

Susanne Hakenbeck

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



All'insegna del Giglio

ISSN 2035-5424
ISBN 978-88-7814-432-3
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Edizioni All'Insegna del Giglio s.a.s
via della Fangosa, 38; 50032 Borgo S. Lorenzo (FI)
tel. +39 055 8450 216; *fax* +39 055 8453 188
e-mail redazione@edigiglio.it; ordini@edigiglio.it
sito web www.edigiglio.it

Stampato a Firenze nel marzo 2011
Tipografia Il Bandino

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the summer of 1965 excavations began for a new housing development in a field on the outskirts of the town of Erding, in Bavaria. The JCBs and machines attracted several local boys, who would climb over their garden fences into the field to watch the builders doing their work. Without doubt the machines were interesting; however, as they were playing among the spoil heaps, they discovered rusty swords and skulls sticking out of the dirt. They picked up as many as they could carry, took them home and there left them on the kitchen sideboard. Before they could decide on their future use, their mother intervened, somewhat horrified, and phoned the authorities to report the discoveries. The county archaeologist investigated the spot where the boys had found their treasure and realised that the builders had hit upon an early medieval cemetery of some size. He was able to put a temporary stop to further building work and, with the help of volunteers, went about recording the graves that had been revealed. When the excavation of the site was completed several years later, it became apparent that it was one of the largest early medieval cemeteries in southern Germany. Two of those boys are my uncles, Thomas and Hermann Schöberl, and their mother is my grandmother, Else Schöberl. Without their presence of mind the cemetery of Altenerding might have been lost to the machines.

During the preparation of this book I have had the help and support of a large number of colleagues and friends. Above all I am indebted to my doctoral supervisor, Catherine Hills, for her constant intellectual and moral support. Without her help this book could not have been completed. It is particularly important to me to extend my heartfelt thanks to Hubert Fehr, Heinrich Härke and Sam Lucy for reading and criticising chapters of this book, as well as to Manuel Arroyo-Kalin, Hans Geisler, Doris Gutsmedl, Stefania Merlo, David Robinson, Stephanie-Wynne Jones and many other colleagues for discussions of various points contained within. None of them is responsible for any of the opinions and errors contained within, and in some cases they disagree with me strongly. I would very much like to thank Irwin Scollar, Karen Høilund Nielsen and Stefania Merlo for help with the technical aspects of this book and Tim Rangelcroft for his work on the illustrations. Permission to reproduce images has very kindly been granted by Silvia Codreanu-Windauer, Hermann Dannheimer, Hermann Helmuth and Walter Sage. I gratefully acknowledge financial support received through the Board of Graduate Studies' Domestic Research Studentship, the Cambridge European Trust, the Kurt Hahn Trust, an Emergency Grant from the British Federation of Women Graduates and various grants provided by Newnham College, Cambridge.

INTRODUCTION

Ethnic interpretations are more prevalent in studies of the early medieval period than in any other. One reason for this is that the big events – the coming of the Germanic tribes, the fall of the Roman Empire and the emergence of the early medieval kingdoms – form the foundation myths of many northern or central European countries (HILLS 2003: 18). More recently they have also been used in support of the idea of a unified Europe. Written sources name the principal actors and their peoples, and they narrate battles, midwinter river crossings and the surrendering of the Roman Empire to the barbarians. Large, publicly funded museum exhibitions, focusing, for example, on the Bavarians, the Alamans and the Franks, reinforce images of the barbarian tribes as a source of popular national identity today. The exhibition on the Franks, held in 1996 in Mannheim near the Franco-German border, was entitled *The Franks – Trailblazers for Europe*. They were portrayed as the predecessors of Charlemagne, who has been promoted heavily within the European Union as the ‘first European’ and ‘founder of Western culture’. Unsurprisingly the exhibition was arranged under the patronage of two other ‘great Europeans’, Jacques Chirac and Helmut Kohl.

Traditional archaeological approaches to early medieval ethnicity operate within the framework established by historical sources. They aim to find archaeologically those barbarians who are already familiar from the written sources. The sources tell the story of the barbarian migrations, and archaeological evidence provides the illustrations. Sword types, belts and brooches are classified, ordered, dated and plotted to help track the path of these migrations, reinforced by the occasional spectacular burial that can be associated with a historical figure. Within this so-called ethnic paradigm, artefacts, in particular brooches, are interpreted as having unambiguous ethnic meaning, so that wherever a brooch is found associated with an individual, it is interpreted as an identity card, a clear sign of that person’s ethnicity.

Over the years, such approaches have provoked a mass of criticism (e.g. BRATHER 2002; EFFROS 2003; HILLS 2003; FEHR 2008). The influence of nationalism on archaeological interpretations has come under attack, and a stereotypical view of the barbarians has been discredited. The belief in the

existence of homogeneous and bounded ethnic groups has been replaced by the notion that ethnicity is an identity, that is, a feeling of belonging that is fundamentally self-defined and thereby evades simplistic external classification. This has fundamental methodological implications. The direct link between material culture and ethnicity has been severed. It has been replaced by the notion that any aspect of material culture can have ethnic meaning but that the meaning that is given to material culture is entirely dependent on the context in which this assignation of meaning takes place. When studying the past, without recourse to living informants, critics such as Sebastian Brather (2002; 2004) believe that such meaning can only be grasped with difficulty, if at all. As a consequence, scholarly focus in early medieval archaeology has largely withdrawn from investigating ethnicity and has turned instead to other aspects of social structure.

