

# Approaches to the Archaeology of Ethnogenesis: Past and Emergent Perspectives

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Published online: 8 March 2013  
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**Abstract** Recently, interest in the archaeology of ethnogenesis has surged. This renewed interest stems from innovations in the historical study of ethnogenesis, theoretical shifts favoring multidirectional agency, and relevant contemporary sociopolitical debates. Theoretical problems surrounding the appropriateness of the social science concept of “ethnicity,” however, have made the comparative study of ethnogenesis difficult. Drawing from past and emergent perspectives adds renewed vigor to comparative studies of ethnogenesis. A methodology that integrates the different types of theory can resolve the theoretical tensions in the archaeological study of ethnogenesis.

**Keywords** Ethnogenesis · Ethnicity · Archaeology · Identity · Theory

## Introduction

In the past generation or so, archaeologists have recognized that boundaries of archaeological cultures, based on material culture traits, do not neatly correspond to how the people themselves perceive social, cultural, and ethnic boundaries. To complicate matters further, the old sense that identities are discrete and long-lived has been seriously challenged. Instead, anthropologists now consider identity to be situational and relational and in the constant process of making, unmaking, and, sometimes, disappearing (Eriksen 1993, pp. 10–12; Gosden 1999, p. 196; Jones 1997, pp. 125–126; Kohl 1998, p. 231; Lucas 2004, p. 198; Meskell 2001; Smoak 2006, p. 5). This constructivist view of identity, specifically ethnic identity, has

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