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# Betty Jane Meggers (December 5, 1921 - July 2, 2012)

Monica Barnes

*American Museum of Natural History*, [monica@andeanpast.org](mailto:monica@andeanpast.org)

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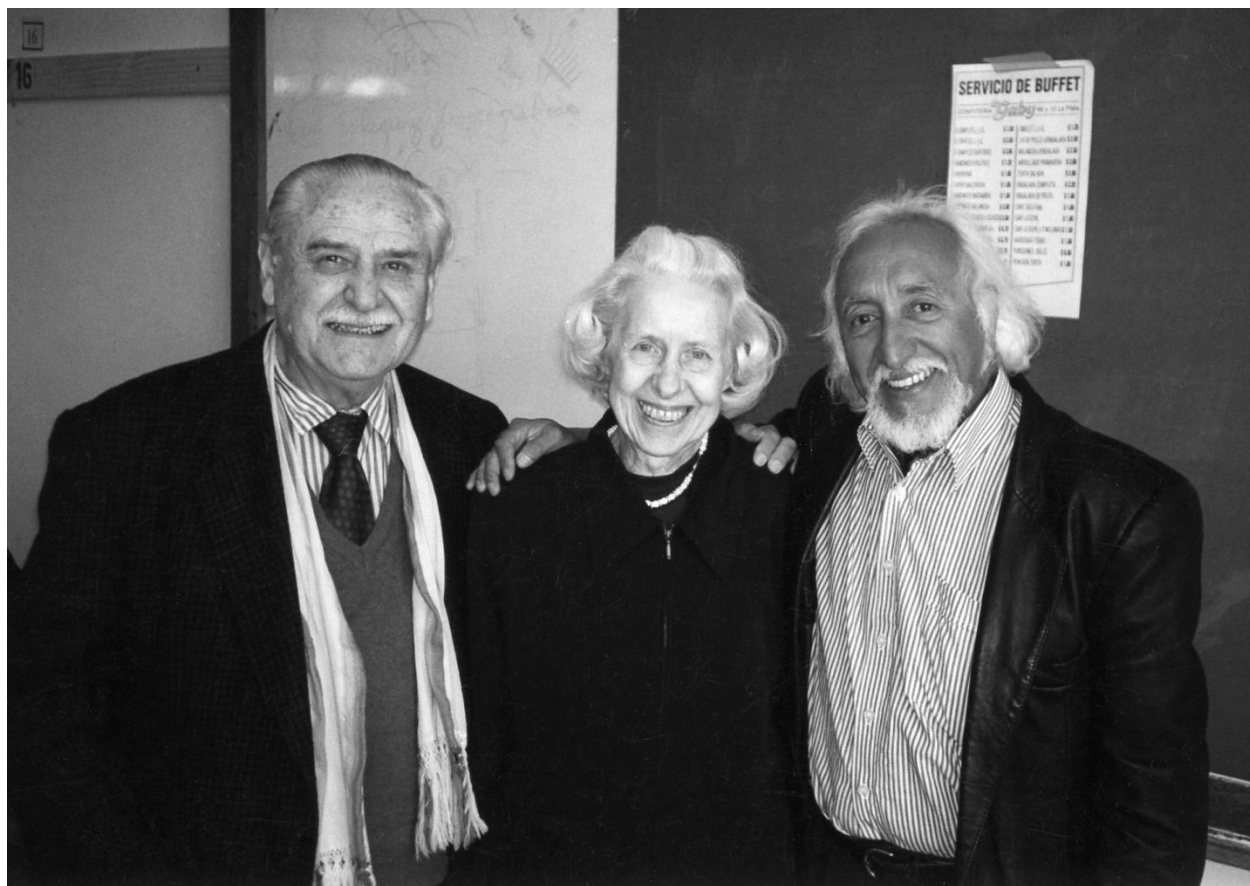
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BETTY JANE MEGGERS (DECEMBER 5, 1921-JULY 2, 2012)

