

# The stone house in Bohemia

Its evolution and geographic distribution

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The very shape of Czechoslovakia, curving and elongated, its roughly one thousand kilometre length linking the western and eastern parts of Central Europe, allows one to surmise that there are numerous types of houses to be found on this territory. And as a matter of fact, in the 18th and 19th centuries the dramatic evolution of the Czech and Slovak rural house, governed, as in other countries, by economic and social conditions, geographic location and ethnic influences, was crowned by a great many distinctive regional house types. These were characterised first and foremost by the ornamental motif so typical of Bohemia and Moravia. In the case of the log house this was applied in the richly articulated gable face or on some constructional element suitable for this purpose, e. g. the head-piece of upper jutting beams, the wooden support or the balcony of the North Bohemian house. Even these houses of north Bohemia with their timber-framed gables and upper storey did not lag behind in this respect, a case in point being timber — framed farmhouse of the Cheb Region, which rivals the most imposing rural timber-framed construction of northwestern Europe. The clay cottage of South Moravia and the Slovakian lowlands likewise has its decoration, even though here, in view of the tectonics of the construction and the hip roof, it appears chiefly in the form of the brightly coloured ornamentation of the front window and projecting construction, called "žudra", around the entrance to the entrance hall. Also well known is the skill and talent of the Czech stonemasons who, especially in the last century, primarily in South Bohemia but elsewhere too, built farmsteads with the front gables of both houses and granaries decorated in the spirit of the rustic Baroque and Classicism, enriching these styles with often new and in the case of town houses, unknown elements. It would be possible to continue in this vein at length.

The decorative detail, however, could never have achieved this marked esthetic effect in the case of the Czech rural house were it not part and parcel of the entire structure, impressive in its entirety by virtue of the attractiveness of its forms and shapes. The constructions of these

unknown builders did not overwhelm nature, on the contrary they complemented it with sensitivity, fully respecting the given economic conditions and geographical environment.

The Czech rural house, with the exception of Eastern Moravia where its evolution continued till the end of the 19th century, attained its fixed basic form in the late Middle Ages, namely a three-sectional layout comprising a room (jizba, světnice), entrance hall and storeroom (the so-called storeroom house or "komorový dům"). At the beginning of the modern age a gradual transition occurred from the black or smoke room into a light room with the mouth of the cooking oven being moved into the antechamber together with the open fireplace (black kitchen — "černá kuchyně"). The layout of the farmstead likewise tended toward a more regular pattern, the farmyard enclosed on three sides becoming the predominant form.

From the aspect of building material (and construction) we find the following types on the territory of Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia — the wooden house primarily of logs, which was the most widespread, the timber-framed house and the hard-walled house. The timber-framed construction appeared in the village buildings of Northwest Bohemia slowly and gradually and not till the 16th century, being first applied only in the gables and later also in the upper floor. Only in some farm buildings, such as the barns and sheds of the Cheb region, do we find it also in the ground-floor walls. The hard-walled house, built of clay, stone, burnt or unburnt bricks, is considered a more recent type according to specialized literature, except for the age-old clay house of South Moravia and with the exception of certain isolated localities, one that did not become more widespread in some areas until the late 18th century.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have also indicated in basic outline the distribution of the various house constructions in the Czech Lands (Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia), but none, as yet, has employed the ethno-cartographic method to such an extent as to be able to give a reliable picture of their geographic distribution. The ethno-cartographic method, used with increasing frequency in the study of the Czech house, is not, of course, an end in itself but leads to new scientific knowledge and at the same time opens unexpected horizons for further research. For the mapping of certain phenomena, such as village type, building materials and farmyard layout, the stable land register of 1826—1843 provided a good source of information. To date, this large and more or less uniform and reliable complex of land-register maps has been little used for this purpose, one that is of great value and that registers certain house attributes from the early 19th century, in other words, from the time prior to the industrial revolution. The only distinction not made here

<sup>1</sup> B. Vavroušek — Z. Wirth, *Dědina*, Praha 1925, 21. E. Baláš, „Sídlní formy a bydlení“. *Československá vlastivěda III (Lidová kultura)*, Praha 1968, 114.

is between wooden and timber-framed buildings and this had to be ascertained by field work. Of the total of 10871 villages in the Czech Lands<sup>2</sup> we evaluated more than one fourth from the stable land register, mainly parish villages, so that the general picture is quite complex. The cartogram of the construction materials of rural buildings, is the first of its kind in Czechoslovakia and thus provides the first opportunity of seeing the composition of this aspect of the rural house in Bohemia with respect to a specific time factor worked out by the ethno-cartographic method on the basis of a complex source.

