Tracing the fixing agent:  
On Americanist archaeology’s contemporary engagement with boundary, process and practice

Alexander Geurds  
Leiden University | University of Colorado at Boulder

Abstract
To talk about material worlds from an archaeological perspective is an unruly challenge. More than ever before, archaeological narratives no longer foreground closed statements, steering clear from singular explanatory positions. Archaeology, at least in North American academia, is increasingly cautious. The tracing of cultural boundaries for example is avoided due to its culture historical roots. Rather than a paradox to earlier accusations of postprocessual freischweberei, Americanist archaeology now appears progressively critical in how it engages with material culture. The goal of this paper is not to ‘summarize” nor to “integrate” existing views on migration and object movement as studied in Americanist archaeology, instead its aim is to provide views on how these subjects are broached through invoking ethnic identity, essentially forming an archaeology of difference. Such an archaeology is relevant in our times, where differences between people, things, and ideologies persist, despite continually being debated and challenged.

Introduction
Our social sciences are by now firmly focused on things in motion. Ideas, humans, and things together constitute refracting worlds of meaning. As recognized in Globalization studies during the last fifteen years or so, this indeed has become a ‘world of flows’ (Appadurai 2001). Nonetheless, a noteworthy duality persists in our research: We acknowledge the fluidity of object worlds, but we also continue to seek cultural structures and social identities that latch on to unevenness at the bottom of the flowing stream of mobility. They persist or, if you will, root, and form temporary stability for people situated in sites of cultural difference and self-representation. Contemporary Europe is a case in point, where the endangered nation-state (icon of stability!) is attracting attention once again. This balance is part of our research agendas as well. In this group we frequently invoke the concept of networks as being an intermediary between the
mentioned processes of fluidity and clustering. We find it attractive for its open-endedness and its implicit multi-directionality. It takes us away from ‘areas’, but still allows research to detect the vectors of change we seek. It also brings archaeologists to echo cultural hybridity and social personhood (Falck 2003; Fowler 2004), and to invoke discussions in terms of memory and termination (van Dyke and Alcock 2006; Lucero 2010; Stanton et al 2008).

The proposal made in this paper makes the suggestion that all archaeology is ultimately an archaeology of different and for identity. Indeed I would say there are few more pressing matters of theoretical and methodological significance in our discipline, precisely because such an archaeology goes beyond disciplinary boundaries and extends from prehistory into contemporary times. As such, it can address what the American Anthropological Association this year called the ‘traces, tidemarks and legacies’ whereby people create different through identity politics, (in)tangible local, national and world heritage, and postcolonial engagement with cultural stakeholders. In this paper my aim is to develop this argument through a brief foray into some of the ways in which identity has been treated in Americanist archaeology, and by illustrating an example from ongoing archaeological research in Central Nicaragua.

**Americanist archaeology, a bit on definitions**

Certainly in archaeology vectors of change are a central concern. In this paper I will illustrate how archaeology –the discipline *par excellence* caught in the bending web of space and time – has fared in increasing our understanding of fluidity. I will argue that, with the possible exception of historical archaeologies, Americanist archaeology at times struggles to find a balance between recognizing change and structure in relation to the ethnicity concept. Here, I want to focus on a key element in continuing the archaeological study of fluidity in identities. Practice theory can serve as an umbrella theme for a number of different approaches in archaeology and is useful for studying identity using specifically archaeological analytical tools. As I hope to show, the ontological difficulties can be historically understood not just as a struggle about concepts, but they are also to be explained by the differences between institutional landscapes between North America
and Middle- and South-America on the one, and Europe on the other hand. Students undergoing academic training and archaeologists operating in such fields of practice are not left unaffected by this. Americanist archaeologists, due to their place in geographically diverse Anthropology departments, structurally do not deal with many colleagues at their respective universities who broadly share their regional cultural focus. Therefore, interregional comparative research outlooks tend to dominate the analysis of investigators’ data sets. These comparisons are fueled by theoretical discussions based on questions such as sociopolitical complexity and state formation (e.g. Smith 2011), processes of urbanization (e.g. Joyce 2009), and political economies (e.g. Rice 2009). Superfluous to say, archaeological institutes and departments at European universities traditionally tend to operate quite differently, congregating multiple specialists working in one region. The examples from the Faculty of Archaeology at Leiden University are regionally wide-ranging (and still expanding!), but to take the example for the Americas, it houses the single largest group of specialists worldwide working on the prehistory of the Greater Caribbean, as well as a sizeable group on Middle American archaeology.

