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Alfred Vincent Kidder 1885-1963

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Obituaries



ALFRED VINCENT KIDDER

1885–1963

IN EVERY profession there arise giants whose contribution is substantially greater than that of most of their own generation. The impact of their work may be felt through important discoveries or interpretations of knowledge, or it may be cumulative and realized only relatively late in their careers. The subject of this essay is one whose impact has been felt in each of these ways. For in a sense, Alfred Vincent Kidder had two careers, in both of which his contributions are genuinely outstanding.

Born in Marquette, Michigan, on October 29, 1885, Kidder was one of the first to be professionally trained in archeology in the United States. His midwestern nascence notwithstanding, he was raised a Bostonian, in the finest sense of that tradition. Private schooling in Boston plus two years more in Switzerland served as preparation for Harvard College,

which he attended beginning in 1904. After receiving his A.B. degree, he continued at Harvard for his M.A. and Ph.D., both in anthropology.

The direction of Kidder's future career was somewhat unconsciously taken during his childhood when he had access to many works on anthropology and archeology in his father's library. Original plans for him to study medicine were changed during his undergraduate days both through a strong disinclination for some of his medical studies and also because of a growing interest in anthropology aroused by studies under Roland B. Dixon in his junior year. These led directly to an opportunity to go to the Southwest the following summer for his first field work. There, in the "Four Corners" region, plans for a medical career were transformed into a resolve to make archeology his life's work. Kidder returned to Harvard to take a full schedule of anthropology courses under Dixon, Farabee, Putnam, and Tozzer. Immediately after graduation he returned to the Southwest to dig in New Mexico and southeastern Utah.

Before starting graduate work Kidder traveled with his family to Greece and Egypt. While in the Middle East he learned of the great Egyptologist George A. Reisner, a professor at Harvard. On his return to graduate school Kidder took Reisner's course on archeological field methods, one of the most significant he was to take for it led to Kidder's application of Reisner's high standards to New World archeology. That trip to the Mediterranean had another effect, for he became engaged to Madeleine Appleton, whose family had joined his for the tour. The couple, married in 1910, had five children, one of whom, Alfred II, worthily carries the Kidder name in anthropology and archeology today.

Five years of graduate study (1909–1914) were interspersed with field trips to the Southwest under the sponsorship of the Harvard Peabody Museum and the New Mexico Territorial Museum. Results of a portion of this work were incorporated into Kidder's Ph.D. dissertation, *Southwestern Ceramics: Their Value in Reconstructing the History of the Ancient Cliff Dwelling Pueblo Tribes*. Even

though not published in its original form this dissertation represents a breakthrough in Southwestern archeology through its application of scientific methodology to the study of the most abundant, the most perplexing, and now the most meaningful of prehistoric remains, the lowly potsherd. A chapter of the work did appear in print as *Pottery of the Pajarito Plateau and of some Adjacent Regions of New Mexico* (1915). It is important because of its careful, accurate descriptions of ceramic decoration, for the comparative method employed in assessing relationships among groups defined, and for the imaginative inferences drawn from the hypothetical relationships. Here is one of the first examples of anthropological archeology in this country. From data procured through controlled excavation, then carefully analyzed, he drew inferences based upon such theoretical concepts as acculturation, clans, exchange, role in mortuary or ceremonial customs, and divergence in evolution.

Accompanied by Samuel J. Guernsey and Charles Amsden, Kidder took a noteworthy field trip in the summer of 1914. The resulting publication, (with Guernsey) appeared in 1919 as *Archaeological Explorations in Northeastern Arizona*. Under this unassuming title lies one of the classics in New World archeology, for therein the authors took another large step toward defining not only ceramic groupings in the Southwest, but also archeological cultures or "culture periods," as they termed them. Three groups were defined, "Basket Maker," "Slabhouse" culture, and "Cliff-house" or "Kiva" culture, with the postulated sequence in the order given. The essential correctness of the sequence has been demonstrated by subsequent work, and in addition the paper remains one of the definitive studies of pre-ceramic Basket Maker culture (although they did not invent the name).

