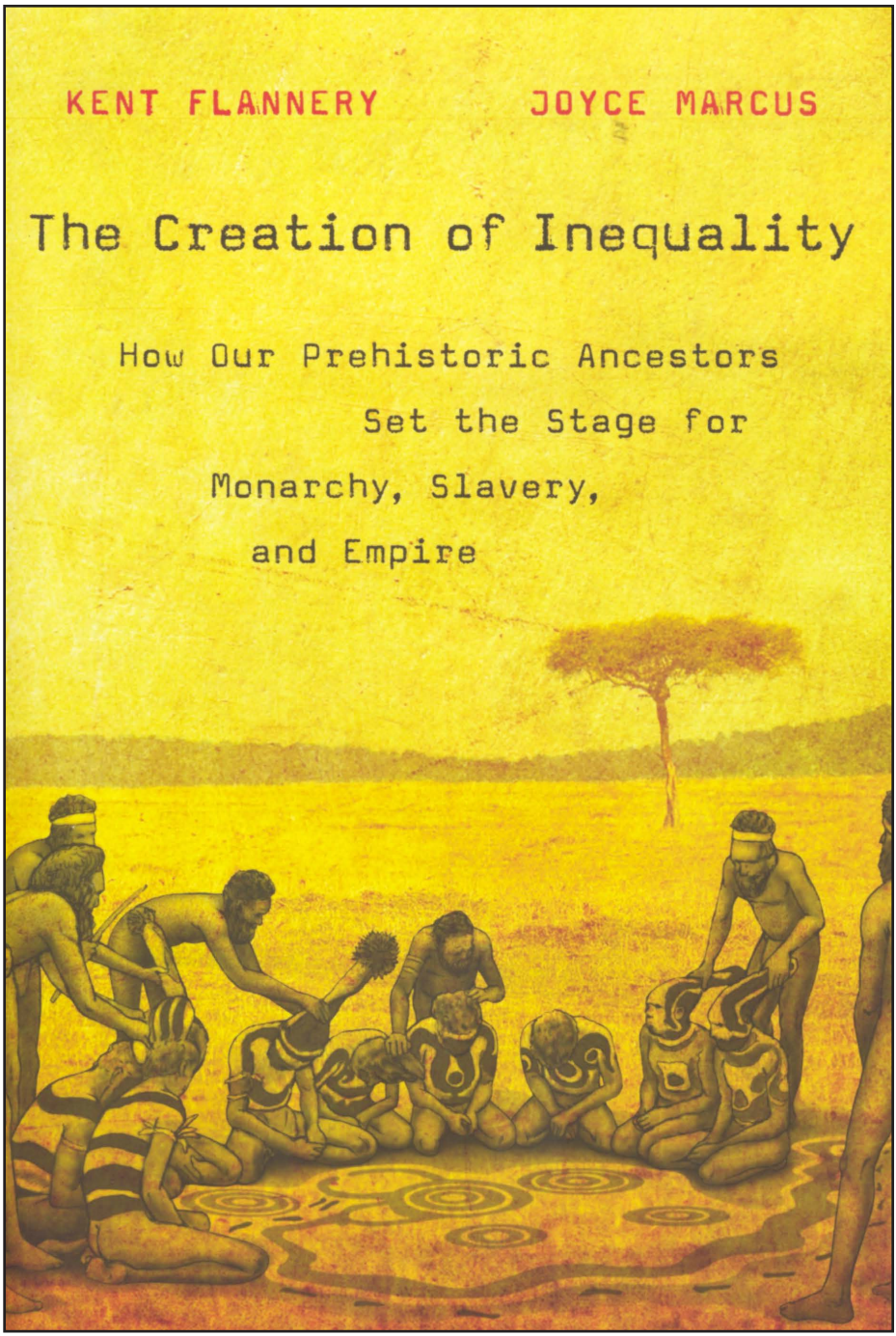

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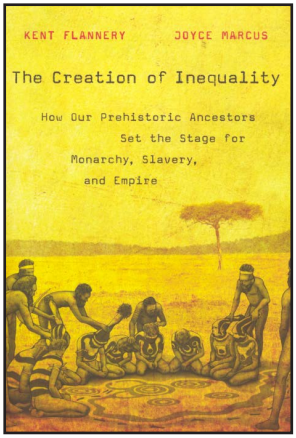

The Creation of Inequality: How our Prehistoric Ancestors Set the Stage for Monarchy, Slavery, and Empire

Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus. 2012. Harvard University Press. xii + 631 pp., 30 halftones, 42 line illustrations. $39.95 (hard cover).

Reviewed by Kenneth E. Sassaman, University of Florida.

