ALFRED VINCENT KIDDER
1885—1963

A Biographical Memoir by
GORDON R. WILLEY

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Biographical Memoir

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October 29, 1885–June 11, 1963

BY GORDON R. WILLEY

Alfred Vincent Kidder died at his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on June 11, 1963, in his seventy-eighth year. The span of his life saw the transformation of archaeology in the Americas from antiquarianism to a systematic discipline. More than any other single person of his generation he was responsible for this change. He was the outstanding American archaeologist of his time.

Alfred Vincent Kidder was born in Marquette, Michigan, on October 29, 1885. His father, Alfred Kidder, was a Bostonian who had gone west as a mining engineer to the iron mining regions of the Michigan Upper Peninsula. His mother was Kate Dalliba of Chicago, Illinois. Early in his youth he was brought east by his family and he lived and went to school in Cambridge, Massachusetts, attending the Browne and Nichols School until 1901. In that year he was sent to school at La Villa, in Ouchy, Switzerland, where he remained for two years. Returning to the United States, he spent the year of 1903-1904 at Noble and Greenough School in Boston. He entered Harvard College in 1904, graduating with an A.B. degree in 1908. Subsequently, he enrolled as a graduate student at Harvard, taking A.M. and Ph.D. degrees in 1912 and 1914.

Kidder's childhood and youth were extremely happy. One had only to listen to him tell of his early experiences to realize
the warm and affectionate family atmosphere in which he grew up. He was the youngest of three sons, and the only tragedy of his boyhood was the early death through a sudden illness of a much-loved and admired older brother. One of his fondest memories was of his father's library, which had contained not only all of the Bureau of American Ethnology and Smithsonian publications then available in anthropology and archaeology but also the fascinating book *North American Indians*, by the explorer and artist Catlin, and the richly romantic *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* and *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan* by the nineteenth-century traveler-diplomat-archaeologist John Lloyd Stephens and the illustrator Frederick Catherwood. His father was a great reader and lover of books, particularly of history and exploration, and Kidder attributed his own later interests in archaeology to this early conditioning. His mother he has described as "intensely alert, fond of people, and a gifted letter writer." The son's remarkable flair as a writer perhaps owes something to this side of the family.\(^1\)

It was originally intended that young Kidder should become a physician. He seems to have accepted this decision without strong feelings one way or the other; but his undergraduate experiences at Harvard, as a premedical student in such subjects as chemistry, physics, and mathematics, dampened whatever ardor he may have had for medicine. In his own words he "thoroughly disliked" such studies, preferring instead languages, history, and natural sciences. In casting about for a suit-

\(^1\) The author has drawn on the autobiographic files of the National Academy, an article of reminiscences written by Kidder for the journal *Kiva* (Vol. 25, No. 4, 1960, Arizona Archaeological and Historical Society, University of Arizona, Tucson), and upon autobiographic material which was elicited directly from Dr. Kidder during the summer and fall of 1957. This last was done as a part of a project supported by a grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation. Mrs. A. V. Kidder has also been most helpful in furnishing various items of information.
able elective to relieve the boredom of the "hard sciences" he settled upon Harvard's famed "Anthropology 5," then taught by the encyclopedic Roland B. Dixon. The teaching assistant in the course was none other than Vilhjalmur Stefansson, who was later to make a great reputation as an Arctic explorer and an authority on the Eskimo. Kidder did well in Anthropology 5 and looked forward to more courses in the department. Then, in the late spring of 1907 he accepted a job in archaeological survey in the Southwestern United States. This was arranged through Professor A. M. Tozzer, of Harvard, and Professor E. L. Hewett, the latter at that time a leading Southwestern archaeologist and a principal figure in the Archaeological Institute of America, which was sponsoring the proposed work. Another volunteer for the survey was S. G. Morley, who not only accompanied Kidder during the summer of 1907 but was to be associated with him in archaeology in later years and to continue as a lifelong friend. That summer of 1907, in New Mexico, western Colorado, and southern Utah, was the definite turning point in career plans. The twenty-one-year-old Harvard student was thrilled with the Far West, its peoples and places and, above all, its archaeology. This excitement comes out clearly in his diaries, kept at the time, and in later reminiscent writings. When he returned to college in the fall he was a converted and dedicated archaeologist, and he switched from the premedical course to a concentration in the Department of Anthropology.

