

# San Agustín

## National Archaeological Park

Guidebook  
English

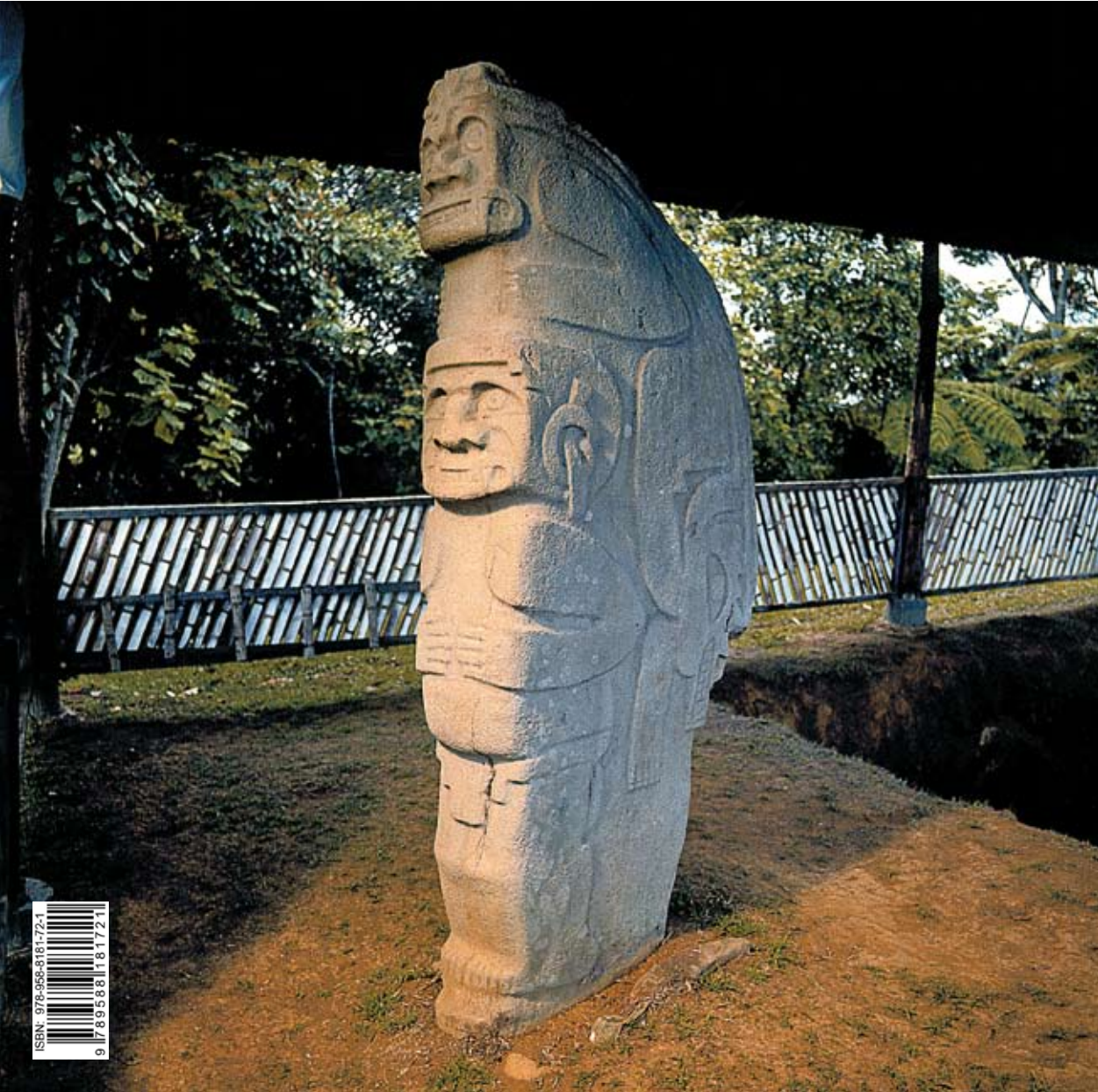




Photo: Mesita A, Western Mound, San Agustín.



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Anthropomorphic statue N°. 289, Alto de Las Piedras site.  
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Photo: Fuente de Lavapatas site.

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Photo: Statue 25, Mesita B site, San Agustín.

# Introduction

The greatest complex of megalithic monuments of pre-Columbian America is made up of a group of archeological sites dispersed on a broad region in the upper valley of the Magdalena River, in the Colombian Southwest, known as the “Archeological Zone of San Agustín” (figure 1). Recognized by Unesco in 1995 as World Heritage, San Agustín symbolizes the ability of pre-Columbian societies



**Figure 1.** Map of Colombia showing the location of the San Agustín region in the Southwest of the country and other archeological zones.



of northern South America to create and express, especially through monolithic sculptures, earth mounds and funerary corridors, their singular social organization and worldview.

The first written descriptions of the monuments were made at the end of the 17th century by the chronicler Fray Juan de Santa Gertrudis (1970). From 1913 on (Preuss, 1931), the region has been intensively studied by archeologists interested in a better understanding of the monumentality of these graves and the importance of these kinds of commemorative elements for the development of politically complex societies or chiefdoms (*cacicazgos*). Research on San Agustín, one of the first complex societies in Northern South America, is of great importance to understand the development of political organizations, a central issue for anthropological theory.

In 1931, Law 103 ordered the creation of the Archeological Park and an office, *Servicio Arqueológico Nacional*, within the *Ministerio de Educación*, in charge of research and preservation at the Park. Since then, and thanks to the interest of the national and international public and the continuous State investment in studying, protecting and promoting the cultural heritage located there, the zone of San Agustín is one of the best known archeological zones of Northern South America and, probably, the most representative of the archeological sites of the Colombian cultural heritage.

The *Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia*, ICANH, a national authority in archeological matters, is directly responsible for research and protection of the archeological heritage and manages the National Park of San Agustín, aiming, through the display *in situ* (figure 2) of diverse kinds of archeological evidence, to promote knowledge of this singular culture and of cultural diversity in general. Every year, more than 60,000 people from various parts of Colombia and from other countries have the opportunity to appreciate the material remains of an enigmatic and already disappeared culture that left us an important legacy about the varied possible forms of social organization and about the importance of religion and the ideas of the death and life for ancient cultures.



**Figure 2.**  
Funerary  
monument of the  
Regional Classic  
Period. Mesita B, San  
Agustín.

## 1. Location

The Archeological Park of San Agustín is located at the foothills of the Colombian Massif, in terrains that are today part of the municipalities of San Agustín and Isnos, at both sides of the Magdalena River between the Central and Oriental Ranges, in the southern part of the Department of Huila, approximately at Latitude 1°53' North and Longitude 76°18' West, with elevations varying from 1500 to 2000 MASL.

Administratively, it is made up of a series of disperse properties owned by the ICANH (figure 3), that were especially delimited as to include the most important concentration of funerary mounds and statuary

of the Regional Classic Period (1-900 A.D.) of the San Agustín culture (Drennan et al. 2000).

