

A HALLOWED PATH: AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS
OF THE MUTABLE PERSPECTIVES ON
INTERPRETATIONS OF MISSISSIPPIAN PERIOD
ICONOGRAPHY

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Abstract:

Interpreting Mississippian Period iconography has been an ongoing process for the last five hundred years. As early European explorers moved into the Southeastern United States, only the remnants of the once great Mississippian communities still held sway. Gone were the vast ceremonial complexes which exemplified the height of Mississippian culture. At their pinnacle, these people created some of the most intricate and ornate ceremonial objects in all of North America. Infused with iconographic imagery representing both naturalistic and supernatural elements, these cultural and religious objects characterized the core of the Mississippian belief system and were, in all likelihood, tied to the economic, political, and social structure of the Mississippian people. Once considered unknowable, the meaning behind these objects is now being deciphered using a multidisciplinary approach that incorporates and necessitates the views of Native and non-Native historians, art historians, folklorists, archaeologists, ethnologists, cultural anthropologists, and ethnohistorians.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Section 1 – Topic and Purpose

As early European explorers moved into the southeastern United States nearly 500 years ago, only remnants of the once great Mississippian communities still remained. Gone were the vast ceremonial complexes that exemplified the height of Mississippian culture. At their pinnacle, they created some of the most intricate and ornate ceremonial objects in all of North America. With iconographic imagery infusing both naturalistic and supernatural elements, these cultural and religious objects characterized the core of the Mississippian belief system. They were likely tied to the economic, political, and social structure of the Mississippian people, and are collectively referred to as the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex (SECC). Recent investigations, however, have led some scholars to adopt the terms Mississippian Art and Ceremonial Complex and Mississippian Ideological Interaction Sphere. This change primarily reflects researchers current understanding that Mississippian ceremony and iconography represented multiethnic elements spread well outside the geographical region referred to as the North American Southeast, and that specific iconography was used in regionally distinct ways

and stylistically different.¹ Today, the iconography is the subject of great debate by Native and non-Native historians, art historians, folklorists, archaeologists, historians, cultural anthropologists, and ethnohistorians.

Formal interpretative scholarship of Mississippian iconography is a relatively new scientific endeavor. Although scientific undertakings aimed at studying this period were underway 120 years ago, until recently, no multidisciplinary approach to the interpretation of this material formally existed. The absence of a concrete analysis was predicated on several factors: the limited availability of primary documentation linking pre-Columbian cultures to the present Native American communities that inhabited the midwestern and eastern half of the United States; lack of communication between scholars; inadequate scientific testing; and insufficient data to properly contextualize and compare the various media and localities in the Mississippian world. Technological advancements played an additional role by allowing extensive digitalization initiatives, scholarly and community outreach, high quality general public and academic oriented publications, and made travel to museums and libraries, typically the keepers of many, if not most, primary documents and pre-Columbian objects, cheaper and easier. This in turn produced a paradigm shift in scholarly attempts to interpret Mississippian culture and beliefs.

This paradigm shift has evolved over the last fifty to sixty years, yet no paper, book, or historical narrative has been produced that summarizes the methodology and

¹ F. Kent Reilly III, "People of Earth, People of Sky: Visualizing the Sacred in Native American Art of the Mississippian Period," in *Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand: American Indian Art of the Ancient Midwest and South*, ed. Richard Townsend, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 125-126. The North American Southeast stretches from Virginia to Florida and west towards Louisiana. However, similar iconographic representations have been found in the Midwestern United States and in the north, presenting a larger geographical region incorporating the North American woodlands as well. This would include states from Oklahoma up to Michigan.

change in research methods used by scholars today. This dissertation, therefore, will investigate the changing perspectives that have influenced the interpretation of Mississippian Period iconography—specifically the adoption of the multidisciplinary approach, which began in the 1960s, but has since grown with the establishment of a Mississippian Iconographic Conference held annually at Texas State University-San Marcos.

Hosted by Dr. F. Kent Reilly III, the Mississippian Iconographic Conference is devoted to the study and interpretation of the Mississippian Period. Participants to the conference include, but are not limited to, anthropologists, archaeologists, Native Americans, art historians, ethnohistorians, and folklorists. Each perspective plays a pivotal part in developing an accurate interpretation of the Mississippian people, the mounds they created, and the thousands of objects they produced in a variety of mediums, including, stone, shell, copper, and ceramic, which bear images of people, deities, deity-impersonators and events in codex like complexity. Moreover, these engraved, painted, and embossed objects provide critical insight into the cosmology and culture of the Mississippian people and today's Native American communities from the American Southeast, Great Plains, and possibly Mesoamerica.

This dissertation is divided into four primary chapters: a review of the literature, interviews with scholars from the iconography conference, a discussion regarding scholarly interpretation of the Mississippian period and iconographic interpretations prior to the introduction of a multidisciplinary approach, and a discussion of the period and the iconography using the multidisciplinary approach. As stated previously, no publication or analysis has been completed detailing the contributions of the Texas State Iconography

Conference and the unparalleled academic influences that come from it, by way of symposiums, books, articles, and academic collaborations. Moreover, this dissertation illustrates how the multidisciplinary approach has advanced the analysis and understanding of the Mississippian Period beliefs and iconography faster and more efficiently than any other approach, and at any other point in the past.

Section 2 – Early Americans

In order to recognize the material and methodology used to study iconography, it is critical to look at the cultural evolution of North American pre-Columbian cultures. The advancement of each culture, we now know, is often dependent upon environmental factors. In North America, there are nine distinct regions: Arctic, California, Great Basin, Great Plains, Northwest Coast, Plateau, Southwest, Eastern Woodlands, and the Subarctic. Each environmental zone provides archaeologists and historians a more comprehensive understanding of the people who lived in each and the factors affecting their development. The advancement of each culture depended on regions, as each provided specific resources in the subsequent ages that aided cultural growth.² Because the focus of this dissertation is the Mississippian cultures and their descendants, the relevant region and cultures are the Eastern Woodlands and Great Plains.

Ancient North American cultures living in the Eastern Woodlands and Great Plains are generally divided into four distinct time periods —Paleo-Indian, Archaic,

² C. Britt Bousman and Bradley Jay Vierra, “Chronology, Environmental Setting, and Views of the Terminal Pleistocene and Early Holocene Cultural Transitions in North America,” in *From the Pleistocene to the Holocene: Human Organization and Cultural Transformations in Prehistoric North America*, ed. C. Britt Bousman and Bradley Jay Vierra (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2012), 3.

Woodland, and Mississippian. These periods are unique unto themselves with regards to the technological, political, economic, and societal development, and include, in most cases, a transitional phase overlapping each period by several hundred years.³ Each period, like all others, ebbed and flowed, and saw cultures built upon the most effective developments of the successive period, gradually culminating in the Mississippian cultures that were encountered by early European explorers. The environments of the Eastern Woodlands and Great Plains differ greatly, yet cultures from both share ideological similarities in religious undertakings, folktales, and social structure. Therefore, modern scholars use ethnographic sources from both regions when analyzing Mississippian material culture and iconographic representations.

The first inhabitants of North America, known as Paleo-Indians, migrated into the continent via the Bering Strait Land Bridge known as Beringia. This section of land connected North America and Asia during the last Ice Age in the waning years of the Pleistocene. Conservatively, the date of this migration is thought to be 14,300 BCE, although recent archaeological data suggests it might be much earlier.⁴ Most scholars view Paleo-Indians as high-technology foragers, meaning they were nomadic and used stone tools for hunting and foraging. Roaming the continent in small groups of no more than fifty, they hunted megafauna with the aid of the Clovis point—a knapped stone with fluted grooves on either side. The Clovis point was the dominant tool of this period so most archaeologists refer to people of this period as the Clovis culture.

³ Georg K. Neumann, “Archaeology and Race in the American Indian,” in *Archaeology of Eastern United States*, ed. James b. Griffin, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 13.

⁴ Andrew Curry, “Ancient Excrement,” *Archaeology*, 61, 4 (July-August 2008): 42. This date is based on human coprolites found in Oregon and allows for a more critical assumption of human migration patterns in the Americans.

These early wanderers ventured into a rapidly changing environment. The end of the Pleistocene saw the retreat of the large glaciers and by 9,000 B.C.E, this in turn, caused the extinction of nearly all the large animal species across the North American continent. The loss of an easy food source meant early Indians were resigned to “search and encounter” hunting tactics. Some argue that this resulted in the rapid colonization of the continent.⁵ Others however, based on new archaeological information and enhanced dating techniques, reason the opposite. They are pushing back the date of colonization to a pre-Clovis period and argue for a less rapid model of colonization emphasizing the lack of known kill sites.⁶ This has also led some to speculate there was a floral based foraging strategy in place during this period. In their view, this accounts for the overall lack of kill sites and the length of time between first migration and the extinction of megafauna.⁷

Others still suggest multiple entry points into the North American continent, via Europe and the Pacific Ocean. These scholars, in some instances, argue for a date of 28,000 B.C.E, if not earlier.⁸ This is predicated on the recent archaeological finds in multiple locations in North and South America. The most widely discussed is Monte Verde, Chile, which shows human occupations sites dating to approximately 12,000 B.C.E.⁹ Other dates at this site come in at 30,000 B.C.E, but those are much more

⁵ Paul A. Delcourt and Hazel R. Delcourt, *Prehistoric Native Americans and Ecological Change: Human Ecosystems in Eastern North America Since the Pleistocene* (Cambridge, University of Cambridge Press, 2004), 142.

⁶ C. Britt Bousman and Bradley Jay Vierra, “Chronology, Environmental Setting, and Views of the Terminal Pleistocene and Early Holocene Cultural Transitions in North America,” 6-7.

⁷ Renee B. Walker and Boyce N. Driskell, “Introduction: New Developments in Paleoindian Subsistence Studies,” in *Foragers of the Terminal Pleistocene in North America*, ed. Renee B. Walker and Boyce N. Driskell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), xii.

⁸ Don Wyckoff personal communication with author at Gilcrease Museum, February, 2014. And Tom Dillehay, *Monte Verde: A Late Pleistocene Settlement in Chile Vol. 2, The Archaeological Context and Interpretation* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Scholarly Press, 1997), 34.

⁹ Dillehay, 34.

controversial. Another theory, termed the Solutrean hypothesis, proposes a pre-Clovis European migration into North America. This theory is based on flint knapping techniques and their similarities to those found in Europe. Moreover, they argue that the time frame of a “Clovis first” model doesn’t correspond to the warm interglacial period that would allow movement between Asia and the Americas.¹⁰

Regardless, the lithic material at several sites in North America indicates a refinement of tools including points, scrapers, gravers, knives, and clubs with the introduction of fire coming with the migrating groups from Asia.¹¹ Although the social structure remained egalitarian and the population did not increase, the evolution of tool manufacturing, shifts in hunting and foraging strategies, and changing environment led to the transition from this period to the Archaic. Taking place between 10,000 and 7,000 B.C.E., the shift to the Archaic Period took thousands of years. The overlapping of this date came by way of a more in-depth understanding of a regional social development and better techniques for analyzing archaeological data.¹²

The Archaic Period in North America began sometime around 9,000 B.C.E. and introduced more stationary settlements. Although the majority of people were still organized in band societies, numbering no more than fifty and still typically egalitarian, the adaption of a more sedentary settlement pattern was likely predicated on the changing environment, different food sources, and an increased population.¹³ The populace created

¹⁰ Dennis J. Stanford and Bruce A. Bradley, *Across Atlantic Ice: The Origin of America’s Clovis Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 8-10.

¹¹ Emma Lila Fundaburk and Mary Douglass Fundaburk, eds., *Sun Circles and Human Hands: The Southeastern Indian Arts and Industries* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001), 8.

¹² Bousman, C. Britt and Bradley Jay Vierra, “Chronology, Environmental Setting, and Views of the Terminal Pleistocene and Early Holocene Cultural Transitions in North America,” 1.

¹³ David G. Anderson and Kenneth E. Sassaman, “Modeling Paleoindian and Early Archaic Settlement in the Southeast: A Historical Perspective,” in *The Paleoindian and Early Archaic Southeast*, ed. David G. Anderson and Kenneth E. Sassaman (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996), 18.

one of the most distinctive features of the period known as “flint workshops” which produced more refined knives, drills, scrapers, and the atlatl. Containers were the other significant feature of this period. Called the “Container Revolution,” this term refers to the use of carved gourds and soapstone, a soft magnesium rich rock, as vessels for storing food.¹⁴ Archaeological evidence has also pointed to the existence of early pottery, though it seems to have occurred in a very limited capacity and only in certain regions. It nevertheless was a very important development showing engraved iconographic elements that seem to match historic and protohistoric imagery.¹⁵

Polished stone, pipes, blankets, jewelry, trade networks, and burials first emerged during the Archaic Period. The burials in this period were kept close to the encampments and crafted in a circular fashion. The bodies were placed in a sitting position with evidence of some of the first grave goods. It is speculated that the Archaic Period may have produced the first forms of a ceremonial complex, because objects, found in numerous graves, appear to have been intentionally broken or ceremonially “killed.”¹⁶ The relationship between this practice and a ceremonial complex is suggested because this happened at several locations. The definition of a complex in this instance is that of an exchange network and would be an important aspect of the Mississippian Period. These exchanges dispersed beliefs and religious objects throughout the eastern half of United States.

¹⁴ George R. Milner, *The Moundbuilders: Ancient Peoples of Eastern North America*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 36.

¹⁵ James R. Duncan, “Dhegihan Tattoos: Markings That Consecrate, Empower, and Designate Linage,” in *Drawing with Great Needles*, ed. Aaron Deter-Wolfe and Carol Diaz-Granados (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 200.

¹⁶ Milner, *The Moundbuilders*, 36. The symbolism of ceremonially “killing” an object is connected to death practices. The intention is to remove the living soul from the object so that it can be of further help to the deceased.

The transition into the Woodland Period occurred approximately 2,500 years ago and was characterized by six distinct features: the bow and arrow, pottery, plant domestication, extensive trade networks, mound building, and artistic renderings of real-world and supernatural characters in mounds, stone, and ceramics. Although there were numerous other inventions leading up to and culminating during this period, these six were the most unique. Like the Archaic, the Woodland Period began and ended at different times depending on the region. In some areas it ended at around 300 C.E. while others have it concluding around 1,000 C.E. This period also saw the rise of two main cultural traditions—the Adena, arising in the Ohio River Valley, and the Hopewell, appearing slightly later but extending their influence throughout the Eastern Woodlands. Both cultures influenced others throughout the East and used the technological advancements mentioned above to create new social models focused on a select group of individuals.¹⁷

The technological advancements of this period were profound. Around 200 C.E. to 500 C.E., the bow and arrow replaced the throwing spear. Introduced onto the continent by the Aleut people in northern Alaska sometime around 3,000 B.C. E., the bow and arrow slowly moved east adding increased velocity, mobility, and accuracy to the hunt.¹⁸ Pottery was also revolutionary to the people of the Woodland Period. It increased the effectiveness of storing and cooking food, and was introduced into the burial.¹⁹ Pottery usually indicates that communities are transitioning from a nomadic

¹⁷ Martin A. Byers, *The Ohio Hopewell Episode: Paradigm Lost, Paradigm Gained* (Akron: The University of Akron Press, 2004), 249.

¹⁸ Paul S. Boyer et al., *Enduring Vision: A History of the American People Volume I* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2010), 10

¹⁹ Fundaburk and Fundaburk, *Sun Circles and Human Hands*, 11.

lifestyle to a more sedentary one. The pottery of this period is also incised with zoomorphic and anthropomorphic designs. Unlike later Mississippians, the zoomorphic designs are more realistic in their appearance. The increase in ceramic use also directly corresponds to the development of crop domestication and small-scale agriculture leading to changes in social relationships (i.e. a social elite class) and religious practices.

The building of mounds possibly indicates a transitional phase from a nomadic to a sedentary lifestyle and a sophistication in religious and artistic symbology. Two general types of mounds dominate this period—burial mounds and figural mounds. The burial mounds were typically small, located near rivers, often tapered, and built directly onto the earth’s surface.²⁰ They housed between one and a dozen individuals and were located in multiple layers denoting continuous use over long periods of time.²¹ The grave goods of this period also appear to be more defined and were created with greater



Figure 1; Beaver Effigy Pipe, Hopewell Period, A.D. 200-400, Gilcrease Museum, 6124.1140.

skill. The figural mounds took the form of animals, such as Serpent Mounds in Ohio, and may have represented real creatures or been connected to supernatural beliefs.

Iconographic representation of people and mythical creatures produced in this period can likely be traced through the Mississippian era and into the historic period.²² These representations are most often seen in pipes and include real world creatures such as the frog or the beaver. Other depictions, as seen on a bone scepter found in a grave in

²⁰ Susan C. Power, *Early Art of the Southeastern Indians*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 63.

²¹ Fundaburk and Fundaburk, *Sun Circles and Human Hands*, 11.

²² Duncan, “Dhegihan Tattoos,” 200.

Illinois, are more supernatural in appearance and are likely the physical representation of an advanced religious system that continues in North America today.²³

The introduction of the Mississippian Period occurred in North America approximately 1300 years ago and was geographically located in what is today the eastern United States. These communities, like those in the previous period, built mounds, used trade networks, and used a variety of tools. However, the marked difference was the overall refinement of these items as well as the creation of cities, similar cultural, religious and iconographic forms, and a hereditary chiefdom system based around prestige goods, which separated the elite from the commoner class. The design of their ritualistic objects also became more supernatural in appearance and their characteristic flat topped mounds were produced by piling successive layers of dirt onto the mound with baskets.²⁴

The most dominant example of Mississippian culture is the city of Cahokia, located just outside of St. Louis, Missouri. This city, at its height, had a population of nearly 20,000 (making it larger than London at the time), contained 120 mounds, and stretched across five square miles.²⁵ Notable features of this site are the large woodhenge and the presence of craft workshops. Workshops indicate that the city had an artisan class who created the iconographic representation seen on various media across the eastern half of the United States. In fact, the first and most prominent style of iconographic illustrations likely took here.²⁶ Cahokia was not the only example of a large

²³ Eric Singleton, "Finding the Forgotten" (paper presented at the annual meeting for the Society for American Archaeology, Austin, Texas, 2014).

