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On “Orient-preference” in archaeological research on the Avars, proto-Bulgarians and conquering Hungarians

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It is commonly known that people’s historical consciousness, besides depending on other things, is largely governed by the cultural and political affiliation of the acting persons. Thus, it also did not remain unnoticed under archaeologists that during the twentieth century, their field of research was not always capable of evading the effects of contemporary politics. Examinations on this subject actually have become quite en vogue at the moment.¹

A clear allusion to the possible abuse of archaeological activities in the case of conflict is presented by the – not always observed – by the Convention of The Hague’s ban on carrying out excavations in regions engaged in armed conflict or under military occupation. In Central and Eastern Europe, an intervention by politics and current modes of thought into archaeology was in certain cases not preventable. Still, this problem was approached with very different levels of interest in respective national research: Whereas, e.g., a considerable range of publications has been devoted to the work of G. Kossinas and the archaeologists of the Third Reich² and likewise an exemplary survey has been made of the French archaeologists during the Vichy-Regime,³ up until recently, little has been published on comparable phenomena in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. We know more about the influences of the Daco-Romanian theory of continuity and of the communist

² Smolla 1979/80, 1-9; Schwerin von Krosigk 1982; Veit 1989, 35-56; Arnold 1990, 464-478; Junker 1998, 282-292; Steuer 2001. It remains, however, to be verified (or considered), if a concluding verdict on the archaeologists who co-operated with the Third Reich can only then be attempted, when the conduct of colleagues and the functioning of institutions in the Soviet Union is surveyed and analysed in similar detail and criticism. Due to several similarities, it thereby remains to be ascertained, which type of behaviour stems from a general human weakness in the face of a dictatorship and which type actually remains as a testament to the individuals’ transgressions and disgrace. Very instructive is the book by L. Klein, who knew the Soviet dictatorship “from the inside” and indicated parallels, see Klein 1997.
ideology on archaeological research in Romania than what has actually been written in analyses published on this subject. Concerning the meddling of Soviet politics into archaeological research on the Goths and Vikings, on the Eastern Slavs and the people of the steppes, since quite recently we can now fortunately point out a “first swallow” among current publications. Similarly, the question of Pan-Slavism in the regions of Europe mentioned above has also by far not been sufficiently analysed.

At this point, a phenomenon shall be addressed which so far has not even been mentioned in research. In the archaeological studies on the eighth to tenth century proto-Bulgarians on the one hand, and on the tenth-century conquering Hungarians on the other, as of yet, no common tendencies or trends were discernible. The general resemblance of some types of finding, spanning both time and peoples, in this respect naturally plays no palpable role here. Both here and there, traditions of research,

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5 Klejn 1993, 21, 28.
6 As this subject is highly complicated, I shall only point out the instance that – unsubstantiated, historically – a Pan-Slavistic surge is observable for the fifties and sixties, and even up until the late seventies, in the GDR, moreover also in the so-called socialist countries of non-Slavic origin. – For the GDR we are merely only able to cite a small number of examples. Thus, e.g., the compendium “Die Germanen” does not even mention Ostrogoths, Gepidae, Heruli etc., as they had inhabited the territory of the “brother-nations” Poland and the Soviet Union (Krüger 1978/1983). On the general map of the “Zonen unterschiedlicher Herausbildung des Feudalismus”, not even the Avars or Hungarians were depicted besides the (Southern) Slavs and Bulgarians, see Herrmann 1979, 5, pl. 1b. – In Romania, a number of essays were published in Russian (thus in the series “Dacia” and “Materiale şi Cercetari Arheologice”); this practise was continued up until the end of the fifties. On Pan-Slavism in Romanian archaeology, see Curta 1994. – In Bulgaria, the approach towards the own origin was subject to several changes. Between the two World Wars, the Turco-Bulgarian roots were favoured, whereas in the fifties and sixties the Slavic constituent was regarded as more important, and in the seventies, the Turkish root of the ethnogenesis was erased. A realistic examination of the proto-Bulgarian period only begins after the Romanian Revolution around 1990. A critical historiographical synopsis is yet to be published. – Hungarian archaeology kept with the advice “give to the emperor ...”. With the exception of A. Cs. Sós, no significant influence by Pan-Slavism is observable (as opposed to several other historians). The same is true for nationalism between the two World Wars, see on this subject Bálint 1986, 166-174. Interestingly enough, all of these countries – as of the state of campaign in 1944 – stood on the side to be later defeated. If this Pan-Slavism occurred due to the expectations or demands on the part of the Soviet forces, or was a result of the servility of the local dignitaries, cannot be ascertained without detailed study of the history of research.

