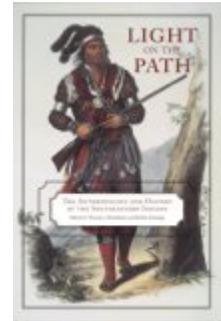


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Thomas J. Pluckhahn, Robbie Ethridge, eds. *Light on the Path: The Anthropology and History of the Southeastern Indians*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006. xi + 283 pp. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8173-5287-5; \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8173-1500-9.

Reviewed by Tyler Boulware (Department of History, West Virginia University)
Published on H-AmIndian (February, 2007)



Connecting Prehistory to History

It has been thirty years since the publication of Charles Hudson's groundbreaking study of Native peoples in the Southeastern United States. Long a centerpiece of every Native Americanist's library, it was not a new interpretive framework that made *The Southeastern Indians* so valuable, but rather its comprehensive analysis of an important yet neglected region of indigenous peoples in North America. Attempting to eradicate the "virtual amnesia" that then existed about Southeastern Native Americans, Hudson effectively integrated the benefits of archaeology, anthropology, and history to produce a work that influenced succeeding generations of scholars.[1] Indeed, it is due to Hudson's legacy that *Light on the Path* originated, as the papers in this commendable volume mostly stem from a day-long symposium honoring the University of Georgia professor upon his retirement.

Edited by Thomas J. Pluckhahn and Robbie Ethridge, *Light on the Path* begins by tracing Hudson's career and ideas, and their connection to larger trends within the field. The introduction thus serves as a useful review of interdisciplinary approaches to Southeastern Indians over the past fifty years, an assessment that could be valuable to graduate classes devoted to such issues. Also quite valuable is the volume's extensive bibliography, which students and advanced scholars alike will find extremely beneficial. More importantly, this volume offers new insights into how scholars have recently begun to reconceptualize the Native Southeast. When Hudson wrote in 1976 that archaeologists and ethnohistorians

"are now making some headway in establishing linkages between archaeology and history in the Southeast," he recognized few attempts had been made to connect pre-contact Mississippian chiefdoms that once dominated the Southeast to the historic Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and others.[2] This is no longer the case, according to Pluckhahn and Ethridge, as the bridging of prehistory and history by scholars of the American South has been under way for the past twenty years.

Light on the Path is therefore primarily concerned with highlighting this new way of thinking and writing about the Southeast. Pluckhahn and Ethridge depict these exciting trends in Southeastern ethnohistory as nothing short of a "paradigm shift." It is now possible, they argue, to write a "seamless social history that includes not only the sixteenth-century Late Mississippian period and the eighteenth-century colonial period but also the largely forgotten, but critically important, century in between" (p. 1). Toward this end, *Light on the Path* presents ten essays that span the connection between prehistory and history in the Southeast. It is this emphasis on *spanning* rather than *exploring* that connection, however, in which this volume could use further development, especially in the introduction where few connections are made between the assembled papers. Besides the fact that each contributor deals with Southeastern Indians, was influenced by Hudson's writings, and relies on interdisciplinary approaches, what more do these papers have in common? Unfortunately, Pluckhahn and Ethridge fail to adequately address this issue in an oth-

erwise well-conceived introduction, as they offer next to nothing in the way of weaving these chapters together. Less than two pages at the end of the introduction, in short, do little more than offer a brief description of each paper and a terse acknowledgement that each falls within the period under study. One way to redress this deficiency would have been to tie these chapters together within the context of continuity. Indeed, if their aim was to demonstrate a connection between prehistory and history, it would seem imperative that they identify how each paper relates to issues of continuity and discontinuity from precontact Mississippian societies to historic-era Southeastern Indian communities.

These faults of the introduction aside, there are some excellent papers within *Light on the Path*. David J. Hally opens the volume with an examination of Mississippian chiefdoms in northern Georgia. He demonstrates that interrelationships between these chiefdoms were characterized by interaction, interdependence, and exchanges, thereby encouraging the development of a larger regional system. By broadening his view to consider six hundred years of the Mississippian era, Hally argues for a marked degree of continuity within the precontact period. Though individual chiefdoms cycled in and out, “the fundamental structural characteristics of Mississippian society remained unaltered” (p. 31). It was only with the arrival of Europeans, he notes, that the Mississippian regional system in northern Georgia experienced major disruption and structural change.