²⁴Power, *Early Art of the Southeastern Indians*, 63.

²⁵Thomas E. Emerson and R. Barry Lewis, *Cahokia and the Hinterlands: Middle Mississippian Cultures of the Midwest*, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 7. And, Power, *Early Art of the Southeastern Indians*, 72.

²⁶ James A. Brown, personal communication at the Texas State Iconography Workshop, May 19, 2013.

city with giant mounds. Etowah in Georgia, Moundville in Alabama, and Spiro in Oklahoma, were large community centers as well and played pivotal roles in the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex. Each of these cities contained a large population base, a religious and political hierarchy, and used iconography to express its understanding of the world.

Other communities developed throughout the East and Southeast, varying in size and scale, and were connected directly through religious beliefs and iconographic representations.²⁷ According to Richard Townsend, Curator of African and Indian Art of the Americas at the Art Institute of Chicago, “the way these societies were organized and functioned followed the way they perceived the design and rhythms of the world around them”²⁸ These people envisioned a direct connection to the life forces of plants and animals, rivers and mountains, earth and sky, and life and death. These beliefs, shared by nearly all Mississippian groups, was further tied to their understanding of the



Figure 2; An artist's depiction of Monks Mound as found within the interpretive center at Cahokia Mounds State Park.

²⁷ Power, *Early Art of the Southeastern Indians*, 64.

²⁸ Richard F. Townsend, “American Landscapes, Seen and Unseen,” in *Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand: American Indian Art of the Ancient Midwest and South*, ed. Richard F. Townsend (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 20.

supernatural world. The structure of both worlds was expressed in terms of a celestial dome. This held that the earth was surrounded by a primordial sea, the sky, and the watery underworld. Embedded within it, was an understanding of the dualistic representation of the cosmos; life and death, and day and night, where the tensions of the natural world, or living world, was balanced against the above and beneath worlds. Most iconography was based on this cosmological structure and the supernatural beings, both human and animal, that inhabited it.²⁹ The arrangement of the society was then divided between the elite that held this knowledge and the general community.

The Mississippian Period produced agriculturally based communities that deified their leaders and created cults to distinguish the various roles within society. Three main cults emerged: an elite warfare-cosmology cult, a communal agricultural fertility cult, and a priestly mortuary cult.³⁰ The elite warfare cult used artifacts that had symbolic displays such as animals, weapons, and supernatural forms of both humans and animals. The communal cult focused on the earth and agriculture, and the mortuary cult directed ancestor worship and funerary rights. The structure of the community was tied to all three but “the priestly mortuary cult served to mediate between the warfare-cosmology cult that sanctified chiefly authority and the communal fertility-world purification cult.”³¹ With regard to the ruling elite, many of the iconic artifacts found are thought to reinforce political power in that “control (and possession) of political symbols [and religious artifacts] would have played a crucial role in the social relations among individuals

²⁹ F. Kent Reilly III, “People of Earth, People of Sky,” 127.

³⁰ John F. Scarry, *Political Structure and Change in the Prehistoric Southeastern United States* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 15.

³¹ *Ibid.*

within Mississippian societies.”³² Communal relationships were therefore reinforced through an understanding of the natural and cosmological universe, centered on society’s understanding of the celestial dome and how people and deities factored into it. Signs of these different cults have been found across the eastern United States in various communities and are traced via the iconography.

Archaeological evidence indicates cities during this era undertook large-scale warfare with the likely purpose of extorting tribute creating a dependence-based system.³³ The Chief reigned supreme. All others, including elites, demonstrating subservience. Succession to the throne came only through natural succession or uprising. The common man could never become a Chief.³⁴ The most apparent distinction between these classes appears to be access to high status goods—both raw and exotic material and finished products crafted at specialized workshops in large cultural centers—such as copper, stone, shell, and ceramic. These high-status goods are seen throughout the Eastern Woodlands. Their similar iconographic designs, as opposed to the quality of the rendering, suggested a system of trade networks or the creation of a “cult”, identified in 1945 by Antonio Waring and Preston Holder as the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex. Often referenced as the “Southern Cult,” this complex stretched across the eastern half of North America and possibly into Central America. Documented in multiple early historical sources, this established power structure was still in place when the Spanish arrived in North America.

³² Ibid.

³³ David Dye, “Feasting with the Enemy: Mississippian Warfare and Prestige-Goods circulation,” in *Native American Interactions: Multiscalar Analyses and Interpretations in the Eastern Woodlands*, ed. Michael S. Nassaney and Kenneth E. Sassaman (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 289.

³⁴ Elizabeth M. Brumfiel and John W. Fox, *Factional Competition and Political Development in the New World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 63.

The location where all the varied and regionally distinct iconographic objects meet is Spiro. Discovered in the early 1900s, Spiro is, undoubtedly, the most unique Mississippian political and ceremonial center in North America. Located in the southeastern corner of Oklahoma in LeFlore County, Spiro rose around 800 C.E. as a small village but soon expanded into one of the largest cities in prehistoric North America. Twelve mounds were built in the city's center to facilitate religious rituals and political elitism. The city also developed large trade networks, evidenced by recovered goods identified as being from California, Lake Superior, and Mesoamerica.³⁵ Spiro's collapse came around 1450 C.E. following a "Little Ice Age," which began sometime around 1350 C.E. This site allows scholars to look at differing iconographic styles in a single location and provides a context for interpreting their usage and symbology. Because of this, Spiro and Spiroan material will be a focal point of this analysis.

The artistic complex created by the Mississippian people is related to the social and religious makeup of the culture and served to separate elites from commoners. Based on a wealth of archaeological information, scholars now see a multifaceted hierarchical social system with prestige goods correlating to Mississippian religious views. These views coalesce around common anthropomorphic and zoomorphic imagery in various media found throughout the Eastern Woodlands and in common religious and social settings. Based on the scale of this religious ideology and the social and political structure of the cities in the region, many archaeologists conclude that the Mississippian Period was the height of Native American cultural development in North America.

³⁵ F. Kent Reilly III, personal communication over the phone, June 15, 2015.

Section 3 – Methodology

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the evolution of thought regarding the analysis of Mississippian culture and iconography. Today, this journey has produced a holistic approach known as the San Marcos School of Interpretation. Established at the Texas State University Center for the Arts and Symbolism in Ancient America, this methodology argues that a firm multidisciplinary approach rooted in historical and ethnographical research and juxtaposed with scientific testing and a stringent methodology can determine the use and meaning behind the symbolic art forms seen in a variety of Mississippian materials. Applying this tactic, scholars are making great leaps forward toward understanding the belief practices shared by ancient groups throughout the eastern half of the United States. Artisans recorded beliefs via religious and prestige goods made from diverse materials. In each of these forms, the ancient Mississippians carved, engraved, embossed, and molded stylized representations of real-world and supernatural figures. When used by elites, these ritualistic objects revealed the historical, religious, and allegorical nature of their society.

However, an understanding of the multidimensional connectedness was not always evident, so previous generations of scholars interpreted this material within the context of their own disciplinary framework, and with limited to no access to scientific testing and modern resources, such as conferences, books, the internet, and digitized museum collections. Highlighting this problem, in a particularly eye-opening manner is Dr. Vernon J. Knight, one of the leading members of the iconography conference, who comments that

The iconography of ancient images is a peculiar area of scholarship, and not one with a stellar reputation. Its literature is relatively disorganized. Its important concepts are published in scattered places. At the moment, the field has no primary journal...[and at times] “it results in some of the worst archaeology on record.”³⁶

Although this assessment of the field is particularly harsh, it does indicate the need for sturdy foundational document that addresses the changes that have occurred, why they were needed, and to address where the field stands today. These issues necessitate a look at how the field came to be—its foundation, its evolution, the methodology, and the material it examines.

As this is an historical study of the changing nature regarding the interpretation of Mississippian period ceremonial material, it is important to quickly address the principle mediums, copper, ceramic, stone, and marine shell, used within the field and discussed repeatedly in this study. These four material types remain separated from other trade goods based on four characteristics: they were valued goods; they were traded over long distances; they show craft specialization; and they incorporate the use of common imagery over large regional areas.³⁷ Other trade items fit several of these conditions, but not all four. For instance, chert stone hoes were perhaps the most widely traded item in the late pre-historic era, but they do not have iconography and are not typically found in elite contexts.³⁸ Knowing this, scholars can investigate the source of material and the trade routes that moved raw and finished goods between communities. They can archaeologically determine who held these items, in life and death, and they can use

³⁶ Vernon James Knight, Jr., *Iconographic Method in New World Prehistory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), xi-xii.

³⁷ Kathleen L. Ehrhardt, “Copper Working Technologies, Contexts of Use, and Social Complexity in the Eastern Woodlands of Native North America,” *Journal of World Prehistory*, 22, 3 (2009): 214.

³⁸ Charles R. Cobb, “Mississippian Chiefdoms: How Complex?,” in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 2 (2003): 70.

historical, ethnological and oral accounts to determine what the objects symbolized. Consequently, in order to understand the historical evolution of iconographic analysis, it is critical to understand the chronology and the material being investigated.

Of all the naturally occurring material available, copper was the most widely used metal in ancient North America with a history of use dating back nearly 7,000 years.³⁹ From the Archaic Period onward, it surpassed gold, lead, and meteoric iron as the metal of choice and was mined in three principle locations in the Eastern Woodlands—Lake Superior, the Appalachian Mountains, and Nova Scotia. Of these, the Lake Superior mines are the largest. In fact, they are the largest deposits in the world with at least 5,000 ancient mines presently identified.⁴⁰ Investigations of Mississippian copper indicate it was cold hammered with no discernable indications of smelting, melting, or the use of alloys. In addition, it was used as a medium of exchange and seen as far south as Florida and as far west as Oklahoma. Copper is connected to the other media as well through its imagery and use as a prestige good. Unlike ceramic and stone, copper was used in conjunction with other material in an artistic fashion to enhance the artifacts being created, for example, as an overlay on wooded objects including masks, plates, and spearheads.

³⁹ Gregory D. Lattanzi, "The Provenance of Pre-Contact Copper Artifacts: Social Complexity and Trade in the Delaware Valley," *Archaeology of Eastern North America*, 35 (2007): 126.

⁴⁰ Ehrhardt, "Copper Working Technologies," 217-218.

For the most part, however, copper was used in the pre-Columbian world to create axe heads, ear spools, gorgets, awls, and other items. The bulk of the copper iconographic items from the Mississippian Period were repoussé plates. These plates bear images of a falcon, *Birdman* (half bird/half man), weeping eye motifs, bi-lobed arrow motifs, warriors with headdresses, and countless other depictions. Early archaeologically excavated copper from mound builder sites as early as the 1800s. Found primarily in burial and religious contexts, copper plates reflect a widespread cult ideology that



Figure 3; Copper Birdman Plate, National Museum of National History, A91113.

appears to underpin the belief structure of the eastern half of the United States. Although today archaeologists realize that regional variations arose, the recovered copper plates indicate that at least an underlying shared cultural, religious, or political hierarchy and trade system existed which spread this material from Cahokia to other major ceremonial centers.⁴¹ Scientific dating of associated copper items from Spiro specifically, but also Etowah, reinforce the regional chronology of their creation and dispersion, the idea of a wide-reaching trade system, the Cahokian origins of its manufacturing, and the idea of “antiquing” or curation of artifacts.⁴²

⁴¹ James A. Brown, “The Cahokian Expression: Creating Court and Cult,” in *Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand: American Indian Art of the Ancient Midwest and South*, ed. Richard F. Townsend (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 118.

⁴² James A. Brown and J. Daniel Rogers, “AMS dates on Artifacts of the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex from Spiro,” *Southeastern Archaeology*, 18, 2 (1999): 135. Antiquing refers to the long-term usage of an item or the changed usage of a specific item formally used in a different capacity.

Excavations at Cahokia indicate the presence of craft workshops in connection with a political elite power structure. The iconographic objects, including copper plates, are in this capacity “regarded as an embodiment of spiritual power. Chiefly elites had a strong incentive to invest resources in visual symbolism: the more goods produced and the more intense the artistic achievement, the greater the impression of their accumulated power.”⁴³ Cahokian power was transferred to other satellite cities, namely Spiro, Etowah, and Moundville, “with the exchange of copper plates [being] the key to this political connection.”⁴⁴ The determination of Cahokia as the principle creator of this material is predicated on a specific iconographic style formed at the site. This style is known as Braden and was identified and expounded upon by Philip Phillips and James A. Brown in their six-volume book, *Pre-Columbian Shell Engraving from the Craig Mounds at Spiro, Oklahoma*. This epic work used the large quantities of engraved shell cups and gorgets found at Spiro to determine that incised iconographic depictions could be divided into 6 separate categories—Braden A, Braden B, Braden C, Craig A, Craig B, and Craig C. These categories were later traced via time and space to show the evolution of the craft and its dispersion from Cahokia. Further research now indicates that Braden originated at Cahokia while Craig sprung from Spiro or the surrounding communities.

Ceramic is the most common artistic medium of the four. Predominantly utilitarian and manufactured by women, pottery usage dates to the Archaic Period. It provided storage for food, vessels for cooking, and a means for transporting other items.⁴⁵

⁴³ Brown, “The Cahokian Expression” pg. 117.

⁴⁴ Brown, “The Cahokian Expression” pg. 119.

⁴⁵ Judith A. Habichet-Mauche, “Women on the Edge: Looking at Protohistoric Plains-Pueblo Interactions from a Feminist Perspective,” in *The Oxford Handbook of North American Archaeology*, ed. Timothy R. Pauketat (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 392.

Archaeologically, ceramics provide a wealth of information concerning a specific community. Within them, trained scholars see snapshots of daily life, recognize the collapse and revival of sites, and establish immigration patterns by identifying certain styles and designs, as well as tempering and firing techniques.⁴⁶

Separated from the utilitarian ceramics are painted and engraved vessels bearing ritualistic symbols found in temples, mounds, and burials. Like copper, these items are investigated for their connection to prehistoric people's religious ideology. Charles C. Willoughby, in his article "Analysis of the Decorations Upon Pottery from the Mississippi Valley," produced one of the first ethnographical papers on ceramic iconographical elements identifying sun and wind motifs used by cultures in the historic period.⁴⁷ His research is studied by scholars today who investigate the quality of design and the various complicated shapes—including human heads, animals, and female effigies, tripod vessels, and countless other designs. Specific religious and mythical figures appear as well, such as the *Old Woman Who Never Dies*, the *Piasa* (a mythical underworld panther or serpent creature), and include various tattooing and scarification symbols. The high quality of these vessels once again indicates a craft specialization and places these objects into an elite context.

⁴⁶ Susan M. Alt, "Making Mississippian at Cahokia," in *The Oxford Handbook of North American Archaeology*, ed. Timothy R. Pauketat (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 501.

⁴⁷ Willoughby, C.C., "An Analysis of the Decorations upon Pottery from the Mississippi Valley," in *The Journal of American Folklore* 10, 36 (Jan-Mar, 1897): 19.

Of all the Mississippian cultural areas, Caddo ceramics stand out as the most refined. As noted by John Swanton, “in Caddo ceramics the art of the Southeast easily reached its apex, for while there are specimens of pottery from the Middle Mississippi region and Moundville which show as high technical excellence, there are none that, upon the whole, exhibit equal artistic feeling.”⁴⁸ In this regard, Swanton could not be more correct. These ceramic vessels appear to be the most artistically advanced and yet still maintain the iconographic elements seen throughout the rest of the Mississippian world.



Figure 4; Female Effigy Jar, Possibly Old Woman who Never Dies, Mississippian Period, A.D. 1300 – 1500, Detroit Institute of Arts, 1991.115.

Stone is the third medium to be discussed. Archaeological excavations, as well as surface finds, yield stylized objects in countless forms using multiple types of rock. Of all the stone types, two stand out—limestone and flint clay. These rocks are similar in that specific quarry sites are identifiable via geological analysis. Beyond that, they share no discernable qualities. Limestone is a light colored sedimentary rock composed of fossilized marine organic, while flint clay is a red colored sedimentary crystalline clay rock made from a mineral known as kaolinite.⁴⁹ Each are found in locations across the

⁴⁸ John R. Swanton, “Source Material on the History and Ethnology of the Caddo Indians,” in *Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 132* (Washington: D.C. Government Printing Office, 1942), 159.

⁴⁹ W.D. Keller, “Flint Clay and a Flint-Clay Facies,” in *Clays and Clay Minerals*, 16 (1968): 114. For bib 113-128.

globe, but are identified using visual and scientific testing. As described by Vincas P. Steponaitis,

Sorting out mixtures often requires provenance studies, which link the raw materials in these objects to particular geological sources. Geological provenance, especially when combined with geographical data and stylistic comparisons, can provide powerful evidence for where Mississippian objects were actually made and thereby can give us a clearer view of the patterns of craft production and distribution in ancient times.⁵⁰

Local styles are determined by looking at male and female statuary, underworld creatures, mythical warriors, assorted birds of prey, and various other effigies then comparing those images to distinct regional manifestations.⁵¹ Many, but not all, were used as pipes—although there is some indication that, with the flint clay figures, certain items were likely temple statues before being transformed into pipes. This is evidenced by their construction and corresponding chisel marks on the base of certain statues.⁵²

Like many Mississippian iconographic mediums and styles, these pipes, specifically the flint clay, were likely constructed at Cahokia in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, if not earlier, and in the previously mentioned Braden style. Their use as a religious and/or elite good continued for nearly 200 years before being antiqued and transferred south to Spiro, where they were buried, along with thousands of other items including copper, ceramics, stone, shell, textiles, and



Figure 5; Flint Clay Pipe, Morning Star Figure, Mississippian Period, ca. A.D. 1250, University Arkansas.

⁵⁰ Vincas P. Steponaitis and David T. Dockery III, “Mississippian Effigy Pipes and the Glendon Limestone.” *American Antiquity*, 76, 2 (2011): 345.

