Some remarks on ethnicity in medieval archaeology

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Recent critiques of the culture-historical approach to ethnicity have denounced the idea that archaeological cultures are 'actors' on the historical stage, playing the role that known individuals or groups have in documentary history. But the critique has gone as far as to claim that, because archaeologists supposedly have no access to the meaning of cultural traditions, medieval ethnicity cannot be studied by archeological means. Ethnicity should be banned from all discussions, if medieval archaeology is to make any progress in the future. The paper examines the theoretical malaise at the root of this scepticism verging on nihilism. The understanding of the archaeological record not as an imprint, but as a text allows for much learning about meaning in the past. Symbols, style and power are the key concepts that currently guide anthropological research on ethnicity as a 'social construction of primordiality'. As several archaeological examples show, medieval ethnicity was a form of social mobilization used in order to reach certain political goals. Ethnic identity was built upon some pre-existing cultural identity, in a prototypic manner.

Eine ethnische Einheit, ein Volk oder ein Stamm, mit dem man in Mitteleuropa ohne weiteres Kulturen oder kulturellen Gruppen identifizieren pflegt, ist aber kein gar so homogenes und gleichbleibendes Gebilde, wie man es in Anlehnung an der romantischen Volksbegriffs Herders annehmen zu können glaubt, sondern eine ungemein vielschichtige Gesellungsform, die nicht so sehr durch die Bande des Blutes, als *vielmehr durch das Moment politischer Herrschaft* zusammengehalten wird.[1]

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[1] Helmut Preidel, 'Awaren und Slawen', *Südost-Forschungen* 11 (1952), pp. 33–45, at p. 57 (emphasis added): 'Ethnic groups, peoples or tribes, with which cultures or cultural groups are indiscriminately identified in Central Europe, are not homogeneous or static formations, as many believe on the basis of Herder's Romantic concept of Volk. Instead, they are unevenly multi-layered social forms, which are kept together not so much by the bond of blood, as by the circumstances of political power.'

An archaeologist studying the early Middle Ages, who would be curious about what historians of that same period have to say about ethnicity, will quickly experience disappointment if venturing to read some of the most recent publications in the field. Not too long ago, ethnicity was treated more as a modern construct than as a medieval category, while students of the Middle Ages were even warned against examinations of 'ethnic identity' that risked anachronism when the origins of contemporary concerns and antagonisms were sought in the past.[2] There is now little encouragement for the neophyte in search of theoretical guidance and methodological advice. The current debate between the Vienna and the Toronto 'schools' on the issue of the barbarian (specifically Gothic) ethnogenesis may be stimulating for the critical reading of written sources, but has little, if anything, to offer in terms of innovative approaches to medieval ethnicity. The debate is primarily about whether and to what degree it is possible to use written sources for explaining the forming of medieval ethnic groups. In the words of a recent commentator, members of the 'Vienna school' purport to be able '[to] explain how national or ethnic (take your pick) communities arose in the early Middle Ages'.[3] By contrast, Walter Goffart and his students have 'incessantly attacked the idea that ancient traditions and orally transmitted myths had any part in the shaping of early medieval peoples'.[4] Underlying assumptions about the intellectual heritage of the 'Vienna school' have increasingly politicized the debate and provoked much irritation. The unofficial founder of the Vienna school, the German historian Reinhard Wenskus, is said to have rescued the discipline of Germanic antiquity from total discredit after World War II, and in turn the members of the Toronto school are accused of 'misapprehensions and defamatory insinuations'.[5]

At this point in the polemic, the archaeologist with an interest in ethnicity may be able to recognize some familiar tunes. It is by now common knowledge that the founder of the culture-historical school of archaeology was the German archaeologist Gustaf Kossinna. Today,

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[2]   Patrick J. Geary, 'Ethnic Identity as a Situational Construct in the Early Middle Ages', *Mitteilungen der anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien* 113 (1983), pp. 15–26, at p. 16; and *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton and Oxford, 2002), pp. 16–19; Patrick Amory, 'Names, Ethnic Identity, and Community in Fifth- and Sixth-Century Burgundy', *Viator* 25 (1994), pp. 1–34, at p. 5; and *People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy, 489–554* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 317.
[3]   Charles Bowlus, 'Ethnogenesis: The Tyranny of a Concept', in A. Gillett (ed.), *On Barbarian Identity: Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages* (Turnhout, 2002), pp. 241–56, at p. 243.
[4]   Walter Pohl, 'Ethnicity, Theory, and Tradition: A Response', in Gillett (ed.), *On Barbarian Identity*, pp. 221–40, at p. 222.
[5]   Walter Goffart, 'Does the Distant Past Impinge on the Invasion Age Germans?', in Gillett (ed.), *On Barbarian Identity*, pp. 21–38, at p. 31; Pohl, 'Ethnicity, Theory', p. 239.

both archaeologists and historians attack Kossinna's tenets and, when-
ever possible, emphasize his association with Nazism and the political
use of archaeology. Like Wenskus for the Vienna school, Kossinna is
now regarded as the archetypal incarnation of all vices associated with
the culture-historical approach to archaeology. Unlike Wenskus, though,
Kossinna's work is rarely cited, except for his famous statement:
'Sharply defined archaeological culture areas correspond unquestionably
with the areas of particular peoples or tribes.'[6] In post-war Germany,
Kossinna's followers passed over in silence the fundamental question of
equating *Völker* and archaeological cultures, but continued to believe
that cultural community equalled biological community. In doing so,
they were simply reproducing views about ethnicity that were until
recently common in both German law and German politics. For more
than fifty years of the post-war period, ethnicity in Germany was
approached in the terms of the 1913 law (abolished only in 2000), which
defined German citizenship by descent, not by residence. In German
archaeology this has led to a deeply rooted confusion between ethnic
identity and biological group affiliation. The idea that a person buried
in 'Germanic' dress may not necessarily be of 'Germanic' descent has
rarely, if ever been questioned.[7] As Hans Jürgen Eggers has long noted,
Kossinna's *Glaubenssatz* of interpreting archaeological cultures as ethnic
groups was not his invention. Instead, this was a notion directly inspired
by the Romantic idea of culture as reflecting the national soul (*Volksgeist*)
in every one of its elements.[8] According to Reinhard Wenskus, Kossinna's
mistake was not so much that he aimed at an ethnic interpretation of
culture, but that he used a dubious concept of ethnicity, rooted in the

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[6] Gustaf Kossinna, *Die Herkunft der Germanen. Zur Methode der Siedlungsarchäologie* (Würzburg,
  1911), p. 3; and *Ursprung und Verbreitung der Germanen in vor- und frühgeschichtlicher Zeit*
  (Leipzig, 1936), p. 15. For a balanced evaluation of Kossinna's work, see Leo S. Klejn, 'Kossinna
  im Abstand von vierzig Jahren', *Jahresschrift für mitteldeutsche Vorgeschichte* 58 (1974), pp. 7–55
  and Ulrich Veit, 'Gustaf Kossinna and His Concept of a National Archaeology', in H. Härke
  (ed.), *Archaeology, Ideology, and Society: The German Experience* (Frankfurt a.M., Berlin and
  Bern, 2000), pp. 40–59.

[7] E.g., Volker Bierbrauer, 'Zu den Vorkommen ostgotischer Bügelfibeln in Raetia II', *Bayerische
  Vorgeschichtsblätter* 36 (1971), pp. 133–47. The notion of 'Germanic' costume (*Tracht*) was
  first introduced in the 1930s for the study of the early medieval ethnicity through material
  culture. For an excellent survey of the issue, see Hubert Fehr, 'Hans Zeiss, Joachim Werner und
  die archäologischen Forschungen zur Merowingerzeit', in H. Steuer (ed.), *Eine hervorragend
  nationale Wissenschaft. Deutsche Prähistoriker zwischen 1900 und 1995* (Berlin and New York,
  2000), pp. 311–415. For the link between the 1913 law and contemporary archaeology in
  Germany, see Heinrich Härke, 'Archaeologists and Migrations: A Problem of Attitude?',
  Current Anthropology 39 (1998), pp. 19–45, at p. 21.

[8] For Kossinna's *Glaubenssatz* and an early German critique of his ideas, see Hans Jürgen
  Eggers, 'Das Problem der ethnischen Deutung in der Frühgeschichte', in H. Kirchner (ed.),
  *Ur- und Frühgeschichte als historische Wissenschaft. Festschrift zum 60. Geburtstag von Ernst
  Wahle* (Heidelberg, 1950), pp. 49–59, at p. 49.

Romantic views of the *Volk*.[9] A new generation of archaeologists now wants to free German archaeology both from such a misconstrued concept of ethnicity and from the ghost of Kossinna.

