



# The Curassow's Crest: Myths and Symbols in the Ceramics of Ancient Panama

*Mary W. Helms*

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"This work is groundbreaking not only because of the logic behind the interpretation of ancient Panama polychrome ceramics but also because of its methodological thoroughness."--Lisa J. Lucero, New Mexico State University

The native peoples of pre-Columbian Panama are famous for their gold and ceramic artifacts. In this illustrated work Mary Helms, continuing her well-known study of symbols in early Panamanian ceramics, further decodes and interprets the cosmology of this art as depicted in the geometric forms and stylized and abstract animal figures painted on plates, trays, and bowls.

Analyzing ceramic wares dating ca. A.D. 500-1000 and excavated from the Sitio Conte in central Panama in the 1930s, Helms identifies basic design motifs and argues that they suggest a number of basic ideological themes. Often found at burial sites, including the richly furnished graves of persons of apparently high rank, the ceramics depict themes suggestive of Amerindian myths of the origins of the cosmos, its fundamental realms, and its basic operational principles. Helms's study incorporates scientific data on animals and speculates about the reasons certain animals (for example, the curassow and the iguana) were important symbols.

Because many of the designs and themes Helms discusses suggest parallels with Mexican and Mayan art and iconography and with Amazonian belief systems, and because her interpretations come from myths of the native peoples of Panama, Costa Rica, and northern South America, the scope of this important study has considerable relevance beyond Panama. Anthropologists, archaeologists, prehistorians, and art historians will find it especially useful.

Mary W. Helms, professor of anthropology at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, is the author of *Creations of the Rainbow Serpent and Access to Origins*.

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