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SPECIAL SECTION: BREAKING AND ENTERING THE ECOSYSTEM—REMEMBERING ELIZABETH M. BRUMFIEL

INTRODUCTION

This Special Section honors the memory of Elizabeth M. (Liz) Brumfiel, a highly respected colleague and most prolific anthropologist, Mesoamericanist, and Aztec specialist. Liz was highly influential for her work in Aztec archaeology and ethnohistory, political economy, and her interests in the intersection of agency, gender, class, ethnicity, and ideology, as well as for her service as past president of the American Anthropological Association from 2003 to 2005. In the latter position she promoted anthropology in the worldwide struggle for human rights and social justice. She was lauded for her courage and conviction on issues going beyond narrowly defined academic concerns, while also attracting the ire of conservative critics (Parsons and Nichols 2012; Robin 2014). Liz was also a valuable and active member of the Editorial Board of *Ancient Mesoamerica* from the time of its inception in 1989 until her unfortunate passing in 2012. But a renowned scholar makes her greatest impact through publications in her discipline, and in this case the impact has been profound. This is not the place to review the entire Brumfiel corpus, and the papers by Liz's students, colleagues, and collaborators that follow here are much more replete in that respect, but I want to take this opportunity to comment on just a few of her publications from both the early and late stages of her career that seem especially important to me.

I first became aware of Liz's early work in the late 1970s when, as a graduate student, I read her chapter in Flannery's *The Early Mesoamerican Village* (Brumfiel 1976). This paper, written when Liz was herself still a graduate student at the University of Michigan, foreshadowed much of her later work, always firmly grounded in an ecological and materialist foundation but critical of unsupported assumptions about the primacy of environmental factors in social change such as, in this case, the idea that population pressure was the primary force in the development of the archaic state. Influenced by Marxist approaches, she was more inclined to seek economic, social, and political causation rather than simplistic ecological explanations. Perhaps the crystallization of this approach came a few years later in her much-read and highly influential paper on early Aztec state formation in which she adopted a structural Marxist perspective to encourage a focus on the dialectic of ecological variables and political dynamics (Brumfiel 1983).

All of Liz's publications are characterized by empirical rigor and creative applications of social theory. Other significant characteristics of Liz's work include solid quantitative analysis of artifact distributions and statistical analysis (Parsons and Nichols 2012). An excellent demonstration of these characteristics may be seen in Liz's paper on weaving, cooking, and women's production in Aztec Mexico (Brumfiel 1991) in which she studied variation in size and distribution of spindle whorls from Huexotla and Xaltocan, in the northern Basin of Mexico; Xico, in the southern portion of the basin; and Xochicalco, Coatetelco, and Coatlan Viejo, in the Valley of Morelos. She found dramatic differences in frequencies from early to late Aztec times (i.e., before and after dominance by the Culhua Mexica empire). Spindle whorls decrease in frequency from Early Aztec (A.D. 1150–1350) to Late Aztec times (A.D. 1350–1521), indicating a decline in textile production under Mexica dominance. As Liz put it, "these data require some explication" (Brumfiel 1991:232). Her explanation was that less intensive production of cloth was facilitated by increasing participation in the market economy (Brumfiel 1991:234). She also examined ceramic data related to different types of maize-based food production and found a declining proportion of pots to griddles from Early to Late Aztec times, indicating increasing consumption of tortillas. Liz attributed this change to domestic adjustments to a more mobile labor force, strategic realignments of household labor, under Mexica dominance: she reasoned that "in making tortillas, women used their domestic labor to facilitate work activity carried out at some distance from the home" (Brumfiel 1991:241). The data presented and conclusions that Liz reaches in this paper support her contention that "Mexican women were not passive victims of emerging political power" (Brumfiel 1991:246). While increased tribute demands fell mostly on the shoulders of women, they met this challenge through their own agency in diverse and creative ways.

