**Excellent**

**Carrasco**

**Mesoamerican Corpus of Formative Period Art and Writing**

The Mesoamerican Corpus of Formative Period Art and Writing is an outstanding proposal is all respects: highly qualified personnel from various disciplines will collaborate to create on online resource that fills a need, applies cutting edge technology for the analysis of visual imagery, and promises to have a significant impact on the study of Formative art and early epi-Olmec writing.

The Mesoamerican Corpus project will provide online access to an extensive set of high resolution digital images of archaeological objects from the millennium preceding the development of the earliest Mesoamerican script. It will use and develop software for visual searches and thus facilitate the study both of stylistic developments over time and space and of early iconographic images that led to the development of the earliest documented writing in Mesoamerica. The start-up grant will develop a prototype database and graphical user interface as well as a preliminary set of digital materials that will serve to test the functionality of both the database and the GUI. This will be the first step toward full implementation of a large-scale digital project that the teams will present to NEH at the end of the start-up project.

There are only three shortcomings to this otherwise excellent proposal. The first is that there is little mention of the script itself or of any plans to make the known written material (most notably Stela 1 of La Mojarra) available online as part of the Mesoamerican Corpus. It would seem that if the focus is on the iconographic antecedents to the earliest known Mesoamerican writing system then the rather limited corpus of written materials should be available online with the same degree of resolution as the material objects. The corpus of epi-Olmec writing has already been photographed as part of the FAMSI project "Photographic Documentation of Monuments with Epi-Olmec Script/Imager". This material includes not only script but also iconographic images that were deemed by the researchers (Pérez de Lara and Justeson) to be iconographically related. The online report states: "As the documentation work

progressed, nevertheless, it became apparent that there were other monuments without Epi-Olmec texts on them that, nevertheless, appear to ICONOGRAPHICALLY (emphasis added) belong in the same or in a very similar tradition. This is the case of El Mesón Stela 1, the El Mesón basalt column or the Tepetlaxco monument, to name a few of them. So the decision was made to present these monuments alongside others more clearly inserted in this tradition, such as Cerro de las Mesas Stelae 5, 6 and 8. An especially strong effort has been made to present the photographic record of the very eroded (and less well-known) side text on La Mojarra Stela 1."

This material is not mentioned in the present NEH proposal (nor are other documents on early writing such as the ms by Kaufman and Justeson (2001) "Epi-Olmec Hieroglyphic Writing and Texts". The reason for this omission is not clear. Again, if the purpose of Mesoamerican Corpus is to establish the potential iconographic antecedents to the earliest New World writing system it would seem essential to present the earliest writing itself in a manner that would lend itself to the visual search software that the project proposes to create. It might be that the PI holds that the La Mojarra material is dated (ca. 150 CE) beyond the period he wishes to cover (up to 400 BCE) an argument that in one context makes sense. But Kaufman and Justeson argue that there was little change in epi-Olmec from the earliest documented materials (ca. 300 BCE) to the La Mojarra stela. If this is the case then the images from La Mojarra would be relevant for visual searches in Formative materials is the purpose of the image corpus is to facilitate an understanding of the antecedents of early writing.

The second shortcoming is that the letters of support from Mexico are somewhat noncommital. Thus Ladrón de Guevara, director of the Xalapa museum that houses most of the material that will make up the Mesoamerican Corpus states simply that she has "no objection" ("no existe inconveniente") that the PI and colleagues "look over the archaeological materials held by the museum" (permitiéndoles revisar los materiales argueológicos que forman parte de nuestro acervo"). This may simply be caution or a rather reserved way to express support (after all, Ladrón de Guevara permitted the photographing and posting of the material for the FAMSI grant). Nevertheless, it would have been better if the project could show a clear acknowledgment of the rights to photograph and distribute the necessary material. If this project is to be funded, as I hope it will be, perhaps the PI could be asked to ensure that rights to the digital imagery for educational web use are given.

The third point is the possible existence of vast amounts of relevant material in private collections. Much of this material is the result of looting. And there has been a significant division among US academics as to whether this type material should even be published. The difficulties that ensued from the public exhibit of the Grolier Codex should be taken into account. I would assume that this project would not incorporate such objects into the online images, and perhaps there are not many relevant Formative period objects in private hands.

The three points just mentioned in no way affect my extremely high opinion of the project. The third is just a request for clarification, the second is to ensure that any NEH investment in this project will not by stymied by future difficulties in copyright issues. The first point is more substantial as if the idea is to provide images of iconographic material that was precursor to early writing then the images of early writing should be included in the corpus. Of course the Mesoamerican Corpus will have another major impact: it will facilitate the study of diachronic shifts in Formative iconography.

Overview

Intellectual significance: This is a excellent project that will have a significant impact on the study of early Mesoamerican iconography from an area (Gulf Coast) that saw the development of the first major civilizations.

Impact on research and technology: The project design for presenting and searching through visual imagery is right on target for a effort of this type. The availability of such a large amount of material in high definition, searchable images, is significant.

Innovation: The digital applications are well thought out and will take advantage of the most recent innovations for presenting and searching through visual material.

Proposal development: The proposal is excellent conceived and presented.

Feasibility: Given the caveat re: digital rights, the project is feasible and should be successful.

Qualifications: The PI and colleagues are well qualified to implement this grant.