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## The Amazonian statue. A biography of a famous and polemic artifact from Brazil

### A estátua amazônica. Biografia de um famoso e polêmico artefato vindo do Brasil

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**Abstract:** A large stone statue was brought from the Amazon to France in 1848 by the explorer Francis de Castelnau. It depicts a being, apparently human, squatting, with his hands on his chest. Now exhibited at the *Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac*, this piece created a strong controversy since it was made public. In the mid-19th century, several Brazilian intellectuals strongly criticized the arrogant attitude of the Frenchman who had 'looted' their heritage. In reality, the reasons for this conflict are much deeper since they affect the very identity of the nation, then in formation. In any case, even a play was written to mock the explorer. This gave rise to doubts about the authenticity of the object, which has persisted to this day. The authors therefore studied the artifact to determine its cultural origin, while analyzing existing references to compare it with other pieces from the Amazon. They were thus able to validate the statue's Amerindian identity, nearly 170 years after its discovery.

**Keywords:** Amazon. Stone statue. Explorer. Theatre. Iconography. Museum.

**Resumo:** Uma grande estátua de pedra foi trazida da Amazônia para a França em 1848 pelo explorador Francis de Castelnau. A escultura representa um personagem, aparentemente humano, agachado com as mãos no peito. Agora exposta no *Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac*, esta peça gerou uma forte controvérsia desde quando foi tornada pública. Em meados do século XIX, vários intelectuais brasileiros criticaram fortemente a atitude arrogante do francês que havia 'saqueado' seu patrimônio. Na realidade, as razões deste conflito eram bem mais profundas, uma vez que afetavam a própria identidade da nação, então em formação. De qualquer forma, uma peça de teatro foi escrita para zombar o explorador. Isto deu origem a dúvidas sobre a autenticidade do objeto, que persistem até hoje. Por isso, os autores apresentam aqui um estudo do artefato para determinar sua origem cultural, analisando as referências existentes para compará-lo com outras peças da Amazônia. Assim, os autores conseguiram validar a identidade ameríndia da estátua, quase 170 anos após sua descoberta.

**Palavras-chave:** Amazônia. Estátua de pedra. Explorador. Teatro. Iconografia. Museu.

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## INTRODUCTION

"This statue is nothing but a petrified mummy"<sup>1</sup>  
(Porto-Alegre, 1851, p. 60)

Some objects trigger the most extreme enthusiasm and resentment. The 'Amazonian statue' of Castelnau is one of them (Figure 1). Barely made public, it has generated controversial campaigns on its origin, authenticity, place of discovery, the legality of its expatriation, the true intentions of its inventor, etc. The adventures of this stone sculpture brought back from the Amazon to France more than 170 years ago are epic, multiplying the most persistent doubts and resentments among all the actors in his life. Already, the French explorers involved strongly criticized each other. Similarly, the Brazilians concerned – intellectuals, politicians, artists, and military – followed this path of protest. Once in France, it was repeatedly either honored or forgotten. One would think that at the beginning of the 21st century, it would finally enjoy a well-deserved peace of mind. No! We are still wondering about the veracity of its origin. It is now time to resolve this question.

## FROM THE DARK RAINFOREST TO THE CITY OF LIGHT

During the XIXth century, the Amazon underwent the development of scientific explorations, especially by European travellers. For French explorers, the 19th century was a bit like the century of names beginning by a C: Crevaux, Coudreau, Cullère, Chaffanjon, Castelnau. The first is the barefoot explorer of French Guiana, before going half crazy on the Orinoco River from where he only brought back human skulls, before dying under the blows of the Bolivian Toba. The second was desperate to smear the reputation of the first who preceded him, while at the same time giving a scientific dimension to his exploration with geographically-military aims. The third one, a priest of a parish in the lower Amazon built up a beautiful collection of archaeological finds from the Óbidos area, which is now the pride of the Musée Dobrée in Nantes, France (Rostain, 2019). The fourth visited for three years the Orinoco basin in Venezuela. Castelnau, on the

other hand, scoured South America from 1843 to 1847, collecting many local samples, but his most famous piece was undoubtedly a large stone statue.

After a short training at the National Museum of Natural History and an expedition of more than three years in North America, Count Francis de Castelnau set sail for South America in 1843 to begin an exploration in good and due form (Castelnau, 1850-1852). His steps led him from Rio de Janeiro to Lima, then to Belém do Pará. He crossed Brazil, Bolívia and Peru before moving to the Upper Brazilian Amazon, where he met several Amerindian groups (Castelnau, 1847, 1848; Bajon, 2005; Porro, 2013) (Figure 2). He travelled in very different conditions from those of a Crevaux or a Coudreau, who experienced loneliness, hunger and despair in their respective adventures. He benefited from a comfortable financial cushion provided by the French State and appreciable human support from the Brazilian army and visiting scientists.

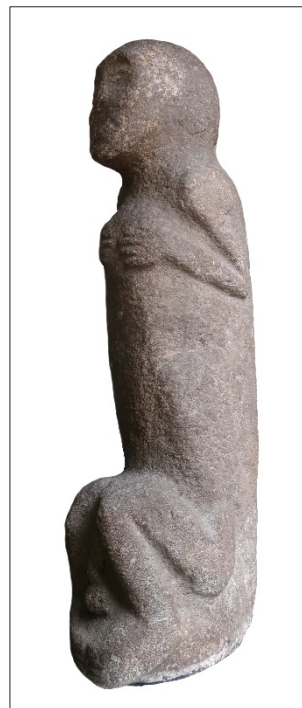


Figure 1. Amazonian statue inventoried under the number 71.1887.160.1 at the Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac Museum. Photo: S. Rostain (2019).

<sup>1</sup> "Esta estátua não passa de uma múmia petrificada" (English translation from Portuguese).

