

# Izydor Kopernicki (1825–1891) and Czech Archaeology

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**Abstract:** Contacts between Czech and Polish archaeologists started to develop at the beginning of 19th century, especially with the part of Poland ruled by Austrian (later Austro-Hungarian) empire. An outstanding representant of these, then relatively scanty relations was Izydor Kopernicki, professor of Anthropology in Cracow, who co-operated with several Czech archaeologists by processing human skulls from their excavations. He also participated in the Anthropological/archaeological section of the Second Congress of Czech Naturalists and Doctors (Prague, May 1882) and published his contribution in the major Czech archaeological journal. His closest friend in Bohemia was Kliment Čermák, regional archaeologist and founder of Czech museology, who included Kopernicki within one of his, then popular 'archaeological short stories' for young readers.

Keywords: Izydor Kopernicki, Czech archaeology, historic anthropology, craniology, Kliment Čermák

Prehistoric and early medieval archaeology developed in Central Europe as a modern scientific discipline within the relative political unity provided by the empires of Austria, later Austro-Hungary and, after 1870, Germany. The external barriers to contact between scientific communities of central European nations were minimal. This makes the fact that some of them in the 19th century had lively contacts while others did not more interesting.

If we speak specifically about Czech archaeology, which started to develop as a scientific discipline at the beginning of the 1840s (in Bohemia, in Moravia a bit later), these differences are obvious. Even if we ignore the personal relationships of its main founder, professor Jan Erazim Vocel (1802–1871) with Danish archaeologists, we can observe fairly lively contacts with the German speaking realms in the neighbouring parts of Germany (especially Saxony and later Virchow's Berlin) given by its advancement in archaeology and later its leading role in the anthropological orientation of the discipline from 1870. Contacts with the region that is now Austria were different. In Austria (apart from Classical and Provincial-Roman or the site of Hallstatt) archaeology developed somewhat later and less intensively than in Bohemia. Vienna though, which was the capital, with its scientific institutions attracted the attention and presence of Czech archaeologists. This applies even more to Moravia, which did not have a centre on the same level as Prague and was geographically closer to Vienna. On the other hand mutual national antagonism hindered contacts with the closest German speaking areas – such as the German settled border regions of the Czech countries (especially absurd) and Hungarian archaeology.

It is strange, that the contact of Czech researchers with Polish archaeology at first developed weakly, despite Czech national ideology throughout 19th century

being of supporting and propagating brotherhood with fellow Slavs. To understand this phenomenon we have to consider the political context caused by the antagonism of two Slavic nations – the Poles and the Russians. From the end of the 18th century the Czech National Revival based its geopolitical views on Slavic kinship with Russia. It was spared direct neighbourhood and so the earlier generation of 'Fathers of the Nation' idealistically looked up to Russia as the only Slavic power and a possible counterweight to germanisation by the Habsburg monarchy. This led at the beginning of 1860s to an argument within Czech society when a later, more liberal, generation showed active sympathy for the Polish uprising in areas ruled by Russia (the more radical ones supported, against the will of Austrian officials, Polish emigrants escaping after the defeat of the 1863 uprising through Bohemia to Western Europe), while the earlier generation saw it as a betrayal of the idea of Slavic unity (more to this topic: Žáček 1935). As a result the Russophile part of Czech science was reserved towards the Poles. The later generation in the context of the developing anthropological approach oriented themselves more to Berlin and Vienna.

The situation of science in those part of Poland ruled by Russia got worse after the uprising, in the part ruled by Prussia (later Germany) the situation for Polish cultural life was not much better. The only easy contact left was with the Austro-Hungarian part of Poland with the most important scientific centre being in Cracow. Despite Cracow and Prague being in the same country strong contacts did not develop, probably because of the reasons mentioned above.

