

“THE FARTHER REACHES OF HUMAN TIME”: RETROSPECT ON CARL SAUER AS PREHISTORIAN*

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ABSTRACT. Carl Ortwin Sauer (1889–1975) is widely regarded as one of the most influential geographers of the twentieth century, admired particularly for his studies in cultural and historical geography. His contribution to the study of prehistory is less widely acknowledged, but, between 1944 and 1962, he published a series of speculative yet scholarly papers that contain many prescient insights into humanity’s remote past and the relationships of our ancestors to the environments they occupied—and modified. In this essay, based on the Carl O. Sauer Memorial Lecture given at the University of California, Berkeley, in October 2001, I reflect on Sauer’s contribution to the science of prehistory by examining, in the light of recent advances in knowledge, two major themes of Sauer’s work: the early dispersal of *Homo sapiens* in the Old World, and the origins and prehistoric spread of agriculture. *Keywords:* agriculture, archaeology, domestication, fire, prehistory, Carl Sauer.

It is neither accident nor escape that thoughtful human geographers have given much attention to primitive groups and remote time.

—Carl Ortwin Sauer, 1944

Looking back over the years since 1976, when John Leighly delivered the inaugural Carl O. Sauer Memorial Lecture, I am impressed by how widely my predecessors have ranged in time and space, as befits the celebration of a man whose scholarship was as broad and deep as Carl Sauer’s. Some chose topics only tangentially linked to Sauer’s own work, but most spoke about aspects of their research that were inspired, directly or indirectly, by his unique geographical and historical vision. On this occasion, I want to follow a somewhat different path by offering a critique of one part of that vision: Sauer’s contributions to the study of prehistory. I count myself very fortunate to have been one of those who came directly under Mr. Sauer’s influence (Figure 1). Encountering him, and others in the Berkeley Department of Geography in the mid-1950s, was for me a liberating and defining experience. Under Sauer’s inspirational tutelage, and responding to the diverse talents of his remarkable departmental colleagues—Clarence Glacken, John Kesseli, John Leighly, Jim Parsons, and Erhard Rostlund—I discovered a new kind of geography, unrestricted in its exploration of time as well as space.

Since then I have strayed beyond the institutional bounds of geography into archaeology but, happily, have found the boundary between them to be a comfortably permeable one. In his well-known poem *The Road Not Taken*, the New England poet Robert Frost regretted, when faced by two roads diverging in a yellow

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