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Functional Ethnicity

Or, How to Describe the Societies of Ancient Palestine?[1]

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Abstract

Social studies and anthropology, based on ethnographical research, take for granted the role of large populous groups in defining ethnicity. Self-definitions of the group, as well as definition by others, are interpreted as the central issues regarding large groups. The paper aims to argue for the key-role of elite groups in self-identification and ethnic creation. Small groups of elite, by defining their own "ethnicity" decided it for larger groups. This hypothesis will be tested and illustrated by test cases of ethnogenesis in Iron Age Palestine.

1 Preface

Studies on ethnicity in ancient Palestine face two specific challenges: first, the historical and ethnic realities of biblical times contributed to the formation of the historic and religious identities of Judaism and Christianity. Those who believe in the religious truth of the Scriptures tend to accept the ancient narratives as faithful representations of the past. They are inclined to see the texts as literally true and currently relevant at the same time. For example, when readers of the New Testament, while reading the description of the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts, see the enumeration of many different groups ("Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from

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[1] The earlier version of this paper was presented at the joined meeting of European Association for Biblical Studies and Society of Biblical Literature International Meeting in Vienne (2014), and at University of Oxford during the conference: *Identity, Ethnicity and Nationhood before Modernity: Old Debate and New Perspectives* (2015). I would like to thank Jim West for improvement of English of this paper.

Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs," Acts 2,9–11), they may be willing to interpret these names as belonging to ethnic groups similar to ones in existence today. Readers of the Hebrew Bible may see the Israelites and Egyptians of the Bible as being analogous to contemporary ethnic or national groups.

Secondly, biblical heritage, especially the heritage of the Hebrew Bible, became the foundation for the national identity of modern Jews and Israelis. This very fact affects all scholarly research on the ethnicity of Ancient Palestine, even if conducted *sine ira et studio*, because such research may indirectly touch people's sense of Jewish self-identity, i. e., some people, who at least in part live with a sense of threat and are traumatised by the Shoah experience of their compatriots.

Keeping all this in mind, we must still agree that scholars cannot avoid this field of research based on the sensitive nature of its implications. With due caution, scholars have to face the topic. Such an introduction may seem superfluous – because of being obvious – to scholars dealing with ethnicity in many pre-modern societies. It is however important that it be kept in mind when facing the reality of ancient Palestine.

If one even agrees to use the term ethnicity in regard to the Late Bronze and Iron Age populations of Palestine, one has to do so with caution.[2] Undoubtedly, ethnicity is one of those phenomena which has changed considerably in the course of the last centuries. However, some scholars do not see this change, or pretend not to see it. Some try to equate ethnic groups of the remote past with present day groups. They try to think about populations living three thousand years ago as if they were the same as their contemporaneous compatriots.[3] Such an attitude – in my opinion – is incorrect. Though, we may admit, there are universal, unchangeable, or very slowly changeable, human attitudes and feelings. Greed, love, and hate are probably unchangeable. However, those feelings are individual and as such depend on personal conditions, which as a matter of fact, may not have changed considerably in the last few thousand years. Ethnicity is not the construct of an individual, but of large groups. And there were groups that changed a lot during the last two centuries.

Three of the best-known scholars in the field of study of nineteenth and twentieth century nationalisms, Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, and Eric Hobsbawm have taken such positions. All of them pointed out the radical shift in the groups' self-consciousness, taking place in the last two hundreds years.[4] Following their point of view it is not difficult to find large number of illustrative examples. The most important may be the empowerment of large groups of

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[2] Sparks, 1998, 16–22.

[3] Pfoh, 2013, 5–6.

[4] Gellner, 1983; Anderson, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1983; 1991.

people, and – thanks to the growth and dissemination of the educational system – creation of their self-consciousness. Development of communication systems also allowed the equation of ethnic groups with the states inhabited by them.

Soldiers from the time of the French Revolution fought in the name of the cause, which was their cause, or the cause someone tried to convince them was their own. Formerly, as we may presume, military forces served their commanders who decided what, how, and why to fight. The shift in the status of large groups of people allowed another – more peaceful phenomenon – namely the existence of national sport-teams' fans. Such identification would hardly be possible in pre-modern times.

