Rethinking Ethnic Identity in the Archaeology of the Ancient Slavs

Razmislek o etnični identiteti v arheologiji Slovanov

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Izvleček

Arheologija Slovanov v zgodnjem srednjem veku ostaja razdeljena med raziskovalce, ki zanikajo migracije Slovanov, in tiste, ki materialno kulturo neposredno povezujejo z etničnimi identitetami. Ta članek premošča to delitev s prevrednotenjem teoretskega okvira. V kritični obravnavi razvoja raziskav etničnih identitet v arheologiji izpostavi omejitve tako primordialističnih kot instrumentalističnih modelov. Namesto teh predlaga redefinicijo arheološke kulture kot politetično skupnost praks, ki so utemeljene v priučenih družbenih vedenjih. Ta okvir omogoča prepoznavanje etničnih identitet v arheoloških zapisih. Z uporabo tega pristopa na arheološki kulturi praškega kulturnega kompleksa pokažemo skupnost praks, ki so jo združevali jezik, bivanje, noša, gospodarstvo, družbeni odnosi in genetska povezanost. Članek torej potrdi, da so Slovani v zgodnjem srednjem veku obstajali tako kot arheološka kultura kot tudi kot prepoznavna identitetna skupina z močnim kolektivnim samozavedanjem.

Ključne besede: Slovani; arheologija; arheološka teorija; pozna antika; zgodnji srednji vek; etnična identiteta; arheološka kultura; habitus

Abstract

The archaeology of the ancient Slavs has advanced methodologically but remains divided between scholars who deny the Slavs' migrations, and those linking material culture directly to ethnic identities. This paper seeks to bridge this divide by reassessing the theoretical framework for studying the ancient Slavs. It critiques the historical development of research on ethnic identity in archaeology, highlighting limitations in both primordialist and instrumentalist models. Instead, we propose redefining archaeological culture as a polythetic commonality of practice rooted in learned social behaviours. This framework permits identifying ethnic identities in the archaeological record without relying on texts. Applying this approach to the Prague-culture-assemblage archaeological culture, we demonstrate shared practices in language, housing, dress, sustenance, social relations, and genetic relatedness. Our findings confirm that the ancient Slavs existed as both an archaeological culture and a distinct identity group with strong collective self-awareness.

Keywords: Ancient Slavs; archaeology; theory; Late Antiquity; Early Middle Ages; ethnic identity; archaeological culture; *habitus*

The archaeology of the ancient Slavs, like archaeology in general, has made great methodological advances in the last two decades. For example, in the applications of computational (e.g., Štular 2022; Rihter 2023) and web-based analyses of cemeteries (e.g., Eichert 2021), applications of airborne LiDAR (e.g., Lozić 2021), focus on soil analyses (e.g., Štular, Lozić 2024; Magdič 2024) and exploitation of large archaeological data sets using machine-learning methods (Štular et al. 2022). In addition, geocomputational analyses are finally being applied to the archaeology of the Slavs (e.g., Magdič 2022). According to a recent scientific conference (Machaček, Hofmanova 2024), the focus of current research is on the subsistence using isotopes and lipids (still at an early stage, e.g., Machaček et al. 2024) and

(ancient) DNA studies of human (e.g., overview in Lindstedt, Salmela 2020) and animal remains (e.g., Macháček et al. 2021).

Unfortunately, unlike archaeology in general, the archaeology of the ancient Slavs has also become utterly polarised in its theoretical stance. On the one hand, there are researchers who unconditionally reject not only the possibility of a migration of the ancient Slavs, but the existence of the Slavs as such. On the other hand, there are researchers who continue to use the toolset from the 19th century that equates 'pots with people'. The aim of this article is to shed light on the archaeology of the ancient Slavs in its theoretical context and to bridge the gap in the search for a common path.

First, we briefly describe the theoretical development in the 19th and 20th centuries and its current state in the 21st century. We consider the archaeology of the ancient Slavs in the context of the archaeology and historiography of Late Antiquity and the Early Medieval Period. Only since the 1950s has the archaeology of the ancient Slavs embarked on a relatively isolated path (see below).

The second part of the article is devoted to the development of the theoretical framework, which seems to have stalled. The current framework is critically presented and a new framework, or rather an evolution of existing trends, is proposed.

Finally, the newly proposed framework is put into practice through the case study of the so-called Prague culture assemblage, or, as we define it, the Prague-culture-assemblage archaeological culture.

Although the article contains abundant references, it was not our intention to provide a bibliographical overview of the archaeology of the ancient Slavs, as this has already been covered in several recent studies (e.g., Pleterski 2013; Živković et al. 2013; Šalkovský 2018; Kowalski 2019; Curta 2020; Filipec 2020).

HISTORY OF RESEARCH

Grand narrative

The transformation of barbarian Europe in Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages was, until World War II, overwhelmingly regarded as a phenomenon of the migration of peoples. The meaning of the terms 'people' or 'tribe' was taken for granted and understood as stable, permanent, and almost unchangeable entities (e.g., overview in Olsen 2002, 30–39). In the social sciences, this view is known

as the primordialist model (e.g., critical overview in Eller, Coughlan 1993).

Migration was understood as the main process of change (e.g., Ratzel 1909), and peoples and tribes were, as MacEachern (2000, 370) puts it, understood as 'caroming around the continent like culture-bearing billiard balls'. Along the lines of a good break at the beginning of a game of billiards, the Huns bounced off the Great Wall of China and broke through the Roman Limes, forcing numerous other peoples to migrate in the process. The rest of the Late Antiquity and Early Medieval history was merely a process of 'clearing the billiard table', with peoples and nations bouncing around until they settled in places where they were still to be found in the 19th century. That some peoples disappeared in this process was attributed almost exclusively to crushing military defeats.

Reconstructing the more distant past relied on archaeological and linguistic evidence and tended to be written up in terms of a succession of ever more advanced population groups. Best known were the large-scale Germanic migrations in the fourth and fifth centuries that supposedly brought down the western Roman Empire and established new linguistic and cultural patterns in the north (e.g., Bradley, 1888; Hodgkin, 1897).

Of great importance for the Medieval aftermath was the Slavic migration. Slavic origins were always hotly debated, but there was no doubt that from relative obscurity in the sixth century, the speakers of Slavic spread across vast tracts of Central and Eastern Europe over the next two hundred years (e.g., Niederle 1931).

This grand narrative of European history – or culture-historical epistemology, as is known in archaeology – was firmly nestled in the then ideal of once 'pure' national states. It has considered that migration and identity in the first millennium AD were inextricably linked for two reasons. First, the model assumed that human beings always came in compact and closed groupings of men, women, and children. Second, it assumed that there was a direct and tangible continuity between immigrant groups of the first millennium and similarly named nations of modern Europe (overview in Heather 2010a, 6–14).

Ethnogenesis

Following Barth (1969), the understanding of ethnic identity in 1960s shifted to the concept known in the social sciences as the instrumentalist model

or situational ethnicity. This model promotes the concept of dispersed identities and claims that people adopt different identities as the changing social circumstances require them to (e.g., Bentley 1987, 25). Today, most social scientists consider identity to be a product of differentiation and exclusion, not an essential sign of unity (Knapp 2008, 32).

In archaeology, this change began in the context of the 'new' processual archaeology, which rejected migration as an explanatory model and replaced it with transformation and autonomous development from within. The New Archaeology, particularly the USA branch, did not concern itself with the study of identities (ethnic or otherwise), nor did it consider them as a subject of archaeology. Instead, it regarded them as a historical idiosyncrasy, the explanation of which is not the objective of archaeology (e.g., Adams, Van Gerven, Levy 1978; overview in Olsen 2002, 45–51). Later, the post-processual concern with agency and the individual completed the shift toward the interactionist position (Knapp 2008, 63).

Thus, the deconstruction of the grand narratives began. By the 1990s, this became prevalent, particularly in English-speaking academic circles (Heather 2010a, 12). Currently, the persistent scepticism of using migration to explain cultural change is considered a processual anachronism (Knapp 2008, 51).

The deconstruction of the grand narratives in research of Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages took the form of focusing on new critical research on ethnic identities. Early medieval peoples were no longer defined on the basis of a common biological descent but on the basis of belief in a common lineage, such as *gentes*. *Gens* may have shared a common language, a common law, and a common geographic origin, but the most important was a common myth about their origins. This myth was passed on by the leading aristocratic families in the form of genealogies about heroic ancestors. The elites and their stories functioned as nuclei of tradition (ger. *Traditionskerne*), which were crucial for the formation of the *gentes* (Wenskus 1961). The fundamental methodological consequence of the *Traditionskerne* approach was that ethnic identities were no longer perceived as rigid and unchanging but as fluid.

In the 1980s, this approach was refined and led to the entrenchment of ethnogenesis as a fundamental concept. Ethnogenesis describes the complex phenomenon of the formation of peoples and their identities. *Origo gentis*, the origin story of medieval people, became the key building block of ethnogenesis. These mythical narratives were no longer

considered just a passive source of information for modern historiography but as crucial to the formation of ethnic identity at the time of their creation (Geary 1988, 64–73; Wolfram 1988).

In the late 1990s, selected concepts from sociology and critical theory were introduced into the study of ethnic identities, leading to a deconstruction of the ethnicity of Germanic *gentes*. Headed by the protagonists of the so-called 'Vienna School of History' (Reinhard Wenskus, Herwig Wolfram, Walter Pohl, etc.), the fundamental condition of early medieval ethnicity was now understood fluidly. The *gentes* could only define themselves in opposition to late Roman civilization. It was the choice of each *gens* between the dependence on the Roman model or its rejection that shaped early medieval Europe. Ethnic names preserved in the written sources became concrete only when political events or cultural expressions associated with one of these ethnic groups were recorded. Therefore, the long-term success of the *gentes* was possible only with a fluid – stable but flexible – form of organisation that was able to respond to the ever-changing political reality. Under such conditions, historiographers were not expected to find direct and objective evidence of ethnic identity. Some artefacts recovered by archaeology may have been expressions or symbols of ethnic identity, but no artefact or group of artefacts was ethnically absolute (e.g., Pohl 1998a, 1998b).

