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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 1969; 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 interchange 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-aztec languages as far to the southeast as the lake region of Nicaragua (Chapman 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, Bruhns, and Dotta 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 Mercedés and some of the Atlantic watershed styles, with their three dimensionality of representation and emphasis upon bellicose 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-Classical equivalent sites of northern Central America, the overall configuration of architecture, sculpture, and other features is considerably different from that which is seen in Mesoamerica proper (Bruhns 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 sculpture include human males and females, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic supernaturals of both sexes, and a limited group of animals, among which reptiles and batrachians 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 peering over the head of the main figure or, as in some of the Chontales (Nicaragua) figures, actually sitting on top of the headdress (Figs. 1, 2). Most alter-ego figures, regardless of style, are reptilian, 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,

¹ The identification of the meaning of animal headdresses on human figures is a problem. The traditional identification of these is as alter-ego or animal spirit figures, an identification that, according to Wolfgang Haberland (personal communication, 1987), probably originated with Theodore Preuss, at least in the case of the San Agustín sculptures. Preuss was strongly influenced by his earlier experiences among the Cora and Huichol groups of northern Mexico



Fig. 1 Supernatural figure with reptilian alter-ego headdress. Punto de las Estatuas, Zapatera Island, Nicaragua. Photograph by K. Bruhns.

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

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 headdresses as alter-ego representations. Individual and cultural variation in these figures was not considered. It is, however, obvious that all 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 Colombia, Indian shamans of various cultural groups often wear the skin of an animal as part of transformational rites. Skins, heads, or whole stuffed animals were common elements of warrior costumes throughout the Americas. In some instances these had totemic or fraternal meaning, such as among the Aztec knightly orders. The subject of animal representations in Intermediate Area sculptural traditions merits more careful scrutiny than it has yet received.



Fig. 3 "Altar" or "scat of power" in the form of a batrachian. Tierra-dentro, Colombia. Photograph by K. Bruhns.

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 batrachians and reptiles (Fig. 3). These 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.² 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 trifle over-enthusiastically, sometimes been identified as 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

² Many of the figures shown in Intermediate Area sculpture 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.



Figs. 4 and 5 Statue of a feline holding one human figure in its anthropomorphized paws while a second small figure stands in front in a standard pose of veneration. La Candela, San Agustín, Colombia. Photograph by K. Bruhns.

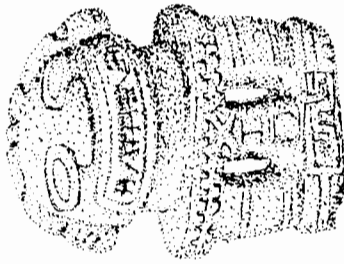


Fig. 6 Supernatural figure, Diquis Delta, Costa Rica. Drawing courtesy of Tom Weller.

mating habits of felines, the two known statues clearly have little to do with any sexual act (Figs. 4, 5).³

Shamanistic beliefs, which have analogues in modern indigenous mythology and ritual, may well be reflected. However, capture or overpowering of the human by the animal seems to be a more conservative identification, as has been pointed out regarding the Olmec sculptural style by Reichel-Dolmatoff himself, as well as by Furst and Davis (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1972a: 74-75; Furst 1968; Davis 1978; Bruhns 1982a).

³ San Agustín sculpture was apparently sometimes painted, and it is possible that pelage markings were indicated in that medium. Unfortunately, all the known figures with felines on them are weathered and no traces remain of the paint they may once have had.



Fig. 7 Human figure in a standard pose of veneration. Tierradentro, Colombia. Photograph by K. Bruhns.

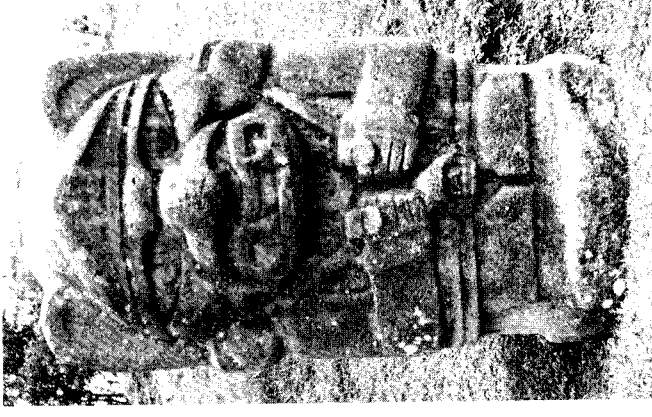


Fig. 9 Supernatural figure with elaborate "eared" headdress similar to those seen on some northern Peruvian humans of the Recuay and Moche cultures. This male wears a trophy head suspended from his neck and holds shells(?) in his hands. Northwest barrow, Mesita B, San Agustín, Colombia. Photograph by K. Bruhns.

