

# The Economist

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## BIG ENOUGH TO LEAD THE WORLD?



## Pre-Columbian culture

## Wings of gold

NEW YORK

SCIENTIFIC investigation of pre-Columbian culture in Colombia may be still in its infancy, but it is growing up fast. Two types of discoveries are pushing it forward. In 1975 archaeologists uncovered the remains of a vast urban civilisation in stone, the Lost City of the Tairona, which is now judged to be 1,500 years old and superior in ecological planning to anything built by the Incas, Aztecs or Mayas. Scholars had assumed that the aboriginal inhabitants of Colombia, lacking monumental cities and a notable hieroglyphic language, were of marginal importance in the history of the Americas. In the past decade they have been forced to change their minds.

Less spectacularly, but more regularly, exquisite gold objects keep turning up. "Sacred" pieces have been unearthed recently in both the north-western jungles and the vast eastern plains. Even an old atlas will show that Colombia had more distinct centres of high-class metal production than either northern Peru or southern Panama, and quite advanced metalwork techniques were probably developed before the fifth century BC.

A prodigious number of golden artifacts are on display in the Gold Museum in Bogotá, and an Austrian-born scholar, Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, who has been living and working in Colombia for half a century, has just published the most decisive account to date of their origin and use. In his "Goldwork and Shamanism" (Colino, \$60) he insists that pre-Columbian gold is aesthetically equal to that of the Incas and technically superior to anything in the Americas. And by drawing on the shamanistic practices of present-day Colombian tribes such as the Kogi of the Sierra Nevada, the direct ancestors of the Tairona who built the Lost City, he suggests what the true significance of the gold may have been.

To the pre-Columbians, gold was valued not as a measure of personal wealth but for its divine generational powers. It stood for a superior celestial world visited by priests in their trances, a world it was believed everyone had once been able to visit by means of a ladder. Gold meant fertility, the sun and life itself: it possessed an almost magical transforming power. The goldwork's unifying theme is the ecstatic flight of the "birdman", or shaman, from

the lower to the higher worlds, or from death to rebirth.

Concentrating as he does entirely on gold, Mr Reichel-Dolmatoff does not speculate on the possible formative importance of pre-Columbian cultures to the civilisations of Ecuador, Panama, Costa Rica or northern Peru. But the museum's curators do. When all the new scholarship is put together it may be possible, they hope, to say which culture gave rise to which. When that occurs, the spectacular "bric-a-brac" and "frippery" of pre-Columbian gold may be seen to match, or even supplant, the monumental remains of the Incas as primary evidence of high civilisation.