

New Approaches to Early Medieval Ethnicity

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Introduction

Ethnicity is a central theme in the archaeology of the early medieval period. The basis of any study of early medieval ethnicity has to be a detailed typological and chronological understanding of the material. However, the analysis must not stop here. As Jentgens (2001) has shown, the concepts of ethnicity used in archaeology are generally fairly simplistic and essentialist; ethnicity is thought of as a two-dimensional form of group-identification that is assigned at birth and remains unchanged throughout a person's life.

A theory of ethnicity that can match the often-encountered complexities of early medieval ethnicity therefore has to be developed. It is important to move away from a search for origins and attempts to match archaeological material with historically attested tribal territories, and rather to focus on specific situations in their regional context. Changes in the way ethnicity is seen in the social sciences (see Banks 1996), but also in much recent work by historians of the period (such as Geary 1983; Amory 1993; 1997; Pohl/Reimitz 1998), can contribute greatly to a more appropriate theory of early medieval ethnicity.

Theoretical concepts

In developing a more appropriate concept of early medieval ethnicity it is important to see it as a form of group-identification in opposition to an Other. It is conveyed by a range of sometimes overt, sometimes more subconscious signals of difference in the material culture. One aspect of this, which is of relevance to

cemetery studies, is appearance and bodily adornment. These signals can be read with the knowledge of a common grammar. For archaeologists the difficulties begin here: such signals can only truly be read with knowledge of that grammar. As they are part of a language of difference, however, they can be traced as patterns within the archaeological record.

It is important to remember that anything has the potential to carry such meaning, not just artefacts that appear significant today. In practice, we have to make informed choices about what seems relevant. Nevertheless, we do have to move away from focusing on a limited range of artefact types to considering a wide range of evidence.

An understanding of the general workings of ethnicity, that is, what it means and how it is expressed, is not enough, however: we must also be aware that modern day concepts of ethnicity, which invariably have been influenced by nationalism, are likely not to be applicable to ethnicity in the past. Guided by much recent interesting work by historians we have to understand that we may be dealing with concepts of ethnicity quite different from popular perceptions of ethnicity today. Whether such a phenomenon of social cohesion is labelled ethnicity or something else is of secondary importance.

