

Mesoamerican Archaeology: Theory and Practice

Edited by Julia A. Hendon and Rosemary A. Joyce, Blackwell Publishing, 2004. Pp. xvi, 352.

Introduction and Disclaimer

Mesoamerican Archaeology; Theory and Practice is one of the latest in a long line of books designed as texts for university undergraduate classes in Mesoamerican archaeology. I have used many such textbooks in teaching Mesoamerican archaeology since 1967 and my choices have run the gamut from detail-laden encyclopedias to theoretical exegeses to engagingly-written summaries designed for the non-academic public. Some were the work of one or two authors; others were multi-authored compilations. Like many of my colleagues, I actually use texts as supplementary materials. They function as an anchor for the students who sit through my lectures on whatever I consider important. In other words, I assign the book at the beginning of the semester and then generally ignore it. While I have never written a textbook, I know how difficult an undertaking it is and have tremendous admiration for those who accept the challenge. There are no academic, and very few financial, rewards for doing it. In terms of time spent and money earned, most of us can do better mowing lawns.

Mesoamerican Archaeology is the initial volume in Blackwell Studies in Global Archaeology, a new series of textbooks on the archaeology of the world's major regions. Series editors Lynn Meskell and Rosemary A. Joyce have established a high goal for the entire effort, and one by which the first book should be measured. In the copy describing the series, they state that it will consist of "... contemporary texts, each carefully designed to meet the needs of archaeology instructors and students seeking volumes that treat key regional thematic areas of archaeological study."(p. [ii]) They go on to say that like the present volume, each future book will contain a series of newly commissioned essays by top scholars. They then devote a paragraph to the philosophy or guiding principles for the series. I quote it in full because it provides the framework for my evaluation of the book. It is also one of the few public statements I know of in which authors lay out their visions of what textbooks should be.

"What sets *Blackwell Studies in Global Archaeology* apart from other available texts is that it is *accessible*, yet does not sacrifice theoretical sophistication. The series editors are committed to the idea that usable teaching texts need not lack ambition. To the contrary, the *Blackwell Studies in Global Archaeology* aim to immerse readers in fundamental archaeological ideas and concepts, but also to illuminate more advanced concepts, thereby exposing readers to some of the most exciting contemporary developments in the field. Inasmuch, these volumes are designed not only as classic texts, but as guides to the vital and exciting nature of archaeology as a discipline." (p. [ii])

Quite a breath-taking responsibility! I am not certain it is entirely attainable but in any case, I conclude that *Mesoamerican Archaeology: Theory and Practice* fails to achieve it. I believe the failure results from the fact that the desire for theoretical sophistication too often eclipsed the need for accessibility. Put another way, many of the essays are beyond what I would expect undergraduates to grasp. Nevertheless, I applaud the editors for making the effort. To say that it is not the text I would have prepared is a statement of fact, not a criticism.

Any text must be organized in some coherent fashion that emphasizes certain themes and topics while slighting or ignoring others. Hendon and Joyce chose to emphasize a number of themes that interest many (but not all) Mesoamericanists. The most prominent include social identity, social relations, and social diversity as reflected in artifacts, landscape use, and architecture, and agency theories. Chronologically they pick up the Mesoamerican story at the beginning of the Formative period (ca. 2,000 BC) and carry it through to the early Colonial aftermath of the Spanish conquest. Geographically they focus on four core regions of Mesoamerica: the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the central Mexico highlands, Oaxaca, and the lowland Maya region.

Content

The book opens with Rosemary Joyce's "Mesoamerica: A Working Model" an exploration of "...some of the meanings of Mesoamerica that have supported its use as an organizing framework for archaeological debate for over 50 years." (p. 1). This essay not only introduces the scope of the book to the reader, presumably an un-initiated undergraduate student, but also creates the framework through which to understand Mesoamerica. While acknowledging the physical/geographical meanings of the term, Joyce prefers to see it as "...mainly a cultural and linguistic concept that anthropologists find useful as a way to refer to groups of people who lived within a defined geographic region over a long period of time and who shared certain cultural and linguistic features." (p. 3). After describing Paul Kirchoff's initial formulation of the concept as a series of cultural traits and tracing its subsequent history, Joyce proposes that Mesoamerica be considered a geographical region defined by cultural practices rather than a set of individual traits. For her, the most important of these practices include 1) a basic structuring economy based upon agriculture, 2) beliefs about how the world works and associated rituals and the practices related to these beliefs, and 3) the material signs of social stratification. I certainly agree with her priorities but the five-page discussion of writing that follows places much more weight on that particular practice than I would, and seems to eliminate a number of regions not known for their literacy, most notably West Mexico, from her Mesoamerica!

