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A Biographical Memoir by
HENRY T. WRIGHT

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James B. Griffin

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BY HENRY T. WRIGHT

JAMES BENNETT GRIFFIN WAS ONE of the leading North American archaeologists of his day. Known to everyone—even his children—as Jimmy, he was the man most responsible for reshaping the archaeology of eastern North America, for building an enduring center of research on long-term cultural change at the Museum of Anthropology of the University of Michigan, and for fostering many innovations in archaeological method and theory throughout his long career.

Born in Atchison, Kansas, and raised in Denver, Colorado, and Oak Park, Illinois, Griffin was steeped in the traditions and perspectives of the American Midwest, the land to whose prehistory he brought systematic order. He received his bachelor of arts from the University of Chicago in 1927. He gained excavation experience in the Illinois field school of the polymathic anthropologist Faye Cooper Cole in the summer of 1930 while working in Fulton County near Peoria, and this fieldwork led to one of his first publications (1934). Later that year he received a master of arts with a thesis on mortuary variability in eastern North America.

There were few posts open for young archaeologists in the tumultuous first years of the Great Depression. Griffin sought research positions in Pennsylvania, Hawaii, Guatemala, and Iraq with varying success. In 1932, however, Griffin was

fortunate to find support as a research fellow in charge of the North American ceramic collections at the University of Michigan's Museum of Anthropology, which was directed by Carl Guthe. His fellowship was funded by the pharmaceutical entrepreneur Eli Lilly, an Indiana native fascinated by American Indian cultural traditions.

In 1936 Griffin married Ruby Fletcher in the University of Chicago chapel. They raised three sons—John, David, and James C.—in Ann Arbor and traveled widely together. Their long and productive marriage ended with Ruby's death in 1979.

Up until the mid-1940s there was little appreciation of how long the Americas had been occupied. Archaeological assemblages were often ascribed to late ethnic groups mentioned by early European explorers. This approach had broken down as more and different assemblages were found in each subregion. Griffin joined those who argued for the purely archaeological classification of material, without reference to putative ethnic groups mentioned in historic accounts and travelers' reports. Samples of well-excavated ceramics from meaningful contexts—at first from excavations occasioned by federal reservoir construction in the Tennessee Valley and then from other Depression-era projects—came to Michigan's Ceramic Repository for description and classification. With Lilly's funding Griffin drove from project site to project site studying ceramics in the field and making suggestions to excavators. Griffin brought order to the mountains of sherds with a binomial system in which larger groupings based on clay body and inclusions were subdivided into smaller groupings based on surface treatment and decoration; this improvement produced not only precise descriptive studies but also became the basis of Griffin's 1938 doctoral dissertation at the University of Michigan. That was but the first of many syntheses of the prehistory of eastern North America (1946)

based on ceramic sequences and correlations. The binomial system ultimately developed into the type-variety approach to ceramics used throughout the Americas today.

Just as ceramics could be formally classified in hierarchical taxonomies, so could entire material assemblages. Griffin became a partisan of the Midwest Taxonomic System (McKern, 1937) and produced its finest exemplification, a study of the latest prehistoric sites of the middle portion of the Ohio River drainage. The trait lists from individual sites were compared, sites with similar assemblages were grouped into a focus, and the foci of this region were grouped into a Fort Ancient Aspect, an element in a broader Mississippian Pattern. Only after formal classification did Griffin (1943) consider the chronological, sociological, and ethnic affiliation of these units.

In 1940 and 1941 Griffin joined Philip Phillips of Harvard University and James A. Ford of the American Museum of Natural History (New York) to undertake an archaeological survey of the lower valley of the Mississippi River. Hundreds of sites were systematically recorded and the recovered ceramic fragments, classified by Griffin and Phillips, were grouped into sequences of chronological units using statistical and graphical techniques developed by Ford (Phillips et al., 1951). Griffin and Phillips attempted to assign an absolute chronology to their lower valley sequence based on the association of sites with prehistoric meandering channels of the Mississippi River, to which absolute dates had been ascribed based on changes evident on dated maps from the past three centuries (Fisk, 1945). As it did not account for changes in climate and hydrology during the Holocene, this approach yielded dates that later proved to be too young, which led to the incorrect assessment that rates of cultural change were relatively rapid.

In 1946 Griffin was appointed director of Michigan's Museum of Anthropology, a post he was to occupy for almost three decades. In 1949 he became a professor in the Department of Anthropology. The postwar years saw an expansion of archaeology within new anthropology departments. Griffin used Michigan's Department of Anthropology to provide advanced academic training to archaeologists already experienced in the Depression-era programs or in salvage archaeology occasioned by postwar pipeline, highway, and reservoir construction so they could fill newly established posts.

