

A PROJECTILE POINT FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF QUINDIO, COLOMBIA

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Although it is generally accepted that any early migrations into South America must have passed through the territory of the modern country of Colombia, until a short time ago evidence of a Paleo-Indian occupation in that country was rare and restricted to chance finds. Archaeological investigations on the Caribbean coast, on the Sabana de Bogotá, and in the Magdalena Valley have now uncovered a number of early sites, but information on the earliest cultures is still almost completely lacking for most of the country. Nonetheless, a general pattern of northern Andean Paleo-Indian cultures is emerging and a salient characteristic of them all seems to be a lack of stone projectile points. This has been interpreted by not a few as evidence of a well developed "preprojectile point stage" and presented by others as evidence that the later prehistoric custom of making lances and arrows entirely of wood has great time depth.¹

Regardless of one's stand on the preprojectile point stage controversy, the almost total lack of stone projectile points in Colombia is puzzling. The earliest dated cultures in both lower Central America and in the countries to the south and east of Colombia do possess stone points in abundance. A suggestion has been put forth, that since stone projectile points are found associated with very early cultures in adjacent areas the very few stone points that have been found in Colombia must date to the earliest Paleo-Indian occupation, that which had its origin in peoples with stone points who were migrating into or through Colombia. Those who stayed in Colombia, it is alleged, soon made the change to wooden weapons, thus accounting for the paucity of points. This hypothesis is almost impossible to verify or to disprove, however, since most of the known stone projectile points result from chance finds by local inhabitants and lack exact provenience. The few with good provenience come from the Caribbean littoral where Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff has conducted a number of excavations in early sites. Almost nothing is known of points or of Paleo-Indian occupations elsewhere, especially in the Cordillera Central and the Cauca drainage, one of the great routes of prehistoric movements of peoples.²

In 1970, in the course of an archaeological site survey in the Department of Quindío, we discovered a chipped stone projectile point. The find was a surface one, and examination of the immediate area revealed no other artifacts of possible Paleo-Indian type. However, the fact that this is the only projectile point with sure provenience from the Cordillera Central makes it an interesting discovery. The point was found lying on a recently eroded surface in a patch of cleared land near the southeast end of the El Edén Airport runway in the municipio of La Tebaida, Department of Quindío. The Department of Quindío lies in the direction of the fall of the ash plume from the volcano Cerro Bravo, a volcano which was active from about 5000 B.C. to approximately the 18th century A.D.³ There has also been considerable soil buildup in the region since the cessation of these volcanic eruptions. The area where

the point was found has had approximately 6 m. of soil removed to level the landing strip, a fact which helps explain why a possible Paleo-Indian artifact was found in an area which otherwise yielded only remains of very late prehistoric cultures.

The only other artifact which may be of Paleo-Indian type, a small yellowish chert scraper (fig. 3), was found some distance to the northwest of the point, about 500 m. from the other end of the runway, but within the area which had been levelled so drastically. Neither the point nor the scraper bears any resemblance in form, material, or workmanship to stone artifacts of the later cultures of the area. The scraper is, however, very similar in shape and material to scrapers found by Gonzalo Correal Urrego in Paleo-Indian sites in the Magdalena Valley.⁴

The projectile point is made of a dull black chert with numerous faults and inclusions (figs. 1 and 2). It is a large, corner notched specimen measuring 5.5 cm. in length, 4.5 cm. in width (at the base) and 0.7 cm. in maximum thickness. It has a proximally converging stem and a slightly damaged tip. The somewhat convex edges of the point are pressure retouched deeply enough to give a slightly serrated appearance. Some thinning is evidenced on both faces; this later bifacial flaking as well as the primary flaking was probably done by a direct percussion technique.

The Quindío point bears little or no resemblance to any of the points now known to have been found south of the Caribbean littoral. There are a few points, said to be from the Cauca drainage and now in private collections, which are of entirely different types, as is a point from Manizales, some 80 km. to the north, illustrated by Reichel-Dolmatoff.⁵ Some resemblances can be seen to the points found by Reichel-Dolmatoff in Santa Marta, although the Quindío specimen is somewhat larger and more coarsely chipped.⁶ There are also resemblances to the somewhat later Canaima Complex points of eastern Venezuela.⁷ However, the Quindío point is not identical in either shape or size to any of these other specimens or styles.

To date no further evidences of the earliest occupation of the Cauca drainage, either in the Cordillera Central or in the Cauca Valley proper, have been forthcoming. Until such time as a thorough site survey is undertaken in this area we will have to be content with such finds as this projectile point as indications of a Paleo-Indian occupation in the western portion of Colombia.

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NOTES

- ¹See Lynch, 1974, for a review of the literature on this topic.
- ²See Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1965, pp. 44-50, for a summary of the Colombian material.
- ³Gerald D. Herd, United States Geological Survey, personal communication.
- ⁴Correal Urrego, 1974, pp. 204-205 and 218, lám. 5.
- ⁵Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1965, p. 46, fig. 6 right.
- ⁶Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1965, p. 46, fig. 7.
- ⁷Rouse and Cruxent, 1963, pp. 42-43 and pl. 6a.

