

THE NATIONAL SOCIALIST PERVERSION OF ARCHAEOLOGY

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The intrusion of politics into the world of archaeology is not new, and the misuse of archaeological and historical data has a long and not exactly honourable history. In Germany the National Socialist perversion of archaeology in the 1930s offers a cautionary example. The ideology of the Nazi party was to some extent an historical one:

“It is the task of German *Germanentum* [a word which is difficult, if not impossible, to translate into English: it means both the concrete ‘German peoples’ and the abstract ‘that which is their essence or ethos, Germanic-ness’] to bring the new world order to completion. The living right to this responsibility is based on the historical achievement of German *Germanentum* and its constitutional power to create order”.

Beck 1944

Thus the past also had to be made subservient to the aims of the leaders of this world “order”. Hitler himself was by no means enthusiastic about this *Germanentum*:

“These professors and obscurantists with their nordic religion are just spoiling everything for me. Why do I put up with it then? Because they create unrest, and that’s the only thing we can do at the moment.... In itself the whole palaver is worthless.”

Rauschnig 1940, p 52

Both Rosenberg — who was a Baltic German (one is inclined to ask whether it was an inferiority complex deriving from these origins and his rather suspicious, because Jewish sounding, name that made him try to be more Germanic than the rest) — and Himmler — who believed that he was the reincarnation of the tenth century emperor Henry the Fowler — took a very active part in this “palaver”. Not that they co-operated in a friendly way, quite the opposite: they did their best, or worst, to hinder one another in activities of this kind, and Rosenberg’s ministry and the *Ahnenerbe* [Ancestral Heritage, Himmler’s research organisation], were permanently on a hostile footing.

Ahnenerbe had been founded by Himmler in 1935 with the aid of Hermann Wirth, who suffered from a rather more innocent Germanomania, as a “society for the promotion of the study of spiritual prehistory [*Geistesurgeschichte*]”. Many of the activities of this society (described in detail in Kater 1974) were more laughable than dangerous: among their research projects we find, for example, Atlantis, the Holy Grail, the connections between Indo-European and Germanic music, the history of German peasant bread, and protogermanic symbols (here Himmler, when faced with symbols of thunder and lightning, went so far as to say “that we are concerned here not with natural thunder and lightning, but with an early highly developed weapon of our

ancestors, which was naturally only in the possession of a select few, namely the Aesir, the gods, and which presupposes an astonishing knowledge of electricity" (Kater 1974, p 51)). These activities took place under the protection of the SS, and the majority of the scientists involved were recruited into the SS. Archaeology was particularly important: excavations were even carried out by SS men under scientific control, since every SS unit stationed within the territory of the Reich was supposed to have a Germanic excavation in the vicinity as a "cultural focus of German greatness and the German past", because "an excavation brings one into direct contact in every sense with the houses, weapons and possessions of our ancestors". Education was naturally not the only aim of these excavations: they were also meant to provide propaganda and "scientific" support for the National Socialist world-view. They "proved" that the Germanic races were superior in many, if not all, respects to other races. They were traced back into the mists of prehistory, and as a result of this a new periodisation of prehistory was produced:

"The Germanic tribes play a special role among them [i.e., the Indo- Europeans] inasmuch as they can trace their origins furthest back, further even than the Romans, Celts and Slavs.... But it is not only the earliest entrance on the stage of history which we can prove by archaeological finds, but also the fact that beyond that we can trace the roots from which the organic German people was formed in Northern Europe at the end of the Neolithic period."

Jankuhn 1938, p 2-3

According to these and similar ideas the periodisation of prehistory would look something like this:

"Stone Age-3000	pregermanic
3000-2000	protogermanic
2000-700	early Germanic"

Jankuhn 1938, p 4

In the occupied territories in the East, excavations were reinterpreted with the intention of proving that the Germanic tribes were the first bringers of culture, and that the majority of settlements and traces of what one might call "civilisation" in these areas were of Germanic origin. Thus the Nazi "Lebensraum" and settlement policies would be justified since, seen from this viewpoint, it was simply a matter of reclaiming what had been theirs from the Slavonic latecomers (and of similar claims in South Africa today). In the East, members of the *SS-Ahnenerbe* also carried out "rescue" missions to save Germanic objects in Polish and Russian museums from war damage (just as Goering took works of art from all over Europe into his "protection").

One should not assume, however, that all of these activities were pure charlatanism: many excavations run or taken over by the SS were of the highest quality, and were directed, whether out of conviction, opportunism or self-defence, by excellent scholars. As a shining example there are the excavations at Haithabu: begun before the Nazi period, they were taken over by the *Ahnenerbe*:

"Thanks to the extraordinary interest that the Reichsfuhrer SS Heinrich Himmler has devoted to this wonderful historical site for years, the excavations will be carried on from 1938 onwards even more extensively than before, as SS excavations."

Schwantes 1939, p 82

Unfortunately some of the interpretations of the excavated material seem to be extremely questionable, for example:

"The Germanic people originally had no protective weapons [shields] at all. That is probably connected with the Germanic character, and the attitude to battle which was in their blood [blutbedingt], just like their refusal to build fortifications [Burgen]."

Jankuhn 1938

And this although there was another SS excavation at the *Erdenburg* near Cologne, which was meant to be an "example and symbol of the powers that defeated the Roman Empire" (Langsdorff 1936, p 393).

Probably the darkest chapter in the history of the archaeological activities of the *Ahnenerbe* dates from the year 1941: Himmler saw some pictures of the "Venus" figures of Vestonice and Willendorf and was struck particularly by what he saw as their steatopygic form. Since the women of "some tribes of savage peoples" (eg the Hottentots) had similar figures, he had had the idea that perhaps "people like the Hottentots had lived in the areas where these finds had been made" or "that these people and the Hottentots were of similar descent". If it had been the case that "in our part of the world this type of people had been driven out or made extinct by some combination of circumstances — let us say climatic change — or by the Cromagnon [sic] and the later nordic peoples" (Heiber 1968, p 65), then naturally the racial superiority of the Germanic tribes over not only the Stone Age inhabitants of Vestonice and Willendorf but also the negros of the present day would also be proved. He asked *Ahnenerbe* to provide evidence and support for his theories. Most of the archaeologists on the staff were honest enough to refuse to do this, or at least to avoid answering the question, but one of them, the ethnographer Bruno Beger, was prepared to follow this up, and went further perhaps than even Himmler had expected: he produced the hypothesis that the Jews and the Hottentots might be racially related (because of the similar physical shape). To prove this hypothesis, he had an opportunity close at hand:

"The connections between the Hottentots and North African as well as perhaps some Near Eastern population groups are ... unmistakable ... In some Jewesses moreover strikingly strong development of the buttocks can be observed, which can probably be traced back to the same hereditary elements that cause steatopygic development in Hottentots and Bushmen. In the Jewish inheritance there are, as well as the basic racial elements (oriental and Near Eastern), also traces of African racial elements.

'Perhaps the R[ace] and S[ettlement Office] could, at the selection and inspection of groups of aliens, during which process the women are examined and inspected in an unclothed state, take an occasional look at the development of fatty tissues and, where possible, take some photos.

"In the Polish Ghettos the R & S might have the opportunity to investigate a series of Jewesses with heavy deposits of fatty tissue... If it should turn out that in these cases the fatty deposits can be traced back to the same hereditary elements as in Hottentots and Bushmen, then we would have found evidence for steatopygia even in present-day Europe."

Kater 1974, p 208

– as well, obviously, as for the racial inferiority of the Jews and Blacks. Such an abuse of basic human dignity in the service of a perverted “science” needs, I hope, no further comment.

References

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