

# 18

## Central America

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### 18.1 Introduction

Describing a visit to Teotihuacan, Mexico in March-June 1856, Edward Burnett Tylor – who would become a central figure in the foundation and early history of the Pitt Rivers Museum – noted the vast quantities of antiquities readily accessible to foreign travellers:

‘In the ploughed fields in the neighbourhood we made repeated trials whether it was possible to stand still in any spot where there was no relic of old Mexico within our reach; but this we could not do. Everywhere the ground was full of unglazed pottery and obsidian; and we even found arrows and clay figures that were good enough for a museum’ (Tylor 1861: 147).

Pre-Columbian artefacts had been circulating in Europe since the 16th and 17th centuries; objects, mostly Aztec (Boone 1993: 318), of gold and silver, ceramic figurines, feather shields and painted codices all found their way across the Atlantic. The 19th century, however, saw a new period of European collecting of pre-Columbian material from Mesoamerica. The extensive New World archaeological collections now held in British museums were largely formed during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, by individuals acting privately such as William Bullock, Alfred Maudslay – and Henry Christy, whom the 24-year-old Tylor accompanied in his exploration of Mexico, after a chance meeting on a bus in Havana, Cuba (Tylor 1861: 1).

The Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM) holds a significant collection, largely created through the activities of such private collectors. This chapter presents an overview of the collection of *c.* 2,115 ‘archaeological’ objects from Central America (Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua and Panama). The collections are mostly made up of ceramic and stone objects in almost equal proportions. Over half of these objects come from two major regions: central Mexico, and the Maya area (Belize, Guatemala, and the Yucatán area of Mexico). Much of the material was purchased from collectors rather than procured from fieldwork, although most of the notable 212-strong collection of Maya objects from Belize was recovered through archaeological excavation.

There are *c.* 1,577 objects from Mexico, *c.* 214 objects from Belize, *c.* 109 objects from Panama, *c.* 73 objects from Guatemala, *c.* 47 objects from Costa Rica, *c.* 30 objects from Honduras, *c.* 16 objects from El Salvador, *c.* 7 objects from Nicaragua, and *c.* 42 objects that are recorded as from Central America, but for which the country of origin is currently unknown. The chapter begins with an account of the formation of the Central American ‘archaeological’ collections: the *c.* 100 objects

Period	Approximate Dates
Archaic	8000–2000 BCE
Initial Formative	2000–1200 BCE
Early Formative	1200–900 BCE
Middle Formative	900–400 BCE
Late Formative	400 BCE–1 CE
Terminal Formative	1 CE–300/250 CE
Early Classic	250–600 CE
Late Classic	600–800 CE
Terminal Classic	800–1000 CE
Early Postclassic	1000–1200 CE
Middle Postclassic	1200–1350 CE
Late Postclassic	1350–1500 CE
Terminal Postclassic-Early Contact	1500–1520 CE
Spanish colonial period	1520 CE – (various)
British colonial period (Belize)	1700–1961 CE

*Table 18.1 Chronological overview of Mesoamerican archaeological periods (adapted from Graham 2004, 225; Evans 2008)*

from the PRM founding collection (18.2.1), and the subsequent development of the collection (18.2.2), including the *c.* 132 objects from the collection of E.B. Tylor (Tylor 1861, 1879). A discussion of some of the more significant collections is presented in section 18.3, and brief conclusions are drawn in section 18.4.

A note on the regional terminology used in this Chapter is necessary. The term ‘Mesoamerica’ was coined by anthropologist Paul Kirchoff to evoke a cultural area, in Mexico and adjacent regions, inhabited by Native American civilizations before European contact (Kirchoff 1943). Kirchoff applied the term to societies which, although they did not necessarily speak related languages, were understood to have shared distinctive traditions over a long period, and for which common chronological periods were identified (*Table 18.1*). The architectural arrangement of buildings around plazas, the production of books, hieroglyphic writing, warfare that involved delayed killing and the taking of captives, regular and long-term observations of the movements of the heavenly bodies, auto-bloodletting, the processing of maize with lime, and ball games played in a court were among the shared cultural practices that fostered the region’s material cultural traditions, and that are represented by the Mesoamerican material held in the PRM. Societies defined as Mesoamerican flourished in an area that extended from Central Mexico through Yucatán (Mexico), Guatemala and Belize to western Honduras and El Salvador. The term ‘Mesoamerica’ is therefore applied in this chapter to material from the countries of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, but not to the other countries of Central America – Panama, Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

## 18.2 The Formation of the Central American Collection

### 18.2.1 *The Founding Collection*

The PRM founding collection included *c.* 78 ‘archaeological’ objects from Central America: recorded as from Mexico, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Panama.

Most of these – *c.* 56 artefacts – are from Mexico. These include *c.* 15 obsidian flakes and razors from Oaxaca (1884.132.338–342, 1884.70.28), an Aztec polished pyrite mirror collected from the site of Xochicalco before 1874 (1884.70.19),<sup>1</sup> and an obsidian flake collected by ‘C. Parry’ from La Isla de los Sacrificios in the Gulf of Mexico (near Veracruz) (1884.132.219). The remaining *c.* 37 artefacts have no detailed

<sup>1</sup> Pitt-Rivers would have known about Xochicalco from Tylor’s account of his visit to it (Tylor 1861: 182–95).

