

Anthropology Matters:

Essays in Honor of
Ralph A. Luebben

EDITED BY JONATHAN G. ANDELSON '70

Grinnell College
Professor of Anthropology

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"HERE COME THE ANTHROS": WHAT GOOD IS AN ARCHAEOLOGIST?

BY JOHN WHITTAKER

I was admiring the silver buckles and Navajo rugs in a shop in Flagstaff, Ariz., when the proprietor put a tape of Floyd Westerman (1982) in the stereo. With melodious outrage and a twanging guitar he sang, "Here Come the Anthros," and I went up to the counter and immediately bought three minutes of musical insults:

"The Anthros keep on coming like death and taxes to our land
To study the feathered freaks with funded money in their hand..."

As an anthropologist whose specialty is archaeology, I work with other cultures, especially past ones, because other ways of life fascinate me, and the puzzle of trying to understand other people from the scanty remains they leave behind is a never ending challenge. You might think this a harmless, if esoteric pursuit. Once people are a thousand years dead, does it really matter to anyone but a few academics whether they came from the north or the south, ate corn or each other, or built their houses of stone or wood? In fact, it matters greatly, and the activities of archaeologists in particular have roused a lot of undeserved ire.

The gist of Floyd Westerman's song was that we are insensitive, arrogant, and represent the oppressors. Money spent on us does not help the people we study, and the things we find out are uninteresting or obvious. We poke our noses where they don't belong, and we are disrespectful:

"The Anthros keep on digging our sacred ceremonial sites
As if there's nothing wrong and education gives them the right
But the more they keep on digging, the less they really see
Cause they got no respect, for you or for me."

I have to admit that Floyd, who speaks for a good many others, is sometimes partly correct. Some anthropologists are pests, and even the large major-

ity of us who try not to be obnoxious can give offense sometimes. I have seen the exasperation on the face of an informant when I asked a dumb question, and I have blundered into rooms where I plainly was not welcome. I have offended some of my students and the public by trying to teach them things that contradict cherished beliefs.

But mostly Floyd is wrong. As a group, anthropologists tend to be careful of other cultures and people, and teach that protection of the informant and respect for the culture under study are essential starting points for all work. Moreover, the snooping of anthropologists has led to some practical benefits that even Floyd would probably approve. I could defend my profession by pointing out, for instance, that anthropologists were among those who forced the repeal of laws suppressing Native American religious freedom, and archaeological evidence has many times helped support Indian land right claims by documenting a long presence in a tribal territory. However, I want to argue for the value of archaeologists on less practical, more spiritual grounds.

The criticism that most annoys me is that we “got no respect.” Like most anthropologists, if I did not respect the people I study, and feel both interest and human kinship with them, I would not go to the trouble I do to study and teach anthropology. I occasionally suspect there must be easier ways to earn a living than drinking harsh tea and contaminated water while enjoying Syrian village hospitality; or listening to your neck hairs sizzle under the Arizona sun while you brush the dust off an ancient floor; or convincing a sleepy late afternoon class that the article they were supposed to read, while long and technical, contains insights about people they should understand and care about.

I am fascinated by the Sinagua people whose remains I excavate. They were tough folk who knew every trick to surviving as farmers in the arid pinon-juniper woodland around Flagstaff. It is always a thrill to figure out a little piece of how they did it. If you spend a few days in the sun and wind on the top of O’Neill Crater where we have been working recently, the puzzling walls that stick out from corners and sometimes surround houses begin to make sense as windbreaks. They were higher before 700 years of weather tumbled the stones, and the labor of lifting the basalt blocks was repaid as well by the shade the wall cast. The simple architecture of the Sinagua was quite effective.

On the other hand, their medical practices and hygiene leave much to be desired. The shade of their walls was doubtless less pleasant before 700 years of

weather sterilized the trash and toilet areas just around the corner of the house. Much has been made lately of native herbal knowledge, and we may assume the Sinagua had as many natural remedies as historic Southwestern peoples, some effective, some useless. Nevertheless, their skeletons show that, although they were strong and tough, they were not healthy. Rotted teeth and serious, painful abscesses are common; the few members of the population who survived to my age (44) had lost most of their teeth. Evidence of malnutrition is ubiquitous, especially in children, and badly healed injuries are not uncommon. I would not want to be a Sinagua—they lived an awfully hard life—but I admire their skills, and I certainly would like to ask them some questions.