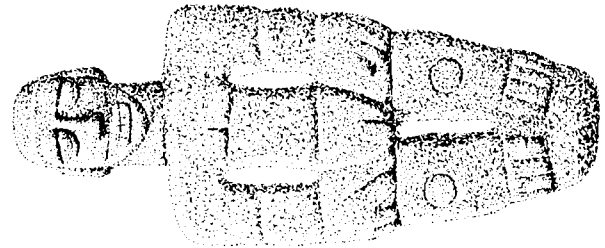


Fig. 8 Standing male figure, Diquis Delta, Costa Rica. Drawing courtesy of Tom Weller.

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 humanlike figures appear in a series of standardized poses, many of which probably refer to respect or veneration (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 *tumi* knives, shells, 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).

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 (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1972a; Duque Gómez and Cubillos Chaparro 1979; Cubillos Chaparro 1980, 1986). The Tierradentro tradition may be as early; the Barriles style of Panama has been associated with the Aguas Buenas complex, sometime 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 must be considerably later) as are the Nicaraguan lake styles of Zapatera and Ometepe (Long and Yangüez B. 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 in trying to use the statuary as guides to past systems of wealth and hierarchy is 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 there were in the site, 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 interment, and its spatial and temporal relationship to other burials in 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.

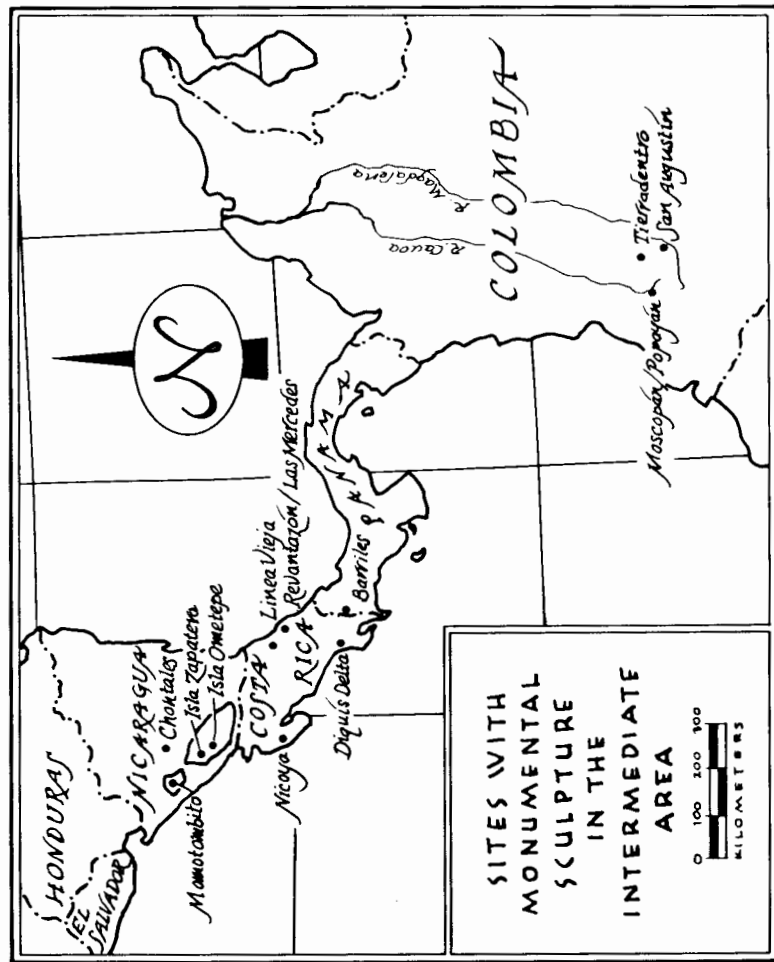


Fig. 10 Map showing the location of major sites or regions with representational stone statuary. Drawing courtesy of Tom Weller.

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; Bruhns 1982a).

