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Archaeological Heritage in Motion: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Interpreting Early Medieval Identities in the Eastern Alps

Community identities in the early Middle Ages have long been a defining theme in Slovenian historiography and archaeology, but the dominant narrative-shaped in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries-projected modern ethnic concepts deep into the past (Magdič, 2024). Drawing on social theory (Habermas; Bourdieu; Laurajane Smith), this paper shows how recent interdisciplinary research on migration, regional settlement patterns, and political organisation, based on computer models and archaeometric analyses of material culture, repositions early medieval settlers as dynamic communities rather than fixed ethnic groups, thus moving beyond traditional frameworks.

We combine critical discourse analysis of historiographical and archaeological texts (Magdič, 2024) with advanced spatial and computational approaches and archaeometric techniques. The use of machine-learning tools such as time-series clustering and emerging hot-spot analyses (Štular et al., 2022) and the results of petrographic investigation of pottery (Fazioli, 2024) are linked with the results of regional historical geolinguistic research (Magdič, 2022) to interpret patterns of movement, cultural interaction, and the formation of identities.

Our results show that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholarship entrenched nationalistic assumptions, while current interdisciplinary work reveals more complex pathways. Machine-learning analyses point to at least two waves of migration between c. 500 and c. 700 AD in the Eastern Alps that created complex community identities. Petrography shows a clear shift in ceramic technology from carbonate-rich late antique fabrics to gneiss-rich and grog-rich wares in the early Middle Ages, indicating both technological innovations and new community practices. Data on regional communities and dialect boundaries further illustrate the interplay of complex identity landscapes.

By integrating historiographical criticism, digital archaeology, linguistics, ceramic petrography, and social theory, we move beyond the nationalist narrative of the nineteenth century and develop a multi-scalar interpretation of early medieval communities. This approach considers material culture as habitus and identity practice and emphasises the need for closer collaboration with the natural and computer sciences to test hypotheses about mobility, provenance, and interaction. Interdisciplinarity combined with community-oriented theory thus enables a more nuanced and deeper understanding of archaeological heritage and its identity narratives.

References

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