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Elin Andreassen, Hein Bjartmann Bjerck and Bjørnar Olsen: Persistent Memories: Pyramiden - A Soviet Mining Town in the High Arctic

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Elin Andreassen, Hein Bjartmann Bjerck and Bjørnar Olsen:
Persistent Memories: Pyramiden – A Soviet Mining Town in the High Arctic. Tapir Academic Press, Trondheim, 2010, 215 pp., ISBN 978-82-519-2436-8

JOHN SCHOFIELD

Archaeology is a popular subject. People like it. They like the mystery of times past and unfamiliar worlds. Archaeology is unique in providing a window into these worlds, but its capacity to excite and entertain is something that rarely features in its publications. These are often dry and inaccessible to the many people who support or take an interest in archaeological endeavour. I began writing this review on the day the death of Lewis Binford was announced, and am reminded now of those – and there are many of us – who do archaeology ‘the Binford way’ (Gamble 2011). For all his critics, Binford realized the importance of data and of spatial and quantitative patterning, and he was among those who recognized a more nuanced relationship between past and present, understanding how one can inform the other. Much of his work was also conducted in the Arctic. But Binford’s books were typically presented in a dense academic style and – with the exception of his magnificent *In Pursuit of the Past* (1983) – these were hardly accessible to the wider public. His books required hard work and persistence. A fellow student once described them as comprising ‘jargon-packed mega-sentences’. He was not wrong. *Persistent Memories* is very different and is, to my mind, an example of how we can celebrate archaeology in conventional print media, and of how it can be both exciting and entertaining. I think it also bears some close comparisons to archaeology ‘the Binford way’.

This book caught my attention the moment I unpacked it. It looked great, and, from a cursory flick through, the format appeared imaginative and engaging. I have long been an advocate of what we might call a more aesthetic and imaginative form of publication, one which emphasizes the visual

component, in terms of both photographic imagery and design, alongside a more creative and lucid narrative than academics are used to producing. Six months after I received this book I have almost become immune to its appeal. Almost, but not quite.

Let us begin then with the images, which play such a prominent role in conveying the character of Pyramiden. If used correctly, images will accurately convey the character of place and of landscape. Such things are integral to archaeological and cultural heritage research yet few books emphasize the visual component in the way of *Persistent Memories*. It may be more expensive to produce books like this, but surely publishers could be more imaginative and still remain within budget. People like pictures, but ‘serious’ publishers and authors often use them sparingly or not at all. The images here are fabulous in the detail they contain, in their diversity and in their grainy atmospherics. I have written previously about visual images and film combining to give the impression of having actually visited a place, such is the sense of familiarity the visual images convey. And it is not views and sight-lines that matter so much as the mundane, everyday details of the place – objects, surfaces and their sometimes odd juxtaposition: things that through a visual representation reveal impressions of air temperature, of the smell of the place and of its soundscape. The images in *Persistent Memories* are full of smell and noise: the smell of deterioration and of damp salty air, and the sounds of silence, of emptiness and of gradual decay. But images can achieve even more than this. Images can also repopulate places, notably here the bedrooms and sitting-rooms (pp. 92–110) with their soft-porn and fashion-model wall decorations alongside pictures of elk, and whisky and vodka bottle labels. The place is abandoned, but every so often there is shock as faces – people – appear to the reader, as they must have done to the researchers. Take the man in the photograph in Block 38 for example (p. 179). Was he resident in Block 38, or just a friend, husband or maybe the son of someone who lived here? What was his story? How did he fit in at Pyramiden? And how did the authors react to their first encounter with the man in Block 38?

That this is an archaeological study of landscape explains the aerial photographs, with individual buildings identified, and with the site’s expansion evident in photographs from 1960 and 1990. With these exceptions the view is predominantly an internal view of the site, with occasional outward glances.

And surely that is how it was for the residents: more interested in the pictures on their walls than on the bleak arctic views beyond. The views may seem spectacular to readers from a temperate climate, for whom they might also seem unfamiliar, exotic even. But one assumes that for residents the novelty of this extraordinary landscape would have soon worn off.

The text conveys the same sense of the extraordinary, the bleak and the otherworldly. Rarely have I encountered 'serious' archaeology books and site reports (which I believe this is) that capture the acute sense of the place. The place is eloquently described in a narrative that flows without interruption, like meltwater, with progress through this book accelerating as one uncovers and understands more. One becomes part of the survey team, wanting to know what is around the next corner, over the next page. I was reminded of Tim Edensor's phrase from his *Industrial Ruins*, that ruins provide 'limitless possibilities for encounters with the weird, with inscrutable legends inscribed on notice boards and signs, and with peculiar things and curious spaces which allow wide scope for imaginative interpretation, unencumbered by the assumptions which weigh heavily on highly encoded, regulated space' (2005, p. 4). How much more weird can you get than a polar bear in an abandoned museum, shot twice, once to kill it and once again through the museum window? Did the gunman think it was alive or did he just fancy taking a pot-shot at a museum exhibit? One can imagine the former, in a place like this and on one's own. The threat of polar bears, especially hungry ones, is ever-present as is the sense that, as readers, we have joined this exciting expedition, sensing the highs and the lows, the points of elation and of fear, of camaraderie and of loneliness.

Place is described and examined in close detail, as is material culture. There is much about the site's history, as a coal-mining community, about its formation in 1939 and its abandonment, finally, on 10 October 1998. There is talk about heritage protection, and of the physical and psychological conditions of this archaeological encounter. There is a bibliography and helpful endnotes. In short, it has all the ingredients of a classic archaeological site report.

But *Persistent Memories* is so much more. I have not enjoyed an archaeology text book so much for a long time. Some books are a trial, a requirement, and in reading them one cuts corners – scanning whole paragraphs on the lookout for key words that might reveal something interesting. This book was not like that. I read every word, and scrutinized

every image. I look at it again every so often, wondering if I will read more into some of the photographs than I had noticed previously. But the book is also haunting, and that too is part of the appeal. Like a film with alternative endings, one wonders, maybe on the next reading, whether a hungry polar bear *would* reveal itself to Hein as he headed downstairs in the dark to retrieve his rifle, fearful the bear may already be in the building, stalking the team through dark, empty corridors. And perhaps next time they would be attacked as they slept, in their 'flesh-filled cocoons' (p. 72). But most haunting of all, and something that still troubles me at unexpected times, is the presence of 'the last man' (p. 184). In describing leaving Pyramiden by helicopter after an inspection in March 1999, Hein recalls seeing a human being in this vast, empty and hostile landscape, running along the road from the frozen power plant, waving his arms. This was the self-appointed German caretaker who had spent a winter in a cabin some kilometres outside the town (one wonders why). He was lonely after months of isolation (his nearest neighbour 30 km away and rather unfriendly). He wanted a letter delivered, but, having no glue or tape, he had sealed the letter with 31 paper-clips. Bearing in mind all that he was missing, Hein was impressed that he had acquired so many. This scene could be the beginning or end of a wonderful movie.

This is a landscape not dissimilar to the ones where Lewis Binford spent time, closely evaluating the habits and behaviours of indigenous hunters. Here the people have long gone, and archaeologists are left with physical traces and no-one to act as informant. Binford's *In Pursuit of the Past* was for a long time my favourite archaeology book. But perhaps it is appropriate to mark his passing with a new favourite, and a book he would no doubt have enjoyed. *Persistent Memories* is simply fabulous: an adventure in contemporary archaeology, combining field-work and theory with imaginative design and impressive visuals . . . and the first archaeology book, surely, to reveal the double-shooting of a polar bear.

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