

ROBERT LEONARD CARNEIRO (4 JUNE 1927–24 JUNE 2020):
HIS INFLUENCE ON ARCHAEOLOGY

Monica Barnes¹

American Museum of Natural History

monica@andeanpast.org



Robert L. Carneiro in the field. Photograph courtesy of Brett Carneiro.

When Robert Leonard Carneiro died in New Hampshire, listening to Beethoven, with his son Brett at his side, one of the longest and most

distinguished careers in anthropology came to an end. While this was not an unexpected shock, the news was melancholy.

¹ This is a corrected and expanded version of “Robert Leonard Carneiro (4 June 1927–24 June 2020)” published on the Histories of Archaeology Research Network (HARN) blog on 19 August 2020 <https://harngroup.wordpress.com/> (accessed 23 September 2020). The list of works by Robert L. Carneiro has also been published in a different format (Erikson 2022).

Robert Carneiro was born in New York City and educated at the prestigious Horace Mann School in its Riverdale neighborhood, where he grew up and lived, as an adult, for many years. However, instead of studying in New York, he obtained all of his degrees from the University of Michigan including his B.A., in 1949, with a major in political science. Bob abandoned that field when he decided that it was not a science at all and became impatient with “the excessive respect we were showing the political theories of thinkers who did not have the factual knowledge or necessary attitude to solve the problems they tackled” (Carneiro 1981a:174). A graduation present from his father was a trip around the world, his first, but not his last. Afterwards he entered his family’s newspaper machinery export business. Within five months he realized that was not for him.

Bob recognized that anthropology offered the intellectual framework sought, and he returned to Michigan, earning his M.A. in 1952, and his doctorate in anthropology in 1957. His mentor was cultural evolutionist Leslie White (Carneiro 1981a; Carneiro *et al.* 2008; Dillingham and Carneiro 1987; Dole and Carneiro 1960). Other members of his dissertation committee included cultural biologist and entomologist Marston Bates, ethno- and archaeobotanist Volney Jones, anthropologists Elman Service and Mischa Titiev, and processual archaeologist Albert Spaulding. Their influence on Carneiro is patent.

Like White, Bob remained a staunch cultural evolutionist throughout his life,² arguing

that, over time, most cultures follow a trajectory from simple to more complex, and that they pass through similar stages. For almost his entire career, he was a curator in the Division of Anthropology of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, being hired in 1957 after the premature death of Harry Tschopik (1915–1956) (Freed 1912:903–906). In 2009, Carneiro retired as Curator Emeritus and Professor Emeritus at the museum’s Richard Gilder Graduate School. However, he continued to be a regular presence in his office until shortly before his death.

Although primarily a South American ethnologist and theorist, as a cultural evolutionist, Bob was archaeology-friendly (Carneiro 2013:3, 2009b) and made real contributions to that field. His work regularly appeared in *American Antiquity* (Carneiro 1958b, 1970f, 1972a, 1974b, 2002a) and once in *Latin American Antiquity* (Carneiro 2000a). In 1952, on his honeymoon in Cuba with his first wife, ethnologist Gertrude Evelyn Dole (Trudie), the couple excavated a cave in Matanzas Province, that contained evidence of the nonagricultural, pre-Taino culture of western Cuba, often called Siboney or Guanahatabey (Barnes 2003; Carneiro 2008b).

Carneiro remained alert to archaeology throughout his career. In an early article “An Instance of the Transport of Artifacts by Migratory Animals in South America” (Carneiro 1958c), that followed upon an article by Frank Heizer (1944), Carneiro points out that naturalist John Graham Kerr (1950) documented the transport of stone artifacts in the Gran Chaco by rheas, who sometimes swallowed exotic axe heads and hammer stones, probably as large as five centimeters, to serve as gizzard stones. In a thought experiment with Daisy F. Hilse, he applied statistics to an estimate of population growth during the Neolithic in what was then known as the “Near

² Carneiro 1960c, 1964e, 1967, 1968a, 1969b, 1969c, 1970a, 1992, 1996, 1970e, 1970f, 1970g, 1972a, 1972b, 1972c, 1973a, 1973b, 1974a, 1974d, 1979b, 1979e, 1982a, 1984a, 1985, 1986c, 1987a, 1988b, 1988f, 1988g, 1988i, 1990b, 1992a, 1992f, 1995e, 1996a, 2000b, 2000d, 2003a, 2004b, 2005b, 2005d, 2007a, 2010b; Carneiro (editor) 1967; Carneiro and Brown 2007; Carneiro and Tobias 1963.

