

CURRENT DIRECTIONS AND  
PERSPECTIVES IN MESOAMERICAN  
COGNITIVE ARCHAEOLOGY

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- MESOAMERICAN SITES AND WORLD VIEWS. Edited by ELIZABETH P. BENSON. (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, 1981. Pp. 245. \$24.00.)
- THE ART AND ICONOGRAPHY OF LATE POST-CLASSIC CENTRAL MEXICO. Edited by ELIZABETH HILL BOONE. (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982. Pp. 254. \$20.00.)
- AT THE EDGE OF THE SEA: MURAL PAINTING AT TANCAH-TULUM, QUINTANA ROO, YUCATÁN. By ARTHUR G. MILLER. (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982. Pp. 133. \$35.00.)
- THE BODEGA OF PALENQUE, CHIAPAS, MEXICO. By LINDA SCHELE and PETER MATHEWS. (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1979. Pp. 173. \$24.00.)
- CHACS AND CHIEFS: THE ICONOLOGY OF MOSAIC STONE SCULPTURE IN PRE-CONQUEST YUCATÁN, MEXICO. By ROSEMARY SHARP. (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1981. Pp. 48. \$6.00.)
- TERCERA MESA REDONDA DE PALENQUE. Edited by MERLE GREEN ROBERTSON and DONNAN CALL JEFFERS. (Monterey, Cal.: Pre-Columbian Art Research, Herald Printers, 1978. Pp. 232.)
- THIRD PALENQUE ROUND TABLE, 1978, PART 2. Edited by MERLE GREEN ROBERTSON. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981. Pp. 226. \$30.00.)
- MIDDLE CLASSIC MESOAMERICA: AD 400-700. Edited by ESTHER PASZTORY. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978. Pp. 197. \$20.00.)
- THE MAYA BOOK OF THE DEAD: THE CERAMIC CODEX. By FRANCIS ROBICSEK. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983. Pp. 257. \$48.50.)

Profound changes have occurred within the discipline of archaeology during the past three decades. New field and laboratory techniques coupled with basic changes in theoretical perspectives have created what is optimistically called the New Archaeology and have initiated a broad range of new directions or subfields.<sup>1</sup> This essay concerns one such

subfield, cognitive archaeology, as it is currently practiced in Mesoamerica, the Mexican and Central American homeland of numerous ancient civilizations. The essay will examine the development of Mesoamerican cognitive archaeology, its relationship to the broader realm of Mesoamerican studies, and a sample of recent publications that are representative of work being done in the field.

Ancient Mesoamerican civilizations have fascinated Westerners for centuries. Their magnificent temples, exotic settings, and strange lifestyles initially led to unfettered speculation and later to disciplined scientific study in an attempt to learn about the history and nature of these cultures. Scholarly interest in Mesoamerican civilizations has grown at an astounding rate in the past three decades; indeed, one can speak of an academic boom in which the number of scholars in the field grew from a few score in 1950 to hundreds of professionals in North America, Latin America, and Europe today.

Most of the current scholars are archaeologists trained in the North American tradition of anthropological archaeology, but their ranks currently are being augmented by art historians, cognitive anthropologists, ethnohistorians, linguists, astronomers, physical scientists, medical historians, and others. Many of these individuals have orientations and perspectives quite different from those of modern anthropological archaeology. Art history is the most important of these alternative pathways to the past in terms of the number of scholars involved. Although the formal study of Mesoamerican art goes back at least to Herbert Spinden's classic monograph *A Study of Maya Art*,<sup>2</sup> George Kubler of Yale University has been the main impetus to the current growth in the field.<sup>3</sup> His two seminal books, *The Shape of Time*<sup>4</sup> and *The Art and Architecture of Ancient America: The Mexican, Mayan, and Andean Peoples*,<sup>5</sup> have provided the intellectual and factual matrix for modern Mesoamerican art history. He also has trained many of the current workers in the field.