Generally it is possible to say that the exceptions were based on mutual relationships between individual researchers. An example already mentioned is professor J. E. Vocel, during the phase of waning Romanticism, who established contact with the Polish-Lithuanian

scientific centre in Vilnius/Wilno in the Russian part of former Poland, especially with count Konstanty Tyszkiewicz (1806–1868), who visited him in Prague several times between 1857 and 1864. There were also visits by other Poles, for example Waclaw Aleksander Maciejowski (1792–1883) and count Aleksander Przezdziecki (1814–1871), the contacts with Russians were though more frequent. Although Cracow was closer geographically and also within the same state only Józef Łepkowski (1826–1894), later a professor of archaeology of medieval art at the Jagiellonian University, visited Vocel from there just once in 1861, while Vocel himself never visited Poland.

In the following era of anthropologically oriented positivism the international relationships were also based – with exception of Moravian Jindřich Wankel (1821–1897), who thanks to his participation in many congresses became the first cosmopolitan of Czech archaeology – on personal relationships. Concerning Polish archaeology, this movement had in the second half of the 19th century one remarkable representative – anthropologist Izydor Kopernicki (1825–1891; Fig. 1).

Kopernicki was not a pure archaeologist, but he was interested in archaeology and did much for it. He was originally from present western Ukraine, in the 1840s he studied medicine. In the 1850s he became an army doctor and then worked at Kiev University. In 1863 after the anti-Russian uprising, in which he took part as an army doctor, he had to go abroad where he fully applied himself to his historically orientated interest in anthropology. In Kiev he was already interested in old Slavic skulls and later, during his stay in Paris, he studied anthropology. From 1871 he worked in Cracow, mostly at the Jagiellonian University, where in 1878 he became a private lecturer and in 1886 professor extraordinarius of anthropology, the first professor of anthropology in a Polish University. From 1887 he was also a member of Academy of Arts and Sciences in Cracow and until his death he acted as a secretary to its Anthropological Commission, which he co-founded in 1874 with Józef Majer (1808–1899) and which later contained also the local Archaeological Commission. He died prematurely exhausted by work in Cracow in 1891. Within physical anthropology he was most interested in the then generally popular study of craniology – the research of prehistoric and early historic skulls (from archaeological finds in museums) and skulls of some modern populations as well. He created the first important anthropological collection on Polish territory, he published in western countries. He also carried out a number of excavations, especially in present western Ukraine, in the Dniester basin (Pagel 1901: 898; Talko-Hryncewicz 1925; Ćwirko-Godycki 1948; Czekanowski 1948: 9–19; Godycki 1956; Nosek 1967: esp. 57–59; Kieniewicz and Sikora 1968).



Fig. 1. Izydor Kopernicki (1825–1891). From the collection of the Scientific Library of the Polish Academy of Sciences and Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences in Cracow.

Together with Józef Majer (president of the Academy of Arts and Sciences in Cracow and its Anthropological Commission) Izydor Kopernicki represents the first, founding phase of Polish anthropology, in his case with a large overlap with prehistory. Therefore it is worthy to remind ourselves about his co-operation with Czech archaeologists, an aspect of his life we do not find mentioned in the literature on his life and activities (not even in the only Czech review of Czech-Polish archaeological contacts by Skutil 1946; on the contrary, it is newly mentioned by Woźny 2014).

As a lecturer at Cracow University Kopernicki lectured during the winter term and during summer he supported himself as a spa doctor, in the 1880s especially in Mariánské Lázně (Marienbad) in western Bohemia. At that time he met several Czech researchers interested in anthropological interpretations of their skeletal finds. Historic anthropology, at that time commonly understood as craniology, was barely pursued in Bohemia. Its pioneer was doctor Eduard Grégr (1827–1907; Sklenář 2005: 194), an assistant of famous professor Jan Evangelista Purkyně (1787–1869) at Prague University, who was though only interested

in anthropology for a short time (Grégr 1858); later this subject also caught some short term interest from anthropologically oriented doctors. It was pursued systematically only from the beginning of 1890s when it was taken up by Bohuslav Hellich (1851–1918; Sklenář 2005: 215), a psychiatrist interested in anthropology, and the anthropologist, later important archaeologist Lubor Niederle (1865–1944; Sklenář 2005: 405–408). During the 1870s and 1880s there was no specialist in this discipline and Czech archaeologists gladly accepted co-operation with Kopernicki.

