

## INTERPRETING ARCHAEOLOGICAL CULTURES

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**Abstract.** This article was prompted by the concern that the main problems in the ethnic interpretations of our past originate from the misuse of terms like “archaeological culture”, “anthropological type” and “proto-language” composed by the researchers for the systematisation of the corresponding evidence. General uselessness of ethnic reconstructions based on the old culture historical approach to archaeological, anthropological and linguistic evidence that misuse those terms is demonstrated. It is argued that we are not able to solve ethnic questions of the Stone Age (*resp.* prehistoric times in general) using the old methodology and, therefore, one has to seek for new possibilities of interpretation. Some ideas concerning the comparisons between archaeological cultures and the so-called semiosphere – a continuum filled with semiotic formations of different types and organisation levels – are presented.

### Introduction

The reviewing of an article about ethnic questions published more than 50 years ago (Indreko 1948a) offers an opportunity to show how the study of ethnic history has been in a deadlock during all these years, and even longer. Typically of his times, Richard Indreko was, from the methodological point of view, a representative of a culture historical school of archaeology. According to this school, archaeological cultures were largely interpreted as ethnic groups, and the movements of cultures or culturally significant artefacts were equalised with the movements of people. Such an approach relied on the imagination of romantic nationalism of the 19th century and both Gustaf Kossinna’s and Vere Gordon Childe’s ideas about archaeological cultures as independent historical actors and ethnic entities (see more: Shennan 1989; Brather 2000). This method<sup>1</sup> has continued to be widely used in Europe during the 20th century, although in words many researchers have cautioned against doing so (see more: Lang 1998:87–88; Brather 2000). In this paper, I will try to demonstrate the general hopelessness of ethnic reconstructions based on the culture historical approach to archaeological

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<sup>1</sup> I will call such a method, in short, “culture ethnical archaeology”.

evidence. I will argue that we are not able to solve ethnic questions of the Stone Age (*resp.* prehistoric times in general) using the old methodology and therefore it would be, at least now, far more sensible to do something else.

### **What is the problem?**

The problem will become clear if one compares all these theories on ethnic movements in the Baltic region and East-European forest belt during the Holocene, which have been published during the twentieth century. The number of different schemes, ideas, interpretations and theories can be certainly counted in their dozens. All have been written in the culture ethnical paradigm, using specific vocabulary of migrations and cultural diffusions, or contacts, and many of them have been “strengthened” with linguistic and anthropological evidence. I do not even ask where the truth is because the Truth is a term of philosophy and not a goal that archaeology has to score. Moreover, a multitude of interpretations is characteristic of archaeology in general. But still, how can one orientate in such a jumble of opinions? What can one person, a linguist, for instance, use in elaborating his/her own standpoints concerning ethnic histories? Are the latest theories – that are supposed to rely upon more complete data – more sophisticated, more precise, more complete to be employed in further generalisations?

Let us analyse the Indreko case in the context of Estonian and East Baltic research of ethnic history. What was new in his paper under question at the time it was published? Unlike the majority of scholars of that time, Indreko was convinced that “...the origins of the Finno-Ugrians could have their roots in the early sections of the same culture which developed from the centre of the European Palaeolithicum...” (Indreko 1948a:13). Thus, the Finno-Ugrians reached the Baltic region not in the Middle Neolithic moving from the European East together with typical Combed Ware culture westwards, but remarkably earlier, following the retreating ice-sheet from the south and southwest. The same ideas are also presented in his solid monograph on the Estonian Mesolithic (Indreko 1948b:406–409). Later on, after several new finds had come to daylight, Indreko slightly changed his views on the origin of the Kunda culture – the south-eastern direction seemed now more plausible (Indreko 1964). Yet, the main core of his theory – the Finno-Ugrians were the first settlers of the eastern Baltic region and there was no later (mass) immigration from the East – remained unchanged. Discussing later prehistoric periods, starting from the Corded Ware culture, Indreko’s treatment from 1948 does not involve new ideas in the context of the knowledge of those times; he repeats the standpoints of earlier researchers (e.g. Tallgren 1922; Moora 1932; Eesti ajalugu 1935).