It would seem that anthropological archaeology and art history have a great deal to offer each other and one would expect close collaboration between researchers in the two fields. Such collaboration does occur, but not nearly to the degree possible; certain tensions between the two are clearly evident. Of the numerous reasons that might account for them, the most important apparently derives from the changes that anthropological archaeology has undergone since 1950.<sup>6</sup> The discipline has experienced a virtual revolution in which older concerns with cultural history and chronology have been supplanted and at times even replaced by new emphases on scientific methodology, ecology, materialism, theory building, quantification, and other interests outside the humanistic sphere. These new directions have proven extremely fruitful for archaeology, but have partially estranged it from art history just when the field was coming into existence.

Contemporary anthropological archaeologists examine settlement patterns, house remains, food residues, burials, trade commodities, and other types of evidence in order to reconstruct the cultural history of the particular group and the processes behind cultural change and stability. They hope to discover laws, or at least generalizations, that apply to human societies in general, not just the creators of the specific materials they happen to be analyzing. This scientific, evolutionary, and comparative approach deemphasizes and at times even rejects the traditional concern of art history with style, iconography, and elite culture.

What then do art historians do? Cecilia Klein has suggested that “pre-Columbian art history came into existence in this country [the United States] in part specifically to do what archaeology has ceased to do,” and that art history studies “have involved either descriptive, stylistic, or iconographic analyses of selected classes of objects—or both.”<sup>7</sup> These studies are frequently integrated with analyses or explanations based upon ethnohistorical accounts of the cultures of the contact period or ethnographic materials drawn from isolated twentieth-century Indian societies. This tendency to explain older materials by invoking later beliefs and practices is not only common in all realms of Mesoamerican studies, despite appropriately cautionary criticisms of it by Kubler and others,<sup>8</sup> but is a basic element in most studies.

The relationship between anthropological archaeology and art history has been brought up because this view is a common one, but an oversimplification nonetheless. A close examination of recent publications, including those reviewed here, will reveal two basically different approaches to the studies of ancient civilizations, approaches that I will call *scientific archaeology* and *cognitive archaeology*. It should be noted at the outset that *science* and *scientific* are loaded terms in current American parlance; things called scientific are often viewed as intrinsically better or more valid than things not awarded this label. Although I consider myself a scientific archaeologist, I am not denigrating cognitive archaeology by my choice of terms; I fully agree with the comment made by Michael Coe that “it does not matter whether something is scientific or not as long as it is good scholarship.”

Scientific archaeology is the post-1950 mainstream or establishment approach to the field as described above. Cognitive archaeology is a relatively new, vaguely delimited, amorphous approach defined by one archaeologist as “the study of past mental processes, as viewed through the archaeological record.”<sup>9</sup> It involves attempts to learn about the motivations, beliefs, and world views of ancient peoples and is cognitive because of its emphasis on mental, rather than social or environmental, phenomena. It is archaeology (despite some disclaimers by some of the more rigid scientific archaeologists) because it deals with the past and depends on archaeological facts for its data. Although cognitive archae-

ology is normally considered to be a humanistic alternative to scientific archaeology, a few practitioners have blended it successfully with the latter into a broad ecological-systems approach that draws on both.<sup>10</sup>

Ironically, most cognitive archaeologists are not field archaeologists who collect their own data, but art historians, linguists, ethnohistorians, and the like. Nevertheless, they are certainly engaged in archaeology, if archaeology is "the study of the past." On the other hand, only a few contemporary Mesoamerican field archaeologists qualify as cognitive archaeologists; Michael Coe, Kent Flannery, and the late Dennis Puleston are a few names that come to mind in this context. This unfortunate situation means that with few exceptions, cognitive archaeologists depend either on scientific archaeologists or looters, whose depredations feed the growing antiquities market, for their basic data. Modern field archaeologists frequently do not collect the kinds of data needed for cognitive studies, thus the cognitive scholars are forced to use old and often poorly collected information. Objects gathered by looters are not pinpointed in the time, space, and contextual matrices that are so essential to archaeological inferences of any sort.

Given this background, what is the current status of cognitive archaeology? The nine books that form the basis of this essay represent a good cross-section of recent work in the field and exemplify the main trends in the field. Five are conference or symposium volumes, the other four have single or joint authors. The fifty-four authors involved include most of the scholars currently working in the field. Although it is difficult at times to classify scholars by their primary affiliations, I count twenty-six anthropologists (including archaeologists, ethnographers, ethnohistorians, and linguists), seventeen art historians, at least four astronomers, two physical scientists, a mathematician, and a professor of medicine.

