



Review Article

Migration and ethnicity in prehistoric and early historic Europe

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MANUEL FERNÁNDEZ-GÖTZ, COURTNEY NIMURA, PHILIPP W. STOCKHAMMER & RACHEL CARTWRIGHT (ed.). 2022. *Rethinking migrations in late prehistoric Eurasia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 978-0-19-726735-6 hardback £85.

F. SACCOCCIO & E. VECCHI (ed.). 2022. *Who do you think you are? Ethnicity in the Iron Age Mediterranean*. London: Accordia; 978-1-873415-47-4 paperback £30.

I am very grateful to *Antiquity* for asking me to read and write a review article of these two volumes. Together they provide an integrated picture of trends in recent years on the themes of mobility and ethnicity in late prehistoric and early historic Europe. Topics, chronology and regional focus are different, if not often opposed, in each book but the reader can easily catch the common ground for further reflection.

Rethinking migrations in late prehistoric Eurasia is a comprehensive book edited by Manuel Fernández-Götz, Courtney Nimura, Philipp Stockhammer and Rachel Cartwright as an outcome of the conference ‘Where are you going? Reconsidering migrations in Metal Ages’, held at the University of Edinburgh in 2019 and published in 2022 by the British Academy. After major genetic and isotopic publications in the period from 2014–2018, the scientific community was indeed committed to trying to integrate results originating from different epistemologies and methods in the framework of historical-archaeological reconstruction. Since then, I have been involved in this flow of new data, ideas, criticism, reconsiderations. In 2018, with Katharina Rebay-Salisbury and Benjamin Roberts, I organised the conference ‘Genes, isotopes and artefacts. How should we interpret the movement of people throughout Bronze Age Europe?’ at the Austrian Academy of Science in Vienna (talks are available online at www.youtube.com/@oeai_oeaw). On that occasion, from the frequent collisions between hard and social scientists, I realised that the integration would require years. Looking back at 2018 and now reading *Rethinking migrations* I acknowledge the distance we have covered, the objectives we achieved, as well as the space that divides archaeologists from the full control of analytical results, and geneticists from conscious developments of sampling strategies.

Rethinking migrations is a journey across Europe and West-Central Asia, looking at prehistoric cultural groups (e.g. Yamnaya, Corded Ware, Bell Beaker, Tell, Terramare, up to the *Germani*), as well as single individuals (e.g. the Amesbury Archer, the Boscombe Bowmen, the Franzhausen I girl), whose meaningful life-history enable reflection on prehistoric

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movements and behaviours. Female mobility acquired particular relevance, especially in relation to marriage and motherhood. After the Introduction and a theoretical chapter on the different approaches of social and natural sciences, two contributions are devoted to the Late Neolithic-Bronze Age transition. They incorporate different points of view: one more oriented towards large migrations suggested by aDNA data; the other towards the understanding of mobility strategy on a smaller demographic scale (exogamy, fosterage, conquest, warriors, traders and craftsmen circulation, transhumance). The second set of four chapters focuses on the Bronze Age and its increasing evidence of intense network and interaction practices, mostly along the corridor that connects the Po Plain, the Alps, the Carpathian Basin, Central Europe and Scandinavia, with a *sortie* towards the Kazakhstan metallogenic province occupied by the Andronovo miners/shepherds. The next six chapters deal with the final phases of the Bronze and the Iron Age in the Po Valley, the Alpine and sub-Alpine areas and Britain, showing perhaps an extreme level of network complexity. In the last chapter, there are comparisons with early historical contexts and the first recognisable ethnicities are described, such as the *Helvetii* in *Gallia*, or the *Batavi* in *Germania*. The book concludes with a summary by the editors.

I was surprised that the book is still, to a large extent, the point of view of archaeology. Theory and results are thoroughly discussed but we are still denied the voice of the sample collectors, method developers and data producers, above all the geneticists. Using a metaphor, it is like reading a book only in translation and not in the original language. At the end of the book the editors mention the IBD (Identity-By-Descent) and ROH (Runs of Homozygosity) methods. These are two recently developed, very promising types of genetic analyses, which will enable us to retrace biologically related individuals up to various degrees of relatedness (IBD) and estimate the levels of consanguinity/population isolation (ROH), starting from genome-wide shared databases. We will therefore then have a clearer perspective on the inter- and intra-site kinship-ties (even at an extra-continental level), the biodemography, and the cultural permeability of prehistoric populations. The mobility of pathogens (e.g. Spyrou *et al.* 2019) will also have a substantial impact on the reconstruction of demographic-economic fluctuations and consequent flows of people. Beside aDNA, I believe that other aspects that have not been explored fully will become progressively clearer, such as livestock mobility (e.g. Trentacoste *et al.* 2019), organic material trade (e.g. Arena *et al.* [in press](#)), agricultural technology transfer (e.g. Filipović *et al.* 2020) and religious ideas movements (e.g. Cavazzuti *et al.* 2022).

The book combines well-researched studies on migration but highlights mainly the archaeological perspectives and neglects the integration of the genetic and other archaeological sciences that are key to many interpretations on mobility. Hopefully, this will occur with future research.

