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The Tairona Culture and Their Goldwork

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THE TAIRONA CULTURE AND THEIR GOLDWORK

A Thesis

Presented to

the Office of Graduate Studies and Research

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

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December 1979

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Part I

ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE TAIRONA CULTURE OF COLOMBIA

The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta is an isolated mountain range located in the Northeast corner of Colombia, in the department of Magdalena (See Map 1). The lower slopes of these snow capped mountains are covered with heavy forest growth, which merges gradually with the tropical jungle. Along the Caribbean coast, however, there is less precipitation, and in some places desert conditions prevail.

This is the region once dominated by the Tairona culture. Extensive archeological exploration has discovered over fifty prehistoric Tairona sites distributed over a wide range from the dry coast to the wet forest mountain slopes.¹ Although the influence of Tairona culture just prior to the conquest can be detected over a large portion of the lowlands, its maximum development was achieved on the slopes of the Sierra Nevada, corresponding to a geographical context of difficult topography (2:62).

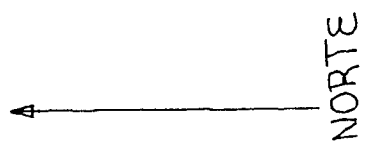
Little is known about the prehistoric sequence of development of the Tairona area. Reichel-Dolmatoff places the site of Nahuange to the east of Santa Marta as one of the earliest ones, based on the ceramics found in this site which he labelled "First Horizon of Painted Ceramics" (8c: 59).

¹Systematic excavations in this zone have been done by Alden Mason in 1922-23, 1931, 1936, 1938. Also by Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff in 1946-50, 1954 a,b,c, 1955a (183:71).

MAP 1

ZONE OF THE SIERRA NEVADA DE SANTA MARTA AND
PRINCIPAL RIVERS. ATLAS GEOGRAFICO
INSTITUTO AUGUSTIN CODAZZI. BOGOTA
1977

MAR CARIBE



Archeological evidence seems to indicate that the Tairona culture was first developed along the river banks of the region. Secondary distribution was toward the coast, until the late pre-Colombian times, when the Taironas were established mainly in the Sierra Nevada. Some investigators² have tried to correlate certain Tairona traits with Mesoamerica and Central America. However, efforts to reconstruct its derivation are impeded by the absence to date of a complete chronological sequence, and the absence of Carbon 14 dates for the earliest manifestations of Tairona culture. A general distribution of archeological materials has been done by Reichel-Dolmatoff (18d:II, 153), as follows:

Subtairona:

Formative period, permanent settlements, some agriculture.

Tairona:

Period I, before the Spanish Conquest.
Period II, during contact with the Spaniards.³

This is a very broad division for a culture of such pre-Columbian importance in Columbia. Only future archeological studies will determine the specific chronological sequence.

²These investigators are Reichel-Dolmatoff (18e:89,90), Carlos Angulo Valdes (2:61-62), and Luis Duque Gomez (8c:59).

³Jose Perez de Barradas places the expanse of Period I between 1000 A.D. and 1500 A.D. for the development of gold in the Tairona area (16:89).

HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS

The name Tairona appears for the first time in the manuscripts of the early Spanish chroniclers. Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo y Valdes, Juan de Castellanos, and Pedro de Aguado were the three chroniclers of the sixteenth century who were in Santa Marta during the conquest of the territory. They never refer to the natives of the surrounding as Taironas. Oviedo never mentions any tribal names. Castellanos used the term Tairona in a geographical way when referring to the land inhabited by the Tairos. In 1545-46 he traveled through the region. He wrote:

We call Tairos to the ones TAIRONA, their land borders with Morona (5a:321).⁴

We pass another river called Don Diego, which originates in the TAIRONA valleys (5a:325).

It is evident that one of the Tairona valleys is that of the Don Diego River. The other two neighboring valleys of the Buritaca and Guachaca rivers were also populated by the Taironas, as were the outskirts and intermediate slopes of the Sierra, where these rivers originate, since Castellanos also says:

The dressed-up Tairos were people proceeding from the Sierra (5a:325).

⁴Morona is located between Cape San Agustin and the Don Diego River (See Map 1).

The conquest of the tribes which inhabited the region from the outskirts of the Sierra Nevada to the coastal areas took place between 1525 and 1600, ending with the final submission and dispersion of the natives. During this period of 75 years of Spanish contact, the name Provincia was given to a tribal territory or to a geographical area where the natives showed homogenous characteristics, from the point of view of the Spaniards. These provinces were the following (See Map 2) (18c:20):

La Ramada:

Coastal zone between the Cape San Agustin, the Rancheria River, and the outskirts of the Sierra Nevada.

Seturma:

The region of the lower Rancheria River.

Betoma:

Area of Santa Marta City, between the Rio Frio and Guachaca rivers.

Carbon:

The area between the Rio Frio and Tucurinca rivers.

Orejones:

The area between the Tucurinca and Guatapa rivers.

Aruaco:

The most southern spurs of the Sierra Nevada.

Maconcagua:

The region to the north of the Aruacos.

MAP 2

PROVINCES OF THE TAIRONA AREA ACCORDING TO THE CHRONICLERS
OF THE XVI CENTURY. GUIA BIBLIOGRAFICA DE COLOMBIA.
UNIVERSIDAD DE LOS ANDES. BOGOTA. 1969.



Taironaca:

More to the north of the Maconcaguas.

Valledupar:

The region of the eastern slopes of the Sierra Nevada.

Tairona:

The valleys of the Don Diego, Buritaca, and Guachaca rivers and the slopes of the Sierra Nevada, where they originate.

The provinces of La Ramada, Seturma, Tairona, and Betoma are continuously mentioned in the chronicles of the sixteenth century, most likely because they are all located on the Caribbean coast; therefore, they were the first ones to be conquered. The rest are located in the interior, and they began to be mentioned in the second half of the seventeenth century.

Specific characteristics existed among the natives of the provinces of Betoma, Tairona, and Carbon, enough to represent an homogeneous complex to be studied separately from their neighboring provinces, although in this same region a distinction can be drawn between the natives from the slopes of the Sierra Nevada, and those from the coast, based on climatic conditions reflected in their way of living. We also know of the trade of goods between them, which is partly explained by Juan de Espeleta when he wrote:

The natives from the towns of Durcino, Gaira, and Cienaga,⁵ depressed by the cruelties of the Capitan Manjarres who makes them pay excessive taxes and tributes; they leave their towns in the direction of the Sierra Nevada where the natives provide them with gold to pay their taxes so they will go back to their towns, otherwise the ones from the Sierra would starve because they live from the fish and salt that these three towns provide them with (9:LXXXI, 150).

Even though secondary divisions existed in the area, the archeological remains found in the region corresponding to the provinces of Betoma, Tairona, and Carbon support the theory for grouping them under homogeneous complex, designated as the "Tairona Culture."

TOWNS

Some of the original names and towns from the sixteenth century have survived until now, but their locations are not clear, and some are still lost in the tropical jungles of the region.⁶ Two of the towns are mentioned constantly because of the battles fought around them during the conquest. They are Pocigueica and Bonda. The first one is always referred to as the capital, the most populated and

⁵These three cities are all located on the coast (See Map 1).

⁶Recently Colombian anthropologists discovered a lost town believed to be the old site of Buritaca. Reported in the newspaper "El Tiempo," February 15, 1978.

prosperous one. According to Castellanos, it was located on the slopes of the Sierra Nevada. When Garcia Lerma visited Pocigueica, he arrived there from the Buritaca River, but he does not say exactly from which direction. Fray Pedro Simon, referring to Lerma's journey to Pocigueica says:

Pocigueica is located on higher and cooler terrains, two leagues from the sea (20:II, 15,16).

Pocigueica was located close to Cienaga, a city that they threaten with their raids. They also attack the Spaniards settled along the Cordoba River (20:V, 214,215).

Pocigueica must have been located to the east of Santa Marta toward the Sierra. Another accessible route to this town was through the Cordoba River. Therefore, it was located somewhere close to the headwaters of the Guachaca, Don Diego, and Cordoba rivers. All the descriptions agree with this location because from this site they could easily attack the localities along the Cordoba River, as well as the coastal regions to the east of Santa Marta, and still be isolated by two high peaks called "Cerro Quemado," and "Cerro de la Horqueta" (18b:64). Until now, this important city has not been found. It seems that its location was so obvious to the Spaniards, they never bothered to describe it in exact terms.

The present town of Bonda is easily located ten kilometers northeast of Santa Marta. It is not the same antique town.

Fray Pedro Simon says "The entrance to the town of Bonda is paved with stone slabs" (20:V, 28). This kind of paving does not exist in the present town. By historical sources, we know that the governor, Juan Guizal Velon, ordered the destruction of Bonda in 1599-1600 (18b:64). After his victory he ordered the natives to build their new houses in the lower part of the valleys, in order to be more easily controlled by the Spaniards. Since Bonda was a center of Indian rebellion, its change of location should date from this time. The old town of Bonda is probably in the present plains called "Limon." This is located at a short distance from the new Bonda, over some hills, where nowadays can be seen large stone slabs like the ones described by the historians.⁷

Another important Tairona location was the city of Taironaca in the so-called valley of Tairona. Castellanos and Simon locate this town along the Don Diego River, in cooler and higher rocky terrain, almost inaccessible, at the headwaters of the Don Diego River, six to seven leagues from Santa Marta (20:II, 15-17).

Between the Guachaca and Tairona valleys, along the Don Diego River, were the villages of Domo, Bohoco, and

⁷Most of these sites are cited in Reichel-Dolmatoff (18b:65).

Sincorona; this last one provided access to Taironaca (5a: 321). Besides the three main towns of Bonda, Pocigüeica, and Taironaca, the towns of Betoma, Buritaca, and Durcino are notably important in the development of Tairona culture. According to Simon, Betoma was close to Pocigüeica (20:IV, 371); Buritaca was located 14 leagues from Santa Marta in the valley of the river of the same name (20:II, 18,19); Durcino was located at the present site of Pozos Colorados. Many more towns and villages of more or less importance flourished in the Tairona area. They are all cited abundantly by historians.

POPULATION

The native population was very dense. There were hundreds of populated sites to the south and east of Santa Marta. Historical data has been corroborated by archeological investigations in the region. For example, the archeological site of Pueblito⁸ (the prehistoric Chirama) was also inhabited during the time of the conquest. It had 600 houses, each corresponding to a family of an average of five members, giving a total population of about 3000 people. However, this site is never referred to as a town by the chroniclers, and could never be compared to the so-called

⁸Excavations in Pueblito by Reichel-Dolmatoff in 1946-49 (18d:169).

cities of Betoma, Pocigueica, and Taironaca, which must have been much larger, giving us an idea of the dense population in the Tairona area.

In this large population, authority was divided between civil and the religious chiefs, with the latter the more dominant. In the socio-political sphere, large urban centers were a feature. Also typical were social stratification, a marked division of labor, incipient militarism, a theocratic government, and intense intertribal trade of goods.

They made use of the bow and arrow, with poisonous arrow heads, for hunting and defense in battles.

Their agriculture was very intense. They mainly grew maize, yuca, beans, and auyama, with the help of well constructed channels for irrigation. Their diet was mostly vegetarian, although they ate pork and deer occasionally.⁹ Apiculture was well known to the Taironas.

Their clothes were made out of woven cotton or feathers. They used gold ornaments such as necklaces, earrings, nose rings, bracelets, breast plates, cuffs, and crowns. Their metallurgic techniques and designs were very advanced.¹⁰

⁹There is a controversy as to whether or not the Taironas practiced cannibalism. Reichel-Dolmatoff says that in the coast they did, but not in the Sierras (18c:25).

¹⁰The metalwork of the Taironas will be discussed in detail in the second part of this M.A. thesis.

ARCHITECTURE

The Tairona culture is striking for its feats of architecture and engineering. Above ground stone construction is their outstanding characteristic (3b:849). Split and selected stone work is the most common, but in some of the better constructed ring houses, vaults, and tombs, carefully dressed and fitted blocks are employed.

Terraces were made for house sites and fields. Stone-lined ring house platforms are from about five to twenty meters in diameter. The ring is formed by a double or triple row of stones in a circle. The inner row is composed of curved slabs placed around the circle. The outer row is of wedge-shaped slabs laid horizontally, forming a platform around the inner wall. Such houses usually had two opposite entrances usually made of slabs arranged in steps leading to an interior threshold stone. A layer of habitational refuse covers the floor of these houses and shows that they were used as dwellings. Some of them also contain graves, burial vaults, and remains of ceremonial objects, which suggests certain religious significance as well as utilitarian.

Ceremonial houses were located at the centers of the towns and villages. They had four entrances located on ample terraces. Within the villages long slab stairways and paved roads as much as five meters in width connected

the various units, also facilitating communication with outside settlements. Stone-slab bridges crossed rivers and streams, and sunken stone-lined pits served as reservoirs. Irrigation channels as well as drains were constructed by the Taironas. Containing walls, columns, and stelae were also features of their architecture (2:62).

Burial mounds were laid with stones. Urn burial was common. There were three major types of urns, usually covered with inverted bowls. Stone-lined box graves and burial vaults were built of dressed stone blocks. Shaft and chamber graves have been found near the coast.¹¹

CERAMICS

Two major wares dominate the ceramics: a thick red ware and a thin black ware. Although a number of substyles have been recognized, there are no bases for arranging them chronologically (3b:845).

Red ware ceramics are utilitarian rather than ceremonial (18c23). These are typically decorated with appliques of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic representations. The main shapes are shallow plates, shoe-shaped vessels, ollas, trays, open bowls, and cylindrical jars. Some have basketry handles; others have annular bases.

¹¹According to Bennett, the identification of these shaft and chamber graves as Taironas is very dubious (3b:845).

The thin black ware is, on the whole, better made than the red ware, and also better decorated with fine-line incisions and naturalistic modeled reliefs, with polished surfaces. The shapes are more varied and include annular based ollas, bowls, and cups, many of which have shoulders. This ware is also represented by tetrapod vessels, collar jars with tetrapod feet, and single spouts, and modeled effigy figures with stirrup spouts.¹²

Some of the vessels were used for funerary purposes. They were either red or black ware ceramics with a cylindrical shape. To this category belong the so-called "treasury jars" (13c:245). These are tall cylindrical vessels with fitted clay covers. Some are decorated with painted designs, a rarity in Tairona culture. The paintings consist of curvilinear designs in red or brown on a buff base. Some of the containers also have human faces as decorations on the neck of the vessels, made out of applied clay bands.

