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## THE NAZIS' ARCHEOLOGY

Megan Young

*The Nazi Party found that archeology is a very useful tool in propaganda. The Nazis used it to justify their nationalistic interests, from the conquest of Europe to create the Third Reich to genocidal racial cleansing. They glorified their past to unite the German people and gain their support. However, the people could not have been misled without the cooperation or apathy of German archeologists in general.*

Archeology is a science that can be easily manipulated and misinterpreted for conscious or unconscious reasons. The biases of the researchers can determine what is believed about the past. This is especially true for prehistoric archeology which mainly relies on non-written sources for its interpretation (Daniel 1962:120).

Archeology was especially vulnerable in the time between the world wars; many European nations were developing, or had been developing since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a nationalistic ideology.

Nationalism became integral in forming new national boundaries after World War I.

However, the Nazis in Germany saw the chance to use nationalism and archeology in an unprecedented way to support and justify their party ideology of the superior Germanic race. Unfortunately, many archeologists were all too willing partners in this scheme.

### Beginnings of Nationalistic Archeology

The marriage between nationalism and German archeology did not occur overnight. Its roots go back to the mid-1800's when two Frenchmen, the Comte de Gobineau and the Comte de Boulainvilliers, developed the idea of a superior race of Germans, possibly for the first time. Supposedly, the 19<sup>th</sup> century French nobles were descendants of the German Aryans who defeated the Roman Empire and have ruled over the inferior Gauls ever since. Gobineau's writings were very popular in Germany and influenced others to write more on the

subject. At the turn of the century, Houston Stewart Chamberlain wrote *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, a two volume set that revived interest in Gobineau's ideas. The German Kaiser made sure all of his army officers had a copy as well as all bookstores and libraries. In it Chamberlain claimed a German could become a Jew if he interacted with them or read their writings (Daniel 1962:115-118). Not only did nationalistic ideas spread as a result, but also anti-Semitism.

Another contributing factor to the growth of nationalism was the formation of the first German nation in the late 1800's. The new nation was created from numerous territories of German speaking people who had no real sense of national unity. Gustav Kossinna, a language expert turned prehistorian, intended to prove their common ancestry and history with his idea of ethnic cultures (Shennan 1989:7). His Kulturkreis theory used material culture in the archeological record to define ethnic groups. Prehistoric Germans were seen as a great race that spread throughout Europe, conquering the inferior races and of course leaving their material culture in the territories they occupied as proof of their presence. Kossinna tried to prove, through archeology and a very "inflated chronology", that the most important prehistoric innovations and their subsequent spread were results of Germans because culture always diffused from the more advanced people to the less advanced. Kossinna wanted to impress upon his fellow Germans the importance of studying their ancestors; he produced many

publications that were aimed at a “non-academic audience” (Arnold 1990: 464; Clark 1957:259; Daniel 1962:123; Veit 1989:37). He used an idea from the historian Sybel that ““a nation which fails to keep in living touch with its past is as near to drying up as a tree with severed roots. We are today, what we were yesterday”” (Clark 1957:259). In other words, the German nation could not become a great power unless it was also one in the past.

After the German defeat in World War I, Kossinna wanted the negotiations at Versailles to include a reoccupation of what he called ancient German territory (Poland). He and other German archeologists used archeology and sources written by Pliny the Elder and others to support their claims. They said the Germanic Vandals had occupied the territory between the Odra and Vistula rivers in modern Poland during the time of the Roman Empire. The Vandals were associated with the archeological Przeworsk culture that later occupied the territories of modern Slovakia and Hungary. Their efforts proved fruitless as the Polish state was created in 1919 (Arnold 1990:467; Martens 1989:58-60; Veit 1989:38).

### German Prehistory

Despite Kossinna's efforts, prehistoric archeology was not a very popular discipline in the years before the National Socialist government. Kossinna and other German prehistorians complained that German archeologists put too much focus on studying Classical archeology and were making German prehistory look dark and barbaric. Kossinna claimed that German prehistory was given less funding and museum space than the Hottentot and Papuan cultures. It was true that German prehistory was only taught in a few universities and received little state funding (Arnold 1990:467; Baker 1988:103; Daniel 1962:122). The discipline and its scholars were neglected and not given as much respect as they would have liked. This became very important when the Nazis turned to German prehistorians for help.

Kossinna argued that German prehistory was very important in rebuilding Germany after the war. Quoting the “Crown Prince” Kossinna said that there was a need to put emphasis on the ““German-national people, in contrast to the internationalizing tendencies, which threaten to wipe out our healthy ethnic characteristics”” (Baker 1988:103).