One of the most vocal representatives of this movement is Sebastian Brather, the author of a recent book dedicated to the study of ethnicity in early medieval archaeology.[10] The abrasiveness of this volume has already provoked the irritation of the die-hard followers of Kossinna. In a paper for the most recent publication of the Vienna school, a *Festschrift* for Herwig Wolfram, Volker Bierbrauer angrily scolds Brather for having used too much Anglo-Saxon literature in his critique of German archaeologists. According to Bierbrauer, any discussion of the ethnic interpretation should begin with the data and move gradually to theory, not the other way around. Besides, it is essentially wrong to call ethnic identity a social construct, Bierbrauer argues, because in German the word 'construct' (*Konstrukt*) is an abhorrently foreign loan (*Fremdwort*), the meaning of which requires explanation. To Bierbrauer, Brather's accusations of nationalism and repeated references to Gustav Kossinna are nothing but slander.[11]

At a quick glimpse, the incipient scandal may appear to indicate that Brather's is the most revisionist book ever written in the archaeology of ethnicity. But is it really? Taken on its own terms, the argument the author lays out seems reasonable enough: 'the nature of archaeology as a historical discipline does not rest upon and cannot be reduced to the question of ethnic interpretation, just as history cannot be reduced to the study of politics'.[12] Ethnicity is subjective and the boundaries of ethnic groups are marked with symbols. As a consequence, ethnic identity in the past is beyond the reach of archaeology, because the meaning initially attached to the material culture symbols used for building ethnic boundaries will forever remain unknown. In a typically empiricist stance, Brather recommends that archaeologists abandon any research on ethnicity, as long as no independent, written sources exist out there, to decipher the meaning of those symbols for them. In the meantime, they should focus on what they can really do, namely research on economic and social structures, social rank, religious behaviour, and the like.

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[9]   Reinhard Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung. Das Werden der frühmittelalterlichen Gentes* (Cologne, 1961), p. 137.
[10] Sebastian Brather, *Ethnische Interpretationen in der frühgeschichtlichen Archäologie. Geschichte, Grundlagen und Alternativen* (Berlin and New York, 2004).
[11] Volker Bierbrauer, 'Zur ethnischen Interpretation in der frühgeschichtlichen Archäologie', in W. Pohl (ed.), *Die Suche nach den Ursprüngen. Von der Bedeutung des frühen Mittelalters* (Vienna, 2004), pp. 45–84, at pp. 46, 49 and 74–5.
[12] Brather, *Ethnische Interpretationen*, p. 27.

The issue at stake

To be sure, Brather's *bête noire* is the culture-historical approach for which many blame Kossinna without knowing that what happened in German archaeology between the two World Wars was 'only the tip of a pan-European iceberg'.[13] The culture-historical approach was based on an essentially expanded meaning of the concept of culture, as used in the nineteenth century for classifying human groups, with all the underlying assumptions of holism, homogeneity and boundedness.[14] Traditionally, archaeological cultures were defined in monothetic terms on the basis of the presence or absence of a list of traits or types, which had either been derived from excavated assemblages and type sites or were intuitively considered to be the most appropriate attributes for the definition of the culture. In practice, it became rapidly clear that no group of cultural assemblages from any single culture ever contains all of the cultural artefacts, a problem first acknowledged by a Marxist archaeologist, Vere Gordon Childe. Childe's solution was to discard the untidy information by demoting types with discontinuous frequency from the rank of diagnostic types, thus preserving the nineteenth-century ideal of a univariate cultural block.[15] The culture-historical archaeologists against whom Brather directed his attack typically regard archaeological cultures as actors on the historical stage, playing the role for prehistory that known individuals or groups have in documentary history. Archaeological cultures were thus easily equated to ethnic groups, for they were viewed as legitimizing claims of modern groups to territory and influence.[16]

The first criticism against the idea that archaeological cultures represent ethnic groups came from within the framework of culture history, but critiques usually consisted of cautionary tales and attributed difficulties to the complexity and incompleteness of the artefactual record, without

[13] Brather, *Ethnische Interpretationen*, p. 27. Nonetheless, Brather insists that the concept of 'culture' (*Cultur*) in its ethnological and archaeological sense is a German invention, having been first introduced by Gustav Friedrich Klemm (1802–67). Moreover, the *Kulturkreis* theory was in turn the invention of another famous German, Leo Frobenius, before gaining reputation through the studies of Fritz Graebner and the Vienna school of ethnology. As a consequence, in Brather's view, the relation established in Germany between prehistoric archaeology and ethnology was essentially different from that between archaeology and anthropology in England or the United States. See Brather, *Ethnische Interpretationen*, pp. 44 and 61–63.

[14] Hans-Peter Wotzka, 'Zum traditionellen Kulturbegriff in der prähistorischen Archäologie', *Paideuma* 39 (1993), pp. 25–44. For a recent demonstration of how resistant nineteenth-century concepts can be, even when computers replace field notebooks, see Vera B. Kovalevskaia, *Arkheologicheskaia kul'tura: praktika, teoriia, komp'iuter* (Moscow, 1995).

[15] Vere Gordon Childe, *Piecing Together the Past: The Interpretation of Archaeological Data* (London, 1956), pp. 33 and 124.

[16] The most balanced assessment of the culture-historical approach to archaeology remains that of Bruce G. Trigger, *A History of Archaeological Thought* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 148–206. See also the pertinent, if altogether ignored, remarks of C. Ronald, 'In Defense of Migration and Culture History Studies', *Journal of Intermountain Archaeology* 3 (1984), pp. 43–52.

calling into question the assumption of an intrinsic link between arte-
facts and groups. The general response to such problems was a retreat
into the study of chronology and typology as ends in themselves, and
the emergence of debates concerning the meaning of archaeological
types, in particular whether such types represent etic categories imposed
by the archaeologist or emic categories of their producers.[17] By contrast,
Brather now insists that there will always be a considerable distance
between etic and emic categories. Since ethnicity in the past was defined
with conceptual categories different from ours, ethnicity cannot be studied
by archaeological means. A historian not versed in the vagaries of
archaeological theory, but well informed about the scandal surrounding
Brather's ideas, sarcastically noted that after abandoning Kossinna's
approach, 'we are now told by archaeologists that archaeological cultures
tell us nothing about ethnicity'.[18] An archaeologist with an interest in
migrations is similarly puzzled: 'Exactly at the point where identity has
become the key question of the post-modern world, and migration is fast
becoming the key issue in post-Soviet Europe, academic archaeologists
and historians have lost their own convictions and fail to provide the
historical guidance that the general public is looking for.'[19]

Whether or not they had Brather in mind, both German-speaking
authors point to discrepancies well illustrated in his latest book. For
Brather does not believe that archaeologists have access to ethnic signs.
Because such signs were not mentioned in written sources, 'we have no
inside report, no message about the meaning of things'.[20] He denies that
we will ever have the ability to learn in detail the meaning of cultural
traditions, their symbolic underpinnings, or their importance for past
ritual or group behaviour. 'There is no hermeneutic path to a real

[17] Lev S. Klein, 'Regressive Purifizierung und exemplarische Betrachtung. Polemische Bemerkungen
zur Integration der Archäologie mit der schriftlichen Geschichte und Sprachwissenschaft bei
der ethnischen Deutung des Fundgutes', *Ethnographisch-archäologische Zeitschrift* 15 (1974),
pp. 223–54, at p. 224; and 'Die Ethnogenese als Kulturgeschichte, archäologisch betrachtet.
Neue Grundlagen', in H. Kaufmann and K. Simon (eds), *Beiträge zur Ur- und Frühgeschichte*,
vol. 1 (Berlin, 1981), pp. 13–25, at p. 18. See also Shaun Hides, 'The Genealogy of Material
Culture and Cultural Identity', in P. Graves-Brown, S. Jones and C. Gamble (eds), *Cultural
Identity and Archaeology: The Construction of European Communities* (London and New York,
1996), pp. 25–47, at p. 26. For the earlier criticism of the idea that archaeological cultures
represent ethnic groups, see Ernest Wahle, *Zur ethnischen Deutung frühgeschichtlicher Kultur-
provinzen. Grenzen der frühgeschichtlichen Erkenntnis*, vol. 1 (Heidelberg, 1941).
[18] Walter Pohl, 'A Non-Roman Empire in Central Europe: The Avars', in H.-W. Goetz, J.
Jarnut and W. Pohl (eds), *Regna and Gentes: The Relationship Between Late Antique and Early
Medieval Peoples and Kingdoms in the Transformation of the Roman World* (Leiden and Boston,
2003), pp. 571–95, at p. 588. Pohl explicitly refers to Sebastian Brather, 'Ethnische Identitäten
als Konstrukte der frühgeschichtlichen Archäologie', *Germania* 78 (2000), pp. 139–77.
[19] Heinrich Härke, 'The Debate on Migration and Identity in Europe', *Antiquity* 78 (2004),
pp. 453–6, at p. 456.
[20] Sebastian Brather, 'Ethnic Identities as Constructions of Archaeology: The Case of the
Alamanni', in Gillett (ed.), *On Barbarian Identity*, pp. 149–76, at pp. 172–3; Brather, *Ethnische
Interpretationen*, pp. 369, 570 and 577.

understanding' of ethnicity. Ethnic identity in the past is beyond the reach of archaeology, whether or not that identity truly existed and mattered for people in the past. Looking for ethnic identity is just an archaeological form of nationalism.[21] Volker Bierbrauer may well complain about Brather's critique of ethnic(ist) interpretations in Germany. By now, agnosticism has made converts well beyond the linguistic and institutional boundaries of Germany. This is particularly true for those countries in Eastern Europe in which there is still an undercurrent of culture-historical archaeology that Kossinna would have easily recognized. In the midst of heated debates about the ethnogenesis of the Slavs, some Polish archaeologists have begun to entertain doubts that we would ever be able 'to explain and describe the birth of any kind of ethnic group'.[22] A Lithuanian archaeologist cites Brather in support of his firm belief that 'the archaeological material represents social, but not ethnic identity'.[23] Others maintain that 'we cannot get to the psyche of those societies in the past, which we study'.[24] Studying ethnicity in the past is therefore only the study of the past with the ethnocentric (or, worse, nationalist) concerns of the present. The reductionist approach on which the archaeological search for ethnicity is based comes dangerously close to the logic of ethnic cleansing. As a consequence, ethnicity must be banned from all discussions, if archaeology as an academic discipline is to make any progress in the future.[25]

What is ethnicity?

