

Some Reflections on the Migrations of Palaeo-Balkan Peoples in Pre-Roman Times

Abstract: In the history of the central Balkans prior to the Roman conquest migrations of people had manifold importance. The recognition of these migrations has been the basis for distinguishing between different periods of prehistory. Various analyses of the material culture offer information on the social contact between the invaders and the autochthonous populations. They reveal details of the transfer of elements of culture and technological knowledge from one region to another. Of particular significance in this respect are migrations over vast territories, sometimes from as far as the Ural mountains in the east, the Alps in the west and the Pindus in Greece to the south. Investigations into the models of the migrations open up possibilities for determining the variation in, and different forms of, human movement from one geographic area to another.

Keywords: palaeo-Balkan peoples, pre-Roman period, migrations, cultures

“Migrations, movement of people from one region to another” has been a recurring theme of a number of scientific symposia, congresses and conferences; it has remained a matter of debate and argument between scholars from different fields — from archaeologists, historians, and anthropogeographers to contemporary demographers. Migrations were the topic of one of the round tables at the 7th Congress of the Association for South-East Europe that took place in Thessaloniki in 1994. The number of participants was small, but they were of very diverse scientific backgrounds and this demonstrated the exceptional complexity of the issue of migrations, underlining the fact that it cannot be addressed within a single discipline — for instance, using only archaeological evidence, or written sources, or linguistic studies, or historical data. The tracking of the course of migration movements and the research into their multiple aspects, their causes and purposes, require amalgamation and considerations of all relevant interconnected information, including those emerging from anthropological studies. The further we travel into the past, the more we need assistance from other sciences. In the context of large-scale population movements, usually across a vast territory, it is difficult and often impossible to identify all the ethnic groups that are involved in the migrations. One group of migrants prompts another, and jointly they make a journey toward the “promised land” that they have been hearing about from former soldiers or political leaders. It was like this in times before recorded history. Time after time, the will to live and improve the life of a population triggered migration

waves the scale of which was at first unforeseen, and which swept over immense areas stretching from the Urals and the Caspian Sea in the east to the central and south-east Europe in the west. Up to the time of the Roman conquest of the Balkans, numerous migrations took place, big and small, into and across the region.

Our scientific disciplines have a task before them — to determine the causes of migrations, trace their routes and directions, recognise the resulting changes in the material and symbolic culture, and identify new civilisations rising from the integration of the elements of culture and identity of indigenous and incoming (invasive) populations. Among the reasons behind human migrations, the primary ones would be of economic nature, including the pressure exerted by the strong upon the weak, the movement of pastoralists across their Balkan paths from prehistory up to medieval times; a host of other reasons can be assumed for the movements of variously-sized groups of people from one area to another. An important question arises regarding the internal cultural development of a community: at what stage in the communal life, and in which circumstances does a community, often guided by the desire to lay hands on the wealth of the neighbours, start to expand over adjacent and distant territories? Large-scale migrations are most often initiated by a community displaying high biological potential, but lagging behind in the cultural development compared to the population in the areas to which its movement is directed. There are numerous examples in prehistory and early history of this tendency, for instance the movement of steppe pastoralists (“shepherds”) towards central and south-east Europe; the migrations of Cimmerian and Scythian horsemen into the Danubian region or Asia Minor; the invasions of the Danube region in Serbia, and further, of Hellenistic Greece by the militant Celts from central Europe; incursions into Roman and, later, Byzantine territories by the Sarmatian, Avar, Hun, proto-Bulgarian, Finno-Ugric and many other tribes. The one thing in common to all of these migrations and invasions is the demographic boom characteristic of underdeveloped tribes keen on attaining favourable living areas as well as appropriating the wealth owned by others.

Several chief models of migrations of pre-Roman period can be discerned through the analysis of various causes of movement and relocation of people, of economic or any other nature (transhumance, war migrations, raiding). The first to recognise them was Gordon Childe in his book *The Danube in Prehistory* (Oxford 1929) and some other of his works. One of the most renowned theoretician of prehistoric archaeology (e.g. *The Dawn of European Civilisation*, 1925; *Progress and Archaeology*, 1954; *Social Evolution*, 1951), Childe strongly supported the theory of the development of cultures through migrations. Opposing him are the advocates of autoch-

thonism, that is, gradual evolution of prehistoric cultures from one phase to another. These two conflicting views on the emergence and developments of human cultures have also been manifested in prehistoric archaeology. Admittedly, the polarisation in the opinions was not significantly deep and some scholars adopted both theories as equally possible (for instance Miloje Vasić, Milutin Garašanin, Alojz Benac). In terms of the genesis of prehistoric cultures, of interest is the evolution of Dragoslav Srejšević's opinion on this. Prior to the discovery of Lepenski Vir, in many of his papers he maintained the migrationist theory when discussing the development of Neolithic cultures (e.g. Vinča and Butmir cultures). Following the investigations at Lepenski Vir, he realised that the *ex oriente lux* approach cannot be taken for granted, and so he searched for the roots of European civilisation in the central Balkan Danube area.

