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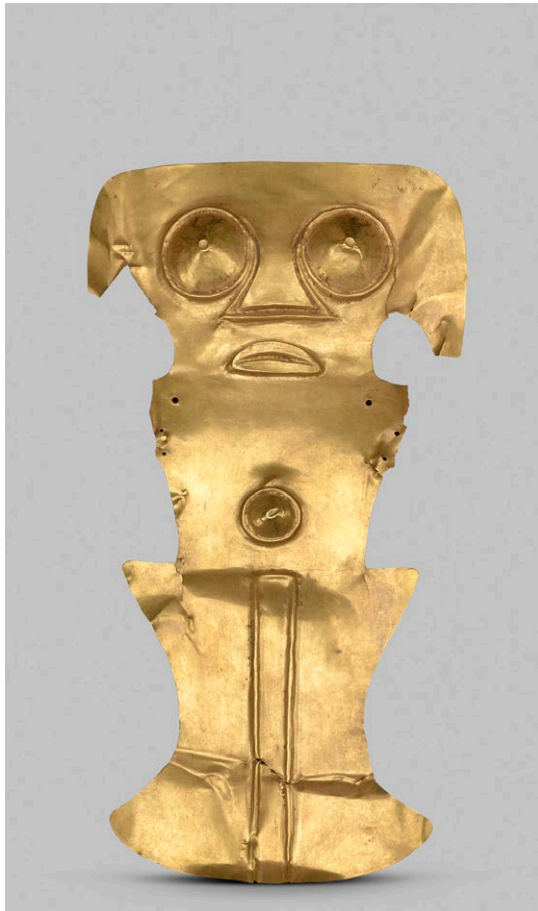
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## A gift for a Queen: A PRE-COLUMBIAN PECTORAL IN THE BRITISH ROYAL COLLECTION

**Resumen:** Una placa precolombina regalada a la reina Isabel II por el presidente José Cantera de Panamá durante su coronación en 1953 contiene una figura humanoide en tumbaga, una aleación de oro y cobre. Este estudio examina las características del pectoral, estableciendo paralelos con artefactos similares encontrados en Colombia y Panamá con iconografía y rasgos artísticos compartidos. A pesar de la limitada información sobre la procedencia de algunas piezas, la representación del "personaje de ojos saltones" añade una categoría más a la lista del Estilo internacional que prevalece en Panamá y en el Caribe colombiano. Este tipo de piezas son escasas, lo que plantea preguntas frente a su reconocimiento y aceptación generalizada.

**Abstract:** A pre-Columbian breastplate that was given to Queen Elizabeth II by President José Cantera of Panama on the occasion of her coronation in 1953 contains a humanoid figure in tumbaga, a gold and copper alloy. This study examines the characteristics of the breastplate and establishes parallels with similar artefacts found in Colombia and Panama that share the same iconography and artistic features. Despite the limited information about the origin of some objects, the depiction of the 'Goggle-Eyed Personage' adds one more category to the list of the International Style that was prevalent in Panama and in Colombia's Caribbean region. This type of object is rare, which raises questions about its recognition and general acceptance.



**Fig. 1.** Panamanian plaque in the British Royal Collection. Photo and copyright Royal Collection Trust. Published with permission. Royal Collection Trust / © His Majesty King Charles III 2024

In 2017, Buckingham Palace put on display a collection of items given to Queen Elizabeth II during the sixty-five years of her reign. One of these gifts (Fig. 1), a Pre-Columbian plaque (no. RCIN 49997), was presented to Her Majesty by President José Cantera of Panama on the occasion of her Coronation on 2 June 1953 (Goodsir, 2017: 81). The Collection website notes that the plaque is in 'a green leather box, with gilt metal coat of arms and presentation inscription, lined with green velvet. The accompanying certificate states that the breast plate was found in the 'Chocó region (present-day Colombia) and is over 700 years old' (<https://www.rct.uk/collection/49997>). There is no information about the previous history of the piece, how it came to the President, or exactly where it was found. Since the Colombian department of Chocó shares a frontier with Panama, the reported provenience is quite plausible.

