

Cristóbal Gnecco · Carl Langebaek
Editors

Against Typological Tyranny in Archaeology

A South American Perspective

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Introduction: Against Typological Tyranny

Cristóbal Gnecco and Carl Langebaek

Typological thinking is our guide in the world, the lens through which we categorize (emotions, fellows, plants, stars, cultures). We can only avoid it if we get up rather early every day to invent the world anew, from the beginning and thoroughly; if we accept the burdensome task of creating from scratch the categories that now preexist us, and with which we forded day-to-day waters, but that would no longer exist. The task would be arduous and endless and, provided it ends, it would have to start again the next morning and, well, until the end of eternity.

However, if we cannot live without typological thinking, we can at least escape its tyranny—such is the purpose of the chapters in this book. What does this mean? Several things. Firstly, accepting that extant typologies order the world, that they reduce it to manageable proportions, does not mean that we should also accept that it only fits in them and that we cannot invent new categories, new ways to interpret, and new analytical avenues. Secondly, typologies have a (unnecessary) tendency to universalize; to be more precise, the scientific (ab)use of typologies provided them with a universal character that is not part of their definition—typologies are universal only to the extent that the theory that builds need them to be. Thirdly, typological tyranny essentializes because it demands that its categorizations be noncontingent to time and space. Fourthly, typologies, like any other social product, do not escape ideological struggles; they are not innocent and neutral constructs but power devices. Typological thinking is also a political theory; for example, evolutionism is solidly based on typologies that translate cultural differences into temporal hierarchies, thus feeding colonialism. In other words, they are not happy disciplinary findings as much as mechanisms acting within enduring power structures.

Typological thinking in archeology is as old as the discipline itself; both are related to the formation of national states and to colonial expansion as providers of cultural hierarchies and a new temporality—that of modernity. Typologies in archeology have been, from the start, part of the horizon of politics. The nineteenth century is a typological century (and political, of course, with the imprint of the bourgeois triumph). However, since confrontations to the bourgeois order became real threats to its hegemony, the historical sense was filed (and typologies along with it): the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first three or four of the twentieth century could breathe without typological surveillance (indeed, this was the

time of particularism and relativism). However, since archaeological theory adopted neoevolutionist typologies on society from the 1960s onwards (a trend linked to the historicist revival activated by the bourgeois optimism of the second postwar) their crushing weight on the interpretations of the past has not ceased. Of particular note has been the widespread tendency to use them prescriptively, leading archaeologists to be more interested in “confirming” the existence of types (especially those related to sociopolitical organizations) from a few cultural traits than to trying imaginative interpretations, sensitive to local contexts and capable of inquiring for different dimensions of social life. The tyranny of typological thinking has narrowed dramatically the interpretative spectrum and has shown that reality imitates fiction: Jorge Luis Borges said decades ago that archaeologists seek what they know, in advance, that they will find.

This book provides readings that question the tyranny of typological thinking through case studies in several South American countries. Its purpose is to show that typologies are inevitable (they are, after all, responsible for creating networks of significance in which symbols are meaningful) but that their tyranny can be overcome if they are used in a critical, heuristic and nonprescriptive way: critical because a complacent attitude to their tyranny is replaced by a militant stance against it; heuristic because they are used as means to achieve alternative and suggestive interpretations but not as last and final destinations; and nonprescriptive because instead of using them as threads to be followed they are used as constitutive parts of complex and connective frames. The friends we have summoned to this book are here because their works propose, unlock, and seek. Instead of repeating venerable formulas, they suggest paths (sometimes not much more than trails) rarely traveled by archaeologists or ignored in favor of handsome highways generously paved by iteration. Besides, some of them also read typologies from the contemporary present, asking about their place, their role, even their fate. Those contemporary readings situate typologies in a historical perspective, contesting the reification to which they have often been subjected.

From Brazil Cristiana Barreto challenges a unilinear archaeological imagination. From the analysis of three different kinds of deposits (shell middens in the southeastern coast, ring villages in the central region, and settlements in the middle Amazon and lower Rio Negro) she takes distance from ecological reductionism (an enduring inheritance in Brazilian archeology) and shows that the environmental framework is not enough to understand different forms of social organization, some allegedly unequal. Her use of three cases in different environmental conditions is deliberate and highlights her idea that archaeological analysis should ignore neither local conditions nor social phenomena such as demography, ritual intensification, the mobilization of the work force and the establishment and maintenance of supra-local interactions.