The archaeological association between people and things

In archaeology, the material record of the past has always been drawn upon to induce group identity through the formal variation in material culture as observed in a synchronic and diachronic perspective (for a more recent overview see Insoll 2006). This group identity is frequently referred to by ‘ethnicity’ or, more often still, ‘culture’. But these ethnicities are static corporate identities, allowing for little variation and tend to be perceived as highly essential in nature. Accordingly, investigations into the social context of the studies material culture emphasize communal practices, often ritual aspects of social life. One can think for example of civic-ceremonial function of monumental architecture throughout the Americas, as examples of how commonality is evidenced. This monumental built space is perhaps the most visible of material entities, situated in and constructive of social environments. It directs daily lives and seemingly materializes people’s shared identity. Also, monumentality tends to be seen as a set of formalized spatial structures representative of ethnicity. Culture historical views on the archaeology of the Americas, dominant until the onset of processual archaeology in the 1970s, still
maintain an implicit presence in a surprisingly large number of recent studies and regional archaeologies in the Americas (add refs.). Accordingly, changes in the material record in one such contained culture can only be explained through diffusionist motifs, either through group migratory movements or more frequently through trade and exchange. Even though the latter does more to illuminate the social world we seek to reconstruct, the invoking of migrations does not. The matter of how these people movements may have come about and transpired is mostly left untouched. In the case of lower Central America (including El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama), changes in material culture complexes (mostly iconography on pottery) during the period of the ninth and tenth century AD. These changes are commonly related to historical references in sixteenth century sources chronicles outlining the arrival of unidentified numbers of speakers of more northerly languages (situated in Central Mexico) (Abdel-Vidor 1981; Chapman 1984). Recent research has attempted to archaeologically trace these historically referenced migratory movements, through analyzing excavation materials for presence of material culture that may have been used to perform particular ‘foreign’ identities. This has proven to be a vexing challenge, as the historically anticipated allochthonous ethnicities cannot be evidenced in the archaeological record (McCafferty and McCafferty 2009).

**Boundaries**

The recognition of ethnicity in the archaeological record is traditionally accomplished through the tracing of patterns in material culture and by outlining these, creating boundaries between such patterns. Accordingly, in this patterning identity is then recognized and argued. In Americanist archaeology this form of inference has a rich history, starting with the typological work of William Holmes (1914) and Clark Wissler (1916) and fundamentally continuing to this day. Even though the culture-concept critique has left its mark on the archaeological explanatory models of cultural change (e.g. Hodder 1979, Shennan 1989), culture areas are still around, in fact in some areas ongoing somewhat of a resurgence. Much of this more recent research approaches the identity question through stylistic analysis (add refs.). Regions where stylistic characteristics merge are coined as boundaries and by extension perceived (if not explicitly than
implicitly) as ethnic boundaries (Stark 1998). This echoes Fredrik Barth’s seminal presentation of ethnicity as a conscious, malleable aspect of social organization, rather than a static cultural feature. Famously, Barth preferred a focus on boundary building over the cultural things within those boundaries (Barth 1969). What these ethnic grounds then represent to archaeology are areas where architectural, domestic, and stylistic material culture prevalence is equated to social unity and perhaps regional coherence. Despite its recurrence, this equation of style and ethnicity is an inherently troubled one, and despite decades of research looking into this relation, it still remains poorly understood. For Americanist archaeology though, with the importance it awards to researching the mentioned questions, these ethnic groups remain an important ontological model despite the considerable concern voiced from cultural anthropology.

