



Book Reviews

PRÉHISTOIRES D'EUROPE. DE NÉANDERTHAL À VERCINGÉTORIX 40,000–52 AVANT NOTRE ÈRE BY ANNE LEHOËRFF

Mondes Anciens series, ed. Joël Cornette. Paris: Éditions Belin. 2016. 604pp, numerous illustrations, almost all in colour. ISBN 978-2-7011-5983-6, pb, €43

This is the first volume in an ambitious series which will include others on ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, Rome, the Roman Near East, Byzantium, the Islamic world up to the 16th century AD, the medieval West, and Africa from prehistory to the 16th century AD. This illustrates the compression that prehistory often suffers: six millennia in 500 pages, preceded by a summary of the later part of the Palaeolithic, in contrast to some other volumes covering a millennium or less.

In fact, the inclusion of the Palaeolithic seems to be a token compliance with the publisher's specifications. The author is most at home in the later second and the first millennia cal BC and it is there that she shows her strengths. She is also most at home in north-west Europe. The title might more accurately be 'Prehistories of France and its Neighbours'. The viewpoint is francocentric and central and eastern Europe come into the story only when they are particularly important for certain topics.

The intended readership seems to embrace the thinking non-archaeologist, the student and the archaeologist venturing out of his/her period. A glossary and a final chapter on archaeological practice and methods are clearly aimed at the first two categories. The text is conversational without being condescending, and complex concepts are explained lucidly and succinctly. The problems of thinking and writing prehistory, and the recent origins of the concept itself, are explored thoughtfully in the prologue. The structure combines the chronological and the thematic, often seamlessly, sometimes rather disruptively. Further detail is provided in panels, which include extended quotations from luminaries ranging from Polybius to Mortimer Wheeler. Historiography is one of the author's strengths, the thinking of the last couple of centuries being placed knowledgably in its time. Only theory gets short shrift, receiving little more than the odd disdainful nod.

The content is up-to-date. The numerous excellent illustrations communicate superbly the quality and complexity of Bronze Age and Iron Age craftsmanship. Errors occur where the author is on unfamiliar ground. To take a handful of examples, the 'livres de beurre' of Grand Pressigny are explained as the long blades of this distinctive flint, rather than as the cores from which they were struck, which got their familiar name from their resemblance to blocks of butter from traditional elongated moulds; flint daggers are seen as pre-figuring metal ones, rather than mimicking them; and a henge is defined as a stone circle with lintels, so that, while Stonehenge is a henge, Durrington Walls is a ditched circular monument. The text could have been better-edited. This would have countered a tendency to reiterate the nature and interpretive limitations of the archaeological record, sometimes so frequently as to provoke an inward scream of 'Don't nag! You've done it admirably already!' The strongest chapters are those covering the late second and the first millennia cal BC, culminating in the defeat of Vercingetorix at Alesia.

All-in-all, the author has risen to the challenge of synthesising a daunting mountain of data into an accessible narrative. The scale and the significance of the story are, however, sometimes lost in digression and caution. An infusion of courage and confidence, even a little brashness, might have done the story greater justice.

Frances Healy

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