⁵¹ Vincas P. Steponaitis and David T. Dockery III, “Effigy Pipes,” 346.

⁵² F. Kent Reilly III, personal communication at Gilcrease Museum, June 2014.

basketry.⁵³ Embedded within these pipes are stories. As described by Reilly, the large flint clay pipes likely told at least one element of the three overlapping myth cycles of the Mississippian people: “the Morning Star Cycle, The Earth and Fertility Cycle, and the Path of Souls.”⁵⁴ These pipes might also have been changed, given specific tattoos, painted designs, or used as actors in a ritualistic context other than their original purpose. This is evidenced by “secondary” marking covering the pipe that do not match the original artistic creation, yet show patterning and match historic tattooing and skin drawing seen in a painting of Mató-Tópe (Four Bears) by Karl Bodmer.⁵⁵



Figure 6; Mató-Tópe, Adorned with the insignia of his warlike deeds. By Karl Bodmer.

Shell is perhaps the most well-known and well-researched Mississippian iconographic medium. This is likely due to the large volume of shell unearthed at various sites. Dependent on type, shell can be formed into beads, left uncarved, or engraved with religious symbols and were likely used as adornment, in elite and religious contexts, or as a monetary system.⁵⁶ Archaeological excavations indicate people as far back as the Archaic Period used a variety of freshwater and oceanic shells from across the United States including California, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Atlantic Ocean.⁵⁷

⁵³ James A. Brown and F. Kent Reilly III, personal communication at Gilcrease Museum, June 2014.

⁵⁴ F. Kent Reilly III. “People of Earth, People of Sky: Visualizing the Sacred in Native American Art of the Mississippian Period,” 126.

⁵⁵ Eric Singleton, “Finding the Forgotten” (paper presented at the annual meeting for the Society for American Archaeology, Austin, Texas, 2014).

⁵⁶ Guy Prentice, “Marine Shells as Wealth Items in Mississippian Societies,” in *Midcontinental Journal of Archaeology*, 12, 2 (1987): 194.

⁵⁷ Cheryl Claassen and Samuella Sigmann, “Sourcing Busycon Artifacts of the Eastern United States,” *American Antiquity*, 58, 2 (Apr. 1993): 335. For bib pp 333-347.

The type of marine shell usually seen in drinking vessels and gorgets is from the genus *Busycon* and comes from either the shores of Vera Cruz or the Florida Keys. To determine the place of origin and their value within ancient societies, researchers conduct species analysis using modern scientific testing. By knowing their place of origin, scholars determined trade routes and spheres of influence.⁵⁸ Correspondingly, researchers look at their use as either an elite or utilitarian good, commonly determine by what type of object it is, whether or not it has been engraved, and finally its archaeological context—whether it was found in a temple, mound, burial, or home. As far back as the 1880s, researchers were investigating shell engraving techniques and found that “any one [sic] who thinks lightly of such a work undertake, without machinery or well-adapted appliances, to cut a groove or notch even, in a moderately compact specimen of *Busycon*, and he will probably increase his good opinion of the skill and patience of the ancient workman.”⁵⁹ The difficulty of engraving likely made it a specialized craft and the particular symbol carved onto it indicating its role, “including ornamentation, wealth, marking statues, and as ritual paraphernalia.”⁶⁰



Figure 7; Engraved Shell Cup, National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, 18/9121.

⁵⁸ Claassen and Sigmann, “Sourcing Busycon Artifacts of the Eastern United States,” 340. Testing is now indicating that the bulk of whelk shells now comes from the Florida Keys, it is difficult to determine the origin of all shells.

⁵⁹ William Henry Holmes, “Art in Shell of the Ancient Americans,” in *Second Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Offices, 1883), 286.

⁶⁰ Mary Beth D. Trubitt, “The Production and Exchange of Marine Shell Prestige Goods.” *Journal of Archaeological Research*, 11. 3 (September 2003): 243.

Today, researchers conduct residue analysis on the interior of the shell drinking vessels to look for what was stored inside. A recent study, conducted in 2014 at Gilcrease Museum, in Tulsa OK, showed evidence of *Datura*, a flower that produces hallucinogenic alkaloids.⁶¹ This residue further reinforces their usage as prestige and religious goods. Similar tests on ceramic vessels as well as marine shell reinforced the iconographic connection between symbols and media. As described by the authors of the study, “our operating assumption was that bottles and symbolically loaded vessels were likely to contain special liquids in the past...[and] that shell cups, made from the outer whorl of whelk shells, were used as dippers for serving and consuming ritual beverages.”⁶² The genesis of this investigation was predicated on historical sources describing the ritual use of shell cups in Native American ceremonies for the consumption of Black Drink.⁶³

In the end, a scholarly understanding of pre-Columbian imagery created on copper, ceramic, stone, and shell is not possible without both an understanding of the ethnographic literature and archaeological context. Both combine to bring forth an understanding of the past, which is utterly lost without the other. For the last 500 years, both scholars and laymen have grappled with the origins of mounds, the cultures that built them, and the iconographic representations engraved, embossed, or otherwise added to exotic material found throughout the North American Southeast. This dissertation,

⁶¹ Adam King, Terry G. Powis, and Kong F. Cheong, “Absorbed Residue Evidence for Prehistorical *Datura* Use in the American Southeast and Western Mexico,” Unpublished paper, Manuscript to be submitted to *Advances in Archaeological Practices*, 1.

⁶² King, Powis, and Cheong. “Absorbed Residue Evidence for Prehistorical *Datura* Use in the American Southeast and Western Mexico,” 3.

⁶³ Jerald T. Milanich, “Origins and Prehistoric Distributions of Black Drink and the Ceremonial Shell Drinking Cup,” in *Black Drink: A Native American Tea*, ed. Charles M. Hudson (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 84.

therefore, traces the evolution of both ethnographical and archaeological research to show how only through a multidisciplinary approach is it possible to understand the esoteric meaning behind Mississippian Period iconography.

CHAPTER II

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE MOUNDS

Section 1 – Mutable Perspectives

The documentation, investigation, and analysis of mounds and associated iconographic material began with the arrival of European explorers, traders, and missionaries in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Early explorers, from Hernando de Soto and Juan Pardo in the sixteenth century to William Bartram in the eighteenth century, explored the Southeastern United States and wrote about the Mississippian people and their cultural descendants. Documented primarily in personal journals, these early descriptions detail the physical structures of villages and the social practices of the people they encountered. However, disease, conquest, and displacement soon eliminated nearly all remnants of the Mississippian culture, and therefore any potential scholarly endeavor to document the in situ structures of Mississippian life.

Arising from the older Mississippian cultural traditions were new Native American communities defined today by the Cherokee, Muscogee, Choctaw, Caddo, Pawnee, Sioux, and Osage to name just a few. However, with these nations' acculturation, connections to early Mound Builders were forgotten. This gave rise to fanciful speculation by nineteenth-century Americans regarding the construction of

Mississippian communities and led to a congressional mandate in 1882 to determine who made the mounds in the Eastern, Midwestern, and Southern United States. Spearheaded by Cyrus Thomas, who worked for the Bureau of Ethnology (later the Bureau of American Ethnology, BAE), the government soon showed a conclusive link between Mississippian mound builders and living Native Americans. However, scholars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as John Swanton, a student of Franz Boas, did not focus on these connections. Consequently, limited results were yielded as early ethnologists and archaeologists inadequately investigated Mississippian cultural and religious elements against historical literature and contemporary native nations and their beliefs. Yes, Mississippians were the ancestors of many modern Native Americans, but did they share the same views which could enable scholars to interpret Mississippian belief structures? Unfortunately, these well-respected ethnologists preferred to study Native nation's pristine characteristics rather than dive into their prehistorical roots.⁶⁴ Therefore, highly focused investigations of cultural connections between contemporary native Southeastern peoples and the prehistoric Mississippians did not fully arise until the late 1960s when archaeologists and anthropologists began working with historians and heavily integrating ethnographic literature and historical documents into their scholarship.

⁶⁴ Thomas J Pluckhahn, et. al., introduction to *Light on the Path: The Anthropology and History of Southeastern Indians* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 5. And Robbie Ethridge, *Creek Country: Creek Indians and their World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 111. Swanton pioneered the use of historical literature to investigate the pristine characteristics of Native cultures going back to de Soto. However, Swanton operated under the anthropological concept of "ethnographic present" assuming that Native American cultural beliefs had not changed but rather entered a state of decline.⁶⁴ Many scholars today argue that this method is flawed because it does not account for acculturation during the 18th and 19th centuries. Instead, they believe that the historical literature must be a baseline for comparing the archaeological data of the prehistoric period to the ethnographic sources of the present.

In the 1960s, scholars began documenting the cultural traits and religious beliefs through a more holistic approach. They recorded, interpreted, and integrated the historical and prehistorical traditions of Southeastern Indians by juxtaposing historical, ethnohistorical, and anthropological research. This new way of interpreting data came from the Annale School of thought—an idea that is still highly valued in Southeastern Native American studies today. These new scholars incorporated the oral traditions and mythology of contemporary Southeastern Indians which directly corresponded to archaeological investigations of Mississippian sites excavated under the government's Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Works Project Administration (WPA) initiative. Today though, there is still a great deal that is not understood, and archaeological excavations and ethnohistorical analysis still raise questions concerning the nature of native Southeastern beliefs and the iconographic representations of their objects. Consequently, a great deal more scholarship is necessary to properly understand and interpret these cultures and the objects they valued.

These questions, ultimately, led to the formation of the Texas State Iconography workshop in San Marcos. Created by F. Kent Reilly III, it has since maintained a working group of scholars from a variety of fields including anthropology, history, art history, ethnology, and folklore. With the aid of Native Americans, this group works to decipher the iconographic engravings on copper, stone, ceramic, and shell objects found in, and around, the Eastern Woodlands and North American Great Plains. Rooted in ethnology, but balanced against history and archaeology, this workshop has significantly advanced the interpretation of these objects.

Section 2 - Trappers, Traders, Explorers, and Statesmen

Pre-contact Native populations living in North America did not have a written language that can be studied. They relied on oral traditions to communicate and impart their religion, mythology, and history to countless generations. Subsequently, we are left only with European interpretations from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to explain and interpret the culture's religious practices and beliefs. Personal journals and governmental records of Spanish, English, and French explorers and colonizers represent the earliest documented evidence of the Mississippian people, and are the foundation of the historiography regarding their culture and iconography. This period can then be viewed as a baseline for modern scholars who study pre-Columbian cultures.⁶⁵

As valuable as these early documents are, they are not without their problems. For the first Europeans, this was a period of exploration, trade, and settlement, nothing more. There was no archaeology, no mound excavations, and speculation regarding the nature of ancient structures was not even considered. These early sources were purely descriptive and contained a great deal of bias. This absence of reliable data has always created a problem for modern researchers. Scholars today are thus dependent upon heavily prejudiced early narratives and modern archaeological excavations to aid them in unraveling the ancient North American past. Another complication is the overall lack of records, and those that do exist are difficult to research. Therefore, this early period has been largely overlooked by modern historians and scholars. As Charles Hudson and Carmen Tesser point out in the introduction of their book, *The Forgotten Centuries*:

⁶⁵ Patricia K. Galloway, "Ethnohistory," in *The Development of Southeastern Archaeology*, ed. Jay K. Johnson. (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1993), 81.

Indians and Europeans in the American South 1521-1704, “this is a forgotten period of American history...[yet] this should not obscure the fact that these historical documents contain priceless information about social and cultural worlds that existed in the past.”⁶⁶ Hidden within the accounts of men, such as Hernández de Biedma, a chronicler on the Hernando de Soto expedition, Tristán de Luna, who attempted to colonize Florida, and Juan Pardo, a Spanish explorer who founded the first European settlement in North Carolina, are the only observations of ancient Mississippian people.

Of all the early European accounts, the earliest is that of Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto. Currently, there are four known versions of his nearly three-year journey through the North American south, but the only first-hand description is that of Luis Hernández de Biedma. As a document, it is a remarkable eye-witness account of the expedition. Unfortunately, the account is also known for its pithiness. What makes it particularly interesting is the neutral tone of the expedition and the lack of first-person descriptions. This dispassionate approach and lack of narrative may reflect Biedma’s role as a government chronicler and enhance its accuracy with regards to descriptions. Presented to the Spanish government following the expedition, this detached account avoids the many pitfalls of other histories from this period and focuses entirely on the daily endeavors of the expedition as well as “describing the towns, types of dwellings, and the local economy,” something that is usually lacking in personal narratives.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Charles Hudson and Carmen Chaves Tesser, introduction to *The Forgotten Centuries: Indians and Europeans in the American South 1521-1710*, ed. Charles Hudson and Carmen Chaves Tesser (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 2.

⁶⁷ Ida Altman, “An Official’s Report: The Hernández de Biedma Account,” in *The Hernando de Soto Expedition: History, Historiography, and “Discovery” in the Southeast*, ed. Patricia Galloway (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 5.

Complementing Biedma's account of the de Soto expedition is Garcilaso de la Vega's 1605 account titled *La Florida Del Ynca* or *The Florida of the Inca*. Calling himself "Inca", de la Vega, was a Spanish chronicler born in Peru in 1539 to a Spanish aristocrat and a Peruvian mother. Seeking fame, but denied his inheritance due to his mixed heritage, de la Vega moved to Spain and became a writer.⁶⁸ While there, he met one of de Soto's veterans. A much more detailed work than that of Biedma, this narrative of the de Soto expedition by de la Vega describes the layout of the villages he encountered.

They build such sites with the strength of their arms, piling up very large quantities of earth and stamping on it with great force until they form a mound from twenty-eight to forty-two feet in height. Then on top of these places they construct flat surfaces which are capable of holding ten, twelve, fifteen, or twenty dwellings of the lord and his family.⁶⁹

Although this was not a first-hand account, the work was taken from actual participants of the de Soto expedition. Other descriptive elements of the publication include discussions of the landscape and the similarities of people, practices, and weaponry of the area.

Because of the complexity of accessing and studying first-hand primary documents from this period—many are in Spain—contemporary translations of these journeys and early writings are still published today and can be easily consulted. They contain a great deal of data on social structures, religion, and daily life in post-Mississippian villages and have the added benefit of archaeological and ethnographic

⁶⁸ Irving Leonard, "Review of The Florida of the Inca," review of *The Florida of the Inca*, by Garcilaso De La Vega, trans. and ed. John Grier Varner and Jeanette Johnson Varner (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1951), in *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, 31, No. 4 (Nov., 1951), 686. doi: 10.2307/2509371

⁶⁹ John Grier Varner and Jeannette Johnson Varner, trans. and ed., *The Florida of the Inca by Garcilaso de la Vega* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1951), 171.

context. The most notable of these numerous works are Jerald Milanich's *The Hernando de Soto Expedition* (1991), which contains translations of the four accounts of the de Soto expedition; Charles Hudson's *The Juan Pardo Expeditions: Explorations of the Carolinas and Tennessee, 1566-1568*; and Herbert Priestley's *The Luna Papers: Documents Relating to the Expedition of Don Tristan de Luna y Arellano for the Conquest of Florida in 1559-1561*.

Complementing the written descriptions are numerous artistic renderings of mound sites and cultures. The earliest of these comes from Jacques Le Moyne, who in 1564, was part of a French expedition that moved into Florida. From this excursion Moyne produced a series of watercolors and drawings, showing Native Americans of this region in a multitude of traditional settings. One of these images, seen in the accompanying image, shows a burial mound in the early stages of construction and is likely the first visual

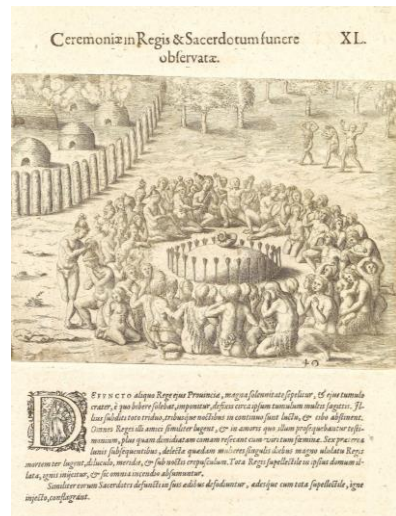


Figure 8; Ceremonies at the death of a chief or priest. By Jacques Le Moyne, 1564, Jacksonville Public Library.

depiction of a Mississippian mound being constructed.⁷⁰ The other images, which were made into engravings by Theodore de Bry in 1591, were of landscapes, plants, and people. De Bry was famous for his engravings. In addition to Moyne, he included watercolors by John White, an artist and Governor of the Roanoke colony. White's images show villages, burial customs, ceremonial dances as well as hunting and fishing scenes. De Bry's engravings of people have recently been researched because they are

⁷⁰ Robert Silverberg, *The Mound Builders of Ancient America: The Archaeology of a Myth* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1968), 25-26.

the first illustrations of tattooing in North America. This is important, because tattoos are seen not only on people but have recently been recognized on flint clay statues, ceramics, and on shell cups and gorgets helping iconographers better understand the meaning and personages being depicted.

For the next half a century, there was almost no written documentation detailing the indigenous cultures of the area. The earliest came in 1608, when Captain John Smith published his first letter from Virginia. Seven more publications followed and included accounts of his encounters with Native people of the area. The most notable of Smith's publications appeared in 1624 with the printing of journals titled *The General Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles*. Although some scholars doubt certain events described by Smith, it is nevertheless an early account of Native peoples from the period and was highly celebrated at the time of publication.⁷¹ A recent edited volume from Philip Barbour, *The Complete Works of Captain John Smith (1580-1631)*, complements the original work of John Smith by examining his accounts to determine their validity.



Figure 9; Indian in body paint, Watercolor. By John White, ca. 1585.

Other European powers, such as the French, were pushing into North America as well, providing additional early sources of encounters with explications of Native American practices and beliefs. One of the earliest is from Fr. Gabriel Sagard-Theodat.

⁷¹ Captain John Smith, *The General Historie of Virginia*. American Journeys Collection: Wisconsin Historical Society. 2003, accessed June 15, 2015. <http://www.americanjourneys.org/pdf/AJ-082.pdf>.

