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## **Some Thoughts on Archaeology and Slavs**

### **The Dark Ages**

The Early Middle Ages<sup>1</sup> are notoriously viewed as a troubled, violent and unstable part of our past, squatting among the ruins of Antiquity and not yet amid the Christian light. This era of migrations, invasions, wars, epidemics and political entities rising and falling is infinitely fascinating, colourful and diverse, twisting and turning behind every corner, but since at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century its main attraction has been the perceived potential to explain the births of nations, arrivals of nations, deaths of nations and general sense of roots, belonging and identity.

In recent decades within the archaeological and historical professions countless attempts have been made to put the Dark Ages bias into context, to see the late antique period as something more than the Gibbonian “decline and fall” and the early medieval one as a transformed Antiquity, not the end of civilization.<sup>2</sup> These endeavours have certainly brought much progress to the scholarly public, specialized in the topic, but have not necessarily significantly changed the perception of the period among the general public.

Many volumes have also been written on the political misuse and abuse of the past in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially in connection with the early medieval period. The obvious attraction of the early medieval history to any political entity in search of new identity and in the construction of a sense of superiority towards its neighbours has been pointed out and criticized.

While misrepresentation of the past often centred on the non-existent ethnic content projected into it, actual existing opportunities to learn from it remain untapped. In both Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages we can observe how people faced uncertainty, otherness, diversity and change. In this paper would like to explore how

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1 In Slovenia, the Early Middle Ages are traditionally dated to the 7<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> centuries AD.

2 E.g. Pohl, 2010; Brather, 2017; exhibitions on the Byzantine world: Byzanz 2001; Byzanz 2010; Transformation of the Roman World ERC project and Brill book series; Transformations of Romanness: Pohl et al., 2018; Der Untergang des Römischen Reiches exhibition in Trier; Francia Media. The cradles of European culture project; The legacy of Charlemagne 814-2014: Gustin et al., 2015.



the period is perceived in Slovenian archaeology at present on different levels, and plead for a more justified use of it in the construction of our future.

## The Slavic Dark Ages

In Slovenian archaeology the Early Middle Ages begin with the historically reported arrival of the Slavs and end with the beginnings of feudalism in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. For a long time, the centuries in between were filled almost exclusively with the Slavs. After a while, the remains of the Roman(ized) population were accepted into the narrative. As the number of written sources rises after the 10<sup>th</sup> century and various non-Slavic individuals' presence in what is now Slovenia is reported in the written sources, the Middle Ages begin, and they are allowed to be "international".

But the centuries before that were uncontestably Slavic (see the titles of the publications listed in Milavec, 2009), and the cemeteries, jewellery, and settlements that were found were all spoken and written about primarily as such (as late as Guštin, 2002; 2008; Brezigar et al., 2015; Lux et al., 2018). It is only recently that the expression "early medieval" has begun to substitute the ethnic term of Slavic (e.g. Pleterski, 2008; Modrijan et al., 2020; Berden et al., 2021).

I must emphasize two points here. First, I am not arguing the early medieval people of present-day Slovenia were *not* Slavic. However, we must also continue discussing what Slav-ness, undisputed in history, means in archaeology, and whether it translates in any way to material culture. I am arguing there were others involved in our past, and that this makes it no less *ours*.

Secondly, we must take account of the interesting discrepancy in this regard within the Slovenian humanities between the fields of early medieval history and archaeology. It was a historian, Bogo Grafenauer, who in 1951 remarked that simply linking archaeological material and ethnic and linguistic groups had for a long time been criticized (Grafenauer, 1951, 168), and it was a historian who was of the opinion that this approach was methodologically wrong and all but dead in archaeology in 2004 (Štih, 2004a, 483). In the aftermath of Slovenian independence the same historian battled against the political abuse and propagandist misuse of the Slavic part of the nation's past, and attempted to show it for what it was (to the best of our historical knowledge) (Štih, 2004a; 2004b; 2005a; 2005b; 2006; 2007a; 2007b; 2011 and others). A little book called *The Myth of Nations* by Patrick Geary (2005) was translated into Slovenian and has been available since 2005. It is an essentially simple, reader-friendly and approachable explanation of the errors of past historiography and their consequences, and a proposal for how to understand the Europe of 1,500 years ago beyond our Romantic bias with regard to the importance of nation states, yet it seems to have had zero impact on Slovenian archaeologists. Archaeologists often complain of the dictatorial role

