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Monumental Sculpture as Evidence for Hierarchical Societies

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INTRODUCTION

One of the more memorable aspects of the Pre-Hispanic cultures of the Intermediate Area is the habit that some of them had, at some times and in some places, of erecting representational stone statuary. A careful scrutiny of the very limited contextual information available for this art form suggests that the function of the stone sculptures was essentially funerary. There seems to be a general association between the statues and burials, although the form of the associated burials varies considerably, from simple interments, to cist graves, elaborate barrow tombs, and finally to the late Pre-Hispanic architectural complexes such as Las Mercedes, Costa Rica, and Zapatera Island, Nicaragua, in which the burials are close to, but not within, the main precinct of earth-and-stone platforms.

The sculptural tradition of the Intermediate Area is a local phenomenon and cannot be derived from the architectural and political sculptural traditions of Mesoamerica. This is not to deny contact between the cultures of the Intermediate Area and those of Mesoamerica, for it is evident that there always was some interchange even though the nature of such contact is often known only in the broadest outline. However, in the half millennium or so before the European invasions, there seems to have been a reexpansion of such interchanges, an expansion that may have included outright migrations and invasions, between Mesoamerica and the Intermediate Area (Miles 1957; Feldman 1990; Bruhns n.d.b). Samuel Lothrop (1942) has even suggested that one group of Mesoamericans, the Sigua, were resident as far south as Panama, although the evidence here is quite shaky, and the Sigua may well have been only permanently present after the Spanish Conquest.

Regardless of the actual presence of Mesoamerican trading (or other)
colonies, it is very evident that there was considerable interchance of both goods and ideas between the Intermediate Area and mainstream southern Mesoamerica and that this resulted, among other things, in the spread of Uto-Aztecan languages as far to the southeast as the lake region of Nicaragua (Chippewa 1957). In such a situation one might expect some dilution of local traditions, given the evident attractions of Mesoamerican deities and rituals, and indeed, there is some stylistic evidence of such dilution (cf. Zelaya Hidalgo, Brumfield, and Doherty 1974: 43, 81, 83, 85) including Mesoamerican Post-Classical stylistic influence on the sculptural realization as well as the on the subjects of a number of sculptural groups (especially Las Mercedes and some of the Atlantic watershed sites, with their three dimensionality of representation and emphasis upon belllicose themes).

The nature of interaction between these two regions has been very little studied, but its existence must be kept in mind when considering the evolution of native societies and, especially, when trying to utilize sixteenth-century sources as explanatory analogues for the earlier epochs. This is even more of a caveat when one realizes that the function of statuary in Mesoamerica and in the Intermediate Area was always quite different and, even at the Late Post-Classic equivalent sites of central and southern Central America, the overall configuration of architecture, sculpture, and other features is considerably different from that which is seen in Mesoamerica proper (Brumfield 1982a).

Looking at Intermediate Area statuary as a group, it is evident that although there are marked differences in style between the different geographic and temporal groups, the various local traditions show a considerable thematic homogeneity. The major subjects of the sculptures include human males and females, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic supernaturals of both sexes, and a limited group of animals, among which reptiles and barracudas are the most common. Birds, felines, and monkeys also appear; other animals, such as fish or serpents, are very rare. Animals are shown both as subjects in themselves and as accoutrements of humans or supernaturals. Among these latter the most numerous are the so-called alter-ego figures, figures that show a human or supernatural with an animal piercing the head of the main figure or, in some of the Chontales (Nicaragua) figures, actually sitting on top of the headaddress (Figs. 1-2). Most alter-ego figures, regardless of style, are repulian, although it is never clear whether alligators/caymans or some other lizard are being shown.1 Feline alter-ego figures, which are most common in Nicaragua, and this, added to his general knowledge of Aztec religion and ideas that were common in German anthropological studies of religion when he was active, led him to identify all human figures with animal headaddresses as alter-ego representations. Individual and cultural variation in these figures was not considered. It is, however, obvious that even these alter-ego figures are not the same. Some appear to be animal skins worn as part of a headdress, whereas others are fairly realistic animals shown as if they were alive (or stuffed) and sitting on the head/ headdress. Still others seem to be composite figures, not depictions of a real animal. In contemporary Colímbia, Indian shamans of various cultural groups often wear the skin of an animal as part of transformation rites. skins, heads, or whole stuffed animals were common elements of warrior costumes throughout the Americas. In some instances there had been ritual or formal meaning, such as among the Aztecs lengthy orders. The subject of animal representations in Intermediate Area sculptural traditions merits more careful scrutiny than it has yet received.

