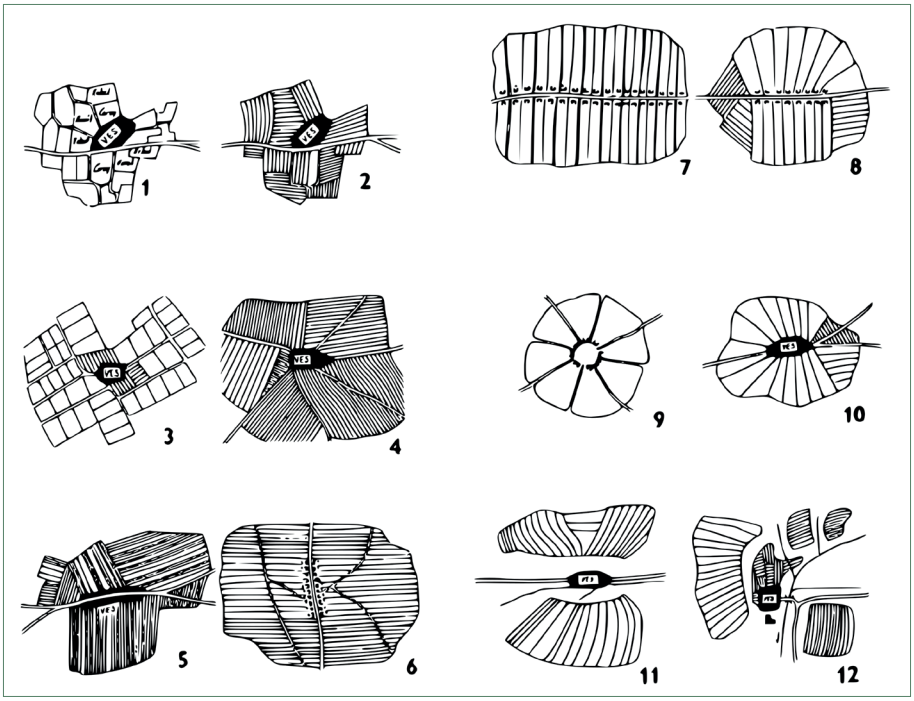

Figure 5. General typology of ploughlands' layouts (according to E. Černý): types mentioned in the text: 4: sectional ploughland; 6 – 10: long strip plots / backyard ploughland.

Figure 6. Illustrations in a Saxon Law Book (Sachsenspiege) show peasants' diverse actions, rights, and obligations: 1. Landlords hands over the foundation charter to the locator of the village that is being established, 2.-3 Peasants promise the landlord to pay the rent and other obligations, 2. Peasants pay the rent in spring after ploughing and 3. In autumn, after crop harvesting, 4. The watermill, heavy plough and church are part of the village's facilities, 5. Peasants are obliged to build dykes as flood protection, 6. Peasants are obliged to build fences around their farmsteads, and running water from the roof must not fall onto the neighbouring plot, 7. Neighbour's trees overhanging the fence of the farmstead may be cut down.

values.[48] Peasants shared a common idea of the village and its surroundings, which was essential for its functioning. Without the cohesion of the rural community, the village could not operate (the disintegration of neighbourly relations is regarded as a factor in abandonment,[49] see below).

5. *Formation of the three-compartment residential house and the peasant household*

Alongside the transformations ongoing in villages and the countryside, a three-compartment house was formed and became the predominant peasant dwelling in East Central Europe. This house type existed in various regional forms, constructions, and layouts (longitudinal or hooked), but the concept was analogous throughout the whole area. It typically consists of a smoke or semi-smoke living room with a heating device in the corner (in German: *Rauchstube*, in Czech: *jizba*), an entrance hall, and a storage-room/granary (in Bohemia, and Moravia) or byre (in Germany).[50]

Traditionally it has been assumed (particularly in the works of ethnographers and building historians) that the three-compartment house was imported from Western Europe.[51] However, archaeological excavations of DMVs in Czech lands (notably Bystřec, Mstěnice, and partly also Pfaffenschlag), have revealed its complex origin; the formation of three-compartment house was rather a gradual process, resulting from the merging of originally separate residential dwellings and farm outbuildings.[52]

The appearance of the farmsteads and the architectural and functional differentiation of spaces within peasant houses, even within the same village, provide insight into everyday life and social practises. These practices encompass various activities and routines related to housing, storage, housework, and household maintenance, revealing potential for peasant agency as well.[53]

Agency is manifested in ideas about household functioning and overall appearance, particularly concerning the sharing of space with other household members. Rural households represent social assemblages formed by social relations based on blood kinship as well as a common way of life and hospitality. Under one roof, not only the nuclear biological family lived, but also

[48] Górecki, "Medieval Peasants," 277.
[49] Dyer, "Villages in crisis," 30.
[50] However, one- and two-parts houses of archaic building tradition still existed in some areas, Vařeka, "The Formation of the Three-compartment Rural House," 145.
[51] Frolec, "K interpretaci."
[52] Smetánka, "K problematice trojdílného domu;" Nekuda, "Vývoj trojdílného;" Pálóczi-Horváth, "Development of the Late-Medieval house;" Vařeka, *Archeologie středověkého*, 256-7; Vařeka, "Formation of rural house;" Schreg, "Farmsteads in Early Medieval Germany."
[53] Schreg, "Interaktion und Kommunikation," 485; Gilchrist, *Medieval*, 114-9.

other members such as tenants, lodgers, or servants.[54] Estimates of peasant family size in Central Europe suggest an average of 6 to 9 members.[55] They had to coexist in some manner; the competence of the household and its individual decisions shaped the living space.

