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COLOMBIA'S LURID PAST

How Drugs Inspired the Art of an Ancient People

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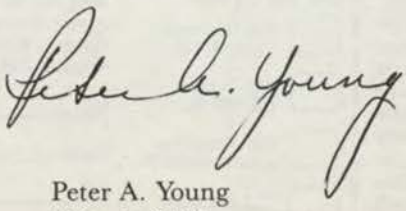
Assignment Colombia

It isn't often that a seasoned reporter and veteran photographer walk into our offices and ask for an assignment to one of the world's most dangerous places. When Suzan Mazur and George Obremski did just that last spring—offering to report on and photograph Colombia's impressive Prehispanic heritage—we naturally wanted to know if they thought they would come back alive. Two months later they returned, bearing news about grotesque statuary in an archaeological park in the south, extraordinary gold pieces in the capital city of Bogotá, and a "lost city" in the north (see our cover story beginning on page 28). They also brought reports of skirmishes between government troops and guerrilla organizations, one of which is reputed to be Colombia's third-ranking drug cartel. They spoke of gangs of *guaqueros*—highly organized thieves bent on the systematic appropriation of some of the country's finest antiquities, an extremely lucrative business whose practitioners operate with seeming impunity from the Sierras in the north to the Alto Magdalena mountain ranges in the south.

Mazur flew to Colombia in the company of Andres Pastrana, the mayor of Bogotá who had been co-hosting a mayors' drug conference in New York City. Obremski joined her a few days later. They then drove for ten hours through exquisite mountain terrain, following the one paved road that runs south from Bogotá. Twice their 1976 Dodge sedan was stopped by government forces and searched; their car, they were told, was identical to one suspected of being used by drug runners in the area. Nonetheless, "it was quite peaceful, and we felt relatively safe," Mazur recalls. A Colombian scholar who studies the sociology of violence told Mazur that some two million people in Colombia are in the drug trade. "It's a business that's not going to be broken by simply going after the drug lords," she says. "It's just not going to be that easy."

It's also not going to be easy to practice archaeology in Colombia if the civil conflict continues to escalate. Robert D. Drennan, who has just completed four years of archaeological survey in southwestern Colombia, doubts that he will want to send graduate students and follow-up teams if the political climate gets much worse. Meanwhile, work in the north, he says, "is frighteningly difficult. We'd die in a week if we tried to conduct the same regional surveys there that we did in southwestern Colombia."



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VISIONS *of the* ALTO MAGDALENA

Grotesque stoneworks, possibly wrought by ancient artists high on hallucinogenic tea, litter the rugged hill country of southwestern Colombia—an intriguing cultural heritage caught in the cross fire between drug traffickers and government forces, and an easy target for the nation's organized thieves.

by Suzan Mazur
PHOTOGRAPHS BY GEORGE OBREMSKI

To the untutored eye, Colombia's Prehispanic statuary seems perverse and nightmarish: smiling, fang-mouthed heads, jaguars copulating with flared-nosed humans, faces emerging from the tails of snakes, bat features combined with feline and monkey, jaguar-toothed rodents crouching atop males whose genitals are cinched-up by ropes tied to the waist. Lurid visions of man and beast, these sculptures resemble grotesques from paintings by the fifteenth-century Dutch master

"The Goddess of La Chaquira" overlooks the canyon of the Río Magdalena.

Heironymus Bosch. One prominent Colombian archaeologist insists they were wrought by craftsmen who were high on drugs, and he has sought to prove his claim by drinking hallucinogenic tea, the very sort of stimulant these ancient artists might have used.

Like their stone counterparts, early Colombian goldwork bristles with animal life—bats, buzzards, toads, alligators, and jaguars. Shamans, or priestly wizards, are believed to have worn gold finery in ceremonial rites, during which they used hallucinogens to facilitate "ecstatic flights" into the spiritual world. Some claimed that, in a trance, they could ascend to such realms by climbing up a column of tobacco smoke. To the shamans, gold was invaluable not because of its material worth, but because it stored up the sun's life-giving energies; when its vital force waned, gold could be "recharged" by exposing it to the sun. The sixteenth-century Spanish had a more conventional attitude toward the metal. The conquistadors plundered Colombia's gold relics so voraciously that some Indians thought the invaders ate them.

