

Book reviews

SIMON J. HOLDAWAY & WILLEKE WENDRICH (ed.). *The Desert Fayum reinvestigated—the Early to Mid-Holocene landscape archaeology of the Fayum north shore, Egypt* (Monumenta Archaeologica 39). Los Angeles (CA): UCLA Cotsen Institute of Archaeology; 978-938770-09-8 hardback \$98.



More than 80 years have passed since Caton Thompson and Gardner first explored the Fayum depression. This volume, edited by Holdaway and

Wendrich, exhaustively reviews the various topics related to the region and, as has been the case in other studies, proposes a large number of revisions to both the original interpretations made and the foundations on which previous research was based.

The main body of the book is dedicated to the results of the surveys carried out between 2003 and 2012 by the University of California Los Angeles, the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen and the University of Auckland (URU Fayum Project). Earlier surveys were conducted by Wendorf and Schild (1976), Kozłowski and Ginter (1993), Wenke *et al.* (1988), Brewer (1989) and Hassan *et al.* (2012). The URU Fayum Project has promoted the safeguarding of all that has survived in the region following the destructive agricultural expansion that has recently taken place. The situation in the area known as the K Basin was particularly severe. The site of Kom K had virtually disappeared, swallowed by new crops, and in the Upper K area, many of the pits with organic material identified by Caton Thompson and Gardner were severely damaged. What began as a rescue archaeology project has ended up providing a new account of the problems that have developed around the Fayum depression over time, as well as showing how it has reached its emblematic role in the Neolithisation process of North Africa.

In contrast to the questions most commonly asked in relation to the Fayum (according to the authors, “Why did the Egyptian Neolithic develop? Where did it come from?” (p.10)), the authors (Phillipps, Holdaway and Wendrich) propose an alternative

approach in Chapter 2: “to focus more specifically on the localized variability of Egypt’s key early Neolithic locations” (p.12). This statement stems from a new interpretative paradigm for the North African Holocene that develops a much more fluid notion of the Neolithic package than earlier work reliant on discrete categories (Barich in press). In particular, Phillipps *et al.* make reference to the cultural framework described by Bruce Smith (2001), based on the concept of low-level food producers, to explain the typical economic variability of people whose diets comprised a large wild resource component as well as a smaller amount of early domesticates. In this way, the authors are distancing themselves from previous models that placed their focus on the discovery of exotic domestic species and attributed their presence in North Africa to a diffusion phenomenon from original centres in south-western Asia. Equally avoided was the functionalist approach that defined the Neolithic in the Fayum based on the function attributed to specific objects (axes, sickle blades, grinding stones). But, the authors say, neither of these models offers an explanation for the variability that can be found between sites, which can only be understood through regional reconstructions. The survey therefore did not simply address the classic stratified key sites, but also included the rich surface deposits on the northern shores of the lake, documenting a wider extension of human occupation within the depression.

In Chapter 3 (by Phillipps, Holdaway, Ramsey, Wendrich, Emmitt), a further myth to be dismantled is that of the close relationship between the sites and the old beaches of the Qarun Lake, which has served as the basis for almost all reconstruction hypotheses since Caton Thompson. The authors note that in the absence of modern digital topographic technologies it would not have been possible to obtain correct measurements of the above-sea-level heights reached by the lake, and, consequently, the stratigraphic correlations so far established cannot be fully relied on. In addition, it is impossible to establish the exact limits/ extents of sites, now reduced to extensive surface assemblages. The complete reorganisation of survey and recording methods has thus played a leading role in these new investigations. The new

techniques allow for a thorough description of the lake sites, showing that they covered a range of 20km along the northern shore, representing a surface area of 142km² (pp. 31–32). Transect collections of archaeological items and their locations were also made, and, where necessary, were associated with stratigraphic interventions. The latter have been particularly important at the E29H1 and Kom K sites: the faunal collection recovered from Kom K is particularly outstanding, comprising about 150 000 animal bones, including some domestic specimens (caprines and cattle) (Linseele, p. 204).

The theoretical and methodological premises set out by the authors in the first three chapters are developed through the discussion of the results of the new investigations, to which the next three chapters are devoted (Chapters 4, 5, 6). They illustrate, respectively, the surveys in the L basin, in the K basin—including Upper K—and at Kom K. In all three chapters the presentation style is highly synthetic, making extensive use of tables, diagrams and computational percentages, with a total absence of artefact drawings. Ceramics are counted rather than described or illustrated as their study is still in progress; lithics are identified and described at the class level. This is very much in keeping with one of the major premises set forth by the authors, namely that the typological approach to artefacts common to the region is an unhelpful hangover of the culture-historical paradigm.

