

Archaeology and Art: the Relationship of Karel Absolon (1877–1960) and Czechoslovak Artists in the Period Between the World Wars*

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Abstract: The article in the introductory section maps the connection of the production of the leading Czech artists in the services of archaeology from the middle of the 19th century and their role with the national emancipation before World War I. The main part of the text comes from a source study of the archive of Karel Absolon, who was one of the central personalities in the fields of archaeology and speleology in Czechoslovakia in the interwar period. Absolon's scientific activities aroused interest with a number of Czech painters, men of letters, photographers, filmmakers and philosophers, who reflected on the results of archaeological research both in cooperation with Karel Absolon and in their own artistic production.

Keywords: history of archaeology, Czech archaeology, Karel Absolon, artistic production

Cooperation of Czech archaeologists and artists

Archaeology and Art – the connection of two human activities, which thanks to the significant imaginative powers of both fields was very strong particularly in the past. We can follow with certainty the need of reflection of one's own past in art, which drew from archaeological finds and knowledge, from the time of the Renaissance (Barkan 2001). In European countries lying north of direct contact with Antique culture, this symbiosis comes immediately in connection with the emergence of archaeology as a new scientific discipline in the course of the 18th and particularly 19th centuries. Not even the Czech lands were an exception in this trend. On the territory of Bohemia, the foundation of the National Museum in Prague (1818) and particularly then the emergence of the Archaeological Committee of the National Museum in 1843, initiated by the leading Czech scientist and historiographer František Palacký (1798–1876), were crucial for the emergence of archaeology. Precisely at that time, Josef Vojtěch Hellich (1807–1880), a graduate of the painting academy in Prague, became the first custodian of the archaeological collection of the National Museum. Hellich in the short period of his activity at the National Museum conducted painting documentation during the first official archaeological emergency acts in the Czech lands (Skalsko, Mladá Boleslav district, burial grounds of the Únětická culture), illustrated the archaeological handbooks of the founder of Czech archaeology Jan Erazim Vocel (1802–1871) as well as the first Czech journal of this field – *Archeologické listy*.¹ J.V. Hellich as

the first in Bohemia in the selection of painting themes from the earliest history and legends used an inventory from real archaeological finds. However, Hellich felt himself to be first of all a painter and therefore suddenly left the National Museum already in 1846 and devoted himself to an artistic career in Vienna and especially in Prague, where he became famous as a portrait painter and as the president of the Artistic Department of the Christian Academy (Sklenář 2014: 20–43).

The emergence of archaeology in Bohemia around the middle of the 19th century falls in the general stream of European Romanticism, manifesting itself with individual nations through rising historicism and in the Czech lands also the national renewal process, the so-called 'National Revival'. This period also allowed a number of artists, who attempted to visualize the concepts of the famous past of Slavs on Czech territory, to come to the fore in the Czech lands. The means, which would allow the emergence of an idea on the form of life or clothing of our predecessors in the dark past would, however, be limited. Archaeological finds in the middle of the 19th century were not yet numerous, sufficiently organized and other than the collection of the National Museum dispersed in various private collections. So, at that time one of the main sources, which revealed the form of the distant past were the exceptionally well done fakes of Old-Czech literary texts, the so-called *Manuscripts* supposedly found in 1818. The dispute on their authenticity then moved Czech society for practically all of the 19th century and was still fading at the beginning of the 20th century (Ivanov 2000). From an archaeological perspective, the most substantial in this area is the so-called *Rukopis Zelenohorský* [Zelená

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¹ Magazine was published in 1852.

Hora Manuscript] which was to describe the mythical events of Bohemian history reaching back as far as the 9th century. Bohemian historical painting also reacted to the issue of the *Manuscripts*, which broke away from Antique themes and brought the search for a national style and content drawing from national history. A number of artists, who are included in the Czech 'national pantheon of personalities', also tried through their production to touch a time where no historical sources reached. Besides the emerging archaeological collection of the National Museum, their leads were also the first professionally illustrated publications, particularly from the pen of J.E. Vocel. The leading pioneer and creator in this direction was the painter, illustrator and one of the most important creators of Czech Romanticism Josef Mánes (1820–1871). One of the peaks of Mánes's illustrator's production is precisely the second of the *Manuscripts* the so-called *Rukopis královedvorský* (Manuscript of Dvůr Králové), which began to come out with his illustrations in 1860. Here in an effort to remove the form of prehistoric life, he used a conglomerate of all the prehistoric elements and decorations, in which jewellery and models from the Bronze Age and Hallstatt Period dominated. In the armament of the Slavonic heroes, he used stone axes, whose simplicity stood in contrast to the improved armour of the foreigners, over whom the moral strength of the Slavonic hero wins in the end. For the reconstruction of the clothing, he used his knowledge of folk traditional clothes from the mountainous areas of the border between Slovakia and Poland (Matějček 1925; Fig. 1). Mánes was a very pedantic creator, he studied the models of his work thoroughly both in the originals and undoubtedly also with consultations with the leading experts of his time. One of them was also his friend, the founder of archaeology in Moravia, a physician and also the grandfather of Karel Absolon (1877–1960), Jindřich Wankel (1821–1897). Mánes visited his friend on his journeys in Moravia, they studied together the discovered archaeological finds and later also became his patient, treated for the progressive paralysis caused by an infection of syphilis.

The authentic study of prehistoric material was the model also for another classic of Czech painting of the generation younger Mikoláš Aleš (1852–1913), who was himself an amateur archaeologist. Particularly the attractive finds from the Hallstatt Period again served as the appearance and clothes of his Slavonic heroes. For instance, he put in the hand of the first historically proved person of Czech history – Prince Sámó – the spectacular find by Jindřich Wankel from the Hallstatt cave temple from Býčí skála in Moravia – the so-called sceptre. Another significant artistic act was the depiction of the monumental equestrian statue of Duke Wenceslas, the symbol of the Czech nation, located on Wenceslas Square under the National Museum in the

heart of Prague (the statue was unveiled unfinished in 1913). Its author became the most important Czech sculptor of the turn of the 20th century, Josef Václav Myslbek (1848–1922), who dressed the figure of the Czech ruler realistically in armour, coming from the 10th century (helmet, stirrups, chainmail shirt...). Of the significant Czech artists, who attempted to reconstruct the appearance of long-ago life, it is possible also to name Alfonse Mucha (1860–1939) and his *Slovanskou epopej* [Slav Epic, 1910–1928] or the Czech academic painter Jaroslav Panuška (1872–1958).

