



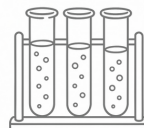
Ljubljana, 13–14 November 2025

BRIDGING HISTORY, ARCHAEOLOGY, AND NATURAL SCIENCES

New Perspectives on Identity, Mobility, and Social
Organization in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages

BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

Doctoral and Postdoctoral Workshop



**BRIDGING HISTORY, ARCHAEOLOGY, AND NATURAL SCIENCES: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON
IDENTITY, MOBILITY, AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION IN LATE ANTIQUITY AND THE EARLY
MIDDLE AGES – Book of Abstracts**

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Introduction

Welcome to Bridging History, Archaeology, and Natural Sciences: New Perspectives on Identity, Mobility, and Social Organization in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, held at the National Museum of Slovenia – Metelkova, Ljubljana, 13–14 November 2025. This Book of Abstracts presents the programme and abstracts for a two-day workshop for doctoral and postdoctoral researchers, designed to encourage cross-disciplinary exchange in the study of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages.

The need for such exchange is clear. Over the past decades, Late Antique and Early Medieval studies have undergone a remarkable transformation. Historians working on the period between c. 300 and 900 increasingly collaborate not only with archaeologists and linguists, but also with researchers from paleogenomics, bioarchaeology, and the natural sciences more broadly. This growing interdisciplinarity reflects the exciting new possibilities offered by aDNA, stable isotope analyses, and bioarchaeological methods. Deeply intertwined with archaeological expertise, these approaches are shedding new light on genetic ancestry, biological kinship within and across burial communities, mobility, diet, and social differentiation in subsistence practices – precisely in a period where written sources are often scarce or biased. At the same time, advances in pathogen aDNA along with collaborations with environmental historians studying land-use changes and climate proxies, are opening new dimensions for understanding historical crises and societal resilience. Yet while these natural-scientific approaches offer powerful tools for studying early medieval history, they also raise deep methodological and epistemological challenges. They produce new data, but no data, whether written, material, genetic, or isotopic, speaks for itself. All must be critically interpreted and contextualized to acquire historical meaning. Disciplines rooted in the humanistic tradition, particularly history and archaeology, therefore play a crucial role in shaping interpretation.

This workshop therefore brings together emerging scholars from history, archaeology, bioarchaeology and related fields to present the latest research and to critically explore both the potential and the limits of interdisciplinarity. Rather than simply juxtaposing different types of evidence, we seek to engage with the theoretical, methodological, and semantic differences that shape interpretation, since new methods open new questions and, in doing so, complicate long-standing debates. Therefore, how can we, working together across disciplines, integrate written, material, genetic, and isotopic evidence to illuminate Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages in ways that open new questions without sliding into circularity or re-establishing disciplinary hierarchies?

This two-day workshop pursues these questions through a programme of themed panels and keynote lectures by Walter Pohl and Susanne Hakenbeck, complemented by a round-table discussion. As organisers, we aim to cultivate rigorous, collegial debate and lay the groundwork for collaborations that continue beyond these two days.

Aljaž Sekne,
Kaja Pavletič,
Brina Zagorc

Programme

Thursday, 13 November

9:30–10:00: Registration

10:00–10:30: Introduction and opening remarks

Mojca Schlamberger Brezar, Dean of the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana

Oto Luthar, Director of the Research Centre of Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Ljubljana

Aljaž Sekne, Department of History, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana

10:30–11:30: Plenary lecture 1

Walter Pohl: From genetic storytelling to historical identity research

11:30–12:00: Coffee break

**12:00–13:00: Humanities and Natural Sciences in Intersection:
Methodological Thoughts (Chair: Kaja Pavletič)**

Brina Zagorc: Beyond the Sequence: Interdisciplinary Reflections on aDNA and Archaeological Interpretation

Peter Zeller: Regional Climates in the Greco-Roman World – Some Methodological Thoughts

13:00–14:00: Lunch break

14:00–15:00: Constructing the “Other”: Perceptions and Ethnic Discourse in Written Sources (Chair: Kaja Pavletič)