There were also parallel theories, two of which had significant influence on the contemporary understanding of the Slavs. The first was the socio-anthropological approach of Soviet anthropology. It based ethnicity on a stable core, called *ethnos* or *ethnikos*, which allowed for continuity over long periods of time (e.g., Bromley 1974; reviewed in Banks 1996, 17–24). The second was the so-called 'Toronto school' (Walter Goffart, Andrew Gillet, etc.). It did not attach importance to the *origo gentis* in the formation of an early medieval *gens*. Instead of purely ethnic, it emphasised other types of identity, such as political, social, regional, etc. Importantly, key written sources, such as Jordanes' *Getica*, were considered artificial constructions that were completely devoid of oral tradition and therefore had no informational value for historiography. In addition, it emphasised the role of the Roman empire in the formation of any early medieval *gens* (e.g., Goffart 1998; Gillet (ed.) 2002).

The development in archaeology in general was, to a large degree, parallel. First, the role of style as a means of social signalling including

communicating identity should be mentioned. Wobst (1977) was the first to suggest that style functions as a form of non-verbal communication both within and between groups, particularly in situations where direct interaction is limited; he equated 'style with that part of the … material culture which can be related to the participation of artefacts in processes of information exchange'. As style is a relatively costly means of communication, he believed that it is employed selectively. Wiessner (1983; 1985) challenged this view by noting that in identity displays, efficiency of the message is not paramount and that such displays are often extravagant. She also argued that stylistic messages need not be clear or uniform, and that a degree of ambiguity can actually increase their effectiveness. She emphasised the role of style in group cohesion and social signalling, grounding it in established theories of identity. She argued that style functions as non-verbal communication in which the performance of an action conveys identity in a certain way. In her approach, she suggested that stylistic differences arise more from social constraints on decorative choices than the context in which it was learnt. She distinguished between the emblemic style, which conveys a clear message about group identity, and the assertive style, which reflects personal identity. The emblemic style, thus, marked social boundaries and could be identified archaeologically.

About a decade later, Jones considered the dynamic and situational nature of ethnic identification, which she understood as a constant process of making, unmaking, and sometimes disappearing. Thus, the construction of ethnicity was based on the shared subliminal dispositions of social agents that shaped and were shaped by objective commonalities of practice, i.e., Bordieu's *habitus*. Ethnic identification involved an objectification of cultural practices in the recognition and signification of difference in contrast to others. Consequently, the cultural practices and representations involved in the signification of identity may vary across social contexts. Therefore, there was rarely a one-to-one relationship between representations of ethnicity and the full range of cultural practices and social conditions associated with a particular ethnic group. Under these circumstances, archaeology's ability to trace ethnicity through time has been called into question (Jones 1997).

Brather (2000; 2002; 2008, 31–50) raised two questions. First, was there ethnicity in the Middle Ages? And second, can archaeologists discover it?

The answer to the first question he provided was affirmative, but ethnic affiliation in the Middle Ages was not considered as important as it is today to citizens of national states. The second answer was largely negative. Brather perceived archaeology to be capable of detecting cultural traditions but not the details of their meaning, their spiritual background, or their significance for past mentalities and identities. Archaeology can observe the framework of the context in which archaeological finds occur and, at best, can gain an understanding of that context. However, there is no hermeneutic path to true understanding.

Current trends

In some parts of Europe, the grand narrative (see above) still holds, but the explanatory models have been greatly refined (e.g., Ciglenečki 2000; Pleterski 2013; Šalkovský 2018) and supported by modern scientific methods (e.g., Kowalski 2019). We agree with Watson (1995, 690) and Hu (2012, 394) that these approaches remain a valid heuristic tool with valuable contributions to the empirical understanding of history.

The currently prevailing theoretical approach to ethnicity in Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages, however, is built on the 'Vienna School of History' approach enriched by the criticism of the 'Toronto School'. From it emerged the current state of research (recent overview with references in Sekne 2019, 3–9). Ethnogenesis is understood as a complex process that leads to the formation of identity communities. Individuals are integrated into an identity community through an 'Us-feeling' that is the result of the individual's subjective self-identification. The notion of 'Us-versus-Them' is an integral part of human nature (e.g., Lévi-Strauss 1958; Reis, Gruzen 1976). Identity communities are therefore socially constructed and not biologically determined. Members who share a common identity do so in certain political circumstances to demonstrate a common interest or to emphasise the otherness of their group over another. Therefore, ethnic identity is a result of social interaction, not a prerequisite for it (e.g., Pohl 2013; Reimitz 2015). Accordingly, it cannot be detected through material culture recovered in archaeological record alone, but needs to be supplemented by a contemporary narrative written source, which is explicit, subjective, and 'active' (Pohl 1998c, 22–61).

However, ethnic identity is only one of the possible identities, and it is difficult to distinguish between different identities, such as urban, religious, ethnic, military, etc.; they are interrelated, have a reciprocal relationship, and as such need to be studied as a whole. The formation of the social units referred to as ethnonyms in the written sources was the result of the coexistence and reciprocity of several different identities. Furthermore, the goal of historiography is not to define the type of identity, but to determine the context in which it became relevant (e.g., Pohl 2010, 2014; Geary 2018).

Based on the above presented trends, we propose the hypothesis that this approach to ethnicity in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages is outdated for three reasons. First, it equates ethnic identity with a polity.

Second, it postulates that such a polity could only exist if it was recorded in a contemporary written source that was explicit, subjective, and 'active'. This means that such a polity could only exist in the realm of an administrative apparatus capable of recording, archiving, and executing policies. In Late Antique Europe, only such an apparatus existed within the former extent of the Roman Empire or possibly in a contact zone on the periphery of the contemporaneous Empire.

Third, this approach to ethnicity is based on the half-century-old instrumentalist model. However, the central postulate of the instrumentalist model has recently undergone significant development. Recent studies have revealed that sensitivity to the evaluation of others develops in the second year of a child's life (Botto, Rochat 2018); in the third year of life, collective intentionality emerges and cultural knowledge is transmitted (Tomasello 2019); in-group members are strongly preferred beginning in the fifth year of life (Engelmann et al. 2013); and by age six or seven, children become responsible for self-regulating their beliefs and actions (Tomasello 2019). This means that the social conditioning of the 'Us-versus-Them' principle matures at a very young age. In essence, this fits the primordialist model better than the instrumentalist: whereas people are not born belonging to an identity group, they are raised into one in very early childhood. This makes the fluidity of social identity in adulthood, i.e. the ease with which identity can potentially be changed, much more challenging.

Regardless, in archaeology, Knapp (2008, 35–53) notes that both the primordialist and the instru-

mentalist model have proven unhelpful. Like historiographers, he does not believe that clear material expressions of past ethnic groups are liable to be found in archaeological record. Nevertheless, archaeological record often reveals complex patterns of overlapping distributions of material culture that have been repeatedly shaped and reshaped in different social contexts. Analysing the contextualised identities reflected in such records is within the realm of archaeological interpretation. If ethnic identities are self-characterising, then the parts of material culture that reflect social practices are part of the symbolic repertoire that constitutes their identity. Even if social practices cannot be directly equated with ethnicity, shared practices are likely to be involved in the formation of ethnicity.

One of the most recent archaeological definitions of ethnic identity comes from a study of qualitative factors in archaeological modelling (Barceló et al. 2019, 63–65). The ethnic group is defined as a polythetic long-term pattern of similarity and regularity that emerges through learning and transmission from one generation to the next. As such, it is a polythetic entity. Membership in a polythetic entity is based on a large variety of shared characteristics, but a single cultural characteristic is neither necessary nor sufficient for membership. Therefore, the definition of belonging to an ethnic group can be derived from the definition of membership in a cluster in the science of data analysis: clusters are formed by grouping objects that are more similar to each other than to those in other groups.

The main goal of any cluster analysis is to define the characteristics of and threshold for this similarity. It follows that the goal of an archaeological study of ethnic identity is to measure the degree of clustering by revealing patterns of similarity. However, patterns are not sought only by the similarity between archaeological artefacts. Rather, similarity between behaviours, values, and social norms must also be addressed by using all available information: the product, the residues generated by the activity, wear traces, the context, the technology, etc. Once the data is compiled, the membership of an ethnic group cluster is to be calculated with a statistical comparison in a multiscale analysis of similarity patterns between different spatial categories, e.g., with a places-by-behaviour evidence matrix.

Significant attempts to overcome the existing dichotomies in the approaches to the archaeology of ethnogenesis were made by Hu and Fazioli.

Hu (2012) advocated for a methodology that integrates various theoretical perspectives to study the emergence, transformation, and dissolution of ethnic identities over time. This approach involves understanding social relationships and identity markers within specific historical and political contexts. By introducing a four-quadrant scheme, Hu assessed existing theoretical models, highlighting the value of older concepts of ethnicity, such as primordialism, while challenging earlier assimilation models that emphasise multidirectional agency. Thus, Hu provides a framework that allows archaeologists to conduct comparative studies of ethnogenesis while considering the fluidity and complexity of identity formation. A careful examination of material culture, alongside historical and social data, enables the tracing of ethnic identity development over time, making ethnogenesis a productive field for archaeological research.

Fazioli (2014) offers an alternative approach to the study of ethnicity in the material record. He critiques three major approaches to ethnicity in archaeology. The traditional culture-history approach, which associates artefact assemblages with particular ethnic groups, has been challenged for its simplistic assumptions. Interpretive approaches are too focused on symbolic communication through material culture. Sceptical approaches that question whether ethnicity can be reliably studied through archaeology argue that ethnic identity is too arbitrary and fluid to be discerned archaeologically. Fazioli proposes an alternative, relational approach that views social identity and material culture as interdependent, rather than treating artefacts as passive reflections of ethnic identity. He emphasises the importance of skilled practice and technological choices for understanding social identity, using the example of the production of coarse-ware pottery in the south-eastern Alps during the transition from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages. The study shows that examining technological choices — such as pottery techniques — can reveal insights into social identity that are not evident in the written sources. Ultimately, Fazioli argues that focusing on communities of practice and technological traditions allows archaeologists to move beyond simplistic ethnic categories and develop a more nuanced understanding of early medieval societies.