The position of prehistoric archeology changed dramatically when the Nazis came to power in 1933. They almost immediately recognized the power and legitimacy archeology could give them; it was seen as a great propaganda tool and a way to solidify the pure Germans under the Nazi party. The timing was perfect since “public interest in archaeology, and political manipulation of archaeological research” is highest during “periods of internal unrest or stress” (Arnold 1997-1998:249). State funding poured into prehistoric archeology; university chairs in prehistory were created; the Institute for Prehistory and the Institute for Pre- and Early History were founded in 1938 and 1939 respectively; institutes for rune research were started in the late 1930's; new museums were built while old ones opened new exhibits; many excavations were shown to the public as “open-air museums”; and several documentaries of German prehistory were filmed for public education. The public responded by patriotically joining prehistoric organizations such as the Confederation for German Prehistory (Arnold 1990:468; Arnold 1997-1998:248-249; Clark 1957:259).

Polish museums of the time are good examples of how museums were affected by the change. The Nazis used them to present lectures and exhibits that supported the Nazi doctrine, especially those aspects that concerned the occupied territories. An urn with a swastika symbol that had been found before the occupation was rediscovered in a Łódź museum by the Nazis. It was made the main exhibit and the coat of arms of the city. Many African, South American, and Slavic artifacts were either sold to other museums in Germany or destroyed because they did

not support Nazi propaganda (Mikołajczyk 1990:247,250).

During the 1930's British archeologists held German archeology in high regard. Some even said they were jealous of the state funding it received and the high public interest and involvement. There were, in fact, far more prehistoric archeology classes offered at German universities than at English ones by 1939 (Evans 1989:441). Grahame Clark said, "It reflects a situation in which a whole people thrills with a consciousness of its past and in which a knowledge of national archaeology is regarded as much a part of the normal equipment of children as algebra or Latin verbs" (Evans 1989:440). There was, however, some criticism of the state involvement in German archeology. A.M. Tallgren (1937:155) argued that Germany was using archeology as a "political weapon in the service of ideology in home and foreign policy."

Archeology was definitely employed to indoctrinate the next generation of Germans with the Nazi ideology. In 1933 the German Minister of the Interior announced new national guidelines in the study of history and prehistory in German schools and textbooks. In them, he said that the study of German prehistory had been ignored but it was important in feeling a sense of German brotherhood. The guidelines emphasized a "significance of race" in prehistoric and modern times because race is what determines the character of a person. The Minister spoke of a need to have pride in one's German citizenship and to feel a sense of nationalism as opposed to internationalism, the "creeping poison" that has caused "a lamentable intrusion of alien elements" in the Germanic blood, language, and way of life. He believed this nationalistic feeling should include Germans living outside of Germany's borders. By employing Kossinna's Kulturkreis theory, the Nazis claimed it did not matter what language a person spoke or where they lived because the German race could cross national borders. Germany existed wherever there was evidence of 'Germans', whether in

the past or present because "culture is a creation of race" (Arnold 1997-1998:247,250; Frick 1934:298-299).

The Minister of the Interior's guidelines also included teaching how the Germanic race (superior in culture and language) was distributed in prehistory based on artifacts. He provided the following examples to support his argument that all great European and Near Eastern civilizations owed their development to the Germanic race. He claims that archeological evidence points to German invasions of Asia, North Africa, and Egypt as early as the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium B.C. resulting in the advanced Indians, Medes, Persians, and Hittites all being descendants of the Germanic race. In addition, the ruling classes of the later great Greek and Roman civilizations were Germanic. The Greek aristocracy was Germanic and the indigenous commoners were originally Asians. When democracy was developed, it helped break down some class barriers and the subsequent intermarriage of races resulted in a low birth rate and a collapse of Greek culture. The next great civilization was that of the Romans which included Germanic patricians and indigenous plebeians. Intermarriage between races caused most of the late Roman Empire's population to be descendants of Oriental slaves. The invading Germans at the end of the Roman Empire "brought fresh Nordic blood" (Frick 1934:298-299). Not only were the possibilities of German world domination expressed from the prehistoric and historic past but also the warning of what would happen if racial mixing occurred. It would be the downfall of yet another great German civilization. It was the German people's responsibility to their ancestors to have children of pure German blood (McCann 1990:77-78).

