

# **Processions in the Ancient Americas**

**Susan Toby Evans, editor**

*Occasional Papers in Anthropology*

**Department of Anthropology  
Penn State University**

**No. 33**

**2016**



### About the series

Penn State's *Occasional Papers in Anthropology* series was established in 1965 with an enduringly valuable research report by William Sanders (at left, in the 1960s Teotihuacan Valley), *Cultural Ecology of the Teotihuacan Valley*, or, as we now know it, <http://journals.psu.edu/opa/article/view/59754/59501>. This work and others originally published on paper for the series are now available on an internet journal platform, <https://journals.psu.edu/opa/index>, recently developed by Penn State University Libraries. Our university shares in the global effort to publish cultural resources as freely as is possible. President Barack Obama in 2012 prioritized timely open access to research results funded by the United States government, and scholars are responding enthusiastically, quickly seeing the great advantages of a shared digital data bank. Web sites for distribution of research reports have been established by publishers, research institutions, and academic departments, and present a practical way to distribute research results and curate databases, at least as long as the institutional host (here, Penn State University) exists.

And cultural trends follow – and prompt -- this kind of sharing. Increasingly, the net has become a primary resource for research. Free internet access to many scholarly articles and books is commonly available through academic servers, for use by all members of the academic community, including undergraduates, who, as native-speakers-of-digital are devoted to their tablet-based knowledge systems. This increasing dependence on the tablet and web has serious disadvantages if misused, but the advantages for scholars are terrific, not just for publication but also for increased clarity in presenting their work. In an online open access publication, the scholar may include as many publication-quality images as are appropriate and shareable, including those available for common use on various websites.

Generous illustration greatly enriches our understanding of the analyses and interpretations of any data set, and this potential will be increasingly realized in publications of this *Occasional Papers* series. In the case of No. 33, *Processions in the Ancient Americas*, we are pleased to present these research papers for their styles of presentation as well as for their solid analyses and thought-provoking interpretations and conclusions. This volume is dedicated to William Sanders for his great work as a cultural ecologist, in documenting – and curating -- archaeological settlement systems in the Basin of Mexico, particularly in the Teotihuacan Valley.

Susan Toby Evans, Series Editor

*Occasional Papers in Anthropology*, Department of Anthropology  
Pennsylvania State University, PA 16802-3404, <http://anth.la.psu.edu/>

ISSN: 2380-4998

**Copyrights** are held by individual authors, according to Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License (CC BY-NC-ND); users may copy and to create excerpts from the Contribution for non-commercial purposes provided that the user gives appropriate credit [Title of Article, Contributor, Journal Title and Volume/ Issue, Copyright © [year], copyright owner as specified in the Journal, Publisher] and provides a link to the license.

#### Citation:

Evans, Susan Toby (editor). 2016. *Processions in the Ancient Americas*. *Occasional Papers in Anthropology* No. 33. Department of Anthropology, Penn State University.

## *Processions in the Ancient Americas.*

- Editor's Preface Editor's Preface to *Processions in the Ancient Americas*  
Susan Toby Evans
- Chapter One Processions, Ritual Movements, and the Ongoing Production of  
Pre-Columbian Societies, with a Perspective from Tiwanaku  
John W. Janusek
- Chapter Two Processional Ceremonies in the  
Formative Period Chiapas Central Depression, Chiapas, Mexico  
Timothy Sullivan
- Chapter Three Location and Orientation of Teotihuacan, Mexico:  
Water Worship and Processional Space  
Susan Toby Evans
- Chapter Four Ritual Processions in Ancient Tollan: The Legacy in Stone  
Elizabeth Jiménez García and Robert H. Cobean
- Chapter Five Processions and Aztec State Rituals in the Landscape of the Valley of Mexico  
Johanna Broda

Related publication: *Implorar con los pies: Procesiones en Mesoamerica*  
(*To Pray with the Feet: Processions in Mesoamerica*)  
a special section of *Arqueología Mexicana*, Vol. 22, 2015

[Las procesiones en Mesoamérica](#)

Susan Toby Evans

[La Ofrenda 4 de La Venta, Tabasco](#)

Ann Cyphers

[Procesiones en Oaxaca](#)

Ernesto González Licón

[Procesiones en Teotihuacan. Agua y Tierra](#)

Susan Toby Evans

[Desplazamiento ritual en el Occidente de México](#)