Until recent times, monumental discoveries at Inka and Maya sites have overshadowed Colombia's antiquities. Then, in 1975, gold looters uncovered a 1,500-year-old city in the Sierra Nevada Mountains on Colombia's Caribbean coast, now known as "The Lost City of the Tairona." At about this time, recovery work began in Colombia's northern lowlands on 3,000-year-old canals, the most extensive Precolumbian irrigation system known to exist in the Americas. And in 1986 at San Jacinto, a town not far from the Caribbean coast, a Colombian graduate student at the University of Pittsburgh discovered some of the oldest pottery in the New World, carbon dated to 3990 B.C. The importance of these discoveries has inspired a reassessment of Precolombian archaeology.

Unfortunately, research and exploration have proved difficult. The growing interest in Colombian archaeology has spurred on the country's highly organized *guaqueros*, tomb robbers whose treasure hunting stretches back to the time of the conquistadors. To further complicate matters, drug barons have interdicted large areas of the countryside, including the Lost City. The outback crackles regularly with small arms fire from warring government forces, guerrilla factions, and drug smugglers. As in Prehispanic times, narcotics continue to influence the political and spiritual climate of Colombia.

The stone statues of the Alto Magdalena region in southwestern Colombia litter a rugged hill country, where seven waterfalls plummet into the Rio Magdalena, Colombia's largest and most important river. The "Goddess of La Chaquira," a giant rock-relief, overlooks the river canyon, her arms outstretched and her mouth agape. Presumably named after a seed which the indigenous Indians admired for its iridescent beauty, La Chaquira watches over a 250-square-mile region. A large percentage of Colombia's stone statues are concentrated here, in a 15-square-mile archaeology park near the mountain town of San Agustin. The most comprehensive catalogs of the statuary list at least 500 pieces. Archaeologists believe the area was once a crossroads of early civilizations, which took advantage of the confluence of river systems that connect San Agustin with the Caribbean, Pacific coast, and the Amazon Basin.

Standing in a circle within the park are 35 representative stoneworks once scattered throughout the valley. Pedestals and thatched roofs protect many of the statues from the elements, but mold and mildew encrust them

Alto Magdalena statuary includes, from left, a figure sacrificing a child, a sarcophagus lid, and a bat/jaguar.

just the same. Others stand unprotected, alone or in small groups, at grave sites and on hillsides thick with exotic vegetation.

It is not clear why the ancient stonecutters, lacking metal tools, invested so much time and trouble sculpting the figures. While it appears that a great many of the statues served as public monuments, archaeologists think the Indians created others to ward off evil and otherworldly beings from the grave sites of chieftains and shamans. If accurate, this view helps to explain the profusion of animal imagery in the San Agustin statuary. The ancient Colombians lived in close communication with the animal world around them. Their artwork was an imaginative extension of their everyday efforts to hunt, grow food, and shelter themselves from lightning, storms, and flooding.

The Indian artists attributed human and animal characteristics to their environment. These associations varied from tribe to tribe. Typically, the monkey stood for fertility, the bat for agriculture, the frog for rainfall and death, and the eagle for light, power, and fire. To some tribes, the sun stood for masculinity and power, and the moon for femininity.

Jaguar imagery is ubiquitous in the statuary since many Precolumbian groups had a profound respect for the animal's hunting ability and sexual voracity. Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, the preeminent expert on Colombia's Prehispanic past, likens their reverence for jaguars to that of the Eastern Europeans' for Siberian tigers and bears; it symbolized a wish to merge with an animal's "life force." The big cats, he says, were revered because "the jaguar gets its prey."

