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*Gold and Power in Ancient Costa Rica,  
Panama, and Colombia*

*Jeffrey Quilter and John W. Hoopes, Editors*

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**GOLD AND POWER**  
**IN**  
**ANCIENT COSTA RICA, PANAMA,**  
**AND COLOMBIA**



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A Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks

9 and 10 October 1999

Jeffrey Quilter and John W. Hoopes, *Editors*

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*Frontispiece:* King Antonio Saldaña of Talamanca wearing a necklace of *tumbaga* bird-effigy pendants. Detail of a portrait by S. Llorente, 1892.  
©1992 National Museum of Costa Rica, Editorial Escudo de Oro, S.A.  
(Calvo Mora, Bonilla Vargas, and Sánchez Pérez, 1992)

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Archaeological culture areas and contemporary states in southern Central America and adjacent regions of South America



	Greater Nicoya	Central Highlands/ Central Pacific	Atlantic Watershed	Diquís	Chiriquí	Central Panama
1600		Contact Period				Late Ceramic E
1550	Ometepe					
1500						
1450		Cartago	La Cabaña	Chiriquí	Chiriquí	Late Ceramic D
1400						
1350						
1300	Sapoá					
1200						
1100						
1000		Curridabat	La Selva	Aguas Buenas	San Lorenzo	Late Ceramic B
900						
800						
700						
600	Bagaces					
500						
400						
300		Pavas				
200						
100 A.D.	Tempisque		La Montaña	Sinacrá	La Concepción	Middle Ceramic B
0						
100 B.C.						
200						
300		Barba				
400						
500						
600						
700						
800						
900						
1000						
1100						
1200						
1300	Orosi				Early Ceramic B	
1400						
1500						
1600						
1700						
1800						
1900						
2000						

Chronological Chart: Prehistoric Costa Rica and Panama

	Upper Magdalena	Tierradentro	Calima	Middle Cauca Valley	Antioquia	Muisca	Sinú	Lower Magdalena	Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta	Guajira
1600	?	Late Period	Sonso	Late Quimbaya	Late Period	Modern	Malibú Complejo Las Palmas	Modern	Tairona	Modern
1500						Late Muisca	Tradición Modelada Pintada	Late Formative		Late Period ?
1400	Recent	Late Period	Sonso	Late Quimbaya	Late Period	Early Muisca	Tradición Modelada Pintada	Late Formative	Tairona	Late Period Los Cocos Poracelli
1300										
1200										
1100										
1000	Regional Classic	Middle Period	Yotoco	Early Quimbaya	Pueblo Viejo	Late Herrera	Tradición Granulosa Incisa	Midde Formative	Neguanje	Early Period La Loma El Horno
900										
800										
700										
600	0	Middle Period	Yotoco	Early Quimbaya	Pueblo Viejo Ferrería	Early Herrera	Tradición Granulosa Incisa	Midde Formative	Neguanje	Early Period La Loma El Horno
500										
400										
300										
200	Formative 3	Middle Period	Yotoco	Early Quimbaya	Pueblo Viejo Ferrería	Early Herrera	Tradición Granulosa Incisa	Midde Formative	Neguanje	Early Period La Loma El Horno
100 A.D.										
0										
100 B.C.										
200	Formative 2	Early Period 3	Ilama	Early Quimbaya	Pueblo Viejo Ferrería	Early Herrera	Tradición Granulosa Incisa	Midde Formative	Neguanje	Early Period La Loma El Horno
300										
400										
500										
600	Formative 1	Early Period 2	Ilama	Early Quimbaya	Pueblo Viejo Ferrería	Early Herrera	Tradición Granulosa Incisa	Midde Formative	Neguanje	Early Period La Loma El Horno
700										
800										
900										
1000	Formative 1	Early Period 1	Ilama	Early Quimbaya	Pueblo Viejo Ferrería	Early Herrera	Tradición Granulosa Incisa	Midde Formative	Neguanje	Early Period La Loma El Horno
2100										
Before										
2100										

