

# PRECOLUMBIAN GOLD

**Technology, Style and Iconography**



**EDITED BY COLIN McEWAN**



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# The Iconography and Symbolism of Metallic Votive Offerings in the Eastern Cordillera, Colombia<sup>1</sup>

Roberto Lleras-Pérez

## Geographic and archaeological setting

The region known as the Eastern Cordillera (Cordillera Oriental) comprises the easternmost branch of the northern Andean range which begins at the Colombian Massif in the heart of Colombia and extends northwards approximately 1,300 km to near the Caribbean Sea. The Eastern Cordillera divides the mountainous part of the country from the eastern plains of the Amazon and Orinoco basins. A branch of the Eastern Cordillera originates at the Santurban Massif and follows a north to north-eastern direction into Venezuelan territory where it is known as the Serranía de Mérida.

Nowadays there is a general chronological framework for the human occupation of the southernmost part of the central region which includes a cultural periodization covering nearly 20,000 years and provides an explanation for cultural developments in this area. The Muisca, Lache, Guane and Chitarero cultures represent the later prehispanic period; it is generally accepted that these groups might have started to assume distinct identities by around AD 300. The most striking feature of this period is the close linguistic relationship of the groups inhabiting the Eastern Cordillera at the time of the Spanish conquest.

There is only a very fragmented knowledge of the neighbours and relatives of the Muiscas (Guane, Lache and Chitareros) living in other areas of the central Eastern Cordillera. For some time attention has been called to the close similarities between the archaeological materials of the Eastern Cordillera and the Serranía de Mérida in Venezuela, particularly the Tachira, Quibor and coastal Falcon areas.<sup>2</sup> The snow peaks of Mérida are regarded as a sacred site by the Eastern Cordillera Uwas<sup>3</sup> and there seems to

have been an active circulation of certain kinds of gold ornaments in the Venezuelan Andes before the arrival of the Spaniards.<sup>4</sup> The reported findings of gold ornaments to the east of the present border of Colombia are, nevertheless, extremely scarce.

Linguists and archaeologists<sup>5</sup> believe that during the first centuries of the Christian Era there was a massive migration of Chibcha speakers from their ancestral territory in Central America (Costa Rica) to northern South America. This common origin may help explain why the groups inhabiting the Eastern Cordillera share many features of their material culture.

It has been proposed that there were two different phases in the development of the Chibcha groups.<sup>6</sup> The best-documented period is the later one and particularly the years immediately preceding and following the Spanish conquest. The most detailed information on language, religion, sociopolitical organization, economic production and interchange, as well as many details of daily and ritual life, comes from this period.

Among the Chibcha groups the Muisca were the largest. Different models have been proposed to explain their chiefdom structure.<sup>7</sup> There was a basic or, perhaps, two basic types of social and kinship units, the Utas and the Sybins, which had separate territories and obeyed the authority of their respective leaders (*capitanes*). Utas and Sybins might have been organized in pairs as part of dualistic structures or in triads forming double oppositions.<sup>8</sup> They formed larger units, known to the Spaniards as villages, which obeyed chiefs (*caciques*) and had control over larger territories. Villages were not always politically independent; groups of villages were, in turn, under the authority of powerful chiefs (*uzaques*). Finally, the *uzaques* obeyed the great regional lords.



### Sacrifice and offerings among the Chibcha

Muisca religion was extremely complex and is not yet fully understood. There were at least four principal deities: Chibchacum and his wife, creators of the world; and Bachue and his son, creators of humanity. A culture hero, Bochica, saved the Muisca people from flooding and taught them cultivation and weaving. Finally, a multitude of minor spiritual entities, such as lakes and mountain tops, were considered sacred, and the Sun and the Moon were worshipped and had special temples dedicated to them. Religious services were provided by specialized shamans (*jeques*).

Sacrifice and votive offerings played an important role in religious practices, and a large part of metallurgical production was devoted to the latter. It is clear, in fact, from the colonial accounts that offering was a very special and deeply rooted custom among the Muisca people. There are some descriptions revealing how the shamans prepared and performed the offerings and what the temples looked like. Apart from these special places, called Cucas, offerings were deposited in other locales which were held to possess a special significance or occupy a special liminal region between the aquatic, terrestrial and celestial worlds. Lakes were one such preferred site for offerings, but the list also includes mountains, hilltops, crossroads, springs, rivers and creeks, open fields, house and temple foundations, caves and gorges.

As for sacrifice, its meaning and purpose remain obscure. Sacrifice was practised during special ceremonies, perhaps related to certain calendrical dates. The best-known form was the one called by the Spanish the 'Sacrifice of the Gavia' (Gull): victims were tied to the upper part of a high pole erected in a special site of the village, probably next to the temple or the chief's dwellings, and warriors would kill them by throwing darts. The blood running down the pole was collected in bowls and offered to the Sun. Some votive figures represent the sacrificial post and the victim tied to it. The victims were small children, seven to eight years old, chosen from birth for this purpose and brought up with utmost care. Sacrifices of children were also common at the consecration of important buildings; their skeletons are usually found beneath the most important posts.

### Metallurgy in the Eastern Cordillera

The Prehispanic metallurgy of the Eastern Cordillera in Colombia has the peculiarity, not shared with other archaeological areas in South

America, of having an overwhelming proportion of its production (nearly 56%) exclusively devoted to votive objects. Furthermore, several adornments were also finally intended as votive offerings, thus increasing to 62.5% the proportion of objects used as offerings.

On the basis of the available information it is not yet possible to propose a proper chronological framework for metallurgy. Dating has been carried out whenever appropriate samples are spotted, but without a proper selection guided by research objectives. There are, though, fourteen radiocarbon dates directly associated with metal artefacts, which agree fairly well, both among themselves and with other chronological data for Eastern Cordillera archaeological materials.<sup>9</sup> According to them, metallurgy was present in this region from around AD 300 and remained in production for some 1,200 years until the early colonial period (c. 1600).

The earliest date corresponds to what most archaeologists agree as the beginning of the occupation of the cordillera by Chibcha-speaking groups. The ceramic chronology has enabled us to propose the existence of Early and Late periods both for the Muisca<sup>10</sup> and Guane cultures.<sup>11</sup> Ten of the dates associated with metal objects fall in the Early Period (AD 300 to 1100), thus indicating that metallurgy was a cultural feature that these groups brought with them into their newly occupied territory or was developed shortly after their arrival. Two dates corresponding to imported items (seventh and tenth centuries AD) reveal that exchange with neighbouring areas also occurred in early times.

### Metallic votive offerings

While most of the votive offerings from the Eastern Cordillera are undoubtedly miniatures, not much has been said about this topic for this particular region; a fact which contrasts with the interpretations that relate miniaturization, landscape and control mechanisms in the central Andes and elsewhere (see also Dransart, this volume).<sup>12</sup> The production of votive figures as miniatures in the Eastern Cordillera was not an accidental one. In a certain sense the figures reproduce, to scale, part of the real world of the Indian communities. They evince an intention to represent and obtain control over nature and society, and this in turn determines both what is represented and how the patterns of representation are established. On the other hand miniatures become a very convenient and manageable way of producing symbols with their own complete meaning. These may be deposited in large groups and express more complex ideas.



6.1 (right) Gold votive figure of a woman with staff (female figures category).

6.2 (below) Woman heavily adorned (female figures category).



Muisca votive figures have attracted the attention of archaeologists, historians and scholars from early in the history of the study of metalwork in Colombia. The first works on this topic, which included the interpretation of the most attractive figures, followed concepts derived from chroniclers or from mythology and were far from systematic. The basic principle of the classificatory system that I have developed is the definition of types or typical depictions which, independently of minor variations, seem to convey a specific meaning of their own. Care has been taken not to overemphasize details, as this would produce an excessively complex typology making classification unnecessarily difficult. It is considered that, ethnographically, the representation of any given figure follows the same general patterns in different places, providing cultural traits and beliefs were shared, although the details may vary. Seventy-six typical depictions distributed in eight major groups have been identified.

The classification of anthropomorphic figures starts from the most conspicuous characteristic: gender. Feminine, masculine and unsexed figures are identified. Next, all the other attributes of the figures are considered; figures appear wearing different types of ornaments and carrying staffs, weapons, miscellaneous objects and birds. In most cases attributes appear combined; this makes it necessary to establish the types of combinations that occur. Another major group consists of scenes with one or more people in a specific setting.

