

BOOK REVIEWS

ANTHROPOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY

Lawrence Barham and Peter Mitchell. *The First Africans: African Archaeology from the Earliest Toolmakers to Most Recent Foragers.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Cambridge World Archaeology series. xvii + 601 pp. Maps. Photographs. Figures. Tables. Notes. Glossary. References. Index. \$99.00. Cloth. \$36.99. Paper.

The human lineage originates and flourishes against an African backdrop. It is here that the first tool users emerged and the unique human behavioral adaptation originated, and it is from Africa that human populations first ventured forth to spread around the globe. This exodus does not signify the end of African prehistory, yet the historical trajectories of modern African peoples are often overlooked relative to developments of modern human populations of Europe and the Near East. Addressing these concerns is among the principal objectives in Barham and Mitchell's book *The First Africans*. In this comprehensive review, the authors seek first to assess the archaeological and fossil evidence for human origins in Africa, and then to examine the archaeology of more recent hunter-gatherers on the African continent.

A growing body of knowledge on African prehistory has demonstrated that the three-stage framework of Early, Middle, and Later Stone Ages is a gross oversimplification of emerging hominin behavioral complexity in Africa. Consequently, the authors reject a three-stage system and instead organize their chronological narrative according to the record of global climate change. In doing so they acknowledge the important, but not exclusive, role that environmental change has played in shaping human adaptation. Unlike many other summaries of African prehistory, *The First Africans* does not consider the archaeological record as a uniform entity. Rather, the authors address the regional archaeological records of North, South, East and Central Africa separately, highlighting that biological and cultural evolution in Africa does not follow a simple pattern of homogenous progression.

Barham and Mitchell admirably cover the intricacies of the archaeological and behavioral record during periods of prehistory that are historically ignored or oversimplified. The fossil and archaeological records for

the end of the Middle Pleistocene are sparse, and thus often are given only cursory attention. However, this period is critical, for it is during this interval that biologically and behaviorally modern *Homo sapiens* first appears. The authors provide a thorough summary of the growing archaeological record for this period, and review the current debate over the interpretation of this record for the origins of the modern behavioral adaptation.

The Pleistocene-Holocene boundary marks a time of dramatic global climate and culture change. Similar to what is observed in Eurasia, Africa saw revolutionary social change as a result of plant and animal domestication; these transformations were crucial to the rise of the great African civilizations. However, eschewing ideas of cultural determinism and in keeping with their objectives, Barham and Mitchell leave this subject largely untouched. The narrative of this book remains focused on the long-term persistence of hunter-gatherer adaptations into the modern era. Farmers and pastoralists are discussed only with regard to how their appearance affected hunter-gatherer groups and reshaped foraging adaptations of the past into those observed today.

Archaeologists often use modern hunter-gatherers as analogs in order to make behavioral inferences about the past. Barham and Mitchell react against the supposition that modern hunter-gatherers represent some sort of prehistoric cultural “fossils.” They remind the reader that these groups have their own developmental record that is inextricably intertwined with both their environment and historical interactions with other human groups. Their examination of modern hunter-gatherer groups focuses on three key aspects: the emergence of more sedentary hunter-gatherer societies and their corresponding technological innovations, the abundant rock art record, and the interrelationship of hunter-gatherers and food-producers over last few thousand years.

This book has a carefully defined focus and adheres to it faithfully. It is not meant to be a source on agropastoralist adaptations or state formation in Africa. Rather, it provides an accessible, succinct, and informed summation of the human archaeological record from the first tools at 2.5 million years ago through the diversification of modern hunter-gatherer populations today.

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Bernd Heine and Derek Nurse, eds. *A Linguistic Geography of Africa*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Cambridge Approaches to Language Contact series. v + 371 pp. Maps. Figures. Tables. Contributors. Notes. References. Index. \$115.00. Cloth.

A Linguistic Geography of Africa, despite its reader-friendly title, is a highly technical book aimed at professional linguists. It has global implications