Similarly, respecting other people and their rights today does not mean you have to agree with them. Floyd Westerman has a perfect right to express his views about anthropologists, but I can disagree strongly and still expect to find him a decent person, should we ever meet. It is plain that we differ about how to treat the evidence of the past. He wants me to leave it alone; I want to excavate it and learn from it. He wants control to be in Indian hands; I regard it as a human heritage that belongs to all. He may see a spiritual presence in it; I regard it more materialistically as evidence, data. I am interested in his opinions about the past; he doesn’t think I have anything to say to him.

Nowhere has this conflict of beliefs developed more strongly than in the case of human remains. In 1990, Congress passed NAGPRA, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. Among other things, NAGPRA and related federal and state legislation and policy statements make it generally illegal to disturb prehistoric burials except under closely defined situations (mostly construction and occasionally research), and mandate that most newly excavated burials and also skeletal remains that are now in museums should be given to modern groups that claim descent from them, usually to be reburied (Price 1991 provides a review). I consider this bad law, and disastrous for archaeology. In practical terms, the laws do not really protect burials, which continue to be disturbed by construction, and illegally ravaged by looters interested only in artifacts. Meanwhile, excavating burials scientifically is now so laden with political and legal difficulties that many archaeologists fear to deal with them. The laws have resulted in the destruction by reburial of vast amounts of archaeological evidence, just as the profession has finally learned that nothing can be thrown away—we are always finding new ways to understand old evidence. In the case of skeletal remains, the last de-

cade has seen the development of new ways of analyzing isotopes, DNA, genetic material, and pathologies that allow us to understand diet, trace genetic connections (a matter of considerable interest to some tribes), and follow the early patterns of diseases that still plague us. Many of the reburied skeletal remains and artifacts have little or no connection to the modern group that claims them, and belong in the public trust as part of the country's heritage.

The political effects are much worse. NAGPRA has set a dangerous legal precedent in allowing various minorities to prevent some kinds of scholarly research. NAGPRA gives a large measure of control over part of the past to groups vaguely defined on ethnic and religious grounds. While it has promoted some much-needed communication and cooperation between anthropologists and Native American organizations, just as often it has produced divisive arguments among Indian groups about who is really descended from which skeletons, and between Indians and archaeologists, who ought to be natural allies in protecting the past. The act is subtly racist—it would never have been passed if most legislators had not felt that American prehistory was unimportant enough that exclusive claims by Indian activists could be granted.

The most important reason NAGPRA was supported by many and passed by Congress is that most people can be convinced digging up the dead is "disrespectful." As an archaeologist, I believe there are a lot of different ways to respect the dead, and one of them is to study them and try to understand their lives and tell their story. On my desk, beside the photos of my wife and child, are two other pictures which I consider "family portraits" as well. Both result from work at a prehistoric village site near Flagstaff, Ariz. (Kamp 1997; Kamp and Whittaker 1998). At Lizard Man Village, my wife Kathy and I spent four summers excavating with Grinnell students, following a tradition of summer archaeological field schools begun by Ralph Luebber in 1968. In 1985, before the current legal situation made excavating burials a political hassle fraught with red tape and restriction, we excavated a number of burials at this site. (All are now at the Museum of Northern Arizona and will probably be reburied sometime in the future.) A large photo on my desk shows the skull of Burial 9. Sad to say, some archaeologists are now so afraid of giving offense they will not even publish pictures of burials. In this case, the restrictions of this publication format prevent me from showing my two pictures here. I will first describe Burial 9 in objective and scientific terms, pretty much the way it will be published, and then explain why I keep a slightly grim picture on my desk.

Burial 9. Child, 4.5 to 6 years old, sex indeterminate. Buried extended on its back, in pit along north wall of Room 15, head to east. Pit cut through fill in room and 20 cm below floor.

