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Ancient Panamá: Chiefs in Search of Power by Mary Helms

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BOOK REVIEWS

Ancient Panamá: Chiefs in Search of Power. By Mary Helms. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979. xiv + 228 pp., illustrations, maps, tables, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$16.95 cloth.)

This carefully produced and fluently written book analyzes Panamanian Precolumbian chiefdoms by collating ethnohistorical, archaeological and ethnographic data. Though one can sympathize with the author's efforts to make sense of "disparate bits of data" (p. 24), and though her observations are often sound, she uses documentary and archaeological evidence unevenly, and resorts to risky extrapolations from the ethnographic record. These deficiencies make it difficult to accept her major assumptions (concerning symbols of power, esoteric knowledge and long-distance trade).

The first two chapters describe Panama in the sixteenth century, with special emphasis on the "fields of influence" of the different chiefdoms. Accuracy is important in brief syntheses. Helms states (p. 9) that "Panama gives little evidence of . . . ceremonial structures," whereas El Caño (Coclé) and Barriles (Chiriquí) were obviously used for ceremonial purposes (R. Torres de Araúz and O. Velarde, *Patrimonio Histórico* (Panama), 2(1): 201-224, 1978; and O. Linares and P. D. Sheets, *Adaptive Radiations in Prehistoric Panama*, Peabody Mus. Mono. 5: 44-55, 1980). Citrus fruits were not cultivated in Precolumbian America, nor did the Panamanian Indians dine upon "pork" or "pheasants" (p. 11).

Helms attempts to fit Panamanian chiefdoms into Polynesian typologies. She concludes that they were moderately stratified, and that elites fought constantly over rank. Linares reached a similar conclusion: warfare, trade and ritual games enabled budding big men to jockey for rank, resource redundancy put constraints on conquest; and proximity to trade routes consolidated chiefly influence (*Ecology and the Arts in Ancient Panamá*, Studies in Precolumbian Art and Archaeology, Dumbarton Oaks, 1977).

The author could have bolstered these ideas with more references (e.g. J. T. Medina, *El Descubrimiento del Océano Pacífico*, Tomo 2: 287-317, 445 ff., Santiago de Chile, 1913). Three important problems deserved elaboration: (1) "buffer-zones" between chiefdoms, (2) cross-cordillera contacts, and (3) the role of restricted alluvial zones (see Medina 1913: 201; O. Linares, P. D. Sheets and E. J. Rosenthal, *Science*, 187 (4172): 137-145, 1975; and R. G. Cooke, *Actas IV Symp. Inter. de Ecología Tropical*, Panamá, pp. 919-973, 1979). The maps are too schematic. Helms shows Comogre's territory abutting onto the River Bayano (p. 41), whereas his prestige depended upon control of the valley itself.

In Chapter 3, Helms proposes that the "Panamanian political order was linked by sacred as well as secular expressions of power." Though her idea that saurians depicted on goldwork and pottery are lizards, rather than crocodilians, might be partially correct, she belabours her argument, and her zoology needs polishing (the *borriguero*, pp. 98-100, is *Ameiva ameiva*, a very mundane commensal).

More serious is the author's insistence (Chapters 4-5) that Colombia was the heartland of Panamanian knowledge: cast gold pieces were imported thence, while Panamanian chiefs acquired prestige by imbuing themselves with esoteric information imparted by Colombian *savants*.

Panamanian gold and pottery styles share so many iconographic elements (S. K. Lothrop, *Coclé*, Memoirs Peabody Mus. of Arch. and Eth., vols. 7 and 8, 1937 and 1942) that it is quite illogical to assume that Isthmian cast gold is Colombian and the polychrome ceramics local (see O. F. Linares, 1977). (*real* trade pieces are identifiable because they look different!) Gold mining was a very important activity in early Colonial Panama (A. Castellero C., *Estructuras Sociales y Económicas de Veragua desde sus Orígenes Históricos*. Panamá, 1967), the *Museo del Hombre Panameño* possesses two exploded lost-wax moulds from Veraguas, and Mexican-Mayan traders came to the Isthmus to barter for gold pieces (León Fernández, *Documentos Especiales sobre los límites entre Costa Rica y Colombia*, vol. 5, Paris, 1886; and S. K. Lothrop, The Sigua: Southernmost Aztec Outpost, *Proc. 8th. American Scient. Cong.*, Vol. II, 1942).

It is true that, archaeologically, Panama east of the Bayano and northernmost Colombia were indisputably linked, while the Kuna were once more widely dispersed over the area. But there is an important difference between an ancestral Kuna chief visiting a shaman kinsman on the other side of the mountain (hardly a long-distance journey), and a big man from Natá crossing Panamá Bay into a linguistically and culturally distinct zone. One simply cannot use modern Kuna ethnography and Oviedo's comments on Darién uncritically to interpret the archaeology of central Panama, and one should be circumspect when using Panamanian Central Region ceramics and gold dated to a thousand years before the Conquest, to analyze Kuna myths.

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Persistence and Exchange: A Symposium. By Roland W. Force and Brenda Bishop (eds.). (Ecological Problems of the Traditional Societies of the Pacific Region). (Honolulu: Pacific Science Association, 1981. ix + 155 pp., papers, abstracts, commentaries, maps, tables, photographs, notes, references cited. \$10.00 paper.)

The ten papers in this volume are among a larger set from a symposium entitled "The Persistence of Exchange Systems as Adaptive Mechanisms in Ecological Change," organized by Roland Force. Five deal with Micronesia, two each with Polynesia and Melanesia, and one with resource management. Included also are four papers headed "Commentaries" as well as the twenty-three abstracts submitted by prospective participants in the symposium. The order of presentation is alphabetical by author's surname, following a preface by Brenda Bishop and an introduction by Force.

Six papers describe how systems of exchange and resource utilization have been modified or have persisted in the face of other economic, political, and environmental changes in Yap (W. H. Alkire), New Britain (D. R. Counts), Ponape (J. L. Fischer), Palau (M. T. and R. W. Force), the Gilbert Islands (K. E. Knudson), and Fiji (S. Koojman). The point is made that students of persistence and change must distinguish what happens under conditions of