

Did the Boii have their homeland in our territory? That's not a sure thing, one archaeologist points out



The opuka head of the Celtic Hero found in 1943 in Mšecké Žehrovice. | photo by Hynek Glos, [LIDOVÉ NOVINY](#)

Prague

Where is my home, where is my home, or so the Czech national anthem asks. And those Czechs who take pleasure in deriving their ancient origins from the Celtic tribe of Boii can keep on singing it. Archeologist Vladimír Salač from the Czech Academy of Sciences has pointed out that it's not certain that the Celtic Boii tribe had their homeland in our territory which they named "Bohemia". He deduces this from the first three mentions of the *Búiaimon* or *Boihaem*, and archaeological contexts as well.

This term was used by the Germanic tribes, but it is not known which Germans, and what territory. "The Germans from Thuringia in the west to Lower Silesia in the east can be taken into consideration, who pointed southwards and said, that that's where the Boii live... At first, they probably didn't even know the extent of the Boii territory. Their *Boiohaemum* could have stretched from Würzburg to Ostrava, or it could have indicated merely the North Czech Elbe River area," Salač told LN.

His studies might actually end up as revisions to Czech textbooks in many aspects. "It's always good to take a critical look at alleged or traditional truths," says Professor Jiří Macháček, an expert from Masaryk University, commenting on Salač's work.

Onwards we go, and we get the impression that nothing new can be read from the old chronicles. Not speaking about the early history of the Czech lands (specifically *Čechy*), which, as everybody knows, got their name *Boiohaemum* (*Bohemia* in English, *Böhmen* in German, and so on) from the Celtic Boii tribe who lived here before the Germans and Slavs. But how true is this really?

Vladimír Salač (60)



Vladimír Salač

“When you open the history textbooks, encyclopedias, and handbooks, it’s always written there that in the last centuries BC the Celts lived here who, at the turn of the millennium, drove out the Germans, namely the Marcomanni headed by King Maroboduus, the first historical figure of Czech history. It’s also said that these Marcomanni originally lived near the Mohan/Main River in northern Bavaria, from where they set out to conquer territories at the expense of the Celtic Boii,” says Vladimír Salač, speaking from the Prague Archaeological Institute of the Academy of Sciences.

But none of this is certain, even though it’s been repeated for many years. “Since the publication of the important book by Josef Dobiáš ‘History of the Czechoslovak Territory Before the Entrance of the Slavs’ (*Dějiny čs. území před vystoupením Slovanů*) in 1964, it’s assumed that everything has been resolved. Maybe that’s why we don’t have a historian of ancient history here who would focus on Central Europe. Why? If it’s a closed case, well..., “says the archaeologist.

Salač took a thorough look at the three first mentions of Bohemia: at the Greek writer Strabo and the Latin writers, Velleius Peterculus and Tacitus, who were the first to write the words *Búiaimon*, or respectively *Boiohaemum*. This happened in the first century after Christ, however, when the Germans had already settled in the Czech lands.

“In all the books today, it’s written that the name *Boiohaemum* was given to the Czech lands by the Boii tribe. But this ignores the essential fact that the word is of Germanic origin; it was originally *Baia-heim*, meaning something like home or the country of the Boii, and the best translation would probably be ‘there where the Boii live’. At the same time, though, we don’t know when and which Germanic tribe it was or where they created that name. It had to be in the vicinity of the Celtic Boii world, but we have no idea where,” says Salač. The Germans somewhere from Thuringia in the west to Lower Silesia in the east thus come to mind, who pointed somewhere southwards and said: That’s where the Boii live, that’s their *Baia-heim*.

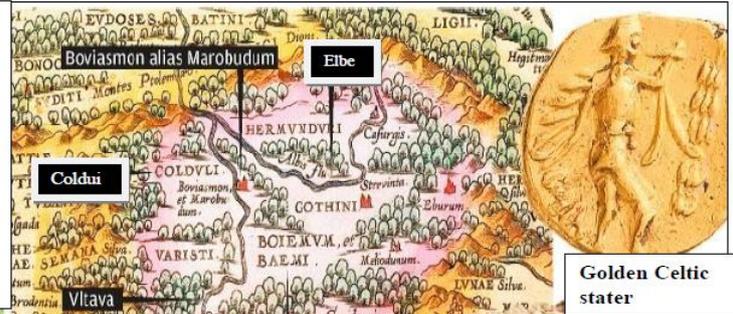
- Archaeologist specializing in the La Tène and early Roman periods.
- Studied archeology at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Charles University in Prague (1981), but for many years has primarily worked at the **Prague Archaeological Institute** of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic.
- Focuses on Celtic oppida and La Tène settlement ceramics.
- In 2015 compiled a major publication named “Boii, Between Reality and Fiction” (*Bójové mezi realitou a fikcí*).

Where was it?

There were originally three authors who wrote about the land of the Celtic Boii, about **Bohemia**: the philosopher Strabo in his *Geographica* just after the turn of the millennium, the Roman army officer **Velleius Paterculus** in his *Roman History*, and later **Tacitus** in his *Germania* published in AD 98. Other news about events in the Czech lands (Čechy) come from the 10th century.

The land of the Boii?

A section from the historical map of **Abraham Ortelius** (1587) with the localization of the Germanic tribes including the **Coldui** and important settlements such as **Boviasmon** alias **Marobudum** in the region now commonly known as Bohemia, or Čechy.



