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Linguistica Brunensia. 2024, vol. 72, iss. 2, pp. 41-56

ISSN 2336-4440 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/LB2024-38774>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.80401>

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Access Date: 01. 12. 2024

Version: 20240823

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Florin Curta

MIGRATION AND COMMON SLAVIC. CRITICAL REMARKS OF AN ARCHAEOLOGIST

ABSTRACT

Archaeologists can rarely contribute to any discussions among linguists. However, they are in a privileged position, when it comes to identifying and delineating migrations. The paper is an attempt to assess the archaeological evidence pertaining to the supposed migration of the Slavs in the 6th century, from their original homeland to the Danube. Wherever that homeland was located, in order to reach the Lower Danube (where the northern frontier of the Empire was located in the 6th century), the Slavs had to cross the territory of present-day Romania. A special emphasis is therefore placed on the archaeological evidence of that country, particularly on those classes that have been typically associated with the early Slavs. However, no class of evidence attests to the existence of any migration across the territory of Romania. Migration is therefore not the mechanism that can explain the spread of Slavic.

KEYWORDS

Early Slavs; language spread; migration; archaeology

1. Introduction

Paraphrasing the American archaeologist Lewis R. Binford (1931–2011), one cannot excavate a language.¹ Wearing an archaeologist's hat among linguists would therefore not help one blend in; it would instead make one stand out. To be sure, despite all criticism, both archaeologists and linguists still link languages to archaeological

¹ BINFORD (1962, 281): "It has often been suggested that we cannot dig up a social system or ideology. Granted we cannot excavate a kinship terminology or a philosophy, but can and do excavate the material items which functioned together with these more behavioral elements within the appropriate cultural sub-systems."

cultures (DARDEN 2004, 149; HOLZER 2008, 210; GREENBERG 2017, 177; NAZIN 2020; PROFANTOVÁ – PROFANT 2020, 312; KARA 2022, 79).² There is no point in denying that when it comes to linguistic reconstruction, archaeologists can only shrug their shoulders.³ But can they truly and meaningfully contribute to a discussion about Common Slavic? The answer, in my opinion, is positive, and it concerns a key aspect of that discussion – the spread of Common Slavic. There are three possible mechanisms that can explain a language spread: language shift, demographic expansion, and migration. Almost all literature on the spread of Slavic assumes, at least implicitly, that that language spread outside the homeland in multiple directions by means of migration.⁴ It is precisely at this juncture that archaeologists can lend a hand.

The Hungarian archaeologist István Bóna (1930–2001) once wrote that “there are many problems that cannot be resolved by archaeology”. However, archaeologists are definitely in a position to tell “whether or not a region was inhabited at any given time”. They also have the ability to confirm with some degree of certainty “whether or not the settlement was a lasting one” (BÓNA 1994, 139). Recently, there has been a great deal of discussion about migration among archaeologists, who now distinguish between long- and short-distance migrations, as well as different patterns of migration that may be recognized in the archaeological record (ANTHONY 1990; HÄRKE 1998; BURMEISTER 2000; DOMMELEN 2014; CURTA 2020). There is therefore hope that archaeologists can identify and delineate what linguists only assume as an explanatory device. Instead of explaining cultural and social change, they could simply confirm or reject the idea that migration was the mechanism responsible for the spread of Slavic.⁵ However, before that idea is put to the archaeological test,

2 Some cannot miss the opportunity for a plea pro domo: “Archaeological evidence tends to be in part ambiguous; its full interpretation often requires consideration of linguistic evidence” (GVOZDANOVIĆ 2020, 167). Others are circling the wagons: “Historical linguists today... do not proclaim that the Przeworsk, Zarubinec, or Černjachov cultures were Slavic, nor do they identify Jordanes’ Venethi with those of Pliny the Elder, Ptolemy, or Tacitus” (REJZEK 2020, 344). NALEPA (2007), GAUDIO (2011), BABIK (2012), and TIMBERLAKE (2013) are all clear evidence to the contrary.

