



## Book Review

*Under the Canopy: The Archaeology of the Tropical Rain Forests.* Edited by Julio Mercader. 2003. Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick

Reviewed by Roy Sugarman

Julio Mercader is a professor in the Department of Anthropology at The George Washington University, in Washington, D.C. and has spent time in the various forests that pepper the pages of *Under the Canopy*.

At first, this banal title will leave many of us cold, and moving along the bookshelves without a second glance. At second glance, it is fascinating to realize the value of not buying entirely into the Leakey/Tobias view of man emerging solely as *Homo erectus* on the plains of Africa. Whilst Damasio and others tell us how primitive hominids had no awareness of emotion, clearly there were emotional choices to be made. Entering the forest must have been one of them, as Mercader and colleagues go out to show. There were thriving communities there from the get go it seems, with the same technologies that thrived on the savannah.

Although it may appear to us to be a very harsh environs, the choices made may not seem obvious: after all, primitive people have lived in the harsh cold of Europe and Scandinavia, even the antipodes of the earth, so why not the rain forests, why not stone age sites in the tropical

forests?

The book presents evidence from Australia, Brazil, Canada, Columbia, France, Malaysia, Panama, Spain and the USA in terms of the origins of the expertise in the book.

Answers are sought as to whether hunting and gathering was possible, was there forest in the Pleistocene occupation, and how early was the occupation? What about fat, calories, oil extraction, starch consumption, the presence of seeds, fruit, spices, stimulants?

The fact that it was only recently that archaeologists began to document the Pleistocene occupation of tropical forested regions says more about the nature of archaeological research than it does about early human adaptations to such 'harsh' environs (page 239).

After the introduction by Mercader, Joanna Casey covers the West African perspective from the Pleistocene to the mid-Holocene, looking at the Paleoenvironment, and the archaeology of these areas, given the few geographic impediments in such areas. The Sahara for instance was not the wasteland we now see, not in the Pleistocene anyway, nor did the ca-

pabilities of the early hominids restrict their movement here, with a strong archaeological record of bifaces and picks in areas such as Ghana, with later small flaked-stone industries found all over West Africa. The macrolithic material in itself is thought to be a derivative of that found in early adaptations to a heavily forested environment.

So it goes with the occupation of Atlantic Central Africa in the middle Stone Age period, according to Julio Mercader and Raquel Marti. The authors present a careful analysis of the area, and the chronology and classification of the Mosumu industry found there, and of the Njuinye site in particular, both sites representing a middle to later stone age transition to the wet grasslands. Mercader continues in a similar vein in the next chapter, in which he goes alone, into the Congo, focusing on the Ituri region, moving beyond the savannah grassland bordering the forests.

Chapter four moves to Australasia, with David Bulbeck on the Malay peninsula from the Ice to Iron Ages. He again follows the tradition here of looking at the paleoenvirons (this is what the book is about after all), and then the comparative lowland hunter-gatherers, and the non-flaked lithics there. Reference is made to the dating presence of shells and glacial deposits, and the burial chronology and body size reduction evidence. Finally he shows that coastal based hominids have a place in the ancestry of Holocene forest dwellers.

A million years of habitation by hominids on the islands of Southeast Asia is the focus of Francois and Anne-Marie Semah, and Truman Simanjuntak, again following the formula of environs, stratigraphy, and especially selected sites, such as the Ngebung, or the Song Terus cave at Punung, and the examination of bifaces there and other flaked industrial-technological evidence. Did *Homo erectus* make stone tools, well yes, such as scrapers and borers made from Javanese quartz, chalcedony, jasper or hardily silicified tuff, or in Patjitanian terms, chert.

Brit Asmussen tackles the forests of North-east Queensland in Australia, covering the paleoenvironmental evidence, the archaeological evidence from the Jiyer Cave and the Mulgrave River site. There is a nice inclusion, a discussion of the Horsfall and Cosgrove models, concluding there is no direct evidence that these areas were inhabited in the Pleistocene, but there are indirect evidence points for discussion, mainly axes with waists, as well as pollen cores.

The central American rain forests next come under discussion, and Ranere and Cooke take this on, following the same patterns as the others, and this time beginning with Panamanian examples, and the historical connections of all populations here with the Clovis technology.

William Barse deals with the Orinoco, based on pre-ceramic assemblages, and then Santiago Mora and Cristobal Gnecco report from the Colombian perspective. This last appears to indicate more that the forest was opened up, rather than actually inhabited for long periods of time, perhaps in the slash-burn mode, and perhaps only for short periods.

Betty Meggers and Eurico Th. Miller take on Amazonia and also look at the modern environment, and linguistic, genetic and cultural evidence for population movements and replacements in the past. Lithic production as always plays a major part here.

Despite the heaviness of the title and subject matter, the chapters are short, rapidly educational, and provide a standardized way of viewing the development of the tools of survival in the Pleistocene forest environs, via direct and indirect evidence, and in ways that always hold interest, if not for the layman, then for the interested and evidence bound archaeologist.

I leave it to the experts to answer the yet-unanswered questions of habitation of the forests all those years ago, but the challenge to us all as students of human behaviour is, as always, interesting, as it opens up questions as to what our conscious awareness is about, and how we came to demonstrate a global capacity

to think rationally, act with purpose, and deal effectively with out environment, in short, our intelligence.

As such, the evidence shows that our ancestors were intelligent in terms of the definition ‘the aggregate, or global capacity to act purposefully, think rationally, and deal effectively with the environment’, coined by David

Wechsler in 1944.

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