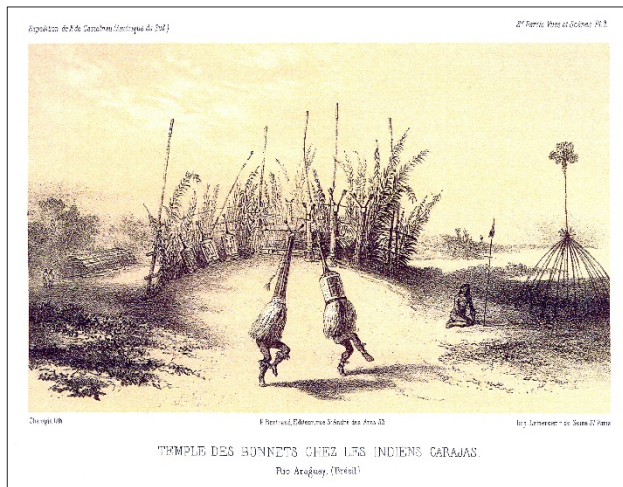


Figure 2. Temple of the hats among the Carajás of the Araguaia River, Brazil. Originally, the Amazonian statue may have been planted in such ceremonial mound or ritual area of this kind. Source: Castelnau (1848, plate 9).

Among all his finds is a large stone statue. His interest in this type of sculpture awakened in Villa da Barra do Rio Negro, where “I learned from the commander that several had been unearthed and that they had curious ornaments in the form of animals and especially monkeys”<sup>2</sup> (Castelnau, 1850-1852, p. 113). He was then informed that “a large statue. . . had been transported to Santarem”<sup>3</sup> (Castelnau, 1850-1852, p. 115). When he arrived in this town, he asked around and “finally a man told me that a stone monkey was in the courtyard of a house. He led us to the place”<sup>4</sup> (Castelnau, 1850-1852, p. 124). Supposedly offered by its owner, it was brought back as a trophy to France.

His fellow citizen Paul Marcoy, who was also exploring the Peru and Amazon at the same time,

nevertheless told a different story of the discovery. It must be said that after befriending each other on the spot, the two men argued in Peru and became angry, each following his own path. According to Marcoy (1867, p. 158), “. . . one of the houses of the Barra kept a trachytic sandstone statue, representing a seated monkey man with half-closed eyelids and crossed arms on his chest, long in front of his threshold, to which it was used as a step”<sup>5</sup>. Thus, this author locates the discovery, not in Santarém, but again in Barra, *i.e.* the current city of Manaus. It provides many details – perhaps too much to be totally credible – involving Carmelites who would have kept the piece in their Mission on the Upper Rio Negro, then a Brazilian using it as ballast for his boat, which eventually ran aground at the Barra. The overly detailed explanation smacks of romantic verve. And the explorer adds, calling upon Inca and ‘Indo-Mexican’ art to identify its origin.

Still captivated by the legend of tropical women-warriors, Castelnau (1850-1852) presented the statue in his native country as representing one of them:

According to the tradition of the country, she represents an Amazon, and her position could perhaps confirm this way of seeing things. Indeed, she seems to hide her udders with her hands, and she holds between her feet the emblem of the male sex<sup>6</sup> (Castelnau, 1850-1852, p. 125).

There was nothing like it to make the *gorges chaudes*<sup>7</sup> in Paris. All the elements were present to arouse the curiosity of the jet-set of the time: an expedition into the jungle, a crude statue of the first peoples, of the warring women of Amazonia, a figure of her enclosing a male sex between her legs.

<sup>2</sup> “J’ai appris du commandant qu’on en avait déterré plusieurs qui présentaient des ornements curieux ayant la forme d’animaux et surtout de singes” (English translation from French).

<sup>3</sup> “Une grande statue. . . avait été transportée à Santarem” (English translation from French).

<sup>4</sup> “Enfin un homme me dit qu’un singe de pierre se trouvait dans la cour d’une maison. Il nous conduisit sur les lieux” (English translation from French).

<sup>5</sup> “. . . une des maisons de la Barra garda longtemps devant son seuil, auquel elle servait de marche, une statue en grès trachytique, représentant un homme-singe assis, aux paupières mi-closes, aux bras croisés sur le thorax” (English translation from French).

<sup>6</sup> “D’après la tradition du pays, elle représente une amazone, et sa position pourrait peut-être confirmer cette manière de voir. En effet, elle semble cacher ses mamelles avec ses mains, et elle tient entre les pieds l’emblème du sexe masculin” (English translation from French).

<sup>7</sup> A big deal (French translation from English).

The Orangerie of the Museum of Natural History in Paris proudly displayed for a few months the glorious sculpture. Then, it was exhibited in the Louvre Museum before being stored. In 1887, the statue was entrusted to the Trocadero Ethnographic Museum.

The statue slept in the storerooms for most of the 20th century. It only came twice to light for the 1928 exhibition at the Musée des Arts décoratifs (Palais du Louvre) and the 1965 exhibition at the Musée de l'Homme (Société des amis du Musée de l'Homme, 1965). In 1930, Alfred Métraux spoke briefly about it in an article describing the archaeological finds from the upper and middle Amazon, all of which are kept in the collections of the same museum: “. . . we can only define her as a squatting character, hands clasped against her chest. . . .”<sup>8</sup> (Métraux, 1930, p. 167). The object was again published in the 1965 catalogue of the Musée de l'Homme's Masterpieces (Heim & Millot, 1965).

