

Reviews

The Emergence of the Bohemian State. [Series: East Central and Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 450–1450.] By PETR CHARVÁT. Pp. 235. Leiden: Brill. 2010. \$153. Cloth. ISBN 9789004180093.

The Emergence of the Bohemian State is a recent addition to Brill's rapidly expanding series, *East Central and Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 450–1450*. In keeping with past publications, Petr Charvát's book satisfies the early-medieval bias that is evident from the series catalogue. Charvát's contribution is not an entirely new work, but rather a translation of his earlier Czech volume, *Zrod českého státu 568–1055* (Prague, 2007), with the addition of more recent (post-2007) material. Charvát's latest work is an exercise in interpretation, often beyond what the evidence might plausibly suggest. Indeed, Charvát admits as much in his postscript: 'I am only too aware of the fact that I cannot provide firm proof for what I say' (p. 208). Charvát would have profited from placing this important information at the beginning of his brave and interesting book, perhaps as a sort of warning to the reader.

Charvát arranges his volume chronologically. The four long chapters each concern a century at a time, starting with the seventh and ending with the tenth, although Charvát's tenth century is 'long' since it begins in the ninth century and continues into the eleventh century. There is no particular problem with Charvát's approach here. The chronological arrangement allows for something of a natural narrative while the stretching of centuries happens frequently in academic history writing – historians often ignore time and elongate centuries beyond their usual hundred years. The chapters are subdivided into an, occasionally disorientating, array of sections discussing various aspects and themes.

The thesis that is postulated through the chapters and various subsections suggests that the Bohemian state was an eastern influenced creation. The *Bohemi* who inhabited what we would now see as part of the Czech Republic were a people that spoke a Germanic language. This group was joined in the region by Slav immigrants who had moved west in the seventh and eighth centuries – apparently 'the Czech lands accepted a continual migration of new population groups' during the eighth century (p. 77). Included in this migratory movement, potentially from the Pontic region, were the *Doudlebi*, whose name is derived from a Turkic dialect. Similarly, the Croats (or *Charváti*) had a name that was from an Iranian language, while they are known to have settled in the Balkans after moving from the east. This eastern influence on Bohemia is continued with Charvát's suggestion that the Croats were placed in the Carpathians as an Avar border guard, and that the Serbians, another group with an Iranian name, migrated and split into two groups. One cluster settled in the Balkans, while the other progressed to the river Elbe. These eastern groups then abandoned their nomadic lifestyles, becoming 'Slavinized' (p. 113). Evidence of the impact of eastern religious cultures in Bohemia and Moravia is scarce, but archaeology might support the idea that eastern religious figures, such as Ardha Viradh (an 'Iranian sage' [p. 229]), Sesen (a 'protective demon' [p. 237]) and, most crucially, Mithra (an 'ancient Indo-Iranian deity' [p. 87]), were known in these regions. Mithra is particularly important here because it is Charvát's argument that Mithra was linked to the idea of peace and, thus, the contemporary version of his name, Mihr, was associated with the Slavonic word for peace (*mir*), which developed

into the Czech *mír*. The importance of Mithra for Charvát's argument, however, goes beyond etymology. Once settled, the groups inhabiting the region, including the *Bohemi*, *Doudlebi* and *Charvátí*, came together to claim suzerainty over the territory, using the *columna mundi* associated with Mithra as a physical representation of this act. According to Charvát this blend of cultures went some way to creating the Bohemian state, and the *columna mundi* would become the stone throne used by Bohemian dukes. These dukes, then, were responsible for upholding the peace in the new territory because of their association, through elaborate ritual, with Mithra. Even into the Christian period, 'every new suzerain of Bohemia continued to be imbued with Mithra upon enthronement', with Přemyslid seals seemingly supplying the evidence: *pax ducis/regis in manu sancti Wenczelai*, or as Charvát's imaginative translation puts it, 'Mithra in the hand of St. Wenceslas' (pp. 114–115).

Charvát knows he has no proof for all this, and even before his apologetic postscript he admits 'that the hypothesis I am presenting here leans on ethnographic parallels and indications, and that it may be disproved by future research' (p. 115). What he does know is that written sources have probably been exhausted. There is an almost total lack of written material relating to Bohemia in this period and that which we do have is either western, such as Thietmar of Merseburg's chronicle, or produced later, as in the case of Cosmas of Prague's work. Thus, unless new discoveries are made in the archives, archaeology has to fill the void. Unfortunately, archaeology is not really capable of doing this to any great extent. For instance, Charvát's argument revolves around Mithra, yet evidence for the presence of Mithra in the region relies solely upon the discovery of *one* belt mount, which 'is most probably a likeness of the Iranian deity Mihr (Mithra)' (Figure 21b, p. 84). Logically, the fact that parallels of other eastern deities or mythical characters have been found in the region says nothing about Mithra.

As so often with volumes produced by Brill the book is a handsome item, although for the price it ought to be. It is richly illustrated and the forty-nine black and white figures are absolutely crucial in a work of this kind. The colour plates at the back of the book are also a welcome addition. There are, however, some irritants. University teaching staff engaged in the battle to stop their students using non-scholarly sources will be dismayed by the author's decision to cite Wikipedia pages. This is particularly disappointing in the cases of Saint Amandus and Saint Emmeram of Regensburg, as both have *Catholic Encyclopaedia* entries which are also available online. Elsewhere there are not enough footnotes, leaving the reader frustrated and wondering where Charvát found his information. Furthermore, the written style of the book can grate at times. For example, 'didn't' survived the copy-editing process (p. 24) and 'I' is used far too often.

Ultimately Charvát has probably extended his sources and interpretations a little too far. There is no doubt, however, that this is a challenging work and it should be read by those wishing to learn about the primary and secondary source materials for the study of Bohemia in the early medieval period. New additions to the English-language literature on this subject are to be welcomed, and Petr Charvát's imaginative and provocative contribution is no exception.