

OBITUARIES

GUSTAVE LE PAIGE DE WALQUE, 1903–1980



Father Gustave Le Paige De Walque, Director of the Museo Arqueológico de la Universidad del Norte in San Pedro de Atacama, died May 19, 1980. Although not a professional archaeologist by training, Le Paige grew up in a thoroughly scientific family atmosphere. He was born in Tilleur, near Liège, Belgium, November 24, 1903. Third among eleven brothers, his father was Ubric Le Paige, and his grandfather Constantin Le Paige, president of the University of the State of Liège. His mother, Teresa De Walque, was a daughter of another president of the same university, Gustave De Walque, professor of geology and founder of the Royal Institute of Geology in Belgium; a brother of his grandfather was an important paleontologist, Joseph de Frainpont, who worked with the Neanderthal "Man of Spy."

Throughout his career Le Paige sought to create better ways of life for people wherever he was, trying to understand their thoughts, values, and insights. As a priest, or as a scientist, he was always concerned with current problems involving childhood, the family, and the social and economic structure of human groups. In this sense

he was more a social anthropologist than an archaeologist. Le Paige became an archaeologist in order to apply his tremendous scientific rigor to the investigation of human origins.

Because of his contribution to science and the rigorous research for which he stood, Le Paige was honored with the title of Caballero de la Orden al Mérito Bernardo O'Higgins, Knight of the Belgium Royal Crown and of the Royal Lion of the Congo, the Encomienda Isabel La Católica of the Spanish government, and Doctor Honoris Causa of the Universidad del Norte and Universidad Católica de Chile. Nevertheless, in his daily life Le Paige was an outstanding example of humility, always trying to learn from and to teach his fellow men, giving much more than he had even for himself. He presented that odd mixture of personalities where one could not say, from day to day, whether he was a priest with his dogma in one hand, or an anthropologist, scientific, critical, and realistic, true to his hypotheses and data. To some it seemed that his very life and even his personality were full of contradiction. But through a close observation of his acts and works, one came to realize that he was trying to study the wide variety of human societies in the many ways in which they exist; trying to understand them as a truly scientific anthropologist.

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In 1922 Le Paige entered the Jesuit Order at Arlon, continuing studies later at the University of Louvain. In 1928 he was sent to Kivango Mission in the Congo where he became director of the school. In 1931 he returned to Louvain for two years and completed his studies at Tronchiemes. Returning to the Yasa Mission in Africa, he became an itinerant priest between 1936 and 1946. In 1952 he became the Superior of the Ngi Mission. During these years Father Le Paige learned to understand the African societies and accomplished so much ethnographic and anthropological work that the government of the Belgian Congo acknowledged his attempt to adapt and reform the traditional Catholic liturgy to the local African societies. His position, however, was too realistic and advanced for the time and he was soon called back to Brussels. Father Le Paige's missionary work, full of anthropological observations, remains a pioneer model for Christianity in Africa. He is recognized today as one of the first priests to have helped the local people to serve Mass and conduct Catholic religious services.

It was at this time that, under the auspices of Father Alberto Hurtado, he was asked to come to South America, first to Brazil and finally to Chile. In 1953 he was sent to the copper mine of Chuquicamata, but he could not tolerate this industrial environment for long and soon he started searching again for his people outside of Western culture. Neither a professional anthropologist nor archaeologist, Le Paige was only slowly accepted by colleagues and faced many obstacles to recognition. However, no one would deny that his vigorous investigations have brought the Atacama Desert to the fore among the most important archaeological areas in the world. In a practical manner, Le Paige studied the people whom he always loved—the Atacamenians—and along the way built the magnificent Museum of San Pedro de Atacama. Through his efforts, the small village of San Pedro de Atacama has been studied, interpreted, and become a symbol for our concern with Chile's rich cultural heritage. He attracted scholars from other nations, and scientists from other universities and research centers, to share his rich experiences. In 1963 he organized an International Congress of Chilean Archaeology, a basis for a newly created Sociedad Chilena de Arqueología. In 1970 he called for an International Congress on Early Man, which also took place in San Pedro de Atacama. The present Museum, which though not always scientifically accurate, represents an interesting and pioneering stage, should be respected in its own right at the same time that we strive to supersede it. Perhaps because Le Paige was isolated from the great traditional museums, he was one of the first to use the museum as an instructional device, bringing the immediacy of the field into the galleries through his creative reconstructions and dioramas. Through the conduct of his life, Gustave Le Paige gained the respect of a whole community, San Pedro de Atacama, and the neighboring villages. He was able to understand the values of these rural desert people, their insights and their culture, becoming himself one of them and part of the Andean people. Both as a priest and as an anthropologist, Gustave Le Paige was able to fulfill and serve the honorable causes of humanity and science.

Le Paige registered and described in his field notes thousands of archaeological sites in the Atacama Desert and surrounding mountains and punas. This is perhaps his greatest contribution to Andean archaeology. But also he made archaeological collections, mainly of surface sites, which were also registered and kept at the Museum of San Pedro de Atacama, which was planned and built by Le Paige himself. His archaeological studies demonstrate the existence of a long sequence of cultural development. The Preceramic Stage was defined by Le Paige through several Paleolithic resemblances, reflecting his European background and his preoccupation with the study of human origins. His contributions to the study of chronological and typological development are still basic for archaeologists working in the area. In this regard he stressed the importance of the independent Atacamenian Culture, which includes the development of several agricultural and pastoral peoples who occupied the Puna de Atacama. His efforts brought San Pedro de Atacama to the attention of professional archaeologists, as well as to natural scientists and even tourists from all over the world. These developments proceeded to the point that San Pedro de Atacama is now the main center for Chilean archaeology.

Chilean and foreign scientists, their families, and their students have always felt at home in this international scientific atmosphere, under the fatherly guidance of this scholar-priest. Most im-

portant, the inhabitants of San Pedro de Atacama, who know what they stand for, have learned about their past and their present, and they can join the archaeologists in thanking Le Paige for this knowledge.

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