

# Chapter 12

## The Cemetery and Ossuary at Sedlec near Kutná Hora: Reflections on the Agency of the Dead



Jan Horák, Estella Weiss-Krejci, Jan Frolík, Filip Velímský,  
and Ladislav Šmejda

### 12.1 Introduction

The outstanding Church of All Saints with Ossuary at Sedlec is located in central Bohemia within the buffer zone of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Kutná Hora. It is a popular tourist destination and has attracted visitors for hundreds of years. The Ossuary, which forms the lower part of the two-story building, and the surrounding cemetery played a role in religious narratives enabling us to investigate aspects of the agency of the dead and their effects on the living. The history of the Church of All Saints with Ossuary is recorded in various historical sources, and

---

J. Horák (✉)

Department of Ecology, Faculty of Environmental Sciences,  
Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Prague, Czech Republic  
e-mail: [Horakjan@fzp.czu.cz](mailto:Horakjan@fzp.czu.cz)

E. Weiss-Krejci

Department of Historical Archaeology, Austrian Archaeological Institute,  
Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna, Austria  
e-mail: [Estella.Weiss-Krejci@oeaw.ac.at](mailto:Estella.Weiss-Krejci@oeaw.ac.at)

J. Frolík

Department of Medieval Archaeology, Institute of Archaeology of the Czech Academy  
of Sciences, Prague, Czech Republic  
e-mail: [frolik@arup.cas.cz](mailto:frolik@arup.cas.cz)

F. Velímský

Department of Prehistorical Archaeology, Institute of Archaeology of the Czech Academy  
of Sciences, Prague, Czech Republic  
e-mail: [velimsky@arup.cas.cz](mailto:velimsky@arup.cas.cz)

L. Šmejda

Department of Spatial Sciences, Faculty of Environmental Sciences,  
Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Prague, Czech Republic  
e-mail: [smejda@fzp.czu.cz](mailto:smejda@fzp.czu.cz)

© The Author(s) 2022

E. Weiss-Krejci et al. (eds.), *Interdisciplinary Explorations of Postmortem Interaction*, Bioarchaeology and Social Theory,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-03956-0\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-03956-0_12)

269

many folk tales make reference to the special role of the bones. The Ossuary at Sedlec is the most widely known monument in the Kutná Hora region and an iconic place, but beyond this building there are other places that relate to, represent, and commemorate the dead. Archaeological investigations of parts of the cemetery surrounding the Church of All Saints with Ossuary began with multiple brief excavations from 2011. The main excavation activities by the Archaeological Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences under the direction of Filip Velímský and Jan Frolík (Brzobohatá et al., 2019; Frolík, 2017a, b, 2018, 2019, 2020) started in 2016 (exterior 2016–2018; interior from 2019), shining some light on the historicity of the accounts of Sedlec's dead.<sup>1</sup>

To present the Church of All Saints with Ossuary and the surrounding cemetery in its historical context, it is necessary to provide some background and introduce the two main powers that have shaped the region from late medieval times: the town of Kutná Hora, which was the most important mining center of medieval Bohemia during the times of the Přemyslid and Luxembourg dynasties, and the Cistercian monastery at Sedlec to which the Church of All Saints with Ossuary belonged (Fig. 12.1).

## 12.2 Medieval Beginnings

The Sedlec Abbey was founded around 1142 as the first Cistercian monastery in the Czech lands by Miroslav, a member of the regional nobility, and was settled by monks from the Bavarian abbey of Waldsassen (Charvátová, 1998). The region had already been under intensive human influence not only during the early medieval period but also in prehistoric times (Šimůnek, 2010; Velímský, 2009a). The monastery's location contradicts the so-called 'wilderness myth' (Schreg, 2018, p. 40), i.e. the common assumption that Cistercians always settled in undeveloped lands.<sup>2</sup>

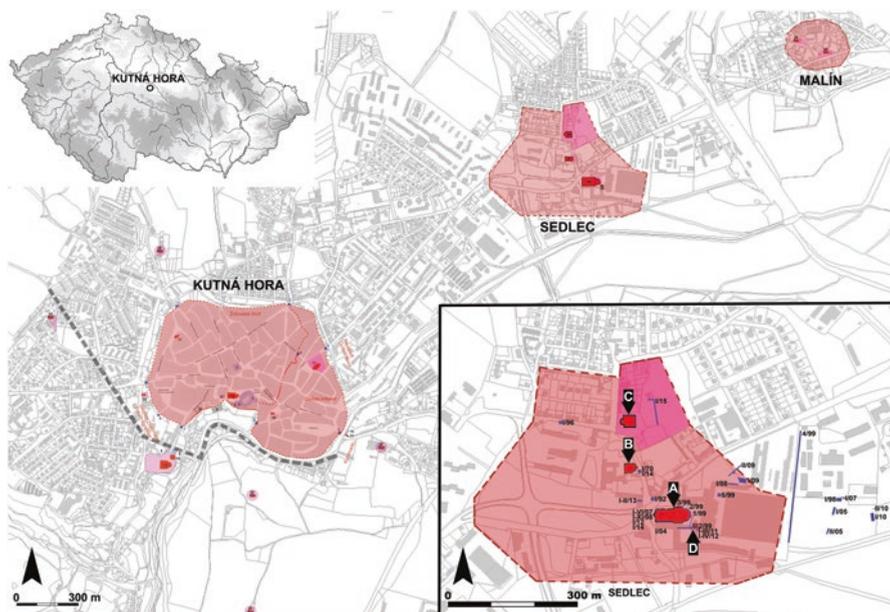
Before the Cistercians came to the region, a local mint was already in operation in the town of Malín (Fig. 12.1) at the end of the tenth century, but it is generally accepted that the silver was not mined in those times. After the discovery of veins of silver ore in the second half of the thirteenth century in the Kutná Hora region,<sup>3</sup> intensive mining surged and the area saw a veritable silver boom resulting in a fast-growing population of miners, entrepreneurs, artisans, and merchants. The mining drifts and shafts were soon surrounded by houses, wooden chapels, shops, and

---

<sup>1</sup>The excavation was published only partially but publication of the results of thorough archaeological and anthropological analyses is in progress. See also <https://www.sedlec.info/en/ossuary/renovations/>. Accessed 25 February 2021.

<sup>2</sup>The observation that the Cistercians preferred old cultivated land wherever it was available was already made in the nineteenth century (Lippert, 1898, p. 64).

<sup>3</sup>The role of the Cistercians in the discovery of the local ore source is still unclear (see Petr Pauliš and Martin Bartoš in Bartoš, 2004, p. 162).



**Fig. 12.1** Town of Kutná Hora, Cistercian monastery of Sedlec, and Malín settlement at the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (light red and delimited by thin dashed line); high medieval church buildings (red ground plans); areas of high medieval cemeteries (light purple); boundary between parish districts of Malín and Pněvice (bold dashed line). Lower right corner: map of the area of the Cistercian monastery in Sedlec with the location of the archaeological test trenches (in blue) and churches: A = Assumption of Our Lady and St. John the Baptist; B = SS. Philip the Apostle and James the Less; C = All Saints with Ossuary surrounded by cemetery; D = Abbot's Chapel (Graphics: F. Velímský)

workshops (Frolík, 2014a, b; Velímský, 2013, 2014, 2017). At the end of the thirteenth century Kutná Hora had developed into a town.

The mining revenues provided the necessary financial means for the extraordinary development of the Sedlec Abbey into a rich and powerful institution. Shortly after the start of mining, during the reign of Přemysl Otakar II, the large deposits of silver ore attracted the interest of the Crown which regulated prospecting and mining on many of the abbey's possessions. The monastery had to ensure the supply of timber, food, and the maintenance of the roads but in return received considerable financial compensation (Velímský, 2009b). After King Wenceslas II of Bohemia issued a new royal mining code (*Ius regale montanorum*) in 1300, which specified the conditions necessary for the operation of the mines such as labor rules, wages, and the king's part in mining and coinage (Zaoral, 2015, p. 7), the monarch (and his successors) compensated the Sedlec Abbey by 'granting a number of privileges' (Velímský, 2009b). In the 1380s, King Wenceslas IV even made Kutná Hora his temporary seat of residence.

Over time, the Sedlec Abbey was increasingly exposed to a conflict with the wealthy residents of Kutná Hora, who made every effort to match the aristocracy in



**Fig. 12.2** Oldest preserved depiction of medieval churches of Kutná Hora (1–9), Sedlec (10–12), Malín (13), and Kaňk (14): 1 = St. Martin; 2 = St. George; 3 = St. Bartholomew; 4 = All Saints; 5 = St. James (former Upper Church of the Virgin Mary at the Italian Court); 6 = Royal Chapel at the Italian Court; 7 = Our Lady Na Náměti; 8 = Hospital Chapel of the Holy Cross; 9 = St. Lazarus; 10 = All Saints with Ossuary; 11 = SS. Philip the Apostle and James the Less; 12 = Assumption of Our Lady and St. John the Baptist (without roof); 13 = St. John the Baptist and St. Stephen; 14 = St. Mary Magdalene. Some of these churches (e.g. St. George) no longer exist (Frolík & Vepřeková, 2011). The depiction is incomplete, as its left part with the churches of St. Barbara, St. Wenceslas, SS. Peter and Paul, and the Holy Trinity is not preserved. The picture also does not show the Church of St. John the Baptist in the lower town, which disappeared during the Hussite Wars. (Image modified from a pen drawing by Johann Willenberg c. 1602, *Knihovna Královské kanonie premonstrátů na Strahově, Prague*, sign. DS-T-I-30/26; interpretation: F. Velímský)

political position and lifestyle. One of the reasons for this conflict was the fact that many churches in Kutná Hora (Fig. 12.2) and therefore also fees and pious donations belonged to the Malín parish, which in turn was under the patronage of the abbots of Sedlec. This did not sit well with the rising class of Kutná Hora burghers, at the time the second richest in Bohemia after Prague, who wanted to support their own town community through the foundation of altars, chapels, and tombs which were connected to a family's memory and representation (Vaněk, 2011, pp. 59–67). The rivalries manifested themselves in the foundation of various confraternities, in disputes about how important processions should be maintained, through which streets and by which churches processions should or should not pass, as well as where people were to be buried. These frictions had a lasting effect on the economy, on religious life, rituals, and burial places.

