

Fieldwork in Brazil

Petrullo's Visit to the Yawalapiti



Figure 1 (opposite page). General map of Mato Grosso showing the route taken by the Expedition. After reaching Montevideo on Uruguay's coast, the Expedition went up the Río de la Plata to Buenos Aires, Argentina, and from there via the Paraná and then the Paraguay rivers to Asunción in Paraguay and Corumbá in Brazil.

From Petrullo 1932: Pl. 25

Figure 2. Aerial view of Descalvados, from west. The territory encompassed by Descalvados was greater than the whole of Belgium. Sparsely inhabited, much of it was unexplored. A small town—more of a frontier outpost—had grown up around the main ranch buildings during World War I when it served as a headquarters for the making and shipping of beef jerky to Europe. As the need for jerky subsided, the workers drifted away and the settlement slowly crumbled into ruin. At the time Petrullo joined his companions there, he found a ranch that was still active, but on a lesser scale.

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Preface Eleanor M. King

Matto Grosso was first entered, by way of the Paraguay river, in the latter part of the sixteenth century by Spaniards. Soon afterwards the Portuguese came from the east, succeeding in traversing the southern portion and even reaching the Andes...In the early eighteenth century, towns were founded on the banks of the Cuyabá and the Paraguay rivers. Following the establishing of these settlements, the southern portion of the state underwent gradual exploration, and its aboriginal peoples inevitable subjugation...[B]ut generally the north resisted penetration, so that at the beginning of the twentieth century it still remained largely unknown.

Petrullo 1932:94

Isolated, little-known regions have always drawn explorers. The northern portion of the vast Matto Grosso district, sparsely settled and difficult of access, was no exception. At the end of 1930 an intriguing consortium of individuals and institutions, including Vincent Petrullo and The University Museum, set off to investigate this area (Fig. 1).

The Matto Grosso Expedition was no ordinary academic venture. It was in fact entirely organized and financed by private individuals, mostly from the Philadelphia area. The chief instigators included Captain Vladimir Perfilieff, a Russian-born artist and world traveler who claimed to be an ex-Cossack, and Alexander Siemel, a Latvian who had spent many years as a hunter, guide, and jack-of-all-trades in South America (see Fig. 6).

In the course of his travels, Siemel had learned the art of spearing a jaguar single-handed from the Guató Indians of



Figure 3. Fenimore Johnson in his quarters at Descavaldos. Expedition members were housed in the former residences of ranch officials.

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Figure 4. Gordon Ramsay (left), a former Texas Ranger, was the manager of Descavaldos. He had been hired by the ranch owners to deal with cattle rustlers crossing over from nearby Bolivia. He welcomed the Expedition and gave its members extensive logistical support. He is seen here with George Rawls (center), a cowboy and film actor, and David Newell, a writer for Field and Stream.

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Brazil. The story of Siemel's prowess captured the attention of John Clarke, Jr., who was interested in using the developing art of motion pictures for educational purposes. Together, the three decided to mount an expedition to the Matto Grosso for the primary purpose of filming Siemel in the act of killing a jaguar. They also wanted to document life as it was then in a remote and relatively untamed area of Brazil. The films were to be scripted and to combine pictures with sound.

The project captured the imagination and support of a number of young Philadelphians, most prominently E.R. Fenimore Johnson, who added a more formal scientific focus to the proposed adventure. It was through Johnson that The University Museum and eventually the Academy of Natural Sciences took part in the Matto Grosso Expedition. Vincenzo Petruzzo, a graduate student in the University of Pennsylvania's Anthropology Department, was "scientific advisor" and Museum representative; he was to conduct archaeological as well as ethnographic explorations. James Rehn, who joined the Expedition as the Academy's representative when it was already in the field, was to make comparative faunal collections. Other personnel included writers, sportsmen, and technical experts. Among the latter were two very talented photographers: Floyd D. Crosby, winner of an Academy Award in cinematography for *Tabu* (1931), and his assistant, Arthur P. Rossi. Together they provided the Expedition with an unusually lively and extensive visual record.