For a long time now indeed, the anthropological field of study looking at ethnicity has regarded it as primarily situational, subject to identity politics and simultaneously object of affection and decay (add refs.). The fluidity of ethnic identity is as such comparable to the flow of objects mentioned earlier (cf. add work Versluys on inherent pluralism). In fact, both anthropological fields of study (i.e. the study of commodification and that of identity) are rather closely related; both subjects being a driving force for the other (add refs. work by Comaroffs etc). Viewed from the safe distance of the Old Continent, one might suggest Americanist Archaeology in North America is in an ideal position to equip itself with the theoretical nuance called for here, precisely because of the proximity to Cultural Anthropology. Here, though, we observe the distortion in our transatlantic view. Archaeology in the Americas operates largely in disregard of the critique voiced to applying ethnicity as a straightforward framework of analysis. Even though ethnic boundaries are considered situational and thus per definition highly temporary, they continue to be recognized in a majority of archaeological analyses as essentially long-term, diachronically stable structures in prehistoric societies. In addition, ethnography has demonstrated a weak correlation between spatial language models from historical linguistics and stylistic material culture analysis. Fundamentally, the links between iconography and identity expression are subject to divergence, once more complicating the use of similarities in evidencing ethnic groups (Geurds 2011). One might think the
continued importance placed on ethnic groups in the study of prehistory is nothing but a strategic choice of archaeological analysis; could that be the case?

In the continued search for ethnic groups in Americanist archaeology, there have also been critiques from within the discipline (Jones 1997; Shennan 1989). These critiques mainly have encouraged archaeologists to acknowledge in their research that the search for ethnicity in the archaeological record is difficult, perhaps even unproductive. The implication of this critique has been relatively limited in Americanist archaeology, but I will argue that an answer to this cautioning can be found in a focus on the technology present in material culture studies. A shift in attention toward understanding patterning in material culture variation, and accordingly, the identification of nuclei of production, consumption and exchange of things, leads to the spatial delimitation of technological centers of production. The appeal of such an attention shift is that archaeology is excellently equipped to spatially delimit such technologies. Systematic approaches to how goods are made are ample and well developed; the examination of the operational steps involved in the production of material culture for example. Such operational sequences tend to be relatively resistant to change, as they are learned, repetitive, and part of everyday life (Gosselain 1992). A recent study on the changes in ceramic production technology in central Mexico from late pre-colonial through to contemporary times, shows that even though vessel form and decoration are subject to significant diachronic change, raw materials and firing techniques (including kiln shape), are resistant to change (Hernandez Sanchez 2011). Dependent on environmental factors, archaeology has access to most if not all of the steps involved in these production sequences, ranging from the initial procurement of raw materials, through the location of productions and the eventual finishing touches on decorations. As such technologies are based on specialized knowledge and dependent on the availability of particular natural resources, they tend to be circumscribed spatially and diachronically stable (add refs. besides Lemonnier 1993).

A prominent example of this approach is ceramic ecology, a form of ethnoarchaeology emphasizing the causal linkages between prehistoric pottery production and the social and natural aspects of the environment (cf. work by Dean Arnold in the Andean region,
One might question here if we can speak of some form of intentionality alongside the portrayal of material culture production as a largely unconscious and mechanistic form of “deep knowledge”. Are things then only marginally resorted to for group identity portrayal; are we better off discarding the idea of “whispering potsherds”, to invoke Kent Flannery? This is a question of some disagreement in archaeology. Some studies argue that information about group identity is largely encoded without the active intention of the maker. That is, even though social identity may be encoded in local or regional material culture complexes, producers are unconscious of this. In Americanist archaeology, a principal thesis of this is James Sackett who coined the *isochrestic* and *iconological* meanings of style (Sackett 1986, 1990). The former defines style that results from enculturation in social groups. Artisans grow up and learn (‘absorb’) traditions. It is a passive view on material culture form. It is style without meaning produced in socially bounded environments. Its offset is iconological style: style that is *emblemic*. In contrast to the unconscious isochrestic style, it is consciously produced and actively used, sending intentional message of social identity. It is style with meaning. Other studies in the Americas emphasize that producers of material culture intentionally apply particular elements in a production sequence to demarcate group identity. One such example is the ethnoarchaeological study of ceramic production sequences in Veracruz, Mexico (Arnold 1999). This study critiques the tendency for progressive evolutionist analyses of material culture technology, instead pointing to the co-occurrence of different ways of organizing production. The ethnoarchaeological cases studies also show that artisans reach informed decisions, calibrated by the consequences of their production choices (Arnold 1999:115-116).

**Practice: From ‘why’ to ‘how’**

Ironically, the study of ancient technology in Americanist archaeology forms part of practice theory, an approach proposed largely developed in the French school of thought on practice theory (Bourdieu 1977), which later produced numerous works on the ties between identity, technical choices and patterns in material culture (add refs.). Practice theory has been part of the language of Americanist archaeology for some time now and it occupies a small but consistent place as approach within the discipline (Hegmon
2003:219–222), being central to some impacting theoretical works (e.g. Dobres 2000; Jones 1997), and being applied in several case studies (e.g. Hendon 2010; Joyce 2004).

