Review of "The Archaeology of Mobility: Old World and New World Nomadism" by Barnard and Wendrich, Cotsen (UCLA)

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the book is an exceedingly handy guide, a veritable encyclopedia of ancient Maya economies. Furthermore, McAnany’s book brings the reader up to speed on a number of important shifts within the discipline, such as the recognition that marketplaces predated the Postclassic period, that ritual economies were central to social inequality and the centralization of authority, and that Maya economies can no longer be understood as two-tiered, with elites trading far and wide for prestigious goods and commoners trafficking locally in cheap pots and flints. The book is indispensable to anyone with a serious interest in ancient Maya society.

References


The Archaeology of Mobility: Old World and New World Nomadism

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Archaeologists struggle to document mobile peoples because the most compelling archaeological evidence typically comes from stratified deposits resulting from the sustained occupation of places. This has led to a disciplinary preference for the study of more sedentary groups and those who invest in distinct locations we call “sites.” Holistic study of nomadic or mobile groups, whether they are foragers or food-producers, demands a reorientation in archaeological perspective as direct evidence from such groups may be ephemeral. The importance of the topic becomes clear when one considers that the vast majority of human history involves highly mobile populations, and even in recent times many groups have only become “settled” in the past 100 years. The mobile component of past societies that were largely sedentary has been similarly neglected because of the focus on unambiguous data from stratified sites, leading to an incomplete picture of larger relationships and lifeways.

This 600-page volume edited by Hans Barnard and Willeke Wendrich, both of UCLA, provides a broad but coherent collection of 25 chapters examining the major issues in the archaeology of mobility. Chapters in this volume are derived from both Old and New World research, and include archaeological and contemporary ethnographic studies. The volume avoids restrictive paradigms that have limited some previous collections. For example, while the chapters predominantly cover pastoralists several valuable contributions consider hunter/gatherer mobility and the common practice of supplementary hunting by herders. Other common archaeological correlates that frequently go unquestioned, such as the link between sedentism and pottery use, are tackled directly.

The book opens with a useful introductory chapter by Wendrich and Barnard outlining the major aims of the volume and providing a few thematic summaries with references to specific chapters. As the volume does not conclude with a discussion chapter, this introduction serves as the overview unifying the text. Fortunately, the reader is left with a sense of consistency because many of the themes in the volume reinforce one another. For example, most of the authors refer to the issue of the hazards of the direct historical approach and analogical reasoning when interpreting ancient archaeological remains from mobile populations. Another issue is that the dynamism in the shifting strategies used by mobile groups will likely frustrate attempts by archaeologists to establish set categories and criteria for analysis. Along these lines, Michael D. Frachetti (Chapter 17), studied Bronze Age pastoralists in Kazakhstan and found that the interplay among environmental, social, and political considerations limits the usefulness of such fixed categories when looking at behavior and practices. He and other contributors to this volume advocate the study of archaeological
strategies using ranges or a continuum of expectations in lieu of concepts like “mobile” and “sedentary,” “hunter” and “herder,” and he manages to productively incorporate broader expectations into his geospatial computer analysis. Steven A. Rosen (Chapter 5) notes that this dynamism among mobile populations often frustrates evolutionary stage approaches, a perspective shared by Reinhard Bernbeck (Chapter 3) who criticizes the processualist assumption of a “drive towards sendentariness, based on adaptationist arguments and their underlying instrumentalist reasoning” [p. 49]. Iron Age farmers and herders in Talgar (Kazakhstan), discussed by Claudia Chang (Chapter 15), may have retained local autonomy while, on a regional scale, they sustained a class of kin-based elite that cultivated an image of militaristic nomadism and that was capable of assembling a number of tribal units when needed for raids and battles. Other examples of dynamism, noted by Browman David L. (Chapter 7) and others, include the responsiveness of mobile groups, such as long-distance traders, to shifting economies and trade opportunities in the modern and pre-modern eras.

Much of the empirical data in the volume provides some usable parameters for defining what could be called the “mobility spectrum” in different contexts around the world (though the volume does not attempt to be comprehensive and the emphasis is on Old World pastoralism). Who in the community are mobile (the whole group or a subset, families, task groups)? Is the productive resource mobilized (as with herding) together with the human group? How are scheduling and seasonality resolved? How does one investigate stratified site reoccupation by mobile groups? There are a number of chapters that address these questions. One is by Jelmer W. Eerkens (Chapter 14) who works through the web of relevant factors behind the use of pottery by mobile groups in the western Great Basin in the United States. The weighing of different criteria for mobility and exchange is made most explicit in a concluding chapter in the volume by Lawrence A. Kuznar and Robert Sedlmeyer (Chapter 25) where a model for pastoralist-agriculturalist interaction based on ethnographic accounts from the Near East and East Africa is presented. While the aims of this final chapter diverge from the rest of the volume, the model is derived from a careful reading of older ethnography and succeeds in “theory testing and in explicating the direction of field research” [p. 564] within the formal assumptions of agent-based modeling.