provenance recorded: a carved stone figure with a perforation (1884.56.1); a cast of a stone blade (*techatl*) 'used for human sacrifice' (1884.134.43); a ceramic *candeleiro* (incense burner) (1884.128.72); a ceramic rattle in the form of a figure of a woman (1884.67.93); 2 ceramic stamps (1884.64.16, 1884.140.437); a ceramic tripod bazier (1884.40.50); 2 ceramic vessels (1884.40.44, 1884.62.2); a glass bust of a woman (1884.58.49); a glass plaque with relief figures of a woman and a child (1884.58.48); 2 hammer-stones (1884.128.1–2); an 18th-century Spanish iron horse-bit (1884.52.19); 16 ceramic heads, many of which are removed from larger figures (1884.67.83–84, 1884.67.88–101, 1884.86.13); and 7 stone tools (cores, axes and scrapers) (1884.126.134–135, 1884.126.192, 1884.132.343, 1884.133.119, 1884.133.120–121). There is no detail of field collectors recorded for these unprovenanced Mexican objects, apart from an obsidian axe (1884.126.134), which is recorded as from the collected of 'J.P. Smith'. A carved jade figure, showing elongation of the head, is recorded as from either Mexico or Peru (1884.86.12).

There are 10 'archaeological' objects from Costa Rica, and 7 from Nicaragua, in the PRM founding collection. From Costa Rica there are 2 stone axes collected from graves at Limón and San José by John Pearse, and exhibited by Pitt-Rivers at the Anthropological Institute on 4 November 1874 (Anon 1874: 363).<sup>2</sup> There are 3 objects – 2 stone axes (1884.126.128, 1884.126.209), and a ceramic vessel (1884.41.10) – for which no further details of provenance are recorded. The remaining 4 artefacts are recorded as 'found in a tumulus' by Dr Berthold Carl Seemann (1825–1871): a sickle-shaped stone tool (1884.126.223), and 4 stone *metates* (grinding slabs) with carved decorations (1884.10.25, 1884.10.27–28, 1884.68.76). Seemann was a German botanist who trained at the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew, and travelled widely around the world: visiting South America in the 1860s, before managing a sugar estate in Panama, and the Javali gold mine in Chontales, Nicaragua where he was the manager (Belt 1874: 94, footnote 1) until his death in 1871. In his account of travel in Panama, Nicaragua and Mosquito, written with Bedford Pim (Pim and Seemann 1869), Seemann described the excavation of some of 'a great number of ancient tombs...in the grassy districts of Chontales' in Nicaragua:

'The tombs are of different heights and sizes. One of the largest, which was about twenty feet long by twelve feet wide and eight feet about ground, I saw opened by people in search of golden ornaments. It took four men about a fortnight to remove the heap of stones placed on top of the grave, and to lay the grave itself completely open. No gold was found, but a round pillar, seven feet high and eighteen inches across, which was standing upright in the centre of the tomb, a hand-mill for grinding corn or cacao, in shape like those still in use in the country, a knife about ten inches long, a hatchet like a reaping-hook, of which I give a woodcut [reproduced on p. 127], and a tiger's head (natural size) – all of stone – and, besides, some broken crocks and a quantity of balls as large as peas, and made of burnt clay' (Pim and Seemann 1869: 126).

The similarity between this 'hatchet like a reaping hook' and the stone tool described above (1884.126.223) indicates that this object – and perhaps also the *metates* – may in fact come from burial mound excavations at Chontales, Nicaragua, rather than from Costa Rica. This appears even more probable since 6 of the 7 objects in the PRM founding collection that are recorded as from Nicaragua were also collected by Berthold Seemann: 4 stone axes (1884.126.123–124, 1884.126.126–127) and a stone

<sup>2</sup> In the discussion, Pearse remarked that 'from the number of ancient graves which have been cut into by the railway, it is evident that the country was once very thickly inhabited' (Anon 1874: 373).

*metate* (1884.128.64) discovered in excavations at the Javali gold-mine, and a stone axe from 'Bluefields River, Mosquito Coast' (1884.126.131). The remaining object from Nicaragua is a stone axe collected from the Mosquito Coast by Henry Wickham before 1874 (1884.126.132).

There is a single object from Panama in the PRM founding collection: a stone axe collected from San José Island in the Bay of Panama by Alfonso Steffens. An account in the first issue of the *Journal of the Ethnological Society of London* vividly described the excavations from which this object appears to derive:

Don Alfonso Steffens, a German merchant, who deals in pearls and precious stones, and a long time resident in Panama, is the owner of two or three islands in the Bay of Panama, which he purchased for the right of pearl fishing. During his inspections he made excursions into the interior of these islands, and, though not a scientific man himself, he wishes to help inquirers on scientific subjects. During one of these expeditions to the island of San Jose, he induced the natives to open a grave for him, of which there are a great number on a summit hidden by rank tropical vegetation; in the grave opened, they found the implements exhibited. He would have dug deeper in the grave, expecting to find beneath some other objects, when a lizard, bloated in form, and yet somewhat like a cameleon, of which the natives are very much afraid, appearing in a tree overhead, they immediately desisted, and could not be induced to dig another foot of soil....No mention was made of the form of the graves, or of the materials used in their construction. A portion of a skull and several teeth in a portion of the ramus were also found, but crumbled away on being touched. These he did not disturb. He purposes to visit the same place and collect everything, without being satisfied with his own estimate of their value, in the hope that whatever he forwards to England may be set in order when delivered to the Society. Some remarks on these implements were made by Mr Carter Blake, Sir John Lubbock, and Col. Lane Fox' (Steffens 1869: 69).

