

# Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America

ISSN: 2572-3626 (online)

---

Volume 1  
Issue 1 *Special Issue: Politics and Religion in Amazonia*

---

Article 8

June 2003

## Archaeology in Latin America

Peter W. Stahl  
*State University of New York, Binghamton*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Stahl, Peter W. (2003). "Archaeology in Latin America," *Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol1/iss1/8>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact [jcostanz@trinity.edu](mailto:jcostanz@trinity.edu).

intersubjective understanding. Or, something like that.

A more significant problem lies in Raffles's reluctance to define the outer limits of the claim that nature is a social construction. He explicitly identifies his analysis with the work of Anna Roosevelt, William Balée, William Denevan, and others who have demonstrated that Amazonian ecology has been more shaped by human intervention than was once recognized. In broader philosophical terms Raffles's analysis echoes and supports more theoretical approaches—the work of Raymond Williams and William Cronon comes first to mind—that question the arbitrary exclusion of human beings from environmentalist images of nature.

Yet, as the environmental policy expert Paul Wapner has pointed out recently (“Leftist Criticism of ‘Nature’: Environmental Protection in a Postmodern Age,” *Dissent*, Winter 2003, pp.71-75), this new vision of nature-as-social-construct is enthusiastically embraced by right-wing critics of environmentalism to support their view that nature need not be regarded as a pristine resource worthy of preservation. To observe, as Raffles does, that human engagement with a given landscape produces changes that still qualify as “natural” leads inexorably to the question of whether we should regard the Dantesque digging pits of Amazonian gold mining—burned on our visual memories by the photographs of Sebastião Salgado—as just another example of an anthropogenic nature. It is hard to imagine that Raffles would support this position, but by failing to address the full implications of his analysis he leaves awkward questions unresolved.

Perhaps this is asking too much of a book that celebrates indirection. Raffles's argument twists and doubles back on itself, much like the Amazonian rivers that are one of its main themes. And like those rivers, it gathers momentum as it moves along, turning stories from the region's history and social relations into a compelling vision of humanity's place in a complex and vulnerable ecosystem.

*Archaeology in Latin America.* Gustavo G. Politis and Benjamin Alberti, editors. London: Routledge, 1999. xiv + 286 pp., figures, tables, index. \$41.95 (paper). ISBN 0-415-22158-7. [www.routledge.com]

PETER W. STAHL

*State University of New York, Binghamton*

In this interesting collection, editors Gustavo Politis and Benjamin Alberti sample the many approaches that are used in contemporary Latin American archaeology. Contributing chapters are written by Latin Americans or by long-term foreign residents who have been incorporated into their local

scientific communities, and who are currently exploring key issues or applying innovative ideas to their interpretations of the past. The book's goal is to approach a wider audience of readers for whom many of these contributions remain invisible because they may be published either in languages foreign to Anglophone readers, or in venues lacking wider dissemination. Monetary policies beyond the control of our tiny academic community have transformed English language, principally North American, publications into accepted coins of the realm. Unfortunately, when we fixate on standard coinage we neglect the valuable currencies minted elsewhere, and even the best efforts made through the interlibrary loan system often find them difficult to obtain. One hopes that this problem will vanish in the age of the internet, an expectation made more conspicuous by only a brief glance at the impressive bibliographies accompanying many of the chapters.

Politis introduces the volume by way of his "inside view" on a Latin American archaeology as diverse and heterogeneous as the historical and political landscape in which it was produced. Although this point is certainly valid, he contrasts these local archaeologies with a North American archaeology that is presented as homogeneous and hegemonic, a characterization that would hardly sit well with many northern practitioners. Politics argues that we focus on different things because our perceptions of reality are different. He is correct if "we" refers to individuals. However, with only the rarest exception, Latin and North American archaeologists alike tend to be Europeans excavating a Native American past. Politics discusses external, particularly North American, influences on archaeology in Latin America, but cautions against its simple portrayal as a passive receptor of outside ideas. On a regional level, archaeologists in various countries have contributed original and lasting insights for many years. Throughout his introduction, I detect a somewhat apologetic tone regarding a lack of theoretical development. To his contention that Latin American archaeology remains largely empirical, I say "Amen," for archaeology everywhere is empirical or it is nothing. However, he rightly draws attention to our use of the region as a source of raw material for reinforcing our own agendas. Politics does refer to the oft-mentioned "social archaeology" as a unique theoretical contribution, but more on this below. The vitality, diversity, and originality of contemporary Latin American archaeology is illustrated in 12 subsequent contributions, penned by 14 authors from seven different countries, and organized into three parts.