### 12.3 Medieval Cemeteries and Confraternities at Kutná Hora

The situation of cemeteries within Kutná Hora is not well known. Cemeteries were archaeologically uncovered next to the churches of Our Lady Na Náměti, St. Martin, and St. George, but the graves are undated or stratigraphically dated to the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries (Frolík & Vepřeková, 2011). We can assume that there were cemeteries by the Church of All Saints in Kutná Hora, by the Kutná Hora town hospital (founded before 1324) with its Chapel of the Holy Cross (founded at the end of the fourteenth century), and by the Chapel of St. Lazarus, which is believed to have been connected with the leprosarium due to its location some distance from the town hospital. Another cemetery was probably located by St. Wenceslas in the

neighboring Pněvice parish. Because Kutná Hora belonged to the Malín parish, we suppose that the main cemeteries for the population of Kutná Hora were located in Malín and in the area of the Sedlec Abbey (Vaněk, 2011).

The situation changed when the burghers of Kutná Hora founded the confraternity of Corpus Christi around the year 1384 (Neuwirth, 1893, pp. 311–312). Confraternities of Corpus Christi had become highly popular in the fourteenth century, following the establishment in 1264 of the Feast of Corpus Christi which celebrated the presence of the body and blood of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. Confraternity members promoted and attended religious events such as processions, funerals, and rites of remembrance for the souls of deceased members and their families. They were also granted indulgences, i.e. a remission before God of the temporal punishment one has to undergo for sins (Pátková, 2000, pp. 18 and 119).

In 1388 the Kutná Hora confraternity of Corpus Christi received a piece of land from the Prague Cathedral chapter in order to construct the Church of Corpus Christi and St. Barbara (Neuwirth, 1893, p. 335–337).<sup>4</sup> This church was located in the southwestern corner of Kutná Hora within the confines of the Pněvice parish (Fig. 12.1) and thus beyond the reach of the Sedlec abbots. When, in 1401, Pope Boniface IX awarded the right to perform baptisms and funerals to the Church of Corpus Christi and St. Barbara (Neuwirth, 1893, p. 339–341), the tensions between the Prague Cathedral chapter, the confraternity of Corpus Christi, the Pněvice and Malín parish priests, and the Sedlec abbot flared up (Vaněk, 2011, pp. 101–114). The Sedlec Abbey and its subordinate Malín parish regarded the new church and the cemetery behind the city walls as a threat to their parish rights and income. The lengthy dispute was only settled in 1410, when the boundaries between the parishes Malín and Pněvice were defined and an agreement about sacraments and funerals was reached and confirmed by Pope John XXIII. It was decided that Kutná Hora townspeople were to receive the sacraments exclusively in their residential parish district, but had the right to be buried at the Church of Corpus Christi and St. Barbara. The priests of the Church of Corpus Christi and St. Barbara were not allowed to visit the sick and dying in Kutná Hora without the permission of the Malín priest so as not to influence their choice of place of burial nor to encourage bequests for funeral masses, etc. If one of the inhabitants of Kutná Hora chose the Church of Corpus Christi and St. Barbara for funeral, however, he or she should be allowed a procession and chants by priests and disciples from the new church (Vaněk, 2011, p. 105). These developments reduced the pressure to use the Sedlec cemetery considerably, but animosities continued. For example, in 1412 people from Kutná Hora burnt down Malín (Charvátová, 1998, p. 112; Vaněk, 2011, p. 61 and 112).

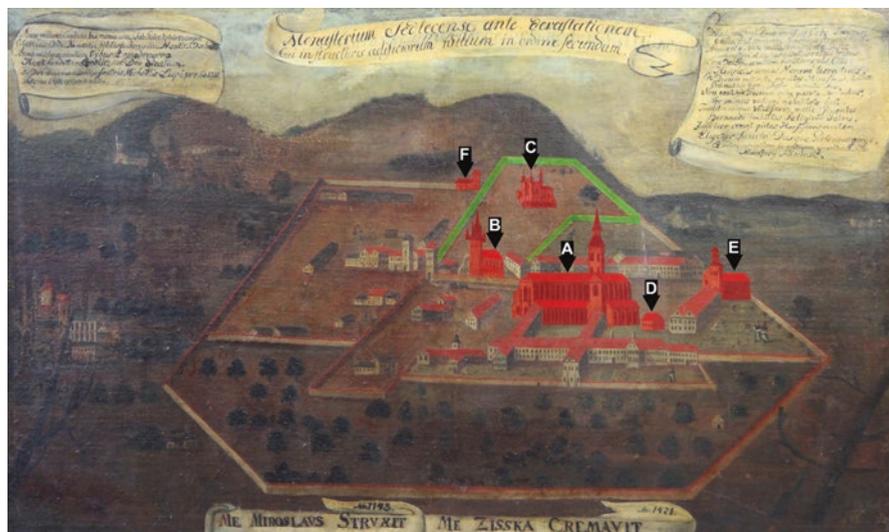
---

<sup>4</sup>The original church was never completely finished but instead expanded and renovated throughout the centuries (Devoty, 1828). Today St. Barbara is a UNESCO World Heritage site.

## 12.4 Sedlec Abbey

The first chapels at Sedlec were probably built near the monks' dwelling not long after the foundation of the monastery, but were soon replaced by larger buildings. The places of relevance to this paper are the Church of SS. Philip the Apostle and James the Less, the Sedlec cemetery, and the Church of All Saints with Ossuary (Figs. 12.2 and 12.3).<sup>5</sup> They will be discussed in detail further below.

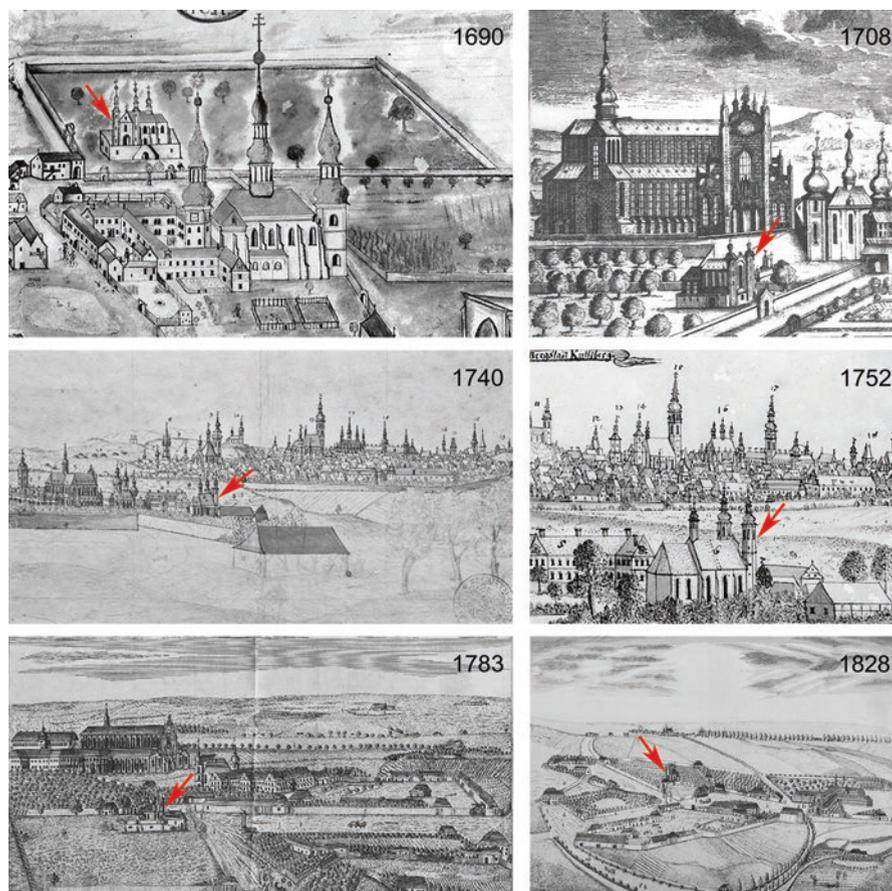
Over the centuries, Sedlec suffered numerous incidents of destruction and vandalism in the course of wars and fires. Probably the most dramatic event in the history of Sedlec occurred in 1421 when the monastery was severely damaged at the beginning of the Hussite rebellion. The buildings were burnt and those monks who were not killed were expelled. Thirty-three years later, the monastery was restored to the Cistercians and the monks were able to return. Since all monastic possessions and the economic basis had been destroyed, the monastery was administratively



**Fig. 12.3** Sedlec's churches before the devastation by the Hussites: A = Assumption of Our Lady and St. John the Baptist; B = SS. Philip the Apostle and James; C = All Saints with Ossuary; D = Abbot's Chapel; E = SS. Cosmas and Damian; F = St. Bartholomew (Baroque veduta, eighteenth century, Schwarzenberg collection, Orlik Chateau, inv. no. 1235; interpretation: F. Velímský)

<sup>5</sup>The complexity of Sedlec's medieval sacred buildings cannot be dealt with in this article. The construction of the main monastery church in Romanesque style was probably started shortly after the monks' arrival. Postmedieval images show a church in the eastern area, identified by some as SS. Cosmas and Damian, the medieval monastery infirmary church. Another medieval sacred building is St. Bartholomew which allegedly was connected to one of the monastery gates (Fig. 12.3).

united with the Bohemian monastery of Skalice. The renovation of the buildings by the impoverished monks was very slow and lasted for approximately two to three centuries (Fig. 12.4) (Charvátová, 1998, pp. 112–113).



