




## Roosevelt's Amazon: A Life Dedicated to the Indigenous Peoples of the Rainforest

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### Abstract

Anna C. Roosevelt is one of the most important scholars of the Amazon. In the late 1970s, the American archaeologist caused a revolution in the archaeological thinking of South America's lowlands by opposing the ecological determinism that dominated archaeological thought at the time. Roosevelt brought significant visibility and prominence to the history of Brazilian indigenous peoples, asserting that the original peoples who inhabited the region thrived in the tropical environment, achieving the status of civilization. This article revisits her chapter published in the work that inaugurated the so-called *New Indigenous History*, which remains a cornerstone in understanding the traditional peoples of the Amazon.

### Introduction

Between the late 1970s and early 1980s, archaeology in Brazil was still in its early stages [1,2]. The French school dominated Brazil, particularly in the southern region. The Amazon region, however, was still seen as a marginal area within the archaeology of South America's lowlands [3,4]. Archaeology practiced in Brazil was fundamentally descriptive and guided by a historical-cultural theoretical orientation [5], although Guidon's [6] work was already generating international excitement with the proposition of the early presence of humans in the Americas.

The Amazonian landscape underwent a revolution in the early 1980s with the arrival of the American Anna Curtenius Roosevelt. Roosevelt [10-17], and Navarro [18,19] brought significant visibility and prominence to the history of Brazilian indigenous peoples, claiming that the original peoples who lived there thrived in the tropical environment, achieving the status of civilization.

This moment led to a revision of Brazilian indigenous history, which had previously been of little interest even to historians. Prejudices predominated, and indigenous peoples were seen only as victims of the colonization process, denying them the agency and political protagonism they now hold in society [20,21].

The movement, coined as the New Indigenous History, and led by important researchers like John Manoel Monteiro [22], began to demand the protagonism of

indigenous peoples in Brazilian history. In this context, Manuela Carneiro da Cunha organized a seminal work that remains mandatory reading for anyone studying the topic: *História dos Índios no Brasil* [6]. This work addresses various aspects of Brazilian indigenous history, from the pre-colonial occupation of the territory to essential discussions on land demarcation and legislation concerning the rights guaranteed in the 1988 Constitution.

Regarding archaeology, the highlight is the chapter on the Amazon, written by Roosevelt, which reshapes archaeological thinking in South America's lowlands. The researcher brought modernity to her fieldwork in Brazil, being, for instance, the first archaeologist to use computers and sophisticated technology of the time in archaeological excavations.

In this article, we explore two central themes from Roosevelt's chapter: the deconstruction of Betty Meggers' ecological determinism and the role of women in complex Amazonian societies. This discussion fueled the course *The Future of the Past of the Amazon* in the postgraduate History program at the Federal University of Maranhão (PPGHIS/UFMA).

### Excavating the Past, Reflecting on the Present: Interfaces Between Archaeology and the New Indigenous History

To truly understand the history of Brazil, we must first understand the history of its indigenous peoples, considering them as active subjects in historical processes and complex

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in their entirety [6]. The chronicles and official documents on indigenous peoples used by traditional historiography were written by those who supported the colonization project and justified the conquest by believing that the way of life of indigenous peoples was savage.

Initially, descriptions of natives were made by European travelers who traversed the colonies in the New World, seeking to understand the natural aspects of the territories and the main characteristics of their populations. Religious figures responsible for catechizing indigenous peoples and converting them to Christianity accumulated writings about them. Some traditional historians took these sources as absolute truths and, despite their distorted lenses, still made comparisons with contemporary indigenous peoples, placing them in a static position.

This documentation, such as the works of D'Abbeville or D'Evreux, remains important and can be utilized with the correct methods, as it contains relevant data and, in many cases, indigenous voices that were overlooked or silenced, as these peoples were present in all the processes of conquest, assuming various roles. Monteiro [23], in an article about the accounts of a 16th-century European traveler, later appropriated in the writing of the Brazilian myth about the Tupinambá, highlights a proposition by Francisco Adolfo de Varnhagen (1981 [1854]), who was part of the first generation of Brazilian historians.