As important as these papers were in their time for presenting a critical position on ecology, politics, gender, and agency, they represent only a prelude to her more fully developed argument in the third annual Distinguished Lecture in Archeology presented in 1991 at the 90th annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Chicago, published under the redoubtable title of "Breaking and Entering the Ecosystem—Gender, Class, and Faction Steal the Show" (Brumfiel 1992). As the title suggests, Liz rejected the traditional ecosystem approach and advocated an agent-centered perspective emphasizing social negotiations along gender, class, and factional lines. In concluding the paper, Brumfiel (1992:560) noted that the "approach suggested here should … enable us to create a more humane archaeology, an archaeology that will acknowledge the creativity and discretion that women and men, subjects and rulers have exercised in the past to fashion their livelihoods and promote their well-being." These worthy goals represent the major theme in Liz's work: an interest in ancient people as knowledgeable actors and the challenges and struggles they faced in everyday life as legitimate research concerns.

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In short, Liz was developing and applying her own form of practice theory. As Ortner (1984:149) commented, practice can be "anything people do, [but] the most significant forms of practice are those with intentional or unintentional political implications."

One could not find a better illustration than Liz's research on the archaeology of factionalism, politics, and identity. In her paper for a volume that she coedited, *Factional Competition and Political Development in the New World*, she argued that the Otomis of Xaltocan displayed their ethnic affiliation more frequently when it was to their advantage as a symbol of cooperation between commoners and elites during the Middle Postclassic (A.D. 1100–1300) (Brumfiel 1994:100–101). During this time the Otomis were the majority ethnic group of Xaltocan. They later suppressed symbols of their ethnic identity during the Late Postclassic (A.D. 1300–1519) after the Tepanecs of Atzcapotzalco conquered them in 1395, and the town was abandoned. In 1435, Xaltocan was resettled under Mexica rulership, and its Late Postclassic ethnic composition included several other ethnic groups in addition to the Otomis, including Acolmatlacas, Colhuas, and Tenochcas. Brumfiel posited that under these conditions it became more advantageous for Xaltocan elites to align themselves with the Nahua ruling class of the Culhua Mexica empire after a dominant Nahua ethnicity emerged on a regional scale throughout the Basin of Mexico. Liz concluded that in late pre-Hispanic Mexico, with the *altepetl* or petty kingdom as the most important political unit, ethnicity itself was "shaped by political development," and its use in political action depended on the scale of existing political structure (Brumfiel 1994:102).

We also see the theme of empirical rigor combined with social theory reiterated in her paper on the quality of tribute cloth produced by women who lived in communities in the Basin of Mexico and the Valley of Morelos conquered by the Aztecs and the Spaniards (Brumfiel 1996). Similar to the 1991 paper in which she explicated the decline in textile production in these communities from Early to Late Aztec times, she confronted another conundrum here. Why, she asked, does it appear that women did not respond to increased tribute demands by making cloth of lesser quality? The answer has to do with the nature and sites of cultural resistance and the deployment of coercion. This paper is especially noteworthy for its clarity of argument and the demonstration of the independence of archaeological data from personal bias and subjectivity. In other words, the "resistance of the data provides (empirical) evidence against statements of extreme relativism" claiming that what we see is dependent on our assumptions, so objectivity is not possible (Brumfiel 1996:468). And in affirming the independence of archaeological data from investigator bias, she also confirmed her skepticism of claims that social inequality can be maintained by ideological domination. She stated that "the knowledge that I have gained from this inquiry will affect the way I regard ideological domination and resistance in future studies" (Brumfiel 1996:459).

