Mesoamerican Sculpture: Three-Dimensional Documentation to Dissemination

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Abstract

The use of close-range, three-dimensional laser scanning for the documentation of ancient Mesoamerican sculpted artifacts (e.g., stone, ceramic, stucco, wood) provides significant advantages in issues of conservation, research, analysis, and dissemination. A series of case studies will illustrate how scan data have been used as a core element in the development of expandable, research databases that offer substantial benefits and advancements to archaeological investigations. Results from this approach have substantially expanded opportunities for international study and collaborative research initiatives. Innovative analytical techniques for the examination and interpretation of Mesoamerican sculpture, the development of research and educational resources, the recording of metadata, and methods of electronic dissemination are discussed.

The results from projects in the United States, Mexico, and Guatemala will show how researchers have access to data sets that allow for comparative and metrological analyses of size, shape, features, and surface detail of Mesoamerican carved artifacts. Examples include the use of close-range scanning technology as a foundational referent that improve, enhance, and increase the extraction of the detail and information carved and encoded on Mesoamerican sculpture. These objects can be analyzed, visualized, measured, and evaluated more effectively and precisely than if the researcher were in the field or had the physical object in their presence. Perhaps the most exciting capability of 3-D scanning of Mesoamerican sculpture is its ability to capture data that can be used to rescue or resurrect carved details on damaged or degraded monuments that have not been previously discernable.

In addition to other advantages produced by this laser scanning technique, it is possible to disseminate these data resources to an international audience of researchers, educators, students, and interested parties via web-based platforms. This type of presentation offers exceptional opportunities for the development of specialized techniques and improved methods for epigraphic and iconographic analysis and interpretation. Along with these benefits, however, come a variety of disparate issues that must be addressed. Foremost are the rights and privileges of the owners or stakeholders of the artifacts that have to be recognized and protected. Potential problems that could arise from the dissemination of the data must be identified and safeguards put in place to prevent their improper use.

Key words: 3-D laser scanning, Mesoamerica, stone sculpture

1 Introduction

Sculpted artifacts and monuments from Mesoamerica contain graphic images and contextual information that illustrate socioeconomic, political, and ideological practices and beliefs of the ancient people who produced them. Further, these carved objects present a developmental continuum of intra-regional and inter-regional iconography and epigraphy. By implementing the “best available technologies” for the data capture, processing, and presentation, a more detailed and comprehensive analysis of the objects and their illustrative content becomes achievable. We will demonstrate how the combination of three-dimensional documentation through the use of close-range laser scanning and the dissemination through a web-based portal can directly lead to better understanding and interpretation the information encoded on these
This paper will primarily focus on Mesoamerican sculpted stone monuments, however, we have conducted similar work on ceramic vessels and objects of carved bone, shell, wood, and stucco with equal success.

2 The Significance of Mesoamerican Sculpture

The emergence of complex societies across Mesoamerica during the Formative period (c. 1800 BC to AD 150) and their subsequent evolution throughout the Classic and Postclassic periods (c. AD 150 to 1519) have intrigued researchers and the general public for centuries


The carved stone monuments from Mesoamerica contain narrative scenes, a sequence of vignettes that portray the fundamental principles of power, rulership, and ideology. Guernsey considers these types of monuments to be “more than a reflection of the dramatic changes” that took place across Mesoamerica, but are instead, one of the “forces directly responsible for motivating and structuring” the significant social, political, and economic events that shaped the social trajectories within this culture area.

To arrive at an understanding of these cultural developments, all lines of archaeological data and inquiry are necessary. Nevertheless, one of the best ways of understanding the motivations of these ancient peoples is through the study of the allegorical and expository content embedded on their carved monuments. In addition to the content, the differing styles and forms illustrate the continuity, modification, and deviation in the portrayal of ancient lifeways that occurred across considerable space and time. The political and cosmological messages incorporated in these monuments could cross multiple ethnic and civic boundaries or be used to demarcate those same borders.