At that time the Harvard Department of Anthropology, one of the very few in the country, was in its infancy; but its teaching staff was a distinguished one with such men as the aforementioned Professor Dixon, F. W. Putnam, the great organizer and scholar, who also served as Director of the Peabody Museum, W. C. Farabee, the ethnologist, and the rising young star in Middle American studies, A. M. Tozzer. These
were the influential men in Kidder's undergraduate and graduate formal and informal training, and he so lists them along with that modernizer of Egyptology, Harvard's Professor George A. Reisner, and the noted ethnologist and anthropologist, Franz Boas, of Columbia University, who was a Visiting Professor at Harvard for a term during the 1908-1914 period of Kidder's graduate work.

The year 1908-1909 was another important one for Kidder. He had the good fortune to be taken by his parents for a vacation in Greece and Egypt. They were joined in this by the Appleton family, of Boston, with their daughter Madeline. Madeline Appleton and Alfred Kidder became engaged at this time and were married in 1910. Over the next dozen years they had three sons (Alfred II, Randolph, and James) and two daughters (Barbara and Faith) and during this time Mrs. Kidder was a constant companion and aid in the archaeological explorations at Pecos, New Mexico, that were to make Kidder famous in his field. The several archaeological summers at Pecos also were important to at least one other member of the family, Alfred II, who has followed his father in the profession of archaeology.

The Pecos excavations were the climax to Kidder's Southwestern interests, which had begun in 1907 with the survey carried out with Morley. He continued Southwestern field work, especially in Arizona, during the 1909-1915 period. This work was maintained concurrent with graduate studies at Harvard and under the auspices of the Peabody Museum of that university. In connection with these undertakings he held the posts of Austin Teaching Fellow in the Department of Anthropology and Curator of North American Archaeology in the Museum. Outstanding among his field explorations at this time was the investigation of several "Basketmaker" caves in northeastern Arizona. This was done in collaboration with S. J. Guernsey,
also of the Peabody Museum, and their joint publication, which appeared in 1919, is one of the landmarks of Southwestern archaeology in first bringing to attention and defining the early horticultural Basketmaker horizon. A number of other publications resulted from these early years of field activity (see Bibliography), but perhaps his most significant writing, as an indication of the methodological and theoretical development of its author, was his unpublished Ph.D. thesis of 1914: "Southwestern Ceramics: Their Value in Reconstructing the History of the Ancient Cliff Dwelling and Pueblo Tribes. An Exposition from the Point of View of Type Distinction." The title is explanatory. Kidder was formulating the basis for his analyses and synthesis of Southwestern archaeology, breaking with the tradition which looked upon all of the Southwestern ruins and their contents as fascinating relics of an undifferentiated, "far away and long ago" past and, instead, seeing them as unique expressions of different times and places in that past to be fitted together to tell a coherent history. It was with this background of some seven or eight seasons of Southwestern field experience to his credit, and with a new methodological slant, that he came to the Pecos excavations in 1915.

The Pecos excavations were sponsored by the R. S. Peabody Foundation of Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts. The Phillips Academy at Andover, although a boys' preparatory school rather than a college or university, had developed an important museum and archaeological research program under W. K. Moorehead. In 1915 the school decided upon a major excavation program in the Southwest, and the thirty-year-old Kidder was its fortunate choice to head the project. The great pueblo ruin of Pecos is located in the Rio Grande drainage of north-central New Mexico. According to Kidder, it was selected for such an intensive excavation because of its great size, the presumed depth of its refuse accumulations, and the indications,
gained from survey inspection of pottery sherds, that it spanned much of the time range of Southwestern Puebloan prehistory. Its somewhat peripheral situation, at the eastern edge of the Southwest area, and tangent to the Plains, was another reason for its choice, for Kidder was aware of the possibilities of not only developing a Southwestern culture sequence and chronology but of interlinking such a chronology with the archaeology of another area by the presence of cross-finds. This same broad orientation extended in another geographical direction as well. Although it is not so mentioned in the 1924 report, Kidder stated many years later that another factor in the selection of Pecos was that it was located in a major river drainage that led from Mexico northward into the Southwest; at that time, he thought it quite possible that the Rio Grande Valley route would disclose traces of early migrations of farming and pottery-making peoples from the centers of Middle American pre-Columbian cultures to the Southwest and that Pecos would surely have been an important station on such a route. Future archaeological research does not bear out this last hypothesis although it substantiates the others. After Kidder’s excavations Pecos did, indeed, become the basic sequence yardstick for Southwestern archaeology, and frequent contacts between the old Pecos inhabitants and the Plains tribes were attested by many instances of trade objects found in the Southwestern pueblo.

