

Evert Baudou

*Oscar Montelius – om tidens återkomst
och kulturens vandringar*

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Stockholm: Atlantis

413 pages

ISBN 978-91-7353-539-7

Review by Joakim Goldhahn

**Oscar Montelius – on the return of time
and the drift of culture**

How do you capture a person's life and his archaeological achievements in 413 pages? Professor emeritus Evert Baudou has recently answered this question through an interesting biography of Oscar Montelius (1843–1921), Sweden's most celebrated and internationally renowned archaeologist.

Baudou presents Montelius's life through a familiar chronological framework that begins in the cradle and ends in the grave. After a short introduction Montelius's life is presented in six periods, which comprise 25 chapters: *Adolescence 1843–1861*, where his upbringing and youth are in focus; *The Uppsala period 1861–1869*, which deals with his studies and dissertation at Uppsala University; *The cultural goals of archaeology 1869–1875*, where his international scholarly breakthrough is depicted; *The recovery of the Bronze Age 1876–1885*, where Montelius's groundbreaking research about the Scandinavian and European Bronze

Age is in focus; *Research and social issues 1886–1907*, where the established researcher and his interest in social issues are highlighted; *The state antiquarian, the politician and research 1907–1921*, where Montelius's political activities to do with the Great War are highlighted. This part also discusses his growing interest in the “Race Issue”.

Within the archaeological field Montelius is best known as the founder of the typological method and his research on European Bronze Age. His chronological division of the Scandinavian Bronze Age into six periods is still valid and taught to students in the twenty-first century. During his life he was a well-known cultural personality who liked to debate current political issues and events. He was active in many associations and in demand as a lecturer. In his youth he was an open-minded liberal and throughout his life he argued and worked for the emancipation of women. During the twentieth century he became more culturally conservative. In 1914, for example, Montelius was one of five speakers at the Farmers' March (Sw. *Bondetåget*) in Stockholm, when he praised the Swedish farmers' historic achievement as “the nation's security guards” and called for a stronger Swedish Army. At the time Montelius was the President of the Swedish-German Association in Stockholm, and as such he spoke for a German revival and reimbursement after the Treaty of Versailles.

Baudou devotes most of his biography to Montelius's scholarly contributions, especially his formative years in the 1860s and 1870s when he established himself as one of Europe's leading archaeologists. Baudou uses a “comparative biographical method”. This means that Montelius's life to a large extent is viewed in relief against that of his contemporary friend and colleague Hans Hildebrand (1842–1913). They had known each other since childhood and their academic and scientific career ran largely in parallel. Hildebrand's father, the state antiquarian Bror Emil Hildebrand (1806–1884), was Montelius's most important mentor. Both young men studied and received their PhDs from Uppsala University with dissertations on the Iron Age, Hans in 1866, Oscar in 1869. During their summer breaks they participated in archaeological excavations together with Bror Emil Hildebrand. They worked together at the National Historical Museum as guides, on the collections, and with the creation of a new exhibition that opened to the public in new premises at Blasieholmen in 1866. Through their own scholarly research, they independently invented the typological method, an achievement that they generously shared with each other. After their dissertations, both were employed at the same museum, where they stayed until they retired. Hans Hildebrand eventually became the state antiquarian after his father retired in 1879, and Montelius followed after Hans in 1907.

Baudou's comparative biographical method develops into an interesting analysis about the cause and effect of heredity and environment, one of the most debated and protracted scientific enigmas in the modern era. Hans Hildebrand faithfully followed his father's footsteps. By birth he inherited a symbolic and cultural capital that in many ways opened doors for him during his education and career. Hildebrand was a bright intellectual, always number one in his class, but he also was a reclusive, religious zealot who wrestled with life's irresolvable existential questions. Early in life Hildebrand accompanied his father on research trips where he was introduced to pioneers in the archaeological field. In 1858, years before he went to university, he visited the famous Christian Jürgensen Thomsen (1788–1965) in Copenhagen, the often celebrated creator of the Three-Age system. When Hildebrand began his studies, he was already clear on the subject of his thesis. He was single-minded, almost manic, did not take any active part in social life, chosen as he was to follow his father's calling. He was already known among the professors at Uppsala; his name opened doors to their homes and social networks. Hildebrand left the university in record time with a lauded dissertation, which received the highest grade, and the book became very popular and was reprinted in several editions.

