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Gold in the Everyday Lives of Indigenous Peoples of Sixteenth-Century Southern Central America

Eugenia Ibarra

(1563) (Juan Vázquez de Coronado) “as best he could, received said presents [gold pieces], giving in trade a great amount of axes, glass beads, and other things; which they received with great pleasure since there is trade among these natives and they value this metal highly for use in their trades” (Fernández Bonilla 1886a: 374)

Introduction

The subject of gold objects from southern Central America has been of great interest to archaeologists, art and other historians, and the general public for a long time. Small figures—skillfully decorated objects now in national and foreign museums, in private collections, and in the hands of individuals—have been discovered more as a result of plundering than of archaeological investigation. Such figures are important in the documentary sources for the contact and colonial periods. Those documents help in reconstructing the social, political, ideological, and natural worlds of native peoples, including their daily lives, and the sociological and historical contexts of their times. Such information makes it possible to contextualize the information that the ethnohistorical sources offer about gold in the early colonial era.

This chapter explores gold within the context of the sociopolitical and supernatural worlds of sixteenth-century southern Central American natives. Within this framework is an examination of gold’s role in daily activities and how it functioned variously as a symbol of identity, wisdom, and knowledge and at other times as a generator of ethnicity. The Spanish destroyed this indigenous system during their conquest, with gold playing a crucial role in this rapid cultural change.

Methodological Considerations

Studying gold in southern Central America necessarily involves investigating the logic

behind the organization and order that people gave those objects of gold in light of the sociopolitical and cultural dynamics of their times. Naturally, this involves analyzing trade activities involving gifts and gifts offered in reciprocity in all sectors of society.

Some investigators have tied particular gold objects to magical-religious uses or sociopolitical functions related to rank (Ibarra n.d.a; 1990; Cooke and Bray 1985; Aguilar 1988; 1997; Fernández and González 1997; Fernández 1995; Corrales n.d.). Such interpretations appear to be strongly influenced by the words of William M. Gabb, who visited Talamanca in 1874:

I had the opportunity to bear visual witness to the [funeral ceremonies] that were made for an old man who died at Urén. He belonged to a *distinguished family*: one of his ancestors, perhaps his father, had been one of the leaders during the war with the Tiribí, and he had inherited and possessed one of the few gold “eagles,” or “*insignias of rank*.” (Gabb 1874: 125) (emphasis added)

This quotation's focus on gold use by men inhibited researchers from making any connection between gold and women for a number of years. Generally, research has only viewed the tip of the iceberg in the sense that it has been trying to interpret the function and significance of gold objects only in relation to elite natives in hierarchical “rulerships.”¹ Other contexts for gold use have been ignored. Documentary sources are rich in information about elite connections to gold but evidence exists that other members of southern Central American societies also had access to gold and that this metal played a role in daily life, including in exchanges and trade among common people.

The different forms and designs of gold objects likely signified the position within a hierarchy of the individuals who wore them (Ibarra 1990: 126; 1991: 9–10). Doubtless, some gold objects also held magical-religious meaning. The sources that support this study, the methodology applied to them, and a more regional focus suggest that gold also fulfilled other, complementary roles in the daily lives of the natives of southern Central America. Ethnographic analogy has been employed where pertinent. Although there is not necessarily an exact correspondence between past societies and those that survived the Spanish Conquest, the oral tradition of native peoples and ethnographic studies identify important social and cultural similarities among the natives of the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, particularly in the case of the Bribri of Talamanca.

The evidence here is based on primary sources in document collections and on works focusing on the conquest and colonization of Central America. The majority of these date from the sixteenth century, with the exception of those dealing specifically with Costa Rica,

¹ The Spanish used the term *caciques* (chiefs) generally to identify a person who occupied a position superior in rank to the rest of the population. What these positions consisted of or what their titles or activities were is unknown. Among the Bribri and Cabécar in Talamanca at the beginning of the twentieth century, such “chiefs” were divided into the *usékol* (*usékar*), high priest; the *bikili*, interpreter between the *usékar* and the village; the *bulu*, king or chief, the *awá*, medicine man; the *isokol* (*isogro*), bard; the *okom*, burial priest; the *sia'tmi*, caretaker of the medicine man's stones; the *bikakla*, head of ceremonies; and the *tsuru'okom*, distributor of cacao (Jara 1993: 30). Whether the same designations existed in the sixteenth century remains unconfirmed.

where the conquest occurred later, and some important twentieth-century sources. The documents primarily concern the processes of “discovery,” Spanish conquest, and, in some areas, colonization.

The Spanish often noted where they had traded or taken gold, and the place names still pertain or the areas are easily identifiable. The Europeans also recorded the objects they took—“eagles,” disks, anthropomorphic figures, *muñecas*, and the like. The conquistadors also distinguished between what they called “good gold” and “low gold.” The former consists of objects of high gold content and low amounts of alloy metals, whereas the latter refers to alloys usually of high copper content (*guanín* or *tumbaga*). While the Spanish sometimes mentioned places where only low gold was to be had, it is possible that such locales may have also gone unreported in some instances. These reports on gold, its forms, and the many locations where it could be acquired provide valuable information about precious metals in native south Central American societies at the time of Spanish contact and conquest.

Carlos H. Aguilar proposed an archaeological zone for the distribution of gold in Costa Rica and Panama that he at first called the Tumbaga Isthmus (1972) and later dubbed the Guanín Isthmus (1998). Based on his study of the Banco Central de Costa Rica’s Museo del Oro collection, Aguilar demarcated this area as the territory between the San Juan River and the edge of Nicaragua’s La Mosquitia, with the Guanacaste mountain range to the east, by the southern cone of Mesoamerica to the north. At the extreme south are the Panamanian provinces of Coclé, Panama, and Darién. Aguilar does not, however, exclude regions of Colombia. On the contrary, he suggests that similarities are to be expected in the patterning of “gold and guanín areas despite the cultural diversity of the inhabitants” (Aguilar, personal communication, 1998).

Gold at the Conquest

Friar Ramón Pané first defined the term *guanín*, observing that the Taíno of Hispaniola had metal ornaments shaped like disks that, when small, were used as earrings, but if large, were used as pectorals. These were made from a gold-copper alloy with a gold content of less than twelve carats.² In general he used *guanín* to mean a low gold in pieces that he called mirrors (Szaszdi 1984: 19; Pané 1988: 8–13, 61).

Columbus, familiar with *guanín*, had no trouble identifying it in 1502 in Cariay and other parts of the Caribbean coast. He commented that the people walked around naked, with a mirror at their necks, which in Carambaru they were unwilling to trade or sell (Fernández Bonilla 1975: 22). He added that the people sent him “well-adorned” girls who possessed concealed magic powder. Hernando Columbus wrote that the girls wore *guanín* objects around their necks, but he did not specify their forms (Lines 1952: 155). Bartolomé de las Casas, who was not himself a witness to these events, declared that these objects were

² Documentary sources from eighteenth-century Costa Rica indicate the use of *tumbaga* among Spanish women in rings, buckles, and bracelets, although these objects’ origins are unclear (ANCR: Protocolos de Cartago no. 960, f51.14v [1772] and no. 958 f21.30 [1770]).

“eagles”³ (Fernández Bonilla 1975: 19). This citation is the only source that mentions a female wearing a gold eagle around her neck; it is perhaps not to be fully trusted. In southern Central America, the Spaniards began to refer to guanín objects worn around the neck as “medals,” because of their similarity to ornaments of the Catholic faith.

The word guanín began disappearing as the conquest of the region advanced, eventually being replaced with “gold,” “worked gold,” “low gold,” and “fine gold,” to which were added additional descriptions related to its value or weight. In foundry documents from between 1514 and 1528, this gold and copper alloy was known as “weights of golden copper without fineness,” “guanín without fineness,” and “guanín copper” (Góngora 1962: 108). In 1519 it was defined as “a very low gold containing copper that often after smelting does not have fineness” (Alvarez Rubiano 1944: 511).

Rivers, Mines, and Smiths

How did the natives of southern Central America obtain gold? How was guanín produced in this area? The documentary sources agree that natives obtained gold in three ways: from rivers, with the use of tree leaves and “other trivial tools,” probably calabash gourds (*Crescentia alata*) (Fernández Bonilla 1886b: 434); from mines; and through trade with other villages, sometimes in the form of unsmelted nuggets. Searching for gold mines was of primary interest to the Spaniards, who were amazed by the enormous quantity of gold obtainable from rivers (Fig. 1).

In 1502 in Veragua, Columbus found gold in the roots of trees, indicating the presence of alluvial gold (Lines 1952: 165). In 1513 Vasco Núñez de Balboa declared the discovery of thirty rivers in Darién that contained gold. According to Balboa the house of the chief Dabaibe, located two days upriver, was “where all the gold comes from that leaves by this gulf and that the chiefs of these regions have” (Jopling 1994: 23). He mentions rivers with gold in the territories of Careta, Comogre, and Pocorosa in Caribbean Panama. As the conquest advanced, rivers containing gold were found in the Duy Valley, among the rivers of Santiago de Turlurí, at Chiriquí and in the Guaymí Valley (Peralta 1883: 522, 528), at Coctu and Turucaca (Vázquez de Coronado 1964: 51, 52), and in the Estrella River (today the Changuinola and Tilorio) (Fernández Bonilla 1882: 27), to mention just a few. Balboa notes other ways of obtaining gold by the people of Dabaibe:

The way it is gathered . . . is to wait for the rivers in the gorges to rise, and then after the flow dries up the gold is discovered left behind. It is big, in nuggets as large as oranges or fists. Or they set fire to the dry grass on the ground and then go to collect the gold nuggets. (Jopling 1994: 23)

³ For the purposes of this study, the term *eagles* in general refers to an object shaped as a bird, although I am well aware that scholars have identified other flying birds, including buzzards, and hummingbirds (Aguilar 1972; Helms 1979; Cooke 1985; Corrales n.d.). The same holds true for the “medals,” since the sources only distinguish them as larger or smaller, while archaeologists have identified variations (Aguilar 1972; 1998; Falchetti 1995).

