

BOOK REVIEW

Prehistoric Hunter-Gatherers: The Emergence of Cultural Complexity. T. Douglas Price & James A. Brown, eds. *Studies in Archaeology*. New York: Academic Press, 1985. Pp. xvii. 450. n.p. (hardcover).

The subtitle of this book is more accurate and indicative of content than the main title. This is not a book about hunting and gathering. Rather, it is a book about increasing complexity in the socio-economic and belief systems of prehistoric groups who may be classified as hunter-gatherers because they putatively depended largely on wild resources for their subsistence. Because it does not focus on subsistence systems themselves, readers primarily interested in the relationships between specific animal or vegetable resources and human cultures are likely to be disappointed. Most of the studies do not even consider the relative importance of animals, vegetables, and fish in the diet, let along the particular species exploited, the technologies involved in their exploitation, or the balance between calories received and energy expended in particular subsistence pursuits. What they do instead is concentrate on what hunters and gatherers do when they are not busy hunting and gathering. The results are stimulating and theoretically interesting for our total understanding of hunting-gathering lifestyles, and of the sources of cultural change and complexity.

The book grew out of a symposium on "Complexity among Prehistoric Hunter-Gatherers" at the XIth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences in Vancouver, BC, in 1983. Additional essays and discussions were included in the final volume. The purpose of the symposium and book are clearly set forth by the editors in the Preface (p. xiii):

This is a book by archaeologists on the subject of culture change and complexity ... Our specific focus is on the emergence of cultural complexity among hunter-gatherers. We hope to point out that the traditional dichotomy of forager versus farmer has little significance with regard to the organizational development of human society—that means of subsistence do not dictate levels of cultural complexity. We intend to spotlight the variety of adaptations that characterize prehistoric hunter-gatherers ...

Participants considered such questions as the origins of intensified food procurement systems, sedentary communities, and social inequality or hierarchic organization, as well as the interrelationships of various factors leading to the elaboration of society.

The focus of both symposium and book was global. Essays in parts I and IV stress comparative models; those in parts II and III stress models and data for particular times and places. Essays in Part II deal with North America, focusing on Alaskan Eskimo, Northwest, Interior British Columbia, and Midwest examples. Those in Part III deal with the Old World, including the Upper Paleolithic of the Central Russian Plain and of Southwest France, ritual communication in Paleolithic Europe, the Mesolithic of Northwest Europe and of Southern Scandinavia, the Natufian of the Levant, and Australia. These essays make no attempt to present comprehensive reconstructions of prehistoric cultures in the given times and places; rather, they concentrate on models of and evidence for developing cultural complexity. Readers not intimately familiar with each area may find it difficult to judge the models and their supportive data without more general contextual information. Condensation and presentation in tables of general sequences as well as specialized data might have made for better understanding in some cases. In general, participants attempt to stress both data and theory in their essays. Partly because the data base varies from region to region, however, and partly because the postulated cultural systems are large and complex, most essays present more theoretical models than data. The book serves better as a source of provocative ideas than as a reference source for information about prehistoric hunter-gatherers in specific regions. It should also be noted by non-archaeologists that most of the cultural systems discussed are reconstructed from archaeological data and should thus be considered as hypothetical models for testing rather than field observations against which models are tested.

Within these limitations, the volume deals an effective blow to a cultural ecological approach which has become an almost subconscious part of archaeological thinking in the years since Julian Steward proposed his theory of culture change. Because ecofacts, artifacts, and spatial patterns make up much of our raw data in archaeology, it is very tempting to follow Steward's prescription of working from the environment, which lies outside the cultural system, through the environment-technology link to the core cultural elements most affected by this link, and thence to the "peripheral" elements which are less closely tied to subsistence. Because our reconstructions work this way, we have sometimes tended to assume that culture works this way, too. The argument that in some cases social or ideological factors are the prime movers in cultural dynamics and that the environment-technology link acts only as a secondary enabling factor

has been voiced strongly by Marxist scholars, some of whom are represented in this volume. An equally strong factor in creating discontent with traditional cultural ecological models, however, has been the shift from site-based to regional approaches in data acquisition. As many of the studies presented demonstrate, the idea of cultural adaptation to a specific set of resources is very seductive when a single social unit inhabiting a specific resource zone is the focus of study. When the focus shifts to a regional social-economic system spanning a number of resource zones, the model becomes less satisfying. The search for models which will deal with such regional systems, and the complementary search for data which will test these models, are the focus of most of the essays in the book. In general, they are successful in making strong cases for a degree of cultural complexity among hunter-gatherers which requires and supports new explanatory models. Several such models are proposed. Neither theoretical nor regional essays, however, pretend to offer final solutions. The aim was to point out the inadequacy of traditional models and data bases and to suggest new directions in the study of prehistoric hunter-gatherers. This aim has been admirably achieved.

R. Carol Barnes
Department of Anthropology and Geography
Rhode Island College
Providence, RI 02908