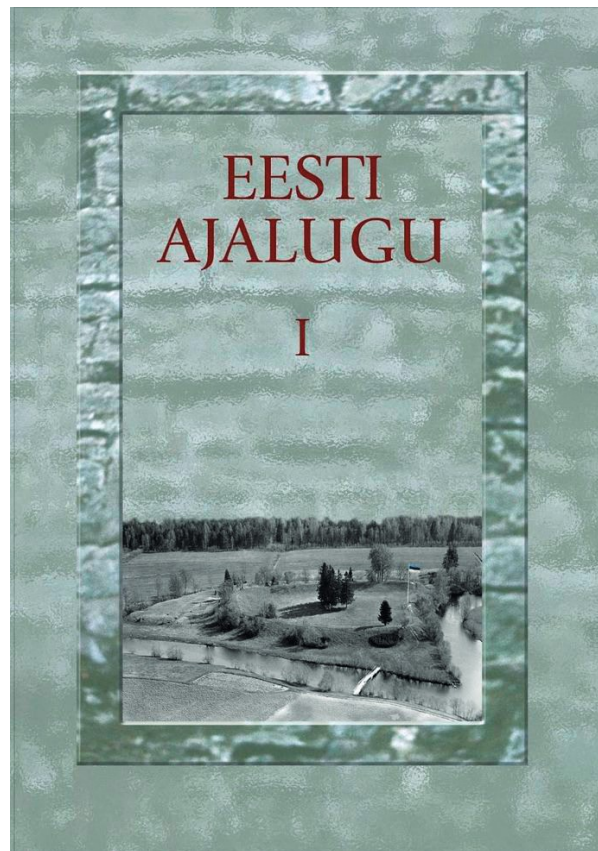


Aivar Kriiska, Valter Lang, Ain Mäesalu, Andres Tvauri & Heiki Valk: *Eesti ajalugu I: Eesti esiaeg*. Tartu Ülikooli ajaloo ja arheoloogia instituut, Tartu 2020. ISBN 978-9985-4-1241-1. 520 pp.

*Eesti esiaeg* (*The Prehistory of Estonia*) is the first volume of the six-part series *Eesti ajalugu* (*Estonian History*), even if it is the last of these six books to be published. The story begins already in the 1930s, when volumes I–III of *Eesti ajalugu* were printed for the first time (prehistory by Moora et al. 1935), while parts IV–VI were delayed by World War II and the subsequent Soviet occupation. After the restoration of independence in the 1990s, the project was revived and volumes IV–VI appeared between 2003 and 2010. Due to the long time since the first versions of volumes I–III saw the light of the day, it was decided to rewrite them. Volumes II and III went out of the print in 2012–13, and after a nearly 10-year delay, the first volume closed the saga in 2020 (see also Lang 2020).

The background of the volume is reflected in the team of authors. All of them are well-established archaeologists in their fields and have held positions at the University of Tartu since the 1990s: professor Aivar Kriiska, professor Valter Lang, professor Heiki Valk, associate professor Andres Tvauri, and lecturer Ain Mäesalu. This may also explain the all-male composition of the author collective, which does not reflect the number of women active in Estonian archaeology and on whose work the reviewed volume is similarly based (as shown also in the book; see also Lang & Tõrv 2020: 8).

The book is quite massive, has 520 pages and stretches from the early post-glacial settlement to the beginning of the Middle Ages. Like most archaeological narratives, the presentation is structured according to the generally accepted prehistoric periodisation and includes individual chapters on the Middle Stone Age (9000–3900 BC) and the Younger Stone Age (3900–1750 BC) (Kriiska); the Bronze and Pre-Roman Iron Ages (1750 BC–AD 50) and the Roman Iron



Age and the Migration Period (AD 50–550) (Lang); the Pre-Viking and Viking Ages (AD 550–1050) (Tvauri); and the Late Iron Age (AD 1050–1225) (Valk & Mäesalu). In addition to these six chapters, the volume contains introductory chapters on archaeology in general and Estonian archaeology in particular, as well as a description of the natural conditions and their development.

While the general framework is traditional, the contents and boundaries of many periods have been changed from what was presented earlier. The border between the Mesolithic and Neolithic Stone Age, which was previously associated with the introduction of pottery (Narva Ware) in the late 6<sup>th</sup> millennium BC, has now shifted to the emergence of the Typical Comb Ware c 3900 BC. This limit is considered to better correspond to economic, technological, socio-cultural, and demographic changes; Narva Ware now encompasses the fourth and final phase of the Mesolithic (p. 48–9). The new division of the

Bronze Age comprises three (Early, Middle, and Late) phases instead of the previous two (Early and Late), with internal boundaries drawn to 1250 BC and 850 BC. This change is made to align the periodisation with the poorly-known early phase and the archaeologically identified later phenomena (p. 160–1); in addition, the limit between the Stone Age and the Bronze Age is moved to 1750 BC. The Iron Age periodisation is also changed and the Middle Iron Age, which previously included the Migration Period and the Pre-Viking Age, is omitted. Instead, the border between the Early and Late Iron Ages is placed between the Migration Period and the Pre-Viking Age, c AD 550, and is correlated with a big change in material culture and settlement, partially also associated with the AD 536 event (p. 238, 285, 291). These changes are a reminder of the need to periodically review the structure of prehistoric periodisation and aim to better adapt the framework to present archaeological materials, as well as to a broader regional context. Nevertheless, the shift of the Mesolithic-Neolithic boundary remains, at least for the time being, debatable and rather confuses the already diverse and contradicting Stone Age periodisations in the eastern Baltic and north-east Europe.

Each of the chapters is structured similarly and covers similar basic topics, which broadly include settlement (distribution, way of life, material structures), economy (subsistence, material culture and various handicrafts, exchange and trade) and people, culture, and society (communities, relations and reproduction, religion and burial customs, clothing and other material culture, weapons and warfare, ethnic conditions). The internal division and the order and number of subheadings vary between the chapters, depending on the available sources, as well as the personal preferences and interpretations of the authors. Discussing the same topics in each chapter naturally leads to a little repetition between them, but in general the solution works and makes it possible to follow long-term developments and processes in material culture over several periods.

The volume is intended to provide an overview of Estonian prehistory based on archaeological material (p. 30). The presented material companions are used to introduce various aspects of past humans both as biological individuals and

as social members of their communities. How this succeeds varies between the periods and depending on how broad the material culture is and how far it allows interpretations to be taken. On a larger scale, however, only the chapter on the Late Iron Age differs due to its additional reference to early written (chronicle) sources. The availability of material (not the length of the period) is also reflected in the number of pages allocated for each chapter: the Late Iron Age is 120 pages (175 years), while the other chapters are between 50 and 60 pages (500–5100 years), the Bronze and Pre-Roman Iron Ages 75 pages (1800 years). The larger number of pages in the chapter on the Late Iron Age also offers space for repetitive structure, visible in the descriptions of regionality and territorial setup from different perspectives (settlement units and societies, routes and communication, fortifications, taxation, etc.).

The volume presents many important new discoveries recently made in Estonian archaeology. These include finds from fieldworks, but also from the field of archaeological theory and method. For example, Lang's recent synthesis of the ethnogenesis of the Finnic peoples in the areas east of the Baltic Sea is briefly presented, and also the shift in the Late Iron Age units mentioned in the chronicles from purely political and administrative units to geographic, linguistic, cultural, and identity-related ones illustrates changing approaches. New themes – such as violence, disease, and genetic demographics – reflect general trends in recent international research. The first results of aDNA and other archaeometric and natural scientific analyses are presented, especially in chapters on the earliest periods, the Stone Age and the Early Metal Period. Still, given how the new methods are described as groundbreaking (p. 29–30), they are not very well described. Additional 'information boxes', which are commonly contained in such general volumes, have not been used, even if they could deepen the understanding of neighbouring sciences and methods (such as aDNA and isotope studies, but also ones like radiocarbon dating, recent theoretical developments or other subfields of archaeology). What has not changed much, however, is the generally male-dominated view of prehistory; the biggest exception is the

discussion about the role of women in the Late Iron Age (p. 400, 419).

