

McGhee, Robert. *Ancient People of the Arctic*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 1996, xii + 244, Cloth \$35.95.

Now and then, one is fortunate in being able to review a book that is both interesting and a pleasure to read. Robert McGhee's *Ancient People of the Arctic* is such a book. Concisely written and fully illustrated, his authoritative treatment of the New World Arctic's earliest inhabitants does more than catalogue the cold, hard facts of an archaeological record painstakingly (if still incompletely) brought to light since Therkel Mathiassen first identified Thule Eskimo culture back in the early 1920s. More importantly, it breathes vitality into those inanimate physical remains, engaging the reader's imagination in visualizing a formidable polar terrain and the Palaeo-Eskimo pioneers—precursors but not progenitors of the modern Inuit—who began trekking across the far north upwards of four millennia ago. Out of their ancient explorations of the vast and varied landscape stretching from the Bering Sea to Greenland came successful if delicately balanced survival strategies, ways of living as notable for the evident richness of the intellectual life they nurtured as for the technical ingenuity upon which the people's material welfare rested. McGhee's considerable achievement here is in weaving so vivid and detailed a picture of Palaeo-Eskimo culture history, and doing so from the strands of what is thus far a highly fragmentary body of archaeological evidence.

The author, one of Canada's most accomplished Arctic archaeologists, begins by providing essential background to three closely-related problems that have sustained several generations of research and scholarship into this part of the world: determining the origins of the people commonly (if sometimes incorrectly) referred to as Eskimos; pinpointing the timing of their initial appearance; and establishing the affinities between their spatially and temporally separated populations. Compared to a century ago, none evokes much controversy any more. An ultimate and comparatively recent source in northern Asia, not, as was once thought, in ice-age Europe or North America's boreal forests, has stood as conventional scientific wisdom for some time. However, the business of identifying and accounting for the distinctive features of the several Eskimoan cultures known to archaeologists, and of tracing connections between them across time and space, remains very much a work in process. These last form the stuff of chapters 3 through 11, McGhee laying before us what is now known, what remains unknown, and what is probably unknowable about the Palaeo-Eskimos and about their biological, cultural and linguistic relationship to contemporary Eurasian and especially North American circumpolar peoples.

The first glimpse of the Palaeo-Eskimo past came in 1924 when anthropologist Diamond Jenness called attention to some artifacts from northern Hudson Bay that appeared older, and stylistically different, than those belonging to Mathiasen's Thule culture. Naming his proposed new archaeological culture Dorset, Jenness had in fact identified evidence from the final phase of the long Palaeo-Eskimo tradition in Canada, the 1500 year Dorset Eskimo presence eventually being supplanted by the Thule, a maritime people who spread eastward from northwestern Alaska sometime after 1000 AD. As McGhee explains, however, the first clues to the Dorsets' own lineage were comparatively late in coming: J.L. Gidding's discovery of the Denbigh Flint Complex on Alaska's Bering Sea Coast in 1947, and Eigil Knuth's of Independence culture in Greenland's remote Pearyland district the following year. Though lying at opposite ends of the New World Arctic, each site yielded similar types of remains, including small, chipped stone tools—later referred to as the Arctic Small Tool Tradition, a definitive Palaeo-Eskimo trait. By happy coincidence, these tools bore strong resemblance to implements recovered from northeastern Siberia and, in dating to between 3000 and 4000 years before the present, proved consistent with the Siberian time horizon as well. In all probability, then, their makers shared common parentage, Knuth's Independence people representing the easternmost (and northernmost) advance of a single population whose roots on this continent lay with the earliest inhabitants of Cape Denbigh, and before that with the inland hunting peoples of the Chukchi Peninsula. Until the Thule (or Neo-Eskimo) era began, it was they and their descendants—the geographically and temporally-limited archaeological cultures such as Dorset and Independence—who were the original inhabitants of this enormous northern territory.

With that bit of history established, McGhee proceeds to take his readers on a guided tour of the vast and varied terrain over which the first generations of Palaeo-Eskimos passed. A journey inevitably begun on the frozen straits running between East Cape and Cape Prince of Wales, those who made the crossing were doing what hunters have always done, scouting for fresh sources of game. And by all indications they were not disappointed. Great herds of caribou, and even greater ones of muskoxen provided the material foundation for a largely interior-based adaptation, and in the case of easily-hunted muskox, an important incentive to occupy some of the remotest portions of Greenland and Canada's high arctic archipelago. On these last habitats McGhee's narrative is at its best, offering reasoned conjecture about what everyday life there must have been like under conditions able to sustain little more than a precarious existence. The image of entire families abiding the intensity of winter's cold and prolonged

darkness in a dream-like reverie is especially intriguing, according well with the highly developed representations of shamanistic belief and practice found in assemblages of later Palaeo-Eskimo materials.

While its known archaeological record spans some three thousand years, these ancient societies were by no means stable, nor was the extent of their distribution through the high and low Arctic constant. Climatic and concomitant ecological fluctuations precipitated a good deal of this instability, a gradual cooling trend after about 1500 BC, variously manifested at different localities, leading to new subsistence adaptations in some areas, abandonment or outright disaster at others. McGhee serves us well here, too, examining the evidence for successes and failures in meeting the challenges posed by such natural factors as changing patterns of winter ice and wholesale shifts in the distribution of game species. He gives special attention in this regard to the rise of Dorset culture around 500 BC, its highly successful way of life, unlike antecedent Palaeo-Eskimo cultures, based on the exploitation of land and marine animals, the latter, mainly seals and walrus, hunted from the ice edge. All this was to change again, of course, an era of warming as the present millennium began bringing all new challenges, not the least of which came in the guise of the Alaskan Thules, a technologically-advanced people able to hunt for whales in open water. In McGhee's words, their appearance brought an end to the Dorset world.

*Ancient People of the Arctic* has much to recommend it, providing the reader with an informative, ably-written, jargon-free, and lavishly-illustrated (including maps, colour plates, and some wonderful artist's renditions of ancient scenes) account of Palaeo-Eskimo society and culture. While its principal appeal should be to lay readers and students, no doubt specialists will find much to mull over in its pages as well. Like me, however, I suspect at least a few of the latter will find the absence of footnotes and bibliography a tad annoying, the two page "Note on Sources" a rather poor substitute for the real thing. Never mind. Buy the book.

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