It must take a lot of effort to deny that the past two centuries mark a new phase in the history of humanity, especially in creating large groups of people as the subject of their ethnic or national identity. Such an effort however is not uncommon, and was undertaken by biblical scholars and archaeologists of ancient Palestine as evidenced by Avraham Faust's note on Anderson's and Gellner's views:

> "Note that some claim that ethnicity is modern, and that there were no ethnicities in the past (…). This view, which is based on studies of modern nationalism, is unfounded (…), and need not be discussed here."[5]

Steven Grosby states:

> "The existence of the nation, whether ancient Israel or the modern nation-state, is predicated upon the existence of a *collective consciousness* constituted by a belief that there exists a territory which belongs to only one people, and that there is a people which belongs to only one territory" (emphasis mine).[6]

Grosby puts emphasis on the idea of the land and its role in the imagination as the key element in the nation-building process. However, the most important idea in his statement is his declaration concerning 'the existence of a collective consciousness'. We have hardly any idea about this collective consciousness. As Emanuel Pfoh points out: "From a socio-anthropological point of view, the social world of the Bible is culturally alien to us (…)".[7] Still, Grosby refers to the "ingredients of nationality" and underlines – recalling Renan – the key role of the "common memories of the past".[8] The question remains: who shaped and created the memory?

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[5] Faust, 2006, 14, n. 4, repeated also verbatim in Faust, 2014, 58, n. 2.

[6] Grosby, 2002, 27.

[7] Pfoh, 2013, 3.

[8] Grosby, 2002, 46.

Generally, we have at our disposal two alternative models: 1., Ancient society as primitive society, and if so, very like those studied by Claude Lévi-Strauss and other anthropologists and ethnologists; or, 2., hierarchical, patronage society, with vertical structures, dominating horizontal ones. It is not impossible that both such societies existed together, and mixed one with another. I have, however, little doubts that it is the latter which is relevant in regard to ethnicity in ancient Palestine. Ancient Palestine – as far as we can look back through our historical sources – existed as a multileveled, intensely hierarchical society.[9] This social structure influenced every human activity, ethnic consciousness included.

Hierarchy is far from being alien to humans. As Petersen puts it:

"In most of history, as well as in most of the non-Western world today, the overwhelming social division has been between a small ruling elite and a vast ruled mass, with the latter not significantly differentiated by possessions or the lack of civil rights."[10]

Following this lead, let us assume that in chiefdoms or hierarchically organized tribal societies[11] all decisions were taken from above, and not spontaneously from below. Hierarchical society followed the directions given by the community leaders. Can we imagine such a scenario for the creation of "common memories of the past"? And following them, can we presume the creation of collective consciousness concerning ethnicity?

Relevant to this point is the following idea expressed by Thomas Hylland Erikson:

"At the level of personal identification, nationhood is a matter of belief. The nation, that is the *Volk* imagined by nationalists, is a product of nationalist ideology; it is not the other way around. A nation exists from the moment a handful of influential people decide that it should be so, and it starts, in most cases, as an urban elite phenomenon. In order to be an efficient political tool, it must nevertheless eventually achieve mass appeal."[12]

What if Erikson's remarks are not only true for modern nations, but also for ancient ethnicities? Let us for now imagine the situation in which there were elites in ancient Palestine, which shaped and promoted ethnic consciousness. (By the way, is it not the case with the Hebrew Bible that Israel is seen as a holy nation?

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[9] Pfoh, 2009.

[10] Petersen, 1975, 180.

[11] Pfoh, 2013, 7.

[12] Erikson, 2010, 126.

The view created by few and promoted to many?[13])

Among the most studied phenomena of Israel's history, in regard to ethnicity, are the period during which the ethnogenesis of Israel occurred, alongside the settlement of the Sea Peoples, at the end of Bronze Age and beginning of the early Iron Age, and the existence and internal changes of the Jewish communities of the Hellenistic era. I will address both of these phenomena.