Montelius was another child of his time. He had a bright open mind that embraced the modern age. He had a dedicated faith in progress, shaped by the time when steam power, electricity, railways, telegraph and dynamite were novelties. Montelius was talented but never number one in his class. His father was a lawyer, so when he became interested in the past and began his studies, he deliberately avoided his father's life course. Montelius sought a way of his own. Montelius too visited Thomsen, the year after Hildebrand (1859), probably with an introductory letter from his mentor Bror Emil Hildebrand. His studies at Uppsala University were a time of searching and dragged out for years. At times Montelius seemed to get bored with his studies and was more occupied with the social life where he was known for his playful comic talent. He occasionally interrupted his studies to think about what he should do with his life. When he finally decided to take his degree, he was on his way to becoming a perpetual student. Once he made his mind up, he was dedicated, systematic and focused. His thesis did not gain the highest grade and was only read by a few interested scholars, but he immediately went on with his research, exploring new grounds and new materials, and looking ahead to the challenges awaiting him. Montelius's academic career was based on a clear and conscious choice, a choice that Hildebrand experienced as an opaque call. In short: Hans Hildebrand's academic career and life choice were marked by heredity, Montelius's by environment.

The main difference in the career and the legacy of these gentlemen is grounded in their personalities. Hildebrand was without doubt more intellectual, but also withdrawn and ruminant, while Montelius had an open, social and playful mind. The difference became clear during the 1870s. Hildebrand took advantage of his profound cultural capital. He spent equal amounts of time doing research on the Stone, Bronze and Iron Ages, but he also covered the medieval period. His research career was manifested in his pivotal synthesis, “The prehistoric peoples of Europe: A handbook of comparative archaeology” (*De förhistoriska folken i Europa: En handbok i jämförande fornkunskap*), published between 1873 and 1880. Montelius was more concentrated, focused and systematic in his research. Hildebrand made the most of the talents inherited from his father, while Montelius formulated new scholarly questions that pointed forward. He came to devote most of his time developing a chronological framework for the Bronze Age, first for the Scandinavian countries, and then for the rest of the European continent. The broader picture that Hildebrand embodied through his cultural capital got lost in details and depth; conversely, what Montelius initially lacked was compensated for in the long run when he was able to present an innovative groundbreaking chronology and interpretation of the whole European Bronze Age.

A significant difference between Montelius’s and Hildebrand’s research, which Baudou could have highlighted more clearly in his biography, was their explanation of cultural changes in the past. Here too, Hildebrand was restrained by his father-ridden legacy. Both he and his father maintained the hypothesis formulated by Sven Nilsson (1787–1883) that changes in the archaeological record should be explained by dramatic invasions by “new races” or ethnic groups. Montelius thought differently. Where others saw a cultural hiatus between the different ages in the past, he sought for continuity. As early as 1869, he argued that changes in the archaeological record should be explained in other ways, primarily through contacts between different areas and cultures in terms of trade, the spread of technological innovations and ideas – diffusion. When Montelius presented his thoughts about this in his study “The Swedish people during pagan times” from 1873 (*Svenska folket under hednatiden*), it was carefully formulated as an alternative hypothesis to Nilsson’s and Hildebrand’s explanation of cultural change, but when he republished his study again between 1875 and 1877, now under the title “Sweden’s pagan times and the Middle Ages” (*Sveriges hednatid, samt medeltid, förra skedet*), it was formulated as a sharp antithesis. Montelius went his own way.

According to Baudou, one of the reasons behind Montelius’s success can be found in his social competence. He liked people and people liked

him. He was a frequent visitor and lecturer at public and scholarly meetings. In the proceedings from the anthropological and archaeological congress in Stockholm in 1874, he presented no fewer than six printed papers. At the conference in Budapest in 1876 he presented four papers, which says something about his scholarly zeal and commitment, but also about his charisma. When the relationship between the newly formed Swedish Association of Antiquities (*Svenska fornminnesföreningen*) and the state antiquarian was tested on the sensitive issue of a new Heritage Act in the early 1870s, Montelius stepped in and poured oil on the waves. Montelius clearly defended the standpoint of the state antiquarian and his warning that the proposed legislation would have severe consequences for the new research field of archaeology. During this conflict, father and son Hildebrand searched for conflicts, Montelius acted as the spider in the web and searched for consensus. The result was that Montelius was elected to the board of the Swedish Association of Antiquities and became the editor of their journal. The latter published the works of amateur researchers side by side with recognized archaeologists and other scholars. Montelius published frequently in the journal, often with a lucid, picturesque and fluid pen. Hildebrand responded by creating a scholarly journal of his own (*Månadsbladet*), where only dependable academics were invited. Montelius created a social network that was inclusive, Hildebrand's strategy was exclusive.