7 It should, however, be pointed out here that the number and importance of these similarities has lately become so large, that a revision of the origin of proto-Bulgarian and conquering-Hungarian material culture is become necessary.
problems, methodology and the social surrounding of archaeologists are indeed so different that, with the exception of Géza Fehér, one of the founders of proto-Bulgarian archaeology, hardly any connections between the two fields of research seem observable. Still, if we delve into the deeper levels, i.e. the methods and motives of research, we are able to discern a similarity. In research on the Avars, on the conquering Hungarians and on the proto-Bulgarians, a specific point of view is recognisable, which I would like to term – briefly and simply – as an “Orient-preference”.\footnote{This consists of a perception, respectively a method of research conceding precedence, regarding the archaeological material under examination, to specifications and descriptions connecting them to the Orient, whereas other regions of culture, like Byzantium and Europe, are mostly not incorporated.} One of the characteristics of this “Orient-preference” is that it:

a) regards the Orient as being globally independent, namely regarding time, space, the ethnic and political circumstances of the data under consideration and

b) all ethnographical specifications of peoples of the Asian steppes and of Siberia, even up until the twentieth century, as being directly relevant for the archaeology of East- and Central-European peoples of the steppes in the early Middle Ages.

This perception agrees with that of Hungarian ethnographic research and society at the end of the nineteenth century, according to which, the heritage of all ancestors, including the Old Hungarians, was to be found with the common people and “ethnography” to be classified “as living archaeology”.\footnote{Kősa 1996, 1042; Hofer 1996, 1043.} Here then lie the romantic roots of this “Orient-preference”! It is the endeavour of an “Orient-preferring” scientist, to merely unearth parallels

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\footnote{In Hungary, the founding of the chairs for archaeology took place over a century earlier than in Bulgaria. At the same time, systematic collection activity of the museums began earlier. Up until the last third of the twentieth century, research was mainly influenced by German and Austrian archaeology, on this subject, see Bálint 1997, 17-26.}

\footnote{For a CV and a bibliography, see Fodor 1990, 256-259. A positive sign for a change in the fifty years of continuing condemnation is the reprint of his book published in Bulgaria in 1940: Feher 1997.}

\footnote{Interpretation and content of the term “Orient” in both German language and scholarship are not uniform throughout time and space (indicated to me by U. von Freeden, who was kind enough to read the manuscript and to whom I would like to express my gratitude). They at the same time encompass much more variegated and richer facets than contained in the term Orient, impossible to properly discuss in this essay. The fundamental mistake of the “Orient-preferential” authors consists of them actually using the term Orient independently of time, space and cultural circumstances. Studies on how such a point of view could have developed belong to the fields of sociology and psychology. The romantic roots cannot be denied and Gy. László, the most eminent representative of “Orient-preference” and teacher at the same time of several generations of Hungarian archaeologists, himself wrote about the influence that was exerted on him by the works of C.G. Jung and G. Roheim.}

\footnote{Interestingly enough, a certain fascination for the Orient can also be determined with J. Werner, as demonstrated by U. Fiedler, on this subject, see Fiedler 1996, 260.}
between the given Avar, conquest-age or proto-Bulgarian finding, respectively ornamentation, with the help of which he can then substantiate the conclusion that the type of find to be scrutinised, the ornamental element, the depiction, etc. originated in the Orient. Behind this methodically misguided concept, widespread throughout Central and Eastern Europe, stands the idea that historical questions can be answered with the aid of parallels and analogies from material culture. The resulting conclusion then seems to be purely culture-historical. It eventually evokes the impression of being one hundred percent historically founded, due to the fact that these peoples, from whom the examples for comparison originate, were indeed of eastern origin. In the course of this procedure, parallels are used independent of their originating from China, from Inner or Central Asia, from Iran or the Arab Caliphate. At the same time, the following questions are not even posed:

a) What does the occurrence of typologically similar types of findings, elements of ornamentation and depiction signify?

b) What was the original aim of the depiction? – one of the basic problems of modern research into the history of art.\(^{13}\)

Regarding the method, the researcher standing under the impression of the “Orient-preference” will not proceed unobjectionably. Even if in the course of the analysis based upon it, it is never spoken out or put into writing, either unconsciously or simply from habit one acts on the assumption that one is dealing with a chain of arguments, arising in the course of the examination, whose individual elements are more or less right. Yet it is the manner of their conjunction and especially the resulting conclusion that I hold as being erroneous. The following theses are to be examined closer:

