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Report on the 62nd Annual Meeting of the Society

Over the last decades, the annual meetings of the Hugo Obermaier Society were a fixed date in the calendar of international archaeological meetings. For April 2020, the 62nd Annual Meeting of the Hugo Obermaier Society was originally scheduled in Brno, Czech Republic, at the invitation of the Anthropos Institute and the Centre for Cultural Anthropology of the Moravian Museum in Brno. The entire conference – from venue to conference booklet and excursions – was organized and we were all looking forward to a cheerful meeting with friends and colleagues and face-to-face discussions.

Taking into consideration that several of the previous meetings had been dedicated to the Middle Palaeolithic, our hosts looked for a different topic and decided to focus on another important Prehistoric period of the region – the Gravettian. The region around Brno is world-renowned for several famous Gravettian sites. Together with other sites in neighbouring countries, they form one of the most important clusters of Gravettian occupation in Europe. "Back to the Gravettian" was the title thus chosen for the meeting and presentations within a special session highlighted the increase in knowledge over recent years about this fascinating period of human history. In line with the focus topic, the Gravettian sites of Dolní Věstonice and Pavlov were two of the main destinations of the two initially scheduled excursion days. These were planned in collaboration with the Archaeological Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Brno. The excursions were also intended to cover other significant phenomena of Moravian prehistory and history, such as the occupation of the Moravian Karst with the well-known multilayer site of Kůlna Cave, and one of the most important centres of the early Slavic period at Mikulčice, where archaeologists from the Archaeological Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences had uncovered the stone foundations of several churches.

In March 2020, however, it became clear that the pandemic situation would not allow for a meeting and – with a heavy heart – our hosts and the board members decided to cancel the meeting and postpone it to 2021. Looking back, our hopes of having a regular meeting in 2021 were clearly over-optimistic.

In the autumn of 2020, the organizers were again confronted with the question as to whether to hold the conference in Brno or to postpone it again. A face-to-face meeting seemed not only hardly feasible but also risky, largely because of a lack of reliable predictions for the state of the pandemic in April 2021. On the other hand, our hosts and the board members felt that some form of get-together and scientific exchange was necessary, not only professionally but also psychologically. The pandemic time forced us to seek and develop new forms of social interaction. Many of us had gained valuable experience, often via teaching at universities or in other professional exchanges, of online platforms providing the means for joint discussions. Therefore, we decided to conduct the Hugo Obermaier meeting in the form of an online conference. However, opting for an online conference also meant that the 2020 plans could not just be taken wholesale and transferred to 2021. Instead, the entire conference had to be re-designed and adapted to the digital environment. This also included familiarizing ourselves with different software solutions for online meetings.

Due to its widespread distribution and because many people had already gained experience of it, we opted for Zoom to conduct the talks and discussions of the meeting, simply and flexibly. A more demanding task was to set up a digital space that would allow for individual chats and parallel discussions in small groups for the poster session and social events as well as a digital representation of the excursions. Here, we would like to thank Marcel Weiß and our hosts for the great job they did in designing a digital meeting room in "Gather" (www.gather.town). Participants could walk through the poster session and have individual discussions with the authors, take part in an exciting online excursion, where the sites of Moravia could be

visited and information could be downloaded, and a cosy bar for the social get-togethers in the evening.

Except for a few minor problems with internet connections, the running of the meeting, with all its presentations, went surprisingly smoothly. A total of 170 participants had registered for the conference and sometimes more than 120 colleagues were simultaneously connected to the online transmission. Thanks to the responsible timing of the individual speakers, it was possible to remain on schedule and to have fruitful discussions similar to the usual practice. A special thank-you goes out to Martin Oliva from the Anthropos Institute, who took it on himself to give the evening lecture in this unfamiliar format and present the results of his year-long research on prehistoric mining activities in the Krumlov Forest, where the outcrops of a local chert were exploited throughout the prehistory of Moravia.

Although each of us probably prefers direct meetings with colleagues, it eventually turned out that, if necessary, it is possible to organize large events also online. This was also reflected in the discussion during the general assembly of the Hugo Obermaier Society, where members discussed options to regularly implement online presentations in future meetings. Such a hybrid conference will allow many researchers to overcome personal and other issues that prevent them from attending the conference.

Despite the smooth course of the "meeting in Brno" and the undeniable advantages of online participation, most of us are certainly looking forward to a direct and personal meeting with friends and colleagues during the Hugo Obermaier conference in Berlin in 2022.

Once again, the society would like to thank our hosts Zdeňka Nerudová and Petr Neruda for embarking with us into these uncharted waters, which were new to all of us back then. Together, we managed to recreate the Obermaier programme with talks, poster presentations, even a virtual excursion, and hopefully also a bit of the Obermaier spirit and feeling - being among friends.

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