MONICA BARNES  
*American Museum of Natural History  
and Andean Past*



*Betty Jane Meggers (center) with Alberto Rex González (viewer's left) and Lautaro Núñez (right), at the Simposio Internacional de Arqueología Sudamericana, Cuenca, Ecuador, 1992.*

*Photo by Marta I. Baldini.*

In some important ways, the life of Betty Jane Meggers spans an epoch in archaeology. When she was a student in the 1940s, absolute dating techniques were in their infancy. These revolutionized our knowledge of the past. Previously, firm dates could only be established for those ancient cultures that had produced writ-

ten records, such as Egypt or Sumer. By the time of Meggers' death, scientific dating methods had been considerably refined, but some had proven unreliable. Meggers and her husband and colleague, Clifford Evans, Jr., were early advocates of radiocarbon, thermoluminescence, and obsidian hydration dating. They also placed

considerable stress on a technique first applied in Europe and Western Asia in the nineteenth century—type-variety seriation. Using a combination of stratified excavation, seriation, and geophysical dating techniques, they established the first cultural sequences for large portions of South America, lasting achievements that have stimulated much subsequent research.

Meggers' life also spans an epoch in that she launched her career with two paradigms—that the Amazonian drainage cannot support sustained agriculture and large populations, and that the initial stimulus for early ceramics and other cultural traits along the eastern Pacific coast had come from Japan and/or China. The first of these paradigms received broad acceptance when she proposed it and seemed to support the cause of ecological activists who wished to preserve what they believed to be primeval forests. However, by the time of Meggers' death, both of these explanatory frameworks had been widely, but not entirely, rejected on the basis of emerging evidence. Nevertheless, Meggers defended them to the last. This section of *Andean Past 11* celebrates and evaluates her considerable achievements, while not avoiding the shortcomings of her theories.

Especially in the early part of her career, Meggers was a prodigious field-worker. In 1963, with Evans and ethnographer Saul H. Riesen-berg, she made an examination of Megalithic structures in the Caroline Islands of Micronesia. She and Evans also conducted archaeological survey on Dominica in the Lesser Antilles in 1966. However, the heart of her research was lowland South America. She dominated Amazonian and Ecuadorian archaeology for many years.

Meggers had a solid formal education in anthropology and archaeology. She received her A.B. from the University of Pennsylvania in

1943, her M.A. from the University of Michigan in 1944, and her Ph.D. from Columbia University in 1952. Evans was one of her fellow graduate students at the latter institution. The couple met, and carried on a romance, behind the scenes, in the American Museum of Natural History, where both were studying the pottery collections. They married in 1946. Through her choices of universities, Meggers was exposed to a variety of teachers and approaches (see Carneiro's essay below).

Meggers' influence far outweighed what one would expect from her formal positions as a Volunteer (during her teenage years), Research Associate (1954 until her death), and Expert (1981 until her death) in the Anthropology Department of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History. Although Meggers was equally well qualified and shared in almost all of his research, it was Evans, who died in 1981, who held the post of Curator of Latin American Archaeology at the Museum. At the time this was a common arrangement. The male member of a couple had the official position, while the female was nominally some kind of adjunct. Nevertheless, Meggers was at least as much of a force as Evans and their marriage was strong. Meggers made no secret of her devastation when Evans died suddenly and unexpectedly.

In the 1940s, when Meggers entered her profession, archaeologists were still trying to discern the basic culture histories and temporal sequences of the peoples who occupied what later became the Latin American republics. This work had been launched earlier in the twentieth century by pioneers such as Max Uhle, Julio C. Tello, and Wendell Bennett. In 1936 Tello, Bennett, Samuel K. Lothrop, Clarence Leonard Hay, Leslie Spier, and George C. Vaillant founded the Institute of Andean Research to serve as an umbrella organization for coordinating archaeological research in Latin America and to

