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T. Max Friesen & Owen K. Mason (eds): *The Oxford Handbook of The Prehistoric Arctic*. In the Oxford Handbook Series, Oxford University Press, New-York, 2016. 988 pp. ISBN 978-0-1997-6696-6

EIRIK HAUG RØE

The publishing of *The Handbook of The Prehistoric Arctic* is nothing less than a milestone within Arctic archaeology. Over three decades have now passed since the previous interregional syntheses of the North American Arctic were written for an academic readership (e.g. Damas 1984, Maxwell 1985). To fill this gap in the literature, editors T. Max Friesen and Owen K. Mason have united current leading researchers working across the field, including the western side of the Bering Strait and Greenland. The handbook delivers a comprehensive and thorough dissemination of knowledge that will stand as a vital work of reference for future research. In the near foreseeable future, it will surely be found on the bookshelves of every serious scholar in the field.

The chapters of the handbook are divided among three parts. Part one introduces the reader to the North American Arctic through themes relevant to the entire area and its prehistory, showcasing the potentials of different methodologies such as climatic reconstructions, wood analysis, metallurgy, etc. Parts two and three cover the Western and Eastern Arctic regions respectively, a division that follows clear (but permeable) cultural boundaries throughout prehistory. The narrative structures of the two parts are somewhat different due to the varying complexity of the regions' prehistories. This pertains to the deeper prehistory and geographic position of the Western Arctic as the gateway to North America, and the extremity of the Eastern Arctic geography and its severe conditions for human adaptation. Although a

few themes and regions have evidently been difficult to corral into the format of a comprehensive handbook, the total result is an orderly and forthright volume that is accessible for a general academic readership.

The two opening chapters feature recent advances in genomic and isotope science made within Arctic archaeology, introducing the reader to the field through perspectives from cutting-edge research in archaeological science. While innovations in archaeological science have advanced our understanding of culture-historical connections between prehistoric and present demographics of the Arctic, progress has also been made in decolonising archaeology to include Indigenous-focused methodologies and community-oriented research. Historically, the participation of Indigenous populations in Arctic archaeology has often been limited to being represented in ethnographic literature as analogies for prehistoric societies. This situation has changed through recent decades, concurrently with the development of community-based archaeology. The topic is covered in chapter 8 by Natasha Lyons, who thoughtfully challenges perceptions of what makes archaeology relevant for society by reviewing the development and current state of the relationship between archaeology and Indigenous communities of the Arctic. The critical evaluation of past and present research practices can be reflected on the preface discussion by the editors concerning how ethnographic accounts of modern and recent peoples are used in Arctic archaeology. While the use of ethnography in research on Arctic prehistory remains a highly relevant issue throughout the handbook, Lyons looks beyond the use of historical and modern ethnographies towards the *actual* involvement by local communities in archaeological research. The reader is thus engaged in a discussion of why researchers should be concerned about how they interact with, and how their research impacts, Indigenous stakeholders. Rather than providing a protocol for making research multivocal and accessible, the chapter serves as an intellectual platform for researchers to reflect on the context and

circumstances that tie their research to the interests of communities.

Thanks to the exceptional conditions for preservation in the Arctic, archaeologists are graced with an abundance of organic remains. Two important categories of organic material often recovered from Arctic sites are bones and wood. In chapter 3 of the handbook, Matthew Betts provides a good overview of the present state of zooarchaeological research in the Arctic, as well as its implications for human–animal relationships over the long term. Most of the chapter consists of a summarisation of selected major taxa of species in the archaeological record, along with typically associated artefacts and features. The author does an outstanding job at conveying how the complexity that confronts zooarchaeologists is also projected on the archaeology of the region in general. Indeed, even within the limited format of a book chapter, the reader can appreciate the considerable efforts researchers have put into reconstructing the intricate prehistoric economies that testify to the requirements for human habitation of Arctic regions, as well as the range and boundaries of their technological and social adaptations. Furthermore, the chapter looks beyond the field of archaeology, briefly summarising the potential zooarchaeology has for interdisciplinary contributions to fields such as paleoecology and paleobiology.

In chapter 4, Claire Alix introduces the fascinating, highly promising and woefully understudied topic of woodwork among Arctic peoples. The study of wood utilisation occupies a unique position within studies of material technologies from Arctic prehistory. Wood use centred around driftwood is dependent on a variety of natural factors that must come together, including, but not limited to, the continuous erosion of riverbanks in boreal forests; spring-ice break-up of rivers; the subsequent transport of trees by ice; winds and currents; and, ultimately, the regional and local geographies of areas where driftwood accumulates. This makes for a highly dynamic set of preconditions for the availability of a critical raw material. Understanding these preconditions also ties the study of wood use and technology closely to environmental sciences aiming to reconstruct long-term climatic changes on a vast geographical scale.