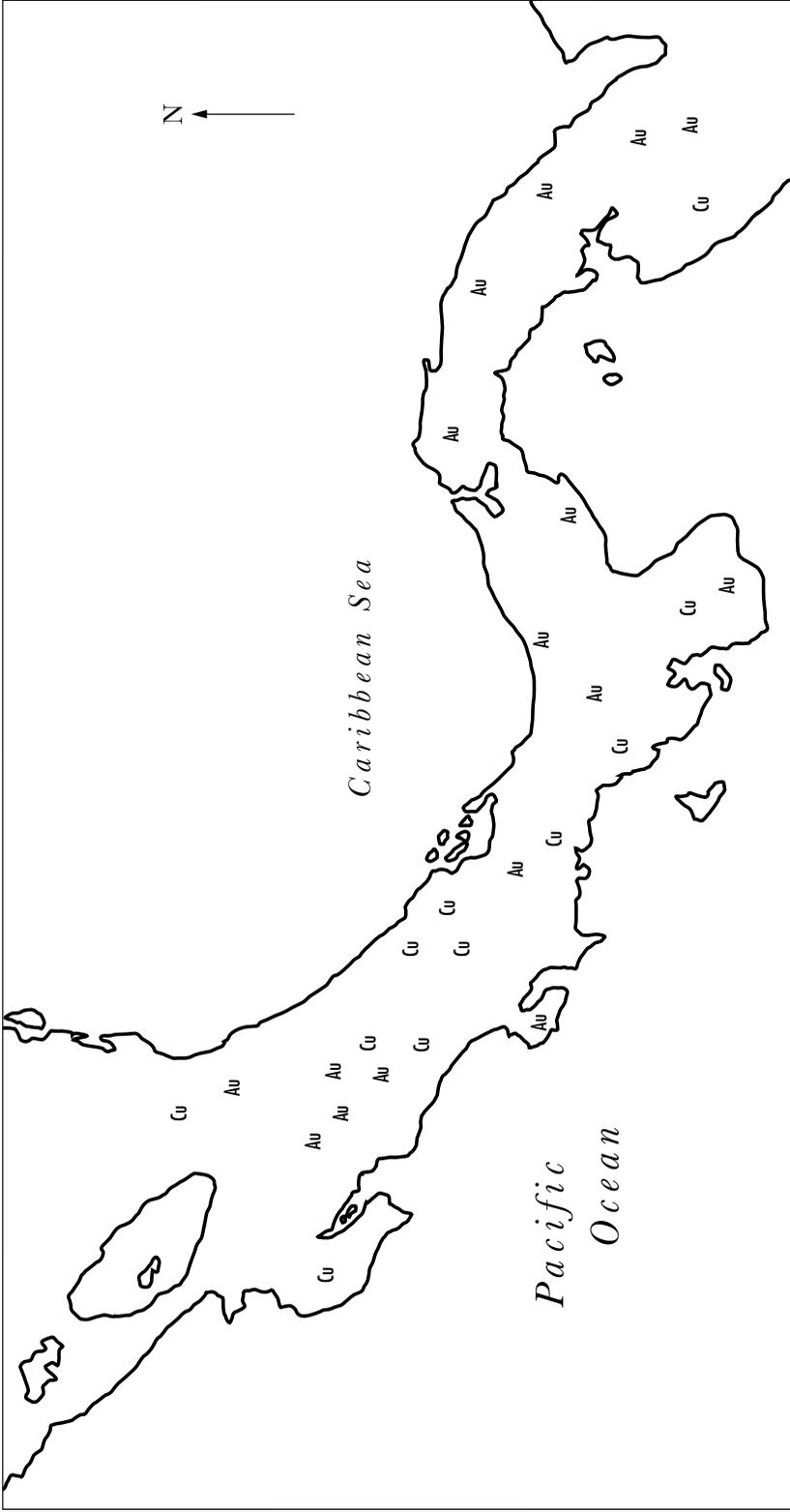


Fig. 1 Gold and copper deposits in southern Central America. Map by Eugenia Ibarra (after Comisión del Atlas de Panamá, 1965)

Gold from mines was more difficult for the Spaniards to locate (see Cooke, this volume). Although information is scarce, in 1515 there were thought to be mines 50 leagues to the east of Darién, in Mocli and Tarufí, in the vicinity of Urabá (Alvarez Rubiano 1944: 434; Góngora 1962: 110). Other data from 1520 point to mines “at Chira,” which may refer to the present-day Abangares mines in Costa Rica (Vega Bolaños 1954: 87); from 1527, at Santa María de la Buena Esperanza in Nicaragua, about 25 leagues from León (Peralta 1883: 716); from 1528, around Chiriquí on lands belonging to Chief Bacari (Góngora 1962: 122); and from 1529, around the Belén River and Nombre de Dios, Panama (Fernández de Oviedo 1977: 477–478). Documentation revealing how the natives extracted gold from mines is to be found, but in mines operated by the Spanish in Nicaragua gold was obtained using native and enslaved manual labor. Available sources indicate that the natives of southern Central America obtained gold primarily from rivers and through exchange systems. The important role that exchange played in gold’s acquisition cannot be overstated.

Guanín was made by melting gold in clay crucibles and adding copper, a well-known process. Copper is mentioned infrequently in the documentation. In 1577, Diego de Artieda confirmed the presence of copper and *alambre* in the area surrounding Almirante Bay (Peralta 1883: 548). According to Adam Szaszdi (1984: 19), *alambre* is an alloy of gold and copper in which copper predominates, that is, gold of less than twelve carats, or *guanín*. Columbus also refers to *alambre*. The following quotation from 1610 describes how *guanín* was made:

And considering the gold in the pieces I mentioned, the carats are lower since their low skill level forces them to make an alloy of copper and [gold melted in clay crucibles] in order to cast them, [and to work them into different forms] it must be of less fineness. But in the case of medals, since they only hammer and spread them without need of alloys, the fineness of the gold increases to twenty-two carats. (Fernández Bonilla 1886c: 158; Peralta 1883: 699–700)

Columbus also notes

“riches fixed and deep in all the mountains in the provinces of Térrevi el Grande and Térrevi el Chico, occupying more than 20 leagues along the Almirante Bay. The principal amount of gold is in the hills of Corotapa on that same bay at the point where the Estrella River enters, a wondrous river.” (ibid.)

One must suppose that the riches in the mountains around Almirante Bay refer to copper which can still be found there today.

Judging from all the available information, between 1500 and 1629 *guanín* could be found in the region of Urabá, in the northeast of Darién, on the coast and islands of Mar del Sur, in Nata, Coclé, Cohíba (Cueva), the Pacific coast of Costa Rica, Caribbean Panama, Veragua, Almirante Bay, Caribbean Costa Rica, including Talamanca and Térrevi (Terbi), the islands of the Gulf of Nicoya, the Isthmus of Rivas, and the chiefdoms of Nicaragua. It was distributed throughout the area in question, suggesting that *guanín* was valued and appreciated similarly by all of its users. Its distribution supports the name that Aguilar gave to this area—the *Guanín Isthmus*. Some of the meanings that gold had in the early colonial era

seem to have been understood equally by all the different ethnic groups that used it, although it is probable that their motivations for using it were varied.

Who worked gold? Only chiefs? Previous investigations reveal a close relationship between chiefs and gold, leading to the proposition that these men were the primary goldsmiths, particularly in light of an account by Vázquez de Coronado in which he declares that the chief of Couto had made some eagles himself (Ibarra n.d.a: 167–171). Despite evidence strongly associating chiefs with gold, several other accounts cast doubt on whether chiefs alone produced gold. For example, at Dabaibe the chief had “a hundred men who continually worked gold” (Jopling 1994: 23). Were these hundred men also chiefs, however? It must be remembered that not everyone has the skill and ability required to be an artist, especially a goldsmith.

María Eugenia Bozzoli has uncovered clan specialization among the Bribri. For example, the *inokÖLdiwak* clan were “masters of an abundance of money or gold.” This information supports oral tradition of the Bribri that states that the god Sibö designated clans to specialize in different gold figures and in other activities (Bozzoli 1972: 178; 1979: 41–49). Without a doubt, some goldsmiths came from such specialized clans. These people, probably male, likely transferred their specialized knowledge of gold technology and decoration to other men from their clan as well as to others who showed an aptitude for goldsmithing. There must have been some form of control over this process, but at present it is impossible to determine what it was. According to one theory, by Gordon R. Willey (1984: 374), it is possible that these “masters” may have come from distant places.

Gold Objects: Types and Function

With the aid of linguistics and archaeology, it has been possible to identify many of the gold jewelry styles produced by the natives of southern Central America. Thus far twenty-six different types of objects have been so identified. Among the most important are eagles (including some with two heads); “small idols, small men, and statuettes”; medals (or disks); beads and small tubes for necklaces; nose rings; armor; diadems; bracelets; small flasks (*limetas*) similar to perfume bottles; objects with hanging parts; bells; earrings; and animal forms, including toads, spiders, and lizards, among others.

In the case of the eagles, various accounts describe them as “small royal eagles” or “royal eagles” of fine worked gold (Vázquez de Coronado 1964: 48), but distinctions are not discernible from the source documents. The fact that these objects were given by different chiefs as gifts suggests that chieftain’s eagles had different attributes, perhaps based on rank or ethnicity. What is clear is that some were more “royal” than others.

“Small idols” likely refers to anthropomorphic pieces that are part human and part animal, which Aguilar calls “shamans” (Aguilar 1997: 55, 58, 65, 66). These appear to have belonged to religious specialists. They are recorded as coming from “temples” or “chapels” or the homes of people with magical-religious functions, thereby suggesting that they held similar properties.

[T]his witness saw two gold idols, one belonging to the master of the province and the other to . . . this witness. When he tried to sell the latter to some Indians, they said that it was an idol from a temple, and since it belonged to sorcerers they did not want to buy it. (Fernández Bonilla 1882: 152)

This bit of information seems to indicate that some objects had particular functions, in this case a religious one associated with sorcery, and that a relationship existed between this piece and some person considered to be powerful and “dangerous” by the local population.⁴ This reference also vaguely hints at a hierarchy of gold objects.

It seems clear that certain types of objects were associated with different civil and religious ranks and perhaps with other objects. Some were intended for religious uses, others had civil purposes, but each filled its role without losing all characteristics of the other. Doubtless the small idols were used by people in charge to manage “forces” and “powers” beyond those that concerned the general population. These objects held such “power” that persons not authorized or prepared to touch them did not dare do so out of respect and fear. Friar Agustín de Cevallos asserted that the natives of Talamanca “had idols and priests that seemed more like sorcerers to those who were familiar with the Devil” (Peralta 1883: 698).

Regarding such idols, upon the arrival of Gil González in 1522, the chief of Nicoya gave him gold in the form of small idols (Fernández Bonilla 1881: 61), probably obtained from villages to the south. In this case, the chief did not present eagles or medals, possibly indicating some ethnic or cultural differentiation from his southern neighbors.

