

Remarks on the Discussion of Polish Archaeologists on the Ethnogenesis of Slavs

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The Slavs under this very name are mentioned in the written records only as late as in the first half of the 6th c. A. D. We are not able to define when exactly they became a separate ethnic community. We know for certain, however, that all history scientists must consider the Migration Period, from the 5th to the 6th c. A. D., as the key moment and the only possible chronological point of departure for any sensible exchange of opinions about the location of the earliest span of settlement in the Slavic world.

Competent participation of archaeologists in the discussion on the ethnogenesis of the Slavs became reality no sooner than in the middle of the 20th c., as only then did the analysis begin of the excavation sources from the appropriate period (i.e. the 5th–6th c. A. D.), unearthed in the area between the Oder River and the left bank of the Dnieper. Successive growth in the quantity of the available data has been enormous in the course of the last fifty years. And it is not just an increase in quantity, but, more importantly, in the information potential which we are able (or at least we should be able) to use in a more proficient way. A similar quality leap, characteristic for a relatively young domain of science, could not encompass other disciplines, particularly history and linguistics, to the same extent, although these disciplines had much earlier than archaeology made successful attempts at replying to the hard question on the origins of Slavs.

This dynamics, although not readily noticed by all observers, is worth emphasizing, as it results in the process of depreciation and quick aging of the hypotheses proposed half a century ago, at the time when archaeological source knowledge on the period of the 5th–6th c. A. D. was fragmentary and not systematised.

The Early Slavic culture, known thanks to excavations, which developed in Central and Eastern Europe in the 5th/6th–7th c., was gradually isolated and defined only in the 1950s–1980s. It seems paradoxical that in the Polish territory the picture of this culture was shaped quite late.

In my opinion the difficulties in defining the common platform for discussion that we can observe in the current argument among Polish archaeologists on the subject of the Slavs' primary settlements originate in the source-oriented and methodological spheres. We are still burdened by the fact that we properly joined the discussion quite late (some of the authors still make statements on the subject without taking under consideration the source value of the artefacts, omitting their analysis – such patterns dominated in archaeology in the 1950s and 1960s). On the other hand, the methodological progress of our science in the area of sociolinguistic interpretation of the excavation data is slowing down. Unfortunately, the most progressive concept in this field is thought to be a doctrine founded on the criticism of an ill-formulated theory, built in Berlin and developed in Poland in the mid-twentieth century (usually referred to as 'kossinism'). There have been few sensible attempts to encompass the current – shaped by today's state of knowledge – cognitive reality.

The thesis on autochthonism of Slavs on the Oder and Vistula Rivers, which dominated among Polish archaeologists for at least thirty years after the Second World War, was built on the foundations laid by J. Kostrzewski, whereas the construction itself was built by K. Jażdżewski, W. Hensel, L. Leciejewicz, J. Żak, and Z. and St. Kurnatowski. Today we can claim that the autochthonistic theory was *'a sort of cognitive credo of the Poznań archaeological school, which was handed down from generation to generation with great emotional commitment... Arguments were drawn above all from written records – mainly identifying ancient Veneti (from works by Pliny, Tacitus and Ptolemy) with the Venedi (Slavs) of early mediaeval chronicles (particularly Jordanes), and also from the toponymy (mainly the analysis of hydronyms), from hypothetical demographic approximations, from the assessment of similarities in economic activity, from the comparison of selected archaeological findings, etc. However, the complete*

analysis of settlement network and structure of both periods throughout the whole territory of Poland was taken under consideration to a lesser extent, or not at all. This could once have been explained by the awareness of the unsatisfactory state of research, but nowadays, in the face of the progress noted in the area,... it should rather be treated as a disability to accept a source-oriented reality' (Szymański, 2000, p. 359, bibliography incl.).

The autochthonistic concept was undermined, and then refuted on the source-based grounds by K. Godłowski, the founder of the so-called Kraków school of historical archaeology. K. Godłowski – on the basis of the available set of data from the 3rd–5th/6th c. – demonstrated the lack of cultural and settlement continuation on Polish territory in the 5th–6th c.¹ I carried out the analysis of the sources from the 6th–7th c., which broadened and partly supplemented the picture of the great breakthrough in the basin of Oder and Vistula Rivers². Further progress was brought by the monographic work by M. Dulinicz (2001). The analysis of selected categories of artefacts from the discussed period has been undertaken³.

W. Szymański has recently presented the assessment of the current results of the dispute dividing Polish autochthonists and allochthonists. He does not see 'a possibility of the straightforward filling the gaps between the groups dated from the 3rd–4th c. and those from the 6th–7th c.' (Szymański, 2000, p. 360). In spite of long years of research, 'it has not been successfully proven that there existed some intermediate stage between the late antiquity and the early mediaeval specialised pottery production. We are not aware of any reliable groups from the 5th–6th c. containing the prototypes of ceramics of the discussed type' (Szymański, 2000, p. 370).