**Fig. 12.4** Six post-medieval views of the Church of All Saints with Ossuary (red arrows) and its cemetery. In 1690 the cemetery is separated from SS. Philip the Apostle and James and from the other buildings by a wall. The two churches appear renovated. Trees spread across the whole area of the cemetery. In 1708 the Church of the Assumption of Our Lady and St. John the Baptist has also been renovated. The two center images of 1740 and 1752 show Kutná Hora in the background. The 1783 view depicts the monastery before its dissolution and in 1828 SS. Philip the Apostle and James has already been dismantled (1690: *Graduale monasterii Sedlecensis* [...], unknown artist, Národní knihovna České republiky, Prague, sign. XIII A 8, fol. Viv; 1708: engraving by A. Fridrich published in Sartorius, 1708, fol. 922; 1740: *Die königl. Bergstadt Kuttenberg in Böhmen* [...], F. B. Werner 1735–1740, Státní okresní archiv Kutná Hora, Sběrka vedut a grafických listů, inv. no. 2; 1752: *Cisterc. Clost. Sedlitz und K. Bergstadt Kuttenberg*, F. B. Werner, Štencův archiv negativů, Prague, no. 46747–4364, Kutná Hora – Sedlec; 1783: *Prospectus posterior monasterii Sedlecensis ante abolitionem*, unknown artist, Státní okresní archiv Kutná Hora, Sběrka vedut a grafických listů, inv. no. 5; 1828: *Postremus Sedlecensis prospectus A:MDCCCXXVIII*, unknown artist, Státní okresní archiv Kutná Hora, Sběrka vedut a grafických listů, supplements, folder 2)

During the Counter-Reformation, which was characterized by new impulses and the reintroduction of medieval traditions, such as a procession with the monstrance from Sedlec to Kutná Hora in 1620 (Dačický, 1955, pp. 571 and 574), Sedlec underwent the first major renovation of its structures in the seventeenth century. This was followed by a second even more profound restorative wave in the eighteenth century (Fig. 12.4). Around 1700 the restoration of the main abbey church, consecrated to the Virgin Mary and St. John the Baptist took place (Benesch & Zettl, 1856; Vácha, 2008). This church had been built in the Gothic style at the beginning of the fourteenth century under Abbot Heidenreich (Jindřich) (Doležel, 2015; Hynková, 2000) on the site of the older Romanesque convent church (e.g. Brzobohatá et al., 2008; Neuwirth, 1888, p. 53; Velímský, 2009a).

In 1783 the Sedlec Abbey was dissolved by Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II, and in 1809 the possessions were sold off to the aristocratic Schwarzenberg family. Since 1995 the Church of the Assumption of Our Lady and St. John the Baptist in Sedlec has been included in the zone of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Kutná Hora, while the Ossuary is in its buffer zone.

#### 12.4.1 *SS. Philip the Apostle and James*

The Church of SS. Philip the Apostle and James was erected in the first half of the thirteenth century and is often referred to as being located “at the gate of the monastery” (“in porta monasterii”) (as in the deeds of 1394, 1395, and 1399: Kapihorský, 1630, p. 5–6; Monumenta Vaticana, 1903, p. 427, no. 755 and p. 492, no. 910). It contained a chapel with the Holy Sepulcher on which stood the monstrance with the Host. A sanctuary lamp symbolizing the ever-burning light hung above one of the altars (Mudra & Ottová, 2009, pp. 500–501; Tadra<sup>6</sup>, 1886). In 1389 the confraternity of Corpus Christi and the Holy Sepulcher was established in this church by initiative of Jan of Jenštejn, archbishop of Prague, and in 1395 the celebration of the Feast of Corpus Christi (including a procession with the Blessed Sacrament) was ascertained by Pope Boniface IX (Kapihorský, 1630, pp. 4–6; Monumenta Vaticana, 1903, p. 492, no. 910). Indulgences were granted to those who visited the church and participated in the procession on the Feast of Corpus Christi or in the celebrations during the Octave. Consequently, the church attracted large numbers of visitors. Originally the church was designed for the needs of the laic visitors of the abbey; in later times it also held a parish function, served as a burial place for wealthy people, and was associated with a hospital and a building for the accommodation of Sedlec’s numerous visitors. The church was demolished in 1817 (Mudra & Ottová, 2009; Tadra, 1886; Uličný, 2009, p. 229; Velímský, 1970).

---

<sup>6</sup>In the publication, the author’s name is misspelled as “Fadra”.

### 12.4.2 *Sedlec's Cemetery and the Legend of the Holy Soil*

During medieval times at least seven burial locations were in use within Sedlec's monastic grounds. Four were located inside churches and three next to them. Here we pay particular attention to the second group. The cemetery by the Gothic Church of the Assumption of Our Lady and St. John the Baptist—as well as its Romanesque precursor—was the most important one for the monks<sup>7</sup> who were buried there from the middle of the twelfth century until the Hussite Wars, with burial activities reaching a maximum during the thirteenth century (hence before the construction of the Gothic church). This burial ground was archaeologically excavated during five seasons between 1998 and 2008 (Brzobohatá et al., 2008; Velímský, 2009a). A laic cemetery was located by the Church of SS. Philip the Apostle and James, which probably originates from the time when the church was first built. It was excavated in 1970 and 2014 within a limited spatial scope, without it being possible to exactly date it or determine its extent (Velímský, 1970). At the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, burial activities in both cemeteries decreased and shifted to the area where the Church of All Saints with Ossuary (of which more below) was eventually constructed. Excavations in this cemetery started in 2016.

The historical records on the medieval Sedlec cemeteries are sparse. The Zbraslav Chronicle (*Chronicon Aulae Regiae*) by Peter of Zittau (Žitava) records the burial of a monk in the cemetery in the late thirteenth century (Emler, 1884, p. 51). The laic cemetery of Sedlec is mentioned in the Chronicle in connection with the 1318 peace agreement of Domažlice. Bad harvests in 1316 and 1317 and the ongoing conflict between the Crown and the Bohemian aristocracy had destabilized the country to such a degree that, according to the Chronicle, 30,000 people succumbed to famine and were buried in pits at the gate of Sedlec within a single year (Brázdil et al., 2018, pp. 100–101):

[...] ita quod infra unius anni spacium [...] in porta Scedelicensi triginta milia hominum sunt sepulta. [...] In omnibus locis fovee fodiebantur, que mortuorum cadaveribus replebantur. (Chronicon, 1316–1333, p. 6r; Emler, 1884, p. 248)

[...] so that within the period of one year [...] thirty-thousand people were buried at the gate of Sedlec. [...] Pits were dug everywhere, which were filled with the corpses of the deceased.<sup>8</sup>

Although most historians see the number of 30,000 dead as exaggerated, recent archaeological interventions may confirm the Chronicle's account. Beneath and beside the Church of All Saints two stratigraphically distinct levels containing 32 mass graves with approximately 1200 skeletons were discovered (Frolík, 2017b, 2018, 2019, 2020) (Fig. 12.5). The upper layer probably represents an epidemic

<sup>7</sup>The abbots of Cistercian monasteries were usually buried in the chapter house as for example Sedlec Abbot Frederick who died in 1330 (Chronicon, 1316–1333, p. 67r–68 l; Emler, 1884, p. 302).

<sup>8</sup>All translations are by the authors.



**Fig. 12.5** Fourteenth century mass grave unearthed in 2017. (Photo: J. Frolík)

of 1348–1350.<sup>9</sup> A connection of the lower layer to the famine of 1318 mentioned in the Zbraslav Chronicle is possible (Brzobohatá et al., 2019, p. 85), but has not yet been fully established.<sup>10</sup>

The archaeological investigations have confirmed that the medieval laic cemetery was much larger than it is today and probably extended from SS. Philip the Apostle and James all the way to the Church of All Saints with Ossuary in the north (Fig. 12.3). Reports of the discovery of hundreds of bodies beneath the pillar of Saint John of Nepomuk in the eighteenth-century additionally support this assumption:

When the ground for the beautiful new stone pillar of honor, on which the statue of the great miraculous Saint John of Nepomuk rests, was dug in 1704 just outside the ring wall of the much-mentioned cemetery, again up to three hundred bodies buried in ancient times were found in the immediate vicinity: also in the current renovation of the old handsome collegiate church as well as during the previous construction of other buildings, various bodies

<sup>9</sup>Two of the graves contained Prague groschen (dated shortly before 1346) from the time of John of Luxembourg, king of Bohemia from 1310–1346 (Brzobohatá et al., 2019, p. 85). The Prague groschen was minted at Kutná Hora as of 1300 in varying quality for more than 200 years (Milejski, 2018).

<sup>10</sup>Clarification is expected from a project in progress.

were found in the ground, sometimes up to twelve lying on top of one another, so that a large number of old burials can easily be deduced from this.<sup>11</sup> (Sartorius, 1708, p. 918)

The cemetery by the Church of All Saints with Ossuary retained its function as burial ground after the Hussite Wars.<sup>12</sup> In addition to archaeological research, its extent can be defined on the basis of postmedieval maps and other imagery (Fig. 12.4). Measuring approximately 90 × 150 m in the seventeenth century, the cemetery was reduced to its present and final dimensions (c. 70 × 60 m) somewhere between 1783 and 1838. The 1838 Sedlec map of the Franciscan Cadaster of Bohemia shows a similar size as today.

The uniqueness of this cemetery lies in fact that extraordinarily huge amounts of people were buried here. This is because, in contrast to other parish cemeteries, this cemetery was not only used for people from within the parish but also attracted people from far away. The exact time when this popularity arose is not known but is certainly connected to the cemetery's status as *Campus Sanctus* (Holy Field) and the legends revolving around it, especially the legend of the Holy Soil. Although this legend is probably of medieval origin (Uličný, 2009), the earliest written mention of the Sedlec *Campus Sanctus* can only be traced back to the early seventeenth century. According to the legend which is first mentioned by Šimon Eustach Kapihorský (1630, p. 4) and retold by Augustin Sartorius (1708, p. 915), the soil of the Sedlec cemetery was able to transform fresh corpses into white dry bones within one day.

