

ESKIMO ARCHITECTURE: DWELLING AND STRUCTURE IN THE EARLY HISTORIC PERIOD.

BY MOLLY LEE AND GREGORY A. REINHARDT, FORWARD BY ANDREW TOOYAK, JR. (UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA PRESS, FAIRBANKS, 2003. ISBN 1-889963-22-4). CLOTH \$45.00, 216 PP, ILLUSTRATIONS, MAPS, APPENDIX, REFERENCES, INDEXES.

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Although there is considerable literature on Eskimo dwellings and other constructs, no single, comprehensive treatment of the subject exists. This generously illustrated volume goes a long way toward bridging that gap. The introduction begins by pointing out the term igloo (*iglu*) is a generic term in many Eskimo languages for house – not a term for the domed-snow block house of the north-eastern Arctic that many think is a pan-Eskimo house form. It is good to make this obligatory statement early on – hopefully readers outside of the anthropological community will not skip the introduction when they peruse this volume. The remainder of the rather brief introduction is devoted to outlining the scope of the volume and definitions. Early historic, for example, is defined as the first 50 years following Western contact and the authors stress that this term is at best a heuristic device since it is impossible to precisely define the onset of western contact for many, if not most, of the numerous groups discussed. Many archaeologists will no doubt wish the volume also covered prehistoric structures, but the authors chose to stay within the early historic period and with few exceptions did so. Archaeological data would have been especially useful in areas, such as the Gulf of Alaska, where ethnographic literature on dwellings is thin. This, of course, would have doubled the size of the volume.

The heart of the book is chapters 1-4 which provide a comprehensive survey of Eskimo architecture on a regional basis. Chapter 1, Greenland, is devoted exclusively to that region; Chapter 2, Central Arctic, covers Arctic Canada except for the Mackenzie Delta; Chapter 3, Northwest Arctic and Bering Strait, covers the area from the Mackenzie Delta to southeastern Seward Peninsula and the islands of Bering Strait proper; Chapter 4, Southwest Alaska, Bering Sea, Siberia, and Gulf of Alaska, discusses structures in the remainder of the Eskimo area. At first, the regional divisions employed seem somewhat strained or at least unorthodox, e.g., including almost the entire Canadian Arctic in the Central Arctic. Upon more reflection, the authors were faced with the need to divide

the almost 10,000 km linear extent of Eskimo culture into manageable units; the units created probably serve this purpose as well as any other scheme.

Each of these chapters is primarily devoted to winter and summer dwellings with the latter primarily consisting of tents in most areas. Additionally, transitional dwellings, i.e., structures used in spring and fall, are discussed as well as special use structures. Special use structures are those not normally intended for sleeping and include a wide variety of forms, men's or ceremonial houses, menstrual huts, birth huts, grave architecture, and even windbreaks. Chapters 1 and 2 have sections on domestic life in summer and in winter dwellings. In Chapter 1, for example, heating, lamp use and maintenance, furnishings, and other aspects of domestic life are examined. These sections are of considerable interest and no doubt provide relief to readers only mildly interested in dwelling construction details. The last section of the substantive chapters ends with a discussion of the rituals and beliefs associated with dwellings.

The overall coverage is extensive – as extensive as the available literature permits. A corollary to this, of course, is that coverage is unequal since areas are not equally addressed in the literature. That being said, the breadth of *Eskimo Architecture* is impressive. The chapter on Greenland, for example, at 22 pages the shortest of the regional chapters, discusses eight primary dwelling forms excluding temporary or emergency shelters, transitional dwellings, and special use structures. Additionally, the chapter contains 33 figures, many of them composites showing multiple views of the same dwelling type.

Chapter 5, Summary and Conclusions, summarizes house features found in winter and summer dwellings (Table 1) and suggests directions for future research. Lastly, the final section, *Appendix: Data on Dwelling and Household Size among Selected Eskimo Groups* provides data on house size, number of occupants per

house, and floor space per individual occupant. The selected groups include 12 societies ranging from the Polar Eskimos of Greenland to the Alutiiq of the Gulf of Alaska.

Certainly, one of the strong points of *Eskimo Architecture* is the number and quality of the illustrations it contains. The volume has 174 figures, six of which are maps; the remainder shows various aspects of the structures discussed. The regional maps, produced by Robert Drozda, are quite simple, but elegantly display the required information. Of the remaining figures perhaps half are historic photographs while the rest consist of contemporary line drawings, and copies of paintings and other historic illustrations. The illustrations are well produced and they, along with the artwork found at the head of each chapter which appears to be taken from Hoffman's (1895) monograph on Eskimo art, make this volume quite handsome.

The volume is well edited, although early in the reading there was cause to wonder if this is the case. On the first page of the preface Nabakov and Easton 1986 are cited in text, but dated 1989 in the references. Happily, no further discrepancies of this nature were found. The book is not without typographical errors, but they are uncommon and the ones that do occur do not render the sentence containing them unintelligible. Likewise, on only one occasion was a figure incorrectly cited in the text. This is another indication of good editing, since the large number of figures provides ample opportunities for this type of error. As noted above, illustration quality is very good, although occasionally one wonders why a particular illustration was selected. Figure 129, for example, illustrates the interconnected house depression complexes occurring on Nunivak Island. The illustration fails to convey the idea that numerous houses are connected in this manner, while the report describing the house complexes cited by the authors (U.S. BIA ANCSA 1995) contains scores of drawings that convey the concept quite well.

Some portions of the text could have been written more clearly. On page 98, for example, the reader is informed that one of the advantages of the domed skin-tent is that ". . . because heat loss is minimal in this type of structure, space is maximized." In another the reader is informed that near the storage platform of houses in the Barrow vicinity each ". . . family could usually claim a supernumerary ice cache. This was an underground storeroom, framed and roofed with whale bones, in which permafrost kept meat and blubber freezer cold." A supernumerary ice cache, it turns out, is what most residents of northwest Alaska, white and native alike, call an ice cellar. It would seem better to stick to this widely

used term even though the ice cellars of northwest Alaska are not strictly equivalent to the ice cellars used to cool foods before the advent of refrigeration.

Elsewhere, the authors, quoting Stefansson (1944:197), indicate that the domed skin-tent of the Nunamiut does not need to be anchored except in severe winds. I could not find this in the reprinted version of this work (Stefansson's 1984). However, Stefansson (1984:202) does note that the Eskimo dome tent "dispenses wholly guy ropes." It is likely that the authors misquoted Stefansson since it seems that any tent in the arctic would require anchoring, as witnessed by the numerous stone tent rings found in the Nunamiut area.

I do not wish to belabor the perceived problems with this book. There are few production problems, and the word "few" needs to be stressed here, in this well-researched and handsomely illustrated publication. The goal of the authors was to produce a comprehensive volume on Eskimo architecture and they have succeeded. Students of Eskimo culture, particularly archaeologists, will find the book very useful if not indispensable. I have to admit to putting *Eskimo Architecture* to work on at least two occasions before this review was finished.

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