In wanting to understand the fluidity of identity formation, both consciously (e.g. strategically) as unconsciously, the relation between the material and the ideal must be understood. This is a point that has become somewhat hijacked at times by interpretive archaeology, yet the ties between action and thinking are clearly important for the interpretation of archaeological data and avoiding the idealist freischweberei of some postprocessual archaeological works. If we want to regard what people did in the past through more than behaviorist approaches, practice theory is a constructive way to look at what people did, and interpret those activities (Thomas 2004: 190-192).

Another, which dovetails absolutely with issues of identity, is the way practice theories enable us to deal with tradition and transformation, and with the internal-external dialectic of identification. All across the spectrum of theoretical schools active on this theme (Marxism, phenomenology, structuration and Symbolic Interactionism) the central argument made is that people’s lives are a continuum of embodied interaction with the material world, along structured ways, but with room for alternatives. People’s activities in the past are the stuff that archaeologists deal with: Buildings constructed and destroyed, food procured, produced, and consumed, garbage discarded, deceased dressed, adorned and interred, writing op non-perishable media and so on. By means of all those activities people categorize themselves and others during the fluidity of daily life; harboring the potential to bring forth particular identities depending on the social context. Despite this flexibility, identity and practice mesh together to create a synchronic and likely diachronic sense of stability, forming routines and traditions. This patterned activity across time and space is archaeology’s field of study.

However, practices are also hazardously easily transformed into identities, the mentioned example of recognizing migration and ethnicity in changes in pottery decoration is illustrative. Particular types of ceramic vessels are assumed to be representative of group ethnicity. This however, is one step short in an archaeology of difference, as it falls into
the same trap as many preceding archaeological approaches to identity. To avoid the trap, practices must be established first, and then it must be investigated when the performance of a particular practice led to salient comparisons of identity (sensu Hogg et all 1995, and compare to ‘inherent pluralism’ in Versluys in press).

**Practice of stone sculpture in Nicaragua**

My ongoing research considers the practices relating to the production and use of stone sculpture as a social activity taking place in or near monumental architecture, viewing stone sculpture as durable results of cultural dispositions (Bachand et al. 2003). Monumental architecture has always been a focus of archaeology, and it remains central to discussions about remembrance, identity and worldview in prehistoric societies worldwide. Among other topics, monuments are currently linked in archaeological investigations to landscape, architecture, time and memory (Rowlands and Tilley 2006). Increasingly, cultural practices are viewed as central to understanding these monumental settings and their associated sculptures (Joyce and Hendon 2000; Mills and Walker 2008). Both monumental architecture and sculpture constrain, shape and reaffirm people’s cultural dispositions (sensu Bourdieu 1990; de Certeau 1984). In prehistoric settings, archaeology is beginning to study these practices through its unique ability to access micro-scale events, such as the technology involved in sculpture production, to understand the practices that shaped human experience in the process (Dobres 2000; Hodder and Cessford 2004; Joyce 2003; Meskell and Joyce 2003; Pauketat 2001, 2005; Van Dyke and Alcock 2003). As a result, detailed understandings of spatial contexts are becoming fundamental to considering stone sculptures in relation to cultural practices.

In the Americas, sculptures were typically situated in settings of monumental architecture defined by planned arrangement of stone and earthen mounds serving a communal function. These monumental sites emerged in several regions of Middle America during the last millennium BCE, and lasted up to the period of the Spanish Conquest in the early sixteenth century. In Nicaragua, the use of monumental stone sculpture flourished perhaps between 800 and 1522 CE, but its development and link to monumental
architecture is hardly known. We are unable to evaluate what role sculptures played in these complexes and it remains obscure how these monumental centers figured in regional settings.