The soil itself was generally only called *Terra Sancta*, Holy Soil, and had the effect that it consumed the bodies within 24 hours except for the bare bones, which appeared quite white.<sup>13</sup> (Sartorius, 1708, p. 915)

Allegedly, Abbot Heidenreich himself had brought back the soil from the Holy Land. Through its dispersion into the local soil of Sedlec, the cemetery transformed into a Holy Field. As word about the abbot's deeds spread through central Europe, the cemetery became increasingly famous and many wealthy people desired to be buried there. Several nineteenth-century accounts claim that the soil came from

---

<sup>11</sup> „Als jüngsthin An: 1704. der Grund zu der schönen neuen Steinernen Ehren-Seule / worauff die Statuen des Grossen Wunderthätigen heiligen Joannis Nepomuceni ruhet / gleich ausserhalb der Ring-Mauer des mehr-besagten Gottes-Ackers gegraben wurde / hat mann in selbigem wenigen Umcreys / auff's neue bis drey hundert der allda vor Alters beerdigten Körper gefunden: desgleichen auch in jetziger Verneuerung der alten ansehnlichen Stiffts-Kirche / und vorhero in Aufrrichtung anderer Gebäuder / in dem Grund verschiedene Leiber / deren auch zuweilen bis zwölfte auff einander gelegen / angetroffen / daß demnach aus allen diesen die grosse Anzahl der alldasigen alten Begräbnussen ohnschwer abzunehmen.“

<sup>12</sup> Although SS. Philip the Apostle and James became the main convent church—and may have served as burial place for the members of the convent—after the destruction of the Church of the Assumption of Our Lady and St. John the Baptist by the Hussites, the cemetery around All Saints with Ossuary remained Sedlec's main cemetery in post-Hussite times.

<sup>13</sup> „Die Erden daselbst wurde ins gemein nur *Terra Sancta* die Heilige Erden genennet / und hatte die Würckung / daß sie die Leiber innerhalb 24. Stunden bis auff die blosse Gebeiner / so gantz schön weiß schienen / verzehrete.“

Golgotha (Anonymous, 1854, p. 162; Devoty, 1829, p. 12; Grueber, 1861, p. 227; Wankel, 1879, p. 353), where Jesus was crucified. There is one instance that mentions the garden Gethsemane, the place where Jesus was arrested (Dudík, 1878, p. 229), and another that traces the soil back to Akeldama, the Field of Blood (Benesch, 1870), a potter's field outside Jerusalem, which according to Matthews 27.3–7 was bought and turned into a burial ground for foreigners by the Temple priests using the 30 pieces of silver that Judas Iscariot had returned to them.

There are also numerous accounts about the effects of the Holy Soil. For Kapihorský only the bodies of those who died in God's grace decayed within 24 h, whereas those who died outside this state needed more time (Kapihorský, 1630, p. 4; see also Sartorius, 1708, pp. 915–916). Priest Florian Rudolf, on the other hand, writes in 1711 that only the bodies of those who died without sin remained buried in the soil of the Sedlec cemetery, whereas the bones of sinners were rejected and cast out. The latter were then buried outside the walls of the cemetery and can sometimes be found in the fields (Načeradská, 2011, p. 9). According to yet another version, rapid decay only happened to those who died in the grace of God, whereas the Holy Soil does not take care of those who go to Hell (Bechstein & Erhardt, 1853, p. 566; Gebhart, 1854, pp. 145–146). It is worth questioning whether real pedological properties of the Sedlec soils influenced these legends. Kutná Hora and Sedlec as centers of a mining zone were heavily affected by pollutants connected to the mining and smelting, including arsenic, cadmium, copper, lead, and zinc. High concentrations of these elements were detected in the graves excavated in the cemetery at the Ossuary. Importantly, high levels were found not only in the cemetery soils (necrosols), but also in the samples taken directly from the buried dead bodies.

Many historians dismiss the Sedlec legend of the Holy Soil as mere invention, mostly due to the fact that no journey to Jerusalem by Abbot Heidenreich is recorded in the historical sources and that the city was not under Christian administration at the time when the alleged journey took place (e.g. Charvátová, 1998, p. 110, Charvátová, 2009; Hynková, 2000). According to Petr Uličný (2009), the story should not be entirely disregarded. The concept of the Holy Field probably originated in the Third Crusade (1188–1192) when Ubaldo Lanfranchi, the archbishop of Pisa, allegedly brought back a large amount of sacred earth from Mount Calvary to enshrine it around Pisa Cathedral (Cole Ahl, 2003, p. 95). Like other relics, dirt from Christ's death place possessed "the power to colonize" (Nagel & Wood, 2010, p. 198) anything that it came into contact with and to instantiate one sacred place in another. Uličný (2009) believes that Heidenreich may have been confused with Abbot Nicholas Mikuláš, who traveled to Avignon in 1342 where he could have picked up the topos of the Holy Soil and also gained knowledge about architectural imitations of buildings from Jerusalem. The fourteenth century saw the emergence of a variety of stories associated with the Camposanto cemetery of Pisa and a twelfth-century Crusader building at Akeldama, Jerusalem, which had been constructed by the Knights Hospitaller to dispose of the dead from the order's infirmary. The soils of both places were believed to miraculously consume the flesh of the deceased in the shortest possible time and to ensure salvation (Cole Ahl, 2003, p. 95; Uličný, 2009, p. 233).

The late-fourteenth-century layout and architecture of Sedlec may have been an attempt to recreate the Jerusalem topography using the Campus Sanctus (with its Holy Soil), SS. Philip the Apostle and James (with the Holy Sepulcher, the monstrance with Host, and the ever-burning light), and the Church of All Saints with Ossuary, which replicated the Akeldama funeral building (cf. Uličný, 2009, Fig. 6), as sacred land-marks.

### 12.4.3 *Church of all Saints with Ossuary*

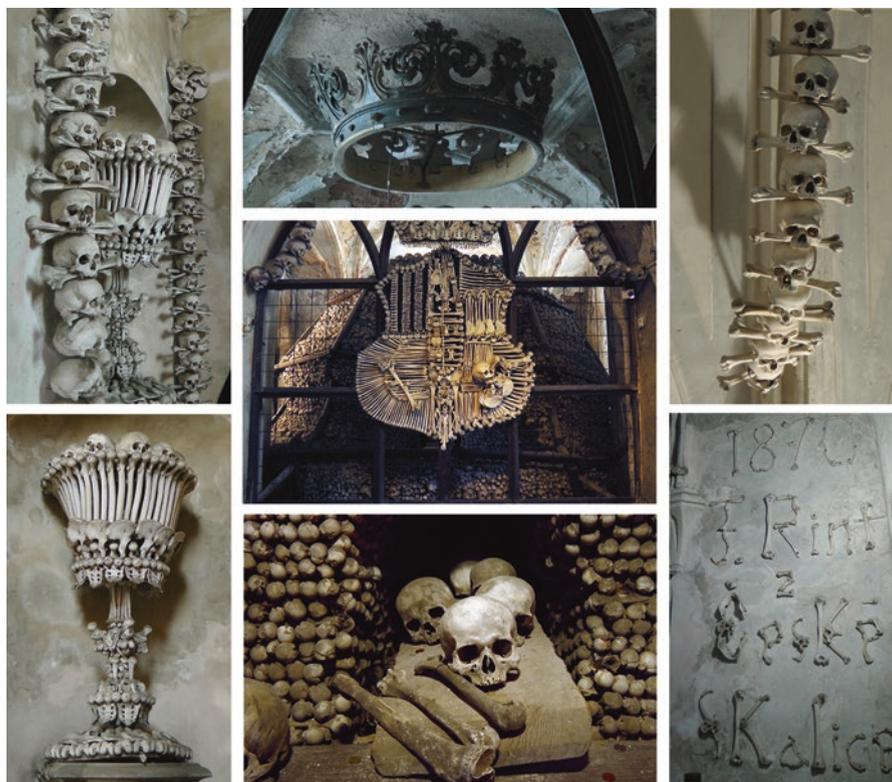
The two-story Church of All Saints with Ossuary with its upper chapel and underground charnel house was built after the completion of the main abbey church (Doležel, 2015, p. 208). It had two hexagonal towers with ever-burning lights (Neuwirth, 1888, p. 420) and an altar in the charnel house on which masses for the deceased were celebrated. Based on the archaeological survey (2016–2020), the construction can be narrowed down to the time period between 1380 and 1400 (although a wall of an older building was uncovered during the excavation in the southern part). The earliest written mention of the Ossuary comes from the year 1409, when the debt of 100 threescores<sup>14</sup> by a man called Jaksch Blumel for a Mass performed in the Ossuary is mentioned (“item Jaksch Blumel centum sexagenas pro missa in ossario”) (Čelakovský, 1916, p. 126).

Today the Ossuary is considered the second most famous charnel house after the Paris Catacombs (Koudounaris, 2011, p. 96). This fame is primarily based on its decoration made from the bones of thousands of dead people (Fig. 12.6). The curation of large quantity of bones in the Ossuary was first noted by Kapihorský (1630, p. 4). The exact date when the bones were first arranged in a decorative manner is not known. It may have been connected to the time when the Sedlec cemetery was reduced in size, and bones from emptied-out graves were moved into the charnel house (Vácha, 2003, pp. 191–192). Since Josef Braniš (1886, p. 51) refers to the year 1511—a year mentioned several times in nineteenth-century regional histories—and Jan Beckovský remarks that in 1661 the bones had been arranged in the Ossuary for almost two centuries (Beckovský, 1700, p. 688), the most likely period for this event is between the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century. That large quantities of bones were already stacked up by the mid-sixteenth century is supported by the discovery in 1560 of a gilded silver chalice with 10,000 ducats and a pearl and goldwork embroidery, which had been hidden among the bones (Devoty, 1829, p. 19).

After slowly disintegrating during post-Hussite times, the charnel house was renovated in 1661. This event was commemorated in a dedicatory inscription: “HOC OSSARIVM EX VLTIMIS RVINIS NOVITER EREXIT. 1661” (“This

---

<sup>14</sup>= 6000 Prague groschen. In 1409 the average weight of one groschen was 2.626 g containing 1.6 g silver (see Milejski, 2018, p. 100).



