

# TRENDS IN THE GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS OF AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

## AN ANALYSIS OF *AMERICAN ANTIQUITY* ARTICLES AND PH.D. DISSERTATIONS

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**A**s the flagship journal for archaeology in the Americas, *American Antiquity* (AA) represents the leading wave of method and theory in this hemisphere. Articles appearing in the journal often set the stage for later developments, serving to bring new ideas, methods, and data to a broad audience. In this respect, the journal plays a major role in structuring change in archaeological thought.

This study began as an inquiry into how the archaeology of different regions contributes to the development of the field. My sense was that certain areas were better represented than others and that their importance had changed through time. Other than studies by Feinman et al. (1992) and Chamblee and Mills (2001), which examined the regional focus of papers presented at SAA meetings, I knew of no similar work examining this topic. Ultimately, this study stemmed from my own interests in the archaeology in California and the Great Basin, which I felt had moved in a different direction than regions such as the Southwest and Southeast. I focus here on a more general question: How well have different regions been represented in the pages of AA since its inception in 1935/1936?

### Methods

The geographic foci of all research articles and reports appearing in AA from Volume 1 through Volume 65 were tabulated; comment articles are excluded. I defined 11 major regions, including eight in North America (Northwest, California, Great Basin, Southwest, Plains, Southeast, Northeast, and Arctic), South America, Mesoamerica (including Central America), and anything else. These divisions partially reflect my own biases and interests, since I am more familiar with the archaeology of the Western US, and in hindsight I should have divided the Plains, the Northeast, and the Southeast into at least two subregions each. Figure 1 shows how I subdivided North America.

AA articles sometimes self-identify a region of focus within the title or abstract (this is particularly true in the earlier history of the journal). However, often I had to skim through the article to determine from which region the data were derived. Some articles had no specific regional focus or were focused on more than one region. In the former case, I assigned the article to a “general” category; in the latter, I assigned a fraction of a point to each region (e.g., one-half if two regions were represented, one-third if three).

### Results

The study compares the percentage of articles representing different regions through time. Thus, this is a zero-sum exercise, and an increase in the percentage of articles from one area necessarily causes a decrease in others. Figure 2 shows the percentage of articles from each region in 5-year blocks of time.

Most dramatic in Figure 2 is the rise of Mesoamerican/Central American articles from a minority of less than 10% in the first 20 years of the journal to over 25% between 1956 and 1985. A similar rise is seen among South American articles, which rise steadily from the inception of the journal through 1970, at which point they decline slightly. Following the introduction of *Latin American Antiquity* (LAA)

in 1990, the representation of these two areas declines sharply in *AA*, such that each represents less than 3% of all articles between 1996 and 2000, even though Mesoamerica continues to dominate papers presented at the SAA meetings (Chamblee and Mills 2001).

Another notable trend is the dramatic growth in “general” articles. After a decline between 1940 and 1950, these articles increased greatly between 1960 and 1980 and have remained high, accounting for 20% of all articles in the last 20 years. This is surely a reflection of the rise of processual archaeology over the culture-historical approach in American archaeology and the concern with more general issues of culture process (Willey and Sabloff 1993).

The rising popularity of Latin American and general articles comes at the expense of most North American regions, especially the Southwest, Northeast, and Southeast. The former two dropped from representing 24% and 17% of articles in the first five years of the journal to less than 10% each by the 1970s. Notably, three regions did not decrease during the rise of Latin American articles. Old World articles steadily increased from a nonpresence before 1955 to approximately 8% by the early 1980s, and they have steadily contributed between 6% and 8% of all articles since that time. The only North American regions that fared similarly well are the Great Basin and, to a lesser extent, the Plains. The Great Basin attains its all-time high in the 1960s and 1970s but drops significantly after 1980, while Plains articles remain relatively high between the late 1940s and 1960s, before decreasing significantly between 1970 and 1980.

More recently, the migration of Latin American articles to *LAA* has promoted a rebound in the representation of most North American regions. This is particularly pronounced among Southwestern articles, which nearly tripled during the 1980s and the 1990s. However, the same can not be said for Arctic, Great Basin, or Old World articles, and articles focusing on California and the Plains have increased only slightly. The real increase is among articles dealing with topics in the Southwest, and to a lesser extent the Northeast and Southeast.

Discussion

Given the large changes in regional representation, I found myself asking what factors were responsible? For example, what led to the dramatic rise in the number of Southwestern articles since 1981? Surely the answer to this question is complex. In the sections below I consider some potential factors.



Figure 1: North American regions examined in the study.

