

Copyright

by

Katherine A. Schumann

May 2019

THE RIVER OF GOLD AND THE FLOW OF POWER

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the

School of Art

Kathrine G. McGovern College of the Arts

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts in Art History

by

Katherine A. Schumann

May 2019

THE RIVER OF GOLD AND THE FLOW OF POWER

Katherine A.Schumann

APPROVED:

Rex Koontz, Ph.D.
Committee Chair

Judith Steinhoff, Ph.D.

Dirk Van Tuerenhout, Ph.D.

Andrew Davis, Ph.D.
Dean, Kathrine G. McGovern College of the Arts

THE RIVER OF GOLD AND THE FLOW OF POWER

An Abstract of a Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the

School of Art

Kathrine G. McGovern College of the Arts

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts in Art History

by

Katherine A. Schumann

May 2019

Abstract

This thesis compares the iconography of gold objects from the Mixtec of Mexico and the Panamanian Coclé civilizations. It focuses on the construction of authority and dominance through iconographic statements involving communication with the supernatural and gender symbolism, as well as the ritual function of golden adornment in these communications. In terms of gender symbolism, the thesis is especially interested in female iconography in precious metals, and how these symbols are utilized by male spiritual authorities at the highest echelons of society. The idea that metalworking traditions were transmitted into Mexico through the Panamanian isthmus is not new. However, could the cultural significance of gold objects as burial items, and the gender imagery they were associated with, have been transmitted along with crafting methods? I hope to raise these questions again and add to the discussion with specific art historical arguments on metal iconography and gender roles.

Acknowledgements

The journey to higher education is always a challenge, but—if one is as lucky as I have been—there will be forces that help along the way. I would like to express my great appreciation for the University of Houston as an institution, the value of its resources, and the helpfulness of the staff at every turn. These things made the attainment of a Master of Arts degree in Art History possible, and thoroughly fulfilling. A deep well of gratitude is owed to the members of my committee, Dr. Judith Steinhoff and Dr. Dirk van Tuerenhout, for their thoughtful suggestions and sage guidance over the course of writing this thesis. Without this help, this project would be incomplete. Special recognition goes to my committee chair and Faculty Mentor Dr. Rex Koontz, whose commitment to the success of his students, and endless enthusiasm for the pursuit of knowledge in general has benefited me immensely. I'd like to thank Dr. Sandra Zalman, program director of Art History, for patiently answering my myriad questions when I didn't know who to ask. Special thanks to Chelsea Dacus, who oversaw my Object Based Learning fellowship at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the anonymous members of the committees that granted me this fellowship, as well as the Guenther Memorial Scholarship. With the help of these fine people, I was granted learning opportunities of which I could previously only dream of.

Table of Contents

Abstract	v
Acknowledgements.....	vi
List of Figures	ix
Introduction.....	1
The Mixtec: Gold and Codices in South Central Mexico.....	3
Monte Alban: The Hilltop Citadel.....	6
Tomb 7: Preliminary Notes	9
Tomb 7: Analysis	11
Tomb 7: Interpretations	15
Mixtec Iconography: The Codices	23
Pectoral 167	28
Pectoral 26.....	30
Interpretations of Pectoral 26	32
9 Grass and Cihuacoatl	34
The Cocle: Golden Graves in Central Panama	38
Sitio Conte: The River of Gold	41

Gold and Ritual.....	45
Ritual Practitioners and Supernatural Communication	48
Male Appropriation of Female Imagery	50
Comparison and Analysis	56
Ritual Use of Gold.....	58
Male Appropriation of Female Imagery in Goldwork	61
Supernatural Communication in Ritual Practice	64
Conclusion	67
Bibliography	69

List of Figures

1. Map of Mixteca.....	75
2. Lost-wax casting diagram	76
3. Adornments from Zaachila	77
4. Map of Oaxaca Valley	78
5. Site of Monte Alban.....	79
6. Mural, Tomb 105, Monte Alban	80
7. Tomb 104, Monte Alban, reconstruction.....	81
8. Tomb 7, site drawing, bird's eye view.....	82
9. Tomb 7, human remains	83
10. Tomb 7, artifacts	84
11. Turquoise skull from Tomb 7	85
12. Mandible masks from Tomb 7.....	86
13. Pectoral 26, Tomb 7	87
14. Spindle whorls, Tomb 7	88
15. Bone battens, Tomb 7	89
16. Codex illustration of woman using a backstrap loom.....	90

17. Xolotl with spindle whorl headdress.....	91
18. Mixtec year sign.....	92
19. Aztec and Zapotec year signs	93
20. Zapotec carvings from Tomb 7.....	94
21. Codex illustration of girl learning to spin	95
22. Codex illustration of woman spinning.....	96
23. Cihuacoatl	97
24. Tlazolteotl	98
25. Xochiquetzal	99
26. Quetzal bird and codex illustration showing use	100
27. Pectoral 26 serpent earrings	101
28. Belled necklace, Tomb 7.....	102
29. 9 Grass	103
30. 9 Grass with serpent quechquemitl	104
31. Culture areas of Ancient America.....	105
32. Map of Sitio Conte.....	106
33. Coclé gold plaques	107
34. Cast gold pendants, Sitio Conte	108

35. Coclé pottery designs vs Coclé goldwork designs.....	109
36. Ornament with dangles	110
37. Coclé composite creatures	111
38. Nude female pendants, Sitio Conte.....	112
39. Mammiform plaques, Sitio Conte.....	113
40. Mammiform plaques, MFAH	114
41. Frog pendants from Isthmo-Colombian area	115
42. Pectoral 167, Monte Alban	116
43. The moon as a flint knife	117
44. The earth monster	118
45. Map of both sites.....	119

Introduction

Gold has long been fetishized in Western thought. It is beautiful, valuable, practically indestructible, and it is rare. It is prized for its unique properties that make it an excellent medium for art. It is soft and can be hammered into a variety of shapes and textures; it is a simple matter to polish it to a brilliant shine. The gleam of it is arresting, eyes are naturally acutely aware of a flashing object, such as a gold medallion reflecting the sunlight.

Gold working was independently invented in the Ancient Americas, and there took on distinct roles and symbolisms to those it had in Western thought, though parallels do exist. This thesis explores but a small facet of the relationship that ancient Americans had to their gold objects, and rather than comparing this to the attitudes of the West toward gold, it seeks to compare the relationships of two master gold working cultures to each other: the Mixtec of Central and Southern Mexico, and the Coclé of Southern Panama. After a thorough investigation of these two distant populations, remarkable similarities begin to emerge, the most significant being the use of gold objects in ritual, the connection of goldwork to supernatural sight, and the significance of sexual symbolism in goldwork, particularly the appropriation of female bodies by male ritual practitioners in ceremonies that legitimize and perpetuate authority.

Reevaluations of gold objects at the Coclé burials at Sitio Conte in southern Panama, as well as the Mixtec interment of Tomb 7 of Monte Alban in Mexico's Oaxaca Valley reveal evidence that gendered iconography in metalwork could have a similar, if not related function in the practice of legitimizing and perpetuating existing power

structures. An investigation of the ritual significance of gold objects, their ties to esoteric knowledge and supernatural sight, and the appropriation of female anatomy by male practitioners of ritualistic divination (known by names such as shaman, priest, priest-chief, or oracle) suggests the interdependence of these aspects— certainly among the Coclé, but ostensibly among the Mixtec as well. The larger issue, which will only be alluded to in my thesis, involves the history of fine metalwork in the Americas: as the knowledge of gold working moved north from Panama to Oaxaca, what was the relationship between the new elite material— and associated artistic techniques— to political power?

The Mixtec: Gold and Codices in South Central Mexico

The mountains of northern and western Oaxaca present a rugged landscape known as the Mixteca (fig. 1). The people who inhabit the small valleys of this area are known as the Mixtec, and their legacy extends centuries into the past, long before European contact with the Americas. This thesis will focus on the Postclassic period (900-1521 C.E.), when the Mixtec were important political players in the southern Mesoamerican region of Oaxaca. The Mixtec are known for being the creators of the last surviving Pre-Hispanic codices, which offer a wealth of information about Mixtec society. They were also masters of gold working technique, and developed a rich symbolic language in that medium.

The political structure of the Mixtec bears mention here, not only because it is unusual in greater Mesoamerica, but because it has immense implications for the priorities of the Mixtec ruling class, the actions of Mixtec authority figures through history, and the content of Mixtec artwork. We will be especially interested in the way Mixtec elites constructed a language of power using a gendered symbolism, and how that gendered symbolism manifested itself in specific gold objects. Unlike the Aztec or the proximal Zapotec civilization, the Mixtec were not united underneath one supreme authority. Mixtec authority consisted of a conglomeration of factions, each of which was a wholly independent city-state ruled by its own distinct lord.¹ This lack of centralized authority engendered political instability, as Mixtec rulers of the autonomous kingdoms— each ostensibly of equal status— were driven into almost constant

¹ Elizabeth Hill Boone, *Stories in Red and Black: Pictorial Histories of the Aztecs and Mixtecs* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2014), 88.

competition for power and resources.² Warfare, strategic alliances, and political intrigue were commonplace between Mixtec ruling families. Central to many of these disputes was control over what little fertile farmland could be had, as the thin, rocky soil of the Mixteca presented precious few plots for crops.³ To counter the onslaught of political rivals and threats, legitimized authority became a priority to Mixtec rulers. Traditionally, Mixtec lords drew their authority through inheritance from their deified ancestors, who themselves were granted authority to rule specific lands by the gods, so genealogy and the history of elite lineages, along with the definition of places and the maintenance of boundaries were critical to the preservation of the status quo.⁴ Naturally, the preservation of these genealogies and histories became an essential objective. The initial solution was institutional: Oracular priests, a combination administrative and religious class, independent of the lines of kinship that dictated the various heads of state would be charged with committing the sacred Mixtec lineages to memory. This was the preferred solution until the development of a system of pictorial representation, after which the Mixtec began to preserve this information on screen-fold, deerskin codices in order to avoid human error.⁵ However, oracular priests remained as the administrators of a developing cult centered on the deified ancestors, where they would act as intercessors between the Mixtec lords and their venerated dead.⁶ This would affect Mixtec society in two ways. The establishment of burial shrines in neutral locations disconnected to

² Jeffrey P Blomster, *After Monte Albán: Transformation and Negotiation in Oaxaca, Mexico* (Boulder, Colo: University Press of Colorado, 2010), 27.

³ Michael D Coe and Rex Koontz, *Mexico: From the Olmecs to the Aztecs* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2013), 183.

⁴ John M. D. Pohl, *The Politics of Symbolism in the Mixtec Codices* (Nashville, Tennessee: Vanderbilt University, 1994), 11.

⁵ Nancy Troike, "Pre-Hispanic Pictorial Communication: The Codex System of the Mixtec of Oaxaca," *Visible Language* 24, no. 1 (1990): 74.

⁶ Pohl, *The Politics of Symbolism*, 70.

ancestral lands would have a unifying effect on the heavily factionalized Mixtec rulership. The members of the nobility would share adherence to certain ancestral shrines, stabilizing their relationships.⁷ In addition to this, as neutral parties and the mouthpieces of the gods, the oracles that officiated over these shrines could play an active role in the legitimization of power through discourse with the gods.⁸

The ancient Mixtec are also known for their skill as goldsmiths, which was something of a rarity in ancient greater Mesoamerica. Mixtec goldsmiths produced golden articles of adornment through hammering as well as the *cire perdue*, or “lost-wax” method of casting, with the latter method resulting in some of the most intricate and technically complex metal objects from ancient Mesoamerica.⁹ Mixtec artisans would create a model of beeswax— sometimes molded around a charcoal core— surrounded by a clay mold, leaving vent holes for the wax to escape (fig. 2). As the mold was hardened by fire, the wax would melt and escape through the vent-holes, leaving behind its shape in the hardened clay. The surface of the wax model could be incised, or wax could be rolled into fine threads to add highly complex decoration to surfaces. Using this method, Mixtec artisans were able to accomplish a number of impressive smithing tricks, such as lacy, thread-like openwork often mistaken for filigree, bells with cast-in clappers, and objects joined by closed links of chain cast as one.¹⁰

⁷ Coe and Koontz, *Mexico*, 185.

⁸ Robert Lloyd Williams and John M.D. Pohl, *Lord Eight Wind of Suchixtlan and the Heroes of Ancient Oaxaca: Reading History in the Codex Zouche-Nuttall*, 1st ed, Linda Schele Series in Maya and Pre-Columbian Studies (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2009), 47.

⁹ Alfonso Caso, “Lapidary Work, Goldwork, and Copperwork from Oaxaca,” in *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 3 (Austin, Texas: Univ Of Texas Press, 1965), 918.

¹⁰ Coe and Koontz, *Mexico*, 185.

Though the higher altitudes of the Mixteca were the original habitat of the ancient Mixtec, the civilization flourished in the Postclassic period and they soon turned their interests outward, expanding into the surrounding valleys.¹¹ By the 14th century, the Mixtec had begun to infiltrate the Valley of Oaxaca where they both cooperated and warred with the dominant Zapotec culture. Shrewd statecraft and strategic intermarriage of elites, both hallmarks of Mixtec expansion tactics, allowed them to integrate into Zapotec centers in the Oaxaca Valley while still retaining their distinct culture and art style.¹²

Monte Alban: The Hilltop Citadel

The fine goldwork of the Mixtec caught the eye of Aztec conquerors and Spanish explorers alike. Though recent scholarship has begun to suggest that there was more than one gold working center, the Mixtec have long been thought to be the premier gold workers of central and southern Mexico.¹³ There have been a number of significant discoveries of Mixtec goldwork over the years. The second largest cache of Mixtec-style gold (fig. 3) has been found between two tombs in the ancient capital of Zaachila, but these are often overshadowed by the truly splendid ceramic specimens from the site.¹⁴

Despite the richness of the Zaachila tombs, the main evidence for the claim of Mixtec dominance in Mesoamerican gold working would be found with the discovery of

¹¹ Robert D. Drennan et al., "Mesoamerica, Pre-Columbian," in *Grove Art Online* (Oxford University Press, 2003), <https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T057023>.

¹² Drennan et al., "Mesoamerica, Pre-Columbian."

¹³ Lujan, Leonardo Lopez, and Jose Luis Ruvalcaba Sil. "Mexican Gold." In *Golden Kingdoms: Luxury Arts in the Ancient Americas*, edited by Joanne Pillsbury, Timothy F. Potts, Kim N. Richter, J. Paul Getty Museum, Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, N.Y.), and Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA (Project). Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum and The Getty Research Institute, 2017, 120.

¹⁴ Coe and Koontz, *Mexico*, 187.

the fabulous grave items of Monte Alban Tomb 7. Over 121 pieces of Mixtec-worked gold were discovered alongside the remains of several individuals in Tomb 7, a Zapotec construction that was later reused by the Mixtec culture after Monte Alban's abandonment. Tomb 7 was discovered by Oaxacan archeologist Alfonso Caso in 1932 as part of his larger excavation of Monte Alban over the course of nearly two decades.

Monte Alban is a massive hilltop citadel that rises 1300 feet from the crux of the arms of the Oaxaca Valley, resembling at both times a mountain fortress and a watchtower over the narrow tripartite bed of the fertile valley below (fig. 4). Beginning in the Preclassic period, Monte Alban was the seat of Zapotec political power and the base of an expansionist policy that dominated the Valley of Oaxaca for over a thousand years.¹⁵ At the peak of its power archaeologists believe that the reach and influence of Monte Alban was such that the city was able to foster relationships with the Maya to the south, and during the Classic period (250-700 CE) with Teotihuacan—the supreme political force in Mesoamerica for much of the first millennium—to the north.¹⁶ Though the reason is unknown, Monte Alban's population began to slip into decline by the end of the Classic period, and by the Postclassic it was abandoned, yet still visible from the valley floor—a lofty, ancient sentinel over the valley it once controlled.¹⁷ Monte Alban continued to be used for ritual purposes long after it was abandoned, most likely due to its past political might or lingering reverence for the site after the Mixtec moved into Zapotec settlements

¹⁵ John M. D. Pohl and Javier Urcid Serrano, "A Zapotec Carved Bone," *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 67, no. 2 (2006): 225.

¹⁶ Kim N. Richter, "Bright Kingdoms: Trade Networks, Indigenous Aesthetics, and Royal Courts in Postclassic Mesoamerica," in *Golden Kingdoms: Luxury Arts in the Ancient Americas*, ed. Joanne Pillsbury (The J. Paul Getty Museum and The Getty Research Institute, 2017), 105.

¹⁷ Peter Mathews, "Monte Alban," in *Encyclopedia of Archaeology: History and Discoveries*, ed. Tim Murray (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2001), Credo Reference, https://search-credoreference-com.ezproxy.lib.uh.edu/content/entry/abcarch/monte_alb%C3%A1n/0.

in the surrounding valley during the Postclassic. After the fall of Monte Alban, the practice of reuse of ancient or even ruined sites had been common in the Oaxaca region for centuries.¹⁸

Built in several phases of growth beginning in the Preclassic period, Monte Alban was built around a very large, oblong plaza atop an artificially leveled ridge (fig. 5). The plaza is oriented north to south with colossal platforms on either end, connected to the plaza by impressive staircases. The east and west sides are bordered by smaller platforms for temples, a ball court, and the palaces of nobility, and a central row of platforms would have supported ceremonial buildings.¹⁹ Many of the buildings have a distinctive architecture, consisting of raised stone platforms with steeply slanted walls, wide central staircases framed by balustrades. The terraced slopes surrounding the hilltop plaza once supported the residences of up to 25,000 inhabitants.²⁰ Over 170 underground Zapotec tombs have been found all over Monte Alban. The Zapotec are known to have buried their dead in family crypts beneath their homes— furnishing their tombs with a lavishness corresponding to the status of their houses— and such is certainly the case at Monte Alban.²¹ Some of the richer tombs directly associated with noble houses are built underneath elite residential structures with sophisticated architectural features, fine

¹⁸ Arthur A. Joyce, Laura Arnaud Bustamante, and Marc N. Levine, “Commoner Power: A Case Study From the Classic Period Collapse on the Oaxaca Coast,” *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, 8, no. 4 (December 2004): 371; William D. Middleton, Gary M. Feinman, and Villegas Guillermo Molina, “Tomb Use and Reuse in Oaxaca, Mexico,” *Ancient Mesoamerica* 9 (1998): 133.

¹⁹ Jorge R. Acosta, “Preclassic and Classic Architecture of Oaxaca,” in *Archaeology of Southern Mesoamerica*, Pt. 2, vol. 3, Handbook of Middle American Indians (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1965), 828-831.

²⁰ Coe and Koontz, *Mexico*, 131.

²¹ Charles S. Spencer and Elsa M. Redmond, “A Late Monte Albán I Phase (300-100 B.C.) Palace in the Valley of Oaxaca,” *Latin American Antiquity* 15, no. 4 (December 2004): 443.

ceramics, and splendidly muraled walls (fig. 6).²² Tombs 104 and 105, famous for their murals, represent some of the finest examples of elite Zapotec family crypts (fig. 7).

However, though they would opportunistically repurpose one of these family palace crypts, Mixtec elite burial practices differ from those of the Zapotec. Mixtec elites prefer to inter their ancestors in somewhat remote burial shrines, deliberately far away from their homes, where the sacred dead could be watched over by a venerated oracular priest. This oracle would also act as an intercessor should Mixtec elites need council with their ancestors, who, as previously noted, were worshipped as gods. Tomb 7 is located some distance from the city's central plaza, near tomb 105 on the slopes northeast of the enormous Northern Platform (see fig. 5). Tomb 7 and Tomb 105 share a smaller ballcourt between them which may have been visible to the Mixtec at the time of Tomb 7's interment. This, along with the shrine's more convenient location—it is not quite as far from Mixtec settlements on the valley floor as the main plaza—may have presented an attractive compromise for Mixtec elites, who wished to honor their dead with a suitably grand tomb, but would need to visit it reasonably often for ritual use.

Tomb 7: Preliminary Notes

The goldwork of Tomb 7 is accompanied by works in silver, gold-silver alloys, elaborate turquoise mosaic, and an incredible inventory of carved precious stones, shell and bone, making this tomb the most lavishly interred at Monte Alban.²³ The Mixtec reopened the Zapotec chamber in the Postclassic period, removed the original occupants, and replaced them with approximately nine individuals. The word “approximately” is

²² Spencer and Redmond, “A Late Monte Albán I Phase Palace,” 132.

²³ Richter, “Bright Kingdoms,” 105.

used here— and elsewhere in the literature— because there has been some difficulty in attributing the bones to the individuals that they once were. Caso found that all of the skeletons were incomplete, and only sections of the bodies were still assembled in anatomically correct positions.²⁴ The human remains were in such a scattered and incomplete state that only 5 individuals could be substantially accounted for. Supernumerary bones not belonging to these 5 individuals make up the rest of the human remains.²⁵ Caso identified the principal occupant— designated “Skeleton A”— as male.²⁶ We will return to the crucial question of the gender identity of this figure below.

When dealing with ancient sites, one will always come across difficulties in the reconstruction of the historical narrative surrounding a place; natural degradation, the absence of historical data, and subsequent human intervention are all frequent obstacles that can distort or obscure our understanding of past events, to name only a few. Tomb 7 is no exception to this, and its peculiar difficulties arise when trying to ascertain the function of the tomb, who it was dedicated to, and the identity of its occupants. The human remains within Tomb 7 are exceedingly disarticulated and incomplete. More than half of the bones lie in a jumbled heap across the tomb’s first chamber. None of these were found to be in anatomical position, and some individuals are represented by only one or two bones.²⁷ Some of the bones present in this mass were used as ornaments, complicating the matter further.²⁸ Skeleton A contains bones from up to three individuals,

²⁴ Alfonso Caso, *El Tesoro de Monte Alban*, Memorias Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia 3 (Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1969), 275.

