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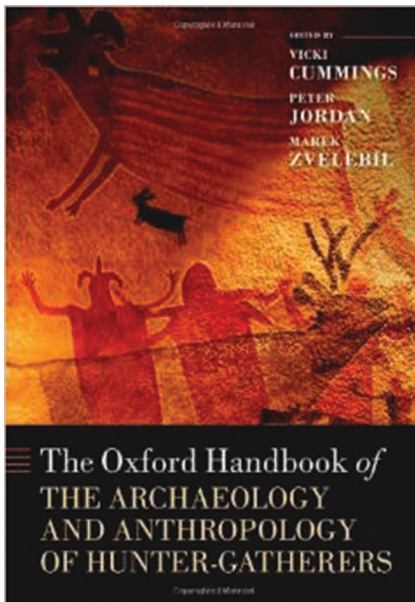


Book reviews

The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology and Anthropology of Hunter-Gatherers.

Vicki Cummings, Peter Jordan, Marek Zvelebil (Eds.).

Oxford University Press (April 24, 2014), Oxford, UK, 1 360 pp., 123 illustrations, ISBN: 9780199551224. £ 125 (hardcover).



This huge handbook focuses on the phenomenon of hunter-gatherers from the perspective of two disciplines, namely archaeology and anthropology. The volume under review here is written by a distinguished group of internationally-recognised researchers under the leadership of Vicki Cummings (Reader in Archaeology at the University of Central Lancashire), Peter Jordan (Director of the Arctic Centre at the University of Groningen) and Marek Zvelebil (deceased Professor of European Prehistory at the University of Sheffield). The book is a complex piece of work providing a detailed critical review of several present-day investigations that vary both in their scope and approach. The 61 essays are well-organized into seven thematic sections, comprised of individual chapters that cover specific issues and case studies from around the world.

Part I (*Theoretical Frameworks*) deals with the concept of hunting and gathering societies, mainly in terms of its evolution, development, cultural and historical context, as well as its current position in the scientific community (A. Barnard; M. Pluciennik; A. Cannon). Presented within this scope are some highly-discussed adaptive approaches that emphasise the importance of considering the social variables along with the environmental ones (R. Garvey and R. Bettinger). The last two chapters in this part are devoted to valuable methodological issues, namely ethnoarchaeological investigations (P. Jane) and the impact of gender studies on hunter-gatherer research (K. Sterling).

Part II (*The Earliest Hunter-Gatherers*) concentrates on the notion of foraging itself with respect to early human evolution (J. Robinson). This part concerns the Neanderthals (J. Zilhão) and early modern humans from the perspective of evolution and extinction along with tracing their biological and social traits. Much work has been done in this area and the nine subsequent chapters provide a critical up-to-date and very valuable overview of these processes taking place in various areas involving: Africa (K. Kuykendall and I. Heyerdahl-King); Asia (O. Bar-Yosef; A. Derevianko, S. Markin and A. Tabarev; M. Petraglia and N. Boivin; S. O'Connor and D. Bulbeck); Europe (P. Pettit); Australia (I. Davidson); and the Americas (M. Kornfeld and G. Politis).

Part III (*Post-Glacial Colonisations and Transformations*) looks at the post-glacial epoch as a period characterised by key environmental changes and the human responses to them. To this end, this part of the handbook outlines major transformations and developments taking place in the Mesolithic in areas of lower latitude such as Africa (A. Smith) and Asia (A. Moore; R. Rabett and S. Jones; J. Habu), as well as in colder European zones (J. Svoboda; G. Warren; F. Riede). As the introductory chapter by V. Cummings explains, a study into hunter-gatherers in the post-glacial world has long been

a topic that is rather problematic to grasp and deal with. As a consequence, several remaining key issues for future research in this period are stressed, including: more detailed information on environmental and cultural variability, along with a call for a new integrative mode of thinking in order to fully understand humans in the post-glacial period in a broader sense.

Part IV (*Prehistoric Hunter-Gatherer Innovations*) aims to highlight the fact that hunter-gatherers should be perceived as active beings having an intrinsic capacity for change and innovation, as opposed to the traditional view of pre-agricultural societies being passive recipients of external influences. Technological innovations in material culture (S. Kuhn and A. Clark; P. Hommel), artistic skills (J. Lewis-Williams), the emergence of coastal economies (C. Wickham-Jones), structured and symbolic mortuary practices (L. Nilsson Stutz) and the presence of more complex societies in terms of transformations of social relations (B. Hayden) represent some of the key issues discussed in this light. These are accompanied by other chapters dealing with the active management and domestication of plants and animals (D. Harris; A. Outram), emphasizing its roots among prehistoric hunter-gatherers. Although much work on hunter-gatherers engaged in individual innovations has already been published, the key element stressed by the editors here is the “agency” of hunter-gatherers leading to new patterns of behaviour in more general terms.

