Lewis R. Binford (1931–2011)

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On 11 April 2011, Lewis Roberts Binford died of congestive heart failure at the age of 79 in Kirksville, Missouri. An era in archaeology ended with his death.

Lew was born in 1931 in Norfolk, Virginia. He attended Virginia Polytechnic Institute until 1952, when he joined the military. While on duty in Japan he became interested in anthropology, and after leaving the service, he attended the University of North Carolina, graduating with a degree in anthropology in 1957. He continued studies in the discipline and received his MA in 1958 and, in 1964, his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan. He taught at the University of Michigan, the University of Chicago, the University of California at the Santa Barbara and Los Angeles campuses, and from 1968 to 1991, he was on the faculty of the University of New Mexico. He then taught at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas until his retirement in 2003. Lew published more than 20 books and 150 papers, dating back to 1959. He lectured throughout Europe, Asia, and North and South America. His many honors included election to the United States National Academy of Sciences, the Huxley Memorial Medal from the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain, and the Society for American Archaeology’s Lifetime Achievement Award.

To say that Lewis Binford was a mover and shaker is putting it mildly. Beginning with his 1962 paper, “Archaeology as Anthropology,” Lew wanted nothing less than to completely change how archaeologists approached archaeology. In the 1950s, many archaeologists saw the purpose of their enterprise as classification and artifacts as reflections of “mental templates,” useful for tracking the migration of “cultures” or the diffusion of ideas. Lew challenged archaeologists to do more by fully participating in anthropology. Kinship, for example, was a hot topic, so two of his first students, William Longacre and James Hill, used ceramics to study kinship in southwestern pueblos. Lew pushed archaeologists to work scientifically with analytical rigor, to create research designs, to pay attention to sampling, and to use statistically analyzed data to test hypotheses. He demanded that archaeologists understand why cultures change over time. Although he ceased traditional archaeological fieldwork by the 1970s, his research among the Nunamiat Inuit, the Navajo, and Australia’s Alyawara helped pioneer ethnoarchaeology—the study of living communities—to create ways to interpret archaeological remains. He also pushed forward taphonomy, the study of how natural processes create assemblages of animal bones. As the chief architect of the “new archaeology,” later called “processual archaeology,” Lew focused on the adaptive processes of cultural change. He never found a lost temple, a new hominin species, or the oldest evidence of anything. Nonetheless, Lewis Binford was the most influential archaeologist of the 20th century.

Lew thrived on controversy. Challenging orthodoxy, he argued that agriculture was not an inevitable cultural advance, but an adaptation to population pressure. He debated the eminent French archaeologist François Bordes, arguing that variation in Mousterian stone tool assemblages reflected functional differences rather than different “tribes” of Neandertals. Reanalyzing faunal assemblages from sites of considerable importance to human evolution, including Olduvai Gorge in Africa and Zhoukoudian in China, he replaced the cherished idea of big game hunting in the Lower Paleolithic with a vision of our human ancestors as lowly scavengers of carcasses. He was a harsh critic and argued with many, but I recall him saying that he only argued with people from whom he thought he could learn something.

Lew focused on understanding how prehistoric societies were adaptive organizations. His 2001 magnum opus, Constructing Frames of Reference, used a database of ethnographic information and environmental data to examine the organization of hunter-gatherer societies, his lifelong interest, to understand how group size, food storage, mobility, diet, and social organization were adaptations to the environment.

He also focused on what he labeled “middle-range theory,” arguments to make inferences from patterns in archaeological data. His books Nunamiat Ethnoarchaeology (1978) and Bones: Ancient Men and Modern Myths (1981) showed how to interpret patterns in assemblages of animal bones in terms of butchering strategies and natural processes. He developed concepts (residential and logistical mobility, site structure, site furniture, expedient and curated technology) that led archaeologists the world over to think about spatial distributions of artifacts and technology in new ways.

Lew was a brilliant speaker and teacher. As his graduate assistant, I would watch him develop lectures as he walked across campus to class. His conference presentations were standing room only, and his courses were routinely attended by non-enrolled students. He gave so willingly of his time to students and visitors that he rarely wrote in his university office. Instead, he wrote at home, where he kept two typewriters (in the days before computers) on two desks so he could work on two manuscripts simultaneously. Some 30 years later, his hunter-gatherer seminar remains vivid in my memory. Lew would often slip into a southern Baptist preacher mode and talk . . . and talk. One evening, a particular class that began at 7 PM found him still lecturing at midnight—and his audience still listening. Every time we walked out of that seminar, we felt as if the world had changed.

Lew taught archaeologists to look at the big picture, to search for patterns, and to realize that our knowledge of the past is limited only by the imagination and effort we bring to creating methods to infer that past from its material remains. He saw the past not simply as a historical record of events, but as a record of adaptation. He moved the field from a largely descriptive effort to a more scientific, explanatory enterprise. And no one will move it as far for a long, long time.