Tinker 2012 Summary Report

Melanie J. Miller

Travel to: Colombia

During the summer of 2012 I was extremely lucky to receive a grant from the Tinker Foundation in order to travel to Colombia for archaeological research. I am a bioarchaeologist: I study human skeletal remains from archaeological contexts to investigate the lives and experiences of ancient peoples. Originally, I only planned to work for a few weeks at the Universidad de los Andes, a private university located in Bogotá, Colombia, where an archaeological collection (called the Tibanica collection) is currently housed. I had been in contact with professors at the university who directed the Tibanica project, and I made travel plans to visit them in Colombia so that we could discuss the possibility of collaborative projects and my potential dissertation research. I had plans to visit in July, but in early June, my friend Jennifer, a fellow graduate student at UC Berkeley who also studies prehistoric archaeology in Colombia, asked me if I could fly down early to help out on an excavation. I of course said yes, who wouldn’t want to help excavate a 5,000-year-old site (well, maybe some people who don’t like getting dirty)?

I flew into Bogotá at the end of June and spent less than a day in the crowded capital before cramming into an overloaded car (we had lots of luggage plus all of our tools for excavating) and headed out to the beautiful pueblo of Ubaté. Ubaté is located in a gorgeous valley with incredible views of the Colombian mountains and sky, and is known throughout Colombia as the best milk and cheese producing area in the country, so we certainly enjoyed the food! For fourteen days straight we excavated at a site on a hill just outside the center of town. We worked in an area of a field that used to be an agricultural zone (and now is a pasture for two cows named “Sol” (sun) and “Luna” (moon)) and a neighboring area that is now a communal property used as the local soccer field. Excavating in the local soccer field was certainly an experience: for many people in Latin America (and around the world) soccer is a serious sport and the neighborhood children and adults had mixed feelings about our archaeological studies invading their favorite daily activity. Although we occupied a corner of the soccer field, many of the local children enjoyed visiting with us and learning about the process of archaeological excavation and the kinds of materials we were recovering. After two weeks of excavation we had recovered the skeletal remains of three 5,000-year-old individuals, many lithic artifacts (modified stones used as tools), many bones from animals (often linked to the diet of site inhabitants), and some ceramics from more recent time periods. The project was overseen by two archaeology professors at the Universidad de los Andes — Dr. Carl Langebaek (the same professor who directs the Tibanica research projects) and Dr. Sonia Archila. You can look at photos of some of the archaeological materials we found and watch a video that the university made about the excavations on their website: <http://www.uniandes.edu.co/ubate>. It was very exciting to be a part of the excavations in Ubaté, and it was a great start to my Colombian trip.

I returned to Bogotá for a few days after the excavation wrapped up and planned a short trip to the northeastern coast of Colombia. Since this was my first trip to Colombia, I wanted to see the diversity of landscapes, people, and rich histories that Colombia offers, I had also never been to the Caribbean so visiting historical cities on the Caribbean coast sounded like a great plan to me! I flew into Cartagena, boarded a bus, and headed out to the port city of Santa Marta, the oldest city in Colombia, founded in 1525. In Santa Marta I explored the historic sights of the city for a day (such as the Quinta de San Pedro Alejandrino where liberator Simón Bolívar spent his last days) and then visited the incredible Tayrona National Park another day. The white-sand beaches are not to be missed and the food, especially the fresh seafood, people, and wildlife are wonderful. I then returned to Cartagena, one of the most amazing and hottest cities I have ever visited. Colonial-era ramparts enclose part of the city where historical buildings have been repurposed for hotels and restaurants. Tourists can explore the Castillo San Felipe de Barajas, a massive and imposing fortress that overlooks historic Cartagena, strategically constructed by the Spanish in the mid-1500s to dominate and defend this key port city. I wandered deep into the bowels of the fort’s inner maze of tunnels, descending through narrow stone passages that I couldn’t stand-up in (the Colonial-period peoples who built and used these passages must have been much shorter than I am) until I became too claustrophobic and resurfaced into the sweltering 90º F heat of the city. For dinner that night I found a ‘locals’ restaurant and enjoyed a huge plate of *arroz con camarones* (rice with shrimp) and a *limonada con coco* — one of the most refreshing drinks I have ever tasted, made of fresh-squeezed limeade with coconut cream blended into it. The following day I flew back to Bogotá. I was sad to leave Cartagena, and I hope to return there with friends next time I am in Colombia.

