

BOOK REVIEW

Torsten Edgren, *Den förhistoriska tiden. Finlands historia I*. Schildts. Ekenäs 1992, pp. 9–270. ISBN 951-50-0566-3.

A previous complete description of the prehistory of Finland, printed in languages other than Finnish, was published by Ella Kivikoski in 1967 and has long been out of date. There are two more recent books, both in Finnish: the one composed by Matti Huurre in 1979 (*9000 vuotta Suomen esihistoriaa*) is a very popular and well comprehensible introduction to the past, and volume I of the *History of Finland* by Torsten Edgren, Unto Salo and Pirkko-Liisa Lehtosalo-Hilander from 1984 (*Suomen historia I*) is a colourfully illustrated presentation, also suitable for academic studies. However, the lack of presentations of the latest results in foreign languages has long been acknowledged and an improvement has been awaited, offering Finnish prehistory to students outside our own country, especially in Scandinavia. At the same time, there has been a great need for a handbook with more detailed and specific, but at the same time conclusive, information on the different prehistoric periods.

The latest presentation of the prehistory of Finland has been composed by Dr. Torsten Edgren, docent of the University of Helsinki and the head of the Department of Archaeology at the National Board of Antiquities. It was published at the end of 1992 as the first volume of *Finlands förhistoria*, together with Lena Törnblom's description of the Medieval Period. Edgren begins with a short but good overview of the history of archaeological research in Scandinavia, including the development of basic terminology and methods. Then he outlines the prehistory following the three-period system, giving the grounds for defining the cultural phases, describing their typical features, artefact forms and site and monument types. He also gives a sketch of the ecology, economy, trade and religion of each period. The text is well supplemented with windows on special questions, written by both Edgren himself and other experts. Many of these windows are very useful and give

detailed information which is very valuable for academic studies, e.g. the section describing the types of the battle axes (p. 92–93).

Edgren's style is fluent and pleasant to read. At the same time his somewhat careless and uncritical way of using assumptions lowers the reliability of the text. As examples of such we could mention the theory that Stone Age people controlled the increase of the population by a long period of breast-feeding (p. 71), or that the clay figurines of the Comb Ceramic Culture may represent the youngest descendants of the Palaeolithic Venus sculptures. However, giving colour to the text by using assumptions is a commonly used method in a book meant for the public and cannot be blamed.

The same effect of uncertainty results from some of the very detailed and perhaps exaggerated information, e.g. of the grave measurements and grave numbers of Kolmhaara (p. 64) or percentile amounts on seal bones at some Stone Age dwelling sites (p. 72). These accurate details are in contradiction with the popular way of using "common knowledge" and thus cause a certain degree of irregularity. The stone artefacts furnished with animal heads are listed in the text but no illustrations are given (p. 80–83), so that only a person who already knows the material can picture them. When reading the book, one repeatedly asks oneself, for whom is this book actually meant.

One also often wants to know where the data actually comes from, and an archaeologist would actually need references to the literature to be able to check and criticise the conclusions himself. References would also increase the value of the book as a "Handbook of Finnish Prehistory". This need is enormous especially when only lists of objects or names of their find locations (e.g. p. 108) are presented, and one needs to find out how to get more information of the results.

As a whole, the book is relatively conventional. A student of the 70's almost feels like reading lecture notes from that period. The Comb Ceramic Culture is – as always – presented using a wide point of view, showing the uniformity and connections of the large area between the Urals and the Gulf of Bothnia. The Battle Axe Culture, on the