Chronological Chart: Prehistoric Colombia



## *Introduction: The Golden Bridge of the Darién*

Jeffrey Quilter

DUMBARTON OAKS

A pandemic of gold fever gripped the New World for centuries. Columbus, on his last voyage, named a strip of land he touched “Costa Rica” because of the ubiquity of gold he saw on the necks, arms, and chests of its inhabitants. One of the great tales of the conquest of Mexico is Cortés telling Moctezuma’s envoys that the Spanish suffered from a strange malady for which the only cure was gold (Sale 1991: 233). “Gold as cure” may have been a common Spanish trope. Apparently, once native peoples understood the lengths to which Europeans would go for this remedy, they occasionally obliged by pouring molten gold down selected gullets of the “ailing.”

The Spanish did, however, get their gold fix: between 1503 and 1660, some 185,000 kilograms of gold flowed from the Americas to Spain (Elliott 1996: 180). If sold at gold’s current price of \$262 an ounce, this plunder would be worth \$1,558,023,000; the equivalent in sixteenth-century currency would be more than ten times this amount. Gold fueled the Counter-Reformation and the Spanish Armada, altering the course of world history.

Lust for the yellow metal spread throughout the New World and continued unabated, from the sixteenth century (from Columbus to Cortés to Pizarro) through the nineteenth century (with the California forty-niners and Alaskan gold rushes) to the twentieth century (and the outbreak of gold fever in the open pit mines of Brazil). The magical incorruptibility of gold has induced the corruption of many a body and soul.

The lure of gold as a source of quick and bountiful cash led to looting on a vast scale in southern Central America and Colombia. Overgrown ridge-top cemeteries in Costa Rica, picked clean a century ago, now resemble tropical versions of World War I battlefields, their surfaces riddled with the pockmarks of looters’ picks rather than mortar shells. Thousands of gold “eagles” and other items poured out of the Intermediate Area to the extent that some of the smaller pieces were commonly used as watch fobs at the turn of the last century. Despite these items’ ubiquity and the row upon row of bright, shiny objects lining museum cases and collectors’ cabinets, the number of gold objects scientifically excavated from the region (excluding Sitio Conte) could easily fit on a standard dining room table.

Although pioneering work has outlined major gold styles in Colombia and the adjacent isthmus, much basic information remains unknown (Bray 1978; 1981; Cooke and Bray 1985;

Falchetti 1995; Plazas 1978). Gold objects stripped of their archaeological contexts lend little information about how they functioned in society or how styles were spread or modified by social agents. For example, in 1979 Mary Helms proposed a model for the distribution of gold styles throughout the region. She suggested that seekers of esoteric knowledge who spent long periods in distant lands would return to their homes with gold jewelry in exotic styles as symbols of their newly acquired knowledge and status. This, in turn, would lead to the mixing of distant and local gold styles in the archaeological record. Helms's intriguing theory remains largely untested, however, because local styles cannot be distinguished with the degree of certainty necessary to separate foreign from domestic gold in terms of design or alloy composition. A number of chapters in this book challenge the Helms theory while others support it.

Despite the obstacles to studying the social context of goldwork, a considerable amount of research has been conducted in the last three decades (see McEwan 2000), expanding knowledge of the relations between gold and the people who made and used it in ancient times. Although archaeologists have only excavated one Intermediate Area site with numerous gold objects (Cooke, Sanchez, Herrera, and Udagawa 2000) since research at Sitio Conte (Lothrop 1937; 1942; Mason 1942; Hearne and Sharer 1992), many studies directly or indirectly relate to gold objects. These include research on settlement patterns and exchange systems and other investigations that may contribute to new perspectives on social organization. Studies of prehistoric and more recent symbolism and ideology offer views on how gold may have been valued in the nonmonetary societies of the ancient New World. Other research has made significant advances in better understanding of the languages and physical anthropology of the peoples of Colombia and the adjacent isthmus.

