

AMERICAN BEGINNINGS: THE PREHISTORY AND PALAEOECOLOGY OF BERINGIA. Edited by FREDERICK HADLEIGH WEST, with the assistance of CONSTANCE F. WEST, BRIAN S. ROBINSON, JOHN F. HOFFECKER, MARY LOU CURRAN, and ROBERT E. ACKERMAN. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996. xxiv + 576 p., maps, b&w illus., bib., indexes. Hardbound. US\$75.00; £59.95.

*American Beginnings* opens with David Hopkins' introduction, "The Concept of Beringia," and West's preamble, "The Study of Beringia." The remaining text is in three parts. The first part, comprising nearly one quarter of the work, concerns palaeoenvironmental research. The second and longest section describes the archaeological evidence. The conclusions contain an article by linguist Joseph Greenberg and West's key essay, "Beringia and New World Origins." The large format makes this book equivalent in length to publications containing up to three times its pages.

Its subtitle, *The Prehistory and Palaeoecology of Beringia*, states what this book is about, while the main title, *American Beginnings*, indicates its theoretical thrust or bias: "the conviction that far too much of the debate on the earliest peopling of the New World proceeds with only perfunctory reference to the very region where it all began" (Preface, ix). The setting is Beringia, an inhabitable land that during Late Pleistocene time reached from the Rocky Mountains across a wide belt of emergent land north and south of the Bering Strait and well into eastern Siberia (Hopkins, introduction; Hoffecker, introduction to Part Two). Hoffecker defines the time span of this land's existence as roughly 25 000 to 10 000 B.P., but notes that for the present volume, some evidence as recent as 6000 B.P. has been considered.

*American Beginnings* is by intent a compendium. This characterization is most appropriate for the 65 archaeology articles in Part Two, whereas Part One might be described as a summary and sampler of the palaeoenvironmental data. Although palaeoenvironmental evidence tends to belong to a genre of pollen diagrams and stratigraphic sections that does not attract a casual readership, Hopkins' introduction to the volume, West's preamble, Paul Colinvaux's lead article, and an interpretation of Siberian pollen data by Thomas Webb III go far towards making Part One reader-friendly for nonspecialists. Some items especially caught my interest.

Tomirdiaro's description of Arctida, an amazing Siberian landscape that is 90% ice, underscores the environmental fragility of a terrain that once extended considerably farther out into the Arctic Ocean. Tomirdiaro's claim (p. 66) that the winter oxygen content of air in that extremely cold environment was only half that of modern air—which would have excluded humans from this north edge of Beringia, though mammoths were able to survive in the less oxygenated air—caused me to consult with colleagues in disbelief, but they were unable to explicate this point to me.

Data from dated cores from the Chukchi Shelf might be applied more critically. Scott Elias, whose article on insect fossils treats these cores and sea level curves, conservatively

states that people could have crossed the land bridge as late as 11 000 BP (p. 118), but many researchers, in this volume and elsewhere, have interpreted the core data to indicate that the Bering Strait was not drowned until after 10 000 BP (uncalibrated radiocarbon years). The core site actually is very peripheral to Bering Strait (Fig. 2-26).

Like a number of the papers, Dale Guthrie's report on large-mammal localities in Alaska is abridged from one that had appeared earlier, in 1968 in this case. But his paper is timeless and elegant in the simplicity of its approach and the practical manner of dealing with the large amount of faunal material collected from placer stripping operations for the Frick Laboratory. Fauna are listed by percent of individuals in the sample and by percent of the biomass that they represent. The data show the dominance of *Bison priscus* and an abundance of horse (*Equus caballus*), as well as moderate numbers of woolly mammoth, caribou, and moose, during the Wisconsinan stage of the Pleistocene.

