

Digging Politics: The Ancient Past and Political Present in East-Central Europe

Veranstalter: Emily Hanscam / James Koranyi, Durham University

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The workshop was a joint call by the Departments of History and Archaeology, organised by James Koranyi and Emily Hanscam. Interdisciplinary in its approach, the programme featured not only by historians and archaeologists but also by an ethnologist, linguist, political scientist and a journalist. The workshop aimed to bring together different approaches and disciplines in a collaborative, comparative and interdisciplinary manner and establish a conversation about the uses of the ancient past from the Cold War to the present.

JAMES KORANYI (Durham) framed the workshop around the questions of why then (temporally) and why there (geographically). Why has the ancient past mattered in east-central Europe in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? Moreover, how to make sense of it? The workshop focused on similarities and contradictions, top-down and bottom-up processes, the involved actors, concepts of national identity formation and considered comparative perspectives to Europe as a whole.

ALEXANDER RUBEL (Iași) focused on the idea of autochthonous origins in intellectual and radical discourses in Romania. According to Rubel, the spiritual foundations of a politically instrumentalised history in Romania can be placed in the inter-war period. A „young generation“ of writers and scholars took the lead in changing Romanian nationalism. The search for uniqueness was accepted uncritically in public. Influential scholars, uncritical citation circles and a free book market after 1989 lead to the preservation of the Dacian blood and soil theory. The Dacians are, in the public reception, still a significant ethnic and „biological“ element of Romanian national identity. He illustrated this through the logo of the Romanian EU Council Presidency 2019, which is a stylised Dacian wolf and was chosen in public polls.

OLEKSII RUDENKO (Glasgow) explored the reinvention of Spartacus as a Soviet Union

hero and the shifts in the reception and perception of this historical figure, as well as the methods of implementing the Soviet narrative on Spartacus in various dimensions. He followed it from art and culture to sports and toponyms and to the further development of „Spartacus“ image in the period after the Second World War. At first, the revolutionary aspect of Spartacus was emphasised, while the intensive use of new media in the Soviet Union made the figure into a popular proto-communist hero. Spartacus featured more and more as a symbol of the competitive spirit in sports. The continuing popularity of Spartacus leads not only to the renaming of sports clubs but also to the Cold War shift from the „Spartakiad“ (effectively Soviet Olympic games) idea to the People’s Game of the USSR which was adopted by other Warsaw Pact states, too.

FLORIAN OSTROWSKI (Vienna) opened the next panel with a presentation about Thracian archaeology and national identity in communist Bulgaria. He focused on archaeological exhibitions and objects, which have been ascribed to the Thracians. Through the presentation of metallurgical objects in wandering exhibitions, like those presented 1975 in Vienna, the artefacts were intended to create a positive image of Bulgaria and help to establish a new national identity within the country: competing with neighbouring countries for prestige and vying for autonomy from Moscow. The archaeological exhibitions were used as a strategic tool and political message, by associating ancient Thrace with modern Bulgaria. While Thracology is only gradually undergoing a critical review of established interpretations of the Thracian past, Thracian culture itself has become an essential part of tourism.

KATRIN KREMMLER (Berlin) presented current entanglements of archaeo-anthropology and archaeogenetics with neo-nationalist geopolitics and identity politics in Hungary. Her main focus was Kurultáj, an annual cultural festival mixing historical re-enactments of ancient nomad warrior culture, neo-paganism, ethno-sports, nationalist rock music, and Hungarian folklore, with a stage for government cultural diplomacy, claiming a Eurasian identity and celebrating

Hungary's new geopolitical and economic links to Turkic countries and Central Asia. Central elements are scientific exhibitions and lectures provided by a team of natural scientists of state institutions, popularising an anthropologic and genetic Eastern kinship narrative, based on a well-established national physical anthropology tradition since the 1920s. While contested by most of the Hungarian academia as pseudoscience, the ethnogenesis narrative popularised at Kurultáj is currently implemented in new government-based research institutions.

MELINDA HARLOV-CSORTÁN (Budapest) presented archaeological research and its heritagization in what she referred to the Iron Curtain region. She emphasised the link between archaeology and politics and the consequences for monument protection, heritage and even tourism. In the second part of her presentation, she compared the situation for classical archaeology in Hungary in the Cold War and after 1989. In the last part, she examined the shift in emphasis from Romans towards Huns and Magyars in Hungarian archaeology. Even though Romans past has great potential for tourism, as shown in a case study of the Fertő/Neusiedler region, the Roman heritage is currently not recognised as part of Hungarian identity, and, any funding in that direction is mainly channelled into prestigious reconstructions in the Budapest area.

