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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

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serve as stoppers for the ends of the log hives and have been identified archaeologically at a handful of sites, the authors develop geoarchaeological methods in order to identify ancient beekeeping practices via soil chemical signatures.

In Chapter 6, Harrison-Buck combines ethnohistory and archaeology to investigate cacao-producing areas in Belize and the relationships between chocolate and gender. She convincingly observes that cacao is directly linked with women in Maya ideology.

Meyers (Chapter 7) unites geographical and archaeological approaches to delve into the multi-scalar history of henequen cultivation in Yucatán. Henequen, most useful for its fibre, played a minor role in the colonial economy, but by the early 1900s, Yucatán had become a 'henequen zone'. Inspired by the materiality of landscapes, Meyers examines how different social groups experienced the 'henequen episode' at two farming estates that prospered from the mid 1800s to the 1940s.

Mathews and Gust (Chapter 8) consider the rum and sugar industries at Costa Escondida, a region of northern Quintana Roo in Yucatán, between 1850 and 1920. Combining archival research, ethnographic interviews and archaeology, the authors fittingly contend that ranch managers saw labourers as fungible commodities and took advantage of the peonage system to entrap them into indebtedness using, among other things, alcohol.

In Chapter 9, Fedick lays out a very promising methodological approach to the gargantuan task of defining Maya plant food commodities.

Cain and Leventhal (Chapter 10) take an ecological perspective and discuss land as a commodity in the Maya world, especially Quintana Roo in Mexico and Belize. They demonstrate how shifts to liberal and neoliberal forms of governance have contributed to seeing land as a resource for exploitation. The authors are particularly critical of this transformation and assert that the Maya have been coerced into the liberal framework. For them, this obscures the ways through which people position themselves and their identities within landscapes.

Chapter 11 by Arnold eloquently summarises arguments and data presented in previously published books. Taking an ethnoarchaeological approach, he looks at pottery production in Ticúl, Yucatán. Amid all the historical disruptions, pottery production in Ticúl remained organised at the household-level. Arnold notes that task segmentation is evident

in the separation of the fabrication and painting stages.

Finally, Scott (Chapter 12) departs from the development of sandy beaches in Yucatán in the 1970s and examines the rise of the tourist industry and *artesanía*. The relationships between tourists and visual arts indicate that "value systems regarding locally made handicrafts are based on what tourists perceive to be authentic remnants of Maya culture" (p. 215). Focusing on the Puuc region, she cogently articulates the agency of artisans and their strategic marketing of Mayan cultural heritage in order to demonstrate how they act as 'cultural brokers' for Mayan art, archaeology and history.

In sum, the chapters in this useful volume are succinct, accessible and provide food for thought about the production, circulation and consumption of certain commodities in Mesoamerica. As such, it should appeal to a broad audience of archaeological anthropologists, geographers, art historians and material culture specialists interested in Native American peoples, things and landscapes.

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SCOTT C. SMITH. *Landscape and politics in the ancient Andes: biographies of place at Khonko Wankane*. 2016. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.



One of the more consequential intellectual transformations underway in contemporary archaeology is the vibrant materialisation of the political sphere in

a diverse array of global contexts, from the prehistoric to the recent past. This new archaeology of sovereignty attends not to the expectations of formal social types nor to their stentorian developmental ordering. Rather, at the forefront of analytical concern are the ways that the material world—from