

*Published in Archaeology of Eastern North America, Vol. 5, pp. 138-43 (1977). In retrospect I had no idea how daring I was. This contribution was issued at the time the doctrine of "New Archaeology" was at its apex. There were cases of scholars losing their academic positions for failing to toe the line. Indeed the article was solicited by the editor of the journal to rebut what he considered outlandish claims. He had difficulty finding a professional archaeologist that had not closeted him/herself.*

## A CYCLE OF NORTH AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGIES

By B. K. Swartz, Jr. from [Selected Writings](#)

*We have not managed to surmount the obstacle, as we were absolutely determined to do, but life has taken us around it, led us past it, and then if we turn around to gaze at the remote past, we can barely catch sight of it, so imperceptible it has become. (Proust)*

*The more things change, the more they remain the same. (Karr)*

*The exact contrary of what is generally believed is often the truth. (La Bruyere)*

From a developmental perspective, a series of theoretical approaches in dealing with archaeological data can be formulated for North American archaeology, in general, and eastern North American in particular. These may be labeled Object Archaeology, Taxonomic Archaeology, Spatiotemporal Archaeology and Cultural Archaeology. The purpose of this paper is to examine briefly these approaches, and then to attempt to evaluate where North American archaeology is now.

### OBJECT ARCHAEOLOGY

In Object Archaeology, each material remain, often elaborate or in some way unusual, is studied as a separate entity. This procedure must be followed if an object is divorced from its member assemblage. It may occur as an isolated find, but practitioners of Object Archaeology often cause assemblage disassociation by using inadequate provenience recording and/or improper field recovery of remains in context. Descriptive data and specific cultural interpretation can be extracted from discrete archaeological objects, but no integrated description or generalization is possible. Such objects are usually put into "collections" on the basis of morphological class units, for example points, pots, birdstones, etc. The commonest, practitioners of Object Archaeology (though not only they) are non-fulltime-professional workers, sometimes specified as amateur or avocational archaeologists, though some realize the limitation of this approach.

## TAXONOMIC ARCHAEOLOGY

The term taxonomy used here is restricted to the classic method used in biology, i.e., *the inductive classification of units on the basis of natural relationships*. To a biologist this would be the classification of species on the basis of phylogeny and to an archaeologist the classification of assemblages on the basis of cultural relationships; true taxonomy ignores time and space relationships. The writer differs with Willey and Phillips (1958:12) and Rouse (1960:315) by this usage. They would use the term not only for the classification of culture units but, also, artifact types. This activity, called typology, is a branch of classification traditionally used by classical biological taxonomists, but it need not be applied to conventional archaeological taxonomic study. The analogy of paleontological (biology) and archaeological (culture) classification should not be taken too far, however, in that culture variation not only occurs by developmental innovation (evolution), but, also, by borrowing (diffusion) and, therefore, the phenomenon of anastomosis must be dealt with. A Frenchman may learn to speak Chinese or build pagodas, but a pig, nor any of his descendants, can ever become a hippopotamus.

In North America a taxonomically oriented variety of archaeology evolved in the Midwestern United States, formally appearing in 1932 (McKern 1939:301). An early application of the method was done with eastern Massachusetts material (Smith 1940). On the basis of my narrowed usage of the concept of taxonomy, the only legitimate taxa in the

Midwestern "Taxonomic" System are *Focus* and, possibly, *Aspect*. *Phase*, *Pattern* and *Base* are units defined by limited diagnostic keys rather than formulated by inductive search of archaeological content. Temporal ordering implications are present for *Phase*, e.g. Early, Middle, and Late Woodland is a sequence. *Component* is, of course, a valid and useful classification unit widely accepted and used by English-speaking prehistorians, but it is based on geological contexts. *Site* is a locality--not a unit of classification.

The development of Taxonomic Archaeology in eastern North America is probably an historic aberration. In pre-1930 eastern North America there were no widely accepted regional sequences, but recognition of extensive overlapping distributions of assemblages, the necessary prerequisites of such a development. Earlier introduction of stratigraphic excavation methods and chronometric placement techniques would have probably modified or aborted taxonomic efforts .

## SPATIOTEMPORAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Historically, Taxonomic Archaeology evolved from Object Archaeology in the Midwestern United States quite late. In other parts of North America relative placement techniques, namely stratigraphy and seriation, though chronometric tree-ring dating soon followed, were discovered and employed quite early in the establishment of regional

sequences. The best beginning for early North American Spatiotemporal, or more appropriately in its earlier phases, Chronological, Archaeology, is 1912-1916 in the Southwest with the concurrent work of A. L. Kroeber, Nels C. Nelson and Leslie Spier, though early independent work was also done in California by Nelson, E. W. Gifford and others. However, the assumptions and precepts of Spatiotemporal Archaeology were not formally presented until Willey and Phillips (1958). Radiocarbon dating and the Willey-Phillips placement scheme overthrew the Taxonomic Archaeology of the Midwest in the 1960's.