administer funds. One of the major goals of the IAR was to build archaeological sequences, and to co-ordinate them across cultures and geographical distances. With these goals in mind, field projects were established in Peru, Mexico, El Salvador, Cuba, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, and Chile. One of the most influential of these was the Virú Valley Project (1946) that introduced the concept of settlement pattern studies to Latin American archaeology (Daggett 2009). Through William Duncan Strong, one of their teachers at Columbia University, Meggers and Evans became conversant with the methods and goals of the IAR (Strong and Evans 1952). She and Evans published the first cultural sequence for the mouth of the Amazon (Evans and Meggers 1950; Meggers and Evans 1957). Meggers and Evans' next field-work was in what was then British Guiana (now Guyana) and in parts of Venezuela, from 1952 to 1953. There they also worked out a cultural sequence (Goodwin *et al.* 1982:636) and applied the concept of settlement pattern.

After British Guiana/Guyana Meggers and Evans turned their attention to Ecuador. Between 1954 and 1961 they conducted archaeological survey and excavations on Ecuador's coast and in the Río Napa Valley in close collaboration with self-taught Ecuadorian archaeologist Emilio Estrada Icaza. Estrada's death in 1961, at the age of 45, ended this cooperation.

Meggers, Evans, and Estrada excavated at the Hacienda Chorrera in Los Ríos Province and at the Valdivia site in Guayas Province, among other places. The stratified ceramics they found allowed them to devise a chronology for much of Ecuadorian prehistory (Evans and Meggers 1955, 1965; Meggers *et al.* 1965). The Formative Valdivia culture, in particular, received a lot of attention, in part because it had produced the earliest pottery known from the Americas. However, Meggers and Evans were not the first archaeologists to work in Ecuador.

Marshall Saville (Saville 1910), Max Uhle (Uhle 1927), Jacinto Jijón y Caamaño (Jijón y Caamaño 1951), Edwin Ferdon (Lubensky 2007), and Donald Collier and John Murra (Collier and Murra 1943) had all conducted survey and excavations in that country earlier, but none of their publications created a big picture. Meggers' Ecuadorian sequence is most accessibly presented in her book, *Ecuador* (Meggers 1966).

It was Emilio Estrada who formulated the hypothesis that the art of pottery making was brought to Ecuador, and hence to the rest of South America, by mariners of Japan's Jomon culture who had drifted along the Pacific Rim between 3000 and 2000 B.C. (Estrada *et al.* 1962). Nevertheless, Meggers did not oppose the idea and allowed her name to be associated with it. However, Jomon is a sort of catch-all phrase, used by some to refer to cultures spanning approximately 14,000 years. This temporal depth makes tight Old and New World comparisons almost impossible. Meggers also believed that Olmec civilization in Mexico was sparked by contacts with China. Meggers defended the idea of significant transpacific contacts with her usual tenacity, even late in her career (Meggers 1998).

After Estrada's death Meggers and Evans returned to field-work in the Amazonian lowlands. Anthropologist Robert L. Carneiro in "Reminiscences of a Stalwart Adversary" and geographer William I. Woods in "Betty Meggers: Her Later Years" (both in this issue of *Andean Past*) assess Meggers' influence on Amazonian archaeology. In the space remaining to me, I would like to comment upon Meggers' enthusiastic adoption of environmental archaeology and scientific dating methods, and upon her role of mentor to Latin American archaeologists.

Beginning in the 1930s, environmental and landscape archaeology were developing rapidly,

especially in Europe<sup>1</sup> and in parts of the United States (Cole and Deuel 1937). Meggers embraced that trend. In all of her work in Amazonia and in Ecuador she never saw cultures as divorced from their environments. Rather, she was an environmental determinist, or, some would say, an environmental possibilist, *sensu* Hardesty 1977:4-6), positing that some environments posed insuperable obstacles to the development of complex cultures. This idea permeates Megger's work, and is clearly stated in her 1971 book *Amazonia: Man and Culture in a Counterfeit Paradise*.

