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Gerding, Henrik

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

BOOK REVIEWS

Centuries of darkness: a challenge to the conventional chronology of Old World archaeology, by Peter James in collaboration with I.J. Thorpe, Nikos Kokkinos, Robert Morkot and John Frankish. Foreword by Colin Renfrew, New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press 1993. (Originally published by Jonathan Cape, London 1991.) xxii + 434 pp., 19 pls., 85 figs., 20 tables, 13 maps, with 4 appendices. \$16.95.

In 1986–87, we saw the beginning of an explosive development within the field of chronology. A number of international symposia¹ were soon followed by a flood of books and articles,² as well as a brand-new series solely devoted to this subject.³ Chronology had a virtual renaissance and is still in the centre of debate. This development can partly be explained by the continuously refined methods that are now at our disposal. According to Sturt Manning, it was in the late eighties that radiocarbon techniques reached the level of sophistication that made them a truly useful tool.⁴ On the other hand, it may be that the accumulated archaeological knowledge had by that time given us the strength to question the established chronologies despite, their longevity and status as generally accepted facts.

Of course, a chronological debate has been going on since the late 19th century, but it has mostly been confined to minor adjustments⁵ and, above all, it has continued to rely on assumptions that were postulated in the childhood of archaeology. The absolute chronology of Egypt, in particular, has stood firm since it was established by Sir William Flinders Petrie and Eduard Meyer at the turn of the century. In recent years, though, the intensity of the debate has accelerated and several controversial theories have been presented, for example, by Francis and Vickers. Their theories include the compression of Attic Black-figure and early Red-figure pottery and the lowering of the construction dates of monumental buildings in both Athens and Delphi.⁶

More important is perhaps the back-dating of the eruption of Santorini. The combined results of ice-core drillings, radiocarbon samples and tree-rings have prompted a significant number of the Aegean archaeologists to place the event in 1628 BC,⁷ instead of 1550–1500, which is the conventional date. As this finding is, to some extent, contradicted

by archaeological synchronisms,⁸ we now face the task of re-evaluating the work of more than half a century.

Without diminishing the tremendous impact of the Thera revision, it must be said that an even more revolutionary concept has been created by Peter James and his co-authors in *Centuries of darkness*. This book has met with furious opposition amongst scholars and experts, especially those representing the field of Egyptology, but is certainly worth every attention.

Centuries of darkness takes its starting-point in a series of chronological paradoxes, archaeological question-marks and unexplainable oddities at the end of the Late Bronze Age and the beginning of the Iron Age all over the Mediterranean world. These concern, for instance, the Phoenician colonisation of the West, the ancestors of the Neo-Hittite

¹ *Chronologies in the Near East, Relative Chronology and Absolute Chronology 16,000–4,000 B.P.*, C.N.R.S. International Symposium, Lyon (France), 24–28 November 1986; *High, Middle or Low? An International Colloquium on Absolute Chronology* held at the University of Gothenburg, 20th–22nd August 1987 (acts published in three volumes 1987–1989; SIMA-PB 56–57, 80).

² A small selection of these would be the following: E.D. Francis & M. Vickers, 'The Agora revisited: Athenian chronology c. 500–450 BC', *BSA* 83, 1988, 143–167; *Thera and the Aegean World III*, Vol. 3: *Chronology, Proceedings of the third international congress, Santorini, Greece, 3–9 September 1989*, eds. D.A. Hardy & C. Renfrew, London 1990; K.A. Kitchen, *The Third Intermediate Period in Egypt (1100–650 B.C.)*, 2nd rev. ed., Warminster 1986 (1973); K. Randsborg, 'Historical implications. Chronological studies in European archaeology c. 2000–500 B.C.', *ActaArch* 62, 1991, 89–108; P. Warren & V. Hankey, *Aegean Bronze Age chronology*, Bristol 1989.

³ "Studies in Ancient Chronology", published by the Institute of Archaeology, University College, London.

⁴ S.W. Manning, 'Dating the Aegean Bronze Age: without, with, and beyond, radiocarbon', (forthcoming), 12.

⁵ The discussion between Swedish and Italian scholars concerning the chronology of early Rome is an obvious exception to this.