If we study this cartogram, supplemented by the boundaries of the distribution of the timber-framed house on the territory of Northwest Bohemia<sup>3</sup>, we still find widespread distribution of the log-house in the early 19th century. Whereas in Northeast and East Bohemia the wooden house is almost totally prevalent at this time, in South Bohemia we find the first traces of the hard-walled house, even though to a very limited extent. Its further development here did not come about till after the year 1848, which marked the beginning of the distinctive South Bohemian style of stone and brick architecture. In the lowest parts of Bohemia this architecture is linked with the old stone house whose distribution coincides roughly with the boundary of the four-sided farmhouse with central yard. Likewise in the territory of the timber-framed house, whose boundary was variable, it is still necessary to count with the limited yet not entirely negligible occurrence of the log-house.<sup>4</sup> What is most surprising in the given cartogram is the comparatively widespread territory of stone and brick folk architecture forming a solid broad belt, except for several small islands chiefly in the vicinity of larger towns, that stretches from Prague all the way to the state border in the Krušné hory Mountains, its western boundary extending south of Kladno roughly in the direction of Vejprty and its eastern boundary through Mělník to Ústí nad Labem. At Prague this broad belt is joined by another, though far narrower belt of hard-walled rural houses extending down the fertile Labe (Elbe) River region to Kolín and thence to Kutná Hora. In the thus defined area of stone and brick architecture in Bohemia at the beginning of the 19th century it is necessary, of course, to observe with great care the dynamics of house evolution and distinguish between hard-walled buildings whose construction was determined by the geographic environment and those which began to be built of hard materials in fertile farming regions because of better social conditions, the influence of towns and general civilizational progress. If we study the rural house in Bohemia with this in mind then

<sup>2</sup> Administrativní lexikon obcí Republiky československé 1955, Praha 1955, 13.

<sup>3</sup> More about this in J. Vařeka's article „K otázce rozšíření hrázďeného domu v severozápadních Čechách“. In: *Památková péče*, 1971, in print.

<sup>4</sup> J. Vařeka, „Grafické listy a akvarely z 18. a 19. století jako pramen ku studiu lidových staveb na Teplicku a Chomutovsku“. In: *Český lid* 50 (1963), 7—14.

we see that the hard-walled architecture in the Labe River region and in the vicinity of certain towns (e. g. Nymburk) is predominantly architecture of an economically prosperous region where in the building of houses and later whole farmsteads wood was replaced by stone or brick only in the second half of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century. In the broader belt of the hard-walled house to the northwest of Prague the situation up until roughly the mid-19th century was far more complicated because there, especially in some sections, hard-walled houses intermingled with log and timber-framed constructions reaching as far as Kladno and in some instances even Prague. The log-house is also found wherever there was a handy supply of suitable wood, e. g. in the Nové Strašecí district and elsewhere. In some parts of this territory we find all three types of construction, either separately alongside one another or all together in a single-storeyed building in widely varied combinations, still to be seen in some of the houses preserved in the villages on the right bank of the Labe River north of Mělník.<sup>5</sup> According to the data in the stable land register, however, the prevalent construction in this belt at the beginning of the 19th century was the hard-walled house, the centre of its concentration in the immediate vicinity of Prague and in the broader area of the central and Lower Ohře River region. Here throughout we find the stone house, often storeyed, the area of its distribution roughly the shape of a trapezium reaching from Prague to Chomutov and Ústí nad Labem. On this roughly delineated territory in a total of 150 investigated localities we found wooden or rather timber-framed constructions in only 29 villages; in 18 of the localities, however, these were primarily granaries.<sup>6</sup> Only in the remaining eleven villages do we find the appearance of wooden (timber-framed) houses in the early 19th century, and only in eight of these do they comprise the preponderance or at least half of the village buildings. The eight also include there villages where masonry penetrated to only a very limited extent.<sup>7</sup> Of the total number of investigated

<sup>5</sup> L. Štěpánek lists a total of ten various combinations of building material in the two-storey house of the broader Slaný district but even this number does not exhaust all the modifications. (řatový lidový dům širší slánské oblasti a jeho problematika", to be published in Český lid).

