

Transmigrations as a mechanism of living space exploration in the Northwestern Black Sea region at the Pleistocene–Holocene boundary

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Introduction

Migration can be defined as a total or partial change of location (habitat) and/or movement into new areas for a certain period of time or forever. Contemporary prehistory, archaeology, ethnology, and cultural anthropology tend to interpret migration as one of the four basic genres of human activity, alongside habitation, storage, and creation.

One can trace long lasting migrations (or colonization) and comparatively rapid movements (or relocation). In the framework of this last group of population movements, which implies changes of habitat realized by groups or by individuals with a certain purpose over a temporally restricted interval, one can distinguish two basic variants: (a) migrations which give rise to significant enlargement or total change of habitat for a certain population group, and (b) movements within one foraging territory that are often called seasonal migrations. In all cases, the main historical function of migrations is to ensure group survival for the population in question.

The subject of the present contribution is an examination of the first definition of relocation, i.e., total or partial living space changes that could be called transmigration. This sort of human relocation is usually traceable relatively easily on the basis of changes in the territory of distribution of archaeological cultures identified by certain flint-knapping traditions. The last decade was marked by a growth in popularity of ecological and demographic explanations for migratory processes of this genre. According to its promoters, disequilibrium in hunting intensity and scale, natural reproductive potential, and population growth that created overpopulation and, therefore, pressure on the foraging territory were the main agencies that caused the need for transmigration or, at least, expansion of living space by Late Paleolithic and Mesolithic hunter-gatherers (e.g., S. Bibikov, P. Dolukhanov, L. Binford, M. Freeman, R. MacArthur, and E. Pianka). Recent studies of Black and Mediterranean sea-level dynamics at the Pleistocene–Holocene boundary unexpectedly opened new, 'catastrophic' insight onto translocation, as the proponents of the 'Great Flood' hypothesis suggest that a rapid inundation formed a reasonable escape mechanism that encouraged Fertile Crescent and Mediterranean populations to avoid the steadily rising water and in so doing, spread their technology and skills, including early agriculture and cattle breeding, to inner parts of Europe (e.g., W. Ryan, W. Pitman, R. Ballard, Ch. Turney, H. Brown, D. and P. Dimitrov, and L. Zaliznyak). Based upon data from Mesolithic archaeological sites of the Northwestern Black Sea Steppe region, we try to verify existing explanations for the causes of translocation, their mechanisms, and their historical and cultural implications.

Translocation as infiltration or separation: case of Bilolissya

The origin of the Bilolissya flint-knapping tradition in the Ukrainian part of the Lower Danube region represents one typical example of translocation occurring at the Pleistocene–Holocene boundary. Initially, the migrants were representatives of the Middle Danubian culture circle at the end of Dryas III, who came from the neighboring Romanian territory following aurochs, their main prey species. As archaeological mapping shows, the source of their movement can hardly be connected territorially or ecologically with sea-level changes. The migrants preserved their traditional tool kits, subsistence,

and livelihood systems in the new territory during the short period of their existence there (until the beginning of the Preboreal period of the Holocene).

It is rather difficult to define the character of this population displacement. On the basis of the number of migrants and their compact and short occupancy (1) without serious impact on the further cultural history of the region and (2) without archaeologically traceable contacts with neighboring coeval cultures, this phenomenon could be interpreted as infiltration. For one basic unit of the Middle-Danubian Culture circle, it might be regarded as migrational separation (Bromley, 1983:236). At the same time, the absence of Paleolithic sites and artifacts within the territory makes it possible to assume that, with respect to this particular ecological region, the process could be interpreted as colonization in its non-typical, rapid form. The necessary background for this process was brought about by two circumstances: the growth of a subsistence crisis in the Middle Danube region on the one hand, and on the other, aurochs radiation within the Lower Danube region, which gave migrants a chance to continue the same subsistence strategy in the new territory.