Despite being occasionally exhibited, it only really came out of its anonymous confinement in the first decade of the new millennium, when André Delpuech, then chief curator of the Americas collections of the Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac Museum, began to document the piece. In 2006, it was part of the first temporary exhibition 'D'un regard, l'autre' at the museum on the Quai Branly. Thus, it was integrated into a section of pieces with a singular history with, once again, the same explanation of its unverified origin. Very quickly, a journalist published an article in a major French daily newspaper about the unusual adventure of the object (Biétry-Rivierre, 2010). It was almost a decade later, in 2019, that the strange piece was closely analyzed by the authors. The museum then decided to bring the object up to date by exhibiting it. Then, the heavy plaster base, molded around a large post several decades earlier, was broken, in order to have a

complete display of the object. Today, it finally found a place of majesty in the permanent exhibition with a revised description (Figure 14).

## A THEATRE PIECE FOR A STATUE

The transport of the statue to France in the 19th century and, above all, the story told by Castelnau, raised a strong controversy that culminated in a literary work. Colonel Antônio L. Monteiro Baena, a member of the Institute of History and Geography of Brazil, was the first to react. He sent an official letter to the president of the province of Para, to question Castelnau's overall observations about navigation conditions in the region, denouncing his lack of expertise on the subject and reminding the government that his country should only be explored by local researchers, who knew well the region. Indeed, Baena himself had just previously produced a long report on the advisability of establishing a navigable trade route on the Araguaia and Para Rivers. The region was experiencing commercial and agricultural success that was taking precedence over other traditional activities which were in decline due to a lack of slaves, such as gold mining and forestry. Castelnau's negative statements run counter to this project by describing inadequate local conditions, for example when it refers to the falls of Carreira grande: “. . . the terrible waterfalls to be overcome and in which so many people have died”<sup>9</sup> (Baena, 1847, p. 92). The Brazilian blamed the geographical inaccuracies of the Frenchman, who allegedly passed too quickly over the Araguaia, which had already been explored since 1720 by Diogo Pinto da Guaia.

The colonel was not the only one against Castelnau; a whole cabal had been established against the explorer. Many intellectuals were protesting against this dominant foreign arrogance, teaching lessons to the local, as if they knew better. It should be remembered that in the middle

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<sup>8</sup> “. . . nous ne pouvons que la définir que comme un personnage accroupi, les mains serrées contre la poitrine. . . .” (English translation from French).

<sup>9</sup> “Em seu relatório escripto. . . no qual pondéra que é respeitavel o perigo que encontra a navegação do Araguaia embarçado por terriveis catadupas, onde tanta gente tem achado a morte” (English translation from Portuguese).

of the 19th century, the Empire of Brazil experienced a period of questioning and reconstruction in the socio-political field in particular (Rozeaux, 2016). Independence was still fresh and a series of political and economic crises were hitting the country. In the background, the consolidation of power required a detachment from colonial models and the definition of a specific Brazilian identity. Imperial France remained an admired model but, paradoxically, one tried to detach oneself from this heavy archetype of the Old World. In any case, the French stallion created controversy, which explained the rise of the protests as soon as one of them fails.

Faced with the unattainable Castelnau, Brazilians took second degree weapons to skin the indelicate. In 1848, the artist Manoel Araújo Porto-Alegre, Baron of Santo Ângelo, wrote “. . . an ‘archaeological comedy’, a satirical allegory that offers its readers a caricatured account of a group of French ‘scientists’, both ignorant and ill-intentioned, already living from the discovery of allegedly precious finds” (Poncioni, 2015, p. 76)<sup>10</sup>. He dedicated his literary work to the illustrious Mr. Manoel Ferreira Lagos, Vice President of the Instituto Histórico e Geográfico do Brasil and Director of the session ‘Archeologia e Ethnographia Brasiliana’. This play, ‘A Estatua Amasonica, Comédia archeologica’ (Figure 3), was a comic satire clearly intended to discredit while ridiculing Castelnau.

The play takes place in three acts, located in Paris, in the living room of a rich French antique dealer, the Count of Sarcophagin, who has a plaster copy of the great discovery of Castelnau, a statue whose existence would brilliantly demonstrate the truth of the ancient Amazon women warriors’ civilization in America. The enthusiastic Count boasted of having written a thesis that would revolutionize science in Europe, while leaving clear his hope of being accepted into the Institute:

My memory of this wonderful artifact will revolve the whole of Germany, break more than a thousand archeological pipes, and produce in England an antiquarian irritation, make beer and grog more expensive, and put the British brain like a Watt boiler<sup>11</sup> (Porto-Alegre, 1851, p. 7).

In the first act, when talking to his wife, the Count declares that he believes in the theory of lost civilization:

This statue is the relic of a great empire; it is a link in the interrupted chain of the past: it is the fragment of the bones of a giant, suffocated by a cataclysm, and buried by the most remote barbarism<sup>12</sup> (Porto-Alegre, 1851, p. 10).

The Countess is incredulous, but the Count despises his wife’s opinions and prefers the enlightened ideas of their guests, French scholars, in order to assess the value of his theory.

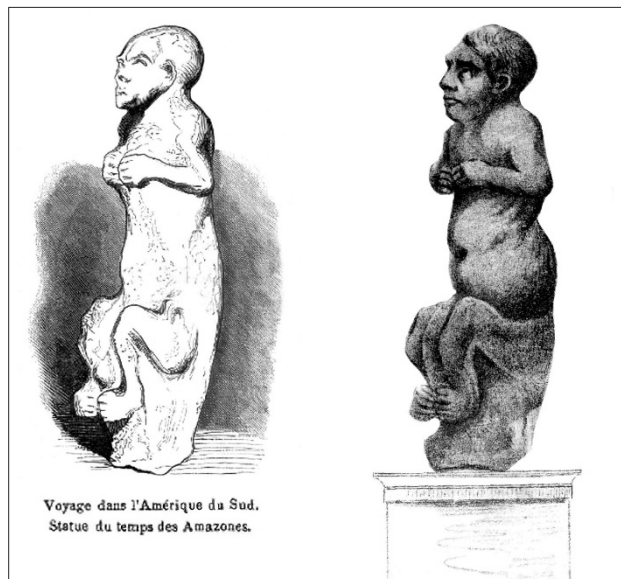


Figure 3. Amazonian statue, on the left very approximately drawn in ‘The Illustration’ (Joanne, 1847), which most certainly served as a model for the drawing published in the piece ‘A estatua amasonica’, on the right. Source: Porto-Alegre (1851, plate II).

