Preface: BAE Anthropology, Its Roots and Legacy

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The papers in this issue were originally presented at the annual meetings of the Society for American Archaeology in Nashville (1997). They were invited contributions to the symposium entitled “Scholars of the BAE: The Relevance of Nineteenth-Century Field Research for Current Archaeological Debate.” The organizers, M. N. Zedeño and W. H. Walker, sought to bring together anthropologists who have scrutinized the vast anthropological information amassed under the mandate of the Smithsonian Institution’s Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE). Through focusing on topics of contemporary interest and on individual achievements of BAE scholars, symposium participants were asked to contribute a critical reflection on the historical context and research questions that guided the BAE’s fieldwork in North America, examine relationships between anthropological fields, assess the empirical value of data collected by the BAE, and discuss their relevance for current research. This introductory note briefly explains the goals of the symposium and each author’s contribution to them.

However great our knowledge might be, however extensive our collections might prove, we could not comprehend, as would be comprehended at some future time, the full value and significance of either the specimens we were gathering, or especially the facts relating to them and their gathering which we were accumulating, that, in other words, we were not collecting merely for ourselves, but for the future generations!

—F. H. Cushing, 1890

1. The paper entitled “The Bureau of American Ethnology Studying Real Peoples and Societies,” by N. Parezo, was presented at the meetings but unfortunate circumstances prevented the author from writing it for publication. D. L. Shaul’s “Linguistic Natural History: John Wesley Powell and the Classification of American Languages” was added to the collection in an effort to provide a more comprehensive review of the BAE’s research efforts.

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Tracing the history of anthropological thought and the social context in which it developed is an established endeavor that has resulted in the publication of several treatises as well as many edited volumes and journal articles. Approaches to the discipline's history range from chronological description of scientific advances (e.g., Brew 1968; Daniel 1976; Willey and Sabloff 1980) to biographical studies of individual scholars and their work (e.g., Fowler and Fowler 1971; Givens 1992; Mark 1988; Meltzer and Dunnell 1992); and from detailed regional research histories (O'Brien 1996) to critical examination of specific problems (e.g., Meltzer 1983a). Histories written by anthropologists generally focus on the evolution of concepts and methods (e.g., Grayson 1983; Lyman, O'Brien, and Dunnell 1997), whereas those written by historians bring forth the sociopolitics of anthropological research (e.g., Hinsley 1981; Trigger 1980). Underlying most of these histories are at least two widely recognized needs: to understand the intellectual roots of contemporary scholarship, and to justify and explain changes in theory and practice (see papers in Christenson [1989] and Reyman [1992]). Less acknowledged yet increasingly important for current research endeavors is the need to evaluate the principles that guided early scholarly fieldwork, so that the resulting data may be incorporated systematically into hypothesis building and interpretation. This was precisely the goal of the symposium and is the thread that holds together the papers that follow.

While the papers discuss linguistic, ethnographic, and archaeological contributions of the BAE, the main thrust of this collection is archaeology. The symposium organizers are archaeologists whose research programs have led them to revisit "old" problems in North American prehistory and to incorporate a broad range of research findings dating to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries into all stages of their work. Their interests, along with those of the contributors, illustrate growing trends in American archaeology, which are being fostered by advances in both theory and method—some of which integrate anthropological fields (e.g., Shaul and Hill 1998)—and by current sociopolitical and intellectual debates between archaeologists and Native Americans (e.g., Dongoske et al. 1997).

Expanding the reach of contemporary inquiry into problems that, just a few decades ago, archaeologists abandoned as unsolvable and even unworthy of study—ritual and religion, and ethnic origins of prehistoric and historic groups are examples in point—requires a careful reexamination of data collected in early research along with the intel-
lectual background, political and individual motivations, and methodological expertise of the researchers. The contributions published here provide various perspectives from which to reexamine these data.