3 It remains unclear, therefore, why DIDI (2023) claims that CURTA (2001) is about the Slavic glotto-genesis, when it is not.

4 There is a remarkable reluctance in the recent literature to consider any other mechanisms: ANDERSEN (2003), BABIK (2012, 846–850), GREENBERG (2017), ROMANCHUK (2020), GVOZDANOVIĆ (2020); LINDSTEDT – SALMELA (2020) leave some room for language shift. Some (e.g., HOLZER 2014, 1123; UDOLPH 2014, 1140–1142; ANDERSEN 2023, 41, 42, and 78; DIDI 2023, 444) use “expansion” instead of migration; in such cases, the word is not short for “demographic expansion”. See TIMBERLAKE (2013, 337): “Around 500 AD, as the Slavs began to move in various directions, somewhat different demic and linguistic scenarios play out in each case”. For arrows showing the directions of migration on the map of Eastern Europe, see UDOLPH (2017, 193 map 13).

5 The task is relatively easy with recent attempts to postulate a Slavic migration and explain it in terms of push-and-pull factors (SOŁTYSIAK 2006; FETNER 2011; LINDSTEDT – SALMELA 2020, 282–284). One cannot simply assume that the Slavs migrated to the Balkans to fill in the vacuum created by a supposed demographic collapse caused by the Justinianic plague. There is not a single shred of evidence that that plague had any effect(s) in the Balkans. Moreover, one would have to explain why a population com-

some preliminary clarification is needed. The terms of the problem will have to be defined clearly to avoid confusion.

2. Where did it start?

Three main theories have so far dominated the linguistic literature pertaining to the origin of the Slavs. According to one of them, the Slavic homeland was in the region between the Carpathian Mountains, the Pripet, and the Middle Dnieper (MOŻYŃSKI 1957, 207–232; GOŁĄB 1983, 139; TIMBERLAKE 2013, 334). Another theory favours the Middle Danube region inside the Carpathian Basin (TRUBAČEV 1991; 1997; 1998; NAZIN 2017). Finally, the third theory locates the Slavic homeland in the lands between the Oder and the Vistula rivers, in modern-day Poland (MARTYNOV 1963; MAŃCZAK 2000a, 52; NALEPA 2007, 62–65).⁶

For the idea of migration to be acceptable, one would have therefore to prove the movement of large numbers of people from any of the three areas considered as homeland to the Lower Danube region, where the Slavs are first mentioned in the 6th-century sources. It is important to note that, irrespective of which homeland one chooses to favor, emigrants from that area heading south (southeast or southwest) to the Danube frontier of the Empire had to cross the territory of present-day Romania. The archaeological evidence from that country is therefore crucial for testing the idea of migration. Within that country, traces of the migrants' trek to the Danube, as well as their ties back to the homeland, should, in principle, be easily detectable, much like the Gothic and Pecheneg migrations of earlier and later times, respectively (SPINEI 1995; HARHOIU et al. 2011, 34–38; HARHOIU 2021, 353–355).

3. When did it happen?

From a historical point of view, the most serious problem of all attempts to reconstruct early Slavic history based on linguistic data is the lack of chronological precision. In the absence of written sources, linguistic changes can be dated with

ing from afar was attracted by the population vacuum supposedly created in the Balkans. Why weren't the neighboring populations (such as those in the southern and eastern regions of modern Romania) filling that vacuum, prior to the arrival of the Slavs? Why is there no mention of such a migration in any of the 6th- and early 7th-century sources that are otherwise quite rich in information about the Slavs?