**Fig. 12.6** The Ossuary in 2016. In the center one of the bone pyramids and the Schwarzenberg coat of arms. (Photos: E. Weiss-Krejci)

Ossuary was newly erected from the last ruins in 1661”). In 1711 Abbot Bonifatius Blahna founded a confraternity associated with the Ossuary to support the cult of the souls of the dead (Vácha, 2003, p. 200). From 1708 to 1712 the Church of All Saints was extended in the area of the narthex by architect Jan Blažej Santini-Aichel—he also rebuilt the Sedlec Abbey church of the Assumption of Our Lady and St. John the Baptist (Horyna, 1998). Santini-Aichel renovated the Ossuary in a Baroque-Gothic style and probably laid the basis for today’s bone decorations. The bones were piled up into pyramids symbolizing heavenly mountains. Above the pyramids, wooden, gold-plated crowns were suspended from the ceiling. They are said to symbolize the martyrs’ crowns belonging to the monks murdered by the Hussites. Glass covers were also applied around the bone pyramids making them look like giant reliquaries. The glass has not survived into modern times (Vácha, 2003, p. 199).

Although the Church of All Saints was once again redecorated between 1735 and 1740, in the 1860s the Schwarzenbergs decided to give the Ossuary a total make-over (Meeting Reports of the Archaeological Society, 1865). The artist was



**Fig. 12.7** The Ossuary in the first half of the twentieth century. (Photo: K. Vokoun, Státní okresní archiv Kutná Hora, Sběrka fotografií a negativů Kutná Hora, inv. no. 1171)

woodcarver František Rint from Česká Skalice and the work is dated to 1870.<sup>15</sup> Rint's creations include a Schwarzenberg coat of arms, a chandelier, chalice, monstrance, and garlands hanging from the ceiling (Fig. 12.6). The majority of the hanging decorations did not survive to the present day, but were dismantled during the twentieth century together with most of the interior furniture (e.g. confessional, parapet, benches, and pulpit) (Fig. 12.7).

After a series of minor repairs between 1989 and 2010, the owner and administrator of the building, the Roman Catholic parish of Sedlec, decided to overhaul the entire building, and in 2011 the renovation of the Church of All Saints with Ossuary was initiated once again. These works were accompanied by the rescue excavations mentioned above, with the most intensive part taking place from 2016 to 2020. Among others the work comprised repairs of the roof, renovation of the sewer, and the installation of a ventilation system, the relocation of the ticket office from the Ossuary to the information center outside the cemetery, the establishment of a separate book and souvenir store and an exhibition area, the construction of two terraces and a new paved walkway around the lower part of the church, cleaning and restoration of the hanging bone ornaments, and repair of the facade. From the end of 2018 through 2019, one of the four bone pyramids was dismantled and the secret of its inner construction unveiled. It turned out that the interior was made up from construction debris intermixed with highly fragmented bone pieces. Beneath the bone pyramid three intact graves were discovered. The bone pyramid will eventually be

<sup>15</sup>Rint also arranged the bone decoration in the ossuary of St. Stephen's in Malín, which at the time fell under the Sedlec parish. It cannot be ruled out that the skeletal material used for the original decoration of the Malín Ossuary in the eighteenth century derived from Sedlec. Documents prove that in later years fallen and removed bone decorations were transferred from Sedlec to Malín.

reconstructed using only those bones that are well preserved. The others will be reburied. The investigations allowed a distinction between different stages of the decoration. The oldest parts were simple stackings of bones along the walls. The bone pyramids were created during the Baroque era, followed by the hanging decorations.

## 12.5 Bones, Ghosts, and Martyrs

Although the date for the first arrangement of the bones in the charnel house is not known there exists general agreement that it was a blind person who was responsible. The exact identity of the person is variably given as blind friar (Bechstein & Erhardt, 1853, p. 566; Gebhart, 1854, p. 146; Sartorius, 1708, p. 915), blind lay brother (Müller, 1861, p. 40) or blind youth (Nedobyty, 1902, p. 780). The underlying message of the story, however, remains the same. The reported blindness of the maker minimizes the role of human intention in the decoration of the Ossuary, and locates power and agency instead in the bones themselves.

[...] those who have traveled through different countries say that nowhere have they seen so many bones of the dead together than at Sedlec, which a certain friar from said monastery, who was otherwise blind, allegedly brought into the fine order that now can be seen on all four sides regaining his sight after the work was done.<sup>16</sup> (Sartorius, 1708, p. 915)

The legends of the Holy Soil and the Blind Friar are just two examples of a much wider complex of stories that became widely distributed in the German-speaking and Czech lands (Bechstein & Erhardt, 1853, p. 566; Devoty, 1829; Gebhart, 1854, pp. 143–146, etc.). Additionally, there are several unpublished accounts such as the record by priest Florian Rudolf from 1711 and the book of the funeral confraternity of Sedlec of 1769 (Načeradská, 2011), which might be reflective of the oral traditions circulating in Bohemia during the eighteenth century. Despite some changes in the narrative over time there are many general themes that allow us to investigate the agency of Sedlec's dead.

Apparently, the belief prevailed that all those dead who were turned into bones in the Holy Field and then deposited in the Ossuary were pure and free of sin. Like relic bones, they were able to perform malevolent or benevolent acts depending on the behavior of those who came into contact with them. A story from the Sedlec funeral confraternity book of 1769 tells of a monk who often served masses for the dead in the Ossuary, but was criticized for it by the other monks. One day, when he was with the other monks, the arm of a dead man appeared in front of him and gave him a blessing. From that time on, the other monks followed his example and never

---

<sup>16</sup> „[...] sagen diejenige / so verschiedene Länder durchreiset / daß sie nirgends so viel Toten-Beiner bey einander gesehen / als eben zu Sedletz / welche ein gewisser Religios aus besagtem Closter / der sonst blind gewesen / in diejenige feine Ordnung / wie sie anjetzo auff allen vier Seiten zusehen / solle eingerichtet / und nach vollbrachter Arbeit / sein Gesicht hinwiederum bekommen haben.“

troubled him again (Načeradská, 2011, p. 10). Florian Rudolf tells how toothache was solved by touching the aching cheek with a tooth taken from the Ossuary and how promises of paying for a Mass to be served for the dead or making a donation to the Ossuary helped to relieve pain (Načeradská, 2011, p. 11).

Much more frequent than the tales of the benevolent dead are stories of threats to the living. After leading the annual Easter Monday procession in 1657, a preacher named Rudolf Reichenberger visited the Ossuary in the afternoon together with his companion Johannes. Overwhelmed by the large number of bones and ignorant that these bones were “of blessed children” („von Kindern der Seligkeit“) (Bechstein & Erhardt, 1853, p. 566) he asked a question of serious consequence:

How many of those present do you think are damned? No sooner had he said such a thing, behold, there was a terrible noise among the bones through the whole chapel and two mighty stones were thrown thereupon, so that the good father and brother had to run away in fear and trembling.<sup>17</sup> (Sartorius, 1708, p. 917)

Reichenberger still visited Sedlec afterwards but never dared to set a foot into the Ossuary again (see also Gebhart, 1854, p. 146). This story not only expresses a threefold aversion against the preacher, who was a Jesuit, a German, and from Kutná Hora („aus der Gesellschaft JESU, Teutscher Prediger zu Kuttenberg“) (Sartorius, 1708, p. 917), but also clearly attributes agency to the bones, which turn out to be quite dangerous. To doubt their state could indeed threaten one’s life as the following story shows, which was written down in 1769 in the book of the funeral confraternity of Sedlec. In 1663, so the story goes, a young man from Čáslav visited the Ossuary where he brooded about the possible origin of one of the skulls, asking himself if it could be from a hanged man. No sooner had he expressed this thought than the skull jumped on the floor and rolled under his legs in such a manner that it caused him to fall down. Terrified, he died on the spot (Načeradská, 2011, p. 11).

### 12.5.1 *The Holy Field*

After the Hussite Wars and before the large renovation campaigns of the eighteenth century, large parts of the cemetery had fallen out of funerary use. In his family chronicle, Mikuláš Dačický mentions that preaching was performed in the cemetery in 1565 (Dačický, 1955, p. 232), and in 1598 the abbot of Sedlec allegedly allowed the bailiff of the property next to the monastery to plow and cultivate the sacred cemetery ground,

in which so many pious Christians had been laid to rest [...]. Immediately after the first day of desecration, God’s punishment followed. The unfortunate bailiff was severely crushed by

---

<sup>17</sup> „Wie viel vermeynt ihr Wohl / daß aus Gegenwärtigen solten verdammt seyn: kaum hatte er solches ausgeredet / siehe / da geschah durch die gantze Kapelle unter den Gebeinern ein entsetzliches Geräusche / und erfolgeten hierauff zwey gewaltige Stein-Würffe / daß der gute Pater samt dem Bruder voller Forcht und Zittern den Reißaus muste nehmen.“

an unknown ghost at night / from which he died soon afterwards [...]. The unexpected death of Abbot Francis that same year made the matter even clearer / that God would defend the honor of the places consecrated to him.<sup>18</sup> (Sartorius, 1708, p. 918)

It is notable that in this version of the story the dead act by order of God, not out of their own will. Sartorius tells a second version, in which the bailiff died as soon as he had opened a number of furrows. And in another version by priest Florian Rudolf (cited after Načeradská, 2011, p. 9), it was a ghost who killed the bailiff in the field.

During one of the major renovations of the monastery area (1661, 1708–1712, 1735–1740), there was some terrain leveling but—as shown by the recent archaeological excavations 2016–2019—with no destructive consequences for the graves. Intrusive ploughing was obviously conceived as improper whereas non-intrusive use or cultivation with little disturbance was not a problem. According to Joseph Devoty, until 1817, the Campus Sanctus had ‘always’ been an agricultural meadow for growing *Wiesewachs*, i.e. hay. His words suggests that even long after its use period, the cemetery was still considered a sacred area.