A workshop held at Dumbarton Oaks in 1997 explored many of these issues.<sup>1</sup> Discussions revolved around whether there is enough evidence and consensus to designate a new name for much of what is now termed the "Intermediate Area." Conferees agreed that recent work in linguistics (Constenla Umaña 1991; 1994a, b) and physical anthropology (Barrantes 1993; 1998) strongly support the proposition of long-term occupation of the isthmus and adjacent continent by a relatively stable human population. Archaeologists, and art historians must, however, depend upon material culture to marshal arguments for the designation of a region as a culture area or sphere of interaction. What became increasingly clear at the workshop was that gold jewelry in a distinctive style range serves as a horizon marker for Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia from about A.D. 700 onward, reaffirming Gordon Willey's (1971) observation, made thirty years ago. Thus, gold and the way it expressed sociopolitical and ideological power leads to a variety of other issues. The topic of gold may thus serve as a bridge linking disparate peoples, times, and places.<sup>2</sup> It was on this basis that the symposium from which this book derives was conceived and planned.

<sup>1</sup> It was entitled "The Gran Chibcha as a Culture Area: Horizon Styles, Cultural Traditions, and Temporal Depth at the Center of the Pre-Columbian World."

<sup>2</sup> The title of this introduction, "The Golden Bridge of the Darién," is borrowed from a remark made by John Hoopes and is ironic. The Darién is the least archaeologically known area in the region under consideration

### 3 *Introduction: The Golden Bridge of the Darién*

Many of the scholars who attended the meeting have advanced knowledge of regional styles of gold, symbolic concepts of the people who used it, the nature and transformation of social formations, and other topics. The symposium and the papers presented represent a summation and a starting point. More than a century ago, William Henry Holmes wrote the first extensive treatise on archaeological remains from Chiriquí, in western Panama. The nineteenth-century gold rush had produced considerable quantities of related materials for scholarly study although no formal archaeological fieldwork had been done. Holmes wrote,

The antiquarian literature of the province is extremely meager, being confined to brief sketches made by transient visitors or based for the most part upon the testimony of gold hunters and government explorers, who took but little note of the unpretentious relics of past ages.

[U]ntil recently the isthmus was supposed to have remained practically unoccupied by that group of cultured nations whose works in Peru and Mexico excite the wonder of the world. But, little by little, it has been discovered that at some period of the past the province was thickly populated, and by races possessed of no mean culture. (1888: 14)

The chapters in this volume represent the great progress in knowledge about the ancient peoples of Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia we have made since Holmes wrote those lines. At the same time, however, many fundamental questions remain unanswered, and most of the chapters clearly reveal the potential for future research in every area of this part of ancient America.

#### *Volume Overview*

Nicholas Saunders opens the book by locating the high value placed by Amerindians on metals within a larger symbolic system that esteemed shiny things. He convincingly argues that such appreciation of bright things was widespread (even stretching beyond the New World) and of long duration in the nonmonetary societies of the ancient Americas. This model can be tested and examined in the specific, different contexts of New World societies for many years to come. Certainly, ample support for Saunders's theory is provided many times in the succeeding chapters and in the exhibit cases of museums throughout the world in which the treasures of the ancient New World are displayed.

The following chapter brings together one of the most active proponents of a unitary vision of the southern Isthmian and Colombian region, Oscar Fonseca Zamora, and a sympathetic North American colleague, John Hoopes. Together they review the linguistic and physical evidence for patterns of similarities and differences in Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia, a region they call the Isthmo-Colombian Area. As a straightforward geographical reference, the term avoids the danger of essentialism in designating this location a culture

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here. In the sense that bridges link places and the Darién links the continent with the isthmus, however, the title seemed appropriate.

area. Detached from the Intermediate Area, the region is no longer framed in a dependent relationship with Mesoamerica, to the north, or the Central Andes, to the south. Fonseca and Hoopes bring together information supporting the idea of local development within an overall framework of shared cultural practices.