There are 3 'archaeological' objects from Honduras in the PRM founding collection: a rare three-legged Mosquito Coast stone vase, with lug handles in the form of vulture heads and two bands of squared-scrolled motifs, dating from *c.* 800–1200 CE (1884.63.60), a Maya stone spear-head (1884.134.70), and a cast of a spear-head (1884.134.71). Finally, there are 2 objects with no country of provenance recorded: a stone *metate* with a carved animal head (1884.10.26); a bronze human figure, recorded as probably a forgery (1884.140.970).

### 18.2.1 *The Central American Collection after 1884*

Some 126 'archaeological' objects expanded the PRM's Central American collections through a series of small donations and purchases between 1884 and 1917. Notable items among this material include a model of ball court at Chichen Itza, Yucatan, Mexico donated by the pioneering Mesoamerican archaeologist Alfred Percival Maudslay (1894.37.1); and *c.* 46 objects collected from Mexico by Osbert H. Howarth (1893.69.1–8, 1912.45.1–37), including a carved stone figure excavated from a tomb at Milpa Alta in the Valley of Mexico (1893.69.2), and a ceramic figurine 'excavated in a railway cutting' in Michoacán, near to the border with Colima (1893.69.3). There is also collection of *c.* 56 ceramic vessels donated to the PRM by Douglas Freeland Shute Filliter: *c.* 36 collected by J.L. Kraus from 'graves near Bugaba' in the Chiriquí Province of Panama (1913.3.1–36) (including 2 olive jar mouths and a glazed majolica sherd, both indicators of the conquest or early colonial period), 7 possibly collected by Filliter himself from the same region (1911.22.1–7), and *c.* 13 from the 'site of the old Spanish town' at Panama City (1913.3.37–49).

Also from Chiriquí are 16 pottery artefacts collected and donated in 1924 by Lilian Mabel Alice Richmond Brown and Frederick Albert Mitchell-Hedges who explored the region in 1922 (1924.46.92–107). Mitchell-Hedges was an amateur archaeologist, who is possibly best known in relation to the ‘Crystal skull controversy’. Richmond-Brown claimed (Richmond Brown 1924) to have discovered a ‘new tribe’, although communities in the region were known about previously.

In 1917, the collections were further expanded by a donation of *c.* 130 ‘archaeological’ objects from Mexico from the estate of Edward Burnett Tylor (1917.53.100–101, 1917.53.299–406, 1917.53.460, 1917.53.525–539, 1917.53.769). Tylor had previously also donated a single ceramic spindle whorl from Mexico in 1911 (1911.1.90). Some or all of these *c.* 131 objects were possibly collected by Tylor himself during the trip to Mexico which he undertook in March–June 1856 (Tylor 1861), in the company of Henry Christy: from whom he received guidance on ‘what it was the business of the anthropologist to collect, and what to leave uncollected; how very useless for anthropologic purposes mere curiosities are, and how priceless are every-day things’ (Tylor 1884: 549). The strategies for collecting these objects varied, but Tylor’s account of a day spent at Teotihuacan gives a clear sense of some of the opportunities for acquiring antiquities:

‘The day was closing in by this time; and our man was waiting with the horses at the foot of the great pyramid and with him an Indian, whom we had caught half an hour before, and sent off with a real to buy pulque, and collect such obsidian arrows and clay heads as were to be found at the ranchos in the neighbourhood... Two days afterwards we came back... We held a solemn market of antiquities. We sat cross-legged on the ground, and the Indian women and children brought us many curious articles in clay and obsidian, which we bought and deposited in two great bags of aloe-fibre which our man carried at his saddle-bow’ (Tylor 1861: 146, 148).

The Tylor collection comprises *c.* 108 ceramic heads, *c.* 15 ceramic sherds (1917.53.525–539), 4 obsidian tools (1917.53.100–101, 1917.53.769), and a cast of a model of a calendar stone (1917.53.460). Although Henry Christy, who became a major benefactor of the British Museum, accompanied Tylor in his travels in Mesoamerica, nothing from his collection is represented at the PRM. The Tylor bequest also includes *c.* 25 photographs of the Maya site of Quirigua taken by Alfred Maudslay in 1883 (1998.182.1–25; Grover 2012; *Figure 18.1*).

Material continued to be incorporated into the Central American collections throughout the 1920s. Acquisition was largely haphazard, through small donations, and included material from prolific collectors such as Louis Colville Gray Clarke. Clarke donated some 49 Mesoamerican objects (1920.5.4–5, 1921.24.2–12, 1921.24.17–30, 1921.24.33), including stone axes, ceramic figurines, spindle whorls, and ceramic vessels, including a Maya shoe-shaped pot from Guatemala, a type often associated with children’s burials (1921.24.2). Two notable chert objects from Honduras were amongst the large collection of flint implements (mostly from the UK) purchased from the estate of Alexander James Montgomerie Bell. These two fishtail points (1921.91.232–233) are rare and are generally only known from cave sites, such as Cueva del Gigante, during the early part of the Archaic Period (*c.* 9220–8750 BCE) (Rosemary Joyce pers. comm.). These are the only 2 Central American objects among Bell’s extensive donations to the PRM.