⁶ A useful summary of their ideas can be found in R.M. Cook, 'The Francis-Vickers chronology', *JHS* 109, 1989, 164–170. As an example of their writings, one may mention Francis & Vickers (supra n. 2).

⁷ *Thera and the Aegean World III* (supra n. 2); S.W. Manning, 'Santorini, ice-cores and tree-rings: resolution of the 1645 or 1628 BC debate?', *Nestor* 19, 1992, 251ff.

⁸ Warren & Hankey (supra n. 2), 137–140.

civilisation in northern Syria and the puzzling lacunae in the history of both Nubia and Anatolia. There are not only huge gaps in the archaeological record, but the loose ends also often seem to fit astonishingly well, despite the number of years that are supposed to separate them. This has been explained sometimes as due to continuity upheld by perishable materials and sometimes to heirlooms. In some cases, we are even led to believe that people left a site, only to return several hundred years later with the same material culture. The basic hypothesis of the book is that all these problems are due to a fundamental error in the current chronology and the aim is to demonstrate that they can be solved or accounted for with an alternative one. The conclusion is that about 250 years of our history, in Greece known as the Dark Age, never existed and that the end of the Bronze Age could be down-dated by the same number of years.

James (from now on, as a matter of convenience, this name will also include his co-authors) builds up his case in a very systematic and convincing way. An imposing amount of archaeological and historical facts is compiled and meticulously scrutinised. The first chapter, reviewing the formation of the conventional chronology, is most enlightening and makes up an intriguing story on its own. The following chapters (2–9) deal with the different geographical areas, presumably according to the different authors' respective fields of expertise.⁹ A long row of chronological anomalies (some of which have already been mentioned above) are presented, constituting the backbone of the book. Although some of the examples are less convincing than others, one is impressed by the sheer amount of evidence.

Perhaps the two most persuasive statements are those concerning the Nubian and the Hittite "dark ages". As regards the former, James shows in a decisive way that a reduction of 200 years would correspond much better with the archaeological situation than the present solution. A series of royal tombs in el-Kurru, linked at one end to the final years of the New Kingdom and at the other to the beginning of the Late Period, seems to be stretched out to cover too large a space of time.

Having started at the periphery, he then works his way towards the core of the problem, Egypt and Mesopotamia (Chapters 10–11). The reader is constantly reminded that everything depends on the chronologies of these two cultures, and in the end it really comes down to the Third Intermediate Period (TIP) of Egypt. "Aye, there's the rub".

In order to prove that the chronology of the TIP is faulty, two major obstacles have first to be overcome: the fixed points supplied by Sothic sightings and the synchronism of Shoshenq I's campaign in Palestine. James makes a lavish attack on the validity of these two pieces of evidence. (Actually the Mesopotamian King List makes up an equally important keystone and subsequently also receives harsh treatment in the book.) After having discredited these fixed points, he goes on to demonstrate a number of peculiarities in Egyptian archaeology, the most important being: the absence of 21st Dynasty Apis bulls in the Lesser Vault of the Serapieion in Saqqara, the presence of a seemingly later burial in the midst of the Inhapi cache and the apparently reversed construction order of the royal tombs in Tanis.

The matter of the Apis bulls, which in my view is only

due to a lack of evidence, is connected with extremely poor excavational records and long lost finds.¹⁰ Obviously, the circumstances regarding the Lesser Vault, are in a state of confusion and the scientific world would be wise to postpone its judgement until the present re-excavation is finished. Although the Inhapi cache is puzzling enough, it is the royal tombs in Tanis that present a genuine indication that something is amiss in the TIP chronology. Up to now, no one has been able to give a reasonable explanation why the tomb of Psusennes I was built after that of Osorkon II, who is supposed to have lived 140 years after the former. The physical remains of the two adjacent tombs raise no doubt about the order of construction and, furthermore, there are no indications of a re-burial.¹¹

Having, thus, questioned the validity of current TIP chronology, i.e. the chronology of Kenneth Kitchen,¹² James sets about constructing a "provisional alternative". The 22nd Dynasty is shortened by approximately 100 years and the 21st is interpreted as a parallel dynasty, contemporaneous with the former. It is true that, without astronomical fixed points or the Shoshenq/Shishak synchronism, the support for the existing regnal lengths is very weak indeed. But should we really abandon the Sothic datings so easily?

