
What does the ancient historian need to know about European prehistory? For a discipline methodologically focused on texts and literate culture, the answer has often been not much. The role of prehistory in the historical narrative has consequently tended to be compartmentalised into sub-specialisms at the field's periphery (early Greece, Etruscanology, Celtic studies). But as Kristian Kristiansen's new monumental overview of the thousand or so years of Europe's Bronze and Early Iron Age (c. 1100-150 BC) goes to show, there is much to be learned from seeing the emergence of classical civilisation in the context of the global processes that gave it shape and direction.

Following in the tradition of V. Gordon Childe, Kristiansen sees the Bronze Age as a pivotal moment in European development, laying the essential foundations for a thousand years of subsequent European history—helping to explain not just the fragmented (and fractious) nature of European state formation, but even, more speculatively, the rise of European entrepreneurial capitalism. Conventional distinctions between Bronze and Iron Age, history and archaeology, Europe and Near East, are, Kristiansen believes, arbitrary and inhibiting. Instead he constructs, à la Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein, a Marxian historico-sociological 'world systems' model of interdependent regions bound together by large-scale structures and processes arching grandly through time and space. For a period this complex and expansive, it is a very tall order, and one courageously out of step with the current wariness of super-wide-angle explanatory models. Whatever the shortcomings of the book, it should be stressed that Kristiansen is one of the very few archaeologists active today with the wherewithal to take on such an ambitious enterprise.

The book begins with three introductory chapters laying out Kristiansen's theoretical template and its genealogy. This is a pragmatic amalgam of Anglo-American postmodernism and nitty-gritty Germanic empiricism, a Scandinavian 'middle way' between hard data and abstract theory broadly unified under a 'world systems' umbrella. Kristiansen then
proceeds to make his case in the five chronologically consecutive but largely freestanding chapters that follow.

Looking especially at metalwork and burial dispositions Kristiansen isolates six regional traditions or cultures in the period 1100-750 BC (ch.4), setting the stage for the breakaway of the Mediterranean traditions in the ninth and eighth centuries and their formation of new, urbanised forms of social organisation (ch.5). Much of the background to this process will be familiar: population growth, expanded trade connections, increased social specialisation. But the value of Kristiansen’s account for those accustomed to see this process from the viewpoint of the Greek polis lies in his trans-European perspective and the contrast it offers between differing regional responses to the same pressures and challenges.

What stimulated the development of city-states in the Mediterranean precipitated north of the Alps, where social structures were more restrictive and economic expansion faced greater environmental obstacles, a crisis which led in the seventh and sixth centuries to large-scale regional contraction. It is this separation of evolutionary trajectories that developed in the Hallstatt era (750-450 BC) into Europe’s two patterns of centre-periphery relationship with the civilisations of the Mediterranean South (ch.6). Central Europe, with its more settled and complex political structures, maintained its economic ties, while Northern Europe, where the trade connections that had sustained Bronze Age vitality were eroded by the spread of iron, lost its links, and reverted to decentralised warrior pastoralism.

These relationships between the Mediterranean and its European hinterland are not only important for understanding the economic bases of Graeco-Roman civilisation, and the patterns of cultural diffusion that went along with it, but even help to explain Europe’s structural development. As Kristiansen argues, it was the separation into Northern, Central and Southern European zones, characterised by their different regional traditions (e.g. Celts and Germans), which underlay the shape of the Roman empire in the West. Chapter 7 discusses the vexed question of the Celtic migrations and issues of cultural exchange and fusion in the period 450-150 BC. The final chapter offers a kind of rounding-up conclusion,
drawing together the book’s themes and setting them within a world-historical context.

The book is an enormous storehouse of ideas and information, but a work of this scale does not come without its problems. Despite its careful organisation, the thesis tends to get lost in a super-abundance of information; keeping an eye on the Big Picture is a difficult exercise. Part of the problem is that Kristiansen’s theoretical superstructure—largely walled off in its own introductory and concluding chapters—is never fully integrated into the treatment as a whole, often feeling more like an imposition rather than a natural outgrowth. After the complex, data-heavy chapters that have preceded it, the highly schematic models of ch.8 inevitably appear reductive and over-elegant.

Another weakness is Kristiansen’s tendency, for all his efforts to keep culture and religion as active parts of the historical equation, towards economic determinism. Hence the Trojan War appears as a symbol of the Bronze Age’s ‘competitive warfare over trade’ (390). The explanatory force of such rationalism makes it admittedly highly attractive, but one still has to wonder if it is always entirely adequate. It is a troubling kind of causation, after all, that was invisible to the actors at the time. One is left feeling that the special ‘otherness’ of Bronze Age society—which Kristiansen reminds us not to forget—is in danger of being lost.

These problems seem to speak to a larger one. Who, exactly, is this book for? Such an enormously comprehensive synthesis—Kristiansen’s net is cast across two hundred years of scholarship in a dozen languages (his bibliography runs to fifty-seven tightly packed pages)—suggests wide-ranging utility. Indeed, Kristiansen’s commitment to bridging disciplinary boundaries would seem to demand a book that speaks to all manner of interested parties. But those hoping for the accessibility of a new What Happened in History are likely to be disappointed. The sheer heft and expense of the book suggest a broad readership is not really expected. And indeed, the non-specialist is well advised that a fairly heavy-going read awaits. The text is dense and often technical, and many of the diagrams, graphs, maps and charts with which the book is filled—especially the more conceptual and schematic ones—are highly obscure, if not frankly inscrutable; many are also surprisingly poorly reproduced.
The result is often something of a clutter, which does little to transcend the impression of a specialist technical report.

Again, while Kristiansen acknowledges areas of controversy and debate, he is also not always clear about where summary of the orthodoxy ends and where his own interpretations begin—another stumbling block for the uninitiated. The net effect, one cannot help feeling, is that this opportunity to carry the author's enthusiasm and extraordinary breadth of learning to a more general audience has been largely missed. As impressive an achievement as *Europe before History* is, this must count as a great pity.

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