

The Muisca Raft: Context, Materiality and Technology

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Since its discovery and acquisition by the Museo del Oro, Bogotá, more than four decades ago, the Muisca Raft has become one of the most distinctive icons of Indigenous cultural achievement in all the Americas. Underpinning its great popularity among scholars and the public alike is its long-established association with the legend of the El Dorado ceremony, the “Golden Man” ritual, and this moniker extended in popular parlance to refer to a legendary place. The myths of El Dorado, about both places and individuals replete with gold, fed European ambition during the conquest of the Americas and became key elements of modern Colombian identity. Many of the chroniclers who visited the New Kingdom of Granada, which included the territory of present-day Colombia, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries reported the ceremony of the golden *cacique* that took place at Lake Guatavita in Cundinamarca. Among the various versions recorded, the most popular is that of the writer Juan Rodríguez Freyle, and it has been repeated on numerous occasions, especially since its inclusion in the book *El Dorado* by Zerda (1883). Rodríguez Freyle ([1636] 1973:65–66) reports that he was told the story by don Juan, then *cacique* of Guatavita and heir to the previous chief whom the Spaniards had encountered upon their arrival in the Cundinamarca and Boyacá Highlands. According to his version, the ritual at Lake Guatavita was a coronation ceremony. To prepare for it, the man who inherited the role of chief had to

spend six years of harsh abstinence, isolated in a cave. Once this preparation was complete, the heir to power was taken to the lake, around which people congregated for a celebration. His naked body was covered with a sticky substance and then sprayed with gold dust. Then, accompanied by four of his *caciques*, he embarked on a reed raft laden with gold and emerald offerings. The raft was propelled to the center of the lake, at which point the occupants threw the offerings into the water. The raft then returned to the shore, where the successor was welcomed as chief. Other chroniclers prior to Rodríguez Freyle tell the story in very similar terms, although they describe it simply as an offertory ceremony rather than as a specific coronation ritual.

The popular link between the raft and the El Dorado myth and ceremony is largely due to staging by the Museo del Oro. Since its acquisition in 1969, a year after the inauguration of a special exhibition space, the raft has been specifically exhibited to play a key role in museum visits and to evoke in visitors' imaginations the idea of a gold raft placidly floating on a lake. In the most recent renovation of the Museo del Oro, completed in 2008, the connection between this object and the ceremony of El Dorado was further reinforced: the delicate artwork is now shown in the center of a large vitrine, resting on a dark reflective surface that produces a water-like effect. The showcase itself is located in a dark, small, confined circular space. A single beam of light theatrically illuminates the raft, and a quotation printed on the wall of the El Dorado ceremony story by Rodríguez Freyle makes the association explicit (Figures 15.1 and 15.2). After pausing here, the visitor is led into a space where a combination of artifacts, lights, and sound suggest that an offering is being made into a lake. The previous version of this display was even more literal: the raft rotated at the center of a showcase, against the background of a photograph of Lake Guatavita, that was placed at the end of a third-floor exhibition focused on myths and symbolic thought.

Paradoxically, the focus on the El Dorado ceremony in virtually every context where the raft is mentioned has perpetuated a Eurocentric view of this object. Readings of this object that favor this view over others have led to an excessive emphasis on European narratives, which were flooded with ostentatious and lucrative images of the El Dorado myth at the time of the conquest. However, the object itself, and the information available about its context, offer an exceptional opportunity to reexamine goldwork within the Muisca sociocultural and historical universe. In this essay, we present the results of a holistic study of the Muisca Raft and its discovery, with the aim to understand it within the Muisca context. Here, we approach the raft as an object of study from successive vantage points including iconography, technology, circumstances of discovery, and sociopolitical context.



Figure 15.1 Exhibition space of the Muisca Raft at the Museo del Oro, Banco de la República, Bogotá. Photograph by Clark Manuel Rodríguez / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.



Figure 15.2 Exhibition display at the Museo del Oro of the Muisca Raft, which evokes the El Dorado ceremony in a lake. Museo del Oro, Bogotá, O11373. Photograph by Clark Manuel Rodríguez / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.

The context of the discovery

In 1969, local farmworker Cruz María Dimaté discovered the Muisca Raft inside a cave in a hill known as La Campana (Figure 15.3). This hill is located near moorland, between the Lázaro Fonte and El Retiro *veredas* in the Pasca municipality, Cundinamarca, at the northern end of the Eastern Cordillera of Colombia (Figure 15.4).

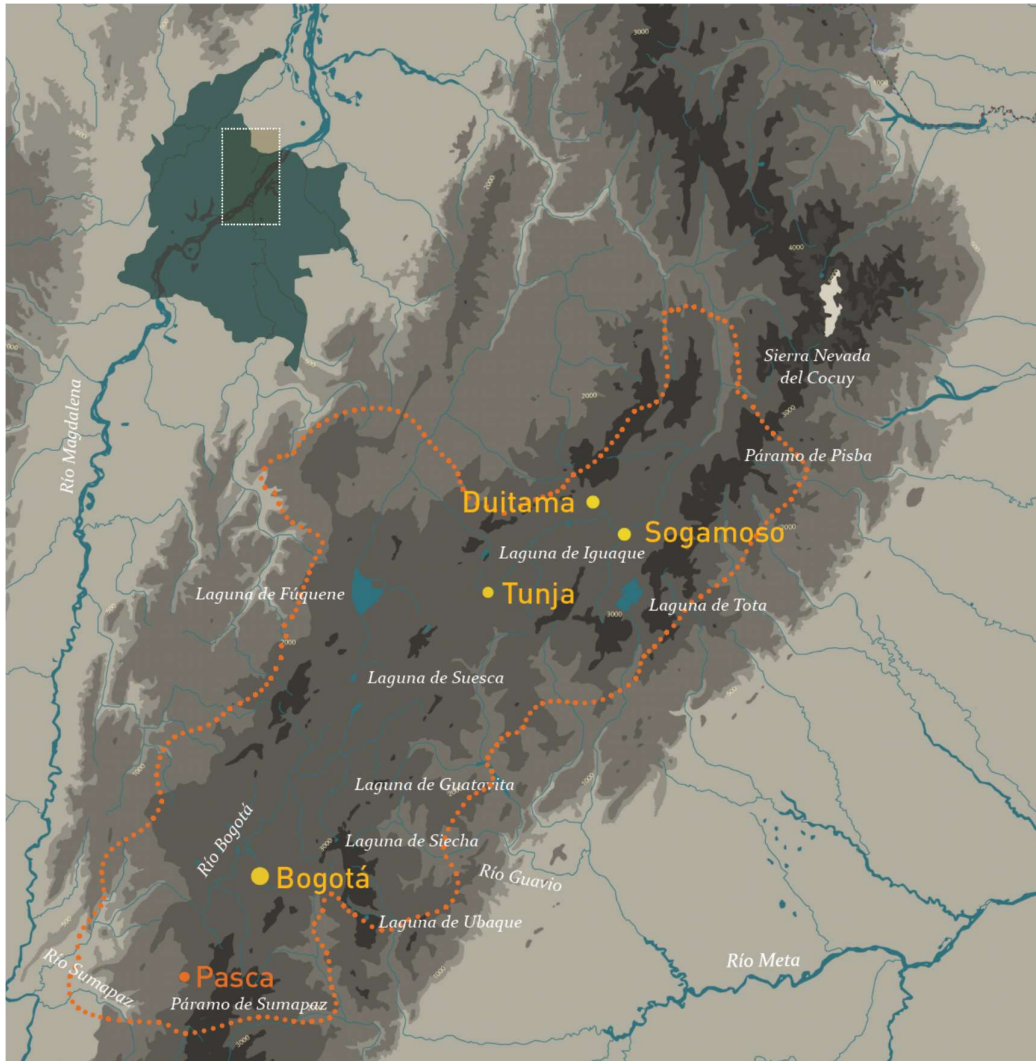


Figure 15.3 Muisca territory in the sixteenth century, at the time of the Europeans' arrival. Map by Germán Ramírez / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.

From this setting are ample views of the imposing landscape of surrounding mountains, which are often shrouded in fog. The hill is a steeped mountain and numerous broken boulders can be found on its slopes, detached from high outcrops (Figures 15.5 and 15.6). These provide shelters and caves—one of which is said to have been the findspot for the raft. Local inhabitants now disagree on the specific cave where the find was made, and we may never know the truth since those involved have all passed away.



Figure 15.4 Mountain landscape around Pasca in the Cundinamarca highlands. Photograph by Clark Manuel Rodríguez / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.



Figure 15.5 Rock outcrops at the top of La Campana hill in Pasca. Photograph by Clark Manuel Rodríguez / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.



Figure 15.6 Cruz María Dimaté, the discoverer of the Muisca Raft (at the center), with some relatives and friends in Pasca, 1968. Photograph courtesy of the Museo del Oro, Bogotá.

Three artifacts were recovered with the raft and acquired for the Museo del Oro: one is a gold object, and the other two are ceramics (Figure 15.8). There are also reports of a bone, which according to local inhabitants looked like a feline skull (Eduardo Londoño, personal communication, 2016), though, unfortunately, this item was never brought to the museum. In one of the photographs taken at Dimaté's house around the time of the discovery, it is indeed possible to notice an additional item besides the gold and ceramic objects, but it is difficult to identify it with certainty (Figure 15.7).



Figure 15.7 Jaime Hincapié Santamaría, parish priest of Pasca, with the Muisca Raft offering assemblage. He contributed greatly to making possible the acquisition of the assemblage by the Museo del Oro. Photograph courtesy of the Banco de la República Archives.

