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ETHNICITY: AN APPROPRIATE CONCEPT FOR ARCHAEOLOGY?

The collapse of the Soviet Union inevitably has been accompanied by many recriminations. Among these is Ligi's charge that Western archaeologists speak about the abuses of their discipline in the Third Reich, while "completely forgetting the former Soviet empire." The fact is that, as a result of the publications of A.M. Tallgren (1936), Grahame Clarke (1936), and Mikhail Miller (1956), Western archaeologists have long been aware that the Soviet regime, while lavishly supporting archaeology, subjected the interpretation of archaeological data to rigid ideological control. It has also been well known that, beginning in the late 1920s, many archaeologists in the Soviet Union were persecuted, exiled, and imprisoned as part of a campaign of terror intended to subordinate Soviet intellectual life to the dictates of the Communist Party. Because of such intimidation, Soviet archaeologists were not free to interpret their data as they thought best. During the Cold War, Soviet archaeology was ridiculed, dismissed, and vilified in the West. Yet, even in the more sympathetic treatments of recent years, the dark side of Soviet archaeology has not been ignored (Trigger 1989, 216–227). In the post-Stalin era, Soviet intellectual life became freer, but Soviet archaeologists remained subject to party and state control. For that reason, Western archaeologists who were sensitive to what was happening in the Soviet Union preferred to write about developments there in a way that would not threaten the careers of archaeologists who were working from the inside to loosen the shackles of doctrinaire Marxism.

Ligi is correct that political control of archaeological research in Nazi Germany was less stringent than it was in the Soviet Union. Kossinna's nationalistic views were promoted by appointing

his followers to new research and teaching positions and archaeological finds were used to glorify the German past. Yet, while Heinrich Himmler enthusiastically encouraged archaeological research along these lines, Hitler privately ridiculed German prehistory as an age of barbarism and indulged in an old-fashioned German enthusiasm for classical antiquity (Speer 1971, 141). With this degree of ideological disarray within the Nazi leadership, it is little wonder that the control over archaeology was less severe in Germany than in the Soviet Union. The German archaeologists who suffered persecution under the Nazis mainly did so because they were Jews or socialists, not for their archaeological interpretations.

This, I believe, explains much about the differing reactions of Western archaeologists to archaeology under the Soviet and Nazi regimes. Prehistoric archaeology began in Western Europe in the early 19th century as part of an attempt to demonstrate the historical reality of the cultural evolution that had been posited by Enlightenment philosophers. This was part of a movement to empower the middle classes within the context of the major social and economic changes that were occurring as a result of the industrial revolution. By the 1860s, colonialism and nationalism, together with racism, were influencing the development of archaeology. John Lubbock argued that the lack of evidence of progress in the archaeological record in many parts of the world outside Europe constituted proof that the indigenous inhabitants were incapable of progress and that this in turn justified the European annexation and exploitation of these regions. Similar ideas were very popular in the United States, where an apparent lack of progress in the archaeological record was interpreted as justifying the seizure of aboriginal lands by White settlers.

By the 1880s, Western European intellectuals were countering Marxist efforts to unite the working classes of the different European countries as

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part of a concerted effort to overturn the existing political order. The most effective device for countering Marxism turned out to be nationalism, which stressed the cultural, historical, and often the biological unity of national groups as being more important than their class divisions. During the First World War, Communists were disillusioned to discover that (except in Russia) nationalism had a greater appeal to the working class than did international worker solidarity. Later, in the struggle against Nazi Germany, the Soviet Communist Party turned to Slavic nationalism, with the result that, as Ligi observes, Marxist evolutionism increasingly was complemented, if not overshadowed, by a culture-historical approach that methodologically resembled that of Kossinna (but with the roles of Germans and Slavs reversed). In the end, a plethora of nationalisms, no less than poor economic management, played a major role in the disintegration of Soviet power.

