

# H-Net Reviews

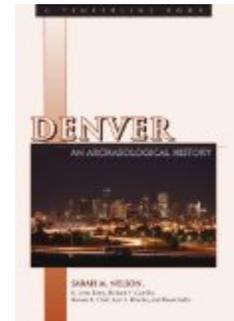
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sarah M. Nelson, with K. Lynn Berry, Richard F. Carrillo, Bonnie J. Clark, Lori E. Rhodes, and Dean Saitta. *Denver: An Archaeological History*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2008. xii + 273 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87081-935-3.

Reviewed by Chris Merritt (University of Montana)

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## Thirteen Thousand Years of Human Resource Exploitation and Settlements in the Greater Denver Area

*Denver: An Archaeological History* is the result of over twenty years of compilation research by the authors, with the project's impetus coming from famed historical archaeologist John L. Cotter in the mid-1980s. Cotter, a Denver native, suggested a scholarly work that would tie together the geologic, archaeological, and historical narratives of the area. The book's lead author, Sarah M. Nelson, pulled together a group of significant Colorado-based archaeologists to complete Cotter's dream of an archaeological history of the Greater Denver Area (GDA). The book begins by noting that the intended audiences are "readers interested in archaeology and in Denver's past, but the sources are unwritten history" (p. 1). Thus, the contributors to *Denver* do not attempt to mislead readers about the scope and nature of the volume as the true data of the book are archaeological sites and the artifact assemblages within.

Theoretically, the authors explicitly frame their discussion of the archaeological history of the GDA within a frontiers and boundaries perspective. More specifically, the authors state that the "interaction between cultures ... is most visible on the 'frontiers'" (p. 13). Denver, in the authors' perspective, is an ideal representative of frontier processes where members of different cultural and ethnic groups interacted and created a visible signature through the archaeological record. Ultimately, the theoretical foundation for this work borrows liberally from World Systems Theory and the works of historians and archaeologists.[1]

The long period between the book's initial start to final publication is evidenced by the use of significant, but somewhat outdated, literature cited by the various contributing authors. For the most part, the authors use theoretical works from the 1970s and 1980s as the core of their interpretation and discussion, though they omitted one of the seminal works in archaeology dealing with frontiers and boundaries from that same period, the edited collection of Stanton W. Green and Stephen M. Perlman, *The Archaeology of Frontiers and Boundaries* (1985). More important, there have been significant publications by historians and archaeologists on the topics of frontiers and boundaries over the last two decades that should have been incorporated, to the book's advantage.[2]

The introductory chapter lays the foundation of the theoretical position taken by the authors to analyze the Denver region. Nelson and the other contributing authors provide discussion and justification of the boundaries used in the analysis, and of the process of collecting information from the various sources. The study area for this book includes an area of 70 kilometers by 50 kilometers, with the Denver metropolitan area as its center. Within this rectangle, the authors further divide the area by ecosystem, creating four divisions that guide the discussion and interpretations for the rest of the volume. These four areas include Hogback (foothills of the Rocky Mountains), Black Forest (south and east of the Denver area), Streams (largely the confluence of Cherry Creek

and the South Platte River), and the Plains (west of the Denver area). These areas were chosen because they represent a different variety of economically viable resources that prehistoric and historic peoples exploited.

Using the established project boundaries, the authors consulted the Colorado Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation to locate all archaeological and historical sites within this area. In total, they determined that there are over 1,500 sites in the project area. These sites, including the excavations performed at several dozen of them, provide the core archaeological data for this volume.

Chapter 2 is devoted to the geologic and environmental history of the GDA. The chapter is ordered chronologically starting from about two billion years ago and follows the geologic processes that shaped the GDA, and describes how each of the four ecosystem zones employed by the authors was created. The last half of chapter 2 focuses on the archaeological evidence for how prehistoric humans exploited the fauna and flora of the four distinct ecosystem zones. Overall, this chapter provides a solid basis for understanding prehistoric uses of the GDA, while only one paragraph mentions the presence of gold-bearing placer gravel that led to the area's initial historic development in the 1800s.

Chapter 3 analyzes the patterns of prehistoric occupation from the end of the Pleistocene to just before contact with Europeans in the early 1800s. The authors split the prehistory of the GDA into three main divisions differentiated by technology and economic choices: the Paleo-Indian period, the Archaic period, and the Ceramic period, with the last two having several subdivisions. The authors encapsulate nearly thirteen thousand years of human occupation of the study area by providing a synopsis of trends and patterns of resource exploitation and technological progression, as illustrated by the archaeological discoveries from excavated sites.

More than any other section, chapter 3 struggles to find a flow: the numerous offset boxes with technical information and the oddly incorporated recipes for each prehistoric period make these pages difficult to navigate. As is the trap of many archaeological works trying to bridge the gap between the public and professional, the end result is a mediocre discussion that leaves both intended groups dissatisfied. On the one hand, if the authors had chosen to include more scientific discussion and to leave out the distracting box discussions and recipes, the chapter would have been improved considerably. On the other hand, if the authors had removed

the technical boxes and made the chapter more conversational, it would have worked just as well, though it might not have been comparable to the rest of the chapters.

