

Reviews

Die Kinder des Prometheus: eine Geschichte der Menschheit vor der Erfindung der Schrift

By Hermann Parzinger. Munich:

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This book is a global, geographically organized, loosely chronological compendium that surveys ‘prehistory’. Based on archaeological material, it purports to a cover history before the invention of writing (and yet covers eras long after the invention of writing in Mesopotamia in c.3200 BCE). In this sense, it is a strange but unparalleled venture, and thus worthy of our attention. Yet Parzinger undermines his project by interpreting it in terms of an older argument based on subsistence economies and environmental challenges.

The first two chapters cover evolution and the dispersal of the human race across the continents. Chapters 3–5 address the beginnings of the Neolithic ‘revolution’ in the Near East and its spread to Europe; though they include the Ice Ages and the first part of the current geological epoch, the bulk of the text centres on recent millennia. Geographically, chapters 6–7 deal with Egypt

and Africa, chapters 9–10 the Eurasian Steppe and the Indian Subcontinent, chapter 11 the Far East, chapter 12 the Pacific, and chapters 13–15 the Americas. The final chapter is a comparative survey, though it largely summarizes the preceding chapters, stressing the author’s understanding of the importance of the environment in influencing human behaviour. The book has no references or footnotes. Instead, there are bibliographies organized by chapter, followed by references to the illustrations, and indices of geographical and archaeological terms.

As the book is not organized sequentially, there is arbitrariness over the boundaries of the various cultural areas and periods treated by the author, which are unrelated to either ‘the invention of writing’ generally or the introduction of writing locally. So, in relation to Europe, Parzinger’s account breaks off millennia before the introduction of writing, whereas in relation to Africa, he inadvertently wanders into the historical period (pp. 370–1). Also, it is debatable whether a discussion of the Indus civilization (pp. 462–3), with its wealth of sign-bearing seals, falls within the parameters of his project. All this suggests confusion.

In Parzinger’s teleology, Europe furnishes the template for understanding human history. In this, the European Neolithic ‘package’ – composed of sedentary people using polished stone tools and weapons, tending domesticated cattle and crops for food, and having pottery

for storing reserves in villages with houses – inexorably eliminated the hunter-gatherer way of life over a relatively brief period of several millennia (c.5500–2000 BCE). The assumption is that the Neolithic ‘production’ economy (c.10,000–3000 BCE in the Near East) swept away the less efficient ‘collection’ economy of the preceding Palaeolithic era (c.2 million–10,000 BCE in the Near East). Pottery is the hallmark of this European conception of the Neolithic, expressing an advanced creative technology that allowed the storage of produce.

Parzinger seems to believe that humans have always been obsessed with procuring food, which constitutes ‘a decisive incitement of all human development’ (p. 698), and that the environment (p. 11) is the scene of a constant struggle. Yet he also acknowledges that understanding the ‘economies of those people’ is impossible given the current state of our ‘research’ (e.g. p. 410) and that the data necessary for ‘a comprehensive reconstruction of settlement behaviour’ are ‘lacking’ (p. 416). Furthermore, cultures do not seem to change in time and space in his argument (e.g. pp. 409, 411). As evidence, he notes that the people of Egyptian Nile Valley did not adopt the Neolithic package, preferring to combine a production economy with pastoralism and hunting (p. 284); elsewhere in northern Africa, he mentions two groups living in the same region simultaneously, yet enjoying contrasting economies and cultures (pp. 357–9). Mesoamerica aside (p. 627), Parzinger identifies the same type of contrasting economic strategies between neighbouring peoples in North America (p. 589); even in Eurasia, he points to groups that refused to adopt the Neolithic way of life ‘over thousands of years’ (p. 407) and argues that, while some adopted agriculture, their neighbours ‘further North did not complete these developments’ (p. 401).