“The origin of the Avars, the conquering Hungarians and the proto-Bulgarians lies in the steppes.” This is undisputed. Then, however, this statement is connected with another, according to which “the material culture, resp. the findings on the Avars, the conquering Hungarians and the proto-Bulgarians represent a kind of steppe-culture”. Although this is equally true, these two sentences are not causally compellingly connected: The ethnic origin and the ethnogenesis of a people do not necessarily directly pertain to material culture.\(^{14}\) And a further claim is connected with this statement: “The material culture resp. the findings on the Avars, the conquering Hungarians and the proto-Bulgarians represent individual branches of Asian cultures.” To some measure this also is true, especially in the case of spiritual culture. But due to all of the specifications mentioned above, the “Orient-preferential” perception arrives at this point of view: “For the examination of the material culture of the Avars, the conquering Hungarians and the proto-Bulgarians, Asian cultures are not just only highly relevant, but they represent inexhaustible sources for the process of

\(^{13}\) This problem is examined in more detail in my book on the hoard of Nagyszentmiklós ( Bálint 2004).

\(^{14}\) Since the penning of these lines, the fundamental monograph by S. Brather (see Brather 2004) has been published, examining this complex of questions.
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reconstruction of their material culture.” This latter assumption resp. method is idealistic, static and inconsequent, moreover it is unhistorical and, therefore, completely fundamentally amiss from a methodical point of view.

Idealistically, the “Orient-preference”-influenced researcher views the Orient as an intrinsic unit, whereby he will serviceably regard arbitrary elements of Oriental culture during research on the above-mentioned Central- and Southeast-European peoples as being consistently. This scholar does not care if the parallels incorporated by him can be retraced, either chronologically, temporally and culturally to direct contacts. By the same token, no attention is paid to the enormous geographical distances between the Carpathian Basin and the regions included into the discussion. How, therefore, should analogous phenomena be precisely interpreted? Do they possess an historical basis? As an example, we shall now look at the problem of the evaluation of some Central Asian depictions for the archaeology of the peoples under scrutiny here

In the reconstruction of costume in publications and exhibitions, the Avars and the conquering Hungarians are always garbed by some authors with reference to the example provided by wall paintings from urban cultures from Central Asia.15 According to the general opinion, these murals depict persons, whose clothing and costume accessories are related to, if not identical with that of the people of the steppes. This practice already has a certain tradition16 in the research on European steppe peoples and was also utilised by non-Hungarian archaeologists in the last decades.17 And yet it was never attempted, as opposed to an unreflective adoption of these examples, to historically and culturally explain a series of questions. Like, for instance, how and why costume in the Carpathian Basin or on the Balkans could have resembled that of Central and Inner Asia. Was there actually any “steppe clothing” typical to this kind of culture?18 That the Asian depictions could possess any relevance to the archaeology of the Avars at all is, according to the generally prevailing opinion, induced by the historical circumstance that there had been close contacts between

15 In Szeged an archaeological exhibition was staged, in which the garb and costume of the Avars was reconstructed according to certain Central Asian paintings, see the catalogue: Kürti/Lőrinczy 1991; critically Bálint 1990, 221-226.

16 The discovery of the importance of the Asian depictions for the archaeological of the Avars and conquering Hungarians are to the credit of Supka 1914, 17-18, 104 and Fettich 1926, 60; idem 1929, 66-68. Later, this point of view was incorporated by László (e.g. László 1942, 76, fig. 12, pl. V 4) in his publications and especially in his lectures, to then subsequently become a typical characteristic of Hungarian migration period -research (on this subject, see also Bálint 1990). On László’s work, see Bálint 2004, 82-87.