Finally, it is necessary to comment on the interaction between historiography and archaeology in the field of Late Antiquity and Early Medieval identities. The historiography of our interest, often referred to as the 'Vienna School of History', is geographically concentrated in Central Europe. When it interacted with archaeological theory, it indeed interacted with the culture-historical epistemology which largely still prevails in that region (e.g., Becker 2010). As a consequence, the achievements of interpretative archaeologies (e.g., Austin, Thomas 1990; Hodder (ed.) 2001; Hodder, Hutson 2003) have barely entered the discourse.

The Ancient Slavs

The ancient Slavs is a complex subject to discuss, and the complexity begins with the definition of the term. To a linguist, 'ancient' means something different than it does to an archaeologist. The term 'Slavs' means everything from an ancient people who can be traced back to deep prehistory to a whim of a Byzantine scribe. In this text, we are focusing on Southeast and Central Europe in Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages, and we use the term to describe the Early Medieval people who, among others, inhabited the said time and space. At this point, we use the term simply to tie in with existing research, to find shoulders on which to stand, so to speak. Our conclusions about the people and the concept of the ancient Slavs will be discussed below.

Until the end of World War II, the study of ancient Slavs methodologically differed little from other studies of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages in Europe described above. In the aftermath of the war, however, all major Slavic populations, except for Yugoslavia, ended up on the Soviet side of the 'Iron Curtain'. To outside observers (e.g., Curta 2002, 2020, 10–11; Heather 2010b, 607), therefore, it may have seemed that the entire field of Slavic studies was united under the strong influence of the Marxist theory enforced by the Soviet Union. In reality, in archaeological theory outside the Soviet Union, Marxism rarely went beyond formal declarations in public speeches (Novaković 2011, 442–446). For example, in the 1950s, the Archaeological Society of Yugoslavia provided its members with several dozen scholarships for travel to Germany, Italy, France, and Great Britain but none to the countries 'behind the Iron Curtain' (Novaković 2021, 414). The main influence on Slavic studies in Central and Southeast Europe remained the culture-historical epistemology of the German School (Novaković 2012; Curta 2018).

Slavic studies in the second half of the 20th century were regional in nature. There were several academic circles which, at least according to the bibliography to which they referred, were relatively self-contained. The reasons for this, which are not our focus, were most likely simply due to the regional nature of the topics. These circles were: Germany (overview in Fehring 2014), Poland (overview in Jędrzejewska 2016), Czechoslovakia (overview in Gojda 1991), and Southeast Europe (overview for Eastern Alps in Štular, Pleterski 2018; the region was further subdivided).

A good example of how closed these academic circles were is Poland. Until recently, Polish research was focused on locating the territory of origin of the Slavs, the *Urheimat*. There were two hypotheses: The *Urheimat* was supposed to be either within present-day Poland or outside, further to the east. The first hypothesis was called autochthonous and the second allochthonous (overview in Jędrzejewska 2016). Obviously, the location of *Urheimat* within Poland is autochthonous only to Poles. The terminology thus clearly reveals that this discourse took place exclusively among the Poles (*cf.* Pleterski 2013, 22).

Within the paradigm of the grand narrative and the culture-historical epistemology, studies focused mainly on the ethnogenesis of the ancient Slavs and the search for the *Urheimat*. Of course, there were tremendous advances in terms of archaeological data collected and in terms of methodology (Gojda 1991; Parczewski 1991; Pleterski 1995; Dolukhanov 1996; Kazanski 1999). By the mid-1990s, the immutability of ethnic identity was being questioned, and the field was in the process of moving away from the perception of ancient Slavs as an ethnic group and instead viewing them as a language-based identity group (e.g., Pleterski 1995; Mamzer 1999). Pleterski (1995, 537), for example, defines the Slavs as a group of people who are held together by a common legal and ideological system (in Slovenian, 'skupina ljudi, ki jih je družil skupni pravno-ideološki sistem'), whereby religion, tradition and language are part of the ideological system. Material culture, e.g., specific types of pottery, are no longer part of the definition. Until the end of the 20th century, the development of the field, albeit on a different theoretical basis, was thus on a similar trajectory to that of 'Western languages' (see Pohl 2004 for the term, which is used to denote scholars educated in the global West).

The watershed event for the study of ancient Slavs were two books published in 2001. Reflecting the political reality in Europe after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the fall of the 'iron curtain', the subject drew the attention of 'Western language' scholars. In the study of Late Antiquity and Early Medieval Europe at the time, the migration of the Slavs was the last grand narrative yet to be deconstructed.

The first of the two books can be described as the light approach. *The Early Slavs* (Barford 2001) presented the most comprehensive overview of the subject to date by a 'Western language' scholar. He admirably combined a thorough knowledge of research in Slavic-speaking countries with the methodological caution and scepticism of 'British education', but he did not offer a new global hypothesis about the origin of the Slavs (Pohl 2004).

The second book was anything but a light approach. *The Making of the Slavs* (Curta 2001) unleashed the full force of the 'Toronto School' deconstructionism on the field, which was still firmly anchored in the grand narrative paradigm. Methodologically, deconstructive historiography was underpinned by the application of ethnographic analogy to the interpretation of archaeological information (Curta 2001, 325–334). While at the time, the deconstructive historiography method was cutting-edge, the anthropological analogy was largely outdated. The ethnographic analogy method, as used by Curta was introduced by Binford (1962; overview in Novaković 2003), but came under heavy criticism in the 1980s. Hodder (1983), for example, criticised this approach by emphasising the role of human agency, culture, and meaning.

Applying these methods, Curta was able to transcribe Woolf's (Woolf 1998) 'Becoming Roman' in *The Making of the Slavs* and Geary" (Geary 1988, vi) 'The Germanic world was... (a) creation of Roman political and military genius' into '(Being Slav) was... an identity formed in the shadow of Justinian's forts... ' (Curta 2001, 350).

However, there are significant differences between the Germanic *gentes* and the ancient Slavs. One particularly significant difference is the more than 200 million surviving speakers of Slavic languages. How could such a legacy be created by a loosely connected group with a fluid identity that came together only in response to temporary political circumstances and did not even bother to name itself? To clarify this, Curta (2001, 345–346) drew on a little-known hypothesis at the time (Pritsak 1983; Lunt 1996, 1997; recent discussion in Boček 2014): The Common Slavic language was used as a *lingua franca* inside and outside the Avar Qaganate.

In the past two decades, this hypothesis has been comprehensively refuted (recent overview in Lindstedt, Salmela 2020) because it was flawed in its foundations. Namely, the first paragraph of the first chapter stated, 'What remains unclear, however, is the meaning given to (Slavic) ethnicity (although the word itself was rarely, if ever, used) by scholars...' (Curta 2001, 6; brackets are original). With this phrase, the agenda to focus on ethnic identity was set without any deliberation. This was in line with the contemporaneous historiography of the 'Vienna' and 'Toronto' schools (see above). Also, it was and still is a legitimate and most common aim of similar studies of Germanic *gentes*. However, as shown above and highlighted in the quoted sentence, this was not a common topic in studies of the ancient Slavs at the time. By Curta's own admittance, even the word ethnicity was rarely used in the research of the ancient Slavs.

The rest of the book was a straightforward execution of this agenda in three steps. First, the existing epistemology was deconstructed as inadequate for dealing with ethnic identity (Curta 2001, 6–14), for which it was never designed. Second, in line with concurrent studies of Germanic *gentes*, ethnic identity was defined as a polity, a political association of people (Curta 2001, 14–35, 60–61, 311–334). Third, it was unveiled that the Slavic speaking polities recorded in Byzantine texts first appeared 'in the shadow of Justinian's forts' (Curta 2001, 335–350).

This result was predetermined by the methodology which defined the ancient Slavs as a polity interacting with the Byzantine empire. As indicated above, such polity could only exist within or on the fringes of the Byzantine administrative apparatus. The emergence of Slavs defined as polity could only coincide with the emergence of the Slavic chiefs, who – by entering into a *foedus* – were recognised, documented, and cocreated as political counterparts by the Byzantines. Just as the Germanic *gentes* and *regna* could exist only in relation to the Roman Empire, the Slavic-speaking '*gentes* and *regna*' could exist only in relation to the Byzantine Empire. However, these polities were neither the totality nor the earliest ancient Slavs.

Another criticism of *The Making of the Slavs* is from a post-colonial perspective, which aims to strengthen the historiography of local and indigenous populations in comparison to global, imperial or colonial regimes (e.g., Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 1998; Young 2003). The study divulges a typical colonial view of a technologically and culturally inferior 'indigenous' population passively adopting a superior imperial culture. The surprising twist is that it was the Byzantine Empire that was under military attack and retreating from its Balkan provinces. The colonial stance is made clear in key inferences, including the book's title, which assigned a passive role to the Slavs. Slavic political and military mobilisation 'was the response to the historical conditions' (Curta 2001, 343) and their group identity 'was growing out of the historical circumstances' (Curta 2001, 350). In the above statements, the Slavs are considered as merely reacting passively to their environment, even while engaged in active and protracted military campaigns.

Regardless of its shortcomings, the hypothesis put forth in *The Making of the Slavs* deserves credit for initiating the deconstruction of the grand narrative surrounding the migration of the ancient Slavs. It also succeeded in shifting the focus towards the importance of methodology and the underlying theoretical framework in Slavic archaeology.

Unfortunately, this was not the main legacy of *The Making of the Slavs*, because the book is written in a manner that is resentful to those with different methods and/or interpretations. This sentiment is made very clear: '...the dominant discourse in Slavic studies, that of "expert" linguists and archaeologists, profoundly influenced the study of the early Slavs...' (Curta 2001, 335).

Almost everyone who has studied the ancient Slavs before the 21st century is called an 'expert' in quotation marks, that is, a false expert. Even those who have long since passed away and whose only fault was that they lived and worked in a different century. As a result, almost all researchers active at the time were alienated from the potential benefits of the impressive methodological innovations in *The Making of the Slavs*.

This approach culminated in Curta's recent book, *Slavs in the Making*, with one of its goals being 'strategic, because it undermines the "text-driven archaeology" practiced by advocates of the culture-historical approach...' (Curta 2020, 4). Thus, rather than constructing a narrative about the past, the text aims to undermine those employing different methodologies. The book examines archaeological evidence from Slavic-speaking regions north of the Lower Danube, questioning the traditional association of this evidence with the Slavs. While the interpretative model aligns with the above-described earlier work (Curta 2001), suggesting that the emergence of (Common) Slavic cannot be explained by migration alone, it also addresses the broader issue of migration within early

medieval Eastern European archaeology. Notably, it advocates for a more nuanced interpretation of archaeological data concerning mobility.

