

The Archaeology of Mobility: Nomads in the Old and in the New World

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Quotes from two anonymous reviews on the draft manuscript (September 2006):

There have been edited books on the archaeology of nomadism in various regions, and there have been individual archaeological and anthropological monographs, but nothing with this kind of coverage.

The clear strength and importance of the book lies in the fact that it brings together a world-wide collection of studies of the archaeology of pastoral nomadism. I am not aware of such an undertaking, although the number of books on the general theme is slowly rising. Thus, the book will provide a ready-made reference to the world-wide phenomenon, a valuable research tool.

On the general level, this is a book ostensibly about the archaeology of mobility; however it is really about herding societies, or about a spectrum of behaviors involving herding societies which includes mobility, and which also includes three early hunter-gatherer societies and one study of a modern Australian aboriginal group. Some of the papers actually have very little to say about mobility, per se, although they deal with aspects of herding societies. The individual papers are (almost) all of high quality; they should be published and it is not clear that the book is actually damaged by this apparent lack of real focus.

The substantive strength of the volume is the thorough mature of discussion each paper brings to the concept of mobility. Personally, I don't like the term mobility since it here forces us to discuss twenty papers on pastoral nomads, with which I identify the two editors, but also three chapters on hunter-gatherers from North America and one on hunter-gatherers from Australia. The point is: hunter-gatherers were, according to current research, originally complex foragers with little or no mobility. Mobility became an issue when hunter-gatherers were impacted by first agriculturalists and then pastoral people and European colonialists. I think it can be a legit issue, but it seems a little odd to group it with pastoral nomadic studies.

Of course, all such volumes are uneven in topic, but it seems a shame that there are no papers on the Sahara (archaeology, ethnography, rock art, historical sources). On Arabia, we have the paper by Betts, but only Rosen discusses the following Chalcolithic periods so important in forming the nomadism of Arabia.

This volume is unique in that it tries to redefine pastoralism within a larger group by the term mobility. It presents lots of new ideas and thoughtful approaches, especially in the Central Asian field.

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