

T. Douglas Price: *Ancient Scandinavia. An Archaeological History from the First Humans to the Vikings*. Oxford, Oxford University Press 2015. 494 pp. ISBN978-0-19-023197-2.

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The backbone of undergraduate courses in Scandinavian archaeology was until recently a set of national volumes about Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland's prehistory. These volumes also target the interested layman, and are chronologically organized, usually starting with Quaternary background and the oldest potential finds (often dubious, like Blomvåg outside of Bergen). Following the sub-division of the three-period-system, these volumes present the Stone Age, the Bronze Age, the Iron Age and usually end in the Viking Age. The chronological narrative within periods is more or less systematically empirically organized around individual or groups of finds, sites or finds categories. These are described and lead to an interpretative narrative of life at a given time and place, changes, migrations and enigmas. Lacking in explicit theoretical discourse, weak on methodology (but frequently with a dose of Scandinavian source critique) and usually avoiding contentious positions, these books were authoritative exponents of (and building blocks for reproducing) national and institutional schools of archaeological research. They were also written by leading authorities in the national archaeological organization – organizations that integrated research, training, excavation, museums, management and heritage politics. At their best these books are also excellent literature (e.g. Johannes Brøndsted's *Danmarks Oldtid*, Mårten Stenberger's *Den forntida Sverige*, Ella Kivikoski's *Finland/Suomen Historia* and Anders Hagen's *Norges Oldtid*), and sometimes captivatingly illustrated. Later generations of national prehistory volumes of the 1980's and 90's were perhaps of a more mixed literary standard, but the level of artwork, illustration and pedagogical quality grew with time.

These volumes were meant to be monuments to the nations and their past, but they (or the abbreviated student volumes that were spun off) were actually highly useful for students of archaeology – you had a place to go for an answer or comprehensive story. They served to create a common archaeological platform across the national borders – either as a canon or as a referential point of departure for critique. They provided Scandinavian archaeology with a sense of certainty, in a way substituting the archaeology itself with textual renditions. There were and are, however, inherent problems with these volumes. The traditional national and ethnic projects are ostensibly abandoned, or are at least in the throes of transformation. There have been theoretical and epistemological developments that rendered these "objective" authoritative narratives if not obsolete, difficult to produce in a single volume. There is no longer a single authoritative narrative. On a practical level the production of archaeological knowledge through field research, laboratory analyses, ecological research and theoretically driven interpretation continues at an accelerating rate, and is increasingly fragmented. Monumental books are rapidly outdated and challenged by instantly updated and multivocal digital media. An analogy is found in the national Encyclopaedia projects, multi-volume collections of expert knowledge produced by prestigious national publishers. The rate of knowledge turnover and digital technology pretty much put an end to them. Perhaps most importantly, archaeology and prehistory as interpretation about what went on in the past doesn't really fit national or contemporary ethnic boundaries very well – even though prehistory continues and will continue to play a role in the constitution and self-understanding of contemporary states. In all the Scandinavian states, multiple prehistories and trajectories took place, and there are few prehistories that can be isolated to a single state's territory.

There have been impressive attempts to modernize the genre. These can be highly readable, geographically and chronologically complete narratives within the confines of a state, that consistently apply an explicit or implicit theoretical perspective. To my mind, Jørgen Jensen's socio-ecological *The Prehistory of Denmark* is perhaps one of the most impressive books in this category. Other *studies* (as opposed to narrations) could address a theme (often in a region, not a state) to illuminate a broader problem through methodological and theoretical tools, for example Christopher Tilley's *An Ethnography of the Neolithic* or Kristian Kristiansen's *Europe before history*. These provide the arguments and interpretations, but do not work well as undergraduate introductions.

Ideally, I would probably contend that problems noted above (the arbitrary boundaries of a modern state, dynamic and rapid knowledge production) and the sheer size of the undertaking imply that the national and chronologically complete standard reference books can no longer meet the combined contemporary expectations of up-to-date theoretical grounding, methodological clarity, detailed empirical description and variable interpretation –and should perhaps not be written anymore, or at least written by a *team* of specialists?

However, we would then be left with a gap in the archaeological literature. The archaeology interests of most students are rooted in a time and a place, and students need a comprehensive and coherent source - a cognitive baseline - to turn to in trying to create order out of (and opposition to) changing and fragmented academic narratives and arguments. It's against this backdrop that I opened T. Douglas Price's *Ancient Scandinavia. An archaeological history from the first humans to the Vikings*. This is a new synthesis of Denmark, Sweden, Norway and in time Iceland's prehistory. The book presents a set of narratives that span the late quaternary history and western and central European origins of the first Palaeolithic inhabitants through to the Viking Age of Scandinavia – and indeed even some strands of observations leading up to the present. It is chronologically ordered and built up around recognised period divisions. Each chapter carries a title with a characteristic content (e.g. "Bronze warriors, 1700-800 BC", here oddly with a 300 year gap to the next chapter "The Age of Iron, 500 BC-700 AD"). Each chapter is introduced with prominent archaeological feature narratives (e.g. "A market for axes", "Expensive trinkets", "People of the peat" or "The explorers"), which is followed by general chapters. A presentation and short discussion of important sites, cases and research from each of the countries follows, and finally important finds - "treasures" - are selected for particular attention.

