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Material Relations: The Marriage Figurines of Prehispanic Honduras

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Material Relations: The Marriage Figurines of Prehispanic Honduras

Abstract

Focusing on marriage figurines—double human figurines that represent relations formed through social alliances—Hendon, Joyce, and Lopiparo examine the material relations created in Honduras between AD 500 and 1000, a period when a network of social houses linked settlements of a variety of sizes in the region. The authors analyze these small, seemingly insignificant artifacts using the theory of materiality to understand broader social processes.

They examine the production, use, and disposal of marriage figurines from six sites—Campo Dos, Cerro Palenque, Copán, Currusté, Tenampua, and Travesia—and explore their role in rituals and ceremonies, as well as in the forming of social bonds and the celebration of relationships among communities. They find evidence of historical traditions reproduced over generations through material media in social relations among individuals, families, and communities, as well as social differences within this network of connected yet independent settlements.

Material Relations provides a new and dynamic understanding of how social houses functioned via networks of production and reciprocal exchange of material objects and will be of interest to Mesoamerican archaeologists, anthropologists, and art historians.

Keywords

marriage, archaeology, Honduras, Campo Dos, Cerro Palenque, Copán, Currusté, Tenampua, Travesia

Disciplines

Anthropology | Archaeological Anthropology

Comments

This is the introduction of Dr. Julia Hendon's book, *Material Relations: The Marriage Figurines of Prehispanic Honduras*.

Introduction

This book has multiple goals. First, it demonstrates how an analysis drawing on contemporary theories of materiality can enhance our understanding of broad social processes from a dedicated, detailed study of small things. This is a point that is familiar from other archaeological studies in areas as far removed as the recent history of the United States (Beaudry 2006) and ancient Egypt (Meskell 2004). In our case, the small things are three-dimensional fired clay figures, shaped into images of human beings and animals through a combination of modeling by hand and using molds, produced in Honduras before European contact. Some of these figurines are musical instruments. Their abundance and wide geographic distribution signal their significance to the ancient people who made and used them. We have chosen to concentrate on a particular theme, that of human double figurines representing two figures standing next to each other.

Second, we make an argument for returning to previously excavated and curated collections to interpret them in conjunction with more recent excavation data. It has long been a principle of the code of ethics of the Society for American Archaeology (1996) that archaeologists should undertake work on such collections, yet few such studies exist. We combine information from recently excavated samples of figurines with that derived from collections, now held by museums in Honduras, Europe, and the United States, deposited by early archaeologists and the systematic collectors often referred to as antiquarians. These two goals are global contributions to archaeology, and we hope they make this book interesting for readers not steeped in the specifics of Central American archaeology.

Our study also has specific aims rooted in the local history of archaeological practice in Honduras. The arguments we make turn away from a tradition, initiated in the late nineteenth century, of explaining variation across prehispanic Honduras in terms of a gradient from civilization to barbarism, from states to chiefdoms, from Mesoamerica to an area so inchoate it could only be called the periphery or frontier of the Intermediate Area.

In this early archaeological approach, western Honduras—the zone where a few settlements are found that incorporate inscriptions in the Classic Maya script—is the source driving development throughout most of the rest of Honduras. Sites further east are compared, usually negatively, to these Classic Maya sites, especially the largest and longest studied, Copán. They are described as smaller, simpler, and derivative. The typically smaller size of settlements, and the division of the landscape into smaller territories occupied by a network of settlements sharing traditions of material culture, are viewed as problems to be explained: Why didn't the rest of Honduras become as highly stratified socially as Copán? These arguments portray more economic inequality and greater disparities in power not just as normal but as almost more desirable than less economic inequality and lower differentials in power.

