

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	San Agustín Archaeological Park (San Agustín, Alto de los Idolos, and Alto de las Piedras)
<i>Location</i>	Municipalities of San Agustín and San José de Isnos, Department of Huila
<i>State Party</i>	Colombia
<i>Date</i>	10 October 1994

Justification by State Party

The nomination of the Archaeological Park of San Agustín is justified according to cultural **criteria i, ii, iii, iv, and vi** as set out in paragraph 24(a) of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, 1994.

The symbolic, religious, and organizational systems created in the San Agustín region, particularly during the Intermediate Period, exerted an influence over a wide continental area. They affected centuries-old processes of man's conquest of ecosystems as different as those of the High Andes and the Amazonian rain forest.

The monumental character of the statuary and the funerary complexes associated with it will slowly yield insight into a symbolic world which reflects a complex system of thought that guided the interaction of man with one of the most diversified environments in the world. The organization strategies to which they testify will also gradually yield information about the history of an area of the world that experimented with intermediary political structures. The lessons learned may well have been preserved in the dynamics of societies over a wide region, which were to be obliterated completely by the Spanish conquest.

What distinguished this region is the density, concentration, and monumentality of the statuary and funerary architecture. These represent religious manifestations of a rural society which seems to have permeated life beyond the grave with a grandeur absent from everyday life. The statuary also appears to be an expression of the forms of political control of a theocratic society. Stone statues with similar characteristics are found in the northern Andes and in Central America, but there they do not attain the expressive power or the profusion which characterizes San Agustín. The San Agustín assemblage has originality in the construction techniques in the tombs, barrows, and platforms, and also versatility in its stonework, since in the same context expressions such as sculpture, painting, graffiti, and funerary stelae are combined. Furthermore, it has unique characteristics in respect of the conception and handling of volume, design, and space. A plastic language is produced in San Agustín which expresses symbolically the blending of Andean and Amazonian thought.

San Agustín represents a unique testimony to a vanished civilization.

Besides the scientific knowledge that the study of the statuary of San Agustín is destined to provide, its sheer aesthetic dimension should not be underestimated. There are ever fewer opportunities for the present generation to be privileged to witness the integrity and coherence of different symbolic systems in a world of rapid standardization. San Agustín speaks from another epoch, through sufficiently varied forms, to permit of successive and multiple interpretations. Thus it engages present generations in a dialogue with other versions of humanity, beyond their capacity to transform or homogenize.

Category of property

In terms of the categories of property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, San Agustín is a *site*.

History and Description

History

In the pre-agricultural period, from c 3300 to c 600 BC, San Agustín was occupied by a society with a rudimentary stone technology using unretouched basalt chips; their principal food was wild fruits, but hunting cannot be ruled out. Nothing is known of their political or social structures, but it is assumed that they were kinship-based.

A new society that was agricultural and pottery-using, appeared in the region in the 7th century BC, at the start of what is known as the Early Period. The people cultivated maize on flat land or gentle slopes: no terraces or drainage are associated with this period. They lived in dispersed houses near the main rivers, possibly in simple groups headed by chiefs. There appears to have been a tradition of carving in wood, but not stone. The extended burials were in vertical shaft tombs, with simple grave-goods. This period probably lasted until the 3rd or even 2nd century BC. The culture is linked with that of the Colombian south-west, a link which lasted well into the Christian era.

Gold working is attested by radiocarbon dating from at least the 1st century BC, and increased substantially in the following period. Around the 1st century AD there were profound cultural changes in the San Agustín area. This was the period of the great flowering of monumental lithic art, the so-called Agustinian Culture. Links with other regions of the south-west increased, with the consequent evolution over the whole region of societies known as Regional Classic. Population density increased markedly, and earlier settlements were reoccupied. New house sites on hilltops were also settled and occupied over long periods. The economy was still based on maize cultivation, and population pressures led to the opening up of new agricultural lands.

There was considerable social consolidation, and the concentration of substantial power in the hands of the chiefs made possible the production of gigantic works by the use of large bodies of men to carry out massive earth movements. Hundreds of elaborate stone statues were carved, some in complex relief and large in size. The huge monumental platforms, terraces, and mounds and the temple-like architecture reflect a complex system of religious and magical belief.

