THE THEME *IS* VARIATION:
Recent Publications on the Archaeology of Southern Mesoamerica

Wendy Ashmore
University of Pennsylvania

PRECLASSIC MAYA POTTERY AT CUELLO, BELIZE. By Laura J. Kosakowsky. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1987. Pp. 101. $29.95.)

AN ANALYSIS OF CLASSIC LOWLAND MAYA BURIALS. By W. B. M. Welsh. British Archaeological Reports, International Series no. 409. (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1988. Pp. 377.)

ARCHAEOLOGY AT CERROS, BELIZE, CENTRAL AMERICA: VOLUME II, THE ARTIFACTS. By James F. Garber. (Dallas, Tex.: Southern Methodist University Press, 1989. Pp. 154. $22.50.)

STONE TOOL USE AT CERROS. By Suzanne M. Lewenstein. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987. Pp. 228. $42.50.)

RECENT STUDIES IN PRE-COLUMBIAN ARCHAEOLOGY. 2 vols. Edited by Nicholas J. Saunders and Olivier de Montmollin. British Archaeological Reports International Series no. 421. (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1988. Pp. 634.)

EXCAVATIONS AT SEIBAL, DEPARTMENT OF PETEN, GUATEMALA: PERIPHERAL SURVEY AND EXCAVATION; SETTLEMENT AND COMMUNITY PATTERNS. By Gair Tourtellot III. (Cambridge, Mass.: Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 1988. Pp. 473. $45.00.)

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN THE EL CAJON REGION: VOLUME 1, PREHISTORIC CULTURAL ECOLOGY/INVESTIGACIONES ARQUEOLOGICAS EN LA REGION DE EL CAJON: TOMO 1, ECOLOGIA CULTURAL PRECOLOMBINA. Edited by Kenneth Hirth, Gloria Lara Pinto, and George Hasemann. (Pittsburgh, Pa., and Tegucigalpa: University of Pittsburgh and Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia, 1989. Pp. 281. $15.00.)

THE HOUSE OF THE BACABS, COPAN, HONDURAS. Edited by David Webster. Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology no. 29. (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, 1989. Pp. 116. $15.00.)

THE SOUTHEAST CLASSIC MAYA ZONE. Edited by Elizabeth Hill Boone and Gordon R. Willey. (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, 1988. Pp. 412. $40.00.)

A TUMPLINE ECONOMY: PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION SYSTEMS IN

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0023879100035147 Published online by Cambridge University Press

SIXTEENTH-CENTURY EASTERN GUATEMALA. By Lawrence H. Feldman. (Culver City, Calif.: Labyrinthos, 1985. Pp. 146. $20.00.)

GODS OF THE POPOL VUH: XMUKANE', K'UCUMATZ, TOJIL, AND JURAKAN. By Mary H. Preuss. (Culver City, Calif.: Labyrinthos, 1988. Pp. 106. $20.00.)

QUICHE WORLDS IN CREATION: THE POPOL VUH AS A NARRATIVE WORK OF ART. By Jack J. Himelblau. (Culver City, Calif.: Labyrinthos, 1989. Pp. 76. $20.00.)

READING THE PAST: MAYA GLYPHS. By S. D. Houston. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989. Pp. 64. $8.95.)

THE CITIES OF ANCIENT MEXICO: RECONSTRUCTING A LOST WORLD. By Jeremy A. Sabloff. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1989. Pp. 224. $19.95 cloth, $12.95 paper.)

Variability is a word used frequently in archaeology these days. The term seems especially apt for characterizing recent research in southern Mesoamerica, including the works under consideration here, and for fitting them all into larger trends. Variability can take multiple forms. The topics addressed by the works listed in the heading are obviously diverse, but that is a relatively trivial observation. Rather, the kinds of variability at the heart of this discussion represent broader themes in archaeology and the study of southern Mesoamerica, and each publication under review here frequently exemplifies several of these themes. The themes to be discussed are theoretical and methodological as well as substantive and practical. A heightened sense of variability can be seen in a set of four interrelated trends: greater appreciation for variations in human behavior in the past, increased integration of diverse theoretical perspectives in archaeological reconstructions of that past behavior, innovative diversity in methods used to analyze the data, and expanded diversity in disseminating interpretive results.

