

# Tierradentro

National Archaeological Park

Guidebook  
English







Photo: Half moons and salamanders, hypogeum A-0, Alto de El Aguacate, Tierradentro.





Fabián Sanabria Sánchez  
**General Director**

Ernesto Montenegro  
**Scientific Subdirector**

Fernando Montejo  
**Coordinator, Archaeology Group**

Victor González Fernández  
**Texts and Maps**

Mabel Paola López  
**Head of Publications**

Jimena Perry Posada  
**Translator**

Tiza Orión Editores  
**Text and Style Editing, Design and Diagramming**

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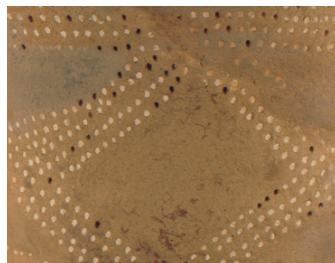
Calle 12 No. 2-41 Bogotá D.C.  
Tel: (57-1) 4440544 Fax: ext. 144  
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Photo: Hypogeum SA1, San Andrés, Tierradentro.



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Photo: Hypogeum S9, Segovia, Tierradentro.



# Introduction

The National Archeological Park of Tierradentro is world-renowned because it has the largest concentration of monumental subterranean tombs from Prehispanic times. The Park works in protecting, preserving, researching, and exhibiting one of the most important cultural properties of the Colombian Nation, and one of the most impressive remains of disappeared indigenous societies.

The archeological region of Tierradentro (figure 1) is part of the cultural area of Alto Magdalena and shares with Valle de la Plata, directly to



**Figure 1.** Map of Colombia showing the location of the Tierradentro region in Colombian Southwest.





**Figure 2.**  
Interior view of  
the entrance stairs,  
hypogeum S9,  
Segovia National  
Archeological Park  
of Tierradentro.

the South, and with San Agustín zone, even further South, many of the general developmental characteristics of their societies during Prehispanic times. Nevertheless, the hypogea –large and elaborate subterranean funerary chambers without known counterpart (figure 2)– give Tierradentro an exceptional cultural value that has deserved its inscription in the UNESCO World Heritage List since 1995.

Tierradentro is also the name of the geographical region where the Municipalities of Inzá and Páez are located, and where archeological remains and the hypogea can be found. This is a mountainous and volcanic zone on the east side of the Central Mountain Range of the Northern Andes. Here, the basin of the Páez River is formed and it flows into La Plata River, forming the main tributary of the upper Magdalena River basin.

This region is enclosed, in an approximately triangular shape, on the West by the Las Delicias, Guanacas and Moras Moorlands; on the East by the Nátaga Mountains and on the South by La Plata River. The northern corner is formed, as a vortex, by the summit of the snow-capped volcano Nevado del Huila, the highest point in Colombian Andes (5780 m). The large Páez River, born from the Páez Lake, close to the summit of Nevado del Huila, receives as tributaries the abundant waters of San Vicente, Moras and Ullucos Rivers in its southbound trajectory, as well as numerous streams of the entire region.

The name, tierra-adentro or inward-land, comes from the great difficulties in accessibility that the European Conquistadores found in the process of Conquest, during the 16th century, when the region was covered by thick woods that sheltered the indigenous people. Contrasts in height, water abundance and rich soils formed by volcanic ash deposits give the region a great variety of very productive ecologic niches, and the possibility of relatively rapid access from any point to exclusive products of the varied thermal levels, a characteristic of Los Andes Mountain Range which was well taken advantage of by Prehispanic populations.

Around 1700 MASL, the warmer climate is ideal for corn farming, which along with beans, arracacha and manioc, forms the core of traditional agrarian economy in the Northern Andes, while around 2000 MASL, colder weather lends itself more for the cultivation of potato, ulluco and other tubers. Even colder moorland that starts around 3000 MASL offers a variety of fauna, wild fruits, fibers and wood.

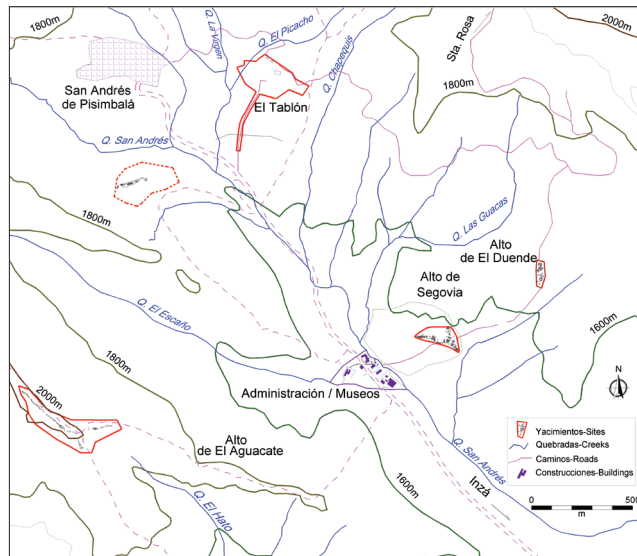
Climate in this zone of Tierradentro is Andean tropical, with an average rain of 1500 mm per year, with two rainy periods, between April and May, and October and November. Average temperature is 18°C with variations related to rain and frost during dry periods. The region is affected by an intense volcanic activity that implies frequent earthquakes, ash rains and avalanches.



# 1. Location

The Archeological Park of Tierradentro is situated on the valley of San Andrés Stream, a tributary to Ullucos River, around Latitude 2° 34' North and Longitude 76° 2' West, with elevations from 1299 to 2600 MASL (figure 3).

Administratively, the Park lies on terrains of San Andrés de Pisimbalá reservation and within the jurisdiction of the Municipality of Inzá, in the Department of Cauca. It is formed by five stretches of land located on the zone of concentration of the monumental hypogea, at both sides of the San Andrés Stream (figure 4) in a valley known for its high density of archeological sites of various types and periods, located over hill ridges, mountain summits and artificial terraces built on the hill slopes.



**Figure 3.** Map of the San Andrés valley with locations of Tierradentro archaeological park's sites.



The Archeological Park can be reached by road from Bogotá, using the route Bogotá-Neiva (229 km paved road), Neiva-La Plata (130 km paved road) and La Plata- Archeological Park (48 km unpaved road). It is also possible to get there by road from Popayán (134 unpaved road). Taxis and buses frequently travel this route and may be found at the Transportation Terminals of the mentioned cities. There are domestic flights from Bogotá to Popayán (Guillermo León Valencia Airport-PPN) and to Neiva (Benito Salas Airport-NVA). If you are driving, it is recommended you use a 4-wheel drive vehicle since the roads in Tierradentro are frequently in precarious condition.