Access to the Park is by road from Bogotá (nine hours approximately) or from Neiva (four hours approximately) where domestic flights arrive from Bogotá, Puerto Asís or Florencia, in the Benito Salas airport (NVA). It is also possible to get there by road from Pasto, through Mocoa (10 hours approximately), and there is a dirt and tough road from Popayán (10 hours at least).



**Figure 3.** Map of the Alto Magdalena showing the Archeological Park of San Agustín sites.

Offices of the National Archeological Park of San Agustín are located at three sites: Mesitas, in the Municipality of San Agustín; Alto de los Ídolos and Alto de Las Piedras in the Municipality of Isnos. The biggest property, near the Mesitas office, covers 80 ha and is located 2 km west of the town of San Agustín, where hotels and other tourist services are concentrated. To access the Alto de los Ídolos site (13 hectares), further north, a road 18 km long from San Agustín and 8 km long from Isnos, can be used. The Alto de las Piedras site (11 hectares) is located even further north, 9 km by road from Isnos.

Besides the archeological sites, the region offers to the visitor a great variety of ecological niches with exuberant vegetation and wild fauna, surrounded by a rugged topography of deep canyons, waterfalls and water rapids.

## 2. The San Agustín Region Today

**T**he archeological zone of San Agustín has an average elevation of 1800 MASL, 20° C temperature and an annual precipitation of 1500 mm. The region's temperature depends strongly on elevation over the sea level and varies very little throughout the year. Weather is varied and the flora and fauna very diverse because the zone has an uneven relief that produces great vertical ecological variations.

The rich soils of volcanic origin as well as the varied climate and the high humidity that characterize the region present obvious advantages for agriculture that generally does not require irrigation or earthworks, except in the plains of the alluvial valley, where mechanized assistance is needed.

The municipalities of San Agustín and Isnos have areas of 1310 and 361 km<sup>2</sup>, respectively, with current populations of 27,500 and 23,400 inhabitants, and 70-75% people living in rural zones with densities between 20 and 40 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>. This population is dedicated mostly to agricultural activities being coffee and sugar cane the main crops today.

This population has autochthonous indigenous roots in southern Huila and also in the neighboring regions of Nariño and Cauca, although it has historically been composed by migrations from different zones at different times. The ancient pre-Columbian inhabitants that built the stone monuments had already abandoned the area by the 14th and 15th centuries, so the current population does not have a direct connection with the San Agustín cultural tradition. Most of the modern population has arrived in the last decades as part of an important wave of people coming to this region, which nowadays offers some economic opportunities. The language used is almost exclusively the Spanish and the predominant religion is Catholic, in spite of the existence of Christian Protestants and other religious groups. There are indigenous reservations recently established in the zone, formed by families that come from the Department of Cauca and that identify themselves as part of the Yanacóna ethnic group, originally from Perú and Bolivia during the Conquest and Colony (Zambrano, 1993).

Part of the population of San Agustín and Isnos benefits directly from cultural tourism, that also contributes, although indirectly, to the economy of the whole region of southern Huila. San Agustín is known as the "Archeological Capital of Colombia" and even though the economic effect of tourism is difficult to assess with the available data, its importance is indisputable. Directly, tourism employs guides, transporters, direct and indirect staff at the archeological parks, and the personnel of hotels, accommodations, restaurants, shops and craft factories. Craftworks are an important income source for a group of people that is dedicated, especially, to manufacturing stone and ceramic replicas of archeological pieces and also a wide variety of objects on various materials.

Aside from the archeological interest, southern Department of Huila has also other attractions for visitors, and among them we can highlight the waterfalls at Santo de Bordonos and Salto de Montaña in Isnos, and the river gorge at the Estrecho del Magdalena in San Agustín, the Cueva de los Guácharos Natural Park in the Municipality of Acevedo and the Puracé National Park that includes areas of Isnos, San Agustín, La Argentina, La Plata and Salado Blanco.

### 3. The Prehispanic Sequence

The archeological research of the region has made advances in several topics, but a matter of basic importance is chronology, that has allowed organization of the material remains of the region's societies in several historic periods in order to better characterize their evolution and to permit comparison of the particular organization in each period of time. The combination of radiocarbon dating of organic samples (wood, bone and other carbonized remains) that were associated to stone and ceramic artifacts, with the study of the stylistic change of artifacts in many stratigraphic excavations, has allowed to clearly identify the periods of time in which certain decoration styles and artifacts were used, especially in ceramic pots.

The identification of the chronological organization of various kinds of ceramics is an important tool for dating the region's sites and supports the analysis of other archeological aspects, since in almost all the sites there are broken ceramic sherds that were discarded during the occupation and let us know, with great confidence, in which periods and places the activities were developed.

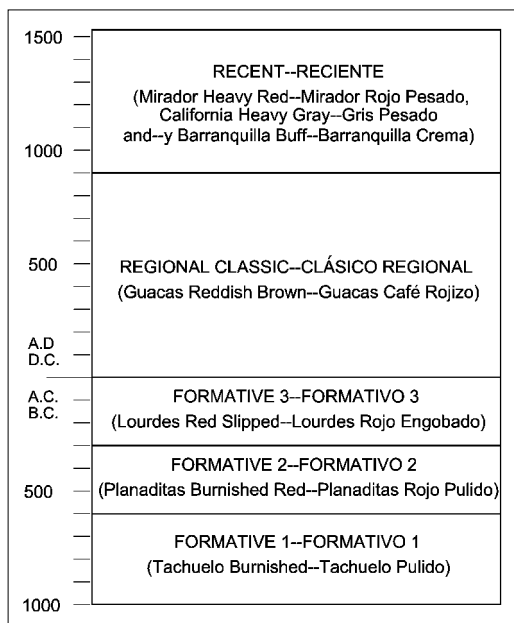
The region's chronology has evolved more accurately for two consecutive periods after the adoption of ceramic technology; they are called for this zone Formative and Regional Classic (figure 4). The immediately previous period, the Archaic, still does not have any chronological indicators.

The current state of the chronology is the result of the gradual accumulation of information recovered by several archeologists that study particular aspects and it has improved with every new research.

For more than ten years, Archeology publications had different names for the Periods and their initial and final dates, which reflect knowledge at the time; nevertheless, in spite of these changes, the basic chronological organization has not been drastically modified.

## The Archaic Period

Though there is little evidence about the initial human occupation in the Upper Magdalena, it is supposed to start during the Archaic Period, around the fourth millennium B.C. or even before, when the



**Figure 4.**  
Ceramic chronology  
for the Alto  
Magdalena region  
(González, 2007).

hunter-gatherer societies would have had an easy access from the northern Magdalena River Valley. Archeologist Gonzalo Correal (1974) found in Palermo, northern Huila, lithic artifacts that are similar to those found in the preceramic sites located further north in the same valley. There is a radiocarbon date of  $3300 \pm 120$  B.C. (Duque Gómez and Cubillos, 1988, p. 76) associated to a burner but with no diagnostic artifacts, at the Lavapatás site.