Written in 1615, *Histoire du Canada*, recounts Sagard-Theodat's experiences moving through Canada with an emphasis on tattooing among various tribes including the Huron, Montagnais, Iroquois, Souriquois, and Algonquin. In it, he talks about the images tattooed on the body and face of men and women, and how it was accomplished. "They take a bone of bird or fish, which they sharpen like a razor...and figure the body...[then] they rub the incisions thoroughly with black powder."⁷² This French account is not only valuable for its depictions of various cultures and their practices, but also as a comparative to more southern accounts by English, French, Italian, and Spanish explorers and colonizers. Other documents from the period include Francesco Guiseppe Brassani's, *Les Jésuites-Martyrs Du Canada*, and René Goulaine De Laudonnière's, *L'Histoire Notable de la Floridie*.

In the vaults of The Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art (Gilcrease Museum) are several additional first-hand English and French accounts of North America dating back to the early seventeenth century. The earliest is a letter from May 27, 1634, by Sir John Harvey, Governor of Virginia, reporting the arrival of the first Maryland settlers and Indians that were encountered. While this manuscript focuses more on interactions between settlers and Native Americans, and does not go into any detail about Native American homes, social structures, or belief systems, it does offer a small glimpse of the region and the people living in the area, allowing scholars to use it as a reference for their historical analysis.

⁷² A.T. Sinclair, "Tattooing of the North American Indians," *American Anthropologist*, 11, no. 3 (1909): 369. The original document is in French and I could not locate a translated copy to compare the translation described in the paper above.

One of the most impressive works from this period can also be found in the Gilcrease Museum archives: *Les Raretés De Indes*, is published today as *The Codex Canadensis: The Natural History of the New World*. Written by the Jesuit French priest



Figure 10; Drawing by Louis Nicolas in *Les Raretés De Indes*, Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, OK.

Louis Nicolas between the years 1664-1675, this work is nearly unmatched with its illustrations and narrative of the region and people. The one failing point of this work is the tendency of the author to incorporate mythological characters, such as the unicorn, into the illustrations and narrative. These supernatural characters were often based on descriptions by Native people or by other Europeans who had claimed to have seen these images. The bulk of the work, though, is taken from life, and the author is meticulous in his drawings of animals and people that he identified in person. Translated from French, the caption for figure 10

reads, “This is a representative sent by the village of Gannachiou-aé to invite the gentleman of Gandaouagoahga to a game. They believe that the snake is the god of fire. They invoke the god by holding the snake in their hands while dancing and singing.”⁷³ Today, these images are used by iconographers, such as Reilly, in his 2011 paper “The

⁷³ Louis Nicolas, *The Codex Canadensis and the Writings of Louis Nicolas*, ed. François-Marc Gagnon (Montreal & Kingston: Gilcrease Museum and McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2011), 118.

Lady and the Serpent” to describe the relationship between ancient and historical Native American ideology.⁷⁴

Perhaps the most informative document, was written in 1698 by a South Carolina trader named Alexander Longe. This Gilcrease Museum document, titled “The Nation of Indians called Charrikees [sic],” describes the social structure of the people, their religious beliefs, and their burial practices. Moreover, it includes a wealth of information within its pages describing, in detail, certain festivals, Native American beliefs regarding the immortality of the soul, rituals associated with temples, and beliefs connected to thunder, fire, and creation. Its fatal flaw is Longe’s attempt to connect the Cherokee belief system, described to him in detail, to the lost tribes of Israel.⁷⁵ We know now that the idea, arguing that the American Indian was part of the “lost tribe,” is completely false. Nevertheless, it was in accordance with the opinions at the time which persisted until the late nineteenth century.

In the seventeenth century, we find additional narratives that can be used by today’s historians, archaeologists, and iconographers. The most well-known is that of the Jesuit missionary Jacques Marquette in 1673. On his journey down the Mississippi River, Marquette records his interactions with numerous Native American groups and mentions the calumet pipe and the close association each group had to it.⁷⁶ This documentation represents one of the first indications of shared cultural traditions within separate Native American communities. Because of this description, Marquette’s

⁷⁴ F. Kent Reilly III, “The Lady and the Serpent: Recovering the Images of Supernaturals in Early Ethnographic Sources in the Art of the Mississippian Period” (paper presented at the Midsouth Archaeological Conference, Memphis, Tennessee, June 5, 2011).

⁷⁵ Longe, Alexander, “The Nation of Indians called Charrikees,” manuscript accessed from the Gilcrease Museum archives, November 12, 2011.

⁷⁶ Tracey Neal Leavelle, *The Catholic Calumet: Colonial Conversations in French and Indian North America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 2-7.

manuscript was heavily used by Robert Hall in his groundbreaking work *The Archaeology of the Soul*, to discuss the calumet ceremony and the comparative nature of Native American religious beliefs across North America and into Mesoamerica.

The other document worth noting is from French explorer and soldier Henri Joutel. Joutel's explorations through North America between 1684 and 1687 were first printed in France in 1713. It was quickly reprinted in England the following year, and due to its popularity and the abundance of information it contained, reprinted several more times over the next two hundred years. The latest publication came in 2013 titled *A Journal of the Last Voyage of Monsieur de la Salle*.⁷⁷ In it, Joutel describes encounters with 116 indigenous groups describing their customs, values, and beliefs. The bulk of the narrative, however, describes Joutel's daily progress through North America as he travels from modern day Texas to Canada.⁷⁸

During the eighteenth century, other accounts emerged that offered detailed descriptions regarding Native America and the beliefs of the local inhabitants. The most important were written by French explorers living with the Natchez in the early 1700s in present-day Louisiana. They are significant because many consider the Natchez the closest in parallel to prehistoric Mississippian people.⁷⁹ The first of these is from Mathurin Le Petit—a Jesuit Missionary who, in the book *Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France 1610-1791*, describes many Native American groups,

⁷⁷ This volume was originally titled "A Journal of the Last Voyage perform'd by Monsr. de La Sale, to the Gulph of Mexico: To find the mouth of the Missisipi River; Containing an account of the settlements he endeavour'd to make on the coast of the aforesaid bay, his unfortunate death, and the travels of his companions for the space of eight hundred leagues across that inland country of America, now call'd Louisiana (and given by the king of France to M. Crozat,) till they came to Canada."

⁷⁸ William C. Foster ed. and Johanna S. Warren trans., *The La Salle Expedition to Texas: The Journals of Henri Joutel 1684-1687* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1998), 5.

⁷⁹ Peter N. Peregrine, *Archaeology of the Mississippian Culture: A Research Guide* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), 31-32.

specifically the Illinois and the Natchez. With regards to the Natchez, Le Petit describes their temple—including its measurements and illustrations of the mound it sat upon in its entirety. Also, incorporated into the volume, are letters with explanations of Natchez leaders, burial rituals, and social customs. Other accounts from this book discuss Jesuit encounters with Native people in St. Louis, Montreal, and Quebec.⁸⁰ Although Le Petit is not used as abundantly as a source by modern anthropologists and historians, that should not limit its potential as a research tool, nor devalue his artistic renderings. Although they are rudimentary, they are great tools for contextualizing and reinterpreting items in museum collections.

Published in 1753, Jean-Baptiste Le Mascrier produced another highly informative chronicle of his experiences in early America. *Mémoires historiques sur la Louisiae*, is a report of the journey of French army officer Lieutenant Jean-François-Benjamin Dumont de Montigny from Quebec to Louisiana. While much of his manuscript is a personal history of Dumont as he moved through North America, the author discusses the landscape and the Native people he faced both in battle and while negotiating travel. Included are twenty-three watercolors depicting forts, maps, people and plants.⁸¹

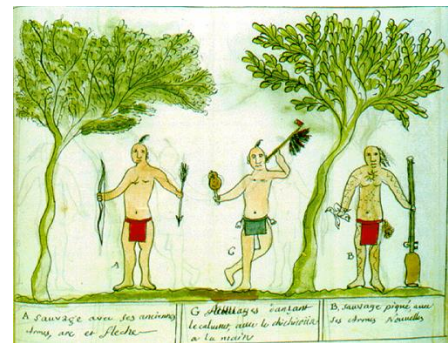


Figure 11; Watercolor. By Jean-François-Benjamin Dumont de Montigny, The Newberry Library Chicago.

⁸⁰ Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Travels and Explorations of the Jesuits Missionaries in New France 1610-1791. The Original French, Latin, and Italian Texts, with English Translations and Notes; Illustrated by Portraits, Maps, and Facsimiles. Vol. LXVIII, Lower Canada, Crees, Louisiana, 1720-1736* (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers, 1899), accessed June 10, 2016.

http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_68.html.

⁸¹ Gordon M. Sayre and Carla Zecher, ed. and trans., *The Memoir of Lieutenant Dumont, 1715-1747: A Sojourner in the French Atlantic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012). As a side note, I

Perhaps the most famous and well-used early source comes from Antoine-Simon La Page Du Pratz. Du Pratz's work, *History of Louisiana*, was published in 1758 in three volumes and describes his journey up the Mississippi River and his settlement among the Natchez, with whom he lived for nearly eight years. Many consider this account to be the best early Native cultural description of a Mississippian ancestral community. Other Frenchmen wrote accounts of their travels, such as Jacques Gravier, who in 1700 visited a place he called "Kaowikia," which many now argue is the site of Cahokia just outside of St. Louis, and Bénard de la Harpe, who authored the *Historical Journal of the Establishment of the French in Louisiana* which was published in New Orleans in 1831. In both of these publications, the authors describe mounds, but they are nowhere near as informative as the work of Du Pratz.⁸²

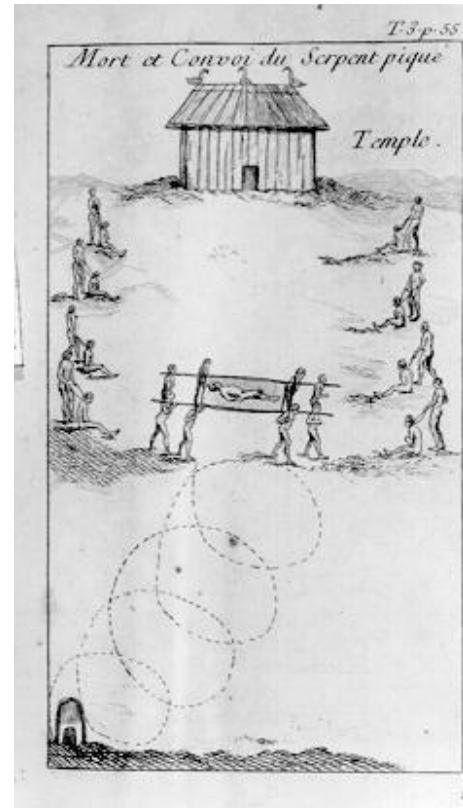


Figure 12; Drawing. By Antoine-Simon Le Page Du Pratz, 1758.

From the English territories of North America comes further colonial sources fully describing the customs and religious practices of the indigenous people in the southern half of the Eastern Woodlands and the Mississippian mounds scattered throughout the area. The best of these publications, and one of the most valuable primary sources on Southeastern Indians, comes from William Bartram. Bartram's account,

tried to find a translation of this document from the 17th century, but none could be located. The original French version can be found <https://archive.org/details/mmoreshistori01dumo>

⁸² Silverberg, *The Mound Builders*, 27.

written between 1773 and 1776, is unexpected because he was a botanist. However, as Gregory A. Waselkov and Kathryn E. Holland Braund's edited and annotated volume *William Bartram on the Southeastern Indians* (1995) points out, Bartram had a keen mind and was a careful observer of Native Americans, specifically Muscogees and Cherokees.⁸³ This excellent primary source details specific rituals, ceremonial objects, village layouts, social hierarchy, games, and sacrifice. Although Bartram willingly admits that he is occasionally lost as to why certain acts are performed, he does take careful notes about their beliefs in the supernatural and constantly questions many esoteric practices performed by the Native nations. This account comes at a time when many people had forgotten that these people were the remnants of early Native cultures found by explorers and considered to be descendants of the mound building people. Even Bartram only vaguely discusses their relationship to earlier community sites in the region. He typically appraised them in their current form.

Taken as a whole, these early narratives and descriptions of Native American people are highly informative. Although they are laced with personal bias and were not intended to be used for historical research, they are nevertheless useful. They shed light on the historic people allowing researchers a comparative model to understand modern societies and archaeological data from various pre-Columbian sites.

⁸³ William Bartram. *William Bartram on the Southeastern Indians*, ed. Gregory A. Waselkov and Kathryn E. Holland Braund (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 10.

Section 3 - Who Built the Mounds?

In the late colonial era and through the founding of the United States, people began to focus less on descriptions of contemporary Native American people and more on the ancient past—specifically the mounds seen across the eastern half of the North America. Prior to this, as was previously noted, individuals were more concerned with trade, exploration, and establishing permanent colonies in North America. Now, with stable settlements, a proclivity had been fostered and people were free to dig, compare, and investigate. Some of these approaches were reasoned, while others focused their analysis on fanciful speculation and entirely ignored scientific methodology. This two-sided approach confuses any historiographical examination of the literature from this era and makes it difficult to create an easily navigable time-line or flow of events. Years overlap, and scientific approaches are trampled by the racist and speculative assertions by pseudoscientists, religious practitioners, and ill-informed traders, who at times provided reliable data but, in the end, drew incorrect conclusions as to who created the ancient monuments and the material contained within the mounds.

Good sources from this period concerning mounds are limited and primarily come from the English territories of North America and later the United States. These books, journals, and society papers describe the customs and religious practices of the indigenous people in the southern half of the Eastern Woodlands and the Mississippian mounds scattered throughout the area. Perhaps the most referenced colonial author was David Zeisberger. In his 1772 publication, *History of the North American Indians*, Zeisberger, a Bohemian-born missionary, describes the Native American people he

encountered in New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio as well as the regional wildlife. From a certain point of view, this work can be helpful. Zeisberger describes customs and explains specific practices such as the piercing and cutting of ears and the social nuances of both sexes. In addition, he describes hunting practices and the types of homes that were built. However, the bulk of the narrative takes a religious perspective, with the author constantly portraying the Indians as lazy, cowardly, and unkempt.⁸⁴ To his credit, Zeisberger remarks on the ancient mounds located in Ohio and concludes that they were likely burials, adding “interesting additional proof of the relationship of the so-called ‘Moundbuilders’ and the earlier Indians, the implication being exceedingly strong that they were one and the same race.”⁸⁵ Zeisberger’s conclusions are rare for this period, and his supporters were limited.

Others in this period began looking specifically at mounds and attempted to determine their origins. This desire to unravel the mystery of the mounds ushered in the early stages of rudimentary archaeological excavations, as people attempted to ascertain who built them, what their purpose may have been, and what was inside. The most famous of these early writers and archaeologists was Thomas Jefferson. An avid learner, his work *Notes on the State of Virginia*, published in 1785, showed a practiced and conservative interpretation of mounds he excavated on his own land. He introduced a methodological approach to digging and suggested that the creators of the mounds were indeed the ancestors of the people who currently lived in the area.⁸⁶ Dr. J.H. McCulloh,

⁸⁴ David Zeisberger, *David Zeisberger’s History of the Northern American Indians*, ed. Archer Butler Hulbert and William Nathaniel Schwarze (Columbus: Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, 1910), 18. <https://archive.org/details/zeisbergerhistnaind00zeisrich> accessed July 4, 2016.

⁸⁵ Zeisberger, *David Zeisberger’s History of the Northern American Indians*, 8.

⁸⁶ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Virginia: J.W. Randolph, 1853), 104-106, accessed June 10, 2016. <https://archive.org/stream/notesonstateofvi01jeff#page/n7/mode/2up>.

Jr. was another early writer. He published several works between 1813 and 1829, but his book *Researches, Philosophical and Antiquarian, concerning the Aboriginal history of America* is easily his best. This was truly an exceptional effort for the period and was relatively comprehensive in its approach. The author discusses language, including sign language, incorporates an analysis of Native culture, has chapters relating to South and Central America, and goes into an exhaustive description of mounds and their content—both burials and artifacts.⁸⁷

On the other hand, clouding many of the eighteenth and nineteenth century narratives on Native Americans and the mounds was a deeply held belief that the mounds were built by a mythical lost race. This theory likely stems from racism and help justify European expansion into Native American land. The origins of the mythical race or ‘Lost Tribes’ theory had old roots. It probably dates to the late 1500s, when a Spanish Franciscan priest, Diego de Landa, wrote a volume regarding the ancestry of the Native American people encountered by conquistadors in Central America concluding that they were likely of Jewish descent.⁸⁸ By the late 1700s and early 1800s, many writers, from early archaeologists to novelists and poets, echoed this sentiment.

History of the American Indians, one of the most widely used of these ill-concluded historical descriptions, was written by James Adair in 1775 and is still referenced today by Southeastern archaeologists. This volume is a solid historical

⁸⁷ Dr. J.H. McCulloh Jr, *Researches, Philosophical and Antiquarian, Concerning the Aboriginal history of America* (Baltimore: Fielding Lucas, JR. 1829), accessed June 10, 2016, <https://archive.org/details/researchesphilo00mccugooq>.

⁸⁸ William Gates, trans., *Friar Diego De Landa: Yucatan Before and After the Conquest* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2012), 8. Father de Landa was responsible for destroying nearly all traces of Maya writing and history by burning their books. Ironically, it was de Landa’s work in Spain translating Mayan hieroglyphs and sounds into Spanish characters, which ultimately provided the keys to cracking the Mayan linguistic code in the 1970s.

narrative of Adair's time spent as a deer trader with long chapters devoted to the Catawba, Muscogee, Cherokee, Choctaw, and Chickasaw people, and in particular their methods of war, social customs, and hunting and fishing techniques. He discusses the region's mounds and presents evidence that Indians were still using mounds to bury their dead, remarking "many of thofe [sic] heaps are to be feen [sic], in all parts of the continent of North-America where ftones [sic] could not be had, they raifed [sic] large hillocks or mounds of earth, wherein they carefully depofited [sic] the bones of their dead, which were placed either in earthen veffels [sic], or in a simple kind of ark, or chefts [sic]." ⁸⁹ However, Adair's descriptions are not empirical, but comparative. Like so many, Adair tries to connect the practices and heritage of Native Americans to Israel and the ancient 'Hebrews.'