This is a remarkable synthesis of archaeological perspectives on the evolution of social complexity based on a premise that I do not accept. Contrary to the claim made in the first line of this book, our primal ancestors were not born equal. Equality, like inequality, is created by people. We have known this for some time now. And we also have a pretty good sense that egalitarian and nonegalitarian social relations coexist because of, not in spite of, each other. This became apparent in the heyday of historical anthropology (1970–80s) when the long-presumed "primitives" of the modern world were re-examined under the lens of global process. Lifting their modern condition as an analog for primitiveness became anathema, and so it was left to archaeology to assemble the pieces of a past independent of modernity. This task has proven extremely difficult because cultural evolutionism—as an enduring if maligned metanarrative for ancient human history—has a logic that requires some form of primitive, in this case a form lacking inequalities beyond those of raw biology.

The authors of this fascinating volume, Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus, are top scholars who know well the criticisms of 1950–60s vintage cultural evolutionism. But their mission here is to explain the evolution of inequality, and for that they need an egalitarian baseline from which all forms of ranked societies evolved. Commendably, this book is written for the public, a readership not enough exposed to anthropological perspectives. Most of these readers will not likely have an opinion on the analytical utility of concepts like "tribe" and "chiefdom," but they will not be surprised to learn that societies evolved from simple to complex, from mobile to sedentary, from food collecting to food producing, and from equal to unequal over the 10,000+ years showcased in studies worldwide. Much of the educated public is comfortable with this sort of evolutionary narrative and would interpret it as "progress." I believe that an uncritical read of this book may lead to that end. However, and thankfully, Flannery and Marcus show us in the very last chapter of the book that we can actually learn from primitives the social means to resist inequality. Here then, the narrative gets mobilized for better futures and we are thus assured that it is not slavishly a cultural evolutionary treatise, unwittingly reifying the notion of progress.

With a style at once authoritative and breezy, this book is a pleasure to read. Ethnographic and archaeological case material is woven together in a journey that takes the reader from the foundations of equality (Part I), to the challenges of achievement-based

societies (Part II), to the trappings of hereditary inequality (Part III), and to the power of states and empires (Part IV). Along the way, many enduring problems of archaeological research garner serious discussion, including the beginnings of food production, the first ritual and public architecture, and the origins of village life, hereditary inequality, chiefly authority, and institutionalized religion. The journey takes us through case material spanning New Guinea, Polynesia, the Near East, Highland Mexico, the Andes, the American Southwest and Plains, Egypt, Hawaii, and more. There is even a 15-page chapter on the Mississippian chiefdoms of North America, although readers of this journal will be surprised that Cahokia goes completely unmentioned. That is a trifling audience to offend compared to the 1.3 billion Chinese that will be surprised to see their entire history left out of the discussion.

To be fair, *The Creation of Inequality* is not intended to be a comprehensive survey of ancient societies. It is instead a reasoned explanation for how social logics are altered under varying material conditions to enable inequalities to become institutionalized in first kinship and eventually kingship. The first big leap away from a presumed egalitarian base—Rousseau's State of Nature, the defining theme of Part I—was the development of clan-based social organization, in which "us" vs. "them" divisions held the potential to be ranked, often based on genealogical priority. We learn that delayed returns in economy are among the material conditions of enchaining people across time, and this contrasts with the immediate returns of clanless foragers, people who appear timeless. This familiar dichotomy is undermined by a slightly different perspective on immediacy, one which views time not distributed in ways familiar to westerners (genealogy, generation, etc.) but instead in spatial forms, with social groups distributed in massive networks of movement and interaction. So, for instance, the *hxaro* exchange networks of "clanless" Kalahari foragers are all about long-term futures, distributed as they are across vast social scales and thus long stretches of time, even transgenerational.

The point to this is that the evolutionary baseline for inequality may not reside in the genealogies of clanship as much as it does the temporality of social life. No society ever documented by anthropologists can honestly be described as timeless, with no sense of a past that we would call historical and no sense of a future that would differ from a given present. Arguably, the seemingly timeless people of the world have the deepest sense of time, and they would appear—if archaeologically real and not imagined—to have figured out how to sustain themselves for long stretches of time without significant structural change. These qualities come into play in the very last chapter of the book, where the authors look to the clanless foragers of the world for object lessons on resisting inequality. In a welcome twist on an otherwise linear narrative, Flannery and Marcus invite the *Primitive Other* to jump the evolutionary scale and become relevant to our own future. I would have liked much more on this; but a topic that warranted lengthy consideration comes down to only a few pages. I feel there was opportunity lost here to underscore the value of archaeological knowledge and perspectives to looming challenges. The quick exit of this book makes this reader feel that either space had grown short or the authors were unwilling to go too far down the pathway of activist archaeology.

Quibbles aside, this book is well worth buying and reading, and it is mercifully affordable. It will likely stand as a standard reference on the evolution of social inequality for decades to come and it is one of the few works written expressly for the public that puts our own struggles with social inequality into deep-time perspective. The enduring challenge is to mobilize archaeological perspectives for a better tomorrow.