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Book Reviews



THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF HUNTER GATHERERS: KEY THEMES FOR ARCHAEOLOGISTS. By Vicki Cummings. Pp. xii and 163, Illus 8. Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. Price: £45.00. ISBN 978 178093 202 6.

This is a relatively brief treatise and thus a rather quick read, with a simple objective, to provide ‘an introductory text for archaeologists seeking to gain a way into the anthropological literature on hunter-gatherers’ (p. 1). Judged against this objective, the book could certainly be termed a success. In brief (only 163 pages) and succinct fashion, Cummings sets out the key elements, as she sees them, of hunter-gatherer anthropology relevant for archaeologists. The book is explicitly and unapologetically positioned within an interpretive (or post-processual) theoretical framework. It is thus, as Cummings outlines, more concerned with a symbolic approach to the past and why hunter-gatherers acted in particular ways rather than with what they did. Having recently co-edited *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology and Anthropology of Hunter Gatherers* (forthcoming), Cummings is in a good position to write this more succinct and accessible guide to hunter-gatherer anthropology.

In eight chapters, the volume explores hunter-gatherer subsistence, mobility, social organization, belief systems, landscapes and material culture, before concluding with a more general discussion on how the study of modern hunter-gatherers can help us understand the prehistoric past. Additionally, each chapter is augmented with at least one case study taken from prehistoric archaeology. These case studies are designed to demonstrate how the study of modern hunter-gatherers can help our interpretation of archaeological evidence from prehistoric Europe. For example, in Chapter 3 on mobility and settlement, Cummings summarizes some of the key evidence from the Scandinavian Ertrbølle in order to demonstrate how the archaeological material has been interpreted within anthropological models for hunter-gatherer settlement (pp. 50–51); she draws here on Binford’s terminology of logistical versus residential mobility. In Chapter 5, dealing with the question of belief systems, the author recounts the evidence from Gravettian burials (pp. 89–91). She discusses the fact that only certain members of Europe’s Upper Palaeolithic communities — especially neonates and adolescents — were given formal burials, while the majority of the population appears to have been fragmented and/or excarnated after death. Cummings relates this ‘special treatment’ to these individuals having been considered ‘liminal’, i.e. in transition between two important life-stages. Such transitions are often marked by specific rituals among contemporary hunter-gatherer communities, such as the puberty ceremonies among the Apaches and the Mbuti (p. 87).

One of the key issues explored throughout the book is the question of the usefulness of utilizing ethnographic analogies of modern hunter-gatherers to understand prehistoric

communities, and each chapter returns to this question. Clearly, the application of analogy drawn from contemporary hunter-gatherer communities to prehistoric archaeology represents a vital debate. However, this issue is repeatedly returned to in each chapter, where it is discussed in the context of the specific theme under review, and hence the book becomes slightly repetitive. In hindsight, it might have been more effective to have a chapter on the use of analogy in its own right instead.

In conclusion, the nature and format of the book would certainly lend itself to being an introductory text for early-stage researchers. Students new to hunter-gatherer archaeology will welcome this book as a simple access point to the vast body of anthropological literature on modern and recent hunter-gatherer communities.

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