Arturo Massa: *Populi, Gentes, and Nationes*: The Perception of “Barbarians” in the *Sermons* of Chromatius of Aquileia (388/389–407/408)

Aljaž Sekne: Two Expansions, One Label? The “Slavs” between Ethnographic Discourse and Migration (6th–7th c.) — A Historian’s View

**15:00–16:00: Communities and Identities after Rome:
Bioarchaeological Perspectives — Part I: Italy (Chair: Brina
Zagorc)**

Michelle Hämmerle, Alexandra Chavarría Arnau, Maurizio Marinato, Carla Brauer, Alessandra Mazzuchi, Monica Perez, Olivia Cheronet, Susanna Sawyer, Martin Kuhlwilm, Ron Pinhasi, Pere Gelibert: Omics analyses suggest diversity within the lowest social strata-associated individuals of Late Antiquity in Italy

Sarah Defant: Continuity and Change in the Late Roman–Early Medieval Transition: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Diet, Mobility and Community in Northwestern Italy

16:00–16:30: Coffee break

16:30–18:00: Round table: Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages Between the Humanities and the Natural Sciences: Potentials, Pitfalls and Prospects

Friday, 14 November

10:00–11:00: Plenary lecture 2

Susanne Hakenbeck: Telling big stories from small stories

11:00–11:30: Coffee break

**11:30–12:30: Communities and Identities after Rome:
Bioarchaeological Perspectives — Part II: Eastern Alps and
Carpathian Basin (Chair: Brina Zagorc)**

István Koncz: Individuals and communities from the 6th-century CE Middle Danube region in light of recent bioarchaeological results

Magdalena T. Srienć-Ściesiek: Temporal changes in Health and Diet in Early Medieval Jaunstein/Podjuna

12:30–13:30: Lunch break

**13:30–14:30: Communities in Motion: Mobility and Demographic
Change in Comparative Perspective (Chair: Aljaž Sekne)**

Alok Chaudhary: Migration and Settlement in the Indo-Gangetic Plains: A Study through Historical Narratives and Archaeological Evidence

Salvatore Liccardo: “The Huns rose against the Alans, the Alans against the Goths, the Goths against the Taifals...” Political Upheaval and Population History in the Late Antique Tisza Basin

**14:30–15:30: New Perspectives and Frameworks in Social History:
Historiographical and Data-Driven Views (Chair: Aljaž Sekne)**

Igor Krnjeta: Decline of Rome in the age of “Big Data”: A Proposal for a New Theoretical Framework for Researching Socio-Economic Topics in Late Antiquity

Maureen Boyard: Is crisis a number? The Carolingians and the demography of crisis (8th-9th c.)

15:30–16:00: **Coffee break**

16:00–17:00: Cemeteries, Community, and Social Structure in the Eastern Alps and Beyond (Chair: Brina Zagorc)

Luka Božinović: Late Antique Refuges in the Eastern Adriatic and the Western and Northern Black Sea Regions: Problems of Settlement Identification and the Identities of their Populations

Kaja Pavletič: The Archaeology of Identity at Lajh in Kranj (Slovenia): Gender, Age, and Power in a Late Antique Community

17:00: **Conclusion**

Keynote speakers

Walter Pohl

From genetic storytelling to historical identity research

Abstract:

The dynamic development of Archaeogenetics has created spectacular new opportunities to learn more about the human past. For some time, geneticists have extended their efforts from human evolution and prehistory to historical periods. This poses a challenge to all disciplines involved: for the Humanities, to open up to the potential of new scientific and bioinformatic methods; and for Genetics, to collaborate with historians and archaeologists in order to get the most out of their data. Translating genetic models into historical narratives requires adopting historical method, not simply relating genetic results to mainstream historical knowledge. This is an interdisciplinary task that needs collaboration from beginning to end, from devising the questions and selecting the material to be tested, to interpreting the results and drawing historical conclusions.