## CULTURAL ARCHAEOLOGY

In the United States, prehistoric archaeology is, almost invariably, taught in Departments of Anthropology. Making archaeology a sub-discipline of anthropology demonstrates the recognition of the function of archaeology as cultural interpretation of the past. This may be by lifeway reconstruction, for example, Lewis and Kneberg's (1946) Hiwassee Island, or by tool manufacture and/or use interpretation, the modern approach pioneered in the Old World by Semenov (1957). Formalized thought on Cultural Archaeology was discussed by Steward (1942). Criticism of early Spatiotemporal (Chronological) Archaeology and Taxonomic Archaeology was initiated by Taylor (1948), stressing contextual interpretation. The issue of method was introduced with the establishment by Binford (1968) of what was to be called New [or Contemporary (Leone)] or, now that it is getting old, Processual (Schiffer 1976:2-4) Archaeology. Though virtually all American anthropological archaeologists are, in part, Cultural Archaeologists, it was Binford and his group who finally exorcised not only taxonomy in the Midwest, but, also, both typological and culture unit classification in general, from much contemporary archaeology. For example, Brose questions whether archaeological units with no contextual relationship can or should be formed! (Swartz 1971: 176~177). Indeed it is unfortunate that New and Traditional archaeologists alike do not seem to comprehend the difference between spatiotemporal and cultural interpretation classification procedures, a distinction pointed out by Brainerd (1951:302) and reiterated by the writer (Swartz 1967, 1968, 1971:175). To illustrate, one is not saying the same thing when describing an artifact as a Kan'a black-on-white sherd or a Hopi water pot. The distinction between phonetics and semantics (Bloomfield 1933:74, 513) might serve as an analogous linguistic example. I think it is this confusion that has caused New Archaeologists to repudiate non-contextual classification and traditional Cultural Archaeologists to acquiesce although they sense something is wrong.

The New Archaeologists have maintained, and indeed stressed, Spaulding's (1960) ideas of attribute analysis, even encouraging computer application. The nature of this work is analytic, however, not classificatory, in that interpretation, not order, is the primary goal.

The fundamental difference between New Archaeology and Traditional Archaeology as proposed by practitioner's of the former is that they are scientific, and Traditional Archaeologist's are historical in method and outlook. New Archaeologists make two distinctions to support this dichotomy. The first is the difference between idiography and

nomonomy, an observation noted by Windelband (1894). This division was widely introduced into anthropology by Radcliffe-Brown:

"In an idiographic enquiry the purpose is to establish as acceptable, certain, particular or factual propositions or statements. A nomothetic enquiry, on the contrary, has for its purpose to arrive at acceptable, general propositions. We define the nature of enquiry by the kind of conclusion aimed at" (1953:1-2) .

This idea was further enunciated by White, perhaps the major anthropological theoretical influence of the "New" archaeologists. Indeed White explicitly `states that only descriptive history but by evolutionary development is idiographic:

"The evolutionist process is like the historical, or diffusionist, process in that both are temporal, and therefore irreversible and nonrepetitive. But they differ in that the former is nomothetic in character, whereas the latter is idiographic" (1959:30) .

The mistake Radcliffe-Brown, White, and "New" Archaeologists on one side, and Boas on the other, make is in confusing the operations of two types of history--particularizing and integrating (Kroeber 1935). Integrative history is as generalizing or nomothetic, if not more so, than science. Use of the word history for both operations is, perhaps, unfortunate in that it has caused misplaced thinking. The Culture History of Traditional Archaeology primarily deals with integrative history and its nomothetic contributions far outstrip "New" Archaeology.

A more valid distinction between the "history" of Traditional Archaeology and the "science" of "New" Archaeology is the emphasis of the Historical Method by the former and the Comparative Method by the latter. The conscious application of the Historical Method to anthropology, termed the Culture-Historical Method, was advanced by Boas (1896) to counter the claim's of the Unilineal Evolutionists . The Comparative Method is as old as Social Philosophy, but was explicitly formulated on the basis of a comparative anatomy model for anthropology, or more precisely "comparative sociology," by Radcliffe-Brown (1940), probably inspired by, though not acknowledging, Spencer's biological and social analogies. The contrast of these two approaches was brought to the particular attention of archaeologists by Steward (1955:88).

It should be `stressed, though, that this distinction is not a dichotomy, but a continuum. Historians emphasize integrating data for making generalizations and tend to defer making comparisons until certain levels of abstraction are reached, while scientist's select specific data, or even atomize data, and proceed initially by comparing it. The battles of Traditional and "New" archaeology are, indeed nothing more than contemporary recognition of Francis Bacon's divisions of thought into Natural History and Natural Philosophy narrowly applied to archaeology.

## THE FUTURE

New Archaeologists, realizing that classification cannot be perfect and that it, therefore, distorts reality, reject this procedure. They must, then, soon realize that the full range of completely demonstrated cultural interpretation cannot be derived from archaeological remains and must also be rejected. North American archaeology 'shall then reach "an ever 'higher' pinnacle", the study' of the only real thing--the object. Each remain can then be studied on its own terms. In order to acquire complete and detailed information, field collectors, rather than theoreticians should be called upon to do the sophisticated work.

As a footnote, there seems to be another cycle, a ten year landmark publication cycle, of some theoretical archaeological concepts:

1. 1938 (Steward and Setzler) - Formal recognition of Cultural Archaeology in North America.
2. 1948 (Taylor) - Attempted repudiation of Chronological Archaeology in North America, formalization of cultural archaeological interpretation by conjunctive association.
3. 1958 (Willey and Phillips) - Formal classification procedure for Spatiotemporal Archaeology, replacement of Taxonomic Archaeology.
4. 1968 (Binford) - Promulgation of archaeology as Social Science in North America.
5. 1978 (??)

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