

BOOK REVIEWS

A PREHISTORY OF THE NORTH: HUMAN SETTLEMENT OF THE HIGHER LATITUDES.

BY JOHN F. HOFFECKER. (RUTGERS UNIVERSITY PRESS, NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY, 2005.) CLOTH, \$65.00; PAPER, \$29.95. 240 PP. MAPS, FIGURES, ENDNOTES, INDEX, BIBLIO. PAPERBACK: ISBN: 0813534690.

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The past several months have seen the publication of three separate and major books that deal specifically but in differing ways with the peopling of the New World. One of these is directed to the receiving Hemisphere alone, a large portion of it directed toward the archaeological Clovis culture (Barton et al., eds., 2004). The second covers a part — but only a part — of the Old World with special attention to Siberia, and although it deals in some detail with certain areas of northeast Asia, it devotes considerable discussion to aspects of Clovis, giving attention to that will-o-the-wisp, a possible Asian progenitor (Madson, ed., 2004). The book reviewed here is the third of these to appear, the only one of the three that is under single authorship, and although it is in ways the most abstractly conceived and the least broadly detailed, in the coherence of the story it tells it is the most focused and satisfactory.

After a brief orientation chapter in which Vikings interact with, apparently, Dorset first and then Thule peoples, John Hoffecker's story begins not in the north, but in tropical Africa with the birth of humankind. From there it proceeds slowly northward in what are set out as five expansionist stages: First, between about 1.8 and 0.8 million years ago there is the peopling (by *Homo erectus*) of northern Africa and southern Asia. Second, beginning possibly a half-million years ago, is the intrusion (by *H. heidelbergensis*) into western Europe. Neither of the species involved shows any indication of cold tolerance, but both carry along the heritage of tropical beginnings.

The first indication of an ability to deal with the cold, in stage three, is in the expansion of Neanderthals into eastern Europe and southwestern Asia after 300,000 years ago, this by a population evidently physically and physiologically more adapted to frigid conditions. Stage four, with a shift from adaptive measures largely physical to those more cultural, exhibits the preliminary movement

of modern humans into central Asia and southern Siberia. This was after 50,000 years ago, and sometime after 30,000 B.P. modern Gravettian hunters had replaced Neanderthals in eastern Europe. Despite a cooling trend, sites such as Kostënki and its contemporaries give apparent evidence of human hunting prowess against not only herds of horses and reindeer, but to some extent of Pleistocene elephants, and also provide tantalizing suggestions of active fishing. Some sites are large, with extensive inventories of artifacts of bone and ivory — including such promising devices as the eyed needle — and provide evidence of widespread trade bespeaking substantial networks of communication. Still farther east, this same period included the occupation of the well-known sites of Mal'ta and Buret' on the Angara River of the Irkutsk region of southern Siberia. The author lards all of these discussions with salient factors of climate and human adaptability as indicated by archaeological evidence.

But despite apparently favorable subsistence resources and techniques for garnering them, the spreading moderns were largely stymied below 60 degrees north latitude, possibly directly by climate, possibly by climate-driven situations such as a shortage of woody fuel. As an exception stands a recently described site on the lower Yana River of northernmost Siberia — east of the Lena a short distance (as the great spaces of Siberia go), well north of the Arctic Circle, and dated nearly 30,000 radiocarbon years ago (Pitulko et al. 2004). This was, Hoffecker remarks, near the end of the warmer Middle Peniglacial, when “access to the New World was apparently blocked . . . by glacial ice” (p. 175, n. 72).

In any event, not long after 24,000 years ago with the continuing environmental swing into the Late Glacial Maximum, the more northerly of these areas in Siberia as well as in Europe were abandoned in a human retreat southward. In southern Europe, as the climate chilled but not to the point of uninhabitability, this was the time of

the high development of the reindeer-provisioned European Upper Paleolithic, with the appearance of mechanical devices such as the spear thrower, with somewhat later the bow and arrow, and with fetching art and symbolism.

It was only after this period of cold lessened, which induced the advance of at least scattered forests to the north, that portions of northern and eastern Europe were reinvested by people. The East European Plain then saw spectacular houses of mammoth bone, either scavenged or from hunted animals, attributed to Epi-Gravettians. Southern Siberia was again occupied almost to the 60th parallel of latitude, but the region was evidently less productive than eastern Europe, its occupation unmarked by substantial houses like those of the Epi-Gravettians, and people lived consistently more dispersed as hunters of herd animals, especially reindeer. This was the time and place of extensive use of microblades derived from wedge-shaped cores, segments of the bladelets inserted in the grooved shafts of bone or antler recovered from some sites.

