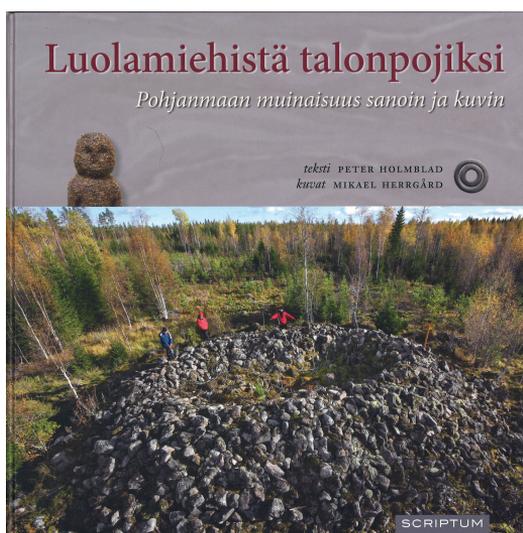


Peter Holmblad (text) & Mikael Herrgård (photographs): *Luolamiehistä talonpojiksi. Pohjanmaan muinaisuus sanoin ja kuvin*. ('From cavemen to peasants: ancient Ostrobothnia presented in words and images'). SCRIPTUM, Vaasa 2013.



The present book is based on a previous work by Holmblad and Herrgård in Swedish, titled *Forntimmen i Österbotten: från neandertalare till sockenbor* (2005), but even though the name and to some extent also the structure of the book now under review follow those of its predecessor, it is not simply a translation into Finnish but must be considered a separate work. The aim of the book is ambitious: to present an overview of the prehistory of Ostrobothnia (Fi. *Pohjanmaa*, Sw. *Österbotten*) – a region of Finland located on the eastern shores of the Gulf of Bothnia – that is approachable for the general public but also useful for students of archaeology and professional archaeologists. In other words, the book sets out to be a ‘popular academic’ publication. From the beginning, it is evident that the book adopts a modern archaeological perception of the past – that is, as a past populated by humans, not by artefacts – and accordingly the importance of interpretation is emphasised (p. 18–9). Such an

approach is commendable in a popular work especially now that, due to the high level of media interest surrounding metal detecting, artefacts tend to take the centre stage in archaeology-related discussions among the general public.

The geographical scope of the book includes the Finnish provinces of Ostrobothnia, Southern Ostrobothnia and Central Ostrobothnia, although some references to Northern Ostrobothnia are also made. The eleven chapters of the book cover a time period ranging from the Palaeolithic Stone Age to the historical period, as the name of the book implies. However, the section on the Palaeolithic is limited to a discussion of the controversial Susiluola site and, although it may justify the use of the rather striking title of the book, one has to point out that the possible presence of Neanderthals at Susiluola has no bearing on the continuity of occupation in this region and the name of the book is thus slightly misleading. However, this is a flaw that, considering the popular nature of the work, may be forgiven.

After a short introduction (Chapter 1), where the author describes archaeological research methods, the discussion of Ostrobothnian archaeological data begins with Susiluola (Chapter 2), the only candidate for a Neanderthal site in Fennoscandia. Owing to the nature of the find, this chapter is somewhat disconnected from the rest of the narrative, but as the space reserved for it is limited, this is not a major problem. The treatment of the find itself, however, warrants some comments. Susiluola is a controversial find and has generated a heated debate with many scholars doubting its association with the Neanderthals and others defending its authenticity (for different views see e.g. Pettitt & Niskanen 2005; Donner 2007; Kinnunen 2007; Schulz 2007; Manninen 2007). Holmblad is clearly pro-Susiluola and, while there is nothing wrong with a researcher openly stating their position in controversial issues (indeed this is a good practice), the critique of the find is only superficially reviewed. As the book is supposed to be a general work, aimed at the general public and students of archaeology, among others, a more neutral treatment would have been preferable. At least, the critical voices

should have received the same amount of space as those that are pro-Susiluola.

After Susiluola, Holmblad proceeds to the Mesolithic and works his way through prehistory towards the historical period. The Stone Age is covered in Chapters 3–6, with Chapter 3 discussing the Mesolithic and the rest of the section dedicated to the Neolithic. Compared to the other main periods of prehistory, the space (in numbers of pages) allotted to the Stone Age is strikingly small. The Mesolithic and Neolithic combined take roughly the same amount of pages as the Middle Iron Age, or in other words, a period of several thousand years is discussed in a length equal to that given to a period just a few hundred years. Furthermore, unlike in the later chapters, the interpretations presented in these first chapters offer few new insights – they are something one could read in almost any general work on Finnish prehistory. Although this may, to a certain extent, reflect the current research situation, one is left wondering whether the personal interests of the author have also played a part. I will return to this issue below.

