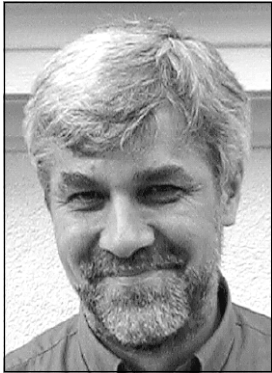


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Ethnic Phenomena in Late Antiquity



Born in Bucharest in 1954, I graduated in History in 1978 from the University of Bucharest and took a Ph.D. in 2000 at the same university, where I teach archaeological theory and anthropology in the Department of History. Since 1986, I have been a member of the Institute of Archaeology in Bucharest, working on research themes on the archaeology of the Late Roman Barbaricum. My current interests are centered on the use of anthropological knowledge for the understanding of collective identities from Late Antiquity, especially on the possibilities it could open up for the archaeological inquiry. – Address: Institutul de Arheologie “Vasile Părvan”, str. Henri Coandă, nr. 11, Bucarest, 71119, Rumania.

I came to the Wissenschaftskolleg with the purpose of finishing a paper on the coming of the Goths in Walachia and of preparing an overview of the recent historical research on Late Antique ethnic phenomena. Both are parts of a project which will use what we can know about ancient collective identities for a better understanding of ethnicity.

Archaeological research is very important for this project, but for the specific goals pursued in Berlin, it seemed a good idea to leave it out. For my first theme, the current crisis of the archaeological interpretation of ethnicity recommended this; for the second, I assumed the existence of significant differences in the ways social sciences are used by historians and archaeologists in their study of Late Antique ethnic phenomena.

1. My research on when and how the Goths came to Walachia, an attempt to do traditional history with the awareness of the influence the representation of ethnic entities might have, was confronted with a dominant view in Romanian literature, produced by historians insensitive to the dangers of mixed argumentation, who still conceive their work as a preface to national history. They think in terms of continuity and discontinuity, following the tradition of seeing peoples live or die, survive or disappear, in an atmosphere of cultural

(moral?) selection. This kind of research has produced an image of pre-national coherence of the local population confronted with disruptive invasions of the “migrators”, built on assumptions and hypotheses that have acquired the authority of established facts. One of these constructions is the alliance between the *Carpi* and the Goths. It is based on a curious interpretation of Petrus Patricius fr. 8 Müller. The fragment presents a delegation of the *Carpi* who claim to be stronger than the Goths and demand from the governor of *Moesia Inferior* to be subsidized as the Goths were. The governor, regarding the claim as boastful, rejects the demand and offers only a relation to the Empire as subjects. The construction I am discussing starts by considering that the *Carpi* – not the Roman governor – were right and assumes the existence of a coalition with the Goths as the weaker partner, with no other evidence than the fact that both were attacking the Empire from the same direction. Such a relationship is not supported by the sources: even in the frequently evoked passage (*Get.* 91) in which Jordanes mentions the readiness for war of the *Carpi*, they are present as a contingent in a Gothic army. The function of this fiction is to postpone the arrival of the “foreign”, “allochthonous” Goths as much as possible, anyway until after the dissolution of the Carpi power. Thus the Goths, inferior allies of the “autochthonous” *Carpi*, would not cross the territory of their superiors, although they were able to cross, and not just once, the far better defended border of the Roman Empire.

2. My overview of the recent historical writing on Late Antique ethnic phenomena concentrates on the use made of the work done in the social sciences on ethnicity and related matters, considered relevant by many authors who want to see beyond the identities projected by the written sources. Here are some preliminary observations.

Most of the work relevant to my purposes is dedicated to the study of the *Barbaricum*: the concern for ethnicity in the literature on the *Alamanni*, for example, is greater than that observable in the literature on the Romans, despite the obvious imbalance in the available written information. Are social sciences seen as adequate especially for the “barbarian” other – as once anthropology was for the non-Europeans – and less for the Romans or the Greeks? Are the historians of the *Barbaricum* more sensitive to the research on ethnicity?

The limitation of the research to the “barbarians” and the emphasis on the “situational”, “fluid”, less than substantial nature of their identity, could have the consequence of confirming the “not-really-

a-people” feeling that partisans of the traditional essentialist views, like those inclined to value the cultural majesty of the Roman Empire, had about the “barbarians” all along. While to speak about “barbarians” in an attempt to understand the Romans is unavoidable, to do so in order to understand non-Roman identities only reproduces the uniform lack of civilization the Romans saw beyond most of their frontiers.

Among the historians who study the peoples beyond the *limes*, those who refrain from using archaeological research as a basis for their conclusions, like Herwig Wolfram, are also reluctant to take ideas directly from the social sciences. This loss is at least in part compensated by the influence of a bold constructivist approach to ethnicity, present in their field from 1961 on, when Reinhard Wenskus’s *Stammesbildung und Verfassung* was published.

Many of the historians of the *Barbaricum* and of the successor states are, like Walter Pohl and Peter Heather, confident both in their use of the archaeological research and in their ability to draw theoretical strength from the social sciences. The lack of restraint is consistent with the conviction, shared by many, that their discipline can absorb anything deemed useful for historical reconstruction, and the scanty information on the peoples outside the Roman Empire perhaps makes the appeal of non-literary information and borrowed concepts greater. This kind of receptivity to the social sciences is usually associated with the search for a stable body of true statements about the essences that generate social phenomena, different from the practicality of a tool kit appropriate for the study of ancient societies. The ready-made knowledge prepared by the social sciences accepted in this way risks turning our attention away from studying the “social organization of cultural difference”, which is far more useful for the understanding of ethnicity than is conformity to what is perceived as dominant social theory.

Reluctance or propensity to use the results coming from the social sciences are seldom explained. I was not able to find anywhere an explicit defense of the paradigms that until recently have produced, without any need to quote Fredrik Barth, what we know about Late Antiquity or concerns about the possible incompatibility between the principles and definitions recently borrowed from the social sciences and the disciplines that developed for so long without them. No sign of an epistemic crisis that could bring the historian to question the constituent ideas of his trade, the rules of the particular games he is playing. The result: peoples with different names and different histories, speaking different languages but so similar in their

making, named abstractions, more or less discretely endowed with the conflicting qualities imagined by the Ancients.

Despite an increased emphasis on process versus pattern, on becoming versus being, and, particularly important for the Late Roman period, despite the tendency to abandon the time-honoured “billiard ball” representation of the migrations, the traditional image of the ancient world does not seem as yet seriously in danger. The current recourse to social sciences, mostly done by presenting some writings as authoritative, as containing the accumulated knowledge of whole disciplines and supposed to do the job of updating the historian’s understanding of ethnic phenomena, does not change much and “business as usual” goes on, without any fear that what comes from outside the discipline can disrupt traditions and what they support in the academic world. While debating over false dilemmas, like that which opposes the subjective character of ethnicity and its capacity to determine behaviour (Walter Pohl versus Peter Heather), historians persist in using the notion of tribe without any sign of awareness that anthropologists are nowadays very uneasy about it, as well as notions like ethnicity and identity without questioning their cross-cultural value. Perhaps more attempts to understand what our term “ethnic” could mean in local settings, in particular circumstances of interaction, could change the understanding of collective identities as uniform, basic cultural realities producing the world of Late Antiquity, with its several kinds of Romans and almost no Barbarians.