

**Peter Rowley-Conwy 2007. *From Genesis to Prehistory. The Archaeological Three Age System and its Contested Reception in Denmark, Britain and Ireland*. Oxford University Press. 384 pages; 55 in-text illustrations; ISBN13: 978-0-19-922774-7.**

Reviewed by **Tim Murray**

It is a commonplace observation about the history of archaeology that the Three Age System, along with the discovery of high human antiquity, forms one of the two great defining ‘events’ of prehistoric archaeology in the nineteenth century. Generations of students have been introduced to the discipline (and the nature of its distinctive contribution to the writing of human history) through re-telling of foundation stories about antiquity, and our capacity to order and measure it. Glyn Daniel, perhaps more than any other historian of archaeology, was particularly adept at conveying the magnitude of both ‘discoveries’ – the clearing of Nyerup’s fog, and the location of prehistoric archaeology right at the heart of the Darwinian project. Such foundation narratives played the vital role of persuading practitioners and laypersons alike that prehistoric archaeology had unshakeable foundations in typology and the earth sciences and was a significant advance on the ‘speculations’ of predecessors such as Stukeley. Even the most cursory acquaintance with general textbooks on archaeology (Chapter One ‘Origins and Rise of Archaeology’) makes it pretty clear that those foundation stories are still working their magic.

Its time they were changed. Since the publication of Trigger’s *History of Archaeological Thought* (1989) new research into the history of archaeology has grown rapidly, providing new insights into disciplinary history. Some of those insights (particularly the now numerous discussions of the intersections between archaeology and the development of nationalism in nineteenth century Europe) have had an impact on disciplinary practice. Others have taken somewhat longer to grab the attention they deserve, either because they have the potential to profoundly influence the ways in which archaeologists think about what they do, or because they are the result of highly detailed explorations of significant passages of disciplinary history that require us to re-examine those foundation narratives. Change at the disciplinary core of archaeology is never quick and the inertia of tradition weighs more heavily in the history of archaeology than in many other aspects of archaeological practice.

Which brings me to Rowley-Conwy’s excellent book, a work that significantly recasts the first of these great foundation narratives. How does Rowley-Conwy do this? At its core *From Genesis to Prehistory* rests on his ability to read Danish, which allows him to do two vital things. First, he can go back to the original Scandinavian sources (especially those that have been ‘translated’ into English) and to read them anew. Startling differences begin to appear between the nineteenth century translations (particularly Lubbock’s translation of Nilsson) and those produced by Rowley-Conwy. Second, Rowley-Conwy introduces, to non-Danish speakers, the work of Scandinavian scholars on the history of the Three Age System that has been denied us because it has not been published in English. If ever there was a case demonstrating the serious shortcomings of mono-lingualism this is it!

There is much that is new here which will take some time to assimilate, but at this early stage we can confidently state that Rowley-Conwy has simply transformed our understanding of the history of the Three Age System in Scandinavia. We are now presented with a very much more ambiguous and richly textured discussion of how disciplines are transformed and big ideas take root. While it is true that historians of archaeology have long been aware of the struggles of the Three Age System outside of Scandinavia (the adventures of Ludwig Lindenschmidt in this regard are salutary), Rowley-Conwy has given us a quite different picture of what was happening in Denmark and Sweden, as well as in the United Kingdom.

*From Genesis to Prehistory* is a work of fine scholarship. Rowley-Conwy is well versed in the by-ways of British and Irish prehistoric archaeology and his familiarity with the key players and key texts

in England, Scotland and Ireland enhances his account of the travails of the Three Age System (particularly in the British archaeological societies). Above all the work is strengthened by an appreciation of the connectedness between the evolving discipline of archaeology and other disciplines (or areas of study) such as ethnology that shared the historical (and prehistorical) landscape of Europe in the mid nineteenth century. The links that were forged between race, language and culture (first discussed in Stocking's major syntheses of some forty years ago) have now assumed a greater importance in the historiography of archaeology and not a moment too soon.

## VI. Announcements

The members of HARN (Histories of Archaeology Research Network) an exciting new interuniversity and interdisciplinary postgraduate and postdoctoral research initiative dedicated to the unravelling archaeology's past and practice, are pleased to announce that two of their biographical sketches are now published on the Project Gallery in *Antiquity* (2008). Pamela Jane Smith first offers an introduction as to how she organised the network; Kathleen Sheppard and Julie Lawrence then contribute historical studies on Flinders Petrie and Louis Leakey. Please view these short articles on <http://antiquity.ac.uk/ProjGall/europe.html>.

The members of HARN also report that their second meeting, held on 9 October 2008 at Birkbeck College, London, was well attended with 9 presentations of new research. The papers and authors were:

**Stephen Leach:** "The detective and the archaeologist: the origins of the analogy";  
**Sara Perry:** "Visualisation and the disciplinary foundations of British Archaeology";  
**Katherine Cooper:** "Making and presenting prehistory and community in 19th century Europe";  
**Megan Price:** "Town and gown, amateurs and academics; the (re)-discovery of British prehistory";  
**Kathleen Sheppard:** "Margaret Murray at University College, London";  
**Amara Thornton:** "Archaeology during the interwar period in the British Mandates";  
**Naomi Farrington:** "Interpretations of the history of archaeology in Israel-Palestine";  
**Julie Lawrence:** "Louis Leakey: The man and the myth"; and  
**Pamela Jane Smith** gave a short workshop on "Oral-historical methodology and resources".

HARN members also discussed the possibility of an international history-of-archaeology conference to be held in late 2009. The conference would focus on presentations of the new research from full-time Ph.D and postdoctoral researchers with senior, established scholars presiding and commenting. A call for papers will go out early in 2009; more details will then be available.

HARN warmly welcomes new members who are undergraduates, post-graduates and post-doctoral candidates, worldwide, who are interested in and who are researching the history of archaeology. If you have questions or are interested in joining HARN, please contact Amara Thornton (Institute of Archaeology, UCL), email us at [HARNgroup@googlemail.com](mailto:HARNgroup@googlemail.com), or view our blog at <http://harngroup.wordpress.com/>.