Animal representations are organized from sky to earth and water, that is to say, first flying animals, next walking animals and reptiles, and last amphibians and fishes. In the case of jaguars and snakes there are different types of the same animal, since meaningful variations are found. Objects are placed last; they are organized so that objects of personal use, such as clothing and weapons, come first and household objects, such as furniture, are last. Finally geometric and undefined objects are described.



### Female figures

One hundred and sixty female figures (9.6% of votive figures) are divided into seven subgroups, according to their additional elements or to special body positions (Figs 6.1–2). Usually figures are standing up, with legs straight or slightly bent and arms straight or crossed, facing front.

Subtype	Description	Frequency	% of group
Women, heavily adorned	Wearing no dress and adorned with elaborate headdress, dangles, ear ornaments and necklaces.	9	5.6
Women with bowl, lime container and tray	Holding a bowl with one or both hands, a lime container held in a hand or hanging at the waist. The three elements appear by themselves or in couples.	7	4.4
Women with staff and birds	With staff and birds or one of the two elements.	60	37.5
Women with weapons	With spearthrowers and occasionally darts.	11	6.9
Women seated holding knees	Seated with legs bent and arms crossed over the knees, thus forming a kind of container.	2	1.3
Women with child	Carrying a small child, sometimes in a cradle.	21	13.1
Women without additional elements	With no special additional elements and no special body position.	50	31.3

### Male figures

Male figures total 495 (29.6% of votive offerings); they are divided into eleven subgroups according to their additional elements or to special body positions. Usually figures are standing, with legs straight or slightly bent and arms straight or crossed.

Subtype	Description	Frequency	% of group
Men, heavily adorned	Adorned with elaborate headdresses, diadems or crowns, rectangular nose ornaments, various necklaces, ear ornaments and dangles.	20	4.0
Men with bowl, lime container and tray	With a bowl held in one or both hands, a lime container in a hand or hanging at the waist or a hallucinogen tray held in one hand. The three elements appear either by themselves or in couples.	22	4.4
Men with staff and birds	With one or two staffs and/or one or two birds. Staffs are held in one hand and birds are depicted seated on the shoulder or the head.	125	25.3
Men with weapons	Carrying one or two spearthrowers, with or without darts, an axe and/or club.	112	22.6
Men seated holding knees	Seated with legs bent and arms crossed on top of knees, thus forming a kind of receptacle.	42	8.5
Men with tools	With objects different from staffs or weapons, presumably tools, in their hands.	9	1.8
Men without additional elements	Without special ornaments.	97	19.6
Priests with weapons, staff and birds	Always combining three elements: spearthrower, staff and birds. They have been named 'priests' as a way of identification.	41	8.3
Warriors with trophy head	Heavily armed with spearthrowers, darts and clubs. One or occasionally two trophy heads hanging from the wrists or held at the end of sticks. The term 'warrior' is used for identification.	14	2.8
Men seated on benches	Heavily ornamented man seated on a four-legged bench.	7	1.4
Masked men	Wearing a mask, sometimes held with one or both hands. Face can clearly be seen behind the mask.	6	1.2



### Unsexed figures

Unsexed figures total 181 (10.8% of votive figures); they are divided into seven subgroups according to their additional elements or to special body positions. Usually figures are standing up, with legs straight or slightly bent and arms straight or crossed, facing front.

Subtype	Description	Frequency	% of group
Unsexed figures, heavily adorned	With elaborate headdress, rectangular nose ornament, ear pendants, dangles and necklaces.	4	2.2
Unsexed figures with staff and birds	Carrying a staff and/or bird seated on the shoulder.	44	24.2
Unsexed figures with weapons	Carrying a spearthrower and, in some cases, darts.	7	3.8
Unsexed figures, seated	Seated with legs bent and arms crossed over knees, thus forming a receptacle.	14	7.7
Unsexed figures without additional elements	Without additional elements.	105	58.2
Unsexed warriors with trophy head	With spearthrower and darts or club, and carrying a trophy head hanging from the waist or held in a stick.	3	1.6
Mummies	With body fully wrapped in bandages.	4	2.2

### Scenes

Sixty-seven scenes have been found (4.0% of votive figures). They are divided into eight subgroups according to their characteristics. Their only common feature is that they portray one or more persons.

Subtype	Description	Frequency	% of group
Double-headed human figures	Person with one pair of legs, two trunks, one pair of arms and two heads.	2	3.0
Couples embracing	Couple making love.	2	3.0
Chiefs on litters	Important person, heavily adorned, seated on a litter. The word 'chief' is used as a means of identification.	6	8.9
Enclosures with one human figure	Heavily adorned important person standing in the middle of an enclosure.	12	17.9
Enclosures with main and secondary figures	Heavily adorned important person in the middle of an enclosure surrounded by secondary figures.	4	6.0
Rafts with human figures	Raft made of bent logs in the middle of which there is a main figure, heavily adorned and very large surrounded by secondary figures.	2	3.0
Alligator with human inside	Small alligator with short tail. The belly is open and a human face is seen inside.	1	1.5
Sacrificial posts	Sacrificial post with a human figure on its upper part.	38	56.7

### Animals

Animals total 214 (12.8% of votive figures). They are divided into fourteen groups according to the species, when it proved to be identifiable, or, if not, to broader biological families or orders.

Subtype	Description	Frequency	% of group
Birds – eagles, hawks, condors	With a hook-shaped beak like that of condors, hawks, eagles and similar birds of prey.	16	7.5
Birds – pheasants, doves, parrots	With a plain beak, generally represented with its wings closed.	14	6.5
Jaguars	Feline, most probably a jaguar, even though in some cases pumas or other felines might be represented.	35	16.4
Jaguars on litters/trays	Jaguar or similar feline standing on a litter or on one of the ends of a hallucinogen tray.	3	1.4
Jaguars, serpentiform	Feline with fangs, whiskers and ears, usually with short legs. The most prominent feature is the extremely long and undulating tail.	7	3.3



Deer	Deer seated with its head pointing frontward.	3	1.4
Lizards	Lizard or small iguana.	2	0.9
Turtles	Turtle with incised carapace.	4	1.9
Snails	Shell of a snail, sometimes with dangles.	34	15.9
Snakes	Snake with rounded head, usually having human or jaguar face with whiskers and fangs	86	40.2
Snakes, coiled	Snake coiled and having a human face; sometimes whiskers are also represented.	3	1.4
Snakes, double	Couple of snakes side by side.	2	0.9
Insect	Insect of undefined species.	1	0.5
Unidentified animals	Not identifiable to any species or genus.	4	1.9

### Objects of personal use

Objects of this type total 405 (24.2% of votive figures). Miniature objects of personal use are divided into seventeen types according to the function of the real objects they represent and their additional elements.

Subtype	Description	Frequency	% of group
Staffs	Type used by chiefs, priests and important persons as a symbol of status and authority.	109	26.9
Staffs with birds	Complex or very complex staff adorned with one or two birds.	105	25.9
Staffs/spearthrowers, double or multiple	Staff or a spearthrower bifurcated or with multiple endings.	7	1.7
Spearthrowers	Type used for hunting and battle.	85	21.0
Spearthrowers with birds	Miniature spearthrower adorned with one or occasionally two birds.	17	4.2
Axes/weapons	Trapezoidal axes and clubs are the most frequent.	4	1.0
Quiver with spears	Cylindrical quiver ending in a rounded base and with darts or spears inside.	1	0.2
Blowguns	Blowgun of the type used for hunting.	4	1.0
Bows	Miniature bow with its cord.	3	0.7
Shields	With frame, adorned with birds and dangles.	20	4.9
Hallucinogen trays	Tray of the type used for the inhalation of hallucinogens.	23	5.7
Lime containers	Miniature lime container, together with its dipper pin.	6	1.5
Bag	Cotton bag of the type used to carry coca leaves and lime containers.	1	0.2
Masks	Miniature mask with human features.	6	1.5
Robes	Robe or textile. Designs are visible on the surface.	2	0.5
Belts	Textile belt or band woven in a twisted fashion.	4	1.0
Drums	Cylindrical drum.	8	2.0

### Household objects

Objects of this type total ninety (5.4% of votive figures). Miniature household objects are divided into eleven types according to the function of the real objects they represent and their additional elements.

