

FOCUS: HOW CAN HISTORY AND
ARCHAEOLOGY BE HANDMAIDENS
IN DEFINING A NATIONAL OR
REGIONAL (IN THIS CASE
EUROPEAN) IDENTITY?

Nationalism and the Pan-historical Perspective in Early Middle Age Archaeology

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*To the memory of Jurij Voronov
archaeologist, Vice-Premier of Abkhazia
murdered on 11 September 1995*

Nationalism is a most general and worldwide phenomenon, known at least since European antiquity. It is also present in archaeological research, more intensively indeed in Central and Eastern Europe than in its Western counterpart. It is mostly connected with national prehistory, and its basic questions concern ‘ancientness’, ‘previousness’ and a high(er) culture, which are always the issues put forth in a comparison with others. Its emergence becomes more direct when manipulating constructed histories. Yet a decrease of its overall influence may be expected in the long run. Panhistorism in archaeology partly stems from the overestimation of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century archaeological finds and was the view generally adopted by Soviet-type Marxism. Its aim is to render history useful for political manipulation. Its followers and advocates, however, are generally ill-informed about the methodological issues of research developed in the second half of twentieth century. We may, therefore, be somewhat more optimistic as to its impending disappearance.

To be nationalistic in archaeology is like being an *ancilla politicae*, a slave of politics. But as it is known, since Aristotle, that man is by nature a political animal, to be nationalistic in archaeology could be considered as a general overall condition of mankind. National commemoration days all over the world demonstrate that both politicians and people can look at the past in a similar way, or, to quote Hungarian writer István Örkény (1912–1979), ‘history is part of the present, conjugated in past tense’, an idea somewhat reminiscent of the famous statement attributed to Edmund Burke more than 200 years ago – ‘those who don’t know history are doomed to

repeat it'. Or take the recent example of a Hungarian orientalist who, when attending a family feast while on fieldwork in Mongolia, received apologies for the Mongol invasion of the Pannonian steppe in 1241. The negative role of nationalism in politics is well-known, and a very short look at some collected studies (Kohl and Fawcett 1995; Díaz-Andreu and Champion 1996; Hardt *et al.* 2003) is enough to illustrate its connection with archaeology throughout the world.

Allowing nationalism to influence research is inadmissible of course; although – unfortunately – it regularly happens in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Consequently, it should be treated simply as a mental handicap of our societies, something we have to live with and consider as a particular attribute. Since nationalistic tendencies in Central and Eastern Europe have tended to be more explicit, these are more often cited as examples when discussing the subject.

Next to nationalism, there is another issue, typical for Central and Eastern Europe, which is the overestimation of the historical relevance of archaeological finds and cultures. Both problematic trends are inherited from nineteenth-century conceptions, going back to Romanticism, or even earlier. In an essential monograph on the ethnic interpretations of archaeological cultures, Sebastian Brather (2004) has shown how many nineteenth-century notions, abandoned by most scholars but still upheld by many even today, derived directly from the eighteenth century, at a time when modern sciences were still in their formative process. To quote *Ecclesiastes (I)*: there is nothing new under the Sun. Therefore, to relate archaeological data and historico-sociological phenomena to each other is, quite often, more than problematic; but such an attitude still flourishes today in many circles.

Nationalism in archaeology is the extreme use of the past: some scholars try to be useful to politicians, and some politicians try to use academics. The idea of the 'usefulness' of humanistic studies is an issue of eighteenth-century pragmatism (as in the case, for instance, of Adam Smith), while the direct utilisation of science may go back to Los Alamos in the 1940s, when politicians discovered the tangible output of atomic research. Science proved to be immediately 'useful', and since then a twist is observable in the world of research: technocrats expect that science should be useful. (When recently applying for a grant to study Avar and Byzantine contacts in the sixth–seventh centuries, I was required, in the last item of the application form, to describe the 'usefulness' of the intended research.) Of course, research on medieval glazed pottery may seem to many as useless as research on Byzantine ink. However, an international company for copying-machines was recently interested to know why Byzantine ink proved so long-lived over more than a thousand years. Similarly, ethnographers can provide information, which can certainly prove useful for international trade, about the very different Balkanic peoples: what to sell them, what is irrelevant or forbidden for them to buy?