of history in our interpretations, yet we might benefit from paying more attention to the progress in historians' interpretative frameworks. While it is true that historical sources give us a context we must not be ruled by, we should also not neglect the parts which complement our work. The Early Middle Ages of present-day Slovenia through the eyes of archaeology are a closed-off, shut-out scatter of relatively poor and primitive communities. But for historians the region is a part of a vibrant, colourful new empire in the making.

There may be another discrepancy making Slovenian early medieval archaeology so overwhelmingly Slavic. The questions of identities, ethnicities and ideological abuse among Slovenian scholars were discussed by the "theoretical archaeologists" (Mirnik Prezelj, 1998; 2000; Slapšak et al., 1996), and their critique was not integrated into teaching or interpreting basic level early medieval archaeology. Perhaps I am oversimplifying, but equating ethnic groups and small finds, however misconstrued, sounds practical and applicative. Goths, Longobards and Slavs can appeal to an archaeologist as clear and tangible categories, easy to label and fit into the historical narrative. The complexities of the archaeological interpretation without them may seem daunting. It may well be that the persistence of this approach in Slovenian early medieval archaeological publications is (at least partly) simply the consequence of a lack of a more convenient tool.

However, a compelling new tool, ancient DNA (aDNA) analyses, is uncovering biological categories, another point of view for us to add and integrate into the way we think about people in the past. But the natural sciences offer no easy answers to questions we could not answer before – quite the contrary – and are extremely open to further abuse, especially due to the very high level of interdisciplinary collaboration necessary for a comprehensible interpretation, particularly for the general public (Geary et al., 2016).

An amazing result of the aDNA analyses of whole cemeteries is the biological pattern of a community. We can find out who was the mother of whom, who could have died of a particular disease, was the community exogamous, are different grave goods reflected in the biological characteristics of people or not, the biological sex of the children and young adults, were biological families buried together or apart, and much, much more. We will still not be able to know in what terms they thought about themselves and each other, even if we know better than they did who fathered whom. Does it really matter so much whether they would have styled themselves as (only) Slavs or not? There is so much to know about the early medieval communities, yet we persistently want to force them into the categories that obsess us in the present. Perhaps that is not the most important task of archaeology, unless of course we need these categories in order to care about *our* past and *our* heritage?

## Slavs, our heritage

One step further from the archaeological interpretation carried out by academics is how we present our work to the public. Here we, as archaeologists, are directly responsible for not repeating the mistakes we reproach the propagandists and politicians with. Yet in some relatively recent exhibition catalogues statements can be found linking early medieval material culture and “ancient Slovenians” (Globočnik et al., 2013, 34; Perko, 2016, 9). Even high-status Carolingian and Ottonian material culture is presented as belonging to “ancient Slovenians” (Globočnik et al., 2013, 33).

Even more alarming is the title of an article on the official website of the Institute of Archaeology ZRC SAZU – “Groundbreaking discoveries on the settlement of *Slovenians* with artificial intelligence”<sup>3</sup>. With due respect to my colleagues, if an institution such as the Institute of Archaeology of the SAZU endorses this kind of statement, how far from the 19<sup>th</sup> century have we come?

## Whose ages then?

We are not alone in the search for a contemporary interpretative framework which would be as easy to use on the material as the so-called “culture history paradigm”, and at the same time free of its bias. And we are not alone in trying to shake off the remains of the nationalist-oriented past. In other parts of Europe with historically reported Slavic settlements in the Early Middle Ages and/or a mainly Slavic population today, various different scenarios are under way.