Rafael Gassón, using an example from the Venezuelan Orinoco, criticizes rigid and unilinear interpretations that avoid variations in the same way that populations avoid the plague. Rafael analyzes social aspects that have received selective (and meager) attention—competition, trade, and war—from an archaeological perspective that departs from the automatic projection of typologies built from chronicles of the time of the European arrival in South America. In his view the sociopolitical

organization of the pre-Hispanic societies of the Orinoco should not be understood from generalizations that do not consult local trajectories, structured upon social inequalities differentially expressed in each case. In the case of the Orinoco, the tendency to generalize from a few paths has reached delusional levels: stating that a society was relatively egalitarian is immediately identified as equivalent to stating that all were. The same happens when talking about complexity. Instead, his research constructs a picture of great diversity.

Rodrigo Navarrete's concern is different and has to do with an important issue that hermeneutics brought to bear in archeology: our readings of the past cannot ignore their contemporary contexts of production. Rodrigo shows that the interpretations of Palenque societies in Venezuela have been made from three approaches: the first, with a long-lasting tradition in Latin America, posits that civilization developed in the highlands and barbarism in the lowlands; the second, centered on a scientific perspective that objectified those societies from neoevolutionist categories; and the third, awareness of its place of utterance, which showed interpretative (contextual) oscillations and opted for a modern version. But that's not all; Rodrigo wants to escape textualism and to do so, turns his analytical eye to the Indigenous societies of his country, a *loci* of information (and transformation) of the archaeological gaze.

Alejandro Haber has been long proposing that the automatic and uncritical use of Western typologies in archeology has had two devastating effects (this is our reading of his work, not his): to limit the interpretive spectrum to a few dichotomies, essentially modern; and to leave out different (local) interpretations, including those of the people whose ancestors (usually denied) interest archaeologists so much (although only as vestiges of the past, not as referents for the present and the future). Although we could say that one effect is disciplinary and the other political, they really cannot be separated; for that reason, we better say that such a dual effect is disciplinarily political and politically disciplinary. The interpretation of Alejandro relativizes the modern separation between culture and nature showing how Andean societies (it could also be others as well, not subdued by Western logocentrism) understand differently the relationship between people and the beings with which they interact; in such an understanding the criterion of exteriority does not exist.

Andrés Laguens found in the work of Pierre Bourdieu analytical tools that allowed him to enter rarely trodden paths. Perhaps Bourdieu never imagined that he would speak Spanish from northwestern Argentina, as Andrés wants him to do, but his concepts of field and social space are relevant to interpret pre-European social inequalities. The chapter has another virtue: alternative interpretations—that is, interpretations that elude traditional typologies—are not afraid of numbers or statistics. It is not surprising to read that Andrés finds, at the end of his analysis, the particular character in the differential distribution of resources; for that reason he deems it necessary to consider social inequality in polythetic terms and to define differences from several coexisting capitals, whose interrelation escapes universalizing typological mandates.

The analytical theater of Axel Nielsen lies in the Bolivian highlands. His interpretation of Late Intermediate Period archaeological contexts questions neoevolutionist

typologies, noting that they are unable to accommodate the idea that political integration could have been accompanied by diminishing social differences; he states that such typologies are not useful in understanding the sociopolitical organization of pre-Inca societies in the region and wields arguments that undermine the legitimacy of the conceptions of power, authority, and wealth traditionally used by archaeologists. The same direction, but from the northern tip of South America, is followed by Wilhelm Londoño and Víctor González.

The identification of chiefdoms has been an obsession of the archaeologists who have worked outside Mesoamerica and the Central Andes. (It truly is an unintended coincidence, of which we are aware only now, as we write this introduction, that all of us participating in this book come from areas located outside the “nuclear” areas of the Americas. Does this “coincidence” deserve a psychoanalytic interpretation or an explanation based on the *esprit de corps* or on marginal solidarities?) Víctor González, convinced that this phenomenon has prevented the adequate assessment of the abundant theory on chiefdoms, uses geographic patterns to indicate that the spatial arrangement of the monumental centers in the Upper Magdalena (in the southern Andes of Colombia) during the Regional Classic period can be read from a model of competitive hierarchies. His chapter suggests that the theory on settlement patterns (inescapably typological) allows moving out of the classificatory obsession. Does it? No, because the author uses a model that classifies. To what obsession does his chapter refer to? If we replace *obsession* by *tyranny* Víctor’s article is yet another challenge to the interpretive closure produced by the obsequious and repetitive use of known and exhausted typologies. One more thing: his analysis shows that the equivalence between power and wealth does not apply in this case, which invalidates its universal pretense.

