

Review

Arctic archaeologies: recent work on Beringia

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YVON CSONKA (ed.). *The Ekven settlement: Eskimo beginnings on the Asian shore of Bering Strait* (British Archaeological Reports international series 2624). ix+112 pages, numerous colour and b&w illustrations, and tables. 2014. Oxford: Archaeopress; 978-1-4073-1259-0 paperback £30.

DAVID C. TENNESSEN. *K'emiyi: settlement patterns and prehistory in Lake Clark National Park and Preserve: an archaeological overview and assessment*. xiii+299 pages, 51 b&w illustrations, 174 tables. 2014. Anchorage (AK): Lake Clark National Park and Preserve & National Park Service, US Department of the Interior; 978-0-9796432-8-6.

E. JAMES DIXON. *Arrows and atl atls: a guide to the archaeology of Beringia*. xvi+321 pages, numerous b&w illustrations. 2013. Anchorage (AK): National Parks Service, United States Department of the Interior; 978-0-9853948-2-0 paperback.



This review considers three books on the archaeology of territories situated

around the Bering Sea—a region often referred to as Beringia, adopting the term created for the Late Pleistocene landscape that extended from north-east Asia, across the Bering Land Bridge, to approximately the Yukon Territory of Canada. This region is critical to the archaeology of the Arctic for two fundamental reasons. First, it is the gateway to the Americas, and was certainly the route by which the territory was colonised at the end of the last glaciation. Second, it is the place where the entire Aleut-Eskimo (Unangan, Yupik, Alutiiq, Inupiat and Inuit) phenomenon began, and every coastal culture from the far north Pacific, to Chukotka, to north Alaska, and to arctic Canada and Greenland, has its foundation in the cultural developments that occurred around the Bering Sea.

There has not been a critical synthesis of the prehistory of this region since Don Dumond's 1987

review, where he successfully integrated the known archaeology, linguistics, human biology and historic cultural manifestations into a broad storyline that sought to elucidate the entirety of Aleut-Eskimo prehistory. Since that time a few cursory attempts at synthesis have been overshadowed by dozens of excavation reports, micro-regional overviews or synthetic reviews of the literature, without critique, reanalysis or even a good storyline. These three volumes exemplify these trends.

Yvon Csonka's edited volume on the archaeology of the Ekven settlement on the Chukchi Coast is an example of a good site report. The Ekven site was for many years the 'Holy Grail' of Eskimo prehistory. A massive cemetery with dozens of elaborate burials, it contained carved harpoons, masks, figurines, pieces of armour, utilitarian tools and ceramics—but only available to those able to work through a 1960s literature that was all in Russian. More recently, a few of these reports became available in English, translated by archaeologist Richard Bland. The early Soviet publications were focused on the cemetery and burials, with little on the archaeology of the associated village. Csonka's work is a welcome relief, although very limited in scope. Focusing on the village, a massive erosion front on the settlement was cleared and analysed, and house floors, hearths, storage features and other remains were identified. Much of the publication is on the geomorphology of the erosion front, by Bernard Moulin, and a regional palaeoclimatic synthesis, by Owen Mason. Yet information placing the site in a regional cultural context is lacking. The book's subtitle, 'Eskimo beginnings on the Asian shore of the Bering Strait', is somewhat of a misnomer, as the issue of Eskimo origins is assumed in the introduction and no data are subsequently presented to support the case. In fact, there is little in this report that ties the village to the original cemetery publications, making it difficult to evaluate the full significance of Csonka's discoveries.

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Lake Clark lies 1200km south-east of the Ekven site. For years the National Park Service of Alaska has been producing elaborate and extensive publications on the archaeology and history of the area under their supervision. Each park is provided its own publication that synthesises the archaeology in the context of a broader region. These publications review the prehistoric archaeology (up to *c.* AD 1750) and historical land use by both indigenous peoples and Euroamericans, and provide ethnographic details of indigenous peoples including subsistence practices, modern villages, oral histories and land claims. The success of these publications is largely a product of the author assigned to them. For Lake Clark Park Service archaeologist David Tennesen has produced an excellent overview.