Luis Duque Gómez, who has excavated in the San Agustin region for three decades, believes the ancient stonecutters, or "Agustinian people," inhabited the region from A.D. 200–800. The Colombian government's principal archaeologist, Duque Gómez believes the area was a vast necropolis, a sacred place where "people came from distant lands to bury their dead." Reichel-Dolmatoff disagrees. He contends the site was occupied by a succession of societies and was never just a memorial ground. In 1966, Reichel-Dolmatoff and his wife, the archaeologist Alicia Dusan, dug a 20-foot trench into a San Agustin hillside and found bits of pottery, carbonized wood, and other residential debris. "We did it to prove to the world that San Agustin was not a necropolis, not a ceremonial site," he says. He further believes that the rolling hills of the area favored the development of small villages.

The age of the stone sculptures is another point of disagreement between Duque Gómez and Reichel-Dolmatoff. Duque Gómez contends that they were created between A.D. 200–800, while Reichel-Dolmatoff suggests that they may date as early as 1000 B.C. One difficulty in dating the statues is the lack of information about their original contexts, where they were found and what artifacts were associated with them. Reichel-Dolmatoff believes that many of the stone statues were sculpted by craftsmen while in drug-induced trances. He also believes that many, if not all, Colombian Indian religions were either based on or closely related to hallucinogens. "There is no mystery about it," he says, "the Indians had lots of plants to induce ecstasy."

Several years ago, Colombia's Barasana Indians invited Reichel-Dolmatoff to take part in a *yaje* session. Yaje is a hallucinogenic tea made from a tropical vine, a stimulant the ancient stonecutters might have used. By drinking yaje, Reichel-Dolmatoff hoped to experience a

Two moon goddesses, center and right, and a jaguar-toothed human are among the artworks in the San Agustin park.

Chest ornament with a face, a disk piece, and a reptilian figure are among Prehispanic artifacts at the Bogotá Gold Museum. Shamans are believed to have worn gold finery in ceremonial rites, during which they used hallucinogens to facilitate "ecstatic flights" into the spiritual world.

trance that would provide clues to the state of mind of the ancient craftsmen. After drinking six cups of yaje, he began hallucinating. A recording device taped his spoken commentary. Among other things, he reported:

"The motifs are . . . yes, everything is curvilinear; semicircles, shapes like hearts that are intertwined and then become flowers; suddenly, shapes like a Medusa. Sometimes there are . . . yes . . . again these effects of fireworks. But when—no it isn't three-dimensional . . . it's flat and fairly dark. Like a basketry design. Like stained-glass windows . . . colors . . . blots, surrounded by a thick black line. Large, different-colored eyes. These things drawing near are like bodies . . . now they are like large caterpillars, with a lot of quills and fur."

Reichel-Dolmatoff says the yaje session reinforced his belief in a relationship between hallucinatory imagery and decorative design elements in the Precolumbian statuary. While he concedes that this is a border area of research, he does say that "If we observe the close relationship between drug-induced hallucinations and such aspects as mythology, social organization, and artistic creation . . . the study of hallucinogenic plants and their use by native shamans provides the key to an understanding of many basic cultural processes."

Another researcher into Colombia's Prehispanic past is Robert D. Drennan, an American anthropologist at the University of Pittsburgh. Drennan heads fieldwork operations in a district called La Argentina, in the Valle de la Plata. The site is a three-hour jeep ride from San Agustin through backwoods and farmland.

Drennan has conducted large-scale archaeological and environmental surveys in Valle de la Plata in an effort to gather enough information for a meaningful cross-cultural comparison of ancient chiefdoms. It is believed that chiefdoms of no more than a few thousand inhabitants each defined the political structure of northern South America, excluding Peru. Some scholars have interpreted this to mean a regional lack of cultural evolutionary success. Drennan has sought to study the ancient Colombian chiefdoms to determine why they developed as they did, and in doing so has shed light on why northern South American societies did not develop more along the lines of those in Mesoamerica and Peru.