Archaeological excavations (Pfaffenschlag and Hard) have revealed that the basic layout of the house was further subdivided internally, resulting in five or even seven distinct spaces. The prevailing interpretation, supported by ethnography, suggest that these additional spaces served as private areas for other household members.[56] Additionally, numerous discrete zones of activity can be identified, including those related to social and gender distribution.

Peasant houses could be utilized, experienced, and perceived in various ways and should not be viewed statically – they had a degree of social 'flexibility' and 'fluidity'. Space, conceptualized in terms of social relation, was 'inherently dynamic', and peasants as social actors, attributed them different meanings at different times.[57] Although houses were primarily built for habitation, their form, internal layout, and furnishings were subject to change. The physical and material furnishings of the house can be reconstructed through archaeology or analysis of written sources such as household inventories, property transfers, and wills.[58]

Archaeology reveals objects typically omitted from inventories, such as pottery, agricultural and craft tools, while rural household inventories document more valuable items like metal vessels, textiles, leathers, blankets, pillows and specific types of wooden furnishing, such as tables, beds, chairs, benches, and wooden chests.[59] A typical space, whose function could socially change, was two-storey storage room/granary, which may have served various purposes beyond the primary storage of agricultural products and handicraft tools.[60]

As a domestic, physically framed space, the peasant house was not a simple binary entity generating and articulating social differences through its spatial and social organization (inside/outside; public/private; male/female). In the traditional view, the peasant household was considered a space for exercising patriarchal authority. However, it also provided opportunities for women's agency.[61] The gendered division of labour within space, as perceived in the past, with men primarily engaged in productive work outside (mainly

[54] Laslett, "Family and household," 528; Rösener, "Die bäuerliche Familie des Spätmittelalters," 139; Jervis, "Examining Temporality."
[55] Klír, *Rolnictvo na Chebsku*, 275-6.
[56] Dyer, "Living in Peasant Houses."
[57] Flather, "Space, Place, and Gender," 345.
[58] Goldberg, "The fashioning of bourgeois domesticity;" Gilchrist, *Medieval Life*, 115; Jervis, "Examining Temporality;" Petráňová, Vařeka, "Vybavení venkovské."
[59] Dyer, "Living in peasant houses," 21-2; Briggs, Forward, Jervis, Tomkpins, "People, possessions and domestic space."
[60] Vařeka, "Formation of rural house," 148.
[61] Müller, "Peasant women;" Jervis, "Examining Temporality."

