



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Beyond borders: toward an archaeology of Middle America

Geurds, A.

Citation

Geurds, A. (2026). *Beyond borders: toward an archaeology of Middle America*. Leiden. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4304988>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4304988>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Beyond borders: Toward an archaeology of Middle America

Inaugural lecture by
Prof. Dr. Alexander Geurds



Universiteit
Leiden

Beyond borders: Toward an archaeology of Middle America

Inaugural lecture by

Prof. Dr. Alexander Geurds

on the acceptance of his position as Professor
Archaeology of Middle America
at Leiden University
on Monday, 15 June 2026



**Universiteit
Leiden**

Madam Rector Magnificus, Deans, Members of the Board of the Faculty of Archaeology, Your Excellencies, dear colleagues, students, friends, and members of the audience,

In the early decades of the sixteenth century, Spanish soldiers pushing through the humid Caribbean coastal lowlands of Panama encountered something unexpected. Along the river valleys near present-day Bocas del Toro lived communities whose leaders spoke Nahuatl; the principal indigenous language spoken mostly in Central Mexico, at the time the heart of the Aztec Empire, more than 2,000 kilometres to the north. One local indigenous ruler reportedly addressed the Spaniards in Nahuatl, using the word *motolin* (“humble person”). Another was explicitly described as being “a Mexican, cacique of the Chichimecs,” whose speech required translation by a *nahuatato*, a speaker of multiple languages. One historical document claimed that traces of the indigenous “*soldados y ejercitos*” sent from Central Mexico, perhaps generations earlier, to obtain gold for the Aztec ruler Motecuzoma Xocoyotzin could still be found there, scattered among the forests and rivers of Caribbean Panama.¹ These would come to be known as the Sigua.

At first glance, this episode might seem quite unusual: strangers from the Aztec world, on the isthmian far end of Middle America. However, the Sigua were not historical accidents. Their

presence helps us understand a fundamental aspect of Indigenous Middle America in the centuries and millennia before Spanish colonisation. Long before the arrival of the Spanish, the coastlines, rivers, and maritime routes of Middle America connected societies across enormous distances through trade, migration, alliances, and ritual exchange. Nahuatl-speaking groups had been gradually moving southward through eastern Mesoamerica into Guatemala en El Salvador to Nicaragua and beyond from around CE 800 onwards, while coastal canoe traffic linked Honduras, Costa Rica, and Panama, creating wider networks of interaction. This is arguably also what helps us understand how initial Spanish colonisers beat the odds and made their way from Mexico into parts of Central America, aided by groups of hundreds of enlisted indigenous warriors.² The Sigua example challenges us to rethink how archaeology has traditionally parcelled up Middle America into discrete spatial classificatory bubbles. Rather than separated cultural worlds, the evidence from the sixteenth century shows us a deeply interconnected Indigenous landscape.

The Indigenous societies of the Americas have long been organised by archaeologists into the cultural areas of Mesoamerica to the north and areas of various names across Southern Central America to the south. Between them lies a conceptual boundary that has shaped more than a century of archaeological interpretation.

It appears in textbooks, museum collections, archaeological maps, and university courses. Yet the closer one examines the archaeological record stretching from Mexico to Panama, the more unstable this boundary becomes.

Objects crossed it continuously. Volcanic obsidian moved southward along exchange networks extending into southern Central America. Conversely, gold and metallurgical knowledge travelled northward from present-day Colombia and Panama toward the Maya world and parts of western Mexico. Shared iconographies emerged across large distances. Mesoamerican languages spread south along the Pacific coastlines. Maritime mobility likely linked communities around the Gulf of Fonseca, Pacific Nicaragua, northwestern Costa Rica, and farther beyond. So, rather than isolated cultural blocks, the archaeology of Middle America increasingly reveals worlds of movement, interaction, and continual negotiation.

This inaugural lecture presents a simple proposition: the history of Indigenous societies in Middle America cannot be adequately understood through rigid cultural boundaries alone. Such boundaries have undoubtedly been analytically useful. The concept of Mesoamerica, first formulated in the 1940s, provided archaeology with a powerful comparative framework for understanding writing, calendrics, ritual systems, and urban development.³ Likewise, concepts

such as the “Intermediate Area” and later the “Isthmo-Colombian Area” sought to recognise forms of relatedness among societies extending from Honduras into northwest South America.⁴

At the same time, however, such area classifications risk reifying the very boundaries they seek to describe. Areas and subareas gradually come to seem timeless and self-evident rather than heuristic constructs. Interaction across supposed cultural borders is then treated as secondary or exceptional. The countries and territories of southern Central America have often suffered particularly from this perspective, frequently discussed as a peripheral zone situated between supposedly more dominant traditions to the north and south.⁵

Yet archaeology increasingly points toward a different picture. From the last millennium BCE onward, the indigenous worlds of Middle America were deeply relational. Communities maintained alliances across considerable distances. Political authority depended upon access to distant materials and far-reaching networks of exchange. Objects acquire meaning precisely because they move. Early Mesoamerica, during the last millennium BCE, may best be understood not as a homogeneous core of cultural activity expanding outward, but rather as an “archipelago of complexity”: interconnected nodes linked through exchange, symbolism, and emerging political relations.⁶

This perspective illustrates how we can change the way we approach an archaeology of Middle America. Instead of asking where one cultural area ends and another begins, we may instead ask how connections were created, maintained, and transformed through time. Such a shift moves attention away from static cultural maps and toward networks of interaction and shared ways of doing. Coastlines become corridors and conduits rather than margins. Frontier zones emerge not as peripheral spaces, but as central arenas of encounter and negotiation.