The lack of information does not allow to say much about this period, but any population in the zone was, with no doubt, very disperse and small. In other parts of the Colombian Southwest the sites of the period show that they already had various crops that complemented their diet which was basically of wild origin. The societies were organized in small groups or bands of 15-25 people that frequently moved their camps and exploited wild and domesticated resources with a technology of stone and organic raw materials (bone, shell, wood, fibers). Characteristic of this period are the polished stone axes with handle of the Calima Valley, small arrowheads carved in hard stone and small mortars or millstones identified in the zone of Popayán and Valle del Cauca. At the end of this period there was a shift towards sedentarism in the settlement pattern and the ceramic technology was adopted.

## The Formative Period

For the Formative 1 Period (1000 BC- 600 BC), almost all the region contains remains of a sedentary occupation, with disperse settlements that tended to choose the fertile agricultural lands, located between 1500 and 2000 MASL, and where several kinds of crops were cultivated, such as corn, beans, quinoa, manioc and yam (Quattrin, 2001).

As a result of intensive research, we know that during all the Formative Period (1000 BC-1 AD), the inhabitants of the Upper Magdalena region buried their dead in shaft tombs with lateral chambers dug near their households, where they placed the mortal remains on the floor with grave



goods that included ceramic pots (figure 5) and utilitarian stone artifacts (Drennan, 1995). The archaeologists have identified three sub-periods: Formative 1, 2 and 3, among which gradual shifts in the styles and decoration can be appreciated, allowing the study of change in other aspects, for example, in demographics and economic organization.

The population increased gradually, more strongly between Formative 1 and Formative 2, with smaller change into Formative 3. Since the beginning of occupation, this population started to concentrate in some zones of the region that would continue to be demographic centers, but total regional population never reached levels high enough to drastically transform the natural vegetation which, according to pollen analysis continued to have important patches of native forest.

The Formative Period economy was organized without an apparent centralization, without food exchange systems nor specialization of production, being basically self-sufficient, with independent households, formed by nuclear families that located their residency within the areas



**Figure 5.**  
Funerary urn of the  
Formative 2 period  
(600-300 BC).

of cultivation and economic exploitation of wild products, which were an important part of the diet during this period (Quattrin, 2001).

During the Formative Period the political organization was that of independent chiefdoms, each one composed by some 200 families dispersed around a denser center where some 30 families were settled with shorter distance between them. There were no villages strictly speaking, because even at the chiefdom centers, households were spatially separated and the central communities did not even include 200 inhabitants, much less than the limit of 500 people traditionally used to classify smaller villages. So, the settlement patterns were strictly rural and dispersed.

## The Regional Classic Period

During this period (1-900 AD) the demographic density continued to increase and population concentrations were consolidated. Even though they did not constitute villages or towns, they were communities relatively dense that also contained ceremonial centers of political importance. Great earth mounds were built to cover funerary dolmens with large slabs; each mound holding the remains of an important person.

Stone statues of mythological beings signaled the tombs. In spite of very impressive funerary architecture, the Regional Classic tombs had very few offerings and only in few cases fine objects like pendants of pure gold. This period is characterized for having relatively crude, poorly decorated ceramics, a very elaborate and technologically complex goldwork (figure 6) and the famous monumental statues.

The economy was similar to the one of the Formative Period and although part time specialists in craft production within the chiefdom centers have been identified, the production was still organized within family lines, with very limited regional exchange systems, weak formalization of craft production and no evidence whatsoever of political control over the production.

**Figure 6.**  
Laminar nose ring  
of the Regional  
Classic period.  
Currently lost  
(Stolen in 2008).



The political organization was that of strong independent chiefdoms, perhaps in active competence, that gathered each one some 600 families dispersed in territories of about 100 km<sup>2</sup> and that participated with some frequency in ceremonies at their political and funerary centers (González, 2007).

### ***The Statuary***

The San Agustín region is well known for the prehispanic sculptures that inhabitants made during the Regional Classic Period. In the statues, made of hard stones of volcanic origin, there is evidence of the development not only of crafting techniques, but of a complex of beliefs expressed in them. The statuary shows various themes, most of them with an unknown meaning for us but many with an evident religious character.

The iconographic study of the statues has allowed finding similarities among the group of expressive elements of the sculptures and the ritual activities of indigenous contemporary groups. For example, some anthropologists have suggested that certain themes of the statuary allude to shamanic practices: beings with feathered crowns or birds over their

foreheads can represent the shamanic flight of healing or communication with spirits. Anthropomorphic statues that seem covered by feline skin or that include a mix of animal and anthropomorphic features (figures 7 and 8) suggest the ability of transformation of the character into another being. Not all the statues are anthropozoomorphic, some of them are exclusively anthropomorphic representations (figure 9) and others exclusively zoomorphic (figure 10), and in any case the represented themes in almost all the earth mounds probably express the reunion of natural powers under the control of beings of vast importance.

Usually, the statues are part of burial sets that includes a funerary mound inside which the dead body was placed over slabs or in a stone sarcophagus. Processional paths were constructed to give access to the



**Figure 7.**  
Anthropozoomorphic  
statue (No. 262) with  
shield and monkey  
staff. Mound I, Alto de  
los Ídolos, Isnos.



**Figure 8.**  
Large anthropomorphic statue (Nº. 258) with necklace. Central embankment, Alto de los Idolos, Isnos.

artificially flattened areas where some statues were located around the funerary mounds. Other statues were buried inside the mounds, probably as offerings. Even though there is a variation in the funerary architecture, there is a frequently repeated pattern that consists of a huge statue accompanied by two smaller ones, one at each side (figure 7) and behind them there was, constructed in stone slabs, a chamber that contained the sarcophagus. Although the specific meaning of all the representations is unknown, we have to assume that they expressed a strong association between religious aspects and the buried individuals in the tombs that were decorated with the statues.

Considering the monuments' distribution around relatively flat areas, the expression of the social importance of the buried individuals surely



**Figure 9.**  
Anthropomorphic  
statue (Nº. 296) with  
necklace and hat.  
Alto de las Piedras,  
Isnos.

happened in ceremonies that gathered the community and commemorated the death of great leaders. The archeological data obtained in tombs and residential areas suggest that these activities were important enough to promote the social basis of the political power of the elites that deserved this funerary treatment. Also, these elites beyond having a special relationship with supernatural forces, surely produced and possessed the esoteric knowledge that granted them a central place among their peers.



**Figure 10.**  
Zoomorphic  
statue (Nº. 22)  
–owl or eagle– with  
snake. Mesita B, San  
Agustín.

## The Recent Period

Towards 900 A.D. the ceramic styles shifted again and the monumental tombs with statuary were not constructed anymore. However, in this period, named just Recent (900-1350 A.D.), the population increased and became even more centralized, maintaining however the rural and disperse residential pattern. The systems of drainage channels and earth-works (figure 11) indicate that agriculture was intensified to feed a more and more dense population (Sánchez, 2005), and there are some larger households (Duque and Cubillos, 1981), that could reflect an economic difference between families, that did not exist before.

