REVIEWS

STEINHÜBEL, Ján. *VEĽKÁ MORAVA A SLOVANSKÝ SVET*. Bratislava: Veda, vydavateľstvo SAV; Historický ústav SAV, 2024. 296 pages.
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Ján Steinhübel ranks among the foremost Slovak medievalists specializing in the early and high Middle Ages. Among his works, the less frequently cited now should be mentioned, *Veľkomoravské územie v severovýchodnom Zadunajsku* (*Great Moravian Territory in Northeastern Transdanubia*, 1995), but above all, his most extensive and undoubtedly best-known monograph *Nitrianske kniežatstvo* (*The Principality of Nitra*, 2004 and 2016), as well as the collection of studies *Kapitoly z najstarších českých dejín 531–1004* (*Chapters from the Earliest Czech History 531–1004*, 2011). His most recent monograph, arising from his earlier research, is *Veľká Morava a Slovanský svet* (*Great Moravia and the Slavic World*, 2024). In the relatively short time since its publication, it has succeeded in attracting considerable attention from among both scholarly and general audiences.

Although it may appear self-evident at first glance that "Great" Moravia possessed a Slavic character, this is not entirely the case. Over the past decades, research of the earliest history of the Slavs has shifted away from the automatic identification of the use of a Slavic language with the evidence of cultural or ethnic Slavicness. We may recall from earlier studies and older literature that even a simple wavy-line motif on ceramic vessels was sometimes regarded as an expression of Slavic culture. Fortunately, recent researcher approaches view such material manifestations far more critically, and identity itself has thus become th primary object of inquiry. Modern theories of ethnogenesis no longer view ethnic groups as collections of ethnic markers (language, culture, customs, etc.), but rather as bearers of identity – that is, as communities sharing a (subjective) belief in a particular origin, which then becomes a passed-on tradition. The bearers of such traditions need not be uniformly distributed across early medieval societies; they only need to be present, and it is the task of historians to identify their manifestations primarily through those sources capable of preserving cultural expressions of such identity. Consequently, the significance of written sources has grown in recent decades, while archaeological evidence – though still important – plays a comparatively smaller role in the study of identity.

In the case of the Slavs, their identity is all the more intriguing: it concerns a consciousness of belonging that must be traced across several political entities which, by virtue of employing varieties of the Slavic language, were regarded as Slavic. For a long time, in accordance with linguistic studies and with the *Stammbaumtheorie* of nation formation, an original unity of the Slavs prior to their appearance in written sources was presumed. Even this notion is now treated with increasing scepticism. The key question therefore is what these Slavic groups really shared. Was there indeed anything beyond language?

The author of the monograph identifies several points of contact that may be attributed to various Slavic groups in the early Middle Ages. Nonetheless, such features cannot be understood as exclusively Slavic. They include, for instance, an awareness of the existence of a central place of the Slavic gens: among the early Czechs this was originally the Mount Říp and later Prague, while among the Polans it was Kyiv. Steinhübel proposes a similar central point for both the Moravians and the Nitrans. In line with his previous studies, he interprets these as distinct ethnic communities with their own respective centres. For the Moravians, this centre was their principal princely stronghold, while for the hypothetical (and not directly confirmed) Nitrans it would have been the Mount Zobor above Nitra.

The author also draws attention to the territorial extent of early medieval Moravia and the Nitra regions. It is useful to observe that, whereas Moravia appears frequently in written sources, this is not the case of the Nitra region. The term "Nitra Region" (or "Nitrian Principality") is thus a construct of historiography and it may be refreshing to remind readers of this fact. The existence of the Nitra region is demonstrated only indirectly, especially through the clues in the letter of the Bavarian episcopate from the year 900, whose interpretation must be compared to Pope John VIII's *Industrię tuę* of 880. While *Industrię tuę* mentions Wiching, the bishop of Nitra, the letter of the year 900 states that he resided in the territory of a certain "newly baptized people." Steinhübel (p. 67) in our view correctly regards this information as the strongest proof of the ethnic distinctness of Moravia and Nitra regions, despite the absence of the name of both the community and the territory. Older studies repeatedly placed this distinction into the context of the dual rulership of Rastislav and Svatopluk, who each governed separate territories (referred to as *regna* in the sources) and against whom, in 869, two separate East Frankish armies were dispatched. Steinhübel highlights this fact as a key argument in favour of the dual structure of "Great" Moravia.