The argument I wish to present today, therefore, is not that cultural differences were absent. Clearly, they existed and were of key importance to the indigenous societies that lived them. Nor is it to deny the analytical usefulness of regional traditions. Rather, it suggests that the notion of Middle America is especially valuable archaeologically because it reveals a broader human reality: societies are rarely bounded in the neat ways our disciplinary categories sometimes gravitate towards.

The invention of cultural areas

The cultural geography of the precolonial Indigenous Americas that many archaeologists now more or less take for granted is itself a historical construction. Terms such as “Mesoamerica,” “Lower Central America,” and “Isthmo-Colombian Area” emerged during the twentieth century as archaeologists attempted

to organise immense cultural variability into coherent analytical frameworks.

Among the most influential was Paul Kirchhoff’s concept of Mesoamerica, articulated in 1943. Kirchhoff, working from a German anthropological approach of cultural particularism, proposed that a large area, extending from central Mexico into parts of Honduras and Nicaragua, shared a constellation of cultural traits, including calendrical systems, ritual ballgames, writing traditions, and intensive maize agriculture. The framework proved immensely productive, enabling archaeologists to compare long-term developments in rulership, urbanism, religion, and exchange across large parts of Indigenous America.

Similar frameworks were also put forward further south. Archaeologists working in southern Central America adopted concepts such as the “Intermediate Area” and, later, the “Isthmo-Colombian Area” to describe societies extending from Honduras through Panama and into northern South America.⁷

These classifications were historically important. They helped organise archaeological knowledge during a formative period in the discipline’s development, in ways similar to those in other areas of the Americas. Yet they also produced enduring problems. Boundaries gradually hardened conceptually. Academic communities

formed around these notions. Regions and subareas situated between larger traditions were discussed primarily through the language of frontiers, margins, and influence zones.

Olga Linares famously criticised this tendency. She argued that archaeology in Central America had become dominated by questions of influence and diffusion from supposedly more important traditions elsewhere;⁸ a predictable consequence of cultural particularism. Rather than being approached on its own historical terms, southern Central America often appeared merely as a corridor through which ideas and peoples moved.

6 At the same time, archaeology itself was undergoing theoretical change. During the 1960s and 1970s, processual archaeologists working in Mesoamerica criticised older culture-historical approaches for focusing too heavily on classification and chronology rather than on explanation. Notably, archaeology increasingly shifted towards questions concerning ecology, political economy, settlement systems, and long-term social change.

Yet despite these major theoretical transformations, culture-area frameworks largely survived. Mesoamerica remained a powerful organising concept, enveloping a growing catalogue of localized studies in river valleys, inland basins and the like. The notion of the Isthmo-Colombian Area emerged most

recently in the early 2000s. In many respects, these frameworks remain of some use today. The problem is not that they are entirely wrong. Rather, they can too easily obscure the relational character of the archaeological record itself.

Increasingly, archaeologists working in southern Central America emphasise movement, multilingual interaction, maritime mobility, and network formation rather than static cultural mapping. From this perspective, an archaeology of Middle America becomes valuable precisely because it complicates bounded cultural worlds inherited from earlier scholarship. Let's look at some early and later precolonial examples.

First connected worlds

Work at archaeological sites such as Puerto Escondido and Los Naranjos in Honduras and Chalchuapa in El Salvador has fundamentally altered our understanding of the second and last millennium BCE in Middle America.⁹ These findings point to the fact that involvement in broader interaction networks began early and was locally based.

Materials studied at these sites show that many objects previously identified as "Olmec" were locally produced rather than imported from the Mexican Gulf Coast.¹⁰ Their significance, therefore, cannot be reduced to diffusion or foreign influence alone. Instead, such objects point to extensive networks of communication,

symbolic affiliation, and material experimentation that linked communities across large parts of Middle America during this early period.

Radiocarbon dating indicates the chronological framework for these events was a period of participation in larger regional interactions (between approximately 1400–900 BCE), which corresponds with timeframes for the development of coastal areas along the Gulf of Mexico and part of the Pacific coasts of Central America (c.q., the Soconusco region) and not significantly *after* these developments. These studies show the potential to break down an old model, suggesting that southern Central America's history was somewhat delayed or less significant than that of more developed regions.

More importantly, this evidence suggests that connectivity preceded boundedness. As Joyce and Grove have argued, many of the social and symbolic practices later associated with the notion of “Mesoamerica” itself emerged through long-term interaction during this so-called Preclassic period.¹¹ The interaction networks of this early period were therefore not peripheral phenomena operating around already formed regional cores. They were constitutive processes through which broader cultural worlds gradually took shape.