2 Ethnicity in the early Iron Age

Archaeologists have long realised that material culture, treated separately, or in-dividual aspects of human material behaviour cannot be used as sufficient markers of ethnic self-identity. Statements in which the presence of four-room houses or a lack of pork bones are said to point to the existence of the Israelites or proto-Israelites are heard less frequently in recent years. The dominant trend in recent years has been to describe the ethnic self-identity of ancient groups via a complex amalgamation of different factors. One may recall works in which archaeological data – for example, site planning, types of pottery, types of city-walls or gate constructions, ratios of animal species' remains found on the spot – are used as ethnic markers for the populations of certain regions or individual archaeological sites. Sometimes, this archaeologically based data is supported by a perspective, either explicit or, more often, implicit, of agreement with the Biblical account. When available archaeological data, chosen by individual scholars, and Biblical stories, also picked by the scholar to support his or her view, are in agreement, suddenly Israelites, Judahites, Canaanites, or Philistines appear.[14]

In most cases, scholars simply believe in their ability to dig into the ethnic self-consciousness of ancient groups by exploring their material culture in context. Unfortunately, the need to examine the self-description and self-identity of these groups is not often expressed. Luckily for such scholars, the voice of the ancient societies is hardly heard.

Before an attempt to describe the ancient societies of the Southern Levant in ethnical terms, one must begin with a short synthetic overview of the data at our disposal. The civilisation of the Canaanite city-states, remaining heavily under the political and cultural influence of Egypt, gradually weakened at the end of the Late Bronze Age. The Tell el-Amarna letters are diplomatic correspondence, which confirm the use of a local form of Akkadian as the language of diplomatic letters in Canaan and a local Canaanite language as the aboriginal language. This Canaanite language of the 14th century remains closely related to the group of dialects found in the region in written form in the 1st Millennium BCE. This language was used in most of the oldest alphabetic inscriptions known to date.

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[13] Cf. Mullen Jr., 1997; Goodblatt, 2006, 35.

[14] Killebrew, 2005.

The process of weakening the Canaanite centres is associated with the gradual withdrawal of the political and economic presence of Egypt in the region during the Ramesside period. The changes, which occurred over a long period of time, also influenced the internal social structure, which produced a twofold result: first, the number of people living outside the political centres, i. e., people taking over the peripheral zones, increased (the case of the Habiru is the best known example); and second, the importance of the regions remaining outside the direct control of the former political centres increased. The second part of this phenomenon has been particularly well-studied archaeologically. There are regions, like the Hill Country in central Israel, where the number of small rural, newly established inhabited sites grew considerably in the 13th through the 10th centuries BCE. As far as we can tell based on archaeological evidence alone, people living in these sites were organized in a relatively flat society, i. e., they were vertically homogenous with little or no internal differentiation. These economic and social conditions did not create the necessary conditions for the process of elite formation.[15]

There are no convincing arguments for treating these people as being of non-local origins. Without such indications, one must understand these settlements as the result of the movement of an aboriginal population, which changed its way of life in response to certain influences (be they economic, climatic, military, political, or other). The diminishing population in the large urban-centres corresponded with an increase in the number of people living in the wild regions of the Hill Country, which was less suitable for agriculture but naturally protected and distant from the main trade routes. During the 10th century BCE, in the region of these new settlements, the new political entity, traceable by archaeological and historical data, arose. It, later, in the beginning of the 9th, century became the Kingdom of Israel.

This socio-political view would not be complete without taking into account the external pressures. In the late 13th and early 12th centuries, the Mycenaean world collapsed, causing far-reaching effects outside the Aegean region. The collapse of the political system in the Aegean region caused migrations. Scholars still dispute the scale and nature of these migrations. We are on safe ground, however, if we say that the migrants who originated in the Mycenaean elite groups were skilled in seafaring and warfare and highly motivated to find a new homeland. Undoubtedly, the Aegean crisis had a strong influence on Anatolia. The Hittite Empire collapsed in the same period, which cannot be considered unrelated to the chain of changes affecting the entire Mediterranean region at the end of the Bronze Age.