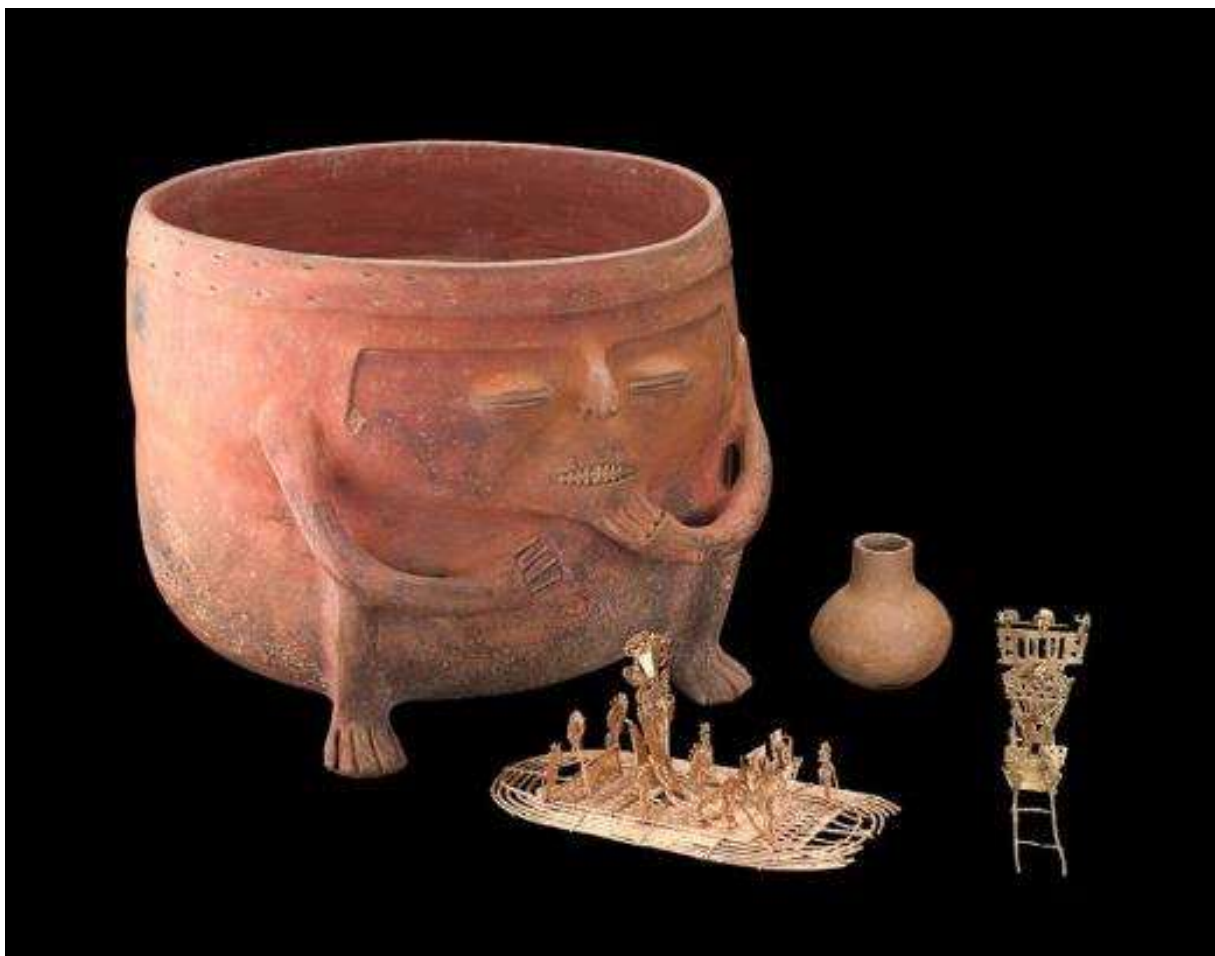


Figure 15.8 The Muisca Raft offering assemblage in the collection of the Museo del Oro. The offering vessel (H. 25.8 cm; W. 31.5 cm) stands out because of its large size and atypical shape. Museo del Oro, Bogotá, C01183, C01184, O11373, and O11374. Photograph by Clark Manuel Rodríguez / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.

All of the artifacts, particularly the gold objects depicting scenes, as well as the findspot (i.e., deposition in a cave), suggest this assemblage represents a Muisca votive offering.¹ Such offerings are a widely documented practice for this period (cf. Boada Rivas 1989; Langebaek 1986; Lleras- Pérez 1999; Londoño Laverde 1989).

The artifacts in the offering

Both of the metal objects in the assemblage belong to the category of Muisca votive figures, which differs from the ornaments category (cf. Falchetti de Sáenz 1989; Lleras- Pérez 1999). The metal objects share formal elements between them; however, the raft stands out for its larger size and considerable iconographic detail (Figure 15.9).

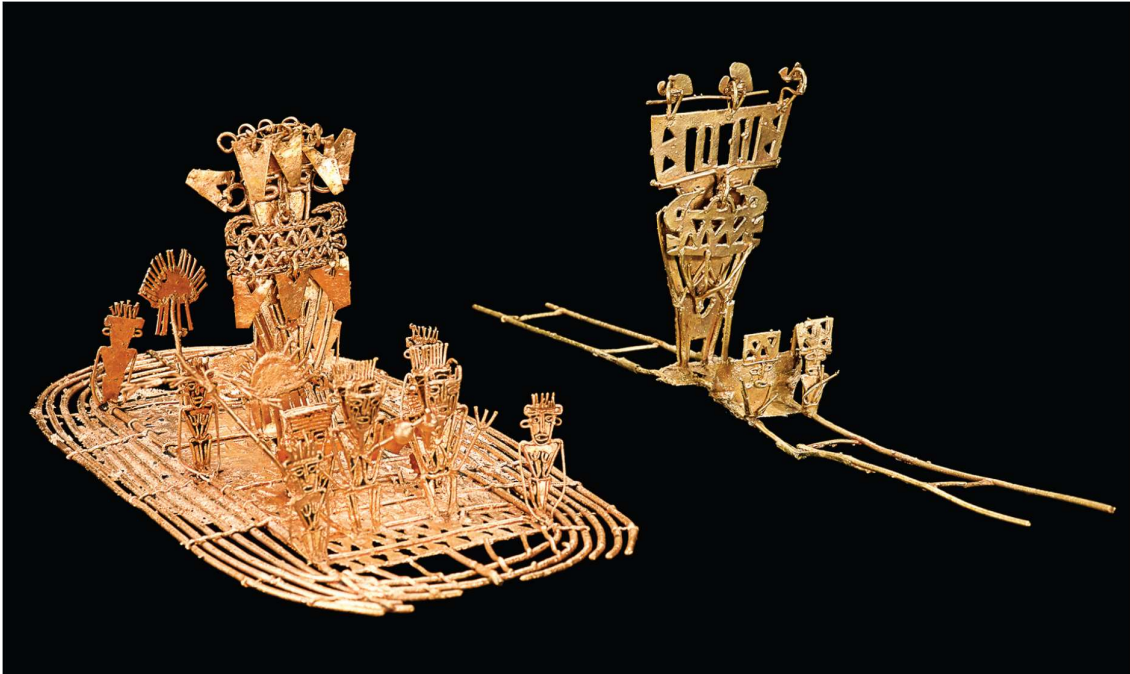


Figure 15.9 The two metal figures—raft and litter—of the Pasca offering assemblage. Museo del Oro, Bogotá, O11373 and O11374. Photograph by Clark Manuel Rodríguez / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.

In the raft, the goldsmith created a scene with eleven characters in a symmetrical arrangement; they are on an oval surface, formed by a rectangular sheet with a lattice of triangular openwork, surrounded by a series of coils. The center of the scene is dominated by a larger and more elaborately attired man; he is naked and folds his arms to form a W on his chest, a common gesture in Muisca goldwork. He wears several distinctive ornaments: a large, rectangular nose pendant that is decorated with fretwork, bird heads, and three trapezoidal pendants; two similar trapezoidal ear pendants; and a plain headdress, perhaps a crown, with three additional trapezoidal pendants. He is leaning backward, as if sitting on a *duho*—a low chair with a high backrest. He is in the middle of a space that is framed by two short palisades, which are flanked by two semicircular banners with feather-like projections at the top.

The ten human figures around the main character can be grouped into three types and size ranges (Figures 15.10 and 15.11). The larger two figures stand and preside over the scene: they wear a headdress with eleven sticks—one is missing in the figure on the left—

that perhaps represent feathers (Figure 15.13). They carry in their hands a rattle (*maraca*) and a zoomorphic mask with ears on the top. A kind of trident, leaning outward, is joined to one side of each large figure's waist. A branch with two stems at the top rises at the feet of the figure on the right; the left branch is missing but its former presence can be inferred by the broken stump at the base. These two figures are followed by two smaller individuals, attired with a bonnet-like headdress made of coils that recalls the texture of fabric; they are seated and carry a gourd-shaped *poporo*—a flask used for the lime that was chewed together with the coca leaves— and its stick. The remaining six individuals are smaller and simpler; they stand and wear only a headdress with little sticks, and they surround the scene. As in many Muisca examples, none of the figures have recognizable genitals.

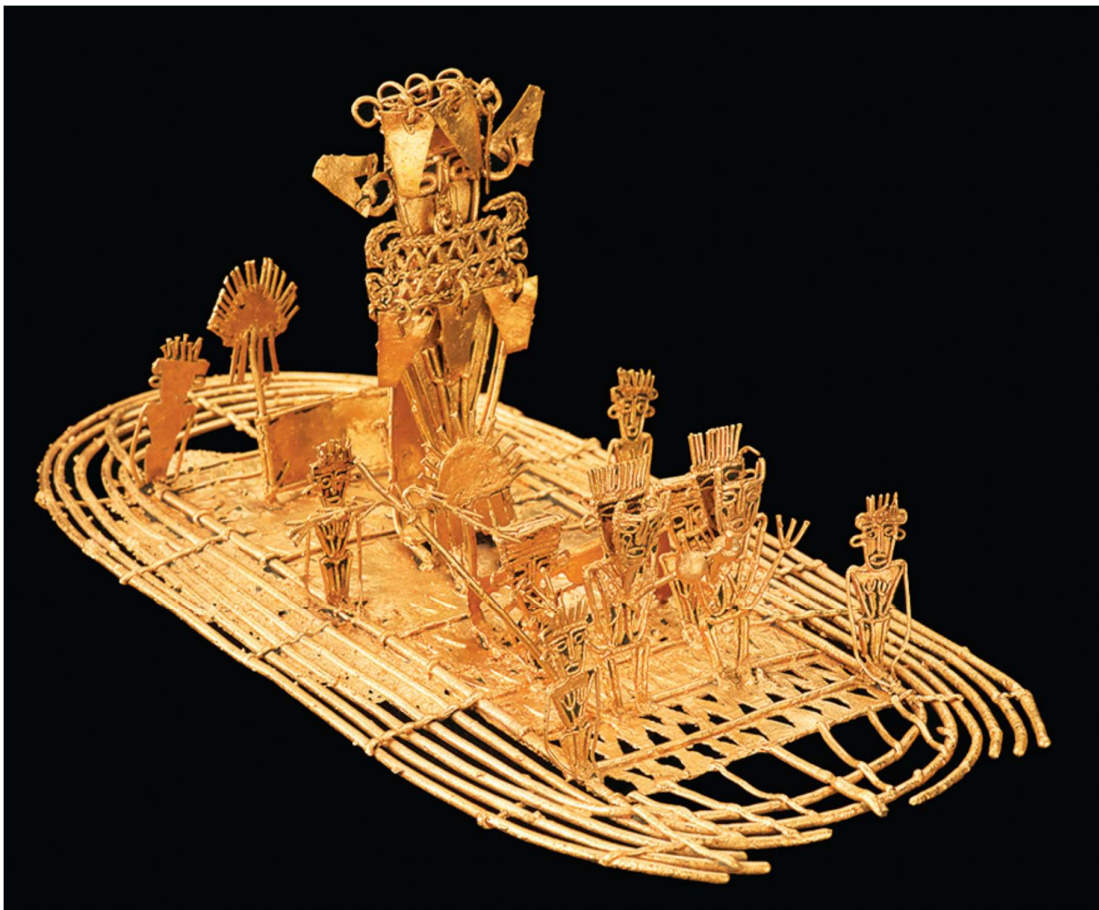


Figure 15.10 The Muisca Raft. Museo del Oro, Bogotá, O11373. Photograph by Clark Manuel Rodríguez / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.



Figure 15.11 Back view of the main figure in the Muisca Raft. Photograph by Clark Manuel Rodríguez / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.

The second gold artifact represents a litter, as detailed below. It includes three humans in an orderly arrangement. In this case, they rest on an artifact made up of two long, parallel poles; a central flat space, where the main individual rests, is flanked by two crossbars (Figure 15.12). The scene is dominated by a larger individual, standing and attired in a way comparable to that of the main figure on the Muisca Raft, wearing an openwork nose pendant with birds and a crown with three hanging pendants. Again, the figure's sex is not indicated. This main character is guarded by two smaller figures at the front, who wear headdresses or crowns with triangular fretwork; it is not clear whether they are seated or standing, as they are only represented from the waist up. There is a small palisade in front of the main character, similar to those in the Muisca Raft, where the banners have been broken. Although the raft is in an excellent state of preservation, several fractures in the litter have been restored by conservators.