<sup>10</sup> English translation from Portuguese.

<sup>11</sup> “A minha memoria sobre este portentoso artefacto vai revolver toda a Allemanha, quebrar mais de mil cachimbos archeologicos, e produzir na Inglaterra uma irritação antiquaria, encarecer a cerveja e o grogue, e pôr o cerebro britanico como uma caldeira de Watt” (English translation from Portuguese).

<sup>12</sup> “Esta estatua é a reliquia de um grande imperio; é um elo da cadêa interrompida do passado: é o fragmento da ossada de um gigante, abafado por um cataclisma, e sepultado pela mais remota barbaria” (English translation from Portuguese).



The second act takes place around these characters, in the Count's archaeological cabinet, where one after the other develops the most researched theories on the origin of the statue. The Viscount of Bibletin sees in it a representation of the Phoenician god Baal. The Marquis de Barathre thinks it would be a 'degenerate dog-head', perhaps the *Anubis labrator* of Virgil, brother of Osiris. The Baron de Colombaire invited them to abandon the 'nebulous dreams' by reminding them that the statue came from America and that its skull did not have the Caucasian constitution, but rather that of the 'quadriman' class or the 'pythechio' genre. Columbaire replies that it is a gorilla, or one of the gorgonians described by Herodotus in Hammon's journeys. And the conversation continues in these high spheres of tartuffery. Finally, the enthusiasm for a spectacular discovery led them to make big plans for Brazil:

Brazil must be ours, not as the traveler who went on a secret mission would like, but in a free way, and according to the highest theories of transcendent politics; it must belong to us, as must the whole Earth, through socialism: it is a country that is very indebted to the current situation. . . . Go. Once Brazil is acquired, then we will change the face of historical science, of politics, that world that lies petrified like a fossil<sup>13</sup> (Porto-Alegre, 1851, p. 34).

The third act takes place in the dining room and then in the garden, where scientists continue to chat while strutting around to display their scientific and literary erudition. They recite poems even when interrupted by a servant who gives

the Count a letter and a brochure brought by someone who seemed to be a Brazilian student. The Count reads the letter and begins to tremble, then faints. The Marquis de Barathe continues to read aloud the text speaking of an article in the *Revista do Instituto Histórico Geográfico Brasileiro* by see Baena (1847, p. 96), he claims that the statue transported to France by Castelnau was not made by Amerindians, but by a mason:

It is without a doubt that the wise men bathe and flood a nation with light: but it is necessary that these wise men who visit exotic countries, in their search for truth, do not take as Ixião by the requested goddess their silhouette formed by the cloud, as it seems to me to have happened to Mr. Castelnau, who found at the Barra of Rio Negro do Pará, at the door of the sister of the late Joaquim Anvers da Costa Corte Real, a small and crude stone statue resembling almost a monkey, which served as stone bench, and undertook to take it to France, where it helped to give him the reputation of a curious and fine researcher. But, if in this case such precipitation had not occurred, he [Castelnau] would know that the raw artifact, which had surprised him so much to be a production of the hands of the jungle, was the work of Antônio Jacinto de Almeida, one of the masons employed in the placement of survey markers in the last demarcation expeditions, who was at the village of Ega with astronomers and geographers from the Japura River due to an outbreak of disease, and who had fun shaping the said figure on a stone he found, and from which the said Antwerp in the year 1791 brought to the Barra of the Negro River, this work without art, for which said mason did not have the same taste as the sculptor Pygmalion had for his statue of Venus<sup>14</sup> (Porto-Alegre, 1851, p. 82).

<sup>13</sup> "O Brasil deve ser nosso, não como quer o illustre viajante que foi em missão secreta, mas de uma maneira livre, e segundo as mais altas theorias da politica transcendente; elle nos deve pertencer, assim como toda a terra, por meio do socialismo: é um paiz que está muito endividado para com a actualidade. . . . Va. Adquirido o Brasil, então mudaremos a face da sciencia historica, da politica, esse mundo que jaz petrificado como um fóssil . . ." (English translation from Portuguese).

<sup>14</sup> "É sem duvida que os sabios banham e inundam de luz uma nação: porém é preciso que a esses sabios visitando terras exóticas não lhes aconteça no alcance da verdade tomar como Ixião pela requestada Deusa o seu vulto formado pela nuvem, segundo me parece haver acontecido ao Snr. Castelnau, o qual achando na barra do Rio Negro do Pará, á porta da irmã do fallecido Joaquim Anvers da Costa Côte Real, uma pequena e bronca estatua de pedra quasi parecida a um macaco, que alli servia de poial, a julgou uma feitura gentilica, e tratou de a levar para França, onde servisse de grangear-lhe a reputação de curioso e fino pesquisador. Mas se neste caso tanta aceleração não tivesse havido, elle saberia que o tosco artefacto, que tanto o surpreendera como producção de mãos selvaticas, era obra de Antonio Jacintho de Almeida, um dos pedreiros empregados na collocação dos marcos das ultimas demarcações, o qual achando-se na villa de Ega com os astrónomos e geographos vindos do rio Japurá por causa de uma epidemia de molestias, se lembrou de divertir-se em moldar na dita figura uma pedra que alli achou, e donde o dito Anvers no anno de 1794 trouxe para o lugar da barra do Rio Negro esse trabalho sem arte, a vista do qual seguramente o mencionado pedrciro não experimentou agrado semelhante ao do escultor Pygmalião com a sua estatua de Venus." (English translation from Portuguese).

