

## ***Diploma Thesis Review***

### **The Geographical Influence on the Development of Early Slavic Culture and Society**

by Brian Vernon McClellan

Taking on a topic that straddles the fields of ethnography, anthropology, archaeology and history is no easy task, especially for a master thesis with all its limitations. Therefore, one has to admire Brian McClellan for his courage to go and try an analysis that is doing precisely that, asking some ambitious questions in the process – what was the influence of geography in society? How did it affect its development? To answer these questions, he goes on to look deep into the early Slavic history and combines this insight with some examples used by Jared Diamond in his classic work *Guns, Germs and Steel*. While it is easy to accuse the author (as well as Diamond, of course) of blatant geographic determinism and generally raise doubts about the single-minded interest in the all-importance of physical surroundings for cultural developments (something cultural studies mostly left behind these days), taking this premise as granted, we may well say “so far, so good”. Unfortunately, the promising outlines and goals of the text are not followed by an equally interesting analysis. Actually, the resulting text is – and I really regret having to write this – an underwhelming effort that seems almost hopelessly underdeveloped in terms of methodology, sourcing, as well as conclusions. I will try to explain why in the following paragraphs.

While the general structure is sound, first explaining the premise and outlining the methodology (based on Diamond’s comparison of Maori and Morior societies), explaining the common origins of the early Slavs and, finally, comparing the specific Slavic groups and their development throughout the centuries up until the Middle Ages, there is a number of complex, but all-important issues that remain unanswered over the course of the text. First and foremost, the very starting point of the analysis – there is no definition of *Slavs* bar vague geographic. What or who is a Slav? How do we define them in the context of early European history, and how do we define them in the context of the present analysis? By language, ethnicity, or the material culture? And how do these categories connect to each other? Does, for example, language really equal ethnicity? And, are these cultures self-defined in some way, or just defined by their neighbours (i.e. historical civilization such as the Romans or the Byzantines)?

Also, using the example of the Lusatian culture that the author identifies as an analytical space where he puts the Slavic pre-history, we see another problem: over-reliance on just one (secondary, see below) source steers the author firmly towards one specific interpretation of this culture and its meaning. Any other alternative interpretations of Slavic origins go completely unmentioned (the Danubian theory and others, including plain simple uncertainty). Were Lusatians really what we call Slavs today? In broader terms, does material culture really reflect ethnicity? Is it really connected, or are there overlaps? What makes “Slavic” culture, besides it being designated so? The same issue then repeats itself in basically all the parts of the text, starting with the Przeworsk culture, which is associated with early Slavs as often as it is with Germanic background (see Mallory, 1997, for example). Is actually analytically feasible calling the selected groups “west-slavic” and “east-slavic” at all, or is it just a process of stamping our designations to cultures of mixed, potentially unknown origin? Similarly, when the author asks “what was the Slavic life like after the Lusatian culture”, the big question is – was it really Slavic? To be clear, the problem is the author assuming this; the problem is taking it for granted and not even discussing the issue (some secondary literature from cultural studies or up to date ethnographic work would really help here).

Which takes us to the elephant in the room of this text – the use of sources. The whole text is based on secondary literature, which may not necessarily be a problem – only if the analysis would go deep enough and all available sources would be put to use in support of a thesis. The problem here is, while the thesis is there, it is basically just agreeing with Diamond; and, what’s much worse, the bibliography cannot even be called “limited”. It literally consists of *seven* books, some of the rather general in nature and several key works a bit dated. It actually seems that each chapter is more or less a summary of one specific study of a given culture, including some rather disputable notions (the idea of prehistoric “Slavic democracy” is a 19<sup>th</sup> Century concept, while a “professional army” in Great Morava makes little historical sense). I really doubt that there are no recent (past 20 years) works on the issue beyond Bradford, 2001, and that there is not more of them – even a brief research on the web shows otherwise. When the author actually goes on to mention some sources, they’re invariably quoted via secondary works (also, the author manages to call Herbord, the author of St. Otto of Bamberg’s biography, first Herord, then Herold).

Perhaps as result of this rather patchy sourcing, the main body of the text carries numerous problems within its structure. While it may be plausible to define “East Slavic” areas of settlements as based on trade, expansion, and imminent threat of invasion, traits that produced city-based settlements, the text does not even mention the age-long dispute of whether these settlements were really “Slavic” or “Nordic”. Similarly, it is quite problematic to say that “the Marcomani and the Quadi” were “leaving” the areas of future West Slavic settlement – while they may well have been subject to conquest by the Slavs. Calling the “Bohemian basin” a “cradle of Slavs” (taken from Bradford?) makes little sense in this context, too, as does the idea of “adventure” as a motivation for large population movements (p. 16). Also, claiming that “isolation and borders forcing them to get along and not kill each other” helped to establish society in Bohemia does not go well with the unification by conquest usually described in the early Premyslid era. Also, it is not clear whether Bohemia was isolated or trade-oriented area? And, even more importantly – what about the other West Slavs like the Poles?

While we may fully agree with most of the conclusions, some of them a bit overstretched – how, for example, has geography helped the Slavs to turn Christian? And do we know that it was really “friends” who was torn apart by geography of eastern Balkans / Bulgaria? Otherwise, the concluding remarks, while plausible, may have deserved a more substantial attention leading to a more fleshed out summary of arguments.

Looking at the formal side of the text, while the language is mostly clear with occasional typos (Albina / Albania etc.) and not-so-clear formulations (“Mr. Kmietowicz claims that the Lusatian culture came to an en much sooner that 500BC. He claims it ended in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC...”), it also possesses one glaring, I would even say disastrous shortcoming greatly diminishing its value as an academic text – the citation practice with *no page reference*.

In this light, I recommend this text for the *defensio* only with great hesitation, putting my faith in the defendant’s substantial intellectual ability in the hope that he can answer some of the presented criticisms.

In Hradec Kralove, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2019

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