



Ancient North America

Brian M. Fagan

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Brian Fagan, one of the foremost living archaeological writers and an authority on world prehistory, has completely revised and updated his definitive synthesis of North America's ancient past. The book offers a balanced summary of every major culture area in North America, and places the continent in its wider context in human prehistory. Lavish illustrations, many new to the fourth edition, draw on North America's rich ethnographic record to illustrate key sites and artifacts. The chapter on first settlement has been heavily revised in light of new discoveries in Siberia and the Americas, and current controversies are surveyed. Chapters on archaeological theory, the Great Basin, the Northeast, the Northwest, and the Archaeology of European Contact reflect major advances, and important new discoveries and scientific methodologies receive full coverage.

Ancient North America Details

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Author : Brian M. Fagan

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Czarny Pies says

This is a very enjoyable introduction to pre-Columbian North America for a laymen more accustomed to reading history books based on written rather than archaeological sources. During the nine years that have passed since I read this work, I have read half a dozen books on more narrow aspects of the Indian societies that existed prior to arrival of the Europeans and have always felt that this book provided an excellent context in which I could situate the findings of the works having a restricted focus.

Fagan's book does a good job of explaining where the state of dating technology is and the strength of the evidence supporting the theses that are currently dominant.

Jael says

this was a textbook used for my north american prehistory class.

Sarahanodus says

All you ever wanted to know about ancient North America and much more. In incredible detail, with pictures and drawings. I'm afraid I couldn't stick it out to the end, but I learned a lot anyway.

Joseph Carrabis says

Here is a book worth reading by anyone, period. Doesn't matter if you're an anthropologist, archeologist, historian, lay-reader looking for a good, exciting, entertaining and engaging read, you've found it. Fagan makes the ancient continent live again. Strongly recommended as a writer's resource if you're writing about this time period and place. It was one of the few science books that was so enlivening I couldn't put it down (says a lot about a writer when they can cause that level of interest in a "dead" topic).

Kassilem says

Ugh. I don't know why but I've never liked US history. Some, but mostly not. Thus I was not excited for this textbook in the first place. Reading it did not change my attitude. I did not enjoy this book. It was too dry and full of information I am not particularly interested in. This is my opinion. The book was very comprehensive, so if you would like to learn details on North American prehistoric cultures, this is a good informational book. There was once when I was reading the chapter on the Mississippian cultures and listening to Fire the Sky in the same week and I had a sort of epiphany. The culture I was learning about was similar to the culture I was listening to for the historical fiction book. That made it real for me and I began to enjoy the

topic for about five minutes. Then the dryness of the book got to me again. :) It just wasn't for me. I gave it a three star because it does have a lot of good information.

Michael says

I read the 2nd edition, but it's probably almost the same. I still use this as a reference.

Bob Nichols says

In short: Good maps, pictures. Focus is on hard evidence - projectiles and such. Super dry. Quite a bit on methodological approaches used in the presentation of the material. Seems to be wide-ranging interpretive theories, which struck me as being all over the map, with considerable liberties taken based on limited evidence (Fagan asserts, but then more than often qualifies, suggesting significant uncertainty).

Throughout the book, Fagan states that all hunter-gatherers were egalitarian, which he defines as authority based on "experience and personal qualities" and "not political power." Other than several references to evidence from various burial practices and trade in exotic goods that indicate rank and hierarchy, it is surprising that Fagan doesn't discuss thoroughly the basis for such a generalization, especially when many places in his text indicate otherwise. For example, Fagan makes many references to a great diversity among the various Indian cultures, which includes those of the hunter-gatherer era that suggest the possibility that each band or tribe, and the larger associations of such groupings, had to figure out how to reconcile the issue of conflicting personal freedoms and exertions of power. Theoretically, unless there's a presumption that all of human nature is benign like Rousseau thought and that it was environmental influence (e.g., surplus) that corrupts humankind, it's not clear why there would not have been great variation in the way these issues were handled. And, after raising a question about whether "Southwestern farming villages" (i.e., not hunter-gatherer) were "far less egalitarian than often thought" (because of "long-distance exchange of essentials and luxuries by farming cultures usually results in some form of ranked society"), Fagan then states more generally that "whether Archaic, or even Paleo-Indian, societies were ranked is a matter of on-going debate." As the paleo-Indian era is generally thought to be 8,000 years ago, and as Archaic cultures (and its boundary with the paleo-Indian era "is often impossible to draw") hunted and presumably gathered too, though they placed greater evidence "on plant foods," it seems hard to reconcile this with his egalitarian characterization. Also throughout the text, Fagan references early North American Indian as being based on kin relations and reciprocity and that this is further evidence of egalitarianism. Whether families were equal in a fundamental sense (women, children vis-a-vis men, and among kindred men themselves), and whether all of these early groups practiced reciprocity (versus some did, some did not), also seems questionable.

As a final comment, it's a bit strange that a book on Ancient North America opens up with a discussion of Western Discovery (Chapter 1). Fagan ends his book with a discussion of Indian cultures after European contact. He admits that this is "still little understood," but then goes on to focus on the Southeast where he says "systematic research into the interests between the Spaniard and the American Indian has been most intense." Given the heavy Spanish involvement in the Southwest, and the little attention given to this area in U.S. history books, I wondered whether Fagan gave the Southwest short shrift.

Kevin Belanger says

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