In East European dictatorships, the attitude of the individual with regard to nationalism was/is different, a fact rarely taken into consideration by those who are writing about such a process, mostly without having undergone personal experiences of their own: how to live on a daily basis under such a political predicament? Three behaviours can be associated with this particular question: scholars can either genuinely serve the

interests of the politicians concerned, or merely do so formally, or totally stay away. To live within a dictatorship is difficult, and there are a sizeable number of examples illustrating how one could build a career quickly or suddenly lose it, from the loss of research positions to that of a secure livelihood itself.

Nationalistic attitudes in archaeology are markedly observable in the descriptions of nation-state formations, while they seem to have faded out completely from studies on Prehistoric times or Antiquity, since this particular research has become highly international since the mid-twentieth century. (Obviously, it doesn't really matter whose Bronze Age is 'older' or 'more beautiful', etc.)

Pan-Slavism, as a scholarly attitude, was unambiguously assumed almost exclusively in the former Soviet Union. It entailed the denial of the Norman foundation of Kievan Rus', or the survival of the Goths in Crimea, as well as the more negative judgements on steppe peoples. After the Second World War, in Eastern Europe under Soviet control, Pan-Slavism also became a decisive factor in early medieval archaeology, although showing a slowly declining tendency over time. It found its natural medium, so to speak, in the Slavic countries. Each of these followed a cultural tradition of its own. In Poland, the Slavic tradition was treated differently within the Warsaw–Kraków–Poznań triangle, each element of the triangle following its respective traditions. Both former Czechoslovakia and present-day Slovakia defined their ninth century antecedent State as a principality, originally designated as '*Megalé Moravia*' by a Byzantine source. (It is usually referred to as '*Magna Moravia*', but its translation in German as '*Großmährisches Reich*' sounds rather unfortunate.) The emergence of Pan-Slavism took on particular features in non-Slavic countries (the German Democratic Republic, Hungary and Romania). In the German Democratic Republic, the study of the early Middle Ages was completely devoted to the Slavs up to the demolition of the Berlin Wall in 1989. It was only Hungary that benefited from the compulsion of Pan-Slavism (even with all its exaggerations), as experts began to concentrate on the almost entirely neglected topic of Carpathian basin archaeological remains. Romanian archaeology, on the other hand, chose a special path: in the 1950s it was committed to the Slavophile idea, followed by more 'objective' scientific approaches in the 1960s – in parallel with a turn in the country's foreign affairs policy. With Ceaușescu's rise to power in the 1970s, however, the precondition of research and everyday work was to accept the theory of Daco-Roman continuity and the complete rejection of steppe cultures.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, a triple affiliation has characterised the Hungarian and Bulgarian approaches to their prehistory. Both nations arrived from the East European steppe to their present day homeland, and mixed with the native inhabitants: Hungarians with surviving Avars and Slavs; Bulgarians with descendants of Thracians and Slavs. The judgement of these components was always exposed to the fluctuations of political trends; today, in both countries, it is the steppe ancestry that is now emphasised. (I labelled this view in one of my studies as the 'Orient preference', Bálint 2007, 545–567.)

A new discipline, archaeo-genetics, born in the 1990s, also became very popular among those who are influenced by nationalistic ideas when looking at the past. Such

large popularity can be derived from three points. First, it is a natural science, i.e. not belonging to the realm of Humanities. One could therefore use it as a strong argument, as if it were absolutely objective. Second, because its adherents followed the nineteenth-century idea that ‘peoples’ can correspond to biological factors. This is not new. It was already implied by physical anthropology and serology until the mid-twentieth century; yet both disciplines slowly proved to be irrelevant for the purpose of ethnic identifications. Third, because archaeo-genetics is fashionable, it can be very promising, fostering one’s reputation and bringing success among politicians and common people as well. Such temptation endangers scientific objectivity.