Skull mostly complete, but damaged. Occipital flattening is evidence that a hard cradleboard was used. Cribra orbitalia in R orbit (fine porosity in the eye socket) is evidence of an anemic condition, probably resulting from nutritional deficiencies. Long bone measurements were shorter than normal for tooth age, again probably resulting from poor nutrition. The milk teeth were heavily worn, with hypoplastic bands, further evidence of disease or nutritional stress. One unhealed abscess caused the loss of the first right lower milk molar and indicates general ill health, and possibly a systemic infection. Flaring of long bone shaft ends suggests metabolic difficulties like scurvy (vitamin C deficiency) or rickets (vitamin D deficiency, which often occurs if people are not exposed to sunlight). The right leg shows a healed fracture below lesser trochanter of femur, which set crooked resulting in shortening of the leg. The bony callus around break was mostly healed but still remodeling, indicating the accident took place a year or more before death. The right lower leg bones are strongly bowed and covered with fine porous new bone growth. This suggests the bone softened during the period of confinement after the fracture, and then was walked on before it could regain its strength. Porous new bone on legs and other long bones suggests a systemic infection.

Goods: A necklace of more than 195 *Olivella* shell beads was around the neck. A *Glycymeris* shell frog pendant was on the breast, and two *Pecten* shell pendants at knees and pelvis. These ornaments were probably made by the Hohokam people to the south. All Sinagua shell was probably obtained by trade. Ten vessels of local Sunset Brown pottery were included in the grave. One small bowl has a white organic crust with finger streaks and may have been used in the burial ceremony. Two are crude and atypical miniature jars, probably a child's work. Two bowls imitating large shells, one fine and one crude, were nested together. The others are normal small bowls and jars. This was the largest quantity of goods found in any burial at Lizard Man Village, and more than in most Sinagua burials anywhere.

The description above provides the facts and some scientifically useful interpretations from them: The child led a hard life, typical of the Sinagua population, suffered a typical injury, was tended carefully but with primitive medicine, and buried with a lot of goods at death, suggesting again that some-

one cared. It shows how much information can be obtained from burials, and how small details are important, but it is admittedly rather dry. Much archaeology is written this way because we wish to be objective and scientific. Nevertheless, archaeologists are fascinated by burials because they are the closest we can come to seeing something of the life of one individual, a real person. In this case, the story is a sad one, as it often is in archaeology—after all, death, and loss, and change, and forgetting are the soil from which archaeology must grow. We are taught to write without passion, but no good archaeologist fails to see the people in the bones.

The second of the “family portraits” on my desk was drawn by 1994 Grinnell graduate Amy Henderson on our instructions. It shows the Sinagua child standing by the petroglyph rock for which we named the site. Now read the burial description again, and remember the skull was once a child:

Picture a child, sitting beside mother in the shade of a wall, imitating her pots, learning how to work the clay. Brown legs, cheerfully scampering on the rocks above the petroglyph—but now it is winter, and icy, and the child falls. Screaming with the pain of a broken leg. Bedded down on a soft blanket in a corner of the dark and smoky room all winter. While the priest chants and the parents worry, the child tosses and moans with fever. Spring comes, and the child is carried out to see the sun again, and hobbles around, affectionate and uncomplaining despite the pain. The child sits with grandmother and makes pots again, but food is short once more that year, and the child grows listless. The playing stops, and one morning there is only a body under a blanket, and the parents weeping as they put the necklace the child loved around its neck and bury it in a shallow grave with its toy pots to hold their love and loss.

Do I disrespect the dead when I excavate, photograph, and study them? The photograph on my desk shows a bone, which no more cares what happens to it than a dead stick from a tree. Yet we do not handle it carelessly, or mock it, because in our minds the photo is not separable from the drawing. One is the evidence, the other is the meaning, and we need both. I do respect the dead, and their culture. I do not want to live their lives, and they might or might not be pleased by my interest if they were alive, but I do want to learn from the dead, and tell their story as best I can. I feel honored that I have seen and can tell a human story lost for 700 years, and the Sinagua child of Burial 9 is a real person who has entered my soul more than anything else I have ever encountered in archaeology.

