

500 Years Before Christ: the Tumaco Culture of Colombia

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Every schoolboy, as the hackneyed expression goes, knows about the three great pre-Columbian civilizations of the Aztecs in Mexico, the Mayas in Yucatan and Central America, and the Incas in Peru. But relatively few people realize that prior to the coming of the European there were many other aboriginal societies throughout the Americas.

Five hundred years before Christ a sophisticated Indian culture flourished in the area of the Pacific Coast port of Tumaco. Located in the extreme southwest corner of Colombia, Tumaco today is known chiefly for being the terminus of the Transandean Pipeline which since 1969 has been delivering crude oil from the Putumayo Territory east of the Andes Mountains.

However, 2,000 years before Columbus (and some archeologists say even earlier) the coastal plain and swampy river deltas around Tumaco were inhabited by Indians who built *tolas* or burial mounds. These mounds are seen today as small, pyramidal hills rising inland from Tumaco and southward down to the Ecuadorean port of Esmeraldas.

Substantial amounts of ceramic sculptures have been recovered from these mounds. The epicenter of the ceramic finds has been pinpointed by Jaime Errazuriz, a Chilean architect who resides in Colombia and who has been one of the most active investi-

gators of the Tumaco Culture, as being at the Santuario de la Tolita in Ecuador close to the Colombian border.

What were these people like? There being no evidence of a written language, we can only attempt to reconstruct their appearance and customs from the ceramic sculptures that have been unearthed.

Let me here interject an etymological note. These clay sculptures are known locally as *guacas* which is derived from the Quechua *huaca*, an idol or sacred object. It can also refer to an ancient Indian burial site or a buried treasure.

(According to the *Pequeño Larousse Ilustrado*, 1969, *guaca* refers only to the burial site or treasure and *guaco* is the object taken from such a site. *Huaca* and *huaco* are respective variations of these words. The dictionary adds that in local slang *guaca* has also come to mean a parrot or an ugly old maid.)

Unlike the ceramic objects of other Indian cultures in Colombia which are brown or reddish, the Tumaco *guacas* are grayish. Many are found eroded by centuries in swampy soil or underwater.

One of the salient features of the Tumaco Culture was the practice of skull deformation. This is evidenced by the high, receding forehead and enlarged cranium of many of the sculptures of human heads. Reichel-Dolmatoff mentions this high receding forehead as being typical of Tumaco figures.

This writer has not seen any figures from other cultures in Colombia that have this feature, but Augusto Panyella, the director of the Ethnological Museum of Barcelona, cites many examples of skull deformation in Indian cultures in Ecuador. These are specifically the Manabí and Esmeralda Cultures from further south along the coast. He also reports aborigines practicing this custom today, among them a tribe from the Ucayali River in the Peruvian Amazon region.

Related to this high receding forehead feature of the Tumaco heads is what seems to be a hair-do somewhat like the beehive style of today.

Other features found in close examination of *guacas* are multiple perforations in the ear lobes, apparently for earrings. Many heads show earrings and also nose plugs being worn. They also show long necklaces with pendants worn by both males and females. Other *guacas* show figures wearing headdresses.

The smaller Tumaco figures are usually solid and the larger ones are generally hollow with a hole at the top rear of the head. By blowing into this hole a musical sound could be produced.

One notes a curious resemblance in many of these sculptures to ancient Egyptian figures. Some have extremely fine, beautiful features. Other faces are quite ugly, but what is noteworthy here is the obvious attempt at reality. Apparently, the ancient Tumacans went to the local sculptor to have their face and figure perpetuated in clay just as we might go to a photo studio today.

One also finds some double, Gemini-type *guacas*. Were these husband and wife portraits?

Sex seems to have been of great interest in the Tumaco Culture. The male organ was frequently sculpted in clay as were couples in amorous embraces. In summary, there is a higher degree of realism and sophistication in the Tumaco clay figures than in those of the other Colombian cultures.

Not all was photographic realism, however. There is a wide range of weird, grotesque animal life—lion-headed figures, birds, a heavily-scaled iguana with a face somewhat like a Chinese dragon. There are whistles in the form of birds, crocodiles, and other animals. A surprisingly realistic work is that of a dog at the base of a tree attempting to catch a bird that is nesting on a branch.

Some *guacas* are strictly utilitarian. These include rollers (*rodillos*) for printing designs on cloth and a kind of stamp or seal with a flat face that is attractive in its simplicity, almost like a cartoon character.

To conclude, despite all that has been found there is a great deal more to be discovered, excavated, and reported. What Bennett and Bird wrote in 1949 about all of Colombia, that «many areas have never been investigated and others are known only through undocumented collections», is still quite true. However, work is going ahead. Besides Errazuriz, two of the leading authorities on Tumaco Culture in Colombia are Prof. Jaime Cubillos at the Universidad del Valle and Dr. F. Carlos Lehmann, director of the Departmental Museum of Natural History, both in Cali.

Other sources of information are the various professional *guaqueros* who, though they may have little formal education, have a lifetime of practical experience.

The story, then, of the Tumaco Culture is far from complete. When in the future it can be described more fully it may be recognized as one of the leading Indian civilizations of pre-Columbian America.