This review essay will consider these trends in historical perspective within archaeology and the anthropology of southern Mesoamerica and will assess each work within that historical context. Because the historical outline is necessarily painted with a broad brush, it must at times risk oversimplification. For balance, the reader is referred to more detailed treatments.[1] My intent here is simply to highlight some of the ways in

1. Gordon R. Willey and Jeremy A. Sabloff, *A History of American Archaeology,* 3d ed. (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, in press); *American Archaeology Past and Future,* edited by David J. Meltzer, Don D. Fowler, and Jeremy A. Sabloff (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1986); Bruce G. Trigger, *A History of Archaeological Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); K. Paddayya, *The New Archaeology and Aftermath: A View from Outside the Anglo-American World* (Pune, India: Ravish, 1990); and *Processual and Postprocessual Archaeologies: Multiple Ways of Knowing the Past,* edited by Robert W. Preucel (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1991).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0023879100035147 Published online by Cambridge University Press

which current archaeological research in southern Mesoamerica differs significantly (and usually in welcome ways) from that of the recent past. Although two of the volumes under review deal with Mesoamerica more broadly, this essay, like most of the works it discusses, will focus on southern Mesoamerica. The latter is defined here as the area occupied by Mayan-speaking peoples and their neighbors to the south and east, comprising the modern nations of Guatemala and Belize as well as southern Mexico and the western portions of Honduras and El Salvador.

Regarding archaeological theory, most would agree that until the 1960s a culture-historical approach dominated, its central emphasis being a relatively mechanical ordering of artifacts, sites, and cultures in geographically nested sequences or "time-space grids." In this pursuit, archaeologists focused on "normative" or archetypal forms and styles as the means best suited to achieving the ordering. The central questions were "what," "when," and "where," and interpretive links between archaeological data and human behavior were largely speculative. For example, in southern Mesoamerican culture history, tanged macroblades are lithic artifacts that indicate the Late Preclassic period and Copador-type pottery bespeaks some connection with Late Classic Copán. Similarly, settlement remains were once typified by house mound groups and ceremonial centers, whose collective populace was supported by (undocumented) swidden agriculture.

With the advent of the "New Archaeology," or processualism, in the 1960s and 1970s, the questions changed to "how" and "why." This shift was not a replacement, however; culture-historical questions and time-space ordering remain fundamental to archaeological research in unknown or little-known regions.[2] Rather, processualism built on and expanded the range of questions being systematically addressed.[3] Interest focused less on the described sequences of pottery or architecture and more on the processes inferred as underlying the changes and contrasts embodied in those sequences. Consequently, more attention was given to studying variation (rather than norms) as the raw material for change and contrast in archaeological forms and styles. More rigorous inquiry pursued the conditions under which the variation should have occurred.

The latter inquiry spawned a number of methodological innovations, from adoption of a hypothetico-deductive and explicitly scientific methodology in research design to use of computer-simulated modeling, probabilistic sampling, and refinement of ethnographic analogies employed to reconstruct the past. Techniques of data recovery and analysis, from flotation to chemical characterization studies, likewise evolved in response

2. Paddayya, *New Archaeology and Aftermath*.

3. Robert C. Dunnell, "Five Decades of American Archaeology," in *American Archaeology Past and Future*, 23–49.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0023879100035147 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to perceived needs for tighter specification of archaeological data. Processualist interpretive models have been primarily ecological or economic in orientation, focusing on cultural realms with the most directly tangible archaeological traces—to wit, settlement patterns, subsistence systems, and economic organization. Domains that include symbolic expression, such as mortuary customs, have been treated as reflecting social status and organization. Most commonly, the meaning of symbol systems was considered difficult if not impossible to study scientifically and was left largely to art historians to study, in relative isolation.[4] And despite a stated emphasis on studying variation, processualist models tended at first toward broad generalizations that were monolithic in form: settlements were described as dispersed or dense, and subsistence was extensive or intensive.

