SEEKING A RICHER HARVEST:
An introduction to the archaeology of subsistence intensification, innovation, and change

Tina L. Thurston and Christopher T. Fisher*

INTRODUCTION

Plowed ground smells of earthworms and empires. – Justin Isherwood

In current times, intensification is most often discussed in terms of feeding the world’s poor, counteracting globalization, or improving the balance of trade, issues earnestly debated by economists, geographers, development experts, and agricultural soil scientists, chemists, and the like (i.e. Bashaasha et al. 2001, Bebbington 1997, Byerlee et al., 1997, FitzSimmons 1986, Pingali 1989, Smith et al., 1994). When one speaks to current farmers, the voices are more immediate, if sometimes ambivalent (Bennett and Warrington 2003a). Some praise intensification and the coming of the “new” while others damn it, still others point out both successes and failures with the introduction of ‘scientific’ farming.

For the historically documented past, one finds many illustrations of experimentation with subsistence methods and their relative intensity (Bassett 1988, Jacobs 1996, Koval’chenko and Borodkin 1988, Rhode 1995). Some past processes are described as driven by a need for more food or to supply markets; others as attempts to

* Tina L. Thurston, Department of Anthropology, State University of New York at Buffalo, Buffalo, NY 14261. Christopher T. Fisher, Department of Anthropology, Colorado State University Fort Collins, CO 80523.
prop up states and empires; usually, there is a substantial distance between the historian’s voice and the reality of fields, pastures, and high seas.

In some ways, traditional archaeological approaches to the study of subsistence change have been akin to historic voices – distant, omniscient, and mostly about outcomes – or perceived outcomes – this volume seeks to consider the conditions of past farmers, herders, and other producers more directly, taking cues from ethnographers and NGOs, as opposed to historians and demographers, to learn not only about structures and institutions, but also about experience, intention, and process.

With this volume, we attempt a fresh look at an old topic – the intensification of food production – long cited as an important indicator or engine of cultural evolution in the archaeological record. Intensification of subsistence generally refers to productivity increases generated through changes in the methods of agricultural or pastoral production (see discussion Morrison, 1994:115) – a seemingly simple concept that has proved surprisingly difficult to apply. In archaeology, intensification itself is almost always imagined in similar ways: explanations typically focus on “how agriculture intensifies, who benefits, and who (or what) pays the price” (Dove 1997:399), referring to the technologies and features of agricultural systems.

Intensification has been invoked as both a cause and outcome of state development, population growth, climatic or environmental change, and centralization, and in addition, often forms the basis for explanations centered on the evolution of subsistence systems (R. McC Adams, 1966; Blanton, et al., 1982; Boserup, 1965, 1981; Brumfiel, 1983; Butzer, 1977; Erickson, 1993; Flannery, 1972; Haas, 1982; Kolata, 1996; Parsons, 1991; Parsons et al., 1985; Sanders, 1976; Sanders et al., 1979; Steward, 1949, 1955; Wittfogel, 1957; Wright, 1986).

Given the centrality of intensification to seminal archaeological explanation, and the major shifts in archaeological thought over the past two decades, it is remarkable that more has not been written on the subject in recent years (though there are exceptions – i.e. Hastorf 1983, 1993; Hastorf and Earle 1985, Kirch 1985, 1994; Lade- foged et al. 1995, Leach 1999; Morrison 1994, 1996; Nichols 1987; Stahl 1995; Stone and Downum 1999). Even fewer have attempted to study other processes of subsistence change, such as specialization, diversification, or disintensification.

As some have noted, archaeologists working in a variety of contexts “routinely and incorrectly label virtually any kind of subsistence change...‘intensification.’ They conflate intensification with more extensive use of some resource rather than employing the term to refer to increased per capita labor expenditure for a specific resource or for overall subsistence (Arnold et al 2004:1).” Many consider the conditions of agrarian production and neglect discussion of large-scale marine exploitation, or the complex connections between livestock and cereal strategies (Benchirifa and Johnson 1991, Blowfield and Donaldson 1994, Bourne and Wint 1994) and the multiplicity of mixed processes adopted by farmers to exploit niches and short-term opportunities. Others fail to imagine that conflicting local needs and state demands form a complex matrix of pressures, resulting in a simultaneous combination of strategies (Potter 2001). There is also a tendency to forget that “processes of intensification and innovation that are implicated in change to agricultural systems are, similarly, instances of more general processes of adaptation and transformation