In Croatia, early medieval archaeology is divided between the Dalmatian (Croat) and Pannonian (Slavic) part of the country. In Dalmatia, after what is now more than a century of research into the “old Croats” (Bilogrić, 2019), the emphasis turned first to the Carolingians and now also to the Byzantines as important points of identity (Milošević, 2000; Džino et al., 2018; Ančić et al., 2018). The Pannonian part of the country has, similar to Slovenia, benefitted from the motorway excavations project which has seen groups of archaeologists working on early medieval settlements, pottery, cemeteries and physical anthropology.<sup>4</sup>

The so-called “Bijelo Brdo culture” or group has been dusted off and presented in a different context or as a fashion, linking the now Hungarian, Austrian, Croatian and Slovenian Pannonia in the 10<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries AD (Obenaus, 2010; Bilogrivić, 2019, 223, footnote 141).

3 <https://iza2.zrc-sazu.si/en/novice/groundbreaking-discoveries-on-the-settlement-of-slovenians-with-artificial-intelligence> (access 28. 8. 2023). Slovenians are italicized by Tina Milavec.

4 E.g. Bekić 2016; Dugonjić et al. 2020; Proceedings of International Scientific Conferences of Medieval Archaeology by the Institute of Archaeology in Zagreb, physical anthropology schools around Mario Šlaus and Mario Novak.

In Austria, early medieval archaeological research has in recent years moved along with the Vienna School of History in perceiving Carantania as a multi-ethnic polity with fluid identities, and moving away from the focus on ethnicities while at the same time criticizing and reassessing the past negative bias towards the Slavs (Eichert, 2010, 2012; Leskovar, 2016; Breibert, 2011; Novotny, 2018; Diesenberger et al., 2020).

In Germany an overview of the research on the western Slavs and many of the questions outlined here were elaborated in the works of Sebastian Brather (Brather, 2008, 2011). Brather calls for a focus on other topics in the Early Middle Ages apart from ethnicities, and underlines the limited reach of archaeology in this respect.

In Poland the competing theories about the autochthonous or allochthonous origin of the Slavs are now taking advantage of the aDNA analyses to prove their points (Stolarek et al., 2023 with further reading). As often happens in “genetic” papers, the state-of-the art biogenetic technology is framed by outdated ideologically informed archaeological concepts and questions. But ethnicity is not a biological category.

The Czech and Slovak early medievalists are concerned with Moravian and Premyslid ruling dynasties and principalities and their very impressive archaeology, uncontestedly Slav (bibliography available by colleagues from the Institute of archaeology and Masaryk University in Brno, Institute of Archaeology in Nitra, Charles University in Prague and many others). Perhaps the national identification with the early medieval elite, equal to their western neighbours, creates a peaceful feeling of content, with only the east-west religious preferences fluctuating according to the political inclination.

The once “Slavic” early medieval archaeological finds in Friuli and northern Italy are still viewed with suspicion (Possenti, 2021; Borzacconi, 2021).

At the beginning I emphasized I do not intend to deny the Slav-ness of our early medieval history and archaeology. But I regret to see other parts of our past neglected. The Early Middle Ages were a time of great political and social change, especially in the territory of present-day Slovenia. Since prehistory the geography of the land, the easiest communication corridors and the position within Europe have dictated both settlement characteristics and road networks. Various climate and relief differences are reflected in the political and administrative characteristics of the lands we now call Slovenia, a bundle of small parts of larger geo-political units. This bundle may not have been joined under one rule for a very long time – a fact that seems greatly regretted by modern Slovenians – but our history and archaeology are consequently significantly richer and more colourful. Could we not be proud of this great diversity?

We live in a time of great population changes and migrations. While we should certainly avoid oversimplifications and direct comparisons with the post-Roman past, we can use contemporary social diversity, the need for inclusiveness and equality to build a proportionate sense of pride in our more-than-Slavic and less-than-royal past, and to learn from it.

