

ŠTÚDIE / STUDIES



ARCHAEOLOGY, PREHISTORY, HISTORY

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Abstract: Who we used to be and who are we now? Author deals with the ambiguous meaning of the term prehistory. Sometimes it means the oldest period of human past but sometimes it is a synonymous term for archaeology. According to L. Klejn, a leading Russian researcher, prehistory should be the science crossing over a narrow framework of the study of archaeological sources and which should focus on wider interpretations and generalizations. But prehistory is not just history and archaeology. Due to its unique and specific character, it cannot be incorporated into any group of smaller scientific branches. It is a social science most closely related to anthropology.

Keywords: archaeology, prehistory, history, concept of, definition of

Abstrakt: Archeológia, prehistória, história. Kto sme boli a kto sme teraz? Autor sa zaoberá neurčitým významom termínu prehistória. Niekedy sa používa v zmysle najstaršieho obdobia ľudskej minulosti a niekedy je to synonymum pre archeológiu. Podľa popredného ruského teoretika L. Klejnu prehistória by mala byť veda, ktorá prekračuje úzky rámec štúdia prameňov a venuje sa širším interpretáciám a zovšeobecneniam. Prehistória (archeológia) však nie je história a pre svoj jedinečný a zvláštny charakter sa nedá bez problémov pričleniť ku žiadnej skupine vedných odborov. Je to spoločenská veda a je najbližšia k antropológii.

Kľúčové slová: archeológia, prehistória, história, concept, definícia

1. Introduction

In this paper I will present an overview of the position of archaeology in the system of sciences in the former Czechoslovakia and nowadays Slovakia. I will also refer briefly to German archaeology, as in the past it had a significant influence on Central European research. Although archaeology at its beginnings had a strong relationship to evolutionary cultural anthropology (Tylor, Morgan), under the influence of the 19th century nationalism a tendency started to consider it rather as a science closer to history (historiography)

At the time the scientists strove to find the oldest possible roots of the existing modern nations which culminated in a well-known ethnic conception of G. Kossina. However, evolutionary anthropology had also a historical dimension. J. Morgan had influenced also F. Engels and thus in a later Marxist classification archaeology and ethnology became historical sciences. In the former Soviet Union these two disciplines were incorporated into a scientific branch called "The History of Material Culture". This model has been applied also in Poland, where a journal of the same name has been published since 1953.

2. Vorgeschichte, Prehistory

In the 19th century, the term “prehistory” (in German „Vorgeschichte“ or „Urgeschichte“) came into use for the period before the written sources. By this time, however, the terminology confusion arose. It is illustrated by the statement of T. Mommsen, a well-known historian, who said that prehistory is for analphabets (after *Vašíček 2006*, 9). By saying that, he wanted to point at the difference between prehistoric and classical archaeology. This ambiguous meaning of the term “prehistory” persists to the present day. Sometimes the term has been used even synonymously for archaeology.

The former Czechoslovakia can serve as a good example. In 1919 both the State Archaeological Institute and The Society of Czechoslovak Prehistorians were founded here at the same time. That means an archaeologist was identified with a prehistorian. The changes in the names of the Department of Archaeology in Charles University in Prague give evidence of the uncertainty about terminology: 1958 – The Department of Prehistory, 1989 – Department of Prehistory and Early History, 2012 – Institute of Archaeology. As far as the name of a department is concerned, e.g. at the University of Comenius in Bratislava, the term prehistory has never been used here after the World War II. Archaeology could be studied, at first as part of other departments (mostly history departments), later on as an independent department on its own, but always under the term Archaeology.

At present there has been a change in terminology also in the Czech Republic and the term prehistory is used there only in reference to the period before the written records, complemented quite often by the term protohistory, which is not so fashionable in Slovakia or other countries and seems to have a more French connection. At the same time, it must be mentioned that in the Czech language (and Slovak as well) there exists another synonymous term for this period – “pravěk“. J. Neustupný, one of the first theoreticians in the former Czechoslovakia, said that prehistory deals with the history of prehistory and archaeology is its main auxiliary science (*Neustupný 1960*, 11). In this way a nonsensical expression originated (“history of prehistory”), especially in translations into some languages (besides in English, it is seen also in German – Geschichte der Vorgeschichte). At some universities in the Czech and Slovak republics lectures are still given on the subject called “The History of Prehistory” [Dejiny pravěku].

