

Eskimo Architecture: Dwelling and Structure in the Early Historic Period

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Book Review

ESKIMO ARCHITECTURE: DWELLING AND STRUCTURE IN THE EARLY HISTORIC PERIOD. By Molly Lee and Gregory A. Reinhardt. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2003. 216 pp. Sources and Notes. Index. \$45.00. ISBN 1-889963-22-4.

Combing the works of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century arctic scholars for information on the early historical period architecture of the Eskimo is not an easy task; there are few descriptions completely dedicated to architectural styles, and specific details are often woven into narrative accounts of unrelated activities. Through considerable effort, Molly Lee and Gregory Reinhardt have created a useful reference by bringing together data from many rare and unique sources, including sketches and artistic renditions, in *Eskimo Architecture: Dwelling and Structure in the Early Historic Period*.

The chapters are logically ordered based on geography and seasonality. The authors divide the North American Arctic into four geographic regions: (1) Greenland; (2) Central Arctic; (3) Northwest Arctic and Bering Strait; and (4) Southwest Alaska, including the Bering Sea, Siberia, and the Gulf of Alaska. Within each of these regions the authors present historically derived accounts of Eskimo architecture based on season of use, i.e., winter, transitional, and summer structures. The authors also include sections on special-use structures (e.g., birth, menstrual, and death huts).

The authors suggest that the different materials used in wall construction best illustrate geographic differences in winter houses, and that tent shape is the most useful in the comparison of summer houses. Although the authors believe that a general winter-summer dyadic is the organizing force behind Eskimo architecture, they

maintain that a sizable amount of geographic variation exists, especially in transitional house forms.

A shortcoming of the book is the near absence of data derived from the archaeological record. The development of archaeology in the Arctic proceeded hand in hand with the development of ethnography, and as such, many of the early works drawn upon by Lee and Reinhardt make reference to prehistoric house forms (unoccupied houses). For example, in "Contributions to the Ethnology and Anthropogeography of the Polar Eskimos" (1910), H. P. Steensby provides a comparison between previously used and in-use houses. He posits environmental change (e.g., depletion in whale populations) as a possible cause for some of the changes in house form. The inclusion of this type of data would undoubtedly help readers (particularly nonarchaeologists) to develop a better understanding of the dynamic nature of Eskimo architecture.

All criticism aside, the book is well illustrated with numerous photographs and sketches of floor plans, house shapes, and more (often two or three illustrations per page). The inclusion of vignettes from the historical sources helps to lighten the heavier chapters and make the book more readable. For those wanting more, the authors provide additional details in extensive chapter endnotes. Overall, this book is a good reference on early historic Eskimo architecture and would make a nice contribution to arctic historians' and archaeologists' libraries.

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