Wilhelm Londoño’s chapter takes a slightly different perspective from a neighboring region of the Andes of southern Colombia. His attack to the simplistic and stereotypical use of the concept *chiefdom* turns Tierradentro into a battlefield but his arguments are equally relevant to other regions, times, and social types (evolutionary or not). His work questions the Western load in the conception of power used by archeology and suggests that it should be reconfigured. In such a task other symbolic universes such as Indigenous, may bring in interpretative freshness and help the discipline break free of its colonial devices. Wilhelm chose to illustrate this freshness showing the role played by ritual and beliefs, not economic benefits nor domination, in the configuration of power in some Indigenous societies from southwestern Colombia.

Hope Henderson explores the importance of place-making in chiefdom societies, particularly in the case of the Muisca of Colombia in a small village in the Leiva Valley. She suggests, alongside other previous researchers, that the Muisca leaders did not monopolize all ritual practices, even though small material differences between elite and nonelite households can be identified. Her study calls for a more holistic and dynamic approach to the identification of social differences and, in particular, to the study of aspects of Muisca archaeology that have received little attention, including architectural differences and comparative studies between settlements. Hope’s chapter provides provoking theoretical references that will be of

immense value to archaeologists trying to understand social organization away from simplistic and unilinear models, using both material culture and ethnohistorical and linguistic evidence.

In their chapter on Antarctic archaeology, Maria Ximena Senatore and Andrés Zarankin challenge the notion of orderly sequence of dates, events, and heroes to understand the exploration of the Antarctic, the white continent. A master narrative that focuses its attention on the “Heroic Age” and industrial whaling has resulted in a vision of history concentrated on historic sites and monuments. This approach is replaced by archaeological research focused on the material culture associated with exploration. Ongoing research has helped to understand living conditions and the specific nature of human settlement in the region. Although none of the sites can be considered testimony of specific events or a place of “great historical value,” they provide new light on the sealers’ daily practices and how they related to the exploration and exploitation of the Antarctic and the new landscape. History is thus not “preserved” but instead provided with meaning and sense, those aspects of human understanding that conventional typologies plainly disdain.

Finally, us. To avoid the annoying and distanced third person, we exchange roles. Cristóbal (according to Carl) has written a chapter that deals with a theme that cross-cuts not only the issue of typologies but also their function in modern archaeology. Typologies that translate to the realm of archaeological interpretation as the definition of well homogeneous, self-contained cultures are criticized in favor of the recognition of hybrids. Instead of denying them, Cristóbal calls for admitting their existence and potential. His contribution to this book reconstructs the historicity of archaeology in the context of its interpretations of the pre-Hispanic cultures of southwestern Colombia, usually posited as sharing the same origin and the same civilized worldview during centuries, only to collapse due to the arrival of “savage” peoples with a “less developed culture.” By historicizing archaeological practice, Cristóbal unveils the modern rationality behind “scientific” and “objective” interpretations of the past. Supposedly “neutral” ways of looking at the past deny archaeologist’s bearing in the creation of what they “discover,” frequently justifying and providing a “natural” perspective on issues like the civilized-primitive dichotomy, “decadence,” “horizons,” “archaeological areas” and a long list of concepts that have traditionally been used as the tool-kit of scientific archaeology.

Carl (according to Cristóbal) sets to understand processes of pre-Hispanic social change in the Colombian Eastern Cordillera, criticizing the interpretations that posit that elite power was based on controlling labor and fertile lands, a frequent (universal) disciplinary extrapolation based on the modern idea that differences in terms of wealth implies unequal, inherited, and material-based distinctions. The very meaning of “wealth” is thus called into question. From excavations at El Infiernito (Leiva Valley) and from the analysis of ethnographic and ethnohistorical information, he proposes alternative interpretations. At the same time, he takes distance from interpretations uncritically based on documentary evidence from the sixteenth century or on recent ethnographies. He feels that they have led to an approach to the past which has no historical significance in that which ignores cultural specificities that are only

meaningful in certain places and certain times. Instead of contributing to an intercultural understanding (across time as much as across space), such an approach has imposed social categories and types as universal and timeless models. Carl's work—and the same can be said about Wilhelm's paper—establishes a dialogue between archeology, history, and ethnography not intended to build relational analogies but to expand the interpretive horizon, making it sensible to nonmodern cosmologies. Above all, he vindicates diversity and history.

This tight and concise presentation brings together diverse papers dealing with diverse topics from diverse places. What do they have in common? Their proposals enhance the imagination, showing novel horizons that are not restricted to the security of venerable typologies that have been questioned because of their suspected association with colonial narratives and modern mandates. Ah! Novelty reappears on the scene. That would be nothing special (the *new* arises from time to time in capitalist historical cycles) if it were not that archeology has a pathological tendency to prefer known paths. Nothing more (and nothing less). There is little else to foretell, except inviting readers to venture into the book.

