Archaeology and the Ethnographic Present

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article soutient que la recherche archéologique est essentielle pour la compréhension des données ethnographiques. C'est seulement à la lumière de l'archéologie que l'on peut établir objectivement la nature des cultures qui ont existé avant le contact avec les Européens. Dans un cadre plus étendu, toutes les ethnographies doivent être comprises comme des descriptions d'un moment dans un continuum de changement. On peut donc dire que l'archéologie, l'ethnographie et l'histoire (comprenant l'ethnohistoire) constituent des approches mutuellement interdépendantes à l'étude des aborigènes de l'Amérique du Nord.

This paper will examine certain aspects of the changing relationship between prehistoric archaeology and the other social sciences during the last quarter of a century. I will restrict my comments to work done in North America and illustrate them with references to Iroquoian archaeology.

Prior to the 1960s, prehistoric archaeology was generally considered to be the weak sister of ethnology or social anthropology. In spite of the work of first-rate archaeologists such as William A. Ritchie or Richard S. MacNeish, ethnologists continued to view it as a factual discipline that was unable to contribute significantly to the development of anthropological theory, either because of the limitations of its data or because of its practitioners' specialized intellectual horizons. Prehistoric archaeology was little more esteemed than it had been in the previous century, when Egerton Ryerson had

despaired of the purposeless of Sir Daniel Wilson's pre-occupation with Indian bones and broken clay pipes (Harris 1976: 87). Yet, despite attitudes such as these, anthropology had held together as an academic discipline in North America. By contrast, in Europe archaeology and ethnology had evolved into autonomous disciplines, following the rejection of the concept of unilinear evolution late in the nineteenth century. Anthropology remained united in North America because its various sub-disciplines had found a common focus in the study of the American Indian. Indeed, Indian studies, either by design or by default, became for a time exclusively the prerogative of anthropology.

As anthropology had developed under the leadership of Franz Boas, its traditional four fields were devoted to the study of Indian physical types, Indian languages, Indian prehistory, and Indian ethnology. Although ethnologists later studied contemporary life on Indian reserves, at first they sought to record the traditional cultures of as many Indian groups as possible before these were totally forgotten. Because Indian life had been altered so radically by European contact, ethnographic field work normally took the form of interviewing elderly native people, who claimed to remember what their ways had been like prior to change. The results of these studies, as exemplified in T.F. McIlwraith's (1948) *The Bella Coola Indians*, were usually generalized impressions rather than detailed descriptions of behaviour, that viewed societies retrospectively through the eyes of a few members. This produced ethnographies that were normative rather than behavioural in orientation. Nevertheless, ethnographers believed that working in this manner they could reconstruct a valid picture of what Indian life had been like prior to the arrival of the White Man and that their ethnographies constituted a corpus of case studies that were useful for understanding the cultural similarities and differences of mankind. Only traditional ways of life were believed to be sufficiently integrated and self-sufficient for this purpose; Indian groups living under White domination were too "disrupted" to constitute valid units for comparison. This implied that cultural diffusion in prehistoric times, unlike in the historic period, had not been so disruptive as to prevent individual cultures from remaining integrated units. Native cultures, as they were described in the late nineteenth century in western America by native informants and in the east from historical documents to a much

larger degree, were accepted as constituting a basis on which cross-cultural comparisons could be made. Cultures were thus treated in isolation from their historical context and as if they existed in an atemporal «ethnographic present».

The most striking element lacking from the original constitution of anthropology was history. This was no accident. Instead, it reflected the opinion prevailing among nineteenth century White Americans that history, which to them implied change and development, was a characteristic of White, but not of Indian societies. Anthropology, as the study of the Indians, dealt with peoples who were seen as intrinsically incapable of change. Thus anthropology was viewed as a substitute for history and even as its antithesis. Given these presuppositions, it is not surprising that historical studies were excluded from the make-up of anthropology.