With Montelius's star rising in the scholarly heaven, his relationship to Hans Hildebrand changed. From 1880 when Hildebrand became the new state antiquarian, succeeding his father, his working hours were instantly filled with obligations and administration. Montelius could continue to visit conferences and give lectures, and worst of all: he still had time to do profound research. Hildebrand became increasingly envious and started to oppose his colleague. He plotted against the possibility to establish an archaeological chair for Montelius at Stockholm University. He also was negative in his assessments of faithful disciples of Montelius, including the influential scholar Knut Stjerna. When Hildebrand eventually was ordered to retire in 1907, it was against his own will, not least as he knew that the position would be offered to Montelius.

As you can see, it is fascinating reading, which is largely due to the fact that Baudou knows his material inside out and that his biography of Montelius is written in a concretely informative style. In short: it is a well-structured book that gives great pleasure to read. Saying that, I cannot escape the feeling that Baudou is a forgiving and loyal writer who is keen to avoid letting Montelius wandering off the rightful path to glory. The private and personal is unmistakably kept apart. Private concerns that Montelius faced during his lifetime are omitted; the ex-

ception is his and his wife's great sorrow over their infertility, and one of Montelius's love affairs. Anyone who has got a glimpse of the vast archive of Montelius and his wife, which is really frightening by its size and diversity, knows that there are many more stories to be told, including amusing anecdotes and juicy scandals, but the latter are not to be found in Baudou's biography. At the same time that I think this might be justified, I also consider this as a lost opportunity to present a more colourful and multifaceted picture of Montelius as a person. Failures, side-tracks and setbacks are also a part of life. Another issue that could have been given more space is the sincere and close relationship between Montelius and his wife, but then it would have become a different biography. As a writer you have to make choices, or to put it simple: you have to kill your darlings.

In more than one way, there is as an official person that we meet Montelius in Baudou's biography. This is manifested in the consistent choice of official studio portraits of Montelius. We meet him with his father and mother as a five-year-old boy (1849), as a young student (1861), at age 26 when he had recently completed his doctorate (1869), as a mature 45-year-old man (1888), and as a 70-year-old retiring state antiquarian in Emerik Stenberg's pompous painting from 1913. The typological chain is unbroken. It is only after his retirement in 1913 that we are allowed to meet Montelius in more unofficial and private contexts. This may partly be explained by the fact that cameras became more common during the first half of the twentieth century, but that is not the whole truth, because there are plenty of photos to be found in the archives where Montelius is caught in motion, in real life: reading a newspaper in an arbour in Scania during one of his numerous field campaigns; on a platform, waiting for a train on his way to some forgotten conference or museum somewhere in Europe; taking a refreshing meal in Greece at a small taverna by the sea with known and unknown colleagues (figure 1), and so on.

In several places in his biography Baudou emphasizes that Montelius's research design and his cultural-historical archaeology remained unchanged throughout his career. It was Montelius's concentration, commitment and the continuity in his research design that was the main key to his success (pp. 278, 316). Here I think Montelius's heavy emphasis on cultural continuity has influenced Baudou, for there are evident differences to be found between the young and the old Montelius. His important inaugural address to the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters in March 1878, printed slightly revised in 1885 as his seminal work "On the age and chronology of the Bronze Age, especially in Scandinavia" (*Om tidsbestämningen inom bronsåldern med särskildt afseende på*



Figure 1. Oscar Montelius, second from the right, having lunch in the shade by the sea with some well-known and some unknown colleagues somewhere in Greece, 1905. Photo in ATA, Stockholm.

Skandinavien), is more or less free from cultural-historical archaeological traits and interpretations. It is the artefacts, their contexts and the combination of artefacts in closed contexts that are in focus. The research design, which clearly aims to establish a chronological framework, has more to do with statistics and natural science than the form of cultural-historical archaeology that characterizes his later works. There is an evident difference in the way the young Montelius treats the Iron Age, on one hand, and the Stone Age and Bronze Age, on the other hand. As Stig Welinder showed in an essay from 1994, entitled “On the protoracist conception and sediments of Swedish archaeology” (*Svensk arkeologis protorasistiska föreställningssediment*), Montelius’s theoretical framework changed towards the turn of the century. The form of cultural-historical archaeology that he presents at the end of his life is very different from his early works. There is a difference between an interest in cultural history and conducting a cultural-historical archaeology.