A great variety of clay artifacts are encountered. There are miniature vessels, of both red and black ware, small pestles, rattles, and carved cylindrical stamps, ocarines, whistles, and small effigies representing both animal and human forms. The most common zoomorphic motifs are jaguars, wolves, bats, serpents, turtles, crocodiles,

¹²Tetrapod vessels are found only in the Quimbaya and Tairona cultures in Colombia (3b:828).

and birds. In their human representations, they show priests and warriors wearing all sorts of ornaments. Phallic representations are very common, too. It is interesting to note that spindle whorls have not yet been found (8c:59).

STONE OBJECTS

The stone artifacts are both ceremonial and utilitarian. The ceremonial objects are animal amulets, small carved tables with four legs, well made polished axes, and broad winged pendants. Thousands of stone necklaces have been found. They are highly polished, and the most commonly used bead-stones were cornelian, agate, jade, and quartz, plus any other stones of bright color. Other important types of ceremonial objects were the staffs. They measured from twenty to forty centimeters in length, and were made out of highly polished stones, and ornamented with zoomorphic heads. The utilitarian group of stone objects is composed of manos, axes with trapezoidal shapes, metates, mortars, pestles, pierced stones for weights, and polished stones.

RELIGION AND MYTHOLOGY

Religion is a very complex feature of the Tairona culture. There is evidence that the religious beliefs and

practices of the Koguis, Cagabas, and Ikas (present tribes from the Sierra Nevada) date back to Tairona times.¹³

In excavations done by Reichel-Dolmatoff in the Tairona area, he often found jaguar skulls placed close to the main entrance of the ceremonial houses. Among the Koguis all their ceremonial houses are dedicated to their Jaguar god called "Cashinducua," and according to their tradition, these feline skulls have always been at the entrance of their ceremonial houses (8c:I, 58). The Taironas, as well as the present inhabitants of the Sierra Nevada, were divided into totemic clans directly related to a specific animal.

In general, their religious beliefs were concerned principally with spirits that were often malignant, and with ancestors, particularly the ancestors of their priests (Mamas).¹⁴ The chief figure was "Gauteovan, the mother of all things. The sun was created out of her menstrual blood, and she brought in existence the demons who caused illness."

¹³Reichel-Dolmatoff, in his article "Contactos y Cambios Culturales en la Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta" (18c:44), demonstrated the ties between the Koguis and the Taironas. He bases his theories on anthropological facts.

¹⁴All priests, as well as all priests' ancestors' souls, are called "Mama" (18c:43).

The term "Aluna" was used to designate the supernatural, the secret powers of man and nature, as well as intention, will, feelings, and thought; also the magical powers of their ancestors. The principal means of controlling Aluna and all the circumstantial misfortunes was through specific songs and dances executed by the Mamas. In these efforts they were aided by the use of masks representing the fantastic faces of spirits and demons.

Among the natives existed a sect of priests called Noama (8c:60). To become priests they had to undergo nine years of training as novices in order to secure the knowledge and magical powers to control supernatural forces. During this period a novice could not eat salt or any other foreign foods. He had to be at the service of a priest, working in his gardens, carrying wood, and weaving cloth. He could only marry after he became a priest. Once they were priests they would practice the rites that ward off disease, control the weather, and assist the souls in their journey to the afterworld. They also possessed knowledge of herbs and roots used in curing many forms of sickness.

The principal religious ceremonies were directly related to the seasons. Ceremonies during March were to ask protection of the sun against sickness during the coming rainy season. Ceremonies in September were to bring rain in

order to moderate the dry season. Their general purpose was to insure abundance of food through successful agriculture and protection from disease.

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS AND DANCES

Taironas had two types of drums. One type was a large wooden drum used for religious rites. This was composed of an upright cylinder with a single membrane. The other type of drum was used for secular dancing. It was similar to the European ones, but with two membranes. In both cases, gourd rattles were suspended from the last poles holding the membranes (3b:884). They were used exclusively by men. Women used a small single-headed drum with the membrane held taut by pegs on the side of the cylinder. They bear strong resemblance to West African instruments.

Flutes were used in pairs and usually were made out of cane. One flute had five spaced holes and the other flute a single hole.¹⁵ The mouthpiece resembled a bird made out of beeswax. The reed was made from the quill of a turkey feather. The Taironas used long-necked gourds as trumpets.

Men and women danced separately, although men played the flutes for the women's dances. Dances were, for the

¹⁵Identified as Female-5, and Male-1 by Bennett (3b:884).

most part, religious, but similar dances were executed during secular community drinking sprees. In their ceremonial dances they wore wooden masks. These masks had a bestial mouth with large canines, N-shaped, sometimes covered with gold, and with a protruding tongue. A bulged cheek in this mask represented the mastication of coca leaves. This is shown as well as a perforation in the lower lip for the so-called "Tembetas."

When the community assembled, a great variety of intoxicants was consumed in large quantity. They were obtained from fermented sugar, cane juice, yuca, or maize. Their preparation was a community undertaking. Women and children participated in all the phases of the process.

Men chewed coca continuously during waking hours. They carried toasted coca leaves in a small bag called "Mochila," and the lime container or "Poporo" was a small symmetrical gourd with a short neck, provided with a stick used to put a small quantity of lime in the mouth. The stick was then rubbed on the neck of the gourd, forming, in time, a rim around the neck of the Poporo.

They boiled tobacco leaves into a black sticky substance, which was carried in a small tube-shaped gourd with another gourd as a cover fitted at one end. The tobacco was rubbed on the gums while they were chewing the coca. Women used neither coca nor tobacco.

Part II

THE GOLDWORK BY THE TAIRONAS

The historic information about the native Tairona¹ metallurgy are scarce and most of the time inexact (11:197). The gold objects found in the hands of the Indians by the Spaniards were valuable only as war booty, and almost without exception, they were melted down. In the years following the conquest, due to the large demand for gold by the Spaniards, the natives chose to lower the gold content in the elaboration of gold objects. This way they could mitigate the scarcity of the precious metal under the greedy demands of their conquerors (11:198).

We still have some first-hand information from the chroniclers of the time, especially about the body ornaments worn by the natives in the Santa Marta region. Oviedo says in 1514:

They wore gold jewelry, feathered headdresses, and woven clothes; also ocean shells, emeralds, and precious stones mounted in gold (15:VI, 137,138; VII, 121).

Aguado describes the native's ornaments as follows:

They are adorned with golden jewelry. The male's ear ornaments weigh 15 to 20 pesos (weights) each. Nose ornaments hang from their septum, and breast-plates covered their chests. On their necks they wore all sorts of necklaces. Among them gold jewelry is very precious. Women's jewelry is almost as varied as the male's, besides, they wore gold ornaments on their arms, legs, over the ankles, and below the knees; over their breasts they wore molded gold to cover them (1a:I, 98-99).

¹According to Ernesto Tirado the word Tairo means "Forge" or "The Melting Place," due to the large elaboration of gold objects proceeding from this particular place (19c:25).

According to Vasquez de Espinosa, the chiefs and the richest men of the town wore the most beautiful and elaborated ornaments (21:230-337). Castellanos talks about the natives from Taironaca wearing headbands and other gold ornaments (5b:325), and Fray Pedro Simon, referring to the natives along the Don Diego River and Taironaca, says:

They had feathered ornaments worn on top of huge plaques of polished gold (20:IV, 361).

The same author talking about the Indians of Caldera Valley says:

There was no Indian male or female who would not have a set of jewelry containing ear ornaments, necklaces, besotes or tembetas², nose rings, and crowns, all of them made in gold (20:V, 191).

A careful examination of sixteenth century documents in the Archivo General de Indias (Seville), referring to the elaboration of gold in the Santa Marta region, has been done by Juan Friede.³ According to his investigations, in the third decade of the sixteenth century there were three categories of gold coming from Santa Marta:

²Besotes or Tembetas are facial ornaments worn on orifices opened on the lower lip.

³Juan Friede was commissioned by the Colombian Historical Academy (Academia Colombiana de Historia) to compile all the documents concerning the conquest of the Nuevo Reino de Granada. He worked at the Archivo General de Indias during the years 1948, 1949, 1950 (11:198).

1) the so-called gold of Chafalonia of two to seven carats; 2) low quality gold of eight to twenty-one carats; 3) fine quality gold of twenty-two carats and over. It seems that the Taironas used fine quality gold for personal attire, and lower quality gold for the elaboration of figurines and ceremonial paraphernalia (11:200).

There is no doubt that the goldsmiths of the Tairona culture held an outstanding place among all their neighbors (18b:86). Fray Pedro Simon says:

They are very ingenious, and the way they work in gold is out of common boundaries (20:V, 356).

According to Castellanos, the site of Bondigna was very famous because of the large amount of gold melted there, which was the largest compared to the rest of the towns (5a:278). He personally worked in some of the gold mines along the Guachaca River in 1545-46 (5a:256,276); he also mentions the gold obtained from the San Salvador and Don Diego rivers. Other information about sources of the precious metal comes from Antonio Narvaez (6:II, 185) when he says:

In the province of Santa Marta the gold mines are particularly rich and abundant, especially in the zone called "Alto de las Minas" and "Real de Felipe V,"⁴ thirty leagues from Santa Marta, close to the Iriguani

⁴According to an anonymous author, who wrote on the native tribes of Santa Marta, the Alto de las Minas and Real de Felipe V were part of the Sierra Nevada, in the north-western slopes (Anonymous 1857:269).

River, and there are many more around not only of gold, but silver and some other metals. The gold from the objects found in the graves is originally of this territory. They did not have to go too deep in the earth to find it, since it was abundant on the surface.

According to the works of Vasquez de Espinosa, Oviedo y Valdes, and Fray Pedro Simon, the Spaniards also found gold in the following sites: Santa Marta, Bonda, Bongay, Taybo, Consequin, Chairoma, Pocigueica, Taironica, the Caldera Valley, and La Ramada.⁵ We do not know the exact amount of gold taken by the Spaniards in the name of the king, but, according to Reichel-Dolmatoff, it was a very large amount (18b:87).

Besides the information derived from the chroniclers of the time, another helpful source comes from the gold objects owned by the Koguis. They do not come from excavations. They have been inherited from generation to generation, and they represent a whole collection of ceremonial objects of great value, worn mostly by the Mamas at the great ceremonies at the solstices and equinoxes. They are inherited from father to son or from mother to daughter (18c:42).

Still the main source for study and analysis of the Tairona aesthetic representations in gold is derived from objects found in scholarly excavations, or proceedings from

⁵This information is according to the following; Vasquez de Espinosa, 318; Oviedo y Valdes VI, 106, 137, 138; and Fray Pedro Simon II, 8, 10, 17, 18, 24, 43, IV, 361, V, 35, 191.

private collections.⁶ The Gold Museum in Bogota has one of the largest and most complete collection of gold objects of the Tairona style (12:10). A large number of metal objects, exclusively ornamental in purpose, have been found by J. Alden Mason.⁷ Naturally, almost all objects were found in the richest graves or the most important ceremonial sites, and usually in Treasure Jars. By far the majority of the objects come from Nahuange, especially from the large graves there; others were found at the sites of Gairaca, Pueblito, and a few of unknown original provenience purchased in Taganga and Bonda (13c:245). Reichel-Dolmatoff found a large Treasure Jar with a substantial collection of gold objects at the site of Jirocasaca; he also found objects at Pueblito, Bonda, Taganga, and Bocatoma (18e:71-78). The data and analysis done by Mason and Reichel-Dolmatoff on the gold pieces that they found constitute an excellent guideline for the analysis of the Tairona style in gold.

According to Mason, gold in the Tairona region was probably obtained by placer mining. Some of the deposits were evidently of very high purity, others of practically

⁶Many collectors have purchased these items from Guaqueros. They are grave diggers with no archeological or anthropological background. They do it for the money involved in the purchase. Therefore, the site of provenience of the object is usually lost (12:7).

⁷The excavations by Mason were done in 1922, 1923, 1931, 1936 and 1938 (16:317).

pure copper, and others of combinations of these two metals and of silver in various proportions. These produced alloys of different qualities. Sometimes gold from different deposits was employed for different techniques on the same object so that it may appear yellowish in some parts, reddish in others (13c:245).

TECHNIQUES

The exact method of elaboration is unknown. According to Friede, the use of a core made out of clay, which the natives called Copey, was very extensive (11:200). The Copey was used in the process of lamination, and mainly for gold casting by the Cire Perdue method. In this last method it is uncertain if the core was baked before casting or not. In some cases the core was completely covered, but more generally the back of the ornament was open, and here the core shows (13c:245). Decorative elements were often added later by means of soldering or welding, using gold of a lower degree as the solder. Other elements were joined by hammering, but the gold was probably first heated almost to the point of fusion. Rolled rings were joined in this manner; the joints sometimes are evident, at other times they are so well hammered as to become invisible⁸ (13c:245). Repousse work

⁸Faults in casting were often remedied by hammering bits of gold of a different quality over the fault (13c:245).

is common, but there are no evidences of hammering over a form or a prepared design; in most cases the ornamentation was done by hammering from the back of the object. Based on the abundance of copper, and the information of the chroniclers, we know of the process of oxidation or "Mise en Couleur" applied to the Tumbaga pieces. Enciso writes in 1519:

The Indians owned a lot of gold and copper, and a lot of golden-copper has been found. The Indians say that they obtain it by treating the objects with an herb found in the land. They mashed these herbs into a puree, then they washed the tumbaga object with it; next they place the artifact on the fire and it turns golden. The intensity of the finish depends on the amount of the herb's puree added to the surface (10: 444-446).

Cast gold wire was one of the main means of ornamentation (13c:246); also false filigree is abundant (12: 30), together with lamination by covering the object with a thin layer of gold or gold powder.⁹

TYPES OF GOLD OBJECTS

As already mentioned, most of the gold objects in the Tairona area were part of the personal attire of the natives, such as: rings, earrings and ear rods, nose rings, tembetas, beads for bracelets and pendants, necklaces,

⁹Carlos Margain did the initial studies and analysis of the gold collection of the Gold Museum in Bogota in 1950. His work is very clear and specific on techniques and elaboration of the gold pieces in the museum.

breastplates, and plaques. Biomorphic, zoomorphic, and anthropomorphic representations were also produced by the Taironas, together with a variety of bells.