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Fig. 1. Supernatural figure with reptilian alter-ego headdress. Punta de las Estaneras, Zapatate Island, Nicaragua. Photograph by K. Brumfield.

Fig. 2. (right) Human being with reptilian alter-ego headdress, Omotepe Island, Nicaragua. Note the individuality of the rendering of the facial features. Photograph courtesy of Wolfgang Haberland.

1 The identification of the meaning of animal headaddresses on human figures is a problem. The traditional identification of these as alter-ego or animal spirit figures, an identification that, according to Wolfgang Haberland (personal communication, 1977), probably originated with Theodore Pressus, at least as the case of the San Agustín sculptures. Pressus was strongly influenced by his earlier experiences among the Cuna and Huilote groups of northern Mexico and this, added to his general knowledge of Aztec religion and ideas that were common in German anthropological studies of religion when he was active, led him to identify all human figures with animal headaddresses as alter-ego representations. Individual and cultural variation in these figures was not considered. It is, however, obvious that even these alter-ego figures are not the same. Some appear to be animal skins worn as part of a headdress, whereas others are fairly realistic animals shown as if they were alive (or stuffed) and sitting on the head/ headdress. Still others seem to be composite figures, not depictions of a real animal. In contemporary Colímbia, Indian shamans of various cultural groups often wear the skin of an animal as part of transformation rites. skins, heads, or whole stuffed animals were common elements of warrior costumes throughout the Americas. In some instances there had been ritual or formal meaning, such as among the Aztecs lengthy orders. The subject of animal representations in Intermediate Area sculptural traditions merits more careful scrutiny than it has yet received.

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are not identifiable as to species, although a few Chontales pieces show some pelage markings of a non-specific type (Zelaya Hidalgo et al. 1974: 14–15). Most feline figures, even in those styles that commonly indicate surface patterning of textiles, artifacts, or other adornments, show no such markings; thus any identification of these animals as jaguars is seriously in doubt.

Animals also figure as what appear to be offerings held or presented by anthropomorphic figures. Among these, the majority appear to be bacthecians and reptiles (Fig. 3). There are also the most common species represented in statues depicting an animal as the major subject, at least among those animal statues that can be identified as a natural species, not as composite creatures. There are also (rare) group compositions, of which the most publicized depicts a feline attacking a human being (Figs. 4–5).

To date, these group compositions have been found only at San Agustín, in southeastern Colombia, where they have, a tribe over-enthusiastically, sometimes been identified showing copulation between a human and a jaguar (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1972b). The problems of exact species identification hold at San Agustín especially, where much of the statuary shows minute details of body parts and surface texture and yet, the feline group statues show no pelage markings. Moreover, to anyone familiar with the

1 Many of the figures shown in Intermediate Area sculptures appear to be composite creatures formed of elements taken from a series of distinct animal species. These figures doubtless had mythological or folkloric significance, but just what this might have been is unknown.
Supernaturals in Intermediate Area sculpture, whether anthropomorphic or zoomorphic, can be identified by their large fangs (Fig. 6). The fangs are a device equivalent in function to the halo of Western tradition and, judging from their appearance in a plethora of largely unrelated styles covering some thousands of years, they probably had as much intrinsic meaning to the average viewer as the halo does to the average westerner; that is, the message that the figure so adorned is supernatural. The ultimate origin of the fangs in reptilian, feline, or hominoid species is extraneous to any argument concerning the immediate social function of this sculptural tradition (Lyon 1985).

Humans and humanoid figures appear in a series of standardized poses, many of which probably refer to respect or venerating (Figs. 7, 8). Other figures wear costumes and/or manipulate artifacts identifying them as warriors, dancers, musicians, or religious practitioners. Many of the figures seem to be occupied in some ritual role, such as making an offering or manipulating ceremonial objects, including城市管理, shields, and trophy heads (Fig. 9).

