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Creation Imagery in the Goldwork of Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia

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This somewhat unorthodox study is the result of two intersecting curiosities. First, is the presence among some gold pendants of southern Costa Rica and western Panama of anatomical features that look like female breasts on figures that also have a male sex organ. Equally intriguing is the paucity of notice of these features in the literature, even by pioneering observers, most of whom were men. If these features were meant to be seen as female breasts, why are they on figures with male organs, and why did earlier observers not remark on this? If they are not breasts, what are they? Second, is the impact of *Maya Cosmos* (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993), and the encouragement that this reconstructed Maya creation narrative gave to inquiries about creation lore in other Mesoamerican traditions, especially among the Formative Olmec. Among these inquiries is the question of whether images existed of primeval creation in the Intermediate Area that were comparable to those postulated for the Maya and the Olmec, and whether there were any narrative settings.¹

These two threads come together thus: Were the sexually anomalous (or composite, or hermaphroditic) gold figures related to creation narratives of the Intermediate Area and comparable, for example, to the various representations of mother-father figures and aged creator couples in Mesoamerica?² These “men with breasts” or “women with penises” are not the only anomalous figures in Intermediate Area goldwork. There are also large gold

¹ I continue to use the term *Intermediate Area* to designate the ancient civilizations between Mesoamerica in the north and the Central Andes and the Amazon in the south. I acknowledge the value of having a shorter name for this area, such as the *Chibchan Area*, proposed by John Hoopes and Oscar Fonseca Zamora (in this volume), but am not yet convinced that this is a better term because of the number of non-Chibchan-speaking peoples in the southern part of the area. In some respects, the entire area, whatever we call it, might better be regarded as epi-Andean and Amazonian.

² There is no Freudian notion of a man with breasts, but there is one of the phallic woman, or phallic mother, centered on the woman's preservation or envy of the phallus (Laplanche and Pontalis 1974). Freud regarded the mother's breast as a more potent symbol than the vagina, because of the infantile attachment to the nurturing breast. Hermaphroditic images are rare in Pre-Columbian art. David Freidel (1996: fig. 5) has identified a possible Middle Formative Mesoamerican, “Olmec”-style figure as a “mother-father” creator having a vagina with a penis within, but no breasts. The much later Mexican deity Ometeotl, “Lord Two,” apparently was not represented as a single figure, but as a primordial creator couple. Aged creator couples are common in western Mexico as well. Figures having a phallus and prominent breasts may be found only in the Intermediate Area.

pectorals with multiple mammiform imagery (again, rarely identified explicitly in spite of there being little evident iconographic ambiguity in the wearing of multiple breast forms over one's chest). Also troubling is an iconographic type from Colombia, in gold and shell pectorals mostly, of displayed males in the so-called hocker, or parturition, pose. Many cast figure pendants, including those with female breasts and male organs, depict serpentine or crocodilian heads or masks rendered emerging from the human figures' bodies.

The visual arts are often the most complex surviving material elements of ancient ideologies, cosmologies, and rituals, but it is not clear how or even whether one can elucidate the nonmaterial elements of these ideologies—the narratives of myth and ritual, the unspoken iconographies conveyed through image, ornament, dress, and dance. Are the figures with female breasts and penises literal renditions of a hermaphroditic father-mother creator or perhaps a male appropriation of the symbol of a woman's nurturing breasts?³

The Austro-Hungarian-Colombian anthropologist Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, in one of his most synthetic accounts of the symbolic thought of indigenous South Americans, suggests that self-adornment, a social and aesthetic category to which nearly everything discussed in this essay belongs, invariably has connotations of sexuality (1981: 22–23). He describes the rather modest metal ornaments of the Tukano of the Colombian northwest Amazon as being richer symbolically than materially. He and his informants go on to elucidate a complex body of thought in which alloy, shape, color, and odor underwrite a mnemonic and rhetorical discourse of insemination, reproduction, and fertility, in other words, a living narrative of creation imagery.

Crocodilian and Serpentine Emanations and Myths of Parturient Men

Numerous gold and *tumbaga* figure ornaments from the goldworking provinces of Diquís in Costa Rica and Chiriquí and Veraguas in Panama portray human figures with male genitalia and with serpentine or crocodilian masks or heads emerging from certain parts of their bodies, especially the legs, waist, and ears (or the head generally) (Figs. 1, 2). Particularly interesting are the figures with a penis and testicles in which one also finds serpentine or crocodilian emanations from the legs in addition to ligatures or constricting bands on the same limbs. In the Isthmian region of the Costa Rica–Panama frontier, where the modern border approximately marks the biological boundary between North and South America, these figures often have breasts or nipples that are prominent enough to construe them as female.⁴ Other serpentine or crocodilian heads and masks emanate from the waist or from a belt or from the hair, features of iconography common in the goldwork of the central prov-

³ The depiction of both primary and secondary sexual characteristics in Pre-Columbian art is typically schematic rather than exact. In depictions of women in sculptural media, the nipples are often more prominent than the breasts proper. I based my identification of figures as having both phallus and female breasts on the relative prominence of the nipples. Additionally, it is not uncommon in Mesoamerican art that portrayals of women depict their breasts seemingly dislocated toward their armpits, a configuration observed in such Mesoamerican areas as Veracruz and western Mexico.

