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É T U D E S

CULTURE-HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE ON ETHNIC PHENOMENA

GHEORGHE ALEXANDRU NICULESCU*

Abstract: The recent and growing interest of culture-historical archaeologists for what social sciences have to say about ethnic phenomena raises questions about how the borrowed information is selected, understood and used. The interpretation made without explicit recourse to the social sciences is illustrated with some recent writings of V. Bierbrauer. For the impact of their training in a research tradition which was built around the task of identifying peoples from the past on how knowledge from the social sciences is used I have chosen writings of S. Brather and F. Curta. Although there are important differences between their views, both carry on aspects of the nationalist representation of ethnicity, S. Brather mainly by leaving unexamined assumptions about human groups, F. Curta by choosing from the social sciences some ideas which are consistent with what he was educated to believe. Both fail to recognize the full implications of the mainstream representation of ethnicity in the social sciences for the archaeological research.
Keywords: archaeology, culture-historical archaeology, ethnic phenomena, social sciences, paradigm.

Rezumat: Interesul recent și crescând al arheologilor din paradigma cultural istorică pentru ce au de spus științele sociale despre fenomenele etnice evocă întrebări despre cum își selectează informația preluată, cum o înțeleg și cum o folosesc. Pentru a ilustra cum este făcută interpretarea fără a recurge în mod explicit la științele sociale am folosit scrieri recente ale lui V. Bierbrauer. Pentru impactul a ceea ce au fost educați să creadă, într-o tradiție de cercetare construită în jurul sarcinii de a identifica popoare din trecut, am ales scrieri ale lui S. Brather și F. Curta. Deși există diferențe importante între perspectivele lor, ambii păstrează aspecte ale reprezentării naționaliste a etnicității, S. Brather mai ales pentru că nu examinează presupunerile despre natura grupurilor umane, F. Curta pentru că alege din științele sociale ceea ce potrivește cu ceea ce a fost educat să creadă. Nici unul, nici celălalt nu realizează pe deplin implicațiile reprezentării dominante a etnicității în științele sociale pentru cercetarea arheologică.
Cuvinte-cheie: arheologie, arheologie cultural istorică, fenomene etnice, științe sociale, paradigmă.

The last three decades have seen significant changes in the archaeological understanding of ethnicity, due to an increased but variable and specific receptivity of various traditions of research to knowledge produced by the social sciences. Even European culture-historical archaeology, after ignoring the New Archaeology critiques from the 1960s and being ignored since as a debate partner by most other research traditions, is experiencing now what Sebastian Brather, having in mind the research on the Early Middle Ages, considers to be a paradigm shift. In his opinion this change, which invites archaeologists to "an intense methodological reflection", was brought by historical and sociological research showing that ethnic groups were not the basic form of social organization, that they were flexible and situational, not stable but incessantly changing.[1]

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[1] Brather 2008a, p. 1. See, however, Brather 2004, p. 3: "Bis heute haben 'ethnische Deutungen' in der prähistorischen Forschung nicht gänzlich an Popularität verloren, ist ein Paradigmenwechsel im Sinne Thomas Kuhns ausgeblieben und werden traditionelle Forschungspogramme weiterhin verfolgt". A paradigm shift certainly did not occur during the four years separating the two publications.

The purpose of this article is to examine what happens when new knowledge about ethnic phenomena, taken from other disciplines and/or from other ways of thinking and doing archaeology, is used in culture-historical archaeology, a research tradition built on the ethnic paradigm,[2] shaped from its beginnings by the goal of making the past relevant to the present, through the assistance offered to the historians in their attempts to reconstruct national ancestries,[3] and by its capacity to offer to the national states deeper roots than those which could be known from the study of the written sources.

The main tool for doing this was the notion of "archaeological culture", grounded in a view of the world as being made up of radically different cultures, equivalent to as many peoples, and condensed in the well known axiom of Gustaf Kossinna: "scharf umgrenzte archäologische Kultur-Provinzen decken sich zu allen Zeiten mit ganz bestimmten Völkern oder Völkerstämmen".[4] Although this axiom and the notion of "archaeological culture" have been subjected to numerous critiques,[5] the identification of ethnic entities remains a productive routine for culture-historical archaeologists. Most of them do not see any need of a radical change and ignore the critiques formulated from other traditions of archaeological research against their interpretations.

The persistence of the old ways is supported by the long tradition of culture-historical archaeology, by the prestige of its products, and also by the rarity of the interventions from other traditions of archaeological research on the field of late Roman and early medieval archaeology, where the identification of ethnic entities is so important because they can be directly linked with the current national territories.

In order to assess what culture-historical archaeologists known for their efforts to abandon the understanding of ethnic phenomena embedded in their research tradition have achieved, it is useful to examine the views of a less adventurous archaeologist, Volker Bierbrauer. Unlike most of his colleagues involved in the research of Late Roman and Early Medieval ethnic phenomena, he defends the theoretical grounding of his interpretations. What seems to bother him the most is that in the critiques of S. Brather and others traditional individual research is dissolved in the corpus of culture-historical archaeological interpretations and that conclusions are rejected not because they are based on a poor knowledge of the archaeological record or because they are an inadequate interpretation of it, but because traditional archaeologists do not want to abandon what was achieved in their tradition of research. He wants to bring the discussion back to the archaeological as he understands it, to artefacts, features and contexts, and resents vividly the politicization of the debate, which links culture-historical archaeology views on past ethnicity with nationalism and right wing movements.[6]

According to his understanding of the discipline, V. Bierbrauer would like the discussion on the "ethnic interpretation" (ethnische Deutung) to be focused on the problems raised by the archaeological record, and then to proceed from the archaeological source towards the "Aussage", not to start with what belongs to "the theoretical superstructure" (Überbau).[7]

However, any attempt to assign finds to peoples from the past does not start with the archaeological record, but with the belief that those peoples existed, with some ideas about what peoples are and about what links could exist between artefacts and peoples. Such ideas cannot be generated by the artefacts themselves, they have to come from somewhere else, usually from the particular research traditions in which the archaeologists are working or even from the common knowledge surrounding them.

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[2] Härke 1991, p. 188.

[3] For a recent affirmation of the importance of archaeology to the writing of national history for those epochs where written sources are "ambiguous or mistaken" or missing, see Dan Gh. Teodor, in Protase, Suceveanu 2001, p. 641.

[4] Kossinna 1920, p. 3. He states that for early history this was "tausendfach erprobt", without giving examples. See Grünert 2002, p. 74: "Für die Richtigkeit dieser Prämisse ist Kossinna den Wahrheitsbeweis schuldig geblieben".

[5] See Veit 1989 and Jones 1997, p. 106-110.

[6] Bierbrauer 2004, p. 74-75. He refers to the invitation to a conference held in Leipzig in 2000 (papers published in Rieckhoff and Sommer 2007) and to a report on this conference (Burmeister 2000).

[7] Bierbrauer 2004, p. 49: "Anders als S. Brather werde ich mich dem Problem der ethnischen Interpretation nicht mit einer Diskussion um den theoretischen Überbau auseinandersetzen; statt dieses Weges von ‚oben' bevorzuge ich den Weg von ‚unten', also meinem Fachverständnis entsprechend von der archäologischen Quelle (Funde und Befunde) zur Aussage; dabei wird sich zeigen, was methodisch trägt und was nicht, wobei sehr unterschiedliche Grundkonstellationen von Bedeutung sein werden. Diese Vorgehensweise hat somit nichts mit Theoriefeindlichkeit zu tun: 'Für die je konkrete, in einer bestimmten Fund-und Befundsituation herausgearbeitete archäologische Kultur gibt es keine Patent-oder Standarddeutung. Das gesamte Spektrum der Möglichkeiten muß vielmehr an jeden einzelnen Fall herangetragen und sorgfältig erwogen werden' (Eggert 2001, p. 296)".

Archaeologists do not see all that there is out there to see, but only what their archaeological training prepares them to see, and this partial blindness is not an individual or collective failure but a part of what it means to be an archaeologist in a particular research tradition.

The difference between V. Bierbrauer and those archaeologists who are inclined to start with a theoretical discussion is that he trusts the knowledge accumulated in his tradition of research and feels no need to question it before engaging in the observation of archaeological configurations, whereas his dissatisfied colleagues look for better knowledge elsewhere. One sociologist has argued that people inclined to do so are usually those with less specific capital accumulated, i.e. less knowledge specific to particular traditions of research, who want to gain recognition by subverting them and that this is one of the main sources of change in all viable traditions of scientific knowledge.[8]

The problem is whether the knowledge accumulated within culture-historical archaeology about ethnic entities and their relations with artefacts and features is to be trusted. The short answer is no. A century ago, when the notion of "archaeological culture" came into being, the understanding of ethnic entities on which it was based was fully compatible with what most social scientists and historians, philosophers and politicians where thinking.[9] This is no longer the case. Only few social scientists would accept today views similar to what culture-historical archaeologists have grown accustomed to believe about ethnic entities.[10] Although such beliefs are still supported by the common knowledge disseminated through mass media, most social scientists and many historians have abandoned them decades ago.