The political organization of the Recent Period was more centralized and incorporated larger polities or chiefdoms, than in the previous periods. Each one of those political units was formed by several thousand families. However, the most significant change that has been detected is that the basis of power in these units suffered evident transformations and that funerary ceremonies and associated monuments do not longer appear as a central element of the political organization. These shifts and the notorious intensification of the agriculture, has led to propose for this period, in contrast with former times, that the economic organization was an element of political importance (Drennan, 2000). It seems that the region was abandoned for unknown reasons before 1530 AD.

The prehispanic sequence for this region has provided crucial empiric evidence to understand the development of politically complex societies and for constructing adequate theoretical models for explaining their cultural evolution. The region is still being studied and the sites' preservation for future investigation is an important function of the ICANH, the authorities of the Department of Huila and of the Municipalities of Isnos and San Agustín.

**Figure 11.**  
Drainage channels  
for intensive  
agriculture of the  
Recent Period in La  
Marquesa, Isnos.





## 4. Main Archeological Sites

In all the region of the Upper Magdalena there are disperse archeological sites of the various prehispanic periods. For example, archaeological surveys of an area of 300 km<sup>2</sup> encompassing Isnos and San Agustín identified more than 3000 archeological sites, almost all of them of residential areas. Only 50 of them have funerary monuments of the Regional Classic Period and of these only some (table 1) have archeological structures or sculptures that are accessible to the visitors.



Photo: Alto de los Ídolos site, Isnos.

**Table 1**

**List and geographic coordinates of the most important archeological sites in San Agustín and Isnos, Alto Magdalena**

<b>Site</b>	<b>Lat, Lon (WGS84)</b>
Las Mesitas-Mesita A (big statues)	N1.883,W76.294
Las Mesitas-Mesita B (the most complex mounds)	N1.884,W76.296
Las Mesitas-Mesita C (plain sculpts, not much volume)	N1.881,W76.297
Las Mesitas-Mesita D (statues without funerary corridor)	N1.887,W76.295
Las Mesitas-Fuente de Lavapatas (sculpt in the stream bed)	N1.880,W76.299
Las Mesitas-Alto de Lavapatas (associated to a child cemetery)	N1.879,W76.304
El Purutal-La Pelota (statues with multicolor paint)	N1.913,W76.295
Uyumbe (particularly deep funerary mound)	N1.874,W76.257
El Tabor (monumental sarcophagi and phallic monoliths)	N1.853,W76.283
El Rosario (rare representation of attacking feline)	N1.822,W76.304
Quebradillas (particularly big statues)	N1.886,W76.344
La Parada (representation of simian-feline with humanoid features)	N1.866,W76.329
Quinchana (a burial made for a statue)	N1.919,W76.426
El Tablón (statues with many corporal ornaments)	N1.899,W76.275
El Jabón (site reliefs with three mounds, very affected by looting)	N1.939,W76.327
La Chaquira (reliefs over the natural rock)	N1.903,W76.268
Alto de los Ídolos (high concentration of mounds and statues)	N1.915,W76.241
Alto de las Guacas (rare figure representing feminine breasts)	N1.900,W76.236
Alto de las Piedras (explicit sex representations)	N1.971,W76.200
Alto de Betania (rare sarcophagi with sculpt of human face)	N1.919,W76.257

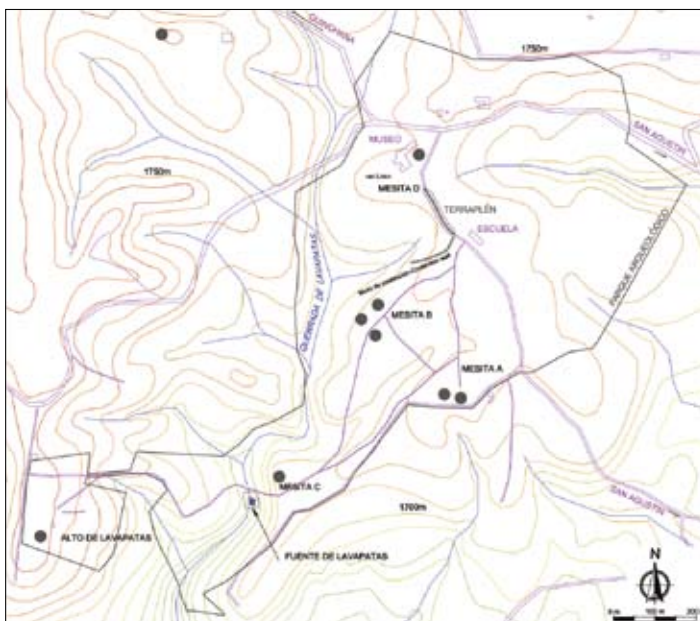
## Las Mesitas

Although the elements that characterize the archeological culture of San Agustín, such as the carved stone statues, slab tombs, the classic goldwork and the undecorated ceramics of the Regional Classic period are found in a vast region, they are clearly concentrated around the Mesitas area in San Agustín, in which there was also a greater density of residential sites. Mesitas, that has the most ancient radiocarbon dates for the region,

includes in an area of less than 1 km<sup>2</sup> several of the most impressive examples of funerary mounds and San Agustín statuary (figure 12).

In Las Mesitas, several residential sites from all the periods have been studied, and among them La Estación stands out as the area with the remains of the largest architectonic structure found in the region (9 m in diameter), belonging to the Recent Period, that has been interpreted as a temple or ceremonial house.

At arrival to the park, the visitor finds Mesita D, where the main office is located (figure 13), and encounters there a museum that displays artifacts from different periods and places of the region and shows a summary of the scientific research. From there, the visitor can start the Park route with the Forest of the Statues, an outdoor lineal exhibition circuit, directly south of the Mesita D, where 35 statues from diverse funerary sites of the entire region are exhibited, including some of the most amazing San Agustín sculptures (figure 14).



**Figure 12.**  
Map of Mesitas,  
in the National  
Archeological Park  
of San Agustín in  
the Municipality of  
San Agustín.



**Figure 13.**  
View of the park's  
offices in Mesitas,  
San Agustín.

205

107

24

223

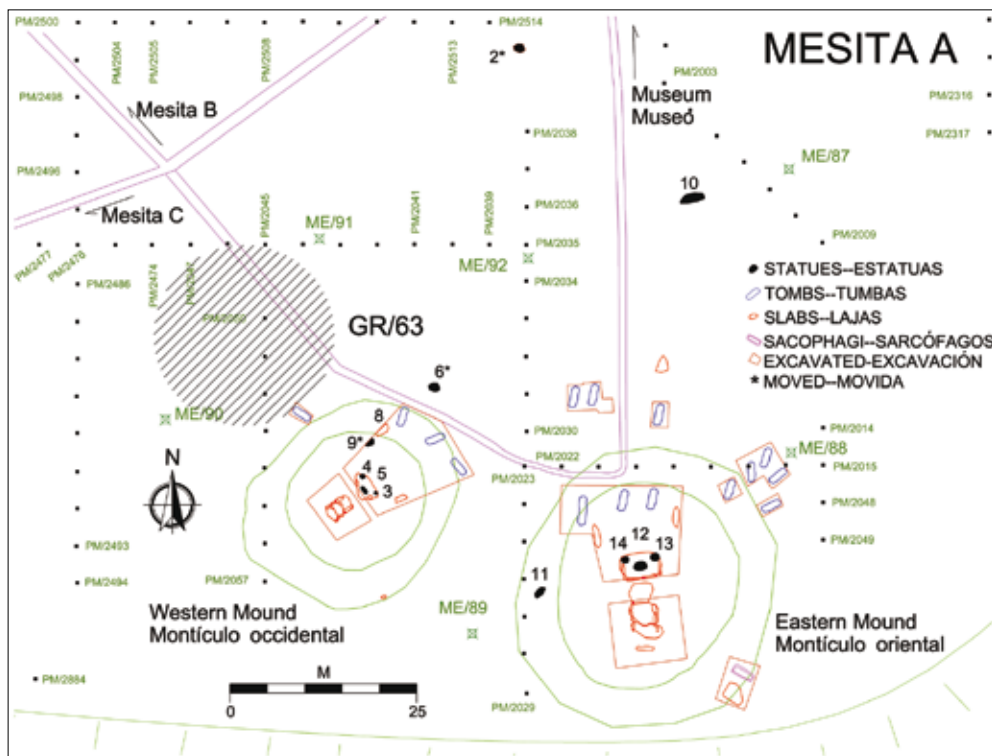


**Figure 14.**  
Some of the statues  
located in the Forest  
of the Statues, San  
Agustín. (N<sup>os</sup>. 205,  
107, 24, 223).

Further on, the visitor can see five monumental areas restored *in situ*, located towards the south and west of Mesita D: Mesitas A, B and C, the Fuente de Lavapatas and Alto de Lavapatas. While walking by these funerary sites the visitor can also appreciate the ancient earthworks made in order to prepare the terrain for the mounds, flattening the summits, filling depressions, constructing elevated paths over embankments and underpinning the earth fillings with stone structures.

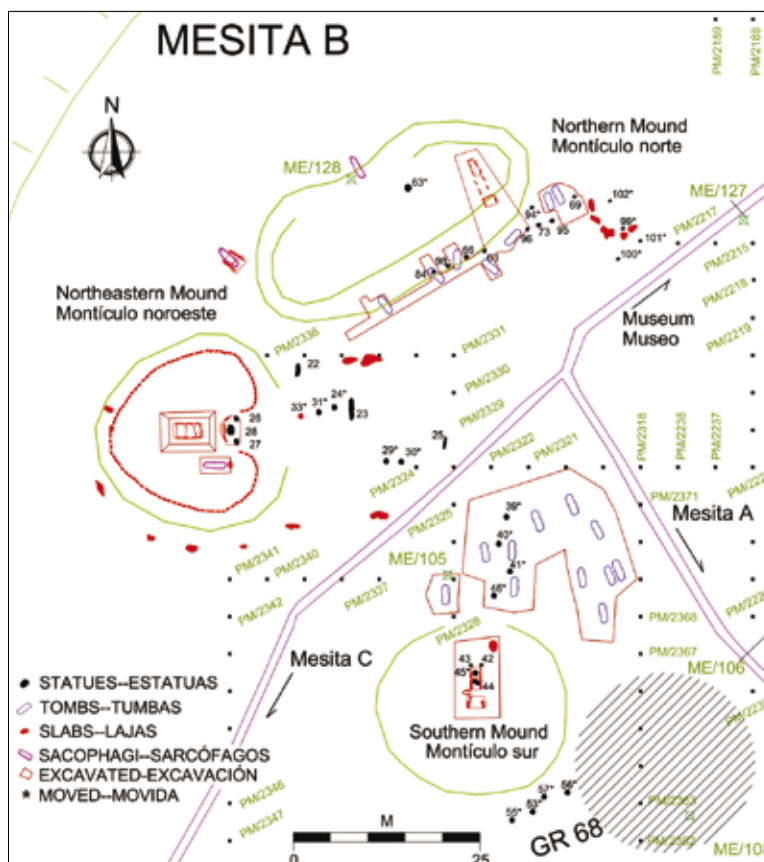
The site known as Mesita A (figures 15 and 16), is located 600 m south from Mesita D and since the early 20th century has been one of the greatest attractions of the Park. The visitor can arrive there after going through a prehispanic embankment and the entrance gate to Las Mesitas, taking the path detour to the left (south). It contains the biggest funerary mounds of the Regional Classic Period (1-900 A.C.), 4 m high and 30 m in diameter, where, at different times, important figures were buried. The corridors and dolmens of these two principal tombs have, at least, 15 statues and used to be surrounded by numerous simple slab stone tombs probably for relatives of the chiefs or other important people that lived in the nearby household (GR/63).

**Figure 15.**  
Mesita A  
plan, Mesitas,  
San Agustín.  
(González, 2007).





**Figure 16.**  
Statues of the  
Oriental Mound,  
Mesita A, San  
Agustín.



**Figure 17.**  
Mesita B plan,  
Mesitas, San  
Agustín (González,  
2007).

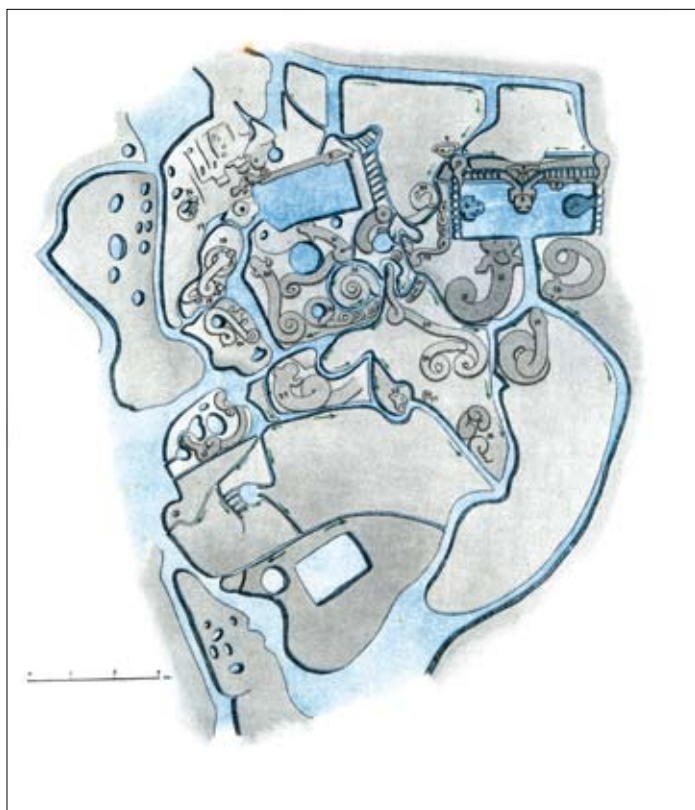
The site known as Mesita B (figure 17) is located 400 m south from Mesita D and it can be visited at the end or the beginning of the route, as an alternative to Mesita A, taking instead the detour to the right (west) on the path from the gate. Mesita B is located 200 m northwest from Mesita A over the top of an artificially flattened hill near the bank of the Lavapatas Stream. This place was used for residential occupation of high status families since the Formative 1 period, and during all the prehispanic sequence fulfilled a central role in the communities' organization. Clear evidence of ceremonial activities has been found here as well as production of gold ornaments. During the Regional Classic Period (1-900 A.C.) three large funerary mounds were built here accompanied by, at least, 63 statues. As in Mesita A, it has also many simpler tombs of every archeological period and a household (GR/68).