Consciously, Varnhagen inscribed his aversion to indigenous peoples in his General History of Brazil, where his description of the "ancient" Tupi was able to capture only "in the sad and degrading state of savage anarchy, an idea of their state, we cannot say of civilization, but of barbarism and backwardness. Of such peoples in their infancy, there is no history: there is only ethnography" [23].

The degenerative and evolutionary thesis about indigenous peoples, although debated, was widely accepted by the Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute (IHGB). According to Monteiro [24], in another text about the challenges of Indigenous history in Brazil, this chronicle of extinction has been and continues to be present in the narrative of many Brazilian social thinkers who emphasize the demographic decline of indigenous peoples and miscegenation as factors leading to the total disappearance of original peoples.

The author focuses on an ethno-historical analysis of documents that take into account silenced indigenous voices, considering them a central issue in the analysis of colonial history. Throughout the 2000s, this movement, which prioritizes themes like "indigenous protagonism" and "indigenous agency," consolidated itself with a series of publications seeking dialogue between History and Social Sciences.

It is within this context that History, Anthropology, and related disciplines merge their theoretical-methodological procedures to better understand the past of indigenous populations without losing sight of present-day demands. This interdisciplinary approach considers the history of indigenous peoples, acknowledging their cultural and ethnic plurality, and attributes the concept of historical agency to these social actors, who are now seen as active subjects and protagonists [25,26].

A contemporary of Monteiro, Maria Celestino de Almeida wrote *Os índios na História do Brasil* [27], a synthesis of the New Indigenous History that revises traditional bibliography and updates research in the field. The book covers the 16th to 19th centuries and interprets the collective and individual actions of indigenous peoples in the context of colonization and its regional variations based on diverse sources.

The new interpretations are based on the premise that, contrary

to the belief that indigenous peoples were passive victims of history, they were in fact subjects who actively participated in historical and political processes, with diverse interests and establishing complex relationships with non-indigenous peoples across time and space.

Roosevelt [11] already pointed out the benefits that both Archaeology and History could gain by approaching their analyses and using ethno-history, cross-referencing their sources, as Porro [28] did in his studies. This conjunction can provide comparative frameworks between different periods of indigenous history in the Amazon, understanding their differences, as "to understand the transformations that occurred since the conquest, it is necessary to forge theoretical and empirical links between archaeology, ethno-history, and ethnography of these peoples" [11].

One example of how archaeology can contribute to an indigenous historiography that deconstructs prejudiced ideas such as "backward peoples" or "immutable" is ongoing research at the Archaeology Laboratory of the Federal University of Maranhão (LARQ/UFMA) on stilt villages in the Maranhão Amazon. The discovery of a frog-shaped *muiraquitã*, a rare artifact, in the Boca do Rio stilt village, in Santa Helena city, dates back to the 10th century and opens up a range of interpretive possibilities, as the object is made of jade, a green stone not found in the Amazon.

According to Roosevelt [11], Boomert [29] and Navarro [30], this relationship suggests a probable connection between the peoples living in the lower Amazon and other parts of the Caribbean through trade. The artifact, which has two holes and was likely worn as a necklace, also evokes symbolic aspects related to the beliefs and rituals of these peoples, as frogs and toads are amphibians that appear frequently in the ancestral and mythological narratives of several indigenous peoples across the Americas [30].

The presence of the *muiraquitã* in Maranhão's Amazon is an important source for thinking about connections and Atlantic routes, specifically with the Caribbean, where indigenous populations maintained trade and ritualistic relationships even before the European invasion. This perspective contrasts with many traditional studies that placed indigenous peoples of the Americas, particularly in the Amazon, in a position of isolation and simplicity.

Roosevelt's [11] archaeological research on ceramics from Marajó and Santarém sought to combat the conventional interpretation of Andean diffusionism [3,4], emphasizing the complexity of indigenous societies not only in the Amazon's floodplain areas but also on solid land. These societies were possibly sedentary, stratified, and indigenous, populating this vast territory for many centuries with their own technologies.

