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Abstract

A formal comparative introduction, without any interpretive intent or archaeological analysis, is provided to the shaft and chamber tombs (SCTs) in the necropolis of the Archaeological Park of Tierradentro, Colombia, which was included in the World Heritage List in 1995. The necropolis is unique among the known SCTs for the concentration in four hills of 78 tombs open to the visitor, their architectural complexity (including elaborated staircases), and the existence in some of them of high and low relief sculptures and mural paintings. A web site contains more detailed information and some attention is directed to archaeological and social anthropological research currently underway. © 2007-2010 Archaeodiversity Research Group & Syllaba Press. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Tierradentro, Necropolis, Shaft and chamber tombs, Pre-Hispanic funerary architecture, Andean sculpture, Mural Painting.

Resumen

Sin intención interpretativa alguna ni de análisis arqueológico, se hace una introducción formal comparativa de las tumbas de pozo y cámara (TPC) de la necrópolis del Parque Arqueológico de Tierradentro, Colombia, que fue incluido en la Lista del Patrimonio Mundial en 1995. La necrópolis es única entre las colecciones de TPC conocidas por la concentración en cuatro altos de 78 tumbas abiertas al visitante, la complejidad arquitectónica, y la existencia en algunas de ellas de esculturas en bajo y alto relieve y pintura mural. Se hace referencia a un sitio web con mayor información y se mencionan en la sección final los trabajos que se adelantan actualmente en los campos de la arqueología y la antropología social. © 2007-2010 Archaeodiversity Research Group & Syllaba Press. All rights reserved.

Palabras Clave: Tierradentro, Necrópolis, Tumbas de pozo y cámara, Arquitectura funeraria prehispánica, Escultura andina, Pintura mural.

There are many ancient monumental tombs in the world. Spatial concentrations of secondary tombs, monumental or not, are less abundant. Some have listed as “cultural heritage sites” by world and national organizations and by cultural tourism (see [example](#)). The pre-Hispanic necropolis of National Park of Tierradentro, Colombia, South America is outstanding among these sites for three reasons: (1) it contains an important concentration of tombs distributed in four hills, carved directly into the sheer volcanic rock, 78 of which are open to the visitor; (2) the complexity of these shaft-and-chamber burial places is exceptional; (3) and some of its structures have been ornamented by sculptures carved directly in the same rock, and by profuse mural painting. Based on these unique characteristics UNESCO included the Park in its List of World Cultural Heritage in 1995 under reference number 743. Since there is a dearth of information about this necropolis in the international

literature, the present note provides introductory data on the site architecture, sculpture and painting. A more detailed description exists in a [web site](#) especially destined to that purpose (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Shaft-&-Chamber tomb in Tierradentro, Colombia (The rock ceiling has collapsed) Source Varona and Sevilla 2009, <<http://www.tierradentro.info>>

Most of stone tombs across the world are **made of individual stones** in the form of megaliths or smaller pieces (slabs, blocks, etc.) that are assembled in various ways and either left in the open, or covered with earth or other monumental constructions. The best known are called **dolmens** on which there is abundant literature, most of it dealing with the European segment of the Old World (see for instance, Joussaume 1985; and Laporte & Tinévez 2004). There, the dolmen or **mound tombs** have received various names, such as court cairns, entrance graves, gallery graves, giants' graves, hunebeds, passage graves, portal dolmens, tholos, transepted gallery graves, and wedge-shaped gallery graves. The archaeological complex of **Stonehenge and Avebury** (included in the WH List under the same criteria as Tierradentro) is a much studied and celebrated icon of this type of funeral architecture (Darvill 2006). In Colombia, not far from Tierradentro, the Archaeological Park of **San Agustín**, also a WH Site, is appreciated for its elaborate statues that are associated with the beautiful mounds or dolmens scattered over a wide area.

