

Reevaluating What We Know About the Histories of Maize in Northeastern North America: A Review of Current Evidence

John P. Hart · William A. Lovis

Published online: 14 December 2012
© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2012

Abstract The adoption of maize in northeastern North America is often seen as a catalyst for the development of settled village life. In this review we develop a theoretical framework centered on shifting-balance theory (SBT) and domesticated landscapes through which to understand the context for the adoption of maize agriculture in the Northeast. We review micro- and macrobotanical evidence and stable carbon isotope data from various sources to reevaluate maize histories and adoption trajectories. These data are coupled with contributions of subregionally significant predecessor plants, such as those constituting the Eastern Agricultural Complex, and wild rice. We find no evidence for rapid transitions to settled village life as a result of maize adoption. Maize was grown for centuries before settled village agricultural systems evolved. It was grown for a sufficiently long time that the potential for local selection leading to Northern Flint is a viable working hypothesis. We call for a refocusing of research questions and a systematic application of contemporary techniques as a means by which to strengthen future inferences based on comparative information sets.

Keywords *Zea mays* ssp. *mays* · Domesticated landscapes · Shifting-balance theory · Agricultural evolution · Paleoethnobotany

J. P. Hart (✉)
Research and Collections Division, New York State Museum, 260 Madison Avenue, Albany,
NY 12230, USA
e-mail: jph_nysm@mail.nysed.gov

W. A. Lovis
Department of Anthropology, Michigan State University, 355 Baker Hall, 655 Auditorium Road,
East Lansing, MI 48824, USA
e-mail: lovis@msu.edu