Besides the fine arts, we understandably know the connection of artistic production with the knowledge of archaeology also from other fields of human creativity. In music, the reflection of 'old times' found its place again mainly in the treatment of themes from Czech historical mythology. We find them in the works of the classics of Czech music Bedřich Smetana (1824–1884; particularly in the work *Libuše* from 1872), Zdeněk Fibich (1850–1900); Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904; the opera *Vanda* from the milieu of Polish pagan Slavs) or Leoš Janáček (1854–1928; the opera *Šárka*). A large theme was the depiction of prehistory for Czech writers both in prose and poetry. We find many texts already at the beginning of the 19th century in the already mentioned forgeries of the *Manuscripts*. However, this theme was developed in an unprecedented way within very attractive and sought after archaeological short stories and prose works, intended particularly for the young and school pupils. These found their place in the rich production of amateur archaeologists including for instance Kliment Čermák (1852–1917), Rudolf Richard Hofmeister (1868–1934) or Eduard Štorch (1878–1956). Particularly these authors, whose texts and books came out in significant print runs richly illustrated with high-quality drawings, were the creators of expanded ideas of prehistory for many generations of Czech readers – the theme in Czech literature was treated in an exhaustive way by Karel Sklenář (2003).

An interesting chapter and milestone, which also presents the main theme of our paper, is the production of the founder of modern painting, the world famous author of Czech origin, František Kupka (1871–1957). His work, unlike the previous cases, did not only include archaeological artefacts into historical paintings. Kupka, during his work in Paris in 1909, created a drawn reconstruction of a Neanderthal, depicted according to the finds in La Chapelle-aux-Saints unearthed in 1908. He cooperated in the reconstruction, which was later published in *L'illustration* and *Illustrated London News*,² with the leading French anthropologist and discoverer of the Neanderthal find Marcellin Boule (1861–1942). Kupka shifted his appearance of the Neanderthal

² See <http://granger.pixels.com/featured/1-neanderthal-man-granger.html>, accessed 8 January 2015.

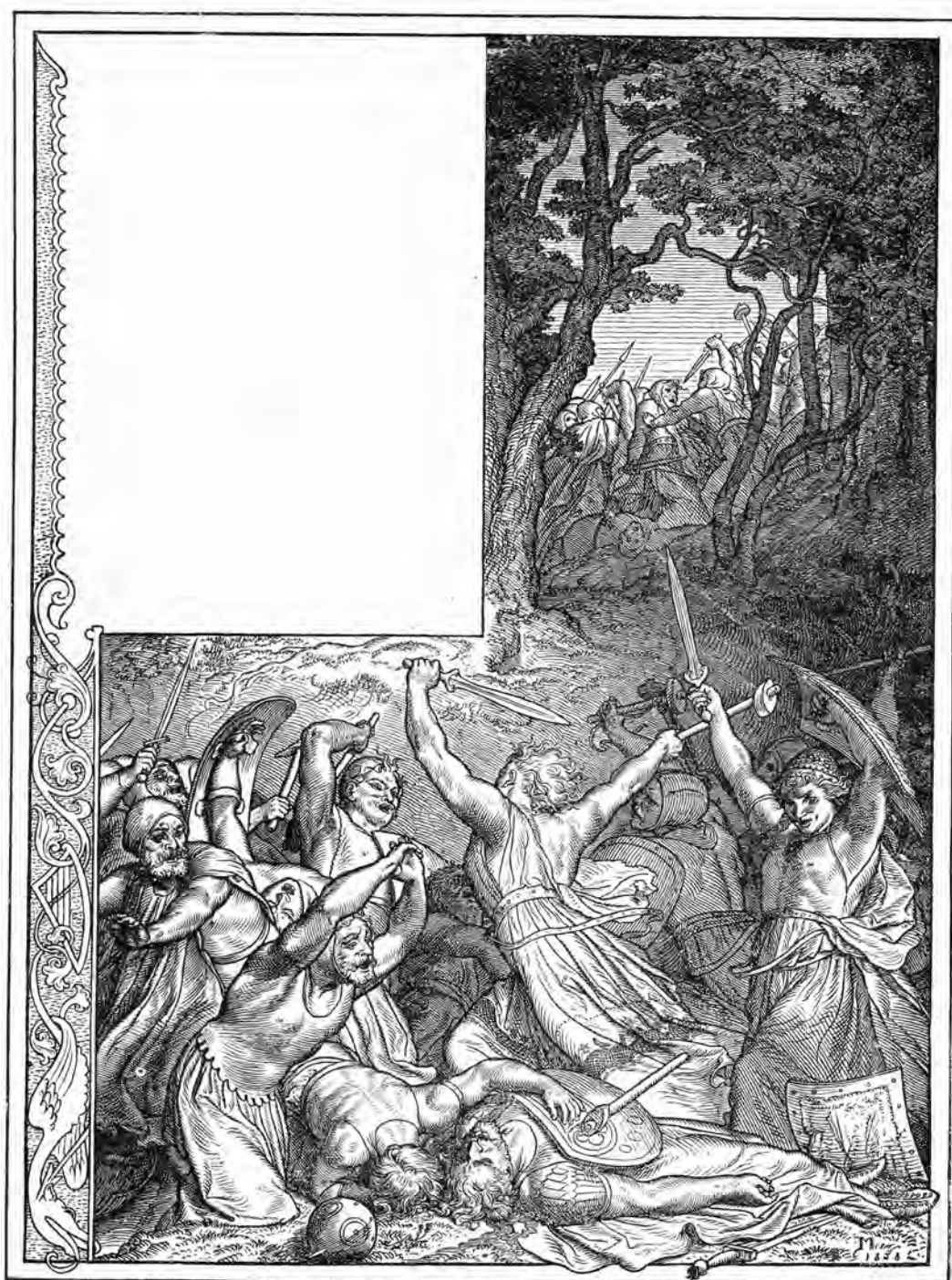


Fig. 1. One of the illustrations of Josef Mánes's Manuscript of Dvůr Králové 'Boj Zábaje a Slavoje s Luďkem' [Battle of Zábaj, Slavoj and Luďek] from 1858. The technologically backward and scantily clad Slavs fighting with Neolithic hammers and bronze swords against foreigners, armed with a longer historical Late Gothic weapons and protective armour. Mánes depicted the Slavs as a prehistoric nation that wins over the dominance of a technical culture of a hostile nation with a historical culture. The hero on the right has a helmet decorated with half-moon motives, which Manes adapted from decorations of prehistoric pottery (after Matějček 1925: tab. IV).



Fig. 2. View of the exhibition ‘The beginnings of humanity in light of anthropology, archaeology and art’ at the National Museum in Prague in 1947. At the exhibition, a gift from František Kupka was presented – an oil painting from 1905 ‘Pithecanthropi’ and 8 other drawings. Photo from the collection of the Archive of the National Museum in Prague.

to the level of a scientific reconstruction created in cooperation with experts. For Czech archaeology this work is important for the author donated a collection of 8 drawings on this theme to the National Museum in 1947; of particular importance is an oil painting from 1905, entitled *Pithecanthropi*, in which two men battling over a woman are depicted. This significant gift provided the cause for two noteworthy exhibitions at the National Museum, which for the very first time tried to capture the relationship of artistic production and archaeology. The first was opened in 1947 under the title *The Beginnings of humankind in light of anthropology, archaeology and art/Les hommes fossils* as the very first archaeological exhibition after World War II. The second then built on the theme in 1954 with the title *Prehistoric subjects in art* (Turek 1947; Svoboda 1947; Neustupný *et al.* 1954; Sklenář 2014: 208–213; Opatrná 2014; Fig. 2).