Without doubt, the unidirectional thinking on the origin of prehistoric cultures in central and south-west Europe, and the inclination toward one of the concepts while excluding the other, is far from being productive. Further, there were dramatic transformations in the material and symbolic cultures in the post-Neolithic period, at the end of the fourth and beginning of the third millennium BC, that indicate changes in the ethnic structure which must, and could, have only been caused by migrations. We, therefore, support viewpoints that take account of both of the methodological and theoretical approaches to the origin of cultures; the role and importance of indigenous developments *versus* the influence of migrations are likely to have been different between individual cases.

This paper is concerned with the migrationist view of cultural development and we will single out cases that can be directly linked with the movements of people in prehistory. The mechanisms of these movements are sometimes similar regardless of the period with which they are associated — whether distant prehistory or recent transhumance, for example in the area between the Carpathians to the north and the Pindus in the south, or between protohistoric Mycenae and Asia Minor. It would be erroneous, however, not to point out the diversity of migrations and the existence of varied models of population movement which were shaped primarily by the diversity of reasons behind the migrations. Here we shall analyse only some of the most important types of migration using the examples that in the best way illustrate the link between the cause and the effect of these movements.

We have already mentioned migrations that took place across vast geographic areas and which derive from the nature of animal-based economy of prehistoric and proto-historic communities. One finds evidence for these in the fact that the same or similar elements of the material culture were attested in different, often very distant areas, as well as in ancient my-

thology (e.g. the road of Kadmos), or in similar toponyms and hydronyms surviving until the middle ages and sometimes even into modern times. Some important pieces of information can be found in the earliest written sources. For instance, writings in Linear B script on Knossos tablets describe flocks of sheep (that were sometimes as big as several thousand sheep) and their routes from central Greece and the Peloponnese, across Thrace and into Asia Minor. It is interesting that the owners of sheep flocks would shear their sheep, sell the fleece or even whole flocks, and then return home, only to embark on the same journey to Asia Minor in a few years time. P. Iliyevski speaks about numerous texts from the Mycenaean archives, particularly those that refer to sheep flocks (e.g. 800 of them from Knossos). Long before this, especially from the beginning of the third millennium BC, pastoralism became the major constituent of the prehistoric economy; not local transhumance, practised within a single region, but fully mobile pastoralism, in constant move between the Carpathians in the north, all the way to the Pindus and the Peloponnese in the south. One of such routes of migration, deriving from the end of the fourth and the start of the third millennium BC, was identified by mapping the archaeological sites representing a unique culture. The elements of this culture can be traced and followed in the area extending from the southern Carpathians and the Oltenia Plain in south-west Romania, across the Danube, over the Homolje mountains, up the Timok valley to the confluence of the Nišava and the South Morava, then stretching over Prepolac into the Kosovo plain, and further to the south, following the foot of the Šara mountain towards Pelagonia, all the way to the Pindus. The culture that developed along this route is in archaeology known as Bubanj-Sălcuța-Krivodol complex which also includes Crnobuki-Bakarno Gumno culture in Pelagonia and the sites around the town of Florina in Greece. Pastoralists moved seasonally across this central Balkan “highway” throughout prehistory, and even in medieval times. On these roads we later see the Aromanians, the Sarakatsans, the Karakachans and their flocks, and many other tribes; the origins of their economy and ethnic continuity lay in the distant past.

The Carpathian-Pindus route was only one of possible directions of movement of pastoralists across the Balkans. There were, obviously, other roads which started in the Pindus; one of them led across Epirus and southern Albania, towards the west through Montenegro, reaching the pastoral areas in the far north-west Balkans, thus connecting Dinaric pastures with Greece. In Greek mythology, this direction was known as the road of Kadmos. One other route is relevant for the understanding of the subsequent territorial distribution of the palaeo-Balkan tribes. This one connected Thracian coast of the Aegean Sea (as well as Thessaly and the Pindus) with the Lower Danube and the south-west Carpathian zone, transversing the

Rhodopes and the Balkan highlands. The movements of people and cultures from one region to another, particularly after the great migration of the “steppe pastoralists” to which we shall return below, resulted in the constitution of some of the most influential palaeo-Balkan peoples: the Illyrians in the west; the Paeonians and the Dardanians in the central part; the Triballi, who shared ethnic origin with the Daco-Moesians, in the north; and, lastly, the Thracians, who occupied eastern part of the Peninsula. Initially organised as pastoralist tribes, they were separated by mountain ranges, not rivers. Thus, the pastures on the eastern slopes of the Durmitor and Šara mountains, for example, belonged to one tribe, and those on the western slopes — to the other. The property rights were established via non-written rules which were maintained through customary law, with some likely modifications over time, until the disintegration of the patriarchal society.

