
El Salvador has been all but ignored by Mesoamerican archaeologists. Few excavations have been undertaken, fewer still have been published. Thus, it is impossible to overestimate the importance of this report on the University of Pennsylvania’s excavations in the highlands of western El Salvador. The three volumes provide an initial view of the prehistory of the region, as well as some new and exciting approaches to artifact analysis.

The first volume documents the excavations in the Chalchuapa zone, including Bruce Anderson’s trenches into the stratified middens which provided the artifactual sequences (extending back to 1000 B.C.). Volumes II and III consist of analysis and interpretations of artifacts (Payson Sheets), figurines (Bruce Dahlin), and ceramics (Robert Sharer). Each analysis is independent of the others and a separate sequence is established for each material category. This original approach cross-checks the various lines of evidence and allows for comparison of the differing rates of change within each industry. Of particular interest is Sheets’ brilliant lithic analysis which emphasizes manufacturing techniques and their refinement through time. The more traditional type-variety analysis of ceramics is quite thorough and is supplemented by modal studies. Finally, Sharer’s conclusions draw on all lines of evidence to reconstruct the culture history of western El Salvador and the changing nature of the Maya frontier.

Clearly, The Prehistory of Chalchuapa marks a turning point in the archaeology of El Salvador, a solid foundation for future research. The innovative nature of the analyses, the excellence of the descriptions, and the importance of the results allow little room for criticism. The only serious flaw is the absence of a section to thoroughly coordinate the separate sequences of artifacts, figurines, and ceramics. Intersite comparison would be less difficult if the independent analyses of industries were balanced by a subsequent reunification of coeval materials.

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