At the root of this scepticism verging on nihilism seems to be a serious theoretical malaise. To be sure, the premise – that collective identities are social constructs – is theoretically as well as empirically sound. In a

[21] Brather, 'Ethnic Identities', pp. 173 and 175.
[22] Jerzy Gąssowski, 'Is Ethnicity Tangible?', in M. Hardt, C. Lübke and D. Schorkowitz (eds), *Inventing the Pasts in North Central Europe: The National Perception of Early Medieval History and Archaeology* (Bern, 2003), pp. 9–17, at p. 9. See also Stanisław Tabaczyński, 'Procesy etnogenetyczne: doswiadczenia badawcze archeologii i przyszłość', in M. Miśkiewicz (ed.), *Słowianie w Europie wczesniejszego średniowiecza. Katalog wystawy* (Warsaw, 1998), pp. 79–99; Przemysław Urbańczyk, 'Archeologia etniczności – fikcja czy nadzieja?', in A. Buko and P. Urbańczyk (eds), *Archeologia w teorii i w praktyce* (Warsaw, 2000), pp. 137–46. For current debates about the ethnogenesis of the Slavs, see Magdalena Maczyńska, 'Die Archäologie über die Anfänge der Slawen. Tagung in Kraków, 19.–21. November 2001', *Ethnographisch-archäologische Zeitschrift* 42 (2001), pp. 417–19; Paul M. Barford, 'Crisis in the Shadows: Recent Polish Polemic on the Origin of the Slavs', *Slavia Antiqua* 44 (2003), pp. 121–55.
[23] Mindaugas Bertašius, 'The Archaeology of Group: From Situational Construct to Ethnic Group', in V. Lang (ed.), *Culture and Material Culture: Papers from the First Theoretical Seminar of the Baltic Archaeologists (BASE) Held at the University of Tartu, Estonia, October 17th–19th, 2003* (Tartu, 2005), pp. 29–38, at p. 32 (citing Brather, 'Ethnische Identitäten', p. 168).
[24] Henryk Mamzer, 'Ethnischer Mythus in der Archäologie', in G. Fusek (ed.), *Zbornik na počest Dariny Bialekovej* (Nitra, 2004), pp. 223–7, at p. 226.
[25] Mamzer, 'Ethnischer Mythus', p. 225.

Weberian stance, Brather maintains that social identities (ethnic ones included) are not a direct reflection of 'social reality', even though they are themselves 'nothing less than real'.[26] This is clearly an echo of recent studies of ethnicity as a mode of action and of representation. While twenty years ago, ethnicity could not be defined as 'either culture or society, but a specific mixture, in a more or less stable equilibrium, of both culture and society', now the tendency is to treat it as a decision people make to depict themselves or others symbolically as bearers of a certain cultural identity.[27] In short, ethnicity has become the politicization of culture. Ethnicity may not be innate, but individuals are born with it; it may not be biologically reproduced, but individuals are linked to it through cultural constructions of biology; it is certainly not just cultural difference, but ethnicity cannot be sustained without reference to an inventory of cultural traits. As Thomas Hylland Eriksen puts it, ethnicity must be regarded as the 'collective enaction of socially differentiating signs'.[28]

Such an approach is largely due to the extraordinary influence of the Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth.[29] He shed a new light on subjective criteria (ethnic boundaries) around which the feeling of ethnic identity of the member of a group is framed. He also emphasized the transactional nature of ethnicity, for in the practical accomplishment of identity, two mutually interdependent social processes are normally at work: internal and external definition, the latter also known as categorization.[30] Barth's approach embraced a predominantly social interactionist perspective, derived from the work of the social psychologist Erving Goffman.[31] Objective cultural difference was thus viewed as epiphenomenal,

[26] Brather, *Ethnische Interpretationen*, pp. 100 and 106.

[27] Guy Nicolas, 'Fait "ethnique" et usages du concept d' "ethnie"', *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* 54 (1973), pp. 95–126, at p. 107; Anthony P. Cohen, 'Culture as Identity: An Anthropologist's View', *New Literary History* 24 (1993), pp. 195–209, at p. 197.

[28] Thomas Hylland Eriksen, 'The Cultural Contexts of Ethnic Differences', *Man* 26 (1991), pp. 127–44, at p. 141. For similar formulations in German sociology and historiography, see Veit-Michael Bader, 'Ethnische Identität und ethnische Kultur. Grenzen des Konstruktivismus und der Manipulation', *Forschungsjournal Neue Soziale Bewegungen* 8 (1995), pp. 32–45; Klaus Erich Müller, 'Ethnicity, Ethnozentrismus und Essentialismus', in W. Essbach (ed.), *Wir, ihr, sie. Identität und Alterität in Theorie und Methode* (Würzburg, 2000), pp. 317–43. For ethnicity and the inventory of 'cultural traits', see Brackette F. Williams, 'Of Straightening Combs, Sodium Hydroxide, and Potassium Hydroxide in Archaeological and Cultural-Anthropological Analyses of Ethnogenesis', *American Antiquity* 57 (1992), pp. 608–12.

[29] Fredrik Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organisation of Culture Difference* (Bergen and London, 1969). For Barth's more recent ideas, see his 'Enduring and Emerging Issues in the Analysis of Ethnicity', in H. Vermeulen and C. Govers (eds), *The Anthropology of Ethnicity: Beyond 'Ethnic Groups and Boundaries'* (The Hague, 1994), pp. 11–32.

[30] Richard Jenkins, 'Rethinking Ethnicity: Identity, Categorization and Power', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 17 (1994), pp. 189–223, at pp. 198–9.

[31] Norman Buchignani, 'Ethnic Phenomena and Contemporary Social Theory: Their Implications for Archaeology', in R. Auger, M.F. Glass, S. MacEachern and P.H. McCartney (eds), *Ethnicity and Culture: Proceedings of the Eighteenth Annual Conference of the Archaeological Association of the University of Calgary* (Calgary, 1987), pp. 15–24, at. p. 16.

subordinate to, and largely to be explained with reference to, social inter-action. Studies of ethnicity inspired by Barth's approach thus suggest that ethnic groups are more an idea than a thing. It is not so much the group that endures as the *idea* of group. Activation of ethnic identity was thus used to explain contextual ethnic phenomena, but this very ethnic identity, since it was not directly observable (because of being an *idea*), had to be derived from the actor's 'ethnic behaviour'. Barth's model of social interaction is so general that there is virtually nothing theoretically unique about ethnic phenomena explained through reference to it, for the model could be as well applied to other forms of social identity. The emphasis of the post-Barthian anthropology of ethnicity has tended to fall on processes of group identification rather than social categorization.[32] However, ethnicity as ascription of basic group identity on the basis of cognitive categories of cultural differentiation is very difficult to separate from other forms of group identity, such as gender or class. Indeed, if social identities are social constructs, then ethnic identities are not different from any other forms of identity in their subjective, 'constructed' nature. Any social identity is a *Gemeinsamkeitsglauben*, to employ Max Weber's *bon mot*. 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, with some recognizable members sharing some but not all traits, and different traits being weighted differently in people's minds.[33] How is this specific configuration structured and what mechanisms are responsible for its reproduction?

Attempts to answer this question resurrected the idea that ethnic groups are bounded social entities internally generated with reference more to commonality than to difference.[34] Such an approach draws heavily from the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory of *habitus*, a system of durable, transposable dispositions, 'structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures'.[35] According to Bourdieu, those durable dispositions are inculcated into an individual's sense of self at an early age and can be transposed from one context to another. *Habitus* involves a form of socialization whereby the dominant modes

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[32] D.L. Horowitz, 'Ethnic Identity', in N. Glazer and D.P. Moynihan (eds), *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1975), pp. 111–40, at p. 114.
[33] Eugeen E. Roosens, *Creating Ethnicity: The Process of Ethnogenesis* (Newbury Park and London, 1989), p. 12; Cynthia K. Mahmood and Sharon L. Armstrong, 'Do Ethnic Groups Exist? A Cognitive Perspective on the Concept of Cultures', *Ethnology* 31 (1992), pp. 1–14, at p. 8.
[34] G. Carter Bentley, 'Ethnicity and Practice', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29 (1987), pp. 25–55.
[35] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, 1990), p. 53.

of behaviour and representation are internalized, resulting in certain dispositions that operate largely at a pre-conscious level. Ethnicity is constituted at the intersection of the habitual dispositions of the agents concerned and the social conditions existing in a particular historical context. Barth and his students built on concepts of the self and social role behaviour typified by the 'we *vs.* them' perspective. In doing so, they laid emphasis on ethnic boundaries and on the transactional nature of ethnicity. By contrast, the tendency now is to view the content of ethnic identity (the 'we' perspective) as important as the boundary around it (the 'we vs. them' perspective). In practice ethnicity results from multiple transient realizations of ethnic difference in particular contexts of production and consumption of distinctive styles of material culture. The very process of ethnic formation is coextensive with and shaped by the manipulation of material culture. No surprise therefore that such an understanding of ethnicity coincides in time with an explosion of studies, primarily inspired by Edmund Husserl, that stress ethnicity as a phenomenon of every day's life (*Alltagsleben*).[36] Routine action, rather than dramatic historical experiences, food ways, rather than political action, are now under scrutiny. As the idea of ethnicity turns into a mode of action in the modern world, it becomes more relevant to study the very process by which the ethnic boundary is created in a specific social and political configuration.