In the late 1930s and 1940s the PRM received some assemblages of Mesoamerican archaeological material that were more focused. The full-time presence of Beatrice Blackwood at the PRM from 1935, along with the New World interests of the second Curator of the Museum (from 1939), Tom Penniman, were undoubtedly important



*Figure 18.1 View of a carved stone stela at the Maya site of Quiriguá, taken by Alfred Percival Maudslay in March–May 1883, and donated to the PRM from the estate of E.B. Tylor in 1917 (PRM Photograph Collections 1998.182.3; cf. Grover 2012).*

influences. Blackwood herself donated a collection of *c.* 113 ‘archaeological’ objects, all of which were from Mexico (1938.36.1729–1805, 1938.36.1828–1830, 1938.36.1854–1860, 1938.36.1872–1879, 1946.3.24–27, 1961.4.49). These include a range of 20th-century ceramics, purchased in a similar manner to that in New Mexico and Arizona and currently classified as ‘archaeological’ (see Chapter 20 below for a full discussion), as well as a stone chisel from Monte Albán, Oaxaca (1938.36.1771); 3 ceramic heads, an obsidian spear-head, and a copper pellet bell from Calixtahuaca (1938.36.1762–1766); *c.* 28 ceramic sherds from Copilco, Pedregal (1938.1729–1755); a ceramic head from Mitla, Oaxaca (1938.36.1759).

Further accessions included material collected by John Eric Sidney Thompson, C.C. James, Elsie McDougall, and ‘M. Salinas’. Thompson (1898–1975) was a Maya epigrapher and archaeologist who excavated a number of Maya sites in Belize and became Assistant Curator at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. Between 1946 and 1948 he presented *c.* 25 Pre-Columbian objects across Mexico, Guatemala, Belize and Honduras to the PRM (1946.2.4–15, 1946.3.127–128, 1947.5.11–19, 1948.6.46–47), including 7 examples of diagnostic pottery figurines from the early Zacatenco I horizon of Tlatilco (1947.5.12–17), a pottery effigy – possibly of the Maya merchant deity Ek Chuah – that formed the foot of a tripod vessel (1946.2.15), and a Maya pottery figurine whistle (1947.5.11) representing a ball-game player, which he had published in 1943 (Thompson 1943). C.C. James was an engineer whose work took him across Mexico during the early 20th century. The *c.* 277 artefacts that he donated in 1943 (1943.10.0B–67B) had been collected when he undertook archaeology in his spare time during these travels.<sup>3</sup> This donation includes *c.* 200 stone beads from Northern Oaxaca (1943.10.9B, 1943.10.66B–69B), further Mixtec and Zapotec artefacts from Oaxaca, Teotihuacan artefacts – including several figurines – from central Mexico (*Figure 18.2*),

<sup>3</sup> Letter from H.J. Braunholtz of the British Museum to Beatrice Blackwood dated 1 September 1943. PRM Related Documents File.

World Archaeology at the Pitt Rivers Museum: A Characterization  
 edited by Dan Hicks and Alice Stevenson, Archaeopress 2013, page 384-400