²⁵ William D. Middleton, Gary M. Feinman, and Villegas Guillermo Molina, “Tomb Use and Reuse in Oaxaca, Mexico,” *Ancient Mesoamerica* 9 (1998): 302.

²⁶ Coe and Koontz, *Mexico*, 186.

²⁷ Middleton, “Tomb Use and Reuse in Oaxaca,” 303.

²⁸ Caso, *El Tesoro de Monte Alban*, 64, fig. 42.

and the cranium shows signs of genetic abnormalities (Paget's Disease) that not only causes facial deformities, but can affect bone density—one of the aspects taken in to consideration in the sexing of human remains.²⁹

Issues such as those outlined above present intriguing questions, but also frustrating roadblocks in the investigation of the past. In an attempt to circumvent these obstacles, many archaeologists and art historians turn to an examination of the grave goods in order to shed light on the function of Tomb 7, who was buried there, and their cultural significance to the Mixtec.

The Tomb 7 gold hoard, along with the human remains and other materials, are some of our strongest evidence for elite Mixtec iconography. For this reason, it may be helpful to go over both the burial contents and the iconography of the interred gold and other elite objects in significant detail. In the paragraphs below I establish the elite context of the burial, describe the general burial contents, and then focus more carefully on several key objects and their iconography.

Tomb 7: Analysis

Tomb 7 takes the form of an approximately 4-6-foot-wide hallway situated underneath the remains of an elite residence (fig. 8). The rectangular construction of the tomb is divided into an antechamber near the entrance, a small secondary chamber, and a longer principal chamber extending west from there. Short, narrow passageways connect the rooms. Because the Mixtec interment is contained within the last two rooms, we will concern ourselves with this area. If one were to join Caso—who tunneled into the tomb

²⁹ McCafferty and McCafferty, "Engendering Tomb 7," 144.

from the north— on his initial exploration of the tomb in 1932, the first thing that you would notice would be the scattered fractional remains of several unidentified individuals, strewn across the floor of the smaller chamber (see fig. 9 for the location and position of human remains in Tomb 7). In the light of your flashlight, hundreds of gleaming objects would wink from amongst the bones: in gold there would be glittering beads, heavy necklaces fringed with bells, bracelets, and a diadem, complete with a golden feather— earspools of jade, obsidian, and rock crystal, tiny pearls, jade, as well as miniscule plaques of turquoise, pearl and shell— the remnants of an elaborate mosaic, whose wooden base had long since rotted away.³⁰ In seemingly equal number to the bones, the floor would be littered with precious objects, some of exquisite workmanship (see fig. 10 for positions of some items noted here, as well as general locations of objects catalogued by Caso). Against the southwest corner of the room, near the passage into the next chamber, you would see a human skull, turquoise mosaic still clinging to the facial bones (fig. 11). Wide, circular eyes made of shell would stare back at you from the eye sockets, and an elliptical stone in the form of a flint knife would protrude from the nasal cavity, forming an ersatz nose. Moving towards the passageway into the main chamber, you would need to be extremely careful to avoid disturbing the substantial amount of human bones—which represent over half of the human remains within the tomb— which are most thickly clustered in the narrow passage and just before it.³¹ Among these you may notice five lower mandibles leading from the center of the doorway towards the northeastern wall of the chamber, perforated at the joint and still showing traces of red

³⁰ Alfonso Caso, "Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America," *National Geographic*, July 1932. 498.

³¹ Middleton, Feinman, and Villegas, "Tomb Use and Reuse in Oaxaca, Mexico," 303.

paint (fig. 12). Caso and others believe these to have been an example of human remains used as ritual ornamentation; once painted brilliant red, they would have been strapped to the face of the wearer to simulate a skeletal lower jaw.³² Even if you did not notice the buccal masks amongst the jumbled mass of bones, you would with certainty notice a large gold pectoral displaying this motif, directly in the center of entrance to the passage (fig. 13). With a rectangular composition, the pectoral displays the grinning visage of a personage with a skeletal lower jaw, a gigantic floral headdress and helmet in the stylized form of a serpent's open mouth, and two broad plaques where the chest and shoulders would be, upon which are elaborate symbols in tubular relief. If you were familiar with the as-of-yet misattributed Mixtec codices as Caso was, then you would recognize these symbols as dates.

As you enter the second chamber of the tomb, more riches would be revealed: hundreds of objects in gold and precious stone litter the chamber floor, again intermingled with bones. You would notice the incomplete remains of one individual within a ring of stones in the chamber's north-east corner— this is “Skeleton N” one of the five skeletons in the tomb which were complete enough to be named. Directly in front of you are the confused, also incomplete remains of Skeletons B, C and D, strewn across a line of stones and leading up to but stopping short of the main occupant, Skeleton A. A line of stones delineates the space of Skeleton A from that of B, C and D, which consists of the breadth of the chamber's western end. Skeleton A, though still notably incomplete, is the most complete of all the individuals buried in Tomb 7.³³ In fact the collection of

³² Caso, *El Tesoro de Monte Alban*, 61.

³³ Sharisse D. McCafferty and Geoffrey G. McCafferty, “Engendering Tomb 7 at Monte Alban: Respinning an Old Yarn,” *Current Anthropology* 35, no. 2 (April 1994): 152.

bones designated as Skeleton A contains many skeletal redundancies— including a female mandible— leading some to believe that Skeleton A represents a composite of up to three individuals.³⁴ Immediately behind Skeleton A are twelve small segments of intricately carved bone, resembling tiny versions of the weaving battens used by weavers across Mesoamerica (fig. 15).³⁵ Though it would be difficult to notice by flashlight, small clay spindle whorls, their distinctive wooden spindles ostensibly rotted away, can also be seen near and around Skeleton A (fig. 14).³⁶

The amount and splendor of the grave goods interred in Tomb 7, as well as what appears to be a sizable entourage buried along with Skeleton A suggest the elite status of the individual. For comparison, commoner graves in Oaxaca are not known to contain items of fine workmanship, and often lack grave goods altogether.³⁷ The gold, bone, and other precious objects found within Tomb 7 are elaborately carved, incised and otherwise furnished with peculiar imagery. The style and content of this imagery matches that found in the famed Mixtec codices, the illustrated legacies of Mixtec elites. The iconography found on the burial goods of Tomb 7 is directly connected to Skeleton A, an ostensibly elite individual. The connection between the iconography of the goldwork and the sacred dead in Tomb 7 represent one of the most potent examples of an elite Mixtec iconography, therefore the identity of the interred individual as well as the iconography of the gold objects warrant investigation. Furthermore, because the elite iconography in

³⁴ Middleton, Feinman, and Villegas, “Tomb Use and Reuse in Oaxaca, Mexico,” 302.

³⁵ McCafferty and McCafferty, “Engendering Tomb 7,” 146.

³⁶ McCafferty and McCafferty, “Engendering Tomb 7,” 174.

³⁷ Nancy Gonlin and Jon C. Lohse, *Commoner Ritual and Ideology in Ancient Mesoamerica* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2016), 200.

the goldwork of Tomb 7 can be traced back to the codices, we have a situation similar to a “Rosetta Stone” for iconography in Mixtec goldwork.

Tomb 7: Interpretations

Caso, basing his hypothesis off of the identification of a male principle occupant with facial deformities, identified the tomb as a shrine to Xolotl, the Postclassic god of monsters. A depiction of Xolotl in the Codex Telleriano-Remensis shows the god with spindle whorls in his headdress (fig. 17), which Caso took as explanation for the admittedly female coded whorls in the tomb.³⁸ He would also assign male identities to figures depicted in the grave goods, notably a golden pectoral that Caso believed was a representation of the great Mixtec lord 5 Lizard.³⁹ Caso did not identify the carved bone implements found with Skeleton A as battens, instead referring to them as “sheets with pointed ends”.⁴⁰ However, he does recognize the wealth of iconographic content in their inscriptions, and the distinctive style of the imagery.

Early in his investigation of Tomb 7, Caso was able to differentiate the style of the carvings on the objects with in Tomb 7 from those of the Zapotec. He was familiar with Zapotec archaeology from other sites in the Valley of Oaxaca, and was able to identify the art style at Monte Alban.⁴¹ He made comparisons between the inscriptions on the bones and goldwork of Tomb 7 to Zapotec imagery found in paintings from other Tombs at Monte Alban (see fig. 6 and 7), such as 104 and 105, as well as carved stone

³⁸ McCafferty and McCafferty, “Engendering Tomb 7,” 148.

³⁹ Alfonso Caso, “Lapidary Work, Goldwork, and Copperwork from Oaxaca,” in *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 3 (Austin, Texas: Univ Of Texas Press, 1965), 925.

⁴⁰ Caso, *El Tesoro de Monte Alban*, 179.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 231.

stelae and urns from the site, and found them to be in a visibly different style, with a distinct form of writing and calendar.⁴² Zapotec items were also found in and around Tomb 7; a small antechamber of the tomb contained some clay vessels and the stone that sealed the tomb bore Zapotec inscriptions (fig. 20). This helped Caso to ascertain that the Mixtec reused a tomb that was already occupied by a Zapotec burial.⁴³

As Sian Jones relates, establishing ethnicity through stylistic differences in material culture is fraught with theoretical problems.⁴⁴ Luckily, Caso was able to rely on practical knowledge to suggest that Tomb 7 was most likely Mixtec. The practice of metallurgy in Mesoamerica was not widespread until 1100 CE, about 300 years after Monte Alban was abandoned by the Zapotec.⁴⁵ There were Spanish accounts of Mixtec gold in Oaxaca from the 16th century, so Caso knew that the iconography on the objects in Tomb 7 must be Mixtec.⁴⁶ The distinctive Mixtec year sign, is a particularly instructive example of this. This symbol, also referred to as the A-O sign, is clearly represented on a golden pectoral in Tomb 7 (fig. 18). The Mixtec glyphs are clearly distinct from the Classic Zapotec year signs, as well as Aztec year signs (fig.19).

At this time, though they were already known to Caso and the scientific community, the volumes that would come to be known as the Mixtec codices were thought to be Aztec creations. Caso recognized the imagery on the carved objects of Tomb 7 from his study of the codices, which allowed him to identify the texts as Mixtec

⁴² Ibid., 234-235.

⁴³ Caso, *Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America*, 512.

⁴⁴ Sian Jones, *The Archaeology of Ethnicity: Constructing Identities in the Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 1997), 119-127.

⁴⁵ John M. D. Pohl and Javier Urcid Serrano, "A Zapotec Carved Bone," *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 67, no. 2 (2006): 232.

⁴⁶ Caso, "Lapidary Work, Goldwork, and Copperwork," 915.

creations.⁴⁷ This groundbreaking discovery would allow Caso to identify the places mentioned in the codices as tangible places in Oaxaca. This discovery would lead to others, including the ability to date the events in the codices on the Christian calendar, and establish the fact that the codices contained actual histories of once living Mixtec rulers, rather than mythologies as once thought.⁴⁸

In a reexamination of the grave goods, Sharisse and Geoffrey McCafferty identify a large collection of carved eagle and jaguar bones as weaving battens.⁴⁹ Noting the difficulties in the identification of the human remains, the McCaffertys propose that the weaving implements in the tomb suggest that it was a female space, devoted to the earth-mother goddess complex and celebrating important female leaders, most likely 9 Grass (Cihuacoatl), with a female-gendered primary occupant.⁵⁰ The McCaffertys recount that in previous work they have argued that Mesoamerican weaving tools represent metaphorical equivalents to male weapons and symbols of female power and identity as well as representative of the conceptual link between war/death and fertility/life.

The presence of weaving tools in Tomb 7 have lead Geoffrey and Sharisse McCafferty to propose that Tomb 7 could be dedicated to, if not a biological female, then at least a female gendered individual. McCafferty and McCafferty base the majority of their evidence upon the weaving implements found in the tomb, including the small spindle whorls discussed above and the miniature, blade-shaped items that they identify as weaving battens made of elaborately carved bone (fig. 15). Weaving battens, long, flat bars with pointed ends, would be used by ancient American weavers to separate the

⁴⁷ Pohl, *The Politics of Symbolism*, 6.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ McCafferty and McCafferty, "Engendering Tomb 7," 146.

⁵⁰ McCafferty and McCafferty, "Engendering Tomb 7," 143.

vertical threads on a loom so that the weaver could place the horizontal threads between them (fig. 16).

As is stated by McCafferty and McCafferty in their argument, the act of weaving and the implements involved with the craft are intimately associated with female gender identity in Mesoamerican thought. So much so, in fact, that it seems quite odd that so many of these implements appear to be associated with the male Skeleton A. In Postclassic Mesoamerica, weaving was the women's craft *par excellence*.⁵¹ Early Spanish accounts tell us that Aztec girls were awarded spindles at birth to signify their craft, and taught to weave from the age of four (fig. 21).⁵² Young Aztec men and boys were forbidden by their parents from touching looms or battens.⁵³ Women are known to have been buried with their weaving tools, and several Postclassic graves at Cholula are examples of women buried with spindle whorls and needles.⁵⁴

The craft of spinning and weaving was not only closely tied to female gender identity, it was also symbolically associated with notions of pregnancy, birth, and fertility. The insertion of the spindle into the whorl represents sexual intercourse, and the thread, creating a bulge as it is wound around the spindle, represents the forming embryo.⁵⁵ An Aztec riddle asks, "what is it that they make big with child in the dancing place?" with the answer being the spindle (the dancing place refers to the spinning bowl

⁵¹ Henry B. Nicholson, "Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico," in *Handbook of Middle American Indians: Archaeology of Northern Mesoamerica*, vol. 10 (Great Britain: Univ Of Texas Press, 1971), 421.

⁵² Elizabeth M. Brumfiel, "Asking about Aztec Gender: The Historical and Archaeological Evidence," in *Gender in Pre-Hispanic America*, ed. Cecelia F. Klein (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2001), 66-67.

⁵³ Cecelia F. Klein, "On Engendering Tomb 7," *Current Anthropology* 35, no. 2 (April 1994): 157.

⁵⁴ McCafferty and McCafferty, "Engendering Tomb 7," 149.

⁵⁵ Thelma D. Sullivan, "Tlazolteotl-Ixcuina: The Great Spinner and Weaver," in *The Art and Iconography of Late Post-Classic Central Mexico: A Conference at Dumbarton Oaks, October 22nd and 23rd, 1977* (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1977), 14.

that holds the spindle as it turns, see fig. 22).⁵⁶ As cloth is woven, the fattened spindle loses its girth and is spent, but in turn creates cloth, another symbol of creation, fertility and production. This echoes the conception of life, death and rebirth that is pervasive in Mesoamerica.⁵⁷ John Monaghan has observed the equation of conception pregnancy and childbirth with craft production in the Mixteca specifically— contemporary indigenous ideas that likely have their roots in the Prehispanic past.⁵⁸

Parallel to the close connection between textile production and feminine procreation, battens and spindle whorls are common as diagnostic markers of goddesses' involved with the "Earth-mother-death" complex in art throughout Postclassic Mesoamerica, as the processes of textile production are symbolically linked to the cycle of birth and death.⁵⁹ Weaving implements commonly form parts of these goddesses' costumes, as do fertility and death motifs. Certain aspects of these goddesses often overlap, sometimes to the extent that they can be thought of as different aspects of the same deity.

Cihuacoatl, who is discussed elsewhere in this thesis, is one of the principal deities in the Postclassic pantheon. She is said to have given birth to the stars and planets, the current race of mankind, and the gods. She is the patron of midwives, and a warrior as well; Aztec midwives would invoke her when coaching women through childbirth, as giving birth was analogous to going into battle.⁶⁰ She is usually depicted with a fierce

⁵⁶ Sullivan, "Tlazolteotl-Ixcuina," 14.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ John Monaghan, "Physiology, Production, and Gendered Difference: The Evidence from Mixtec and Other Mesoamerican Societies," in *Gender in Pre-Hispanic America*, ed. Cecelia F. Klein (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2001), 293.

⁵⁹ Henry B. Nicholson, "Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico," in *Handbook of Middle American Indians: Archaeology of Northern Mesoamerica.*, vol. 10 (Great Britain: Univ Of Texas Press, 1971), 421.

⁶⁰ McCafferty and McCafferty, "Engendering Tomb 7," 163; Sullivan, "Tlazolteotl-Ixcuina," 18.

skeletal face, a death motif, and the skirt and *quechquemitl* blouse of fertility gods. She is also commonly shown holding a weaving batten, brandishing the implement like a sword (fig. 23).

Tlazolteotl, a goddess associated with midwives, the fertile earth, sexual impropriety, and regeneration overlaps heavily with Cihuacoatl. She is considered the great mother goddess as well, the spinner and weaver and creator of the cloth of life.⁶¹ She also shares certain combative aspects with Cihuacoatl.⁶² Tlazolteotl wears a headdress of unspun cotton with two cotton wrapped spindle whorls protruding on either side, as well as unspun cotton ear ornaments (fig. 24). She is also associated with renewal and regeneration.⁶³ She wears flayed skin of a captive in the codex Borbonicus, a potent symbol of regeneration in Aztec ritual— of removing the old to reveal the new.⁶⁴

Yet another goddess that makes up part of the earth-mother-death complex, is Xochiquetzal, who in fact is believed to have merged with Tlazolteotl by the Postclassic period.⁶⁵ Xochiquetzal, “Flower feather” is the young and beautiful personification of beauty, fertility, flowers, feasting and pleasure.⁶⁶ Like Tlazolteotl and Cihuacoatl, she was the patroness of weavers, mothers, and female sexuality. She wears a lavish headdress of flowers and quetzal feathers, which at times includes spindle whorls, and she is often depicted holding a batten menacingly, echoing depictions of Cihuacoatl (fig. 25).⁶⁷

⁶¹ Sullivan, “Tlazolteotl-Ixcuina,” 14.

⁶² Nicholson, “Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico,” 421.

⁶³ Ibid., 15.

⁶⁴ Mary Ellen Miller and Karl A. Taube, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya: An Illustrated Dictionary of Mesoamerican Religion* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 188.

⁶⁵ Sullivan, “Tlazolteotl-Ixcuina,” 17.

⁶⁶ Nicholson, “Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico,” 421.

⁶⁷ Sullivan, “Tlazolteotl-Ixcuina,” 18.

Similar between all of these deities are the association with weaving and spinning, but also with birth, the cycle of life, and the fertile earth. This represents a synchronism between these aspects and further establishes the strong association of femininity with the weaving implements found in Tomb 7.

In response to the McCafferty's proposal, Cecelia Klein, who has written extensively about the iconography of Aztec goddesses, reviews the skeletal masks, weaving tools, and the figure represented on the golden pectoral from tomb 7, and recognizes the strong parallels to the Aztec goddess Cihuacoatl. She suggests that, as was the case with Cihuacoatl, Tomb 7 represents a case of a man ritualistically impersonating a goddess.⁶⁸ Klein agrees with McCafferty and McCafferty that Tomb 7 could be devoted to 9 Grass, but acknowledges that the true sex of Skeleton A will remain unknown until testing can be done on the bones. However, because the ties between weaving and femininity in Mesoamerica are well-established, Klein finds their presence here to be strong evidence for a female gendered individual.

Noting that the similarities between Tomb 7 and Aztec art are too strong to ignore, Klein proposes that the skeletal buccal masks of Tomb 7 were worn to impersonate certain principal skeletal faced goddesses, also known from Aztec stone carvings. She suggests that based on the grave goods of Tomb 7, Cihuacoatl, the Aztec counterpart of Mixtec 9 Grass, would be a fitting dedication for the tomb, were it Aztec. Cihuacoatl was depicted with a skeletal face, and also carried a weaving batten (fig. 23). A skeletal buccal mask and weaving batten were known to be necessary elements in the costume of her impersonators. As mother to the stars, the gods, and the current race of

⁶⁸ Cecelia F. Klein, "On Engendering Tomb 7," *Current Anthropology* 35, no. 2 (April 1994): 157.

mankind, Cihuacoatl was a major part of the earth-mother-fertility complex of goddesses in Aztec cosmology, and is associated with beginnings, foundations, and fertility.

However, her skeletal face represents her connection to death, and she known to have a fearsome nature; she holds her weaving batten like a sword.⁶⁹ The conflation of birth and death imagery is common in Postclassic Mexico, where birth, life and death are thought of as a cohesive cycle.⁷⁰

She references the golden “Deaths Head” pectoral found in Tomb 7, noting the possibility that it could depict a female, and also notices the resemblance of the pectorals headdress to those of Aztec fertility goddesses, which are usually described with a year sign. Two Mixtec year signs—indicative of a beginning can be seen on the pectoral. Klein associates this beginning with creation— An appropriate motif for a mother goddess.

Klein wonders about the role of a gender-female of such high status in Postclassic Oaxaca, referencing the McCaffertys’ proposal that Tomb 7 was devoted to the female entity 9 Grass, an exceedingly influential being with a similar costume and skeletal face to Cihuacoatl. While the McCafferty’s reference only her divine role as a fertility goddess, Klein reports that John Pohl, who has written extensively about the Mixtec codices, has argued that 9 Grass represents a position of office that was held by many individuals through the years— an oracular priest of the Mixtec ancestor cult. When depicted in the codices, 9 Grass is consistently shown officiating from a particular shrine. Referred to as the “Skull Cave”, this burial shrine consistently takes the form of a literal skull, with 9 Grass often seated between its grinning jaws.

⁶⁹ Nicholson, “Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico,” 422.

⁷⁰ Pohl, *The Politics of Symbolism*, 78.

