By Way of Introduction: Colombia as a Field of Study

Colombia is today the least studied of the major Latin American countries, and probably the least understood. It has attracted the attention of specialists in Latin American literature, in good part thanks to its Nobel prize–winning novelist, Gabriel García Márquez; economists have taken note of its slow but steady economic growth, in a region better known for sharp (and in recent years mostly downward) fluctuations; and a number of political scientists have been intrigued by the peculiarities of its traditional two-party system. Nevertheless, in the papers presented at scholarly meetings and the articles published in scholarly journals, Colombia is featured far less frequently than Brazil or Mexico or Argentina or even, say, Chile or Peru. In the field of history specifically, the only English-language survey is a long-outdated English translation of a Colombian secondary text,[1] whereas at least four modern English-language histories are available on Peru. Meanwhile, at the level of popular impressions—in the United States and Western Europe—the name *Colombia* suggests mainly drug trafficking and endemic violence. If anything more positive comes to mind, it is the familiar Juan Valdez of the Colombian coffee growers' advertising, whose image is really that of a stereotypical Latin American peasant farmer.

Colombia deserves better than this, if only for reasons of size. It is the fourth largest Latin American nation, and it is the third most populous. It had actually been third in population at the time of independence, exceeded only by Mexico and Brazil. Argentina then moved ahead on the basis of a massive influx of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century immigration such as Colombia never received, but in the past year or so Colombia has edged ahead again. In gross production it is only fifth, exceeded also by Venezuela, but it occupies first place as an exporter of such disparate commodities as emeralds, books, processed cocaine, and cut flowers.

If, in spite of such claims on the attention of the outside world, Colombia still does not receive its fair share of scholarly attention, one reason undoubtedly is that the pervasive image of violence leads faint-hearted investigators to turn elsewhere. Another, in the view of historian Charles Bergquist, is that Colombia does not fit the stereotypes and "models" conventionally used in discussions of Latin America.[2] After all, what is a Latin Americanist to do with a country where military dictators are almost unknown, the political left has been congenitally weak, and such phenomena as urbanization and industrialization never spawned a "populist" movement of lasting consequence? Actually, for a student of the nineteenth century, Colombia is perhaps the most stereotypical country of all, with its long string of civil wars between Liberals and Conservatives, its retrograde clericalism and radical anticlericalism, all in a context of socioeconomic stagnation. But even scholars who work on the previous century will often choose their country of specialization on the basis of current headlines.

The problem of Colombia's image as a nation is compounded by ambivalent characteristics of the Colombians themselves. Quite apart from their tendency in recent years to take the lead in underscoring negative aspects of the national panorama, they continue to exhibit major differences along the lines of class, region, and in some cases ethnicity. It is thus a commonplace to say (with Colombians often saying first and loudest) that the country lacks a true national identity or a proper spirit of nationalism, at least as compared to most of its Latin American neighbors. Indeed, hyperbolic nationalism is not common in Colombia; and the national character, if such a thing can be said to exist, is a composite of sometimes contradictory traits. However, both the *costeño* (or denizen of the Caribbean coast) and the *cachaco* (from Bogotá or more generally the Andean interior), who profess to have almost nothing in common, make much the same complaints about the country's society and institutions, and do so within a common frame of reference.

For better or worse, Colombia does exist as a nation in the world today. The people and territory known as Colombian have not arrived at this status by an easy path; they have been torn by social, cultural, political, and regional antagonisms and misunderstandings. Yet the story consists of much more than lives lost and opportunities wasted. There have been accomplishments, too, including a remarkably vigor-

ous output of literature and art. Colombians have also shown time and again the ability to recover from terrible predicaments and to continue their daily round of activities under circumstances that to the outside observer might have seemed hopeless. A skill at "muddling through" is certainly one of the traits to be included in any putative model of the national character.