The land of this sacred field has always been used for growing grass until it was first planted with fruit trees in 1817 by order of the authorities. Since then, it has been leased annually per bed, whereby it often turns out that large gravestones, on which a cross is usually carved, have been excavated and the arrows used by the Hussites have been found.<sup>19</sup> (Devoty, 1829, pp. 24–25)

The sanctity of the cemetery is further attested by reports of processions of ghosts seen at night walking through it. For example, in 1657 and 1663 processions of dead dressed in white Cistercian cuculles holding lit torches and chanting were allegedly observed thereby proving “that there is no doubt about the sanctity of this venerable place” („daß also an der Heiligkeit dieses Ehrwürdigen Orts gar nicht zuzweiflen“) (Sartorius, 1708, p. 916; see also Bechstein & Erhardt, 1853, p. 566; Gebhart, 1854, p. 146). These descriptions of processions are reminiscent of the annual medieval Easter Monday processions from Kutná Hora to Sedlec which allegedly began in the year 1304 and were organized by miners from Kutná Hora who dressed up in white cowls and carried candles. Their path led through the Sedlec cemetery (Sartorius, 1708, p. 914; Devoty, 1829, p. 9). Hence the question needs to be asked whether these stories are rooted in memories of real medieval events, or are merely ‘ghostly’ versions of the processions that were reintroduced from 1620. Similar

<sup>18</sup> „wo so viel fromme Christen ruheten [...]. Gleich nach dem ersten Tag sothaner Verunehrung erfolgte von Gott die Straff. Dann der unglückselige Wirthschaffter wurde von einem unbekandten Geiste zu Nachts heßlich gedruckt / worvon er bald darauff sterben müssen [...]. Des Abbts Francisci eben noch in selbigem Jahre erfolgter unvermuthete Tods-Fall machte hernach die Sache noch deutlicher / daß Gott vor die Ehre der ihm geweihten Oerter eifern thäte.“

<sup>19</sup> „Der Grund und Boden dieses h. Feldes wurde von jeher als Wiesewachs benützt, bis er erst im J. 1817 auf höhere Anordnung obrigkeitlicher Seits mit Obstbäumen ausgesetzt wurde. Seit der Zeit wird er jährlich beetweise verpachtet, wobei es sich oft ergibt, daß große Grabsteine, auf denen meistens ein Kreuz ausgehauen seyn pfligt, ausgegraben, und die von den Hussiten hier gebrauchten Pfeilen vorgefunden wurden.“

topoi are recorded from other Cistercian monasteries such as the night processions of the murdered Cistercian nuns from Oslavany (Vácha, 2003, p. 192).

### 12.5.2 *Martyrs of the Hussite Wars*

The stories about processions of nuns murdered by the Hussites, and Devoty's reference to the arrows left behind by the Hussites (Devoty, 1829, p. 25) are part of a wider narrative which became popular in the eighteenth century in the Cistercian order houses of Bohemia (Vácha, 2003, pp. 191–192). The Hussite Wars not only provided a backdrop for the fabrication of numerous martyr stories about the suffering and cruel deaths of the Cistercians, but became part of the order's history and identity (Vácha, 2008, p. 307) (Fig. 12.8). An important element in the eighteenth-century stories about the Cistercian martyrs is the tree topos (variably lime, oak or elm), on which the monks had been hanged by the Hussites (Vácha, 2003, pp. 187–190). At Sedlec, the martyrs are associated with linden trees that grew close to the cemetery wall.

At the rear wall of the churchyard towards the exit were three large lime trees, on which many of the Cistercians and Carthusians, who had fled here from Prague, Augezd, and Podiebrad, were hung due to the rage of the Hussite leader Žižka by his raging army. An already rotten tree stump has survived to this day as a further memory.<sup>20</sup> (Devoty, 1829, p. 23)

The rotten linden stump referred to by Devoty was reportedly 400 years old and, when cut down, revealed a mingled mix of human bones, rotten monk habits, and nails in its interior. Some of its leaves resembled Cistercian and Carthusian cowls (Devoty, 1829, p. 24). In this context it is also noteworthy to point to a certain resemblance between other-than-human agents—such as sacred destroyed buildings—and persons martyred by the Hussites. In either case, violence and destruction could not undo their sanctity. The following story involving the Church of All Saints serves as an example:

At the time of the Hussite unrest / as well as further on / when the usual lamps on the two towers mentioned were completely gone and extinguished / one saw instead celestial rays more often there / and perceived them / as if the lower chapel / or the Holy Ossuary would be in complete flames.<sup>21</sup> (Sartorius, 1708, p. 916)

<sup>20</sup> „Bei der hintern Kirchhofsmauer gegen Ausgang waren drei große Lindenbäume, auf denen viele der Zisterzienser und aus Prag von Augezd und Podiebrad hieher geflüchteten Kartusianen durch die Wuth des Hussitten-Anführers Žižka von seinem tobenden Heere aufgehängt wurden, von denen ein bereits vermorschter Stock noch zum weitem Andenken bis auf den heutigen Tag vorhanden ist.“

<sup>21</sup> „Zur Zeit der Hußitischen Unruhe / wie auch ferner hinauß / da die gewöhnliche Lampen auff besagten zwey Thürmen völlig abkommen und verloschen / hat mann an statt derselbigen öfftermahls himmlische Strahlen daselbst gesehen / und beynebenst wahrgenommen / als wann die untere Kapelle / oder das Heil: Gebeinhaus gleichsam in völligen Flammen stünde.“



**Fig. 12.8** The torture and murder of the Cistercians and Carthusians by the Hussites at Sedlec on 25 April 1421: 1 = Leader of the Hussite invaders, Jan Žižka from Trocnov; 2 = Hussite soldier on a cow wearing the abbot's miter; 3 = Hussite soldier desecrating the monstrance; 4 = decapitation of monks; 5 = monk beaten at the stake; 6 = monk on breaking wheel; 7 = impaled monk; 8 = burning of monks; 9 = Hussite soldier driving away cattle; 10 = hanged monks; 11 = convent church on fire; 12 = heavenly angels dropping crowns of thorns and palm branches on the martyrs (Baroque oil painting by M. Willmann 1703, Church of the Assumption of Our Lady and St. John the Baptist; interpretation: F. Velímský)

In this folk tale, through destructive and violent acts by the Hussites—in this particular case the destruction of the two ever-burning lights on the towers—the sanctity and the power of the sacred building increased.

## 12.6 Discussion and Conclusion

In central European legends, silver has always played a special role. The dead at Sedlec and the silver mining background of the Kutná Hora inhabitants are intrinsically connected. Silver was the reason for the rise of the wealth of the monastery and the origin of Kutná Hora town. In this light, the Akeldama version of the origin of the Holy Soil which links it to the place of Judas Iscariot's 30 pieces of silver is especially appealing. In addition, Akeldama was a place for pilgrims, which not only received many foreigners as visitors, but like Sedlec also buried them in its own cemetery. But why was Sedlec so popular for so many people?

The topos of the purifying Holy Soil was powerful at Sedlec and it lasted for centuries. According to the legends, the graves of the Holy Field at Sedlec held three basic categories of dead: (1) those who died in the grace of God and need very little or no time for putrefaction; (2) a much larger group of those who have sinned and take a longer time to decay; (3) the wicked hell-bound souls which are either cast out or not taken care of by the soil. The similarities between the affective capacities of the Holy Soil and Purgatory are evident. At Sedlec, decay of the corpse became a metaphor for the temporal punishment one undergoes in Purgatory. Once the dead were transformed into bones, they were deposited in the Ossuary and, judging from the legends, considered clean and destined for salvation. If the Holy Field could serve as a substitute for Purgatory in people's minds, its attractiveness is hardly surprising. Purgatory had to be endured and was non-negotiable for a Christian who desired ultimate salvation.

There may also have existed a connection between the concept of punishment in Purgatory and the reasons behind the construction of medieval ossuaries. In medieval Europe and the Czech lands ossuaries were quite common (e.g. Koudounaris, 2011; Kratzke, 2009; Rendek & Libenský, 2019; Vácha, 2003). There even existed a small ossuary in neighboring Malín and probably one beneath the Church of Corpus Christi and St. Barbara in Kutná Hora. Whereas in the past the main reason for the construction of medieval ossuaries was often considered a functional requirement to avoid overcrowding of cemeteries (Koudounaris, 2011, p. 19), an eschatological component to ossuaries may also exist. Crangle (2016, p. 226) and Craig-Atkins et al. (2019), whose research focuses on English ossuaries, have argued that these buildings served a kind of corrective function regarding the chances for salvation. Wealthy individuals that were buried in church interiors near altars could benefit from masses being held there. Those that were buried in the cemetery did not have that advantage. Committal to an ossuary corrected this imbalance by allowing greater numbers of dead people to benefit from the proximity to an altar. That the Sedlec Ossuary and its altar might have fulfilled a similar role is evident from several stories that emphasize the importance of holding masses for the dead. These masses could help reduce the time souls had to spend in Purgatory and guarantee their ultimate salvation.

The different types of dead within the Sedlec deathscape are connected to different types of spaces. The most sacred spaces are the interiors of consecrated

buildings that hold altars. These were the spaces in which the corpses of the wealthiest people were buried and in which the bones exhumed from the cemetery were deposited. The agency of the latter is strong since they could punish or reward the living (Sartorius, 1708, pp. 915–916).

Ghosts don't ever seem to enter the interior of sacred buildings. Their apparition often took place at night in the cemetery, though in one case there was a daytime appearance (in one version of the story of the ploughed field). Ghosts also appeared at night to people in their bedrooms. Ghosts could assist God and the other dead, but they are not identical with the dead in the Ossuary, whose agency is much more potent. In some legends, ghosts belong to individuals who died violent deaths (e.g. the martyrs tortured by the Hussites). The cemetery contained those dead that had to wait—and might turn into ghosts—until they were pu(t)rified (Kapihorský, 1630, p. 4). It was not conceived as a haunted place in which restless ghosts pestered every living being, but instead an enchanted sacred space that only posed a danger to those who disrespected it.

But not every corpse was destined for the Ossuary and salvation. The cemetery also held wicked people who did not decay (Bechstein & Erhardt, 1853, p. 566; Gebhart, 1854, pp. 145–146) or, in the version by priest Florian Rudolf, were cast out by the soil and reburied outside the monastery wall (Načeradská, 2011, p. 9). The monastery wall seems to have been a very special place reserved for very special kinds of people. Both Kapihorský and Wenceslaus Hajek of Libočan note the following event for the year 1463: on the day of Saint Lawrence, the chief mint master of Bohemia Zdeněk Kostka<sup>22</sup> ordered all Kutná Hora minters to mint coins. They refused, however, because they wanted to celebrate the day of Saint Lawrence. As a result, Kostka got very angry and insulted not only them, but cursed God and Saint Lawrence with shameful words. Soon afterwards, lightning struck the building and the mint master was severely burned. He died six days later and was buried at the wall of the Sedlec Abbey (Hagecius, 1697, p. 802; Kapihorský, 1630, p. 50). Interestingly, the wall is also the place associated with the violent death of the martyrs murdered by the Hussites. However, as martyrs an opposite fate awaited them.