The fundamental contributions of processual archaeology have been its heightened concern with research design and method, a clearer understanding of the variable factors involved in formation of the archaeological record, and a cumulative body of substantive findings on such major anthropological topics as the origins of agriculture and the evolution of civilizations. As will be argued, most of the volumes reviewed here derive basically from processualist-oriented archaeological research.

By the 1980s, however, archaeologists were speaking of newer intellectual trends, in southern Mesoamerica and elsewhere. Hallmarks include a shift from social scientific to humanistic orientation, with reduced emphasis on ecological and economic factors in molding culture and human behavior and a corresponding increase in emphasis on the roles of ideology and symbolism. Closely allied developments have included rejecting hypothetico-deductive methodology as uniquely imbued with explanatory power[5] and asserting that human behavior cannot be understood outside the context of a specified cultural tradition. Following this line of thought has been the identification of the individual (in antiquity and today) as the locus of action and the appropriate focus for studying cultural variation and change—the individual as the inventor of culture on a daily basis. Variation has thus reached a "micro" level of analysis.

In archaeology at large, some of these trends have been collectively labeled "postprocessualism," with the term's reactivity and negativity reflecting both a widespread antipathy to processualistic approaches in archaeology and parallels with broader postmodernist developments. More extreme postprocessual expressions have portrayed cultural vari-

4. Richard A. Diehl, "Current Directions and Perspectives in Mesoamerican Cognitive Archaeology," *LARR* 19, no. 2 (1984):171–81.

5. Jane H. Kelley and Marsha P. Hanen, *Archaeology and the Methodology of Science* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988); and Preucel, *Processual and Postprocessual Archaeologies*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0023879100035147 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ability as so small-scale, idiosyncratic, and historically conditioned as to make knowledge of past human society and culture inaccessible to archaeologists.[6] Much more constructive versions are the more temperate ones in which some or all of the foregoing ideas have complemented or expanded more established processual approaches: the importance of symbolism and ideology; the influence of cultural context; the role and accessibility of the individual; continuous variability of culture in time, space, and form; and nonhypothetico-deductive explanatory modes. Within processualist traditions, too, modeling has increasingly incorporated more complex and realistic variability in human behavior and its archaeological traces. The result has been a closer approximation of the fluidity, dynamism, and complexity of real human behavior. That is, these approaches yield models for the cultural past that are potentially capable of simultaneously achieving processualist and postprocessualist goals: accommodating intricacies like individual-level decision making and short-term compromise strategies, founded often on nonmaterial considerations within a specific cultural tradition (such as foretelling the "need" to acquire captives for sacrifice), and at the same time still incorporating broadly pervasive material influences (such as the availability of natural resources, environmental degradation, and access to exchange or communication networks). Such models incorporate greater variability in a number of senses: they tend to embrace material along with nonmaterial factors, acknowledge short-term as well as long-term change, and tolerate multiple and intermediate cultural forms. I prefer to think of these approaches less as "postprocessual" than as a kind of evolved or perhaps humanistically informed processualism. Fortunately, the studies that have appeared in southern Mesoamerica thus far have been the latter kind.

Perhaps the most dramatic recent instances of these developments in interpretive model building in this part of the world have derived from studying native texts and iconography alongside data from archaeology. In the pages of this journal, Richard Diehl commented at length on archaeologists' reemergent recognition of the invaluable interpretive richness in the artistic and literary legacy of Mesoamerica's indigenous civilizations.[7] In southern Mesoamerica, the result has lately come to be called a "conjunctive approach," in which the mutually unique characteristics of the archaeological and epigraphic-iconographic records are exploited jointly, each providing ideas for testing in the other realm of independent data. Pre-Hispanic documents (such as Maya hieroglyphic texts) and native texts of colonial times (such as the *Popol Vuh*) thus complement the information provided by archaeology, and vice versa. None of these data sets

6. Ian Hodder, "Post-Modernism, Post-Structuralism, and Post-Processual Archaeology," in *The Meaning of Things: Material Culture and Symbolic Expression*, edited by Ian Hodder (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 64–78.