⁴ See, for starters, the entries “Quetzalcoat” and “serpent” in Mary Miller and Karl Taube (1993: 141–142, 148–151).



Fig. 1 Framed gold figure pendant, skeletal bat-headed male with crocodilian emanations, spirals, and ligatures. Reportedly from El Coquito, southern Pacific Costa Rica. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.



Fig. 2 Framed gold figure pendant, male with crocodilian and spiral emanations and ligatures. Reportedly from the Diquís Delta, southern Pacific Costa Rica. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.

inces of Panama and of considerable antiquity in Peru. The “snaky hair” obviously substitutes for the ubiquitous and ritually important feather headdress commonly depicted in the imagery of the Intermediate Area and so well documented ethnographically in the northwestern Amazonian area (Figs. 3, 4). Indeed, there are reasons to believe that one dimension of such emanations is that they reference feather ornaments and their ritual meanings. The interchangeability of snakes and feathers of course recalls the mythic elaboration of the feathered Mesoamerican serpent known as *Quetzalcóatl* among the Mexica and as *Kukulcán* among the Maya.⁵

⁵ See Ruben Reina and Kenneth Kensinger (1991) for an excellent introduction to the anthropology and art history of featherworking in South America, where it has survived into contemporary times. In that volume, Kay Candler, sensitive to the “image play” (as in word play) of native South American body ornamentation, offers numerous instances of the symbolic equivalence and substitution of hair, snakes, and feathers.



Fig. 3 Gold figure pendant, “eagle” impersonator with crocodilian or serpentine emanations as snaky hair or feather headdress. Reportedly from the Diquís Delta, southern Pacific Costa Rica. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.



Fig. 4 Gold figure pendant, male with breasts (?) in armpits and serpentine emanations as snaky hair or feather headdress. Veraguas region, Panama. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.

In Pre-Columbian studies, the classic interpretation of the snaky hair problem is John H. Rowe’s appeal to literary metaphor, in particular to the Old Icelandic rhetorical device of kennings, a literal and textual approach to metaphor, which he argues with reference to Chavín art of Early Horizon Peru (Rowe 1962). In many cases, however, it is likely the deep mythic association of snakes and feathers employed in headdresses and other ritual attire, and the deep native exegesis of feathers, that promise the more productive interpretation.⁶ This substitution pattern suggests that the iconic snake-lizard-crocodilian and the spiral projection or emanation are sometimes equivalent. On another level, such emanations also represent feather ornaments. There is abundant evidence from myth to indicate the many correspondences between serpentine elements and feathers, which may be further illumi-

⁶ One of the common understandings of ancient American symbolic process is the notion of *pars pro toto*, or the part for the whole, introduced by Peter David Joralemon (1976) in his pioneering studies of Olmec iconography. Joralemon borrows a term from rhetoric to explain the Olmec practice of selecting certain features of an animal, for example, to stand for the whole animal. With Intermediate Area and Andean body ornament, however, the inverse may be more appropriate: *totum pro parte*, the whole for the part. For example, the appearance of little birds on the heads of figures or at the top of depicted staffs in jade and in gold may actually signal “feather ornament” and not, as is commonly thought, that the little birds are shamanic alter egos or spirit helpers. At the small scale of jade and goldwork, and perhaps in textiles as well, a small figure is more legible than a small feather. In some cases, little wood models of birds, like decoys, are actually fixed into feather headdresses by Amazonian groups (Candler 1991). Thus, too-literal understandings of representations risk missing the ritual or performative intent.



Fig. 5 Gold pendant, amphibian with serpentine and spiral emanations. Veraguas region, Panama. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.



Fig. 6 Gold pendant, amphibian with serpentine and spiral emanations. Veraguas region, Panama. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.

nated by the rich symbolism of feathers documented ethnographically in tropical America. In some cases, in fact, gold ornaments may be understood as deluxe versions of feather ornaments, and thus, surprisingly, the symbolism of feathers may help us explain the symbolism of gold.

The depiction of serpentine and crocodilian emanations was also formalized into ornamentation, in the form of abstract spirals, as one can see in the serpentine and spiral forms emanating from the mouths of the frogs and toads that are so common a feature of Isthmian goldwork (Figs. 5, 6). Reichel-Dolmatoff in several of his ethnographical studies of Colombian indigenes links the spiral to a “deep,” or sub-ritual, discourse on fertility that, he asserts, underlay much of the material and intellectual culture of northwestern South America. The following is his elucidation of the spiral in Tukano basketry:

The symbolism of the spiral (*oréro*) is very complex; the verb *oréri* has the following alternative meanings: “to break away from something, to separate, to leave the womb, to be born;” when strongly nasalized it means “to form a spiral, a whirlpool, a dust devil.” The expression *dia oréri* can be literally translated as “river to break away from,” and refers to several shamanistic images; one is that of a river (*dia*) as a life-creating force, hence a new being emerges; thus the expression *mahsá dia oréro*, lit., “people-river-to-break-away-from,” but which can be glossed as “where human origins are.” Another verbal, mythic image is that of the slowly moving coils of an anaconda, the huge aquatic serpent which represents a maternal, birth-giving con-