Prehispanic societies from practically every region throughout Mesoamerica produced prodigious quantities of monumental sculpture. The Olmec of the Southern Gulf Coast Lowlands created some of the earliest and most massive monuments that demonstrate “remarkable naturalism of the three-dimensional figures”. The tradition of monolithic stone sculpture spread across Mesoamerica: along the Soconusco Coast at places like Izapa, Tonala, and Takalik Abaj, to Kaminaljuyu in the Guatemala Highlands and Chalchuapa in western El Salvador. Ancient monumental sculpture appears in Puebla, Oaxaca, Guerrero, Morelos, the Valley of Mexico, Tabasco, Veracruz, Chiapas, the Huasteca Region, across the Yucatan Peninsula, and Jalisco, Michoacan, Colima, and Nayarit in West Mexico. Stone carvings are present throughout Guatemala, Belize, and Honduras. These monuments are artistic
representations of the sociopolitical canons of the cultures that arose during the pre-Columbian era.

Across this span of nearly 3,000 years, social complexity emerged, ritual and rulership became the focal point of many cultures, and monumental stone sculpture evolved into the preferred physical manifestation of political power by the elite. Unlike handheld, portable objects or elite grave goods these stone markers were intended to be public confirmation of rulership and authority that would remain visible and accessible for extended periods of time. Through iconographic and epigraphic representations, the sculpted scenes could be used to demonstrate a leader’s right to rule through affirmation of their connection to ancestors or deities. Victories in battle and the taking of captives were memorialized, as on Piedras Negras Stela 12, and elite rituals were depicted as on Yaxchilán Lintel 24. Deities and supernaturals were portrayed on façades at Teotihuacán, Tula, El Tajín, and on the Yucatan’s Chenes and Puuc structures. At places like Loltún, Pijijiapan, and Xoc, narrative scenes were carved into the face of natural rock.

The interpretive and analytical value of the corpus of Mesoamerican stone carving is invaluable to researchers. It presents a continuum that contained conspicuous and nuanced elements of style and form. Since the Formative period, there existed “a dynamic, multiethnic interaction sphere that included not only the dissemination of tangible goods, but the communication of symbolic ideas as well.” Many of the changes that occurred in the evolving political and economic landscape of Mesoamerica were expressed and preserved in an active sculptural record. Visual vocabularies emanated from these monuments, images carved in stone that exemplified the diversity and transmutation in the form and display of power and authority. For example, in the Formative period, “Olmec sculptures are usually three-dimensional, to be seen from all sides, not just from the front.” During the Classic period, bas relief carving and decorative architectural sculpture predominated. Sculpture in the round reappeared during the Postclassic period in areas of the Yucatan Peninsula, in Toltec and Aztec Central Mexico, as well as among the Tarascans of Michoacan and Huastecs of the northwest Gulf Coast.

2 Threats to Mesoamerican Monumental Sculpture

The permanency of archaeological artifacts, monuments, features, sites, and even landscapes is variable over time. Today, the application of best available technologies to the recordation of carved monuments and inscriptions in Mesoamerica takes on a more urgent priority due to their loss and damage through natural and human-induced processes that are occurring at unprecedented rates. Natural processes, such as erosion, acid rain,

pollution, and root intrusion can imperil the archaeological record. Natural hazards including hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, and landslides have impacted ancient and modern Mesoamerica 20-24. Recently, exuberant plant and vine growth that has relentlessly enveloped archaeological sites and monuments in tropical environments has increased substantially 25, 26 (Figure 1). Videla 27:335 demonstrates that many Mesoamerican monuments are “suffering deterioration caused by environmental factors…and by the action of micro- and macro-biological communities.” These latter factors are subsumed under the term biodeterioration, which is defined as any undesirable or detrimental alteration in the properties of a material caused by the vital activities of organisms 28, 29.

