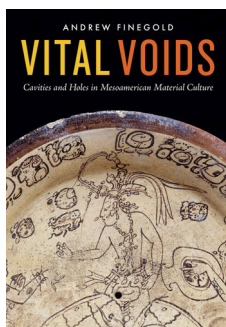


# ANDREW FINEGOLD, *VITAL VOIDS*. *CAVITIES AND HOLES IN MESO- AMERICAN MATERIAL CULTURE*

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and 13 b/w ill., ISBN 978-1-4773-2243-7.



Reviewed by  
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To use his own words, art historian Andrew Finegold's new book, "is about nothing" (p. 1). Behind this catchy statement is the fact that *Vital Voids* is a volume about some of the most important concepts and phenomena in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, since holes and voids, in the shape of caves and several other types of openings and perforations in material culture and human bodies – whether natural or man-made – carried deep religious and cosmological significance. Finegold's wonderfully illustrated book thus lays out his "arguments about the values attributed to holes, cavities, and voids" in a broad selection of Mesoamerican cultures (p. 3). The points of departure for the analysis and interpretations are the so-called "kill holes", referring to holes drilled near the center of ceramic serving plates from the Late Classic Maya culture in southern Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize (ca. 600–800 CE). Such plates or dishes are often adorned with complex iconographic motifs and hieroglyphic texts. When found during archaeological excavations plates with "kill holes" are typically encountered in burials, often atop or underneath the head of the tomb's occupant. Finegold's hypothesis is that the drilled holes had quite the opposite meaning and function. Rather than ritually terminating the object, holes provided a means for continued movement of life forces or energies: "empty spaces were understood as places from which vital energies and

material abundance were propagated” (p. 1). Finegold approaches the meaning of holes through one particular Late Classic Maya ceramic plate. Dated to around 680–750 CE and nicknamed the Resurrection Plate, it has a hole drilled near its center. Finegold draws on a host of other archaeological objects and visual sources to provide a larger contextual framework to suggest specific, shared cultural patterns and practices, but it is this one exemplar around which all chapters and interpretations of negative spaces revolves (although this cannot be characterized as an object biography as such). The Resurrection Plate is famous for its masterfully executed iconography, showing the reborn Maize God sprouting from a cleft opening in a turtle carapace representing the earth. On either side of the turtle are two mythological twins, known as the Hero Twins, which we know from early colonial written sources to be the sons of the Maize God. The twins are instrumental in their father’s resurrection, one directing a large water jar towards the place where his father has pierced through the crust of the earth. The images encapsulate perhaps the most fundamental idea in Mesoamerican religious beliefs, the continued life-death-rebirth cycle shared by all living entities, including objects and phenomena which we would consider inanimate. Characteristically for the majority of art historians working with Mesoamerican materials, Finegold applies a cross-disciplinary approach, complementing art history with epigraphy, archaeology, and the use of ethnohistorical and ethnographic sources from several parts of the Mesoamerican culture area. While the focus is clearly on Maya visual culture and Late Classic ceramics in particular, the comparative pan-Mesoamerican perspective is to be welcomed, not the least because of a growing tendency to (over-) specialize in specific regions, sub-regions, or even individual sites.

The book consists of six individual chapters, starting with “What’s in a Hole? Material Culture and Interpretation”, in which Finegold sets the frame for his analysis, pointing to “an indigenous orientation towards voids that is radically different from what is found in western philosophy” (p. 2). In Mesoamerica, he suggests, holes were conceived of as “vital spaces of emergence” (and, re-emergence, one might add), something Mesoamericanist scholars have long noted. For example, the role of caves in Mesoamerican origin myths and as a foundation for ethnic identity across the region is a widely published topic. Chapter 2, named “Perforated Vessels: Revitalizing the Discourse Surrounding ‘Kill Holes’”, presents the book’s main hypothesis, namely that holes in plates and dishes were not drilled to “kill” the objects or release their animating spirit, but for the purpose of reactivating them. The opening would allow for a flow of creative powers, establishing an *axis mundi* of sorts between the deceased in their burials below, his or her living descendants on the ground above, and the supernatural powers in the heavenly sphere. The author suggests that the painted images and the holes perforating them were, in some cases (but not all), anticipated by the artists already as they composed the imagery. Thus, Finegold reviews several fascinating examples where it is