After my four-day adventure on the Caribbean coast I returned to the Universidad de los Andes to begin working with professors and graduate students to develop academic relationships and research collaborations. I stayed in an apartment in the northern part of the city, so daily I rode the TransMilenio bus to school (about an hour bus ride each way). Bogotá is a sprawling city that can seem daunting to travelers. The TransMilenio bus line is a crucial part of the city’s infrastructure, but traffic and pollution remain major issues for Bogotá residents. Learning to navigate the city like a local is a key part of working in a foreign country, especially when living in a city as densely populated as Bogotá! Every day at the university I met with colleagues and explored the previously-excavated collections from the Tibanica archaeological project.

Before coming to Colombia, I had been in contact with Professor Carl Langebaek who oversees the research done on the Tibanica collection. Tibanica is located in the present-day province of Cundinamarca, covering an area of mountainous terrain that now includes the modern-capital of Bogotá. The site of Tibanica was excavated a few years ago as part of an archaeological rescue operation — new apartment buildings were being built when the construction crews came across an ancient burial ground, leading to the excavation of over 500 human skeletal remains. Three of the burials were carbon-14 dated by analyzing carbon (burned organic remains such as wood) associated with the burials, indicating these people lived between 1200 and 1600 AD. These people were from the Muisca culture, who had a long history of living in this highland area. The Muisca people living in the early 1500s (1537, to be exact) were present and thriving when the Spanish arrived in their territory. In addition to the skeletal remains recovered from the site, the archaeologists excavated pottery, animal bones, shell beads, and a few small gold artifacts, and researchers will use all of these data sets to understand the lives of these ancient peoples.

I went to Colombia with the hopes of developing a collaborative project using the Tibanica collections for my dissertation research. I was able to meet with Dr. Langebaek and his graduate students, particularly Lucero Aristizabal Losada, to discuss my research questions and interests and develop plans to work with a sample from the Tibanica collections for my own research project. As a bioarchaeologist I specialize in the study of human skeletal remains and I am particularly interested in studying human diet and health and how these change with different social experiences. The Tibanica collection is an ideal project for my research questions as there is a large sample size that includes many variables (men and women, young and old people, etc.) and spans a range of time in which we may be able to see stability and change in dietary practices and health. I was very lucky to be given permission to work on the Tibanica project and I feel confident that many excellent collaborative projects will develop in the future.

The final two weeks in Bogotá I worked on identifying samples within the Tibanica collection that I could use for my dissertation research. This entailed spending hours sorting through spreadsheets of data about the skeletal remains that were recovered and then finding individuals that fit the criteria needed to answer my research questions. I then spent almost a week opening hundreds of boxes in a storage room trying to find those individuals who I wanted to include in my study. While archaeology is often depicted as adventurous and endlessly exciting by popular media, the reality is that most of the time spent working on archaeological studies takes place in laboratories, sorting through boxes of artifacts or other materials for analysis. After finding the boxes that contained the individuals I wanted to include in my research, I was given permission by the project and the Colombian government (ICANH) to take samples back to the United States. I will study these samples in laboratories on the UC Berkeley campus to find evidence for human diet and health. Bones and teeth record the chemical signatures of the foods we eat during our lives, and I use stable isotope analysis to recover these chemical signatures to understand past dietary practices. Bones also change over the lifetime and are constantly reacting to the things we do and experience, and different analytical tools can inform us about how and why bone changes. I am very excited to begin working on these preliminary samples for my dissertation research and to continue to develop projects with the other talented researchers working with the Tibanica collection. I am very grateful to the Tinker Foundation for funding my travel to Colombia so that I was able to make these possibilities a reality. I look forward to future travels and continuing my research in Colombia (plus, I miss the *arepas*!)