

Anthropology Book Forum

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Sampson, Christina Perry, Victor D. Thompson, and Scott M. Fitzpatrick, eds. 2023. *Fisher-Hunter-Gatherer Complexity in North America*. First Edition. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

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Fisher-Hunter-Gatherer Complexity in North America offers a collaborative examination of the dynamic and intricate nature of prehistoric societies that once thrived in aquatic environments across North America. Spanning from the southeastern coast of the United States to the Aleutian Islands of the North Pacific, this edited volume underscores the pivotal role that coastal, riverine, and estuarine landscapes played as catalysts for the emergence of sociocultural complexity among fisher-hunter-gatherer communities. To confront progressivist orientations and evolutionary paradigms, this book adopts a historical processualist perspective to understand the shared experiences of communities living near water, reconcile human agency with multiscalar cultural processes, and analyze the interplay of ecology, history, and landscape engagement in shaping the trajectories of fisher-hunter-gatherers.

Following a compelling introductory chapter by C. Perry Sampson, which outlines the theoretical frameworks and methodological foundations of the book, the volume presents eight diverse yet thematically linked case studies. Together, these chapters investigate five central themes that recur throughout the volume: (1) how people used and transformed landscapes, (2) the mechanisms and meanings behind social memory, (3) the evolution of social organization, (4) the development of craft specialization, and (5) the interaction via travel and exchange networks.

Regarding landscape use and manipulation, C. Grier (Chapter 2) examines the historical development of the Salish Sea region over the past 2,500 years, emphasizing how landscapes—both terrestrial and intertidal—were shaped and inscribed with meaning through construction and engineering practices. Drawing on archaeological data from major sites, Grier demonstrates that landscape modification was closely tied to shifts in community organization and household

structure. These transformations were instrumental in facilitating emerging elite strategies that controlled resources, reconfigured social hierarchies, and expressed collective identities.

The examination of high-intimacy transmission and social memory persistence as indicators of complexity is led by C. Funk et al. in Chapter 4. They examine the material and immaterial results of transmitting curated information through time (intergenerationally) and space (across interconnected communities on the Rat Islands of Alaska). The authors review oral histories and archaeologically identifiable evidence of social memory and information transmission, which include earthen moundbuilding, the patterned harvest of birds, and plant management. They conclude that social memory, or the shared knowledge of ways of doing things and its manifestation in ritual behaviors, narratives, and objects and representations, was only possible by intense multilevel cooperation and horizontal and vertical interconnectedness.

A.M. Prentiss et al. (Chapter 3) bridge the topics of social memory and organization in the continuation and maintenance of complexity. They examine the ethnographic and archaeological records in the Middle Fraser Canyon of southern British Columbia during 1000-1300 cal BP, a period that witnessed high levels of demographic density and complex cultural practices. To understand their demographic organization, the authors analyze village size, spatial organization, settlement stability, degrees of social inequality, and the potential autonomy of individual villages. Subsequently, they conclude that the sociopolitical landscape does not align with the expectations of the egalitarian band model often associated with the Plateau region, nor with a traditional chiefdom framework. Instead, they propose a Ranked Local Group model by which the Mid-Fraser societies were composed of clan-based intervillage entities that afforded their members unequal access to resources. These sociopolitical formations supported internal ranking systems based on competition for prestige and authority.

Likewise, T. Pluckhan et al. (Chapter 6) delve into the dynamics of social complexity. They examine the changes in cooperation from Middle to Late Woodland periods (300BC-AD1050) along Florida's central Gulf Coast and identify two main stages. First, an escalation in continued cooperation between the neighboring shell mound and midden complexes of Crystal River and Roberts Island during the Middle Woodland, evolving from episodic to more sustained collaboration. The second shift occurred in the transition to Late Woodland, when cooperation was

concentrated but intensified among related households. These kin-based units worked together more intensively in the production and consumption of both subsistence and ceremonial goods.

S. Sunell and C. Jazwa explore the complexities of settlement and craft production in Chapter 7. They analyze settlement organization in California's Northern Channel Islands between 1500 and 650 BP. During this period, there was a shift from widely distributed and relatively homogenous sites, to fewer but larger coastal sites with evidence of increasing inter and intra-site variation. This transition in household size between the Middle and Late Holocene periods occurred in tandem with the development of the bead industry.

The production of specialized crafted goods is frequently associated with inter-community exchange. C. Perry Sampson (Chapter 5) compares the regional trade of crafted goods on the central Gulf Coast of peninsular Florida during the Late Woodland and early Mississippian periods. Focusing on the production and movement of marine shell artifacts, Sampson argues that coastal Safety Harbor residents used community-level specialization to shift their relationships with neighboring groups strategically to partake as artisans, exporters, and consumers. That way, marine shell trade provided a mechanism for community cohesion and ritual expression, while facilitating relationships of power with remote communities through long-distance trade.

Similarly, M. Fauvelle and J. Perry (Chapter 8) investigate the interconnections between ritual economy and regional political organization in the Channel Islands and adjacent mainland areas of southern California during the period of European contact. The authors demonstrate that the intensification of trade networks during the Middle and Late periods (500 BCE to 1782 CE) was tied to cyclical ritual events. These events, including feasts and ceremonies often orchestrated by elites, catalyzed the circulation of a diverse range of value-added goods. The ritualized exchange of commodities not only underpinned the development of complex regional economies but also contributed to the emergence of sociopolitical hierarchies and institutional complexity in the region.

Chapter 9, authored by T.R. Kidder, serves as a reflective conclusion to the volume, offering a critical historiographic analysis of the concept of "complexity" as it has been applied to hunter-fisher-gatherer societies. While acknowledging the epistemological value of embracing variability within complex social formations, Kidder underscores several persistent challenges in the discourse. These include the overly expansive use of the term "complex," the predominant focus

on political and economic dimensions, and the scholarly tendency to impose binary categorizations such as simple versus complex. In response, Kidder advocates for a more nuanced understanding of human social organization—one that recognizes individuals' capacity to enact multiple roles across different social domains concurrently. To illustrate this perspective, he examines the archaeological site of Poverty Point in northeast Louisiana, the largest known Archaic-period hunter-fisher-gatherer settlement in North America. While the site reveals evidence of complexity in its monumental earthworks and extensive lithic economy, it lacks indicators typically associated with hierarchical social organization, such as social stratification, political centralization, or economic specialization. Poverty Point thus exemplifies how communities can simultaneously exhibit elements of both complexity and simplicity.

In conclusion, this volume demonstrates that aquatic environments were not passive backgrounds but active agents in the formation and development of social complexity among prehistoric societies in North America. The advantages afforded by the proximity to water—the reliable access to subsistence resources and long-distance trade through navigable waterways—enabled the emergence of often sedentary communities characterized by varying degrees of social, political, and economic organization. By focusing on variability and context-specific trajectories, the book questions paradigms that equate complexity with linear progression models, critically reconsiders mid-twentieth-century typologies, and offers a more nuanced and pluralistic understanding of hunter-fisher-gatherer lifeways and worldviews. In doing so, it makes a substantive contribution to ongoing anthropological debates about the nature of complexity and enmeshment of ecological and historical factors in defining prehistoric societies in North America.

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