### **The Archeologists**

Many archeologists favorably responded to the opportunity the Nazis gave them to advance their careers. Others were not so ready to manipulate the past. In fact, there are three generally recognized groups of

archeologists during this period: the party-liners, the *Mitläufer*, and the opposition. Party-liners were eager to serve the Nazis by creating or twisting archeological data and interpretation to support party doctrine. A lot of these archeologists' work had been previously ignored and they embraced the Nazis for paying attention to them; others simply shared the party's ideals (Arnold 1990:469-470; Arnold 1997-1998:248; Daniel 1962:121). In 1939, one professor, Hermann Schneider, talked about the Germanic greatness and the need to look for it in its purest form in prehistory. Referring to prehistory's new role, he said that "archaeological research thus found itself faced with the pleasant task of examining and reconstructing the real essence of Germanic life and customs" (Clark 1957:120-121). The extremist party-liners were known as Germanomaniacs; most archeologists, even other party-liners, often ridiculed them for their bizarre research. Some prehistorians, including Hans Reinerth who later directed the Amt Rosenberg, received high-ranking positions in the Nazi Party for their cooperation (Arnold 1990:468-469,470-471).

The majority of archeologists could be called fence-sitters, or *Mitläufer*. They simply taught what they were told to in the universities and accepted Nazi funding. Since they did not object, they legitimized the abuse of archeology for political purposes. The remaining archeologists made up the opposition, meaning they either openly opposed the misuse of archeology or they were attacked by the Nazis because of their race or political views. There was no official Party policy towards archeology; therefore, there was no uniform treatment of opposing archeologists. Most of these archeologists were relieved of their positions, 'retired' early, and/or were exiled. The newly opened positions were filled with party-liners. Archeologists who continued to focus their research on the Romans were labeled "anti-German." Alfred Rosenberg, the Nazi Party's ideologist, said that Germans who do not value their own history over any other have "forfeited the right to

be protected by that people" (Arnold 1990:465,472-473).

The exiled archeologists often found positions in foreign countries like the United States and the United Kingdom. The best known of these was Gerhard Bersu who was forcibly retired as the director of the Römisch Germanische Kommission in 1935. Bersu objected to the Nazis' ideological research, the use of Kossinna's nationalistic ideas, and was also Jewish. He sought asylum in Britain and became a leading archeologist there. Germany lost many of its scientific minds in this way. Some of the opposition were allowed to keep their positions even though they openly criticized the Nazis and party-liners. Even back in 1928, K.H. Jacob-Friesen criticized Gobineau and the idea of racial superiority in his 'Fundamental Questions of Prehistoric Research'; he warned that it was starting to appear in politics. He was asked to withdraw his statements in 1933 because they were considered heretical but he refused. In a 1934 article, he again warned his colleagues about the "excesses of nationalistic and racist manipulation of archaeological data." He called himself a patriotic German who was afraid this kind of research would ruin the reputation of German archeologists in the world. Many attribute the lack of action against Jacob-Friesen and others to the total absence of an official policy about such matters. Even though there was no real organized opposition, these archeologists were able to conduct some quality research under the oppressive government (Arnold 1990:472-473; Clark 1957:259; Evans 1989:437).

### **Nazi Archeology**

A good portion of the nationalistic research during this period was carried out by Nazi archeological organizations. One such group, known as the Amt Rosenberg, was founded by Nazi ideologist Alfred Rosenberg and directed by Hans Reinerth. The people involved in Amt Rosenberg wanted to find a way to connect modern Germans to their prehistoric past. In 1936

Reinerth said, "We have found the courage once more to admit to the deeds of our ancestors. Their honor is our honor! The millennia separate us no longer. The eternal stream of blood binds us across the ages..." (Arnold 1990:468-469). According to Reinerth, Germans were expressing their wish to live according to the values of prehistoric Germans when they came together under the swastika. The ideal excavation, according to Rosenberg and Reinerth, would be for the Amt Rosenberg to start excavating a site and stop when they reached Roman levels. Then they would call in the Römisch Germanische Kommission to take over until they reached evidence of prehistoric Germans. Although they never actually conducted a project in this manner, this and other bizarre and impractical ideas encouraged many archeologists in the group to leave and join the SS-Ahnenerbe, which is discussed below (Arnold 1990:474; Arnold 1997-1998:247).