These early "mythmakers", as Robert Silverberg refers to them in his 1968 work *The Mound Builders*, were beginning to assert themselves more and more in the scholarly world, claiming that the Mississippian cultural remnants were descendants of nearly everyone but the current Native people encountered by Europeans. Some, such as Benjamin Smith Barton, in his 1785 work *Observations on some parts of Natural History*, claimed that the mounds and their builders were Danish Vikings, which after an invasion by the current Indians, moved south and became the storied Toltec people of

⁸⁹ James Adair, *The history of the American Indians; particularly those nations adjoining to the Mississippi. East and West Florida, Georgia, South and North Carolina, and Virginia: containing an account of their origin, language, manners, religious and civil customs, laws, form of government, punishments, conduct in war and domestic life, their habits, diet, agriculture, manufactures, diseases and method of cure... With observations on former historians, the conduct of our colony governors, superintendents, missionaries, & c. Also an appendix, containing a description of the Floridas, and the Mississippi lands, with their productions--the benefits of colonizing Georgiana, and civilizing the Indians--and the way to make all the colonies more valuable to the mother country*, (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, in the Poultry, 1775), 185, accessed June 20, 2016, <https://archive.org/details/historyofamerica00adairich>. In the colonial period, "s" was substituted with and "f" thus [sic] is placed next to many of the words.

Mexico—a sentiment echoed in 1811 by the Mayor of New York DeWitt Clinton.⁹⁰ Although he did not say who they were, Reverend Thaddeus M. Harris, whose 1803 book, *Journal of a Tour into the Territory Northwest of the Allegany Mountains*, concluded “the earthworks were too elaborate an engineering feat to have been the work of mere savages,” and therefore must be the work of another “higher” race.⁹¹ Believing that Native Americans were incapable of such ingenuity, many writers offered diverse and alternative cultural origins. Egyptian, Russian, Hindu, Phoenician were just a few of the people heralded as the true builders of the Mississippian mounds and the first inhabitants of North America.

During this period, even men making early contributions to the field of archaeology were not immune to fanciful and romantic ideas about the Mississippian cultural remains scattered throughout the Eastern Woodlands. The most prominent of these men was Caleb Atwater. One of the early members of the American Antiquarian Society, founded in Boston in 1812, Atwater wrote a remarkably thorough manuscript about the earthworks located in Ohio. His attention to detail and his elucidations regarding the mounds were extremely exacting and highly informative. They contained illustrations of the area, including Fort Ancient, and maps of his survey.⁹² Atwater even counters proposed theories about Roman coinage found in mounds near Nashville,

⁹⁰ Silverberg, *The Mound Builders*, 33.

⁹¹ Silverberg, *The Mound Builders*, 41.

⁹² Caleb Atwater, “Descriptions of the Antiquities Discovered in the State of Ohio and other Western States,” in *Archaeologia Americana: Transactions and Collections of the American Antiquarian Society*, I (Worcester, Massachusetts: by William Manning, 1820). <https://books.google.com/books?id=HjiMUZwN-fkC&pg=PA107&lpg=PA107&dq=Caleb+Atwater++Description+of+the+Antiquities+Discovered+in+the+State+of+Ohio+and+Western+States&source=bl&ots=4WxMWGfjwT&sig=lo6qK3OOZMtDZtCtkOdI3YLylFY&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjO7rvTneDNAhVHx2MKHcDVBBkQ6AEIUjAJ#v=onepage&q=Caleb%20Atwater%20%20Description%20of%20the%20Antiquities%20Discovered%20in%20the%20State%20of%20Ohio%20and%20Western%20States&f=false>

Tennessee, believing it could have been brought after Columbus and, therefore, was not a rational argument.⁹³ Unfortunately, Atwater, like so many others, gave little credence to the possibility that the mounds, and the objects held within, might have been made by Native Americans. Atwater, for his part, compared them to works in Asia and believed that the builders of the mounds must be “part of the Tartar stock.”⁹⁴

Two other contemporaries of Atwater also excelled in the field of early archaeology: former President of the United States William Henry Harrison and Albert Gallatin, a Swiss born economist, congressman, senator, and secretary of the treasury under Thomas Jefferson. Harrison, for his part, was balanced in his approach to the data, and understood how to read the landscape in relation to the mounds and other structures built in the surrounding area. He concluded that the local population must have been agrarian and that the mounds were the remnants of large cities. He was, however, mistaken in how they were destroyed. Harrison believed the mound builders were destroyed over the course of many great battles, and a romantic last stand took place against the invading barbarians on certain mountain tops. In the end, Harrison conceded that the creator of the mounds had vanished and most likely moved south to Mexico.⁹⁵

Gallatin, on the other hand, was much more practical in his interpretation and description of the mounds and the current inhabitants of the region. For Gallatin, “there is nothing in their construction or the remnants which they contain indicative of a much more advanced civilization than that of the present inhabitants.”⁹⁶ He outlined this belief in his great work *American Indian Languages*. Hailed by later ethnologists and scholars

⁹³ Atwater, “Descriptions,” 119.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 325.

⁹⁵ Silverberg, *The Mound Builders*, 63.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*.

for its methodology and critical investigative nature, John Wesley Powell, founder of the Smithsonian's Bureau of Ethnology, said it "marks an era in American linguistic science, from the fact that he so thoroughly introduced comparative methods, and because he circumscribed the boundaries of many [language] families, so that a larger part of his work remains...sound."⁹⁷

Despite these many wild theories, early sources remain critical investigative tools for modern iconographers. Concerned less with explaining the prehistorical roots of the mound builders, they focused more on the mounds and the objects they contained. This is important because these early investigations allow scholars today to look at the context of a particular excavation even if it was not conducted using modern techniques. One of the most discussed in this period was Grave Creek Mound located in West Virginia. In 1838, Abelard Tomlinson began digging into a mound on his uncle's property and uncovered a wealth of material including copper bracelets, shell beads, mica, ceramics, textiles, and skeletons.⁹⁸ Although Tomlinson was a novice, he dug in a methodical manner, providing future scholars excellent context for the material uncovered.

This site caught the attention of the American public and soon notable scholars such as Henry Rowe Schoolcraft visited the site and analyzed it and material uncovered. Schoolcraft was considered a leading authority on Native American people at the time and went on to publish several notable volumes regarding what became the Adena, Hopewell, and Mississippian traditions. Schoolcraft was thorough. He employed several

⁹⁷ John W. Powell, "Indian Linguistic Families of the American North of Mexico," *Seventh Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Offices, 1885-1886): 9.

⁹⁸ Henry R. Schoolcraft, "Observation Respecting the Grave Creek Mound in Western Virginia," in *Transactions of the American Ethnological*, I (New York: Bartlett and Welford, 1845), 384. In addition to the written description of material found at Grave Creek are illustrations including images of beads, copper, ceramics, and rope.

theoretical methods at the time to determine the age of these sites and the conditions in which they were built. With regards to Grave Creek, Schoolcraft looked at tree rings to determine the age of the mound. Although his dates were wrong—he estimated the mound was built in 1338 C.E. as opposed to the currently recognized date of 250 B.C.E—he was using early modern methods of scientific reasoning. He began conjecturing about potential trade routes in early America based on the identification of shells in the mound as well.⁹⁹ Later, in his epic two volume work, *The Indian Tribes of the United States*, Schoolcraft produced a nearly comprehensive history of the Native American people of the United States, including their history, mythology, religion, art, customs and an early history of relevant literature regarding Native Americans. Schoolcraft discusses clans, the effects of the removals on the communities involved, and even discusses origin myths, such as the Alabama Indians, who “as handed down by oral tradition...sprang out the ground between the Cahawba and Alabama Rivers.”¹⁰⁰

An additional method employed by men of this period to aid in unraveling the mystery of who built the mounds was a physical examination of the human remains found in the burials. Dr. Samuel G. Morton pioneered this method. Often considered the father of American physical anthropology, Morton began to examine skulls from burials throughout the Eastern Woodlands and South America. Using a variety of self-developed instruments, Morton selected ten points of comparison that he applied to every cranium.¹⁰¹ Published in his 1839 work, *Crania Americana*, Morton concluded that

⁹⁹ Schoolcraft, “Observations,” 417-418.

¹⁰⁰ Henry R. Schoolcraft, *The Indian tribes of the United States: their history, antiquities, customs, religion, art, language, traditions, oral legends, and myths*, 1 (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co.: 1884), 348. <https://archive.org/details/indiantribesofun01scho> accessed, June 27, 2016.

¹⁰¹ Silverberg, *The Mound Builders*, 79.

Native Americans were distinct and separate from the other “races” of the world. The one fault of his work was his need to separate the American indigenous people into two categories, something he ultimately had no basis for doing. Morton concluded that there was a ‘Toltec’ family and a ‘barbarous’ family. The early Mound Builders or later Mississippians were from the Toltec stock.¹⁰²

Within this same period, two additional scholars composed a noteworthy contribution titled *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley*. Printed in 1848, this work was the first publication of the *Smithsonian Contributions of Knowledge* series. It was authored by Ephraim George Squier and Dr. Edwin Hamilton Davis—although the bulk of the writing was done by Squier. The data for the book were collected between the years 1845 and 1847 and detailed the unearthing of 200 mounds, 100 enclosures, multiple skeletons, as well as describing a sizable assemblage of objects, including metals, minerals, and organic material recovered throughout their excavations. The contributions to the field of archaeology made by these two authors is staggering. As one writer put it, the volume “instantly established itself as a work of commanding importance in American archaeology. As a summary of knowledge in its particular field at the time, it was remarkable; as a model for later work, it was invaluable; as a detailed record of the Ohio mounds as they appeared in 1847, it was and still is unique.”¹⁰³ This quote, however, still does not do this work justice. The scope of the volume and its ability to map out the locations of so many archaeological sites is incredible! Moreover, Squier and Davis’s work was the first since William Bartram’s to investigate the mounds

¹⁰² Samuel George Morton, *Crania Americana; or, A comparative view of the skulls of various aboriginal nations of North and South America* (Philadelphia: J. Dodson, 1839), 230, accessed June 27, 2016. <https://archive.org/details/Craniaamericana00Mort>

¹⁰³ Silverberg, *The Mound Builders*, 84.

in the southern United States. Equally impressive is the inclusion of topographical maps, illustrations, and analysis of material found at all these sites.¹⁰⁴

For almost the next thirty years, nothing of real note was published concerning the mounds and the pre-Columbian people who inhabited the area. Of course, there were publications, but the bulk of them were dedicated to expounding on the mound builder myth and connecting them to virtually everyone but local Native people. Moreover, several false narratives, such as William Pidgeon's *Traditions of De-coo-da: And Antiquarian Researches*, told of a lost *Elk* nation, whose lone survivor recounted to him the mysteries of the mounds. In this work, Pidgeon offers "proof" that America was visited by Romans, Phoenicians, Danes, and others.¹⁰⁵ This work was a direct result of the mound builder myth that swept the nation and can likely be laid at the feet of Squier and Davis as well. Following their publication, excavations at mounds rapidly increased.

It was not until 1872 that another noteworthy work was finally published. Written by John Baldwin, *Ancient America* was celebrated as a well-documented and well-illustrated book on the ancient people of America. He drew his main conclusions from recent scientific discoveries and modern, at least in terms of the 1870s, scientific analysis. As Baldwin states in his opening paragraph, "The purpose of this volume is to give a summary of what is known of Ancient Antiquities [sic], with some thoughts and suggestions relative to their significance." The significance of the book was how the author analyzed existing records using "modern" techniques. By looking at their

¹⁰⁴ E.G. Squier and Edwin Hamilton Davis. *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley* (New York, Bartlett & Welford, 1848). <https://archive.org/stream/ancientmonuments00squi#page/n7/mode/2up> accessed June 10, 2016.

¹⁰⁵ William Pidgeon, *Traditions of De-coo-dah: And Antiquarian Researches: Comprising Extensive Explorations, and Surveys* (New York: Horace Thayer, 1858), 20.

language, he summarily dismissed all notions that mound builders were of Asian or European origin. Using the same principles, he correspondingly concluded that the Natchez were likely the descendants of the mound builders based on their language and its dissimilarity to neighboring languages. He reinforced this claim by looking at seventeenth-century French documents, such as Le Page Du Pratz, that referenced the Natchez use of mounds, “perpetual fire,” and belief in their chief’s being the living embodiment of the sun—characteristics, he reasoned, that matched those of the ancient people living in the Mississippi Valley.¹⁰⁶ He used tree-ring counts to date archaeological sites, not a new technique but also not widely used, and then compared these dates to the supposed rate of decay found on skeletons. Furthermore, he determined that the mounds, and the people who built them, must be ancient, as contemporary scientists had revealed that “human skeletons have been discovered in deposits of the ‘Age of Stone’ in Western Europe and the decay of those skeletons matched his descriptions.¹⁰⁷ As for where the mound builders went following the collapse of their civilization, the author concludes they went south. The remnants of which still cling to the Gulf coast—including the Natchez.¹⁰⁸

Just prior to the introduction of the Bureau of Ethnology’s conclusions that Native Americans were the actual builders of the mounds came one more work that illustrates the changing perception starting to take hold in the United States. This is not to say that the myth was disappearing. Even today, there are people who make outrageous claims about the origins of the mounds and the ancient people of the Americas. But, it was

¹⁰⁶ John D. Baldwin, *Ancient America, in Notes on American Archaeology* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1872), 55, accessed June 15, 2015. https://archive.org/details/cihm_02482.

¹⁰⁷ Baldwin, “Ancient America,” 49.

¹⁰⁸ Baldwin, “Ancient America,” 55-56.

certainly lessening. With the widespread circulation of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and other scientific methodologies taking hold in the fields of paleontology, geology, and archaeology, a new age was dawning that slowly allowed scholars to evaluate the mound builders and their peers. In 1873, John Wells Foster, President of the Chicago Academy of Science, produced *Prehistoric Races of the United States of America*. In this work, Foster bluntly states,

The combined investigations of geologists and ethnologists, prosecuted during the last quarter of a century, have thrown much light upon the origin of the human race, and developed facts which require us essentially to modify our pre-existing views as to the length of time during which it has occupied our planet. That man lived at a time far too remote to be embraced in our received system of chronology, surrounded by great quadrupeds which have ceased to exist, and under a climate very different from what now prevails, has been so clearly demonstrated that fact must now be accepted as a scientific truth.¹⁰⁹

Although today this statement seems obvious, in the nineteenth century, it was highly contentious as religious practitioners still held the belief that the earth was only 4,000 to 5,000 thousand years old. Regardless, the scientific analysis of ancient material was starting. However, another ten years would pass before the Bureau of Ethnology would formally establish a direct link between the mound builders and the current Native American population.

¹⁰⁹ J. W. Foster, *Pre-Historic Races of the United States of America*, (Chicago: S.C. Griggs and Company, 1887), 17, accessed June 9, 2015. <https://archive.org/details/prehistoricraces00fostiala>.

Section 4 - Reason and Methodology at Play

Because the mounds were such a widespread source of curiosity, Congress, in 1881, charged the Bureau of Ethnology, later the Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE), with determining their origins. Under the direction of John Wesley Powell, the Bureau hired Cyrus Thomas to undertake the project. At the time, Thomas believed the theory that current Native American people were not the ancestors of the mound builders. With a team of three, Thomas set out across the country and within only a few short years had reversed his position. The Bureau's findings unequivocally concluded that Indians were the descendants of the Mississippian people, and the modern era of Mississippian research officially began. Thomas's findings were released in three separate publications dating 1884, 1887, and 1894. The final publication was the largest and was included in the *Twelfth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology for the Years 1890-1891* (1894). In addition to proving categorically that Native people were the descendants of mound builders, Thomas demonstrated that multiple cultures were involved in mound construction. To do this, he first used archaeological techniques to explore the mounds. Then, he cross-referenced his findings against contemporary Native American cultural traditions and those written by Spanish, French, and English explorers. In each of these documents, he found evidence that indigenous people were agriculturalists, built solidly constructed homes, and, in the case of the de Soto narratives, constructed mounds. Thomas, furthermore, offered illustrations from Smith's seventeenth-century journals and the DeBry engraving of the sixteenth century. In the end, Thomas concluded that:

It is evident, therefore, from the abundant evidence relating thereto, that the statement in regards to the habit and customs of the Indians, found in most works

on the archaeology of the United States, and on which the objection to the theory that the people of this race were the mound-builders is founded, are incorrect and not justified by the facts.¹¹⁰

Addressing the arguments that Native Americans lacked the knowledge of who built the mounds, Thomas had a powerful, yet simple response. He merely observed that it was logical for Native Americans to not remember the mound builders because they had no writing. The harder question to answer was how we, with writing, did not remember who built the mounds when it was described in detail by early explorers.¹¹¹

The work of Thomas and the BAE launched a litany of ethnographical studies, excavations, and object analyses that transformed the study of the Mississippian people. Men such as John Swanton, James Mooney, and Francis La Flesche, who worked for the BAE were truly pioneers of early ethnology. Although they worked extensively with tribes all over the nation, they focused their efforts on Native Americans of the Eastern Woodlands and Great Plains. They did not know it at the time but their documentation of Native mythology and contemporary Native traditions became critical tools for later interpretations and studies of Mississippian people, culture, and iconographic representations. Most of the writing completed by these three men, and several others, is discussed in Charles Hudson's *Ethnology of the Southeastern Indians: A Source Book* (1985) and in countless BAE records. Other works, such as James Mooney's *Myths of the Cherokees* (1900), details 126 myths and legends concerning the structure of the cosmos to the birth of various animals and the world itself, and John Swanton's *The Aboriginal Culture of the Southeast* (1928) and his *Final Report of the United States de*

¹¹⁰ Cyrus Thomas, *Twelfth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution*. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1894), 625.

