CHAPTER 2

THE EIGHTH-CENTURY: LET THIS BE OUR HOMELAND

'We praise Mithra, to whom
   The lord of the land appeals for help,
   The lord of the province appeals for help,
   The lord of the village appeals for help,
   The lord of the house appeals for help.'

In the eighth-century, the main concern of the Czech population was learning how to live in their chosen land. They acquainted themselves with the nature of the landscape and with indigenous flora and fauna, and adjusted themselves to the extremes of the local climate. Gradually, they learned about the varying quality of arable soil, and could thus decide which regions were best for cultivating crops and gardens, which were better suited to keeping livestock, and which were not worth the work. Mastering drainage, the new residents of this hilly central European country explored the natural resources which were at their disposal.

The inhabitants of the Czech lands naturally knew all the essential craft and production techniques familiar to their neighbors. Agriculturalists produced more than enough to feed their own families; housekeepers cultivated garden plots, and poorer or sloping soils lent themselves to keeping cattle, sheep, goats and pigs. In winter, shepherds herded their animals into protected lowland valleys while in late spring, they took them to the hills and mountains where they could graze on fresh pastures. The parts of the landscape which were not cultivated provided the eighth-century diet with game, wildfowl, fish and other aquatic comestibles. There were also wild fruits to gather and bees to keep.

Remember:…When Jesus ascended from earth into heaven, he decreed thee to dwell here, not to fly away into the woods, to remain here, not to take residence in woods, to avoid all hollow trees and others’ gardens [pigarton]. Here thou hast that man who provides for thee. He will give thee this receptacle which had belonged to Saint Martin. Thither thou hast
to bring wax and [uunni] and thus to procure candles [steccandela] for Virgin Mary and the altar of the church.

Latin-language Blessing of Bees with Old High German Expressions; tenth-twelfth century.

The task of cooking and preparing all these foods for the dinner table fell to the women of the household. With none of the mechanical equipment that we have today, this was very hard work, and sometimes the men of the house, seeing how their loved ones toiled, put their hands to work to lighten their load.

A written source from a later period has preserved for us a charming episode from the life of a Slav peasant family that depicts this kind of marital relationship. It tells of a man and his wife who took up residence in a wooded area in one of the eastern European countries, where they lived by agricultural means. The husband felt sorry for his wife, who had to labor to prepare meals from flour ground on a primitive stone device. This induced him to make her a quern from two stones, one of which remained stationary while the other rotated. The quern was operated by a handle, so the wife no longer had to kneel to do the work. The lady was not exactly bright, however, and could not work out how to use this new device. When her husband later came home and found that she hadn’t prepared any dinner, he decided to take the matter into his own hands. He is then reported to have said to her: ‘Day ut ia pobrusa a ti poziwai’ (‘Let me do the grinding, and you take a rest’), which became the habit. In the end, people began to ask who was the master and who the mistress in a house where the womanly task of corn-grinding was done by a man, and he became the laughing stock of the neighborhood. The man called Bohukhval thus got the nickname Brukal (miller or grinder), and the village established by their sons, where the couple’s descendants lived, was known as Brucalizi. (Brukalice in Poland exists to this day.)

Craftspeople providing households of both the high and low orders worked with a whole range of materials that could be treated using coeval technologies. They used clay principally for pottery production, either by free-hand modeling or by turning on a slow wheel. Stone served for building fortifications and household objects (kilns), or for manufacturing technical equipment such as the quern mentioned above. Bone was used to produce pointed tools such as awls, bodkins and needles, and also in wide, flat segments to create shaping tools and

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1 Bischoff 1984b.
2 Dembińska 1977.