Part Two is organized geographically: three chapters for Siberia from west to east, and six chapters for areas of Alaska, seemingly in an unpatterned order. Each chapter contains 5 to 11 articles, most of which are reports on sites that have wedge-shaped microblade cores, though these reports cover a few sites like Mesa that do not have microblade cores. The jacket states that this volume carries near encyclopedic coverage of key archaeological discoveries, and probably 90 percent of all early dated site assemblages are described. A large number of articles on undated sites are included, although they represent only a minority of such sites. The relevance of the latter group is, in my estimation, uncertain, as the case for their antiquity is problematical. Nevertheless, all the articles are welcome, as for many sites, information has not been published or is available only in the "grey literature."

I looked for articles on early sites in Chukotka—the region of Siberia closest to North America. There are none, for the reason noted by Slobodin and King: that no early sites east of the Kolyma River (and north of Kamchatka) can be reliably dated. In that case, the Ushki sites of Kamchatka, with structures, dog burial, American archaic style corner-removed points, and pebble pendants suggestive of the Flint Creek phase of the northern Yukon, could have warranted presentation in greater depth. But certainly in a compendium like *American Beginnings*, some topics will end up not being covered to the degree some readers may desire. Two topics that might have been explored, considering the widespread interest that they draw, are how and when the bow and arrow reached the New World, and the significance of fluted point finds in the North.

Stone arrow tips are identified from Bolshoi Elgakhchan (Fig. 4-11), where they are not well dated, and also possibly at Ushki (Fig. 4.19) where they could be as old as 14 000 years, and at a Primorye site thought to be at least 10 500 years old (Fig. 5-13r). But their identification is not wholly convincing, considering that factors other than size alone enter into the identification of arrow tips and those illustrated are larger than some North American arrow tips. The presence of stone arrow tips in eastern Beringia hardly is a topic for

consideration in view of the scarcity of tiny tips there (though most northern spear points are small). Nevertheless, a lanceolate point from Dry Creek that is only 1.3 cm wide (Fig. 7-10a) may give cause for reflection.

The evidence of bone points slotted for microblades is another matter. When Helge Larsen published the Trail Creek points (Fig. 11-1) 30 years ago, he did not create a stir, meaning, in my estimation, that people either did not accept them as arrowheads or considered their association with a 9000-year radiocarbon date to be spurious. But recent finds of very slender slotted points from the Lime Hills, described by Ackerman (p. 471 and Fig. 10-7), reinforce the Trail Creek date and association, and Ackerman's claim that they are arrowheads merits serious examination. Points slotted for microblades also have been recovered from the Ocean Bay I culture of Kodiak Island, from levels at least 6000 years old (P. Hausler-Knecht, unpubl. data). These implements probably were used there for hunting marine mammals, a major readaptation from the Late Palaeolithic tundra hunting ecology once thought to be associated with such points.

Hoffecker states in the introduction to Part Two that "Northern Alaska has been of particular interest to American archaeologists as the only region in Beringia to produce fluted points, suggesting a link to the oldest firmly dated remains in mid-latitude North America" (p. 152). Reanier's article destroys previously assumed dating of fluted points from the Putu site, and Solecki illustrates two points (Fig. 11-14g-h), but there is little follow-up on documenting what could have been a significant Palaeoindian incursion from the northern Plains into the Yukon and across northern Alaska. Nor is there any discussion of the alternative interpretation, today held by few persons, that fluted points, and thus their Palaeoindian bearers, originated in the north. Northern fluted points are not well dated, but dates for specimens that imperfectly or marginally fit the criteria of a fluted point tend to be around 10300–9700 B.P. The volume generally fails to recognize the possibility of there being more than one early cultural tradition in Alaska and the Yukon (eastern Beringia), except that Kunz and Reanier and Ackerman place the Mesa site and Spein Mountain complex respectively in a Palaeoindian occupation distinct from the Beringian microblade people. Kunz's and Reanier's statement that Mesa culture could be ancestral to Agate Basin (p. 503) is especially challenging, as well as a refreshing departure from the purely descriptive scope of most articles.