The Sedlec cemetery and the Church of All Saints with Ossuary were once very special spaces with very special kinds of dead people. Originally part of a larger medieval architectural project that tried to imitate Jerusalem's topography, after the Hussite Wars it was reduced to a legend about sacred soil and later served Counter-Reformation narratives of ghosts and bones with extraordinary agency. Although the fame of the Holy Field of Sedlec attracted pilgrims from distant countries for centuries, it was eventually forgotten and only brought back into the public memory during recent archaeological excavations. The Ossuary, by contrast, never lost its fascination and attraction for the public, and its bones have assumed a very special afterlife of their own. Today, it seems that the dead from the Ossuary are very much alive.

---

<sup>22</sup>The story does not match the biography of the historic chief mint master of Bohemia Zdeněk III Kostka of Postupice who died in 1468 in the Battle of Zvole, nor any of the other members of the wealthy aristocratic Kostka family.

**Acknowledgments** We are thankful for the funding provided by the project DEEPDEAD: Artefacts and human bodies in socio-cultural transformations under the HERA Joint Research Programme “Uses of the Past” (UP) [Collaborative Research Project (CRP) no. 15.055] and the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 649307. We also would like to thank Philip Schwyzer and the anonymous reviewers for suggestions, comments, and corrections.

## References

- Anonymous. (1854). *Illustrierte Chronik von Böhmen: Ein geschichtliches Nationalwerk* (Vol. 2). A. Renn.
- Bartoš, M. (2004) Středověké dobývání v Kutné Hoře. In K. Nováček (Ed.), *Těžba a zpracování drahých kovů: Sidelní a technologické aspekty* (pp. 157–201) (Mediaevalia archaeologica Vol. 6). Archeologický ústav AV ČR & Západočeská univerzita v Plzni.
- Bechstein, L., & Erhardt, A. (1853). *Deutsches Sagenbuch*. G. Wigand.
- Beckovský, J. F. (1700). *Posylkyně starých příběhův českých aneb kronika česká: Od prvního prvního do nynější země české příchodu dvou knížat charvátských, Čecha i Lecha, vlastních bratří, až do šťastného panování císaře římského, krále českého Ferdinanda*. Jeřábek.
- Benesch, F. J. (1870). Correspondenz „Todtenkapelle zu Sedlec“. *Mittheilungen der K. K Central-Commission zur Erforschung und Erhaltung der Baudenkmale*, 25, lx.
- Benesch, F. J., & Zettl, J. (1856). Die Kirche zu Sedletz in Böhmen. *Mittheilungen der Kaiserl. Königl. Central-Commission*, 1(2), 25–26.
- Braníš, J. (1886). *Denkwürdigkeiten des ehemaligen Cistercienser-Stiftes Sedlec bei Kuttenberg*. Kuttenberg. Karel Šolc.
- Brázdil, R., Kotyza, O., & Bauch, M. (2018). Climate and famines in the Czech lands prior to AD 1500: Possible interconnections in a European context. In D. Collet & M. Schuh (Eds.), *Famines during the ‘little ice age’ (1300–1800): Socionatural entanglements in premodern societies* (pp. 91–114). Springer.
- Brzobohatá, H., Pospíšil, A., Štaffen, Z., & Velímský, F. (2008). Příspěvek k poznání stavby kostela Nanebevzetí Panny Marie v Sedlci u Kutné Hory. *Průzkumy památek*, 15(1), 57–68.
- Brzobohatá, H., Frolík, J., & Zazvonilová, E. (2019). Bioarchaeology of past epidemic- and famine-related mass burials with respect to recent findings from the Czech Republic. *Interdisciplinaria Archaeologica: Natural sciences in archaeology*, 10(1), 79–87. <https://doi.org/10.24916/iansa.2019.1.6>
- Čelakovský, J. (1916). *Klášter sedlecký, jeho statky a práva v době před válkami husitskými* (Rozpravy České akademie císaře Františka Josefa pro vědy, slovesnost a umění, Class I Vol. 58). Czech Academy for Science, Literature and Art.
- Charvátová, K. (1998). *Dějiny cisterckého řádu v Čechách 1142–1420: Fundace 12. století* (Vol. 1). Karolinum.
- Charvátová, K., (2009). Opat Heidenreich (1282–1320). In R. Lomničková (Ed.), *Sedlec: Historie, architektura a umělecká tvorba sedleckého kláštera ve středoevropském kontextu kolem roku 1300 a 1700 / Sedletz: Geschichte, Architektur und Kunstschaffen im Sedletz Kloster im mitteleuropäischen Kontext um die Jahre 1300 und 1700* (pp. 71–89) (Opera Facultatis Theologiae Catholicae Universitatis Carolinae Prgensis, Historia et Historia Atrium Vol. 10). Togga.
- Chronicon. (1316–1333). *Chronicon Aulae Regiae* (Pt. 2). Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana, Pal. lat. 950, Vatican City. <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.10719#0001>
- Cole Ahl, D. (2003). Camposanto, Terra Santa: Picturing the Holy Land in Pisa. *Artibus et Historiae*, 24(48), 95–122.

- Craig-Atkins, E., Crangle, J., Barnwell, P. S., Hadley, D. M., Adams, A. T., Atkins, I., McGinn, J. R., & James, A. (2019). Charnel practices in medieval England: New perspectives. *Mortality*, 24(2), 145–166. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2019.1585782>
- Crangle, J. N. (2016). *A study of post-depositional funerary practices in medieval England*. Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Archaeology University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK. <http://theses.whiterose.ac.uk/13315/>. Accessed 1 Sept 2020.
- Dačický z Heslova, M. (1955). *Prostopravda: Paměti*. (Eds. E. Petruš & E. Pražák). Státní nakladatelství krásné literatury, hudby a umění.
- Devoty, J. F. (1828). *Beschreibung der uralten, künstlich gebauten und sehr berühmten heiligen Barbara-Kirche in der königlichen freyen Bergstadt Kuttenberg*. Scholl.
- Devoty, J. F. (1829). *Kurze Mittheilung historischer Merkwürdigkeiten über das uralte Sedletzer Beinhaus*. J. Host.
- Doležel, J. (2015). Konventní kostel kláštera cisterciáků v Sedlci: položení základního kamene českým králem Václavem II. roku 1304. *Studia Mediaevalia Bohemica*, 7, 195–210.
- Dudík, B. (1878). Ueber trepanirte Cranien im Beinhaus zu Sedlec. *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 10, 227–235.
- Emler, J. (Ed.). (1884). *Chronicon Aulae Regiae, Excerpta de diversis chronicis additis quibusdam aulae regiae memorabilibus, Chronicon Francisci Pragensis, Chronicon Benessii de Weitmil* (Fontes Rerum Bohemicarum Vol. 4). František Palacký Foundation. <https://sources.cms.flu.cas.cz/src/index.php?s=v&cat=11&bookid=177>. Accessed 24 Mar 2020.
- Frolík, J. (2014a). Doklady hornické činnosti v areálu Jezuitské koleje v Kutné Hoře (Předběžná zpráva) / Belege der Bergbautätigkeit auf dem Gelände des Jesuitenkollegs in Kuttenberg (Zwischenbericht). In R. Smolnik (Ed.), *ArchaeoMontan 2013: Krušná krajina – Erz(gebirgs) landschaft – Ore landscape* (pp. 169–177) (Arbeits- und Forschungsberichte zur sächsischen Bodendenkmalpflege, Beiheft Vol. 28). Landesamt für Archäologie, Freistaat Sachsen.
- Frolík, J. (2014b). Archeologický výzkum v areálu bývalé jezuitské koleje v Kutné Hoře v letech 1998 až 2012. *Archaeologia historica*, 39(2), 703–721.
- Frolík, J. (2017a). Pohřbívání ve vrcholném středověku a v novověku na Chrudimsku, Pardubicku a Kolínsku. *Archaeologia historica*, 42(1), 187–205. <https://doi.org/10.5817/AH2017-1-9>
- Frolík, J. (2017b). Záchranný archeologický výzkum při odvodnění hřbitovního kostela Všech svatých s kostnicí v Kutné Hoře-Sedlci / Archäologische Rettungsgrabung bei der Entwässerung des Beinhauses in Kutná Hora-Sedlec. *Zprávy České archeologické společnosti, Supplément*, 105, 34–35.
- Frolík, J. (2018). Pokračování záchranného archeologického výzkumu u hřbitovního kostela Všech Svatých s kostnicí v Kutné Hoře-Sedlci / Fortsetzung der archäologischen Rettungsgrabung bei der Kirchhof-Allerheiligenkirche mit dem Beinhaus in Kutná Hora/Kuttenberg-Sedlec. *Zprávy České archeologické společnosti, Supplément*, 109, 35–36.
- Frolík, J. (2019). Dokončení záchranného archeologického výzkumu u hřbitovního kostela Všech Svatých s kostnicí v Kutné Hoře-Sedlci / Beendung der archäologischen Rettungsgrabung bei der Allerheiligen-Friedhofkirche mit dem Beinhaus in Kutná Hora-Sedlec. *Zprávy České archeologické společnosti, Supplément*, 113, 28–29.
- Frolík, J. (2020). Pokračování záchranného archeologického výzkumu při rekonstrukci hřbitovního kostela Všech Svatých s kostnicí v Kutné Hoře – Sedlci v roce 2019 / Fortsetzung der archäologischen Rettungsgrabung bei der Rekonstruktion der Allerheiligen-Friedhofkirche mit dem Beinhaus in Kutná Hora/Kuttenberg-Sedlec in Jahre 2019. *Zprávy České archeologické společnosti, Supplément*, 116, 41.
- Frolík, J., & Vepřeková, J. (2011). Zjišťovací výzkum v Kutné Hoře u Kouřimské brány (otázka lokalizace zaniklého kostela sv. Jiří) / Feststellungsgrabung in Kutná Hora/Kuttenberg beim Kouřimer Tor (die Lokalisationsfrage der untergegangenen Skt. Georgkirche). *Zprávy České archeologické společnosti, Supplément*, 81, 32–33.
- Gebhart, J. (1854). *Die Heilige Sage in Oesterreich*. J. F. Greß.