The skull shrine of nine grass was purportedly located in the Mixteca, at Chalcatongo, The ancestral crypt of the famed Mixtec leader 8 Deer. Part of the role of 9 Grass was to act as a guardian over the remains, and as oracular intercessor for the Mixtec elites, should they need the council of their revered ancestors. Mixtec nobility would often journey to Chalcatongo to consult with 9 Grass before historic decisions such as marriage, and warfare. Klein likens this role of creation—particularly of political alliances and institutions— to the creative, generative powers of Cihuacoatl.

Taking a step back, Klein returns to the issue of the biological sex of Tomb 7's main occupant, remarking that Cihuacoatl's impersonator— a priest who wore the dress of the goddess, a Skeletal mask, and carried a weaving batten— was a man. The likeness, and the very identity of the goddess made up the ritual uniform of the impersonator, who was a powerful political figure that directly assisted the Aztec head of state, the *tlatoani*. An important aspect of the role of the *cihuacoatl* was the presentation of the title to a new *tlatoani*— a symbolic gesture that represents the Goddess Cihuacoatl bestowing the right to rule on the new leader. This legitimizing role is echoed in the powers of 9 Grass, as will be discussed below.

Mixtec Iconography: The Codices

Though Mixtec still inhabit Oaxaca today, most of what we know about the ancient Mixtec comes from a collection of codices that miraculously managed to survive through the colonial period, avoiding the funeral pyres of heresy where so many volumes of irreplaceable native Mesoamerican knowledge met their ends. As some of Mexico's sole remaining pre-conquest texts, the codices of the Mixtec are of unprecedented wealth

in their scope of knowledge about pre-conquest Mexican society, and are an indispensable guide to iconography across the breadth of Mixtec artwork.⁷¹ In the analysis of the grave goods of Tomb 7, there are few aspects that cannot be investigated through the codices. Although there are notable additions from goldwork and painted pottery vessels, most of what is known about Mixtec iconographic patterns can be found in these books.

Clearly illustrated with bold lines and bright primary colors, the Mixtec codices have been said to have an almost “cartoon-like” art style.⁷² This was wholly intentional, as the Mixtec prioritized clarity of meaning in their paintings above all else. Names based on the birth date of each individual are displayed boldly but without flourish beside the figures that appear in the codices. Portraiture and individualized physiognomy is ignored by Mixtec illustrators; instead great care has been taken to unambiguously and precisely portray the individual’s costume, regalia, adornments, and body paint as signifiers of identity and station.⁷³ The nature of the event taking place in any given scene can also be deduced from the costumes of the actors, for in the codices, the Mixtec are always appropriately dressed.⁷⁴

Mixtec writing is also purposefully simplistic and straightforward; this is done to ensure that peoples outside of the Mixtec language area are still able to grasp the meaning

⁷¹ Coe and Koontz, *Mexico*, 183.

⁷² Robert Lloyd Williams and John M.D. Pohl, *Lord Eight Wind of Suchixtlan and the Heroes of Ancient Oaxaca: Reading History in the Codex Zouche-Nuttall*, 1st ed, Linda Schele Series in Maya and Pre-Columbian Studies (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2009), 21.

⁷³ Nancy Troike, “The Interpretation of Postures and Gestures in the Mixtec Codices,” in *The Art and Iconography of Late Post-Classic Central Mexico: A Conference at Dumbarton Oaks, October 22nd and 23rd, 1977* (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1977), 179; Pohl, *The Politics of Symbolism*, xi.

⁷⁴ Pohl, *The Politics of Symbolism*, 16.

of the text, ensuring maximum spread of information.⁷⁵ The Mixtec were also fastidious with their calendar; dates are clearly displayed frequently in the narrative of the historic episodes in the codices. Mixtec individuals are named based on their birthdate on the sacred 260 day calendar; names usually take the form of a numerical value for the cycle followed by the symbol for the day sign.⁷⁶ Due to the 260 name limit, individuals also have an additional non-calendrical name—really an official nickname—to avoid ambiguity.⁷⁷

The content of the codices consists mainly of genealogies and histories of deified ancestors. The one exception is the obverse of the Codex Vienna, the only surviving text that can be considered mythological in subject. The Codex Vienna pertains to the origin of the Mixtec and the original legitimizing decrees of land ownership and authority by the gods and first ancestors.⁷⁸ These beings and their deeds formed a charter for the royal power of current Mixtec elites, who all saw their power descend from these founders. In addition to the semi-divine founders, these codices also established a Mixtec pantheon, in which the costumes and regalia of many of the identified deities correspond to deities of the greater Mesoamerican Postclassic pantheon.⁷⁹ A note here on the significance of costume and adornment in Mixtec art will lend clarity to further discussions of iconography. As touched upon previously, costume in the Mixtec codices provides context to the activity in which the individual is engaged. Costume can be thought of as a

⁷⁵ Pohl and Serrano, "A Zapotec Carved Bone," 229.

⁷⁶ Nancy Troike, "Pre-Hispanic Pictorial Communication: The Codex System of the Mixtec of Oaxaca," *Visible Language* 24, no. 1 (1990): 78.

⁷⁷ Troike, "Postures and Gestures in the Mixtec Codices," 177.

⁷⁸ John M. D. Pohl, "John Pohl's Mesoamerica: Ancient Books: The Mixtec Group Codices," FAMSI, 2003, <http://www.famsi.org/research/pohl/jpcodices/pohlmixtec1.html>.

⁷⁹ Pohl, *The Politics of Symbolism*, 8

more fine-tuned determination of identity than the individual's omnipresent name glyph, for a costume can reference the separate roles played by a single individual.⁸⁰

It is this intimate association between costume and identity that justifies such intensive scholarly study of the objects of adornment within Tomb 7. Ancient Mexico was subject to strict sumptuary laws; cultural affiliation, authority, rank, and privilege were all conveyed in one's dress.⁸¹ Ritual dress, particularly deity impersonation was widespread and taken especially seriously. The costumes of deities, in prayers as well as in the Aztec codices, are described with the same reverence and exacting detail as their divine powers, indicating that the garments were vital to the figure's identity.⁸²

The heroes and gods of the codices are clearly delineated here, with every aspect of their regalia, costume, and associated objects—and thus their *identities*—visible in characteristic clean line and bright color. These actors are the main characters in the imagery found on the Tomb 7 gold and other objects. It is for this reason that we should pause before the subject matter of these ancient books.

The historic narratives in the codices present the rise, tenure and fall of several rulers. For example, rulers featured prominently in the codices are Lord 8 Deer “Jaguar Claw”, ruler of Tilantongo, as well as one of his rivals, Lady 6 Monkey, ruler of Jaltepec, and her son Lord 4 Wind. As John Pohl has pointed out, during certain periods in the written histories, there are also scores of other characters in addition to these rulers; they appear and disappear within the histories seemingly arbitrarily. Pohl has identified these

⁸⁰ Ibid., 16.

⁸¹ Ibid., 14.

⁸² Ibid.

characters as figures whose presence serves to bolster and maintain the authority of the principle ruler: allies, relatives, and priests.⁸³ He also points out that in traditional societies across the globe, this is typical during times of political strife, which, as mentioned previously, was common between the independent city-states of the Mixtec.

One of these characters, a highly sacred and influential figure, is 9 Grass, who appears not only in the Mixtec pantheon of the Codex Vienna obverse, but also appears to have served as an oracular priestess to the various ruling dynasties.⁸⁴ As can be seen in the codices, 8 Deer, 6 Monkey, and 4 Wind are careful to consult with her before acts that will profoundly affect the course of their respective histories, such as warfare, marriage, and ascension to the throne.⁸⁵

From the episodes that play out in the codices, we can see that oracular priests such as 9 Grass played a vital role in establishing Mixtec legitimacy, especially in times of transition and conflict. Mixtec oracles, of which 9 Grass appears to be a particularly influential example, were the intercessors between living rulers and the divine ancestors. These ancestors passed down authority through decree to Mixtec elites; therefore all matters supernatural overseen by the priestly order are also highly political.⁸⁶ As John Pohl argues, the integrity of Mixtec society relied heavily on its oracle priests, who were the guardians and administrators of the deified ancestor cult, to unify the competing independent dynasties under an overarching tradition of ritual practice and commitment to ancestral shrines. 9 Grass in particular was known to preside over an important burial

⁸³ Ibid., 11.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 69.

⁸⁵ Boone, *Stories in Red and Black*, 98.

⁸⁶ Pohl, *The Politics of Symbolism*, 70.

shrine—the “Cave of the Skull” located at Chalcatongo.⁸⁷ Because of her spiritual and physical access to the ancestors and her influence over multiple kingdoms, at times her authority was equal to or even superseded that of the Mixtec rulers.⁸⁸

Pectoral 167 (Cosmological Pectoral)

Just inside the walls of the main chamber of Tomb 7, a large pectoral was found, elaborately decorated with imagery similar in both style and content to that found in the Mixtec codices (fig. 42). The pectoral is a diagram of the Mixtec cosmos, beginning with the sky, then the sun, the moon, and finally the earth.⁸⁹ The object, which presumably would have been suspended around the neck, is made up of four intricate plaques, each suspended below the previous by interlocking links that allow the plaques to swing in their vertical formation. The lowest plaque supports four strands that dangle independently of one another—each terminating with a pair of tiny bells.

The top plaque takes the shape of a capital letter I, and displays two gods, one adorned with solar, day motifs and the other with night, death themes. The deities are standing in a typical representation of the court used in the Mesoamerican ballgame, and both carry rubber balls—implying that they are engaged in gameplay. Caso asserts that the ballgame is representative of the eternal struggle and reciprocity between day and night, light and darkness, and summer and winter.⁹⁰ This struggle is thought to take place in the vault of the heavens; therefore, the top plaque represents the sky.⁹¹ The next plaque

⁸⁷ Ibid., 72.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 69.

⁸⁹ Caso, *El Tesoro de Monte Alban*, 97.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 95.

⁹¹ Ibid., 96.

down is recognizable as a solar disk with a skull in the center, which represents the sun. Below this, the third plaque displays the elliptical shape of a flint knife with a face, and flames issuing from the mouth. Caso recognizes this as a Mesoamerican symbol for the moon, citing examples in the Codex Vaticanus B, the Borgia Codex, and the frescoes of Cempoala, in Veracruz (fig. 43). The lowest plaque represents the earth, in the form of the gaping, bifurcated jaw of the earth monster, who can also often be seen in Mixtec and other codices (fig. 44).⁹²

The imagery in each section of this pectoral is laden with specific significance. However, most important to this discussion is their near perfect translation from the codices into the medium of goldwork. In the codices, these representations are intimately involved in ceremony and ritual, alluding to a similar ritual significance of these images in goldwork.⁹³

An additional aspect of this pectoral that has intriguing implications for its use are the bells that mark the end of the piece. Bells require the wearer to move in order to activate their sonic properties; their inclusion here suggests that the wearer would be required to move in such a way that the little bells could be heard by others— perhaps in a ritual dance or procession. Regardless, the sound made by the bells would draw attention to the wearer’s movements— implying a performative element in the use of this object. Dorothy Hosler establishes evidence for the specific use of bells in rituals of West Mexican societies— it is entirely possible that these customs were transmitted from the Mixtec in the South. Hosler attests that ritual worship of several major Mesoamerican deities required the sound of bells, which represented the sounds of rain, thunder and

⁹² Ibid., 97.

⁹³ Pohl, *The Politics of Symbolism*, 17.

certain rattling reptiles whose presence preceded rainfall and agricultural fertility.⁹⁴ The connection of bell sounds to fertility rituals has powerful implications for the other artifacts of Tomb 7 as well— it add to the mounting evidence that suggests Tomb 7 was devoted to the earth-fertility-death complex of goddesses that were widely revered in Postclassic Mexico.

Pectoral 26 (Death's Head Pectoral)

Certainly, one of the most splendid and arresting piece of goldwork discovered at Tomb 7 is a large figural pectoral, depicting a lavishly adorned personage with a grisly skeletal jaw and a full set of uniform, exposed teeth. The figure wears a headdress roughly in the shape of a large flattened rectangle, made up of miniscule wires that are looped into a glittering, intricate tapestry of tassels, fringes and floral motifs. In his original assessment, Caso refers to this piece as “*El Pectoral con los Fechas*”, in reference to the calendar glyphs described on a brilliantly reflective bisected plaque in the object's lower register. Although there are competing theories, this costume seems to suggest that the person depicted on the pectoral may be a male priest ritualistically impersonating a goddess— the Mixtec counterpart to the Aztec *cihuacoatl*.

The rectangular construction of the headdress takes up almost half of the composition of the pectoral. Caso recalls that in the codices, large headdress elements such as these are made of folded paper, in an array of brilliant colors.⁹⁵ From the top, two large, sunflower-like floral motifs define the upper corners of the headdress. From these

⁹⁴ Dorothy Hosler, “Sound, Color and Meaning in the Metallurgy of Ancient West Mexico,” *World Archaeology* 27 (1995): 108.

⁹⁵ Caso, *El Tesoro de Monte Alban*, 85.

rosettes, sash-like strips descend toward the figure's shoulders, ending with a band of smooth material tipped with a fine, uniform fringe. Caso says that these "streamers" would have been made of feathers, and the smooth material would have been paper or canvas used to hold them together.⁹⁶ The symmetrical rosettes with extended streamers are separated by two rows of short, bristle-like feathers that project upward. From this tactile background, the pointed snout of a serpent, filled with fine, sharp teeth, projects over the crown of the wearer— fitting it snug on the sides and shading the brow, forming a construction similar to a helmet. Sprouting from the nostrils of the serpent, two antennae-like streamers—slender tail feathers of the Quetzal bird, prized across the Americas for their rich green iridescence (fig. 26) — project in gracefully sloping diagonals towards the upper corners of the headdress before bifurcating themselves, like twin forked tongues. Earspools with projecting serpents are situated on either side of the head, each with two thin ribbons dangling below (fig. 27). The upper half of the figure's face is depicted with a sensitive naturalism, complete with fleshy eyelids and a strong, aquiline nose. In contrast, the lower half of the face is covered by a jawbone mask, attached to the face with thin cords that pass under the septum. Both the upper and lower rows of teeth are bared, giving the individual a grisly, fleshless grin. Below the face, the figure wears three layered necklaces: a plain, unadorned cord, a cord supporting a pendant in the shape of a descending eagle, and a cord adorned with tiny amygdaloid bells. Where the figure's chest would be are two rectangular plaques, which display calendar glyphs in a low, tubular relief.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 85.

Given the depictions from the Mixtec codices, and the fact that several of the objects of adornment worn by the figure of the pectoral can also be found in Tomb 7, it can be taken for granted that the pectoral demonstrates the way these objects would have been worn. This confirms the premise that the mandible masks in Tomb 7 would have been worn in this manner, but necklaces of amygdaloid bells like the one worn by the pectoral are found in Tomb 7 as well (fig.28). It is possible that a headdress similar to the one worn by the pectoral was interred at Tomb 7; if such adornments were constructed of paper and feathers as Caso attests, then they almost certainly would have degraded into nothing quite quickly.

Interpretations of Pectoral 26

Pectoral 26 is quite famous amongst the grave goods from Tomb 7, and has thus been discussed by a number of scholars who interpret its imagery in a number of ways. Caso was interested in the dates found on the broad plaques of the pectoral. One “wing” of the plaque displays the Mixtec year sign embedded with the symbol for wind, and ten small circles which can be read numerically. This stands for the year 10 Wind. The day sign, 2 Flint, can be seen beside the year in the form of a flint knife with two small circles. Thus, the date recorded on the left is day 2 Flint of year 10 Wind. The right wing of the plaque is missing a day glyph, but shows the year 11 House.⁹⁷ The Mixtec were fastidious about dates and calendrical notation, and during the course of their history, there was a calendar reform in which the Zapotec calendar was replaced by the new Mixtec calendar.⁹⁸ Caso’s explanation for the missing day glyph is that the two dates are

⁹⁷ Caso, “Lapidary Work, Goldwork, and Copperwork,” 925.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

the same day in actuality and share the day 2 Flint—2 Flint 10 Wind is the same as 2 Flint 11 House— representing the changeover from the old calendar to the new. The ruler who oversaw this calendrical reform was Lord 5 Lizard (sometimes called 5 Alligator), who also wore a skeleton mask and a serpent cap in the codices. According to Caso, 5 Lizard is therefore the figure represented on the pectoral.⁹⁹

Caso's argument is a strong one, and as a pioneer in the study of Mixtec writing, representation and dating systems, his credibility is monumental, even today. Caso's extensive knowledge of the Mixtec calendar often lead him to rely upon this familiarity to solve interpretive problems. However, what can be learned through a close examination of the iconography or materiality of this artifact? Caso does not address the significance of the golden medium in his assessment, nor does he confront the peculiar combination of death and fertility motifs in the iconography of the pectoral; the large floral headdress is familiar from Postclassic fertility figures and fertility rites, while the fleshless jawbone mask is a death motif.¹⁰⁰ Careful exploration of these other avenues may suggest an alternative interpretation of this particular piece of goldwork.

The McCaffertys, who believe the gender coding of the grave goods to be female, extend this theory to the pectoral, which they think could represent a goddess. The McCaffertys interpret the weaving implements within tomb 7 to be evidence that the tomb represents a female power space. Other skeletal imagery within the tomb such as the mandible buccal masks and the turquoise mosaic skull increase the strength of the connection to the fertility/death complex of goddesses. The buccal mask of the pectoral

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Cecelia F. Klein, "On Engendering Tomb 7," *Current Anthropology* 35, no. 2 (April 1994): 157; Sharisse D. McCafferty and Geoffrey G. McCafferty, "Engendering Tomb 7 at Monte Alban: Respinning an Old Yarn," *Current Anthropology* 35, no. 2 (April 1994): 151.

fits this theme. They suggest that the pectoral's costume is more representative of a powerful female—the skeletal facial imagery resembles that of 9 Grass, and the headdress resembles the one worn by Lady 3 Flint, the fertility deity “Xochiquetzal”.¹⁰¹

Klein also examines the golden “Deaths Head” pectoral, and she notes the possibility that it could depict a female. She recalls the common death motif seen in costume of many Aztec fertility goddesses, namely the great mother Cihuacoatl.¹⁰² She noticed the resemblance of the pectoral's headdress to those of Aztec fertility goddesses which are usually described with a year sign. Two Mixtec year signs, which Klein believes to be indicative of a beginning, can be seen on the pectoral. She associates this beginning with creation—An appropriate motif for a mother goddess.¹⁰³

9 Grass and Cihuacoatl

As mentioned previously, the costume and adornment of the figures in the codices are intrinsic to their identity.¹⁰⁴ 9 Grass's costume is closely tied to her nature and each garment and adornment is laden with symbolic significance. Like the rest of the important figures in the codices, she has a defined set of outfits that change to suit the occasion, as well as a selection of objects that she is associated with; they represent the appropriate gifts to bring when seeking her council, but they are also symbolic of her nature.¹⁰⁵ In most situations she wears the beautiful skirt and quechquemilt—a draped

¹⁰¹ McCafferty and McCafferty, “Engendering Tomb 7,” 151.

¹⁰² Klein, “On Engendering Tomb 7,” 157.

¹⁰³ Klein, “On Engendering Tomb 7,” 157.

¹⁰⁴ Pohl, *The Politics of Symbolism*, 14.

¹⁰⁵ Jill Leslie Furst, “Skeletonization in Mixtec Art: A Re-Evaluation,” in *The Art and Iconography of Late Post-Classic Central Mexico: A Conference at Dumbarton Oaks, October 22nd and 23rd, 1977* (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1977), 214.

triangular blouse— of fertility goddesses. At times, her *quechquemiltl* has a serpent motif along the hem, a representation of her personal name or signifier: “serpent *quechquemiltl*” (fig. 30).¹⁰⁶ These fertility motifs are consistently coupled with skeletal death imagery. The most obvious of these is her face, which is usually depicted as a whole or partially fleshless skull, but 9 Grass’s signature temple takes the form of a giant skull as well, and her name glyph— the calendrical symbol “grass”— is depicted as three blades of grass sprouting from a human jawbone (see fig. 29). This glyph, which shows new life sprouting from the bones of the dead, is incredibly appropriate to the nature of 9 Grass, and underscores the rest of her imagery with perfect simplicity. The combination of fertility and death themes in the many depictions of 9 Grass represents her instrumentality the cyclical Mesoamerican conception of birth and death (fig. 29).

In the previous chapter, it was established that the clothing and regalia of the Mixtec pantheon as established in the Codex Vienna obverse, where 9 Grass makes her first appearance, have clear counterparts in the overarching Postclassic Central Mexican Pantheon. As Pohl observes, the clothing and adornments of the oracle-goddess as well as some aspects of her divine role suggest that she is the Mixtec counterpart to the goddess Cihuacoatl, “serpent woman”. Cihuacoatl shares several foundational costume elements with 9 Grass, all intimately involved with her nature: the serpent motifs, skeletal face, and embroidered blouse and skirt combination associated with femininity and fertility are common between the two deities. Cihuacoatl also often holds a batten, one of the gendered weaving implements found in Tomb 7. Among the Aztec, Cihuacoatl was often impersonated by a male priest in ritual. In Postclassic central Mexico, deity

¹⁰⁶ Furst, “Skeletonization in Mixtec Art,” 215.

impersonation for ritual purposes— of Cihuacoatl as well as others— is well documented, as it was still common practice when the Spanish arrived. Bernardino de Sahagún extensively describes this practice among the Aztec, stating that on the feast days of certain deities there could be several individuals masquerading as specific supernaturals as part of a ritual. Most often the ritual would reach a peak with the sacrifice of the impersonator, who may have been living as the deity for periods as long as a year.¹⁰⁷

‘*Cihuacoatl*’ became the title of a male official in the Aztec court, the military advisor and minister of internal affairs.¹⁰⁸ The *cihuacoatl* was second only to the ‘*tlatoani*’— ‘he who speaks’, master of external affairs and the prime Aztec authority.¹⁰⁹ Though the *tlatoani* was the ultimate authority figure, he is said to have still been dependent upon the council of the *cihuacoatl*, much in the way that the Mixtec rulers would have to defer to 9 Grass before important decisions were made.¹¹⁰ Finally, in yet another parallel, John Pohl has argued that ‘9 Grass’ represented an official position that was filled by a succession of individuals.¹¹¹

Mixtec history is not bereft of powerful female figures, and 9 Grass in particular ranks highly among them. The authority and highly influential role of 9 Grass— the keeper of the sacred dead, intercessor to the ancestors, and revered advisor to Mixtec rulers— may have been bestowed upon an individual, or a succession of individuals who

¹⁰⁷ Miller and Taube, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico*, 76.