**Geographic Distribution**

This sculptural tradition has a known distribution from San Agustín, in southern Colombia, northwest into the Nicaraguan lake region (Fig. 10).
Reflections of it can be seen in El Salvador and the Pacific piedmont of Guatemala, as well as in some of the earlier sculptural traditions of the southern frontier of Mesoamerica (Richardson 1940; Brumfi 1982).

In most cases the statues of the Intermediate Area tradition are found in direct association with burials, either within the tomb or tumulus, or associated closely with an area in which there are numbers of burials. In some cases these burials show evidence of social stratification in terms of their elaboration and offerings (such as at San Agustín); in others, for example those of El Salvador Island (Nicoya), there is little visible difference between the various internments (Haberland 1973). The close association between statuary and burials has had one unfortunate result: the looting of the cemeteries for saleable statues has in most instances destroyed any archaeological context the statuary may once have had.

Despite this, a number of factors remain that suggest the existence of a broad-based social system in the Intermediate Area. Most prominently among these is the presence of monumental sculpture, which appears to have been a major focus of artistic effort. The distribution of such sculpture is shown in the map below.

**Monumental Sculpture as Evidence for Hierarchical Societies**

**CHRONOLOGY**

In spite of well over a century of interest in and investigation of the Intermediate Area sculptural traditions, the best that can be said in terms of any chronology is that the earliest securely dated group of statues is currently found at San Agustín, where a number of stylistically diverse pieces were produced between the late centuries B.C. and perhaps as late as A.D. 400-500 (Ritchelf-Dougletoff 1972; Duque Gomber and Caballeros Chaperro 1979; Caballeros Chaperro 1980, 1986). The Tlaxcallan tradition may be as early; the Barilles style of Panama has been associated with the Agua Buenas complex, sometimes during the first half of the first millennium A.D., most of the Costa Rican styles appear to be post-A.D. 500 (a number may be considerably later) as are the Nicaraguan lake styles of Zapanca and Omotepe (Long and Young 1970-71; Haberland 1973, 1986; Zelaya Hidalgo et al. 1974). In no case do we have archaeological data regarding which pieces are earlier and which later for any given stylistic group. This lack of temporal control is a serious problem for interpretations concerning the relationship of the statuary to the evolution of specific social structures.

**CONTEXT**

Another major area of difficulty is trying to use the statuary as guides to past systems of wealth and hierarchy in their lack of context—the essential element for any sort of archaeological interpretation. To use the statuary as evidence for social structures and value systems in these societies, it is crucial to have some basic information concerning the original placement of the pieces. One needs to know, for example, how many statues came from any given site, how many structures of what kinds, and how the statues related to them, the number and nature of the burials, their offerings, and their relationship to the statuary.

Burial information must include competent, professional identification of the age and sex of the human remains as well as information concerning the form and elaboration of the interments, and its spatial and temporal relationship to other burials at that site or associated with that structure. Due to preservation factors in the largely humid tropical environments of the Intermediate Area, as well as to social and financial aspects of the archaeology of the region, this information is rarely available. Skeletal preservation is poor to absent, and this, coupled with the prevalence of secondary and cremation burial (especially in later sites) and the lack of specialists in skeletal analysis, has meant that there is simply no information concerning the age and gender makeup of most cemeteries.
Karen Oliva Brum

The nature of Intermediate Area archaeology in general is also a problem in looking at the sculpture. Most relative chronologies now in use have units of contemporaneity of 500 years or more; this is not sufficient for dealing with any questions of social process as reflected in cultural artifacts. We are faced with a situation in which there is no archaeological chronology of any useful sort for attempting to order the statuary. Moreover, even questions of physical context cannot be dealt with adequately.

There exist no reliable site maps for any of these sites, those maps that do exist are generally incomplete and seldom reflect the original placement of the pieces. Centuries of looting coupled with simply moving the statuary about—practices that were important parts of local recreational systems—have dispersed the statuary so that even before the advent of the international stolen antiquities market and of power equipment—have robbed us of this necessary context. Even in those cases in which there has been archaeological investigation of one of these sites, the data can best be described as incomplete, incompletely published, inadequately published, or antiquely published. The result is that we have an incredibly fragile data base, one which is entirely inadequate to support any attempts to use the statuary for detailed archaeological and iconographic interpretations of the cultures that created the pieces.