The administrative offices of the Park are 1.5 km on the way to San Andrés from El Crucero, which is a place located 7 km East of Inzá, on the way to Belalcázar (Páez) or La Plata, and 6 km West of Las Juntas, over the Páez River Canyon. Normally, the trip to the Park is about 4 hours long from Popayán and 11 hours from Bogotá, via Neiva.

The Archeological Park is managed directly by the Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia, ICANH, the national authority for the protection of archeological heritage, and it comprises El Aguacate, Segovia, El Duende, San Andrés and El Tablón sites (table 1).

**Table 1**  
**List, location and principal features of the Archeological Park Sites**

<b>Site</b>	<b>Lat. Lon. (WGS84)</b>	<b>Principal Features</b>
Administrative offices	N2.570,W76.036	Ethnographic and Archeological Museums
Segovia	N2.574,W76.033	64 located hypogea, 25 open
El Duende	N2.576,W76.028	13 located hypogea, 5 open
San Andrés	N2.577,W76.044	23 located hypogea, 7 open, 1 collapsed
El Aguacate	N2.567,W76.049	62 located hypogea, 42 open
El Tablón	N2.580,W76.040	9 monolithic statues

**Figure 4.**  
Tierradentro  
Landscape.  
Monumental Site  
of Segovia, in the  
foreground, and El  
Aguacate Edge in  
the background.



Law 103 of 1931 declared the archeological monuments and objects from the Upper Magdalena region and from other places in the country as “public properties”, giving legal support to the acquisition in Tierradentro, beginning in 1935, of five of the premises that contain the principal archeological sites. In 1936, the archaeological explorations, conducted by José Pérez de Barradas, started to delineate the shape of the Park, officially created in 1945. Another site of the Archeological Park is located on the Loma de El Aguacate Hill Ridge and it is administratively part of the Nasa Indigenous Resguardo of San Andrés. The Park was declared as National Monument by Decree 774 of 1993, which gave the archeological zone a special legal protection.

In 1995, by petition of the government of Colombia, Unesco included The National Archeological Park of Tierradentro, in the list of World Heritage under criterion C (iii), because it constitutes a unique testimony to the everyday life, ritual, and burial customs of a developed and stable pre-hispanic society in the northern Andean region of South America, giving us an outstanding conception of the funerary space.



## 2. Tierradentro Today

The current population of the Municipality of Inzá (801 km<sup>2</sup>) is 22,000 people, for the most part indigenous of the Nasa ethnic group, the largest in Colombia, with approximately 120 000 people (17% of the Indigenous population of the country). The most common languages in Inzá are Spanish and Páez or Nasa Yuwe.

The Indigenous population in Tierradentro is organized in 21 Resguardos (reservations), each one governed by a Cabildo (council) chosen by the community, and seven indigenous communities. Besides the Nasa, in this territory there are Guanacas, Guambianos, Coconucos and Totoroes ethnic groups, though these are considered minorities.

The Archeological Park of Tierradentro is neighbor to the Indigenous Resguardos of San Andrés (44 km<sup>2</sup> and 1570 inhabitants) and Santa Rosa (22 km<sup>2</sup> and 1050 inhabitants).

The current settlement pattern in the region is disperse and very similar to the one reported by the archeological explorations for Prehispanic times, so the houses are close to the crops, which constitute, as it was before, the main economic activity. Each Resguardo has a small village where traditional weekly markets and religious festivities are held. The Colonial-time churches, with roofs made of straw from the region, are a special touristic attraction. A typical rural house is today built to shelter a nuclear family and consists of a rectangular structure with walls made of reeds and mud floors with gable roofs. In the interior of the traditional houses there is a fire delimited by three buried stones or *tulpas*.

Nasa communities have an eminently agricultural economy, directed to local consumption. Culturally they give earth an almost sacred value, tenaciously defending their plots and their Resguardo territories, which

belong to the whole community. Internal organization of these polities and a large part of the indigenous regional struggles are aimed at the recovery of agricultural lands that have been gradually lost by pressure exerted by other communities in the region with economic and technologic advantages.

Among the Nasa, the traditional system of slash and burn agriculture, not very productive in the worn out soils of slopes of the region is still used. Main cultivars are corn, potato, arracacha, beans, coffee, peas, sugar cane and manioc. Agricultural tasks of slashing and planting among the Nasa are men's responsibilities, while women and children take care of the growing crop. For the important activities of slash and burn and sowing, as for every important events the Nasa communities organize reciprocal communitarian work groups called *mingas*.

The members of the Resguardo are responsible for participating in *mingas*, for tasks of communal interest and for performing duties assigned by means of an election. The elected members of the Cabildo receive as a symbol of their authority staffs traditionally carved in *chonta* wood and decorated with wool tassels and silver plates.

Although the date of their arrival in the region has not been yet established, during the 16th century, the Nasa (known before as Páez) already lived in the Upper Magdalena region and since then, Tierradentro is considered as their ancestral territory. Organized in strongly centralized chiefdom territories, Paeces were independent and bore enmity towards neighboring groups, among which were the Pijaos (to the North) and the Yalcones and Timanaes (to the South). In spite of their traditional rivalry, they formed coalitions to confront the Spaniards, who had to make great efforts during more than a hundred years to achieve control of the region. At the end of this bloody period, only a few groups of the Nasa ethnic group survived and they retreated into the most inaccessible zones of Tierradentro.

The Spanish chronicles of the Conquest describe the Páez chiefdoms as organizations with a leader or *cacique* who concentrated a very diffused and precarious power which did not allow him to demand



tributes (Rappaport, 1982) or accumulate wealth and who depended on his generosity and his personal prestige to form alliances.

Nasa chiefdoms of Colonial times seem to represent a very different kind of organization when compared to those shown by the archeological evidence for Prehispanic times, which leads to think that the Conquest disintegrated these polities or that, alternatively, the Nasa occupied the region short before the Conquest.

Current Nasa communities (figure 5) denied until not too long ago that they had a direct historic relation with the builders of tombs and statues, and therefore rejected a connection with hypogea classifying them as “Pijao tombs” (Sevilla and Piñacue, 2007), which reaffirms the hypothesis of some experts about a relatively recent arrival of this ethnic group to the zone of Tierradentro, not long before the Conquest, driving away neighboring populations or, alternatively, occupying an unpopulated territory.



**Figure 5.**  
Indigenous  
of the Nasa ethnic  
group, 1943.

Such recent arrival remains to be confirmed, but some specialists find support in linguistic information, kinship systems and genetic data that suggest a closer link of Nasa population with Amazonic groups (Langebaek and Dever, 2009).

