DESCRIPTION FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC

Toro Muerto is one of the world's largest archaeological rock art sites. Located in the River Majes valley in southern Peru, its date is customarily set at the 8th–15th centuries. To this day, approx. 5,000 rock blocks have survived in a desert area of over 5 km^2, decorated with carved depictions (petroglyphs) of geometric patterns, plants, animals, anthropomorphic figures and mythical beings. This site was discovered for science in 1951 by a prominent Peruvian archaeologist, Eloy Linares Málaga and, since then, has been visited and examined many times by Peruvian and foreign specialists studying this type of art. However, despite the 65 years that have passed since the date of its discovery, artifacts of pre-Columbian art in Toro Muerto have never actually been properly inventoried, while the existing plans for the site leave much to be desired. This state of affairs has, so far, prevented a reliable interpretation of this complex and has became a major impetus for the current research.

Out project's first task will be to draw up precise documentation of this huge complex using both traditional and modern methods of documentation (photographs, drawings, 3D models and RTI photographs showing the tiniest details of decoration of the surface). The use of integrated measurement techniques (tacheometric and satellite), as well as high-resolution aerial photographs taken for the needs of the project, will enable the preparation of a precise orthophotomap of the whole site. It should be emphasized that a significant amount of the work on this stage has already been completed under the Diamond Grant awarded to Karolina Juszczyk by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education in 2014. The field studies conducted in two previous seasons (performed in 2015 and 2016) enabled the documentation of almost 1/3 of the site and the development of the most appropriate methods of registering petroglyphs in the difficult desert terrain, constituting excellent access to the work currently planned.

The next stages of our project will include a comprehensive analysis of the data obtained. We are planning to establish the precise extent of this site and to clarify its chronology, as well as find a solution to many problems regarding the reasons for its establishment and the functions that it could have held in the life of the communities living in the past in this region of Peru. A detailed stylistic and iconographic analysis of the geometric, plant and primarily zoomorphic and anthropomorphic motifs found in Toro Muerto should provide the answer to the question of what the history was of the development of this site and what the purpose was of its individual sectors. We shall try to determine the meaning and reading the symbols of the individual motifs, as well as the most complex scenes covering almost the whole of the surface of large boulders of many square meters. We shall study the technological aspects of making the carvings. We shall consider who the people were who created them (the excellent quality of many petroglyphs and the repeatability of the characteristic motifs suggests that they could have been specialists with an excellent knowledge of their work), what tools they used, how they composed the individual scenes, on what the observable stylistic differences in the carvings depend, as well as how energy-consuming and time-consuming it was to make them. Certainly, many new, interesting questions that require answers will appear during the field and laboratory work.

Toro Muerto was treated by the local population as a quarry from at least the beginning of the 18th century, while the blocks of volcanic rocks covered with petroglyphs were often used as building stone. Unfortunately, the individual artifacts are being destroyed in modern times by the tourists visiting this place. We hope the documentation collected as a result of the work performed will enable the threats to be monitored on an ongoing basis and that our project – in which we would like to hold several public information and educational campaigns – will contribute to the preservation of this unique site for future generations. The data and results of the analysis we obtain will be posted on a publicly accessible website (http://toro-muerto.com) and will become the basis for preparing the first detailed monograph of Toro Muerto.