Richard Cooke and colleagues address questions asked by lay people and scholars alike: Who made gold artifacts? Who exchanged gold? Who used gold ornaments, and how were they worn? In answering these questions, the authors offer a scholarly treatise, providing the most thorough discussion of Panamanian gold sources to date, as well as a further introduction to the range of issues in the volume. They demonstrate how the use of ethnology, ethnohistory, and geology in combination with archaeology can be valuable not simply as a source of information to augment one field or another, but as an element in producing a sum of knowledge greater than its parts. For these authors, the power in “gold and power” is the role of the metal in social ranking and in exchange systems. Questioning Mary Helms’s (1979) proposition that long distances and the exotic nature of goods and associated knowledge that accompanied them were vehicles for political power, they argue for confirmation by tracing the specific nature, origins, and distribution of such goods. It is a mark of how far investigations in Panama and neighboring countries have advanced in the last two decades that such research is now not only feasible but is also being carried out. This is evidenced by Cooke and colleagues’ (2000) recent fieldwork at Cerro Juan Díaz, where a number of different vectors—precious shell carvings, goldwork, ceramics, and funerary customs—are being examined as complex and dynamically interrelated phenomena. Although the physical evidence of early gold technology is extremely important, the testing of Helms’s thesis is equally valuable. There may have been numerous means by which gold circulated in southern Central America and Colombia.

Michael Snarskis addresses the important issue of the shift from jade to gold as *the* material of precious value in Costa Rica. Drawing upon his extensive knowledge of prehistoric Costa Rica, Snarskis demonstrates that the shift was not an isolated occurrence, but part of other significant developments as evidenced in changes in mortuary practices, settlement patterns, house forms, and a variety of artifact styles. As Snarskis notes, these changes represent the physical manifestations of transformations in the organization of society and in belief systems that likely were much more important to the ancient inhabitants of the region than was gold. In addition to sharing his insights into these shifts, the author also provides the reader with valuable summaries of the archaeology of Costa Rica, especially the Central Valley and Atlantic Watershed zones.

In their contribution to the volume, Patricia Fernández and Ifigenia Quintanilla examine linkages between stone sculpture, metallurgy, and the expression of power in the Diquís Delta of southern Costa Rica. This is one of the better-known areas in the greater region, among English speakers, due to the work of Doris Stone (1977) and Samuel Lothrop (1963) as well as a general fascination with the large stone balls characteristic of the zone. In addition to providing some of the first detailed English-language studies of the area’s stone balls and metallurgy, Fernández and Quintanilla provide important information on and interpretations of the relationships between different symbols of power. Their discussion of the

contemporaneous use of stone statues, stone balls, and goldwork highlights the way in which objects and symbol systems may play dynamic and complementary roles that contribute to the creation and maintenance of what they call an “atmosphere of power.” They also emphasize that in many times and places in the Intermediate Area, social power was not exhibited solely through the acquisition of exotic knowledge and goods. It also included the ability of elites to commandeer surplus labor for the construction of extensive and impressive ceremonial equipment and ritual centers and for activities carried out in these places.

Readers unfamiliar with large-scale sites in the Isthmo-Colombian area will be impressed by the Diquís Delta complexes. Their stone balls were not isolated monuments, but objects integrated into great ceremonial centers. *Wealth and Hierachy in the Intermediate Area* (Lange 1992) discusses some of these sites in greater detail. Many sites similar to Palmar Sur, though with varying formats, such as Guayabo (Aguilar Piedra 1972; Fonseca Zamora 1979; 1981) and Rivas (Quilter and Blanco 1995), await future archaeological study in Costa Rica, while others remain unknown or little explored in Panama and Colombia.

