

The background features a minimalist design with three overlapping circles of varying sizes and shades of gray. Two thin, light gray lines intersect at the top left, forming a large triangle that frames the circles. The circles are positioned in the upper right and lower right areas of the page.

Identity Crisis: Archaeological Perspectives on Social Identity

Proceedings of the 42nd (2010) Annual
Chacmool Archaeology Conference,
University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta

**Edited by Lindsay Amundsen-Meyer, Nicole
Engel and Sean Pickering**

Published by:
Chacmool Archaeological Association
University of Calgary
2011

Sex, Drugs and Rock Gods: Examining Nicaraguan Stone Sculptures

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ABSTRACT. *The possibilities of migration and the extent of contact between Mesoamerica and Lower Central America have been debated for years. Monumental artworks represent a dynamic aspect of most Mesoamerican cultures. Generally, Lower Central America lacks a similar example of a show of power. One exception is the stone sculptures of the Islands of Lake Nicaragua and the Chontales region, just north of the lake. The styles and techniques present on the Nicaraguan sculptures will be examined as well as their possible functions, in an attempt to determine if these sculptures are the result of the diffusion of ideas from Mesoamerica, or show independent innovation.*

Monumental artwork is known throughout Mesoamerica; from Maya Stelae to the Olmec colossal heads. The great civilizations of Mesoamerica asserted their place in history through monumental constructions displaying powerful individuals, events in time and religious doctrine. As we move south out of Mesoamerica we see fewer and fewer grand artworks. While many examples of monumental artwork exist in Central America, this paper will examine the stone sculptures found on the Islands of Lake Nicaragua and the Chontales Region, Nicaragua.

A high level of complexity can be seen in these sculptures which suggest that they were the product of a long standing local tradition, but one that had substantial regional variation (Stone 1961:195). This tradition was likely based in wood carvings which would not preserve, preventing them from being known archaeologically (Easby and Scott 1970:236). Stone (1961:198) notes that the ability of the artist to apply techniques that combine realistic and stylistic elements required a “mastering of the material employed” suggesting the artists were familiar with both the shape and material being utilized.

Sourcing of these statues has been problematic. With the exception of the newly discovered and documented statues found at Nawawasito (Geurds 2009), the exact provenience of the sculptures is not known making sourcing and dating impossible. Multiple estimates have been made for the production dates of sculptures, ranging between A.D. 300–1520 (Baudez 1970; Bruhns 1982:152–153; Haberland 1973; Navarro 2007; Stone 1977), based on the ceramics associated with statues. Obtaining secure dates for these sculptures and defining their association with sites continues to be investigated and debated.

Two main styles of Nicaraguan stone sculptures will be examined in this paper; the “alter-ego” Island-style found on Ometepe and Zapatera Islands in Lake Nicaragua, and the columnar Chontales sculptures of the Chontales region, Nicaragua. This paper will focus on three aspects of the statues; identification markers; supernatural connection and possible functions. Once these

aspects have been examined, they will be compared to their Mesoamerican counterparts to evaluate the level of Mesoamerican influence on their creation.

Identification Markers

The two styles of statuary show drastic stylistic differences. The Island-styles were carved to create three dimensional images, characterized by a combination of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic images. The human figure is usually devoid of individualistic characteristics. In contrast, the Chontales-style statues range from grooved etching to low-relief carvings. These generally consist of rounded, column-shaped statues with an adorned primary human figure, and a small zoomorphic image.

The most common of the Island-styles are the so called alter-ego style. The predominant animal motifs include crocodiles, birds of prey (possibly eagles), jaguars, and deer (Haberland 1973:146). These animals are depicted either worn on the head like a mask or headdress, or as



Figure 1. Island-style statue with detailed anthropomorphic element. Convento de San Francisco, Granada, Nicaragua. Photo by Fernando Moreira.

the full animal seemingly crawling up the back and onto the head of the principal figure. From the front, most of these sculptures look simple. The human figures are not well shaped, with little effort made to make them appear natural. Instead, simple lines were carved to distinguish between torso and arms, while, the faces are blank or shown simple facial features. When viewing the image from the side, however, full details can be seen that allow us to identify the type of animal depicted (Figure 1). That we can still see clearly the zoomorphic component while the human face is blurred suggests that this component was carved in greater detail; the difference in modern appearance cannot have resulted simply from erosion over time. To further obscure the human component, the protruding position of the headdress over the primary figure would cause significant shadows across the human face, further obscuring the individuality of the human figure. The zoomorphic portion



Figure 2. Chontales-style statue showing detailed ornamentation. The Museo Arqueológico Gregorio Aguilar Barea, Juigalpa Chontales, Nicaragua. Photo by author.

represents between one-quarter and one-third of the total height of each statue, further reinforcing the importance of the animal over the human.