With a number of years of survey and excavation experience to his credit Kidder was ready when the opportunity to undertake a long-range project at a large, stratified site was presented to him. Under the auspices of Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, he began excavations near Pecos, New Mexico, in the summer of 1915. Except for an interruption of three years during World War I, work was to continue there until 1929. The site was chosen because of surface and documentary indications of its long history bridging the

prehistoric and historic periods, and its promise of yielding rich anthropological data dealing with questions of economics and trade, internal development, ceremonialism, and social relationships. Among the most important consequences of the Pecos project was the employment on a large scale of the principles of stratigraphic excavation that were being tried in the Southwest for the first time during these years. Over the many seasons of the project a number of young archeologists received their early field training, and several of them went on to become prominent in their own right. High quality in his work together with the magnetism of his personality drew more and more professional visitors to his camp each summer, and in 1927 the first of the now traditional Pecos conferences was held. A particular significance was attached to this conference, for the various archeologists agreed on a statement of the outline and general content of southwestern archeology. Based largely on Kidder's conceptualization from as early as 1924, the statement holds reasonably true today for the Anasazi (Pueblo) culture, although new details may now be added, and whole new cultures have since been discovered. In keeping with the high standards of the Pecos fieldwork are the resulting publications dating from 1917 (on the ceramics, coauthored with Mrs. Kidder) to 1958. To many archeologists the most significant of these was the first monograph on the work, Kidder's *An Introduction to the Study of Southwestern Archaeology, with a Preliminary Account of the Excavations at Pecos* (1924). The portion referred to in the first phrase of the title was a masterful synthesis of what was then known about southwestern prehistory, and was so insightfully written that it is recognized as one of the classics in American anthropological literature. It was recently reprinted.

From time to time in the early 1920s Kidder had been invited by the Carnegie Institution of Washington to serve as advisor on their archeological program dealing with the Maya of Middle America. Kidder's friend from student days Sylvanus G. Morley had been laboring in the Maya field for years and was largely responsible for the Institution's growing commitment to that field. President J. C. Merriam, in 1923, enunciated a research plan that was to take them still deeper, and steps in implementing the plan increasingly involved A. V. Kidder. Appointed Research Associate

of the Institution in 1926, his position was upgraded in 1927 to Associate in charge of archeological investigations, and in 1929 he was named Chairman of the newly established Division of Historical Research. Kidder's broad view of the role of archeology developed during his Pecos work found even wider scope in the study of Maya civilization. Kidder saw the necessity of a multi-disciplinary approach to carry out the mandate given by the president of Carnegie some years before. It must reach into the biological, medical, and earth sciences as well as social science. The remainder of Kidder's professional career was to be devoted to executing a "pan-scientific" attack on understanding Maya culture through time. We can follow his planning and strategy through his statements in annual reports of the Division to the Institution. As he saw it they were dealing with two outstanding problems, "the peopling of the American continents," and "the rise, in this hemisphere, of native civilization" (1932:89). He also saw that these questions, while fundamental to Americanists were "also of extreme importance for the study of anthropology in the broader sense, for the one strikes back to the primary diffusions of the human stock, while the second links into the vast riddle of man's perennial upward striving" (1932:89). At intervals Kidder eloquently underlined his views on the relationships of archeology, anthropology, history, and social science in general. He did not belabor the relationship of archeology and anthropology, for he virtually took this for granted, "archaeologists have become primarily students of culture" (1936:112). In another place, in reference to the American Indian, he stated "nor can the significance of his career be understood unless we have information as to what elements of culture he brought with him, how much he developed independently, and how he managed to build up the complex social, religious and economic structures which he possessed for centuries before the coming of Europeans" (1932:89).

Kidder was quite critical of non-problem-oriented archeology, and decried the tendency to allow archeologists to excavate only where spectacular discoveries might be made—for this turns them aside from "their proper business, which is the study of the long, slow growth of human culture and the formulation of problems of the development of society" (1937:1). The emphasis on sensational finds,

he wrote, leads to a situation where, "in the public mind at least, the whole anthropological dog has come more and more to be wagged by its relatively unimportant archaeological tail" (1937:1).

In a sense Kidder's actions with regard to social anthropology and ethnology attest more eloquently than his written word. He encouraged and cooperated with Robert Redfield, whose work (with his collaborators) represents one of the strongest contributions of American social anthropology.

Kidder wrestled more with the relationship between archeology and history. This may have been partially because he had the executive problem of integrating documentary history into the Carnegie program long after archeology had been established firmly in the research endeavors of the institution. He went to some length to demonstrate how the two disciplines differed, and why they must be brought together. The argument may be demonstrated with the following excerpts:

history deals with peoples whose stories have been perpetuated by the written word; archaeology with those who have left few or, in most cases, no documentary records. . . . Thus, historians consider in great detail (because their materials are abundant) a short period and a small area; archaeologists treat more broadly (because evidence is both scanty and expensive to gather) enormous spans of time and huge terrains. While archaeological thinking has doubtless been over-loose, historical reasoning has perhaps gone to the other extreme through reliance so implicit upon the written word that nothing is taken into account which is not to be found in documentary sources [1936:112].

