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SAMUEL KIRKLAND LOTHROP

1892—1965

A Biographical Memoir by
GORDON R. WILLEY

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Biographical Memoir

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July 6, 1892–January 10, 1965

BY GORDON R. WILLEY

SAMUEL KIRKLAND LOTHROP was born in Milton, Massachusetts, on July 6, 1892, the elder son of William Sturgis Hooper Lothrop and Alice Putnam (Bacon) Lothrop. His was a distinguished family in the New England Brahmin intellectual tradition. His great-grandfather, for whom he was named, was a leading Unitarian minister of his time and is represented in library card files by almost as many author cards as his great-grandson.

Young Samuel spent his childhood in Massachusetts and Puerto Rico, his father having sugar interests on that island at the turn of the century. He attended Groton school, where he was distinguished by being chosen as Senior Prefect and where he played end on the football team and stroked the crew. He entered Harvard College in 1911, graduating with the class of 1915. Subsequently, he was to pursue graduate work in anthropology and archaeology at that institution.

The beginnings of Sam (as he was to be known to his colleagues) Lothrop's interest in archaeology are obscure; however, his brother Francis, six years his junior, remembers that he had a great friend and Groton classmate, William Crocker, whose father was a collector of antiquities of all kinds, and suggests that this may have provided a stimulus. In any event, he was an archaeology and anthropology undergraduate con-

centrator at Harvard, and very early he came under the influence of that remarkable teacher of Mexican and Central American archaeology and ethnology, Alfred Marston Tozzer. He had his first field experience in archaeology in the summer of 1915, at Pecos, New Mexico. This was a field excavation program under the auspices of the R. S. Peabody Foundation of Andover, Massachusetts, and it was under the direction of A. V. Kidder, later to become one of America's leading archaeologists. Next to Tozzer, Kidder was an important influence in Lothrop's archaeological education and general training. Following this summer's work, Lothrop traveled extensively in Central America and in Puerto Rico as an associate of the Peabody Museum of Harvard, visiting sites, making small excavations, and studying collections.

His archaeological career was interrupted by the World War I years 1917-1918, when he served as a Second Lieutenant in the U.S. Army Military Intelligence. But he returned to formal graduate work at Harvard in 1919. His first archaeological publication, an article on Chiriquian goldwork from Panama, appeared in that year; and from then on his course was set in Central and South American studies. His Ph.D. thesis, submitted in 1921, was on the ceramics of Costa Rica and Nicaragua. This represented more than two years of research on museum and private collections in Central America, the United States, and Europe. Among the important by-products of this study, as Lothrop once told this biographer, was making the acquaintance of the British Museum's very distinguished Americanist, Thomas Joyce, who with his broad knowledge of Central Americana aided and encouraged the young Harvard scholar in his task. Later, in 1926, the thesis was published in the classic two-volume work, *Pottery of Costa Rica and Nicaragua*, which, fifty years later, is still the basic reference on the subject.

After taking his doctorate, Lothrop was employed by the

Carnegie Institution's Historical Division to carry out field investigations in Yucatan and in Guatemala. As the result of this period of research, carried out in 1923, he published the first major monograph on the Yucatecan Maya ruin of Tulum in 1924. This was to remain a lifetime pattern. All of Lothrop's field researches resulted in some substantial addition to the printed record; he never allowed field investigations to run far ahead of getting some of the results down on paper and available to his colleagues.

Between the years 1924 and 1930, he was on the staff of the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, in New York City. This was to be one of the most productive periods of his career and, in many ways, one of the happiest, although it ended somewhat abruptly with the sudden dissolution of the Foundation's research staff and interests as a result of the stock market crash in late 1929. During this period Sam explored widely in Latin America and established himself as the outstanding overall Latin American authority in archaeology. Very much of an "internationalist" by nature, he became a good friend of the Argentine archaeologists of the time, particularly the late Fernando Marquez Miranda; and through these relationships, he was one of the very few North Americans who was ever invited to conduct excavations in Argentine territory. He explored a series of sites near the mouth of the Plate River, and his monograph on these, "Indians of the Paraná Delta, Argentina," was eventually brought out by the New York Academy of Sciences in 1932. He also did ethnological fieldwork in the mid-1920s in Argentina and Chile, producing another distinguished work, *The Indians of Tierra del Fuego* (1928). Central America then claimed his attention, with explorations in Guatemala, in the vicinity of Lake Atitlán, and in El Salvador. All of this work was "consolidated" by prompt publication. After the drastic curtailment of the Heye's publication program,

Lothrop turned to other institutions and sources in his determination to see his work made a part of the permanent scientific record.