First Explorations

Expedition members set sail by steamer from New York the day after Christmas 1930. To reach the Matto Grosso with all their equipment they had to take the circuitous but comparatively easy river route through Argentina rather than the arduous overland trail from São Paulo in Brazil. Their journey took several weeks because they had to transfer to increasingly smaller (and slower) boats as they progressed, often pausing to wait for a steamer going in the right direction. By the time they arrived in Corumbá, Brazil, it was the height of the rainy season aftermath, and the flat savannah countryside was completely flooded for miles around (see Fig. 5). Water that was often breast-deep severely limited their activities and the possibilities for exploration.

Petrullo killed the time waiting for the flood to recede by applying to the Brazilian government for exploration permits. Meanwhile other Expedition members moved on to Descavaldos (Figs. 2-4), a cattle ranch located some 250 miles from Corumbá that was to be their base of operations. There, life settled into a predictable routine. The Expedition members met as a group for meals in the morning and in the evening, but otherwise, each person followed his own pursuits. Most spent their days hunting the abundant wildlife in the area (Fig. 5). Particularly prized were the big cats, jaguars and pumas, both for the danger of the hunt and the value of their pelts (Figs. 6, 7).

"the longer the plane and its occupants sat and waited, the less fear and the more curiosity those living nearby felt."



Figure 5. Hunting in the flooded pantanal. Any animal, whether caiman, snake, sloth, monkey, bird, or tapir, was considered fair game. Shown left to right are a ranch hand, David Newell, Floyd Crosby, Vladimir Perfilieff, George Rawls, and probably Benito Pereira, James Rehn's hunter.

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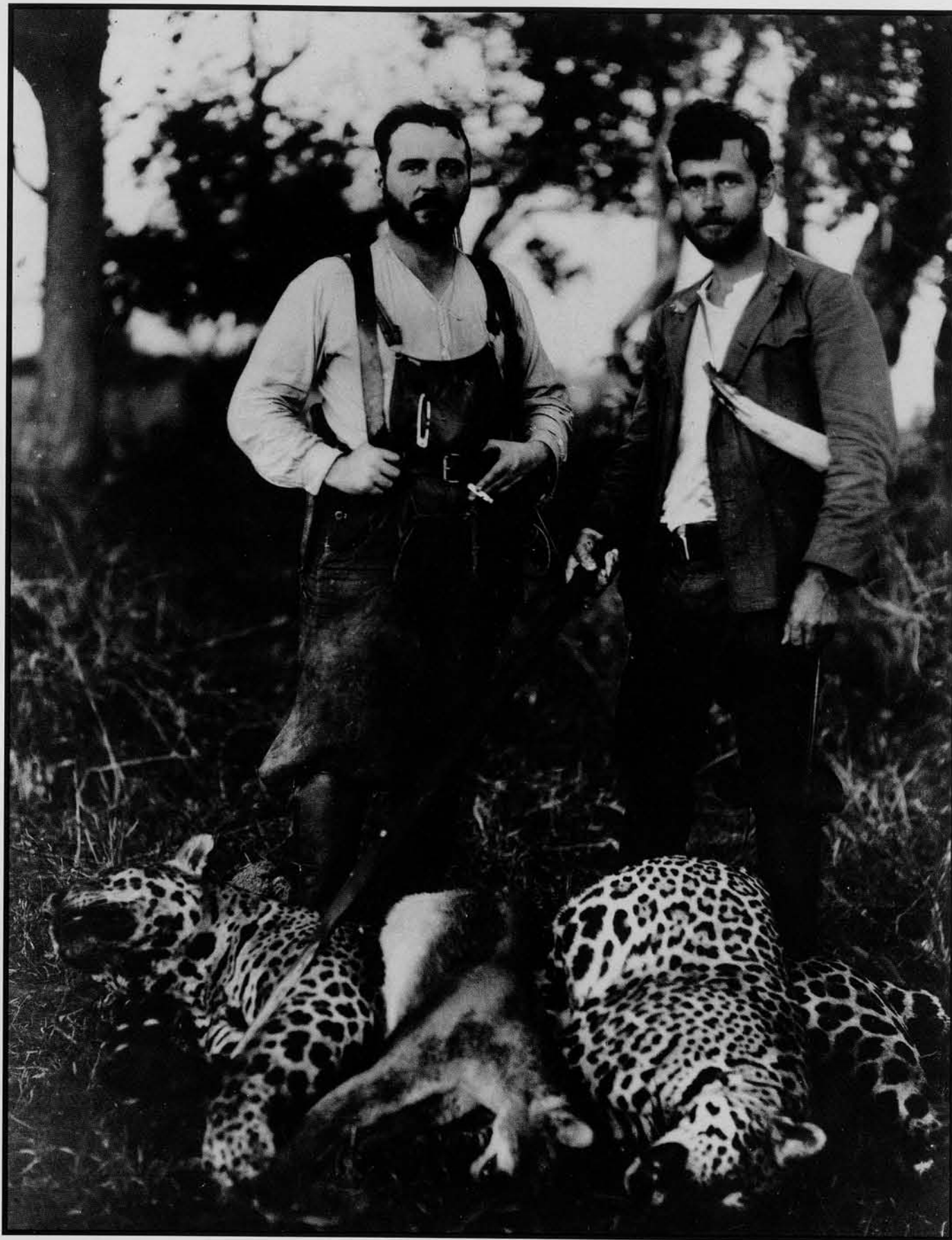


