

Common Slavic: Progress or Crisis in Its Reconstruction? Notes on Recent Archaeological Challenges to Historical Linguistics

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Introduction

It seems fitting to continue asking the question, as did Henrik Birnbaum, what progress the field is making towards the reconstruction of Common Slavic, a term which I use in the broadest possible sense.¹ His last book-length contribution to this endeavor was his second volume reviewing the state of the art, published in 1983 with the co-authorship of Peter Merrill and covering the period up to 1982. In addition, he published a good number of shorter contributions reviewing major works (e.g., Birnbaum 1986, 1993). Since then, not only has work continued unabated in this direction, but together with social change and the political restructuring of Eastern Europe and simultaneous emphasis on national omphalocentrism, questions of ethnogenesis of the Slavs and others have again been placed on the front burner not only of the community of scholars, but of government institutions and the lay public. At the same time, the linguistic approach to the question has been called into question by some and come under outright attack by others. For example, referring to Henrik's "Weitere Überlegungen zur Frage nach der Urheimat der Slaven" (Birnbaum 1986), Florin Curta remarks that the article surveys "the most recent developments in Slavic linguistics, in which the 'Indo-European argument' refuses to die..." (Curta 2002, 204). In a less flippant formulation, Curta affirms his view that the linguistic approach to Slavic ethnogenesis has run its course: "The Slavic ethnogenesis remains a major, if not the most important, topic in the historiography of Eastern Europe. Those writing the

¹ This paper was prepared for and delivered at the Henrik Birnbaum Memorial Symposium, UCLA, 22 February 2003. I am grateful to the participants there for helpful comments, in particular to Henning Andersen (UCLA), who provided me with several of his as yet unpublished manuscripts, and Robert Romanchuk (Florida State University). I have also benefited from conversations with Mark R. Stefanovich (American University in Bulgaria).

history of the Slavs were initially scholars trained in comparative linguistics. Today, the authoritative discourse is that of archaeology” (Curta 2002, 201).²

Do Curta’s remarks signal a crisis for linguistic research on the reconstruction of prehistoric Slavic? If so, what is the nature of the crisis and what can be done to address it? Should linguists throw up their hands and defer to archaeologists’ allegedly superior discourse? The following are some notes that explore the critique of linguistic methodology presented in recent works by archaeologists, Curta’s in particular. The goal here is neither to evaluate Curta’s recent work on Slavic prehistory (which may be the topic of another paper) nor to discuss in an exhaustive manner the relationship between archaeology and linguistics.³ Rather, limitations of time and space require that the paper focus on a less ambitious set of issues: is modern Slavic linguistics the heir to Romantic ideology – as Curta asserts – and does linguistics still have something meaningful to say about Slavic prehistory?

Archaeology and Linguistics

As has often been said, archaeologists and historical linguists have been in the habit of mutual citation of results without a thorough understanding of the precepts, procedures, assumptions, and, importantly, limitations of the others’ field. To quote Curta, “More often than not, archaeology was merely used to illustrate conclusions already drawn from the analysis of the linguistic material” (2001a, 12). We can see this trend continuing to the present day, in a book that is bound to become prominent by virtue of its scope and accessibility (i.e., it is written in English), *The Early Slavs: Culture and Society in Early Medieval Eastern Europe* by Paul M. Barford (2001). Although treating Slavic prehistory

² Archaeologists’ disdain for linguistic approaches is nothing new. Coe (1999) reports on the fascinating history of the decoding of Mayan hieroglyphs, an endeavor that was greatly hampered and delayed by the interference of archaeologists’ research preferences. Another example, closer to the material at hand (Indo-European), is that of Renfrew (1987), whose book, according to Gimbutas “speaks against the validity of Indo-European linguistic palaeontology and the whole corpus of linguistic evidence.... Worse, the author’s proposed hypotheses reflect the fashionable tendency, prevalent in recent decades, to impose models without consideration of, or respect for, what has already been achieved (in this case, in 200 years of Indo-European studies) or the primary archaeological sources. Repeatedly, throughout the book, the author either rejects or ignores everything which does not fit into his model” (1988, 1; see also Stefanovich 1989).