The lasting effect is the divided academic field we experience today. On the one hand, there are 'Western language' researchers who often lack access to the relevant archaeological data and information (as revealed by, e.g., Fusek 2004); on the other hand, there are researchers who have become alienated from the methodological apparatus developed by 'Western language' researchers despite its strengths proven time and again in other areas of research.

This unfortunate development stands in stark contrast to the events surrounding the 'Toronto School' critique of the 'Vienna School of History' described above, which resulted in amicable methodological advances on both sides.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Archaeological Culture

Regardless of how one understands ethnic or any other social identity, one faces a conundrum. Given the complexity of identities, there is little hope that they can be explored using material culture alone, let alone working with the sparse remains of material culture that is archaeological record. Archaeology, however, is often the only science that has sufficient temporal depth to understand the historical trajectory (Knapp 2008, 41–47; Barceló et al. 2019). It is a 'one cannot live with it, one cannot live without it' situation, then (it being archaeology).

We err on the 'cannot live without it' side, so we must look for the tools available. The literature in this field is enormous, and we need not detain us here (overviews in Knapp 2008; Hu 2012; Barceló et al. 2019). We will only briefly discuss the two approaches relevant to archaeological attempts to reconstruct identities that are most relevant to our study: Archaeological culture and *habitus*.

The concept of archaeological culture has shaped twentieth-century archaeology and is the theoretical and methodological backbone of culture-historical archaeology. It is most commonly traced back to Kossinna (1911) and Childe (1925), although it was long in the making before that. The concept was initially developed to link various elements of the archaeological record. Recurrent assemblages of types of artefacts, buildings, and monuments from a particular time and space, representing the remains of the material culture of a particular past human society, were initially understood to be a direct reflection of past ethnic groups (e.g., Jones 1997, 18–30; Roberts, Linden (eds.) 2011).

The concept remains an invaluable tool for archaeology because of its strong empirical content and the recurring issue of spatial patterning. This is especially true for studies that deal with large data sets and/or explicitly consider issues of scale and patterning (Roberts, Linden (ur.)2011; Barceló et al. 2019). Archaeological culture is still used as a tool to describe the characteristics of material culture, which may originate, for example, from chronology, technology, economy, social, or belief systems. Individual archaeological cultures, then, do not necessarily but may coincide with identity groups. It is a matter of interpretation on a case-by-case basis (e.g., Klejn 1988 passim; Heather 2010a, 17; Pleterski 2013, 10–11; Šalkovský 2018, 18; Štular, Pleterski 2018, 9). Material culture is seen as a means of social communication, a strategy for structuring social relations and social actions (Geary, Veeramah 2016, 65). In addition, material culture is no longer just passive reflections of social identities or ethnic groups, but includes the objects and technologies that people use, create, and interact with in their daily lives. It is not merely symbolic, but plays an integral part in the formation and negotiation of social identities through the choices made in production, use, and handling (Fazioli 2014).

One of the most recent, very well-researched theoretical considerations, which builds on Clarke (1978, 34–38), defines '"culture" in archaeology' as polythetic (Barceló et al. 2019, 63–65). That is, as a type of classification in which membership is based on the commonality of a large number of characteristics. For this reason, it cannot be reduced to the presence of a selected cultural attribute in the archaeological record. A specific archaeological culture emerged over time when a group of individuals (agents) learned and shared the same behaviour that was produced and reproduced in a social group (structure). As a result, a commonality emerged in needs, motivations, goals, actions, behaviours, and mediating artefacts. These commonalities have left traces in the archaeological record in the form of patterns of similarity. These patterns can be anything from size, shape, and texture to materiality and placement; all attributes are subject to social influence and reflect a similarity between behaviours. Defined as such, archaeological culture can also reflect ethnic identity.

In the research practice of ancient Slavs, archaeological culture remains an important concept (e.g., Pleterski 2013; Šalkovský 2018; Kowalski 2019). However, in keeping with the prevailing trends in Late Antiquity and Early Medieval studies outlined above, it is also often referred to as an anachronism from a long-gone phase of the discipline. However, stern rejection is mostly limited to theoretical considerations, and the concept continues to be used as an interpretative tool.

This dichotomy between rejection in theory and application in methodology can be clearly seen in what is the most frequent application of the concept of archaeological culture to the studies of the ancient Slavs: The Prague culture assemblage. For example, Pohl (2018) mentioned it twice as an anachronism (pp. 122, 142) and used it twice as an interpretative tool (pp. 145, 279). Heather (2010a), using the term '"Korchak"-type remains', repeated the formula (anachronism: pp. 17, 21; interpretative tool: pp. 388-450). Curta (2001) described it five times as an anachronism (pp. 9, 10, 11, 14, 193) and used it nine times as an interpretative tool (pp. 228, 231, 232, 236, 285, 287, 289, 307, 308). Later (Curta 2020, 4), the dichotomy was escalated to citing the undermining of the culture-historical approach as a strategic goal but naming 'assemblages that have been attributed to the so-called Prague culture' among the 'key issues' of the study of the ancient Slavs in Central and Eastern Europe. The list could be continued, but it is clear enough that the concept of archaeological culture remains an important tool in the study of the ancient Slavs.

Habitus

Researchers who consider the concept of archaeological culture to be an anachronism still have to grapple with the fundamental question of how material culture is associated with particular groups and particular situations. Many researchers of the Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages draw on Bourdieu's theory of practice and the concept of *habitus* (e.g., Austin, Thomas 1990, 45–47; Jones 1997, 84–105; Matthews 2001, 12; Hamerow 2002, 50–51; Wickham 2005, 538–539; Dzino 2010, 35–39).

In his *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu (1977) developed a philosophy of action by constructing a fundamental relationship between the social trajectory of the agent – based on the incorporated dispositions or *habitus* – and the objective structures – specified as *field*. Or, as Bourdieu (1990, 53) puts it, 'structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures'. This is a reciprocal relationship: The social trajectory that constitutes the *habitus* contributes to the structuring of the *field*, which in turn structures the *habitus*. With this, Bourdieu attempts to reconcile the influences of both the external social structures and the subjective experience on the individual.

In other words, the central issue of Bourdieu's social theory is to clarify the process by which objective social structures are translated in the process of socialisation into embodied social structures, which in turn produce practices. These are consistent with the social structures that produced them and that serve to reproduce and change those same objective structures over time (Lizardo 2004, 393–394).

Doxa is an important concept in this theory. It describes the experiences and unquestioned truths with which the natural and social world is taken for granted and which appear as self-evident in a given society (Bourdieu 1977).

Habitus, though, is Bourdieu's most influential concept. It refers to the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that people possess as a result of their life experiences. It is the physical embodiment of cultural *capital*. As such, it extends to taste for cultural objects such as art, clothing, food (Bourdieu 1977), and by association, to jewellery, pottery, and housing. However, taste is linked to social position or, more precisely, it is an act of social positioning (Bourdieu 1979). *Habitus* is used to describe how collective experiences are embodied in people's rational but unconscious judgments about their environment. These judgements are the building blocks of the collective code that makes up a culture (Vilhjálmsdóttir, Arnkelsson 2013, 582). *Habitus* serves to unconsciously shape what people are and thus can contribute to the emergence of ethnic differences (Knapp 2008, 47).

The *habitus* has always been a mysterious entity capable of much conceptual and theoretical work, a kind of theoretical *deus ex machina*. This is at least partly due to the conceptual density of Bordieu's writings (Lizardo 2004, 381–383; Labari, Chiousse 2022), which allows for a wide range of interpretations. Bourdieu has been criticised for his alleged economism, reductionism, or determinism, but this criticism is based on a misinterpretation of Bourdieu as a theorist of agency and structure. Today, *habitus* is understood as Bourdieu's version of a socially generated cognitive structure composed of systems of bodily operations that produce practical action in the world (Lizardo 2004). However, his

phenomenological solutions to cognition, agency, and reflexivity of social action are currently being reassessed (Pula 2019).

In other words, the theory of practice is still a valid conceptual tool for understanding how social structures are implemented in the process of socialisation and how they produce practical action. However, does this make it suitable for the study of Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages?

The answer is an ambiguous 'yes, but…' The complexity involved in engaging the theory of practice in addressing identity has limited the number of informed studies (Knapp 2008, 65). An excellent example of an informed study is the work on the interactions between the Western Slavs and the inhabitants of the South Scandinavian island of Bornholm. The study analysed the manipulation of the *habitus* through the use of material culture to show how members of different networks and groupings were able to pursue their goals and motivations. However, the study was only possible because of the specificity of the historical situation and the archaeological record (Naum 2006). In most cases, the historical situations and/or available sources do not allow the researchers to fully engage with the theory of practice.

Knapp (2008, 47) raised another concern for the application of the theory of practice in the archaeology of ethnic identity. *Habitus* is constantly repeated and reaffirmed through human action, whether or not ethnic identity is altered. *Habitus* forms a link between the subjective internal (emic) experience of ethnic identity and the objective external (etic) social context. An archaeological reading of the situation is somewhat different. If archaeologists are to identify conscious and unconscious practices that reflect and feedback on the realm of *habitus*, they must examine similarities and differences on a smaller scale than that of social groups. Archaeology must also consider individuals. This point is also well illustrated by the Bornholm example.

The complexity of the theory of practice leads to further problems. For example, the term *habitus* is sometimes mistakenly used as a direct substitute for the concept of archaeological culture (e.g. by Rummel 2003). More often, however, the concept of *habitus* is used in isolation from the concepts of *field* and *capital*, which is inconsistent with Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework. For example, Dzino (2010, 211–218) uses 'cultural *habitus*' merely as a descriptor for shared cultural traits or practices perceived by outside observers, thus reducing the *habitus* to a static set of cultural characteristics. This

interpretation overlooks the essential relational and dynamic aspects of *habitus*. Pohl (2018, 344–352) is even more reductional: *Habitus* is equated with observable cultural habits or traditions, such as the inclusion of grave goods or the wearing of belts. While these practices are significant, the text does not situate them within a broader analysis of the social structures (*field*) or the types of *capital*. In essence, both authors reduce *habitus* to a description of collective customs, detached from the structural and relational dimensions that are central to Bourdieu's theory. This misrepresentation neglects the complexity of how *habitus* functions within the nexus of *field* and *capital* to shape and be shaped by social practice. As a result, an agent is inevitably turned into a passive observer.