Some of these questions have led to pioneering work worldwide on the relationship between settlement context and stone sculpture in prehistoric Western Europe (Robb 2009), the Greek Neolithic (Nanoglou 2008), and parts of pre-Columbian Mexico and Costa Rica (e.g. Cyphers 1999; Love 1999; Bachand et al. 2003; Holmberg 2005). The present project is intentionally positioned to partake in current debates surrounding this scholarly discourse. The important contributions of these studies notwithstanding, they do not specifically address the cultural practices associated with monumental sculpture and their role as frames for inscribing and reproducing social values. In this project the focus is on the practices that created and preserved stone sculpture as an integral material element in both the experience of monumental architecture and the modeling of regional social identities, and asks how raw materials were converted into stone sculptures, including from where and how these materials were quarried, and the nature of the technologies involved in shaping them. It also investigates the sculptures’ monumental contextual setting: How do the surrounding anthropogenic mounds relate to the sculptures and can the individuals depicted be linked to those settings?

In 2009 I documented the pre-Columbian settlement of Nawawasito, located in the tropical riverine lowlands of the Caribbean side of central Nicaragua. This settlement revealed the extraordinary number of at least 43 stone sculptures. Materially, they consist of basalt and andesite columnar-shaped stones, typically between 1.5 and 2.5 m tall. The majority is carved with anthropomorphic designs and most are unbroken. Common carved designs are faces, arms and legs, genitalia, and a diverse spectrum of clothing, necklaces, and weaponry. All sculptures are situated in direct proximity to their original position at specific locations relative to pyramidal platforms. This discovery, made during a National Geographic Society sponsored exploratory reconnaissance, enables and necessitates a contextual approach involving archaeometric examination of the
technology of sculpture production, and the analysis of relations between sculpture placement, monumental architectural context and its wider landscape.

**Stone sculpture in Nicaragua**

“When the idol was perfect, its mouth was open, into which the blowing of the wind made a mournful, whistling sound, exiting suspicions that it was the incarnation of one of those ancient ‘demonios’ of the Indians. The pious priests demolished it in consequence.”
- Ephraim Squier in 1852

Ancient Nicaragua was defined by cultural diversity. It was a key transition zone in Central America between what are called the Mesoamerican and Isthmo-Colombian cultural areas to the north and south, respectively (Baudez 1970; Carmack and Salgado 2006; Drennan 1995; Healy 1980; Hoopes 2005; Hoopes and Fonseca 2003; Lange 1992; Lange and Stone 1984; McCafferty 2005; McCafferty and Steinbrenner 2005). Linguistically, it was a patchwork of speakers of many languages, pertaining to numerous language families (Constenla 1991; Lehmann 1920; Van Broekhoven 2002). Until the present investigation, the archaeological context of stone sculpture in Nicaragua was only known from notes by Western adventurers, who travelled the region in the second half of the nineteenth century (Belt 1874; Boyle 1869; Pim and Seeman 1869; Squire 1852). Populations spread across a geographically diverse landscape and subsequently developed chiefdom-level societies, as documented by the Spanish when they arrived in the region in the 1520s. By then the use of stone sculpture in combination with monumental public architecture was vibrant and widely dispersed in central Nicaragua. This we can conclude on the basis of the considerable amount of statues currently still preserved in museum collections. This pervasive use demonstrates that these objects formed an integral part of the local social world. Human sculpture occurred along the Pacific coast, on the interior lake islands, and in the tropical lowland Caribbean region. This indicates that those who commissioned the sculptures not only used them to increase community coherence, but also to proverbially ‘fix’ particular regional memories and histories in the hardness of these basalt sculptures.
Since the 1960s, stone sculptures in Nicaragua were used for purposes of constructing public memories through the formation of local museum collections. On the basis of these collections, existing studies on sculptures have focused on stylistic descriptions, emphasizing style coherence and outlining iconographic aspects such as clothing, weapons, and depicted animal figures (Baudez 1970; Falk and Friberg 1999; Haberland 1973; Richardson 1940; Strong 1948; Thieck 1971; Zelaya-Hidalgo et al. 1974). These studies remained centered on description of sculptures in stylistic terms, mainly due to the near total absence of knowledge of the sculptures’ spatial contexts. Accordingly, questions of whether sculptures occurred singly or were concentrated in larger groupings; what the spatial relations to ceremonial architecture were; and how the technology of procurement, transport and carving occurred, were left unanswered. Obtaining reliable dating on the sculptures was until now also impossible. In sum, how sculptures figured in spatial settings and formed part of cultural practices was beyond the scope of these studies.

This investigation is drawing on practice theory to question what people did with such large monoliths and how these stones related to people’s identity. This practice-oriented approach is well-suited to incorporate the study of: (a) The technology required in procuring, fashioning, and placing these large sculptures; and (b) Improve understanding of the materiality of these sculptures as a mode to create, fix, or alter community identity.

