

Guardians of Stone

Ancient statues keep watch over hundreds of tombs in the mountains of Colombia...



A statue believed to represent a sun god welcomes visitors to San Agustín Archaeological Park.

Colombia is the world's leading source of emeralds.

A 2-m-tall warrior glares across the grassy valley in the Andes Mountains of South America. He flashes fierce jaguar-like fangs and watches with a fixed stare. He's still, silent... and made of stone.

Some 600 magnificent statues have occupied the area near San Agustín, Colombia for more than a thousand years. Even to this day, nobody's sure why they were built or who made them. So scientists are digging up clues to try and solve the monumental mystery.

STONES AND BONES

When the Spanish settlers arrived in the region about 400 years ago, they were completely flummoxed by the statues and the mysterious sculptors who'd made them. Some of the settlers believed that the statues' creators must have had magical powers. How else would you explain the sculptures when the metal tools needed to carve stone hadn't yet been invented?

In the 20th century, less superstitious individuals began excavating the area. Their digging uncovered complex tombs housing old skeletons.

The size of the tombs and the presence of their stone 'guardians' led scientists to think that the rich leaders of an ancient community must have been buried there.

"We expected the tombs would have personal possessions in them," says archaeologist Víctor González, "but they didn't. We were surprised to find that there weren't any treasures inside."

Victor and his colleagues realised that the tombs were for the wealthy members of the San Agustín society. "We think, instead, that the people buried here were believed to possess unusual, supernatural powers," he says, "such as the ability to influence the forces of nature." Woah!

CARBON CLUES

To gather more clues about the ancient people, the scientists had to get hi-tech. They used a process called **radio carbon dating** to find out the age of organic materials (the remains of organisms such as plants and animals) in the tombs. Although the skeletons had mostly turned to dust, the researchers managed to scrape together samples to test. Their data showed that the culture likely started **2,000 years ago** and lasted for roughly nine centuries!

Based on the number of remains found in the area, they estimated that around 20,000 lived in the group. But the mystery of how these people carved such detailed stone structures still hadn't been solved.

TUFF ENOUGH

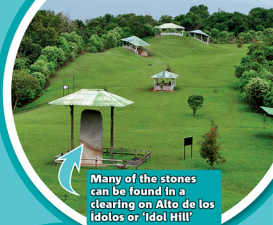
After examining hundreds of statues scattered throughout what is now the San Agustín Archaeological Park, scientists realised that most of the figures were made of **tuff**, a volcanic rock found in large quantities around the area.

Tuff is brittle, and if you strike it with a harder rock you can easily chip off chunks and create grooves. No magic needed!

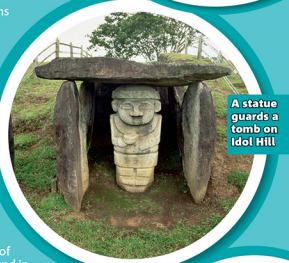
CASE CLOSED?

While the mystery of how the statues were made has been solved, scientists haven't finished asking questions about the people who carved them. For instance, who *actually* did the carving? Did the entire community pitch in? And most importantly, what happened to the people?

The answers to these questions aren't set in stone—unlike the statues that stand guard over the land the people left behind.



Many of the stones can be found in a clearing on Alto de los Idolos or 'Idol Hill'.



A statue guards a tomb on Idol Hill.



Many of the stones have survived earthquakes, erosion and attempted thefts.



While some of the stone guardians are smaller than garden gnomes, others are huge! The biggest statue is an incredible 7m tall!

SUPER STATUES!

Check out these eight awesome sculptures carved out of stone...



Words: Scott Elder. Main picture and second statue: © Art Director: © HRP / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 1: iDeagroup / Getty Images. Illustrations: © National Geographic. Statue 2: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 3: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 4: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 5: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 6: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 7: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 8: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 9: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 10: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 11: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 12: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 13: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 14: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 15: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 16: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 17: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 18: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 19: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 20: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 21: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 22: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 23: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 24: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 25: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 26: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 27: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 28: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 29: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 30: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 31: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 32: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 33: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 34: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 35: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 36: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 37: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 38: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 39: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 40: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 41: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 42: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 43: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 44: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 45: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 46: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 47: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 48: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 49: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 50: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 51: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 52: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 53: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 54: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 55: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 56: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 57: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 58: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 59: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 60: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 61: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 62: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 63: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 64: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 65: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 66: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 67: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 68: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 69: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 70: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 71: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 72: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 73: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 74: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 75: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 76: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 77: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 78: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 79: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 80: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 81: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 82: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 83: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 84: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 85: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 86: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 87: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 88: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 89: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 90: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 91: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 92: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 93: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 94: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 95: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 96: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 97: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 98: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 99: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo. Statue 100: iDeagroup / Alamy Stock Photo.