Varied expressions of ethnicity

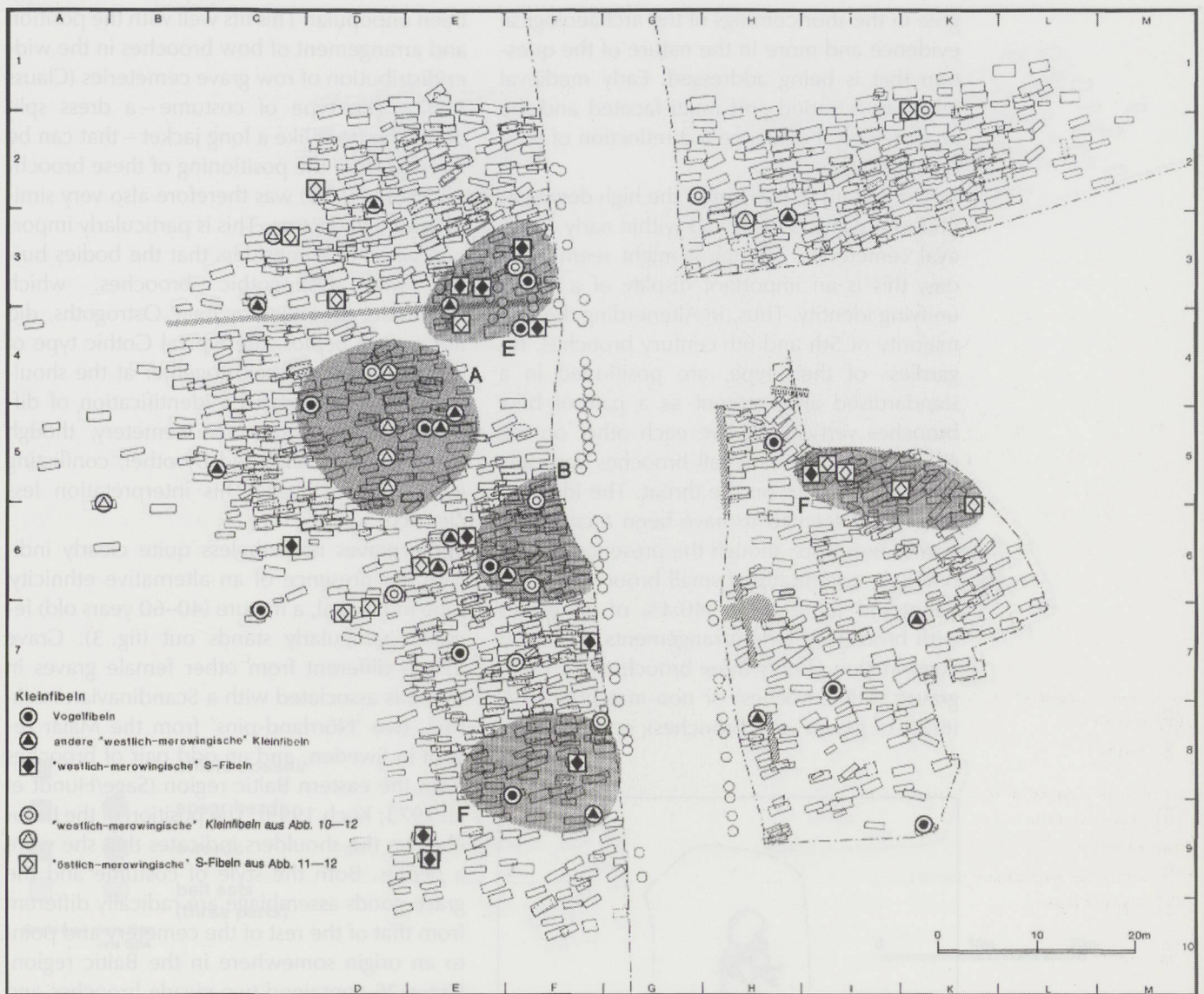
In studying ethnicity it is necessary to move away from simply attempting to identify known early medieval *gentes*. Ethnicity provides structure to society and it does so at many levels. Of these, large-scale cultural affil-



Fig. 1: The spatial patterning of mid 6th century bow brooches established by Bierbrauer (1985, fig. 10). The shaded areas represent the assumed ethnically distinct burial communities.

iations are overarching; however, these rarely correspond with the historical tribal areas (Jentgens 2001). Then there are differences between regional burying communities, expressed as variations in the funerary rite. On a lower level, affiliation to distinct groups can be emphasised within cemeteries. Finally, there are incidences of individual burials in which the deceased is associated with an outside group and explicitly not with the tradition within which she was buried. Ethnicity is employed both actively and on the level of the *habitus* (in the sense of Bourdieu 1977). Thus, for example, it may be possible for an elite to consciously emphasise a super-regional affiliation to a ruler (Geary 1983), while local burying communities express their group identity in the form of differences in local practice.

Ethnicity is also dependent on other forms of social identity, such as gender, age or status. It is therefore possible that ethnicity is most strongly asserted during adulthood. The boundaries between such different group affiliations are fluid, and they cannot easily be separated (Daim 1998). We have to be careful not to limit our ideas of ethnicity to one that seems plausible today. Of course, we are in danger of watering down the concept of ethnicity by calling any group affiliation ethnic. It is my view, however, that a label is only useful as long as it enables rather than limits understanding. In this way, early medieval ethnicity can be expressed in varied, though interrelated ways. Specific social situations determine which predominates at any given time. It is, however, important to bear in mind the public nature of



the funerary rite as here the particular nature of ethnicity as a form of social identification that excludes others while strengthening cohesion within a group, comes into its own.

Ethnicity in the row-grave cemetery of Altenerding

In order to better understand the ways in which such different forms of ethnicity can be reflected in the archaeology record, the row-grave cemetery of Altenerding in Bavaria (Sage 1984) is worth a reappraisal. The cemetery was in use from the mid 5th to the second half of the 7th century and is particularly valuable for the study of ethnicity during the period due to its internal organisation according to social groups, rather than having developed in the

linear fashion common to a majority of row-grave cemeteries (Bierbrauer 1985).