There is no doubt that this is an authentically *archaeological* history and anthropology of Scandinavia. Price emphasises the rich archaeology of the region, and the "extraordinary laboratory" it represents for studies of the past and more general lessons in human history. Given this richness in material, long term and intensive research, the chronological span, and the geographical scope, the potential for illustrations of finds, site and landscapes is virtually limitless. Each chapter is, however, illustrated with a few central finds that also serve as a pedagogic al device and cognitive peg. Perhaps more importantly, for international readers as well as students with predictably restricted familiarity with the geography beyond their own national borders, the numerous maps provide the locations and geographical orientation necessary to support the text. The researchers who have created Scandinavian archaeology are also generously present in the text – briefly in the short introductory research history (which might be too short to make an impact), but mainly through the attributions and references in the text and the bibliography. The bibliography is a good place to start for anyone embarking on an in-depth review or study of a particular subject.

In addition to the above, Price provides a general contextualisation of Scandinavia and its archaeology, an environmental presentation and some broader opinions about the worth of the study of Scandinavian prehistory in the contemporary world. Starting out in chapter five with a brief story about a boat axe sold at Christie's a few years ago, he also offers (virtually apologizing in the introduction for his sentiments) his opinions on the growing threat of looting and trade in archaeological materials. Given the increasing public involvement in archaeology and the role professionals play in the illicit trade (also in Scandinavia), more books in this genre should follow Price's lead and explain the destructive nature of this trade. The final chapter nine is a slight mix of subjects intended to provide perspectives on archaeological studies, Scandinavia and heritage. The first part of the final chapter is a masterful summary of 15000 years of Scandinavian prehistory in seven pages (!). There is a lot of condensed material in this book, and this summary is potentially instrumental in creating a cognitive pattern to make sense of all the data and studies. I would recommend students reading the book as an introduction to Scandinavian archaeology and prehistory to jump straight to this synthesis, using it to create a mental storyline when they return to reading through the other chapters. The rest of the chapter is short commentary on heritage practices in Scandinavia that could profitably have been expanded simply to clarify why these peripheral, Northern nations fostered scientific archaeology and have continued to produce globally referential archaeology (Trigger 1989:73). The final pages are views on the traits of Scandinavians, and how the past and the environment have continued to shape Scandinavia. Rather sketchy, the final pages are primarily directed at non-Scandinavians (?), perhaps appealing to the more general contemporary curiosity about Scandinavia in Europe and North America, but also serving to explain some of Price's fascination with this part of the world.

The value of this book is the chronologically ordered, geographically comprehensive, up-to-date and empirically oriented synthesis of Scandinavia's prehistory in a clear and jargon-free (if at times perhaps too condensed) presentation. For those who wish to pursue a subject in depth, there is an extensive bibliography. Of course, issues can be raised. Though one notes Price's interest in the environment, his science background, emphasis on data and preoccupation with method, the book is not theoretically explicit – material holds sway. Scandinavian archaeology has always been at the forefront of theoretical and interpretative developments, and that theory is important in understanding the differences between Scandinavian archaeology and that of continental Europe, Great Britain and the United States. Theoretical perspectives are also important in understanding dissimilarity between national and regional schools in Scandinavia, and are probably just as important for the internal Scandinavian variations in interpretations and narratives as the materials and environments. This could have been discussed. Given the scope and range, and that Price is not an expert in the full range of subjects and materials, in some instances the text tends to more towards a review than a synthesis. Price has also attempted to leave the familiar mould of national or ethnic narratives to discuss the whole region, even crossing the North-South divide. However, the genuine over-the-border-integration at times fails, replaced by serial regional or national narratives. Price's southern Scandinavian predisposition (which he admits to) is at times apparent, but not often really a problem.

If one is looking for an undergraduate level introduction to Scandinavian archaeology that can serve as a cultural historical backbone and reference book, there aren't really alternatives to Price's book. However, it should be complemented with more in-depth case studies, history of the discipline and theoretical perspectives. It should be critically discussed in seminars and classes. No book can meet

all requirements, and the list of small and large critical remarks could easily be extended. And though I'm still not completely convinced of the wisdom of a single author covering such vast chronological, cultural, geographical and research historical expanses, as a textbook *Ancient Scandinavia* is unique in its combined scope, focus on material, emphasis on environment and its up-to-date content. And perhaps more importantly; I enjoyed reading it and I'm sure others will as well.

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