Mesitas A and B are special because archeological excavations dug here produced enough information to make a very accurate reconstruction of the funerary architecture of the mounds and especially of the original distribution of the statues and tombs, with the exception of the north mound of Mesita B. In other sites, such as Mesita C, D and the Alto de Lavapatas, when the archaeologists started the study of the monuments, they had already been badly damaged and statues or slabs had been removed, which permitted only a very approximate restoration.

In contrast with Mesita A and Mesita B, that besides the monuments present residential occupation since the Formative Period, Mesita C, to the southwest from Mesita A, is a site only occupied since the Regional Classic Period. At this time only one funerary mound now gone was built, and it was accompanied by 15 statues and surrounded by 49 relatively simple tombs. The sculptures were shallowly carved, over big and flat stones, without almost no strong modification, which makes a sharp contrast to the fine tridimensional carving of Mesita A.

Dated with radiocarbon to the 7th century A.D., these monuments, several centuries younger than the ones of Mesita A and Mesita B, show that at that time San Agustín statues became more abstract and less elaborate.

At a distance of 100 m on the path between Mesita C and the Alto de Lavapatas there is the Fuente de Lavapatas site, a lithic monument without funerary association discovered in 1937 by the archaeologists Gregorio Hernández de Alba and José Pérez de Barradas (figure 18). Lavapatas “fountain” is a great complex of channels, ponds and carvings of human and animal figures, mostly reptiles and amphibious representations, surely a sacred place dedicated to religious ceremonies and ritual baths. It was carefully sculpted in the volcanic tuff that forms the natural bedrock of the Lavapatas Stream; it distributed the stream water across channels



**Figure 18.**  
Sketch of the  
Lavapatas Fountain  
(Pérez de Barradas,  
1943).



and small ponds adding sound and movement to the sculpture. Currently, the visitor can appreciate most of the surface carving, belonging, according to the sculptural style, to the end of the Regional Classic Period or even to the Recent Period. The fragility of the stone, combined with the water contamination, has accelerated the natural deterioration process, which prompted the establishing of an emergency plan led by the ICANH that by means of scientific research in preventive conservation looks for proper ways to preserve these kinds of sculptures.



**Photo: Magdalena river gorge near San Agustín.**

The Alto de Lavapatás Site, 600 m west from Mesita C, is separated by the stream that carries the same name. Archaeologists Luis Duque Gómez and Julio César Cubillos excavated part of this site in 1974. Through radiocarbon they dated a burner made in 3300 BC, the most ancient evidence of human activity in the Upper Magdalena. During the Regional Classic Period a monumental funerary mound was constructed there, accompanied by seven statues and surrounded by several simple stone slab tombs, including, to the south of the mound, a group of ten very small graves, interpreted to be children's tombs, probably the young members of an important family.

The funerary mounds were constructed generally over hilltops that were adapted previously displacing great amounts of soil. The topography of Las Mesitas was modified, also to connect at the same level hills of different heights with elevated filled paths. It is still possible to see the stone constructions that served as retaining walls (often confused with cobbled paving) and the embankment that connects nowadays the main parks of the office with Las Mesitas. These kinds of engineering work, so evident in Las Mesitas, are present but go unnoticed in many other funerary monumental sites of San Agustín.

They are made of soil, exception made of some reinforcements that use the same constructive elements of the dolmens, this is to say, a rectangular corridor formed by vertical slabs, and a ceiling formed with slabs. Excavations made by Gerardo Reichel-Dolmaffoff and Luis Duque Gómez near the Portón de Las Mesitas showed that these earthworks are supported by a great retaining wall made in only one constructive event and not by progressive accumulation.

## 5. Other Sites in the Municipality of San Agustín

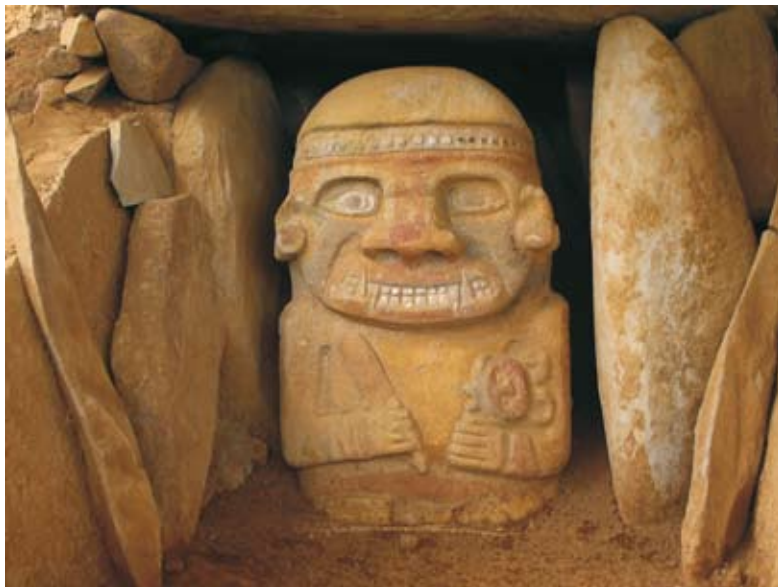
### El Purutal-La Pelota

Located between the El Purutal Hill and the Northwest slope of the La Pelota Hill, this archeological site is constituted by two monumental areas of the Regional Classic Period, each one with an artificial funerary mound built over natural rises connected by an artificial embankment approximately 230 m long. The area of El Purutal was partially excavated in 1984 by Julio César Cubillos and has three structures: a tomb and two “shrines” or dolmens, each one made by one slab structure and including a polychrome sculpture.