Figure 1. Example of natural destruction of carved stone stela at the site of Calakmul, Campeche, Mexico

Anthropogenic factors, such as wanton mutilation, vandalism, graffiti, and looting, also have had grievous impacts on the information available to the researcher 18, 30-32 (Figure 2). All of these processes, individually or in combination, have decreased the visibility and availability of objects and sites, or made them difficult, if not impossible, to adequately document for research, analysis, conservation, and preservation. These types of endangerment can impact all archaeological material, whether they have been recently uncovered or long curated. Moreover, significant contemporary population growth, expansion of economic development, and associated construction of roads and housing throughout

Mesoamerica is having a deleterious effect on the archaeological record\textsuperscript{33}. Scholars have also pointed out a lack of relevant comparative examples or adequate documentation of Mesoamerican artifacts hinders research and analysis. Poor illustrations, inadequate descriptions, and biased samples have prevented a holistic and in-depth analysis of the sculpted evidence\textsuperscript{34}. Michael Coe\textsuperscript{35} decried the omissions, insufficient photography, and the subjective recording of the sculpture. Graham\textsuperscript{36} related that “the frequent problems of poor photographs at unsatisfactory angles, inappropriate or inadequate lighting, failure to clean monuments to reveal detail...[in]attention to the formal properties of the sculpture...result in misconceptions, and hinders or even precludes serious study.” Of the objects that are published, most are those that are considered of the fine quality, a factor that eliminates the majority of sculptures from consideration\textsuperscript{37}. The widespread distribution of artifacts to museums and collections around the world led Michael Smith\textsuperscript{37} to state that, “We need to be able to use museum collections for research without visiting all of the collections in person.”

In addition to the losses, damage, and limitations described above, multiple levels of subjectivity in the recording process also cause difficulty and restrain the analytical process. It is, therefore, imperative that sculpted objects, as well as other Mesoamerican artifacts and features, be documented as completely as possible using the best available technology at our disposal. Attempts are necessary to document the as much of the archaeological record as possible, whether the objects are in museum collections, storage facilities, in situ, or in the field. The best case scenario, for present and future archaeological excavations or investigations, is to record objects as they are uncovered and add them to an expanding corpus of material. The images and descriptions of these objects should then be made as accessible and broadly disseminated as possible.

3 Improving Documentation and Analysis of Mesoamerican Sculpture

In a report to the Getty Conservation Institute regarding stone monuments, Clifford Price\textsuperscript{38} stressed the importance of recording and

documenting stone sculpture. He stated, “If we cannot preserve stone forever, it is imperative that we make the best possible record of it. Indeed, one could argue that recording should have a higher priority than preserving the stone itself.” He adds that conventional methods still have a place in recording, but attention is turning increasingly to techniques of three-dimensional recording.

High Definition Digital Documentation (H3D) is an approach to archaeological research that involves a suite of exceedingly accurate three-dimensional and high-resolution spatial data collection and processing techniques. These proven procedures provide capabilities for in-depth comprehensive documentation, research, and analysis in ways that have not been possible earlier. At the center of H3D is three-dimensional laser scanning, an advanced spatial data acquisition technology that significantly improves, facilitates, and increases the extraction of detail and information that is carved and encoded on Mesoamerican stone sculpture. Typically, high definition scanning is considered the systematic and automated collection of three-dimensional data of a particular surface or object at a relatively high rate and in near real time (Boehler 44). Boehler provides a technical description of various scanning processes. The type of laser scanning conducted in our projects does not require physical contact with the objects, and is a non-invasive, non-destructive process that, in our experience, has offered optimal results. The minute detail observable in the spatially exact data, in many instances, is superior to stereophotography and photogrammetry methods that only convey an illusion of depth and only from a single viewpoint. Holography is visually striking, but does not supply a quantitative record. Traditional techniques of molding and casting are not practical on the fragile, damaged, or deteriorated surfaces that are common on Mesoamerican stone sculpture. Scanning data collection is rapid, taking minutes or hours compared to other methods that could take days or weeks to complete.

Beyond the spatial problems of parallax distortion and limited perspectives, traditional techniques of recording include various levels of subjectivity that, intentionally or unintentionally, lead to incomplete or erroneous interpretation. The subjective biases, inherent in conventional methods of documentation, are introduced by the recorder’s decision as to what is important and what is to be captured. Outstanding elements may be recorded at the expense of others that the individual instinctively deems unimportant but, in reality, may be vital to the interpretation of the artifact or message. Further interpretive problems arise when a single or limited view is presented, a common limitation of current two-dimensional images. Laser scan data allows the entire visible surface of the piece to be observed three-dimensionally, the way the sculpture was originally intended to be viewed.