17 Like e.g. Kovačević 1977, 18, fig. 6 and 7, 163, fig. 100, 185, fig. 123 right; Daim 1977, 17.

18 Certainly not, and if we regard the well-preserved textile finds from the early medieval Orient, like for instance Lop-nor, Mošćevaja balka, Antinoe, etc., then we can immediately determine that these hardly resembles traditional costume in the attempts at reconstruction, on this subject, see: Sylwan 1949; Arslanova 1963, 82, fig. 5; Martiniani-Reber 1986, 56, No. 23; Ierusalimskaia 1996, pl. XVIII, XIX, XX.45, XXII.50, LXXIII, LXXVII.
the inhabitants of towns and oases and the peoples of the steppes in Central Asia. But so far, no research has been made on what the political or cultural reason for such an adoption of culture from steppe to settled peoples and urban populations could have been. Concerning the archaeological reflection of these assumed cultural contacts, a look at the publications of finds from burial grounds and urban excavations\(^\text{19}\) suffices to ascertain that no significant influence from the steppes into the material culture of the latter is observable. The suspicion arises, that the small number of commonly worn types of jewellery and objects, resp. those acquired from the people of the steppes from advanced civilisations, were throughout misunderstood as “proofs” for the presumed influence of the steppe on the neighbouring cultures to the South. It is not at all necessary to become immersed into the study of the history and cultural history of Central and Inner Asia\(^\text{20}\) to arrive at the following conclusion: In historical and cultural regard, the overall picture was a lot more complicated than that, painted by researchers of the Avars, Hungarians and proto-Bulgarians themselves, a one-sided and, moreover, undue simplification. This applies on the one hand to the presumed “counteractions” or “influence of the peoples of the steppes on Asian civilisations” and, on the other hand, to the notion which is harboured, by virtue of certain early medieval depictions, to be able to imagine or even reconstruct the appearance of the Avars, Hungarians and proto-Bulgarians. It would seem superfluous to emphasise that the region of Central or Inner Asia referred to here, from which archaeological research on the peoples in question adopts its analogies, did not exclusively have peoples of the steppes for neighbours. It may be true for the North, yet in the South lay the advanced civilisations of Persia, India and China. An influence of the latter on Central Asia always existed, with its intensity varying in time and depending on several different circumstances. Thus, for instance, we have to reckon with a strong presence of Sassanid influence in Central Asia, so that it is possible to refer to this zone as a peripheral culture of Iran. The Central and Inner-Asian murals constantly cited in our research conspicuously display their having been shaped by Buddhism and Manichaeism.\(^\text{21}\) Moreover, cultural influences from Gupta-age India have to be taken into account for East and West Turkestan.\(^\text{22}\) And finally, one must not ignore Classic Persian and Greco-Roman art (Parthians and Gandhara), both living on partly by direct, partly by indirect conveyance.\(^\text{23}\) The scholarship of the history of art is of the opinion that this cultural diversity was kept together by a framework of certain elements, composed of the general geopolitical situation and the role of Khotanese and Sogdian as

19  E.g.: Raspopova 1980; Gorbunova 1986; Litvinskij 1986.
22  E.g.: Rowland 1938; Mandelstam 1966; Williams 1982.
23  Schlumberger 1969.
a *lingua franca*. There is no word to be found alluding to any kind of effect or influence from the world of the steppes in these analyses. It would easily be possible to extensively list the political influences documenting the contacts between the towns of East and West Turkestan and the individual posts of the Silk Road on the one side, and the inhabitants of the steppes on the other. Yet if “Orient-preferential” research establishes its thesis of the “influence” resp. “of a conveyance from the steppes to advanced civilisations” and, *vice versa*, of an “influence” or “conveyance from advanced civilisations to the steppes” on the basis of these occurrences, then it should not be forgotten that cultural contacts and transfers, originating from the advanced civilisations and leading to the people of the steppes, were more intensive by far. The political suzerainty of the Sassanids and Arabs, of Tibetans and Chinese was undisputedly the one more important in this region. It should be pointed out here, that behind the truism of the “influence from the steppes” lie no chronological analyses of the typology, as is common practice in archaeological research on the Avars, Hungarians and proto-Bulgarians. Quite the opposite, even a superficial scrutiny with Central and Inner Asian depictions demonstrates that costume, equipment and the anthropological character of persons portrayed on them, moreover finally the ornamentation cannot leave us in doubt as to the fact that they fundamentally were not a part of the culture of the steppes. This also applies to the scenes of a non-explicit kind, e.g. the Korean envoys on the murals from Afrasiab.

When specialists accredit certain – yet practically nearly always the same – few Central Asian depictions with an outstanding significance for studies on the Avars, Hungarians and proto-Bulgarians, then there is one further factor to be considered. This is not only of an archaeological-cultural importance, but also has methodological consequences. I am referring to the striking discrepancy between the number of East and West Turkish graves. From the Eastern half of the Khaganate we know of around 400, from the Western of not even fifty burials of Turk type. This disparity cannot be ascribed to the level and intensity of research, or to a lack of interest regarding the resident colleagues.