The methodological problem is that archaeo-genetics studies *individuals* with their absolutely unique history of several hundred generations, while the communities within cemeteries emerged over the course of many thousands of years of history, and are of unknown ethnic interferences. (In Europe, the genetic characteristics of an individual can be traced back to the Bronze Age, an epoch very far before from the formation of ‘peoples’.) The humanities are often criticised for not being ‘objective’ enough. Archaeo-genetics data are more objective, of course, but their interpretation may depend on the character and bias of the scholar(s) involved. The best illustration is the study of the 100-year old question about the size and significance of Anglo-Saxon immigration into England. Such a study was conducted most recently by two British groups with identical instruments and led to opposite conclusions (Weale *et al.* 2002, 1008–1021; Capelli *et al.* 2003, 979–984).

Pan-historicism in archaeology takes its origin partly from a misunderstanding of the nature of ‘archaeological culture’ as such. The title of many monographs promised to present, for instance, ‘The history of such-and-such region in such-and-such period’, or the ‘Ethnic processes in such-and-such period’. Going back to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this view was adopted by Soviet-type Marxism in order to render history more ‘useful’ for political manipulation. Such extreme considerations quickly became obsolete in archaeology after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but did manage to survive in Central and Eastern Europe. To be sure, on the one hand, nobody today would interpret three dust-hole pits and a fireplace from a Bronze Age settlement as the ‘reflection of class struggle’; but, on the other hand, many colleagues cannot resist the temptation to ‘write history’ on the basis of finds and of cultural phenomena. They are simply ill-informed about the abundant literature discussing such issues since the second half of the twentieth century. One cannot but hope for the impending disappearance of such views.

After the breakup of the Soviet Union and the so-called ‘Socialist World’ in the early 1990s, significant and important processes were initiated. (One single, impressive, though not directly relevant example: the Russian journal *Vizantijskij Vremennik*, again and almost overnight, became the most influential periodical of Byzantinology.) The 40–50 years of communist inheritance were also challenged in archaeology. Not surprisingly, the most ‘objective’ case was written about the German Democratic Republic (Coblentz 2000, 304–334); the most ‘exhaustive’ on

‘Soviet archaeology’, as it is now commonly known, was developed by Russian archaeologist and anthropologist Lev Klejn (1997); the most ‘self-critical’ case was presented for Romania (Niculescu 2007); and, much to my regret, only a meagre theoretical discussion was offered for Hungary (Laszlovszky and Siklódi 1991, 272–298).

Overcoming failed ideology and methodological backwardness – still today, at times, and here and there – one may see signs of a nationalistic mentality; but the real present-day danger for science is the technocratic view of politicians and the expatriation of younger scholars. ‘Old school’ icons often remain influential in national research and many of them keep pulling back on any attempt at methodological renewal; but the decisive problem is to ensure that the most active younger generation of Central and Eastern Europe scholars stay home. There is, indeed, a growing gap – and tension! – between young archaeologists who thanks to their research results and language knowledge are now welcome in the Western World, and the rest of their colleagues who stay home. The latter can make a living only by renouncing personal expectations or because of an exceptional family background. However, ideological and methodological change should equally be expected from them! They are perfectly capable of doing this; but in order to really achieve a meaningful transformation, a basic change of governmental attitudes towards research-policy is necessary.

Until quite recently, I tended to be quite optimistic in the sense that, thanks to the evolution of social structures in Central and Eastern Europe and to the increasing contacts and collaboration with Western European archaeologists, nationalism and pan-historicism would play only a minor role in our research. And, to a great extent, this is indeed so. Yet current populist tendencies may well divert some of our scholars, by promising them more money for a particular type of research and, above all, by ensuring them ‘success’ and exposure in the media. At present, I do not venture to predict any particular developments, being very sceptical about the scientific relevance of futurology; however, it is my deepest hope that Europe, as a whole, will finally be intellectually united, once and for all.

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