<sup>6</sup> Wooden (timber-framed) barns were found in the villages of Hořín near Mělník, Honice (former district of Nové Strašecí), Domoušice (Louny), Hořetovice (Žatec), Bitozeves (Žatec), Hradiště (Žatec), Milešov (Lovosice), Čachovice (Kadaň), Nechráňice (Chomutov), Hrušovany (Chomutov), Droužkovice (Chomutov), Spořice (Chomutov), Krbice (Chomutov), Libčeves (Bílina), Slatinice (Most), Čepirohy (Most), Havraň (Most), and Nemilkov (Most).

<sup>7</sup> Villages with wooden (timber-framed) houses: Rozdělov (Kladno), Libořice (Podbořany), Mory (Podbořany), Radešín (Roudnice n. L.), Košlice (Lovosice), Pětipsy (Kadaň), Hrušovany (Chomutov), Naší (Chomutov), Bílence (Chomutov), Polerady (Most) and Koporeč (Most). In Rozdělov, Mory, Radešín, Naší and Koporeč wooden (timer-framed) houses comprise at least fifty percent of the buildings, in Košlice, Bílence and Polerady they comprise the majority.



1. Stone farm buildings U Cívků. The nucleus dates from about the middle of the 17th century. Třebíz (nr. Kladno)  
2. The gabled front of a stone farmhouse U Valešů (over 3 hectares) from the 17th century. Kalivody (nr. Rakovník)



3. Entrance gate to the former stone farmstead U Bernášků, probable date 1666.  
Hole (nr. Prague-West) (20 hectares)  
4. Façade of a former stone farmstead from 1777. Řisuty (nr. Kladno)



5. A storeyed stone barn made from tufa (a room for drying hops in the upper storey).  
Lipenec (nr. Louny)



6. The back, farmyard, part of a former farmstead (30 hectares). Late Gothic. The now walled-up portal dates the stone house as from the 16th century. Kvíllice (nr. Kladno)

hamlets, then, villages with wooden (timber-framed) houses comprise a negligible seven per cent. According to the cartogram timber-framed constructions increase in number towards the north and are most abundant south of Most and Chomutov.

By means of the ethno-graphic method we thus reliably established the existence, in the early 19th century, of a more or less compact belt of hard-walled house architecture in the northern half of Bohemia west of the Labe River. Field work then showed that the main type on this territory is the stone house made chiefly of cretaceous marly limestone, sandstone and other stone found in the vicinity of these villages.<sup>8</sup> Everything indicates that this type of house is far older than previously believed and that it is necessary to seek its beginnings at least in the late Middle Ages, for it is found in an old, culturally developed, woodless and fertile farming region where wood was a rare commodity already in the 14th century. Archival sources reveal, for example, that in 1341 the people of Louny finally received permission from King John to float timber down the Ohře River without payment as a special grant because the town was situated far from any forests and woodlands.<sup>9</sup> In the 14th century wood, needed to be transported not only to Louny but to all of the central and lower Ohře River region where its lack became increasingly pronounced.<sup>10</sup> In the 17th century there was already such a scarcity of wood in the Libochovice and Budyně nad Ohří districts and on the Pátek and Ohří estate that the 1677 instruction pertaining to the said estates forbade the sale of wood, which was to be used only for the needs of the brewery and the gentry. The record of the inspection of the Budyne and Libochovice estates dated 1716 points out that wood for the needs of the brewery was purchased from as far away as Prague.<sup>11</sup> One can imagine how difficult and costly it was for the Libochovice and Budyně gentry to obtain wood and all the more so for the workers on the estates, who for this reason built their houses of materials that were readily available. Workers on the estates were even directly ordered<sup>12</sup> to build houses of stone and clay in the interest of saving timber and as protection against fire.

Our surmise as to the long-standing tradition of the stone house in Bohemia is confirmed likewise by the oldest hardwalled buildings ascertained by field work. Of course, the same applies for the classic region of the Czech stone house as for rural architecture in general, with the

<sup>8</sup> For example in the village of Hole (district of Prague-West) the material mainly was black layered stone. In the oldest farmhouses the stone was held together by clay and only later was sand-lime mortar used for this purpose.