Karel Absolon

As has already been indicated, archaeology and art had a close relationship from the beginnings of prehistoric science also in the Czech milieu. In that, Czech archaeology did not deviate from a similar trend of the other European countries. With the



Fig. 3. Karel Absolon (1877–1960, in the foreground in a dark suit) and the Moravian author and poet, later First Republic deputy and senator for the agrarian party Jaroslav Marcha (1880–1961) in the Moravian Karst, more closely undated. Photo: R. Czižek.

gradual specialization of the field and transformations of the nationalistic needs, also the role of artistic production in the services of archaeology changed. Individual personalities from the ranks of both

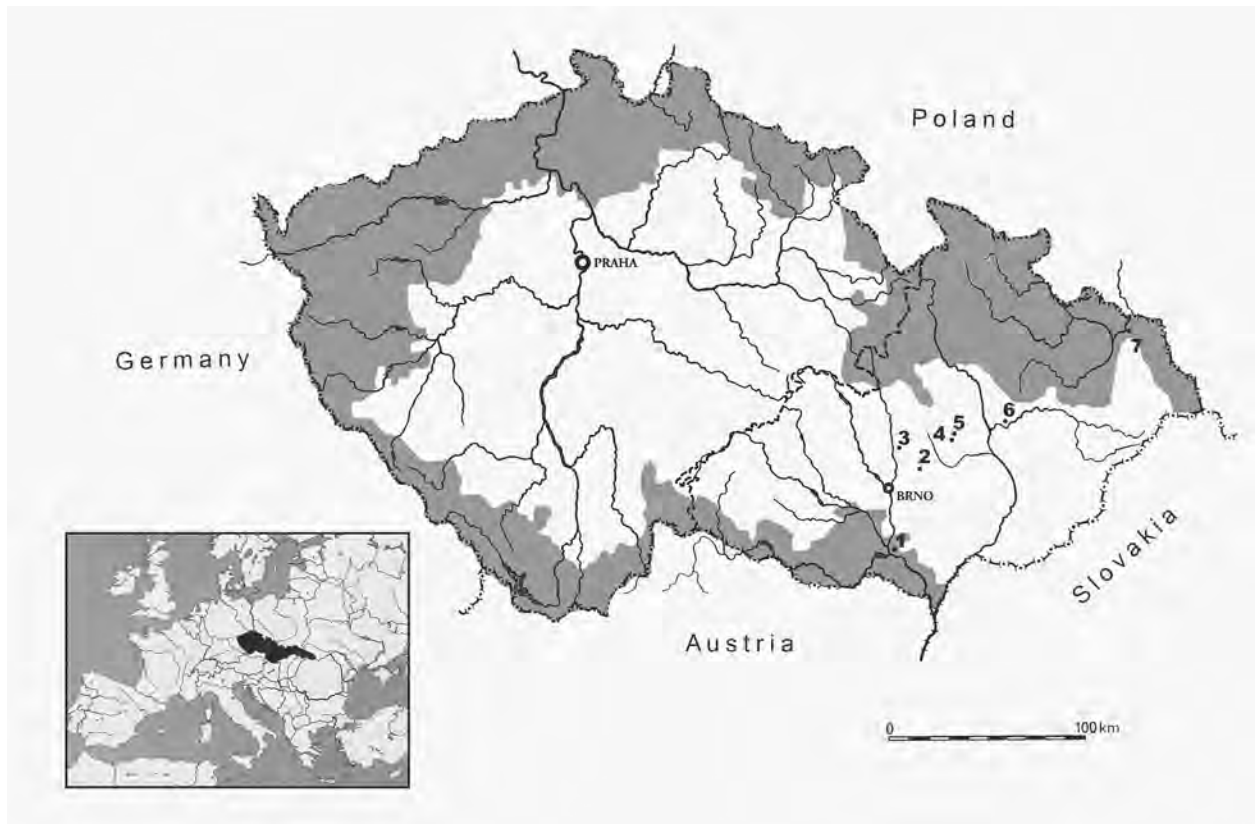


Fig. 4. Marking of the main Palaeolithic localities, whose research and popularization in 1918–1939 made Karel Absolon internationally famous. On the map, the historical borders of Moravia are marked. The territory of the Sudeten lands is marked in grey, taken from the CSR from 30 September 1938 to 9 May 1945 after the Munich Agreement. 1– Dolní Věstonice, 2 – the cave Pekárna, 3 – the cave Býčí skála [Bull Rock], 4 – Ondratice, 5 – Otaslavice, 6 – Předmostí near Přerov, 7 – Ostrava – Petřkovice.

artists and archaeologists sought their own routes of mutual collaboration, dependent on the specific interest or current needs. On the general level, artistic production complemented or revived a number of archaeological finds and works particularly by pictorial reconstruction of settlements, places of pagan cult, clothing; alternatively, they attempted to reconstruct specific events – burials etc. (Slezák 2008, 2013). There was already a mention of the irreplaceable role of illustrations in the popular literary works on the boundary of adventure and professional literature (Sklenář 2003). In the event of exceptional personalities from the field of archaeology, this relationship was not only one-sided (artist creates a work at the commission of the archaeologist). In some cases, the archaeologist himself could, thanks to unique finds or character features become a source of inspiration for the artist directly. Such cases undoubtedly include the icon of Czech archaeological and speleological research in the period before World War II Karel Absolon (1877–1960; Fig. 3).

A series of works were devoted to the biography of this person both during his life and after his death (Kostrhun 2009, 2014: 131–182 with other references

to the literature). Karel Absolon became famous at the beginning of the 20th century particularly as a recognized speleologist with his vigorous prolongations of Moravian caves through the multifaceted use of techniques and dynamite, which until that time was completely uncommon. He recorded significant successes in the field of speleology also in 1908–1922 with his investigations and mapping of the cave systems in Bosnia and Herzegovina. After 1918, he however became famous as an archaeologist particularly thanks to his research of the Palaeolithic settlements from the Gravettian Period (Dolní Věstonice, Břeclav district, Předmostí near Přerov) and Magdalenian Period (the cave Pekárna; Fig. 4). A component of Absolon's work was also a significant emphasis on the medialization of the finds and the discoverer himself, the intensity of which clearly surpassed all of his colleagues. He was helped to fame by lucky finds, among which the so-called Venus of Dolní Věstonice stands out – a ceramic statue of a woman found in 1925 at a Gravettian settlement in Dolní Věstonice – only the second such a find of Palaeolithic art in Europe. However, besides that, he also had rich contacts in the international scientific world and domestically also the respect (and oftentimes also disdain) of the political



Fig. 5. One of the rooms of the exhibition on the origin and development of mankind – Anthropos. In the foreground, there is the skeleton of the mammoth from Předmostí near Přerov, an installation from the 1930s. Karel Absolon created a very attractive exhibition with the use of modern museum science elements (dioramas with views of the life of prehistoric people, projection of stereoscopic photographs) and in cooperation with numerous artists. Photo: K. Absolon.

and cultural establishment. Thanks to Absolon's organizational skill, also the modern anthropological and archaeological museum Anthropos (Fig. 5) was created in Brno in 1928, which became the main point of interest of the Czech and foreign public. The aim of Absolon's efforts in this area was to build an interdisciplinary research centre focused on the earliest history of mankind, which in Central Europe would compete with the then most prestigious Institut de Paléontologie Humain in Paris. All of Absolon's activities thus stood in the sights of not only Czech and foreign journalists (lengthy articles in *The Illustrated London News* between 1925 and 1946, *Le Matin*, *Central European Observer*, *Herald-Examiner*, *American Weekly*, *New York Times* and others recorded great success) but also a series of active artists.

