

Stig Welinder

Sveriges historia 13000 f Kr–600 e Kr

Stockholm: Norstedts 2009

502 pages

ISBN 978-91-1-302376-2

Dick Harrison

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ISBN 978-91-1-302377-9

Review by Susanne Thedéen

Almost 50 years have passed since the prehistory and history of Sweden were last written and presented for the public. Last autumn the first two of a total of eight volumes of a new edition of the history of Sweden were published. The main editor is Professor Dick Harrison who is also the author of the second volume covering the period from AD 600 to 1350. The author of the first volume is Professor Stig Welinder who has taken on the challenge of writing the history of Sweden from the very beginning around 13000 BC to AD 600. Both volumes are ambitious and impressive works written within very limited time frames. Crucial issues within humanities debated over the last 50 years are covered. The main focus in both volumes is social perspectives including questions related to cultural identity and social structure. Further, issues of significance in our contemporary society such as war and conflict, the important role of food, the relation between humans and animals, ritual aspects of the life and death of humans, and contacts and travels are covered.

Readers are introduced to two very different tales. Welinder con-

structs his narrative with a bottom-up approach using small tales, often very detailed ones. Readers are served several explanations and interpretations of prehistoric life and death, but syntheses are to a large extent absent. Welinder has written a history of his own, emphasizing issues of interest to him, perhaps provocative in some parts but overall delivered with enthusiasm. He discusses his thoughts, doubts and problems in a personal way and maintains a constant dialogue with readers. In contrast, Harrison uses a top-down approach that emphasizes broad perspectives such as the formation of the state, the struggle for power between leading families, and the growth of the church as a major impetus for societal change. Harrison is the great storyteller, presenting the big picture clearly and arguing as an experienced scholar and a professor of deep knowledge.

The disposition in Volume II is straightforward, quite pedagogical and easy to follow. On the other hand Welinder, in Volume I, moves between various time periods, although there is an underlying chronology. This may very likely confuse readers especially as he has chosen not to use the traditional chronological framework. Unfortunately the headings do not provide much help. Instead they sometimes appear to be cynical, for example “The light people with the light metal” and “Aryans”, which take into account the significant discussions of cultural identity in the text. Both volumes are richly illustrated. The beginning of Volume II suffers, however, from a narrow choice of illustrations where rune stones and churches are heavily over-represented. A greater number and wider variety of illustrations of archaeological sites, architecture and material culture in general would have been a contribution to Volume II.

An additional remark on Volume II is that only 130 out of 500 pages are devoted to the period AD 600–1000, and moreover the entire period AD 600–1000 is in general discussed with written source material as the point of departure and main source. Archaeological sources only serve as backgrounds and are foremost used to confirm the written sources. This becomes clear when Harrison uses a patronizing tone and choice of words to imply that archaeology is of less value than historical sources. On several occasions he returns to the use of the word “guesses” in relation to archaeological interpretations. A disappointment with Volume II is that it does not take advantage of all the archaeological excavations of the last 40 years. Consequently, important results of foremost settlement archaeology but also burial practices as well as

ritual and symbolic approaches are overlooked and neglected. Readers are provided with the obvious archaeological sites such as Birka and Uppåkra as well as famous burial grounds such as Valsgårde and Old Uppsala. In Volume I, Welinder clearly shows that archaeology has a great deal to tell about people and societies and worldviews in prehistory. Therefore it is strange that Harrison in Volume II has so little to say about a time that is so much closer to ours than the very remote past in Volume I. This reflects weak knowledge of and lack of concern for the archaeology of the Iron Age. Overall it was not the best choice to make AD 600 the break point between the two volumes. Welinder and Harrison are two very qualified writers but their main interest and knowledge is not in a narrative of the Scandinavian Iron Age and Viking Age. A better solution would have been to have a further volume covering the first millennia AD, preferably written by someone with archaeological knowledge of the period.

Welinder is known to have initiated gender issues within archaeology in Sweden. It is therefore a surprise that we are told such a traditional story of gender roles in Volume I. Even when there are good occasions for it, the opportunity is not taken to suggest interesting gender interpretations. This is most obvious in relation to discussions of women and female gender roles. However, the author has all the more to tell about children in the past, which is an important contribution. Children are present on as many as 50 pages. In Volume II the lives and roles of children in society are invisible. Already the headings are very worrying and revealing for a reader who is interested in gender perspectives throughout history. The headings comprise to a large extent identities and phenomena with associations to male words and worlds such as chieftain, ruler, lords, kings, war and plundering, monks, knights and crusaders. Women appear occasionally but more as “add-and-stir” or stereotypes. The possibility of third genders or queer perspectives does not appear in the main texts but is touched upon in an article by a historian of religion.

All in all Welinder has succeeded in writing many small, non-linked, but new narratives of Swedish prehistory, while Harrison has written an impressive synthesis in which power is the main explanation for various phenomena but which is surprisingly conventional and has few new interpretations. Of course both volumes should be read by anyone interested in the history of Sweden, but if you have to choose only one I would certainly recommend Volume I.