Fig. 7 Gold figure pendant, classic Tairona style with fiber pattern headdress, plaited collar, armbands, and ritual staff with spiral emanations. A plaited pattern covers the penis, perhaps in imitation of a similarly shaped penis sheath. The figure also wears nose ornaments, spiral ear ornaments, and a labret. Santa Marta region, Colombia. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.

cept. . . . From textual analyses and detailed commentaries it would seem that the entire *oréro* concept is related to—if not derived from—physiological imagery of copulation, gestation, and birth . . . the occurrence of spiral elements in basketry is to the initiated a constant reminder of these forces and processes. (1985: 26–27)

Braided and spiral-wrapped cord motifs are ubiquitous in goldwork as frames, connectors, and projections or “emanations,” obvious imitations of basketry and fiber patterns and perhaps iconographic signatures of those symbol-laden crafts (Figs. 1, 7). The technical process of lost-wax casting facilitates such simple two-strand plaiting because the twisted cords are easily formed in the pliable beeswax used at the beginning of the casting process. One might then hypothesize that such spiral and plaited motifs in Pre-Columbian goldwork are nonfigural icons of creation, as explained by Reichel-Dolmatoff for historic Northwest Amazonian basketry and fiber arts.

Peruvian anthropologist Luís Eduardo Luna, in his work with *vegetalistas*, herbal healers, of the Peruvian Amazon, uses the English word *emanations* to describe what apparently are the shamanic spirit helpers imagined by one of his informants as “electromagnetic emanations” from their bodies, although in this particular case the emanation is a jaguar, as in this healing incantation:

Behind him it comes/the jaguar already tamed/my tinguna is likewise/it comes behind him.

Behind him it comes/the red jaguar/it comes screaming/my tinguna comes likewise. (1992: 243, 252)

As for the native term *tinguna*, Luna cites the Quechua dictionary of Diego González Holguín, suggesting that the mestizo term *tinguna* is related to the Quechua *tincuni*, *tincunacuny*, glossed as “to quarrel,” “to compete,” with the common sense being that the emanations are construed (or imagined) by the *vegetalistas* as their spirit protectors and defenders.

North American scholar Armand Labbé, who has curated several museum exhibitions of ceramics and gold from the Intermediate Area and written or edited accompanying catalogues, has extended the poetic-incantatory notion of shamanic emanations to the visual world of Pre-Columbian imagery, suggesting that the *tinguna* notion explains the widespread iconographic feature, in art of the Intermediate Area, of serpentine and crocodilian projections not only from animal and human figures, but also from ritual furniture, such as benches and stools, which may also have been construed as animate (1998: 27, 43, 48, 68). According to Labbé, these emanations are the mark of empowered shamans, and they appear on animal and human figures as crocodilian or “dragon” heads and also on ceramic images of figures seated on bicephalic “dragon-headed” benches. Labbé suggests that in Intermediate Area goldwork, these emanations “often take the form of serpentine projections extending from the shaman’s body with the head of a crocodilian or dragon” (Labbé 1998: 68). In Colombia, according to Labbé, the earliest depiction of a *tinguna* emanation is a gold figure in the *Ilama* or *Malagana* style from the Cauca Valley, dated 200 B.C.–A.D. 200 (1998: 88, cat. no. 67). These emanations, however, might be better understood as sculptural renditions of graphic (that is, two-dimensional) motifs, because they provide front and rear views but no intelligible side view. They probably thus derive from such two-dimensional Andean image traditions as embroidered textiles, such as those from Nazca, for example, where snaky hair, belts, and similar “emanations” are common features.

There is a certain danger in a too-literal interpretation of ancient imagery solely on the word of contemporary accounts of therapeutic practices that are, now, in times of ethnic extremis, certainly more folklore than elite lore. Of course it is advantageous to have something approximating a native term for and exegesis of these emanations, but this should not circumscribe the hermeneutic horizon.

There is much evidence to suggest, not in opposition to the work of Luna or Labbé, but as a complement, that these emanations, whether crocodilian, serpentine, or spiral, have dimensions in addition to references to the therapeutic imagery of marginalized Indians. These emanations reflect profound efforts to depict a native hermeneutic of immanent creation and fertility, first, by reference to natural secretions and exudations that are variously whitish, creamy, bubbly, slimy, sticky, and pungent, substances that are often taboo-laden as well, and second, by reference to what can only be described as a mythic claim of male pregnancy. The mythic role of the serpent as progenitor is exemplified by the Tukanoan *Desana* anaconda, or Snake Canoe. This mythic anaconda progenitor travels up real rivers that are embodiments of the Milky Way, or the “Milk River,” establishing along the way sibs or exogamous local groups, which are symbolized by their residential longhouse or *maloca*. In his now-classic account of the creation mythology of the Tukano, Reichel-Dolmatoff states “[The Snake Canoe] is the personification of a phallus that ejaculates, a new creator, sent by the Sun to populate the earth. . . . ‘The men left [the progenitor phallus Snake Canoe] by a



Fig. 8 Gold figure pendant, male blowing a conch trumpet and with crocodilian and spiral emanations, ligatures, and serpentine knee joints. The penis is represented as a snake head, perhaps in imitation of a similar penis sheath. Chiriquí region, Panama. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.