Culture-historical archaeologists do not trust social sciences. Usually they view them as sources of anachronisms which move the archaeologist away from the past. The past is their only concern: they have no academic interest for the present and therefore they lack the critical instruments needed to go beyond current political ideologies and to study what is the role of the knowledge they are producing in the social worlds to which they participate. This avoidance makes them ignore or reject what contemporary social scientists might believe and embrace what seems obvious, because embedded in their tradition of research.

For the interpretation of ethnic phenomena V. Bierbrauer does not rely on what the social sciencess might say about them but on history: for him what the *gentes* of Late Antiquity really were is not the concern of archaeology: its practitioners should accept whatever significance is given to them by historians: "…dem Gebrauch von *gentes*-Namen durch den Archäologen nur jene Sinnhaftigkeit beigemessen werden kann, die der Historiker in Interpretation der Schriftquellen diesen nach dem derzeitigen Forschungsstand beimißt".[11] He claims that without the archaeological "ethnic interpretation" there could be no interdisciplinary discussion, especially no discussion with the historians. In an interdisciplinary symposium about the Langobards, historians would be puzzled if the archaeologist would use this ethnonym between inverted commas or if a neutral cultural term, like Nocera Umbra, would replace it. Therefore interdisciplinary research and symposia, *horribile dictu*, would lose their meaning.[12] This is not true: V. Bierbrauer chooses to ignore those historians who would not lose the ground under their feet without ethnonyms and would continue to be interested in archaeology even if deprived of his kind of "ethnic

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[8] Bourdieu 1975, p. 29. I apply his remarks about scientific fields to what seems more manageable and meaningful for an empirical analysis: a tradition of research (knowledge).

[9] G. Kossinna seems to have come to his notion of Kulturgruppe influenced by of the debates of German folklorists, physical anthropologists and historians from the last decade of the 19th century (Brather 2000, p. 153-155) and pursued his philological interest for the dynamics of ancient peoples using antiquities (Smolla 1979-1980, p. 7), and especially for the Germanic and Indo-Germanic ancestors. "Damit war er Teil einer Zeitströmung…" (Smolla 1979-1980, p. 8). He rejected any relevance of ethnological research for his purposes, although at the same time Leo Frobenius, Fritz Graebner and Bernhard Ankermann were developing culture area concepts. On the context of Kossinna's views on culture and ethnicity see also Grünert 2002, p. 71-75.

[10] For instance, social scientists engaged in cross-cultural research (e.g., de Munck, Korotayev 2000).

[11] Bierbrauer 2004, p. 49. See however, Bierbrauer 2005, p. 54, about how archaeologists should cooperate with historians: "Es geht dabei selbstverständlich im Sinne Helmut Beumanns nicht um Zulieferdienste der einen Disziplin an die andere, etwa um die Umsetzung archäologischer Daten in historische Aussagen zum Gebrauch für den Historiker oder um historische Interpretationshilfen für einzelne archäologische Funde, so erwünscht und notwendig diese Formen gegenseitiger Hilfe sind, nein, richtungsweisend ist nach wie vor Walter Schlesingers Postulat: 'getrennt marschieren und vereint schlagen', …".

[12] Bierbrauer 2004, p. 48; see also p. 62.

interpretation".[13] One could wonder about the value of interdisciplinary endeavours which might be ruined by different perspectives on what they are supposed to enquire. The interdisciplinarity V. Bierbrauer seems to have in mind is productive only for the investigation of what ethnic entities did or didn't, whether they are identified by archaeologists in the archaeological record or assumed by historians to exist behind the categories used by the written sources. But it will not help the investigation of what those particular peoples were. If everybody starts with the same set of convictions, namely that beyond ethnonyms there are durable and coherent human groups, whose trajectories in time creates meanings accessible to scientific research, it is very likely that little more than a confirmation of those convictions will be achieved.

For his ethnic identifications, V. Bierbrauer uses what he terms "cultural models", which preserve the normative character of the discredited "archaeological cultures", but focuses on some aspects of the archaeological record, deemed more relevant for ethnic identification than others. I do not know what are the relations between these models and other cultural facts, ideal or material. Burial customs are "hochrangigen Determinanten"[14] in (of?) his cultural models. This status is explained by their association with religious beliefs, which also makes them "langlebig-konservativ".[15]

Like most culture-historical archaeologists, V. Bierbrauer wants only to identify specific ethnic units, so he shows no interest for the problem whether religion is a distinctive trait for each and every ethnic unit, a position which cannot be sustained. But even if we restrict the relevance of statement to the peoples V. Bierbrauer discusses, the Goths and the Langobards, there is not enough evidence to support the idea that they had distinctive religions. For the Goths we have instead the certitude of a conversion to Arian Christianity, something which does not seem to alter their supposed cultural models to a point that would make the archaeologists unable to recognize them as the descendants of earlier Goths. The idea that peoples outside the Empire during Late Antiquity had distinctive burial customs based on distinctive religions is also contradicted by the fact that only a few from the tens of non-archaizing ethnonyms known from the written sources, usually understood as designating real peoples, can be linked with particular burial customs, and even that not for the whole period of their use.

V. Bierbrauer's belief in the existence of durable core ethnic cultural models is not something prompted by the archaeological record, as his insistence that we should start with "Funde und Befunde" suggests. It is just a theory, poorly supported by evidence, and it relies on the old normative view of culture, which is the ground for the "archaeological culture" notion. This view makes of culture rules everybody follows, hence the assumed internal homogeneity and non-conflictual nature[16] of the cultural units and the imagination of past human beings as cultural robots.[17]

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[13] There are historians who have argued for the need of a history of late antiquity which is not shaped by the genealogical trajectories of peoples following the ethnonyms used by the ancient sources (Amory 1997, p. 313: "The existence of these group-names, and of people claiming these group-names, demonstrates nothing about distinctive cultural traits, let alone about ethnic identity", Wickham 2005, p. 83, n. 72:: "[o]ddly, although historians have abandoned [the essentialist position in the understanding of early medieval ethnic groups], archaeologists remain attached to it, particularly in the German tradition of ethnic readings of grave-goods").

[14] Bierbrauer 1994, p. 57 (here dress customs are also included in the "hochrangigen Determinanten") and p. 67: "kulturimmanente Determinanten", Bierbrauer 2004, 60-61, 69; see also Bierbrauer 2005, p. 26: "Es ist also nicht primär die sog. Sachkultur, die diese neue und fremdartig in Italien auftretende Kulturfazies kennzeichnet, sondern es sind vor allem die hochrangigen Kriterien der Grab- und Beigabensitte, die mit den alten heidnischen Jenseitsvorstellungen verbunden sind, dazu noch die Tracht; ,Sachkultur' und ihre Typen sind nur nachgeordnet".

[15] Bierbrauer 2004, p. 69. No argument is employed to support this idea. Against it, see, for instance, Ucko 1969, p. 273-275, with many examples of rapid change in the burial customs, without any link to ethnic persistence or ethnic change.

[16] V. Bierbrauer states that he does not assume a homogeneity of the Langobards and understands them "in demselben Sinne wie auch der Mediävist Langobarden versteht, nämlich nicht als eine in jeder Hinsicht homogene Bevölkerungsgruppe oder gens, was spätestens seit R. Wenskus selbstverständlich ist" (2005, p. 24), but this has no impact on his archaeological analyses of ethnic membership. On the importance of homogeneity in the history of the anthropological understanding of ethnic groups see Heinz 1993, p. 151-152, 163. See also Shanks and Tilley, 1988, p. 139.

[17] For a critique of the notion that culture "consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members" (Ward Goodenough) see Geertz 1973, esp. p. 11. On the error of transferring the rules, which are the observer's way of making sense of the regularities he observes, into the social reality he is supposed to understand, see Bourdieu 2000[1972], p. 225-234.

Without a comprehensive representation of what ethnic phenomena were, V. Bierbrauer's attempts to identify ethnic entities rely on the correlation between what historians can say about the location of a group and the chronological and chorological determination of archaeological artefacts and features which are relevant because linked with his "cultural models". He separates "cultural models" in areas (like Romania, Italy or Spain) where he knows from the interpretation of written sources about the coexistence of a late Roman local population and newcomers from beyond the borders. I do not think there are serious problems with the identification of foreign material culture in Romania during the 4th century, Italy during the Ostrogothic kingdom and Langobard kingdoms or Spain during the Visigothic one. But those traits cannot be reserved to the Goths or the Langobards simply by declaring that the burial rituals must have been ethnically determined and difficult to change. V. Bierbrauer's interpretation depends on how he imagines ethnic groups: constants in the historical development, which must have preserved distinctive cultural traits.