Oncoming migration or 'counter-relocation': case of Grebeniki and Kukrek

Analysis of Boreal (or Late Mesolithic) site distribution lets us distinguish a special sort of transmigration that led to habitat changes: the so-called oncoming relocation. It is represented by the dispersion of Grebeniki groups into the Lower Dnieper region and Crimean foothills, accompanied by Kukrek population movement into the Lower Dniester and Lower Danube region and Girs'ko-Crimean culture dispersion into the Lower Dnieper region. These could be brilliant examples of such migrations. Areas of distribution for archaeological sites of every flint-knapping tradition overlap, and this fact indicates that the territory was exploited jointly by representatives of different tool-production traditions. At the same time, as suggested by L. Zaliznyak (2004:13), movement of populations from the Middle East through the Balkan region escaping from the 'Great Flood' could not be traced archaeologically. Quite the contrary, one can trace significant advancement of representatives of the Kukrek tradition (who traditionally explored only the central part of the Northwestern Black Sea steppes) up to the Lower Danube region.

Simple searches in order to broaden one's foraging territory seem necessary, but one would need to obtain sufficient background about the oncoming relocations. Only mutual interest in "counter-relocation," through cross-ethnic and intercultural contacts could guarantee a steady, durable, and peaceful character for this process. Ethnographic data testify that the main purpose of such forms of interaction among different cultural traditions is to increase their survival potential and general level of security in social development with the help of knowledge, skills, and a resource base obtained from neighbors. Such contacts, accompanied by oncoming population movement, could bring about new cultural origins or, as it is supposed for hunter-gatherer societies, form social and/or ethnic units at a higher level of integration. One of the possible results of such transmigration could be a contribution to the origin of a specific form of tribal organization (the so-called "blinking" tribe), which is sometimes traced to pre-agricultural societies (Ghirenko, 1991).

Although the implications of a "counter-relocation" seem quite logical, it is also possible that we face here another sort of one-time targeted relocation versus seasonal migration, which would be examined later. At the same time, one should not ignore the significance inherent in hunters' thirst for journeys, simple curiosity, and the search for a "better life" in the motivation for such movements. *Most likely, they acted together with the tendency toward broadening the living space, strengthening the subsistence base, personal conflicts, and tension elimination, as well as other factors connected with the behavioral and livelihood peculiarities of early prehistoric populations.*

Conclusion

Brief examination of the causes, mechanisms, and cultural consequences of translocation as a peculiar genre of migration was conducted in the Northwestern Black Sea region during the course of a cultural exploration of the Pleistocene-Holocene boundary. Results testify to the predominance of

environmental, demographic, and social factors, and no direct connection with geological processes, such as with sea-level changes, could be established.

Analysis of translocation consequences does not prove the traditional assumption that, in the new habitat, the migrants' culture usually changes rather quickly and often is thoroughly transformed. On the contrary, in most cases, migration appears to be the only possibility to preserve traditional culture and continue their subsistence system and, quite often, their tool kits and the technology of flint processing, as well. This was the case in the examination of the groups at Bilolissya. It was so because, for hunter-gatherers, the main criteria for choosing a new habitat were similarity of landscape features and familiar environmental conditions, which due to a set of obstacles, could not in whole measure, satisfy the vital needs of the community in the original region.

As a result, transmigrations due to change or enlargement in living space could be regarded as a necessary measure permitting further evolutionary development, and that the practice emerged over long periods of time group as a behavioral strategy in permanently changing environments. In the course of time, the culture of newcomers would begin to change, being influenced by multi-stage contacts with local populations and local landscape peculiarities. Such processes usually cause modifications in both recently arrived and native populations, resulting in the formation of new tool production techniques and, probably, cultural traditions. In such a context, transmigration as living space change could be interpreted as a specific form of intercultural contact as well as a peculiar agency of culture genesis. Transmigration is most likely a means of cultural preservation in a new territory with the same ecological situation; in the case of oncoming movements, it is obviously one form of ethnic contact.

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