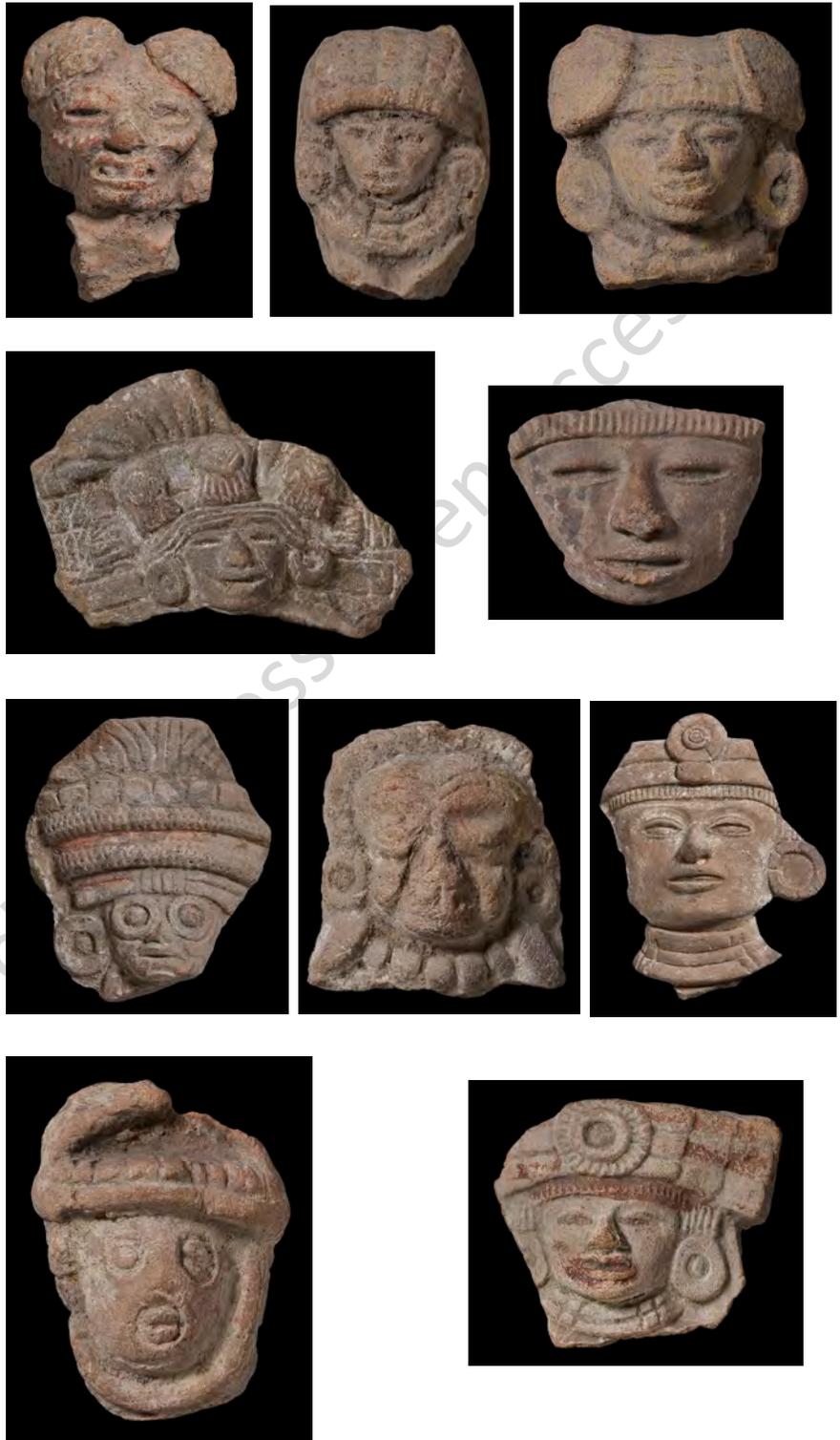


Figure 18.2 Ten examples of Teotihuacan figures donated to the PRM by C.C. James (PRM Accession Numbers 1943.10.23–26, 1943.10.28–31, 1943.10.33–34).

and Aztec pottery vessels (e.g. 1943.10.58 B). A funerary urn (1943.10.64 B) from the site of Monte Albán (Oaxaca), is of a type frequently purchased by foreigners before the Second World War, some of which have been shown to be forgeries (Sellen 2004). Elsie MacDougall donated 63 'archaeological' objects (1946.5.13–53) – including stone beads, and pendants ceramic spindle whorls, stone and ceramic figures and heads, a copper axe (1946.5.15), and a copper *tajadero* ('chopping knife') used as a medium of exchange (1946.5.16) – collected by her in Mexico, as well as c. 200 photographs of archaeological sites in Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras, which were donated between 1948 and 1961 (1948.6.13–42, 1953.1.36–128, 1955.6.39–70, 1961.3.34–66). In 1948, a collection of c. 79 objects – c. 33 ceramic heads and figurines, and c. 39 stone beads – from Oaxaca, made by 'M. Salinas', 'the agent in Oaxaca of Mr Constantine G. Richards' while he was Vice-Consul in Mexico City between 1920–1926, was purchased from Norman King (1948.3.1B–33B).

The PRM's Central American collections were expanded with the transfer of c. 95 Pre-Columbian archaeological objects from the Ashmolean Museum in October 1950 (these were assigned 1886 accession numbers), all of which are from Mexico. There are 2 stone spindle whorls 'from an Ancient Mexican grave' that were donated by William Wylie in 1866 (1886.1.1119–1120). A wax model of the 'Great Mexican Kalenda Stone', donated by Sibylla Bullock in 1824 (1886.1.1123), was recorded as part of a transfer from the Ashmolean Museum, but appears never to have been transferred. An obsidian knife found at the mouth of the Champoton River, near Progreso, Yucatan, 'with 14 others in an earthenware pot amongst the massive stones of a mine, submerged at high tide, by Mr Taylor of Liberty Street, New York in 1885', was donated by E.B. Tylor's nephew, Joseph John Tylor (1886.11.1). There are also 3 objects from Pánuco, Veracruz State: a stone axe (1886.1.1041) and a ceramic female figurine (1884.1.1121) donated by 'Captain King' (possibly Philip Parker King) in 1831, and a fragment of a carved stone female figurine donated by Captain George Francis Lyon (1795–1832) in 1825, having been found by him 'whilst making a survey of the River Pánuco, on the eastern coast of Mexico, at a town or village of the same name' (1886.1.1122; *Figure 18.3*).

Most of the Central American 'archaeological' material in the 1950 Ashmolean Museum transfer, however, comprises a collection of c. 87 objects donated to the Bodleian Library by Charles Lemprière, before being transferred to the Ashmolean. These are recorded as having been 'taken out of' the Great Pyramid of Cholula (Tlachihualtepetl) in Puebla – although the finds are perhaps more likely to be from the vicinity rather than from the structure itself (cf. McCafferty 1996). The Lemprière material was collected during a trip in 1861–1862 (Lemprière 1862): just five years after Edward Burnett Tylor's trip of 1856 (Tylor 1861). The Cholula artefacts include a wide range of ceramic objects: 21 ceramic heads, many of which were broken from figurines (1886.1.1055–1057, 1886.1.1059–1076; see *Figure 18.4*); a ceramic figure depicting a bunch of sticks (1886.1.1102); 4 ceramic fragments of figurine torsos (1884.1.1058, 1884.1.1077–1079); 6 ceramic vessels, including a tripod vessel in the form of a bird (1884.1.1042–1046, 1884.1.1054); 5 miniature ceramic vessels (1884.1.1047–1051); 7 ceramic discs or labrets (lip ornaments) (1886.1.1088–1093, 1886.1.1104, 1886.1.1107); 2 ceramic incense burners (*candeleros*) (1886.1.1052–1053); 2 ceramic sherds (1886.1.1112); 7 ceramic spindle whorls (1884.1.1081–1087); and 5 ceramic fragments, probably from figurines (1886.1.1101, 1886.1.1103, 1886.1.1105–1106, 1884.1.1108). There are also 4 bivalve shells (1886.1.1109–10); an unquantified assemblage of perhaps 30 flakes of mica (1886.1.1113); c. 100 perforated stone beads strung on a necklace (1884.1.1080); a pebble (1884.1.1096); a perforated shell fragment (1884.1.1114); 8 obsidian razors and arrow-heads (1884.1.1115–1118); 2 stone cylinders (1884.1.1099–1100); and 6 further unidentified stone objects (1884.1.1091, 1884.1.1095–1095, 1884.1.1097–1098).