Even if the relatively large number of graves of the Eastern Turkish type is undoubted a result of extensive research expeditions preceding the experiments with hydrogen bombs in the area of Tuva (the modern-day Republic of Tuva), this offers no satisfactory explanation for the discrepancy mentioned above. A number of expeditions were also made

24 The best synthesis is to be found in Bussagli 1963.
26 Anazawa/Manome 1976.
27 A complete catalogue of burial finds from the Turkish age is lacking as of yet. This assessment came from the author and Gleb Kubarev (viva voce). A review of the archaeological material is presented by Mogil’nikov 1981; Bálint 1989, 237-267.
into the Soviet Union’s Central Asian republics.\textsuperscript{28} Also, national feelings of the resident field archaeologists positively contributed to concentrating the objectives and activities of their studies on the people of the steppes during the early Middle Ages. Therefore, the fact that, despite optimal circumstances, we know of only such a small number of burials of the Turkish type – and also of the eighth-century Uigur, and ninth-century Kirghiz type – from this region of Central Asia, is not simply to be seen as a failure in research, but as a purely scientific phenomenon.

In this connection, the rapid adaptation of Chinese culture by the Eastern Turks in the seventh century gains in importance, mentioned so critically on the famous inscription of Orchon from the middle of the eighth century by Kül tegin, one of the great Turkish leaders.\textsuperscript{29} The bulk of the text consists of Turkish runes. It is, however, very symptomatic that another segment of the same inscription is written using Chinese characters, although the Chinese were considered to be the arch-enemies of the Turks! How then can the influence of the Western Turks on the material culture of Central Asia, ever estimated as momentous by research on the steppes, be truly verified, if the primary cultural phenomena of this people are archaeologically not subsumable? The following historical episode exhorts to great caution in cultural weighting: Around the middle of the fourth century, the emperor of China ordered all of the Hiung-nu (the Asian Huns, according to general opinion) living in his empire to be killed. As the majority of the Hiung-nu wore Chinese clothing and spoke Chinese, only their “large noses” and “scanty beard” could serve as distinguishing characteristics. Thus, in the execution of this racist order also several Chinese were killed.\textsuperscript{30}

The following can be recorded for the relations between the Central Asian peoples of the steppes and China: In the instances, where we find close contacts and cultural transfer, we probably must at least reckon with a progressive adaptation of Chinese by the barbarians. In the case of missing cultural contacts between the people of the steppes and the Chinese Empire we can anticipate no noteworthy influence – no matter in which direction. As already mentioned, these and similar questions are neither posed nor answered. Instead, Oriental-bent scholarship \textit{a priori} assumes an identity of Avar, Hungarian and proto-Bulgarian (material) culture with that of the Eurasian steppe and even that of whole Central and Inner Asia. A further mistake, finally, consists in making all available readings in the subsequent steps of scientific processing subject to this assumption.

\textsuperscript{28} E.g.: Trudy Kompleksnoj Kirgizskoj Archeologo-Étnografièeskoj Ékspedicii; Materialy Chorezmskoj Ékspedicii; Trudy Chorezmskoj Ékspedicii (all: Moscow); Trudy Južno-Turkmenistanskoj Archeologièeskoj Kompleksnoj Ékspedicii (Ashchabat); Trudy Tadžikskoj Archeologièeskoj Ékspedicii, in: Materialy i Issledovanija po Archeologii 37, 1953; \textit{ibid.} 66, 1958; \textit{ibid.} 124, 1964.

\textsuperscript{29} North side cap. 5-8. Turkish text and translation: Malov 1951, 16-20.

\textsuperscript{30} McGovern 1939, 350.
The “Orient-preferential” method of research is static, due to its singling out of the facts utilised as parallels removed from their context, completely disregarding not only the local development (the precursors of certain types and their continuous influence), but also the cultural contexts of a find. A literally static mindset is testified by an adherence to the notion, according to which the material culture of a migrated people, in spite of both the time meanwhile passed and the continuously growing distance, will have remained similar or even identical to its region of origin. Both regions – the (disputed or assumed) original homeland and the new territory of the peoples – must at first be studied independently of one another. Concerning the culture of the former, it can be stated that after the migration of a part of the population the material culture will of course continue to develop. It will only partly remain identical to the culture of the preceding period, following the cultural processes of the entire region. Furthermore, the instance, not in fact really surprising, must be pointed out that such processes can proceed completely different in the individual regions. This also refers to the culture of the migrants, which will of course continue to develop under the influence of their new surroundings. Due to spatial, temporal and cultural reasons, the cultural development of the original home and that of the new one proceed in a different fashion and are hardly comparable. Consequentially, there exists no “Oriental culture” as such, from which, according to level of information, to demand and taste we can permissibly construct “parallels” and “analogies” to the Avar, Hungarian and proto-Bulgarian finds.

