

Introduction

Changing Perspectives on the Archaeology of the Upper Amazon

RYAN CLASBY AND JASON NESBITT

This volume explores recent advances in the archaeology of the Upper Amazon. Little studied compared to the adjacent Andean highland and coastal valleys, this region has long been framed by its geographical position between two major South American culture areas, the highland Andes and the Amazonian lowlands. While sometimes considered a geographical buffer zone or an obstacle to interregional movement and exchange, it has also been viewed as a conduit for facilitating those processes. In fact, archaeological investigations in the region show that the Upper Amazon was the locus of important cultural developments that occurred both *in relation to* and *independent from* contemporary phenomena in adjacent coastal, highland, and tropical lowland environments (Lathrap 1970; Wilkinson 2018).

Although intermittent work has been done in the region over the last fifty years, Donald Lathrap's seminal *The Upper Amazon* (1970) remains the last major attempt to examine the region from a synthetic perspective over the *longue durée*. Drawing on the broad geographic and temporal perspective that Lathrap first presented in *The Upper Amazon*, this volume brings together archaeologists working in eastern Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia with the objective of creating the framework for a new archaeological narrative of the Upper Amazon that illustrates both the cultural variation that developed in the region through time and space and the interconnectivity that existed among peoples of this zone. Collectively, the book outlines the historical trajectory of the ancient Upper Amazon from the early third millennium BC to the Inca Empire of the sixteenth century AD, helps unite the recent wave of archaeological investigation that has occurred in this region over the last twenty years, and reassesses

older evidence and ideas in light of new data. By analyzing Upper Amazonian societies as autochthonous and linked by intraregional and interregional interaction, this volume aims to improve knowledge of cultural developments and the contribution of those developments to the rise of complex societies in western South America.

Complexity and Interaction

Although the chapters in this volume address different regions and time periods, they are united by the themes of complexity and interaction. Debates about cultural complexity pervade the history of archaeology in the Upper Amazon. In the early twentieth century, Julio C. Tello made the then-radical claim that the Chavín civilization could trace its roots to the societies of the tropical forest. At the time Tello was writing, there was almost no archaeological research in Amazonia. For this reason, the claim was long thought to be speculative.

In the ensuing decades, Donald Lathrap argued that the Upper Amazon was the locus of cultural developments dating back to at least 2000 BC. At a broader level, Lathrap argued that the region witnessed the emergence of large populations, a view that ran counter to other scholarship that claimed that the region was marginal to the kinds of processes that led to the formation of the complex societies of the Andean coast and highlands (Meggers 1971; Steward 1948). Since that time, archaeological research on a wide swath of the Upper Amazon region has identified the presence of large settlements with monumental architecture, high population densities, urbanism, and social inequality, hallmarks of what archaeologists gloss as social complexity.

Interregional interaction and its impact on culture change are intimately tied to issues of social complexity and are equally prominent in the history of Upper Amazonian archaeology. Because of its geographical positioning between dramatically distinctive environmental zones and major culture areas, the region has often been studied according to its ability to impede or promote culture contact (Bonavia 2000; Church 1996; Clasby 2014b; Guffroy 2008; Lathrap 1970; Raymond 1988; Valdez 2008), an important causal mechanism of social change (Cusick 1998; Kohl 2008; Lightfoot and Martinez 1995; Parker 2006; Rodseth and Parker 2005; Schortman and Urban 1992). Indeed, broad similarities in material patterning from Ecuador to southern Peru and Bolivia suggest that autonomous societies in this zone were at times deeply integrated in long-distance interaction networks oriented along the major rivers of the Upper Amazon (e.g., the Santiago, Marañón, Huallaga, and Ucayali Rivers; see

Clasby 2014a, this volume; Wassilowsky 2020; Hornborg 2005; Lathrap 1970, 1973; Nesbitt et al., this volume; Wilkinson 2018). By crosscutting environmental zones, these rivers and their tributaries provided natural corridors that facilitated the movement of people, resources, and ideas between the highlands and the Amazonian lowlands, significantly influencing cultural developments in each ecological zone. At the heart of this issue is the nature of the interaction that occurred and the types of movement and socioeconomic patterns that governed these networks. Many of the chapters in this volume address this topic.