It is actually not surprising that Indreko’s works published in exile in the 1940s were not considered in Estonia in the 1950s – the reasons had a political nature. They were not, however, discussed here later, in politically more liberal times,

either.<sup>2</sup> Instead, another theory was elaborated by Harri Moora, Paul Ariste, Lembit Jaanits, and some others (Moora 1956; Ariste 1956; Jaanits 1956). According to this, the eastern Baltic region was initially settled by an unknown proto-European people, while the Finno-Ugrians did not reach these areas before the Middle Neolithic and typical Combed Ware culture, coming as a wave of immigrants from the eastern neighbouring areas. It is important to notice that both the main methodology and archaeological material available to Indreko and Moora–Ariste–Jaanits were principally the same. I guess that it was mainly due to the enormous scholarly (but maybe also administrative) authority of these researchers that the latter theory became “untouchable and official” – at least in Estonia – for almost forty years. In 1990, Evald Tõnisson presented some new but minor corrections, which still did not exceed the general frames of this approach. His paper is an excellent example of superposition of archaeological cultures, ethnic entities and languages.

In the 1990s, new ideas about the ethnic history have been elaborated by some researchers, led by the linguists Kalevi Wiik and Ago Künnap (e.g. Wiik 1996; 1997; Künnap 1996). The main supporting pillar for the new theory is exactly the same that was pointed out by Indreko: the people who first arrived in Northern Europe after the thawing of the ice-sheet already spoke Finno-Ugric (Proto-Uralic) languages. Moreover, the Finno-Ugric languages are now supposed to have been spoken also in Scandinavia and Germany. Unlike Indreko’s theory, this conclusion is based on linguistics, on the Finno-Ugric substratum found in northward Indo-European languages. The posterior language replacement, i.e. the shift from the Finno-Ugric to Indo-European, has been connected in those regions with the transition of local tribes to agriculture. It is noticeable, however, that by explaining this shift, certain archaeological cultures were expected to correspond to different stages in the process of the replacement of a language (Wiik 1996). Thus, archaeological cultures are again equalised with languages and ethnic groups, i.e. we are actually back in the starting point, in the framework of the culture ethnical approach.

These were a few examples of how to produce different interpretations for the same archaeological material. Yet, the list is not complete. The theories of neither Indreko nor Moora or others prevented, for instance, the Finns from believing until the 1980s that their ancestors immigrated to Finland not more than two thousand years ago from Estonia, as it was stated by Alfred Hackman (1905). These theories are also no obstacle to the Lithuanians and Latvians to fully accept the standpoints of some archaeologists who see the origin of the Balts in the early Neolithic Narva culture, or even in the local Mesolithic cultures (Girininkas 1994). As pointed out by many researchers (in the case of Finno-Ugric studies, see: Ligi 1994), the ethnic studies form a sphere where the nationality and political interests of the researchers are influencing their scientific interpretations, either consciously or

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, Evald Tõnisson (1990, 2248) refers to Äyräpää (1950), who some years later had expressed similar ideas about the Finno-Ugric origin of the Kunda culture, but he does not refer to the works of Indreko.

subconsciously. The plenitude of theories is characteristic not only of the ethnic studies of Finno-Ugrians and Balts, but also of the Indo-European peoples (Brather 2000:174–175) and others. We should even be grateful here that our different ethnic interpretations of the past have not initiated more serious political claims or international conflicts today.

There is no doubt that the possibilities of the culture ethnical school to find out “new and fresh” interpretations of ethnic histories are not exhausted with the list presented above.<sup>3</sup> This is partly because, first, in the case of sufficiently large material the number of different interpretations is always bigger than one, and second, the interpretation of archaeological evidence is a process without final solutions. Yet, in the case of ethnic studies, it seems that the main reason for the “jumble” of opinions lies in the insufficient theory that makes different, often even antagonistic, interpretations possible. As a matter of fact, it is not possible to argue against these interpretations staying on the same methodological basis, i.e. using the same vocabulary and equalising archaeological cultures with languages and ethnic groups.

What is wrong with equalising archaeological cultures with ethnic groups and languages, is explained by a number of authors (e.g. Shennan 1989; Trigger 1994; Taavitsainen 1999; Brather 2000; Robb 1993). One may distinguish at least three different but interrelated sets of questions here, the answers of which divide the researchers into opposing groups.

(1) What is an archaeological culture and can one use this concept in the reconstruction of ethnic histories? “Archaeological culture” is an artificial term created by the archaeologists merely for the organisation of archaeological material, and it means the spatial and temporal coexistence of certain types of artefacts and/or antiquities.<sup>4</sup> According to this definition, it does not have much in common with real nations or ethnic groups from the past. The archaeological cultures cannot be considered as historical actors since they have not been real entities, and therefore they cannot be equalised to other entities, such as tribes, societies and ethnic groups. Examining the distributions of individual types of archaeological material, one does not find neatly bounded entities but an enormous variety of cross-cutting patterns (Shennan 1989). Essentially similar terms are “proto-languages” and “anthropological types”, which were respectively created by the linguists and anthropologists for the systematisation of their materials, and which – in such a way – have never existed in reality.