Part one includes four papers that deal with history and theory, although I would have added Eduardo Neves' excellent examination of Amazonian archaeology as a fifth contribution. It begins with an interesting reappraisal of Brazilian archaeology by Pedro Paulo Funari, who emphasizes the changing relationship of scientific practice and Brazilian society from the colonial period to the present. Funari provides an excellent, readable summary, and a wonderful bibliography. In drawing our attention to external theoretical contributions

and subsequent local developments, the book parallels evolutionary processes by suggesting that contributions from different individuals at different places and times led to intellectual drift and subsequent isolated development of regional archaeology. While wisely reminding us that “there is no single French archaeology, nor a single Latin American archaeology” (p. 40), José López examines French influence on Uruguayan and Brazilian archaeology. He reviews contributions of early travelers like L  ry to the later works of Rivet, Leroi-Gourhan, and Laming-Emperaire, and their technical, methodological and theoretical impact, particularly in paleolithic and rock art studies. Iraida Vargas Arenas and Mario Sanoja contribute a chapter on social archaeology, which is Latin America’s theoretical alternative to a positivism they consider to be unconcerned with archaeology’s potential contributions to contemporary society. Instead of serving as a testing ground for first world archaeological theories, archaeology can play a role in understanding the societies in which the contributors participate. Their “tropical archaeology” privileges the quotidian, which links general and specific historical processes and is expressed materially in the archaeological record. The problem, of course, lies in application. Although they claim to break away from the chronological blocks of cultural-functionalism, a later contribution by the authors seems to be doing little more than renaming them. Social archaeology has been criticized as a theory not readily applicable to the kinds of evidence upon which archaeologists necessarily rely. Vargas Arena and Sanoja discuss its recent application to urban archaeology, yet these contexts tend to be qualitatively different from the bulk of New World archaeology. A similar point is raised in the next paper, that by Jos   Lanata and Lu  s Borrero. They briefly review the history of hunter-gatherer archaeology in South America, and advocate an understanding of diachronic change through the perspective of evolutionary biology and biogeography. Lanata and Borrero see great promise in the application of evolutionary theory to questions they pose of the stones and bones recovered from their specific archaeological contexts.

The second part of the book presents four papers that examine key issues in Latin American archaeology. Three can be considered as great achievements in the area: early urban centers, the domestication of large mammals, and the expansion of a colossal empire. Linda Manzanilla begins with an exhaustive summary of what we know about the emergence of complex urbanism at Teotihuacan, based on years of multidisciplinary study. Manzanilla traces the development of this impressive city, and offers speculations on sociopolitical organization and symbolic spheres at domestic and state levels. While reading this chapter, I thought of how difficult it would be to explain S  o Paulo through participant observation, let alone through the interpretation of 1000 year-old buried remnants. Duccio Bonavia reviews our current state of knowledge on the poorly known domestication of camelids in Andean South America. Despite years of research effort, we are still unsure even of their ancestry.

Speculation is interesting, but we need more empirical data, and especially the increased application of new techniques that can shed light on a biogeographic past that was devastated by the Conquest. Sanoja and Vargas attempt the difficult task of applying social archaeology to early assemblages in northeastern Venezuela. What we get is background environment and a mixture of cultural ecology, migration, typological analysis, and some old style cultural evolutionary units with new names. It is also difficult to evaluate exactly how Sanoja and Vargas arrived at some of the more theoretical interpretations they apply to their tripartite sequence of local “modes of life.” These concerns are more succinctly raised by Lanata and Borrero who suggest that adherents of Social Archaeology rely “. . . mainly on a typological approach which does not depart from the type of research they criticize,” and that “the language is different but, as far as hunter-gatherers are concerned, the result is a theoretical stance which is difficult to reconcile with the archaeological record” (p. 78). From the vantage points of its frontiers, Rodolfo Raffino and Rubén Stehberg review recent research on the expansion of the enormous Incan empire. In particular, their discussion of the “Inca Problem” raises issues about the unquestioned acceptance of ethnohistoric chronology in lieu of archaeological chronology, and the existence of a longer time frame for the Pax Inca throughout its 1,700,000 km<sup>2</sup> area.