Ben A. Nelson

[Procesiones y sacbeob de las Tierras Bajas del norte en el Clásico maya](#)

Traci Ardren

[Procesiones esculpidas en la antigua Tollan](#)

Elizabeth Jiménez García and Robert H. Cobean

[Procesiones en Chichén Itzá](#)

Rafael Cobos and Lilia Fernández Souza

[Tenochtitlan, centro de procesiones y peregrinaciones en la Cuenca de México](#)

Johanna Broda

## Editor's Preface to *Processions in the Ancient Americas*

This volume presents research papers exploring the role of processions in shaping the built environment in four cultural regions of ancient Mexico (Formative Chiapas, Early Classic Teotihuacan Valley, Early Postclassic Tula Valley, and Late Postclassic Basin of Mexico), and one, Tiwanaku, from ancient Andean South America. Examining the role of processions in particular landscapes involves the application of cultural ecological principles to ritual life, and the results are significant.

In each case, as was prevalent all over the ancient Americas, ritual life was experienced almost exclusively out-of-doors and processions were an essential means of connecting with the living landscape. The outdoor ritual settings of ancient American cultures stand in strong contrast to those of many ancient agrarian cultures of the Old World, where most rituals were held in enclosed spaces. The broad distinction between cultures with indoor or outdoor ritual life is essential to understanding an archaeological culture's rituals and how

ceremonial architecture and landscape modifications work toward promoting the participant's interaction with the visible landscape; it is mediated but not masked by the built environment. And because ancient Americans venerated that visible landscape and regarded it as animated by a lambent spiritual energy, processions would connect them to the energy in the mountains and mountain effigies around them and the causeways beneath their feet.

Processions – the orderly progression of lines of people, moving toward shared destinations with shared, often sacred intentions -- represent a possibly universal human experience, encompassing a wide range of cultural meanings, piety and communal action foremost among them. Even in modern secularized societies, we are accustomed to observing and sometimes even participating in them. We understand that participation signals a willingness to submit to an authority, to demonstrate an attitude – and it is with good reason that participation in a procession has been termed “praying with your feet.”

Today, processions are often politically motivated, such as protests or demonstrations against economic inequality, climate change, or government policy (**Figure 1**). Nonetheless, they are communal rites and generate solidarity.



**Figure 1.** In Washington DC on March 27, 1982, a procession of concerned citizens protested U.S. foreign policy. (photo by S.T. Evans)

Processions may celebrate rites of increase and rites of passage, such as the example John Janusek presents in this volume, of school children visiting Washington DC, filing respectfully past the Constitution. Many processions are restricted to members of organized groups, or families, lineages, age sets, gender, and other cohorts. In traditional societies, the gender, relative rank and status of any individual is well known to all – falling into line in a procession would be a familiar reinforcement of society's rankings and rules of precedence.

Processions also serve latent functions. Even without an overt statement that participation demonstrates loyalty to the event or cause, those in charge may use this as a test of group solidarity. Furthermore, while individuals may participate from a sincere belief in the importance of the ceremony, they may also enjoy being part of the spectacle and the sense of transcendence of individual consciousness through the sensory experience of synchronized movements to the rhythms of music. Rituals like processions may feed many sensory appetites, even for degradation and pain. In ancient agrarian societies, those in processions experienced a fusion of natural, social, and sacred realms as they moved with their co-worshippers through a built environment planned to harness the forces of nature to human use.

In traditional societies, faith was likely to have been sincere, if not fervent. This point may escape some modern scholars. We look for the adaptive value of cultural practices and can readily identify economic, political, and social functions, but when we come to ideology, we find it difficult to adopt an emic perspective, even though its explanatory power is

considerable. To their participants, processions, like other ceremonies, were thought to have an adaptive value beyond that of social or political solidarity. Propitiating and venerating the rain gods by procession was seen as another means of controlling the forces of nature, different than, say, digging an irrigation canal, but in the emic view no less effective.

In the regions under consideration here, this effort at manipulation of nature's forces is understandable, given closely juxtaposed, radically divergent ecozones being actively shaped by earthquakes, volcanic activity, torrential storms and desiccating droughts. This no doubt promoted belief in the animation of the natural environment, widespread in the Americas. These regions are bounded by mountains, and the relationship between the mountains and storm systems was closely observed and creatively explained. As if to form human-scale models of their surroundings so as to better control natural forces, important cultural centers were planned and built to mimic landscape features so that the people could use processions in their rituals designed to placate the forces of nature.

