

Carl Persson

Den hemliga sjön – en resa till det småländska inlandet för 9000 år sedan.

(The secret lake – a journey to the south Swedish inland 9000 years ago)

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Review by Björn Nilsson

Early Mesolithic bang for the buck, and more

It is not an everyday thing: an Early Mesolithic dissertation in Sweden. I presume one have to return back to the early 1970s, and the moss-green *Tidigpostglacialt mesoliticum i Skåne* by Stig Welinder, to encounter a doctoral thesis. No moss grows on Carl Persson's *Den hemliga sjön*. On the other hand, never has a Swedish archaeological thesis from the 2000s felt so 1970s! And this is a real treat for the theoretically interested, and for the more "Mesolithic" scholar. In fact: this might be the most interesting thesis written in ten years or more. Personally speaking, it is the best thesis I have read. And I have read it four times already. I do not agree at all with Persson. But he delivers personal, witty and well-performed research.

The book is elegantly written and easy to read and understand. The situation is the Boreal Mesolithic landscape of the south Swedish inland (Småland). The landscape is rich in lakes, bogs and stones, but poor in flint finds, contemporary Stone Age archaeologists and archaeologically

excavated places. Divided into eleven chapters, the thesis takes us on a varied excursion to archaeological theory, to contract archaeology, to the world of the Early Mesolithic. The research grows along five themes.

The first (pp. 11–57) explains the theoretical and empirical ground on which the study relies. It presents and positions Persson's Marxist and structural-analytical approach, where we meet Marcel Mauss, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Karl Marx, Claude Meillassoux, Carl-Axel Moberg, to mention some. The author's theoretical preferences are graphically reproduced in a novel diagram called the "theograph" (p. 33). Handy and honest!

On pages 57–72 Persson uses the archaeological research history of Småland to describe how current archaeological thinking and action produces sites and creates archaeological/prehistoric landscapes.

Through pages 73–145 we get to know the archaeological places and traces. Enter RAÄ 71, and enter 586 (!) pieces of flint. Now Persson and his elaborate and analytical (in its right term) archaeology start to move things around. Gradually he advances to the high-set goals: most "bang for the buck" (p. 27) and the hunt for the Maussian *fait social total* (p. 29) through mundane finds in a quite unknown archaeological context. But the scarce flint material, mostly due to determined archaeological fieldwork and post-processing, gives results. At the core of this we find an intellectual and realistic archaeologist who knows his Binford and Middle-Range-Theory, as well as his C.-A. Moberg. And evidently, he knows how to handle the moraine- and bog-covered soils of southern Sweden, and how to deal with the archaeological situation as such (p. 80).

On pages 145–199 Persson delivers a range of perspectives on the world 9,000 years ago. We get to know the water-world, its animals and the ongoing ecological and environmental changes. We get to know Mesolithic society from a neo-classical economic approach (supply and demand 9,000 years ago), and we get to know the structure of the archaic world (p. 183) of the Mesolithic. This leaves us in a sparsely inhabited but nevertheless highly social and knowledge-driven, mythical though material water-world. We end up in the traditionally established Mesolithic research duality of coasts and inlands – albeit with a twist. Persson describes the 9,000-year-old highland as an archaic, strange, unknown and dangerous situation in between the familiar salty waters of the west and the fresh waters of the large Ancylus Sea (sic!) in the east (p. 189). This renders a social history of travellers, of mythical landscapes where the exclusive knowledge of the inland is contrasted to the common knowledge of the coasts. Chapter 9 ends with an inviting The Lovers Camps–inspired narrative, or better, story. Well captured, and again, honest.

From page 207 on we return to the scientific archaeological and wider context. Here the “totality” of archaeological places in the studied area get to meet each other, and interact with radiocarbon analyses, archaeological temporal divides, theories of lithic selection and environmental crises. Here, I think, Persson shows that he is ready to cross the finishing line. *Cum laude*.

So. Could this really be? No major faults, no missed points and misunderstandings or misinterpretations. Of course there are. Mostly I do not agree at all with Persson.

For him all work is social. For me it is the opposite (in a Latourian way): *the social* is nothing but work. For him the Mesolithic can be understood economically. For me economic reasoning hinders the Mesolithic from speaking. For him the Early Mesolithic inland is a strange, unknown and dangerous place, a Heart of Darkness. For me, *au contraire*, the forested inland is a culturally explored and exploited landscape in which common knowledge flourishes. And why reject the complex term “ideology” for its ambiguity and “several connotations” (p. 39) and replace it with the equally complex term “cosmology”, which most scholars outside the realm of anthropology and archaeology consider something astronomical? And is it that easy to distinguish between wild thinking and scientific (p. 256)? I think not. Furthermore, can we seriously consider demographical calculations that maximize the amount of Early Mesolithic people in southern Halland (2,393 km²) to 47 persons as reliable? Of course not.

But here is the twist: Carl Persson goes all the way. His research is self-contained, and honest. Throughout the text he talks and thinks with us, and with himself. We can follow every step of reasoning, every step of archaeological action. And according to his ideological (!) footing everything fits rather fine. And he is certainly not always certain; he has his honest doubts.

It is a multi-layered text. You can read it for the joy of archaeological reasoning and methodology. You can read it as a book on archaeological history. Indeed it is a text of the Early Mesolithic. It is a text that revives some old and almost forgotten archaeological intentions. It is a text that ideologically tries to connect now and then. It is a thesis and a county museum’s report on contract archaeology. It is a book in the legacy of C.-A. Moberg. But above all: it is a scientific text that is equally theoretical and practical, in which theoretical and empirical work is of equal status and importance.

This is why, and this seldom happens, this Mesolithic monograph ought to be read, outside the obvious stakeholders.

There are some conclusions that we can draw from this work.

Firstly, it is worth concentrating on 586 pieces of flint, as long you have the stubbornness, time and resources to enroll all thinkable archaeological methods and theoretical focus. Bang for the buck, no doubt.

Secondly, this thesis is a rare piece of “one man’s work” in the sense that without the élan of Carl Persson I am pretty sure that RAÄ 71, in the parish of Markaryd, Småland, would have turned into something else. It is a “one man’s work” in the sense that Persson from his time as an undergraduate has had quite a similar archaeological approach. His doctoral studies do not follow any of the proposed academic schedules of today. In fact Persson is more like Uno Sundelin or any other of his “three wise men” (p. 64), than the ordinary young doctor – the strange combination of creativity and rigor, of introspection and expression.

The book is full of Mobergian vocabulary: *Arkeogram*, *Arkeografi*, *Arkeoskopi*. In order to describe Carl Persson and his work one could complete the list with some similar terms: *Arkeosofi*, *Arkeofili*. Persson has some of both. He knows, and he knows what he doesn’t know. He knows how to love the old, but not at the expense of science, nor of the present.

And again, if you never have read any Mesolithic monograph: read this one.