

A Carving Sequence for Stela 1, Copan, Honduras

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Background

Copán Stela 1 (one) stands on the bottom step of the west side of Structure 9, set back into a niche in the three lower steps of the structure. The east side of Structure 9 is the west side of the ball court at Copán, and the entire complex is located between the Middle Plaza and the Court of the Hieroglyphic Stairway. Morley concluded that Stela 1, with an Initial Series date of 9.11.15.14.0 (May 3, 668 A.D.), was the earliest *in situ* monument in the plaza (Morley 1920:163). Today we know not only more about the early activities in the main city center (“Principal Group”) of Copán, but we know specifics about the ruler who erected Stela 1 (Fash 1991). Known as Smoke Imix God K (or Smoke Jaguar), the figure depicted on Stela 1 was the 12th ruler of Copán. Six stelae (2, 3, 10, 12, 13, 19) were erected by Smoke Imix God K in the Copán Valley and in the Principal Group in the Period Ending 9.11.0.0.0 (Fash 1991:101-104). During the remainder of his reign he also erected Stelae 1, 5, 6, and I, and Altars H’, I’, and K in the Principal Group (Ibid:104). Fash believes that future excavation in the Acropolis area of the site will reveal buildings dating to the reign of this prolific Copán ruler who is said to have been in power for 67 years, from 9.9.14.17.5 (February 8, 628 A.D.) to 9.13.3.5.7 (June 18, 695 A.D.) (Ibid:104, 112 and 80).

Excavation under Stela 1 by the Fourth Peabody Museum Expedition in 1895 revealed that a small cross-shaped chamber had been constructed beneath it. The chamber is similar to those also found under stelae 7, I, M and C, which belong to rulers both earlier and later

than Smoke Imix God K. Inside the chamber under Stela 1 were “five rude earthenware vessels, fragments of stalactites, shells of the *Spondylus calcifer*, a large jadeite bead, and a quantity of cinnabar” (Gordon 1896:37). Similar items were found in the other chambers as well.

In the summer of 1992 I noticed that the two profile sides of Stela 1 were quite different. On the top half of the south side of Stela 1 a complete profile of the figure is carved, showing the side of the turban headdress, a profile of the earflare, the shoulder draped with a feathered cape, and a segment of the upper arm. In the same upper area on the north side of Stela 1 is a plain, flat, prepared but undecorated area. (Compare figs. 1 through 4.) An analysis of this undecorated section, and a comparison between the two profiles, allows me to offer some proposals regarding the process of sculpting for this particular stela.

Description of Stela 1

The east side of Stela 1 is entirely glyphic. On the north and south sides there are long vertical glyph columns adjacent to the east side, and profiles of the figure next to the front or west side. The west side is figural. I must rely on Morley’s measurements for the dimensions of the piece, as I did not have permission to approach Stela 1 as closely as would have been required to check Morley’s numbers. Morley reported that the stela is “2.75 meters long, 92 cm. wide and 76 cm. thick” (Morley 1920:162). Stela 1 was broken into two pieces, the top half laying on the ground when Morley saw it, just as it was when Maudslay photographed it in the 1880s



Fig. 1. Stela 1, CPN, Honduras, North side.

(fig. 5). The Peabody Expedition repaired the monument, leaving it in its current state and position.

The figure on the west side of the monument wears a turban-like headdress, and is shown in approximately half-round. The bottom half of the figure, below the waist, is badly damaged, so the depth of relief of the legs and feet of the figure cannot be fully judged. The figure's left hip (viewer's right) is undamaged however, and judging by this small section, I suggest that the entire figure was half released from the block of stone. It is interesting to note that this side of the hip cuts back at a sharp 90

degree angle, as do the sides of the legs of the figures on Stelae 2, 3 and 5, which are also attributed to the reign of Smoke Imix God K. This same boxy effect is also seen in the front and side planes of the arms, which are flat and also at a 90 degree angle to each other. The outermost plane of the sculpture on the west side (the figure when viewed in profile) is intersected by the apron at waist level, the hands and wristlets, and the top step of the turban.