East” (Carneiro and Hilse 1966). He attempted to quantify the “cultural development” of the ancient Near East (Western Asia) and of Anglo-Saxon Britain (Carneiro 1969c), and he applied his theoretical perspective to predynastic Egypt (Carneiro and Bard 1989). He suggested a method for archaeological seriation (Carneiro 1997c). Bob didn’t hesitate to comment upon, criticize, and review the work of archaeologists (Carneiro 1971a, 1971b, 1974b, 1975b, 1984a, 1993b, 2000a, 2004a, 2009d, 2010a, 2012a). For example, he reviewed a book on Mississippian political economy (Carneiro 1998b). In 2006 he was the co-organizer of a symposium on Olmec archaeology at the 52nd meeting of the International Congress of Americanists held in Seville in 2006.

Carneiro made substantial contributions to both archaeological and political theory. In an early article entitled “The Culture Process” (Carneiro 1960a) he set out the general principles and methodology of a processual anthropology as it developed in the 1940s and 1950s. Although, at the time of writing, Carneiro may not have foreseen the development of processual (or “New”) archaeology in the 1960s, upon reading his essay, it is easy to draw the conclusion that this theoretical orientation is a direct development from anthropologists’ attempts to discern regularities in culture change through time by defining systems and their components, by searching for laws, and by applying statistical techniques and other explicitly scientific methods. Here the influence of Spaulding is apparent. Spaulding’s thought was foundational to the New Archaeology (Cowgill 1977). One of Carneiro’s fellow students at Michigan was Lewis Binford (1931–2011), another leading developer of New Archaeology (Kuhn and Stiner 2011). The influence of White is also apparent. As a mature scholar, Carneiro continued to apply processual methodology in his own work (Carneiro 1962b, 1964d, 1968a,

1969c, 1969d, 1970e, 1970f, 1970g, 1972a, 1972c, 1988g).

In 1970, Carneiro published his seminal contribution to theories of early state formation. This is the first version of his “Circumscription Theory”, an explanation of how warfare and limited resources contributed to the development of the state. According to this, civilizations first arose in six areas—in the Nile Valley, in what is now Peru, in Mesoamerica, in China’s Yellow River Valley, in the Indus River Valley, and in Mesopotamia. Later civilizations ultimately developed from these. In these places, highly concentrated agricultural populations were under ecological constraints. They could not expand their territories because they were “circumscribed” by deserts or other areas of low potential for human settlement. Warfare developed with the aim of gaining control of the resources of neighbors through force. Defeated groups could not flee, because there was nowhere for them to go. They had no choice but to accept the governance of outsiders, and the early state was born.

Carneiro, therefore, postulated that societies evolved from simple, autonomous Neolithic villages into ever-larger and more complex polities, as they passed through various stages of development, including the chiefdom. The culmination of this process was the formation of pre-industrial states and empires. Thus, Carneiro saw the development of the chiefdom as a prelude to the formation of the state (Carneiro 1981b, 1991a, 1998c, 2002b, 2004a, 2004f).

According to Carneiro, in areas that were not densely populated, and where resources were evenly distributed, such as the Amazon rainforest, people could flee marauders, and the state never developed in those places, although social and political organization of indigenous

peoples was more complex in the prehispanic past than it is at present.