In Chapters 7 and 8 Holmblad moves on to the Bronze Age and Early Iron Age respectively, and here his narrative clearly picks up with such things as social networks, hierarchies and religion entering the discussion more strongly than before. The same is true of Chapter 9, where Holmblad turns to the Middle Iron Age, which may be seen as the ‘main chapter’ of the book, as it appears that a great deal of attention has been focused on this chapter. The remaining chapters discuss the Late Iron Age (Chapter 10) and the historical period (Chapter 11) up until the 19th century.

When reading the book, one is struck by a feeling of haste in production that permeates the work. The text was originally written by Holmblad in Swedish, and has been translated into Finnish by the archaeologist Santeri Vanhanen. Although Vanhanen has managed adequately, the quality of the translation is very uneven, with the first few chapters occasionally exhibiting a rather clumsy use of Finnish. It might have been better to have the translation done by a professional, with an archaeologist merely verifying the proper use of professional terminology. If nothing else, the final translated manuscript should have been proof-read by a professional language editor – something I suspect has been omitted. The clumsy language only plagues the first few chapters and

subsequently gets better. Consequently, the Stone Age chapters suffer the most from language problems, while those dealing with the Metal Ages are written in a relatively fluent language. This leads me back to my earlier comment that perhaps the research interests of the author have led him to treat the Stone Age chapters with less care than those dealing with the Metal Ages.

Evidently an important part of the book is formed by Mikael Herrgård’s photographs, which are by and large of excellent quality. They consist of two main types, artefact photos and site views, and are present on virtually every page of the book. However, one of the greatest flaws of the book is also related to the illustrations. Even as the book is crammed with photographs of excellent quality, it is practically devoid of maps. There is just one map, showing the shore displacement of the area under examination (p. 13), in the entire book – an approach that I find highly questionable. This issue is made more acute by the fact that Holmblad constantly mentions distributions, but does not demonstrate them using maps. For anyone unfamiliar with the archaeological materials of Ostrobothnia, and this I suspect includes most members of the general public, the lack of maps makes Holmblad’s narrative very difficult to follow. Although images of artefacts may be pretty to look at, they are not very useful in a narrative of prehistory, and thus it would have been advisable to cut back on the photographs and include distribution maps to support the text. As it stands, the value of the book as a general presentation of prehistory, let alone its usefulness as a textbook for students and archaeologists, is greatly reduced.

The manner in which references are used in the book is also problematic. For example, there are several cases where Holmblad cites other researchers, whereas in some other cases he refrains from doing so, even though it is clear that he draws from the work of others. The bibliography includes several books and articles that are not cited in the text, implying that this approach is not accidental, but the unsystematic use of references is disturbing. In general, it appears that Holmblad is rather careful in citing Finnish archaeologists of the older generation, such as C.F. Meinander, Torsten Edgren and Mirja Mietinen, as well as his Swedish colleagues, but the work of younger Finnish archaeologists is cited less frequently even though it may be included in the bibliography. A notable exception is Markku

Mäkivuoti, who is neither cited nor included in the bibliography, even though Holmblad makes some specific comments on the Välikangas cemetery in Oulu excavated by Mäkivuoti (p. 178). Such lack of academic rigour could be considered improper, and leads me to wonder whether it is intentional or simply reflects a lack of care related to the apparent haste in producing the book.

With regard to the academic content of the book, I have chosen to focus on a few issues I feel are worth noting in a review. To begin with, it appears that Holmblad may not be critical enough in using some of his source material. This is most evident in his discussion of the Pre-Roman burial cairns of Ostrobothnia. Holmblad maintains that the municipality of Laihia may be the best-surveyed region in Ostrobothnia, with the total number of prehistoric cairns being around 2700 (p. 132). What he fails to mention, however, is that a large part of this survey work has been done by an active local prehistory enthusiast. Although the said enthusiast has discovered several genuine prehistoric cairns, I have personal experience of having been presented 'Pre-Roman cairns' in Laihia that in actual fact were either related to contemporary road construction or simply natural boulder fields. Archaeologists working for the Finnish National Board of Antiquities have in recent years conducted survey in the area and, judging by their comments left in the ancient site register (National Board of Antiquities 2014), it seems that they have often reached similar conclusions. As a result, several of Laihia's cairn sites have had their number of cairns greatly reduced. Whether Holmblad is aware of these recent developments or not, he makes no comment, and does not problematize the issue. I, however, remain sceptical of the '2700 cairns' of Laihia.

