
In this volume, editors Roth and McBrinn bring together ten chapters that grew out of a 2010 Society for American Archaeology annual meeting symposium that sought to bridge the gap between the hunter-gatherer research of the Great Basin and that on early farmers in the American Southwest. After reading McBrinn and Roth’s introductory chapter, where they promised an integration of the ecological approaches of the Basin with the Southwest’s focus on practice theory and agency, I was very intrigued. That this promise hinged largely on assessing how these disparate theoretical constructs inform our understanding of the understudied Late Archaic, which was marked by over a millennium of economic and social negotiations between opposite ends of the foraging-farming continuum, left me even more captivated, especially given renewed interest in resolving the conflicts between evolutionary and humanistic anthropological theory and the import of such an approach to understanding foraging-farming transitions worldwide.

To some degree, my expectations were met—there are indeed some very interesting papers in this collection and the presentation of information on the Late Archaic and Early Formative is very useful. But to a larger degree they were not. This partly results from the depth of some of the papers (several are syntheses of past work that contain little data) and also to their nearly wholesale settlement and subsistence approach. But I also think the inability of this collection to live up to McBrinn and Roth’s admittedly difficult challenge is due largely to the intransigence of anthropology’s disparate theoretical approaches toward meaningful synthesis and the problems of doing so with notoriously difficult-to-interprete archaeological data.

Most chapters focus on settlement and subsistence; few address such things as agency and identity. For instance, Jim Railey uses radiocarbon summed probability distributions in conjunction with ethnographic datasets to explore the roles climate change and demographic packing played in the development of Formative lifeways near Albuquerque. Bradley Vierra and Maxine McBrinn use the diet-breadth model and the notion of foraging versus farming scheduling conflicts to explain the resistance to domesticates in the northern Rio Grande Valley. The next two chapters, by Stephan Whittlesey and Barbara Roth, respectively, look at settlement and subsistence around Las Capas in southern Arizona, the former to deconstruct the very notion of an Archaic-Formative divide. Turning to the Fremont, Renee Barlow uses cost-benefit analysis to hypothesize why Fremont people built storage facilities on cliff faces and A. Dudley and William Gardner describe extant macrobotanical and palynological data to assess Fremont non-maize-based plant subsistence. In the only chapter to address postprocessual concerns, Michael Searcy and Richard Talbot
explore identity along Fremont borderlands. Turning to the southern deserts, Heidi Roberts and Richard Ahlstrom use Bruce Smith’s notion of low-level food production to help understand macrobotanical, palynological, and faunal data from near Las Vegas. And in the last chapter, Mark Sutton reports on nine extremely rare village sites in the sparsely populated Mojave Desert.

With only one chapter dipping its feet into postprocessual waters, little opportunity for integration or synthesis of divergent theoretical perspectives is possible. As Searcy and Talbot’s chapter on Fremont borderlands shows, however, it’s very difficult to address identity and related issues with archaeological data—convincing postprocessual middle-range theory just hasn’t been (or has yet to be) developed. It seems equally likely that at the timescales most archaeologists work—centuries and millennia—evolutionary approaches tend to have much more explanatory rigor. But when it comes to their ostensibly evolutionary-ecological approach, I found that several of the chapters either belied a tendency toward culture-historical description (which negated any possibility for theoretical discussion) or were mired in outdated stage-like conceptions of cultural evolution. Other chapters use diet breadth and return rate studies to fairly strong effect but ignore their larger theoretical connections. This could be rectified by doing some of the math contained in the models, rather than simply using them as heuristic devices, but even more so by employing related high-level theory (the chapter that does this best is Roberts and Ahlstrom’s on low-level food production). But I believe that this type of thinking could be taken much further, perhaps by conceiving of the Late Holocene Desert West as a spatiotemporal landscape of competing adaptations that included social structure and ideology, rather than as a set of unrelated culture histories or subsistence-oriented evolutionary stages. In any case, this collection of essays points to just how much work still needs to be done in terms of theory and modeling in order to arrive at a nuanced, post-Jennings synthesis of the Desert West.

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This volume joins a long list of works that have been published by the University Press of Florida in the field of historical archaeology and is a valuable contribution to the series as it approaches the widely neglected (until now) topic of race in the northeastern portion of the United States. The neglect centers on the previous misunderstanding of the role of slavery in this region, implying that it was absent or