Fine Arts

With Karel Absolon, we can follow an interesting relationship with important Czech artists already at the beginning of his scientific career. He began his investigations of Moravian caves still as a student of the Faculty of Science of Charles University in Prague, particularly then the most distinctive sight in the area of the Moravian Karst – Macocha Chasm and the

related Punkevní Cave. In 1901–1909, he assembled a team of young scientists and friends, who in several 'expeditions' always remained on the bottom of the deepest cave chasm (138 m) in Central Europe for more days and conducted scientific measurements and mapping of the accessible caves there (Fig. 6). However, they did not lack time for entertainment and particularly sending reports from the deeps of the earth to watching visitors and reporters on the surface, who spread the fame and credits of the young discoverers (Kostrhun 2007). A member of the expedition in 1905 was also the young painter, sculptor and graphic artists Otakar Kubín known also as Othon Coubine (1883–1969), who became famous in later years as an important members of the Parisian *Salon des Indépendants*. Although Absolon and Kubín came from the same small Moravian town of Boskovice (Blansko district), they became acquainted only after the end of Kubín's studies at the Prague academy. Afterwards, Kubín more frequently participated in Absolon's expeditions, which he captured in his paintings. Thus, also the cycle of impressionist paintings from the expedition to the bottom of Macocha Chasm was created, which he exhibited and sold successfully in Vienna (Fig. 7). The money acquired from the sale of these paintings then allowed the author a journey to



Fig. 6. Karel Absolon at the beginning of the 20th century organized several 'expeditions' to the bottom of Macocha, which were participated in by for instance also the painter Otokar Kubín or the poet Jiří Mahen. Photography of the camp of the expedition in 1905. From the photography, the careful arrangement of scenes and figures is apparent, which moreover evoke the idea of a scientific expedition in distant and unknown landscapes. The red-white flag, which symbolizes the traditional banner of the Kingdom of Bohemia, was left erect at the bottom of the chasm after the expedition. It remains hidden from the observers that the basket contains beer and hot food sent from the trip restaurant just above the chasm. Photo: A. Wiesner.



Fig. 7. The 'Base Camp' of the young researchers on the bottom of the Mococho Chasm captured in this way in 1905 by the young impressionistic painter Otokar Kubín (published in Absolon 1970: Fig. 45).

Rubens's Academy in Antwerp and other travel around Europe and a final anchorage in Paris in 1912. Kubín then many times returned to his artistic beginnings in his correspondence with Karel Absolon: 'Today, I have to tell you that that trip down to Macocha was my fate and if I write to you today from Simian that trip down is precisely the reason. I that time painted there arduously and applied everything in it and mainly that it was all sold opened the path for me to which I could hardly have made otherwise. You see on how then a thread the life of a person hangs. Today, I am thankful to you that you took me with you'.³

The mentioned episode from the beginning of Absolon's research of the Moravian Karst was not unique in relation to important Czech artists, who expressed an interest in Absolon's massively promoted finds of Palaeolithic art. The leading creators certainly included one of the founders of Czech modern painting Max Švabinský (1873–1962), several times the rector of the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague and member of

the council of the international artistic grouping. In the work of Švabinský, graphic production dominates lyrically evoking the life of human couples in nature. A frequent theme was also the depiction of primeval forests, paradises and visions of contented human life in peace with nature. For this reason, he also displayed an interest in prehistoric history, which he expressed by the creation of eight broadsheets (for instance *Venuše Předmostská* [The Venus of Předmostí], *Zpodobení mamuta* [Depiction of a mammoth]) for the popularizing trilogy *Pravěk Čech* [Prehistory of Bohemia] from the 1920s, a fictionally described geological, anthropological and archaeological development of the country by the author Rudolf Hofmeister (Loriš 1943). Certainly from this reason Švabinský's interest arose also in Absolon's work, captured in the correspondence and supported by an exchange of literature.⁴

Absolon's finds aroused a similar interest with Czech painter, graphic artist and journalist Lev Šimák (1896–1989). The main part of Šimák's production focused on

³ O. Kubín to K. Absolon, 6 August 1948, Archive of the Anthropos Institute, Moravian Museum.

⁴ M. Švabinský to K. Absolon, 2 April 1944, Archive of the Anthropos Institute, Moravian Museum.

oil landscape painting and figural painting inspired by Expressionism, Fauvism and Cubism. His interwar production is most appreciated, which began after his return from the front line of World War I (he served e.g. in Przemyśl in Galicia). Also for that reason he was already an active Communist in the 1930s and never stopped admiring the USSR, he acquired in the period after World War II a series of high awards and became a national artist. In this context, Šimák's mention in a letter from 1938 is interesting: 'It sticks in my head these thirty thousand years of culture to which you have given me insight. And I think about it in terms of art, which is particularly valuable. It seems to me that I understand it rather because now that I am not against it as a painter of Cubism. The modern view of the painting culture today seems to give me the key to understanding the shape of the hand of the earliest first genius. It is not only a rare interesting find more significant than the discovery of Tutankhamen's grave – but just an aesthetic beauty that attracts me and I am not an exception. I remember e.g. the bear, which is wonderful in its long form and the dorsal arch – it also applies to the drawing of a bison on the elongated bones gnawed clean by worms. What about the oldest portrait in the world, it is not a gem? I swear at myself that I abstained and did not buy from you at least casts of those two things on the occasion of the visit of the collection. Therefore, I am also writing; if you could write to Stalin himself about the cast of the Venus of Malta – from Siberia – I dare to ask you to send at least the two mentioned casts...'⁵

The cooperation of Karel Absolon with fine artists distinctly intensified at the end of the 1920s, when he was organizationally absorbed with the creation of an extensive exposition devoted to the earliest history of humankind and the emergence of culture – Anthropos, ceremonially opened in 1928. The exposition was based on his own archaeological material but also particularly a number of copies of global archaeological iconic finds (Palaeolithic paintings and reliefs) and also the production of a number of dioramas with figures of 'Diluvian' hunters and gatherers. Last but not least, it concerned also Absolon's most successful exhibit – a reconstruction of the appearance of a mammoth in life size (Kostrhun 2003). From the whole series of creators who cooperated in the production of Anthropos, it is possible to mention for example the famous Viennese painter Franz Roubal (1889–1967), who specialized in the reconstruction of prehistoric animals besides other painting and sculptural production. Karel Absolon acquired for his purposes from this author an



Fig. 8. Neanderthals quarter their catch in an oil painting by Franz Roubal (1889–1967). Karel Absolon had the painting made for the exhibition Anthropos in 1934. Original in the Anthropos Institute of the Moravian Museum.
Photo: J. Čága.