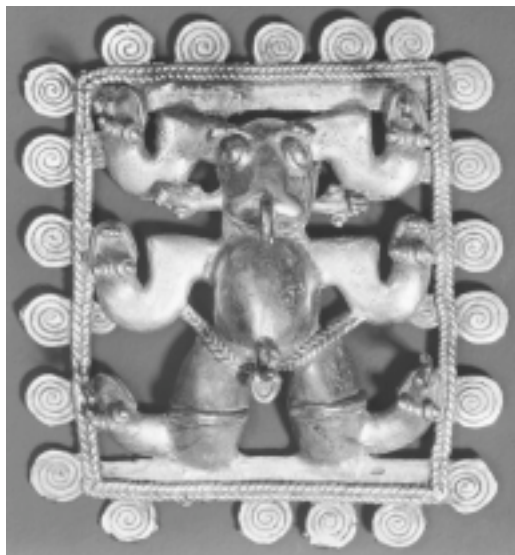


Fig. 9 Framed figure pendant, with braded frame and spiral emanations. The figure has serpentine emanations from legs and head or headdress, serpentine hands, and a snake-headed penis, as in Figure 8. Chiriquí region, Panama. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.

hole in the front of the canoe; they gushed forth like white bubbles.' The symbolism is unequivocal, superimposing on this scene various images: coitus, ejaculation, and birth" (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971: 55, 57).

The progenitor phallus Snake Canoe ejaculates Desana men, not women, through a watery channel into the uterine container, that is, the longhouse. It is not unusual in more complex figure ornaments to find a full complement of emanations—crocodilian, serpentine, and spiral—along with a snake-headed penis, perhaps rendering a similarly shaped penis cover (Figs. 8, 9). The mythic and ritual identity of snake and phallus, probably evoked constantly in the canoes tied up at the riverbanks, could hardly be more literal.

In the work of such modern ethnographers of northern South America as Reichel-Dolmatoff, Christine Hugh-Jones (1979), Stephen Hugh-Jones (1979), and others, one might begin to see the outlines of a narrative of creation that twists together snakes, the phallus, semen, coition, and the Milky Way as a cosmic river of transcendent fertility. The northwest Amazonian notion of a transcendent cosmic substance may be compared to the concept of *itz*, "cosmic sap," elucidated for the Maya by David Freidel and Linda Schele: "Communication with the Otherworld also involves the powerful concept of *itz*. In the Maya world of today, *itz* refers to excretions from the human body like sweat, tears, milk, and semen. But it can also refer to morning dew; flower nectar; the secretions of trees, like sap, rubber, and gum; and melting wax candles" (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993: 210).

How do cosmic fertilizing juices relate to the goldwork of the Intermediate Area? It is interesting that the wearing of ligatures or constricting bands around the limbs, especially below the knee, is very common among Isthmian and northern South American groups. The ethnographic literature explains this custom as apotropaic, an act of magical protection. Rafael Karsten, for example, discusses ligatures under the rubric of fixed ornaments, as opposed to detached or removable ornaments: “[The bands, girdles, etc.] begin to be used, as a rule, at an early age and with certain ceremonies, and when once put on are seldom or never removed. This kind of ornament is met with in many parts of South America, and is more commonly worn by women than by men” (1926: 131). Karsten adds that in some groups boys may retain the arm and leg bands until they reach puberty, when the bands are replaced by a labret for pierced lips; he also observes that ligatures in general are worn apotropaically. Karsten even compares the spiritual or therapeutic function of ligatures to the (Western) use of a tourniquet in case of snake bite: “Just as civilized [*sic*] people may, in a case of snake-bite, apply a ligature or cord round the bitten limb above the wound so as to prevent the poison from spreading, so the Indians consider such ligatures as a hindrance to evil spirits” (1926: 134).

Of interest is Karsten’s reference to snakes, in which he relates the observable swelling of the calf (or whatever part is ligatured) to the Western practice of applying a tourniquet to a snake-bitten limb (and then, after having cut deeply into the flesh, sucking out the venom, supposedly). European observers noted early on that the constricting band caused the limb to swell greatly, and Rowe (1944: 237) notes that Inka men “appreciated” the swelling that ligatures cause in the calves of Inka women, like a “well-swollen” ankle. Thus, there is evidence to associate ligatures with the attainment of puberty among boys and as permanent markers of femininity for girls and women. For both sexes, then, ligatures, and the swollen calves that they create, were symbolic of reproductive potential and fertility.

Other myths recorded from northern South American groups concern giving birth from an unusual part of the body. A few of these myths describe giving birth from the thumb, but most are, oddly enough, about males giving birth from the calf of the leg. The Yaruro of southwestern Venezuela were once thought to speak a Chibchan or Jivaroan language, but are now considered to speak an isolate.⁷ In the Yaruro myth compendium of Johannes Wilbert and Karin Simoneau (1990b: 21–23), Kumañí, the creator goddess, dreams about giving birth to the sun through her thumb in Myth 3. Afterward, Kumañí pierces her tongue with a stingray spine. This myth thus begins with the penetration of a swollen extremity, which leads to the emergence of a stream of blood, but not from the same body part. Birth from an unnatural part of the body perhaps signifies nonhuman or supernatural fertility. The thumb and the mouth here represent upwardly displaced counterparts of the vagina. Bloodletting from the tongue or mouth thus equates with menstruation, implicitly constructing a metaphoric chain linking mouth, vagina, and menstrual blood.