The fact that a migration for which we know from the written sources both the space of origin and that of the destination can be associated with the existence in both areas of burials indicating similar rituals and similar dress customs does not prove that these cultural traits are linked with ethnic identity. From the written sources we know that the Langobards did not live alone in Pannonia or in Italy, but we do not know how numerous they were. The same applies to the Goths in the area of the Chernjakhov culture. The validity of several attempts to identify such co-inhabitants is disputed so, if we trust the written sources, we have to accept that cultural traits such as burial rites were not useful for a distinction between them and the more illustrious Goths and Langobards, that the Goths were not the only ones to use the big Cernjakhov cemeteries and the Langobards were not the only ones who put weapons in their graves in Italy. A serious drawback of V. Bierbrauer's method is that it is based on uniformitarian principles that appear to function only in some cases. He knows that the Visigoths are invisible for archaeologists from the end of the fourth century to the beginning of the sixth, including during their historically well documented kingdom of Toulouse,[18] and that two distinct peoples, the Alamanni and the Baiuvari, inhabiting different territories, cannot be distinguished starting from the burial finds.

We know from the written sources that the Langobards did not migrate alone towards Italy.[19] But they are, not by accident, the heroes of ancient and modern historical narratives, the royal family has led the migration, therefore those who were not Langobards are usually represented as "minorities", subordinated to the dominant cultural model. The link between the Langobard migration and the appearance in Italy at the same time of burial rituals with no local antecedents is obvious, but it is not clear what we should understand, as archaeologists, by the Langobard population of Italy. Since those who came with the Langobards, and who where ethnically distinctive, according to the written sources, are not to be distinguished with archaeological means, we can not assume that the "Langobard" burial ritual and dress habits were used only by Langobards. A Langobard state with two populations, one Langobard and the other one Romance, is suggested by law texts but legislation, which expresses the intentions of the legislators, is not to be equated with social reality.[20] An examination of the legal practice during the Langobard kingdom has concluded that ethnic differences were not important.[21]

V. Bierbrauer's massive and well documented work illustrates the main feature of the research of cultural history archaeology on ethnic entities: the lack of interest for ethnicity as a social process. V. Bierbrauer believes that without written sources and their interpretation by historians, material facts cannot be used for "ethnic interpretation", and that archaeologists should use the names of the *gentes* from the written sources only with the meanings ascribed by historians, according the current state of the research.[22] But what is the current state of the research is a matter of dispute among historians, as it is among archaeologists. Going along with this line of thinking what would a historian who wants to use archaeological knowledge about ethnic phenomena do when the current state of the research is marked by disputes and uncertainty?

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[18] Bierbrauer 1994, p. 154-155.
[19] P. Diac. Hist. Lang. 2, 6; 8.
[20] A.H.M. Jones, in Morley 2000, p. 199, writing about the laws of the Roman empire as "records of the aspirations of the government".
[21] Pohl-Resl 1998.
[22] Bierbrauer 2004, p. 47 and 49. S. Brather has the same opinion (2000, p. 173).

Despite his professed reliance on what historians think today, V. Bierbrauer seems to be more under the influence of the knowledge already inscribed in his tradition of archaeological research.[23] His knowledge can lead only to the identification, in time and/or space, of ethnic entities and the quality of his analyses is situated at the level of associations between artefacts and features. That is why a discussion about his work which does not gives due attention to these analyses, but focuses on their premises, separating the study from its argumentation basis, like that of Sebastian Brather, appears to him unfair.[24] This is a typical attitude for culture-historical archaeologists. They defend their ways of thinking by leaving their beliefs about social reality outside the debate and by concentrating on methodology, on how their undiscussed aims can be achieved, in the form they have taken during decades of research. The beliefs about what peoples were rely on a construction more than one hundred years old, prompted by national ideologies, repudiated by current social research. This construction – a politically contingent project, not an accurate representation of social reality – is the axiomatic foundation on which the research on ethnic entities is based in culture-historical archaeology.

The validity of this axiomatic foundation is questioned now by researchers educated within the research tradition of culture-historical archaeology, who have gained recognition for their work on ethnic phenomena based on the use of the social sciences, among whom S. Brather and Florin Curta figure prominently. I did not find in what I was able to read from what they have written[25] a discussion of the relevance of the social sciences for the past or a discussion of the problems concepts designed for the understanding of contemporary phenomena and certainly influenced by them, like ethnicity,[26] might create when used for Late Antiquity. To the two authors the use of knowledge from the social sciences appears simply as the natural thing to do.

I do not know how S. Brather and F. Curta have managed to select from the huge amount of literature dedicated to ethnic phenomena what is both relevant for their concerns and viable in the context of the social sciences. How were they able, without training in the social sciences, to properly understand what social scientists write? They are not in the least surprised by the different styles of thinking they have encountered and show no sign of the slow and vacillating progress one could expect from someone educated as a culture-historical archaeologist who explores the social sciences. Reflexivity does not come naturally and, because I was also educated as a culture-historical archaeologist, I know how difficult it is to engage in describing what has been for me a tortuous and hesitating journey through foreign knowledge, partially blinded by what I believed I knew, puzzled by lasting misunderstandings and, benefiting from being recognized as an archaeologist by your colleagues, to arrive at conclusions of such importance that you try to convince them to abandon what they were accustomed to believe.[27] However difficult to transform in a routine scientific practice, the description of such journeys might help us put into perspective what we know and what we have to do in order to achieve our scientific goals.

Not only the mystery about how they came to know what social scientists believe about ethnic phenomena is unsettling. S. Brather and F. Curta introduce heteronomous knowledge to fellow archaeologists, knowing that they have little or no means of judging its quality. That is why many of them are so reluctant to accept what is supported by an authority – "the social sciences", "the anthropological research" and so on – they cannot recognize without losing faith in what they know a scientist should do: trust only what he or she knows according to the norms and practices of one's own scientific tradition.[28]

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[23] See Jones 1996, p. 74, on the circular character of this knowledge: "social scientists (including anthropologists and archaeologists) may have developed paradigms 'to explain that which they have themselves created" (cited by Brather 2004, 30); see also Jones 1997, p. 139.

[24] Bierbrauer 2004, p. 47.

[25] My views on how they understand ethnic phenomena are based on Brather 2000, 2004, 2008a, 2008b and 2008c, and on Curta 2001, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2008, 2010 and 2011.

[26] See, for instance, the position of K. Blu: "the term ethnicity should be dropped altogether as a cross-culturally useful analytic term…[and] restricted to describing and analyzing what it does best, namely, an important form of social differentiation in the United States" (1980, p. 227)

[27] I have made such an attempt at a conference ("Wandering and settled Barbarians in the Carpathian Region and neighboring areas. (1st-5th cent.) New finds, new interpretations") held in Nyíregyháza in October 2010. See the text that will be published at http://jam.nyirbone.hu/muzeum/nka/Niculescu.pdf (March 10, 2012). On the problems of a reflexive epistemology, see Pels 2000.

[28] This is probably what V. Bierbrauer thinks when he writes about engaging ethnic interpretation "meinem Fachverständnis entsprechend" (Bierbrauer 2004, p. 49). The novelties are more palatable when they are presented as coming not only from the social sciences, but also from the historical research, as S. Brather does (2008a, p. 1), because of the constitutive subordination of culture history archaeology to history.

   S. Brather's work on the archaeological interpretation of ethnic phenomena contains a comprehensive critique of how notions like culture (Kultur) and people (Volk) have been used in his research tradition, which opposes knowledge borrowed from the social sciences to its history. He argues that such notions are no longer to be understood as closed and clearly delimited entities and quotes for that Eric Wolf.[29] But his definition of ethnic identity as "Gemeinsamkeitsglauben, d.h. eine subjektiv geglaubte Schematisierung", following Max Weber, and his explication of ethnic identity as a belief in common history and origin, common customs, language, local religion and juridical norms allow the representation of the world as being made of E. Wolf's billiard balls.[30] S. Brather also draws attention to the lack of homogeneity of group identities, they tend to be strong in the core (Traditionskern) and to diminish towards the periphery, to their situational character, and to the fact that individuals use different group identities according to the situations they have to face.[31] He tells us that ethnic entities have no eternal substance, no unchangeable traits, cannot be understood starting from an immutable core, and are flexible.[32] But without an enduring substance what is the thing that is flexible?

   Ethnic entities are rather processes than historical constants, in a state of continuous ethnogenesis.[33] The cultural traits expressing ethnic identity, only a few from the available cultural repertoire, are not objective but chosen by the members of the groups from their cultural repertoire and instrumentalized by individuals or groups in order to build and maintain social borders. The choice is subjective but not arbitrary: it depends on existing cultural differences, which they dramatize, and on current social and economic interests. Because ethnic signification can be attached to almost any element of material culture or to none at all, and their meaning cannot be determined without knowing what people believed, without knowing "was den Zeitgenossen bewußt war, und für ihre Identität relevant wurde", archaeologists who want to identify ethnic entities from the past are faced with a difficult and unsolved problem,[34] unless they can find out what symbols were used to signify ethnic difference in the written sources which were contemporary with them.[35] Without

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   [29] Wolf 1982, p. 6: "By endowing nations, societies, or cultures with the qualities of internally homogeneous and externally distinctive and bounded objects, we create a model of the world as a global pool hall in which entities spin off each other like so many hard and round billiard balls". Brather 2000, p. 157, n. 94, quotes from a German translation published in 1991.