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 Ometepe Island (Nicaragua), there is little visible difference between the various interments (Haberland 1986). The close association between statuary and burials has had one unfortunate result: the looting of the cemeteries for saleable artifacts has in most instances destroyed any archaeological context the statuary may once have had.

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 practices. 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 statues about—practices that were important parts of local recreational systems even before the advent of the international stolen antiquities market and of power equipment—have robbed us of this necessary context.⁴ 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 antequely published. The result is in an incredibly fragile data base, one which is totally 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 statues have some relationship. Elaborate sculptures certainly involved trained craftspeople 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 murkier depths of analogy 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.

⁴ 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 San Agustín statues were moved over and over again before reaching their final(?) resting places in the Archaeological Park or at one or the other protected sites. The advent of trucks, tractors, and graded roadbeds has speeded up the movement of statuary in much of the Intermediate Area.

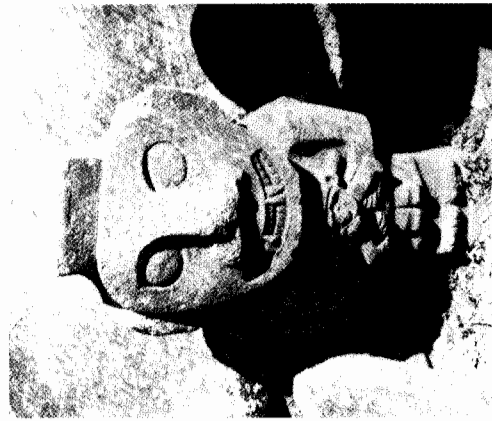


Fig. 11 Supernatural figure offering a smaller human, perhaps a representation of human sacrifice or of retainer burial. South barrow, Mesita B, San Agustín, Colombia. This figure, like many of the important San Agustín pieces, seems to have functioned as a caryatid within the tumulus. Photograph by K. Bruhns.

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 or 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, Las Mesitas (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 Idolos, 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 Tablon 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 enumerative hierarchy suggests that only at Las Mesitas was there a sufficient number of wealthy, presumably prestigious persons, to routinely merit elaborate burials with a stone sarcophagus (often covered by a slab statue), with stone statues within the tumulus or within cist burials associated with the tumulus, and with other, subsidiary burials within and surrounding the main funerary barrow.⁵ Duque's and Cubillos' investigations at Las Mesitas and other sites suggest

⁵ The slab-like statues appear to have served as sarcophagus or coffin lids. Those for which we have archaeological context are associated with other sculptures in what Reichel-Dolmatoff (1972: 68–70) has called the "expressionistic" style. The style of a piece can thus be shown to be related to its function and not necessarily to chronological or geographical factors.

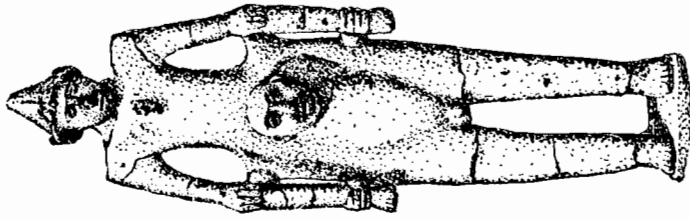
that the less elaborate burials surrounding the main interment were of people of various ages and both sexes, although there is no evidence concerning the age or gender of the main burials (Duque Gómez 1966; Cubillos Chaparro 1980). There is also some indication of human sacrifices (surely an expensive option), made either to the main burial or to the supernaturals depicted in the sculptures. Human figures as offerings are commonly shown in San Agustín sculpture (Fig. 11).⁶

Unfortunately, we do not have comparable evidence for other Colombian styles, although at Tierradentro there is some hearsay evidence that most statues were found at a single site and that other sites had only one or two figures. Similar informal information exists for the Popayan area, where both single monuments and groups of statues seem to have been associated mainly with hill or ridgetop cemeteries.

To the north, the much better studied Aguas Buenas phase of Greater Chiriquí has but one major site in terms of sculptures. This is Barriles, in northern Panama, where a series of deep shaft and chamber tombs was found. These contained giant *metates* with anthropomorphic supports; large stone statues were associated with the tombs in some manner (Stirling 1950). Other, contemporary, sites, such as Piedra Pintada near San Vito, are where the highly publicized stone balls, stone barrels and petroglyphs were found. These sites did not contain figurative statuary and may form a secondary tier in the local hierarchy (Haberland 1968: 8–13).