RINGS

They vary greatly in size; a few of them are small enough to have been worn as finger rings. Most, on the other hand, appear to be a little too small to have been used as bracelets or anklets (See Plate I, Figures 1 through 6). Also, most of them have sharp edges on the inside, which would have made their use for these purposes uncomfortable. All may have been used as nose rings or earrings, according to Mason (13c:251),¹⁰ but according to Reichel-Dolmatoff, this very same type of ring which he found at Pueblito could have been used as a bracelet (183:Plate III, Fig. 3, p. 73). They are usually made of thin pure gold plate, circular in shape, with a circular cross section, as in Plate I, Figure 7. The edges generally do not meet on the inside; the cross section being more horseshoe-shaped than circular. The entire circle is broken and not permanently joined. One of the ends is slightly tapered to fit inside the other, which is generally furnished with a ferrule at the end (13c:251). Their size varies from 8.5 cm X 1.5 cm, the

¹⁰Mason found a total of 34 rings of this type at Nahuangue, 9 at Pueblito, 1 in Gairaca, and 1 at Taganga (13c:251).

PLATE I

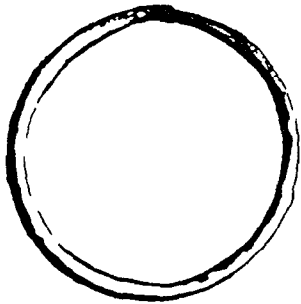
RINGS



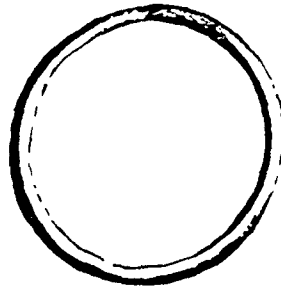
1



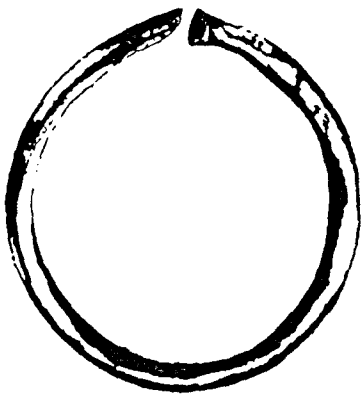
2



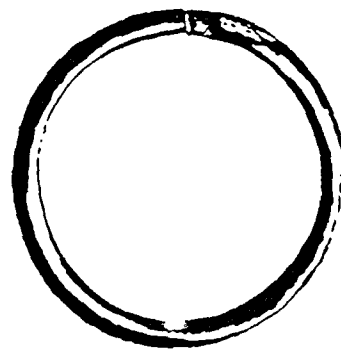
3



4



5



6

largest and thickest to 2.4 cm X 0.6 cm, the smallest one.¹¹ In general, these are very simple rings of a plain construction. They could have had several uses as body ornaments, or maybe for holding pieces of garments together.¹²

EARRINGS

The following gold objects have been classified as earrings, due to their shape and openings, and because they have generally been found in pairs (13c:253). Several types of earrings have been found. They rank from very simple hollow ones to the most intricate designs and ornamentations. The simplest one is the Type A shown in Plate II, Figures 1 through 4. They are generally of heavier metal with a considerable allow of copper in some of them. They have plain surfaces. They are wider at the base than at the upper joints, which are usually pointed and with ferrules at each end.¹³

¹¹For the exact account of sizes and thicknesses of the pieces found by Mason, see Mason c.

¹²There are no representations of this type of ring at the Gold Museum in Bogota. There is one more of these rings at the Volkerkunde Museum in Berlin. See Mason Plate CXLIX, Figure 10.

¹³Mason found 17 earrings of this type, 13 at Nahuangue, 2 at Pueblito, 1 at Taganga, and 1 at Gairaca (13c:253).

In the samples found by Mason at Nahuangue, the cross section is circular or horse-shoe shaped, see Plate II, Figure 5. In the ones from Pueblito, the three sides have been flattened as in Plate II, Figure 6. The sides are converging, but not rolled inwards (13c:253).¹⁴ The earring Type B, which is shown in Plate III, Figure 1, is beautiful, ornated with a curved cross section. It is usually made of thick heavy fine gold.¹⁵ There is a double ring ferrule at each end. The main body is the same as Type A, but with a lot of extra ornamentation added to it. They have variations resulting in one of the most beautiful pieces of the Tairona goldwork. Around the exterior of the main body there are several rows of gold wire circles. The amount of rows varies from a minimum of two to a maximum of five rows, but most of them have an average of three rows.¹⁶ These rows seem to be composed by eight shaped units,

¹⁴Reichel-Dolmatoff found two earrings at the site of Bonda with this particular cross-section. He also found a third earring of the same type at the site of Mamatoco. There are nine pairs of these earrings in the Tairona collection at the Gold Museum in Bogota.

¹⁵The maximum dimensions for this type of earring are 8.5 X 6.0 X 1.5 cm.

¹⁶The Gold Museum in Bogota actually has a total of 13 earrings of this particular type, 1 with 2 rows, 10 with 3 rows, 1 with 4 rows, and 1 with 5 rows.

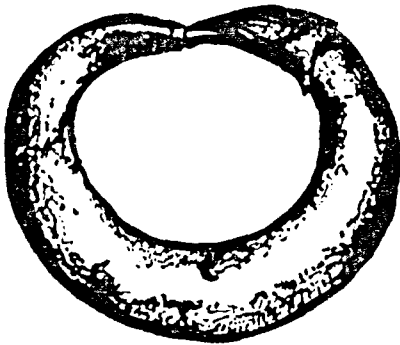
PLATE II
EARRINGS TYPE A
AND SECTIONALS



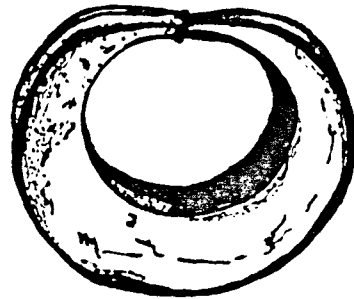
1



2



3



4



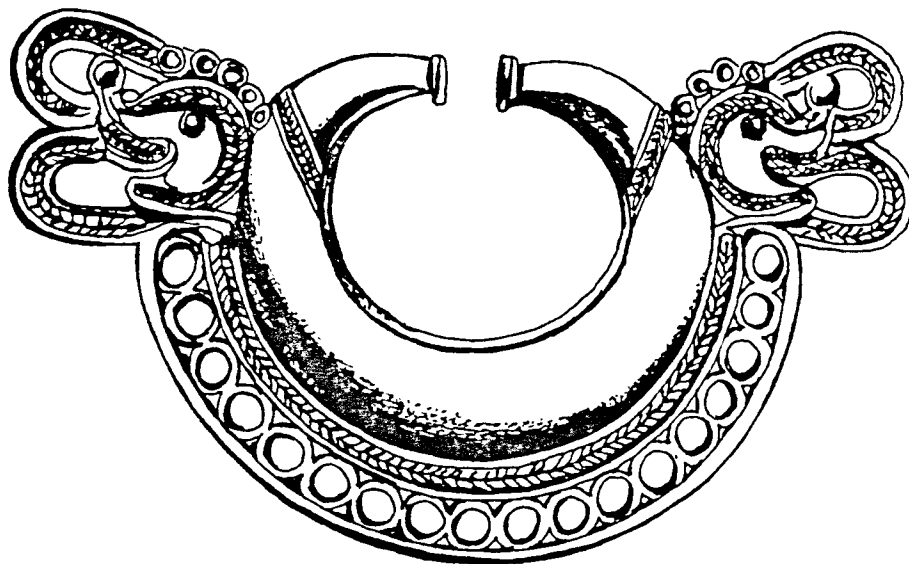
5



6

exactly parallel and properly spaced, as in Figure 2. This section of the earring gives the appearance of having been cast at the same time of the central part of the earring, and not attached later by soldering or welding (13c:254). Another kind of variation within the same type of earring is shown in the ornamentation at the end of the rows. While some of them will not have anything, like the earring shown in Figure 3, some others like the one in Figure 1 would have a zoomorphic head, with the eyes and nostrils represented by cast gold balls. From its mouth, bifurcated tongues protrude, the lower one toward the end of the rows of circles, and the upper one toward the crested head of the zoomorphic figure. Some of them, instead of having this type of zoomorphic design, only show an abstraction of the bifurcated protruding tongues, as shown in Figures 4 and 5. In the figure 4, the tongues encase a cast gold ball in the middle. In the figure 5, a meandering design ends in an abstraction of the crested head. In general, some other varied details are found on the surfaces of the two ends of the earring, while some of them have simple braided designs, and others have pairs of spiral designs cast on the surface (Figure 3). The surface detail in the form of wire braiding is extremely fine and noticeable in these types of earrings (A, B), and throughout all the Tairona goldwork.

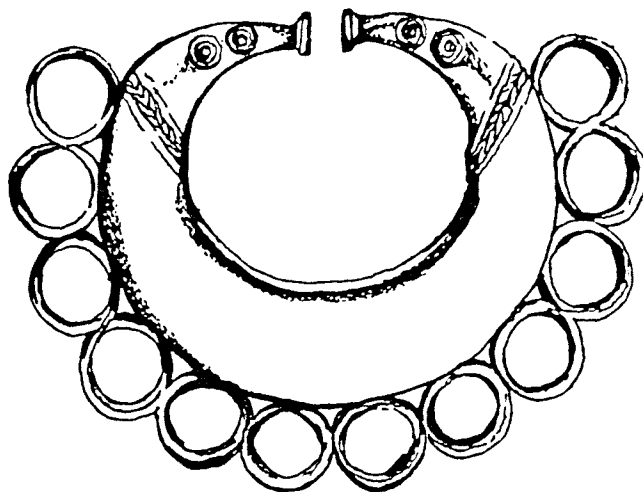
PLATE III
EARRINGS TYPE B
AND COMPONENTS



1



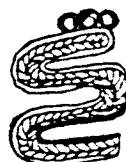
2



3



4



5

EAR RODS

Although ear rods are not abundant in the Tairona culture, several samples of this type of artifact have been found (Plate 4, Figure 1).¹⁷ They are ear ornaments composed by two sections: one is the long tube made out of a flattened sheet of gold rolled into shape,¹⁸ the other section is the tip, which fits into one of the ends of the tube. The tips are usually representations of a zoomorphic head with bifurcated tongues, and a crested head similar to the ornamentation on the side of some of the Type B earrings. It seems as if they would wear them by passing the tube through an orifice in the ear lobe; then they would add the tips as an ornamentation. Two similar kinds of tips are shown in Figures 2 and 3.

NOSE RINGS

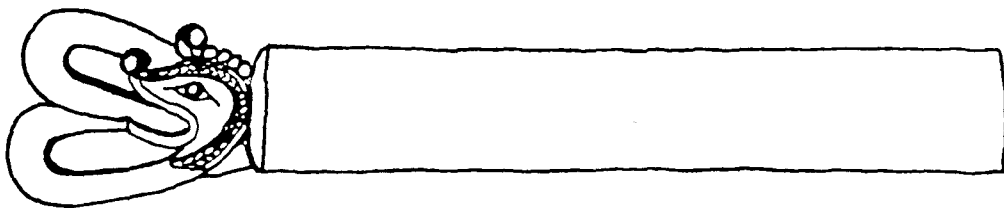
The following gold objects have been classified as nose rings by Reichel-Dolmatoff (18c:73). Mason describes them as gold ornaments of uncertain purpose (13c:256), although they all have several elements in common (see Plate V). Each has side wings of medium thin metal, separated by

¹⁷In the Tairona collection at the Gold Museum in Bogota, there are 11 ear rod tips, and only 2 of them are shown with the complementary tube section. See Plate IV, Figures 1, 2, and 3.

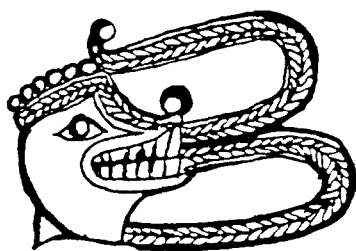
¹⁸The dimensions for the tube average 16 to 20 cm, about 1.2 dm in diameter. The tips vary from 5 to 7 cm.

PLATE IV

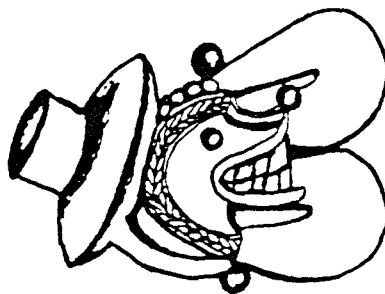
EAR RODS



1



2

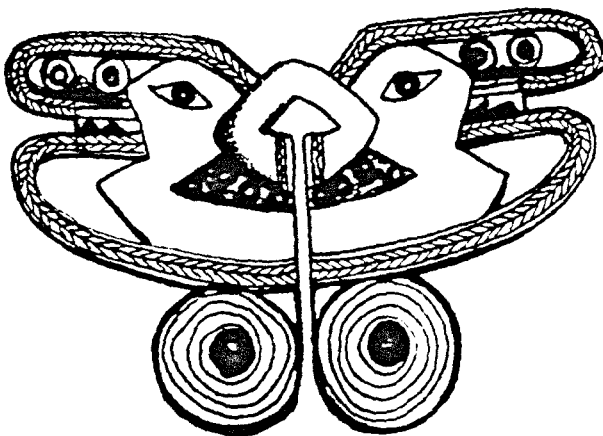


3

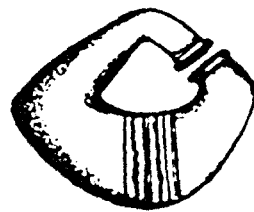
PLATE V
NOSE RINGS



1



2



3

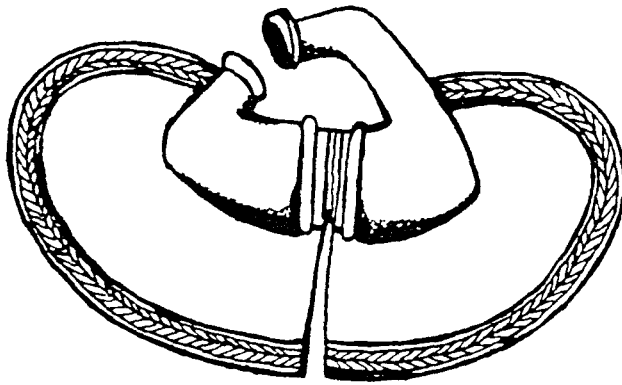
a slot and connected by a thicker solid bar. The wings are too broad for them to have passed through the nasal septum or the ear lobe (13c:256), but the slot is thin enough so that the septum might have been inserted into this and the object hung thereby. The first type of nose-ring is illustrated in Plate V, Figures 1 and 2; they are the most ornate. They could be described as a filigree of coiled gold wire with solid nubs in the centers of the spirals, and a clasp of hollow wrought gold. These have an ornamented periphery of braided wire technique.¹⁹ A few of them have a clasp with an open side, as the one shown in Figure 3. The sample shown in Figure 2 is a variation of the nose-ring already described, but the clasp becomes the nose of a zoomorphic mask, the eyes are clearly depicted, the eyeballs are solid cast gold nubs; the open mouth shows a profusion of gold nubs representing the teeth or canines.²⁰

Some simpler types of nose rings are illustrated in Plate VI. They were probably cast with the wings; later hammered and polished. The thicker parts are indented from the back; some of these indentations are shaped like a nipple.