This Intermediate Period came to an end in the 8th century AD, as shown by the abandonment of monumental construction and the carving of stone statues. A similar phenomenon of decline is perceptible in other parts of the Colombian south-west at the same time, when the cultural unity of the region disintegrated. New peoples, possibly from the Upper Caquetá river basin of the Amazon region, seem to have settled in the San Agustín area around AD 1000, bringing with them new agricultural practices, such as the cultivation of manioc, a new house type, and new pottery styles. This Late Period, which lasted until the Spanish conquest, is characterized by a considerably less complex craft tradition, suggesting a measure of cultural retrogression,, despite the improved agriculture, which allowed an increased population to be supported. Both settlement and agriculture moved to the hillsides, with the introduction of terracing for both housing and cultivation and low-gradient drainage. The social structure seems to have been less complex and hierarchical than that in the preceding period: small communities were linked by kinship and temporary larger units were only created in times of war, to be disbanded afterwards.

The last settlers in the area, identified by the Spaniards as Andakis (of Amazonian origin) and Yalcones, survived into the 17th century, but many eventually returned to the rain forest. The social and agricultural structures of the region were unable to resist Spanish religious and commercial pressure, giving way to the colonial *encomienda* system. The colonial settlement of San Agustín began in 1608-12 with the foundation of a centre for religious indoctrination of the indigenous peoples. It was eventually occupied by Spanish homesteaders and mixed-race peoples, becoming a crossing point for routes to Popayán and the jungles of Putumayo.

Description

Three localities of the Archaeological Park are nominated for inclusion on the World Heritage List - San Agustín, Alto de los Idolos, and Alto de las Piedras.

San Agustín, where the most important monuments are to be found, lies 2 km from the town of the same name and covers 78 ha. Its northern and eastern boundaries are the left bank of the Magdalena river, the southern boundary is the north bank of the Naranjos river, and the western is defined by the low hills of Quebradillas and the Lavapatas stream.

The main archaeological monuments are: Las Mesitas, containing artificial mounds, terraces, funerary structures, and stone statuary; the Fuente de Lavapatas, a religious monument carved in the stone bed of a stream; and the Bosque de las Estatuas, where there are examples of stone statues from the whole region. Much of the area is a rich archaeological landscape, with evidence of ancient tracks, field boundaries, drainage ditches, and artificial platforms, as well as funerary monuments.

The *Alto de los Idolos*, covering 20 ha, is on the right bank of the Magdalena river and the smaller (10 ha) *Alto de las Piedras* lies further north: both are in the municipality of San José de Isnos. Like the main San Agustín area, they are rich in monuments of all kinds.

Management and Protection

Legal status

The three locations that make up the San Agustín Archaeological Park are owned by the Government of Colombia, through the Instituto Colombiano de Cultura (COLCULTURA), an autonomous body coming under the Ministry of Education.

The Park is protected principally by Law No 163 of 1959 "By which measures are adopted with regard to the defence of the national historic and artistic heritage and the public monuments of the Nation, and the Council of National Monuments is set up" (Regulatory Decree No 264:1963). In 1990 the Commission wrote a Resolution, Article 2 of which declares that "the statues of San Agustín, Tierradentro, and the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta cannot form part of collections, since they belong to the Archaeological Parks of the Nation."

A number of other legislative instruments also relate to the Archaeological Park, of which the following are the most significant:

- Law No 103:1931 "By which aid is given to the conservation of the archaeological monuments of San Agustín" (Regulatory Decree No 260:1935)
- Decree 1060:1936 "By which regulations are adopted for scientific expeditions which come to the country, and a commission set up";
- Law No 147:1938 "By which the continuation and enlargement of the works of excavation and research in the region of San Agustín and Tierradentro are ordered";
- Law No 116:1960 "By which the work of preservation and study of the archaeological remains of the Upper Magdalena are enlarged, and by which funds are allocated for the endowment of the Tourist Hotel of San Agustín";
- Decree No 774:1993 "By which the National Government declares a National Archaeological Monument in the Upper Magdalena, a large geographical area comprised of the townships of San Agustín, San José de Isnos, Pitalito, Oporapa, and Saladoblanco" (a region of some 500 square kilometres).

In the new (1991) Political Constitution of Colombia, articles 63 and 72 gave an inalienable character to the Nation's archaeological heritage, which is declared to be national property under the protection of the State (though the regulations for the implementation of these articles have not yet been agreed).

Management

Management of the Archaeological Park of San Agustín was transferred to the new National Archaeological Service of the Ministry of Education when the latter was set up in 1938 (it was merged in 1945 with the National Ethnological Institute, founded in 1941). However, the National Ethnological Institute re-emerged in 1952 and was renamed the Colombian Institute of Anthropology (ICAN), which in turn became part of the Colombian Institute of Culture (COLCULTURA) in 1968.

