

BLACKWELL STUDIES IN GLOBAL ARCHAEOLOGY

mesoamerican archaeology

second edition

Edited by
**Julia A. Hendon,
Lisa Overholtzer, and
Rosemary A. Joyce**



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Mesoamerican Archaeology: Theory and Practice

Second Edition

Edited by

Julia A. Hendon, Lisa Overholtzer, and Rosemary A. Joyce

WILEY Blackwell

This edition first published 2021

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Edition History

Second Edition © 2021 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

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Editorial Office

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hendon, Julia A. (Julia Ann), editor. | Overholtzer, Lisa, editor. | Joyce, Rosemary A., 1956- editor. | John Wiley & Sons, publisher.

Title: Mesoamerican archaeology : theory and practice / edited by Julia A. Hendon, Lisa Overholtzer, Rosemary A Joyce.

Description: Second edition. | Hoboken, NJ : John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2021.
Series: Wiley blackwell studies in global archaeology | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020043053 (print) | LCCN 2020043054 (ebook) | ISBN 9781119160885 (paperback) | ISBN 9781119160915 (pdf) | ISBN 9781119160922 (epub) | ISBN 9781119160939 (obook) Subjects: LCSH: Mayas--Antiquities. | Indians of Mexico--Antiquities. | Indians of Central America--Antiquities.

Classification: LCC F1435 .M557 2021 (print) | LCC F1435 (ebook) | DDC 972.8/01--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020043053>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020043054>

Cover image: © Rafal Kubiak/Shutterstock

Cover design by Wiley

Set in 10 on 12.5 pt Palatino LT Std by Integra Software Services, Pondicherry, India



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Preface

In the 17 years since the first edition of *Mesoamerican Archaeology: Method and Theory* was published, our goal of providing theoretically sophisticated and data-rich explorations of important topics for a nonspecialist reader, written by the researchers themselves, has proved successful. When approached by Wiley-Blackwell to edit a second edition, the original coeditors, Julia A. Hendon and Rosemary A. Joyce, agreed that the chance to incorporate new research by an international array of scholars was not to be missed. The first move was to add Lisa Overholtzer as editor. The three of us approached some authors from the first edition who agreed to update or rewrite their chapters. We then invited new contributors whose work reflects current research trends in Mesoamerican archaeology. For this edition we purposefully included a chapter on bioarchaeology and three chapters that include the Colonial period in their discussions.

As with the first edition, this book is intended to be useful for anyone teaching Mesoamerican archaeology, whether as the sole subject of a course or as one case study among others in courses dealing with archaeology of the Americas, complex societies, or other topics. We also expect that it will be of interest to any reader who wants a sample of contemporary research on the major time periods and societies that are the focus of Mesoamerican archaeology.

Because this book is a departure from other models for introductory texts, it is appropriate for us to briefly explain what it is and is not and to suggest how we hope it might be incorporated into the classroom. All three of us teach material from the field of Mesoamerican archaeology in basic introductory courses and more advanced offerings. As active researchers who each have developed and led our own field projects, we find ourselves struggling to provide students with a sense of the research process. In particular, we think it is important for students to see that changes in archaeological understanding (or differences in opinion, as illustrated by some of the essays included here) are a constructive part of the research process. They reflect the mechanisms through which our discipline debates explanations, puts them to the test against existing and new data, and gradually revises them. Too often, we find that students (and people outside the academy interested in archaeology) have the impression, especially from media coverage, that changes in interpretation result from violent rejection of earlier ideas, represented as poorly conceived, foolish, or examples of bad work. We do not think that representing archaeology as a kind of winner-takes-all contest is very true to the reality of the constant hard work, only occasionally accompanied by moments of transformative insight, that we do as field researchers. Nor does the metaphor of a contest accurately represent the way that new research builds on and acknowledges older ideas, even in the process of modifying, extending, or disagreeing with those ideas.