Material culture is viewed through the same normative lens. Ulúa Polychromes for example, are the main Classic period decorated serving, eating, and drinking ware in the lower Ulúa Valley, Lake Yojoa, and Comayagua Valley regions, where they develop out of earlier local traditions independently of Copán or the Maya heartland (Joyce 1993a; see also Baudez and Becquelin 1973; Joyce 1985, 1987a, 1988a; Robinson 1989; Viel 1978, 1993). Ulúa Polychromes have been described as *Mayoid*, a term we reject because of its inappropriate implication of secondhand copying of an existing Maya tradition that somehow represented an aspirational ideal for Ulúa Polychrome producing and using societies, an assumption not borne out by the archaeological record in these areas (Hendon 2007, 2009, 2010; Hendon and Joyce 1993; Hendon, Joyce, and Sheptak 2009; Joyce 1986, 1993a; Joyce and Hendon 2000; Joyce, Hendon, and Lopiparo 2009a).

From the perspective of twenty-first-century social archaeology, these older perspectives entirely miss the point about the variability we can document in Honduras. We should take a region like this, where between AD 500 and 1000 a network of social relations linked settlements of a variety of sizes, as an interesting place to understand the diversity of ways that human beings can inhabit a landscape. We should not take for granted an older evolutionary assumption that human societies always become more complex. We should be critical of the implicit endorsement of complexity of this kind, which is better characterized as inequality. Consequently, because Honduras has a history of being studied as

a site where a developed world met an underdeveloped one, one of the things we are impelled to do in this book is to take seriously the internal dynamics of each of these small-scale societies.

When we take Honduran societies east of Copán as the center of analysis, we realize that the comparative perspective has had two notable legacies, and again, we want to counter these here. The first is that Copán, as the supposed engine of political and economic relations in Honduras, comes to loom particularly large; other places and their particularities are swamped. Treating the archaeology of northern and central Honduras as Mayoid, putatively derived from Copán, impeded the recognition of practices that link areas of northern Honduras with Maya sites in Belize and the Guatemalan Petén and totally obscured relations of areas of central Honduras with Nicaragua and Costa Rica (Joyce 1993a). In this tradition, Copán itself is treated as a token of a much bigger whole—of an ideal Classic Maya—for which it ironically serves as an example of peripheral-ity. From this perspective, even Copán is not truly Maya, and the rest of western and central Honduras is at best a bad Mayoid replica of peripheral Maya-ness.

These traditional archaeological analyses “mayanize” Honduras (Euraque 1998). Mayanization erases or covers up the histories of other indigenous groups that occupied Honduran territory. In the region we are most concerned with, this includes speakers of multiple Lenca languages and their immediate eastern neighbors, speakers of Tol and Pech languages. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century nationalist approaches to archaeology are perpetuated when archaeologists mayanize the Honduran past (Joyce 2003a, 2008a). In fact, as we argue in this book, this approach forces scholars into a level of analysis of entire populations joined only by language. This is a poor fit to the analytic levels at which we can see social action taking place: the household, the village, and the town. For this reason, it would not be enough simply to define bounded areas where presumed speakers of Care Lenca, Toquegua, Tol, and Pech bordered the Chorti Maya of Copán. Historical information in particular urges us to assume that people in at least some parts of prehispanic Honduras were multilingual, and that their self-identity existed at the level of the family and the town (Sheptak 2007). Our social analysis needs to be undertaken at these levels and without any hint of models equating language spoken, material traditions, and ethnic identity, models that are clearly relics of nineteenth-century nation-building (Kuper 1999).

So in this book we undertake a social archaeology of western Honduras, not a culture history. Our account fits into the time-space frameworks that early twentieth-century archaeology established while it contests the boundedness taken as evidence of peoples in culture historical models. Instead, we treat broader distributions of making and using similar things as evidence of

historical traditions reproduced over generations through practices by actors using material media in social relations between individuals, families, and communities (see also Pauketat 2001).

The earliest evidence of such a network of localized societies composed of households organized in villages from Honduras comes from the period roughly from 1500 to 900 BC. Earlier evidence of human habitation does exist (e.g., Rue, Webster, and Traverse 2002; Scheffler 2009), but it is with the more permanent villages that we see localized traditions of pottery develop at sites like Copán (Viel and Hall 1997; Hall and Viel 2004), Yarumela (Dixon et al. 1994), Los Naranjos (Baudez and Becquelin 1973), and Puerto Escondido (Joyce and Henderson 2001). Raw material from obsidian sources located in southern Honduras and adjacent Guatemala, and others in northwest Honduras, was in use in these widely scattered villages, at first for flake tools produced in a bipolar industry and later for production of blades from prepared cores (Joyce et al. 2004). The exchange of obsidian across the Honduran territory is a visible and durable sign of what probably were routes for the exchange of other raw and worked materials (such as shell) and cultivated plants like cacao. These early farming villages also produced the earliest evidence of figurines (Cummins 2006; Joyce 2003c, 2008c). Some figurines were used in burials, including in caves away from settlements (Henderson 1992). Toward the end of this period, a few places began to employ marble and jade as luxury goods (Garber et al. 1993; Joyce and Henderson 2002; Luke et al. 2003).