Carl Henrik Langebaek continues the focus on the political dimensions of gold, providing a thorough discussion of changes in settlement systems, sumptuary goods, and artifacts of everyday use and the symbolism of them. These changes are supported by radiocarbon dating and excavations (despite extensive looting). Researchers working in other areas of the Isthmo-Colombian region are likely to be appreciative of this body of data and the interpretations that can be drawn from it (and perhaps a little envious as well). Archaeological fieldwork in Colombia has been extensive in recent decades despite the political problems facing the country. The importance of Langebaek’s contribution is its documentation of the dramatic shift of gold jewelry as elite items to its more widespread use. He also offers a sobering view of our ability to trace exchange systems in prehistory and to determine whether elites or commoners controlled them. Local production and consumption in early times appears to have been under elite control. The more widespread distribution of gold jewelry in later times may have been the result of elite control of trade, as in the case of the Muisca, but Langebaek leaves open the possibility for other kinds of exchange systems. He notes that what the Spanish saw may represent a relatively recent development in trade patterns, an issue that may also apply to other areas of the Isthmo-Colombian region.

Mark Miller Graham takes a different approach to politics and power relations by proposing an interpretation of a number of stylistic motifs as male appropriation of female reproductive power. His perspective on the art and symbolism of the region as expressions of fertility concerns yields great insights, as does the research of Ana María Falchetti. Graham finds clues and routes to interpretation in a wide variety of continental South American sources. As he notes in his conclusion, the ethnographic data from the northwest Amazon and Orinoco are of great potential value in the interpretation of other parts of the Intermediate Area and beyond. In this, Graham’s perspective reflects a continuity of the thought and scholarly tradition recently espoused by Donald Lathrap and established earlier in a more general way by Carl Sauer.

The broad geographical range of a symbol set as presented by Graham is complemented in Warwick Bray’s chapter, in which he argues for temporal continuity in Colombia. Bray



posits a fifteen-hundred-year cultural tradition extending from the Tairona archaeological culture to the contemporary Kogi peoples of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. Bray's contribution provides a wealth of information with broad implications for the goals of this volume. He examines the complexity of Tairona political organization as reported by the Spanish with references to *capitanes*, *principales*, *capitanes de guerra*, and *mandadores*, among others. He also reviews Tairona gold styles, links between symbolism, concepts of power, and gold objects, and the intriguing evidence from a Nahuange tomb of an early Colombian polished stone tradition resembling the better-known and -documented polished stone complex of Costa Rica. He argues for much more complex patterns of interchange between peoples of mainland South American and the isthmus than have been considered previously, thus echoing the cautionary remarks raised by Langebaek. In addition to this rich serving of information and ideas, Bray provides an intriguing discussion of Kogi interpretations of ancient gold. He then applies the cautionary brakes, however, through a reminder that these ideas, like the analyses in this book, are contemporary interpretations of the works of ancient peoples who may have had very different views than those of today or those of the Kogi. An extensive appendix of documented finds of Tairona metalwork is an added bonus to a fascinating and provocative essay.

Ana María Falchetti continues the focus on Colombia, with a look at the symbolic dimensions of the technology of gold objects. The symbolic power of lost-wax casting techniques, the nature of copper-gold alloys, and patterns of exchange of precious goods were seen as expressions of processes of transformation. Falchetti skillfully melds ethnographic, archaeological, and materials analyses into a sparkling interpretive alloy. A signal point here is that the value of metals was not always their physical stability or slowness in tarnishing. Rather, the change from bright to dull was appreciated. This seems, at first, counterintuitive to people raised with a Western appreciation of a hierarchy of substances in which those that change least are valued most. Metals in Colombia, however, were valued for contrasting reasons, just as in many areas of ancient America the scent of copper-gold alloy was a metal's most valued aspect, one that few Europeans might appreciate. Falchetti thus reminds the reader that while one may seek to understand behaviors and values through cross-cultural comparison and long-term, widespread general patterns, one must remain sensitive to differences even within generally similar cultural spheres.