This line of reasoning has inspired Frank Siegmund's recent interpretation of the distribution of weapons, pottery and glass vessels on either side of the early medieval frontier between Franks and Alamans. Stressing the importance of daily activities for the construction of ethnic boundaries, Siegmund has noted that many more swords appear in burial assemblages of the Alamannic than of the Frankish region, while axes and spearheads seem to dominate in the Frankish region. Similarly, within the Frankish zone, most, if not all, vessels associated with burials were either wheel-made pots or glass beakers, while half of all pots deposited in graves from the Alamannic zone were handmade. Siegmund's conclusion is that despite considerable variation within each category of artefacts, the ethnic boundary created by such means was maintained throughout the fifth to seventh centuries.[37]

But was that truly an ethnic boundary? Sebastian Brather rejects the idea that anyone could be made a Frank or an Alaman by the simple

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[36] Ina-Maria Greverus, *Kultur und Alltagswelt. Eine Einführung in Fragen der Kulturanthropologie* (Munich, 1978).

[37] Frank Siegmund, 'Alemannen und Franken. Archäologische Überlegungen zu ethnischen Strukturen in der zweiten Hälfte des 5. Jahrhunderts', in D. Geuenich (ed.), *Die Franken und die Alemannen bis zur 'Schlacht bei Zülpich' (496/97)* (Berlin and New York, 1998), pp. 558–80, at pp. 560–1 and 574.

deposition of a glass beaker or a handmade pot, respectively, into his or her grave.[38] According to him, Siegmund's exercise demonstrated nothing else than the existence of a difference of *habitus* between the two sides of the frontier. This amounts to no less than an explicit rejection of the link between *habitus* and ethnicity. As a consequence, Brather excludes ethnicity, without noticing that by explaining material culture patterning as the result of *habitus*, he had turned the clock back to the culture-historical approach against which he directs his criticism. For if the material culture patterning is not the result of deliberate choices inspired by a desire to mark difference, then the *habitus* is nothing but a cultural 'norm', whose consequences are always outside the awareness of the actors and always work 'behind their backs'. In other words, the Franks and the Alamans were different without knowing it. Such a conclusion is in direct contradiction to Brather's otherwise firm conviction that ethnicity is a matter of complex *representation* of the entire culture and of common origin, and not an *objective* combination of traits.[39]

Symbols, ethnicity and style

Sebastian Brather's placing a premium on representation and symbols opens the door for a 'subjective' approach to ethnicity. Ethnicity is truly represented through such things as certain dress elements, speech forms, lifestyles, food ways, and the like. But Brather believes that the selection of these elements is the result of gambling: should the selection turn out to be wrong, the very identity and therefore existence of the group is threatened. Once the symbols are gone, the ethnic group disappears.[40] While it is true that ethnicity is concocted out of a few cultural elements (as opposed to the whole 'culture'), those elements are not arbitrarily chosen, to the extent that they are meant to mark the boundaries of the ethnic group as visibly as possible for outsiders to acknowledge the existence of that group.[41] Moreover, the ethnic group does not originate in the symbols used to mark it as distinct from others. The symbols as well as the group are in fact the result of human action. It is precisely that agency that Brather's approach ignores. In the words of a historian of the Vienna school, 'to make ethnicity happen, it is not enough just

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[38] Brather, *Ethnische Interpretationen*, p. 297.
[39] Brather, *Ethnische Interpretationen*, p. 313: 'Ethnische Identität ist die komplexe *Vorstellung* gemeinsamer Kultur und gemeinsamer Abstammung und keine objektive Merkmalskombination' (original emphasis).
[40] Brather, *Ethnische Interpretationen*, p. 108.
[41] Sam Lucy, 'Ethnic and Cultural Identities', in M. Díaz-Andreu and S. Lucy (eds), *The Archaeology of Identity: Approaches to Gender, Age, Status, Ethnicity, and Religion* (London and New York, 2005), pp. 86–109, at pp. 96–7.

to be different'.[42] The selection of ethnic symbols is a political strategy in the same way that choosing a certain dress style is for the construction of social status.[43] The success or failure of such strategies does not depend upon the quality or number of symbols chosen to represent them. Instead, that is a matter of how much power is exercised by real people over equally real people. In other words, if social constructs such as ethnicity do not reflect 'social reality', they can certainly shape it in accordance with the interests of those in power. Material culture is not a passive reflection of ethnicity, but an active element in its negotiation.[44]

The idea that political ethnicity is a goal-oriented ethnicity goes back to the influential work of Abner Cohen, a member of the Manchester School of social anthropology known for his work on informal social organization.[45] Manchester School anthropologists were concerned especially with colonization and urbanization, as well as with other dramatic changes taking place in African societies after contact with Europeans and other indigenous groups. Cohen's approach to ethnicity was therefore very pragmatic: to him ethnic identity was formed by internal organization and stimulated by external pressures, and held not for its own sake but to defend an economic or political interest. Such an ethnicity needed to be built upon some pre-existing form of cultural identity rather than be conjured up out of thin air. Ian Hodder's ethno-archaeological fieldwork in East Africa may be viewed as an attempt to test that conclusion. Hodder's idea was to study how spatial patterning of artefacts related to ethnic boundaries, and he chose the district of Baringo in Kenya. He found that, despite interaction across tribal boundaries, clear material culture distinctions were maintained in a wide range of artefact categories. He argued that distinct material culture boundaries were foci of interaction, not barriers. Hodder showed that material culture distinctions were in part maintained in order to justify between-group competition and negative reciprocity, and that such patterning increased in times of economic stress. However, not all cultural traits were involved in such differentiation, since, typically, interaction continued between competing groups. Hodder thus suggested that the use of material culture in distinguishing between self-conscious ethnic

[42] Walter Pohl, 'Telling the Difference: Signs of Ethnic Identity', in W. Pohl and H. Reimitz (eds), *Strategies of Distinction: The Construction of Ethnic Communities, 300–800* (Leiden, Boston and Cologne, 1998), pp. 17–69, here pp. 21–2.
[43] For an archaeological example, see Harold Mytum, 'The Vikings and Ireland: Ethnicity, Identity, and Cultural Change', in J.H. Barrett (ed.), *Contact, Continuity, and Collapse: The Norse Colonization of the North Atlantic* (Turnhout, 2003), pp. 113–37.
[44] Ian Hodder, *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 9.
[45] Abner Cohen, *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa: A Study of Hausa Migrants in Yoruba Towns* (London, 1969).

groups would lead to discontinuities in material culture distributions that may enable the archaeologist to identify such groups. The specific kind of relations between groups is often related to the internal organization of social relationships within one or the other group. In the case of the Baringo, between-group differentiation and hostility was linked to the internal differentiation of age sets and the domination of women and young men by older men, a conclusion later substantiated by Roy Larick's fieldwork among the Loikop (Samburu) of northern Kenya.[46]

Hodder provides a good example of Cohen's concept of goal-oriented ethnicity. The Maasai sometimes 'become' Dorobo in order to escape drought, raiding or government persecution. But, although the Dorobo had a real separate existence in the conscious thoughts of those calling themselves by that name, there was no symbolic expression of any difference between Dorobo and Maasai.[47] In other words, different groups may manipulate material culture boundaries in different ways, depending upon the social context, the economic strategies at stake, the particular history of the social and economic relations, and finally, the particular history of the cultural traits chosen for marking the ethnic boundaries. The history of the Middle Ages is replete with examples of just that. To cite one among many relevant cases, in the Latin kingdom of Cyprus, rulers wanted to project the image of a society with a thoroughly Western, chivalric look. By 1200, the Latins in the kingdom formed a close-knit caste from which local Greeks were excluded. Not only were Latins obsessed with hunting and falcony, but the earliest instance of knights dressing up as characters from the Arthurian cycle occurred in Cyprus in the mid-1220s at the jousts held as part of the celebrations surrounding the knighting of the sons of the Lord of Beirut, John of Ibelin (1197–1226).[48] Whether a marker of ethnic identity or social rank, or perhaps both, material culture in this case was not a mirror of social identity.

