

The “Mesuno Hoard” Revisited by Daniel Frank Sedwick

Shipwreck gold cobs are valuable and exciting items today, but in 1959 you could not give them away for much more than melt value. They had very little public interest until massive quantities of them from the 1715 Fleet off the east coast of Florida started to hit the market in the 1960s. But there was a small warm-up act before that big show, and its name was the “Mesuno Hoard” of 1636.

The first Mesuno coin to hit the market was in 1939, offered by Spink of London as a Bogotá two escudos cob “found at the shores of the Magdalena river” (for the whopping price of about £15), but sales of these coins did not begin in earnest until 20 years later, with public offerings by Schulman and Stack’s Coin Galleries in New York (for about \$50 to \$75 each), backed up by hundreds of specimens that went directly into jewelry. These were all Bogotá two escudos cobs of 1628-35* (mostly 1635, but usually without the date visible), with mintmark NR (for Nuevo Reino) and assayer A (for Alonso de Anuncibay) or P (for Miguel Pinto Camargo) when visible, and usually in choice UNC grade (what we would call Mint State today) as from a hoard originating in Colombia. It was known that the hoard was found in 1936 at a bend known as “El Mesuno” in the Magdalena River near the town of Honda in Colombia. Also called the Yuma River, the Magdalena is the longest river in Colombia, flowing northward about 950 miles through the western half of the country, navigable by ship through much of its lower reaches but plagued by shifting sand bars at the mouth of its delta. There was a short article about the “Mesuno Hoard” by C.S. Wilcox in 1943 in Stack’s *Numismatic Review*, republished by that firm in 1959, but little else was said about the hoard, and still in 1959 no one but hardcore numismatists cared about these lumpy cob coins.

The 1960s changed everything, however, with the introduction of thousands of 1715-Fleet coins to the general public and the publication of important studies by X.F. Calicó and A.M. Barriga-Villalba finally establishing a knowledge base about the early Colombian cob coinage. It soon became clear that the 1636 “Mesuno Hoard” had compelling numismatic significance, since it had provided virtually the only known specimens from the first decade of production at the Bogotá mint. When properly researched by Leopoldo Cancio starting in 1959 (culminating in a series of articles in the 1970s), the discovery of the hoard was shown to have been sloppily reported in the 1930s, mostly due to intentional obfuscation by the finders. In addition to studying hundreds of the coins from the hoard personally at the Banco de La República in Bogotá, Cancio conducted some general interest research and ferreted out the names of the finders and distributors of the coins in Colombia, among other things. But as we shall see, there was much more to the story.



Bogotá two escudos 1628 (left) and 1635 (right), both assayer A, from the Mesuno Hoard. Note the rusty stains from the original iron chest, and also note the different styles of cross.

In November of 2007 the Colombian newspaper *El Nuevo Día* published an article about the “Mesuno Hoard” with some interesting and rather dramatic revelations, which we summarize here. Entitled “Así se despilfarró el tesoro de El Mesuno,” meaning “This is how the Mesuno treasure was squandered,” the article tells how three fishermen brothers by the name of Guzmán found the hoard and rapidly depleted their profits from sales of the coins. It is basically an interview with 89-year-old Don Alfredo Gutiérrez, who in the 1930s was the best friend of the youngest of the three brothers, and it reads like a Latin American *novela*.

Gutiérrez relates that on August 22, 1936, at about noon, his friend Domingo Guzmán went down to the river to check on fishing lines. While there, he noticed something bright in the water, like the sun reflecting off a metallic surface, and jumped into the river to investigate. There he found the remains of a small iron box, inside which were more than 1600 gold cobs as well as gold chains and diadems (ornamental headbands). Domingo immediately grabbed some of the coins and then buried the treasure box on land and placed a rock to mark the location (hence the enduring myth that this was a “land hoard”). Screaming something like “We are saved! God sent us these coins!” Domingo ran to inform his two older brothers (identified by Cancio as Aristóbulo and Jorge), who apparently thought he had been eaten by a *caimán* (big alligator), since he had taken so long to return from the river.

The three brothers then rushed down to the river to the place where Domingo had buried the treasure. They divided the coins into three even parts and put them into metal cans of a type used for butter. Then they also divided the chains and diadems three ways. Gutiérrez made a comment that back then greed and jealousy were not an issue; nevertheless, before telling the news to his brothers, Domingo had secretly set aside a few cobs that he later gave to their mother.