Another type of stone burial **construction** (different from direct carving into the sheer rock) is represented by the extraordinary royal or imperial ancient architecture in the Old and New World. These massive public structures contain abodes for the dead, usually underground. The *mastabas* in Egypt, the caves under the Teotihuacan pyramid and the funeral chambers in other imposing Mesoamerican monuments are examples (see, for instance: Riggs 2005; Taube 1986; Dillehay 1995). Apart from similar constructions in the Central Andes of South America (ex. gr. the royal tomb of El Señor de Sipán) special mention should be made of the extended funerary masonry structures called **chullpas** (Gil 2009; Keselli & Pärssinen 2005), which are constructed above ground with assembled stones (or adobes) and are different from the **machay**, underground natural caves transformed into burial places (Duviols 1986). Chullpas abound in the high and cold plateaus of Central Andes and are outstanding not only for their wonderful architecture but for their concept: they were created as replicas of a uterus where corpses or, better, bundled corpses, were deposited in fetal position. Some of these tombs have lizards and feline forms carved into the stone. Like the Tierradentro necropolis these exquisite structures are part of the extended architectural/sculptural production that characterizes the stone architecture and sculpture of the Andean ancient societies (Paternosto 1986).

Shaft-and-chamber tombs in the world

Shaft-and-chamber tombs (SCT) impose some technical restrictions that may account for their rather scant global distribution. As shown in figure 2, a SCT consists of a vertical pit with lateral chamber(s) destined for burials, usually of the secondary type, in ossuaries or vaults. The structural requirements are

met in underground layers that are hard enough to sustain the chamber, but not so much as to impede carving with ancient tools, certainly lithic in the case of Tierradentro. (For more on SCT general characterization see Doyon 2002).

Areas well known for ancient SCT include Egypt, the Middle East, Greece, Southern Italy, Western Mexico and Northern South America (Ecuador and Colombia), although there are reports from other parts of the world, including Asia and Africa. There are variations in the SCT forms. Overlap with dolmen structures were not dug in hard soil or carved into sheer rock but were built with pieces of stone or adobes and later covered with earth like the "**Treasury of Atreus**" in Mycenae, Greece (Mee and Cavanagh 1990; 2007).

A common, albeit misleading, name for SCTs is **hypogeum**, a Greek word that literally means "underground". Very famous hypogea, for instance those in ancient Egypt, are part of complex funerary and non-funerary public monuments. A much visited one is the **Hal Saffieni Hypogeum** in Malta, included in the World Heritage List. According to UNESCO, "Its hypogeum is an enormous subterranean structure excavated c. 2500 B.C., using cyclopean rigging to lift huge blocks of coralline limestone. Perhaps originally a sanctuary, it became a necropolis in prehistoric times." The maintenance and management of this hypogeum is quite sophisticated and the visits of tourists are well regulated. Another outstanding place, also included in the UNESCO List, is the **Al-Hijr Archaeological Site** (Madāin Sālih) in Saudi Arabia, of an age between 1100 and 990 years. Like the tombs of Tierradentro, its chambers were carved directly into the rock, and have beautiful sculpted decorations. Other world SCTs are very simple in their architecture, like those of Western Mexico (on which more below) and Northern South America, where the exception is Tierradentro.

Apart from SCTs defined above (Figure 2), there are **chamber-tombs** (CT) that do not have a vertical shaft, but different solutions for the entrance, as in the case of the Al-Hijr funerary architecture. In certain

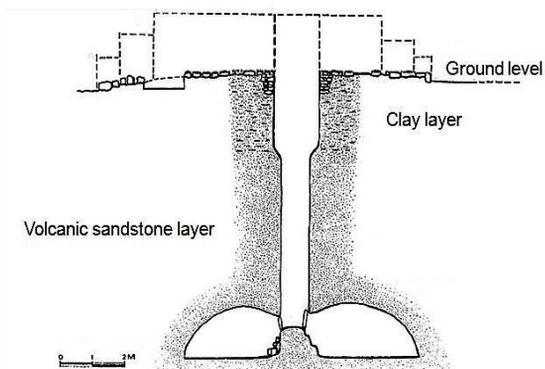


Figure 2. Shaft-and-Chamber Tomb in Huitzilapa, Mexico (After López y Ramos 2006).

