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978-0-521-10542-2 - Stone Age Prehistory: Studies in Memory of Charles McBurney

Edited by G. N. Bailey and P. Callow

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STONE AGE PREHISTORY

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CHARLES McBURNEY

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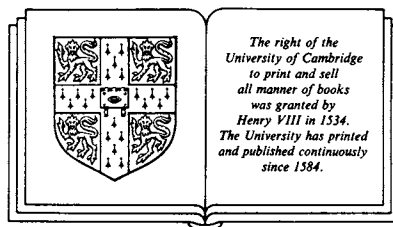
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STUDIES IN MEMORY OF CHARLES McBURNEY

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G. N. BAILEY AND P. CALLOW



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FOREWORD

As we foregathered on some occasion in the main gallery of the University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Cambridge, my Colleague, Meyer Fortes, then William Wyse Professor of Social Anthropology, remarked a trifle wistfully, I thought, that archaeologists were more fortunate than they realised. Maybe they could not interrogate their peoples face to face, but at least they acquired data which undeniably existed. Social anthropologists too often had to rest content with accounts based on answers to rhetorical questions, or even on the writings of individuals unable to speak the language of those whose most intimate feelings and practices they sought to retail to western readers; whereas even the dimmest archaeologist could reckon to bring home evidence, which, being tangible, could be counted, measured, weighed and subjected to the variety of tests available to science.

Yet there is danger in the very plenitude and tangibility of archaeological data. Flints and stones, metal artefacts, potsherds, seal-stones and the like, more especially when enshrined in the sanctity of museums, may too easily attract attention in and for themselves, without reference to the communities to which in many cases they provide the only access. Indeed they may even become objects of veneration, the objects of veritable cults imposing their own rituals of publication and display and disposing of their own custodians and expositors. Charles McBurney was saved from this by having been trained in a Faculty housed in a museum dedicated to the study of living as well as dead societies, including the biological and social study of man past and present. As a true archaeologist he was passionately devoted to his material evidence, in his case mainly assemblages of flints, stones and bones, and he insisted on its rigorous study by his pupils. Yet he never forgot that artefacts were only of value to a prehistorian in so far as they complemented the palaeontological evidence for the evolution and expansion of different types of man, or provided an insight into the development and spread of the communities in and through which men acquired and

utilised their human qualities. His training in the Cambridge Faculty also helped to dispose him to approach the study of Palaeolithic man in a worldwide perspective. As an undergraduate he profited from the basic teaching of Miles Burkitt, who gloried in the number of pupils he sent to work in different parts of Africa, including Professor Desmond Clark, co-author of the appreciation which forms the richly documented chapter that opens the present volume. He also experienced the intellectual stimulus provided by the writings and example of Dorothy Garrod, under whom he was to serve during her tenure of the Disney Chair (1939–52). Already by 1928 Miss Garrod had pleaded for extensive excavation beyond Europe to provide the new evidence which she regarded as ‘the very lifeblood of our science’. Indeed in that very year she had begun her exploration of sites in south-west Asia, which culminated in the excavation and analysis of the Mount Carmel caves between 1929 and 1934.

The close attention paid to lithic assemblages which Charles McBurney exacted from his pupils and which is reflected in their contributions to the present volume, is amply justified by its objective. No trouble was too great, no detail too trivial, if it contributed to advancing knowledge about something held to be supremely important, namely where, when and under what conditions modern man emerged on the stage of prehistory. He dedicated his own volume on the Haula Fteah to Dorothy Garrod, above all because she had pointed the way to a broad geographical approach. He himself came to realize that the minimum territory for an enquiry of this magnitude included not merely western and central Europe, but North Africa, south-west Asia and the entire territory of the Soviet Union from the Ukraine to Kamchatka and from Inner Asia to the circumpolar zone. Again, no one appreciated more keenly the need to view this terrain in the context of the immense changes it underwent during the Pleistocene. At each of his major excavations he took immense care to link the archaeological sequence precisely

with the procession of glaciations, sea-level changes and fluctuations in climate, vegetation and fauna, which between them transformed the environment of Palaeolithic man. The recovery of even fragmentary fossils of Neanderthaloid man from the Haul Fteah in their precise stratigraphical context gave him special pleasure. If few prehistorians made fuller use of radiocarbon and other dating methods, this is because few have sought to effect correlations between such a diverse range of evidence, human, palaeontological, geological and ecological as well as archaeological, over such extensive territory.