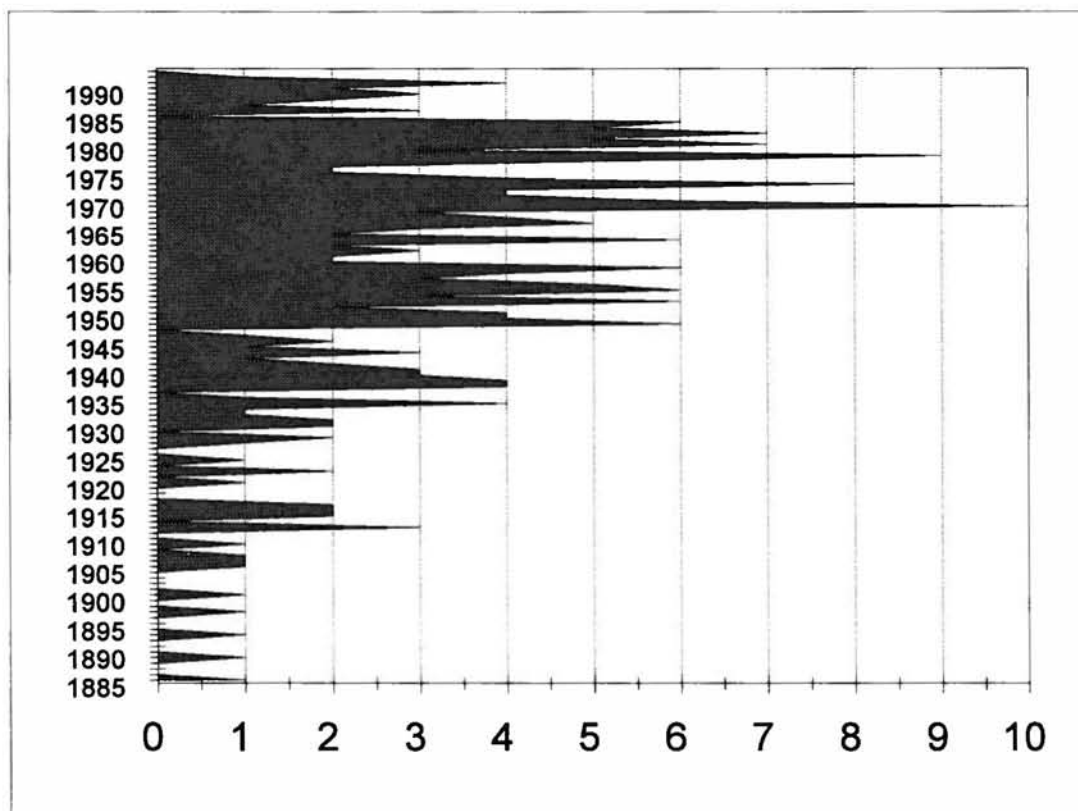


Fig 1. Diagram showing the number of referenced literature counted by year of publishing in Edgren's "Den förhistoriska tiden".

contrary, is presented in a more individual and accurate aspect, with separate graves and their goods and giving arguments stated by Aarne Äyräpää about annual mean temperatures and their relevance in estimating the subsistence of this culture. One would like to know if the contrast of these cultures is at least in some respect a result of the different attitudes which have been taken by archaeologists to these phases, and if an attempt would be worth making to show a more comparative overview of them, in spite of the differences in the character of find material.

On the other hand, the book has been updated with some selected new information. Such very new results as those of the marine archaeological research of the Viking Age wreck of Lapuri (p. 218) bring a fresh breeze to an otherwise conventional way of discussing the past. The recent results of the famous village of Varikkoniemi in Hämeenlinna are also provided. In this case a more careful use of new research would perhaps have been recommended, given the considerable cri-

tique which has been arisen concerning the existence of the houses and the walls. Presenting uncertain information in a book like this tends to change it into accepted fact, which is then used as such by both archaeologists and the public. Without taking any sides in the debate itself, we ought to allow it to swell, both in printed form and around the coffee tables, and then wait until the thunder dies down and some conclusions and agreements can be accomplished. Maybe we have a lot to learn about scientific discussion before we are able to accept and make use of the variance of different opinions?