It was in this same fifth stage, the author says, that people finally and more generally pushed north of the Arctic Circle, to achieve the latitude of Beringia and the commonly presumed gateway to the New World. By 15,000 years ago microblade-making people, who also used some bifaces, burins, and scrapers, and hunted steppe-bison, were visiting Dyuktai Cave in the middle Lena River basin, just south of the 60th parallel. This was the type site of the Dyuktai culture, analogs of which extended north and east, and, Hoffecker suggests, formed “probably the first culture to spread across the Bering Land Bridge and into the New World” (p. 112). In northern Siberia this manifestation was succeeded by the Sumnagin culture, which still more widely inhabited the high Siberian Arctic.

And so to Beringia, with microblade-makers represented east into Kamchatka, as in the well-known Ushki site, and across the still-exposed land bridge to the earliest site thus far known in Alaska, Swan Point, dated (in calibrated years) around 14,000 B.P. This is a date the author presumes was little later than the New World could have been occupied, given that movement above 60 degrees north in Siberia did not occur until the warming trend perhaps as late as 16,000 years ago. At both Ushki and in Alaska’s Nenana Valley a slightly later horizon is described as including small bifacially chipped points, although with the notation that the relationship between the two is unclear.

The final chapter provides a resume of both early and later people of the circumpolar zone, following them into northernmost Europe, across northern Siberia in the Neolithic, through cultures known as Syalakh and Belkachinsk, and thus into the Paleo-Eskimo world of the Denbigh Flint complex of Alaska, the Pre-Dorset of Canada, and the Independence cultures of Greenland. The text follows with, of course, the Thule expansion and later cultural reorientation, again as responses to climate change. Thus, the book comes full circle from its beginning with the reconstructed Viking interactions with Dorset and Thule in Greenland, and caps it with a final brief note on the Cold War of the twentieth century — which planted DEW Line and air bases at strategic locations, including the Thule zone of north Greenland.

The author is known not only for work in northern sections of the Old World (e.g., Hoffecker 2002), on which he draws at length in the present book, but also for serious treatment of early sites in Alaska (e.g., Hoffecker et al. 1993), in which the Nenana complex of the Nenana River drainage is touted as especially significant in the peopling of the New World, and as having putative ties to the archaeology of the North American heartland to the south — a view that one of his co-authors has carried to greater extremes (e.g., Goebel et al. 1992, 2003). I think it is now to Hoffecker’s credit that the earliest of Alaskan evidence he recognizes is the pre-Nenana site of Swan Point, which, as indicated above, he describes as Dyuktai-like.

This is an appropriate culmination to the story of the Old World development of the ability to deal with the arctic environment. With so much ink spilled by other authors over the question of the origin of the people of the Americas to the south, especially their obsession with Clovis, and so often with such slight treatment of the peopling of the upper righthand corner of Asia and the upper lefthand corner of the Americas, this text is refreshing. Physical anthropologists with evidence of the solid and boney kind and as well as from the growing body of data from ancient and modern DNA, insist that the adjacent upper corners of the Old and New Worlds are crucial to understanding the underpinnings of the native American people. Despite the lack of an easy mesh between the present DNA-derived chronology and that from archaeology, surely no one can seriously argue that the peopling of this region is other than crucial for understanding the advent of humans in the Americas.

This is why I said that that the present work, although shorter and of necessity more broad of brush than the other two mentioned, is more focused than either. In

both of these others there is the predictable emphasis on the Clovis culture — on the one hand (Madsen 2004) with the editor's discussion and other articles, and then a special recitation of potential Clovis predecessors in Asia (Goebel 2004), on the other (Barton et al. 2004) in a very plethora of chapters that revolve around Clovis with varying degrees of fancifulness. One of these, directed at the question of overland migration from Beringia, goes so far as to argue that the major reason for the persistence of the notion of a migrational "ice-free corridor" is the preferential dream by predominantly male archaeologists of bully-boy hunters ranging widely after big game — and yet no alternative way southward is clearly set out (Mandryk 2004). In such works the matter of getting people far enough north in Asia to permit them reasonably to transit to America appears in serious danger of being sidestepped.

Hoffecker's book, then, is pointed toward appreciating and understanding this elementary requirement for deriving American natives from northeast Asia. The story is a complete one, although without a detailed recitation site by site, which starts at the beginning and conveys the sense of developing history as early humans become finally and fully human in abilities, and establish themselves in what to them must be the earth's most challenging environment. And in this book, I may note, the word "Clovis" does not appear even in the index. For this I especially congratulate the author.

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