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RECONNAISSANCE OF THE UPPER ARIARI RIVER REGION,
DEPARTMENT OF THE META, EASTERN COLOMBIA

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By John P. Marwitt (University of Akron), Robert V. Morey (Western Illinois University) and James A. Zeidler (University of Utah). This paper was delivered by Prof. Marwitt at the 38th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology in San Francisco, California, May 5, 1973.

The plains (llanos) of eastern Colombia, an area of more than 100,000 square miles, comprise a very significant proportion of eastern, lowland South America. They also represent a potentially strategic zone of culture contact, diffusion and migration between three well-defined cultural and environmental regions—the Orinoco Basin, the Amazon Basin, and the Andean Cordillera.

Ethnological reports on the Colombian llanos are few, and until 1972 nothing whatever was known about the archeological resources of this immense area. This lack of knowledge is reflected by the absence of any mention of the llanos in the most definitive synthesis of Colombian prehistory to date (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1965). Perhaps because of the general lack of information, the cultures of the llanos, both historic and prehistoric, have usually been described as small, marginal, passive societies constrained by their limited environmental resources and moulded by a variety of cultural influences emanating from "more advanced" regions.

In August and September, 1972, a research team consisting of the writers and Salomón Rivera (Bogotá, Colombia) conducted a preliminary archeological survey of the upper Ariari River drainage in the west central portion of the Department of Meta, Colombia. The initial objective of the survey was to assess the potential of archeologic resources in a restricted part of the llanos with a view toward more intensive survey and excavation if this was warranted on the basis of preliminary findings.

The Río Ariari rises in the páramo of Sumapaz and is a principal affluent of the Río Guayabero (also known as the Guaviare), a major tributary of the Orinoco. Approximately 335 km. long, the Ariari, with its affluents, drains a number of diverse environmental types, including Andean slope, tropical savanna, floodplain gallery forest, and interfluvial tropical forest. In addition to the environmental diversity, the Ariari region falls within the historic Llanos of San Juan/San Martin which includes many early mission sites and routes of exploration, and hence is well-documented in the ethnohistoric literature. The Río Ariari also has a potentially important geographic situation as a possible route of migration and/or culture contact between the Andes, the Orinoco Basin and the northern Amazon Basin (the boundary between the Orinoco and Amazon river watersheds is located less than 20 km. south of the Ariari-Guayabero confluence). Just as important as the cultural, historical and environmental potential of the region is the practical consideration of its ease of access from nearby Colombian centers which can serve as points for supply and labor recruitment, and which are linked by roads passable during the rainy season which lasts from April to November.

The 1972 survey was designed to take advantage of this combination of favorable conditions, and was concentrated along an approximately 75 km. length of the upper Ariari main stem, from Cubarral in the northwest to Puerto Lleras in the southeast. In this region, the width of the Ariari floodplain varies from less than one to more than 12 km. Sites were located principally by enlisting the aid of local farmers and ranchers, after several days of unaided search proved to be totally unproductive. Al-
though the local people were both hospitable and helpful, it is extremely unlikely that we succeeded in compiling more than a minimal sample of the archeological resources in the survey area. This is due in part to dense gallery forest which covers the Ariari floodplain and the heavy grass mat present in interfluvial areas, and also to the fact that most of the present population of the Ariari region is made up of relatively recent colonists who have settled in the llanos since the mid-1950’s. Earlier settlers abandoned the towns and were displaced from rural areas during the Colombian Civil War of 1948 to 1955. Accordingly, a relatively small portion of the total forest and grass cover has been removed and cultivated, with the almost certain result that many sites have not been exposed.

A total of 19 archeological sites were visited and recorded by the survey, and represent the first sites recorded for the whole of the Colombian llanos. Several other sites were located through informants but could not be visited because of flooded roads and streams. Of the 19 sites recorded, two probably date to the late 19th or early 20th century. A third site, located near the modern town of San Juan de Arama probably represents the location of San Juan de los Llanos, which was founded in the mid-16th century as the first Spanish mission in eastern Colombia. The remaining 16 sites are presumed to date from pre-contact times, although no firm dating is available as yet. Without exception, these latter sites are located in the alluvial floodplain of the Río Ariari or on terraces within a kilometer or so of the river. This may indicate that the savanna grasslands were only lightly exploited by inhabitants of the area who did not sinate their villages there. On the other hand, modern patterns of land use may account for the apparent absence of sites in the interfluvial savannas. Today, the grasslands are used primarily by cattle ranchers who have little if any occasion to plow the land, thereby exposing sites for the archeologist to find, while farming, which is generally restricted to the gallery forest, turns over the topsoil and exposes the remains of earlier human activity.

The sites themselves are, in the main, quite large in areal extent, as evidenced by rather dense but apparently random distributions of refuse over as much as twelve acres. In only one case was it possible to identify discrete concentrations of refuse within a site which could conceivably represent midden accumulations associated with use of single structures.

