

‘Kritik der reinen Vernunft’: Archaeological cultures

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ABSTRACT

Scholars of archaeology who dove into the depths of prehistoric finds confronted themselves with the notion of archaeological cultures. Unease was awakened in most when interpreting materials in a regional or supra-regional context. Often the expressed views have left the reader with a sort of “cliff-hanger” interpretation, as they seemed final and conclusive, but one wonders how the leap to archaeological cultures is made from e.g. a mound of systematised pottery or large amounts of typologically arranged metals. This paper tries to address this shortcoming after presenting a brief overview of the concept. In an attempt to deconstruct, two major generalisations and an essential paradox are emphasised, in order to underscore the unsteady nature of the construct. Lastly, alternative pathways are suggested to solve this fallacy of rhetoric and sometimes of thinking as well. Although the mind-set is post-structuralist, the benefits of some positivistic and structuralist approaches are highlighted and incorporated in the suggested solutions.

Introduction

One of the most commonly, if not the most often used notion within prehistoric archaeology is *culture*. Already as a student I have struggled with the concept, especially its application and the actual, factual background of what it expresses. A synoptic and extensive study with strong post-structuralist views and heavy deconstruction of the term seems to linger between the lines of most extensive studies concerning southeastern, prehistoric Europe, even if they are not expressed as such in their texts. Attempting to synthesize these thoughts in a coherent manner, with regards to southeastern Europe and especially to

the Eastern Carpathian Basin (ECB), but also to address the issue directly and not just let it loom within our field, are the main impulses for the conception of this paper.

What I am proposing is to review a short history of the concept and critiques of the actual archaeological cultures from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age. Further, I would like to suggest new approaches, how obvious and severe shortcomings of using archaeological cultures in the scientific rhetoric could be addressed and finally indicate practicable pathways through which these can be initially circumvented and finally, in a later stage replaced.

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What are archaeological cultures?

Culture in the French milieu originally, in the eighteenth century is used to designate agricultural endeavours, but also man's enlightenment and self-cultivation². German speaking regions employ the concept around the turn to the nineteenth century as a means to describe a slowly passing life of tribes or peasants, in contrast to the modern and 'civilized' urban centres³. These views give birth to culture history, i.e. *Kulturgeschichte*, maybe the best exemplified by the thoughts and views of Klemm⁴. The classic definition is accredited to Tylor, who relied on the usage of the concept by Klemm, stating that "culture or civilisation ... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society"⁵. By the middle of this century Rygh sees spear points and arrowheads as products of Stone Age "culture and people"⁶, where by the concept of culture and civilisation is tied to material culture and its interpretation. From the association of sets of material culture with a group of people the leap to a generalising statement is not far and saw the light within the sub-field of settlement archaeology, i.e. *Siedlungsarchäologie*: "Scharf umgrenzte Kulturprovinzen decken sich zu allen Zeiten mit ganz bestimmten Völkern oder Völkerstämmen"⁷. Expanding the previous definition and concept Childe formulated the following: "We find certain types of remains – pots, implements, ornaments, burial rites and house forms – constantly recurring together. Such a complex of associated traits we shall call a 'cultural group' or just

a 'culture'. We assume that such a complex is the material expression of what today we could call 'a people'⁸. Views of the latter definition are nuanced during the past century according to the direction that different schools of thought take, but in essence are expressing the same principles of associating an abstract, allegedly monolithic idea expressed as a group of people with sets of reoccurring material culture restrained in space and time.

The paradox of using archaeological cultures

Precisely the above two leaps, both tied to a trend of generalising the particular, of equating a group of individuals with a single idea, i.e. culture or civilisation, and a group of single, archaeological finds with a previously generalised civilisation, lead our current archaeological understanding to the interpretative dead-lock that in many instances we find ourselves. Essentially, also gave birth to a paradox in our field, as one must use the notion of culture in order to sustain a discourse, present materials, tie in closer or more distant relations, while trying to elucidate in the same time the actual essence that the very culture that we are naming contains. In Lehmann's terms, we are using in the definition the very word that we are defining. This is what I have previously referred to as the essential fallacy of using the notion of culture in archaeology⁹. Moreover, since the essence of an archaeological culture is sketchy at best, even if we would have at least the principles set out by Tylor or Childe followed by every southeast European group, culture and cultural-complex we would still have the same essential paradox.

The lack of rigorous methodology and no doubt a certain amount of hubris on

² Kroeber, Kluckhohn 1952: 10.

³ Trigger 1989: 162.

⁴ Klemm 1852.

⁵ Tylor 1871: 1.

⁶ Meinander 1981: 106.

⁷ Kossinna 1911: 3.

⁸ Childe 1929: V-Vi.

⁹ Daróczy 2011: 20.

behalf of the researchers lead to an overwhelming number of archaeological cultures.

I am not referring here to disputes of the names, but rather to the 'partially excavated site-an archaeological group or culture' approach or the mixture of archaeological materials from two neighbouring regions or sometimes even of those which are chronologically separated. In most cases these do not even have the very minimal of pottery, metal finds if the case, mortuary and funerary, habitat and settlement studies researched before proclaiming the advent of the new archaeological entity. Boroffka eloquently highlighted almost two decades ago that most if not all archaeological cultures of southeastern Europe are in essence pottery assemblages¹⁰. The discourse on cultures is in fact a story of how pottery shapes and decorations, ceramic styles circulated, or even more precisely since sourcing of raw materials is still in his baby years in the region, how ideas and perceptions of certain ceramic styles, that we refer to as cultures, circulated. This can be used to our advantage in overcoming this impasse (see below).

