MESIARKIN ADAM*

The Basis of Research of the Croatian and Slovak Ethnogenesis

Základy pre výskum chorvátskej a slovenskej etnogenézy /
Osnove za istraživanje hrvatske i slovačke etnogeneze

In this paper I would like to present the methodological approaches which are currently used within the research of the early medieval ethnicity. Previously, the focus was on criteria as material culture or a common language of the special group. However, the emphasis has shifted from objective categories to the mental level. We know that the ethno-social units were created situationally, under various different circumstances, and not through the inherited biological code. Early medieval ethnicities survived thanks to the common myths which stood behind the existence and appearance of the group. The warrior class, being the political elite as well, represented the compound of historical memory, symbols, and collectively directed emotions. I will try to apply the theories of ethnogenesis on the example of the creation of names "Slovak" and "Croat", as well as to present the most widespread opinions with regard to this topic from the perspective of various scientific disciplines.

Key-words: *Early Middle Ages, ethnogenesis, tradition, myths, memory, Croats, Slovaks*

Within the research of ethnogenesis the emphasis has always been on the localization and chronologization, while the whole process has often been neglected. Where the written sources speak weakly about the roots of the ethnic group, the scholars traditionally turn to archeology and linguistic science. Another problem is to see the beginning or the dawn of an ethnic group or a nation in biological categories: it was born, it lives and today's bearers of its name are its direct consanguineous descendants. These views are present in Slovak historical science, where the effort to push the roots of the nation as far as possible into the past still lasts.

We know how difficult it is to connect an archeological culture with a particular ethnic group. One archeological culture can represent more groups, the culture can change with migrations, can be inspired by other cultural enviroments, and we know that the culture does not have to reflect the real material culture of the whole group or tribe: "Changes in material culture do not have to mean the change or migrations of population, they can be caused by progress or regress of the whole standard of living, which are liable to internal and external factors."[1] Traditionally,

* Adam Mesiarkin. Comenius University in Bratislava. Faculty of Philosophy. Department of Slovak History

1 MAČALA, Pavol: *Etnogenéza Slovanov v* archeológii. Košice: Slovo, 1995, p. 59; SIÂN, Jones: *The Archaeology of Ethnicity: Constructing identities in the past and present.* London: Routledge, 1997, p. 115; URBAŃCZYK, Przemysław: Archeologia etniczności – fikcja, czy nadzieja? In: *Archeologia w teorii i praktyce*. Eds.: Andrzej BUKO – Przemysław URBAŃCZYK. Warszawa: IaiE PAN, 2000, p. 140.

from Tacitus or Isidore of Seville, language is used as the strongest distinguishing method. Isidore, as a scholar of his epoch, saw the birth of the nations under the Babylonian tower because until that time the nations had had one language. The nations start to differ when they start to have their languages, because for Isidore the nations emerge from languages. He shows the controversy of this approach by himself in the next (previsou, earlier) citation where he writes: "At the beginning, there where as many languages as *gentes*, and then more *gentes* than languages, because many nations from one language sprang."[2] One language within the heterogeneous tribal units could not play the unifying, cementing role. Moreover, in the early Middle Ages language borders did not overlap with political borders, as we know it from many centuries later.

Group that is bound by the knowledge of mutual interconnection (emotional, economical, etc.) is created situationally (revolutionary) thanks to some common mark or feature and thanks to the cultivation of those features. The central mark of the group is its common emotional tie (war, blood, danger), which is formed to common myth and memory. Identity of those groups is not inherited, it is not a biological category of a self-conscious homogenous community. Those groups rise neither in a misty, mythical, and distant past, nor in legendary locations, but at the background of real political contexts.