The subject of Sothic sightings, apart from being an issue of heated debate, is constantly laden with misunderstandings and therefore needs some clarification. The Egyptians had, at least, two parallel calendars. The lunar-religious calendar was based on the natural, lunar cycle, in which each month has a duration of 29 or 30 days. Since twelve months of 29 or 30 days each do not add up to the 365.25 days of the sidereal year, they had to insert an extra month now and then to keep the calendar synchronised with the seasons in the long run. The civil calendar consisted of twelve artificial months, comprising 30 days each, plus an additional five days. This makes a total of 365 days, which is also on the short side of the sidereal year. The Egyptians were certainly aware of their civil calendar running ahead by a day every fourth year but never seem to have bothered to introduce a leap-year.

A heliacal rising of Sothis is when the star, also known as Sirius, can be seen over the horizon just before sunrise. This is not possible all the year round, since Sirius stays invisible for a period of time, as a result of the changing position of the earth relative to the stars. The day when Sothis makes its re-appearance was celebrated by the Egyptians and marked the New Year in the lunar-religious calendar. The exact date of this regularly recurring, astronomical event depends on the latitude of the observer, but in Egypt it falls in July, according to the modern calendar. As it happens, the first heliacal rising of Sothis heralds the yearly inundation of the Nile, which usually starts in late July or early August, thus explaining its importance to the ancient Egyptians.

⁹ These are as follows: Prehistoric Britain, I.J. Thorpe; Minoan Crete, N. Kokkinos; Mycenaean Greece, J. Frankish; Biblical Archaeology, P. James; Pharaonic Nubia, R. Morkot.

¹⁰ D.M. Rohl, *A test of time*, Vol. 1: *The Bible—from myth to history*, London 1995, 52.

¹¹ Rohl (*supra* n. 10), 91–107.

¹² Kitchen (*supra* n. 2).

Because of the lagging of the civil calendar, the return of Sothis moved along it by one day every four years. If the New Year of the civil calendar coincides with the return of Sothis in one year, it will take 1460 (365×4) years before it occurs again. Knowing that such an “ideal year” took place in 139 AD, we can trace the Sothic cycle backwards. More important, though, if we are supplied with the date of a Sothic re-appearance, according to the civilian calendar of Egypt, it is possible to calculate when that observation was made. Today we know of two documented sightings, one in the 7th year of Sesostris III and one in the 9th year of Amenhotep I, recorded in the Ebers papyrus.¹³

There are some problems in interpreting the Ebers papyrus, however. Where in Egypt was the observation made? Does the text give us the exact date of the event, or just the month in which it took place? Does it concern heliacal sightings of Sirius at all?¹⁴ Whatever the answers to these questions are, we still have the Middle Kingdom observation, which is more clear-cut. In this case, the only real issue of dispute is the point of reference: Memphis, Thebes or Elephantine. The time difference resulting from the two extremes is less than 50 years, though, and does not allow of an automatic lowering of Egyptian chronology as a response to the disappearance of the “Dark Ages”.

James has brought to our attention a multitude of existing chronological problems, indicating that a major revision is due. Unfortunately, he constructs his own theory as a string of circumstantial evidence, in which every single link will hardly stand up to the same kind of thorough scrutiny. James does, indeed, illustrate a widespread tendency to twist the archaeological record in order to make it fit the existing chronological system.¹⁵ His technique of argumentation is beguiling and fascinates the reader, but the methodology is not always up to the standards he has set himself. In several cases, he uses a particular piece of evidence just to demonstrate the principle that the chronology could be reduced. If some of these arguments were followed up, however, it would be clear that they also place a limitation on the number of years to be deducted. James seeks support for his ideas in whatever sources there may be, without regard to whether it is one that he has already criticised as being unreliable on some other issue. It is also interesting to note that the Bible is treated as one of the most trustworthy sources and that its regnal lengths are accepted without question.

One of the major disappointments of this book is the way it deals with radiocarbon datings. The author makes no real effort to explain the untrustworthiness that he attributes to them. Nor does he account for the possibility of differentiating between good and bad C14 dates. This kind of distinction could be made on the basis of several criteria (method of sampling, laboratory etc.). Still, James does not hesitate to use C14 dates in his argumentation, in those cases in which they can be found to support his ideas. This book is, primarily, the result of what could be called traditional, historical and archaeological dating methods, whereas Sturt Manning, for example, uses new, scientific techniques.