The other major archeological organization originated with the SS under Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler. Himmler's SS Main Office, known as Personal Staff, RF-SS, had several responsibilities, one of which was cultural. In 1935, this office founded the Forschungs- und Lehrgemeinschaft Ahnenerbe (Ahnenerbe-Stiftung), or the Research and Teaching Society Ancestral Heritage Foundation; one year later Die Gesellschaft zur Forderung und Pflege Deutscher Kulturdenkmäler (The Society for the Advancement and Preservation of German Cultural Monuments) was started. Both organizations were soon combined. Ahnenerbe was led by SS officers and was funded with donations of individuals and firms. Its purposes were to excavate and restore "Germanic cultural relics", make publications (including its journal *Germanenerbe*), sponsor field schools for the public, educate SS soldiers, and legitimize the expansionist policies of Germany (Koehl 1983:113,115; Arnold 1990:468-469,474).

To educate the SS Himmler planned to have an excavation near every SS-Standarte

in the Reich to serve "as a cultural centre of German greatness and the German past" (Baker 1988:104; McCann 1990:84). The education of the SS was especially important because they were considered the most racially pure of the entire Germanic race. They were supposed to be the ideal blond-haired, blue-eyed Germans and were expected to create a future pure German race with the aid of programs like Lebensborn. The SS needed to imitate the noble prehistoric German values, and they learned about these through archeology (Koehl 1983:227; McCann 1990:80).

As mentioned above, Germany was thought to exist anywhere someone of the German race had ever lived. Therefore, the main goal of archeology in occupied lands was to find archeological evidence of German occupation because this could justify the 'reclamation' of lost land to Germany. The evidence did not have to be complex. As K. Sklenar said, "Distribution maps of archaeological types became a convincing argument for expansionist aims: wherever a single find of a type designated as Germanic was found, the land was declared ancient German territory..." (Arnold 1990:464-465). In occupied Poland and Czechoslovakia, many Slavic landowners were evicted or killed and their land given to Germans. It was not enough to merely declare an area was German land; they wanted to prove that the original inhabitants were conquered or driven off by the superior German warriors. The conclusions of the Ahnenerbe excavations at Biskupin, Poland from 1940-1942 were that the indigenous people were driven out by the militarily, physically, racially superior Germans even though earlier research found they left because of natural causes (Arnold 1997-1998:247; McCann 1990:84).

The Ahnenerbe also attempted to determine race in prehistoric art. Himmler believed that the so-called Venus figurines were actually proportionately representative of the people who made them. He recognized a similarity between the Venus figurines' features and the Hottentots of Africa and wanted Ahnenerbe archeologists

to determine if the two groups were related and if prehistoric Germans had made the 'Venus people' become extinct. An ethnographer by the name of Bruno Beger agreed with Himmler and suggested that the Hottentots and Jews were also related; this could be tested in the concentration camps (McCann 1990:85).

Heinrich Himmler, the man who believed he was the reincarnation of the German emperor Heinrich I, had his own views of the future of Germany. He wanted to create a new national religion for Germans by excavating what he called prehistoric religious sites and by studying paganism in German folk tales. A megalithic site in Saxony called Externsteine became a cult center and a "pilgrimage for the SS" who took tours of the site led by archeologists. Himmler was often ridiculed by Hitler and other leading Nazis because of all this bizarre research, which included his search for Atlantis and the Holy Grail, and because he actually believed his own propaganda (Arnold 1997-1998:248; McCann 1990:78-79,84). It seems that while some Nazi leaders appreciated prehistoric archeology's importance as propaganda, they found most of the ideas ridiculous. Hitler was also not impressed by German prehistory. He said,

"Why do we call the whole world's attention to the fact that we have no past? It's bad enough that the Romans were erecting great buildings when our forefathers were still living in mud huts; now Himmler is starting to dig up these villages of mud huts and enthusing over every potsherd and stone axe he finds.....We really should do our best to keep quiet about this past. Instead Himmler makes a great fuss about it all. The present-day Romans must be having a laugh at these revelations" [Arnold 1990:469].

Nationalism has very serious consequences in archeology. The numerous ways the discipline was misused under the

Nazi Party makes this clear. The Nazis conducted archeological research with the purposes of glorifying their past and justifying their occupation of Europe and their genocidal policies. Hitler and other leading Nazis may have mocked the research of Himmler and others but they recognized its potential for propaganda. The Nazi government is not the only one to corrupt archeology for political and nationalistic reasons, but their extreme example should serve as a caution to all archeologists. It would not have been as easy to employ archeology for nationalistic purposes without the cooperation and/or apathy of archeologists. It is impossible to keep biases out of archeological research, but archeologists should be conscious that they are there and never purposely use them to misinterpret data. The results can be as costly as those under the Nazi regime.

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