

Domestic Pigs in Prehistory: A Review of Approaches and Recent Results. *Journal of World Prehistory*, 25(1): 1–44. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10963-012-9055-0>

Slim, F.G., Çakırlar, C. & Roosevelt, C.H. 2020. Pigs in Sight: Late Bronze Age Pig Husbandries in the Aegean and Anatolia. *Journal of Field Archaeology*, 45(5): 315–33.

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doi:10.1017/aaa.2022.36

Reviewing the Classics

Manfred K.H. Eggert. *Prähistorische Archäologie: Konzepte und Methoden* (Tübingen & Basel: a. Francke, 2001, 4th Edition 2012, xvii and 412pp., 82 figs., pbk, ISBN:3-8252-2092-3)

This introductory textbook has had a profound influence on German speaking archaeology. Since its first publication more than twenty years ago in 2001, several generations of archaeology students have referred to it as their first, or one of their first archaeology reads. A colleague recently stated that, as a teacher, she suffered greatly from the book's impact, as she perennially had to deal with her students' fundamental pessimism towards the possibilities of archaeological interpretation, a notion she traces back to Eggert's strong focus on source criticism—and scepticism—towards the use of anthropological analogies in archaeology. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that the book significantly widened the view on what prehistoric archaeology is, should, and can be for many German speaking students, especially by introducing them to a much wider range of international, especially anglophone, perspectives than had been regularly taught at German archaeology departments. Before Eggert's book, we were told to read the introductory text by Hans-Jürgen Eggers

(unfortunately a very similar name, but not related to Manfred Eggert) from 1959, which conserved a wildly outdated and Germanocentric view of archaeology all through the 1990s. Yet, the influence of Eggers' *Einführung in die Vorgeschichte* remains strong in Eggert's 2001 book. Indeed, as it was probably written in order to replace that old textbook, large parts are dedicated to updating or critiquing several of the central parts of Eggers' sections on classification, typology, and chronology. This is largely correct and useful but at times has the effect of giving these topics more space than they might actually deserve. Nonetheless, such focus does well represent the specifically German tradition of prehistoric archaeology as a first and foremost empirical, data-driven discipline. It is primarily about what our sources are and how to describe and classify, date and order them, and then secondarily about the possibilities to draw inductive inferences from the evidence.

Eggert's book devotes a lot of space to historiography, for example a whole chapter (Ch. 3) is focused on the

invention of the three-age system of Stone, Bronze, and Iron ages in the early nineteenth century, or the development of the typological method in the late nineteenth century. Another chapter (Ch. 4) focuses on the 'main categories of prehistoric sources', that is, it discusses the different formation and characteristics of single finds, burial finds, caches/hoards, settlement finds, cult places, workplaces, means of transport, rock art, and other archaeological contexts or materials. This categorization is obviously a legacy of Eggers' approach, and comprises an attempt to update, better systematize, and expand that original proposal. While we might consider it useful to discuss the different properties of such categories of archaeological finds, it is, from our current perspective, hard not to stumble over the obviously modernist, Eurocentric nature of that categorization. Another prominent topic is the most German of all, namely that of *Quellenkritik* ('source criticism')—the extensive discussion of how biased, incomplete, and non-representative our archaeological record actually is, and how we can basically not say anything meaningful about prehistoric societies (Chapter 5). Traditionally, this was mostly directed at the archaeological material. However, Eggert was one of the primary figures in Germany who directed a comparable level of scrutiny at the culture historical reconstructions that dominated German archaeology until recently, and this is also visible in his book, which, to put it mildly, does not particularly encourage bold interpretations, the creation of narratives, or the search for explanations.

A large part of the book then deals with classification of material culture and its ordering in space and (especially) time (Chs 6–13). In Chapter 6, he discusses in detail what can be considered a trait, how traits make up types, what kind of types we know—including references to David

L. Clarke's (1968) *Analytical Archaeology*, which has had a profound and lasting impact on German archaeology. A discussion of relative vs absolute chronology (Ch. 7) is followed by an account of stratigraphy and the Harris Matrix (Ch. 8). Typology as a dating tool is covered in Chapter 9, with an extensive discussion of Oscar Montelius and his typological system for the dating of the Nordic Bronze Age—a discussion that, again, seems to largely be a reaction to Eggers' 1959 discussion of the topic. Drawing on critiques formulated in Eggert's own earlier writing and by other authors, such as Edward Sangmeister (1967), he largely deconstructs several of the underlying assumptions of typological dating, and thus its usefulness in archaeological practice. To some, that might seem like old news, but given the reality of the late 1990s in Germany, it was a timely and very effective critique. This must be understood in its specific German or Central European context of the time. It seems hard to comprehend from an outsider perspective, or now in hindsight, but until the early 2000s there remained serious debate in German-speaking archaeology concerning whether or not radiocarbon dates could be trusted. A main reason for this anachronistic debate is that radiocarbon dates often contradicted established relative chronologies that were mostly built on typological dating. While this seems more understandable when it comes to later periods (i.e., the Iron Age or Middle Ages) for which the wide probability ranges of radiocarbon dating are less useful than the years or decades documented in text and fine-grained typologies, these discussions also concerned the Bronze Age, Copper Age and Neolithic periods. Here, even the absolute chronology as indicated by radiocarbon dates was considered contentious by many authors. For example, Central

