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Exploring Identities in Archaeology

Stéphanie Adroit, Kevin Parachaud, Pascual Perdiguero, Thibaud Poigt

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Tools, methodologies and case studies

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Stéphanie Adroit, Kevin Parachaud,
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Grave 3 at Achau. Reproduced courtesy of Benedict Seidl.*

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Introduction

When dealing with archaeological sciences, whether considering past or present works, one may frequently encounter general assumptions mixing descriptive and interpretative elements: “an Iberian settlement”; “a warrior’s burial”; “a feminine adornment”. These kinds of statements are frequently used to characterise the archaeological record, sometimes being so present and embedded in our descriptive models that they represent landmarks in our scientific landscape.

However, such notions involving a claim to identity—whether of gender, ethnicity, or social position—are anything but neutral. Most of them can often be interpreted in a variety of ways. When looking closer at these terms, we observe that they are loaded with strong significance that largely depends on their context and our degree of knowledge. From a formal perspective, we can position them along a broad interpretative spectrum. They may cover a strictly factual approach, for example: “this site is located in what Greeks and Romans called Iberia”, “this burial contains weapons”, “this individual is biologically female”, but they can also have a deeply identity-driven meaning: “this is a dwelling inhabited by people considered by their commercial partners as Iberians”, “the burial belongs to someone recognized by his own kind as a warrior, and who was socially treated in this manner socially”, “this person adopted the feminine gender, and evolved and was accepted this way by her society”.

This ambiguous positioning, somewhere between factuality and interpretation of identity, can be considered problematic in an archaeological approach. This is especially true when the intended meaning of these terms is not stated, and when the evidence for supporting such interpretations is discarded. Consequently, it is imperative to exercise caution when employing these terms because of the polysemy inherent in their usage. Dealing with the notion of identity implies defining it and clarifying how we can and cannot use it in our analyses.

This state of affairs led us to question ourselves about the use of identity in archaeological approaches. If identity is a dialectic process, without objective criteria as stated by the social sciences, archaeologists face an epistemological paradox: how can we speak about identity when we have mute remains with no objective marker of identity? The archaeological markers used to discuss identity are nonetheless numerous: writing as a manifestation of languages, funerary customs as the result of conscious choices in representing the deceased, tools and instruments providing us with information about ways of producing or consuming. But what evidence precisely makes these archaeological markers about identity? Are we talking about collective identity (ethnic groups, lineages, communities...) or individual identity (gender, social class,

function in the society...)? Moreover, did these concepts prevail in ancient societies, or are they just transpositions of our own identity classifications on the past?

As is the case for most archaeologists, each one of us was confronted with these questions about identity, often through very different approaches: through the movement of ethnic groups, burial practices, production patterns in multicultural contexts, or consideration of the social status of craftsmen and merchants. This led us to organise a specific session dedicated to the approach to identities in archaeology during the 29th Annual Meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists held in Belfast in 2023. Our goal had, first and foremost, a methodological nature, as indicated by our title “Archaeological Identities. A Methodological Toolbox to Approach Identities.” We wanted to gather contributions offering different contexts, points of view, and methods to deal with the question of identity. Our aim was not to offer a mere collection of case studies invoking identity-based interpretations, but to present a series of rigorous demonstrations grounded in clearly defined concepts, highlighting the tools archaeologists can use to tackle identity-based interpretations. Although the organizers of the session are all specialists in Late Prehistory, we sought to include contributions addressing this issue across a wide diachronic and geographic spectrum. The day’s presentations and discussions far exceeded our expectations, highlighting both the dynamism of this theme and the interest it garners. The meeting, held on August 31st, received seventeen oral presentations and one poster from authors covering a broad chronology and highlighting various contexts. These authors were: Kevin Parachaud (University of Limoges, France), Irina Ponomareva (University of Barcelona, Spain), Dag Erik Olsen (University of Oslo, Norway), Réjane Roure (University of Montpellier Paul-Valéry, France), Michael McCabe (Leiden University, Netherland), Jesús Jacinto-González (University of Almería, Spain), Léonard Dumont (Universities of Ghent and Bourgogne, Belgium, France), Elizabeth L. Arnold (University of California Los Angeles, USA), Colin P. Quinn (University at Buffalo, USA), Marton Szilagyí (Eotvos Lorand University, Hungary), José Luis Martínez-Boix (University of Alicante, Spain), Alicia Hernández-Tórtolas (CSIC, Spain), Selin Gür (University of Bern, Switzerland), Valery Schlegel (University Freie Berlin, Germany), Thibaud Poigt (University Bordeaux Montaigne, France), Kaja Stemberger Flegar (PJP d.o.o., Slovenia), Jasmin Özyurt *et al.* (Austrian Academy of Sciences, Institute for Medieval Research, Austria), Nicolò Pini (University Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium), and Carlos Díaz Sánchez (University Autonomous of Madrid, Spain).