With the limited resources a museum director could assemble, Griffin turned to unresolved problems in archaeological research. The first of these was the issue of absolute chronology. Before 1949 the dating of prehistoric sites depended on tenuous correlations across the Great Plains to the southwestern U.S. cultures dated by the newly developed tree-ring or dendrochronological method or on geological arguments. Griffin was well aware of the promise of Willard F. Libby's work on radiocarbon dating at the University of Chicago, and he provided Libby with some Eastern Woodland samples. When he received the results, Griffin was puzzled that the age determinations made in Chicago were in several cases the reverse of what he expected. He and his colleague in physics, H. R. Crane, were convinced that the problems had two sources: the imprecision of Libby's technique of measuring the radioactivity of solid carbon and the use of samples that had been contaminated during the excavation and/or during the time they were in storage at the museum. Crane built his own lab, which accepted only samples that met Griffin's standards of unambiguous context, which pretreated samples as carefully as then current knowledge permitted, and which measured the radioactivity of gaseous carbon dioxide rather than solid carbon. In its years of operation more than 2000 age determinations were made and

published, mostly in the journals *Science* and *Radiocarbon*. It was shown that the archaeological sequences proposed in Griffin's various syntheses were correct but that the time spans involved were longer than suspected. The lab also pioneered the dating of Formative cultures of Central and South America, the very early Jomon ceramics of Japan, and materials from many other areas.

North American archaeologists had long discussed cultural contacts between Mexico and the Mississippian cultures, bringing such crops as maize and beans as well as social patterns and symbolic representations to the Mississippi Valley. In 1946 Griffin spent six months in Mexico working with Eduardo Noguera, then director of the Museo de Antropología in Mexico City, Miguel Covarrubias, Alfonso Caso, Ignacio Bernal, Antonieta Espejo, and other Mexican scholars. Griffin studied collections, visited sites, and applied his binomial method to Mesoamerican ceramics (1947). He became, however, less and less convinced that direct contacts existed between Mesoamerica and the U.S. Southeast.

As editor of a massive festschrift for his mentor Cole, *The Archaeology of the Eastern United States* (1952), Griffin oversaw the ordering of much of the cultural evidence from the entire region in terms of McKern's scheme but given a chronological dimension not only from classical stratigraphic evidence but also from new statistical techniques and from radiocarbon dating. The "Green Bible," as it was termed by generations of graduate students and colleagues, went through five printings and remains a useful reference to this day.

It was during this period that interests in the Siberian roots of North American cultures led Griffin to travel periodically to Western Europe and in 1961 to visit Poland and Russia. He demonstrated to his satisfaction that while Siberian cultures had an impact on Alaska ceramics, centers of ceramic innovation farther south were independent (1960,

1970); he indefatigably visited sites and museums and learned much about the new European approaches to studying the environmental contexts of archaeological sites. He made many friends, launched collaborative projects in Poland and then Yugoslavia, and became a U.S. representative to the International Union of Pre- and Protohistoric Sciences, for many years serving on its Executive Committee.

In the later 1950s, with the basic framework of North American prehistory well established, Griffin turned to the problem of understanding cultural change, particularly the impact of environmental change on human communities, which he viewed in rather direct cause-and-effect terms. He planned research on this problem with Albert Spaulding in the Great Lakes region, where the uplift of Holocene beaches had left magnificent archaeological landscapes available for study. That proposal received one of the first National Science Foundation grants ever awarded to an archaeology project. In this research he could draw on Michigan's geologists and paleobotanists, on the museum's own strong Laboratory of Ethnobotany under Volney Jones, and on an energetic generation of graduate students. The specifics of the field research were largely in the hands of Lewis Binford and Mark Papworth. The resulting influential studies of human ecology (Cleland, 1966; Yarnell, 1964), artifact variability (Binford, 1963), and social organization (McPherron, 1967) mark a transition toward a new approach to archaeology in North America.

Foreseeing the accelerating changes within the field, Griffin transformed the Museum of Anthropology from an institution focused on North American culture history to an institution that continues to conduct research on cultural evolution throughout the world. Beginning in the mid-1960s, he added curators with research interests in Mesoamerica and the Andes, Europe, and the Near East. The long-stand-

ing program in ethnobotany was complemented by others in ethnozoology and human biology. Individuals with strong skills in statistical analysis and computerized data management replaced the departed Spaulding. If his museum in Ann Arbor became a center for new developments toward a processual archeology, however, Griffin was not about to shirk his responsibilities as an intellectual patriarch. He made it plain that he saw little value in evolutionary or behavioral theory. Ever supportive with resources and requests for time away for field research, he was firm in his criticism of what he saw as overblown or patently wrong theory, inadequate evidence, or impolite behavior.