Concerning the importance of Åland, in respect of the Stone Age chronology, Edgren presents the well known sites of Långbergsöda valley (p. 96). Are the new excavations made in the 80's on the slopes of Geta mountain so insignificant that they are not worth mentioning? They at least confirm the theory.

Other new research concerns the Pyheensilta phase: the book declares that only three sites of

this period are known. In a recent study by the author of this review, more than 20 sites are presented. Since Edgren was the other examiner of the so far unpublished paper, he is well aware of the results. Although some of these sites are doubtful and presented as such, most of them are, however, indisputable. If Edgren disagreed with the author's opinion on these sites, he should have indicated so in his review and not just ignored the results, thus enlivening discussion and the creative atmosphere of our archaeology.

The Pyheensilta phase was originally connected with the Comb Ceramic culture and has been commonly considered as the last period of it. Edgren has presented another perspective and combined it with the Middle Neolithic Asbestos Ceramic styles Kierikki and Pöljä. This point of view is one of the awaited modern conceptions in this book. Although already introduced in his previous book, it has not been set under critique by Finnish archaeologists. It seems obvious that this assumption is correct: both the slate arrowheads and the decoration of pottery point to a closer relationship between these post (or sub ?) Comb Ceramic phases than between Comb Ceramics and each of them separately. However, Äyräpää's classification of Comb Ceramic phases has not been criticised, and the very doubtful Sipilänhaka phase has been accepted without question (p. 48). A certain need exists to expand the new concept to include this dubious phase, too.

Since the selection criteria for new data appeared to be somewhat obscure, a brief look at the literature used is interesting. The frequency of the utilised publications presented by year of print (Fig. 1) shows that Edgren's data consist mostly of the products of the years 1950–1983. If this diagram reflects the intensity of archaeological research in Finland during the last 100 years, we have a good reason to worry about the decrease of activity after 1985. Another guess can be made: that it reflects the date when the author, as a young student, began to obtain information, being all the time aware of new publications. There is a third explanation and at least in some cases it seems to be valid; new data is presented but the origin of it does not turn up in the literature list. This is understandable, if the information has been obtained face-to-face, and the publication, which has perhaps come out later, has not been picked up.

Even though the overall value of the information is remarkable, some mistakes can be found. When describing the ceramic styles of the Stone Age Edgren says that a typical feature of the earliest northern Finnish Comb Ware style Säräisniemi I is that it is richly asbestos-tempered (p.

45). In fact, asbestos was not used in the clay material of Sär I pottery. This Eastern Finnish speciality came into use during the Early Comb Ware I:2 and as a characteristic feature in the Early Metal Period pottery of the Säräisniemi II style, but certainly not in the early pottery. *Errare humanum est*. However, the same mistake appeared in Edgren's previous presentation of the same kind almost ten years earlier. The question again arises: what is the difficulty in archaeological communication in Finland that prevents feed-back about such mistakes from reaching the author himself.

Finally, the reader is often interested in what the author's own opinion is. Edgren's descriptions of different theories about the first Mesolithic population and its origins give an excellent overview to the history of research and also list some important sites and phenomena concerning the problem (p. 37–39). However, the reader is not able to get an idea of whether there is a commonly accepted theory, or which theory the author himself supports, if any. This lack of commitment seems to be a very common tradition in Finnish archaeology: we are afraid of saying what we actually think and we try to hide behind facts and the opinions of others. We should be aware of the insufficiency of archaeological discussion in Finland and work towards increasing the quantity and improving the quality of it, even though this may sometimes be painful. It may be the only way to reduce the consequences of it, some of them exemplified in the reviewed publication.

In all, Torsten Edgren's new book well meets the need of informing Scandinavian readers about our prehistory, and we have to remember its significance for our Swedish-speaking minority, too. One also has to confess that it well delineates the stage of archaeological research in Finland and as such is a good presentation of it. The lack of publication in one of the more common European languages – giving a detailed, versatile, conclusive and critical view of our prehistory to the professional archaeologists of Finland and other countries – still remains.

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