The lecture builds on the experience of the ERC Synergy Grant project HistoGenes (2020-26), coordinated at the Austrian Academy of Sciences and uniting research teams from the MPI for Human Evolution Leipzig, the ELTE/University of Budapest and the Institute for Advanced Study Princeton. It deals with the population history of the early Middle Ages (c. 400-900) in Eastern Central Europe. The lecture will address the potential and the problems of a cooperation between Archaeogenetics and the historical disciplines. In particular, it will discuss the extent to which interdisciplinary collaboration can give us new insights into identity formation and the role of ethnicity in past societies, without falling back onto old essentialist paradigms. It will also sketch some of the results about the population history of the period and their significance for further research.

Walter Pohl was Professor of Medieval History and Auxiliary Historical Sciences at the University of Vienna and Director of the Institute for Medieval Research at the Austrian Academy of Sciences. His research focuses on the transformation of the Roman world, migration, and ethnic processes and identities between Antiquity and the Middle Ages in Europe and beyond. He is a Principal Investigator of the ERC Synergy Project HistoGenes, which integrates historical, archaeological and genetic research to study population history and social change in East-Central Europe between 400 and 900 AD.

Susanne Hakenbeck

Telling big stories from small stories

Abstract:

The expansion of scientific methods in archaeology and related disciplines over the last decades has resulted in extraordinary new and ever-growing datasets. We can reconstruct the biological biographies of individuals in the past, we can determine the provenance of material culture from its raw materials, we have access to information about climate from every year for the past two millennia, and much more. There is a wealth of granular information for historians and archaeologists to draw on. How can we make sense of this? In this talk I will consider how archaeologists have tackled this problem from the 1960s to today. Considering different scales of analysis, I will reflect on how we can bridge the epistemic gap between molecules and tree rings, and big questions about the human past. How can small stories become big stories?

Susanne Hakenbeck is a University Lecturer in Historical Archaeology at the University of Cambridge. Her research explores social and cultural transformations along the late Roman and early medieval frontiers, particularly in the Carpathian Basin and the Danube region, integrating archaeological, isotopic, and historical approaches. She is Principal Investigator of the project *MIGRANT: Mobility and Migration in the Transformations of the Roman World*, which examines human mobility and identity construction in post-Roman Europe. Her work has significantly advanced interdisciplinary perspectives on migration, identity, and cultural interaction in the early Middle Ages.

Abstracts

Is crisis a number?

The Carolingians and the demography of crisis (8th-9th c.)

Maureen Boyard¹

Abstract:

The Carolingian Empire experienced numerous crises, be they food, health, political, or military. Yet, the number of deaths is generally not central to medieval authors' descriptions of these crises, or at least not in the same way as the human tolls we are accustomed to in the 21st century. This paper questions this discrepancy between our definitions of crisis and the medieval ones. I will state that, in medieval texts, crisis is not defined by absolute mortality, but by an upheaval of the existing order. Crises are described above all by the breakdown of social ties and the decline of a "useful" demographic: authors are more interested in the changes that the absence of laborers brings to agricultural production—whether peasants have died or fled—than in the overall number of deaths. Mortality affecting populations that are already the most vulnerable—children, the elderly—is very rarely reported. I will particularly study the case of food crises, the human cost of which is difficult to establish, even for us in the 21st century, because hunger kills slowly and is often combined with other mortality factors such as disease or war. Our contemporary criteria for the severity of food crises are based on indicators, particularly statistical ones, which were inaccessible to medieval people: I will therefore try to see the criteria for the severity of a food crisis from the perspective of medieval people. This paper will therefore question the link which may seem obvious between what we call "mortality crisis" and what medieval people considered to be crises.

¹French School of Rome, Italy

Late Antique Refuges in the Eastern Adriatic and the Western and Northern Black Sea Regions: Problems of Settlement Identification and the Identities of their Populations.

Luka Božinović¹

Abstract:

The presentation begins with the display of the problems in general identification of late antique hilltop settlements of the “refugial” type. It is an area where many conflicting theories about their proper categorization exist, and this part is not an attempt to definitively solve those, but rather an overview of challenges in their proper identification in the fields of archaeology and history.