'The basic weapon in the practical research activity for both sides is the comparative method. The supporters of the discontinuity approach have without a doubt gained advantage in the matter. First of all, they use incomparably larger quantity of sources and their analyses, at the same time displaying a much more thorough knowledge on the appropriate artefacts from the neighbouring territories, most of all from Byelorussia and Ukraine... Secondly,

they carry out a much more comprehensive analysis of these artefacts... Thirdly, they believe it is extremely important to compare the settlement processes, structures and forms in both analysed periods on wide territories, at the same time proving there was no continuity in this area on Polish territory' (Szymański, 2000, p. 363).

Let me add that for a long time no significant analytical works representing the autochthonistic concept have entered the scientific world⁴. We observe, however, some polemic essays whose authors avoid mentioning any details from the source knowledge area (compare further). In spite of many requests and appeals, none of the archaeological groups from western Poland researched in 1950–1975 has been published – and in literature these groups are still representative examples of the cultural continuity between the Roman Period and the beginning of Early Middle Ages. Considering all this, autochthonists' references to the mentioned groups that are impossible to verify must be regarded as an obvious instant of abuse.

In the circles not dominated by the autochthonistic concept the progress of source knowledge has been normal and regular for several years now, i. e. reports on the field research are made available in a more or less successful way, and full analytical source knowledge works are published now and again. The author of the most recently published monograph shows that the oldest well-documented traces of Slavic presence in north-western Poland are dated as late as from the end of the 7th c., although theoretically one cannot exclude that scarce penetration of small groups arriving from the East began even in the 6th c. (Dulinicz, 2001, p. 207–211).

In the last decade the results of the newest analytical research undertaken abroad have remained in constant correspondence with the outcome of Polish source-based research⁵.

It is worth emphasizing that according to the Kraków school, the basis for interpretation of archaeological data used in studying the localisation of the Slavic original territory is the whole and untouched (not subject to any

¹ Particularly Godłowski, 1979; 1985; 1989; 1999; comp. also the same author, 2000.

² Particularly Parczewski, 1988a; 1988b; 1993; 2002.

³ Broad analytical study was carried out by Zoll-Adamikowa, 1979; 1993 and Kobylński, 1988, among others.

⁴ In 1975 the work by J. Hasegawa was published, although it had little value as for the critical remarks about the sources, as well as their analysis. Another work was published almost 20 years later (Brzostowicz, 1994).

⁵ Jelínková, 1990; Terpilovskij, Abašina, 1992; Dulinicz, 1994, bibliography there; Fusek, 1994; Brather, 1996; Oblomskij, 1996; Leube, 1996; Gavrituchin, 1997; Vjargej, 1999; Biermann, 2000.

interference) set of facts displayed by the written records from the 1st–7th c. Autochthonistic concept, on the other hand, is stained with the primal sin of the necessary “active” approach to written records. The facts that are inconvenient to the stated theses are most often omitted or belittled; there are also more or less subtle attempts of “correcting” the writings of the past authors.

Such vein of behaviour is characteristic not only of archaeologists. Almost all great specialists in the Middle Ages in the twentieth-century Poland – with H. Łowmiański at the forefront – did not hesitate to interfere in the texts of source records from the discussed period. The case is simple: in order to make the written-records-based autochthonic theory seem convincing, one should at any price (including undermining the reliability of the sources in use) “move” the settlements of the ancient Veneti to the area west of the Vistula River, which is obviously inconsistent with the mentioned records. The autochthonists easily comply with the high cost of this operation – without questioning or “perfecting” the essential elements of the relations of Pliny, Tacitus, Ptolemy and Jordanes, all of whom located Veneti/Venedi in a closer or further distance to the east of the Vistula River, and without rejecting the information of Geographer from Ravenna about the eastern origin of Sclavenians – autochthonism inevitably loses its ground.

Modern archaeologists-autochthonists who in the examined discussion try to refer to source-based argumentation do not have an easy task. Although the leading representative of this option claims strongly that *‘there is a large amount of archaeological data convincing enough to think that next to the currently well-defined, eastern zone of the crystallisation of the early mediaeval culture in the 5th–6th c...., there also existed at the same time the western zone, in the basin of the Oder and Vistula Rivers’* (Leciejewicz, 1998, p. 32), unfortunately from among this “large amount of archaeological data” the author does not quote even one specific and assessable example.

