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

Associate researcher of ICANH (Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia) www.proyectopatrimonio.org





The archaeological site of El Purutal is located in the municipality of San Agustin, Huila department, in the south of Colombia, 1800m over

The region is surrounded by several important remains from the Upper Magdalena culture (9 century BC to 9 century AD) like the archaeological Parks of San Agustin (WHS) and Alto de los Idolos (WHS), La Chaquira and El Tablon that shows numerous sculptures, burial mounds and tombs.













allow the elimination of paint layers in a selective way.

false documents of the past

Methodology and procedure





Once the newly added paint layers were removed, the degradation of the sculptures polychromy became evident1. The black spots on the nose of the sculpture 161 have increased; probably because people often wet

In the sculpture 162 new spots have appeared on the left side of the face, the neck and the torso. Some of these

spots are foreign material applied by visitors on the polychrome surface. Others have a natural appearance

(resinous), or were caused by the migration of minerals on top of the surface. In order to determine the exact

According to radiocarbon data, the sculptures from El Purutal were carved, painted and buried in the 6th century. Their

polychromy was well preserved covered by the earth until 1984 when a peasant discovered the sculpture 162. At that

time, an archaeological survey was leaded by Julio Cesar Cubilios and the site that has one tomb, two sculptures and their dolmens was reconstructed. Since then, protected by a shelter and with a poor system of surveillance the site has

In the beginning of 2011, someone covered the polychromy of the sixth century sculptures with contemporary paints (oil

based paint and viryl). Instead of showing their age, these sculptures looked renewed and had the appearance of being

Alarmed by the damage caused on these important sculptures, the Colombian Archeological and Historical Institute de-

cided to hire conservators Maria Paula Alvarez and her collaborators Isabel Cristina Quintero and Camilo Betancur

during Holly Week of 2011 (the peak of the tourism season) to conserve the sculptures. The conservation activities included removing the newly added paint layers and recovering the original polychrome of the sculptures from El Purutal.

become one of the most visited in the archaeological area of San Agustin.

The treatment began with a photographic record of the sculptures and solvent testing. There are conservation procedures that allow for removing layers of varnishes or paintings and preserve underlying layers and original polychromy. These procedures involve the use of organic solvents which are volatile substances that do not leave residues and



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 polycromy. However, in some small areas where the stone presented decohesion and the original paint layer was damaged 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 destilated water was applied with cotton swab 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 destilated water has to be used and in several areas

it was necessary to insist with a plastic brush. The red newly added paint was oil-based, then organic solvents like ethylacetate and dimethylformamide has to be used. This paint had adhered well to all surfaces including the surfaces were the original color is 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 spounge (WishAB) was used giving a last cleaning to the recovered original







During the excavation of the sculpture 161 in 1984 the head was separated from the body but both parts were exhibited together until 2005 when someone tried to lift the head. The ICANH alarmed hired a group of conservators leaded by Maria Paula Alvarez that adhered the 2 parts with resins. They used a mortar with similar character istics of the stone for filling the empty spaces.



The inability to fully remove these contemporary paints and the fact that the sculptures were repainted prove the threat to the preservation of these sculptures and the need to reduce vandalism through community involvement During the onsite work, the conservators patiently explained the procedures carried out on the sculptures in simple terms to visitors, guides, tourist services providers, park officials, and inhabitants of the region so they would better understand the threat to their preservation. Once the conservation process was finished, several conferences for present-

The community response was very positive. People expressed both admiration and curiosity to learn about the characteristics of the original materials, the results of previous studies, and the details of the conservation process that allowed the recovery of original paint layer. They also showed interest in the discipline of archaeological conservation in Colombia and understood the importance of being involved in the task of preserving cultural heritage.

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 irreversible conse-

Considering that the vandalism is one of the main causes of the deterioration of El Purutal sculptures, it is essential that all stakeholders get involved and apply appropriate measures to achieve the protection

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

The educational approach under which this conservation project was developed that included the involvement of visitors during on site works, contribute not only to the recognition of the values of this important archaeological site, but also raised awareness on deterioration and conservation issues, for the long-term protection of the sculptures.



nature of the spots described above it is necessary to carry out laboratory tests.

the surface of the sculpture to appreciate the original colors.



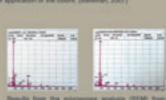
















ing it were given in San Agustin municipality.

Numer Maria Paula 2000. Proyecto pera la comercación de los exculturas del Purulat, Ean Aguatin, Multa Fundación de Investigacio

Balancer, Catalina Printinse Funeration Sthraugh y color on its monuments dal our dal Alta Magdalana. Tools de Masotria, Universidad de los Andres 2007

Cubifox, Ario César 1967, Arquestigle de San Aquelin, El Punulal, Bogold, Fundación de Investigaciones Arquestigicas, Banco de la