

Book Reviews and Notices

Twelve Millennia: Archaeology of the Upper Mississippi River Valley, by James L. Theler and Robert F. Boszhardt. A Bur Oak Book. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003. xiv, 254 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, charts, appendixes, bibliography, index. \$27.95 paper.

Reviewer Scott F. Anfinson is the National Register archaeologist at the Minnesota Historical Society. He is the author of *Southwestern Minnesota Archaeology: 12,000 Years in the Prairie Lake Region* (1997).

Any archeologist who writes a cultural-historical synthesis for a region faces a major decision before the writing even begins: to decide the principal target audience. If the audience is to be the general public rather than one's peers, it involves more than just changing the tone, style, and use of jargon. It involves a concerted attempt to make the document more readable. A sufficient number of facts must be presented to form the matrix of the document, but the matrix must be made interesting through the presentation of ideas and concepts that make the past understandable. If this is done skillfully, the document is not only readable, but it becomes useful to professionals and the general public alike.

James Theler and Robert Boszhardt have been largely successful in bridging the gap between what is satisfying to archeologists and what is interesting to the general public. In *Twelve Millennia*, they attempt to synthesize the prehistory and early history of the upper Mississippi River valley, based on archeological endeavors over the past century and a half. The cover immediately grabs the eye with its colorful aerial photograph of a small section of the valley showing both modern field patterns and the river with its woods and islands. The picture encapsulates what the book is largely about: human successes and problems in dealing with a changing environment.

In their preface, Theler and Boszhardt define the region as "that portion of the Upper Mississippi . . . from Red Wing, Minnesota to Dubuque, Iowa." It is interesting that the boundaries are set by Minnesota and Iowa places, when the book is largely about the portion of the valley in Wisconsin. Wisconsin dominance is perfectly understandable considering that Theler and Boszhardt are both based in La Crosse and much of the archeological research in the region has indeed been done in Wisconsin.

The book begins with a description of what archeology is about and how archeologists do it. This is essential considering the audience. The authors introduce the concepts of *culture* and *social organization*, demonstrating that the analyses of the artifacts that archeologists find are not an end in themselves, but that the ultimate objective is an understanding of past societies and cultural processes.

The authors also describe in the first chapter how one can place archeologically identified artifacts and societies into a chronological framework. Due to fluctuations in atmospheric carbon, *radiocarbon years* are not the same as *calendar years*. The deviation between the two becomes more pronounced as we move back in time. What is 12,000 years ago in radiocarbon years is actually 14,000 years ago. Archeologists (the reviewer included) have been remarkably inconsistent in how we talk about *years before present* (BP). Although Theler and Boszhardt state that they will use uncorrected radiocarbon years for their dates, they do not do this consistently. Additionally, when they talk about Paleoindian cultures first appearing about 12,000 years ago, they are really talking about 14,000 years ago (and the book could be titled *Fourteen Millennia*). Because the public does not generally understand the problems with radiocarbon dating, it is essential for archeologists to use corrected AD/BCE dates when they write for the public.

After standard chapters on the environment and the history of archeology in the region, *Twelve Millennia* proceeds with chapters based on major cultural traditions or major cultural innovations, with chapter titles such as "The First People," "The Archaic Tradition," and "The Beginning of Tribes." I like the use of the thematic approach rather than the standard tradition/period approach for chapter titles, especially in a book that will be read by the general public. "The First People" and "The Beginning of Tribes" tell readers about what is important about that time, while a term such as "Archaic Tradition" is not only jargonistic, but it provides no literary excitement.

The authors are moderately successful at conveying excitement and understanding about the archeological past. Their opening line in "The First People" chapter is great: "The initial peopling of the Americas persists as the most publicized and controversial issue in all of American archaeology." They avoid as much as possible the use of jargon, and when they do use it, they define their terms. This makes not only the past more understandable, but archeologists as well. The book is well illustrated with photographs and charts. I highly recommend it to both professionals and the general public.

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