Recently, Christian Carpelan (1999; 2000) has presented an idea that an archaeological culture (which is most commonly defined by ceramics) would represent an ancient “mating network”. This idea is grounded in the supposition that pottery was a production of women who had used the same “pattern book”, i.e. women who shared a common tradition. Although this idea sounds slightly

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<sup>3</sup> One of the most recent interpretations is presented by Christian Carpelan (1999; 2000).

<sup>4</sup> This definition is, of course, my own simplification of a rather complicated, varying and diffusing set of understandings of what an archaeological culture might be. An excellent overview of the development of this concept among archaeologists is presented by C. F. Meinander (1981).

different from the typical equalisations of archaeological cultures to ethnic groups, it is still reducible to the same principles. On the other hand, the connecting of archaeological cultures with mating networks assumes that these networks were **closed**, restricted by some social-cultural conventions or limitations. However, closed mating networks are not quite probable with such low density of population as might be expected in the Uralic zone in the Stone Age. Therefore an **open** mating network is much more plausible, and in that case, the mate could be found in the nearest possible place, notwithstanding her/his linguistic, cultural, racial, etc. features (Jacobs 1994). This brings about close language contacts as well as cultural and anthropological mixing over expansive areas. And this is exactly what one can find in the available archaeological, anthropological and linguistic materials (Künnap & Lang 2000; Robb 1993:750).

(2) What is ethnicity and can one use this term in archaeological interpretations of prehistoric times? Ethnicity should refer to self-conscious identification with a particular social group at least partly based on a specific locality or origin. This concept must be distinguished from mere spatial variation of material culture – the latter always exists, but ethnicity as a specific and contingent phenomenon, the product of particular situations is supposed to be rather late in origin, probably connected with the emergence of more complex societies (see more: Shennan 1989; Lang 1998). It is not likely that the differences between distinct Stone Age archaeological cultures were necessarily the results of the expression of different ethnic identities – ethnicity as a specific social strategy, as we know it from history, probably did not exist in such early times. And when ethnicity began to play an important role in social strategies – what exactly was then used to exhibit ethnic differences? As pointed out by Jussi-Pekka Taavitsainen (1999), although there could have been ethnical markers (which appeared and disappeared and are mostly impossible to discover by archaeological methods), they could in no way make up the whole material culture of an area or ethnos; archaeological cultures were probably multi-ethnical. And although ethnical markers have been in use, their discovery is admittedly possible but methodologically difficult and practically almost impossible.

(3) What relationships exist between languages and archaeological cultures, i.e. natural languages and artefactual sign languages? According to Carpelan, for instance, an archaeological culture is a sphere of internal communication and reflects a community with a shared tradition and a shared communication system that sustains it. Spoken language as a communication system is a reflection of the community and culture that it represents. The common artefactual sign language that characterises an archaeological culture reflects a common identity, cultural and/or ethnic. Proceeding from the supposition that archaeological cultures represent mating networks (i.e. territories where women have shared a common tradition, a “pattern book” or “mother tongue”; see above), he concludes that there is a strong possibility that an archaeological culture, defined by ceramics, represents also a common vernacular (Carpelan 1999; 2000). Thus, the artefactual sign language (a pottery style) is essentially equalised with spoken language.

While studying the relationship between a spoken language and an artefactual sign language, one cannot avoid an excursion into semiotics. According to Juri Lotman (1999:20), the different languages/sign systems that form a semiosphere (see below) have a different speed of development: natural languages change much more slowly than mental and ideological structures. The synchronism of processes going on in these languages and mental/ideological structures is therefore totally out of the question. One may even think that the sign languages causing the creation of ancient artefacts (e.g. pottery styles), developed under the influence of completely different factors as the spoken languages.