3. Archaeology, History

Let us now go back to the relationship between archaeology and history in the 20th century. In German speaking countries archaeology was still considered a historical science. H. J. Eggers in his “Introduction to Prehistory” remarked jokingly that “prehistory is the science of spade” (Vorgeschichte des Spatens), however, he considered its inclusion in historical sciences as a matter of course (*Eggers 1959*, 14, 16). This situation persists to this day, although the younger generation of German archaeologists is not so unequivocal in their opinions. M. Eggert, a senior leading theoretical researcher, criticized traditional German antiquarian conception of archaeology and tried to bring it closer to cultural anthropology (*Eggert 2008*, 13). He defined archaeology as historical-cultural science (historische Kulturwissenschaft – *Eggert 2006*).

In British and USA science the relationship between archaeology and history was formed in a less distinct manner. As early as in 1936, G. Childe considered prehistory as the bridge between the history of man and natural sciences such as biology, paleontology and geology. In his opinion, the role of the prehistory should be the study of the changes in human culture (*Childe 1936*, 21). A complete rejection of historical interpretation can be found in the 1960s in American processual archaeology. L. Binford in his first program study (*Binford 1962*) designated archaeology as (cultural) anthropology (“archaeology is anthropology or it is nothing” – slightly modified definition from G. Willey and P. Phillips). If in USA archaeology is considered as an historical discipline, then it is meant in the meaning of a science about the past – similarly as geology, paleontology, and astronomy as well (*Cleland 2002*, 474). The work of K. Butzer “Archaeology as Human Ecology” from 1982 can be mentioned in connection with this tendency of drawing archaeology closer to natural sciences. D. Clarke (1978, 11) wrote his opinion very clearly “Archeological data are not historical data and consequently archaeology is not history”. The post-processualists took pity on historical science once again; however, what the most radical of them (*Shanks – Tilley 1987*) were after was mainly its political interpretation and they even wanted to change the world with the help of it.

In the former Czechoslovakia under the influence of German archaeological school archaeology was considered, of course, a historical science. This concept was reinforced after W.W. II. when archaeology under the influence of the Soviet Marxist school of historic materialism was reduced to the so-called auxiliary science to historiography such as archival science and considered as an inseparable part of history. In the present-day Russia this classification has persisted until today – archaeology is studied at the faculties of history and graduates receive B.c. and/or M.A. diplomas in history. A similar situation has existed until recently in Bulgaria. As the influence of processual archaeology could not manifest itself due to ideological reasons in the past in the former Czechoslovakia this conception has persisted in the views of senior archaeologists until today. E. Neustupný, who in his work “Theory of Archaeology” intentionally avoids the term history and speaks always about the past (*Neustupný 2010*), represents the exception in the senior generation in the Czech Republic. However, in Slovakia the first monograph ever dealing with theoretical archaeology has still the conservative subtitle “Archaeology as a Historical Science”, while its authors evidently identify history (and prehistory as its inseparable part) with the past, e.g. ‘Staré osídlenie Slovenska 1’ (*Bujna – Furmánek – Wiedermann (Eds.) 2013*).

I consider the differentiation between history and the past as crucial from the methodological point view. If archaeology studies the human past, then, indeed, we can consider it a historical science, but only with some reservations. Almost every science may have its historical dimension e.g. demography, anthropology, human geography or botany, this means they are also historical sciences, which corresponds with the above-mentioned American conception. I assume that the archaeological study of the past does not necessarily have to embrace an historical aspect. An archaeologist can consider the size of individual human communities, their economy or social organization, however, not their history. Of course, this relates only to prehistoric archaeology, in younger periods also the written records must be taken into consideration. Then historical interpretation is thus possible and even desirable, but only where the sources allow this – as long as we do not consider an historical interpretation as mere dating of finds.

4. Archaeology, Prehistory

The past without written records, prehistory, according to some researchers, must be differentiated from history also for other reasons. In their views the origin of the first written records at a certain period of the development of society was not only a case of lucky coincidence, but a consequence of social structure changes, which the written records inform us about. From this point of view history appears rather as a specific state (*mentalité*) of society, as a structure capable of perceiving and generate events at the same time. People behave historically, if they change a social reality intentionally. By accepting this view prehistoric communities would differ from the historic ones by different functioning mechanisms (*Kuna 1995, 49*).

For the given reasons it is impossible to consider archaeology a historic science in the narrower sense of the word, not to mention the so-called archaeology of the present or forensic archaeology. An archeologist then may resign on historical interpretation and still remain an archaeologist, while this does not apply to a historian. Archaeology can simply be also ahistorical, what I do not consider *a priori* the sign of some inferiority or low quality. In an attempt to legitimize this ahistorical quality of a part of archaeological work some researchers differentiate between archaeology and prehistory – this would lead to the renaissance of prehistory as a scientific branch.