7. Diehl, "Current Directions and Perspectives," *LARR*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0023879100035147 Published online by Cambridge University Press

should be used uncritically, however. Questions concerning the historicity of pre-Hispanic texts or the appropriateness of the *Popol Vuh* as analogue for Classic-period culture will likely be debated in some form for decades. But when the data sets are used with caution, the results can be extremely fruitful. The most impressive compilation of such achievements to this point is the School of American Research volume, *Classic Maya Political History: Hieroglyphic and Archaeological Evidence*.[8] Such a book was unthinkable only a generation ago. Here, then, variability has increased dramatically in the diversity of the data bases and in the degree of detail that can be incorporated simultaneously.

Of the works listed at the head of this essay, several exemplify the history of trends just described. Laura Kosakowsky's study of Preclassic ceramics from Cuello in Belize, competently follows the established type-variety method of analysis and reporting. *Preclassic Maya Pottery at Cuello, Belize* clearly reflects the ongoing value of descriptive culture-historical analyses. Descriptive rigor was critical for this controversial ceramic assemblage because its earliest complex, Swasey, resembled Middle Preclassic Maya ceramics found elsewhere (circa 800–400 B.C.) while apparently associated at Cuello with Early Preclassic dates (circa 2000–1500 B.C.). The latter estimate made Cuello the earliest and a seemingly unique lowland Maya village. E. W. Andrews V and Cuello project director Norman Hammond have recently reconsidered the radiocarbon chronology and have placed Swasey firmly in the Middle Preclassic period, although still beginning at or before 1000 B.C.[9] The chronology-related portions of Kosakowsky's arguments are therefore "outdated," but the core of her analysis remains a valuable and permanent contribution.

W. B. M. Welsh's *An Analysis of Classic Lowland Maya Burials* reconsiders data reported in multiple individual projects. Despite some inconsistencies (as in categorizing burial contexts, especially "middens") and minor inaccuracies, this work is a useful summary compilation that highlights evidence for several phenomena of current interpretive importance, such as human sacrifice and ancestor worship. Welsh's interpretive framework might be said to derive from combined culture-historical and early processual approaches. Were the study to be redone today, for instance, Welsh might add interpretation of interment arrangements as symbolic "texts," as expressive symbolic statements of the structure and content of Maya beliefs.[10] As published, the monograph points intriguingly

8. *Classic Maya Political History: Hieroglyphic and Archaeological Evidence*, edited by T. Patrick Culbert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

9. E. Wyllys Andrews V and Norman Hammond, "Redefinition of the Swasey Phase at Cuello, Belize," *American Antiquity* 55 (1990):570–84.

10. Ian Hodder, *Reading the Past*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Michael D. Coe, "Ideology of the Maya Tomb," in *Maya Iconography*, edited by Elizabeth P. Benson and Gillett G. Griffin (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 222–35; and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0023879100035147 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to regional variability in some specific practices and provides a backdrop for viewing continuing discoveries of Maya mortuary remains.

The two volumes on artifacts from Cerros are likewise descriptive but reflect more clearly the kinds of methodological innovation and variation spurred by processualism, especially in its "evolved" form. Both volumes represent explicit attempts to focus on behavior behind the artifacts and to recognize explicitly a greater potential for variability in such behavior. James Garber's *Archaeology at Cerros: The Artifacts* covers artifact categories other than chipped stone and pottery, each of which merited its own analytic program. Although most of the monograph is fairly traditional culture-historical description, Garber also tests several processual hypotheses regarding aspects of economic and social organization within and beyond Cerros. At least as important is the frank emphasis given to context in interpreting artifact function. Although Garber acknowledges that context is an inappropriate criterion for descriptive artifact classification, he argues its indispensability for understanding the behavior that the artifacts represent: "For example, although there are no physical or chemical differences between holy water and ordinary water, to ignore the contextual differences between them would ignore the quite distinct function each has in our own society" (p. 11). As an illustration, focus on context has allowed Garber and project ceramicist Robin Robertson to isolate evidence of "termination rituals," important for understanding ceremonialism and patterns of architectural growth at Cerros and for discovering parallel phenomena in the archaeological record from other Maya sites. Here the reader finds expanded appreciation for variability, complexity, and subtlety in ancient behaviors—ideological, economic, and other kinds—as well as for their potential recognition in the archaeological record.

