

CLASSIFICATION AND TYPOLOGY

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Summary

Classification is probably the single most basic analytical procedure employed in archaeology. Excavation yields a wide variety of material objects, and before they can be studied in any systematic way they must be sorted into recurring types on the basis of shared characteristics (attributes). They may be sorted and classified in various ways, which yield different classifications, according to the purposes of the archaeologist. This article discusses the different ways in which archaeological finds are classified, the purposes for which they are classified, and some of the problems involved in archaeological classification.

1. Introduction

Classification is the initial means through which we impose a degree of order on the enormously diverse remains of the human past. As such, it is probably the single most basic analytical procedure employed by the archaeologist. Excavation yields an enormous diversity of materials that are not self-labeling; they must be endowed with identity and meaning by the excavator or the analyst. This is done in the first instance through classification.

Archaeologists often use the terms classification and typology interchangeably, but in this article a distinction will be made. A classification is any set of formal categories into which a particular field of data is partitioned. In contrast, a typology is a particular type of rigorous classification in which a field of data is divided up into categories that are all defined according to the same set of criteria, and that are mutually exclusive. As

will be shown, most archaeological classifications of artifacts are typologies, while most classifications of cultures are not.

1.1. Archaeological Classification and Culture

The basic organizing concept for most prehistorians, as for most other anthropologists, is the concept of culture, but it is somewhat differently defined in the two cases. The cultural anthropologist conceives of the world as divided into a set of distinct peoples—tribes, nations, or ethnic groups—each of which has its own unique set of behavior patterns and beliefs, very often including its own language, which together constitute a culture. The prehistorian thinks of the ancient world as similarly partitioned, but the various long-vanished peoples can now be recognized only by the distinct kinds of artifact types they left behind. In place of forgotten languages and behavior patterns, every artifact type is treated as tantamount to a deliberate cultural expression—a culture trait. An archaeologically defined “culture” is, then, a unique combination of artifact, house, and burial types that are assumed because of their cultural commonality to be the remains left by a distinct, self-recognizing people. Those commonalities are recognized above all through processes of classification.

1.2. Kinds of Archaeological Classification

Obviously, any of the different kinds of material remains that archaeologists find can be classified, and there are in fact many different kinds of archaeological classifications and typologies. In the broadest sense, all of them fall into two categories, which may be called analytic and synthetic. Analytic classifications are classifications of one particular kind of object, in which all of the regularly recurring variants are recognized, defined, and named. The things most often classified are those that show a high degree of culturally patterned variability, including various kinds of stone tools and weapons; pottery; beads and other ornaments; house types; and grave types. Classifications of these things are usually typologies; that is, they partition the entire field of variability into a comprehensive set of mutually exclusive categories, because they are very commonly used for sorting and counting the objects found.

Artifact typologies can be made in a wide variety of ways, depending on what criteria of identity are considered important. This in turn will depend on the purpose for which the classification is made. Among the many kinds of artifact classifications, it is possible to recognize the following:

- purely morphological typologies, based on the overall form of objects; stylistic typologies, which specially emphasize stylistic features;
- functional classifications, in which objects are classified according to their presumed use;
- “emic” classifications, in which objects are classified according to criteria believed to have been important to the makers; and
- distributional typologies, in which objects are classified according to their distribution in time and space.

In addition to the analytic classifications of particular object types, there are also synthetic classifications, in which recurring combinations of different artifact, house,

and grave types are taken together to define “cultures.” These classifications are quite different from artifact classifications, in that they are not typologies. That is, they are not used to divide up material into discrete, mutually exclusive units. The boundaries between units are not always sharp, and the criteria of identity are not always uniform. Some “cultures” have been identified primarily by pottery types, others by stone tool types, and still others by house types. Archaeological “cultures” are above all historical constructs; they are the prehistorian’s basic way of mapping the prehistoric world, by dividing it into units of study that can be thought of as equivalent to peoples.

Culture classifications generally have a chronological as well as a spatial dimension. That is, the classification includes cultures that existed in different areas, but also that existed in different periods of time in the same area. Very often a generalized regional culture, like Anasazi, is divided into a sequence of developmental stages, which in the case of Anasazi are designated as Pueblo I, II, III, IV, and V. Like biological classifications, then, culture classifications often have a genetic component, when later cultures are recognized as “descended from” earlier ones

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Biographical Sketch

William Y. Adams was born in California in 1927. However, he grew up mainly in Arizona, where his interest was especially stimulated in the study of American Indians. He studied anthropology at the Universities of California and Arizona, receiving a doctorate from the latter institution in 1958. His first professional job was as director of archaeological rescue work on the river basins of the San Juan and Colorado Rivers that were to be flooded by the building of a large dam. This experience led to an invitation from UNESCO to assist the Sudanese Government in planning the program of archaeological rescue in Nubia necessitated by the Aswan High Dam.

Professor Adams went to the Sudan in 1959, and remained there for the next seven years. During that time he developed the basic framework for the massive archaeological rescue program in Nubia undertaken by the Sudan Antiquities Service. He personally conducted excavations in more than 100 sites, as well as providing advice and supervision for more than a dozen archaeological excavations from other countries. He also developed the classifications of pottery, of churches, and of house types that have become basic working tools for all field expeditions in the Sudan.

Professor Adams left the Sudan in 1966 to accept a position as Professor of Anthropology at the University of Kentucky, a post he held until his retirement in 1992. However, he returned to the Sudan in 1969 and in 1979, with additional archaeological expeditions sponsored by the University of Kentucky. In 1972, he also became associated with, and eventually became director of, the major British excavations at Qasr Ibrim in Egyptian Nubia, continuing his work at that site with biennial expeditions until 1984.

Professor Adams is the author of 12 books and monographs, and over 200 articles, chapters, and reviews, mostly dealing with Nubian archaeology and culture history. His major opus, *Nubia, Corridor to Africa*, now widely cited as a classic, is based on years of both field research and library research. It has been acclaimed by the Nubian people as their “national epic” and has been translated into Arabic by them.