According to Almeida [27], "in the case of indigenous history, it is about shifting the focus of analysis from the colonizers to the indigenous peoples, seeking to identify their forms of understanding and their own goals in the various situations of contact they experienced." It is about directing the focus to indigenous subjects and their individual and collective actions as protagonists of history, as they indeed were.

## Interactions Between Peoples and Ancestral Environments in the Amazon

For a long time, the Amazon was considered an environment with scarce resources and incapable of supporting complex human societies [3]. This theory made the development of civilizations in pre-colonial Amazonia impossible. For Roosevelt

[11], “the Amazon, far from being a hostile environment, is a space full of adaptive possibilities, shaped by millennia of human interaction”.

Early archaeological studies reinforced an idea rooted in environmental determinism, which saw the humid tropical rainforest as incapable of producing cultural development [3]. According to Roosevelt [11], this determinist theory did not take into account the ecological diversity of the region, nor the ingenuity of its peoples. As Roosevelt [11] observes, “new works show that the tropical lowlands were not only occupied very early, but were also the origin of important cultural innovations”.

One of the most striking features of this new view is related to the Amazon floodplains. These regions, with their alluvial soils rich in Andean sediments, sustained various human communities for thousands of years. Unlike the solid land regions, whose oxisols and ultisols are often nutrient-poor, the floodplains provide an ideal environment for intensive agricultural practices. According to Roosevelt [11], “Amazon floodplains present characteristics that make them comparable to the world’s most productive agricultural regions, such as the Nile and Ganges basins”.

These conditions facilitated the development of advanced agricultural systems, such as the black earths created by indigenous peoples, soils enriched with charcoal and organic matter, capable of sustaining intensive agriculture over long periods. These anthropogenic soils demonstrate a sophisticated interaction between humans and the environment, as “the sustainable use of black earths is a testament to the ecological knowledge accumulated by generations of indigenous populations” emphasizes Roosevelt [11].

Beyond fertile soils, the seasonal savanna climate in various parts of the Amazon contributes to the creation of conditions favorable for human settlement, as “the Amazon environment is not uniform, and this diversity was crucial in allowing different subsistence strategies and adaptations” [11]. Thus, areas of dry forest and savanna proved particularly productive in terms of biomass for hunting, gathering, and cultivation.

However, it was not just the surrounding environment that shaped Amazonian societies; they also directly transformed the landscape. Evidence of intensive land management, such as the construction of channels, embankments, and irrigation systems, proves that these Amazonian societies were active agents in relation to their environment, as “Amazonian cultures not only adapted to existing conditions but also modified them to create more productive ecosystems” [11].

Unlike earlier interpretations that placed the Amazon in a position of dependence on external cultural influences, recent research positions the tropical lowlands at the center of the cultural history of the Americas, as “complex Amazonian societies emerged from local processes and developed in interaction with other cultural centers, but without depending exclusively on them” [11].

Notable examples of these processes are the Marajoara, Moxos, and Chiquitos cultures, which flourished in richer soil areas, developing dense settlements and impressive infrastructures. These cultures ultimately created advanced social and economic systems, including intensive agriculture, highly specialized handicrafts, and long-range communication and trade networks, with many of these settlements potentially being considered urban [11].

The ancient societies and all the knowledge accumulated about them have direct consequences for contemporary challenges of environmental preservation and the protection of indigenous lands. Environmental devastation and neglect, through deforestation, mining, and intensive agriculture, starkly contrast with the sustainable systems practiced by indigenous peoples.

Solutions for the conservation and sustainable use of the Amazon, such as agroforestry systems and enriched soil management, suggest the recovery of the region through the revitalization of traditional practices. Additionally, the support, participation, and recognition of indigenous populations as protectors and defenders of this knowledge are essential.

The history of Amazonian environments stands as an exhibition marked by resilience and human ingenuity. Far from being an environmentally impoverished region, the Amazon emerges as a place of great ecological, social, and cultural diversity, from which lessons from the past are crucial for addressing present challenges and building a sustainable future. Reassessing the history of the Amazon through a more human and less deterministic perspective is essential to understanding its cultural and environmental contributions to the world.