Subtype	Description	Frequency	% of group
Cradles, empty	Cradle made with wooden sticks tied together; there is no human figure in it.	11	12.2
Cradles with babies	Cradle made with wooden sticks with a child (male or female) lying inside.	30	33.3
Benches	Four-legged bench used by chiefs and priests.	3	3.3
Hammock	Miniature hammock with suspension rings.	1	1.1
Weaving looms	Miniature weaving loom with an irregular wooden frame and textile bands held inside.	2	2.2
Baskets	Miniature basket with handles.	25	27.8

Ceramic vessels	Miniature ceramic vessel; forms include bowls and jars.	2	13.3
Bell	Miniature bell or rattle; no sound function.	1	1.1
Fence	Row of crossed wooden sticks forming a fence.	1	1.1
Jaguar pelts	Pelt of a jaguar or similar feline, including its skull and tail, stretched on a rectangular wooden frame.	2	2.2
Deer pelts	Pelt of a deer stretched on a rectangular wooden frame.	2	2.2

### Undefined and unknown objects

In this group I have included two types with a total of sixty-three objects (3.8% of votive figures).

Subtype	Description	Frequency	% of group
Undefined/ geometrical objects	Variety of objects of unknown function, or highly schematized representations, including complex geometrical objects.	8	12.7
Unknown objects	No precise description available.	55	87.3

### Main iconographic traits

Many people, animals and objects drawn from both the everyday and the ritual life of the Indian communities of the Eastern Cordillera are represented in metal figures. Seventy-six different categories of representations convey an idea of what was considered important in religious terms. If the intention was, indeed, to represent what made up the universe of the community, then it is worth looking also at the range of people and things which existed in the region but were not modelled in metal. The subjects that do not appear include: anthropomorphic figures representing diseased or malformed persons; anthropozoomorphic figures; various kinds of animals; most types of scenes, such as fighting and hunting; all types of buildings (except enclosures); and all forms of vegetation (with the possible exception of a cactus tree).

Representations of malformations and disease are common in north-western South America, especially in the Pacific Coast, from the Tumaco area in southern Colombia to northern Peru.<sup>13</sup> They also appear in the metal and terracotta votive figures of other cultures such as, for example, southern Italy<sup>14</sup> and Jaina Island, Mexico.<sup>15</sup> Diseases causing conspicuous malformations and genetically determined anatomical defects have been reported for Muisca and other Chibcha populations of the Eastern Cordillera.<sup>16</sup> They are completely absent in the votive offerings of the region.

There are many differences between the iconography of the votive and non-votive sets of objects, and one concerns the representation of sexual characteristics. In the non-votive group there are no representations of sexual organs or

sexual intercourse whatsoever; yet in the votive group sex is a most prominent feature of anthropomorphic figures. While only two examples of sexual intercourse are found, sexual organs are clearly depicted in nearly three-quarters of the figures. Taking all the above into account, there seems to be a pattern determining what is acceptable within the iconographic universe of votive items that is rigidly adhered to and differs radically from the patterns governing the decoration of adornments.

Anthropozoomorphic motifs are clearly not as common in the Eastern Cordillera as in other goldworking areas of Colombia. There is one, however, which is extremely important and constitutes the core of adornment iconography: bird-men. One would expect this shamanistic motif to be occasionally, if not frequently, present in votive figures. I was unable to record a single figure depicting the combination of bird and human characteristics found in pendants and breastplates. Birds appear by themselves, decorating staffs, spearthrowers, benches and trays, or on the head or shoulders of anthropomorphic figures – never combined with men in one single figure (Fig. 6.3).

The range of animals represented in votive figures is quite different from those appearing on adornments. Even though birds are present in the votive group, they have less pre-eminence. At the same time other animals, very scarce or completely absent in adornments, acquire an important role, as is the case with jaguars and snakes. Both are frequent and enormously varied in their representations. Another animal absent in the votive context is the frog, otherwise common in necklaces and pendants.

The range of scenes is rather limited. While





6.3 Man with staff and birds  
(male figures category).

most of them seem to convey very special ritual activities (i.e. a sacrifice, an offering or an important person standing in the middle of an enclosure), others refer to domestic or, at least, not distinctly ritual activities; this is the case with couples embracing and the alligator that has eaten a man. The existence of other types of scenes could, therefore, be expected. Hunting, and especially deer hunting, was a very important activity with ritual connotations.<sup>17</sup> War was an ever-present part of life in certain areas of Muisca territory since it was the only way of keeping the Magdalena valley tribes at bay.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, weapons, people carrying them and warriors with trophies are frequently depicted. There are, however, no figures depicting actual combat or hunting scenes.

Enclosures, with or without people in them, occur quite frequently (Fig. 6.4). Some even have a rough representation of the avenues that opened in front of them and served for ritual competitions.<sup>19</sup> Not one shows the buildings (such as houses and temples) which stood inside.<sup>20</sup> Nor are houses and temples found as separate images.

There are, finally, no representations of trees or plants of any kind. One object, which I have not been able to examine personally, looks very much like a cactus tree. If it is indeed a cactus, then it would be the only such case. Plants and vegetable products are represented in metal objects elsewhere in prehispanic Colombia (e.g. in Calima, Quimbaya and Palmira objects). Moreover, they played an important role in the life of Chibcha communities of the Eastern Cordillera; their range of uses included, naturally, some ritual ones such as the building of temples with special logs of *Guayacan* brought from the eastern Orinoco Basin plains.<sup>21</sup> Coca plants were highly valued for their leaves, as were tobacco and some other lesser-known varieties, but none were represented in votive contexts.

Despite this, it is worth looking again at the iconographic universe of votive items. Human figures form a very important part of the group (Fig. 6.5), both in quantitative and qualitative terms; they number 932 (including scenes and objects with human figures), which is 55.6% of all the votive figures. There are three times more male than female figures and, as a whole, men tend to be more elaborate than women; the simplest type of figure for both sexes (women/men without additional elements) forms a much larger proportion of the female group (31.3%) than of the male one (19.6%). On the other hand, complex, elaborate and large figures tend to be more frequent in the male than in the female group.





6.4 (above) Enclosure with main and secondary figures (scenes category).



6.5 (above right) Man sitting on a bench (male figures category).

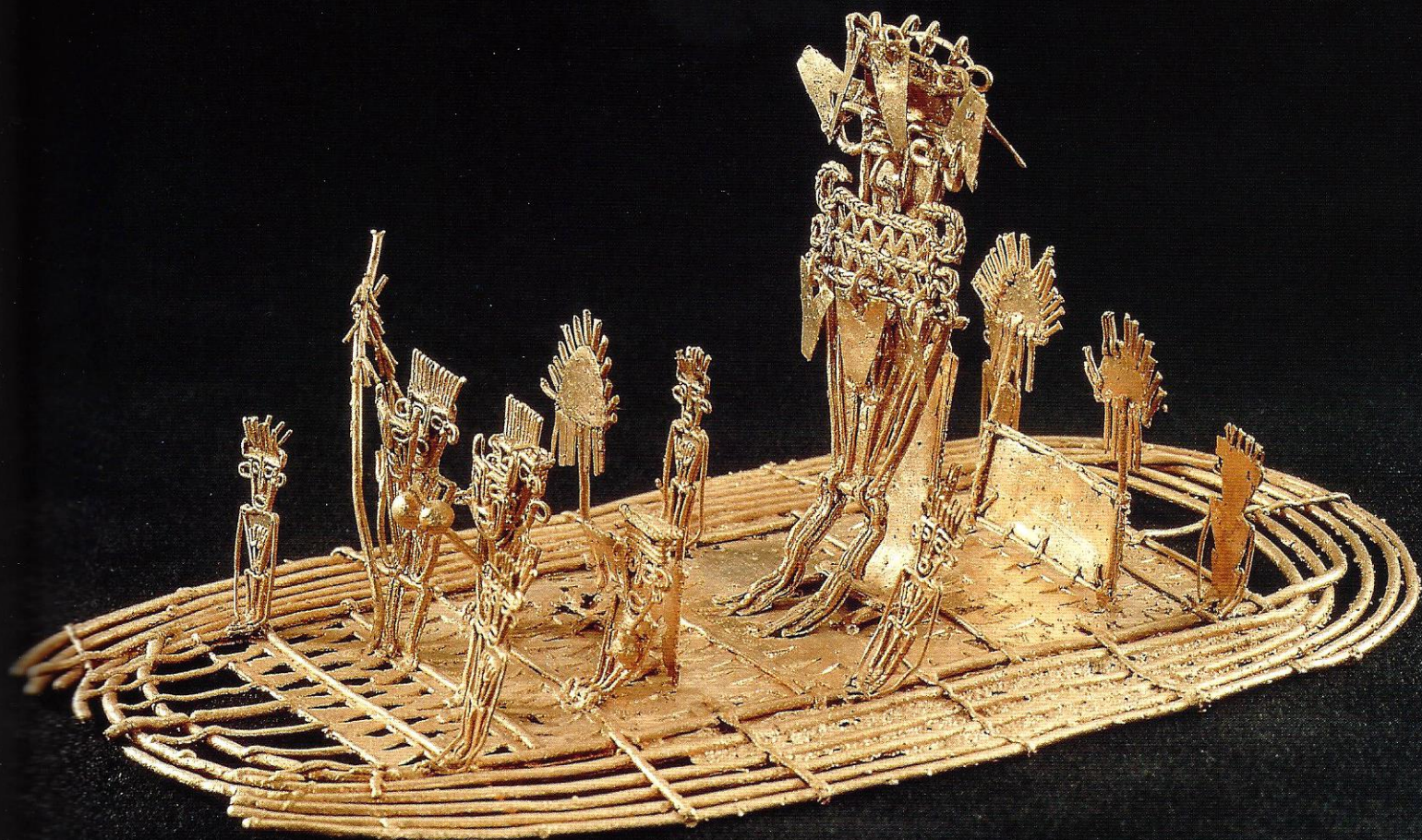
The existence of a large group of unsexed figures (181 or 10.8% of the votive items) is extremely interesting. As I have already pointed out, the absence of sex organs is not due, at least in an overwhelming majority of the cases, to the representation of garments which might have covered them. Most of the categories and attributes present in the male and female groups are also present in the unsexed figures, even though they are even less elaborate and complex than the female figures. The simplest type (without additional elements) constitutes the majority (58%) of the group.