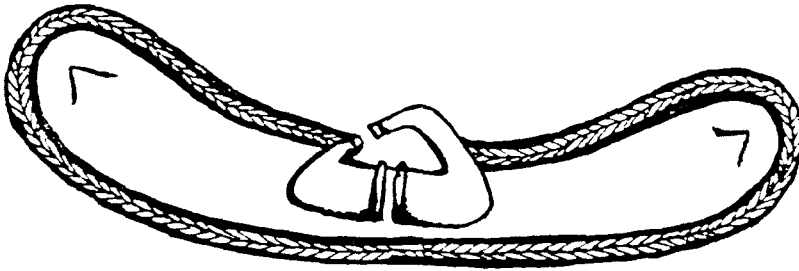
¹⁹There are three nose rings of this type at the Gold Museum in Bogota. They differ mainly in size, according to which they can be divided into small, medium, and large, the average size of which is 11 cm wide by 8 cm in height..

²⁰There is only one of this type of nose ring at the Gold Museum in Bogota.

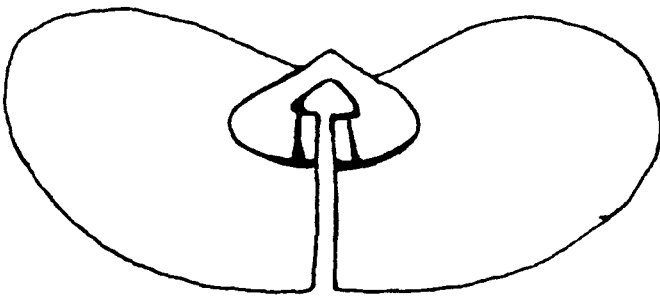
PLATE VI
NOSE RINGS



1



2



3



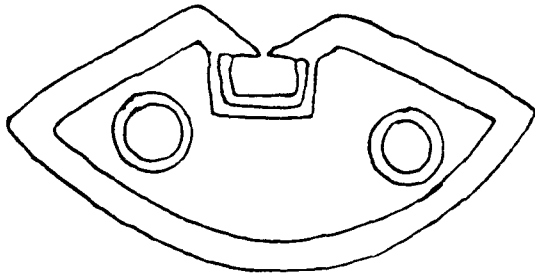
4

Generally, they are kidney-shaped, and sometimes even elongated, as in Figure 2. Most of them have the usual band of braided wire technique around the periphery.²¹ In some of them the body, instead of being divided by a vertical slot, is intact (see Figure 2). The usual slot is marked by two parallel vertical relief lines facing each other, with some space between them. The upper arm, normally connecting the two halves, is broken, having a narrow separation and a ferrule at each end (see Figures 1 and 2). It can be assumed that the nasal septum was inserted in this (13c:257). Within the same type of nose rings there are some representations without any ornamentation, as the one shown in Figure 3. They are flat and very polished; they vary only in the shape of the clasp (see Figure 4).

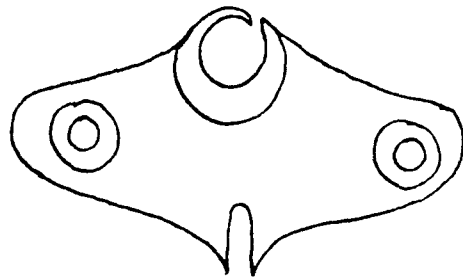
In the following Plates VII and VIII, nose rings of different shapes are shown. Figures 1 to 4 are made in the repousse technique, some of them with indented ornamentation. The following five are either concave or hollow. According to Mason, they were cast over a hard-baked clay core, which was never covered at the back of the wings (13c:257). All the samples shown in these two plates (VII, VIII) have similar clasps, which are rounded thin hooks which passed through the septum. They are all grouped together, due to

²¹There is a total of 20 of these nose rings at the Gold Museum in Bogota. Sixteen of them are elongated.

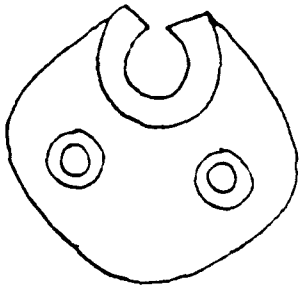
PLATE VII
NOSE RINGS



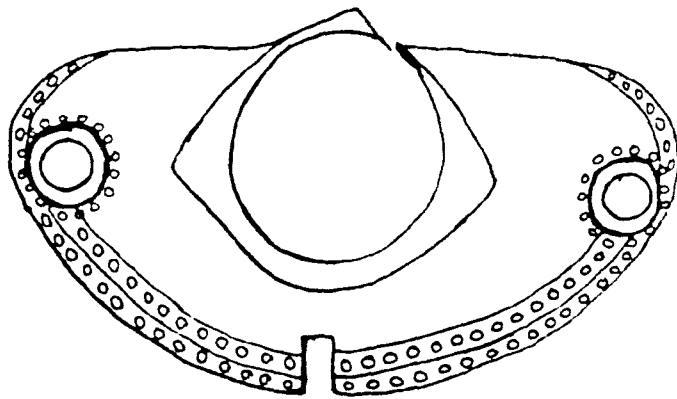
1



2



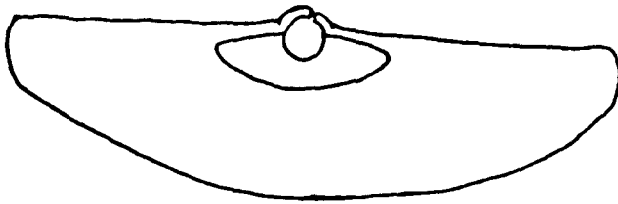
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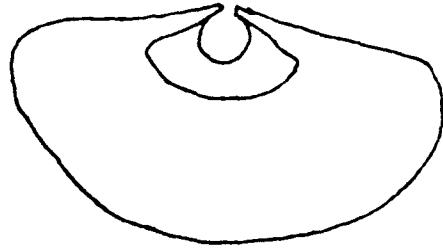
4

PLATE VIII

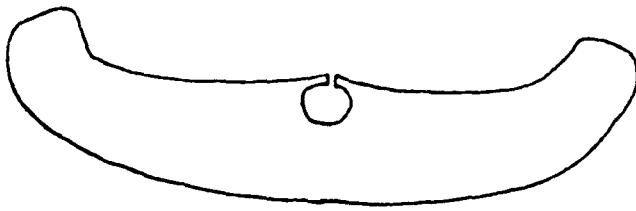
NOSE RINGS



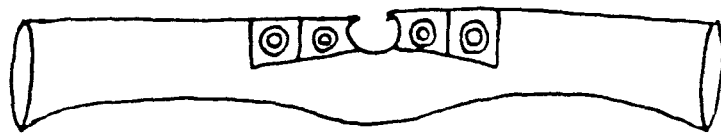
1



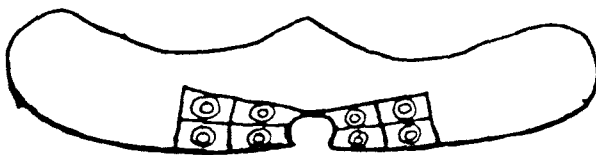
2



3



4



5

their over-all similarities, without really being identical to each other. They seem to have served the same purpose.

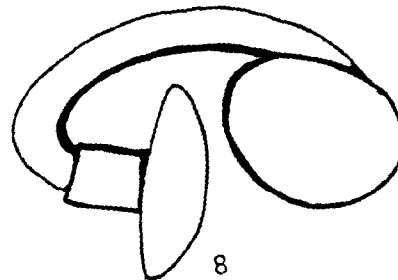
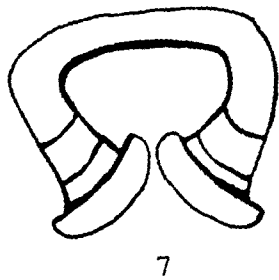
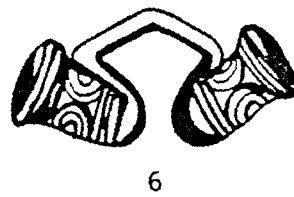
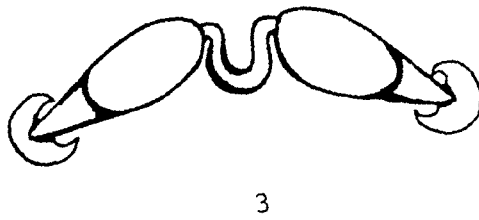
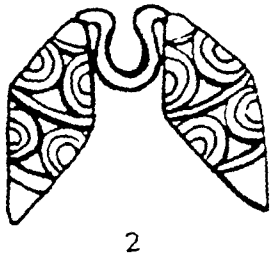
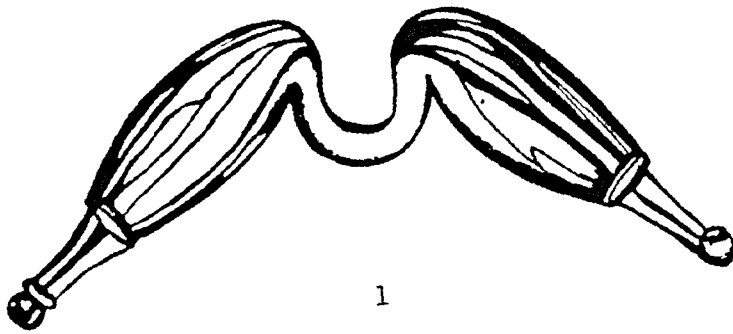
The next category classified as nose rings are what Mason called "Gold Looped Pendants" (13c:259) (Plate IX). They have a semi-circular or crescentic middle portion, solid and plain, and a circular cross section, and at either side an upturned ornament of horn or stud form (13c:259) (Figures 1 to 6). Reichel-Dolmatoff directly classifies them as nose rings (18e:76), composed by two conical bodies, close-mold cast, tied together by a thick curved solid wire. The conical bodies are hollow; they could be plain as in Figures 1 and 3; others show spirals and braided wire decorations as in Figures 2, 4, and 6. They are rather small in size and volume.²²

A simpler type of nose ring is shown in Figures 7 and 8. They are not ornated, therefore, they show very little variation. They seem to be derived from the nose rings discussed above, but instead of having the ends turned outwards, they are turned inwards. The two ends converge, ending in two round large convex tips almost facing each other, leaving the space to catch the septum between them. The ends seem to be separate pieces fitted to the tips.²³

²²There are a total of 7 nose rings of this type at the Gold Museum in Bogota. Their maximum spread is 5 cm.

²³There are a total of 7 nose rings of this type in exhibit at the Gold Museum in Bogota.

PLATE IX
NOSE RINGS



TEMBETAS

Also called "Besotes"²⁴ are facial ornaments worn by the Taironas through orifices perforated in their lower lips (Plate X). Most of the tembetas have perforations or orifices which produce sounds when air goes through them. It seems as if it was a very common practice among the Taironas to whistle and talk at the same time. They obtained this effect by the use of the Tembetas. They are found in a variety of shapes, from pointed tips to curved ones, many of them showing the typical braided ornamentation (Figures 3 to 7). Two of them (Figures 1 and 2) are not ornated; one is extremely pointed and without any orifices, the other one is plain, but with indented sides. These two types seem to have been used merely as a defensive weapon in combat.²⁵

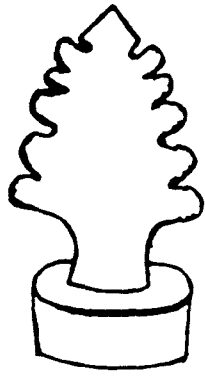
BEADS

Most of the golden beads found have a tubular shape, either long or cut into short ring sections; a smaller number have a barrel shape (Plate XI), together with a few odd types, including animal shapes (13c:246). The largest beads are long tubes of thin, reddish rolled gold plates, the edge not jointed or overlapping (see Plate XI, Figure 1).²⁶ A

²⁵There is no information about the tembetas and their use in the works of Reichel-Dolmatoff or J. Alden Mason.

²⁶The longest ones are about 3.5 cm in length. They average 3.5 mm in thickness.