A volume like this, which is so much a study of the occurrence of microblade cores, but explains very little about them up front, requires that the reader bring a lot of prior specialized knowledge. Eventually, the authors explain the significance of wedge-shaped microblade cores, the use to which microblades were put, details of the very specialized techniques of producing and maintaining (rejuvenating) the most distinctive form of wedge-shaped core, the Campus type (also called Denali or Gobi cores); and the place of other core types in prehistory, but this information is disseminated with varying degrees of completeness among several articles. It would have been helpful to have a central statement on core

technology and typology, especially for microblade cores. West's seminal statement "The Denali microblade core is certainly one of the most complex and efficient devices to have developed in the realm of lithic technology" deserves far greater prominence than it receives by being placed on page 305. Reference is made to the existence in Beringia of other core types in addition to Denali cores—Sumnagin and degenerate Denali cores, for instance—but the text makes no reference to illustrations, though these types are present among the numerous figures. While it may become evident to the reader that the term "wedge-shaped core" refers to a larger class, it may not be apparent that northern specialists, including contributors to the present work, often fail to distinguish between core varieties. For example, as analysed by Jeffrey Flenniken (1987:117–132) the Siberian Dyuktai cores, often cited for identity with Denali or Campus cores, in fact are not Denali cores, as their respective modes of platform preparation and maintenance are quite different. Perusal of specimens illustrated in the present volume supports this distinction. It is necessary, though, to qualify this statement: some of the cores from eastern Siberia and even the region of the Dyuktai site actually are Denali-type cores. Here we are at the attribute level, but when so much of northern prehistory is based on the study of microblade cores, important cultural distinctions risk being overlooked through inattention to such detail.

Nevertheless, and while I am on the topic of detail, the editor is to be congratulated on the presentation of illustrations drawn to a scale of only about one-third reduction and portraying such detail of the flaking that they are eminently suited for consultation by specialists. It is apparent that considerable care has been taken in the editorial preparation of this volume, which itself is a very creditable production requiring the coordination of the work of approximately 50 authors. For example, the articles by Russian authors are largely free of distracting translation problems.

Canadian evidence is sparsely presented. For the West Coast, the Queen Charlotte Islands in particular, recognition is limited to one reference to material 5000–8000 years old. But it was not known when the articles for *American Beginnings* were written that sites older than 10 000 years (calibrated years) would be discovered on the islands during Parks Canada research that began in 1990. West notes that, early on, Richard MacNeish had formulated a Northwest Microblade tradition with various cores, few of which were of the Denali type; but he does not report that subsequently, dozens of microblade cores identical to specimens from such Beringian sites as Dry Creek and Healy Lake have been recovered from the Yukon, together with other artifacts, like burins, to which considerable antiquity can be attributed. Considering the significance assigned in the conclusions to the so-called Mackenzie corridor, more notice might have been taken of the 9800-year-old Engigstciak Flint Creek component in the north and the undated Pink Mountain fluted point finds from just south of the Yukon

West writes that "there is *no* convincing evidence in sub-Laurentide [glacial] America for *any* human presence prior to the appearance of Clovis, which is to say 11,500–11,000

years ago” (p. 539). He thus points to the stage for the concluding scenario, mapping out a tight sequence of events for eastern Beringia. The earliest sites of 11 000–11 500 years ago are reclassified as nonmicroblade sites (of microblade users) instead of pre-microblade sites. After having spread to the limit of eastern Beringia, some people exited southward through the Mackenzie valley. Possibly their exodus was part of a chain reaction to environmental distress—the deterioration of the steppe biome. Their arrival at the south end of the corridor accounts for the origin of Clovis people and culture. To explain the actual lack of evidence from the corridor of this migration, West proposes that the migration was accomplished very rapidly and by one small group.