Bierbrauer (1985) has convincingly shown that the cemetery developed around nuclei of social groups. He interpreted this as different phases of ethnically distinct kinship groups moving to the area and burying their dead there. Bierbrauer based his study on the spatial patterning of bow brooches within the cemetery (fig. 1). These brooches, indeed, are distributed in fairly distinct groups. However, as Bierbrauer acknowledged himself, the addition of small brooches to the analysis already causes the patterns to become less obvious (fig. 2). Bierbrauer believed the confusion to be due to a lack of thorough typological and chronological work on small brooches. I believe, however, that the impossibility of obtaining clear ethnic patterns lies to a lesser de-

Fig. 2: The distribution of small brooches. The patterns are now less easy to identify (Bierbrauer 1985, fig. 13).

gree in the shortcomings of the archaeological evidence and more in the nature of the question that is being addressed. Early medieval ethnicity is varied and multi-faceted and the archaeological evidence is a reflection of such complexities.

It is important to remember the high degree of uniformity that is displayed within early medieval cemeteries. Though it might seem obvious, this is an important display of a strong unifying identity. Thus, in Altenerding the vast majority of 5th and 6th century brooches, regardless of their type, are positioned in a standardised arrangement as a pair of bow brooches vertically above each other on the pelvis and a pair of small brooches vertically above each other on the throat. The ideal arrangement seemed to have been a combination of two pairs, though the presence of only one pair, commonly of small brooches, is encountered more often (40.4% of all graves with brooches). Odd arrangements, such as a combination of only three brooches (10.1% of graves with brooches) or non-matching pairs (6.7% of graves with brooches), seem to have

been unpopular. This fits well with the position and arrangement of bow brooches in the wider distribution of row grave cemeteries (Claus 1987). The type of costume – a dress split down the front like a long jacket – that can be inferred from the positioning of these brooches (Martin 1995) was therefore also very similar over a wide area. This is particularly important when one considers that the bodies buried with Ostrogothic brooches, which Bierbrauer identified as Italic Ostrogoths, did not wear a *peplos*, the typical Gothic type of costume that was held together at the shoulders. Thus, Bierbrauer's identification of different groups within the cemetery, though surely valid, is obscured by other, conflicting evidence that makes his interpretation less clear-cut.

Some graves nevertheless quite clearly indicate the presence of an alternative ethnicity. One individual, a mature (40–60 years old) female, particularly stands out (fig. 3). Grave 421 is different from other female graves in that it is associated with a Scandinavian neckring, two 'Nörrland-pins' from the Mälars region in Sweden, and an odd pair of brooches from the eastern Baltic region (Sage/Hundt et al. 1973; Koch 1999). The position of the brooches on the shoulders indicates that she wore a *peplos*. Both the style of costume and the grave goods assemblage are radically different from that of the rest of the cemetery and point to an origin somewhere in the Baltic region. Grave 26 contained two cicada brooches and four beads. The brooches, which are of a similar type to the ones found in the grave of Childeric in Tournai, were positioned on the shoulders. This suggests that the deceased also wore a *peplos*. Grave 522 is interesting too, not so much because of differences in costume but because of the presence of much Roman material. Among other more common objects, the adult female was buried with a Roman buckle worn on the chest, probably as a brooch, a Roman bronze coin and the sherd of the rim of a Samian ware dish. The position of the buckle/brooch is typical of a 7th century dress style.

Only grave 421 strongly indicates the presence of a distinctly different ethnic identity, as both the assemblage and position of the material can be identified as originating in Scandinavia. Grave 26 and grave 522 do not have such parallels. However, they too are interest-