¹⁰⁸ Cecelia F. Klein, “Re-Thinking Cihuacoatl: Aztec Political Imagery of the Conquered Woman,” in *Smoke and Mist: Mesoamerican Studies in Memory of Thelma D. Sullivan* (British Archaeological Reports International Series, 1988), 237.

¹⁰⁹ Joyce Marcus, “Breaking the Glass Ceiling: The Strategies of Royal Women in Ancient States,” in *Gender in Pre-Hispanic America*, ed. Cecelia F. Klein (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2001), 330.

¹¹⁰ Klein, “Re-Thinking Cihuacoatl,” 237.

¹¹¹ Cecelia F. Klein, “On Engendering Tomb 7,” *Current Anthropology* 35, no. 2 (April 1994): 157.

impersonated the goddess, assuming her identity.¹¹² It may be tempting to assume that these impersonators were female, and therefore evidence of an official, state-sanctioned tradition of female spiritual authorities among the Mixtec. However, there is evidence to suggest that if 9 Grass were to function as her counterpart, Cihuacoatl, functioned to the Aztec, then in ritual practice she was impersonated by a man.

¹¹² Pohl, *The Politics of Symbolism*, 70.

The Coclé: Golden Graves in Central Panama

The discussion must now turn from the Mixtec of highland Oaxaca, and towards the Coclé of Ancient Panama (fig. 45), who were flourishing at around the same time but in a completely different society and geography. Though many scholars believe that Mesoamerican goldwork is a direct descendant of Panamanian goldwork, there are clear distinctions between the artistic contexts in each case. Unlike the Mixtec, the Coclé have no existing evidence of a writing system. This leaves little info about the social structure of this society. The Spanish do have accounts from the area, but these are usually more interested in acquiring gold or converting the natives than the intricacies of their political systems. Unless one considers the “crude stone columns” unearthed by the Conte family during the earliest phases of exploration at the site in 1928, there is no monumental sculpture that exists; there is scarcely any evidence of architecture at all. However, early Spanish accounts describe large domestic structures made of cane poles, topped with ceramic ornamentation.¹¹³ Some of these structures were said to have elaborate interiors with carved ceilings and decorated floors, especially those belonging to leaders.¹¹⁴ Unfortunately, in an area that is known for seasonal flooding and intensely acidic soils, these structures have vanished without a trace.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Pamela Hearne, “The Story of the River of Gold,” in *River of Gold—Precolumbian Treasures from Sitio Conte*, ed. Robert J. Sharer and University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia: University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, 1992), 16.

¹¹⁴ Mary W. Helms, *Ancient Panama: Chiefs in Search of Power* (Austin, Texas: UT Texas Press, 1979), 9-10.

¹¹⁵ Olga F. Linares, “Ecology and the Arts in Ancient Panama: On the Development of Social Rank and Symbolism in the Central Provinces,” *Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology* 17 (1977): 34.

Mary W. Helms has reconstructed a thoroughly realized hypothetical ancient Panama, basing her assertions on accounts of conquest-era Spanish chroniclers in conjunction with ethnographies of contemporary indigenous tribes of the area. Helms establishes a social structure consisting of many small, independently governed polities, that despite being tightly packed into Panama's limited landmass, control a diverse selection of resources due to the isthmus's wide variances in climate and terrain.¹¹⁶ The disparity in resources drove the chieftains of the separate polities to compete for control, resulting in almost constant warfare, forging and dissolution of alliances and other political intrigues.¹¹⁷ Not quite chiefdoms, ancient Panamanian life was organized into ranked societies with "open" power structures— though power was passed down through lineage, it could be lost through competition with other high status individuals.¹¹⁸ Helms proposes that, similar to the Mixtec, ancient Panama had a highly competitive, unstable power structure. This instability, and the constant threats to the power of the ruling class created the need for a legitimizing process to preserve the authority of Coclé chieftains. In Helms's ancient Panama, authority was legitimized through the acquisition of esoteric knowledge. In other words, one's right to rule was determined by how much one knew, specifically, how much more one knew than other competitors. As this special knowledge was a scarce good— analogous to adornments and precious materials— its display was of great importance in a competitive society.¹¹⁹ For how can one ward off usurpers if this legitimacy is not made obvious? Knowledge by itself as a legitimizing attribute therefore presents a conundrum. If knowledge is not demonstrated or displayed somehow, then it

¹¹⁶ Helms, *Ancient Panama*, 3-4.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 128.

loses its function as a qualifier of authority— but if knowledge is displayed or demonstrated, then others will come to know it, and it is no longer esoteric. To reconcile this paradox, precious objects like the enigmatic works in gold that we see from Sitio Conte would have served as signifiers of esoteric knowledge. The search for the rarest knowledge would lead Panamanian chieftains on distant journeys— from which they would return with exotic “foreign” objects as symbols of that knowledge.¹²⁰

In ancient Panama, much like other Isthmo-Colombian societies, society was structured around a ranked system, which, from highest status to lowest, consisted of: the chief and his family, shamans or priests, a group of lesser chiefs with local authority, warriors, commoners, and then slaves or prisoners.¹²¹ The role of the religious authority— referred to in this thesis as a shaman, although truthfully, at times his role could reach the elevated status of priest— does not fit statically in this pyramid of social status. His authority could exceed that of the chief in certain instances, and in some societies the shaman was also the high chieftain.¹²² The shaman’s authority was directly dependent upon his unique ability to transcend the mortal plane in order to procure knowledge that would benefit his subjects or society in general.¹²³

Helms’ methods for the construction of this hypothetical Panama have attracted some criticism, namely in that a substantial amount of her theories are based on ethnographic data from the San Blas Cuna, a native tribe of Panama that may or may not draw its traditions from the Prehispanic past.¹²⁴ Studies that draw equivalencies between

¹²⁰ Ibid., 142.

¹²¹ Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Goldwork and Shamanism*, 66.

¹²² Helms, *Ancient Panama*, 89-90.

¹²³ Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Goldwork and Shamanism*, 66.

¹²⁴ Olga F. Linares, “Reviewed Work: Ancient Panama: Chiefs in Search of Power by Mary W. Helms,” *American Ethnologist* 8, no. 1 (February 1981): 201.

past and contemporary indigenous societies can be misleading, and should be approached with caution. Despite this, Helms's hypothesis still forms the most complete picture of ancient Panama by far, and provides satisfying explanations for some of the most perplexing and frustrating aspects of the archaeology of the region. Particularly, Helms's model emphasizes the legitimization of authority through the acquisition of luxury items from distant sources. If it is given that Coclé leaders were buried with the trappings of their power, this model explains why so many styles of goldwork are found in Coclé elite burials. As Helms attests, sources for many of the finer points of ancient Panamanian thought are sparse at the very best. For this reason, many studies take a broad approach which informs upon the greater Isthmo-Colombian Area (fig. 31). Though there were certainly distinctions between these societies, the overlap in societal structures and cosmological thought was significant across this relatively geographically compact culture area, and broad studies such as this are quite useful when constructing a view of the Coclé of ancient Panama.

Sitio Conte- the River of Gold

The Panamanian soil corrodes human remains— so much so that often little is left except for the large quantities of pottery and the gold that elite individuals once wore. In fact, just about all that are left of the Coclé are their large cemeteries. One of these, often considered “paradigmatic” in the archaeology of the Isthmo-Colombian Area, is Sitio Conte. Sitio Conte lies about ten miles inland from the Pacific coast, along the eastern bank of the Rio Grande de Coclé. The site takes up about eight acres of the property of

the Conte family, who uses the land for cattle.¹²⁵ The surrounding terrain, at about 61 meters above sea level, has been described as ‘tropical savanna’: flat, grassy plains bordered by a small range of low hills to the north (fig. 32).¹²⁶ During the dry season, these plains bake in the hot equatorial sun, but during the rainy season, the Rio Grande has a tendency to flood the surrounding plain, causing it to alter course.¹²⁷ Because of the close proximity of the site to the Rio Grande, this shift in the river’s course would cause it to pass through the area of the necropolis, corroding the soil until it eventually intersected with a burial. The contents of the grave, including the gold and polychrome pottery that made up the grave goods of the disturbed burial were then washed out into the river and along its banks. Stories of children playing with gold marbles found along the river’s banks go back to the first half of the twentieth century, and items from the area had been exhibited in a show celebrating the completion of the Panama Canal in 1915, which imply that the river opened graves at an unknown part of the early twentieth century.¹²⁸ This part of the site’s history, in addition to an exhibition in 1992 by the Penn Museum of the same name, gives the site its nickname the “River of Gold”.

A particularly severe flood of the Rio Grande de Coclé in 1927 caused the river to saw through more graves, scattering precious objects along its banks, which were collected by locals and sold into local antique shops.¹²⁹ This attracted the attention of the landowners, the Conte family, who investigated the site by digging pits in the area the following year. This effort turned up some stone columns, but was considered

¹²⁵ Peter Briggs, “Pre-Conquest Mortuary Arts and Status in the Central Region of Panama” (Ph.D. diss., University of New Mexico, 1986), Proquest Dissertations Publishing (8709609), 94.

¹²⁶ Briggs, “Pre-Conquest Mortuary Arts,” 94.

¹²⁷ Hearne, “The Story of the River of Gold,” 1.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Briggs, “Pre-Conquest Mortuary Arts,” 95.

unsuccessful by the Contes.¹³⁰ Some of the objects from the 1927 flood—visibly similar to those exhibited in 1915—were brought to the attention of Peabody Museum at Harvard University, who conducted several excavations—first under Henry Roberts in 1930, and then by Samuel K. Lothrop in 1933. These excavations were considered successful with the discovery of a large amount of graves and caches. The University of Pennsylvania followed these excavations in 1940.

The Sitio Conte cemetery consists of an overlapping, unorganized collection of graves that took the form of pits with rounded bottoms which were filled in with dirt. In addition to scores of examples of exquisite polychrome pottery, the Penn and Peabody excavations turned up pendants of bone and resin, sometimes with gold-foil overlay; tooth-necklaces; beads of precious stone at times carved into the shapes of animals; gold beads, nose rings, ear-rods, bracelets and as well as the repousse gold plaques and lost-wax cast pendants that the site is famous for. The plaques (fig. 33), usually circular in form, are usually feature representations of enigmatic anthropomorphic figures in hypnotic patterns.¹³¹ When they feature ornamentation, the plaques are found only with male individuals of the highest status.¹³² In fact, adult males have a higher concentration of golden grave goods altogether, though it must be stated that females were buried with some small gold ornaments.¹³³ The cast gold pendants (fig. 34.), showing forms of

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Richard Cooke et al., “Who Crafted, Exchanged, and Displayed Gold in Pre-Columbian Panama?,” in *Gold and Power in Ancient Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia: A Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks, 9 and 10 October 1999*, ed. Jeffrey Quilter and John W. Hoopes (Washington, D.C: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, 2003), 94.

¹³² Cooke et al., “Who Crafted,” 94.

¹³³ Monica Fenton, “Gender Post Mortem at Sitio Conte” (Senior Thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 2015), University of Pennsylvania Scholarly Commons, https://repository.upenn.edu/anthro_seniortheses/1/, 25.

humans, animals, composite animals, and animal-human hybrids were also found to only have been buried with males.¹³⁴

There are many theories as to the iconography of these items. The recognizable animal types, such as the jaguars, birds, and saurians found in cast gold pendants, are thought to be power animals, revered by Coclé peoples for their attributes. Olga Linares asserts that the most commonly depicted animals in Panamanian artwork were those with attributes which are useful in battle— such as stingers, claws or sharp teeth, hard carapaces, or the ability to see great distances, such as birds.¹³⁵ Animals like these had attributes that the ancient Panamanians, so often engaged in battle, wanted to emulate.¹³⁶ Another theory likens these animals to shamanic familiars; these animals were thought of as spiritual helpers— facilitators of his spiritual abilities. Existing outside of the corporeal realm, these animals cooperated with the shaman in a variety of ways: they could act as messengers or executioners, they could help the shaman cure disease, they could help him achieve the shamanic flight sought through hallucinations, or they could serve as his alter ego— when the shaman would take the form of a certain animal to undergo hallucinogenic “journeys”.¹³⁷ Composite animals, seen in both gold plaques and pendants, are thought to be entities experienced during these hallucinogenic journeys, which will be discussed in greater detail in a following chapter.¹³⁸

¹³⁴ Fenton, “Gender Post Mortem at Sitio Conte,” 34.

¹³⁵ Linares, “Ecology and the Arts in Ancient Panama,” 65.

¹³⁶ John W. Hoopes, “Magical Substances in the Land Between the Seas: Luxury Arts in Northern South America and Central America,” in *Golden Kingdoms: Luxury Arts in the Ancient Americas*, ed. Joanne Pillsbury, Timothy F. Potts, and Kim N. Richter (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum and The Getty Research Institute, 2017), 55.

¹³⁷ Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Goldwork and Shamanism: An Iconographic Study of the Gold Museum of the Banco de La República, Colombia* (Bogota: Villegas Asociados, 2005), 241.

¹³⁸ Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Goldwork and Shamanism*, 241.

Additionally, goldwork found at Sitio Conte appears to include a wide range of styles, some of which can be tied to the area by obvious resemblance to pottery motifs (fig. 35), and some that are clearly examples of goldwork from distant populations.¹³⁹ This could be explained by Helm's theories, mainly that long-distance contacts and esoteric knowledge were sought to legitimize authority, and exotic goldwork served as a symbol of these things. Whatever the motivation, these foreign objects certainly establish the presence of long-distance trade networks.¹⁴⁰

Gold and Ritual

Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, in a vast assessment of the Colombian goldwork housed at the Banco de Republica in Bogota, establishes a theory that connects the imagery of goldwork to shamanism. Shamanistic ritual in Colombian tribes associates the glitter of gold, directly related to the light of the sun, to the sowing of seeds, hunting, and harvesting fruit, all powerful symbols connected to the genesis of life.¹⁴¹ Indigenous tribes associate these themes strongly with maleness.

Reichel-Dolmatoff's iconographic assessment, though focused on Colombia, applies easily to ancient Panamanian goldwork for two reasons. Firstly, burials in Coclé necropoli often contain adornment of styles endemic to a wide range of locations across the Isthmo-Colombian area, which, as mentioned previously, would have served as representations of the esoteric knowledge gave authority figures their right to rule. As it

¹³⁹ Warwick Bray, "Sitio Conte Metalwork in Its Pan-American Context," in *River of Gold--Precolumbian Treasures from Sitio Conte*, ed. Pamela Hearne, Robert J. Sharer, and University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia: University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, 1992), 33.

¹⁴⁰ Cooke et al., "Who Crafted, Exchanged, and Displayed Gold in Pre-Columbian Panama," 104.

¹⁴¹ Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Goldwork and Shamanism*, 31.

happens, much of the imagery in the goldwork examined by Reichel-Dolmatoff in his iconographic analysis can also be found in Coclé graves, potentially due to Panamanian shaman-chiefs taking journeys to Colombia to obtain esoteric knowledge. Exotic goldwork acquired from Colombia instantiated the long-distance voyage and the knowledge obtained there.¹⁴² Furthermore, throughout her hypothesis Helms suggests that ancient Panama and Columbia may have had a common socio-religious belief system, with Panamanian authority figures looking to authorities in certain Columbian centers as mentors in esoteric teachings.¹⁴³

To ancient societies in the Isthmo-Colombian area, the weight, yellow color, and light reflecting qualities made gold a ritualistically potent medium.¹⁴⁴ Gold seemed to be a conduit for the concentrated light of the sun, as it appeared to have the ability to cast yellow light when exposed to sunlight.¹⁴⁵ The sun, which stimulates the growth of crops and is responsible for all life, was thought of as a creative, fertilizing, phallic force. Sunlight's effect upon the earth was thought to have a similar function to that of semen in sexual reproduction, with the earth as a womb and growing crops representing the life resulting from this union.¹⁴⁶ Some indigenous accounts attest to the ability of the sun to "charge" gold with ritualistic power, even acting as a "divine phallus" to "impregnate" the gold with energy.¹⁴⁷

Reichel-Dolmatoff has studied the tribes of Colombia extensively, particularly the Kogi tribe. The Kogi, who trace their lineage back to the Tairona of ancient times,

¹⁴² Helms, *Ancient Panama*, 149.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 145-6.

¹⁴⁴ Hoopes, "Magical Substances," 55.

¹⁴⁵ Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Goldwork and Shamanism*, 34.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

reference the ancient goldwork, goldsmiths and burials frequently in their rituals. During one such ritual, practitioners adorn themselves in gold and masks for hours, and then darken the room and consume a hallucinogen. The room then becomes brightly lit from the hallucinations that are induced, and the gold “begins to shine”. The ritual continues until dawn. Reichel-Dolmatoff believes this ritual to be ancient, and likely of Prehispanic origin.¹⁴⁸

The practitioners of these rituals involving gold would be harnessing the fertilizing, male power of the sun to imbue their rites with sacred energy. The shaman, who was the authority charged with the practice and knowledge of ritual in Isthmo-Colombian Area societies, was the custodian of fertility most of all.¹⁴⁹ He regards the creation and stimulation of life as his primary responsibility and nearly all of his practices are related to this axiom in some way or another. Many rituals are focused on the stimulation of agricultural fertility and the increased procreation of game and other fauna related to food production. The shaman also concerns himself with the fertility of humans— childbirth, pregnancy, and puberty are all subject to shamanic ritual.¹⁵⁰ The shaman is usually male, however regardless of sex the role of the shaman is certainly thought of as a phallic one, having a creative, seminal role that echoes that of the sun. Isthmo-Colombian Area societies believe that the shine of gold, its ability to harness the light of the sun, could transmit the fertilizing, impregnating energy into human beings.¹⁵¹ Therefore, when a shaman clothed himself with gold adornments, he was emphasizing,

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 34.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 46.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 38.

and perhaps concentrating, his fertilizing, seminal, solar abilities, making these golden artifacts fundamental to his practice.

The wearing of gold objects while participating in ritual movements or dances may have helped stimulate or enhance the hallucinations that are vital to the shaman's practice. Gold objects were meant to mimic the effect of sunlight, sparkling through the tropical canopy, or the flickering light of a campfire or domestic torch. When indigenous rituals in contemporary South America involve gold, it is usually in conjunction with firelight or sunlight, highlighting the connection of these elements in indigenous thought.¹⁵² Many Panamanian gold objects have broad, mirror-like elements or rows of dangling plaques (fig. 36) to enhance not only the reflective quality of gold, but also to accentuate the movement of the wearer and emulate a commonly held conception of light that moved as if it were alive.¹⁵³ This glimmering effect, and the dancing movement that it evokes and intensifies would have seemed to imbue the wearer with the glimmer of fire or the sun. Just like the swinging pendulum used by western hypnotists, the flickering light caused by a shimmering object is known to sometimes induce a state of calm and focused meditation. It is even thought to produce hallucinations or visions in the correct circumstances; such phenomena are well documented by neurologists.¹⁵⁴ This hypnotic state may have allowed ancient shamans to breach the veil of the human realm and communicate with ancestors or supernatural entities, or symbolically 'transform' into animals.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 31.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 38.

Ritual Practitioners and Supernatural Communication

Another fundamental aspect of the use of gold in shamanistic ritual is the ancient American idea of “sacred brilliance”. Nicholas Saunders puts forth a theory that relates the reflective or iridescent quality of many substances that are highly prized to cultures across America to the supernatural— beings and realms that are reflective or iridescent themselves.¹⁵⁵ Examples of these materials include quetzal feathers prized in Mesoamerica, the widespread appreciation of iridescent shells, and sacred gold in Panama. The colorful or reflective qualities of these substances were thought to be evidence of supernatural attendance. The realms and beings of the supernatural exhibited the same brilliance as the objects, but were only visible to those with the power and knowledge to see them— Shamans, priests or others who could contact the supernatural through hallucinogenic “journeys”.¹⁵⁶ The reflective ancestors and supernatural beings that inhabit these other realms are the source of all earthly power; Power which, through his exclusive contact with these entities, only the shaman can harness. Gold objects, imbued with the essence of the supernatural, allow the shaman to emulate these powerful beings, and represent his privileged access to these supreme authorities, which he would need to employ in order to influence events in the human realm.¹⁵⁷ In ritual hallucinogenic communications with the supernatural, he would acquire arcane knowledge and techniques. This knowledge could take various forms: recipes for medicines, new rituals, songs or prayers with beneficial effects, or advice to facilitate the

¹⁵⁵ Nicholaus Saunders, “Catching the Light: Technologies of Power and Enchantment in Pre-Columbian Gold working,” in *Gold and Power in Ancient Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia: A Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks, 9 and 10 October 1999* (Washington, D.C: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, 2003), 17.