   [30] Brather 2000, p. 160 and Brather 2004, p. 106. F. Curta believes "[v]ery few would now disagree with Max Weber that ethnic groups are 'human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration; conversely, it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists' (Weber 1968, p. 389)". This is not true: see Banton 2007, p. 19-20: "As Weber predicted, his review of 'ethnic communities' is now antiquated; yet it is still worth examining it, and its fate in later sociology, to see if lessons can be learned from the weaknesses of the text itself, including the misjudgements of its editors and translators and, indeed, from the failures of later sociologists to appreciate the complexities of the underlying issues". I do not know any social scientist who would agree with Weber that the belief in common descent is based on "similarities of physical type or of customs or both". However, Weber was also considering a reversed relation between commonalities and belief in common descent and emphasized its artificiality: "On the other hand, it is primarily the political community, no matter how artificially organized, that inspires the belief in common ethnicity. This belief tends to persist even after 'the disintegration of the political community, unless drastic differences in the custom, physical type, or, above all, language exist among its members" (Weber 1968, p. 389). After 1900 he developed a strong mistrust in the explanatory power of race and ethnicity (Kalberg 2005, p. 291).

   [31] Brather 2000, p. 160; Brather 2004, p. 101.

   [32] Brather 2004, p. 108-109, 320.

   [33] Brather 2004, p. 49-50, 111.

   [34] Brather 2000, p. 175, with reference to Hodder 1982, p. 211, and p. 166, with reference to Jones 1997, p. 125. See also Brather 2004, p. 163: "Ebenso unbekannt sind daher jene kulturellen Merkmale, die zur Gruppenabgrenzung dienten. Denn diese Symbole spiegeln keine grundlegenden kulturellen Differenzen wider, sondern stellen gezielt ausgewählte Einzelmerkmale dar".

   [35] Brather 2000, p. 171. The position taken by S. Brather in 2004 seems different. He quotes H. J. Eggers, who believed G. Kossinna's cardinal mistake was that he thought archaeological and written sources have to give the same kind of information, and recognizes here a decisive step towards overcoming the "ethnic paradigm" . See also Brather 2004, p. 230: "Unterschiedliche Quellen liefern unterschiedliche Aussagen, weil sie je spezifische Aspekte vergangener Realität beschreiben. Deckungsgleichheit ist deshalb nicht zu erwarten", and the position of a historian: "In most cases, literary attempts to tell the difference between gentes cannot be reinforced by material evidence, and vice versa" (Pohl 1998, p. 64).

written sources prehistoric ethnic identities, which are historical phenomena, linked with certain times and certain spaces, can not be determined with our existing methods.[36]

More accessible to an archaeological understanding appear to S. Brather the "strukturgeschichtliche Prozesse" of the *longue durée*, which are difficult to link with the quick changing political and ethnic relationships.[37]

Throughout his discussion of ethnic identities S. Brather maintains a view of individuals and groups which seems to have a different and older origin than his views on ethnicity. He believes that for historians and social scientists groups are the most relevant and, since the representation of the world individuals have is to a great extent determined by their group identities, the limitations of archaeology, which make individuals inaccessible to research, are not very important.[38] The traditional fascination of many historians with groups, usually with peoples,[39] is well-known, but social scientists who want to understand social reality by talking with people, not just by analysing survey results, know that there is no way to understand groups than the study of what individuals do and think, although "relationships are as real as individuals"[40] and individuality is not a human universal, but a socially contingent way of living in particular worlds. S. Brather believes archaeologists do not have access to ancient ethnic identities without a personal account (Selbstzeugnis).[41] But such accounts are obviously individual, and their use for the understanding of groups can create the illusion that people writing adequately represent them. A similar situation exists in archaeology: we are confronted with individual artefacts and we can safely assume that most of them were manufactured by one individual.[42] Artefacts usually do no come in groups. We make them belong to groups in order to make sense of the archaeological record. But this is just a local methodology, arguably related to a groupist social ontology, not a recognition of the structure of past worlds contained in the archaeological record.

There are passages where S. Brather's thinking about history seems untouched by the significance of what he has learned about ethnicity from the social sciences. He goes back to what P. Veyne has named a bad start for history, the concern with peoples and important individuals:

> "Für den Historiker und Sozialwissenschaftler sind vor allem die Gruppenidentitäten relevant. Denn diese sind es, die für historische Entwicklungen von Gesellschaften eine wichtige Rolle spielen. Damit wird das mitunter entscheidende, langfristig oft bedeutsame Handeln einzelner herausragender Personen keineswegs negiert. Doch deren individuelle Entscheidung erlangt vor allem dann Bedeutung, wenn sie größere Gruppen beeinflußt und zum Handeln veranlaßt. Die Konstitution von Gruppen steht daher im Mittelpunkt des Interesses – insbesondere hinsichtlich der ethnischen Identitäten".[43]

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[36] Brather 2000, p. 173.

[37] Brather 2000, p. 171. See also Brather 2004, p. 75: "Im Mittelpunkt archäologischer Interpretationen stehen …strukturgeschichtliche Zusammenhänge der "longue durée", bzw. die "unbewußten Elemente des sozialen Lebens"[Lévi-Strauss 1977, p. 38]. Damit wird gewissermaßen das Fundament sichtbar, auf dem sich die politische und die Ereignisgeschichte abspielten".

[38] Brather 2000, p. 159, with reference to Erikson, Halbwachs and Yates. See R. Brubaker's critique of the groupist social ontology, which he finds "every bit as impoverished, and every bit as analytically disabling and politically constricting, as the individualist social ontology" (2003, p. 553).

[39] See Veyne 1984, p. 282: "History, a few millennia ago, made a bad start. It has never completely freed itself of its social function, that of perpetuating the memory of the lives of peoples or of kings."

[40] Calhoun 2003, p. 546.

[41] Brather 2000, p. 173.

[42] S. Brather (2004, p. 98) believes that we can grasp the individuals in a cemetery ("jedes Grab repräsentiert schließlich ein Individuum". Actually a single grave only contains the remains of an individual; it does not represent him but what the people who have arranged the burial thought about the burial. See Leach 1979, p. 122: "Blackmore et al., throughout this section, write as individuals were normally in a position to determine the scale of their own funeral rites. It is surely self-evident that this is not the case. If graves are in any way an index of social status it is the social status of the funeral organisers as much as the social status of the deceased that is involved." In a recent paper S. Brather is aware of this problem and stresses the importance of the people who organize the funeral and that of the participants   (2008b, p. 255).

[43] Brather 2004, p. 98. For the quote from P. Veyne see n. 39. Similar contradictions between recently acquired knowledge and knowledge embedded in one's tradition of scientific research can be found elsewhere in S. Brather's

Also as a return to the knowledge embedded in his research tradition can be interpreted S. Brather's view of the behavioral aspect of ethnicity:

> "Das Entscheidende für ethnische Abgrenzungen sind nicht ausgewählte und überhöhte Einzelmerkmale selbst, sondern Handlungen von Gruppen in bestimmten sozialen und historischen Zusammenhänge und die Wahrnehmung dieser Handlungen. Ethnische Identität wird relevant, wenn in den Augen der Gruppenmitglieder die konkrete Situation entsprechendes Handeln erfordert. Dieses Handeln läßt ethnische Identität zur Realität werden. Man gibt und verhält sich – in bestimmten Situationen – wie ein Franke oder ein Gote, wie ein Deutscher oder ein Franzose, d. h. wie es die eigene Gruppe und 'die Anderen' von einem erwarten. Die jeweilige Wahrnehmung wird dabei durch die spezifischen Erwartungen präformiert und eingeschränkt".[44]

Here anyone belonging to an ethnic group is imagined as behaving in the same characteristic way, even if this is limited to "certain situations", according to the expectances of the fellow group members and to those of people who do not belong to his group. This behavioral uniformity is closer to the old "national character" tradition of understanding peoples than to the current research on ethnicity in the social sciences which tries to replace the representation of the world as made of distinct groups of people with specific behaviors with a more realistic image. The lack of homogenity of the ethnic groups, repeatedly asserted by S. Brather, seems to refer not to radical cultural differences as in the case of the distinction between ethnic groups, but to a cultural and behavioral continuum in which identity is concentrated at the core and dilutes towards the periphery but it is still the same thing.[45] This representation does not conflict with the nationalist representation of society, which claims that not all members of a nation are equally aware of what they are. If we apply this representation to the early medieval *gentes* this means that everybody behaved more or less like the royal or princely families, and that the behavior of those families had more in common with what the rest of the ethnic group did than with the behavior of other royal or princely families, which brings to mind the nationalist claim that having people "of your kind" as rulers is natural.[46]

