

By: ~~May 2008~~ ~~May 2008~~ Whitei, Science Editor

## [Human Sacrifice at the Tombs of Mysterious Columbian Civilizations](#)

### *The Usme site*

Back in January, construction workers stumbled in the Usme district (southeast of Bogotá, Colombia) upon an ancient burial site made of about one thousand tombs belonging to two mysterious civilizations. The site spans over an area of 12 acres (5 hectares) and could host victims of human sacrifice. "The possible victim is a young woman who seems to have been buried alive. Her mouth is open as if in terror, and her hands seem contracted as if she had tried grabbing hold of something. Another tomb contains the remains of a man with a curved tibia, or shinbone, possible evidence that the man was a shaman." anthropologist Ana Maria Groot of the National University of Colombia, leading the teams working at the site, told National Geographic News. "Spanish observers in the 1500s wrote of indigenous shamans spending long periods in caves with no exposure to sunlight. A lack of sunlight would produce a shortage of vitamin D, causing curving of the bones," said co-author Virgilio Becerra. The graveyard is unusual because of the long period it was in long use for, between the 1st century to the 16th century AD. Until 500 AD, the tombs were made as part of the Herrera period, connected to an agricultural Andean population living in small groups. "The agriculture became more intensive, more systematic at this time. From around A.D. 500 to 1500, the site seems to have been occupied by the Muisca, another culture that is one of Colombia's most important, but least understood, civilizations. Ongoing analysis should reveal more about life expectancy, diet, disease, and other aspects of daily life and social organization in the settlement. Anthropologists also found ruins of a human settlement next to the burial site, including what may be evidence of a temple. Holes for posts suggest a large circular structure," Groot explained. Pottery encountered in the tombs is represented mainly by fragments of decorative and simple pitchers, cooking pots, and cups. Decorations are mostly geometric motifs representing animals - frogs, birds, and snakes. Stones used for the grating, cutting and grinding of plant food point out to the diet of the ancient inhabitants. However, with all this, there are several voices that give another interpretations to the discovered bodies. "In the case of the young woman who looks to have been buried alive, her contracted hands may be explained by early arthritis. Likewise, her opened jaw may be the result of the body having been moved before or after burial," Guillermo Cock, an archaeologist and Andean expert, who dug thousands of Peruvian tombs, told National Geographic News. He ended up by cautioning about the danger lurking around these sites. "Conservation [of graves and other archaeological material] in Colombia and Venezuela tends to be poor because of the soil's humidity, which quickly destroys organic remains."