FOOLS RUSH IN

Bearing in mind the extreme limitations of the data base, some general statements can be made about hierarchy within the various sculptural communities. No matter how site hierarchy was originally defined and expressed, it is probably reasonable to assume that wealth, prestige, and quantities of status have some relationship. Elaborate sculptures certainly involved trained craftspersons to carve the statues and a considerable labor force for their movement and erection. In addition we must consider the numbers of people involved in the fabrication and maintenance of the ceremonial system that called for such memorials, although here we move out of the realm of tangible facts and into the murky depths of analogical with the practices of cultures distant from those of the Pre-Hispanic Intermediate Area. However, the mere habit of carving and erecting these statues can be taken, in itself, as evidence of economic surplus and craft specialization, and sheer numbers must reflect wealth or other specialized hierarchies among sites.

A major problem in contextual studies is the widespread movement of statues from the cemetery in which they were found. At least a half dozen times Aguateca statues were moved over and over again before reaching their final resting places in the Archaeological Park or at one of the other protected sites. The advent of trucks, tractors, and earth-moving equipment has speeded up the movement of statues in much of the Intermediate Area.

San Agustín. Here, in a relatively restricted area around the headwaters of the Magdalena River, there are some twenty-five separate sites known. The numbers of statues attributed to an individual site vary from one to two to more than fifty. This quite clearly indicates, if the statues are all more or less contemporary (and there is good reason to think that they are), that one site, San Agustín (where the modern archaeological park stands), had significantly more sculptural activity, and thus probably much more ceremonial activity, than did any of the other sites in the region. A second range of sites can be delineated, sites like Alto de los Ildos, where approximately fifteen to twenty statues have been found. There is also a more numerous tertiary range of sites such as Alto de las Piedras with approximately nine statues, El Talbón with six, and Ullumbe with seven. These are trailed by those sites that appear to have had but one or two funerary monuments.

This is a very rough sort of hierarchy, although it is supported by some other archaeological evidence. This enunciator hierarchy suggests that only at San Agustín was there a sufficient number of wealthy, presumably prestigious persons, to routinely merit elaborate burials with a stone sarcophagus (usually covered by a slab statue), with stone statues within the tumulus or within the burials associated with the tumulus, and with other, subsidiary burials within and surrounding the main funerary barrow. 1 Duque's and Cubillos' investigations at Las Mesitas and other sites suggest

1 The slab-like statues appear to have served as sarcophagi or coffin lids. These for which we have archaeological context are associated with other sculptures in what Roether-Dolmanoff (1972: 46-50) has called the "explosive" style. The style of a piece can thus be shown to be related to its function and not necessarily to chronological or geographical factors.
the less elaborate burials surrounding the main interment were of higher status. Certain classes of the native society were buried with offerings of obsidian, shell, and other luxury goods (

Unfortunately, we do not have comparable evidence for other Columbian sites. The Morro account is the only known evidence of a human figure in a burial context. Human figures in offerings are uncommon in the Americas. This is true even in the Maya area, where human figures are common in art and architecture. The Maya believed that the dead were connected to the living through the figure of the deceased. Similar monumental structures for funerals seem to have been associated with the Olmecs, but there is no definite evidence of human figures in offerings.

The most elaborate burials are those of the elite. The central figure in the Morro account is that of a man who was buried with a stone basin, a stone ax, and a stone knife. He was also buried with a stone bowl, a stone cup, and a stone bracelet. The stone bowl was decorated with a human figure. This is the only known example of a human figure in a burial context in the Americas.

Apart from these few and very approximate indications of the presence of human figures in burials, we can only speculate on the possible significance of these figures. The Morro account suggests that the dead were connected to the living through the figure of the deceased. Perhaps the stone figure of the deceased was a reminder of the dead's importance. Alternatively, the stone figure could have been a symbol of the dead's power or influence in the afterlife. Whatever the case may be, the stone figure of the deceased is a unique and important example of the use of human figures in burials in the Americas.
There can be no doubt that these figures show a physical hierarchy, although it is possibly a quite ephemeral one. Given the apparent versimilitude of other details of the statuary (human sacrifices and trophy heads are both artistically and archaeologically attested to, jewelry and weapons identical to those portrayed in the statuary are found in archaeological sites, etc.), is it possible that these statues reflect a social hierarchy? Numbers of archaeologists have thought that the master-slave motif is definite evidence of social ranking. With regard to Barrios, Wolfgang Haberland has said of it and related sites that "Aguas Buenas was certainly a class society, containing at least a nobility and/or a chieftain class, commoners and slaves (1984: 244). Doris Stone (1972: 103) arrived at similar conclusions. This interpretation is based on the contents of the tombs and related materials, especially the giant statues (which Haberland considers to be seats of power), the stone spheres, the barrel-shaped stones from which the site takes its name, but, above all, on the statues of nude males with conical hats and trophy heads, two of which show the master-slave motif.