³ I take issue with some fundamental points in Curta’s works, though I hasten to add that I admire certain aspects of it, especially his close and revisionist readings of the key texts of outside observers, Herodotus, Ptolemy, Jordanes, etc. One seldom, if ever, encounters a fresh reading and interpretation of these works in the handbooks nor, more importantly, a challenge to the received views.

as an archaeological problem, Barford defines the Slavs exclusively as a linguistic group:

What do we mean when we talk of the Early Slavs? The Slavs today are a number of ethnic groups, most of them living today in various nation states in central and eastern Europe, and the main characteristic they have in common is that they all speak languages assignable to the Slav group of Indo-European languages. The term 'Slavs' is therefore primarily a linguistic one. When referring to the 'Early Slavs' here therefore, I intend to mean the people who we have good reason to believe speak spoke [sic] early versions of the Slav languages, and it should be stressed that I do not mean the term to refer to a single ethnic group. Nevertheless as we have seen, the linguistic evidence suggests that at some stage of the distant past the Slav language group may have had an origin among a relatively restricted population. This population spoke the same language, or dialects of it, and, to judge from similarities in the material culture of the Migration period, had similar lifestyles. To this extent the descendants of the 'Proto-Slavs' can be regarded as a series of related peoples. (Barford 2001, 27)

Speaking of the linguistic evidence Barford offers the liquid metathesis as “one of the earliest changes to have taken place in the Proto-Slavic language” and thus one of the changes that “allow the reconstruction of the original root language, its vocabulary and grammar” (2001, 17). In the same paragraph he correctly gives the generally agreed-upon dating of the change to the eighth century AD. Nevertheless, Barford’s statement is a contradiction in terms to the reader with a background in Slavic linguistics, as the change adduced is one of the *last* to have taken place in the Proto-Slavic language. If Barford’s work is representative, then archaeologists and linguists are speaking fundamentally different metalanguages. The archaeologists’ “Early Slavs” are Slavic historical linguists’ “speakers of Late Common Slavic” (conversely, the “speakers of Early Common Slavic” are those who had recently broken away from Baltic in the last millennium BC). These terminological points reveal a disconnection between the conceptualization of the formation of “Slavs” and “Slavic” by the respective camps of archaeologists and linguists.

Curta delves into this substantive terminological disconnection and, more importantly, its assumptions and entailments, in his recent book, *The Making of the Slavs*, as well as shorter, article-length contributions. According to Curta, Slavic linguistics and archaeology proceeded from the *Kulturkreis* school, which assumes that ethnic groups (Curta’s *ethnies*) and languages originate in an *Urheimat*, which spreads its racial and cultural attributes via migration (Curta

2001a, 335–36). As part of this assumption, Jordanes' equation of the *Venet(h)i* with the *Sclavenes* and *Antes*, giving a deeper antiquity to Slavs in Central Europe, allows the inclusion of earlier writers, Pliny the Elder, Tacitus, and Ptolemy, in the textual tradition of Slavic antiquity (2001a, 336; 2002, 203). He lays the blame for this view at the feet of Pavel Josef Šafařík (2001a, 6–7), in turn the heir of Herderian views of national character and its connection with language as the carrier of the national spirit, and in particular the legacy of linguistic theories that proceed from Šafařík, as well as the Czech scholar of Slavic antiquity, Lubor Niederle (2002, 204). Curta connects Nazi ideology, manifested in Gustav Kossinna's school of archaeology – concerned with identifying discrete ethnic assemblages as the correlate of proto-languages – with the development of Slavic studies prior to, during, and after the Second World War, beginning with the emphasis on the discovery of the Iron Age Prague culture, which was portrayed as the material index of early Slavic presence in Central Europe (2002, 202–03, 206). Within the Soviet Union, Curta reviews the emphasis placed on Slavic ethnogenesis as a counterweight to Nazi propaganda, filtered through the discourse of historical materialism first in its Marxist and later in its Marxist historical-cultural guise (2002, *passim*).

After the war, Curta claims, Slavic studies—and here he is addressing primarily Soviet archaeology—“added an enormous amount of information, but did not alter the main directions set for this discipline by its early-nineteenth-century founders.... Together with language, the search for a respectable antiquity for the history of the Slavs showed two principal thrusts: one relied on the interpretation of the historical sources as closely as possible to the linguistic-archaeological argument; the other located the Slavic homeland in the epicenter of the modern distribution of Slavic languages” (2002, 217). “Like Kossina, Soviet archaeologists were guided by the same fundamental principle: ‘sharply defined archaeological culture areas correspond unquestionably with the areas of particular peoples or tribes’” (2002, 218). In the continuation I shall refer to this view with the shorthand term “bounded primordialism.” It should come as no surprise that Soviet views in archaeology (as in other intellectual endeavors) embody Romantic ideology, as the Marxist doctrine itself is intellectual heir to Romantic meta-narratives as well as its admixture with Darwinian evolutionism (Doluxanov 2000, 17–18). Curta's own analysis, based primarily on Romanian archaeology, with an emphasis on economic interpretation based on numismatic evidence (coin hoards), and close readings of the relevant texts, leads to his conclusion that:

