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## A Pre-Columbian World [Review]

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**A Pre-Columbian World.** Jeffrey Quilter and Mary Miller, eds. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2006. 395 pp.

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This excellent volume arose out of the 2001 Dumbarton Oaks symposium, “A Pre-Columbian World.” The proposal of the symposium, in response to the recent trend of hyperdifferentiating cultures and emphasizing geographic and cultural boundaries, was to examine commonalities of the pre-Columbian world. The subsequent well-crafted, 11-chapter volume examines “the Americas” through the research of scholars working in North, Central, and South America. A number of themes emerge, including a call to Americanist archaeologists to remember that the geographic and political boundaries that we have placed on the ancient world are not real and that we should once again consider the broader interactions that may have occurred. Several chapters convincingly examine these overlapping themes of pre-Columbian cultures, including the following: Polly Schaafsma and Karl Taube's masterful overview of rain ceremonialism and symbolism in the Mesoamerican and Puebloan worlds; Warren R. De Boer's argument for comparisons with creation stories of the Hopewell and the Olmec; Mary W. Helms's evaluation of the use of serpent imagery, world trees, mirrors, and cacao among the Coclé of Panama with Mesoamerica and South American peoples; and Anna Blume's consideration of animal hybrids among the Maya and European cultures.

Another major theme of the volume is reflection on the reality of why we study what we study in Americanist archaeology. Elizabeth Hill Boone's chapter notes that, because of chance, the environment and the material from which objects are made—that is, what preserves in the archaeological record—often dictates the importance that we give them in that particular culture. Using three examples of beautifully preserved objects (the Aztec Coatlicue sculpture, the Inka all-tukapu tunic, and the Olmec Las Limas figure), Boone demonstrates that past scholars have used these objects as jumping-off points for interpreting cultural ideology. Had each of these not been an exceptional object but, rather, one of many, we may have given them different importance. Simon Martin's chapter also emphasizes that singular objects can be problematic and that it is crucial to recognize repeated themes in the material record. Archaeological objects include cultural “narratives” and were used as mnemonic devices and relied on broader cultural worldviews for their understanding. Tom D. Dillehay and Ramiro Matos provide a related argument that while physical objects reflect broader cultural imprints and symbols, we must not fail to recognize local innovations and resistance to adopting the cultural mandates. Enrique Florescano's chapter underscores that our understanding of the ancient world may be compromised by chance historical events. During much of the 20th century, studies at Teotihuacan were limited while the great scholars were drawn to the splendor of the Maya. Similarly, the 1940s excavations at Tula drew the attention of the general public and scholars alike, perhaps leading to its identification as the mythical “Tollan,” despite strong evidence that it was in fact Teotihuacan. Mary Miller's chapter contends that our research is shaped by our scholarly frameworks, such as Paul Kirchoff's “Mesoamerica,” which keenly divided it from the United States and isolated the scholars that worked there. This is further supported in Robert L. Hall's chapter on Cahokia, a site that, despite sharing Mesoamerican concepts such as feasts for the dead and blooding, has been virtually ignored by Mesoamerican scholars. Although there has

been a resistance to looking at the similarities among the people of the Americas, in part because of a racist legacy of seeing ancient Americans as a unified “barbarian” culture, this volume argues that it might be time to take a fresh look at the relatedness, while still recognizing differences.

Each chapter forces the reader to reflect on the ways in which we as scholars frame the ancient world. These authors also remind us that before we became highly specialized in our study areas, we were once students of the cultures of the Americas. It may be time to dust off our old books and articles and remember that ancient peoples were not bounded into neat categories and time frames, even if we would like them to be. On a minor note, as this volume does attempt to bridge scholars of the Americas and their disparate research, it would be helpful to include a general map that locates all of the sites discussed, as well as a table that lays out the corresponding time periods of the different geographic areas. I also found it curious that the cover image (perhaps chosen by the publisher) is of Zoomorph P from the Maya site of Quirigua. As the cover art is often what draws one to pick up a book and examine it more closely, it might have been appropriate to choose a more inclusive image.

This book's broad and comparative nature makes it an outstanding reference for scholars of archaeology, art history, and history of the Americas; however, it would also provide up-to-date and well-rounded readings for advanced graduate student courses focusing on Pre-Columbian history, art, or archaeology of the Americas.