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Manfred K. H. Eggert, *Prähistorische Archäologie. Konzepte – Methoden – Theorien.* 5th ed. Tübingen, Narr Francke Attempto/utb. 2024. 625 pp., 80 b&w ill. Soft cover. ISBN 9783825259860

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This is one of the landmark volumes of German-language prehistoric archaeology, now in its fifth edition (Eggert 2024; Fig. 1). It covers most of the ground already trodden by earlier editions (prehistory as a discipline, the Three-Age System, kinds of source material, source criticism, classification, chronology, stratigraphy, typology, seriation and combination statistics, horizontal stratigraphy, cross-dating, change and continuity, analogies, ethnoarchaeology), while also introducing two new chapters on theory. Yet, because of its landmark status, this book is quite tough to review. My impression is that a split has developed between what the volume wanted to achieve – providing students with a Central European yet progressive view on what prehistory as a discipline can and should be (Eggert 2024, 18) – and how the volume is now mainly used: as virtually the sole general introductory text for first-year students.

Beginning with the former, it is easy to see how this book earned its status as a classic. To name just a few examples, the sections on disciplinary history are particularly strong and detailed. Where other introductory volumes treat key concepts in a paragraph or so, Manfred K. H. Eggert goes into rich detail, tracing the controversies that new ideas generated at the time and deconstructing their assumptions and potentials. This is done to great effect for the Three-Age System (Chapter 3), for cross-dating (Chapter 12, confusingly titled '*Kalendarische Zeit:*

Figure 1: Cover of Manfred K. H. Eggert's *Prähistorische Archäologie. Konzepte – Methoden – Theorien* [*tr.* Prehistoric Archaeology. Concepts – Methods – Theories], 5th edition, Tübingen, Narr Francke Attempto/utb. 2024.

Zum traditionellen Modus der ***absoluten Datierung***' [emphasis added] [*tr*. Calendar Time: The Traditional Method of Absolute Dating]) as well as the Harris Matrix (Chapter 8). There is also a good deal of perceptive methodological criticism. For instance, in Chapter 9, Eggert demonstrates that 'types' can never be objectively real, given the analytical choices that go into their definition – an angle also fruitfully deployed in discussions of 'culture' (Chapter 6). These points are valuable also for archaeology beyond prehistory and illustrate the strengths of a critical tradition in continental European archaeology.

The crucial point – that archaeology is inherently comparative and analogical – is well made throughout the volume. In particular, the chapter on interpretation (Chapter 14) is a highlight, clearly outlining how analogies can generate several possibilities for further targeted research and discussing how the discipline should engage with this material. I was missing a more direct statement on the implications of comparing 'traditional' and 'prehistoric' societies, especially after the discreditation of social evolutionary schemes. The issue is briefly hinted at (Eggert 2024, 435) but could have been detailed a little more clearly, given the volume's status as a student primer. Yet, overall, this chapter opens up interesting possibilities for the kinds of studies archaeologists could pursue more in the future.

Nevertheless, there are also reservations, and this brings me to the second way in which the book is used. For many German-speaking students, this is one of the first volumes they meet when they begin their studies, and it remains the only up-to-date general German-language introduction available. Having now finally read all of it, I am not sure this is a good idea, unless it is strongly tempered with other texts. The book is written from an unashamedly skewed perspective. This is appropriate, given its self-stated goal of serving as a corrective to Anglophone research traditions. It is less good for a text that will fundamentally shape students' outlook on their new field of study, as it is all too often casually dismissive, pessimistic and also (of necessity) limited in content.

One example is Eggert's treatment of theory – one of the three themes mentioned in the book's subtitle but clearly an afterthought for this edition, crammed into just two chapters (Chapters 16 and 17) totalling 24 pages and largely approached in a destructive way. Much of the problem is how 'theory' is presented – namely (modelled on the natural sciences) as the identification of universal principles for the discipline as a whole. As such, it is, of course, set up to fail. Theory as a structured means of choosing a question and scale of analysis, guiding data collection and method choice or organizing the pieces afterward is omitted – which partly explains why this book makes no reference to the plurality of perspectives on the discipline. Instead, Eggert begins by throwing in a couple of random -isms (Structuralism, Marxism, etc.), without explanation or contextualisation, then bemoans how confusing, abstract and therefore pointless it all is – a good way to win the student reader over, perhaps, but not immediately helpful. It would have made more sense to reflect on whether a universal theory of archaeology would even be desirable at all. Instead, we are treated to an in-depth account of how German-speaking historians in the 1960s and 1970s tried to find a place for theory in their discipline – and failed. And if they 'needed to answer in the negative, then this is all the more the case for archaeology' (Eggert 2024, 500; translation: D. Hofmann) – case dismissed.

This leaves the problem of why so much has been written about theory in archaeology. It is dealt with here in two ways: by omission and by cherry-picking case studies that can be criticized for one reason or another, using them as warning examples. This seems to be the purpose of the short chapter on practice theory (Chapter 17), which goes through a few general position papers on the topic – criticizing them as rather abstract – then deconstructs one case study and concludes that there is no useful application of practice theory at all. This in spite of the fact that practice theory has been used to great effect by numerous archaeologists, including Rainer Schreg, Caroline Heitz, Jennifer Bagley, Robert Schumann, Philipp Stockhammer and many others. Perhaps more serious is the statement that, because practice theory has been criticized, it is doomed to be forgotten and, like Processualism or Post-Processualism, will disappear without a trace (Eggert 2024, 514–515). This is the note on which the book as a whole ends.