Griffin's work with the material remains of Eastern Woodlands cultures, both the Mississippian peoples and the preceding Woodland peoples, particularly the Hopwellian florescence of the first few centuries of our era, revealed many possible cases of trade in unusual raw materials. His first effort to track the import of obsidian into the Midwest in Hopewell times (1965) led him to search for more precise methods of source identification. Working with the newly developed technique of neutron activation analysis, Griffin and Adon Gordus (a member of the University of Michigan's Department of Chemistry) succeeded in characterizing the trace elements in obsidian sources and archaeological samples from all over the world, and definitively established that Hopewell obsidian originated in Yellowstone Park, Wyoming (1969). What social mechanisms facilitated the transport of obsidian from the Rocky Mountains to Ohio remains unresolved to this day.

By the early 1970s Griffin was deeply involved in a project designed to provide data adequate to evaluate ideas about the classification of the major communities of the Mississippian culture as chiefdoms, an idea that he regarded with deep skepticism. It seemed logical to him that only a strat-

egy combining the complete settlement excavation (used previously only in a few salvage projects in eastern North America) with detailed plotting of artifacts in and around houses and screening and floating for subsistence remains, could show the enduring differences in social rank thought to characterize chiefdoms. In southeastern Missouri, James Price, then a student at the University of Missouri, had discovered a series of Mississippian villages burned after only a few years of occupation. Griffin obtained funds for a near complete excavation of two hamlets, two villages, and part of the ceremonial center of the Powers Phase (1979). Final analysis of these excavations by a team under Bruce Smith of the Smithsonian Institution is nearing completion. The massive interstate highway program gave archaeologists trained in the Powers Phase project and many others the opportunity to apply the same approach of complete excavation and intensive debris sampling to the hamlets and centers of the greatest of the Mississippian societies, that at Cahokia near modern St. Louis, where Griffin sponsored excavations as long ago as 1950. In his own overview of his career Griffin (1985) makes little of his contribution as an adviser to the later work at Cahokia, but his stamp not only on the names of pottery types and cultural phases but also on the basic research approach—the excavation of whole communities and analysis and reporting of every aspect of the material remains—continues to be profound. The prompt publication of almost 20 detailed monographs on this work is due in no small part to his encouragement. Perusal of the recent overviews edited by Timothy Pauketat and Thomas Emerson (Pauketat and Emerson, 1997) and written by George Milner (Milner, 1998) or a visit to the magnificent interpretive center at Cahokia itself is certain to fascinate any serious scholar of archaeology.

During his long career Griffin received many honors. He received the Viking Fund Medal from the Wenner-Gren Foundation in 1957. He was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1968. In 1971 he received an honorary doctorate from Indiana University. From the Society for American Archaeology, of which he was a founding member, he received the Fryxell Award for Environment and Archaeology in 1980 and the Distinguished Service Award in 1984.

In his last years Griffin was a Regents' scholar at the Smithsonian, working on synthetic articles and overviews of conferences, both with the humor and the acerbic criticism for which he was famous. Moreau Maxwell (Maxwell, 1977, p. xi) once described Griffin as follows: "With a remarkably retentive mind, back-stopped by voluminous cross-indexed files, he has been quick to pick up, reassemble, and make useful to students of prehistoric behavior a myriad of devices, techniques, and data gleaned from his eclectic contacts" and "from what was, in the thirties, a chaotic assemblage of discrete variables, particularly in the prehistoric treatments of clay, he was able to store vast numbers of these variables, from them to abstract the key ones, and to see the relationships to similar key variables over hundreds of miles of space." Many remember best, however, his inimitable ability to pause, to look at you, and leave you thinking about the issue in a completely new way, with hardly a word spoken.

James Bennett Griffin died quietly in his sleep in Bethesda, Maryland, in the loving company of his wife, Mary Marsh Dewitt Griffin, and his sons and their families on May 31, 1997.

Today the destruction of our limited and irreplaceable archaeological record throughout the world by new agricultural technologies and suburban sprawl is vastly worse than the destruction wrought by reservoirs, pipelines, and roads in Griffin's time. Future archaeologists will have a basis for

evaluating new theories of cultural change in human history because of the eastern North American collections Griffin assembled and so patiently catalogued, the chronological framework to which he contributed so much, and the standards of rigor he imposed in the assessment of evidence throughout his life. If Griffin were speaking today, he would decry the destruction of sites, fight for the integrity of museums and university programs, assiduously seek to increase funding for fieldwork (still limited given the scale of the challenges), and sharply criticize any theoretical construct that was unsupported by hard evidence. His contributions are exemplary accomplishments, deserving of emulation by future generations.

THE FOREGOING PROFITED FROM Griffin's own writings, from unpublished assessments by Richard Ford and Jeffrey Parsons, from discussions with many of his friends and family members, and from the editorial skills of Joyce Marcus. An earlier version appeared in the British journal Antiquity (Wright, 1998). The errors and deficits are entirely my own.

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