



## Book Reviews

### **LIFE AND DEATH IN THE MESOLITHIC OF SWEDEN BY MATS LARSSON**

*Oxbow Books. 2017. 134pp, 62 illustrations, pb, ISBN 978-1-78570-385-0, £38.00*

Mats Larsson begins the book by explaining that he previously published a book on Neolithic Sweden and because this was received well he decided to write one on the Mesolithic. However, as he notes in the preface, he had no idea how difficult it would be, largely because of the huge number of sites which have been excavated and published in various ways over the last 20 years. He states that this book is targeted at archaeology students and archaeologists in general as well as other interested readers. The introduction states, quite rightly, that it is impossible to describe in detail or discuss the huge amount of material out there, so instead he has purposefully picked fundamental research perspectives concerning the period and focuses on Southern and Middle Sweden where there is most archaeology, though Northern Sweden is also included.

Larsson states that he has structured the book chronologically and each chapter is thematically organised; beginning with the Early Mesolithic and ending with the Neolithic. However, the chapters do not really seem to follow this. Instead it starts with a brief introductory chapter on the Mesolithic period in Sweden, followed by a chapter on southern Sweden (2: Hunters in the forest), the region of Blekinge (3: Blekinge: New Discoveries), the area around Kalmarsund and Öland (4: Hunters along the Kalmar Strait and on Öland), Gotland (5: Seal Hunters on Gotland), the interior (6: Into the Forest: Early Hunters in the Southern Swedish Interior), Eastern Middle Sweden (7: Pioneers: Hunters in Eastern Middle Sweden), the archipelagos (8: Pioneers in the Early Archipelagos of Eastern Middle Sweden), the counties of Västmanland, Närke and Dalarna (9: Moving Inland), the west coast (10: The Western Part of Sweden), Uppland, Ångermanland and Dalarna (11: Moving North), Norrland (12: Pioneers in the Interior of Northern Sweden) and finally a short epilogue. It therefore felt that the book was not structured so much chronologically, nor the chapters thematically, but that this was a tour through the different regions of Sweden.

In each chapter a number of case studies were used. Because this is a synthesis of many sites, each site is described in varying amounts of detail, though in each case the key points are presented. This provides a very helpful overview of Swedish Mesolithic archaeology, though anyone wanting to know more about a site would have to go back to the original reports for more information.

The information included for each site generally covers when it was excavated, what finds were uncovered, what culture it is attributed to and/or the date. In terms of the stone tools, where possible there tends to be a discussion of the proportions of types of raw material and the number of microliths, stone axes etc, as well as some overview on the faunal remains. Where human bone is present, either as

loose bone or burials, these are described with details of the numbers of individuals and any scientific results such as stable isotope analysis. One of the most exciting excavations of recent times has to be Motala, described in Chapter 7. Here, excavations which have taken place between 1999–2013 have revealed a number of sites including the discovery of ceremonial deposits of human crania, displayed on stakes, in a lake at Kanaljorden. Here again brief details are provided and an explanation of the DNA analysis carried out.

Some broader questions are addressed in the section from Motala: it is stated that in recent years several Mesolithic cemeteries have been excavated close to settlements, though key questions such as ‘do the burials represent the living inhabitants of the settlements?’, and ‘were they important to later groups of people who inhabited the site?’, are not fully answered. Unfortunately, further discussion of these sorts of questions (both regarding death and settlement/life) are not really brought out any further in the book. The book ends with an Epilogue but this is only half a page and does not sum up for the reader the wider implications or the ‘big picture’. Really the reader needs to assimilate the data in the book and think through the implications of life and death in the Mesolithic of Sweden for themselves.

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges to a reader unfamiliar with the geography of Sweden is the lack of a clear map, or maps, which could show the different regions which are focused on in each chapter. There are very few maps overall and it is quite hard to be sure where each site or chapter is located. The book has a good number of illustrations, usually an image for most of the sites, but unfortunately a number are poor quality and in some cases data is hard to make out.

Overall, this is a very interesting book which provides a very thorough overview of Mesolithic sites in Sweden, and especially highlighting a lot of the important new discoveries made within the last couple of decades. Although it does not provide much theoretical or thematic insight into life and death, it will be a really important source for students of the Mesolithic who wish to get a good grasp of the current state of play in Sweden in terms of sites.

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