Yet there are good reasons to persevere. A continued archaeological engagement with ethnicity leads to the heart of archaeological inquiry: how do we know what things meant in the past? It requires us to question fundamentally the nature of ethnic identity, the meanings material culture may have had in the past and whether the one depended on the other. Since the simplistic equation of object and ethnic identity has been challenged, attempts to answer these questions have been almost overwhelmed by the complexity of the issues they conjure up.

This is thrown into sharp focus in early medieval Bavaria. The Bavarians were first mentioned in historical sources in the mid-sixth century AD, when the Bavarian dukedom was already established. In contrast to other early medieval peoples, such as the Alamans, Goths or Langobards, no contemporary origin myth was associated with them, and they only appeared in the written histories of others, such as in Jordanes’s *Getica*. This has left a gap of a hundred years, which was historically undocumented, between the end of Roman rule in the provinces of Raetia Secunda and Noricum and the established Bavarian polity with Garibald I as its first duke. This caused a great deal of distress among historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, who saw it as a given that the Bavarians as a people must have migrated into the depopulated former Roman provinces, just

as they understood the other early medieval tribes to have done. Yet the Bavarians were the 'foundlings of the *Völkerwanderung*' (WOLFRAM 1990: 319), deposited on the doorstep of the Roman empire, origins unknown. Archaeological and linguistic evidence was therefore given particular importance in determining these origins. A multiplicity of theories has been put forward over the years, the currently dominant one propounding the migration from Bohemia of small groups of warriors that initially served as soldiers on the Danubian *limes*. They are believed to have brought about the so-called ethnogenesis or development of a common Bavarian identity from among the many disparate ethnic groups that were already present in the area. While paying lip-service to the idea of ethnicity as an identity, this theory still relies on the existence of stable ethnic groups, however small, to bring about the creation of a new ethnic identity. Approaches to the archaeological evidence have certainly not changed: even within the ethnogenesis model, brooches still represent people.

However, it is possible to investigate these issues from an entirely different perspective. Any search for origins implies that the origin is fixed, that there is a truth to be found there that will explain all later developments. But if we really take seriously the notion that ethnicity is an identity, then it has to be explained within its specific social and temporal context. Distant origins, both in time and place, may impinge on identity but only because of what they have been interpreted to mean, not because they represent 'what really happened'.

The cemeteries on the Munich gravel plain have been considered something of a backwater in the

process of Bavarian ethnogenesis, which is believed to have been initiated near the late Roman settlements on the Danube. Yet, several row-grave cemeteries have been found there that came into use in the late fifth century, at the same time as the Danubian cemeteries. If the theory of trans-Danubian migration and consequent ethnogenesis in the context of the late Roman army is upheld, then the early existence of these cemeteries remains unexplained, as is the absence of any material culture that points to Bohemia.

I investigate here the changes and developments in expressions of ethnic identity in this specific area in central Bavaria from the late fifth century when the practice of burying the dead in row-grave cemeteries began, to the late seventh century when it came to an end; not to determine its origins or to prove or disprove migration but because these changes provide a window onto the wider development of identities at the time. People lived in a world that had politically and structurally ceased to be Roman but in which *romanitas*, the idea of being and acting Roman, was still a source of political power. The ideological counter-point to this was the notion of origins in a barbarian homeland. Yet, while Romans and barbarians were discussed by the ancient authors of the histories of the barbarian peoples in terms of a black and white dichotomy, being Roman and being barbarian in practice meant negotiating shades of grey. By treating ethnicity not as something that can be assigned from the outside by the presence of certain artefacts, but as a social identity that people express through their material world, we can obtain a sense of where people felt they belonged in a complex world.

PREFACE

The fifth to seventh centuries AD saw the collapse of the western Roman Empire and the emergence of the medieval kingdoms of Europe, which were the basis for the modern nations of Europe. This period has been defined as ‘the Migration period’ because it saw the movement of peoples from outside and within the former empire, peoples who gave their names to the lands where they took control: Franks in France, Anglo-Saxons in England, Lombards in Lombardy. Archaeologists used to fit their evidence into the framework given by historical accounts, using artefacts as proxy for people by attributing ethnicity, especially to the brooches buried with women. Mapping where ‘Frankish’ or ‘Alamannic’ brooches had been found showed where Franks or Alamans had settled, thus expanding, modifying or confirming the historical accounts of settlement and migration.

However, this is in fact a circular argument: the only reason for giving the artefacts that ethnic identity is the historical account. It is an illusion that the equation of brooches with historical people provides independent information. Ethnicity itself is now seen by anthropologists and archaeologists as a complex phenomenon, not tied precisely to genetic ancestry. Fundamental rethinking is needed of the significance of the archaeological evidence and its implications for understanding the processes which created medieval Europe.