In her next major paper, Liz tackled this issue head on. Addressing the role of state-sponsored religion in Aztec political life from an archaeological perspective, she argued persuasively that the dominant elite ideology of cosmic warfare and human sacrifice was probably much more effective in the large urban centers of the Aztec Basin of Mexico, and that in hinterland communities "commoners were not impressed by the state's claim that its military activity was crucial for their existence" (Brumfiel 1998:7). She contrasted the ideological messages delivered in intimate, interior spaces and directed toward young elite warriors to inspire and consolidate their support of the state ideological project with those messages directed outward in open, public spaces via monumental architecture and sculpture and displays of human sacrifice to intimidate and coerce commoners and, I would add, enemies alike. She concluded that Aztec rulers manipulated not one, but two, ideological systems. The dominant ideology was constructed in different ways, and ideological messages were conveyed differently, with different intents to different audiences (Brumfiel 1998:11).

In closing these brief remarks, I want to comment on two recent papers treating Aztec and Mesoamerican women and gender more generally. In 2008–2009 Liz served as lead curator (working with Gary Feinman, Leonardo López Luján, Juan Alberto Román Berrelleza, and Felipe Solís Olguín) of the exhibit "The Aztec World" mounted at the Field Museum in Chicago in association with the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia of Mexico (Leopold 2012). The chapter that Liz contributed to the exhibit catalogue may well be the best short study available on Aztec women (Brumfiel 2008). In this essay she succinctly addressed the issues of gender complementarity, women in the Aztec economy, women and ritual, and women and the Aztec state. In one of her most recent publications, which was published posthumously, Liz left us a very thoughtful reconsideration of the model of gender complementarity (Brumfiel 2013). As she noted, this model was first proposed to challenge widely held theories of universal male dominance and to express the equivalence and mutual dependence of men and women in the realms of economic, social, political, and ritual activities. It has received support from archaeologists, ethnohistorians, and ethnologists, but as Liz argued in this latest essay, the model of gender complementarity has become increasingly untenable because of its lack of correspondence with archaeological evidence (Brumfiel 2013:567–574). Even granting the possibility that gender complementarity may have existed among Aztec commoners, at least as an ideal, it is clear that Aztec rulers promoted gender hierarchy as a specific strategy used to construct state power (Brumfiel 2008:102). Instead of promoting one single, overarching model, "we are now in a position to produce more comprehensive, more analytical histories, specifying the conditions under which particular gender roles and ideologies emerge" (Brumfiel 2013:578).

Turning to the substantive contributions of this Special Section, in the opening paper **Deborah L. Nichols** celebrates the highlights of Liz's life and career and reviews her achievements and contributions as a scholar, a humanist, and a feminist. Nichols describes how Liz's impact in archaeology gradually expanded from archaeology and ethnohistory within the context of Aztec studies to more general contributions to the study of agency, identity, and gender through the application of social theory. Nichols notes that Liz was a leader in the application of "social theory shaped by feminism, Marxism, and practice and agency melded with a long-term commitment to fieldwork and promoting social equality" (2016:159). At the forefront of the development of an archaeology of gender, Liz helped to guide the field from a simple recognition of women and women's activities in the past to challenging preconceived notions about gender roles and gendered activities.

In the second paper, **Lisa Overholtzer** and **Kristin De Lucia** build on Brumfiel's work at Xaltocan to offer a multiscalar examination of a wide range of changes that began at about A.D. 1240 and continued in this community during the Middle Postclassic period (A.D. 1250–1350), during a period when it was a powerful regional center of an expansive Otomi city-state and before it was conquered by the Tepanecs or the Mexicas. They note that archaeologists have traditionally associated these changes with the shift from Aztec I to Aztec II Black-on-Orange pottery, but that the changes were much more complex than simply changes in ceramics and can be detected

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in a wide range of material culture and practices, including different mortuary practices and house construction. Furthermore, because these changes occurred before Xaltocan was conquered by the Aztecs, they are not mentioned in imperial documentary sources and thus can be studied only through archaeology. The authors employ microscale analysis of well-dated, stratified household contexts at Xaltocan in which both Aztec I and Aztec II pottery types were present, linking changes in domestic practice with macroscale population dynamics, ethnic politics, and political-economic processes. They make a compelling case for the arrival of a foreign, probably Nahua-speaking population in Xaltocan during the Middle Postclassic, very likely with origins in the Tula region.