Published prominently in *Science* (Carneiro 1970), the Circumscription Theory has been much debated and the 1970 article was reprinted in many anthologies. An issue of the *American Behavioral Scientist* (1988) was devoted to a consideration of circumscription and the evolution of society. Carneiro continued to develop his ideas on the subject throughout the rest of his life (Carneiro 1979b, 1987a, 1988b, 1988f, 1988g, 2000a, 2000b, 2012b, 2012c, 2018).

Bob's advocacy of cultural evolutionism attracted many admirers in Russia and China. In those places, Marxist understanding of cultural evolutionism reigned supreme for many years. An entire issue of the Russian journal, *Social Evolution & History* (2012) is dedicated to a consideration of Carneiro's work on the development of the state. In 2001, he became an academic advisor to the Research Center for Ancient Civilizations and the Institute of World Prehistory of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

Another of Carneiro's contributions to archaeology helped to debunk the idea of an empty Amazon, a "counterfeit paradise" as Betty Meggers put it (Meggers 1971). Even as an undergraduate, Bob questioned the apparent lack of Amazonian socio-political complexity (Carneiro 2013). Upon arriving in Kuikuru territory, Bob noticed deep trenches extending some distance. These were associated with pre-Columbian pottery sherds. A lengthy elevated causeway was nearby. Carneiro interpreted these earthworks as evidence of large-scale landscape modification by precontact Amazonian societies. Although the Kuikuru recognized these features, they did not claim to have made them. Bob observed that the Kuikuru could not, at that time, have mustered

the labor to undertake the earthworks. Therefore, they must have been created in the past by populations that were larger and, most likely, complex. He found support for this idea in the 1542 account of Gaspar de Carvajal (1942 [1542]).

He was probably only the second person to recognize the significance of Amazonian "black earth" or "terra preta" as these soils are called in Portuguese. The first was geologist Charles Frederick Hartt. In 1870 Hartt led eleven Cornell University students to Brazil. In addition to geological sampling, Hartt and his colleagues conducted what were probably the first archaeological excavations in the Amazon (Hartt 1875). In the course of his survey, Hartt observed that at certain "ancient Indian villages" soils were "light, rich, black loams" containing fragments of ceramics and stone implements to a depth of several feet (Hartt 1870–1871:35–37). These soils were fertile, retained moisture in the dry season, and were under cultivation by non-indigenous settlers. In 1874, Hartt returned to Brazil where he contracted yellow fever and died at age thirty-eight. Consequently, his insights were largely forgotten until Carneiro and Dole went to work among the Kuikuru in 1953–1954 and the Amahuaca in 1960–1961 (Carneiro 1962d, 1964a, 1964b, 1970c; Dole 1960–1961, 1962, 1998). Carneiro learned that Amazonian Indians valued "rich black earth" (Carneiro 1995a: note 11) precisely because these soils were more fertile (Carneiro 1995a:49) and that some Amahuaca recognized that maize grew better in black earths (Carneiro 1964a).

For many years Bob tried to interest archaeologists in this phenomenon. Bob understood that these earths are both anthropogenic and ancient because of the pottery they contained, although he may not have published a clear statement on this subject. Eventually, beginning in the 1970s, geographers, including

William Denevan, Wim Sombroek, and William I. Woods (Glaser and 2004; Lehmann *et al.* 2003; Teixeira *et al.* 2010; Woods 2013:16; Woods and McCann 1999; Woods *et al.* 2009) independently discovered the importance of black earths, and more archaeologists began to work in the Amazon, realizing that the entire region consisted not of pristine primordial virgin forest, as often assumed, but was a sophisticated human-managed series of landscapes before indigenous populations were decimated by Old World infectious diseases. At the very beginning of his career, Bob anticipated this realization by insisting that the carrying capacity of Amazonas was much greater than usually assumed (Carneiro 1957a, 1957b:169–171), and that political complexity among indigenous groups was also greater than at present. Bob continued to develop this perspective (Carneiro 1995a).

Our understanding of prehistoric Amazonian settlement patterns has been revolutionized in recent years. We now know that before the epidemics of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries C.E. this region was densely populated, and its inhabitants had built extensive stable and productive human-managed environments (Heckenberger *et al.* 2007).