Figure 7. The Expedition camera was only the second one ever manufactured combining sound and image. Several attempts were made to film Siemel spearing a jaguar, but it always happened too fast to capture on film. The crew finally decided to build a wooden corral with a fixed camera station high up on the side to film the fight under controlled conditions. A jaguar was caged and brought to the enclosure. The story goes, however, that despite repeated prodding the beast (no fool) refused to leave the comparative safety of his cell and the project failed.

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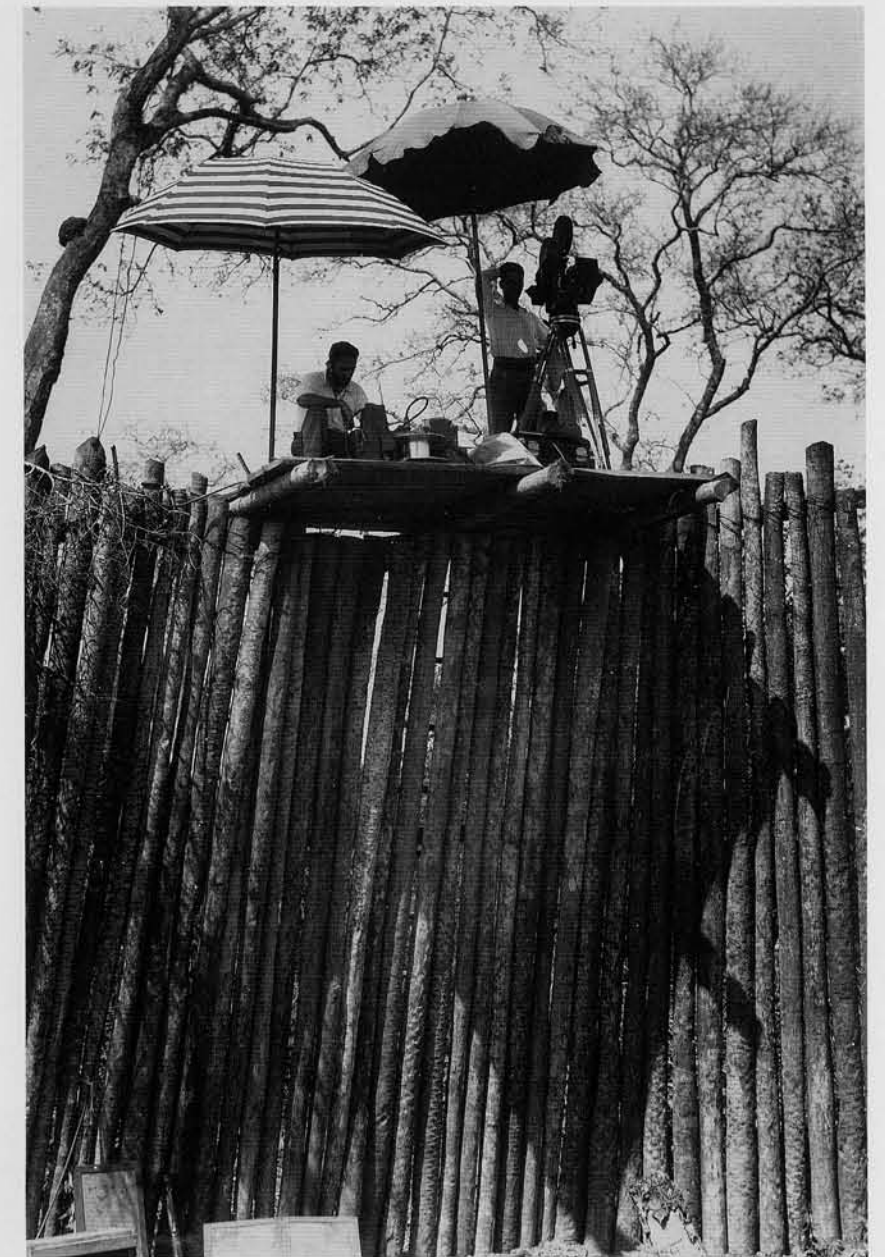