The Count then declares his shame and regret at having written his long memoir, which was already in press, and wonders who would then open the doors of the Institute to him in the face of such a fiasco. The other scholars recommend him to write even more, because no one will know anything about the Brazilian publication. And, in a case like this, it is better not to weaken but to drive home. Finally, they agree not to recognize and disseminate the evidence of forgery, but, on the contrary, to affirm even higher and stronger the exceptional interest of the object.

This play thus raised lasting doubts in people's minds about the authenticity of the statue, specially about its Amerindian origin. Uncertainty has persisted since its publication until recently – when we began to study it. One of the objectives of this collective work was to definitively demonstrate the imposture or, on the contrary, the validity of the artifact. In short, was it a comedy or a tragedy?

## A SINGULAR FIGURATION IN AMAZONIA

At first glance, the statue is a little banal, even coarse, the rustic genre. It is a 135 cm high stone column with a diameter varying from 42 cm at the legs at the base to 23 cm at the head, weighing 45.3 kg. Although initially thought to be made of a trachytic volcanic rock, our more recent observations suggest that behind the grey-brown patina, the rock is actually a basalt. It represents a crouching character, perhaps an animal, carved in relief. The round head shows eyes, nose and mouth partly erased by subsequent pecking. Two strange 2.5 cm diameter concavities are found on the temples. A kind of bun, today broken, has been made at the back of the head. Underneath, both arms are against the body, with hands resting upon the chest. Under an abnormally long torso, the two bent legs are joined at the knees and feet. A protuberance between the legs seems to represent a male sex. A large short tubular extension, about 7 cm high and 7.5 cm wide, continues

the statue under its base, probably to plant it in the ground. Finally, it should be noted that the attachments to the bodies of the limbs, arms and legs, are represented by a ball that resembles an epiphysis.

Although it is undeniably the work of a craftsman skilled in stone carving, the sculpture is too coarse to be identified with certainty. Two questions arise immediately, before any hypothesis about its origin. The first question is the nature of the representation: is it a man or a monkey? First of all, it should be stressed that the design is clearly consistent with the Amazonian aesthetics and modes of body representation in archaeological materials (Barreto, 2014). For example, the legs bent over themselves or the ball ties of the limbs to the body are found in other Amazonian productions, such as in stone figurines and ceramic vessels. Representations of seated human bodies are frequent on ceramic funerary urns (McEwan, 2001), particularly those in the Guarita style found in the region of the ancient city of Barra, now Manaus (Figure 4). The same position of the legs bent and the attachment of the limbs to the body by forming a ball or S are typical elements of anthropomorphic urns not only in the Guarita style (Figure 5), but in the entire Polychrome Tradition of Amazonia, corresponding to the last Amerindian occupation before the European invasion (Oliveira, 2020).



Figure 4. Map of the upper Amazon locating the places and ethnic groups mentioned in the text. Drawing: Rostain (2019).





Figure 5. Funerary anthropomorphic urns of Guarita culture (top: from Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi; bottom: from Museu de Arqueologia e Etnologia, Universidade de São Paulo. Photo: E. Oliveira (2018).

It seems to figure a human being, but we cannot immediately rule out the possibility that it is a monkey. The ambiguity between human and animal status is also a strong characteristic of Amazonian animistic art (Descola, 2010). Barreto (2014) has shown that most representations of bodies in ancient Amazonia, sometimes in a human-animal composite form, allude to the unstable and transformational capacities of beings in Amazonian perspectivist ways to conceive and fabricate the body (Viveiros de Castro, 1998). Furthermore, the representation of monkeys is quite common throughout the Amazonian iconographic repertoire. The squatting position, the round head and the oversized trunk are quite characteristic of the red-faced spider monkey (*Ateles paniscus*). The tail could have disappeared with the hammering of the back by the caboclos. This species is particularly represented on the Mochica culture vessels (100-700 AD) on the northern coast of Peru. The red-faced spider monkey

is particularly present in the Karib universe of Guyana, notably among the Trio (Rivière, 2001) and Kachuyana, and among the Waimiri-Atroari of Amazonas State (Matarezio Filho, 2013). In addition, the two concavities are generally arranged on the temples in a similar way to those of the Amazonian statue (S. Bourget, personal communication, 15/01/2019). While these clues are by no means definitive, they still raise reasonable doubt. But what can we understand about such a 'monkey man'?

In fact, the Amazonian statue looks like nothing known on the continent. However, comparisons can be proposed, without real family resemblances being detected. No stone statues of this size are reported in the Amazon. It is true that it is a rare material, if not non-existent in the great tropical plain. Only the Andean foothills offer volcanic rock deposits worthy of the name. It is in this region of the Upper Amazon that stone figurines have been found, especially in Ecuador, but they bear little resemblance to the Barra's one (Figure 6). On the other hand, they prove that rocks are available in the upper Amazon to shape statues and support the hypothesis of a western origin of the Upper Negro figurine. In contrast to the Amazon, downstream of the river, around Óbidos, about twenty copies of small sculptures of great finesse and complex iconography have been discovered (Aires da Fonseca, 2010) (Figure 7).



Figure 6. Figurines of polished basalt from Ecuadorian Amazon, of uncertain provenance (at the left, National Museum of Ecuador). Photo: S. Rostain (2012); at the right, surroundings of Macas, private collection. Source: Drawing S. Rostain quoted in Paymal & Sosa (1993, p. 38).



Figure 7. Polished stone sculpture for hallucinogen inhalation, from the Óbidos area, lower Amazon, Brazil. Nearly thirty of these objects have been found in this region and they are considered to be related to the practice of hallucinogenic powder taking (Dobrée Museum of Nantes). Photo: S. Rostain (2019).

