

**Social Memory in Mesoamerica:
Methodological Considerations in
Multidisciplinary Approaches**

Memory Traces: Analyzing Sacred Space at Five Mesoamerican Sites. CYNTHIA KRISTAN-GRAHAM and LAURA M. AMRHEIN, editors. 2015. University Press of Colorado, Boulder. xxx + 231 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-60732-376-1.

Social Identities in the Classic Maya Northern Lowlands: Gender, Age, Memory, and Place. TRACI ARDREN. 2015. University of Texas Press, Austin. xii + 210 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-292-76811-6.

Reviewed by Ellen E. Bell, California State University, Stanislaus

These volumes engage a timely and important topic in archaeology—memory studies—in very different ways. In *Memory Traces: Analyzing Sacred Space at Five Mesoamerican Sites*, Cynthia Kristan-Graham and Laura M. Amrhein bring together authors working at archaeological and ethnohistorical sites in Mexico who explore the construction, functions, and meanings of socially constituted landscapes through the lens of memory studies. In *Social Identities in the Classic Maya Northern Lowlands: Gender, Age, Memory, and Place*, Traci Ardren uses the concept of the social imaginary as developed by Benedict Anderson and Charles Taylor to explore how identities are enacted, enmeshed, and maintained through practice, identifying memory as the “glue” that holds people together within the communities that constitute their imagined social whole. While these volumes take distinct approaches to memory, together they emphasize the value of multiple ways of interrogating the past, highlight what is gained and lost in each approach, and underscore the need to incorporate multiple ways of knowing into the study of past lifeways.

Memory Traces is a collection of essays that focus on landscape and its social construction, with a strong

emphasis on the constitution, function, and memorialization (or erasure) of sacred spaces. The volume began as an SAA session, and, as often happens, some of the original authors dropped away and others were added to strengthen the volume. In this case, all the original contributions by archaeologists found homes in other publications and the volume transformed into a strong exemplar of the contributions made by analyses grounded in art history and related disciplines, framed by chapters focused on landscape archaeology and physical geography. The bulk of the volume explores the definition, use, and theorization of sacred space at five Mesoamerican centers: Teotihuacan, El Tajín, Tula, Chichén Itzá, and Tonina. The editors situate the discussion in the context of work by twentieth-century artist Robert Smithson, whose *Hotel Palenque* and *Incidents of Mirror Travel in Yucatan* play with the idea of the ephemerality of the physical elements that reinforce memory traces. The chapters in the volume explore the ritual use of spaces and identify different functions—and diverse ways to achieve the same function—at the five centers examined. With the notable exceptions of the Early Classic period central Mexican powerhouse of Teotihuacan and the Classic period Tonina sculptures appropriated and reimagined in colonial-period Ocosingo, Chiapas, most of the case studies focus on Postclassic (A.D. 800–1519) centers. At Teotihuacan, Sarro and Robb suggest that murals on interior walls created backdrops for ritual processions whose participants populated the scenes. They propose that the paintings lack a central figure because the ruler himself embodied the focus of the composition when he entered the room, so that the paintings depict practice but do not contain it wholly. Koontz explores the integrative function of ritual spaces at Tula and El Tajín, arguing that they served to bring disparate social factions, tentatively identified as warriors and merchants, together in royal accession rituals imbued with maize symbolism. Colonnaded entryways at both sites depict individuals gathered to witness the installation of the ruler; these entryways channeled participants into the ceremony. The spaces and their decoration serve as models of and models

for participation, creating settings for and memorials of these integrative rituals. At Tula, Kristan-Graham expands upon this interpretation to assert that interior spaces link past and present and erase distinctions between public and private space by evoking mythic-historic places important to residents' shared political and social identities, in what she terms *architectural veneration* and *interior landscapes*. Amrhein and Looper argue that the resonance between gender representation and performance is fundamental to the construction of sacred space at Chichén Itzá and that the House of the Phalli, like sacred spaces Teotihuacan, Tula, and El Tajín, must be understood as settings for performances of social cohesion that are inherently gendered. The final case study in the volume examines the reuse of mutilated stelae from Tonina as baptismal font bases in the colonial-era San Jose de Polonia church in nearby Ocosingo, Chiapas. Wren, Nygard, and Spencer argue that the systematic mutilation of Classic period art represents an attempt to denigrate idols, dispel their power, and visually confirm the authority of the Spanish crown and the Christian god it proselytized. In sum, all the chapters explore the ways in which Mesoamerican art creates, supports, and informs ritual space, underscoring its importance in the fabric of the centers it enhanced.