¹¹¹ Thomas, *Twelfth Annual Report*, 643.

Soto Commission (1939), which attempted to trace the exact route de Soto took in the Southeastern United States, were monumental undertakings and valuable sources for contemporary scholars.

Following the BAE's determination that the Mound Builders were the ancestors of Native American people, the region saw a dramatic rise in archaeological investigations, which paralleled the increase in ethnological work. Although slow at first—the majority of excavations at this time were still conducted by amateurs and looters—archaeologists began systematically excavating Mississippian cultural centers across the American South. Amateur archaeologist Clarence B. Moore conducted the most detailed of these early surveys and provided a wealth of information still used today. As an archaeologist, Moore traveled across the Eastern Woodlands excavating and analyzing material from mounds and Mississippian sites. As a writer, he was prolific and authored nearly every article in *The Academy of Natural Science of Philadelphia's Journal* between the years of 1905 and 1908. Within its pages, and in his field notes housed at the Cornell University Library, Moore discusses the material found at mounds in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee. As a group of historical documents, Moore's work is essential.

Perhaps the most important archaeological publication and work during this time was centered on a site called Etowah. Located in present day Georgia, Etowah is one of the largest Mississippian political and ceremonial centers. The results of the excavation, which occurred between 1925 and 1928, were published in an edited volume titled *The Etowah Papers*. Although excavations were conducted at the site in 1883 by the BAE, each paper in this work revolves around new excavations and discusses the site and its

mounds, offers a comparative analysis of excavated material, including copper, shell, and ceramic to Muskogean (Muscogee or Creek) symbolism, and proposes a context for the finds that are then compared to Mesoamerican iconography. Although this site and its relevance were important, and critical tools for determining the extent of Mississippian influence, professional excavations did not become mainstream until the 1930s when government-sponsored work projects directed by the CCC and the WPA brought significant funding to Native American archaeology.

Of these government-funded projects, the most notable one took place in Le Flore County in southeastern Oklahoma at a site called Spiro. When compared to all other sites found in North America, Spiro is without question the most unique. When looters opened up the hollow chamber in the early 1930s, they found thousands of objects in almost every known medium. Newspapers across the United produced articles about the discovery, and private collectors, archaeologists, and museums, swooped in and began buying objects. It soon became the most talked about Mississippian community in all of archaeology.¹¹² Unfortunately, the site was leased to pillagers, requiring the State of Oklahoma to pass some of the nation's first antiquity laws protecting Spiro and allowing archaeologists, with funding from the WPA, to formally excavate the site. A general overview of the excavation was detailed by Kenneth Gordon Orr in 1946. In this volume, Orr comprehensively discussed the excavation conducted through the combined efforts of the University of Oklahoma, the University of Tulsa, and the Oklahoma Historical Society—all three of which still house a considerable Spiro inventory. Orr goes on to discuss the layout of the community, village structures, burials, and the location of

¹¹² Robert Bell, "Trade Material at Spiro as Indicated by Artifacts," in *American Antiquity* 12, no. 3 (1947): 181.

objects in what he describes as the early, middle, and late Spiro constituent.¹¹³ Following his article, an inventory (a complete one is nearly impossible due to the quantity of material and because most was sold by looters) was written by Dr. Robert E. Bell of the University of Oklahoma in 1947. Bell describes the types of objects and provides rough descriptions of how the site was located, exploited, and later excavated. After its discovery, Spiro became the most widely discussed site due to its location, the extent of unearthed material, and its potential relationship to other sites within the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex (SECC).

Using the new ethnographic studies produced by the BAE and by cross-referencing them against the archaeological data, scholars began interpreting the symbols on Mississippian objects. Scholars, such as Moore, Bell, and Orr, now had a sample with which to evaluate this material and began offering suggestions as to their meaning. But, there was no overarching guideline that organized the cultural developments of the Eastern Woodlands. In 1941, J.A. Ford and Gordon R. Willey offered a solution. In their paper, “An Interpretation of the Prehistory of the Eastern United States,” the authors attempt to define the Eastern Woodlands and place specific locations within an evolutionary timeframe. Less interested in interpretation, they created an outline, which they argue was long overdue.¹¹⁴ As the paper progresses, the authors introduce the descriptive term “The Southern Cult” as a means of explaining the similar iconographic elements spread across the region. However, they do not discuss the nature of the cult or

¹¹³ Kenneth Gordon Orr, “The Archaeological Situation at Spiro, Oklahoma: A Preliminary Report.” *American Antiquity* 11, no. 4 (1946): 228-232.

¹¹⁴ J.A. Ford and Gordon Willey. “An Interpretation of the Prehistory of the Eastern United States.” *American Anthropologist* 43, no. 3 (1941): 325-361.

the various motifs and themes incorporated within it. Consequently, their analysis is limited to the development of the cultural periods and lacks any defined methodology.

Without a comprehensive methodology, you simply have a series of people looking at a random assortment of objects and guessing their use. Although most scholars believed, correctly, that a firm ethnographic approach was the likely avenue to understanding the objects, no one had yet offered a procedural approach. That tactic came in 1945, when Antonio Waring Jr. and Preston Holder published their article “A Prehistoric Ceremonial Complex in the Southeastern United States.” In it, Waring and Holder argue that a regional religious ideology from Oklahoma to the Atlantic and from the Eastern Woodlands and Great Lakes could be identified. They refer to this area, which incorporated Etowah, Moundville, and Spiro as the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex and the material within it as being part of a “Southern Cult,” defined earlier by Ford and Willey. Both the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex and the “Southern Cult” became the most likely theory to explain this common iconographic manifestation. These terms quickly took hold and remained in use, without much debate, until the early 1980s. They are still used today, although many argue against their use based on new data that provides a more regional interpretation based on a localized elucidation.

At the heart of their analysis were three overarching points: “(a) that the motifs and ceremonial objects appear as a cult complex in association with platform mounds, (b) that the complex is found virtually intact over a wide geographic area, and (c) that the complex is chronologically late.”¹¹⁵ In addition to these points, the authors lay out a methodology allowing for the interpretation of these artifacts—at least within the context

¹¹⁵ A.J. Waring Jr. and Preston Holder, “A Prehistoric Ceremonial Complex in the Southeastern United States,” in *American Anthropologist* 47, no. 1 (1945): 3.

of the cult, wherein they isolated objects by material, motif, theme, and location. While this work was brilliant in its scope and gave the archaeological community an interpretational footing for this material, several aspects of their report was debatable—the connection with Mesoamerica, its lack of a stylistic model, and its chronology. Until this point, scholars believed that the Mississippian people were likely influenced or greatly connected to Mesoamerican cultures, such as the Toltec and Maya and had no concept of archaeological time.

Subsequent to this report's publication, a counter argument further analyzed the motifs, themes, locations, and time frames expressed by Waring and Holder and argued against the potential of the cult to have spread from Mexico, where similar motifs, mediums, and mythologies are found. Alex D. Krieger argues in "An Inquiry into Supposed Mexican Influence on Prehistoric 'Cult' in the Southern United States" that too many non-Mexican aspects exist within the cult to argue it spread from Mexico. He references the large use of copper from Etowah and the appearance of regional preferences of certain designs. Regional variation, he argues, indicates the appearance of multiple versions of the "cult." With regards to the Mexican question in general, Krieger remarks "that the Southeastern ceremonial representations form, on the whole, a distinct development in aboriginal America instantly recognizable when compared to the products of any other region...[and] no definite trade pieces from Middle American cultures have yet appeared in the eastern United States."¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Alex D. Krieger, "An Inquiry into Supposed Mexican Influence on a Prehistoric "Cult" in the Southeastern United States," in *American Anthropologist* 47, no. 4. (1946): 501, accessed October 15, 2009. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/663372>. Incidentally, the issue of a Mesoamerican influenced religion, ideology, or interaction is still often debated. Although there are certainly commonalities, there is limited data which show heavy trade or culture route via Mesoamerica in the ancient North American world. Still today, little evidence beyond mythology links the two regions—Mesoamerican and the North American

Section 5 – The Holistic Approach

Even with new research, a determination of just how connected contemporary Native Americans and Mississippians were was still lacking, and the “paradigm shift” would not occur in the field of Mississippian and Native American studies until the late 1960s. Using the Annale School as their methodology, men like Charles Hudson, Franklin Professor of Anthropology and History at the University of Georgia, began combining academic disciplines in order to link the prehistoric past with the historic age. In his book, *The Southeastern Indians* (1976), Hudson combines cultural anthropology, history, and archaeology to “reconstruct broad patterns of history-not just political history with Native Americans as a backdrop nor simply an archaeology with added historical specificity but true social history of the southeastern Indians themselves, spanning their entire existence in the American South.”¹¹⁷ Until this time, anthropological training did not prepare students to evaluate cultures in such a broad context or to evaluate them historically.¹¹⁸ This is not to say that Hudson was the first to advocate or implement this approach. Other scholars also incorporated this multidisciplinary approach, such as Melville Herskovits and Erminie Wheeler-Voegelin, who in 1954 founded the American Society for Ethnohistory (ASE). However, these scholars were more associated with the Indian Claims Commissions and were still in the development stage of creating a true methodology.¹¹⁹ Swanton was another anthropologist who incorporated historical data

Great Plains and Woodlands. An exception would be the introduction of certain flora and obsidian, which was found at Spiro.

¹¹⁷ Pluckhahn, *Light on the Path: The Anthropology and history of Southeastern Indians*, 1.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

into his research, but, as mentioned before, he was more interested in pristine cultures. Swanton's model of research was described by Thomas J. Pluckhahn and Robbie Ethridge in *Light on the Path: The Anthropology and History of Southeastern Indians* (2006) as "the ethnographic present and the declension model. The ethnographic present was an anthropological convention by means of which one depicted cultures synchronically in the present that were, in fact, wholly or partly defunct. The declension model was from history and presumed that once Indians became acculturated their "traditional" way of life became degraded or went into decline."¹²⁰

Hudson's influence on this new perspective—combining history and anthropology—was profound. One of his most notable students, Theda Perdue, was one of the first generations of scholars to embrace "New Indian History," which, like New Social Historians, focused on minorities. Other scholars, such as Francis Jennings and Michael Green, also embraced this new interpretative model and put Indians at the center of historical and anthropological inquiry and designed new approaches for the study of Native Americans, both historically and pre-historically.¹²¹ However, not all scholars hailed these changes. Many continued to separate the archaeological perspective from the historical, and it was not until the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act that additional resources were found that significantly increased archaeological digs and allowed for greater amounts of new data from across wider swaths of the country. This act officially bridged the gap between history and anthropology in Mississippian and contemporary Native American studies. Anthropologists and archaeologists were now using this increased funding and historical records, such as the de Soto narratives, to

¹²⁰ Pluckhahn, *Light on the Path: The Anthropology and history of Southeastern Indians*, 5.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

identify new sites in which to excavate. Simply put, this new interdisciplinary approach combined with the National Historic Preservation Act to revolutionize the field.¹²²

As good as this was for general historians and archaeologists of Mississippian and Southeastern people, this change in perception was critical for scholars investigating Mississippian religion and iconography. The Mississippian belief structure, the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex (SECC) or Southern Cult, is very complex. Initially, little was known about it except that nearly all Mississippian people appear to have shared it and that it seems to have been an integral part of their daily life. Within the last thirty years, though, scholarship on the SECC has exploded. Scholars such as F. Kent Reilly III, Vernon J. Knight, George Langford, James Brown, Philip Phillips, and Patricia Galloway have delved into interpretations of iconographic symbols and found that no detailed interpretation could have been possible without knowledge of contemporary Native people or the writings of early explorers and ethnohistorians such as Mooney, La Flesche, and Bartram.

Using this holistic approach, specific correlations are discussed by Robert Hall in his 1977 article, "An Anthropological Perspective for Eastern United States Prehistory." Hall links an understanding of the cognitive aspects of pre-historic people to a study of symbols among contemporary Native Americans. Additional correlations were noted by John Witthoft in his 1949 book *Green Corn Ceremonialism in the Eastern Woodlands*, which compares fertility rituals of eastern North American people to those of the Natchez, and Vernon Knight in his 1981 Ph.D. dissertation, "Mississippian Ritual." In his dissertation, Knight explores the organization and symbolism of Mississippian ritual

¹²² Ibid.

using ethnographic and archaeological data to compare platform mound imagery to the symbolism of the SECC.

The iconographic representations within the SECC are engraved upon shell gorgets and cups, copper, wooden masks, polished stone axes, and various other objects and are representative of mythical creatures and heroes similar to many Mesoamerican cultures. At the same time, these images are found all over the Midwestern and Southeast United States, indicating that they were extensively traded and very important in Mississippian society. This point was argued most effectively in 1976 by James A. Brown in "The Southern Cult reconsidered," published in *The Midcontinental Journal of Archaeology*. Brown argues that viewing the SECC as simply a group of stylistic traits and artifacts is incorrect. These artifacts were vital to Mississippian ideology and were linked to prestige structures and chiefly power. Lee Ann Wilson added to this argument in 1980 in her dissertation, *Human and Animal Imagery on Southern Cult Shell Work, Southeastern United States A.D. 1200 to 1350*, where she argues that design motifs on Southeastern Ceremonial objects represents a Pan-American belief system that continued into the historic period and was used by elites to support their high status. Around this same time, James A. Brown and Philip Phillips released their six-volume work, *Pre-Columbian Shell Engravings from the Craig Mound at Spiro, Oklahoma*, which examined the large assemblage of engraved shell and attempted to isolate and extrapolate on various style manifestations present in the iconography. What they found were two distinct styles of artistry, labeled Braden and Craig. Within this framework, they discovered that regional variants played a role in the development of Southeastern iconography.

One of the best single sources for understanding the Mississippian belief system is Patricia Galloway's edited volume *The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex: Artifacts and Analysis* (1989), where the contributors discuss the "Southern Cult" symbolism in the early historic period and how, using the multi-disciplinary approach, it can be connected to the prehistoric Mississippians. Their findings directly challenged Waring and Holder's the original concept of a late Mississippian cult manifestation. Instead of offering a concrete reinterpretation, they presented an assortment of theories that proposed a "broad expression of similar socio-politico-religious ideas associated with chiefly rule" to natural climatic and environmental changes brought on by the "Little Ice Age" to regional manifestations which developed independently within a common ancient ideological framework.¹²³

Taking up the mantle of the newly conceived multi-disciplinary approach was the Texas State Iconography Workshop at Texas State University. Organized by F. Kent Reilly III, this workshop met in March of 1993 at the Mayan Hieroglyphic Workshop hosted by Linda Schele at the University of Texas. The goal was to approach Mississippian iconography in the same manner that others had approached it in the Mesoamerican world. The results were immediate. By 2006, scholars, such as Vernon J. Knight in his paper, "Farewell to the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex," were arguing for the complete abandonment of the term Southeastern Ceremonial Complex.

Numerous other participants of the workshop used this interdisciplinary model and brought several differing perspectives into the discussion of Mississippian Period

¹²³ Jon L. Gibson, "Review of *The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex: Artifacts and Analysis*," ed. Patricia Galloway, *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 34, no. 1 (1993): 121-124, accessed June 15, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4233005>.

iconography. For George Lankford, a folklorist, it was important to connect Mississippian interpretation to the myths of modern Native communities. As described in *Reachable Stars: Patterns in the Ethnoastronomy of Eastern North America* (2007), Lankford proposes an interpretative understanding using ethnoastronomy. He concludes that by understanding how Native Americans view the cosmos, scholars can better understand how they view themselves. This approach required the examination of ceremonial objects from across the Mississippian sphere of influence and those objects of living Native cultures. Furthermore, Reilly, an Olmec and Mesoamerican scholar, has brought a different perspective to the field by incorporating his knowledge of the Mesoamerican religious structures to an understanding of Mississippian religious traits. Reilly, Knight, Garber, Lankford, and others have authored two books, *Ancient Objects and Sacred Realms: Interpretations of Mississippian Iconography* (2007) and *Visualizing the Sacred: Cosmic Visions, Regionalism, and the Art of the Mississippian World* (2011), that compare regional variations of Mississippian art and symbols in order to understand the connection objects had to society and to other objects across the Mississippi River Valley and the Eastern Woodlands. The various chapters in the books also reconstruct rituals, cosmology, ideology, and the political structures of the Mississippian people. Within this same framework is Richard Townsend's edited work, *Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand: American Indian Art of the Ancient Midwest and South* (2004). This work reconstructs the archaeological remains of pyramids, plazas, large communities, and artifacts from the late Archaic period through the Mississippian period—a sequence of time stretching across 4,500 years and examines how themes, rituals, and artifacts share common characteristics with modern tribes. Other scholars, such as Carol Diaz-

Granados, an art historian, and Jim Duncan, an archaeologist, in *Petroglyphs and Pictographs of Missouri* (2000) are constructing a model of religious development in the region by dating cave art found in Missouri. They then compare it to ritual objects within the SECC and to modern descendants of the Mississippians in the region, such as the Osage, Omaha, Ponca, and Kansa.

Developing a methodology to interpret the SECC and the people who lived in it has been a nearly 100-year endeavor. The first step came in the late nineteenth century when ethnohistorians and anthropologists culturally linked living Native American tribes to the ancient Mississippian mound building cultures of North America. Next came an increase in excavations and a more methodological determination of just how to work with modern Native communities in order to appreciate, compare, and incorporate their beliefs into an understanding of ancient ceremonial and ritual practices. Over the last fifty years, research on the Mississippian iconography and political interactions amongst the various Mississippian communities has grown tremendously due to the more holistic approach of interpretation and data assessment brought on by the *Annale* tradition of scholarly research. However, as more sites are examined, more disciplines are included in analyses of imagery, and as more historical documents are uncovered, there is little doubt that explanations of Mississippian iconography will continue to evolve as well.