While some variation exists in shape, the majority of Chontales-style statues are columnar, with designs representing personal ornamentation and facial features carved in low relief. It should be noted that a range exists regarding the amount of detail and naturalistic portrayal of these figures. In particular, arms, and often legs, show variation with regards to the degree of naturalism. The unique features of each statue suggest that they were created to represent a specific individual, rather than a deity or other supernatural force with a rigid set of identification markers. These figures are frequently combined with a small zoomorphic element (located either on the head or less frequently at the waist).

The personal adornments of the Chontales statues consist of geomorphic designs placed in areas to show headdresses, necklaces, pendants, and arm and leg bands (Figure 2). These designs focus on serpent motifs, often mimicking patterns likely seen in textiles (Zeyala-Hidalgo et al. 1974), and some may be indicative of body painting or tattooing (Bruhns 1992:351).

Where possible, identifying the gender of the individuals depicted in these statues may provide information regarding gender relations in everyday life. While all the statues appear naked, many are asexual (Disselhoff and Linne 1960:120). Both males and females are represented in the sample of statues with biological indicators of sex, reinforcing that both sexes held important roles within society.

At the *Convento de San Francisco* museum, in Granada, Nicaragua, which houses 30 Island-style statues, the ratio between asexual and male figures is roughly equal, with only two examples of females identified. Many of the presumably male statues show evidence of the removal of sexual organs.

The presence of a deer instead of one of the more predatory animals seen on other sculptures may be indicative of a powerful female figure. While a buck would represent a power force, this figure lacks the antlers that would serve to emphasize the animal's power, and appears instead to be a doe. Another statue with a bird headdress is distinctly female due to the presence of breasts (see Navarro 2007:Figure 14). This bird is different from other styles as it lacks the curved beak and menacing eyes, instead portraying an upturned rounded beak.

The Chontales-style figures show more variation in the depiction of sexual organs. Male genitalia are depicted with the presence of three circles (one up, two down), while the depictions of female genitalia are more subjective and include realistic, concentric circles, and a possible flower design. Many figures show raised bumps on the chest, but as they occur on both male and female forms they do not necessarily represent breasts. Both male and female representations appear with the zoomorphic element and the styles of adornments are similar for both sexes.

Supernatural Significance



Figure 3. Chontales statue with large eyes. Statue from The Museo Arqueológico Gregorio Aguilar Barea, Juigalpa Chontales, Nicaragua. Photo by author.

Helms (1992:321) relates stone sculptures to the supernatural world, as the ability to work raw materials into intricate ornamentation endowed the creator with mystical properties. The raw material itself may have been thought to possess some supernatural qualities as well, but the act of working the material into usable goods provided much of their “aesthetic, sociopolitical, and symbolic value” (Helms 1992:321). The individual who commissioned the work would gain the supernatural boost from the construction of the sculpture with the establishment of a large public symbol; the statue not only acting as evidence of an individual’s high status, but also betraying a need to convey personal capability (Helm 1992:323).

Animals are prominent images represented on the large sculptures of Zapatera and Ometepe Islands occurring both on their own and along with a human figure. These monumental figures have commonly been thought to represent supernatural interaction with an animal spirit and are most closely associated with shamanism (Bruhns 1992:332. Throughout Central America, the interaction between human and animal has also been associated with the use of hallucinogenic substances to assist in the physical transformation of human into jaguar or the acquisition of animalistic qualities (Cooke 1993:187).

The appearance of deep-set oval eyes on some Chontales-style statues (Figure 3) may be interpreted as a sign of intentional drug use to instigate hallucinations (Carrie Dennett, personal communication 2009). If this is the case, the combination of oval eyes with zoomorphic images may represent an animal spirit associated with a shaman figure.



Figure 4. Chontales statue with animal on the head. Statue from The Museo Arqueológico Gregorio Aguilar Barea, Juigalpa Chontales, Nicaragua. Photo by Christina Pitre.

Of the four major classes of animals represented in the Island-style, three represent fierce predators. Animal headdresses were first seen in Mesoamerica in the Acatlan region of Oaxaca in the Late Protoclassic (AD 1–150) and were worn by warriors to give them the characteristics of that animal (Easby and Scott 1970:171). Political and religious leaders also aligned themselves with the power of these animals. It cannot be overlooked that these three animals occupy different levels of the world, and can transverse between them with little difficulty. By commissioning and/or carving one of these statues, the individual represented is symbolically connecting him or herself with the qualities of the animal they are depicted with.

Over sixty percent of the Chontales-style sculptures housed at the Museo Arqueológico Gregorio Aguilar Barea in Juigalpa Chontales, Nicaragua have evidence of a miniature animal on the head of the primary figure (Figure 4), assumed by Zelaya-Hidalgo et al. (1974:3) to be a “visual representation of a guardian animal or the animal soul of the individual”. These

zoomorphic images are distinct from their Island counterparts in that they represent a much smaller part of the statue. While the Island statue animals seem to overpower the human, the animals of the Chontales sculptures are more subtle. The smaller size could be interpreted as representing an animal spirit, while the larger zoomorphic images on the Island-styles could represent a transformation into the animal or the acquisition of the animal’s qualities.