The Yanomami of Venezuela also have been variously thought to speak a Chibchan or Cariban language, but more recently were considered to speak a language from a separate

⁷ Language classifications used here are from the volume on Amazonian languages by R. Dixon and Alexandra Aikhenvald (1999), especially from the article by Aikhenvald and Dixon (1999) on linguistic isolates.

family. In one Yanomami myth (Wilbert and Simoneau 1990a: 55–59, Myth 19), the story of Peribo, the moon, describes a time of creation when there were only men and no women. The men were born, as though from a cosmic menstruation, when drops of blood rained down from Peribo, who is thus a menstruating man: “[F]rom Peribo’s blood only men had been born. There were no women. Therefore these men used as women the holes in the trees and the anuses of their companions. But there were no real women to increase the population” (Wilbert and Simoneau 1990a: 57). One man, Xiapoko-riwe, tires of having intercourse with anuses and trees and decides to make a hole in the calf of his leg. His companion, Kanobo-riwe, copulates with the hole in the calf, and Xiapoko-riwe’s calf becomes pregnant. Xiapoko-riwe’s leg then gives birth to the first Yanomamo women. Xiapoko-riwe, however, becomes ashamed of the hole in his leg and changes into a bird called *xiapokoromi*.

Myth 22 recounts a similar birth from a man’s calf involving the two brothers Omame and Yoasi. The myth notes that the inseminated calf swells up just like a woman’s stomach, an obvious allusion to the swollen calves produced by wearing ligatures. In a related story, Myth 23, a man named Omame makes his penis thinner so it will fit into the narrow crease behind his brother Yoasi’s knee. Another story, Myth 25, an origin myth of the Sanema group of Yanomami, tells of a time when men of the bat people had no women and thus copulated with other men to produce births, of men, from the calves of their legs: “Although the bat people had no women . . . they copulated a lot. Being only men and having no wives they copulated on the calves of other men. Their calves became pregnant and that way they had children” (Wilbert and Simoneau 1990a: 64). Finally some birds came to visit and showed the bat people how to make vaginas:

It was the koli [bird] people who created women. They knew all about women. They came to visit the bat people and noticed them copulating on the calf . . . [and then] . . . the koli people pulled off a penis. . . . They pierced a hole where the penis had been and thus made a vagina. . . . “This hole here is where to copulate, not the calf,” they said. . . . Those koli people were chiefs, those ones with the red beaks. That red on the beaks is the result of their piercing the vagina; it’s the women’s blood. (Wilbert and Simoneau 1990a: 64–65)

Thus, the Sanema created their women by excising the sexual organs of male bat people.

In these myths the prominent beaks are specifically phallic: they penetrate, they are stained with women’s vaginal (menstrual) blood; the beak-phallus is a founding engenderer. These myths thus envision a total inversion of gender: men menstruate and give birth, men create women, men are the primordial roots of society. This mythic focus on the phallic beaks recalls the association of gold “eagles” with high-ranking men in the Isthmian area in the 16th century. There is also a symbolic association with beeswax, the sacred “sap,” or itz, that gives birth to the golden ornament.⁸

⁸ See Eugenia Ibarra (in this volume), for historical evidence suggesting that women did not wear “eagles,” and Ana-María Falchetti (in this volume), for suggestions that the making of the wax models used in gold casting may have been construed as a kind of “ensouling” of humans as if in a “uterine hearth.” This notion of

In other Yanomami myths in this series, crested oropendolas copulate with another bird's toe or leg, making the digit or limb pregnant, and so the first women are born (Wilbert and Simoneau 1990a: 65–66, Myths 26 and 27). Here again, the beaks of these birds are mythical phalli, and a limb is the site of insemination and parturition. Thus, several myths from northern South America describe beaks of birds instituting binary sexuality by removing penises and pecking proper vaginas in their place. This warrants taking another look at the prominence of large-beaked birds in the imagery of the Isthmian area, as in the famous beak-bird, or *ave-pico*, theme of Costa Rica, widely represented in jade and in stone sculpture. Years ago, Costa Rican archaeologist and collector Carlos Balsler related the *ave-pico* theme to an Antillean myth, reported by Peter Martyr, in which the beak-birds pecked vaginas to create women (Balsler 1955).

These Yanomami myths are among the more interesting and salacious narratives of a class of northern South American myths concerned with birth from unexpected body parts, of which perhaps the most common is that of a man giving birth from the calf of his leg.⁹ In the myths of a number of linguistically disparate but geographically proximate groups in northern South America, swollen calves are, in effect, the pregnant bellies of men, and a group of Yanomami myths relates stories of how copulation in the calf or leg was the norm before men created women. Men create women in several ways: copulation in the calf results in the birth of the first women, or women can also be created by removing the penises of men and pecking a vagina in their place with a beak-phallus. This sounds eerily like Freud's mythic scenario of the psychic constitution of women, in that they fear that the female organ is the mark of the castration of their (original) penis. These myths strongly assert the primacy of men in creation and fertility, in a mythic Eden, before humans were separately sexed, when there was only male sexuality, and when male homosexuality was the norm. A common narrative feature of these myths is the subordinate place, even the absence, of women in mythic biology and reproduction. The Mesoamerican notion of a primeval and seemingly co-equal aged mother-father creator couple may not exist in the Intermediate Area, where, in myth and imagery, the male term of binary sexual difference is frequently privileged.