Nevertheless he felt it desirable to work for a rapprochement between the two for, "archaeology, rightly conceived, is a historical discipline" (1937:1) and historians should not neglect "the precious incidental fragments of cultural, racial or environmental information, the historical potsherds, so to speak, that are tucked away in books and manuscripts" (1936:112).

In implementing his "pan-scientific" approach Kidder took on a sizable administrative responsibility. For example, in the second full year under the newly organized Division there were no less than 33 professional people engaged in research in the following fields: archeology (13), ethnology (3), physical anthropology and nutritional studies (6), lin-

guistics (2), medicine (4), geography (3), plus 2 more archeologists working in the south-western United States. Not all were employed directly by the Division, but rather a series of cooperative arrangements were set up under which investigators from various departments within the Institution worked on problems in the Maya area. Research personnel of several universities and the United States government participated from time to time as well. In subsequent years to the above list of fields were added biology, epigraphy and hieroglyphics, and ceramic technology.

To a man as physically active as Kidder had been for so many years the "desk" aspect of his work must have been tedious, but he managed to take a number of trips into various parts of the Maya country. By 1935 he was able to take an active part in the excavations at Kaminaljuyu on the outskirts of Guatemala City. Digging at this site went on for two years, and although publication was delayed until 1946, the report on these excavations, co-authored with Jesse D. Jennings and Edwin M. Shook, represents another landmark in American archeological writing. The report is particularly notable for its lucid description of remains and for its carefully drawn inferences about the total culture of the people who left them.

Besides his thoughtfully constructed annual reports Kidder's writing during this period ranges through papers in the major journals and authorship or coauthorship of eight monographs. Since he encouraged specialization within his research group, it occasionally fell to him to write syntheses and interpretations of the work of others. Then too, he would take the left-over tasks, such as describing and interpreting the nonceramic artifacts. Here again he was able to extract a maximum amount of significance from the data and write about it clearly and meaningfully.

After a decade of intensive work by the Division of Historical Research, Kidder in 1939 wrote of the desirability of a history of the Maya that would synthesize the results of all of the investigations carried out under the program. However, at this time there occurred two events that were to greatly affect the future of this research. First, World War II interrupted their work by virtually stripping the Division of personnel. Kidder, who was too old for service, carried on by completing papers for which there had been little time previously,

such as descriptions of private collections, and papers on special subjects like jade, stone axes, and spindle whorls. His bibliography grew rapidly during this interval.

The other event, which was to have far greater consequences for Kidder's work and plans, was the decision by President Bush of the Institution to phase out the Division and its program. Thus his last years as head of the Division were occupied with closing current projects and arranging for the future of the personnel. In 1950 he handed over the reins to his successor H. E. D. Pollock.

Although Kidder was disappointed that the synthesis of the "pan-scientific" attack was never written, the 79 contributions to knowledge by the Division are of fundamental importance in the anthropological literature for they provide one of the major, indispensable sources of documentation and interpretation of an ancient civilization. Through the efforts of the Division the history of Maya culture was extended back into the preclassic period. The previous view of "Old" and "New" empires was demonstrated incorrect with the discovery that occupation of Yucatan and the Peten were coeval. Further, these aspects were demonstrated to be partially contemporaneous with Maya culture in highland Guatemala. Relationships of Maya culture to others in the New World were seen in much clearer perspective.

Kidder led a full professional life—to mention just a few of his ancillary activities, he was president of the Society for American Archaeology in 1937, and of the American Anthropological Association in 1942. He cooperated often with the National Research Council and served as Chairman of the Division of Anthropology and Psychology for two years in 1926–1927. From 1939 to 1951 he was a member of the Faculty of Peabody Museum, Harvard, and during the period 1927–1935 he was Chairman of the Board of the Laboratory of Anthropology, Santa Fe, New Mexico. Even though he was not to see Carnegie Institution extend its scope into a comparative study of New World civilizations as he had proposed, he was one of the founders of the Institute of Andean Research, which later carried on with a number of his aims. Kidder received many honors, but the greatest was the establishment under the auspices of the American Anthropological Association of the Alfred V. Kidder award, which was announced to him on the

day of his retirement. Appropriately, the first medal in his name was presented to his old professor, A. M. Tozzer. Kidder had previously received, in 1946, the Viking Fund Medal for Archaeology.

