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CONSERVATION DILEMMAS ON A "NEW" ARCHAEOLOGICAL FRONTIER IN PERU

Warren B. Church and Ricardo Morales Gamarra

Peruvian archaeologist Walter Alva (2001:91) estimates that there are approximately 200,000 unregistered monuments and archaeological sites in Peru dating from the last four millennia. "All of them," he believes, "including the farthest or most overgrown, have been partially affected by looting." Some might quibble over Alva’s figures, but most archaeologists feel that there really are no more unlooted pre-Hispanic sites in the Andes. They share an attitude that we can win few battles in a war that we have already lost.

Such battles are currently being waged on the forested eastern slopes of the Central Andean cordillera, an emerging archaeological frontier that still lies largely outside of Peruvian mainstream archaeology but that has always figured hugely in the popular imagination and Peruvian consciousness. The so-called coja de selva, or coja de montaña, has been described as “South America’s last forested wilderness” (Young and León 1999:11). It is characteristically rainy, windy, and cold; dense tropical foliage chokes a vertical landscape that plummeted nearly 4,000 m in the 50–150 km separating the eastern Andean cordillera from the Amazon lowlands (Figure 1). Extending approximately 1,500 km north and south, and representing 20% of Peru’s territory, the coja de selva is also one of South America’s most biologically diverse and fragile environments (Young 1997). This is the heart of El Dorado, where dreams of the “golden-man,” the Inca’s hidden ransom, and mythical Patití lured thousands toward heartbreak and death during the Colonial Period. Today, an aura of romance and riches still inspires unregulated ecotourism, extreme-sports expeditions, pseudo-scientific explorations, and, most recently, the rampant looting of pre-Hispanic monuments. Since new archaeological initiatives in Peru’s northeastern Andes began in the mid 1990s, unlooted and freshly looted sites attributed to the “Chachapoya Culture” have indeed been located. This article draws attention to battles now being waged, won, and lost on this archaeological frontier, and points the way toward some solutions.

Identifying the Problems

Peru’s increasing integration within the global economy has spawned government and private-sector initiatives to open or expand tourist access to archaeological attractions in remote regions, ostensibly as one kind of sustainable development. The damage caused by swelling numbers of tourists at the coja de selva site of Machu Picchu has led to a collision between competing interests of tourism developers on the one hand, and defenders of monument conservation on the other (Mujica 1999). In the Chachapoyas region, backpackers have visited the immense fortified settlement of Kuelap for a century. However, a new road and an effective publicity campaign generated a boom in tourism that belatedly spurred the Peruvian government into contracting archaeologists and conservators. These specialists work frantically to stabilize the monuments and to develop a formal management plan (Narváez and Morales 2000). In the nearby Rio Abiseo National Park, the Protected Areas division of the Ministry of Agriculture has been more circumspect in its proposed development of tourist infrastructure at Gran Pajatén, Los Pinchudos, and other monuments. The highly decorative architecture at these sites is con-
structured of fragile slate slabs, friable sandstone, and degraded mortar (Figure 2). Every conservation project in this harsh environment is nothing less than a research experiment. Some archaeologists believe that tourism at Gran Pajatén will not return the monetary investment in infrastructure without exorbitant visitor fees. The ruins themselves will not withstand such impacts without a permanent conservation program requiring continuous investment (Church 1999; Morales 2002). Unfortunately, the government's Ministry of Commerce and Tourism already invites tourists to visit Gran Pajatén (see http://www.minetur.gob.pe/regiones/libertad/granpajaten.html) despite the lack of a finalized management plan and conservation program.

Within a climate that favors the marketing of fragile cultural heritage sites, colonization of the eastern slopes by highland villagers in northern Peru is also accelerating. Consequent deforestation exposes previously concealed monuments, and Chachapoya cliff tombs become especially easy targets for looters since they were built in sheltered promontories where mumified ancestors could “see” and be seen by the living. A horror story with a quasi-happy ending unfolded in 1997 at cliff tombs high above the Laguna de los Cóndores, a long-day’s trek from Leymebamba into the eastern cloud forest. Cattle herders had discovered and thoroughly ransacked a cluster of six mortuary chambers while seeking gold and silver artifacts. They hacked some mummy bundles in frustration at their failure to find precious metals but left behind a wealth of extraordinary textiles, intact Inca quipus, pyro-engraved guards, and other objects that archaeologists of Centro Mailquí succeeded in recovering and conserving in a new museum and research center in Leymebamba (Von Hagen and Guillén 1998). Like the 1987 discovery of the Moche “Lord of Sipán,” the Laguna finds have permitted a quantum leap in our knowledge of Chachapoya art and archaeology by rendering objects that are normally lost to looters. Yet even as archaeologists publish their finds, those in the field have seen the first evidence of targeted “hits” on other newly exposed Chachapoya cliff tombs. Such waves of looting are the high price that the world pays for extraordinary archaeological discoveries. A textile recently advertised on the Internet by Tai Gallery Textile Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and attributed to a Chachapoya “Abisco [sic] or Pajatén Culture,” bears witness that Chachapoya archaeology has indeed come of age (Figure 3). Archaeologists of Centro Mailquí, Denmark’s National Museum, and Peru’s National Institute of Culture (INCC) now race to inventory monuments uncovered by a settlement frontier that is cutting its way deep into the Huallaga River basin.