The idea that Indian cultures had not changed much in prehistoric times seemed to be supported by the observation that when they were first contacted by Europeans all of them still had a stone tool technology. Yet in Europe, where there was a vested interest in demonstrating that the material progress so spectacularly manifested in modern times had been characteristic of all periods, developmental trends had quickly been delineated within all major periods, including the Stone Age. The American conviction that the Indian had no history was derived not from anthropological evidence but from the religious doctrine, first applied to North America in Puritan New England, that the Indians' failure to develop and make use of their land justified the Whites seizing it from them (Dickason 1977). This view remained useful and hence popular as White colonization spread westward. Although Boas and his students firmly rejected ideas about the natural inferiority of Indians and denied that one culture could be judged superior or inferior to another, they did not promote the study of Indian history in a recognizable form. They continued to believe that, in general, Indian cultures had been unchanging prior to the arrival of the Europeans. This was no longer rationalized by assuming that Indians were biologically inferior to Whites. Instead it was postulated that most native cultures had been harmoniously integrated and attuned to their environments in prehistoric times. Change had come about as a result of White intrusion destroying this balance. The few anthropologists who expressed an interest in studying prehistoric change among the

Indians (Sapir 1916) did so in a mechanical and "unprocessual" fashion.

The idea that native cultures had been essentially unchanging in prehistoric times was reflected in American archaeology until the 1930s. Interpretations of the archaeological evidence reflected the assumption that Indian prehistory had been short and uneventful. The most obvious challenge to this view came from the imposing remains of the Hopewell-Adena and Mississippian cultures in the midwestern United States. Yet it is significant that so long as these so-called Moundbuilder cultures were held to be superior to those of Indians of the historic period it was widely believed that the Moundbuilders were racially not Indians; whereas, once the Moundbuilders were generally admitted to be Indians towards the end of the nineteenth century, their cultures were said to be no more advanced than those of the historic period. The wish not to see change in the archaeological record also encouraged archaeologists to assume that the Indians had been living in the New World for only a few thousand years. While a handful of archaeologists sought to demonstrate that there had been a palaeolithic period in North America to rival that of Europe in its antiquity, Aleš Hrdlička's refutation of their evidence easily won support because it proved what most archaeologists wanted it to do (Trigger 1978a: 87).

At first, American archaeologists interpreted prehistoric remains in terms of what they knew about geographical and ethnic variation in American Indian cultures at the time of European contact. It was generally assumed that these cultures could be traced backward into prehistoric times in the archaeological record without much change being observed. William Beauchamp (1900) and A. C. Parker (1907; 1922) discussed prehistoric Iroquoian materials from upper New York State in terms of the historic tribes of that region and attributed earlier, stylistically-different finds to Algonkians, whom they believed the invading Iroquoians had expelled and forced to resettle in neighbouring regions. It was routinely asserted that prehistoric Iroquoian assemblages closely resembled those of the historic period (Beauchamp 1900: 20-21; Parker 1922: 98). The exceptions were Parker's (1907: 474; 1922: 509) observation of significant differences between Iroquoian sites of the historic and prehistoric periods in Chautauqua County, south of Lake Erie, and William Wintemberg's (1939: 60; 1948: 40-41) informal but sound cultural chronology for

Iroquoian sites in southwestern Ontario, which was based on developmental criteria. Wintemberg (1928: 48) noted the improved quality of Iroquoian pottery through time and suggested that the Iroquoians had developed their distinctive pottery wares after they had arrived in their historic homeland. He also noted that the Iroquoians had borrowed far more from the "Algonkians" than the latter had from them (1935: 231). Nevertheless, he continued to maintain that the "Algonkian" appearance of early Iroquoian cultures in southwestern Ontario resulted from intermingling and borrowing of traits between Iroquoian invaders and indigenous Algonkians. Such views did not encourage archaeologists to spend much time trying to work out precise developmental chronologies.

Stratigraphic excavations were made sporadically in the United States beginning in the 1860s. Yet such excavations and a concern with working-up local cultural chronologies by means of seriation did not begin to transform the archaeology of the American Southwest until a growing awareness of European archaeology led N. C. Nelson, A. L. Kroeber, and Leslie Spier to apply these techniques beginning in 1913 (Willey and Sabloff 1974: 88-130). This work led to Kidder's *An Introduction to the Study of Southwestern Archaeology*, the first historical synthesis of the prehistoric archaeology of any part of the United States (Kidder 1924). By the 1930s, archaeological material from many regions of the United States was being integrated to form *foci* and *phases* (which were concepts equivalent to the European concept of the archaeological *culture*) and these in turn were being arranged by means of seriation and stratigraphy to form regional chronologies. In the central and northeastern United States, this type of approach was dominated by the Midwestern Taxonomic Method, which stressed the formal comparison of total assemblages of artifacts (McKern 1939). These developments made archaeologists far more aware than they had been before that major cultural changes had taken place in prehistoric times. They were also becoming increasingly interested in the developmental implications of these changes (Ford and Willey 1941; Willey and Phillips 1958; Caldwell 1958).

