

THE TAKALIK ABAJ MONUMENTAL STONE SCULPTURE PROJECT: HIGH DEFINITION DIGITAL DOCUMENTATION AND ANALYSIS

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With support from the National Science Foundation (BCS-0911078), Drs. Travis Doering and Lori Collins will organize a team of international researchers to conduct an archaeological project at the site of Takalik Abaj on the Pacific piedmont of Guatemala. Interdisciplinary scholars will include specialists in archaeology, epigraphy, iconography, and art history who will record, document, and analyze this pivotal Preclassic period socioeconomic and political center (c. 900 BC to AD 150). A corpus of carved monuments and architectural features at Takalik Abaj presents an evolutionary record of increasing social complexity, interaction, and ideological practices. The extensive collection of monuments is the most eclectic in all of Mesoamerica, containing examples of Pacific coastal and piedmont styles as well as Southern Gulf Coast Olmec, Izapan, and early Maya styles. This assemblage constitutes the portrayal of a dynamic developmental sequence that began with early symbolic elements; evolved into elite ideological expressions of rulership, power, and authority; and culminated with the appearance of initial glyphic inscriptions and early Long Count dates (c. 235-18 BC) that were foundational to Classic Maya script. Yet, this unique record has not been fully assembled or documented, nor has it been the subject of a coordinated, comprehensive study to determine the specific progression of narrative communication and the internal and external influences exerted in early Mesoamerica.

A suite of high-definition, three-dimensional, digital technologies will be used to record iconographic, epigraphic, and morphologic information contained in the sculptures and architectural features. Earlier work by the project directors has demonstrated how these innovative methods provide analytical information and perspectives that have not previously been attainable in Mesoamerican research. The new insights generated from the acquired data will be combined with earlier, conventional images and commentary regarding Takalik Abaj. The intellectual merit of the research includes compilation, examination, and development of requisite theoretical and substantive information that will allow analysis at multiple scales (e.g., artifact, feature, architectural, and regional). The resultant data will provide the ability to test models of local and long-distance sociopolitical interaction in early Mesoamerica.

The plan of work consists of the: 1) recording of monuments and architectural features at the site using a variety of three-dimensional documentation techniques, 2) iconographic, epigraphic, and morphologic analyses of these data, 3) assembly and interpretation of the analytical findings into an evolutionary sequence of ideological and political presentational narratives, and 4) worldwide dissemination of the project results. Broader impacts also include the use of the developed workflow for the continuation of long-term management and research at the site, while at the same time offering a mechanism for future cross-comparative examination of interregional monuments from this transitional period. The synergistic analytical approach increases international collaboration and contributes significant information regarding a poorly understood but dynamic period in the development of Mesoamerican societies. Guatemalan and U.S. students will participate in all segments of the project enabling them to expand their field training and technical skills, and providing thesis projects for graduate students of both countries to increase their knowledge of Guatemala's prehistory.

2009 *The Takalik Abaj Monumental Stone Sculpture Project: High Definition Digital Documentation and Analysis*. Public abstract and project description, National Science Foundation, Senior Researcher Grant (BCS-0911078), Arlington, Virginia.