These interpretations are supported by early historic descriptions of native societies, such as that of Father Pedro Sarmiento, who describes a coca de Fenceno, in northern Colombia, as never putting her feet on the naked ground, always walking on the backs of her lades in waiting (1935: 3-+). This interpretation is also probably influenced by ideas of many and labs drawn from Polynesian ethnography (Haberland, personal communication, 1985). There are, however, problems with the acceptance of such statues as showing social hierarchy. One of these is simply their scarcity: there are only three recorded instances of this subject in stone sculpture (although Stone [1972: 102] shows a Muiscó gold ornament with the same motif.

This suggests that shoulder transport was not a major theme, and thus not a major concern, of the sculptural community. More telling, however, are the details of the known statues. These details suggest that the depictions were of ceremonial activities, dances, or dramatizations, and not of elite locomotion or, as Praxton Sheets has suggested (personal communication, 1987), a metaphor of hierarchical social organization.

The only other master-slave piece known, from San Agustin, represents a masked figure carrying another figure who wears an animal mask (Fig. 13), in contrast to the unmarked human males of the Barries pieces. The San Agustin sculptural corpus includes abundant representations of musicians, dancers, and masked or disguised figures (Fig. 14); depictions of parties in rituals are very common.

One of the Barries' "masters" is displaying a shell or lime container and a trophy head. Trophy heads are seen in other sculptures of Barries, as well as at San Agustin (and in tomoys of the other sculptural traditions). Historically and ethnographically, trophy head display is associated with considerable ceremony, either on its own or as part of wider-ranging activities commemorating victory and ascendancy over another social group.

In both Mesoamerican and central Andean art styles, trophy heads are clearly shown as parts of ceremonial costumes and/or as being displayed ceremonially as parts of ritual activities; the same is true in many, if not most, of the Intermediate Area sculptural styles (cf. Harner 1972: 187-193; Moser 1973; Proulx 1971). Thus it seems likely that the master-slave motif may be reflective of victory or other ceremonies involving dancing and display of trophies with the victor or main protagonist being carried on his colleagues' shoulders during the festivities.

The question of when is a master-slave a master and when is it something entirely different is a part of the ongoing problem of the validity of ethnohistoric and ethnographic analogy. It is clear that much of the Intermediate Area statuary considerably predates the sixteenth century, often by many centuries. This fact suggests that it may not be appropriate to utilize European descriptions of Conquest-period societies as interpretative aids, especially when there is reason to believe that the sixteenth-century peoples were relative newcomers, often not related historically or linguistically to the much earlier peoples who erected the statues.

Other attempts to infer relative status or social hierarchy rest upon the ornament, headdresses, and costumes worn by the sculptured figures. Ethnographic analogy in this particular situation is even more fraught with danger, largely because of the post-Conquest history of much of tropical
America. The closest analogues of most items worn or carried by Intermediate Area statues are to be found among the indigenous peoples of the Amazonian lowlands (with the possible exception of some of the Mexican-influenced headdresses worn by Zapotec style figures). There is a close correspondence between feather headdresses, types of weapons carried, and hair styles and garments worn in the various sculptural styles and those which have been reported ethnographically from Amazonian South American cultures. However, none of these surviving societies is hierarchically organized in the sense of having social classes. Even prestige ranking tends to be poorly developed in Amazonian societies, although it may not have been so in the past (Lathrap 1970). Thus, although there are close ethnographic analogues to sculptural details, it is difficult to use the ethnographic record to interpret any of these as insignia of relative social, political, or ritual position. There is no close correspondence between displays and hierarchy of any sort. Headdresses, ornaments, and so on, although they may have considerable local meaning in terms of prestige or ritual are, in fact, little more than testimonials to the industry of an individual or his or her relatives.