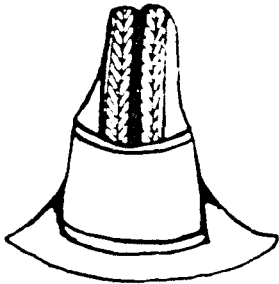
PLATE X
TEMBETAS



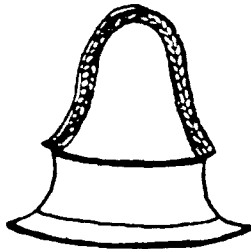
1



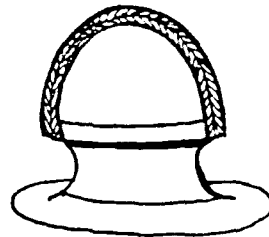
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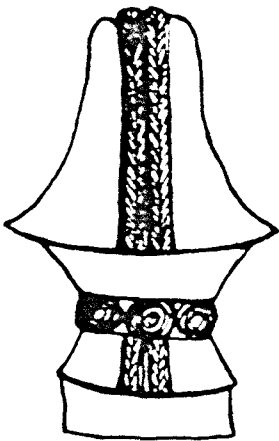
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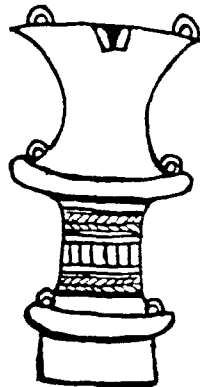
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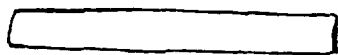
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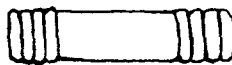
7

PLATE XI

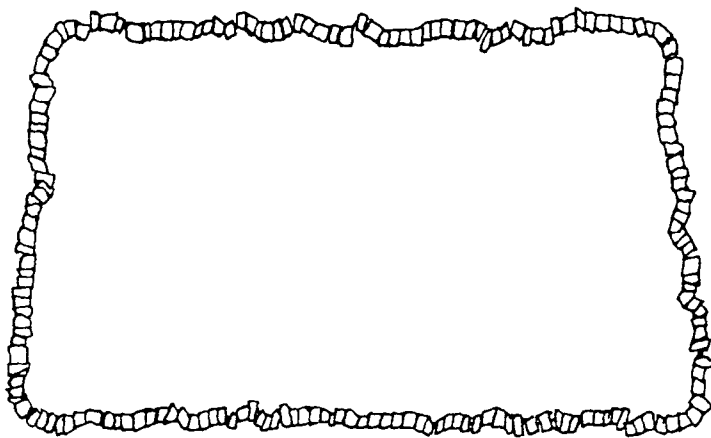
BEADS



1



2



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4



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6



7



8

slightly variant one is that shown in Figure 2, which differs from the preceding one by being ornated with parallel encircling raised rings. According to Mason, these two types of beads were made by using small sticks as cores. The beads were presumably formed by rolling them around this core.²⁷ The necklace shown in Figure 3 is composed of about 300 tiny rings of pure gold plate. Each bead is probably a section cut from longer tubes. The edges are joined carefully, probably by hammering, so that the junction is invisible (13c:247). The beads shown in Figures 4 and 5 are cast in the method called "Scroll Wire Technique" by Mason (13c:247). They have hollow interiors and interstices between the scrolls.²⁸ The following two beads are barrel-shaped (Figures 6 and 7); they have the metal bent over and rolled tightly, but the edges are not joined. The bead in Figure 7 has its surface divided by encircling gold wires. In the upper section the bead shows the delineation of a human face made in cast gold wire. The ornated barrel-shaped bead shown in Figure 8 was made in the same "Scroll Wire Technique" as the tubular ones shown in the same plate.²⁹

²⁷Samples of the preceding types of beads were found by Mason at Nahuange (13c:246).

²⁸They average 3 cm in length by 0.8 cm in diameter.

²⁹This bead is in exhibit at the Museum of the American Indian (13c:248).

BEAD STRAND SPREADERS

According to Mason, the following gold objects were obviously used by the Taironas to hold apart parallel strands of beads made out of gold, shell, jade, or cornelian (see Plate XII).³⁰ Some of the spreaders are plain, as those shown in Figures 1 and 2. They are hollow and thin. They also have several holes on the sides for the insertion of the cords carrying the beads. They were apparently made by hammering and binding. In some samples, the holes are surrounded by relief rims. The samples shown in Figures 3 and 4 are decorated with circular coils of wire technique; this shows in one side; the other side is plain. There is a hole in the center of each coil, but they also have holes on their sides for the insertion of the cords. The back is closed and there is no evidence of any junction by hammering or welding. The central objects of some bracelets or belts are like the ones shown in Figures 5 and 6. They are long rectangular gold ornaments, thin and plain in lower 3/5, the upper 2/5 consisting of high relief bird figures. They are not solid; they are made in thin gold, maybe cast or probably made by cold hammering or welding (13c:250). Together with the other bead spreaders, they have several holes on each

³⁰Six samples of bead spreaders were found by Mason as part of bracelets among the ceremonial objects worn by the Kagaba-Arhuaco priests of the Tairona region (13c:249). Fifteen similar objects are in the collection of the Museum of the American Indian.

PLATE XII
BEAD STRAND SPREADERS



1



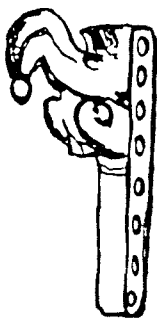
2



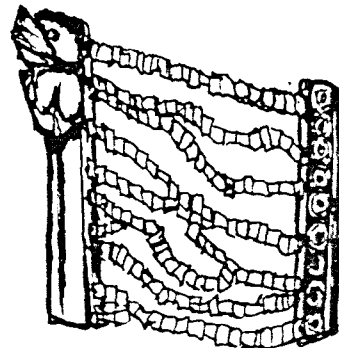
3



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6

edge for the purpose already stated. The back is irregular and not well finished, but with no evidence of a clay core.³¹ The upper bird figure is also hollow and apparently cast. The bird representations in all of them are alike, with a slight variation in the size and the direction of the beak. The beaks sometimes end in a horizontal wire tube, probably for the suspension of another ornament. The bird figure is quite stylized. The eyes are small relief globules and a loop encircles them and the forehead. The body is usually small with folded wings in high relief; the small symmetrical legs grasp a twig, which seems to project through the tips of the wings. Below the legs there is an ornamental band. These bird figures have a great similarity to the zoomorphic pendants which will be described later. The specific purpose of all the bead spreaders is determined by the holes on their sides for the suspension of several cords of beads at the same time.

PENDANTS

This group includes gold ornaments of two different types. One type of non-biomorphic, shown in Plate XIII, and the other type is based on biomorphic representations shown in Plates XIV and XV. The object shown in Figure 1,

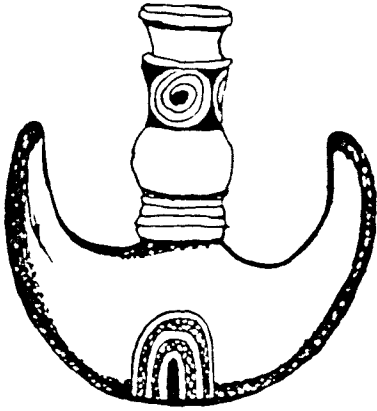
³¹They measure approximately 6 cm in total length by 1.5 cm in width. The lower part has approximately 3 mm in thickness (13c:250).

Plate XIII, may be described as anchor-shaped, and probably cast in one piece.³² The stem is tubular, with the top partly covered, and with a small hole in the center. The stem is mainly composed of two large wire spirals running in the same direction. There are holes in the centers of the spirals from which the object could have been suspended. There are also lateral orifices between the lower part of the spirals. The top of the stem has a double wire ring ferrule. The lower part of the stem is wider, with an encircling ring above and below. The crescentic lower part is wide and hollow, with long and short slots crossing at the base at right angles; at the bottom there is a tiny ring with a central orifice. The slot in the lower edge runs only about half way to the end, and is bordered by a decoration of twisted wire on either side, forming the typical braided wire pattern. The decorated borders of the lateral slots loop around the end. The upper part of the "Anchor" is undecorated (13c:258). The ornament shown in Figure 2 is a very similar one, with a small variation in the proportions; in addition, it has an extra hole in the stem. In Figures 3 and 4 the crescentic lower part becomes triangular. Both triangles tend to be obtuse, and they have a

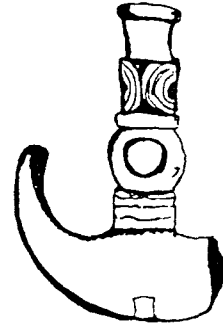
³²Samples of these pendants were found by Mason at Pueblito, Nahuange, and Santa Marta, and all over the Tairona area, indicating that they are very characteristic of the Tairona culture (13c:259).

PLATE XIII

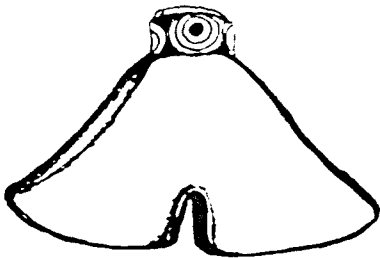
PENDANTS



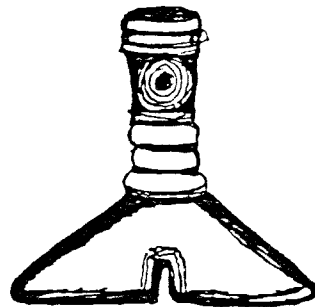
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central incision in the front. They have only one face; the back shows the clay core on which they were cast. The proliferation of this type of pendants in the Tairona area is very noticeable.³³

Many gold pendants have been found in the form of frogs, birds, and jaguars. The frog--or more probably toad--and birds--probably the eagle and toucans--may be considered the most typical figures (13c:259). It is presumed that the toad rather than the frog is represented, since the former is common in the region, grows to a large size, and is venerated to some extent by the present day descendants of the Taironas. Toad and pelican figures are typical of the Gairaca region, and toucans and crocodiles (caimans) are typical of Nahuange (13c:259). Toad representations are on the whole, naturalistic (See Plate XIV, Figures 1 to 3). They have a triangular body and slightly triangular head, the principal detail being the large raised eyes. The hind feet are flexed. They have a tubular opening under the neck, which may represent the front feet, which also served for suspension, as shown in Figure 2, becoming zoomorphic beads for beautiful necklaces.³⁴

³³These pendants have an average size of 2.5 cm in width by 2.5 cm in length. In many cases, they were used almost as beads, as we can see it in several necklaces at the Gold Museum in Bogota.

³⁴There is a necklace at the Gold Museum in Bogota made with 37 toads of this type, spaced by cornelian beads.

They were cast around an earthen core. A very characteristic toad figure is shown in Figure 3. It is very conventionalized in the form of a bell. The base is flat and thin, with a narrow horizontal slot above it. The body is high, with a ridged hollow interior, and ends in a head like a hammered shark, very triangular, with raised eyes at either end. A spherical rattling pellet within serves as a clapper. At the front of the base is a tubular suspension hole. They are smaller in size than the ones analyzed before.³⁵ According to Mason, this is a common type which seemed to have been manufactured in large quantities, and sold and traded to their neighbors (13c:260).³⁶

Other zoomorphic pendants representing birds are shown in Figures 4 and 5. Although they are somewhat stylized, they show the head of a bird with a long beak turned down at the end, probably a toucan, though possibly a flamingo.³⁷ The mouth is indicated by a curved incised line. A relief wire separates the beak from the head. A relief globule forms the eyes. The head is surmounted by

³⁵Seven gold figures of toads were excavated by Mason, six of them at Gairaca and one at Pueblito. Their average size is 2.5 X 1.8 X 1.5 cm (13c:259).

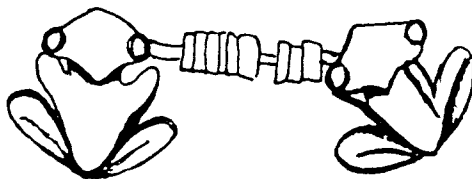
³⁶There is a necklace formed by 17 of these toads at the Gold Museum in Bogota.

³⁷Their average size is 2.8 X 1.7 X 1.5 cm (13c:261). A necklace at the Gold Museum has 13 of these birds plus jade beads.

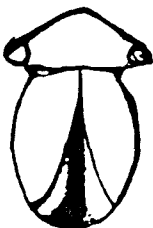
PLATE XIV
ZOOMORPHIC PENDANTS



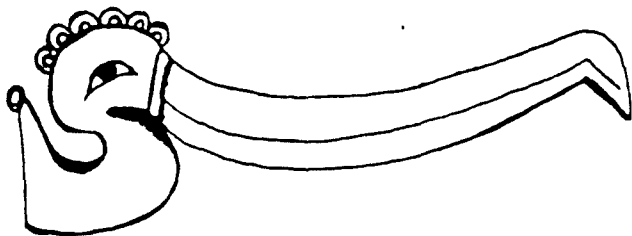
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several pairs of wire scrolls, probably representing the comb of the bird. The back of the ornament is broad and winged, and surmounted by a tubular suspension hole, with terminal raised ferrule rings. The back is open and, in some cases, it shows the clay core on which it was cast. Sometimes a relief decoration shows on the surface of the winged sides as shown in Figure 5.

The type of bird shown in Plate XV, Figure 1, is technically and artistically different from the ones already discussed. The complete bird is shown, instead of merely the head, the wings and tail being very conventionalized, outspread, and plain. Probably the toucan is again represented, the beak being in high relief and long, with a pronounced downward curve at the end, and an incised line representing the mouth; at the tip of the beak there is a wire ring for the suspension of small ornaments in the shape of thin plaques, as shown in Figure 2. The eyes are represented by a relief globule surrounded by a relief ring. There is a double ring around the neck, and suspension holes through the edge of the metal at either side of the neck. The figure is ornated with wire braiding at the neck and at the narrowest part of the body. It was cast on a clay core which is open at the back.³⁸

³⁸ Some of these specimens were excavated by Mason at Nahuange. They measure approximately 3.0 X 2.5 X 1.5 cm (13c:262).

The bird represented in Figure 3 seems to be an owl, due to the very noticeable depiction of the eyes; they are gold globules, very round and circular, surrounded by wire braiding. The shape of the crest and the size of the beak also correspond to an owl. The body has folded wings in high relief, and the legs grasp a twig. On the whole, the figure is in an alert position. Braided wires denote the beginnings of the head and the tail. This last one is very flat and stylized, with some smooth reliefs hammered into it.³⁹

Another zoomorphic pendant, representing a feline, most likely a jaguar, is shown in Figure 4. A very naturalistic crouching figure is depicted, with legs flexed and flat, the head up, and the tail is up, curled and pointed. The head is very naturalistic with the ears high, the eyes and mouth in low relief, a ring around the mouth, and the canine teeth shown by wire relief. The claws are depicted by parallel lines; the front paws in wire technique are rolled to form tubular suspension holes. The tail is plain and thick at the base. It was cast on a clay mold, which shows on the uncovered base.⁴⁰

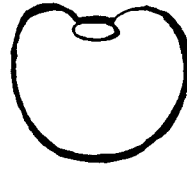
³⁹Their average size is 6.0 X 2.5 X 1.0 cm.

⁴⁰The two specimens of this type at the Gold Museum in Bogota are very tiny, averaging 2.5 X 2 X 1.5 cm. Mason found two of them at the site of Nahuange and Gairaca (13c: 264).