*Eesti Ajalugu I* is a national project with a focus and scope specifically in the area of what is now Estonia, but this does not preclude extending the coverage to the neighbouring regions and addressing a broader context. All chapters contain an introduction that puts the period and its developments in the framework of northern Europe (or beyond), and comparisons and parallels are also presented in the chapters. Likewise, the one-two-page summaries that close each paragraph serve a general reader well – and for the very lazy, these alone give compact outlines of the periods. However, the lack of references makes it difficult, if not impossible, to delve deeper into a specific topic or to verify the origin of individual statements or materials. This would be of crucial importance, since the readers of the volume are not only specialists in archaeology, but also scholars of other sciences, students, and laypeople. The selected bibliographies associated with each chapter do not really solve this problem (in fact, the illustrations are much better referenced than the text). Obviously, the volume has to balance between a strictly academic and a general popularising presentation and to conform to the general guidelines of the book series, but the solution chosen is far from optimal.

The layout also follows the look outlined for the entire series: it is clear and the 216 illustrations have been consistently produced for the book. The text is the product of five authors, each with their own emphasis and views, but as I am not a native speaker of Estonian, the assessment of the language used and its editing are beyond my abilities. Of course, a volume of over 500 pages always contains small mistakes: for example, ‘the sites mentioned in the text’ are not always to be found in the corresponding maps. Illustrations consist of artefact and site photos, plans and various distribution maps, while graphic presentations or more interpretive images often used in popular forums are little used. This may again be in line with the series guidelines but given the works of the artists working in close cooperation with Estonian archaeologists (including Jaana Ratas, who is responsible for the design and layout of this volume), more vivid illustrations could provide a more approachable perspective on prehistoric life.

The volume brings together material that has accumulated over the past decades (up to the early 2019). Much of it has already been published in one way or another in recent monographs and numerous journal articles, but the present book synthesises the data in a new way. This is the greatest justification for the publication of such a volume. Even if a traditional monograph may not ideally meet the needs of the rapidly evolving modern research, such overviews are necessary: the currently favoured short article format hardly allows to include and develop such depth of synthesis and long timescales, let alone the description of material cultures. Their presentation, even in a partially popularised version, is also urgently needed for understanding the development of archaeological thought.

Indeed, the volume is a milestone that reflects the state-of-the-art of the current Estonian prehistoric archaeology, but at the same time it is a milestone that marks a certain turning point in it. The decade-long delay of this volume provided the opportunity – and was partially a reason for the delay to (p. 30) – to include new results and discoveries from recent years, particularly in the field of natural-scientifically oriented archaeology. On the other hand, many of these results are preliminary and research is proceeding swiftly in numerous fields. It is true that singular advances do not necessarily directly change the grand questions of human development or abruptly shake the basic structure of prehistory, but the devil is in the detail. The new methodologies make it possible to grasp topics that were unreachable not so long ago. The inquiries are increasingly focused also on questions at the micro-scale and deal with prehistory on the individual level. The amount of data produced is constantly increasing due to the much larger group of scientists involved. At the same time, the new data is more fragmented, but rapidly disseminated, communicated, and modified for different purposes: the postmodern diversity of views and thoughts effectively challenges the basic idea of a unified national prehistory and increases the pressure to ‘outdate’ the present volume more quickly than the previous general publications.

In an interview in connection with the completion of the book series, one of the authors (Kriiska) underlined the need for each generation



of archaeologists to write their own version of prehistory (ERR 2019). In this sense and as stated in the beginning of the book (p. 30), the volume continues the tradition of prehistory writing started in *Eesti ajalugu I* by Harri Moora et al. in 1935 and in *Eesti esiajalugu* by Lembit Jaanits and colleagues in 1982. Still, it strives further. In addition to a modern overview, the works of past generations are clearly identified: the volume is about roots on several levels. The entire volume as well as each individual chapter begins with an account of the research history. This is appropriate not only for the historiography of science but also for contextualising the circumstances under which archaeology was practiced. In particular, the Soviet occupation between the 1940s and early 1990s meant not only a totalitarian change in the political regime, but also in the infrastructure and conduct of archaeology, in the questions to be asked and in the ideologically correct reading and interpretation of the archaeological record (p. 25–8 and p. 356). The present volume is therefore also a story about how these requirements and constraints were navigated in Estonia and how a new prehistory was constructed from the 1990s to the 2010s.

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