

## B O O K R E V I E W S

LEWIS BINFORD, Nunamiut Ethnoarchaeology. Academic Press, New York and London, 1978. 509pp. £33.00 (Hard) ISBN 0-12-100040-0.

Reviewed by Sue Rowley

Originally published in 1978, Nunamiut Ethnoarchaeology is one of the earliest ethnoarchaeological studies printed as a monograph. It is an outstanding example of research into the hunting strategies of a modern, northern hunting society. However, continuing interest in this work is not for its in-depth study of the economic anatomy of caribou and sheep, nor for Nunamiut methods of maximising their nutritional yields which it presents, but for the method offered for interpreting inter-site variability -- so-called middle-range research (readers interested in a synopsis of the text are referred to the review by S.C. Sarayder, 1980).

Middle-range research is the result of the development of Binford's approach to the interpretation of the archaeological record. Since the early 1960s Binford has paraphrased the following quotation in several works: "...the basic task of anthropology - of which archaeology is a part - is to seek an understanding of man's variable cultural behavior, to explain cultural similarities and differences" (1981:181, see also 1962:217, 1967:234). In the mid 1960s Sally and Lewis Binford studied the Mousterian, and Lewis Binford ultimately came to the conclusion that, "...if we were going to make sense out of the Mousterian and its remarkable forms of variability, we needed some reliable behavioral context in terms of which variability in stone tools could be studied" (1977:15). Binford originally thought that lithic use-wear analysis would provide an interpre-

tive framework; however, he soon abandoned this idea and turned to ethnoarchaeology and the Nunamiut, who "...provided the closest analogue to the conditions envisioned for the Neanderthals of any known contemporary society" (1977:16). He was awakened from this reverie of possible ethnographic analogy when he arrived in Anaktuvuk Pass in the summer of 1969 and was immediately confronted by a people who lived in modern houses, used guns and wore blue jeans (1977:17). He modified his research plans and returned to Anaktuvuk in the spring of 1971. Once back at Anaktuvuk he realized that while the people wore modern clothing they were still exploiting the same resource base: "...the information I wanted was right before my eyes in the form of the contemporary patterns of land use and variability in the activities at numerous locations still used by the Nunamiut" (1977:21).

Middle-range research evolved from Binford's attempts to understand variability in the archaeological record and come to grips with the reality of ethnoarchaeology. Middle-range research is based explicitly on the uniformitarian principle that the processes acting in the past are the same as those acting in the present. It is defined as "...actualistic studies designed to control for the relationship between dynamic properties of the past about which one seeks knowledge and the static material properties common in both the past and present..." (1981:29).

The uniformitarian assumption Binford chooses to make in Nunamiut Ethnoarchaeology is about caribou and sheep. He states that the anatomy of these two species was the same in the archaeological past as it is today (p. 11). This assumption is hardly earth-shattering

or liable to generate arguments. However, the tools Binford develops to understand inter-site variability, the modified and inverse modified bone, marrow, and grease indices, are based on the way the Nunamiut butcher the animals. In fact the assumption now becomes: "Many of the animal species present in the assemblages are still extant, and the processes of exploitation and use operative in the past are still operative today" (p. 12). In other words, Nunamiut butchery behaviour is rational, and prehistoric peoples exploiting these species would have butchered them in a similar manner.

In interpreting the gathered data, Binford implicitly assumes that it is possible to separate cultural and rational variability. He believes that once the rational variability has been factored out, all residual variability will be cultural. In fact, the present-day situation among the Nunamiut and many other modern tribal groups has probably contributed to this assumption: for the last 25 years the Nunamiut subsistence base has remained relatively stable while the culture has altered radically due to acculturation. This allowed Binford to study, in isolation, the rational subsistence behaviour of the Nunamiut.

The evidence for cultural variability which Binford discovered (the treatment of the brisket in spring [p. 220] and the treatment of sheep's heads at fall kill sites [p. 413]) was in fact residual. However, this is not necessarily because cultural variability is residual, but because Nunamiut behaviour has been selectively stripped of pre-white contact cultural behaviour (Burch, 1980 raises this issue in his review of the book). This is a serious problem and one which needs more attention in the literature. What is the validity of an approach which

studies a situation where the processes affecting the behaviour of the people are not the same as those that were operating in the past? It is unfortunate that Binford was unable to complete his archaeological study of late 1800s occupations of the area, as these pre-acculturation sites would have thrown light on the suitability of his models for studying the subsistence and behavioural patterns of the present population's ancestors.

Little attempt is made to relate the middle-range research developed among the Nunamiut to the interpretation of prehistoric archaeology. Binford explains: "I have not yet attempted to provide guides to analysts for the use of the models generated. Such procedures would greatly aid the investigator seeking to identify an unknown faunal assemblage. These procedures can certainly be developed" (p. 473). Given the constraints of excavation ("One needs to have samples of equal comprehensiveness from differentiated areas of a site before attempting to interpret the total assemblage" [p. 336]), and the amount of juggling Binford has to do when employing his indices for historic Nunamiut sites, such optimism seems unwarranted. An attempt to utilise the indices is presented only in the last chapter of *Bones* (1981 -- also reviewed in this issue).

As outlined above there are problems with the use of middle-range research in Nunamiut Ethnoarchaeology: the applicability of the uniformitarian principle, the indices and models developed, and their relevance to the archaeological record can all be questioned. Nevertheless *Nunamiut Ethnoarchaeology* remains an important work in the history of archaeology for being the major report of research which led to the development of middle-range research.

## References

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LEWIS BINFORD, *Bones: Ancient Men and Modern Myths*. Academic Press, New York and London, 1978. 320pp. £24.20 (Hard) ISBN 0-12-100035-4.

Reviewed by Paul Halstead

Reading *Bones* is at once a stimulating and a deadening experience. To begin with the bad news, the prose is inimitably Binfordian, and the lack of editorial intervention is apparent at every level. In terms of organisation, the attempt to emulate the involuted form of narrative used to such effect in Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* is not a success. Like Heller's Yossarian, the muscle-stripping argument of the hapless George Frison is resurrected and re-crucified in chapter after chapter and repetitions like this make *Bones* twice as long and half as clear as it should be. The text is generously leavened with about 90

photographs - of which some are good and most serviceable. About a quarter of them, however, mainly those taken in the field, are useless, and a singularly uninformative aerial view of wolves relaxing is featured twice (pp. 199 and 222)! Most of the line drawings are clear, but some of the tables would baffle a cipher clerk, and the incorrect references to tables almost torpedoed this reviewer's attempt to run the gauntlet of chapter 6. For all its inexcusable editorial shortcomings, however, *Bones* is guaranteed a wide readership by Binford's name and belligerent style - and it does address absolutely central problems of archaeological method.

Binford's basic proposition (passim, but especially chapter 2) is that our attempts to explain the past ('general theory') are worthless unless we have an independent body of 'middle-range theory' (Binford, 1977), 'interpretive theory' (Clarke, 1973) or, at a pinch, 'behavioral archaeology' (Schiffer, 1976) with which to extract unambiguous information about hominid behaviour from the archaeological record. Middle-range research must begin in the present where the relationship between the dynamics of behaviour (the bear) and its static derivatives (the footprint) can be observed. Putting this observation to work in the archaeological record then requires that two conditions be met. Firstly, a causal relationship, and not simply a correlation, must be established between dynamics and statics in the present. Secondly, uniformitarian assumptions concerning this causal relationship must be warranted by some argument for its relevance to the past. Binford is well aware that warranting arguments on these conditions must themselves be theory-laden, but circularity may be avoided by heeding his dictum that "Our middle-range theory must be intellectually independent of