¹⁵⁶ Saunders, “Catching the Light”, 18.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 22.

resolution of social conflict— but most importantly, this knowledge would make the shaman shine, like the supernaturals that gave it to him. Golden ornaments were physical representations of his sacred power.¹⁵⁸

The spiritual, hallucinogenic journey undertaken by the shaman to acquire arcane knowledge and converse with supernatural beings is a Pan-American concept.¹⁵⁹ The hallucinatory state may be achieved in a variety of ways; traditional substances, sensory deprivation, or deep meditation, can all lead the shaman to the spiritual plane, and the glimmer of gold is thought to stimulate this hypnotic effect.¹⁶⁰

Reichel Dolmatoff asserts that the creatures that are so common in Panamanian art, be they fantastical hybrids (examples can be seen in fig. 37) or simply spiritual versions of earthly animals represent transformations that take place during hallucinogenic journeys, which the shaman sees as the source of his power. If we recall Helms' theory concerning the acquisition of esoteric knowledge, the knowledge gained by the shaman on his spiritual journeys would legitimize both spiritual and political power. This would make the male shaman the supreme authority in Isthmo-Colombian Area societies.

Male Appropriation of Female Imagery

Given the aspects of goldwork and ritual practice examined in the previous chapters, most of the iconography found in the gold objects at Sitio Conte is related to shamanistic practice or visions in some way. Shamanistic transformations, spirit animals,

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Goldwork and Shamanism*, 47.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 38.

and depictions of the shamans themselves make up most of the subject matter of Panamanian goldwork. Shamanic practice, while not exclusive to males in all Isthmo-Colombian societies, certainly appears to be gender-coded as male: the shaman is a phallic, fertilizing force, connected to the sun.¹⁶¹ The shaman's solar power, in addition to his access to supernatural knowledge, find expression in the goldwork that he wears.¹⁶² Despite the strong associations between the shaman, solar, and male concepts in Coclé goldwork, a distinctly female iconography is present at Sitio Conte, in both realistic and highly stylized form. Two figural pendants featuring nude human females have been placed at Sitio Conte, as have two plaques with raised circular bosses, thought to represent breasts.

Two pendants from Sitio Conte are identified by Lothrop depicting nude females with prominent breasts and clearly defined vulvae (fig. 38).¹⁶³ The figures wear headdresses, ear-rods, necklaces and leg-bands, but their bodies are otherwise bare. Leg bands, or "ligatures" could have particular ties to fertility and procreation, a detail discussed further below. Lothrop notes the figures' strong resemblance to Quimbaya statuettes of Colombia.¹⁶⁴

In addition to these, two plaques have been found at Sitio Conte which may depict stylized female breasts (fig. 39). Mark Miller Graham identifies plaques of this type as "mammiiform plaques" (see fig. 40). The smaller of the plaques shows two sets of

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 58.

¹⁶² Saunders, "Catching the Light," 22.

¹⁶³ Samuel K. Lothrop, *Coclé: An Archaeological Study of Central Panama Part 1: Historical Background, Excavations At The Sitio Conte, Artifacts And Ornaments*, vol. 7, Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (Cambridge, Massachusetts: the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, 1937), 165.

¹⁶⁴ Lothrop, *Coclé*, 164.

concentric circles which resemble areolae, and is bordered along the edge by two rows of repoussé bumps. The larger plaque shares the outer border of bumps, but has three rows. In fact, the larger plaque appears to be an elaboration of the smaller in every way. The inner field of the plaque shows seven sets of concentric circles encircling a larger set, but this time the form of the circles has been pronounced to form mounds that protrude from the flat field of the pectoral.

To investigate the significance of this particular iconography, it is essential to reconstruct the context in which they were buried at Sitio Conte, and to whom they originally belonged. Due to J. Alden Mason's notes from the 1940 Penn excavations, we know for certain that one of the mammiform plaques was buried with a male. Due to difficulties surrounding the various excavations of the site, including uneven documentation, the decomposed state of the human remains at Sitio Conte, as well as other problems, the context of the other two "female" objects cannot be established for certain. However, a look at the trends in grave goods as they occur in graves at Sitio Conte, reveals certain patterns that are useful to us here. According to the analysis of grave goods at Sitio Conte given by Peter Briggs and Monica Fenton, gold items are still found with female skeletons, but they tend to be simple in design, and small in both stature and number.¹⁶⁵ With the exception of one female in burial 11, gold items in female graves at Sitio Conte lack representational iconography altogether.¹⁶⁶ Furthermore, large embossed plaques of the type in figure 20 B were only ever found with male individuals of the very highest status.¹⁶⁷ Given the evidence from previous

¹⁶⁵ Cooke et al., "Who Crafted," 136.

¹⁶⁶ Fenton, "Gender Post Mortem at Sitio Conte," 34.

¹⁶⁷ Cooke et al., "Who Crafted," 136.

sections, there appear to be strong connections between large amounts of goldwork and shamanic practice, as these types of adornments would be worn during shamanic rituals and communications with the supernatural.

There is clear evidence of representations of female iconography in Sitio Conte goldwork— but these are owned and worn exclusively by men, who were likely shamans. Why would a culture that associates what Reichel-Dolmatoff refers to as the fertilizing, seminal nature of “maleness” with gold and shamanic practice choose to incorporate emblems of the female into their golden adornment?

Referencing South American creation myths, Mark Miller Graham interprets these instances when males wear female anatomy as “profound efforts to depict a native hermeneutic of immanent creation and fertility” through reference to a mythical male pregnancy and the equivalence of shamanically potent, fertile, white bodily fluids.¹⁶⁸ Other examples of this effort to masculinize fertility are not uncommon in Panamanian goldwork; Graham references pectorals depicting male figures with female breasts.¹⁶⁹ These figures also commonly wear ligatures like those worn by the female figural pendants from Sitio Conte. These leg bindings are still common among indigenous groups. Young boys often wear these bindings until puberty, while women will wear them for their whole life. The tight binding of these adornments, worn just below the knee, can apparently cause the calf to swell into a full, rounded silhouette that indigenous men find to be sexually attractive. Ligatures and swollen calves can therefore be

¹⁶⁸ Mark Miller Graham, “Creation Imagery in the Goldwork of Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia,” in *Gold and Power in Ancient Costa Rica, Panama, and Columbia: A Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks, 9 and 10 October 1999* (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1999), 285.

¹⁶⁹ Graham, “Creation Imagery,” 291.

interpreted as markers of femininity and reproductive fertility.¹⁷⁰ The creation myths of several indigenous groups from the Isthmo-Colombian and Amazonian culture areas tell of a time before women, when men reproduced through copulating with and impregnating each other's calves. In these mythical narratives, women are secondary or even absent from the biological processes of procreation, and the primacy of male fertility is asserted.¹⁷¹ In these myths, it is men's fertility that created women. The complementary concept expressed in the mother-father creator couple of Mesoamerican myth is absent in these societies— here the male is solely responsible.¹⁷²

Graham attests that such myths demonstrate the relocation of the inherently female ability to give birth onto the male, and suggests that the relocation of breasts and the “milky fertility” of breastmilk that they symbolize onto males is a parallel action. Repousse plaques with breast shapes embossed into them are common in several stylistic variations, often in paired formation on plaques that would hang over the chest (fig. 40). In the orientation seen on the Sitio Conte plaque, the breast shapes form a quincunx, a shape associated with the Milky Way— perhaps suggesting a sort of cosmic fertility.¹⁷³ Graham asserts that this finalizes the male subsumption of biological fertility, stating “The 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.”¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 287.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 290.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 291.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 293.

Male shamans would repurpose the fertility of females in order to supplement their shamanic potency. Women alone have the ability to produce life-sustaining breast milk— a power that isthmian societies find to be particularly spiritually potent. Ancient Americans observed that through breast-feeding, nourishment comes directly from the body of the mother, and yet she herself is not diminished. Men cannot possess this power, which gives women an advantage over them— that of inherent fertility. This, and women's power to give birth, represents an exclusive fertile power that threatened the role of the male shaman as the main agent of fertility in indigenous society. Gold, imbued with the male, solar, fertilizing power of the sun, would therefore be the perfect medium for the male shaman to appropriate the fertile power of women's breasts. Goldwork bearing female anatomy such as mammary pectorals and nude female pendants would be worn by the shaman, completing his universal control of fertility in all forms. As discussed in a previous chapter, the Coclé of Sitio Conte forbade women to wear elaborate or large pieces of goldwork of any kind, including that decorated with female imagery. Perhaps this is due to the fear that a woman, with the combined power of her inherent fertility and the power of gold ornament, would interfere with the male shaman's authority.

Comparison and Analysis

In the introduction to “A Precolumbian World”, Jeffrey Quilter makes the point that no matter where one stood on what would be the American continent before 1492, the rising of the sun stirred people from their beds, and the grinding of various starches for the day’s food began. Protein was less mundane, taking the form of local fauna, whether wild or domesticated. Sandals and textiles provided separation between bodies and the elements. Less utilitarian objects of adornment take on myriad forms and mediums, but they are ubiquitous in Ancient America nonetheless.¹⁷⁵ Materials were prized based on scarcity and brilliance; the brighter and more difficult an object was to attain or refine, the more likely it was to be highly prized, or reserved for a privileged few. Communities of people across Ancient America were largely organized into an uneven duality: a favored few above, with a more populous common segment of the population below it. The number of layers varied from one society to another, but the complementary participation of both upper and lower— in all of life’s essential processes— was required to preserve order. This reciprocity was echoed in the conception of life and death. The idea that human existence is cyclical— that life begets death begets life, and so on— was pervasive in the Americas.¹⁷⁶

Quilter’s underlying motive in pointing out all of these Pan-American similarities is that though it is currently unpopular in scholarly practice to construct classifications based on broad patterns of beliefs and practice, it is in this manner that the framework for

¹⁷⁵ Jeffrey Quilter, “Introduction,” in *A Pre-Columbian World*, ed. Jeffrey Quilter and Mary Ellen Miller (Washington, D.C: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library & Collection : Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2006), 8.

¹⁷⁶ Quilter, “Introduction,” 9.

the study of the major culture areas of the Americas— the Andes, the Isthmo-Colombian Area, Mesoamerica, and the Southwest, to name only a few— were developed.¹⁷⁷ These frameworks are still firmly in place, and continue to be valid as well as useful. For there is much we can learn from comparisons between cultures.

It is exactly this approach which this thesis seeks to employ. By examining the similarities between gold working civilizations of two larger culture areas— the Mixtec of Mesoamerica and the Coclé of the Isthmo-Colombian Area— I hope to tease out what can be learned about both cultures, rather than a direct historical connection between the two. Specifically, this thesis seeks to illuminate some of the finer points of the significance of golden adornment in these culture areas.

Despite these concessions, as I state previously, the “artistic revolution” in gold working as well as cultural attitudes toward gold had to have traveled into Mesoamerica from somewhere in the southern parts of the Americas.¹⁷⁸ We know this not only because the earliest examples of worked gold are found in the lower parts of the Americas, but due to the fact that certain smithing techniques and idiosyncratic imagery have changed so little that they can easily be traced back to the traditions of these areas. For instance, the lost-wax technique was transferred into Mesoamerica virtually unchanged, and the flat, bisected plaques that are common on the lower registers of Mesoamerican pectorals are quite visibly a direct descendant of the “frog” type pectorals from the Isthmo-Colombian area (fig. 41).¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 10.

¹⁷⁸ Richter, “Bright Kingdoms,” 105.

¹⁷⁹ Caso, *El Tesoro de Monte Alban*, 81.

Now that the artwork and the societal structure of the Mixtec and the Coclé have been examined, important similarities between the two begin to emerge. The significance of female imagery in goldwork used by male spiritual authorities, the use of gold adornment by these figures in ritual, and their use of a type of ritual “supernatural sight” are all particularly noteworthy aspects. These comparisons could reveal other important connections between the two cultures and speak to a much larger issue: the nature of the relationship between the gold working societies of Central America and the cultures of greater Mesoamerica, as well as the issue of gendered imagery in the construction of systems of authority.

Ritual Use of Gold

The first and most obvious comparison between the Mixtec and Coclé is their penchant for fine goldwork. The attention paid to the crafting of gold objects and their localization in elite burials reveals the ties between goldwork and status, but ethnographic and iconographic studies, such as those undertaken by John Pohl and Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, disclose a potent ritual component to these objects.

Among Isthmo-Colombian societies like the Coclé, gold was ritualistically potent due to its heft, its yellow color and its reflective qualities.¹⁸⁰ The ability of gold to seemingly cast its own yellow light led to association of the metal with the sun in indigenous thought. Sunlight is conceived as a fertilizing element in the creation of life, and is associated with maleness, playing a role similar to that of semen in sexual reproduction.¹⁸¹ A way to look at this could be that the sun impregnates the fertile earth,

¹⁸⁰ Hoopes, “Magical Substances,” 55.

¹⁸¹ Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Goldwork and Shamanism*, 31.

which causes plants to grow. Like the sun, in ancient and contemporary indigenous thought, the South American shaman is the steward of fertility— a phallic, procreative, seminal force that stimulates and presides over the fertility of agriculture and animals as well as the sexually active human population.¹⁸² Rituals commonly concern puberty rites, pregnancy, hunting and sowing seeds.¹⁸³ Thus follows that the golden ornaments of the shaman are of paramount importance to his practice, as they represent his connection to and his role in the impregnating action of the sun. Also intrinsic to the use of gold in shamanistic ritual is the Pan-American idea of “sacred brilliance”; the idea that sacred beings and realms radiate light and are reflective, and all reflective objects are connected to them and therefore sacred as well.¹⁸⁴ The shaman would clothe himself in sheets and ornaments that would glitter and reflect the sunlight, signifying his ability to enter the brilliant spirit realm and commune with glittering beings. In virtually all corners of the American continent, the indigenous shaman’s practice involves the undertaking of spiritual, hallucinogenic journeys that allow him to commune with supernaturals to obtain esoteric knowledge.¹⁸⁵ Hallucinations may be obtained through the use of traditional substances, sensory deprivation, or deep meditation, and in these situations the glitter of gold as it moves in the light is thought to enhance, and even stimulate these visions.¹⁸⁶

The specific ritual use of gold objects to the Mixtec is more difficult to ascertain. No scholar as of yet has taken on the herculean task of establishing a wide scale interpretation of the underlying ideas of the Mixtec gold tradition as Gerardo Reichel-

¹⁸² Ibid., 46.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 58.

¹⁸⁴ Saunders, “Catching the Light,” 17.

¹⁸⁵ Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Goldwork and Shamanism*, 47.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 38.

Dolmatoff has for the goldwork of Colombia. Despite this lacuna in scholarship, the religious and symbolic iconography found in Mixtec goldwork and its use as personal adornment indicate a rich ceremonialism associated with the objects.¹⁸⁷ Costume and adornment have a particularly potent meaning among the Mixtec, and not only as markers of identity and status. As John Pohl and Patricia Anawalt contend, the elaborate regalia of Mixtec elites can even be specific to a particular event.¹⁸⁸ This preoccupation with highly specific costume suggests that golden adornment had a highly specific significance as well. Many of the symbols and figures depicted in Mixtec goldwork can be identified as deities, ancestors, places, and dates that are also found in the Mixtec codices. As John Pohl points out, the imagery of the histories, genealogies, and mythologies depicted in these ancient books is saturated with ceremonialism— Mixtec authorities relied upon symbolism and ceremony to communicate their doctrine.¹⁸⁹ This suggests a similar ceremonial significance when these same images appear in goldwork.

Much of the Mixtec goldwork in museums today was meant to be worn; richly cast finger and nose-rings, necklaces, pectorals for suspending around the neck, and other items of adornment make up virtually all of the Mixtec gold that has been discovered. Among the Aztec, it is known that the use of gold as adornment was restricted to the upper echelons of elite society, and the classic Nahuatl word for the metal (*coztic teocuitlatl*) means “yellow excrement of the gods” strengthening the association with the divine.¹⁹⁰ From the examination of the “cosmological” pectoral from Tomb 7, we see that

¹⁸⁷ George Clapp Vaillant, *Artists and Craftsmen in Ancient Central America* (Detroit: B. Ethridge—Books, 1973), 83.

¹⁸⁸ Pohl 1994, 17.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁹⁰ Julie Jones and Heidi King, “Gold of the Americas,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 59, no. 4 (2002): 59, 5.

it is not uncommon for Mixtec gold objects to include bells, or dangling sections joined by rings. This serves as evidence that the objects were meant to be worn— at least initially— by living individuals, possibly during rituals. The jingling of rows of tiny bells or the fiery glitter of a panel of dangles could only be caused by the movement of a living wearer, activating the object. This suggests a highly performative role for gold objects themselves. There is also evidence to suggest that the sound of bells could have been likened to rainfall and associated with fertility rituals.¹⁹¹

Male Appropriation of Female Imagery in Goldwork

In both of these cases, the shaman and the oracular priest adopt images of female anatomy in the goldwork with which they adorn themselves. This appears to be a strategic symbolic device to harness the power of the female body, the ability to create life (through birth) and sustain it (through breast milk).

The Coclé utilize mammary plaques and nude female pendants to subsume the inherent fertility of the female body, appropriating these qualities for use by the male shaman. The ability of females to sustain life through breast milk is particularly shamanically potent for societies of the isthmus, and rightly so: in no other way can a human provide food for another directly from their own body. All other nourishment must be obtained from outside sources, which can be intermittent and unpredictable, leading to famine and nutritional deficiencies; never is human nourishment so guaranteed as it is with breast milk. Furthermore, men simply do not possess the ability to lactate, giving women an exclusive power— a monopoly on inherent fertility. Combined with the

¹⁹¹ Dorothy Hosler, “Sound, Color and Meaning in the Metallurgy of Ancient West Mexico,” *World Archaeology* 27 (1995): 108.

ability to give birth, the exclusive fertile power of the feminine body must have seemed threatening indeed to the male shaman, who was supposedly the steward of fertility in indigenous life. It seems logical then, that the male, solar, reflective medium of gold be used to repurpose the fertile power held in the feminine form for use by the male shaman. The evidence seems to suggest that among the Coclé of Sitio Conte that women, as a direct threat to the shaman's role as the administrator of fecundity in all forms, would be restricted from wearing feminine iconography, as well as iconography in goldwork in general.

For the Mixtec, birth is a particularly important aspect of the female sex, particularly in cyclical relation to its counterpart, death. This close connection between birth and death can be offered as a suitable explanation of the prevalence of birth-fertility-death goddesses in the Central Mexican Postclassic pantheon.¹⁹² Birth and death are part of the same sequence, which illuminates the encapsulation of these aspects within a single deity. Notable examples include goddesses such as the Aztec Cihuacoatl and her Mixtec counterpart 9-Grass.¹⁹³

It is known with some certainty that the guise of Cihuacoatl was worn by a male priest, who, as a deity impersonator, subsumes her identity symbolically, ritualistically, and perhaps also practically. The similarities between the appearance, associations and roles of Cihuacoatl and 9 Grass seem to suggest that male impersonation of the Mixtec goddess was practiced as well. Most telling of all is the similar active political function in society of both figures. As an oracle, 9 Grass's supernatural sight was vital to legitimizing the authority of Mixtec rulers in times of political instability. Pohl contends

¹⁹² Pohl, *The Politics of Symbolism*, 79-80.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

that “9 Grass” was a position, passed from one individual to another by succession.¹⁹⁴ Similarly, ‘Cihuacoatl’ would become a political title, held by a male priest whose authority was subordinate only to the king himself.¹⁹⁵ In either case, a man subsumes the body of a female goddess, along all of the ritual and mythological potency imbued within her identity and her sex— which, in this case, is the embodiment of the cycle of life and death. This appropriation of the complete female body is similar in both form and function to the practice of Coclé shamans with golden female objects. In both cases, males usurp widely held symbols of the power associated with female deities to carve out their identity in a complex political landscape.

In the Mixtec case the subsumption of female-gendered power is deeper, as the male official appropriates the identity and function of a female entity in addition to her body. However, the representation of the goddess in goldwork, as is suspected in the case of the “Death’s Head” pectoral from Tomb 7 (fig.13), could be seen as an attempt by the male priest to claim ownership of the female power of fertility and creation. The imagery of the pectoral emphasizes many elements of the goddess that are tied to her role as the personification of the cycle of birth and death. The large floral headdress recalls the *meyotli* fertility garments of Aztec goddesses, and the A-O year sign that can be seen on the plaques below the figures face is a common device to refer to beginnings, and thus creation.¹⁹⁶ In addition, her fleshless jaw is a death motif and her serpent headdress ties her to Cihuacoatl, the Aztec “serpent women”. The function of 9 Grass as an oracular priestess could also be a part of her role as a mother-creator goddess. In many

¹⁹⁴ Klein, “On Engendering Tomb 7,” 157.

¹⁹⁵ Pohl, *The Politics of Symbolism*, 65.

¹⁹⁶ Klein, “On Engendering Tomb 7,” 157.

Mesoamerican societies, divination is closely connected to creation. The primary actors in many creation accounts are also diviners, and ritual practitioners of divination often refer to their acts in terms of creation.¹⁹⁷

Supernatural Communication in Ritual Practice

Mixtec oracular priests such as 9 Grass and Coclé shamans both practice a type of supernatural sight as part of their ritual practice. This sight has legitimizing aspects, and is of paramount importance in times of political instability or when a ruler's authority is called into question.

If one recalls Helm's hypothetical reconstruction of ancient Panamanian society, one will remember that competition for authority drove leaders to seek esoteric knowledge to legitimize their right to rule.¹⁹⁸ Though physical journeys were also undertaken to achieve such knowledge, journeys to supernatural realms through trance and the use of hallucinogenic substances was another way to attain arcane wisdom.¹⁹⁹ The ability of the shaman to see into supernatural realms and commune with spirits and sacred animals on these spiritual journeys was an ostensibly endless, consistent, and—through the institution of social norms surrounding hallucinogen use, exclusive—source of the esoteric knowledge. Therefore, it follows that the supernatural sight of shaman-chiefs legitimized existing power structures, though the practice was also undertaken for other reasons.

