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A Study of the Carved Boulders of Lake Güija, El Salvador and A Survey of Rock Art in Highland Guatemala

Research Year: 1997

Culture: Maya

Chronology: Classic

Location: Highlands Guatemala and Western El Salvador

Sites: Lago Güija and Iqualtepeque

My project funded by a FAMSI grant in 1997 focused on the study of rock art in the highlands of Guatemala and western El Salvador. The first phase of the project concerned a truly remarkable petroglyph site on Lake Güija in western El Salvador which I, along with two graduate students, attempted to document and map. The petroglyphs occur on volcanic boulders that ring the edge of a peninsula jutting into the lake. The site is exceptional in terms of the quantity and quality of carvings found there. I have catalogued 225 thus far and many are carefully crafted like relief sculptures. The public setting of the rock art and its association with a large surface site, Iqualtepeque, is equally unusual in Mesoamerica. The style of the carvings is distinct and only shows sporadic influence from Mesoamerican art styles found in nearby regions. The iconography emphasizes birds, serpents, deer, fish, and other fauna, as well as schematic human figures, frontal faces, and other nonfigurative forms, particularly meanders and circles. The schematic style and emphasis on birds suggests connections to lower Central America, even as far south as Costa Rica. It is possible that the rock art site, though located close to areas occupied by ethnic Maya, such as the Chortí, is a product of a distinct ethnic group with cultural affiliations to lower Central America. I currently have a fellowship at Dumbarton Oaks to write a monograph on this intriguing but problematical material.

The second phase of the project entailed a survey of rock art sites in highland Guatemala, carried out with Guatemalan archaeologist, Sergio Ericastilla. Over a period of two weeks, we attempted to relocate a series of poorly reported rock art sites. Our treks into the eastern highlands centered on the departments of Jalapa, Jutiapa, and Santa Rosa. In Jutiapa we found three unreported rock art sites: one with seven positive handprints, one with two negative handprints associated with an obsidian workshop, and a small cave with a red painting of a deer. In Jalapa we visited a Late Classic painting site with a figure of God N found in a rock shelter at Balneario Los Chorros, previously published by the French archaeologist Alain Ichon. We also visited an important Postclassic painting site at Lake Ayarza, Santa Rosa which had been published in 1936 by Edith Ricketson. In the western highlands of Guatemala, we

visited rock art sites in the departments of Quetzaltenango, San Marcos, Sacatepéquez, and Sololá. One of the most remarkable is El Manantial, Quetzaltenango which consists of an large boulder carved with skulls, faces, snakes, and spirals, partly submerged in a river. The Guatemalan rock art survey revealed a number of new sites, many associated with water, that are largely of an idiosyncratic, local nature. The results of this survey have already been written up and will be published next summer in the proceedings of the annual archaeology symposium held last summer in Guatemala City.

Submitted 10/01/1998 by:

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