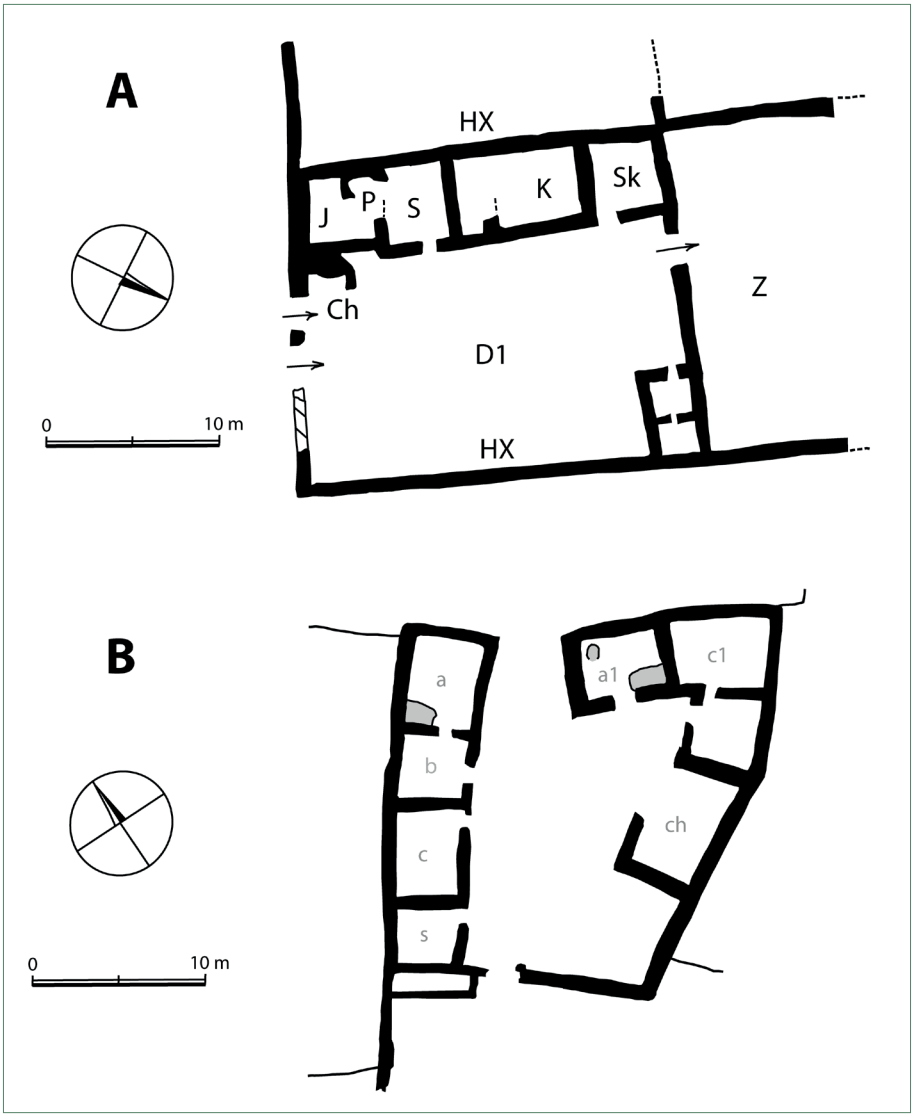

Figure 7. Comparison of two excavated farmsteads with the interpretation of individual objects / functional units: A) farmstead in DMV of Svídna: J – smoke living room, P – stone oven, S – entrance hall, K – storage room, Sk – granary, Ch – bread oven, D – courtyard, Ds – courtyard's building of indeterminate function, HX – assumed farm building, Z – garden (according to Z. Smetánka); B) farmstead in DMV of Mstěnice: a – smoke living room with stone oven (grey), a1 – a second living space (probably an outhouse – life tenancy, rent-charge house) with stove and a fireplace (grey), b – entrance hall, c – storage room, c1 – probable storage room, s – granary, ch – barn (according to R. Nekuda and V. Nekuda).

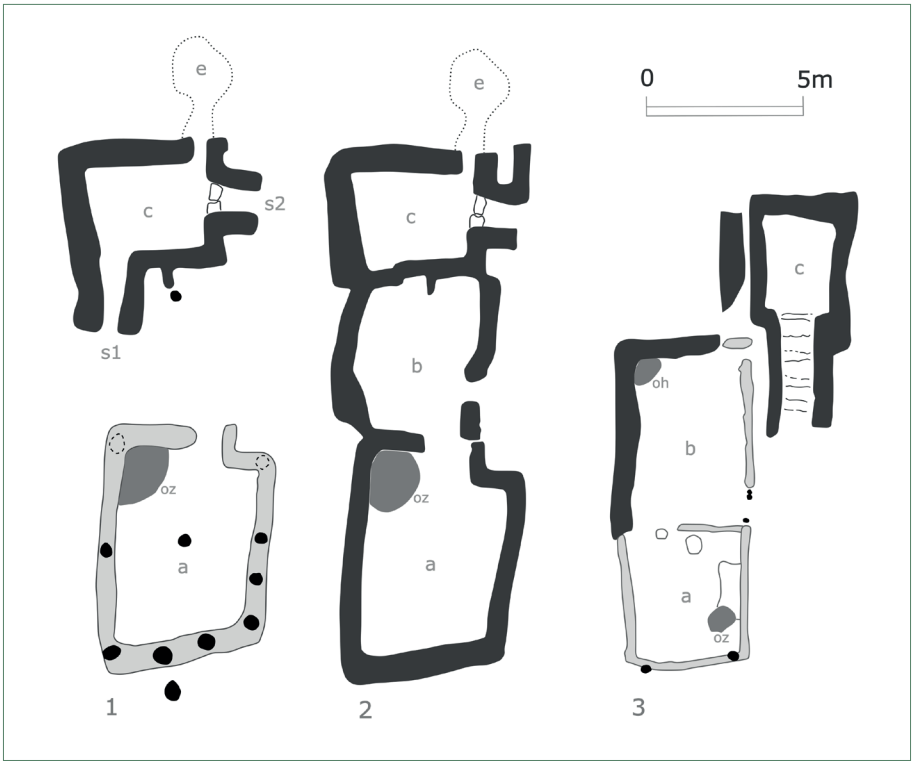

Figure 8. Genesis of a three-part house according to the evidence obtained by archaeological excavation in Mstěnice (according to V. Nekuda): 1: The oldest phase of the house in farmstead II; a – freestanding smoke living room of post-and-beam constructions (oz – oven), c – freestanding stone-built semi-sunken storage room (S1 entrance, entrance from the courtyard), l – cellar ('loch'); 2: the latest phase of the house in farmstead II; a – smoke living-room with oven (oz), b – entrance hall, c – semi-sunken storage room with entrance from the courtyard, l – cellar ('loch'); 3: Farmstead III; a – smoke living-house of post-and-beam constructions (oz – oven), b – attached entrance hall of combined construction with fireplace (oh), c – freestanding stone-build semi-sunken storage room (according to R. Nekuda and V. Nekuda).