This issue begins with an overview, by Woodbury and Woodbury, of the institution that almost single-handedly led nineteenth-century anthropological research in the United States. The intellectual and political forces that stimulated the creation of the Smithsonian Institution in 1846 and the subsequent establishment of the Bureau of Ethnology in 1879 (after 1894, Bureau of American Ethnology) have been thoroughly documented in recent years (e.g., Hinsley 1981; Hoxie 1984; Meltzer 1983b, 1985), thus providing a solid background for the essay. While contributions to the knowledge of prehistoric and historic native peoples of North America has been accumulating since the colonial period, as evidenced in the works of explorers, missionaries, army men, government agents, and local amateur societies, it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that a concerted, pan-continental effort to develop anthropology came into place. For the next decades, the Smithsonian Institution and its affiliates—the BAE and the National Museum—applied federal funds to gathering information in the fields of ethnology, archaeology, and philology, and to expanding artifact collections. The place of the institution in nineteenth-century intellectual circles is all the more salient given that only one contemporaneous institution in the United States (the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard) had, to a lesser extent, the financial and human power to systematically advance research in anthropology (Meltzer 1985: 249).

The BAE’s work was carried out by individuals of diverse intellectual backgrounds who made research a full-time job. Long seasons in the field followed by the preparation of lengthy reports, vocabularies, and catalogues of archaeological and ethnographic collections were required in a program of institutionalized inductivism, where efforts focused on gathering facts to dispel ignorant speculation; synthesis and interpretation were tasks left for the future (Hinsley 1981: 35). However, aptness to do fieldwork, commitment to method, or thoroughness of reporting were not sanctioned by formal professional standards and thus varied widely from one individual to another.

As with many institutions whose reasons for existence are inseparable from the social and political environment within which they were created, the BAE and the scientific tenets it upheld eventually fell victim to institutions competing for a rightful place in the profession, in
particular universities offering academic programs in anthropology. Woodbury and Woodbury summarize the rise and demise of the BAE's government-sponsored field research and its seminal role in the development of modern American anthropology.

Since its inception, the Smithsonian Institution's program in anthropology sought to achieve scientific status through systematic, empirical research. A field that received consistent attention for more than fifty years was philology. Few efforts illustrate the breadth of knowledge accumulated during the second half of the nineteenth century better than the institution's most ambitious project—the classification of American Indian languages north of Mexico. As discussed by Shaul, this was an enterprise of encyclopedic proportions, conceived as an intrinsic part of the study of the history and development of humankind, and conducted under the principles of natural history. One of the most useful contributions of that project is that it affords a glimpse into the period's cultural context of language usage among American Indian tribes. More importantly, the author suggests that the linguistic classification laid the groundwork for projecting historical culture/language areas onto prehistoric regions through the direct historical approach (e.g., the work of J. R. Swanton—see O'Brien and Lyman, this issue).

If linguistics provides a sense of the scope of BAE's research goals, ethnography illustrates the depth of knowledge achieved through long-term participant observation in American Indian communities across the United States. The presence of BAE scholars in these communities and their efforts to collect information as well as artifacts has been variously described as useful, polemical, or intrusive (Whiteley 1997). Yet, at that time both activities were deemed indispensable for recovering information on the lifeways of "vanishing" peoples for future generations of Americans. Adams and Zedeño review BAE research among the Hopi Pueblos of Arizona, from the broad social context within which it was envisioned to actual studies carried out by a number of scholars. Undeniably, the product of their work created a sense of Hopi culture and society and, more generally, of Pueblo peoples that has influenced a century of Southwestern ethnography and archaeology. Yet the direction and pace of change in theory, method, and research focus have delayed a detailed evaluation and integration of the data recovered by the BAE into modern archaeology. As explained by the authors, the fact that BAE scholars were present at Hopi long enough to observe and
record relationships between ethnographic and archaeological contexts facilitates the integration of their observations in the formulation of hypotheses, material correlates, and interpretations that may be applicable outside Hopi and the Southwest. From this perspective, nineteenth century ethnography—and long-term ethnography, for that matter—is as relevant today as it was in the past.