The articulation between settled and mobile populations is a pervasive theme in this volume. Discussions focus on the interdependency between mobile hunters and herders and settled farmers, and the manner in which this relationship has changed over time. Alison Betts (Chapter 2) argues that interdependency was less common during the Neolithic and expanded as settlements diversified to include more non-food producing residents. The question of how to distinguish archaeological evidence of raiding from trading between these parties is explored by several authors, while others discuss the importance of temporary labor represented by mobile groups residing near farming communities during the harvest season, as well as the potential vulnerability of herder families who are camping close to towns. Two authors (Rosen, Chapter 5 and Giorgio Buccellati, Chapter 6) conclude that it is more difficult to go from a sedentary existence to a mobile one than the reverse, and Jeffrey J. Szuchman (Chapter 18) notes that sedentary communities are inherently more visible to archaeologists thanks to residential permanence as well as their use of heavier, more durable materials. An ethnographic account (Alan Roe, Chapter 22) of interaction between Saharan oasis dwellers and Bedouin herders who visit seasonally provides an interesting example of shared access to oasis resources wherein the use of isolated oases by mobile herders on a summer grazing circuit is tolerated by the sedentary oasis date and olive cultivators under a significant stipulation: the herders may not assign names to the oases. Details such as these are available only through ethnographic and historical accounts, but as a number of authors caution, historical texts are nearly always written from the point of view of the sedentary and literate populace providing their limited—perhaps pejorative—perspective on the “vagabonds” with whom they interact.

The authors use varied terms to discuss issues of mobile communities and identity, but the theme of mobility practices in various forms occurs throughout the volume and provides a theoretical range that is welcome, especially when it is linked to empirical evidence. Building to some extent on landscape archaeology of recent years as well as practice theory, mobility practices may be most evident among mobile groups that perceive themselves as dispersed communities and sharing concepts of landscape despite geographical separation and varied interactions with their sedentary neighbors. Not all practices are equal, and Bernbeck (Chapter 3) contrasts dispositional or quotidian practices with the larger practices that are open to discussion such that “the moment of and direction of a household move may have been open to dispute but not the necessity of the move itself” [p. 62]. Other chapters that may fall under the category of mobility practices and identity include Stuart Smith’s (Chapter 16) contribution discussing the often mutable basis of identity with examples from Nubia and Pharonic Egypt, as well as,
to some extent, chapters on pastoralist rock art and burial mounds. Some of the richest information on identity and practice among mobile peoples comes from contemporary studies, such as two chapters on tent architecture, with the critical issues returning to the applicability of these data to archaeological contexts from the distant past. Wendrich (Chapter 23) provides a wonderful study of contemporary Ababda nomads in Egypt’s eastern desert and presents data on the manner in which social information and organizational hierarchy are linked to group relations rather than to fixed geographical domains by this mobile group. Wendrich also collected two ranked lists showing gender differences in objects considered “essential to represent their culture” [p. 529] among Ababda nomads, as well as material traces left by these nomads such as leather water bags stashed at water holes and insignia left in the sand or on rocks marking resource ownership.

Scattered throughout the volume are often ingenious approaches to recognizing and linking archaeological evidence to mobile groups, although methodological details were left out perhaps to conserve space. One notable limitation in this volume is its lack of current geographical analyses given the spatial theme of group mobility. Geographical technologies have improved rapidly in recent years and they provide a variety of tools for managing spatial data and examining dispersed phenomena both across time and space. With the prevalence of geospatial technologies among current research projects, one suspects that a volume published in say 10 years time will include a number of novel ways to examine mobile populations. In this volume, good maps and figures are in short supply in many chapters, although publication quality and editing is uniformly high. Consistent use of terminology is another issue that, while present in most of the volume and the index, it is clearly needed in others. For example, Buccellati’s (Chapter 6) interesting discussion of the Amorite shift from what he terms a “peasant” lifestyle to “industrial nomadism” in the 3rd millennium B.C. overlaps thematically with many other chapters in this volume but he uses completely different terms.

The effects of mobility have long been prominent themes in archaeology: the spatial distribution of technologies, the diffusion of raw materials, and the spread of ideas and symbols are century-old issues for archaeologists. However, the passing of a caravan or the seasonal movement of a foraging group typically leaves scant evidence for archaeologists despite the great potential for the study of the transmission of goods and concepts on a regional scale. Despite the absence of a concluding synthesis, the contributions in this volume provide novel empirical material and sophisticated interpretations that effectively link theoretical and regional discussions that are frequently left unconnected. The volume is timely in that it joins a number of more conjectural recent books on landscape and movement that combine archaeological evidence of mobile peoples with regional scale analyses, insights from ethnoarchaeology, and interpretations of cultural landscapes.