Obituary

Gordon Randolph Willey (1913–2002)

HARVARD

Archaeologist of the Americas

"Misled" and "dealt a marginal hand by my colleagues" were just two of the thoughts that ran through Gordon Willey's mind in the spring of 1946, as he walked over the rough terrain of the Virú Valley in northern Peru. As a relative newcomer to the field of archaeology, just four years on from finishing his PhD at Columbia University, Willey fretted that, while his associates in the Virú Valley programme were getting to do the important work such as excavating stratigraphic pits or collecting ancient potsherds, he had been assigned the less significant chore of studying the distribution of archaeological sites and trying to understand their prehistoric spatial relationships and functions. Time has shown that, rather than being marginalized, Willey was on the verge of sparking methodological and interpretive innovations that would come to dominate the field of archaeology in the second half of the twentieth century. Moreover, in a few years, Willey would become the leading American archaeologist of his generation and one of the most widely respected archaeologists in the world.

Willey's Virú Valley research soon led to the rise of a 'settlement-pattern' approach in archaeology. Although Willey was not the originator of settlement-pattern studies, his Virú work, and the 1953 publication that followed, convinced colleagues around the world that this particular methodology could provide new data that would in turn lead to clearer insight into the functioning of ancient cultures.

Willey's now classic definition of settlement patterns appeared on the first page of his Virú monograph, *Prehistoric Settlement Patterns in the Virú Valley, Peru*. It is, he wrote, the study of "the way in which man disposed himself over the landscape on which he lived. It refers to dwellings, to their arrangement, and to the nature and disposition of other buildings pertaining to community life. These settlements reflect the natural environment, the level of technology on which the builders operated, and the various institutions of social interaction and control which the culture maintained. Because settlement patterns are, to a large extent, directly shaped by widely held cultural needs, they offer a strategic starting point for the functional interpretation of archaeological cultures."

This approach became a rallying point for archaeologists who wanted to move beyond the classificatory and typological emphases of the time, in order to understand not just the chronology of potsherds but the nature of whole cultural systems, and how and why they changed through time.

The full potential of the approach became apparent in Willey's subsequent research in the Maya Lowlands of Belize. In 1950, Willey was appointed the first Bowditch Professor of Mexican and Central American Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University. Taking up this chair required him to move his research to the geographical areas stipulated in his new title. So in 1954, after brief fieldwork in Panama, Willey initiated a settlement-pattern project in the Belize River Valley, supported by the first grant for archaeological research from the newly established National Science Foundation.

Willey's and colleagues' settlement mapping and excavations showed how the traditional emphasis in Mayan studies — on the temples, palaces and other remains of the ruling class — had ignored the vestiges of the perishable houses and activities of Mayan peasants and others who were not members of the society's élite. By systematically identifying these remains, Willey was able to provide a much fuller picture of ancient Mayan society than had been possible before, as well as revealing some of the pressures that this society had faced, including that of a growing population. Willey's research rapidly stimulated other settlement-pattern work that showed, for example, that the ancient Maya had substantial cities and complex agricultural practices to support the extensive urban zones.

As important as the settlement-pattern approach has been for archaeological research, it was not Willey's only contribution to the field. He made significant empirical contributions to our knowledge of the prehistory of Florida and the southeastern United States in general, to our archaeological understanding of coastal Peru, and to Mayan studies with key field projects at Barton Ramie (Belize), Altar de Sacrificios and Seibal (Guatemala), and Copan (Honduras). He was also justly renowned for his broad syntheses, especially his highly influential, two-volume *An Introduction to American Archaeology* and the widely cited and discussed *Method and Theory in American Archaeology*, written with Philip Phillips. Additionally, he had a great interest in the intellectual history of archaeology, as evinced by the publication that I co-authored, *A History of American Archaeology*.

Willey's other great scholarly talent was his ability to see the big picture. He was particularly interested in the rise and development of pre-industrial civilizations and was a strong admirer of the American anthropologist Alfred L. Kroeber. He wrote a number of notable articles on the nature of early civilizations, with special emphases on the social and ideological aspects of these complex societies.

Willey was an amiable person, widely liked and respected by his peers. He won virtually all the accolades and honours in his profession, and he trained or mentored two generations of leading Maya scholars during his teaching years at Harvard. He lectured around the world but was especially fond of the United Kingdom, spending two separate sabbatical years at the University of Cambridge and becoming a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy.

Without doubt, Willey's name has become the most widely known in American archaeology and his prolific publications have influenced all aspects of the discipline. Whether on a typewriter or a computer keyboard, Willey hammered out these publications with one of the fastest two-finger typing styles in the world. Countless students, colleagues and friends all over the globe will miss his illuminating ideas, breadth of knowledge and warm good humour. **Jeremy A. Sabloff**

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