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[46] Ian Hodder, *Symbols in Action: Ethnoarchaeological Studies of Material Culture* (Cambridge, London and New York, 1982), pp. 27, 31, 35, 85, 187 and 205; Roy Larick, 'Age Grading and Ethnicity in the Style of Loikop (Samburu) Spears', *World Archaeology* 18 (1986), pp. 269–83, and 'Warriors and Blacksmiths: Mediating Ethnicity in East African Spears', *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 10 (1991), pp. 299–331. Kathleen Deagan, *Spanish St. Augustine: The Archaeology of a Colonial Creole Community* (New York, 1983), pp. 99 and 271 offers similar conclusions. The sixteenth-century Spanish settlers of St Augustine (Florida) strove to create ethnic boundaries around their community by means of a unique Hispanic-American cultural tradition, itself the result of *mestizaje*, or Spanish-Indian intermarriage. Deagan found that elements of that cultural tradition that were linked to male activities and to public stages of social interaction (tablewares, items of clothing and personal adornments) tended to retain their Spanish appearance, while those cultural elements that were female-centred and focused on the household (internal home furnishings, household pottery) were often of Native American manufacture.

[47] Hodder, *Symbols*, p. 104.

[48] Peter W. Edburg, 'Latins and Greeks on Crusader Cyprus', in D. Abulafia and N. Berend (eds), *Medieval Frontiers: Concepts and Practices* (Aldershot, 2002), pp. 133–142, at p. 135.

Instead, that identity was at least in part the result of the manipulation of material culture. To be a Latin meant, among other things, to have access to the re-enactment of the Arthurian cycle and be allowed to dress up as one of its characters.

A key component of ethnic boundary building is therefore style, which may be viewed as the pattern people make around a particular event, recalling and creating similarities and differences. This became particularly clear during the 'style debate' of the 1980s, in which several archaeologists argued over the communicative role of material culture.[49] Max Wobst first proposed the idea that style operated as an avenue of communication.[50] James Sackett argued that style was a passive aspect of artefacts, an intrinsic or adjunct function of material culture, which he called isochrestic variation. According to Sackett, the isochrestic variation permeated all aspects of social and cultural life and provided the means by which members of a group express their mutual identity, coordinate their actions, and bind themselves together. Style thus became an idiomatic or diagnostic of ethnicity. No matter what meaning style may have had for its producers in the past, its consequences were not completely within their awareness and thus often worked 'behind their backs'.[51] By contrast, Polly Wiessner argued that as a form of non-verbal communication through doing something in a certain way that communicates about relative identity, style is an intentional, structured system of selecting certain dimensions of form, process or principle, function, significance, and affect from among known, alternate possibilities to create variability within a corpus of artefacts. According to Wiessner, a distinction should be made between 'emblemic' and 'assertive' styles. Emblemic styles have distinct referents and transmit clear messages to defined target populations about conscious affiliation or identity, while assertive styles are personally based and carry information supporting individual identity. Because an emblemic style carries a distinct message, it should undergo strong selection for uniformity and clarity, and because

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[49] For a review of the debate, see Michelle Hegmon, 'Archaeological Research on Style', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21 (1992), pp. 517–36; H.M. Wobst, 'Style in Archaeology and Archaeologists in Style', in E. Chilton (ed.), *Material Meanings: Critical Approaches to the Interpretation of Material Culture* (Salt Lake City, 1999), pp. 118–32.

[50] H.M. Wobst, 'Stylistic Behavior and Information Exchange', in C.E. Cleland (ed.), *For the Director: Research Essays in Honor of James B. Griffin* (Ann Arbor, 1977), pp. 317–42.

[51] James R. Sackett, 'Style and Ethnicity in the Kalahari: A Reply to Wiessner', *American Antiquity* 50 (1985), pp. 154–9; 'Isochrestism and Style: A Clarification', *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 5 (1986), pp. 266–77; and 'Style and Ethnicity in Archaeology: The Case for Isochrestism', in M.W. Conkey and C.A. Hastorf (eds), *The Uses of Style in Archaeology* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 32–43. For similar views, see Natalie R. Franklin, 'Research with Style: A Case Study from Australian Rock Art', in S. Shennan (ed.), *Archaeological Approaches to Cultural Identity* (London, 1989), pp. 278–90, at p. 278; Esther Pasztory, 'Identity and Difference: The Uses and Meanings of Ethnic Styles', *Studies in the History of Art* 27 (1989), pp. 15–38, at p. 17.

it marks and maintains boundaries of group membership, it can be distinguished archaeologically by uniformity within its realm of function.[52]

When used as a tool in social strategies, style provides the potential for the control of the meaning and thus for power. Recent studies demonstrate that an emblemic style appears at critical junctures in the regional political economy, when changing social relations would impel displays of groups identity. With the initial evolution of social stratification and the rise of chiefdoms, considerable stylistic variability may exist between communities in clothing and display items. At a regional level, however, iconography and elite status become important to legitimize and 'naturalize' the inherent inequality that exists in such societies. Extensive interchiefdom trade and shared political ideology serve to deliver rare and foreign objects linked symbolically to universal forces.[53]

An examination of the sixth-century archaeological material from the Middle Danube region of present-day Hungary may illustrate this discussion of the active use of material culture in the creation of cultural identities.[54] Most finds in that region concentrate either on the right bank of the Danube or on the left bank of the Tisza River.[55] There are very few finds between the two rivers, an area that may have served as a 'no man's land' separating the Lombards from the Gepids. But this buffer zone was not a barrier, for considerable interaction occurred across the 'no man's land'. For example, in the early 500s the Lombard king Wacho married a Gepid princess.[56] In the late 540s, a candidate to the Lombard throne named Hildigis is said to have fled to the Sclavenes, who presumably lived somewhere near the Gepids. When Emperor Justinian decided to turn the Lombards into his new allies, Hildigis fled

[52] Polly Wiessner, 'Style and Social Information in Kalahari San Projectile Points', *American Antiquity* 48 (1983), pp. 253–76; 'Style or Isochrestic Variation? A Reply to Sackett', *American Antiquity* 50 (1985), pp. 160–6; and 'Is There a Unity to Style?', in Conkey and Hastorf (eds), *Uses of Style*, pp. 105–12.

[53] Castle McLaughlin, 'Style as a Social Boundary Marker: A Plains Indian Example', in Auger *et al.* (eds), *Ethnicity and Culture*, pp. 55–66; Timothy Earle, 'Style and Iconography as Legitimation in Complex Chiefdoms', in Auger *et al.* (eds), *Uses of Style*, pp. 73–81; Ian Hodder, 'Style as Historical Quality', in Auger *et al.* (eds), *Uses of Style*, pp. 44–51.

[54] What follows is a summary of a longer discussion to be found in Florin Curta, *The Making of the Slavs: History and Archaeology of the Lower Danube Region, c.500–700* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 197–203.

[55] Joachim Werner, *Die Langobarden in Pannonien. Beiträge zur Kenntnis der langobardischen Bodenfunde vor 568* (Munich, 1962), p. 116; Neil Christie, *The Lombards: The Ancient Longobards* (Oxford and Cambridge, 1995), p. 55. For the conflict between Lombards and Gepids, see Walter Pohl, 'Die Gepiden und die Gentes an der mittleren Donau nach dem Zerfall des Attillareiches', in H. Wolfram and F. Daim (eds), *Die Völker an der mittleren und unteren Donau im fünften und sechsten Jahrhundert. Berichte des Symposions der Kommission für Frühmittelalterforschung, 24. bis 27. Oktober 1978, Stift Zwettl, Niederösterreich* (Vienna, 1980), pp. 239–305; and 'Die Langobarden in Pannonien und Justinians Gotenkrieg', in D. Bialeková and J. Zábojník (eds), *Ethnische und kulturelle Verhältnisse an der mittleren Donau vom 6. bis zum 11. Jahrhundert. Symposium Nitra 6. bis 10. November 1994* (Bratislava, 1996), pp. 27–36.

[56] Paul the Deacon, *History of the Lombards* I. 21.

to the Gepids, followed by a retinue of renegade Lombards and Sclavenes.[57]
Goods seem to have also moved freely between the Lombards and the
Gepids. At least this may be part of the explanation for the fact that
the construction of male identity on both sides of the 'no man's land'
operated with the same categories of artefacts. Judging from grave-goods
associated with male burials, there were no differences between Gepid
and Lombard warriors, at least not in their appearance. A specific com-
bination of weapons – sword, spear and shield – was typically associated
with high-status male burials on both sides of the 'no man's land'. Clear
material culture distinctions were maintained not through male accoutre-
ments, but through a range of artefacts found in female graves. Most
interesting in this respect is the distribution of bow fibulae, which shows
a sharp contrast between western and eastern Hungary. While disc- and
S-shaped brooches are rare in the area east of the Tisza, they were
particularly popular in western Hungary. Completely different types
of brooches were in fashion at the same time on either side of the 'no man's
land'. Brooch classes such as Goethe, Cividale, Ravenna and Castel
Trosino that are represented in western Hungary have no analogies outside
that region, except Italy.[58] Conversely, the most popular fibulae in eastern
Hungary were those of the Hahnheim class, many of which have parallels
in Germany and France.[59] The distribution thus reveals two different *styles*
of brooch-use, which may be interpreted as two different ways to convey
information about the relative identity of the brooch owners. The patterns
and contrasts created did not produce ethnically specific artefacts. Very
few, if any, brooch classes were creations *ex nihilo* and many were either
'imports' from other regions or replicas of 'imported' specimens. In other
words, no particular class of artefacts could be diagnosed as either
'Gepid' or 'Lombard'. The ethnic boundary emerged from the manipu-
lation of specific types, without assigning an 'ethnic value' to any one
of them. Since most, if not all, brooch classes may be dated to the late
fifth and first half of the sixth century, it is important to note that the
pattern visible in the distribution of all specimens came into existence
at the time of the increasing rivalry between the two groups.[60]