From this angle, the early time frames are becoming much less like maps of separate and distinct regional developmental trajectories in Middle America and instead stages of increasing entanglement throughout the area. Obsidian travelled between the Guatemalan and Honduran highland regions; marine shell and greenstone moved through developing trade networks; ritual practices, figurine traditions, and technological developments in pottery evolved in interconnected areas of interaction that extended from Pacific Chiapas to Central America.

Importantly, these early connected worlds did not share identity. Indigenous communities in El Salvador and Honduras lived in very different ecosystems. So, connectivity didn't mean everyone became alike. It was through this diversity that interactions occurred naturally.

The archaeological record, therefore, points to a broader reality that characterised Middle America for millennia: interaction was foundational rather than secondary. Coastlines, river systems, and frontier zones were active corridors through which people, materials and ideas moved.

From islands to networks

If the early period of the second and last millennium BCE witnessed the emergence of the first connected worlds of Middle America, the first millennium CE, leading up to colonisation by

Spain, saw these networks intensify dramatically in scale and geographical reach.

Between approximately CE 800 to 1100, Indigenous peoples in Honduras were positioned at a strategic point in long-distance trade systems that extended from Honduras to the centre of Mexico (c.q., the site of Tula), northeast toward the well-known Maya site Chichén Itzá, and south through Nicaragua into Costa Rica. Various regions of Honduras are more a nexus of contact rather than a distant border between two large cultural zones.

8 One of the clearest archaeological manifestations of these networks is the distribution of Las Vegas polychrome pottery. Produced primarily in the central Honduran Comayagua Valley, these white-slipped vessels circulated over considerable distances between CE 900 and 1200. Examples have been recovered not only in Honduras but also in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Costa Rica, and even at Tula itself.¹²

The significance of this pottery lies not merely in its range of movement, but in what it reveals about the social worlds through which it circulated. Las Vegas polychrome emerged from earlier Honduran potting traditions while simultaneously incorporating elements shared with Papagayo polychrome styles that were prevalent across Nicaragua and Costa Rica.¹³ The resulting material culture was therefore

neither simply “Mesoamerican” nor “Isthmo-Colombian.” It materialised precisely the kind of overlapping affiliations that rigid cultural area models struggle to accommodate.

These networks were sustained through the movement not only of symbols, but also of technologies and materials. Obsidian from central Mexico reached Honduran sites together with Tohil Plumbate pottery and copper objects. At the same time, metallurgical knowledge of gold, silver, and copper alloys spread northward from southern Central America toward parts of Mesoamerica.

Importantly, these interaction systems were not solely terrestrial. Coastlines and maritime routes were central to mobility throughout Middle America. Canoe traffic linked the Caribbean coast of Honduras with Belize and Yucatán, while Pacific maritime routes likely connected western Mexico with Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama,¹⁴ and perhaps extending much farther still, to the coastlines of South America.¹⁵

Mary Helms’ body of research remains especially useful for reconsidering long-distance interactions as directly associated with prestige, worldview, and political legitimacy rather than solely as economic transactions. In this sense, mobility itself can be seen as producing authority and power; access to faraway locations, foreign

objects, and knowledge are therefore implicated in the generation of social hierarchy.

The maps of Middle America have been shown to be much more than simple representations of the area's geography. They are stories of how people interacted in the past: networks developed or declined, and as they did, the routes of travel changed, and alliances shifted politically. While this has happened many times throughout history, there have always been groups on the move from one ecological zone to another, bringing languages with them and establishing themselves in initially foreign lands.

Greater Nicoya and the problem of boundaries

Few archaeological subareas illustrate the limitations of culture-area thinking more clearly than the concept of Greater Nicoya. Since its formulation by Norweb and Willey, the concept has occupied an ambiguous position within Americanist archaeology: useful as a heuristic framework yet persistently problematic as a bounded cultural category.¹⁶

Traditionally defined as encompassing Pacific Nicaragua and northwestern Costa Rica, Greater Nicoya was proposed to classify archaeological materials that appear to share broad stylistic and technological similarities, particularly in pottery traditions. Yet from the outset, this subarea was also understood as a contact zone linking Mesoamerica and southern Central America.

Recent research suggests that this tension may be exactly what makes the Greater Nicoya of interest for study in late precolonial times. Rather than being seen as a relatively fixed and well-defined cultural space, the subarea is best described as a historical area where different types of networks (local and otherwise) interacted while negotiating their cultural affinities.¹⁷

Greater Nicoya is therefore best understood not as a stable cultural territory on the southern edge of Mesoamerica, but as a historically shifting interactional field shaped by centuries of mobility, exchange, multilingualism, and selective cultural adoption. As the archaeological evidence increasingly shows, the dramatic changes from around CE 800 to 1250 (including the spread of white-slipped polychrome ceramics, Feathered Serpent iconography, and intensified long-distance exchange) did not simply represent the wholesale "Mesoamericanisation" of Pacific Nicaragua and northwestern Costa Rica through migration alone.

Rather, these developments occurred in landscapes that already had long-standing exchange ties to communities across Honduras, El Salvador, and broader southern Central America. Local communities actively incorporated new aesthetics and ritual forms into pre-existing social worlds while maintaining considerable continuity in production practices, settlement organisation, and regional interaction systems.