cases, “chambers” are not artificial, but natural underground spaces (caves), for instance the already mentioned machay of Central Andes, of which those found in the Coporaque cemetery in Peru (Duchesne 2005) are much visited. People with Biblical affinities may find it interesting to know that the **Bab edh Dhra archaeological site** near the Dead Sea, Jordan has been considered by some authors to be a SCT corresponding to Sodom. These Jordan tombs are not much different from some of the medium complexity tombs with niches and no decoration found in Tierradentro. In addition, some people say that the tombs of Jesus and Lazarus, mentioned in the New Testament, probably were of the SCT type. (For more on this topic see <<http://www.bibleplaces.com>>).

Distribution of SCTs in the Americas

US archaeologist Stanley Long, who did field work in Tierradentro, mapped the distribution of SCTs in the New World (Long 1967). The map in figure 3 shows that they are concentrated in western Mexico and northern South America with some scant presence in other parts of the hemisphere. More recent research has modified this map; for instance, Shimada et al. (2004) present the results of careful excavations of two very complex SCTs integrated into the monumental construction of Huaca Loro in Middle Sican, northern coastal Peru.

The SCTs of western Mexico have become famous, not for their architectural features, which are rather elementary (see below), but for their grave goods found there, most of them very attractive clay figurines, which have induced intensive looting. A rather extensive body of archaeological literature exists about this “shaft-and-chamber tomb tradition” with emphasis on the prestige goods as indicators of social and political differentiation. For a review see Beekman (2000) and Lopez and Ramos (2006).



Figure 3. Distribution of shaft-and-chamber tombs in the Americas (After Long (1967)).

Recent papers with substantial information on the tombs themselves (apart from grave goods) are those by Mountjoy and Sanford (2006) and Oliveros (2006; 2004). Figure 4, taken from Beekman & Galvan (2006), presents the series of ground plans and cross sections of the SCTs of Atemajac, western Mexico; which are typical of the whole area. A similar series with simpler or irregular forms is described in a paper on Sayula SCTs by Valdés et al. (2006).

The distribution of SCTs in northern South America, with emphasis on Ecuador and interesting advances on the archaeological interpretation of the spatial and temporal variation of their forms, has been

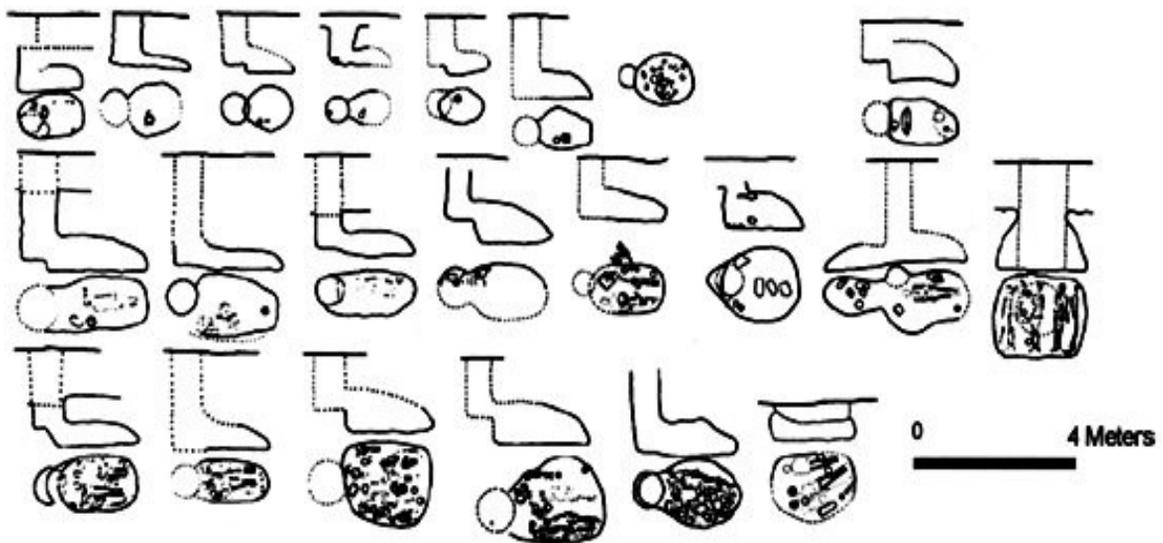


Figure 4. Typical architectural forms of SCT in Western Mexico (Atemajac Valley). (After Beekman & Galvan 2006).



