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Archaeology of Precolumbian Florida

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Archaeology of Precolumbian Florida. By Jerald T. Milanich (Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1994) 476 pp. \$49.95 cloth \$24.95 paper

Milanich provides a useful survey of the 12,000-year development of Native Americans in Florida before the arrival of the Spaniards in the early sixteenth century. The book comes at a propitious time, for resurgent scholarly interest in the southeastern Indians continues to produce a stream of enlightening new studies. Yet, because of historians' fascination with the clash of European and indigenous cultures, the great bulk of that work remains focused on the post-contact period. Most scholars rely primarily on written documentation from European sources and confine precolumbian archaeological evidence to footnotes. By building his study almost exclusively on such evidence, Milanich reminds us that 500 years of Indian–European contact constitute an important but relatively short period in the longer continuum of Native American presence in the American southeast.

Once past a tedious and clubby introductory survey of archaeology in Florida, Milanich synthesizes the fruits of that work from dozens of studies to give a clear and well-differentiated overview of Florida's Indian peoples across time and space. He works a huge assortment of data—including animal and plant remains, stone and bone tools, projectile points, ceramics, copper ornaments, wooden implements, and human remains—into a composite portrait of cultural evolution in a changing environment. He shows how early Paleoindian hunters, gatherers, and fishers gave way, by c. 3000 BC, to the more complex sedentary cultures of the late Archaic period. The development of fired ceramics c. 2000 BC, the advent of corn cultivation in the sixth or seventh century AD, and the spread of trade links within and beyond Florida contributed to distinct regionalized cultures.

Among the book's most fascinating evidence is a collection of carved wooden ceremonial masks and tablets painted with animals—all retrieved in 1896 from a mud pit—that indicate considerable esthetic sophistication. On the eve of European contact, Florida's native peoples were characterized by “larger populations, more complex social and political organization, and different subsistence and settlement systems” than Paleoindians (414).

For the most part, Milanich builds his case on pre-contact archaeological evidence, choosing to save data from the colonial period for a subsequent volume. He thereby seeks to avoid reading evidence backward into the precolumbian age. The difficulty of this approach, however admirable, becomes clear when, on occasion, he must resort to evidence from post-contact documentary sources to elucidate ceremonial customs and belief systems (for example, 137, 140, 188) and building practices (201). The point is not that he should have avoided citing post-contact evidence at all. Rather, the inherent problem of interpreting long-lost mental worlds from either archaeological or written documentation alone raises challenging questions about the relationship

between these kinds of evidence in tracing cultural change across pre-contact and post-contact eras.

Nonetheless, the book stands as one of the most complete overviews of any region in the precolumbian southeast. It attests both to the diversity of Florida's earliest peoples and the tenacity of archaeologists in reclaiming their story from the soil.

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Plains Indians, A.D. 500–1500: The Archaeological Past of Historical Groups. Edited by Karl H. Schlesier (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1994) 479 pp. \$39.95

The question asked most frequently of North American archaeologists working on prehistoric sites is, "What tribe of Indians lived at this site"? The question may be simple, but it is difficult to answer in the absence of historic documentation. Archaeologists often deal with only the remains of past human behavior, and those remains—such as stone tools, pottery, plant and animal remains, and structures—seldom leave tribal fingerprints. Nowhere is the attempt to correlate prehistory with historic Indian tribes and groups more arduous than in the Great Plains. In this volume, the editor, along with a contingent of well-known Plains archaeologists, addresses this issue in a comprehensive and intellectually stimulating manner.

The book is divided into fourteen chapters, each reflective of the major subcultural and archaeological regions of the Great Plains and its periphery. The editor's introduction broaches the key question and the theme connecting the chapters to follow: "Given the incompleteness of the archaeological record and the impact of change, how can we with any certainty identify historic ethnic groups with ancestral prehistoric populations?" (xxii). The symbolic nature of ethnic and tribal identity, historic dislocations and migrations, population decimations, and the cultural borrowing of tools and technology all contribute to the complexity of such an enterprise. Yet, in each chapter, the authors combine comprehensive and up-to-date summaries of regional archaeological chronologies with a variety of models and inferences to locate people in prehistory, to attempt to build a bridge between the distant prehistoric past and the dynamic Plains groups witnessed through the historic record. As a whole, these regional contributions address—besides historic group identities—methodological issues, aspects of the environment, climate change, migrations, shifts, and changes in human group composition and structure.

Overall, this volume succeeds rather well in its intentions, and without question makes an important contribution to Great Plains