Figure 6 (opposite page). Vladimir Perfilieff and Alexander Siemel with dead jaguars and puma.

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Once Petrullo and Rehn joined their companions in Descavalδος, they set hard to work collecting scientific data. Rehn prepared specimens for the Academy's collections from animals the hunters brought in (Fig. 8). Petrullo, although hampered by the waterlogged countryside, nonetheless conducted archaeological excavations at two prehistoric cemeteries, one within the settlement of Descavalδος itself and one on a nearby knoll (Fig. 10). As the flooding subsided, he was also able to travel with a few other Expedition members to a Bororo da Campanha village (Fig. 9). They found the Bororo impoverished and half-starved, with few of their old customs left; most of their cultural heritage seemed to have been forgotten. Petrullo then and there resolved to go as far into the interior as he could to reach groups as yet unacculturated to western ways. He chose to explore the headwaters of the Xingu River,

northeast of Descavalδος, an area that was then little known.

The Xingu Expedition

By May the ground had begun to dry. Equally importantly, an amphibious airplane donated to the Expedition by Eldridge Johnson, Fenimore's father, arrived in Descavalδος (see Fig. 19). With the arrival of the plane, Petrullo and other Expedition members were able to travel easily to the town of Cuyabá to obtain final permits from the authorities, as well as information on the Xingu area. The use of the plane also permitted them a rare bird's-eye view of the terrain Petrullo proposed to travel. The area was considered quintessential "wild country" by Brazilians and foreigners alike. The way to the Xingu lay up a dramatic escarpment that rose some 2500 feet straight up from the lowlands of the Paraguay River to a plateau that



Figure 8. James Rehn, with ranch hand, skinning a tapir.

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fell off gently northward. Indeed, the abrupt southern face of this formation, known as the chapadão, had given rise to legends of a "lost continent" and a "lost civilization" (Fig. 11).

Petrullo made two reconnaissance flights over the chapadão and the Xingu area. He and his companions tried to identify known rivers and locate likely native settlements to visit. They found, however, that the village clearings were so insignificant in comparison to the surrounding rainforest that the dwellings were invisible. On the second trip they landed the plane on a clear stretch of water at the juncture of two rivers, got out, ate their lunch, and waited for natives to appear. No canoes materialized, however, and after several disappointing hours of inactivity they were forced to take off in order to return before dark, leaving behind some trinkets in sacks attached to bushes. That trip, however, was not entirely fruitless. On the way back they happened to fly right over a village, thereby discovering that there were settlements to be found, but only from directly overhead. They circled around for a closer view and were met by a hail of arrows from a group of men standing beside the central men's hut of the village. They dropped more bags of gifts and continued on their way.

That second trip also helped establish an exploration plan and a rendezvous. It was decided that Petrullo would set out from Cuyabá for the chapadão with a contingent of men that included some Expedition members and some locals. Once up and across the plateau, he was to proceed by river to the junction where the plane had landed and there wait for Johnson to appear by air. This plan would probably have worked well had they gotten their geographical coordinates right. As it was, they mistakenly identified the river junction



Figure 9. Jaguar dancer, Bororo village. Contact with European civilization had had disastrous results for the Bororo. Petrullo and his companions were appalled by the conditions they found in the village where the remnants of the Bororo da Campanha were gathered. For example, the Bororo staged a jaguar dance for their guests, but could not explain the original meaning of the performance or the context behind it.