Whereas more than a decade ago an academic debate involved the royal title of the Mojmírian rulers (especially Svatopluk) – a discussion in which Steinhübel himself participated (and which appears, in a revised form, in Chapter 6) – the terminological chapter on Slavic ruler titles is equally compelling. In addition to the earliest titles (such as *reges*), he discusses the well-known terms *vladyka* and *knieža* (the latter originally of Frankish provenance). Steinhübel also observes that the rulers of the Rus were originally designated by the title *kagan*, including the *chagan Northmannorum* ("kagan of the Rus"), identified as Rurik. The ruler of Kyiv, Vladimir, was likewise referred to as kagan.

Chapter 7 examines various manifestations of the concept of Slavic identity. Steinhübel invokes the Byzantine author Procopius, from whose testimony he infers a form of Slavic unity. I would say that this formulation deserves greater caution as Procopius refers to the Slavs and the Antes as nations that once allegedly shared the common name Sporoi. A recollection of a (even mythical) Slavic unity does not imply that the Slavs constituted a single nation in the sense understood in the early Middle Ages. Conversely, the author of the Pochvala Kirillu explicitly designated the Slavs as a "ramified nation" ("МНОГОПЛЄТЄНАА ѢЗЫКА СЛОВѢНЬСКА"), and thus it would be more appropriate to interpret this "national unity" primarily on the basis of younger sources.

It is notable that the imagined unity of the Slavs appears also in later sources (e.g., the so-called Bavarian geographer and al-Masʿūdī), while other authors, such as Ibrahim ibn Yaʿqūb, depicted the Slavs as fragmented – observing that, were this fragmentation absent, they would be invincible. These perspectives are, of course, external; although one may assume that Slavs themselves sometimes supplied information to these authors, it is noteworthy that the term "Slavs" became established as a common ethnonym relatively late only and that myths about primordial unity played just a limited role in Slavic traditions. The Slavs did not constitute a common nation but rather a distinctive cultural community linked primarily by linguistic proximity. It is therefore significant that one of the culminating historical points of Slavic identity became the mission of Methodius in Moravia. This, indeed, suggests what Slavic identity in the early Middle Ages looked like. For the everyday members of Slavic *gentes*, it did not play a decisive role comparable to the struggle of the Moravian ecclesiastical elites for cultural-political emancipation within Latin Christendom, nor to the later role of the "Slavic program" during the national revivals of the nineteenth century.

One of the most engaging chapters of the book is the section devoted to *župans* and *župas*. Here Steinhübel offers a wealth of insights from Mojmírian Moravia and from other lands. Fortified sites as units of administration have long been acknowledged in historiography and played an important role in older conceptions of the Central European type of medieval state. The existence of *župas*, however, remains disputable. If *župans* existed in Mojmírian Moravia, the *župas* themselves are unproven – this also applies to later Hungarian conditions. Hungarian administrative terminology included *ispáns* (*comes*), a term which entered Slovak language as *išpán*. By contrast, *župas* (*županije*) are known from Croatia and, eventually, from Bohemia, whereas the Kingdom of Hungary did not recognize *župas* in a strict sense, even though the term "castle *župa*" (castle ispánate, Hungarian *várispánság*) appears in the research.

The book concludes with a survey of terminology relating to local administration. Framed in this way, the Slavic world becomes an illustration of how challenging it is to conceptualize Slavicness within the context of our history. On the one hand, the study of Slavic identity is restricted by the limited number of sources that directly preserve expressions of such identity. On the other hand, a straightforward conclusion emerges: Moravia became one of the key loci of medieval Slavic identity – not as an heir of some primordial Slavic tradition, but as its active creator. The biographer of the *Life of Constantine* was explicit on this point: Moravia was to serve as a model for others; its path to Christianity was to become the paradigm for the other Slavic peoples of the early Middle Ages. This beautiful motif in the *Life of Constantine*, which Steinhübel analyses in detail, is perhaps the most powerful message of the entire book.

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