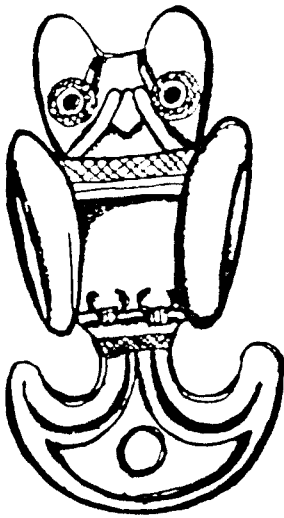
PLATE XV
ZOOMORPHIC PENDANTS



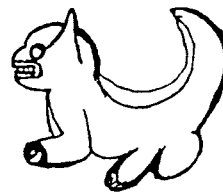
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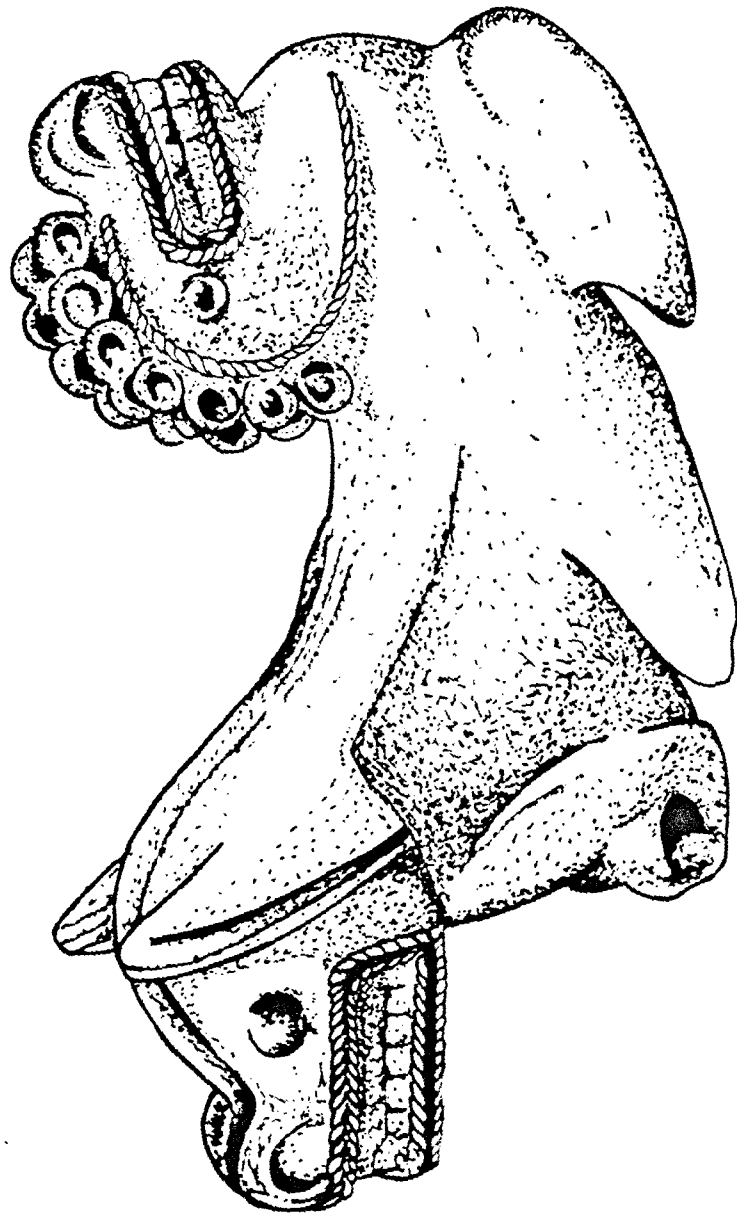
A variation of this type of zoomorphic pendant is shown in Plate XVI. Its main characteristic is the double head. Even though their size is rather small, they are one of the most beautiful figurines created by the Taironas.⁴¹ The head of the feline at one end remains the same as the preceding samples, and the up-curved tail changes into the crested head of an alligator with protruding nostrils and an open mouth showing the teeth. Braiding wire surrounds the mouth and the crest. This last one is formed by rows of parallel rings; sometimes the feline head would have a crest. The tubular suspension holes in the front paws remain the same in all of them.

BREASTPLATES

Most of the Tairona's breastplates are composed of two parts: a flat plaque or background, and a central figure in relief. This central figure sometimes represented a bird, in others it is a combination of a zoomorphic monster with a human body. Most of the birds represented seem to be eagles. In their representation, the beak is generally bigger, shorter, and more curved than those of other birds represented. The breastplate shown in Plate XVII, Figure 1,

⁴¹There are six of these specimens at the Gold Museum in Bogota. They vary in size from 5.6 X 5 X 2.8 cm to 3 X 2.8 X 1.8 cm. They also vary in the amount of rows in the crested heads. The smaller the object, the less rows it has.

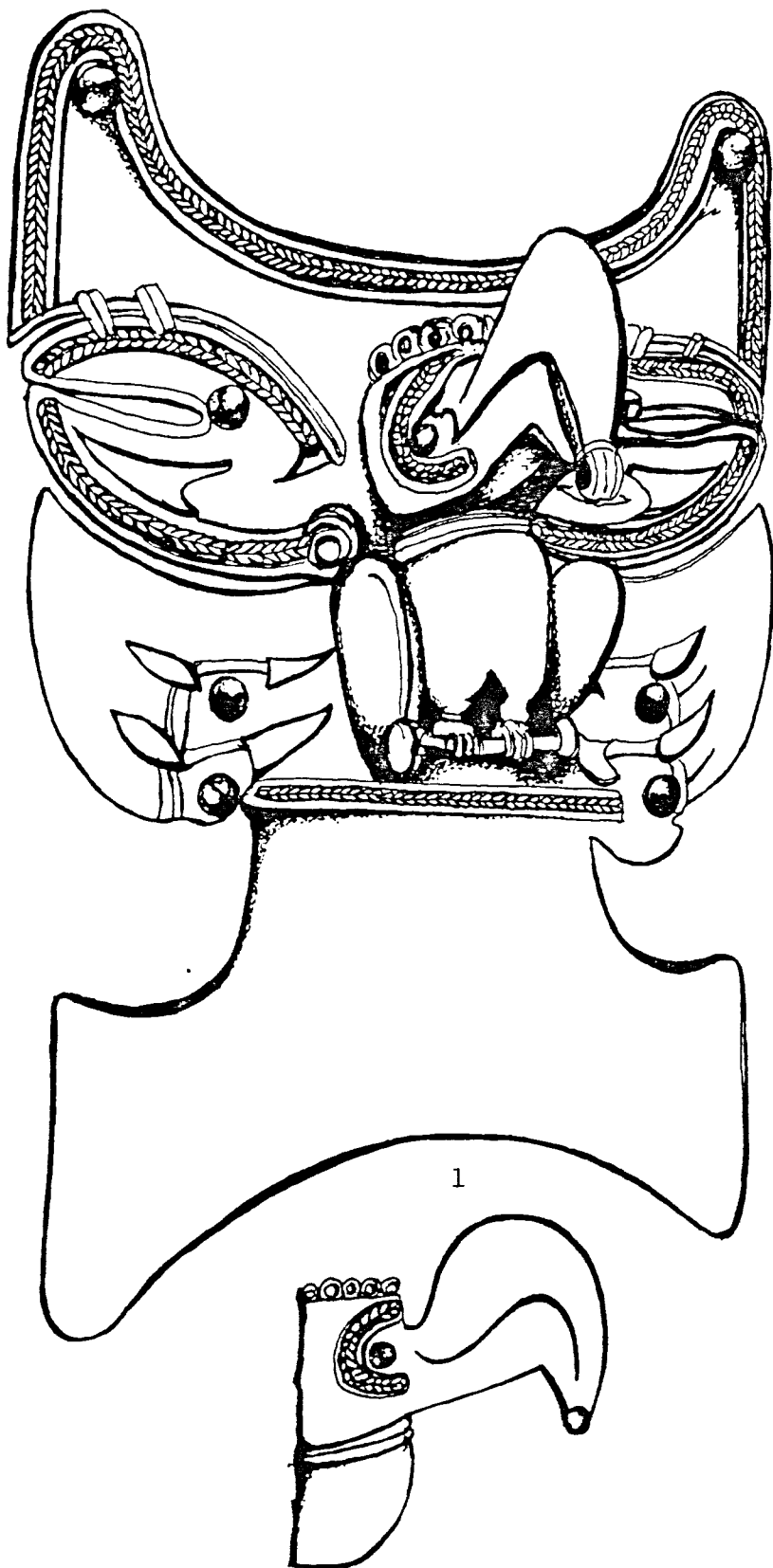
PLATE XVI
DOUBLE HEADED ZOOMORPHIC PENDANT



has an eagle as the central figure in relief. The flat background is divided into three parts: upper, middle, and lower.⁴² According to Mason, they are the representation of a flying bird. The three parts represent respectively, the head, outstretched wings, and spreading tail (13c:263). In order to make a symmetrical, well-balanced figure, the head sometimes is duplicated to either side of the upper part, making a double-headed eagle. This upper part is also the most decorated one. The central part, the wings, is slightly decorated, and the lower part or tail is perfectly plain. The whole breastplate shows the narrow ornamental bands in braided wire technique, together with the high relief globes for depicting the eyes and other ornamental details. The central bird figure (shown in profile in Figure 2) has a crested head. It also has a ring at the end of the beak for the suspension of gold rings or gold plaques as the one shown in Plate XV, Figure 3. In some cases, the neck of the bird is longer, the body has folded wings, and the legs grasp a twig. A variation of this type of bird breastplate is shown in Plate XVIII, Figure 1. The flat background is also divided into three parts, but the upper part has a symmetrical representation of the head of a bird (maybe a toucan) on top of the head of an alligator (maybe a caiman).

⁴²There are 11 of these breastplates at the Gold Museum in Bogota. They vary in size from 14 X 10 cm to 7 X 5 cm.

PLATE XVII
BREAST PLATE - EAGLE CENTRAL FIGURE

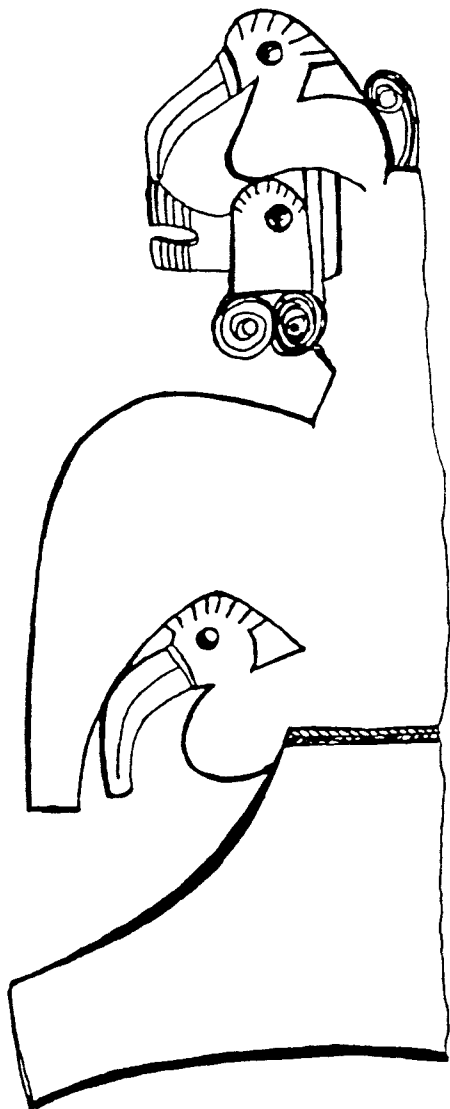


1

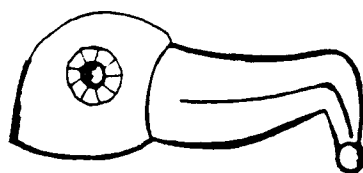
2

PLATE XVIII

BREAST PLATE - TOUCAN CENTRAL FIGURE



1



2

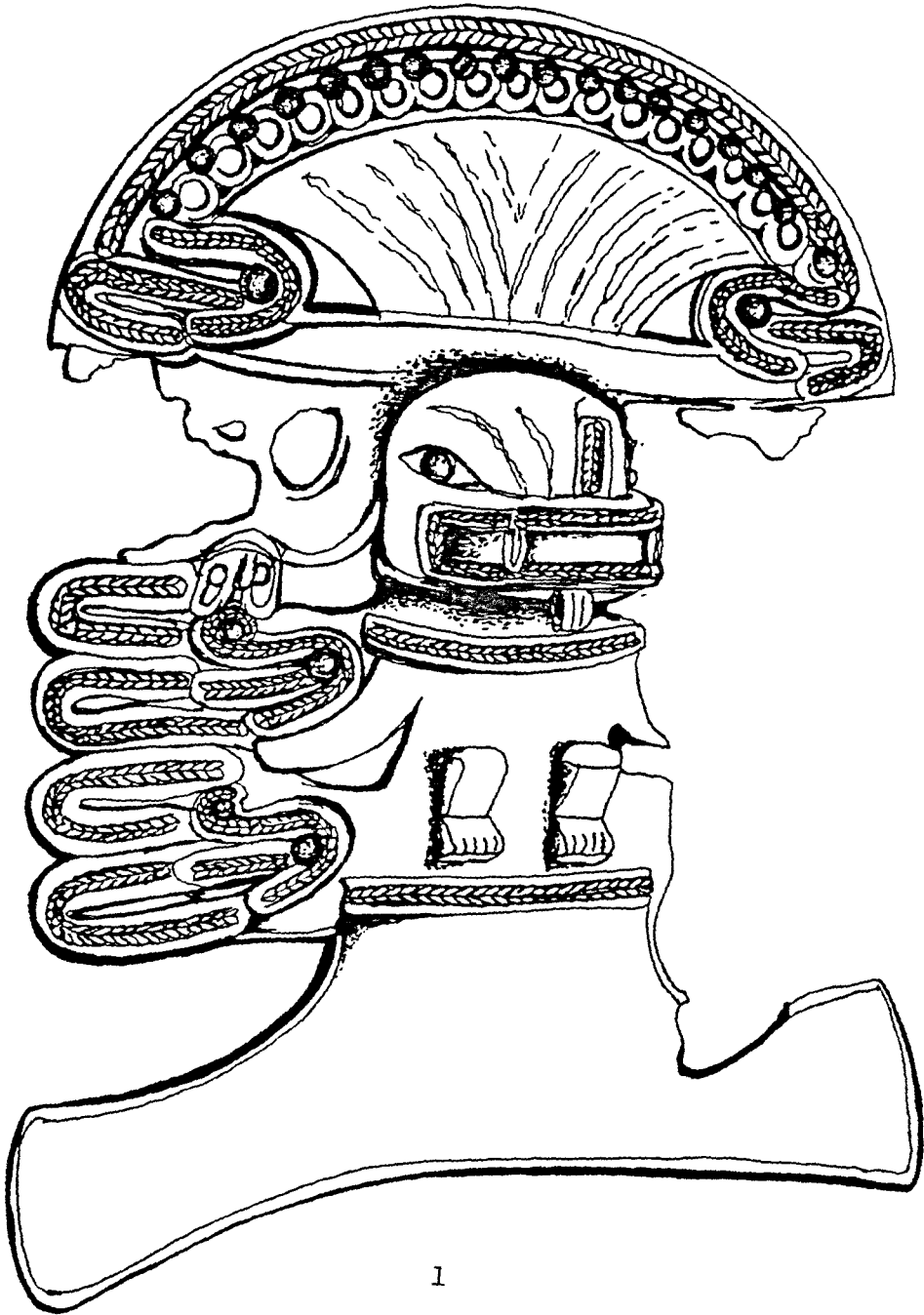
This part is ornamented with gold wire spirals. The eyes of the animals are gold globules. The central part realistically resembles wings, again with the figure of a toucan. The lower part remains as plain as in the others. The body of the relief central figure does not change, but the head is like the one shown in Figure 2, most likely the head of a toucan.⁴³

The breastplate shown in Plate XIX is a pretty unique variation of the ones already discussed. The upper part of the flat background is beautifully ornamented with wire braiding, a row of gold globules, and another row of wire gold circles, all of them in a semi-circular arrangement. It is more of a headdress with two stylized crocodile heads at each end, with gold globules for eyes and nostrils. These heads are repeated two at each side of the central part. They all end in bifurcated tongues made out of braiding wire. The lower part remains plain. The central figure is biomorphic and rather plain. Only the head, legs, and feet are in relief. The head is that of a monster with some jaguar characteristics. The mouth shows the canines. The eyes are raised, and it has indented lines along the head, maybe representing skin spots. The legs

⁴³There are two of these breastplates at the Gold Museum in Bogota. They measure 16 X 14 cm approximately.