⁶ The most influential advocate of this theory was the Polish linguist Tadeusz Lehr-Spławiński (1891–1965), who pushed the origins of Common Slavic well into prehistory (LEHR-SPLAWIŃSKI 1946; 1961). His ideas were embraced by almost all Polish scholars of the subsequent generations (e.g., UŁASZYN 1959; MIODOWICZ 1984). In the early 21st century, the Polish linguist Witold Mańczak (1924–2016) fiercely defended the idea (by that time known as the “autochthonist theory”) against both linguists and archaeologists. His main argument was that Polish has more lexical agreements with German than with Lithuanian (MAŃCZAK 2000b; 2000c; 2002a; 2002b; 2004, 28–45; 2009).

difficulty, if at all (HONEYBONE 2012, 25–26 and 34).⁷ That is why dates offered by various scholars studying Common Slavic vary widely. Max Vasmer (1886–1962) dated Proto-Slavic (*Urslavisch*), the phase of the language believed to have been spoken by the early Slavs with minimal dialectal differences, between 400 BC and AD 400 (VASMER 1926, 119). Others, however, believe that the Slavs remained in their presumed homeland between 1500 BC and AD 500 (TIMBERLAKE 2013, 334).⁸ Some are convinced that in the 5th century, the Slavs occupied the southern region of present-day Belarus, but according to others the Proto-Slavic language was already in the lands between the Oder and the Middle Dnieper during the 4th century (BIRNBAUM 1975, 5–6; POPOWSKA-TABORSKA 1997, 91–92; SŁAWSKI 1998, 278).⁹ In the 1960s, the American linguist George Shevelov (1908–2002) still believed that one could use loan words employed as toponyms to date absolutely the changes taking place in Common Slavic (SHEVELOV 1965, 10–11). A little more than a decade later, however, Jürgen Udolph had to admit that it was impossible to pinpoint the moment at which rivers were given the earliest names of Slavic origin. Notwithstanding that, he still assumed that Common Slavic existed ca. 500, and concluded that those names must therefore be earlier, perhaps from the early 1st century AD (UDOLPH 1979, 623). Because of contacts with Latin, others claimed that the first palatalization must have still been in operation by AD 600, and that a few clear borrowings from Romance are to be dated to that same time (BIDWELL 1961, 126; PALIGA 2006, 124; for the relative chronology of the three palatalizations in Slavic, see VERMEER 2014). The Austrian linguist Herbert Galton (1917–2004) noted that Roman authors such as Tacitus, Pliny, and Strabo knew about Aestii and Fenni, but not about the Slavs, simply because there were no Slavs at that time (GALTON 1997, 12). However, his cautionary remark was simply ignored. The problem of chronology still plagues

7 Most linguists assume that their reconstructions can be taken to represent genuine historical forms of a real language, which just happens not to be recorded. However, that is no more than an unwarranted assumption. Few are willing to recognize that, but among the notable exceptions is KOSTIĆ (2023, 117). In the absence of historical records, it is impossible to verify linguistic reconstructions. Distrust in glottochronology (and lexicostatistics, in general) derives precisely from the fact that verification from comparison to external events always comes as an afterthought.

8 Many maintain that Slavic formed in prehistory (ANDERSEN 2003, 46; NALEPA 2007, 74; BRACKNEY 2007, 91 and 134; SCHUSTER-ŠEWIC 2007, 314–315; GAUDIO 2011, 17). The same results from studies of Celtic-Slavic contact, even though no precise dates are given (GVOZDANOVIĆ 2009; GVOZDANOVIĆ – BLAŽEK 2020). An older generation of scholars had the tendency to push into prehistory the breakup of Balto-Slavic, the beginning of which was then dated to the Bronze Age. Recent attempts to date Common Slavic to prehistory are inspired by that tendency.

9 GALTON (1997, 2 and 156) believes that one can speak of Proto-Slavic only from the 5th century onward, for typical sound changes leading to its individualization as a language took place only in contact with Altaic during the Hunnic period. HOLZER (2004, 50) believes that by the late 6th century, “Slavdom” expanded westwards “to the banks of the Elbe, Saale, and Enns rivers, including the shores of the Baltic Sea and the Balkan Peninsula”. According to him, around 600, Proto-Slavic was spoken “all over the huge territory that has been Slavic since 500”. There is no evidence for any of the dates advanced by those authors.

all attempts at reconstructing the history of the early Slavs based on the language they presumably spoke.