The categories that I established for the classification reflect the most conspicuous characteristics, but they do not account for the wide range of variation present in anthropomorphic figures. Apart from sexual features and attributes such as staffs, birds, weapons, lime containers, trays,

bags, benches, adornments and body postures, there are many different types of headdresses<sup>22</sup> and forms and positions of parts of the head and body.<sup>23</sup> The range of different figures is such that, to a certain point, it can be said that there are no two figures alike in every detail. Whether these differences are due to regional variation in the manufacture of types or whether they are just the expression of particular stages of production in different workshops will have to be investigated. It is evident, nonetheless, that the final form of votive figures was not determined by very strict models; this may also explain the limited use of matrices to cast votive figures. As long as basic attributes were present, details could vary widely.

The scenes constitute another interesting group. Even though limited in number (67 or 4% of votive items), they are, by far, the most elaborate objects. Some scenes are readily identifiable as





6.6 Raft (scenes category).

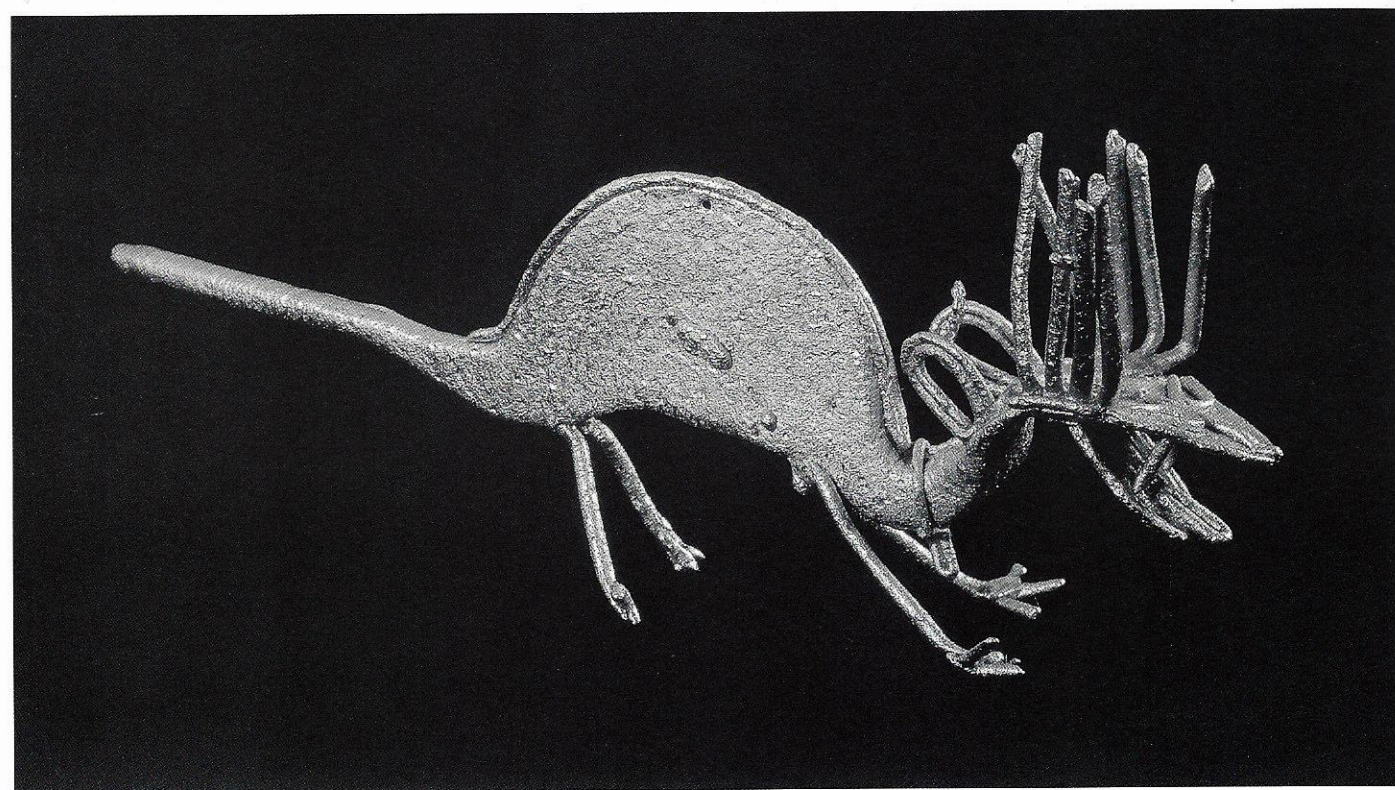
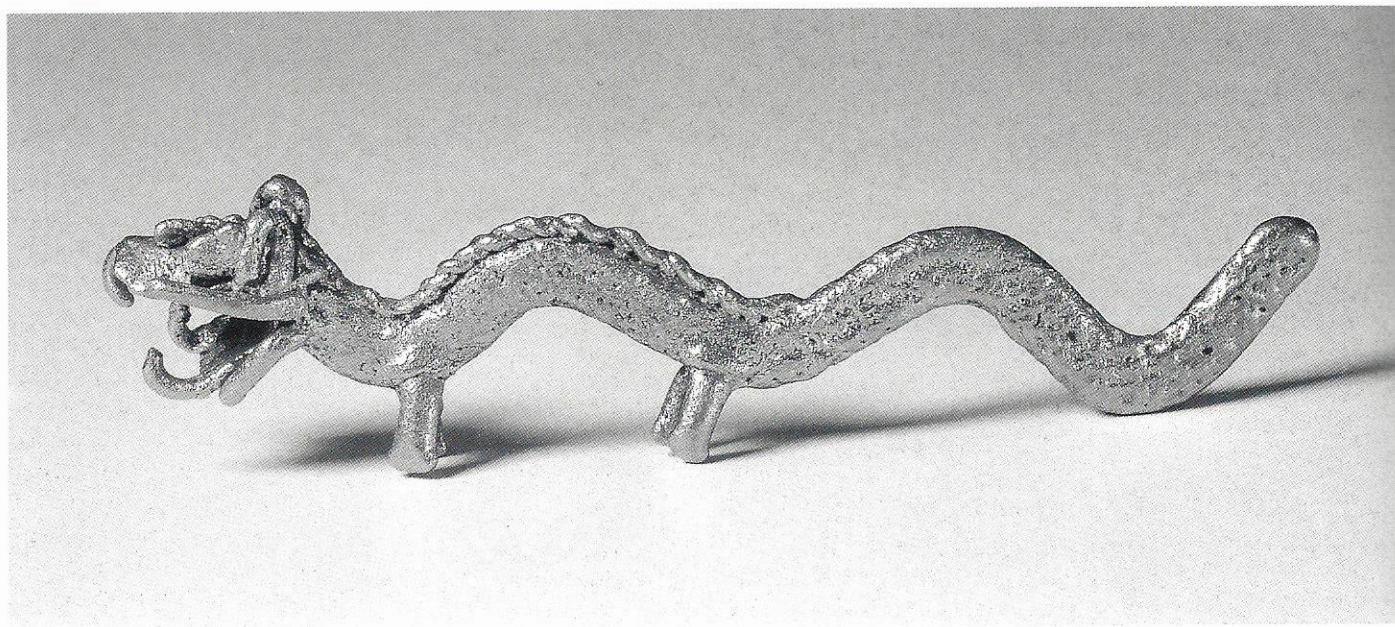
depictions of significant events or acts of ritual life which are well known from the ethnohistoric documentation;<sup>24</sup> that is the case with chiefs on litters, enclosures, rafts (Fig. 6.6) and sacrificial posts. There are some other, somewhat problematic, scenes: double heads springing from single unsexed bodies; couples making love; and an alligator with a human head inside its open belly. These later types are extremely rare.

