

# Nothing but the facts?

Jeremy A. Sabloff

**What is Archaeology? An Essay on the Nature of Archaeological Research.** By Paul Courbin. Translated by Paul Bahn. University of Chicago Press: 1988. Pp.197. \$24.95, £19.95.

ARCHAEOLOGISTS who enjoy watching William F. Buckley skewer a liberal guest on the American television programme *Firing Line*, or relished Malcolm Muggeridge making mincemeat of a pseudointellectual, are certain to have a great time reading Paul Courbin's book. *What is Archaeology?*, which was originally published in 1982 in French, is a short, harsh attack on the 'new archaeology' of Lewis R. Binford, David Clarke and many others who have tried to improve archaeological knowledge over the past three decades. I savour a good polemic as much as anyone, yet when I finished the book I was left with the same feeling that most of us have when we have eaten a plate of junk food. It's been fun, but one can have too much of it.

For many scholars, the nature of archaeological research has changed dramatically, albeit sometimes painfully,

## The New World of archaeology

IN HIS review of *The Pastmasters* (facing page) Warwick Bray voices the mild complaint that the Americas are under-represented in the collection. Partially compensating for that deficiency is a similar kind of book, *Portraits in American Archaeology: Remembrances of Some Distinguished Americanists*, to be published on 28 April by University of New Mexico Press (price hbk \$35, pbk \$19.95).

Unlike the essays in *The Pastmasters*, all of the portraits are a product of a single hand, that of Gordon R. Willey. But both books reflect earlier times when archaeology was very different — less 'scientific' but, on Willey's evidence, rather more pleasurable to work in, because only a small fraternity was involved. As Willey writes in his preface, of when he was starting out on his career in 1937: "the annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology . . . was held in a single room and with single sessions. Attendance was probably on the order of 30 or 40 of us, young and old. . . . We were terribly dependent upon each other".

There are 16 portraits altogether, an avowedly personal selection of people Willey knew and liked. This is no reference work; but it is well-written and enlightening, and imbued with the author's affection for his subject. T.L.

since the early 1960s. Archaeologists now try to understand long-term cultural changes and have developed innovative techniques and methods to reach this goal. Both the planning of research and the interpretation of research results have become much more rigorous. Other tenets of the new archaeology, such as the necessity of a deductive-nomological approach to establish archaeological laws, appear to have failed to take hold.

Courbin, a professor of archaeology at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris, denies that any significant changes have taken place. He zeroes in on the excesses of the new archaeology with scathing sarcasm that — in Paul Bahn's effective translation — dissects the jargon-laden claims of many writers with great dexterity. But Courbin is so blinded by outrage that he loses sight of several of the new archaeology's genuine accomplishments.

Although Courbin has been assiduous in reviewing the theoretical or programmatic literature, he does not pay equal attention to the literature documenting fieldwork. Why, just to give a few examples from the New World, is there no mention of Howard D. Winters' path-breaking *The Riverton Culture* (Illinois State Museum, 1969) or of the reanalyses undertaken by Stuart Truiever and others of the Hopewell culture? Why is a diagram from David Hurst Thomas's Great Basin research reproduced but the innovative fieldwork ignored? Why, unless Courbin considers it traditional archaeology, is there no citation of Kent V. Flannery's important *The Mesoamerican Village* (Academic Press, 1976)? Why, in the text itself or in his new introduction to this English edition, does he not recognize the growth and development of Binford's thinking or the changes of emphasis in the work of Patty Jo Watson and her colleagues (compare *Explanation in Archaeology*, published by Columbia University Press in 1971, with *Archeological Explanation*, issued by the same publisher in 1984)?

Courbin would have the reader believe that the new archaeology has failed and that traditional archaeology triumphantly continues on. This contention is not correct. Although many of the specific proposals of the 1960s and early 1970s have not been followed, the practice of archaeology in the New World and elsewhere has been profoundly affected by fresh ideas.

In my view, the most notable changes have been methodological in nature, not theoretical. Courbin is correct when he argues that there has been relatively little progress in theoretical understandings of long-term change. But he does not acknowledge that much effort has gone into developing methodologies that have the potential to lead to new understandings. Certainly, there is no evidence

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