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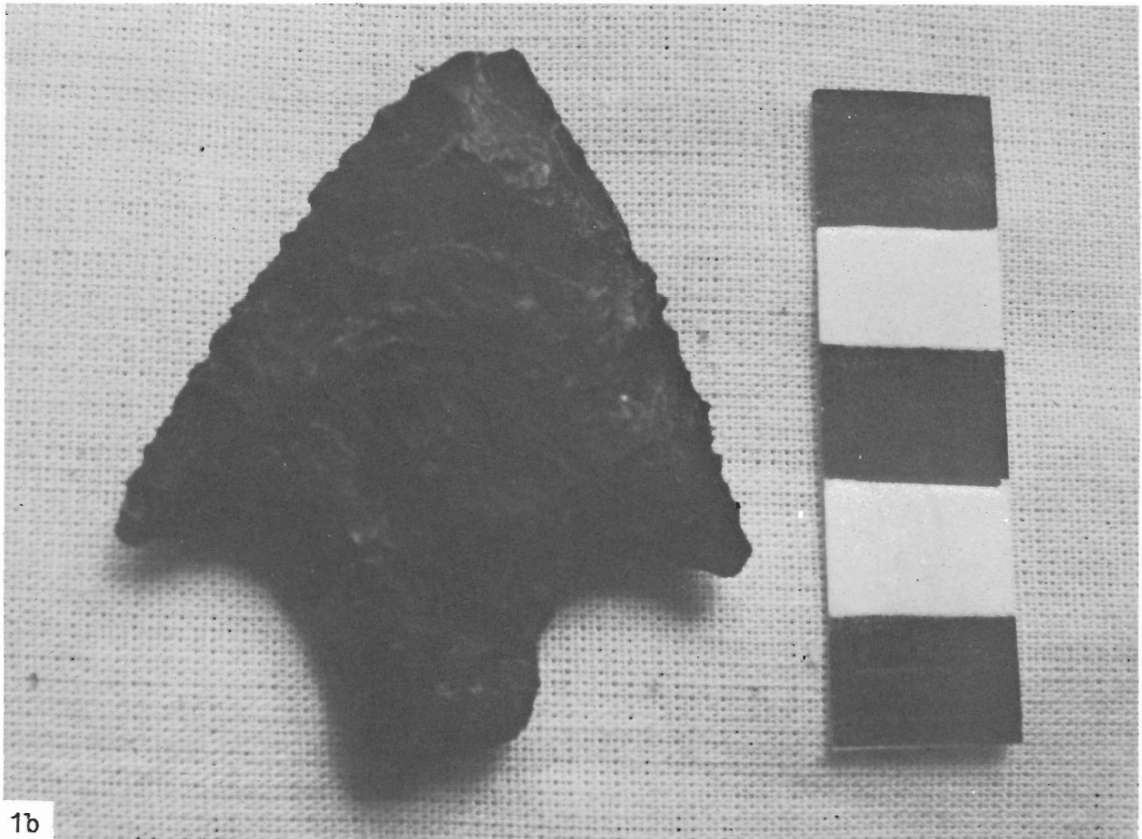
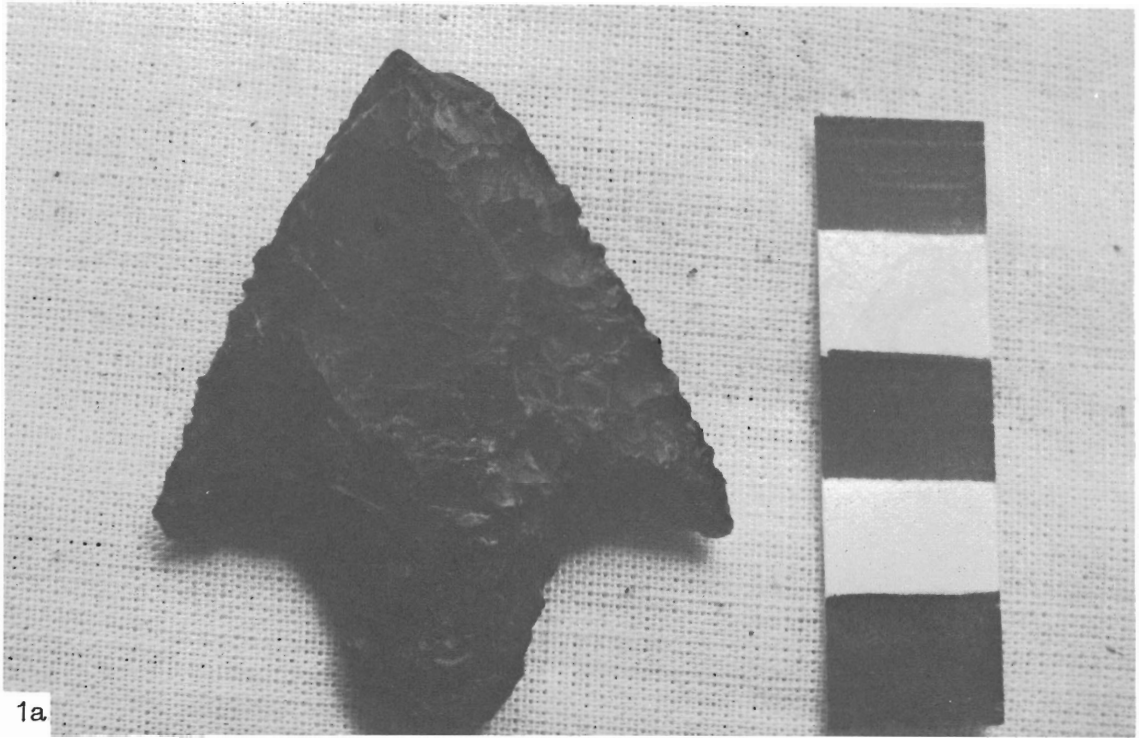


