Complex Hunter-Gatherers: Evolution and Organization of Prehistoric Communities on the Plateau of Northwestern North America


The Intermontane Plateau has long been perhaps the most obscure culture area in North America. Archaeologists working there knew the region had an important and fascinating 11,000-year-plus sequence of hunter-gatherer cultures. No one else did.

There are many causes of this obscurity. The Plateau is sometimes lumped with the Great Basin, which has long received more theoretical attention from both cultural anthropologists and archaeologists. Sandwiched between the much more famous Northwest Coast and Plains, its cultures are often treated as mere absorbers of traits diffusing in from the east and west. In fact, a recent ethnographic textbook does not include it at all, even though it is organized by culture area (Plateau tribal names appear on the book’s maps—albeit sometimes in the wrong places).

Plateau archaeology is theoretically and methodologically challenging. One need only read the decades-long literature on the difficulties of excavating multi-occupation pithouses to know that. Much of its archaeology is produced by heritage management projects, and significant results are often buried in the grey literature. Some workers, but far too few, move their project results from reports to journal articles. I do not excuse myself from this indictment. The region suffers from the “Northwest Micro-Paper Tradition”; research results and ideas effervesce at regional meetings and dissipate afterwards, never to be heard of again. The international border also impedes the flow of information; it is hard enough to get contract reports from another state or province, let alone another country. There is a lot going on, but it is hard to keep track of.

This has begun to change, due in part to the discovery of Kennewick Man in Washington state in 1996 and to Brian Hayden’s long-term research program into the development of hunter-gatherer social complexity based on excavation at the Keatley Creek site in British Columbia. The Kennewick discovery forcefully drew attention to the Plateau’s Late Pleistocene/Early Holocene record, which recent work suggests is more complicated than previously thought. It is not clear, however, whether Kennewick will ultimately have been positive for Plateau archaeology. Hayden’s project, on the other hand, has drawn international attention to at least Keatley Creek, although some scholars seem to think the site is on the Northwest Coast. It has also generated active additional research.
by others, including Prentiss and Kuijt. This book is an important product of their on-going research.

*Complex Hunter-Gatherers* is an edited volume primarily concerned with the Late Holocene of the Fraser-Thompson Plateau. It does have two initial papers reviewing the full cultural sequences for the Canadian Plateau (Mike Rousseau) and the American Plateau (William Andrefsky, Jr.), but otherwise the papers focus on developments within the last 2,500–1,500 years. After the editors’ introduction, eleven chapters are organized into four sections: 1. Chronology and Materials in Plateau Archaeology; 2. Households, Social Complexity, and the Formation of Aggregate Hunter-Gatherer Communities; 3. Social Organization, Plant Resources, and the Abandonment of Pithouse Villages; and 4. Discussion and Implications.

In their introduction, Prentiss and Kuijt frame the book in the evolution of complex hunter-gatherers. They touch on three topics: variability among ethnographic Plateau groups in the degrees to which they were complex (i.e., ranked, etc.); the Plateau as a place to investigate the evolution of hunter-gatherer complexity; and the current state of complex hunter-gatherer studies on the Plateau. In the latter discussion, they look specifically at culture history (chronology and sequence), evolutionary contexts on the Plateau, and how complex hunter-gatherer communities were organized. I had hoped that the topic of variability among ethnographic groups—a topic in need of serious review—would be further addressed somewhere in the book, but was disappointed.

The first section contains four chapters: the culture history overviews by Rousseau and Andrefsky; a paper by Nathan Goodale, Prentiss, and Kuijt presenting a new radiocarbon-based chronology for the Upper Columbia River region; and a paper on the evolution of logistical mobility strategies (collector systems) on the Plateau by Prentiss and Kuijt. The Rousseau and Andrefsky papers present basic descriptive archaeology for their respective regions. Rousseau’s paper updates and condenses his previous syntheses, using the now-standard cultural historical periods for the Canadian Plateau for the past 7,000 years. Rousseau also touches on issues and developments central to this book. In contrast, Andrefsky divides the Columbia Plateau’s 11,000 year sequence into four periods: Paleoarchaic, and Early, Middle and Late Archaic. This terminology is not in general use, although I agree with Paleoarchaic as a period and concept. While Rousseau engages in some interpretation and explanation of the record, Andrefsky takes a conservative line and his paper is primarily descriptive. It seems disengaged from the rest of the book. These two papers are a missed opportunity to address broad issues of variation, including both differences and similarities, across the Plateau. I do not think the authors saw each others’ papers; indeed, the culture histories of the Canadian and American Plateaus, as presented here, might as well be in different solar systems.

Goodale, Prentiss, and Kuijt’s chronology encompasses the Columbia’s run downstream from the upper end of the Arrow Lakes to its confluence with the Spokane River. This includes the chronologically vexed Kettle Falls region; anything clarifying that sequence is an important contribution. They propose four periods spanning the last 7,000 years on the Upper Columbia based solely on mobility patterns: an early period of foragers, followed by
three different phases of collectors. Implicit here is the possibility of extending this framework across the entire Plateau, as a means of resolving some of the issues left unresolved by Rousseau and Andrefsky.