What then would be the result of combining the views of James and the proposed back-dating of the destruction of Akrotiri? As the former sets the end of the Late Aegean

Bronze Age at about 900 BC and the latter sets the beginning between 1700 and 1650, there would be at least 750 years to be accounted for by the ceramical sequences. This is not the biggest problem, however. The use of “wiggle matching” of stratified radiocarbon series supports the conventional datings of LH III and therefore makes the end of the Aegean Bronze Age even more firmly rooted in the second millennium BC.¹⁶ As regards the Protogeometric and Geometric periods, James seems to be contradicted by Sarah Morris, who wants to expand them, instead of reducing them.¹⁷ Recently, however, he has gained stout support from David Rohl, who, as a result of his investigations in Biblical and Egyptian chronology, advocates an even greater reduction.¹⁸ Rohl has, however, confined the discussion to a smaller area.

The way in which the entire question is discussed by James implies that the reader must either fully accept his suggested model or reject it. It is also in this manner that *Centuries of darkness* has generally been treated by the audience. But is this polarisation really necessary? Could it be that he is closer to the truth in some areas than others?¹⁹ Maybe a reduction of 50 years in Egyptian chronology (which few would deem impossible and some even probable) would allow one of 100 years in another region. The complexity of the problem is so great that more than one scenario has to be contemplated before James’ basic proposal is rejected. I firmly believe that his work has made an important contribution to our understanding of the past, as a part of the continuous dialectic process. Anyway, several of the points of discussion will probably be clarified within the next decade, owing to the results of ongoing excavations and dendrochronological developments.

In the process of establishing archaeological links and synchronisms, there are quite a few areas in which mistakes may be made. They could be made in stratification, identification, taxonomy (for example, sequential contra parallel ceramic styles), contextual interpretation or chronological

¹³ James has got it wrong on p. 12, stating that “the ‘ideal’ ancient Egyptian year was one in which the rising [i.e. the return] of Sothis ... coincided with the annual flooding of the Nile”. Actually, this happened every year and not in a 1460-year cycle.

¹⁴ For further details, see W. Helck, in *High, Middle or Low* (supra n. 1), Part 3, 1989, 40–43; W.A. Ward, ‘The present status of Egyptian chronology’, *BASOR* 288, 1992, 53–66.

¹⁵ For an additional illustration of this phenomenon, see Warren & Hankey (supra n. 2), 141. Here the authors favour a rather unlikely interpretation of an Egyptian tomb, just because otherwise an Aegean synchronism “would make LM I B a very long period”.

¹⁶ S.W. Manning & B. Weninger, ‘A light in the dark: archaeological wiggle matching and the absolute chronology of the close of the Aegean Bronze Age’, *Antiquity* 66, 1992, 636–663.

¹⁷ S.P. Morris, abstract handed out at the conference entitled “Sardinian Stratigraphy and Mediterranean Chronology: An international colloquium devoted to the chronology of the ancient Mediterranean”, Tufts University, Medford, Massachusetts, March 17–19, 1995.

¹⁸ Rohl (supra n. 10). His reduction of 350 years is derived from the equation of Shishak with Ramesses II, instead of Shoshenq I.

¹⁹ See G.J. Wightman, ‘The myth of Solomon’, *BASOR* 277/278, 1990, 5–22, for a discussion on Biblical archaeology and chronology. Wightman’s conclusions confirm, to some extent, James’ ideas.

significance. As an example of the last one we have the question of the expected lifetime of imported goods.

It is also important to realise that the current precision of the Egyptian chronology is not always warranted. There are a great number of uncertainties, such as the interpretation of Manetho, the existence of co-regencies and the identification of astronomical events.²⁰ James has shown the chronology of European prehistory to be ultimately derived from the Egyptian one, in most cases via Mycenaean links. As unavoidable errors in this chain of correlations are multiplied by each other and added to local issues of debate, we run the risk of arriving at a dead end, from which it will be extremely difficult to return.