Figure 5. Distribution of shaft-and-chamber tombs in Colombia and Northern South America (After Long 1967).

provided by Doyon (2002). He defined an interesting area along the axis of the Andean range northern of Ecuador and southern of Colombia, where SCTs are concentrated¹. Archaeologists have documented a variegated series of burial forms, both primary and secondary, in Colombia (Gutiérrez y García 1977; Ford 1944; Long 1967) including SCTs. Figure 5 shows the geographical distribution of SCTs in Northern South America according to S. Long. As Ford (1944) has indicated, this type of funerary architecture was particularly abundant in the region of Cauca and Valle del Cauca in the Southwestern Colombia, where Tierradentro is located.

Fieldwork by Ford in 1944 concluded that most of the SCTs of Cauca and Valle del Cauca (Tierradentro was not included in the survey) consisted of a vertical pit and a small oval lateral chamber, very similar to those western Mexico. Most of the vertical pits were filled with stones, as shown in figure 6.

The entrances to the SCTs are interesting. Some were filled with earth or stones. According to the Encyclopedia of Ancient Egyptian Architecture (Dieter et al. 2003:221) shafts can reach notable depth (up to 20 m), their diameters are usually reduced to 1 or 2m, with space only for downloading corpses or processed remains. Only when a special need exists does the shaft receive more elaborated treatment, either in amplitude or in architectural structure, for instance to facilitate the deposit of sarcophagi. Stairs are one of the technical-architectural solutions, as in the case of some Egyptian mastabas and of

Tierradentro where even the simplest SCTs have staircases. These are absent in most of SCTs elsewhere in the world, including those of western Mexico where only tombs of El Opeño have straight stairs with few steps.

Tierradentro is outstanding not only for the systematic existence and elaboration of staircases, but for the architectural complexity of the chambers and their ornamentation with high/low relief sculptures and mural painting. The exceptional condition of Tierradentro is documented by Long's (1967) complete series of SCTs ground plans and vertical cross-sections illustrated in figure 7. The forms within the red box are those of Tierradentro. The rest of this paper summarizes these exceptional formal features.

Tierradentro necropolis and its tombs

The necropolis of Tierradentro occupies four hills in the basin of a small river called Quebrada de San Andrés, in the municipality of Inzá, Departamento del Cauca, Colombia. The hills are part of the drainage systems of the Paez river that descends from the Nevado del Huila volcano into the Upper Magdalena river. The underground of the hills of San Andrés consists of volcanic deposits called andesitic toba by geologists. This soft rock was a perfect medium for the carving of the tombs. Figure 8 shows the general disposition of the hills within the basin. There are 78 tombs open to the public plus an indeterminate number of closed/collapsed ones. The open tombs are distributed in this manner: Hill of Segovia 25, Hill of El Duende 5, Hill of San Andrés 6 and Hill of El Aguacate 42. The tombs of El Aguacate, are slightly different in the structure, sculpture and paintings from

