

Anthropomorphizing the Cosmos: Middle Preclassic Lowland Maya Figurines, Ritual, and Time. PRUDENCE M. RICE. 2019. University Press of Colorado, Louisville. xx + 284 pp. \$74.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-60732-888-9.

Reviewed by Julia Guernsey, University of Texas, Austin

Prudence Rice's book is a timely and welcome addition to the ever-growing and methodologically rich corpus of literature on Mesoamerican ceramic figurines. Focusing on 377 Middle Preclassic handmade figurines from the sites of Nixtun-Ch'ich' and Ixlú on the western shore of Lake Petén Itzá, this book contributes significantly to understandings of the material and social significance of figurines in the early years of Mesoamerican civilization. Rice notes in the preface that this study also fills a significant gap in the reporting of Preclassic anthropomorphic figurines in the southern Maya Lowlands, a task often made difficult by the simple fact that much Middle Preclassic occupation lies beneath later Late Preclassic and Classic period constructions. In addition to analyzing the Nixtun-Ch'ich' and Ixlú figurines, Rice's book also pursues several deceptively simple queries: Why figurines? And why at this fascinating juncture in Mesoamerican history?

Rice notes that it was during the Early and Middle Preclassic periods that a variety of forces, including sedentarization, food production, population growth, and complexity, "ordained some exigency in developing tools for continuous time reckoning: that is, a calendar or calendars" (p. 113). One of her central premises is that Middle Preclassic figurines played a key role in the time- and calendar-related public rituals that emerged during the Preclassic period. Figurine heads in particular, on which markers of identity and costuming were most concentrated, "constituted a cognitive mnemonic technology for specific kinds of (ac)counting systems" and came to "stand for numbers associated with the days" (p. 115). Of equal import, Rice argues, is the legacy of this Preclassic emphasis on figurine heads: they became "icons related to

developments of a set of graphemes used in Classic Maya hieroglyphic writing with reference to the almanac, particularly the numbers associated with day names" (p. 47). Several chapters apply a detailed focus to the potential roles of Middle Preclassic figurines in "processes of calendrical elaboration and the origins of numeracy and writing" or, put more simply, "the evolution of writing" (p. 114).

To pursue these lines of reasoning, Rice adopts a somewhat complicated structure for the book that nevertheless succeeds in merging careful analysis of the figurines with discussions of the Mesoamerican calendar, timekeeping, and the figural elements of personified units of time in the Maya writing system. In places, larger-format illustrations would have aided the reader; several of the figurines that factor significantly in her analysis are reproduced at a tiny scale, as part of a compound image that reduces each to only a few centimeters in height. This small scale hinders appreciation of individual features such as minutely detailed headdresses. However, her point that the headdress of one figurine (Fig. 7.5a), with its broad band and animated piscine visage at the crown, anticipates conventions for naming and signifying titles in later periods is spot-on. The Nixtun-Ch'ich' figurine head calls to mind not only comparable Middle Preclassic traditions of signification in monumental stone sculpture traditions, as Rice recognizes, but also in contemporaneous figurine traditions like those from other regions of Mesoamerica not considered in this text.

Middle Preclassic figurines, according to Rice, "incorporated and literally embodied centuries, if not millennia, of hard-won social and spatio-temporal knowledge: they 'anthropomorphized the cosmos'" (p. 25). Arguments throughout the book hinge on the careful navigation of both material evidence and the many theoretical lenses—personhood, partibility, fragmentation, enchainment, inalienability—that can be used, productively, to think about figurines and their patterns of distribution. Rice's detailed discussion of recent neutron activation analysis of the Nixtun-Ch'ich' and Ixlú figurines reveals the exciting potential of such approaches. Most of the figurines

were manufactured in the Petén lakes area. But the results also revealed intriguing intersite movement and exchange between Nixtun-Ch'ich' and Ixlú and lend "support to the hypothesis of enchainment through exchange" of figurine heads, torsos, and limbs (p. 179). Rice also considers the distribution of figurines crafted from different pastes, calling attention to preferences distinguishing households from civic-ceremonial cores. Her comparison of figurine body parts/percentages from different contexts—Nixtun-Ch'ich', Ixlú, and throughout the immediate region—further reveals patterns that stand to tell us much about the "deliberate acts undertaken as the final stage of a (reverential) ritual termination process inherent to the figurines' creation, meanings, and use-lives and dispersion of their 'essences'" (p. 107).