Recent history of the Nasa and other indigenous groups of Tierradentro is marked by social struggles and projects of cultural vindication, where three *caciques* called Avirama, Páez and Suin excelled in leading the war against *conquistadores*, and the historic and mythic figure of a leader known as the cacique Juan Tama who, according to oral tradition, is a reincarnation of Thunder, and would have lived during Colonial times, but also had led the organization of several Resguardos over a very long period.

Nasa shamans or *Te-walas* are specialists in esoteric knowledge and are responsible for articulating religious life, ecology and politics through traditional ceremonies. The *Te-walas* consider Juan Tama as their teacher in the knowledge of medicinal plants and in the relationship with spirits and supernatural beings, among which are spirits related to the Prehispanic tombs which are greatly respected because of certain dangerous elements that, according to shamanic knowledge, are still contained in the tombs and in the bones of "Pijaos". However, these traditional beliefs are changing, adjusting themselves to new political and cultural contexts in which the relation with foreign visitors and specifically cultural tourism are strategic. In this way, Nasa leaders, specially the youngest ones, see with new eyes the archeological remains of Tierradentro, to which renewed values are assigned (Sevilla and Piñacue, 2007).



### 3. Archeological Studies

The existence of the great chamber tombs in Tierradentro was known from long before, but scientific research started only in 1936 when geologist Geor Burg made a study of one hypogeum and when archeologist José Pérez de Barradas began his research funded by the Ministerio de Educación Nacional. Pérez de Barradas proposed (1937) that the big tombs with painted decoration at the sites of El Aguacate, San Andrés and Segovia (figure 6) were built later than the Classic Period of San Agustín and belonged to a period which he



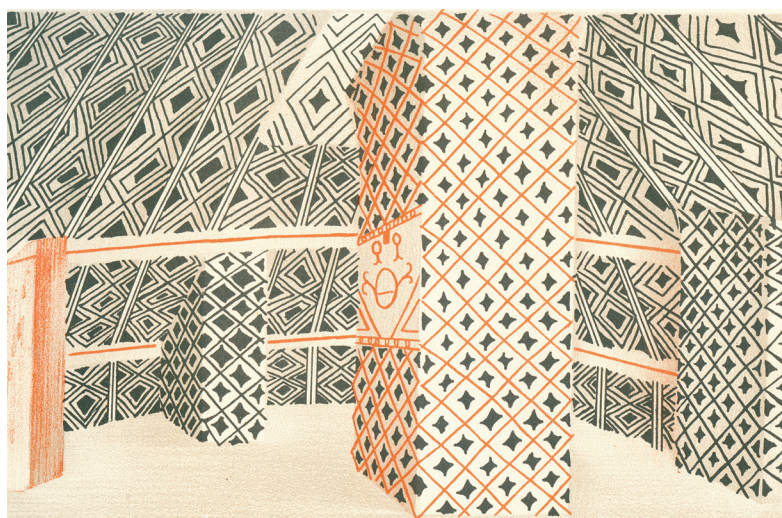
**Figure 6.**  
Internal view of  
the walls and roof  
of hypogeum  
S10 in Segovia,  
Tierradentro.

called “Flowering Cauca Culture” dated between the 9th and 12th centuries AD. He argued that between the 12th and 15th centuries another culture (which he called “Recent Cauca”) lived in the region and its remains could be seen in the zone of Belalcázar, assigning the Nasa ethnic group, which according to historical data inhabited this region since at least the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a more recent arrival (Rappaport 1982).

Even though the chronology proposed by Pérez de Barradas did not have the support of direct methods of radiocarbon dating, invented a decade after his studies, it is still accepted by the majority of researchers.

In 1937, Gregorio Hernández de Alba made a technical visit for the Ministerio de Educación in which he described in detail the hypogea and sketched the first planes and drawings of the tombs’ interiors (figure 7) (Hernández de Alba, 1938).

These materials are still located at the Documentation Center of ICANH and they are a very important support for decision making regarding restoration and research. In 1938 the Servicio Arqueológico Nacional was created and it was assigned to it the study and care of archeological properties, including the management of the Park of Tierradentro. From 1952



**Figure 7.**  
Sketch of  
hypogeum SAS,  
Segovia site,  
Tierradentro.  
Gregorio Hernández  
de Alba (1938).



on, these matters would be the responsibility of the Instituto Colombiano de Antropología (today Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia).

The excavations made by Gregorio Hernández de Alba (1938) and Horst Nachtigall (1955) indicated a close link between San Agustín and Tierradentro in a big portion of the archeological sequence, sharing ceramics styles, the general settlement patterns and the funeral statuary of the Regional Classic Period (1-900 AD). Nonetheless, excavations showed that ceramics associated to hypogea was much different from the styles known in San Agustín (figure 8).

Later research (Chaves, 1972; Langebaek, 1955, 2009) confirmed that during the Formative Period (1000 BC-1 AD) and the Regional Classic Period (1-900 AD), Tierradentro was inhabited by agricultural societies that shared with San Agustín the disperse settlement patterns, statuary, ceramics (figure 9) and goldwork. Ceramics of all the Prehispanic sequence is so



**Figure 8.**

Typical funerary urn, recovered from hypogeum D5, Alto del Duende. ICANH collection, Museo Arqueológico de Tierradentro, Inzá.



**Figure 9.**

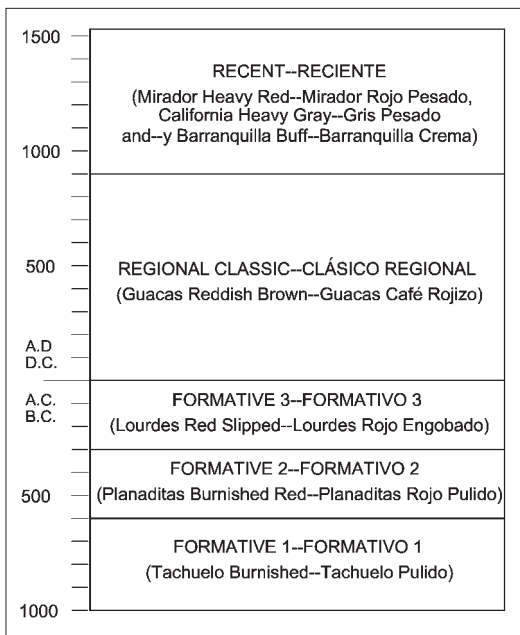
Zoomorphic jug of the Regional Classic period (1-900 AC) of Tierradentro used as a funerary offering. ICANH collection, Museo Nacional, Bogotá.

similar that in current archeological studies the same ceramics chronology is used for Valle de la Plata and for San Agustín and Isnos zones (figure 10) although there is recent information of some sites that suggest later dates for the end of the Formative 3 Period and Regional Classic Period in Tierradentro, when compared with the San Agustín zone (Langebaek and Dever, 2009).

