

The Direct Historical Approach to Archaeology

Author(s): Julian H. Steward

Source: *American Antiquity*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Apr., 1942), pp. 337-343

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/275399>

Accessed: 04-08-2017 19:34 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Cambridge University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Antiquity*

THE DIRECT HISTORICAL APPROACH TO ARCHAEOLOGY

JULIAN H. STEWARD

IN RECENT years considerable attention has been given to theoretical statements and to concrete applications of what is called the "taxonomic method" in archaeology. Although this method is not necessarily in conflict with the direct historical approach to archaeology, a growing preoccupation with the former has definitely been at the expense of the latter. The direct historical approach, although employed more or less for many years, has not received formulation comparable to that of the taxonomic method, nor have its potentialities for planned research programs and its possible integration with recent types of historical ethnographic research received full recognition. Even, therefore, if it is unnecessary to argue its value, it seems timely to attempt a statement that may help clarify its procedures and research possibilities.

Methodologically, the direct historical approach involves the elementary logic of working from the known to the unknown. First, sites of the historic period are located. These are preferably, but not necessarily, those of identifiable tribes. Second, the cultural complexes of the sites are determined. Third, sequences are carried backward in time to protohistoric and prehistoric periods and cultures. This approach has the crucially important advantage of providing a fixed datum point to which sequences may be tied. But, far more important than this, it provides a point of contact and a series of specific problems which will coordinate archaeology and ethnology in relation to the basic problems of cultural studies.

The direct historical approach to archaeology was first deliberately used in the Southwest about 1915 by Nelson, Kidder, Spier, and Kroeber¹ and in New York State by Parker and Harrington about the same time.² In areas like the Southwest and Middle America, where many of the more conspicuous sites were only recently abandoned and where a connection between historic and prehistoric cultures was obvious, it was almost an inevitable approach. In all these areas, it was possible

¹ Nelson, 1916; Kidder, 1916. See also, Kidder, 1924, pp. 84-95; Spier, 1917; Kroeber, 1916.

² Parker, 1916; Also, Parker and Harrington, 1922.

to start with historic sites and, through stratigraphy, or seriation,³ or both, to carry sequences backward beyond the point where the trails of the known, historic peoples faded out.

Despite this fruitful beginning, the full value of the direct historical approach seems not to have been recognized until much later. It is, in fact, a striking commentary on the divergent interests of archaeology and ethnology that in the Southwest the gap represented by the four hundred years of the historic period remained largely unfilled, while archaeology devoted itself mainly to prehistoric periods, and ethnology, to the ceremonialism and social organization of the modern Pueblo. And yet it was during this four hundred years that the Pueblo had contacts with one another, with the nomadic and seminomadic tribes, and with the Spaniards, that account for much of their present culture. There are only a few happy exceptions to the general indifference toward this period.⁴ Similarly, interest in New York seems recently to have drifted away from problems of history to those of taxonomy.⁵

In most areas, use of the direct historical approach was delayed because historic sites were difficult to find or because other practical considerations interfered or simply because attention had been directed away from problems involving history or ethnology. For the Southeast, however, Swanton had assembled documentary evidence on the location of many sites of historic tribes.⁶ Following his leads, Collins identified Choctaw pottery in 1925⁷ and other historic wares were subsequently determined by several workers, especially Ford, Willey, and Walker. Ford has now succeeded in carrying a sequence for the lower Mississippi Valley back from the historic tribes through several prehistoric periods.⁸ Meanwhile, sequences have also been established through use of the direct historical approach by Strong and Wedel in the Plains,⁹ by

³ This method was employed by Kidder in the Rio Grande valley (1915), and was stated more explicitly by Spier (1917).

⁴ For example, A. V. Kidder's long and detailed studies of the historic Pueblo of Pecos, now published in full; F. W. Hodge's partially published studies of Hawikuh, an old Zuñi site, and J. O. Brew's recent excavations of Awatobi, an old Hopi village. E. C. Parsons has called attention to some of the types of study that will help relate archaeological and ethnological data in the Southwest (1939, Vol. 2, p. 1212 and 1940).

⁵ W. N. Fenton (1941) showed the possibilities for use of the direct historic approach to archaeology in the Iroquois area and assembled abundant materials (1940) that could be used for this approach.

⁶ Contained in many of Swanton's works. For his complete bibliography, see Swanton, 1940, pp. 593-600.

⁷ Collins, 1927.

⁸ See the summary in Ford and Willey, 1940.

⁹ The latest summaries are Strong, 1940, and Wedel, 1940.

Collins in the Arctic,¹⁰ by Parker and Ritchie in New York,¹¹ and elsewhere. In short, history is being rapidly blocked out and it is now becoming possible to describe archaeological materials in terms of time and space, the first elementary step toward understanding culture change.