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Alejandro Haber is an Argentinian archaeologist and anthropologist, from the National University of Catamarca and CONICET (National Council of Scientific and Technological Research). He is regionally focused in the Andes and he is interested in coloniality as coded by academic disciplines. He is currently involved in un-disciplining archaeology as a no-methodology for cultural and social research.

Hope Henderson currently works as an associate professor of anthropology at the National University of Colombia. Her investigations in Mesoamerica and Colombia focus on the evaluation of change in prehistoric societies through the documentation and comparison of households and communities. She is particularly interested in discussions about theoretical constructs that enable a more culturally specific consideration of political leadership in ancient and non-western societies. Her latest publications include “Understanding households in their own terms: investigations on household sizes, production, and longevity at Káxob, Belize,” in *Ancient households of the Americas: conceptualizing what households do* (2012) and “*Reproducción social y creación de desigualdades. Discusiones desde la antropología y la arqueología suramericanas*,” co edited with Sebastián Fajardo (2012).

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Carl Henrik Langebaek is a Colombian anthropologist, graduated from Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, in 1985. He obtained his Ph.D. from the University of Pittsburgh in 1992 and has since worked on issues related to social change among pre-Hispanic complex societies, particularly in the Eastern Highlands, Tierradentro and the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. He has also conducted research on ethno-historical information regarding ancient trade, and economy among the Muisca of the Eastern Highlands. More recently he has focused his research on the history of Colombian and Venezuelan archaeology. During his career he has been fellow at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington and in 2009 he was awarded the Alejandro Ángel Escobar award in the field of social sciences for his book *Herederos del Pasado*, and investigation dedicated to the idea of the pre-Hispanic past in Colombia and Venezuela. He has been dean of the faculty of Social Sciences at Universidad de los Andes and currently is the Vice-President of research at the same institution.

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Social Complexity in Ancient Amerindian Societies: Perspectives from the Brazilian Lowlands

Cristiana Barreto

Models of Social Evolution in the South American Lowlands

Models of social evolution, which rely on typologies for characterizing the degree and structure of inequality and social complexity of past societies, together with its corresponding trait lists of typical features and archaeological signatures, have been largely used in South America to both describe and explain the emergence and decadence of a variety of past social formations, ranging from the Inca empire, to smaller polities which have been classified as tribes, chiefdoms, and states.

Study of the prehistoric South American lowlands has been fatally marked by the longtime assumed absence of complex societies and the eternally restated contrast with Mesoamerican and the Andean complex civilizations, powerful states, and vast empires. Indeed, the view that the lowlands is one part of the world where evolution has maintained societies in a relative state of social egalitarianism has been perpetuated in many ways and has served different philosophical ideals, from eighteenth century colonial romanticism to 1960's Latin American Marxism.

During the last decades, results of archaeological, ethnohistorical, and ethnographic research have gradually changed the long-held view of native South American lowland societies as just simple and egalitarian. The greater time-depth perspective provided by both ethnohistory and archaeology reveals now that such views were strongly inspired by the study of present living native populations highly affected by centuries of contact. Although it is now clear that the present cannot be taken as examples of past social developments, we still know little in terms of how different these past social developments were, especially in terms of social complexity. Furthermore, the little we know seems to challenge previous models based on intensive agriculture and population growth leading to complex forms of social organization.

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On the other hand, the past decades have witnessed a dramatic rethinking of the nature of the so-called egalitarian societies (Flanagan 1989; Paynter and McGuire 1991). Although ethnographers of Brazilian native populations have long recognized that a narrow focus on tribal social organization has masked different kinds of social stratification, hierarchy, and inequality (Basso 1973; Carneiro 1993; Crocker 1979; Gregor 1990; Ireland 1986, 1996; Kracke 1978, 1993; Turner 1992; Werner 1981, 1982), we also know a lot more about the mechanisms which prevent lowland Amerindian societies to turn into stratified states (Clastres 1979; Sztutman 2012; Viveiros de Castro, 2008). Ideas about just what are “complex” and “hierarchical” societies as opposed to “simple” and “egalitarian” have also moved away from traditional key concepts of techno-economic control and social prestige towards other, perhaps subtler, forms of power and control, as well as less visible ways to institutionalize and perpetuate ideological systems (Heckenberger 2005). Even though no strong states or vast empires have been revealed by new data, it is now widely accepted that, at least in some parts of the lowlands, polities of considerable duration, formalized leadership, and hierarchical political structures, sometimes referred to as chiefdoms, have indeed emerged along the lengthy history of South American lowlands (Carneiro 1995; Heckenberger et al. 1999; Neves 1998, 2008a; Porro 1994; Roosevelt 1999; Viveiros de Castro 1996; Whitehead 1996; Schaan 2004).