I can take my revenge on Floyd for calling me disrespectful by being an anthropologist, and analyzing him, too. After all, I’m not a fan of country western music styles, and I surely did not buy the tape for the poetry of the lyrics either. Westerman may be sincere in his feelings, but it is fair to note that he lives in a big house in California and makes lots of money singing protest songs to the right people. Although I don’t think he is quite as oppressed as he would like you to think, he does ask a question asked by many in the Native American community, and which ought to be asked by all archaeologists as well: What good is archaeology?

Archaeologists know their work is unlikely to solve the problem of world hunger or cure the common cold. Nevertheless, intangible understanding has practical consequences. By looking at the past we not only see processes and human situations that are relevant to us today, we also give it a concrete reality and make it live in our minds. People are interested in the past, and maybe that is enough of a reason to do archaeology.

However, it goes deeper than that. We also use the past to understand ourselves, and to make statements today about what has been and what should be. For modern Native Americans, the record of the past reflects the achievements of their ancestors, and depictions of the past make statements about the importance of their heritage, the value of past and present Indian cultures, and the continuing worth of them as people. I share much of this view. Like most archaeologists, I feel that archaeological evidence is the record of fascinating cultures and tangible people who are worth understanding and learning from. Pride in a people’s specific heritage and in the wider heritage of humanity is something archaeology can and often should promote.

Sometimes pride and self-definition go awry. At a meeting in Albuquerque in 1995, representatives of all nine Apache tribes signed an agreement to claim exclusive rights over their cultural heritage. They expressed the intent not only to claim Apache (and also possible Apache, and prehistoric and thus non-Apache) materials now held in museums, but to control everything within their cultural domain—songs, stories, ideas, depictions, and even the name “Apache.” Carey Vicenti, chief judge of the Jicarilla, was quoted to the effect that anyone, including historians, who wanted to write about the Apache would have to obtain tribal permission.

Anthropologists often share Indian dislike of inaccurate representations and sympathize with some tribes’ frustration when their characteristic art mo-

tifs, which often have religious significance, are perverted for commercial uses. However, attempts to claim exclusive rights to a group's entire "cultural domain" are legally absurd, and morally indefensible. It would be as wrong for the Apache to control what I say about them, as it would be for me to tell Floyd Westerman he could not use a guitar because that was part of my heritage, not his.

Anthropologists have a different view of cultural domains. We believe any culture is a legitimate object of study, which makes us seem intrusive and imperialistic to some, but is in fact the reverse. As an archaeologist, I am interested in everyone's past, not to claim it and monopolize it, but to understand it and share what I learn from it. If I have a political statement to make in teaching North American prehistory, it is that all archaeology is a common human heritage. Prehistoric Native Americans are as interesting, and as important, and as worthy of study as the ancient Greeks, the Biblical Hebrews, the Anglo-Saxons, or George Washington. This anthropological inclusiveness is worth preaching and should be welcomed by Native Americans, because many other Americans think the prehistory of this continent is not important, so it is all right to destroy it by "progress," loot it for salable artifacts, and pervert it for racist propaganda. Separatist claims like the Apaches' simply reinforce these trends. When the past is recognized as everyone's heritage, both the evidence of the past and the modern descendants of those who left it will get more respect.

There are worse things than having archaeologists poke at the remains of your ancestors, even if they are overly fussy about technical details, or sometimes reveal a past less flattering than you would like. We archaeologists know we will never understand everything about the past, or even achieve an unquestionable truth in our interpretations, but we do try to get it right. And in fact, by relying on the evidence, we do come close to understanding some of what the past was really like, even if our writing is sometimes sterile. Being human we do have biases, but we try to be fair and follow the evidence rather than our preconceptions or wishful thinking.

The treatment of the past by nonarchaeologists is not usually so scrupulous. History has shown that people who make exclusive claims on the past for political reasons usually have a low regard for the truth and use perversions of archaeology to further bigotry and to take things away from people.