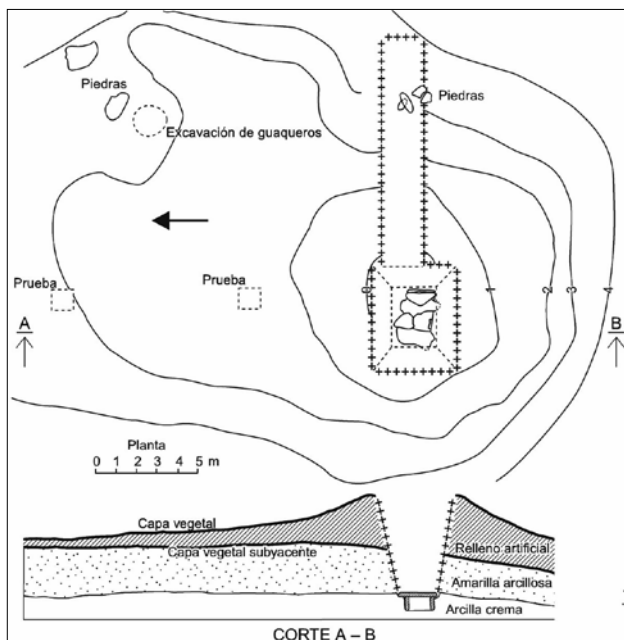
The visitor finds in El Purutal four statues. Two of them, located *in situ*, have retained until recently the polychrome painting (figure 19) that at some time all the principal statues had. In La Pelota, 150 m east, there are three sculptures that have been moved 80 m from their original place, where there are still the remains of a low mound. In 1857, Agustín Codazzi described in this place four statues associated to a “shrine” or funerary slab structure that was already destroyed by looters.

### Uyumbe

In the Uyumbe or Ullumbe Hill, 500 m east of the modern town of San Agustín, there have been found several statues and stone tombs associated to one funerary mound (figure 20) built over the side of the hill and connected to the hill with an embankment made with artificial filling. Already in 1857 it was severely intervened by clandestine excavations, but in 1991 it was excavated by the archaeologist Julio César Cubillos, who



**Figure 19.**  
 (No. 162)  
 Painted statue.  
 El Purutal site,  
 San Agustín.



**Figure 20.**  
 Mound 1 cut,  
 Uyumbe (Duque,  
 1999).

obtained a radiocarbon date of  $1040 \pm 90$  A.C. and succeeded in reconstructing the shape of a slab tomb with six columns and four big slabs as if they were lids.

## El Tabor

This site is also known as La Florida, and it is located on the ridge of Lavaderos hill, 4 km south of San Agustín and the Naranjos River, over the route to the Police Station Inspection of El Rosario, in a region where numerous funerary sites have been reported (Ordóñez, 1995). Over a hilltop there is a great artificial mound with three funerary chambers that include three particularly large and elaborate monolithic sarcophagi, and also 11 huge stone columns with slots that are not typical in the monuments of the region (figure 21). At one side of the mound archaeologist Eduardo Forero

**Figure 21.**  
Sarcophagus and  
monoliths of El  
Tabor, San Agustín.



excavated in 1995 a fourth tomb formed by several columns and slabs and in its interior, apparently as an offer, a statue of a crouching figure carrying an arrow. Years before, yet another statue was found there by looters. The apparent inexistence of dolmens in this site is noticeable although it was already badly altered in the 1930s and it is possible that such structures were removed.

## Quebradillas

Located 5 km to the west of Las Mesitas, on the road that connects to the El Oso rural district, this site has barely visible remains of two funerary mounds from the Regional Classic Period, 270 m apart from each other, where looters have removed countless pots and several statues, three of which, of great size, are exhibited there.

When Pérez de Barradas visited the zone, in 1937, he found intensive looting stimulated by the rare finding of golden rings or nose rings at the site, and was able to examine human bone remains that are also rare to find here due to soil acidity. According to the description of the ceramics removed by looters, the site had also tombs of the Formative Period. Two statues with masks that come from here (figure 22) are a clear expression of the importance of the ceremonies in the social organization of the Regional Classic Period.

## El Jabón

The El Jabón rural district is part of the Obando Inspection, where several tombs have been looted and excavated, even in the modern village, where some of them, now restored, are exhibited. To access El Jabón from the San Agustín town the visitor must cross (7 km north) the Magdalena River towards Obando by El Estrecho gorge, where the river goes through a slot in the rock less than 3 m wide, and turn west another 3 km on a dirt road from the Obando village. The site still has visible remains of

**Figure 22.**  
Statue with  
mask. (Nº.157).  
Quebradillas, San  
Agustín.



two of the three funerary mounds reported by Konrad Th. Preuss in 1914. It had at least seven statues, from which three are currently in the Archeological Museum of Berlin and one is exhibited *in situ*, near two sarcophagi and several slabs that were part of the already destroyed dolmens. The rest is now lost.

## El Tablón

This site is located 2 km north of the town of San Agustín, in the banks of the El Tablón Stream. It was reported in 1914 by Preuss, who found over the narrow edge of a hill three funerary dolmens associated to several statues and covered by a large earth mound. One of the statures, 2.2 m in height, is wearing a headdress, a tunic, a necklace and a ring nose and is carrying a flat instrument that covers its mouth. This and the other statues of the site have been classified as feminine figures.

South of the site, in a separate plot of land owned by the ICANH, there is an exhibition of five statues found in the tombs. The visitor can visit next to it, an ethnographic museum organized by the neighbors of the El Tablón rural district.

## La Chaquira

One of the most important examples of the sculptural art of San Agustín is La Chaquira, located 4 km north of the town of San Agustín, on the edge of the range that separates El Tablón Stream from the Magdalena River Canyon. It is not a funerary site, but a unique group of naturalistic human and animal figures, sculpted on the walls of huge natural volcanic rocks, looking at the Magdalena River that runs 200 m below, east of this monument. Three human figures sculpted in the same block, with arms and feet to the sides, like in a worshipping act, stand out (figure 23). Nowadays, there is a steep path that leads to a series of stairs to access the group of sculpted rocks.



**Figure 23.**  
Sculpture of  
La Chaquira, San  
Agustín.

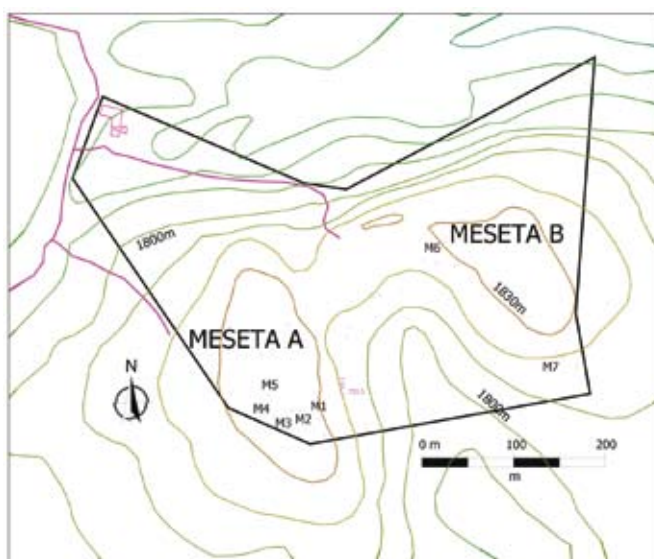


## 6. Sites located in the Municipality of Isnos

### Alto de los Ídolos

The Alto de los Ídolos is only after Las Mesitas, the site with the most density of tombs, mounds and statues of the archeological culture of San Agustín. Reported for the first time by Konrad Th. Preuss (Preuss, 1931), it is located in the Municipality of Isnos , 5 km northeast from the modern town of San Agustín (15 km by road) and 4 km southwest of the modern town of Isnos, and it has an administrative office and an ethnographic museum managed by the ICANH (figure 24).