The model of “successive migrations” or “gradual movements” has recently been introduced; a version of it was applied in earlier reconstructions of the expansion of some of the Near Eastern Neolithic cultures or Eneolithic steppe cultures from the north-Pontic areas. Essentially, this model assumes the gradual movement of people from one place to another and, in parallel with the existence of primary core areas, the formation of secondary or tertiary centres. Another major trait of these migrations are the three phases of the process: first, the gradual penetration and diffusion of a culture; second, driving the local populations out of the newly occupied land or assimilation of the inhabitants; and third, translocation of the communities that refused to be assimilated, which led to a chain reaction — movements of greater groups of people across a wider area. How this model functioned in practice is best illustrated by the fourth millennium BC migrations of the nomadic steppe pastoralists, in archaeological literature known as the Indo-European migration. This relocation took place over an immense territory extending from, in the east, the Eurasian divide between the Urals and the Caspian Sea, i.e. the area of the Orenburg steppe, to the Pannonian plain and the large part of the Balkan Peninsula in the west. The migrants can be identified primarily by their distinct burial customs, the nomadic economy similar to the extant pastoral systems found in Kyrgyzstan and former Soviet republics and, finally, the limited material culture which is in agreement with the high level of mobility of nomadic pastoralism. The characteristics of the funerary cult and associated rituals are highly recognisable; those displayed by the kurgans (tumuli) in the east are entirely analogous to those observed in the lowlands of the Carpathian basin (the Tisza valley, Banat, the Danube area in Serbia and Romania, and also to the south of the Danube). Tumuli (large earthen mounds) were usually dedicated to a single person, e.g. tribal chief, shaman and the like. In the grave, cut in the centre of the mound, the body of the deceased was placed in a

flexed position on a matting (which is a clear steppic element) and covered in red ochre. Wooden planks were put on top and the earthen mound built, forming a kurgan of about 40 m in diameter and 2 m in height. Animal burials, such as interments of one or more horses alongside the deceased, or chariot burials (such as at Plachidol in Bulgaria) also testify to the nomadic character and mobility of these people. The whole cultural complex and culture were named after this specific burial custom, e.g. “Jamnaja” in Russian, “Jamna” in Serbian, “Pitgrave” in British, “Grubengrab” or “Ok-ergrabkultur” in German literature. This large-scale migration over a huge territory in eastern, central and south-eastern Europe is considered crucial for further development of prehistoric society in Europe and the formation of palaeo-Balkan communities later recorded and described in the earliest written sources. Even if not always directly, this great migration had a far-reaching impact on the subsequent distribution of tribes in the Balkans. The new, Indo-European populations had initially set foothold in the Lower Danube and from there they spread into the Carpathian Basin and to the south of the Danube, into Bulgaria and Serbia. Here they indirectly caused movements of the autochthonous people that then, under pressure of hardly benevolent incomers, retreated to the south where they formed new, kin-based communities. This area was already familiar to the natives — it lay on the previously described pastoralist route that they had commonly used; the territorial distribution of the already mentioned tribes (the Illyrians, the Dardanians, the Paeonians, the Triballi, the Thracians and others) was the same as described above.

Another great wave of migration happened in the first millennium BC. This time it was the Cimmerians (Kimmerians) who were driven southward and westward by the Scythians. Their final destinations were the same areas in which the preceding “Indo-European migration” commenced. Given that they were horsemen, the Cimmerians moved swiftly over large expanses of land and so this later migration took place within the shorter period of time than the previous movements of the kind. Other than the material culture, the migrants did not leave much evidence behind. Numerous pieces of horse equipment were discovered in the Pannonian plain, in Srem (Adaševci, Šarengrad, Ilok) and Banat (Ritiševo), as well as in parts of Serbia south of the Sava and the Danube (Sinoševci, Rudovci, Zlotska cave near Bor and so on) and Kosovo (Janjevo). The movement of the Cimmerians was likely the result of a pressure exerted on them by the Scythians who forced them out of the forest-steppe zone of southern Russia towards the Pannonian plain and the Balkan Peninsula. Literary sources describe three directions of the migrations: the north road over the Carpathians towards the upper Tisa/Tisza course and further to the Pannonian plain; the south route which led to the Danube Delta and Dobruja and then westwards to

the southern edges of the Carpathian Basin, branching out to the south and the north of the Danube; finally, as confirmed in the ancient sources, a minor route that followed the Black Sea coast from Dobruja to the Bosphorus. According to some linguists, the name “Bosphorus” is of Cimmerian or Thraco-Cimmerian origin.