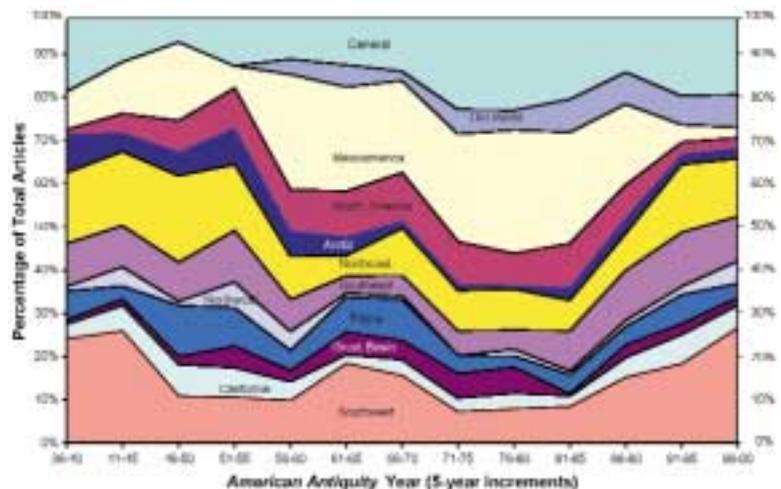


Figure 2: Representation of different regions in pages of *American Antiquity*.

Table 1: Inception date of regional journals and effects on representation in *American Antiquity*.

| Journal  | Year Started | Region | Prior 10 yrs. | Subsqt. 10 yrs. | 11-20 years after |
|--|--------------|--------|---------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| <i>Journal of Southwestern Anthropology</i>              | 1945         | SW     | 23.7%         | 10.7%           | 14.9%             |
| <i>Plains Anthropologist</i>                             | 1954         | Plains | 9.1%          | 6.5%            | 6.4%              |
| <i>Arctic Anthropology</i>                               | 1962         | Arctic | 6.8%          | 2.6%            | 1.1%              |
| <i>Pacific Coast Archaeological Society Quarterly</i>    | 1965         | Calif. | 4.2%          | 3.4%            | 3.0%              |
| <i>Northwest Anthropological Research Notes</i>          | 1967         | NW     | 2.0%          | 0.4%            | 1.5%              |
| <i>Man in the Northeast</i>                              | 1971         | NE     | 8.0%          | 8.8%            | 12.6%             |
| <i>Archaeology of Eastern North America</i>              | 1973         | NE     | 9.9%          | 8.0%            | 9.5%              |
| <i>Journal of California Anthropology</i>                | 1974         | Calif. | 3.3%          | 3.1%            | 4.8%              |
| <i>Journal California &amp; Great Basin Anthropology</i> | 1978         | GB     | 4.1%          | 1.5%            | 2.7%              |
| <i>Southeastern Archaeology</i>                          | 1982         | SE     | 5.0%          | 11.1%           | 12.5%             |
| <i>Ancient Mesoamerica</i>                               | 1990         | Meso.  | 24.2%         | 3.2%            | n/a               |

Notes: yrs. = years; Subsqt = Subsequent; Calif. = California; Meso. = Mesoamerica; n/a = not available.

**EDITORSHIP.** The editor has ultimate decision-making power over which articles are accepted. In this sense, she or he can influence the direction of the journal and how different regions are represented. An editor could subconsciously promote or reject publication of articles in the same region in which he or she works. Authors also might see an editor as sympathetic to a particular region and be encouraged to submit articles.

The data show that under some editors, representation of their own regions of interest increased, while under others it decreased. For example, during the editorships of Jesse Jennings (ca. 1951–1954) and Jeremy Sabloff (ca. 1978–1981), the number of Great Basin and Mesoamerican articles, respectively, increased slightly. Yet under Robert E. Bell (ca. 1967–1970), the number of Plains articles decreased. In all cases, the changes are slight. There does not seem to be any systematic influence by AA editors.

**REGIONAL JOURNALS.** As discussed above, the introduction of LAA had a visible impact on the representation of Latin American articles in AA. I began to wonder if the introduction of other regional journals had impacts as well. Table 1 lists the journals examined in this study that were started after 1935.

In many cases, the beginning of a regional journal is preceded by a rise in the number of articles representing that region in AA, suggesting that many regional journals are the outgrowth of an increase in publishable research. The commencement of such a journal clearly attracts articles away from AA. Almost every time a regional journal begins, there are fewer AA articles representing that region over the following 10 years. In most cases, the number of articles increases again after 10 years. Perhaps as regional journals stimulate interest in various topics, or as certain regional issues are resolved, articles are directed again toward AA.