We can observe common evolutional points for the territories of Slovakia and Croatia. It is the collapse of Roman power on the Danube frontier and its retreat from Illyricum. Mutual birthmark is the political domination of the Avar khaganate and its destruction by the growing Frankish power. The khaganate has shown a special know-how to the warrior groups and created a space for social and ethnic (political) identities. We can mention the case of Kuber from *Miracula Sancti Demetri.* Sixty years after the khagan towed many captives from various regions into Pannonia, they mixed with Avars, Bulgars, and "others" and created a new ethnic group. They had a special consciousness of being different and a sentiment related to the will to return home. "The khagan started to consider them as a different nation and according to tribal custom he chose Kuber for their leader."[3]

Later the expansion of the Frankish Empire to the east brought a new model of social relations and ideological-religious patterns, which created a new environment for the construction of identities within the Carolingian Empire and on its peripheries. Imperial mechanism cooperated with local elites and institutionalized their power through its offices.

The first essential identification character with which these elites work is the name, which is trying to push through in some geographical frame. The second substantial element (often

---

[2] ISIDOR ZE SEVILLY: *Etymologiae*, vol. 9. Trans.: Irena Zachová, notae: Irena Zachová – Hana Šedinová. Praha: Oikoymenh, 1998, p. 17 and than 13.

[3] Cuda św. Dymitra, cap. 2, 5. In: *Testimonia najdawniejszych dziejów Słowian, Seria Grecka, zv. 2, Pisarze z V. - X. w.* Ed.: Barbara KOZŁOWSKA. Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1989, p. 210.

connected with the first) on which the ethnic group stands is the myth. I use the myth as a single term that covers other categories like symbols, memory, and common communication. The myth of a common ancestor, common origin, and fate, as well as enemies or goals. The common selective memory works well and produces emotions and premises. Common communication produces a set of symbols and their interpretation, rituals, feasts, colours, terms, and the feeling of solidarity (at least within the elite).

The creator of the new tribe of Goths collected from various groups, Alaric, was a Roman officer. He was elected king by a group of soldiers around him. He represented the dominant power in region, with contacts, money, and people. He needed a past, a myth. Alaric could choose Athanaric, he was from the House of the Balts. But the Balts became glorious thanks to him. Alaric created the ground for ethnogenetic tradition, he had the myth and a strong sentimental background. This tradition was forming and grew into a new quality in Gaul in the fifth century. Theodoric Amal (accidentally) came from Constantinople just in the right time to finish the ethnogenetical work of the Goths waiting under the domination of the Huns for too long. Walamir surely created a good base with the wars against *Suebi*, *Scirii*, Rugians, and Sarmatians. On the one hand, from warrior groups of the conquered tribes, and, on the other hand, from a good bloody myth which was born during those battles. According to Cassiodorus, a legendary dynasty of Amals has to live somewhere in *barbaricum.* The Goths were warriors, they accepted the legendary past and after that they started to create their own culture. Athaulf married Galla Placidia, Geiseric tried to marry his son with Eudoxia; both Theodoric Amal and Burgundian Gibichungis were well known for their dynastic policies. These efforts to create succession do not go together with legends of mythical family tree. Leaders of these tribes have more Roman titles for their bloody services than real legendary ancestors.

We can see analogical process in the case of Turkish khagan: "*My father, the khagan, went off with seventeen men... Having gone on campaigns forward and backward, he gathered together and collected men; and they all numbered seven hundred men. After they had numbered seven hundred men, [my father, the khagan] organized and ordered the people who had lost their state and their khagan, the people who had turned slaves and servants, the people who had lost the Turkish institutions, in accordance with the rules of my ancestors.*"[4]

With military might and attractivity he gains followers, who will become the root of a new ethnic group. With the rules of ancestors he obtains legitimacy and politically creates an ethnic group. The key to the unity of a tribe is invincibility, which in this case proves the interconnection of the heaven with the person of khagan. It shows to the others that it is worthy. It is the same in the

[4] GEARY, Patrick J.: Barbarians and Ethnicity. In.: *Interpreting Late Antiquity. Essays on the Postclassical World*. Ed.: Glen Warren BOWERSTOCK – Peter BROWN – Oleg GRABAR. Cambridge – Massachusetts – London: Harvard University Press, 2001, p. 108.

case of Germanic tribes, where much depends on the cleverness, brutality, and nimbleness of the ruling family or basically of the elite that manipulates the myth and the memory of the society. Many a time the elite searches for the proofs of legitimisation through God, gods, and legendary beings just as khagan through the heaven. The Amals, or Merovingians, helped themselves to the divine origin with military might and violence. The combination of myths and symbols together with the operations of military and political elites constitute the ground for the functioning of the ethnic group. Myth-symbol complex as an inception and warriors as bearers and representatives.