The central part is based on the discussion about the reasons for the existence of the “refugial” settlements in the areas of the Eastern Adriatic coast and Crimea and the reasons for the apparent lack of such settlements in the area of the western Black Sea coast. Evidence for the existence of such settlements (primarily archaeological, and in the case of the Eastern Adriatic coast some toponymical evidence) is compared, and some lesser-known types of possible refuges are discussed (such as the so-called “cave towns” in Crimea, which have their own challenges in identification and classification). This part also provides possible explanations for the differences in their existence, which primarily stem from the geography of the areas.

In addition, the presentation addresses the issue of the defence of such refuges – whether the hilltop “refugial” settlements were primarily defended by their inhabitants, or whether the defence was generally carried out by military garrisons. This last part also includes a reflection on the methodological challenges of precisely defining the identity of the populations in hilltop “refugial” settlements, which are often called “Romans” or “Romanized local populations” in contemporary research.

¹Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, Croatia

Migration and Settlement in the Indo-Gangetic Plains: A Study through Historical Narratives and Archaeological Evidence

Alok Chaudhary¹

Abstract:

The Indo-Gangetic Plains are historically significant for understanding human movement and settlement patterns. This research paper examines the processes of migration and settlement in this fertile and strategically significant region through both historical narratives and archaeological evidence. The timeframe spans from the early historic to the early medieval period, the study examines human mobility due to reason of ecological, economic, political, and cultural factors, which resulted in the demographic patterns in the Indo-Gangetic plains. This research study adopted a content analysis methodology for the analysis of ancient Indian texts such as the Vedas, Puranas, Buddhist literature and travellers' accounts, along with archaeological reports and secondary data from excavated sites from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Settlement patterns identified through material evidence discovered from several places in both states, including pottery, habitation mounds, burial practices and so on. A comparative study is conducted to identify the relationship and gaps between literary depictions and material culture for a better understanding of migration and settlement in this region. Through a comparative approach, the study highlights the convergence and divergence between textual and material records, offering insights into population movement, urbanization, and the formation of early agrarian and trading communities in this region. The field of study encompasses present-day Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh; both are crucial from the point of significance for human migration and settlement within broader regional trends. The paper suggests that migration in the Indo-Gangetic Plains was not a linear process but rather a complex, multi-layered phenomenon contributing to cultural pluralism and socio-economic transformation. The findings challenge deterministic models of historical development by foregrounding human agency, ecological negotiation, and intercultural exchange. This research study contributes to the broader academic discourse on South Asian history by integrating diverse methodological tools and highlighting the value of interdisciplinary analysis in understanding the deep historical roots of mobility and settlement in one of India's most historically significant regions.

¹Department of Social Work, Mahatma Gandhi Central University, India

Continuity and Change in the Late Roman–Early Medieval Transition: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Diet, Mobility and Community in Northwestern Italy

Sarah Defant¹

Abstract:

This paper presents an interdisciplinary bioarchaeological study of three communities in the underexplored region of north-western Italy—Albintimilium (Late Roman), Frascaro (Ostrogothic), and Collegno (Longobard)—spanning the 3rd to 8th centuries CE. Drawing on osteological, isotopic, archaeological, environmental, and palaeogenomic evidence, it examines how rural and small urban populations navigated the geopolitical and social transformations following the end of Roman rule and the arrival of new groups. Taken together, these case studies challenge assumptions about migration, decline, and cultural disruption, instead revealing patterns of continuity, local adaptation, and strategic community formation.

The results present a nuanced picture of late and post-Roman Italy and provide insight into identity construction and social organisation in post-Roman contexts. Across all three sites, the findings highlight the complexity of interpreting mobility, identity, and ethnicity in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. Rather than supporting simplified narratives of mass migration or abrupt cultural breaks, they point to resilience, continuity, and the agency of local communities. In doing so, the study also demonstrates the value—and necessity—of integrating diverse strands of evidence to build meaningful interpretations.

By focusing on a region that has received relatively little attention and adopting a reflexive, context-aware approach, this paper contributes both new data and broader reflections on the possibilities of interdisciplinary work in the study of the late- and post-Roman West.