The plaque is unusually large, measuring 37 cms in height, and is made of *tumbaga*, a gold-copper alloy. It is broken and incomplete and would originally have had two downcurved arms (cf. Fig. 3). The breaks appear to be old ones, and the presence of paired repair holes shows that the missing arms had been stapled back into position sometime after breakage. There is no suspension loop on the reverse, and the small holes at the shoulders suggest that the plaque was once sewn or pinned to a backing material.

The plaque represents a stylized humanoid figure, with the legs separated by a narrow rectangular space, and the eyes and navel in the form of conical bosses surrounded by raised circles. Bosses of this type are a defining feature of Zenú (Sinú) gold work from Caribbean Colombia, where they occur on a series of breastplates, or pectorals, with an unhelpfully wide chronological range from ca. A.D. 200-1600 (Falchetti 1995, Figs. 29-34). Their distribution extends as far west as the rio Atrato, which drains into the Gulf of Urabá close to the frontier with Panama (Fig. 2; Londoño Laverde and Mendoza Vargas 2008: 151). The relationship between these Colombian discs and the similar ones from the late period (post A.D. 700) in Panama and Costa Rica is far from clear.



**Fig. 2.** Embossed disc from near the mouth of the Rio Atrato, Colombia.

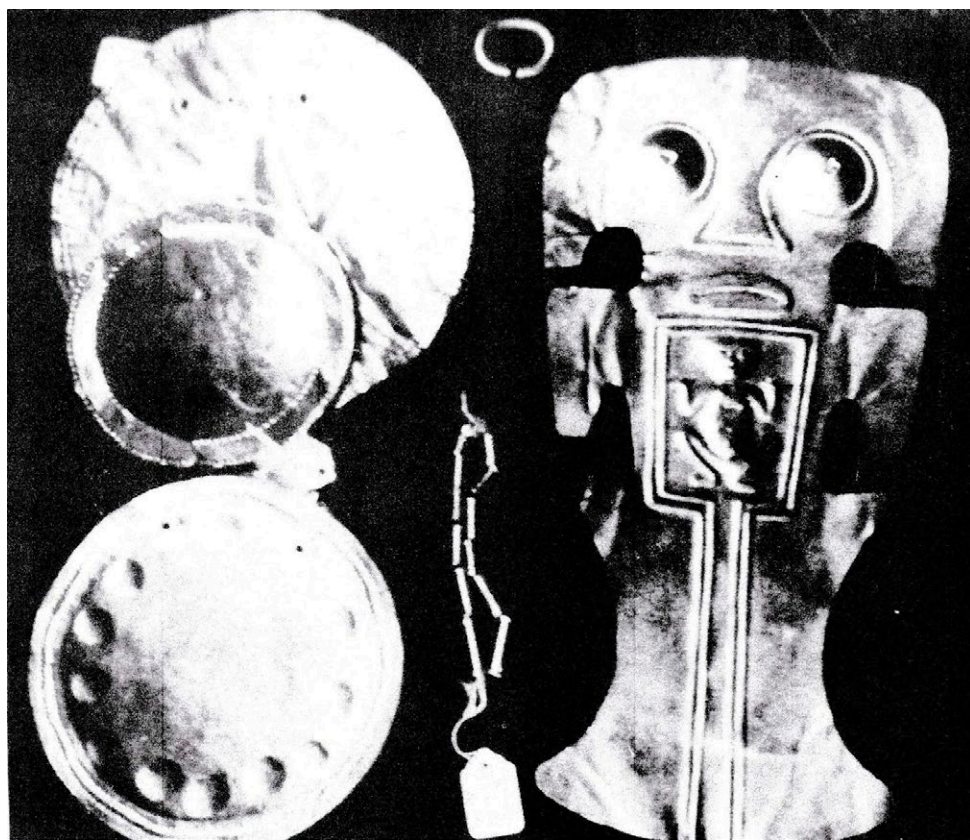
Photo: Luisa Fernanda Espinosa.

Museo del Oro, Bogotá.