Christopher T. Morehart follows with his multidisciplinary study of *chinampa* agriculture, production, and political change at Xaltocan during the Middle Postclassic. He employs data from geophysical remote sensing, artifact and ecofact analysis, radiometric dating, historical research, ethnographic studies, and environmental studies to reconstruct the potential productivity of an extensive *chinampa* system that surrounded the urban core of the Xaltocan city-state. Morehart argues that the system was capable of producing a sizeable caloric surplus beyond the needs of the kingdom's estimated total population and the number of laborers necessary to maintain full production. To situate the processes related to agricultural production, Morehart then considers how agricultural strategies were articulated with social and political institutions. Increased integration between political, social, and household institutions, he argues, would have encouraged participation in group politics and provided mechanisms to finance the political economy. This is an intriguing study that will reward careful study.

Enrique Rodríguez-Alegría and **Wesley D. Stoner** in the fourth paper present a chemical characterization study of Plain Ware ceramics and lead-glazed earthenware from Xaltocan. These wares were mostly used by women for cooking and storage. The pattern shows that the people of Postclassic Xaltocan increased their reliance on Plain Ware from nearby Cuauhtitlan through time, before and after they were conquered by the Aztec empire. After the Spanish conquest, the people of Xaltocan relied more heavily on locally produced Plain Ware and began using lead-glazed earthenware. The authors conclude that both imperial powers affected the trade in cooking tools even though it was not part of their explicit policies to affect the domestic economy directly.

In the fifth paper, **Frances F. Berdan** presents a fascinating study of provincial Aztec featherworking. While she considers the structure of this craft in the major urban centers of the Aztec empire, the main focus of the paper is on "the impact of imperial conquest and its attendant economic demands on the production and distribution of feathered objects" in provincial centers under Aztec rule outside the Basin of Mexico. As Berdan notes, "this provincial perspective leads naturally to additional issues of how these imperial subjects obtained the materials and acquired the skills integral to the production of these ornate, complex and expensive objects" (2016:209). She outlines four premises of the study, and then considers the role of imperial conquest in the production and distribution of feathers and feathered objects. Berdan shows a complicated and dynamic relationship between warfare, conquest, and trade with respect to the imperial acquisition of exotic feathers, featherworking, and finished goods involving featherwork such as warrior suits and shields.

Cynthia Robin adapts the title of the final paper in the section from an amusing yet very serious statement that Liz once made: "One of my basic operating assumptions is that women are not dupes" (Brumfiel 1996:454). And in expanded form: "Recognizing the economic and political structures that engaged individuals in past societies actually enhances our sense of them as active agents rather than cultural dupes" (Brumfiel 2006:36). Departing from these statements, Robin notes that this paper is intended to highlight Liz's foundational contributions to a critique of the "dominant ideology thesis," i.e., the idea that commoners are always beguiled by state-level ideologies or false consciousness in the production of inequality and power. Robin writes about research at the prehistoric Lowland Maya farming community of Chan, Belize, which has an occupational span of 2,000 years, and where from 2002 until 2009 she directed a multidisciplinary team of archaeologists, botanists, geologists, geographers, other specialists, students, and volunteers. As Robin (2016:227) recounts, the main focus of the Chan research has been to explore the "capacity of ordinary farmers to innovate complex ideational knowledge," leading to a deeper understanding of Maya religion and cosmology as ordinary practice that originated in the homes and villages of farmers as early as the Middle Preclassic period. From this perspective, the assertion that Maya commoners did not or could not understand esoteric knowledge is obfuscation.

I am sure that anyone who reads these papers and thinks seriously about them will gain a better understanding of what a tremendous, stimulating, positive force Liz Brumfiel was in Mesoamerican archaeology, anthropology, and gender studies. I want to thank Deb Nichols and Enrique Rodríguez-Alegría for their efforts in organizing and coordinating this Special Section.

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