



Stone Tool Use at Cerros: The Ethnoarchaeological and Use-Wear Evidence

Suzanne M. Lewenstein

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For centuries scholars have pondered and speculated over the uses of the chipped stone implements uncovered at archaeological sites. Recently a number of researchers have attempted to determine prehistoric tool function through experimentation and through observation of the few remaining human groups who still retain this knowledge. Learning how stone tools were made and used in the past can tell us a great deal about ancient economic systems, exchange networks, and the social and political structure of prehistoric societies.

Suzanne M. Lewenstein used the artifacts from Cerros, an important Late Preclassic (200 BC–AD 200) Mayan site in northern Belize, to study stone tool function. Through a comprehensive program of experimentation with stone tool replicas, she was able not only to infer the tasks performed by individual tool specimens but also to recognize a wide variety of past activities for which stone tools were used.

Unlike previous works that focused on hunter-gatherer groups, Stone Tool Use at Cerros is the first comprehensive experimental study of tool use in an agricultural society. The lithic data are used in an economic interpretation of a lowland Mayan community within a hierarchically complex society.

Apart from its significance to Mayan studies, this innovative work offers the beginnings of a reference collection of identifiable tool functions that may be documented for sedentary, complex society. It will be of major interest to all archaeologists and anthropologists, as well as those interested in economic specialization and artisanry in complex societies.

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