These forces were often anthropomorphized in the ancient world, though in Mesoamerica depictions of deities as humans are perhaps best understood as congeries of features applied to various frameworks, some of them human-like. However expressed, once these plausible models of the characteristics of forces of nature have been developed, these "deities" become the focus of what humans imagine are the most effective ways of placating, even manipulating them.

Processions, like other rituals, serve as display to supplicate the divine, and the

sincerity of this supplication is expressed through proper adherence to rites. This is a form of impression management operating at several levels: influencing the gods with

## Evidence

Scholarship pertaining to the role of processions in the Americas has until now largely concerned ethnographic or post-Conquest Colonial period cultures. In contrast, the papers here represent a uniquely focused approach to this important phenomenon in the complex societies of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica and the Andes. To reconstruct an extinct society's belief systems, archaeologists and ethnohistorians bring together several resources.

A basic source of evidence is the natural environment. Understanding the natural environmental context is the foundation of culture-ecological analysis, essential to developing a meaningful reconstruction of cultural patterns, particularly those as idiosyncratic as rituals. This culture-ecological record includes, of course, the archaeological sites and settlement patterns framed within landscape features and horizon markers. To appreciate rituals we must know the region's limits and potential for cultural adaptation: climate, soil, and resources. Tim Sullivan, this volume, shows how site plans from Chiapas show changing possibilities for processions.

The ethnographic record is important for archaeological interpretation in the Americas. None of us is so naïve as to assume a simple translation, a flawless application of the direct historical approach, but we must consider the important role of deeply rooted traditions, particularly in regions where the natural environment plays an important role in shaping perceptions of changing seasons. There, important horizon

the elaboration of human effort, and assuring state authorities (including priests) of society's conformance to authority.

markers survive while books of ancient knowledge can be burned. The landscape carries basic elements of the stories people tell their children to explain the wider world, and the skills they teach them to survive. Some farming practices that are still used today have a long indigenous history. The persistence of folk traditions is particularly strong when concerning matters of life and death: the timely onset of the rains, for example.

The ethnohistorical record is also fraught with problems as a source for interpreting the cultures of the very societies it purports to describe, much less those of possibly ancestral groups. And in spite of the problems, these descriptions are too rich and their value too great to ignore, as Johanna Broda's paper in this volume makes clear, using Duran's 16<sup>th</sup> century description of the procession of Aztec lords on their yearly pilgrimage to Mt. Tlaloc.

The culture's graphic and plastic representations as well as built environment itself lend themselves to art-historical interpretations. Also from the Central Highlands of Mexico, Tula's bas-reliefs and colonnaded halls seem to illustrate processions and give them spatial scope, as Elizabeth Jiménez and Robert Cobean discuss in this volume. Teotihuacan's legacy includes graphic depictions in murals and on ceramics that strongly suggest figures moving in line. In my essay, I explore how the site's avenues and monuments set up processional scenarios resonating within the Teotihuacan Valley.

## Processions in the Ancient Americas: Symposia and Publications

This volume on processions has roots in my long-term interest in the great city of Teotihuacan, my field research in its setting, the Teotihuacan Valley, and research into Teotihuacan materials, at Dumbarton Oaks (Washington D.C.). Jeff Quilter, Director of Pre-Columbian Studies 1995-2005, suggested that I prepare the new catalogue of Mexican art in Dumbarton Oaks's Bliss Collection (Evans [ed.] 2010). In studying the Teotihuacan mural ("Net Jaguar" Mural 8 from the Tepantitla compound, Room 12) for the catalogue, I realized that its water temple was a logical ancestor of San Juan Teotihuacan's Catholic church, with its enclosure of one of the springs.

I had been there years ago as part of a group of graduate students of William Sanders. We were researching dissertations on various cultural-ecological topics pertaining to the Teotihuacan Valley and Basin of Mexico. Bill took us to the churchyard to show how powerful interests appropriate key resources.