Archaeological Adventure Tourism

The globalization of ecotourism and the rising popularity of “extreme” wilderness expeditions also generate conservation dilemmas. Partnerships between archaeologists and whitewater outfitters like those described by Goddard and Jennings (2003) in the Cotahuasi Canyon can alleviate conservation prob-
lems. Some outfitters in the Chachapoyas region also show sensitivity and communicate regularly with archaeologists. The most damaging kind of eco-tourism in the ceja de selva, “discovery tourism,” is profit-driven and seeks “undiscovered” sites well-known to local villagers who serve as guides. Clients pay to “discover” ruins and perhaps apply a grandiose name (e.g., “Gran fill-in-the-blank”). Expedition machetes cut inviting avenues to sites where clearance activities expose ancient masonry to weather and aggressive secondary growth that takes root and explodes the stone walls (Church 1999). In 1998, a Web-publicized Dutch climbing expedition planned to enter the forests near Leymebamba in search of an unlooted Chachapoyas tomb, but neglected to ask the government for a permit or to contract an archaeologist. They were successfully detained until they met government requirements. Yet even as the team announced its success, looters were following their freshly cut trail to sack the tombs. Similar episodes are a yearly occurrence. In 2000, guards at the entrance to the Rio Abiseo National Park intercepted a group of U.S. kayakers arriving without necessary permits. Upon being turned away, they became indignant, as the kayaker’s ethos dictates that no one owns earth’s waters.

More than ever, the ceja de selva has become a playground for adventurers wishing to live out their Indiana Jones fantasies. A tour of the Internet confirms that the search for El Dorado did not end with the beheading of Sir Walter Raleigh in 1618. Every year, huge expeditions with six-figure budgets slash their way down the Andean slopes in search of El Dorado, Paititi, or similar “Holy Grails,” financed by paying expedition member-clients. During 2001, 2002, and 2003, massive expeditions armed with GPS and geophysical surveying equipment were led by Col. John Blashford-Snell, Jacek Palkiewicz, and Gene Savoy, respectively. All claimed unqualified success at locating Paititi and El Dorado in eastern Bolivia, central Peru, and northern Peru, respectively. Their websites describe expedition leaders as “self-styled academics” and “self-taught archaeologists” and sustain personality cults by providing the kinds of triumphant testimonials usually reserved for the dead. The sites also offer expedition “memberships,” links to commercial interests, and even mail-order New Age religion. On July 28th of this year, Peru’s Independence Day, the nation’s leading newspaper declared in banner headlines that El Dorado had been found by Gene Savoy and his team of Peruvian archaeologists in the upper Huabayacu River valley (El Comercio 2003a). In the accompanying article, Savoy’s son Sean clarified that only the part about “the city covered in gold” was a myth. He certified the find as authentic by affirming that his father had already looked everywhere else. The elder Savoy admits that he views history as “more an art than a science.” “After all,” he concludes, “no one can prove that what we have found is not El Dorado” (El Comercio 2003b:86).
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Surprisingly, Savoy's claims were not picked up by wire services which usually publish his finds of always bigger and earlier lost cities. Savoy declared that his 1985 “discovery,” dubbed Gran Vilaya (previously known as Cap quirca), was the largest pre-Columbian city in South America and the ancient capital of a Chachapoya kingdom. The settlement reportedly consists of 23,950 circular stone Chachapoya-style buildings covering an estimated 120 square miles. Savoy's most recent “discovery,” alternately referred to as Cap quirca, Gran Sapsoa, and El Dorado, extends over 26 square miles, and the archaeologists working under his aegis have endorsed his El Dorado attribution (El Comercio 2003a). It appears likely that what Savoy describes as “a vast ancient metropolis” at Gran Vilaya is actually a particularly dense clustering of settlements built on terraced hillslopes in the Vilaya River drainage. However, no professional archaeologist has ever reported on the site. Those of us who work elsewhere in the Chachapoya area see little evidence for political unification that would entail a “capital city.” Savoy's claims as a “discoverer” are dubious. Worse, his team has been clearing sites for three years without the benefit of a conservator. Nonetheless, he has seen more Chachapoya archaeology than most professional archaeologists ever will.