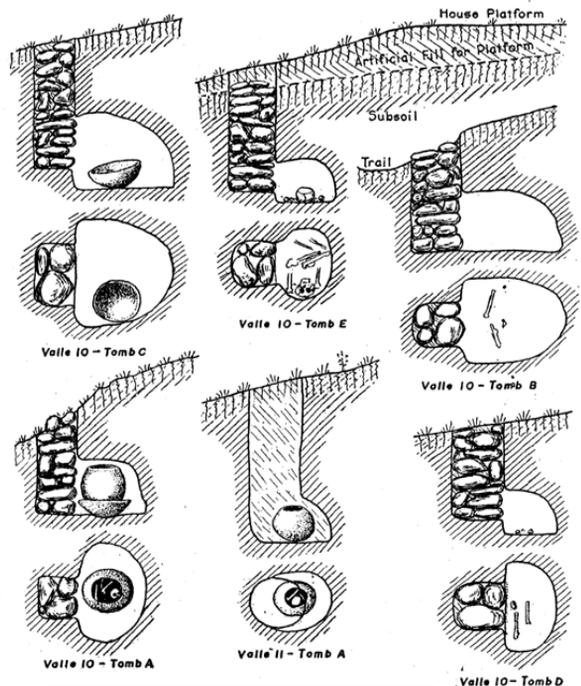


Figure 6. Types of SCTs found in the vicinity of Cali (After Ford 1944:18).

1. The study by Doyon is imprecise about Tierradentro necropolis. For instance, in its figure 5.3, the diagram corresponding to Tierradentro typical tomb is inexact (no forms like that are found there); in addition, the form for San Agustín is of mound/dolmen type, not of shaft-&-chamber. Consult figures 7, 9, 10 and 11 (below) for exact diagrams.

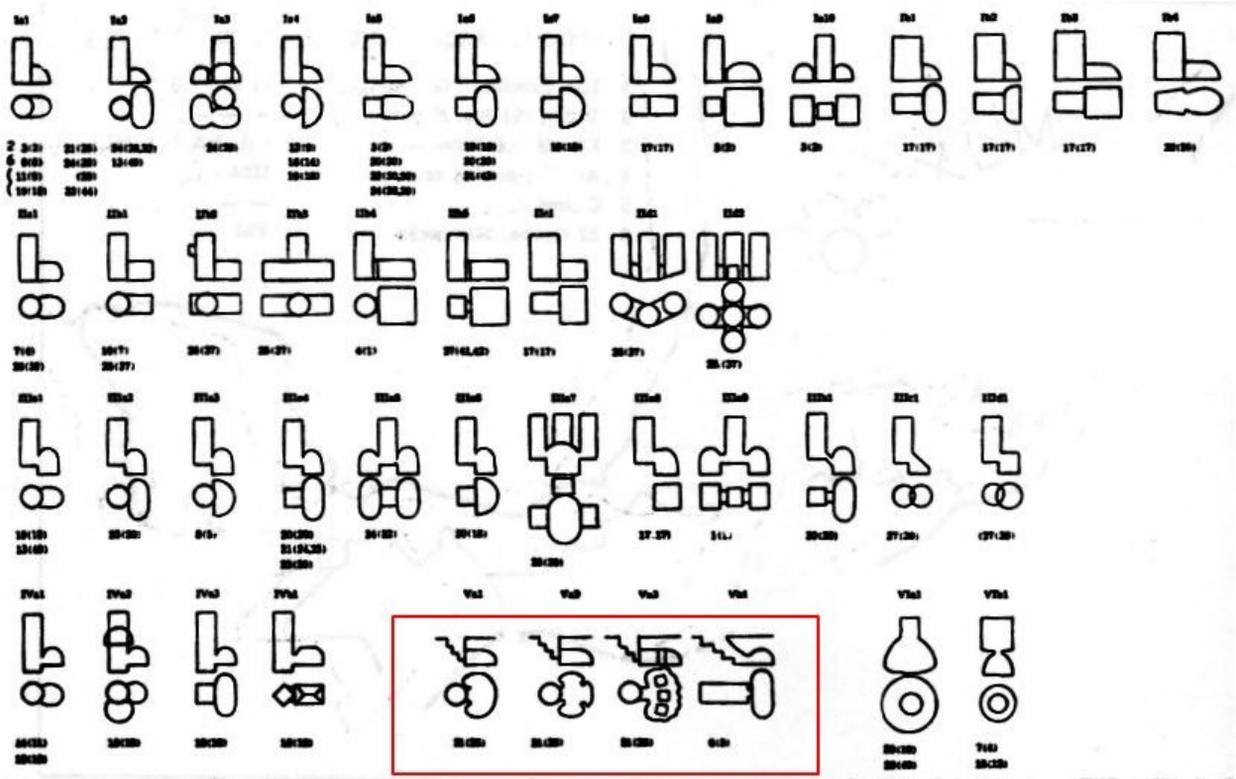


Figure 7. Complete series of SCT forms found in the Americas (After Long 1967).



