

Trends and thoughts on the archaeology of Germanic cemeteries

Tendencias y reflexiones sobre la arqueología de los cementerios germánicos

Juan Antonio Quirós Castillo *

SUMMARY

This issue of 'Arqueología y Territorio Medieval' includes a compilation of some articles whose intention is to stimulate the debate which, subtly and informally, has been going on during the recent years regarding the ethnic reading of the material culture of the Early Medieval Iberian Peninsula and other related topics under the light shed by recent European research.

The purpose of this dossier is to introduce the new archaeological evidence in order to prepare a new setting in which to revise older ones, debating about the theoretical interpretations given to the so-called "Visigothic necropoleis" and other material evidence, such as Visigothic architecture. This issue includes three monographic articles together with this introduction, which intends to briefly frame the debate.

Palabras claves: Visigothic necropoleis, Ethnicity, Ethnogenesis, Post-processualism.

RESUMEN

En este número de la revista 'Arqueología y Territorio Medieval' se recogen en forma de dossier algunos trabajos que pretenden estimular el debate que, de forma más o menos soterrada e informal, está teniendo lugar en los últimos años en torno a la lectura en términos étnicos del registro material del período altomedieval de la Península Ibérica y otros sectores próximos a la luz de las experiencias europeas más recientes.

El objetivo de este dossier es el de presentar nuevos registros arqueológicos y plantear escenarios para la revisión de otros antiguos reflexionando en torno a la dimensión teórica de las interpretaciones que se han realizado en torno a las "necrópolis visigodas" y otras evidencias materiales, como es el caso de las arquitecturas. El dossier está compuesto por tres artículos monográficos y la presente introducción que pretende encuadrar brevemente el debate.

Palabras claves: Necrópolis visigodas, Etnicidad, Etnogénesis, Postprocesualismo.

There has been a profound renovation in the studies on the end of the Roman world and the beginning of the Middle Ages in the past decades by a great number of specialists, as a result of synergies and meetings of researchers from different academic backgrounds (ancient history, archaeology, source specialists, etc.) which have met at different levels.

There is consensus in accepting that the *European Science Foundation* funded project *The Transformation of the Roman World* (1993-1998) has had a great effect in the academic

revision of this historical period. As the title indicates, the researchers who took part of the seminars and publications related to this project maintained a 'continuist' interpretation of the Early Middle Ages as opposed to the catastrophists and discontinuists, who saw the late antique centuries as the end of a civilization. As a result of these different positions, another group of researchers has constructed new paradigms and has adopted new positions which have contributed to a renewed study of this historical period, searching for a common European 'origin'.

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Another interesting factor that should be highlighted is that this debate has been supported and fed to a great extent to the gargantuan effort of legions of archaeologists who have provided with new material and high-quality interpretations, which have allowed to tackle basic questions such as the evolution of trade through ceramic distributions patterns, the forms of territorial structuring based on rural settlement patterns or the study of the transformation of the Roman society and its elites through urban archaeology.

The debate, which has led to numerous conferences and to the publication of the results of the project mentioned above during the 1990s, has led to the publication of syntheses and monographs of great importance, amongst which those of C. Wickham (2005, 2009), J. Smith (2005), B. Ward-Perkins (2005), M. McCormick (2001), G. P. Brogiolo (2011), G. Halsall (2007) or P. Heather (2005) should be mentioned.

Any careful reader of these volumes (most of which are long books with hundreds of pages) will notice that rather than consensus on the general interpretation of the period between the fourth and eighth centuries, there are very diverse positions, sometimes even opposed, but all are still well-argued on solid bases.

One of the main issues around which *The Transformation of the Roman World* project turned was the role of barbarians as historical agents and of Germanic kingdoms as main organisers or post-Roman politics. The function traditionally assigned to these groups was revised through the analysis of processes of ethnogenesis, stressing the role of ethnic identities on the construction of post-Roman elites (Pöhl 1997; Pöhl, Reimitz 1988; Goetz, Jarnut, Pöhl 2002).

This topic has generated numerous discussions over the past years, both by the authors who have questioned the points of view offered by the ethnogenesis models, the written sources and their limitations (Gillett 2002) and by those who have questioned the role given to the

Germanic peoples by these new historiographic positions. On this purpose, the discussion written by B. Ward-Perkins on the "Euro-Barbarians" in his recent and controversial book is very telling (Ward-Perkins 2005, 172-176).

One of the fields on which this confrontation is more evident is in the study of the archaeology of the barbarians. There has been a recent renewed emphasis to identify barbarians through archaeology as a new priority through which analyse the social and political transformations of Late Antiquity, especially in southern Europe. This emphasis looks back at more "traditional" approaches, even if reformulated and reassessed on new bases. In this way it has been possible to revise the evidence, especially in funerary contexts, which had been studied in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Furthermore, new material has been incorporated to the *corpus* of evidence, in particular sunken-featured houses (*grubenhäuser*).