The Upper Amazon

The Upper Amazon is a nebulous term that has been used inconsistently throughout the years to describe the tropical forest environments to the east of the Andean highlands. While the term Upper Amazon has generally been used to describe the western part of the Amazon River and its affluents, most of which begin in the Andes (e.g., Contos and Tripcevich 2014), there has been considerable debate about both the starting point and the end point of the Upper Amazon River proper and about the degree to which the term should include the differing environments that are found along the major tributary systems (i.e., tropical lowlands, eastern Andean montane forest, and highlands). This debate has been informed not just by the environmental variation that exists on the eastern side of the Andes but also by the cultural connections that may have existed between different regions and environments at various points in time. As a result, there are significant discrepancies in the meaning of the term Upper Amazon.

The chapters in this volume take a varied approach. Contributors work in different environments that range from the high-altitude *páramo* grasslands to the canopied Amazonian lowlands. Numerous microenvironments exist within these broader environmental zones, each of which has its own specific local environmental terminology. For example, the eastern Andes may be referred to as the *ceja de selva*, the *ceja de montaña*, the *montaña*, or the cloud forest. Usage differs based on nationality and region and on whether one is referring to specific elevations and vegetation types rather than to a general geographical zone. Instead of trying to attach narrow definitions to these terms, we use the term Upper Amazon as an encompassing signifier to mean the Upper Amazon River (which extends as far east as its confluence with the Madeira River) and its associated tributary systems (Figure 1.1). In this sense, we are following the vast geographical scope Lathrap (1970) used. Because most of

