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T. Max Friesen & Owen K. Mason (ed.). The Oxford handbook of the prehistoric Arctic

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Published in:
Antiquity

DOI:
[10.15184/aqy.2018.208](https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2018.208)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2018

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Jordan, P. (2018). T. Max Friesen & Owen K. Mason (ed.). The Oxford handbook of the prehistoric Arctic. *Antiquity*, 92(365), 1401-1402. <https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2018.208>

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Book reviews

T. MAX FRIESEN & OWEN K. MASON (ed.). *The Oxford handbook of the prehistoric Arctic*. 2016. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 978-1-9976-6956 £132.50.

This superb handbook will become the standard reference text on the prehistoric Arctic for a generation to come. While some world regions appear to benefit from a crop of new books every few months (e.g. Neolithic Europe), others cry out for many years for decent academic

overviews. The Arctic is in the latter category. This landmark publication closes a lingering gap in the literature, and presents a comprehensive account of current knowledge in a detailed yet accessible format.

Readers should bear in mind that the title is slightly misleading as the handbook is not fully circumpolar in scope and 'only' focuses on the North American Arctic (i.e. Alaska, Canada and Greenland). This is still a vast area and, importantly, contains some of the most dynamic and well-preserved archaeological sequences on Earth. Moreover, the prehistory of this part of the Arctic enjoys an inherent coherence given that all of the region's most important cultural developments are linked to a series of eastward population movements through Alaska, and then out into the remote northern landscapes of Canada and Greenland beyond. These dispersals began around 15 000 cal BC, with Beringia serving as the conduit for the initial peopling of North America. Lingering ice sheets, however, meant that human settlement of almost the entire North American Arctic could only be completed much later in the Holocene. The handbook emphasises these later migrations and interactions, which all took place within the last 5000 years.

The first important Arctic dispersal began around 3200 cal BC with Early Palaeo-Inuit people from Siberia spreading into Alaska and then onwards into

the 'empty' environments of Canada and Greenland. The spread of the 'Arctic Small Tool tradition' (ASTt) involved small, highly mobile groups who had developed the skills and technology necessary for living along frozen northern coastlines. The expansion briefly culminated in the first human settlement of almost the entire North American Arctic, including a precarious presence in the far north of Greenland that was not to last. The rapid dispersal of Thule Inuit populations from north-west Alaska into Arctic Canada and Greenland around AD 1200 had major consequences. These groups replaced earlier Palaeo-Inuit populations such as the Dorset, and went on to become the direct cultural and biological ancestors of many modern Arctic indigenous communities; in many areas, this ensures a surprising degree of continuity between rich archaeological and ethnographic records.

The dramatic sequence of population dispersals, regional developments and abrupt cultural replacements makes for fascinating reading, even for those unfamiliar with Arctic prehistory. The structure of the handbook is clear and logical, and the concise introduction by Friesen and Mason sets later chapters in a broader research context, highlighting cross-cutting themes such as long-distance interactions, the complex role of climate change and the challenges of chronology-building. Crucially, the editors have worked hard to transcend the confusing terminology generated by numerous regional research traditions and present an excellent spatio-temporal overview of all the major archaeological sequences, including summary tables and location maps of all the key archaeological sites. These pages alone provide valuable teaching materials, and enable the reader to navigate easily through the wealth of archaeological detail that follows.

The handbook is organised into three parts, ensuring good integration and minimal overlap. Part I engages with central themes, including exchange networks, prehistoric materialities (lithics, wood, metals) and the exciting insights emerging from modern and ancient DNA research. A key chapter by Betts reviews the thriving tradition

of archaeozoological research, greatly encouraged by the superb preservation of many Arctic faunal assemblages, and, of course, by the centrality of hunting to all northern lifeways (economically, socially and spiritually).

Part II focuses on the 'Western Arctic' (defined as both sides of the Bering Strait, the Aleutians, coastal and interior Alaska, plus parts of north-western Canada). Two important background chapters reach outside North America and explore Late Pleistocene settlement of the Eurasian Arctic (Goebel and Potter), including north-eastern Siberia, and the emergence of Holocene maritime adaptations around the North Pacific Rim (Fitzhugh), which served as an essential prerequisite for the later colonisation of the High Arctic's seasonally frozen coastlines. Holocene cultural developments in the Western Arctic are notoriously complex (not least in the Bering Strait), and the remaining chapters succeed in presenting solid regional- and period-specific overviews.

Part III moves on to the 'Eastern Arctic' (primarily Arctic Canada and Greenland). Here, the step-wise sequence of eastward migrations, regional abandonments and cultural replacements provides a somewhat simpler spatio-temporal framework to work through. The section opens with two background chapters that explore how climate change in the Eastern Arctic may have driven some important cultural changes (Finkelstein), and that highlight the rapidity of many long-range population movements, with some pioneering Thule Inuit groups probably traversing the entire Eastern Arctic within a generation (Friesen). Many of the most dramatic cultural expansions and contractions play out in prehistoric Greenland, which was settled and abandoned multiple times, often by entirely different populations.

One fascinating theme running throughout the handbook is how continuity between the archaeological record, early ethnographic descriptions and modern Arctic communities continues to shape research agendas. In their Introduction, the editors review the strong tradition of using ethnographic parallels to support archaeological interpretations, often in the form of 'direct historical analogies' that can either sharpen existing interpretations or

generate new questions to be tested with archaeological data. In her chapter on 'Archaeology and Native Northerners' (Part 1), Lyons traces an evolving relationship between archaeologists and local indigenous communities. While many early archaeologists lived in Arctic villages and worked closely with elders to locate sites and interpret artefacts, distance between researchers and communities grew substantially during the era of the scientific processual paradigm, largely because research was geared towards understanding general cultural processes rather than the significance of local cultural diversity. Recent years have seen greater responsiveness to community needs, not least because local engagement now forms a central part of applying for permits and funding.

Looking to the future, this handbook makes three important contributions to Circumpolar archaeology. First, it sets aspiring new researchers on a stimulating journey into some of the richest archaeology on the planet. Ranging from the rich burial complexes of the Bering Strait through to the dramatic migrations and replacements that shaped the prehistoric Eastern Arctic, the chapters offer a wealth of inspiring regional and thematic coverage that is suitable for a broad range of archaeological teaching. Second, the inside front cover promises "the most comprehensive coverage of Arctic archaeology ever assembled", and the content does not disappoint. Archaeologists already working in the North American Arctic will find the pages packed full of inspiration for fresh projects, ranging from new surveys and excavation, opportunities for better community engagement, the application of new scientific methods to revive 'dormant' collections and the need for higher-resolution chronologies that could transform understanding of many crucial cultural sequences. Finally, back to the title. In providing wonderful coverage of the North American Arctic the handbook sets a new standard of scholarship for the wider Circumpolar North. To close the remaining gaps, we now need a handbook of the prehistoric *Eurasian* Arctic, but that is another mission entirely.

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