The most significant finding to emerge from all of these modern expeditions is this: the ceja de selva is littered with monumental sites that remain under-studied and mostly ignored in scholarly accounts of Andean archaeology. Twenty years ago, Lynn stated that “wherever a reasonable amount of research has been carried out we find continuous occupation and utilization of the land from the highlands into the montaña” (Lynn 1981a). A significant percentage of Inca and Chachapoya archaeology seems to be unreported in published Spanish chronicles and remains concealed beneath forest regrowth. When scholars finally do get an accurate view of the ceja de selva's hidden archaeology, a great deal of the Andean past, especially pre-Hispanic demography and paleoecology, may have to be reassessed.

Finding Solutions

The pursuit of the past in the Peruvian ceja de selva has coricic epic episodes, but it is largely tragic, with few success stories. Archaeologists working in Chachapoya have been blessed by invaluable collaboration with a few avocational archaeologists and explorers who have contributed immeasurably to research and conservation efforts while attracting a minimum of attention to themselves (e.g., Muscutt et al. 1993). But how can archaeologists take control of this runaway freigh train? Clearly, Peru's government must lead the way. To this end, ex-president Alberto Fujimori signed an executive decree in 2000 (Decreto Supremo No. 022-2000-ED) declaring the territory covered by ancient Chachapoya an Archaeological Reserve and prohibiting “all missions, expeditions, and projects” until the INC formulated new regulations. A deadline for the new regulations came and went, and the decree became null. It may have been insufficient to prevent some of the greatest destruction anyway. How can Peru effectively police a wilderness frontier nearly 1,000 miles long? Archaeologists have limited political clout anywhere in the world. In Chachapoya, the unity of purpose so important to concerted political action is usually undermined by professional rivalries and “terrorist” disputes. Unfortunately, the cultural area lies within three jurisdictions: Amazonas, La Libertad, and San Martín. Because sites like Gran Pajaten lying within its jurisdiction are only accessible through mountain passes in Amazonas or La Libertad, San Martín fights bitterly for some political and economic control over these potential tourist attractions.

The most effective solution for both the short- and long-term is already exemplified by Centro Mallqui. Permanent constructive engagement of communities and public educat-
tion through the establishment of research museums in their midst is the common denominator shared by all effective conservation initiatives (Alva 2000; Stanish and Kusimba 1996; Vega-Centeno S. 2001). Vega-Centeno S. (2001:47) cites Centro Mallqui as a rare example of a successful initiative that places conservation and research on equal footing. Unfortunately, Centro Mallqui is a target for lawsuits and continuous accusations of conservation malfeasance directed by a competing archaeologist (El Comercio 1997a, 2001; Kauffmann D. and Ligabue 2003). The underlying issue seems to be a case of alleged “claim-jumping” at the Laguna de los Condores tombs salvaged by Centro Mallqui’s archaeologists under INC supervision in 1997. Kauffmann refers to the site as “Laguna de las Momias” and seeks moral high ground by claiming that the tomb contents were largely undisturbed and should have been left protected in situ for posterity (El Comercio 1997b). Centro Mallqui archaeologists report that over 90 percent had been disturbed when they visited the site and that its contents were endangered (Von Hagen and Guillen 1998:30). Regardless of the details, a new dilemma has been introduced to Peruvian archaeology. Can any of the sites—never mind all of the sites—on this frontier be effectively protected for posterity? Or is it the ethical obligation of Peruvian archaeologists to intervene and collect disturbed and undisturbed vestiges that remain of this neglected heritage before looters plunder all? Alva (2001) reminds us of prior cases where entire pre-Hispanic “cultures” like Lemblera were lost and sold before archaeologists could take action. Is archaeological intervention upon encountering an unlooted cliff tomb now subject to professional and public censure? This important issue is only one of many now contemplated by archaeologists faced with the monumental challenge of discovering the Chachapoya, before this so-called “lost civilization” is truly lost forever.

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