[57] Procopius of Caesarea, *Wars* VII.35.16 and 19.
[58] For detailed descriptions of these types of fibulae, see Herbert Kühn, *Die germanischen
      Bügelfibeln der Völkerwanderungszeit in Süddeutschland* (Graz, 1974), pp. 996–1006, 1187–91,
      1217–24, and 1239–48.
[59] Herbert Kühn, *Die germanischen Bügelfibeln der Völkerwanderungszeit in der Rheinprovinz* (Graz,
      1965), pp. 151–3; and *Die germanischen Bügelfibeln der Völkerwanderungszeit in Süddeutschland*,
      pp. 799–802. See also Alexander Koch, *Bügelfibeln der Merowingerzeit im westlichen Frankenreich*
      (Bonn, 1998), pp. 200–1.
[60] Brather is therefore right in rejecting the idea that brooches per se can be an expression of
      ethnic identity. Equally to be rejected, however, is his interpretation of such dress accessories
      as 'the continued existence of older cultural traditions even under new political conditions'
      (Brather, 'Ethnic Identities', pp. 149–76, at p. 161).

The Lombard–Gepid wars of the mid-sixth century may have indeed contributed to the consolidation among both Lombards and Gepids of specific dress styles. That such styles were more prominently displayed by women than by men is the result of the position that aristocratic women had in the conflict. It has long been noted that the meaning of dress is a form of social knowledge, where messages become 'naturalized' in appearance.[61] Since clothing serves to convey information, dress may be seen as a symbolic 'text' or 'message', a visual means of communicating ideas and values.[62] One important aspect of the communicative symbolism of dress is its capacity for providing locative information, referring to either the individual's physical location in space or to his or her position within the social network. Because dress has a distinct referent and transmits a clear message to a defined target population about conscious affiliation and identity, it may be treated as a form of emblemic style.

That brooches appear exclusively in female burials shows that the real challenge for archaeologists is not so much that ethnicity in the medieval past did not have any material culture correlates, but that distinctive features, such as dress accessories may signal other forms of social identity, such as gender, age or class.[63] Ethnicity *was* a form of social identity, often combined with, rather than in opposition to, gender. However, archaeologists normally treat these two forms of social identity separately and often favour ethnicity over gender. This is especially true for rich female burials with bow brooches, in the analysis of which gender has often been neglected in favour of interpretations overemphasizing the role of brooches as markers of ethnic identity.[64] One reason for this bias may be that many, if not all archaeologists tend to treat gender as

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[61] Marie Louise Sørensen, 'The Construction of Gender through Appearance', in D. Walde and N.D. Willows (eds), *The Archaeology of Gender: Proceedings of the Twenty-Second Annual Conference of the Archaeological Association of the University of Calgary* (Calgary, 1987), pp. 121–9, here p. 122. See also Marilyn Revell DeLong, *The Way We Look: A Framework for Visual Analysis of Dress* (Ames, 1987); Odile Blanc, 'Historiographie du vêtement: un bilan', in *Le vêtement. Histoire, archéologie et symbolique vestimentaires au Moyen Age* (Paris, 1989), pp. 7–33. Brather does not believe that it is at all possible to detect ethnic differences in clothes because too many social identities can in fact be communicated simultaneously through dress (Brather, *Ethnische Interpretationen*, p. 411).

[62] Cherri M. Pancake, 'Communicative Imagery in Guatemala Indian Dress', in M. Blum Schevill, J.C. Berlo and E.B. Dwyer (eds), *Textile Traditions of Mesoamerica and the Andes: An Anthology* (New York, 1991), pp. 45–62. See also Jean-Thierry Maertens, *Dans la peau des autres: essai d'anthropologie des inscriptions vestimentaires* (Paris, 1978).

[63] Thomas Wallerström, 'On Ethnicity as a Methodological Problem in Historical Archaeology', in H. Andersson, P. Carelli and L. Ersgård (eds), *Visions of the Past: Trends and Traditions in Swedish Medieval Archaeology* (Lund, 1997), pp. 299–352, at p. 303.

[64] Bonnie Effros, 'Dressing Conservatively: Women's Brooches as Markers of Ethnic Identity?', in L. Brubaker and J.M.H. Smith (eds), *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300–900* (Cambridge and New York, 2004), pp. 165–84.

a given and not so much as socially constructed as ethnicity. Nonetheless, much like ethnicity, the representation of gender through burial assemblages is not a direct reflection of social practice.[65]

In the east Baltic region, gender distinctions are clearly visible in late fifth- and early sixth-century cemeteries. For example, in eastern Latvia and western Lithuania, male and female bodies were buried in opposite directions. In south-western Latvia, male burials were additionally marked by the inclusion of horse skulls on top of the body.[66] Clear gender distinctions are also visible in grave-goods. In Pagrybis (western Lithuania), males were buried with fibulae, bronze torcs and weapons, while female burials produced tools, as well as headdress garlands with bronze spirals, bracelets, and dress pins joined by chains. Much has been made of the typical female burial kit consisting of headdress garlands, bracelets and dress pins. This has more often than not been viewed as an ethnic marker, the 'national costume' of the earliest Lithuanians.[67] However, at a closer examination this interpretation proves to be wrong.[68] In Pagrybis, the standard set of dress accessories appears only in burials with skeletons of women who died between twenty and thirty years of age. Neither girls, nor older women were given such adornments. By contrast, the presence of bronze dress accessories in male burials does not seem to have anything to do with age. Silver dress accessories, which are exclusively found in male burials, appear in graves of both older men and boys. Unlike girls, boys could be ascribed status upon death. Grave 55 in Pagrybis contained the skeleton of a ten-year-old boy buried together with the head and the legs of a sacrificed horse, a practice that is otherwise attested only with graves of adult men. Despite his young age, the boy was buried with a bronze torc and a silver crossbow brooch, both indicators of high status.[69] The evidence thus suggests that distinctions based on social status were the most important for male burials. Indeed, the majority of such burials excavated in Pagrybis each had only a spearhead, an axe, or a knife. By contrast,

[65] For the difficulties of 'reading' burial assemblages as a direct mirror of gender divisions in society, see Heinrich Härke, 'Die Darstellung von Geschlechtergrenzen im frühmittelalterlichen Grabritual: Normalität oder Problem?', in W. Pohl and H. Reimitz (eds), *Grenze und Differenz im frühen Mittelalter* (Vienna, 2000), pp. 180–96, at pp. 193–6.

[66] Andris Caune, 'Die Gräbertypen und Bestattungssitten im Ostbaltikum in der Zeit vom 1. bis 13. Jahrhundert', in F. Horst and H. Keiling (eds), *Bestattungswesen und Totenkult in ur- und frühgeschichtlicher Zeit* (Berlin, 1991), pp. 257–74, at p. 263.

[67] Most typical for this approach is Regina Volkaitė-Kulikauskienė, *Senoves lietuviu drabužiai ir ju papuosalai* (I–XVI a.) (Vilnius, 1997).

[68] The following is based on Laima Vaitkunskienė, 'Moters ir vyro statusas žemdirbių bendruomenéje V–VI amžiais', *Lietuvos TSR Mokslų Akademijos darbai. A serija* 1 (1985), pp. 74–85; and 'The Formation of a Warrior Elite during the Middle Iron Age in Lithuania', *Archaeologia Baltica* 1 (1995), pp. 94–106.

[69] For the role of silver artefacts as markers of social status in early medieval cemeteries in Lithuania, see Laima Vaitkunskienė, *Sidabras senoves Lietuvoje* (Vilnius, 1981).

age distinctions seem to have been paramount for female burials, which suggests the existence of such gender categories as 'married' and 'non-married'. Moreover, most high-status men of older age were buried together with young females. In Grave 65, a male and a female holding hands were facing each other. The presence of a one-edged sword and a silver torc associated with the male skeleton has rightly been inter-preted as an indication of high status. By contrast, the female skeleton was unusual in many respects. First, unlike single female burials in the cemetery, it was buried in the same direction as the male skeleton. Second, although aged twenty to twenty-five, the woman in Grave 65 had no standard kit of dress accessories and no traditional tools, such as spindle whorls or awls. A spearhead placed between the male and the female skeletons was interpreted as a marker of social distinction, which further suggests that the female buried together with the high-status man in Grave 65 was of inferior social status, arguably a slave.[70]

Material culture is therefore fundamentally social, and artefacts are rendered 'appropriate' for use only in social context. Decisions about the use of artefacts are embodied in artefacts themselves in terms of the conventions of culture. Artefacts 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. What should concern medieval archaeologists is not so much what people do, what kind of pots or brooches they make, what shape of houses they build, but the 'way they go about it'.[71]

The archaeological record, ethnicity and power

Despite their plea for shifting the emphasis of archaeological research from ethnicity to social issues, Sebastian Brather and a number of other similarly minded archaeologists in Eastern Europe believe that archaeo-logists are not even capable of identifying the boundaries of social groups. Without independent sources, such as written accounts, archaeologists cannot entertain any hopes of describing the meaning of symbols or the particular situations in which they were created and used.[72] The 'floating gap' between the communicative and cultural memory of any social group supposedly prevents archaeologists from reconstructing the meanings initially attached to symbols manipulated to mark the boundaries of the

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[70] Whether or not she was sacrificed on the occasion of the man's death remains unclear. See Vaitkunskienė, 'The Formation of a Warrior Elite', p. 100.
[71] Paul Graves-Brown, 'All Things Bright and Beautiful? Species, Ethnicity, and Cultural Dynamics,' in Graves-Brown, S. Jones and C. Gamble (eds), *Cultural Identity and Archaeology*, pp. 81–95, at pp. 90–1.
[72] Brather, *Ethnische Interpretationen*, pp. 337 and 369.

group. One needs written sources to decide which symbols were used in any particular society for building ethnic boundaries.[73] But without evidence of perfect overlap between written and archaeological sources, the argument is simply circular. Many sources were written by outsiders and as such reflect the authors' idiosyncrasies, not the self-identification of the ethnic groups described. Even when written by 'insiders', such sources rarely describe the artefacts archaeologists usually find in excavations. How could then such sources help them understand ethnicity? What about periods in history for which no written sources exist?