It is ICAN that is directly responsible for the Park, though its Division of Promotion of the Cultural Heritage. Through the relatively independent administrative structure built up within the Park itself over the years, ICAN carries out technical-administrative supervisory control, staff supervision, and protective and maintenance work. There is a permanent guardian service and the sites are protected by fences and night lighting. In addition, there is an alarm system at the San Agustín location. The budget for this work comes principally from COLCULTURA, with substantial additional subventions from the Cultural Institute of Huila and the Ministry of Public Works.

There are three administrative management areas:

- 1 Archaeological observation circuits linking the ceremonial sites. These consist of monumental units of terraces and mounds in which there are stone funerary structures and carved statues;
- 2 The reserve areas, made up of those sectors of the localities that are reserved for future research because of their archaeological and natural importance;
- 3 The administrative and maintenance area, where visitors are received and work activities carried out.

A number of protected archaeological sites outside the Park (and not included in this nomination) are also within the purview of the Park administration for statutory purposes; four of them are maintained, conserved, and guarded by ICAN.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

The monuments within the nominated area are in general well preserved and reasonably resistant to the effects of water, wind, changes in temperature, and biological attack. However, special conservation treatment has been given to the Fuente de Lavapatas, the ceremonial spring with a base of andesite, a rock of volcanic origin that is extremely vulnerable to atmospheric pollution. The greatest threat to the monuments, especially the statuary, is theft.

Removal of statues and other archaeological material from the sites dates back many years. Some of this was simple looting, but in other cases materials were transferred to museums and other institutions outside Colombia, or simply within the Park itself. The major inventory carried out in 1987 included an attempt to locate the original sites of a number of pieces that were known to have been moved. Control began to be asserted in the 1960s, when the looters were expelled and a policy of acquisition began. Work also began on the removal of undesirable biological agents.

Reconstruction of some of the tombs that had been partially destroyed by looters was started in the 1960s. A number of security measures were put in place in the 1970s on the advice of an UNESCO expert, Henri Lehmann, and these have been considerably extended over the past four years.

The conservation and maintenance priorities identified for the immediate future are:

- 1 Repair and control of the ceremonial Fuente de Lavapatas;
- 2 Acquisition of lands bordering the Alto de los Idolos in order to provide a protective strip around the 10 ha site;
- 3 Restoration of statues showing surface damage;
- 4 Continuation of the programme of exploration, study, and inventory of the archaeological heritage of the area.

Authenticity

As with many prehistoric sites, it is difficult to challenge the authenticity of those which make up the San Agustín Archaeological Park. There has been a certain amount of reconstruction, to make good the depredations of earlier looters, but all within acceptable limits so far as anastylosis is concerned. Some of the stone statues are no longer in their original sites, either because of well meaning but misguided actions in the past or as part of a deliberate policy aimed at ensuring that these important pieces do not find their way on to the market in illicit antiquities, upon which they would command very large prices.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

ICOMOS consulted its International Committee on Archaeological Heritage Management, and also two experts on Andean archaeology, Dr Margaret Maclean (Getty Conservation Institute, USA) and Dr Wolfgang Wurster (Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Germany). An expert mission visited the property in February 1995.

Qualities

The San Agustín complex contains the largest assemblage of megalithic sculptures in South America. The sculptures, with their wide range of artistic representation from abstract to realistic rendering of mythical deities and animals, are the most outstanding archaeological remains in Colombia. San Agustín represents the wide range of a pre-hispanic culture in a very impressive setting of wild landscape, and bears witness to the creativity of prehispanic culture in the difficult tropical environment of the Northern Andes.

Comparative analysis

Along with Tierradentro (also nominated for the World Heritage List), San Agustín provides the most significant testimony to the high level of artistic and social culture of the northern Andean region over its long prehispanic history.