These developments influenced Iroquoian archaeology only very slowly. In New York State, Beauchamp and Parker had concentrated on Iroquoian archaeology. Both men carried out extensive site surveys and discussed various facets of material culture in the light of Iroquois

ethnology. In Ontario, geographically more restricted, but even more intensive and in some cases technically superior surveys of Iroquoian sites were carried out by Andrew F. Hunter, George E. Laidlaw, and W. J. Wintemberg, all associates of David Boyle at the Provincial Museum in Toronto. Later, Wintemberg published a series of standardized reports on his excavations of a carefully-selected sample of Iroquoian sites in different parts of southern Ontario. These reports stressed the functional interpretation of artifacts and adhered closely to the organizational principles that Harlan I. Smith (1910) had pioneered in his monograph on the Fox Farm site in northern Kentucky. This report, on a site of the Fort Ancient culture, had been titled *The Prehistoric Ethnology of a Kentucky Site.* Wintemberg continued to report his findings in this style throughout his life. Only shortly before he died in 1941, did he begin to reconsider his data in terms of the Midwestern Taxonomic Method (Wintemberg 1942). During the 1930s and 1940s, William Ritchie attempted to counter-balance Parker's pre-occupation with the Iroquoian prehistory of New York State by concentrating on what he called the "pre-Iroquoian" occupations of the area. His principal synthesis of this material was organized in terms of the Midwestern Taxonomic Method (Ritchie 1944). As a result of this hiatus, new programs of field work relating to Iroquoian archaeology, largely initiated by Ritchie in New York State and Norman Emerson in Ontario, began late enough that they were influenced by the *in situ* hypothesis. This theory, which proposed that Iroquoian cultures had evolved from so-called "pre-Iroquoian" antecedents, had first been formally proposed by James B. Griffin (1944) and Bertram S. Kraus (1944). It was substantiated, between 1947 and 1949, by Richard S. MacNeish's (1952) study of Iroquoian pottery types. The *in situ* hypothesis raised a host of problems of a processual sort that are still being studied and elaborated.

Thus both for Iroquoian archaeology and for North American archaeology as a whole, the development of an interest in chronology gradually negated the traditional view that native cultures were essentially static. By providing indisputable evidence of cultural change, which had frequently been rapid in the east in Late Woodland times and intermittently so at other periods, it revealed Indian cultures to have had dynamic properties in prehistoric times. This challenged White Men's views about Indians that were deeply-rooted both in popular mythology and in anthropological theory. The strength of the

traditional, static view of Indian cultures can be measured by the difficulties that it posed for the acceptance of the *in situ* hypothesis. The previous hypothesis, which had postulated that Iroquoian culture had developed in the southeastern United States and been carried northward by a migration, did not explain cultural change in the vicinity of the lower Great Lakes in a developmental fashion. Instead, it attributed it to a single event, the incursion of the Iroquoians. In spite of denials that taxonomic relationships, as established by the Midwestern Taxonomic Method, implied genetic relationships (Griffin 1943: 327-341), many archaeologists equated the distinction between the cultures assigned to the Woodland and Mississippian patterns in New York State with the older distinction between Algonkian and Iroquoian ones. The presumed difficulty, if not the inconceivability, of cultures evolving from one of these patterns to the other seemed to sanction the reluctance that some archaeologists felt for perceiving the so-called "pre-Iroquoian" cultures of New York State as being potentially ancestral to Iroquoian ones. It was hard for many Iroquoian archaeologists and ethnologists to accept the possibility that native cultures had changed that radically over relatively brief intervals of time. Because they lacked a longstanding commitment to the Midwestern Taxonomic System, Ontario archaeologists generally found it easier to accept many of the implications of the *in situ* hypothesis than did their colleagues in New York State.