Other archaeologists question these interpretations, both in theoretical and analytical levels, opposing to those studies which value the ethnic component of material culture. From hypercritical approaches towards the use of ethnicity in archaeology (Jones 1997), new interpretative theses based on post-structuralist positions have been built in order to analyse the context of the material culture and the audience at which the funerary rites were aimed (Halsall 1995).

These proposals developed in the recent years (even if currently in a process of oversimplification) have generated two new, completely opposite analytical approaches to the funerary material, which have even entered into conflict one with another.

This debate has deep theoretical roots, even if the background of the proposals is not usually openly presented. But as G. Halsall points out in one of the papers of this issue, 'an object does not have an ethnicity'.

In an extremely succinct statement: the first of the approaches states that it is possible to identify ethnicity through the material record or

that it is possible to distinguish “cultural facies” (even if these lack a label). This interpretation dates back to the normativist and diffusionist proposals which emerged late in the cultural historicism of the late nineteenth century. But then, how is it possible that such arguments are used again (explicitly or implicitly) early in the twenty-first century?

In my opinion, there are two elements that may explain this. Firstly, a clear reaction against the continuist conclusions reached by the aforementioned *The Transformation of the Roman World* project. Barbarians caused a rupture, and brought discontinuity, explaining the ‘end of civilisation’, as expressed by A. Carandini or B. Ward-Perkins. In a recent publication by provocative Marco Valenti, the author underlined precisely how he felt relieved after reading Ward-Perkins book in which he reaffirmed his discontinuist position, because he had no need to feel conservative or retrograde (Valenti 2009, 29). Therefore, for a group of authors, identifying barbarians as historical agents and identifying their material culture are the pillars on which to build their interpretative framework.

A second and more widely-accepted proposal, put forward by G.P. Brogiolo amongst others, is based on the refusal of post-processual and post-modern interpretations with all their implications, claiming back processualism as viable, even if it was thought to be outdated, especially amongst European scholars which are characterised by a lack of an explicit theoretical thought during the years in which this new paradigm emerged. One of the most immediate consequences of this new theoretical approach was to question the theory of ethnogenesis and to put forward newer processualist approaches, in what this author calls “archaeology of complexity” (Brogiolo 2007; Brogiolo, Chavarria Arnau 2010 45-48).

It seems paradoxical that arguments closer to cultural historicism are needed in order to question post-processualism, especially when the New Archaeology emerged as a way to counter these very proposals. On the other hand, the most recent theoretical debate considers post-processualism over (Johnson 2010,

221-222), substituted by new positions, such as processual-plus (Hegmon 2003) or the so-called *New Historical Processualism* (Pauketat 2001).

A second group of authors, which questions the historicist proposals of the previous group, puts forward its proposals also from a double theoretical perspective,

Firstly they use the ethnogenesis theory (Gillett 2006), which despite the suspicions that it generated, has been accepted by authors such as C. Wickham (2005, 83, 311, 786-787). This position, originally proposed by R. Wenkus, questions the biological and ethnic notions of “peoples” in order to argue that culture, based on traditions and common institutions, is more important. Even if certain basic issues have been questioned by his followers (amongst which are Wolfram and the “Viennese School”), the defenders of this proposal argue that the *gentes* were not static elements, but rather that they changed and were reconstructed constantly during the Early Middle Ages, and the barbarian kingdoms were defined in political terms through those ethnic identities which were based on common traditions (Goetz 2002). Considering these proposals, many archaeologists have changed the ethnic interpretations of the material culture in favour of social and contextual analyses.

The most extreme positions completely deny the existence of ethnic identities in archaeology (Brather 2002, 170-175), because as they are a social construct. The processes of aggregation and the strategies of distinction (which are constantly adapted and remade, creating social identities) allow deeper analyses (Pöhl 1998).

Secondly, these proposals are framed inside a theoretical post-modernism and post-processualism, making the emphasis on the context and significance of the material culture, therefore denying the basic starting points of cultural historicism. In this way, more attention is paid to the significance of the funerary ritual, which implies the public destruction of wealth, through which the status of the heirs is legiti-

mised and confirmed in a period of instability and social competition (Halsall 1995; La Rocca 1998, 79-80; Lucy 2002).

Many of the proposals put forward by these authors are extremely suggestive when it comes to understand the context of the archaeological record, but as a consequence, their conclusions are hardly verifiable and rely on written sources (which are always few and problematic) to give significance to their proposals (Gillett 2002).