The Scythian tribes that subsequently arrived in the region rapidly advanced along the Danubian and the Carpathian routes, looting and destroying villages of the native populations on the way. Besides ruins of indigenous settlements, they also left behind traces of their distinctive material culture; above all, weaponry of specific shapes (the “akinakes” dagger, the trilobate-type arrowheads) and the characteristic jewellery inspired by animal symbolism.

At the end of the first millennium BC the last major migration in the south-east Danubian area occurred. This time it was Celtic tribes who, from the Gaul region (Gallia), set on the “journey without return”. By the fourth century BC they reached, and spread over most of the Pannonian plain. After the settling-in period, they invaded Macedonia and Thrace and, ultimately, Hellenistic Greece, with the aim of raiding and robbing the wealth. These incursions were not merely military actions; accompanying Celtic warriors were their families, which had not been the case in earlier conflicts in the region, such as the wars between the Illyrians on one side and the Macedonian, Thracian and Greek states on the other. Thus Celtic incursions can justifiably be considered as migrations. As recorded in the Greek written accounts, the defeat at Delphi in 279 BC and the related events confirm this. Following the defeat, Celtic chief Brennus took his own life in a ritual manner. One Celtic group crossed into Asia Minor and constituted their official entity: *Gallatia*. Another group returned to where they had started off the invasion; there, in Srem, they founded their state — *Civitas Scordischorum* — as described by Justinus and Ateneus. The Scordisci could not survive for long in this insecure region, surrounded by the territory of the Amantini, the Breuci, the Triballi, the Dacians. The initially high war capacity, reflected in the level of destruction along the Celtic military trail, plunged; however, there is a considerable body of evidence of their presence in the area during the second century BC. It includes fortified settlements of Taurunum and Singidunum, whose names remained the same in Roman times; the graves of soldiers in Karaburma and Rospri-ćuprija, in Singidunum (Belgrade), near Osijek, and in Pećine near Viminacium; a number of workshops producing and exporting the characteristic Celtic grey ceramic ware — for instance Gomolava in Hrtkovci; several Celtic oppida in Vojvodina, i.e. hillforts protected by earth walls still visible today, such as Čarnok near Vrbas, and Židovar near Vršac — the settlement closest to the territory of the warlike Dacians. As many as nearly fifty more-or-less

investigated Celtic sites are found in Vojvodina and along the Sava and the Danube in Serbia. Exhausted by the wars, the Celts/Scordisci lost their independence around AD 10, when Tiberius conquered the interflaves of the Sava and the Danube. This marked the end of an epoch in Celtic history of intensive warfare and migration, the epoch filled with great successes as well as defeats. It started with invasions and movements from Gallia, then continued with conflicts and settling in the Danube area, and subsequent migrations further to the south. The extremely strong and, from the military aspect, well-trained alliance of Celtic tribes only began to weaken after the disaster at Delphi. Nevertheless, even after they had lost their importance as a powerful force, the Celts were welcomed as mercenaries in Macedonian, Thracian and Greek armies; there are also records, though rare, of Celtic presence in Roman legions.

Migrations and moving of populations in the pre-Roman south-east Europe were of key importance for the subsequent developments and life of people settling in this part of the world. The nearly five centuries-long Roman rulership introduced a sort of equality between many different areas, but some similarities and differences were retained, and they were continuously fuelled by inter-tribal confrontations and the contrasting religious beliefs of the early middle ages.

The divide between Balkan geotectonic units running west from the Drina river served as a boundary between different cultures throughout prehistory of the region. For example, it divided the Balkans into the eastern painted-pottery complex and the western *impresso*-style ceramic ware — into the Neolithic Vinča complex in the east and the Danilo-Butmir culture complex in the west. This duality was by and large (ab)used for the purpose of gaining political power, a tendency also present in modern times. This, however, is a double-edged sword. Assertions by some modern nations that they descend from palaeo-Balkan peoples have been definitely refuted by the evidence presented in the new research. Claiming territorial rights on Thracian, Dacian, Illyrian, Dardanian, Paeonian or any other land can hardly be justified through presenting it as a quest for ethnic origins. The derogatory reference to the Balkans as a “vegetable medley cooking pot” can, in a way, be upheld by numerous well-documented migrations in the Balkans, mergings and assimilations of peoples, and countless combinations of anthropological types. The findings of recent anthropological research leave no doubt about it.

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