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Review of *The Sjovold Site: A River Crossing Campsite in the Northern Plains* Ian Dyck and Richard E. Morlan

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The Sjovold Site: A River Crossing Campsite in the Northern Plains. Ian Dyck and Richard E. Morlan, with contributions by E. A. Christiansen, Hugh E. Hendry, D.W. Anderson, and J. G. Ellis. Hull: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1995. xxvi+615 pp. Maps, photos, tables, figures, references cited. \$C39.95 paper (ISBN 0-660-14033-0).

While reading this book, I found myself visited repeatedly by a phrase encapsulating its essence: *archaeological science*. Regardless of whether the site function hypothesis presented in the conclusion is ultimately confirmed or falsified through further testing, the book will remain a model of the application of science to archaeology. How is this so? Reduction, synthesis, hypothesis formulation, falsification of alternative hypotheses, explanation—all of these methods and goals are there, although not always defined or in sequence.

As site reports go, this is one of the most thoroughly researched to appear anywhere in Canada. The detail presented is almost numbing, but obviously only a summary of more detail resting in files and museum collections. Yet the book is much more than a site report; it is this fact that enhances its value immensely, propelling it into the company of major archaeological works in this country, not just the prairies.

The book begins by stating its objectives and the methods employed to meet them, describing the environmental setting of the Sjovold site in

Saskatchewan and its historical and cultural contexts, and providing detailed inferences about its past environmental history based on information collected at the site and available information from nearby. Then it moves to description of the site itself, its stratigraphy and stratigraphic relationships, features, material cultural remains, faunal remains, and chronology. Finally, the book provides an explanation of the function of the site within its cultural and environmental contexts and relates it to alternative explanatory hypotheses.

The chronology begins about four thousand years ago with the Hanna material culture, exemplified by corner-notched stone atlatl dart points, and ends with the late Plains culture about five hundred years ago, exemplified by side-notched stone arrow points and cord impressed pottery. The site was occupied neither continuously, nor frequently, but appears to have been used "by a series of bison-hunting groups at intervals of about 165 years." Dating is based on a combination of relative methods such as comparison of artifacts with those dated nearby via absolute methods, and by radiocarbon dating, standard methods in modern archaeological investigations. Clearly, the Sjøvold site is one of the more deeply stratified sites excavated on the Canadian Plains.

The book even provides estimates of early historic human population on grasslands of the Canadian Plains as information basic to understanding the site and its relation to population movements. To the authors' credit, they do not allow themselves to be swept up in revisionist population overestimates for the Americas currently in fashion but for which there is no hard evidence.

Refreshingly, the book has explicitly stated objectives uninflated in scope: "(1) to situate the site in geographical and historical context; (2) to explain its significance to regional prehistory; and, especially (3) to describe and interpret the occupation layers and their contents. . . ." Yet the volume actually exceeds its objectives, especially the second one: far more than a site report, it is, in fact, a regional synthesis, addressing regional prehistory in greater detail than is required to meet this objective.

Here is classic science in action, proceeding from reductionist analysis of local information for testing the specific site function hypothesis to construction of more holistic, regional explanations. These, then, form the springboard for formulating more comprehensive alternative hypotheses for further testing. The book is not especially explicit about this procedure, but it is there nonetheless.

What are some of these new hypotheses? For one, the Sjovold site provides support for the previously developed chronological sequence for the central Canadian Plains region, and the authors identify this. But the work also tends to refute another long held hypothesis, namely, that the first Besant projectile points were atlatl dart tips. The Sjovold excavation indicates that arrow points appear early in the Besant sequence. A new hypothesis, moreover, is derived from the data concerning Pelican Lake projectile points: the evidence indicates that not all late corner-notched points are Pelican Lake—that, in fact, some may be Besant.

Does the book adequately test the site function hypothesis formulated under the third objective, namely, that the site was a river crossing campsite? The authors amass the evidence and then draw their conclusion. First, the Sjovold site never was more than a campsite, a temporary residence for small groups of people. The evidence is sound that occupation was mainly in the open water season (twelve out of thirteen layers). The lithic evidence indicates that the occupants were mixtures of local and distant groups. The food consumed at the site was “overwhelmingly bison” even though plenty of other resources were available, indicating that no group spent more than a short time there. This information, when added to the local geographic context, allows for systematic elimination of all explanations other than that this site was used by people mostly prior to or after crossing the South Saskatchewan River when it was not frozen over.

Falsification of alternative site hypotheses does not confirm conclusively the hypothesis that the Sjovold site was a river crossing campsite; however, in the light of present evidence, it does leave this as the most likely explanation of its function. Given the impossibility of actually observing the events that transpired at the site, this is the best science can do to test the authors’ hypothesis.

A search for flaws in the book and the technical work leading to its development does not reveal many. The field methods are sound, have been competently executed, and are described in appropriate detail. The geological, soil, and faunal analyses and interpretations are excellent, and the details provided are appropriate to the archaeological purpose. The volume’s layout, format, and illustrations are excellent, its print is easy to read, and typographical errors are minimal. I would, however, have liked a clearer, more explicit, and sequential methodological approach regarding the application of scientific explanatory procedures to the analysis and synthesis.

The book’s most serious fault is not in its science, description, or explanation, but in its physical nature. At 615 pages, its glued “perfect”

binding does it no justice whatever. The book will fall apart in a few short years given the use it deserves.

The scientific approach taken in *The Sjøvold Site* makes it cutting edge archaeology, squeezing what it can—but not more—from the information available. This, along with its hard data and the parsimonious explanation following application of scientific analysis and synthesis, is what will give the book its lasting value. **Henry T. Epp**, *Calgary, Alberta*.