For Roosevelt [11], valuing and recognizing the complexity of the Amazon is essential to preserving and caring for its cultural and natural wealth. By combining traditional knowledge with modern technologies, it becomes possible to envision the Amazon as a symbol of biodiversity and a model for harmonious coexistence between humans and the environment.

## Gender, Body, and Sex in Material Culture

The category “gender” refers to the sociocultural aspects, such as behaviors, norms, and identities that society assigns or expects from individuals based on their biological sex [31]. In this sense, gender is a social construct, which can vary across cultures over time. Because it is variable in time and space, the category of gender has become an object of study and a suggestion for a new methodology in archaeological interpretation.

Scott [32] states that gender became a useful category in the work of historians, especially feminist researchers, introduced as a relational notion in their analytical vocabulary. In this sense, speaking about women in various fields of activity would fundamentally transform disciplinary paradigms, not only by introducing new themes for debate but also by imposing a critical reexamination of the premises of existing scientific work, which has been deeply marked by a Eurocentric and male perspective. Mapping women’s roles by rewriting History, Archaeology, and other sciences from both personal and subjective experiences, as well as public and political experiences, would redefine and expand traditional notions of what is historically important.

However, discussing gender should not be limited to discussing only women, as a History of Women written separately, marginally to the disciplinary content of History. It has become increasingly necessary to analyze not only female or male experiences in the past but also the connection between past and present history, as the theme of gender is part of human social relations and has occupied public and political debate, especially in recent decades [32].

Thus, although Roosevelt [11] does not explicitly use the term “gender” and does not make it a methodological or analytical category, her contributions on the occupation of the tropical lowlands, the territory we now conceive as the Amazon, reveal complex societies that were strongly differentiated in terms of



age, sex, diseases, physiological conditions, isotopic content, and robustness [11].

The social-economic information, modes of life, the complexity of human settlements, and the relationship between humans and their surrounding environment are the primary goals of Archaeology. The technical knowledge of ceramic production is not the final goal of this science, but the history of peoples, their socio-economic, political, ritual, and ideological systems, which, in the case of the tropical lowlands of the Amazon, is still poorly documented.

In this sense, Roosevelt's professional experience highlights the importance of the involvement of both women and men in constructing a more plural past. Roosevelt was one of the first archaeologists to criticize prevailing environmental theories about the cultural development of indigenous peoples in the tropical lowlands. She was also, and continues to be, a staunch defender of Processual Archaeology, through the application of various techniques to gather detailed information not only from artifacts (recovery of ceramics and regional stylistic comparisons) but also from ancient Amazonian skeletons, animal remains, and plants, in a joint analysis of multiple areas of knowledge, such as botany and chemistry.

Additionally, her hypotheses on the significance of pre-colonial Amazonian history and the function and iconography of artifacts from societies of that period suggest the possibility that female roles were more prominent in religious and political contexts. Therefore, her academic work breaks many barriers and notions imposed by 19th-century Archaeology, which was predominantly conducted by white European or American men.

Today, with the advent of Gender Archaeology, Body Archaeology, Social Anthropology, and other perspectives in Archaeology and Anthropology, new questions are being raised in front of archaeological records. Questions that, in the early 1990s, when Roosevelt's work [11] was published and the so-called New Indigenous History was emerging, were still in their infancy.

Roosevelt [11] delves into the issue of gender when discussing the complexity of material culture produced by the so-called chiefdoms, evidenced by the presence of vessels, effigies, figurines, musical instruments, stools, smoothers, jade ornaments, and others. The art of the late prehistoric horizon styles emphasizes the human figure, which appears prominently and centrally in representation and ceramic production systems.

According to the researcher, the human figure gained greater importance than the animal figure because animals ceased to be the sole protein resource for these populations and consequently assumed a lesser ritual role. Moreover, the use of art may have been employed to support the genealogical claims of the elites to power and prestige, as Roosevelt [11] believes that these societies were hierarchical. Thus, human figures frequently appear in mortuary contexts, such as in funerary urns, male and female figurines, and polychrome loinclths.