Eugenia Ibarra mines ethnohistoric sources for great riches, providing the first detailed account of the points of origin for some of the gold objects taken by the Spanish in southern Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama. Ibarra notes the terminology used by the Spanish for different gold objects as well as their perceptions of different qualities of gold, for example, *buen oro* and *oro bajo*. The latter stands in marked contrast to the subtle appreciation of the transformative qualities of copper-gold alloy by the native peoples. Ibarra also raises the issue of who was entitled to wear gold ornaments, one of the recurring issues in this volume, and offers avenues for future investigation of this matter. This issue, in turn, is but one aspect of the larger question of the nature and variability of systems of social rank in the Intermediate Area, with indications that in some places the Spanish report what appear to be "all chiefs and no Indians," as it were. Ibarra also offers a theoretical perspective on how gold and other

precious goods may have circulated physically and within the context of meaning. The issues that remain to be addressed concerning the Isthmo-Colombian region can be viewed from a broad intellectual perspective that raises fundamental issues of how humans construct societies, create meaning, and attempt to propagate them.

One paper presented at the symposium does not appear in this volume: “Quimbaya Goldwork: Context, Chronology, and Classification” by Clemencia Plazas and María Alicia Uribe. Plazas and Uribe’s masterful coverage of Quimbaya gold contains such a wealth of new information—a considerable amount of which requires detailed description and illustrations—that this work is best published in a more extensive format elsewhere.

As a group, the chapters in this volume illustrate dexterity in utilizing a wide variety of sources, from geological reports to materials analyses to field archaeology to early historical records. Together, these essays also highlight the great variety of ways in which people organized themselves in the Isthmo-Colombian region: there is no simple template for what a “chiefdom” system looked like that is universally applicable. Thus, how gold entered into equations of political power also likely varied. It was an important vehicle, but not the only one for expressing social differences. At the same time, however, gold’s brilliant luster and, when alloyed, its mutability, were consistently used to express a set of similar, related concepts associated with energy and fertility. Continued research in the Isthmo-Colombian region that reveals ever-greater diversity in sociopolitical organization through time and space and different uses of gold in equations of power will help to demonstrate how the Intermediate Area is both different from, and similar to, other New World regions. Asking what made the peoples and cultures of this part of the globe similar to or different from others is one of the best ways to develop intellectual muscle and will likely encourage research for many years to come.

### *Reflections on Metals and More*

As noted, the diversity of sociopolitical organizations in this part of the ancient New World is one of the topics repeated throughout this volume. Evidence of such diversity relies, to a great degree, on information contained in early colonial documents often not well known outside of the scholarly community of particular nation-states. Attempting to examine sociopolitical diversity, and therefore different power relations, in more remote times provides challenges that are always daunting in archaeology and, as in the case of site surveys, are made doubly so in densely forested tropical environments.

Another source for delineating social organization is mortuary data. More than a hundred years of extensive looting has destroyed much of this kind of information, and even in the best of circumstances preservation factors work against the archaeologist. At the Rivas site, in Costa Rica, Aida Blanco and I excavated two low-status cemeteries that had suffered only minor looting due to the absence of gold (Quilter and Blanco 1995). We found clusters of ceramic grave offerings but the only trace of human remains was soil stains. Thus, the kinds of information on status differentiation that can be discerned through micro- and macroanalyses of human remains were not available to us. The excavations by Richard Cooke and his team

(Cooke et al. 2000) at Cerro Juan Díaz, where preservation was fairly good, are thus all the more important for the osteological information they will be able to retrieve in future studies.

Another factor related to determining social organization and expressions of political power is the ability to conduct excavations of large areas. Although few sites in the central Intermediate Area have the kind of vertical monumentality of a Tikal or Machu Picchu, many are quite extensive horizontally. The work conducted by Ifigenia Quintanilla in the lower Diquís Delta is impressive in that, on a very small budget, she was able to document not only the great size of individual sites but also to show the extensive and expansive nature of site complexes throughout the area.

Finally, the investigation of symbol systems offers opportunities to discuss social relations from perspectives different from the information gathered from site surveys and excavations. An example is Mark Miller Graham's exploration of power and gender issues.

The switch, particularly in Costa Rica, from jade to gold as an expression of symbolic power is one of the most dramatic and clear-cut prehistoric examples of change in value systems in the New World. As Michael Snarskis argues, this shift was part of a complex set of changes. What puts the southern Central American case so sharply in focus is the fact that jade came from southern Mesoamerica (cf. Snarskis, in this volume) and that gold was introduced from the south. This begs for an examination of how new materials and the ideologies bound to them were accepted and assimilated into local desires and interests. The question of the degree to which these materials brought new ways of thinking or how they were locally absorbed is at the heart of this matter. Acceptance and assimilation almost certainly include new or rearranged ideas about the relations of people to their "natural" world and to one another.