Presenting the full scope of possibilities, the margins of error and the range of uncertainty, instead of promoting the illusion of exact dates, would be a valuable aid to scholars without the necessary insights in the details of chronology. Preconceived ideas, whether real or just assumed to be such, need to be examined and tested. The real merit of this book lies not in the new alternative chronology, which stands up to criticism no better than the present one, but in the will to question the authority of generally accepted theories.

The book has a pleasant appearance and the abundance of figures, maps and tables contributes positively to its comprehension, as does the overall structure. The comfortable language and the intriguing story make the reading a rare pleasure. I also find it most enjoyable to see the kind of collaboration between different disciplines that is exemplified by this work. The fact that the co-authors of *Centuries of darkness* represent Ancient History, Anthropology, Archaeology and Classical Archaeology has certainly been of vital importance in the making of this impressive synthesis. The rapid developments within these disciplines and the growth of available material have made it difficult, if not impossible, for the individual to maintain a complete overview.

Apart from giving one a ring-side view of a current chronological dispute, this book also provides an excellent outline of the archaeology of the transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age all over the Mediterranean.

As early as 1987, the same authors (except for Robert Morkot) presented their ideas in *Bronze to Iron Age chronology in the Old World: time for a reassessment?* This was the first volume of the series entitled "Studies in Ancient Chronology", published by the Institute of Archaeology in London. *Centuries of darkness* is really an extended version of this monograph, with the addition of some new arguments and the refinement of others. It is unfortunate that James has adhered to a sceptical view of the new scientific dating techniques, however well founded it was in 1987. This, however, does not in any way diminish the effect of his astounding proposals.

Henrik Gerding

Department of Classical Studies
Lund University
Sölvegatan 2
SE-223 62 LUND

Carla M. Antonaccio, *An archaeology of ancestors: tomb cult and hero cult in early Greece* (Greek Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches), Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 1995. 295 pp., 24 figs. Paperback. ISBN 0-8476-7942-X.

As early as the turn of the present century, Greek hero-cults were of great interest to scholars, and the studies by Pfister, Rohde and Farnell produced at that time are still used as handbooks today. However, most of this work was based on literary evidence. Archaeology as a source of evidence for hero-cults is a more recent development, beginning more or less in the 1930s with Carl Blegen's systematic observations of the presence of Iron Age material in the Mycenaean chamber tombs at Prosymna in the Argolid. During the last two decades, the scholarly attention paid to the Greek Iron Age and the rise of the polis has resulted in a renewed interest in hero-cults. Carla Antonaccio's book forms an important contribution to this field of research.

The book is a reworking and extension of Antonaccio's Ph.D. dissertation presented at Princeton in 1987. In the meantime, some of the major points have been expanded and published as papers elsewhere, most importantly her contribution to *Cultural poetics in Archaic Greece* (Cambridge 1993, 46–70), which serves as a clear and distinct summary of her book. Antonaccio approaches the subject of hero-cults and tomb-cults from an archaeological point of view, since she argues that some practices, beliefs and actions can be studied only on the basis of that material. What is important in this book is the aim to include all the relevant sites on the Greek mainland and the Cycladic and Ionian islands, from the end of the Bronze Age to the early Archaic period (c. 1100 to 600 BC). The material covered is both extensive and highly complex. Antonaccio adopts the contextual approach outlined by Ian Hodder (referred to on p. 9, n. 38, but not included in the bibliography), which takes into consideration such varied factors as regional variations and similarities, offerings and actions performed in a variety of circumstances, preserved written sources and historical frameworks.

Permeating Antonaccio's approach to the material is a basic distinction between hero-cult and tomb-cult. Hero-cults, according to her, were ongoing practices, in which the recipients were named. These cults were occasionally located at Mycenaean habitation sites, but never at tombs, and they included some kind of construction, such as a shrine or an altar. Tomb-cults, on the other hand, were, with a few exceptions, isolated phenomena found at tombs. The recipient was anonymous, there was no construction of a permanent shrine, and the offerings were modest. According to these definitions, both the deposition of later votives in Mycenaean tombs and the re-use of the tombs for new burials could be considered as tomb-cult.

In the second chapter, which forms almost half of the book, the evidence for later activity in Bronze Age tombs is surveyed and discussed. The material is in many cases

²⁰ Ward (supra n. 14).