A radiocarbon laboratory was established at the Smithsonian in 1962, shortly after Meggers and Evans completed their Ecuadorian fieldwork. They embraced the technique enthusiastically and contributed to its refinement by dating organic temper in seriated potsherds (Evans and Meggers 1962). They also experimented with obsidian hydration dating (Evans and Meggers 1960; Fowler *et al.* 1982:547; Goodwin *et al.* 1982:637), a technique that has not shown as much promise and cannot be applied to so wide a range of materials.

Meggers and Evans placed great emphasis on collegial relationships with Latin American archaeologists. Not only did they work together with Emilio Estrada in Ecuador, and with José M. Cruxent in Venezuela, they garnered the resources of the Fulbright Commission, the National Geographical Society, the United States National Science Foundation, the Organization of American States (the Pan American Union), the Smithsonian Institution, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, and various Latin American institutions in a sustained effort to sponsor the training of Latin Americans. Much effort was made in teaching ceramic seriation. In 1961 Meggers, Evans, and James Ford organized

a seminar on quantitative pottery analysis at Barranquilla, Colombia in association with the Universidad del Atlántico's Museo Etnológico. Eight young archaeologists from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela participated. This was an attempt to establish a common typological system for Latin America and to weave a network of professionals (Fowler *et al.* 1982:546), ensuring that what was taught would diffuse widely.

Three years later they organized a month-long training seminar for ten Brazilian archaeologists in Paranaguá, Brazil with the cooperation of the University of Paraná. This resulted in a five year cooperative effort, the Brazilian National Program of Archaeological Research (PRONAPA) co-sponsored by the Brazilian Conselho Nacional de Pesquisas and authorized by the Brazilian Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional. The program aimed to establish a basic culture-historic framework for Brazil, to train Brazilian archaeologists, and to stimulate national interest in archaeology (*ibid.*: 547; Meggers' *vita*). The need was great. As Robert Carneiro once joked, "At that time you could fit all the archaeologists in Brazil into a single van." Now Brazilian archaeology is flourishing and expanding.

In 1968 Meggers and Evans established a similar program for the Andes, the Proyecto Andino de Estudios Arqueológicos (Fowler *et al.* 1982:546). Although conditions in the United States precluded the establishment of a national anthropology or archaeology (Barnes 2010), intellectual, social, and political conditions were much different in the Latin American republics, making national coordination feasible. In 1979 Meggers and Evans established a private foundation, Taraxacum, to publish and distribute Latin American Research.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the four editions of *Dating the Past* published by F.E. Zeuner between 1945 and 1957.

At the time of Megger's death she was still actively working on disseminating the results of several South American projects including the Chorrera Project begun in 1954, survey and excavation in Guyana sponsored by the Walter Roth Museum, excavations at the Werepiah site in Surinam, and research in Peru's Manu Basin (Sandoval 2012:22).

Meggers was justifiably proud of her excellent relations with Latin American scholars and all that she had done to foster them over the years. However, sometimes this pride degenerated into a kind of essentialism, with Meggers expressing the idea in correspondence that only nationals of a particular country were truly able to form valid ideas about its archaeology. There were exceptions, of course, one being Meggers herself.

Meggers' long life was one of the factors that allowed her to influence generations of South American archaeologists. An evaluation of this and other aspects of her career can be found in the tributes prepared for her late in her life (Echeverría 2012; Ledergerber-Crespo 1999). She received many high honors including the 50th Anniversary Award from the Society for American Archaeology, the Smithsonian Secretary's Gold Medal, the Gold Medal award from the International Congress of Americanists, and honorary doctorates from the Universidad Nacional de la Plata in Argentina, and the Universidad Católica de Goias, the Universidad Federal de Paraná, the Universidad de Rio de Janeiro, and the Universidad Federal de Rondonia in Brasil. She held the Decoration of Merit from the Government of Ecuador.

Betty Meggers will be missed by many. Even those who locked horns with her seem to have taken their encounters in good spirits, as the reminiscences of Carneiro and Woods demonstrate.

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Betty Meggers and Clifford Evans. Photo courtesy of Barbara Watanabe, Smithsonian Institution.