The mythic importance of the swollen male calf, so obvious in these myths about the creation of women by men, freshly illuminates the frequent appearance of ligatures on figures in gold and other media in the art of Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia. The connection between ligatures that make calves swell like the bellies of pregnant women and the mythic birth of women from men's calves suggests that ligatures are a coded allusion to a masculinist ideology of creative primacy. Ligatures may thus be visual analogues of such gender-biased rituals as the so-called Yuruparí complex found in much of the northwest Amazon. The Yuruparí is a ritual-mythic cycle predicated on primal gender conflict over

wax as a fertilizing or animating substance is similar to the Maya *itz*, as noted above. See also Stephen Hugh-Jones (1979) for extensive discussion of the symbolism of beeswax in the northwest Amazon, within the context of the Yuruparí ritual complex.

⁹ Mary Helms (1997; 2000) discusses at length the apparently related theme of the severed leg as depicted in Panamanian painted ceramics of the central provinces. She notes, for example, that the crest feathers of the curassow may be rendered as a severed leg, often with a ligature clearly indicated as a simple band. Helms, in a richly detailed account, argues that ligatures are markers of mythic creation.

access to ritual artifacts, especially flutes, whose phallic symbolism is fairly obvious.¹⁰ The gender conflict is ultimately resolved in favor of men, who become the custodians of the sacred flutes, myths, and songs, the sight of which is nominally forbidden to women.

Yolanda and Robert Murphy, in their work among the Mundurucú of Brazil, describe a variant of the Yuruparí complex and the women's theft of the men's phallic flutes, and note that the resolution in favor of men insures an ongoing sexual-gender tension.¹¹ What, then, of the numerous gold figures of the Isthmian traditions with crocodilian or serpentine emanations from the legs and other limbs or body parts? Because there does not appear to be any pattern in the appearance of either emanation, they may be provisionally construed as more or less interchangeable. Murphy and Murphy report (1985: 120), interestingly, that Mundurucú men called the vagina the "crocodile's mouth," understood rightly as a variation of the ancient Andean *vagina dentata*, one of the earliest iconographic signs of the tectonics of sexuality and gender at the very heart of their formulation of ideologies and cosmologies.¹² Among Tukanoan speakers of the northwest Amazon, who were neighbors of Paézan speakers in southern Colombia, sibs have their origins in an ancestral snake, an anaconda, and the travel of the anaconda upriver establishes the ranking of the sibs, with those upriver being higher in rank than those downriver. Among Tukanoans, the progenitive anaconda establishes and represents the structure of the society, the discrete exogamous and patrilineal sibs. The ancestral snake either "vomits" (that is, ejaculates) humans out of its mouth or transforms its body. In the context of goldwork in the wider Intermediate Area, serpentine or crocodilian emanations from various parts of the body, especially the leg and calf, may be a coded allusion to this ideology of male primacy in creation. The notion that human society was established by the travels of a giant snake suggests that the anaconda of Tukanoan myth is nothing less than a giant detached phallus. Notably, the penises of many of these gold figures is literally transformed into the head of a snake, a literal image of the ejaculating snake of myth (Figs. 8, 9).

Men with Breasts and the Meaning of Mammiform Pectorals

If in myth men can give birth from their legs, and if men can create women by removing women's penises, then the appearance of men with breasts and penises is perhaps not

¹⁰ On the Yuruparí and similar ritual-myth complexes of the Amazonian area, see Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff (1996) for a densely annotated transcription of a Tukanoan ritual that he began by working with a single informant, and Stephen Hugh-Jones (1979) whose careful analysis of a (related) Barasana ritual derived from fieldwork in Barasana settlements. Both authors make extensive reference to earlier accounts. In this essay I offer a preliminary argument linking the Yuruparí ritual-myth complex to prehistoric civilizations of the Intermediate Area as reflected in the iconography of gold ornaments.

¹¹ As the Murphys state, "The entire charter and rationale of Mundurucú sex roles is contained within a single myth, which tells of the invention of the sacred musical instruments, or *karökö*, and of their relation to male ascendancy" (1985: 113). "The myth of the *karökö* is a parable of phallic dominance, of male superiority symbolized in, and based upon, the possession of the penis" (1985: 113).

¹² See Richard Burger (1992: figs. 178, 207, 212) for illustrations of the *vagina dentata* theme in the art of the Early (Chavín) Horizon of the Central Andes.

surprising. Among the gold ornaments from the Isthmian tradition are figures of men with prominent breasts. How should one interpret these images of men with breasts? Several ethnographers, among them Reichel-Dolmatoff (1971) and Christine Hugh-Jones (1979), have discussed the complex semantics of fertile white fluids among Tukanoan speakers of the northwest Amazon, assembling and commenting on the existence of a category of cosmic fertilizing fluids that includes mother's milk, semen, manioc juice, narcotic potions, and the Milky Way (that is, the Underworld River of the Dead). Perhaps, then, the inclusion of prominent breasts on gold figures is another allusion to male possession of the milky fertility of nursing women, a symbolic and ideological appropriation of another power biologically lodged in women.