Some have argued that these chiefly societies were particularly common worldwide in 1492 (Mann 1986) and that in the South American lowlands, as elsewhere, such powers were based on notions rooted in “divine” ancestry values and hierarchical sociality according to which persons were ranked relatively to one another (Heckenberger 2005). However, we are still lacking substantial archaeological evidence to understand the dynamics of power and politics of such chiefdoms.

We do know that when the Portuguese arrived on the coast of Brazil in 1500 they encountered most of the territory occupied by Tupian groups organized into chiefdom-like polities. Ethnohistorians and archaeologists have argued that from all precolonial populations of lowlands Brazil, these, the Tupians from the coast, were probably the only ones in a process of state formation, a process that was brutally interrupted by the arrival of Europeans. Yet, besides living in large, settled, agricultural villages, they apparently lacked the types of rigidly hierarchical social structures commonly attributed to chiefdoms in many other areas (Clastres 1979; Fausto 1992). In this case, we shall never know if state formation was to occur in fact. Nor shall we know whether it was just a matter of time or if social development would have taken another course. We can know, however, about other social developments in the lowlands that were not affected by the conquest, which sequences can be studied as “whole,” and about which we can ask ourselves whether and why formalized political and social inequality, hierarchy and complexity ever happened.

From the start, it has to be said that from a large variety of reconstructed archaeological sequences in the Brazilian lowlands, covering a period of at least 12,000 years of cultural developments, in quite diverse natural and historical contexts, the great majority of such developments have not reached high levels of social complexity, in the sense of having many vertical levels of political representation, leadership, and authority. Rather, even among societies which have an extremely hierarchical ethos

in terms of ancestral lineages, as Heckenberger has identified among the different Arawakan societies of the Upper Xingu, power and authority seem to be somewhat loose, circumstantial, and split between chiefs and shamans (Heckenberger 2002, 2005).

Furthermore, the few cases known to have displayed higher levels of social complexity and inequality from either archaeological or ethnohistorical sources seem to correspond to rather brief and ephemeral developments which can indeed be strongly contrasted to the long-lived states and empires of the highlands.

For instance, although very old dates are now known for the early human occupation of Amazonia, beginning as early as 12,000 BP with early foraging groups (Miller 1987; Roosevelt et al. 1996; Oliver 2001), and also relatively early dates for ceramics (up to 7,600 BP, according to Roosevelt et al. 1991 and Roosevelt 1995), large and dense settlements organized into chiefdoms are not believed to have occurred in the region until AD at least 400 AD. Furthermore, some of these late developments seem to display a very short-lived sequence, collapsing even before the European conquest, as is the case of the Marajó chiefdoms (Schaan 2008).

Although empirical research and reconstructed sequences do not allow definite generalizations, for now, asking why more complex societies did not develop in the region, or did not last too long in the region, is as important as explaining how they evolved in the first place. In order to address these questions, one has also to admit that insisting in the contrast with Andean and Mesoamerican states and empires will only contribute to further blurring of past social developments in the South American lowlands, framing it as one, big, uniform whole. Instead, this chapter argues that only careful examination of different developmental sequences within the lowlands and comparison of such sequences within the broad region will deepen understanding of how more complex societies emerged in the past and why they seem to not have lasted for too long.

This chapter presents a brief review of current models explaining the emergence of complex forms of social organization and inequality in the Brazilian lowlands, and reviews recent evidence from three different empirical cases which allows to approach nonegalitarian past societies from previously unexplored perspectives in the archaeology of the region.

From Ecological Determinism to Historical Ecology

Throughout the twentieth century, models of social evolution advanced for the South American lowlands were largely based on environmental factors as either limiting or promoting the local development of more complex societies. Regardless of whether models explain the absence or the presence of societies more hierarchical than the ones presently known in the region, debates have been consistently organized around the twofold argument of whether environmental conditions allowed increasing sedentism and population growth leading to more complex forms of social organization.

Since Steward tagged Amazonian populations under his “tropical forest culture type” (Steward 1946) not only has cultural development in this region been explained mainly on the basis of ecological conditions, but also its implications have been generalized to all of the South American lowlands, including nontropical forested regions.

The “tropical forest culture type” model—now also called the “standard model” (Neves 1998; Viveiros de Castro 1996)—assumed both environmental uniformity across the region and a limited agriculture and protein capture potential to argue that, in Amazonia, environmental conditions led populations to organize into small, autonomous, semisedentary settlements across the entire region. Supposedly, a uniform environment, with an even distribution of resources discouraged any form of competition, economic specialization, and stratification, whereas the low carrying capacity inhibited the more formalized systems of social and political control that usually emerge out of dense population aggregates.

