



NEW ZEALAND  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
ASSOCIATION

## ARCHAEOLOGY IN NEW ZEALAND



This document is made available by The New Zealand  
Archaeological Association under the Creative Commons  
Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

To view a copy of this license, visit  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.



# THE LOSS OF LEW BINFORD

DAN WITTER

I came into archaeology with a zoological background. I had been identifying animal bones from archaeological sites for years, but had been unimpressed with what archaeologists did with the data (usually just put it all in the back as an appendix). I felt that much in ecological theory could be used to make the bones more meaningful. I knew however that I would need to know something about cultural systems. Thus when I wound up as a graduate student at the University of New Mexico Anthropology Department in the early 1970s, I had never heard of Binford.

Lew Binford was very charismatic and dominating in class, and put on a real show. The ecological concepts and his scientific approach very much appealed to me – especially after the unapologetic ethnological waffle I was getting in other classes. The Binford seminars were stimulating and demanding, and you learned to defend your position. We were a very tight knit group, thriving in a hot-house environment. Certainly part of Binford's global effect was his students. He said that he was interested in educating – not teaching – which meant us learning how to think.

My summer of 1972 in Alaska with him was the high point of my life and my greatest ever learning experience. Alison was about to have a baby, and he offered to pay for her ticket on his grant if she kept a diary on what it was like to keep a baby alive on the tundra. It was a close thing (the date of birth that is), but there we were out with the Inuit and caribou with a 10 day old baby. All my thinking on faunal analysis and hunting was transformed, and the way it was all organised was in front of me. He never actually explained much to me. He just gave me tasks to do, such as recording bones in the dog yards or the contents of the stone meat caches where I would discover things for myself.

Lew Binford was a student of Leslie White and completed his PhD in 1964. This put him at the core of the cultural evolution movement which was in full swing at the time (e.g. White 1959, Sahlins and Service 1960, Service 1962, etc.). His PhD was on the Algonquian-speaking Powhatan chiefdom in Virginia in which he made extensive use of ethnohistorical sources. This

was the location of the first English colony in the Americas with Jamestown established in 1607. The romantic tale of Pocahontas and John Smith is known to every American school child. Since Binford was born and grew up in Virginia-North Carolina, this was his home territory, and there was a rich source of very early documentary material. His PhD thesis fits nicely in with the band-tribe-chiefdom-stage evolutionary sequence. This theme of cultural evolution was always in his mind, and even though he is best known for his work on hunter-gatherer bands, he always had a concept of where cultural evolution was going.

Another big topic in the 1960s was population biology and the r-K selection debate. Robert MacArthur at Princeton University led a wave of 'new ecology' complete with the math, jargon and the focus on rigorous methodology. Binford did his undergraduate studies in North Carolina in wildlife management, graduating in 1958. This would have equipped him to understand the new population ecology and see its application in anthropology. Originally trained as a zoologist myself, I remember being annoyed that he would use many of the terms in ways not fully consistent with the ecological literature. I asked him about it and he said that he would rather misuse an existing term than have to invent a new one.

To me, it was the cultural evolutionary theory of White and the MacArthurian population ecological methodology that provided his intellectual foundation. The names of Sahlins, Service and MacArthur were big in their field, and I think that Binford set out to have a similar impact, choosing archaeology. Once he gave me the proofs of a review article in which he thoroughly demolished the argument of the writer. He then went on to make a personal attack. I asked him why he included the attack since his critique would stand alone. The author would not need to answer his points, but merely retaliate at a personal level. Binford said yes, he knew, but he wanted to stir things up. He said life was too short to merely do good archaeology; he wanted to get attention and make people react to his ideas.

There is no doubt that he was a tireless warrior, and always ready for a fight. He also truly loved what he was doing and was perpetually excited by the insights and ideas which continuously came to him. He was physically robust and thrived on field work. In Alaska he told me he really liked working above the Arctic Circle since it was continuous daylight, and indeed he would often work 18 hours at a stretch. It was this kind of energy which made his output so prodigious, along with his endless creativity.

What were his effects on New Zealand archaeology? The band-tribe-chiefdom-state evolutionary framework was workable in the Americas, but apparently not as helpful in the Pacific. The oceanic islands were mostly within

the tribe-chiefdom bracket and the distinctions not always clear-cut. In Australia it was band level hunter gathers throughout, and there were no agricultural societies nor tribal level organisation as might be predicted in the more watered parts of Australia which had agricultural potential.

The issues on methodology, however, seemed to have more application. Concepts about subsistence, economy and the environment, and how they can be quantified have been useful. The goals of understanding behaviour and cultural strategies have also probably contributed to a New Zealand form of cultural ecology.

The loss of Lew Binford on the other side of the world comes as something of a shock. However, he will always be with me when I think about archaeology, or those days in New Mexico and Alaska.

### References

- Sahlins, Marshall D. and Service, Elman R. (eds.), 1960. *Evolution and Culture*. The University of Michigan Press.
- Service, E., 1962. *Primitive Social Organisation, an Evolutionary Perspective*. Random House, New York.
- White, L., 1959. *The Evolution of Culture: The Development of Civilization to the Fall of Rome*. McGraw-Hill book Company Inc., New York.