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IDENTITY AND ETHNICITY IN CURRENT ARCHAEOLOGY: INTERVIEW WITH SUSANNE HAKENBECK

Identidad y Etnicidad en la Arqueología actual: Entrevista con Susanne Hakenbeck

Identitatea eta Etnizitatea gaur egungo Arkeologian: Susanne Hakenbeckekin elkarrizketa

"But a critical examination of our ideas about the past, including concepts of ethnic groups, nations and civilisations and what motivates them, allows us to question whether the narratives we are told about cause and effect in society and about the apparently intrinsic characteristics of certain groups are a reliable representation of a complex reality."
(Susanne Hakenbeck)

Susanne Hakenbeck

Susanne Hakenbeck is lecturer in Historical Archaeology at the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology of the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research (University of Cambridge) since 2013. Her research focuses on the social transformations in Central Europe after the dismantling of the Roman Empire, including the study of social identities and population mobility. For this purpose she has carried out several isotope analyses on Early Medieval populations, e.g. the Bavarian area, which has been the main core of her book *Local, regional and ethnic identities in early medieval cemeteries in Bavaria*. She is currently studying the interactions of nomadic pastoralists with settled agricultural populations in the Roman provinces during the fourth and fifth centuries. She has also focused on issues like particular mortuary practices, such as the 'Hunnic' modified skulls or cremation practices.

1. The issue of Arkeogazte focuses on the archaeology of identity and otherness, so the first question should be about 'identity' in itself as a category. How would you define identity? What significance has the problem of identity in the field of archaeology?

'Identity' can be understood as the identification of an individual with categories of people or groups within society. Fundamentally, this identification with a group is an active process – as Rogers Brubaker (2002) said, groupness is an event specific to a time and place, it has to be constituted. However, in this process we can often see a tension between self-identification ('I belong to

the group X') and external ascription ('You are a Y').

We can access identity through the material world, because it sustains itself through people's activities. Thus, for example, we can learn about religious identity from skeletal activity markers, as Sarah Inskip (2013) has shown for the Roman to Islamic-period cemetery at Écija in southern Spain. Or we can learn about masculine identities from a study of grave goods in early medieval cemeteries in Germany, carried out by Doris Gutsmiedl-Schümann (2012).

The use of the concept of identity in archaeology developed out of feminist and gender archaeology of the 1980s and 90s. Prior to that Anglophone archaeology had gone through a period in which past societies were understood as large, unified bodies, that were mainly divided on the basis of class or economic activities. Women and marginal groups such as children or old people did not feature. Gender archaeology criticised this monolithic view of society and, instead, aimed to study diversity in society. Initially the focus was on gender, but subsequent studies examined a wide variety of categories: childhood, old age, disability, and also ethnicity and religious identity.

The concept of 'identity' allows us to change the scale of analysis from the whole society – the Durkheimian perspective – to the individual and how she or he fits into groups within society. The popularity of identity studies in archaeology is therefore representative of a wider shift in how we think about past societies.

2. One of the main interests in your work is the archaeological study of ethnicity. What relation do you consider is there between identity and ethnicity? And between ethnicity and other levels of identity like gender, age, class or religion?

The study of ethnic identity is more complex than studying gender or age identities. Gender and age are universal categories in human experience because they are tied to biological realities, though the exact nature of the categories is socially variable. To study them, we can start from physical sex or age markers in the skeleton and relate these to material expressions of gender or age. The extent to which biology matches up with cultural ideas can yield very interesting results.

In the case of ethnic identity, we cannot assume a universal experience. Humans tend to put each other into groups, but the nature of the groups and ideas about how a person can be included or excluded from them is highly variable. Historical and ethnographic studies show us that belonging to a group can be tied to ideas about shared ancestry, language, the law or specific behaviours.

Ethnic identity is a component of group identity, but the concepts of ethnicity are historically specific. In some societies written sources may tell us of how people are categorised as being in or out, and there it can be interesting to examine the material evidence for such demarcations. The relationship between Egypt and Nubia is a good example. Here the material expressions of ethnicity were very fruitfully explored by Stuart Tyson Smith (2003). However, we have to be very careful not to go hunting for named groups in the past by isolating apparently diagnostic items of material culture. Material culture cannot be used as an ID card.

To study ethnicity in the past, we have to start from the bottom up and investigate behaviours that can be linked to 'groupness'. This can be the use of shared material culture or shared practices. It is important to note that shared material culture cannot be considered a reflection of ethnicity – in the way Gordon Childe and Gustaf Kossinna and many others saw it – but, ins-

CONTRIBUTI DI ARCHEOLOGIA MEDIEVALE 5

Susanne Hakenbeck

Local, regional and ethnic identities in early medieval cemeteries in Bavaria

Local, Regional and Ethnic Identities in Early Medieval Cemeteries in Bavaria, one of the publications by S. Hakenbeck.

tead, shared material culture creates groups and people can use it to manipulate group belonging.

3. In the study of ethnicity there is a main division between essentialists – those who think there is an immanent essence in ethnicity – and constructivists – those who think ethnicity is a social and contextual construction, where and why do you position yourself?