¹⁹⁷ Miller and Taube, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico*, 79.

¹⁹⁸ Helms, *Ancient Panama*, 126.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

Helms and Reichel-Dolmatoff agree that gold objects were symbolic of esoteric knowledge, whether they represented long-distance contacts attained through physical journeys, or depicted directly the transformation of the shaman during the cosmic flight taken on hallucinogenic journeys.²⁰⁰ Gold objects functioned as visual signifiers of knowledge in Panamanian society, a role that closely connected them with ideas of authority, legitimacy, and ritual practice— specifically supernatural sight.

Much like the Coclé shaman, as an oracle, 9 Grass is able to communicate with the supernatural realm. For the Mixtec, this refers to the great leaders of the past, who become deities upon their death. 9 Grass has the power to legitimize the important decisions of elites in times of transition by handing down approval from deified ancestors. As we can see in the codices, 9 Grass is most often consulted by elites when the order of succession has been interrupted, or could be called into question, as is the case with the rise of 8 Deer and 6 Monkey. 9 Grass is also consulted just before the marriages of powerful elites. Marriage alliance is a known Mixtec strategy for securing power, as this is how they came to cohabitate the Oaxaca valley with the Zapotec. Because of this ability to communicate beyond the mortal realm, in this specific instance the authority of the oracle supersedes that of the ruler.

9 Grass, like the Coclé shaman, holds a monopoly on supernatural sight. Unlike Coclé rulers however, who may obtain legitimizing esoteric knowledge from other sources, Mixtec elites are ultimately beholden to the oracle for legitimacy. Pohl points out the genius of this situation: as the only intermediary between the Mixtec and their deified ancestors, 9 Grass creates a singular Mixtec identity through the reliance on the

²⁰⁰ Ibid.; Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Goldwork and Shamanism*, 149.

funerary cult and stability among the decentralized factions of Mixtec society.²⁰¹ The opposite of this stabilizing effect could be observed in Isthmo-Colombian societies, who continued to war amongst themselves until the colonial period.

²⁰¹ Pohl, *The Politics of Symbolism*, 76.

Conclusion

Taking a broad view, this study illuminates telling similarities between the cultural aspects of goldwork in two distant societies. This provides avenues for further research into the larger issue of the transmission of gold working traditions across the ancient Americas. Mixtec and Coclé societies both associate goldwork with ritual connected to communication with the supernatural. Its use is usually restricted to ostensibly male, high-status individuals with particular abilities concerned with supernatural vision, be they priests, shamans, or oracles. Interestingly, both societies utilize female anatomy to further their goals, whether it be to enhance fertile potency or to appropriate a legacy as the administrator of the cycle of life and death.

What may have at first appeared to be exciting evidence of female power appears to have been a red herring. Both the Coclé and the Mixtec show the use of female bodies in the iconography of their goldwork, as well as their association with creation, death and spiritual potency. However, instead of bestowing the veneration for these processes on living women, this practice represents the relegation of feminine power to symbols and ideological aspects, which can then be used for whatever ends by powerful men.

An analysis of two cultures that use goldwork as a component of ritual costume has led to the discovery of striking similarities in ritual practice: goldwork as an active component of ritual; ancestor worship where by the sacred dead or otherwise supernatural beings legitimize authority through an intercessor— a spiritual authority with the ability to communicate with the supernatural; and the use of gendered imagery to perpetuate

ideologies of dominance, particularly the use of female imagery by male spiritual authorities.

Bibliography

- Acosta, Jorge R. "Preclassic and Classic Architecture of Oaxaca." In *Archaeology of Southern Mesoamerica, Pt. 2*, edited by Gordon R. Willey, 3:814–36. Handbook of Middle American Indians. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1965.
- Blomster, Jeffrey P., ed. *After Monte Albán: Transformation and Negotiation in Oaxaca, Mexico*. Mesoamerican Worlds. Boulder, Colo: University Press of Colorado, 2008.
- Boone, Elizabeth Hill. *Stories in Red and Black: Pictorial Histories of the Aztecs and Mixtecs*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2014.
- , ed. *The Art and Iconography of Late Post-Classic Central Mexico: A Conference at Dumbarton Oaks, October 22nd and 23rd, 1977*. Washington, D.C: Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, 1982.
- Bray, Warwick. "Sitio Conte Metalwork in Its Pan-American Context." In *River of Gold: Precolumbian Treasures from Sitio Conte*, edited by Pamela Hearne, Robert J. Sharer, and University of Pennsylvania. Philadelphia: University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, 1992.
- Briggs, Peter. "Pre-Conquest Mortuary Arts and Status in the Central Region of Panama." Ph.D. diss., University of New Mexico, 1986. Proquest Dissertations Publishing (8709609).
- Brumfiel, Elizabeth M. "Asking about Aztec Gender: The Historical and Archaeological Evidence." In *Gender in Pre-Hispanic America*, edited by Cecelia F. Klein, 57–85. Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2001.
- Caso, Alfonso. *El Tesoro de Monte Alban*. Memorias Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia 3. Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1969.
- . "Lapidary Work, Goldwork, and Copperwork from Oaxaca." In *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, 3:896–930. Austin, Texas: Univ Of Texas Press, 1965.
- . "Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America." *National Geographic*, 1932.

- Coe, Michael D, and Rex Koontz. *Mexico: From the Olmecs to the Aztecs*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2013. <https://www.overdrive.com/search?q=3443567A-6436-4E61-8A0D-4EDAB821D564>.
- Cooke, Richard, Ilean Isaza, Luis Alberto Sanchez, Benoit Desjardines, and John Griggs. "Who Crafted, Exchanged, and Displayed Gold in Pre-Columbian Panama?" In *Gold and Power in Ancient Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia: A Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks, 9 and 10 October 1999*, edited by Jeffrey Quilter and John W. Hoopes. Washington, D.C: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, 2003.
- Drennan, Robert D., H. B. Nicholson, Elizabeth Baquedano, Peter W. Stahl, Eloise Quiñones Keber, Christine Niederberger, Muriel Porter-Weaver, et al. "Mesoamerica, Pre-Columbian." In *Grove Art Online*. Oxford University Press, 2003. <https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T057023>.
- Fenton, Monica. "Gender Post Mortem at Sitio Conte." Senior Thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 2015. University of Pennsylvania Scholarly Commons. https://repository.upenn.edu/anthro_seniortheses/1/.
- Furst, Jill Leslie. "Skeletonization in Mixtec Art: A Re-Evaluation." In *The Art and Iconography of Late Post-Classic Central Mexico: A Conference at Dumbarton Oaks, October 22nd and 23rd, 1977*, edited by Elizabeth Hill Boone and Elizabeth P. Benson, 207–25. Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1977.
- Gonlin, Nancy, and Jon C. Lohse. *Commoner Ritual and Ideology in Ancient Mesoamerica*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2016.
- Graham, Mark Miller. "Creation Imagery in the Goldwork of Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia." In *Gold and Power in Ancient Costa Rica, Panama, and Columbia: A Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks*, 279–99. Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1999.
- Hearne, Pamela. "The Story of the River of Gold." In *River of Gold--Precolumbian Treasures from Sitio Conte*, edited by Robert J. Sharer and University of Pennsylvania. Philadelphia: University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, 1992.

- Hearne, Pamela, Elizabeth P. Benson, Warwick Bray, and Stuart Fleming. *River of Gold - Precolumbian Treasures from Sitio Conte*. Edited by Robert J. Sharer. Philadelphia: University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, 1992.
- Helms, Mary W. *Ancient Panama: Chiefs in Search of Power*. Austin, Texas: UT Texas Press, 1979.
- Hoopes, John W. "Magical Substances in the Land Between the Seas: Luxury Arts in Northern South America and Central America." In *Golden Kingdoms: Luxury Arts in the Ancient Americas*, edited by Joanne Pillsbury, Timothy F. Potts, and Kim N. Richter. Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum and The Getty Research Institute, 2017.
- Jones, Julie. *The Art of Precolumbian Gold: The Jan Mitchell Collection*. Edited by Julie Jones. 1st U.S. ed. New York Graphic Society Book. Boston: Little, Brown and Co, 1985.
- Jones, Julie, and Heidi King. "Gold of the Americas." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 59, no. 4 (2002): 59.
- Josserand, Kathryn, and Karen Dakin, eds. *Smoke and Mist: Mesoamerican Studies in Memory of Thelma D. Sullivan*. Oxford: B.A.R, 1988.
- Joyce, Arthur A., Laura Arnaud Bustamante, and Marc N. Levine. "Commoner Power: A Case Study From the Classic Period Collapse on the Oaxaca Coast." *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, 8, no. 4 (December 2004): 343–85.
- Klein, Cecelia F. "On Engendering Tomb 7." *Current Anthropology* 35, no. 2 (April 1994): 157–58.
- . "Re-Thinking Cihuacoatl: Aztec Political Imagery of the Conquered Woman." In *Smoke and Mist: Mesoamerican Studies in Memory of Thelma D. Sullivan*, 237–77. British Archaeological Reports International Series, 1988.
- Klein, Cecelia F., and Jeffrey Quilter, eds. *Gender in Pre-Hispanic America: A Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks, 12 and 13 October 1996*. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2001.

- Linares, Olga F. "Ecology and the Arts in Ancient Panama: On the Development of Social Rank and Symbolism in the Central Provinces." *Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology* 17 (1977): 1–5, 7–86.
- Lothrop, Samuel K. *Coclé: An Archaeological Study of Central Panama Part I: Historical Background, Excavations at The Sitio Conte, Artifacts and Ornaments*. Vol. 7. Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. Cambridge, Massachusetts: the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, 1937.
- Lujan, Leonardo Lopez, and Jose Luis Ruvalcaba Sil. "Mexica Gold." In *Golden Kingdoms: Luxury Arts in the Ancient Americas*, edited by Joanne Pillsbury, Timothy F. Potts, Kim N. Richter, J. Paul Getty Museum, Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, N.Y.), and Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA (Project). Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum and The Getty Research Institute, 2017.
- Marcus, Joyce. "Breaking the Glass Ceiling: The Strategies of Royal Women in Ancient States." In *Gender in Pre-Hispanic America*, edited by Cecelia F. Klein, 305–40. Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2001.
- Mathews, Peter, and Tim Murray. "Monte Alban." In *Encyclopedia of Archaeology: History and Discoveries*. Vol. 5. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2001. Credo Reference. https://search-credoreference-com.ezproxy.lib.uh.edu/content/entry/abcarch/monte_alb%C3%A1n/0.
- McCafferty, Sharisse D., and Geoffrey G. McCafferty. "Engendering Tomb 7 at Monte Alban: Respinning an Old Yarn." *Current Anthropology* 35, no. 2 (April 1994): 143–66.
- Middleton, William D., Gary M. Feinman, and Villegas Guillermo Molina. "Tomb Use and Reuse in Oaxaca, Mexico." *Ancient Mesoamerica* 9 (1998): 297–307.
- Miller, Mary Ellen, and Karl A. Taube. *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya: An Illustrated Dictionary of Mesoamerican Religion*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993.
- Monaghan, John. "Physiology, Production, and Gendered Difference: The Evidence from Mixtec and Other Mesoamerican Societies." In *Gender in Pre-Hispanic America*, edited by Cecelia F. Klein, 285–304. Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2001.

- Nicholson, Henry B. "Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico." In *Archaeology of Northern Mesoamerica*, edited by Peter Wauchope, 10:395–446. Handbook of Middle American Indians. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1971.
- Olga F. Linares. "Reviewed Work: Ancient Panama: Chiefs in Search of Power by Mary W. Helms." *American Ethnologist* 8, no. 1 (February 1981): 200–201.
- Pillsbury, Joanne, Timothy F. Potts, Kim N. Richter, J. Paul Getty Museum, Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, N.Y.), and Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA (Project), eds. *Golden Kingdoms: Luxury Arts in the Ancient Americas*. Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum and The Getty Research Institute, 2017.
- Pohl, John M. D. "John Pohl's Mesoamerica: Ancient Books: The Mixtec Group Codices." FAMSI, 2003.
<http://www.famsi.org/research/pohl/jpcodices/pohlmixtec1.html>.
- . *The Politics of Symbolism in the Mixtec Codices*. Nashville, Tennessee: Vanderbilt University, 1994.
- Pohl, John M. D., and Javier Urcid Serrano. "A Zapotec Carved Bone." *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 67, no. 2 (2006): 225–36.
<https://doi.org/10.25290/prinunivlibrchro.67.2.0225>.
- Quilter, Jeffrey. "Introduction." In *A Pre-Columbian World*, edited by Jeffrey Quilter and Mary Ellen Miller. Washington, D.C: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library & Collection : Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2006.
- Quilter, Jeffrey, and John W. Hoopes, eds. *Gold and Power in Ancient Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia: A Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks, 9 and 10 October 1999*. Washington, D.C: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, 2003.
- Reichel-Dolmatoff, Gerardo. *Goldwork and Shamanism: An Iconographic Study of the Gold Museum of the Banco de La República, Colombia*. Bogota: Villegas Asociados, 2005.
- Richter, Kim N. "Bright Kingdoms: Trade Networks, Indigenous Aesthetics, and Royal Courts in Postclassic Mesoamerica." In *Golden Kingdoms: Luxury Arts in the*

Ancient Americas, edited by Joanne Pillsbury, 99–109. The J. Paul Getty Museum and The Getty Research Institute, 2017.

Saunders, Nicholaus. "'Catching the Light': Technologies of Power and Enchantment in Pre-Columbian Goldworking." In *Gold and Power in Ancient Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia: A Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks, 9 and 10 October 1999*. Washington, D.C: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, 2003.

Spencer, Charles S., and Elsa M. Redmond. "A Late Monte Albán I Phase (300-100 B.C.) Palace in the Valley of Oaxaca." *Latin American Antiquity* 15, no. 4 (December 2004): 441–55.

Sullivan, Thelma D. "Tlazolteotl-Ixcuina: The Great Spinner and Weaver." In *The Art and Iconography of Late Post-Classic Central Mexico: A Conference at Dumbarton Oaks, October 22nd and 23rd, 1977*, edited by Elizabeth Hill Boone, 7-35. Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1977.

Troike, Nancy. "Pre-Hispanic Pictorial Communication: The Codex System of the Mixtec of Oaxaca." *Visible Language* 24, no. 1 (1990): 74–87.

———. "The Interpretation of Postures and Gestures in the Mixtec Codices." In *The Art and Iconography of Late Post-Classic Central Mexico: A Conference at Dumbarton Oaks, October 22nd and 23rd, 1977*, 175–206. Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1977.

Wauchope, Robert, Gordon F Ekholm, and Ignacio Bernal. *Handbook of Middle American Indians: Archaeology of Northern Mesoamerica*. Vol. 10. 16 vols. Handbook of Middle American Indians. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2015.

West, Robert C, Gordon F Ekholm, Norman A McQuown, Manning Nash, Evon Z Vogt, T. Dale Stewart, Ignacio Bernal, Howard F Cline, and Margaret A. L Harrison. *Handbook of Middle American Indians: Archaeology of Southern Mesoamerica*. Edited by Robert Wauchope and Gordon R Willey. Vol. 2–3. 16 vols. Handbook of Middle American Indians. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1973.

Williams, Robert Lloyd, and John M.D. Pohl. *Lord Eight Wind of Suchixtlan and the Heroes of Ancient Oaxaca: Reading History in the Codex Zouche-Nuttall*. 1st ed.

Linda Schele Series in Maya and Pre-Columbian Studies. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2009.

Figures

Figure 1

The Mixteca Region within the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. (Map from Google Maps, "Oaxaca, Mexico." Google Maps, 2018, <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Oaxaca,+Mexico.>)

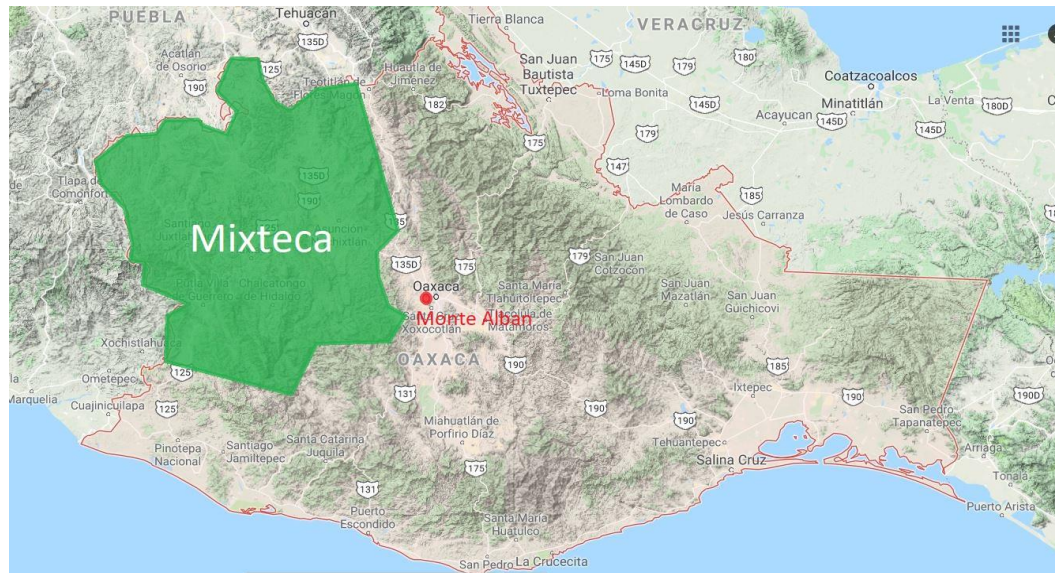


Figure 2

Alfonso Caso's illustration of the *cire-perdue* or lost-wax casting process, showing a clay mold for a bead, with a charcoal core, ready to be heated to melt away the wax, making way for the molten gold. (Illustration by Alfonso Caso, in *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 3. Austin, Texas: Univ Of Texas Press, 1965, 918, figure 45.)

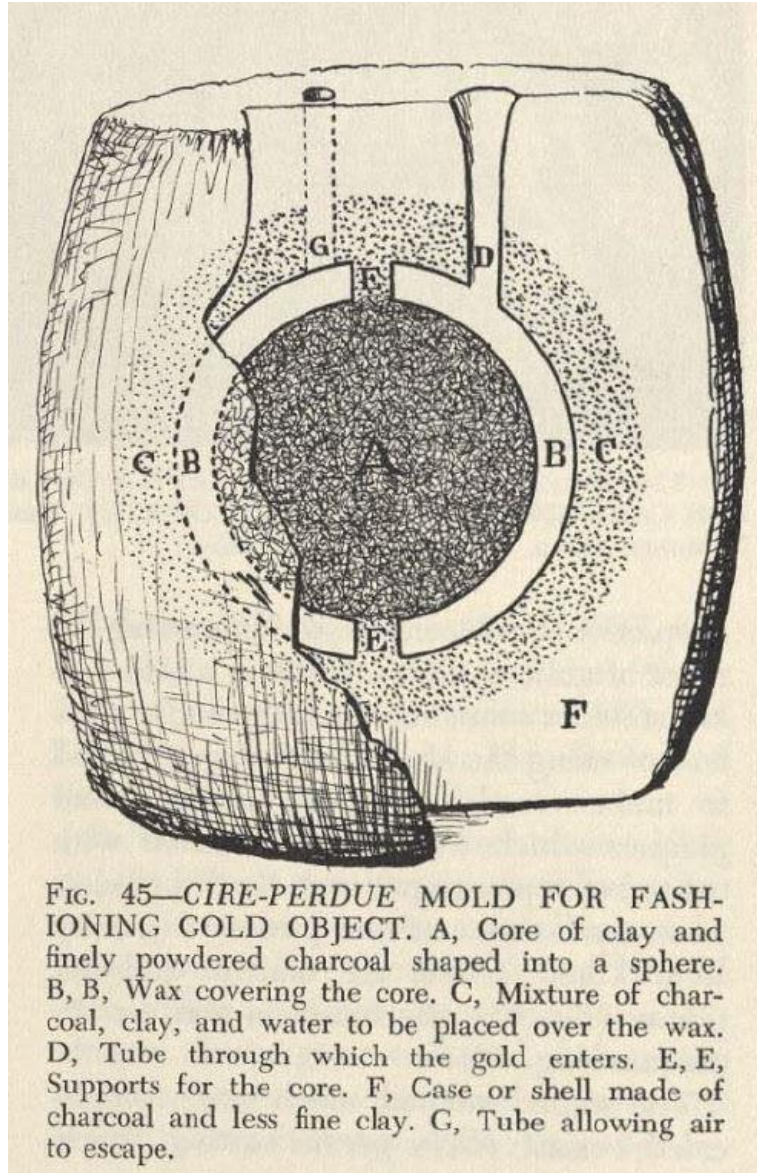


Figure 3

Gold jewelry originating from Zaachila (Oaxaca, Mexico). Mixtec Civilization, 7th Century. (Photograph by Bridgeman Images. In Bridgeman Images: DeAgostini Library, edited by Bridgeman Images. Credo Reference, 2014.)