The use of three-dimensional scanning on Mesoamerican sculpture is based on its numerous advantages over other recording techniques, and its ability to produce and visualize details on carved stone monuments to a degree of precision and clarity that have not been possible previously. This ability to literally “see” the narrative scenes more clearly and in greater detail will allow its analysis and interpretation to move to a higher level as well. In sum, most sculpture has not been sufficiently documented to permit critical comparative morphologic, iconographic, or epigraphic analyses. Three-dimensional scanning substantially lessens, if not eliminates, most of the difficulties and limitations including much of the subjective nature inherent in other methods of documentation. Thus, laser scanning is currently the most appropriate technological method for the majority of applications, which, besides thorough comparative analyses, includes archiving, restoration, reconstruction, replication, and monitoring for damage and deterioration.

Minimally, the technology provides the finest archival documentation possible for museum or collection registration, heritage preservation planning and management, public presentations, and educational applications. The benefits to long-term research and analysis, however, are exceptional. Perhaps the most exciting capability of three-dimensional scanning is its ability to capture data that can be used to rescue or resurrect sculpted details that, through wear, erosion, or other causes, have not previously been known or discernable. Additionally, the life history of use, re-use, and recycling of the stone can be deduced from the data. New perspectives and considerations of the sculpture are provided by the ability to electronically manipulate, visualize, and measure the object. Evidence of tool marks, wear, grooving, etching, and abrading that, heretofore, may not have been visible to researchers can be analyzed and enhanced through the electronic cross-sectioning of the piece.

4 An Expandable Electronic Archive: Web-Based Dissemination

In 2006, the University of South Florida’s Alliance for Integrated Spatial Technologies (AIST) and the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI) began a collaborative effort entitled the Mesoamerican Three-Dimensional Imaging Database. The result is a freely accessible resource data base <http://research.famsi.org/3D_imaging/index.php> that is hosted on the FAMSI web site. The database is an ongoing developmental effort to make high definition, three-dimensional laser scans of Mesoamerican objects viewable to researchers online.

The electronic archive was designed to address a number of deficiencies and limitations in data previously available for iconographic, epigraphic, and other comparative research and analysis. Previously, many Mesoamerican sculptures have not been adequately documented or organized in a comprehensive manner. These artifacts are dispersed in museums and collections around the world, a factor that makes access to them difficult. There have been instances where pieces have been misplaced or misidentified. Frequently, when traditional methods of recording have been made, the images, scale, and detail are not adequate for the type of comprehensive study required. The recording and images of sculpted monuments has been, at best, irregular and it remains incomplete today.

The data base is intended to accommodate continued use and development and is designed to be a living document. Ongoing and future recordation of other Mesoamerican artifacts, features, architecture, sites, and landscapes are being conducted by the authors, and will be made available to the research community. We would like to encourage other researchers using these and other forms of documentation and visualization in


46. Lori D. Collins, Travis F. Doering, and Chris Branas, High Definition Documentation Survey (Hdds) of the Yulee Sugar Mill, Citrus County, Florida’, (Technical project report submitted to the Florida Park Service, Department of Environmental Protection, Tallahassee, FL, 2006). their
work to contact us about adding to and improving the web portal. To date, this archive contains more than 80 documented monuments, and is part of the FAMSI web portal that receives more than 746,108 hits per month.

5 Research and Analytical Capabilities

Archaeological research and analysis are substantially enhanced and facilitated by the use of scan data sets, and in-depth, comprehensive examinations of the stone and its sculpture can be conducted in a virtual computer environment. Our work has demonstrated that the 3-D data acquired through scanning allows objects to be analyzed, visualized, measured, and evaluated more effectively and precisely than if the researcher were in the field or had the physical object in their presence (Figure 3). The objects can be virtually rotated 360° and viewed in true three-dimensions. The angle of the light source can be maneuvered across the laser images to better observe and accentuate any portion of the object, sub-millimeter measurements can be made of any segment of the piece directly on the computer screen, and numerous visualization techniques can be used to enhance and clarify details. Also, we have developed methods of cross-sectional and profile analysis and Surface Elevation Modeling techniques expressly for investigation of carved stone monuments 40 (Figure 4).