Las Mercedes, in Costa Rica, seems to have been a unique complex site in a region of dense occupation where the other sites had many fewer or no sculptural monuments (Hartman 1901; Snarskis 1984). To the northwest, in Nicaragua, tiny Zapatera Island has two sites with elaborate mound construction and quantities of sculptures, plus an adjoining islet covered with petroglyphs and urn burials. Nearby Ometepe Island is similar. Related sites on the mainland, such as Nacascoco or the Momotombo and Mombacho sites, are reported to have contained one or two statues at the most, as did some otherwise unknown sites on the Isletas de Granada (Squier 1851; Bovallius 1886; Thieck 1971; Zelaya Hidalgo et al. 1974; Bruhns n.d.a.; Haberland, personal communication, 1987). This suggests either that there was one very important site in an area, head and shoulders above the others in terms of access to labor and general wealth, or, equally, that these were specialized sites, whose effusion of artwork was supported by others for some, as yet, unknown reason. Given the lack of reliable archaeological data for these sites, it is not currently possible to say which interpretation is correct, if neither is, or if both are.

⁶ The identification of humans as offerings in San Agustín is based upon representations of small human figures, wearing ordinary adult garments and ornaments, being presented by much larger supernatural figures in the same manner as both humans and supernaturals present other types of offerings or ritual paraphernalia. Humans seldom present other humans.



Bruhns

Fig. 12 "Master-slave" figure. The conical hat may be an insignia of special status. The upper figure wears a pendant in the form of a human. Drawing courtesy of Tom Weller.

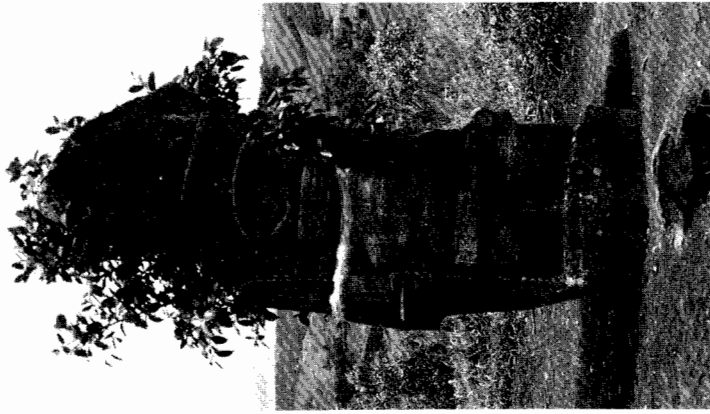


Fig. 13 "Master-slave" statue from Alto de Lavapatas, San Agustín, Colombia. The lower figure wears a mask depicting a supernatural being and carries a staff of the kind used in dances. The upper figure is wearing an animal mask, perhaps a peccary or a tapir. Photograph by K. Bruhns.

PROBLEMS OF ETHNOGRAPHIC OR HISTORIC ANALOGY

Apart from these few (and very approximate) site hierarchies, if hierarchies they are, the other main source of information on social and economic ranking comes from the subjects and details of the statues themselves. One of the most often-cited evidences of hierarchy in Intermediate Area societies is the existence of a motif referred to as the "master-slave"—one figure carrying another on its shoulders (Figs. 12, 13).

There can be no doubt that these figures show a physical hierarchy, although it is possibly a quite ephemeral one. Given the apparent verisimilitude 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 Barriles, 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 *metates* (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 Simón, who describes a *cacica* of Fencenu, in northern Colombia, as never putting her feet on the naked ground, always walking on the backs of her ladies in waiting (1935, 5: 117). This interpretation is also probably influenced by ideas of *mana* and *tabu* drawn from Polynesian ethnography (Haberland, personal communication, 1987). 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 Muisca 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 Payson Sheets has suggested (personal communication, 1987), a metaphor of hierarchical social organization.