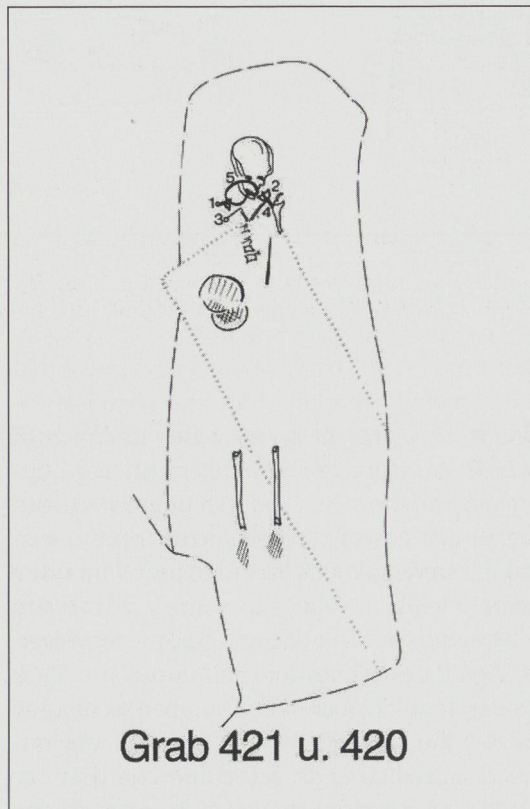


Fig. 3: Grave 421 stands out due to the unique assemblage and positioning of its grave goods (Sage 1984, plate 180).

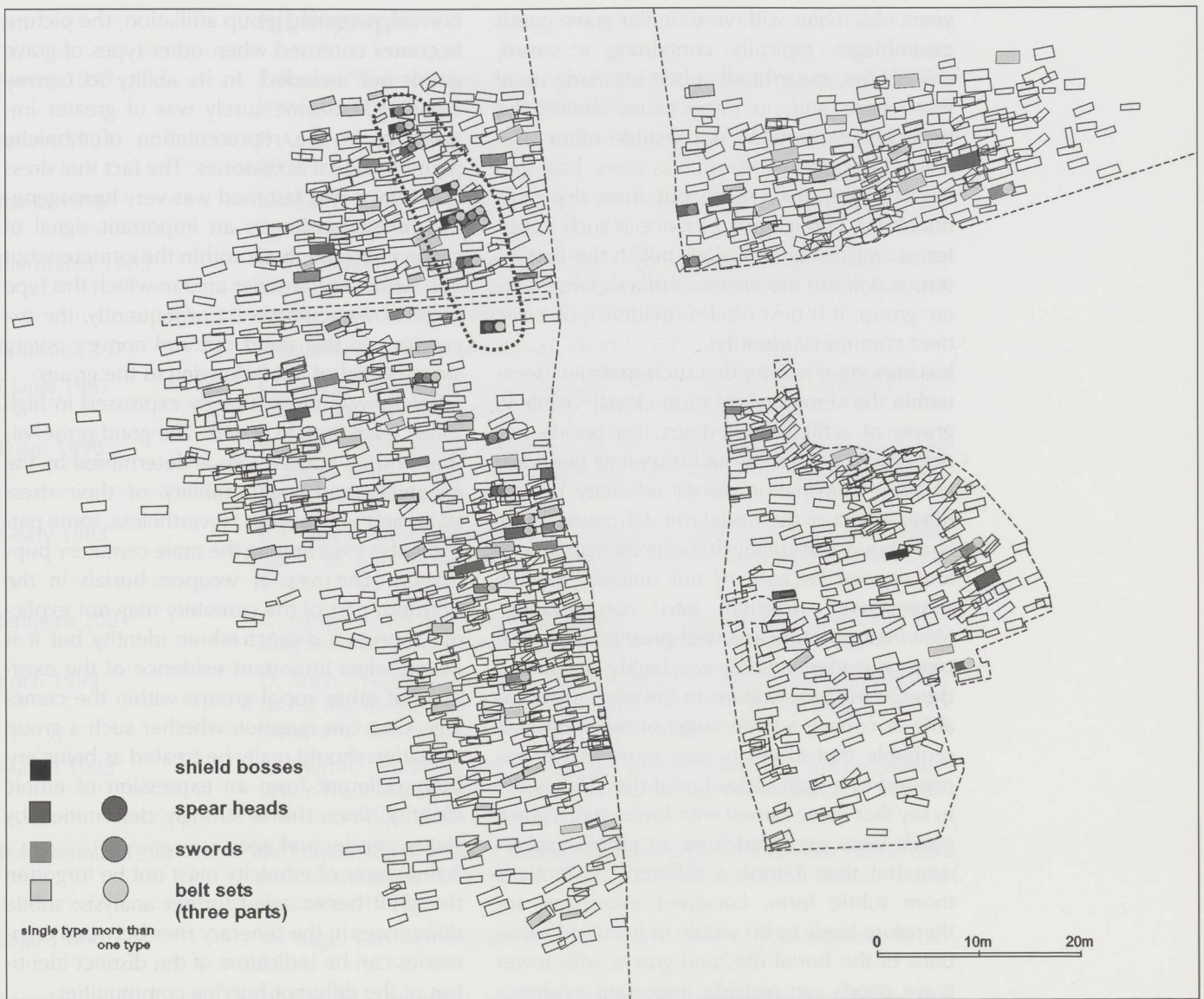


Fig. 4: Late 6th to 7th century weapon burials. Note the row of burials distinguished by the presence of shield bosses spreading from south to north (redrawn from Sage 1984, attachment 3).