The Nazi government of Germany used bad archaeological arguments to

claim Poland was really "Aryan" and belonged to Germany, but was temporarily occupied by "squatter" cultures. Once they had conquered Poland, the SS organized a major excavation at the fantastic medieval site of Biskupin to pursue this line of research. When they were forced to retreat at the end of the war, they dynamited the site, expressing their true regard for archaeology (Arnold 1992).

The recent war in Bosnia has seen the intentional destruction of churches, mosques, and other cultural monuments by both sides. If you can destroy the archaeological evidence of the past, you can deny your opponents their right to land, to their heritage, and to their pride and identity as a people (Chapman 1994).

Even in America there has been a long and continuing tradition of false archaeology by crackpots who attempt to show that the Hebrews, or the Phoenicians, or the Celts, or the Egyptians, or the Chinese, or the Africans managed to get to this continent in prehistory and thus are really responsible for the achievements of the Native Americans, and taught them everything they knew (Williams 1991). There was a strong political motivation behind these ideas when European colonists were intent on pushing Indians off their land and claiming it for themselves; there are still plenty of racists around who would like to excuse past injustices and use false archaeology to put down the Indians. American archaeologists have been debunking these stories for more than 100 years, and I think that alone justifies our existence. We may be annoying and obtuse sometimes, but if archaeologists do not tell the truth about the past, someone will make up a fictional past to suit their political motives, and it will usually be a racist fiction, denying Native Americans their real achievements. If you do not tell a true story, the lies are all you will hear.

Archaeology is often the only way to get an accurate picture of the past. To me this means seeing the real, individual, gritty people, with their ill health and nasty habits as well as their wisdom and skills. By viewing the past scientifically, and realistically, and by caring about the truth, we speak for the value of other cultures, the importance of learning from other people who we can only partly understand, and who may not be wholly admirable to us. We speak for the importance of diversity, the preservation of our heritage, appreciation of our ancestors, sharing of ideas, and common humanity.

When the anthros stop coming, when the archaeologists are silenced by divisive politics, and when the evidence of the past is controlled for political

purposes, allowed to be destroyed by "economic progress," or left unprotected by budget cuts and weakened environmental laws, we will lose more than a few academic positions. Then the dead will be truly dead, their faint voices stilled forever, and the living will have lost a part of their souls.

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APPENDIX

RALPH A. LUEBBEN SCHOLARLY PRODUCTIONS

THESES

1951. *The Leaf Water Site, Chama Valley, New Mexico*. University of New Mexico (M.A.).
1955. *A Study of Some Off-Reservation Navaho Miners*. Cornell University (Ph.D.).

PUBLICATIONS

- 1953a. *Physiographic Environment of the Lower Chama Valley*, in Fred Wendorf, *Salvage Archeology in the Chama Valley, New Mexico*. Monograph of the School of American Research 17:1-2.
- 1953b. *Leaf Water Site*, in Fred Wendorf, *Salvage Archeology in the Chama Valley, New Mexico*. Monograph of the School of American Research 17:9-33.
1957. & W. H. Stacy. *Iowa and Industry*. *Agriculture Extension Service P.S.* 399:2-7.
1958. *The Navaho Dilemma: A Question of Necessity*. *American Indian* 8-2:6-16.
1960. & Laurance Herold & Arthur Rohn. *An Unusual Pueblo III Ruin, Mesa Verde, Colorado*. *American Antiquity* 26:11-20.
- 1962a. *Navaho Status and Leadership in a Modern Mining Situation*. *Plateau* 35:1-14.
- 1962b. & Arthur Rohn & Dale Givens. *A Partially Subterranean Pueblo III Structure, Mesa Verde, Colorado*. *El Palacio* 69:225-239.
- 1964a. *Anglo Law and Navaho Behavior*. *The Kiva* 29:60-75.
- 1964b. *Prejudice and Discrimination Against Navahos in a Mining Community*. *The Kiva* 30:1-17.
1964. & Janell Luebben. *A Calamites Pith Cast Fossil from San Diego Canyon, New Mexico*. *El Palacio* 71:18-21.