¹Department of Archaeogenetics, Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Leipzig, Germany

Omics analyses suggest diversity within the lowest social strata-associated individuals of Late Antiquity in Italy

Michelle Hämmerle^{1,2}, Alexandra Chavarria Arnau³, Maurizio Marinato³, Carla Brauer¹, Alessandra Mazzuchi³, Monica Perez¹, Olivia Cheronet^{1,2}, Susanna Sawyer^{1,2}, Martin Kuhlwilm^{1,2}, Ron Pinhasi^{1,2}, Pere Gelabert^{1,2}

Abstract:

Late Antiquity and the Early Medieval period were marked by profound social and political transformations, including the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the arrival of non-Romanized groups in Southern Europe. These shifts reshaped societies across Northern Italy, where the Longobards established a kingdom. However, little is known about the everyday lives of lower social strata or how biological factors such as sex or genetic ancestry shaped experiences of inequality. This period also witnessed major climatic disruptions, notably the 6th-century climate crisis, which significantly impacted ecosystems and human health. This study presents an interdisciplinary investigation of social stratification and health in Early Medieval Northern Italy. We analyzed hundreds of individuals from 12 well-documented archaeological sites, integrating archaeology, faunal and isotopic analysis, osteology, genomics, and metagenomics. From these, we generated metagenomic data from 80 individuals. Genetic analyses reveal striking diversity: individuals of lower status typically show local Italian ancestry, while wealthier individuals often display admixed Longobard ancestry. This suggests a link between ancestry and social mobility in post-Roman societies. This project is among the first to combine ancient metagenomic data with archaeological indicators of social status. Pathogen screening recovered five complete Hepatitis B virus genomes and one Human betaherpesvirus 6B genome—only the sixth such ancient genome known to date. We also reconstructed oral microbiomes for 69 individuals, identifying several novel metagenome-assembled genomes (MAGs). Surprisingly, microbiome composition and pathogen prevalence remained relatively stable across four centuries and different sites. This may reflect consistent dietary and health conditions across regions or point to current limitations in metagenomic analysis of dental calculus. Overall, our findings offer new insights into the intersection of ancestry, health, and social inequality in a time of profound change.

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²Human Evolution and Archaeological Sciences (HEAS), University of Vienna, Austria.

³Department of Cultural Heritage, University of Padova, Italy

Individuals and communities from the 6th-century CE Middle Danube region in light of recent bioarchaeological results

István Koncz¹

Abstract:

In the past few years, the ‘whole cemetery approach’ became widespread in projects and studies involving paleogenomics and it is often complemented with other types of scientific analyses, such as isotopic measurements, as well to, combined with archaeological and historical data, give insights into the lives of communities that would be unachievable by any of the scientific fields alone. Not only do longstanding questions of archaeology of identity gain new perspectives, but subjects once considered beyond the scope of burial archaeology have now become central to current research.

Through the example of several comprehensively sampled 6th-century cemeteries from the Middle Danube region, I aim to explore the complex relationship between biological relatedness and social kinship. In the vast majority of sites examined, we were able to identify pedigrees, ie groups of biologically related individuals. These relationships were often reflected in burial customs, suggesting that these biological ties played an important—though not exclusive—role in shaping social kinship. However, the size and structure of these so-called pedigrees varied significantly between sites, indicating that their influence on the formation and development of communities may have differed from one site to another. Combining these results with isotopic and anthropological data highlights how these ties played a fundamental role in mobility and coping with crises but also in everyday activities such as the care of children.

¹Institute of Archaeological Sciences, Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary

Decline of Rome in the age of “Big Data”: A Proposal for a New Theoretical Framework for Researching Socio-Economic Topics in Late Antiquity