I have already mentioned that jaguars and snakes are especially important in the group of animal votive figures (Figs 6.7–8). Both are known to have had special significance in Muisca and Guane mythology. Jaguars were hunted and their skins used by shamans for ritual occasions,<sup>25</sup> sometimes they were kept captive in cages belonging to the Chiefs.<sup>26</sup> In Guane and northern Muisca pottery jaguars and their skin pattern are often depicted. Snakes were regarded as ancestors

of humanity in the myth of Bachue, one of the main accounts of the origin of humanity.<sup>27</sup> This goddess emerged from Iguaque lake as a snake and then became a woman; after her life on Earth she and her son became snakes again and returned to the depths of the same lake.

The importance of birds representing the drug-induced imaginary flights of shamans has already been mentioned. Birds, however, are divided into two distinct groups, one of which clearly represents species which are not characterized by their ability to fly, or at least to reach great heights, such as pheasants and parrots. Another significant animal is the deer; both species existing in the Eastern Cordillera (*Odocoileus virginianus* and *Mazama sp.*) were regarded as special prey reserved for important people.<sup>28</sup> There is an association in Muisca language between deer (*boy-chica*), weaving and the cultural hero (*Bochica*),





6.7 (top) Serpentiform jaguar (animals category).

6.8 (bottom) Jaguar (animals category).

who taught the art of weaving.<sup>29</sup> The significance of the other animals represented (lizards, turtles, snails, insects and unidentified mammals) is not referred to in documents directly linked with Indian communities of the Eastern Cordillera.

Objects, both for personal use and belonging to the household, form another big group (495 or 29.6% of votive items). A large proportion (214) is represented by staffs (with or without birds).

Even though Spanish chroniclers do mention staffs,<sup>30</sup> they have never been regarded as very important items. They are probably a symbol of status and authority, a type of authority which was in many cases linked with religion and shamans, as is suggested by the frequent association with birds.

Spearthrowers were the preferred type of weapon among Chibcha speakers in the region





6.9 Man with weapons  
(male figures category).

(Fig. 6.9); as votive figures, they are very frequent (102) and share with staffs, though to a lesser degree, the association with birds. Shields, blowguns, axes, quivers and bows constitute categories that, due to their use, it is possible to associate with spearthrowers. The iconography of weapons and people carrying them is usually associated with societies frequently involved in war; offerings of real weapons are common in these cases.<sup>31</sup>

With the exception of the Guanes, most of the groups inhabiting the Eastern Cordillera have traditionally been regarded as peaceful.<sup>32</sup> Recent studies have shown, nevertheless, that internal conflicts were rife in the years preceding the arrival of the Europeans.<sup>33</sup> It is very likely that war, and the need to fight in order to defend the territories of the communities, has been overlooked as a strong force shaping the life of these societies (Fig. 6.10).

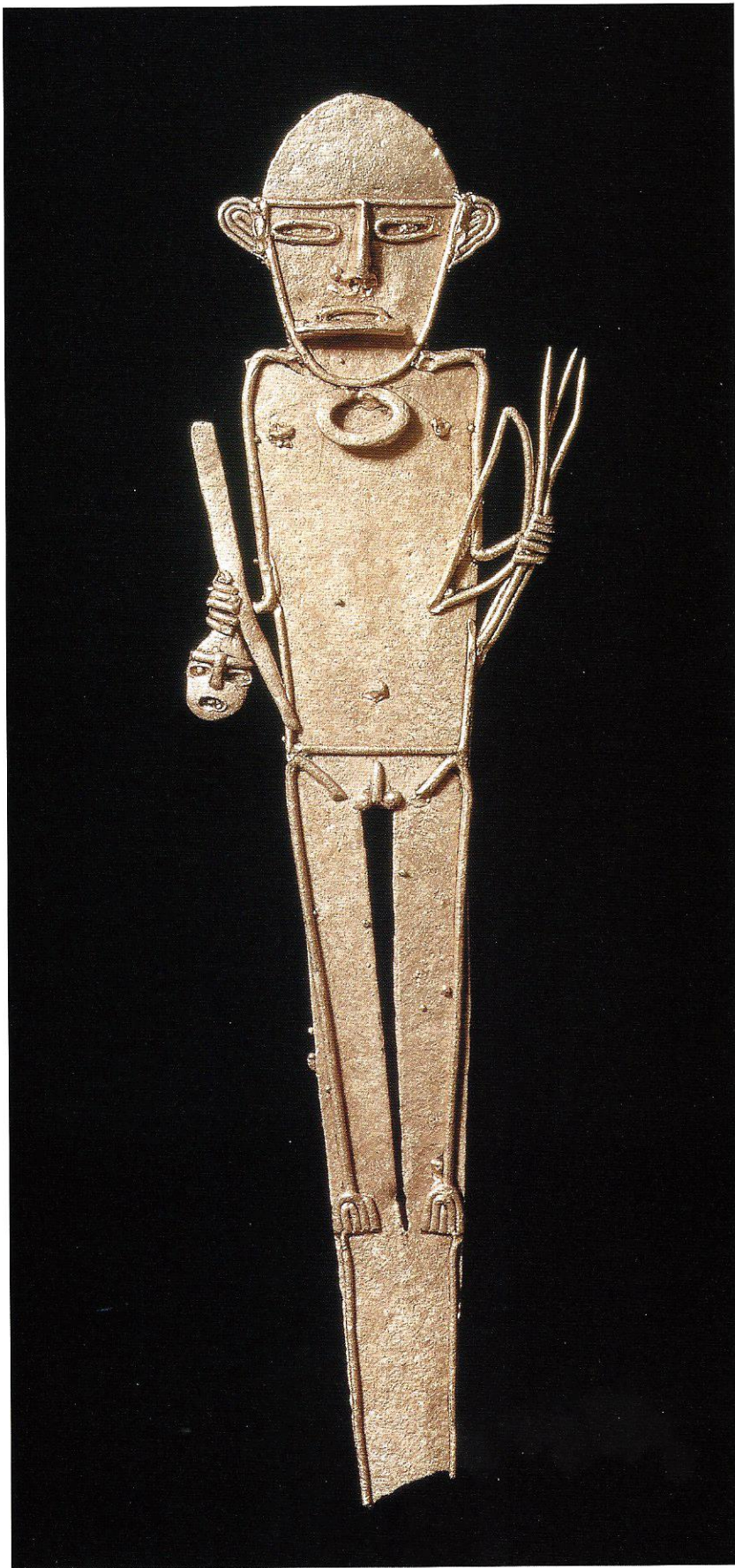
Another group of objects is directly related to the use of drugs: hallucinogen trays (Fig. 6.11), lime containers and bags (Fig. 6.12). They come as no surprise in view of what is known about the use of substances such as coca and *yopo* in the region. There are, finally, several other categories of objects, which are difficult to interpret. An interesting type are cradles, with or without babies (Fig. 6.13). This miscellany includes ritual objects of shamanic use (masks, benches, drums) and ordinary objects (robes, belts, weaving looms, baskets, vessels, etc.), which may have had, in spite of their modest appearance, certain symbolic importance.