It is made of seven funerary mounds associated to several monolithic sarcophagi and at least 23 statues. The mounds were built over a naturally horseshoe-shaped hill, leveled out with a huge artificial terrace.



**Figure 24.**  
Map of the Alto de los Ídolos site, Isnos.

At each end there are two groups of mounds: Meseta A located in the Southwest sector (figure 25) and a bit more elevated than the rest of the site, has five mounds (1-5). These are characterized for having lithic sarcophagi with elaborate carving, that are up to 3 m in longitude (figure 26), and still have in some cases, their also decorated lids. Meseta B (figure 27) is located in the northeast sector of the hill and although it has a similar area, only has the remains of two groups of relatively simple tombs that are surrounding two great earth mounds (6 and 7) characterized by very elaborate funerary architecture, with huge slabs and well preserved sculptures that represent animal figures like alligators and frogs accompanying the human figures.

In 1966, Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff directed research sponsored by the Universidad de los Andes to improve the ceramic chronology and also made some excavations at the site, where the accumulation of artificial fillings to adapt the surface of the hill is evident. But, finally, it was only during

**Figure 25.**  
Outlook of the Alto de los Idolos site, Isnos. In the background the Meseta A.





**Figure 26.**  
Large Sarcophagus.  
Mound 2, Meseta A,  
Alto de los Ídolos.



**Figure 27.**  
Funerary mound 6,  
Meseta B, Alto de  
los Ídolos, Isnos.

the scientific commission of 1970, carried out by Duque Gómez and Cubillos when the whole site was surveyed and restoration organized, distinguishing two Mesetas (A and B), each one with several separate mounds. At this site, is noticeable the good preservation of the polychrome figures that decorated many of the slabs that formed funerary corridors.

According to the results of systematic surveys, similarly to Mesitas and Alto de las Piedras, Ídolos was a ceremonial center at the center of important demographic concentrations during the Regional Classic Period, when the mounds and statues were constructed, but also before and after, during the Formative and Recent Periods, those three places were centers of high residential density. So, although the funerary monuments are their most visible characteristic, these sites had a ceremonial importance not only related to the burials of important people, but surely to a varied set of activities organized in the same places by certain families and that were important for the communities of the region.

On the other hand, even though Las Mesitas has more monuments, the human concentrations around these three centers were not so different, which means that we can assume they were similar politically independent units and, perhaps even with some rivalry among them. The way in which these units of thousands of people, called chiefdoms in anthropological theory, were organized, and the changes that took place within these organizations, are still under research.

## Alto de las Piedras

The Alto de las Piedras, located in Las Delicias District, 10 km north from the Alto de los Ídolos, is a ceremonial center built atop a small hill that obtained a half moon shape by terracing and artificial filling. It was known originally as Gallineros due to the name of a nearby stream. It was first studied by Preuss in 1914, and it contained 11 statues distributed around at least four funerary mounds, each one of them with large corridors and several smaller tombs. In contrast with other monumental sites here the

visitor can find very deep tombs and stone slabs with elaborate and well preserved original painting. It includes one of the most enigmatic figures of San Agustín sculpture, called *El doble yo* (Double me): a human character with long canine teeth that carries on top of his head a second, smaller figure, that also combines animal and human features (see cover). The site was already intervened in 1914 and was restored between 1975 and 1990, when the principal tomb of mound 2 was reconstructed.

## 7. The National Archeological Park of San Agustín and its Protection

The concern of the archaeologists and other citizens, for the protection of the funerary monuments of the Regional Classic Period has encouraged for decades the Colombian Congress and the National Government to establish a legal regime to protect and preserve this and other Colombian archeological properties.

The Park is legally protected since 1931 as a public cultural property under the protection of the State. As part of the development of the law, in 1938, the National Archeological Service was created, managed since 1952 by the Instituto Colombiano de Antropología, ICAN, today Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia, ICANH, the entity responsible for its research and management.

At the end of the 1930s some sectors of archeological interest were identified, and research was intensified, some monuments were reconstructed and some areas were delimited so that they could become an

archeological reservation for protection and educational purposes. The Colombian State gradually acquired stretches of land that would form the Archaeological Park of San Agustín. In 1993 it was declared as a National Monument and in December of 1995 Unesco inscribed it in the World Heritage List. The Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia, ICANH, as manager of the Colombian archeological properties, has a management plan that includes programs for maintaining the facilities and the outdoor areas open to the public, the periodical update of the museum's exhibit design and park signaling, the archeological research, the programs related to conservation and restoration, the monitoring of the touristic activity and the promotion of the Park's cultural values.

The direct threats to the good preservation of the archeological cultural properties in the Park are mainly fungus, lichen and insects attacks, and also the erosion of the sculpted stones. A prime factor, among others, is direct solar exposure which accelerates the natural process of deterioration. The ICANH carries out research in these three fronts and also activities of preventive conservation and restoration. Also, it has invested in constructing fences around the terrains and in the Park's path network, which has made surveillance easier and has improved the visiting conditions.

The resources for the Park's management come from the Nation's budget that is annually awarded through the Budget Law. The ICANH maintains an investment project registered in the Departamento Nacional de Planeación in order to support these activities. Secondary sources of funding include the entity's own, generated in a small proportion by the sale of entrances to the Park, and the contributions of the Ministerio de Cultura and Fundación de Investigaciones Arqueológicas Nacionales of the Banco de la República.

## 8. General Recommendations

In Colombia, the archeological heritage is a Nation's property and it is inalienable, indefeasible and imprescriptible (Article 72 of the Political Constitution, General Law of Culture, 397 of 1997, modified by the Law 1185 of 2008). It is a crime to commercialize archeological properties, to intervene, to export or to use them without official authorization. San Agustín has suffered the effects of looters and of illegal traffic and the visitors risk being involved in illicit activities if they do not know about these regulations.

Do not engage in any kind of excavation and do not buy crafts that could be original archeological properties. When buying modern crafts, demand that the copies or archaeological replicas have engraved in high relief the word "Réplica" to comply with Decree 833 of 2002. If you witness suspicious excavations or craft sales that might include archeological pieces, please inform it to the Park staff or to the Tourism Police.

The statues and other archeological remains are in danger due to erosion and biodeterioration that can be accelerated by contact with strange elements. Due to the lack of precautions, the paintings and sculptures can suffer irreversible damage. Please, do not touch, do not scrawl or scratch or pour any kind of liquid over the surfaces of the archeological properties. If you witness vandalism activities, please inform Park staff or the Tourism Police.

The archeological heritage is a National asset and also a property of mankind. We all have the right to enjoy it but also the duty to protect it and preserve it for future generations.

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Photo: Figure in El Tablón site, San Agustín.