

### REGIONAL CHRONOLOGIES, HIATUSES AND CONTINUITIES IN THE PRECOLONIAL HISTORY OF THE AMAZON

Eduardo Góes Neves

Museum of Archeology and Ethnology / University of São Paulo (USP)

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*Cluster of urns identified in situ, Hatahara site, Central Amazon (photo by Val Moraes)*

The available archaeological evidence points to a peculiar situation related to the past human occupation of the Central Amazon. After an early settlement of the area, dated to 9,000 years ago (7,000 BC), visible signs of human occupation become scarce, only to appear again many thousands of years later, approximately 500 BC. From this time on, marked changes in patterns of social and political organization become noticeable. The most remarkable aspect of this process was the increase in size, density and duration of the occupation of archaeological sites. The visible features observed at those sites include the following: the development of organically rich fertile dark soils, known as *terras pretas*; the construction of artificial mounds supporting houses; and the production of refined pottery decorated by painting and incision.

In other areas of the Amazon, such as the Upper Madeira basin, the cultural sequence appears to be different. There, one also sees early signs of human occupation, but the sequence stretches without chronological gaps throughout the entire Holocene. Furthermore, the evidence for sedentary life and landscape changes seems to be earlier there than in

the central Amazon.

Based on these findings, we propose that the history of the past human occupation of the Amazon has not been homogenous, uniform or continuous, but rather has been marked by the periods of stability interrupted by brusque events of economic, social and political change that varied regionally.

This hypothesis applies to both recent and more ancient periods of human occupation in the area. The project aims to test this hypothesis through the identification, mapping and excavation of archaeological sites located in two research areas, one in the Central Amazon and the other in the Upper Madeira basin. The aim of the research is to confirm whether one of the regional sequences is discontinuous and the other is continuous and to attempt to understand the variables that can be correlated to these different patterns.

The general hypothesis has a number of corollaries.

First, it is proposed that the visible changes that happened from 500 BC onward in the Central Amazon and earlier in the Upper Madeira were of the same sort, and they both correlate to a general paleoecological process associated with the increase in rainfall across the Amazon.

Second, it is proposed that the social and political transformations related to these ecological changes are associated with the establishment of a greater dependence on agriculture or agroforestry across the Amazon. If correct, this hypothesis assumes that there has been a large interval between the beginning of plant domestication and the establishment of agriculture in the Amazon.

The third corollary is that the economic basis for Amazonian social formations has always been centered on the domestic group, which led to the emergence of politically unstable systems. This process can be verified in the archaeological record through the successive occupation and abandonment of large settlements across the area. This could be why, despite an effective productive basis, centralized forms of political organization, such as the state, never developed in pre-colonial Amazon.

## SUMMARY OF RESULTS TO DATE AND PERSPECTIVES

In the Central Amazon, the most interesting results have been the establishment of a firm correlation between ceramic styles, site size and shape, on the one hand, and patterns of social and political organization, on the other. Hence, ceramics from the so-called Manacapuru and Paredão phases, produced from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, are associated with villages that had a ring- or horseshoe-shaped layout. These villages were occupied by sedentary populations that lived in the same place for many generations. In some cases, such as the Lago Grande site, the occupation lasted for 300 years, from the late seventh millennium to the early eleventh millennium AD. Populations at that time were integrated into regional systems that included the circulation of pottery and most likely other goods that are not archaeologically visible. Interestingly, however, there are no clear signs of the emergence of centralized political structures because each studied village seems to have been an independent political unit.

At the beginning of the second millennium AD one sees a drastic political and demographic change in the area. Sites become smaller, their layout changes from ring-shaped to linear and these changes are matched by replacements in ceramics. Ceramics from a different complex, known as Guarita, become visible on the surface of sites in the area and rapidly spread upstream the Amazon River toward what are currently Peru, Ecuador and Colombia. Guarita occupations in the area are much shorter-lived than the preceding ones. The presence of defensive ditches on some Paredão phase sites suggest that the replacement of Paredão occupations by Guarita occupations was associated with armed conflict. Despite these differences, one does not see the development of centralized forms of political organization associated with Guarita occupations.

Work in the Upper Madeira has allowed for the identification of contexts, yet undated, that suggest that this was the center of origin of the populations that produced Guarita ceramics. This claim is based on the striking similarities between these local ceramics, called Jatuarana, and Guarita ceramics as well as the fact that dates established by previous scholars in these contexts show that they were earlier than Guarita.

The results obtained so far support the general premises of the project, suggesting that the emergence of sedentary life in the Amazon was fairly recent, that the Upper Madeira basin was a center of cultural innovation and that the political formations in the Central Amazon and Upper Madeira were decentralized.

*Crew standing in front and on top of a large house mound, Laguinho site, Central Amazon (composite photo by Eduardo Neves)*



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### Eduardo Góes Neves

Museu de Arqueologia e Etnologia/USP  
Av. Prof. Almeida Prado, 1466 – Cidade Universitária  
CEP 05508-900 – São Paulo, SP – Brasil

+55 11 3091-2894  
edgneves@usp.br  
<http://www.mae.usp.br>