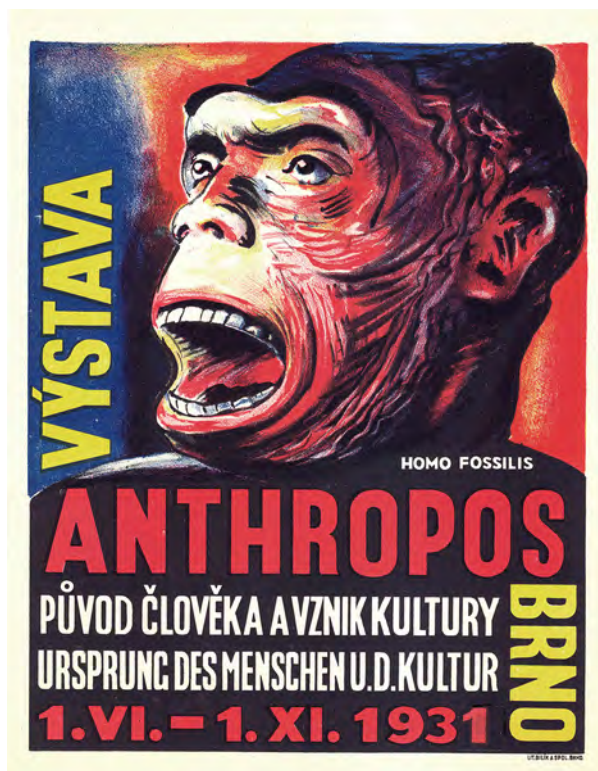


Fig. 9. Wild looking 'fossil man' attracts people to visit the pavilion Anthropos at the Brno Fairgrounds in an expressively rendered poster from 1931, which literally flooded the entire Czechoslovak Republic.

impressive oil painting of a group of Neanderthals, four of them with their catch (Fig. 8 and 9).

The theme of the cooperation of Absolon with fine artists can be closed with a mention of the icon of the

⁵ L. Šimák to K. Absolon, 1 September 1938. In connection with the mention of the interest of K. Absolon in Russian paleolithic finds, it is interesting to mention his journey to the USSR in 1932 and the subsequent wonder of Czech researchers at the Soviet situation and level of science (Kostrhun 2015a).



Fig. 10. Reconstruction of Wankel's idea of the burial of a magnate in the entry hall of Bull Rock from the Hallstatt Period in an oil painting by Zdeněk Burian from 1946. Original in the property of the Absolon family (published in Absolon 1970: Fig. 28).

Czech artistic conception of prehistory Zdeněk Burian (1905–1981). Burian became famous in the interwar period first as an illustrator of adventure literature, but he soon became acquainted with authors writing fictional literature on prehistory and early Middle Ages and already in 1937 illustrated the most popular book on Czech prehistory – *Lovci mamutů* [Mammoth Hunters] by Eduard Štorch. From 1935, he cooperated with the leading Czech palaeontologist Josef Augusta (1903–1968) on the scientific reconstructions of extinct fauna and later on the illustrations of Augusta's also very popular educational books, devoted to the development of mankind. He achieved international recognition in his production in the period after World War II. He created more than 300 drawings and paintings of nature, animals and prehistoric people from the Palaeozoic to the Holocene, almost 14,000 illustrations for more than 500 books (Prokop 1993, 2005; Sklenář 2003). He came into contact with Karel Absolon at the time of World War II, when Burian's interest in the reconstruction of prehistory intensified. Both figures particularly met over two topics. A large task was to create a reconstruction of one of the most important archaeological finds, standing at the beginning of Czech archaeology – the Hallstatt cult cave of Býčí skála [Bull Rock]. Absolon's grandfather Jindřich Wankel investigated the locality in 1867–1872 and archaeology in a Romantic conception interpreted

it as a ducal burial of a magnate (Oliva *et al.* 2015). The illustrations were created for the post-war edition of *The Illustrated London News* (Absolon 1946) and later used more time on further occasions (Absolon 1970: 280; Fig. 10). It is possible to add on the period context that the author of the image complained still in 1949 that it was not possible to get the appropriate edition of the magazine under the circumstances (the Communist putsch in Czechoslovakia in February 1948), because *The Illustrated London News* found itself on the index of undesirable magazines, which could not be distributed in Czechoslovakia. The second large theme of their mutual cooperation was a series of illustrations for Absolon's life synthetic work on the Moravian Karst, for which Burian created the illustrations in 1944–1946. The sad fact was then that the prepared monograph came out only 10 years after the author's death and in a limited edition, but Burian's illustrations are contained in the book (Absolon 1970).

Literature

From the period media, we understandably find the most frequent reflection on prehistoric research, and thus also the activities of Karel Absolon, in the form of the written word. In the case of Absolon's finds, it was natural that the period Czechoslovak press (Czech and German) was overloaded with reports on the constant



Fig. 11. Karel Absolon and the success of *Anthropos* was also the grateful object of newspaper caricatures. This was created on the occasion of the reopening of the exhibition *Anthropos* in 1934. The author of the drawing was Absolon's colleague, painter and restorer F. Dobrovolný.
Photo: J. Čága.

surprising finds, both in the field of archaeology and speleology. Numerous reports soon followed besides in the Austrian newspapers also in important French, English and American dailies. Other than that reporting, literary, poetic and caricature production dominated particularly in the Czech newspapers, not even folk songs intended for cabarets were an exception. It is an almost labyrinthine amount of shorter works by various authors, who reflect mainly four basic themes: Absolon's speleological activity in the Moravian Karst, the discovery of the Venus of Věstonice, the museum *Anthropos* with the reconstruction of the mammoth and also the famous case in the media of the 'find' of a forgery of the so-called 'second Venus of Věstonice' from the 1930s (Valoch 2008; Fig. 11). From today's viewpoint, folk humour that is over 80 years old is already significantly antiquated, moreover it is hard to transfer into another language. However, these short literary units often reflected the current political and social situation of the country (corruption, socialism, capitalism...). For instance, also the reference to the unending and still permanent rivalry of the two largest cities of Czechoslovakia – Prague and Brno – is telling: 'In Brno we live in prosperity/in Prague tilted poverty/Brno claims openly:/in Prague there is no mammoth'.⁶