At the termination of his appointment with the Heye Foundation, Lothrop, again, returned to Harvard's Peabody Museum, where he continued as a Research Associate and as the Curator of Andean Archaeology until his retirement. Actually, he continued on beyond that, in a very active emeritus status, until his death in 1965. A man of independent means, he was not dependent on the very small stipend that the museum could afford to pay him during those years. Indeed, his out-of-pocket monetary contributions to archaeology were much greater than his formal income from that subject; but, fully a professional in his dedication to archaeology and anthropology, Sam Lothrop always prized his curatorial status at the museum, to which he was very loyal.

His first important archaeological job of the 1930s was to take over as Field Director of the Peabody Museum's exciting archaeological dig at the Sitio Conte, in the Coclé Department of Central Panama. The Sitio Conte had been found, by amateurs, as the result of seasonal river flooding. Amazing gold specimens, along with pottery and handsomely carved objects of colored stone and bone, had been washed out along the banks of the Rio Coclé. Professor Tozzer and other Peabody Museum archaeologists had visited the site and arranged for its excavation with the Conte family, the owners of the property. The excavations revealed unusually rich tombs, fully consistent with the early sixteenth-century Spanish descriptions of the burials of warrior chiefs of the region. These petty but all-powerful dignitaries had been interred, along with retainers sacrificed at their deaths, with profusions of grave goods, including cast and hammered gold jewelry. The style of these metal objects, while related to that of the better-known Chiriquí goldwork of northern Panama and Costa Rica, was, if anything, even more hand-

some. Along with the pendant frogs, bats, and human figures were embossed breastplates and diadems or crowns, as well as polished stone items set or bound in gold. Among these last were occasional emeralds. Lothrop proved equal to the task of directing the careful explorations that laid bare the dispositions of grouped human skeletons and the numerous accompanying artifacts in these chiefly graves. His two volumes on the Coclé culture, *Coclé; An Archaeological Study of Central Panamá*, published in 1937 and 1942, are masterpieces of archaeological description and presentation. He was always extraordinarily careful with his illustrative material—both photographic and line and stipple drawings; and in the Coclé volumes he did himself, and American archaeology, proud with superlative work of this sort by topflight professional photographers and artists.

Early in 1941, before America's entry into World War II, Sam was in Peru, directing a unit of the Institute of Andean Research's program in Latin American archaeological studies. This was the first time this author came to know him well. He gave generously of his time in guiding some of us younger colleagues to archaeological sites up and down the Peruvian coast. His knowledge of the ceramics, textiles, and other arts of the area was enormous, so that he was an excellent consultant for those who were tyros to that particular field. Although he carried out no excavations in this 1941–1944 period, being largely occupied through much of it with U.S. governmental matters, he was able to travel widely and to make numerous surface collections as well as compile field notes on sites. Later, he published articles on the little-known Chira–Pariñas region of the far north coast (1948) and, in collaboration with Joy Mahler, papers on Zapallan and Chaviña grave finds (both in 1957).

In the 1950s Lothrop was again in the field as an excavator, working in southern Costa Rica and in the Canal Zone. The

Costa Rican explorations, made in the Diquis delta country of the Pacific drainage, were the subject of his last major field report, brought out in 1963. He was at work on the Canal Zone Venado Beach site collections, among other projects, at the time of his death in 1965.

This very brief rundown of Lothrop's field career fails to include the numerous articles of synthesis or of special topical interest that he also authored. Among the outstanding of these are his detailed analysis of the goldwork from the sacred Maya cenote at Chichén Itzá (1952), "Metals from the Cenote of Sacrifice"; "A Re-appraisal of Isthmian Archaeology" (1959); and "Early Migrations to Central and South America" (1961).

Sam Lothrop was highly regarded by his colleagues and contemporaries. He received the A. V. Kidder Medal for Achievement in Archaeology in 1957, the Huxley Memorial Medal of the Royal Anthropological Institute in 1960, and the Wenner-Gren Medal for Archaeology in 1961. In 1951 he was elected to membership in the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, and in Great Britain he was honored by being made an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute. He was also a longtime fellow or member of the American Anthropological Association, the Society for American Archaeology, the Société des Américanistes de Paris, and many other European or Latin American scientific bodies. It has been noted that he was very internationalist in outlook, and this is underlined by the fact that he was a moving spirit in the International Congress of Americanists and, certainly, in foreign circles its best-known U.S. member. A founder and longtime member of the Institute of Andean Research, he helped direct its policies, establish its foreign ties, and carry out its investigations for many years. The esteem of his colleagues was given special emphasis by the publication of the volume, *Essays in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology* (1961), a unique *Festschrift* presentation in that it contained an article by the dedicatee, a

reminiscent survey of archaeology in the Latin American field, entitled "Archaeology, Then and Now."