While the depth of cultural deposits at many sites could not be determined, in a number of cases it was possible to estimate the depth of refuse by examining open holes which had been prepared for the planting of plátanos. Such holes average about a meter in depth, and at several sites where these were open, refuse accumulations were observed to be from 70 to more than 100 cm. deep with well-defined soil strata. Similarly, deep refuse accumulations were reported by farmers at other sites where the deposits were not sectioned by plátano pits at the time of our visit.

Surface collections of pottery from 14 of the 19 sites show considerable variation with regard to both tempering and decorative techniques. While no formal types have yet been defined, the most common ceramic variety, occurring at several sites, is a tan to light orange plain ware tempered with what appear to be small light gray "clay pellets"; surface texture of this pottery is quite rough. Sherds of similar pottery have been found by Brouillard (personal communication, 1973) at several sites in the upper reaches of the Río Caquetá. Meggers (personal communication, 1972) also reports that a few sherd were tempered with clay pellets were found in the upper Río Napo drainage of eastern Ecuador. Other tempering materials include sand, burned bark (cariapé), and crushed sherd. Significantly, sherd tempering is a very rare trait elsewhere in the Orinoco basin, but comprises a majority temper type in pottery from
several areas in the Amazon basin.

The dominant decorative technique for pottery in the Ariari region, judging from our small sample, appears to be modeling, in the form of small zoomorphic rim lugs and more elaborate zoomorphic adornos which represent fish and turtle (or perhaps bird) heads. Several adornos are also painted with red and white, or black and white pigment. Painted designs also occur on body sherds in the form of dots, chevrons and wavy lines which are applied directly to unslipped vessel exteriors (?) in white pigment. Incising is a rare decorative technique in the Ariari sample, and with the exception of a single sherd with a flat, grooved rim, it is found only in a zone below vessel rims, always in company with adornos, and on burial urns.

The only ceramic vessel categories we have been able to establish for the survey area are flat manioc griddles, represented in the collection by several sherd-s, as an anthropomorphic burial urn, which was discovered by a local farmer while preparing a platano field. The body of the urn is vaguely trapezoidal in section, and is divided into two parts by a deep groove. On the upper portion of the body are modeled and incised facial features; the lower urn body has two incised arms. Attached to the carinated base of the body, and serving as a pedestal, are modelled legs and feet. When discovered by the farmer, the urn contained the badly decomposed bones of a child. The urn mouth had apparently been covered with a pottery bowl which was broken on discovery and discarded. Other informants reported finding both similar urns and ceramic figurines, but no figurines were located by the survey.

Stone artifacts, recovered from several sites or viewed in private collections, include large manos presumably used for the grinding of maize, and a well-polished pebbleoid stone celt.

The small size of the survey collections and their provenience as surface finds will not permit the construction of a relative chronology for the Ariari region, and no absolute dates have as yet been obtained. Further, no comparative material exists for any area of the Colombian llanos or for nearby Andean slope or Amazon basin localities. This makes it difficult to demonstrate any firm typological relationships between the Rfo Ariari material and established cultural sequences in other lowland areas. However, the scanty data available suggest that the main cultural affinities of the Ariari ceramics are with the tropical forest complexes of the Amazon basin, rather than with assemblages from the environmentally similar savannas of northern Colombia and western Venezuela. Specific, though hardly diagnostic common traits include anthropomorphic burial urns with "L" or "U"-shaped arms, and the extensive use of crushed-sherd tempering material. Several adornos and painted sherd-s can probably be assigned to the widespread Amazonian Polychrome horizon, which dates roughly from the mid-12th to the late 14th centuries A.D. (Lathrap, personal communication, 1973), although Rouse (personal communication, 1972) suggested that the Ariari adornos have general resemblances to adornos in Arauquinoid complexes in the middle Orinoco area.

Even though it is hazardous to extrapolate very far from the data obtained by the 1972 survey, we would like to make a few points in conclusion which might have application for other parts of the Colombian llanos.

1) While the strategic geographic location of the llanos in regard to other areas of lowland South America has been pointed out in the past, judging from the Ariari data the actual prehistoric resources of the llanos have been badly underestimated.
2) Earlier assumptions that prehistoric cultural groups in the llanos were small, scattered and mobile are probably in error as well. In the Río Ariari floodplain, at least, sites are quite large, closely-spaced, and in some cases have deep accumulations of refuse. This suggests that the flood-plains of major rivers, if not the interfluvial areas, may have supported long occupations by rather sizable sedentary societies. The discovery of both manioc griddles and corn-grinding implements may further indicate that at least in the later prehistoric stages these societies had a diversified and probably stable horticultural base. Investigation of early documentary sources (by Nancy Morey) also lends support to the hypothesis that llanos populations were significantly larger at contact than has generally been believed. The ethnohistorical research has also revealed evidence of extensive intertribal trade and economic specialization throughout the area.

In summary, the 1972 Ariari survey has shown that at least the western portion of the Colombian llanos has important potential for further archeological research. Preliminary findings suggest that like other areas of lowland South America where recent research has required the abandonment or modification of earlier interpretations, the prehistoric cultures of the Colombian llanos may not have been marginal to the mainstream of cultural development.

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