The account that follows, of Colombia's emergence as a modern nation, is the end result of a personal association with Colombia and Colombians that by now goes back almost half a century. It does not pretend to be a wholly objective story. Whether or not full scholarly detachment is even desirable, in practice it is not humanly possible, and I do not claim to be unbiased where Colombia is concerned. I have had my share of bad experiences in that country as elsewhere, and I have seen things that I would rather not have seen; but I have made firm friends there and have come to love the sights and sounds and smells that assault my senses whenever I again set foot on Colombian soil. I have also observed that the great majority of Colombians (trite as it may be to say so) are peaceable, courteous, and not engaged in any kind of violent or criminal activity.

I still do not claim to understand Colombia as well as someone who was born into the culture and has lived there always, though at times my condition as a foreigner may actually help me see a few things more clearly. I have naturally been helped even more by a host of other people, from clerical personnel to distinguished scholars, Colombian and non-Colombian, so numerous that it is better not even to attempt a list of acknowledgments. Either I would inadvertently leave some names out or I would need too many pages. For comparable reasons, of fearing to do too little or too much, I have mostly omitted reference notes, documenting only quotations, statistical data (so that anyone who wishes can check on them), and certain special cases. Some reviewers and other readers will probably object, but the publisher did not, and cutting down on notes does leave more room for text.

I must nevertheless acknowledge at least the help of my immediate family, all of whom have spent time in Colombia with me (one was born there). Above all, I pay a tribute of gratitude to my wife, whom I first dragged off to Colombia in the aftermath of the *Bogotazo*—the explosion of urban rioting that shook the Colombian capital in April 1948—when I was a graduate student setting forth to do Ph.D. research on a wholly inadequate stipend. Her initial exposure proved

traumatic, but she kept going back and has come to love the country too; hers have been a second pair of eyes through which I have been able to look at the Colombian scene over the years.

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I

Indians and Spaniards

In the beginning there were mountains, plains, and rivers, but especially mountains; no one geographic feature has so molded the history of Colombia as the Andes. They do not attain the same height that they have in Bolivia and Peru, but separated into three principal ranges—the Cordillera Occidental, between the Pacific Ocean and the valley of the Cauca River; the Cordillera Central, between the Cauca and the Magdalena River; and the broad Cordillera Oriental, which branches off toward Venezuela—they give the Colombian landscape its basic structure. They also determine temperature, climate, and ease of human access.

The greatest part of the country's land area is made up of lowland plains. Whether covered with tropical grasses or (as in the Southeast) Amazonian forest, these plains are accurately called *tierra caliente*, "hot land." As one rises in the different Andean ranges, however, average temperature falls and the natural environment changes. In the Cordillera Central and the Oriental, as well as in the isolated mountain outcropping of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta along the Caribbean coast, there are even a few snow-covered peaks. But the mountains also contain a string of basins and plateaus some 1,500 to 3,000 meters high that offer moderate temperatures and often the best soils and living conditions. These middle elevations have for centuries held the densest concentrations of human inhabitants; yet the earliest Colombians did not live there, since they first had to cross the lowland plains.

PRE-COLUMBIAN COLOMBIA

No one knows when the first human beings set foot on what is now Colombian soil, but we may assume that they were part of the great migration of Native American peoples who, having crossed over from Asia, spread out through North and then South America. Presumably,

they first encountered the present Colombian department of Chocó (adjoining Panama), a hot, densely forested area with some of the world's heaviest yearly rainfall. It was not the most attractive place to settle, but it did become permanently inhabited, by forest groups that made the necessary adaptation to the environment. The rest of the country was ultimately occupied as well, though we have no idea how long the process took, and no physical traces of most of the early occupants have been found.

The first clear evidence of human activity consists of stone chips found at El Abra, a site on the Sabana de Bogotá (the high plain that today contains the nation's capital). These chips have been dated to earlier than 10,000 B.C. On the western edge of the same Sabana, near the Falls of Tequendama (where the Bogotá River suddenly drops 140 meters straight down toward the Magdalena Valley), a similar find has been made. However, we cannot assume that the arts of civilization first developed in the vicinity of Bogotá; and both there and elsewhere, the sequence of developmental stages—the emergence of agriculture, creation of ceramics, and so forth—was exceedingly gradual and generally comparable to that found among other American Indian peoples.