In considering these issues, it is worth noting that when Columbus was sailing along the region's shore he observed that everyone wore gold. He also noted that there were differences between how much gold and what kinds of ornaments were worn within particular regions and that in some areas "fine gold" was common while in others baser gold (gold-copper alloy) was favored. This suggests a diverse and complicated pattern of distinctive but contemporary gold provinces within a general cultural system that valued gold.

Current evidence indicates that jade was imported, and its acquisition required long-distance contacts. If status was tied to access to jade, then those on the receiving end who held high status were dependent on maintaining contacts with those who could provide the material. Once procured, however, jade was transformed through a relatively simple but slow process of cutting, grinding, and polishing. Although some individuals were more skilled than others in lapidary work, the skills necessary to work with jade were obvious, straightforward, and could be mastered by almost anyone.

Gold was in many ways the opposite of jade. It was available locally, in rivers and mines, although concentrated in some places. The production process was complicated, requiring the assembly of a great variety of materials that included beeswax, copper for alloys, clays for molds and crucibles, fuel for fires, and other materials. These likely did not have to be imported

from great distances, but they probably required the maintenance of complicated intraregional exchange systems.

Whereas lapidary work was straightforward and laborious, goldworking was complicated and mysterious but relatively quick, once all of the necessary materials were assembled. There is considerable evidence that high-status individuals were active in getting, working, and socially using gold (Cooke et al., in this volume). Some examples of attitudes toward gold, such as Chief París taking back a gold gift (Ibarra, in this volume), suggest that the appreciation and valuation of gold was not always limited to its physical properties, but also extended to its value as capital. If so, this is a significant point that deserves future study.

Not much is known about how jade objects circulated, but, as noted by Ibarra, hints of their value are provided in the histories of these objects, as in the case of the shell goods of the Kula Ring of the Trobriand Islands or the great “coppers” of the Canadian west coast. Jades were cut in two, further divided, and reworked. In carving, cutting, and layering marks on the surface of these precious stones, the workers and owners created historical documents. Splitting a Maya jade belt plaque did not necessarily demonstrate a disregard for the object’s history but may instead have added to its historical depth. Rather than a desecration of an essential, complete object, splitting may have expressed a historical sensibility and represented an empowering act through which a received, foreign object was appropriated as one’s own.

Reworked gold does not always show its history in a similar manner, for it may go back to the crucible to be reformed into something new. In these cases, as passed down to future generations, it does not bear its history directly. Its form—an antique or foreign style—may indicate aspects of its history, but the object does not physically bear the markings of that past on its substance as does a reworked jade.

Gold was offered in mortuary rites in quantity, as illustrated by the huge amounts looted from cemeteries throughout the Isthmus and Colombia. It is unlikely that jade was ever available in such abundance. This most precious greenstone was an exotic substance from lands far away, but once in the hands of local people it survived, until eventually buried in a grave, as a marker of great temporal depth of historical continuity rather than the achievement of territorial distances covered.

The kinds of technical changes discussed here are highlighted by Alfred Russel Wallace’s (1969 [1853]) account of quartzite stone cylinders worn by Cubeo men of the Vaupés River in the northwest Amazonian region (Fig. 1). Slightly harder than jade, quartzite was procured from a great distance up the Río Negro, at the base of the Andes. The cylindrical artifacts Wallace describes measured four to eight inches long, were about an inch thick, and were pierced at one end for suspension. To drill such a hole was said to take years, and to drill a hole for transverse suspension through the length of the cylinder—worn only by the highest-ranking men—was purported to take two lifetimes.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> I thank David Watters for drawing my attention to this citation. The full account is as follows: “I now saw several of the men with their most peculiar and valued ornament—a cylindrical, opaque, white stone, looking like marble, but which is really quartz imperfectly crystallized. These stones are from four to eight inches long, and about an inch in diameter. They are ground round, and flat at the ends, a work of great labour, and are each