Aside from the problems of ethnographic parallels, we are faced with the archaeological problem of sample size. One of the best indications of the cost of erecting such statuary is that there is not all that much of it. Distributions have been mentioned for San Agustín and for some of the Chiriquí and Nicaraguan sites, but in all regions there is simply not a great quantity of sculpture. The largest number of statues recorded for a single region (and not from the same site) is from San Agustín, where there are approximately 250 statues known. Only about twenty to thirty statues are known from the closely related (and relatively close by) Terradentro styles, and there are even fewer from the Puyapuy region. Lack of appropriate material does not seem to have been a factor.

In all cases the statues are carved of locally available minerals, abundant in the given area. This is not a situation, such as that of the Olmec heartland, where there was long-distance transport of stone for ritual purposes. Rather, other factors must have mitigated against the carving of more sculptures. In no case, incidentally, is it possible to do more than estimate the numbers of sculptures that once may have existed. Site destruction, destruction of statues at "idols" by enthusiastic missionaries or their converts, theft, private collectors, uncatalogued local and national repositories, and grossly inadequate publications make exact tabulations impossible.

It is possible that numbers of statues remain to be discovered. Ritual disposal of the statues, either entire or broken, is reported from some areas (notably Panama); in parts of Costa Rica, statues were buried with human interments; at San Agustín statues are found around and within mounds; in all these places new sculptures are appearing with each new onslaught of excavation or looting. Much of the cordilleras of Colombia remain archaeologically unexplored, as do entire regions of Central America. This makes it impossible to use stylistic groups to observe hierarchies of costume and ornaments on a local or regional level, although this might be possible in some distant future.

These caveats aside, it is quite likely that a lot of the details of Intermediate Area sculpture are testimonials of wealth and status. One assumes that a person would have had to be of elevated social or ritual position and wealthy within his or her community's terms to merit an elaborate burial.
drinking vessels, ceramic imitations of calabashes, and gold imitations of the ceramic calabashes (Bruhns 1976); the same is true of poporo, the small gourd lime containers associated with the ritual consumption of coca (cf. Arango Cano 1923–24 for many examples of these found in the tombs of the Department of Quindío). Among some neighboring groups, however, ordinary people also had access to metal, although they did not have as many ornaments or other objects as the wealthy.

Thus Chief Parita and some of the Sinu caciques were lavishly supplied with golden ornaments, but quite ordinary people were permitted to display ornaments to the extent that they could acquire them. In other words, the possession and display of metal ornaments may be evidence of financial acumen, not a specific status signal (Espinosa 1987: 24–25; Plazas and Falchetti de Saenz 1981: 72–74). Because almost all Pre-Columbian gold known from the Intermediate Area was recovered through clandestine excavations, there is little evidence that allows for any definitive identification of regional styles of metalwork. The statuary is the best clue to local styles in metal ornaments; the gold items themselves do not help to place or date the statuary.

Another indication of the status of the figures represented in sculptures is the representation of exotic elements as part of their costume. At San Agustín, two statues, which because of stylistic details were almost certainly carved by the same sculptor (even though they were found at the separate sites of Alto de Lavapatas and Alto de las Piedras), show the incorporation of the central Andean “moose animal” (a crested, dragonlike figure with feline/reptilian/raptorial bird characteristics) into their headdress (Figs. 13, 16; Bruhns 1976b). Another figure, from Las Mexitas, is shown wearing a Quimbaya-style metal poporo suspended from his necklace (Fig. 17). The archaeological Quimbaya culture is found some 100 km northwest of San Agustín. The Bariles figures are shown wearing anthropomorphic pendants in what appears to be a northern Colombian style, although these are badly eroded and a closer identification cannot be made.