Ardren's exploration of how rituals of integration create multiple social imaginaries, in contrast, focuses on extensive archaeological investigations at sites on the Yucatan peninsula, principally Chunchucmil and Yaxuna. These extended archaeological case studies allow Ardren to link practice, imagined communities, the built environment, and portable material culture in mutually supporting arguments. The focus on archaeological evidence contrasts with the Kristan-Graham and Amrhein volume, but the larger contrast lies in the extended discussion and uniform application of a single interpretive framework. Ardren uses Anderson and Taylor's emphasis on the social imaginary, conceived, echoing Taylor's view, not as a set of ideas, but rather as that which enables the practices of a society by making sense of them (p. 154). Ardren ambitiously links several social imaginaries, including the urban imaginary shaped by the social experience of living in a Maya city as instantiated through circulation; elite and commoner imaginaries created through shared social memories and their strategic manipulation; social imaginaries of childhood and perceived connections with the divine; and social imaginaries that enabled gendered practice and complicated its intersection with imaginaries of power. This approach is used to interpret patterning in the built environment in the Late, Terminal, and Postclassic periods, with an

emphasis on the identities made possible by participation in multiple social imaginaries. The case studies successfully illustrate the utility of the approach in that they help us understand daily practices and their ideological underpinnings more thoroughly. Archaeologists less enamored of postmodern approaches grounded in symbolic anthropology and practice theory may find the theoretical discussions excessive, but even the staunchest processualists are likely to find the data that ground the theory informative and the reconstructions of past lifeways compelling. The volume is a valuable contribution to the archaeology of the northern Maya Lowlands and a clear example of the felicitous intersection of social theory and dirt archaeology.

Both volumes engage topics that have been actively pursued by increasing numbers of archaeologists in recent years: the archaeology of identities, social memory, and practice theory. While the theoretical underpinnings of the research are emphasized to different degrees, authors in both volumes focus on the active constitution of social experience, how elements of material culture play a dynamic role in constituting that experience, and how the practices involved shape social reproduction. Each volume, however, leaves something on the table by narrowing the methodological focus within the publication. While the emphasis on archaeology and art history by turn is valuable and instructive, the enriched perspective provided by their simultaneous employment and the addition of other perspectives is even more effective. Multidisciplinary projects such as the University of Pennsylvania's Early Copan Acropolis Program (ECAP) at the Classic Maya center of Copán, Honduras, illustrate the power of a conjunctive approach.

The ceramic vessel known informally as "The Dazzler" (ECAP Object 1/6/208-1 and 2), for example, has been the focus of simultaneous multidisciplinary analysis to stunning result. The lidded cylinder tripod was found in the upper chamber of the Margarita tomb (ECAP Burial 93-2), the A.D. fifth-century interment of a woman thought to be the wife of the dynastic founder, K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo'. Stylistic analysis augments INAA to suggest the vessel was made in highland central Mexico but painted by a Copán artist. Conservation intervention salvaged the painted design and revealed departures from manufacturing norms, and iconographic, epigraphic, and art-historical analyses suggest the vessel depicts the spatially contiguous, Teotihuacan-style Hunal structure in which the founder was likely buried. The Dazzler, therefore, materialized the alliance it was likely made to commemorate—the fabric of rulership forged in central Mexico, the representation and communication

of it distinctly Maya. The multidisciplinary approach brings together the evidence necessary to understand the object, its social meaning, and its role in Early Classic Maya statecraft, producing a synthetic interpretation greater than the sum of its parts.

