Reviews

Meetings at the Margins, Prehistoric Cultural Interactions in the Intermountain West

David Rhode (editor)


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This edited volume grew out of the “Beyond the Fringe” symposium chaired by David Rhode during the 31st Great Basin Anthropological Conference (GBAC) held in in Portland, Oregon, in 2008. The symposium was a centerpiece of the conference, drawing as it did quite a few participants whose work lay on the periphery of the traditionally recognized boundaries of the Great Basin. Its goal was to take advantage of the conference’s location outside this boundary and draw attention to the supraregional social and historical contexts that affected the archaeological patterns of the Great Basin proper.

I attended the conference, remember the symposium well, and was excited to see what would come of the papers presented there. The volume certainly does not disappoint and was well worth the wait, as it delivers a diverse array of chapters by leading researchers working in and around the Great Basin and covers a span of time from the terminal Pleistocene to the very late prehistoric. As such, this volume more than meets—and makes available in print—the goals of the symposium from which it arose as well as the overarching objectives of the 31st GBAC, which was to get Great Basin researchers to think about their work in broader geographic, historical, and evolutionary contexts. It is thus essential reading for professionals and students working within, on, and “beyond the fringe” of the Great Basin.

The chapters that comprise the volume range from: (1) overviews of regions and topics by experts working in these respective fields; (2) development and testing of ecologically based models; and (3) presentation of new data focused on identifying the historical development of Great Basin cultures. In the first instance, for example, James Adovasio provides a concise, clear summary of a lifetime’s work on Great Basin basketry and shows how this research helps clarify several of the historical and ethnolinguistic questions that continue to vex Great Basin archaeologists. Similarly, Michael Delacourt and Mark Basgall deliver a comprehensive description of cultural interaction between the Plateau and the Great Basin that could easily be expanded into a textbook in its own right. In the second case, Frank Bayham and colleagues develop a
robust model predicated on environmentally based resource distributions to predict large game predation and how this affected territorial boundary maintenance along the western edge of the Great Basin. They test this model with a large-scale settlement pattern analysis. Likewise, Jelmer Eerkens develops a resource-distribution model based mainly on climatic data to predict degrees of cultural interaction and economic interdependence in the deserts of southeastern California, testing this model with pottery type and sourcing data.

The third major topic presents data speaking to what are essentially historical questions regarding population interactions and migrations. For instance, the second and third chapters by Charlotte Beck and George Jones and by Loren Davis and colleagues, respectively, use lithic data to argue that Western Stemmed and Clovis technologies represent tools and lifeways affiliated with distinct and separate populations. At the other end of the temporal spectrum, Joel Janetski and colleagues explore cultural interactions between Anasazi and Fremont by looking at variation in ceramics, projectile points, and residential features across the Great Basin-Southwestern divide. In sum, the volume delivers a wide range of densely packed subject matter. The only topic I would have like to have seen added is a chapter on DNA studies that might help shed new light on the old problems of identifying prehistoric migrations and population interactions.

This diversity of subject matter, however, can be a little overwhelming, leaving the reader working sequentially through the book to wonder how they are going to keep all the historical trajectories and evolutionary sequences straight and questioning whether they will be able to synthesize the reams of information the volume contains. Fortunately, they do not have to. David Madsen provides a remarkably cohesive and nuanced synthesis in the volume's concluding chapter, tying together everything from the Paleoindian-Paleoarchaic controversy covered in the book's first few chapters to the way adjoining regions affected and were affected by the emplacement of Numic-speaking peoples. I recommend readers of this volume to delve into Madsen's chapter first, along with Rhode's introduction, and then re-read it after they have worked through the core of the book.

I imagine, however, that this volume is not for everybody. All but the most committed lay readers with an already well-developed sense of Great Basin cultures and culture history will likely be quite challenged by the sophisticated and dense material covered in most of the book's chapters. But for academics and their students, for cultural resource management professionals, and for serious avocational archaeologists this volume is indispensable. The material it contains is as equally relevant to Great Basin archaeologists (who are the
obvious market for the book) as it is to those studying and working on the Plateau, in California, in the Rocky Mountains, and in the Southwest.

Beyond its intended audience, the real contribution of this volume is to remind Great Basin archaeologists that the region as commonly conceived is itself a historical construct that can occlude the complexity of the prehistoric cultures and cultural interactions of what is mainly Nevada, Utah, southern Idaho, and southwestern Oregon today. As James Chatters suggests in his chapter about the Plateau and the northwestern Great Basin, adjoining regions played essential roles in determining—and were at times nearly indistinguishable from—Great Basin lifeways. Conversely, as Janetski argues in his chapter, sometimes the divide between the Great Basin and adjacent regions like the Southwest was quite sharp. In a more synthetic mode, David Hurst Thomas makes both of these perspectives exceptionally clear when arguing for an isolated “chert core” in the central Great Basin but also an “obsidian rim” along its margins that was more greatly affected by interactions abroad. Rhode and his contributors are thus to be commended not only for the comprehensiveness of the material contained in this volume, but also for bringing to the fore the perspective that although archaeology may at times be local, it operates in social and economic contexts that are often truly continental in scale.