That he was highly appreciated is shown by the fact that he was the elected chairman of all the meetings in the Anthropological/archaeological section of the Second Congress of Czech Naturalists and Doctors (Prague, May 1882) [Nekut 1882]. The participation in this given section, which was de facto the first ever congress of all Czech archaeologists, was much bigger than during the first congress. Nearly all the important archaeologists or people connected to archaeology in Bohemia and Moravia, including three women (one of them was Ms Strzyżowska from Cracow) were there, and also representatives of the south Slavic nations and especially the Poles, with whom there was according to the reports 'warm befriending'. Among Polish guests who stood out, apart from Kopernicki, was Godfryd Ossowski (1835–1897), who presented his excavations in the caves around Cracow and exhibited originals of 'prehistoric bone carvings'. Kopernicki (who later became a member of the Academic Commission which considered these sculptures) evaluated the finds of trepanated skulls in Bohemia. Proceedings of this section and details of the presentations content were reported by its chairman Josef Smolík (1832–1915) in the main Czech archaeological magazine *Památky archaeologické a místopisné* (Smolík 1882) and by archaeologist Břetislav Jelínek (1843–1926) in Vienna's scientific press (Jelínek 1882a). Ossowski presented his cave finds at an exhibition connected to the congress (Jelínek 1882b).

Several Czech archaeologists took up co-operation with Kopernicki. One of them Břetislav Jelínek has already been mentioned (about him Sklenář 2014), who among others in 1883 gave Kopernicki for analysis and recording dolichocephalic (exceptional among Czech finds) skulls from Únětice culture graves (Early Bronze Age), which were excavated in Bechlín near Roudnice nad Labem on the order from Ms Růžena Fričová (1851–1935), 'a lady very interested in anthropological science' (Jelínek 1884: 180–187). Later he gave him a skull from a grave of Knovíz culture (Late Bronze Age) with a crouched skeleton, found in 1885 in Prague New Town. This funeral rite was a unique find for that culture in the Prague territory (Jelínek 1890; Lutovský *et al.* 2005: 569; Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Břetislav Jelínek (1843–1926). From the collection of the City of Prague Museum.

By the way, Jelínek who as a young man sided with the Polish insurgents later became, with the changed mood of the Czech society, an uncritical admirer of Russia as a 'Slavic power'. He was an exception among Czech archaeologists as he knew something of the conditions in the Russian ruled part of Poland, as he stayed in Warsaw on his way to Russia in the spring of 1867. Observing these conditions during his stay, he sobered up from his admiration of Russia, especially when he learned of the oppression in Russian ruled Poland. 'The numbers of Russian supporters are decreasing', he wrote a year later, 'because the Czech nation could never be engaged with a people who would point at it, as a tool of desire, arbitrary oppression'. This was at the time of strengthened political struggle for Czech national and state rights within Austro-Hungary: 'what we fight for now is what Poles fought for, and what happened to Poles is now getting ready for us'. Russia cannot rule itself other than with despotism and violence, so decline and a sad future is expected for it. The Russian government 'wants us to humble ourselves in front of them, to demean ourselves so they can generously make us their slaves and subordinates'.

The second archaeologist, who Kopernicki knew in Bohemia and who probably befriended him the most, was Kliment Čermák (1852–1917; Fig. 3), an outstanding



Fig. 3. Kliment Čermák (1852–1917) around 1890. From the collection of the City of Čáslav Museum.