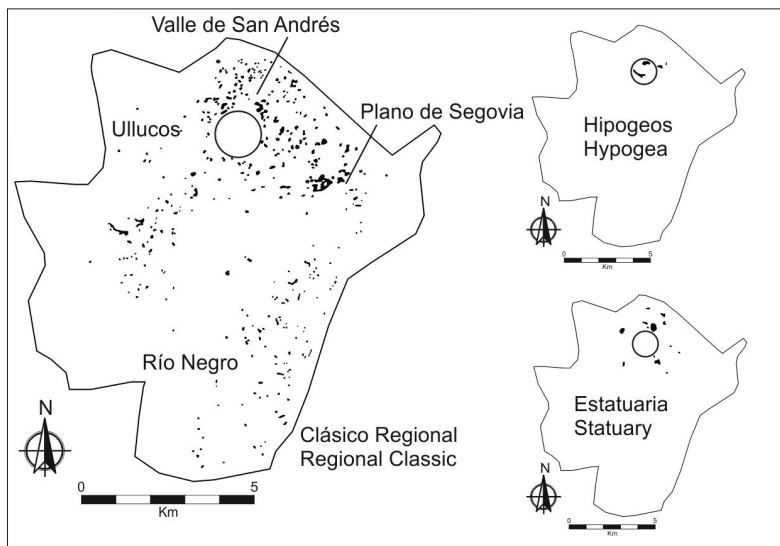
Regional surveys of the Ullucos, Malvasá, Río Negro and San Andrés valleys (figure 11) show that sedentary occupation of Tierradentro begun during the Formative 1 period (1000-600 BC) with a series of small residential sites, which were very disperse and had a density of less than 1 person/km<sup>2</sup> (Langebaek and Dever 2009). During Formative 2 (600-300 BC) population in the region doubled, but with less than 2 persons/km<sup>2</sup> it was still very low. It seems that in this period salt exploitation begun, and some remains identified in the Plano de Segovia, can be interpreted as the existence of specialization in the economic organization. Although population was dispersed during these periods, not all of the valleys had the same occupation. Residential areas were more frequent in the valley of the Stream of San Andrés and somewhat less in the valley of the Ullucos River. During Formative 3 (300 BC-1 AD) regional population increased drastically to something less than 10 people/km<sup>2</sup> and clear demographic concentrations appeared in the valley of the Stream of San Andrés, where the Archeological Park is now located, and also in the lower zone of the same valley, the Plano de Segovia. A third concentration, more tenuous, appeared also in the Malvasá valley.

These concentrations are analogous to the ones found in the archeological surveys of San Agustín and Valle de la Plata regions, where they have been interpreted as political units or chiefdoms whose territories are delimited by areas of lesser density than expected and that were formed by some hundreds of people whose houses show clear spatial concentration.

During the Regional Classic Period (1-900 AD) the population continued to increase to something less than 20 people/km<sup>2</sup> and for the first time residential sites covering several hectares are identified, specifically in San



**Figure 10.**  
Ceramics  
Chronology for the  
Alto Magdalena  
region.



**Figure 11.**  
Map of the  
regional survey of  
Tierradentro –left–  
with distribution  
of the Prehispanic  
settlement, from  
Langebaek and  
Dever (2009),  
compared to the  
distribution of  
hypogea (upper-  
right) and sites with  
statues (lower right).



Andrés Valley, in Loma de Segovia and in Plano de Segovia. Demographic units were larger at this time and a new one appeared in the valley of Río Negro. During this period the inhabitants carved stoned statues of Classic Agustinian style, but with some iconographic characteristics that distinguish them. The statues are concentrated in and around the upper part of the Valley of San Andrés (figure 11), where there is also the largest demographic concentration and a spatial association between statues and funerary mounds at least in the El Hato Site.

Nonetheless, in contrast to other regions of the Alto Magdalena, in Tierradentro there is no clear association between ceremonial centers, with funerary mounds and statuary, and demographic concentrations. For example, the zone of dense occupation in Plano de Segovia only shows one statue and there are other sites with statues but lacking mounds and concentration of residential remains for this period. It is possible that there were monumental tombs just like the ones found at San Agustín, but the intensity of illegal excavations could have destroyed the mounds. The few Tierradentro gold objects that are known could also belong to this period, given that they are similar to those from San Agustín and the Calima region, further North. However, the original contexts of the tombs that produced such gold work have already disappeared.

During the Regional Classic Period, the population does not show a strong tendency to choose fertile soils, which has led some authors to propose that the control of agricultural production was not a determinant for the chiefdoms organization during this period (Langebaek and Dever, 2009).

Population's levels and concentration during the Recent Period (900AD-1530 AD), and carving of San Agustín style statues ceased. It is likely that the individual mound tombs were replaced by hypogea that offer a sharp contrast because they were built to contain the remains of a group of people. During this period, human occupation reached its maximum with a density of approximately 40 people/km<sup>2</sup>, much higher than the current population density (of approximately 30 people/km<sup>2</sup>).

There is no reliable information yet about the relationship between the dense population of the Recent Period and the indigenous populations described in Spanish documents during Conquest and Colonial times. It is possible that, as in other parts of the Alto Magdalena, depopulation had taken place before the Conquest and that the indigenous populations during the Colonial Period would have occupied a largely uninhabited area, although it is also possible that there had been a continuity in population but that Conquest affected the traditional structures so quickly that no descriptions of dense chiefdoms of the Recent Period remained. In any case, population drastically decreased before the historical records. It was only after the Colonial period that demographic levels similar but smaller than to those of Prehispanic times were reached again.