<sup>9</sup> B. Lůžek, „Plavení dříví“. In: Český lid 57 (1970), 81 (the original document is in the Louny archive, No. 6).

<sup>10</sup> J. Nožička, „Přehled vývoje našich lesů“. Praha 1957, 168.

<sup>11</sup> J. Nožička, „Přehled vývoje našich lesů“, op. cit. 168.

<sup>12</sup> In „Přehled vývoje našich lesů“ (op. cit., 63) J. Nožička refers to one such order from the year 1603.

exception of the Lower German hall house, namely that apart from a few, remarkable exceptions,<sup>13</sup> most of the existing constructions date from the 18th and 19th century and only in truly rare instances do we come across buildings from the 17th century or even earlier. Investigation is also made difficult by the fact that only a few stone farmhouses are marked with the date of their construction,<sup>14</sup> besides which, over the years, they were several times rebuilt and adapted both inside and out. The layout of the farmyard was likewise changed with the removal of farm buildings that were no longer satisfactory and the erection of new ones. In investigating such farms it is necessary to employ primarily the stratification method by means of which we get to the original house nucleus. Instructive evidence is provided, for example, by the evolution of one stone farmhouse in Třebíz near Slaný, which was later turned into a pub.<sup>15</sup> The constructional evolution of this farm, worked out in detail by L. Štěpánek,<sup>16</sup> shows what changes and period adaptations were made as well as when and why they came about. The determined house nucleus plus the entry in the local chronicle lead to the conclusion that the farmhouse dated from the mid-17th century or even earlier.<sup>17</sup> This farmstead, currently being turned into an ethnographic museum by the Middle Bohemian Regional Bureau for the Preservation of Historical Monuments and the Slaný Museum, is not a unique example in Třebíz as evidenced by the find of a stone with the date 1699 inscribed on it on the adjoining farmstead.<sup>18</sup> Particularly remarkable is the discovery of a small Late Gothic portal opening on the entrance hall at the back, longer side of the house facing the yard on a farm in nearby Kvílice (U Zázvorků, No. 10, 30 hectares). This entrance was walled up apparently in the 19th century when a new one leading to the central

<sup>13</sup> In the European context such exceptions include, for instance, the 14th century, log-house, currently located in a Norwegian skansen (outdoor museum), 16th century buildings in the Alps (Valais) and of Bohemia's stone folk architecture the hard-walled granary inscribed with the date 1564 in Rožnov near České Budějovice.

<sup>14</sup> One of the later stone farmsteads that we found was in Pisuty (No. 38, district of Kladno) where the date A 1777 was inscribed in the stone above the small niche stop the pedestrian entrance in the wall beside the gateway.

<sup>15</sup> „U Cívků“, farm, No. 1.

<sup>16</sup> L. Štěpánek, „K stavebnímu vývoji usedlosti čp. 1 v Třebízi u Slaného“, manuscript, 5 pages, ÚEF ČSAV archive.

<sup>17</sup> The author of the Třebíz chronicle, though born in 1754, did not know even by word of mouth when this house was built, for otherwise he would have noted this fact, considering that he recorded information pertaining to certain of its adaptations (L. Štěpánek, „K stavebnímu vývoji“, op. cit. 3).

<sup>18</sup> According to architect J. Nedvěd of Zlonice, who rebuilt this farmhouse (No. 3 — „U Baňků“) before World War II, the whole building was not of stone; its front part was of logs covered with cretaceous marly limestone. Architect L. Štěpánek, to whom, the same as J. Nedvěd, I am indebted for various pieces of information from the field also came across such structures during the course of his investigations in other parts of the territory of the stone house.