As a teaching officer, whether as lecturer, Reader or Professor, Charles McBurney's consistent aim was to advance knowledge of Palaeolithic man and impart this concern to his pupils. None of the young people exposed to his teaching could doubt that they had been brought to the frontiers of knowledge in an intensely exciting and important field of study. From the moment the Faculty resumed full activities after the war, undergraduates specializing in archaeology were encouraged to assist in active field research and in this way learn to interpret textbook excavation reports. To begin with sites were chosen

within daily reach of Cambridge, but soon undergraduates were excavating at sites elsewhere in the country, such as Star Carr in Yorkshire (1949–51). Charles McBurney further enriched this tradition by taking parties overseas, notably to Cyrenaica (1951–2, 1955), Iran (1962, 1964 and 1969) and Jersey (1961–78), and systematically involving his helpers in working on the finds under laboratory conditions at Cambridge. It is no wonder that, as one may see from the contributors to the present volume, many of his best students opted for research and went on themselves to academic posts. If he had lived to receive this volume, he would surely have been proud as well as gratified to see that it contains contributions from sixteen former pupils and, even more, that in addition to the five working in Britain, four of these hold academic posts in Australia, four in the United States, and one each in Canada, and South and West Africa. Nothing can have given him greater pleasure during the final years of his own career than the knowledge that for years to come undergraduates in four continents would be grounded in the knowledge of Palaeolithic man to which he had dedicated his own life.

Grahame Clark

PREFACE

This book was originally proposed as a tribute to Charles McBurney by his former students on the occasion of his retirement in 1981. Following his death, we felt that the book should go ahead as a memorial volume, but in modified form so as to ensure a coherent collection of papers referring to issues of broad and enduring interest.

It should be emphasised that this is not an attempt to develop specific lines of enquiry initiated by Charles McBurney or central to his work, as described by Clark and Wilkinson in chapter 1. Rather our intention has been to bring together a collection of papers focused on the more fundamental issues which inspired him, notably the methodological and conceptual problems of classifying material culture, and of identifying and interpreting large-scale patterns of cultural, social and economic change. We have also concentrated as far as possible on papers which naturally fit together to form a set of closely related themes about the main issues, and which come closest to combining treatment of methodological and theoretical matters with detailed investigation of substantive archaeological problems, a combination which characterised the best of Charles McBurney's work and teaching.

Like many of his generation, Charles McBurney was somewhat sceptical of the new ideas and approaches ushered in by the 'New Archaeology' of the 1960s, especially where these were not backed up by the rigorous analysis of data, although he was considerably ahead of his time in his insistence on the need for quantitative and statistical analysis. For those of a younger generation he represented an older tradition of scholarship, one which combined a broad humanistic frame of reference with a lifetime commitment to personal familiarisation with archaeological material, and an emphasis on careful

empirical analysis of primary field data combined with the creation of self-imposed standards and the eschewal of intellectual fashion. This tradition seemed out of place in an increasingly overcrowded and competitive academic environment in which self-advertisement or armchair criticism, and a concern with the length of a publication list rather than the quality of its contents, could yield quick reputations won on the feeblest foundation of empirical experience. It is a vindication of the importance that Charles McBurney attached to the analysis of primary data and of the philosophy that he espoused and imparted in his teaching that many of the issues and approaches adumbrated in his earlier work are being rediscovered in a fresh light and re-examined with renewed vigour.

Apart from Clark and Wilkinson, who were his contemporaries, and Dibble and Haynes, who are junior co-authors, all the contributors to this volume are former students of Charles McBurney, either as undergraduates or postgraduate students, or both. Although arguments could be advanced for broadening the authorship, especially in a volume with the general aspirations of this one, we believe that the sense of unity and of underlying ideas represented in the life and work of one man, and their effect on subsequent research, is best conveyed by those who were taught by him.

We are indebted to all those who offered suggestions, ideas and encouragement in the early stages of planning this book, and to the patience of our contributors. We hope that all who knew him will feel that the outcome succeeds in conveying something not only of the lasting influence of Charles McBurney's work, but also of the spirit of the man himself.