Rank insignia medals probably possessed power as can be inferred from the following quotation from 1556:

After the captain and the people who had gone with him to kill the Indians surrounded them, Yñigo López Carrillo killed two of the Indians with a crossbow, one of whom wore a gold medal at his chest. As soon as that Indian was killed, all the other Indians ended their siege of the Christians and went away. For that reason this witness believes and is certain, as are all those who went there to conquer them, that the Indian with the gold medal must have been the leader of all the others. (Fernández Bonilla 1886: 448)

In this example, from Veragua, the leader’s medal carried the power inherent in the role of a war chief. In Mexico and Peru, when the leader of a battle died, his army withdrew immediately as well. In Talamanca, the *awá* (shaman) Arturo Morales Pita told Bozzoli that his grandfather had told him that for the Bribri, the death of the chief was an indication that victory for the enemies was preordained (Bozzoli, personal communication, 1999). Once the medal holder died, the medal itself most likely preserved the vital power associated with the person’s role of war chief as was the case with ritual objects of the *awapa* or *usékar* (high priest) in Talamanca.

⁴ In the case of Talamanca, the “chapel” mentioned likely was not really a chapel, but the house of an important person, such as a chief. There was a great amount of gold, pearls, and beads that “since it belonged to sorcerers” certain natives refused to touch (Fernández Bonilla 1886: 152). I appreciate the help of Marcos Guevara in interpreting this quotation.

Boruca legends and oral tradition reveal similar associations.

The Boruca had an object like a plate, made from gold and very large, that they liked to use when they were in battle. At that time, the Boruca would aim the object at their enemies to blind them with the reflection of the sunlight so they could not see well. In the meantime they would take the upper hand in the battle. . . The Boruca had with them the golden plate and with it they conquered their enemies. (Constenla Umãna and Maroto 1986: 79)

The “golden plate” likely refers to a disk; and the same significance can be attributed to the objects mentioned in both texts above. Its sacredness may be the symbolic linkage between the shiny metal, its shape, and the sun (see Saunders, this volume). Likewise, wearing a gold object around the neck seems to have been a symbol of authority, as can be inferred from statement made in 1515, when at Darién, Pedrarias Dávila ordered that gold be smelted to make a chain for him to use when he went to visit the chiefs of Comogre, Pocososa, and Tubanamá so that “the Indians would see his authority” (Jopling 1994: 89). In other words, Pedrarias adopted a symbolic system that the natives could understand. This reaffirms the relationship between power and certain gold objects among southern Central Americans.

It is important to analyze documentary evidence about the relationship between women and gold pieces. With only a few exceptions, possibly due to errors in the sources, the intentions of the conquistadors, or the effects of the conquest, it does not appear that women in general took part in the exchange of small idols, eagles, or medals.⁵ The handling of such objects, starting with production, overwhelmingly appears to have been a male activity. An *awá* told Bozzoli that women could touch such objects as long as they were ritually prepared to do so. In general, he was referring to his wives or nieces (Bozzoli, personal communication, 1999). Perhaps it was the same centuries ago.

There does exist limited documentary information describing women as “donors” of gold, providing objects to the conquistadors using their husbands as intermediaries. These cases involve wives of chiefs or leaders, but not common women. It is unknown what form this gold took, and the scarcity of documentation does not allow for speculation. On the other hand, female natives on *encomienda* in Darién and Panama had in their possession (or could acquire) beads and tubes for necklaces and nose pieces or nose rings, which they gave as gifts or traded with *encomenderos*, perhaps in place of labor. Spanish women were involved in the gold trade in the early colonial era, and by their own dealings with natives or chiefs under their husbands’ authority or by their husbands’ means the women obtained small gold pieces that they melted down to make gold necklaces and bracelets (Alvarez Rubiano 1944: 663; Jopling 1994: 92).⁶

References to gold armor probably refer to a group of pieces that chiefs used on special occasions, such as during wartime or for burial, when they were laid out with it adorning

⁵ I refer especially to natives on *encomienda* in Panama (Jopling 1994: 87, 90, 98).

⁶ There is no evidence in documents from the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries that Spanish women wore native jewelry (Carmela Velázquez, personal communication, 1999). This custom may only have originated around the middle of the twentieth century.

their bodies (Jopling 1994: 31). This likely included a helmet or basinet or some type of hat, a pectoral, a diadem, and other pieces that could be worn on the ears, arms, waist, and legs. In some parts of Colombia, however, there are objects that are clearly described as being armor (Clemencia Plazas, personal communication, 1999).

There is no direct information linking type and function for gold objects such as frogs, toads, and lizards. These are described as trade objects that natives from Talamanca took to Térraba (Fernández Bonilla 1886c: 158), although they are also reported as seen briefly at the Gulf of Urabá and Veragua. These representations may have been related in daily life to sacred knowledge for the propitiation of good omens for agriculture, hunting, war, and other activities for the benefit of society in general. They may also represent important mythological figures (Corrales n.d.). Limetas are mentioned only in relation to the Azuero Peninsula and the Gulf of Urabá. Since they resemble bottles used to contain powdered lime for the chewing of coca leaves, their use could be related to narcotics consumption, as is the case in other areas of Colombia.

Trade and the Power of Objects

Population studies suggest that the territories of Costa Rica and Panama were home to approximately 2,200,000 inhabitants (Kramer, Lovell, and Lutz 1993). Their societies were organized into chiefdoms (Fig. 2) and exhibited hierarchical differences based on size, power, and access to resources and lines of communication. The area was culturally diverse. Clothing, jewelry, languages, ceremonies, and other aspects of daily life, as well as physical appearance and skin color, served to contrast various groups, such as the Cueva-Chocó and the Guaymí (Ibarra 2001).

The peoples of the area also shared cultural elements—common languages such as Huetar in central Costa Rica. Common languages are also thought to have existed along the Caribbean coast of Panama and into central Panama, allowing more efficient communication between chiefdoms during the course of daily life.

The documentary sources indicate that the inhabitants of Central America had a vast knowledge of geography—their own and beyond their borders—and of other ethnic groups in distant lands. The inhabitants of the Guanajas Islands in the Gulf of Honduras gave Columbus directions to Veragua (las Casas 1986: 274). Between 1519 and 1544 Mesoamerican groups paid occasional visits to various points on the Caribbean and Pacific coasts, apparently with the objective of trading goods or taking prisoners (Ibarra 1995; Jopling 1994: 32). Visitors from the Pacific regions of South America, Ecuador, and Colombia arrived in Panama in boats filled with trade goods (Ramírez 1995: 139). Informants from Cariay, on the Caribbean coast of modern-day Costa Rica, told news about people further down the coast. Judging from the evidence of such contacts and trips, it is not difficult to imagine the enormity of “commercial” activity in southern Central America in 1500.

In examining trade in the area, it is useful to classify goods as alienable and inalienable

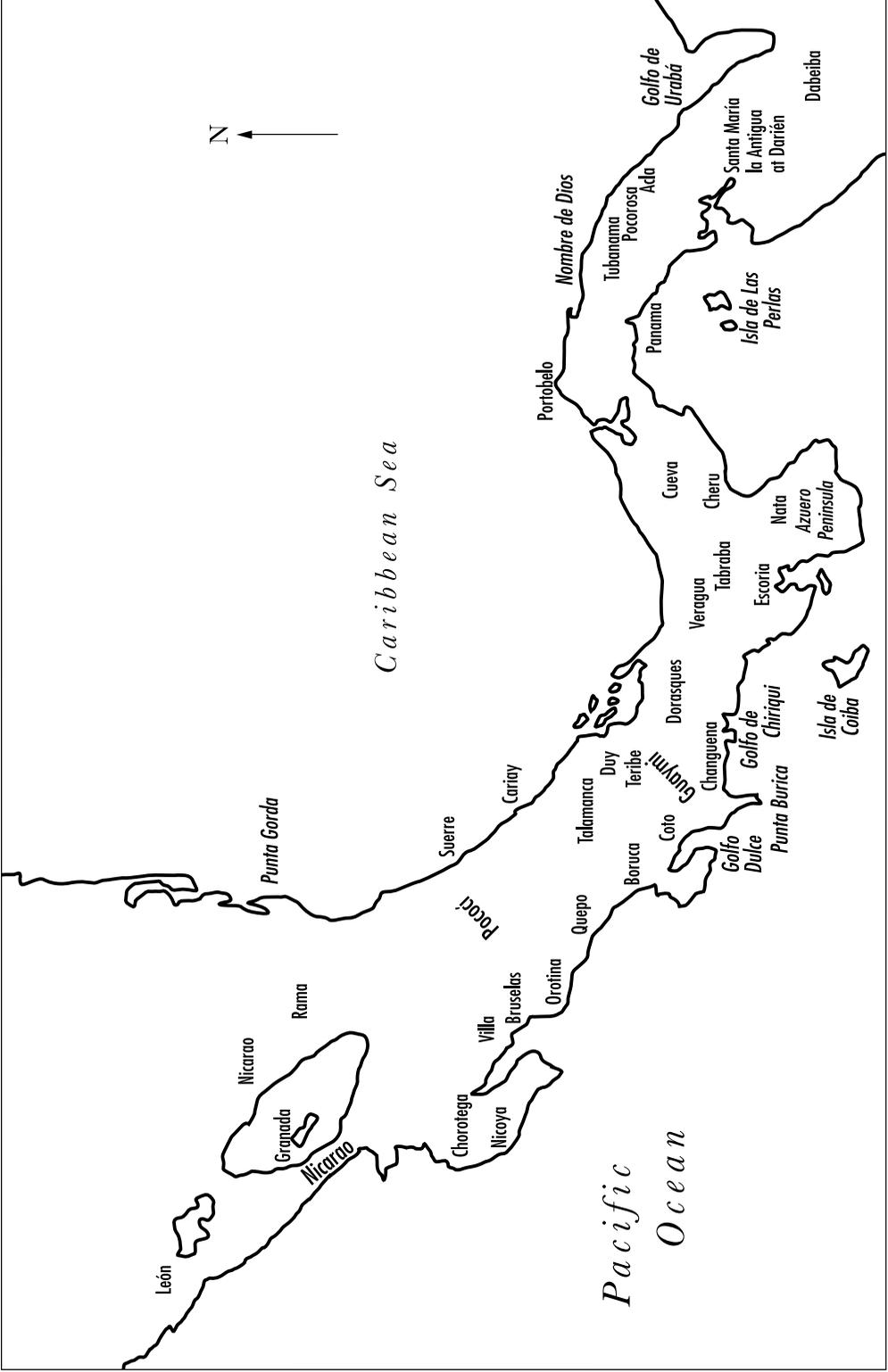


Fig. 2 Spanish and native settlements in sixteenth-century southern Central America. Map by Eugenia Ibarra

objects, as Maurice Godelier proposed, based on his careful revision of Marcel Mauss's theories about the Baruya of New Guinea (Godelier 1998a: 157–207).⁷

Among the Kwakiutl, Mauss identified two levels of wealth represented by two types of copper goods: one, the most important, did not leave the family and remained permanently within the clan; the second type, called secondary copper goods, were accessories to the first type, had a second-class status, and traveled from chief to chief and family to family between generations and sexes as potlatch gifts. Mauss, however, did not explain that the most beautiful and oldest copper objects were not part of the potlatch, because they were considered sacred gifts of the gods and spirits and were associated with the most prestigious levels of rank. Among the Baruya, similar sacred objects are associated with the Great Men, the masters of initiation and masters of the shamans (Godelier 1998b: 16). This is the basic concept of inalienable and alienable goods. Inalienable goods are never given as gifts, but are instead preserved, while alienable goods are used in trade activities as gifts and counter-gifts (Godelier 1998a: 54, 55).

