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The land of ring forts. The landscape of communities inhabiting the area between the middle Odra and middle Prosna in the 8th-10/11th centuries

Summary

The landscape of the Slavs from the tribal times constitutes an exceptional field for scientific reflection. However, this issue requires a specific approach. Above all, it should be borne in mind that the socio-cultural reality of this people was completely different not only from that in which we function today, but also from that of the medieval writers, from whose works medievalists draw their knowledge of various aspects of the life of past communities. The world of barbarians and the world of post-Antique Christian culture were fundamentally different, as they had developed independently on different cultural and environmental substrates. This assumption became the basis of my study. A significant problem is the paucity and bias of sources directly relating to the functioning of Slavic societies. What is now available to us are mainly silent archaeological monuments, dating from the times before common Christianisation. An exceptional category of these, still present in the landscape, are ring forts. They are tangible relics of an ancient culture - gateways to its history. They are anchor points linking our understanding of the pre-Christian Slavs with the Slavs themselves. But they are only a component of a narrative that needs to be filled with content. Interdisciplinary comparative studies and the cultural anthropology theories were helpful in this task.

The research perspective I adopted treats landscape not as a fragment of a natural environment, but as a cultural creation. It is a cognitive representation of man's living space that regulates his functioning in nature. Specific communities create landscapes according to their cultural view of reality and individual values. The same space can be perceived in many ways – it is the basis for many landscapes (*one land, many landscapes*). The aim of this study was to present a potential landscape of tribal Slavs. In order to achieve it, it became necessary to present a reconstructed model of their culture, which can be described as syncretic. Its distinctive feature is a magical-mythical valorisation of reality, in which all spheres of activity, both practical and symbolic (communication and worldview), are inseparable – they do not function autonomously. Reality was shaped by myths, among which the most significant role played those about the origins of the world and its way of functioning. They gave form to cognitive representations, including landscape. The second important factor was the social model of tribal Slavs, which after K. Modzelewski I call barbarian collectivism. In such a society subjectivity is distributed over the whole community, and authority is task-based, not institutional. Decisions were taken at meetings of the general free population – assemblies.

These were not secular meetings, for the gods were always present, and they sanctified all decisions, the adoption of which required the common consent that underlay the social order. I stand above it that the ring forts were a manifestation of a barbaric world view.

The area I have chosen to illustrate my concept of Slavic culture, with particular reference to the Slavic landscape, is a unique and almost literal "land of ring forts". In a relatively small, morphologically undifferentiated area, delimited by the basins of the middle Obra, Barycz and middle Prosna rivers, 82 ring forts dating back to the older phases of the early Middle Ages have been discovered so far. I do not exclude, and even consider it highly probable, that their number will increase with the intensification of the field survey. The state of research on these sites varies and in most cases is, euphemistically speaking, unsatisfactory. Nevertheless, certain conclusions can be drawn from them. My analysis of the dislocation of these sites, their form, development, and uncovered relics made it possible to consider them as central places of Slavic communities, where communal needs were fulfilled. At the same time they were not the only centres of contemporary tribes, but constituted one of their categories (the others were sanctuaries "in the world of nature", topographic objects of mythical-magical valorisation and perhaps market places, although these could have been the same as those mentioned above). I believe that they were multifunctional public structure that focused the phenomena that regulated the life of the surrounding population, the most significant of which was the assembly. They were also treasuries of collective goods such as weapons, economic and productive tools and foodstuffs. The ramparts protected them from unauthorised persons and secured the goods stored within, also in sacred terms.

The vision of the Slavic landscape presented in this work is an attempt to understand how our tribal ancestors lived and what guided them in their actions and choices. In spite of the long tradition of archaeological research on ring forts, or generally on settlements from the times before the establishment of the Polish state, I believe that there are still many questions that remain unanswered. In my work I mainly wanted to emphasise the otherness of the tribal world, whose collectivism may seem unnatural and even difficult to accept to someone functioning in the European culture, the roots of which go back to post-Antiquity times.