

BOOK REVIEW

The Barbarians, Lost Civilizations. By PETER BOGUCKI. London: Reakton Books, 2017. Pp. 248. Hardcover, \$25.00. ISBN 978-1-78023-718-3.

A survey of the barbarian world is welcome, especially one that draws heavily upon the archaeological evidence. The idea of a ‘barbarian world’ as a fixed identifiable entity is of course loaded with numerous interpretive issues, but a survey incorporating different groups, and considering issues of identity and ethnicity, would satisfy a current need in the scholarship. It would be useful to both a general audience as well as students new to this period. Ultimately, Bogucki’s efforts here do not fully satisfy this need, and although there is much to praise throughout this work, there are also elements that substantially weaken the overall book. This is a great shame, as Bogucki writes with confidence and a clear eye, and is very strong when describing and interpreting the archaeological sites.

The book offers an ambitious chronological coverage (2000 BC – 500 AD), and dips into a whole array of different cultures and societies. This of course limits the depth of the discussion, and poses serious problems when thinking of structure and consistency of analysis. Bogucki refers to the work as a “tour of the Barbarian world,” providing a “very high-level overview” (23). The book is divided into chronological chapters, beginning with the Neolithic period, before then moving ever onwards, reaching the Greek and Roman world in chapters 3–5. The final section seeks to examine modern reactions to the barbarian past, and in truth it stands as a peculiar addition, adding little to the preceding chapters.

The book opens in a slightly unclear manner, exacerbated by a superficial discussion of the relationship between historical sources and archaeological evidence (14–18). It suggests, incorrectly, that the title itself is oxymoronic (11), and does not fully explore the terminology used. Although later chapters allow for a clearer engagement with these ideas (e.g. 91 & 134), much more needed to be set out in the introduction; to provide a stronger foundation against which to place the archaeological evidence. To write of the “privileging of written sources from classical authors” (13), and that their writings “must not be taken as definitive but simply as one line of evidence, and a flawed one” is not strong enough to support the subsequent discussion.

The main body of the book provides an entertaining tour through Europe's distant past, led at every stage by the archaeological evidence. Of the six chapters, the first two are the strongest (26–57; 58–86). Although the structure in both could have been tightened, they provide informed and useful depictions of prehistoric Europe. In the first chapter, the discussion of the Amesbury Archer and the Iceman offer a good sense of cohesion, and allow for a sense of the men and women who lived in this distant world. As Bogucki surmises “we can now glimpse the people behind the pot-sherds, flint tools and early metal artefacts” (43).

Similarly, the second chapter makes very good use of important archaeological finds, and presents some spectacular images, in particular the Trundholm Sun Chariot (62–3), the Nebraskan Sky Disc (65) and the Gleninsheen Gorget (85). The ideological thoughts on seafaring (68) are promising, and the recognition of burial evidence dominating, and thus controlling, our image of the past (69–74) suggests a good sense of reflection and interpretation.

The other chapters are weaker. Although the focus on archaeology continues, the written evidence needed to be integrated with much greater care into each discussion. The resulting observations of both the Greek and Roman worlds are unsatisfying, in that they paint only an impressionistic sketch, and do not engage in as nuanced a manner as needed with the classical writings. Although two of the chapters (115–188) present an understanding of the Roman historical narrative, there are moments where the observations and arguments do not really stand up. This is particularly true when discussing the barbarian migrations (172–183), and this allows for a somewhat peculiar reading of the migration period (174).

The weakest section of the book is the final chapter. In contrast to the earlier chapters, which appear aimed at first year students, or those new to archaeology, the audience here is very difficult to ascertain. I am not sure who would expect the Asterix comics to be a true reflection of the barbarian world, or see in Robert E. Howard's Conan a lens through which to study the past (189–190). The discussion of state interest in the barbarian past has some merit, but not in the manner that it is discussed here (198–205). This chapter also highlights an issue seen in other sections of the book where perfectly adequate analysis and interpretation are placed alongside awkward allusions to the modern world (e.g. microchips at 59; smartphones at 76; Pinterest at 78 & Tesco at 164). It suggests that there is an unclear understanding of projected audience.

To close, this is a book that ultimately does not provide as useful a survey of the barbarian world as is needed. Instead, it presents an enjoyable collection of

sketches, highlights important archaeological sites and finds, and is strongest when looking at prehistory.

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