This result is not terribly surprising. However, it illustrates the effects that regional journals have on the national visibility of each region's archaeology. They clearly reduce visibility following their inception but may stimulate more research down the line, at least as measured in the pages of AA. Thus, regional journals likely have *some* influence on the representation of different regions in AA.

**PH.D.S.** The number of AA articles on a particular region must be related to the total amount of research carried out in that area, and one measure of this might be the number of dissertations focusing in each region. Many articles appearing in AA are either directly abstracted from dissertations or represent additional research based on dissertation data. Although research generated in the context of CRM is increasingly contributing to the journal, I could not think of any systematic way to estimate the quantity of such work.

I gathered data on all archaeology Ph.D. dissertations awarded from American universities prior to 2001 that are on file with University Microfilms (UMI; ProQuest). Beginning in 1975, most dissertations in the UMI database self-identify by subject area. For earlier dissertations, I downloaded all those containing the words "archaeology," "prehistoric," "lithic," "ceramic," or any cognate thereof in the title, filter-

Table 2: Comparison of dissertations and AA articles.

| Region           | Total Ph.D.s | Total AA Articles | Standardized Residual <sup>1</sup> | Correlation Coefficient (5-year blocks) <sup>2</sup> |
|------------------|--------------|-------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| Arctic           | 104          | 73                | -0.02                              | 0.33   |
| California       | 78           | 90.3              | 0.50                               | -0.51  |
| Great Basin      | 76           | 69.8              | 0.25                               | -0.06  |
| Mesoamerica      | 495          | 375               | -0.67                              | 0.09   |
| pre-1990         | 264          | 355.5             | 1.72                               | 0.02   |
| Northeast        | 503          | 236.5             | -2.51                              | -0.13  |
| Northwest        | 95           | 43.3              | -0.29                              | -0.44  |
| Old World        | 1670         | 92.5              | n/a                                | 0.90   |
| Plains           | 114          | 117               | 0.42                               | 0.53   |
| Southeast        | 215          | 171               | -0.05                              | -0.08  |
| South America    | 228          | 156.5             | -0.38                              | 0.22   |
| pre-1990         | 122          | 143               | 0.66                               | 0.24   |
| <b>Southwest</b> | <b>328</b>   | <b>306</b>        | <b>0.37</b>                        | <b>-0.46</b>   |

1. Residuals for regression on columns 2 and 3, removing Old World. Positive residuals indicate more articles in AA than expected given total number of dissertations; negative residuals indicate fewer articles.
2. Correlation coefficients between percentage of Ph.D.s and percentage of AA articles in 5-year blocks of time. Positive values indicate that increases in Ph.D.s corresponds with increases in articles.

ing out all irrelevant theses (e.g., pertaining to geology or materials science). Searching only for these specific words may introduce bias (e.g., for lithic- and/or ceramic-bearing regions); however, I felt that these four keywords would retrieve a representative sample of dissertations. Based on the title, each dissertation was coded for a regional focus, using the same 11 regions defined earlier.

Together, the database contains over 4,000 titles published between 1940 and 2000. However, 88% of these date after 1974, and 97% after 1960. Indeed, the number of archaeology dissertations has grown steadily between 1975 and 2000, having nearly doubled from just over 100 per year in the mid-1970s to nearly 200 a year by the late 1990s. Given the scarcity of pre-1961 dissertations, the analysis focused on the period between 1961 and 2000.

Table 2 lists the number of dissertations and AA articles in each area. There is a linear correlation, indicating that more dissertations in an area correlates with more AA articles. Regression residuals listed in Table 2 show which regions are over- and under-producing AA articles, given the number of dissertations produced. For example, the number of Mesoamerican articles is far more than would be expected (see column 4), particularly when we limit the analysis to before 1990 (when LAA started). To a lesser extent, this is also true of South America, the Plains, California, and the Southwest. On the other hand, articles from the Southeast and especially the Northeast are under-represented in AA.

Does an increase in the representation of dissertations from an area correlate with an increase in related articles in AA? Figure 3 examines the regional focus of dissertations through time. If there is one clear pattern, it is the steady increase of those covering the Old World, and the number of Old World articles in AA increased over this same period. The rise in popularity of this region comes at the expense of most others, with the exception of the Northeast and Mesoamerica. The percentage of Northeast dissertations increases steadily between 1960 and 1985 before falling again, and Mesoamerican dissertations show a steady increase between 1990 and 2000, consistent with results reported by Chamblee and Mills (2001) for SAA annual meeting papers. However, AA articles from these two regions do not follow the trends in dissertations. In fact, few areas display significant correlation coefficients (Table 2), suggesting that the percentage of dissertations and AA articles do not rise and fall together.