Kidder continued as Director of the Pecos project from 1915 until its termination in 1929. This was the first large-scale and thoroughly systematic stratigraphic operation in American archaeology. It demonstrated, conclusively, that changes in pottery styles, as these changes were correlated with refuse depth and depositional position, could be used to mark off a relative chronological sequence. Kidder was not the first to carry out such stratigraphic work in the New World; N. C.
Nelson's work in the Galisteo Basin of New Mexico, in 1912, predates Pecos by a few years, as Kidder himself has pointed out. There were also Kroeber's early studies of Southwestern pottery, of about the same time, and Gamio's stratigraphy in the Valley of Mexico. Interestingly, all of these activities can be bracketed in the half-decade of 1910-1915. It was a time of ferment in archaeological development in the Americas. But Kidder, at Pecos, followed through the whole way, with massive evidence and detailed presentation. Still more importantly, he went forward from his own Pecos stratigraphy to extend the knowledge and order derived there to an entire archaeological culture area.

Two events might be said to mark the climax of the Pecos work. The first of these was the publication, in 1924, of the preliminary results together in the same volume with the first archaeological area synthesis of modern type in the Americas. The book in question is the classic, *An Introduction to the Study of Southwestern Archaeology, with a Preliminary Account of the Excavations at Pecos*. It is a rarity in that it introduces systematics to a field previously unsystematized, and, at the same time, it is vitally alive and unpedantic. It might well be said that Kidder put the classification of potsherds into Southwestern archaeology without removing or obscuring the people who made the pottery. He wrote a book that was romantic but not ridiculous, scrupulously close to the facts but not a boring recital of them. The second climactic event was the calling of the First Pecos Conference in Southwestern archaeology. These conferences have since become annual events in which Southwestern archaeological and ethnological researches, active in the field at the moment, forgather toward the close of the summer season to thrash out problems and differences of opinion. The First Conference, of 1927, is famous because it marks the establishment, by a common consent of those in attendance,
of a system of culture classification and chronology which has persisted, with but minor changes, down to the present. This system, although differing in terminology, is clearly foreshadowed by that presented in Kidder's 1924 *Introduction*; and the organic relationship of the conference to the whole Pecos program is clearly evident.

One other significant contribution of the Pecos work to American archaeology remains to be mentioned. Although Kidder, except for his duties as a Teaching Fellow at Harvard during his graduate years, and for a single academic term many years later, was never a formal teacher or professor, the role of the Pecos field camp was a major one in the development of a corps of younger archaeologists who received their first systematic training there. Many of these men became leaders in the field in the decades to follow. Among them can be singled out the late George C. Vaillant, whose brilliant stratigraphic analyses in the Valley of Mexico were to a large extent inspired by his experience with Kidder in the refuse dumps of the Pecos pueblo, and the well-known archaeologists S. K. Lothrop and C. E. Guthe.

The excavations at Pecos were interrupted by World War I, and Kidder was in France with the A.E.F. during 1917-1919. He served first as a lieutenant with the 91st Division and was made a captain in 1918. He took part in the St. Mihiel, Argonne-Meuse, and Ypres-Lys actions and was given the distinction of a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor by the French government.