#### Additional characteristics of votive depictions

It is very unlikely that each category of votive offering had a significance of its own, independent from the whole group. The analysis of the sample has shown the recurrence of types, which, apart from minor details, clearly depict the same icon and must, therefore, share much the same meaning. On the other hand, Muisca votive offerings were subject to rigid norms; Spanish chroniclers agree in saying that *jeques* (shamans) determined the type of figure to be offered.<sup>34</sup> In this case it is also quite improbable that the characteristics of the offering were determined by individual needs. This notion is a Judaeo-Christian concept,<sup>35</sup> first applied to American Indians by the sixteenth-century European historians, and has persisted unchallenged in spite of its inability to explain the basic facts of prehispanic offerings. Furthermore, detailed studies of votive offerings in the Old World have shown that their character was, in many cases, very different from the Judaeo-Christian model.<sup>36</sup>

Surface colour is a conspicuous property of metal objects, which is usually achieved intentionally by alloying basic metals or by special surface treatments.<sup>37</sup> This property was accurately determined for 43.9% of the sample; the findings confirm a preference for two groups of colours, whitish yellows (36.6%) and pinkish yellows (31.0%), which were obtained by alloying





between 70 and 90% gold with 20 to 10% silver (the rest being copper) for the first group, and 60 to 90% gold with 40 to 10% copper for the second group. The remaining 32.4% ranges across several shades of reddish yellows without any definite concentration.

There is no way of knowing the particular significance of the two principal groups of colours but, nevertheless, this bipolar trend agrees with the 'strong tendency towards binary oppositions' found by Osborn<sup>38</sup> among the modern Uwas of the Eastern Cordillera, as well as their colour classification patterns.<sup>39</sup> This prominent feature also seems to have prevailed in prehispanic times.<sup>40</sup> The available data does not show any clear pattern of surface colour emerging for particular types of objects or for specific sites.

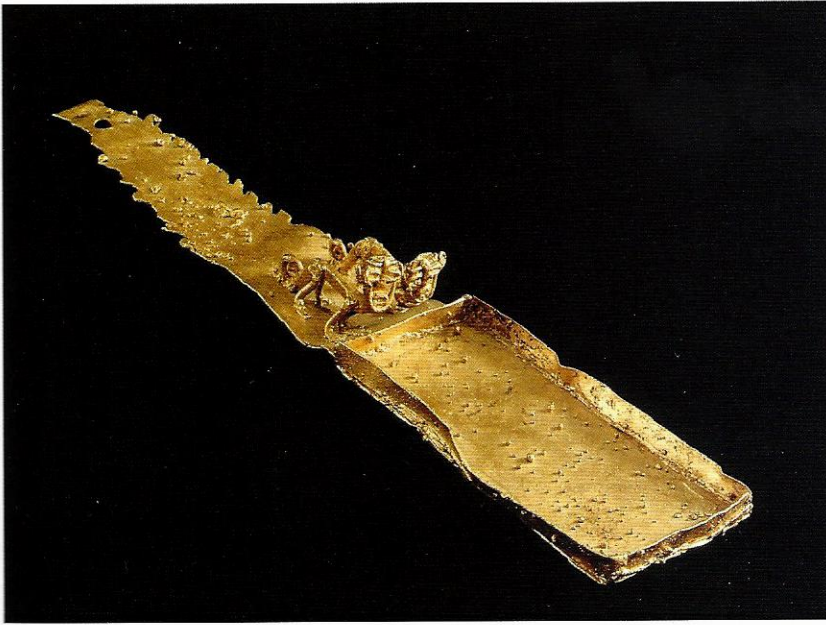
Manufacturing technique is predominantly lost-wax casting (82.5%) but, nonetheless, hammering intervenes, either as the sole technique or in conjunction with casting, in 19.9% of the objects. Hammering was an important technique in the Eastern Cordillera and it was extensively used. The importance and use of hammering are better understood when votive items are separated from adornments. In the votive group only 1.4% of the objects are hammered while in the adornments group this figure rises to 37.9%; taking into account the secondary use of hammering for finishing purposes, it must be concluded that this technique was applied to nearly 40% of Eastern Cordillera adornments.

Lost-wax casting with stone matrices is not as frequent as is commonly believed; just 9.3% of the sample was manufactured in this way. The technique is restricted mainly to necklaces and to model human and bird figures in pendants and breastplates. There is no extensive use of it to manufacture votive figures. Lost-wax casting with core was not very frequent either; only 142 objects (4.73% of sample) have cores. There are reasons to believe that goldsmiths in the Eastern Cordillera did not master this technique. Most of the objects cast with cores reveal manufacturing defects, such as voids and porosity. This, however, did not greatly affect the production of tri-dimensional complex objects which were cast in solid blocks.

Finishing is rather coarse for most objects (72.5%), but again there is a marked difference between the votive items and the adornments. Polished and well-polished votive figures amount to just 1.9% of the group; with respect to adornments this figure rises to 59%. It is not possible,

6.10 Warrior with trophy head  
(male figures category).

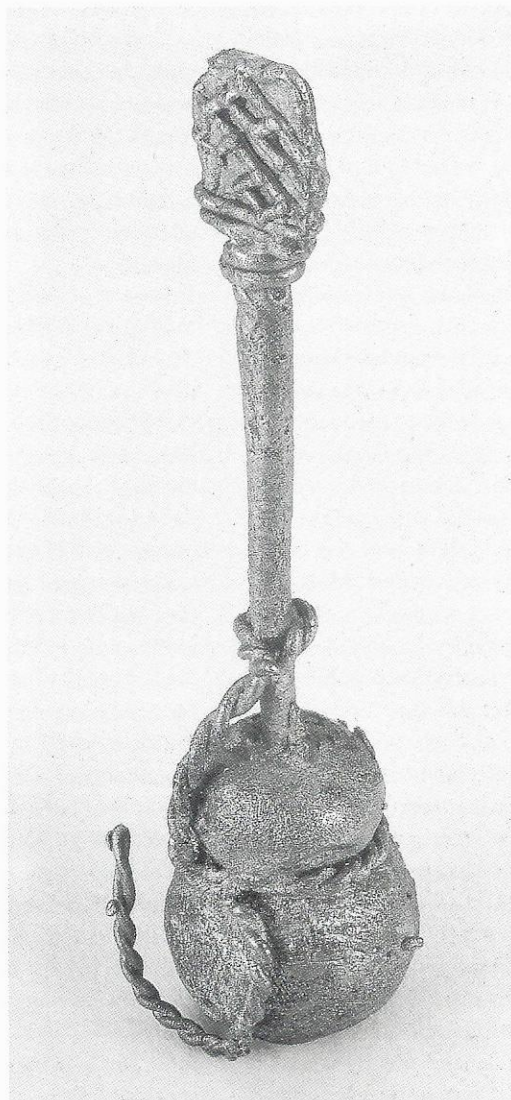




6.11 (above) Jaguars on a tray (objects of personal use category).

6.12 (right) Lime container (objects of personal use category).

6.13 (far right) Cradle with baby (household objects category).



then, to continue to assert that Eastern Cordillera adornments as a whole are characterized by a coarse and careless finish. Surface depletion gilding is present in 2% of the sample; it was possibly used also to obtain certain surface colours not present in the alloy used.

Metallurgical composition is available for just 9.9% of the objects, mainly votive figures. The data show a marked concentration in the range of high to medium gold-content *tumbagas* (40 to 80% gold). Copper is used to a much greater extent than in other prehispanic cultures, with the exception of Nariño in southern Colombia; pure copper and copper-rich (up to 80% Cu) objects amount to nearly 10% of the sample. This proportion is only a fraction of the original one; many copper objects were lost in their burial sites, due to severe corrosion, and many others were not collected by treasure hunters, because they were regarded as valueless.





Another striking fact of metallurgical composition is the consistent presence of silver in relatively high quantities. While most of these results can be explained by the presence of native silver in alluvial gold, one set of very high values (up to 31%) suggests that in some cases it was intentionally added to the alloy, possibly as a means of obtaining very whitish colours. It must be noted that silver is scarce in the Eastern Cordillera and its neighbourhood; apart from the mines which possibly existed near Sogamoso, the nearest sources would have been in the Central Cordillera (Mariquita and La Plata), but it is not certain that they were exploited in prehispanic times.