The second book is *Who do you think you are? Ethnicity in the Iron Age Mediterranean*, edited by Fabio Saccoccio and Elisa Vecchi and published by the Accordia Institute. It stems from a conference that took place at the UCL Institute of Archaeology in 2018. The volume includes nine contributions—plus the Introduction by Vecchi and the Epilogue of Saccoccio—presenting pivotal case studies on the theme of ethnic identity at the dawn of history, across the geographical arch from Central-Western Iberian Meseta to Arkadia in the Peloponnese, also touching on the central Po Valley and the southern Carpathian Basin.

Liguri, Celts, Vettones, Vaccaei, Greeks, Gauls, Latins, Liburnians, Japodi, Arkadians—these are all known names attached to peoples, and the authors engage with fundamental questions, such as: to what extent can we identify and characterise these peoples, and circumscribe them into defined boundaries, known from the earliest written sources, using archaeological evidence? What was the degree of ethnic self-consciousness the members of these societies had? Do the data legitimise the use of traditional comprehensive labels, such as Hallstatt, La Tène or Celts? How and why have the ethnic definitions changed through the various phases of the protohistoric research? What is the impact of our own historical *milieu* in the new interpretations we propose?

All chapters carefully address these topics, which I believe readers will agree are central to both archaeological and historical research. The theoretical thread that runs through the volume ties around two main points, one ontological and one structural: 1) ethnicity is a “dynamic and situational” social construct (Jones 1997: i); 2) various levels of ethnicity existed in antiquity (e.g. “ethnic categories”, “ethnic networks”, “ethnic communities”; Smith 2008: 31). Various types of contexts, materials and sources are analysed including figurative art, sculpture, funerary space and customs, settlement patterns, urban planning, pottery forms and technology, food and drinking traditions, as well as dress. The objective is to track the ethnicity and verify the degree of reliability of ethnic labels provided by written sources.

Of particular interest for my current research was the theme of identity/ethnicity expressed by ornaments. Looking at earlier examples, such as Middle and Late Bronze Age pins, we observed that different shapes and models are typical of specific territorial districts within the Terramare system in the Central Po Plain, which appears rather unitarian as regard to many cultural aspects (Barbieri *et al.* 2021). Personal ornaments are indeed powerful signifiers, endowed with strong symbolic and communicative value, connected to the stratified identity of the bearer, be it personal, individual or social (Roach-Higgins & Eicher 1992; Eicher 1995).

One of the most intriguing aspects throughout the whole volume is the role of the political elites in shaping, changing and redefining group identity. This element appears quite often, but it is not always deeply discussed, leaving space for personal reflections and perhaps requires a new volume for this specific issue. I find that Jones’s adjectives ‘dynamic’ and ‘situational’, constantly recalled in the volume, even if undoubtedly effective, are too neutral when dealing with the historical flow and changes in societies. As most of the economic theories from the nineteenth century to the present day tell us (as well as the psychoanalysis, speaking of the individual), societies experience phases of growth, often sustained by a good propensity to openness, permeability and co-operation, during which boundaries with others can be easily crossed, but also often followed by periods of stagnation, crises, (true or believed) external threats, when the need of protection prevails (Guidi 2019: 49).

Considering the overall tendency to more pronounced and stable social hierarchies in the European and Mediterranean Iron Age, we are driven to thinking that the managerial elites are certainly the main (although not the only) characters in the economic and (geo)political processes that generate these fluctuations. Beside them, religious and intellectual authorities may indulge or oppose the rulers’ decisions, for their own convenience. With the rise in the use of communal and, later, private ownership of the land, there was an increase in the need of administering or rather ruling those territories, such as drawing boundaries and establishing who was in and out, who was born, raised or ruled under certain norms and who referred to a different system.

As historical and present-day dynamics clearly show, crises may bring political authorities to look for external scapegoats, and use ethnical, identitarian elements—often preserved among the lower social segments through tradition—to unify the *clients* under a single banner. And here is the contradiction: one of the main structural elements of the elite is to be (or act as) interconnected at a supra-regional level, using exotic goods and customs, managing trade and establishing alliances, such as exogamic practices; however, when threatened, their need of transferring competition from the internal to the external can be pursued by closing borders for the subordinates, maintaining for themselves ‘international’ relations, which can protect their own essence and guarantee the survivorship of existing power structures.

This is the reason why I prefer instead of Jones’s ‘situational’ the adjective ‘opportunistic’ for the elites’ actions. Ethnic or identity politics have always been played through different forms within the framework of power relations. Materials, structures, rituals and symbols may serve this purpose, and this supports the hypothesis that ethnicity was a crucial element of historical dynamics at the dawn of urbanism in Europe, which was most likely the case already at the end of the Bronze Age despite the absence of literacy and names of peoples.

To sum up, both volumes are great sources of inspiration, especially for those who want to carry out territorial analysis, create distribution maps of artefact types, network analysis, or simply to prepare an effective sampling strategy for bioarchaeological research.

I have great expectations from a progressively more conscious application of quantitative methods, most notably aDNA, IBD, ROH, isotope analyses to early historical contexts. There are already some examples (e.g. Scheeres *et al.* 2013; Posth *et al.* 2021), but the dataset must be increased and discussed to explain when boundaries were more permeable and when they tended to close. This political-territorial practice is, in my opinion, one of the most significant indicators of trends among societies that based most of their economy on internal production.

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