

Macro-changes at the dawn of history: The Slavic Expansion

Henning Andersen, UCLA

The extraordinary expansion of Slavic-speaking territories during the early centuries of our era (300s–700s) has long defied explanation. Slavic scholars have tried to link it with such macro-events as the Little Ice Age in the 500s or the Justinian plague. But these events are chronologically off and would at best explain population displacements and not the attested, vast territorial spread. Besides, there is linguistic evidence of distinct stages in the Expansion and of the role of language contact from its earliest stages (Andersen, To appear); this evidence leaves no doubt that the Expansion resulted from gradual, substantial population growth.

A rational account for this can refer to a macro-event of a different character, the gradual integration of Slavic-speaking populations into early medieval iron-age culture: The gradual adoption of an iron-age tool-kit and the replacement of slash-and-burn agriculture with crop rotation would naturally lead to a better return on hours worked, result in improved social health, and produce growing populations across the Slavic-speaking areas.

In connection with the adoption of iron-age tools it is significant that there is no single Proto-Slavic word for 'blacksmith' but instead a handful of native synonymous neologisms with a geographical distribution that reflects distinct population flows in the Expansion. Furthermore, hundreds of Slavic placenames reflect chronological stages in this development. The earliest stage (i) may be the introduction of industrial iron smelting and manufacturing, archaeologically evidenced in Poland in the 100s–300s. Perhaps simultaneously with this, (ii) iron-making spread across the land as a part-time activity of farmers, likewise part of the archeological record. A later stage (iii) was the gradual specialization of successful local blacksmiths who each supported farming communities in a small area. Stages (i) and (iii) are rather spectacularly reflected in Slavic placenames with geographical distributions that appear independent of that of the appellatives. Eventually, of course, (iv) every village would have its blacksmith.

The Expansion redistributed early dialect differences (Andersen 2020) and formed the background for the development of new isogloss systems across the Slavic-speaking territories.

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