The “Orient-preferential” method of research is inconsequent, as its point of view is too narrow concerning geography and culture, yet too broad regarding the chronology.

a) Central and Southeast European scholars influenced by the “Orient-preference” either entirely or partly neglect to search for potential parallels among the Byzantine or European material with the Avar, proto-Bulgarian and Hungarian finds. An example concerning this matter is represented by the Avar-age type of ear jewellery from Mezőszilas, which I have already presented at another occasion.31 It appears that a piece comparable to the Central European Avar material, unearthed in the burial ground Kudyrge in the Altai, cannot serve as proof for the Central Asian origin of the Avars, as similar finds have also been made at other locations and belonging to other ages. Especially important are the more elegant, considerably more precious version of this jewellery, namely the golden ear pendants exclusively discovered in East European graves from the sixth and seventh centuries. Thus, for instance, technical details and the context of the findings of grave 2 from Ufa-Medicinskij fakul’tet positively show that this type of jewellery was of Byzantine origin.32

As a further example for the inconsequential approach the studies on the multipartite belt trimmings of the early Middle Age-steppe people should be mentioned. The numerous

31 Bálint 1993, 205-206.
32 Achmerov 1951, 127, fig. 1,3. This burial find and similar earrings are examined more closely by me at this point.
source references from the world of the steppes, documenting the belt as a badge of rank, and several illustrations on Central Asian murals are constantly cited in scholarly literature on Avars and ancient Hungarians. That belts as such from the age of the Old Testament in the Near East, in the Roman and Byzantine Empires, and in the Medieval Occident had also been used as insignia eluded the attention of the “archaeologists of the steppes”. What reason then can there be for such obvious ignorance? The only explanation I can find is that this inattention results from the “preference for the steppes”. Nobody considered that the often-cited Central Asian depictions of belts could be irrelevant to the solution of the question of origin of the multipartite belt trimmings, as they either are not multipartite, or must be temporally estimated a lot later than the belts of the early Avars. Thus, for instance, the ninth-century painting, depicted in every exhibition and popular scientific study on the Avars, of a standing horseman with a quiver and lance and two plated belts originates from a region nearly 4,500 km distant and from an age, in which the Avars no longer possessed an own culture! And nobody so far has demonstrated that depictions of multipartite belts are also to be found in other regions entirely (even with the enemies of the former Avars), namely around the middle of the sixth century. These are Coptic murals, moreover mosaics from Israel, from North Africa and even the imperial palace in Constantinople. If one, therefore, searches for parallels exclusively in a certain direction, then one necessarily must arrive at the conclusion that the culture under scrutiny is related to the one in the region previously chosen. If other directions and other cultural regions are not taken into account as a matter of principle, then the final result may appear to be impressive, but will actually be completely wrong.

b) Therefore, due to the “Orient-preference”, the too imprecise point of view, chronologically seen, of the finds, depictions and phenomena from the Orient is obviously based on a presumption, according to which the culture of the Orient was supposedly timeless. This narrow view of the examinations is due to a lack of knowledge and the missing want of a broader horizon. Behind this attitude, basically inspired by a notion of mental history, hides something else, i.e. the idealistic-seeming notion of a persistence of Asian cultures. How else could the idea possibly have arisen, for instance, of using the figures of a sixteenth-century Ottoman shadow play as parallels to the most famous scene of the hoard of Nagyszentmiklós from the early Middle Ages? Naturally, such crude mistakes are seldom made in research. Still, there is hardly ever any notice taken of a more precise relative chronology. The fundamental requirement for the use of finds and depictions from

33 E.g.: László 1955, 225, fig. 61; Erdélyi 1966, fig. 3.5; Kovačević 1977, 119, fig. left; 185, fig. 123 right.
34 E.g.: Schüppe 1928, 126-146; Hančar 1940, 4-18.
35 von Gabain 1973, pl. 68, fig. 163; von Le Coq 1913, pl. 2c; Maillard 1973, fig. 165c.
36 On questions in this context, see Bálint 2000.
37 As was done by A. Alföldi, well-known and not only renowned for his research on the age of the Romans (Alföldi 1951, 127, pl. II.2/3).
the Orient for the study of the Avars, Hungarians and proto-Bulgarians in the context of cultural-history, consists of these originating from the time before their respective migration to Europe. Yet this simple fact often finds no consideration. Caution before such a linking of so-called parallels dating from a later time will prove necessary, as we scrutinise finds and illustrations that actually comply with the chronological prerequisites mentioned. As an example I would here like to point out the types of sword on Central Asian murals and in early Avar-age graves. On the two paintings known from Qyzil, dating to ca. 500 AD, we see the artist himself carrying a sword buckled to his waist.\(^38\) The fastening eyelets of the sword, the shape of the stone intarsia of the mounting of the opening the scabbard is completely unknown from finds of the Avars. Moreover, it must be observed that the sword hangs from an unadorned belt and its owner anthropologically must be positively identified as being of Indo-Iranian origin. In this case, one could argue that the Avars simply did not adopt this type of sword, or that Qyzil – at least at that time – did not have any contact with the Asian Avars.

