

Cultural Changes in the Upper Odra Basin in Late Antiquity

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This paper discusses cultural changes that took place in late Antiquity in the upper Odra basin: the decline of the barbarian settlements from the Roman period and the early migrations period, and the problem of the appearance of Slavonic populations in this region. Most interesting are the relations between settlements, the exploitation of the environment (mining, agriculture, iron smelting), and the traditions of cultural and economical contacts with the Roman *limes*-zone (importation of objects and ideas).

The upper Odra basin (practically: SW Poland) is a very special region from a geographical point of view: the main river, the Odra, with its biggest tributaries (Ślęza, Bystrzyca, Nysa Kłodzka on the left bank, Widawa, Barycz on the right bank) was a very important communication artery during the Pre-Roman and Roman Iron Age until the early migrations period. With a large surface of very good soil (black earth in the central part, loess in the eastern part), useful minerals (i.e. iron and copper ores, slates, granites, but also silver and gold), the region was obviously very important in the economic life of the “deep” *barbaricum* and its cultural development.

Between 250 B.C and 450 A.D., the region was connected to the population of the Przeworsk Culture, identified with Germanic tribes (sometimes in a very categorical manner with the Vandals). In late Antiquity, in the stage C2 of the Roman period, we see a clear tendency to move settlement concentrations to the South, near (or even in) the Sudete Mountains.

According to older archaeological literature, this process corresponds with late Roman and Byzantine written sources, concerning the territory of Central Europe (massive and intensive migration of barbarians into the Roman Empire, especially after 375 A.D. – the Hun’s invasion in Europe).

However, we can also observe the foundation of new centres of power (political, economical and cultural), proven by prince's graves. For stage C2 (late 3rd century A.D., early 4th century A.D.) those graves confirm the liaisons of local elites with the Roman Empire, and for stage D (late 4th century and early 5th century A.D.) the connections to the Hun's Empire.

At the same time, the region continued its economical development: iron smelting, mining and pottery production using Roman-provincial technology. Local funeral customs were varied. Some inhumation graves demonstrate close similarity to finds from Middle- and Upper Elbe-Region. The other graves of the same type are well connected to the rituals from the Lower- and Middle-Danube zone (Sîntana de Mureş Group, Cherniakhov Culture). The same direction of contacts shows its presence at the very special sepulchral sites: surface cremation cemeteries in the eastern part of the region.

Using the latest research and field work, we can conclude that in late Antiquity the upper Odra basin was never depopulated. The settlement structure after 375 A.D. was of course discontinuous, as traces of migrations are very clear (external and internal as well). However, the relicts of few enclaves and sites concentrations reveal the continuation of "old" cultural tradition even for the 5th century A.D.

The main problem with the analysis of those late settlements is the chronology, uncertain and sometimes sketchy, as the complexes of finds contain pottery with no metal indicators (brooches, belt parts etc.). In those circumstances, the archaeologists should work with scientific methods, which are more objective and measurable (dendrochronology, for example).