This success motivated us to publish this collective volume to which thirteen authors have contributed, for which

we thank them warmly. Rather than constituting formal proceedings from our conference session, this volume is a curated and thematically structured collection of chapters built to provide the reader with a panel of case-studies and methods to face specific issues concerning the concept of identity, and how to try to resolve them.

In the first chapter, Kevin Parachaud offers a conceptual introduction to our topic. He explores the methodological paradox raised by the study of identity from an archaeological approach. He provides an overview of the definitions that social sciences apply to identity, its social weight, and subjectivity and multiplicity, and compares these to what classical sources tell us about identity. He addresses the question of the difficulty of using concepts of identity in Archaeology, and encourages the use of correlative approaches, rather than basing hypotheses on the causality between identity and material culture.

The first papers approach the topic of identity through production patterns, starting with Irina Ponomareva who takes us to Neolithic and Bronze Age Siberia to explore the way rock art styles can be considered a reflection of ethnocultural identity. She uses the rock art style as an analytic tool to describe artistic variability, submitting hierarchical taxa to develop a systematic analysis. Through a multidimensional analysis, she highlights the fluidity of identity, how cultural interactions and migrations influenced the styles, and how rock art played a role in building and maintaining identity between people, their history, and their land.

Léonard Dumont continues this exploration of identity through production patterns, exploring European Bronze Age metalworkers, and more specifically, sword makers. His approach is techno-typological, through a classification of artefacts based on their production techniques. He demonstrates that sword makers were probably highly-specialised craftspeople, investing a large amount of time in this activity, but also that the patterns of this production changed over time, maybe implying changes associated with the metalworker's identity.

Through a case study of Middle Bronze Age Transylvania, Elizabeth L. Arnold and Colin P. Quinn use ceramic motif data and network analysis to present a methodology for studying cultural and social dynamics. The authors evaluate the evolution through time of communal identity reflected in changes and differences in decorations, identifying broad patterns that allow them to discern differences in scales of organization and identity through time and space in the Wietenberg cultural groups.

To study the scope of the roman conquest on the identity of communities in north-western Hispania, Alicia Hernández-Tórtolas presents a study of the spatial distribution of local, regional, and imported products in a gold-mining castró. The methodology of the study, based on spatial analysis and unequal access to certain products, demonstrates

that the contact with Rome triggered social changes that translated into the formation of military, urban, and rural identities.

Selin Gür proposes studying the materiality of private spaces to identify how individuals and communities changed their identity through time. She brings forward a case study of Sirkeli Höyük in Cilicia, particularly during the Iron Age. The layout of domestic spaces, the architecture, and the features, showcase the existence of communal practices and a distinct social identity that evolved through time, encompassing changes in culture and identity.

The paper by Valery J. Schlegel tackles the complex concept of intersectionality with regard to identity and archaeology, especially when it comes to the study of Mortuary Archaeology, where different aspects of an individual's identity can be detected. The author presents a coherent reflection on the aspects to consider when trying to detect intersecting identity aspects in burials, and proposes a series of methodological steps that can act as a common base to build upon.

The notion of socio-professional identities in the Bronze and Iron Age has been widely used to describe societies in Western Europe. However, Thibaud Poigt proposes a methodical review of the concept, showing that professional identities are more complex and diluted, not only adhering to status, but to time, space, and social context. However, according to the author, professional identity can be an interesting tool with which to formulate or disprove hypothesis regarding identity in ancient societies.