Together, the chapters on zooarchaeology and wood technologies showcase many qualities of Arctic archaeology. However, a major

discrepancy is also seen between the two examples despite the abundance of both faunal and wooden remains. While zooarchaeology has often had a surplus of researchers contributing with a considerable output throughout research history, only a few individuals have directly focused their research specifically on wooden remains in the Arctic – Alix herself being one of the them

The second and third parts of the handbook narrow the scope to the various regions of the Western and Eastern Arctic respectively. Chapters 9–26 of part two review the prehistoric lifeways of the Western Arctic from the Bering Sea in the west to the Central Canadian Arctic in the east and the Northwestern Canadian Subarctic bordering British Columbia to the south. Each chapter covers a set of topics – for example, chronology, subsistence economics, technology, housing, etc. With respect to certain regions and traditions, book chapters alone cannot cover the complexity of their prehistory. This is especially pertinent with extensive topics such as the prehistory of the seminal Aleutian regions of the Bering Strait, which is excellently condensed into chapters 11, 13 and 25. On the contrary, the review of the archaeology of the Northwest Canadian Subarctic in chapter 22 reveals how large areas connected to Arctic prehistory still leave much to imagination. Due to the challenging accessibility of vast boreal forests and their typically unfavourable taphonomic conditions, the archaeological record of this particular area remains woefully patchy. This highlights the need for further efforts in archaeological fieldwork and the construction of chronologies in Arctic regions.

Another major theme in part two is the emergence of the Thule Inuit culture in the Western Arctic. The topic of its ambiguous origins in the Old Bering Sea culture is covered in chapter 20 by Owen K. Mason, where the complex archaeological record of the Thule progenitors is reviewed and discussed. The eventual spread and evolution of the Thule is a theme that crosses over into the third and final part of the handbook, chapters 27–40. These cover the regions eastwards from the Central Canadian Arctic to Greenland, and southwards to the Subarctic of Labrador and Newfoundland – referred to as the Eastern Arctic. Chapter 27 introduces the reader to paleoclimatic research on the region, showcasing the heterogenous climatic conditions present and how these have

developed during the ~ 4800-year presence of humans in the area. This becomes a useful backdrop for the subsequent chapters where the dynamic developments of prehistoric and early historic societies in the region are reviewed and summarised. Part three follows a clear narrative structure that starts out broadly with paleoclimate and pan-Arctic demographic movements during prehistory and history, before it narrows down to the archaeological records of cultural traditions such as the Pre-Dorset, Saqqaq, Dorset and the Thule. Although presented in an approximate chronological order, the reader must still face a breadth of archaeological units, most with arbitrary regional and temporal borders. One of the best examples in this regard is the Dorset. The research on the origins of this persistently enigmatic material culture is reviewed in chapter 32 by author Karen Ryan. The reader is here given a glimpse of the complexity of traditional questions in archaeology, particularly when it comes to determining the origins of cultural traditions. While the answer to the Dorset origin remains exceptionally opaque, Ryan's review familiarises the reader with persistent problems and inconsistencies that are unravelled from the history of research on the specific material culture. The perpetuation of research biases, arbitrary regional typologies, and lack of reliable absolute datings are pointed out among the underlying reasons. Her proposed solution to resolve these issues is one that resonates through the field in its entirety: archaeologists should revisit extant sites and assemblages with refined perspectives and new research techniques and methodologies. Otherwise, interpretations from new excavations and ever-

improving research methodologies risk being built upon shaky foundations.

In *The Oxford Handbook of The Prehistoric Arctic*, editors Friesen and Mason have managed to astutely combine and comprise a wealth of knowledge on Arctic prehistory and its research history. The total structure of the handbook resembles a metanarrative that takes the reader retrospectively through the history of the field, starting out with introducing the impact of recently introduced research methodologies (i.e. ancient DNA research) and developed research practices (i.e. community-based archaeology), before proceeding with unravelling the complexity of its archaeological legacy. Perhaps one of the most significant achievements of the handbook is how it strikes a satisfying balance between encouraging new research while appreciating the old. Indubitably, the handbook will remain an essential work of reference for decades to come. Scholars in Arctic and Subarctic archaeology from across the circumpolar world should seriously consider the benefits of leaving a similar legacy for their respective regions.

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