It is the prehistory, according to L. Klejn, a leading Russian researcher, which should be the science crossing over a narrow framework of the study of archaeological sources and which should focus on wider interpretations and generalizations. According to this conception the role of prehistory is to collect all data about the past provided by the disciplines such as archaeology, anthropology, numerous natural sciences, as well as linguistics, ethnology or history (*Klejn 1995, 41*). From the methodological point of view the division between archaeology and prehistory is apparently correct and – by my opinion – in the future a practical need for this division will arise. After all, this tendency can be observed even today: there are archaeologist who can hardly be called prehistorians. It concerns especially the so-called rescue archaeology. At present modern archaeology – as prehistory – must cooperate with almost every science as it is interested in the past in its complexity i.e. in everything that has been preserved. If any prehistoric songs were preserved, these would also belong to the sphere of interest of archaeology (of course, in cooperation with musicology). Thus, I am a supporter of the term “total archaeology”.

5. Conclusion

Prehistory is not a crossover between history and archaeology. It cannot be incorporated into any group of smaller scientific branches, due to its unique and specific character. It is a social science most closely related to anthropology, however, I must agree with a well-known definition of D. Clarke (1978, 11): “Archaeology is archaeology is archaeology”.

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Zhrnutie

Hoci archeológia mala vo svojich začiatkoch blízko k evolučnej kultúrnej antropológii, pod vplyvom nacionalizmu 19. storočia sa začala považovať skôr za vedu blízku histórii (historiografii). V 19. storočí sa pre obdobie pred písomnými prameňmi začal používať názov „prehistória“, v nemčine „Vorgeschichte“ či „Urgeschichte“. Už v tom

čase sa však zrodil terminologický zmätok, keďže tento termín sa používal zároveň aj na označenie vedného odboru. J. Neustupný (1960, 11), jeden z prvých teoretikov v Československu, sa vyjadril, že prehistória sa zaoberá dejinami praveku (history of prehistory) a jej hlavnou pomocnou vedou je archeológia. Vzniklo tak v podstate nezmyselné spojenie, najmä ak sa to prekladá do niektorých cudzích jazykov (okrem angličtiny sa to napríklad ukáže aj v nemčine – *Geschichte der Vorgeschichte*). Popredný nemecký teoretik M. Eggert (2006, 13) kritizoval tradičné nemecké starožitnícke poňatie archeológie a snažil sa ju priblížiť ku kultúrnej antropológii. Archeológiu označil za historicko – kultúrnu vedu (*historische Kulturwissenschaft*). Úplné odmietnutie historickej interpretácie nachádzame v 60. rokoch 20. storočia v americkej procesuálnej archeológii. L. Binford (1962) vo svojej prvej programovej štúdiu v roku označil archeológiu za (kultúrnu) antropológiu. Za kľúčovú otázku považujem z metodologického hľadiska rozlíšenie histórie a minulosti. Ak sa archeológia zaoberá poznávaním ľudskej minulosti, tak ju síce môžeme považovať za historickú vedu, ale iba s istými výhradami. Takmer každá veda môže mať aj svoj historický rozmer, napr. demografia, antropológia, humánna geografia či botanika, sú teda tiež historické vedy, čo zodpovedá už spomínanému poňatiu. Archeológia môže byť skrátka aj ahistorická, čo nepovažujem a priori za znak nejakej menejcennosti, či nekvality. V snahe legitimizovať túto ahistorickosť časti archeologickej práce rozlišujú niektorí bádatelia archeológiu a prehistóriu – išlo by o akúsi renesanciu prehistórie ako vednej disciplíny. Práve prehistória by, podľa popredného ruského teoretika L. Klejna (1995, 41) mala byť vedou, ktorá prekračuje úzky rámec štúdia prameňov a venuje sa širším interpretáciám a zovšeobecneniam. Úlohou prehistórie podľa tejto koncepcie je zhromažďovanie všetkých údajov o minulosti, ktoré jej poskytnú jednotlivé disciplíny, ako archeológia, antropológia, množstvo prírodných vied, ale aj jazykoveda, etnológia či história. Z metodologického hľadiska je zrejme oddelenie archeológie a prehistórie správne a v budúcnosti sa pravdepodobne ukáže aj praktická potreba tohto delenia. Koniec - koncov, istý trend sa dá pozorovať už dnes: existujú aj archeológovia, ktorých by sme len ťažko mohli nazvať prehistorikmi. Prehistória teda nie je história a archeológiu pre jej zvláštny charakter definoval D. Clarke (1978, 11) ako “archeológia je archeológia je archeológia”.