It is interesting that the population of the regions of Croatia and Slovakia was in the sources of the era described mainly as Slavs. As we will see, this description in the case of either region did not always have to reflect a literary stereotype of Latin writings.

The name "Croat" appears for the first time in *De administrando imperio* of Constantine Porphyrogenitus, which would like to describe the events from the times of Emperor Heraclius. It is well known that the name Croat (and Serb as well) appeared in various parts of Slavic speaking world, so it can be a case of a wandering name. The analysis of *De administrando* or the motivation and goals of Constantine's work are not the object of my paper.[5] Trpimir is described as *dux Chroatorum* in a charter from the middle of the ninth century, preserved in a manuscript from the sixteenth century. Its language has the signs of multiple authorship and shows some discrepancies with the political terminology in the era of Trpimir. Therefore, the oldest evidence of Croatian identity remains the title of Branimir, *dux Cruatorum*, found in the basilica in Šopot in Ravni Kotari region, dated to the 880s. The majority of Latin sources use classical literary stereotypes when describing the population of Dalmatia as Dalmatians and Slavs. Majority of them entitles Croats as *Sclavi*. Trpimir is mentioned in the 840s as a *rex Sclavorum*; Mislav, Domagoj, Zdeslav are described as *principes* or *duces Sclavorum* in the writings of John the Deacon. The pope wrote the letters to *comes*, *dux*, or *princeps Sclavorum*[6] until the year 925 and the council in Split, when Tomislav was mentioned as *rex Chroatorum.*

The fact that Constantine Porphyrogenitus did not have to describe the situation from the first half of the seventh century is not important at this moment. It is important that he wrote down a myth, which lived and stood in the centre of the ethnogenesis, of the memory of the elite – which created a political-ethnic group. They maintain the myth of the arrival to the country with a permission of the emperor – for the absolute right for taking the land.[7] In this story they definitely

5 I agree with the author in the question of a „general" construction of the mentioned parts of the text of *DAI*: BORRI, Francesco: White Croatia and the arrival of the Croats: an interpretation of Constantine Porphyrogenitus on the oldest Dalmatian history. In: *Early Medieval Europe*, vol. 19, 2011, pp 207-210.

6 BUDAK, Neven: Identities in Early Medieval Dalmatia. In: *Franks, Northmen and Slavs: Identities and State Formation in Early Medieval Europe.* Ed.: Ildar H. GARIZPANOV – Patrick J. GEARY – Przemysław URBAŃCZYK. Turnhout: Brepols, 2008, p. 236.

7 TŘEŠTÍK, Dušan: Mýty kmene Čechů. Praha: Lidové Noviny, 2008, p. 89.

turned away from the past linked to the khaganate, using instead the fight against them, with wandering from far-away (or maybe not so far) White Croatia and with the baptism from the hands of a glorious emperor. The Biblical *topos* of wandering to the Promised Land might have been chosen by Constantine for an easier explanation of the complicated ethnical situation and transformation to his son.

In spite of naming the Croats as Slavs in Latin sources, probably due to their language, Croatian identity was not Slavic. They turned away from the Slavs and Avars in their *origo* and the Slavic identity probably existed beside the Croatian identity. In addition, it is not the subsequent evolutional phase of the development of Illyrian (if there was something like that) identities mixed with Gothic or Slavic identity.[8] It is something new, created at the time of the changes inside the khaganate[9] and the transformations in the orbit of Frankish domination in Europe. In the context of the uprising of Louis/Ljudovit in *Pannonia Inferior* the Frankish annals mention his Frankish ally, Borna, who is *dux Dalmaciae*, or *dux Dalmatiae et Liburniae* and *dux Guduscanorum*. *Dux Dalmatiae et Liburniae* was for the Franks a real term from the late antique political geography, according to which those regions were included into the Friulian mark; and *dux Guduscanorum* could be a name for his ethno-political identity. The Croats appear on the scene when Borna's family is replaced with Mislav and Trpimir, and the Croats replaced the Guduscans in the control of Dalmatian (and Liburnian) *ducatus* with the Carolingians as nominal rulers.[10]