It might be argued that the Marxist evolutionary archaeology of the 1930s was a subtle means for encouraging the assimilation of other ethnic groups by the dominant Russian one. Whether or not this is so, Marxist archaeology clearly served the political goals of the Communist Party in promoting the ethnic policies laid down by Lenin for the Soviet Union. Yet, for that very reason, in contrast with the dark mixture of racism and nationalism that prevailed in Western and Central European archaeology, only Soviet archaeology celebrated the inner capacity of all human groups to change and develop to the same degree. While Soviet archaeologists were not free to decide whether or not they wished to subscribe to this progressive doctrine, Western and Central European archaeologists willingly adhered in large numbers to various doctrines that are now seen to have been racist rationalizations of conservative political programmes. The racist-inspired crimes of the Nazi regime were not an isolated phenomenon, but the extreme product of racist justifications of colonialism and nationalism that had been an integral part of an ideological struggle that had been going on in Western Europe for several generations. The present loathing of Nazi archaeology is part of a heartfelt rejection of what most of Western and Central European archaeology stood for prior to 1945. Dachau and Belsen had their origins not only in Nazism but also in over a century of European intellectual culture in which archaeology had played an important role.

There is nothing inherently good or bad about nationalism. It as often has been a liberating and creative force as one that favoured oppression. For a long time in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, nationalism has been associated with

resistance against repressive, imperial regimes. Yet nationalism is always associated with complex political programmes. Karel Sklenar (1983) has shown that in Eastern Europe archaeology was used to promote the interests not simply of ethnic groups but of various social classes within these groups. Furthermore, the same beliefs that at one point in time may spearhead the liberation of an oppressed minority may subsequently be used to justify the disadvantaging and mistreatment of other ethnic or class groups.

In recent years, there has been a tendency among some postprocessual archaeologists to argue that all interpretations of archaeological data are determined by the experiences and political allegiances of individual archaeologists (Tilley 1990, 338). It cannot be denied that the problems archaeologists address and the levels of evidence that they find persuasive are considerably influenced by such considerations. Yet it is equally unrealistic to maintain that archaeological evidence, however it is recovered, classified, and studied, does not constrain archaeological interpretations. Over time, archaeology moves towards an understanding of the past that is more constrained by evidence that exists independently of the prejudices archaeologists bring to its interpretation. This does not mean that there will ever be a time when the past will be understood wholly objectively, but it does mean that enhanced objectivity is a possible goal and one worth striving for. This being so, it is better to try to identify our own prejudices and to subject the theories based on them to empirical testing than it is to fall into the trap of believing that "anything goes" and that all interpretations of the past and all approaches to studying it are equally valid or invalid (Trigger 1989).

While I believe that archaeology has an important role to play in informing people about human history and the forces that shape human behaviour, good archaeology depends on archaeologists developing exacting and verifiable methods for inferring human behaviour and beliefs from archaeological data. Perhaps the most important contribution that postprocessual archaeology is making is to encourage archaeologists to expand their protocols beyond the restrictive limits of Binfordian middle-range theory (Binford 1981) by developing more rigorous versions of the direct historical approach, contextual analysis, and the combining of archaeological and non-archaeological sources of information about the past. Good archaeology, like good science in general, requires that its practitioners not accept too readily evidence that confirms what they want to believe and that they do not dismiss evidence which contradicts their assumptions. It also

requires archaeologists, as far as possible, to uncouple their research and interpretations from politics. Ligi has vividly documented the archaeological conundrums that were caused by the efforts of Russian archaeologists to support the theory of "Slavonic colonization," which was attractive to Russian nationalists. He has also shown how this theory perhaps unintentionally increased Estonian resentment of Russian colonization, by making it appear to have had greater time depth. Ligi offers in place of this theory the hypothesis that the Russians of North-West Russia originated as a result of the substitution of Slavonic languages for Balto-Finnish ones. He further hopes that this theory may serve as a "balancing ideological factor" between his country and Russia. It is my belief that the latter hope is no less misconceived than the nationalist interpretations that Ligi condemns. I admit, without knowing anything in detail about the archaeology of the region, that his explanation is a highly persuasive hypothesis and may be the correct one. I also admit that this idea might serve the political role he envisions for it. Yet, as soon as archaeologists seek to prove that certain things happened in the past in order to promote a specific political agenda, they risk finding only the things for which they are looking. In that respect, Ligi's well-intentioned objective is potentially almost as dangerous for archaeology as was the Soviet government's interference with how archaeologists interpreted their data. All archaeologists should strive as much as possible to uncouple their research from political objectives and government direction. History shows that this is not easy, because archaeologists frequently are unaware of the political implications of what they are doing. That makes it all the more important to try to liberate archaeological research from political agendas, whether these are motivated by nationalism or some more transcendental ideology. The aim of archaeology should be to test beliefs, not simply to reflect them.