Figure 4

Map of the Oaxaca Valley (light blue), showing the three arms, the central location of Monte Alban, and the surrounding mountainous terrain. (Map from Google Maps, "Oaxaca, Mexico." Google Maps, 2018, <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Oaxaca,+Mexico>)



Figure 5

The site of Monte Alban, showing the orientation of major buildings, location of some of the richer Zapotec tombs, and the location of Tomb 7. (Map from Google Maps, "Oaxaca, Mexico." Google Maps, 2018, <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Oaxaca,+Mexico>)

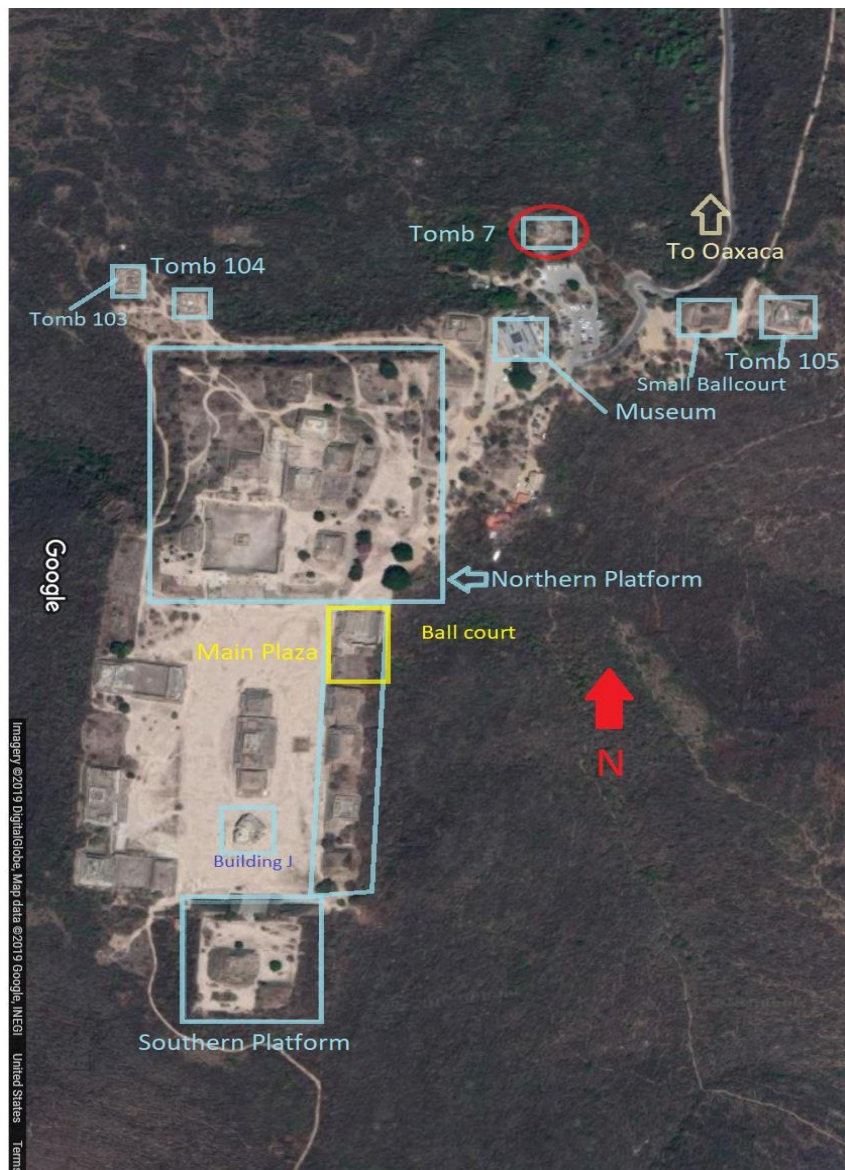


Figure 6

Mural from the walls of elite tomb 105 at Monte Alban, displaying the rich decoration of the tombs of elite Zapotec families. Figures can be seen with elaborate costumes and plumed speech scrolls indicating song, suggesting they are participating in a procession. (Photograph by Bridgeman Images. In Bridgeman Images: DeAgostini Library, edited by Bridgeman Images. Credo Reference, 2014.)



Figure 7

Reconstruction of Tomb 104 at Monte Alban, showing the arrangement of fine ceramic grave goods around the body of an elite personage, vibrant murals, and the elegant niched walls of the tomb. (Photograph by Bridgeman Images. In Bridgeman Images: DeAgostini Library, edited by Bridgeman Images. Bridgeman, 2014.)

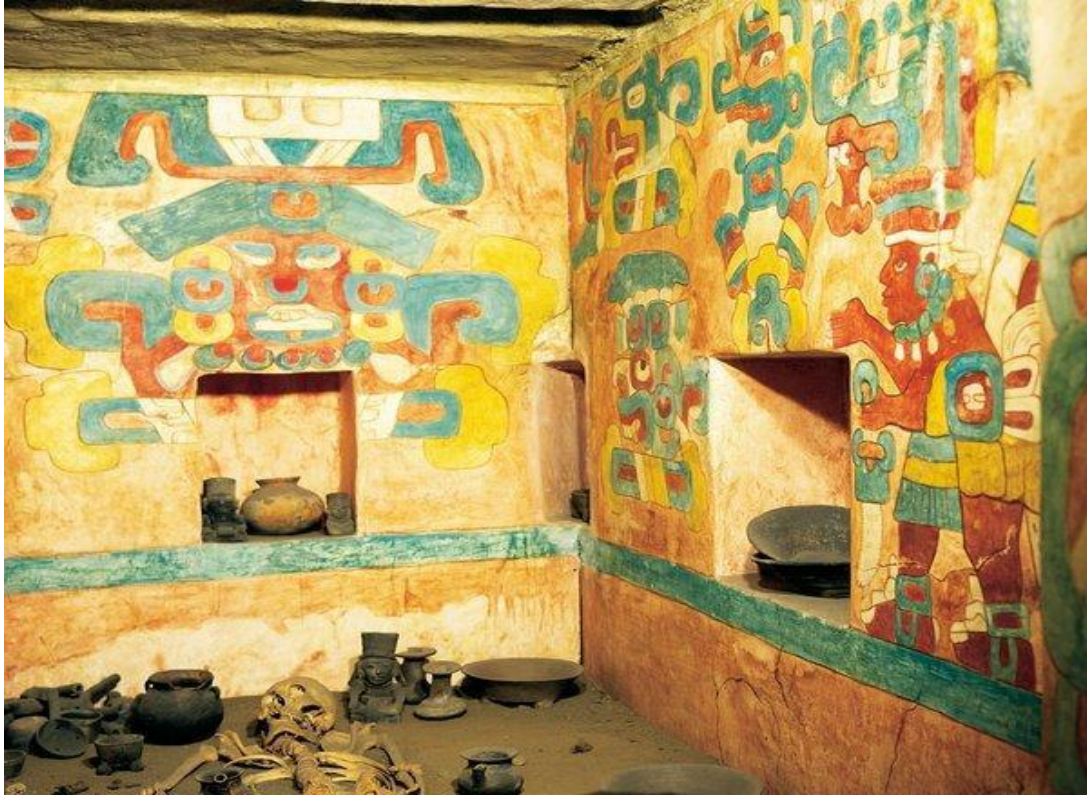


Figure 8

Drawing of the site of Tomb 7, birds eye view. The subterranean structure of the tomb, beneath the remains of an elite residential structure, is depicted in dark gray. (Illustration by Alphonso Caso. From *El Tesoro de Monte Alban*, by Alphonso Caso. Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1969, 49, plan IIa.)

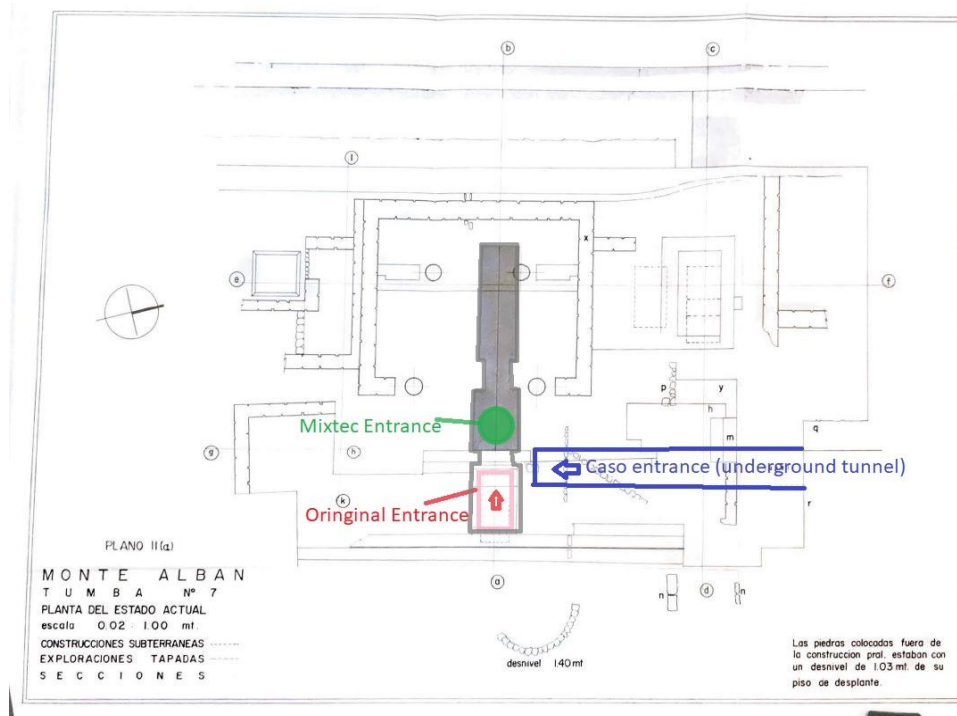


Figure 9

Drawing showing the location and position of the identified individuals in Tomb 7. Note Caso entrance through tunnel from the side. (Illustration by Alphonso Caso. From *El Tesoro de Monte Alban*, by Alphonso Caso. Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1969, 53, plan IIIa.)

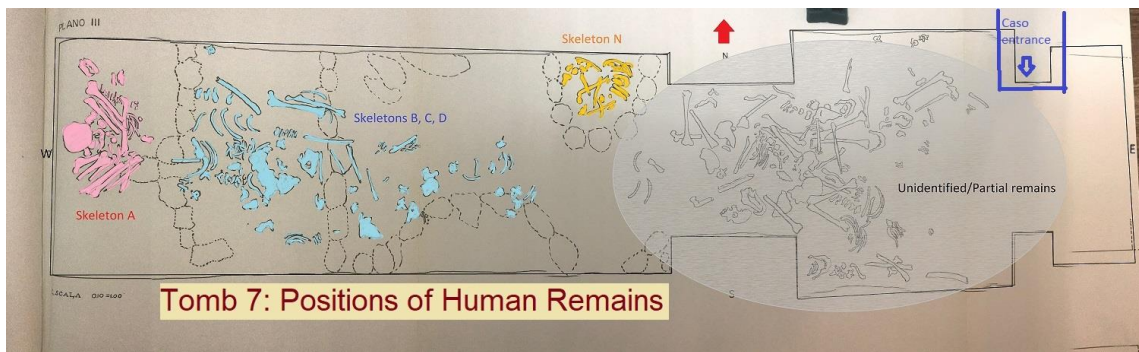


Figure 10

Approximate placement of notable grave items. Image is not to scale. (Illustration by Alphonso Caso. From *El Tesoro de Monte Alban*, by Alphonso Caso. Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1969, 53, plan IIIb.)

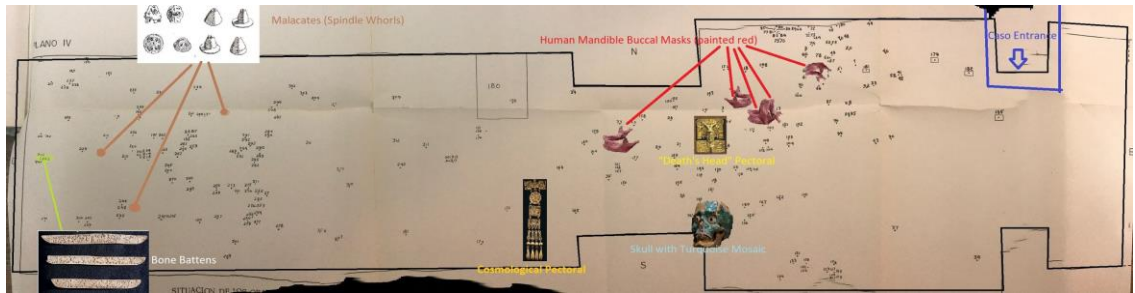


Figure 11

Human skull covered with fine turquoise mosaic. Originally the tiny tiles of turquoise were applied to the bone with amaranth dough. Insets in the eye sockets made of shell give the skull a wide-eyed stare. There is an ornamental flint/knife, also made of shell, deposited in the nasal cavity to form a sort of nose. (Photograph by Alphonso Caso. From *El Tesoro de Monte Alban*, by Alphonso Caso. Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1969, 65. Lam. V.)

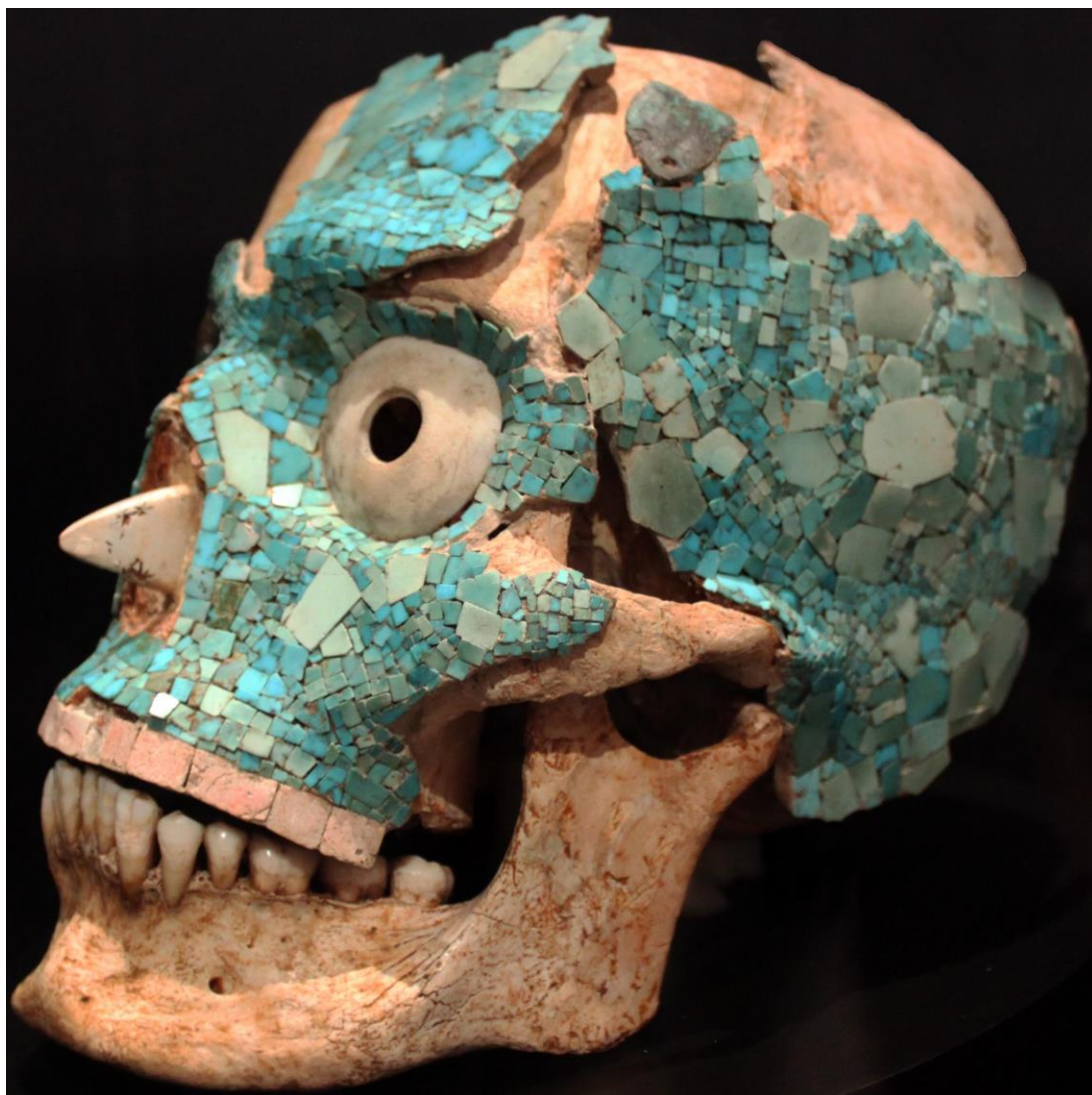


Figure 12

Human jawbones that would have been worn as buccal masks. All are perforated near the hinge to allow a strap to be fastened and retain traces of red paint. (Photograph by Alphonso Caso. From *El Tesoro de Monte Alban*, by Alphonso Caso. Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1969, 63, figure 41.)



Figure 13

Golden Death's Head pectoral found in Tomb 7 Monte Alban. Note the skeletal jaw and stylized serpent helmet. (Photograph by Alphonso Caso. From *El Tesoro de Monte Alban*, by Alphonso Caso. Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1969, 85, lam. vi.)



Figure 14

Clay “Malacates” or spindle whorls found in Tomb 7. When spinning thread, whorls are attached to the end of a thin wooden spindle in order to increase the speed and longevity of the spin. (Illustration by Alphonso Caso. From *El Tesoro de Monte Alban*, by Alphonso Caso. Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1969, 159, figure 129.)

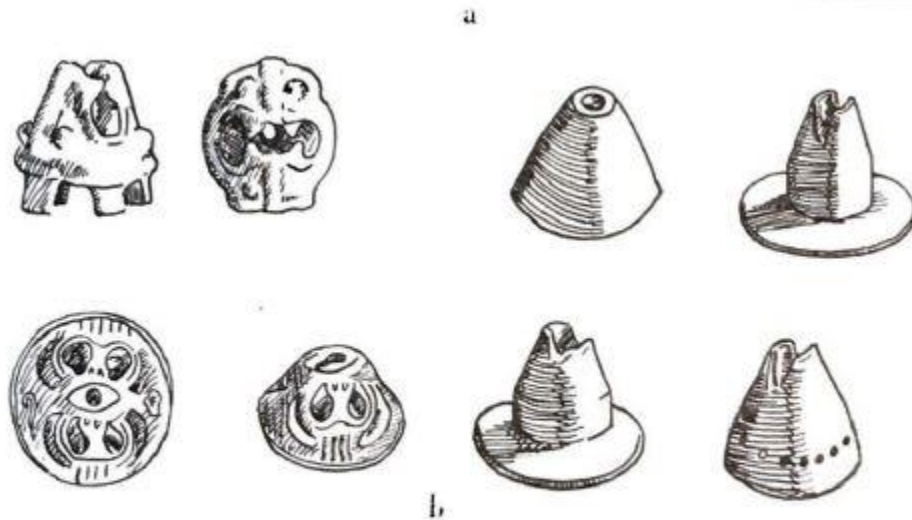


Fig. 129. a y b. Malacates de barro. (Foto y dibujo). Tumba 7.

Figure 15

Elaborately carved battens made of bone recovered from Tomb 7, showing displaying Mixtec style imagery. (Photograph by Bridgeman Images, In *Bridgeman Images: DeAgostini Library*, edited by Bridgeman Images. Bridgeman, 2014.)



Figure 16

Nahuatl woman using a batten to weave. (Illustration by Sharisse McCafferty, after Sahagun.

In “Engendering Tomb 7 at Monte Alban: Respinning an Old Yarn,” By Sharisse D., and Geoffrey G. McCafferty. in *Current Anthropology* 35, no. 2 (April 1994): 145, figure 3.)

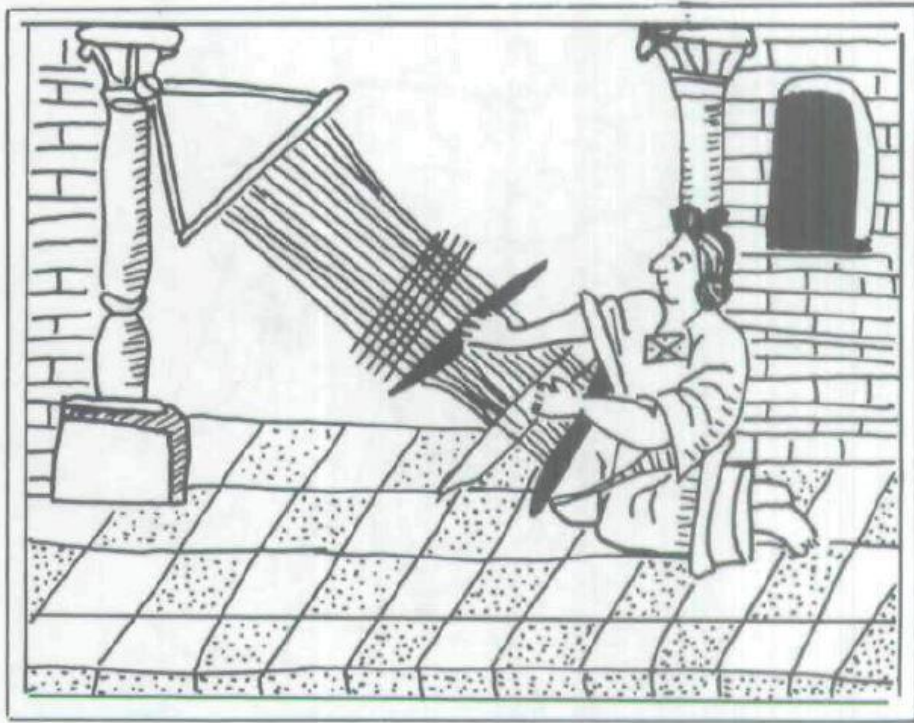


Figure 17

Xolotl, the god of monsters, shown here with Spindle whorls in his headdress.
(Illustration by Sharisse McCafferty, after Codex Telleriano-Remensis 19V, in
“Engendering Tomb 7 at Monte Alban: Respinning an Old Yarn,” By Sharisse D., and
Geoffrey G. McCafferty. in *Current Anthropology* 35, no. 2 (April 1994): 148, figure 11.)