In Egypt, the time of global crisis was linked to the foreign pressure of the Libyans and the group of invaders called the Sea Peoples. Despite the fact that we

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[15] Faust, 2006; Finkelstein, 1988.

still do not understand some details of this process, we can safely say that a part of this coalition settled for good in the Southern Levant when it still belonged to the Egyptian sphere. Contrary to scholars who question the very fact of the migration and interpret the material-culture changes in the Levant as the natural process of cultural diffusion, I am convinced that what we have here is a case in which the newcomers had a significant impact on the aboriginal population, and they settled down in the Levant and gradually assimilated into the Semitic environment.[16]

One of the Sea Peoples' groups is referred to as Pelešet (PRŠT) in Egyptian sources. We do not have definitive evidence regarding the homeland of this group. However, if we consider the analogies of other groups, i. e., DANUNA being equal to TNJ/*Danaoi* and RWK/LUKA coming from Licia, it is more than tempting to interpret Pelešet as one of the groups that originated in the Mycenaean sphere. The name Pelešet is attested in the Near East as Wadasatin/Palistin (Taitas, king of …) in Syria, in the Neo-Hittites inscriptions from the 10th century (Aleppo, Tell Tayinat), as well as in the Southern Levant describing a large territory (Palestine). *Māt-Palastu*, as a description of the region, is seen in Assyrian texts dated to the reigns of Adad-Nirari III, Tiglatpilesar III, and Sargon II. (The isolated Egyptian evidence, which mentions *pꜣ–Knˁn n Pršt*, on the statuette of Pedeset, from Baltimore, cannot be used as conclusive evidence).[17] Along with the flood of objects and inspirations, undoubtedly of Aegean origins, as urban planning, or pottery types, one can point to the appearance of the name Palestine in the Levant as one of the decisive arguments for the role of migration during this period.[18]

None of what has been just said about the population of the ancient Near East provides a means by which we can describe these people in ethnic terms. In other words, we are unable to know their ethnic identity at all, if we agree that there even was such 'a thing' as an identity in this period. It is, however, obvious that the population, which settled in the isolated, remote Hill Country differed in many aspects from the well-stratified populations of the big cities, the fertile valleys, and especially the populations of the towns inhabited by the newcomers from the West. These differences had an economic aspect, which directly influenced the variations in the various populations' ways of life. There might also have been a religious aspect; however, we cannot say much about it because of the scarcity of material at our disposal. Furthermore, we may assume that there were very few differences in language. It is very possible that the populations of different regions, towns, or economic-spheres perceived their status as being different from

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[16] Yasur-Landau, 2010.

[17] Niesiołowski-Spanò, 2016, 12–28.

[18] Niesiołowski-Spanò, 2013.

their neighbours. We have, however, no indication regarding whether such perceived differences had an ethnic aspect. We know nothing about the self-identity of these populations in ethnic terms, so I suggest abandoning the use of ethnic labels for societies about which we do not have enough data to prove the existence and role of ethnicity. Instead of the Israelites or Philistines in early Iron Age, I would propose to talk about the population of the Hill Country or inhabitants of Gath.

3 Ethnicity in Hellenistic Palestine

Ethnic identity would primarily be part of the cultural prerogative of a small, educated, and self-conscious elite, as shown from Peteresen's quotation above. This elite was able to cultivate as well as create and promote their own ethnic traditions, and as such their sense of uniqueness. Leaving the right to think about oneself as ethnically separate from others, only to the elite, would fit in with our knowledge about the scale of literacy in this era. There were the members of the elite, who monopolized the means of writing, not to mention the ability to express any views in literature. I quote Goodblatt:

> "The existence of a body of written literature asserting a common genealogy and embodying components of a common culture, like the biblical books, is not by itself sufficient for the creation of a national identity. (…) so long as the belief in shared descent and culture is limited to small circles of the elite, nationalism does not emerge."[19]

One may object that Goodblatt refers to nationalism, not to ethnicity. The same author, however, states earlier: "difference between ethnic identity and national consciousness sounds like a difference in quantity, not quality."[20]

Elites might have been interested in promoting their own ethnicity, as the useful tool of control. Building and promoting notions of common origins – of the elite and normal people – would be a helpful tool for keeping the subdued populations under control. Stronger internal links make power stronger. In this light ethnicity might have been used as the method of reinforcing power and organizing the community.