Lake Clark is a massive drainage system that feeds into Bristol Bay in the south-east Bering Sea. It is a region famous for the substantial salmon runs that provide most of the world's wild salmon harvest. Lake Clark National Park and Preserve extends from this Bering Sea drainage, southwards, to also share a small section of mountainous shoreline with the North Pacific. This region was the homeland of Yupik and Alutiq peoples (Eskimoan), and interior Dena'ina peoples (Athabaskan). The book gives an extensive historical overview, and reviews the prehistory of south-west Alaska. This is an important contribution because the actual prehistoric archaeology of the Lake Clark region is rather paltry. Very little archaeology has been found in the Park—even though the historical use of the region by both Euroamerican and Dena'ina was extensive—necessitating a rather broad literature review to compensate. To some extent, this book is an elaborate planning document designed to meet the Park Service's requirements; on the other hand, it is likely to be the only archaeological report on this region for many years.

E. James Dixon's *Arrows and atl atls: a guide to the archaeology of Beringia*, is a completely different type of publication. Also contracted and funded by the National Park Service, this volume was initiated in order to present a broad overview of the archaeology of Beringia—almost in textbook format, but written much more for a public audience. The first two chapters of the book provide a regional and historical overview of the archaeology and archaeologists who have worked in the region. Chapters 3–8 provide a review of the prehistory, with chapter 9 a synthetic summary. This book is odd in a number of ways. First, there are no references in the text, simply a list

of additional reading at the end of each chapter. This is a style of writing that Brian Fagan perfected decades ago where a section is introduced by a statement such as “Don Dumond has been working on the Alaska Peninsula for 40 years, here he found [...]”. But Dixon's work does not reach the same standard. Where Fagan would make obvious which conclusions were gleaned from others' publications, and which were his own, Dixon is less clear and potentially misleading.

The best sections of the book are on the Late Pleistocene and early Holocene—Dixon's own area of expertise. But the chapters reviewing Eskimo and Aleut prehistory show little difference to how they might have in the 1970s. The same terminology and the same chronologies are restated without review of the extensive revisions that have changed our understanding of many areas of Beringia over the last 20 years. The book ends with an 80-page section providing biographies of arctic archaeology luminaries, and this is perhaps its greatest contribution. Dixon is among the last of a generation that actually knew many of the original arctic archaeologists and these brief biographies are the only such of their kind in the literature.

These three books are typical of the literature of the region. But what makes the prehistory of Beringia special is that the most important questions concerning the prehistory and evolution of humanity can be tested here with high-quality data sets. Hunter-gatherer mobility, the origin of sedentism, the rise of towns, migration, the evolution of complexity and rank, marine adaptations, the bow and arrow versus atl atl, the origins of war, status competition, effects of climate change, human ecosystem engineering and niche construction, regional interaction and trade, even the origins of agriculture and animal husbandry—all are available for study. Yet few of these questions are raised, and none dealt with in detail, by any of these publications or in most other works of the last few decades.

Over the last 35 years, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the National Park Service, and Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, and the USDA Forest Service have spent over an estimated \$50 million (some would argue over \$100 million) identifying and protecting the cultural resources of Alaska, and private companies have spent another estimated \$25 million (probably much higher). While we certainly have a better understanding of the timeline for the occupation of Beringia,

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the distribution of microblades, new localities for notched points, many new radiocarbon dates and improved knowledge of some territories, little has been generated that offers insight into the great questions that are central to understanding the evolution of humanity. These resources have not even generated critical revisions to chronological sequences—chronologies that everyone knows do not work but are used in every report and publication. This is why, regardless of the spectacular archaeology of the region, the archaeological world pays little attention to the Arctic, and even less to the archaeology of Beringia in particular.

This brings us back to the subtitle of Csonka's book, and the final section of Dixon's book. When Csonka mentions 'Eskimo beginnings', and Dixon presents biographies of the great arctic archaeologists, one characteristic should stand out. Csonka can mention Eskimo beginnings because the early excavators of the Bering Straits sites, both Soviet and American, were concerned with the grand synthesis of arctic prehistory. What made the early Alaska archaeologists great was not their site reports, but the fact that they could address the larger context of humanity in their syntheses. Whether it was Rainey's comparisons of Ipiutak with the Scythians or Jenness's recognition

that Punuk armour was very much like Chinese plate mail, everything connected. It was David Hopkins's grand syntheses of the Beringian landscape that changed our understanding of the peopling of the Americas. When Frederica de Laguna published the *Prehistory of North America as seen from the Yukon* (1947), it was all about grand synthesis and great connections. It made it all matter. We have lost that.

With Don Dumond now retired, the Arctic needs a Barry Cunliffe, a Clive Gamble even a Brian Fagan. Until then, outdated chronologies, lists of radiocarbon dates, and maps of house pits or microblade site distributions will be the extent of our understanding of one of the most spectacular prehistories on the planet.

References

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