Native and Spanish practices suggest that the church, founded in 1548, overlies an Aztec period water temple, which would in turn overlie an Early Classic Teotihuacan temple. Its portrait in the Tepantitla mural is one of several dozen similar scenes, the eight in Room 12 presenting a procession of net-jaguars, headed toward the water temples and toward the setting sun in late spring, at the onset of the rainy season. Cultural ecology and art history together could translate the message of the mural, and perhaps also untangle the reasoning behind Teotihuacan's distinctive orientation and gridded plan.

Yet, in spite of the obvious importance of processions in Teotihuacan

and in the cultures of the ancient Americas, there had been no in-depth treatments of the topic. The first step to understanding such processions would be to gather interested scholars together to share research and ideas. The next Director of Pre-Columbian Studies, Joanne Pillsbury, encouraged me to organize symposia on the topic.

The first symposium was held in April 2014 at the Society for American Archaeology meetings (Evans and Nair 2014a), and the second, in October 2014 at Dumbarton Oaks (Evans and Nair 2014b). The topics in the two symposia ranged over Mesoamerica and Andean and coastal South America, and covered several thousand years of pre-Columbian culture history. In this volume, John Janusek reviews these contributions in an introductory and overview essay.

Joanne Pillsbury's successor, Mary Pye, continued support for the processions symposium at Dumbarton Oaks in 2014, as did the Pre-Columbian Studies Senior Fellows, with particular encouragement from Barbara Arroyo, Leonardo López Luján, and Chip Stanish, and further suggestions from Tom Cummins, Ken Hirth, John Verano, and Gary Urton. The Dumbarton Oaks symposium of October 2014 was highlighted by a witty and erudite etymological introduction by the Director of Dumbarton Oaks, Jan Ziolkowski. A special exhibition at the Dumbarton Oaks library, "Standing on Ceremony" presented books and art related to processions, plazas, and pathways, organized by Bridget Gazzo, Librarian, Pre-Columbian Studies. The symposium's complicated logistics were ably coordinated by Kelly McKenna, while Kathy Sparkes and Sara Taylor of the

Publications Office gave valuable advice and inspired appreciation of their high standards of print publication.

At the suggestion of Leonardo López Luján, the processions topic was featured in the popular Mexican magazine *Arqueología Mexicana*. Four articles related to symposia topics were included among the short pieces in *Implorar con los pies: Procesiones en Mesoamerica*, a special section of the magazine (Evans 2015 [ed.]). It was a privilege to share processions research with this popular journal's large readership, and I appreciate the generosity of María Nieves Noriega de Autrey, General Director, in commissioning this special section and in making the articles available here, with hyperlinks in the Table of Contents (see p. iii), provided by Enrique Vela.

In contrast to these short treatments, some of the symposia presentations were developed into extended research papers, and some were gathered into this publication. The external review by a distinguished scholar was positive, recommending publication. Under ordinary circumstances, this book would have first been published in a print edition by an academic publisher (possibly as early as 2017), followed, perhaps two years later, by digital access. But through a fortuitous set

of circumstances I was able to take advantage of the opportunity to publish online in my academic department's research series; *OPA* No. 33 includes five research papers from the symposia.

This book has been formulated as printer-friendly, but you are almost certainly reading it on a screen, and appreciate the e-format's ability to share research results much more quickly, in an accessible and readable format, extensively illustrated. I do regret the absence of that "new book smell" and the particular aesthetic pleasure of typeface on paper, but the advantages balance the losses.

This volume continues the work of the *Occasional Papers in Anthropology* series from Penn State, established in 1965 by William T. Sanders and dedicated to the dissemination of research results.

I appreciate the support of the Department of Anthropology (particularly George Milner, Doug Kennett, Betty Blair, and Robin Kephart), and the help of Mark Mattson and Linda Friend (Publishing and Curation Services, Penn State Libraries). Thanks also to Molly Allan and David Webster.

Susan Toby Evans

## References cited

Evans, Susan Toby (ed.)

2010 *Ancient Mexican Art at Dumbarton Oaks*. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington D.C., and Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

2015 *Implorar con los Pies: Procesiones en Mesoamérica* [To Pray With the Feet: Processions in Mesoamerica], a special section of *Arqueología Mexicana*, Vol. 22.

Evans, Susan Toby and Stella Nair, symposiarchs

2014a Processional Rituals in the Americas, a symposium presented at the 79th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, Austin.

2014b Processions in the Ancient Americas: Approaches and Perspectives, a symposium presented at Dumbarton Oaks, Pre-Columbian Studies.