

Kerstin Cassel

*Det gemensamma rummet. Migrationer, myter och möten*

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Review by Fredrik Svanberg

In this study, Kerstin Cassel focuses on the issue of migrations in Swedish prehistory and to some extent history. This issue has long been neglected by archaeologists, who instead have concentrated on studying (and constructing) origins. The central problem revolves around a question of historical perspectives: origins/essence or mobility/transformations? Cassel takes a clear stand for the latter, the outspoken purpose of the book being “to further the study of migrations within archaeology based on new perspectives”.

The study is entirely in Swedish and consists of five chapters. “The hunt for origins” (*Jakten på det ursprungliga*) comes first and introduces the subject. Cassel goes straight into research history demonstrating how migrations, from being the preferred explanation for most major social and cultural changes in prehistory, were more or less abandoned by archaeologists as a subject of study and an explanatory strategy by the mid-20th century. This has opened the door for a major problem: the very widely spread view that the movement of substantial numbers of people is a modern phenomenon and, consequently, that our origin is a more or less pure, unmixed group, having been unaffected by migrations for a very long time. Cassel finds this view at the core of a currently revived interest in the background of contemporary peoples and groups within genetics. Furthermore, such a view, which implies

the idea that humanity consists of essential groups, gets dangerously close to or even becomes racism.

Cassel notes a new interest in migrations within archaeology but also identifies the need for a more thorough theoretical discussion. She finds inspiration in researchers outside archaeology, for example in sociologists such as Saskia Sassen and most notably in anthropologists such as James Clifford, Akhil Gupta, and James Ferguson. Cassel argues that the study of migrations and the inclusion of its results into national historical narratives will build a more inclusive history: if history is a history incorporating migrations, immigrants in the present will be able to find themselves in it. The latter part of the first chapter discusses definitions of the concept of migration: should it denote many or few people, and are there general processes to be found in all migrations or not? Cassel notes the promising possibilities for archaeologists to look at and apply concepts worked out in other disciplines – such as transmigrancy, diaspora, identification, and transhumance – but concludes that migration is a broad concept that she will continue to use in that way, including a wide variety of phenomena.

The second chapter, “Migration myths” (*Migrationsmyter*), first discusses the historical mythology about an unmixed, homogeneous Nordic context, untouched by prehistoric migrations. This view was powerfully argued by the early giants of Swedish archaeology such as Oscar Montelius and has lingered ever since. Cassel then relates the complex new research about the “peoples” and migrations of early medieval Europe, as represented by Peter Heather, Patrick Geary, Herwig Wolfram and others. Cassel points to the problems with using the scanty written sources of this period. She then reviews some recent research on travel in history, primarily represented by Mary Helms.

The third chapter, “The common room” (*Det gemensamma rummet*), deals with the way in which archaeologists and historians tend to think about the world geographically, in “homogeneous rooms”. Patrick Geary is a major critic of this view, having argued that geographical boundaries are hardly relevant to the understanding of early medieval peoples. Alternative views and models can easily be found in anthropology, for example that of “discontinuous rooms” and of how the same geographical rooms can be understood very differently by different groups inhabiting them at the same time. Cassel forcefully demonstrates this by taking as an example the large numbers of Finnish immigrants to middle Sweden in the 16th and 17th centuries. These Finns

constituted a defined cultural group that maintained a specific identity while inhabiting the same space as other groups – all in a continuous process of cultural hybridisation. Thereafter follows a discussion of the concepts of transmigrancy, diaspora and transhumance. Transmigrancy is the most interesting one and denotes how the migrant has not simply left one context for a new one – the hybrid identity and culture of the migrant is created in relation to several areas and places.

The fourth chapter deals with “Meeting places”. A number of archaeologically investigated sites are discussed, mainly the Stone Age site of Hedningahällan in Hälsingland, the Iron Age site of Gudme on Funen in Denmark, Helgö in Lake Mälaren, and Stora Karlsö just outside of Gotland. These are places where different people and groups of people met. Cassel’s point is to try to see these places from the perspective of the travellers/migrants, and she notes that several things were common to such “meeting places”. She is partly critical of the “central place” concept, which figures prominently in current research on the late Scandinavian Iron Age. The suggested basic shift in perspective here, from viewing a place of power as dominating a geographical area to regarding it as a meeting place – a node for the processes of migration – is interesting, though I have a hard time seeing how the presented analysis of the selected sites really relates to the understanding of migrations.

The last chapter, “Histories about mixes” (*Historier om blandningar*), starts with a note on the importance and possibilities of cultural hybridity. The “Nordic” animal art of the Iron Age as well as a gold medallion of the Roman Iron Age serves to exemplify how mixed influences create new and continually transforming wholes. Cassel also gives a number of examples of the redesign and reuse of artefacts as well as graves and burial grounds with “mixed” contents. There never was any original, unmixed, authentic Swedish, Roman, Gotlandic, etc. culture.

It is inevitable that a study like this must touch upon associated questions such as the understanding of ethnicity, the new research on early medieval peoples, nationalism and suchlike, though in my opinion focus could have stayed longer on the central questions of migrations and how archaeologists may proceed to study this. The examples of the two concluding sections are of relevance though none of them really gets to the heart of how archaeologists may actually study migrations.

The book is written in an essayistic style and lacks an initial introduction to the overall line of argument and the methods used. Neither

is there a concluding section – the book starts and ends *in medias res*. In my opinion, this free style works fine though perhaps it gets slightly disorderly at times, and I think many readers would have benefited from a bit more introduction to the line of argument.

All in all, this is an important and inspiring study. The perspectives on migration that it introduces to Swedish archaeology, and the consequences for the understanding of culture as well as historical and present-day human groups that these perspectives entail, are of prime relevance. The main contribution is this introduction to migration studies and associated concepts (from anthropology) such as transmigrancy, diaspora and transhumance. It should definitely be read.