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American Archaeology

AT THE mid-century archaeology as a science is little more than 100 years old in the Americas. During this period it has been concerned with (1) systematic description, (2) historical ordering, and (3) functional understanding. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century investigators were primarily systematists in the description and classification of prehistoric cultural phenomena. After 1912 the temporal and spatial ordering of classified archaeological data (ceramics) was successfully demonstrated in the southwestern United States, and a disciplined historical approach was inaugurated. These innovations, borrowed in part from Old World archaeologists, established a trend that has been reinforced by the contemporary historical objectives in the allied field of ethnology. Since 1940, however, a third approach, the functional, has prompted an increasing demand for the understanding of cultural processes as these are revealed by, or inferred from, archaeological remains.

The historical approach has contributed most to American archaeology over the past 100 years, and systematic description and taxonomy have been largely the means to the ends of time-space reconstructions. The following conclusions seem to be especially noteworthy: First, the prehistoric past in the Western Hemisphere is directly ancestral to the American Indian cultures of the historic period, and no "mysterious lost race" is responsible for the earlier monuments and remains. Second, there is good evidence that the Americas were first peopled from Asia at the close of the Pleistocene, about 15,000 years ago, and that the aborigines had worked their way to Tierra del Fuego 5,000 years ago. Third, a rich American neolithic civilization or series of civilizations, based upon sedentary maize farming, developed somewhere between central Mexico and Peru as early as 1000 B.C. From these civilizations grew the classic New World states of the Maya, Aztec, and Inca, and basic neolithic influences spread as far northward as Utah and the Great Lakes, and as far southward as Chiloe Island and the Paraná River. Fourth, the interconnections between North and South America were

through Central America; the West Indies were merely a cultural appendage of the South American mainland. Fifth, it is fairly certain that the cultural traditions of the southwestern and southeastern United States were developed in semi-isolation from Middle American centers and from each other, and that both areas had settled farming populations by the beginning of the Christian era. Moreover, a surprisingly complex ceremonialism, including large-scale earthwork construction, was present in the eastern United States at about this same time. Sixth, the ancestors of the colorful nineteenth-century semino-madic horsemen of the eastern plains of North America were settled village farmers as late as the sixteenth century. Seventh, the earliest known levels of Eskimo culture have an elaborate art style (later to disappear), with close affinities to Asiatic styles dating after the beginning of the Christian era.

For many of these substantial findings the aid of other scientific disciplines has been crucial. Dendro-chronology (during the past 30 years) and carbon 14 analyses (during the past 5 years) have provided absolute datings of cultures, and geology and paleontology have solved many problems involving the early peopling of the Americas.

For all attempts at functional interpretations there is necessary recourse to historical data. In the North American Plains and elsewhere a study of acculturative processes has been possible on the basis of ethno-historic-to-archaeologic sequences. In the eastern and southwestern U. S. correlations of natural environmental situations with culture types in sequence have given an insight into ecological adaptations. Long culture sequences in Middle America and Peru have provided the historical facts for developmental-functional interpretations. And in the southwestern United States settlement pattern, house-type, and house-content analyses are revealing a chronology of prehistoric social organizations. Recent critiques or appraisals of archaeological methodology indicate the need of a comprehension of process, as well as historical outline.

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