One may also question the inclusion of the 'runnic inscriptions' of Vöyri (Sw. Vörå) (p. 212–3) in the book. Holmblad admits that their nature is unclear, but unlike in the case of Susiluola, he does not make it clear what his position is regarding the runes. Instead, he takes 'the easy way out' by pointing out that regardless of whether they are genuine or not, they are a unique piece of the history of archaeology in Finland. While this may be true, it could be pointed out that all the 'pro-runes' studies cited by Holmblad have been published in the *Studia Archaeologica Ostrobotniensia* -series, which cannot be considered a full-fledged scientific journal, whereas Donner's (1986) critical

study was published in the peer-reviewed *Fennoscandia Archaeologica*.

As a more methodological note, it may be pointed out that Holmblad uses radiocarbon dates quite liberally on at least one occasion. He states that the series of 14C-results from the Middle Iron Age dwelling site of Pörnnullbacken in Vöyri shows dates ranging from the 7th to 9th century AD (p. 142, cf. also p. 158). However, if he is referring to the series published by Viklund (2002), the information is slightly misleading, as there the youngest date (Ua-15531) is AD 770–1030 and none of the dates feature margins beginning later than AD 770 (only two samples out of 23 have margins this young). Therefore, contrary to what Holmblad implies, the series does not prove post-8th century activity but only indicates that it is possible.

In observing the academic merits of the book on a more general level, attention is drawn to the fact that there is no theoretical framework on which the interpretations are based. Holmblad mentions anthropological and social approaches on one occasion (p. 175), but gives no references and does not elaborate on the point any further. Although this is understandable in a popular work, it does diminish the academic impact of the book. Besides, theoretical positions could have been elaborated even in a popular work and, to me at least, not doing so smacks of underestimating one's audience. The lack of a general theoretical framework is most evident in the ad hoc nature of many of the interpretations. Sometimes they even remind one of naïve romanticism, such as when Holmblad ponders how the red sandstone cover on top of a Pre-Roman burial cairn could represent the honour, independence and self-subsistence of a farm (p. 134).

To conclude this review, I must say that in spite of my (perhaps a bit harsh) critical remarks, I found the book a rather good read. As a popular work it has definitely earned its place, and may serve as a useful sourcebook for prehistory enthusiasts. Of particular merit is the fact that it emphasises interpretation, context, and a general/holistic view of the archaeological record, rather than focusing on artefacts and typologies. The value of the book for archaeology students and archaeologists, however, is more limited, and the book suffers greatly from the lack of maps – to the extent that it is sometimes hard to understand Holmblad's narrative. The references are

somewhat lacking in academic rigour, and the language could have benefitted from professional proof-reading, but all in all, the book is a commendable effort in the field of popular presentations of prehistory.

REFERENCES

Internet sources

National Board of Antiquities 2014. Kulttuuriympäristön rekisteriportaali. <http://kulttuuriymparisto.nba.fi/netsovellus/rekisteriportaali/portti/default.aspx>. Accessed 24 April 2014.

Literature

Donner, J. 1986. Bidrag till kännedomen om Vörårunornas ålder: exempel på ristningsteknik använd i runinskrifter och hållsristningar. *Fennoscandia Archaeologica* III: 73–80.

Donner, J. 2007. On the lack of evidence of artifacts in the Susiluola cave in Finland. *Fennoscandia Archaeologica* XXIV: 53–6.

Holmblad, P. & Herrgård, M. 2005. *Fornminnen i Österbotten. Från neandertalare till sockenbor*. SCRIPTUM, Vaasa.

Kinnunen, K.A. 2007. Fractured siltstones in Susivuori esker close to Susiluola cave, Karijoki, Finland. *Fennoscandia Archaeologica* XXIV: 57–63.

Manninen, M.A. 2007. Non-flint pseudo-lithics: some considerations. *Fennoscandia Archaeologica* XXIV: 76–83.

Pettitt, P. & Niskanen, M. 2005. Neanderthals in Susiluola cave, Finland, during the last interglacial period? *Fennoscandia Archaeologica* XXII: 79–87.

Schulz, H.-P. 2007. Artefact-geofact analysis of the lithic material from the Susiluola cave. *Fennoscandia Archaeologica* XXIV: 64–75.

Viklund, K. 2002. Österbottens järnåldersbygd och kontinuitetsproblemen. In K. Viklund & K. Gullberg (eds.), *Från romartid till vikingatid. Pörnullbacken – en järnålderstida bosättning i Österbotten*: 25–44. SCRIPTUM, Vaasa.

Jari-Matti Kuusela

Post-doctoral researcher at the University of Oulu
jari-matti.kuusela@oulu.fi

Copyright of Fennoscandia Archaeologica is the property of Fennoscandia Archaeologica and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.