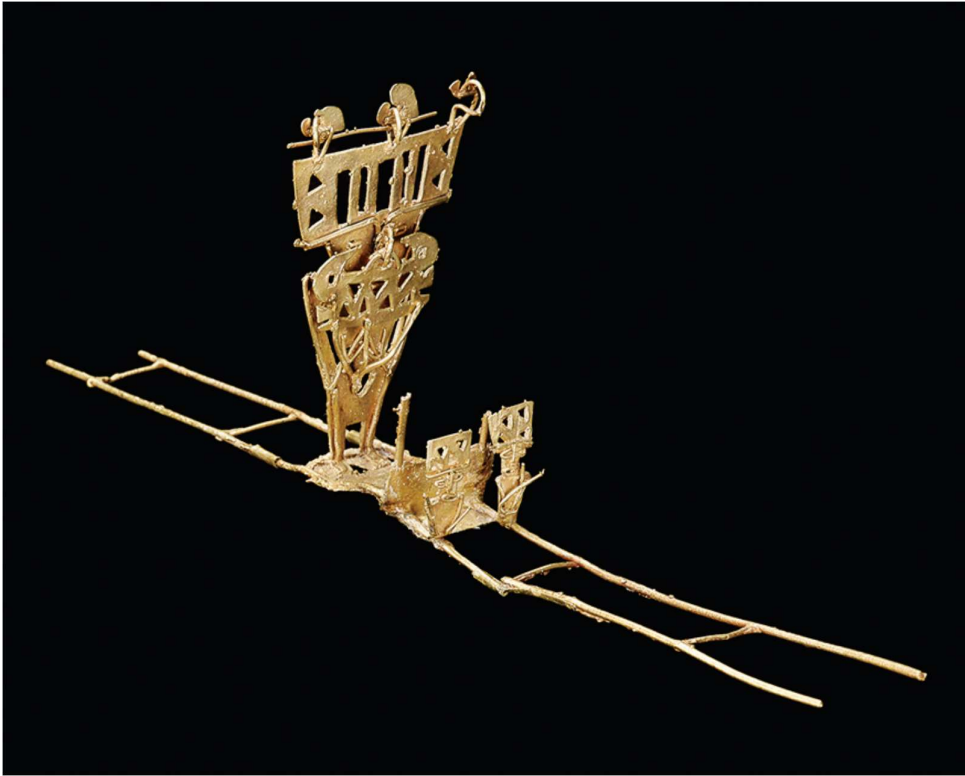


Figure 15.12 The litter figure. The cylinders joining some parts of the litter frame are modern repairs. H. 8.3 cm; W. 22.6 cm. Museo del Oro, Bogotá, O11374. Photograph by Clark Manuel Rodríguez / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.

The main ceramic artifact would have been the offering vessel within which, at least, the two gold objects and the bone were originally deposited (see Figure 15.8). In this case, as documented in other cases, such as in the offering assemblage on the *gavia* sacrifice found in Fontibón (Londoño Laverde 1989; Uribe Villegas et al. 2013), the size and shape of the vessel were adapted to the artifacts it was meant to contain. Its overall shape is cylindrical, and it represents a stylized human with closed eyes, an aquiline nose, and an elongated mouth showing the teeth. As is common in Muisca iconography, this person appears in the “basket posture”—that is, with flexed legs at the front and the arms around the knees; however, here one of the hands reaches up toward the face. The ceramic is made of a fine gray paste, but its surface is covered by a very smooth red slip. The paste conforms to the Guatavita Desgrasante Tiestos ceramic type, and the red slip is typical of Muisca ceramics—but the

style is atypical. The second ceramic is a small globular vessel with a short neck, fine manufacture, smooth surface finish, and a buff-colored paste typical of the Pasca Carmelito Liso or Pasca Habano Liso ceramic type (cf. Herrera 1972).

Fabrication of the metal votive objects

In the past few years, we have conducted a detailed technological assessment of Muisca votive objects, focusing on their manufacturing traits and composition, which has allowed us to identify some common elements of the Muisca technological tradition (Martín-Torres and Uribe Villegas 2015a, 2015b; Uribe Villegas 2012; Uribe Villegas et al. 2013; Uribe Villegas and Martín-Torres 2012a, 2012b). Now, the study of the Muisca Raft under the microscope, combined with chemical analyses by portable x-ray fluorescence (pXRF), has made it possible to gain unprecedented insight into the manufacturing process behind this artifact—and into how the technology was just as embedded in ritual as the finished object itself. Based on this examination, it is possible to single out some features that make the Muisca Raft unique but also to contextualize it more broadly in its sociotechnical framework. The following paragraphs present a tentative reconstruction of the manufacturing sequence, together with the evidence that supports our inferences.

To understand the manufacture of the raft, we have to bear in mind that, like all the other Muisca metal objects, it was manufactured using the lost-wax method. As such, a very important step in the *chaîne opératoire* would have been the creation of the original model using primarily coils or threads of rolled beeswax, in addition to some cutout flat pectorals also made of wax. Thus, when we examine the finished object, what we often see are the traces of the original work in wax, made more durable as they were cast in metal.

In the raft, these coils exhibit remarkable uniformity, which indicates great skill both in the preparation of the wax coils and in their application, either by attaching them to flat sheets on which to draw individual body parts, such as eyes or mouths, or leaving them largely free-

standing to create arms, headdresses, feathers, or other features. Although the thickness of the threads may vary depending on the nature or fineness of the item, often reaching less than 1 mm in diameter, each of the lines formed with wax is of very consistent appearance: there is hardly any lump or irregularity in them, and areas where the coils could have been accidentally deformed from pressing or bending are extremely rare (see Figures 15.10, 15.11, and 15.13).



Figure 15.13 Human figures on the front of the raft. Photograph by Clark Manuel Rodríguez / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.

It is reasonable to assume that each of the anthropomorphic objects would have been modeled in wax separately before they were joined to the raft base; however, it is quite likely that a single (highly skilled) artisan was tasked with manufacturing all of them, rather than having several members of a workshop working in parallel. This approach is evidenced by the groups of figures whose members are nearly identical, such as the six smaller characters on the edges of the raft (Figure 15.14) and the two medium-sized characters that carry the

masks (Figure 15.15). Beyond iconography and style, their similarities extend to the way the various elements are constructed, the thickness of the coils, and the attachment of the feeders. Furthermore, such technical similarities can be observed among groups. For example, the eyes are always ovals or flattened C shapes with the opening facing out; the nose is shaped as a narrow U that expands to form the top frame of the face; and the hands, always three-fingered, are formed by attaching a U-shaped wax coil to the ends of the arms (Figure 15.16).



Figure 15.14 Two “rowers” of the raft. Photograph by Clark Manuel Rodríguez / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.



Figure 15.15 Masked figures leading the scene in the raft. Photograph by Clark Manuel Rodríguez / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.



Figure 15.16 Three types of figures of the raft scene: "rower," masked figure, and main character. Photograph by Clark Manuel Rodríguez / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.

After each figure, the raft, and other elements were modeled, the various wax components would have been pressed against the base to fix them in their position, perhaps with the help of a warm tool that would soften the joints. As the wax figurines were pushed against the base, their lower parts were partly flattened (Figure 15.17). This stage of manufacture is particularly obvious when the raft is turned upside down. From this view, one can appreciate the small but significant protuberances that appear on the underside as the figures were pressed onto the soft base (Figure 15.18). These bumps would not be there if the figures and the base had been cast separately and then soldered together once solid. The slight backward tilting of the figures, which probably occurred during the wax stage, was most likely aimed at facilitating the flow of the metal downward, by gravity, as it was poured from the front of the raft. The cast feeders left at various places—for example, those that connect the shoulders of the smaller figures to the raft proper—further demonstrate that the raft began as a single wax model—and hence, as a single cast (Figure 15.19). These feeders were modeled with wax and, once the wax was melted out of the mold, they would have provided additional channels for the flow of metal and gases during casting.



Figure 15.17 Lower part of the main figure in the raft. Photograph by Clark Manuel Rodríguez / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.

It is important to emphasize that the entire artifact, with all of its details, would have been created as a single piece of waxwork. We were unable to identify a single solder or post-casting mechanical joint anywhere in the Muisca Raft—not even in smaller details such as items held in hands, details of headdresses, or, most impressively, the dangling items that hang from loops, such as the main figure’s nose ring or the pendants suspended from his headdress (Figure 15.20). Behind each of the hanging ornaments, it is possible to identify the stumps left after cutting the cast feeders that connected them to other parts of the object. For example, the remainders of the feeders that would have connected the nose ring are visible on the hips of the main individual, similarly to the feeders preserved in the main character standing on the litter that accompanied the Muisca Raft in this offering. Rather than casting small parts separately and subsequently joining them together, the artisan opted for the much more complex and riskier practice of preparing the model for a single metal pour. Most likely, and as we have argued elsewhere, part of the ritual associated with these objects dictated that they had to be made in this way (Martín-Torres and Uribe Villegas 2015a).

Once the wax model was ready, the next step would be the creation of the mold around it; this stage required the painstaking application of very finely ground charcoal, probably mixed with a small fraction of equally fine clay. This mixture, perhaps in the form of a slurry, had to cover every detail—be thoroughly inserted in every cleft, corner, and crevice—to make sure that the molding material took up the shape as a negative of the wax model. Reminders of this black material are still visible in many narrow areas of the object (Figure 15.21). Applying this material around pendants must have been particularly difficult, as the artisan had to ensure that the pendants themselves and the loops from which they hang were kept separate; otherwise, they would stick to one another upon casting—an error documented, for example, in the main figure’s earrings (see Figure 15.20).

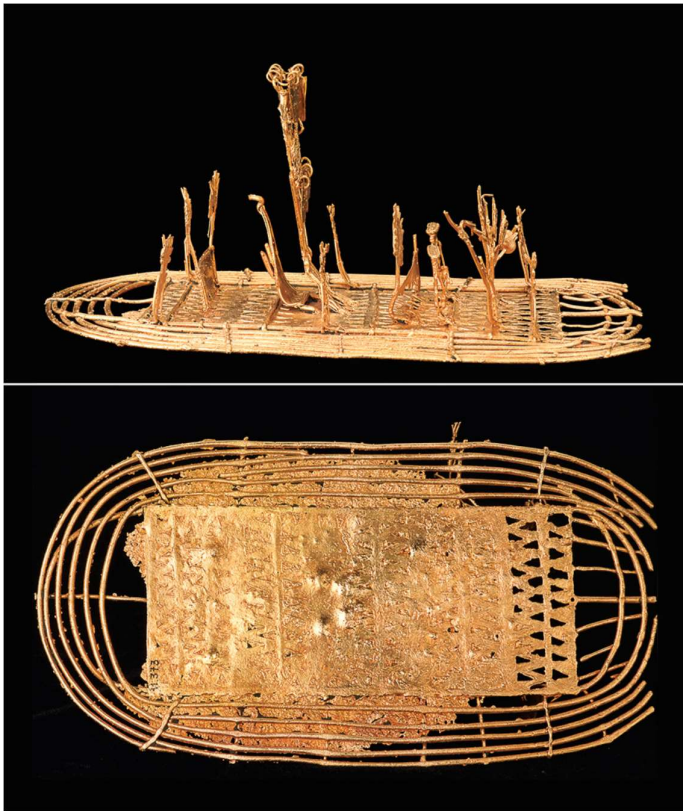


Figure 15.18 Side and bottom views of the raft. Photograph by Clark Manuel Rodríguez / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.



Figure 15.19 Raft "rower" with cast feeders in both sides of his body. Photograph by Clark Manuel Rodríguez / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.



Figure 15.20 The *cacique* of the raft. The photographs show two views of the same figure, the right one with dangles moved to reveal the face. Photograph by Clark Manuel Rodríguez / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.