Rice's emphasis on the significance of Middle Preclassic figurines as bodies and as models both "*of and for reality*" (p. 5) is especially persuasive, as is her premise that figurines played a central role in defining new social roles for both males and females in Preclassic Mesoamerica. Her argument that "the materialization process for Maya calendrics came at least in part from bodily reference frames" like those conceptualized during the Preclassic period in figurine and sculpture traditions (p. 110) is also compelling; as Beatriz de la Fuente perceptively argued in numerous publications, the history of Mesoamerican art and representation begins with the human body.

Less convincing, however, is Rice's argument that Classic period head-variant glyphs for the personified numbers 0–13 (or other units of time likewise assigned anthropomorphic patrons and forms) derive from, or were inspired by, Middle Preclassic figurine heads and their particular conventions of representation. Too many years, not to mention a plethora of burgeoning innovations in the arts and writing, separate these traditions to make suggestions of any causal relationship particularly persuasive. Such a premise also overlooks the fact that figurine usage appears to have declined precipitously during the Late Preclassic period in the Maya Lowlands (as it did in some other regions of Mesoamerica). Only in the last few pages of her conclusion does Rice briefly address the waning of the figurine tradition that characterized the Late Preclassic Maya Lowlands, only to be revived again during the Late Classic period in the form of mold-made figurines. Surely such a pronounced Late Preclassic figurine cessation was linked to the burgeoning of other figural traditions in different media including stucco, paint, and stone, conceived on a monumental scale and eventually graced with hieroglyphic inscriptions. Some earlier conventions of representation, like an emphasis on the head so clearly

illustrated by Preclassic figurine assemblages, persevered in later artistic and writing traditions, as Rice emphasizes. But what is not explored in this book is the social dynamic through which the domain of figural representation became increasingly the purview of ruling elites during the Late Preclassic period, just when the handmade figurine tradition declined. During the Late Preclassic and Early Classic periods, monumental figuration, often in concert with texts equally laden with bodily references, monopolized the aesthetic—and conceptual—domain of bodily representation, perhaps to the detriment of earlier figurine traditions.

Even with those caveats, Rice's overarching argument concerning human representation, its calendrical implications, and its indebtedness to Preclassic figurine traditions is deeply provocative. And, to be fair, Rice does not oversell her case: her tone throughout is a cautious one that readers will appreciate. She readily concedes that a considerably larger corpus of figurines from this region of Mesoamerica, far more than the 46 heads analyzed from Nixtun-Ch'ich' and Ixlú, "will be needed to examine the existence and extent of any empirical relations between Middle Formative Maya figurines and [the] graphemes" (p. 155) of later, more widely attested script traditions. Scholars would be wise to consider, as Rice does throughout this book, important traditions of representation like those of Preclassic figurines. Only when the broader corpus of human representation, at a variety of scales and in diverse media, is considered will we move closer to understanding the conventions, legacies, and implications of the "anthropomorphization" of the Mesoamerican cosmos.

Maya Narrative Arts. KAREN BASSIE-SWEET and NICHOLAS A. HOPKINS. 2019. University Press of Colorado, Louisville. 2019. xiii + 305 pp. \$102.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-60732-741-7.

Reviewed by Kerry Hull, Brigham Young University

The evolving field of ancient Maya studies has of late begun to take seriously the narrative and poetic features of the roughly 10,000 extant Maya texts. Although once primarily a source for historical data, Maya hieroglyphic texts are now providing startling insights into the craft of scribal production at the narrative level. Discovering the literary aspects of certain ancient texts has also laid clear the powerful continuity between Classic period (AD 250–900) poetic practices and those that survive in many current Maya groups. Bassie-Sweet and Hopkins's welcome addition to