Such a view of ethnicity would point to the figure of Ezra – regardless of whether he was a real or fictitious person – as a typical promoter of ethnic identity. He defined that identity, drew ethnic limits beyond which there were 'the others,' and imposed the idea on the wider group.[21]

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[19] Goodblatt, 2006, 31.

[20] Goodblatt, 2006, 11; see also 13–14.

[21] For the problems with precise understanding of the term *gēr* see Rendtorff, 2002, 77–87.

In this light we may now evaluate anew all indications usually interpreted as the proof of migrations. Cultural changes, including habits interpreted as the function of ethnic identity might have been due to the shift in population being a result of imposing new models 'from above'. This may help us to understand the supposed flood of Jewish people in the late Hasmonean period.[22] Judah – the supposed region of origin of the large number of the Jews of the early first century BCE – did not suddenly turn into a prosperous and wealthy region, from which masses of people migrated. It is easier to imagine the 'ethnic turnover' as the result of a new political domination. When Hasmoneans took over the neighbouring territories, they imposed their ethnic identity over native populations. We may call it euphemistically 'an ethnic proselytism'. This very example – of changing ethnicity – finds support in Josephus, who in the *Antiquities* describes the wars of John Hyrcanus thusly:

> "Hyrcanus also captured the Idumaean cities of Adora and Marisa, and after subduing all the Idumaeans, permitted them to remain in their country so long as they had themselves circumcised and were willing to observe the laws of the Jews. And so, out of attachment to the land of their fathers, they submitted to circumcision and to making their manner of life conform in all other respects to that of the Jews. *And from that time on they have continued to be Jews*." (*Ant.* 13,257–258).

Hence, the change of ethnic identity did not happen as the result of a long, natural and voluntary process of Idumean consciousness.[23] Rather, it was the result of forced political actions. Nevertheless, this process must have been successful, if after more than two hundred years Josephus still recognizes its results.

This passage lends itself to a few observations concerning ethnicity. First, it demonstrates the attachment of the people to their homeland, which shall be interpreted as the standard attitude of groups towards their territory. Second, the conversion, forced on Idumeans by the Jews, was primarily of a religious nature; i. e., they were forced to undergo circumcision and to follow Judaic Law. Less clear, however, is the part of Josephus' statement in which he says they "[made] their manner of life conform in all other respects to that of the Jews." Was he referring to the habits and customs of daily life? I suppose this sentence has a chiefly rhetorical function and may be interpreted as a conclusion drawn from the religious conversion in question.

Specific attention shall be given to the content and the context of this fascinating passage. The Jewish intellectual wrote about the Idumeans who had become Jews two hundred years earlier. This historical event affects the historian's present because "from that time on, they have continued to be Jews." This

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[22] Dąbrowa, 2010.

[23] Cf. Levin, 2015.

demonstrates the passage's double meaning. Those Jews are still remembered as being originally Idumeans. It is, impossible, I am afraid, to establish whether such a memory was limited to the elites, who may have reconstructed the past on the basis of written sources or if this memory might have survived in both the group of common Jews and particularly in the Jews of Idumean origin. We must remember that Herod the Great had to face the political pressure fuelled by the memory (or gossip) of his "bad" origin. Keeping in mind that the situation in the royal court represents a particular case, we may assume the existence of a long-lasting memory of this process of mass-conversion of the neighbouring population and expansion of Jewishness into that population.

Similar territorial expansions of the Hasmonean state were conducted over the course of one hundred years; not only in Idumea, but also in many other areas. Therefore, how should we describe the ethnic identity of the population of Marisa and Adora, after they began practicing circumcision and started to follow Jewish law? Unfortunately, the populations in question are unable to comment. In theory, we can expect three model scenarios. First, the converted population might have completely identified themselves with the dominant group. The economic and political benefits, as well as the fact that this population had very few initial cultural differences with the Jewish population were of enormous help, of course. Such scenario can presumably be expected from a population within close proximity to the Jewish territorial core. However, we must remember that the people of this population of first century CE Galilee, who were obviously recognized as legitimately Jewish, were still – as we see in the New Testament – called Galileans. Second, the population might have accepted the new identity only superficially and continued their original self-identity or at least held on to the memory of being originally different from the rest of the group. Third, the group forced into conversion might have rejected the new identity. An example of such a case may be the Jewish subjects, the Samaritans. It is also difficult to imagine the inhabitants of such cities as Gaza and Apollonia on the coast, and Gadara, or Pella, in Hellenistic Decapolis in the East, accepting the entire cultural, religious, and, in effect, ethnic identity of the Judeans and becoming Jews.