The quality of similar contributions was changeable. In some cases, however, Karel Absolon also addressed the leading Czech men of letters of the interwar period. One of the first of such authors still before the end of World War I was the writer, columnist, singer, cabaret performer but also editor-in-chief of the most prestigious Czechoslovak papers *Lidové noviny* [The People's Newspaper] Eduard Bass (1888–

1946). Already in 1917, the rising star of Absolon – the discoverer – inspired him to write the stories *The Beauties of our Karst*, where Absolon appears in his own role as a speleologist attempting to make Macocha Chasm accessible ('the most famous sensation of all of Europe') in an unexpected meeting with a journalist, full of mistakes and misunderstandings (Bass 1956: 197–211). The most distinctly poetic character is in the works of the poet, editor of *Lidové noviny*, literary manager and director of the National Theatre in Brno and the municipal library Jiří Mahen (1882–1939). He was among the other participants of Absolon's expeditions to the bottom of Macocha at the beginning of the 20th century and also reflected several times on the acquired deep impression in his production – the short story *Vzpomínka* [Memory] (Mahen 1921: 47–50), the poem *Poslední dnové Macochy* [The Last Days of Macoha] (Hýsek 1942: 122–125).⁷ He then mirrors the friendly relationship with Karel Absolon in the poem sent by the author in 1911 and printed after Mahen's voluntary departure from life after the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1939 (Teyrovský and Absolon 1939). Public congratulations on significant life jubilees of the important scientist from the pens of famous men of letters were naturally also common. For all of them we will mention in this place the profile by the leading Czech lyricist, playwright, journalist and translator Rudolf Těšnohlídek (1882–1928), complemented by a portrait drawing by the famous painter, graphic artist and stage designer Eduard Milén (1891–1976).⁸

Absolon's activity in the field of research of the Palaeolithic Period as a source of inspiration for Czech authors, writing fictional stories on prehistory would deserve an independent work. Of the long series of authors, who treated the theme in the Czech literature of prehistory (cf. Sklenář 2003), great interest in Absolon's work was shown by immediately two of the most important whom we have already mentioned. The first was Rudolf Hofmeister, already labelled around World War I as the 'poet of prehistory'. Among his many works, particularly his trilogy *Pravěk Čech* [Prehistory of Bohemia] (Hofmeister 1921–1929) acquired great popularity. He met Karel Absolon after the commencement of research works on the already long known Palaeolithic locality from the Gravettian Period in Předmostí near Přerov in 1918. Absolon immediately popularized the old and his own new excavations in the newspapers (he understandably emphasized mainly the credits of his grandfather Jindřich Wankel). Hofmeister was both fascinated with the published finds and reacted positively to Absolon's call 'to write a fantasy based on the finds of the person of Předmostí'. Everything took place on the background of the end of World War I connected with a number

⁶ Humorist magazine *Lucerna* Nr. 25/1928: 5.

⁷ Feuilleton *Nová Macocha* in *Brněnská svoboda* Nr. 7-1/1933.

⁸ *Lidové noviny* Nr. 35/18 June 1927.



Fig. 12. Eduard Štorch (1878–1956), a teacher, archaeologist and writer, who immortalized Czech Palaeolithic finds and locations in his very popular adventure novels and so created a basic idea of life in prehistoric times for several generations of Czechs. Photographs from the period after World War II. Photo: K. Absolon.

of economic and other problems,⁹ so that Hofmeister utilized the mentioned motifs only in a smaller book *V jeskynním bludišti moravském* [In a Moravian cave maze] (1922). However, for the Czech reader the icon of a writer of prehistory is until this day the pioneering teacher and lover of archaeology Eduard Štorch (Fig. 12). This writer in the 1930s to 1950s was one of the most popular authors of adventure literature; he was successful also abroad. His clearly most famous work *Lovci mamutů* (Mammoth Hunters), coming out from 1907 then for another thirty years, was issued in more than 20 Czech and 10 German editions, in more than a half million copies. It even received one Japanese translation (Sklenář 2003: 213–322). For many readers of several generations, Štorch's books were the only source of information on the prehistoric settlement of Bohemia and Moravia. We have already mentioned that their power was distinctively intensified by the captivating illustrations by Zdeněk Burian, who became an inseparable co-creator of the book for the later editions. It thus is no wonder that precisely Absolon's research and reports on the finds from Předmostí near Přerov and Dolní Věstonice, Břeclav district became the main source of the stories of *Mammoth Hunters*. The personal ties of the two are documented by a rich correspondence but also professional cooperation, which developed primarily thanks to Štorch's wealthy collections of Neolithic chipped stone industry in Lobeč near Mšeno from the end of the 1930s.

Photography and film

Another of the areas, in which Karel Absolon stood out with his scientific career, was the complete

appreciation of the power and possibilities of the media of photography and later also film. Already from the beginning of his scientific career, Absolon worked with photography at a very high technical and aesthetic level and utilized the freshly discovered medium in its full breadth for promotional purposes to such an extent, that had no precedent in the context then. In this context, it is not accidental to mention that Absolon's half-brother was Vladimír Jindřich Bufka (1887–1916), one of the most prominent figures of the history of Austro-Hungarian photography, founder of the utilization of autochrome in photography. Bufka was also an experimenter in the area of microphotography, which Karel Absolon also used in his entomological research (Scheufler 2013: 16–17, 60–65). This fact is most distinctively clear already in the first decades of the 20th century from the photo-documentation of the 'exhibitions' to the bottom of Macocha Chasm. During the individual descents, several hundred photographs were exposed, which are on the boundary between documentary and arranged pictures, evoking the great discoverer's adventure. Absolon called on the leading photographers of the time with a quite specific idea of the numbers of photographs of his expeditions. He then used the acquired photography in the publication of the research results in very prestigious designs and formats (Absolon 1905–1911) and also during numerous lectures. In this field, Absolon soon went from an active organizer of his research on the bottom of Macocha Chasm and director of their depictions in the modern photographic media to his own creator. Absolon very soon took over the role of photographer – documentarist himself and had a number of specially modified photographic instruments created for this purpose. Particularly then in the 1920s and 1930s during his research, he created thousands of high-quality photographs preserved to this day on glass negatives. He became one of the founders of Czech scientific photography through the level of the usage of the photographic medium. However, using photography, Absolon also built his position of the consummate researcher in the Karst landscape in Moravia and his image in front of the public and for the future generations as a global discoverer (Trnková 2010; Kostrhun and Oliva 2011).