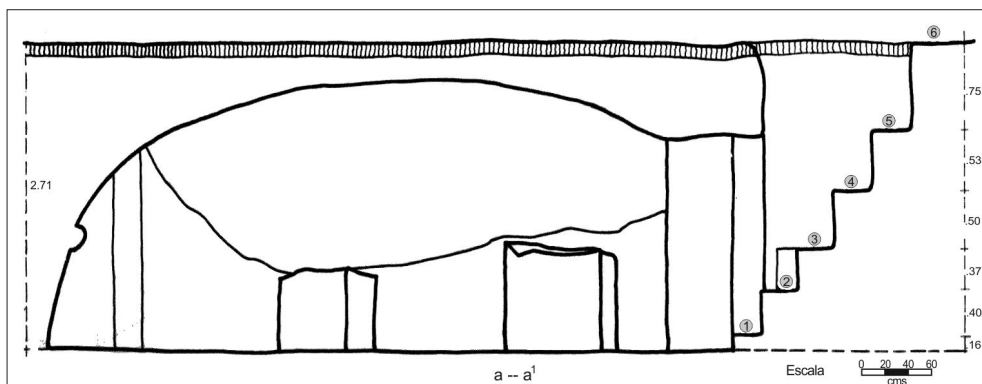
## 4. Hypogea or Monumental Tombs

In spite of the great similarity in residential patterns and demographic dynamics of Tierradentro to the rest of the Alto Magdalena, hypogea and some ceramics, dated tentatively to 600-900 BC, are an exclusive trait of this region that marks a clear separation from the cultural patterns of San Agustín at the end of the Regional Classic Period. The only two radiocarbon dates for the Tierradentro tombs (Chavez and Puerta, 1986) come from organic material found in a primary burial in Santa Rosa (630±80 AD) and from a funerary urn from a hypogeum in Loma de El Aguacate (850±220 AD). Nonetheless, less elaborated monumental hypogea from other regions in Southwestern Colombia have also been dated to the Recent Period, which supports the idea that hypogea can be dated back to the end of the Regional Classic Period.

Not every tomb associated with the ceramics material exclusive to Tierradentro was in urns and collective tombs. Several individual primary burials have been found in shallow shaft tombs, with a small lateral chamber where the body, along some funerary offerings was laid. If the chronology of residential places is well defined and homogenous for all the Alto Magdalena, the chronology of hypogea, including their excavation date and the period in which the large multiple tombs were used, is still a very controversial topic.

The hypogea appear in groups or cemeteries, on the edges and summits of artificially flattened hills. Composed of downward stairs and funerary chamber (figure 12), they were carved in the volcanic rock which is the natural geologic formation that prevails in the region. Carving of the tombs, that reach up to 9 m diameter, with depths of up to 7 m, was performed with simple chisels and adzes of andesite and basalt, tools that have been found in some of the archeological excavations. The funerary chamber often contains lateral niches (figure 13) and in the larger and more elaborate hypogea two or three columns seem to support the concave roof. To prepare the base for the large murals, the carved walls were covered with plaster that smoothed the surface. Human remains

**Figure 12.**  
Side cut of  
hypogeum SA3,  
San Andrés,  
Álvaro Chaves  
and Mauricio  
Puerta, 1986.  
Tierradentro.







**Figure 13.**  
One of the decorated niches found inside the hypogeum S30, Segovia site, Tierradentro.

were exhumed from their primary tombs and carefully prepared and deposited for the second burial inside elaborate funerary urns, thus it is believed that these sacred spaces were opened during relatively long periods, when modifications to their constitutive elements could have been made; this helps us to understand their role as ceremonial areas but, on the other hand, makes more difficult to establish the chronology of their production.

The dimensions of many of the hypogea exceed the measurements of studied residential structures which rarely reach 8 m in diameter. It is admirable then, the work investments required to excavate the chambers, carve the columns and stairways and paint these artificial caves, all done with a stone based technology.

According to existing information, and probably by the end of the Regional Classic Period (900 AD), the great shaft tombs with lateral chamber were being used as secondary collective burials for the members of certain families or groups who deserved special treatment after death and whose remains were re-buried in pits inside the funerary room or deposited in the elaborate ceramics urns that were placed in niches carved on the walls of the precinct. Simpler shaft tombs with a small chamber were used for the majority of the population or for the first stage of primary burial of individuals whose remains were finally taken to the monumental

tombs. Hypogea, carved in volcanic rock under the surface of places also used for residency, were profusely decorated with niches, stairways, anthropomorphic columns and geometrical figures of red, black and white serpents and lizards that reproduce aspects of the elite houses but that placed them in an underworld inhabited by dead ancestors.

The exact meaning of the paintings and the geometric zoomorphic and anthropomorphic stylizations is lost, but Sevilla (2009a) finds similarities with the geometric designs in textiles made by modern Nasa for the *jigras cuetanderas*, or bags for carrying coca leaves, in which certain rhomboid patterns are associated with basic concepts of the indigenous world view. Even though these patterns are found in several other Amerindian cultures, and are present too in murals and painted ceramics, the resemblance leads to think that there could be a relationship between the decoration patterns of hypogea and creation myths.

Hypogea are not the only monumental tombs in the region that also contains apparently older mounds with stone tombs and statues focused on a single powerful individual. These two kinds of tombs are very different and the hypogeum has the characteristics of a family mausoleum, suggesting the commemoration of important families or lineages, signaling also a contrast between possible bases of power in these hierarchical societies (known also as *cacicazgos* or *señoríos*) that built different funerary monuments at different times. These patterns support Drennan's idea (2008) about a shift from individual power related with personal prestige to a more institutional and group-oriented power, related to control of key aspects of economic organization by the elite.

Most Prehispanic monumental hypogea are located in the San Andrés Valley of Tierradentro, but similar though smaller, less decorated and also less studied hypogea, have been reported in other zones of the Alto Magdalena region, including Saladoblanco, close to the main San Agustín sites and also in the region of Cumbre-Pavas in the Calima archeological zone. The regional importance of the locations containing hypogea is evident since these same places are also center of demographic occupation

for all the Prehispanic sequence and also show concentration of the funerary sites with San Agustín style statues. Residential remains have been found recently directly along the hypogea in the Archeological Park and also outside this zone in a wide region occupied today by the villages of Inzá, Belalcázar, San Isidro, El Marne and San Andrés de Pisimbalá. In this way, the valley of San Andrés that seems to have been a funerary ceremonial center throughout the sequence, also was a demographic center and surely a political and social axis for the chiefdoms of the region.

## 5. The Funeral Architecture of Hypogea

**H**ypogea are shaft tombs with lateral chambers, which are a much extended type of tomb in all Prehispanic America, but concentrated in the North of South America and the South of Central America. However, the hypogea of Tierradentro are more elaborate and complex than the shaft tombs in any other region.

Each hypogeum has a vault and a shaft and lateral entrance to the chamber. To make the access easier, the shaft has some kind of stairways carved in the rock, usually in zigzag or spiral patterns, though in some cases the entrance is a straight stairway. The care and preparation of this access stairway suggests that descent to the chamber, maybe for visiting the buried people, was a ceremonial act of great importance.

The vault is generally oval-shaped though it varies in the complexity of its design and in elaboration of the internally carved elements, such as niches and vestibules. The ceiling of the hypogea has been carved in a curved form, probably to distribute the weight of the roof in a more effective way. Used apparently for better supporting the larger vaults, central and lateral columns were carved in some cases. On the other hand, the



floor is not always smooth, as some excavations known as “cists” that contain funeral urns have been frequently found. There are also several types of purely decorative, high reliefs and bas reliefs carved as part of the walls, combined with paintings so as to create the effect of a much elaborate underworld house. Internal sculpture includes horizontal or vertical bands that seem to represent the posts and wooden beams of the house of the living. There are also stylized anthropomorphic representations carved in the columns in some of the tombs.