Preserved objects maintain their identities through time, thus maintaining differences in identity between individuals and groups who, through trade, want to situate themselves in relation to others in neighboring societies. These differences in identity constitute a hierarchy, and in this process of producing and reproducing hierarchies among individuals, groups, and societies, the strategies of giving and preserving fill distinct but complementary roles. Preserving certain items is always necessary (Weiner, cited in Godelier 1998a). Godelier observes that preserved goods have every possibility of becoming more powerful and, as a consequence, of greater symbolic value. One finds that in societies with such outlooks, the social formula is not to preserve in order to give, but to preserve in order *to be able* to give and to give in order *to be able* to preserve. Society is therefore neither the sum of the alienable plus the inalienable nor the juxtaposition of both spheres. Society is only born and maintained by the union and interdependence of these two spheres as well as by their relative differentiation and autonomy. The sphere of political relations revolves around the possession and use of sacred objects that every clan carefully preserves and is unable to give or to trade.

In the dynamics of trade, being indebted to others and having others indebted to oneself are essential elements connecting trade-linked groups and are indispensable to maintain trade. The debt generated by a gift, however, is not annulled or suppressed by an identical gift, since the item given has not been completely separated from the gift process, carrying with it something that forms part of the being and identity of the one who gives it. For this reason, givers no longer have any rights over an object after presenting it, obtaining instead a

⁷ I must clarify that although the Baruya of New Guinea are located far away from the villages under discussion here, they are useful for comparisons with the people of southern Central America based on similarities between their trade activities, such as the type and function of objects traded, and between some aspects of their social organization. For example, the Baruya have some commonalities with Talamanca: they are both organized into clan-based hierarchies, some of the customs practiced by women during menstruation are similar, men are associated more with the forests while women are associated more with cultivation of fields and plowed spaces, and neither culture gives away its land.

series of “benefits.” At the same time, recipients of a gift allow the giver certain rights over themselves.

Godelier, following Mauss, recognized that objects have two characteristics: force, or power, and soul, or spirit. An item given as a gift has a “force” originating from the relationship that ties it to the person who gives it. This creates a “double” relationship, because the giver remains present in the item in the form of a “force” of rights that continues exercising itself over the item and, through it, over the person who accepts it.

As Godelier states, “items are not transferred without reason, nor by their own power” (Godelier 1998a: 149–150). In other words, giving and reciprocating with a similar object represent the most simple and direct form of producing dependency and solidarity, preserving the status of persons in a world in which the greater part of social relations is produced and reproduced through the institution of bonds between people. A gift followed by a countergift constitutes the elemental essence of the entire practice of the gift and is the minimal exchange needed for the practice to make sense.

According to Godelier, as part of the dynamics of gift exchange, it is necessary to consider the intentions of the individuals to produce or reproduce among themselves social relations that combine solidarity and dependency. These relationships between items, individuals, and societies are similar to the thoughts and activities of the inhabitants of southern Central America. Godelier’s classification of objects in the life and society of the Baruya highlights these phenomena. He divides them into three categories: objects that are preserved, or sacred objects; monetary and “quasi-monetary” objects that are traded; and “value” objects that are given as gifts. Baruya sacred objects are inalienable in that they cannot be traded; there is also concern in keeping them within the clan. Such objects may be used in ceremonies and special rituals. Monetary or “quasi-monetary” objects are represented by salt extracted from the ashes of a cultivated plant (Godelier 1998a: 199–201). Salt is considered a source of power that accumulates in the liver, an organ full of blood. It is associated with male sperm and for that reason, salt is manufactured only by men; fields of salt cane grow along the Baruyas’ riverbanks.

Within a tribe salt is for distribution as a gift through relations of kinship, neighbor, and co-initiation. It is never traded as merchandise within these circles. The majority of salt, however, is produced as merchandise for trade with neighboring tribes. The Baruya regularly embark on two- or three-day expeditions after painting their bodies with magical signs to protect them from enemy sorcerers and evil spirits, traveling to the camps of friendly tribes that offer them hospitality and protection and who likely had been enemies yesterday and could well be enemies again tomorrow. This trade among the Baruya takes place in front of the neighboring tribes’ doors in a space that functioned during that time as a zone of peace and trade. The Baruya exchange their salt for various types of goods: productive goods (bows, arrows, etc.); social goods (feathers, large shells, ornaments and artistic items needed to decorate initiates, marriageable women, warriors, etc.); goods for daily use (animal hide cloaks, braided cord nets); and small peccaries.

To the Baruya, salt differs from other types of traded merchandise in that it is the only

good that can be traded for something else, making it a kind of proto-money. Godelier points out that salt serves as “money” for another reason: in the eyes of the Baruya and neighboring tribes, salt contains a magical-religious, vital force and is therefore akin to sacred objects.

The Baruya and their neighbors use salt in ritual contexts, although these rites vary from group to group. On special occasions, salt can be given as a token to seal a peace treaty. Such salt bars serve as reminders and testimony of political agreements.

The tribes that “buy” salt do not use it as a privileged means of payment in their own trade nor do they produce more salt than is necessary to obtain goods that they do not produce themselves or produce in insufficient quantities. They never produce salt to hoard it or to obtain merchandise to resell for profit. If salt is in a certain sense a money, it is “money” that never functions as capital. Baruya salt, although it is the only merchandise traded for any other needed goods, never ceases to be a trade object. While it is certainly a privileged object of exchange, its trade value is not distinguishable enough from its use value for it to be considered money in the strictest sense.

Among the Baruya, objects of value are given as gifts. They can be obtained with salt or other types of goods, such as smooth shells or mother-of-pearl, though in a much more limited form. These objects—such as shell necklaces that are given to sons or daughters when they are born or married—also contain a magical-religious power linked to the reproduction of life. Although gifts such as these necklaces have great value attached to them, they remain different from sacred or monetary objects.

Objects in Southern Central America

Sacred objects, power, and religion

Southern Central Americans of the sixteenth century also possessed sacred, inalienable objects. The Talamanca had cult objects that correspond to Godelier’s observation that “possession of a sacred object is fundamental to having power” (1998b: 17). Within this category are chiefs’ command staves, feathers, and other objects, such as gold eagles belonging to a particular clan and passed from generation to generation. The power contained in sacred objects comes from having been given to their ancestors by gods. The gods, through gifts, grant distinction upon the ancestors, power that a clan can monopolize. Each clan must use these objects in the service of the entire tribe (or its territory) for such things as making rain or securing the fertility of women. This power generates inequality among the clans based on who possesses or does not possess sacred objects (Godelier 1998b: 18).

There also appear to have been sacred objects among the different medical specialists in Talamanca, possibly indicating hierarchy among this type of object (Bozzoli 1982: 48–66). Usékar relics, stones, and staves remain in the immediate family; small healing stones are preserved and given or traded only among *sukias* (healers) under special conditions.⁸ At the

⁸Today the spouses of sisters inheriting these stones pass them down as an inheritance to *awapa* of the same family or sell them to other *sukias* (Bozzoli, personal communication, 1999).

same time, the possession of such objects among the Talamanca elite suggests a particular conception of what could be understood in these societies as “power,” which was associated with the handling of magical-religious forces, garnering propitiation, and establishing relations with supernatural beings for the benefit of all. It therefore seems appropriate that Talamanca leaders were elites who held power based on their training, skills, and roles in society.

Another example of sacred objects can be found in the plumed crest and eagle necklace of Antonio Saldaña, the last chief of Talamanca (see the frontispiece), which the sources state were goods preserved within the tribe. Maurice de Périgny, who visited Talamanca in 1912, observed how the crown of feathers and necklace with seven gold eagles were guarded in Saldaña’s house. The necklace was later sold by Saldaña’s sister, and its whereabouts are unknown (Fernández and González 1997: 14).⁹ That Saldaña’s clan guarded his eagles identifies them as sacred objects and conforms to Godelier’s theories about possession of a sacred object being fundamental to having power.

What about the eagles that were given to the Spaniards? Obviously they were not considered sacred objects since they were given to “foreigners.” This indicates a distinction among eagles that is similar to the Kwakiutl’s copper objects. Different forms and qualities of eagles exist, such as those made from guanín or good gold. Thus it is possible that objects of the same form, such as eagles, were given away, while others were not, depending also on the materials from which they were made.

The following fragment from a Bribri myth, collected by Carlos Gagini and studied by Bozzoli, suggests that ethnic identity was involved in the “spirit” of some eagles as well as in their exchange:

Some Indians went to sell cacao at Cartago. They saw a tapir bathing in a pool, which they hurt with their arrows. The animal fled with the hunters in pursuit. After running some hours, the tapir’s path ended at a stone building from which some strange men emerged. They said that the tapir was not inside, but they were willing to exchange gold eagles for cacao beans. The men brought some eagles out of the house and ordered the hunters to keep their distance. They would throw the eagles so the hunters could catch them and the hunters would do the same with the cacao, but they must not drop any of the eagles. And so they did it, but the last eagle fell on the ground. (Gagini, quoted in Bozzoli n.d.)

Based on this myth, Bozzoli studied kinship relations, the dynamics of trade, and the prohibition against incest among the Bribri. From the fragment here, it is clear that eagles—not disks, frogs, toads or small idols—were going to be used in a situation in which the Bribri (“us”) wanted to establish an alliance with the men from the stone house (“others”). That eagles were the objects chosen for such an important transaction permits cautious specula-

⁹ A replica of the feathered crown was given to the Museo Nacional de Costa Rica in 1957 by native Bribri, who asked that it be placed near the 1892 oil painting of Saldaña displayed there (Meléndez, quoted in Stone 1961: 208).

tion, that the men of the stone house were people with whom the Bribe could also establish matrimonial relations. The eagles may represent a common symbolic language between groups open to establishing kinship relations. This idea might have existed throughout the isthmus and in parts of Colombia. Thus, some eagles were associated with the exercise of power while others might have had qualities for the establishment of kinship relations.