Although he usually published in top tier anthropology journals, Bob was willing to seek other readerships. His work appeared in periodicals as diverse as *Gambling Times* (Carneiro 1978d), *The Journal of Libertarian Studies* (Carneiro 1981c), and *Vistas in Astronomy* (Carneiro 1995e). His interests were wide-ranging. His first published article, which appeared before his dissertation was filed, was on marital freedom among the Kuikuru Indians (Carneiro 1956–58), anticipating current discussions of polyamory by many years. His interest in football, statistics, and betting led to a publication on football handicapping (Carneiro 2006).

After completing their dissertations, Bob and Trudie returned to fieldwork in 1960–1961, this time among the Amahuaca living in Peru's Upper Ucayali drainage (Carneiro 1964a, 1970b; Dole 1960–1961, 1998). In the 1970s I helped Trudie with the transcription of her (still unpublished) Amahuaca dictionary. It was then that I encountered an article in *Time* magazine that sensationalized the lethal violence among that group. I asked Trudie how it felt to be living with them. She sighed, and said in a slow, mild voice, "You try not to offend them."

Carneiro returned to the Kuikuru in 1975. At that time Gertrude Dole's health, which had suffered as a result of previous fieldwork, prevented her from accompanying him. That year he also worked with the Yanomamö Indians of southern Venezuela as part of a team consisting of Napoleon Chagnon, William Sanders, Raymond Hames, Erick Fredlund, and Kenneth Good. In 1979, Dole and Carneiro divorced. Unlike with most break-ups, their friends didn't have to choose sides. In fact, Trudie remained at the AMNH for many years as Bob's research associate.

Meanwhile, Bob married Barbara Bode (13 February 1933–6 January 2020), an anthropologist in her own right. Barbara's fieldwork had taken her to Guatemala (Bode 1961), Costa Rica (Bode 1968), and Peru. She is the author of *No Bells to Toll: Destruction and Creation in the Andes* (1989) a study of how the few survivors of a 1970 earthquake and landslide of the Huascarán Valley, Peru, coped with loss, faith, and survival.

Bob's anthropological studies went beyond warfare and state formation. Ecology and indigenous technology also interested him deeply throughout his career (Carneiro 1957a, 1961, 1964, 1970c, 1975a, 1979d, 1983, 1986a, 1994b, 2000d, 2007a). This aspect of his work can provide archaeologists with useful

interpretative frameworks. He wrote about the shifting cultivation (slash and burn) that is now common among Amazonian groups (Carneiro 1960b, 1961, 1964a) and on manioc growing and processing (Carneiro 1983). Hunting and weaponry interested him (Carneiro 1970c), as did myth and magic (Carneiro 1970c, 1977b, 1989).

As Bob's colleague, Curator Emeritus David Hurst Thomas has written:

Carneiro was . . . known for his precise and solidly scientific contributions to the specifics of South American ethnology, situated within explicitly evolutionary theories of cultural complexity. His initial fieldwork . . . among the Kuikuru of Brazil . . . demonstrated that the population of a single Kuikuru village could grow many times its present capacity without depleting resources. The implications were far-reaching and revolutionized today's understandings of carrying capacity, population dynamics, and sociopolitical formations of neotropical horticultural societies. In subsequent fieldwork, Carneiro found the Amahuaca of Peru to be far simpler than the Kuikuru, leading him to develop a focus on the evolutionary formulation of societies (posted on "Dan's List" 29 June 2020).

In terms of museum curation, Carneiro's most important contribution was, no doubt, his co-curation, with the late E. Craig Morris, of the AMNH's Hall of South American Peoples, inaugurated in 1989. He also curated a successful temporary exhibition in 2002 on "Baseball as America". Bob was proud of having grown up practically in the shadow of Yankee Stadium. When the museum administration wanted an exhibition on the subject, Bob was more than willing to step up to the plate.