Igor Krnjeta¹

Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to present a new approach as well as to showcase the usage of digital types of historical sources; both in the function of researching the socio-economic topics of Late Antiquity. An additional goal is to demonstrate the possibilities and deficiencies of this framework which were encountered during research. Firstly, the four criteria which have been determined as the most suitable indicators of pre-modern economic performance will be presented, and each of these will be covered with a short explanation on how to approach them methodologically. These are: demographic trends, the standard of living, social relations, and finally, urban-rural connectivity and interdependence. We will begin with demonstrating how demographic trends can be reconstructed and interpreted on the basis of archaeological data. The second criterion attempts to answer whether the Roman standard of living during the Imperial and Late Antique era experienced a decline or an increase as a reaction to population pressure. By the examination of social relations, an attempt at clarification will be made whether population growth increased social inequality, or conversely if population decline reversed that trend. The last criterion, urban-rural connectivity, and interdependence probes whether the city of Rome was a “parasite” on its hinterland, or if there was a division of labour that was equally beneficial for both the city and its rural environs. As mentioned, attention will also be given to the description and role of new types of sources, in this case, the use of databases, in historical research. To be more precise, this part of the presentation will discuss, by using the *Roman Hinterland* database as an example, the topics such as database schemas, the principles on which they function, and how historians can approach these digital tools while using them for their research.

¹Miroslav Krleža Institute of Lexicography, Croatia

“The Huns rose against the Alans, the Alans against the Goths, the Goths against the Taifals...”

Political Upheaval and Population History in the Late Antique Tisza Basin

Salvatore Liccardo^{1,2}

Abstract:

Understanding the impact of political and military events on society is central to the study of past cultures. For Late Antiquity (c. 250–750 CE), debates persist over whether migrations reflected large-scale demographic shifts or more limited elite-led movements amplified through cultural assimilation. This paper presents findings from the HistoGenes project concerning population dynamics in the Tisza Basin between the late 3rd and 6th centuries CE. Inhabited by communities identified in written sources as Sarmatians until the 4th century, the region experienced repeated military conflicts and the rise of polities with wider geopolitical ambitions in the following two centuries. Two pivotal episodes, the arrival of the Huns (c. 400) and the establishment of the Avar Khaganate (late 6th c.), are traditionally viewed as catalysts for major societal transformations.

To assess their demographic impact, the HistoGenes project combines archaeological and historical analysis with new archaeogenetic and isotopic data from approximately 500 individuals. Focusing on entire cemeteries in continuous use throughout the period under scrutiny, it was possible to examine internal site structures to detect patterns of population continuity or disruption. The results reveal notable social and demographic changes aligned with both the Hunnic and Avar arrivals, especially marked by increased human mobility between the early 5th and mid-6th centuries. These findings suggest that major political shifts corresponded with real demographic transformations, not merely changes in elite culture or ideology. By integrating genetic, archaeological, and historical evidence, this study contributes to ongoing debates on the nature of Late Antiquity, moving beyond binary models of ‘decline and fall’ versus ‘transformation’ to offer a more complex picture of change, continuity, and adaptation.

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²Institute for Medieval Research, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Austria

Populi, Gentes, and Nationes: The Perception of “Barbarians” in the Sermons of Chromatius of Aquileia (388/389–407/408)

Arturo Massa¹

Abstract:

The study of the interactions between Aquileia and the world beyond the imperial *limes* provides a valuable framework for elucidating the mechanisms of communal self-determination in opposition to an external Otherness.

This paper seeks to explore the perception of the so-called barbarian populations through an analysis of the homiletic corpus of Chromatius of Aquileia.

Situated at a crossroads of diverse cultures and religions, the Aquileian community – comprising both Arian and Nicene Christians, as well as a substantial Jewish faction – was compelled to confront the significant Germanic presence along the borders of the patriarchal territory.

An examination of Chromatius’ *Sermons* reveals that the bishop deliberately distinguishes, through a nuanced use of terminology, the identity groups constitutive of the Aquileian community from external elements. By designating Christians and Jews as *populi* and *gentes*, while reserving the term *nationes* exclusively for the Germani peoples, the collection of *Sermons* invites reflection both on the semantic significance and usage of these terms in late antiquity and on how Aquileia, through the lens of its most eminent bishop, codified group membership in terms of specific ethnic, cultural, and religious identity. Furthermore, the recurrent references to *barbari* in Chromatius’ sermons transcend mere categorization, serving instead as a rhetorical strategy to reinforce communal belonging by emphasizing the perceived differences between the community and the “other”, who is viewed as potentially threatening.