One of the most remarkable and appealing capabilities of 3-D scanning to researchers, however, is its ability to capture data that can be used to rescue or resurrect details of damaged monuments that have not been previously legible or discernible 40. We have developed 3-D data acquisition and post-processing techniques that significantly improve and facilitate the ability to visualize and analyze Mesoamerican sculpture 40, 41, 45, 47. These ongoing efforts provide archaeologists,

epigraphers, iconographers, and other researchers an increased capacity to recognize and interpret information from the stone monuments.

In addition to the iconographic features, the life history of the stone can frequently be traced through the identification of tool and other marks. Through examination of these clues it is possible that the manufacturing process, transport methods, and re-use and recycling of the stone can be deduced. In this manner, it may be possible to differentiate between specific “ethnic” or “cultural” episodes. The stone monuments can include classification and comparison according to morphology, style, associated context, design attributes, and other features capable of description.

Metadata, or information about how the data was collected and processed, is available for each monument included in the archive. This metadata includes information such as resolution, number of scans taken, native and post-processing software used, and any editing or transformations conducted during the processing of these data. For carved stone monuments of the material types encountered in Mesoamerica, these post-processing procedures have included, noise reduction, hole-smoothing and filling, and color adjustments. The need for these software transformative procedures relates to the surface features of the stone material (basalt and limestones), which can be highly textured or pitted. These conditions require noise reduction applications to allow for visualization of carved surfaces and hole smoothing and filling in areas where, due to the relief of the sculpture, full data acquisition is missing or limited.

Other analytical techniques performed and documented for sculpted pieces include 3D surface comparisons, that allow for sculpted surface to be exaggerated and smoothed and then compared to reveal carved surface detail elements more completely.

6 Closing Remarks

Results from the application of close-range laser scanning to the Mesoamerican sculptural corpus have demonstrated the effectiveness of this technique. In some cases, previously indistinguishable features can now be perceived, and the life history of the stone (e.g., tool marks, abrading, re-use, recycling, and other production piece to be observed as the original artist meant it to be viewed.

The research potential for three-dimensional scan data is immeasurable. It is a tool that offers significant additional interpretative insight into Mesoamerica’s past. Through the various collaborative projects that we have conducted, the analytical power of the scanning technology has been demonstrated repeatedly. For purposes of archival documentation, preservation planning, and management, three-dimensional scanning documentation is an exceptional and multipurpose record. It is only through the broad dissemination of these data sets, however, that the full analytical value of the technology will become a reality. The outcome has to be applied in practice in order that the research can contribute to the understanding and interpretation of the information encoded on the stone sculptures, as well as the care and conservation of the heritage. We believe the methods that have been outlined above will assist researchers to conduct more comprehensive and precise examination of sculpted artifacts and monuments, and our next step is to develop a best practices methodological workflow that will maximize the extraction of that information.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank John Clark, Sandra Noble, Julia Guernsey for their continued support and efforts on our behalf. The open communication and sharing of ideas with Stephen Houston, Federico Fahsen, David Freidel, Mary Pohl, Miguel Orrego Corzo, and Christa Schieber de Lavarréda has significantly improved our work. In Guatemala City, exceptional cooperation and assistance was provided by Claudia Monzón Sosa de Jiménez, Director of the Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología; Oswaldo Chinchilla, Director of the Museo Popol Vuh, Universidad Francisco Marroquin; and Juan Antonio Valdes, Director of the Miraflores Museum. In Villahermosa, Tabasco, Mexico our work was greatly facilitated by the services
of Rebeca Perales Vela, Juan Antonio Ferrer Aguilar, and the staff at the Parque-Museo de La Venta and the Museo Carlos Pellicer. We are also grateful for the cooperation of the Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes and the Dirección General del Patrimonio Cultural y Natural de Guatemala, the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia in Mexico City, and Centro INAH Tabasco. Funding for portions of the documentation projects was provided by the New World Archaeological Foundation of Brigham Young University and a major research grant from the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. We thank these institutions for their support.

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