The opposite is true for another mural from Qyzil, well known to Avar research. On the frescoes of the “cave of sixteen swordsmen” we recognise short swords, whose fastening eyelets seem to be typologically related to the p-shaped ones of the Avars. Yet they cannot be chronologically associated with the Avar-age swords. The paintings only date from the time around 600 until 650, thus precisely not from before 557, the date of the Avars’ migration from Asia.\(^39\) The depiction from the “cave of sixteen swordsmen” can, therefore, on no account prove that the Avars brought this type of eyelet from Asia. Moreover, the length and shape of these swords and their hilts would make it seem even less likely that these hanging eyelets could be related to the Avar swords in any way. In Qumtura, for instance, one sees a Tocharian prince with such a sword, worn from a belt with large round buckles.\(^40\) Instead of deriving the p-shaped eyelets of the Early Avars from Central Asia,\(^41\) it must rather be taken into account that this type of sword was already found in the region of the Black Sea and in Transcaucasia in the course of the sixth century.\(^42\)

The “Orient-preferential” method of research is \textit{unhistorical}, as it either negates historical incidents and processes in favour of an ideology, or, in more fortunate cases, only treats them as being of secondary importance. It can therefore happen that historical facts are completely forgotten or disregarded. It remains inconceivable, how the following

\(^{38}\) Grünwedel 1912, 154, fig. 354; von Le Coq 1977, 37, fig. 4, 38; fig. 6, 7; O’Neill 1982, 74.
\(^{39}\) Grünwedel 1912, 50, 56; O’Neill 1982, 168.
\(^{40}\) von Le Coq 1977, 64, Abb. 86.
\(^{41}\) In agreement with other scholars, I also used to formerly be of this opinion: Bálint 1978, 180-183.
\(^{42}\) Bálint 1992, 456, pl. 20; 460, pl. 24; 462, pl. 26.
statement could have occurred, i.e. that the Slavs lived in the vicinity of Iran.43 Even if this assumption were true (historically speaking it is of course completely impossible!), the resulting argumentation lacks any evidence as to the consequences of such circumstances for the material culture of the proto-Bulgarians from the eighth to tenth century. At the moment, more and more often quotes and even essays appear, drawing a causal connection, between e.g. illustrations or ornamentation from finds of proto-Bulgarian toreutics with those of the goldsmith’s craft of Central Asia.44 In these publications, however, it is never comprehensibly demonstrated, how these Oriental elements actually could have arrived in Bulgaria. In this connection, the word “contact” is most often used. What is meant by it? We know of no trade activities or diplomatic missions of any kind in the early Middle Ages between the Balkans and Asia. It is of course theoretically not impossible that such could have existed, but arguing along these lines is, in view of the current state of research, far too risky.

Does then the concept of N. Mavrodinov, introduced in his classical book on the hoard of Nagyszentmiklós, present a possible model of explanation for the depictions on proto-Bulgarian finds? He assumes that the Oriental elements occurring in proto-Bulgarian art must in all probability originate from the epoch where the Bulgarians still lived in Asia.45 Let us, therefore, pay some attention to this theory! Let us look at first at the archaeological evidence: Here it must be stated that it is completely hopeless at the moment to archaeologically subsume the Old Bulgarians in Central Asian finds from the time before their migration to Europe (around 463). Nobody so far has attempted to single out the legacy of the Bulgarians from between fifth and seventh century-findings from the East European steppes. With the exception of the find from Malaja Pereščepina,46 there exists practically nothing in Eastern Europe or Central Asia comparable to the proto-Bulgaran material from the Balkans. From the point of view of the history of art, the following question arises from N. Mavrodinov’s concept: Is it at all conceivable that a people, after several centuries, after having migrated over a distance of thousands of kilometres, moreover, after having made contact with several cultures along their way and despite undergoing such a highly complicated process as is ethnogenesis would have been able to retain such ancient