Figure 15.21 Two “rowers,” with traces of the ground charcoal of the casting mold. Photograph courtesy of the Museo del Oro, Bogotá.

If any of the smaller wax components were moved while the clay was applied, they

would appear as flaws in the final cast—as was probably the case with the “fallen feather” that can be noticed on the head of one of the smaller figures (see Figure 15.19). Possibly, as the mold was built in successive layers, the grain size of the molding material increased—as did the proportion of clay to charcoal—to bolster the mold’s structural stability. Although such outer layers have not been preserved here, they have been documented in casting molds elsewhere (Sáenz Obregón et al. 2007). In the end, the entire wax model would be covered by the charcoal and clay mix, except for an opening at the raft’s bow, which would serve as the pouring channel, and perhaps some further channels for degassing. Although there is no direct evidence for these front channels in the Pasca raft, we can see the cast feeders depicted in the photography of the now lost raft from Siecha, which indicate that this raft was also cast from the bow (Figure 15.22).

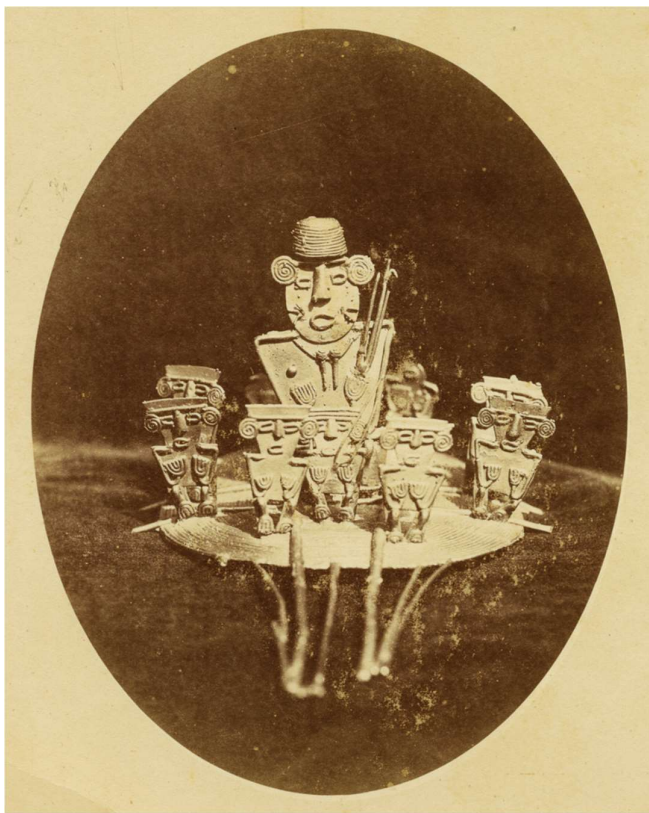


Figure 15.22 Nineteenth-century photograph of the Siecha raft. Julio Racines Bernal (1848–1913) identified the work as “Gold raft that represents the El Dorado ceremony of the Chibcha Indians,” ca. 1890. Albumen silver print, H. 19.7 cm, W. 13.9 cm. Museo Nacional de Colombia.

Upon drying, the mold would retain the shape of the wax object, and the artisan could proceed to melt the wax out. This step could have been carried out at relatively low temperatures—beeswax melts at around 60°C. The void left inside the clay mold would thus constitute a unique, irreplaceable, perfectly accurate negative of the wax model. Before the metal was poured into this void, the mold was preheated to a considerable temperature, probably of several hundred degrees. Evidence of that process could be seen in the developed dendritic texture in many areas of the metal surface—an indication of a slow cooling (Figure 15.23). If the molten gold alloy was poured into a cold mold, the metal would solidify too quickly before reaching all the very thin voids and filling all the narrow spaces previously occupied by wax coils. Furthermore, the chance of a mold fracture triggered by thermal shock would be much higher if the mold was not preheated.

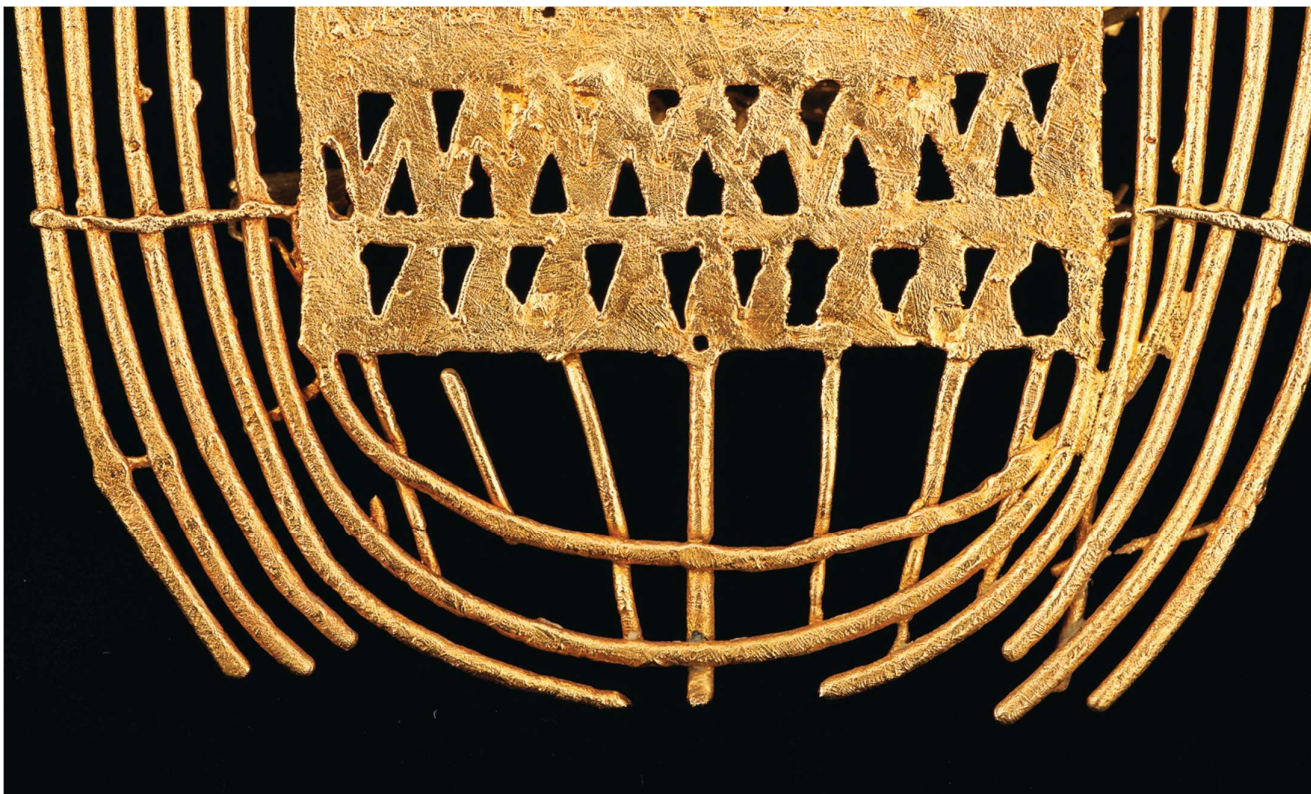


Figure 15.23 Dendritic texture in the surface of the raft. Photograph by Clark Manuel Rodríguez / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.

It is impossible to quantify the time and effort that would have been invested before the critical moment: the metal pour. But something unexpected happened at this point. As the metal poured from the raft front ran into the various parts of the mold, a fracture developed at the base, allowing the metal to flow into what should have been openwork. If one looks at the base of the raft, it is possible to imagine what the original intention, as created in the wax model, would have been: a crisscross of lines with open spaces in between, perhaps evoking the reeds of a raft; however, as the crack in the mold grew, the metal filled many of these spaces, resulting in the flaw that we see today (see Figure 15.18, bottom). As metal was lost into those spaces of the mold, the curved “reeds” forming the raft’s bow as well as and the main feeders at the front were never filled with metal.

While a goldsmith today may regard this accident as a casting failure, we cannot assume that this would have been the case for the artisan who made this raft. In fact, in its current form, the Muisca Raft boasts several features that recur in other examples of Muisca goldwork (Martín-Torres and Uribe Villegas 2015a, 2015b; Uribe Villegas 2012; Uribe Villegas et al. 2013; Uribe Villegas and Martín-Torres 2012a). The first is that, while the waxwork is impeccable, the casting often shows apparent errors, and there is no attempt at correcting them by subsequent post-casting work. The second related feature is that, in general, the Muisca Raft shows very little in the way of finishing touches: there is hardly any work after the casting to clean the object surfaces, remove cast feeders, or polish off minor imperfections. Everything is left almost the way it comes out of the mold, as if the sequence of manufacture had to remain materialized in the objects offered; this is shown in the remnants of charcoal-rich molding material left filling many crevices in the metal artifact, the feeders left connecting the smaller figures’ shoulders to the base, and the fallen feather that no one attempted to bend back into the correct position. It is also visible on the backs of the figures in the many small globules of metal, which probably originated in tiny voids from gas

bubbles in the mold when it was filled with metal (see Figure 15.11). This irregularity, like the dendritic texture observed above, could have been filed or polished to enhance the sheen and appearance of the finished item. It strikes us as odd today that no effort was made to enhance the golden sheen of such an exceptional object, but this ancient choice simply illustrates how different conceptions of gold and crafting goldwork may be put into practice.

There is little doubt that whoever commissioned this offering must have been someone important, perhaps the *cacique* himself, as we will discuss later. So, it would seem reasonable that if the work were not executed at the desired standard, he could have requested that the artisan start again or at least try to mend the mistakes. We strongly believe, however, that neither the maker nor the person who commissioned the offering seem to have been concerned with the objects' appearance. Instead, the raft, like the other Muisca votive metalwork we have examined, illustrates some of the shared characteristics of this sociocultural tradition: the objects had to be made by the lost-wax method and cast in a single pour, and they were left in an "unfinished" state, with limited post-casting work, no matter the accidents that might have occurred during casting. As we have argued elsewhere, it is quite likely that the objects were made on commission, in a single manufacturing event, and deposited very soon after manufacture (Martín-Torres and Uribe Villegas 2015a, 2015b; Uribe Villegas 2012; Uribe Villegas et al. 2013, Uribe Villegas and Martín-Torres 2012a).

Reconstructing the manufacture of the Muisca Raft in this way reminds us of the vital importance of beeswax, a material with a key technical role but also a marked symbolic role that some Chibchan-speaking communities continue to observe today (Falchetti de Sáenz and Nates Parra 2002). The ritual and symbolic associations between wax and metal are well documented ethnographically and materialized in objects such as the Muisca Raft (Martín-Torres and Uribe Villegas 2015a).

If we now turn to the other metal artifact in the offering, we can observe broadly

similar traits but also some peculiarities: for example, as in the raft, the main character on the litter wears an elaborate headdress and a spectacular nose ring. In the litter, however, the artisan did not remove the cast feeders connecting the body to the nose ring, again reinforcing the impression of an “unfinished” item. More generally, this sculptor seems to have had less dexterity in modeling and using wax coils: their thickness is more variable and, where possible, the artisan used flat, cut sheets rather than elaborate coils. This difference is evident, for example, if we compare the headdress and the nose ring of the two main individuals. Thus, and contrary to what we have observed in other offerings, it would seem that at least two artisans created the metal objects of this assemblage. The reason behind this shared effort may have been the exceptional time investment required for this offering, which perhaps had to be ready on short notice. In fact, the only other offering where we have confidently found evidence for the hand of more than one artisan was a large and complex example, also found in Suba, Bogotá, composed of thirty-four votive objects made in different gold alloys. This work includes figures of warriors, women carrying children, babies in cribs, animals and objects from daily life, and a cast metal ingot (Martín-Torres and Uribe Villegas 2015b; Uribe Villegas et al. 2013).