For these reasons, the global account given in this book is unable to substantiate Parzinger’s core argument. Take the example

of pottery. This did not form part of the original Near Eastern Neolithic package and yet became part of it in Europe. In fact, pottery dates from well before the Neolithic period, having been used by hunter-gatherers in Siberia, China, and Japan more than 13,000 years BCE. But in this book, the references to pottery generally only refer to periods after its appearance in Europe (for example, the dates given on the maps on pp. 171 and 235 do not precede 6000 BCE) and the Near East (pp. 118, 139, where the dates imply 6200 BCE). Earlier dates for the appearance of pottery are not discussed when considering hunter-gatherers in Siberia (for which Parzinger gives dates closer to 5000 BCE, p. 488) and the Khartoum Mesolithic (p. 277, where it has long been known that pottery was used by hunter-gatherers c.8000 BCE). This is all the more surprising given his suggestions that the use of pottery by hunter-gatherers in Siberia could potentially influence the interpretation of the chronology of the Neolithic (p. 408). Such lacunae and oversights betray a failure to recognize the historical sequence of technological developments.

This book’s treatment of the earliest human settlement in Cyprus offers another insight into the author’s views. In his narrative, Parzinger appreciates that recent evidence means that humans from the Levant introduced cattle into Cyprus during the ninth millennium (pp. 211–12). But in his conclusion he reverts to a more traditional interpretation, dating the appearance of cattle on Cyprus to the seventh millennium (pp. 707–8). This new evidence is of monumental importance. It has transformed our understanding of the recent human expansion from the Near East to Europe: rather than being agricultural and land-based (via the Danube), the initial expansion involved island-hopping from the Levant; the incipient Neolithic economy spread from the islands to

the mainland northern coasts of the Mediterranean, rather than arriving fully formed from the north. This precocious maritime activity underscores the importance of sea-faring in the most recent human colonization of the Mediterranean area.

While it is true that Parzinger records an ‘8000-year-old boat’ (p. 338) in slowly developing Africa and describes ‘waterborne movement for the first time’ in the Baltic in roughly the same era (p. 229), he neglects the broader significance of these discoveries. So, when discussing the Americas, he dismisses the relevance of Japanese Jomon pottery to the earliest pottery in the Valdivia culture of Ecuador (p. 644). This is despite the fact that this Valdivia material is older than the Colombian pottery to which Parzinger refers (and probably older than any other native American pottery). Significantly, Parzinger’s map of the distribution of prehistoric Jomon pottery-making culture in Japan (p. 476) wrongly fails to indicate that the Jomon extended to Kyushu – which is where Japanese fishermen who reached Latin America came from, according to archaeologists’ claims. This potentially Japanese-influenced pottery, which is the earliest to have been found in the Americas, greatly increases the importance of navigation in influencing cultural developments, thereby significantly extending the chronological scope of our concept of globalization. Furthermore, running counter to the assumption that pottery is a technology of sedentary Neolithic peoples, this example supports the probability that hunter-gatherers (as the Jomon fishermen were) contributed to the invention and diffusion of pottery around the globe. Although quite aware of the importance of navigation in prehistory (e.g., maps pp. 22, 530, 534, 539), Parzinger hardly stresses it, dwelling instead on the horses that allowed the peoples of the Eurasian steppe to achieve ‘a hitherto unknown degree of

mobility’ in the late fourth and early third millennia BC (pp. 395–6) – although this actually belongs in the historical era. Thus, it is unfortunate that Parzinger marginalizes the importance of navigation in prehistory.

By conceiving of his subject positivistically, as a research challenge to be solved with more data rather than a great unfolding narrative, Parzinger fails to perceive the overall success of human cultures in colonizing the globe. Instead, he appears to be mesmerized by the successive failure of individual human societies. More importantly, this book shows, despite itself, that human collectives cannot be understood solely in economic terms; although inefficient, rigid economies can doom societies facing direct competition, people frequently manage to muddle along. This points to a paradox at the heart of Parzinger’s work: only archaeologists are able to study what happened in the very distant past, yet their fixation on the material dimensions of life prevents many of them from understanding it.

Inventing exoticism: geography, globalism, and Europe’s early modern world

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Benjamin Schmidt’s elegantly written and beautifully produced new book argues that ‘a new conception of the world and of Europe’s relationship to it’ developed in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries