

T H E N E W S L E T T E R

Of the Houston Archeological Society

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(Published from time to time. Chairman of the Society, Alan R. Duke. Editorial committee, H. Mewhinney, L. E. Aten, Ivan Newlin.)

MEYLAND HEADS STATE SOCIETY

Wayne B. Meyland, presently one of our directors, was elected president of the Texas Archeological Society at the annual meeting held at Dallas in November, 1961. Wayne will preside until November, 1962.

THREE EDITORIAL SUGGESTIONS

The senior and most decrepit member of the editorial committee herewith takes the liberty of offering three suggestions to members of the Society:

1) We could improve this Newsletter no little if we could obtain and publish occasional brief progress reports on major work undertaken by the Society, such as the digging in Liberty County and Austin County. Really, our busiest and most accomplished excavators have been our most bashful and backward contributors. What our members can do when they finally make up their minds to come across was well illustrated by R. B. Worthington's article in the last Newsletter. That was perhaps the most interesting comment on Texas archaeology since J. F. Epstein published his notes on burins.

2) Since Wayne Meyland of this Society is now president of the Texas Archeological Society, our members might well be reminded that Meyland may need some help, since there is only one of him and the duties of the office---even though partly ceremonial---are numerous.

3) The revised edition of the T.A.S. Handbook will be published shortly in a new looseleaf form (8 1/2 x 11) so new pages can be added. Send your \$6.00 to Lardith K. Schuetz, Texas Archeological Society, Witte Museum, San Antonio 9, Texas.

A BRIEF GLIMPSE AT POVERTY POINT Damon C. Dunn

In West Carroll Parish near Epps, La., stand the remains of an Indian city built more than 2,000 years ago.

Unique in its shape, the Poverty Point Mound towers some 70 feet to overlook a vast earthwork of concentric swells or ridges that form an octagonal pattern.

Tons of small clay objects believed to be cooking balls because of their frequent occurrence in fire pits or kitchen middens are still found throughout most of the site.

Clay earthenware is almost non-existent, except for an occasional small sherd of fiber-tempered ware. The many fragments of steatite and sandstone indicate a people who used stone for containers and vessels.

Scattered over the site are artifacts indicative of a highly specialized microblade development. These blades are found in numerous stages of wear, the unmodified and perforator types being most frequent.

Surface finds include projectile points, bolas weights of hematite and magnetite, adzes, flake scrapers, hafted blades, knives, choppers, unusual clay objects, clay cooking balls, beads, celts, gorgets, hammerstones, gravers, drills, microflints and cores.

Classifiable projectile points include Gary, Pontchartrain, Ellis, Motley, Delni, Macon, Kent, Epps, Carrollton, Desmuke, Hale and Webb. A number of other types appear with less frequency.

The artistic achievements of Poverty Point man are best demonstrated by the many small beads, pendants and ornaments on display at museums and in private collections throughout the country.

One of the finest objects I have seen in a private collection is a bird effigy pendant found by Bertha Hale and now in the collection of Carl Alexander of Epps, La. The pendant is three centimeters high and is drilled longitudinally for stringing.

My own collection contains a small owl effigy bead one and a half centimeters high with a small transverse hole through the neck.

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the Poverty Point culture is the diversity of material used for tools and weapons. Steatite from the Southern Appalachians, flint from Ohio, galena from Missouri, sandstone from Mississippi and magnetite from Arkansas are only a few of the lithic materials found at the site. They show the Poverty Point man as a traveler and a selective trader.

I have made an attempt to give you a glimpse at Poverty Point. For a fine, detailed study of the site, get a copy of "Poverty Point, A Late Archaic Site In Louisiana" by James A. Ford and Clarence H. Webb.

PURPOSE IN ARCHAEOLOGY L. E. Aten

Practically everyone interested in archaeology has at some time wondered, either silently or aloud, what purpose there is in archaeology. What good is it? Perhaps the most common answer heard is that the object of our efforts is as complete and detailed reconstruction of man's unrecorded history as is possible. But, is this really the object? Dr. James A. Ford, in the introduction to his paper, Measurements of Some Prehistoric Design Developments in the Southeastern States,* discusses what may be in store for this art which is developing into a science.

We are indebted to Dr. Ford, who is associate curator of North American Archaeology at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, for giving the Houston Archeological Society permission to reprint part of his paper. It is hoped that his words will help create a better understanding of what we are about.

* See footnotes.

Pages 317 and 318 from the Introduction to Measurements of Some Prehistoric Design Developments in the Southeastern States, by James A. Ford.

The study of archaeology has changed considerably from a rather esthetic beginning as an activity devoted to collecting curios and guarding them in cabinets to be admired for their rarity, beauty, or simple wonder. Students are no longer satisfied with the delights of the collector and are now primarily interested in reconstructing culture history. In recent years methods and techniques have progressed rapidly, and there are indications which suggest that some phases of the study may develop into a truly scientific concern with general principles. This trend seems to be due more to the kinds of evidence that past human history offers than to any planned development. For centuries the perspective of the study of history was narrowed to a listing of battles, kings, political situations, and escapades of great men, an activity which is analogous to collecting curios and arranging them in cabinets. Such collections are fascinating to those who have developed a taste for them, but they contribute little towards the discovery of processes which are always the foremost interest of a science. The evidence that survives in archaeological situations has made it impossible to study prehistory in terms of individual men, or even in terms of man as an acculturated animal. When the archaeologist progresses beyond the single specimen he is studying the phenomena of culture.

