

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and  
Social Sciences

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

October 1997

Review of *Beyond Subsistence: Plains Archaeology and  
the Postprocessual Critique* Edited by Philip Duke and  
Michael C. Wilson

Alan J. Osborn

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, Aosborn2@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Osborn, Alan J., "Review of *Beyond Subsistence: Plains Archaeology and the Postprocessual Critique* Edited by Philip Duke and Michael C. Wilson" (1997). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 349.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/349>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

**Beyond Subsistence: Plains Archaeology and the Postprocessual Critique.** Edited by Philip Duke and Michael C. Wilson. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1995. xiv+304 pp. Photos, maps, tables, references, index. \$29.95 paper (ISBN 0-8173-0799-0).

Philip Duke and Michael Wilson have compiled a well-written, well-organized book designed to “demonstrate the potential of postprocessualism to Plains archaeologists.” It contains an editors’ introduction, eleven scholarly contributions, as well as two commentaries. The editors suggest that the success of this “new paradigm or research strategy” will be assessed on the basis of its “second-generation scholars” and what they contribute to the “intellectual hybridization” of postprocessualism.

The reader must be aware that postprocessual archaeology does not consist of a coherent body of theory, models, concepts, or robust methods for data collection and analysis. Instead, it is a postmodern response to processual archaeology—an explicitly scientific, materialist-based approach that developed in the United States during the late 1960s. Postprocessual archaeology rejects the goals and methods of science, ignores human biology and ecology, and spurns cross-cultural generalizations. Postprocessualists argue that particular social, historical, and ideological factors shape human action and that humans are not pawns of an external environment; instead, humans create their own environment via material culture and symbols.

This collection attempts to provide a number of insights to Plains archaeology. Kehoe proposes that postprocessual archaeology is highly relevant given the current mistrust of science, growth of pluralism, and loss of energy-based funding sources. Zimmerman argues that there is not just one “past” and that archaeologists must share “interpretative power” with the Indian people. Whelan’s examination of gender in the archaeological record argues for continued vigilance against androcentrism and ethnocentrism in our studies of the past. Benn suggests that, in order to extend their power base, the theocratic elite duped prehistoric Mississippian farmers into growing corn and adopting related technology.

Brooks follows the “migration” of the River Crows after they split from the Hidatsas in the Middle Missouri region. Brooks concludes that the Hagen and White Earth Creek sites served as ceremonial “center-places” in Crow/Hidatsa “thought-world” because the Hagen site contained ceramic “ollas” but no “mugs, bowls, or ladles;” and, there were no earthlodges inside the palisade at the White Earth Creek site. The reader should be informed at this point that the ceramic assemblages of the Northern Plains, unlike those of

Anasazi in the Southwest, do not contain ollas, mugs, bowls, or ladles. Furthermore, the apparent lack of earthlodges at the Hagen site is not surprising given that it lies far from timber sources, that the site was severely vandalized, and it was never systematically excavated by archaeologists.

Wilson's discussion of the mnemonic character of mobile hunter or pastoralist tent camps is provocative but it falls victim to the post-processualists' symbols/cosmology research cul de sac. Similarly, Mirau posits that the circular rock features or "medicine wheels" of the Northern Plains may have served symbolic purposes such as memorials or grave markers for warriors, instead of astronomical devices, mnemonic landmarks, or territorial markers. Once archaeologists make these symbolic arguments there are few, if any, robust empirical implications to explore. Finally, Warburton and Duke explore the "multivocality" of messages that arrows possessed in Blackfoot life (games, life crises, warfare, and art), research offered to stimulate lithic studies in Plains archaeology.

Some day, postprocessual archaeologists may begin to question the ultimate utility of this "new paradigm or research strategy." They will ask what do we know, how well do we know it, and what do we need to know now? Perhaps, by that time, they will have asked questions about symbols themselves. Why do different societies transmit symbolic information via similar or different media such as language, folklore, music, dance, art, body decoration, and electron flow? How do symbolic systems and communication vary with other life making and life sustaining activities? Plains Indians, as well as other indigenous peoples, will no doubt ask questions—practical questions. These requests, as well as those from other archaeologists, will be the ultimate test of postprocessual archaeology in the Plains and elsewhere.

**Alan J. Osborn**, *Department of Anthropology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.*