**Approach**

The stone sculptures are studied simultaneously ‘as sculpture technology’ through the cultural knowledge needed in the practice of stone sculpture-making (sensu Dietler and Herbich 1998; Dobres 2000; Hegmon 1996), and ‘as architectural technology’ at the level of the spatial context of stone sculptures (Bradley 1998; Scarre 2002). Such an approach, comparing technological and architectural practices, must take into account the operational choices made during the procurement and transport of stone from quarries; the preparation through carving; and the setting of the sculpture in its monumental surroundings. In accordance with ideas from practice theory, stone sculptures are not merely seen as propaganda objects for political elites or as material end-products – rather,
sculptures are regarded as constitutive of cultural practices and communal sensibilities (Pauketat 2001). An archaeology of stone sculpture practices is best achieved through a study of both through the everyday practices of sculpture production, and the ways in which these durable sculptures inscribed monumental settings and recursively created community identity (Bachand et al. 2003; Robb 2009).

Archaeology is well suited to translate these issues into methodologies allowing the study of these micro-scale occurrences. In the case of stone sculptures practices, archaeology observes artifacts, platform mounds, stone quarry sites, production workshops, stratigraphic evidence of sculpture setting, and the patterns in which these are distributed across the landscape. The integral study of these archaeological traces permits understanding how these sculptures were fashioned and handled, and how these practices contributed to creating cultural identities.

The research is proceeding in two interrelated steps:
1) Recording, excavation, and surface survey of the Nawawasito site, emphasizing - spatial control, through contextual relations between sculptures and pyramidal platforms, and determining stone outcrops and the surrounding settlement pattern
   - chronological control, through a series of 1x1 m test pits
   - given the imminent threat of looting, recording of sculptures will be completed in the first fieldwork period
2) Critical evaluation of changes in sculpture use in space and time, comparing - Treatment of sculptures, including spatial setting, applied iconography, and intentional interment
   - Operational choices in mining of stone quarries and use of sculpting techniques

As such, the research employs both intrusive and non-intrusive methods, including excavation, surface surveying, and archaeometric analysis. Chronological control is established through absolute and relative dating procedures to understand how time-depth related to stone sculpture practices (Pauketat 2001). The excavations focus on collecting data on the site’s stratigraphy in order to determine the spatial relation between stone
sculptures and architectural features, in combination with collecting diagnostic artefacts and wood or charcoal samples to be used for radiocarbon dating. This spatial and temporal data can be used to document the variability of sculpture use through time, in turn creating an understanding of the different histories of practice with regard to stone sculpture.

**Preliminary results**

Aesthetic elements of style guide the viewer in ways of seeing, but they presume a viewer predisposed or habituated to understanding the taken-for-granted meanings: what silent conventions are involved in understanding the trick of perspective, the movement from one panel to the next as the passage of time, the representation of spiritual power as light (Morphy 1992), or the derivation of aesthetic terms from a basic system of material reference such as cattle (Coote 1992)? The challenge in interpreting prehistoric aesthetics is to turn the interaction around and try to understand what we can deduce about the habituated reflexes of the viewer from the clues presented to guide them.

The stone sculptures from Nicaragua do not display a highly conventionalized aesthetic; a significant amount of variation is visible in the known museum collections and in the sculptures encountered in context throughout the central regions of Nicaragua. In this diversity, one can recognize the following broadly comparable elements. First, a strong emphasis on the physical qualities of the utilized stones; these include their extraordinary mass and hardness, and also attributes of durability and color contrasting from the tropical natural surroundings. Second, a highly abstracted representation of bodily form, reducing anatomy to distinct areas of the lower body, and head. Third, the carved rendering of bodily decoration (e.g., body paint, possibly tattooing), ornaments (e.g., jewelry, headdress) and objects such as weaponry and animal companions. These three elements allow for regional understanding by individuals from possibly other contexts.