43 This – undoubtedly under the (indirect?) influence of J. Strzygowski and the “Wiener Schule” – was written by the Bulgarian academy member I. Dujčev and the renowned Byzantine scholar V. Beševliev. Even if a mistake crept up in translation here and they probably actually meant Iranian (-speaking) peoples, thinking i.e. of the descendants of the Sarmatians and Alani in the steppes of Eastern Europe, ethno-historical terms and geographic dimensions must naturally not be confused. Dujčev 1966, No. 76, 243-313; Beševliev 1967, 237-247.
44 Mavrodinov 1943. Her ideas are based on a certain tradition of research in Bulgaria, see Protič 1930, 137-159.
45 E.g.: Dončeva-Petkova 1979, 28, fig. 12; Stanilov/Atanasov 1993, 48-49, fig. 10-11; Vitišanov 1990, 195-204.
46 Werner 1984.
On “Orient-preference” in archaeological research

Cultural elements, the roots of which, in addition, we do not at all know or are able to provide evidence for? And I would like to repeat emphatically: Not a single historical and/or archaeological element of this formidably long chain, which could possibly link the Balkans, or, in the case of the Avars, the Carpathian Basin with Asia, is known to us. We are therefore confronted with an illusion, if, at the current level of knowledge, we should encounter any claim of there being the possibility of implicating the finds and ornamentation of the proto-Bulgarians (and also of the Avars) directly with Asia. This would signify that the search for the routes of migration of types of finds and depictions, moreover also of ornamental elements are still part of our task!

Where then lie the roots of such a point of view, reviewed here under the heading “Orient-preference” and, as of yet, never openly formulated? In my opinion, they are to be sought after, on the one hand in the method of Eurasian steppe archaeology, and, one the other hand, in the political and social environment with its resulting conditions for research.

Method

So far, research on Central, Southeast and East Europe was not able to do away with the mistake of regarding types of findings as being ethnospecific. As the world of the steppes in the early Middle Ages, compared to the neighbouring Finno-Ugrians, Slavs, etc. *grosso modo* formed an ethno-cultural and economic unity, in which synchronous developments took place, it is no wonder that certain types of finds occur in the East European or Eurasian steppes, the Southern border region of the latter and also with peoples of steppe origin in Central and Southeast Europe. And yet, finds are still regarded as signs of migration respectively for ethnic contacts, whereby no attention is paid to their chronology, i.e. their synchronous position. Particularly revealing hereby is the procedure, by which the finds, resp. the ornamental elements from the steppes and the Orient are dated to a later time than, for instance, the examined finds or ornaments in the Carpathian Basin itself.

Political and social surroundings

In the case the Avars, the conquering Hungarians and the proto-Bulgarians, it must be kept in mind that Hungary and Bulgaria are primarily responsible for archaeological research on these peoples. They lay claim to a descent from the steppes of Eastern Europe, i.e. to a non-Indo-Germanic ancestry. It was, therefore, obvious to these archaeologists from the beginning that the roots of the material legacy of their ancestors, who had migrated from the East was also to be sought after in the East, namely in the steppes of Eurasia. Any provision for the, actually generally known, instance
that material culture, language and anthropology do neither necessarily, nor exclusively directly refer to the origin of the people under observation, has so far either not been generally acknowledged or is not known to the archaeological research on Central, Southeast and Eastern Europe. One factor undoubtedly contributing to the persisting survival of the “Orient-preference” in Hungarian and Bulgarian archaeology was the non-uniform Slavic descent of these peoples. It thereby was possible to distance oneself from the Pan-Slavistic tendencies observable in most Eastern European countries in the course of the twentieth century. Thus, the “Orient-preference” was, or is connected to national identity. Those scholars influenced by the “Orient-preference” are, in my opinion, anxious to solve an antagonism which would seemingly serve to the frustration of some: Hereby, their respective peoples, i.e. Hungarians or Bulgarians with their Eastern origins, are to be integrated in Europe, yet at the same time emphasising their differing ethno-cultural origin as compared to Europe.

Finally, a crucial point should here not go unmentioned. It is a fact that after World War II the number of technical publications regarding Byzantine history of art and archaeology increased by leaps and bounds, becoming very numerous, moreover the majority of publications from Western Europe did not reach the libraries of the former Eastern Bloc. This had not only financial reasons. The resulting lack of knowledge of an important part of the specialist literature entailed the possibility for a continuous existence for humanity’s ancient dream of “ex oriente lux”. An overcoming of the “Orient-preference” can only be expected from the intensification of methodically unobjectionable research in archaeology, and on the material and social invigoration of the middle classes in Central and Southeast Europe.

(translation: David Toalster)

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