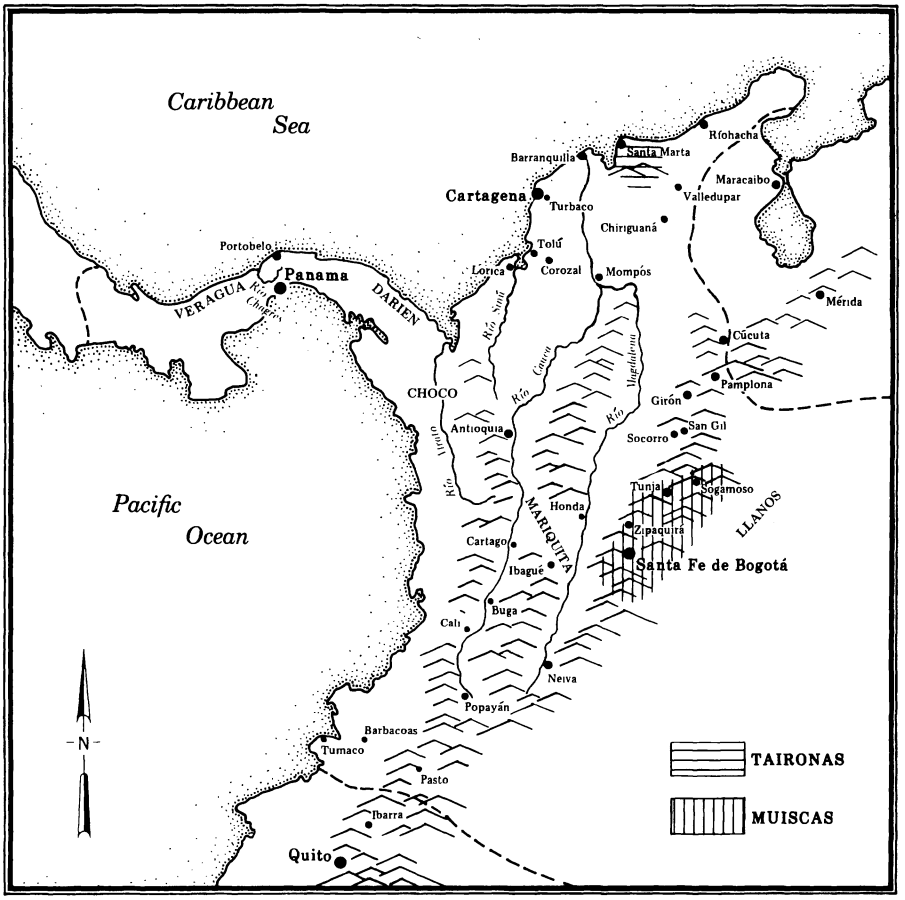
The earliest native culture from which monumental remains have come down to us arose in the upper Magdalena Valley, near the headwaters of the river—in an area of ample rainfall, about 1,800 meters in altitude, and admirably suited for the growing of corn. Commonly referred to as the "San Agustín culture," from the name of the present-day municipality where the principal archeological sites are found, it flourished from at least the middle of the first millennium B.C. until after the coming of the Europeans, although possibly with some interruptions. The most impressive findings are the several hundred stone statues of human or animal figures, some over three meters in height, that apparently stood guard over tombs. Indeed, the archeological record consists mainly of burial sites, since structures for the living were obviously made from perishable materials. It is no less obvious that a society of some complexity and stratification must have existed, to carry out the works.