Although only responsible for two exhibitions during his fifty-three years as an active curator, Carneiro discharged his duties by sitting on many museum committees including the Museum Centennial Committee (1961–1962) and the Grants Committee (1964–1972). From 1970–1972 he was chairman of the latter committee. He was on the Appointments and Promotions Committee several times (1967–1968, 1972–73, 2007) as well as on the Council of the Scientific Staff twice (1971–1973, 1975–1978). He served on the Science Policy Committee (1981–1983), on the Federal Research and Collection Grants Committee (1983–1984), on the Mack Lipkin Man and Nature Lecture Committee (1984–1988), on the Exhibition Policy Committee (1985–1987), on the Library Committee (1988–1990, 2004–2008), on the James Arthur Lecture Committee (1991–2010), and on the Advisory Board for the Margaret Mead Film Festival from 1995.

Bob was a philosopher in the deepest part of his being. It is not surprising that, as a cultural evolutionist, he became fascinated by Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), whose theoretical stance was, in some ways, fundamental to his own. Over a fifty-year period, Bob collected and indexed quotations by and about Spencer, accumulated reprints relevant to Spencer, and helped the AMNH library accumulate monographs by and about Spencer.

Bob thought that not just cultures, but the human mind itself was evolving, from a belief in the non-material (or supernatural) towards secularism and rationality. He set out these thoughts in detail in his self-published book, *The Evolution of the Human Mind* (Carneiro 2010b).

In addition to his curatorship, Robert Carneiro disseminated his ideas through his teaching at a number of U.S. and Canadian universities. He was an adjunct professor of

anthropology at Columbia University in the City of New York (from 1992); a visiting professor of anthropology at Fordham University, Lincoln Center, New York City (1980); at the University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia (1977); and at Pennsylvania State University, State College, Pennsylvania (1973); a visiting associate professor of anthropology, at the University of California Los Angeles (1968); a lecturer in anthropology at Columbia University (1964, 1965); a lecturer in anthropology at Hunter College (1964, 1965); and an instructor in Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin (1956–1957).

Carneiro served on many editorial boards including those of *Curator* (1969–1971, 1977–1981), *Abstracts in Anthropology* (1971–1975), *Natural History* (1973–1974), *Reviews in Anthropology* (1979–1985), *New World Anthropology* (Quito, from 1978), the *Journal of Social Distress* (from 1992), *Tipiti the journal of the Society for the Anthropological Study of Lowland South America* (SALSA) (from May 2002), and, in 2008, was named an initial editorial board member of *Amazônica*, published under the auspices of the University of Amazonas in Brazil. From 1974 through 1978 he was an advisory editor of *Behavior Science Research*. In 2008 he was invited to become a member of the Editorial Board of *Evolution: An Interdisciplinary Almanac* published in Russian.

He was a consultant on anthropological terms for the fifth edition of *The New Columbia Encyclopedia* (1990–1991). He was on the governing board of the Archaeological Institute of America (from 2008).

In 1959 he was elected a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. From 1981 until 1983 he was a member of the AAAS's nominating committee of Section H, Anthropology, chairing that committee in 1982 and 1983. He was elected a

fellow of the New York Academy of Sciences in 1983, and became the co-vice chairman of the anthropology section of the Academy (1981–1983) and later the co-chairman (1983–1985). He was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1999. In 2005 the Department of Anthropology of his *alma mater*, the University of Michigan, established the Robert L. Carneiro Distinguished University Professorship in Cultural Evolution.

He was the literary executor for the unpublished manuscripts and papers of Leslie A. White. In 1969, he was made a corresponding member of the Niedersächsisches Landesmuseum, in Hannover, Germany. He assisted other museums by serving on the visiting committee of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, Pittsburgh, as well as on the visiting committee of Chicago's Field Museum. He was a member of the advisory board of the Hunter-Gatherer Studies program of the Museum of Ethnography of Vienna (Weltmuseum Wien, from 2008).

He participated in advanced seminars at the School of American Research in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1985 and 1987. In 1990, he was a consultant on the international task force at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian.

