

On the Problem of the Post-Avar “Ethnogenesis”

The 9th Century Polities of Banat,
Crişana, and Transylvania

DENIS ALIMOV

in Comparative-Historical Context

*When comparing
Anonymus’ ethnic discourse
in *Gesta Hungarorum*
and the world of early
medieval gentes, the special
features of the post-Avar
‘ethnogenesis’ should be
taken into consideration.*

“Ethnogenesis”: What Does It Mean?

THE WORD “ethnogenesis” has several meanings in relation to the subject of the present article. According to Julian Bromley, the founder of the influential theory of *ethnos*, which has been dominant for a long time in Russian ethnological studies, ethnogenesis is a process of making an *ethnos*. The most important indication of the process is the emergence of ethnic self-consciousness. According to Bromley’s theory, which presupposes the existence of three different stages of

The study was conducted within the framework of the research project supported by the grant of the President of the Russian Federation for state support of young scientists—candidates of sciences (МК—950.2012.6 “Political formations in the Slavic world from the seventh to the tenth centuries: the evolution of power structures and ethno-social processes”).

Denis Alimov

Candidate of historical sciences, senior lecturer at the Department of Slavic and Balkan Studies of the Faculty of History of Saint Petersburg State University, Russia.

ethnic development called *tribe*, *narodnost*, and *nation*, it is the process of the making of the *narodnost* that is the most characteristic when dealing with ethnogenesis in the barbarian polities of early medieval Europe.¹

It is clear that such an interpretation of ethnogenesis can make sense only within the framework of the primordialist approach to the phenomenon of ethnicity, which implies that ethnogenesis is the initial phase of any ethnic group's history can be investigated as a complex process involving the formation of both the objective features of *ethnos*, such as language and culture, and its self-consciousness.² Within the framework of the instrumentalist approach to ethnicity, which emphasizes situational conditionality, fluidity and variability of criteria of ethnic identity, ethnicity acts as a form of social organization depending exclusively on subjective factors, such as self-identification and categorization from the outside.³ It is clear that in this case the term "ethnogenesis" should be considered absolutely incorrect because ethnicity, according to the given approach, becomes apparent only in situations of social interaction between groups when the need for its social registration gives rise to what can be called ethnic borders. However, even in the works of instrumentalist authors it is sometimes possible to find the word "ethnogenesis" between inverted commas. Obviously, they refer here to the emergence of ethnic identity as a result of self-identification and external ascription.

The other meaning of the term "ethnogenesis," also directly related to the subject of this article, is much more contextual than that described above. The question is about the model of the making of the early medieval "tribes" (*gentes*) elaborated in the works of scholars belonging to the so-called "Viennese school," mainly in those of Reinhard Wenskus, Herwig Wolfram, and Walter Pohl. As R. Wenskus has shown, early medieval Germanic "tribes" (*Stammes* in German), known from contemporary Latin sources as *gentes*, were heterogeneous communities, politically, socially and ideologically constructed on the basis of military groups.⁴ In this connection the term "ethnogenesis" is used for the process involving the crystallization of a broad community, caused by socio-political factors, first of all, by the rise of a military elite group consolidated by a charismatic leader. Their ethnic character manifested itself, first of all, in ideology, the most important element of which was the myth of a common origin.⁵ The predominance of political factors in the process of *Stammesbildung* within the Germanic world makes some researchers abandon the use of the attribute "ethnic" in reference to such groups, preferring instead the terminology borrowed from early medieval texts. Though the belief in a common origin was an important element of social cohesion for the *gentes*, it should be remembered that their social, political and "ethnic" (i.e. based on the belief in a common origin) identity were practically inseparable from each other. Such communities exist-

ed simultaneously both as political and as ethnic units. Therefore we prefer to name them ethno-political communities, thus using the term well established in Russian historiography.

Meanwhile, ethno-political communities (*gentes*) were not the only type of quasi-ethnic groups of the barbarians. Besides kin groups and small residential communities, there undoubtedly existed other types of what Walter Pohl designated as “face-to-face groups.”⁶ The correlation of those groups with what we put now in the concept of ethnicity remains in many cases unclear. Debatable is also the question of to what degree gentile identities interpreted as ethnic identities of the early Middle Ages were a product of the development of barbarian society, or a consequence of the structuring of fluid barbarian group identities within the bookish ethnic discourse going back to Antiquity.⁷ Finally, it is also still unclear whether or not the *gentes* were the universal form of “ethnic” development in early medieval Europe. There is no doubt that, like with the Germanic *gentes*, a great part of the so-called “tribes” within the Slavic world, as well as among other language communities of East-Central Europe, can also be ranked among the ethno-political entities.⁸ The question, however, regards the basic bonds of their social cohesion that provided their stability.