Just like in the case of photographers, Karel Absolon began cooperation with film creators. Considering the uncommonly good verbal skills of Karel Absolon, who always attracted the attention of the wide representatives of the audience at lectures, the mass expansion of sound film was crucial for Absolon's intentions. In Czechoslovakia, the first sound film was screened in the middle of 1929. All of the cinemas in the republic, however, were installed with sound systems only in the course of 1938. Yet, Absolon had used filmstrip for the documentation of his research

⁹ Letters of R. Hofmeister to K. Absolon, 2 April, 1, 14 and 29 May 1918. Archive of the Anthropos Institute of the Moravian Museum.

several times already in the 1920s. He did so in his speleological expeditions to Bosnia and Herzegovina, but the film has not been preserved. Also a film camera was present several times in the research in Dolní Věstonice, Břeclav district where for instance the visit of American researchers from the Logan Museum in 1926 was captured (Kostrhun 2015b). Absolon also screened a short film on the research in Dolní Věstonice *Pavlovské kopce and diluviální naleziště* [The Pavlov Hills and Diluvial Excavation] from 1930 with great success at the international professional meeting in Leningrad (St Petersburg) in 1932 (Kostrhun 2015a). The culmination of these efforts was the cooperation with Czech director Josef Lachmann (?–1953), who at that time worked for the prestigious producing firm Lucernafilm, which besides Prague's Film Factory AB in Barrandov also represented Czechoslovak interwar cinematography. The aim of the connection of Karel Absolon with Josef Lachmann was to film a promotional documentary on the research of the Moravian Karst entitled *The Secrets of Macocha*. It is noteworthy that this originally more-than-one-hour sound film was created from the beginnings in the times of the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia. Work on the screenplay began in 1940, and although it was mainly a celebration of the speleological and archaeological research of the free interwar state, the German censorship allowed the film and the film's premiere took place in Brno on 25 October 1942 (Fig. 13). The total costs on the film's production were calculated at approximately CZK 250,000 and after being introduced into distribution its great success was spoken of (for instance in Prague the film was screened in six sold-out cinemas at the same time, the film was also distributed in Germany). From today's perspective, we consider this film as the very first professional sound film on speleology in the world (Coufalík *et al.* 1982).¹⁰ Another fruit of this cooperation was then a shorter film *The Prehistory of Moravia* on the life of a 'diluvial person', which was created in 1942 mainly based on the filmed materials in the exposition of Anthropos and in the collections of the Moravian Museum. The promise to create a 'fantastic Balkan mystery' on Absolon's research of the Dinaric Karst, which was created still before the end of World War II, was however never fulfilled. Also the *Secrets of Macocha* was already forbidden soon after 1948 by the stricter Communist censorship.

Karel Absolon and Czechoslovakia between the World Wars

It was already indicated several times in the previous text that an inseparable component of Absolon's scientific career was maintenance of rich contacts

¹⁰ Collection of the correspondence of J. Lachmann with K. Absolon from 1940–1947, 49 letters. Archive of the Anthropos Institute of the Moravian Museum.



Fig. 13. Film poster inviting people of the German Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia to cinemas to the production of Absolon's film *The Secret of Macocha Gorge* in 1942. Original of the poster in the Museum of the Capital City of Prague.



Fig. 14. An inseparable part of Absolon's 'policy' was also the popularization and promotion of his finds. On 20 June 1928, he welcomed also President T.G. Masaryk (1850–1937) in Dolní Věstonice. In the background on the left, the president of the Czechoslovak government, minister of Interior and the land president of the Moravian-Silesian Land Jan Černý (1874–1959). Karel Absolon is in the centre.

Photo: E. Dania.

with the representatives of the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic between the world wars. In this sense, Absolon's efforts seem very modern. In the basic contours, they copy the current indispensable network of client ties, which are connected particularly with the needs of the financing of scientific research, research teams and the support of individual media-famous scientific personalities. Also Karel Absolon often resolved convoluted problems connected with the financing of both archaeological research projects and particularly with the question of the construction of the planned scientific institute Anthropos. These aspects have already been described in a different place (Kostrhun 2003, 2009, 2014: 148; Oliva 2014). Briefly, we only mention that Absolon's contacts aimed directly at the president of the republic Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850–1937; Fig 14), who richly supported Czechoslovak science. Absolon even met several times with Masaryk directly at the excavations in Dolní Věstonice and besides other things connected with it acquired also the promise of a generous gift of CZK 500,000, intended for establishment of an international scientific institute. Absolon maintained contacts also with the family of President Masaryk. Correspondence is proved with the eldest daughter Alice Masaryková (1879–1966), *inter alia* the founder and long-term president of the

Czechoslovak Red Cross.¹¹ Absolon again captured with the youngest daughter Olga Masaryková-Revilliod (1891–1978) in a photograph at a private excursion at Macocha Chasm (Kostrhun 2014: Fig. 247). The results of Absolon's work both in the field of archaeology and in speleology gradually became an important component of the cultural policy of the state, namely also on the international level. From an economic perspective, they also played an important role in the support of tourism (a common phenomenon for instance in London cinemas was an invitation to visit the 'eighth wonder of the world' – Macocha Chasm in Czechoslovakia). It is not then surprising that from the rich archive of the legacy of Karel Absolon we find among the more than 13,500 letters many proofs of the connections to Czechoslovak politicians, influential industrialists and other personalities, who, however, exceed the scope of this paper.

We can conclude the excursion into the relation of Absolon the archaeologist and Czech artists with a mention of several important personages, who were on the boundaries of science, art or philosophy and maintained rich ties with Absolon. In the case of the first of the respondents, we do not have to go far from the president's office at Prague Castle. A multi-year acquaintance connected Karel Absolon with Jiří Stanislav Guth-Jarkovský (1861–1943). Guth-Jarkovský was a versatile personality, although after his study of philosophy he first worked as a secondary-school teacher and was not an active sportsman, he became an important promoter of sport. He served as the general secretary of the Olympic Committee and as the co-author of the Olympic Charter, president of the Czechoslovak Olympic Committee and also president and editor of the Club of Czechoslovak Tourists. He was also an important writer and translator of French and German literature. He played a significant social role in 1919–1925 as the master of ceremonies in the office of the president of the republic T. G. Masaryk. He was known by the wider public for his works in which he canonized the rules and norms of social behaviour, particularly in his famous *Společenský katechismus* [Social Catechism] (Guth-Jarkovský 1914). Almost ninety preserved letters from 1900–1933 reflect the relationship of both men mainly in the framework of the work in the Club of Czechoslovak Tourists, in which Absolon was an esteemed member because of his highly visible promotion of the Moravian Karst. Guth-Jarkovský supported Absolon and many times exhorted him thoroughly and directly to intensive work which could later also be published under the letterhead of the Club (Fig. 15).

¹¹ A. Masaryková to K. Absolon, 17 September 1926. Archive of the Anthropos Institute of the Moravian Museum.

