

The European Barbaricum in the Early Middle Ages Ethnogeography and Ecology

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The application of new evidence of the past, discovered in the course of archaeological investigations, makes it easier to overcome the hitherto common tendency to perceive the process of the making of the European civilisation through the prism of the Latin West. It was only relatively recently that the researches began to appreciate also the output of the Byzantine circle and the importance of the relationships with the Muslim world. In my opinion, looking at these phenomena from the perspective of countries situated beyond the former frontiers of the Roman Empire will significantly widen and deepen the image. Certainly, the main culture-forming centres of early medieval Europe were in succession lands, and the periphery of the civilised world was constituted of the former barbaricum. Processes also occurred in these areas, which had significant influence on the further history of Europe, deciding about the dynamics and permanence of the changes taking place. Several characteristics which distinguished the societies living there and their culture were going to become the common European output within Middle Ages.

When considering the ethnogeography of the former barbaricum in the early Middle Ages we must first of all respect the ecological conditions of this part of the continent. Cultural characteristics distinguishing those Germanic peoples remaining in their central-northern European cradle are of basic importance. Agricultural Slavic communities living in the mild, forest-field and forest-steppe zone of Central and East Europe became a new important factor of the changes. In many aspects they were different from the Balts inhabiting the local forest zone as well as from the Finno-Ugrians inhabiting the zone of forests and taiga further to

the north. Quite an important factor in the history of Europe were also Nomads, still flowing in succeeding waves from Asia into areas situated on the middle part of the Danube and steppes on the Black and Caspian Seas.

Let us begin with the Normans on the Scandinavian Peninsula, Jutland and the nearby islands. As a Germanic people they belonged to the Indo-Europeans who tilled land and bred animals since the Neolithic. However, ecological conditions, extensive mountain ranges in the western part of the Scandinavian Peninsula, only small enclaves of fertile land in spreading forests and among numerous lakes forced this population to considerable deviations from this model. Animal breeding was usually more important in providing food than agriculture and it was often necessary to improve upon hunting or fishing activities. But those shortcomings were made up with other natural goods, above all deposits of high quality iron and copper ore, etc. They provided a basis for metallurgical development, unparalleled in the north European countries and, consequently, the development of trading.

Scandinavia's specific ecological conditions were the reason, why water became one of the basic routes for people, goods and information. Nowhere else in Europe, besides ancient Greece, did the maritime environment exert such an influence on culture. This was seen in the development of sailing, the range of overseas contacts and in many everyday customs. Contacts with the Roman heritage also occurred earlier and were more fertile in many sections of culture than was the case with their neighbours. This was probably – but not only – favourably influenced by the ethnic kindred with Germanic people of the Merovingian circle. The peculiar living conditions

evidently referred to a greater openness towards foreign influences than anywhere else. Slavic societies inhabiting central and eastern Europe differed in many ways. They also belonged to the Indo-European group and engaged in agriculture and animal breeding since the Neolithic revolution. But, contrary to the Normans, they were through and through inland communities. The fact is, that the relation of the length of the coastline to the area of occupied territory was for example almost thirty times smaller with the western Slavs than that of the Scandinavians. The fertile land at the foot of central European mountain ranges and in the lowlands provided various opportunities for the development of corn farming. Land cultivation was a basic trait of the Slavic economy distinguishing them among other inhabitants of barbaric Europe. The cycle of agrarian work led to a much stronger impression on their everyday life and their conception of the world than in other societies. Hence the greater conservatism of original cultural structures than in Scandinavia, and a relative isolation broken only during the great early feudal turning point in the ninth and tenth centuries. Ethnically related to the Slavs were the Balts dwelling on the south-eastern coast of the Baltic Sea. It is known that linguists even assume the existence in ancient times of a Baltic-Slavic linguistic community in the Indo-European family. At the turn of antiquity and the Middle Ages differences became evident and the dividing line between two ethnic communities coincided with the range of dense forests in north-eastern Europe in such an obvious way that it clearly brings out one of the essential factors of division related to ecological conditions. Agriculture had rather limited possibilities of progressing in the forest environment, and animal breeding became more important. Although raw material often had to be imported, the art of metal working was comparable to that of Scandinavia. But various reasons delayed the process of sociopolitical changes. The native Lithuanian statehood followed by a turning point in civilisation crystallised there only in the later Middle Ages.

The north and north-eastern part of the continent, in turn, was inhabited by Ugro-Finnic groups. They belonged to great family of non-Indoeuropean origin occupying extensive areas in northern Europe and Asia. Their culture was also subjected to natural conditions, en-

compassing surrounding dense forests, extensive bogs at the foot of Scandinavian mountains in the west, numerous lakes in the east and the tundra in the distant subarctic periphery. The sustenance of these tribes was based on the breeding of animals (including reindeers), hunting and fishing. Land was tilled to a small extent – if the rough natural conditions allowed it. Population in those areas learned the art of working metal – including iron – from the Scandinavians. Despite the continuous economic and political Swedish and Russian penetration, it retained the specific social and cultural patterns of tribal culture for many centuries.

It is evident that the steppe area on the Black and Caspian seas as well as the enclave on the middle Danube offered quite different ecological conditions. The peoples flowing in succeeding waves from Asia – Huns, Avars, Bulgars, Khazars, Pechenegs, Magyars – cultivated a nomadic way of life. Animal breeding and pastoralism was their basic economic activity as well as military expeditions which overran the neighbouring countries. The steppe landscape influenced their culture patterns and the scale of values to a high degree. Nevertheless, cohabitation with the Slavic farmers and the participation in the long distance trade frequently contributed to the culture change and – as in the case of nomads on the Volga river – to the creation of early towns. They often lost their ethnic identity, were assimilated by the farmers as in the case of the Bulgars, or totally exterminated by the powerful neighbours.

In early medieval Europe, two different – although both Christian – circles emerged. The Germanic inhabitants of the Scandinavian Peninsula, West Slavs between the Elbe and the Vistula rivers, as well as the Slavs and the Hungarians on the middle part of the Danube joined the communities of the western Latin civilisation. The Christianisation of Old Russia contributed to the propagation of the Byzantine patterns of civilisation in East Europe, on the Dnieper and the upper Volga. The Muslim penetration of the areas on the lower and middle parts of the Volga river was significant as well. In other words, in the early Middle Ages the opposition between the European South and the North ceased, due to the process of the adding of new peoples to the Christian civilisation which was emerging. However, the division into the Latin West and the Byzantine

East, rooted in different socio-cultural traditions, turned out as significant. Regional differences determined by different ecological possibilities and ethnical characters of the inhabitants of the early medieval barbaricum also still came into prominence.

However some ethnographic changes occurred too, as the Slavs assimilated the Baltic and Ugro-Finnish groups on the upper Dnieper and the upper Volga.

Bibliography

The topic is in a more extensive manner discussed in a study on the birth of medieval European civilization, recently published in Polish:

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