Chapter 4 connects the prehistoric and historic periods by discussing the tribal groups that used and occupied the GDA just before and after initial European and Euro-American contact. Due to the lack of concrete data on the native peoples that inhabited the study area just before European or American contact, the authors successfully incorporate regional histories and appropriately tie them to the GDA. The authors discuss several native groups who lived and traveled through the study area, including the Ute, Apache, Comanche, Cheyenne, and Arapaho, as well as Mexican groups represented by the Comancheros and Ciboleros. Finally, the chapter discusses European and American interactions with these groups in the GDA, and the correlation of their displacement with the historical development of Denver.

Chapter 5 condenses the historical development of Denver by focusing on the archaeological investigations of several significant sites from the 1970s through the 1990s. The authors directly state that there have already been significant historical works written about Denver and that in this section they instead analyze the area "with an eye toward changes in its material culture and built environment" (p. 142). Intermixed with the archaeological discussions, the chapter also includes a successful analysis of the grid system of Denver's streets as an artifact in itself, which can provide other scholars with a model to present these kinds of discussions.

The historical background in this chapter provides context for the archaeological investigations of several significant sites. These sites include the remains of a late nineteenth-century hotel complex, the Tremont House Hotel, and two way stations along the trails heading east out of Denver's core. Archaeological evidence connects the frontier establishments of the GDA with commercial markets in the eastern United States and abroad. Over time, many types of material goods began to be produced in Denver itself, thus changing the nature of the study area's position on the frontier and marking its full incorporation into a world system of exchange. Finally, chapter 5 discusses the archaeological remains of homesteads in the Rocky Mountain Arsenal. Due to the annexation of the property by the army in the 1940s, these homesteads have been kept in a type of time capsule devoid of the alteration or development that has so affected other areas around Denver.

A major problem with chapter 5 is the significant lack

of citations for primary historical sources. Census and mining data, along with information on the urban planning of Denver, come with few or no citations for the original sources. This seems to be a major oversight in the volume's production, and will leave historians wanting more. Yet the archaeological findings and interpretations are well presented and fully cited, so it is unclear why the historical sections are lacking.

Chapter 6 provides a concluding section on the theme of Denver as both a frontier and a boundary that spans across prehistory and history. It is in this last chapter that the authors tie together the theoretical themes discussed in chapter 1, as Denver today is the result of centuries of cultural interaction rather than constancy. The authors connect the current residents of Denver to those who came earlier as "the inhabitants of Greater Denver continue to pursue diverse economic strategies, albeit ones increasingly removed from the intimacies of collecting plants, cultivating crops, and mining the earth" (p. 227). Finally, the authors provide some perspective on urban processes when they state that "the constant reshaping of the Denver landscape both creates and obliterates the material remains of the past, ever threatening to deny us access to the details and nuances of this history," while at the same time, "landscapes, like languages, only remain interesting if they are changing" (p. 228).

The afterword by Cotter provides an intimate perspective of an urban environment by a long-time resident of Denver. Cotter relates childhood stories that offer personal substance to the urban environment of Denver, and attempts to make archaeologists aware of the material culture of individual stories and not simply large-scale analyses. So instrumental to the book's inception, Cotter passed away before the final version of this book went to press.

Overall, *Denver* is excellent for the professional or amateur archaeologist interested in understanding the development of the area across long spans of time. However, if a reader wishes to understand the intricacies of Denver's historical development, then this book is not

for him or her. The historical references, as noted in the discussion of chapter 5, are minor and largely under-cited by the authors. While major themes of Denver's historical developments are introduced, the lack of a systematic synthesis in the volume will lead readers to search for more detailed and historically oriented works on the topic. The bright spot of this book for historians and urban scholars will be chapter 5, as that section clearly demonstrates what archaeological investigation of historical sites can bring to the table of multidisciplinary research in urban environments. This book, while struggling at times to find its voice for both the public and the professional audience, is a worthwhile discussion of a single area's evolution over thousands of years.

#### Notes

[1]. Main theoretical works consulted included Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Pamela J. Cressey and J. F. Stephens, "The City-State Approach to Urban Archaeology," in *Archaeology of Urban America: The Search for Pattern and Process*, ed. Roy S. Dickens (New York: Academic Press, 1982), 41-61; and Ian Hodder, *The Present Past: An Introduction to Anthropology for Archaeologists* (London: Batsford Press, 1982).

[2]. Some major omitted works include Frederick Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1969); Kent G. Lightfoot and Antoinette Martinez, "Frontiers and Boundaries in Archaeological Perspective," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 471-492; J. G. Cusick, *Studies in Culture Contact: Interaction, Culture Change and Archaeology*, Occasional Paper No. 25, Center for Archaeological Investigations (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1998); Marcy Rockman and James Steele, *Colonization of Unfamiliar Landscapes* (London: Routledge Press, 2003); and Kent G. Lightfoot, *Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants: The Legacy of Colonial Encounters on the California Frontiers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

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