Golden Celtic stater



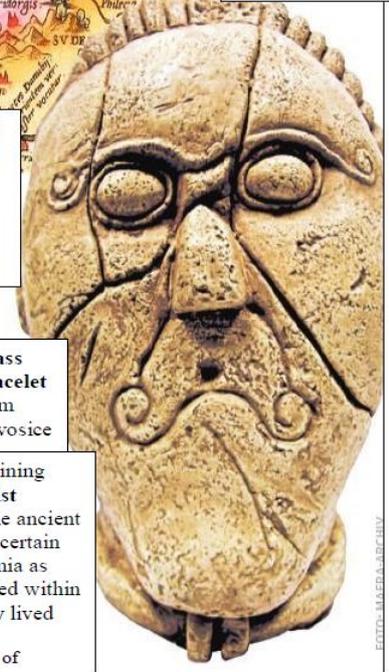
approximate extent of contiguous settlement

The Celts built a relatively advanced culture; they were familiar with glassmaking and coinage. The most famous heritage item in the Czech Republic is the opuka head of the Celt found at **Mšecké Žehrovice** near Kladno.



Glass bracelet from Lovosice

Archaeologist **Vladimír Salač**, while examining Celtic history, including the **Oppidum Závist** (pictured) in his studies, has overturned some ancient "truths". From fragmentary records it is not certain whether the mentioned Boii tribe had Bohemia as their homeland, whether Bohemia was located within modern-day Czech territory, or whether they lived here before the **Marcomanni** and **Coldui**.
Source: LN, Institute of Archeology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic



CECILIA MAERA-BICHSEL

Corrections to Czech history

“But at first, these Germans, however, didn’t even know the true extent of the real Boii territory. Their Boiohaemum could have ranged from Würzburg to Ostrava, or it could have indicated merely the North Czech Elbe River area,” Salač told LN.

He is attempting to overturn similar myths, first in professional literature. “Even though the words *Czech* (*Čechy*) and Boiohaemum are commonly considered to be identical in theories concerning the BC period, and this word is translated and interpreted as the homeland or ancient homeland of the Boii, there is no documented proof from this era to support the connection of Boiohaemum with the Czech basin, nor even for the existence of this designation ... The identification of the homeland of the Boii with Boiohaemum in the La Tène period and later with the Czech lands gradually became an axiom of (not only) Czech history and archeology which was not investigated or verified any further,” Salač wrote last year in a 55-page study for the journal “*Perspectives on Archaeology*” (*Archeologické rozhledy*).

He supports it with an allegation that one cannot claim (as is often posted in exhibitions) that the Boii came from *Czech* (*Čechy*) and that they already lived here in the 5th century BC. This allegation is more of a wish than a historical fact. In the same article, Salač struggles with another accepted story. During a careful reading of Strabo’s *Geographica*, he noticed unusual references to the Germanic Coldui, about whom we learn that they lived in Moravia and Slovakia.

The Coldui “erased” from history

But alas: according to Strabo’s text, in the territory to where Maroboduus moved (the Búiaimon settlement), the Coldui had already settled before the Marcomanni! Even though a number of other chroniclers (Kuthen, Hajek of Libočany) and other scholars (Clüver, Píč) also interpreted their role in this way, all it took was for one generation of historians in the first half of the 20th century to omit one of the parts of Strabo’s text to “erase” the Coldui from Czech history and archeology. At the same time, it is possible that the bearers of the first wave of Germanic migration to *Čechy* were not the Marcomanni, but the Coldui. This hypothesis has been supported by a linguistic analysis of Strabo and Tacitus in a further professional study by Ivan Prchlík from the Institute of Greek and Latin Studies at the Faculty of Philosophy, Charles University.

Maroboduus actually came to “his own kind”, to other Germans. But what happened to the Celts, to the Boii, when the first Germans arrived? Did they fight, or offer resistance? “It seems more likely that the Celtic economy was sort of overheated. The Celts began to build large fortified settlements (oppida) on hills and in barren areas, and they had trouble maintaining them, which exhausted them economically. Under those circumstances all that was needed then was a small impulse – an attack from the outside, a drop in the climate – that they would normally withstand, but it led to their collapse. And their community disintegrated. The new population, the Germans, started entering into a kind of non-governed situation, and it didn’t have to be violent at all, like we imagine it,” says Salač. But neither he nor his colleagues know why the Germans didn’t assume the Celts’ better achievements – the pottery wheel, millstones, not even glasswork or coinage.

The Marcomanni puzzle solved

On the other hand, another myth of European historiography has been rebutted, namely that the Marcomanni came with Maroboduus from the Main River area. That’s how it’s been written and rewritten. But this contradicts both written and archeological sources. Where did such a delusion come from? Salač spent four years finding out. He gradually tracked down the works of Wocel (1868), Zeuss (1837), Hansselmann (1768) and Mascov (1726) until he came upon the Jesuit Bucherius (1656), who made a “personal interpretation” of Florus’ antique entry on the map, thus setting research on a blind path for several centuries afterwards.

“There’s a lot of these types of myths, and I’m trying to remove them from the oldest history. I’d love to be able to accomplish this not only with experts but for the general public as well,” says Salač, underscoring the mood of Strategy AV21 which is now being pushed through by the Czech Academy of Sciences. The strategy states: “Top research in the public interest.”

[Martin Rychlík](#)