In this depiction, Smoke Imix God K clenches a double-headed serpent bar against his chest with mitten or claw-like hands which do not grasp the bar, but rather secure it there with the press of the hands and wrists. In addition to the distinctive turban, Smoke Imix God K wears large earflares, a tubular-shaped collar, a feathered cape over his shoulders, a pectoral, neatly tied wristlets, and an apron that drapes to the front and



Fig. 2. Stela 1, CPN, Honduras, Northwest side.

sides in three parts. The legs and feet of the monument are too eroded to make out the sandals or leg ornaments that could normally be expected.

Temporal and Stylistic Placement of Stela 1

Morley, with his typical detailed description of glyphic inscriptions concludes that Stela 1 dates to 9.11.15.0.0 4 Ahau 13 Mol, or July 28, 667 A.D. in our calendar (Morley 1920:161-163). The initial series introductory date is 9.11.15.14.0 11 Ahau 8 Zotz (May 3, 668 A.D.), followed by the directive to count backward 14 uinals, thus arriving at 4 Ahau 13 Mol, the hotun-ending date for Stela 1. Morley's conclusions are not contested.

Proskouriakoff noted that Stela 1 marks a turning point for sculptural styles at



Fig. 3. Stela 1, CPN, Honduras, Southwest side.



Fig. 4. Stela 1, CPN, Honduras, West side.

Copán. She felt that it was “a radical departure from the conventional mode of carving stelae at Copán, and its style probably precipitated the changes which are apparent on the subsequent monuments” (Proskouriakoff 1950:116). She debates whether the distinctive style of Stela 1 could have arisen in Copán from “some unusually original native artist,” or whether it derives inspiration from outside. The turban headdress is seen elsewhere at Copán on Stela 6, on most of the figures on Altar Q, and worn by several of the clay figurines discovered outside of Burial XXXVII-4, inside Structure 10L-26 (Fash 1991:104-111). Stela 6 is also a Smoke Imix monument and the burial figurines are associated with either the reign of Smoke



Fig. 5. *Stela 1, CPN, Honduras, West side. (Maudslay 1889-1902, Plate 100).*

Imix or his successor 18 Rabbit (*ibid*). Altar Q is attributed to Smoke Monkey, 18 Rabbit's successor, but depicts the earlier rulers of Copán.

Proskouriakoff described Stela 1 as showing increased three-dimensionality, in that there are more "receding and projecting surfaces" than in previous carvings (Proskouriakoff 1950:116). Despite this shift in style from previous sculptures, it is still easy to visualize the original shape of the cut block from which Stela 1 was carved. The figure, although in half-round, is still blocky and square, filling most of the space from which it was cut. Proskouriakoff notes that although there are some rounded contours on this figure, it could still have been "envisaged on perpendicular planes" (*ibid*). She suggests that the plan of the carving was probably blocked out on the prepared surface of the stone and need not have had a three-dimensional model as may have been the case with later sculptures.

Description of Stela 1 Profiles (North and South)

A plain rectangular area is clearly visible when Stela 1 is viewed from the north side (figs. 1 and 2). This plain segment on the north side can be compared to the same approximate area on the south side, in order to understand the overall composition (compare figs. 1 and 2 with fig. 3). A careful look at the west, or figural side of the monument (fig. 4) will also show differences between the upper left and right sides that are present because of the plain area on the north side. Evidence of the plain section is not visible on the south (glyphic) side of Stela 1, which faces the stairway of Structure 9. I describe the north, south and west sides in turn.

When viewing the monument directly from the north side, a plain, unembellished section, approximately 11 cm wide, can be seen running from the top of the turban to just above the crook of the figure's arm. This plain area is to the right (west) of the frame of the glyph column running the length of the stela. Although somewhat pitted from erosion, the outermost surface of this section is as high as the surface of the frame around the glyph column. Just a little over halfway down the plain section is an incised horizontal line at the level of the figure's shoulder, which divides the plain area into two unequal parts.