In other parts of the country, different native peoples, while not equaling those of San Agustín in stone statuary, were perfecting their own crafts, gaining practice in management of the ecology, and gradually creating a more complex social and political organization. One

craft that reached high levels of sophistication almost everywhere was goldwork, thanks to the widespread existence of alluvial gold deposits. These were most often found near the western and central cordilleras, but Indians who lacked gold in their own territory had little difficulty obtaining it by trade. Trade and other contact likewise existed with peoples living beyond what is now Colombia—with the Indians of Middle America, for example, and with those of what became the Inca empire to the south. Outside influences do not, however, appear to have been decisive in development of the native civilization; it is worth noting, for example, that the llama, which served as beast of burden as well as source of wool and meat in the central Andes, was not to be found beyond the present northern border of Ecuador. Thus, the native peoples of the present Colombia, like those of North America, were wholly dependent on human power for transport—even on the rivers and few lakes.

The Indian peoples who inhabited the northwest corner of South America belonged variously to the Carib, Arawak, Chibcha, and other groupings, but the greatest number formed part of the larger Chibcha family that extended into Central America and (in various pockets) Ecuador. What Chibchas mainly had in common was the fact that they spoke related languages, so that the term is above all a linguistic designation. Certainly the Chibchas varied widely among themselves in other respects. They did, though, include the two most notable peoples of pre-Columbian Colombia: the Taironas and the Muiscas. The Taironas are the only people who appear to have achieved something like a true urban civilization; the Muiscas had progressed furthest in the direction of political and territorial consolidation by the eve of the Spanish Conquest.

The Taironas lived mainly on the lower slopes (below 1,000 meters) of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, a range that rises abruptly from the Caribbean shore behind the present city of Santa Marta to beyond the snowline (see map 1). Just as the Sierra Nevada itself was cut off from the Andean cordilleras, the Taironas were isolated from other principal centers of Indian civilization, and though their territory was densely inhabited, its limited extent naturally set a limit on their total numbers. Once conquered by the Spanish, they were largely forgotten, and they did not much figure in discussions of Colombian antiquities until the 1970s, when the discovery of "Buritaca 200" (also called "Ciudad Perdida" or "Lost City") and intensified study of other



Map 1. Colonial New Granada, with Areas of Muisca and Tairona Civilizations

Tairona sites suddenly made contemporary Colombians aware of their achievements. These include the most impressive native engineering works found anywhere in the country: roads and bridges made of stone slabs, terracing of mountainsides for the planting of crops, and extensive construction of level platforms on which dwellings or other buildings once stood. The buildings have disappeared, but the system of platforms makes it possible to visualize a form of urban living. In addition, the Taironas produced some statuary, though not on the scale of San Agustín, and a great quantity and variety of other stone objects, goldwork, and fine ceramics. In purely qualitative terms, they were without question the outstanding Amerindian people among the precursors of modern Colombia.

The Muiscas were not equal to the Taironas in technical skill or artistic sophistication, but they were far more numerous (around 600,000,[1] representing the largest concentration of Native Americans between the Inca empire and the Mayas of Middle America) and on that basis alone have tended to mold perceptions of preconquest culture and institutions. They lived in the intermountain basins of the Cordillera Oriental. The altitude of these basins, the largest of which is the Sabana de Bogotá, ranges generally between 2,000 and 3,000 meters, giving them a temperate to cool climate; the land was fertile and well watered; and the surrounding escarpments gave protection from such warlike peoples as the Panches of the upper Magdalena Valley. Apart from ritual anthropophagy, there is no real proof that the Panches were fierce cannibals, as the Spanish later claimed, but they were certainly uncomfortable neighbors.

The Muiscas were a preeminently agricultural people, living chiefly on potatoes and corn and also drinking fermented corn beer, or *chicha*. They were expert at making cotton textiles, from cotton obtained principally through trade; they worked gold, and they did some stone sculpturing. But they had no engineering works comparable to those of the Tairona, nor any settlements that could be described as incipient cities. Like all the other native inhabitants of the present Colombia, they had no form of writing. The Muiscas lived in single-family homes scattered amid the fields, and not just their homes but their "palaces" and temples were made of reed, wood, mud, and similar materials. To be sure, the more important structures might also have thin sheets of hammered gold hanging from the eaves—and these were inevitably among the first things to disappear when the Spaniards arrived on the scene. In some instances small children became con-

struction materials. A child would be placed in the hole dug for one of the wooden pillars that was to hold up the building; then the pillar would be set, the child crushed, and construction would proceed. This was one of a variety of human sacrifices practiced by the Muiscas and other preconquest inhabitants; but sacrifices were never even remotely on the Aztec scale.