Figure 18.3 Fragment of a carved stone female figurine donated by Captain George Francis Lyon (1795–1832) in 1825, having been found by him 'whilst making a survey of the River Pánuco, on the eastern coast of Mexico, at a town or village of the same name' (PRM Accession Number 1886.1.1122).



Figure 18.4 Figurine from Cholula, Mexico (PRM Accession Number 1886.1.1064).



A trickle of other small donations, primarily figurines, continued throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and included 2 Mexican examples that had been excavated not in Mesoamerica, but in Gloucester, England (1977.15.1–2): one from College Court Gloucester, the other from the site of the old Telephone Exchange on Bull Lane in the city. Both were previously held by the Gloucester City Museum and Art Gallery, and were presumed to be local medieval products, but they were subsequently identified as Mexican.<sup>4</sup> The objects were subjected to thermoluminescence (TL) dating in the 1990s by Doreen Stoneham at the Oxford University Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art, and shown to date to between 900 and 550 years ago.

The material received in the 1970s represents a shift in the profile of the collection, with two donations from excavations in Belize: from Norman Hammond's work at Lubaantun (18.4.3 below) and from the estate manager at Barton Ramie (18.4.4 below). In the 1980s just over 100 small objects from the collection of Henry Wellcome were transferred to the PRM, most of which had been purchased from auction houses

in the 1920s and 1930s by Wellcome's employees (see Larson 2009) and the dates and auction lots are known.<sup>5</sup> One item, a Maya obsidian 'amulet' (1985.49.16), is said to have been acquired by Thomas Gann, an early explorer of Maya ruins.<sup>6</sup> Although several fakes are certainly present amongst the purchased items, there are several genuine pieces of note, including a jade pendant (1985.49.69, Figure 18.5), which could be Preclassic and is significant because of its early Olmecoid style. In addition there is a variety of stone beads

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Beatrice Blackwood to Mr John Rhodes, dated 18 June 1968. PRM Related Document File for 1977.15.1–2.

<sup>5</sup> Glendining's Auction Rooms 1.2.1929 [lot 436], Puttick and Simpson 12.4.1929 [lot 43], Sotheby 12.11.1928 [lot 133], Sotheby 5.4.1933 [lot 2130], Stevens Auction Rooms 13.10.1925 [lot 71], Stevens Auction Rooms 17–18.3.1931 [lot 481], Stevens Auction Rooms 21.10.1929 [lot 268], Stevens Auction Rooms 21.8.1923 [lot 8], Stevens Auction Rooms 27.7.1920 [lot 301].

<sup>6</sup> In the PRM manuscript collections there is also a six-page written account of archaeological excavations in British Honduras (Belize) that has been identified by David Pendegast as probably having been written by Thomas Gann. Dated January 1898, the account was transferred to the Museum from the Ashmolean. PRM Miscellaneous Manuscripts, Item 12.



Figure 18.5 Olmecoid-style jade pendant from the Wellcome collection (PRM Accession Number 1985.49.69).



Figure 18.6 Fifteen Postclassic stone and ceramic spindle whorls and beads (PRM Accession Number 1985.49.84).

and well-preserved pottery spindle whorls, some with incised decoration (e.g. 1985.49.84, Figure 18.6). Spindle whorls of this kind are usually Postclassic in date (after 900 CE) and are highly important because they represent innovation in spinning technology (cotton or maguëy fibres). Their shapes, weights and designs can tell us about the kinds of fibre being spun, the materials being woven, and to some extent how spinning and weaving was organized in the household. The last donation of Mesoamerican material to the Museum, consisting of 19 pieces collected in the 1920s by Consuelo María Linares Rivas Allen, was accessioned in 1991 (1991.17.90–110), and comprises pottery figurines, *candeleros*, and spindle whorls.

### 18.3 Significant Collections

#### 18.3.1 Figurines and Effigy Heads

Some 461 of the *c.* 2,115 ‘archaeological’ objects from Central America are anthropomorphic and zoomorphic stone or ceramic heads, figurines, or fragments of figurines from Mexico. Most of these are made of terra-cotta pottery. Although the predominance of such figures in the PRM may seem at first to be collection bias, figurines in human (and sometimes animal) form are an abundant class of artefact in Mesoamerica and were an important means of cultural expression (Corson 1976; Foncerrada de Molina and Caradós de Méndez 1988; Halperin 2009; Krutt 1975;

Martínez-López and Winter 1994; Pulido Méndez 2008; Romain 1984; Scott 1993, 1994, 2001; Stocker 1983; Von Winning 1974). Mesoamerica has rich and varied traditions of ceramic manufacture: indeed the oldest Mesoamerican ceramic artefact known, dating to 2920 BCE, is a figurine (Niederberger 2000: 176). It was recovered from a hearth associated with the Middle Archaic occupation of a site in the central highlands of Mexico. Although broken below the torso and abstract in style, it can be seen to depict a pregnant woman (Evans 2008: 91). Figurines date from the Initial Formative period through to Postclassic and Colonial times, although they are not found in all regions and they are rarely found whole. They commonly depict people, or possibly deities in human form, but animals are also represented. How they functioned is not entirely clear. Some may have been votive objects used in prayer and fashioned to represent the supplicant, as is the case with the statuettes from Tel Asmar in early Mesopotamia (Whitehouse and Wilkins 1986: 13). Others may represent the object of the ritual or prayer, such as the image or spirit of an animal to be hunted. Still others are almost certainly toys. A further group, which served as tomb or burial accompaniments, may have represented the dead person in life, which seems to have been the case with the figurines from the burials on Jaina Island (Kimball 1960; Piña Chán 2001). The urns found in tombs in Oaxaca, of which there is one example in the PRM (1943.10.64 B) are thought to represent ancestors (Marcus 1978; Miller 1995). Many figurines in Mesoamerica are recovered from household middens, but evidence is accumulating, at least in the Maya area, to demonstrate wider use in public, civic-ceremonial contexts as well as in caves and sweatbaths (Halperin 2007: 285–300; Halperin 2009).