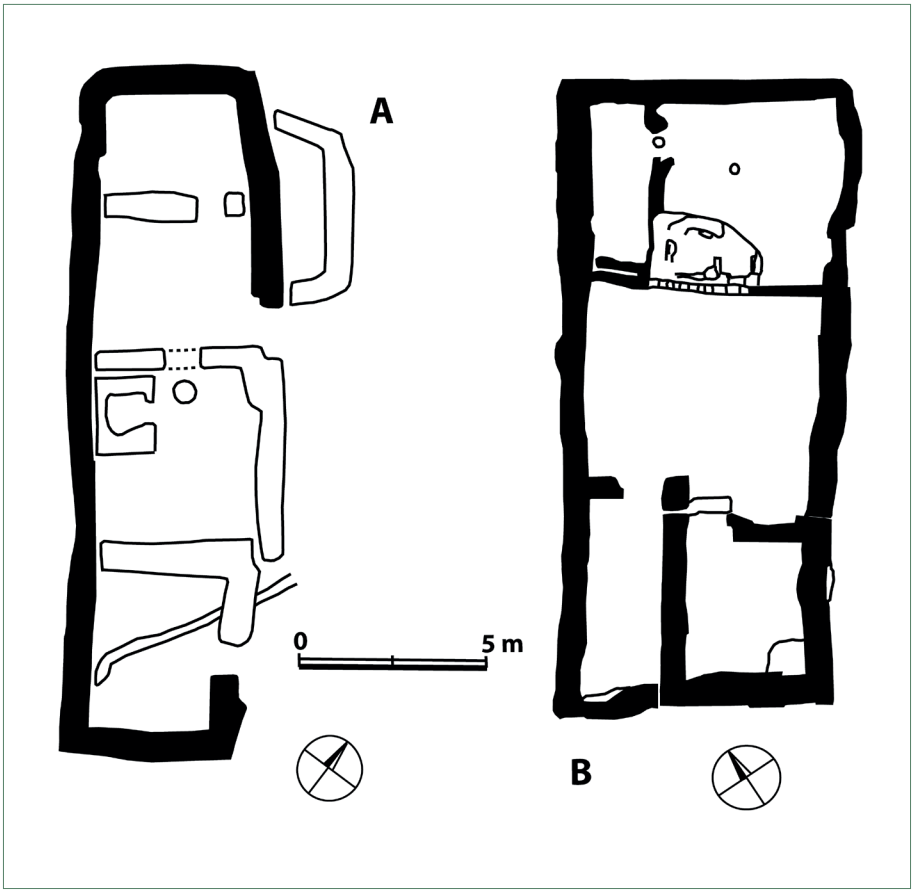

Figure 9. Comparison of a selected three-part house in (A) Svídna (according to Z. Smetánka) and (B) Pfaffenschlag (according to V. Nekuda).

agriculture) and women in small-scale production within the domestic space, is highly simplistic. Women were engaged in a wide range of activities,[62] and they could play leading roles in organization household management or even take control of economic activities in some cases.[63]

6. *Production, livelihood, and nutrition of peasants*

The original idea that East Central European peasant communities were engaged in agricultural production still prevails. They grew grain for subsistence and generated surplus for subsequent commercial market exchange. The accompanying activity was the domestic animals breeding.[64] The proportion between arable farming and livestock breeding varied depending on the type of landscape – in mountainous, less agroclimatic favourable areas, the amount of arable land was significantly lower in favour of pastures and more livestock production.[65] The creation of the regulated field system and the transition to the three-field crop farming system during the 13th century represented a significant structural change involving new land management and economic decision-making.[66] It led to a more significant intensification of agriculture, which was carried out on a smaller scale but with high inputs, resulting in greater diversification of the crops grown compared to the previous period. A negative consequence of extensive arable farming was the reduction of the area for pastures, which were an integral part of the village ecosystem. Animal housing in byres (cowsheds), which has been well-documented in excavated DMVs, positively affected the production of manure used to fertilize the fields. This is indicated by scattered pottery shards or geochemical analysis of soils.[67] Innovations in farming tools were also emerged during this period (especially a heavy mouldboard plough allowing deep tillage and better cultivation of fields).[68]

In less favourable conditions, such as mountainous and foothills areas with limited availability of arable land the medieval village economy relied more on non-agricultural production. Village communities engaged in craft and proto-industrial production to diversify their economics. Between the 'lowlands' oriented on commercial grain production and 'mountainous' areas, there were extensive mixed zones – agriculture had a subsistence character accompanied by other sources depending on the local conditions. These dif-

[62] Flather, "Space, Place, and Gender;" Dyer, "Living in peasant houses," 23.
[63] Rösener, "Die bäuerliche Familie," 139; Čechura, "Rolnictvo v Čechách," 479.
[64] Rösener, *Peasantry of Europe*, 122-43; Cerman, "Social structure."
[65] Schreg, "Feeding the village;" Schreg, "Ecological Approaches," 96-7.
[66] Schreg, "Ecological Approaches," 102.
[67] Klápště, *Proměna Českých zemí*, 284; Horák, Klír, "Pedogenesis, Pedochemistry and the Functional Structure;" Janovský, Horák, "Large Scale Geochemical Signatures."
[68] Klápště, "Změna – středověká transformace," 22-4; Gringmuth-Dallmer. "Der Wandel der Argrarwirtschaft."

ferences in production regions are reflected, for example, in the size and arrangement of farmsteads. Large courtyard-type farmsteads situated in compact village were mainly in lowland areas, while small, dispersed farmsteads predominated in mountainous areas.[69]

The peasants had to manage work organisation in different local conditions, with considerable autonomy in decision-making. Within individual households, they had a great deal of latitude to decide which activities to undertake, choose the crops to be sown or animals to breed, or determine the amount of expenditure to be allocated to the farmstead equipment.[70] The rich archaeological, archaeobotanical and archaeozoological evidence demonstrates considerable variation and diversity not only between regions and villages but also between farmsteads within a single village.[71] This is manifested particularly by the different spectrum and proportions of cereals and livestock, as well as by the presence of horticulture, gardening, winemaking and hunting[72] on some farmsteads.