If we consider ethnographic studies of ethnicity, it is quite clear that it is a social construct, because definitions of who is in and who is out of the group are highly variable across the world and across time.

Recent years have seen an explosion of the use of genetics and isotope analysis in archaeology; in particular, the use of aDNA has really taken off. The majority of these studies are interested in past population dynamics – ancestry and migration. The juxtaposition of these studies with social investigations of ethnicity can be extremely productive. Leach et al. (2010), for example, identified a high-status woman from Roman York who was apparently of North African descent. Studies like this can provide very important insights into how visibly different people were perceived, even about concepts of 'race' in the Roman period, and about the social impact of mobility. However, we still have to be very clear that ethnicity and ancestry are different categories. Information about ancestry does not tell us anything about perceptions of being in or outside a group.

4. In your book 'Local, regional and ethnic identities in early medieval cemeteries in Bavaria' you affirmed that 'There is no straightforward or direct relationship between material culture and ethnicity', does it mean that we cannot approach ethnicity from archaeological sources?

I meant by that sentence that we cannot take isolated elements of material culture – brooches, buckles, pottery types – and use them as indicators of ethnicity. This is an approach that has been taken very frequently by archaeologists, but it does not reflect how people actually use material culture. In his ethno-archaeological work in the Baringo District in Kenya, Ian Hodder (1982) explored how people use different types of jewellery, pottery and other household goods. He found that while there were shared distributions of one type of artefact, these distributions did not overlap with other artefacts. While the individual artefacts are socially and culturally meaningful, they don't hold meaning as a homogeneous assemblage. Instead, different artefacts are meaningful depending on the social context.

In our archaeological investigations, we should similarly consider the situational relevance of material culture. In a funerary assemblage, for example, grave goods can inform us about group belonging, as well as gender, age,

status, profession or other categories of identity.

5. In some of your works you have dealt with the question of the relationship between the archaeological study of ethnicity and nationalism, what do you think about this issue?

The history of archaeology as a discipline is closely bound up with nationalism. In particular in northern Europe where there were no remains of the classical civilisations to draw on, archaeology was used to create a narrative about the antiquity of the emerging nation states. Much of the archaeological work of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was carried out within a nationalist framework whereby apparently typical items of material culture were used to trace past settlement areas of ethnic groups. Gustaf Kossinna did this most explicitly, but he was only the most extreme example in a wider field of research. In the last twenty years we have seen a number of detailed critical evaluations of the contributions of archaeology to the nationalist agenda, notably in an edited volume by Heiko Steuer (2001) on German pre- and proto-history and a book by Bonnie Effros (2012) on Merovingian archaeology in France. Such studies of our own disciplinary history are essential because they force us to reflect on the concepts and methods that we use and that we may have taken for granted as 'common sense'.

6. Mobility and migrations have been other objects of study in your work affirming that 'it is more useful to adopt 'mobility' as an encompassing and more open concept', how can we understand past migrations looking through the archaeological record?

Migrations are very difficult to study archaeologically. Archaeologists have traditionally used material culture as a proxy for migrations. The classic example is the early medieval period, where the 'Great Migrations' are traced through the movement of jewellery types, such as brooches, based on the assumption that these brooches are an integral component of ethnic costume and are therefore not traded independently. However, this assumption does not hold. Philipp von Rummel (2007) has dismantled it very effectively, and instead makes the case that this type of dress can be considered the dress of an emerging new elite that exhibits wide-ranging 'international' connections.

Modified skulls from Altenerding, one of Hakenbeck´s field of research.

Yet, sometimes it is possible to identify mobility, perhaps even migration, using material culture. With the exception of luxury items or mass-produced ceramics, ceramic technology travels with the skill of the potter, but is rarely traded. Pottery can therefore be an indicator of mobility. At the fifth-century Anglo-Saxon cremation cemetery of Spong Hill in Norfolk, Catherine Hills (1998) identified hand-made cremation urns that had decorations that were so similar to urns

found in Issendorf in Lower Saxony that they may have been made by the same potter. This is a rare example where material culture can provide direct insight into mobility.

7. In the last few years you have been working on stable isotopes as a means to analyse social identities, what are the possibilities and the limits of this innovative technique in relation to the study of past identities?

Isotope analysis (in particular of strontium isotope ratios) has developed as a new method for studying mobility more directly than is possible with material culture. Indeed, it allows us to identify first-generation immigrants in a cemetery population, but, of course, the method is not without limitations. First, while we can be sure that individuals with non-local isotopic signatures really did not grow up locally, we cannot be sure of the reverse, that is, individuals with local isotopic signatures may have grown up elsewhere, but in an area of similar geology. We may therefore be underestimating levels of mobility. Second, it is not possible to pin-point a particular area of origin, because strontium isotope ratios cannot be matched to specific geological areas. Finally, it is very difficult to quantify what constitutes a migration. What proportion of any given cemetery population should be non-local for it to be evidence of migration? When do normal levels of mobility become a migration?

8. In relation to the limits you have pointed out before, what do you think is the main objectives or the 'agenda' of stable isotope analyses for the next years?