In the same location on the south side of Stela 1, is the profile carving of the figure, which has been executed in fine detail (fig. 3). In contrast with the plain area on the north side, here there are details of the side of the figure's headdress, a profile of the earflare, and the delicate details of the feathered cape which drapes the figure's shoulder.

The treatment of the elbows is different on the two sides also. On the south side, which received more attention and detailed work, the outside edge and the front plane of the elbow are plumply rounded and curve up and back in a more satisfactory and naturalistic manner. The crook of the arm is clear-

ly delineated with a deep line that does not appear on the elbow on the north side. The outside edge of the elbow on the north side cuts nearly straight back and the front plane is flattened, thus giving this elbow a very different appearance from the one on the south side.

The figure viewed frontally (west side) reveals more details of these differences (fig. 4). On the viewer's left (north), a narrow plain border runs from the top of the headdress to just level with the bottom of the earflare. This is the side edge of the plain zone. On the viewer's right (south) the narrow strip or border has been cut away. Further inspection shows that the two earflares are different when viewed directly from the west side. The figure's right (north) earflare is fully rounded and complete. The figure's left earflare (south) is flattened on the outermost edge. The explanation for these differences leads to a consideration of the sequence of sculpting for the monument.

Sequence of Carving

Because of the presence of this plain area on the north side of Stela 1, and the differences between the two earflares, I believe it is possible to show that Proskouriakoff was correct in suggesting that Stela 1 was blocked into segments before carving. In addition, I think we can entertain ideas about the sequence in which Stela 1 was carved. I suggest that the cut stone that was to become a monument to Smoke Imix God K was blocked out on all four sides and that the glyph blocks on the east, north and south sides were carved first. The figural (west) side was sculpted next, working from the original outside plane to the depth of the plain area that I have identified on the north side. This would be the same as the depth of the earflares, where the front of the earflares are even with the edge of the plain area. It would have been necessary of course to carve the rounded portions of the figure from both the front and sides at the same time.

This is especially true for the figure's left arm and elbow, which is carved more naturalistically. The figure's right arm is flattened on both the north and west sides indicating a rather less proficient or detailed rounding of what was the corner of the block.

Next, the details of the profiles of the figure were carved on the north and south sides. Probably the upper and lower portions of the figure were divided into sections to be carved separately, and the portions below the elbows were done first. Finally the upper profiles of the figure on the north and south sides were completed. The top half of the profile of the figure on the north side was not carved, but left instead with a plain area. The incised horizontal line that divides the plain area approximately in half is located at just the point where, on the south side, a deep cut marks the top of the shoulder of the figure. During my preliminary analysis of Stela 1, the plain area divided into two parts indicated to me that the plan was to carve the north side in the same way that the south side had been done, with a profile of the figure, and that the level of the shoulder had been preliminarily marked out by the incised horizontal line. In other words, I thought that the plain area was actually a section that had been blocked out to be carved with the north profile of the figure, but had somehow been overlooked in the carving process.

At the Katun Mesa Redonda (June 1993), Linda Schele pointed out to me that this plain area on the north side of Stela 1 is actually the tail end of the ribbons that make up the wound turban headdress of Smoke Imix, and not an uncarved area. This identification was confirmed by comparing the Stela 1 headdress with the headdresses on clay figurines discovered near Structure 16 by the Copán Archaeological Project (Fasquelle and Fash 1991:104; Fash and Fasquelle 1992:cover photo). Several of these ceramic figures wear wound head-dresses, but one in particular has a turban with ribbons that hang down from one side

of the top edge of the headdress. Two thick slabs of clay represent the two ribbon ends as they emerge from the top of the headdress and hang down to approximately the level of the figure's shoulder. The ribbon on the outside edge is somewhat shorter than the ribbon closest to the figure's body. Clearly the plain area on the north side of Stela 1 is meant to depict two overlapping ribbons.