After 900 BC, Copán, Yarumela, Los Naranjos, and Puerto Escondido continued to be occupied and many other villages appeared (figure 0.1). Where multiple villages exist in a region, as in northwest Honduras, preferences in vessel shape and finish and figurine manufacture are similar (Joyce, Hendon, and Sheptak 2008), suggesting a close connection between networks of villages. The importation of obsidian from a diversity of sources continues as well. In a very few sites, notably Yarumela and Los Naranjos, monumental earthen platforms were constructed (Joyce 2004, 2007a; Dixon et al. 1994). Measuring up to 20 meters tall and 100 meters on a side, these massive constructions co-occur with some stone sculpture—at Los Naranjos stylistically related to the Gulf Coast Olmec style (Joyce and Henderson 2002). A few individuals are buried with body ornaments made of jade, and in these areas, indications suggest that greater economic inequality was being linked to ideologies of difference to underwrite differential political power.

In Honduras, these developments of greater inequality generally seem to have been countered. Instead of ever-increasing stratification, what we see in the succeeding period, from 400 BC to AD 500, is the growth of small villages

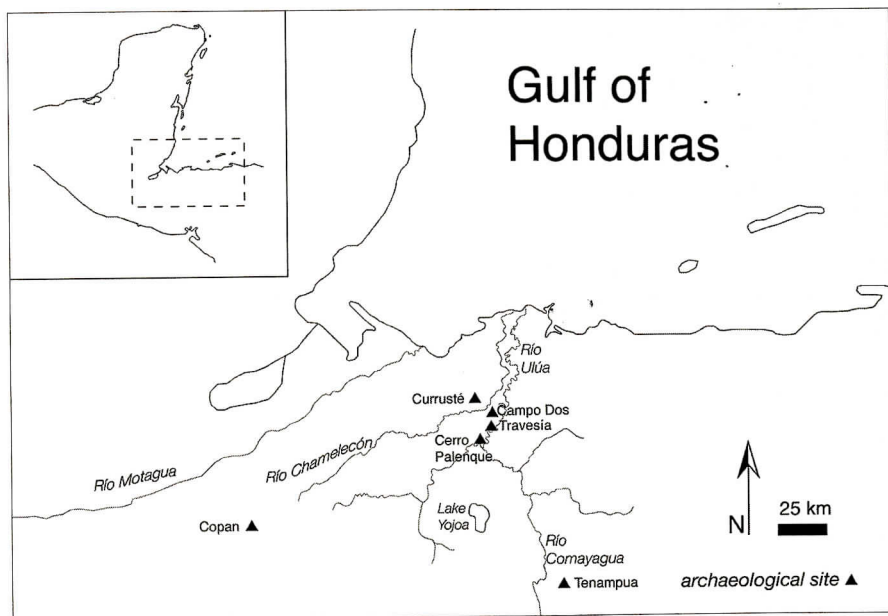


FIGURE 0.1. Honduran archaeological sites discussed in the text. Drawing by Rosemary A. Joyce, used by permission.

and towns—some quite prosperous—but with limited evidence of institutionalized social distinction or the conversion of wealth into power. Settlements occupied in Honduras during the beginning of this period used, produced, and also imported from other areas certain new vessel forms with resist decorative techniques and finish, called Usulután resist, that find analogs from Chiapas in Mexico to El Salvador (Demarest and Sharer 1982, 1986; Goralski 2009). Yet there is little evidence for political integration of even small regions in Honduras.