Chemical composition

We carried out numerous chemical analyses of various points of both objects using a pXRF spectrometer. The results scatter considerably, most likely because of the metal segregation and associated heterogeneity that would take place during the very slow cooling in a preheated mold (cf. Martín-Torres and Uribe Villegas 2015a for similar cases). When averaged, the results for both objects are quite similar: 19 percent weight of copper, 16 percent weight of silver, and 65 percent weight of gold for the raft; and 19 percent weight of copper, 18 percent weight of silver, and 63 percent weight of gold for the litter (Table 15.1). We have previously shown that the Muisca employed the whole spectrum of alloys available

to them by mixing different proportions of argentiferous gold and copper (Uribe Villegas and Martín-Torres 2012a, 2012b). The compositions of the objects discussed here are, therefore, consistent with those analyzed previously, although it is worth noting that their silver-to-gold ratio is higher than typical (Figure 15.24).

		Cu	Ag	Au
Raft (n=10)	mean	19.2	16.1	64.7
	median	19.2	16.1	64.7
	SD	1.2	0.4	0.9
	minimum	16.2	15.6	63.9
	maximum	20.2	16.7	67.3
Litter (n=10)	mean	19.2	17.7	62.9
	median	19.6	17.8	62.8
	SD	0.9	0.4	0.9
	minimum	16.7	17.3	62.0
	maximum	19.8	18.5	65.2

Table 15.1 Composition of raft and litter.

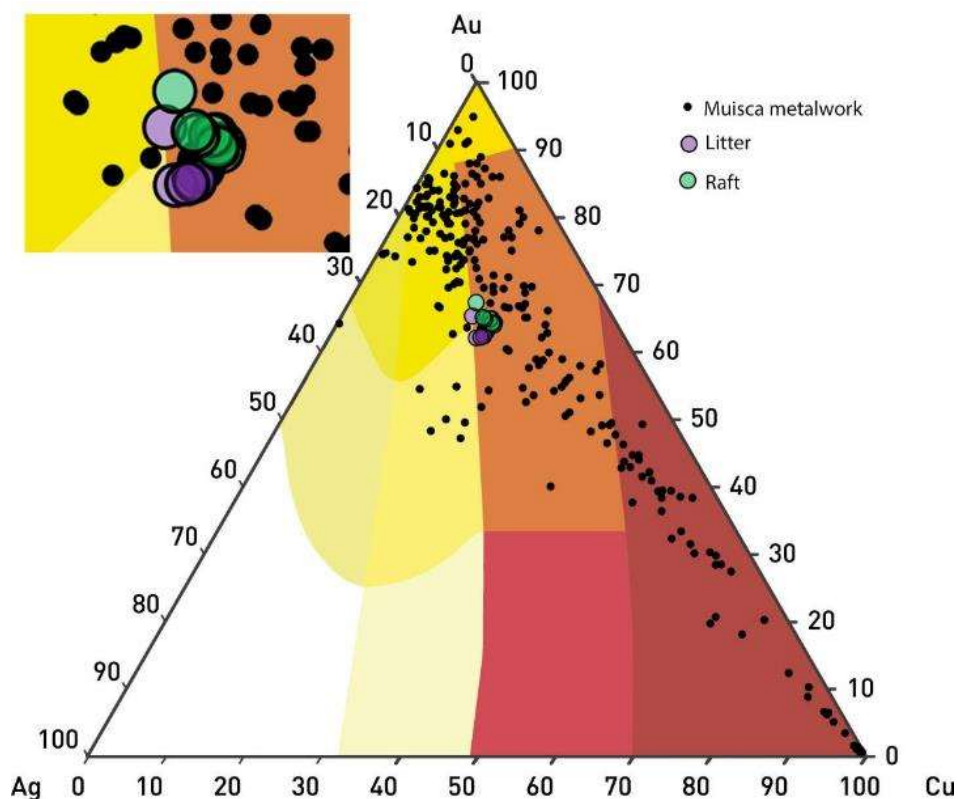


Figure 15.24 Plot of the results of multiple chemical analyses of the raft and litter from Pasca by pXRF compared with our database of Muisca metalwork. The background colors are a simplified representation of the colors of the corresponding alloys. Inset, detail of the area of interest, showing how the objects plot near the boundaries between three different “color regions.” Illustration by the authors.

A final aspect that deserves mention is that, in spite of their similar compositions, the objects show rather different color hues: the raft has a warmer, more orange color, whereas the litter is exceptionally paler, with greenish tinges (see Figure 15.9). This disparity may, in part, be due to the fact that both objects lie in a particular range of the copper–silver–gold (Cu–Ag–Au) system where small changes in composition may have a very significant impact in the resulting color, as illustrated in the simplified color diagram in Figure 15.24. However, it is also possible that the litter underwent some surface treatment, deliberate or not, which has led to its peculiar appearance (cf. Martínón-Torres and Uribe Villegas 2015a for a possibly similar case in Tenjo), or that the different color may derive from some subsequent conservation or restoration treatment. Until further analyses, this will have to remain an open question.

The message in the offering

As in other offerings we have investigated previously (Martinón-Torres and Uribe Villegas 2015b, n.d.; Uribe Villegas 2012; Uribe Villegas et al. 2013; Uribe Villegas and Martinón-Torres 2012a), the context and the objects associated with the Muisca Raft provide revealing insight into the offerer and the intended message. The two goldwork scenes, with individuals and items rich in detail, are particularly informative in this sense, and they point to a clear association with the status of chief. In order to decipher the codes inscribed in these artifacts, we have carried out a detailed iconographic analysis; we resorted to additional sources of information, mainly documents written by Spaniards around the time of the conquest, archaeology, and other Muisca material culture.

The central man in both scenes reveals his hierarchical status through, among other elements, his larger size and his attire, both of which are canonic in Muisca iconography (Martinón-Torres and Uribe Villegas 2015b; Uribe Villegas et al. 2013). Rectangular fretwork nose rings with stylized bird heads, such as those worn by both main figures, are among the largest, most technically complex, and ornate items of the Muisca goldworking tradition (Figures 15.25 and 15.26). Some funerary assemblages include these types of nose rings, though they are far from common. They are also rare in the wide spectrum of social statuses represented in anthropomorphic figures, and they can sometimes be observed in ceramic offering vessels shaped like richly attired characters (Figure 15.27). A Spanish chronicle, probably written around 1540, hints at the importance of this ornament for the chiefs: “Those who are to become caciques or captains, whether men or women, they lock them up while young in some houses; and they remain there for several years, depending on the quality of what they expect to inherit, and there are men who remain for seven years . . . and once they come out, they can pierce their ears and noses to bear gold, which is the most honorable thing among them” (Jiménez de la Espada 1889:100).²



Figure 15.25 The main figures of the raft (left) and the litter (right). Photograph by Clark Manuel Rodríguez / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.

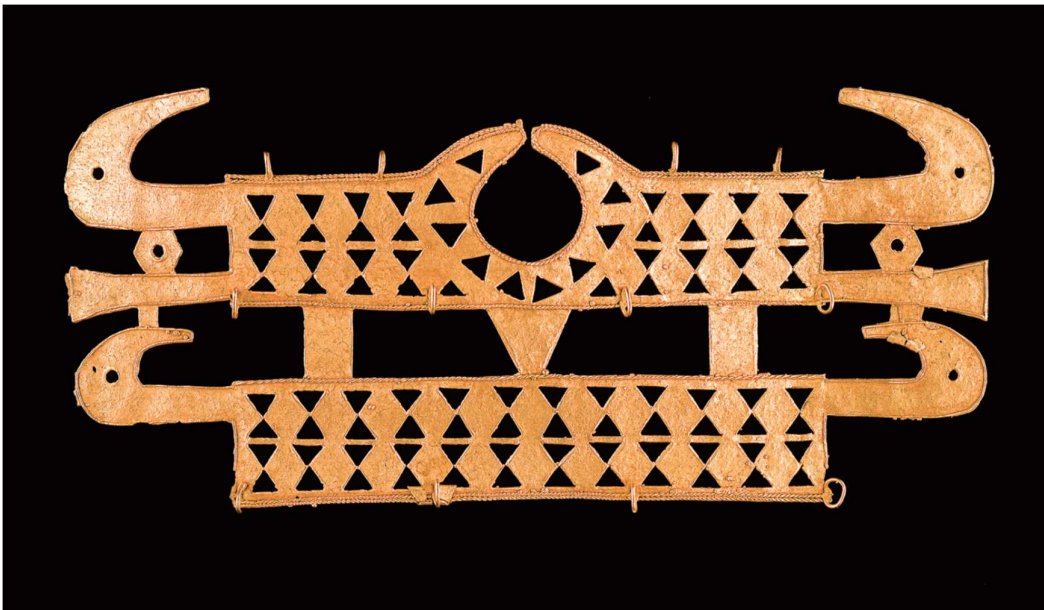


Figure 15.26 Muisca nose ring made in tumbaga. H. 7.1 cm; W. 15.6 cm. Museo del Oro, Bogotá, O33883. Photograph by Clark Manuel Rodríguez / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.



Figure 15.27 Lid of a Muisca offering vessel, depicting a carefully adorned personage with his two small companions. It likely represents a stylized *cercado*. H. 31 cm; W. 19.4 cm. Museo del Oro, Bogotá, C00493. Photograph by Clark Manuel Rodríguez / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.



Figure 15.28 Muisca funerary attire found in Sogamoso, Boyacá, integrated by a crown and a pair of earring pendants. Museo del Oro, Bogotá, O19535 (crown), O19536 and O19537 (earring pendants). Photograph by Rudolf Schrimppff / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.

and crowns indicated the chiefs' power. Even more revealing is a 1569 document in which Indigenous people report that the *caciques* of Suba and Tunja, towns near Bogotá, used to call their people by means of their *pregoneros*, or town criers, "and they send their earrings and blankets and hats as a signal" (Santiago 1991:159–160). The Museo del Oro holds a luxurious funerary assemblage recovered in Sogamoso, Boyacá, composed of a crown and a pair of earrings of delicate manufacture (Figure 15.28), as well as other examples of these types of ornaments, always of highly skilled manufacture.

An equally important element in the Muisca Raft is the *duho* behind the main character (Figure 15.29). This type of low seat, together with small benches, was part of the paraphernalia of political and religious leaders in many Amerindian societies (Pineda Camacho 1994). Concerning specifically the Muisca, chronicler Fray Pedro Simón reports that the armies of Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada found the powerful chief of Tunja in his enclosure "according to the custom of his elders, sitting on a *duro*,³ a low chair, all made of wood, of unusual craftsmanship, with a very bent back" (Simón [1627] 1891:2:188). We are not aware of any preserved Muisca wooden *duhos*, and there is only one other votive figure, besides the raft, that includes a representation of this type of seat (Figure 15.30).



Figure 15.29 The *cacique* of the raft seated in his *duho*. Photograph by Clark Manuel Rodríguez / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.



Figure 15.30 Nineteenth-century photograph of figures of the offering assemblage discovered in the Huaca de Chirajara site. Julio Racines Bernal (1848–1913) identified the works as “Gold figurines made by the Chibcha Indians, found in Chirajara, ca. 1892.” Museo Nacional de Colombia.