Figure 18

The Mixtec year sign, seen here on a golden pectoral (left) as well as in the codices (right). This symbol is sometimes referred to as the A-O symbol, as it resembles a letter A interlaced with a letter O. (Illustration and photograph by Alphonso Caso. From *El Tesoro de Monte Alban*, by Alphonso Caso. Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1969, 86, figure 58.)



Figure 19

Aztec year signs (left) and Zapotec year signs (right). (Illustration by Alphonso Caso. From *El Tesoro de Monte Alban*, by Alphonso Caso. Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1969, 85-86, figures 57 and 60.)

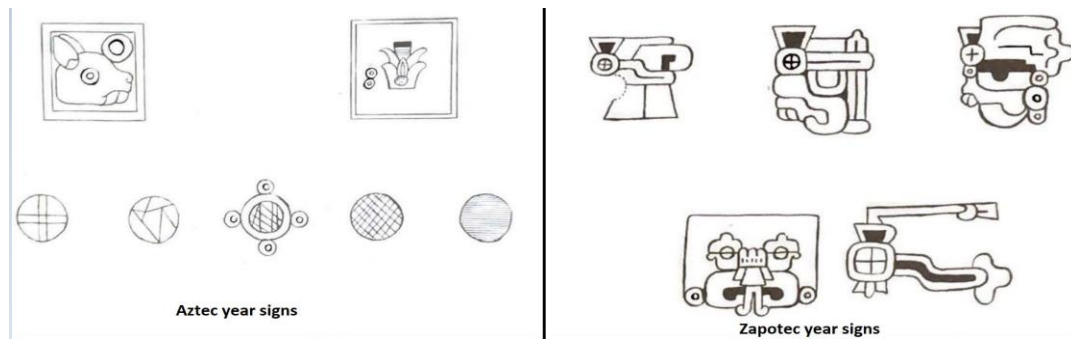


Figure 20

Zapotec carvings on the entrance to Tomb 7. The Zapotec writing commemorates a date, likely the death of the original Zapotec occupants of the tomb. (Illustration by Alphonso Caso. From *El Tesoro de Monte Alban*, by Alphonso Caso. Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1969, 234, figure 246.)



Fig. 246. Lápida zapoteca.

Figure 21

An Aztec woman teaching her four-year-old daughter how to spin thread. (Illustration by Elizabeth Brumfiel, after Codex Mendoza, fol. 58r. In *Gender in Prehispanic Mesoamerica*, ed. Cecelia F. Klein, Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2001, 66, figure 5.)



Figure 22

A picture of a woman spinning. (Illustration by Sharisse McCafferty, after Codex Mendoza, vol. 3: folio 68r., in “Engendering Tomb 7 at Monte Alban: Respinning an Old Yarn,” By Sharisse D., and Geoffrey G. McCafferty. in *Current Anthropology* 35, no. 2 (April 1994): 149, figure 12.)

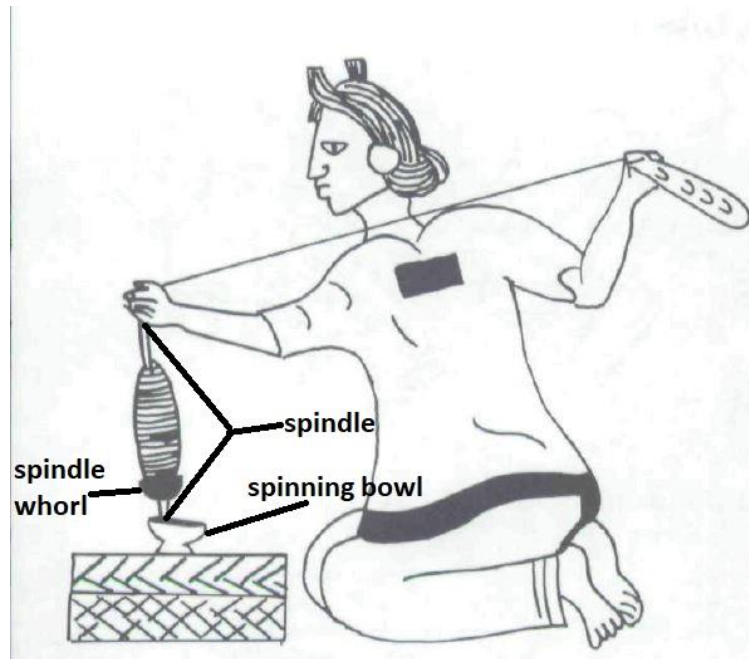


Figure 23

Cihuacoatl, the “serpent-woman”. A combination of death and fertility motifs, Cihuacoatl also has a warlike nature. Note that she carries a weaving batten like a sword, and has a fierce skeletal face. (Illustration by Eduard Seler, after Codex Magliabecchiano 45r. In *Archaeology of Northern Mesoamerica*, ed. Peter Wauchope, vol. 10, Handbook of Middle American Indians Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1971, 421, figure 29.)



Figure 24

Tlazolteotl, the great mother, spinner and weaver. She shares many characteristics with Cihuacoatl. Her headdress is composed of a headband of unspun cotton, with two cotton wrapped spindle whorls thrust through it. She wears the skin of a flayed captive, which symbolized regeneration, like a sprouting seed shedding its husk. (Illustration by Thelma

D. Sullivan, after Codex Borbonicus 13. In *The Art and Iconography of Late Post-Classic Central Mexico: A Conference at Dumbarton Oaks, October 22nd and 23rd, 1977*, ed. Elizabeth Hill Boone Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1977, 10, figure 4.)



Figure 25

Xochiquetzal, a goddess who merged with or could represent an aspect of Tlazolteotl and Cihuacoatl. The personification of sexual pleasure, beauty, mothers, weavers, and sexual impropriety, Xochiquetzal represents the young and beautiful aspect of the earth-mother-death complex of Postclassic goddesses. As the patron of weavers, she holds a weaving batten, and often shows spindles in her hair. (Illustration by Eduard Seler, after Codex Telleriano-Remensis, fol. 22. In *Archaeology of Northern Mesoamerica*, ed. Peter Wauchope, vol. 10, Handbook of Middle American Indians Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1971, 422, figure 31.)



Figure 26

The long, slender tail feathers of the quetzal bird were prized across Mesoamerica for their brilliance and rich green color. A: a Resplendent Quetzal, showing long tail feathers. B. Quetzal feathers featured in elite Aztec headdresses. (Photograph by Sahoo,Supreet, in “Resplendent Quetzal,” Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, 2016; Illustration from Codex Mendoza Fol. 64, AD 1542, Bodleian Library, In *Golden Kingdoms: Luxury Arts in the Ancient Americas*, ed. Joanne Pillsbury, The J. Paul Getty Museum and The Getty Research Institute, 2017, 108, figure 121.)



Figure 27

Detail showing the serpent earrings worn by the golden pectoral (fig. 13). The earrings are difficult to see, but their design is similar to the drawing on the right, which is the Mixtec “serpent” day sign. (photograph by Alphonso Caso. From *El Tesoro de Monte Alban*, by Alphonso Caso. Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1969, 365, figure A-14; Illustration by Elizabeth Hill Boone, in *Stories in Red and Black: Pictorial Histories of the Aztecs and Mixtecs*, Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2014, 40, figure 12.)



Figure 28

Necklace of amygdaloid (almond-shaped) bells found at Tomb 7. The death's head pectoral wears similar ornaments. (Photograph by Bridgeman Images, In *Bridgeman Images: DeAgostini Library*, edited by Bridgeman Images. Bridgeman, 2014.)



Figure 29

9 Grass in her standard attire, showing the skeletal face and the skirt/quechquemiltl that represent her dual nature. Note also her name glyph, composed of blades for grass sprouting from a human jawbone, accompanied by nine numerical dots. (Illustration from Codex Vienna 33c, in *The Art and Iconography of Late Post-Classic Central Mexico: A Conference at Dumbarton Oaks, October 22nd and 23rd, 1977*, ed. Elizabeth Hill Boone and Elizabeth P. Benson, Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1977, 215, figure 7.)



Figure 30

(Left) 9 Grass in the codex Vienna 28d. She wears a serpent quechquemiltl, her insignia. She also receives a quechquemiltl of white scrolls on a dark background, which she is also frequently depicted wearing. At times her insignia serves as the personal name of powerful females in the genealogical codices, such as Lady 6 Monkey. (right) a serpent quechquemiltl as depicted in the codices. (Illustration from Codex Vienna 28d, in *The Art and Iconography of Late Post-Classic Central Mexico: A Conference at Dumbarton Oaks, October 22nd and 23rd, 1977*, ed. Elizabeth Hill Boone and Elizabeth P. Benson, Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1977, 216, figure 8; Illustration by Joyce Marcus, after Codex Selden. In *Gender in Prehispanic Mesoamerica*, ed. Cecelia F. Klein, Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2001, 232, figure 13.)

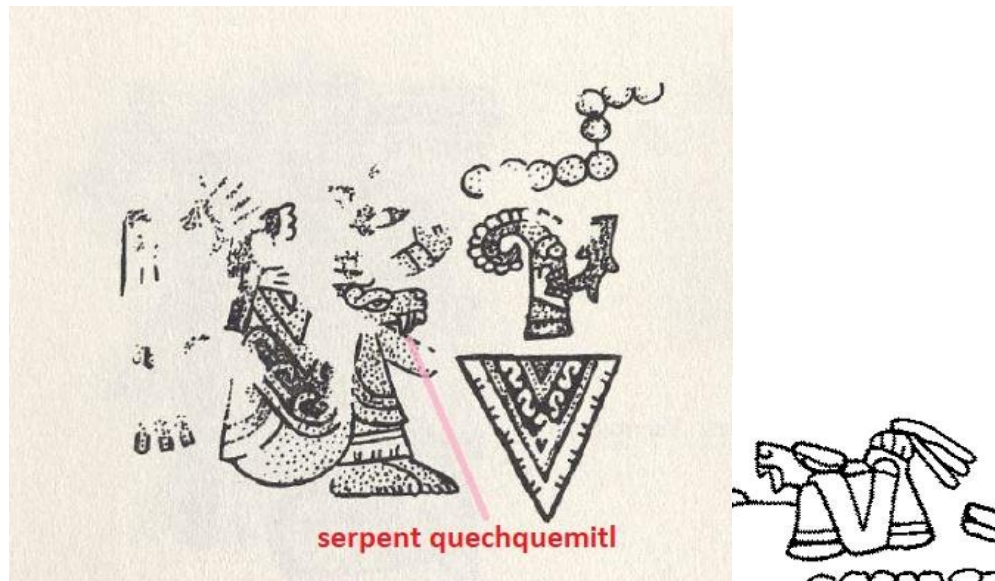


Figure 31

Map showing geographic boundaries of Isthmo-Colombian culture area. (Map from Wikipedia. In "Isthmo-Colombian Area." Wikimedia Foundation, 2018)

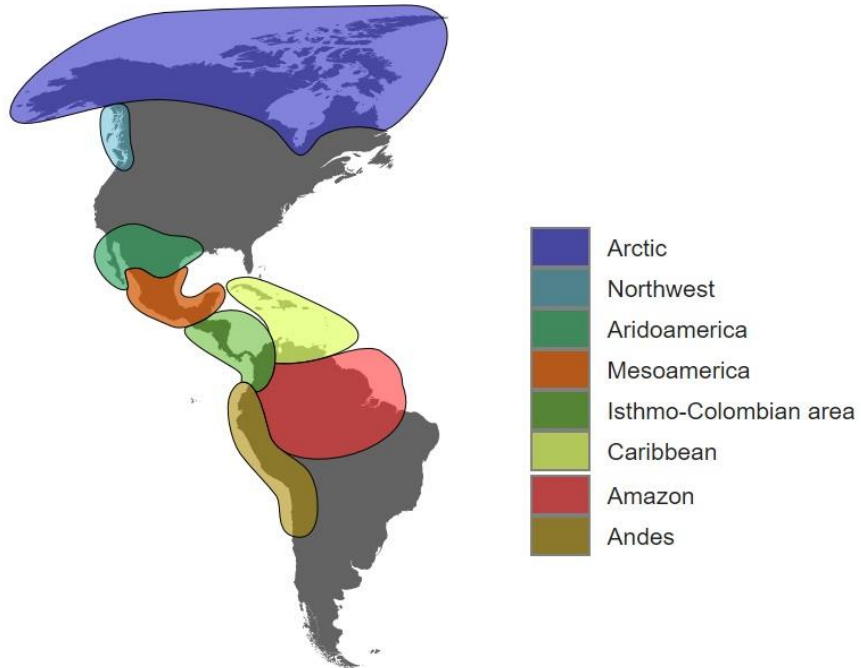


Figure 32

Map of Sitio Conte and surrounding areas. (Illustration by Samuel K. Lothrop, in *Coclé: An Archaeological Study of Central Panama Part I: Historical Background, Excavations At The Sitio Conte, Artifacts And Ornaments*, vol. 7, by Samuel K. Lothrop, Cambridge, Massachusetts: the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, 1937, 35, figure 19.)

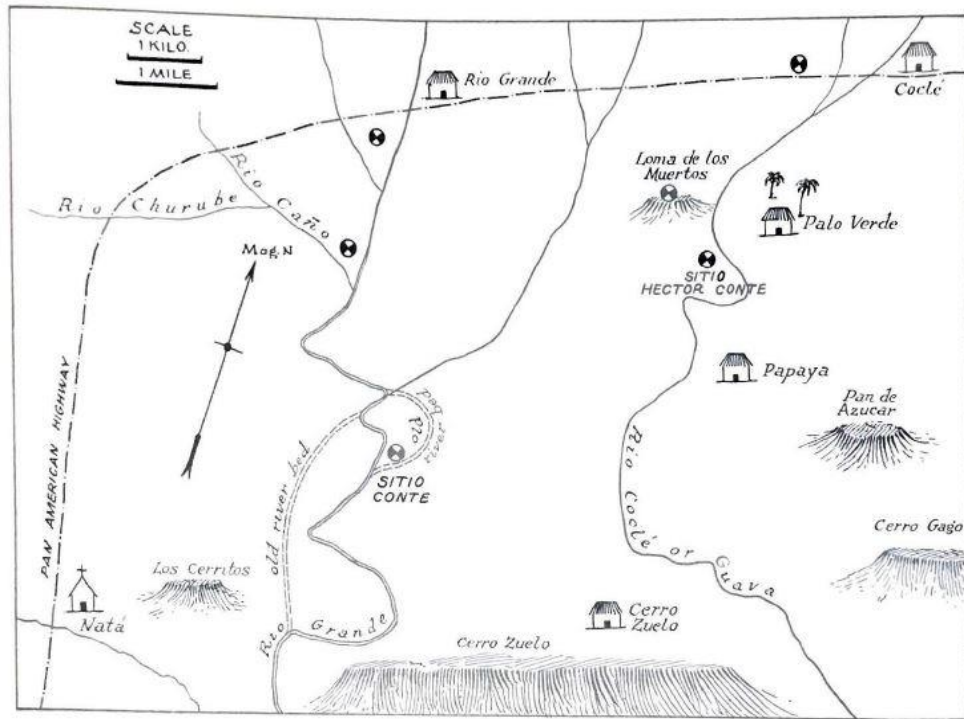


FIG. 19. Sketch map showing the location of archaeological sites.

Figure 33

Golden plaques typical of the type found at Sitio Conte. Most feature embossed decoration. (photographs by Penn Museum, in Penn Museum Collections Online, Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2007)



Figure 34

Cast gold pendants from Sitio Conte showing a variety of forms, were only found with men. From Penn Museum. (photographs by Penn Museum, in Penn Museum Collections Online, Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2007)



Figure 35

Comparison between Coclé pottery motifs and gold work. Pottery was found in great profusion at Sitio Conte and believed to have been manufactured locally. Parallels in goldwork imply local production for these artifacts as well. (Illustration by Warwick Bray, in *The Art of Precolumbian Gold: The Jan Mitchell Collection*, ed. Julie Jones, Boston: Little, Brown and Co, 1985, 40, figure 9.)

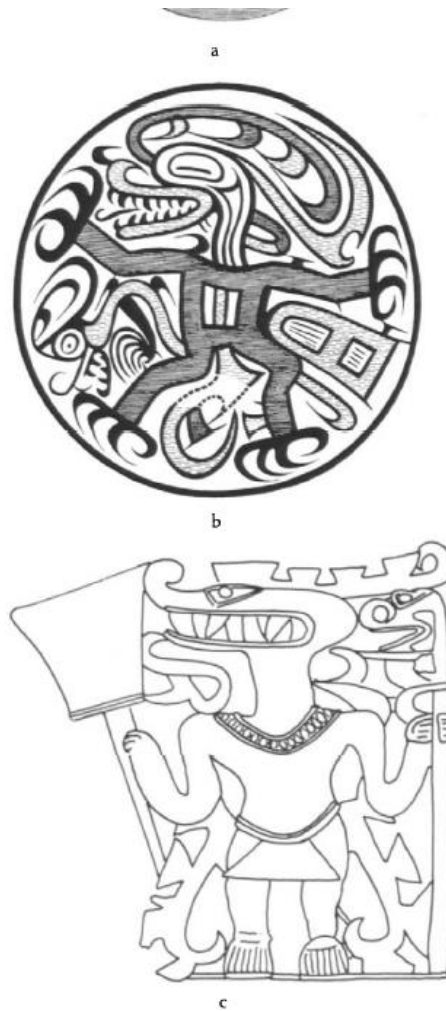


Figure 36

Panamanian gold object with dangles. (Photograph by Met Museum, in *The Art of Precolumbian Gold: The Jan Mitchell Collection*, ed. Julie Jones, Boston: Little, Brown and Co, 1985, 115, Plate 16.)



Figure 37

Composite creatures in Coclé goldwork and pottery, ostensibly figures encountered during shamanic hallucinatory “journeys”. A, Coclé bowl, Montijo Transitional style. From Labbe. B, Gold Pendant from Sitio Conte in the shape of a bat, with saurian creatures for wings. (Photographs by Penn Museum, in Penn Museum Collections Online, Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2007)

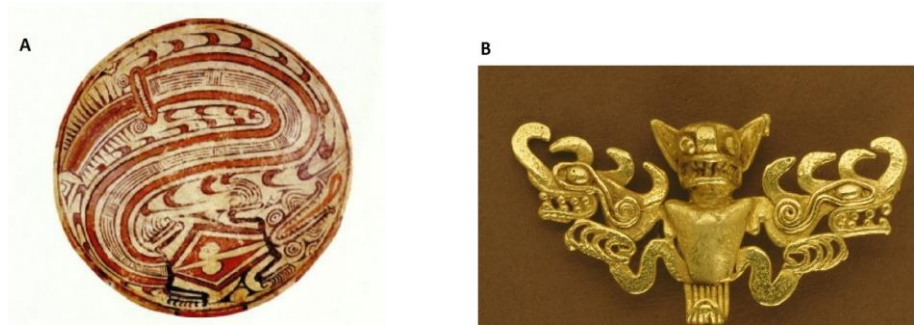


Figure 38

Nude female pendants from Sitio Conte. (Illustration by Samuel K. Lothrop, in *Coclé: An Archaeological Study of Central Panama Part 1: Historical Background, Excavations At The Sitio Conte, Artifacts And Ornaments*, vol. 7, by Samuel K. Lothrop, Cambridge, Massachusetts: the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, 1937, 165, figure 147.)



Figure 39

“Mammary plaques” discovered at Sitio Conte. A: “Disc” found with Person B (Male), Penn burial 18. Positioned as if worn around the neck, excavated by Penn Museum, 1940.

B: “breastplate” Excavated from Sitio Conte by the Peabody Museum, 1930-1933.

(Photograph by Penn Museum, in Penn Museum Collections Online, Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2007; Photograph by Peabody Museum, in Collections Online, Cambridge, Massachusetts: the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology.)



Figure 40

Examples of “mammiform plaques” in paired orientation that would have been worn as pectorals. (Photographs by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in Search the Collections Online, MFAH, 2006.)



Figure 41

A comparison between the common Mesoamerican “bisected plaque” motif (E-H, right) and the “frog” pectoral (A-D, left) with its broad, flat feet, a widespread theme throughout the intermediate area. A, Chiriqui. B, Coclé. C, Greater Chiriqui. D, Panamanian. E, Mixtec (Monte Albán). F, Mixtec (Monte Albán). G, Mixtec (Monte Albán). H, Oaxaca. (Photograph by Met Museum, in *The Art of Precolumbian Gold: The Jan Mitchell Collection*, ed. Julie Jones, Boston: Little, Brown and Co, 1985, 100, Plate 1.)



Figure 42

Pectoral 167, the “Cosmological Pectoral” of Tomb 7. Note the resemblance of the iconography to that in the Mixtec codices, and the use of bells to highlight the movement of the wearer. (Illustration by Alphonso Caso. From *El Tesoro de Monte Alban*, by Alphonso Caso. Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1969, 97, Lam. ix.)



Figure 43

Representations of the Moon as a personified flint knife. (Illustration by Alphonso Caso.
From *El Tesoro de Monte Alban*, by Alphonso Caso. Mexico: Instituto Nacional de
Antropología e Historia, 1969, 97, figure 69.)



Fig. 69. La luna y el cuchillo de pedernal.

Figure 44

Representations of the Earth Monster “Tlaltecuhtli” from Mesoamerican codices.
(Illustration by Alphonso Caso. From *El Tesoro de Monte Alban*, by Alphonso Caso.
Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1969, 97, figure 70.)



Fig. 70. Representaciones de *Tlaltecuhtli* y cueva.

Figure 45

Map showing locations of Monte Alban, Oaxaca, Mexico and Sitio Conte, Conte Province, Panama. (Map from Wikipedia. In "Central America" Wikimedia Foundation, 2018.)

