

Ethnicity, Archaeology and Nationalism: Remarks on the Current State of Research

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Abstract:

While in the modern world, ethnicity has become the politicization of culture, the old controversy over the relation between ethnicity and archaeology refuses to die. The first studies of that relation dealt primarily with what made the historical interpretation of the archaeological material dependent upon the political situation. Soon, the emphasis shifted to the link between archaeology and the beginnings of nationalism, especially the influence of Romanticism, the rise of the culture-history paradigm, and of the historical interest in ethnogenesis. Now, the emphasis is more on the role of archaeology in the shaping of social memory as past that may be used politically. This study focuses on the new trends in this research field, particularly those concerned with the social mobilization by means of the ancestors' myths, with pseudo-archaeology, and the staging of historical authenticity through heritage tourism. The second part of the article highlights differences between approaches to ethnogenesis in the European and American archaeology and illustrates the latter by means of three key studies by Christopher Stojanowski, Scott Ortman, and Laurie Wilkie. To judge from the titles of the publications that came out in Eastern Europe and the United States over the last year, several common trends are apparent, along with significant divergences. Archaeology is increasingly perceived as the most important, if not the only way to understand the ethnicity of immigrants in the (medieval) past. Archaeologists have taken a front seat in all debates about ethnic identities. Instead of state authorities or the ideological pressure of various political regimes, the emphasis in Eastern Europe is now on individual archaeologists, the role of their life experience and of their education in the ethnic interpretation of the archaeological record. Meanwhile, in the United States, it is the ethnic identity of the archaeologists themselves that has now come under lens. In other words, agency is restored to archaeologists, who are now regarded as much more capable of original work and decision making than before. Finally, gender perspectives are now applied to the study of the relations between ethnicity, archaeology, and nationalism. In both Eastern Europe and the United States, there is a conspicuous interest in women archaeologists.

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