Monetary or Quasi-monetary Objects

Other data allow tentative comparisons of the role of certain gold pieces with that of salt. The goldsmiths of southern Central America have, for the most part, been identified as being male (Vázquez de Coronado 1964: 36), as have the saltmakers of the Baruya. Among the Baruya, salt is traded within the same ethnic group, and in Talamanca in the seventeenth century this was true in respect to gold: the Talamanca offered gold to the Térraba and others, and the Dorasque brought gold to the Térraba and Talamanca. Among the Baruya, salt was distributed through relations of kinship and proximity but never as merchandise within the ethnic group, a practice likely similar to what occurred in southern Central America with gold.

There is little direct evidence of this, but certainly a large quantity of gold was produced for trade with neighboring tribes. As with the Baruya, the natives of these regions regularly left on two- or three-day trading expeditions after painting their bodies with magical signs. Certain trade activities among the Dorasque suggest that in the sixteenth century, some rivers may have been meeting points for "commerce" for the former inhabitants of Costa Rica and Panama.

Available documentation suggests that among the people of southern Central America, gold was exchanged for tapirs, peccaries, resins, and prisoners of war, a category of goods similar to those obtained by the Baruya in exchange for salt. Gold appears to be a type of merchandise different from others in that it alone could be exchanged for other objects, as appears to be the case with salt among the Baruya and with cacao in Mesoamerica. Gold also served in a certain sense to measure the value of exchange of other merchandise since trade starts from stable rates that constitute "prices."

In the eyes of the Baruya, as well as of neighboring tribes, salt serves as "money," because it contains a magical-religious life force unique among sacred objects, a trait similar to the power suggested of gold. Among the Kogi and Desana and among the Uwa of Colombia, goldsmiths transformed metal into objects with ritual and social content that they considered magical and sacred (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1981: 25, 26; Falchetti, in this volume; 1995: 5).

Salt, like gold, appears to be used in ritual contexts. As noted above, salt is given to seal a peace treaty, in such instances serving as a testimony. Perhaps a similar reasoning is why native South Central Americans gave gold to the conquistadors: they sought to seal a political agreement that would allow them to conduct exchange in a peaceful atmosphere.

The natives of southern Central America do not appear to have used gold as a special means of payment in their internal transactions. It also seems that they did not produce more

gold than was necessary for their purposes. Gold pieces kept in baskets in the chiefs' houses were not to make them "rich," but created the possibility of establishing relations with neighboring chiefdoms or with possible enemies, such as Mesoamericans or "strangers" (and enemies) like the Spaniards. Through relationships with these "others," chiefs could obtain important, esoteric knowledge or scarce and rare goods (Helms 1988; Ibarra, 2001).

If certain medals, eagles, and other objects are considered as money-objects, one must take into account various aspects of the categories of such objects. Natives gave eagles and disks to the Spaniards early in the conquest and later. What might these eagles' messages and functions be that distinguishes them from other objects yet at the same time imparts a similarity or complementarity? On the topic of money in Nicaragua, Fernández de Oviedo noted that "[cacao beans] are saved and considered as precious as Christians and other people consider gold and money; these beans are considered so because they can buy all other things with them (Fernández de Oviedo 1976: 67)." Juan Vázquez de Coronado stated that "there is trade between these natives and they value this metal highly for barter" (Fernández Bonilla 1886b: 374). Obviously, the reference to "barter" is to the exchange of gold for other objects. Vázquez de Coronado adds that "said Indians (of Costa Rica) deal and counterdeal using gold medals, eagles, and other objects in that province" (Fernández Bonilla 1886a: 56). Thus gold medals, eagles, and other objects fulfilled an important role, perhaps almost like money, in the transactions that natives conducted with one another in southern Central America.

Objects of Value

As noted, the Baruya traded objects of value for salt and other types of goods, including smooth shells and mother-of-pearl. A shell necklace also was given to sons and daughters when they were born or married, granting them a magical-religious power connected to the reproduction of life. Could this be the case with the necklaces of materials resembling shell that continued to circulate in Talamanca not long ago? It would be argued that pearls, certain feathers, shell beads, and shells belong to this category of valuable objects. Pearls were guarded in baskets in the chiefs' houses. In Panama they were taken from the Isle of Pearls (Isla de Perlas) and transported to the Caribbean, where the chief of Comogre received them (Jopling 1994: 24). Moreover, on some occasions natives gave Spaniards pearls, together with gold, as a sign of peace (Jopling 1994: 26). Shells seem to have been valued in a manner similar to that of *Spondylus* in South America (Sánchez n.d.: 99–101). Natives also used shells to signal the beginning of trade activities (Ibarra, 2001), and among the Uwa they were used in certain other ceremonies and rituals (Osborn 1995: 103). Shells also are prominent in Bribri myths. The Spaniards traded a certain type of shell with Gulf of Urabá natives, who were very pleased to receive it. Doubtless there existed other objects of value beyond those here mentioned briefly, but the sources do not mention them. Future studies may clarify them. What were the relationships between some objects and the dynamics of ethnicity among the inhabitants of southern Central America?

Eagles, Disks, and Ethnicity

What were the relationships between some objects and the dynamics of ethnicity among the inhabitants of southern Central America? At first glance, eagles might appear to be related to aspects of ethnicity. Their use and control by members of the elite suggest as much. Their presence throughout southern Central America seems to indicate some type of sociopolitical relationship among different ethnic groups, since in spite of linguistic differences—Boruca, Bribri, Cabécar, Chánguina, Kuna, Dorasque, Guaymí, Huetar, and Tórraba—important trade relations existed in the sixteenth century (Ibarra, 2001).

Genetic studies reveal greater affinity between groups located close to each other than, say, among groups such as the Kuna and Guatuso (Barrantes 1998: 8). Proximity can influence sociocultural distance so the geographical proximity of the Boruca, Bribri, Cabécar, Guaymí, Huetar, and Tórraba, combined with their kinship relations, might have led to their choice of a type or types of eagles to identify themselves ethnically. The assorted eagles and disks made from different golds could have indicated hierarchies and contexts for use and function. The diversity of forms and styles of these objects may also have reflected spheres of daily life among ethnic groups and “outsiders,” with attendant implications in the meanings and structures of social relations. For example, it is said that the chiefs of the Teribe carried one or two eagles wrapped in bundles and that the Talamanca took the eagles after killing the chiefs. The objects were then presented to the Talamancan chief (Bozzoli 1982a: 2).¹⁰ Perhaps these eagles were distinctive as Teribe eagles, but no further information exists to clarify this point.

Relationships between styles of material culture and the expression of ethnicity vary across time and space. Material styles that in one social context shape the development and meaning of ethnic identity may in other contexts form only part of ethnicity (Jones 1997: 121–122). This may be the case with gold eagles in the sixteenth century (and perhaps earlier) versus their meaning in the twentieth century. According to Godelier, the more intently a sacred object was preserved, the more imaginary power and symbolic value it likely contained. If in the sixteenth century an eagle possessed meaning beyond other types of value, and if the messages it carried were essential in creating and sustaining social relations that supported society, by the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth its meaning had changed. By this time eagles had been transformed primarily into “insignias of rank” (Gabb 1981). Among the Bribri they may have signified more than this, perhaps representing ethnic identity for those who had survived the Spanish Conquest. These changes and symbolic reaffirmations may have been affected by internal conflicts among the natives, as well as by other political and ethnic shifts in Costa Rican power structures. In native societies, eagles continued to be considered special, although they had lost their former function as a means of establishing social and political relations with other societies and within southern Central America in general.

¹⁰ These objects were seen by the anthropologist Marcos Guevara B. while he was living in Talamanca in 1983 and 1984 (author’s note).

Concepts of ethnicity that some ethnic groups in sixteenth-century southern Central America constructed through the use of eagles likely were tied to origin myths in which a winged animal, such as a buzzard, filled a distinct role in the establishment of social relations that legitimized and oriented daily lives. The same could be said of disks, which perhaps are related to myths about the sun.¹¹

There are many influences in the Talamancan origin story related to the “seed” and the sun (see Falchetti, this volume). “The Seed of the Bribri was born when the sun was born,” goes the story. A buzzard hawk had come to eat the Bribri. When the usékar was asked what should be done, he responded that nothing could be done because the bird had come with the Seed. God wanted to see if the Seed had power and whether the usékar could send it away. The usékar summoned his power and sent the bird where the sun was born, and there it is today (Bozzoli 1977: 75). It is thus that the Bribri explain their origin (in the sun), their “power,” and their continuity and survival through time. Gold, medals, and eagles may well be related to these ideas.¹²

Gold and Trade

The range of environments of settlements and chiefdoms induced variability in the extraction and exploitation of resources. This and differing customs and ideologies encouraged people to trade objects. Sixteenth-century native villages between Venezuela and Nicaragua traded prisoners of war, stone, gold, cotton, pigments, grain and seeds, vegetables and produce, medicinal herbs, honey, and beeswax. They traded raw materials such as deer hides, coral, shell, and gold processed into beads, emeralds, blankets, hammocks, nets, arrows, ceramics, and other objects. Another category of goods included animals, such as tapirs, peccaries, and various birds and dogs. Other goods were utilitarian, such as baskets, sleeping mats, sandals, resins, and painted cups. There were also “nonmaterial” goods, such as esoteric knowledge, that could be exchanged for healing techniques and special herbs. The majority of these goods are the same as those identified by Karl Langebaek for early Colombia (Langebaek 1992: 100–161 and this volume).

The trade of gold objects and nuggets occurred in various contexts and spheres in southern Central America, even among very different ethnic groups, such as the Nicarao, Chorotega, and Zenú (Figs. 2 and 3). Trade probably also occurred between the “Chuchures from toward Honduras,” located near Nombre de Dios in Panama and possibly with the Maya and villages located more toward southern Panama, Colombia, and Ecuador, as well as among themselves and with the Spaniards. Documentation suggests that trade in gold ob-

¹¹ For examples, see Meléndez: 1971, Bozzoli n.d. and 1979, and Séptimo and July 1986.

¹² The natives seem to have accepted that Spanish golden ornaments also possessed “power.” This was demonstrated in 1699, when natives, angry at the theft of their treasures and with a chief who was angry about his son’s illness, took a chalice from a priest and made it into gold pieces that they distributed to be worn as necklaces. The church’s patens, the sources say, were sent to Cachegabasa and were perforated and worn around the neck (Ibarra 1991: 25).