I would like to ask my fellow early medievalists, have they never wondered at the difference between the publications of early medieval sites and the first early medieval sources? How the skeletons and head-rings clash with the descriptions of vineyards, honey-combs, ponds, farmers, smithies and complex network of families and people from a much wider territory? Slavic and non-Slavic. Two images of the same world, seen from two different perspectives. We will never – thankfully – reach the same conclusions, historians and archaeologists, but I believe this should encourage us to research several other facets of early medieval life.

**Acknowledgement:** The source of funding that has supported the work is Javna agencija za znanstvenoraziskovalno in inovacijsko dejavnost RS grant number P6-0247.

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## Nekaj misli o arheologiji in Slovanih

**Ključne besede:** zgodnji srednji vek, arheologija, Slovani, dediščina, nacionalizmi

Zgodovina in arheologija zgodnjega srednjega veka (približno 7. do 11. stoletje n. št.) prekipavata od imen in premikanja skupin ljudi, vojskovanja, pokristjanjevanja ter propadanja in ustanavljanja vedno novih političnih enot. Evropejci 19. in 20., pa tudi 21. stoletja se obračamo nanju enkrat v želji po skupni identiteti, drugič po tistem, kar nas dela posebne, po koreninah in po občutku lastne vrednosti. Arheologiji tega obdobja ni pripadla le nehvaležna naloga ustvariti povezavo med nami in materialnimi

ostanki naših neposrednih prednikov; od nje se pričakuje tudi izbiranje kandidatov za nacionalne in druge simbole. Zdi se celo, da je varovanje dediščine lažje sprejemljiva naloga, če se nam ta dediščina zdi zares naša. Če smo z njo malodane genetsko povezani. Arheologija zgodnjega srednjega veka je zato v marsikateri državi, kjer govorimo slovanske jezike, kar arheologija Slovanov. S tem pa se odpovedujemo pisani in bogati sliki tega dela preteklosti, odpovedujemo se mnogim drugim razlogom, da bi bili ponosni na dediščino sedaj našega prostora.

Ali smo zmožni pustiti tovrstne zahteve ob strani? Smo zmožni pogledati na obdobje po propadu zahodnega rimskega imperija premaknjenih političnih silnic in številnih neslovanskih poudarkov tudi drugače? Smo se sposobni soočiti z omejitvami stroke pri vprašanjih identitet predmetov, prebivališč in grobov nekega obdobja? V tem prispevku za zgodnjesrednjeveško arheologijo iščem poti iz preživetja službe narodu.

## **Some Thoughts on Archaeology and Slavs**

**Keywords:** Early Middle Ages, archaeology, Slavs, heritage, nationalisms

Early medieval history and archaeology (ca. 7<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> centuries) is bursting with migrating groups, warfare, Christianization, and politics rising and falling. Many 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century Europeans turned to early medieval history and archaeology in a search for identity, exclusive characteristics, roots or sentiments about their intrinsic values, a process that continues today. The ascribed task of early medieval archaeology was to create an association between us and the material remains of our direct ancestors and to provide candidates for national and other symbols. Moreover, it also seems that protecting heritage is easier if the heritage is ours, and almost genetically connected with us. In many Slavic-speaking countries, early medieval archaeology became simply the archaeology of the Slavs. However, by doing this we renounce a rich and colourful past and many other reasons to be proud of the heritage within Slovenia. Can we leave aside such requirements and look at the period after the fall of the Western Roman Empire from a wider perspective, including many non-Slavic accents? Can we face the limitations of archaeology when studying the identity of objects, dwellings and graves? Can we look for a way out from the antiquated service to the nation in such efforts?

## **O avtorici**

**Tina Milavec** je doktorirala na Univerzi v Ljubljani. Ukvarja se z arheologijo pozne antike in zgodnjega srednjega veka s poudarkom na poznoantičnih višinskih naselbinah ter materialni kulturi, predvsem steklenih in kovinskih najdbah, ter arheologiji

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