A yet separate cognitive current in the field of study on the ethnogenesis of Slavs, which I will call negationism, started developing relatively recently. The researchers within this current claim that archaeological sources do not produce basis for discussion on the ethnic matters.

The opinions and suggestions of St. Tabaczyński, the most eminent Polish methodologist and theoretician of archaeology, require careful reading and reflection. In the collective work *“Słowianie w Europie wczesniejszego średniowiecza”* (*Slavs in Europe of Early Middle Ages*),

therefore in the context directly relevant to our discussion, he placed a very educational statement about the experience of archaeology in examining ethnogenetic processes (Tabaczyński, 1998). St. Tabaczyński is sceptical about the attempts of ethnical identification of archaeological data carried out so far, but at the same time in his article he emphasises strongly the value of the theory of communicative communities, little known among archaeologists, a superb cognitive tool whose use opens new perspective in the area of sociolinguistic interpretation of archaeological cultures (Parczewski, 2000).

Having read the works of other “negationists” (Mamzer, 1999; Kurnatowski, Kobusiewicz, 2000, p. 627–628), I am unfortunately forced to state that the authors only imitate a scientific dispute with the backward, in their opinion, approach of the Kraków school. They carefully avoid the core of the research knowledge of their adversaries, i. e. the priority of written records in the criticized attempts of defining the localization of the original Slavic settlements. Therefore such voices – probably with full awareness of the consequences – ignore the only sensible point of reference to the authentic knowledge on the origins of Slavs, to the advantage of a completely speculative argumentation.

Another idea needs to be mentioned which, in my opinion, leads the discussion astray. P. Urbańczyk developed a vision of the great expansion of Slavs as the expansion of *“specific cultural pattern”*, to the wider extent than just demographic expansion. Early Slavic culture was indeed deficient and primitive, but that is why it was attractive to others, if *‘the integrating potential of rural communities and economic advantages of extensive exploitation of natural environment – easy to implement in almost any conditions – turned out to be attractive for the inhabitants of huge areas of Europe, who, with the standard pattern of material culture, took over the language as well from the Slavic guests’* (Urbańczyk, 2000, p. 136–137 et al.). The author does not quote any real historical examples or evidence of such an astonishing mechanism of linguistic expansion, of course completely inconsistent with the descriptions of Slavs colonising the Balkans.

It is time to close this review with an attempt of a forecast. What is the direction that the enquiries of Polish archaeologists on the origins of Slavs will take?

The answer to this question seems easier in the part regarding the source-based knowledge. The set of archaeological sources introduced into academic circulation has been constantly growing. This means that

there has been constant testing of reliability of both introduced research source-based hypotheses. Thanks to this process the concept of the settlement and ethnic discontinuation in the Polish territory in the 5th–6th c. has in fact during the last fifty years become the option with the strongest supporting evidence. It is highly unlikely that the trend reverses.

It is less clear which way the theoretical thought will travel in the future. In my view the issue of greatest

importance should be the potential benefits which archaeology is offered by the theory of communicative communities (Verkehrsgemeinschaften) developed by linguists (comp. Tabaczyński, 1998, p. 83–85; Parczewski, 2000). The theory opens new interpretative perspectives for cultures distinguished by archaeology, which brings a chance to break from the cursed circle of the alleged complete worthlessness of archaeology in the studies on ethnic matters.

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LENKŲ ARCHEOLOGŲ DISKUSIJOS SLAVŲ ETNOGENEZĖS KLAUŠIMU BŪKLĖ

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Santrauka

Per pastaruosius penkiolika metų Lenkijoje vėl pagyvėjo ginčai dėl pirmųjų slavų gyventiečių. Pasirodė gana daug archeologijos srities publikacijų, beje, labai nevienodos vertės, suorganizuota keletas įdomių diskusijų susitikimų.

Pasisakymuose galima pažymėti dvi pagrindines kryptis. Pirmoji, remdamasi archeologiniais ir istoriniais šaltiniais, pripažįsta, kad tezę apie slavų autochtoniškumą Oderio ir Vyslos baseinuose yra labai menkai argumentuota. Kartu aptariama kryptis šios etninės grupės šaknų ieško vidurinėje

ir aukštutinėje Padneprėje. Kita kryptis remiasi teoriniais samprotavimais (vadovaujamas kultūros antropologų nuomone), pagal kuriuos kasinėjimų duomenys ir rašytiniai VI–VII m. e. a. šaltiniai neduoda pagrindo kalbėti slavų etnogenezės tema. Reikia pagaliau paminėti ir paramokslinius pasisakymus, kurių emocionalus santykis su šia labai sena problema išėina už normalios dalykiškos diskusijos ribų.

Iš lenkų kalbos vertė M. Michelbertas

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