Since the 1950s, this tropical forest culture type model led the few archaeologists working in Amazonia to interpret any indication of more complex societies in the basin as an intrusion from the highlands (Meggers 1954, 1971, 1992, 1995; Meggers and Evans 1957). In order to support this interpretation, attention focused in both environmental studies and cultural diffusion with little concern to improve understanding about the nature of such societies.

While data gathering has been consistently directed to explain larger and denser sites as settlement superposition and to correlate archaeological sequences to environmental episodes, little has been advanced about the scale and organization of settlements believed to belong to more complex societies (such as those of Marajó and Santarém culture complexes, to cite only those admittedly to be more complex than the natural course of local social evolution would allow). Moreover, if both settlement and ceramic attributes indicated some degree of social stratification, other topics, such as labor mobilization, craft specialization, and differential participation in large trading networks, were not subject of archaeological research.

Over the past two decades the “standard model” has been going through a slow and steady decline due to developments in ethnohistory, historical ecology, and archaeology. The contrasting position that has gradually taken shape suggests that, at least in some areas, large, fully sedentary villages were not only once present in Amazonia but also were densely clustered along some riverine areas (Beckerman 1979, 1991; Carneiro 1986, 1995; DeBoer 1981; Denevan 1976, 1996; Heckenberger et al. 1999, 2001; Lathrap 1970, 1977; Myers 1973, 1992; Porro 1994; Roosevelt 1980, 1981, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1999; Whitehead 1994, 1996; Wüst and Barreto 1999; Petersen et al. 2001; Neves et al. 2003; Neves and Petersen 2006; Schaan 2008). Most scholars have again focused on ecological determinants, only this time environmental abundance and high levels of productivity (instead of scarcity) become the key to explain large and dense settlements, and environmental diversity (instead of uniformity) is the key to explain competition leading to population pressure and stratification. While, again, a great deal of research has attempted to pin down the subsistence basis of such dense populations, and to invert the diffusion arrows now indicating the indigenous development of social complexity, little attention was focused on the nature and scale of such complexity.

Lathrap (1970) was certainly the first to question the standard model suggesting that while swidden agriculture did constitute an obstacle to population growth, the floodplain areas of the Middle and Lower Amazon provided not only conditions for a more “efficient” agriculture but also fishing resources that could support relatively dense populations for long periods of time. Arguing for an indigenous development of complex societies in the Middle Amazon, Lathrap inverted the direction of diffusion arrows.

Significant ethnographic data were gathered by Carneiro (1985) among the Kuikuro in the Upper Xingu, an inland interfluvial border of the Amazon basin, suggesting that not only a fishing and manioc subsistence could support larger populations but also that if more complex societies had not developed in this area it was only because no social circumscription and population pressure had yet occurred.

Roosevelt has first argued for the complexity of Amazonian chiefdoms based on the possibility of developing intensive agriculture, and specifically maize, in at least some parts of the Amazon valley, only to revise her model after excavations in Marajó island led her to believe that it was the particularly rich and diverse environmental resources of the regions that allowed for complex chiefdoms to arise out of an economy based on a mixed system of cultivation and foraging, including long-term garden plantings and intensive fishing (Roosevelt 1999, p. 22). Schaan was able to confirm that, indeed, Marajó chiefdoms grew out of intensive fishing, arguing that once local kin groups obtained control over the surplus produced by built fisheries, both population growth and competition fostered the process of increasing hierarchy and social complexity (Schaan 2004, pp. 41–44).

More recently, a third approach to understand the dynamics of political organization, competition and conflict over resources, and its effects on different social organization modes has emerged out of advances in both the historical ecology of tropical forest, focusing on resource management by contemporary indigenous groups, and from archaeological research in sites with “terra preta de índio” (indigenous black earth) and other earth features such as canals, mounds, and pathways. The historical ecology perspective (Balée 1994) shows that indigenous populations not only act on the environment so as to change the local conditions but also occupy and develop adaptive strategies to live on previously transformed places by human activity. These strategies can be seen among very mobile hunter gatherers (Politis 1996; Rival 2002) and sedentary agriculturalists (Balée 1989, 1995; Balée and Moore 1994; Posey 1986).

The archaeological research proposes that much of the diverse sociopolitical dynamics behind dense and continuous occupations of particular sites along the Amazon floodplain were not so much based on either food production such as in intensive agricultural systems, nor on the control of, or access to, specific resources such as fish, but strongly centered on the selection and management of resource diversity and built landscape (Neves 2008a, b; Moraes and Neves 2012).