Of course, as Patrick Amory pertinently noted, “there is a question of how to define ‘full’ ethnogenesis. If ethnic groups are always in flux, if their membership and definitions of membership are always changing, then they are constantly undergoing ethnogenesis.”⁹ We must necessarily admit that the question concerns an extremely conventional term that is an element of the modern ethnic (both scientific, and ordinary) discourse rather than a reflection of reality. It is impossible to ignore the fact that ethnic processes, as Walter Pohl reminds us using Fernand Braudel’s expression, are processes of “*longue durée*,”¹⁰ and ethnic identity—for all its subjectivity and conditionality—can be rather stable. Until we give up operating with such terms as “ethnic group,” “ethno-political community,” etc., which are somewhat problematic, it is impossible to get absolutely free from the essentialist approach.

Methodological difficulties connected with the study of ethnogenesis in the early Middle Ages are certainly not exhausted by the confrontation of the two basic approaches to the phenomenon of ethnicity. It is hardly possible to set aside the question of whether it is correct to treat early medieval group identities as ethnic ones. Over the last several decades historians repeatedly emphasized the role played in the formation of the ethnic discourse in early medieval Europe by educated intellectual, who included barbarian group identities in the notion of *gentes* inherited by them from ancient ethnography.¹¹ The influence of ancient ethnography and of the Bible on the formation of ethnic discourse in early medieval Europe is really great. Does it mean, however, that the barbarians—at least, those

who had not yet come under the influence of the ancient heritage and had not yet converted to Christianity—had no notion of ethnic division? Like the ethnographers of the 19th century, who started to describe numerous “tribes” of Africa, America, Australia, and Oceania, modern medievalists face a great number of group identities bearing a strong resemblance to what is usually meant by ethnicity. Meanwhile, those identities could correspond to kin groups, residential entities, linguistic, social and professional communities, political formations, etc. How is it possible in this case to distinguish ethnic identity from the non-ethnic one? It should be remembered in this regard that an important feature of the barbarians’ self-consciousness was its syncretism and semantic undifferentiability.¹² As for the belief in a common origin usually considered to be the basic feature of ethnic identity, we should be aware of the fact that its existence can be hardly confirmed in reference to many early medieval groups. It is quite understandable that against this background the use of the term “ethnic” becomes extremely conventional.

The Carpathian Basin in Anonymus’ *Gesta Hungarorum*: The Ethno-Political Situation

ANONYMUŠ’ *GESTA Hungarorum*, a well-known medieval narrative considered by many to have been written in the late 12th or in the early 13th century, and supposedly based on an 11th century Hungarian chronicle, contains detailed information on several polities that allegedly existed in the territories between the Tisza River and the Carpathian mountains by the time of the Magyars’ migration to Pannonia at the end of the 9th century. These are the land of *Menumorout*, the descendant of *Morout*, on the territory of Crișana, the land of *Glad* on the territory of Banat, and the land of *Gelou* on the territory of Transylvania, in the narrow sense of the term.¹³ Two polities situated in the neighboring area of the Middle Danube region are also mentioned in Anonymus’ narrative. These are the land of *Salamus*, situated between the Danube and the Tisza, including a local administrative unit with its center in the stronghold of *Hung*, that is, in present-day Uzhgorod (Ungvár), in the Upper Tisza region,¹⁴ and that of *Zubur*, with its centre at Nitra in southwest Slovakia. There is no need to emphasize that the information of the *Gesta Hungarorum* relating to the ethno-political situation of the late 9th and early 10th centuries is treated with a great degree of skepticism in current historiography. Such a treatment of Anonymus’ information does not seem surprising, when taking into consideration the dating of the text and its generic features.¹⁵ However, recent research by Romanian

scholars has demonstrated that the picture drawn by Anonymus as a whole fits well with the archaeological data. The existence of local political units supposedly corresponding to those described by the Anonymus can be proved, first of all, by the spatial distribution of early medieval settlements excavated by Romanian archaeologists in the territories of present-day Banat, Crişana, and Transylvania.¹⁶