The main site where there appears to be growing social inequality during this period is Copán, where inscriptions and monuments made between AD 250 and 400 suggest a few families or individuals were claiming sanctioned roles as a ruling group (Stuart 2005). Researchers suggest that some of these families drew on ties to towns and cities farther west in developing their political authority. Tombs of some of these early Copán nobles contain vessels that, while locally made, adopt preferences for form and finish typical of a network of sites emulating distant Teotihuacan, Mexico.

The period from AD 500 to 1000 is the best known archaeologically throughout Honduras. Archaeologists have traditionally used different styles of

polychrome (painted) pottery as guides to delimiting boundaries between cultural traditions during this time. In western Honduras, in an area reaching from Copán to the Naco Valley along the Chamelecón River, Copador Polychrome and Gualpopa Polychrome were most common (Beaudry 1984). From the lower Ulúa Valley on the Caribbean Coast to Lake Yojoa, the Comayagua basin, and beyond, variants of Ulúa Polychromes dominated (Joyce 1993a, 1993b; Viel 1978). Because they are so varied, Ulúa Polychromes can be subdivided into groups made and used at different points between AD 500 and 1000.

The earliest, produced before AD 650, are *Dedalos* and *Santa Rita* classes, and they are also the most uniform across the entire area. By the time that the latest Ulúa Polychromes were developed in the late eighth century, there was enough diversity in regional preferences for vessel shape and design layout that these classes—*Santana*, *Selva*, *Nebla*, and *Tenampua*—can be assigned to specific regions of origin. *Santana* class was produced in the lower Ulúa Valley; *Selva* class is most common near Lake Yojoa; *Nebla* and *Tenampua* classes appear to be typical of the Comayagua Valley. In Comayagua, the latest versions of Ulúa Polychromes, developing after AD 750, are *Tenampua* Polychromes. They develop into *Las Vegas* Polychrome, a new tradition that continues until ca. AD 1200.

In most regions, abundant evidence of settlements dating to this period is found in the form of collapsed stone buildings or stone or earthen platforms that support buildings of stone or more perishable materials. There is a considerable range in size of the largest of these settlements. Most areas of western Honduras have large towns with between 100 and 300, and at most one town in a region with up to 600 buildings. The exception again is Copán. Most settlement in the Copán Valley is concentrated in a 1 square kilometer area, with neighborhoods of buildings and patios surrounding the religious and political heart of the settlement. This area contains over 1,000 structures along the river and includes two ballcourts used successively before and after AD 800 (Webster 1999, 16–21). In the hinterland, up to an additional 1,000 structures have been mapped (Fash and Long 1983). Because sites from this period are easily visible on the surface, many household archaeologists interested in the practices of everyday life have excavated them (Gonlin 1993, 2012; Hendon 1991, 2010). These studies provide rich evidence of the continued use of imported obsidian and locally produced pottery in households that were the center of social life and ritual practice.

Figurines and figural artifacts form part of household assemblages in a wide area, from Copán east to the lower Ulúa Valley and south to Comayagua. While most figurines are locally made, larger collections from individual sites often

contain examples that originated elsewhere. The same is true for polychrome pottery. As noted earlier, distinct styles develop across Honduras, and household assemblages at some sites include pots from other traditions. In every area, some households have more diverse possessions, and a few have large numbers of things from distant sources. Yet in most Honduran sites of this period, there are no obvious households living in much larger or more lavishly decorated buildings. The main exception, again, is Copán.

Our focus on human double figurines led us to identify six sites for discussion, each a place where one or more human pairs were represented in figurines: Copán, Tenampua, Campo Dos, Currusté, Travesía, and Cerro Palenque. One cluster was recovered at Copán, located in the highlands of western Honduras. Copán is the largest, and apparently most hierarchical, of the six settlements that we discuss in this book. Located in a 25-square-kilometer valley along the Copán River, a tributary of the Motagua River, Copán, as noted above, is composed of approximately 2,000 structures. The remaining sites we discuss are located further east, in two regions along the drainage of the Ulúa River. Far upriver, on its largest tributary, the Humuya or Comayagua River, is the upland basin of Comayagua. Covering an area of approximately 550 square kilometers, the Comayagua basin was occupied by 1000 BC (Dixon 1989, 1992; Dixon et al. 1994). During the period when central Copán saw a decline, ca. AD 800–1000, one town, Tenampua, dominated the basin from an elevated plateau, its few approaches blocked with massive walls. Remains of more than 500 buildings, including a ballcourt, were mapped here (Popenoe 1936). Tenampua was far larger than any earlier site in the Comayagua basin, most of which were located on the floodplain of the river.

The remaining sites that we discuss are located far downriver from Tenampua, along the Ulúa River Valley just before it flows into the Gulf of Honduras. The lower Ulúa Valley covers 2,400 square kilometers. More than 500 archaeological sites have been documented here, the earliest dating before 1500 BC. Many houses located along the Ulúa River and its major tributaries—the Humuya and Chamelecón—were buried by years of river flooding that left behind rich soils. Some villages in the central floodplain are still evident on the surface as large, low earthen platforms. Such earthen platforms supported the foundations of multiple buildings and work areas. Campo Dos is an example of a small site of this type (Lopiparo 1994). Located on an abandoned course of the Chamelecón River, it was made up of at least three platforms and also incorporated a stone ballcourt (Swain 1995).

A few sites in the central floodplain of the lower Ulúa Valley included clusters of stone buildings around formal courtyards. Travesía is the largest known; it

originally contained approximately 250 structures, including a ballcourt (Joyce 1987a; Sheehy 1982; Robinson, Hasemann, and Veliz 1979; Sheehy and Veliz 1977; Stone 1941). Similar sites are found in zones of low hills that border the floodplain west of the Ulúa River. Currusté, north of the Chamelecón River, is one of these; Cerro Palenque, south of the Chamelecón River, at the union of the Ulúa and its smallest tributary, the Río Blanco, is another.

Currusté, like Travesía, was composed of about 250 buildings (Hasemann, van Gerpen, and Veliz 1977). It may have included a now-destroyed ballcourt. Cerro Palenque began as a smaller hilltop settlement, including five courtyards and about 30 structures dating before AD 800 (Joyce 1988b, 1991). After that point, the site expanded along the adjacent ridges and became the single largest prehispanic settlement known in the lower Ulúa Valley, with more than 500 buildings, including a ballcourt and major plaza (Joyce 1991; Hendon 2010).

Everyday practices that emerged after AD 500 in the lower Ulúa Valley were quite similar from one of these sites to another: Ulúa Polychrome pottery and figurines of similar construction and appearance were made and used in house compounds of comparable size, and even ritual practices were similar. After about AD 700, differences between sites in this region become more visible. Distinct pottery types with fine clay textures were made and used in specific sites or localized areas: Quitamay group, Tacamiche group, Lasaní Orange, Baracoa Fine Paste, and Blanco Grey.

Quitamay vessels, which reach a peak of popularity at Currusté, have yellow pastes with relatively fine and evenly distributed nonplastics (Beaudry-Corbett and Joyce 1993). Vessels are slipped solid red orange rather than adding red and black paint to orange pottery to create polychromes. Decoration is provided by pre-slip geometric grooving or, more commonly, post-slip geometric incising. Usually done while the pots were still soft enough for the clay in the incised areas to be displaced without forming rough edges, these incisions are often further softened by the final burnishing of the slipped vessels.

More widely distributed in an area stretching from Campo Dos to Cerro Palenque, including Travesía, are Tacamiche vessels. These are miniature vessels, effigies of everything from unslipped jars to carved marble vases (Beaudry-Corbett and Joyce 1993). Executed on a distinctive fine paste fired to pink to brown, with well sorted, uniform nonplastics added, Tacamiche group vessels are exceptionally varied in finish—some varieties slipped orange, others left unslipped, and a very few white slipped. Tacamiche vessels can have mold-impressed panels and added red or black paints. Some have post-fire blue paint. In paste, slip, and paint, Tacamiche vessels are very similar to some contemporary figurines made in the same area.

Lasaní Orange appears to have been made at Cerro Palenque, where it was defined originally (Joyce 1988a, 1993c). These are mold-made bowls, with thick walls made of an almost chalky light yellow paste, with no nonplastics visible without magnification. Bowl interiors are covered with an orange or reddish-orange slip, with a glossy finish not well bonded to the body.

Baracoa Fine Paste vessels are extremely thin walled, have no added nonplastics, and are fired normally to a tan or sometimes orange brown color (Joyce 1988a, 1993c). With new shapes, including a tripod support dish and periform vases, Baracoa Fine Paste is clearly related to the western Maya Altar Fine Orange group (Joyce 1987b). Compositional analysis confirms that Baracoa Fine Paste is made from local clays (Lopiparo and Hendon 2009). The group is an important component of the assemblage at Cerro Palenque after AD 850, but examples are found in many other sites in the lower Ulúa Valley, including Travesía (Sheehy 1982).

Blanco Grey shares the same dish shape as Baracoa Fine Paste, but vessels have a dark brown paste with abundant, well-sorted nonplastics (Joyce 1988a, 1993c; Lopiparo, Joyce, and Hendon 2005). Examples are found in the Cuyumapa Valley, east of the lower Ulúa Valley, where the same paste is used for a wider range of vessels, suggesting the type originated there. Blanco Grey was originally defined based on samples from Cerro Palenque, where it was probably present as a result of exchanges with the Cuyumapa region. It also dates after AD 850.

These fine paste ceramic groups are particularly important to us for two reasons. First, they allow us to trace patterns of interaction at a fine scale within the lower Ulúa Valley. Second, in many cases they share technology with figurines made at the same time or in the same sites. They direct our attention to aspects of figurines we might not otherwise consider.

The recovery of figurines in modern archaeological research at Copán, Currusté, and Cerro Palenque conducted since the 1970s allows us to consider the contexts of use and discard of figurines in fine detail. At the other sites—Tenampua, Campo Dos, and Travesía—figurines depicting human pairs were recovered in research before 1950. In these cases, the fine detail of contexts of recovery in more recent studies may be missing, but often there are larger samples of artifacts than more modern research typically recovers. Understanding the contexts involved at Campo Dos and Travesía is enhanced by results from modern research that produced evidence of the small-scale production of fired clay vessels and artifacts and their use and disposal (Lopiparo 1994; Joyce 1987a).

Our emphasis throughout each chapter is on providing an understanding of the ways that similar practices of figurine production, use, and disposal at

these sites served to create social relations, and at the same time, how variation in these practices within and between sites testifies to social differences among a network of connected yet independent settlements. Each chapter illuminates most strongly one aspect of the practices involved. At Copán, where we start, human double figurines were used in practices surrounding death and burial, moments when social networks were refashioned as the living became ancestors and juniors became elders. Considering the practices that took place at Tenempua, a site long regarded as significant for its defensive features, allows us to explore how independent towns in prehispanic Honduras engaged in competition and conflict through social alliances.

At Campo Dos we encounter our first evidence for production of fired clay artifacts as a critical social resource. Campo Dos forms part of a network of towns and small villages in the lower Ulúa Valley that, while not politically united, were linked by common ritual and daily practices. Currusté, a larger town in this network, provides substantial evidence of the kinds of events in which families and individuals in the largest towns commemorated their ancestors and links with others. At Travesía, some families drew on other practices to begin to create more hierarchical distinction than is seen in contemporary towns and villages. Here we examine how the use of figurines and the social relations that they were used to effect were transformed by the introduction of other social relations and material practices.

Cerro Palenque, where we end our discussion, begins as a small settlement contemporary with the other Ulúa Valley towns discussed, and likely with a strong historical tie to Travesía. After AD 800, it grows to an unprecedented size, and one family gains greater prominence through practices that mix tradition and innovation, including continued use of figurines to commemorate in material form the social relations that bound residents together. Here our focus on paired human figures as subjects of figurines provides us one last, subtly different example that may be testimony to a different logic for establishing and commemorating social relations.

The story we have to tell begins at Copán with an object excavated in the 1980s. Likely made in the eighth century, it was this object that drew our original attention to figurines depicting human pairs, and it is by detailed attention to the figurine itself and the context where it was recovered that we are able to begin to sketch out how figurines created material social relations in prehispanic Honduras.