regional archaeologist and museologist (founder of Czech museology as a discipline) from Čáslav in Central Bohemia (Sklenář 2005: 112–114). Kopernicki visited him there during his residences in Mariánské Lázně. Much later, Čermák in his memoirs wrote: ‘(...) I became friendly with doctor Isid[or] Kopernicki, who was laid to rest after a troubled and hard working life in Cracow and who used to go in spring as a doctor to Mar[iánské] Lázně. I was always looking forward to his arrival. We spent many pleasant moments at Hrádek in Čáslav [at that time one of the most important archaeological sites in Bohemia, excavated by Čermák – K.S.] He was a noble, selfless soul. That was the way I learned about the Polish’ (Čermák 1912: 110; Fig. 4) According to Čermák this was after his return from the journey to Russia in 1877. Elsewhere he described Kopernicki as ‘golden heart’.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike Jelínek, Čermák did not attempt to do craniology himself, but he attached great importance to it. ‘For a long time craniology hasn’t been written about in the Czech language (...) which is very regrettable, as

<sup>1</sup> K. Čermák to Jindřich Matiegka (1862–1941), doctor and future anthropologist, 26 November 1890, Archives of the National Museum, Prague, fund Matiegka, box 7, no. 128.

it is nearly the only certain lead for archaeologist, if it is used responsibly and to its current level of development’, he wrote in a popular article about this branch of anthropology, based on Kopernicki’s works (Čermák 1880: 17).

Čermák sent to Kopernicki in Cracow craniological material for conservation, processing and determination. In December 1882 he sent him the skull of a skeleton found in Čáslav in loess which he suspected to be Palaeolithic (that was not confirmed).<sup>2</sup> At the end of 1890 he was still looking forward to his friend Kopernicki coming in summer of 1891 to the great Jubilee Exhibition in Prague, but unfortunately did not get see him again. It is possible to mention the manuscript of Kopernicki treatise *Człowiek i jego łączność z przyrodą* [Man and his connection with nature] which is part of Čermák’s estate;<sup>3</sup> whether the author gave it to him as a courtesy or if he was interested in publishing it in Bohemia (which did not happen) is not known.

Another researcher in contact with Kopernicki was an excellent regional archaeologist, Ludvík Šnajdr (1839–1913; Fig. 5) working in northeast Bohemia, in the Jičín region (about him Sklenář 2005: 570–571). He had in 1882 sent to Kopernicki a skull from Velíš, found in a cultural layer with a question as to if it had a so called *rondelle* as described by French anthropologists. Kopernicki answered in mid-September from Mariánské Lázně that he had not ascertained any traces of after death intervention on the skull.<sup>4</sup>

In spring 1887 Šnajdr again contacted Kopernicki with reference to favours he did earlier for Čermák and Jelínek. He asked him if he would examine some of his finds. Kopernicki answered (9 May 1887) that he thanks him for the chance to process the skulls from Šnajdr’s excavations. He will process the skulls which are from three easily determinable periods (did he see them before?) after his return from Mariánské Lázně to Cracow, although he would be busy there with his university lectures. He attached instructions on how to pack the skulls for transport. He would glue and restore whatever was broken. In September he wanted to visit the Prague National Museum, Čermák also promised him his finds so he would have material for work on ‘ancient Czech skulls’ which he would like to publish at the Academy of Arts and Sciences in Cracow.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> K. Čermák to L. Šnajdr, 20 December 1882, The City of Prague Museum – Department of archaeological collections, fund J. A. Jíra, vol. 85/1.

<sup>3</sup> I. Kopernicki, *Człowiek i jego łączność z przyrodą*, manuscript, 6 pages, Literary Archives of The Museum of Czech Literature, Prague, fund K. Čermák, box 7, other people’s manuscripts.

<sup>4</sup> L. Šnajdr to I. Kopernicki (draft), 30 June 1882; I. Kopernicki to L. Šnajdr, 12 September 1882, The City of Prague Museum – Department of archaeological collections, fund J. A. Jíra, vol. 85/1.

<sup>5</sup> I. Kopernicki to L. Šnajdr, 9 May 1887, Archives of the National Museum, Prague, fund J. L. Pič, box 11, no. 910.



Fig. 4. Hrádek in Čáslav, period drawing (Píč 1909: 281–282).



Fig. 5. Ludvík Šnajdr (1839–1913; *Pravěk* 7/1911: 55).