In his study of the chiefdoms of the Alto Magdalena, Drennan noticed that status rivalries between individual chiefs seemed highly developed in the region. Many of the statues in the archaeology park, he believes, glorified chiefs and other "high status" persons who presumably established their positions through warfare. According to Drennan, the chiefdoms emphasized individual wealth and status differences, and were economically independent in a lush area rich in arable land. In contrast, chiefdoms such as those found in Mexico's Valley of Oaxaca reveal fewer wealth and status differences. Public works there did not necessarily glorify high status personalities, and in many cases were designed to create communal ritual space. Furthermore, the households that made up these Mesoamerican chiefdoms were more economically interdependent, which may have given rise to more complex civilizations. Little such cooperation took place in the Alto Magdalena, and Drennan has noted that demographic changes within the chiefdoms there occurred slowly. While other Mesoamerican cultures built chiefdoms, then empires, Colombia's villages, bounded by hilly countryside, remained chiefdoms for perhaps two millennia, says Drennan, adding that geography may also have had a role in preventing the growth of huge domains. "Nobody ever became king in Colombia," he adds.

Today, few would argue that the guaqueros are the principal "archaeologists" working in Colombia. Since Colombia does not have enough professional archaeologists, guaqueros fill in the gap, and are considered

Some artifacts in Bogotá's Gold Museum were originally stolen from graves by *guaqueros*, then sold to the museum at exorbitant prices.

Map by Joe Le Monnier

Many of the stone statues at San Agustin were designed to ward off evil and otherworldly beings from grave sites.

specialists. Ads in respectable Colombian newspapers recruiting guaqueros are not uncommon, and in one Caribbean coast region, the tomb robbers have formed a union that is registered with the government. It is a matter of some embarrassment to officials of the Gold Museum in Bogotá that many of their artifacts were originally stolen from graves by guaqueros and then had to be bought back at stiff prices. The guaqueros have the upper hand in such transactions; if their prices are not met, they can—and often do—sell the objects abroad or melt them down.

Colombia does have laws, though sketchy, regulating the traffic of Precolumbian art. Oscar Mejia, Colombia's cultural attaché in Washington, says that a law regarding the "conservation of historical patrimony and archaeological artifacts" has been in effect since 1959. "Unfortunately, our police are not present in some areas, so sometimes it is not possible to stop the guaqueros," he says, "but the police can arrest them and there is a judicial process—they can go to jail." Yet Colombia is one of the few "art producing" countries that has not signed the UNESCO Convention, which calls on member nations to police the illicit sales of works of art. It is believed that the country's well-connected drug lords, fearing that the Convention would set a precedent for extradition, have forced a delay in its ratification.

There is evidence of grass roots opposition to the guaqueros. David Dellenback, an American artist living in San Agustin, travels back and forth to the Valle de la Plata, where he has sketched monuments before they have disappeared onto the black market. He says that a group of concerned residents in La Argentina has sought the cooperation of the town's mayor in slowing the guaquero trade. The guaqueros appear not to be as tightly organized in La Argentina as in other parts of the country.

Colombia's Lost City lies squarely within a major drug-smuggling region and is now out of bounds to legitimate archaeologists. "Work there is frighteningly difficult . . . preposterous," says Drennan. "We'd die in a week if we tried the same extensive regional surveys there that we've done in southwestern Colombia." Reichel-Dolmatoff concurs: "The Lost City is lost to archaeology, I'm afraid."

How much else will remain lost to archaeology is a question whose answer must await the outcome of political developments in the country. On August 24, the Colombian government began to crack down on the drug barons with a military sweep through the country's rural areas. They arrested 11,000 people, and seized hundreds of aircraft, automobiles, houses, ranches, and farms. An ominous postscript to the crackdown is that some 10,500 of those arrested were later released. With the country teetering on the brink of civil chaos, it appears likely that progress in archaeological research must, for the moment, take cover in the cross fire between drug traffickers, revolutionary groups, guaqueros, vigilante patrols, and government forces. ■

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