The final section deals with new directions in Latin American archaeology, beginning with César Velandia’s reconstruction of San Agustín cosmology. His new interpretation of this famous yet poorly studied Colombian culture relies on what I consider to be the historic strength of archaeology in northwestern South America, namely analogical use of an extraordinarily rich ethnographic record. In order to recognize the diversity of the “Other,” Velandia implores us “to place one’s own head rather than the frog on the dissecting table” (p. 189). Although this painful strategy may ultimately only help us to know our own heads better, his contribution is an interesting use of native ethnography and myth to search for the underlying logic of a possibly pan-Andean cosmology. Eduardo Neves is well known for his leading role in developing a new understanding of the neotropical lowlands prior to Conquest. He begins his excellent review of changing perspectives in Amazonian archaeology by pointing out that research in this poorly known area has been consistently problem-oriented within an anthropological framework. Neves skillfully guides us through debates on ecological determinism, the use of linguistic models, and the impact of European Conquest, towards the realization of more realistic frameworks for prehispanic Amazonia. I particularly enjoyed Carl Langebaek’s study of pre-Columbian metallurgy and social change, especially for its linkage of theory with data. He challenges the Holy Grail assumption that metalworking and social complexity are necessarily interrelated for political and economic reasons, and demonstrates a convincing relationship between metals and social complexity through identifying the

number of social persona preserved in ornaments. Additionally, he establishes the potential fallacies that can be encountered in the interpretation of foreign or decadent metal objects. Inevitably, the volume closes with Cristóbal Gnecco's paean to the social construction of knowledge, and the demise of alterity at the hands of a relentless global capitalism. He observes that archaeology is not the only valid or legitimate perspective on the past. Although he emphasizes his native multicultural Colombia, this point is certainly valid everywhere. Gnecco considers it paradoxical that anthropologists are not more reflexive, yet I suspect that we are all reflexive to some extent. Perhaps we differ in how we deal with our individual reflexivity. In an ironic twist, Gnecco does not consider it coincidental that archaeologists tend to publish obscure prose in narrowly circulated venues. He finishes by telling us that dialogue not only can never be established between different voices because of their incompatibility, but that it actually destroys alterity. The only way out of this conundrum is to recognize the mutual existence of multivocality. Perhaps naively, I have assumed that this is what anthropology, at least in part, has been doing all along.

Despite the inevitable methodological or theoretical quibbles that we all carry when reading the contributions of our colleagues, I found that this stimulating book made me think. In his introductory chapter, Politis proposes that the book's contributions hope to "... capture the diversity, to reflect on the origin and development, and to explore new areas of research and theoretical-methodological approaches in the archaeology of Latin America" (p. 10). Keeping in mind the constraints of publishing, and the inevitable problems that can arise when dealing with the idiosyncrasies of multiple authors, I believe the book has achieved this in admirable fashion.

*Indians, Markets, & Rainforests: Theory, Methods, Analysis.* Ricardo A. Godoy. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001. xviii + 256 pp., appendix, references, index. \$68.00 (cloth), \$29.00 (paper). ISBN 0-231-11784-1. ISBN 0-231-11785-X. [[www.columbia.edu/cu/cup](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/cup)]

WILLIAM H. FISHER  
*College of William and Mary*

Expansion of markets and trade is often touted as a path forward for the development of rural areas throughout Latin America. There are, in fact, very few social problems analyzed over the past decade that have not provoked one analysis or another suggesting markets and private property ownership as a panacea. The book under review promises a sober and measured consideration of markets and indigenous peoples. The aim is to speak to policy debates and rural initiatives in Latin America in a time of neoliberal reforms. The