CHAPTER III

INTERVIEWS: UNDERSTANDING A NEW METHODOLOGY

This chapter consists of interviews with scholars who participate yearly in the Texas State Iconography Conference. Of those participants, only one from a specific field of study was chosen. The purpose of these interviews is to discuss how the field of Mississippian studies and iconographic research has changed and to determine the exact methodology employed by each today. No book, article, or symposium has ever discussed the specific criteria used by Mississippian iconographers and researchers; therefore, these overt examinations will hopefully be beneficial to both historians and archaeologist alike. Each interview provides a first-hand account of how that specific person views the current field, what changes have occurred over the last fifty years, the benefits of the multidisciplinary approach, and how they personally use this methodology to examine artifacts. This is important because most scholars only publish papers or books directly relating to a specific research topic without reflecting on the exact process or methodology for how they frame their thoughts.

Each interview was conducted over the phone and began with the same eight questions:

1. *Some argue that the field of Mississippian Iconography has changed dramatically in the last 50 years. Would you agree? Why?*
2. *With regards to your particular field how do you think that the academic community has changed with regards to interpretation, publications, and interactions with Native Americans and scholars?*
3. *What are some of the best methods you currently employ for interpreting Mississippian Iconography?*
4. *What role does the holistic method play in your analysis?*
5. *Are there any fields which are not being employed that should?*
6. *What role has the Texas State Iconography Conference played in the interpretation of Mississippian Iconography?*
7. *With regards to a specific object, can you discuss the evolution of thought on how you, or others, interpret it?*
8. *Is this interpretation different from those 20, 30, or 50 years ago?*

As the conversation evolved, it became clear that many questions were answered within the structure of a previously stated question. In that case, it was easier to simply omit the question and not ask the scholar(s) to repeat themselves. Therefore, all eight questions may not be addressed specifically, but were still nevertheless discussed. Introducing each section will be a short biography of the interviewee. This provides a more complete understanding of their relationship to the conference, field of expertise, and published work.

Section 1 – F. Kent Reilly III Interview

The first person interviewed for this chapter was Dr. F. Kent Reilly III.¹²⁴ As previously stated, Dr. Reilly founded of the Texas State Iconography Conference, Professor of Anthropology, and Director for the Center for the Study of Arts and

¹²⁴ F. Kent Reilly, III, interview by Eric Singleton, January 11, 2017.

Symbolism of Ancient America at Texas State University. As a student, he studied with art historian and Maya scholar Dr. Linda Schele at the University of Texas at Austin. It was there that Dr. Reilly worked for Dr. Schele at her yearly workshop known as the *Maya Meetings*. Though one of the foremost Olmec scholars, Dr. Reilly believed the same methodology used to decipher Maya hieroglyphs could be applied to pre-Columbian North America and specifically the Mississippian people. The first Mississippian iconography gathering was held in conjunction with the Maya meetings in 1993. After three years, it was determined that the Mississippian group should hold their own workshop and the yearly conference moved to Texas State University at San Marcos. Since that move, Dr. Reilly continues to organize the conference and invites a selected group of Mississippian scholars to participate. Although the core group remains largely the same, the participants can change yearly.

As a scholar, Dr. Reilly primarily focuses on Mesoamerica, and was the guest curator and catalog contributor to the Princeton University exhibition “The Olmec World: Art, Ritual, and Rulership.” As a researcher, he focuses on Olmec and Maya symbology and transferred this skill to the American Southeast and the Mississippian iconographic tradition seen so prominently on copper, shell, ceramic, and stone. In 2004, Dr. Reilly was on the advisory board and wrote a chapter for the Art Institute of Chicago’s exhibition, “Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand: Ancient Native American Art of the Midwest and South.” Some of his most recent publications are: *Visualizing the Sacred: Cosmic Visions, Regionalism, and the Art of the Mississippian World*, *Sacred Bindings of the Cosmos: Ritual Acts of Bundling and Wrapping In Ancient Mesoamerica*, and *Ancient Objects and Sacred Realms: Studies in Mississippian Iconography, Vol. I*.

Question 1: *Some argue that the field of Mississippian iconography has changed dramatically in the last 50 years. Would you agree?*

Reilly: “Was there a field? I would argue that this field did not even exist fifty years ago. There was Waring and his great article, but there was not a systematic attempt to look at the iconography. There were individual chunks of a bigger story, but they had not been brought together. That is why I created this workshop. Beginning with the first meeting we began systematically turning out publications so people could use it in other areas of study. We gave it a system and method.”

Question 2: *Do you think the academic community has changed with regards to interpretation, publications, and interactions with each other?*

Reilly: “Yes. They look at art in a different way. They look at it now as messages from the past. It is a cognitive interpretation. They gain a sense of how the ancient people looked at their universe, saw their gods, and the physics of their universe. Everyone has a different set of questions. And, they get a total picture by using this method and by comparing all these things. All the ancient people—in the Southeast and Middle Mississippi—were just as sophisticated as all the other people in the Americas, and this methodology brings this to light.”

Question 3: *What are the best methods you currently employ for interpreting Mississippian Iconography?*

Reilly: “Patterning and Construct. We use the Panofsky method.¹²⁵ Symbols and methods into themes. Once you have these symbols and themes, you take them and tape them to a wall and start moving them around. You start looking for similarities and context. For example, we, Cam Weston and I, see now that the spaghetti gorgets are a cult manifestation of the ballgame. We looked at the gorgets, looked for boundaries, and broke down the various themes. Then we looked at the literature to help us explain the themes. We found a story collected by a Franciscan friar in 1646 that matched up to these spaghetti gorgets. The cult had a boundary, and this story was found within that boundary as well. What we saw matched what we read, and represents a pot of boiling water, which turns into a mist. That mist then ascends into the heavens. One of my students, Grant, has now found an additional story about native people in Florida boiling the bones of the leaders before positioning them. Once patterning is established you need to see if it matches the ethnographic sources. But, you might not find it. You might not find a story. Then you need more data. And, it may be left to others to find more data, find other stories, and connect the themes to the ethnographic sources.”

Question 4: *Are there any fields which are not being employed that should?*

Reilly: “It would be helpful if we could investigate private collections. And, determine where these objects were found. Unfortunately, you can talk about these object’s beauty,

¹²⁵ Erwin Panofsky was an art historian who wrote the 1939 volume “Studies in Iconography.” He developed a tri-leveled approach to symbolic interpretation. He labeled the levels: primary, secondary, and intrinsic.

but without context we lose so much data. Most, maybe ninety percent of private collectors, don't care where these objects were found, how they were laying, or if they were with anything else. They look at who owned it before them. This means all that information is lost...forever. We lose context. And, are left with just a beautiful object. If we are lucky, it fits with a theme and may tell a larger story, but if not, we simply have a new theme, action, or something else, and we don't know where it belongs."

Question 5: *What role has the Texas State Iconography Conference played in the interpretation of Mississippian Iconography?*

Reilly: "It is the clearing house, responsible for publications and dissemination of this information. And, it is the founding location of this school of thought. The San Marcos Method."

Question 6: *What role does the holistic method play in your analysis?*

Reilly: "The multidisciplinary approach is critical to understanding this material. A single approach won't work. You can't just find an object, you have to know the context, and the symbols. When you are looking at the symbols, you can't just view the item in terms of where it was found, but you have to know what those symbols meant. Are there any stories that tell you about the image? If so, where are those stories from? Do they relate to the item?"

Question 7: *With regards to a specific object, can you discuss the evolution of thought on how you, or others, interpret it?*

Reilly: “You take an object. It’s a problem if you have an object that has symbols not seen anywhere else. What exactly then do you have? You can’t do anything with it. However, you start with a structural analysis. Start taking it apart. Then compare those structures to other structures. Find the patterning. But, you may not always be able to determine or interpret its meaning. However, you look at the patterning, the larger corpus, and once you define the boundaries, you look to the ethnographic sources to help you interpret the story or its meaning.”

Question 8: *Is this interpretation different from those of 20, 30, or 50 years ago?*

Reilly: “Previously in the past, they said much of this was unknowable. They interpreted these items in the technological process by which it was made, not the meaning with which the object carried.

Question 9: *What is the Mayan Hieroglyphic Conference? When did it start and what were its founding principles?*

Reilly: “The Maya meetings are still in existence and, as a matter of fact, I am giving a talk there this year on the Olmec and Maya. However, it started as a product of Linda Schele and others. They put together books and assembled information about Maya hieroglyphs wanting to teach these things to a larger body of people. Overtime, the workshop expanded. People began staying a week and working in inscriptions. Slowly, it expanded to Teotihuacan and the Mixtec codices. One day, I asked her about applying

the method to the Mississippian world. After that, we began meeting at the Maya hieroglyphic workshop in Austin for 3 years. However, this environment slowly became a problem. People were becoming a little intimidated. The Mayanists were making great breakthroughs and we were not. So, I pulled the conference, and we went to San Marcos. San Marcos was much more constructive. We would divide into groups. Everyone would meet and look at a specific problem or region or corpus. Now, no one had to agree, that wasn't necessary, but they had to present, each group, to the larger group at the end of the week. Show everyone what we worked on...what we had learned. The idea was that this work would then be turned into a book. We have two books right now—*Ancient Objects, Sacred Realms*, and *Visualizing the Sacred*.¹²⁶ This workshop also grew into an exhibit—*Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand* was the first. All of the authors for that publication also were part of the iconography workshop. Look at Spiro. The [Spiro] exhibit we are working on has come about from the workshop. You are a member of the workshop and were able to organize Spiro, but the authors and the themes come from the work of the workshop. Also, as you know, the workshop moves around. Mostly it is in San Marcos, but we went to the Chickasaw Nation, last year we were at the SAR's in New Mexico, this coming summer, we will go back to Santa Fe, then the following year I was asked to hold it at the George Stuart Research Center in North Carolina.”

¹²⁶ F. Kent Reilly, III and James F. Garber, ed., *Ancient Objects and Sacred Realms: Interpretations of Mississippian Iconography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007). And, George Lankford, F. Kent Reilly, III, and James Garber, ed., *Visualizing the Sacred: Cosmic Visions, Regionalism, and the Art of the Mississippian World* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

Section 2 - David Dye Interview

Dr. David Dye is an Associate Professor of Archaeology at the University of Memphis in the Department of Earth Sciences.¹²⁷ His areas of specialization are Mississippian conflict and cooperation, political organization, exchange, and religion. His approach to archaeology is unequivocally multidisciplinary and incorporates folklore, iconography, and ethnohistory. He was awarded his Ph.D. in 1980 from Washington University in St. Louis and is a prolific lecturer and publisher. His selected publications include: *The Transformation of Mississippian Warfare: Four Case Studies from the Mid-South, Ritual, Medicine, and War Trophy Iconographic Theme in the Mississippian Southeast; Severed Heads and Sacred Scalplocks: Mississippian Iconographic Trophies; Hightower Anthropomorphic Marine Shell Gorgets and Duck River Sword-form Flint Bifaces: Middle Mississippian Ritual Regalia in the Southern Appalachians*; and *Desecrating the Sacred Ancestor Temples: Chiefly Conflict and Violence in the American Southeast*. Dr. Dye was selected for this interview because of his extensive work with the Texas State Iconography conference, his expertise in pre-Columbian ceremonial weaponry—a field that separates him from the other scholars—and his extensive publications, which are firmly rooted in the multidisciplinary approach.

¹²⁷ David Dye, interview by Eric Singleton, November 15, 2016.

Question 1: *Some argue that the field of Mississippian Iconography has changed dramatically in the last 50 years. Would you agree? Why?*

Dye: “Absolutely. And, this is really good, because you have to go back and understand the early writers like C.B. Moore. Back then, many of these people worked with ethnologists, and investigated Mississippian symbolism by actually talking to Indians. So many scholars, working at the Smithsonian, could go down the hall and knock on someone’s door, like Alice Fletcher’s, and say what do the Omaha or Osage have to say about this? What does it mean? But then in the 1930s, with the beginning of New Deal Archaeology, that approach was thrown out the window. That’s because they didn’t view the ethnographic approach as scientific. And, this was a paradigm shift. Really, this field has seen so many paradigm shifts. First, by using ethnology, but then when New Deal Archaeology took the stage as the primary vehicle. And, it was here that all of the ethnology stopped. Where it really started again was with Robert Hall. He was the one who really started comparing pre-Columbian symbols with ethnographic sources. Sadly, people were so entrenched in their approach that I was at meetings and conferences where people initially laughed at him. But he was right. And, he just ignored everybody. That included Jimmy Griffin. Griffin just stood up at conferences and blasted him. They were really cruel. So, you have Robert Hall, but the next person who came along was Kent Reilly. Kent really ushered in a new paradigm shift. So, what you have is a series of shifts in thinking and a push back against it, time and time again. Like today, you have people who argue for a political economy and those who argue back that it is a ritual economy. But, the benefit of what we do is incorporate and evaluate all of it. We are not divorced from those changes. We are influencing and influenced by those changes.

Question 2: *With regards to your particular field how do you think that the academic community has changed with regards to interpretation, publications, and interactions with Native Americans and scholars?*

Dye: “Well, look at academia.edu. You can query that through Amazon or Facebook and you can look up stuff and download it immediately. And, you can look at your own work and see who is looking at it, where are they from, and what is getting the most hits and reference and see what people are interested in. For example, I have many hits in Ada, Oklahoma, so I know that, most likely, many tribal members are reading my work. I have an article on academia.edu that I did with a Chickasaw friend from Nashville, and it has hundreds and hundreds of hits. It’s on the ethics of should we talk about warfare, and I’ve done other things that only have like twenty hits. I find that ritual, iconography, and religion are the most popular and create the most interest. I get hits from all over the world on those subjects. So, I think technology not only helps us disseminate this material but also assess the impact. I also think that publications and articles on religion and ritual has helped others come out and talk about these things more. Really, there should be a statue erected of Kent. I mean he has done something that is absolutely amazing. Do people disagree with him, yea, but there are always going to be people who disagree with you, and that is the nature of scholarship. But with regards to the conference and the participants we all agree to work together, and Kent has literally, through his own force of will, created a paradigm shift in Mississippian studies. I can’t extol his virtues enough, and he has done it singlehandedly. Some of this, a lot of this, he got from working with Linda Schele.

Question 3: *What are some of the best methods you currently employ for interpreting Mississippian Iconography?*

Dye: “First of all, it is kind of a combination. I accumulate as large of a corpus as I can. So, for example, if I am looking at female figures or head pots, I want to see every example there is and look at the spatial and temporal dimensions of them, then I am going to do a stylistic analysis of them, then I am going to the ethnographic literature, and how Native people were looking at these things and the language they use. Then consider how all these things work together. But, time and space is just huge. I think that is what blocks so many archaeologists. They can’t see past the particular and the underlining themes and processes and structure that is there. Those little dolls are a good example of that. Seen all over North America, if you begin to look at the use of these little anthropomorphic figures in a ritual context, they are not kid play things. I think people are praying to them for spiritual help and vision. So, when you look at the culture and you realize that this stuff is mostly ritual, and it is also in the ethnographic literature, you have these “ah ha” moments. Same thing with tattoos. I have read a ton of ethnographic literature on ritual and tattooing and ceremonies and how these things articulate with each other. That structure and process and human agency. And sort of an underlining idea that I have is and what this has shown me, is that people across North America, particularly eastern North America, from the Rockies to the Atlantic and from the Gulf to the Great Lakes, they are a lot more alike than they are different. And one of the things that really makes me think that is I was talking to a Choctaw friend of mine who went to visit some Iroquois friends and he said ‘you know, their dances are really just like ours’ and you look at the Pawnee and the Iroquois they have a different

language, but many of their customs are very similar. Same world view and perspective of the world. I think we have spent too much time looking at differences, but as archaeologists, I think we should maybe spend more time looking at similarities and I think that allows us to use the ethnographic literature a lot better. Keep in mind, for example, with the Omaha and the Pawnee, you have different ethnographers working there and each is interpreting and filtering the data differently. A native speaker versus a nonnative speaker. Francis La Flesche versus Franz Boas. And, some of the problem is that much of this stuff is just so sacred, they will not talk about it. And this happened with some of the early French priests, who were working and living with Native people. One person in particular, Father Davian in the Mississippi Valley in the early 1700s, wrote that they will not tell me anything, they are so secretive. And, that I can understand. If you have medicine societies, absolutely they are not going to tell you anything. And, that is one of the clues that these are secret societies. And another thing, he wrote, here are their gods and he listed them and you can match the ceramics right up to them. They've got the sun and moon, the four corners, they got all kinds."

Question 4: *What role does the holistic method play in your analysis?*

Dye: "It is my analysis. Like we mentioned before, you have to look at this material from multiple perspectives. Stylistically, ethnographically, archaeologically, historically, etc. And, they each build on each other. None of them are going to give you the entire picture. You have to use all of them. And that is true regardless of what you are studying. There are so many perspectives and they can all be useful. Don't limit

yourself. Now, that is not to say that all of them are relevant to each situation, but you really need to look at them all.

Question 5: *Are there any fields which are not being employed that should?*

Dye: “That is a good question. I think what is not being used is a very strong post-processual agency orientation. And, I think a lot of this is rooted in politics and personalities, which is a shame, but that is human nature.”

Question 6: *What role has the Texas State Iconography Conference played in the interpretation of Mississippian Iconography?*

Dye: “It has done everything. Attitudes, perspective, scholarship. Fifty-years from now, we will look back at the workshop as the golden age of iconography. Where it was all to be done, and everyone just jumped into it and did it. It has really changed everything. I mean, you have a place where all these different scholars can come, share ideas, and feed off each other. And, we are all friends and have a healthy respect for each other and each other’s work. That is really important. You also want an environment where you can be challenged, but in a good way that makes you think and question your own ideas and those of others and gets to the heart to a topic or idea. But, one where everyone is working towards the same goal...to better understand this material and Mississippian culture.”

Question 7: *Is this interpretation different from those 20, 30, or 50 years ago?*

Dye: “Oh, absolutely. First off, the field really wasn’t that big. And, those that were doing it weren’t looking at it holistically. Remember what I said about Robert Hall. They just didn’t see it. Today, we also have access to so many more resources, and really we look at it differently. We look at the object, its context, the ethnographic literature. That is just so important. The ethnographic literature can tell you so many things.