Knowledge of the consumption, nutrition, and diet of rural communities is still very limited. However, there are indications of different dietary preferences in the selection and consumption of plant and animal food, which also vary among village communities.[73]

Archaeology has contributed significantly to the evidence of non-agrarian production, especially in mountain and foothill areas, associated with surface exploitation of iron ores and their primary metallurgical processing (sorting, roasting), as well as forest crafts such as charcoal burning and tar production.[74] There is an absence of references in written sources for such activities as they took place outside of the empytheutical relationship between the serfs and the landlords.[75] Craft industries commonly associated with the urban sphere were abundant in villages, such as blacksmithing (Bystřec, Sarvaly, Hard, Pagram) and pottery workshops (Mstěnice). Almost all excavated villages provided evidence of wood and leather processing and textile production. The question arises whether this evidence of small-scale production represents domestic consumption or could generate alternative economic income.[76]

Overall, the traditional deterministic ideas of a one-sided orientation of rural communities towards agriculture and their insistence on growing grain

[69] Klír, "Die ländliche Besiedlung Böhmens;" Klír, "Zaniklé středověké," 24-5.
[70] Čechura, "Rolnictvo v Čechách," 482; Stone, *Decision-Making*.
[71] Klápště, *Archaeology of Prague*, 34-5.
[72] This contradicts often-reported hunting prohibitions, which was the prerogative of the nobility: Goßler, "Gedanken zur sozialen Schichtung," 149.
[73] Klápště, *Archaeology of Prague*, 35.
[74] Denecke. "Siedlungsentwicklung und wirtschaftliche;" Kenzler, "The Medieval Settlement;" Černá, Klír, "Osídlení Krušných;" Klír, "Die ländliche Besiedlung," 147-60; Klír, "Zaniklé středověké vsi," 24-5.
[75] Nováček, "Nerostné suroviny," 294.
[76] Svensson. "Before a world-system?."

everywhere can thus be challenged.[77] On the contrary, we encounter different strategies (and adaptability; cf. resilience theory below), which may have varied flexibly according to external circumstances and local conditions. Economic decision-making – what is or is not profitable to grow and whether it makes sense to focus activities on complementary production – is part of the essential 'cognitive equipment' of peasant communities and their capacity for agency.

7. *Integration of the rural economy into the market (trade relations)*

Peasant farmsteads were the 'micro-economy' units with their own farming practice aimed at securing the subsistence of all members (see above).[78] Additionally, they were obligated to pay a serf's rent to local authorities (landlords, church). A fifth or a quarter of the harvest had to be set aside for the next sowing season. Any eventual surplus was then used for market exchange to acquire goods and services they lacked or were unavailable in the village, and to obtain cash. It is estimated that around 30% of total production was allocated for market sale in the 15th century. Alternative sources of income included the sale of livestock, poultry, or other domestic products (cheese, honey, etc.).[79]

The local market played an increasingly important role in the life of peasant communities. In the Late Middle Ages, the demand for market exchange grew alongside the preference for cash as a serf's rent.[80] The share of commercial grain trade significantly increased during this period. Many peasants became involved in the market economy and trade relations with towns and the countryside, which gradually ensured their relative economic prosperity.[81]

In these circumstances, peasant might invest in purchasing or renting additional land or expanding their herds of livestock.[82] Commercial trade required the storage of agricultural products and food, which was also organised at the level of individual farmsteads, becoming an essential part of the socio-economic system.[83] In the Late Middle Ages, storage capacity for accumulating of large stocks exceptionally increased, as evidenced by archaeological excavations. Above-ground multi-storey granaries (in Mstěnice and Hard) were integrated into the house or situated separately within the farmstead. Additionally, various walled cellars were probably used for storage purposes (as uncovered in Pfaffenschlag and Sarvaly).

[77] Houfková, Horák, Pokorná, Bešta, Pravcová, Novák, Klír, "The dynamics of a non-forested."
[78] Čechura, "Rolnictvo v Čechách," 477.
[79] Guzowski, "A Changing Economy," 14; Míka, *Poddaný lid*, 31-2.
[80] Cerman, "Social structure."
[81] Čechura, "Rolnictvo v Čechách," 468-9; Cerman, Maur, "Proměny vesnických;" Klír, "Die ländliche Besiedlung," 152; Schofield, *Peasant and community*, 6.
[82] Cf. Guzowski, "Changing economy," 18; Klír, *Rolnictvo na Chebsku*.
[83] Schreg, "Feeding the village," 305.

Markets offered many opportunities for various forms of peasant agencies. They served as central places with a strong socialising function, where peasants interacted with craftsmen and traders, negotiated prices, and arranged various obligations and transactions.[84]

Peasant also engaged in negotiations with external lenders (trades, officials from outside the village, but also neighbours) with whom they entered into loan agreements (for instance in response to economic stress and environmental crises). The enforcement of such agreements may have influenced the nature of relationships within the rural community.[85] The connection of peasants to the market system and their increasing purchasing power in the Late Middle Ages was positively reflected in farmsteads and their interiors (see below).

8. *Material culture and living standards of peasants*

Thanks to market-oriented production and reduced taxes and rents in the Late Middle Ages, the overall economic situation of peasants in East Central Europe is generally assessed as favourable. Therefore, it allows them to invest in equipping their farmsteads and improving their living standards. In some cases, they may have accumulated relatively substantial wealth.

Insight into the peasants' standard of living is mainly provided by artefacts (material culture). Archaeological excavations of DMVs have revealed notable differences and varied patterns among farmsteads, sometimes even within the same village. These differences suggest a considerable social hierarchy among peasant households, evidenced by the size of the farmstead, the complexity of the building and architectural structures, and the variety of equipment and material culture. Composition of obtained artefacts and representation of their individual kinds is particularly varied. Although a complete and representative inventory of household furnishings is not always available due to organic material decay, recycling, and the transfer of valuable items, rich evidence of wealthier or more luxurious furnishings in some farmsteads has been obtained. This evidence is diverse, as follows:

1) Abundance of iron objects, including various types of tools and equipment, as well as valuable things suggesting greater purchasing power and 'luxury', such as small metal decorative objects as part of the clothing and personal equipment (metal buckles, clasps, rings), equestrian gear (stirrups, spurs), and weapons (long knives and dusacks).
2) High-quality tableware such as stoneware, majolica, Loštice goblets, or glass vessels. However, directly associating these objects with higher so-

[84] Klír, *Rolnictvo na Chebsku*, 37.
[85] Schofield, "Dealing in Crisis," 254-5.

cial status for peasants can be problematic.[86] The proliferation of valuable objects in the village farmsteads may be directly related to the involvement of peasants in trade relations and their purchasing power. A sensitive indicator of market exchange is the presence of imported pottery.