To the north, influence in terms of exotic elements seems to have come from Mexico or the Maya area. Many of the Zapatera statues wear headdresses in which large serpents or other animal figures form face-framing helmets in a manner reminiscent of Late Classic and Post-Classic Mesopotamian fashions (Figs. 18, 19). The Zapatera figures also show Post-Classic Central Mexican (“Tolete”) traits in their three-dimensional representation, including realistic detailing of the limb and torso muscles and fatty deposits. Interestingly enough, the same mode of representation is seen on some of the very late Costa Rican sculptural styles, especially those of Las Mercedes and the related Atlantic watershed sites. These sculptures, although they also duplicate some of the bellicose themes

or, at least, a burial associated with one of these funerary monuments. It is a reasonable assumption then that the funerary statues—be they guardians, festive deities, or depictions of ceremonial performers or of myths—would reflect this wealth and prestige.

Elaborate headdresses, decorative scarification, metal ornaments, and exotic motifs are widely associated with elite status and wealth in native American societies. Such motifs as a conical hat, found in many Intermediate Area sculptural styles, may very well refer to status or ritual affiliation, as may the commonly depicted headdresses with tassels or birds on a headband on San Agustín statues (see Figs. 12, 17). If one can use ethnographic data in a very general manner, which may be justified, then another aspect of the statuary may represent elevated status. This is the depiction of metal ornaments, worn by humans and supernaturals alike (Fig. 15). Many of these ornaments are identical to those known from archaeological sites within the Intermediate Area, a region that apparently had metallurgy from the early centuries A.D. (Bray 1977; Bruhns 1976).

Throughout much of the Andean and the Intermediate Areas at the time of the Conquest, the use of metal ornaments and vessels was restricted to the elite. This practice was especially marked among the Incas and other extremely hierarchical societies, but is found also among less complexly organized groups. Cieza de León (1984: 66) mentions that in central Colombia, golden vessels were utilized by the chiefs and nobles in drinking parties.

Archaeologically one sees a complete continuum in this area: calabash
Many sculptures, especially those from the Chontales region, include ornamental human(Sculptures from El Parulal at San Agustín show such body painting or tattooing. The chance preservation of two painted sculptures from El Parulal at San Agustín shows that such ornamentation may have in a perishable medium (Cuhillos Chaparro 1988). Elaborate body decoration is often associated with exotic stamps, although equally there is an association with specific ceremonial or ritual rituals/activities (Bean 1919). Body decoration is shown in a number of the ceramic styles of the Intermediate Area, although it is difficult to associate any specific types of decoration with an identifiable status. Linares (1977) has attempted, with some success, to show an association between specific animal species used as decorative motifs and power, although it is unclear what meaning or meanings other animal or geometric motifs may have had.

There is also the question of “seats of power” as signs of status. Throughout much of nuclear America, stools or low benches have often been associated with high status. The Inca, for example, was seated on a stool, Mixtec lords of Central Mexico are shown sitting on stools, and many Maya lords and ladies are shown seated on benches. In the Intermediate Area the situation is not so clear-cut. Many of the Intermediate Area sculptural styles depict seated individuals: masked personages and warriors, supernaturals, and ordinary, although richly adorned, humans. The stools themselves appear in stone, often with trophy-head decorations. It has been suggested that the elaborate metates, characteristic of some of the earlier Costa Ricas cultures (but also found in Panama at Barrelo and elsewhere) functioned as seats of power, too. The alternate explanation is that all these artifacts are altars (Pfeiffer 1987). The former interpretation is slightly supported by the depiction of a male figure reclining with a drink on a metate-like piece of furniture on a Conte Polychrome modeled vessel (Linares 1977, frontispiece). However, many of the elaborate metates show signs of having been used for grinding some substance, which suggests that they may actually be metates. The situation regarding status seating in the Intermediate Area was simply too variable (in the sixteenth century and on through historic times) to allow an unqualified identification of the seated figures as powerful and the seats as being some sort of throne.

The existence of true portraiture, that is, the depiction of a specific individual, possibly indicates some sort of hierarchy. Portraits are not common in Intermediate Area sculpture, but identifiable individuals do appear at San Agustín, in the Popayan region, in Costa Rica, and in some of the Nicaraguan styles (Fig. 20). Portraiture is rare in native American art styles and in those situations in which it has been identified, such as among the Olmec, the Maya, and, perhaps, the Moche, true portraiture seems to have a close association with a personalization of the leadership, in whatever way that leadership validated its position. It is very possible.

Fig. 18 Seated or squatting male figure wearing a Mixteca-derived serpentine headdress. Pescado Island, Nicaragua (after Squier 1851:453).