IONUȚ MIRCEA MARCU (Bucharest) focused on the history of the Vasile Pârvan Institute for Archaeology in Bucharest during the transition period after 1989. In the first part, he focused on the structure, funding system and research agendas of the institute from the foundations till the late 1980s. Whereas the political support after 1990 diminished, the research in ancient Romanian history continued and even increased after the fall of communism. Historical research was opened and broadened for Romanian archaeologists and historians. During the post-socialist transition period, the framework, the human resource management, the research strategies and the institutional identity changed considerably.

In the next panel MATTHIAS CICHON (Münster) explained Polish ideas for re-founding medieval Western Slavic states af-

ter 1945. He began by outlining the usage of Slavic narratives by the pro-Soviet government. Later on, he offered two comparative case studies. Karol Stojanowski, for instance, proposed the foundation of a Polabian state reaching from the river Oder to Hamburg. In contrast, Władysław Kołodziej pleaded for the creation of a neo-pagan Slavic refuge on the island of Rugia. In both cases, references to the „age-old Slavdom“ of the coveted Polish-German territories played a pivotal role. Although the Polish government never adopted those proposals aimed at weakening the German „drive to the east“, it tolerated them for a long time. Most likely, they served as an antidote to German attempts questioning the post-war borders.

In her presentation, ANNE KLUGER (Münster) focused on another aspect of the (re)construction of „Slavic pasts“ in the context of the Cold War – „Slavic archaeology“. In a brief overview of the history of Slavic research, she illustrated the influences of its political and social environment. Anne Kluger then looked at the extent of political and ideological permeation of „Slavic archaeology“ in the socialist regimes of the Eastern Bloc, namely on East Germany and Poland and two prominent „Slavic archaeologists“, Witold Hensel (PPR) and Joachim Herrmann (GDR), as case studies. Looking at publications about the early Slavs, she examined for both scholars how ideological and political aspects were interwoven in the arguments, which Hensel and Herrmann, in turn, used to justify the relevance of their research discipline. The comparative approach also made it possible to identify similarities and differences between the East German and the Polish case.

CLAUDIA GABRIELA ȘERBU (Brașov) enlarged the panel by focusing on depictions of the Transylvanian Saxons from the communist to the post-socialist period. As the Dacian ancestry played an ever more significant role in Romanian society, so too did the curriculum in Romanian schools, change to reflect this. Textbooks presented positive ancient narratives and glorified the Dacian past. In this identity formation process, Transylvanian Saxons and other minorities played a less significant role. Whereas Romanians were

presented as ancestors of the Dacians, Saxons were shown as following the ancient Romans heritage albeit in a „primitive“ interpretation. Names of Saxonic inventors, engineers and humanists were romanised, and the German-speaking minority were subsumed under Romania nationalism.

GHEORGHE ALEXANDRU NICULESCU (Bucharest) began the following panel by thinking about the „choices“ Romanian archaeologists had in their research. Nonetheless, the elites, the politicians and almost the whole of academia, whom most were members of the communist party, were not replaced or overly criticised. Archaeologists adopted an authoritative position and were not aware of the political nature of their research. „Cultural history“ is dominant in Romania and has been challenged only by a few archaeologists, who are positioned outside of academic mainstream. The main general novelty after 1989 is the openness towards natural sciences as a supplement to archaeological research and interdisciplinary projects. That said, self-criticism, reflexivity and the questioning of (political) concepts which frame the research are still largely absent.

EMILY HANSCAM (Durham) presented the use of the past in a post-national framework by exploring the politics of theory in Roman archaeology. One of the challenges of the discipline is to update the toolkit of social archaeological theory for the current global political climate. The theory of post-nationalism makes it possible to address both – the recent political situation as well as the need to rejuvenate archaeological theory. She also focused on the history of scholarship and politics in Roman archaeology in Romania, from pure Roman to pre-Roman Dacian to the Daco-Roman narrative as well as the reception of Roman studies in Britain through the lenses of post-nationalism. Since archaeology is political, the appeal was that archaeologists must become „unapologetic political actors“.