Often equipped with a cavity, they are supposed to have been used during ritual hallucinogenic powder snuffing (Wassén, 1965; Zerries, 1985; Rostain, 2019). Like the Amazonian statue, they are exceptional too and without equivalent known. Several of them show a representation of a large animal holding a small being between its legs, usually looking like a human being, reminiscent of visions caused by South American psychotropic drugs (Rostain, 2012). Larger stone sculptures representing quadruped animals have also been reported by Alves and Prous (2017), but they do not exceed 32 cm long. Therefore, the large size of our statue is what makes it truly unique in the universe of Amazonian stone works.

A big question concerns the small protrusion between the legs of the statue. The idea that immediately comes to mind is male genitals. However, this supposed representation of a penis and testicles is singularly unrealistic, although it is a little disproportionate (Figure 8). On the other hand, this protuberance reminds us of the character sometimes covered or held by a large animal placed on his back, of several figurines from the lower Amazon and statues from San Augustin, Colombia. One

immediately thinks in particular of the 'Obispo' statue of San Augustin. The question remains open. It leads to the problem of comparison with pre-Columbian lithic art in the Amazon.

If the figures seem very distinct, we find this theme of the character imprisoned by an animal on the outer periphery of the Amazon, over a few hundred meters high in the Colombian Andes overlooking the great Amazonian plain. There, during the first eight centuries of our era, the San Augustin culture flourished (Figure 9). The pre-Columbian San Augustin culture has left us a very large collection of megalithic monuments and funerary statues. These statues, made of blocks of tuff and volcanic stone, are up to 4 m high and sometimes weigh several tons. They protected burial chambers, monolithic sarcophagi and burial sites. This culture includes the theme of human-animal bodily transformation, with a human character dominated by a large animal behind, a theme sometimes called 'alter-ego', also associated with shamanism and the consumption of hallucinogenic plants. But this iconography, especially in the Andean context, is still poorly studied and misunderstood.

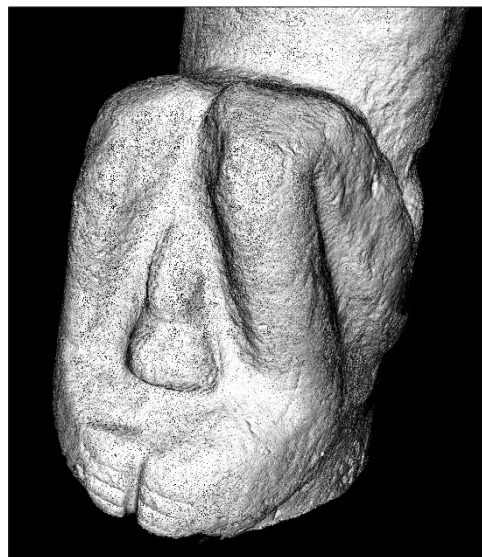


Figure 8. Protuberance between the legs of the Amazonian statue: a male sex or a small being captured? Source: Scan 3DFaro by G. Chaumet (Institut national d'histoire de l'art - INHA) (2019).



Figure 9. Statue of the site of Alto Lavapatas, Colombia, San Augustin culture. Photo: A. Delpuech (2017).

Archaeology therefore provides little data on Amerindian stone statues. However, ethnohistory reports its use (Rostain, 1994). Thus, in 1613, Yayo Indians from Bruyère Mountain, in French Guiana coast, told Robert Harcourt that Karib from the banks of the Oyapock River had a stone idol, of which he gives a precise description:

There is an idol of stone, which they worship as their God; they have placed it in a house made on purpose for the greater honour of it, which they keep very clean and handsome. This idol is fashioned like a man sitting upon

his heels, holding open his knees, and resting his elbows upon them, holding up his hands with the palms forwards, looking upwards, and gaping with his mouth wide open (Harcourt, 1926, pp. 109-110).

Statues are also mentioned on the Middle and Lower Amazon in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century archives. There, the Arawaks, Tapajos and Trombetas people worshipped wooden or stone idols, sometimes painted, and mummies, which were destroyed by the Jesuits in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Nordenskiöld, 2017).

Finally, it is in recent ethnography that we find an object comparable to the Amazonian statue, since large wooden figurines are known in the Upper Amazon. Thus, the Conibo sculpt and paint life-size wooden human representations (Figure 10). They are used during Wake-Honeti initiation rites during which the little girls are excised (Waisbard & Waisbard, 1958). In a comparable statuary style, there are also the Witoto figurations (group formerly called Murui-Muinane) of the Putumayo River, a little further east (Figure 11). These large wooden statues, whose manufacture and use disappeared in 1928, were reportedly associated with the supposed anthropophagous rite and were obviously banned by European settlers. They are generally 70 to 80 cm high and less than 20 cm in diameter, but some were 1.4 m long and 30 cm in diameter, *i.e.* similar in size of the Castelnau statue. Collective memory indicates that ceremonies involving statues, the 'original beings', as past symbolic elements were used for pedagogical-reorganizing and conflictual-reorganizing purposes of society, while protecting society from magical nocturnal animal attacks (Yépez, 1982) or symbolizing ancestors for funerary purposes (Steward, 1948) (Figure 12). There is therefore a certain consistency between the ethnographic use of wooden statues in the Upper Amazon, the archaeological existence of large stelae in the Andean-Amazonian sites of San Augustin, the proximity of stone deposits (so rare in the Amazon) and the declared origin of the Castelnau statue.





Figure 10. Conibo girl, Peru, before her ritual excision marking her passage to adulthood, with her face painted in gold yellow clay, her hair blue and her lower lip pierced by a silver fish. She is accompanied by an anthropomorphic wooden statue. Source: Waisbard and Waisbard (1958, p. 201).