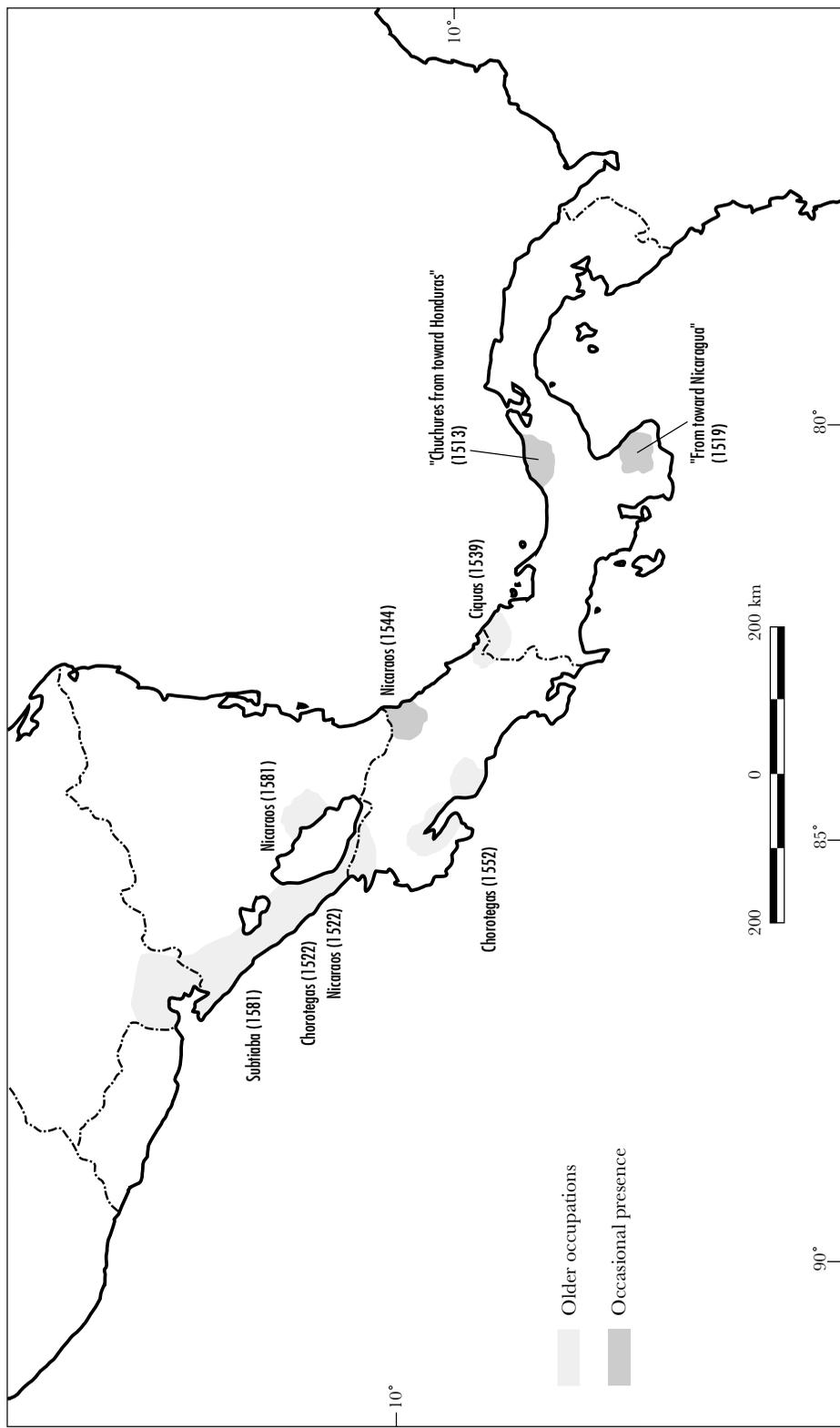


Fig. 3 Mesoamerican settlements in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama according to documentary sources, 1513–1581. Map by Eugenia Ibarra

jects was a daily activity, and was not limited to southern Central America. Juan Carlos Solórzano observed that the natives were accustomed to establishing trade relations with people who were different from themselves and hypothesized that this influenced their reaction to the Spaniards during their first contact:

It is useful to note that the inhabitants of the Caribbean coastline of Central America had developed maritime trade in the years preceding the arrival of Europeans. Therefore they did not show hostility toward the strangers, but rather proceeded to trade with them as was their custom with foreigners. (Solórzano 1994: 13)

Vázquez de Coronado states that “in these particular [villages] and in all of them, from the news that I have, a great abundance of gold is traded and collected” (1964: 57). In other words, natives “bartered” for gold or with gold.

Gold was traded for cacao in the markets (*tianguis*) of Nicaragua (Fernández de Oviedo 1976: 348), implying that cacao, the “money” of the Nicarao and Chorotega, was interchangeable with gold. It also implies that gold (in some form) was present at such markets, obtained primarily through trade with other ethnic groups of southern Nicaragua (although it may have been produced locally) (Ibarra n.d.b: 61; Mártir de Anglería 1976: 30). Pascual de Andagoya suggests how the inhabitants of Nicaragua obtained gold: “Two years before we arrived in París a large army of people had shown up who had come from the area around Nicaragua. They were such ferocious people that in all the provinces they destroyed the peace and made people give them whatever they wanted: they ate human flesh, and by this caused great fear in the lands they visited” (Pascual de Andagoya, quoted in Alvarez Rubiano 1944: 178).

Markets like those in Nicaragua are not found in southern Central America, nor are “ports of trade” such as those in Mexico (Polanyi 1976). Nevertheless, some places do stand out due to their importance for trade, such as the Gulf of Urabá, Portobelo, Tójar Island in Almirante Bay, Talamanca, the Azuero Peninsula, Boruca, and the islands in the Gulf of Nicoya (Ibarra 2001). Gold was present at these sites.

Southern Central American natives traded in gold frequently. In 1513, Vasco Núñez de Balboa indicated that the Zenú, a cannibalistic “Caribbean” people, gave the chief at Dabaibe unsmelted gold nuggets from “very good mines they had on their lands” in exchange for prisoners of war and young women to serve as wives. They also received peccaries, fish, cotton rope, salt, and other objects of manufactured gold. These Zenú only traded gold nuggets with Dabaibe (Jopling 1994: 23, 41), perhaps indicating a “monopoly” on gold nuggets by the Dabaibe in this area.

The “visits” by the cannibals from “the area toward Nicaragua”—although it is unknown whether they were Nicarao or Chorotega—had as one of their objectives the collection of as much gold as possible. In 1519, during an incursion into the Azuero Peninsula they all became ill with diarrhea and died or fled. The chief of París, leader of the area, took advantage of the booty they left behind and became “rich,” according to one source (Jopling 1994: 35).

The scarce documentation available suggests that when an important person, such as a chief or the relatives of a chief, was captured, that person could be ransomed in exchange for

gold. This was observed in the Azuero Peninsula in the case of the son of a chief (Jopling 1994: 64) and probably in Couto and Quepo in southern Costa Rica (Vázquez de Coronado 1964: 49). Moreover, in Dabaibe, prisoners of war were given to the Zenú in exchange for unsmelted gold. The Spaniards quickly discerned this equivalency, and in 1580 Diego de Artieda was accused of capturing a “chief” and “ransoming him for a large sum of gold” (Peralta 1883: 603).

The trade of gold objects among ethnic groups in southern Central America is documented in various places, and the practice can be deduced from observations made by Hernando Columbus when he noticed the eagerness of the natives of Caribbean Panama to trade gold for Spanish objects. It would seem that the natives quickly reached an agreement among themselves regarding the different values of gold; for example, for pins they traded only a little gold, and “they gave more for beads or bells” (Lines 1952: 164). The disks that some natives wore around their necks were traded for “three sparrow hawk bells” (Lines 1952: 21). Moreover, in the Gulf of Urabá the iron axes that Julián Gutiérrez carried were exchanged for pieces of gold, while other objects were traded for some other type of object (Matilla Tascón 1945: 12–15).

Vasco Núñez de Balboa reports that at Comogre, Indians arrived from “the other sea” with gold from mines for smelting. They were given in trade for “Indians and beautiful Indian women,” probably prisoners of war, “that they did not eat,” and cotton rope (Jopling 1994: 24). Thus we have another instance in which people, prisoners of war, were exchanged for gold. Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo in 1529 stated that the natives of Veragua gave disks and other pieces of good gold to the natives of Nata in exchange for cotton blankets and hammocks (1977: 486). As early as 1563/64 Vázquez de Coronado documented the importance of gold in exchanges. In 1662, the Dorasque and the Térrebe, Zurri, and people of Talamanca traded for pieces of gold, including disks (de la Rocha 1964: 104). In 1591 a native from Tucurrique (Costa Rica) protested, alleging that Pedro Alonso de las Alas had taken a gold eagle and promised to give a hatchet for it “of greater value than the eagle” (Férrandez Bonilla 1907: 387, 389).

Some friars in Talamanca documented these equivalencies in greater detail. Agustín de Cevallos reported in 1610 that the natives had three “classes” of goods to trade with other natives: “slaves” or prisoners of war; “very well worked” cotton ropes; and gold eagles, lizards, toads, spiders, medallions, medals, and other “creations.” These “classes” are the same as cited for earlier years (Férrandez Bonilla 1886c: 158). Elsewhere Cevallos noted that tapirs and peccaries were also exchanged, one tapir equaling four small peccaries. *Caraña*, a resin extracted from a tree, equaled one tapir. Large strings of beads, as large as the man making the trade, made from the shells of oysters also equaled one tapir. He adds that with these three classes they obtained “in that place” (southern Talamanca) three others, namely, prisoners of war, rope, and gold (Peralta 1883: 699–700).

Cevallos also reported that one tapir was valued at twenty weights of gold and peccaries at five weights of gold apiece; therefore, four peccaries equaled one tapir. It is not clear however, how values in gold were calculated, although it is evident that equivalencies of a certain quantity of one good for another, including gold, did exist. Presumably such “values”

were known by all participants involved in an exchange and respected for the sake of obtaining a balanced transaction.

Natives sometimes stole gold but such cases are rarely mentioned. There are examples involving enemies or enemy ethnic groups, such as a case around 1514 in which París stole from the “Mesoamericans” in Pacific Panama (Alvarez Rubiano 1944: 178). In the vicinity of Chirripó, Costa Rica, in 1611, Juan Quetapa, a chief, accused a Caxagua Indian of stealing eagles (Fernández Bonilla 1882: 169). Such thefts almost certainly were not carried out for the same profit motives that the Spanish had nor in order to accumulate gold, but rather for the sake of political or magical-religious reasons or for establishing alliances with others and obtaining benefits thereby (Ibarra 1990). Thus can be explained the words of Vázquez de Coronado when he commented that the natives of Coctu waged war on their neighbors who stole the gold they had extracted from their mines (1964: 50). It is clear that the defense of their territories was essential, including those where they could obtain gold.