Robert Carneiro received many prizes, awards, and honors. His 1953–54 fieldwork among the Kikuru in central Brazil was supported by a Doherty Foundation Fellowship. In 1973, he won the Institute for Humane Studies' Monks Memorial Prize for his paper "A Theory of the Origin of the State". He gave the Distinguished Lecture at the annual meeting of the Central States Anthropological Society, Cincinnati (1984); the keynote address at the annual meeting of the Northeast Anthropological Association in Danbury, Connecticut (1993); the Antonio J. Waring

Distinguished Lecture at the State University of West Georgia, Garrollton, Georgia (2003); he presented the 53rd annual Korzybski memorial Lecture of the Institute of General Semantics in New York (2004); and the keynote address at the annual meeting of the Brazilian Archaeological Society in Belém (2009).

In this tribute I have said little so far about Bob's persona. Although a New Yorker through and through, he was proud of his Cuban heritage. Slim and handsome, he somehow projected not only a sophisticated Latin vibe, but a bookish one as well. Indeed, his office at the AMNH, the home he shared with Gertrude Dole in Riverdale, the Tribeca loft he later occupied with Barbara Bode, and the Bode-Carneiro house in Rhode Island had floor-to-ceiling bookshelves in almost every room. In his homes and at the AMNH, he was a paragon of academic hospitality who, with his partners, created spaces that often served as salons open to both senior and junior anthropologists, especially those who were South Americanists.

At times he could be a dreamy intellectual. In 2009 the late William I. Woods and I discovered that Bob, an expert on ancient chiefdoms, had never been to Cahokia where Bill Woods had worked earlier in his career. With my husband and colleague, David Fleming, Brazilian archaeologist Lilian Rebellato, Chicagoland anthropologists Ellen FitzSimmons Steinberg³ and Jack Prost, and Bob, we organized an expedition to American Bottom with its abundance of Mississippian sites. Flying back to Newark Airport, our small commuter plane was hit by lightning. There was a loud bang, a sudden lurch of the aircraft, and the flight attendant was propelled into the lap of a passenger. Bob and I were sitting in separate rows, so I couldn't see his reaction. A few days

later I asked him if he had been scared when our plane was struck. "Our plane was struck by lightning?" he asked. "I didn't notice." I had a glimpse of the *sang froid* (or was it sheer absent-mindedness?) that allowed him to do fieldwork in the remote Amazon on several occasions and made him a perennial favorite as a model for Indiana Jones.

Polite, charming, interesting, generous, and an excellent correspondent, over the years he formed a large circle of friends and colleagues. As David Hurst Thomas has posted on Dan's List: "With a unique humanity, Carneiro inspired three generations of anthropologists to pursue harder-core science, and, yet, many remember him as the nicest man they ever met." We miss him very much.

Robert Carneiro is survived by his son, Brett Carneiro, his daughter-in-law Sara, and three grandchildren: Charles, Wren, and Silas. His first wife, Gertrude E. Dole, predeceased him in 2001. His second wife, Barbara Bode, died in January 2020.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Kirsten Mable, registrar for archives and loans, American Museum of Natural History for her essential help in constructing the bibliography and the trajectory of Robert L. Carneiro's life. Thanks also go to Mai Reitmeyer, senior research services librarian of the Department of Library Services for additional essential bibliographic assistance. Brett Carneiro supplied encouragement and the photo at the head of this obituary, read an earlier version, added to the bibliography, and made some important corrections. The late Ellen FitzSimmons Steinberg also read an earlier draft and added to the bibliography. Richard Chacon's probing questions prompted me to correct an earlier misapprehension of Carneiro's understanding of Amazonian black earths. David Fleming, as always, urges me to synthesize.

³ For an obituary of Ellen FitzSimmons Steinberg see this volume of *Andean Past*.

WORKS BY ROBERT L. CARNEIRO

Note: Robert L. Carneiro's field notes, correspondence, photographs, and other personal papers remain in the Anthropology Division of the American Museum of Natural History in the City of New York.

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*Robert L. Carneiro at Carneiro, Kansas, October 10, 2008.
Photograph by the late William I. Woods.*