### Votive assemblages and votive grammar

To understand the Muisca votive system, it is important to take into account that many objects were not found on their own but as part of assemblages. The concept of votive assemblage as used in this study requires a precise definition in order to avoid confusion. This is most important, since this work is being carried out in museum collections which lack much contextual information. Votive assemblages in the Eastern Cordillera resemble what López Luján<sup>41</sup> has termed 'caches'. The most important link between the objects making up the assemblage is their contemporaneity; to constitute a cache they must have all been interred at roughly the same time or within a short period, no longer than the life span of a single person. This is usually established by spatial association – the concept of proximity is most important – which is often determined by a container or by any other archaeological structure in which the objects are placed.

Apart from contemporaneity and spatial proximity, the other important condition is that a significant number of expressly votive objects be present. The precise number or proportion is not easily established, since it depends on various factors. Those factors include the total number of objects in the group; the number and relative importance of non-votive objects; the type of site; the presence or absence of votive containers; and the quality and quantity of non-metallic objects. If the group has a clearly votive setting (i.e. a vessel in a hilltop), then the presence of only a few votive figures suffices to classify it as a votive assemblage. If the group comes from a non-votive setting, then a larger proportion of votive figures would be required to distinguish it from other types of groups, such as funerary offerings. Provided that the setting is characteristically votive, a group might be considered as a votive assemblage

even if it contains no proper votive figures; as pointed out, votive offerings were by no means limited to votive figures. Seventy votive assemblages were identified.

The seventy votive assemblages recorded are composed of a minimum of two and a maximum of fifty-seven metallic objects. The size of assemblages, as a general rule, tends to be small. Half of the assemblages recorded have between two and seven elements, while those having more than twenty elements amount to just 15.6%. With respect to the distribution of objects in size categories the larger number of small assemblages counterbalances the smaller number of large assemblages so that overall there is an even distribution.

The number of objects in votive assemblages, 807, accounts for 26.9% of the total number of objects recorded (3,001). Of this total, 196 are non-votive objects and 611 are votive figures; globally speaking, votive assemblages are composed of 24.3% of non-votive objects and 75.7% of votive figures. A proportion of 14.8% of non-votive objects (total 1,326) was found as part of votive assemblages, while 36.5% of votive figures (total 1,675) form part of assemblages. With respect to the relative heterogeneity of votive assemblages, it was found that they are composed of between one and twenty-two different types of objects.

Forty-nine assemblages (70%) have between two and seven different types of objects, while fifty-six (80%) have between two and nine. Thirteen (18.6%) have ten or more types, and five (7.1%) have fifteen or more types. These figures show that variation is limited and that the range of different objects is nearly always low; extremely varied assemblages are unusual.

Another aspect is that of figure predominance, which occurs if any type is present in two out of two, three, four or five objects; three out of six, seven or eight objects; and 25% or more from a total of nine or more objects. If there are two similar and closely related types in the assemblage (i.e. staffs and staffs with birds), then there is combined predominance. If there are two very different types in equal or very close proportions, there is shared predominance.

Out of seventy assemblages, thirty-seven (52.9%) have some type of figure predominance. Predominances are divided in the following manner: twenty-two (59.5%) are simple; nine (24.3%) are combined; five (13.5%) are shared; and one (2.7%) is both combined and shared. The most frequent predominant types are: men with staffs and birds (8); men with weapons (5); staffs



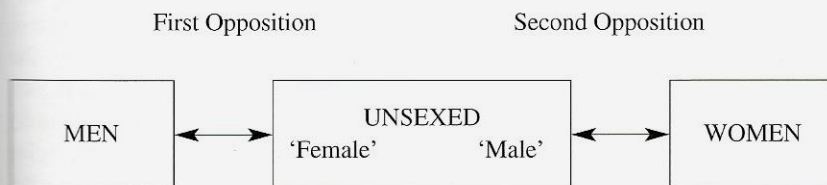
with birds (5); staffs (4); spearthrowers (4); unsexed figures without additional elements (4); men without additional elements (3) and necklaces (non-votive) (3). Non-votive objects are predominant in nine cases, of which six correspond to simple predominances, one is a shared predominance between two non-votive types and another a shared predominance between a votive and a non-votive type.

### Dualism and dualistic equilibrium

Native American cultures have a special character, which differs greatly from Western culture. The study of the religious systems of several prehispanic and present-day societies has enabled us to gain some insights into what is a very complex vision of the cosmos.<sup>42</sup> Dualism, that is the concept of the whole cosmos and each of its parts as entities composed of opposed complementary principles,<sup>43</sup> seems to be prevalent amongst these societies. Elsewhere, I have proposed that dualistic modes of thought played a significant role in shaping conceptions and patterns of life among Eastern Cordillera groups through different applications of the same underlying principle.<sup>44</sup> An exploration of dualism as it applies to the iconography of votive figures raises interesting questions.

Gender represents the most obvious expression of a dualistic opposition,<sup>45</sup> and tends to reflect the deepest cultural patterns of dualistic thought. I have already called attention to the importance of the representation of gender in anthropomorphic figures, where there are three clearly distinguished groups: female, male and unsexed figures. These groups encapsulate the basic principles involved in dualistic oppositions. In this case it is a complex form of dualistic opposition, which has been recognized elsewhere in South America,<sup>46</sup> involving a triad (three elements) linked by a double opposition. Male figures represent a pole of one of the oppositions, whose other pole is constituted by the unsexed figures; they in turn form another opposition with female figures as shown in the following diagram:

This dualistic pattern can be recognized in



other cultural expressions of the Eastern Cordillera groups.<sup>47</sup> It represents an elaborate form of the simple binary opposition, in which a third element is introduced as a buffer between the extremes (male and female) and in itself incorporates the properties of both. In this way the third element can interact with both the others. The range of possible oppositions includes male–female, male–unsexed, female–unsexed. Anthropomorphic figures probably not only represented but also contained in themselves the essence of basic dualistic principles; to make an offering of them would, therefore, have definite effects upon the equilibrium of these principles in the cosmos.

Reichel-Dolmatoff has drawn attention to the widespread belief among Chibcha-speaking communities that humans are responsible for the preservation of the harmony and equilibrium of the cosmos.<sup>48</sup> In spite of our limited understanding of the full range and depth of religious beliefs among Eastern Cordillera groups, it seems likely that they all shared the notion that man can effectively alter, by means of his actions, the equilibrium of heaven and earth. There are several ways in which this equilibrium can be upset, and mythology is full of descriptions of catastrophic events which are marked by a disruption in the harmony between opposing principles.<sup>49</sup> Restoring the equilibrium and maintaining a watchful eye on any disturbance is the work of religious specialists, shamans or *jeques*, and is achieved mainly through two fundamental actions: sacrifice and offering.

Equilibrium could be upset by an excess of either one of two opposing principles, and restoring the balance demanded the offering of an opposing essence, according to the nature of the disturbance. This underlying rationale probably explains the existence of male and female votive figures. But the equilibrium of the cosmos was certainly not such a simple matter. It must have involved other more subtle oppositions and complementary poles than just a straightforward male–female pair. Complex dualistic visions of the cosmos include oppositions related to existence (life–death); direction and movement (up–down, left–right, still–moving, etc.); colour and brightness (black–white, white–red, dark–bright, etc.); temperature (cold–hot); form and shape (square–round, flat–volume, etc.); smell; taste; texture; sound; and many others which are applied to the understanding of physical phenomena, social events, settlement patterns, kinship and descent, and are often reflected in language.<sup>50</sup>

The very complex nature of the votive offerings



of the Eastern Cordillera suggests that they are the representation of an equally complex system of dualistic oppositions. I have identified the basic principle as a sexual one consisting of a double opposition of three linked principles. The particular attributes of those figures that have enabled me to propose a more refined classification must, therefore, represent secondary dualistic oppositions operating alongside the main one. When our understanding of the full range of religious beliefs is so limited, the identification of the pairs of principles involved in those oppositions becomes speculative and even entirely hypothetical. Nevertheless, it is worth looking at the most conspicuous secondary oppositions and attempting an interpretation of their significance.