One of the most striking aspects of cognitive archaeology that is shown in this group of works is the tremendous diversity of topics and interests that it encompasses. The table of contents of any of the symposium volumes highlights this diversity. For example, *Mesoamerican Sites and World Views*, edited by Elizabeth Boone, focuses on late Post-Classic Central Mexico and contains articles on the Mixteca-Puebla concept in Mesoamerican studies, the goddess Tlazolteotl-Ixcuina, costume analysis, state ideology as reflected in monumental sculpture, a new interpretation of the site of Malinalco, Aztec law, codex portrayals of archaeologically documented material culture, the interpretation of poses and gestures in codices, and skeletonization in Mixtec art. This broad range of topics and approaches to one basic set of materials representing a relatively small segment of time and space is characteristic of the field. It suggests that cognitive archaeology is a young discipline that is just beginning to explore its environment and discover what can be done

within it. As cognitive archaeology matures, it may settle into a more predictable and narrowly defined set of approaches to problems, although I hope it will not because its diversity is a strength, rather than a weakness.

A second observation is that the field of cognitive archaeology is dominated by one institution, the Dumbarton Oaks Center for Pre-Columbian Studies, and one major biannual conference, the Mesa Redonda de Palenque. Dumbarton Oaks is a museum and research organization that sponsors frequent symposiums and seminars and provides support for in-house fellowships and basic field research. Five of the nine books reviewed here were produced by Dumbarton Oaks. This organization attained its prominence in Mesoamerican art history and cognitive studies under the leadership of Elizabeth Benson and Michael Coe in the sixties and seventies, and despite recent changes in personnel and direction, it may be expected to continue to play a crucial role in the field.

It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of Dumbarton Oaks in the development of Mesoamerican cognitive studies. It has served as a rallying point and congenial refuge for scholars who have few sympathetic colleagues with whom they can talk shop at their home institutions and also as a forum for unorthodox ideas. Virtually everyone who is active in the field has attended a Dumbarton Oaks conference, held a fellowship, or received some form of aid or stimulation from it. In fact, one could suggest that it plays a role in its own sphere analogous to that played by the Carnegie Institution of Washington in Mayan archaeology earlier in this century.

The Mesas Redondas de Palenque are a series of conferences organized by Merle Green Robertson and held at the Mayan site for which they are named. They began with a small informal meeting devoted to studying all aspects of Palenque art, archaeology, and epigraphy, but have grown into major gatherings with scores of contributors and over one hundred observers. Palenque remains the primary emphasis, but other Mayan and even non-Mayan topics are included in the two volumes from the Third Round Table. The intensive study of Palenque art and inscriptions has made the site one of the best-known Mayan centers in existence, even though relatively little fieldwork has been done there in recent years. The number of Palencano scholars has reached a critical mass point that has fostered major advances on the topics of epigraphy, dynastic history, site orientation, and world view as expressed in the material remains. The large corpus of stucco architectural decorations, the unique sarcophagus of the Temple of the Inscriptions, and the unusually lengthy and abundant texts have enabled scholars to make tremendous advances in deciphering Mayan writing—a significant accomplishment of Mesoamerican studies in the twentieth century.

It is not possible to discuss each of the nine books in detail, but

short descriptions of each will indicate what is being done in the field. Beginning with the Dumbarton Oaks volumes, Arthur Miller's *At the Edge of the Sea: Mural Painting at Tancah-Tulum, Quintana Roo, Yucatán* presents a welcome exception to the rule that Mesoamerican cognitive archaeologists generally utilize archaeological data recovered by others rather than engage in excavation and survey themselves. Miller organized a field project to study the known murals on the east coast of Yucatán, discover new ones, and establish the archaeological contexts of these relatively rare examples of Mayan art. With the collaboration of Felipe Dávalos G., an artist justly famous for his drawings and paintings that painstakingly reconstruct pre-Columbian art, Miller recorded the extant murals at several sites. In addition to describing the paintings, Miller proposes a chronology for the development of mural art. The chronology is admittedly open to question and is in fact challenged by Joseph Ball in an appendix. Miller discusses the prehistoric cultural sequence in the Tancah-Tulum area and the iconology of the mural tradition as it relates to changes in the political and economic fortunes of the ancient inhabitants. His historical reconstruction varies considerably from the traditional syntheses written by scientific archaeologists, and although it may be inaccurate in certain specifics, it displays a richness and elaboration that should make scientific archaeologists appreciative and perhaps a bit envious. The result is a refreshing blend of art history, archaeology, social science, and humanism that serves as a model of what can be achieved when one dares to cross disciplinary boundaries instead of viewing interdisciplinary areas as academic no-man's-land to be avoided at all costs.

