

THE RISE OF BRONZE AGE SOCIETY

BY KRISTIAN KRISTIANSEN AND THOMAS B. LARSSON. PP. XIV + 449, FIGS. 170. CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS 2005. £59. ISBN 0-521-84363-4 (CLOTH).

This ambitious and provocative book attempts to provide an account of the appearance and development of a specifically Bronze Age type of society in Europe, from the Aegean to Scandinavia, during the second millennium B.C.E. It is argued that the conditions of the Bronze Age, and in particular the need for the long-distance exchange of copper, tin, and other materials, make this period very different from both the Neolithic and the Iron Age. One important consequence is that models and assumptions derived from later periods, such as the static and spatially limited lives of later populations, are likely to be misleading. The framework for the account is provided, on one hand, by Mary Helms' well-known studies of the social and ideological importance of long-distance travel, prestige artifact production, and the acquisition of esoteric knowledge for the attainment of high status, and, on the other hand, by a kind of cultural world-systems theory in which cosmologies associated, for example, with rulership in the east Mediterranean spread across Europe as far as southern Scandinavia. There are many interesting observations concerning patterning in European Bronze Age material culture, and the book has a powerful narrative force that makes it very easy to read. However, the presentation is best described as tendentious, and much of it is based on argument by assertion.

In this book, the world is what its authors want it to be. For example, it is asserted without any supporting arguments or evidence that complex symbolic structures are more likely than simple ones to maintain their meaning unchanged as they are transmitted, a key assumption for the authors' argument. It seems more likely to me that the opposite is the case. Indeed, the whole of the theoretical intro-

duction is really an attempt to inoculate the subsequent account against any kind of criticism. Everything is described from the point of view of the authors' thesis; counterarguments are dismissed or ignored. Thus, the authors want later, orally derived sources, like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, to refer to the Bronze Age, so arguments about the dangers of anachronism in this position are summarily dismissed. If supposedly Indo-European gods do not fit the cosmological story they want to tell, then influences from Near Eastern cosmologies are invoked. Indeed, throughout there is an eclectic choice of sources for supposedly significant similarities. There is little evidence for the warrior wanderings on which the argument depends, other than the phenomena they want to explain by invoking them. Moreover, like many postprocessual accounts, this one provides an account of a symbolic mode of discourse that floats above more mundane realities.

There is no economic analysis of any kind, despite the claim that the search for metal is a key part of the story. Why are southern Scandinavia and east central Europe so important in terms of the wealth deposited there and the connections they have? It is never clear. Nor is the nature of the social institutions. How big were the polities involved? What led to one being more powerful than another? What was the relation between the chiefs and the local populations that must have supported them? Why were so many barrows constructed in Denmark in so short a time? What determined the scale of the connections of local leaders? All we have are the wandering chiefs and their warrior retainers. Twenty to 30 years ago, the present authors were part of a movement that offered materialist accounts of socioeconomic process that had coherence and explanatory

power even if one disagreed with them. It is a pity that the process has been forgotten, and only the dubious diffusionist connections remain.

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