The majority of monumental hypogea also has as decoration very elaborate murals, generally painted over a white plaster in red, black and yellow paints made with minerals that are common in the region. The motifs are generally geometric, although there are also some naturalistic representations, especially of animals as in El Aguacate.

Given the complexity of design and the variety of constitutive elements, it is clear that the excavation of these tombs implied careful previous planning. Choosing the right place, with a rock stratum with enough depth, defining measures, proportions, spaces dedicated to niches, carvings and high reliefs, as well as the exact form of the stairways and vestibules should have had followed a very deliberate plan that required an impeccable performance. These characteristics suggest the existence of true specialists in charge of the creation of these impressive monuments.

## 6. The Park's Sites

The archeological sites with the most important hypogea that have been yet found –Segovia, San Andrés, El Duende and El Aguacate– are today archeological reservations and also the exhibition places of a representative sample of the magnificent Prehispanic hypogea. The visitor can descend through the original stairways and witness firsthand the most decorated hypogea, the biggest ones or those that are an example of the various types of decorative designs. Besides the sites with hypogea, that appear to form some kind of “necropolis”, the region has important examples of Agustinian statues and abundant remains of domestic activities from societies that dwelt here since at least 1000 BC. The Archeological Park also includes El Tablón, one of the most important sites featuring statues from the Regional Classic Period in the northeast zone of the Alto Magdalena. A brief review of the most relevant characteristics of these sites follows.

### Segovia

The most attractive monumental site at the Park and also the one of easiest access is located over the summit of Segovia Hill, 400 m East (ten minutes by foot) from the park's administrative office. Segovia, with 25 hypogea open to the public (figure 4) is notable because of the great variety in tomb shape and decoration (figures 6 and 14). It has the largest, the most complex and the best preserved hypogea. It includes several tombs with central columns, multiple niches and polychrome murals, measuring 2.5 to 6.0 m in depth and showing various types of designs of stairways and of internal area distribution. Decoration is outstanding in tombs S1, S4, S9 although there are also simpler hypogea in the site, as S16 and S19 (figure 15). From the total of 63 hypogea registered in Segovia, 22 have



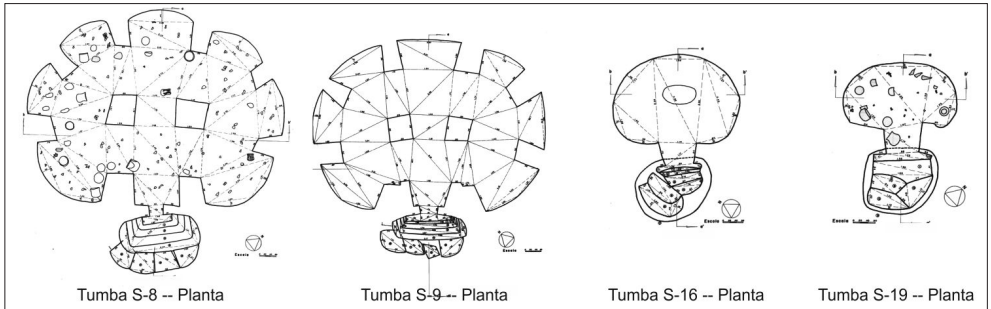
**Figure 14.**  
Detail of an  
anthropomorphic  
column, hypogeum  
S9, Segovia,  
Tierradentro Park.

been studied by archeologists Álvaro Chaves, Mauricio Puerta, Eliécer Silva Celis, Stanley Long, Horst Nachtigall, and Gregorio Hernández de Alba.

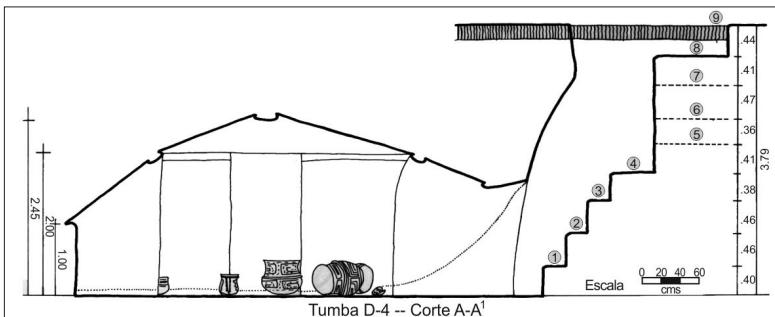
In these excavations, many funerary urns, bowls and pots have been found. Most of the pieces can be seen at the Archeological Museum located near the park's administrative office. Recent studies have shown remains of residential activities from the Formative Period (1000 BC-1 AD), Regional Classic Regional Period (1-900 AD) and Recent Period (900 AD-1530 AD) in the relatively flat areas around the hypogea.

Of course, this does not mean that there was not a division between the residential and the burial areas, but hypogea were in any case an integral part of Prehispanic settlements.





**Figure 15.**  
Comparison of different hypogea floorplans at Segovia (from left to right, S8, S9, S16, and S19). From Chaves and Puerta (1986).



**Figure 16.**  
Cut of hypogaeum D4, monumental site of El Duende, Tierradentro Park.

## El Duende

Located 600 m (ten minutes by foot) to the Northeast of Segovia, over a hill, El Duende has five hypogea in exhibition, all of them decorated with painted murals. Hypogaeum D4 is special because it has a rectangular chamber with the representation of a hipped roof, decorated with rhomboids and black lines that come down from the ceiling and cross horizontal lines (figure 16). These kind of structures, similar to the roofs

of contemporary indigenous houses, have led some authors to propose that hypogea represented houses. The depth of monumental tombs at El Duende is 1.40-5.80 m. In several of the hypogea excavated by archeologist Eliécer Silva Celis in 1940, funerary urns with applied and modeled decoration and with human and animal representations were found (figure 8). Archeological studies at El Duende have not shown yet residential occupation directly in the site where tombs were excavated although the adjacent area does have residential occupation from every Period.

## San Andrés

Located 1500 m (30 minutes by foot) north of the park's administrative office, on the road that gives access to the village of San Andrés de Pisimbalá, the funerary site on the Hill of San Andrés presents seven open hypogea, all decorated with murals with red and black painting over white, and central columns. Hypogeum SA5 is special in this group because it includes the representation of human faces (figure 17). The depth of these hypogea is 2.70-5.20 m. The ceiling of one of San Andrés hypogea



**Figure 17.**  
Painted face,  
hypogeum SA5.  
San Andrés site,  
Tierradentro.

collapsed, destroying its murals and carvings, so its internal structure with symmetric niches and careful orientation of funerary architecture is now visible.