part of the house (now the kitchen) was made next to it. The new entrance was also raised, this being evident from the fact that of the simple, standstone doorcasing of the old entrance only the upper part (116 cm) is visible, the lower part being below the level of the present door and concealed by subsequently built-on sheds. The dimensions of the original entrance, its execution and analogy with the door-casing of the entrance to the cellar and of the now no longer used pedestrian entrance in the wall beside the gateway indicate that this casing was not transferred here from a church edifice but is original and determines the date of the farmstead as being the 16th century. A stone house with a timber-framed first storey in Kalivody in the Rakovník district (U Valešů), No. 16, 3.5 hectares), likewise dates from the year 1620<sup>19</sup> according to the coins found there. Somewhat more recent is the stone farmhouse in the village of Hole north of Prague (U Bernášků, No. 1, 20 hectares, at one time also a pub),<sup>20</sup> whose nucleus dates from the year 1666. True, the said date is inscribed on the wall beam laid on the stone wall at the left rear part of the barn but investigation<sup>21</sup> showed that it is a ceiling beam from the old living room whose wooden ceiling was replaced by a vaulted one probably at the beginning of the 19th century.<sup>22</sup>

We could cite other examples and further field work will doubtless bring to light more information about the age of the stone house in Bohemia. Stone, like wood, was without doubt a traditional building material but up to the end of the Middle Ages in most Czech houses it was used in the main only for the foundation wall and later also for the fireplace wall. Only from the end of the medieval period were stone houses begun to be built in the woodless country northwest of Prague; first of all ground-floor dwellings and later also two-floor constructions. In all instances, even beyond the one-time German language boundary, these were solely, or in the majority, of the storeroom type characteristic of the Slavic house.<sup>23</sup> Hard-walled folk

<sup>19</sup> The wood and clay fill of the framework was replaced by cretaceous marly limestone in 1944. The upper triangular part of the stone gables is of wooden boarding.

<sup>20</sup> The present owner, sculptor J. Racek, whom I thank for bringing this building to my attention.

<sup>21</sup> This is borne out by four facts: 1) the date on the wall beam is atypical, 2) the beam is placed upside down, 3) the dimension of the preserved beam from the living room correspond more or less with those of the wall beam, 4) the lower edge of the wall beam is partly bevelled.

<sup>22</sup> A like instance is to be found in the case of the Třebíz farmhouse referred to in this article where the wooden ceiling (with painted ornament on the ceiling beams!) was replaced by a vaulted one in 1811. Here, too, some of the ceiling beams have remained preserved to this day.

<sup>23</sup> A detailed description of the Czech stone house will be given in another study. In the meantime we refer you to K. Procházková, „Zděné stavby na Strašecku“. In: Český lid 13 (1904), 263 + photographs 264—269.

architecture did not spread to other parts of Bohemia until the end of the 18th century and mainly in the 19th century, finding its way even into such areas as the Cheb and Chod regions<sup>24</sup> in the second half of the latter century.

### C o n c l u s i o n

On the map of Europe on which Vidal de la Blache showed the distribution of the various individual types of traditional building material and timber-framed constructions the territory of the stone house is located in the Mediterranean region, northwestern France and parts of central and southern England. Regional investigation, a precondition of synthesis, shows, however, that there are larger and smaller islands with this type of dwelling also in Central Europe. Small areas exist, for instance, in the northern part of the Tekov district in Slovakia as well as in Germany, chiefly in the middle Rhine region, in the wine-growing districts of the Franks, in the central and western parts of Upper Palatinate and elsewhere.<sup>25</sup> Even though these are more or less smaller areas where the stone house does not have as old a tradition as the wooden house, nevertheless in the study of folk architecture they cannot be completely ignored or classed en masse as latterday constructions as was done even by K. Moszyński.<sup>26</sup>

Revaluation of the stone house in the northern part of Bohemia west of the Labe River and its new placing in the evolution of Czech folk architecture may prove to be the same kind of contribution to ethnography as the recent discovery of stone and brick churches on the territory of Greater Moravia was to archeology.

Photos J. Vařeka, 1971, ŮEF ČSAV archives

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<sup>24</sup> V. Sladký, a teacher in Klenčí (born 1916 in Draženov) ascertained from local narratives that in the 1870s one Chmelík set fire to certain Chod villages, thus obtaining work for his relative, a stonemason by trade.

<sup>25</sup> J. D ü n n i n g e r, „Houswesen und Tagewerk“. Deutsche Philologie im Aufrise 38 (2nd edition), Berlin—Bielefeld—München 1962, 2807).

<sup>26</sup> Kultura ludowa Słowian I, Warszawa 1967 (2nd edition), 508.