Migration likely helped create new connection patterns, especially as Oto-Manguean language speakers and Nahuatl-speaking groups moved south. But the archaeological record does not support straightforward narratives of people being displaced. Instead, Greater Nicoya seems to have been a lively, multilingual area where identities, customs, and alliances were continually negotiated through interactions across various networks that stretched from central Mesoamerica into Central America.¹⁸

More recent archaeological research has provided further complications for this displacement model. Technological and petrographic analyses show significant consistency in local production techniques, alongside the selective use of certain external imagery and materials.¹⁹ The evidence does suggest a greater degree of regional variation, with little sign of complete displacement or replacement.

This is especially evident in pottery. Many decorative patterns changed over time; pottery styles shifted significantly, and external design elements were added to local pottery repertoires; however, many pottery-making methods persisted from generation to generation. So, it's not about which cultural area Greater Nicoya was part of (Mesoamerica or the Isthmo-Colombian Area), but about where these communities located themselves within several overlapping worlds.

Material culture in Pacific Nicaragua and northwestern Costa Rica frequently drew on both northern and southern affiliations. Mesoamerican ritual symbolism appeared alongside traditions rooted more deeply in the histories of Southern Central America.²⁰ Yet these elements were rarely reproduced mechanically. They were selectively transformed within local social and political contexts.

The geography itself was instrumental in structuring this activity. The landscapes around the large freshwater lakes of Cocibolca and Xolotlán were dynamic environments that shaped mobility, exchange, and cosmological understanding. While canoe travel could reduce distances and provide links among communities, it also introduced uncertainties, such as storms, currents, and contested shorelines.

The archaeological evidence from regions along and beyond the traditional border around Greater Nicoya further complicates recognizing boundedness. In central Nicaragua, sites in the Chontales province contain materials linked to broader exchange systems while maintaining distinct local architectural and material traditions. At sites such as Aguas Buenas, mound complexes display substantial communal investment yet lack the centralised forms of monumental authority traditionally associated with hierarchical chiefdoms.²¹ These regions of central and Caribbean Nicaragua would later form

a part of southern Central America that was never effectively administered by the Spanish nor, later on, the English.²²

These uncommon monumental landscapes are particularly revealing because they show that regions on the supposed “edges” of Greater Nicoya actively participated in wider interaction networks without necessarily replicating the social configurations visible elsewhere.

This perspective also offers a new way for archaeologists to think about migration and identity. Research on languages spoken in the past shows there was a wonderful variety of languages in Pacific Nicaragua and northwestern Costa Rica before Europeans arrived.²³ Communities speaking Nahua, Oto-Manguean, Misumalpan, and Chibchan languages lived across different parts of the subarea, often in close proximity to one another. Colonial records also describe politically fragmented landscapes composed of multiple interacting communities rather than one single unified territory.²⁴

Greater Nicoya seems more like a vibrant meeting place of many languages and cultures, shaped over centuries by people’s movement and interactions, rather than a neatly organised cultural subarea.

Maritime Middle America

One of the enduring problems in archaeological

boundary thinking is its tendency to privilege terrestrial perspectives. Cultural areas are represented on maps as coloured blocks, separated by lines running across the land. Yet for many Indigenous societies of Middle America, movement along coastlines, rivers, lakes, and estuaries may have been at least as important as movement across the terrestrial interior.

Recent scholarship increasingly emphasises the importance of these maritime worlds. There is growing evidence of extensive coastal interaction systems that linked communities along the Pacific littoral of Middle and South America long before European colonisation.²⁵

Open-ocean voyaging was neither necessary nor likely for indigenous societies. Parallel coastal navigation, in the form of regular short-distance journeys along identifiable shorelines, estuaries, islands, and protected bays, is a more likely avenue through which substantial long-distance interaction would have been created.

The Gulf of Fonseca is a particularly revealing example. Recent work by Kolbenstetter and others shows that the Gulf was not merely a geographical boundary between present-day Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, but a dynamic maritime zone of interaction that connected communities around its shores through fishing, exchange, ritual interaction, and mobility.²⁶

This maritime perspective is also helpful for understanding a range of archaeological distributions that are difficult to account for with purely land-based models. The movement of obsidian into southern Central America, alongside the distribution of polychromous pottery-making practices, and recurring iconographic parallels across Pacific Nicaragua and northwestern Costa Rica become more comprehensible when approached through a combination of land- and coastal-based interaction systems.

Importantly, these dynamics were likely not confined to the Pacific coast. Work on the Campeche coast of Mexico, as well as in Belize, also points to sustained circum-peninsular coastal market economies linking parts of the Gulf coast and the Caribbean Sea within broader maritime interaction spheres involving Central America.²⁷

Long-distance mobility across Middle America may therefore have been considerably more common than archaeology has traditionally assumed. Such movement did not necessarily require dramatic open-sea voyages. Those would have been incidental at best, and Indigenous societies in Middle America lacked the technology for sailing. It may instead have unfolded through continual, incremental travel between neighbouring coastal communities, linked into broader chains of interaction and dependent on seasonal patterns of currents and prevailing winds.

As such, this Isthmian corridor of the Americas appears less like a mere land bridge separating distinct cultural worlds and more like a dynamic interactional landscape shaped by both movement across land and sea.