But beyond these limitations, the conflict between both positions, which may have been exceedingly simplified, allows the revision of old archaeological material from new points of view, and allows to think over again in theoretical terms several of the assumptions we make on early medieval societies.

For this reason, it is frustrating to realise that most of these arguments have not been put forward for the Iberian Peninsula. Ethnogenesis has hardly been used by scholars in the field, with very few exceptions (e.g. García Moreno and recently López Quiroga and Ripoll), although in my opinion the consequences of using this term have not been fully analysed when it comes to study the society of the Peninsula in this period. In fact, in some recent publications traditional interpretations based on the ethnic interpretation of the archaeological record are still present (Barroso *et alii* 2008; Morín, Barroso 2008; López Quiroga 2010).

Without a doubt, there is an urgent need to revise the funerary archaeology of the Iberian Peninsula between the 5th and 8th centuries. It is enough to say that the 1960s map made by Palol showing the "Visigothic necropoleis" is still used, largely because there is no other. Furthermore, we now have new material, like the finds obtained from rescue archaeology, and new analysis possibilities, like stable isotope analysis. But maybe the most important task is to renovate the theoretical and conceptual framework in order to make historical sense out of the new archaeological material. The following volume intends to contribute to the developing of such a debate which may trigger the renovation.

As it has been pointed out, this issue is formed by three papers. In the first one, which is the result of a seminar organised in Vitoria-Gasteiz, Guy Halsall tackles the problem of the interpretation of medieval cemeteries from an ethnicity point of view. In order to do so he takes as a starting point two recent works by Michael Kazanski and Patric Périn, in which they argue for the possibility of making ethnic identifications from the material culture in the Merovingian world. The British author, who for decades argues for a contextual reading of the material culture from Northern Gaul, questions the interpretative bases proposed by these two French authors using their own logic and argumentation. From this internal criticism, the author concludes pointing out that the relationship between material culture and ethnic identity is very problematic, largely because identity is polyedric. Halsall defines it as 'a state of mind' and as a reality 'existing in several layers which can be adopted or highlighted or abandoned, played down or concealed'.

In the second article, Carlos Tejerizo, DPhil student of the research group on Patrimony and Cultural Landscape of the University of the Basque Country makes a triple analysis: in the first place he makes a critical revision in historiographical terms on the papers written about the "Visigothic necropoleis"; in the second place, he makes a revision on the archaeological evidence of the eastern part of the Northern Meseta through the study of 43 sites of this period; in the third place, the author suggests new interpretative frameworks which he will further develop in his doctoral thesis.

In the last article, Alfonso Vigil-Escalera Guirado, doctor in Archaeology by the University of the Basque Country, presents the results of some of his works in rescue archaeology carried out in the province of Madrid. This author bases his argument on the deep rupture in territorial organisation throughout the fifth century, its most evident consequence being the formation of a network of villages and farms, which substituted previous forms of centralised production and political organisation based on *villae*. One of the most impressive discoveries in village archaeology (as developed in Madrid)

is that an important part of the “Visigothic necropoleis” are nothing but village cemeteries, and that the integral study of cemeteries plus dwelling areas provides us with new clues to understand these sites. The examples of Góztquez and El Pelicano put forward in this paper are very interesting.

As it is evident, these articles do not intend to tackle all the current interpretative problems in the funerary archaeology of the Iberian Peninsula between the sixth and eighth centuries, as there are other sites and other authors who are nowadays making new and interesting contributions. But we thought that these articles can be an instrument for the debate, which as mentioned above, is emerging.

Just as it has been outlined above, interpreting the role of the *gentes* in the context of the transition from Antiquity to the medieval world and of barbarian archaeology has generated in the recent years very radical positions, which have led to situations of conflict.

This debate, in my opinion, will only make sense as long as it is really productive and it will allow us to advance constructively in our knowledge of what we used to call Late Antiquity (as evident by the many continuities visible from the Roman period) but that now many of us call the Early Middle Ages, even if we position our proposals closer to post-processualism. But in more than one occasion the debate has reached in Europe an unnecessary virulence.

In my opinion, there are more things that link the defenders of both positions than things that keep them apart. Regarding those who were buried in some sites of the Meseta with “Visigothic” grave goods: were they villagers who used elements we consider “Visigothic” to differentiate themselves within the village community, or were they “Visigothic” peasants who lived in a village community?

As we have pointed out recently, when it comes to understand more complex historical dynamics it is more important to determine who they were in social term than to establish

what they were in “ethnic” terms (Quirós Castillo, Vigil-Escalera 2011). On the other hand, if ethnicity has no organising purpose in conceptual terms, it is not possible either to fall back in the nihilism denounced by F. Curta (2007). The existence of markers and signs was important in the past and played an active role in social dynamics. And even if identifying their meaning is not always easy, we cannot simply ignore their significance.

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