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Book Review of Plains Earthlodges: Ethnographic and Archaeological Perspectives Edited by Donna C. Roper and Elizabeth P. Pauls

Thomas D. Thiessen
Midwest Archeological Center, National Park Service

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Nomadic Plains peoples such as the Cheyenne and Sioux have become the stereotypical image of North American Indians in general. In contrast to the hunting and gathering lifestyle of these groups, however, many Plains tribes lived in settled villages and grew extensive garden crops through much of the past millennium. These groups developed a habitation distinctly characteristic of the Plains village way of life—sturdy, earth-covered timber structures known as earthlodges. The remains of thousands of these structures dot the landscape of the Central and Northern Plains. Lodges of various forms persisted from about 1000 CE into the twentieth century. Particularly characteristic of the Pawnee, Arikara, Mandan, and Hidatsa, earthlodges were also adopted by several other Plains tribes. In this well-illustrated volume eight authors offer nine essays that explore the earthlodge as a subject warranting archaeological and anthropological research in its own right and from numerous perspectives.

Editors Donna Roper and Elizabeth Pauls introduce the subject by surveying the characteristics, sources of historic and ethnographic information, and geographic distribution of earthlodges, and conclude the volume with a brief essay suggesting broad directions for future research. Between these contributions are papers that describe the construction of a replica earthlodge in 1976 (Michael Scullin); interpret earthlodges as structures that symbolically partitioned Hidatsa concepts of gender roles (female earth/male sky, and so on), contributing to a conservatism that helped to preserve the use of lodges by the Hidatsa long after Euroamerican contact changed other aspects of their culture (Pauls); link the origin of the historic Sun Dance arbor to earthlodges, possibly those used in the Mandan Okipa ceremony (Margot P. Liberty); explore diversity in excavated Central Plains Tradition lodges from the Medicine Creek (Nebraska), Glen Elder (Kansas), and Glenwood (Iowa) localities (Donald J. Blakeslee); inquire into the longevity and maintenance of earthlodges through an examination of issues of load bearing and wood material decay susceptibility as shown through analysis of timber from a recently dismantled replica earthlodge in southwestern Nebraska (Roper); explore analytical ways of measuring the duration of village occupation as reflected at prehistoric sites of the Initial Middle Missouri variant in Iowa and South Dakota (Stephen C. Lensink); and illustrate the kinds of information about lodge structure, village plan, and village history that can be gleaned from nondestructive geophysical methods of investigation such as magnetic surveys, electrical resistivity, and ground-penetrating radar (Jennifer R. Bales and Kenneth L. Kvamme). The volume opens with an appreciative foreword by W. Raymond Wood, who has devoted much of his archaeological career to the investigation of Plains village peoples.
There is little to criticize in this book and much to absorb from the different perspectives offered. Other than a few minor editorial glitches, the only problem worth noting is a minor discrepancy between the geographic range of earthlodges shown on the national map in Figure 1.6 (depicting them throughout the northern half of Oklahoma) and the narrative description of their distribution on page 16 (which limits their southern extent to northern Kansas). For those with an interest in Native American architecture and Native Plains village cultures, this book is a “must read.” Thomas D. Thiessen, Midwest Archaeological Center, National Park Service.