Suzanne Lewenstein's *Stone Tool Use at Cerros* illustrates further innovations in artifact study and interpretive modeling. The production technology of these implements were ably analyzed separately by Beverly Mitchum, and Lewenstein studied the assemblage from the vantage of use wear. Although she did not invent this approach, her work is a model of controlled and thorough execution. Employing replicas of the ancient tools, she examined wear and breakage resulting from their experimental use in different activities and then used the data as a baseline against which to propose the range of activities attested in wear on Cerros tools. Lewenstein applied the results to test four "scenarios" of economic organization and task-specialization at Cerros. Most notable in the context of this review is the way she emphasizes variability over normative interpretation. Lewenstein accepts overtly the complexities and ambiguities of

———

Wendy Ashmore, "Site-Planning Principles and Concepts of Directionality among the Ancient Maya," *Latin American Antiquity* 2 (1991):199-226.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0023879100035147 Published online by Cambridge University Press

use wear (for example, tools often have more than one use, and later wear effaces earlier traces) and proposes a provisional range of activities. More important, while using idealized scenarios to describe alternative forms of economic organization, she explicitly recognizes that "real" human behavior is often a compromise, not a neat reflection of analysts' formulations. Such tolerance for interpretive ambiguity is a welcome step toward archaeologists recognizing the complexity and variability of ancient human life.[11]

Similar tolerance for ambiguity is displayed in some contributions to *Recent Studies in Pre-Columbian Archaeology,* the two volumes of the British Archaeological Reports edited by Nicholas Saunders and Olivier de Montmollin. The set includes papers from annual meetings of the Society for Latin American Studies in the United Kingdom in 1985, 1986, and 1987 on a miscellany of topics involving pre-Columbian Latin America. For example, Marshall Becker argues the artificiality of analytical distinctions between Maya burials and caches, contending that they constitute a conceptual continuum of ritual interments. Other Mesoamerican topics dealt with in this compendium include Maya human sacrifice (W. B. M. Welsh, derived from the monograph cited earlier), theoretical aspects of scale in settlement analysis (de Montmollin), ancient Maya politics and territoriality (Rien Ploeg), modern international politics and Maya archaeology (Daniel Schávelzon), the meaning of pre-Columbian mirrors (Saunders), a brief site report from the Lacandon region (Sonia Rivero Torres), Aztec sculpture (Elizabeth Baquedano), and a newly found Aztec codex (Gordon Brotherston and Ana Gallegos). The contributions are somewhat uneven in quality, but the compendium exemplifies a still-growing interest in the role of ideology (ancient and modern) and the interpretation of meaning as well as a healthy continuing variety in interests being pursued.

Another three volumes reviewed here report findings from discrete archaeological projects. While each work is a major contribution in its own right, the trio certainly reflect larger trends outlined earlier. In date of research design, the Seibal research was earliest (in the mid-1960s), with work at Copán and in the El Cajón region each designed around 1979 or 1980.