Another question that perhaps could be highlighted in a different way in the biography is what inspired Montelius to search for continuity between the prehistoric periods. Of course Darwin’s celebrated theory of evolution is mentioned as an inspiration; it was decisive, but Baudou also highlights an often-overlooked article by de Quatrefages from the proceedings of the anthropological and archaeological congress in Co-

penhagen in 1869. In this article de Quatrefages stated that a race, a people or a nation never went from one evolutionary stage to another without external influence, and Montelius writes in the margin of his book that “all cultural improvements are transferred from the outside” (*all kulturförbättring förs över utifrån*) (p. 102). But was this all?

Archaeologists are often inclined to explain that the origin of grandiose new scientific achievements, like the Montelian typology, is to be found in the contemporary society’s intellectual thought-style and philosophy. As a consequence of this, changes within the archaeological field are always believed and considered to be introduced from the outside. Contemporary society influenced the archaeologist to interpret the past in a certain way. It is very rare that the relationship is presented in reverse. I find this questionable, not least as this thought-style ends in a passive view of the scientific praxis followed by past and present archaeologists. Moreover, the findings that are revealed in this process are seldom thought to change the perception of form of the archaeologist. It follows from this that the “external” theoretical foundation and influences always takes precedence over “internal” archaeological praxis and empirical realities. It is contemporary society and its thought-styles that shapes and even predict the archaeologist’s interpretations. But would Darwin’s thoughts on evolution have appeared out of the blue, without all the finches that he studied on his long journey with the *Beagle*? Maybe, maybe not, but without a real world out there, his theory could not be tested, verified and proved. The above mentioned thought-style about cause and effect seem to rule research on the history of archaeology, because it is very seldom that you find any argument that the scientific praxis itself – *simple dirt archaeology* – changed the perception of form of archaeologists: it seems as if archaeologists always are digging in a sterile desert.

I think we need to reconsider this relationship. An example: When Bror Emil Hildebrand turned against Sven Nilsson’s interpretation that the Phoenicians had founded colonies in Scania in Southern Sweden during the Bronze Age, it was not because he did not like the Phoenicians or Nilsson’s theory *per se* – in fact he shared the same thought-style about cultural changes in the past; it was simply because it did not fit with empirical facts. If, and I write *if*, a Phoenician temple dedicated to Baal had been found in Scania, or *if* just one single artefact with this origin could have been demonstrated, Hildebrand would hardly have closed his eyes to the reality. Crucial to Hildebrand’s objection to Nilsson’s interpretation was that he had found ceramics and bones from domesticated animals in megalithic monuments from the Stone Age, suggesting that these primitive people must have left the barbaric wild evolutionary

stage that Nilsson associated with the Stone Age. Likewise, Montelius could clearly prove that many bronze objects were made in Scandinavia and that some of them were several hundred years older than any Phoenician colony in the Mediterranean. Nilsson's interpretation was rejected on the basis of empirical facts.

If you become acquainted with Montelius's writing and research you soon discover that many of his arguments for continuity between prehistoric periods, and for cultural changes in the past being caused by diffusion rather than migrations and invasions, were grounded on his vast experience as a field archaeologist. I believe that Montelius's profound experience of excavating ancient monuments, the recovered artefacts and their contexts, was at least as important for his interpretation as the celebrated thesis of Darwin and the forgotten article by de Quatrefages. For instance, the continuity between the Stone Age and Bronze Age was evident to him through his own experience of excavating burial mounds in southern Sweden; it was an empirical fact, and he experienced this phenomena time and time again (today we know that about 15 to 20 per cent of the burial mounds in Scania show continuity in burial practice between the Stone and Bronze Age). In this context, it would have been of great interest if Baudou had chosen to follow Montelius on one of his numerous excavations, to see how he was influenced by this praxis. But again, it would have ended up as a different biography.

