Anthropology of postglacial historic populations

By

T. TÓTH

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Abstract. A brief survey of the paleoanthropological investigations carried out in Hungary during the last three decades. The list of a number of publications is also given.

The great success of the anthropological investigations, carried out on the osteological remains of historical populations which lived in the sequences of the postglacial geologic (Holocene) periods, has been convincingly demonstrated by the general paleoanthropological literature of the last three decades, including also some syntheses. The investigations have been made possible first of all by the establishment of paleoanthropological collections originating from different regions of the Eurasian continent.

From the osteological remains of skeletalized populations which lived in the different postglacial periods of mankind there arose a very rich collection also from the territory of the Central Danubian basin; it became possible to make territorial and epochal comparisons on this basis. In the last decades a significant part of the material kept in central and county collections of Hungary (Anthropological Department of the Hungarian Natural History Museum, Budapest, Anthropological Institute of the University JÁTE, Szeged, as well as in Debrecen, Eger, Pécs, Székesfehérvár, Veszprém) a total of finds of some 12 000 individuals, have been studied and the results published in about 270 papers in Hungarian and in foreign publications abroad, as well as presented at conferences, congresses or symposia.

A preponderant majority of the subjects of the investigations derived from cranioscopic and craniometric analyses. In addition to the papers mentioned above nearly twenty inaugural dissertations (rerum naturalium), three candidate dissertations of an academic degree (LIP-TÁK 1956, TÓTH 1958, FARKAS 1975) and two academic doctorate theses (LIPTÁK 1967, TÔTH 1974) have been prepared on the basis of the materials preserved in our collections. In these craniologic investigations two different methodological conceptions found their expression. In a significant part of the papers the practice of the investigations has been mainly determined by individual typology (LIPTÁK 1957, 1959), but it cannot be regarded as identical in every case with individual diagnosis. Another part of the publications is characterizable by the microevolutionary morphological outlook using comparative group-diagnosis (TÓTH 1958, 1970). As well known the essence of the individual typology includes the demonstration of the elements of different taxa displayed by the skeletons under discussion, that is, per individual. This may be an unavoidable part of the analysis of the paleoanthropological finds, irrespectively whether we are evaluating singular morphologic features or their complexes on the individuals of different skeletalized populations. In the early periods of this trend of the possibility of the identification of the morphological character complexes with the different taxa was not unambiguously clear. There is no doubt that the individual diagnosis is unavoidable in the elaboration of the finds nor can the relevance of the individual-typological determination be disclaimed in connection with skeletalized populations. Nevertheless its extreme variant, i.e. the quantitative (percental) determination of the frequency of type-elements furnish
only a small, if any, information about the anthropological composition of the given individuals. In other words, the frequency of the different morphologic peculiarities expressed in percentage cannot be regarded as identical with the components or elements of the different taxa. It means that whereas the definition of the morphoscopic or morphometric data in percentage is equally possible or required in the elaboration of the finds, there is no need for the percental expression of the type-elements per individual. This methodological interpretation can be wholly accepted, if the taxonomically different diagnostic suitability of the morphological traits has been taken into consideration: they evolved in areas which had phylogenetically different extensions (continents, subcontinents, smaller territorial entities: regions, subregions, microregions) and in different millennia.

Beside the unaltered practice of the individual-diagnosis the caution in connection with the typological evaluation per individual became more and more predominant in the last years. Nevertheless, we can obtain a more complete taxonomic picture in the analysis of morphologic features which take into consideration as well the character-complexes as the group-values.

During the last thirty years another trend became more and more usual in the paleoanthropological investigations in Hungary to adopt the comparative group-diagnosis, with due attention to the areality of certain character-complexes in the microevolutionary morphologic conception. The comparative analysis of the osteological remains from the different millennia became necessary, especially with respect to morphologic character-complexes. All this with regard to the fact that the complexes of traits characterize not only individuals, but whole groups of different populations. Hereby it became possible to recognize the morphogenetic trends with respect to the different subcontinents (TÓTH 1966, 1977a, b, 1978, 1982a). This was the reason why efforts have been made to analyse the diagnostic suitability of the cranial-index, the bizygomatic-breadth, the fossa canina, the malar-bone’s convexity and the incisura maxillo-malare as well as the epochal changes of given morphologic traits. The outlining of the possible phases of the ethnogenesis and the delimitation of the components from the main continental taxa (Europoids and Mongoloids) in the anthropological composition of skeletonized populations which inhabited the Central Danubian basin (TÓTH 1970), being one of the most important aims of paleoanthropological investigations, an analysis of the length of time became also unavoidable, the period in which an assimilation took place on cranioleptic series, the different millennia, originating from the main contact zone of the Eurasian continent. The distinction of the subcontinental components (southern and northern ones) (TÓTH 1971), within the area of the Europoids could not be avoided. All of these observations find their realization in the analysis of the territorial and chronologic distribution of morphologic complexes on the neuro- and splanchnocrania. The same can be stated in connection with the two main morphologic phenomena of the microevolutionary modifications, i.e. brachycephalization and gracilization (TÓTH 1966, 1974, 1977a, b, 1982a). The use of the areality principle made possible a more realistic outlining of the early periods in the ethnogenesis of Hungarians (TÓTH 1974, 1983).