After that Šnajdr posted the skeletons with complete skulls – the Neolithic one from Jičín, two from La Tène graves (Jičín, Nový Bydžov) and a partial skeleton with a skull from an early medieval Slavic cemetery in Prachovské Skály.<sup>6</sup> Kopernicki was probably really busy

as he answered Šnajdr only on 16 March 1889 that he had measured and recorded the skulls, the ones which were held together with plaster he had taken apart, cleaned and put back together again. He would then send them to the National Museum in Prague which seemed to be agreeable.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately this did not happen: twelve years later Ludvík Šnajdr told Josef Ladislav Píč (1847–1911), who was the head of the Prehistoric Department of the National Museum in Prague that in 1887 he had sent anthropological material, which after processing should have come to the National Museum, but that after Kopernicki's death it had stayed somewhere in Cracow and that they should demand it back.<sup>8</sup> There is no evidence that this happened despite Šnajdr including two letters from Kopernicki mentioned above and a copy of his own letter (see note 6).

So Kopernicki unfortunately did not get to describe the Czech skulls. We know only about one work dedicated to Czech anthropological material, about trepanation of prehistoric skulls (Kopernicki 1882, 1883). As was already mentioned Kopernicki lectured on this topic at the Prague congress in May 1882. An abstract of this lecture was published together with other lecture abstracts in the journal *Památky archeologické a místopisné* (Smolík 1882). The abstract concerned skulls from one Moravian site (Wankel's find from cave Býčí Skála) and one in Bohemia (cemetery in Strupčice near Bílina, from the collection of the National Museum in Prague). This remarkable phenomenon, only then proved unambiguously in Czech countries, was probably the reason for publishing the full text. Čermák, who also translated it, got it from Kopernicki, who gave it for review to the Čáslav town doctor Konrád and he probably sent it on to Kopernicki for authorisation. Čermák finally sent it to the National

<sup>6</sup> L. Šnajdr's copy of his own letter to I. Kopernicki, 1887, Archives of the National Museum, Prague, fund J. L. Píč, box 22, no. 1472.

<sup>7</sup> I. Kopernicki to L. Šnajdr, 16 March 1889, Archives of the National Museum, Prague, fund J. L. Píč, box 11, no. 910.

<sup>8</sup> L. Šnajdr to J. L. Píč, 20 October 1899, Archives of the National Museum, Prague, fund J. L. Píč, box 11, no. 910.