Are we to imagine that during Late Antiquity everyone had in mind a full repertoire of ethnic behaviors that would allow distinguishing, among others, the Franks from the Goths? Even at the current level of national behavioral prescriptions we are confronted not with specific behavior but with similar, if not identical, behaviors towards national symbols, recommended by any national state, and with national stereotypes, which can play a range of significant roles, but the extent to which they are to be seen as blueprints for individual behavior is debatable. Anyway, what other Romanians and what, e.g. people I have met in Germany or France, expect from me to do are at least two different things, so it is not possible to behave "wie es die eigene Gruppe und 'die Anderen' von einem erwarten". I am aware of the existence of some stereotypes which might be applied to me in Western Europe. They were only very rarely translated into behavior. Since those stereotypes are mostly negative, I certainly did not attempt to behave according to them. I was never identified as a Romanian by people who did not know where I was coming from before talking to me. Several people told me in the United States that my English had a German accent, someone told me in a Norwegian pub that my English indicated that I was coming from New Zealand, and a Spanish speaking inhabitant of Tucson, Arizona, after hearing me speaking in my

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work: e.g. ethnic identities are presented as "flexible" (Brather 2004, p. 101) and as "necessarily conservative" (p. 103), ethnic identities described as open and not clearly delimited (see supra, p. 11) and then: "Ethnische Identitäten … umfassen jeweils eine Gesellschaft" (p. 104).

[44] Brather 2004, p. 108.

[45] S. Brather emphasizes that "[n]icht alle sozialen Gruppen einer Gesellschaft haben, wie bereits erwähnt, gleichen Anteil an der Identitätskonstruktion. Soziale Eliten fungieren häufig als "Identitätskerne", indem die von ihnen getragenen Traditionen und damit das "kulturelle Gedächtnis" zentrale Bedeutung für die Identität der Gruppe gewinnen" (2004, 112). But this does not lead him to a questioning of the representation of ethnic phenomena as identity groups. What he describes as a consequence of this: "[d]eshalb sind ethnische Identitäten sowohl räumlich als auch sozial diffus", means probably that the borders are not clear. I do not understand how this works with the repeatedly used "Wir-Bewusstsein" notion, which is difficult to understand as describing a continuum with blurry limits.

[46] See Barth 1994a, p. 12: "the mobilization of ethnic groups is effected by leaders who pursue a political enterprise, and is not a direct expression of the group's cultural ideology, or the popular will".

mother tongue asked me what kind of rotten Spanish was that. There is something else which deserves comment in this passage: the idea that distinctive behavior is group behavior ("Handlungen von Gruppen"). The main kind of situation from the Early Middle Ages which allows collective group behavior contrasted with that of other groups, in real life, not just in imagination, is that of war and here again we are reminded of nationalist representations, which make of ethnic phenomena continuously mobilized groups.

F. Curta's starting position is different from that of S. Brather: he is not primarily interested in the possibilities of an archaeological understanding of ethnic phenomena, but in answering traditional questions about the Slavs ("Who were those enigmatic Slavs?"). He describes his work published in 2001 as "an attempt to explore the nature and construction of the Slavic ethnic identity in the light of the current anthropological research on ethnicity".[47] Ethnicity is "a mode of action and representation". It refers to "a decision people make to depict themselves or others symbolically as bearers of a certain cultural identity". After mentioning the opinion that ethnicity is a relatively recent phenomenon, F. Curta states that "ethnicity is just as likely to have been embedded in socio-political relations in the past as in the present. What have changed are the historical conditions and the idiomatic concepts in which ethnicity is embedded".[48] Fredrik Barth's contribution to the study of ethnicity is described as consisting in "a new light on subjective criteria (ethnic boundaries) around which the feeling of ethnic identity of the member of a group is framed" and on the "two mutually interdependent social processes… at work, that of internal and that of external definition (categorization)", in "the practical accomplishment of identity". F. Curta qualifies it as a "subjective approach to ethnicity", which, leaving aside the ambiguity of this formulation (one could understand that F. Barth is subjective in his approach), is a misrepresentation of what F. Barth has written. There is no mention of "subjective" in F. Barth's famous "Introduction", only of self-ascription, which is understood by F. Curta as subjective, despite "the two mutually interdependent social processes" mentioned on the same page and the obvious fact that what one thinks about his or her own identity can make organizational sense only if others recognize it as such. F. Curta also states that "Barth's followers thus built on concepts of the self and social role behavior typified by a dyadic transactional (the "we vs. them" perspective) or social exchange theory". There is no reference to who those followers might be. However, F. Barth did not favor the "we vs. them" perspective: "I see the analysis of ethnicity blunted when cast in the fashionable rhetoric of 'we and the other'. Whereas radical cultural alterity plays an important role in much Western thought…, ethnic relations and boundary constructions in most plural societies are not about strangers, but about adjacent and familiar 'others'".[49] F. Curta is dissatisfied with F. Barth's approach because "it does not, in fact, address issues concerning objective cultural difference (subsistence patterns, language, political structure, or kinship),[50] in other words, the theory is lacking exactly what its author wanted out of the discussion because he considered it irrelevant.

Then F. Curta proceeds with an important statement for which he refers to Siân Jones and others, although its source is F. Barth's "Introduction":

> "It has been noted that cultural traits by which an ethnic group defines itself never comprise the totality of the observable culture but are only a combination of some characteristics that the actors ascribe to themselves and consider relevant. People identifying themselves as an ethnic group may in fact identify their group in a primarily prototypic manner. Recognizable members may thus share some but not all traits, and those traits may not be equally weighted in people's minds".[51]

Preferable to the Barthian perspective on ethnicity is for F. Curta the view contained in an article of G. Carter Bentley, where he sees ethnic groups generated by commonalities rather than differences, Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus used to make ethnicity a "durable disposition" (there is no such attempt in

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[47] Curta 2001, p. 2.
[48] Curta 2001, p. 14-15.
[49] Curta 2001, p. 18. He refers to Barth 1994, p. 12 for the "we vs. them" perspective. I was unable to find there any reference to what F. Curta has in mind. My quote on "the fashionable rhetoric of 'we and the other'" is from p. 13.
[50] Curta 2001, p. 20.
[51] Curta 2001, p. 21.

P. Bourdieu's massive work) and, against F. Barth, the cultural content as important as the boundary around it. Thus ethnicity is realized in the "repeated production and consumption of distinctive styles of material culture".[52] G.C. Bentley's view is a return to ethnicity as common culture and common action, and to ethnic identity as something unrelated with what happens outside the group, as acutely observed by Kevin Yelvington,[53] an idea against which F. Barth has constructed his theory. In this way, F. Curta, starting from a critique of nationalism and traveling through social theories about ethnicity, arrives at a view which is an updated nationalist representation of social reality. Ethnic groups are constructed, no longer natural, but the construction achieves what national ideologies put at the origin of a nation: similar thoughts and similar actions. That an archaeologist educated in a culture-historical tradition of archaeological research chooses from what social scientists have written about ethnicity something which resembles nationalist views is no surprise, but its presentation as a mainstream view in the social sciences is certainly unexpected.

There is another aspect of this and other choices from what social sciences can offer to the archaeologist. F. Curta is studying a pre-national world and shows no concern that the use of observations made on contemporary societies are not only keys to the understanding of social realities from the past but also, as V. Bierbrauer feared, ways of introducing the present into the past. Ethnicity as "a phenomenon of everyday life" is what we live in our world of massive transmission of ways of thinking and of acting through the mass media and state supported educational systems, not of Late Antiquity. However, even now, the nation-states are far from having realized their 19th century dreams of producing the commonalities their ideologies have placed at their origins. Our main and most difficult task, as students of phenomena from a pre-national world, resembling what we call ethnicity, is to imagine how was social reality before the emergence of the nation states.

F. Curta also criticizes Anthony D. Smith's view of "ethnies" because they appear to be just traditional forms of modern nations and because of the tendency to reify ethnic groups. However he decides to use it as "a way to avoid confusion between the ethnic group and the phenomenon it supposedly instantiates (ethnicity)".[54]

For an understanding of how material culture is used for signifying ethnic borders, F. Curta begins with Ian Hodder's ethnoarchaeological study in Kenya, and his conclusion that despite interaction across boundaries, clear material culture distinctions were maintained in a wide range of artefact categories.[55] I. Hodder's belief that mundane activities, like meat-eating, the division of the carcass and the dispersal of the bones "must always have a symbolic content behind which there is a conceptual order" is taken by F. Curta to be close to what he presents as G.C. Bentley's "point that the cultural practices and representations which become objectified as symbols of ethnicity are derived from, and resonate with, the habitual practices and experiences of the agents involved, as well as reflect the instrumental contingencies of a particular situation". Thus "the signification of self-conscious identity is linked to the generative structures which infuse all aspects of cultural practice and social relations characterizing a particular way of life".[56]

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[52] Curta 2001, p. 21-22; cf. Bentley 1987. See also Curta 2001, p. 295: "The study of ethnicity as a mode of action has recently caused a shift in emphasis from group boundaries to group experience, as ethnicity is now viewed as a phenomenon of the *Alltagsleben*". No reference to literature that might support this claim.