Overall these appear to form a mixed collection as regards dates, although they fall largely within the Late Preclassic and Classic periods. Many have yet to be classified in more detail. The figurines generally have elaborately modelled headdresses (e.g. *Figure 18.7*), ear and neck ornaments and expressive faces whereas the body may be portrayed in very simple form. There are, however, a considerable number that display complex clothing, of which the real-life examples were often multi-layered and were clearly composed of several materials. Figurines are particularly informative as regards the study of identities through examination of headdresses, adornments and clothing, partly because they often portray materials that are not preserved in the archaeological record. In addition they can suggest uses for objects that are found in excavation, the functions of which are uncertain. For example, single copper bells recovered from middens and mixed contexts are depicted strung together and worn around the ankles of male figures, which probably represent warriors.

There are also several tiny heads with smoothed and often sloping foreheads, but no distinguishing headdresses (e.g. 1917.53.300–343); some may depict deformation of the head, which was practised in Mesoamerica and generally denoted an individual's rank or status in society. The isolated heads that clearly were never modelled with a clay torso are probably dolls that originally had cloth bodies; alternatively, they may have been parts of figurines with movable limbs (see e.g. Borhegyi 1950; Von Winning 1958) but the limbs, at one time attached with cotton twine or string, were not recovered with the heads. Whistle figurines e.g. (1947.5.11) and effigy heads are also present; most of the effigy heads are not from figurines, but instead were ornaments applied to vessels (e.g. 1946.2.15). Some are from what are called 'frying pan' or ladle censers (labelled 'braziers') (e.g. 1919.1.8), a distinctive artefact that heralds the Postclassic period in the lowland Maya area although it is earlier in the Maya highlands and central Mexico (Tobias 2010). One unusual figurine from the PRM founding collection is a moulded glass bust of a woman (1884.58.49), which is recorded on the PRM database as an Aztec object from Mexico (re-using European materials). The scale and diversity of the figurines and effigy heads in the PRM



Figure 18.7 (Left)  
Figurine head with  
elaborate tasseled  
headdress and ear  
ornaments (PRM  
Accession Number  
1912.45.20).

Figure 18.8 (Right)  
Cache vessel from Belize  
dating from the 16th  
century CE (PRM  
Accession Number  
1949.11.01), representing  
an elite, masked  
individual with a canine  
headdress. Four stone and  
shell beads (1949.11.01  
.2–.5) were originally  
placed within the vessel.

collections – some 125 of which come from the collection of E.B. Tylor, and so were possibly collected as early as 1856 – mean that they represent a major potential area of future research into the PRM's archaeological collections.

### 18.3.2 Cache Vessel

One particularly notable rare artefact is a small pottery container, almost certainly originally buried (cached) as an offering or ceremonial deposit of some kind. Collected by 'J.S. Westcott' in Belize, it is complete with its stopper (1949.11.01 .1, Figure 18.8), and is a style now known to be characteristic of the late Pre-Columbian (early 16th-century) and early Historic (Spanish colonial) periods (mid 16th-century or later). Associated with it are 4 stone and shell beads, which were originally placed within the container (1949.11.01 .2–.5). Other items that were commonly placed in cache vessels in historic times include sharks' teeth, stingray spines and small side-notched chert (flint) arrow-heads. The vessel in the PRM collection is almost certainly from northern Belize, either from the site of Lamanai or from Santa Rita. The representation is of an elite person, masked, with an effigy headdress of a dog or *coyote* or perhaps even a *pisote* (coatimundi, or *quash*). The headdress was made and positioned so that the person's head emerges from the mouth, a theme associated with Maya elites. If the head is a coyote, it serves to document artistic influence from central Mexico, which was common at this time. The vessel also depicts a monkey's tail curled around it. The combination of motifs drawn from more than one kind of animal was a frequent approach to the manufacture of effigy vessels in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. The effigy was presented to the PRM in 1949, but the circumstances of its original acquisition are unknown, and Westcott did not donate any other objects to the PRM. It is, however, a type of artefact recovered in other circumstances from both Lamanai and Santa Rita by Thomas Gann.

### 18.3.3 Excavations at Lubaantun, Belize

The PRM holds *c.* 165 objects from Lubaantun, Belize, which were excavated in the first four months of 1970 by a team led by Norman Hammond, with the assistance of Kate Pretty. The fieldwork was supported by the PRM along with the British Museum, the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, where further objects from the season's work are held. The site of Lubaantun ('place of

fallen stones') was named by the discoverer of the site, Thomas Gann, who came across the ruins in 1903. Situated in dense tropical forests in the southern Toledo District of Belize, and characterized by the presence of several platforms constructed on a low ridge between two streams, it was a major Classic Maya ceremonial centre from c. 730 to 860 CE (Hammond 1975: 133).