Although there are few references, some of them offer interesting avenues to shed light on the past use of the stone statue. In addition, we can try to identify the different stages that have punctuated its existence by studying its stigmas.

### CLUES TO IDENTIFY A JOHN DOE STATUE

Observation of the macro traces visible on the statue allows us to account for several successive stages in its history, from its manufacture to its arrival at the Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac Museum. Despite the seemingly

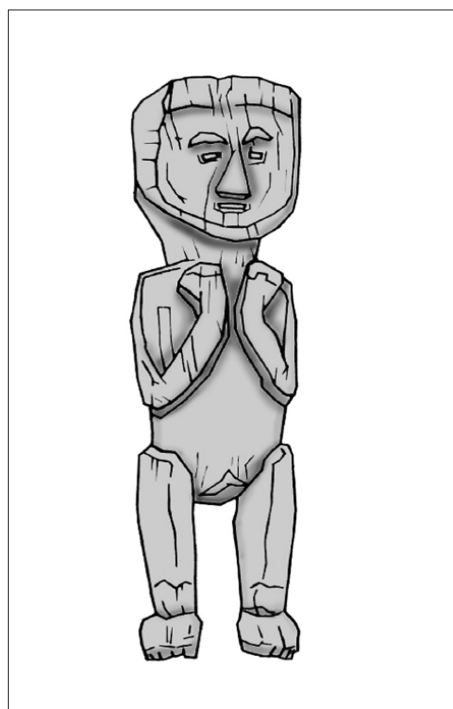


Figure 11. Large wooden Witoto statue, Upper Amazon. Source: Yépez (1982, cover).

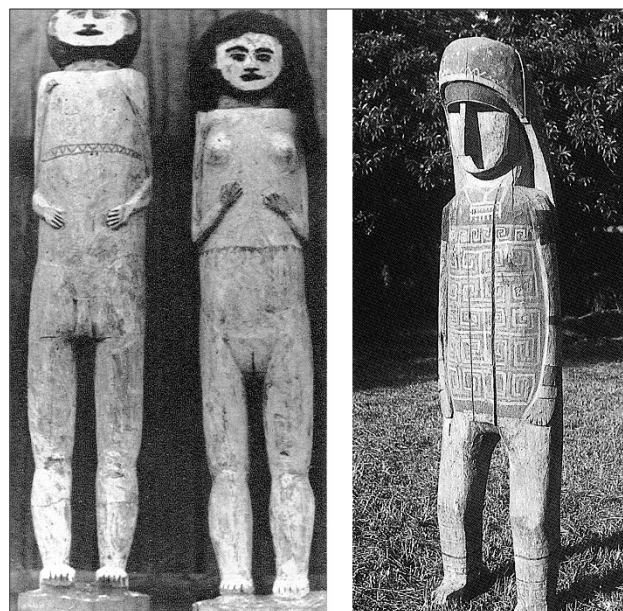


Figure 12. Couple of wooden Witoto statues, Upper Amazon. Source: Steward (1948, plate 82).

untidy nature of the statue's workmanship, the general shaping seems to have been carried out by craftsmen who mastered stonework. While it is still difficult to determine with certainty the type of tool used, in stone or metal, there is no doubt that the initial sculpture of the reliefs (arms, legs, face) follows the rules generally used for the manufacture of this type of object.

The cross-referencing of several types of percussion impacts, of different colors and morphologies, refers to the different successive phases of the object's life, whose temporality remains difficult to define. Considering the percussion scars, observed by naked eye and from a 3D high-definition scan, six periods of manufacture, retouching, use and mutilation can be distinguished (Figure 13).

Phase one is the initial phase of the sculpture's shaping. While the sculpture has completely been carved and shaped by hammering, the morphology of the impacts

remains however difficult to characterize due to a complete alteration of the surface.

Linked to the second phase of the object's life, this alteration would result from a probable exposure of the object in an external or internal space, over a long period of at least several decades, that have partially recovered the initial manufacture traces.

The third phase is visible through the resumption of the initially hammered and then patinated surfaces. Coarse circular percussion impacts on patina large convex surface at the back of the sculpture attest to the reshaping of the back of the sculpture by coarse hammering. Their organization into aligned impact groups suggests a very regular, linear hammering. This evokes a rectification and remodeling of the initial morphology of these surfaces. Its objective remains difficult to determine, but it could correspond to a rework of the block for insertion into a frame, a wall, a corner etc.

During the fourth phase of this object life, its right flank was levelled on a regular basis. An intense smoothing of the surface, combined with numerous multidirectional striations, results from intense abrasion. Its appearance contrasts sharply with the surface aspect of the left flank. The regular levelling and visible wear on this face suggest that it may have been reused, for example as a building element.

It was during the fifth phase of the sculpture's life that many coarse circular impacts of lighter shades began and partly destroyed some of the features of the sculpture, particularly the face (especially the eyes), but also part of the hands and arms, the legs and one of the two lateral concavities located at ear level. There is no doubt that these traces were made with metal tools. It is also perhaps at this stage that the post at the back of the skull was broken.

Finally, more recent shocks certainly related to the transport and handling of the sculpture are clearly visible on all sides of the object, particularly on its ventral part. Deep furrows and impacts of various morphologies are randomly organized and intersect on these surfaces.

