

Colin Renfrew  
Personal Histories, Monday, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2006

Audio-to-text transcription

Personal Histories 2006 with Colin Renfrew, Mike Schiffer, Ezra Zubrow, recounting their memories of the 1960s "New Archaeology". Graeme Barker was Chair. Robin Dennell, Rob Foley, Paul Mellars & Marek Zvelebil were discussants.

Biffen Lecture Theatre  
University of Cambridge  
4pm to 6.10pm

Speaker in this segment: Professor Lord Renfrew

Equipment: Edirol 24 bit WAVE/MP3 Recorder

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Laughter and applause are noted.

**Colin Renfrew**, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2006 {Time 6:22}

I think best on my feet so I stand to my feet, if you will allow me, and move to the podium. If we are talking about Lewis Binford we have to remember that Louis Binford's background was in the American South and he had a wonderful Evangelical style. [audience laughter]

Now, Pamela Jane Smith has said to each of us, certainly said to me, it is very important to be personal. I think she met to be personal about oneself although I may be personal about one or two others [audience laughter] in my remarks. She suggested that it might be appropriate ... first of all I'm sure I mustn't talk for more than 15 minutes.

**Graeme Barker**. 5 to 10 minutes

**Colin Renfrew** TEN! Well that's 5 minutes gone already ... [audience laughter] ... half the time should be for personal reflections and then time for more general reflections.

I came up to Cambridge in 1958 and I read Natural Sciences for Part I and one of the

things I did in reading Natural Sciences was the history and philosophy of science and that was a very good start. I had always been interested in archaeology and when I asked myself what am I really going to do next . . . I wasn't going to be a great physicist. I didn't think I was going to be a captain of industry. I quite thought I would like to be an archaeologist. I changed to archaeology at the end of Part I, which is easy to do in Cambridge, and I did a two-year Part II in archaeology. I was very lucky that the Department then was a lively place to be. There were different figures. There was Grahame Clark who was the father of ecological archaeology. There was Glyn Daniel, who was not only an historian of archaeology but who thought about the nature of archaeology in a serious way. There was John Coles who was an excellent teacher and Charles McBurney who was fired with enthusiasm for the Palaeolithic period, an enthusiasm which only caught on to me slightly later I have to say.

So, that was the world I came into. That was a Cambridge when things were changing. That was between the publication of the structure of the DNA, the double helix, and the award of the Noble Prize to Crick and Watson and so on for that great discovery. So, I found it interesting to do some biochemistry during Part I Natural Sciences.

The New Archaeology, though, arose from the interests of that time. That is why I am referring to the Cambridge of that time. The New Archaeology, of course, arose in several places and there is no doubt at all that its principle exponent was and is Lewis Binford who was at Chicago at the key time. But, I mention the philosophy of science deliberately because I think that one can see that the New Archaeology was a new current in archaeology that came from different strands. One strand was a skepticism about the existing archaeology which Gordon Childe himself called a kind of pseudo history, suggested that it was an attempt to write history without the historical sources using archaeological cultures in place of battles and historical personages.

It was clear that really wasn't working very well. A lot of effort had gone into constructing space/time frameworks, chest-of-drawers chronologies and one could be doubtful about the value of that. Secondly, one of the key issues in the New Archaeology and in all archaeology since is how do you explain things? What is the nature of explanation? What are we doing as archaeologists? And that essentially is the philosophy of science. What are the theoretical underpinnings of this enterprise of doing archaeology?

