Preface

The chapters included in this book are a cross-section of the shorter and more general works I have written during more than forty years as a professional prehistorian, or behavioral paleoanthropologist (as I prefer to consider myself). I was trained as a socio-cultural anthropologist and got my first excavating experience in the New World. Later, my research has focused on the Old World, but the problems that have interested me most should be relevant to the concerns of all archeologists of whatever persuasion. I have selected papers that illustrate those concerns. They are all still relevant today, even though some of the papers selected appeared in print many years ago. Since the chapters I have chosen have been published before, they are reproduced here as they first appeared with one exception. It would have been unfair to revise them to make them seem more “up-to-date” and the major points they make are still as valid as ever.

The choice of chapters for inclusion reflects the extent of my career that has been devoted to Old World prehistory. (I have not included works on investigations in the New World or papers on my work in Medieval religious symbolism here.) The bulk of my research and publication has been in the field of Paleolithic studies in Europe, particularly Cantabrian Spain. Fascinating though I find that material, much of it was published in the form of site reports, detailed analyses of recovered
remains, or extensive surveys aimed at a specialist audience. Most of those publications were co-authored in cooperation with other collaborating scientists, and additionally many appeared in foreign languages or in Spanish, French, Czech, and German journals. Consequently, even when it was published in English, my work is better known to Europeanists than to the larger number of Americanist archeologists or those based in British institutions.

So part of the reason for this book is to familiarize others with my stance. I think it is important that all of us—whether we are anthropologists who learn about living societies, archeologists who excavate or read documents from the past, or members of the intelligent reading public at large—ought to know about the various ways those of us who study the past learn about the lifeways of our ancestors and relatives. My background and perspective are different enough from those of others so that it may seem novel (and, I hope, valuable) to professionals working in other areas with other approaches. I was trained as a socio-cultural anthropologist and only decided to become a behavioral paleoanthropologist late in my career. That helps explain some of the peculiarities of my approach.

If there is one thing that an archeologist should always do, it is to question. Affirmations, whether they are one’s own or others’, should always be examined critically no matter how sensible they seem at first glance. Even in the more speculative chapters in this book I have tried to arrive at conclusions that correspond better to what we know about the past (and present) than do previous conjectures. Of course, it is the duty of any scientist, not just an archeologist, to question all observations before they are accepted, and to challenge all of them that are contrary to what is already soundly established. New conclusions should only be accepted after they have been carefully tested, and that holds as well for the conclusions given in this book as for any other affirmations.

I would scarcely consider conducting an analysis of archeological data without employing one or another statistical or mathematical technique for the purpose. That is partly because of the ways I spent my time after a more or less wasted period in college. Drifting aimlessly after graduation, I spent three years working for a public utilities company, where some of my time was spent in boring repetitive tasks such as drawing the standard plans of gas metering stations. I looked forward to the months I was expected to spend each year helping to prepare their five-year prediction of natural gas requirements. That was fascinating. It taught the value of mathematical and statistical analysis. We did not then have access to the giant calculators used for multivariate statistics and so had to do our load forecasts by trial-and-error methods using Marchant™ and Monroe™ desk calculators. I learned how much easier generating the estimates would have been if we could have used the methods of multiple regression and factor analysis. The experience also taught the need for careful, painstaking cross-checking of data entry and results.

While thus employed, I helped one of my superiors conduct land surveys. I was also a member of the New Jersey National Guard, with the occupational specialty of Combat Demolition Specialist; any mistake in calculating explosive requirements might have had devastating results—as I saw when a lecturer almost blew himself
up placing a “ring main.” That reinforced the lessons I had learned about care in calculation. Then, during active duty with the U.S. Army, there were more than enough demolitions specialists to satisfy the demand, and so I was assigned to be a topographic survey section chief, a specialty that also called for careful calculation. All these experiences provided the background in the mathematical analysis of data that I use today. Although it was not a deliberate plan on my part, much of this early training seems as though it had been designed to help me along to my later career as a paleoanthropologist.