Ancient things changed because the ideas how to do things changed; ideas, however, change either because the people who hold them are replaced by others, or because their ideas are influenced from outside, by diffusion (Shennan 1989). People made different things in different areas for a variety of reasons, and the spread of things from one culture area to another can also be explained by a variety of circumstances (e.g. exchange of goods, distribution of prestige items, social phenomena, sign meanings, etc.). It very often happens that the researchers connect the agglomeration of things of foreign origin or new styles into certain shorter periods of time with corresponding foreign language impacts. Yet, such agglomerations may be either the result of dating problems, or caused by completely different factors, such as the development of social strategies.<sup>5</sup> It is also unlikely that language contacts between the neighbouring groups took place only over certain shorter periods (indicated by the agglomeration of archaeological evidence, for instance) – such contacts happened through all times just because the groups under question were neighbours, living close to each other. Archaeology is not so powerful in helping to date language contacts, as it is sometimes believed to be.

### **What could be the way out?**

Briefly, then – we are in a deadlock, running around in a vicious circle. No matter what new theories and interpretations about ethnic processes will be presented, it is impossible to prove that they stay closer to past realities, or are more scientific and less mythical than the earlier ones. We will struggle in this deadlock as long as the misconception of the terms “archaeological culture”, “ethnicity” and “proto-language” continues. All attempts to range prehistoric archaeological cultures, ethnic groups and languages in such a way are no more than deluding oneself and the readers.

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<sup>5</sup> Of course, if certain social developments occurred under the influence of foreigners, they also brought about a strong language impact (e.g. the cases of prestige and trade languages). However, such scenarios were unlikely prior to the advent of more complex societies in the final Neolithic and Bronze Age. An interesting paper concerning the connections between social strategies and language changes is presented by John Robb (1993).

In order to find a way out of this situation, I would recommend – following the philosopher Richard Rorty (1999) – to completely reject the whole approach and vocabulary of ethnic studies used up to now. We should thus stop the superposition of archaeological cultures, ethnic groups and languages; we should also abandon terms like “archaeological culture”, “artefactual sign language”, “anthropological type” and “proto-language” in the reconstruction of **ethnic histories**. What approach and vocabulary could one use instead of all this? Following Rorty again (1999), there is no need to offer anything in return because otherwise we are not able to find a way out of the vicious circle. Let us forget for a while the ethnic affiliation of ancient people because at those times ethnicity hardly played such a significant role as it does today. We should do something else instead – raise completely different questions, the answering of which helps to compose a new vocabulary, “new metaphors”. Later on, it will probably be possible to return to the old problems on an entirely different level.

In order to offer something else instead, I would like to point to the relationship between prehistoric material culture and the so-called semiosphere. The latter is a concept in semiotics that was brought into use by Juri Lotman (1999:9–12) and it means, briefly, a continuum filled in with semiotic formations of different types and organisation levels. Like the biosphere around the globe filled in with organised matter (which is not simply a sum of living organisms but an organic whole where the existence of one part is impossible without the others), the semiotic space, too, can be treated as a common mechanism, or even an organism. The most important aspect here is a whole, a “large system”, or the semiosphere – and not a single text or structure. Only the existence of the semiosphere makes any single semiotic operation possible and real.

Archaeology explores the past through material culture objects preserved up to the present. Material culture is seen as meaningfully constituted, i.e. it consists of material objects that have a certain meaning – they are interpreted through culture (Hodder 1991). Reading material culture as a meaningful text and attributing a semiotic meaning to its components, it can be treated as material remains of a past semiosphere which was given and comprehensive (in a certain space), and the absence of which could make every single cultural act impossible. Accordingly, the decorating of a pot with comb marks in the Middle Neolithic, for instance, could happen only because such a decoration had a certain sign meaning that was important and understandable for relevant people only in this space and time. Such a decoration could not be possible in the context of Early Neolithic, because then it had no meaning. An archaeologist might say that a pot with comb marks was produced because the Combed Ware **culture** existed at that time and space. Once again – what is an archaeological culture?

The old interpretation of an archaeological culture – the spatial and temporal coexistence of certain types of artefacts and/or antiquities – proceeds, on the contrary to the concept of semiosphere, from the level of “single texts”, i.e. it is a sum of certain types of artefacts and sites. And in this sense, the use of this concept has been really misleading – the entire history of ethnic interpretations has

clearly demonstrated it. The misleading part of this concept is the word “culture” that makes comparisons with modern cultures and nations conceivable and possible. The more “neutral” words and terms like a type, style, complex, techno-complex, etc. correspond much better to the given definition, and they have been already widely used. Yet, in order to preserve the cultural aspect of whole archaeology, the term “archaeological culture” should remain, perhaps, but in that case it must be redefined. It seems to me that, in this sense, an archaeological culture can be understood as an attitude of mind, i.e. as a system of views, beliefs, meanings and interpretations, which at a certain time was distributed in a certain space, and the unique association and peculiarity of which has reached us by means of material objects. An archaeological culture is just the occurrence of a past semiosphere, as defined by Lotman, in a local, historical and materialised form.