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

One of the Barriles "masters" is displaying a shell or lime container and a trophy head. Trophy heads are seen in other sculptures of Barriles, as well as at San Agustín (and in many 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 ceremoniously 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-slave 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 interpretive 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 ornaments, 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

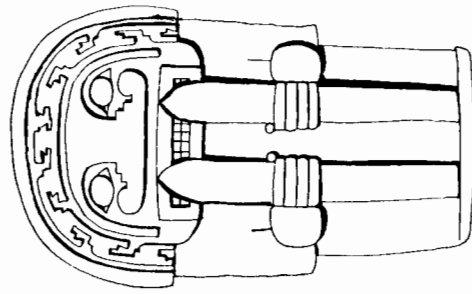


Fig. 14 Supernatural figure with dancing tubes and a stylized nose ornament. The use of large, hollow staves, which are pounded on the ground to make a noise while dancing, survives among a number of lowland Colombian tribes. The very flat mode of representation is related to the function of the piece: it was a sarcophagus lid. Mesita C., San Agustín, Colombia. Drawing courtesy of Tom Weller.

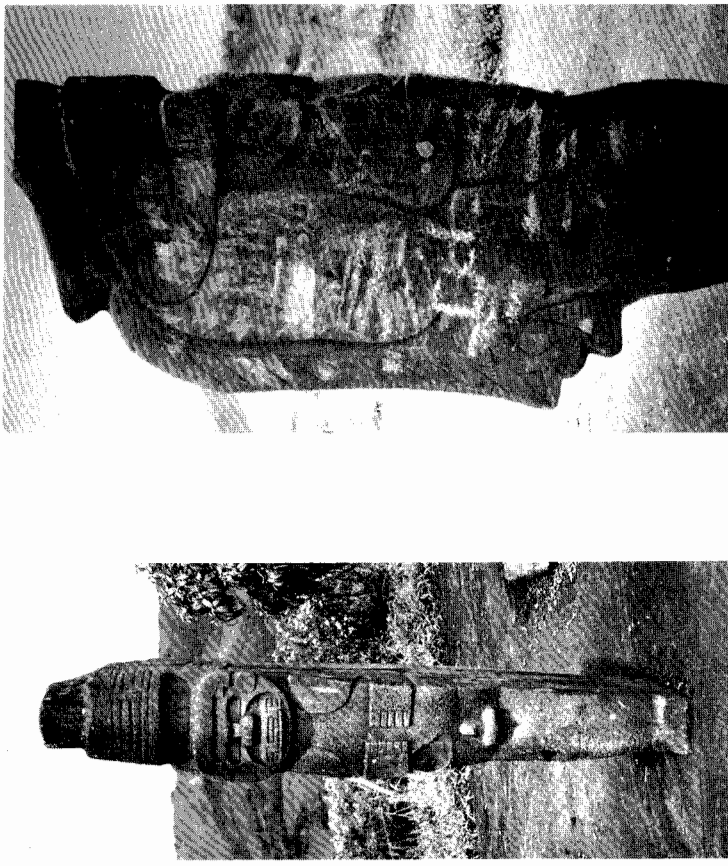
America. The closest analogues of most items worn or carried by Intermediate Area statues are to be found among the indigenous peoples of the Amazonian lowlands (with the possible exception of some of the Mexican-influenced headdresses worn by Zapatera style figures).

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 sculptured 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) Tierradentro styles, and there are even fewer from the Popayan 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 must have existed. Site destruction, destruction of statues as "idols" by enthusiastic missionaries or their converts, theft, private collectors, uncatalogued local and national repositories, and grossly inadequate publication 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 tumuli; in all these places new sculptures are appearing with each new onslaught of



Figs. 15 and 16 Two views of a supernatural male with an alter-ego in the form of a double-headed Moon Animal. The Moon Animal originated with the Recuay culture of the Callejón de Huaylas, Peru, although it spread to coastal cultures within the first half of the first millennium A.D. Photographs by K. Bruhns.

excavation or looting. Much of the cordilleras of Colombia remain archaeologically unexplored, as do entire regions of Central America.⁷ 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

⁷ New statues continue to appear. Several badly broken sculptures have recently appeared in Managua during the construction and repair of roadways. Escalating looting of ancient sites and their destruction through agricultural and construction activities throughout the Intermediate Area is resulting in new pieces of sculpture being discovered. Unfortunately, most of these pieces also have very poor contexts and do not help resolve problems of in-site placement or cultural affiliation.



Fig. 17 Male figure with a tassel and feline skin headdress. He wears a lime flask in the Quimbaya style suspended from his neck. The careful delineation of the features of this figure suggests that it may be a portrait. South barrow, Mesita B, San Agustín, Colombia. Photograph by K. Bruhns.

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, favorite 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 ethnohistoric 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 1989).