In addition to protruding breasts (albeit sometimes located closer to the armpit than is normal, as often are those of women similarly depicted) on gold figures of men, there exists another category of iconographically related gold artifacts—mammiform pectorals on which breasts, nipples, and sometimes areolae are worked in relief from behind, or in repoussé. Such pectorals were probably worn suspended over the chest of a person or figure or bundle; limited historical evidence indicates that only men wore gold plates (Ibarra, in this volume). Some ornaments are circular, with the breasts arranged in cardinal or intercardinal fashion (Figs. 10, 11, 12). The addition of a central motif creates a quincunx, a cosmogram that in Mesoamerica has been shown to signify the cosmic road or the Milky Way (Figs. 13, 14). For example, a four-legged bench or throne becomes a quincunx when a person sits upon it, such as a staff holder who would thus personify the vertical *axis mundi*. The Kogi loom is another example of an activated quincunx: the ends of the two horizontal beams mark the intercardinal points, while the seated male weaver completes the quincunx cosmogram. In addition, when the weaver wears the loose robe of the Kogi and sits upon the typical low wooden stool, he replicates the displayed, or hocker, pose depicted in Tairona art that is normally associated with women.

Gold ornaments often depict or replicate artifacts of similar function made of fiber, cordage, and plaiting. Thus, gold bracelets and anklets reproduce actual fiber bindings or ligatures, and the arching and radiating headdresses of gold and ceramic figures certainly depict the fiber and feather headdresses that are so spectacular a product of historic Amazonian groups. Some gold ornaments replicate the motifs depicted in cast gold figures. The famous Tairona double, or Celtic, scroll ornaments would give the wearer the same kind of spiral emanation that is depicted in gold figure pendants. Many of the elaborate nose ornaments in various Colombian styles probably represent these emanations. In the same fashion, the exquisite Tairona labrets transform the mouth of the wearer into an orifice giving birth to a supernatural crocodilian or serpentine emanation, an animated version of the emanations from the legs of so many gold figures (Fig. 15). In much of the gold of the Intermediate Area, the scroll, with its various permutations, appears to be an icon of cosmic juices and emanations, emerging from actual orifices (mouth, nostrils, ears) and mythic orifices (legs, waist belts), comparable to the notion of *itz* in Mayan cosmology. Many ovoid and circular hammered gold plates with raised bosses may thus represent breast and fertility symbolism, with the detached breast being a crucial icon of creation as a source of cosmic milk. The



Fig. 10 Gold disk, with breast forms at intercardinal points and triangular deity masks at cardinal points. The disk has an areolae-like border. Veraguas region, Panama. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.

Fig. 11 Gold disk, with seven radially arranged breast forms encircled by an areolae-like border. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.



Fig. 12 Gold disk, with large intercardinal breast forms and small pairs of breast forms at cardinal points, the whole with an areolae-like border. Veraguas region, Panama. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.

Fig. 13 Gold disk, with intercardinal breast forms and a central crocodilian to form a quincunx cosmogram. Veraguas region, Panama. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.



Fig. 14 Gold disk, with intercardinal breast forms, triangular deity masks at cardinal points, and a central crocodilian to form a quincunx. The disk is encircled with a basketry pattern. Veraguas region, Panama. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.

iconographic separation of the breast from the female body is important because it completes the symbolic appropriation of the woman's body, the vagina already having been mythically relocated to the legs of men.

Men on Display

The displayed male figure represents the stunningly obvious transformation of the theme of the displayed or heraldic woman. As many know, the displayed woman was the subject of a classic essay by Douglas Fraser (1966) more than thirty years ago. The theme was later taken up in Pre-Columbian studies by, among others, Cecelia Klein (1976) and Tom Zuidema (1992), although in very different ways. The displayed figure—the heraldic figure adds symmetrical flanking motifs—is inherently apotropaic and for genital exposure; glo-

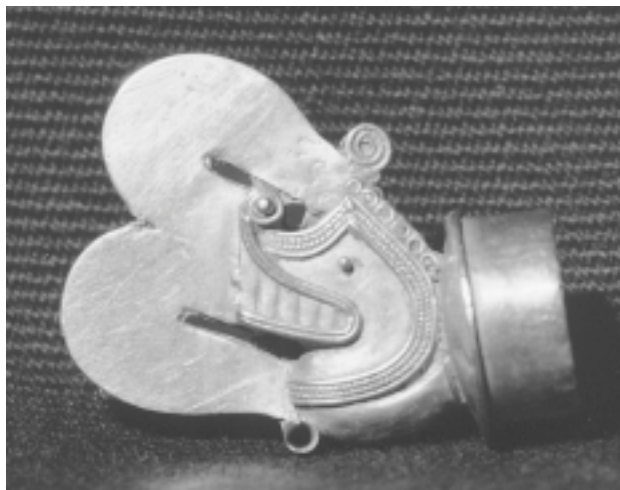


Fig. 15 Gold labret, or lip plug, classic Tairona style with crocodilian head with scroll and spiral emanations. Santa Marta region, Colombia. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.

bally it has been almost entirely female because the displayed, or splayed, pose so clearly alludes to the traditional squatting position for birth and to the powerful combination of the vulnerability and authority represented by the vaginal display, contradictions richly mined by artists around the world since the first millennium B.C.E.