Memory Traces and Social Identities in the Classic Maya Northern Lowlands provide valuable contributions to the archaeological investigation of social memory and its roles in precolumbian Mesoamerica. The volumes' diverse approaches illuminate the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to interrogating the archaeological record; additional lines of evidence enrich them further.

The Salt of the Earth: Ethnoarchaeology of Salt Production in Michoacán, Western Mexico. EDUARDO WILLIAMS. 2015. BAR International Series 2725, Archaeopress, Oxford, England. i + 145 pp. £34.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4073-1380-1.

Reviewed by Barbara Arroyo, Instituto de Antropología e Historia de Guatemala

This book is an English translation of the author's book in Spanish, titled *La sal de la tierra: Etnoarqueología de la producción salinera en el occidente de México* and published in Mexico in 2003. The English version is an updated edition, so new information is included. The book is divided into six chapters and includes a section of references. The chapters include an introduction with a discussion of the importance of salt for prehispanic western Mexico, a region with relevant sites that has been overlooked by researchers. The author also offers a discussion of the role of salt in human life and its research importance.

Chapter 2 contains a discussion of salt production around the world, focusing specifically on various Mexican examples, such as the Basin of Mexico, Oaxaca, Puebla, and the Maya area. This chapter offers ethnoarchaeological examples of salt production in the Basin of Mexico. The third chapter discusses the general geographic and cultural background of western Mexico, providing a good synthesis of the region's occupation from the first inhabitants to modern times. I was surprised that the work of Christopher Beekman, an archaeologist who has done fieldwork in the last two decades in the region, was not cited (e.g., Beekman, *Journal of Archaeological Research* 18(1):41–109; Beekman in Nichols and Pool, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Mesoamerican Archaeology*).

The fourth chapter is an excellent data set on the production of salt in the Tarascan area and its

hinterland. It offers information on salt production in prehispanic times and ethnographic examples from Lake Cuitzeo Basin, the Michoacán coast, Jalisco, Colima, Nayarit, and Guerrero. The author's research has documented two main methods of salt production: *sal cocida* (boiling brine to produce crystallized salt) and *sal solar* (evaporation of brine in pans under the sun). The remains left by salt production when boiling brine in clay vessels are impressive. These vessels were made to be broken, leaving a large amount of material remains on the ground and providing clues about the specialization of particular sites. Arroyo (*Anales de la Academia de Geografía e Historia de Guatemala* 74:183–212) and McKillop (*Salt: White Gold of the Ancient Maya*, 2002) have documented similar techniques for the Pacific coast of Guatemala as early as the Early Preclassic and for the coast of Belize in the Classic period.

This chapter also includes descriptions of ancient and modern salt-making techniques, and discussion of the importance of salt as an exchange product. The author outlines three levels of salt production in ancient Michoacán: (1) places where enough salt was produced and the surplus was exported, (2) others that produced only enough for consumption, and (3) those where production was insufficient for local needs and had to be supplemented with salt imported from other areas of Michoacán. An extensive inventory of ethnographic examples from throughout Michoacán are presented, illustrating what the author calls a "salt-making landscape" because of the prints and remains left by this activity on the ground. The ethnographic cases studied by Williams have shed light on the capability of prehispanic and colonial networks involved in the production and exchange of salt in Michoacán, as well as their salt-making techniques.

The author's careful documentation of ancient salt making practices helps to explain features found in the archaeological record elsewhere. In particular, it called my attention to the round features made of pottery at the sites of Cerritos Colorado and La Motita, where he cites the finding of cylindrical pits with a covering wall made of sherds. During a Vanderbilt University project directed by Arthur A. Demarest, we found similar examples at the Early Preclassic site of El Carmen in El Salvador, over 1,500 km south of Michoacán. His observations of ethnographic and ethnohistorical documentation of salt production indicate diverse methodologies for salt exploitation. This chapter documents specialization in the extraction, evaporation, processing, and distribution of salt. Such specialized activity impacted the development of the Tarascan Empire, as seen in the following