Toward an archaeology of Middle America

What emerges from the examples discussed today is a growing sense that archaeology has consistently underestimated the scale, intensity, and historical depth of Indigenous interaction throughout Middle America.

All too often, archaeological interpretation starts with the assumption that cultures are separate, and traditions are rooted in stability in a particular region. In such views, mobility and long-distance interaction seem like rare events that need special explanation. However, increasingly strong archaeological evidence shows that the opposite is true. Movement, exchange, multilingualism, and shifting affiliation were not interruptions in otherwise isolated societies — they were fundamental conditions of social life.

This insight requires more than the redrawing of maps. It asks archaeology to rethink some of its most deeply embedded analytical assumptions. The societies grouped under the label “Mesoamerica” never understood themselves as part of a single entity. Instead, archaeology encounters a tapestry of communities linked

by shared practices, overlapping histories, and ongoing interaction across generations.

This is important for archaeologists' consideration of the relations between Mesoamerica and the Isthmo-Colombian Area. While the brief examples analysed in this lecture demonstrate an overlap of social space across communities rather than two distinct cultural blocks, there were certainly boundaries. However, these boundaries have been socially negotiated, materially porous, and historically fluid.

This shifts the analytical direction of archaeology from isolating and analysing "cultures" to examining how networks operate, what practice-based forms emerge within them, and how people create their own identities at the local level as they participate in broader social realms.

Such an archaeology also requires stronger interdisciplinary integration. Historical linguistics has already shown that the Mesoamerican linguistic area emerged through long-term interaction among speakers of unrelated languages.²⁸ Paleoecology and paleoenvironmental research likewise provide increasingly important insights into how human movement and environmental transformation unfolded together across long temporal scales. Lake cores, pollen sequences, charcoal records, and isotopic studies reveal anthropogenic

landscapes shaped over millennia by agriculture, forest management, burning practices, and settlement mobility.²⁹ A range of archaeometric techniques enables archaeologists to trace the movement of materials, technologies, foods, and people across remarkable distances.

The importance of this subject extends beyond archaeology and is closely related to other broad topics within the humanities and social sciences, including those at this University today. Issues like mobility, connectivity, identity formation, and adaptation to environments are interrelated and need to be understood as such. The study of archaeology adds unique value to discussions of these processes by looking back at how they have developed over hundreds or thousands of years; it provides us with a deeper understanding of our shared human experience.

The archaeological record repeatedly shows that interaction between societies was not exceptional but foundational to human history. Questions that seem urgent today — migration, cosmopolitanism, resilience, globalisation, and belonging — were already central features of Indigenous societies across Middle America long before European colonisation.³⁰

Conclusion: Reimagining Middle America

An Archaeology of the Americas will still always be defined by borders. On the North side lies

Mesoamerica; on the South lies the Isthmo-Colombian Area. And within those borders lie many transitional zones, cultural frontiers, tied together through path- and waterways. This diversity reflects a long, complex history for the Indigenous communities across Middle America.

Throughout this lecture, I've emphasised that an archaeology of Middle America does not allow for simple divisions. Since the second millennium BCE, Indigenous communities have actively engaged in interconnected worlds of movement, exchange, ritual practices, technology sharing, and environmental connection.

14

This does not mean there weren't stark differences. Groups can and will have sought out difference, through extensive relations with foreign objects as well as through intensive relations with local landscapes and the communal memories tied to them. Communities maintained localised identities, had distinct ecological environments and formed their own unique political structures. Boundaries were important for both economic and ontological roles. Yet they were never static. They were continually negotiated over time through migration, alliance, ritual practice, exchange, and conflict.

Recognising this is not merely to revise a regional model. It also requires reconsidering how archaeology understands human societies. The Indigenous histories of Middle America reveal

deep-time cosmopolitan traditions of mobility, multilingualism, negotiation, and coexistence spanning centuries and millennia.

An archaeology of Middle America should therefore not simply replace one rigid map with another. After all, one could deliver another lecture to discuss the connection between Mesoamerica and the American Bottom in the US Southeast.³¹ Or, indeed, the question of how to telescopically understand the archaeology of central and eastern Colombia as it links into the highlands of western Venezuela and the tropical forests of the Brazilian Amazon.³² Nor should it collapse diverse Indigenous histories into a single, undifferentiated sphere of interaction. Rather, it should seek to reconstruct how Indigenous communities themselves produced and experienced connection through everyday practices of movement, exchange, ritual engagement, and environmental interaction.

Paradoxically, I would argue that the methodological advances of early to mid-twentieth-century cultural particularism and diffusionism in American archaeology were not fundamentally misguided. Rather, they set the stage for a richer understanding of long-distance movement and interaction, in which the exchange of technologies is deeply connected to dialogue, shared knowledge, and an active relationship with an animate world. In this view, humans are seen as actively working to maintain

balance between their communities and the supernatural entities around them.

From this perspective, the title of this chair — Archaeology of Middle America — holds special significance. The “middle” in Middle America is not a hemispheric reference. It is relational and temporal. It points to a part of the Americas marked by a history of movement between worlds: between coastlines and interiors, north and south, deserts and tropical forests, and local traditions and wider networks of interaction. And temporally, an area that was very much “in the middle of something” when the European colonization of the Americas began and anywhere from 50 to 60 million Indigenous inhabitants died.