In Cambridge, we were fortunate in having a very good philosopher of science, Richard Bevan Braithwaite, whose book, *Scientific Explanation, [a Study of the Function of Theory, Probability and Law in Science]*, remains one of the best introductions. In the United States, I am afraid, they were less well off. They had Carl Hempel and I remember when I was doing philosophy of science reading Carl Hempel's paper on 'Aspects of Scientific Explanation in History' where Hempel set out that all explanations are law-like explanations and therefore you can only have explanation in history if you do it through

law-like explanations. I thought at that time, "This really doesn't work!" and I have thought that ever since. If we wish to see one of the things that went wrong with the New Archaeology, one of the great misfortunes of the New Archaeology was that American New Archaeologists relied on Carl Hempel. So they all got their philosophy of science in a bit of a twist. [Audience laughter]

**Ezra Zubrow:** NOT TRUE! [Audience laughter]

**Colin Renfrew (laughs):** I may say one or two things that Mike Schiffer doesn't agree with but that is one of the hazards of starting off first. The third strand in the New Archaeology was the numerical methods which were becoming available. Already people such as Flinders Petrie had used numerical methods in an ingenious way right at the beginning of the twentieth century. But, computers were coming into operation and statistical methods, probabilistic statistics, were being applied and those were one of the ingredients of the current of the time. And, then, there was archaeological science and there were two directions in archaeological science that were hugely influential. One was ecological archaeology where Grahame Clark was a great champion, followed later on by Eric Higgs. There is the notion that if you really understand the subsistence base and the climatic base you've got what you want. That was very much the thought that underlay much of the early New Archaeology in the United States. Lewis Binford is essentially a Palaeolithic person rather than a Neolithic or Bronze Age or historical person. So, it is naturally the case that the ecological and climatic circumstances play a very dominant role in Palaeolithic archaeology and, as I have remarked to Lou Binford himself, he often finds it difficult to climb out of the cave or Palaeolithic trench and emerge into a more recent world where the societies become more complex. So, the social aspects didn't interest him personally as much as the ecological ones.

And, then, there was the impact of radiocarbon dating and that was very powerful in Europe because the early chronologies for European prehistory in the Neolithic and the early Bronze Age periods collapsed entirely. But, it was also influential in the United States and Binford has stressed that in discussions which are on record. It showed that the cultural historical approach was very capable of getting things wrong.

So, that was the background to the New Archaeology.

I first encountered Binford, I first encountered him in writing when I received a copy of his paper, 'Post-Pleistocene Adaptations'. And, I brought several sacred writings of the New Archaeology here today. Here in one precious holy book, *New Perspectives in Archaeology*, edited by Sally and Lewis Binford, published in 1968, which, as you know, was the *Annus Mirabilis* of the New Archaeology.

That paper, 'Post-Pleistocene Adaptations', was thinking in very challenging ways. It was asking, 'how do we know things?' 'What kind of arguments can we use?' It was

seeking to use demographical arguments in a very effective way. It is fair to say that the beginning of the New Archaeology is to be dated from Binford's first significant paper in his series of *American Antiquity* papers and that was 'Archaeology as Anthropology' in 1962. That was one of the slogans which he used.

One of the points I want to stress is that the New Archaeology was in the air and it was in the air as much in Britain and in Scandinavia as in the United States. And, the reason that 1968 was the *Annus Mirabilis* for the New Archaeology; it was the year in which, if I can find that other holy writing . . . here it is, *Analytical Archaeology* by David Clarke. That was also published in 1968. That is, in many ways, a more coherent book. It is a single authored work. It is a much more coherent book than *New Perspectives in Archaeology* which was edited by Binford and his then wife, Sally Binford. Both books, but particularly David Clarke's book, used numerical methods, emphasized quantitative methods. David Clarke was one of the first to apply computer manipulation to archaeological data.

Strangely, Roy Hodson is very often forgotten as one of the founders of the British New Archaeology. Here is his book. And, it was Roy Hodson who organised a conference in Romania in the 1960s and who was one of the figures who was willing to think about archaeological patterning in new ways. [Colin Renfrew is referring to F.R. Hodson's 1971 edited volume, *Mathematics in Archaeological and Historical Sciences* and Doran's *Mathematics and Computers in Archaeology* (1975).] They were indeed exciting times.