*The Bodega of Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico* by Linda Schele and Peter Mathews catalogues virtually all the objects in the government storehouse on the Palenque archaeological zone. It contains descriptions, photographs, and drawings of more than nine hundred stone tablets, stucco fragments, architectural decorations, figurines, and other items. All the glyphic materials in all media are included. The quality of the illustrations, particularly the drawings, is high, and the catalogue will serve as a significant data base for future Mayan art histories and epigraphers. It is particularly useful at the moment because of the current interest in the history, epigraphy, and art of Palenque.

Rosemary Sharp's *Chacs and Chiefs: The Iconology of Mosaic Stone Sculpture in Pre-Conquest Yucatán, Mexico* attempts to interpret an unusual form of architectural decoration that was common to northern Yucatán between AD 650 and 950. These masklike sculptures portray Chac, the Mayan water deity, and are particularly common in the spectacular, but still poorly known, Late Classic sites of the Puuc hill country. Sharp argues that the Chac masks are a manifestation of a widespread inter-regional art style found in Yucatán, Oaxaca, and Veracruz and that they

represent a political-ideological response to the unsettled conditions of that time period. Her study of motifs (such as the stepped fret *Tau* element) and mosaics convincingly establishes the existence of communication and shared ideas among widely separated elites. She goes on to illuminate the meaning of the masks as representation of the relationships between earthly rulers and the supernatural realm and as visual metaphors symbolizing the prescribed rotation of ritual power and positions among different elite factions. The rotation of both godly responsibility for human welfare and ritual power by living elites among the Yucatec Maya is confirmed in documents from later times. In Sharp's words, the mosaic style "represented an attempt to restructure a society by providing a powerful symbolic model which could be copied in the real world" (p. 19).

*The Art and Iconography of Late Post-Classic Central Mexico* is a Dumbarton Oaks conference volume dealing with the late pre-Hispanic cultures of Central Mexico and the Mixtec region of Oaxaca. The broad range of topics and perspectives has already been noted. As is true of all symposium volumes, the quality of the contributions varies, but all contain information that could be a useful starting point for new investigations by either cognitive or scientific archaeologists.

*Mesoamerican Sites and World Views* is another book resulting from a Dumbarton Oaks conference. Among the disciplines represented by the authors of the seven chapters are archaeology, ethnohistory, ethnography, architecture, astronomy, and art history. Its basic purpose is to elucidate the reasons behind the physical layout of Mesoamerican communities. Its primary concern is to ask why sites were located where they were, how buildings are oriented and for what purpose, and how the sites reflect the cosmology and world views of their builders. Some chapters deal with specific sites or areas, others take a broader approach, but all depend to some degree on explaining archaeological facts through ethnographic or ethnohistoric analogy.

*Third Palenque Round Table, 1978* is a two-volume work dealing with the "art, hieroglyphics, and historic approaches of the Late Classic Maya." (The use of the preposition *of* rather than *to* in this statement on the cover of the first volume is a significant indicator of the different attitudes held by cognitive and scientific archaeologists in that it emphasizes the views held by the Maya on these topics rather than those of the scholar.) The two volumes contain thirty-five articles, fourteen dealing primarily with Palenque and the remainder with other sites or more generalized topics. The basic theme of examining ancient Mayan thought, particularly ideology and religion, pervades most of the articles in the form of descriptions of art and architecture, analyses of motifs in terms of ethnohistorical models, and new readings of hieroglyphic texts. Other papers deal with the murals and sculptures of Palenque, the

Mayoid murals at Cacaxtla, Tlaxcala, modern Mayan mythology as a key to understanding the archaeological record, and Mayan astronomy.