4 Conclusions

Another few words shall be dedicated to the first two scenarios, viewed in light of a study on ethnicity. Did successful, or partially successful, conquest allow for permanent incorporation of the defeated population into the *ethnos* of the victorious group? It is not easy to answer this question. Undoubtedly, further studies should be conducted in this field; however, I would like to present one general hypothesis. The rapid growth of the Jewish population during the second and first centuries BCE confirms the efficiency of the expansion and proselytism. On the other hand, the persistence of self-identity beneath the surface of political

Jewishness can be observed. The case of the Samaritans and the Idumeans, who, after two hundred years, continued to be regarded as foreign, is telling in itself. I propose, therefore, to introduce a technical term to describe such cases, namely: functional ethnicity. Functional ethnicity would mean to participate in the group self-identity in a constant process of negotiation. Functional ethnicity would depend mostly on external conditions, be they political, economic, religious, or cultural. Such a technical term would apply to both scenarios discussed in this paper. Functional belonging to the dominant or occupying ethnic group in favourable conditions may result in permanent and long-lasting integration. It may also permit, even over a long period of time, the continuation of double-identity or even multiple-identity (for example, one could be Jewish politically, Samaritan religiously, and Shechemite locally).

The question arises, if the situation of the Hellenistic era might be retrojected into earlier periods. For example, does the term functional ethnicity fit the realities of the twelfth, eleventh and tenth centuries BCE in Southern Levant? I hope it does.

I am inclined to say that the Hellenistic era witnessed only one fundamental change in the social system in Southern Levant; namely, the unparalleled rise of the Jewish religion used as an identity marker. The internal shifts within Judaism led to the creation of the first universal religion, with the strong potential for conversion. In the earlier periods, especially in the early Iron Age, it would not have been reasonable to expect religion to play such a role. In the period in question, ethnicity tended to be defined by membership in larger groups such as the Israelites, or proto-Israelites, Philistines, Judahites, Moabites, Ammonites, Arameans, etc. based on many factors. The introduction of the term functional ethnicity may be helpful in describing those ancient societies. We do not have access to the self-identity of ancient groups; we may, however, assume that economic, social, and political conditions, etc. might have caused these groups to modify their declared identity or sometimes even their experienced self-identity. Every territorial expansion might have witnessed such a phenomenon. In many cases, the declaration of being kin to the dominant group might have been reasonable and useful and might have led to changes in self-identity; be it a temporary shift and creation of a multi-identity or a permanent change of self-identification. The methods used in such processes of change deserve obviously further study.

If we accept such a point of view, it would be in accordance with those scholars who see the Hasmonean Era as the turning point in the process of the creation of Jewishness.[24] It is immaterial, then, if one calls it nationalism or ethnic identity.[25]

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[24] Cohen, 1999.

[25] Cf. also Aitken, 2011.

Furthermore, one may find similarities in the picture drawn above and the way in which Shlomo Sand approaches the issue of ethnicity and identity in his *The Invention of the Jewish People* (2009).

I would argue that the reconstruction of the processes of ethnic identity in ancient Palestine should not be approached as if they were processes taking place in modern world. They might have been radically different from those known to us from other periods. Ethnicity – as one of the manifold aspect of society – unnecessarily reflected the internal self-consciousness of large populations. We shall not see ethnicity as the immanent and unchangeable aspect of society. The sense of ethnic identity might have been the result of various factors, including political and/or economic ones. All those factors took place within the patronage society, which supported every action from the top downward. If so, ethnicity too was not an effect of spontaneous feelings of the people, but rather the result of various processes of imposed group-identity from above. It might have included ethnic self-identity as well. The question as to whether or not it was mostly the result of controlling actions over the people, or other factors, must remain unanswered and await another study.

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