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Book Review of *Imagining Head-Smashed-In:  
Aboriginal Buffalo Hunting on the Northern Plains* By  
Jack W. Brink

David Hurst Thomas

*American Museum of Natural History*

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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Imagining Head-Smashed-In: Aboriginal Buffalo Hunting on the Northern Plains.** By Jack W. Brink. Edmonton, AB: AU Press, Athabaska University, 2008. xviii + 342 pp. Maps, Illustrations, notes, references, index. \$85.00 cloth, \$35.95 paper.

Jack Brink has written an important and engaging book, his personal tribute to the Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump in southern Alberta, Canada. This is an easy-going, almost conversational narrative, but it's easy to detect the author's passion and the solid science that lies behind his simple words.

*Imagining Head-Smashed-In* boasts a remarkably broad and well-crafted table of contents. Brink begins with an overview of Head-Smashed-In, patiently explaining to professional and lay reader alike why this particular archaeological site should command our attention. As an admitted zealot, he doesn't shy away from occasional hyperbole: "If hunters of the Plains were engaged in the most rewarding procurement of food ever devised by human being, maybe life wasn't so bad after all." In Brink's view, this cliff face and "simple lines of rocks" ranks right up there with, say, Stonehenge and the Great Wall of China; this is, after all, one of fewer than 900 places designated by UNESCO as a "World Heritage Site." The stage then shifts to the main character, the American buffalo (or, as Brink points out, more properly called the North American bison). Two chapters chronicle the biology, life history, and especially seasonal behavior of "the great beast of the Plains."

The author then works his way through the extensive ethnohistoric evidence documenting various hunting strategies of bison procurement, morphing into a detailed consideration of the archaeological evidence at the Head-Smashed-In site. This archaeological record is a curious blend of a nearly 6,000-year-old, 10-meter-deep stratigraphic column, directly coupled to subtle (yet essential critical) stone cairns stretching across the gathering basin. An occasional small stone structure testifies to the vision-questing spirituality required to secure the "supernatural guarantees" that made it all come together. Brink estimates that "the blood of more than one hundred thousand buffalo has soaked into the earth at Head-Smashed-In."

In "The Past Becomes the Present" (chapter 10), the author skillfully introduces members of the Piikani Nation and their pivotal role in developing the Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump Interpretive Centre. The story thickens as Jack Brink discusses his working and personal relationship with Joe Crowshoe, a medicine man and keeper of traditional Blackfoot knowledge. As this relationship deepened and strengthened, Brink ultimately was adopted into the Crowshoe family and received a Blackfoot name. The epilogue offers a retrospective look at first-person archaeology, doing science amidst an ongoing, living, viable descendant community of stakeholders.

The Society for American Archaeology recently awarded their "Public Audience Book Award" to Jack Brink for *Imagining Head-Smashed-In*. In my view, this award was richly deserved. I cannot recommend the volume highly enough to professional archaeologists, to Native Americans, and to anybody interested in a good read about the deep history of North America. **David Hurst Thomas**, *Curator, Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History.*