The northern Mississippi Valley has yielded less readily to the direct historical approach. But it is hoped that the ethnographic survey of historical documents being made by Kinietz and Tucker will provide information on historic sites which will facilitate use of this approach. Meanwhile, the archaeological data of this, and, to some extent, other areas, are being arranged according to the taxonomic scheme. Basing classification solely on the association of cultural elements, the result is a set of timeless and spaceless categories. Whatever use may be made of these materials, it is to be hoped that the effort to pigeonhole cultural materials by any non-historical scheme will not direct attention too far away from historical problems, which are surely the most important consideration of archaeology. Furthermore, where history has already been blocked out, it is difficult to see what is gained by scrapping a scheme with historical terms and categories in favor of a non-historical one.

The direct historical approach is not only crucially important in ascertaining cultural sequences, but, integrated with recent endeavors in ethnology, it has a tremendous potential value to the more basic problems of anthropology. Too often, these problems have been obscured by immediate tasks; techniques and procedures have loomed as ultimate goals. Ethnology tends to ignore the results of archaeology, while archaeology, concentrating on its techniques for excavation and its methods for description and classification of the physical properties of artifacts, comes to consider itself a "natural," a "biological," or an "earth science" rather than a cultural science. It is too often forgotten that problems of cultural origins and cultural change require more than ceramic sequences or element lists.

If anything characterizes historical anthropology today, it is a recognition that valid theories which generalize data of cultural change, process, or dynamics must be based on gradually accumulating information about the specific circumstances which surround particular events. To the extent, therefore, that archaeology can deal with specific problems of specific peoples, tracing cultural changes, migrations, and other events back into the protohistoric and prehistoric periods while

¹⁰ Collins, 1940, and earlier works.

¹¹ Parker, 1916. Ritchie, 1932; this preceded the interest in taxonomy.

ethnology traces them forward to the present day, it will contribute to the general problem of understanding cultural change. Its data can be handled directly for theoretical purposes; there is no need for taxonomy.

A few illustrations will suffice to demonstrate the value of the direct historical approach to these basic problems. Using it in the Plains, Strong put the cultures of the area in a new light. Tracing changes in the culture of known, historic tribes back through the protohistoric into the prehistoric period, he showed that the Plains had not been a basically bison-hunting area with a few anomalous, horticultural tribes, as had been generally assumed, but that it had formerly been in large part horticultural. A pronounced shift to hunting had followed the introduction of the horse. This new picture of the Plains required drastic revision of ecological and other theories previously held concerning it. In Alaska, Collins' direct historical approach to Eskimo archaeology revealed a long, local development of Eskimo culture which required new interpretations of Eskimo cultural origins and migrations. In the Southwest, the light thrown on Pueblo cultural origins by this approach is too well known to need comment.

On many other similar problems, work has only started. The Navajo and Apache, for example, are obviously Canadian in language though not in culture. Speculation about their cultural origins, their migrations, and their role, if any, in the retraction of the Pueblo area after about 1000 or 1100 A.D. has been almost futile. It is a job for the direct historical approach to Navajo archaeology, which has just begun. Similarly, the question of the relationship of the Iroquois to southeastern ethnic and archaeological groups and to Ohio archaeological complexes will be definitively solved only when archaeology has succeeded in tracing the different Iroquoian peoples deeper into the past. The distribution of Siouan peoples in the Plains and in the east also indicates the need of tracing both groups back to the area where they formed a single group and even suggests where ancient Siouan remains are likely to be found.

There are also problems connected with the introduction of new European culture elements during the protohistoric or early historic period that archaeology can help solve. We know much about the effect of the horse. But what about the gun, the steel trap, new trade relations, tribal dislocations and other factors coming directly or indirectly from the white man? It is certain that in many cases these produced revolutionary changes in economy, village types, village distributions, migrations, tribal contacts and other features which would afford information basic to studies of culture change. The archaeology of early historic

sites would also help enormously to correct ethnography's attempts to reconstruct pre-contact cultures.

Every tribe in the country cannot, of course, be traced through its archaeology. But a great number of problems can be solved by combining data derived from ethnography and from historical documents with the results of the direct historical approach in archaeology. In fact, if one takes cultural history as his problem, and peoples of the early historic period as his point of departure, the difference between strictly archaeological and strictly ethnographical interest disappears. Archaeology supplements the cultural picture drawn from historic documents and informant testimony. Ethnography explains archaeological materials in their cultural context. And where archaeology traces changes backward into the past, ethnography may trace them forward. It seems certain that historical acculturation studies, such as Keesing's Menomini monograph,¹² which traces cultural changes through the three centuries of the post-contact period and might be called the direct historical approach to ethnology, are destined to find an important place in anthropological literature. Studies of this kind will overlap with and be tremendously facilitated by direct historical studies in archaeology.