Fig. 19 Seated or squatting human figure wearing a mask. The figure has elaborate painting or tattooing on its arms and legs. El Naranjito, San Pedro de Luján, Nicaragua. Drawing courtesy of Tom Weller.

Popularized by the militaristic cults of the Mexican Post-Classic Period, show less influence in terms of adaptation of Mexican ideas of warrior fashion.

On some of the Nicaraguan figures, the common flat (leather? metal?) masks or animal masks worn by “mummying” figures are replaced with masks of the Mexican rain deity Tlaloc or with Mictecacihuatl style death masks (Thieck 1971:162, nos. 158, 111, 168). Both of these deities had become very popular in Early Post-Classic El Salvador, where they were introduced by either Veracruz merchants/migrants or, less likely, by immigrants from the Cotzumalhuapa area (Brumfh 1980; Paul Amoroso, personal communication, 1987). Another Nicaraguan figure has a carving of Ehecatl, the Mexican wind god, on its abdomen (Zelaya Hidalgo et al. 1971:42–43). All of these sculptures combine traditional thematic elements with exotic details borrowed from neighboring groups to create more powerful images that partake of several symbolic systems.

Another element of status display may well be the decoration of the skin.
that something of the sort was happening among the peoples of the Intermediate Area, with important people being considered personally important, not important as holders of a position in the hierarchy alone.

CONCLUSIONS

Intermediate Area sculpture does not prove to be a fertile area for looking at the development of ranked or stratified societies or at the individual representation of such hierarchies within a given cultural or geographic group. Although there is an apparent wealth of information within the corpus of sculpture, including tantalizing hints of ceremonies and mythological systems, of the elevation of the individual, and of trade and ideological interchange between ethnic entities, there is an absolute paucity of firm data to use for interpretative purposes.

On the surface it would appear that the sculptures would be an excellent source of information about the social structure and prestige systems of these societies, but they are not. Iconographic studies with no supporting archaeological data are speculative, superficial, and inevitably subject to ethnocentric bias. In the Intermediate Area, what appears to have been an extremely important aspect of the display and ritual systems of a series of societies, the erection of stone sculpture in mortuary contexts, cannot be associated with the remnants of other cultural activities. Because of looting, the moving of the sculptures (ancient and modern), and generally poor recording when sculptures were recovered through excavation, there are few valid geographical or temporal contexts for the majority of pieces. Moreover, population movements and cultural extinctions in the historic period have deprived us of appropriate sources of explanatory models. Given this situation, we can only speculate on the social meaning of the statues and the differences in wealth and position within the culture that they may reflect.

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The Historiography of Wealth and Hierarchy in the Intermediate Area

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Introduction

From the time of the first chroniclers who wrote about the complex societies of Central and South America, an interest in the relationship between wealth and hierarchy has been a prominent concern. From the earliest Spanish observers to modern scholars, virtually all have recognized the inextricable relationship between the control of wealth, social status, and political and religious power. High status, power, and privilege were manifested and affirmed through the sponsored production, acquisition, and display of elite objects. At the time of Spanish contact these objects were made principally of gold and silver alloys.

The rise of mercantilism and the quest for gold made early Spanish explorers, conquistadores, and chroniclers of the New World keenly aware of wealth and hierarchy and their material manifestations. This was especially true in the area that we now call the Intermediate Area. Perhaps the earliest observations pertinent to this matter by a historian were made by Fernando Colón who, in 1502, accompanied his father on his fourth and final voyage to the New World. Coasting along Caribbean Central America from northeast Honduras to Darén, Panama, the admiral and his crew saw and traded with natives who wore gold "mimicry" around their necks. They also discovered a trade network that moved gold and other fine goods and items along the Panamanian coast for 50 leagues from Chiriquí Lagoon to Coclé (Colón 1500: 243). In Veragosa, the Europeans bartered for gold pieces and raw gold; there they learned that "the gold came from Caroff rugged mountains" (Colón 1509: 250). In early 1503 they marched inland from Veragosa and raked an interior gold mine (Colón 1509: 252; cf. Martín D'Angéls 1412 dec. 3, bk. 4: 126, 129).

The next noteworthy reference came in 1513 in Balboa's famous letter to the king in which he reports the existence of the wealthy and powerful