Figure 8. General map of the National Park of Tierradentro.

those of the other three and have received more attention from the Colombian Government. They seem to be older than the others because their structures are simpler than the typical tombs on the other hills.

A summary description is provided below of the architectural, sculptural and painting characteristics of the tombs. The reader is invited to explore a complete series of photographs and additional information in the web site <<http://www.tierradentro.info>>.

A brief characterization of the SCTs of Tierradentro

Architectural complexity. Figure 9 provided details of the ground plans and cross-sections produced by archaeologists Alvaro Chaves and Mauricio Puerta (1986). The simplest tombs have a

direct and straight stairway of few steps that lead to small oval chambers about 2.5 m in diameter. The more complex ones have elaborated staircases, vestibules, pillars demarking the entrance and niches in the vault; some also have two or three central columns. Figures 10 and 11 provide a visual idea of the complexity and of the disposition of staircases. It should be noted that, with few exceptions, symmetry is present in all tombs, including the elementary ones.

The stairways constitute an outstanding feature of Tierradentro tombs. Their elaborated conception suggests that the chambers were not designed for a

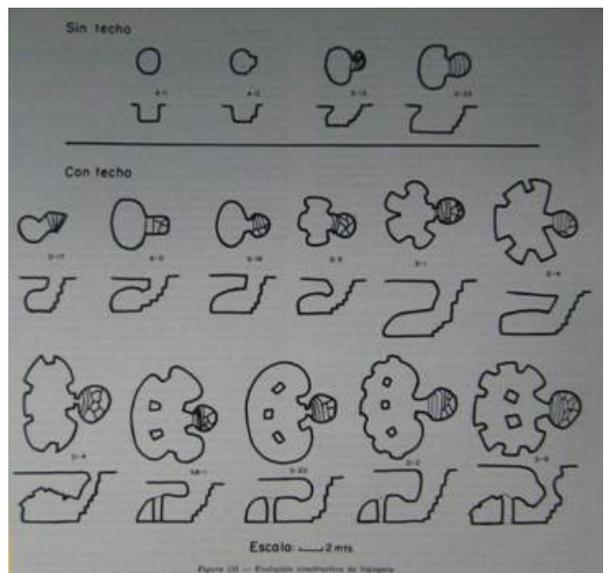


Figure 9. Architectural typology of Tierradentro tombs (After Chaves y Puerta 1986).

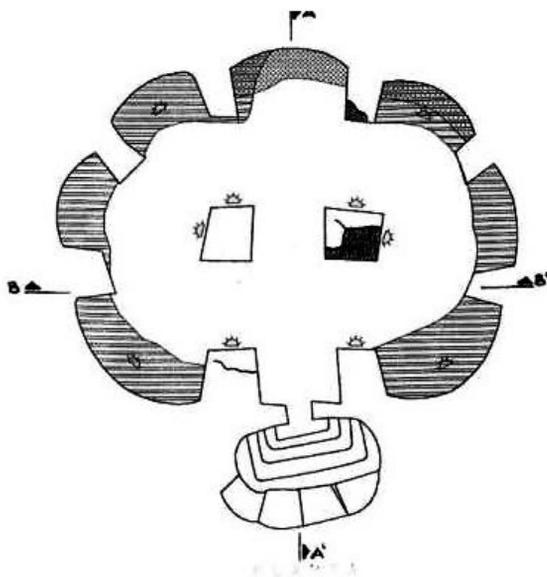


Figure 10. Ground plan of a tomb (NS20) showing the disposition of staircase, vestibule, pillars, niches, and columns (After Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia- ICANH 2006) .