[t]he making of the Slavs was less a matter of ethnogenesis and more one of invention, imagining and labeling by Byzantine authors. Some form of group identity, however, which we may arguably call ethnicity,

was growing out of the historical circumstances following the fortification of the Danube *limes*. This was therefore an identity formed in the shadow of Justinian's forts, not in the Pripet marshes.... That no "Slavs" called themselves by this name not only indicates that no group took on the label imposed by outsiders, but also suggests that this label was more a pedantic construction than the result of systematic interaction across ethnic boundaries. The first clear statement that "we are Slavs" comes from the twelfth-century *Russian Primary Chronicle*. With this chronicle, however, the making of the Slavs ends and another story begins: that of their "national" use for claims to ancestry. (2002, 349–50)

Elsewhere Curta, railing against the connection between language and ethnicity, adduces evidence that undermines part of his own conclusions. He claims that the name "Slavic" cannot be put to ethnic identity of the group(s) in question prior to the sixth-century "invention" of the ethnicity by Byzantine authors, noting "that this ethnic name (*slovene*) [sic] appeared much later and only on the periphery of the Slavic linguistic area, at the interface with linguistically different groups" (2002, 344). On the contrary, this is one of the strongest pieces of evidence that the Slavs possessed a sense of group as defined by language. Further, that it is found at the peripheries of the Slavic territory attests to its wide and *early* (pre-dissolution) acceptance by the in-group as a defining marker. Moreover, its etymology points to the importance of language as this marker, i.e., the root *slov-* means 'name, call, word' (cf. I.E. **kl'eu-*, Gk. *klé(w)uos* 'praise') and combines with the suffix for (ethnic) group *-(j)an/-ěn-* to mean 'Slav, in-group' (*slověne*), a term contrasted with *językú* 'heathen, tribe, out-group' with the primary meaning 'tongue' (cf. Lat. *lingua*, archaic *dingua*).

To sum up this part, the two archaeologists discussed here view the "Early Slavs" (= linguists' "Late Common Slavic") from the moment that they can be convincingly perceived on the historical scene *sensu stricto*, a moment that coincides with the observed *beginning* of the explosion of variation observed by linguists that marks the *end* of the period of common innovation. With his theory-driven cultural-history approach, Curta sees questions of identity and ethnicity as modern constructs, imposed externally, and rejects attempts based on linguistics- and philology-driven theories to push Slavic identity into the ancient European past. Slavic archaeology is nevertheless heir to older varieties of linguistic and philological argumentation that implicitly establish very early ethnic identity for the Slavs that the post-modernist theoretical trends are predisposed to dismantle. The Slavs become such only insofar as they are the object.

processes that took place in the Indo-European period or at the very earliest epochs of the Proto-Slavic language. These processes can be recovered only if they are considered on the basis of material from related Indo-European languages. The Slavist can study the history of the Proto-Slavic language after its emergence from Indo-European, but cannot interpret these facts of the Proto-Slavic language that reflect such ancient processes. This is why many of the most significant discoveries based on Proto-Slavic material were made not by Slavists, but by specialists in the comparative grammar of the Indo-European languages (e.g., Schleicher, Fortunatov, Kuryłowicz, and others). Quite often the Slavic languages do not allow the analysis of facts of the Proto-Slavic language in a historical aspect. These facts are studied by Indo-Europeanists. (Trans. MLG; Bernštejn 1961, 11)

Although one could read this passage uncharitably, I think it refers in a reasonably neutral manner to procedural operations in comparative and historical analysis and is devoid of ideological taint in the sense of claiming ancient Slavic identity. It is perfectly clear that Bernštejn is speaking only of linguistic facts without relation to ethnic configurations or the like. That he pushes the term Slavic into antiquity is a product of the fact that the term to refer to “the grammar of the speech community that was destined to become Slavic,” i.e., Proto-Slavic, contains the term “Slavic.” Identity here is a matter of formal equivalence among terms.

One can still see in Bernštejn’s text a certain rigidity characteristic of *Stammbaum* assumptions and the institutional manifestations that are its product. To be fair to Bernštejn’s progressive erudition, he treats also substratum phenomena and typology. It is encouraging that Slavic historical linguistics has moved on considerably since then, incorporating the fruits of auxiliary procedures, including those of younger disciplines such as sociolinguistics, geolinguistics, and a deeper understanding of language contact and creolization. A more nuanced and complex approach to older stages of Slavic prehistory is emerging.