Discussion

Carving sequences other than the one I outlined above are possible, including carving the figure first and the hieroglyphs last. The important point is that we can be sure that the front of the figure was carved before the sides of the figure were done. The key to this conclusion is the figure's left earflare (south). I believe that it was fully round, like the figure's right (north) earflare, when the carving was finished from the front. But, as the carver cut the details of the figure's profile from the south side, she/he cut too deeply, not realizing that they were cutting into the earflare, thus flattening the outside edge. I assume that nothing could have been done about the figure's left earflare, sculpting being a subtractive process, although it is possible that a plaster reconstruction could have been added. There is evidence that plaster was used to smooth out imperfections in stone and fill in details in some Maya carvings (e.g. Yaxchilan Lintel 55, Graham 1979).

In addition, because of the relatively plain nature of the ribbons hanging over Smoke Imix's right shoulder, it is possible to visualize how this monument was blocked out in preparation for carving. The ends of the two ribbons on the clay figurine lie one directly on top of the other, the slabs of clay overlapping in a way that successfully indicates ribbons. Probably because of the differences in the nature of the two mediums, or perhaps because this was the first time such ribbons had been attempted on a monumental stela, the ribbons portrayed on Stela 1 are

somewhat different from those in clay. It appears that the sculptor wanted to portray two ribbons on Stela 1, as is indicated by the incised horizontal line at the level of the figure's shoulder, but they are not as naturalistically depicted as those on the clay figurine. If there are two stone ribbons, then they occupy the same plane. When viewed from the front (west) side, only one thickness of ribbon is shown, not two overlapping thicknesses. The ribbons could have been portrayed like the clay ones simply by stepping in, or carving back the lower section of the ribbon area below the incised horizontal line, and incising a line on the west side edge of the ribbon. The initial blocking plan of the outside surface on the north side looked enough like ribbons to leave it as it was. It can well be imagined that the south side, before the upper profile of the figure was cut, was also blocked out in this same manner with blocky areas sectioned off by incised lines.

It is interesting to compare the headdress ribbons on Stela 1 and the ceramic figurines, with those on Altar Q (Fash 1991:figs. 11-14). The Altar Q figures are seated cross-legged on "cushion glyphs," each looking over either his left or right shoulder so that their heads are in profile. Almost all of the figures wear turbans decorated with various sorts of knotted and ornamented ties and ribbons, which twist and flow around the shoulders and backs of the historical figures. The ribbons on Altar Q do not lie stiffly in space as do those on Stela 1, but rather conform more to the contours of the bodies of the figures wherever they touch. The Altar Q ribbons move in a way that we would more likely expect ribbons to move—although it must be pointed out that we do not know what the ribbons were made of or whether they were all made from the same material. Although there are some chronological differences between all of these portrayal of turban headdresses, which could account for the differences, I think that

a more useful distinction can be made based on sculptural type. Altar Q is a relief carving, as opposed to Stela 1 which moves toward being three dimensional and the ceramic figurine which is three dimensional. Relief carvings are somewhat unusual at Copán, compared to the numbers of more fully three dimensional types of sculptures represented by the many stelae in and around the main site. When the figures carved in relief are compared as a group, they are seen to be rather uniform in many ways (Fash 1991: figs. 11-14, 69, 98, 101, 107 and 109). Most figures are seated cross-legged with their heads in profile, the positions of their bodies suggest movement, and in many cases two or more figures are relating to each other. In the case of the ballcourt markers (ibid:fig. 69) or Altar L (ibid:109) for example, two figures kneel or are seated across from each other, gesturing or involved in some sort of narrative. On Altar Q all of the figures are interconnected by their positions as historical rulers of Copán. There is more body movement and narrative in Copán relief sculpture than there is on Copán monumental stelae. The flow of the headdress ribbons adds to this feeling of movement. I would also suggest that since relief carvings are more closely related to figural drawings than are either of the other two mediums, the artists are more likely to depict flowing, moving ribbons in relief carving than in either monumental stone sculpture or large ceramic figurines.

With this paper I have shown that careful, detailed art historical analysis can lead to discoveries about carving processes on ancient Maya stone monuments. In this case, a slip of the carver's chisel on the earflare has helped to elucidate the details of the carving order, but similar analyses could be developed for any Maya carving. To fully

understand these complicated depictions it is best to use a comparative approach that includes the entire range of Maya art, artifacts, and archaeological knowledge.

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