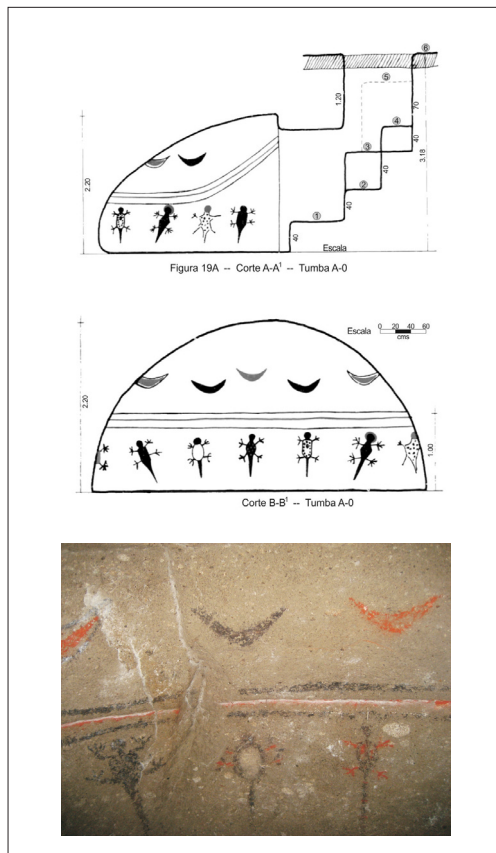
Geologist George Burg excavated several of the tombs of San Andrés site in 1936 and found polished stone artifacts and the typical ceramics urns with incisions filled with white paste. Recent studies show that the site, although it is located on rough-topography hill side, was also used as residence especially during the Recent Period.

## El Aguacate

Located over a ridge of difficult access and an astonishing view, 1200 m (two hours by foot) from San Andrés, El Aguacate presents 42 open tombs. The Aguacate ridge divides the riverbeds of the San Andrés Stream, to the North, and the Ullucos River, to the South. Along the very narrow ridge of this hill 64 monumental tombs have been found, practically aligned one besides the other. Many of them are deteriorated by erosion and illegal excavations and vandalism. This kind of deterioration demands that the ICANH, as the national authority in Archeology, carries out continuous monitoring and preventive conservation programs financed by various governmental entities.

Tombs at this site are relatively small, which is partially explained by the reduced space available on the ridge (figure 18). They lack central columns but do have niches and circular cavities carved on painted walls with radial pattern in red, black and white, and with naturalistic decorative motifs (figure 19), different from the geometric motifs of the other sites. In 1995, archeologists Álvaro Chavez and Mauricio Puerta described 56 hypogea. It is possible today to enter 42 of them, but it is recommended to visit only tombs with formally enabled access in order to avoid causing erosion of the fragile structures.

**Figure 18.**  
Panorama of El  
Aguacate Hill,  
showing the  
entrance to  
hypogea located on  
the ridge.



**Figure 19.**  
Cut and details of  
hypogea A-0,  
Alto de El Aguacate,  
decorated with  
moons and  
salamanders.



Although topographical conditions are difficult, remains of domestic activity were recently found in a stratum 20-30 cm deep, a few meters from hypogeum A60 in the highest part of El Aguacate Hill. This suggests that instead of forming a separate, well delimited “necropolis”, like it has been previously proposed (Langebaek and Dever, 2009), El Aguacate tombs, as in the case of other sites, were integrated into the dispersed rural Prehispanic settlement.

## El Tablón

Located 750 m Northeast of San Andrés, and 1500 m (30 minute by foot) from the park’s administrative office, El Tablón is a monumental funerary site from the Regional Classic Period (1-900 AD) as well as a dense residential occupation site from the Formative Period (1000 BC-1 AD) until the Recent Period (900-1530 AD). Located on a natural sloped terrace North of San Andrés Stream, it included originally 11 monolithic statues (although only nine are exhibited today at the site), characterized by naturalistic human representations.

Although they belong to the same sculptural tradition of the statues of San Agustín (Huila), the 42 monolithic carvings that are known in Tierradentro have a characteristic stylistic unity (figure 20, figure 21). Mostly, they are standing human representations, classified basically in two groups: 1) Small, simple, roughly-carved statues representing naked human beings almost without ornaments, and 2) More carefully and elaborate carved statues, with figures more than 2 m high, generally of dressed individuals. There are other monolithic pieces that do not fit this pattern: 8 statues with zoomorphic figures, 3 house carvings and a polished disc.

Materials used for monoliths are andesite and tuff, volcanic rocks readily available in the region. Carvings must have been performed with basalt or granite artifacts, and if these statues fit the existing pattern in Valle de la Plata and San Agustín zone, they must have been originally

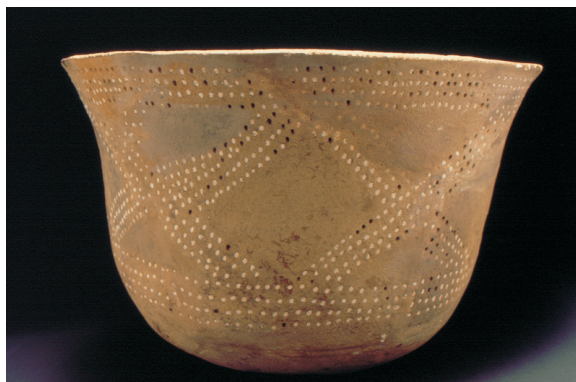
located near individual slab tombs from the Regional Classic Period, and covered by earth mounds.

In Tierradentro there has not been yet an excavation of the typical Augustinian funerary tumuli, where the majority of statues have been found. But in El Tablón Site there is evidence of intense looting activity

**Figure 20.**  
Statue No. 479.  
El Tablón.  
Tierradentro Park.



**Figure 21.**  
Statue 475.  
El Tablón,  
Tierradentro Park.



**Photo: Funerary urn, Tierradentro. ICANH collection, Museo Nacional de Bogotá.**

which has left big unfilled excavations that show previous existence of large earth structures suggesting the most probable location of earth mounds and other associated funerary elements.

A recent study showed that the areas with damaged earth structures (figure 22) contain relatively few remains of domestic activity, but are located directly to the Northeast of a concentration of several artificial terraces associated to great quantities remains of domestic activity. Artificial terraces, visible on the naturally sloped surface as flat and horizontal oval shaped areas measuring some 15 m in diameter, probably indicate the location of the houses where waste material was produced, especially sherds of ceramic vessels and lithic artifacts.