Prentiss and Kuijt continue Prentiss’ prior arguments that logistical mobility on the Plateau evolved elsewhere, possibly on the northern British Columbia coast, and subsequently spread to the Plateau, perhaps as part of a Salish expansion. This paper attempts to demonstrate a discontinuity between earlier cultures on the Canadian Plateau and the expanding Salish-speaking collectors. There are two separate issues here: how hunter-gatherer mobility strategies evolve and the Salish expansion hypothesis, which has a long and honorable history in Plateau archaeology. I am agnostic about the latter, but skeptical of the former. However, it is all very stimulating, well argued, and testable.

James Chatters’ paper on warfare and village formation on the Columbia Plateau opens the second section. He argues that warfare intensified on the Plateau with the introduction of the bow and arrow, which forced the formation of large villages. Other studies have also shown a relationship between settlement aggregation and warfare in, for example, the eastern United States. Chatters carefully musters several lines of evidence to make his case. While he is primarily concerned with the relationship between warfare and villages, the increase in warfare he documents for the Columbia Plateau seems to be part of a much broader intensification of warfare in western North America in the last 2,000 to 2,500 years.

In the section’s second paper, Hayden and Ron Adams postulate that two anomalous features at Keatley Creek represent ritual structures, based on archaeological correlates derived from ethnoarchaeological research and a mass of archaeological analogies ranging widely in time and space. Ultimately the analogies, while impressive, are so far reaching that they undermine their argument by seeming to confirm the consequent. The paper illustrates the need to sample more broadly in Plateau residential sites, where excavations have focused on house pits. In the following paper, Michael Blake examines trade on the Plateau and southern Northwest Coast from the vantage point of the Scowlitz site, looking at obsidian, nephrite, dentalium, and copper. Blake also points out the importance that research into prehistoric trade and labour organization can have in modern legal cases affecting Native rights.

In the third section, Dana Lepofsky and Sandra Peacock review the evidence for the intensification of plant food harvesting on the Canadian Plateau. They examine four pathways to intensification—cognitive, social, technological and ecological, each with its own intensification strategies, effects, and archaeological correlates. They also provide very useful tables summarizing various important qualities of different plant foods. Their important review extends beyond the usual discussion of roots to include a range of plants. They examine the archaeological evidence for plant use, suggesting changing patterns of intensification (and “deintensification”) over the past 2,400 years on the Canadian Plateau. In the following paper, Hayden and Sara Mossop Cousins suggest that certain pits at Keatley Creek were large communal roasting pits, based again on correlates derived from ethnography and ethnoarchaeology, and may be associated with extra-household
events or groupings (e.g., secret societies). Like the Hayden and Adams paper, this addresses a rarely excavated type of archaeological feature and places it into context. However, neither paper articulates well with the overall volume. In the final paper of the section, Kuijt and Prentiss address the disappearance of large villages such as Keatley Creek on the Canadian Plateau around 800 BP. They argue that the dispersal of populations was forced by climate change (the Little Ice Age) and decreasing plant availability, which forced increasing foraging time away from the large villages and ultimately led to a population redistribution. Their argument is more complex, but that is its essence.

In the final section, Jeanne Arnold reviews what she sees as the primary contributions of the volume and the promise of future work on the Plateau. She further develops her distinction between affluent foragers and complex hunter-gatherers—the former characterized by the suite of traits most authors attribute to complex hunter-gatherers (relatively high populations, some degree of sedentism, intensive economies, etc.) and the latter by permanent ranking and the control by elites of non-kin labour. Her chapter is a useful, rather detailed discussion of each paper. She suggests that research on the Plateau can contribute to several important issues, of which she discusses four: 1) the economic foundations of settled life in large villages; 2) what she terms the fragile balance between human groups and their resources, making use of paleoenvironmental data; 3) intercommunity relations, including exchange and migrations; and 4) the evolution of complexity and interesting parallels between the Plateau and other parts of western North America. I would stress her last point and argue that our understanding of the evolution of complex hunter-gatherers generally, and of Plateau prehistory specifically, would be enhanced by broad-scale comparisons at least across western North America. Chatters seems to argue against this at the end his paper when he discusses how regional scale analyses can mask local variation. However, I read him to be advocating multi-scale analyses and comparisons—exactly what we need.

This is a good book because it has a clear agenda and related themes tie most of the papers together. It generally does not suffer from the unevenness and diffuseness afflicting many edited books. The papers are mostly tight, well written and well documented. It would serve well as a text in an advanced class on Plateau or hunter-gatherer archaeology—especially if a less expensive paperback edition is printed. It belongs on the bookshelf of anyone working either on the Plateau or with complex hunter-gatherers. I hope we can look forward to other equally good, and maybe even better, edited volumes on Plateau archaeology from the rest of us.

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