3) Introduction of new heating devices, such as stove tiles[87] and subsequent changes of the living room. Findings of stove tiles in rural milieu appeared earlier in the German-speaking area (at the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries). They did not in the Czech lands until the late 15th century (they were not found during the DMVs excavations either).[88] However, the two wealthiest farmsteads were equipped with stove tiles in Sarvaly, reflecting trends seen in Hungary during the second half of the 15th century.[89]

Traditionally, everything more luxurious was associated with members of the lower nobility or clergy, as suggested by Marxist historiography, which argued that peasants could not attain wealth. However, in the medieval villages, there were undoubtedly richly equipped farmsteads of wealthy peasants (in some cases richer than certain members of the lower nobility). Peasants also attempted to imitate urban or aristocratic style (mirrored in their habitus[90]) but in a peculiar, rudimentary rural form. Nevertheless, the social status of the peasants could change several times (it was both fluid and variable), as evidenced by written record indicating that even wealthy farmsteads were vulnerable to social decline. Younger generations, due to the division of property within the family, were often unable to maintain a wealthy farmstead.[91] Therefore, categorizing village household as simply 'poor' or 'rich' based on material culture alone may be misleading.[92]

9. *Impacts of human agency on the natural environment (human ecosystem)*

The relationship between peasants and the natural environment was traditionally viewed deterministically as a process of adaptation. In this perspective, the life cycle of peasants was affected by short-term events such as weather changes, as well as long-term processes related to climate change (the Medieval Climatic Optimum vs. the Little Ice Age). A paradigmatic shift occurred with the development of landscape and environmental archaeology, along with human ecology, demonstrating numerous examples of how con-

[86] Goßler, "Gedanken zur sozialen Schichtung;" Kypta, "Das Lebensmilieu des Dorfes."
[87] Kypta, "Das Lebensmilieu des Dorfes," 424.
[88] Ježek, Klápště, Tomášek, "The Medieval Peasant House," 352-3; Kypta, "Das Lebensmilieu des Dorfes," 425.
[89] Pálóczi-Horváth, "Development of house."
[90] Kypta, "Das Lebensmilieu des Dorfes," 320; Goßler, "Gedanken zur sozialen Schichtung;" Ghosh, "Rural Economies," 293.
[91] Klír, *Rolnictvo na Chebsku*, 54-5.
[92] Schmid, "Leben auf der Burg," 218.

scious and unconscious human activities have shaped the landscape. Recently, the focus has moved to studying systemic changes in the landscape and understanding the functioning of past human ecosystems. New theoretical approaches, such as systems or panarchy theory, emphasize the active role of humans, adopt a temporal perspective, and consider interactions among all involved actors.[93] The study of village ecosystems is currently developing, extending beyond past landscape reconstruction to examine changes from a long-term perspective. It highlights complex inter-causal dependencies among various actors, where changes and innovations in social and economic organization play essential roles.[94]

There are numerous examples in archaeology of the active role of peasants in coping with adverse conditions and constraints imposed by natural and climatic factors, as well as other exogenous changes, even in marginal landscapes.[95]

1) Various management strategies, including specific agricultural land use system and non-agricultural production, were implemented under local conditions or adapted to changing circumstances, as mentioned above. 2) Diverse ways of adapting to local hydrological conditions are also documented. Peasants actively influenced and regulated the hydrological regime of local watercourses[96] or constructed embankments for watermills (in Mstěnice).[97] They built water reservoirs and drainage ditches in waterlogged soils (in Bystřec), or retention reservoirs (small ponds for rainwater) during water shortage.[98] In the event of floods, they constructed dykes or dams, alternatively raised the terrain.[99] Frequent floods sometimes necessitated the relocation of farmsteads to another place (for instance to a higher terrace, as is well documented at Bystřec). 3) Another form of flexibility is the innovation in agricultural practices, such as fertilization, which can be traced through the distribution of ceramic sherds or through geochemical (phosphate or multi-element) analysis.[100]

It is still an unanswered question whether the peasants were aware of the long-term negative effects of their actions (soil loss, mineral depletion), whether they noticed when a threshold was crossed, and what their (compelling) response was.[101] For example, it is often stated in the literature that the boundary strips (hedgerows, lynchets) separating individual field plots pre-

[93] Schreg, "Ecological Approaches," 107; Dotterweich, Schreg, "Archaeonics," 312-3.
[94] Schreg, "Ecological Approaches," 85-6.
[95] Schreg; Klír, "Rural Settlements;" Klír, "Osídlení horských," 380-1; Klír, "Zaniklé středověké vsi."
[96] Takács, "Medieval hydraulic systems in Hungary."
[97] Nekuda, "Archaeological survey."
[98] Petr, Vařeka, "Palynology research."
[99] Felgenhauer-Schmiedt, "Archäologie ländlicher Siedlungen," 82.
[100] Horák and Klír, "Pedogenesis, Pedochemistry," 43-57; Janovský and Horák, "Large Scale Geochemical Signatures," 71-80.
[101] Dotterweich, "The history of soil erosion;" Dreibrodt, Lubos, Terhorst, Damm, Bork, "Historical soil erosion;" Schreg, "Ecological Approaches," 103.

vented or reduced soil erosion.[102] However, whether this was a sophisticated measure has yet to be proven by future research.