The first thing the Guzmán brothers did with their new-found wealth was to start frequenting a *casa de citas*, literally translated as a “dating house,” a euphemism for brothel. One of the most famous brothels in an area of Honda known as the *zona tolerancia* (“tolerance zone”) was located on *Quebrada Seca* street and was owned by Tulia Manzanares (the “madam”). Every time the brothers visited the brothel, the madam called out something like: “Girls, the coin doctors are here!” As the girls sat with the brothers drinking and dancing, the brothers paid for the favors with their gold cobs, up to five per girl—about a \$10,000 value to collectors today! As the main river port in its time, and the only means of transportation between the Caribbean coast and the inland capital city of Bogotá, Honda was very prosperous and was an obligatory stop for merchants distributing goods. Englishmen, for example, could always be found there trying to negotiate the price of tobacco that was cultivated in the Department (State) of Tolima (which contained the town and municipality of Honda). The substantial foreign presence there attracted the most beautiful prostitutes from all over Colombia and around the world (particularly Italy and Cuba) to work in Honda.



A view of Honda, Tolima, with the Magdalena River in the foreground, taken in 1996.

So it seems most of the gold-cob fortune was wasted on luxuries, girls and liquor. But the article also relates a couple more subtle tales about the brothers and their gold. For one, in the middle of town the Guzmáns opened a *puesto de carne* (butcher shop), which at first sounds like a legitimate and prudent use of the money; but the truth was that, according to Gutiérrez, they sold *libra y media por el precio de una libra*, meaning 1½ pounds of meat for the price of one pound, with the presumed intention of attracting their female friends. The second “new rich” tale involved the requisition of a dozen custom-made suits for each of them to use on—wink wink—*special occasions*.

Of course not everything was drunken, carnal fun for the Guzmán brothers. The last story we hear is that they bought a car, probably with their final few Mint State “bogeys,” and drove to Medellín for more fun. Domingo eventually returned to Honda penniless and so desperate that he stole some chickens, got caught, and landed in jail for a few weeks. Still despondent after his release in the first week of February 1937, Domingo Guzmán committed suicide in dramatic fashion during the celebration of Santa Lucía by blowing himself up with a stick of dynamite in the center of town. Nobody seems to know whatever happened to his older brothers.

For this article the newspaper also contacted the Banco de La República in Bogotá, which had eventually acquired most of the gold cobs, presumably from the people who had been paid with them by the Guzmán brothers, but also from other lucky fishermen who had found some loose coins that had spilled from the original chest. (The ones found by the Guzmáns, it should be noted, were in choice condition compared to some of the loose coins.) Cancio identified two of the fisherman as José Ardila and Manuel Valdés, who sold hundreds of coins to wealthy locals Victor Guillén and David Londoño, with the bank’s permission, as it was not otherwise legal to sell the coins within the country. The Bank confirmed that today its numismatic collection still publicly displays some 500 of these gold cobs. The other 1100 or so cobs went out of the country, with the majority of the coins ending up in New York, as we have seen.

As for why the hoard was in the river in the first place, Angélica Araújo, vice director of the numismatic collection of the Banco de la República, commented that archives mention the loss of a *champán* (a large boat used in river navigation) in the Magdalena River at the time, and she believes these coins may have been a shipment to Cartagena to finance the construction of the castle of San Felipe. Since that would mean a whole ship, and not just one chest of coins, it is believed that the bulk of the treasure is still in the river, yet to be found. Perhaps of more importance to collectors now is that we can and should refer to the coins as true “shipwreck treasure,” in the sense of Spanish doubloons from a Spanish ship, and not just a “hoard” with no specific record of loss or intent. Even if we do not have a name for the ship that yielded these coins, the “Mesuno hoard” will always be important as one of the world’s largest single sources of gold cobs, and practically the only source for early Bogota two escudos.

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*The dates 1627 and 1636 are also possible from this hoard. Prior to the revelation of stylistic differences (particularly the size of the fleurs in the quadrants of the cross) between the early 1630s and the mid-1630s, it is likely that coins formerly attributed to 1630 were actually 1636, as in so many cases just the bottoms of the digits of the date are visible. And while no 1627 specimens are officially recorded for this hoard (or known at all), that date is clearly possible, as there is record of the Bogotá mint having received enough gold in December of that inaugural year to make about 750 two escudos, and also Calicó mentions the existence of an assayer-P specimen with overdate 1628/7.