Of particular interest are recent attempts to reconstruct dialect differences antedating the Slavic entrance into Central and Southern Europe, i.e., the period before 500 AD. A watershed contribution in this regard is Andersen’s 1996 book *Reconstructing Prehistorical Dialects*. To my mind, Andersen’s methodology suggests a way to overcome the limitations of the comparative method, applied in the strict sense, by reappraising seemingly exceptional or anomalous variation and closely reading the linguistic geography associated with this variation. This allows us to look past the migration period (the first half of the first millennium AD), a time of chaos and yet a period during which,

paradoxically, by virtue of the constraints imposed by the comparative method, forces us to see unity. This unity, nevertheless, may be real, for we can also view the distribution of linguistic material through a sociolinguistic perspective. As Andersen illustrates with respect to the variation in *-ni-* || *-nu-* suffixation in Slavic, earlier isoglosses were likely obscured as “a consistent usage developed everywhere in the Slavic lands during the Middle Ages as smaller and larger communities little by little established uniform local and regional norms of usage” (Andersen 1999, 58).

Parallel to Andersen’s investigations is the endeavor by the Moscow Accentological School to see beyond the Late Common Slavic explosion into the earlier period by identifying accentual archaisms redistributed by migration (Dybo, Zamjatina, and Nikolaev 1990, 109–59; Feeney forthcoming). The work of this school has at times returned to the kind of bounded primordialist thinking in their attempt – which, to be fair, they have moved away from in recent years – to map these dialects onto Slavic tribal entities (e.g., *Antes*, *Dulebi*, *Slověne*, see p. 159).

There is a kind of one-step forward, half-step back progression of thinking that can be detected in the late Soviet period. For example, note the mix of both older and newer thinking in the words of Trubačev, who, as is well known, advocated a Danubian homeland of the Slavs: “It is essential to reckon with the mobility of the Proto-Slavic [ďďjřńĎřĀ.ńęĉĉé] areal – with both the possibility of its expansion and contraction, in general – with the fact of the c o e x i s t e n c e of various ethnicities [ýńĚńú] even inside of this area, just as in the larger picture with the mixed character of settlement of ancient Europe, as well as with the unstable ethnic boundaries and p e r m e a b i l i t y of the Proto-Slavic territory” (trans. MLG; 1982: 12). However, it would be unfair to characterize Trubačev’s work monochromatically, particularly in light of his pioneering, if controversial, contributions to Iranian-Slavic linguistic relations (see Andersen 2003b, 48; Cvetko Orešnik 1998).

Another advance is to be found in the application of principles of geolinguistics to the problem of the Slavic explosion. By virtue of its emphasis on the wider view of mechanisms and models viewed in terms of language spread in its pan- and transcontinental dynamics, geolinguistics promises to give us a framework for the larger movements in language succession in time and space. This is not to say that one is left with impressive, if empty generic models—in fact, such models can and have been successfully correlated with details that allow us to enrich, modify, or reject, if necessary, the broad outlines of their predictions. The principled geolinguistic account of the spread of Indo-European given in Nichols (1996), using the spread of Slavic as a typological parallel (see also Nichols 1993), gives to date the most coherent account of the

large developments of language spread and displacement of Pre-Indo-European, Indo-European, Iranian, Turkic, and Mongolian. Nichols' model breaks with the traditional migration-based theories by proposing language spread through language succession (shift) and illustrates successive periodic waves of spread over geographically motivated trajectories. This model does not depend on rapid movements of peoples for the spread of language, but rather on the observation that language shift takes place frequently enough, given the right conditions, to move a language along the map, as it were. It should not surprise us that, as in any human endeavor, regular patterns emerge and that the geographical movement, observed over long periods of time, is not chaotic. On this view, Balto-Slavic gradually emerged as a part of the Indo-European spread, ultimately splitting – she speculates – at the Middle Volga. From there, Proto-Baltic is said to have moved through a forest trajectory to the shores of the Baltic, Slavic through the steppe zone into Central Europe, whence it enjoys another spread akin to the initial Indo-European one. The spread is accomplished largely through the expansion of Slavic language across frontiers, where language interaction/contact gives way to language shift. The language interactions along the trajectories and in the spread zone are amply supported by evidence of language contact in Slavic (for details and references to further literature see also Gołąb 1992).