PLATE XIX

BREAST PLATE - MONSTER HEADED CENTRAL FIGURE

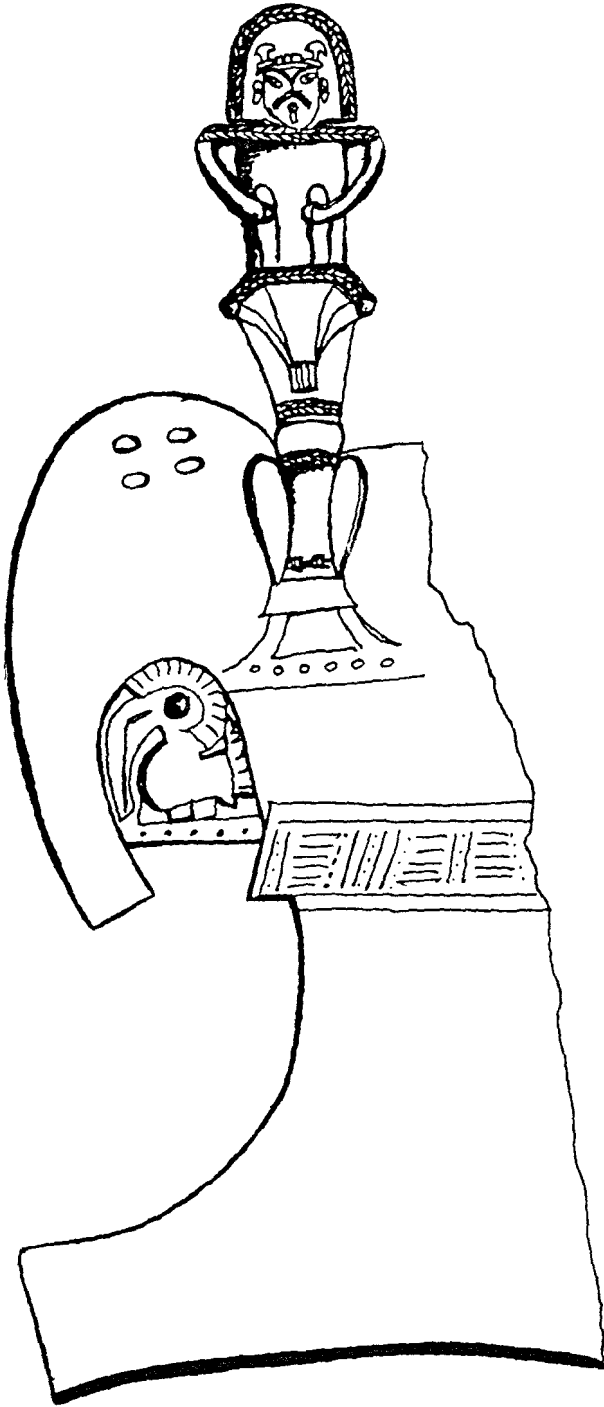


are flexed and the toes are depicted by parallel striations.⁴⁴ Wire braiding shows across the shoulders, around the mouth, and below the feet. To either side of the head there is a figure hanging upside down. This position coupled with the large flat triangular nose, suggests plainly that a bat is portrayed here.

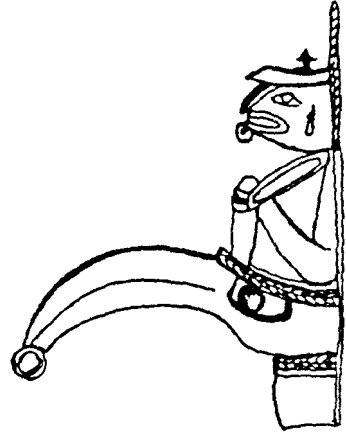
Another rather unique breastplate is shown in Plate XX, Figure 1. The top part is formed by four figures. They are human representations with some zoomorphic characteristics. These four figures are seated on top of the heads of the relief representations on birds (see Figure 2). They are shown wearing a headdress, ear ornaments, and tembetas. Their faces have some zoomorphic details, such as the shape of the mouth and the nose. The four figures are holding their knees with their hands. The arms, fingers, and some other details are made in gold wire. Braided wire, gold globules, and the incision of dots and lines were used throughout the design for complementary ornamentation. There is one bird at each side of the middle part of the flat background. These were made by cutting in the gold, and adding incised details. The lower part remains the same as the preceding breastplates.⁴⁵

⁴⁴This breastplate measures 6.6 X 8.8 cm. It belongs to the Tairona collection at the Gold Museum in Bogota.

⁴⁵This particular breastplate is at the Gold Museum in Bogota. It measures 28 X 22 cm.



1



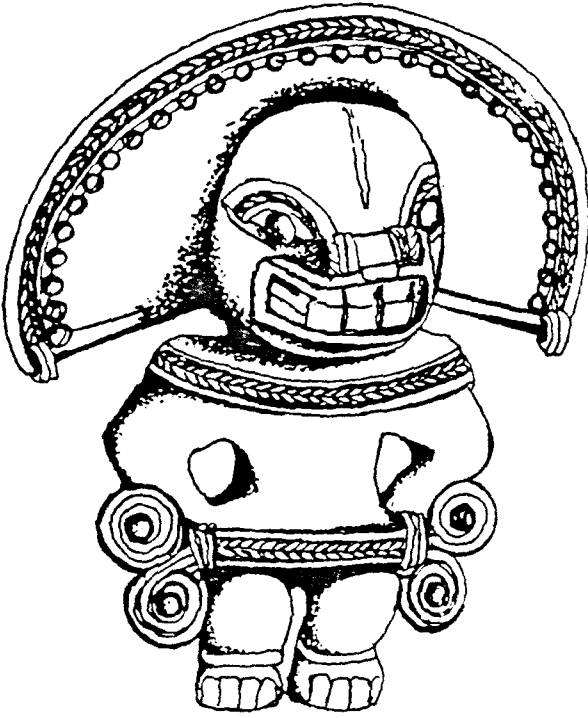
2

ANTHROPOMORPHIC FIGURINES

Although they could have been classified as pendants, their specific characteristics place them in a separate category. In general, they all have human bodies, most of the time shown with the legs flexed (See Plate XXI, Figure 2). In most of the samples, the figure is holding a horizontal band which ends in double spirals (see Figure 1). In few cases hunters with bows and arrows or women are represented, as in Plate XXI, Figures 3 and 4. All the figurines have some sort of ornamentation around the shoulders. Genitals are depicted sometimes. Great variations are found once we analyze the face, head, and headdress. Figure 1 in Plate XXI has a zoomorphic head very similar to the one in the breastplate in Plate XIX. Figures 3 and 4 of Plate XXI are rather human representations of a male and a female, respectively. All three figurines have similar semi-circular headdresses, ornamented with wire braiding and gold globules.⁴⁶ The figurine shown in Plate XXII is wearing earplugs, a nose ring, and a tembeta in the lower lip. On top of his head there are two bird heads in relief. The rest of the headdress

⁴⁶There are ten of these figurines at the Gold Museum in Bogota. Only one of them represents a hunter, and one a female. Reichel-Dolmatoff found two of them at Bonda (18e:74). They average 5 X 3.5 cm.

PLATE XXI
ANTHROPOMORPHIC FIGURINES



1



2

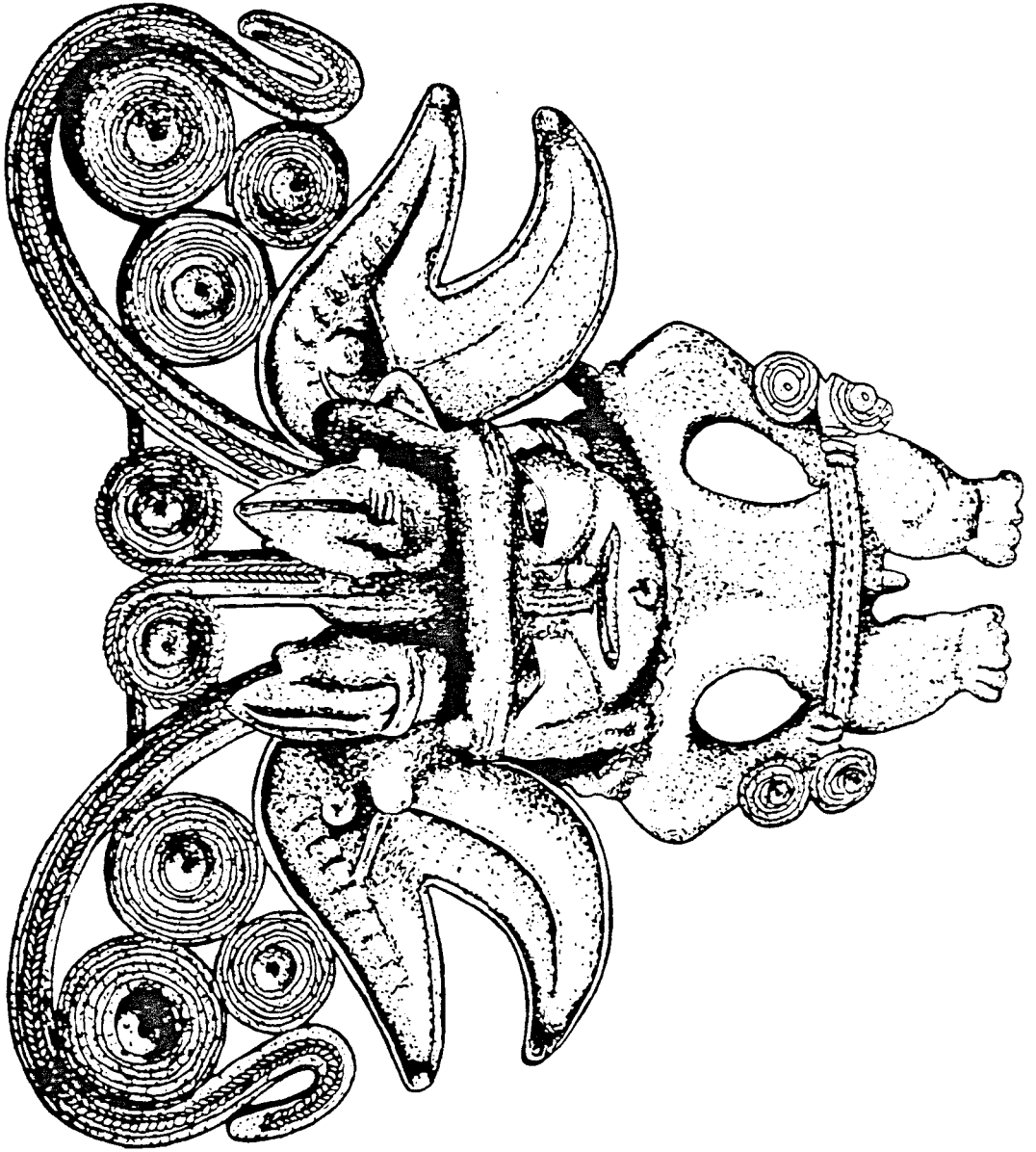


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4

PLATE XXII
ANTHROPOMORPHIC FIGURINE



is rather flat and symmetrical, with the typical Tairona wire braiding, wire spirals with gold globule centers. Two stylized bird heads and beaks can be seen at either side of the relief head of the figurine.⁴⁷ According to Reichel-Dolmatoff, they were produced by the *cire perdue* method of casting, using closed molds (18e:74).

PLAQUES

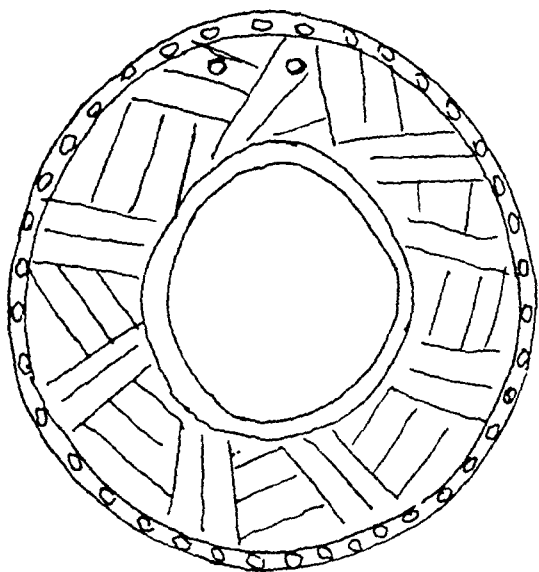
Many of the Tairona plaques are circular (see Plate XXIII).⁴⁸ All are made of very thin gold, apparently with a very high copper content, and all are brittle and broken. Each has a ring of small dots around the edge made with a punch from the rear. They also have small suspension holes for their use. Some of them have very simple designs forming triangles or arranged in parallel lines going in different directions (see Figures 1 and 2). The plaque in Figure 3 was made in the *repousse* technique. It depicts a scene of a man being carried out in a litter by two fantastic beings with human bodies and beast's heads. The central figure is shown wearing a headdress, nose ring, and a breastplate. It also has two belts around his waist. It

⁴⁷There are two of this type of figurine at the Gold Museum in Bogota. They measure approximately 18 X 12 cm.