Central to the culture-historical approach has been the belief that it is possible to recognize "peoples" or "ethnic groups" in the archaeological record. Gordon Childe's *The Dawn of European Civilization* (1925a) was the first study to conceptualize the prehistory of the whole of Europe as a shifting mosaic of archaeological cultures, identified with peoples, rather than as a series of stages resulting from cultural evolution or the diffusion of technology from the Middle East. In undertaking this study, Childe's aim was to determine the original home of the Indo-European speaking peoples. While he had not achieved that goal in a definitive manner, he proclaimed that the principal aim of prehistoric archaeology was henceforth to identify

individual peoples or cultural groups and to trace their differentiations, wanderings, and interactions. He noted with satisfaction the clarity with which the movements of even nameless prehistoric peoples stood out in the archaeological record when it was analysed in this manner (Childe 1925b). Yet it was not long before Childe began to question publicly whether much could be learned about ethnicity from archaeological data alone, and hence whether ethnicity was a concept that could have significant meaning for the study of prehistory (Childe 1930). Later he doubted that it was profitable to continue producing an archaeological substitute for political history in which, as he put it, cultures replaced statesmen and migrations replaced battles (Childe 1958). Since that time, European archaeologists have experienced the greatest difficulty in attempting to trace ethnicity far back in the archaeological record, as indicated by continuing disagreements about the original homeland of the Indo-Europeans (Renfrew 1987; Mallory 1989).

The reasons for this problem were identified earlier in this century by the American anthropologists Edward Sapir (1916; 1921, 221–235) and Franz Boas (1940) as a result of their studies of North American Indian culture history. They concluded that much culture history had been based on the erroneous assumption that racial, cultural, and linguistic differences among peoples resulted from a single process of differentiation. This meant that any sort of similarity between two groups constituted evidence that both were descended from a common ancestor. Sapir and Boas maintained that, on the contrary, race, language, and culture had to be treated as independent variables and their histories studied separately from one another before any correlations were proposed. Because cultural traits can spread from one group to another, similar cultures sometimes are shared by peoples who have very different physical and linguistic characteristics. Hence the latter cannot be used to reconstruct cultural history, any more than cultural criteria can be used to reconstruct the history of the languages or physical types associated with a particular group.

Examples can be drawn from recent European history. The Romance languages all are derived from Latin, but only a small number of Romance speakers are likely to be biologically descended from the citizens of ancient Rome. Likewise, the fact that the majority of modern European nations speak related languages does not explain why they possess similar cultures. Much of their cultural similarity is not the heritage from a remote past, but results from experiences shared as a result of diffu-

sion in recent times. Europeans who do not speak Indo-European languages, such as the Basques, Hungarians, and Finns, have participated in this process no less than have other Europeans (Trigger 1968, 7–12). Among North American aboriginal peoples, there are even more striking examples. The Pueblo way of life of the southwestern United States is shared by groups speaking several languages that appear to be no more closely related than English and Chinese. The culture of the Plains Indians developed after the arrival of the horse in the 18th century and resulted in peoples speaking unrelated languages, some having agricultural and others hunter-gatherer economies, developing a common life style based on hunting bison.

Archaeology is able to tell us much about the development of cultures, especially with respect to technology, subsistence patterns, production and exchange, social organization, and even rituals and religious beliefs. It also recovers evidence that allows physical anthropologists to trace biological changes that result from human populations interbreeding with one another, as well as alterations in standards of health and nutrition within populations. Correlating cultural changes with gene flow or the lack thereof remains a complex problem, but one that some archaeologists and physical anthropologists are prepared to tackle. The findings of historical linguistics, which relies on written evidence and theoretical reconstructions of proto-languages, have proved much harder to correlate with archaeological data.

Since language is normally such an important aspect of ethnicity, it seems very difficult for archaeologists to address this highly subjective category of group membership. Much as ethnicity has fascinated culture-historical archaeologists for over a century, and central as it has been to archaeology's relations with its public and with politicians, it is doubtful that this is a concept that archaeology can or should address, except with respect to times and places for which significant amounts of historical

and linguistic data are available. Nor perhaps is it such an important concept by comparison with issues that archaeology can handle much better, such as those relating to ecological adaptation and the development of social complexity. In my view Tallgren (1937) was steering Estonian archaeology in the right direction when he encouraged a functionalist rather than an ethnic approach to prehistory.

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