It is ultimately an interconnected Indigenous world we see here; a world where these histories are shaped for generations to come through encounters well before the Europeans’ arrival and that continue to emerge today.

Perhaps that’s why this archaeological research has relevance now. We currently see a world that is very much committed to borders, walls, territories and fixed identities; yet the history of indigenous peoples of Middle America reminds us that historically, human societies were shaped not only by separation but also by movement, encounter, negotiation, and relations across landscapes that were never as divided as our maps sometimes suggest.

At the end of this lecture, I would like to express my gratitude to the Executive Board for the confidence they have placed in me, and to all those who have contributed to this chair.

Hooggeleerde Jansen, beste Maarten,
Uit een lange reeks propedeutische colleges trok jouw vurig en enthousiasmerend betoog over de cultuurgeschiedenis van Indiaans–Amerika meer aandacht dan alle andere boeiende windrichtingen in de archeologie. Je hebt een belangrijk deel gevormd van wie ik ben geworden, als mentor en als iemand zittende in een kantoor met te veel boeken.

Querida Aurora,
Sentado en tu oficina después de las clases regulares, me entregaste un pequeño libro de historietas de *Calvin y Hobbes* en español, y ese fue el comienzo de un largo camino para entender la importancia del lenguaje como puerta de entrada a otros lugares, y para comenzar a comprender y conectar con las personas. Me aseguraste que no hacía falta convertirme en un Cervantes, y todavía les digo eso a mis estudiantes. También me enseñaste lo que significa convivir en las frescas montañas de la Mixteca Alta, una lección que he visto resonar en todos tus estudiantes.

Hooggeleerde Adelaar, beste Willem,
Vele jaren zorgde jij ervoor dat het onderwijs in de Indiaanse talen in Leiden van wereldniveau

werd en bleef. Samen met Maarten vormde je een strategisch duo tussen twee faculteiten om studenten de taal en cultuur van Indiaans-Amerika voor en na de Europese kolonisatie mee te geven. In de jaren daarna bood je mij ook de mogelijkheid om in een onderzoeksproject met de combinatie van archeologie en taalkunde deel te nemen. Ik prijs mij rijk met je aanwezigheid al die jaren.

Most learned Joyce, dear Rosemary,
Only last month were you offered an honorary symposium to mark your retirement from teaching at Berkeley. That event really said it all. Rarely have I seen people so genuinely moved by your combination of candour and inexhaustible intellectual generosity. In many ways, your work represents an archaeology of Middle America, and your support toward me and Leiden more generally continues to have an impact.

Most learned Gosden, dear Chris,
You offered me the opportunity to join the institute at Oxford, and it provided me with the comparative challenge of a lifetime. After all, American Archaeology is not among its strong points, so the relative comfort of Leiden in having many regional colleagues was not an option. It was a marvellous experience, and I particularly remember your focus and ability to create chances for those around you.

Dear students,
You are the touchstone of academic life. Your commitment and challenges make it easier for me to remain on top of things and to see how society changes. The global classrooms you constitute are a joy to take part in. As it turned out, this year, I found myself lecturing the introductory bachelor class in front of a couple of students from Mexico for the first time – a far cry from the days when I was sat where you are now, in between 33 students all from this little Rhine delta we call home – that is connectivity for you.

I find myself in the fortunate position of being surrounded by loving family and friends who, despite my often restless and disruptive search for movement, distance, and possibility, never stopped walking alongside me. That wandering disposition has not always been easy on the people closest to me, and it is only right to acknowledge that here today. Whatever path brought me to this moment was never mine alone. I was lucky enough to find work that still gives my life shape and meaning each day, but I could never have followed this path without the patience, sacrifices, encouragement, and love of those who carried me through it.

Ik heb gezegd.