Any pictorial tradition in which men assume this role of genital display would seem to call into consideration the issues of gender and power, especially the question of its meaning: Are men here portrayed as birth givers? Does the displayed phallus convey the same authority as the displayed vagina? Chibchan displayed male figures are not typically heraldic in the sense defined by Fraser, because they lack the flanking figures that make it a tripartite antithetical composition. Fraser (1966) shows clearly that the female displayed figure is the “norm,” that it is concerned with the exposure of the vulval area in relation to the squatting, splayed pose of parturition. The displayed male figure is thus an anomaly at the outset, especially when it appears in such a socially restricted medium as gold. One might begin by wondering if the displayed male figure is a commentary on the displayed female figure, the explicitness of the substitution making the new icon all the more potent. If the displayed female figure merely represents the biological fact that only women can give birth, then the displayed male figure might be about some analogous claim, not biologically obviously, but rhetorically, in terms of myth, ideology, art, ritual, and the various intellectual armatures of power in society and the props for sanctions and taboos.

The northern region of the Intermediate Area has another instance in which a masculinist ideology of power was constructed from the artifacts of women’s culture—the greatly elaborated corn-grinding stones, or metates. These were appropriated and transformed into the symbolic centerpieces of small-scale hierarchies in ways that brought men, warriors, chiefs, and captives for sacrifice into the symbolic realm of grinding corn, which had been the province of women (Graham 1992). Even the most benign and gender-neutral interpretations cannot escape this transformation of the women’s tool of daily food processing into a platform for the male-dominated behavioral and symbolic realms of aggression and death.

Displayed male figures of Tairona attribution have been variously identified as chiefs and sun gods, although the figure portrayed may be one of several mythic and ritual characters. One of the clearest icons of the displayed male in Tairona art is in the Bogotá Museo del Oro (Zuidema 1992: fig. 12, and Bray, in this volume): a circular repoussé gold disk with a displayed male wearing a necklace and bracketed by two horizontal beams, the upper one going across (behind?) the neck and over the shoulders, and the lower one crossing in front of the ankles. Repoussé rings mark the cardinal points. The triangular face of the figure has small repoussé rings as ear spoons, the penis is erect, and the figure has a bifurcated rayed headdress similar to those depicted in Tairona ceramic figures and ocarinas. This figure may be an icon of the Tairona sun god, as personified by a Tairona priest (Bray, in this volume). Seated at his loom, the priest reenacts the weaving and centering of the cosmos that is marked throughout the year by the traversing and reversing of the sun from solstice to solstice. For the Tairona priest, perhaps the ultimate expression of phallic creativity is the man seated at his loom, his legs apart, becoming the living center of the cosmic quincunx, as his weaving replicates the sun god's creation of the cosmos.

Conclusion

In recent years scholars have progressed greatly in deciphering the antiquity of indigenous American creation accounts, such as the Classic Maya illustrations of mythic episodes preserved in the Highland Maya Popol Vuh and the cosmic creation accounts proposed by, among others, David Freidel and Linda Schele (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993), and Kent Reilly (1996). Naturally, scholars working beyond Mesoamerica have wondered whether other cultural traditions have similarly ancient creation accounts. Mesoamericanists may have been somewhat at an advantage, owing to their scripts and to their relatively more abundant documentary sources after the Spanish conquest. The Intermediate Area is, however, not without some promise. Although the archaeological and ethnohistorical corpora are relatively poorer than for Mesoamerica, the southeastern realms of the Intermediate Area, especially those regions adjoining or near the upper reaches of the northwest Amazon and Orinoco River systems, have an abundance of ethnographic data of great value. The small scale of living and recent tropical forest societies in northern South America should not deflect us from serious consideration of possible continuities with prehistoric societies in nearby regions of the Intermediate Area. Having assembled for the present study a working corpus of gold images of anomalous sexual identity, it was possible to turn to the largest and most accessible archive of narratives of historical relevance to the Intermediate Area, namely, myths and stories recorded in northern South America (mostly) in historic times. Within this vast and uneven mass of texts, are groups of myths and tales that can contribute to a better understanding of the images analyzed above.

This essay is obviously not an iconographic survey of Intermediate Area goldwork, with charts and maps showing the distribution and age of styles and themes. It is, on the contrary, more like an iconographic biopsy, very localized, pointing to continuing differences between the approaches of art historians and archaeologists. In venues such as this, the

work of art historians (or, of the art historian) is often dismissed as overly particularistic, not attentive to the “larger” questions that concern archaeologists. Yet, one of the lessons that some have learned from the academic culture wars of the last decade is that cultures are less like seamless wholes and more like puzzles. Even when the pieces fit, they often have jagged edges, especially when it comes to power based on sexual authority.

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