ICOMOS recommendations for future action

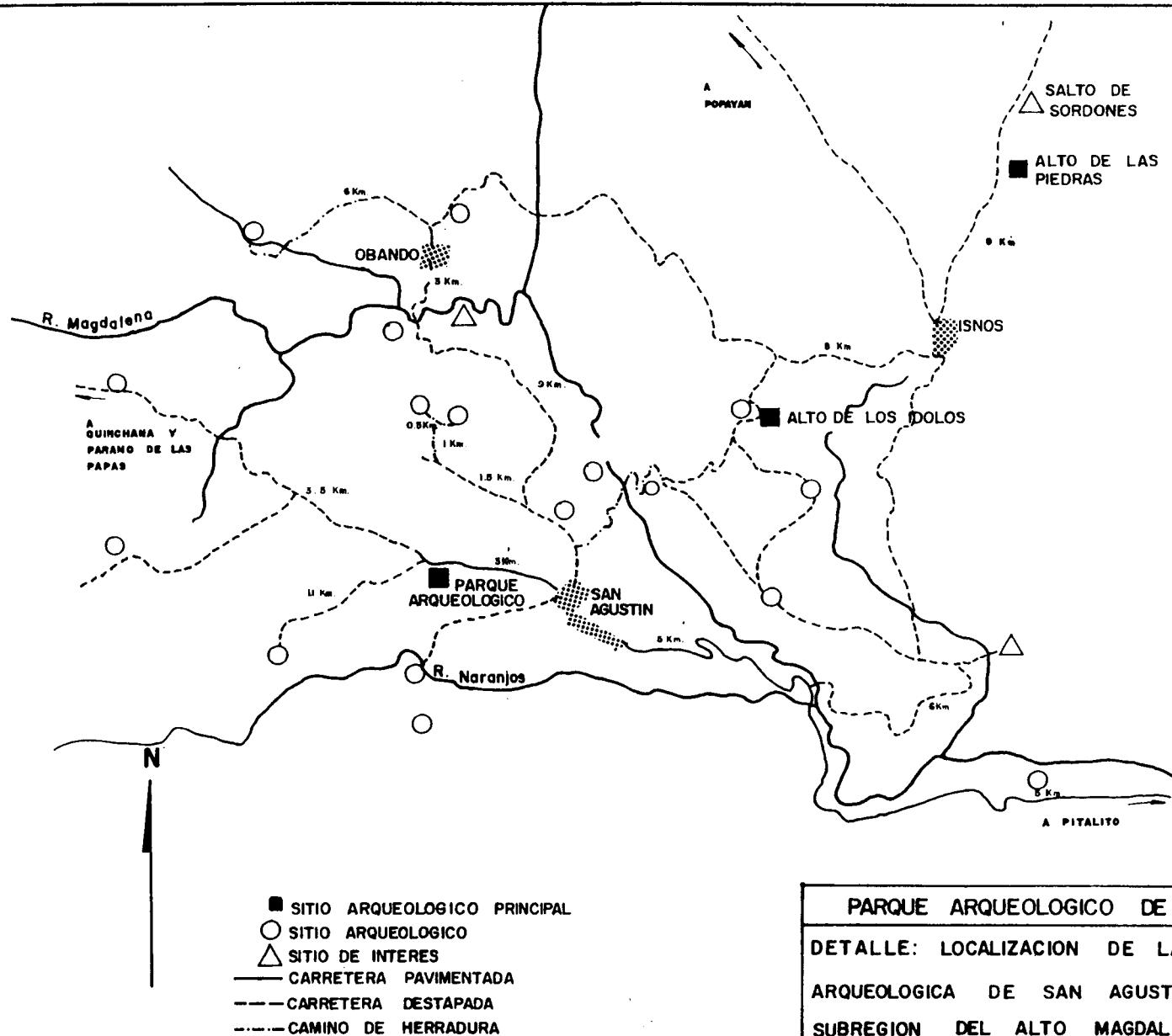
Whilst the ICOMOS expert mission was convinced on the ground of the viability of the areas proposed for inscription on the List, it is recommended that more detailed proposals be submitted relating to the commitment of the Colombian authorities to the implementation of the priorities for conservation and maintenance listed above, in the form of a management plan.

Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of ***criterion iii***:

The wealth of megalithic statuary from the archaeological sites in San Agustín National Park bears vivid witness to the artistic creativity and imagination of a prehispanic culture that flowered in the hostile tropical environment of the Northern Andes.

ICOMOS, September 1995



PARQUE ARQUEOLOGICO DE SAN AGUSTIN

DETALLE: LOCALIZACION DE LA ZONA
ARQUEOLOGICA DE SAN AGUSTIN EN LA
SUBREGION DEL ALTO MAGDALENA.

DIBUJO: MARCELA HERRERA MUNICIPIO: SAN AGUSTIN

ACTUALIZO: INST. COLOMBIANO DE ANTROPOLOGIA



San Agustin : tumulus 1, Mesita A, Alto de los Idolos /
Mound 1, Mesita A, Alto de los Idolos



San Agustin : tumulus sud, Mesita B, San Agustin /
South Mound, Mesita B, San Agustin