An emphatically functionalist declaration underlines this position: the archaeological sources are artefacts, which are not specifically made to carry a certain representation of the past, but to respond to some immediate economic or social demand. But the idea that written sources speak 'naturally', whereas artefacts are 'inherently' dumb has already been denounced as a presentist fallacy of our logocentric times.[74] According to such views, what separates archaeology from history is the fact that the former deals with material remains (*realia*), not with notions fixed by language. By contrast, the historian works in the sphere of thinking and language.[75] Historical records involve encoding of ideas, because human actors, not physical processes produced them and established the language code whereby these documents actually recorded past events. Historical records are thus viewed as 'active', in that they are thought as actively communicating messages and information that may transform the reader's ideas or behaviour. But there are at least two different meanings that can apply to the archaeological record: 'things' found which are supposed to be the result of the causes they record; and 'things' found which are supposed to bear the significance of the symbols they record. The first meaning refers to what Linda Patrik called the 'physical model' of the archaeological record, which represents the cardinal paradigm of modern archaeology.[76] The basic assumption on which this model is based is that the physical remains are the causal effects of physical processes. As a consequence, what the archaeologist is supposed to do is simply to excavate and analyse the 'record' in order to reconstruct the causal phenomenon. Geologists and palaeontologists use index fossils to identify strata belonging to a particular geological epoch, and diagnostic artefacts (*Leittypen*) are nothing more than the archaeological equivalent of index fossils.[77] The idea behind the index

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[73] Brather, *Ethnische Interpretationen*, pp. 570 and 577.
[74] Its most elegant refutation remains John Moreland, *Archaeology and Text* (London, 2001).
[75] Lev S. Klein, 'To Separate a Centaur: On the Relationship of Archaeology and History in Soviet Tradition', *Antiquity* 67 (1993), pp. 339–48, at p. 341.
[76] Linda Patrik, 'Is There an Archaeological Record?', *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory* 8 (1985), pp. 27–62, at p. 33.
[77] For index fossils in archaeology, see Trigger, *History*, p. 96.

fossil is in fact that the recording connection between the record and what is recorded is a strictly causal relationship, maintained in a physical medium. Given sufficient knowledge of the laws governing the causal connection, the original body can be inferred from the fossil record on the basis of the uniformitarian principle.[78] The fossil record is therefore 'passive', because it records its causes by preserving the static effects of those causes. In other words, the fossil record is something like an imprint. The 'physical model' takes primarily physical remains for physical marks, human artefacts and residues for past organic bodies and traces, which the archaeologist excavates and analyses, assuming that the archaeological record can never be exactly duplicated. Such a model implies that the regularities in the features and spatial order of various components of the record can be expressed as universal or probabilistic laws. The 'physical model' is therefore a deductive-nomological model in that it attempts to infer deductively the past causes of the record. Archaeologists operating with this model of archaeological record do not usually distinguish between three different recording connections linking physical things in the present to referents in the past: recording connections of physical remains (e.g., skeletons); recording connections of what is substantially equivalent to something else (e.g., fossils); and recording connections of unique, nomological traces (e.g., fingerprints).[79]

Embracing the 'physical model' amounts to rejecting the idea that physical remains are residues of human actions, ideas and events with human import, which archaeologists can decode, read and analyse. There is little room in such views for intentionality, signs and human agency. By focusing on the intentional codifying process of any cultural activity, the 'textual model' of the archaeological record allows 'a place for individuals' idiosyncratic actions, creativity or protest; just as some authors break new ground (and perhaps break a few grammatical rules in the process), so too certain individuals produce, use or discard material items, they "bring things off" in unique, unpredictable ways'.[80] The 'textual model' implies that the archaeological record is part of a symbolic system and largely encodes ideas or general social behaviour. This actually means that material culture is a 'text' to be 'read'. Archaeologists are therefore supposed to identify and study contexts in order to interpret

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[78] Formulated in 1785 by the Scottish philosopher James Hutton (1726–97), the uniformitarian principle states that 'the present is the key to the past'. When applied to geological processes, this means that the creation of all ancient geological features may be attributed to the same physical mechanisms that are seen in the present. See Dennis R. Dean, *James Hutton and the History of Geology* (Ithaca, 1992).

[79] Patrik, 'Is There an Archaeological Record?', pp. 35–55.

[80] Patrik, 'Is There an Archaeological Record?', p. 37.

meaning.[81] It is particularly in this light that an archaeology of ethnicity becomes possible.

Cultural practices and representations that become objectified as symbols of group identity are derived from, and resonate with, the habitual practices and experiences of the agents involved, but they also reflect the instrumental contingencies of a particular situation. This was certainly true for Louis the Pious who took seriously his father's recommendation to dress like Gascons when ruling over Aquitaine.[82] Similarly, King Dagobert's envoy, Sicharius, had to dress up like a Slav in order to be received by Samo, the king of the Wendish Slavs.[83] In both cases, what was at stake was not marking the difference, as with the Latin noblemen of Cyprus, but on the contrary, the ability to 'blend in', a strategy whose success depended directly upon knowledge of the habitual practices of the target group, be that Gascons or Wends. Ethnic differences are constituted simultaneously in the mundane as well as in the decorative, and become 'naturalized' by continual repetition in both public and private. It is the pattern created by such repetition that lends itself for interpretation by archaeologists studying ethnicity. There are of course different ways to interpret that pattern, and the degree to which the context of social practice can be reconstructed varies considerably. But 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.

Brather's understanding of the archaeological record as imprint may well be a reaction to the tendency of culture-historical archaeologists to treat artefacts as epiphenomenal, that is as subsumed beneath something else than themselves. The task of the traditional archaeologist was indeed to identify diagnostic traits, as ethnic attribution depended upon a symptomatic logic. But such an approach is meaningless: what do lists of supposedly similar brooches tell us? What does it mean to say that this or that brooch is Frankish or Gothic? The correct approach should start by acknowledging that the brooch in question is what is left of the past and not a secondary manifestation of something more primary, or material, or real.[84] The fact that several dress accessories associated with emblemic styles have been found primarily in burial assemblages is an indication of the public display of such styles, as burial in the early Middle Ages was an important 'beyond-the-household' arena of social

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[81]   Hodder, *Reading the Past*, p. 153.
[82]   Thegan, *Vita Hludovici* IV.
[83]   Fredegar, IV.68.
[84]   Michael Shanks, 'Style and the Design of a Perfume Jar from an Archaic Greek City State', *Journal of European Archaeology* 1 (1993), pp. 77–106 (reprinted in R.W. Preucel and I. Hodder (eds), *Contemporary Archaeology in Theory: A Reader* (Malden and Oxford, 1996), pp. 364–493, at pp. 368 and 373–4).

competition between groups.[85] The praxis of ethnicity resulted in multiple transient realizations of ethnic difference in public displays of group identity and aspirations. Inasmuch as archaeologists strive to identify the material correlates of ethnically specific behaviour rather than the material symbols of ethnic identity, ethnic styles are not attributes, but patterns people make around particular events of communal significance, which recall and create similarities and differences. Between the fourth and the sixth century, tombs, passageways of churches, synagogues, and residences of Christians and Jews in towns and villages from the Golan Heights were sometimes inscribed with powerful statements of limits maintained and defended by divine powers. Such decorations operated as 'voices' in the local religious and ethnic competition.[86] The 'imagined communities' of late antiquity and the Middle Ages existed only in the public commemoration of group boundaries, history and identity.