Possible Functions

Reports suggest that the Nicaraguan statues were first encountered in association with earthen mounds and plazas (Easby and Scott 1970:242; Haberland 1973:136), though they may have been moved prior to European discovery obscuring the original contexts for these works (Bruhns 1992:352). New statues documented from the site of Nawawasito in the Chontales region are associated with open plazas, and well-constructed rectangular rock mounds, finally giving *in-situ* context to the possible connections between these statues and the landscape (Geurds 2009).



Figure 5. Alter-ego statue with bracing arms. Convento de San Francisco, Granada, Nicaragua. Photo by Fernando Moreira.

The close association between statues and these ritually or ceremonially significant areas suggests the statues were important at the ritual events occurring there. If these statues were meant to represent social roles instead of individuals, they may have also represented the ceremonial occasions when these roles were performed for long periods of time (Carrie Dennett, personal communication 2009) and have acted as a reminder of these occasions throughout the year. I suggest that the Island sculptures depict participants in ritual events due to the strained posture seen in many of the human figures as participation in elaborate ceremonies may have required a person to hold a specific position for long periods of time. In some statues, the human figures appear to be bracing themselves against the weight of the animal on their head (Figure 5). The further the head is inclined forward, the more support the arms seem to provide. The creation of a permanent public image representing an occasion

allowed any event to be shared throughout time and space, even by those not present at the time of the event. The result is a strong correlation between the power of the event and the social and political realms of “home” (Helms 1992:320).

Discussion

Nicaraguan sculptures contrast with their Mesoamerican counterparts in both style and, likely, function. In style, Mesoamerican sculptures depict major rulers or gods and often relate to specific moments or events that influence a large population (Demarest 2007). The figures are heavily saturated with identification markers such as personal adornments, political and religious symbols, and glyphs telling who the individual was and why they were important (Freidel and Schele 1988). They were used to convey messages to the masses. The messages were of greatness, territorial boundaries, or fierce brutality which would instill fear in enemies. The statues from Nicaragua do not seem to display the same types of information.

The sculptures from the Islands reflect a de-emphasis of the individual, instead emphasizing social identity through the symbols that surround the primary figure. The emphasis is placed on the details of the zoomorphic images suggesting the role the individual played was more important than the actual person filling that role. The lack of adornments on the anthropomorphic figure makes identifying gender impossible and often sexual markers are lacking.

The emphasis on the zoomorphic component of the Island statues suggests that the animal imagery was the most important part of the message conveyed to the observer. The isolated nature of both Zapatera and Ometepe Islands likely would have made daily commutes to or from the mainland unlikely. However, ceramic and lithic evidence suggest that the island sites were either highly integrated with the mainland, or simply remote camps for those mainland groups (Brett Watson, personal communication 2010). Based on this relationship between sites, it is not likely the statuary served as territorial markers.

The Chontales statues show more detail in the decorative aspects of the images. These statues likely represent specific individuals, but they lack the standardization of iconography and widespread recognition of Mesoamerican examples. Though themes exist in the ornamentation of the Chontales statues, enough variation is present to suggest that the same individual was not represented more than once. As no two Chontales-styles statues are the same, or even strikingly similar, it can be inferred that specific individuals were represented who would have been important to a specific time and place. The adornments and markings on these figures do not correlate with decorative motifs elsewhere in the material collection so correlations between design and supernatural associations are difficult to assess. It is more likely that the ornamentation represents the actual textiles, missing from the archaeological record, that were worn by the living community.

Conclusion

The two Nicaraguan sculpture styles discussed here utilize different design techniques to display information. The focus of the statues is placed on zoomorphic images or personal adornments. In the Island-styles this is done to emphasize the social role performed by an individual rather than referring to the specific person performing that role. For the Chontales statues, the adornments were used to represent specific important people. Both styles represent some connection to the supernatural world, though the nature of that connection appears different. Even the primary functions of the styles differ. When these differences can be noted between styles from within Nicaragua, it is impossible to correlate an origin based on Mesoamerican culture. While influences may be present, fundamentally, each style stands alone.

Despite long-standing speculation by archaeologists about the designs and functions of stone sculptures, we still do not know why they were created, who created them, what they represent, or what effect they had on the everyday lives of people. The Nicaraguan statues represent just one phase of a longstanding tradition seen throughout all of Central America. The vast differences in subject, function, and design suggest the Nicaraguan styles were independent of Mesoamerican influence and need to be considered in their own right. Further work must be done as these statues provide imperative clues into understanding the opacity of Central American belief systems.

Acknowledgments. I would like to thank all the scholars who have pushed my interpretations of the Nicaraguan statues and made suggestions to this paper including Carrie Dennett, Brett Watson, and Alex Geurds. Geoffrey McCafferty has provided me with invaluable opportunities to work in Nicaragua and see these artworks first hand. Thanks to Fernando Moreira and Christina Pitre who have photography skills which far exceed my own.

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