Isotope analysis can make a very important contribution to studies of identity, because it allows us to access people's activities and practices, such their diet, levels of mobility, or animal husbandry activities, and shared practices can generate shared identity. On a methodological level, isotope analysis is constantly developing, but I believe the next few years will allow more fine-grained studies, using multiple isotopes and multiple tissue types (e.g. different teeth, bones, hair, even of single amino acids). This will allow us to study the biographies of individuals in great detail, and this, in turn, has implications for our social interpretations.

I believe the most significant developments will arise from a very close integration of social and theoretical approaches with scientific techniques. This will require various specialists to become multi-lingual in the languages of their respective research traditions.

9. What are your main conclusions from the stable isotope analyses in the area of Bavaria you have carried out from the perspective of identity?

Our isotopic study of the cemeteries in Bavaria (Hakenbeck et al. 2010) revealed to me the power of an approach that focuses on lifetime changes in individuals. It became a starting point for my most recent research project on the evidence for Hunnic migrations into the Pannonian basin in the fifth century AD where I am now taking this further. In terms of material evidence, the Huns are almost invisible. Material culture that derives from the Pontic region or central Asia is heterogeneous and sporadic. However, isotopic analysis allows us to identify settled agricultural and nomadic-pastoralist groups through their diet. We can then consider subsistence practices – agriculture or animal herding -- as constitutive of group identities in a way that is not possible through material culture.

In a recent publication, Kristian Kristiansen (https://www.academia.edu/10100372/TOWARDS_A_NEW_PARADIGM_The_Third_Science_Revolution_and_its_Possible_Conse-

quences_in_Archaeology) have affirmed that the archaeological application of DNA and stable isotopes analyses can be consider the 'third revolution' in archaeology, do you agree with this affirmation?

I believe Kristiansen is overly optimistic in his assessment. Many studies of aDNA and isotopes treat the scientific methods as a kind of magic bullet that can now finally provide answers to previously unanswerable questions, forgetting that the questions themselves may be problematic. Thus, for example, the question 'can we trace the migrations of the Franks/Goths/Lombards/etc.?' is predicated on the idea that these existed as stable and bounded ethnic groups that can be identified materially. Of course, a number of archaeologists and historians, including myself, dispute this fundamental assumption. A more productive, open enquiry may be 'what can we learn about the nature of mobility in the post-Roman period?'

Genetic and isotopic data are additional lines of evidence, alongside material culture, osteological information, environmental data, settlement surveys, material provenance studies, studies of parasites and pathogens, and any other creative way to explore the past. However, new methods and new data will not automatically advance the field without continued theoretical and methodological reflection on the questions that we ask.

10. How can the study of past identities and ethnicities shed light to current political and social problems?

Numerous opinion pieces last year attempted to present historical parallels to our present refugee crisis and the problem of Islamic terrorism in Europe. One of the most high profile pieces was 'Paris and the Fall of Rome' published in the Boston Globe (16 November 2015) by Niall Ferguson, professor of History at Harvard (https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2015/11/16/paris-and-fall-rome/ErlRjkQMGXhvDarTIxXpdK/story.html). It tells a compelling narrative of an empire threatened by barbarians: in AD 376 the Goths entered the Roman empire, in 2015 Syrians form a new 'Great Migration' from the East, both endangering civilisation. As the Roman empire fell, so will this new migration period bring about the fall of the European empire, the EU if we do not defend ourselves and our civilisation. Just as the Roman empire should have defended itself against the barbarians instead of accommodating and integrating them, Ferguson implies, so the EU should now do the same.

Ferguson's piece takes an almost Hegelian approach to history. Ethnic groups, here Europeans and Syrians, there Romans and Goths, are animated with the spirit of history that gives them agency beyond the identifiable actions of individuals. They appear to have timeless intrinsic qualities – civilization, reason, the rule of law, or barbarism, religious extremism, chaos. Ferguson's groups are like revenants, animated zombie-like by a will beyond their own. There is no room in this narrative for individual agency, or even the unintended consequences of technology, such as those caused by the tweet by the German Federal Office for Migration and refugees on 25 August 2015 (https://twitter.com/BAMF_Dialog/status/636138495468285952).

What can we learn from studying the past about our current political and social problems? I would say history really does not repeat itself. But a critical examination of our ideas about the past, including concepts of ethnic groups, nations and civilisations and what motivates them, allows us to question whether the narratives we are told about cause and effect in society and about the apparently intrinsic characteristics of certain groups are a reliable representation of a complex reality.

11. We always finish our interviews asking for some advice for young researchers from the point of view of our interviewed.

More people are accessing Higher Education than ever before, yet times are tough. The expansion of universities has not fulfilled the promise of greater social mobility. Universities are run increasingly like businesses with students being turned into consumers and consumer satisfaction measured by satisfaction surveys, learning outcomes and employment opportunities.

My only advice is: defend learning and research for their own sake. The study of the past has no immediate social or economic function, but thinking and questioning are valuable activities in their own right. As Kent Flannery said: 'Archaeology is the most fun you can have with your pants on.' (Flannery 1982, 278). Enjoy it!

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