[53] Yelvington 1991, esp. p. 158.

[54] Curta 2001, p. 23.

[55] Curta 2001, p. 29. Cf. Hodder 1982, p. 58. See also Barth 1969, p. 10: "ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of social interaction and acceptance, but are quite to the contrary often the very foundations on which embracing social systems are built". F. Curta, loc.cit. misrepresents F. Barth's ideas: "the social interaction model rests on the assumption that stylistic characteristics will diffuse or be shared among social entities to an extent directly proportional to the frequency of interactions between these entities".

[56] Hodder 1982, p. 161; Curta 2001, p. 30. Cf. Jones 1997, p. 90: "The cultural practices and representations that become objectified as symbols of ethnicity are derived from, and resonate with, the habitual practices and experiences of the people involved, as well as reflecting the instrumental contingencies and meaningful cultural idioms of a particular situation". Curta makes a reference to S. Jones's Ph.D. dissertation, which was published as Jones 1997, but does not put between quotations marks what he has obviously taken from her.

This way of thinking allows F. Curta to associate ethnicity with an ethnonym (Slavic ethnicity),[57] something social scientists seldom do, which suggests that each people has its own way of life, and makes of ethnicity a synonym for national character. We are back to "the premise that cultural variation is discontinuous: that there are aggregates of people who essentially share a common culture, and interconnected differences that distinguish each such discrete culture from all others"[58], a premise against which the most social scientists of the last four decades have constructed their theories about ethnic phenomena.

What F. Curta believes about the relationship between artefacts and ethnicity is not easy to detect. On the same page he states that "[a]rtifacts are not properties of a society, but part of the life of that society. They cannot and should not be treated as 'phenotypic' expressions of a preformed identity" and that "[s]tyle may indeed be used to express ethnic identity".[59]

Anyway he clearly prefers Polly Wiessner's position against that of James Sackett, and the idea that style is a form of non-verbal communication about relative identity, an idea which he attributes to her and to Martin Wobst. F. Curta also borrows her distinction "between 'emblemic style,' which has a distinct referent and transmits a clear message to a defined target population about conscious affiliation or identity, and 'assertive style,' which is personally based and carries information supporting individual identity".[60]

Emblemic style replaces for F. Curta archaeological culture as a tool for archaeological ethnic identification. "Because it carries a distinct message, it is theoretically possible that it was used to mark and maintain boundaries, including ethnic ones". [61] Thus the Lombard-Gepidic wars "may have contributed to the consolidation of emblemic styles on the Lombard–Gepid frontier", and aristocratic women played a major role in their display,[62] bow-fibulae discovered in the "Slavic" settlements south and east of the Carpathians are also emblemic, only in their decoration, symbols of elite identity.[63] The position of the ovens in pit houses might have been emblemic style, or even their mere presence ("a remarkable cluster of clay ovens in Walachia, close to the Danube frontier") if not "a practical response to local conditions".[64] The shape of the pottery, frequently used by archaeologists to identify the Slavs is not emblemic style, but the decoration might be, as shown, F. Curta believes, by the distribution of vessels with stamped decoration vs. that of vessels decorated with finger impressions and notches: "the distribution of finds strongly suggests that this type of decoration was used in the late 500s and early 600s to mark ethnic boundaries".[65]

F. Curta's way of identifying what is stylistic in artefacts takes us back to the time before the discussions among archaeologists belonging to other research traditions than his about the distinction between style and function. He finds on a distribution map that Avar age pottery with *Kammstich* decoration and potter's marks on the bottom appear only in the northwestern region of the Carpathian Basin:

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[57] Curta 2001, p. 6.

[58] Barth 1969, p. 9.

[59] Curta 2001, p. 31.

[60] Curta 2001, p. 33. Cf. Wiessner 1983, p. 257.

[61] Curta 2001, p. 34.

[62] Curta 2001, p. 203-204.

[63] Curta 2001, p. 274-275. The archaeological argument for this is that "[d]espite systematic excavations and, in some cases, a considerable number of settlement features unearthed, no settlement produced more than one brooch. In most cases, the building in which this brooch was found was also the one with the richest furnishings, which may indicate that access to brooches as symbols of identity was restricted to elites". See also p. 342: "'Slavic' bow fibulae from Romania were primarily found in settlements and since there is always only one fibula per settlement, it is possible that these dress accessories were symbols of social identity, which served as markers of social status for the newly emerging elites".

[64] Curta 2001, p. 283-285. V. Baran's interpretation of the stone ovens inside the buildings as "a Slavic ethnic badge" is mentioned.

[65] Curta 2001, p. 285-294, with fig. 69. Quotation from p. 294. He does do not tell that those two kinds of decoration occur on vessels which are also distinguished by technological traits and shape. Nothing else suggests that the two areas made visible on the map were ethnic areas.

"Was this just a local fashion? The answer, in my opinion, must be negative, primarily because neither potter's marks, nor prick-like comb punch decoration had any practical function. There is no reason for which such attributes could not have been adopted by communities elsewhere in the Carpathian Basin. Both potter's marks and prick-like comb punch decoration may thus be treated as stylistic variation, namely as emblemic styles".[66]

Whatever is not functional is emblemic style. This is what M. Wobst describes as the state of the archaeological knowledge on style at the time when he started the research leading to his well-known article published in 1977: "what was considered 'stylistic' by archaeologists then was simply form that could not be explained 'any other way'… That most archaeologists then could not see stylistic form as having function left me dissatisfied: Why put time into something that did not have 'function'?"[67]

In his analyses F. Curta uses the traditional mapping methodology of culture-historical archaeology. Whatever makes a difference on the map is proclaimed emblemic style, i.e. a potentially ethnic style. However this procedure is supported not only by what he has learned to do as a culture-historical archaeologist. P. Wiessner also believed that archaeologists could distinguish between emblemic and assertive styles just by looking at the distribution of cultural traits, although she recognized factors (e.g. patterns of discard) which could make this difficult.[68] Sometimes F. Curta's identifications of ethnic difference are simple comparisons between the artefacts found in areas about which he knows from the historical research that they belonged to different peoples. He does that when he compares what he labels "Gepidia" and "Lombardia" and finds several categories of artefacts (earrings, combs and, of course, brooches) to be ethnically distinctive, without recourse to any theory about ethnicity and without any attempt to demonstrate that archaeological types had any significance for those who used the artefacts in the past. He comments on the distribution of several types of brooches and concludes: "[t]he distribution of all these types speaks for itself."[69] F. Curta does not ignore that the relation between modern classifications and classifications from the past is a problem. He believes that "it remains unclear whether the meaning of types, as imposed by archaeologists on to a group of artefacts, is only in the mind of the classifier, or, as Rusanova believed, nominal categories discovered by archaeologists by means of statistical identification of combinations of attributes may have also been recognized by manufacturers and users in the past".[70] I do not know what are for him "meanings of types". Anyway, ethnoarchaeological research gives us serious reasons to suspect that our types would be meaningless for the people from the past and that at any time, as today, people do not agree on how artefacts should be classified.[71]

F. Curta does not mention the critiques to which the very idea of style has been subjected by archaeologists,[72] or that other investigations than P. Wiessner's were not able to identify any links

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[66] Curta 2011, p. 540-541. The analysis of the pottery was made by Peter Stadler (2008, p. 73-78). In his review of Stadler 2005, F. Curta (2006a) criticizes P. Stadler because he does not demonstrate that his statistically proven associations of grave goods "were *ethnically* relevant in the past".

[67] Wobst 1999, p. 118. This article is mentioned in Curta 2011, n. 17.

[68] Wiessner 1983, p. 259: "assertive style should be distinguishable in the archaeological record from emblemic style, which has a discrete distribution, while the distribution of assertive style ranges from random to clinal depending on the above-mentioned conditions".

[69] Curta 2001, p. 200-202. The types are taken from the culture history archaeological literature. The new knowledge about ethnic phenomena imported by F. Curta seems to be compatible with traditional typological classifications.

[70] Curta 2001, p. 229.

[71] See, for instance, Herbich, Dietler 2008, p. 228-232, who have constructed 13 archaeological form categories for Luo pottery and found that each potter community uses a local subset of those forms and that "local classificatory vocabularies for vessel types are also regionally distinctive (with the same name used for different forms in different areas, and different names applied to similar forms). This makes "Luo pottery" only "a convenient 'etic' collective analytical construct meaning simply all the pottery produced by Luo potters, without implying …stylistic unity, or 'emic' sense of ethnic indexicality".