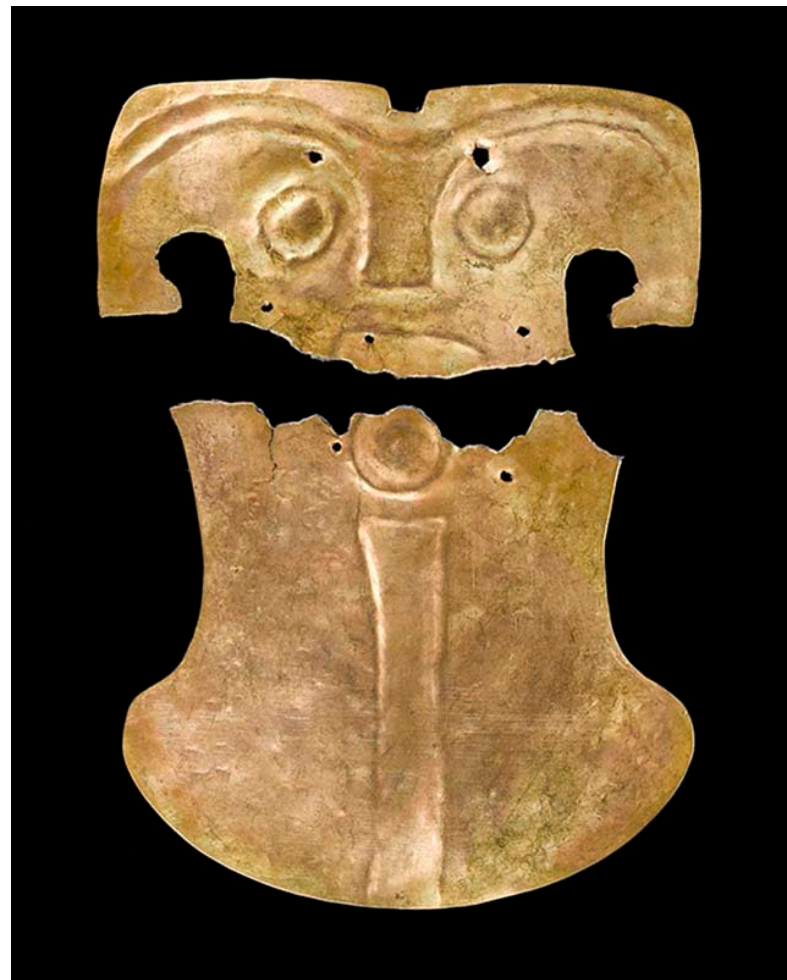
The pectoral in the Royal Collection is a very rare form but is not unique, and the same image occurs on a small number of items from Panama and Colombia scattered throughout several museums and collections.

The closest match for the London plaque is the one from Panama illustrated in Fig. 3. It is known only from a poor-quality archive photo of items stolen from the former Museo Nacional in Panama City; no museum number is visible in the photograph, and there is no record of where or when the item was found. Its size can be calculated from the dimensions of the museum's number-tag attached to the necklace in the same photograph. At various times, the Museum used two different sizes of labels, giving two possible heights for the plaque -- either 29.5 cms or 39.3 cms. The larger estimate is very close to the figure for the plaque in the Royal Collection. Except for the miniature human figure, which replaces the conical navel of the British plaque, the two are identical in overall form and in the details of the face, of the mouth with realistic teeth, and of the separation of the legs.

A third plaque, very similar to the ones in London and Panama (Fig. 4), is in the Museo del Oro in Bogotá (no. 007142; Museo del Oro 2018: 92). The surviving portions add up to a height of 20.3 cms, but the middle section of the object, which would have included the arms, is missing, and the original size may have been in the same range as the two previous examples. Sets of holes suggest that the breakage was repaired in antiquity by sewing or by stapling the parts together with metal wire. There is no suspension loop, but the pair of holes at the top of the plaque would have allowed it to be hung on a cord or attached to a backing. The piece has no provenience but was purchased by the Museum in 1956 in a collection that includes items in Zenú style. Manufacture in the Caribbean lowlands of Colombia is likely.



**Fig. 3.** Gold objects formerly in the Museo Nacional de Panamá



**Fig. 4.** Pectoral, probably from the Caribbean lowlands of Colombia. O07142. Max. width 15,5 cm. Photo Clark Manuel Rodríguez, Museo del Oro, Bogotá



**Figure 5. Embossed disc, probably from the Caribbean lowlands of Colombia.**

Museo del Oro, Bogotá. O07143. Photo  
Luisa Fernanda Espinosa.