It should be noted that in the text of Anonymus all the listed political formations are referred to only by the names of their rulers or by their geographical location. As seen from Anonymus' narrative, none of the listed polities was associated with any concrete *gens*. On the contrary, according to Anonymus, the ethnic composition of each polity was extremely heterogeneous. As for the land of Menumorout, it is firstly reported (in chapter XI) to be inhabited by people called *Cozar* (Khazars?).¹⁷ Meanwhile, as follows from chapter XLI, Menumorout himself was of Bulgarian origin.¹⁸ It is also obvious from Anonymus' further account that the "Khazars" were in no way the only ethnic group to live in Menumorout's land. In chapter XXIII the three Hungarian captains, Thosu, Zobolsu, and Tuhutum, are said to have subdued many *nationes* of Menumorout's land.¹⁹ While describing in chapter LI the next fight between the Magyars and the forces of Menumorout, it is directly reported that the latter consisted of different *nationes*.²⁰ A similar situation appears when dealing with the polity of Glad situated in Banat. According to chapter XI, Glad, who was originally based in the Bulgarian stronghold of Vidin, established himself in what is now Banat with the help of the so-called "Cumanians" (*Cumani*) that can be identified with a certain nomadic ethnic group of Altaic origin.²¹ While describing the Magyar expedition against Glad in chapter XLIV, Anonymus tells us that among Glad's numerous horsemen and soldiers were "Cumanians" (*Cumani*), Bulgarians (*Bulgari*), and Wallachians (*Blaci*).²² Though in chapter XXVI Gelou, a ruler of the *terra ultra silvana*, is defined as *dux Blacorum*, which apparently points to the domination of the Wallachians (Romanians) in his polity,²³ while speaking in chapter XXV of the inhabitants of the territory controlled by Gelou, Anonymus mentions not only the Wallachians (*Blasii*) but also the Slavs (*Sclavi*).²⁴ As for Gelou himself, he is defined in chapter XXIV as a Wallachian (*Blacus*).²⁵ As seen from chapter XI, a similar situation occurred in the land of Salanus, including its easternmost county, governed by Loborcy. Anonymus reports that the Bulgar ruler *Keanus*, who was the grandfather of Salanus, populated the territory between the rivers Danube and Tisza with Slavs and Bulgars.²⁶ As for the *ducatu*s of Zubur, it is reported in chapter XXXV as being inhabited by Slavs and Bohemians (*Boemi*).²⁷

Such a picture is in sharp contrast with the current notion of what was one of the most characteristic features of early medieval ethnicity. As is known, it is

the unity of ethnic and political affiliation which was so characteristic for early medieval Europe that makes modern researchers use the term “ethno-political community” in reference to early medieval *gentes*. At first glance, Anonymus’ notion of early medieval ethnicity can be considered an additional argument against the credibility of the source. As it has been long supposed in historiography, because Anonymus allegedly did not know the true names of the local groups of the 9th century Carpathian Basin, he simply used the names of some *nationes* contemporary to him for the description of the earlier situation. In order to answer the question if Anonymus’ notion of early medieval ethnicity was erratic in relation to the region that was the focus of his narrative, it is necessary to examine the data of earlier and more reliable sources concerning the ethno-political situation in the 9th century Carpathian Basin. Based on the methodological premises described above we will focus not on the issues of culture and language but exclusively on the contemporary representation of those communities in ethnic or quasi-ethnic terms.



(To be continued)