RADU CINPOES (London) started the last panel with his presentation about the situation of LGBT+ rights in Hungary and Romania. After some conceptual considerations, the presentation aimed to look comparatively at the debates concerning constitutional provisions relative to same-sex marriage in Hun-

gary and Romania and the role of far-right movements in Eastern Europe. Whereas in Hungary, the observed process is top-down (parliamentary), in Romania, the discourse is shaped by a bottom-up process (grass-root mobilisation). Nonetheless, the discourse is similar, and the main focus is still on national values like religion and family. Arguments for the opposition of same-sex marriage are done by the use of historical narratives, which points to issues beyond a „cultural turn“ and an ontological crisis in east-central Europe.

CHRISTOPH DOPPELHOFER'S (Durham) presentation explored how popular culture interacts and influences cultural heritage identities. He highlighted the case of Dubrovnik and the popular TV show *Game of Thrones*. Dubrovnik was digitally transformed into a vivid Middle Ages fantasy background for the series, which lead to a significant increase in tourism and new practices at key sites. Therefore, media and tourism are highly influential in creating new identities by falling back on an „imperialism of the imagination“. As Dubrovnik is open for continuing the fictional narratives of the series by geotagging, mapping, renaming, exhibitions, walking tours and souvenirs, it creates a connection between the past and the present reinforcing the fictional narrative. Dubrovnik is a great example of cultural heritage, where the geopolitical and national needs are secondary to the demands of post-modern consumers and their experiences.

CATALIN POPA (Leiden) delivered the keynote on the workshop. In his lecture, he appealed to forget a past of national separation in favour of a future of European togetherness. We have to accept that archaeology has too often shaped identities and appealed to the emotional foundations of imagined communities. Archaeology is political, which is why we should stop stigmatising politics and instead start to build a new European foundation myth and accept multiple interpretations, not „alternative facts“. In his vision of togetherness, Catalin Popa presented the interdisciplinary project „Stories of sustainability“, where the focus lies on craftsmanship. The approach is to make social and technical innovations compatible and construct narratives together, a key recipe for

creating – a meaningful European Archaeology.

The closing discussion questioned the role of historians, archaeologists and the humanities more broadly in identity formation processes and whether it is important to participate in current political and social discourses. The animated discussion went to the heart of what role archaeology, history, and other disciplines should play in shaping and responding to social and political trends.

Conference overview:

Panel: Before the Cold War

Alexander Rubel (Iași): Dacian Blood. The idea of autochthonous origins in intellectual and radical discourses in Romania

Oleksii Rudenko (Glasgow): Reinventing the heroes in the Soviet Union. The case of Spartacus

Panel: Archaeological foundations

Florian Ostrowski (Vienna): Thracian archaeology and national identity in communist Bulgaria. Exhibition making as an ideological pattern

Ionuț Mircea Marcu (Bucharest): History-writing and the post-communist transition. A case-study on the „Vasile Pârvan“ Institute for Archaeology in Bucharest

Katrin Kremmler (Berlin): „Eurasian Magyars“. Archaeo-anthropology, archaeogenetics, and „Eastern Difference“ in Hungarian neo-nationalist discourse

Melinda Harlov-Csortán (Budapest): Archaeological research and its heritagization at the Iron Curtain region

Panel: Slavic pasts

Matthias Cichon (Münster): Allies out of ashes? Polish ideas for re-founding medieval Western Slavic states after 1945

Anne Kluger (Münster): „Slavic Archaeology“ and its political and ideological penetration in communist Poland and East Germany. The examples of Witold Hensel (PRL) and Joachim Herrmann (DDR)

Panel: Daco-Romania

Claudia Gabriela Șerbu (Brașov): The protochronistic depiction of the Transylvanian Saxons, a crutch that sustained the Dacian-Roman continuity theory

Panel: Disciplining the past

Gheorghe Alexandru Niculescu (Bucharest): What choices do we have?

Emily Hanscam (Durham): Postnationalism and the Past. The Politics of Theory in Roman Archaeology

Panel: At the margins

Radu Cinpoes (London): Beyond radical right politics: LGBT+ rights in Hungary and Romania

Christoph Doppelhofer (Durham): Imagining King's Landing: Dubrovnik and the imperialism of visual mass media in the twenty-first century

Keynote

Catalin Popa (Leiden): Becoming European. From a past of national separation to a future of European togetherness

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