While archaeologists were learning to study chronology and cultural change, some ethnologists were at last developing an interest in Indian history. This interest evolved out of a concern with acculturation that began to form in the 1930s (Redfield, Linton and Herskovits 1936; Linton 1940). It was hoped that, by discovering how Indian cultures had reacted to different forms of White domination, anthropologists could assist governments to formulate more humane and effective policies for dealing with modern Indian groups. These studies for the first time made anthropologists aware of the complex series of changes that Indian cultures had experienced since the beginnings of European contact. It was also realized that the gap in anthropological knowledge between the prehistoric period, studied by the archaeologist, and the past as recalled by the ethnographer's oldest native informants could be bridged only by historically-orientated research. Works such as William N. Fenton's (1940) "Problems Arising from the Historic Northeastern Position of the Iroquois" and

E. H. Spicer's *Perspectives in American Indian Culture Change* and (1962) *Cycles of Conquest* are milestones in the development of studies of acculturation into what by the 1950s had come to be called "ethnohistory". As a result of these studies, it had become evident that change had characterized Indian cultures from long before the arrival of Europeans to the present. The arrival of the Europeans may have hastened the process of change and radically altered its direction, but it did not initiate it for most Indian groups.

Most of what we can hope to learn about the nature of social and cultural change in prehistoric times must be elicited from archaeological data. In recent years, archaeologists have developed greater expertise in doing this. Research in Ontario and New York State has shed considerable light on the evolution of Iroquoian subsistence patterns, house types, villages, trading networks, burial customs, and other religious practices (Wright 1966; Noble 1969; Tuck 1971; MacNeish 1976). It has also provided a basis for attempting to explain the development of Iroquoian residence patterns and kinship systems (Trigger 1976: 131-137). Archaeologists have also made progress in tracing the origin and gradual merging of the entities that eventually constituted larger historic groupings, such as the Huron confederacy. Peter Ramsden's (1977) work seems to demonstrate conclusively that in Ontario more is to be learned by "down-streaming" than from the direct historical approach; quite the contrary of what many of us formerly thought might be the case.

Archaeology also provides considerable information about cultural changes in the historic period. In particular, it can supplement information concerning many aspects of material culture that are described only briefly in written sources. Attempts to match archaeological and historical data began early and are exemplified by Father A. E. Jones' (1908) efforts to locate historical Indian villages and by K. E. Kidd's (1953) systematic study of the Ossossané ossuary. Archaeologists long ago became aware that funerary offerings and trade in exotic materials, such as marine shell, had become greatly elaborated in the historic period by comparison with prehistoric times. In recent years, these studies have been broadened to include changes in subsistence patterns, house types, and the distribution of trade goods within sites (Tyyska 1968; Tyyska and Hurley 1969).

Such studies are difficult to execute because they require detailed knowledge of historical sources and how to use them, as well as

familiarity with archaeological data. Understanding the written sources has been complicated in recent years by a revisionist tendency among some ethnologists, who have tried to re-interpret these sources with respect to crucial ethnological issues, such as residence patterns (Smith 1970; 1973). Cara Richards (1967), for example, has argued that the latter were patrilinear rather than matrilinear among the Iroquoians in prehistoric times. For the most part, these revisionist efforts impress me as being far more radical than the evidence warrants (Trigger 1976: 418-425, 852; 1978b). They draw attention, however, to the need for more archaeological data concerning crucial issues relating to the historic period. Analysing such data will require closer co-operation between archaeologists and experienced ethnohistorians than has occurred hitherto.

In recent years, archaeologists and ethnohistorians have together become increasingly aware of the importance of what it has become fashionable to call the protohistoric period (Noble 1969). This has been defined as the interval between the first evidence of European contact influencing a native culture, however indirectly, and the beginning of the intimate and well-documented contact that characterizes the beginning of the historic period. For the Huron, the latter begins with Champlain's visit in 1615; for the Mohawk perhaps with the visit of van Den Bogaert in 1634.

The protohistoric period poses two problems of anthropological interest, neither of which can be answered without the assistance of archaeological data. Nancy Lurie (1959: 37) has argued that, in general, Indians "made their first adjustments to Europeans in terms of existing native conditions". This implies that the manner in which Indian groups coped with change in prehistoric times determined how they first attempted to deal with the problems and opportunities posed by the arrival of the Europeans. If this is so, an understanding of cultural change in prehistoric times is essential for explaining cultural change in the protohistoric and early historic periods. In *The Children of Aataentsic*, I have argued that differing prehistoric developments, no less than different geographical settings, explain the strikingly different reactions of the Huron and the Iroquois to the early fur trade (Trigger 1976: 175-176).