This book is a significant contribution to that rethinking. Susanne Hakenbeck has analysed several cemeteries in Bavaria, in the context of a new and more nuanced understanding of ethnicity and its reflection in material evidence. The jewellery and dress fasteners worn by women are parts of costumes, and how they are worn is as important as the form of each object. Imported brooches can be part of a native costume, local brooches can be worn in a foreign way. Each individual, whether modern or medieval has multiple overlapping identities: gender, age, marital status, occupation, family – as well as ethnicity. These identities change over time. Any or all of these identities may be represented in the graves of early medieval people. Susanne Hakenbeck has identified patterning amongst the burials which reflect different aspects of their identity, and in so doing has shown that while it is not possible to use archaeological evidence to sustain simplistic identifications of clearly defined and ancestrally distinct peoples, it does provide much new information of a more detailed and nuanced character about gender, kinship and ethnicity. Her case study is in southern Germany, but the principles and methods of her analysis can and should be applied other regions.

CATHERINE HILLS
Cambridge, November 2010

1. EARLY MEDIEVAL ETHNICITY MATERIALISES

Two paradigms are currently colliding in archaeological studies of ethnicity. The ‘ethnic paradigm’, as it has been called by Brather (2000), sees ethnicity as an essentially unproblematic category that can be identified clearly from the outside by certain ethnically significant aspects of material culture. The only problem apparently lies in correctly identifying artefacts as ethnic markers. This process has also been called the ‘ethnic ascription method’ (KULIKOWSKI 2002). With the ‘identity paradigm’ the perspective on ethnicity has shifted from the external to the internal: rather than attempting to classify it from the outside, self-identification is considered the defining factor. However, the fundamental problem of how an internal notion of belonging can be identified in the archaeological evidence has not been resolved. This chapter will explain the background to these opposing ways of thinking about ethnicity and its material expression, and will point to a way out of the impasse that they have reached.

1.1 *The creation of a myth*

The roots of the ethnic paradigm in archaeology lie in the emergence of nationalism in the late eighteenth century. In addition to a common language and culture, a nation’s common past and its origins became defining instruments for the creation of a national consciousness. This was particularly important in the struggle for a unified German state that began with the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806. Tacitus’s *Germania* became central to the understanding of the nation’s origins and deep past (WIWJORRA 1996). It apparently provided an illustrative account of an era when the German people had been united and had been living in a primitive but morally elevated state, a kind of ‘noble savagery’. Other periods in history, such as the migration period and the time of the Germanic sagas, the middle ages and the Reformation, were variously also drawn upon in the creation of a national past. However, none of these became as emblematic for pan-German nationalism as the ‘Germanic’ past (cf. WIWJORRA 2006), in particular since parallels were drawn between the struggle of the Germani against the invading Romans and the resistance against French occupation in many German

states during the Napoleonic wars. The erection of national monuments, such as the Hermann monument in the Teutoburg Forest, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm’s collection of folk tales and Richard Wagner’s use of the Germanic sagas for his *Ring* cycle were all examples of how this imagined past was used to further the nationalist movement (NIPPERDEY 1976a; TACKE 1995; ARNOLD, B. 1997/98; SCHLIE 2002).

Studies of the Germanic past drew on historical sources but increasingly also on linguistic and archaeological evidence. Archaeological remains in particular became symbols of a common past that had the power to bring about national integration¹. With the foundation of numerous historical societies (NIPPERDEY 1976b), their study became institutionalised as *Vaterländische Altertumskunde* (patriotic antiquarianism). In 1852, historical societies were consolidated into the Gesamtverein der Deutschen Geschichts- und Altertumsvereine and two major museums were founded, the Germanische Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg and the Römisch-Germanische Zentralmuseum in Mainz (HAKELBERG 2004; STEUER 2004b: 436). The latter was to house ‘Germanic’ archaeological collections from across the German linguistic and cultural area of the time, crossing the boundaries of the different German states (LINDENSCHMIT, L. 1902; BÖHNER 1978; VON HASE 2004). It included objects from prehistory, the Roman period and the early middle ages. The museum’s name pointed to its ideological purpose: ‘Germanic’ presumed a common prehistory of the German people, while ‘Roman’ conveyed the respectability of having been part of the Roman empire (LINDENSCHMIT, L. 1902; BÖHNER 1978; VON HASE 2004: 585). Ludwig Lindenschmit, the museum’s first curator, and his brother Wilhelm were among the earliest scholars explicitly to interpret early medieval funerary remains in ethnic terms by using the new anthropological method of craniology (LINDENSCHMIT, W. 1846; LINDENSCHMIT, W. and LINDENSCHMIT, L. 1848; LINDENSCHMIT, L. 1852). They were both ardent nationalists and their aim was to prove not only that early medieval funer-

¹ See Brather (2000), Geary (2002), Effros (2003), Steuer (2004b), Wiwjorra (2006) and Gramsch (2006) for discussions of the common roots of archaeology and nationalism in nineteenth-century Germany.