Both aggressive and passive attributes seem to be present in various groups, including anthropomorphic figures and those intended for personal use. Warfare was a pervasive concern for the communities of the Eastern Cordillera and is represented as a principle of aggression in a wide array of figures. People armed with weapons and the weapons themselves possibly represent the aggression pole of this dualistic opposition, counterbalanced by the passive principle most probably depicted through figures such as those seated holding knees, people with staffs and household objects. An event, such as the raid by a neighbouring group on a defenceless village, for example, would have altered the equilibrium between aggression and passiveness and may have demanded corrective action such as the offering of large quantities of figures containing the aggression principle.

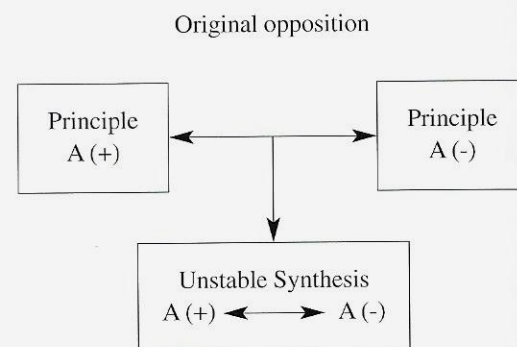
Another opposition is that between barren and fertile. Fertility seems to be depicted by women with children and children in cradles. The principle of barrenness is expressed through empty cradles. Fertility, of the land as well as the people, is a matter of continuing concern. Natural phenomena, such as droughts, plagues and diseases, upset the equilibrium of fertility, thus demanding corrective actions which often include offerings.<sup>51</sup> The opposite situation, excess fertility, is likely to have been less problematical. It is not surprising, therefore, that figures representing the fertility principle would be much more abundant than those representing the barren principle.

Yet another opposition, which appears in the votive iconography, is that of domination–submission. I believe it is clearly depicted in social terms, with the figures of heavily adorned people, chiefs on litters, and enclosures with one human figure representing the domination principle, and people without additional elements representing

the submission principle. Even so, the way in which this opposition was conceived and, therefore, the meaning of its iconographic expression are not limited to the social sphere. As a universal dualistic pair, they extend to all levels of the cosmos. Whenever the equilibrium between what rules and what is meant to be ruled was disturbed, the appropriate remedial measures were required, including perhaps offering elements of some of those principles.

In the context of Amerindian mythology jaguars can be seen to embody the colour, power and strength of the sun.<sup>52</sup> Snakes, on the other hand, are linked with darkness, humidity and the underworld. These two types of animals, which are prevalent in the votive iconography seem to express, therefore, the opposition between brightness and darkness or, from another angle, the world above and the world below. Contrary to what one might suppose, snakes appear more frequently than jaguars. The dominance of the principle of darkness, the underworld, may reflect the overwhelming importance of the earth as the place where life originates.

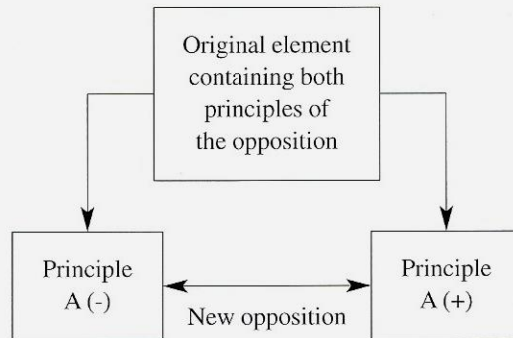
There is, however, a special characteristic in this opposition. As described above, a variety of jaguars acquire a definite serpentiform shape while, on the other hand, some snakes have very short limbs and feline whiskers and fangs. There is, in fact, a continuum between jaguars and snakes corresponding to another type of dualistic opposition, whereby opposite principles generate an unstable synthesis in danger of reverting to the original principles.<sup>53</sup> The following diagram explains the opposition:



One series of figures that deserves special attention comprises those that incorporate the representation of both principles of the opposition. I have identified this type of dualism underlying the Muisca myth of origin.<sup>54</sup> A single original principle unfolds into its opposite and itself, eventually generating two opposed independent principles which remain linked by their complementarity.



The outcome of this process is illustrated by the diagram:



I believe that a particular type of scene, enclosures with main and secondary figures, may well express a domination–submission opposition. The raft scenes, which share with enclosures the depiction of main and secondary figures, might also express such an opposition, even though other important iconographic elements are certainly present in them. A similar variation, this time related to the fertility–barrenness opposition could be depicted in the figures of couples embracing.

The identification of the oppositions that have been analysed does not exhaust the significance of votive iconography. There is, however, a risk of indulging in over-interpretation and conjecture without solid supporting evidence. One final point

must be noted: as a general rule, in all the oppositions I have examined, including the main one (male–unsexed–female), there is a dominant principle, one that is more frequent and noticeable. The other principle, less frequent and conspicuous, can be considered as secondary. In the main opposition the dominant principle is male; in the aggression–passiveness opposition it is, undoubtedly, aggression; in the fertility opposition the dominant principle is fertility; in the domination opposition it is, definitively, domination; and in the brightness–darkness opposition the underworld seems to be dominant.

These observations may also help account for the range of ‘absent’ representations that have been mentioned earlier. Certain anthropomorphic and anthropozoomorphic figures, various kinds of animals, certain types of scenes, all types of buildings and all forms of vegetation are excluded from the votive repertoire because they do not convey any symbolic meaning within the system of oppositions. The primary aim was to express basic principles, not to produce portraits of people, animals and objects. The overall pattern of presence and absence of figures and themes will only make complete sense when it is read as an expression of meaning within a system that may be understood as a visual, symbolic language.



## Notes

1 This paper is a revised excerpt of the Ph.D. thesis 'Prehispanic Metallurgy and Votive Offerings in the Eastern Cordillera, Colombia', written under the supervision of Drs Warwick Bray and José Oliver and submitted to University College London in April 1997. The research was based on a sample of 3,001 objects from museums and collections in Colombia and various countries in Europe. The second part of this investigation dealt with the classification and analysis of 1,675 votive objects from that region. Only those votive figures will be described and discussed in this paper.

2 Lleras and Langebaek 1987; Oliver 1989.

3 Osborn 1985.

4 Langebaek 1990; Oliver 1989.

5 Constenla 1992; Lleras 1990.

6 Broadbent 1986; Lleras 1990; Langebaek 1995.

7 Hernández Rodríguez 1975; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1985a; Langebaek 1987; Londoño 1984a, b.

8 Lleras 1992.

9 Lleras and Vargas 1990; Langebaek 1995.

10 Langebaek 1995.

11 Lleras and Vargas 1990.

12 McEwan and Van de Guchte 1992; Van de Guchte 1990.

13 Reichel-Dolmatoff 1965.

14 Girardon 1994.

15 Corson 1976.

16 Boada 1987; Cardenas 1990.

17 Simon 1981 (1625).

18 Ibid.

19 Castellanos 1955 (1601).

20 Ibid.

21 Silva Celis 1945.

22 Peréz de Barradas 1958.

23 Plazas 1975.

24 Aguado 1956; Castellanos 1955 (1601); Simon 1981 (1625).

25 De la Cruz 1984.

26 Londoño 1990.

27 Zerda 1883.

28 Simon 1981 (1625).

29 Londoño, pers. comm.

30 *Cetros* in Castellanos 1955 (1601).

31 Bradley 1990.

32 Uricoechea 1971 (1854).

33 Londoño 1983, 1984a, b.

34 Aguado 1956; Castellanos 1955 (1601); Simon 1981 (1625).

35 Mauss 1966; Evans-Pritchard 1956.

36 Pinch 1993; Bergman 1985; Englund 1985.

37 Lechtman 1973.

38 Osborn 1995.

39 Faust 1990.

40 Lleras 1992.

41 López Luján 1995.

42 Rostworowski 1986; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1981, 1985b, 1988; Osborn 1990, 1995; Faust 1990.

43 Lévi-Strauss 1966.

44 Lleras 1992, following Lévi-Strauss 1966.

45 Ibid.

46 Rostworowski 1986.

47 Lleras 1992.

48 Reichel-Dolmatoff 1985b.

49 Kroeber 1946.

50 Constenla 1992; Correa 1992.

51 López Luján 1995.

52 Reichel-Dolmatoff 1988.

53 Lleras 1992.

54 Ibid.

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