

A place in history. The life and work of Nils Niklasson

Åsa Gillberg

Abstract

The aim of this study is threefold; 1) to discuss the role of biography in the history of archaeology, 2) to present and discuss an "obscure" (obemärkt) archaeologist and his work, and 3) to discuss the participation of the individual in the creation of archaeological knowledge.

Chapter 2 forms the basis for the first aim, as it gives an outline of how the relationship between life and science has been treated from different perspectives since the 18th century. It is argued that science histories have tended to focus on the scientific hero and his/her success, while neglecting those individuals whose results are labelled as mistakes by present-day scientists. The term "obemärkt" (unnoticed, obscure) is introduced and discussed. Chapter 3 takes this discussion further into archaeology, as several archaeological biographies are analysed according to three criteria given by Donald R Givens. It is argued that most archaeological biographies deal with the archaeologist as hero, with an emphasis on excavations and spectacular finds (rather than administrative or institutionalised work). The analysis shows that although most authors try to avoid an extreme presentist stand, many biographies still deal with research results in terms of right and wrong.

A biographical case-study is introduced in chapter 4, which forms the basis for discussions of the three aims of the text. The study presents a Gothenburg archaeologist, Nils Niklasson (1890-1966) and his work. It focuses on two decades, 1920-1940, which constitute Niklasson's most active period and highlight two different research environments; Landesanstalt in Halle (Germany) and the archaeological department at the museum in Gothenburg (Sweden). The emphasis is placed on Niklasson's work, but with consideration of factors such as educational and social background, personality traits and life experiences.

In the final chapter the theoretical observations of the first chapters are linked to the empirical material and the analysis of the case study in a discussion of the foundations of historical obscurity. It is argued that the role of the individual in the creation of archaeological knowledge needs to be further emphasised, as "mistakes" as well as successes form an integral part in this process.