

# Obituary

Robert J. Braidwood  
1907 – 2003

Robert J. Braidwood, Professor Emeritus at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, died on the 15th of January 2003, at the age of 94 years. He was followed the same day by his wife Linda, aged 92. Both died of pneumonia after 66 years together as a married couple.

Robert J. Braidwood was a pioneer in Near Eastern prehistory. Born in Detroit in 1907 he studied architecture at the University of Michigan where he also took a course in archaeology and joined the University's expedition to Seleucia south of Baghdad. In 1933 he was hired by James Henry Breasted, the famous founder of the Oriental Institute in Chicago, to join the extensive surveys and excavations carried out in the 1930s in the Amuq plain in northwestern Syria. During World War II Braidwood was in charge of a meteorological mapping program for the Army Air Corps. Simultaneously he continued his studies at the Oriental Institute where he participated in Henri Frankfort's seminars, and in 1943 he completed his Ph.D. and started teaching courses in anthropology at the University of Chicago.

By this time Braidwood was stimulated by Breasted's interest in "the fertile crescent" and by V. Gordon Childe's theories on the origin of civilisation in the most ancient east. A friendship had developed between Childe and Braidwood and right after the war they exchanged a series of letters in which they discussed Childe's "oasis theory" and his Neolithic and urban "revolutions". In a letter from May 1946 Childe writes to Braidwood: *"I have always insisted – though perhaps not*

*enough – that my "revolutions" were really gradual processes. This applies even to the Neolithic revolution though the archaeological record is too thin to make the substages of the process plain ..."*

The same year, in 1946, we find for the first time in Braidwood's duplicated lectures his so-called "gap-chart", a diagram showing the absence of Near Eastern sites between the Late Pleistocene Natufian and Zarzian traditions and settled villages like Hassuna and Garstang's Jericho. It was Braidwood's opinion that the sites filling in this gap, if they could be found, would elucidate and perhaps explain Childe's "Neolithic revolution", i.e. the shift from hunting and gathering subsistence systems to settled village-farming in the Near East.

Braidwood's "gap-chart" can be understood as a key to the project which he started in 1947 in northern Iraq, where the Oriental Institute under his leadership located and investigated a large number of sites, in time covering a period from c. 100 000 till c. 5000 years BC. In this way he succeeded to some extent to fill in the empty millennia indicated by his "gap-chart" and to establish a chronological series of stages representing the development from specialised hunter-gatherers to the origin of animal husbandry and agriculture and the establishment of settled villages along the "hilly flanks of the fertile crescent".

With this aim in mind Braidwood and his staff worked first in Iraqi Kurdistan until 1958; here he excavated – among other sites – the early village of Jarmo. In 1960 he continued his work in the Kermanshah plain in western Iran, and finally, with colleagues from Istanbul

University he carried out surveys and excavations in southeastern Turkey from 1963, primarily at Çayönü. His last field season was with Linda at Çayönü in 1989. As usual they were together in the field and at the Oriental Institute, united in a close personal and intellectual fellowship.

In his work on reconstructing the sequence of changing ecological and cultural conditions that led from hunter gatherers to village-farming communities he brought geologists and zoologists, physical anthropologists and palaeobotanists from their laboratories into the field.

Back in Chicago at the Oriental Institute the radiocarbon dating method was developed by Willard Libby and tested on organic materials from Jarmo. Together with the archaeologists these natural scientists not only contributed on essential points to an understanding of the relationship between man and nature, but for the first time – owing to Braidwood's pioneering efforts – Near Eastern prehistory became a multidisciplinary discipline.

The results of Braidwood's field work in Syria and Iraq were published in a few major books and in numerous articles and preliminary reports. He used those not only as a means of rapidly spreading information about his recent discoveries but – perhaps even more important – to communicate his ideas and theories to the public in order to further a broader understanding of his discipline, and also sometimes to get a critical response from his friends and colleagues in the United States and abroad.

As a scholar and teacher Robert J. Braidwood was extremely generous and stimulating. He has been characterised as a pioneer who had a fundamental impact on his discipline by leading the way for others. He and his wife Linda will be remembered with admiration and gratitude by generations of younger archaeologists all over the world.

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