I finished my preparation at graduate school, where I owe my social anthropological training to my late professors Fred Eggan and Eric Wolf. I am especially indebted to the prehistorian A. J. Jelinek and to my recently departed teacher F. Clark Howell, to whom this volume is dedicated. Jelinek’s sensitivity to paleoecology is reflected in these pages, and so, particularly, is Clark Howell’s definition of paleoanthropology as a kind of anthropology, not simply the study of the skeletal remains of prehistoric hominids. It was Clark who persuaded me to take up the career of paleoanthropologist. As a graduate student at Chicago, I continued to employ statistical analysis, much of the time in collaboration with James Brown and under the guidance of L. R. Binford. I also learned much from other prehistorians who have since passed away (François Bordes and Francisco Jordá taught me how to think about the Mousterian). I have a still greater debt to my longtime colleague, mentor, and collaborator, Joaquín González Echegaray, for having encouraged me to develop my own approach. Whatever is good in what follows I owe to them.

Now, to address the contents of the book. Many prehistorians seem to believe that if one has not made a “major contribution to theory,” regardless of whether it can be applied to any relevant data, then his or her life’s activity has been worthless. On the other hand, I have never found that any theory in the absence of applicable data is worth a plugged nickel. I have always tried to accompany each theoretical statement with the data to which it has relevance. So all the papers that follow blend theoretical statements with the archeological facts they are intended to help us understand.

Chapters in the first section of this book present some statements of my own theoretical perspective and some observations that ought to be taken into consideration in further interpretations of the data from the past. They do not fit elsewhere so I have brought them together here. The first chapter differentiates behavioral paleoanthropology from the other kinds of archeology and suggests a program to be followed in paleoanthropological research. “A Theoretical Framework for Interpreting Archeological Materials” addresses the use of analogy in the interpretation of early finds. In “The Fat of the Land” I have tried to indicate some dimensions of the promise and limits of research on prehistoric diet. (I cut out the final sections of this paper because they would appeal mainly to a very specialized audience; I also added a few remarks in an appendix to this paper.)

The next section summarizes some of the results of Paleolithic studies. In “By Their Works You Shall Know Them: Cultural Developments in the Paleolithic,” I have provided a general overview of cultural developments in the Old Stone Age as I
see them. Despite what we have learned since it was written (more than thirty years ago), it still has much of its original value. The next chapter focuses on the spatial relationships of Cantabrian sites. Spatial geographers have used Thiessen diagrams or Voronoi tesserae to study the distributions and relationships of modern cities: this chapter suggests that they may be useful for the study of Paleolithic sites as well.

The chapters on Torralba try to indicate what we know about that site and its sister, Ambrona, and to dispute the idea that early hominids could only have managed to survive in Europe as scavengers. In the Middle Paleolithic section, “Kaleidoscope or Tarnished Mirror? Thirty Years of Mousterian Investigations in Cantabria” presents the evidence that we should take a new look at the Mousterian, and the two following chapters outline several differences between the behavior of Neandertals and that of modern people, and describe some of the research errors committed by prehistoric archeologists in the past.

The first chapter about Paleolithic art is a more or less theoretical statement about where we should be looking for its meanings, and where they will not be found. In “The Many Faces of Altamira” I have tried to show how many ways present concerns are reflected in our handling of the past and discussed the relationship between the validation of religious shrines and the early debate about the painted cave of Altamira. The chapter on enhancement techniques discusses the ways in which some Paleolithic artists added impact to selected figures. The next chapters try to clarify what is meant by the term “sanctuary” when it is applied to Paleolithic caves and involve speculation about the prehistoric uses of the decorated site I know most intimately, the famous painted cave of Altamira.

Last, there is a chapter about the benefits of international research collaboration, showing that those benefits have flowed in both directions: from America to Spain, and (as importantly) from Spain to the Americas.

As I have indicated earlier, these papers are reprinted here essentially unchanged except for the bibliographies, rectification of misprints, omission of abstracts in languages other than English, and corrections to figures and legends that were incorrect in the originals. It is my hope that others, seeing what I have offered that is of worth and rejecting what they can show is wrong, will find something in these pages that stimulates them to further progress.
ANTHROPOLOGY WITHOUT INFORMANTS