ing as they diverge from an otherwise strongly standardised burial tradition and do reflect outside influences. The presence of Roman material in the 7th century is interesting less as an indicator of a potentially persisting Romanic identity, but rather because of its emphasis on archaic material. Roman brooches and coins are not uncommon in cemeteries but normally they are worn on girdle hangers or placed in bags with other amuletic material (Theune 1997).

Other patterns within the spatial layout of the cemetery are evidence for an even more complex make-up of ethnicity. So far, only adult female graves have been analysed. Without

doubt, they provide a very good starting point for the study of ethnicity due to the great typological variation in their grave goods assemblages and costume types. That in itself is worthy of interest as such variation permits a much more clearly visible expression of identity. However, the male grave goods assemblage, though it provides typological variation only in its different kinds of belt sets, can also be used to identify social groups. Indeed, a very distinct row of weapon burials is visible in the north of the cemetery (fig. 4). It can be dated to the late 6th to first half of the 7th century and developed from south to north. This group is made up of 11 fairly high status adult (20–40

years old) males with very similar grave goods assemblages typically containing a sword, shield boss, spear head, a belt set made up of three parts and, in three cases, shears and tweezers. As they did not include other typically male grave goods such as saxes, bags and strike-a-lights they stand out from the male burial rite. Though the presence of such a cluster of 'warrior graves' does not in the first instance point to the presence of a separate ethnic group, it is nevertheless evidence of a distinct communal identity.

It is important to note that such spatial patterns within the cemetery are most clearly visible in graves of a fairly high status. Yet poorly furnished graves should not be seen as providers of poor information about ethnicity or any other aspect of the burial rite. Of course there is always a possibility that our interpretations are skewed because of our inability to take unpreserved material into consideration. However, plentiful and well-preserved archaeological evidence today was highly visible and durable material culture in the past, and thus able to convey a wide range of meaning. It is probable that ethnicity was more visibly expressed in a high status burial rite. This is not to say that those buried with lower status grave goods were excluded from an ethnic expression but that it took a different, potentially more subtle form. Localised ethnicities are therefore likely to be visible in localised variations of the burial rite, and graves with fewer grave goods can provide important evidence for this.

Conclusion

It has become clear that ethnic expressions in cemeteries are not only difficult to identify, but that we are also dealing with a complex phenomenon that is active on different levels. Though brooches obviously had some func-

tion in promoting group affiliation, the picture becomes confused when other types of grave goods are included. In its ability to convey meaning, costume surely was of greater importance in the representation of ethnicity than individual accessories. The fact that dress and how it was fastened was very homogeneous in Altenerding is an important signal of group cohesion, both within the cemetery but also within the broader area in which this type of dress was common. Consequently, the exceptions to this stand out and convey a very strong signal of not belonging to the group.

Ethnicity was most strongly expressed in high status adult female graves. The good preservation of their grave goods is determined by the durability and high visibility of their dress styles and accessories. Nevertheless, some patterns also exist among the male cemetery population. The row of weapon burials in the northern part of the cemetery may not explicitly express a distinct ethnic identity but it is nevertheless important evidence of the existence of other social groups within the cemetery. One can question whether such a group affiliation should really be treated as being entirely different from an expression of ethnic identity, since this is strongly determined by status, gender and age.

A final layer of ethnicity must not be forgotten though it has to await further analysis: subtle differences in the funerary rites between cemeteries can be indicators of the distinct identities of the different burying communities.

The complexities of early medieval ethnicities therefore demand to be represented by equally complex concepts. If theories of ethnicity are to be of greater relevance to the problems encountered, we must move away from views of ethnicity that portray it as unified and immutable towards a discourse that emphasises the instability, context-dependence and multidimensionality of early medieval ethnicity.

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