It is noteworthy that in both scenes, as well as in other representations with hierarchical features, none of the individuals surrounding the main character is facing him—as shown, for example, in Figure 15.34. This feature is probably related to subjects' required observance in the presence of the chief:

“The subjects' reverence towards their caciques is great, because they never look at them in the face, even if they are in familiar conversation, so if they enter [the space] where the cacique is, they have to enter with their backs turned on him, moving backwards. And whether sitting or standing, they have to remain in this manner, so that instead of worship they always have their backs turned on their lords” (Jiménez de la Espada 1889:93).

Both tumbaga objects from Pasca bear close similarities with enclosure scenes, which are much more common than rafts or litters (Figures 15.31–15.35). These enclosures typically show a circular space surrounded by a palisade with an entrance that occasionally extends into a road. These objects are thought to constitute schematic representations of the architectural structures surrounded by palisades that served as dwellings for the chief. The entrance was flanked by strong posts where the human sacrifice ritual known as the *gavia* ceremony was performed and from where roads to sacred places departed. Europeans called these structures *cercados* (enclosures) because of their shapes. Besides housing the chief, these places served as important political, ritual, and symbolic centers; they also acted as a defense for the chiefdom (Casilimas Rojas and López Ávila 1987; Pradilla Rueda, Villate Santander, and Ortiz Gómez 1992), which probably explains their relative frequency in goldwork (Uribe Villegas and Martín-Torres 2017).



Figure 15.31 Figure in the shape of a *cercado*, or the enclosure of the *cacique*. Its bicephalous main character is unusual and intriguing. H. 9.1 cm; W. 5.7 cm; D. 6.4 cm. Museo del Oro, Bogotá, O32866. Photograph by Rudolf Schrimppff / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.



Figure 15.32 Figure representing a *cercado*, found in Pasca, Cundinamarca. H. 5 cm; W. 6.8 cm. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz—Ethnologisches Museum, VA 13636. Photograph by Claudia Obrocki.



Figure 15.33 *Cercado* resting on a surface that recalls that of the Muisca Raft. H. 7.3 cm; W. 3.1 cm. Museo del Oro, Bogotá, O08454. Photograph by Clark Manuel Rodríguez / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.



Figure 15.34 *Cercado* showing the chief accompanied by a group of individuals of lower status. A *gavia*, or sacrificial post, is visible at the right side of the entrance. H. 5.5 cm; W. 6.1 cm. Museo del Oro, Bogotá, O23631. Photograph by Clark Manuel Rodríguez / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.

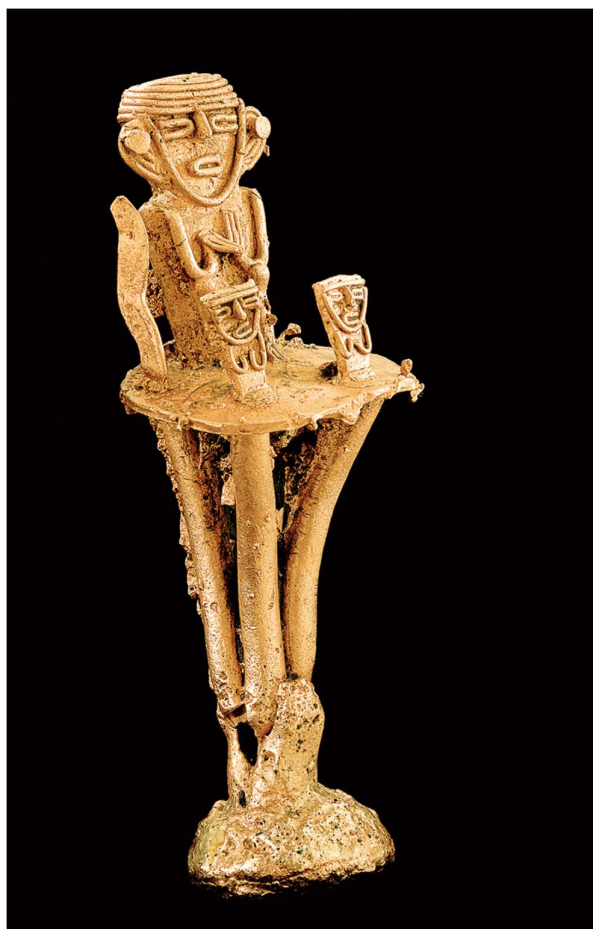


Figure 15.35 *Cercado* with the archetypal scene of the *cacique* escorted by two small individuals. The thick casting feeders and funnel are visible under the scene. H. 12.8 cm; W. 4.5 cm. Museo del Oro, Bogotá, O15117. Photograph by Clark Manuel Rodríguez / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.

As is the case with the objects from Pasca, many enclosures show a larger character, richly attired and dominating the scene, together with two smaller individuals in front, guarding him (see Figures 15.31, 15.32, and 15.35). In one case, the opening in the palisade is closed in the interior with a smaller fence sustained by one pole on each side, similar to the fences that frame the space of the main character in the objects from Pasca (see Figure 15.31). Another example displays four fences, as well as the same banners with semicircular ends that flank the palisades in the raft (see Figure 15.32). Similarities also exist between the surface on which some enclosures rest and the base of the raft. Two of the gold enclosures in the Museo del Oro collections appear on a platform made by a spiral coil, one of them

creating an oval shape (see Figure 15.33). In this artifact, the enclosure is placed toward the back of the platform, an arrangement comparable to that of the raft.

It is thus clear that both of the objects from Pasca allude to the character of the chief, but what exactly do they represent? For the raft, it is appropriate to discuss it together with the only comparable object known, the so-called Siecha raft, found in 1856 during an attempt to drain the eponymous lake (Pérez de Barradas 1958:1:97–98; Zerda 1883:19–20; see Figure 15.22). Even though both objects bear a clear resemblance to one another, they differ in many ways, and the Siecha example is considerably simpler in its iconography. Sadly, we only have an old photograph of this artifact, as it was lost in the late 1880s during a fire at the Bremen Harbor when it was on its way to the Ethnologisches Museum of Berlin (Botero 2006).

The Siecha raft, smaller than the one from Pasca, had a circular base made by a spiral coil, crossed in the center by two thicker, parallel coils and an additional two that intersected them perpendicularly. The central individual was seated and carried a dart thrower and two darts. He wore a headdress and a necklace, and feline whiskers protruded from his cheeks. Nine smaller individuals surrounded him, all apparently seated: six similar ones at the front, in two groups of three on each side; a slightly smaller one in front of the main character, carrying a bag on his back and holding a dart thrower and a dart in one hand; and two additional individuals behind, wearing a different headdress, which can barely be made out in the blurred photograph.

In his book *El Dorado*, Zerda (1883:20) did not hesitate to link the Siecha raft to the El Dorado ceremony: “Undoubtedly, this piece represents the religious ceremony described by Zamora; that is, the Cacique of Guatavita surrounded by the Indian priests on the reed raft that would lead them to the center of the lake, on the day of the oblation.” Later on, Restrepo Tirado and Arias (1892:33) refuted this interpretation and proposed that the artifact

represented “a Cacique’s boat trip on the lake hunting birds.” The bases of these objects, and especially so the one from Pasca, indeed resemble those of rafts, while the orderly arrangement of the human figures and other scenographic elements such as the *duho*, banners, rattles, and masks suggest a ceremony, a ritual, or a display of status symbols. Several chroniclers mention the use of rafts among the Muisca; Simón, for example, reported that they were made of “bundles of reeds or dry bulrush, tied up together; or sticks, out of which a form of raft is made, where three or four or more people can go” (Simón [1627] 1891:2:247).

However, the notable differences between both objects raise doubts as to the identity of both performative contexts, opening up the possibility that they represent different scenes. In fact, it is quite likely that lakes—widely venerated by the Muisca—were the location for different ceremonies at various moments of the year or the life cycle of the chiefdom. It is also possible that the specific nature of lacustrine rituals may have varied across space and over time. Perhaps it is indeed the lacustrine ceremony that would become known as El Dorado, described at the beginning of this essay, which appears materialized in the Pasca raft; however, we can never be certain.

Turning to the litter scene, again there are very few comparable objects; so far, we have been able to identify only three in other collections (Figures 15.36, 15.38, and 15.39). The closest one, and that which provides more clues leading to the interpretation of this object as a representation of a person carried on a litter, is the magnificent example held at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (see Figure 15.36). Reportedly found about a century ago, this work bears numerous similarities with the Pasca artifact but also some differences. The Boston example shows the main individual without companions at his immediate front, though he is guarded by the same palisade—in this case, with the characteristic semicircular banners. He also wears the typical chiefly symbols noted above: a large nose ring, although

here apparently triangular and perhaps similar to one at the Museo del Oro (Figure 15.37), bifurcated earrings, and a diadem with suspended pectorals. He also carries a shield with darts in his left hand—a common attribute in votive figures. The most interesting elements of this artifact are the small figures attached to the sides of the frame. Only seven are conserved, but there are remnants of eighteen: five pairs in front of the main character and four behind. Without a doubt, these figures represent the litter carriers.



Figure 15.36 Man on litter effigy, Muisca, 1100–1550 CE, Departments of Cundinamarca and Boyacá, Colombia. Gold and copper alloy, 7.3 × 22.86 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Landon T. Clay, 1975.139. Photograph © 2018 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

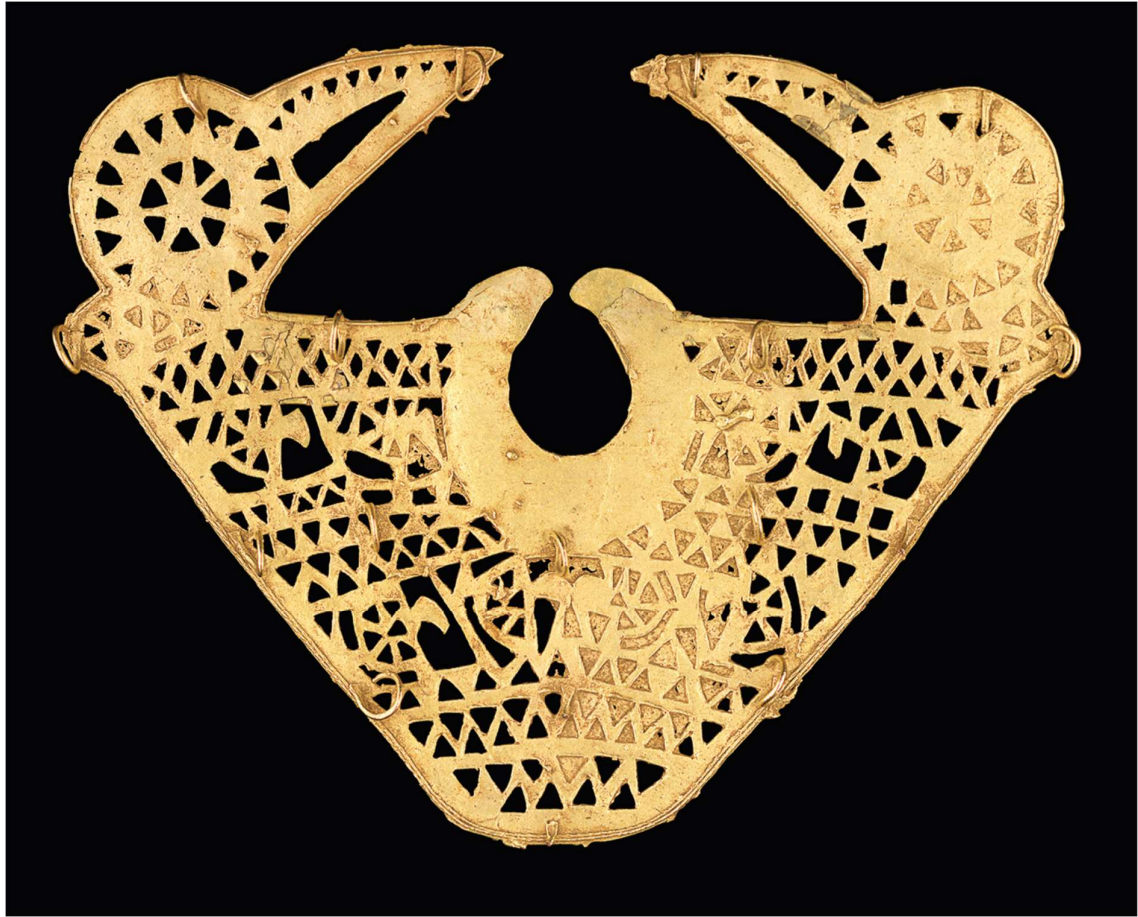


Figure 15.37 Muisca nose ornament. H. 14.6 cm; W. 18.9 cm. Museo del Oro, Bogotá, O33882. Photograph by Clark Manuel Rodríguez / Museo del Oro, Bogotá.