Perhaps the length of time needed to drill these holes was exaggerated to Wallace or, earlier and elsewhere, there may have been other techniques for working jade that reduced time and effort. Nevertheless, the production of jewelry from hard stone was a laborious process that consisted of wearing down the material to transform it from rough to smooth. Transformation in goldworking, as Falchetti notes, was more rapid, more mysterious, and more dramatic. The shift from jade to gold represented a switch from the mysterious origins of the stone in distant lands, locally transformed by straightforward, common, and locally held knowledge, to the procurement of relatively local common materials transformed by the magical techniques of the metal smith. If part of the social power conveyed in valued materials lies in the mystification of some aspect of objects for those who are taught to value them, then this shift was a change from a mystery of origins to a mystery of manufacture. Such a shift may have been integrally tied to the rise of locally based specialists and new elites.

The Isthmo-Colombian shift from jade to gold was clearly tied to altered social relations and other changes that took place concurrently in artifact styles, settlement patterns, mortuary customs, and many other aspects of life. Were these changes part of an intrusive foreign system that supplanted old ways or were exotic materials assimilated into customary habits so that change occurred more gradually? Although these changes appear to have been rapid from our perspective, they may have taken place over the course of many generations and so were seen at the time as completely local in character and origin.

The differing technologies for procuring and working jade and gold are perhaps emblematic of greater social changes in the Isthmo-Colombian region. Jade may have been valued in southern Central America for the same meanings that it held and was prized for in Mesoamerica, where its greenness stood for water, fertility, vegetation, and, in particular, maize and ancestors. Jade came from far away, as the ancestors were distant in time. It was worked and reworked and passed on from hand to hand through horizontal space and vertical time. With the rise of more hierarchical societies in later prehistory, gold jewelry fit well into a system of increased specialization, of power based in nearby but varied sources, of value situated in specialized knowledge possessed by only a few. In some general sense, the shift is similar to the distinctions made by Emile Durkheim between mechanical and organic social solidarity.

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pierced with a hole at one end, through which a string is inserted, to suspend it around the neck. It appears almost incredible that they should make this hole in so hard a substance without any iron instrument for the purpose. What they are said to use is the pointed flexible leaf-shoot of the large wild plantain, triturating with fine sand and a little water; and I have no doubt it is, as it is said to be, a labour of years. Yet it must take a much longer time to pierce that which the *Tushaúa* wears as the symbol of his authority, for it is generally of the largest size, and is worn transversely across the breast, for which purpose the hole is bored lengthways from one end to the other, an operation which I was informed sometimes occupies two lives. The stones themselves are procured from a great distance up the river, probably from near its sources at the base of the Andes; they are therefore highly valued, and it is seldom the owners can be induced to part with them, the chiefs scarcely ever" (Wallace 1969 [1853]: 191–192).



Fig. 1 Cubeo men wearing cylindrical quartzite pendants at a mourning ceremony (Steward 1948: pl. 96)

If some of the suggestions made here regarding the symbolic natures of jade and gold ring true, then perhaps it is possible to transcend a tension evident in the contributions in this volume. Several authors critique Helms's thesis that the search for exotic goods and knowledge provided the dynamo for Pre-Columbian trade, politics, and religion in the Isthmo-Colombian region. They argue for examining exchange systems and political systems on a regional scale. Well-documented searches for turquoise, spondylus, and such, however, suggest that as a general principle Helms's argument has merit: strange things from distant lands do tend to entitle the owner to bragging rights (and often much more). The success of research in the Isthmo-Colombian region during the last two decades now allows the formulation of questions and programs of research on narrower (though by some standards still quite broad) spatio-temporal questions. Searching for regionally based systems of power and exchange while remaining aware of the ties that bound people in the trans-Isthmian region requires thinking globally and investigating locally.

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