

VILLAGE COMMUNITY AND VILLAGE HEADMAN IN EARLY MODERN BOHEMIA

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What role did the village community play under the “second serfdom”? Did powerful overlords stifle communal independence, as traditional “manorial dominance” theories assume? Or were village powers largely untouched, as claimed by recent “communal autonomy” approaches? This article addresses these questions by focusing on the pivotal figure of the village headman (German Scholtz, Schultheiß, or Richter; Czech rychtář). Analyzing a large, micro-level database for the north Bohemian estate of Friedland/Frýdlant (c. 1580 – c. 1740), it examines how village headmen operated in everyday life – how they were appointed, what economic privileges they enjoyed, how their village courts worked, what powers they exercised outside their courts, and which social strata they were affiliated with. The second serfdom, it finds, was based on neither “manorial dominance” nor “communal autonomy,” but rather on communal-manorial “dualism” – close collaboration between manor and commune, huge privileges for village headmen and communal elites, and few safeguards for weaker villagers such as women, migrants, and the lower social strata. Strong communes were complicit with strong overlords in administering and sustaining the second serfdom.