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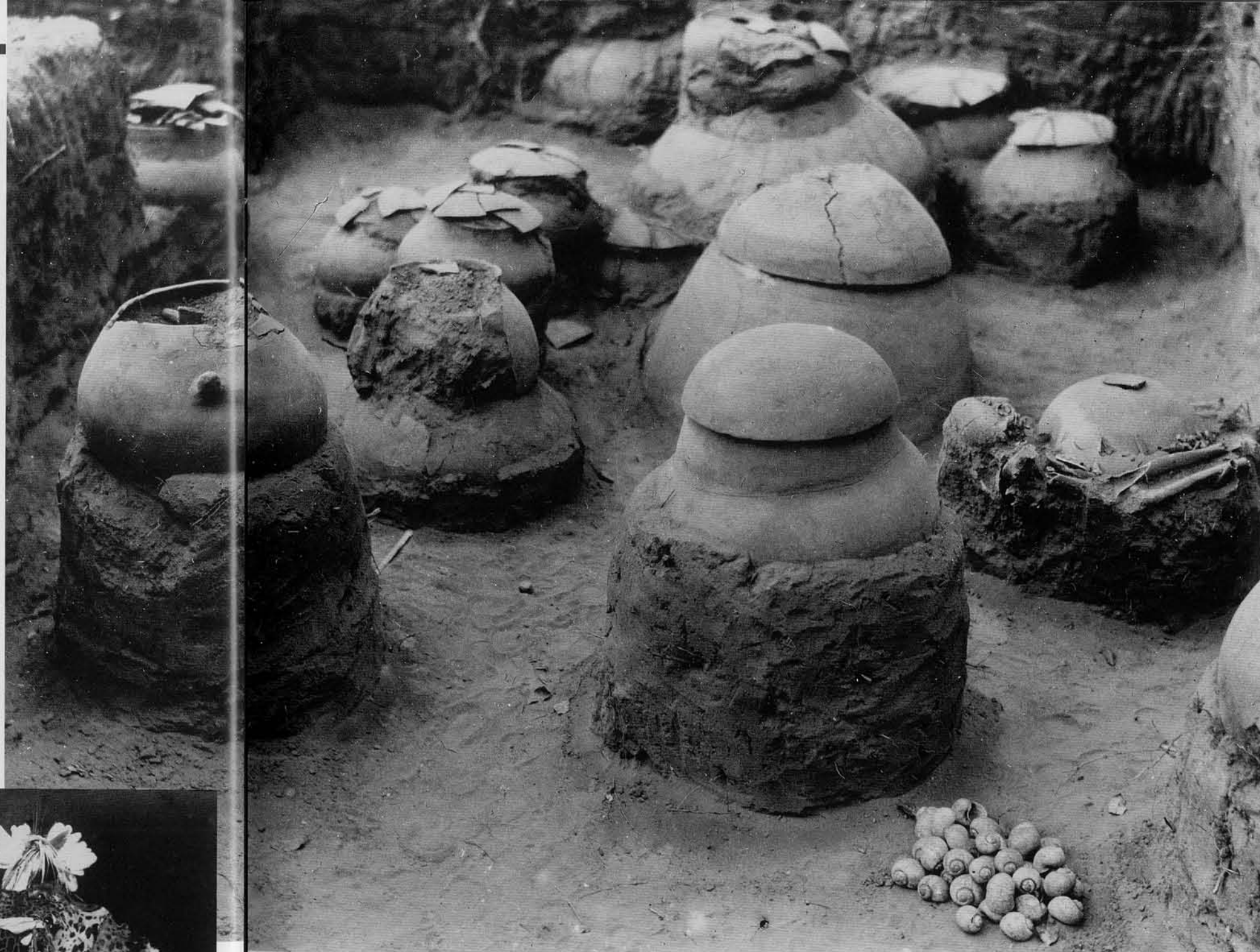


Figure 10. Large urns, many with bowl covers, found during Petrullo's excavation of Cemetery II. Some of these urns were empty, while others contained poorly preserved skeletal remains.

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as the confluence of the Kuluene with the Seventh of September. Thus, while Petrucco made his way to that spot, the plane waited at the original landing place, which turned out to be where the Kuluene met the Kuluseu, some 50 miles further north.