It cannot be expected that a person of Kidder's prominence would go unchallenged in what he did and what he stood for. Significant as his achievements were in anthropology, a heavy bombardment of criticism has been leveled at him. The most formidable attack came in two parts, and it was of little comfort to him that it came from within what might be called the "Harvard Establishment." In 1940, Clyde Kluckhohn in *The Conceptual Structure in Middle American Studies*, took Kidder to task for in effect not writing on "the primary problems of human interaction" (Kluckhohn 1940:43). The Carnegie work was seen on the one hand as having been too concerned with descriptive detail and on the other with not having focused on "the elements which a class of events may have in common," in order to provide "the quantitative basis for generalization which is scientifically essential" (Kluckhohn 1940:49). These partially contradictory criticisms were somewhat gratuitously resolved by the observation that "it is an experiential generalization that material collected and published by the 'historically' minded is seldom suitable for scientific analysis" (Kluckhohn 1940:49).

The salvo from Kluckhohn was only a prelude however. A more detailed critique appeared in 1948 under the title, *A Study of Archeology*. This monograph by W. W. Taylor was clearly a follow-up on the earlier criticism—one in which Kidder's work both in the Southwest and in the Maya area were judged against a rhetorical standard called the "conjunctive approach." This latter involves an explicit attempt to write a complete culture history in the most minute detail of the archeological entity under study. Archeology as it had been done by the Carnegie Institution (and others) was said to be largely chronicle, not historiography as it should be. In belaboring the Carnegie group for an overwhelming concern with the grandiose and hierarchal, Taylor (conveniently for his thesis) left out reference to such studies as Ricketson's on house mounds and settlement patterns at Uaxactun. Undoubtedly both critics had a number of sound suggestions for improving the state of archeological method and theory,

but many colleagues who know Kidder and his work believe that the criticisms were not entirely to the point and furthermore, they were unnecessarily trenchant. It is only fair to observe here that few archeologists have had the breadth of vision and the ability to see that vision realized to the extent that Kidder had.

Formal separation from his institutional affiliation in 1950 was by no means a termination of Dr. Kidder's career. It is impossible to tell from a perusal of his bibliography when he retired, for he kept publishing at about the same average rate up to 1961. In all his long career Kidder had not taught formal courses since his Teaching Fellow days at Harvard. The Department of Anthropology of the University of California was fortunate in persuading him to teach at Berkeley during the spring semester, 1951. Appropriately, he offered two courses, one on the Southwest, the other on Middle America. He used the seminar form and after handing out compendious bibliographies gave a series of introductory lectures in each course. The lectures were well organized summaries of problems and relationships, with enough data to give the ideas substance. As a master raconteur he sprinkled his lectures with anecdotes and personal insights, which together with the authoritative scholarly information rendered the courses high points in the learning experience of the students involved. His graciousness and humility was illustrated in the Middle American course, when in referring to the Carnegie program he did not take the opportunity for rebuttal to his critics, but said merely, "As you know, I have been heavily criticized for this."

Another group of students had their careers enriched through association with Kidder during his years of "retirement." His home in Cambridge was only a few minutes walk from Peabody Museum, and the virtually adjacent Carnegie office. Kidder would join Gordon Willey's seminars on Middle America, and he also participated in various informal functions of the Department of Anthropology. In the afternoons he was "at home" to those who cared to join him for refreshments and always scintillating conversation. We students of course had more questions than answers, but he was always patient with us and helped give us perspective that we value along with our more formal teaching.

A. V. Kidder died on June 11, 1963, at the

age of 78. As a person and as a scholar, he gave so very much more to the world in which he lived than he took from it.

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NOTE

This obituary was written while the author was out of the country and did not have access to all of the pertinent source material. Two other obituaries of A. V. Kidder were consulted: Gordon R. Willey's manuscript submitted to the National Academy of Sciences, and Robert Wauchope's, published in *American Antiquity* 31:149-171 (which includes a complete bibliography). The author gratefully acknowledges assistance rendered by Mrs. Madeleine Kidder and Alfred II, as well as replies to letters of inquiry about Kidder to his fellow students at Berkeley and Harvard: Dorothy Menzel, Clement W. Meighan, Henry B. Nicholson, Raymond H.

Thompson, Reynold J. Ruppé, David H. Kelley, John B. Glass, and William R. Bullard, Jr.

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