Significantly, there is no comparable rise in the percentages of dissertations focusing on the Southwest from 1975 onwards, quite unlike what is seen in AA. If anything, the percentage of Southwestern dissertations has decreased since 1980 (though rising slightly between 1995 and 2000). This relationship is

indicated by the negative correlation coefficient in Table 2. Similarly, there is a slight negative correlation in California, the Northwest, the Southeast, and the Northeast. In sum, although the percentage of Ph.D.s dealing with different regions has some influence on AA articles, for the majority of regions there is little correlation. This factor, then, only partially explains the trends in AA noted earlier.

### Conclusions

It appears that AA editors, regional journals, and dissertations have only marginal effects on the representation of different regions in the pages of AA. What, then, accounts for the changes seen in Figure 2? For example, why did Mesoamerican articles become so popular beginning in the second half of the 1950s, and why have Southwestern articles become so dominant over the last 15 years?

My feeling is that these trends are, in part, explained by factors that are more difficult to quantify. First, the development of core groups of researchers who promote healthy and friendly competitiveness may lead to collaborative efforts that produce innovative ideas likely to make the pages of AA. Such groups also may create academic climates where publication in journals is the norm. As individuals from these groups acquire university jobs and develop graduate programs, they probably promote this value system, passing it along to their students. In other words, the development of a vibrant community of researchers in an area must influence both the quantity and quality of publishable research. Other regions may lack a similar climate where research and/or publication is as encouraged.

Second, the success of recent doctorates in obtaining academic appointments at research-oriented universities must also be important. For example, if Southwestern and Mesoamerican archaeologists are more successful in obtaining jobs at institutions where publication is required, we would expect an increase in the number of articles focusing on those regions. In some ways, such success may be self-perpetuating. If research in an area is being published at a high rate and receiving a lot of national attention, universities may feel it important to have an archaeologist working in that area on staff.

Finally, the uniqueness of the archaeological record may also play a role. Although my knowledge of Southwest and Mesoamerica is limited, I am always amazed by the fineness of temporal resolution as a result of tree-ring dating and the ability to decipher hieroglyphs. These factors allow archaeologists to ask different and more detailed questions, pushing the limits of theory and method. Such resolution is simply not possible in other parts of the Americas. These factors may contribute to the attractiveness of these areas, pulling in more archaeologists and generating more innovative research.

Should these trends be of concern to archaeologists working outside the Southwest or Mesoamerica? If hiring practices at universities are related to trends in AA articles, those seeking academic appointments might be concerned if they work in areas with low representation in AA. Those judged by the visibility and popularity of their work, especially for career advancement, might be concerned. Some institutions, for example, use the Web of Science (<http://www.isiknowledge.com>) to measure citation

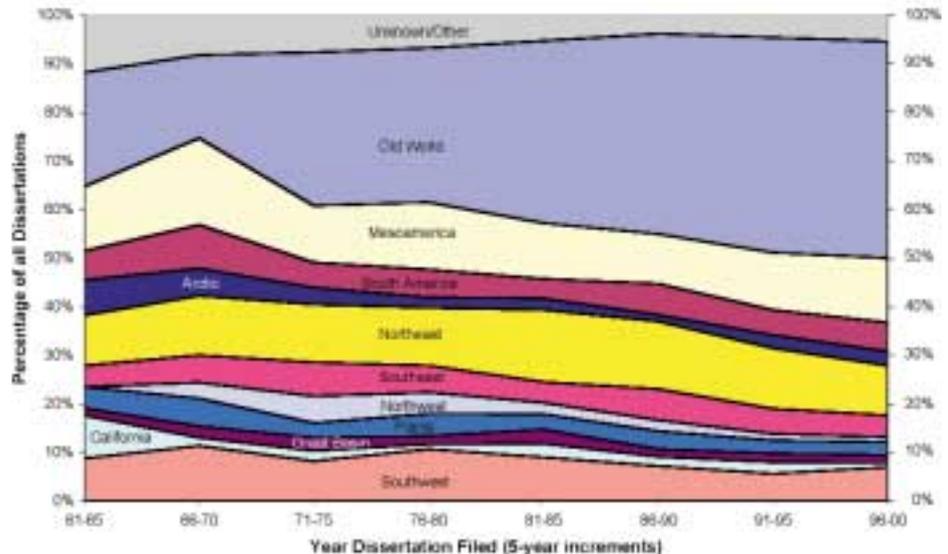


Figure 3 Representation of different regions among Ph.D. dissertations from North American universities.

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rates to gauge faculty success. Working in an area where little research is published means that your work has fewer chances of being cited. ☐

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