The study of the movement of goods points to three types of trade in the region: (1) within the world of “us,” or our world, which would include relatives and related peoples, for example the Dorasque with the Zurri; (2) with “others,” implying different ethnic groups geographically near or far, such as the Huetar with the Chorotega, the Talamanca with the “Chichimeca,” or any ethnic groups with the Spaniards; and (3) with the “supernatural” world, as the discovery of gold pieces in the houses of religious specialists in Talamanca seems to suggest. Gold, in its different forms and shapes, could turn up in the hands of the elite as well as in the hands of the common people, such as in the case of the natives with guanín around their necks who swam to the Spanish ships or women who traded necklaces and beads at the Gulf of Urabá. Various groups within a hierarchy might use particular pieces in activities that were more political in nature as well as in other activities that were more ceremonial.

Ethnography shows that the Bribri and Cabécar communicated with the supernatural world in a variety of contexts. For example, hunters performed a ritual to attract benefits from the Lord of the Animals, a mythological being who took care of the forest. In secret they would offer him small symbolic objects to win his favor and therefore have a successful hunt. Such relations with the supernatural world were not exclusive to the elite.

The foregoing examples and analyses of various gold pieces suggest that unsmelted gold, smelted gold, mixed and hammered gold, as well as the different figures and forms all had social roles beyond use by the elite, even when the elite possessed knowledge not shared by all members of their group. Likewise, the sources seem to indicate that some gold pieces were more “sacred” than others. Information gleaned from historical contexts and different parts of the region points toward an interpretation that broadens the perspective on the use of gold, or at least some gold, in contexts beyond those dealt with by Mary Helms (1979), who limited her analysis of gold primarily to the elite chiefs of Panama.

The Spaniards recognized the native custom of trading gold and goods for other objects and took advantage of it to plunder and obtain as much of the metal as possible, committing tremendous abuses in the process. Encomiendas in Panama and elsewhere served the purpose of allowing encomenderos to obtain the gold of their respective chiefs.

The Eagle and Disk Enigma

Eagles and disks were the primary categories of pieces exchanged among ethnic groups and with the Spanish. Information about other types, such as toads, spiders, and lizards, is scarce. The presentation of eagles and medals as presents, or “offerings,” to the Spaniards is documented throughout the region in question from the time of Columbus’s arrival there. The Spaniards were especially interested in disks, because they were of good quality, made from high-quality gold. They are described as being “made in Veragua” (Lines 1952: 158, 159)

and as mirrors of gold . . . like chalice patens, some larger and some smaller, of twelve ducats in weight, some more and some less. They wear them around their necks hanging from a small cord, like we wear the Agnus Dei or other relic. (Lines 1952: 166)

In native towns, eagles and disks seem to have held a meaning somewhat apart from that of other gold objects. At the very least, descriptions of them and the contexts in which they are described are more complete than for other objects.

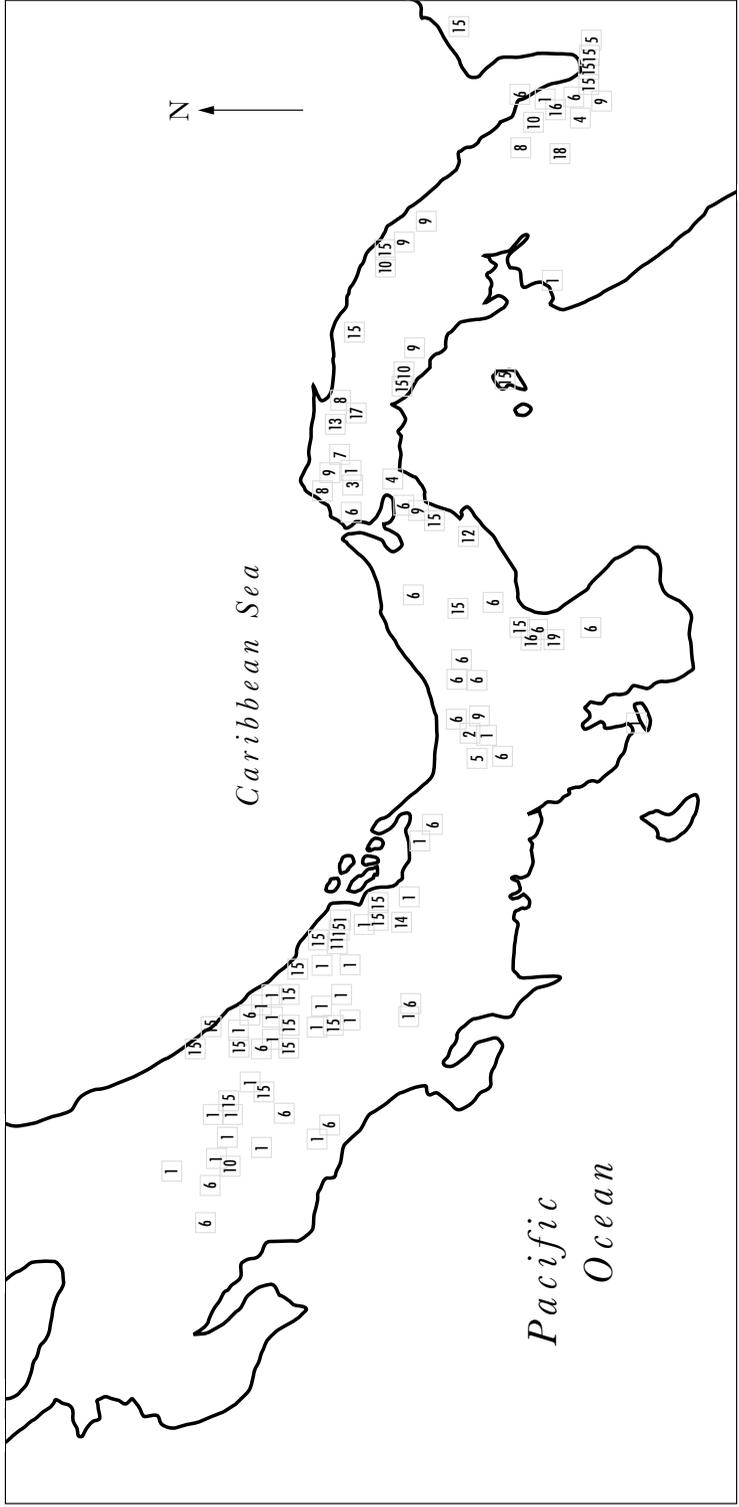
Information indicates that from Dabaibe to Santiago de Talamanca, from 1503 until 1610, chiefs possessed great quantities of disks, eagles, and other objects which were kept in their houses. For this reason the Spaniards were greatly interested in plundering these residences. For natives, then, accumulating disks and eagles in quantity was important.

Gold was reportedly guarded in the houses of the “chiefs” in Veragua (Lines 1952: 170), Dabaibe (Jopling 1994: 23), Careta (*ibid.*: 24), Usagaña (*ibid.*: 52), París, Nata, Cherú (*ibid.*: 64), and in Talamanca (Fernández Bonilla 1882: 152). The use of crates or baskets was common for storing gold, and the sources add that the chiefs had so much gold that “they could not keep it all in baskets so they put it in lofts like corn” (Jopling 1994: 24). This seems to indicate that they would hang the pieces in rows from the posts in their houses or would store them off the ground, perhaps in rafters or attics.

The spatial distribution of disks and eagles in southern Central America indicates their importance during the period studied (Figs. 4, 5, and 6). Between 1500 and 1600 in the territories of Costa Rica and Panama, eagles and disks predominated. Between 1600 and 1920 eagles and disks were reported primarily from the area of Talamanca and the environs of Almirante Bay. While eagles persist in the documentation, and among the Bribri population, into the twentieth century, disks disappear from the documentary evidence, perhaps because their function changed.

Other types of objects, such as limetas, as well as helmets, small bars, tubes, diadems, and small idols, are mentioned less and less frequently as the Spanish conquest advanced. Basically, such a trend signals these objects’ discontinuity.

To elucidate this trend, it is useful to refer to events in Talamanca in 1564, when Vázquez de Coronado summoned neighboring chiefs and asked that they bring him gold (Fernández Bonilla 1886b: 318–323). From various parts of the Central Valley and Talamanca, native chiefs arrived to offer him eagles mostly of low gold, one almost copper, and others of



- | | | | |
|----|---------------------------|----|---------------------------------|
| 1 | eagles | 14 | human figurines |
| 2 | diadems | 15 | gold |
| 3 | axes | 16 | <i>limetas</i> or small bottles |
| 4 | gold plates | 17 | nose rings |
| 5 | unsmelted gold nuggets | 18 | nose pieces |
| 6 | medals | 19 | bells |
| 7 | toads | | |
| 8 | armor | | |
| 9 | tube beads | | |
| 10 | beads | | |
| 11 | small gold bars or ingots | | |
| 12 | two-headed eagles | | |
| 13 | earrings | | |

Fig. 4 Gold figures from the sixteenth century found in Costa Rica and Panama (approximate location).
Map by Eugenia Ibarra