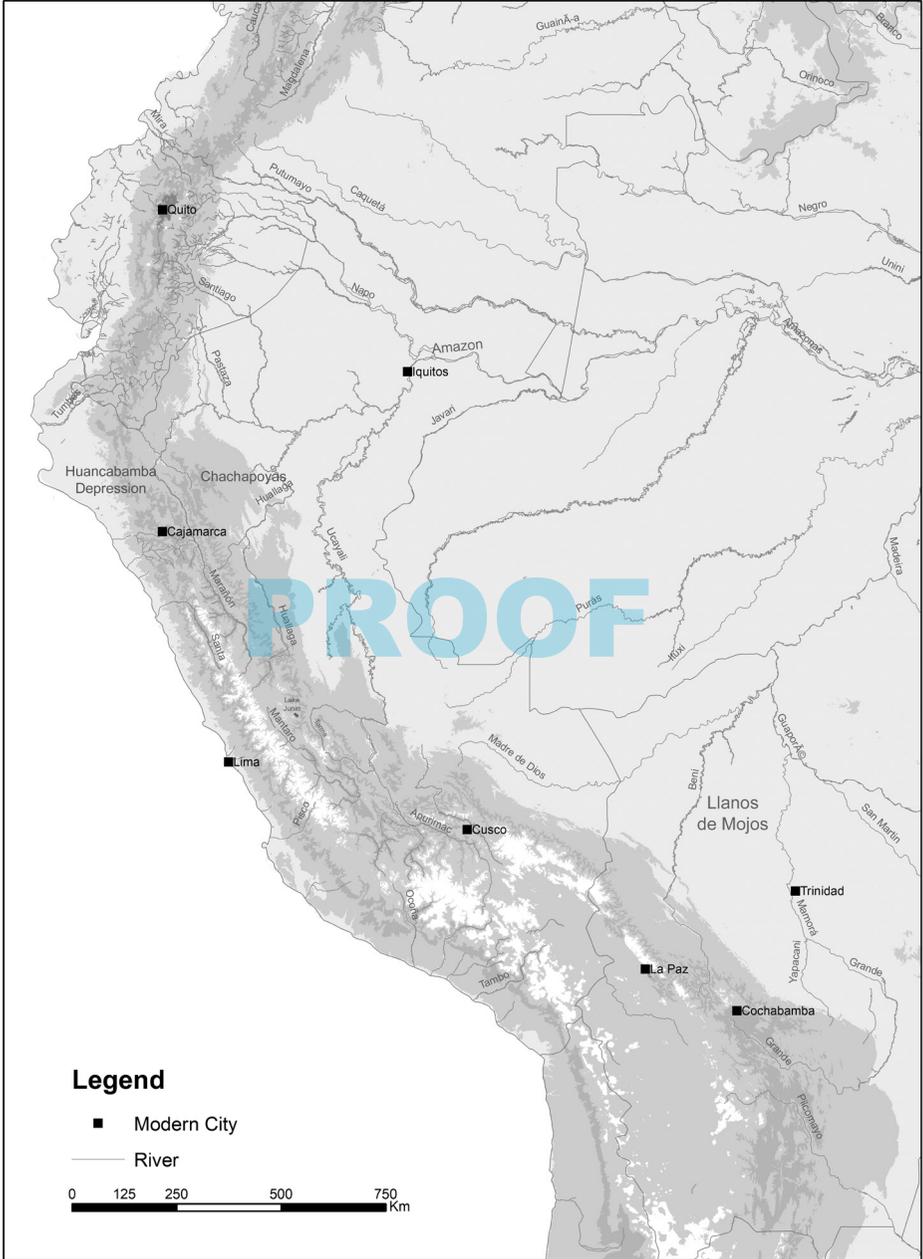


Figure 1.1. Map of upper Amazon with major rivers.

these tributary systems begin in the Andean highlands, they unite different environmental zones of high-altitude grasslands, highland valleys, montane forest, and tropical lowlands. For Lathrap, the environments that made up the Upper Amazon were connected not just geographically by its numerous tributaries but also culturally through a way of life that he thought had its origins in the lowland tropical forest. Lathrap's definition drew on the work of Julian Steward (1948, 507) who argued that the eastern Andean tropical forest was inhabited by waves of migrants from the Amazonian lowlands.

While we eschew Lathrap's notions of cultural origins, we believe that "Upper Amazon" remains a useful term for exploring the cultural and geographical connections that existed on the eastern side of the Andes. Although many of the chapters in this volume are focused on research conducted primarily in the eastern Andean tropical forest, the region is environmentally diverse. It features several microenvironments that differ dramatically in terms of topography, elevation, and vegetative patterns (see Young this volume). In addition, the natural corridors the many highland tributaries of the Upper Amazon created would have promoted interaction and exchange beyond the limits of broadly defined environmental zones, significantly influencing culture change in each area. Much remains unknown archaeologically about the eastern Andean tropical forest and the western Amazonian lowlands, and dividing these environments into archaeological culture areas makes implicit assumptions about the types of sociopolitical developments that occurred in each region. Thus, the more encompassing term Upper Amazon provides a more fluid option for exploring the cultural relationships that existed in the eastern Andes and western Amazon.

The research presented in this volume is inspired by an explosion of research in western South America. In the last seven years, several publications have examined the new data this research has produced from different regions and different time periods in the *ceja de selva* and the Upper Amazon (Guengerich and Church 2017; Olivera Nuñez 2014; Pearce et al. 2020; Rostain 2014; Rostain and Saulieu 2013; Valdez 2013a, 2013b). Our volume broadens the focus on the eastern Andean slopes and their relationship to include the highland Andes and the Amazonian lowlands.

The surge of interest in the archaeology of the Upper Amazon has added to extant data sets, filling in crucial gaps regarding the culture history of the region and helping to clarify past research questions. This renewed interest has also opened up new avenues for exploring the development of social complexity in the Upper Amazon and the role that both interregional and intraregional interaction played in that process. The chapters in this volume, which span