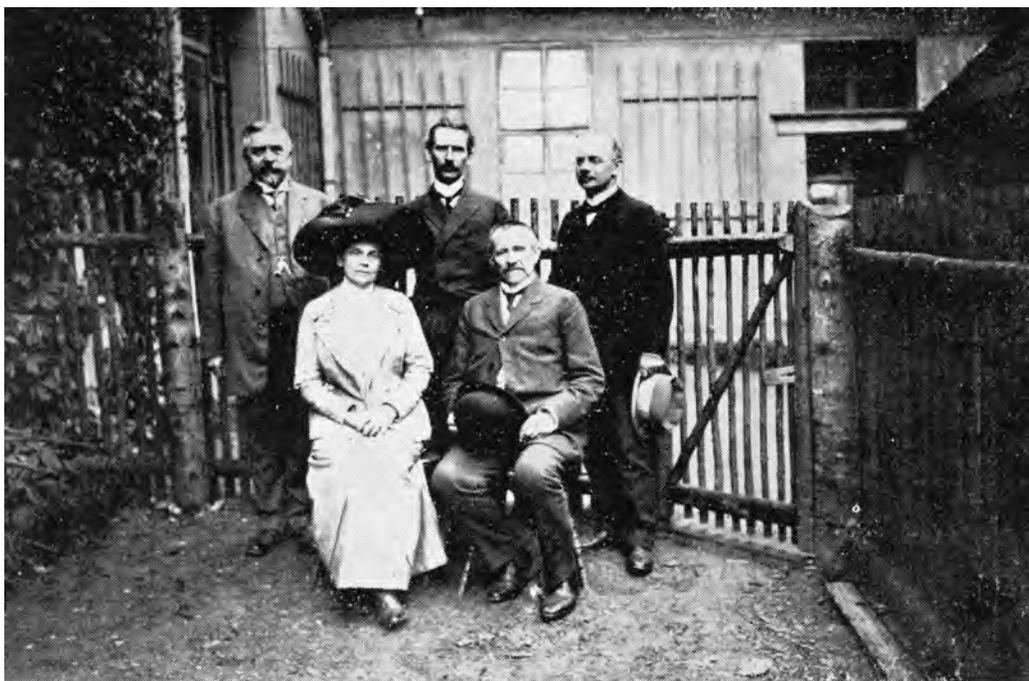


Fig. 6. Julian Talko-Hryniewicz (sitting on the right) at the congress of Czech archaeologists and anthropologists in Prague in May 1912. Standing from the right Moravian archaeologist and palaeontologist Karel Maška and professors of Prague University – archaeologist Lubor Niederle and founder of modern Czech anthropology Jindřich Matiegka. Sitting Mrs Mašková (Acta Musei Moraviae XXXVI/1951: 23).

Museum, which published it in *Památky archeologické a místopisné*. Čermák conveyed Kopernicki's thanks for accepting his article and asked for about 50 offprints to be sent to Cracow, Sławkowska Street 29.<sup>9</sup> The article was published immediately – in issue 5 with a date of 31 March 1883 (Kopernicki 1883).

Izydor Kopernicki gained respect and fondness of all Czech archaeologists thanks to his friendliness, willingness to co-operate and his character. This is obvious from the warm words of a farewell by Lubor Niederle in his still new ethnographic-archaeological journal *Český lid* (Niederle 1891–1892). By the way, Kopernicki was its first official subscriber.

The fact that Kopernicki appeared in Czech literature can be taken as a sort of epilogue to the description of the Czech contacts with him. Kliment Čermák as an experienced museologist and teacher paid much attention to raising public awareness of archaeology among young people. With this objective he wrote, among other things, more than one hundred short stories which he published in a number of books and which present a then unique form in world literature – the 'archaeological short story'. These did not take place in prehistory, but in the present during archaeological

research and excavations and their characters are taught about prehistory and archaeology on actual examples of sites and artefacts. Čermák often included his friends and colleagues within the stories and so doctor Izydor Kopernicki – 'a kind friend of Czechs' appears in the story *Zkamenělý archiv* [Fossilised Archives], where he comes to visit Čermák's excavations on Hrádek in Čáslav and tells the observers about the importance of hill forts as a wealthy treasury of Ancient Slavic history (Čermák 1900).

Kopernicki was not the only Polish researcher introduced in Čermák's works: in the story *Bohatá mohyla* [Rich burial mound] which tells story of a large Scythian burial mound near Ryżanówka present in the west Ukrainian steppe<sup>10</sup> (Čermák 1890) he included archaeologist Godfryd Ossowski and anthropologist Julian Talko-Hryniewicz (1850–1936). The former was, even in Prague, a well-known contemporary of Kopernicki, while the latter was the only true pupil of Kopernicki and his successor as a lecturer of anthropology at Cracow University (from 1908). Talko-Hryniewicz was also in contact with Czech scientists, though with the younger generation, for example

<sup>9</sup> K. Čermák to J. L. Píř, 21 March 1883, Archives of the National Museum, Prague, fund J. L. Píř, box 4, no. 182.

<sup>10</sup> The story was supposed to be published also in German, as shown by the prepared translation *Ein reiches Heidengrab. Eine archäologische Erzählung von Klemens Čermák* (Manuscript, Literary Archive of the Museum of Czech Literature, Prague, fund K. Čermák, box 4-L/61).

Lubor Niederle (Fig. 6). Čermák knew these two only superficially but with Kopernicki he was a true friend until 1891 when he waited in vain for his next visit to Čáslav, and Hrádek. He at least built him a memorial in his stories.

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