There is a predominance of female depictions over male ones. Male figures, which are rarer than female ones, are primarily depicted as shamans or chiefs. Male figures rarely appear in artistic representations, except in depictions of genitalia apart from the body, as in female figures where bodies and heads have phallic shapes. This iconography suggests the possibility that female roles may have been more prominent in religious and political contexts in prehistory, a fact that was generally conceptualized by ethnohistory and ethnography as the "myth

of the Amazonian woman," who is said to have once ruled the Amazon by capturing shamanistic power through possession of sacred flutes [11].

This predominance in the material culture of the Lower Amazon, such as in the societies of Santarém and Marajoara, is a fact attested by the number of artifacts found by the archaeologist, with 70% to 90% of human images being female [11]. This may indicate the recognition of female leadership lineages, with material culture tied to the socio-political organization of the chiefdoms. Male figures may appear in a more marginalized manner. However, according to the researcher, many female figures present the body in a phallic shape, combining the form of the female body with the male genital organ in a kind of symbiosis.

According to Da Silva and De Castro [33], the relationships between body and society change over time, which can contribute to perceptions of the body in Archaeology. These authors also point out that interest in the human body in Archaeology dates back to the 19th century when archaeologists were linked to Darwinian evolutionary thought, which focused on categorizing humans into "racial" types, mainly through craniometric studies.

Even though the human body has been part of archaeological and anthropological studies, the research interests were different. Today, there are various paths for this theme, whether through demographic studies, health studies, or studies of bodily modifications linked to identity practices. The body can also be studied in the field of bioarchaeology, in the study of representation and bodily production in material culture, and in the study of bones. Roosevelt [11] herself draws attention to the importance of osteological analysis of human remains to generate information about the lifestyle of past populations.

Le Breton [34] states that the body grounds all social practice, being at the intersection of all cultural instances and, therefore, is the primary attribution of the symbolic field. Therefore, when talking about the human body from a cultural perspective, we always delve into the notions of "sex" and "gender." So, there is also the concern with the cultural or social body, which is constructed daily through the normal moments of existence

## Summary

The chapter by Roosevelt, written in the early 1990s, points out that the history of indigenous peoples on the American continent before the Conquest was millennia old and had its own characteristics. Regarding material culture, Archaeology played a fundamental role in revising indigenous theories about the arrival of humans on the American continent, demonstrating that the indigenous past of Brazil, for example, was older than previously assumed.

In the Amazon, complex societies developed in fertile soil, contrary to what Meggers proposed with her latent colonialism. This fertile land dates back to the beginnings of the occupation of the American continent, at least 12,000 years ago, when humans are believed to have arrived in the Americas through the Bering Strait.

It was Roosevelt who discovered that the oldest pottery in the Americas were made at the Taperinha shell mound in Pará, Brazil. This means that while civilization was emerging in the Old World, such as in Egypt and Mesopotamia, peoples living on aquatic resources, like fish and mollusks, were already well-organized socially in what is now the eastern Amazon, near the mouth of the great river.

Furthermore, Roosevelt's archaeological excavations in

Monte Alegre, in the current Brazilian state of Pará, revealed the oldest dates of human occupation in the entire Amazon, at least 12,000 BP (calibrated). The projectile points of these original populations are different from those of Clovis, showing that early human history in the American continent is more complex than we had supposed.

Finally, the artificial mounds on the island of Marajó, also in Pará, revealed complex heterarchical societies in the Amazon, the most sophisticated in the entire Brazilian territory. After Roosevelt's work, few excavations were carried out in the mounds. Surprises may come in the future when the work is resumed.

Thus, the tropical rainforest was also the birthplace of civilization, not only in arid lands like Egypt or cold lands like the Andes. In Brazil, Roosevelt was the first to make these conjectures. She opened the doors to what is now Brazilian archaeology and provided the fuel for the diverse research now being conducted in the Amazon.

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