The PRM collection (1972.25.1–164) includes 19 fragments of ground stone maize-grinding implements (18 *manos* [handstones] and one *metate* [grinding slab]), as well as 2 complete pottery vessels, 90 pottery sherds, an obsidian flake, and a series of casts of 2 throne bases, figurines, and ear ornaments. The ground stone artefacts are notable because they reflect a wide range of raw material sources. Such sources can now be traced (Abramiuk and Meurer 2006; Graham 1987; Shipley and Graham 1987), enabling the reconstruction of trade and exchange routes that, given Lubaantun's position, would have integrated marine and overland networks.

The Lubaantun sherds make up a type collection that is useful both as an introduction to the ceramics from southern Belize sites and as material for comparative research. Moreover, the sherds have significant potential value in the petrographic and other compositional analysis of materials used in pottery-making, as much more is becoming known about the way resources were used in pottery production and about differences in the materials used at various ancient Maya centres (e.g. Beaudry 1991; Bishop and Rands 1982; Howie 2006; Powis *et al.* 2006; Neff and Bove 1999; Reents-Budet 1994). Good type and context information was received along with the artefacts, which makes the sherds well suited for such analysis. The analyses, together with studies of shape and surface treatment, can tell us whether the sherds are from pots that were made locally or imported from elsewhere and can also reveal information on how resources (temper, pigments, other admixtures) were used in ceramic production.

#### 18.3.4 Excavations at Barton Ramie Estate, Belize

Barton Ramie, Belize was the site of pioneering settlement pattern research conducted by Gordon Willey and his colleagues from Harvard University in the upper Belize Valley from 1954 to 1956 (Willey *et al.* 1965). The 40 artefacts in the PRM (1977.24.10–33) derive not from Willey's excavations, but from preliminary trenching by the estate's manager, Marcus Chambers, of what was later named 'Mound BR-96' (Willey *et al.* 1965: 208). The assemblage includes obsidian flakes; ceremonial flints or 'eccentrics' (Joyce 1932; Meadows 2001; *Figure 18.9*); burnt bones; shell fragments; and a shallow pottery bowl or *tecomate* (1977.24.25). The flint objects from Barton Ramie complement other characteristic Maya tools of flint and slate in the collection from Benque Viejo in Belize (1946.2.5), and from central Mexico, the latter of which is represented by a fascinating group of obsidian blades, *atlatl* points, cores and other tools of at least three different kinds of obsidian.

Several of the artefacts from Barton Ramie are marked either C1 or C2, which identifies them as material from two separate caches mentioned in Willey's account of the site (Willey *et al.* 1965: 420, 448–9). Such caches are often found in the core of platforms supporting buildings, usually on the axes, or under the floors of the buildings themselves as dedicatory offerings. Sites in the Belize Valley have continued to be the subject of fieldwork (Awe 1993; Awe and Helmke 2005; Awe *et al.* 2009; Garber 2004; Healy 2006; Healy and Awe 1995; Hogarth *et al.* 2010; LeCount and Yaeger 2010). The area is important for the information it has yielded on non-elite and lower elite levels of Maya society as well as on the genesis of Maya civilization in the Preclassic period.



*Figure 18.9 Ceremonial flints often called 'eccentrics' from Barton Raimie Estate, Belize, collected by Estates Manager Marcus Chambers prior to Gordon Willey's excavations at the site in the 1950s (PRM Accession Numbers 1977.24.3-9).*

#### 18.4 Conclusions

No museum collection, no matter how large and how scientifically excavated it may be, can reflect the tremendous richness and variety that marked the ancient civilisations of Mesoamerica and Central America. The best that can be achieved is a series of windows on certain aspects of ancient cultures, every one of which may bring us closer to the people of times long past although none can provide more than a glimpse of the lives they led. The assemblage at the PRM is not large in comparison with collections at institutions such as the British Museum, but its importance lies in the distinctive qualities and coherence of the individual collections, each of which has value in its own right and can be mined for information that has much broader significance than the value of the collection itself. Although often less emphasized, but increasingly important, the collections – through their objects and the collectors of the objects – also serve as a window the history of archaeology (including relationships between Anglophone archaeologists on both sides of the Atlantic ocean), and on the history of Britain, at home and abroad more generally, including the history of British colonialism.

There are a number of ways in which the visibility of the PRM's Central American archaeological collections can be developed to allow visitors to appreciate Mesoamerica and its cultural traditions. The nature of the collections materials (figurines, ceramics, flint, obsidian, jade, ground stone) also means that a range of scientific methods of analysis are open to researchers, as well as much-needed documentary and comparative studies.

Many of the PRM's Pre-Columbian artefacts are not accompanied by reliable provenance data, since they were not recovered through controlled excavation. The Mesoamerican artefacts amassed by the Museum, and indeed those in museums in general, pose a particular problem regarding authenticity because the production of forgeries in nineteenth-century Mexico was extensive (Walsh 2005); the problem has long been an issue for the study of ancient art in Mesoamerica (Ekholm 1964; Holmes 1886; Tylor 1861: 229). On the other hand, forgeries have occasionally acquired a value and an interesting quality all of their own, some owing to the fame accrued by the forger, others owing to cultural continuity of stylistic traditions in particular areas. The Museum's collection certainly contains modern objects masquerading as antiquities,

but their identification will require further expert scrutiny and possibly also TL dating. Moreover, the central challenge for museums is to overcome concerns about the 'non-scientific' nature of such collection activities, and develop new studies of the histories of archaeological objects that start to fulfil the research potential of museum collections.

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