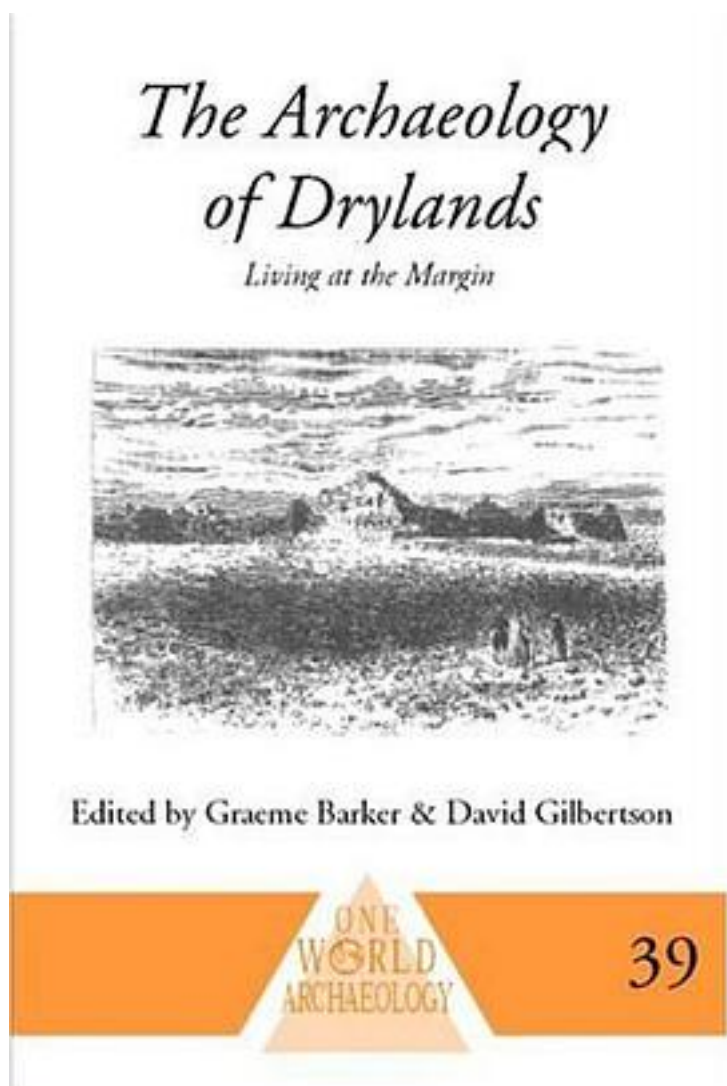


Archaeology of Drylands



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Many dryland regions contain archaeological remains which suggest that there must have been intensive phases of settlement in what now seem to be dry and degraded environments. Scholars have often speculated about what must have happened to turn past glories into present day barrenness, opinions generally dividing between climatic change and human activity as the primary culprit. Perhaps climate shifted to greater aridity, perhaps catastrophic but short-term droughts became too frequent? Or was it that people sowed the seeds of their own destruction, for example by removing trees or developing irrigation systems that promoted salinization, stripping the landscape for fuelwood, or by allowing their livestock to overgraze? The debate has been characterized more by assertion than by knowledge. Contemporary ecological theory suggests that relationships between dryland environments, climate, and people are not simple: drylands can be remarkably resilient both in terms of their environment and the subsistence and farming systems that were once abundant. The archaeological, anthropological and palaeoenvironmental studies in *The Archaeology of Drylands* bring deep time perspective to these debates. This approach is used to examine how different kinds of societies of Africa, the Americas, Asia and Europe, whether near or remote in time, used their different drylands. It explores the risks and opportunities they confronted, identifies the solutions they reached and the reasons for them, and examines the short- and long-term consequences of those solutions. Through developing a more sophisticated perspective based upon archaeological knowledge, the chapters in this book discuss successes and failures of past land use and settlement in drylands, and contribute to wider modern debates about desertification and the sustainability of dryland settlement.

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