[72] See, e.g. Boast 1997, p. 174: "style is not a characteristic of material culture, but is a result of a contemporary way of conceptualizing material culture. … Style becomes that category of human activities that embellishes the material world with social character - with those material features that we 'add' to the natural to construct the social. This view demands that we accept an essentialism, that there exists a basic essence or purpose to things prior to them becoming social"; p. 191: "the fundamental assumptions on which style is based are fundamentally flawed and that the search for a meaningful definition of style, if we are interested in a hermeneutic account of social action, is

between material culture and ethnicity,[73] or that, after the Sackett-Wiessner debate, other archaeologists believe passive traditions of production are better indicators of prehistoric social boundaries.[74] Even from P. Wiessner's research he does not mention what could create problems for his interpretation: the extent to which P. Wiessner's referents for "emblemic style" are ethnic groups is debatable, the attributes used in the analysis were chosen primarily according to what the 55 !Kung, 4 G/wi and 6 !Xo considered to be distinguishing features, emblemic stylistic difference was given by the size and shapes of the metal arrow points hammered out of fencing wire, not by their decoration, different attributes on such simple artefacts as the Kalahari San arrow points simultaneously carried different kinds of social information, and the style of those arrow points had a very practical purpose (it allowed the hunters to distinguish between the animals they hunted and the animals hunted by others).[75]

Style, despite the construction around it of a "better" story by using the information from the written sources about the historical context, is just a new name for what culture-historical archaeologists usually do: they use some cultural traits – most of them agree today that not all cultural traits signify ethnic identity – to determine to whom artefacts and features belonged.[76] The problem with "emblemic style", with its clear referents, is that it is difficult for an archaeologist to say what those referents were. In fact, what we, as archaeologists, are trying to do is to understand the social past which contained those referents and "emblemic style" does not help in any way to pursue this goal.[77] We have first to develop, through the study of the archaeological record, an understanding of what people from the past did, and only then can we hope to make good interpretations of the distribution of stylistic traits.[78]

F. Curta does not elaborate on the relation between his understanding of ethnicity as habitus and his use of emblemic styles in order to identify peoples from the past. In his presentation habitus becomes ethnic style, a particular way of doing things, an idea as old as the nation states, traced by Carlo Ginzburg back to Johann Joachim Winkelmann and developed during the 19th century towards the idea of national styles.[79]

There are differences between the two authors: F. Curta is aware that social scientists do not share the same views on ethnic phenomena,[80] while S. Brather's attitude toward the social sciences might have something to do with some increasingly popular interdisciplinary practices, based on the idea of the unity of scientific knowledge,[81] contrary to the self restraint expressed by several German archaeologists during the "mixed argumentation" debate.

Since both authors rely for their information on anthropological perspectives on ethnicity on the book of S. Jones, one could expect them to have similar views. This is not the case: F. Curta embraces G.C. Bentley's habitus view of ethnicity and uses the notion of style as a tool, while S. Brather takes the views of F. Barth seriously (he never quotes him, all he knows about his ideas is borrowed from S. Jones)

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futile". See also Schiffer, Skibo 1997, p. 1997: "No longer does it make sense to ask if technical choices were stylistic or functional, for these categories lack unambiguous behavioral referents among the myriad determinants of design variability".

[73] Driver 2008, p. 61, 64.

[74] Stark et al. 1998, 211, apud Driver 2008, p. 66.

[75] Wiessner 1983, p. 262, 267-268, 273 . See also p. 259: "basic dress form".

[76] For an understanding of what F. Curta does with his concept of style as a return to culture-historical archaeology, see Gillett 2006, p. 253, n. 3. See also Cameron 1998, p. 191: "the idea that social or ethnic groups have particular ways of manufacturing things or accomplishing tasks is, of course, inherent in the traditional culture area concept".

[77] See Wiessner 1990, p. 105: "Although it would be ideal to have a definition of style that would allow us to identify stylistic attributes in artifacts, to separate the stylistic from the functional from the technological, I doubt this will ever be possible due to the very nature of style, alas", Hegmon 1998, p. 273: "A prehistoric material culture boundary may be indicative of some kind of social boundaries, but such a material boundary should not automatically be equated with an ethnic boundary without further information on social processes", and Lane 2006, p. 416: "different artefact attributes can convey different types of meanings within any group, and … the significance and meaning content of a particular attribute can vary between groups and individuals, and across different social, spatial and temporal contexts".

[78] See Wiessner 1983, p. 256: "the understanding of stylistic variation depends heavily on understanding the behavior that generates it".

[79] Ginzburg 1998, 33-34 and 39-40.

[80] See Curta 2001, p. 14-35.

[81] Against this idea see Galison, Stump 1996.

and this leads him toward a skeptical position, based especially on the subjective character of ethnicity. This character is repeatedly mentioned also by F. Curta, but he believes that the patterns created by repetition allow archaeologists to recognize ethnicity, ignoring that such patterns (in fact just the distribution maps which culture-historical archaeologists are accustomed to interpret) can receive different interpretations, to which S. Brather gives a lot of attention, and which are not ignored by V. Bierbrauer.[82] In part, F. Curta's epistemic optimism is based on the highly questionable idea that dominated the beginnings of post-processual archaeology, before practice theories kicked in, that "material culture is a 'text' to be 'read'" by archaeologists who should identify and study contexts in order to interpret meaning. He believes that "[i]t is particularly in this light that an archaeology of ethnicity becomes possible".[83]

Both S. Brather and F. Curta fail to address the basic question raised by V. Bierbrauer: since social sciences produce knowledge by studying the social present, what is their relevance for the past? By doing so they transform ethnicity into a uniform reality[84] which links the present with the past, thus continuing to make the past relevant for the ethnic present, as their culture-historical archaeology colleagues have done before them. Although the narrative of ethnic persistence is now missing, the idea of a world divided, in the present as in the past, into bounded ethnic entities, central in the nationalist representation of social reality, is reproduced by their interpretations.

By imagining that all archeologists need from the social sciences for their wishes about the study of ethnic phenomena to be fulfilled is a good definition, associated with an appropriate new methodology (recommended by S. Brather, but not by F. Curta), we are have little choice but to shape the social past according to such definitions. Our methods will not be able to show anything else about ethnic phenomena than what we believed they were before using them. If we wish to avoid this obvious reproduction of the contemporary past[85] in our representations of the distant past, we have to leave open what we think about it, to let our finds surprise us, not to make them behave according to our plans. This means that we should assume the difficult task of separating the universal from the local in our understanding of social reality, something which requires a much more serious engagement with the social sciences than the search for the definition which can tell us how things are or how they were. There is no such definition:

> "Certainly no use of the terms 'ethnic' or 'ethnicity' should occur without extensive and detailed description of the situation to which it refers in both sociological and cultural terms. … We must know the particulars of each case, what the interplay is between the categories and concepts people use on the one hand and the way they use them and how they act upon them on the other. Only then can we begin to understand the impact on the larger society of a particular way of viewing and

[82] F. Curta has harsh words for S. Brather's skepticism: "to deny the possibility that ethnicity can be the explanation for such a pattern is at best an exaggeration and at worst a demonstration of ignorance" (2007, p. 180).

[83] Curta 2007, p. 179-180, with reference to Hodder 1986, p. 153. Compare with Hodder 2003, p. 204: "Reading text is not an appropriate analogy for reading material culture because text is a different sort of sign than material culture". He continues, however, by considering text a better metaphor for material culture than language. See also p. 169: "…we can resurrect the idea of reading the past if, ironically, we remember that material culture is not text. Text is only a metaphor, not an analogy, for material culture".

[84] S. Brather recognizes a great diversity of ethnic phenomena and even quotes Max Weber for his statement that "ethnisch" is "ein für jede wirklich exakte Untersuchung ganz unbrauchbarer Sammelname" (2004, p. 321), but he does not go beyond the recognition of their historicity and the necessity of building historically and regionally specific types. For ethnic groups in state societies he claims that they are "nicht grundsätzlich verschieden" from nations (he refers to the similar construction of the "Bewußtsein der Zusammengehörigkeit" (2004, p. 166). In doing so he writes that nations are more open than ethnic groups, thus giving back to ancient peoples their character of proto-nations, in which the national ideals of closedness are better represented.