The second problem is that ethnohistorical research has shown that European contact, either directly or indirectly, had begun to transform the native cultures of North America long before any

significant information was recorded about them. These transformations came about in many ways, altered societies hundreds of miles inland from the frontiers of European settlement, and affected all sectors of Indian life. My work editing the *Northeast Volume* of *The Handbook of North American Indians* convinces me that not one culture in the northeastern Woodlands region was described even in moderate detail before it was substantially altered by European trade and settlement. As T. J. Brasser (1971: 261) has put it, "the Indian world had been distorted in many respects before the first notes of ethnographical value were jotted down".

There is solid archaeological evidence of major cultural changes during the protohistoric period. Trade in general appears to have expanded, patterns of warfare shifted, ritualism became more elaborate, and, as a response to the penetration of European commerce, the political alliances of groups living in the interior expanded to exceed in scale anything known or required in pre-contact times. The Huron confederacy appears to have been largely drawn together in its historic homeland after the beginning of the fur trade and seemingly as a consequence of it (Trigger 1976: 236-245).

Every institution and custom was susceptible to modification in a rapidly changing situation, often in ways that are unexpected and unpredictable. Because of this and a lack of solid evidence, the nature of many changes remains uncertain. Brasser (1971) has speculated that the Iroquoians' emphasis on curing rituals was a response to European epidemic diseases, whereas Tooker (1960) and Chafe (1964), on the basis of superior linguistic evidence, see these rituals as part of an early substratum of Iroquoian culture. It is uncertain whether the calendrical rituals, that are now such an important feature of Iroquois traditional culture, were established among the Huron and Iroquois prior to 1650. Brasser (1971) has alleged, without evidence, that family-owned trading routes developed among the Huron in the protohistoric period as a response to European trade. If any of these problems can ever be solved, the answers are likely to come from the archaeological record.

Anthropologists are thus compelled to acknowledge that most of the descriptions of cultures that have served to define the "ethnographic present", and that have been used either for cross-cultural studies or as bench-marks for studies of acculturation, do not relate to pristine cultures. They are descriptions of native cultures that were

already deeply enmeshed in the process of acculturation. The "ethnographic present", in the sense of a description of a culture unaffected by European contact, has become something that only archaeology can provide. Archaeological data thus become essential to the ethnological study of cultural diversity.

CONCLUSIONS

During the last twenty-five years, archaeology has come to play a more significant role within anthropology. It has long been recognized as the primary source of data concerning prehistoric times. As a result of its increasing interpretative powers, it now yields more information about cultural change during this period than it did previously. By shedding light on ecological problems and the evolution of trade, rituals, and social systems, prehistoric archaeology has become of considerable interest to ethnologists and historians. At the same time, it has been recognized as an important auxiliary source of information concerning cultural change in the early historic period, for which written records usually provide only limited information about material culture and related activities.

Still more recently, ethnologists have realized that significant culture change resulting from European contact began prior to the written accounts on which most descriptions of the "ethnographic present" have been based. Insofar as North American ethnologists require a genuinely pre-contact baseline for their studies of acculturation or for cross-cultural comparison and generalization, they are going to have to rely on archaeological data. Hence to achieve some of its objectives, ethnology will have to depend increasingly upon archaeology.

It is ironic, but perhaps no accident, that just when the findings of archaeologists are becoming vital for ethnology, archaeologists are beginning to question whether anthropology should remain a single discipline in Canadian universities (Wright *et al.* 1977). It seems likely that archaeology and ethnology will continue to find more common ground and to grow more interdependent in years to come, but they will do so in a way that is far different from any previously envisaged. It is therefore perhaps premature to seek the break-up of anthropology departments. On the other hand, archaeology has the potential for developing well beyond the traditional confines of

anthropology. In particular, it has a responsibility, along with ethnohistory and studies of acculturation, to contribute to the study of native American history. If Indian history is to be liberated from the confines of colonial history and current events, it must use what data are available to cover its subject matter without interruption, from the first arrival of native people in North America to the present day. It is an encouraging sign of convergent development that ethnology as well as archaeology is becoming increasingly historical.

Whatever realignments take place within the social sciences, the importance of archaeology is bound to increase, as archaeological findings become the key to answering many more kinds of problems. As Richard S. MacNeish (1978) often has reminded us, archaeologists should not limit their discipline's potential for intellectual or numerical growth by defining its objectives in terms of (or as part of) any other social science. Instead, archaeology should strive to carve out an appropriate role for itself within the broader mosaic of the social sciences. Whatever happens to anthropology, one can scarcely conceive of archaeologists ever again judging their discipline by standards set for them by ethnologists.

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