Such casual dismissal of a vast body of work has been quite common among some of my German-speaking colleagues, perhaps especially those who have read it rather selectively. Yet the attitude remains simplistic. Of course, there are still traces – Processualism introduced, amongst other things, structured thinking about taphonomic processes and much closer collaboration with the natural sciences, while Post-Processualism was instrumental in instilling an exploratory spirit to interpretation and in thinking critically about archaeology's situated role in the present, to name just a couple of obvious examples. Indeed, Eggert's own discussion on the relationship between the material and immaterial (Eggert 2024, 478)

bears more than a slight resemblance to what in Anglophone literature would pass as 'contextual archaeology' – a key idea of post-processual practitioners. More importantly, does an idea lose all value because parts of it can be criticized? Surely this needs a more qualified discussion. And should we abandon our students so wholeheartedly to this gloomy vision of the discipline?

I do not think so. To begin with, theory is just as unavoidable in archaeology as analogy is. Indeed, Eggert's text abounds with examples where a structured theoretical approach needs to be applied – for example, when he points out that there are many ways to classify material, which are therefore not objective but question-led (e.g., Eggert 2024, 207). What Eggert never discusses is *how we choose* the question. That is what theory is for.

This aspect is sorely missed in other parts of the book. For example, Chapter 4 on kinds of finds and features divides the source material into stray finds, graves, settlements, hoards, ritual sites, production sites, transport and infrastructure, rock art, bog bodies, river finds, standing stones, battlefields and sites to do with climate change – as well as presenting Herxheim as an example that does not fit into any of these categories. This is a mixture of being overly detailed while inevitably leaving out much. 'Graves' are then further split according to shape (including a brief walk through megalith typology), location, rite, whether they are single or multiple, whether they are unusual, and their place in the landscape – before concluding that there is no reason to group them this way rather than any other (Eggert 2024, 117). Nothing further is attempted with this classification; there is, for example, no discussion on how funerary evidence may inform on social structure, ideas of the body or anything else. Although it is good to sketch the variety of possibilities, to do so in this much detail (27 pages for descriptive burial classification alone) without any framework or guiding question – a theory – ultimately remains unsatisfying.

I also reacted to the general pessimistic tone found throughout the book, displayed to an extent that would be damaging to the discipline's self-esteem if taken seriously – as many students, unfortunately, may. For example, it is stated that archaeology cannot answer historical questions (Eggert 2024, 400) or that archaeologists will never be able to contribute to the development of scientific methods such as ^{14}C dating (Eggert 2024, 27). The latter in particular is puzzling, given, for example, the crucial role of archaeological knowledge in Bayesian approaches to dating, let alone archaeology-driven applications such as dates-as-data. All this is paired with a sometimes overly contemptuous tone regarding the efforts of others. Criticism is part and parcel of disciplinary development (and does not make a given idea entirely useless), and in this spirit, the longer discussions on specific contributions, such as Ian Hodder's *Symbols in Action* (1982), are useful – although they could be more balanced. What is more insidious are the many allusions and casual put-downs peppered throughout footnotes and half-sentences, including those directed at Richard Bradley (Eggert 2024, 150), the Garbage Project (Eggert 2024, 461), cognitive archaeology (Eggert 2024, 224) and many others besides. The message to budding archaeologists is clear: do not stick your head above the parapet, never try out anything too novel or slightly risky, or you too will end up executed in a footnote – or, in some unfortunate cases, publicly hung in the main text.

How then to summarize such a book? As a philosophical take on many of the foundational concepts and methods of our discipline, I did enjoy it – it made me reflect anew on many things, challenged me to rethink positions I had not actively considered in a while, was argumentative at a high level, and it includes a vast and highly useful bibliography – yes, go read this book! But as an introduction to students it is not suited on its own. It meanders, is destructive towards whole branches of archaeology (such as theory), omits others entirely (such as ethics or most new methods), is pessimistic and all too often focused on problems rather than solutions and is grumpy to the point of being potentially paralyzing to someone who has not yet found their disciplinary feet. When it was first written, this grumpiness may well have been an 'act of liberation' (Eggert 2024, 18), but it works less well for the situation we face now, with its new potentials, new demands and new threats. This is not the author's fault – it was never his purpose to cover everything, and he has made his choices accordingly. But my recommendation would be that students read this paired with several of the other excellent introductions now available – such as Catherine J. Frieman's *Archaeology as History* (2023), Hannah Cobb et al.'s *Archaeology: An Introduction* (2024) or others – if they are to develop a positive and empowering view of the subject they have chosen, its many varied aspects and the many new methods and, yes, theories used. These more optimistic introductions are, for now, mainly available in English. Perhaps this is a gap, but many German-speaking colleagues are now engaged in creative theoretical and methodological research. They could easily fill it.

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