In sum, peasants were often exposed to stressful situations influenced by external and internal factors, but they had specific internal resilience strategies. They could absorb stress, and minimize risks, enabling them to 'survive'.[103] It was the capacity for agency and the social settings that positively influenced their ability to cope with ecological stress.[104]

10. *Late medieval settlement desertion*

DMVs and their abandonment represent a pioneering theme of medieval archaeology in Central Europe,[105] which was also reflected in the perception of peasants. They were seen as victims of: 1) 'Big events' and crisis phenomena (such as wars, famines, epidemics, the vagaries of weather, and crop failures),[106] 2) Adverse long-term processes and changes (especially 'late medieval crisis'[107] and other economic recessions, climate deterioration especially during the Little Ice Age), and 3) Intervention from the landlords and their manorial economy.[108] Additionally, they were victims of their own economic activity and agricultural production. Especially, the high pressure on land and intensive three-field crop farming have frequently been discussed as triggers for ecological crises (erosion, mineral depletion, or drying up of water sources) that could result in the non-profitability of farmsteads and abandonment.[109] Peasants were thus forced to leave their farmsteads and seek opportunities elsewhere (for instance wage labour in towns).

The large-scale archaeological excavations of DMVs have not significantly contributed to explaining the reasons of abandonment. Only two opposite situations have been documented: 1) Destruction horizon manifested by a burnt layer, fire debris, and *de facto* refuse, interpreted as a violent, sudden abandonment (in the case of Mstěnice, Konůvky, Bystřec, or Sarvaly). This evidence was usually associated with wartime events mentioned in written sources.[110]

[102] Recently Šitnerová, Beneš, Kottová, Bumerl, Majerovičová, Janečková. "Archeologický výzkum plužin," 146.
[103] Cf. Daim, Gronenborn, Schreg, *Strategien zum* überleben, 197-302.
[104] Schreg, "Ecological Approaches," 111.
[105] Měřínský, Die "«Villa deserta»;" Klápště, "Investigating Rural Settlement," 102; Klápště, *Archaeology of Prague*, 131-2; Michl, *Wüstungforchung in Deutschland*.
[106] Graus, *Das Spätmittelalter als Krisenzeit*; Schuster, "Die Krise des Spätmittelalters;" Rösener, "Die Wüstungen des Spätmittelalters;" Kitsikopoulos, *Agrarian change and crisis in Europe*; Schreg, "Die Krisen;" Michl, *Wüstungforchung in Deutschland*, 70-4.
[107] Abel, *Agrarkrisen und Agrarkonjunktur*; Kriedtke, "Spätmittelalterliche Agrarkrise;" Rösener, "Krisen und Konkunkturen."
[108] Čechura, *Die Struktur der Grundherrschaften*; Maur, *Gutsherrschaft und «zweite Leibeigenschaft»*; Cerman, "Demesne Lordship."
[109] Schreg, "Die Krisen," 202; Schreg, "Eternal Peasant," 63.
[110] A fire was documented also in Pagram but without any connection to the war event, cf. Theune, «*das dorff pagerem*», 151.

In contrast, 2) archaeological excavations in Svídna and Hard pointed to a planned abandonment of the villages. No destruction horizons were detected, and there is evidence of careful clearance (a voluntary cleaning) of farmsteads before leaving. The quantity of artefacts discovered is much more modest than in the previous case, with only a minimum of valuable items (probably forgotten at the site and not taken away like the other items). No concrete evidence about the motivations of peasants for abandoning the settlement was found. The closer circumstances of abandonment are indicated by the striking disproportion of iron objects both between DMVs and between farmsteads within a single DMV.[111] In addition to the above, environmental constraints (poor soils in Pfaffenschlag) and changes (slope erosion in Bystřec) have been mentioned as reasons for permanent desertion. However, the direct link between negative human ecological impact and settlement abandonment has not yet been adequately supported by evidence. Overall, understanding the abandonment process requires a detailed contextual analysis regarding peasant agency.[112]

Instead of the original view of the village as a static entity, the extraordinary dynamic of the whole process has gradually been emphasized. Linking abandonment to a sudden, single (catastrophic) event and monocausal explanations is misleading.[113] On the contrary, it took many faces, forms, and variations manifested in the long-term perspective. Drawing a sharp line between deserted and inhabited villages is impossible. Abandonment may have involved only several farmsteads and not the entire village; farmsteads could be partially and temporarily abandoned, then reoccupied, and settlements may have survived in a shrunken form until a later period or even the present day.

The vulnerability of rural communities has been anticipated *a priori*. In recent years, however, the issue has been reconsidered. Peasants are no longer perceived as 'passive victims' of external events, processes, or interventions. Instead, their active role is emphasized. Significant importance is given to social factors – the role of peasant agencies that could actively influence their life destinies.[114] Ultimately, the decision to abandon the settlement was that of the village community; often, it was a matter for individual peasant households. Whether 'to stay' or 'leave' should be seen as one of the key factors behind settlement abandonment in the late medieval period. Written sources document considerable peasants' mobility (to other villages or towns).[115] Neighbours often integrated abandoned land into their holdings, or new tenants reoccupied temporarily empty farmsteads.