Although the particular papers and the majority of the different postgraduate dissertations (LIPTÁK 1957, 1967, 1983; TÓTH 1958, 1974) related to the anthropological problems of our people’s origin, a further important synthesis was the dissertation in which the paleoanthropology of the ancient period from the southern parts of the Great Hungarian Plain has been discussed (FARKAS 1975). This dissertation contains the results of the investigations concerning the osteological remains of the populations from the Neolithic, Copper and Bronze ages. Mention must be made of the paleodemographic paper based on a significant part of the Hungarian skeletal collections (ACSÁDI & NEMESKÉRI 1970) in which a wide-ranging evaluation of the problems of human life-span and mortality has been made.

On the other hand the first significant surveys of the anthropological characteristics of the populations of the Copper age (NEMESKÉRI 1956), Celts (NEMESKÉRI & DEÁK 1954) and Sarmatian (BARTUCZ 1961) populations in the Central Danubian basin have been made at the beginning of the last three decades.

Dissertations have been submitted about the systematic serological examinations on the osteological remains from historical populations to obtain the Academic date and doctorate degrees (LENGYEL 1975, 1982); by this a new approach of the essentials of the paleodemographic phenomena as well as of the population genetics of certain tribal groups became possible.

We have to note that with reference to the early periods and possible area of our people’s ethnogenesis significant additional information was furnished by the comparative somatologic, dermatoglyphic and odontologic studies, all of which are parts of the ethnical anthropology (TÓTH 1974, 1979, 1980-1981, 1982b). In the craniomorphologic analysis on an Avar-period population special attention was given to the shovel-shapedness (DEZSŐ 1968). A comprehensive survey has been prepared about the dental caries of prehistoric populations which lived in the Central Danubian basin (SCHRANZ & HUSZÁR 1962). Beside this work an important somatologic synthesis has been elaborated about the abrasion of the teeth including the data from skeletalized populations (HUSZÁR 1976).

Paleopathology (DERUMS 1978; ORTNER & PUTSCHAR 1981; ROKHLIN 1965; SJÖVALL 1939; STEINBOCK 1976) developed in the last three decades (especially in the literature abroad) as one of the disciplinary components of paleoanthropology. On the basis of a rich collection originating from the territory of Hungary, the hygienic condition of four Arpadian-age populations was studied (NEMESKÉRI & HARSÁNYI 1959) and by the use of some finds from the past millennia a system of different pathologic lesions could be elaborated (BARTUCZ 1966, REGÖLY-MÉREI 1962). Special attention was given to the frequency of some discontinuous craniomorphologic character-variants or anomalies (FARKAS 1974, FARKAS and MARCSIK 1975, WENGER 1974a, b). The paleopathologic investigation of Avar-age populations from the Danube-Tisza interfluvial (MARCSIK 1978, 1983), has been finished only recently, as one of the first syntheses to obtain an academic candidate’s degree. Paleosomatologic studies, started in the near past, had as their subject not only the determination of stature from skeletal populations, but the reconstruction of the body weight, too; in this way additional information could be obtained about their over- to undernourished state, their past biological constitution as well as the past economico-environmental conditions (LOTTERHOF 1976, 1977, 1978; PAP 1982, 1982-1983a, b, 1983, 1984; TÓTH 1984, 1985). As an immediate preliminary, all of the above-mentioned Hungarian investigations had the use of the wide-ranging osteometric working-programme of the postcranial skeletal parts for the evaluation of some somatomorphologic (constitutional) peculiarities of two South Transdanubian Avar-age populations (TAJTI & TÓTH 1976-1977).

All of these paleopathologic, paleoserologic and paleosomatologic aspects discussed above contributed to the disciplinary enrichment and further development of paleoanthropology (and in general to that of classical anthropology) by the many-sided analyses of the postcranial parts of human skeletons. The investigations carried out in Hungary seem to have contributed significantly to the results of universal paleoanthropology, to the increase of the interdisciplinary effectiveness of anthropology.

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REFERENCES


Author's address: DR. TIBOR TÓTH
Anthropological Department
Hungarian Natural History Museum
Budapest, Bajza utca 39.
H-1062