First, I see that I shall run out of time in a couple of minutes. I first met Binford in 1967 when I went for a term to teach at UCLA and he was also teaching there having been sacked from Chicago. [audience laughter] He didn't get on very well with Robert Braidwood there. But, anyway, he was going great guns in UCLA. One of the things about Binford is that he is enormously polemical. If you have an argument with Binford you've got your work cut out to win it. It can be done but it is hard work and he won't tell you that you've won it. That I have never heard him concede. [audience laughter]

**Ezra Zubrow and Graeme Barker:** Know thyself.

**Colin Renfrew:** That is actually one of the reasons that Binford's own work has been less influence over the past two or three decades than it was earlier because Binford has had very few students of his own who've gone on to be blessed by Binford and out into the world. Binford doesn't bless people very often. [audience laughter] You can count on the fingers of one hand those who have received and retained the Binfordian blessing.

It was one of the great tragedies of the New Archaeology that David Clarke died so young. He died only a few years after publishing *Analytical Archaeology*. He was a figure of great dynamism. Of course, he had colleagues and successors, one of whom was Andrew Sherratt who very sadly died only recently. They carried on the approach of

David Clarke. Both Clarke and Binford were advocates of generalisation in archaeology and advocates of good explanation.

But the New Archaeology began to go wrong. First of all, it began to age and is now rather like the *Pont Neuf* in constant need of conservation and is no longer new. That is why the term processual archaeology is chosen. I have always disliked the isms. I looked a little askance at this very fine book which I received today by Mike Schiffer and colleagues, *Archaeology as a Process : Processualism and its Progeny* (2005). I am not sure that I would want to be the progeny of an ism. [audience laughter] I slightly question rather we wish to be celebrating processualism here to today. Let us celebrate the continuing development of the New Archaeology.

The New Archaeology went wrong, I think, when it embraced too seriously the kind of philosophy of science that that demonical figure, Carl Hempel, advocated. In 1971, Watson, LeBlanc and Redman published, *Explanation in Archaeology: An Explicitly Scientific Approach* which is mechanistic in relation to explanation and also erroneous and to be both mechanistic and erroneous is unfortunate. [loud audience laughter] The New Archaeology narrowed itself at that point.

**Graeme Barker:** Time!

**Colin Renfrew:** Very good. I am just going to give this important observation before I sit down. [audience laughter] I see post-processual archaeology as within the broad church of processual archaeology. It is schismatic but broad churches have their schisms. You have the Orthodox Church and the Church of Rome. You have the Protestant Church and the Church of Rome. Mr. Paisley refers to the Pope as a 'scarlet lady.' I don't know how Ian Hodder refers to Lewis Binford [audience laughter] not in those terms. But, it is a schism of a rather similar kind. The point I am making is that I think the world was changed with the exciting aspirations of the New Archaeology in the 1960s. The *Annus Mirabilis* was 1968 and after the publication of *Explanation in Archaeology*, the New Archaeology went into something of a decline.

Thank you. (time 21:45) LOUD APPLAUSE

**Pamela Jane Smith** is a Research Fellow at the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research at the University of Cambridge. Working primarily as an oral historian, she investigates the creation, production and 'travel' of academic knowledge during the twentieth century in Britain and North America. Smith is the founder of the Histories of Archaeology Research Network <http://www.arch.cam.ac.uk/harn/> and the Personal-Histories Project. <http://www.arch.cam.ac.uk/personal-histories/> and is a biographer, having uncovered and archived many manuscript collections. Her most recent publication *A Splendid Idiosyncrasy": Prehistory at Cambridge 1915-50*, an account of the election of the first woman to a professorship at Oxford or Cambridge, is available from

Archaeopress <http://www.archaeology.co.uk/books/a-splendid-idiosyncrasy-prehistory-at-cambridge-191550.htm>

The Personal-Histories Project introduces students and researchers from across Britain to the enjoyable experience of listening to life histories in archaeology as Pamela Jane Smith creates aural and visual historical sources. The resulting DVDs are used as teaching aids in archaeological courses and can be combined with published literature and unpublished archives to enhance our understanding of twentieth-century archaeology. A sample of seminars produced can be viewed at <http://sms.cam.ac.uk/media/756276>.

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