*Middle Classic Mesoamerica: AD 400–700*, edited by Esther Pasztory, is an ambitious attempt to bring the approaches of both scientific archaeology and art history to bear on a single time period and the broad question of Teotihuacan's impact on its neighbors and their descendants. The articles are divided between art historians (six) and archaeologists (five). Some authors concentrate on a single aspect of the problem while others take a broadly comparative approach. Historical synthesis, analysis of culture contact, and description and interpretation of new finds are just some of the approaches employed. The editor provides two chapters in which she attempts to integrate the vast body of material relevant to the problem. The quality of the chapters varies considerably. I particularly like those by Parsons, Pasztory, Sanders, and Sharp, but all are informative. Significantly, the volume provides a good example of how scholars from the two disciplines can examine a problem from different perspectives. Unfortunately, it also illustrates that some archaeologists are not listening to the art historians and that some art historians either do not understand or choose to ignore what the archaeologists have to say.

Francis Robicsek's *The Maya Book of the Dead: The Ceramic Codex* is in some ways a milestone in Mesoamerican cognitive studies. The author, a professor of medicine, and Donald Hales, an epigrapher, build on earlier work by Michael Coe to show that Late Classic Mayan artists created a large corpus of decorated ceramic funerary vessels depicting a complex mythology related to death and the underworld.<sup>11</sup> These vessels functioned as abbreviated codices and indeed may have been painted by the same scribes who made the screenfold books. The scenes show the myth cycle of the Hero Twins found in the famous sixteenth-century *Popol Vuh* (Book of Counsel) of the highland Quiche Maya. Three hundred and eight vessels form the data base for the study; one hundred and eighty-six are described in detail and all are illustrated with outstanding photographs.

Coe observes in his forward, "There is enough iconography and epigraphy on the magnificent vessels presented here to keep Mayanists busy for the next fifty years" (p. vii). True enough, but the sad fact is that a vast body of crucial information has been lost because every vessel was excavated by looters, rather than archaeologists. Both Coe and the authors lament this fact, but it deserves more comment because it lies at the heart of one of the most acrimonious debates currently in progress in Mesoamerican studies. While everyone deplores the plundering of art treasures from sites, some scholars feel that their colleagues who study illegally excavated pieces simply encourage looting. The targets of these criticisms respond that the plundering will continue regardless of what

scholars do and that it is their duty to learn as much as possible about the makers of the objects, despite the unfortunate manner in which they have come to light.<sup>12</sup> While I agree with the latter perspective, I cannot help asking a host of questions that perhaps could be answered if information were available on the archaeological contexts of the codex vessels. Are all the vessels contemporaneous? Was every codex vessel placed in a given tomb made by the same artist and did the set depict the complete myth? Are differences among the vessels due to different versions of a single myth or different myths that had geographical, social, political, or chronological significance? What was the social status of the recipients of the vessels? These and other important questions about elite Mayan culture will never be answered in the absence of good archaeological provenance, and we can only hope that archaeologists may locate some of these tombs before looters exhaust the limited supply of elite Late Classic burials.

The books discussed here clearly indicate that the cognitive approach to ancient Mesoamerica is a healthy, growing field. In all likelihood, it will become more important in the future and will earn acceptance by the more traditional scientific archaeologists. Recent favorable statements about cognitive archaeology by Colin Renfrew, a leading scientific archaeologist, are certainly one indication of a promising future for the field.<sup>13</sup>

If cognitive archaeology continues to grow, how can it achieve a more satisfactory interface with scientific archaeology? Each obviously has the potential for explaining much that we need to know in order to comprehend the human past. Scientific archaeology in Mesoamerica and elsewhere has made tremendous strides toward identifying the social, economic, and political factors involved in general culture change and the particular rise and fall of civilizations. Studies of ecology, settlement patterns, subsistence, social organization, and warfare have provided powerful explanations of the forces that created the human past. They do not and cannot explain everything, however, because they neglect the actions and motivations of individuals. Scientific archaeology has allowed cultural anthropologist Leslie White to drive both the individual and ideology out of evolutionary studies.<sup>14</sup> This result is unfortunate because in reality the archaeological record is a fossilized compendium of the actions and motivations of the people who created it and therefore cannot be understood without taking these factors into account.