From the same purchase is the disc illustrated in Fig. 5 (Museo del Oro no. O07143). It measures 17.5 cms x 14.5 cms, is made from surface-enriched *tumbaga*, and bears a repoussé version of the goggle-eyed personage. There is a possible indication of female genitalia, absent from all other renderings, but this may be no more than the separation of the legs. The two holes below the eyes could be for suspension or attachment to a backing; other holes are for the repair of an old crack.

The disc shown in Fig. 6 was exhibited in 1969, with other Pre-Columbian metal items, at the Gimpel Fils Gallery, London, where it was labelled 'Sinú' (Gimpel Fils 1969, cat. No. 62). Its present location is unknown. The gold artifacts in this exhibition originated with the New York dealer André Emmerich, and in a letter (20 January 1980) he wrote that he obtained the disc from a collection in Bogotá but had no background information about the item or its provenience. Since Emmerich was careful about authenticity, and willing to be frank about proveniences, and there is no reason to doubt his information.



**Fig. 6.** Embossed disc of uncertain provenience. Photo Gimpel Fils Galley.



**Fig. 7.** Items from a tomb near Cocolí, Panama.

The disc is 34 cms in diameter and appears to be made of gold rather than *tumbaga*. At each side of the figure's mouth is a pair of holes for suspension or —more probably— to allow the disc to be sewn to a backing. The piece is undamaged. The treatment of the central personage (with its prominent eyes and nose, toothed mouth, stumpy arms, and protruding hips) links this figure with the previous examples, but the flanking quadrupeds have no parallel elsewhere. Crests with trapezoid projections are a widespread and long-lasting motif in Panamanian iconography, but otherwise the style is completely un-Panamanian. In his catalogue entry Emmerich acknowledges the Panamanian similarities but suggests an origin for the disc in the Sinú region of Colombia. Given the place of purchase, Emmerich's guess is plausible, but leaves room for doubt.



**Fig. 8.** Embossed disc,  
private collection.

The only items with a secure provenience are illustrated in Fig. 7. All four objects came from a single tomb in the hills above Cocolí, just west of the Panama Canal. The conic clips are a common Panamanian form, but the two plaques represent, in miniature and in a somewhat aberrant style, the 'goggle-eyed personage' with all the defining characteristics — the head with down-turning elements at the sides, embossed eyes and navel, hemispherical mouth with teeth, downturned arms with no hands, and a rectangular zone separating the legs. The pottery from the tomb, if there was any, was not recorded, but other tombs in the cemetery contained vessels in the Cubitá (A.D. 500-700) and earliest part of the Conte (A.D. 700-1000) styles. This suggests contemporaneity with Playa Venado, dated ca. A.D. 500-850 (Smith-Guzmán et al. 2021).

Two further items have what may be a simplified representation of the main figure. The plaque illustrated in Fig. 8 was formerly in a private collection in the U.S.A. There is no information





**Fig. 9.** Repoussé pectoral Museo del Oro, Bogotá. O06371.. Photo Clark Manuel Rodríguez, Museo del Oro, Bogotá.

about its provenance, and its present location is unknown. The disc measures 20.3 cms in diameter, with two holes for suspension, and has an embossed design representing the face of the Goggle-Eyed Personage in schematic form. The conical eyes of the previous examples are replaced by a more rounded shape, and the downcurved elements beside the head are reduced to spirals. On its chest the figure wears an object resembling a Zenú nariguera (Falchetti 1995, Figs. 24 and 68B; Banco Popular 1992, num. 22).

Assuming it is genuine, this disc, with its multiple rounded bosses and decoration of dots around the edge, provides a link to a well-known, but stylistically anomalous, pectoral in the Museo del Oro (Fig. 9, O06371. This item is 34.6 cms. in height, nearly as large as the breast-plate in the Royal Collection. The Museum's pectoral was first described and illustrated by Pérez de Barradas (1954, Texto: 211-222, Láminas, num. 229), who gives the provenience as 'Cabeceras del Sinú', without further detail.

Although the total sample is small, these representations of the Goggle-Eyed Personage add one more category to the list of items in the International Style found in both Caribbean Colombia and Panama (Bray et al. 2021, Fig. 192). It also raises an interesting, but unanswerable, question. The fact that the details of the 'Goggle-Eyed Personage were reproduced over a vast area suggests that this icon was well known and widely accepted. But, if so, why are representations so uncommon?



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