Gair Tourtellot's *Excavations at Seibal, Department of Petén, Guatemala: Peripheral Survey and Excavation* is the third monograph on research centered on that Guatemalan lowland site (the fourth and final volume appeared in 1990). The fieldwork was conducted in the mid-1960s, and this report comprises a tour de force of descriptive and functional analysis of settlement remains, from the smallest architectural elements through the

11. Similar arguments are raised by Olivier de Montmollin in *The Archaeology of Political Structure: Settlement Analysis in a Classic Maya Polity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0023879100035147 Published online by Cambridge University Press

scale of community and regional patterns and their evolution over time. Although it is now taken for granted that Classic lowland centers were often densely settled, with populations in the tens of thousands or more, Tourtellot's survey was one of the earliest to document areas beyond a civic core in detail. Tourtellot was also one of the first to use probabilistic sampling in placing excavations in southern Mesoamerica, and he also pioneered application of interpretive settlement models (for example, Jack Goody's developmental cycle as applied to changing household size and composition). Tourtellot goes beyond early processual conceptions to allow Maya belief systems a possible role in determining settlement patterns, but in general, this volume is an exemplar of research design of its time. Tourtellot's discussion of the values and pitfalls of the design and implementation of the research is engagingly candid, and he and Seibal colleague Jeremy Sabloff have applied some of the practical and interpretive lessons learned at that site in more recent investigation of settlement at Sayil, Yucatán.

Likewise rooted strongly in processual concerns was the research of the El Cajón project. The monograph reviewed here is the first of the final reports, and its volume title, *Prehistoric Cultural Ecology* also reflects the project's overall theoretical focus on human ecology. Although the study region of ninety-four square kilometers was forcibly defined by salvage considerations in anticipation of dam construction, the research design was crafted carefully to exploit all the archaeological potential of the situation and to optimize quality and quantity of data collected in multiple, well-integrated programs of research in pre-Columbian human ecology. Investigative goals centered on reconstructing ancient demography, settlement, social organization, and economic systems (including subsistence and exchange) as well as the ancient natural environment to which these systems adapted. The goals were addressed through appropriately diverse programs of investigation, ranging from detailed studies of modern natural vegetation, local plant use, and agricultural technology to geomorphological study and archaeological survey and excavation. The variability in programs has yielded independent but strongly convergent data sets and interpretive observations allowing confident reconstruction of an agricultural society that was largely self-reliant for basic resources and apparently stabilized below carrying capacity. Most noteworthy for this review are the cited variability in investigative programs, their close integration in implementation, and the total project's contribution to another (and overdue) kind of "variability." That is, the El Cajón project strongly indicates that the archaeology of southern Mesoamerica is no longer Mayacentric. The diverse non-Maya cultures of the region are increasingly being studied in detail and in their own right. Other important aspects of the project and this report will be noted subsequently.

The Maya do continue to be vital subjects of study in this region, as

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0023879100035147 Published online by Cambridge University Press

illustrated in David Webster's edited volume on Copán's Structure 9N-82, *The House of the Bacabs, Copán, Honduras.* Recent research at Copán has embraced more than half a dozen distinct projects, collectively operating continuously since 1975. Excavation at this particular structure was only a part of one project, albeit an extremely productive part. The overall theoretical thrust of the parent project has been largely processual and like the orientation at El Cajón, cultural ecological. But the prime importance of *The House of the Bacabs* is that it illustrates the productive potential of the conjunctive approach described earlier. Because of the integrated investigation of textual, iconographic, and archaeological data in this royal scribe's residence, an unusually detailed picture has emerged of the occupants of the building, its surrounding compound, and their place within Copanec society. Authors of different chapters adopt diverse theoretical perspectives on their related data sets, and readers are appropriately left to decide among differing views (for example, compare pp. 68–69 with p. 74).

The contributions of research at Copán and El Cajón are also discussed in the book edited by Elizabeth Hill Boone and Gordon Willey. *The Southeast Classic Maya Zone* presents papers from the 1984 symposium at Dumbarton Oaks, summarizing cumulative investigations in the area. Beyond the interpretive summaries, the volume is notable for two important kinds of variability cited earlier. One is the diversity of specializations, theoretical perspectives, and data bases that can fruitfully contribute to studying the pre-Columbian past of this region. In this regard, Dumbarton Oaks has long provided a receptive meeting ground for humanistic and social scientific viewpoints on ancient nuclear America, a place for art historians and archaeologists of the Andes and Mesoamerica to share ideas and compare notes. Most of the recent archaeological projects reported here were informed by processualist goals, although the theoretical perspectives of the authors are instructively diverse, including information theory, human ecology, and systems theory. This symposium and volume also give significant attention to ancient cultural variability by attending to developments among non-Maya cultures of southeast Mesoamerica. More than half of the volume (seven of twelve chapters) is devoted to Maya Copán and Quiriguá, reflecting the longer traditions of archaeological research in these Maya locales as well as their stronger association with art historical study in the region. Nevertheless, chapters by Patricia Urban and Edward Schortman, Rosemary Joyce, Kenneth Hirth, Arthur Demarest, and Gordon Willey all demonstrate recognition of the point that regional evolution of socioeconomic, stylistic, and symbol systems are adequately understood only by studying the fullest range of ancient cultures.