- Grueber, B. (1861). Die Baudenkmale der Stadt Kuttenberg in Böhmen. *Mittheilungen der Kaiserl. Königl. Central-Commission zur Erforschung und Erhaltung der Baudenkmale*, 6, 223–228.
- Hagecius, W. (1697). *Böhmische Chronik: Vom Ursprung der Böhmen*. B. J. Endter.
- Horyna, M. (1998). *Jan Blažej Santini-Aichel*. Karolinum.
- Hynková, J. (2000). Heidenreich Sedlecký. In K. Charvátová (Ed.), *900 let cisterciáckého řádu: Sborník z konference konané 28.–29.9.1998 v Brevnovském kláště v Praze* (pp. 97–160). Unicornis.
- Kapihorský, S. E. (1630). *Hystorya kláštěra sedleckého, řádu svatého cistercienského*. Pavel Sessius. <http://data.onb.ac.at/rep/10486A60>. Accessed 25 Mar 2020.
- Koudounaris, P. (2011). *The empire of death: A cultural history of ossuaries and charnel houses*. Thames & Hudson.
- Kratzke, C. (2009). Die Abtei Sedletz im Kontext der Sepulkralkultur des Zisterzienserordens. In R. Lomničková (Ed.), *Sedlec: Historie, architektura a umělecká tvorba sedleckého kláštěra ve středoevropském kontextu kolem roku 1300 a 1700 / Sedletz: Geschichte, Architektur und Kunstschaffen im Sedletz Kloster im mitteleuropäischen Kontext um die Jahre 1300 und 1700* (pp. 185–214) (Opera Facultatis Theologiae Catholicae Universitatis Carolinae Prgensis, Historia et Historia Atrium Vol. 10). Togga.
- Lippert, J. (1898). *Social-Geschichte Böhmens in vorhussitischer Zeit: Der sociale Einfluss der christlich-kirchlichen Organisationen und der deutschen Kolonisation* (Vol. 2). F. Tempsky.
- Meeting Reports of the Archaeological Society. (1865). Schůzka due 17. února 1865. *Památky archaeologické a místopisné organ Archaeologického sboru Musea království Českého a Historického spolku v Praze*, 12, 196.
- Milejski, P. (2018). Weight debasement of Prague groschen of Wenceslas IV (1378–1419) based on Polish and Lithuanian hoards. In G. Depeyrot & I. Leimus (Eds.), *From ore to money, mining, trading, minting: Proceedings of the Tallinn (2018) conference* (pp. 99–112) (Collection Moneta Vol. 202). Moneta.
- Monumenta Vaticana. (1903). *Acta Urbani VI. et Bonifatii IX. pontificum Romanorum 1378–1404: Monumenta Vaticana res gestas Bohemica illustrantia* (Vol. 5.1, Ed. C. Krofta). Gregorian.
- Mudra, A., & Ottová, M. (2009). K vybavení kláštěra cisterciáků v Sedlci. In R. Lomničková (Ed.), *Sedlec: Historie, architektura a umělecká tvorba sedleckého kláštěra ve středoevropském kontextu kolem roku 1300 a 1700 / Sedletz: Geschichte, Architektur und Kunstschaffen im Sedletz Kloster im mitteleuropäischen Kontext um die Jahre 1300 und 1700* (pp. 499–523) (Opera Facultatis Theologiae Catholicae Universitatis Carolinae Prgensis, Historia et Historia Atrium Vol. 10). Togga.
- Müller, J. (1861). *Geschichte von Böhmen von Einwanderung der Boier bis auf unsere Tage*. N. Lehmann.
- Načeradská, P. (2011). *Kaple Všeoh svatých s kostnicí v Sedlci (okres Kutná Hora) – archivní rešerše k dějinám objektu*. Unpublished report, Archaeological Institute, Kutná Hora.
- Nagel, A., & Wood, C. S. (2010). *Anachronic Renaissance*. Zone Books.
- Nedobyty, A. (1902). Bohemia revisited. *The Overland Monthly, Series*, 2(39), 776–781.
- Neuwirth, J. (1888). *Geschichte der Christlichen Kunst in Böhmen bis zum Aussterben der Přemysliden*. J. G. Calve.
- Neuwirth, J. (1893). Der Baubeginn der Frohnleichnams- und Barbarakirche in Kuttenberg. *Mittheilungen des Vereines für Geschichte der Deutschen in Böhmen*, 31, 306–341.
- Pátková, H. (2000). *Bratrstvie ke cti Božie: Poznámky ke kultovní činnosti bratrstev a cechů ve středověkých Čechách* (Clavis monumentorum litterarum, Regnum Bohemiae Vol. 5, Monographia Vol. 1). Koniasch Latin Press.
- Rendek, J., & Libenský, F. (2019). *Kostnice v českých zemích*. Academia.
- Sartorius, A. (1708) *Verteütshtes Cistercium Bis-Tertium, Oder Cistercienser Ordens-Historie*. W. Wickhart. [https://reader.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/fs1/object/display/bsb1112998\\_00007.html](https://reader.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/fs1/object/display/bsb1112998_00007.html). Accessed 25 Mar 2020.

- Schreg, R. (2018). Mönche als Pioniere in der Wildnis? Aspekte des mittelalterlichen Landesausbaus. In M. Krätschmer, K. Thode, & C. Vossler-Wolf (Eds.), *Klöster und ihre Ressourcen: Räume und Reformen monastischer Gemeinschaften im Mittelalter* (pp. 39–58) (RessourcenKulturen Vol. 7). Tübingen Library Publishing.
- Šimůnek, R. (Ed.). (2010). *Kutná Hora* (Historický atlas měst České republiky Vol. 22). Institute of History of the Czech Academy of Sciences.
- Tadra (Fadra), F. (1886). Die ehemalige Kirche der heil. Apostel Philipp und Jakob im Kloster Sedletz. *Mittheilungen der K. K. Central-Commission zur Erforschung und Erhaltung der Kunst- und historischen Denkmale, Neue Folge* 12, clxiv–clxvi.
- Uličný, P. (2009). Boží hrob a Svaté pole: Jeruzalémská topografie sedleckého klášteřa. In R. Lomničková (Ed.), *Sedlec: Historie, architektura a umělecká tvorba sedleckého klášteřa ve středoevropském kontextu kolem roku 1300 a 1700 / Sedletz: Geschichte, Architektur und Kunstschaffen im Sedletz Kloster im mitteleuropäischen Kontext um die Jahre 1300 und 1700* (pp. 215–249) (Opera Facultatis Theologiae Catholicae Universitatis Carolinae Prgensis, Historia et Historia Atrium Vol. 10). Togga.
- Vácha, Š. (2003). Barokní kult cisterciáckých mučedníků doby husitské. In I. Čornejová (Ed.), *Úloha církevních řádů při pobělohorské rekatolizaci: Sborník příspěvků z pracovního semináře konaného ve Vranově u Brna ve dnech 4.–5.6.2003* (pp. 182–216). Charles University, Prague.
- Vácha, Š. (2008). Antiquitatis illustre monumentum: Die Klosterkirche in Sedletz und ihre Restaurierung von 1700–170. *Umění*, 56, 384–408.
- Vaněk, V. (2011). *Ohlášni fundace kutnohorských měšťanů v předhusitské době: Chantry chapels by burghers in Kutná Hora in pre-Hussite period*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Charles University, Prague.
- Velímský, T. (1970). Záchranný výzkum v Sedlci. *Krásné mesto, 1970(2)*, 15–16.
- Velímský, F. (2009a). Přehled výsledků dosavadního archeologického průzkumu. In R. Lomničková (Ed.), *Sedlec: Historie, architektura a umělecká tvorba sedleckého klášteřa ve středoevropském kontextu kolem roku 1300 a 1700 / Sedletz: Geschichte, Architektur und Kunstschaffen im Sedletz Kloster im mitteleuropäischen Kontext um die Jahre 1300 und 1700* (pp. 385–398) (Opera Facultatis Theologiae Catholicae Universitatis Carolinae Prgensis, Historia et Historia Atrium Vol. 10). Togga.
- Velímský, F. (2009b). Podíl sedleckých cisterciáků na montánních aktivitách na Kutnohorsku. *Argenti Fodina, 2008*, 26–34.
- Velímský, F. (2013). Gründung, Struktur und Entwicklung der mittelalterlichen Bergstadt Kutná Hora/Kuttenberg aus der Sicht der Archäologie, der Montanarchäologie und der Geschichte. In Y. Hoffmann & U. Richter (Eds.), *Die Frühgeschichte Freibergs im überregionalen Vergleich: Städtische Frühgeschichte – Bergbau – früher Hausbau* (pp. 315–325). Mitteldeutscher Verlag.
- Velímský, F. (2014). Wie das Silber in Kuttenberg verarbeitet wurde / Jak se v Kutné Hoře zpracovávalo stříbro. In R. Smolnik (Ed.), *Silberrausch und Berggeschichte: Archäologie des mittelalterlichen Bergbaus in Sachsen und Böhmen / Stříbrná horečka a volání hor: archeologie středověkého hornictví v Sasku a Čechách* (pp. 143–152). Beier & Beran.
- Velímský, F. (2017). Montánně archeologický výzkum středověkých horních děl v Kutné Hoře v letech 1999–2016. *Acta rerum naturalium, 21*, 21–40.
- Wankel, H. (1879). Ueber die angeblich trepanirten Cranien des Beinhauses zu Sedlec in Böhmen. *Mittheilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien*, 8(10–12), 352–360.
- Zaoral, R. (2015). The management of papal collections and long-distance trade in the thirteenth-century Czech lands. *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome: Moyen Âge*, 127(2), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.4000/mefrm.2732>

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

