

# EDITOR'S CORNER

## Recent Findings on North American Prehistory

The Columbian Quincentenary encourages examination of topics long ignored, of little-explored common ground between divergent interest groups, and of outside opinions of what archaeologists are and do. Commemorating the discovery of the New World is paving the way for new findings on the past. Recent discoveries stemming from an all-Native American panel discussion merit a brief note. Furthermore, they contribute to the essential rethinking of North American prehistory.

In organizing the Third Southwest Symposium—a biennial gathering of archaeologists of the American Southwest and northern Mexico—Paul Fish and I seized the opportunity to have Native Americans present thoughts on archaeology and archaeologists. We scheduled an evening plenary session organized by Ivan Sydney (Hopi) and Peter J. Pilles, Jr. The panel comprised Cecil Antone (Pima), Larry Benallie, Jr. (Navajo), Leigh Jenkins (Hopi), Weldon Johnson (Chemehuevi), Theodore Jojola (Isleta Pueblo), Hartmann Lomawaima (Hopi), and Edmund Ladd (Zuni). The tone of the presentations was expectably calm, the content reasoned and candid. Having worked rather closely with the White Mountain Apache for nearly a quarter century, I was surprised to have departed that session with new and rather startling realizations, several of which I summarize here as recent discoveries on North American prehistory.

Several members of the panel raised objections to their oral traditions being labeled myths and legends by archaeologists. They preferred to reference them as “stories” and probably would not object to “oral history.” The subtle issue here is not word usage alone, but the extent to which particular usage may be perceived to decrease the truth value of their cultural heritage. And this worry leads directly to a deeper concern—archaeological accounts of the past, especially the past of a particular Native American people, are perceived by them to present a threat to traditional, Native American accounts of that same past. The perceived threat is that the archaeological account eventually would replace the traditionally constructed past and erode, once again, another piece of their culture. The actual outcome would not be nearly so dire, but the perception is real, at least among this panel, and, as such, presents new topics for deliberation.

There was another discovery. After two full days of listening to academic papers, the all-Indian panel voiced the opinion that archaeologists appeared not to reach conclusions, which I take to certify their powers of observation. More disturbing, however, was their assertion that the archaeology of the Southwest had no relevance for southwestern Indians. To this panel of judges archaeology was relevant only to other archaeologists. Although this condition might diminish the perceived archaeological threat to Native American traditionalism, it should raise threatening questions for archaeologists. A North American prehistory irrelevant to North American Indians would seem to be in jeopardy or, minimally, in serious need of epistemological adjustment.

Should prehistory be relevant to Native Americans? And if so, how is this relevance achieved? Who is to judge? Do Native American oral histories and scientific accounts of prehistory complement one another, like traditional and modern medicine, or is one destined to be subsumed by the other? These are issues archaeologists must discuss among themselves and with Native Americans. The Native American Graves Preservation and Repatriation Act of 1990 has given Native Americans a renewed confidence in discussions with archaeologists; we saw this clearly in the plenary session

of the Third Southwest Symposium. The Columbian Quincentenary provides the unique opportunity and special justification to initiate the dialogues that will lead to new discoveries about Native America.

J. Jefferson Reid  
Editor

**SOCIETY FOR AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY  
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The 1993 SAA Nominating Committee is seeking nominations for the position of Treasurer-elect and for two positions on the SAA Executive Committee. Please send the names of nominated candidates, together with a brief resume of their qualifications, to: Robert J. Sharer, Chair, SAA Nominating Committee, The University Museum, 33rd and Spruce Streets, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6324. **SAA members are urged to suggest names of candidates for the offices listed above by October 1, 1992.**