As a man, Sam Lothrop had considerable charm. He was a *bon vivant* and a gentleman of breeding. There was very little "side" or stuffiness to him. He presented, instead, a rather shy diffidence. At the same time, he was readily approachable on matters archaeological, whether scientific or practical. For the most part, he tended to withdraw from open controversy about his work or that of others; yet he was an archaeologist of very definite opinions and in group meetings or face-to-face conversation was never hesitant to express disagreement.

His mode of work is of interest, and it reflected much in his life-style. This biographer has observed Lothrop in his study of a large collection, that of the Diquis region or of Venado Beach, and others confirm his procedures from his work on the Coclé materials. Pottery, goldwork, and artifacts of all kinds would be spread out over laboratory table space and the available room on the floor. Sam would then spend days looking at the objects, checking excavation notes, and directing the efforts of his photographer and artists with the utmost patience. Weeks, even months, would pass in this manner, with little or no descriptive observations being made by the archaeologist.

Finally, at the end of this laboratory session, carried out at the Peabody Museum at Harvard, would come a relatively brief period of writing and note-taking. With these notes, and with the voluminous photographs and pen-and-ink drawings, Sam would then retire to his library-office in New York City. Here, surrounded by all the pertinent literature, and deeply immersed in it, he would prepare the final report, a document that would be very carefully related to the extant body of scientific writings that could in any way bear upon the subject. His comparative work was done largely from the very rich illustrative record that he brought to his library with him and that would, eventually, end up in his monograph.

He had no peer in the Americanist literature. He was an avid bibliophile, and it is no exaggeration to say that he had the finest library on the archaeology of the Latin American areas of any scholar of his time. This, as mentioned, was for many years housed in his office-library, quarters he maintained separately from his New York apartment residence. To many of the younger members of the profession, Sam's library, with its adjacent well-stocked bar, became "archaeological headquarters" for the whole northeastern United States; and it was here that he hosted the annual meetings of the Institute of Andean Research for many years. A few years prior to his death, when Sam left New York City, he transferred the library to his spacious home in Belmont, Massachusetts. The entire library was left to the Peabody Museum of Harvard in his will.

Lothrop was married to Rachel Warren, of Boston, in 1914, and they had three children, Samuel K., Jr., Joan, and John Warren. His second wife was Eleanor Bachman, of Philadelphia, whom he married in 1929. His third wife was Joy Mahler, of New York City, also a professional archaeologist, who collaborated with him on various archaeological publications, and whom he married in 1958.

Lothrop was a sports fan, especially of boating and ice hockey. This author, raised in southern California and Arizona, had, in those days, seen little of the latter sport. He remembers being taken by an enthusiastic Sam to watch that swift and furious game at the Boston arena. Sam's own participation, in later years at least, was yachting. He was a member of the Union Boat Club of Boston, and, in his role of enthusiast, he provided Edward Wood, Jr., with many of the photographs that were used as illustrations in the latter's history of the Mattapoisett Yacht Club, entitled *Sailing Days at Mattapoisett, 1870-1890*. For many years Sam maintained a summer residence at Mattapoisett. His sailing interests overlapped, to a degree, with his archaeology in his preparation of what was to be an important

article, "Aboriginal Navigation off the West Coast of South America" (1932).

Sam Lothrop's great contribution to American archaeology was heavily substantive. The variety and nature of this substance can be appraised in the appended extensive bibliography covering the years 1919 through a posthumously published article of 1966. He was a pioneer and an explorer. This refers not so much to the connotations of cutting one's way along jungle trails (although Sam did some of this) as to appraising, describing, and laying the groundwork for the archaeology of many South and Central American regions. At the same time Sam's work was in no way superficial. He believed in the objects and materials that were recovered archaeologically. He believed in the value of their most complete description and intrinsic analyses. This is evident in his great respect for technical and artistic craftsmanship and in his attempts to find out all that he could about these. The late Dudley Easby, Jr., in his obituary statement on Lothrop (*American Antiquity*, 31:256-61, 1965), stated:

"He wrote with brilliance and clarity on pottery, lapidary work, fine metalwork, navigation, and, together with Rivet and Nordenskiöld, was one of the first to consult technical specialists instead of dreaming up technological phantasies." Easby, himself a leading authority on Pre-Columbian metallurgy, went on to praise Lothrop's pioneering efforts in this field and to credit him with encouragement and stimulation to others. In this regard, it should be noted that Lothrop was the one who brought the metallurgist, W. C. Root, into Pre-Columbian studies. Root later wrote the definitive articles on the subject of his time, and he later collaborated with Lothrop on the study of the Chichén Itzá cenote metals referred to above.