We hear about the Slavs from the region of present Slovakia for the first time (except a mention by Procopius, which can be interpreted in many ways, and the existence of Samo's Empire) within the last phase of the dying khagante. In the year 805 *kapkan* complained in front of the emperor that he could not stay at his old place because of the attacks of Slavs from the neighbourhood of the Danube. The emperor therefore sent an army to the Pannonias (!) in order to end the conflicts between Avars and Slavs in 811. After this military intervention, the *primores ac duces Sclavorum* had to get to the emperor in Aachen. Just few years later, in 828, the archbishop of Salzburg, Adalram, consecrated the first church in Pribina's domain in the Principality of Nitra, in *Nitrava ultra Danubium*. The Principality of Nitra but mainly Great Moravia and its tradition stand in the center of the ethnic myth of the Slovaks; for example, it found its way to the preamble of the Constitution of the Slovak Republic. The name of those who lived in Great Moravia has more forms in contemporary Frankish sources. Rastislav is *rex Margorum*, his land is *regnum Margorum*.[11] He

---

8 MUŽIČ, Ivan: Nastajanje hrvatskog naroda na Balkanu. In: *Starohrvatska prosvjeta*, vol. 35, nr. III, 2008, p. 31.

9 POHL, Walter: Osnove Hrvatske Etnogeneze. In: *Etnogeneza Hrvata*. Ed.: Neven BUDAK. Zagreb: Nakladni zavod Matice hrvatske, 1996, p. 95.

10 DZINO, Danijel: *Becoming Slav, Becoming Croat*. Leiden: Brill, 2010, p. 189.

11 Annales Xantenses. In: *Magnae Moraviae fontes historici*, vol. 1. Ed.: Lubomír HAVLÍK. Praha – Brno: Státní pedagogické nakladatelství, 1966, p. 66 (deinde *MMFH*).

is also *regulus Winidorum*.[12] Svatopluk appears in sources as *dux Maravorum gentis*,[13] or *rex Marorum*. Comparably, they are recorded as *rex*, or *dux Sclavorum* (sometimes specified as Moravian Slavs) and the population is described as Slavs.[14]

The exact form of the name "Slovak" does not appear until the fourteenth century. In Latin sources the name was simply *Slavus*/*Sclavus* or *Slavi*/*Sclavi*.[15] The terms "Slav" and "Slovak" (in Slovak language "Slovan" and "Slovák") acted or were used like synonyms until the eighteenth century. For example, in Polish and Czech literature of the sixteenth and eighteenth century, the name "Slovak" serves in larger sense, same as the name "Slav".[16] The name *Slovak* is a shorter derivation of the description *Slovjenin*, *Sloväne*, in English "Slav". This original form (*Slovienin*, *Sloväne)* has been preserved in a female form *Slovenka*, as well as in the adjective *slovenský*, or in the name of the country *Slovensko*.[17] We can say that in this sense the Slovak identity is Slavic. Some tribes took or kept the name of a small *gens* which we know from the Byzantine sources from the sixth century. Others became Slavs because they were described like Slavs from the outside, or thanks to later fate of the mission of Constantine and Methodius. There is one text which possibly reflects the ethnic memory of the population of Moravia and it could probably lighten up why the population used the name Slav for a long time. It found its way into the chronicle of monk Nestor from Kiev Monastery of the Caves, through a part called *Skazanie o preloženii knig na slavjanskij jazyk* (Tale about the Translation of the Books into Slavic Language), which according to some specialists was written in Moravia. It speaks about the homeland of the Slavs on the Danube river: "*There was one Slavic language: Slavs who sat on Danube*",[18] it speaks about their dispersion and adoption of new names from the lands where they settled down. Nestor uses their new names in his descriptions of various tribes. For example, he speaks about the leaders of Drevlyans, or the land of Polans. He always uses the regional names except the cases when the groups called themselves simply as Slavs. When he writes about the Hungarian "arrival", he always mentions Slavic dukes, or Slavic land. In the letter to Emperor Michael III, Svatopluk and Rastislav speak for themselves: "*We, the Slavs* (from Moravia, Nitra, Balaton principality), *we are simple people*." The Hungarian Anonymous described the defeated group in Nitra as *Sclaui Nytrienses*.[19]

---

[12] Annales Bertiniani. In: *MMFH* I, p. 74.