Radical changes following European contact could also be found in the environment. In “Lithics, Shellfish, and Beavers,” Mark Williams and Scott Jones propose a highly intriguing but speculative interpretation of native land- and animal-use patterns in the Oconee River valley of north-central Georgia prior to European colonization. Confused as to why Oconee peoples ceased making stone tools and weapons, they suggest this phenomenon resulted from a symbiotic relationship with beavers. Before overhunting decimated the beaver population during the historic era, Williams and Jones argue that a “communal relationship” existed between beavers and local natives. Beavers provided ponds, which attracted fish, fowl, and other animals. Abandoned ponds in turn became lush agricultural fields. Beaver ponds also encouraged large concentrations of freshwater mussels, whose shells were used, along with beaver-cut poles, as labor saving devices for domestic chores (hence, one reason for the lack of stone tools on a significant scale). With the end of the Lamar period and arrival of Europeans, the north-central Georgia landscape eventually morphed from an

area abundant with beaver ponds and extensive meadows to a typical piedmont setting of deep-cut creek beds and narrow floodplains.

While the first two chapters essentially deal with the precontact Southeast, there are a few essays in this volume that successfully connect prehistory to history. Steven Hahn’s analysis of the Cussita migration legend is a superb interdisciplinary exploration into how a precontact migration story took on new dimensions with changing geo-political circumstances of Creek peoples during the early eighteenth century. As Creek towns and individual leaders maneuvered for supremacy within an ill-defined confederacy, the arrival of the English in Georgia prompted Chigelly of Coweta to alter the Cussita migration legend to reflect his town’s hegemonic aspirations. But this was not simply local politics gone awry. Chigelly’s rendition of the migration legend also signifies, according to Hahn, an articulation of Creek nationhood, as it more broadly spoke to common ideological origins shared by all Creek peoples.

This collectivity of Southeastern Indians also attracts the attention of Stephen A. Kowalewski, who employs a comparative approach to show how coalescent societies emerged in the Southeast during times of severe pressure and threat. Though one of many response mechanisms, coalescence became a particularly effective strategy by which weakened and distressed remnant groups formed larger polities in the precontact and contact eras. Adam King argues along similar lines when he emphasizes the ways in which Southeastern Indians used corporate approaches to form coherent polities. Stressing a degree of continuity between prehistory and history rarely found in other chapters, King asserts that the fundamental structures of subsistence systems, community size, and even social and political organization remained remarkably similar over time. Theda Perdue likewise emphasizes continuity of cultural forms in her look at intermarriage between Europeans and Indians in the eighteenth-century South. She finds that both indigenous women and their “mixed” children did not readily embrace the fathers’ culture. Perhaps the most important reason for this owes to the strength of the matrilineal kinship system, which relegated biological fathers and non-clan members to minor importance in a child’s life. Even well into the nineteenth century, Perdue argues, there existed a strong tendency among indigenous peoples to preserve their own cultural values and ethnic identity.

Most scholars in this volume, however, view the ar-

rival of Europeans as a sharp “break” in historical and cultural continuity for Southeastern Indians. Robbie Ethridge, for instance, plainly states, “the Indians of the sixteenth-century South were quite different from the Indians of the eighteenth-century South” (p. 207). In her essay, “Indian Slave Traders and the Collapse of the Southeastern Chiefdoms,” Ethridge borrows and broadens the concept of “shatter zone” to depict how the introduction of commercial trade and ensuing colonial conflicts created “large regions of instability” in the Eastern Woodlands of North America (p. 208). This insightful look at the ways in which capitalism helped spawn a generation of militaristic Indian slaving societies builds on Alan Galloway’s exhaustive work, *The Indian Slave Trade: The Rise of the English Empire in the American South, 1670-1715* (2002), by focusing more on “the Indian side of the story” and extending the “scope of regional instability” to include areas outside the Southeast (p. 217). Indeed, Ethridge connects the first slaving society—the Iroquois—to the rise of the Occaneechees, Westos, Chiscas, Chickasaws, and others in the South. This idea is furthered by Eric Bowne in “‘A Bold and Warlike People’: The Basis of Westo Power.” Bowne shows how the Westos suffered from Iroquois hostility during the seventeenth-century Beaver Wars and accordingly made a calculated emigration to the South. The Westos then replicated the Five Nations’ wars of aggression by establishing themselves as the pre-eminent power in the Carolina Indian slave trade, at least for a while.