[111] Klír, Janovský, Hylmarová, "The contextual value."
[112] Schreg, "Ecological Approaches," 104.
[113] Klír, "Procesy pustnutí," 714; Klápště, "Investigating Rural Settlement," 102; Michl, *Wüstungforchung in Deutschland*, 29-30, 67.
[114] Cf. Sreenivasan, "Beyond the Village," 50; Schofield, *Peasant and community*, 5-8; Alfonso, "Comparing National Historiographies," 8-11; Dyer, "Villages in crisis," 28-45; Klír, *Rolnictvo na Chebsku*, 469-73.
[115] Klír, "Procesy pustnutí," 714; Klír, *Rolnictvo na Chebsku*, 473.

Evidence of the flexible response of rural communities and high adaptive capacity is emerging. There is now a consensus that peasants could overcome short-term events (such as war or fire) under certain conditions and were able to cope with economic pressures and poor ecological conditions (cf. resilience theory).[116] The stimulus to abandon farmsteads (and villages) need not only be various exogenous shocks. It can also be a range of endogenous factors that emanate from within the community – such as, disputes, disruption of neighbourly relations, or weak ties within the community.[117] However, the incentive to leave cannot be limited to shocks and crises – leaving may be driven by nothing more than the attractiveness of other places to live, according to the individual preferences of peasant households.

11. *Conclusion and discussion: A rethinking of rural communities' characterization from the peasant agency perspective*

Changes directly related to rural settlement, including the reorganization of settlement patterns, field systems, the emergence of the (nucleated) village, and the development of the peasant house, as well as innovations in agricultural production, human-landscape interaction, market relations, and material culture, have not been widely discussed in the perspective of peasant agency in East Central Europe.

Rural communities were traditionally considered as either as passive actors who subordinated to higher interests or adapted – were forced to adapt – as a whole mass to external conditions and interventions.[118] The active role of peasants and the contribution of peasant agency in influencing historical processes have been significantly underestimated. The reassessment of the existing narrative poses one of the greatest challenges for medieval historiography and archaeology, even more so in Central Europe.

Today, the initiative and individuality of peasants in many aspects of their lives and historical events can be demonstrated through many examples. Peasant communities must be studied without *a priori* social distinction imposed sometimes by the testimony of written sources. On the contrary peasants should be viewed, in general, in terms of the social relations and ties taking place at the level of individual peasant households and within the wider village community. Historians from the English 'peasantological school' have pointed out the complex and overlapping sets of relationships even within a single community, which were often particularly complex.[119] The diversity in the social status of peasants (social inequality) was caused by different dependencies on labour, access to resources (means of production), and goods.

[116] Schreg, "Feeding the village."
[117] Dyer, "Villages in crisis," 28-45.
[118] Cf. Svensson, "Before a world-system," 189; Rösener, *Peasantry of Europe*.
[119] E.g., Dyer, "The English Medieval Village," 418; Müller, "A divided class?," 117

However, social status was not fixed, as there were many gradations in land possession, welfare, and frequent vertical and horizontal mobility from one social category to another. The medieval (not only Central European) peasantry was not homogeneous but very diverse and fractured, and not sharply stratified into distinctive social classes, as has been proclaimed in the past.[120] Rural communities developed as distinct social groups maintaining complex social relations among their members. In the Late Middle Ages, village municipalities were established with their competencies and institutions to ensure adherence to the norms of coexistence.[121] The peasants participated not only in agricultural production but also supported each other when needed. These collective practices strengthened neighbourly relations.

The rural community represented an essential domain of social, economic, and demographic interaction. Community members can be seen as 'neighbours', born and raised into the same external conditions, gaining similar life experiences, and engaging with each other in a wide range of activities. In such a community, there was no place for anonymity and a strong awareness of interdependence prevailed.[122] They appear very cohesive and often united in their resistance to the local authorities, manifested often in Central Europe.[123]

Peasant communities should be seen as distinctive social groups with internal stratification and social identity manifested by variations in living standards, diverse internal and external ties and interactions, and the ability to withstand stressful situations and effectively shape their life destinies. There is increasing evidence from various places in Europe that peasants were strategic and knowledgeable agents.[124]

Archaeology has an extraordinary potential to reconsider the stereotypical ideas about medieval peasantry imposed by the diction of written sources. However, individual or collective peasant agency is complicated to interpret from archaeological records, which are often fragmentary, ambiguous, and influenced by formative and post-depositional processes. While archaeology can document structured deposits, specific contexts, or forms of 'materialised record',[125] it is very difficult to interpret whether this materiality reflects social practice, behaviour, or evidence of deliberate peasant agency. Interpreting these structures against the backdrop of historical processes through the lens of peasant agency represents a non-trivial task.

One direction for future research may be a detailed contextual analysis of material records. This approach may point to some evidence of motivations for social action, decision-making processes, or even peasant agency,

[120] Cf. Schofield, *Peasant and Community*; Aparisi and Royo, "Fractures in the Community;" Klír, *Rolnictvo na Chebsku*.
[121] E.g., Rösener, "Leben auf dem Lande," 71-2.
[122] Schofield, *Peasant and Community*, 5-6; Klír, *Rolnictvo na Chebsku*, 38.
[123] E.g., Blickle, "Peasant Revolts;" Freedman, "Peasant Resistance."
[124] E.g., Dyer, "Villages in crisis;" Svensson, Pettersson, Nilsson, Boss, Johansson, "Resilience and Medieval Crises."
[125] Cf. Stevenson, "Toward an understanding."

manifesting in the abovementioned variations. Some motivations that led to changes to ‘existing orders’ were undoubtedly individual. Yet archaeology more often encounters objects and contexts that are more likely to be evidence of community agency.

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