

## BOOK REVIEW

# A Review of *The Oxford Handbook of Mesoamerican Archaeology*

*The Oxford Handbook of Mesoamerican Archaeology*, Nichols, D. L., and Pool, C. A., (eds), Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2012

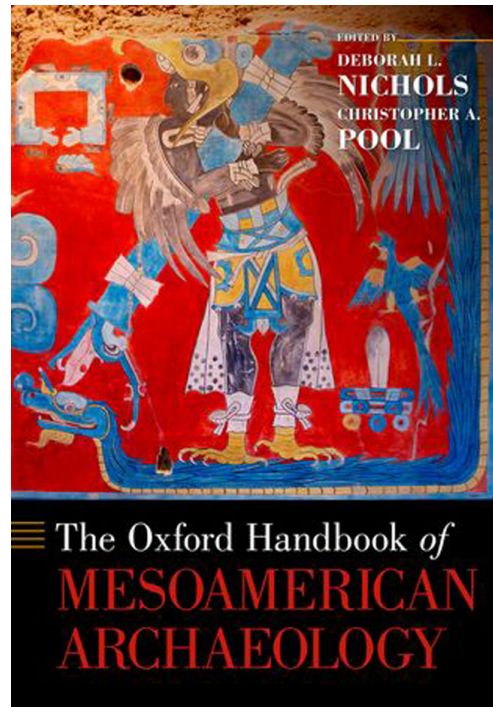
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The *Oxford Handbook of Mesoamerican Archaeology* is intended to be a showcase of the discipline's recent developments and provide a comprehensive - but non-exhaustive - overview of early 21st century work in the region. It is probably one of the most ambitious such projects since the sixteen volume series *Handbook of Middle American Indians* published in the 1960s. It is primarily intended for professionals and students of Mesoamerican archaeology.

The collective of eighty-nine authors is impressive, and includes several world-leading Mesoamericanists, mostly from North American institutions. In addition, there are several contributions from Latin American archaeologists such as Jaime Awe or Oswaldo Chinchilla Maraziegos, and two contributions from European scholars.

The book is comprised of five parts. The first part presents a critical analysis of the development of the discipline in recent years, and as a Public Archaeology MA student it is the one that most appealed to me. It covers themes such as the development of theory and practice in the region, including the functioning of archaeological institutions in Mexico, Belize and Guatemala, indig-



enous archaeology, and the spatial-temporal boundaries of the discipline. One chapter is devoted to the practice of the discipline in El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. Although it may not seem to be enough coverage, it reflects the lack of visibility of these countries in the archaeological record.

The second part focuses on the archaeology of hunter-gatherers and first farmers, and

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is comprised of three chapters only, which is greatly unbalanced compared to the following part, twenty-six chapters on villages, cities, states and empires. This third part features twelve chapters analysing cycles of collapse and regeneration: albeit a major topic within the discipline, it perhaps receives too much exposure in this book. Under this umbrella, a chapter on the Conquest of Mexico is found, which might have been better placed in the section dedicated to the Spanish Conquest and the Archaeology of the Colonial period.

The fourth part of the book consists of comparative topics in Mesoamerican archaeology, and is divided into four subcategories: economies and economic relations (11 chapters), social and political relations (6 chapters), beliefs and rituals (4 chapters), and lastly, art and iconography, calendars, writing and literature (9 chapters). Cross-cultural comparisons are a fruitful approach for our understanding of Mesoamerica, but some chapters seem to be in the wrong category. Chapters 39 and 41, within the 'economy' subcategory, focus more on methods of investigation (aerial reconnaissance or sourcing methods) and seem to be out of place with the later chapters on political economy. Chapters 43, 44 and 45 cover lithics, ceramics and metals respectively, and would perhaps fit in well in their own category centred on resources.

Lastly, the fifth part of the book covers the Conquest and the colonial period. Four chapters, however, do little to recognise the importance of this area of research in the 21st century. Two of them focus on the archaeology of the colonial period in the modern-day state of Mexico, and the other two are a discussion of population and landscape change. There was a missed opportunity here to include a chapter on the Conquest itself, as a period of cultural contact and marked economic, political and social change, or to dwell on this process in other parts of Mesoamerica. There is no dearth of modern research focusing on this area, and the book would gain from a contribution by

Elizabeth Graham or David Pendergast on their work in Belize.

Overall, the *Handbook* accomplishes its objectives since it presents most of the active fields of enquiry of Mesoamerican archaeology. Nevertheless, the book could have given more coverage to themes that have been previously glossed over, such as the archaeology of Costa Rica, Nicaragua and El Salvador. These areas receive one chapter in the first section of the book but are not really further referenced. Chapter 34, which is meant to focus on the Southeastern fringe, covers primarily Honduran archaeology. However, Chapter 8, written by Evans, makes the time and space boundaries of the region under study very clear, which enables the book to define its focus early on.

The book accurately reflects biases within the discipline: some fields of study receive more attention than others, as they traditionally have done. There is a tendency to focus on the monumental, and complex societies. It is particularly striking that only three chapters are devoted to hunter-gatherers and first farmers, while the Classic period receives a lot of attention.

Despite comprising a section on peripheries and frontiers, most of the book seems to consider Mesoamerica as a bounded entity and fails to acknowledge its connections to the wider world. Apart from McGuire's excellent chapter, dwelling on the connections between Mesoamerica and the Southwest/Northwest United States, the other chapters focus on boundaries and interactions within Mesoamerica itself. More could have been included on the links that Mesoamerica entertained, at various stages of its history, with South America, Africa, or the Caribbean Islands. In fact a trade network was present from c. 250 BC to the Conquest that connected the Caribbean, Mesoamerica and South America (Mol 2013, 334).

As a public archaeologist, I was positively surprised with the first part of the book. The study of the social, political and economic context of archaeology is a recent field of

enquiry, and it is refreshing to find chapters dealing with these issues in the *Handbook*. The chapter on indigenous archaeology by Parks and McAnany, albeit really short, is an excellent overview. The book could also have included chapters focused on archaeo-tourism or community archaeology, which are starting to emerge as major themes in the region. A contribution by Anne Pyburn or Richard Leventhal on their recent work would have been welcome.

The *Handbook* strives for breadth of scope rather than depth, which may be a hindrance. Most of the chapters are between 5 and 10 pages long: they come across as summaries of existing research rather than opportunities to provide new insights. However, this fits with the objective of the *Oxford Handbook* series, which is to survey current thinking and research: a lot of the chapters are allegedly 'syntheses'. This Handbook therefore constitutes a foundation for Mesoamericanist stu-

dents and professionals, but acts as a springboard to more extensive reading rather than an exhaustive research tool.

Despite its shortcomings, the *Handbook* should be considered as an excellent resource for students, researchers, and professionals alike: it is a realistic depiction of the discipline at the dawn of the 21st century, and of the general directions of Mesoamerican archaeology. As early as its introduction, it pulls together its main themes and broaches future developments, which enables a holistic understanding of the discipline, and testifies of the high calibre of this book.

### Reference

**Mol, A. A. A.** 2013 Studying Pre-Columbian Interaction Networks: Mobility and Exchange. In Keegan, F. W., Hofman, C. L. and Rodriguez Ramos, R. (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Caribbean Archaeology*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 329–346.

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