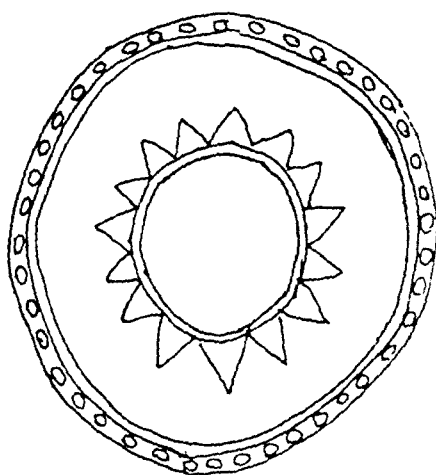
⁴⁸They average 12 cm in diameter. Most of them were found by Mason at Nahuange (13c:256).

PLATE XXIII
CIRCULAR PLAQUES

.



1



2



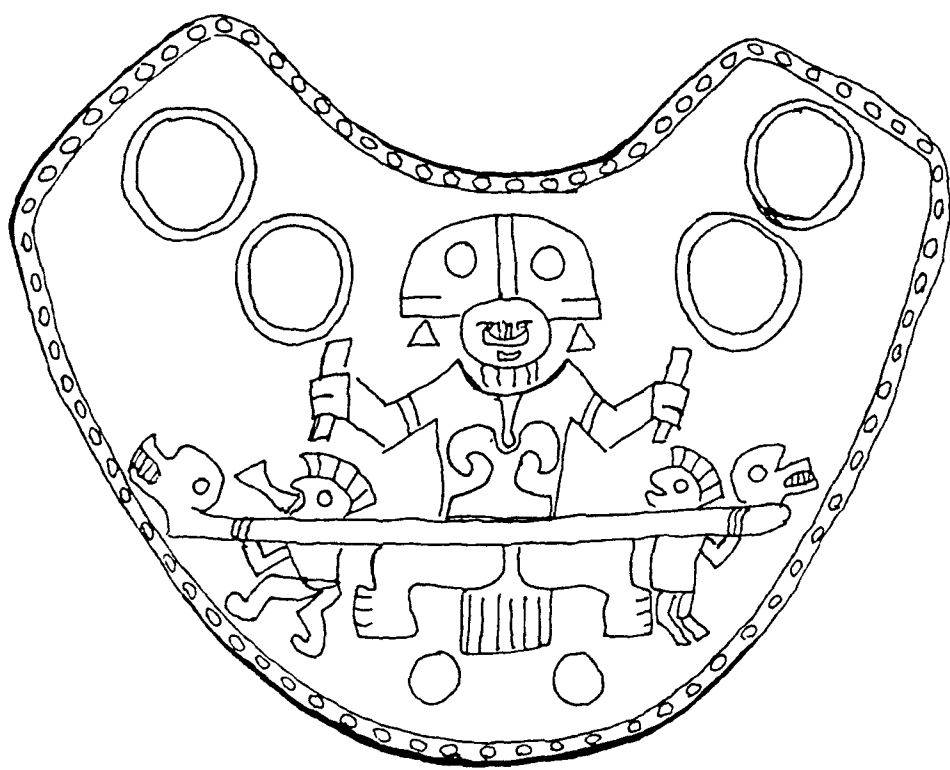
3

gives the impression of being the representation of either a wealthy man, a chief, a dignitary, or a priest.⁴⁹ In Plate XXIV, Figure 1, a similar plaque in the repousse technique is depicted. Although this plaque has a different shape, and larger measurements, it does have a central figure being carried out by two other figures going in the same direction. The carrier on the left has a trumpet or horn in his mouth. The central figure has his arms open, and a staff in each hand. It also wears a headdress, nose ring, and a breastplate. The plaque in Figure 2 was made out of fine, thin, yellowish gold (13c:255).⁵⁰ It was probably beaten out, the edges being thin and wary. The center is occupied by a repousse decoration. The central figure is that of a man made in primitive stylistic art. The body is relatively small, with the feet turned at right angles. At either side of the figure is a repousse profile of a bird. On the whole, the plaque has a crescentic shape, terminating in relief scrolls which turn symmetrically, clockwise on one side and counter-clockwise on the other.

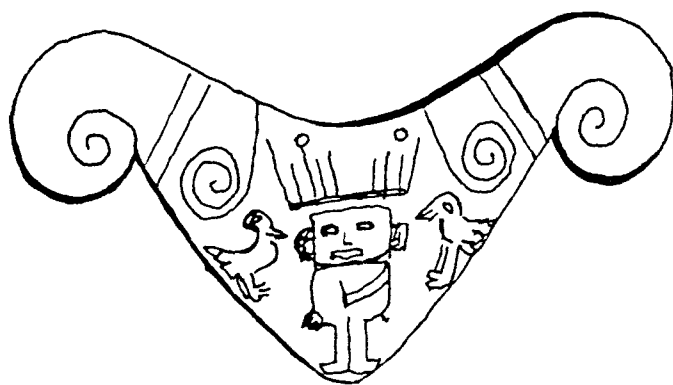
⁴⁹This plaque is at the Gold Museum in Bogota. It measures approximately 14 cm in diameter.

⁵⁰It was found by Mason at Nahuange. It measures 17 X 8.5 cm (13c:255).

PLATE XXIV
CRESCENTIC PLAQUES



1



2

BELLS

These are of two main types, one with open bottom, which probably had a suspended clapper (Plate XXV, Figures 1, 2, and 3), and another with a slot and a free pellet in the hollow interior (Plate XXV, Figures 4 to 7, and Plate XXVI, Figure 1). In Plate XXV, the figures 1 through 3 are relatively similar in size, shape, and in some other details.⁵¹ The basal orifice is lined with a peripheral rim, and to one side there is a flange projecting outwards. This can hardly serve any present purpose, and appears to have been cast in this form, but may represent an original cutting and bending of the metal (13c:267). Each bell is suspended at the top by a pair of small circular rings, apparently of coiled wire, soldered on. In the center of the top is a small hole through which the clapper was probably suspended. A more intricate variation is shown in Figures 4 through 7, and in Plate XXVI. The bell becomes the body, to which a tridimensional head was added.⁵² In Figures 4 and 5 and Plate XXVI, the spherical bodies have a slot running along the lower edge. Sometimes arms and hands are shown in low relief. The features in the tridimensional

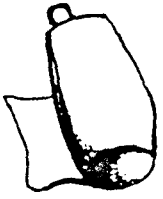
⁵¹They average 2.5 X 1.4 cm. Some of them were found by Mason at Pueblito (13c:267).

⁵²There are 12 of these specimens at the Gold Museum in Bogota, four cylindrical and eight spherical. Their average size is 3 X 1.8 cm.

face are depicted by gold wires, spirals, and gold globules, as well as the headdress. The shape of the bell in Figures 6 and 7 is cylindrical and with a vertical opening in the front. The openings and edges are delineated by wire braiding. In all of them the faces and features remain very similar to the ones in the breastplates, and in the anthropomorphic figurines.

PLATE XXV

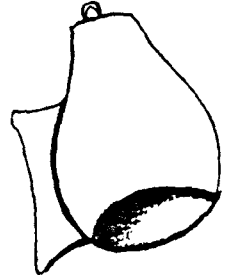
BELLS



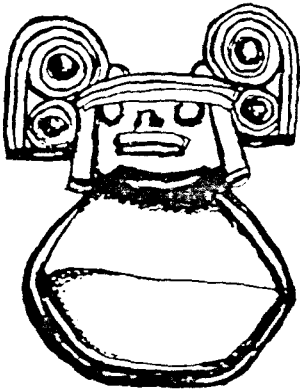
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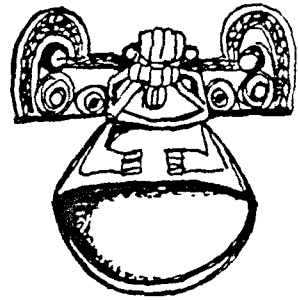
2



3



4



5



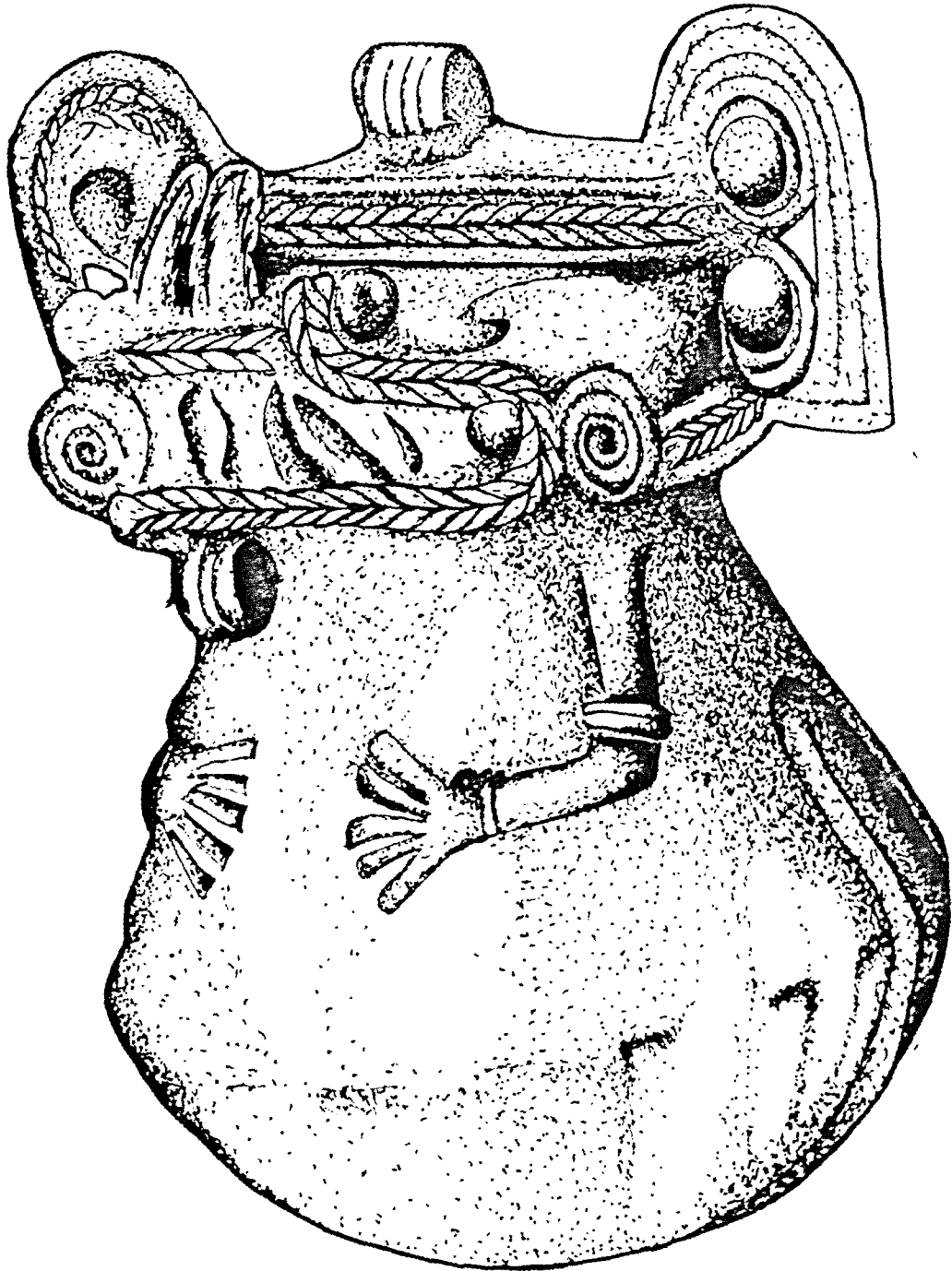
6



7

PLATE XXVI

BELL



SUMMARY

Although the influence of the Tairona culture can be detected over a large portion of the lowlands, its maximum development was achieved in the slopes of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, in the northern part of Colombia. In a geographical context of difficult topography, this culture is striking for its feats of architecture and engineering, such as terraces for house sites and fields, stone floors, and containing walls. There were roads paved with stone slabs to facilitate communication within and outside the settlement. They also built stone bridges, irrigation canals, drains, stone porticos, and columns. There were tombs covered with large slabs.

The ceramic style includes composite silhouette forms, tetrapods, double jars, jars with tubular spout, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic jars, annular bases, and decoration by incision. Thick red ware and thin black ware are typical, and paint is absent. Other clay artifacts are encountered such as: miniature vessels, small pestles, rattles, whistles, and small effigies. The most common zoomorphic motifs are: jaguars, bats, eagles, toucans, owls, serpents, and toads. They also made stone artifacts which were either ceremonial or utilitarian.

In the socio-political sphere, large urban centers, a marked division of labor, social stratification, incipient militarism, theocratic government, and intertribal trade can be noted. The control by magic of supernatural forces was very important to them. Religious ceremonies were related to the seasons. The Taironas were divided into totemic clans directly related to a specific animal.

The Taironas have one of the least known, but finest styles in goldwork, not only in Colombia, but in prehispanic America. They excelled in wax casting technique, and in the casting and application of wire ornaments for surface details. Their skill in annealing, soldering, and hammering was, of course, highly developed. The surface detail in the form of wire braiding is extremely fine; spiral open work and solid gold globules add greatly to its spectacular appearance. In general, the biomorphic and zoomorphic forms represented have realistic proportions, smoothly burnished surfaces, and concern with tridimensional forms. There are quite a number of gold pieces in the forms of rings, earrings, ear rods, nose rings, tembetas, beads, breastplates, plaques, pendants, figurines, and bells. All of them were beautifully worked with carefully calculated details, resulting in these splendid works of art made in a highly polished craftsmanship context.

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