

Håkan Karlsson

*Ekornavallen. Mellan mångtydighet, demokrati
och etnografi*

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Review by Fredrik Andersson

Today, most archaeology is conducted within a digging industry that produces a massive amount of information, often represented as a more or less grasped and complete history. This has left ancient monuments and historical environments to play a less significant role as representations of the past, despite the existential quality many of them possess with their awkward presence and unreachable pastness. So I find it gratifying to open up a book where ancient monuments and the professional practices around them are critically and theoretically examined. Håkan Karlsson contributes with this book to the relevant discussion on the role of archaeology and cultural heritage in our contemporary society. With the site of Ekornavallen as a starting point, the text explores the continuously changing meaning of ancient monuments in relation to the archaeological and antiquarian practices. Like previous work by the author this book is well rooted in a hermeneutic postprocessual tradition, where the meaning of material culture is seen as constructed in the present and archaeological knowledge is understood as contextually and historically constituted. It is an awareness that emphasises archaeology's political function, since the ambiguity of ancient monuments poses critical questions concerning who has the right to interpret and ascribe meaning to them.

The text is composed around three explicit themes. One theme is epistemological, how the history of material culture affects the act of interpretation; another is political and ethical, how the ambiguity of material

culture influences the relationship between the professional practices and the public; and finally, there is a methodological theme that aims to explore ethnographic methods to generate knowledge about the interception of interpretation, antiquarian practice and the public. Although the themes are intertwined, they more or less correspond to three different chapters and are tied together in a concluding discussion.

In the first part a biography is outlined for Ekornavallen and its monuments, from the creation of Neolithic megaliths to the so-called restoration of the site in the 1940s. This biography would, perhaps, be quite similar to an ordinary long-term history if it was not for the focus on the 20th century and the ontological dimension of the site. It is more what the monuments *do* than what they *are* that plays the main role in the story of Ekornavallen. Influenced by the philosophies of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, the author argues that material culture through its effective history has an important (and by most archaeologists neglected) influence over the interpretation – in the past and in the present. The interpreter does not just ascribe meaning to the monument; the horizon of interpretation is constructed by its effective history. Following Karlsson's discussion one important consequence becomes apparent: each ancient monument possesses a unique effective history. This is quite a blasphemous and revolutionary idea for a heritage practice consisting of directives and management plans based on taxonomy and homogeneity. The biography of Ekornavallen shows how meaning continuously changes, so the archaeological task should not be to cement the significance of the traces of the past in the present, but to confront and give in to their radical singularity.

The next chapter explores the plurality of meanings and interpretations connected to a site like Ekornavallen, which has an effective history still active today. The multitude is demonstrated with the help of two different sets of interpretations. The first is represented by pamphlets from the Swedish National Heritage Board, information signs at the site, and an interview with a representative from the local museum. This official interpretation is synonymous with the great national narrative: a well-known history focusing on chronology, linearity and contextuality. It is contrasted with an alternative history summarized from books and discussed in an interview with the author of these books, who understands Ekornavallen as part of a large system of power lines. The chapter aims to advocate epistemological relativism, which Karlsson guarantees does not mean a political or ethical

relativism. The familiar postprocessual argument goes: even though there is no absolute or value neutral knowledge, the interpretations and knowledge produced must be weighed against their political and ethical consequences. Although this statement brings the ethical dimension of archaeology to the surface, the question of what constitutes an ethical archaeology remains. I believe the postprocessual legacy calls for a concept of ethics that allows the question of what is ethically just to be asked; not simply stating what is morally just is that which is opposite to the unjust. An ethical archaeology would in this case be a practice which keeps the game of meaning free and open and which can see that the end may differ. In light of this, I find Karlsson's choice of alternative interpretation misleading and counterproductive. In the text the antiquarian approach comes across as considerate and open-minded, at least compared to an interpretation that sees the Truth in power lines and megalithic yards. This kind of "New Age" history is common in examples of a multivocal archaeology, representing the opposite of professional history. It is clearly a rewarding object of study, quite articulated and coherent – not like most people standing in front of an ancient monument, whose approach to the traces of the past is more fluid and indecisive. These visitors are confined, as Karlsson points out, to reading the official information signs when trying to understand the ancient remains. So I would have liked to see more emphasis on the greatly needed critical discussion on the hegemonic antiquarian practice of communication.

The third part of the book focuses on this interception between official meaning and the public. The purpose is to show how visitors to Ekornavallen engage with the monuments and the official interpretation of the site. A large part of the text consists of an exploration of different ethnographical methods: questionnaires, studies of movement patterns, and photographic documentation. Although some of the methods are quite intriguing (such as giving visitors disposable cameras) the discussion almost drowns in an empirical noise. There are, however, some important points made. For instance that the heritage management speaks to an unknown reader, a relationship that Karlsson aims to change with his study, at least in the case of Ekornavallen. Regardless whether he succeeds or not, this should be a crucial insight for present-day antiquarians. Their predecessors did not see the identity of the individual as a problem since the ancient remains were part of a spatial argument, historically defining and promoting a

modern national citizen. But hopefully the aim for the contemporary antiquarian is not to create a public but to engage in discussions with them. This is at least the kind of archaeologist Håkan Karlsson hopes to see in the future, and he gets support from developments within cultural politics.

The final part of the book discusses current developments in Swedish heritage management. This is a sector facing political directives that emphasise the importance of accessibility, participation and communication and that wants to see cultural heritage contributing to the progression of a democratic and sustainable society. Karlsson concurs with these ambitions but realises that, as much as the new directives are inspiring and challenging, they are problematic. How is one to concretise the fine words in everyday practice? Karlsson has several suggestions for what a new heritage practice could contain. He sees, for example, an archaeologist who no longer is the almighty expert with precedence of interpretation. Instead there emerges an inspiring supervisor who engages with the public in thought-provoking and reflective conversations. But this requires a change of focus for the whole heritage sector, from unanimousness and agreement to ambiguity and resistance. This reminds me of Jean-François Lyotard's idea for an alternative to the modern striving for consensus – a “permanent dissensus”. It is a condition for discourses that not only allows but also aspires to achieve heterogeneity and incommensurability, and that can create the possibility for representations of the past to allow for the identity of the present to stay open. This is a practice quite similar to the one Håkan Karlsson envisions for Ekornavallen's monuments.

These are just some of the many inspiring trains of thought that come when reading this very accessible and extensive book. It is a stimulating injection for further discussions on a subject that should be on every archaeologist's and antiquarian's mind today.