The second artifact comparable to the Pasca litter used to belong to Jaime Jaramillo Arango, a physician, diplomat, and intellectual from Manizales with a scholarly interest in the Chibchan culture now referred to as Muisca (see Figure 15.38). According to Jaramillo Arango's description (1946:67–70, pl. 2), the object originally had twenty carriers, six pairs at the front and four at the back, of which only remains of three had been preserved. Rather unusually, the body of the litter could be detached from the sticks. Ornaments and paraphernalia are similar to those of the two central figures discussed previously, but here the main character carries two dart throwers in his right hand and an apparent rope on his left shoulder. Based on European chronicles, Jaramillo Arango proposed that this probably represented “the Zipa in the flesh”—that is, the chief of Bogotá at the time of European

arrival. The upper part of the litter is currently in the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (Figure 15.39).

The third litter, held at the Ethnologisches Museum of Berlin, shows a single character reclining in a litter with fences at its longer sides; he wears a large rectangular nose ring and is preceded by two semicircular banners but lacks the palisade (Figure 15.40). The whole artifact, with the exception of the litter poles, shows a coiled texture that is conventionally used in the Muisca artwork to represent textiles, such as woven bags and hats, and also mummies wrapped in fabrics.

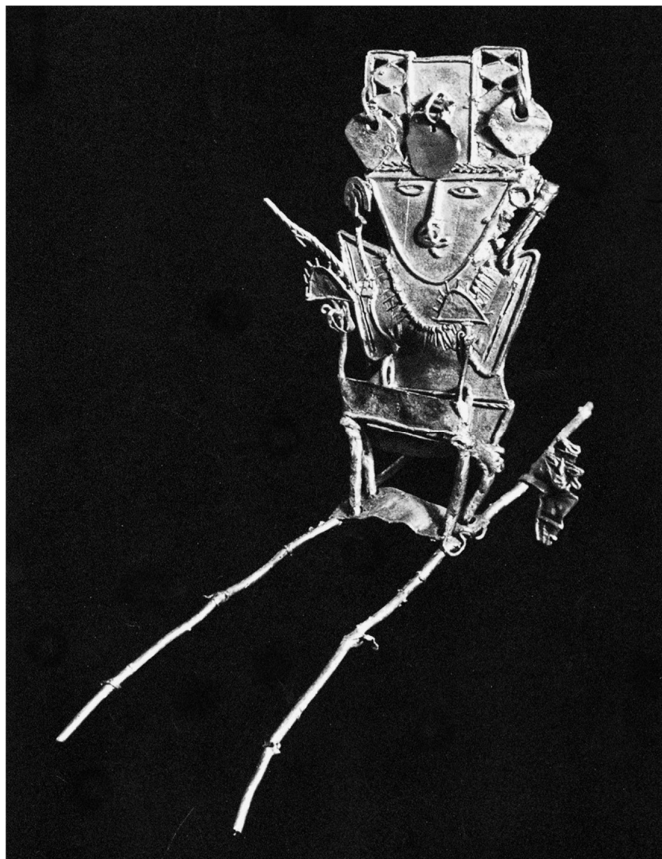


Figure 15.38 Litter with *cacique* exhibiting an elaborated crown. Originally twenty small carriers were attached at the sides of the litter (Jaramillo Arango 1946:pl. 2).



Figure 15.39 The votive figure from the collection of Jaime Jaramillo Arango is now preserved at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. When entering this collection, the lower part to which the figure of the *cacique* was attached was missing (see Figure 15.38). Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Gift of Alfred C. Glassell, Jr., 2010.968.

Several documents dated to the conquest period and later mention the custom of carrying Muisca chiefs in litters. About the chief of Bogotá, Simón ([1627] 1891:2:136) reported that, witnessing the defeat of his men in front of the Spaniards, “[the chief] had himself transported apace, on his litter, with replacement of Indians to an enclosure or fort that he had.” In another case, according to Aguado ([1581] 1906:132), when going to battle, “these Indians [brought] a dead body, embalmed and dry, placed in another litter furnished with rich blankets . . . where they probably came confident that it would give them the victory.” Interestingly, the image of the mummy of a *cacique* carried in a litter, as described

in this document, may explain the enigmatic individual seemingly wrapped in textiles in the litter of the Ethnologisches Museum of Berlin (see Figure 15.40).

Turning to the great offering vessel in the Pasca assemblage, the basket posture is worth highlighting, as it appears to have been a ritual position of great significance among the Muisca. Similarly seated individuals appear on decorative trays for psychotropic substances, and they are frequent in offerings, sometimes making up full assemblages of up to forty individuals. Basket bodies also adorn the necks of fine ceramic jars. More generally, both the fine manufacture and large size of this vessel are notable; it constitutes one of the largest offering vessels known.



Figure 15.40 Litter with chief tilted back, adorned with a prominent nose ring and a crown. H. 13.6 cm; W. 1.6 cm. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz— Ethnologisches Museum, VA 62597. Photograph by Claudia Obrocki.

Although we cannot confirm the presence of a feline bone, such an object would be consistent with the other items in the offering, considering the references to the chief and his paraphernalia. Several strands of evidence point to the identity of Muisca chiefs as felines—to the extent that some of them appear to have been considered “feline-men” (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1978b:53–54): their names alluded to these animals, they wore long tails attached to their backs, and they kept felines in their enclosures (see PC.B.416, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection). Material culture corroborates this association: many ceramic effigies with rich attire show human bodies painted with dots that are probably meant to evoke jaguar fur, and some of the chiefs represented in gold enclosures, as well as the chief in the Siecha raft, display feline whiskers in their faces (see Figures 15.22 and 15.31); also some enclosures show felines inside or guarding the entrance.

Based on the above information, we can infer that the message in this exceptional offering narrates a story concerning political power and the hierarchy of the chief. The importance and coincidence of iconographic elements in both gold artifacts—and additional parallels with chiefly references—evoke all the critical symbols in the representation and materialization of the status of the *cacique*: elaborate goldwork ornaments, the wooden *duho*, the banners and palms, the litter that elevates him off the ground, the rafts, and, perhaps most importantly, the enclosure. To these elements we can add the entourage of individuals accompanying the chief, with their particular arrangement and appearance, especially the two characters typically preceding him. The preeminence of these symbols in these two gold objects, and in the other artifacts discussed above, attest to the significance of public display and ritual practice in legitimizing the chief’s power.

Even though the schematization and strict iconographic canons of Muisca votive figures suggest that they represent social categories rather than individual portraits, it seems clear that each offering told a particular story that varied according to context and specific

intentions (Martinón-Torres and Uribe Villegas 2015b; Uribe Villegas et al. 2013; Uribe Villegas and Martinón-Torres 2012a). This specificity raises the question of whether these two scenes recovered in Pasca represent the very *cacique* who made a particular pledge to the spirits through this offering or whether, instead, these objects are more generic, iconic images representing the hierarchy and status of the chief. While future research may help us address this question, current ethnographic and archaeological data offer interesting ideas to help us envision the ritual and political context that could have led a Muisca chief to send such a resounding message to the deities.

The ritual and political context

A large quantity of Muisca offerings has been recovered elsewhere in the Cundinamarca and Boyacá Highlands; however, understanding Muisca votive practices remains a challenge for archaeologists. The diversity of locations gives relatively few clues as to the social and political circumstances that led to the offerings because, except in a few cases (see McBride n.d.), votive deposits are not associated with activities that leave clear traces in the archaeological record. This problem is made worse by the fact that the great majority of votive figures are bereft of any context at all.

From sixteenth- and seventeenth-century chronicles we know that, at least at the time of European arrival, offering rituals were a widespread practice across different Muisca social spheres. Human effigies in tumbaga and ceramics, emeralds, hair, fingernails, blood, cotton, and animal skulls were offered in lakes, rivers, and caves; by large rocks, trees, and cliffs; under waterfalls; in terraces and agricultural fields, hills and mountaintops, dwellings, temples and shrines, and graves; and at road junctions (Medrano [1600] 1953; Simón [1627] 1891). Usually, offerings were placed in anthropomorphic ceramic vessels, which some scholars (Pérez de Barradas 1958; Restrepo 1895) interpret as representations of priests, called *jeques*, but occasionally offerings were made without a vessel. Sometimes offerings

were part of collective rituals; at other times they took place during more intimate ceremonies. In some cases, rituals were performed by the *jeque* alone (Simón [1627] 1891:2:287); in others, the commoners themselves placed the offerings at shrines (Rodríguez Freyle [1636] 1973).

Notwithstanding their varied nature, Muisca offerings clearly had a propitiatory character. In the *Epítome de la conquista del nuevo Reino de Granada* (Anonymous 1889:300) and according to Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés (1851–1855:3:120–121), the Spaniards understood the Indigenous offerings as a kind of sacrifice to obtain divine favor. The *Epítome* even points out that each shrine was dedicated to an individual deity to whom people petitioned for specific concerns. According to Simón, the Muisca had one god for each necessity. Chibchacum, of the Bogotá province, was the god of merchants, goldsmiths, peasants, and wealthy people; Nencatacoa, of drunkenness, weavers, and blanket painters. Cuchaviva, the rainbow, to whom one should offer figurines of “low karat gold” (Simón [1627] 1891:2:304), was the god of childbirth. Among the many gods, Bochica, the main deity, was lord of chiefs and captains, and, like Chibchacum, received only gold offerings.