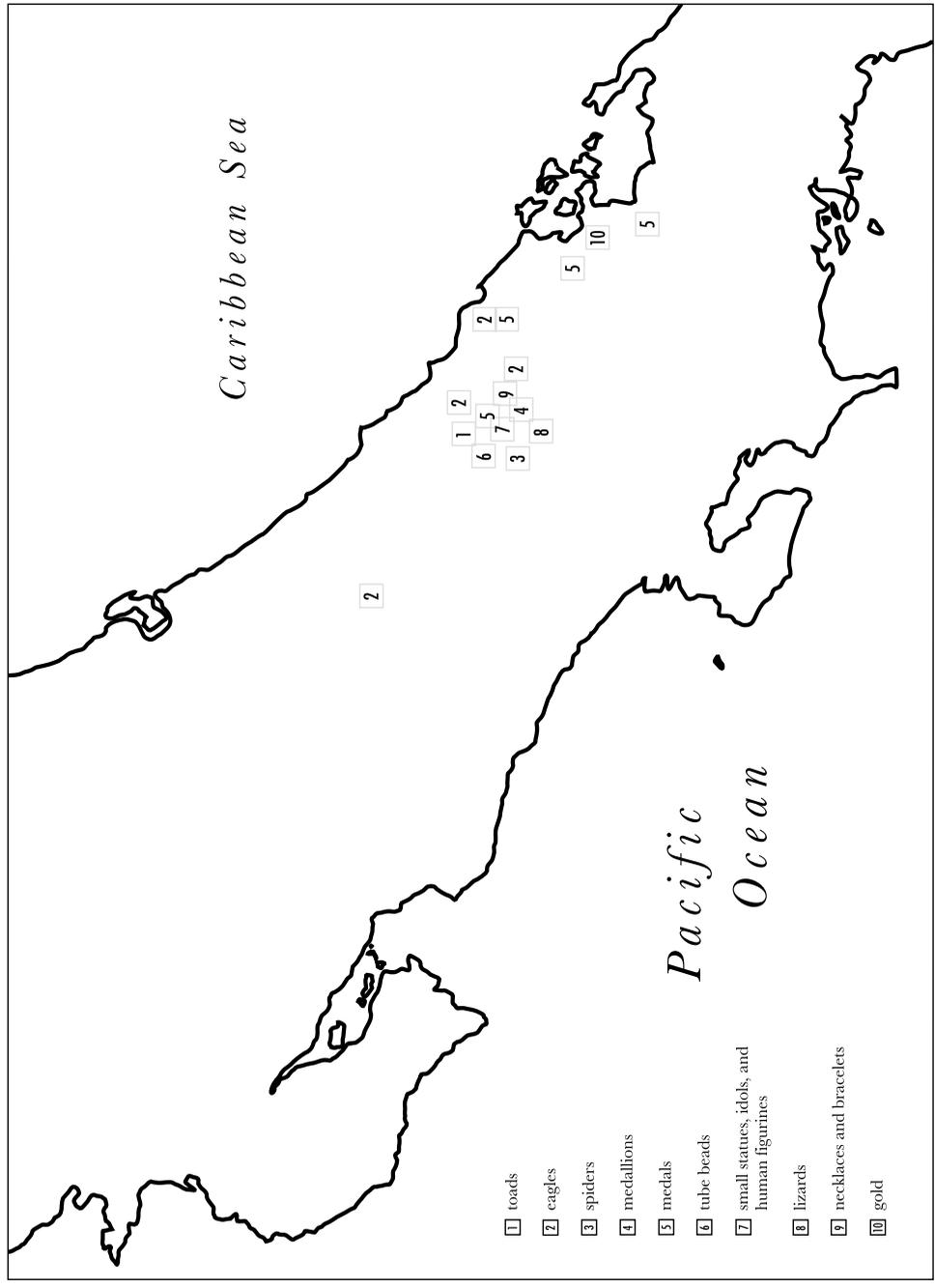


Fig. 5 Gold pieces found in Costa Rica from the period 1600 to 1920. Map by Eugenia Ibarra

good gold, all as “presents” or offerings and one as barter. Two disks and one small idol are also mentioned. One disk was given to him by four chiefs from villages in the mountains of the Tarire River while the other was given by four chiefs from Pococí and its environs. The former group also gave three eagles made of low gold, while the latter gave four more also made of guanín. In that year, this predominance of eagles over disks was also noted for Costa Rica and Panama: it continued in Costa Rica until 1920.

The Destruction of Native Gold in Spanish Foundries

The Spanish obtained local gold in three ways: robbery, barter, and offerings. The conquistadors attacked or plundered houses and villages, taking what was known as “cavalry gold.” They also frequently sacked native tombs. Barter, of course, involved the trade of Spanish objects for pieces of gold while offerings implied the “voluntary” giving of the metal by chiefs or their wives to a conquistador. In recent years in Talamanca, when a usékar arrived at a house and mentioned that he liked an object there, it would be offered to him because of the great fear everyone had of him. Perhaps similar reasoning was behind the offerings made to the Spaniards (Bozzoli, personal communication, 1999).

With the enormous quantity of gold acquired by the Spaniards through these three methods, by 1515 they had already established a foundry at Santa María la Antigua in Darién (Fig. 2). Because there were no strict controls in place and because of “irregularities,” such as conquistadors keeping gold for themselves, hiding it, or stealing it, in 1519 the king of Spain sent instructions to ensure that smelting best served his interests. He prohibited the private ownership of bellows or foundry equipment and ordered that on days when smelting took place, authorized officials should oversee the activity. Gold that spilled from the crucibles into the slots of the furnace door during smelting was called *escobilla*. Twenty-seven or more weights of gold could usually be recovered this way, and since it was impossible to tell whose gold it was, it was used for charity and pious works and sent to the monastery of Sr. San Francisco at Darién (Matilla Tascón 1945: 215). On this occasion the inspector was Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo (Alvarez Rubiano 1944: 487–488), who also put a stop to gold being smelted elsewhere.

Also in 1519, the king decreed that because guanín was a very low and coppery gold, and when smelted was not of fine quality, good gold should be kept and smelted separately. The guanín pieces were to be saved and, when convenient, used for trade with the natives (from the coast or the Gulf of Urabá) for more gold or precious stones (Alvarez Rubiano 1944: 512). From this we can infer that the natives traded guanín for more gold or other goods among each other, a practice the Spaniards obviously exploited. Great quantities of gold pieces, including guanín, were brought to the foundry in Darién.

Though the existing documentation about smelting is sparse, what exists offers valuable data about the types of native objects obtained by the Spanish and their origins (Jopling 1994: 83–102; Góngora 1962: 107–128). In 1524, there was a foundry in Panama for gold taken by commissioners from chiefs on their encomiendas. As for Darién, the documentation is scarce, but again valuable, and is similar (*ibid.*). The encomienda process created a

triangular relationship including gold, the chief, and the encomiendero and functioned on the principles of native trade. Through this institution, encomenderos were assured of their quota of gold, provided directly by their chiefs and other natives on their encomiendas (Jopling 1994:83–102).

By 1527 a foundry had been established at León in Nicaragua (Fernández Bonilla 1886b:12), and in 1528 an inspector was ordered to supervise all the gold smelted and marked there, whether obtained from mines or from natives (Vega Bolaños 1954: 303–305). Information about smelting in León was lost in fires set during pirate raids, but it is known that an enormous quantity of complete native gold pieces was destroyed in the foundries, causing dramatic changes among the natives who survived the Spanish conquest.

Conclusions

Modern history and anthropology place gold objects within sociohistoric contexts that clarify the relationships between such objects and the people who used them. Such analysis begins with the daily lives of these individuals and their interactions with each other, with the objects, and with “others,” primarily examining their trade activities. In this process, old sources and new data acquire relevance and possibly new meanings. Nevertheless, the final hypotheses here remain tentative and are presented with caution. Future archaeological investigations and work in other disciplines will doubtless help to clarify them.

When the Spaniards arrived in the New World, the chiefdoms of southern Central America had found in gold a way to establish interpersonal and communal relationships, a method of communication for transmitting symbols and information, a reaffirmation of ethnic identities, and a means to conduct transactions with the peoples of Mesoamerica and of South America.

Part of the daily context in which the inhabitants of the lower isthmus developed involves their relationships with the chiefdoms of Nicoya and Nicaragua, with the “Chuchures from toward Honduras,” with the “Chichimeca or Ciqua” (likely Mesoamericans), and with the Zenú and other communities of northern Colombia and of the coast of Ecuador, among others. The presence of Mesoamericans in this area is clearly documented. Their interactions include trade relationships that were different from those within the interior of the isthmus. The interactions between the inhabitants of Panama, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua in the sixteenth century can be divided into two categories: “local” and “foreign.”

It is established that contacts and relationships existed between the former inhabitants of Costa Rica and Panama and the people of Dabaibe and villages of northern Colombia (Bray 1984; Ibarra 1998; 2001). Nevertheless, documentary information indicates that such established relationships were not as close as those that occurred among natives of the same “Guanin Isthmus” (Aguilar 1998). A study that explores and compares the hypotheses proposed herein with what transpired among the people of northern Colombia in the sixteenth century remains to be undertaken. It appears that within the isthmus, relations among the Boruca, Bribri, Cabécar, Dorasque, Guaymí, Huetar, and Terreve were closer than those between the Cueva-Chocó and Kuna.

The results here can be compared with those obtained by archaeology, including Aguilar's from the isthmus regarding the distribution of guanín in the territories of Costa Rica and Panama and its connection with other parts of Colombia. Guanín eagles, based on their persistence over time, may have been preferred by some ethnic groups over the more pure gold of disks, due perhaps to concepts related to power, survival in the face of misfortune and danger, or self-preservation as a people. This is suggested by the case of Talamanca, in which the eagles of the chief Saldaña have been identified as guanín by some archaeologists (Patricia Fernández, personal communication, 1999).

One of the most important results of this study is the evidence of an apparent hierarchy among gold objects based on who used them and in what context they were used, whether more "civil" or more religious. Certain objects were associated with the *awá*, *bikakra*, *bikli*, *bulu*, *okom*, *sia'tmi*, and *usékares*. This hierarchy corresponds to one that has been fully documented by ethnography and ethnohistory in Panama and in Costa Rica (Helms 1979; Bozzoli 1979; Ibarra 1984). Archaeology has also contributed to this topic (Fonseca 1992; Fonseca and Cooke 1993). A similar situation appears to have arisen among the elite of other neighboring hierarchical ethnic groups, including the Huetar, the Dorasque, and the Guaymí, among others, as well as among the Cueva-Chocó.

This leads to reflection upon the significance of power among villages in the sixteenth century. Based on documentary evidence, the possession of sacred objects among members of the Talamancan elite suggests a conception of power associated with the understanding and manipulation of magical-religious forces, as well as with the propitiation of and establishment of relations with supernatural beings for the good of all, including protection from enemies. The fact that such objects were special in nature and inherited within families and among members of particular clans, however, suggests that their power was linked to membership in a clan and, in the case of Talamanca, to particular territories. Likewise, there may have been a hierarchy of power among chiefs expressed through the nature and function of the individual: more "civil" and political or more religious, without a sharp division between the civil and the magical-religious in all cases.

Based on the evidence, it is now possible to divide objects forming part of the daily lives of South Central American natives into three categories: sacred objects, "monetary" or quasi-monetary objects, and objects of value. Such a classification, interwoven into the sociocultural dynamics of gifts and counter-gifts, has helped provide a deeper understanding of the role that gold fulfilled in the region in the sixteenth century. The movement of gold objects, observed through social relations, stands out in the analysis of exchange activities among the inhabitants of the isthmus and beyond.

Historical changes during the development of a society favor the construction and reconstruction of ethnicity insofar as the processing or events are modified by the use or abandonment of external symbols. The inhabitants of the isthmus had many means of distinguishing themselves from one another, among which gold ornaments, clothing, language, and bodily ornamentation all played complementary roles. During the period this study covers, it is possible to "read" changes in the messages conveyed by some of the eagles used by chiefs, as suggested by the sale of Saldaña's necklace by his sister. Rank insignias were the

most important objects among the sacred objects, monetary objects, and symbols of ethnic identity in the sixteenth century (and until the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) for at least part of the native population. In the early years of the twentieth century gold objects no longer legitimized native social relations, a trend begun after the arrival of Spanish settlers in the isthmus.

The Spanish struck a tremendous blow to southern Central Americans in their plundering and smelting of native gold. Not only was their metal physically melted down, the very essence of their cultures was destroyed. The crucibles and furnaces of the Spaniards literally melted the “soul” of a society.

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