Ethnicity has often been defined as an essential orientation to the past, to collective origin, a 'social construction of primordiality'.[87] The key word is of course 'construction', for many inferences made by culture-historical archaeology about cultural continuity, which was commonly interpreted as ethnic continuity, have been invalidated by the use of refined chronologies, which revealed instead a considerable degree of discontinuity, recycling of old themes, and 'renaissances'. Ethnic displays are thus carefully staged invocations of pre-existing cultural practices, a (re-)invention of norms. For example, we know that the long, braided hair of the first Avar envoys that came to speak to Emperor Justinian in 558 made a very strong impression on the inhabitants of Constantinople. During the subsequent decades, a marker of perhaps multiple forms of social identity was employed as an ethnic stereotype: during the late sixth and early seventh century, Avars were known in Constantinople as 'the filthy race of long-haired barbarians'. Contemporary burials in the Avar heartland of present-day Hungary produced no evidence that braided hair was in any way valued by Avars themselves as a marker of ethnic identity. But the derogatory label attached to their appearance was soon turned into a badge of identity. During the so-called Middle Avar period, between *c.*620/50 to *c.*680, warriors were buried together with pairs of richly adorned hair clips, the position of which suggests that they were used for the ornamentation of long

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[85] Bonnie Effros, *Caring for the Body and Soul: Burial and the Afterlife in the Merovingian World* (University Park, 2002).

[86] Robert C. Gregg, 'Making Religious and Ethnic Boundaries: Cases from the Ancient Golan Heights', *Church History* 69 (2000), pp. 519–57, at p. 556.

[87] Hoyt S. Alverson, 'The Roots of Time: A Comment on Utilitarian and Primordial Sentiments in Ethnic Identification', in R.L. Hall (ed.), *Ethnic Autonomy – Comparative Dynamics: The Americas, Europe and the Developing World* (New York, Oxford and Toronto, 1979), pp. 13–7, at p. 15.

braids.[88] Burials with hair clips cluster within the region between the Danube and the Tisza rivers, which had served as 'buffer zone' in the 500s, but was now the core area of the Avar polity. The mid-600s was a period of considerable instability. The failure of the siege of Constantinople in 626 and the ensuing civil war brought the Avar qaganate on the brink of extinction. It is no doubt under these circumstances of dramatic social and cultural changes that a tradition of the late sixth century was revived and turned into a badge of identity. A cultural trait the Byzantines had employed to identify 'a filthy race' of barbarians has now become a matter of concern for those who wished to be viewed as Avars in both life and death. It is important to note that this recycling of an ethnic stereotype is associated with men of high status, who were often buried close to each other within one and the same cemetery. Archaeologists may well interpret this phenomenon as the continuation of a tradition first established at the time of the Avar conquest of the Middle Danube region. In reality, the emblemic style associated with hair clips was the invention of the second or third generation of Avar warriors.

More than six hundred years later, similar circumstances led to another invention of traditions. At the time of their migration into Hungary in the aftermath of the Mongol invasion of 1241, Cumans of the first generation accepted baptism and Christian burial, but resented being forced to let their beards grow and abandon their hairstyle (braids with one or three tresses and the top of the head shaved).[89] The strongest resistance in that respect came from a few clans that rose to prominence following the integration of the Cuman nobility into the highest echelons of the medieval society of Hungary. Moreover, a re-invention of the traditions of the steppe seems to have taken place during a period of intense factionalism and political fragmentation that coincided with the reign of King Ladislas IV (1272–90), himself the grandson of a Cuman chieftain. The Chertan clan rose to political prominence under such circumstances and it is no doubt with that family that three isolated burials of warriors must be associated. These were unusual graves in that in each one of them a horse was buried together with the human corpse. No such burial seems to have been given to any Cuman of the first generation in Hungary, but the practice is well attested on burial sites in the northern Black Sea area under the control of the Cumans

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[88] J. Andrási, 'Avar kori varkocsszorítók', *Archaeologiai Értesitö* 123–124 (1996–97), pp. 85–123. See also Eric Breuer, *Byzanz an der Donau. Eine Einführung in Chronologie und Fundmaterial zur Archäologie im Frühmittelalter im mittleren Donauraum* (Tettnang, 2005), p. 58.

[89] András Pálóczi-Horvath, 'Le costume coman au Moyen Age', *Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 32 (1980), pp. 403–27. See also Nora Berend, *At the Gate of Christendom: Jews, Muslims, and 'Pagans' in Medieval Hungary, c.1000–c.1300* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 250 and 261–2.

before 1241.[90] The tradition of the steppe was recycled in Christian Hungary in order to respond to a demand for markers of ethnic differentiation in times of political turmoil.

The fact that the emergence of emblemic styles often coincides in time with political strife or military conflict points to crises as ideal circumstances for the creation of 'imagined communities'. The key variable that must therefore be considered in explaining changes in ethnic boundary maintenance is the differential distribution of power understood as the probability of persons or groups carrying out their will when opposed by others. Both dress styles and 'traditions' become relevant particularly in contexts of changing power relations, which impel displays of group identity. The greater the disparity in power between groups, the higher the degree of boundary maintenance.[91] In thirteenth-century Ireland, the English government legislated against the Anglo-Norman subjects who wore Irish clothes, had their heads half shaved and grew their hair long at the back, 'making themselves like the Irish in clothing and appearance'.[92] However, the continuous conflict between Irish chieftains and Anglo-Norman lords led to much greater polarization. While Anglo-Norman lords lived in motte-and-bailey castles, most native Irish lords before c.1400 lived in crannogs, that is in residences located on artificial islands in the middle of lakes. The distributions of medieval mottes and crannogs in Ireland are mutually exclusive, and this has been interpreted in terms of different modes of waging war.[93] However, general changes in warfare after c.1400 brought about a considerable alteration of ethnic boundaries. With the Gaelic Resurgence of the 1400s, many mottes were abandoned and a process of Gaelicization seems to have taken place in Anglo-Norman Ireland with many lords of Anglo-Norman descent adopting the language, the customs, and the social behaviour of their Irish counterparts. Both Irish and Anglo-Norman lords began building tower houses, which became the hallmark of the military architecture of fifteenth- to seventeenth-century Ireland. Their distribution overlaps with that of both mottes and crannogs of the previous centuries. By 1500, Ireland consisted of a large number of virtually independent lordships controlled either by Gaelic lords or by men of Anglo-Norman descent. The colonial government lost control

[90] Petre Diaconu, *Les Coumans au Bas-Danube aux XIe–XIIe siècles* (Bucharest, 1978); Victor Spinei, *The Great Migrations in the East and South East of Europe from the Ninth to the Thirteenth Century* (Cluj-Napoca, 2003), pp. 217–40.

[91] Randall H. McGuire, 'The Study of Ethnicity in Historical Archaeology', *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 1 (1982), pp. 159–78, at p. 172.

[92] Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization, and Cultural Change 950–1350* (Princeton, 1993), p. 198.

[93] Kieran Denis O'Conor, *The Archaeology of Medieval Rural Settlement in Ireland* (Dublin, 1998), pp. 97–101.

over the island during the reign of Edward I and it was not until the seventeenth century that Ireland was fully re-conquered. The disappearance of the power responsible for the polarization of high-status site distributions during the thirteenth century made room for increased warfare and raiding between a great number of petty lords, all of relatively equal power and similar 'ethnic' identity.[94]

Conclusion

Understanding ethnicity in the past presents a particular challenge. Medieval ethnicity was just as embedded in sociopolitical relations as modern ethnicity is. Ethnicity was socially and culturally constructed, a form of social mobilization used in order to reach certain political goals. Then, just as now, ethnic identity was built upon some pre-existing cultural identity, in a prototypic manner. But ethnicity was also a matter of daily social practice, and as such it involved manipulation of material culture. Since material culture embodies practices, emblemic style was the way of communicating by non-verbal means about relative identity. Because it carried a distinct message, it is theoretically possible that it was used to mark and maintain boundaries, including ethnic ones. But ethnicity was also a function of power relations. Both emblemic styles and 'traditions' became relevant particularly in contexts of changing power relations, which impelled displays of group identity. In most cases, the study of both symbols and 'traditions' implies a discussion of the power configuration in any given historical situation, with an emphasis on the political forces that may have been responsible for the definition of symbols, their organization and hierarchization.

The archaeologist striving to understand the current debate about ethnogenesis opposing the Vienna to the Toronto school will undoubtedly be disappointed, if he or she seeks methodological guidance and theoretical advice on studying ethnicity. After all, the 'debate about ethnogenesis in recent scholarship is not about whether one model of "ethnic discourse" or identity-formation should be substituted for another; nor does it revisit discussion in the social sciences on whether or not ethnic identity is a social construct'.[95] In fact, the debate is mostly about whether or not we can understand the past, about interpretative frameworks within which to position narrative sources, and about issues of modern historiography. But the archaeological alternative does not look any more promising. Taken at face value, Brather's approach to ethnicity

[94] O'Conor, *Archaeology*, pp. 74 and 102.
[95] Andrew Gillett, 'Ethnogenesis: A Contested Model of Early Medieval Europe', *History Compass* 4 (2006), pp. 1–12, at p. 3.

accords with instrumentalist views that now predominate in anthropology and sociology. But he stops short of applying that approach to the analysis of the archaeological evidence. His intention may have been to exorcize the demons of culture-history and to free the archaeology of the Middle Ages from the ghost of Kossinna. But the room left open is now haunted by another spectre, one that Marc Bloch aptly called 'the dangerous modern poison of empiricism parading as common sense'.[96]

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[96] Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l'histoire ou métier d'historien* (Paris, 1974), p. 26: 'les poisons, aujourd'hui plus dangereux, de la routine érudite et de l'empirisme déguisé en sens commun'.