



Golden Kingdoms

Luxury Arts in the Ancient Americas

This publication is issued on the occasion of the exhibition *Golden Kingdoms: Luxury and Legacy in the Ancient Americas*, on view at the J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Center, Los Angeles, from September 16, 2017, through January 28, 2018, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, from February 27 through May 28, 2018.

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El Caño

The necropolis at El Caño is one of the most important archaeological sites of the Coclé tradition, which flourished around Parita Bay and the Central Cordillera in Panama from AD 750 to 1000. Powerful Coclé leaders once dominated a vast area of the Río Grande valley—a savanna region bisected by the Río Grande and its floodplains, which provided fertile soils for agricultural production. Coclé leaders were buried in elaborate tombs at El Caño (fig. 67) and at nearby Sitio Conte, along with spectacular offerings of gold, shell, bone, and greenstone. Recent excavations by archaeologists from the Centro de Investigaciones Arqueológicas del Istmo de la Fundación El Caño have revolutionized our understanding of the social order of Coclé society and broadened our view of its basis of political authority. Luxury goods found on the bodies of juveniles at El Caño, for example, suggest that ancient Panamanians believed that status and perhaps even political power were inherited at birth.

When a ruler at El Caño died, his body was adorned with copper and gold regalia. After several days of celebrations, which included the ritual deaths of dozens of individuals, the deceased chief was buried along with the others in clustered burials that were arranged according to status. Funerary accoutrements, made specifically for interment, differed in number and quality, which suggests a highly stratified society. Objects included breastplates and armbands with embossed designs, ornaments of semiprecious stones, ceramics, and bundles of stingray spines and jaguar teeth. The only surface clues to the burials below are modest stone sculptures, created out of basalt columns.

El Caño tombs also provide crucial new information about Coclé conceptions of life and death. In Tomb T2 (fig. 68), the principal individual, perhaps a warrior-chief, was buried with twenty-six warriors of lesser rank, possibly representing his military unit.¹ Their bodies were laid out on symmetrical axes that framed him, a pattern

unique to the Americas. The warrior-chief was placed at the back of the group; there he was interred facedown, like the others. This arrangement probably reflects aspects of social and military protocol, such as avoiding eye contact with rulers. In Tomb T7, a rich child was buried with a group of approximately forty people, including warriors, women, and children. This extensive scene may represent the ritual death

of an elite child's entire court, laid to rest in all their finery.² Through such interments, the Coclé people could continue to perform their social roles as they journeyed with their leaders into the afterlife.

1. Mayo Torné 2015; Mayo Torné and Mayo Torné 2013; Williams 2012.
2. Mayo Torné et al. 2016.



Fig. 67. Aerial view of El Caño, Panama.



Fig. 68. Seahorse and other ornaments from the treasures of the chief, El Caño, Panama.