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 Inca 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

drinking vessels, ceramic imitations of calabashes, and gold imitations of the ceramic calabashes (Bruhns 1976); the same is true of *poporos*, 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 signifier (Espinosa 1873: 24–25; Plazas and Falchetti de Sacnz 1981: 72–84). 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 “moon animal” (a crested, dragonlike figure with feline/reptilian/raptorial bird characteristics) into their headdresses (Figs. 15, 16; Bruhns 1982b). Another figure, from Las Mesitas, is shown wearing a Quimbaya style metal *poporo* suspended from his necklace (Fig. 17). The archaeological Quimbaya culture is found some 300 km northwest of San Agustín. The Barriles 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 huge serpents or other animal figures form framing helmets in a manner reminiscent of Late Classic and Post-Classic Mesoamerican fashions (Figs. 18, 19). The Zapatera figures also show Post-Classic Central Mexican (“Toltec”) 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

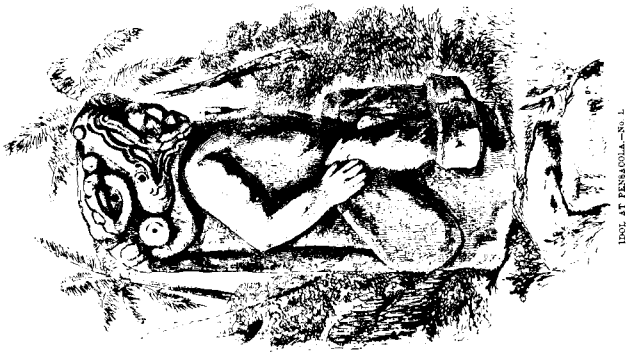


Fig. 18 Seated or squatting male figure wearing a Mesoamerican-derived serpent headdress. Pensacola Island, Nicaragua (after Squier 1851: 451).

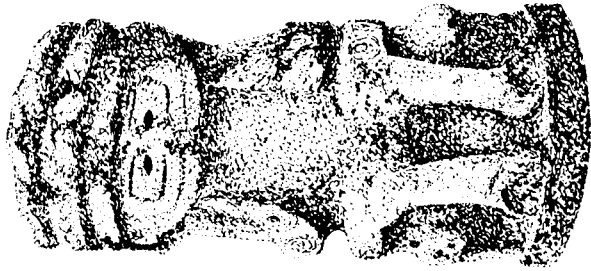


Fig. 19 Seated or squatting human figure wearing a mask. The figure has elaborate painting or tattoos on its arms and legs. El Naranjito, San Pedro de Lovago, Nicaragua. Drawing courtesy of Tom Weller.

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 “mummified” figures are replaced with masks of the Mexican rain deity Tlaloc or with Mictlantecuhli style death masks (Thieck 1971: 162, nos. 108, 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 (Bruhns 1980; Paul Amaroli, personal communication, 1987). Another Nicaraguan figure has a carving of Ehecatl, the Mexican wind god, on its abdomen (Zelaya Hidalgo et al. 1974: 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.

Many sculptures, especially those from the Chontales region, indicate extensive body painting or tattooing. The chance preservation of two painted sculptures from El Purutal at San Agustín shows that such ornamentation may have been in a perishable medium (Cubillos Chaparro 1986). Elaborate body decoration is often associated with exalted status, although equally there is an association with specific ceremonial or ritual positions/activities (Brain 1979). 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 Rican cultures (but also found in Panama at Barriles 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

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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Fig. 20 Human figure with individualistically rendered features, perhaps a portrait. Moscoapan region, Colombia. Photograph courtesy of Vanderhoek and Ruprecht, Göttingen.



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

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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 auriferous alloys.

The rise of mercantilism and the quest for gold made early Spanish explorers, conquistadors, 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 Darien, Panama, the admiral and his crew saw and traded with natives who wore gold "mirrors" around their necks. They also discovered a trade network that moved gold and other elite items along the Panamanian coast for 50 leagues from Chiriqui Lagoon to Cubiga (Colón 1959: 243). In Veragua, the Europeans bartered for gold pieces and raw gold; there they learned that "the gold came from far-off rugged mountains" (Colón 1959: 250). In early 1503 they marched inland from Veragua and raided an interior gold mine (Colón 1959: 252; cf. Martyr D'Anghera 1912: dec. 3, bk. 4: 326, 329).

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