The three Labyrinthos volumes under review likewise attest that diverse ethnohistoric studies are enriching inquiries into the pre-Columbian past. Lawrence Feldman's *A Tumpline Economy: Production and Dis-*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0023879100035147 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tribution Systems in Sixteenth-Century Eastern Guatemala is an outgrowth of the Kaminaljuyú Archaeological Project of the late 1960s. Although the parent project focused primarily on the Valley of Guatemala in the Early Classic period and its long-distance involvement with Teotihuacan, the theoretical importance given to demography and economic organization is mirrored in this work dealing with colonial times. Feldman examines archival and other documentary evidence of economic organization (production and distribution) and demography in central and eastern Guatemala in the sixteenth century. Although he does not stress the goal of providing analogues for archaeological interpretation, Feldman offers useful capsule discussions of ports-of-trade, fairs, the role of merchants, and other topics of potential pertinence to archaeologists. The materialist orientation of the volume contrasts nicely with the focus of the other two Labyrinthos contributions considered here.

Mary Preuss's *Gods of the Popol Vuh* and Jack Himelblau's *Quiché Worlds in Creation* treat aspects of the justifiably famous creation story of the Quiché Maya, the *Popol Vuh*. Preuss concentrates on the four principal deities of the story, their individual characteristics, structural relationships, and the models they provide for human behavior. Himelblau examines the document as a "narrative work of art." He discusses the history of its study, the time frame in which it was recorded, and its morphology and mythic content. Himelblau concludes that this tightly structured document parallels archaic narratives elsewhere, perhaps even suggesting universal structures for such narratives. Both these treatments of the *Popol Vuh* are of interest, although attention to them has been dwarfed by the deserved acclaim accorded Dennis Tedlock's recent translation and commentary.[12] Elegant and insightful as Tedlock's work is, it should not prevent other views and voices from being heard, and the two brief Labyrinthos publications are worthwhile contributions in this regard.

Thus far, variability has been considered in terms of the human behavior studied, the theoretical perspectives brought to bear on that study, and methods used for implementing research. The final kind of variability to be highlighted in this essay concerns traditions of archaeological reporting. Here fruitful enhancement of variability has taken three forms. One is a greater variety of outlets for publishing archaeological monographs and articles. A second is practical appreciation of the linguistic diversity among residents and archaeologists of southern Mesoamerica. The third is variability in efforts at public outreach, at making the fruits of archaeological research accessible to nonspecialist audiences.

To begin with, all publication is expensive, and archaeological monographs are especially costly due to their partly archival nature and the

12. *Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life,* translated by Dennis Tedlock (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0023879100035147 Published online by Cambridge University Press

need for lengthy description of physical remains. Moreover, for monographs or articles, publication is usually in one language only, and in southern Mesoamerica, that has usually been the language of the investigator. These combined circumstances have resulted in multiple and generally disjunctive publication traditions. In the past, publications on southern Mesoamerica were more accessible to persons outside the region than to residents. It is therefore heartening that two new journals with foci encompassing southern Mesoamerica were inaugurated in 1990, *Latin American Antiquity* and *Ancient Mesoamerica*. Both encourage publication in either Spanish or English, with abstracts in both languages (or the language complementing the idiom of the article). Also important is the appearance of a new bilingual monograph series from the University of Pittsburgh. *Archaeological Research in the El Cajón Region,* already reviewed here, is one of the first in this series and commendably includes an extensive bilingual glossary of technical terms, prepared by George Hasemann and Gloria Lara Pinto. These developments complement the growth of journals and monograph series within the countries of southern Mesoamerica in recent decades and are beginning to redress the tradition of uneven availability of the results of archaeological investigation. Although this kind of greater variability has been somewhat difficult to achieve, it is long overdue and welcome.