The isolation of the *habitus* is most devastating when it is applied to the context of ethnic identity, which, as used in the archaeology of Slavs, refers to distinctions between different groups on a horizontal level. However, the theory of practice was developed to study vertical social structures, for example, the influence of social class on the French school system. *La distinction* is a way in which actors in a social field try to distinguish themselves vertically from others. In this process, the *field* is the horizontal element that refers to social structure, while the *habitus* stands for vertical socialisation.

This was not lost on Pohl (1998b, 5–6), who further comments: 'But at a closer look, ethnic identities had a lot to do with status in the *regna*. Being a Goth or a Frank meant to establish a claim of superiority over the Roman population, and over the members of other ethnic networks risen to power within the framework of the late Roman res publica.'

What does this mean for the study of Late Antiquity and Early Medieval ethnic identities? Even when applied in all its complexity, the theory of practice is more likely to lead to the identification of vertical rather than horizontal social structures, i.e., to social class (for example, warrior) rather than to ethnic identity (for example, Lombard). When the concept of *habitus* is applied in isolation (see above), this is almost inevitable.

Pohl's astute and all-important observation was delivered as a brief commentary and, it seems, escaped most practitioners of the theory of practice in the decades that followed. This often led to identifying vertical social class rather than ethnic identities (e.g., Dzino 2010), leading to even more confusion in identifying the group identity known to modern researchers as ancient Slavs.

Archaeological Culture or *Habitus*?

Which concept is therefore best suited to modern archaeology? We consider the theory of practice unsuitable because it is applicable only to certain historical situations and certain archaeological records and often cannot be applied at the scale of a social group. The modern definition of archaeological culture is better positioned, but it needs to be redefined.

For the purposes of this study, we define the archaeological culture based on the above discussion (Bourdieu 1990; Knapp 2008; Štular, Pleterski 2018; Barceló et al. 2019) as follows:

A specific archaeological culture emerged over time when learned behaviour was produced and reproduced in a social group. As a result, a polythetic commonality of practice developed that was both influenced by and had influence on this learned behaviour. The commonality of practice may or may not have been reflected in the material culture which is embedded in the archaeological record.

People who *lived* an archaeological culture were united in a functional group to achieve a goal (for example, to procure raw materials). Relationships within the group were organised around practical interest (for example, to sustain an exchange network). As a rule, one became a member of the group due to social conditioning at a very young age (in essence, was born into a group) or voluntarily joined it in adulthood due to common interests. Once a member, one felt a sense of belonging to the group and used the group as a standard for evaluating oneself and one's behaviour. In social science, such a group is classified as a secondary group, a relational group, and an in-group.

Where the commonality of practices was reflected in material culture, it can be detected in the archaeological record in the form of polythetic patterns of similarity. Therefore, a particular archaeological culture is defined by the commonality of a variety of characteristics (for example, the Prague cultural assemblage) and cannot be reduced to a single attribute (for example, the Prague-type pottery).

An archaeological culture represents a set of material culture traits associated with a social identity group. It can correspond to an ethnic identity group if independent evidence indicates that the shared material practices are characteristic of that specific ethnic group. However, such a correspondence can only be established using information beyond material culture, such as contemporary, explicit, subjective, and 'active' written sources that explicitly link these practices to the ethnic identity in question.

Regardless, although commonality of practice cannot be directly equated with ethnicity, shared practices reflected in archaeological culture likely participated in the formation of ethnicity. In other words, archaeology alone can provide insight into ethnic identity groups but not in its totality.

CASE STUDY: ETHNIC IDENTITY OF THE ANCIENT SLAVS?

Horizontal distinction: Utigurs, Kutrigurs, and Slavs

In this section, we will apply the theoretical framework developed above to the archaeology of the ancient Slavs by examining the identity of the ancient Slavs and the people who lived the Prague-culture-assemblage archaeological culture. The latter term is partially a pleonasm and is a mouthful; the term is not intended for general use, but we use it in this article for clarity.

The earliest written insight into the selfhood of the ancient Slavs comes from the Lower Danube region in the sixth century. This was a contact zone between the Byzantine Empire and the 'barbarians'. The source we are interested in describes the Utigurs (also Utrigurs) and Kutrigurs (also Cutrigurs). These were two Turkic-speaking nomadic polities with a common *origo gentis* (granted, not *origo gentis sensu stricto*); they occupied the Pontic-Caspian steppe in the sixth century, the Utigurs in the east and the Kutrigurs in the west. The latter repeatedly attacked the Byzantine Balkan provinces, for example, in 558/9 possibly in alliance with the neighbouring Slavs. In 559, Justinian responded by inducing the Utigurs to attack the Kutrigurs a second time. The ensuing armed conflict nearly resulted in mutual annihilation, but the remnants of the Kutrigurs (and possibly the Utigurs) were later absorbed into the Avar Qaganate (e.g., Golden 1992, 98–104; 2011, 139–141; Syrbe 2012).

A potentially corresponding archaeological culture in the steppe phase is hardly known (Dimitrov 1987). Kutrigurs of the Avar phase are said to be detectable in certain graves (e.g., Zábojník 2007; Jarak 2016), and attempts have been made to map the corresponding archaeological culture (Stadler 2010, 127–128, Fig. 26).

A contemporary account of Menander Protector – a Byzantine historiographer known as a reliable

source inclined 'to purism' (Blockley 1985, 1–33) – informs us of diplomatic correspondence that in 559 took place between Emperor Justinian I (527–565) and Sandilkh, the Quagan of Utigurs (Menander, ed. Blockley 1985, fr. 2.).

In the search for a general definition of ethnic identity, Pohl (1998c, 17) discussed this example among several others that contain first-hand descriptions of ethnic identity characteristics. His conclusion was that depictions of ethnic identity in Late Antiquity and Early Medieval sources varied from case to case. We agree with this general conclusion, but we are interested in the specific case of ethnic identity in the sixth century Danubian contact zone. Thus, it seems appropriate to revisit the Menander's text:

'Justinian added in his messages to Sandilkh that if he destroyed the Kutrigurs the Emperor would transfer to him all the yearly tribute-monies that were paid by the Roman Empire to Zabergan. Therefore, Sandilkh, who wished to be on friendly terms with the Romans, replied that utterly to destroy one's fellow tribesmen was unholy and altogether improper, "For they not only speak our language, dwell in tents like us, dress like us and live like us, but they are our kin, even if they follow other leaders. Nevertheless, we shall deprive the Kutrigurs of their horses and take possession of them ourselves, so that without their mounts they will be unable to pillage the Romans." This Justinian had asked him to do' (Menander, ed. Blockley 1985, fr. 2.).

There is much to unpack in the above quote and it can be presented in three points. First, the Utigurs *lived like* the Kutrigurs, and both were *fellow tribesmen*; other sources also tell us that Kutrigurs were well informed about their neighbours (Szmoniewski 2010, 66) and were occasional allies of the Slavs (Syrbe 2012, 297). From this context, we can deduce that Utigurs, Kutrigurs, and Slavs – as well as Antes and Gepids, who are not of interest here – were interacting peer-polities in the sixth century Danubian contact zone. Sandilkh's words thus address the generally accepted criteria by which the Utigurs distinguished themselves from others, including the Slavs, and vice versa.

Second, the horizontal distinction (i.e., the horizontal distinction *sensu* Pohl and Reimitz (eds.) 1998) rather than Bourdieu's vertical *la distinction*), or in this case, the lack thereof, was described in terms of four commonalities of practice: language (*they ... speak our language*), housing culture (*they*

... dwell in tents like us), dress (*they ... dress like us*), and sustenance (*they ... live like us*). In addition, a network of social relations (possibly including genetic relatedness) was listed and underpinned with calling the Kutrigurs *fellow tribesmen*. The context of the statement is a clear indication that the list of commonalities was exhaustive. Utigurs were approached by Byzantines as an independent polity, but it was in Sandilkh's interest to establish sameness with Kutrigurs by citing a list, i.e., he was using the rhetorical device of repetition. He described the sameness in three different ways: *fellow tribesmen*, four commonalities of practice, and *kin*. It can thus be inferred that the list of the commonalities of practice was as exhaustive as Sandilkh was able to produce.

Third, the 'Us-versus-Them' distinction between the Utigurs and the Kutrigurs was clearly expressed: they followed different leaders. This time, it is in Sandilkh's interest to establish the distinction, for his rule rested on it. The only difference he cited was political leadership.

If we apply the methodology of the 'Vienna School of History' described above to the Utigurs and Kutrigurs, we arrive at the interpretation that they were separate ethnic identities (*origo gentis*, named political leader with a title, recognised as an entity by Byzantines, recorded as an entity in a contemporary, explicit, subjective, and 'active' written source), although it is highly unlikely that the distinction could be detected in archaeological record (cf. Dimitrov 1987).

Based on this: Were the Utigurs and the Kutrigurs separate ethnic identities or were they just two polities with the same ethnic identity? This is not a question of history (i.e., events taking place in the sixth century) but a question of historiography (i.e., the theoretical underpinning of a modern research).

In conclusion, we argue three things.

First, Utigurs and Kutrigurs were a single archaeological culture and hence a single secondary, relational and in-group of people. They had the same ethnic identity *sensu* Childe (i.e., in the tradition of culture-historical epistemology) but not *sensu* 'Vienna School of History'.

Second, through a peer-polity interaction, a very similar, if not identical, horizontal distinction was valid throughout the sixth century Danubian contact zone. The secondary, relational and in-group of people known to modern science as the ancient Slavs therefore distinguished themselves from the proverbial others by language, housing culture, dress, sustenance, and a network of
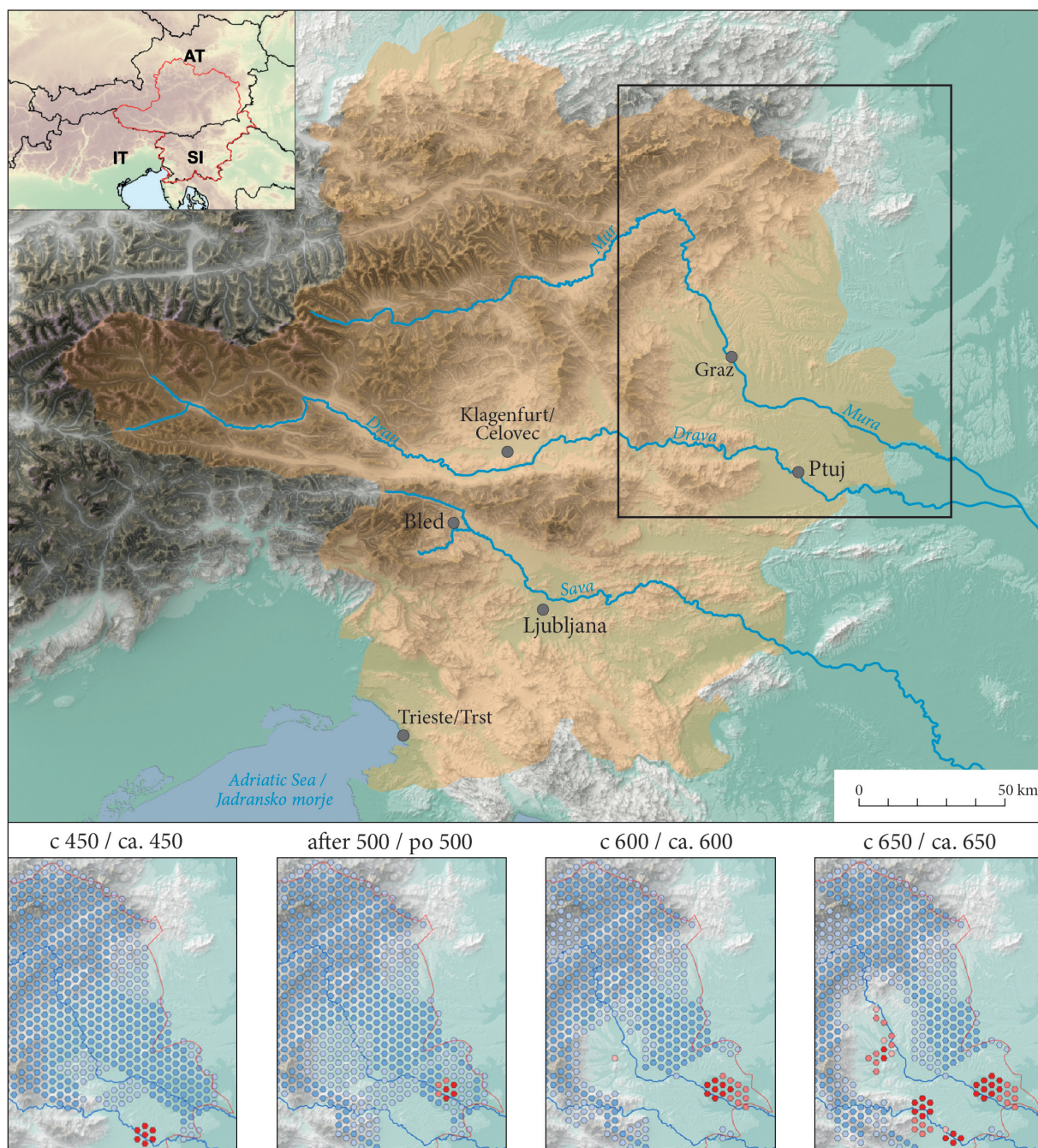
Fig. 1: An analysis of 1105 archaeological sites in the Eastern Alps, dated to the period between 400 and 1100 CE, has demonstrated migrations (Štular et al. 2022). Above: The entire area of the original study with the selected study area framed. Below: Key time slices from the emerging hot-spot analysis for the selected study area. Shades of red represent an above-average density of archaeological sites, shades of blue represent a below-average density. The depopulation after 450 CE stands in stark contrast to the repopulation after 500 CE; archaeological sites in 450 CE are located in the Roman city of Poetovium, and sites after 500 CE belong to the Prague-culture-assemblage archaeological culture (open access raw data sources used: EU-DEM v1.1, https://land.copernicus.eu; OpenStreetMap, https://www.openstreetmap.org).
Sl. 1: Analiza 1105 arheoloških najdišč v Vzhodnih Alpah, datiranih v obdobje med letoma 400 in 1100 n. št., je dokazala migracije (Štular et al. 2022). Zgoraj: območje analize z izbranim študijskim območjem v okviru. Spodaj: ključni časovni prerezi iz analize nastajajočih vročih točk za izbrano študijsko območje. Odtenki rdeče predstavljajo nadpovprečno gostoto arheoloških najdišč, odtenki modre pa podpovprečno. Depopulacija (podpovprečna gostota) po letu 450 n. št. je v očitnem nasprotju z repopulacijo (nadpovprečno gostoto) po letu 500 n. št.; arheološka najdišča datirana okoli leta 450 n. št. ležijo v rimskem mestu Poetovium, najdišča po letu 500 n. št. pa pripadajo arheološki kulturi praški kulturni asemblaž (uporabljeni viri neobdelanih prostorskih podatkov z odprtim dostopom: EU-DEM v1.1, https://land.copernicus.eu; OpenStreetMap, https://www.openstreetmap.org).

social relationships (possibly including genetic relatedness).

Third, the archaeological tool for detecting and studying the horizontal distinction between such groups is archaeological culture as defined in the previous section.

All the above inferences apply whether we understand the letters summarised by Menander the Guardsman as a factual account (i) or as a more (iii) or less (ii) imaginative invention. It reflects the first hand understanding of the horizontal distinction between Utigurs, Kutrigurs, and Others that existed in the Lower Danube region in the mid-sixth century. The only difference is, whether this is the understanding of Sandilkh (i), Justinian's court (ii), or Menander (iii). From the perspective of the archaeology of the ancient Slavs, this divergence is irrelevant.

Prague culture
assemblage

This definition of horizontal distinction can be applied to the Prague culture assemblage. Known in the past as the Prague (archaeological) Culture, it was identified in a wide area over what are now the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Germany, Ukraine, Croatia, and Slovenia. Its main feature is a type of handmade pot without a pronounced shoulder and with a short vertical rim. Other characteristic elements are the location of dwellings near rivers, unfortified settlements with sunken-floor buildings arranged in a semicircle and furnished with stone ovens, cemeteries with a small number of cremations in urns or in simple pits. However, all elements rarely occur together. Modern studies moved beyond observing merely the pottery and characterise it as having distinct housing culture (buildings and domestic pottery), sustenance (defined indirectly by ecological niches and material culture), and dress (the materials used to make dress and some dress accessories) (e.g., Profantová 2012; Profantová and Profant 2020).

The Prague culture assemblage is the key to understanding the expansion of the ancient Slavs in the sixth century. In accordance with our framework, it construes an archaeological culture that reflects a secondary, relational and in-group of people that were defined by and at the same time have defined the material culture retrieved in the archaeological record. However, it is by definition not a sufficient source to define the Slavs as an

ethnic identity *sensu* 'Vienna School of History', as there are no relevant written sources.

This can be built upon by further archaeological analysis. One such analysis recently examined an archaeological Deep Data set (Štular, Belak 2022) using a machine-learning method called time-series clustering and a geospatial analysis called multiscale emerging hot spot analysis. The study has securely demonstrated two physical migrations in the Eastern Alps between c. 500 and c. 700 CE (Štular et al. 2022). The material culture of the archaeological sites belonging to the first of the two migrations, located in what is now North-eastern Slovenia and was at the time on the Western fringes of Pannonia (*Fig. 1*), has been defined as a Prague culture assemblage and securely dated to the mid-sixth century (Pavlovič 2015, 2017).

Pertinent to the broader issue of the ancient Slavs is the following conclusion of the study: 'Based on the convergence of evidence from archaeology, linguistics, and population genetics, we define the immigrants as Alpine Slavs who were speakers of Slavic and shared specific "Slavic" ancestry' (Štular et al. 2022, 13–14). So, at least in this particular case, the people who *lived* the Prague-culture-assemblage archaeological culture shared not only housing culture, dress, and sustenance, but also language and genetic relatedness and thus a network of social relations. This conforms exactly with how contemporary sources described the horizontal distinction between Kutrigurs and Utrigurs on the one hand and Slavs on the other hand in the sixth-century Lower Danube region. In the particular case of the sixth-century North-eastern Slovenia, then, archaeology is able to provide direct evidence for the ethnic identity of a group of ancient Slavs as defined by the concept of archaeological culture.

CONCLUSION

Research on the ancient Slavs in the 19th century, and on Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages in general, has fixated on migration and ethnic identity. Even in the 21st century, this research agenda has changed only superficially. The deconstruction of the grand narratives over the last six decades has been based primarily on the deconstruction of the concept of ethnic identity and, more or less as a collateral damage, on the tabooing of migrations.

The fixation on identity, ethnic or otherwise, makes sense for historiography, which is directed to this topic by its sources. However, making it the (sole) preoccupation is ill-suited for archaeology, as the inference from material culture to identity is seldomly achievable. Archaeology of the ancient Slavs has therefore been sidelined by historiography and, more recently, by population genetics, if one goes by the most cited publications (e.g., Pohl, Reimitz 1998; Curta 2001, 2020; Kushniarevich et al. 2015; Geary, Veeramah 2016; Pohl 2018; Gokcumen, Frachetti 2020; Malyarchuk, Derenko 2021).

However, this need not be the case if archaeology refocuses on the study of archaeological culture as redefined above. We have applied this theoretical framework to demonstrate the horizontal distinction of the people who *lived* the Prague-culture-assemblage archaeological culture. They were a secondary, relational and in-group of people who (horizontally) distinct themselves from the proverbial others by language, housing culture, dress, sustenance, and a network of social relations including genetic relatedness.

This is an archaeological definition of the ancient Slavs in the specific context of the mid-sixth century, but it has some general connotations. The most important is that the ancient Slavs existed as an archaeological culture and as an identity group in the sense of our framework. These people certainly had a more substantial collective self-awareness than that of a loosely connected group with a fluid identity that came together only in response to temporary political circumstances and did not even bother to name itself.

