

EDITORIAL: COMPILATIONS AND EXPLANATIONS

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In my first editorial (von Gernet 1994:15) I noted that the Ontario Archaeological Society has had a history of attracting excellent avocational archaeologists who have little interest in formulating academic theories but who are prepared to furnish meticulous descriptions of important sites or artifacts. Among those "Old Timers" (I use the term reverentially) who have made contributions to the literature are the indefatigable Jim Pendergast, Barry Mitchell, Gordon Watson, Charles Garrad, and Bill Donaldson.

While all of these exceptional autodidacts have published frequently in *Ontario Archaeology*, Donaldson was the first to do so. Between 1958 and 1965 seven of his papers appeared in four consecutive numbers of this journal (see Fawcett 1979:12-14). Now, thirty years later, Donaldson re-emerges as the senior author of a report on the Hind Site. This report has been long-awaited; for many, including one of the associate editors of this journal, an interest in Ontario's prehistory was stimulated by the Hind Site project.

Donaldson and Wortner's submission was not sent to "peers" in the avocational community. Rather, reviews were solicited and received from professors teaching at three major universities in Ontario, Quebec and Michigan. The majority enthusiastically recommended publication in *Ontario Archaeology*, although one suggested rejection of the manuscript on the grounds that it entailed no more than description and offers little interpretation on matters relating to chronology, economy, culture and ritual meanings.

The conflicting assessments were not unexpected since they reflect an old and oftentimes heated debate. K.C. Chang once said that

Some archaeologists take the position that archaeological work can be divided into two steps: recovery and interpretation. The former is purely descriptive, and potentially objective, whereas

the latter depends on individual theories. Other archaeologists take a stand quite the opposite: archaeology must be problem-oriented; investigations are undertaken to solve problems; archaeological remains are intrinsically useless and valueless once squeezed dry of juices that are pertinent to the understanding of human history, culture, and their many problems. To both positions I must take violent exception, although I fully sympathize with and understand both [Chang 1967:127].

The fact of the matter is that descriptions of material objects ("data") and historical inferences or interpretations cannot be easily disentangled, particularly since both rely on a similar language of representation. One does not require recourse to post-modernist argument to acknowledge that even an artifact catalogue is a theoretical construct that is neither neutral nor necessarily objective.

That said, it is still possible to categorize archaeological writing. The French archaeologist Jean-Claude Gardin (1980:17-30) offers a useful distinction between "compilations" and "explanations" which he regards in terms of a polarity rather than a dichotomy. Compilations disclose important materials hitherto unpublished or not easily accessible. They include site reports which often have tabular presentations and are organized either by the types of objects described or by the features and excavation units in which artifacts were recovered. A compilation is, however, defined not so much by its substance or structure, but by its purpose. The goal is "to present archaeological data in a form which will enable others to retrieve them without too much effort, in connection with comparative or historical investigations which the compiler can neither anticipate, nor confine to his own interests" (Gardin 1980:26). The emphasis is on the convenience of information retrieval and on satisfying the requirements of a specific user group (Gardin

1980:148).

Explanations are usually speculative texts which diffuse new ideas and contain propositions about past events or lifeways. They often appear as linear expositions and a continuous discourse. While they depend on compilations, they are intellectually more ambitious since they are not limited to descriptions of objects left by ancient peoples but also theorize on the activities, economies, socio-political organizations, and beliefs of the persons or groups who made the objects (Gardin 1980:26-27). The "New Archeology", with its fixation on generalizations about human behaviour, elevated explanation to a point where it threatened to turn the archaeological record of native peoples in the New World into a vehicle serving the interests of a select group of Euroamerican intellectuals (Trigger 1980:671).

It seems obvious that both compilatory and explanatory constructions are essential ingredients in a healthy archaeological literature; even processual archaeologists seem to concede this (e.g., Watson et al. 1984:236). It does not follow, however, that both must be equally evident in every publication. The burden of achieving an appropriate balance between the two must fall on the archaeological community as a whole and not on individual contributors. Most site reports do, in fact, contain at least a few explanatory propositions, either in formal, concluding sections or scattered throughout the text. The relative position of any contribution on the continuum between compilation and explanation depends in large measure on the author's interests and aspirations — factors which are not particularly relevant in the adjudication process. Rigour and scholarship can be apparent or deficient in either descriptions or interpretations.

The major contribution appearing in this number of *Ontario Archaeology* tends to lean towards the compilation end of the continuum. From the moment it arrived on the editor's desk it was clear that this was a "data-heavy" manuscript. It begins by describing an important site and associated assemblage excavated between 1968 and 1977 and organizes the data in a fashion that facilitates information retrieval. This is followed by descriptions of similar sites and assemblages; once again the primary purpose is the compilation of cultural data (often excavated in the library), although there are modest efforts to apply a comparative

approach. Finally, a discussion section offers a few tentative conclusions.

The report has not been written in a theoretical vacuum. The authors utilize standard typological constructs and nomenclature. Moreover, the Hind Site has been prominent in recent anthropological interpretations of the Glacial Kame Complex in Ontario and the authors rely on this literature. These interpretations have focused on such issues as cultural continuity (between Archaic and Meadowood), exchange networks, burial practices, social organization and band structure. They are essentially synthetic overviews which fall more on the "explanation" end of the continuum (Ellis et al. 1990:115-119; Spence and Fox 1986:8, 11-15). Those who are looking for new or additional explanations in the Donaldson and Wortner report may be disappointed. In fact, one of the strengths of the report (in addition to the meticulous descriptions) is the willingness of the authors to yield to the expert opinion of others in various matters of a technical or theoretical nature. The lengthy acknowledgements section reads like a "Who's Who" in Ontario archaeology.

The collaborative effort is further illustrated by the second paper appearing in this number. Varney and Pfeiffer's osteological analysis, originally intended as an appendix to Donaldson and Wortner's archaeological report, is just as effective standing alone. It not only describes the non-cremated human remains, but offers opinions on the skeletal and dental health of the people of the Hind Site. Higher-level inferences are limited to the reasonable conclusion that Glacial Kame society placed value on the well-being of the physically disabled. This is solid empirical evidence once again refuting the Hobbesian myth about the nature of non-state societies (Dickason 1984:52-53). Life may often have been short, but it was not solitary, nasty or brutish.

A Glacial Kame burial was described in the May 11, 1882 issue of the *Trenton Courier* as an "entire skeleton of a red man or one of Champlain's voyageurs". Donaldson, Wortner, Varney and Pfeiffer illustrate how much we have learned in the 113 years since.

Walter Taylor, who helped stimulate problem-oriented research, understood that archaeological remains constitute a non-renewable resource and that the archaeologist is "obligated to preserve, whether in publica-

lion or some permanent repository, the full body of his empirical data and records," even if such an undertaking bridled progress on specific research questions (Taylor 1948:154-156). It is in the spirit of this ethic that the following contributions were accepted for publication. Their length and nature preclude a comment/response section; this feature will return in the next number of *Ontario Archaeology*.

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