Bibliography

- Auziņa, D. 2017. Monumentality by communities: mapping the spatial logic of the pre-Hispanic site Aguas Buenas (AD 400–1600) in Central Nicaragua. Unpublished RMA thesis, Leiden University
- Baudez, C. F., and P. Becquelin. 1973. *Archéologie de Los Naranjos, Honduras*. Mission Archéologique et Ethnologique Française au Mexique.
- Beekman, C., and C. McEwan (Eds.). 2022. *Waves of influence: Pacific maritime networks connecting Mexico, Central America, and northwestern South America*. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.
- Campbell, L., Kaufman, T., and T. C. Smith-Stark. 1986. Meso-America as a linguistic area. In *Language* 62: 530–570.
- Constenla Umaña, A. 1991. *Las lenguas del área intermedia: introducción a su estudio areal*. Editorial Universidad de Costa Rica.
- Day, J. S. 1994. Central Mexican Imagery in Greater Nicoya. In *Mixteca-Puebla: Discoveries and Research in Mesoamerican Art and Archaeology*, edited by H. Nicholson and E. Quiñones Keber, pp. 235–248. Labyrinthos.
- Drennan, R. D. 1996. Betwixt and between in the Intermediate Area. In *Journal of Archaeological Research* 4(2): 95–132.
- Geurds, A. 2018. Prehistory of Southern Central America. In *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*, edited by C. Smith, pp. 8880–8898. Springer.
- Geurds, A. 2021. Foreigners from far-off islands: long-distance exchange between western Mesoamerica and coastal South America (600–1200 CE). In *The Routledge Handbook of Archaeology and Globalization*, edited by T. Hodos, A. Geurds, P. Lane, I. Lilley, M. Pitts, G. Shelach, M. Stark, and M. J. Versluys, pp. 212–228. Routledge.
- Geurds, A. 2021b. Greater Nicoya through the looking glass: Merging culture history with social theory. In *The Archaeology of Greater Nicoya: Two Decades of Research in Nicaragua and Costa Rica*, edited by L. Steinbrenner, A. Geurds, G.G. McCafferty, and S. Salgado, pp. 505–532. University Press of Colorado.
- Geurds, A. 2024. Understanding Greater Nicoya: Epiclassic and Early Postclassic extended relations in Southern Mesoamerica. In *When East meets West: Chichen Itza, Tula, and the Postclassic Mesoamerican World, Part 1*, edited by T. W. Stanton, K. A. Taube, J. D. Coltman, and N. I Marengo Camacho, pp. 635–650.
- Geurds, A. 2025. Monuments and mounds as time: a brief argument for the Isthmo-Colombian Area. In *Temporalities in Mesoamerican ritual practices*, edited by V. Vapnarsky, D. Michelet, A. Bequelin & P. Nondédéo, pp. 256–80. University Press of Colorado
- Glover, J. B., Z. X. Hruby, D. Rissolo, J. W. Ball, M. D. Glascock, and M. S. Shackley. 2018.

- Interregional interaction in terminal classic Yucatan: recent obsidian and ceramic data from Vista Alegre, Quintana Roo, Mexico. In *Latin American Antiquity* 29(3): 475–494.
- Harvey, W. J., G. Petrokofsky, N. Stansell, S. Nogué., L. Petrokofsky, and K. J. Willis. 2021. Forests, water, and land use change across the Central American Isthmus: mapping the evidence base for terrestrial Holocene palaeoenvironmental proxies. In *Forests* 12(8): 1057.
- Helms, M. W. 1979 *Ancient Panama: Chiefs in search of power*. University of Texas Press.
- Hoopes, J.W. 2021. On hundred fifty years of Isthmo-Colombian Archaeology. In *Pre-Columbian Central America, Colombia, and Ecuador: Toward an integrated approach*, edited by C. McEwan and J. W. Hoopes, pp. 17–32. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.
- Hoopes, J. W. and O. M. Fonseca Zamora. 2003. Goldwork and Chibchan Identity: Endogenous change and diffuse unity in the Isthmo-Colombian Area. In *Gold and power in ancient Costa Rica, Panama and Colombia*, edited by J. Quilter and J.W. Hoopes, pp. 49–90. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.
- Ibarra Rojas, I. 2001. *Fronteras étnicas en la conquista de Nicaragua y Nicoya: entre la solidaridad y el conflicto 800 dC-1544*. Editorial Universidad de Costa Rica.
- Iriarte, J. 2024. *The archaeology of Amazonia: a human history*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Joyce, R. A. 2017. *Painted pottery of Honduras. Object lives and itineraries*. Brill.
- Joyce R. A. 2021. Central America: Time for a paradigm shift. In *Pre-Columbian Central America, Colombia, and Ecuador: Toward an integrated approach*, edited by C. McEwan and J. W. Hoopes, pp. 35–47. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection
- Joyce, R. A., and Grove, D. C. 1999. Asking new questions about the Mesoamerican Preclassic. In *Social Patterns in Pre-Classic Mesoamerica*, edited by D. C. Grove and R. A. Joyce, pp. 1–14. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.
- Joyce, R. A. and J.S. Henderson. 2025. Central America. In *The Oxford Handbook of The Olmecs*, edited by C.A. Pool and C.J. Wendt, pp. 492–503. Oxford University Press.
- Kirchhoff, P. 1943. Mesoamérica, sus límites geográficos, composición étnica y caracteres culturales. In *Acta Americana* 1: 92–107.
- Kolbenstetter, M. M., Auziña, D., and D. Braekmans. 2026. Situating the Gulf of Fonseca in Terminal Classic and Postclassic Interregional Exchange Networks: Procurement of Obsidian on El Tigre Island, Honduras. In *Latin American Antiquity*. Published online 2026: 1–18. doi:10.1017/laq.2024.46
- Linares, O. F. 1979. What is lower central American archaeology? In *Annual Review of Anthropology* 8: 21–43.

