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**Review of *Archaeology and Ethnohistory of the Omaha Indians:
The Big Village Site* by John M. O'Shea and John Ludwickson**

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Archaeology and Ethnohistory of the Omaha Indians: The Big Village Site. John M. O'Shea and John Ludwickson. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press. 1992. xviii + 374 pp. Tables, figures, and plates. \$40.00 paper.

Until recently, anthropological archaeology considered the burial grounds of Native Americans to be a proper subject of scientific investigation with little or no consideration for the cultural values of contemporary Native people regarding the resting places of their ancestors. Between 1939 and 1941 archaeologists from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln excavated cemeteries and dwelling sites of the Omaha tribe at the site of their former village near the present town of Homer, Nebraska. Known to Omahas as Ton'wontonga (Big Village), the site was occupied from 1775 to 1845. Under the direction of John Champe, the remains of something like a hundred Omahas were brought to the university and placed in storage with little or no examination for three decades. In the 1970s, the authors of this volume began working on the material with the cooperation of Champe until his death in 1978. The report is valuable, if long overdue, because it summarizes information previously unavailable to scholars or to members of the Omaha tribe. It also provides a convenient overview of Omaha tribal history and adaptive strategies in the early nineteenth century.

The people who were buried in the Big Village cemeteries experienced some of the most dramatic events in Omaha history. At the time of Lewis and Clark, their location at Ton'wontonga gave them a pivotal role in the Missouri River trade. Big Village graves are rich in trade goods such as brass and tin kettles, iron knives, hoes, and buckets, copper ornaments, glass beads, silver crosses, a sword, and firearms. The report catalogues this material and illustrates some of it. Indeed, it is more of an illustrated and well-contexted catalog of the material as it was available to the authors than a scientific study of the remains and grave goods.

In the 1980s Omahas, with other Native Americans, pressed for state and federal legislation requiring the return of ancestral remains being held by universities and museums. The tribe felt strongly that their people should be returned to the earth but they were also interested in learning about the

conditions under which their people had lived and died in the early years of the last century. Between 1989 and 1991, the tribe encouraged the university to conduct an intensive scientific study of the remains prior to their reburial under the terms of LB 340 legislation. Karl Reinhard and a team of students at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln took up the challenge and carried out an intensive program of study.

The book's chapter on demographics suggests that warfare rather than epidemic disease was a major cause of mortality among the Big Village population. While the authors cite ethnohistorical information to support this argument, they did not have the benefit of the latest physical anthropological studies against which to test their hypothesis. A preliminary report by Reinhard (1990) does not support their interpretation. It states that "the population structure of the Omaha was severely affected by introduced diseases of European origin."

In conclusion, while the book brings together a wealth of ethnohistorical information and presents material from the Big Village site, it should be read only in conjunction with reports from the Reinhard team for an informed interpretation of Omaha demography in the early nineteenth century. As a final note, it is unfortunate that the authors did not establish a rapport with the contemporary Omaha tribe or attempt to relate their work to the concerns of these living people. The book makes no reference to the remarkable collaboration between the tribe and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln that led both to an intensive scientific study of the remains and to their reburial in the summer of 1991. **Robin Ridington**, *Department of Anthropology and Sociology, University of British Columbia*.

References

- Reinhard, Karl. 1990. A Progress Report of Skeletal Analysis Related to LB 340 Legislation. (Report prepared for the Omaha Tribe).