In sum, in the last decades we have witnessed debates about just which part of Amazonia could have supported larger and denser populations, floodplains or hinterlands; about the feasibility of large populations being supported by shifting manioc systems (Brochado 1980; Carneiro 1983, 1985; Heckenberger 1998b); whether more intense agriculture of more protein-balanced products (i.e., maize) was possible

(Roosevelt 1980, 1981); whether fishing could have been a sufficient source of protein in an otherwise protein-poor environment (Beckerman 1979, 1994; Carneiro 1986; Gross 1975; Schaan 2004, 2008); and that diversification of resources and forest management caused cycles of population growth and political competition, conflict and control over certain territories.

In one way or another, all of these arguments rely on a presumed causal relationship between environmental conditions, be they natural or anthropogenic, population growth, and increasing complexity. While the relationship between the environmental carrying capacity and the presence of large and dense settlements evolving in the Amazonia have been greatly stressed (although without definite results—except for Marajó, we still do not know what these dense settlements lived on), the second part of the twofold argument has been left unexplored. Just how did population growth, or population pressure led to the emergence of more complex forms of social organization? This question will require more than just theories based on old ecological models.

Criticisms on the more general perspectives and causal theories relying either on resource abundance and population density or on population pressure/resource stress to explain the emergence of institutionalized inequality (such as those found in Drennan 1987; Feinman 1995; Upham 1990) seem to have been ignored as debates on Amazonian developments became more and more entangled on competing arguments. Also ignored were criticisms about this kind of environmental determinism being extrapolated to other areas of the lowlands (Moran 1995; Wüst 1994).

Again, other factors, usually considered in the examination of social development and inequality elsewhere, such as social organization, resource control, labor mobilization, craft specialization, trade, and networks (as approached in the volumes edited by Erenreich et al. 1995; and Bacus and Lucero 1999) continue to be largely unexplored in the lowlands. Furthermore, the specific environmental conditions tied up to these revisionist models are narrowed to those of the Amazonian lowlands as for its potential to support large communities, also overlooking conditions of other environmental provinces in the Brazilian lowlands.

The cases presented below are an attempt to add new data to discussions about social development in the lowlands in order to seek alternative models to the mechanical use of the twofold ecological determinants/population growth argument and to improve knowledge about nature and scale of intermediate societies that have evolved in the Brazilian lowlands.

In choosing to present data on cultural developments from three environmentally different regions of Brazil, this chapter proposes to move discussion beyond the strong environmental determinism that has shaped Amazonian archaeology and has extrapolated to the South American lowlands in general, and turn archaeologists attention to factors other than environment to explain different degrees of social complexity reached by native Brazilian societies.

The three cases (Fig. 1) herein presented are (1) the shell mound culture complex of southeastern Brazilian coast, as a strong example of nonagrarian societies that developed out of extremely rich and stable natural resource conditions, and whose