The added delay in the rendezvous, on top of a difficult journey, put tremendous stress on Petrucco and his crew. On the other hand, the longer the plane and its occupants sat and waited, the less fear and the more curiosity those living nearby felt. By the time Petrucco and his men finally rejoined their misplaced companions (Fig. 12), virtually every native group in the vicinity had come out of hiding and quite a multi-cultural gathering had coalesced around the gringo camp. Petrucco was thus able to do some quick comparative ethnological work simply by observing the members of each distinctive ethnic group as they moved around their campfires...and as they observed him.

Visit to the Yawalapiti

Shortly thereafter the plane took off, with plans to return soon, leaving the photographer Art Rossi at the camp. Petrucco began exploring the possibilities for fieldwork. He was well aware that he could conduct only the most perfunctory of studies, given his temporal and logistical constraints. His goal

was to pick a likely group or groups and come back some day to conduct in-depth anthropological research. As it was, his observations, perforce superficial, were wonderfully enhanced by Rossi's candid photographs, the first ever from this area.

Nearly every group represented in the makeshift settlement surrounding the camp wanted the honor of receiving a visit from the strangers. Indeed, Petrucco might have been able to make observations and collections in several villages, were they not located so far away. As it was, the single-file trails leading from the river to the villages were too narrow for shoes, as they had been made by bare feet. Both he and Rossi suffered severely from the awkward and extended walking.

Among the groups at the camp were the Yawalapiti, who were so taken with Petrucco that they offered to show him the secret waterway that would bring him directly into their village, avoiding the foot-blistering path that marked the formal entrance to their domain. Accordingly, he and Rossi went with the Yawalapiti and spent an idyllic few days with their most gracious hosts. After further explorations and encounters down the Seventh of September River, they made their way slowly back to Descalvados and shortly thereafter, apparently, Petrucco went home to Philadelphia.

Immediately upon his return, Petrucco wrote a formal, scientific account of his archaeological and ethnological field-



Figure 11. The escarpment north of Cacere was probably the inspiration for Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* (1912). The novel features the discovery of an isolated, high plateau in Brazil where dinosaurs still roam. Thirteen years before the Matto Grosso Expedition, an Englishman, Colonel P. H. Fawcett, had disappeared while trying to find a lost civilization up beyond the escarpment.

Fawcett, like Conan Doyle, was a spiritualist and, indeed, it was the spirits who told him that there was a lost world to discover there. He may well have known Conan Doyle from spiritualist circles in England.

One result of Petrucco's explorations was the discovery that the Englishman had most likely lost his way in the rainforest and been killed by a hostile group of natives.


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Figure 12. Johnson's rendezvous with Petrucco (posed photo). Rossi, Johnson, and the plane's crew had an anxious time waiting for Petrucco on the river. Surrounded by natives whose languages they did not understand, they could only guess at intentions. They knew that some of their visitors spoke Carib dialects and that the Carib were known as fierce, warlike fighters with a penchant for cannibalism (according to non-Caribs). While this allegation has never been proved, the fear of such a dire fate was very real to explorers at that time.

Adding to their uneasiness was a trip Johnson and Rossi had made to a nearby Tsuwa village. Though they were treated courteously, there had been a number of tense moments when the Tsuwa mood threatened to turn hostile. Petrucco and Rossi later went back to the same village and experienced the same ambiguity in attitude. While Petrucco seems to have known better than to expect cannibalism, Rossi coped with his recurring fear by making lighthearted references to the soup pot throughout his stay in the wilderness.

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work that was published as an issue of *The Museum Journal* (Petrucco 1932). It was only some twelve to thirteen years later, long after he had left the Museum, that he produced a much lengthier and more intimate account of his experiences, based upon his fieldnotes. This unpublished book, titled *Uni* after the Yawalapiti word for water, is full of wry humor and subtle observations that convey Petrucco's unmitigated love for the landscape, the life, and the people. A former English major, he was able to blend personal feelings and anthropological observations in lyrical passages such as the one reproduced here, recounting his visit to the Yawalapiti. The bulk of this wonderful travelogue unfortunately remains unpublished due to lack of funding. The excerpt chosen, however, provides a glimpse of a master storyteller and a window on the wilder side of anthropological exploration in the 1930s. 

Note: "Matto Grosso," the spelling employed by Petrucco, is used throughout this Preface instead of the modern "Mato Grosso."

Acknowledgments

This preface draws on Petrucco's written accounts of the Matto Grosso Expedition and on extended conversations I had with him in 1989 and 1990.