

# Anthropology Review Database

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**Schaan, Denise P.**  
**2012 Sacred Geographies of Ancient Amazonia: Historical Ecology of Social Complexity. New Frontiers in Historical Ecology, v. 3.. Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press.**

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**Reviewed 17 Nov 2012 by:**  
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**ABSTRACT:** This is an ecologically oriented summary of recent research in Amazonian Archaeology.

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To uncover the Amazonian past is like walking in the forest without a guide, and this is exactly what Denise Schaan's work is intended to be. Schaan's book is a collection of many years of her research in that area, showing that its natural landscape can be socially and historically constructed and symbolically interpreted.

The six chapters in *Sacred Geographies of Ancient Amazonia* are each responsible for a strategic vision of the environment and its relationship with the long term human actions in this region. The chapters cover three cultural areas of the Amazon forest -- the Amazon Delta, Lower Amazon, and Western Amazon -- with a rich archaeological

record of mound builders, decorated ceramics, soil management, and monumental constructions.

The first chapter is an introduction to the historical ecology and archaeological landscape study of Amazonia. The author starts by explaining that the Paleo-Indian occupation in the Amazon dates back until 12,000 to 8,000 years BP. The Amazonian Archaic period, with the beginning of pottery and water resources management took place around 8,000 to 5,000 years BP, while the Formative period, with domestication of manioc and the rise of horticulture, is dated from 5,000 to 1,000 years BP. Schaan completes the chapter with the Chiefdoms and spread of dense population sites related to earthworks from 1,000 BP until Columbus's arrival.

The second chapter is about the earthworks and water management projects in the area of Marajó Island in the Amazon Delta, where the size and complexity of the construction of the mounds would have required organizations to sustain a large population. Schaan argues that contrary to other propositions the Marajoara society had a local and gradual development on the island. Her work at the Camutins site showcases an example of this argument, since the archaeological excavations revealed the technique of dams and channels construction, and the efficient use of space by this population of fish farmers.

The third chapter covers the forms and iconography of pottery production in the Delta and Lower Amazon. In this section the author identifies individual and group identities that are manifested in the artifacts. Schaan reveals many insights about these practices as well as about the iconographic patterns and format of some objects as an intricate mosaic of the expressions and aspirations of these societies. On the other side, she also exposes that many material culture elements, probably with gender influence, have given rise to different interpretations.

In the fourth chapter, the author talks mainly about the Amazonian Dark Earth, referred also as ADE of the Lower Amazon, exposing how long these sites have been registered, and the different approaches

towards their interpretation. The ADE sites are first understood as a natural product and preferred place to indigenous people dwelling. Later this interpretation has been questioned, and the sites are viewed as a product of pre-Columbian societies. However, despite the controversy about the purpose of ADE formation, Schaan suggests a narrow connection between the ADE formation and the local fishing industry and ceramic production. At the end of the chapter the author also mentions other topics, such as the Muiraquitãs and the stone idols that could have been used as trade goods or religious items.

In chapter five, Schaan presents the earthwork constructions called geoglyphs in the Western Amazon. The geoglyphs only began to be investigated in the 1980's, and were systematically researched by Schaan in the 2000's. Located mainly in the Brazilian northwestern state of Acre, the geoglyphs show besides the predominance of squares and circles many other types of forms. However, one paradox is perpetuated by her archaeological investigation: why these monumental constructions are not accompanied by any signs of large populations surrounding them. To explain this matter Schaan proposes a historical approach, which points to the possible religious function of these impressive earthworks.

The last chapter is the conclusion of a remarkable work, demonstrating how human agency is such a transformative force in the Amazonian landscape since ancient times. Schaan shows us that for an extensive time the indigenous peoples in the Amazon have achieved landscape management through massive earthworks, fish farming, and plant domestication. Through ethnoarchaeology, Schaan also demonstrates that the indigenous peoples today are an important factor in maintaining the Amazon forest for the future.

Today the impact of cattle ranching, mining activities, and dam construction in the deforestation of the Amazon is a reality, and such an important study like this can be the key to reveal that the symbiotic co-existence between humans and nature is indeed very old.

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