Abbreviations

AF	<i>Annales Fuldenses</i> , rec. Fridericus Kurze, Hannoverae, 1891.
ARF	<i>Annales Regni Francorum et Annales qui dicuntur Einhardi</i> , rec. Fridericus Kurze, Hannoverae, 1895.
DAI	Constantine Porphyrogenitus, <i>De administrando imperio</i> , Greek text ed. by Gyula Moravcsik; Engl. transl. by R. J. H. Jenkins, Washington, 1967.
Documenta	<i>Documenta historiae chroaticae periodum antiquam illustrantia</i> , collegit, digessit, explicuit Dr Franjo Rački (Monumenta spectantia historiam slavorum meridionalium, vol. VII), Zagrabiae, 1877.
MMFH	<i>Magnae Moraviae fontes historici</i> , vol. I, <i>Annales et chronicae</i> , Brunae, 1966; vol. II: <i>Textus biographici, hagiographici, liturgici</i> , Brunae, 1969; vol. III, <i>Diplomata, epistolae, textus historici varii</i> , Brunae, 1969; vol. IV, <i>Leges, textus iuridici, supplementa</i> , Brunae, 1971.
SRH	<i>Scriptores rerum Hungaricarum tempore ducum regumque stirpis Arpadianae gestarum</i> , ed. Emericus Szentpétery, vol. I, Budapestini, 1937.

Notes

1. See in details Julian Bromley, *Etnos i etnografiya* (Ethnos and ethnography) (Moscow, 1973); id., *Ocherki teorii etnosa* (Essays on the theory of ethnos), 2nd edition (Moscow, 2007).

2. Bromley's theory of *ethnos* goes into the framework of substantialism considered to be a trend of primordialism. See Yelena O. Khabenskaya, "Etnicheskaya identichnost': podkhody k probleme" (Ethnic identity: Approaches to the problem), in <http://www.viu-online.ru/science/publ/bulleten20/page4.html> (last accessed 01.07.2012).
3. See Barth's classical study on the social nature of ethnic boundaries, Fredrik Barth, "Introduction," in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: Social Organization of Culture Difference*, ed. Fredrik Barth (Bergen, 1969), 9–38.
4. Reinhard Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung: Das Werden der frühmittelalterlichen gentes* (Cologne–Graz, 1961).
5. Ibid.; Herwig Wolfram, "Einleitung oder Überlegungen zur Origo Gentis," in *Typen der Ethnogenese unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Bayern*, vol. 1, eds. Herwig Wolfram and Walter Pohl (Vienna, 1990), 19–34.
6. "It is quite likely that such views [ethnic discourse originated from antique ethnography and the Holy Scripture—D. A.] corresponded to widespread feelings of identity among barbarians. But these feelings were mostly rooted in small, face-to-face groups": Walter Pohl, "Introduction: Strategies of Distinction," in *Strategies of Distinction: The Construction of Ethnic Communities, 300–800*, eds. Walter Pohl and Helmut Reimitz (The transformation of the Roman world, vol. 2) (Leiden, 1998), 4.
7. For the analysis of current views see Peter Heather, "Ethnicity, Group Identity, and Social Status in the Migration Period," in *Franks, Northmen, and Slavs: Identities and State Formation in Early Medieval Europe*, eds. Ildar H. Garipzanov, Patrick J. Geary, and Przemysław Urbańczyk (Turnhout, 2008), 26–49.
8. For Slavic "tribes" as ethno-political communities see Dušan Třeštík, "České kmeny: Historie a skutečnost jedné koncepce," *Studia Mediaevalia Pragensia* 1 (1988): 129–143; Peter Štih, "Plemenske in državne tvorbe zgodnjega srednjega veka na slovenskem naseljenem prostoru v Vzhodnih Alpah," in *Slovenci in država: Zbornik prispevkov z znanstvenega posveta na SAZU (od 9. do 11. novembra 1994.)*, eds. Bogo Grafenauer et al. (Ljubljana, 1995), 24–26.
9. Patrick Amory, *People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy, 489–555* (Cambridge, 1997), 38.
10. Walter Pohl, "Conceptions of Ethnicity in Early Medieval Studies," *Archaeologia Polona* 29 (1991): 39.
11. See, for example, Pohl, "Introduction: Strategies of Distinction," 3–4; id., "Ethnic Names and Identities in the British Isles: A Comparative Perspective," in *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. John Hines (London, 2003), 10.
12. For the conventionality of the term "ethnic self-consciousness" in relation to pre-modern societies see, for example, Igor' K. Kalinin, *Vostochno-finskie narody v protsesse modernizatsii* (The East Finnic peoples in the process of modernization) (Moscow, 2000), 46–47.
13. For the text of the *Gesta Hungarorum* see, for instance, *SRH*, 33–117. For the localization of all the listed polities see in details Ioan-Aurel Pop, *Romanians and Hungarians from the 9th to the 14th Century: The Genesis of the Transylvanian Medieval State* (Cluj-Napoca, 1996), 94–98.

