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Susana Meneses de Alva (1948-2000)

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SUSANA MENESES DE ALVA (1948-2002)

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Susana Meneses de Alva (right) with Walter Alva at Sipán. Photo © The National Geographic Society.

When Susana Meneses de Alva died of cancer on April 15, 2002, Andean archaeology lost a wonderful colleague.¹ I had the pleasure of knowing her for nearly thirty years, and during that time I witnessed the many ways in which she contributed to the archaeology of northern Peru.

Susy (as we all knew her), was born on October 11, 1948 in Guadalupe, a small town on the north coast of Peru. She attended the Universidad Nacional de La Libertad in Trujillo where she pursued her interest in History and Geography. Completing her degree in Education in 1967, she taught for three years before returning to the university to study Anthropology.

In 1974 Susy married Walter Alva. Their first son Ignacio was born in 1976, and their second son, Bruno, in 1982. She was a loving mother, and on Christmas Day, 2001, she and Walter were blessed

¹ *Editors' note:* Christopher B. Donnan wrote this obituary immediately after the death of Susanna Meneses de Alva. The editors delayed publication until *Andean Past* 7 was complete.

with the birth of their first grandchild, Andrés Ignacio.

Walter and Susy had a lifelong and very close partnership. They worked together as field archaeologists, museum administrators, curators of exhibitions, defenders of archaeological patrimony, and most recently, creators of the remarkable Museo Tumbas Reales de Sipán. A great deal of the astonishing success of both Walter and Susy is directly due to the strong personal bond between them, which allowed them to combine their extraordinary talents in a mutually supportive manner.

I first met Susy in 1976, when she and Walter were living in Trujillo. When Walter was appointed as Director of the Museo Nacional Brüning in 1977, they moved to Lambayeque. In the years that followed, they worked tirelessly to improve all aspects of the museum. They completely renovated the museum's exhibits, greatly improved its storage facilities, created a state-of-the-art metallurgical conservation laboratory, built new research facilities, and even enhanced the landscaping around the museum with flowers, trees, grass, and stone walkways. Together, and with very limited resources, they miraculously transformed the Brüning Museum into one of the finest in Peru.

Susy was intensely dedicated to the preservation of cultural patrimony. Knowing first hand the problem of looting and destruction of the archaeological sites in the valleys of Lambayeque and Zaña, she played a major role in the formation of *Grupos de Protección Arqueológica* (*Grupas*), a network of individuals committed to safeguarding the archaeological sites in their local areas. The Peruvian congress acknowledged this organization as a model program for the protection of the archaeological patrimony.

Susy also wrote articles about the need to protect archaeological sites (Meneses 1998a, 1998b, 2001) and expressed her views convincingly in talks at scientific meetings. In 1996 she helped develop a forum on cultural patrimony in Trujillo, which was organized by the Municipalidad Provincial de Trujillo, the newspaper *La Industria* of Trujillo, and

the Museo Nacional Brüning de Lambayeque. This event made people aware that the site of Chan Chan was endangered by squatters who were invading the archaeological zone, and resulted in government intervention to forcibly remove them from the site.

Susy was instrumental in developing the *convenio* in which the United States government agreed to repatriate artifacts that had been looted from Sipán. She was strongly opposed to the construction of the cable car at Machu Picchu, demonstrating how it would irreparably damage the site, and she campaigned against the privatization of tourism at the site of Kuelap.

Walter and Susy enjoyed archaeological fieldwork. Together, they conducted a major excavation in 1975 at Salinas de Chao, an important Preceramic Period site. They also carried out various investigations in the Zaña Valley (Meneses and Alva 1982). In 1979 they made a detailed study of the temple of Udimá — a Formative Period site located in a remote area of the upper valley. Then, in 1983, they conducted a major excavation at Ucupe, a Late Intermediate Period site with spectacular polychrome murals (Meneses and Alva 1984, Meneses 1985).

Susy was an excellent field archaeologist. I was fortunate to have her participate in my project at Huaca Chotuna in 1980 and 1981. She conducted meticulous excavations, documented them fully, and made many insightful observations about the architectural construction sequence. In our second field season working together, Susy conducted a two-month investigation of one of the largest pyramids at the site. As a result of her tireless work, the project team began to refer to it as "Huaca Susy". She did such an outstanding job of excavation that when I published the Chotuna site plan I assigned the name "Huaca Susy" to that structure. It should always be known by that name.

In 1987 a rich Moche tomb was looted at Sipán, a site in the upper Lambayeque Valley. Walter immediately began a salvage excavation there in order to learn as much as possible about the nature of the site and the context of the looted tomb. In

June of that year, his team found what would prove to be the richest burial ever excavated archaeologically in the Americas. Susy worked diligently with him in the Sipán excavation, which continued for more than ten years. During that time, they excavated other graves of very high status Moche individuals. Their work at Sipán clearly demonstrated that the peak of Moche social stratification was much higher than archaeologists had ever imagined. Moreover, two of the richest tombs were of individuals whose role and activities were portrayed in Moche art, thus validating the reliability of the iconography for reconstructing Moche culture and demonstrating that the Moche had something of a state religion, with individuals dressed in rigidly prescribed garments and accessories to perform specific ceremonies. The Sipán excavations have brought about a fundamental reanalysis and reconstruction of Moche culture.

The spectacular finds at Sipán generated world-wide news, and soon there were multitudes of people wanting to see the excavation. Walter and Susy were able to build a small museum adjacent to the site so the visitors could understand the process as well as the results of the archaeological research. They also created paths so visitors could walk around the site to view the burial chambers where the tombs had been excavated, and they filled the burial chambers with replicas of the tombs' contents. I know no other archaeologists who have been faced with the ongoing demands of the public, the media, VIP tours, etc., yet Susy and Walter were amazingly gracious. I have often thought how fortunate the archaeological community was to have these two individuals in that position.

With the excavation of the Sipán tombs there was a pressing need to clean and conserve their contents. At first some of the material was sent for treatment to Mainz, Germany. Soon, however, Walter and Susy developed a metallurgical conservation laboratory at the Brüning Museum. It has excellent equipment and a highly trained professional staff, and is widely recognized today as one of the finest facilities of its kind in South America.

Susy and Walter also became involved in the exhibition of the Sipán material — first in a highly successful show that traveled for two years to major museums in the United States. They then installed an expanded version of this exhibition in the Museo de la Nación in Lima, where attendance was overwhelming. More recently, they worked closely together on the permanent installation of the Sipán treasures in the newly constructed Museo Tumbas Reales de Sipán in Lambayeque.

Susy played a critical role in the genesis of this museum. She was involved in nearly every aspect, from the architecture through the design and installation of the exhibitions. In addition, she created the Casa Real Moche, a spectacular tableau of thirty-seven life-sized mannequins that portray Moche royalty and their retainers. This was Susy's project, and every detail of it was overseen by her. It provides a grand finale for the exhibition, giving the visitor an unforgettable sense of Moche pageantry. The mannequins are dressed in faithful replicas of the objects that she and Walter excavated at Sipán and that are now so beautifully exhibited in the museum that they created together.

Susy was a very modest and unpretentious person. Yet she had great talent, great integrity, a strong will, and untiring commitment — and she used these qualities to achieve much for the preservation and understanding of the pre-Columbian cultures of northern Peru. She chose difficult goals rather than easy ones, yet she was remarkably successful. What she accomplished will serve as a lasting tribute to her. The many people who knew and worked with Susy realize how profoundly she enriched our lives. We will miss her.

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