To understand the context of the Pasca raft offering, it is important to remember that descriptions in archival documents and chronicles cannot be used directly to explain archaeological finds predating the conquest. In spite of multiple lines of evidence pointing to the continuity in Muisca votive practices until well into the colonial period, offerings did not always necessarily have the same meaning over time, as emphasized by Langebaek (n.d.). In any case, the great quantity of Muisca votive objects recovered throughout the Cundinamarca and Boyacá Highlands testify to the fact that ritual offerings were a widespread practice; that said, it is difficult to date the origins of this tradition. Some evidence suggests that several objects could have been offered during the Herrera period

(ca. 800 BCE–800 CE), but the information is not conclusive (cf. Lleras-Pérez, Gutiérrez, and Pradilla 2009). The data are much more robust for votive objects dating to the Early Muisca (ca. 800–1200 CE), a period with abundant goldwork (Langebaek 1995), characterized by a comparatively higher sociopolitical integration (Boada Rivas 1999; Kruschek 2003; Langebaek 1995) and the construction of ceremonial centers. However, several scholars agree that the surge in votive practices probably took place in the Late Muisca period (1200–1600 CE). During this time, population increased considerably and a more centralized and hierarchical sociopolitical structure was in place (Langebaek 1995). Against this background, it is appropriate to wonder about the context of the offering of the raft and its associated assemblage—and the motives behind it. To address these matters, we need to investigate three fundamental aspects: 1) when the offering was made and when it was deposited, 2) where, and 3) what types of practices or rituals took place from the moment when the need for such an offering was perceived to the point of its deposition in the cave. Regarding the first aspect, the Museo del Oro recently obtained via AMS a radiocarbon date on a small sample of the charcoal-rich remnants of the mold material that remains in some of the raft's cracks and crevices. This analysis yielded a date [Beta 410561, 600±30 bp, 1295–1410 CE]. We also dated a sample from the litter, which gave a result [Beta 410562, 890±30 bp, 1040–1220 CE]. It is surprising that the two calibrated chronological ranges, albeit close, do not overlap, especially when the evidence indicates that all the elements in an offering were made and assembled on request and in a single manufacturing event (Martinón-Torres and Uribe Villegas 2015b; Uribe Villegas 2012; Uribe Villegas and Martinón-Torres 2012a). The explanation for this apparent disparity may be the “old wood effect,” the possibility that the charcoal in the litter came from an older part of a long-lived tree. In any case, it seems likely that the manufacture of the raft and the litter took place at some point during the first half (i.e., 1200–1400 CE) of the Late Muisca period. This date is also

supported by the attribution of the anthropomorphic offering vessel to the ceramic type known as Guatavita Desgrasante Tiestos, which is mainly associated with this time (Boada Rivas, Mora Camargo, and Johannesson 1988; Broadbent 1969; Langebaek 1985; Ome 2006).

Regarding the second aspect, given the relative scarcity of archaeological investigations, we know little about the political situation in Pasca during the Muisca period. We, therefore, must rely on the chronicles for information. Simón reports the existence of a chiefdom in the southern end of the Muisca territory (see Figure 15.4), bordering with the populations of Sutagaos and Panches, neighboring groups with whom the Pasca were in constant conflict. Apparently, Pasca's inhabitants regularly attended an important market in the upper Magdalena River valley, near Neiva, in an area inhabited by the Poincos—called *yaporogos* by the Spaniards. These were an Indigenous Guaraní Caribbean group, renowned as excellent miners, and with whom the Muisca traded textiles, salt, and emeralds for gold (Simón [1627] 1891:2:306–307). The discovery of some metalworking tools supports the interpretation that Pasca may have been a significant locus for the production of goldwork (Duque Gómez 1979:2). Chronicles and archival documents also tell us that the chiefs in border territories had a distinct category: *uzaques*, or war leaders (Simón [1627] 1891:2:297). According to Simón, when the Muisca were preparing for war against the Panches, the Zipa, chief of Bogotá, held a meeting with the *uzaques* to determine battle strategies. The *guecha* warriors, noted because of their courage, led the battle formation. Their hair was cut short in the mushroom-like *motilón* style, and they wore as many gold tubes in the ears and lips as Panches they had killed. They used maces, slings, lances, dart throwers, and, occasionally, bows and arrows, to fight the fierce Panches, reportedly cannibals who poisoned their arrows. The Spaniards were terrified by the fact that the Muisca went to battle carrying their dead mummified on a litter, and that the Panches ate the bodies of those fallen in battle and

decorated their shrines with their heads.

The only archaeological survey carried out in the region confirms the existence of both groups in the area (Herrera 1972). In different caves, between the localities of Costa Rica, El Retiro, and Guchipas (once known as Buchipas), archaeologists recovered materials associated with both the Panche and the Muisca. In one cave, researchers found a Panche refuse deposit with human remains but no skulls. In the caves with Muisca materials, instead, they found remains of offerings and, in one case, what seems to have been a temporary cooking installation. Among the items they found were seeds used as beads and fragments of shell, ceramics, and animal bones, as well as millstones and sheets of tumbaga. Interestingly, archaeologists also recovered small globular ceramic vessels of the same type as the one found with the raft, which Herrera assigned to the ceramic types Pasca Carmelito Liso and Pasca Habano Liso and dated to around the conquest period.

To understand the third aspect, the type of ritual practice that preceded the deposition of the raft, we must consider the role offerings played in the sociopolitical life of the Late Muisca period. As mentioned, offerings had a propitiatory character, and their bearers sought different kinds of favors: from relieving sickness to blessing occasions such as marriages, harvests, the construction of *bohíos* and enclosures, and public ceremonies (Langebaek 1986). Offerings are associated with particular events or periods of unrest. Beyond that, some authors argue that the offerings system was in some way closely associated with political power (Correa Rubio 2004, 2005; Langebaek 1990, n.d.). According to Spanish chronicles, conflicts among Muisca chiefdoms were frequent by the time of the Europeans' arrival. There are accounts of groups vying for domination and seeking to establish and strengthen alliances with different political units (cf. Londoño Laverde 1989; Perea 1989:28, 86, 92). In some versions, certain independent chiefdoms, like the Guasca and Guatavita, habitually fought with the prestigious chief of Bogotá; in others, the *cacique* of Guatavita ordered the chief of

Bogotá to battle against Pasca, Ubaque, Fosca, and Fusagasugá, after which the Bogotá *cacique* rebelled (Rodríguez Freyle [1636] 1973:67–68). Although the chroniclers usually contradict each other on the Muisca political situation during the conquest period, they generally agree on the competition for prestige among powerful chiefdoms, such as those of Bogotá and Guatavita, and on the key role played by Pasca, Guasca, and other chiefdoms led by *uzagues* in those conflicts.

Archaeological evidence also indicates tensions among Muisca chiefdoms, especially during the Late Muisca period. Research in the highlands has revealed a substantial hierarchical differentiation of settlements and a notable intensification of activities related to feasting—demonstrated by the increase of jars and vessels associated with consuming chicha and of decorated pottery related to status—which has been interpreted as indicating competition for social prestige among Muisca elites (Boada Rivas 1989, 2007; Casilimas Rojas and López Ávila 1987; Fajardo 2009; Henderson 2008; Langebaek 2006, 2008). The greater number of offerings for this period may be understood in the same framework. Even though neither feasts nor offerings were an elite monopoly (Fajardo 2009; Langebaek n.d.), certain ritual actions including these practices were indeed circumscribed to restricted social sectors, especially when these customs involved public ceremonies.

It should be noted that given the nature of votive objects—they were manufactured mainly in order to be offered—they were quickly removed from circulation, so their role in any public event is not self-evident. This point is important to bear in mind when considering offering itineraries: production, display, and deposition (Joyce and Gillespie 2015). Display does not appear to have been an indispensable element of Muisca offerings, whereas the specific message conveyed by the offering seems to have been much more important. We are left to wonder how much these offerings played a part in public events, or if they did at all, and to what extent they were used by leaders to legitimize their power.

Different from the lake settings that hosted the large public ceremonies described by the chroniclers, many of the contexts where Muisca votive objects are found suggest more isolated settings. This is the case of offerings found in caves and other remote, isolated locations. What is more, archaeological evidence around Lake Guatavita suggests ritual offering practices of a more private nature there, or at least a less crowded one, in contrast with the spectacular scene narrated by chroniclers (Quintero 2009). This evidence seems to confirm some European descriptions (Castellanos [1601] 1886:1:44; Simón [1627] 1891:2:293–294) stating that the *jeques* were in charge of officiating the offering rituals. Simón recalls that marriage ceremonies involved a feast enjoyed by those getting married, their relatives, and the *jeque*. At the end, the *jeque* alone, turning his back to the participants, made the relevant offerings (Simón [1627] 1891). A similar sequence of events is described for human sacrifices: the chiefs organized a great party where they established alliances with other chiefs and captains, and redistributed goods among the population. At some point the victims were sacrificed in the *gavia*, or sacrificial post, in the middle of the festivities, and the blood was collected by the *jeque*, who then offered it to the sun at a mountaintop. Writing about the role of *jeques* in the appointment ceremonies of *caciques*, Simón recalls: “In this year of fasting they pierced their noses and ears, and having done this, the *jeques* of their village and *parcialidad* [communities] told them what they should be offering on that first occasion to the gods: or figures of lions, eagles, tigers or bears, that were made by silversmiths in fine gold, or how it was desired by the heir, from whose hands it went to the *jeques* and from these, on to those of the gods, with the said ceremonies and respect” (Simón [1627] 1891:2:295).

According to these reports, the public ceremonies and the acts of making an offering could be two distinct ritual dimensions. In other words, it is not clear that votive objects would have been displayed during public ceremonies. It is thus appropriate to ask whether, and to what

extent, offerings played a significant role in the competition for prestige and status legitimization among Muisca leaders. Although it is difficult to know whether the population at large had any contact with the offerings made by their leaders, it is apparent that they did know about them. Some chroniclers (Rodríguez Freyle [1636] 1973; Simón [1627] 1891) report that when the Spaniards asked the Indigenous people about deposits of “idols,” they knew very well who had made an offering and what had been offered.

The raft fits this scenario and allows us to better understand the sociopolitical situation in Pasca during the first part of the Late Muisca period. At the moment when the offering was deposited, it is likely that the Pasca chiefdom was growing in importance, owing to three factors: 1) it was located in a territory bordering enemy groups and was known as the fiercest of all; 2) at the same time, it shared borders with main chiefdoms such as that of Bogotá, to which it may have been subject; and 3) it was perhaps the preferred route for bringing gold into Muisca territory. Without a doubt, tensions and conflicts were part of the political diary of Pasca leaders.

All the aspects examined above shed light on the context of the raft offering; the motivation behind it appears to have been to reinforce the prestige of a leader in a circumstantial situation. Langeback (n.d.) points out that change in the social and political context is usually reflected in ritual behavior and iconography. In this sense, the various factors noted above may have contributed to the tension to which the Pasca region was subject, perhaps serving as triggers for the manufacture and deposition of this offering. The proposition that a very important *cacique* commissioned the raft is perhaps the most plausible. As such, the offering could have been made by a Pasca chief at a particular juncture, such as his appointment, or during a period of unrest and political instability; however, other scenarios are possible. It seems chiefs often traveled to make offerings in other chiefdoms (Rodríguez Freyle [1636] 1973; Simón [1627] 1891), sometimes very remote ones, in order to exercise their power or

dominance—even only symbolically—in those places or to reinforce alliances. Important *caciques* such as those of Bogotá, Guasca, or Guatavita may well have had strong interests in the Pasca region.

Conclusion

A holistic view—combining the partial information of archaeology, archaeometallurgy, and ethnohistory—of the offering of the Muisca Raft and its associated objects has brought us closer to a frame of reference that allows us to investigate the who, when, how, and why behind this famous artifact. The raft must be understood in its context and in combination with the other artifacts found with it. Interpretations must be informed by an awareness of broader political tensions and ritual practice, especially propitiatory offerings led by chiefs, in the Pasca region during the Late Muisca period. Equally, the selection of materials and manufacturing process were, just as with other Muisca votive objects, part of the ritual practice and deeply invested with symbolic significance. We hope that this study will have contributed toward an explicative and more Muisca-contextual perspective on this assemblage and that it will encourage others to develop similar approaches to Pre-Columbian goldwork.

Notes

¹ The term votive is used to refer to objects that are presumed to have been manufactured for use primarily in nonmortuary, ceremonial contexts, such as in shrines and as ritual offerings made in caves, rivers, and lakes. This designation includes anthropomorphic Muisca tumbaga figures that were not used as pendants or personal jewelry.

² The quotations from chronicles and documents in this essay were translated from Spanish into English by the authors.

³ This refers to a *duho*, or seat.

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