The impact of European technology on Native Americans, as witnessed with the Westos and their access to English firearms, has long been a subject of debate among scholars of the Southeast. Much of this discussion has centered on the concept of acculturation, which has undergone significant revision over the past thirty years. John E. Worth adds to this debate by using his own research on Spanish missions and aboriginal peoples in Florida to argue that acculturation has “only limited utility” for understanding exchanges and changes that occurred throughout the colonial South (p. 197). No matter how multifaceted the concept has become, Worth contends, it nevertheless fails to account for the more significant and fundamental catalyst behind such changes—“internally generated responses of aboriginal cultures” (p. 199). In an interesting reversal of conventional wisdom, Worth suggests that Indians adjacent to Spanish missions were noticeably less impacted by European culture and technology than those natives on the Southeast’s distant frontiers. The Creeks, for example, experienced “far greater cultural change” than mission Indians

as they increasingly sought European firearms in order to exert their power over neighboring peoples. In a sense then, the Yamassees and Creeks are viewed by Worth as a militaristic slave raiding society, though some scholars will take issue with his emphasis on the notion that Creek peoples had “only secondary reliance on agriculture” (pp. 202-203).

Light on the Path is a valuable addition to the literature on Southeastern Indians, but it is not without faults. A noticeable drawback of this volume—as with many such compilations—is that some chapters do not seem to fit. William Jurgelski’s reassessment of the Tsali affair provides a case in point. This is a well-researched and insightful essay that utilizes previously undiscovered evidence to explore the “martyrdom” of Tsali at the time of Cherokee removal in 1838. Yet, what does this have to do with the paradigm shift that Pluckhahn and Ethridge so boldly announce? How does it connect prehistory to history? The short answer is that it could have had a great deal to do with these issues. Jurgelski, for instance, offers a tantalizing introduction when he renders the Tsali affair “nothing short of a modern-day creation myth for the Eastern Band of Cherokee” (p. 134). It would have been highly informative and relevant if Jurgelski could have connected this myth-making occurrence in the historic era to myth-making in earlier times, as well as to present an interdisciplinary analysis of how and why myths are constructed and perhaps how they relate to a people’s identity, sense of community, and geopolitical circumstances (something Steven Hahn does so effectively throughout his chapter). “New Light on the Tsali Affair,” in short, is just one example of those papers within *Light on the Path* that span the connection between prehistory and history rather than critically investigate this connection. For a work that seeks to alter our basic assumptions about Southeastern Indians by highlighting a new paradigm shift, it seems essential that each paper explicitly reinforce the volume’s primary contention. If, however, the volume’s goal is to merely imply that it is now possible to write a “seamless social history” of the Southeast that bridges the gap between prehistory and history, then perhaps such an undertaking should be left to a single-authored monograph rather than a collection of essays which inherently produces a more uneven and disjointed depiction of historical processes.

Nevertheless, the benefits of this volume far outweigh its limitations. It will be useful to graduate students, researchers, and anyone who is interested in Southeastern Indians. Certain essays deserve more acclaim than others, but scholars from the fields of archaeology, anthro-

pology, and history will find much to like about this book. *Light on the Path* will therefore be a centerpiece of my library, perhaps right next to my copy of Charles Hudson's *The Southeastern Indians*.

Notes

[1]. Charles Hudson, *The Southeastern Indians* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1976), p. 3.

[2]. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-amindian>

Citation: Tyler Boulware. Review of Pluckhahn, Thomas J.; Ethridge, Robbie, eds., *Light on the Path: The Anthropology and History of the Southeastern Indians*. H-AmIndian, H-Net Reviews. February, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12900>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.