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The Life-Giving Stone: Ethnoarchaeology of Maya Metates [Review]

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Searcy, Michael T. (2011) *The Life Giving Stone: Ethnoarchaeology of Maya Metates*, University of Arizona Press (Tucson, AZ), xvi + 168 pp. \$29.95 pbk.

This volume attempts to get at the interpretations of the archaeological record from the back-end by studying the modern Maya *metate* life cycle, including procurement, production, acquisition, use and discard. The author spent two years in Guatemala conducting ethnographic research with *metate* producers and users in three Maya communities. It is through this rich research that he greatly expands our understanding of *metates* by providing background of their complexity through several avenues. For example, he documents contemporary gifting traditions, noting that families still give *metates* as wedding gifts to couples, even as their use decreases with the presence of electric mills. Sometimes the *metates* are passed on through several generations, and families view them as symbolic of coupledom and marriage. He also examines the gender complementarity of *metates*—the fact that while only men make them, it is primarily women who use them to prepare the foods that men grow. He even details cultural taboos related to their use, such as males never touching *metates* after a female has used it out of respect for the woman and the tool.

More directly applicable to the archaeological record is his study of manufacture and use. For example, he is able to demonstrate that most of the debitage related to manufacturing would be near the quarries, forming identifiable elevated platforms after years of chipped stone being swept off to the side of the working area. He also discovers that the actual workshops where the finishing process takes place have little evidence of debitage, and archaeologically would be better identified through the presence of crudely-made *manos* and *metates*. Interestingly, he also learns that the tool assemblage in modern Maya households—a *mano*, an elevated *metate*, and containers with corn and water located near the hearth—is comparable to those found archaeologically at El Ceren in El Salvador, a site buried in volcanic ash that captures what daily life was like for the ancient Maya. Furthermore, he notes that there is a deliberate logic to the craftsman's selection of the stone quality used for making *metates*, indicating that darker basalt with few holes is less likely to break during production and lasts longer. His study of wear patterns results in interesting conclusions about how long a *mano* and *metate* may have been used, and even the grinding style of the user. All of these discoveries may direct archaeologists to rethink the way in which they focus on identifying quarries, workshops, material quality, or the way in which a *metate* was used. The volume also provides interesting suggestions for future archaeological studies. During his ethnographic work he examined social class and the number of *metates* present in a household, as well as a relationship between the size of a *metate* and the kinds of foods being ground, both of which could be applied to ancient households. He also discovered that contemporary Maya have a distinct eastern and western style of *metate*, and although he does not explain how this difference developed, it would be interesting to learn whether or not similar patterns occurred in the archaeological record.

In my view, the biggest weakness of this volume is its review of the recent literature, as it seems he did little updating after the manuscript was first written as an MA thesis. Of the eight-page bibliography, only two sources date later than 2006. Considering the dramatic increased focus on household archaeology and archaeobotany in the last several years, this is an unfortunate omission. I think the book might also benefit from a brief discussion of the use of ritualised *metates* in the archaeological record, such as those found at Balancanche, as a way of

emphasising the complexity of these artefacts, however as the book is focused on the household level he may have felt it was inappropriate to the discussion.

Although geared towards an audience with a strong interest in archaeology, the book is written in a clear and readable style (perhaps a reflection of the author's background in journalism) that would be appropriate to an undergraduate or graduate student audience. The volume includes a large number of excellent drawings, photographs and tables, as well as an appendix with copies of his survey questionnaire and record sheets. While these greatly contribute to the reader's understanding, they also make this study replicable by other scholars. Especially in light of the rapid decline of *metate* use among contemporary Maya, this volume is a significant contribution that can greatly assist archaeologists in their interpretations of *manos* and *metates* as something beyond a commonplace domestic tool. The volume is a fast read, and Searcy provides a great addition to the growing field of ethnoarchaeology.

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