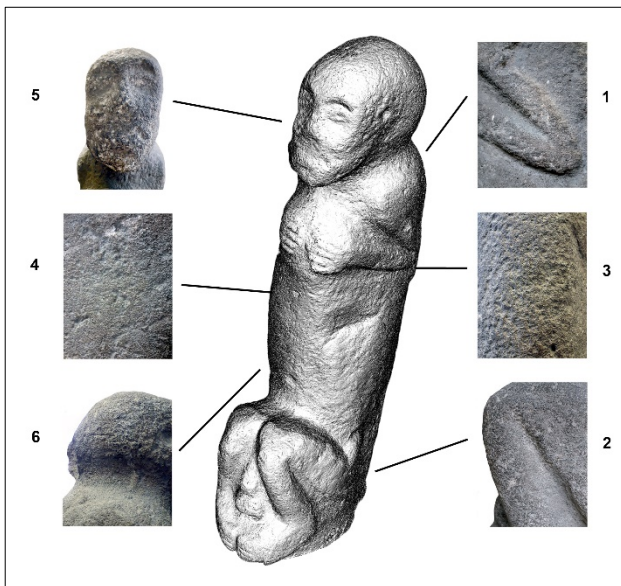


Figure 13. Traces of manufacture, use and mutilation of the Amazonian statue. Six periods of manufacture and use can be recognized on the basis of use-wear: 1. Initial phase of the sculpture's shaping. 2. Alteration resulting from the exposure. 3. Bush hammering, rectification and remodeling. 4. Levelling of the right flank. 5. Partial destroying of the surface by coarse circular impacts. 6. Recent shocks because of the transport and handling. Photos: C. Hamon; scan statue G. Chaumet (2019).



Four other events are out of the safe chronology, as they are hypothetical or may have occurred at any time:

- First event: it corresponds to the face of the statue that was pecked in order to erase its anatomical and personal features. This work differs from the regular hammering of its back by the size and shape of the impacts. This disfiguration could have been done by the Amerindians in order to desecrate the object or by the caboclos who later obtained it in order to eliminate its 'pagan' features.

- Second event: it is the breakage of the bun at the back of the head. The species of hook post existed, perhaps to hang collars on, was broken to leave only a small useless appendix.

The last two events are questionable since they are based on the only doubtful testimony of Marcoy (1867):

- Third event: according to the French explorer, the statue was discovered by Portuguese Carmelites on tour in the 17th century on the borders of New Granada, at the sources of the Uaupes River on the Brazilian side. They brought it back to their mission in Nossa Senhora das Caldas, on the Rio Negro, to make it an altar march. If this is true, the wear marks on the right side may correspond to the trampling of the religious sandals. Although during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century the Rio Negro was occupied by many Carmelite missions, including in the Uaupés area, the historical sources do not mention a mission called 'Nossa Senhora das Caldas' (Wermers, 1965; Hoornaert, 1982) in the Brazilian territory. Humboldt (1819, p. 579), however, does mention such a mission on the Spanish colony side.

- Fourth event: here again, we must be cautious about this account by the same author. More than half a century after the Carmelite mission was extinguished, a Brazilian in search of sarsaparilla found this statue half buried in the ground and used it to ballast his boat. For a long time tossed at the bottom of a hold on the Rio Negro

and its tributaries, the stone came to rest one day at Barra, where it was found and used by a resident. This is where it is recovered by Castelnau. Such repeated movements would obviously have left traces on the object.

Despite the lack of solid historical information, but thanks to the reading of the traces, a plausible biography of the piece can still be reconstructed, corresponding to the historical events described in the various ancient texts on the statue.

## TO BE OR NOT TO BE... A GENUINE AMERINDIAN STATUE

"If Brazil carries out excavations, it is a civilized country"<sup>15</sup>  
(Dr. Fossil in the play by Porto-Alegre, 1851, p. 80).

The tragic-burlesque adventures of the Amazonian statue reflect the torments that have stirred up a crucial moment in Brazil: the birth and formation of a modern nation. Torn between a certain admiration for a country of great chronological depth and a certain rejection for an attitude felt to be paternalistic, some Brazilians are resisting. For Poncioni (2015), Franco-Brazilian relations have always been of high quality and have enjoyed mutual esteem, so the Porto-Alegre play should be seen as an allegory of the nascent Brazilian science crushed by the French influence that seems to know everything. After letters of complaint and journalistic pamphlets, humor finally becomes the sword that cuts through the Gordian knot of a post-colonial paradox. Under diplomatic pressure, the Louvre Museum even removed the statue from its prestigious exhibition. Ripped from its vegetal setting, the object loses its probably protective qualities in the Amerindian world, only to become a mere object of quarrel between 'civilized' people.

This controversy continues until recently, since the venom of doubt as to its authenticity was dispensed the day after its expatriation. Nearly 170 years later (Figure 14), it was time to settle this intellectual and, in a way, sterile conflict definitively. Thus, a group of researchers specializing in

<sup>15</sup> "Se o Brasil faz escavações, é um paiz civilizado" (English translation from Portuguese).

Amazonian art and archaeology, museography, the American collections of France and use-wear analysis was formed to answer the difficult question of the statue's origin and biography. The clues, although rare, all point to the authenticity of an Amerindian artifact. Whether it is use-wear and stylistic observations, or ethnographic and archaeological references, one can advance with relative certainty about its Amerindian identity. No mason, no counterfeit, but a unique testimony of a ritual universe that has now disappeared.

"The world's greatest museums contain nothing but booty"<sup>16</sup>.



Figure 14. Installation of the statue for the permanent exhibition at *Musée du Quai Branly -Jacques Chirac*, in October 2019. Photo: P. Nuñez-Regueiro (2019).

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<sup>16</sup> "Les plus grands musées du monde ne contiennent que des butins" (Dard, 1996).

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### AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

S. Rostain contributed conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, project administration, and writing (original draft, review & editing); C. Barreto contributed data curation, formal analysis, investigation, and writing (original draft, review & editing); C. Hamon contributed data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, and writing (original draft, review & editing); M. Ruiz-Marmolejo contributed data curation, investigation, and writing (original draft, review & editing); and A. Delpuech contributed conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, and writing (original draft, review & editing).