European Baden culture material had been determined to be contemporaneous with the Aegean Bronze Age, i.e. third millennium BCE, by using comparative typology (Kalicz, 1963). Even though radiocarbon dating clearly dated Baden to 3500–3000 BCE, this was not widely accepted after Josef Maran (1998) provided typological arguments confirming the radiocarbon chronology. This is also the explanation for Chapter 12's (now strange verging on anachronistic) account of the traditional 'archaeological-historical' method for absolute dating (i.e. dating through import finds connecting the Mediterranean civilizations and their written sources with pre-historic contexts) and the debates ensuing from the conflicting age determinations of these old method when compared to radiometric dating.

Such debates had a lot to do with personal ego and power structures in the Central European academic system. Many scholars from the 1960s through the early 2000s, having been confronted with scientific evidence proving that their method of choice and results were faulty, chose to insist that radiocarbon dating must be somehow wrong instead. Thus, it is probably inappropriate to dedicate more than half a chapter (Ch. 12.3–12.5) of an introductory textbook to reporting on decades-old and now totally outdated discussions on whether or not to believe in scientific dating. Eggert may well also have been settling some scores, but at the time, in 2001, the validity of radiometric dating was still something one had to state, especially to students, as they all too often would hear or read that radiocarbon dates were unreliable for dating.

Beside such problematic issues, Chapter 10 includes a very good presentation of the most prominent statistical tools for descriptive and exploratory statistics, such as seriation, correspondence analysis, principal component analyses, and other

comparable multivariate techniques. This part was added to the book in the third edition (2008), and it is authored by Nils Müller-Scheeßel. A chapter on spatial integration (Ch. 13) extensively discusses the concepts of spatial find distributions and archaeological cultures, again from a laudably critical perspective. This is very useful, again because of the importance of such flawed concepts in the Central European research tradition.

A very important section of the book is also dedicated to the anthropological dimension of archaeology (Ch. 14), and this is the part in which Eggert is most extensively looking beyond the German or Central European tradition, with an explicit subchapter on the 'Anglophone discussion'. He launches a clear endorsement of a comparative anthropological approach to archaeology, as opposed to the more historically oriented and Eurocentric archaeology that dominated German speaking academia in 2001, and probably even today. Eggert critically discusses the problems of ethnographic analogy and the role of Ethnoarchaeology, dwelling on Hodder's (1982) *Symbols in Action*, which he ultimately decries as unscientific and too far removed from the material. In contrast, he endorses the work of Thomas Knopf (2002) who, in his view, uses ethnoarchaeology in a more empirically grounded, source-critical manner. The value of this chapter on anthropological archaeology is not so much the specifics of Eggert's critique towards certain scholars or his endorsements of others but that he emphasises the relevance of these anthropological perspectives in such a textbook, because that certainly was not the mainstream in Germany in 2001, and still is not.

The book ends with a very instructive Chapter 15 concerning the current situation of archaeology in the university and the public, most of which was added by Stefanie Samida in the 3rd edition of

2008. Nowadays, one would probably have called this chapter, 'Archaeology in the Neoliberal Age', as the impact of the Bologna process on the curricula of archaeology in the German-speaking regions is discussed, with its new emphasis on employability of archaeology students in relation to the aims of the academic discipline, ending with a rather bleak discussion of the difficulties of archaeologists in the job market.

Eggert's textbook was, at the time of its publication, a highly valuable tool to systematize the way in which prehistoric archaeology was taught and practiced in the German-speaking countries. It did fill a gap, but at the same time suffered from a too strong orientation towards its predecessor, Eggers' long-outdated introductory book from 1959. Without such a strong emphasis on research history, the categories of archaeological materials, typology, and even the outdated discussion on historical vs. scientific dating, there might have been more room to fill a number of glaring gaps, such as a more extensive discussion of the role of archaeological sciences, beyond radiocarbon dating, or a broader discussion of (then) current theoretical debates. A more critical evaluation of other fundamental premises of archaeological reasoning, for example from a gender or postcolonial perspective is largely missing—at least, one could argue, from the later editions. Source criticism—What can we actually say?—gets a lot of space, often stifling student's

curiosity and creativity, as the answer offered by this text is largely negative. A critical evaluation not only of our material, but also our own conceptual biases and a discussion of alternatives would probably have been a good opportunity to motivate students to ask more probing questions and search for their own ways of making sense of the past.

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doi:10.1017/ea.2022.34

Marcia-Anne Dobres. *Technology and Social Agency: Outlining a Practice Framework for Archaeology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000, xiii and 300pp, 25 figures, hbk, ISBN 1577181239)

The opportunity to review this groundbreaking book, published more than twenty years ago, and still frequently cited,

is stimulating. Archaeology has changed and expanded and is today a complex field of situated approaches. One is critical