However, there seems to be no disagreement as to the date of the “great expansion” of Slavic. Because of the mention of the Slavs in historical sources of the 6th century, most linguists point to that century as crucial for the migration of the Slavs, even though some postulate subsequent waves of emigrants in later centuries. It is important to note that for migration (and not demographic expansion) to be accepted as mechanism for explaining the spread of Slavic, it must happen within a relatively discrete period, with well-defined chronological boundaries. Given the problems of chronology facing scholars interested in the history of language, the historical record is the guide for the definition of those boundaries. Given that the Slavs were not mentioned in any source before the 6th century, their migration(s) before the 6th century cannot be presumed, much less taken into consideration. In other words, either the migration of the Slavs happened in the 6th century, or it did not happen at all.

4. Was there a migration?

Conventional methods of identifying migration involve the use of archaeological types or material culture styles. On that basis, the presence of immigrants may be detected through cultural practices that are different from those of the local population (CAMERON 2013, 220). For example, some believe that the migration of the Slavs may be tracked by means of the sunken-floored buildings in which the Slavs typically lived (KOBYLÍŃSKI 1998, 53; *contra*: BRATHER 2001, 79). The problem with that idea is that the sunken-floored buildings were known in present-day Romania long before the date of the presumed migration of the Slavs (e.g., PALADE 2004, 55–68). Similarly, the handmade pottery of the so-called Prague type was employed to track the migration of the Slavs across Eastern and East Central Europe. On that basis, the idea was put forward that the Slavs came to Bohemia and Moravia from Ukraine and Belarus (PROFANTOVÁ 2012, 256; 2015, 97–98). However, the pottery found in assemblages securely dated to the late 5th or early 6th century in Ukraine or in Belarus has no resemblance whatsoever to that from the earliest assemblages with pottery of the so-called Prague type found in Bohemia (CURTA 2021, 126–128). Moreover, to this day, there is absolutely no trace of the Prague-type pottery anywhere in the Balkans (VINSKI 1954).¹⁰

Several authors have pointed out that the early Slavs were agriculturists (for example, SZMONIEWSKI 2016, 35–36). Long-distance migrations are indeed likely to

¹⁰ To judge from the lack of any Balkan analogies for the pottery discovered on the settlement sites excavated in Nova Tabla (Slovenia) or Stara Ves (Croatia), their inhabitants were never interested in moving farther south (BEKIĆ 2012; PAVLOVIĆ 2017).

occur in societies with focal subsistence strategies (ANTHONY 1990, 910). As soon as resources that are key to those strategies are depleted, the group moves wherever else the resources may be found in abundance. The argument therefore is that the Slavs moved out of the homeland after depleting resources necessary for their subsistence economy. However, the spatial aggregation of resources necessary for the subsistence strategies of early medieval communities was relatively homogeneous in the forest-steppe belt of Eastern Europe, as well as over large swathes of land in the Carpathian Basin and in East Central Europe. Had resources been exhausted, there was no need of long-distance migration to find something similar; small-scale mobility within a relatively restricted area defined by a certain soil quality (“itinerant agriculture”) would have been sufficient.¹¹

Sunken-floored buildings, handmade pottery, and “itinerant agriculture” existed in Romania before the 6th century, the date of the presumed migration of the Slavs. Are there any specific signs of migration during that century from any of the three homelands? Because of finds of stamped pottery, weapons, and specific jewels, some have advanced the idea of small groups of people moving from the Carpathian Basin in the late 5th and early 6th century and settling in the northern and north-central parts of the Balkans (KISS 1984; STANEV 2012; BUGARSKI – IVANIŠEVIĆ 2018 and 2019). However, none of them crossed, much less settled in the lands now in southern Romania, where 6th-century sources, such as Procopius of Caesarea, locate the Slavs. Similarly, certain pottery forms identified in ceramic assemblages from early Byzantine forts along the Lower Danube have been attributed to immigrants from the Middle Dnieper region (TOPOLEANU – TEODOR 2009). However, such forms are absent from assemblages found on settlements sites across the Lower Danube, in the lands where the Slavs were located by early Byzantine authors and from which several categories of metalwork typical for Right-Bank Ukraine (such as bracelets with enlarged ends) are also absent. There are no signs of any contacts between the territory of Poland and the southern or eastern areas of present-day Romania. In fact, during the late 5th and 6th centuries, the territory of present-day Poland was severely depopulated. No finds are known so far from the region closest to Romania (Lesser Poland) that could be dated with any degree of certainty between ca. 450 and ca. 600 (GODŁOWSKI 2005, 240).¹² In short, there is absolutely no evidence of migration to or across the lands that are now in southern and eastern Romania (i.e., closest to the Lower Danube, which was the northern frontier of the Empire in the 6th century). The many settlements excavated in those lands bespeak a population

11 A point that UDOLPH (2017, 194–197) completely misses. In “itinerant agriculture”, arable lands were periodically left to lie fallow for a varying number of years, sometimes for a period sufficiently long for old fields to turn back to waste land. After a few years, the community moved elsewhere, but not too far from the old fields.

12 Immigrants from the neighboring lands in what is now western Ukraine came to Lesser Poland shortly after 600 (CURTA 2021, 110–125).

growth sustained by a relatively high level of agriculture (TEODOR 2010, 275). However, there is no indication that that growth was the result of migration.

Furthermore, whatever the area from which the Slavic migration supposedly started, it must have witnessed a considerable decrease of population, at least equivalent to the number of people believed to have moved out of the area and into other regions. However, after the 6th century, the date of the presumed migration of the Slavs out of one of three possible homelands (the Middle Dnieper region, the Carpathian Basin, or even Poland, despite being depopulated in the 6th century), the number of settlements in those regions considerably increased (OBLOMSKIJ 2007; POLESKI 2013; TAKÁCS 2021). The supposed migration did not thin out the population of the supposed homeland.

More recently, attempts were made to provide support for the idea of *the* Slavic migration by means of bioarchaeology. Molecular anthropology, for example, can distinguish similarities in the noncoding regions of the genome, which can reflect shared ancestry and/or exchange of genes via the movement of individuals between populations. Some scholars compare contemporaneous populations from different geographic regions. If they find similarity, then they draw the necessary conclusion that those populations share ancestry, which in turn implies migration. Others choose to compare populations that inhabited the same geographic region at different points in time. In this case, similarity reflects genetic continuity, while differences betray immigration, or even population replacement (MALYARCHUK et al. 2003; MIELNIK-SIKORSKA et al. 2013; JURAS et al. 2014). It is of course impossible to date any of those supposed migrations, which may well have taken place long before the (early) Middle Ages. This makes the results of the current research in molecular anthropology very difficult to assess, for they typically lack chronological precision and tend to collapse centuries of population history into a single major event. For example, there is clear evidence of genetic similarity between the medieval populations of Poland, on one hand, and those in (modern) Belarus, Ukraine, and Bulgaria, on the other hand. This supposedly indicates the presence of immigrants on the territory of Poland, but it is unclear when exactly during the medieval millennium (ca. 1000 to ca. 2000) that genetic similarity was established. Moreover, shared haplogroup information between Iron-Age and extant Polish populations suggests some kind of genetic continuity (JURAS 2012, 98–101 and 109).¹³ Others are more categorical: there is no genetic evidence of a Slavic migration to (East) Central Europe (MIELNIK-SIKORSKA et al. 2013, 9). But the idea of using a particular “super-branch” to track Slavic migrations persists (ROŽANSKIJ 2018).

¹³ A study based on the polymorphism of the Y chromosome, inherited on the paternal line, revealed that Ukrainians have the highest level of similarity to other Slavic populations. This has been hastily interpreted as proof that the migration of the Slavs started from the Middle Dnieper region (RĘBAŁA et al. 2007).