14. According to the context of Anonymus' narrative, that Loborcy based in the stronghold of Hung was not an independent ruler because the Upper Tisza region was a part of the territory subject to Salanus. See *SRH*, 51–52.
15. The bibliography on *Gesta Hungarorum*, both in Hungarian and in Romanian, is immense. For orientation, see, for instance, the latest edition of the chronicle, Anonymus Belae regis Notarius, *Gesta Hungarorum*, edited, translated and annotated by Martin Rady and László Veszprémy, Magister Rogerius, *Epistola in miserabile carmen super destructione regni Hungarie per Tartaros facta*, translated and annotated by János M. Bak and Martyn Rady (Budapest, 2010), and the recent study by Alexandru Madgearu translated into English by the author himself, Alexandru Madgearu, *The Romanians in the Anonymous Gesta Hungarorum: Truth and Fiction* (Cluj-Napoca, 2005), 113–146.
16. See in details, with an extensive bibliography on the subject, Pop, 104–156; Alexandru Madgearu, “Geneza și evoluția voievodatului bănățean din secolul al X-lea,” *Studii și Materiale de Istorie Medie* 16 (1998): 191–207; id., “Voievodatul lui Menumorout în lumina cercetărilor recente,” *Analele Universității din Oradea: Istorie-arheologie* 11 (2001): 38–51; id., *The Romanians in the Anonymous Gesta Hungarorum*, 113–146.
17. “. . . et terram illam habitarent gentes cozar qui dicuntur” (*SRH*, 49).
18. Menumorout's answer conveyed by his envoys to Arpad was attested as given in an arrogant way that, according to Anonymus, features a Bulgarian reference: “. . . menumorout qui duci arpad primo per legatos proprios bulgarice corde superbe mandando. . .” (*SRH*, 104).
19. “Thosu et zobolsu nec non tubutum cum uidissent, quod deus dedit eis uictoriam magnam, et subiugauerunt domino suo fere plures nationes illius terre” (*SRH*, 64).
20. “. . . milites congregati ex diuersis nationibus. . .” (*SRH*, 104).
21. “Terram uero, que est a fluuio morus usque ad castrum vrsicia, preoccupauissent quidam dux nomine glad de bundyn castro egressus adiutorio cumanorum. . .” (*SRH*, 49–50). For the term *Cumani* applied in medieval Hungarian sources not only to the true Cumanians but also to the Pechenegs and other Turkic groups, see Pop, 126.
22. “. . . glad, a cuius progenie obtum descendit, dux illius patrie cum magno exercitii equitum et peditum, adiutorio cumanorum et bulgarorum atque blacorum” (*SRH*, 90).
23. *SRH*, 66.
24. *SRH*, 66.
25. *SRH*, 65.
26. “Terram uero que iacet inter Thisciam et Danubium preoccupauisset sibi Keanus magnus dux bulgarie auus salani ducis, usque ad confinium ruthenorum et polonorum et fecisset ibi habitare sclauos et bulgaros” (*SRH*, 48).
27. *SRH*, 77.

Abstract**On the Problem of the Post-Avar “Ethnogenesis”: The 9th Century Polities of Banat, Crişana, and Transylvania in Comparative-Historical Context**

The paper examines the 9th century ethno-political situation in the territory of the former Avar qaganate, that is, within the Carpathian Basin, in terms of the early medieval “ethnogenesis” interpreted as the making of ethno-political units (*gentes*). As a result, the so-called post-Avar “ethnogenesis” is conceptualized as a process whose main feature is the absence of fully fledged ethnic groups that could correspond to the polities that emerged on the ruins of the Avar qaganate and would be comparable to what was usually meant by the term *gens* in early medieval Latin sources. According to the author, this feature could be interpreted as the indication that on the territory of the former qaganate the formation of new political structures caused by the rise of post-Avar elites (polito-genesis) outran the emergence of new group identities (ethnogenesis). Another conclusion states that the polities of Menumorout, Glad, and Gelou, as described in Anonymus’ *Gesta Hungarorum*, are very similar in their principal characteristics to those attested for the 9th century post-Avar area by contemporary sources.

Keywords

Avar qaganate, ethnogenesis, *gens*, Menumorout, Glad, Gelou