In her paper, Kaja Stemberger Flegar addresses several factors that shape our interpretation of identity in the funerary context. Her theoretical approach shows how much language and historical context can influence our perception of the identities of past societies. She emphasises that we must accept that we cannot use funerary archaeology to establish the whole truth because of conscious or unconscious prejudices, and that in addition to individual stories we must propose a general model.

The paper by Carlos Díaz-Sánchez deals with the question of cultural contacts between local societies and Roman culture. After a brief summary of the history of the concept of 'Romanisation', the author proposes an analysis at different levels, global, regional, and local, considering the different geographical, historical, political, and social factors at work in the process. This analysis is based on the concepts of glocalisation and cultural interdependence, a methodology that allows for a systematic analysis of the way in which Roman and local elements became integrated, transformed, or rejected in different territories to produce hybrid identities. The vision of identity used in this article reveals a diverse mosaic of cultural expressions unique to each region of the Empire.

In the absence of texts and the remains of settlements, Jasmin Özyurt and his colleagues use funerary archaeology to address the question of the identity of the people in the Carpathian Basin during the Avars period (7th–9th centuries AD). To do this, the authors study the funerary objects discovered in the Achau cemetery. These grave goods display characteristics that suggest an inter-regional identity for the elite of the Avars, but this does not exclude the expression of local characteristics in the grave goods. Furthermore, through differences in grave goods, the cemetery shows that an accentuated differentiation of individuals took place in the local society, not only at a local level, but also at an individual level.

The paper by Nicolò Pini illustrates the methodological interest in an interdisciplinary approach that consists of cross-referencing archaeological, epigraphic, and papyrological sources to study the ancient identities of the Near East from the 2nd to 8th century AD. Using the metaphor of a damaged kaleidoscope, he explains the complexity and dynamism of identity construction, as well as the importance of context in defining it.

These contributions, with their diversity and richness of approaches, allow us to draw several key conclusions. First, they all remind us of the inherent difficulty in addressing a concept as subjective as identity through material remains, remains whose symbolic meaning is often challenging to discern on the basis of just their characteristics. It is

essential to approach this concept with caution, avoiding the risks of over-interpretation and confirmation bias, and to refrain from identity-based interpretations unless the necessary conditions are met.

Furthermore, the various case studies presented here clearly demonstrate that there is no single solution to addressing questions of identity in archaeology. Different contexts and types of data require specific methods. The solution lies in a combination of methods, using as many tools as possible and determining whether these different analyses yield convergent results. This is precisely the meaning behind the “toolbox” approach we seek to convey through this volume. Such a toolbox should not be considered a finished product, but a work in progress. By aggregating and multiplying approaches and methods, we can bring variety, specificity, and subtlety to the way we deal with identity in the archaeological record. Even if the case-studies will one day become outdated, and the methods themselves will need to be upgraded, one should consider this book a steppingstone within the process of providing a complete toolbox dedicated to archaeologists who want to explore identities.

Finally, this book, through all its contributions, underscores the importance of paying careful attention to the meanings of the words we use and the necessity to explicitly define these meanings to present interpretations as precisely and rigorously as possible. Such teaching is likely to be long-standing.

This volume is the result of a session dedicated to exploring the concept of identity in archaeology, held during the 2023 European Association of Archaeologists congress in Belfast. Drawing from the papers presented during this session, it brings together 12 chapters around a key objective: a methodological toolbox for the study of identity in archaeology.

The ambition is not just to compile a series of case studies, but rather to demonstrate how archaeologists can effectively employ these tools to analyse and address identity-related questions through material remains. By focusing on method and approach, this book aims to go beyond individual examples, offering practical insights and frameworks applicable across diverse archaeological contexts. It serves as a guide to understanding how identities can be reconstructed and interpreted within the archaeological record, ensuring a rigorous, method-driven approach to this complex and evolving subject in archaeological research.

Stéphanie Adroit is a lecturer in Protohistory at Paul Valéry University. She specialises in the funeral practices of societies during the Bronze Age and Iron Age.

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Thibaud Poigt is a doctor of archaeology, specialising in the study of the economy and measurement practices of Bronze and Iron Age societies in Western Europe.

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