Finally, there is the expanded variability of reporting in the form of nonspecialist publications. Nonarchaeologist writers seem to communicate comfortably to the public about archaeological matters, as often as not to the detriment of archaeology (or more benignly, to the bemusement of archaeologists). Well-known presentations range from *Chariots of the Gods?* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* to the thoroughly delightful mysteries of "archaeo-spouse" Agatha Christie and archaeologist Elizabeth Peters. Less frequently do archaeologists succeed in conveying archaeological insights and substance directly to the public, although notable exceptions have appeared. If archaeologists are to overcome frequent misconceptions about archaeology (and now in some cases, active mistrust of archaeologists), more attention must be paid to communicating directly, in clear and engaging style, to audiences other than our colleagues. Patricia Amblin's wonderful animated film on the *Popol Vuh* is pertinent, if not strictly archaeological. A number of good general books are already in circulation on the archaeology of southern Mesoamerica, but more would be welcome, along with popular articles and site guides. Ideally, such publications should be available in multiple languages—the more the better, but certainly for this part of the world, prominently in Spanish.

Two books under review here address the issue of public outreach. Stephen Houston's *Reading the Past: Maya Glyphs* is part of a series that covers ancient recording systems, from runes to cuneiform to Linear B. This slim volume is not a primer on how to read Maya glyphs but rather a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0023879100035147 Published online by Cambridge University Press

succinct description of the form, grammar, and subject matter of Maya writing and a history of decipherment. A sample reading (Dos Pilas Stela 14) is included, and short sections on Maya scribes, members of the court, and "what did the Classic Elite do?" offer tantalizing glimpses of the insights that Maya texts have yielded concerning Classic society. In this regard, the book also reflects the already mentioned integration of epigraphy and archaeology, a trend that Houston has promoted strongly in other publications.[13] Most readers will likely find that this tiny book whets rather than satisfies their appetites for information about Maya glyphs, but that is surely the author's intention. References to more technical publications are included, and Houston lists a number of sites, museums, and libraries where inscriptions may be examined directly.

Jeremy Sabloff's *The Cities of Ancient Mexico: Reconstructing a Lost World* turns the tables on the usual format for describing ancient civilizations. Rather than outlining detailed culture history, for which individual sites become anecdotal illustrations, Sabloff focuses on eight ancient communities (all but one in Mexico) representing six of Mesoamerica's civilizations. In a pleasantly chatty style, he offers imaginative fictional vignettes of daily life in each of these places. Sabloff then turns to issues of method and theory. Retaining his easy nontechnical style without trivializing the subject matter, he discusses the origins and evolution of Mesoamerican civilizations and the ways that archaeologists assemble such knowledge about the past. Along the way, Sabloff effectively counters the pseudo-archaeological interpretations of Erich von Däniken and others. In this volume and elsewhere, Sabloff has made the best aspects of processual archaeology accessible and interesting to a broader audience.[14] He manages successfully to demystify both archaeology and the civilizations of ancient Mexico without diminishing the fascinating qualities of either.

This essay began with observations about multiple kinds of variability and has attempted to point them out in the works under review. It is greatly to be hoped that the intellectual innovation, interspeciality collaboration, and other specific trends noted here will continue strongly to expand the ways in which we study and communicate about the past.

13. Stephen D. Houston, "Archaeology and Maya Writing," *Journal of World Prehistory* 3 (1989):1–32.

14. Jeremy A. Sabloff, *The New Archaeology and the Ancient Maya* (New York: Scientific American Library, 1990).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0023879100035147 Published online by Cambridge University Press