Unlike the case with the substantive data for Western and Eastern Beringia, evidence for the migration through the corridor is “thin soup.” There are assemblages in the region with microblade cores, but those well placed on corridor terrain seem to be late, and earlier ones from south of the corridor do not clearly contain Denali-type cores. Altogether, consideration of the scattered early evidence from the Mackenzie valley, Alberta, and British Columbia does not as yet have decisive bearing on West’s hypothesis. I question, though, why a tool tradition adapted to the use of microblades was discarded during the rapid passage southward, and why northern lanceolate points of Clovisian age bear so little resemblance to Clovis points.

Back in the North, the Early Beringian tradition disappeared about 9000 years ago, replaced by the Late Beringian tradition. As far as *American Beginnings* is concerned, the scene had been played out by that time.

Analysts working with northeast Asian and northwest North American artifact assemblages will find an essential tool in the compendium of data that is *American Beginnings*. Those working with the writing of prehistory will discover an essential awareness of events in the North, though most of that information also can be found scattered in other publications. Those concerned with the broader picture should find West’s conclusions stimulating, though for many that may lead to rebuttal. It is such challenges, though, that stimulate advances in research.

#### REFERENCE

FLENNIKEN, J. 1987. The Paleolithic Dyuktai pressure blade technique of Siberia. *Arctic Anthropology* 24(2):117–132.

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WHO LIVED IN THIS HOUSE? A STUDY OF KOYUKUK RIVER SEMISUBTERRANEAN HOUSES. By A. McFADYEN CLARK. Hull, Quebec: Canadian Museum of Civilization Mercury Series, Archaeological Survey of Canada, Paper No. 153. xviii + 261 p. b&w illus., bib. Softbound. Cdn\$24.95.

This book presents the results of research that began in the early 1960s as the Koyukuk River Culture History Project (1961–72). It describes the excavation and analysis of several mid-to-late 19th-century semisubterranean houses in three winter villages in an Athapaskan/Iñupiat “interface” region in northwestern Alaska, then attempts to identify which cultural group or individual family may have lived in each of them. The author makes use of archaeological, ethnohistoric, and oral history information to achieve her objectives; she refers to this approach as “ethnoarchaeologic.”

After a fairly standard summary of the environmental context, the discussion begins in chapter 2 with the cultural framework. The latter includes a very short piece on prehistory, a more comprehensive evaluation of the available historical data, followed by a still more substantial summary of late 19th-early 20th century history and traditional aboriginal culture. The latter is illustrated with ten full-page maps that display an average annual cycle, broken down by specific activities and fairly fine divisions of the year. These maps depict very effectively the possible temporal and spatial configurations of land use in the region.

Chapter 3 begins with descriptions of the major villages that were excavated. These include the Lake Creek, Kayak, and Okak sites, all of which were shown to the author by village elders. Local residents could not recall any details about the Kayak site until excavation had begun to produce artifacts that triggered latent memories about who may have lived in the village. The Okak site, which was discovered by accident, was completely unknown, despite having artifacts that dated it to the second half of the 19th century.

This absence of any recall for something that, in archaeological terms, seems so recent is intriguing, particularly in this era that recognizes the benefits of traditional knowledge to many facets of archaeological enquiry. I encountered a similar situation in the Old Crow region on three separate occasions. The most striking was during a survey of a small creek on Old Crow Flats, about 50 km by air northwest of the town. A Vuntut Gwitchin elder who accompanied our party was adamant that an obvious winter house was “not one of theirs.” This was in spite of the fact that the dwelling was in excellent condition, with most structural remains intact, and a steel axe with homemade handle was in place within the house; the house appeared to date to the early 20th century. The elder consulted with even older residents of the village, but no one could remember the campsite. A possible explanation is that the Old Crow house was indeed foreign, having been used by Inuvialuit trappers who frequently ventured into the interior northern Yukon in the early 20th century, making this area yet another interface region. Another possibility, suggested by the Peel River people, is that houses may not