In conclusion, the archaeology of the ancient Slavs that interests us needs to free itself from the unproductive debate about identity as defined by the social sciences and focus on the study of the past within the realm afforded by the archaeological record. It should focus on the *what*, the *when*, the *where* and, if available knowledge permits, the *why*. The *who*, as defined by modern social sciences, is, in our opinion, outside the realm of the archaeological record. However, the approach outlined makes the *archaeological who* much more substantial and relevant than it has been.

EPILOGUE

Modern historiography recognises its own inability to know the past objectively. The past is not discovered but created, represented by historiographers, who are not isolated observers of the past but participate in its creation (Munslow 2001, 165–177). Or, in the words of popular culture (Gaal Dornick in Apple TV series Foundation, s1e9, 2021):

'Ask a historian "What was mankind's greatest invention?"

Fire? The wheel? The sword? I would argue it's history itself.

History isn't fact. It's narrative. One carefully curated and shaped. Under the pen strokes of the right scribe, a villain becomes a hero, a lie becomes a truth.'

Any narrative about the past is, therefore, as revealing about the time it describes as it is about the time in which it was created. Just as nineteenth-century researchers took for granted the existence of a strong and immutable ethnic identity because of their personal worldview, twenty-first-century researchers question it because of our worldview.

We concur with Barceló et al. (2019, 58): Yes, the manner in which ethnic identity is expressed depends on the circumstances. However, ethnic identity has an inseparable historical component. If its determination depended solely on the subjectivity of the individual and was entirely situational and forever changing, it would be a useless categorisation. We cannot accept a notion of ethnic identity that is derived only from what people believe or say they believe. To affirm this would be to give carte blanche to all forms of ethnic cleansing expressed through political interests that pervert the way a human community has historically been constructed.

When it matters in the future, the archaeological *who* must be better able to fend off falsifications of history than the *who* we can muster today.

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Razmislek o etnični identiteti v arheologiji Slovanov

Povzetek

Arheologija starih Slovanov je, podobno kot arheologija na splošno, v zadnjih dveh desetletjih dosegla velik metodološki napredek. Uporaba naprednih analiz grobišč z digitalnimi (npr. Rihter 2023) in spletnimi orodji (npr. Eichert 2021), zračnega laserskega skeniranja oz. LiDAR-ja (npr. Lozić 2021) ter geokomputacijskih metod v arheologiji Slovanov (npr. Magdič 2022) postaja vse pogostejša. Sodeč po temah na nedavni znanstveni konferenci (Machaček, Hofmanova 2024) so moderne raziskave osredotočene še na analize preživetvenih strategij s pomočjo analize izotopov in lipidov (Machaček et al. 2024) ter (starodavne) DNK človeških (Lindstead, Salmela 2020) in živalskih ostankov (Machaček et al. 2021). Omeniti velja še analize prsti (Štular, Lozić 2024) in velikih podatkov (Štular et al. 2022).

Vendar je arheologija Slovanov dandanes teoretsko izrazito polarizirana. Nekateri raziskovalci brezpogojno zavračajo možnost migracije Slovanov in celo njihov obstoj, medtem ko drugi še vedno uporabljajo metode iz 19. stoletja, pri čemer enačijo keramiko z etničnimi skupinami. Namen članka je osvetliti teorijo arheologije Slovanov in ponuditi rešitev za preseganje te polarizacije.

V članku najprej opišemo teoretični razvoj arheologije Slovanov od 19. do 21. stoletja v kontekstu arheologije ter zgodovinopisja pozne antike in zgodnjega srednjega veka. Drugi del članka je namenjen razvoju teoretskega okvira. Trenutni okvir kritično predstavimo in predlagamo njegovo evolucijo. Nazadnje novi teoretski okvir uporabimo v študiji primera t. i. praške kulturne skupine, ki jo na novo opredelimo.

Članek ni namenjen bibliografskemu pregledu arheologije Slovanov, saj so to že obdelale številne nedavne študije (Pleterski 2013; Živković et al. 2013; Šalkovský 2018; Kowalski 2019; Curta 2020; Filipec 2020).

ZGODOVINA RAZISKAV

Velika pripoved

Raziskave o preobrazbi "barbarske" Evrope v pozni antiki in zgodnjem srednjem veku so sprva temeljile na migracijskem modelu (Olsen 2002). Skupine prebivalstva so bile obravnavane kot stabilne entitete, migracije pa kot glavni mehanizem sprememb (npr. Ratzel 1909). Po drugi svetovni vojni so nove paradigme v družboslovju, kot je instrumentalistični model, razširile razumevanje etnične identitete kot dinamičnega procesa, prilagojenega različnim okoliščinam (npr. Barth 1969; Bentley 1987). V arheologiji je procesna paradigma, t. i. Nova arheologija, zavrnila migracije kot razlagalni model in se osredotočila na notranje transformacije (npr. Adams et al. 1978). V devetdesetih letih je bil prevladujoči trend dekonstrukcija velikih pripovedi (*angl.* grand narrative). Etnične identitete so bile razumljene kot fluidne (npr. Wenskus 1961; Heather 2010).

Etnogeneza

Etnogeneza je postala temeljni koncept raziskav pozne antike in zgodnjega srednjega veka v devetdesetih letih prejšnjega stoletja. Gre za raziskave nastanka in oblikovanja ljudstev na podlagi mitov o izvoru (npr. Geary 1988; Wolfram 1988). Poznejše študije so v razprave pritegnile teorije iz sociologije in kritične teorije, kar je privedlo do subtilnejšega razumevanja etnične identitete kot posledice socialnih interakcij (npr. Pohl 1998; Goffart 1998).

Trenutni trendi

Trenutne teorije poudarjajo, da etnične identitete v materialni kulturi ni mogoče neposredno zaznati brez podpore pisnih virov (Knapp 2008; Pohl 2013). Etnogeneza je razumljena kot zapleten proces, v katerem so bile politične in družbene okoliščine ključne za oblikovanje identitetnih skupnosti (Reimitz 2015).

Sodobni pristopi v arheologiji vključujejo metode analize vzorcev podobnosti v materialni kulturi, pri čemer se upoštevajo tako izdelki kot sledi dejavnosti (Barceló et al. 2019). Kritiki tradicionalnih in interpretativnih pristopov (Hu 2012; Fazioli 2014) poudarjajo pomen analize tehnologij in metodo "skupnosti prakse" kot ključ za razumevanje socialne identitete.

Arheologija Slovanov

Medtem ko je bil študij Slovanov do konca druge svetovne vojne metodološko podoben drugim raziskavam pozne antike in zgodnjega srednjega veka, se je po vojni večina slovanskih populacij znašla za t. i. železno zaveso, kar je vplivalo predvsem na to, kako so raziskave o Slovanih razumeli na globalnem zahodu (npr. Curta 2002, 2020; Heather 2010b). V arheološki praksi pa je vsaj ponekod marksistična teorija prevladovala le formalno, na primer v takratni Jugoslaviji (Novaković 2011, 2021).

Raziskave Slovanov v drugi polovici 20. stoletja so bile večinoma regionalne, kar je vplivalo na sorazmerno zaprtost akademskih krogov v Nemčiji, na Poljskem in Češkoslovaškem ter v Jugoslaviji (pregledi v Fehring 2014; Jędrzejewska 2016; Gojda 1991; Štular, Pleterski 2018). Velik del teh raziskav se je osredotočal na iskanje *Urheimata,* domnevne pradomovine Slovanov, in na etnogenezo (npr. Parczewski 1991; Dolukhanov 1996; Kazanski 1999). A od sredine devetdesetih let je bila etnična identiteta vse bolj razumljena kot fluiden proces, zlasti v luči novih teorij o jeziku in kulturi (Pleterski 1995; Mamzer 1999).

Prelomnico v študiju starih Slovanov je pomenil izid dveh knjig leta 2001. Barfordova (2001) je ponudila najobsežnejši pregled tematike predstavnika iz vrst zahodnih raziskovalcev, vendar ni prinesla nove globalne hipoteze, Curtova (2001) pa je vpeljala dekonstruktivizem pisnih virov in etnografske analogije za reinterpretacijo virov o Slovanih. Po mnenju Curte so bili Slovani pasivna začasna tvorba, ki se je oblikovala šele v stiku z Bizancem. Poimenovanje Slovani naj bi bila domislica bizantinskih piscev, jezik pa naj bi nastal kot *lingua franca* v avarskem kaganatu.

Številne kritike so pokazale, da je Curta gradil interpretacije na pomanjkljivih ali napačno razumljenih podatkih in na neutemeljenih interpretacijah (pregledno v Lindstead, Salmela 2020). Poleg tega je bil v svojem pristopu kritikantski do predhodnih raziskovalcev. S tem je vnesel razdor v vedo, saj se raziskovalcem z modernim metodološkim aparatom in tistim z dostopom do relevantnih arheoloških podatkov ni uspelo povezati v plodovitem sodelovanju. Kljub pomanjkljivostim je Curta pomembno prispeval k dekonstrukciji velike pripovedi o migraciji Slovanov kot enkratnem množičnem dogodku in k poudarjanju pomena metodologije.

TEORETSKI OKVIR

Arheološka kultura

Arheološka kultura ostaja osrednji koncept pri preučevanju materialne kulture in identitet preteklih družb kljub kompleksnosti teh identitet. Koncept arheološke kulture, ki ga povezujemo z avtorji, kot sta Kossina (1911) in Childe (1925), je bil razvit za raziskovanje ponavljajočih se tipov artefaktov in struktur iz določenega časa in prostora. Sprva je bila arheološka kultura razumljena kot neposreden "odtis" etničnih skupin, danes pa koncept uporabljamo kot orodje za opis lastnosti materialne kulture, ki lahko odražajo kronologijo, tehnologijo, ekonomijo, socialne ali religiozne sisteme. Pri tem pa ni nujno, da se ti ujemajo z identitetnimi skupinami (Roberts, Linden (ur.) 2011; Barceló et al. 2019).

Sodobne raziskave poudarjajo, da materialna kultura ni zgolj pasivni odsev družbenih identitet, temveč ima aktivno vlogo pri njihovem oblikovanju. Ta proces pogajanja družbenih identitet poteka v obliki odločitev o proizvodnji, uporabi in rokovanju z artefakti (Fazioli 2014). Arheološka kultura je politetična, torej temelji na množici skupnih značilnosti, ki se skozi čas pojavijo kot vzorec podobnosti, kar omogoča preučevanje skupnosti prek vzorcev v arheološkem zapisu (Barceló et al. 2019).