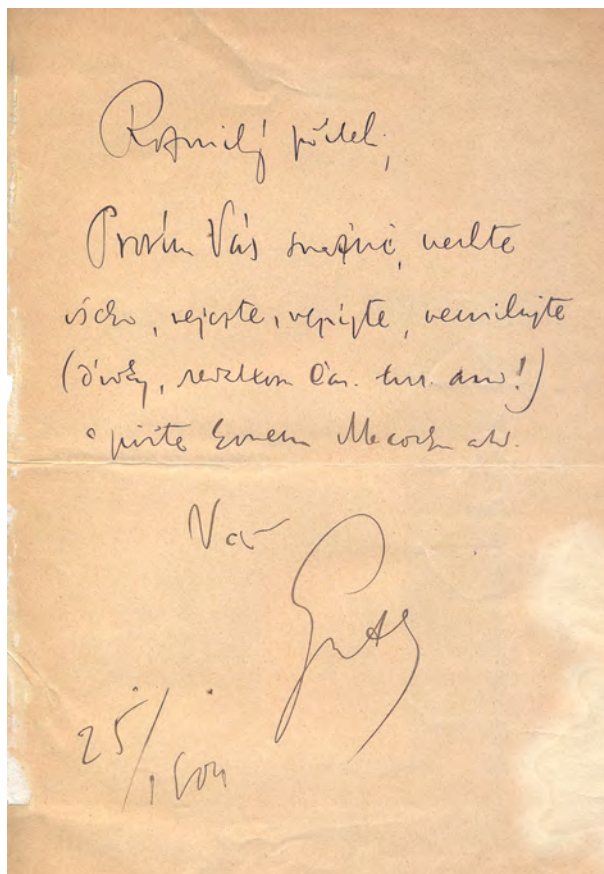


Fig. 15. A letter of Stanislav Guth-Jarkovský addressed to Karel Absolon from 25 January 1904. We read in the letter a brief text, in which Jarkovský exhorts Absolon to intensive work on the publication of his research of Macocha Chasm with these words: 'Dearest friend, I beg you imploringly, leave everything, do not eat, do not drink, do not love, write quickly Macocha etc., Yours, Guth'. Archive of the Anthropos Institute of the Moravian Museum.

We can consider among the personalities, who formed the intellectual climate of the young Czechoslovak state, also the important travellers who were very active publicly in the interwar period. From the ranks of the others, we can name Albert Vojtěch Frič (1882–1944; Fig. 16). Frič was a recognized ethnographer, photographer, botanist and writer, his collections filled for example the Anthropological and Ethnographic Museum in St Petersburg (Leningrad) or New York. In 1901–1929, he made many journeys to South America; he spent tens of years of his life among the Indians, particularly with the tribe of the Chamacoco in the interior of Paraguay, from which also his wife came. He assembled a dictionary of a total of 36 Indian languages. For his victorious heroic battle with a jaguar, he earned the Indian name *Karai Pukú* [Long Hunter]. He became known to the public in Czechoslovakia mainly later when he transported to Europe the Indian Cherwuish, whom he cured of an intestinal disease unknown until that time and after his



Fig. 16. Karel Absolon called Albert Vojtěch Frič the greatest Czech naturalist and traveller. After his return from South America, he devoted himself professionally in his Prague villa and greenhouses to the breeding of cacti and economic crops using UV rays and radiation with radium.
Photo: K. Absolon.

return he helped with the medicines brought to remove it from the whole tribe of the Chamacoco. As a scientist, he was naturally internationally famous mainly as the greatest contemporary expert on cacti. A warm relation of the traveller and Karel Absolon arises from the preserved correspondence, which was not, however, the sometimes quite impulsive forays that corresponded to the eccentric natures of both men. The mutual cooperation begun already at the beginning of the 20th century was naturally work-related (the exchange of exhibits and zoological mounts). On the personal level, however, their relationship is proved by private visits and references to earlier conversations. It is interesting in this context to mention Absolon's fascination with great world discoverers and travellers, whose works filled his library (the leading model for Absolon was for instance Sven Hedin [1865–1852], the controversial Swedish traveller), because Absolon undoubtedly felt to be one of them – although in contrast to his colleagues filling in the white places on maps of all the continents Absolon was active in the unknown underground labyrinths in Europe...

We conclude the relationship of the archaeologist and natural scientist Karel Absolon to Czech artists and their mutual influence with a note on his rich ties to interwar philosophers and intellectuals. We will mention a last two from the whole ranks of various personalities. In Moravia, Vladimír Úlehla (1888–1947), a professor at

the Brno university, a famous physiologist of plants but also an ethnographer. Úlehla was also famous as a pioneer of ecology and a philosopher of a number works considering the mission of intelligence and the essence of life from the perspective of a natural scientist. His popularization articles in *Lidové Noviny*, of which he published more than 1100, were also famous. However, his relationship to Karel Absolon was significantly specific. In 1928, Vladimír Úlehla was also an initiator of the Exhibition of Contemporary Culture in Brno, where he organized the expositions of science and schooling. Within this exhibition, Absolon prepared his exposition *Anthropos*. Of the tens of preserved materials, it is possible to reconstruct particularly the conflict of the two distinctive personalities, who inevitably clashed in the organization of the Exhibition of Contemporary Culture. Of the Czech intellectuals, it is necessary to mention one of the most important – František Xaver Šalda (1867–1937). A leading Czech literary critic, journalist and writer, who very distinctively influenced and formed the period conception of art, literature, culture and politics. He presented his influential essays, critiques and own production particularly in a journal founded by him for criticism and art *Tvorba* [Production], later in 1928–1937 in his famous *Šaldův zápisník* [Šalda's Notebook]. Šalda's acceptance of Absolon was very different from the last case. In his new year's greeting card he writes to Absolon: 'Also I consider your friendship, my contact with you in the past and all of our purely beautiful relationship as real and honourable...' in another part, the text continues with a criticism of the Czech cultural and political situation, mired in 'spiteful' disputes, which do not however concern the two writers, because they manage to rise above them.¹²

Karel Absolon was indisputably a leading personality of interwar Czechoslovak science and culture. He stood out over the other specialists thanks to his spectacular discoveries of previously unknown cave systems or works of art from the Palaeolithic period. It can be argued that often the extraordinary discovery that makes the discoverer famous into 'immortality' is due to chance and luck, but in the case of Karel Absolon his unprecedented organizational talent and unflagging energy that he put into his projects certainly cannot be denied. His approach to the media coverage of his discoveries was quite original, which was often at the expense of time devoted to their scientific treatment. With this method, he made Moravia famous worldwide. It is therefore not surprising that Absolon's activity aroused deserved attention not only of professionals but also the general public, among them also artists. They very carefully monitored the results of Absolon's work and sensitively responded to it as he tried to

summarize the proposed text briefly. The new expert information thus appeared in the visual arts, literature and film and became part of the considerations of many intellectuals. A number of authors also became Absolon's friends. A study of the archival documents and the history of archaeology is thus a leading source for knowledge (not only) of cultural history of the interwar Czechoslovakia. In a certain point of view, we are surprised, however, by the methods and form of the interpersonal relationships prevailing in the fields of science, arts and cultural politics and also how their topicality speaks even to the present day...

Translated by Sean Mark Miller

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¹² F. X. Šalda to K. Absolon, 31 December 1915. Archive of the Anthropos Institute of the Moravian Museum.

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