The Pecos project was continued, formally, until 1929; in a sense, though, Kidder remained concerned with it even in the last years of his life when he completed and published the data on the kivas and architecture from the site. Nevertheless, the high points of the publication of the *Introduction* and the inauguration of the First Pecos Conference had been passed in the mid-1920s, and the time was ready for new ventures. These
were to take Kidder into the second major phase of his career as an archaeologist, and to see this in perspective it is necessary to go back a bit in the history of American archaeology.

In 1902 the Carnegie Institution of Washington was founded as a research organization in the sciences, humanities, and social sciences. Anthropology was included in its planning, including archaeology. Pumpelly's excavations at Anau, in Turkistan, in 1903 and 1904, were among the earliest sponsored by the Carnegie, and investigations were also carried on in Greece and Rome. More immediately pertinent to Kidder's future was another Carnegie plan of survey and excavations in the Maya ruins of Yucatan which was initiated in 1914 by S. G. Morley, a newly appointed Research Associate of the Institution. By 1921 the Carnegie's interests in Maya archaeology had grown sufficiently to require the annual appropriation of a large grant, and long-term arrangements were made a few years later with the governments of Guatemala and Mexico for the continuance of field operations in those countries. In 1926 Kidder, who had earlier been retained in the capacity of adviser on the archaeological work of the Institution, was appointed Research Associate. The following year he was placed in charge of all the archaeological activities of the Carnegie. Ultimately, in 1929, he became head of the Institution's Division of Historical Research. This Division, which was the administrative grouping of humanistic studies, included such fields as History of Science, United States History, and the History of Greek Thought, as well as archaeology. Kidder was to remain as its head until his retirement in 1950.²

On taking over the chairmanship of the Division in 1930 Kidder brought to his new job his experience in the Southwest as well as some foreknowledge of archaeological problems in

Middle America. He had visited that latter area as early as 1922, in company with Clarence L. Hay, and his consultative capacity to the Carnegie in the late 1920s also served as background. In assuming command of Carnegie's archaeological work, he had the advantage of the sympathetic interests in historical and humanistic studies of J. C. Merriam, then President of the Carnegie Institution of Washington. Further, the new position was compatible because he was collaborating with his old friend Morley. Together, they began to plan the future of archaeological research in the Maya region. In this Kidder wanted to devise a program that would train attention upon and elucidate problems of prehistory in the Maya country and the larger Middle American area; but, at the same time, it was necessary to keep in mind that the course of human history in this one particular theater was but a part of the much more embracing story of man and society in the world at large. What he set out to do was, in his own words, "based on the obvious fact that knowledge of man was lagging dangerously behind that of the physical world. Such knowledge can only be gained by clearer understanding of the world's present civilizations: the conditions under which they have arisen, their careers, their present likenesses and differences, weaknesses and strengths. A necessary first step toward such ends is to learn what we can of the prehistoric developments which gave them birth." While pre-Columbian Maya civilization has had no full continuity to the present, it may be counted as one of man's great achievements of whatever time and place. Its accomplishments, trials, and downfall thus deserve scholarly attention in any comprehensive comparative examination of the ways of mankind.

Kidder envisaged the proper attack to be a "pan-scientific" one. Along with the ongoing program of archaeological excavations which Morley had been conducting, and which continued

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3 Statement made in a letter to the Guggenheim Foundation in 1957.
with Morley and others, Kidder launched studies in physical
anthropology, medicine, social anthropology and ethnology,
linguistics, aboriginal documentary history, colonial history,
environmental studies involving plant and animal biology, ce-
ramic technology (as an adjunct to archaeology-ethnology),
geography, geology, and agronomy. All of these investigations,
carried out by Carnegie scientists and by colleagues from the
University of Chicago, the University of Michigan, and other
institutions, focused attention upon the Maya, living or dead,
or upon the Maya territory of southern Mexico and northern
Central America. It was Kidder’s retrospective opinion, in the
late 1950s, that this conception of an over-all approach to Maya
culture history and the natural environmental settings of this
history was his most significant contribution to anthropology.

