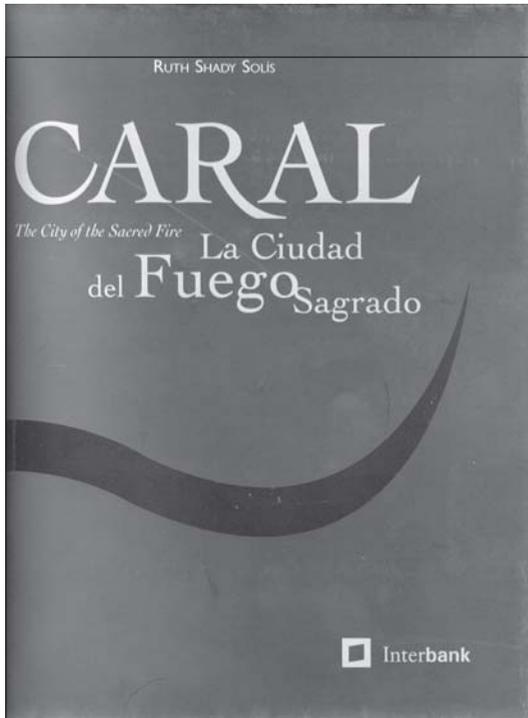


RESEÑAS BIBLIOGRÁFICAS

CARAL. *The City of the Sacred Fire / La Ciudad del Fuego Sagrado* by Ruth Shady Solís.
Graph & Consult, Cuzzi y Cia. S.A. Interbank, Centura SAB, 2004, pp. 260, Perú.

Reviewed by Betty J. Meggers¹



This is a remarkable book about a remarkable site with a remarkable history and it should be read not only by archeologists, but by anyone who enjoys mysteries. What makes this one exciting is that no one knew it existed a few years ago.

Until Ruth Shady decided to investigate what lay beneath the massive piles of earth looming up on the alluvial terrace bordering the Supe Valley, they had attracted little attention from archeologists. What she and her team have uncovered has revolutionary implications for reconstructing the evolution of urban civilization, not only in the Americas but throughout the world. Why did it happen here instead of in one of the broader coastal valleys to the north or south? Why did it disappear before the introduction of pottery, metallurgy, maize cultivation, and other features we associate with sedentary life? The answers to these and other questions are concealed in the abundant and varied remains of perishable composition preserved in the dry soil covering the architectural features.

Some three thousand years ago, the inhabitants of Caral concealed the buildings beneath layers of gravel and waterworn pebbles and abandoned the valley. During subsequent centuries, the wind covered them further with sand and the dry climate collaborated by preserving everything that was buried. The few indigenous residents that remained in the valley did not disturb the mounds and recent commercial developers have not considered the agricultural potential profitable. The absence of pottery and metal saved site from damage by *huaqueros* and even archeologists have lacked sufficient interest to investigate the huge artificial mounds that surround an extensive plaza on a terrace beside the Supe River.

Fortunately, the puzzling contradiction between the magnitude of the monuments and the rarity of other cultural remains aroused the curiosity of Ruth Shady. The results of her investigations during the past decade have not only revolutionized the history of the development of civilization in Peru, but have also challenged the accuracy of theories of the origin of the state on a global scale.

What was concealed beneath the wind-blown sand turns out to be the oldest urban city in the Americas. It contains not only temples, amphitheaters, and other monumental administrative and ceremonial structures, but also extensive elite and commoner residential zones. There is evidence of class distinctions and occupational specialization in subsistence, commerce, manufacture, religion, and administration. Instruments of bone, stone, shell, and wood; fragments of basketry and textiles, and subsistence remains are abundant.

The colored illustrations show cotton textiles, nets, bags, baskets, mats and other woven objects in such excellent condition that it is difficult to believe they are thousands of years old. Remains of squash, beans, sweet potatoes, avocados, guavas, and peanuts identify the principal agricultural products. Wooden spoons, combs, and digging sticks; stone tools and projectile points, gourd containers, and bone needles are among the implements of daily life. Flutes made from pelican and condor bones indicate that music accompanied religious and social activities. A glimpse of the appearance of the people is provided by 100 clay male and female figurines with different hair styles and headdresses, but seldom wearing clothing. Although contempo-

¹ Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC. Meggers.Betty@NMNH.SI.EDU

rary with Valdivia figurines in Ecuador, they are completely different.

Gourds substituted for pottery containers and cotton supplemented bast fibers for the production of cloth, bags, cordage, and fishnets. Subsistence was based on a combination of cultivated plants and marine resources. The principal food plants were beans, squash, sweet potato, peanuts, guava, and pepper. Shellfish, anchovies, sardines, and other fish were obtained from the ocean some 26 km to the west.

Although elite dwellings are more spacious than those of commoners, there is little other evidence of status or wealth to identify the social and religious leaders required to design and construct the plazas, temples, amphitheaters, and irrigation systems, to organize agricultural and manufacturing activities, to obtain and distribute food and goods, to conduct religious ce-

remonies, and to accomplish the multitude of other tasks required to manage and administer a settlement of the magnitude of Caral. Nor is there any evidence of fortifications, weapons or other defensive features suggesting conflict either within the city or with neighboring groups.

In almost every respect, the society that built, inhabited, and abandoned Caral seems unfamiliar. The centralization of wealth and privilege characteristic of city states in the Andean region and elsewhere in the world does not appear to have accompanied the differences in status that must have existed. Cooperation seems to have prevailed over competition for more than 2000 years. As our own society becomes increasingly competitive and antagonistic, Caral may provide a model applicable to the problems that confront us today. The possibility is too important to be ignored.