Part V (*The Persistence of Hunting and Gathering amongst Farmers in Prehistory and Beyond*) goes on to consider the issues surrounding the emergence and spread of farming from the perspective of prehistoric hunter-gatherers. In this part, contributors discuss the process of Neolithisation in various European regions (D. Gronenborn; D. Raemaekers; V. Cummings and O. Harris; C. Damm and L. Forsberg) on the one hand, and forager-farmer interactions in south-east Asia (H. Barton) and North America (K. Spielmann) on the other. The core of this part lies in the contrasting

views of the process – referring directly to older models based on migration and the diffusion of ideas in the European chapters, as opposed to other world regions, where the spread of farming is seen relatively variable with no clear dichotomy between foragers and farmers, as pointed out by V. Cumming in this part's introduction. She also emphasizes a need for focusing on regional variability and constructing new frames of references for understanding the transition to farming in European regions.

Part VI (*The Ethnohistory and Anthropology of "Modern" Hunter-Gatherers*) finally leads to the anthropological understanding of the ethnographically-documented contemporary hunter-gatherers. The opening chapter by P. Jordan is extremely useful, discussing the role of historical and political circumstances that have impacted on the directions of hunter-gatherer research – and presenting some general research trends including the shift from a comparative perspective the study of typical features of all hunter-gatherer societies to the investigation of more local patterns of forager subsistence, social life, or ideology. The following chapters present case studies and discussions from various world areas, such as the traditional study regions of Africa (R. Hitchcock; B. Hewlett and J. Fancher), Australia (I. Keen), the Great Basin and California (D. Robinson) and the Pacific Northwest Coast (S. O'Neill), along with the rather newly-investigated regions of South-East Asia (J. Fortier), South America (G. Politis and A. Hernando), or northern Euroasia (M. Hudson; J.-P. Taavitsainen). Much welcome is that the authors have avoided

a descriptive approach characterizing individual societies as known from earlier works (e.g. Lee, Daly 1999). Instead they consider regional research histories, the specifics of individual hunter-gatherer societies, and last, but not least, future research directions.

Part VII (*Future Directions in Hunter-Gatherer Research*) completes the handbook by giving many theoretical and methodological developments and future opportunities in the study of hunter-gatherers – ranging from adaptive and evolutionary approaches, such as the study of technological issues (R. Kelly) or the application of cultural transmission theory (J. Eerkens, R. Bettinger and P. Richerson) and archaeogenetic research (V. Černý and L. Pereira), through to some new interpretative themes like the study of hunter-gatherer mobility (B. David, L. Lamb and J. Kaiwari), the advancing investigation into social relations and personhood (N. Finlay), or material studies (H. Cobb) and religion and rituality (D. Whitley), to integrative research perspectives including gender studies (R. Jarvenpa and H. Brumbach) and subsistence strategies (R. Schulting). The editors in the introductory chapter rightly point out that: although hunter-gatherer research into the archaeology and anthropology of hunters and gatherers has undergone dramatic changes over the last decades, current research is revealing an enormous diversity that integrates a whole range of new methods, approaches and research areas, and on which future research should be developed.

The book is characterised by a general effort to critically overview and discuss the

central themes and debates at the heart of this interest and outline some of the most essential directions for future research in the field of hunter-gatherer societies. The layout of the chapters is appropriate with very useful introductory pages in each part; the bibliography is a representative picture of what has been done concerning this topic. Despite the fact that some issues have already been discussed elsewhere (e.g. Bailey, Spikins eds. 2008), the handbook is, without doubt, extremely valuable – particularly in terms of its interdisciplinary approach. In this regard, especially the traditional labels of timelessness, uniformity and universal simplicity of hunter-gatherer populations have been severely challenged. This book covers a lot of issues and, because of this, suffers from not being able to deal with some subjects in more detail. On the other hand, the volume completely fulfils its intent and will certainly serve as an important milestone in the development of hunter-gatherer studies for students, teachers, researchers and others having an interest within this broad field. This set of papers will thus surely become a standard work of reference for years to come.

References

- BAILEY, G., SPIKINS, P. (Eds.) 2008: *Mesolithic Europe*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- LEE, R. B., DALY, R. H. (Eds.) 1999: *The Cambridge encyclopedia of hunters and gatherers*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

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