¹University of Bari “Aldo Moro”, Italy

The Archaeology of Identity at Lajh in Kranj (Slovenia): Gender, Age, and Power in a Late Antique Community

Kaja Pavletič¹

Abstract:

The cemetery of Lajh in Kranj (Slovenia), dating to the second half of the 6th century, is the largest Late Antique cemetery in Slovenia and the broader Alpine-Adriatic region. With at least 730 graves uncovered so far, it represents a unique dataset for exploring the archaeology of identity in a period of profound political, social, and cultural transformation. Yet despite this potential, Lajh has often been sidelined in modern archaeological discourse because the majority of its graves were uncovered during early 20th-century excavations, when documentation was poor and often lacking in detail, and its only comprehensive publication (Stare 1980) was riddled with errors. A thorough revision of all the available data on the cemetery, reconstruction of grave assemblages, new methodological approaches, and careful theoretical consideration were required to address complex questions of identity in Late Antiquity. Previous scholarship on Lajh has emphasized ethnicity, reflecting the cemetery's diverse material culture and placement within a turbulent 6th-century context that saw shifting affiliations to Ostrogothic, Frankish, Byzantine, and Lombard polities. While discussions regarding ethnicity remain relevant, in the case of Lajh they risk overshadowing other crucial dimensions of identity embedded in burial practices. Our study shifts focus toward the intertwined identities of gender and age, approached through both archaeological data on graves and grave goods, as well as anthropological evidence that is itself fraught with diverse problems and therefore demands careful re-evaluation. In doing so, we explore how gendered power dynamics were expressed and negotiated in mortuary practice, and how these dynamics intersected with the social structure of the community that buried its dead at Lajh.

¹Department of Archaeology, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

Two Expansions, One Label? The “Slavs” between Ethnographic Discourse and Migration (6th–7th c.) — A Historian’s View

Aljaž Sekne¹

Abstract:

Few problems of the first millennium are more contested than the emergence of the “Early Slavs.” How did the vast space between Greece and the Baltic come to be described as “Slavic” within a few centuries? Answers differ, as do the methods behind them. The biggest methodological problem that plagues Slavic studies is circularity, in that material culture, language, outside identification, and (now) ancestry are too often, deliberately or inadvertently, treated as interchangeable proxies: thus a person with northeastern European ancestry is treated as “Slavic” by default; a Prague-Korchak assemblage becomes “Slavic culture”; and the *Sclavi* in the written sources are in turn read as a single, language-based trans-regional *gens*. Yet the more “Slavs” we find this way, the likelier we are to find even more. To get out of this loop, terminological reflection across disciplines is paramount.

Accordingly, this paper adopts a deliberately modest, strictly historical approach: it traces the discourse of the ethnonym *Sclaveni/Sclavi* in 6th–7th-century Greek and Latin sources, asking what the label meant to contemporaries, where and through which channels it circulated, and how useful it remains for modern analysis. It argues that “Slavs” was not a fixed name of a clearly circumscribed people in the 6th–7th centuries but a dynamic, context-dependent ethnonym, oscillating between an ethnographic category and occasional self-identification. This, in turn, laid the groundwork for the emerging modes of Slavic identification that become visible from the 9th century onward. Seen from this processual angle, the forms of collective Slavic belonging seem to have been the outcome, rather than the driving force, of the diffusion of complex cultural, linguistic, and demographic phenomena occurring in Eastern Europe between the 6th and 8th centuries.

¹Department of History, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

Temporal changes in Health and Diet in Early Medieval Jaunstein/Podjuna

Magdalena T. Srienć-Ściesiek^{1,2}

Abstract:

The Jauntal/Podjuna Valley in Carinthia, Austria, represents a key region in the aftermath of the Roman Empire's decline. During the early medieval period (6th–11th centuries CE), the area experienced significant cultural and demographic shifts, including the arrival of cultural groups such as the Avars, Lombards, Ostrogoths, and Slavs, who were eventually incorporated into the expanding Bavarian and Carolingian spheres of influence. In the absence of contemporary settlement evidence, cemetery contexts serve as the primary source of insight into the lives of communities that inhabited this transitional landscape.

