Promoting Conservation in the archaeological site of El Purutal, San Agustín WHS, Colombia

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The archaeological site of El Purutal is located in the municipality of San Agustín, Huila department, in the south of Colombia, 1050m over sea level.

The region is surrounded by several important remains from the Upper Mompoxa culture (6th century BC to 9th century AD) like the archeological Park of San Agustín (MHS) and the site of Los Idolos (WHS), La Chiquita and El Tablon that showed numerous sculptures, burial mounds and tombs.

Results and observations from the conservation treatment:

The removal of the contemporary colors in the two sculptures was satisfactory and reached a good balance of cleaning and preserving the original polychromy. However, in some small areas where the decay process had advanced, the original paint layer was damaged and the contemporary retouching could not be removed. Therefore, some of the newly added paint in some specific areas was left.

The removal of the yellow was easy, a mix of alcohol and distilled water was applied with cotton swabs obtaining good results. On the contrary in areas covered with brown and red the removal process was more demanding, especially on top of fragile surfaces in bad state of conservation.

For removing the brown color a mixture of acetone, alcohol and distilled water had to be used and in several areas it was necessary to insist with a plastic brush.

The newly added paint was oil-based, then organic solvents like ethylacetate and dimethylformamide had to be used. This paint had adhered well to all surfaces including the surfaces were the original color was missing, then the removing was laborious. In the areas where the red color was applied directly on top of the stone, the fiber glass pencil was carefully used for removing the oil based paint layer.

Once the removal was finished a siliconic spouge (Witch-AB) was used giving a last cleaning to the recovered original polychromy.

Conclusions and recommendations for further study:

The conservation process carried out in 2011 showed that the sculptures in recent years have suffered several episodes of vandalism which is a significant factor of deterioration that has influenced the sculptures.

Considering that the vandalism is one of the main causes of the conservation of El Purutal sculptures, it is essential that all stakeholders get involved and apply appropriate measures to resolve the problem of the site.

It is important that the responsible governmental institutions and conservators make periodic visits to carry out monitoring and work with the community to raise awareness of the importance of protecting archaeological heritage.

The educational approach under which this conservation project was developed included the involvement of schools during site visits, contributing not only to the recognition of the values of this important archaeological site, but also raising awareness of deterioration and conservation issues, for the long term protection of the sculptures.