[13] Annales Fuldenses. In: *MMFH* I, p. 112.

[14] *Annalista Saxo, Reginonis Chronicon, Sigiberti Gemblacensis Chronica, Cosmae Chronica...*

[15] MÚCSKA, Vincent: Uwagi na temat etnogenezy Słowaków. In: *Wędrówka i etnogeneza w starożytności i w średniowieczu*. Red.: Maciej SALAMON – Jerzy STRZELCZYK. Kraków: Historia Iagellonica, 2010, p. 350.

[16] E. g. Hieronim Spiczyński in *O ziołach tutejszych i zamorskich i mocy ich* (1556), in Czech translation of Bible of Kralice (1579 –1593), in Dictionary of Linde by the entry "Slav" (1812). Cfr. OTRĘBSKI, Jan: *Słowianie. Rozwiązanie odwiecznej zagadki ich nazw*. Poznań: Księgarnia Ziem Zachodnich, 1947, pp. 66–67.

[17] STANISLAV, Ján: Slovienin–Slovan–Slovák–Tót. In: *Etnogenéza Slovákov*. Red.: Richard MARSINA – Peter MULÍK. Martin: Matica Slovenská, 2009, p. 120.

[18] *Najstarsza kronika kyjowska*: *Powieść minionych lat.* Trans.: Franciszek SIELICKI. Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 2005, p. 5.

[19] P. Magistri Gesta Hungarorum, 36. In: *MMFH*, vol. I, p. 227.

In the region of the Principality of Nitra a new special identity started to emerge, probably thanks to its territorial peculiarity (namely within the mountains of the Tatras, the Little Carpathians, and the Slanské mountains, and between the Danube and the Tisza rivers), distinct liturgy and thanks to some sort of autonomy within Great Moravia and later within the borders of the Hungarian Kingdom. This distinction maybe stood behind the break-up of Great Moravia, when in 902 the Moravians chose the Bavarian side, while the Nitrans selected the Hungarians as allies.[20] The Principality of Nitra had its special position within the frame of the Hungarian Kingdom until the year 1108. Thanks to the confrontation with other, different ethnic group, the ethnic Slavic identity persevered. The stories of Svatopluk, which complete the Great-Moravian tradition, have had a special place in the ethnic myth of Slovaks. His tradition appears in two main images – in a negative and a positive one. Nevertheless, the oldest Hungarian historiography tried either not to mention him, or to contaminate him with other persons. But those efforts were counter-productive and they rather affirm the strong position of Svatopluk's myth in the elite circles and in oral tradition as well.

Neither the exact localization, nor close dating of the beginnings of those ethnic groups were the aims of my paper. I just wanted to show that the approach to the ethnogenesis of Slovaks and Croats is no longer on the level of the nineteenth century. Ethnic groups were created at the background of complicated and colourful political and social conditions. Some of them are similar in these two cases. The transformation of the system of relations within the khaganate (and on its periphery) and later within the Carolingian Empire have given the opportunity for ethno-political units to strengthen their position against the others in the region. The material back-up and the more advanced organization of the region were the assistant factors. These ethnic names survived to this day thanks to the power of their myth and name. In the case of the Croats it is the arrival to Dalmatia with the permission of the glorious emperor and in the case of Slovaks it is the Slavic tradition of Great Moravia with king Svatopluk.

[20] HOMZA, Martin – RÁCOVÁ, Naďa: *K vývinu slovenskej myšlienky do polovice 18. storočia*. Bratislava: Stimul, 2010, p. 18.