This paper presents the bioarchaeological results of 128 individuals from the early medieval cemetery at Jaunstein/Podjuna. Through the integration of stable isotope analysis ($\delta^{13}\text{C}$ and $\delta^{15}\text{N}$), radiocarbon dating, and skeletal and dental paleopathology, the study reconstructs patterns of diet and health within the community over time. Isotopic data reveal subtle shifts in plant and protein consumption, likely reflecting changes in agricultural practice and access to food resources. Paleopathological data reveal a temporal shift in health and highlight the presence of metabolic stress indicators, such as cribra orbitalia, periosteal lesions, and evidence consistent with scurvy, pointing to a diet that may have lacked nutritional diversity, particularly among non-adult individuals.

These findings suggest that the community at Jaunstein/Podjuna navigated long-term physiological stress and subsistence challenges in the context of broader political and economic change. By emphasizing biological indicators of diet and health, this case study contributes to interdisciplinary discussions on how rural populations adapted to life in a post-imperial world. It demonstrates the value of integrating bioarchaeological methods with regional historical frameworks to illuminate the lived experiences of early medieval communities during periods of social transformation.

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Beyond the Sequence: Interdisciplinary Reflections on aDNA and Archaeological Interpretation

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Abstract:

Researching ancient DNA (aDNA) has transformed archaeological narratives by revealing new aspects of ancestry, kinship and mobility. The analytical precision of aDNA and its ability to reconstruct genetic histories have broadened the scope of archaeological evidence, but they have also redefined how the past is conceptualised. The epistemic authority of genetic data is increasingly shaping interpretations of identity and cultural change, sometimes at the expense of contextual complexity.

This paper explores how integrating molecular data into archaeological reasoning challenges established interpretive frameworks and raises questions about the hierarchy of knowledge between disciplines. The intersection of genetics and archaeology highlights the tension between empirical certainty and interpretive openness, reminding us that data cannot speak independently of theory or context. Maintaining plurality of interpretation and fostering dialogue across disciplines is essential in order to avoid deterministic or reductionist readings of the past.

The focus shifts beyond the production of genetic results to their translation into historical meaning and their ethical and political implications. Recognising these dynamics enables a more reflective and responsible use of ancient DNA (aDNA) in reconstructing human histories — one that embraces complexity, acknowledges uncertainty and situates scientific results within the social and cultural worlds they aim to illuminate.

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Regional Climates in the Greco-Roman World – some Methodological Thoughts

Peter Zeller¹

Abstract:

The question of how climate events influenced the history of Greco-Roman antiquity was already being discussed during the Enlightenment, but it was not until the 1950s that datable and quantifiable proxy data became available, providing at least some insight into the climatic conditions under which the people of antiquity actually lived. Today, palaeoclimatology can reconstruct the ancient climate with astonishing precision in some cases, and as a result, climate history has steadily gained importance in ancient historical research over the past 10 to 15 years. Despite the increasing differentiation of the data material, however, the connection between climatic conditions and the development of ancient societies continues to be conceptualised in essentially deterministic narratives that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s under the influence of numerous technical innovations such as mass spectrometry: 'the Roman Climate Optimum' and 'the Late Antique Little Ice Age'. The focus here is clearly on Roman history; there is no coherent narrative for the Greek world, which is probably due to the political and cultural diversity of the Greek settlement area. Proxy data now show that climatic conditions were far more heterogeneous in space and time than established narratives would suggest, and methodological discourse clearly reveals how difficult it is to draw conclusions about historical contexts from climate-related parameters such as temperature or precipitation. Against this background, this talk once again raises the question of whether and how ancient history can use palaeoclimatological proxy data as sources, and at what scale climatic changes can be considered historically relevant. It explores this question at a methodological level and proposes a micro-historical perspective that takes temporal and regional differences seriously and makes them the starting point for climate-historical analysis. In this way, the traditional narratives and patterns of interpretation of ancient climate history are to be critically revised and, where necessary, realigned.

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