The next four papers examine in detail the archaeological and ethnographic work of four BAE scholars—Edward Palmer, Victor Mindeleff, Frank H. Cushing, and Jesse W. Fewkes—in the U.S. Southwest and Southeast; each from a different but complementary perspective. Jeter documents the archaeological research conducted by Edward Palmer during the 1870s and 1880s. His discussion of Palmer’s botanical training and early research in the U.S. Southwest, California, and Mexico exemplifies the broad intellectual background scholars brought to the BAE and how it influenced their anthropological fieldwork. Jeter highlights Palmer’s archaeological excavations in the Southwest and particularly in the Southeast as among the earliest examples of “scientific” archaeology conducted by the BAE. Jeter’s analysis of Palmer’s field notes illustrates how modern methodological criteria may be employed to evaluate data collected by early anthropologists. Palmer’s observations parallel those made under the methodological principles of modern archaeology, including stratigraphic associations and formation processes. Palmer’s career in the BAE further shows the degree to which anthropological fields and natural history were integrated in nineteenth century research; he, for example, brought botany into ethnography and ethnography into archaeology, making use of analogy to interpret data obtained during his travels and searches, and to synthesize observations cross-culturally.

In many instances, experts in a specific field were sought by the BAE to conduct problem-oriented anthropological research. In his biographical approach to the work of the architect Victor Mindeleff and his brother Cosmos at Hopi and Zuni Pueblos, Longacre highlights J. W. Powell’s desire to collect information in support of his hypotheses about the social evolution of American Indians. Inspired by the work of Lewis Henry Morgan, Powell hired the Mindeleff brothers to study Pueblo architecture. As Longacre states, the Mindeleffs’ detailed recording of architectural variability and their insights into the relationships between spatial organization and traditional society remain central for
our current understanding of variability and change in Southwestern architectural design (see, for example, Cameron 1998).

Hinsley looks into yet another factor in evaluating BAE research: language and expression. The writings of Frank Hamilton Cushing, who lived among the Zuni Indians of New Mexico for four years, contrast sharply to those of Palmer and the Mindelefs in that they represent “ethnographic poesy.” The author discusses Cushing’s inability to express his profound knowledge of, and feelings for, the Zuni people in the realistic language favored by his contemporaries. Torn between describing scientific facts and synthesizing findings in his own impressionist wording, Cushing published only a small portion of the vast amount of information he accumulated during his years as an ethnographer at Zuni and, later, as director of the Hemenway Southwestern Archaeological Expedition. Yet, his writings, as Hinsley describes, capture the complexity and connectedness of Zuni worldview and everyday life, which he attempted to use as a framework for archaeological interpretation.

Walker places BAE research in the context of contemporary theoretical approaches to the study of religion and ritual. The author advances a conceptual framework for understanding how material culture of everyday life becomes part of the ritual realm in Hopi and Navajo religion; his behavioral, rather than ideological, emphasis provides the archaeologist with parsimonious avenues of inquiry into the study of religious practices. Through an examination of Jesse Walter Fewkes’ prolific work in the Southwest, complemented with information collected by Cushing, Stephen, the Mindelefs, and Matthews, among others, the author compares and contrasts two distinct ritual worlds and their material manifestations. Walker clearly demonstrates the benefits of integrating anthropological fields in the development of archaeological theory and method.

O’Brien and Lyman close the issue with an overview of the intellectual trends and field research that shaped regional prehistory and led to the birth of professional archaeology in the American Southeast. The authors discuss the legacy of the BAE to Southeastern archaeology, beginning with the resolution of the Mound Builders debate, and detail the roles of BAE scholars, such as John R. Swanton, Winslow Walker, and Henry B. Collins, in the formalization of archaeological research in the region. The Birmingham Conference of 1932 is presented as the turning point in Southeastern archaeology, when BAE scholars and archaeologists from several regional and national institutions came to-
gether to formulate the theoretical framework that would dominate American archaeology for the next three decades—Culture History. At the root of this formulation, the authors state, was the direct historical approach, which may be considered one of the BAE’s greatest contributions to anthropology.

In conclusion, the passage of time affords new perspectives from which to better understand “why we do what we do” and, equally important, a greater ability to address complex problems in prehistory that require revisiting early theories and data as well as conducting original research. As F. H. Cushing foresaw, it would be a long time—more than a century, indeed—before anthropologists could fully appreciate the impact and worth of BAE field studies on American scholarship.

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