Other sites at Tierradentro where monolithic statues have been found are Loma Alta, San Francisco, Turminá, San Isidro, San Andrés, El Picacho, Santa Rosa, Páez, and El Hato. In this last one, located 3 km to the Southeast of the Archeological Park on the road to Inzá, some monolithic carvings can still be found. The statues, however, have been moved far



**Figure 22.**  
General view of El Tablón Site during recent archeological field work. Area of probable funerary mound construction.

away from their original locations and they are located today at the Park's museum, in the Municipality of Inzá, and in collections in Popayán, Inzá and Belalcázar.

Although there are no systematic studies of the spatial distribution of these monuments, the sites with statues from the Regional Classic Period around the Archeological Park, seem to surround the locations with hypogea (figure 11), and are associated to areas with intensive domestic activity, which implies that the areas where the hypogea were built, already had restricted uses since the beginning of this Period, or even before.

## 7. The Archeological Park Management

**M**anagement of the National Archeological Parks in Colombia is a function of the Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia, ICANH. Its Management Plan for the Preservation of the National Archeological Parks includes Tierradentro maintenance, information updating, review of the Archeological and Ethnographic Museums' scripts, signposting, research, conservation, restoration, supervision of tourism and divulgation.

The ICANH, with the Universidad del Cauca and in consultation with indigenous authorities and other local communities, is developing now a Project for Integral Management of the Archeological Park, looking to raise additional resources to solve the most serious problems of deterioration of archeological properties, and its better exhibition and scientific research. To support divulgation of scientific and cultural information, the Park maintains the Archeological Museum of Tierradentro, exhibiting examples of several kinds of Prehispanic artifacts and materials recovered during research in the region, and also the Ethnographic Museum of



Tierradentro in which the most relevant elements of material culture of the Nasa communities are exhibited, specially the objects related to everyday practices in their traditional cultural context.

For the management of the Park, the ICANH has a staff for administrative, protection and conservation tasks. Besides the scientific and administrative staff, the Park has one manager and 14 official workers, native to the region, that are involved in surveillance, maintenance and visitors' assistance.

Resources for the Park's management come from the Nation's General Budget, assigned annually through the Budget Law, and in lesser extent from the entrance tickets for visitors. The ICANH has registered a Project of Investment in the Office of National Planning to support these activities. Operational resources, such as utilities and staff expenses, also come from the Nation through the annual expense budget. Secondary funding sources include the Park's own resources, generated in part by the entrance tickets, as well as the contribution of Ministerio de Cultura and Fundación de Investigaciones Arqueológicas Nacionales of the Banco de la República.

Among the factors that threaten the preservation of hypogea in the Archeological Park are moisture, biological agents, and the great magnitude earthquakes that are not rare in the region, besides the constant activity of the Nevado del Huila volcano. Additionally, Tierradentro archeological sites have been affected by looting and illicit traffic. Although legislation is clear in forbidding non authorized interventions and the commercial trading of these cultural properties, authorities find very difficult to control the dispersed illegal excavations.

In spite of the efforts dedicated to the preventive conservation of the Park, threats to the archeological cultural properties are a constant source of worry. Due to the fact that the principal damage agents in the hypogea are moisture and biological agents, ICANH has developed a preventive conservation program that includes research on materials for reconstructing

volcanic stone structures (Durán, 1999), research on the causes of damage in the hypogea structures and paintings (Guerrero 1990), studies on drainage systems (Ingeniería e Hidrosistemas, 1990), reconstruction of collapsed columns, as for hypogeum S8 of Segovia, and covering ample zones with geotextiles such as around Hypogea S18 and S19, in Segovia, to decrease the volume of rainwater penetrating the structures. A program for controlling biological agents with biocides has also been developed, as well as a program for preventive maintenance and cleaning.

In 1995, with the help of Unesco, the ICANH held the first Workshop in Conservation of Hypogea of the National Archeological Park (Colcultura 1995), and its conclusions and recommendations have been included in the current management plan. The ICANH has a complete record of the state of conservation and damage of 75 hypogea, which has been complemented recently with independent studies funded by the Fundación de Investigaciones Arqueológicas of the Banco de la República (Sevilla, 2009b).



**Photo: Administrative Office, Tierradentro Park.**

Besides the activities of preventive conservation, the ICANH has intervened some hypogea that suffered serious damage as consequence of the earthquake of June 6, 1994, known as the Páez Avalanche. In Segovia (Hermida, 2000) the intervention of two structural columns of hypogeum S8 responded to structural flaws that threatened the physical integrity of one of the most elaborate hypogea.

As preparation for such intervention, a team of engineers and restorers developed resistant materials that are compatible to the local volcanic rock. In the same place and with help from UNESCO, ICANH developed a successful waterproofing project (Hermida, 2001).

In San Andrés, ICANH has removed some of the cement floors built in the 1970's to mitigate the effect tourist traffic which finally resulted too heavy for channels hypogea. The ICANH carries on continuous maintenance in draining channels, sheds and internal surfaces of the hypogea to minimize and control deterioration.

The preservation of important remains of the particular way of thinking, and of particular conceptions of life and death of Prehispanic societies located in what today is Tierradentro is of national and international interest, but it largely depends on the active collaboration of local and regional authorities, who have in their hands a valuable scientific, historic and cultural heritage that deserves being handed over to future generations as a testimony of ancestral cultures.

## 8. General Recommendations

In Colombia, archeological heritage belongs to the Nation and it is inalienable, indefeasible and imprescriptible (Article 72 of the National Constitution, General Cultural Law 397 of 1997, 1185 of 2008). It is a crime to commercialize, intervene, export or dispose of archeological properties without official authorization. Tierradentro has suffered looting and illicit traffic of archeological properties and visitors do risk getting involved in illicit activities if they do not know these norms.

Visitors should not participate in any kind of excavation; should not buy handcrafts that may be archeological items. When buying, demand that handcrafted objects that resemble archeological pieces do have the word "Réplica" engraved, in accordance to Decree 833 of 2002. If you see suspicious excavations, or the sale of pieces that may be archeological, please inform the Parks' office or the Tourist Police.

Murals and carvings in the hypogea, statues and other archeological remains are threatened also by erosion and biodeterioration that may be accelerated by contact with foreign elements. Due to a lack of precaution, paintings and carvings may suffer irreversible damage. Please do not touch, scratch or write on the surface of archeological elements, and do not pour on them any liquid. If you see vandalism, please alert the Park's office or the Tourist Police. Archeological Heritage is a cultural property of the nation and of humankind and everyone must be entitled to enjoy it but also should protect it and preserve it for future generations.



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Photo: Hypogeum S9, Segovia, Tierradentro.