After getting off to a good start, Joyce's essay seems to stumble through a middle section dealing with "Time in Mesoamerican Archaeology, the Calendar, and Writing." While what she says is accurate, I am not certain how relevant much of it is to the rest of her essay or why she devotes so much space to them. The next to the last section, titled "What Happened in the History of Mesoamerican Archaeology," is an all-too-brief taste of her ideas on the subject and one that I wish she had expanded. In fact, it would have been worth a chapter-length treatment and I hope she takes up the challenge at some time in the future.

The next two chapters focus on Formative Mesoamerica. “Mesoamerica Goes Public: Early Ceremonial Centers, Leaders and Communities” by John E. Clark addresses the emergence of hereditary inequality and political offices through a detailed examination of data from the valley of Oaxaca and the Mazatan region of Chiapas. Since these are the two most intensively-studied and best-reported regions in Early Formative Mesoamerica, they provide excellent test cases. Clark argues that “... necessary events leading to the emergence of hereditary inequalities and political offices were the development of self-perceived communities from dispersed villages and concomitant shifts in personal identities between elites and commoners.”(p. 45). While he maintains that the data support some of his previously published interpretations of the Mazatan material, he modifies others. For example, he now accepts Gareth Lowe’s long-held view that Paso de la Amada, the best-known Mazatan Early Formative site, was indeed a major ceremonial center rather than merely a village. When he turns to Oaxaca, he focuses on San Jose Mogote, offering a reconstruction that varies considerably from that favored by the excavators, Kent V. Flannery and Joyce Marcus. Clark does an effective job of crafting his arguments and defending his ideas in what is yet another stage in the on-going debate about the origins of Mesoamerican complex societies. We may look forward to equally vigorous challenges to his ideas in the near future.

Richard G. Lesure tackles the thorny issue of Olmec art and influence in his “Shared Art Styles and Long-Distance Contact in Early Mesoamerica”. After summarizing current ideas about possible meanings of shared Olmec art styles across Mesoamerica, he proposes to shelve the on-going “Mother-Sister Culture” debates to focus instead on an approach involving *agency* and *structure*. For me, few terms in anthropology set my teeth on edge as much as “agency” because it is used in so many ways that it means everything and nothing. Thus I appreciate Lesure’s clear and succinct definition; for him, agency-oriented research seeks to “...document actual contacts between people and to explore the ways that objects and symbols associated with those contacts were used, manipulated, and interpreted in local settings,” while *structures* are the “frameworks of beliefs and practices that help to create different kinds of agents and to distribute powers and constraints among them.”(p.80). After extended discussions of each, Lesure provides a concrete example by examining the emergence of greenstone (jade, serpentine, etc.) as a key valuable and a symbol in different settings through the Early and Middle Formative periods. Perhaps I am showing my age but I do not see anything new, startling or especially informative in this example. Nevertheless, like most of the essays in the book, this is an important piece of work that deserves the serious attention of Mesoamerican scholars. I am just uncertain about its place in a textbook.

Chapters Four and Five deal with Teotihuacan. Both are important, well-written and clear statements on their topics. How ironic that some of the best writing in the volume is the work of two non-native speakers of English, Saburo Sugiyama and Linda Manzanilla. Perhaps somebody forgot to teach them the jargon! Sugiyama examines the public side of the Teotihuacan state in “Governance and Polity at Classic Teotihuacan,” while Manzanilla looks at the more personal side of life in her “Social Identity and Daily Life at Classic Teotihuacan.” Taken together they provide an unparalleled, up-to-date view of Mesoamerica’s largest city. I could say much more about them but instead I encourage the reader to examine them for their own pleasure.

The outstanding treatment of Teotihuacan is followed by two excellent essays on the Classic lowland Maya by Cynthia Robin and Wendy Ashmore. In “Social Diversity and Everyday Life within Classic Maya Settlements,” Robin examines Classic Maya society through two basic data sets; human representation in figurines and monumental art, and people’s living spaces as seen by household archaeology. She examines three settings, the Calakmul Royal Court, residential architecture at Sepulturas, Copan, and Chan Noohol, a farming hamlet near Xunantunich. Among her many points, one that I find especially interesting is the near absence of women in public art as contrasted with their obvious importance in society in general as evidenced in other data sets. On the whole, her paper clearly shows the complexity of Maya civilization, a complexity that could only be appreciated through the results of household archaeology.