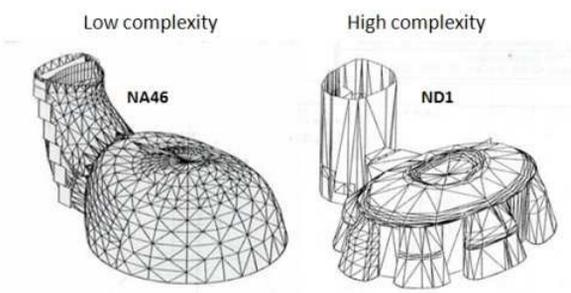


Figure 11. Architectural concept of low and high complexity tombs in Tierradentro (After Preciado 2006).

unique event, but probably were loci of rituals for a few participants. Staircases have direct/straight, helicoid (spiral), zigzag and mixed arrangements of steps, which can reach a number of 16. Some of the staircases end with a sort of small amphitheatre in front of the vestibule (Figures 10 and 11).

Sculpture. Tierradentro sculpture is of two types, the stone statuary, which is independent from the tomb complex, and the series of high/bas reliefs belonging to the architectural concept of the more complex tombs. The **independent statuary** is represented by around 50 stone statues. Only a preliminary classification and roster exists, made by archaeologists of the Colombian Institute of Anthropology, ICANH. Some of these statues have been concentrated for exposition in the grounds of the Park; others are still dispersed in a wide area that surrounds the Park. Preliminary examination suggests that these statues are not as elaborated as those that made very famous the Archaeological Park of San Agustín. However, this conclusion is uncertain if one

attends to the lack of systematic study and, even, of a complete inventory.

The **sculpture associated with the tombs** consists of (1) very stylized high reliefs of anthropomorphic forms carved on pillars and columns of the complex tombs, like those in figures 12 and 13; and (2) high reliefs that enhance the walls and ceilings of the tombs in a sort of replica of the wooden beams that may have been used in the open air constructions for the living people. In El Duende Hill, there is a complex tomb that seems to be a perfect replica in high rocky relief of a rectangular wooden house of the living. As with the independent statuary, no systematic study exists of these sculptural elaborations. Some bas-reliefs of El Aguacate represent the core of “suns”, in combination with mural painting (figure 13). More images of this type of sculpture are provided in the web site <<http://www.tierradentro.info>>.

Mural painting. The paintings on the walls, pillars, columns and ceilings of the chambers consist



Figure 12. High relief sculpture in a pillar of tomb NS20, Segovia Hill.



Figure 13. Combination of sculpture and painting in tomb NA22, Aguacate Hill.

Table 1. Distribution of tombs according to architectural complexity.

Components	Segovia	Duende	San Andrés	Aguacate	Total
HIGH: vestibule, niches, pillars, columns	8	2	5	0	15
MEDIUM: niches, pillars	13	3	1	7	24
PLAIN: vault	4	0	0	35	39
Total	25	5	6	42	78

Table 2. Distribution of sculptural and painting components.

Components	Segovia	Duende	San Andrés	Aguacate	Total
With reliefs	1	0	0	0	1
With reliefs and painting	8	2	1	8	19
With painting	6	2	5	15	28
No reliefs nor painting	10	1	0	19	30
Total	25	5	6	42	78
Total with painting	14	4	6	23	47

of geometric abstract forms in black/red over a white background. Rhomboid arrangements of straight lines predominate in the three hills of Segovia, El Duende and San Andrés. The paintings at El Aguacate are more naturalistic, with representation of “suns”, “moons” and “salamanders” combined with geometric forms similar to those on the other hills. As with sculpture, no systematic study has been made. Figures 13 and 14 provided examples and high resolution photos are accessible at <<http://www.tierradentro.info>>.

The distribution of the decorations of the tombs in the four *Altos* (hills) of the necropolis according to the architectural complexity is provided in table 1 and to sculptural and painting components in table 2.