Plate XXIV. The Quindío projectile point. Photo by K.O. Bruhns.

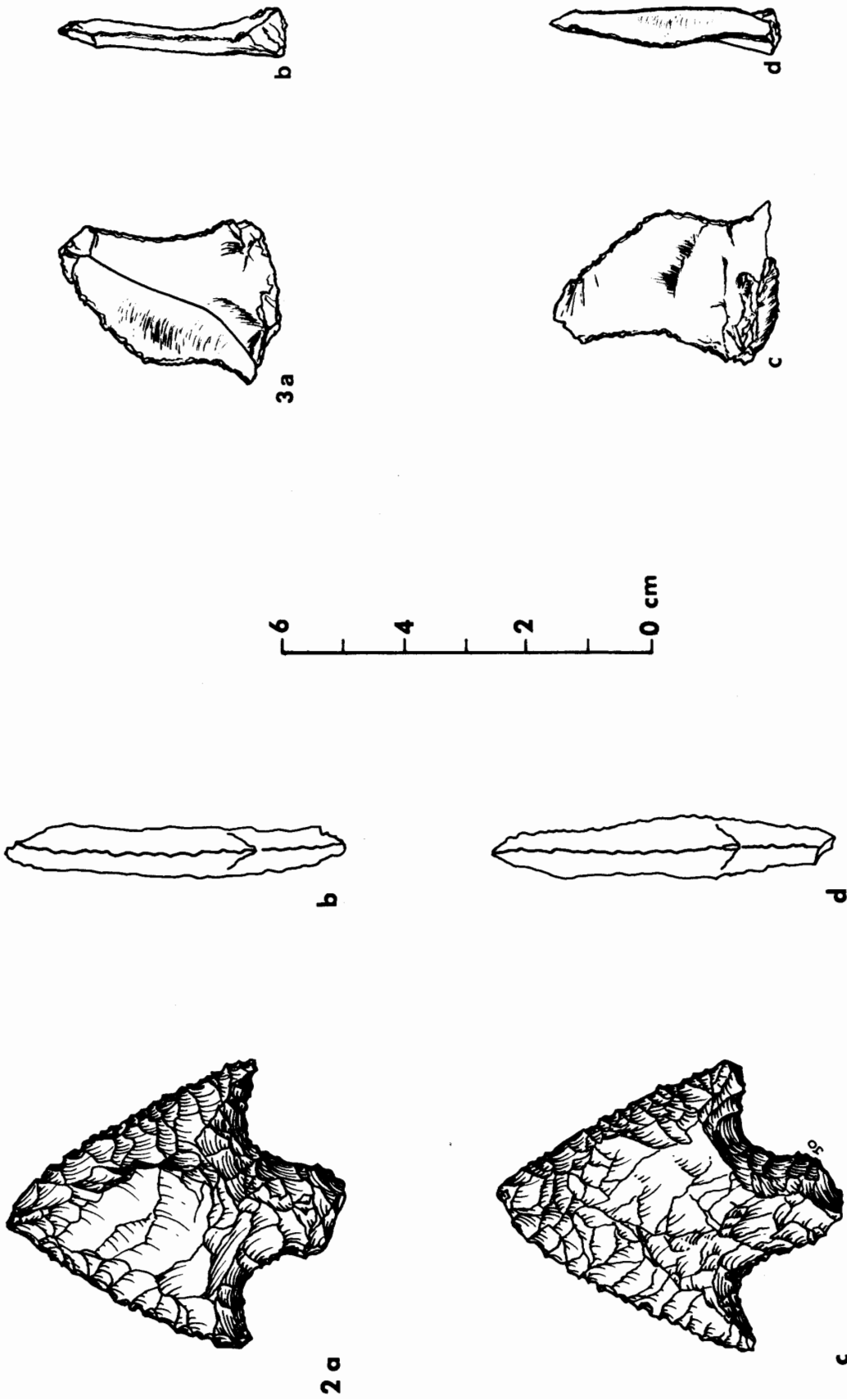


Plate XXV. Fig. 2, the Quindio projectile point; fig. 3, scraper of yellowish chert found in same general area as the projectile point. Both pieces actual size.