Lotman regarded the existence of boundaries and semiotic unevenness as the most important features of a semiosphere (Lotman 1999:12 ff). A boundary between the given semiosphere and non-semiotic, or alien-semiotic, space is as abstract as the whole notion of a semiosphere – it is defined as a sum of bilingual filters of translation, the penetrating of which translates one text into another. The inner unevenness of a semiosphere appears in the existence of both the core structures with a firmly established organisation, and the more amorphous peripheries surrounding the former. The dominating semiotic boundaries are placed into the core, whereas peripheral semiotic structures might be rather open. At the same time, the location of cores and peripheries as well as boundaries is quite relative and depends on the location of an observer.

The distribution of prehistoric material culture, too, can be characterised by boundaries and unevenness. The boundaries of cultural traits, however, are not abstract but real; yet, they have never been exact but quite diffusive. Moreover, the boundaries for the distribution of different components of material culture usually differ remarkably from each other. It is thus often difficult to establish which is one particular archaeological culture (in our new sense) and which is another, or where is the boundary between them – the answers depend on the location of the observer. This is because our new concept of an archaeological culture should certainly involve more than one component, these cultures should be more complex, while the previous “cultures” distinguished merely on the basis of a pottery style are nothing but technical traditions that might have been common for several cultures. It is quite usual also that only the core areas of such archaeological cultures can be distinguished while the large peripheral areas between separate cores are rather amorphous and influenced from different directions. Here, too, the boundaries still have the same purpose as in the case of the semiosphere: they form a sort of buffer between different meaning systems, which limits the entrance of the foreign and the strange, and filters and adapts them into the understandable language.

It is clear that, according to this new definition, we should renounce a number of so-called archaeological cultures that have “enriched” our prehistoric past up to



the present. Incidentally, the research into the Metal Ages has more or less managed without such “cultures”, although the corresponding societies were moving “from barbarism towards civilization”, i.e. from less cultural to more cultural mode of life... This paradox demonstrates the previous misuse of the term “culture” in an archaeological context.

But what about people? How are the attitudes of mind, “the systems of views, beliefs, meanings and interpretations”, related to spoken languages? I cannot say that there is absolutely no connection between these two; yet, before going further, one should thoroughly reconsider the whole picture of prehistoric “cultures” that we have dealt with up to now. The selection of what can be considered real cultures (instead of manufacturing techniques, decoration styles, etc.) and how they were related to each other is a work for many researchers. Theoretical aspects of the whole set of problems should be analysed as well. Although the language boundaries may sometimes coincide with cultural ones, it does not mean that the shift of some cultural traits to other areas is also a reflection of a language movement. From the aspect of scientific research, prehistoric languages and archaeological materials are inevitably separated (Viitso 1997), it is not possible to connect them. The roots of any material culture – archaeological cultures among them – are in people’s frame of mind, not in spoken language.

### **Final remarks**

I cannot find anything in our archaeological material that seriously contradicts the scheme of Richard Indreko about the continuity of main cultural traditions in the eastern Baltic region since the Kunda culture. It does not thus necessarily mean that the ethnic and language developments were continuous as well, as Indreko believed – I think that such a connection is impossible either to prove or disprove. On the other hand, the interpretation of Wiik and Künnap that the first settlers of Northern Europe after the Ice Age already spoke Finno-Ugric languages, seems to me believable as well. As an archaeologist, however, I cannot subscribe to the connection of language replacement, which must have happened in some areas, with certain archaeological cultures. Both these two theories are great, one in archaeology and the other in linguistics. Until they are not falsified, we may consider them as reliable reflections of the past. One cannot forget, however, that the use of linguistic evidence does not help either to falsify or verify archaeological theories, and vice versa.

The main problems in the ethnic interpretations originate from the misuse of terms like “archaeological culture”, “anthropological type” and “proto-language” composed by the researchers for the systematisation of corresponding evidence. In archaeology, the term “archaeological culture” is strongly devaluated, particularly where the East European Stone Age is concerned – many archaeological cultures are defined there merely through the differences in pottery styles. The continuation

of critical analysis of the whole set of problems of archaeological cultures as such is therefore urgently needed.

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