The Muiscas possessed some salt springs in the vicinity of Zipaquirá (site of the so-called Salt Cathedral that is today a Colombian tourist attraction), from which they obtained salt for their own use and for an extensive trade with neighboring peoples. Indeed, most of their gold came not from their own territory but by way of trade. Even so, the Muiscas devised the ceremony that is the clearest model for the legend of El Dorado, literally "The Gilded Man," which the Spaniards later encountered over much of South America. As part of his installation ceremony, the local chief of one subgroup of the Muiscas would coat himself with gold dust and then would go out to the middle of sacred Lake Guatavita (around 50 kilometers northeast of Bogotá) and plunge into the icy waters. Precious stones and gold objects were thrown into the lake as offerings to the gods and, together with the gold dust, settled on the bottom. All this invited the cupidity of the Spanish once the identity of the lake was established; but their draining efforts were never successful.

Politically, the Muiscas had no overall government, although the stronger groups among them were gradually extending their rule over the weaker. At the lowest level, the basic unit of government and society was a clan type of organization, based on kinship ties. The highest-level political units have been conventionally referred to as kingdoms or confederations. When the Spanish arrived, two such confederations predominated: one centered near the present Bogotá and headed by a figure known as the Zipa; the other located about 100 kilometers northeast, at Tunja, whose leader bore the title of Zaque. Their respective "capitals," of course, were not cities like the Taironas' but mere clusters of a few ceremonial or other buildings. Neither the Zipa nor the Zaque exercised tight control over all those who in some way owed them allegiance; but they did enjoy positions of great honor and were surrounded by elaborate court ceremonial. Not even members of the Indian nobility dared to look at them in the face; and if, say, the Zipa indicated a need to spit, someone would hold out a piece of rich cloth for him to spit on, because it would be sacrilegious for anything

so precious as his saliva to touch the ground. Whoever held the cloth (all the while carefully looking the other way) then carried it off to be reverently disposed of.

The Indian leaders, whether local chiefs or heads of whole confederations, normally inherited their positions; but, as with a number of other Native American peoples, inheritance was not patrilineal. Instead, a chief was succeeded by his nephew—the oldest son of his oldest sister. There were exceptions, and the subjects apparently had some say in the matter, if only to confirm the successor in his post. But hereditary succession in the manner indicated was the rule; and, if Europeans had not interfered, it seems reasonable to assume that sooner or later either the Zipa or the Zaque would have absorbed the holdings of the other, along with certain lesser autonomous chiefdoms, thus creating a unified Muisca state. There are also signs that the Muiscas were on the verge of entering a period of more solid building activity and other advances in material civilization. All that, alas, was not to be.

THE COMING OF THE SPANIARDS

One of the numerous Spanish expeditions sent out to explore the Caribbean in the wake of Columbus's initial discovery sighted the Guajira Peninsula of what is now Colombia in 1500. Subsequently, in the early years of the sixteenth century, other expeditions touched on the Colombian coast looking for gold and pearls, Indian slaves, adventure—and the elusive waterway to Asia that Columbus himself had been seeking. Colonization was first attempted along the Gulf of Urabá, near the present border with Panama, where the town of San Sebastián was founded in 1510. From that same stretch of coast, expeditions moved both south into the interior and westward to the Isthmus of Panama, where Balboa, having assumed command of one Spanish band of explorers, happened on the Pacific Ocean in 1513.

Neither San Sebastián nor other settlements on the Gulf of Urabá proved permanent, but lasting footholds did develop elsewhere along the Caribbean coast. Santa Marta, today the oldest Spanish city in Colombia, was founded in 1526. Located on a sheltered bay, somewhat to the east of the mouth of the Magdalena, it was immediately adjacent to the country of the Taironas and also served in due course as point of departure for the conquest of the Muiscas. Cartagena, lying