It was always Kidder’s deep regret that the “planned stage
of synthesis” of all these lines of endeavor was never attained.
In this biographer’s opinion this regret was premature. It is
natural and human for the designer of a program to hold to his
dream of complete fruition and, failing of this, to feel disap-
pointment. To be sure, Kidder did not live to see such a synthe-
sis; but it is unlikely that synthesis of so many disparate ap-
proaches, all more or less starting from scratch, would have
been possible within the lifetime of any one individual. But
Kidder did feel such disappointment. The termination of the
Division of Historical Research in 1958, eight years after his
retirement, was a blow to him. He believed that much of what
he had worked for was lost and scattered, never to be retrieved
and assembled into a meaningful whole. Yet virtually all the
individual lines of inquiry which he was instrumental in initiat-
ing have borne fruit. It was, and probably still is, beyond the
scope of any one intelligence to weld all of these together into
a single illuminating synthesis. Nevertheless, as we juxtapose
the data of these varied approaches of the old Carnegie pro-
gram one to another, new insights occur which broaden and deepen our knowledge of the Maya. For example, much of the ethnological and social anthropological research of the program was, in its immediate orientation, nonhistorical. Its concerns were with social and community structure, with what the social anthropologists designate as the “folk-urban” continuum. Today, however, as we go on with Maya research, the archaeologist draws definite benefit from these “folk” and “urban” concepts and from what the social anthropologists have found out about present-day Maya religion, political organization, and settlement form in his attempts to understand the function and meaning of pre-Columbian sites or communities.

Yet leaving aside the question of the integration and synthesis of interdisciplinary research, the sheer substance of strictly archaeological results under Kidder’s direction of the Carnegie Maya program is vastly impressive. The great excavations at Chichén Itzá, Uaxactún, and Copán provided a body of data on ceramics, artifacts, architecture, and sculpture which forms the main chronological framework of Maya archaeological studies. These excavations were supplemented by lesser digging operations and by surveys throughout the entire southern and northern lowlands. A Preclassic horizon was defined, carrying Maya prehistory well back into the first millennium B.C. The former concepts of Mayan “Old” and “New Empires” were discarded when it became clear through these field activities that all of the lowlands, Yucatan as well as the Petén, were occupied simultaneously from Preclassic times forward. Still other excavations in the Guatemalan highlands demonstrated the affiliation of the Maya cultures of that region to the ancient cities of the lowlands. These same excavations also gave the important clues which related the Mayan lowlands and highlands, Oaxaca, and the Valley of Mexico in a net of prehistoric trade, influence, and counterinfluence. From this it was possible
to construct an archaeological area chronology chart for the first time. Important strides were also taken in calendric and hieroglyphic research and in art analyses. The distinguished archaeologists who contributed to this program, and whose names appear on the monographs published by the Carnegie Institution during the 1929-1950 period, include, in addition to Morley, such people as J. E. S. Thompson, Tatiana Proskouriakoff, O. G. Ricketson, H. E. D. Pollock, R. E. Smith, and A. Ledyard Smith.

Although Kidder himself published less, in comparison with the volume of digging and research done under his direction, than he had in his Southwestern period, he did not abandon his direct participation in archaeology for a purely administrative role. Both before and after World War II he wrote and published a number of important articles and monographs on the archaeology of the Guatemalan highlands. One of these, on Kaminaljuyú, in collaboration with J. D. Jennings and E. M. Shook, is, in effect, the introductory text to Maya highland archaeology. In some of his short papers he moved farther afield, examining the problem of the interrelationships of the high cultures of Middle America and Peru. In this connection, it was he who suggested a revision and rehabilitation of Spinden's "Archaic hypothesis" when he pointed out, in 1936, that a substratum of interrelated simple farming or basic Neolithic-type cultures probably did underlie the more specialized later developments of Mexico, Guatemala, and the Andes, and that Spinden, rather than being wholly wrong, had merely mistaken a relatively late manifestation of Preclassic culture as being the type example of such an understratum. In this, and in a plan for future research which he submitted to the Carnegie Institution in 1946, Kidder foresaw the present-day concern with interareal relationships within the Nuclear American sphere. Although Kidder's 1946 program was not put into effect by the
Carnegie Institution, it is of note that a similar plan of archaeological operations was carried out by the Institute of Andean Research in 1959-1961.

