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Alexander Geurds, University of Oxford, UK / Leiden University, The Netherlands

The basis of political power in pre-Columbian southern Central America: Notes on dependency and community organization

Abstract:

Archaeological views onto the later pre-Columbian past of southern Central America – roughly defined as including Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, but also merging into Colombia – have struggled to connect with more generalized understandings of early leadership, including prevalent models from neighbouring Mesoamerica. Various studies argue for chiefly authority in the area, while others emphasize more heterarchical, collective forms of leadership. A central tenet across these debates often is the role of gifting and the movement of prestige items. Regarding asymmetrical dependency, case material resides in the presence of large public works, prominently including the creation and maintenance of ceremonial centres across the area and various other expressions of group effort, for example, the sculpting of stone statuary. A significant portion of sculptures also alludes to practices of raiding, head-hunting, and bodily submission, although poor contextual control remains a vexing problem for these aesthetic materials. Here then, the control over individuals to conduct labour, that is, the ability to engage with others serves as a proxy for evidencing power and inequality, but is this a form of asymmetrical dependency or rather an expression of community action? Using a range of materials from the pre-Columbian societies of southern Central America, this paper explores archaeological ways to discern political coercive power from participatory collective projects and asks: If we cannot reliably recognize political mechanisms of control, then what can be understood to have organized societies in the past?

Bio:

Alex Geurds, MA (Leiden et Oxon), PhD (Leiden) currently is Associate Professor at the School of Archaeology, University of Oxford and Associate Professor in the Faculty of Archaeology at Leiden University. He also enjoys a post as Senior Research Fellow at Wolfson College in Oxford. Previously, he held a position as Associate Professor Adjunct at the University of Colorado-Boulder (2008-2021) and served as Academic Director of the Netherlands Research School for Archaeology ARCHON (2015-2018). A Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London and the Royal Anthropological Institute, he has carried out archaeological fieldwork in the Netherlands, the Antilles, Mexico and Nicaragua, and researched museum collections and archives throughout Latin America. He is the founding editor of the book series *The Early Americas: History and Culture* at Brill Publishers. He co-edited *The Routledge Handbook of Archaeology and Globalization* (2017) and is working on a monograph on prehistoric stone sculpture from central Nicaragua. His work has regularly featured in different media, and is further promoted by his role as a National Geographic Explorer. Primarily working on the prehistory of Middle and South America, his broader research interests focus on monumental sculpture, technology and practice in prehistory, archaeological ethics, the contemporary conditions of archaeological fieldwork and the history of archaeology in the Americas.