We have each found that our teaching is most successful when we base it on a diversity of articles, written by scholars with different points of view. The juxtaposition of many different, but credible, arguments helps make clear to students that there is not now, and never has been, a consensus about how to understand Mesoamerica's

prehispanic history, what the important questions are, and what the best way to investigate intriguing questions might be. Using research papers written by practitioners active in field and laboratory analyses brings the research process to life. It enables students to engage in critical thinking about how explanations of the past are produced, verified, and disputed. This engagement has the potential to promote a greater mastery of content and principles and a more enduring understanding of the archaeological process.

But there are also difficulties with this approach. Foremost among them, articles written for professional audiences assume a great degree of shared background knowledge. They begin in the middle of an ongoing research dialogue, where even everyday words can have very specific meanings. To use research articles in teaching requires us to spend substantial effort explaining specialist terms and assumptions. And even when this is done, there remains the fact that professional articles are written for particular contexts, often as part of edited volumes dealing with specific themes or issues. To make these articles effective outside their original setting, it is necessary to place them back in context through lectures, orienting notes, or annotations. We have been successful teaching from thematically focused edited volumes, where the context of all the articles is the same and the repetition of conceptual vocabulary reinforces our background discussions. But very few edited volumes cover the full chronological and geographic breadth of Mesoamerican archaeology.

Thus, in this second edition, we continue to provide a single volume containing new papers written with a nonspecialist reader in mind. By selecting contributors who are actively engaged in research on key time periods and topics in contemporary Mesoamerican archaeology, this volume provides what we have been piecing together from existing resources, but with an important difference. Written self-

consciously as explanations of current issues in specific archaeological research areas within Mesoamerica and oriented toward the student or other nonspecialist, these papers provide the equivalent of a casebook optimally suited for teaching.

The response to our invitation to participate gratified us immensely, as extremely dedicated, busy researchers took the time to prepare new essays for this volume. Where possible, we sought to provide dual approaches to important time periods and places, hoping that these juxtapositions illuminate the way that research problems framed differently call for different methods of investigation and interpretation. We balanced contributions taking macroscale approaches with those examining the microscale that begins with the individual actor and extends outward to households, communities, and regions. The one thing we sought in every contribution was self-conscious attention to how problems were framed and what the effects of problem orientation were on research outcomes.

The resulting volume therefore considers research employing many different kinds of materials, highly diverse methods, and many strands of theory. Many of the contributors share with the editors an interest in questions of individual and group identity and agency and are exploring the implications of practice theory for Mesoamerican archaeology. Contributors who do not explicitly use concepts from practice theory nonetheless take seriously the same kinds of questions about how individual people who are raised in a specific cultural, social, and natural environment continue the traditions in which they were raised while also subtly modifying them so that, to modern observers, they can be seen as participants in sequences of social change. All the contributors examine particular practices, perceptible to modern researchers

because they left material traces, and consider the significance these practices had in the formation and reformation of Mesoamerican societies over a long historical trajectory that did not end with Spanish colonization.

We have included sufficient orienting material in this volume to ensure that students and other interested readers will understand the chronological and geographic frameworks of the Mesoamerican tradition and will recognize key issues in its history. Because this volume includes an introduction explicitly sketching out the contexts necessary to understand Mesoamerican archaeology as a subject, it can also serve to contextualize other research articles that might be used to complement the contents of this volume. As a casebook of theoretically explicit studies, it should serve as a resource for comparison with archaeologies from other world areas. Our goal was to be selective, not exhaustive. We attempt not to replace comprehensive syntheses of Mesoamerican prehistory but instead to complement them with a volume that takes understanding how we know as central to understanding what we know. Finally, we hope that this volume gives all of its readers a sense of the exciting developments in the contemporary theory and practice of Mesoamerican archaeology and encourages them to delve further into the original research cited by all the contributors.

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[11.1 Location of Mayapan and other places mentioned in the text. Dark gray-shaded zones reflect Roys's estimate of polity boundaries of the Mayapan](#)