Wendy Ashmore cogently argues that Maya landscapes and the settlements on them are inseparable and neither can be considered without the other. Both reveal a great deal about Maya economics, politics, and beliefs. She shows how these data not only corroborate information in the written texts but amplify them and shed light on subjects they fail to address. Like Robin’s essay, Ashmore’s is well written and one that undergraduates could read with great pleasure and profit.

Moving on to Oaxaca, Arthur Joyce’s “Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca” offers an interpretation of the changing nature and uses of Monte Alban’s Main Plaza based on *practice theory*, as proposed by cultural anthropologist Sherry Ortner. Personally, practice theory is even more difficult for me to grasp than agency theories. I fail to see why such theory is necessary to arrive at the conclusions Joyce proposes. He first outlines the history of the foundation of Monte Alban and the initial construction of the Main Plaza as a replica of the Zapotec *Axis Mundi*. He traces the elite consolidation of power in the Valley of Oaxaca and the conversion of the Main Plaza from what was initially an open space used by all into a residential/ritual zone reserved for use by the elite. If so, and I assume Joyce is correct, future research may show that the social changes it signals were a powerful factor in the eventual decline and abandonment of the Zapotec capital. There is so much we need to learn about this major Mesoamerican city!

John Pohl continues the Oaxaca story with “The Archaeology of History in Postclassic Oaxaca,” a delightful and superbly-written account of his own personal journey through Mixtec studies involving the marriage of Mixtec Lords and Ladies with archaeological survey, excavation, and ethnohistorical studies. He brings the stories of Lord Eight Deer, Lady Six Monkey and the War of Heaven to life in a way that will grab all students by the shoulders and make them want to go off on their own projects. I marvel at the undergraduate course I could teach around a textbook full of such accounts!

For me, Elizabeth Brumfiel’s “Meaning by Design: Ceramics, Feasting, and Figured World in Postclassic Mexico” is quite a let-down. The title left me wondering what I would find when I read the essay. What is a “figured world?” I am still not certain, even after being told that “Feasts provides occasions for learning and shaping the frames of meaning and value around which people construct their lives...” (p.241). Brumfiel opens the essay with an introductory paragraph that explains her intent. Put simply, it is to demonstrate that “...the people of ancient Mesoamerica expressed their

understanding of the world around them in the designs painted on ceramic vessels (p.239). That makes perfect sense although by the time I got to that statement, I was already completely confused by preceding statements such as “How did people decide to act in ancient Mexico? What criteria guided their behavior? How were their ideas determined by existing cultural principles and by changes in economic and political structure?” (*ibid.*) The leap from the latter to the former leaves me dizzy. After discussing theoretical and methodological issues, the author proceeds to evaluate the narrative content designs on Aztec serving vessels from various archaeological sites in the Basin of Mexico. Rather than register all of my questions and complaints about her efforts, I suggest that anyone interested in the topic read the essay and form their own opinion.

Deborah L. Nichols does a superb job of synthesizing “The Rural and Urban Landscapes of the Aztec State.” After summarizing the historical and intellectual background to the Basin of Mexico surveys and other relevant research efforts, she leads the reader through a series of topics that cover precisely what their titles suggest: Aztec population; urban and rural settlement patterns; city-states, political economy and agenda; materials analysis; the Aztec state; social relations; and finally, ideology and the ritual landscape. Rarely have I read such a clear, succinct and well-presented discussion of these topics. It was definitely written with an eye to making the subject accessible to the un-initiated reader.

In the final chapter Julia Hendon returns to the Maya with her discussion of “Postclassic and Colonial Period Sources on Maya Society and History”. She prefaces the core of essay with a section on the Maya Collapse and the Terminal Classic, and then examines archaeological and documentary sources for information about the Postclassic and Early Colonial Maya. Her discussion of the documentary sources is especially enlightening and well done. I particularly enjoyed her caveats about uncritical acceptance of Bishop Landa and Alfred Tozzer’s interpretations of his writings.

Summary

So, what are my overall impressions of the book? Would I use it as an undergraduate text? No. Would I assign selected chapters as supplemental readings? Yes. Have I been overly-harsh in some of my criticisms? Perhaps. Is this a book Mesoamericanists need to examine closely? Absolutely!

Richard A. Diehl
University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa