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Archaeology of Formative Ecuador

J. Scott Raymond and Richard L. Burger, Editors

Jeffrey Quilter, General Editor

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ARCHAEOLOGY OF FORMATIVE ECUADOR

This volume is dedicated to these five pioneers of
the archaeology of Formative Ecuador.



Donald W. Lathrap



Clifford Evans



Carlos Zevallos Menéndez



Emilio Estrada



Betty J. Meggers

ARCHAEOLOGY OF FORMATIVE ECUADOR

A Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks
7 and 8 October 1995

J. Scott Raymond and Richard L. Burger, *Editors*

Jeffrey Quilter
General Editor

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Preface

Students in introductory classes in New World Archaeology invariably learn of the precocious cultures of the Ecuadorian coast. They learn that the great coastal desert that stretches northwards from Chile and continues through Peru ends in southern Ecuador and is succeeded by beaches backed by tropical forest. They learn that along those palm-fringed shores, into Colombia, are found the earliest New World ceramic traditions. They learn of the controversy of where and how pottery came into the lives of coastal people more than 5,000 years ago. Students also commonly learn of the fascinating tradition of Valdivia clay figurines and the similarities between Valdivia ceramics and the carved gourds found at Huaca Prieta, Peru. They also may be told of the stylistic affinities between Chorrera symbolism and those of Cupisnique and Chavín as in evidence on beautifully crafted ceramic vessels.

Students are taught of how Ecuador's location in relation to northern tropical waters and the Humboldt Current, to the south, placed it in an advantageous position. The red-rimmed, spiny oyster, *Spondylus princeps*, is found in the warm ocean off the Ecuadorian coast but not in Peruvian waters. Thus, ancient Ecuadorians were in a position to provide their southern neighbors with spondylus, the very food of the gods more valued than gold. The combination of environmental factors and the ideology of preciousness associated with these molluscs led to a cultural dynamic of interchange among the peoples of much of western South and Central America that lasted for hundreds of years.

Those professors with interests in environmental issues may spend more time discussing the rich biodiversity of Ecuador. Cold and warm currents were both present off the coast and the abundance of different maritime resources was matched by environmental richness on the land. Ecuador partakes of the same vertical stacking of environmental zones, with their different resources, along the sides of the Andes as occurs in other western South American nations. With tropical forest on both sides of the mountains, early humans were able to exploit a wide variety of resources relatively quickly and without the constricting effects of coastal deserts. This distinct environmental setting may have been crucial in the rapid development of early Ecuadorian cultures. And so, the student also may learn of the early adoption of maize and other domestic plants in Ecuador.

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Unfortunately, unless the professor in question is a North Andean specialist, the topics mentioned above are about all these students are likely to learn of ancient Ecuador beyond its role, at the end of prehistory, in the dynastic struggles of the last Inka emperors. Ecuador, like its northern neighbors in the Intermediate Area, lies in the shadows of the pyramids and other monumental constructions cast by the Andean civilizations to the south and Mesoamerican cultures to the north. This is unfortunate, for the prehistory of ancient Ecuador is rich and fascinating and the amount of new information we have learned regarding it, especially in the last two decades, is great.

No single symposium or volume of the length or size to which resources commonly are devoted could do justice to the amount of information now available on Ecuadorian prehistory. This volume and the symposium on which it was based were devoted, therefore, to the archaeology of Formative Ecuador in order to bring new information on one of the most important periods of the region's past to the attention of New World scholars. While the volume includes two chapters on ideology and iconography, the focus is distinctly archaeological, with an emphasis on the fundamentals of archaeological science, including settlement patterns, subsistence, health, and ceramic variability. So too, there is extensive coverage of issues of chronology.

The editors and I decided to supplement the volume with four appendices in order to provide current perspectives on all the regions of Ecuador as an aid to future research. One of the great advances in our understanding of the Formative period in the northern Andes is a growing awareness and appreciation for extensive and intensive settlement throughout the region at an early time. How people in those different regions interacted with one another and the consequences of those interactions remain to be more fully investigated. Recognition of the role of volcanism and other environmental factors are now entering into the evaluations of such dynamics to a much greater degree and with the potential for much greater chronological control than ever before. The volume then is both a summary of work to date and a chart for future action. It reflects how far we have advanced and how far we have yet to go. Moreover, it is the hope of the authors and editors that this volume will serve a useful role as a reference for the great amount of work on the Ecuadorian Formative that remains to be done.

Jeffrey Quilter
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Introduction

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For many decades, the archaeology of the Peruvian highlands and coastal desert has outshone Ecuadorian archaeology. The earliest evidence of complex societies, monumental architecture, and associated art and iconography in the western hemisphere came from Peru. This “nuclear area” was also credited as one of the world’s hearths of plant and animal domestication and as a center of technological innovation in metallurgy, hydraulic agriculture and other fields. Understandably, most archaeologists have been attracted to Peru, with its rich, easily accessible archaeological record.

In recent decades, however, a growing number of archaeologists have turned their attention to Ecuador. Civil strife in Peru during the 1980s and 1990s by the Sendero Luminoso and the Tupac Amaru revolutionary groups reinforced this trend. The tremendous amount of new data and the new interpretations coming from the work there are casting a different light on Ecuadorian prehistory and on the role of Ecuadorian culture played in the development of Andean civilizations. It has been a multinational effort, with investigators from Ecuador, the United States, Canada, Great Britain, France, Spain, and Germany. The most exciting field research has focused on the Formative period in Ecuador, raising questions about the early social, technological, economic, religious, and political development in the Andes.

This volume derives from the Dumbarton Oaks Symposium on the Archaeology of Formative Ecuador. The stimulus for organizing this conference was the perception that while investigations on the Ecuadorian Formative had been advancing significantly, the results were known only to a small group of spe-

cialists involved directly in the research. In contrast to Peru, no general synthesis on Ecuadorian prehistory had been written since 1966, and much of the recent research has appeared only in Ecuadorian publications not easily accessible to the broader archaeological community. The organizers of the symposium saw an opportunity to remedy this situation and to synthesize the progress of the last two decades. Thus participants focused on specific aspects of the Ecuadorian Formative in order to ensure broad coverage of the subject. Among the contributors are several investigators who have been actively involved in this research for the past two decades. Their research, however, was built on a foundation of fieldwork and synthesis carried out from the 1950s to the early 1970s. Hence, this volume is dedicated to Emilio Estrada, Clifford Evans, Donald W. Lathrap, Betty J. Meggers, and Carlos Zevallos Menéndez, who were responsible for much of the earlier research that stimulated debate and piqued general interest about the Ecuadorian Formative.

Although it was Geoffrey Bushnell who first *excavated* and published Valdivia ceramics, it was Emilio Estrada who first *recognized* that the pottery style belonged to the Early Formative, and it was his joint research with Betty Meggers and Clifford Evans that first established its great antiquity (late fourth millennium B.C.). The fact that pottery in Ecuador predated the earliest known pottery in Peru by more than 1,000 years was startling news at the time and was not accepted with equanimity by most archaeologists, nor was the assertion of Meggers, Evans, and Estrada (1965) that the ceramic technology was brought to Ecuador from Japan. Meggers, Evans, and Estrada were also responsible for raising the consciousness among archaeologists about other Formative Ecuadorian cultures, notably Machalilla and Chorrera. Meggers's 1966 book *Ecuador* made Ecuadorian archaeology accessible to the general public, students, and professionals for the first time in an easily read form and called attention to the precocious development of ceramic technology.

Carlos Zevallos Menéndez carried out his research on the Formative independently from Meggers, Evans, and Estrada. He is widely known because his excavations revealed that Valdivians were farmers, cultivating maize among other crops. Donald Lathrap, who saw Valdivia as a product of demographic expansion from the neotropical floodplains, was attracted to Zevallos's agrarian view of Valdivia and rejected the Japanese origin hypothesis. The appearance of early pottery production in Ecuador and, by extension, the emergence of early agriculture excited Lathrap because of his broader research agenda on the history and potential of the tropical forest for human development, and his conviction that these environments had been underestimated and misinterpreted by prehistorians and ethnographers.

Introduction

The debate among these protagonists was heated and sometimes acrimonious. It did, however, attract the interest of other archaeologists, and it stimulated a new generation of archaeologists to focus their own research on issues raised by the debate, as well as to define additional sets of research questions worthy of investigation. Now the debate is less heated. The verbal exchanges are more measured. But the issues debated are no less important and no less exciting.

Although we have chosen to honor five individuals for their pioneering research on the Ecuadorian Formative, there are several others worthy of mention as well. In the mid-1960s, Edward Lanning fielded a research project on the Santa Elena peninsula and brought a team of graduate students to the area. Among the important contributions of Lanning's project was the confirmation of the early dating of Valdivia and a refined seriation of the ceramics, which established the eight-phase chronology used by the authors of this volume. Lanning's concern with chronological precision grew out of his training in Peruvian archaeology garnered from John Rowe. His pioneering research on the Preceramic cultures of the Peruvian central coast in collaboration with Thomas Patterson likewise led him to initiate research on the Preceramic cultures of Ecuador's coast. Although Lanning never fully published his Ecuadorian investigations, his seminal research eventually resulted in the definition of the Las Vegas culture. Also, regional surveys by Lanning's team showed that Valdivia sites were to be found in the river valleys and not just along the coast and in coastal lagoons.

Olaf Holm, late director of the Museo Antropológico del Banco Central del Ecuador in Guayaquil, must also be mentioned. Holm collaborated with Zevallos in the excavation of San Pablo, an important Valdivia site. More importantly, over many years, he provided encouragement and support to several generations of archaeologists carrying out research on the Ecuadorian Formative. We invited Holm to the symposium, but unfortunately, because of failing health, he was unable to participate or submit a paper.

Another pioneer was the late Donald Collier, who in the 1940s, assisted by John Murra, carried out investigations at Cerro Narrío and other sites in the highlands that later proved to be of Formative age. In his later years, Collier, like Holm, played a critical role in supporting and encouraging the Formative research of others.

The late Presley Norton, among those encouraged by Collier, had an intense interest in Formative archaeology. With his former wife, Leonor Pérez, he amassed a significant private collection of Formative ceramics, which Collier brought to the Field Museum in Chicago for exhibition. It formed the basis for the richly illustrated and evocative book, *Ancient Ecuador: Culture, Clay and Cre-*

activity by Lathrap, Collier, and Chandra (1975). Norton also discovered and was the first to excavate the site of Loma Alta, which demonstrated that Valdivia settlements were present deep in the coastal valleys far from the earliest known manifestations of the ceramic style along the shoreline.

Henning Bischof's excavations at the Valdivia typesite, established the existence of a pre-Valdivia, Preceramic occupation on the Ecuadorian coast. Additionally, his discovery of distinctive ceramics, San Pedro, raised the possibility that there was a ceramic industry contemporary with, or earlier than, the early Valdivia ceramics. His investigations of other Formative sites on the Ecuadorian coast are also noteworthy, as is his description and seriation of Engoroy ceramics.

The late Pedro Porras carried out excavations at several Formative sites. These included the Valdivia site of El Encanto on La Puná Island, the Machalilla site of La Ponga in the Valdivia valley, and the site of Cotocollao on the outskirts of Quito. Father Porras was an energetic fieldworker who always published the results of his excavations.

There are many individuals actively engaged in the archaeology of the Ecuadorian Formative who did not present papers at the symposium but whose research has contributed significantly to the chapters in this volume. Notable among these are Stephen Athens, Laurie Beckwith, Jonathan Damp, Evan Engwall, Terence Grieder, Jean Guffroy, Judy Kreid, Ronald Lippi, Collin McEwan, Michael Muse, Patricia Netherly, Dolores Piperno, Arthur Rostoker, John Staller, David Stemper, and Marcello Villaba. Betsy Hill, Eugene McDougal, and Allison Paulsen, although no longer actively involved in fieldwork, should also be recognized for their significant contributions, as should late archaeologists Francisco Huerta Rendon, Emil Peterson, and Julio Viteri.

Conversely, Ernesto Salazar did present a paper on Formative occupations in the Ecuadorian Oriente but chose not to submit a chapter for this volume. We are grateful to him for his contribution to the symposium and look forward to the results of his research once it is further developed.

Those who read all of the chapters herein will note that there is variation in the terminology for the subdivisions of the Formative chronology and in the correlation of the absolute and relative chronologies. Such discrepancies and disagreements reflect the uneven record of the Formative among the different regions of Ecuador and the lack of consensus on matters chronological. We chose not to enforce a single standard terminology and correlation. Instead, we have added four appendices, which summarize and evaluate the Formative period radiocarbon dates for each region of Ecuador. These supplementary contributions should clarify the regional chronologies and their relationships.

Introduction

In closing, we wish to express our thanks to Elizabeth Hill Boone, the Director of Pre-Columbian Studies at Dumbarton Oaks at the time of conference planning, for encouraging us to organize a symposium on the Ecuadorian Formative and for her advice and help. We also thank Jeffrey Quilter, Director of Pre-Columbian Studies, for his contributions to making the symposium a success. We thank him as well for the help, advice, and patience he showed as we labored to turn this manuscript into published form.