Besides his regular duties with the R. S. Peabody Foundation and the Carnegie, Kidder was active in various advisory capacities and in many professional matters. He served on the Advisory Committee of the Southwest Museum of Los Angeles and on a similar committee for the Peabody Museum at Yale from 1931 until the time of his death. He was a member of the Faculty of the Peabody Museum at Harvard for the 1939-1951 period. Between 1927 and 1935 he was Chairman of the Board of the Laboratory of Anthropology at Santa Fe, New Mexico. He gave freely of his time to the National Research Council, including a two-year term in 1926-1927 as Chairman of its Division of Anthropology and Psychology. He served as president of two professional societies, the American Anthropological Association (1942) and the Society for American Archaeology (1937). In the early 1930s he was a principal founder of the Institute of Andean Research, an alliance composed of archaeologists and anthropologists from various universities and museums in the United States for the purpose of promoting research in South America.

Kidder received wide recognition for his scientific and administrative contributions. In 1936 he was elected a member of the National Academy of Sciences. He was also a member of the American Philosophical Society and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Honorary degrees were conferred upon him by the University of New Mexico (1934), the University of Michigan (1949), the National University of Mexico (1951), and San Carlos University of Guatemala (1955). In 1946 he was awarded the Viking Fund Medal for Archaeology, being the first recipient of this award, which was established in that year by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research.
In 1950 the American Anthropological Association set up an Alfred V. Kidder award in his name to be given at intervals of every three years in perpetuity as a recognition of outstanding achievement in the fields of either Southwestern or Middle American archaeology. In 1955 the Guatemalan government honored him with the Order of the Quetzal in appreciation of his many years of work in scientific archaeology in that country. In 1958 the University of Pennsylvania awarded him the Drexel Medal for archaeology.

In the first year after his retirement from the Carnegie Institution, in 1951, Kidder participated in his only official teaching beyond that of his much earlier student teaching fellowship days. This was in a seminar offered at the University of California at Berkeley which was enthusiastically attended by graduate students of that institution. Afterwards, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he had made his home for most of his Carnegie Institution days and where he continued to live following retirement, he was often present as an informal but valued member of seminars in Middle and South American archaeology at Harvard. Possessed of a warm and attractive personality, he was always readily approachable and willing to discuss archaeological problems with students and younger colleagues. Never dogmatic or opinionated, he truly listened to others' conversations, and when he replied it was with wisdom and perception. His knowledge of American archaeology, its substance and problems, was enormous, Kidder was a gifted raconteur, as well, on matters only tangentially related, or completely unrelated, to archaeology, so that one looked forward with anticipation to an afternoon's chat with him. He had the good storyteller's quality of remaining in the wings rather than the bore's penchant for placing himself at the center of the stage of his tales.

The contributions of Alfred Vincent Kidder to American
archaeology were great ones. He led the way in the systematic chronological and geographical ordering of the basic data. His was the master hand in the first full archaeological synthesis of a major area, the North American Southwest. His influence was felt in other New World areas, especially in Middle America, where, although not a pioneer, he had a primary role in the development of the field. It was in Middle America that he also conceived of a broad-front anthropological-historical-natural environmental attack upon the complex of problems which surround the origins, growth, florescence, and decay of a civilization, in this case the pre-Columbian Maya.

Kidder discounted himself as a theorist, saying in the last years of his life that his part had been to gather facts rather than to explain them. This was an erroneous self-appraisal. It was prompted, in part, by modesty and, in part, by his aversion to the idea that human culture, being a fabric of the actions and beliefs of men, could be understood in accordance with any rigid doctrine or scheme. He was deeply humanistic in outlook. Yet there are many kinds of theories which lead to historical understanding, and anyone familiar with Kidder's writings will know that he did not lag in advancing ideas in attempting to comprehend the flow of cultural influences in time and in space and to re-create an image of past life from the bones of the data in the ground. More than this, his words reveal that he was ever sensitively aware of the great problems of “why” and “how” in man's purposive march, or blind groping, toward civilization. That he could not convince himself that he had solved these problems is, perhaps, the most ultimate measure of the man.
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