- McCafferty, G., and C. Dennett. 2013. Ethnogenesis and hybridity in Proto-historic Nicaragua. In *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* 28:191–215.
- McKillop, H. 1996. Ancient Maya trading ports and the integration of long-distance and regional economies: Wild Cane Cay in south-coastal Belize. In *Ancient Mesoamerica* 7(1): 49–62.
- Newson, L. A. 1987. *Indian Survival in Colonial Nicaragua*. University of Oklahoma Press.
- Pauketat, T. R. 2023. *Gods of thunder: how climate change, travel, and spirituality reshaped precolonial America*. Oxford University Press.
- Restall, M. and F. G. L. Asselbergs. 2007 (editors). *Invading Guatemala: Spanish, Nahuatl, and Maya accounts of the conquest wars*. Penn State University Press.
- Rosenswig, R. M. 2017. Olmec globalization. A Mesoamerican archipelago of complexity. In *The Routledge Handbook of Archaeology and Globalization*, edited by T. Hodos, A. Geurds, P. Lane, I. Lilley, M. Pitts, G. Shelach, M. Stark, and M. J. Versluys, pp. 177–193. Routledge.
- Sharer, R. J. (editor). 1978. *The prehistory of Chalchuapa, El Salvador*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.
- Sheets, P. D. 1992. The pervasive pejorative in Intermediate Area studies, in *Wealth and hierarchy in the Intermediate Area*, edited by F. W. Lange, pp. 15–41. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.
- Torreggiani, I., W. J. Harvey, and A. Geurds. 2023. Human Resilience in Fluvial Environments in Pre-Hispanic Central Nicaragua. In *Underwater and Coastal Archaeology in Latin America*, edited by D. Elkin and C. Delaere, pp. 57–70. University Press of Florida.
- Van Broekhoven, L. N. K. and A. Geurds. 2012. Indigenous religious traditions in Central Nicaragua: ethnohistorical documentation for an unknown archaeological record. In *Analecta Praehistorica Leidensia* 43/44: 51–62.
- Versluys, M. J., and I. Lilley. 2024. Rooted cosmopolitanism, heritage and the question of belonging. In *Rooted cosmopolitanism, heritage and the question of belonging. Archaeological and anthropological perspectives*, edited by L. W. Kruijer, M. J. Versluys, and I. Lilley, pp. 3–14. Routledge.
- Wiley. G. R. 1971. *An introduction to American archaeology. Volume Two: South America*. Prentice-Hall.

Notes

1. Lothrop 1942: 111
2. Restall and Asselbergs 2007
3. Kirchhoff 1943
4. For a summary of these discussions, see Hoopes 2021
5. Sheets 1992; Drennan 1996
6. Rosenswig 2017
7. Hoopes and Fonseca Zamora 2003; Geurds 2018
8. Linares 1979
9. Baudez and Bequelin 1973; Sharer 1978
10. Joyce and Henderson 2025
11. Joyce and Grove 1999
12. Joyce 2021
13. Joyce 2017
14. Helms 1979
15. Quilter and Hoopes 2024; Geurds 2021a
16. Willey 1971; Geurds 2021b
17. McCafferty and Dennett 2013; Geurds 2018
18. Geurds 2024
19. McCafferty and Dennett 2013
20. Day 1994
21. Auziņa 2017; Geurds 2025
22. Newson 1987; Van Broekhoven and Geurds 2012
23. Constenla Umaña 1991
24. Ibarra Rojas 2001
25. The most recent overview is found in Beekman and McEwan 2022
26. Kolbenstetter et al. 2026
27. McKillop 1996; Glover 2012
28. Campbell et al. 1986
29. Harvey et al. 2021; Torreggiani 2023
30. Versluys and Lilley 2024
31. Pauketat 2023
32. Iriarte 2024



PROF. DR. ALEXANDER GEURDS

Alexander Geurds completed his *doctoraal* in Archaeology in 1994 at Leiden University. Following this, he completed an Advanced Master's Degree in Anthropology. In 2000, he was awarded a PhD Fellowship through the Research School CNWS, for his PhD dissertation 'Grounding the Past. The Praxis of Participatory Archaeology in the Mixteca Alta, Oaxaca, Mexico', in which he critically examines forms of collaborative stakeholder engagement.

In 2001, he accepted a part-time post as a lecturer at the Faculty of Archaeology to combine his PhD research with teaching, which provided him with a set of academic teaching skills he still considers crucial to his later career. After his PhD defence in 2007, he worked at the University of Colorado-Boulder, to develop postdoctoral research to further teaching. Returning to Leiden in 2009, he established long-running archaeological fieldwork in central Nicaragua. Following the initial recording of the Aguas Buenas site, he followed up on these results by researching the site's hinterland and the regional practice of freestanding stone sculpture. He is continuing his research in Central America through a comparative case study of societal resilience and landscape engagement, focusing on monumentality, zoomorphic imagery, and the role of stone more broadly. For all this, he was supported by a range of (inter)national funding bodies, including NWO, the ERC, and the National Geographic Society.

In 2008, he was the founding editor of the Brill Book Series 'The Early Americas: History and Culture', which currently has 15 volumes in print.

From 2016 to 2025, he held posts as a Research Fellow at Wolfson College and as an Associate Professor at the School of Archaeology, both at the University of Oxford. He combined this with a post as Associate Professor at the Faculty of Archaeology. Since 2022, he has served on the Faculty Board, first for a full term as Vice-Dean for Education and, since 2026, as Dean.

He is an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Oxford, an elected Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London, and a Fellow at the Royal Anthropological Institute. He is a longtime member of the Society for American Archaeology with an established record of service on SAA committees.