possible to observe “a direct congruence between image and hole, often in ways that suggest similar association” (p. 31). In the case of the Resurrection Plate, a hole was drilled at the center of the plate, exactly where the turtle-earth is split open, but also at the groin of the Maize God. The physical opening in the object thus coincides with the opening in the earth, while also implying perforation of the deity’s phallus, referencing a ritual Maya bloodletting practice further discussed in Chapter 5. The ensuing Chapter 3, “Cavities in the Living Earth”, takes up the theme of openings in the earth, which come in a plethora of forms and representations. From natural caves to the holes made by the farmer to plant the seeds for a new, life-sustaining crop to burials, dedicatory caches, and voids in the man-made architectural landscape. It is a huge subject on which numerous volumes and articles have been published in the past three decades. Finegold attempts to cover all periods, and consequently the chapter stands more as a summary of well-known ideas and interpretations, therefore becoming a more superficial and less interesting part of the book. It also makes the reader wonder if all categories of holes, voids, and openings really carried the same meaning to ancient Mesoamericans? One aspect the present reviewer would have liked to see discussed is how key mythological episodes, for example emergence from caves, could have been re-enacted in rituals, participants corporally passing through sculptural holes or openings in architectural settings, for example Chalcatzingo Monument 9. Entitled “The Act of Drilling”, Chapter 4 examines the essential role of fire and heat in transformation processes, including the agricultural cycle, food preparation, and birth. On the Resurrection Plate a flaming torch appears, surprisingly one might think, right where the turtle-earth is split open. The torch is placed on top of a sprouting skull representing the dry and “dead” maize kernel. Notably, and this is an important point, fire was generated through drilling – the same action creating the holes that allowed for continued life-flow in ceramic plates according to Finegold. The torch signals this heated transformation process, which leads to the rebirth of the Maize God. Finegold concludes: “[T]he drilling of the hole through the center of the vessel can be understood as a replication of the formally identical and ritually potent act of fire drilling that both germinates the seed and sets time in motion” (p. 88). As a side remark, it must be noted that the use of the term “picture-writing” (p. 76) for the Aztec logophonetic script is an unfortunate choice, that does not correctly reflect the character of the writing system employed by the Aztec – or their cultural forebears of the Classic, Epiclassic, and Early Postclassic periods, for that matter. In Chapter 5, “Perforating the Body”, Finegold takes us through the textual and visual evidence for auto-sacrifice across Mesoamerica, and in particular the practice of piercing the skin (on various parts of the body) or tongue to draw blood. The most precious life-giving essence is thus flowing from these openings. Finegold here emphasizes the act of penis bloodletting, which might have been imitating the menstrual blood streaming from the female

sex, in itself a cave-like void in the woman's body. The final part of the chapter turns to human stone sculptures with cavities in the chest region, particularly common in central Mexico and among the Classic period culture of the Gulf Coast area. The standard interpretation of these, which Finegold supports, is that "precious materials that were closely associated with life energies were inserted" in these openings and thus "vivified them" (p. 111). On ceramic plates, such as the Resurrection Plate, the author concludes, the "conflation of ceramic and fleshy holes mark[s] the perforation in the plate as a conduit for the flows of life forces, akin to bodily piercings enacted within both living human flesh [and] anthropomorphic sculptures" (p. 116). In the sixth and final chapter, "Conclusions: Beyond the Resurrection Plate", Finegold gathers the threads, summarizing his main points. He notes: "Rather than 'killing' this vessel, the cavity at its center reinvigorated it, infusing its iconography with new life" and "The perforated dish thus actively participates in a broader Maya mortuary symbolism that transforms the burial chamber into a vital chamber of regeneration" (p. 117). Importantly, he succeeds in challenging our ingrained impulse to regard a perforated dish as destroyed and worthless, and therefore in contrast to what he calls "an ideal 'wholeness'" and consequently described as a "kill hole".

Finegold has offered us a well-written, well-illustrated book on a topic that has received relatively little attention. After reading, I am convinced by his main hypothesis (that holes drilled in ceramic plates are not "kill" holes, but rather "life" holes), which I have briefly outlined above. The readers – that is, those with a background in Mesoamerican art history and archaeology, or those without prior knowledge about the region, but seeking comparative perspectives to cultural understandings related to holes and voids in material culture and beyond – will surely find the volume an inspiring resource. However, I am still left with a shadow of doubt, when it comes to some of the broader conclusions presented. I think we must cautiously question Finegold, and ourselves, whether all holes and cavities really shared the same significance across the many centuries and many regions and cultures of Mesoamerica? Or, to put it another way, by using the same frame of interpretation for nearly all possible types of voids, holes, and perforations, is there not a risk of reducing a potentially polyvalent concept to having just one meaning? In Mesoamerica, supernatural entities and sacred objects and places tend to be extremely powerful, containing high concentrations of creative and destructive capabilities at the same time. It would be surprising if voids and holes did not possess similar opposing or complementary aspects of religious and cosmological power and potential.

This leads me to a final point: *Vital Voids* is a monograph – focusing on one particular artifact, the Resurrection Plate – with 88 images distributed over 165 pages (with images frequently taking the space of an entire page), while notes, bibliography, and a register take up a total of 38 pages. In other words, it is a somewhat brief book, and some chapters might even have been trimmed more to the

point. In fact, Finegold's observations and significant reinterpretation of perforated dishes and plates in burial contexts could have been presented in a different scope and format, perhaps best so in the shape of a journal article with a sharp focus on the overarching hypothesis and omitting parts of the background information. There is a constant and very real pressure for scholars (particularly the younger generation) to publish single-authored books to advance up the career ladder and secure a tenured position. Yet, my guess is that Finegold's research could have reached a larger professional audience – which must be the aim of this type of work – with a different publishing strategy. These personal ponderings do not in any way detract from the quality and solidity of the volume, which, ironically, fills a gap in the literature. Finegold manages to pierce a productive hole in our previous frame of understanding, allowing for a new and creative reinterpretation of a Mesoamerican cultural tradition and the underlying worldview. As he concludes: “While such holes enacted a transformation of the dishes in which they were made, this was often likely conceived as a fulfillment of the object's meaningfulness, rather than a negation of it” (p. 126).