Sam's esthetic appreciation and judgment was as finely developed as his sense of craft technology. He had an all-encompassing visual memory for specimens and for the details of these

and a rare good taste that transcended the barriers among cultures. This visual acuity was interesting, in one sense, in that, owing to a childhood accident, he had only 25 percent vision in one eye; yet, despite this handicap, he was one of the great connoisseurs of Pre-Columbian art. He demonstrated this in numerous articles and in two great "art books," one on the Robert Woods Bliss Collection of Dumbarton Oaks (1957) and another brought out by the Skira publishers of Geneva (1964).

But the understructure of Sam Lothrop's substantive contribution was in sheer systematic exploration and recording in little-known regions of Latin America, especially in what has come to be referred to as "Lower Central America," or that part of Central America south and east of the Maya frontier and down to and including the Isthmus of Panama. His research and publication on this part of the New World still stands as greater than that of any other scholar for that region. In recent years younger workers have entered this field, and we are coming to know much more about the archaeology of these Central American republics than formerly; but Sam laid much of the groundwork, and he was instrumental in encouraging Doris Stone and others who have followed him in Isthmian studies.

On the theoretical side, Lothrop's outstanding contribution was in the linking of archaeology and ethnohistory, again especially with the data of lower Central America. In this he was an exacting documentary scholar, and his studies of this kind have not yet been duplicated for the Nicaraguan, Costa Rican, and Panamanian regions. Sam probably would not have looked upon this as something that was in the "theoretical" realm. To him it was straightforward history or history-and-archaeology. Younger workers may question some of his assumptions about archaeological-to-ethnographical continuities in his attempts to explain some prehistoric phenomena; but Lothrop had the very great advantage of knowing his particular areas of work in their depths of both archaeological and ethnohistorical detail so that

the major guidelines of his reconstructions, such as those concerning the Panamanian chiefdoms, are probably very sound even though they appear, to a degree, to be intuitive. He showed little interest in *in situ* processes of cultural development; and, as an investigation of these is now enjoying current favor, some of his writings may seem "old-fashioned." He was, perhaps, something of a diffusionist. At least many of his shorter papers dealt with themes of probable relationships in styles and technologies as these were found across great distances of South and Central America; but he "rode no particular horse" in insisting on special diffusionistic interpretations of American cultural history. He was particularistic and immersed in the data, and he knew these data very well. When H. J. Spinden put forth his imaginative idea of the "Archaic hypothesis," Lothrop, along with G. C. Vaillant, pointed to the exceptions and irregularities in the data that the hypothesis could not smooth over or reconcile. Still, he, too, could take the broad view of the American field.

In retrospect, one sees Samuel Kirkland Lothrop as a very "catholic" archaeologist of his time. Fittingly, for his generation, he bridged the earlier great scholars, such as Eduard Seler and W. H. Holmes, and the somewhat more anthropologically, or "social-science"-minded, group that was to follow. He was less "developmentally oriented," or "chronology-minded," than his contemporaries, A. V. Kidder and G. C. Vaillant; but he was more adept as an ethnohistoric scholar and a technological-esthetic appraiser than they. But, as they were, he was also both an anthropologist and a humanist. And, as is evident in all of his work, he really enjoyed archaeology.

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COMPILED BY MARY L. MALLORY

KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

Am. Anthropol. = American Anthropologist

Am. Antiq. = American Antiquity

Art Archaeol. = Art and Archaeology

Bull. Bur. Am. Ethnol. = Bulletin of the Bureau of American Ethnology

Carnegie Inst. Wash. Publ. = Carnegie Institution of Washington Publication

Contrib. Mus. Am. Indian, Heye Found. = Contributions from the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation

Indian Notes Monogr. Mus. Am. Indian, Heye Found. = Indian Notes and Monographs, Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation

J. R. Anthropol. Inst. G. B. Irel. = Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland

Mem. Peabody Mus. Archaeol. Ethnol. Harvard Univ. = Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University

Pap. Peabody Mus. Archaeol. Ethnol. Harvard Univ. = Papers of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University

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*The Peabody Museum houses a significant number of Samuel Kirkland Lothrop's unpublished notes, photographs, and site plans related to his work in British Honduras, highland Guatemala, Panama, Puerto Rico, and other areas of Central and South America. In addition, other miscellany, such as his personal correspondence, is kept in the Archives of the Museum.

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