Against the concept of archaeological culture

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Abstract

The use of the concept of archaeological culture causes tangles and absurdity. Archaeologists often try to ascribe certain ethnic content to archaeological cultures, or simply replace the discourse about ancient ethnic groups with a discourse about archaeological cultures. Also, different archaeological cultures are frequently singled out within the material culture created by the same ethnicity. And among archaeologists there is a prerequisite to explain any change of archaeological cultures by the change of population. It is better not to use the concept of archaeological culture at all, the concept of technocomplex should be used instead. The concept of technocomplex is much more accurate than the concept of archaeological culture, since the concept of technocomplex designates a recurring assemblage of artifacts from a specific region and a specific time as a phenomenon of material culture only, and leaves aside the question of its ethnic content.

Keywords: archaeological culture; technocomplex; archaeology; cultural anthropology; methodology of science

1. Introduction to the problem

The concept of archaeological culture is the central concept of archaeology. The concept of archaeological culture is usually determined as a recurring assemblage of artifacts from a specific region and a specific time.

The concept of culture was brought into archeology from ethnography without due understanding. Initially, it was supposed that a particular archaeological culture represents remains of activities of a particular ethnic group. However, now it is pretty obvious that a certain archaeological culture does not necessarily correspond to one ethnic group. On the one hand, look-alike assemblages of artifacts can belong to different ethnic groups, and on the other hand, unlike assemblages can belong to the same ethnic group.

The use of the concept of archaeological culture causes tangles and absurdity.

On the one hand, it seems that there is a certain understanding that archaeological culture is not at all the same as culture in ethnography or cultural anthropology.

On the other hand, the very word culture causes tangles and fundamental misunderstandings, because the word culture inevitably evokes associations with culture that is the main subject of cultural anthropology. This tangle is partly because archaeologists usually omit the word archaeological and use only the word culture when they write about archaeological cultures. Archaeologists often try to ascribe certain ethnic content to archaeological cultures, or they simply replace the discourse about ancient ethnic groups with a discourse about archaeological cultures. Also, different archaeological cultures are usually singled out within the material
culture created by the same nation/ethnicity. And there is a prerequisite among archaeologists to explain any change of archaeological cultures by the change of population, i.e.: there is a weird presupposition that ancient societies could not elaborate new practices/techniques, new techniques can appear only due to influence of certain new ethnic groups.

For instance, archaeologists of future who would make excavation of 19th – 20th centuries layers of Saint Petersburg/Tokyo/London (or any other big city) would single out the archaeological culture of carts and the archaeology culture of gasoline vehicles, and would say that took place population shift since the archaeological culture of carts was replaced by that of gasoline vehicles. In the case of Saint Petersburg/Tokyo/London of 19th – 20th centuries the absurdity of such conclusion is evident and clear, but conclusions of the same kind can be often met in archaeological writings about different ancient cultures. Archaeological cultures are not at all the same as the cultures dealt with by cultural anthropology and ethnography. In order to pass from the archaeological culture to the culture of cultural anthropology, it is necessary to perform special transposition procedures.

As far as the concept of archaeological culture causes tangle and absurdity, so in this paper we want to speak about concepts that can be used instead of the concept of archaeological culture.

2. The concept of technocomplex

Basing on the above-said, we can say that it is better not to use the concept of archaeological culture at all. Instead of the concept of archaeological culture, the concept of technocomplex should be used in the archaeological discourse.

The concept of technocomplex is much more accurate than the concept of archaeological culture, since the concept of technocomplex designates a recurring assemblage of artifacts from a specific region and a specific time as a phenomenon of material culture only, and leaves aside the question of its ethnic content. It is noteworthy that the concept of technocomplex is already used by some archaeologists, and this should be welcomed.

And the word *culture* should be used as a concept of cultural anthropology only: it should be used only in the sense in which it is used in cultural anthropology.

However, the problem discussed in this article does not boil down to the need to develop a more accurate term. To elaborate a more accurate term, as we can see, is not a very difficult task. The problem discussed here is actually much more serious, it isn’t just a question of a more correct terminology, but a question of a general understanding of what should be the central subject of archaeology.

3. Some notes on the central subject of archaeology and the place of archaeology in cultural anthropology

According to the definition: archaeology is the study of ancient societies, so its main subject is society (just like the main subject of any other branches/discipline of cultural anthropology). Archaeology is an auxiliary discipline of cultural anthropology, and in this aspect it is much alike ethnography, i.e.: its task is to find and to represent facts in the form that can be used by cultural anthropology. Ethnography deals with folklore, ethnic customs and so on, but its subject is society, ethnography studies customs and folklore not in themselves, but as manifestations of a particular culture, as elements of life of a certain society.
Any science begins with the accumulation and accounting of facts, and different auxiliary disciplines usually deal with concrete materials, however, archeology should not be not just bookkeeping of potsherds and flakes, it should represent the facts in such a way, draw its conclusions in such a way that they can be immediately used in cultural anthropology. Here, in a sense, the question of demarcation arises: where archaeology ends, and where the proper cultural anthropology begins. Discovering and description of remains of activity of ancient societies is the sphere of archaeology, interpretation of facts and linking them with data of other disciplines is the sphere of cultural anthropology. An archaeologist should become a cultural anthropologist when arise the questions of interpretation of the discovered sites/items.