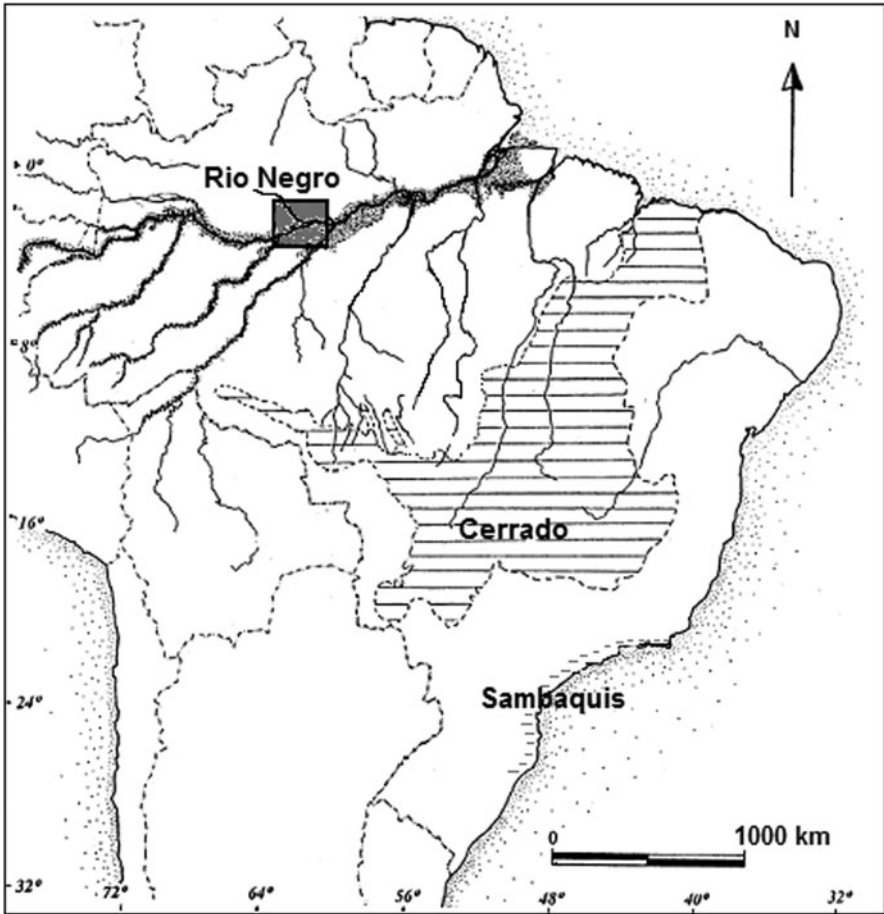


Fig. 1 Map of Brazilian lowlands showing location of the three areas focused in the text: the southeastern coast, where most *sambaqui* sites are located; the cerrado area, where most central Brazilian ring villages are found; and the lower Rio Negro along the Amazonian varzea

monumental structures seem to indicate a certain degree of formalized social inequality (De Blasis et al. 1999); (2) the ring villages of Central Brazil as an example of agrarian societies which evolved out of extremely poor environmental conditions, but nonetheless developed large and dense settlements with highly complex internal village organization, regional hierarchies, labor specialization, and differential access to prestige goods (Wüst and Barreto 1999); and (3) the middle Amazon settlements in the lower Negro river, which seem to not only offer definite evidence against the standard Amazonian model, but also provide new data to explore the diverse nature and scale of different Amazonian chiefdoms (Heckenberger et al. 1999; Neves et al. 2003; Neves 2008a).

The Shell Mounds of Southeastern Brazil

Although shell mounds occur along almost the entire coast of Brazil, the southeastern shore presents a particular situation in that a number of very dense concentrations of this type of site occupy the rich estuarine areas that punctuate an otherwise narrow strip of coast. Protected bays and lagoons edged by vast mangroves provide a high nutrient influx and one of the highest productivity rates among worldwide marine ecosystems. Especially rich in shellfish and fish, these areas have attracted the settling of human groups specialized in shellfish gathering and fishing since at least 6,000 BP (it is possible that older sites have been destroyed by sea level fluctuations). Probably due to expansion of horticulturalist groups from the mainland, these large mounds stopped being built around 2,000 BP and much smaller deposits, including shell mounds, took their place (Fig. 2).

Shell mounds (or *sambaquis*, the Tupian word for it) are the results of intentional accumulation of faunal remains, notably shells, and also of a variety of stone and bone artifacts. These shell mounds vary in size and structure, from small 2-m-high heaps of shell-covered sandy dunes to 400-m-long and 30-m-high impressive mounds containing artifacts, hearths, and burials disposed in a quite complex sequence of layers. In fact, sites larger than 2,000 m³ are known in the southern shores, where their monumental structures stand out in the open coastal landscape (De Blasis et al. 1999; Gaspar 1998).

For decades, *sambaquis* were believed to be the result of the gradual accumulation of food remains by small, nomadic shellfish-gathering groups and many archaeological indicators of possibly more complex sort of social organization have been overlooked. Although site size, and specially the volume of shells moved to form those mounds were quite impressive and had indeed inspired early interpretations of *sambaquis* as built monuments requiring organized labor mobilization (Duarte 1968), no data had been produced on the rate and nature of mound formation. The same can be said for other indicators of social stratification and inequality such as differentiated burials as seen in burial practices and associated burial paraphernalia, differential access to prestige goods as attested by the distribution of exotic materials; craft specialization as seen in the production and distribution of stone and bone sculptures; and site hierarchies as site spatial distribution and size variability suggest. Instead, a stress on ecological determinants had led to interpret faunal remains exclusively as food remains and to a chronological ordering of sites into an evolutionary scale in which the gathering of mollusks predominated first and later more intensive fishing substituted for it just before *sambaquis* stopped being built (Dias 1972; Mendonça de Souza 1981; Perota 1974; Lima 1991). This ordering of sites inspired archaeologists to think that after a 4,000-year-long period of shell-mound building in estuarine areas, population growth caused depletion of mollusk banks and led, first, to a diversification of gathered species (explaining the remains of less nutritious shellfish species in mounds), and second, to an increase and specialization in fishing, explaining why shell mounds became less imposing in size and finally stopped being built (see Figuti 1993 for a review).