Studies based on polymorphism in modern mitochondrial DNA passed down on the maternal line have reached conclusions that are just as contradictory. On one hand, mtDNA displays a high level of homogeneity across Europe (MALYARCHUK et al. 2002, 275; KUSHNIAREVICH et al. 2015, 11). On the other hand, a few mtDNA subclades (such as U4a2a, U4a8, HV3a, and R1a1) have been identified as “characteristic for Slavs” (MALYARCHUK – DERENKO 2001; BELYAEVA et al. 2003; SZMONIEWSKI 2016, 29). While advancing the idea of two migrations of Slavs from (East) Central to Eastern Europe, some point to genetic differences between various “branches” of the early Slavs (MOROZOVA et al. 2012). Because of mtDNA, the idea was put forward that there were two different migrations to the Balkans, one that brought the Bosnians, the other that brought the Slovenians (MALYARCHUK et al. 2003). Meanwhile, the sub-haplogroup R1a1a7 (mutation M458) is conspicuously more frequent in Poland than in any other part of Europe, and the presence of the haplogroup R1a in Croatia has been interpreted as a sign of migration to the Balkans (UNDERHILL et al. 2010, 483 and 482 fig. 2; BARAĆ et al. 2003, 540). However, that haplogroup appears not only in eastern Europe, but in India as well. The migration cannot possibly be that of the Slavs, but a much earlier one, most likely of a prehistoric date.¹⁴ There is absolutely no chronological accuracy in any of those reconstructions.¹⁵ To a great degree, any reconstruction proposed by molecular anthropologists depends upon dates provided by archaeology.¹⁶

5. Conclusion

Noting that the migration of the Slavs was completely invisible to early medieval sources, the French historian Lucien Musset (1922–2004) called it an *obscure progression* (MUSSET 1965, 75, 81, and 85; 1983, 999). After World War II, particularly in Communist countries, without even mentioning Musset, historians and archae-

14 The most recent results of research based on complete mitochondrial genome sequences seem to show a great degree of genetic continuity for several maternal lineages in Central Europe from the Bronze and Iron Ages (STOLAREK et al. 2023).

15 An attempt to date the “Slavic” subclads between 6,400 and 8,200 years before present (thus to the Neolithic age) ultimately concluded that “age estimations appear to be problematic due to high ratios of non-synonymous to synonymous substitutions found in young mtDNA” (MALYARCHUK et al. 2008, 1651 and 1656). Oblivious to the problem, others declare that “fortunately, genetic data can also provide estimates on the time frame of population events and recent relatedness. [...] human population genetics prove unequivocally that a major demographic expansion took place in Eastern Europe, most likely 1,000–1,500 years ago” (LINDSTEDT – SALMELA 2020, 281–282). Whether the Slavic migration happened ca. 500 or ca. 1000 is not a matter of concern in this scenario, but something else – that “because the Proto-Slavs lived more than a thousand years ago, all Europeans are descended from them (as well as from other populations, of course)” (LINDSTEDT – SALMELA 2020, 282).

16 WOŹNIAK et al. (2010, 546) believe that “a younger age is more suitable for subcluster R1a1-WSL, because the pattern of its distribution in Europe seems to be in agreement with the distribution of some archaeological culture existing at about the same time”.

ologists alike employed such terms as “infiltration” and “penetration”, with waves as the favorite metaphor (COMȘA 1960, 733; CANKOVA-PETKOVA 1968, 44; TĂPKOVA-ZAIMOVA 1974, 201 and 205; POPOVIĆ 1980, 246; VELKOV 1987; see also VÁŇA 1983; AVRAMEÁ 1997, 79–80). Most linguists, however, continued to cling to migration as an explanatory device for the spread of the Slavic language (for a notable exception, see NICHOLS 1993). In fact, no class of evidence matches current models for the study of (pre)historic migrations. Short-distance population movements may explain regional phenomena in various parts of Eastern, East Central, and Southeastern Europe. Migration is certainly not the mechanism responsible for the spread of Slavic.

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