One of the main achievements of the project is the new chronology for the Fayum, which supports a different hypothesis relating to changing human occupation in the region in comparison to the traditional binary model of an Epipalaeolithic and a Neolithic separated by an abandonment phase. The new chronology instead supports the hypothesis of a three-phase sequence—9400–9000 cal BP; 8300–8000 cal BP; 7400–6000 cal BP (p. 95)—with an emphasis on continuity rather than clean breaks. This is also based on the premise of a favourable climate phase between 6700 and 5800 cal BP, due to the lowering of the Intertropical Convergence Zone front (pp. 24–25). As the Epipalaeolithic/Neolithic gap has, however, always been used to justify the arrival of new groups and the introduction of the so-called ‘Neolithic package’, continuity makes it more difficult to establish the mechanisms for the introduction and use of domesticates. I agree with the authors in their dismissal of the ‘package’ model as an expedient explanation of change. It is clear

that before 7000 cal BP a type of occupation, a set of interrelationships and a form of mobility was established in the region that allowed for the early acceptance of caprines and then the adoption of cattle, as well as botanical species from the south-west Levant. This was done without revolutionising an entire way of life, evidenced by the continued heavy use of wild resources. In essence, the authors urge us not to view the Fayum as a model for the origin of later systems, but as an example of how people can be flexible and opportunistic in their use of plants and domestic animals in combination with wild ones. Indeed, continuity in the use of the environment is a characteristic feature of the Fayum, as it is for much of Neolithic North Africa during the Holocene. The archaeologists of the URU Fayum Project should be applauded for having objectively demonstrated this, armed with impeccable techniques, modern tools of detection and, above all, led by an illuminating interpretative paradigm inspired by new trends in these studies.

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JENNIFER P. MATHEWS & THOMAS H. GUDERJAN (ed.). *The value of things. Prehistoric to contemporary commodities in the Maya region*. 2017. Tucson: University of Arizona Press; 978-0-8165-3352-7 hardback \$65.



The concept of value is a social construct that anthropologists and archaeologists alike have attempted to define in myriad contextual ways, often focusing on cultural notions of perceived fungibility and worth. Yet value can be economic, social,

cultural and linguistic, and take many forms. The 12 chapters in the volume reviewed here blend various methodological approaches, and aspire to shed “dynamic temporal” (p. 10) light on the value of things in the Maya region of Mesoamerica. Each chapter examines a specific commodity, from portable crafted objects to staple goods, foodstuffs and land. Taken together, the contributions range from the Formative Period, some 3000 years ago, to the present day, and they align with the book’s main goal to provide longitudinal perspectives on the circulation of commodities.

In a brief introductory essay, the volume’s editors define commodities broadly as anything with fungible value, meaning some level of equivalence and interchangeability. The editors provide an overview of the concept of ‘commodity exchange’, and suggest examining commodities through the lens of anthropology. Departing from Appadurai’s *The social life of things* (1986) and its famous dictum that ‘economic exchange creates value’, Mathews and Guderjan posit that “economic value also creates

exchange” (p. 9). Geographically, chapters range from Yucatán in Mexico, to Belize and Guatemala, while methodologically, readers will find input from various branches of archaeology, as well as from history, geography, ethnography, epigraphy, linguistics, ethnobotany and art history.

In Chapter 1, Kovacevich explores the value of labour and pre-Columbian jade. Field research at the site of Cancuén, a major city of the Classic Period in Guatemala, suggests that a single jade artefact could pass through the hands of multiple family members and production households, from commoners to nobles, and eventually from nobles across different Maya communities.

Guderjan, Luzzader-Beach, Beach, Bozarth and Krause (Chapter 2) examine the concept of ‘economic value’, focusing on Maya land tenure and ancient ditched-field systems in the vicinity of Blue Creek in Belize, and along the Río Hondo Valley. For them, the value of agricultural products fluctuated in relation to the intensity of production, the skillsets of production, the control over labour and land, and the components of long-distance trade.

Kwoka (Chapter 3) investigates lithics as essential components of ancient Maya daily life. Moving away from traditional emphases on jade and obsidian, he looks at small chert features from San Bartolo, a Middle and Late Formative site in Guatemala. The author approaches the chert features and their *chaîne opératoire* as ‘communities of practice’, cogently arguing that celt production groups served as meaningful structuring blocks of the San Bartolo society. For the ancient Maya, axe-like celts were valued for their practical utility and symbolism (p. 49).

McKillop and Sills (Chapter 4) offer a model for ancient Maya salt production as seen through the archaeology of submerged features at the Paynes Creek salt works in southern Belize. Reviewing published materials, the authors suggest that the “ancient Maya obtained salt from a variety of nearby coastal and inland locations, rather than relying on long-distance transport from the salt flats on the north coast of Yucatán” (p. 70).

Bianco, Alexander and Rayson (Chapter 5) merge ethnography and archaeology to explore honey and wax production in Yucatán. Stingless bee apiculture was important until very recently when more productive Americanised bees became popular. Beyond the presence of stone disks (known as *panuchos*), which