Outwitting the fallacy of archaeological cultures

Since the subject of our field of study, that is material culture, cannot be altered a metamorphosis is hardly a possibility, hence a shift in our vantage point is the only practicable way through which these issues can be address. The shift results in an anamorphosis, revealing something, previously unseen due to the cemented concept, which can be described as dogmatic in its lack of scientific dialogue and reasoning, of archaeological cultures.

Recently, Stig-Sørensen states that "without some notion of culture we are

analytically impoverished ... it may be necessary to accept we need 'culture' as it helps us to delimitate subject matters and materials"¹¹. I personally do not agree with such a view and a two-step solution is proposed for the highlighted fallacy. The first one is a temporary one, till the second is reached, where the problem is solved.

As part of the first step the relative chronological information carried by pottery-styles of southeastern Europe, which are inappropriately termed as archaeological cultures, can be used to create a framework that is still employable. Good examples and practicable ways how the massive information on pottery styles, that we have termed as 'culture', can be used to our advantage in a regional¹² or over-regional¹³ sense in publishing finds, regardless if they are newly excavated or kept in storage for decades, while still circumventing archaeological cultures, are already in circulation. Moreover, most of our information on chronology of southeastern Europe originates from relative chronologies. In most cases these chronologies are not constructed on the correlation of layer X from site Y with layer Z from site W, but rather on the juxtaposition of phase A of culture B with phase I of culture D, whereas in fact all these designations of layers and phases of cultures are sets of materials not of abstract ideas. If we admit that by using the phase of a culture, in fact we are referring to a layer from a site certain chronological conclusions can still be kept, giving birth to an absolute-relative chronology¹⁴. Similar approaches to obvious problems of southeastern European cultures are addressed in the same manner by larger, synoptic and diachronic studies, using

¹⁰ Boroffka 1999: 124, Boroffka 2000: Online.

¹¹ Stig-Sørensen 2014: 247-248.

¹² Daróczy 2015A.

¹³ Daróczy, Ursuțiu 2015.

¹⁴ Daróczy 2015B: 27-28, Fig. 10.

the same method to manage obvious shortcomings¹⁵. Once the temporary solution is outlined these can be used to side-track cultures in the discourse of archaeology even in large-scale studies bridging several millennia¹⁶.

In the second step, work is focused in relating and tying existing materials at site level to actual building phases, not depositional layers of settlements, burial grounds or other special function sites. The archaeological works which employ such an approach are overwhelmed, by the number of those which if for example a pit is discovered the finds from their content are published as representing a single fill-in, totally disregarding the taphonomic process which lead to the accumulation of these. Moreover, in most cases even if such a feature is dated with radiocarbon the relation of most finds to each other and to the sample is absolutely disregarded, yet again assuming the almost instantaneous deposition of archaeological finds, including sample, and the fill-in of the feature. Lastly, in this second step, redefined or newly published finds must not be labelled as X culture or Y group, but rather as discoveries pertaining to building phase I or II and so on of the site in discussion. While influences, that might seem foreign to the specialist, regardless if these are actual imports or that just the idea, that aided in the local creation, is circulated, must not be branded as from culture X or Y, but rather a wording as from this or that century or one or the other absolute-relative chronological phase from a well definable larger or smaller geographic region can be used.

Turning the page on archaeological cultures

The critique of archaeological cultures is noted both in studies that focus on interpretations of finds over larger areas¹⁷, but also in those that have a more theoretical inclination¹⁸. The most recent work on this subject¹⁹ states in no uncertain terms the need to distance ourselves from the employment of cultures in southeastern Europe and the need to focus on the particular further highlights the longing for alternatives if not solutions to the present issue. A dialogue for the resolve of this essential fallacy must be stimulated and sustained and more importantly new finds and especially new publications must be submitted to an approach that if not eliminates, than distances itself from the employment of the notion of archaeological cultures.

It is acknowledged that a certain panic or resistance to such ideas and views is inevitable and to some extent is the natural flow of any cultural change, but the impasse, I think is obvious for most if not all scholars. One might wonder what prehistoric Europe without archaeological cultures might look like and I am sure for many this is unimaginable. I would like to indicate the Bronze Age Aegean or eastern Mediterranean for this purpose, where although the implementation of archaeological cultures was attempted, it never took roots.

More importantly a system of absolute-relative chronology exists, which is tied to architectural phases and is independent of absolute chronology, discoveries are discussed in their particular terms not in generalising and oversimplifying concepts of cultures. Such methodologies and approaches are not without problems,

¹⁵ E.g. Parzinger 1993: 253-272.

¹⁶ E.g. Daróczy 2015B.

¹⁷ E.g. Smirnov 2003, Heyd 2011: 540.

¹⁸ E.g. Palincas 2010: 57-58, Daróczy 2011: 20, 22-23, 28-29, Stig-Sørensen 2014: 247-248, 251.

¹⁹ Maran 2017.

but are lacking the obvious paradox in the archaeological rhetoric, which ultimately undermines the validity of the practiced science. It is my hope that the present

reasoning will not fall on deaf ears and if not the proposed steps, than at least the existence of the highlighted paradox is acknowledged.

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Abrevieri / Abbreviations

Археологія

Археологія, Kiew

GOTARC ser. A

GOTARC Series A, Gothenburg Archaeological Studies, Göteborg

PAT

Patrimonium Archaeologicum Transylvanicum, Cluj-Napoca

PPMAAEHU

Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA

RGF

Römisch-Germanische Forschungen, Mainz am Rhein

RJA

Romanian Journal of Archaeology, București

TMOM

Travaux de la Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée, Lyon

TransRev

Transylvanian Review, Cluj-Napoca

UpA

Universitätsforschungen zur prähistorischen Archäologie, Bonn