For example, no one would deny that knowledge of ancient economic systems is crucial to understanding the past, but modern humans are more than economic beings, and the same must have been true in the past. Economic considerations do not explain why an individual strives to become President of the United States, and his occupancy of that position in turn affects many aspects of contemporary American culture.

In the same vein, one must try to understand why ancient peoples, peasants and rulers alike, did the things they did. As cultural anthropologist Michael Robbins has said numerous times, "Most archaeological publications leave me with the impression that ancient peoples sat around chipping flint and making pots all their lives. What I want to know is, *why* did they build those pyramids?" This question is one of those being asked by cognitive archaeologists.

If the two fields are to be brought closer together, scientific archaeologists (myself included) must constantly examine the findings of our cognitive colleagues and extract from them the things we find of value. On the other hand, scientific archaeologists can teach them a great deal about the archaeological record and human behavior in general. Contrary to what some cognitive archaeologists seem to believe, not all human behavior is motivated by religion and ideology. Statements such as "Teotihuacan is located where it is because of the sacred cave under the Sun Pyramid" and "Palenque was a Maya necropolis" show a naivete that knowledge of scientific archaeology and social science could easily correct. The field of archaeology is growing and its practitioners can learn a great deal from scholars who look at the same things through different eyes. Archaeologists neglect doing so at their own risk.

#### NOTES

1. Glyn Daniel, *A Short History of Archaeology* (London, 1981), pp. 178–211; and Gordon R. Willey and Jeremy A. Sabloff, *A History of American Archaeology*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco, 1980), pp. 181–266.
2. Herbert J. Spinden, *A Study of Maya Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1913).
3. Cecilia F. Klein, "The Relation of Mesoamerican Art History to Archaeology in the United States," in *Pre-Columbian Art History: Selected Readings*, edited by Alana Cordy-Collins (Palo Alto, CA, 1982) pp. 1–6; Donald Robertson, "Anthropology, Archaeology and the History of Art," in *Codex Wauchope: A Tribute Roll*, edited by Marco Giardino et al., pp. 73–80 (New Orleans, 1978).
4. George Kubler, *The Shape of Time* (New Haven, 1962).
5. George Kubler, *The Art and Architecture of Ancient America: The Mexican, Mayan, and Andean Peoples* (Baltimore, 1962).
6. Clemency Coggins, "A Role for the Art Historian in an Era of New Archaeology," in *Actes du XLII Congrès International des Americanistes, Paris, 2–9 September 1976*, pp. 315–20; Cecilia Klein, "Mesoamerican Art History."
7. Cecilia Klein, "Mesoamerican Art History," p. 4.
8. George Kubler, "Science and Humanism among Americanists," in *The Iconography of Middle American Sculpture* (New York, 1973), pp. 163–67; H. B. Nicholson, "Preclassic Mesoamerican Iconography from the Perspective of the Postclassic: Problems in Interpretational Analysis," in *Origins of Religious Art and Iconography in Preclassic Mesoamerica*, edited by H. B. Nicholson (Los Angeles, 1976), pp. 156–75.
9. David H. Thomas, *Archaeology* (New York, 1979), p. 458.
10. See Kent V. Flannery, "The Cultural Evolution of Civilizations," *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics* 3 (1972): 399–426; Kent V. Flannery and Joyce Marcus, "Formative Oaxaca and the Zapotec Cosmos," *American Scientist* 64 (1976): 374–83; and Joyce Marcus, *Emblem and State in the Classic Maya Lowlands* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1976).
11. Michael D. Coe, *The Maya Scribe and His World* (New York, 1973); *Classic Maya Pottery at*

- Dumberton Oaks* (Washington, D.C., 1975); *The Lords of the Underworld* (Princeton, N.J., 1978); *Old Gods and Young Heroes, the Pearlman Collection of Maya Ceramics* (Jerusalem, 1982).
12. Karl E. Mayer, *The Plundered Past*, pp. 37–38 (New York, 1973).
  13. Colin Renfrew, "Divided We Stand: Aspects of Archaeology and Information," *American Antiquity* 48, no. 1: 12–15.
  14. Leslie White, *The Science of Culture* (New York, 1949).