[85] It is not the immediate past: F. Barth's ideas were published in 1969, and the book of S. Jones, published in 1997, very important for both authors, refers mainly to views expressed before 1990. In their recent articles, e.g. Curta 2011, more recent social science research on ethnic phenomena is mentioned, but nothing that would change their previously expressed views. See, e.g., Brather 2004, p. 97, n. 4, where an important article by Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2000), which aims at showing that "identity" should be abandoned as an analytical tool, is reduced to a warning against misuses of this notion.

being in the world. It is in understanding the complexities of these interrelationships and of the changes that occur in them that the interest lies, not in trying to find a universally applicable definition".[86]

The interdisciplinary practices of S. Brather and F. Curta also raise questions about what we can expect from archaeology as discipline and about its autonomy. If we use knowledge from the social sciences as they do, as a true image of social reality, past and present, we, as archaeologists, can do no more than to illustrate it. Social scientists learn nothing from us, except perhaps something about how social sciences can be used and misunderstood. Thus archaeology, from an ancillary discipline to history becomes an ancillary discipline to the social sciences, something which does not leave S. Brather indifferent. He takes care to indicate that the new knowledge about ethnicity he is using is a result of both historical and social science research. Ancillary means of limited scope and utility, with no means of its own to construct autonomous representations of the past. To do this we need more from the social sciences than definitions.

This is not easy to do for archaeologists trained in the culture history tradition because if some ideas taken from the social sciences seem helpful at first sight, others question the meaning of what we are accustomed to take for granted. Perhaps the most important failure to grasp the meanings of the social science research on ethnic phenomena is the already mentioned misunderstanding of ethnicity as something which resembles "national character". S. Brather writes about ethnicity as "gruppenspezifisch Charakter", [87] while F. Curta believes ethnicity is a "mode of action and representation" and that there is such a thing as "Slavic ethnicity". The main purpose of the use of "ethnicity" by social scientists, at least beginning with F. Barth's "Introduction", is to separate the study of ethnicity from the study of culture, to direct the research away from the description of commonalities within ethnic boundaries towards the relations between people across them: "[t]o think of ethnicity in relation to one group and its culture is like trying to clap with one hand".[88] A good example of what we are inclined to ignore, because it is contrary to what we are accustomed to believe, is an important passage from F. Barth's "Introduction", not mentioned by F. Curta, who claims to be familiar with the work of the Norwegian anthropologist:

> "Since the historical provenance of any assemblage of culture traits is diverse, the viewpoint also gives scope for an 'ethnohistory' which chronicles cultural accretion and change, and seeks to explain why certain items were borrowed. However, what is the unit whose continuity in time is depicted in such studies? Paradoxically, it must include cultures in the past which would clearly be excluded in the present because of differences in form – differences of precisely the kind that are diagnostic in synchronic differentiation of ethnic units" (1969, p. 12).

Here F. Barth draws the consequences of his views on ethnic phenomena for historical research: a long term history of an ethnic unit has no meaning, because there is no cultural content to survive the constantly changing synchronic differentiation. It is not possible to take this seriously, as we should, and continue to do culture-historical archaeology. I am aware that F. Curta prefers the views on ethnicity held by G.C. Carter to what F. Barth has written, but I do not understand why he continues to mention F. Barth as a source of his thinking about ethnic phenomena. The following example shows how comprehensive is the influence of the culture history paradigm on representations of ethnic phenomena which claim to be inspired from the social sciences. F. Curta writes that:

> "scholars are now beginning to realize that just as in the modern world, women in the medieval past often symbolized ethnic collectives and were regularly regarded as biological reproducers of ethnic groups. Women were often given 'the social role of intergenerational transmitters of cultural traditions, customs, songs, cuisine, and, of course, the mother tongue'. They were thus attributed the role of being ideological reproducers of their ethnic group, since the ethnic group's culture was structured around gendered institutions such as marriage, family, and sexuality".[89]

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[86] Blu 1980, p. 227.
[87] Brather 2000, p. 175.
[88] Barth 1994b.
[89] Curta 2011, p. 542. The quotation is from Yuval-Davis 1993, p. 627, and it refers to the role ascribed to women in national projects.

This is another attempt to equate ancient ethnic phenomena with nations. Despite the assertion made in the same article about the "few cultural elements" of which ethnicity is made, we are back to "the ethnic group's culture". Women appear in F. Curta's interpretations as they are imagined in national ideologies, which suggest that they were unable to choose what they wanted to wear, just passive vehicles of identity, reduced to their presumed "ideological role".[90]

The lack of reflexivity about how they came to acquire from the social sciences knowledge on ethnic phenomena makes the discussion between archaeologists who use it difficult, if not impossible, mostly because they cannot tell why they choose one social scientist and not another. F. Curta is thoroughly dissatisfied with the work of S. Brather, among others because he ignores the works of F. Barth and G.C. Bentley and because "he defines ethnicity in an utterly conventional way, a way that leaves too much out".[91] Both F. Curta and S. Brather rely to a great extent on the book of S. Jones from 1997 for their knowledge about ethnicity. F. Curta was impressed by the importance given to G.C. Bentley in this book, S. Brather by the ideas of F. Barth, as presented by S. Jones (he never mentions F. Barth). Why should one choose any of them? How can we, as archaeologists, tell who is right? F. Curta chooses the intuitive view of G.C. Carter, S. Brather the counterintuitive view of F. Barth. I believe S. Brather has made the good choice and his efforts to confront the challenge raised by F. Barth to any archaeological interpretation of ethnic phenomena deserve to be continued, because F. Barth's ideas have a much greater influence on the current research on ethnic phenomena than G.C. Carter's[92] and because they are supported by a growing conviction among social scientists that such phenomena are not generated by cultural or behavioral commonalities but by more or less successful attempts at political mobilization.[93]

F. Curta implies that he knows better than S. Brather what he is talking about not only because S. Brather does not mention F. Barth and G.C. Carter. He also ignores, we are told, "central ideas of the current debate about ethnicity". Among them, "the prototypical manner in which ethnic groups define themselves in terms of material culture". I have never encountered a discussion among archaeologists or social scientists about this "prototypical manner" and I do not know what F. Curta means by this. This kind of discussion, instead of leading to a better understanding, has only the consequence of raising one social scientist (and the archaeologist who likes him) above another. This could be amusing for social scientists. Unfortunately they do not read what culture-historical archaeologists write. We should be able to judge the merits of any anthropological or sociological theory about ethnicity starting not with our doubtful assessments about who's who in the social sciences, but with the contexts in which and for which it was produced.

The attempts made by S. Brather and F. Curta to do research on ethnic phenomena by using knowledge from the social sciences against the knowledge embedded in their own tradition of archaeological research is hampered by their lack of reflexivity. Culture-historical archaeology is not good archaeology with a bad definition of ethnicity. It is an archaeological world view made of undiscussed assumptions, exemplary practices, and particular ways of conceiving interdisciplinarity.[94] It is a living environment, with multiple connections with the social reality surrounding and permeating it. The impact of imported knowledge from the social sciences is not determined primarily by its quality, which archaeologists are anyway poorly prepared to judge, but its prestige in the larger academic environment, and this depends on many factors, including local interdisciplinarities and the relations with the political field. Under adverse conditions new knowledge can be ignored, dismissed, isolated, or made

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[90] Against "the assumption that, from the standpoint of archaeology, women were passive icons of group identity" see Effros 2004.

[91] Curta 2006b, p. 92.

[92] See, for instance, in a book about social identity, at its third edition, the assessment of R. Jenkins: "Barth's body of work is one of the richest and most imaginative in anthropology, and in social science more widely" (2008, p. 118). R. Jenkins does not mention G.C. Bentley's article.

[93] Brubaker 2002.

[94] See Johnson 2006, p. 117: "there is a lack of correspondence between theoretical backgrounds and affiliations that are overtly cited by archaeologists, on the one hand, and, on the other, the deeper underlying assumptions and traditions that structure their work and condition its acceptance".

meaningless by misunderstanding and adaptation. In the case of F. Curta we have a culture-historical archaeologist who selects a social theory compatible with the nationalist representation of society and continues to use the same methods he used before his claimed conversion to non-nationalist views on ethnicity. In that of S. Brather we have a serious attempt to transform the research tradition into which he was trained following the guidelines suggested by it: better definitions and methods. His emphasis on alternative interpretations as a way out of the "ethnic paradigm" is not contrary to what other culture-historical archaeologists think, including V. Bierbrauer. S. Brather also deserves credit for his efforts to maintain active what is unsettling for the traditional "ethnische Deutung" in the knowledge on ethnic phenomena taken from the social sciences. Better results could be obtained by recognizing the incompatibility between culture-historical archaeology and the knowledge on social reality developed by the social sciences. By focusing on ethnicity, even if are able to understand currently valid views, like those of F. Barth, we still have many problems with other representations. Not only ethnicity looks different to social scientists, the whole humanity looks different. S. Brather and F. Curta focus on ethnicity, on what could be a better understanding of ethnic groups. But their insufficient interest for what social scientists believe about groups or societies has important consequences on what they perceive to be true about ethnicity. Although both are aware of the reification problem, they are unable to imagine groups otherwise than primary and their relations secondary, to do research knowing that groups do not exist without these relations.[95]

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[95] See Strathern 1996, p. 51.

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