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Deciphering Wak'as: Exploring the Sacred from an Andean Perspective

Review by Matthew Piscitelli

The Archaeology of Wak'as: Explorations of the Sacred in the Pre-Columbian Andes

by Tamara L. Bray (editor)

University Press of Colorado, 2015

Over the last twenty years, there has been a resurgence of interest in exploring the ideological aspects of our past. Archaeologists have adopted nuanced and theoretically sophisticated approaches to religion and symbolism. Most recently, many have participated in the so-called “ontological turn” (Henare et al. 2007: 7-12) whereby scholars move away from Cartesian dualism and instead embrace non-Western ontologies. As Pauketat (2012: 181) relates, “the religions of ancient America were based on relationship ontologies that lacked rigid distinctions between animate and inanimate powers or human and non-human agencies.” This “return of animism,” or New Animism (Pauketat 2012: 181), parallels theoretical trends in ethnography towards “ontological perspectivism” (Viveiros de Castro 2004). In the edited volume entitled *The Archaeology of Wak'as*, Tamara L. Bray brings together specialists from archaeology, art history, ethnography, linguistics, and history to conduct a unique study of pre-Columbian conceptions of the sacred. The authors use Andean *wak'as* as a point of departure for insightful discussions of materiality, agency, and personhood that are firmly grounded in cutting-edge anthropological theory.

The Archaeology of Wak'as is a product of a session at the Society for American Archaeology annual meetings as well as a colloquium at Dumbarton Oaks. However, this volume demonstrates a particular theoretical coherence not always found within edited works that emerge from conference symposia. The chapters are divided into five parts, which are presented like archaeological strata with each section delving deeper into the past.

In Part I, Bray provides an introductory chapter that clearly orients the reader to the subject

matter—Andean *wak'as*—and contextualizes the volume within broader anthropological discussions. According to Bray, *wak'as* can be referred to generally as “sacred things” ranging from miniature figurines to features on the landscape. While each author defines *wak'as* slightly differently, within Andean communities *wak'as* are understood as non-human “persons” with communicative capabilities that served vital roles in social interactions. As Bray carefully articulates, the volume seeks to identify non-human “persons” archaeologically in order to understand social dynamics in human-*wak'a* interactions.

Part II consists of two chapters that adopt a contemporary lens for their studies of Andean *wak'as*. In Chapter 2, Allen draws on her own extensive body of ethnographic fieldwork to emphasize how *wak'as* were animated objects with “capacities, moods, and appetites” (p. 24). She resurrects the term “animism” while arguing for a broader application of the Amerindian concept. Allen recognizes the temporal salience of *wak'as* and adopts a perspectivist approach to demonstrate their importance within Inka culture. In Chapter 3, Mannheim and Salas conduct a sophisticated linguistic analysis of the term *wak'a* that also engages ethnographic and historical data. They provide an exceptional explanation of the complexities of the term and emphasize close relationship with food circulation and cohabitation, which are both foundations of Quechua sociality. Together, these chapters serve as an excellent starting point for the archaeological studies that follow.

Part III deals with the subject of *wak'as* in the time of the Inkas. Chase’s contribution (Chapter 4) provides a smooth transition from the ethnographic focus of Part II by arguing that definitions of *wak'a* are historically and regionally contextual. In Chapter 5, Makowski compares two archaeological sites in the Lurin Valley to demonstrate how the Inka used *wak'as* and the built environment as part of their political strategy. By constructing a new sacred geography the Inka legitimized their rule and reformed the Lurin Valley into a “pantry” for imperial ceremonial facilities. In Chapter 6, Kosiba shifts focus to the Inka heartland by using evidence from Ollantaytambo to investigate the social practices and environmental transformations through which the Inka assembled their capital in Cuzco. Kosiba artfully demonstrates that Inka political strategy encompassed more than capturing natural resources; rather, the Inka attempted to dominate nature itself.

Chapters 7-9 deviate from the landscape perspective and instead focus on specific types of *wak'as*. In Chapter 7, Dean provides one of the most convincing examples of non-human personhood by focusing on *wank'as* (or *huancas*), which are stone features that Andean communities perceived as guardians watching over the people and land within their viewsheds. The final two chapters of Part III by Meddens and McEwan incorporate archaeological and ethnohistoric data to illustrate how the Inka projected imperial social order and power through ceremonial architecture and portable objects.

Part IV probes the “deeper histories” of the Andean past as the authors take on the perilous task of identifying and interpreting pre-Inka *wak’as*. Nevertheless, both Cook (Chapter 10) and Janusek (Chapter 11) cautiously proceed through the available archaeological evidence. Cook traces a long history of temple architecture that culminated in the D-shaped shrines found at several sites attributed to the Wari culture. Archaeologists studying the Wari frequently make comparisons with the Inka, particularly with regards to antecedents, but Cook’s contribution is unique for her convincing argument that buildings also possess personhood and have subjectivity. In Chapter 11, Janusek uses recent data from the contemporary Tiwanaku site of Khonkho Wankane to describe richly decorated stone monoliths that he suggests are “proto-*wak’as*.” Janusek adopts a materiality approach to emphasize the importance of stone to political action and ritual practice in the Andes.

Part V consists of a concluding chapter by John R. Topic. Despite the title of this section (Concluding Thoughts), Topic’s contribution does not serve as a summary of the preceding chapters. Instead, he expands the discussion with his own research focused at a *wak’a* known as Catequil. Although his analysis articulates much of the common ground among the other Andeanists in the volume, a true concluding chapter would have better stimulated further thought.

The Archaeology of Wak’as offers the most clear and insightful exploration of Andean ontologies and notions of the sacred that I have read thus far. The edited volume is masterfully organized and exemplifies current theoretical trends in anthropology. Although there was potential to incorporate additional examples from outside the Andes (or even the ancient Americas) in many of the chapters, such broad cross-cultural comparisons may not have been the intention of the authors. Nevertheless, this book belongs on the shelves of any scholar interested in pre-Columbian religion and symbolism.

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