V raziskavah starih Slovanov ostaja koncept arheološke kulture pomemben. Čeprav se pogosto opisuje kot teoretski anahronizem, je skoraj brez izjeme uporabljen kot interpretativno orodje. To je najbolj opazno pri interpretacijah tako imenovane praške kulturne skupine, ki se v istih razpravah pojavlja v dvojni vlogi: najprej kot predmet teoretske kritike in nato kot orodje za interpretacijo materialnih ostankov (npr. Curta 2001, 2020; Pohl 2018; Heather 2010a).

Habitus

Raziskovalci, ki koncept arheološke kulture štejejo za anahronizem, se spoprijemajo z izzivom, kako materialno kulturo povezati z določenimi skupinami in situacijami. Številni se pri tem opirajo na Bourdieujevo teorijo prakse in koncept *habitusa* (Austin, Thomas 1990; Jones 1997; Matthews 2001). Bourdieu je opredelil *habitus* kot medsebojno delovanje med družbeno strukturo in subjektivno izkušnjo posameznika, kjer se družbene strukture

odražajo v praktičnih akcijah, ki reproducirajo in sooblikujejo te strukture.Pomembno je, da je habitus neločljivo povezan s svojim kontekstom, ki ga opisujeta koncepta polje in kapital (Bourdieu 1977, 1990). Enako pomembno je zavedanje, da je bil koncept razvit za preučevanju sodobnih vertikalnih družbenih struktur, natančneje, za preučevanje vpliva družbene razslojenosti na francoski šolski sistem.

Habitus opisuje globoko zasidrane navade in dispozicije, ki so rezultat življenjskih izkušenj, poleg tega pa ima ključno vlogo pri oblikovanju etničnih razlik (Knapp 2008). Čeprav je koncept habitusa v arheologiji koristen za analizo družbenih praks, je njegova uporaba omejena zaradi kompleksnosti in specifičnih historičnih okoliščin, kar onemogoča njegovo polno vključitev v študije o etnični identiteti (Naum 2006).

Koncept *habitus* se v arheoloških raziskavah uporablja pogosto, vendar večinoma izolirano od konceptov polje in kapital. Zato je zreduciran na opazovane kulturne navade brez povezave z družbenimi strukturami, posledično je rezultat vertikalno (npr. status) in ne horizontalno (npr. etnična identiteta) razlikovanje (npr. Pohl 2018; Dzino 2010).

Arheološka kultura ali habitus?

Koncept *habitus* se ne zdi primeren za splošno uporabo v arheologiji, saj je uporaben le v specifičnih zgodovinskih okoliščinah in arheoloških zapisih.

Koncept arheološke kulture je bolj uporaben, vendar ga je treba na novo opredeliti. Arheološko kulturo v tej študiji definiramo kot rezultat naučenega vedenja, ki se reproducira v določeni družbeni skupini. Ta skupina je funkcionalno povezana z doseganjem določenih ciljev in organizirana okoli praktičnih interesov. V arheološkem zapisu se arheološka kultura izraža v politetičnih vzorcih podobnosti materialne kulture, ki jih ni mogoče reducirati na en sam atribut (npr. praški kulturni asemblaž in ne samo praška keramika).

Arheološka kultura predstavlja družbeno identitetno skupino, ki lahko sovpada z etnično skupino. Skupna praksa, izražena v arheološki kulturi, je lahko sestavni del oblikovanja etnične identitete, vendar arheologija sama po sebi ne more v celoti opredeliti etničnih skupin. To lahko dokažemo le z dodatnimi viri (npr. sočasni pisni viri), ki te prakse jasno povezujejo z določeno etnično identiteto.

ŠTUDIJSKI PRIMER: ETNIČNA IDENTITETA SLOVANOV?

Horizontalna distinkcija: Utiguri, Kutriguri in Slovani

Najstarejši pisni viri o identiteti Slovanov izvirajo iz 6. stoletja ter opisujejo interakcije med Utiguri, Kutriguri in Slovani na območju spodnjega Podonavja. Iz dopisovanja med Justinijanom in Sandilkhom (Menander, ur. Blockley 1985), kaganom Utigurov, izvemo, da so ti svojo identiteto razumeli kot skupni jezik, bivalno kulturo, nošo, način preživljanja ter družbene mreže. Ker so bili Utiguri, Kutriguri in Slovani enakovredni sosedi v spodnjem Podonavju v 6. stoletju, to pomeni, da so Utiguri naštete kriterije uporabljali tudi za razlikovanje od sosedov Slovanov. Ker pa je etnično razlikovanje vedno obojestransko, lahko sklepamo, da so tudi Slovani uporabljali iste kriterije.

Iz tega študijskega primera smo izpeljali tri ugotovitve:

1. Utiguri in Kutriguri so bili del enotne arheološke kulture z enotno etnično identiteto.

2. Horizontalna razmejitev med skupinami v 6. stoletju je vključevala iste kriterije, ki so oblikovali etnično identiteto starih Slovanov.

3. Arheološka kultura ostaja ključni raziskovalni pripomoček za preučevanje teh razlik v arheološkem zapisu.

Praška kulturna skupina

Praška kulturna skupina, oziroma natančneje asemblaž praške kulture (*angl.* Prague culture assemblage), je bila identificirana na širokem območju, ki vključuje Češko, Slovaško, Nemčijo, Ukrajino, Hrvaško in Slovenijo. Njene glavne značilnosti, ki pa se praviloma ne pojavljajo skupaj, so: ročno izdelane posode z nizkimi navpičnimi robovi, bivalna kultura v neutrjenih naseljih ob rekah, zemljanke s kamnitimi pečmi in grobišča z maloštevilnimi žganimi pokopi (npr. Profantová 2012; Profantová in Profant 2020).

Praška kulturna skupina je ključna za razumevanje širjenja Slovanov v 6. stoletju. V skladu s predstavljenim teoretskim okvirom odraža sekundarno, relacijsko in notranjo skupino ljudi, ki se je definirala skozi materialno kulturo. Kljub temu ni dovolj dokazov, da bi ta kultura sama po sebi opredelila Slovane kot etnično identiteto po kriterijih dunajske historične šole, saj manjkajo ustrezni pisni viri.

Pomagamo si lahko z nedavno arheološko analizo, ki je z uporabo strojnega učenja in naprednih prostorskih analiz dokazala dve fizični migraciji v Vzhodne Alpe med letoma okoli 500 in 700 n. št. (Štular et al. 2022). Študija je zaključila, da so imigranti, imenovani Alpski Slovani, govorili slovanski jezik in imeli specifično genetsko poreklo (ki ga delijo z vsemi modernimi govorci slovanskih jezikov). Prva migracija v Pomurje in Podravje sovpada z najdišči, opredeljenimi kot praška kulturna skupina (Pavlovič 2015, 2017). To pomeni, da so prebivalci Pomurja in Podravja v 6. stoletju imeli skupno bivalno kulturo, nošo, način preživljanja (kar vemo na podlagi arheološke materialne kulture) ter jezik in družbene mreže (kar vemo na podlagi študije velikih podatkov). Takšna definicija pa natančno ustreza opisu horizontalne razmejitve v spodnjem Podonavju v 6. stoletju med Kutriguri in Utriguri na eni ter Slovani na drugi strani.

ZAKLJUČEK

Raziskovanje starih Slovanov, podobno kot raziskovanje pozne antike in zgodnjega srednjega veka, je v 19. stoletju postavilo migracije in etnično identiteto v ospredje. Kljub dekonstrukciji velikih pripovedi in koncepta etnične identitete ta fokus ostaja, čeprav je preveč prepleten z zgodovinopisjem in pogosto neprimeren za arheologijo. Ta lahko namreč le izjemoma neposredno dokazuje etnično identiteto, zato se pogosto znajde v senci zgodovinopisja in genetskih raziskav.

Vendar arheologija lahko prevzame svojo vlogo, če se ponovno osredotoči na raziskovanje arheoloških kultur. Pokazali smo, da so ljudje, ki so živeli v praški kulturni skupini, tvorili sekundarno, relacijsko skupino, ki se je horizontalno razlikovala od drugih po jeziku, bivalni kulturi, oblačenju, načinu preživljanja in družbene mreže. To je arheološka definicija etnične identitete Slovanov v specifičnem kontekstu sredine 6. stoletja, ki kaže na obstoj skupinske zavesti teh ljudi – ta je bila bolj trdna, kot predvidevajo teorije o fluidni identiteti.

Zaključujemo, da mora arheologija starih Slovanov opustiti neproduktivne razprave o identiteti, kot jo definirajo družboslovni koncepti za preučevanje sedanjosti, in se osredotočiti na preučevanje preteklosti v okviru, ki ga omogoča arheološki zapis. Poudarek naj bo na vprašanjih "kaj?", "kdaj?", "kje?" in – če je mogoče – "zakaj?". Odgovor na vprašanje "kdo?", kot ga opredeljujejo sodobne družboslovne vede, pa ostaja zunaj dosega arheološkega zapisa.

EPILOG

Sodobna historiografija priznava nezmožnost objektivnega spoznavanja preteklosti. Preteklost ni odkrita, temveč jo ustvarjajo in predstavljajo zgodovinopisci, ki dejavno sodelujejo pri njenem oblikovanju (Munslow 2001). Interpretacije preteklosti tako razkrivajo ne samo raziskovano preteklost, temveč tudi čas, v katerem so bile ustvarjene. Kot so raziskovalci 19. stoletja samoumevno sprejemali obstoj močne in nespremenljive etnične identitete zaradi lastnega pogleda na svet, raziskovalci 21. stoletja o tej identiteti dvomimo zaradi našega sodobnega pogleda na svet.

Strinjamo pa se z Barceló et al. (2019), da je izraz etnične identitete odvisen od okoliščin, vendar ima etnična identiteta tudi neločljivo zgodovinsko komponento. Če bi bila določena zgolj na podlagi subjektivnih prepričanj posameznika, bi postala nekoristna kategorija, kar bi omogočilo zlorabe, kot je etnično čiščenje. Arheološka preučitev etnične identitete mora biti bolj odporna proti ponarejanju zgodovine, kot je danes.

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