In a recent monograph, Walter Taylor has clearly defined the difference between the interests of history and cultural anthropology, stating that archaeological activity, if successful, is, at best, historiography.¹ This definition appears to have predetermined his major conclusion, which will be found embraced in a plea for a more vivid reconstruction of cultural history on the basis of archaeological evidence. I have no quarrel with either Taylor's definition or his conclusion; they seem to follow one another logically, and there is little profit in arguing definitions. If an archaeologist becomes a cultural anthropologist when he begins to inquire into the uniformities in his data, the change in classification has no great significance. I do question whether improvement in technique and a more adequate salvaging of lost history should be the ultimate goal of the archaeologist. It seems to be axiomatic that the final objective has a marked directive and selective effect on all research. If a clear and complete reconstruction of all possible details of man's unrecorded history in all parts of the world is the primary goal of modern archaeology, then we have merely refined the ancient curio and fact-collecting activities of our predecessors and still can only beg that our studies be tolerated for esthetic purposes. In addition, students in the field must realize that many of us are in a trap which the recent culture history of this specialized discipline has sprung on us and can only make every possible effort to escape while there are still some years of life left to enjoy. If our meticulous scrutiny of constructions, bone awls, baskets, potsherds, sotol cuds, and other bits of ancient wreckage will serve no better purpose than to contribute to the pleasure of similarly conditioned savants, and later, in outline form, to plague long-suffering youth in high schools and colleges as an elevating but not particularly useful subject, we are wasting time and effort. We can have more fun, entertain rather than bore a much larger segment of the public, and certainly make more money by traveling to exotic places, having adventures, and then lecturing and writing popular books and sprightly articles for magazines. To have abandoned the techniques of Layard, Squier, Stephens, and Moorehead was a major mistake.

If we were to poll the practicing American archaeologists we probably would find that, at the moment, the majority do consider that the reconstruction of history, to the fullest extent permitted by modern techniques, is the primary aim of the discipline. In so far as Taylor's "A Study of Archaeology" is intended to be a historical document, he seems to be entirely correct. However, archaeologists have perhaps less excuse than students in any other field to be blind to the fact that not only the methods but the ultimate objectives of their discipline are slowly but inevitably changing. One of the present less-popular concepts of the purposes of archaeological study will become the objective of the majority and then historiography pursued for its own sake will be old-fashioned. Of course, any new objective will in turn be superseded, but we probably cannot now imagine in what way; neither can we be too concerned with this nebulous cultural type that will evolve from a stage of this discipline.

that is not yet fully developed. It is sufficient to recognize that our study is merely another example of cultural phenomena and to align our activities in the direction of the historical trend. To endeavor to exceed the limits imposed by sound methodology and information is quite as unrealistic as to lag behind. Dissipating effort in some divergent by-path destined to be abandoned is a waste of time. The most productive position is one slightly in advance of the majority.

I join a number of contemporaries in believing that archaeology is moving in the direction of its establishment as a more important segment of the developing science of culture than it has been in the past. This does not mean that such objectives as discovering chronological sequences and more complete and vivid historical reconstructions will be abandoned; rather these present aims will become necessary steps in the process of arriving at the new goal.

Archaeology has two principal roles in "culturology" as it matures into a useful science. First, it must be relied upon to provide most of the background for existing cultures, our own as well as the more primitive cultures. Every living culture is composed of elements inherited from the past and modified. To attempt to describe and analyze any culture without this background resembles the description of a mountain range without reference to historical geology; it is art, not science. The second role is to provide basic data for a closer examination of general principles, of causes, speed, inevitability, and quantitative aspects of culture change over long periods of time. History does not entirely serve this purpose, for cultural phenomena have both qualitative and quantitative aspects. Varieties of customs and attitudes have been recorded in a haphazard fashion, but the proportions of the competing cultural items were never set down. The task of providing the basic materials for the clear and accurate visualization of long time span cultural change seems to have been left to the prehistorian.

NOTES

* Measurements of Some Prehistoric Design Developments in the Southeastern States, by James A. Ford. Volume 44: Part 3 Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History. New York: 1952

1. A Study of Archeology by Walter W. Taylor. Memoirs, American Anthropological Association, Number 69. 1948.

NEWS ITEMS

Dr. Frank Hole will join the staff of the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at Rice University in February, 1962. Dr. Hole is an archeologist (Ph.D., University of Chicago, 1960), with field experience in the southwestern United States and in the Near East. During the summer and fall of 1961, he served as field director of a joint Rice University-Oriental Institute expedition to Iran.

Plans are being made at Rice University to conduct in the fall of 1962 an archeological symposium provisionally entitled "Early Man and Civilization in the New World". Approximately twelve distinguished archeologists will present original papers on aboriginal peoples and cultures of North and South America.

Lawrence Aten, one of our H.A.S. editors has had a paper titled "Excavation and Salvage at Starks Hammock, Volusia Co., Florida", published in the March - June 1961 issue of "The Florida Anthropologist".

NEW MEMBERS

E. E. Ochsner - Wurtland, Kentucky
Miss Anne Mohr - 5303 Sugar Hill Rd., Houston
Mrs. M. B. Mohr - "