Whether the objective of cultural studies is a broad cultural sequence or detailed information on the history of a specific people, the contributions of archaeology will be more or less proportionate to its success in using the direct historical approach. This approach will serve to remind both archaeologists and ethnologists that they have in common not only the general problem of how culture has developed but a large number of very specific problems. If archaeology feels that applying itself to cultural rather than to "natural history" problems seems to relegate it to the position of the tail on an ethnological kite, it must remember that it is an extraordinarily long tail. Vaillant has said: "Unless archaeology is going definitely to shift from a branch of anthropology to an obscure type of mathematics, an effort must be made to relate the rhythms of cultural development with the pulsations of an evolving human society."¹³ This requires a perception of problems that involve more than the physical features of material object, bare chronologies, or even classifications.

¹² Keesing, 1939. Kintetz, 1940, also recognizing the importance of distinguishing Indian cultures at different periods within historic times, has ransacked the early literature for information on culture immediately following contact with Whites. It is of some interest that South Americanists, perhaps because most of them have in the past been Europeans and traditionally have devoted more effort to library studies, have made far greater use of old sources than North American ethnologists.

¹³ Vaillant, 1935, p. 304.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- COLLINS, H. B., JR.
 1927. "Potsherds from Choctaw Village Sites in Mississippi." *Journal of the Washington Academy of Science*, Vol. 17, pp. 259-263.
 1940. "Outline of Eskimo Prehistory." In *Essays in Historical Anthropology of North America*. Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections 100.
- FENTON, W. N.
 1940. "Problems Arising from the Historic Northeastern Position of the Iroquois." In *Essays in Historical Anthropology of North America*. Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections 100.
 1941. *Review of Roebuck Prehistoric Village Site, Grenville County, Ontario*, W. J. Wintemberg, AMERICAN ANTIQUITY, Vol. 7, pp. 290-294.
- FORD, J. A. and GORDON WILLEY
 1940. *Crooks Site, a Marksville Period Burial Mound in La Salle Parish, Louisiana*. State of Louisiana, Department of Conservation, Anthropological Study No. 3.
- KESING, F. M.
 1939. *The Menomini Indians of Wisconsin*. American Philosophical Society, Memoir 10.
- KIDDER, A. V.
 1915. *Pottery of the Pajarito Plateau and of Some Adjacent Regions in New Mexico*. American Anthropological Association, Memoir 2, No. 6.
 1916. "Archaeological Explorations at Pecos, New Mexico." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, Vol. 12, pp. 119-123.
 1924. *Introduction to the Study of Southwestern Archaeology*. New Haven.
- KINIEZ, W. V.
 1940. *The Indians of the Western Great Lakes, 1615-1760*. University of Michigan, Occasional Contributions, Museum of Anthropology, No. 10.
- KROEBER, A. L.
 1916. *Zuni Potsherds*. Anthropological Papers, American Museum of Natural History, Vol. 18.
- NELSON, N. C.
 1916. "Chronology of the Tano Ruins, New Mexico." *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 18, pp. 159-180.
- PARKER, A. C.
 1916. *Excavations in an Erie Indian Village and Burial Site at Ripley, Chautauqua County, New York*. New York State Museum, Bulletin 117.
- PARKER, A. C. and M. R. HARRINGTON
 1922. *Archaeological History of New York*. New York State Museum, Bulletins 235-236.
- PARSONS, ELSIE CLEWS
 1939. *Pueblo Indian Religion*. Chicago.
 1940. "Relations between Ethnology and Archaeology in the Southwest." AMERICAN ANTIQUITY, Vol. 5, pp. 214-220.
- RITCHIE, W. A.
 1932. "The Algonkin Sequence in New York." *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 34, pp. 406-414.
- SPIER, LESLIE
 1917. *An Outline for a Chronology of Zuni Ruins*. Anthropological Papers, American Museum of Natural History, Vol. 18.

STRONG, W. D.

1940. "From History to Prehistory in the Northern Great Plains." In *Essays in Historical Anthropology of North America*. Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections 100.

SWANTON, JOHN R.

1940. Bibliography of—, In *Essays in Historical Anthropology of North America*. Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collection 100.

VAILLANT, G. C.

1935. *Early Cultures of the Valley of Mexico: Results of the Stratigraphical Project of the American Museum of Natural History in the Valley of Mexico, 1928–1933*. Anthropological Papers, American Museum of Natural History, Vol. 35

WEDEL, W. R.

1940. "Culture Sequence in the Central Great Plains." In *Essays in Historical Anthropology of North America*, Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collection 100.
Bureau of American Ethnology
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D. C.
January, 1941