Another choice Baudou has made in his biography is that he has devoted little space to describing the antiquarian field and the emerging archaeological discipline that Montelius entered as a young scholar. Sven Nilsson (1787–1883), who was considered to be one of the “grandfathers” of archaeology (p. 98), an honour he earned through his seminal work “The Primitive Inhabitants of Scandinavia: An Essay on Comparative Ethnography, and a Contribution to the History of the Development of Mankind”, first published in 1843 in Swedish (*Skandinaviska Nordens Ur-Invånare*), a work that was *doxa* when Montelius entered the stage, is hardly mentioned at all. Also, the legacy of Montelius is left almost without comment. Baudou might partly be excused here since he has published the most comprehensive study of the history of archaeology in Northern Europe (*Den nordiska arkeologin – historia och tolkningar*, 2004), but nevertheless, the result is that Montelius's life hangs in the air. The biography begins and ends with Montelius, and important events before and after his life remain hidden in the shadows for a novice.

I have a somewhat different view of the legacy of Montelius from Baudou's. His contribution to shaping a methodology for settlement archaeology is indisputable (Chapter 16, pp. 235–250). However, Baudou explicitly states that Montelius's research did not find any follow-

ers after his retirement in 1913 and his death in 1921. He also argues that the influential seminar at Uppsala University in the early twentieth century, founded by Knut Stjerna and later led by Oscar Almgren, with the explicit goal of exploring the early settlement history of Sweden, implemented a totally new kind of archaeology in opposition to Montelius. Baudou claims that (p. 346): “All this was new and independent of Montelius’s research” (in the original: *Allt detta var nytt och självständigt i förhållande till Montelius forskning*). Furthermore, Baudou also states that Montelius’s interest in the “Race Issue” did not gain any followers and supporters among contemporary Swedish archaeologists (p. 351): “Archaeology in Sweden after 1900 was quite different from Montelius’ Germanic ideas and his use of physical anthropology” (in the original: *Arkeologin i Sverige efter 1900, var något helt annat än Montelius germanska idéer och fysisk antropologi*).

I fail to follow Baudou in his arguments and conclusion. Stjerna’s and Montelius’ close relationship is well attested. Stjerna’s important work from 1911, “Before the Late Neolithic” (*Före hällkisttiden*), presents an orthodox Montelian settlement archaeology that faithfully follows the railway tracks that Montelius laid down. The differences that may be detected between them are found in the interpretation of specific traits in the archaeological record, caused by the salient fact that this record is not static but changes through the work of archaeologist, and that the same material culture can be interpreted in different ways. However, it was Montelius who designed the thought-style, including the theories, methods and analysis that Stjerna used. To me, the entire project about Sweden’s early settlement history at the seminar at Uppsala University, which also included the Bronze Age, was not to offer an alternative archaeology, but to verify and deepen Montelius’s research paradigm. Almgren (1919) wrote several articles about the “Race Issue” where Montelius’ research was acknowledged in a positive way. The issue was treated in separate chapters in several theses that were presented by Almgren’s students, including Gunnar Ekholm’s important thesis from 1915, “Studies in the settlement history of Uppland, part 1, the Stone Age” (*Studier i Upplands bebyggelsehistoria 1, Stenåldern*). As late as 1925, Arthur Nordén presented a chapter on the “Race Issue” in his thesis on “The Bronze Age of Östergötland” (*Östergötlands bronsålder*). The “Race Issue” and the settlement archaeology designed by Montelius could not be separated from each other; they were two sides of the same coin. Physical anthropology and its naive measurements of skulls was still an integral and important part of archaeology until the 1940s and 1950s (Svanberg 2012). To me it is evident that the majority of Swedish archaeologists lined up behind Montelius, like wagons after

a locomotive, and agreed that Swedes had lived in Sweden since the last Ice Age. I cannot imagine a greater homage to Montelius's archaeological achievements, and a greater manifestation of his legacy in Swedish archaeology, than the exhibition "Ten Thousand Years in Sweden" (*Tiotusen år i Sverige*) that opened 1943 at the National Historical Museum in Stockholm (Curman *et al.* 1945).

The impossible task of summarizing a person's life and archaeological achievements in 413 pages, a life that was Oscar Montelius's, has been made possible by Baudou through making choices. In doing so, something has of course been left out, but what still remains presents a fascinating picture of Montelius and his influential archaeological research. It is an inviting, well-structured, thought-provoking book that is lucidly written. Baudou's comparative biographical method is inspiring, and I hope that it will have many followers in the near future. The comparison between Montelius and Hans Hildebrand provides contrast, and contrast leads to nuances and shades, which I think is necessary to make disciplinary history more tangible, vivid and multifaceted. Baudou's biography of Montelius must be considered a seminal work, and an English translation would be highly desirable.

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