It is still premature to make detailed comparisons of the El Gavilan sculptures and the documented social context of the ritual center, much less combine this in a regional perspective. The difficulty lies partly in the relatively dominant data set outlining the
aesthetic features of the sculptures’ carvings, and the relation to the physical settings. One reason for this is that this is an exceptionally complicated relation to tackle in prehistory and obligates using requires applying extremely provisional terms. The difficulty is also found in the wide regional distribution of the sculptures, combined with as yet poor chronological control. This sculptural practice may in fact be composed of several practices. There simply are currently too many sculptures in too widely distributed locations, possibly to be dated to a centuries-spanning time period. More likely is it to see them as part of a range of possibly related practices and related meanings. But let’s venture into a brief narrative, tentative as it may be.

The first millenium AD was characterized in Lower Central America as a time period of gradual population growth (add. refs.). During this time period, likely between 300 and 500 AD, a practice of sculpture-making emerged in Nicaragua, as in fact it did in other regions of Lower Central America (add refs.). Archaeological research suggests that sources suggest that the movement of social valuables began to increase, and the social landscape changed from one where communities were tied in more of less equal network relationships to one in which the participation in larger regional networks led to increased interaction and people movement across different ecological zones. This in turn is recognized in the resulting archaeological patterns, of which a more diverse material culture is one, and the appearance of central ritual location, and in particular, prominently featuring the anthropomorphic stone sculptures. One might conclude that individuals living in the region during the first centuries AD might have cited a wider range of identities, whereas an individual from the second half of the first millennium expressed identities limited by the now established sculptural repertoire present in the region.

This form of analysis may begin to create an understanding of sculpture-making practices in Nicaragua. At some point in the middle part of the First millennium, people began to quarry and sculpt monoliths and positioned them in the landscape at particular locations away from communities, to build ritual settings and cite either ancestors, the supernatural, to remember the past and foresee the future. The larger-than-life stones sculpted with anthropomorphic designs became the site of salient identity comparison. In their timeless
presence they functioned as fixing agents. The practice of sculpture-making and the simultaneous creation of ritual contexts, would quite literally have helped create inscribed practices of identity (cf. Connerton 1989). Relatively minimalist in their carved expression, the sculptures added to an everyday life in formal, essential terms. The sculptures were carved with a model in mind but maintaining a sufficient amount of fluidity in the iconography to allow for people to relate across a regional context. Although the archaeological resolution still fall short, it seems that social distinctions remained incipient in Central Nicaragua. The practice of sculpture-making crossed linguistic boundaries, demonstrating the potential ‘openness’ of this practice.

**Summary**

This paper set out to look at how boundaries are conceptualized in Americanist archaeology and it has presented, impressionistically, some examples from Middle America of how archaeologists seek temporally stable boundaries in the material record. Boundaries are recognized in archaeology though style distribution, be it in the form of iconography on pottery or monumental buildings, and archaeology is often eager to behold such boundaries as intrinsically social. We have seen, however, this is indeed significantly more complicated than assumed. From ethnography many studies tell us that material culture style often does not coincide with social groups. Instead, more productive correlations may be found between particular technologies of making things and the definition of social groups. Manufacturing specialists display adopted technologies by means of the selection of raw materials (whether clay or stone) and by means of alterations in the production process of the final objects (whether polychrome ceramic vessel or ceremonial stone sculpture). These adopted choices are internalized and the product of learning and inheritance. The example of stone sculpture indicates that sculpture fashioning was largely uninfluenced by environmental constraints or differences. Regional differences in sculpture style may reflect that sculptors saw and were aware of other ways of rendering sculptures. But the styles never completely lose their iconographic integrity. In Central Nicaragua there were specific ways to work the stone, as there were in Pacific Nicaragua.
Conclusions
Technical choices present archaeology with a wide variety of data that may be useful in answering a broad range of questions. What has been shown from the case study in Nicaragua is that sculpture-making technology and social meaning are context-dependent, and that style diversity has only minor interpretive value. It seems that the incorporation of ideas from material cultures studies in archaeology can benefit primarily from understanding local cultural practices. The presented case study on stone sculpture is an example of this: the study of relationships between quarry (production site), transport (distribution), and contextual architectural meaning (use).

Practice theory allows archaeology to handle both tradition and transformation, stressing that people’s lives and their identities are fluid – a continuum of embodied interaction with the material world around them. This interaction is highly structured by experience, memory, the sheer materiality of things, and by intentions and expectations, but it also allows for innovation and challenges. Finally, this preoccupation about the way interaction took place and identities formed in the past, gives contemporary archaeology reason to formulate ethnical considerations on how it corresponds in the present.

References cited (to be added)