The consideration of language contact cannot lie outside of the purview of studies of prehistoric reconstruction. Andersen's recent work (Andersen 2003a and 2003b) on Slavic and Indo-European summarizes the achievements of language-contact studies to date as well as gives a programmatic assessment of the strata of evidence for language interactions in the past, including epistemological concerns.

Epistemological Issues

Ultimately, the proposition of a conflict between archaeology and linguistics is the wrong way to frame the debate over which field is better equipped to sort out the matter ethnogenesis. After all, if ethnogenesis – in the constructivist mode of thinking – is a matter of invention, symbol selection, and ongoing re-evaluation of tradition, then both archaeology and linguistics (but not only they) can shed light on aspects of the ethnogenetic process – material culture as an index to the ranking and function of utilitarian and symbolic elements; language as an index to intra- and inter-group interaction, social stratification, and modes of thought. There are inevitably large areas of overlap in which the approaches are mutually enriching and affirming. Both approaches are limited by strength of argument, i.e., it is impossible to know with certainty all aspects of a prehistoric society, one can only make the case for one's reconstructions. In the extreme primordialist conceptualization, the primary or exclusive focus

is (or should be) on DNA, which can answer questions of the isolation, interaction, and spread of gene pools and play a deciding role in questions of diffusion or migration. If understanding the complexity of ethnogenesis is the goal, then the claim of a dominant discourse reflects a simplistic, Manichaean mode of thought. None of the disciplines in isolation holds as much interest as having before one the results of all of them and working towards a theory of the relationships among them.

The daunting nature of the ethnogenetic enterprise, if one considers language a significant factor, is brought into relief by typological comparison. Consider the problem of a multilingual speech community observed in the 20th century, Fort Chipewyan, a town of 1500 people in which coexistence and convergence among four languages – Cree, French, English, and Chipewyan – has gone on for over a century. It is not unusual for conversations among community members to take place in three of these languages, yet it is also clear that the use of four languages is converging towards English, which in the process is being transformed by the sociolinguistic processes (Scollon and Scollon 1979). Processes akin to this likely took place at various times and in various places in the Slavic-speaking areas, contributing both to the spread of Slavic and its dialect differentiation. Curta refers to Slavic as a *lingua franca* at the frontiers (e.g., 2002, 345–46), processes that are reflected in the numerous layers of lexical accessions in Slavic (Andersen 2003b).

Conclusion

In this brief sketch I hope to have demonstrated that there is no crisis in the linguistics reconstruction of Common Slavic and, moreover, that the linguistic approach still has important things to say. To my mind, it is not the case that the archaeological discourse is superior to the linguistic, nor vice versa; arguably, addressing certain issues or periods, one approach may shed more light than the other. Nevertheless, the exercise of examining the archaeologists' critique, I believe, is a useful one to suggest paths for future directions in linguistic contributions to the reconstruction of Slavic linguistic prehistory. Rejecting the linguistic approach because of purportedly ideologically-driven conceptualizations held by a few is akin to throwing the baby out with the bathwater (to use one of Henrik's pet phrases). Ultimately, I believe, it is not the legacy of Romantic ideology that drives researchers to search for the elusive and probably non-existent Slavic "homeland" and nascent (prehistorical) ethnicities as derived from language equivalencies through time, but the comparative method itself, a brilliant but admittedly crude tool that compels us, when it is employed to the exclusion of other procedures, to seek entities rather than processes. This is not to say that there are historical linguists who work solely with the comparative method and eschew all other

approaches, but rather that it has been necessary for some time to abandon the view that refining the comparative method is more than adding detail to the reconstructed entities. Now is the time to place more research energy capitalizing on the gains in the younger subfields of geolinguistics, sociolinguistics, and language-contact and to apply their principles and methods to Slavic prehistory (Rankin 2003). Of central importance will be a greater recognition of the transactional nature of language development – language contact is the rule, rather than the exception, a circumstance which the comparative method is not designed to handle.⁴ Future studies and handbooks, one hopes, will emphasize holistic approaches to the problem of Slavic prehistory. With no native witnesses or written records to attest to language, belief systems, the social order, with gaps and ambiguities in the material culture, every piece of evidence about the distant past is useful and precious. In particular, however, the emphasis in future studies should be on reconstructing processes, rather than entities; spread and interaction of populations, rather than homelands; and focus on the interstices, rather than only the beginnings and endings.

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⁴ After this paper was substantially written, and this sentence in particular, I was privileged to read Andersen 2003a and 2003b, which embody the kind of interdisciplinary approach called for here, and importantly, by virtue of such an approach establish increasingly better models of the prehistoric linguistic past.

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