A summary guide to archaeological and anthropological current studies

There is a renewed interest among archaeologists in exploring the spatial and temporal dimensions of funerary architecture and their implications for modeling the relationships within and between living groups and the role assigned by them to the ancestors who “live” in the mortuary structures. This occurs in

**Figure 14.** Geometric mural painting of tomb NS23, Segovia Hill.

regard to some centers with monumental funerary architecture --for instance the Central Andes, Herrera & Lane (2004); and Voutsaki (1995) and Mycaene in Greece (Mee & Canavagh 2007). Architects and other space/time specialists in the material expression of symbolism are joining archaeologists and bio-anthropologists in this multidimensional study (Lau 2006; Shimada et al. 2004).

For the northern Andes, where Tierradentro is located, Doyon (2002) has advanced very interesting interpretations based on the formal variation of the SCTs. He is motivated by the idea that the tombs, that characterize the area have natural (geographical, geological, seasonal) and cultural (ideological, social, political) dimensions. In reference to the funeral architecture of the Upper Magdalena River (including Tierradentro), he has suggested an important paradigmatic distinction between “places and spaces of death”:

It is likely that these artificially created centers were considered portals to the space of death (if not the actual space of death) where contact could be maintained with ancestral spirits. If burial chambers truly were intended as dwellings to be inhabited for a time by the deceased, then probable Formative Period shaft-and-chamber tombs in southern Colombia provide the earliest architectural evidence for a belief in the space of death (Doyon 2002:88).

Although in Tierradentro “places of death” --that is, the currently observable material remains-- were probably created during the Late (post-classic) period, rather than in the Formative (Langebaek y Dever 2009), Doyon’s suggestions are appealing. Colleagues and students of R. D. Drennan of the University of Pittsburg, a specialist in the area of Alto Magdalena to which Tierradentro belongs, have advanced research projects that, while referring to the necropolis only tangentially, offer very interesting and innovating vistas on the corresponding living

populations. Carl Langebaek of the University of Los Andes and Victor González of the Colombian Institute of Anthropology and History (ICANH) are leading such studies. This is a renovated interest because the first professional archaeologists who worked in Tierradentro in the decade of 1930 (G. Hernández de Alba and J. Pérez de Barradas) formulated speculative hypotheses on the same matter. Later archaeologists (such as Alvaro Chaves and Mauricio Puerta) concentrated on the (re)excavation, classification and formal description of the monuments and their contents. (These contents, in contrast to the west Mexican SCTs, have been always reported as “poor” in grave or prestige goods). A complete and critical summary of the archaeological literature is provided in the recent papers by Langebaek and associates (in particular 2001 and 2009) and, for the Alto Magdalena by Drennan (2008; see 2000). For a social anthropological study of the work of archaeologists/anthropologists in Tierradentro see Sevilla (2007).

According to Sevilla (2007), social and anthropological studies of Tierradentro have centered on the indigenous population living in the area, the majority of which belongs to the Paez/Nasa nation. The existence of demographic/cultural continuity between this nation and the builders of the funerary monuments has been ignored. As Sevilla y Piñacué (2008) indicate, these Indians regard the Park with magic/religious awe, because they consider all archaeological remains to have been produced by a sub-human group called “pijaos”. This attitude is compatible with the interpretation of the archaeologists of the 1930s, confirmed by Chaves and Puerta (1986), that the Paez/Nasa people and the pre-Hispanic builders are two different nations. However, recent maneuvers by young Nasa leaders, who are fully conscious of the strategic importance of these archaeological “riches” (heritage) for their own ideological, social, economic and political goals, have led to the affirmation that the Park and the necropolis belong to them, because they are “the city of their ancestors”. This political claim was the initial step in 2006 in a series of negotiations with the Colombian State. Today Tierradentro is a very dynamic field of social, economic and political processes because, apart from the Indians who represent 57% of the local population, the area is inhabited by other Colombians who are considered “mestizos” or Afrocolombians and who also have vested interests in the park. A different perspective is provided by the anthropology of art. A recent paper by Sevilla (2009) deals with the implications of the phrase “Pre-Hispanic Art” as it is applied to the monuments.

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