Section 3 – James R. Duncan and Carol Diaz-Granados Interview

Mr. James R. Duncan and Dr. Carol Diaz-Granados were selected for this interview because they are the leading authorities on Mississippian rock art and its stylistic connections to engraved and embossed images on pre-Columbian material cultural items.¹²⁸ They were interviewed together because they are married. Duncan is the former Director of the Missouri State Museum and is of Osage and Cherokee descent. Both Duncan and Diaz-Granados travel yearly to the Osage Nation to attend the dances and speak with the Osage elders. Dr. Diaz-Granados received her Ph.D. from Washington in St. Louis in 1993 and was the first person to connect Missouri rock art to Cahokian iconography. Together, they have produced four publications, including *Picture Cave: Unraveling the Mysteries of the Mississippian Cosmos*; *Drawing with Great Needles: Ancient Tattoo Tradition of North America*; *The Rock-Art of Eastern North America: Capturing images and insight*; and *The Petroglyphs and Pictographs of Missouri*.

¹²⁸ James R. Duncan and Carol Diaz-Granados, interview by Eric Singleton, October 17, 2016.

Question 1: *Some argue that the field of Mississippian Iconography has changed dramatically in the last 50 years. Would you agree? Why?*

Duncan: “Yes. Absolutely. It goes back to pre-World War II and Philip Phillips, James Griffin and the “Lovell Valley Expedition.” Now Griffin was not a great iconographer or a fan of the ethnographic record, but these objects ignited a spark in Griffin and Phillips. Phillips did the Spiro shell engravings with Jim Brown. They did the Spiro shell book and had a female style analyst working with them. Before them, however, was Griffin and his 1952 book *Archaeology of Eastern United States*.¹²⁹ Also, Hamilton’s Spiro Mounds book.¹³⁰ These are two early works, but they have a checkered commentary. Griffin especially. He tears himself in two in that book. The best information for the early stuff though is Hamilton. Its analytic information. Now back then, the biggest problem is lack of scientific dating. Seriation was how they were doing it.¹³¹ Then there came Brown. Brown extols the virtues of Braden. He saw it as the first, before Craig. However, then you have Kent (Reilly). Kent said, you have to look at the Rock Art. And that’s what Carol (Diaz-Granados, PhD.) does. And that’s it. You can’t remove rock art. It has to be included. It is the baseline.”

¹²⁹ James B. Griffin, *Archaeology of Eastern United States* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952).

¹³⁰ Henry W. Hamilton, *The Spiro Mound* (Columbia: The Missouri Archaeologist, 1952).

¹³¹ Seriation is “the determination of the chronological sequence of styles, types, or assemblages of types (cultures) by any methods or combination of methods. Stratigraphy may be employed, or the materials may be from surface sites.” In other words, seriation was the determination of chronology based on physical attributes or frequency of appearance. Lee Lyman, Steve Wolverton, and Michael O’Brien, “Seriation, Superposition and Interdigitation: A History of Americanist Graphic Depictions of Culture Change,” in *American Antiquity*, 63, 2 (1998): 239. For bib 239-261.

Question 2: *What are some of the best methods you currently employ for interpreting Mississippian Iconography?*

Duncan: “You have to employ as much science as possible; but it is a paradox. If you do not employ science, you get laughed off the stage, but it is very expensive.”

Diaz-Granados “And getting more costly. Ethnology is much cheaper, but you don’t have the scientific dating to back up the conclusions that can be inferred through ethnology. You can travel, use libraries, and look through previous researchers notes.”

Duncan: “But, to get foundational support you need science. And, if you don’t get the funds, you aren’t able to draw the support from others. Science gives velocity and cutting edge to research. On the opposite side, dedicated nonacademic persons make connections in their head, but without science they are often ignored. Like collectors; if not channeled publically it disappears forever.”

Question 3: *Are there any fields not being employed that should?*

Duncan: “The most underutilized is working with descendants of the artist. That is who Carol and I deal with. You have to go to the source. If you know who to talk to, it is all there. But, not everyone is interested in participating. We (Carol Diaz-Granados and I) have spent thousands of hours interviewing Osage elders and tribal members looking for who knows certain information and also wants to share. It is important to share. If not, this stuff will be lost forever.”

Question 4: *What role does the holistic approach play in your analysis?*

Duncan: “It is everything. It is the tacking and cabling methodology used by Alice Wylie.¹³² Essentially, you have to have many strands to make a rope. And, that’s what you have with Picture Cave. The only way for Carol and I to make sense of it was to include scientists, elders, museum curators, folklorists, chemists, and photographers. It takes a village to raise a project and that is the basis of the holistic method. So, what I am saying is, the holistic approach is the only approach. Without it, it is like sailing without an anchor. Also, the holistic approach is better approach when looking for funding and the results you get are without a doubt better.”

Question 5: *What role has the Texas State Iconography conference played in the interpretation of Mississippian Iconography?*

Duncan: “Kent, and his workshop, is the method—tacking and cabling. The holistic method. Kent is the father of this method today in southeastern archaeology and what we do. Without Kent, we would be miles behind. Plus, Kent has a conscience and that is important. Kent believes in what he is doing and brings people together from all over to

¹³² This concept is a direct result of “New Archaeology,” which began in the 1960s, and the philosophical debate regarding methodological strategies for understanding culture offered by Richard J. Bernstein. As Wylie describes, “Bernstein’s characterization of the alternatives ‘beyond’ turns on a central metaphor: an amended version of Peirce’s suggestion that scientific arguments are more like cables than chains. When researchers grapple with incommensurable theories, Bernstein argues, they do not (indeed, cannot) proceed by ‘a linear movement from premise to conclusions or from individual “facts” to generalizations’; they must exploit ‘multiple strands and diverse types of evidence, data, hunches, and arguments to [assess and, ultimately, to] support a scientific hypotheses or theory. By extension of the Pierce metaphor, Bernstein concludes that even where there is no single commensurating ground for judgement, the ‘cumulative weight of [disparate, multidimensional considerations of] evidence, data, reasons, and arguments can be rationally decisive.’ Alison Wylie, “Archaeological Cables and Tacking: The Implications of Practice for Bernstein’s ‘Options Beyond Objectivism and Relativism,’” in *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 19 (1989): 7.

put their heads together and approach this stuff from all different points of view. You have to have different points of view. Sometimes it is what gives you a breakthrough. And, it helps when everyone gets along. And, that is another great thing about Kent. He gets along with everyone and can have a conversation with everyone, and he listens to what they have to say.

Questions 6: *With regards to a specific object, can you discuss the evolution of thought on how you, or others, interpret it?*

Duncan: “Well, the first thing you have to do is know what you’ve got and how that item compares to all the rest. Does it fit in the larger corpus? Where was it found? What is its context? Next, what imagery is on it? Now to understand the imagery, you need to look at the ethnology and talk to the elders. That is how you know what it means and how it was used. You can then compare all that information against the ethnology. It is important though that you know who to talk to. Many people say they know, but they may just be bamboozling you.

Section 4 - Robert Sharp Interview

Mr. Robert Sharp is the former Executive Director of Publications at the Art Institute of Chicago and has been a yearly participant at the Mississippian Iconography Conference since 2005.¹³³ His participation began following a year editing the National Endowment for the Humanities publication *Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand: American*

¹³³ Robert Sharp, interview by Eric Singleton, January 20, 2017.

Indian Art of the Midwest and South for the Art Institute.¹³⁴ Sharp has worked on numerous and extremely varied academic volumes during his career. Born in Nashville, Sharp attended Vanderbilt, where he studied literature, but his professional career was spent working more as art historian and editor. Although not a trained anthropologist, Sharp brings a unique perspective to iconographic research. In many ways, it is his lack of formal anthropological training that makes his contribution to the field and this paper so valuable. Sharp applies his graduate training in “New Criticism” to this subject providing him a perspective often not afforded to those who studied the field in college and the professional world.

Question 1: *Some argue that the field of Mississippian Iconography has changed dramatically in the last 50 years. Would you agree? Why?*

Sharp: “Well, let me first say, I am an unusual participant in this, because I only entered this discipline fourteen years ago. And I came into it at almost the age of 55, with a pretty rich background in art exhibitions and publications on art history from ten different curatorial departments—doing books on photography, architecture, European painting, and Asian art, so I was a generalist, but even then, I was unusual. I was not a trained art historian, but that is how I thought and where I worked—in an art museum. I studied literature. I came into this, and had this unusual exposure, in that I spent an entire year working with these scholars (Texas State Conference members) on their essays for the catalogue *Hero, Hawk* (and open Hand), and that was like my graduate course. It was like I did a Master’s degree in Archaeology and Iconography, so involved was I in the

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catalogue and every essay that went into it, yet I have never had a single course in Anthropology or Archaeology, yet suddenly I'm taking the graduate seminar with Kent (Reilly), and Jim Knight, and David (Dye), and Vin Steponaitis, and Jim Brown—all those guys—so I kind of want to acknowledge that I had a unique introduction. Now I did have my own graduate training, I'm not happy to admit that I am ABD in English literature, but I started working, it was the late 70s, and it is still sitting in a box. People were coming back to college then, and I stayed working. The job market was terrible, there were no tenure track jobs, and I never looked back. But, that year that I spent working on the catalogue was my graduate training. And, as I thought about this question, I wanted to acknowledge that I have not been a part of Mississippian Iconography over the course of my career. It was only the last portion of my career and, of course, my exposure was to the agents of change, as I would call them, David (Dye) and Kent (Reilly) and George (Lankford). Those are the guys who had already been meeting for many years. Already bring change to Mississippian Iconography. So, when Richard Townsend undertook the exhibit (*Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand*) he made one trip to San Marcos, met all the authors, he was very impressed by them, and he then brought everyone to Chicago, where we had several days of a workshop here and he signed them up to write for the catalogue. The bulk of the authors for the catalogue were the workshop members, along with others like Garrick Bailey and the Hopewell guys, so I haven't been around to see it change, but rather walked into the change, as it was happening. Therefore, my perspective on the change is simply limited to research, not experience. I was born into that tornado of change that Kent's workshop was responsible for and I think I brought a perspective I would like to talk about. So, as I was thinking

about this today, I was thinking on my graduate training. When I was at Vanderbilt in the 70s, I started there in '72, that decade was rich in a critical theory that is known today as the "New Criticism." Now there have been many theories that have held sway over the years, but when I was in graduate school, the dominate critical theory was "New Criticism" and the point of it was a very close reading of that text. For example, my professor would present us a text and say tell me about it, and up until that point I would offer a bio of the author, the period in which he wrote, etc., but the professor would stop me and say, no—tell me about the text. They didn't want to know the author's bio or cultural history; who was king, whether they were a noble or a commoner, were they a catholic or a protestant. What does the text say! My undergraduate was all about biography. Know your background. Was the author rich or poor, married, etc. And, sometimes this was overwhelming. That was totally turned on its head in graduate school. So, when I came into iconography there was a similar vein. In the art world, it was look at the art. In a museum, it is, what does the object say? Pay attention to the work of art! So, in iconography, it was look at the object. I didn't know cultural theory, how far one site was from another, or one settlement. I had to look at the objects and that is not how most of these guys started out. They grew up with this. I didn't have the "dirt training" they had, instead I had the catalogue. And, with the catalogue we were just looking at objects. Looking at the marks of a human being. So, in the end, and I want to stress this, I didn't lack graduate training, but I did lack archaeological training. But, if I have gotten somewhere in this field, it is because of my graduate training. In the end, I would say I am an art historian and that is how I approach this."

Question 2: *What are some of the best methods you currently employ for interpreting Mississippian Iconography?*

Sharp: “I had my own academic background and a rich background in publication editing and that is how I started at the conference. So, really the methods I employ are a combination of that previous training and the conference training, so to speak, that I received from these guys, Kent (Reilly), Jim (James Vernon Knight), George (Lankford). And they were great. So, welcoming. It was after I finished the catalogue that Kent invited me down and I joined a group with Vin (Vincas Steponaitis), Jim (James Vernon Knight), and George (Lankford) and they said “What are you interested in?” So, as I am from Nashville, I said I was interested in that. And, they, again, were so fantastic, and said “Ok” let’s look at that. And, what is amazing, was that these guys didn’t work in that area really, but jumped right in and we started looking at bowls, bottles, owl effigies. All sorts of things. It was a great week. We all got along and I said, I have to come back. I had become so drawn to this stuff. So, I studied over the winter, looked at tons of pieces and came back and gave a presentation. Afterwards, it was Jim Knight who said “Robert, you have at least two papers here.” It was so inspiring. And, I wouldn’t have even known that if not for him and those guys. They were so supportive and great. So, for me, I started with those fundamentals that the conference taught. Look at the corpus, the groupings, the sets. The women artists who made them, as you know like the female figures, and doing that, now I think I can identify three or four specific artists! So again, it was these guys. They have been so amazing. David Dye has been amazing. And from

him, and them, I realize that I can study these things and really start to identify them and what they are. And, it has been great too, that my research of female effigy figures goes hand in hand with a rise in the feminist movement, so initially, when I gave my first paper, I was apprehensive on how women would perceive it, but they have been really supportive. So, back to your question. The larger context is important. Once I build a corpus, I need background—the burial context, cosmology, ethnology. I need that additional data. So, I look at the markings in combination with their burial context and this gives me insight into what they mean. Many of these female effigy vessels are buried with children in a house floor. Knowing that, and through the ethnological literature, that many Native Americans believe in soul recycling and thought that they might get these children back, it gives me insight into what these vessels were, what they meant, and why they were being put in the graves of children. So, in many ways, I guess I am working in a reverse fashion. I started with the objects and they (many of the conference attendees) started with theory. Another thing that helped, is studying the work of the conference guys and seeing how they feed on each other. And that is the great thing, and was really the intention of the conference. Kent (Reilly) worked with Linda Schele and that is how the Maya Meetings were set up. To feed off of everyone's ideas. So, the most important thing is sharing. You have to share. In that capacity, a really important article for me was done by Jim Knight, Jim Brown, and George Lankford where they talk about these female effigy figures and determined that they were all supernatural. This was not a real woman, but the Earth Mother. Collectors have come up to me and said this looks like a real woman and I say this is not a real person. She is the mother of us all. She is responsible for rebirth. That is why she was buried with

children. The vessel may be imperfect, she might look like she had a stroke, or some other ailment, but it is likely just an imperfection of the vessel's creation. This is an image of a deity. This is a workshop product—that these figures are supernatural. The above world, or other worldly figures.”

Question 3: *What are some of the best methods you currently employ for interpreting Mississippian Iconography?*

Sharp: “I think the place to begin, for me, is the females (Female Effigy Figures) and their negative painted garments, which I still don't think we have exhausted with regards to interpretation. Anyway, it was to ask about a motif that appears on the negative painted wrap around shawl these women wear and the closest thing was a kind of big oval, which is a large-scale motif and heavily seen on Mississippian material. So I thought, what is the oval associated with? Now going through all the images, it seems to be most associated with the ogee symbol. Often at the center of the ogee there is the oval. And, so I started working on it. Now, the ogee is worldwide. It is a remarkable emblem. It appears in Asian Buddhist art, the Middle East, North Africa. And, the

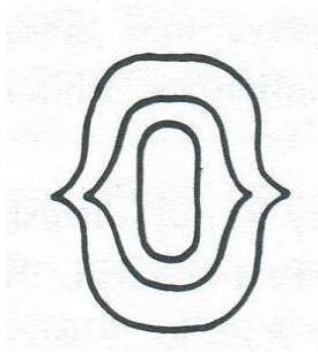


Figure 13; Ogee motif

simple geometric devise of the concave and convex that come down together and repeat. When they come together you get the ogee. So, I thought, that has to come from somewhere. Many thought it was a human eye. But, C.B. Moore wrote in the early teens (1900s), that it is not an eye. He wrote that it was an image of unknown meaning, but that it is definitely not an eye. It doesn't appear on the human head, and is not related to

the human eye. So, as I thought about it, for Native Americans, it had to be drawn from something in their world. Now, just before I wrote a paper on this, Kent Reilly invited me down to Texas State to give a talk to his students and faculty in the anthropology department and the talk was called something like “Finding Our Place in Their World” and by *their* I meant animal world. What all cultures seem to do is incorporate the animals that surround them and establish themselves in a world of animals. In other words, underwater creatures, snakes, etc. And, I was particularly talking about snakes and the predominance of snake imagery, because I had argued that the ogee was drawn from the copper head motif. I had shown those plates from Phillips and Brown of the Spiro shell cups that have ogees on a guy’s arms and torso and there is another plate with a snake and the snake has ogees up and down it. And, I said that is a copperhead motif. It is a very simple copperhead motif as opposed to a diamond rattle snake emblem, which you also see a lot of. In particular, on bottles, Arkansas bottles, where you see diamonds wrapped around the neck of the bottle. There will often be a repeated diamond design. So, I said that is going to be a rattle snake motif, not a copperhead or ogee motif. And, I tried to say, you are not just a copperhead, but rather that you passed through realms and that the motif expresses passage, or a kind of transcendence from this world into the beneath world or the above world. So, it becomes a portal, and we are always interested in other realms and maybe this, and I argued this out with Kent, that the ogee often surrounds the neck and so whatever is being poured in, liquid or substance, or coming out, is passing through that portal. And, so in the course of that conversation, I thought why is this a portal, how does it become a portal? So, for me, it was going back to the beginning. It comes from a snake and they move through realms. It can climb a tree, it

can swim, it moves along the ground, it comes out in spring. Why do we image all these winged serpents? It has the ability to instill in us all the supernatural characteristics. So, if the primary motif is taken from a snake, then it gets abstracted from this beautifully geometric design, then that starts appearing on people's shawls as though they are people of passage, who have transcended this world, or are from the above world, or whatever. They are people of passage. But the symbol is rooted in the natural world, just as the forked eye is rooted in the peregrine falcon. Just like the diamond is rooted in the diamond back rattler. I don't think they had to make up the diamond. They saw it all the time. And, so the natural world just seemed to me to be one of those subjects that helps establish context. So, context is not just archaeological—was it from Tennessee, was it buried under a floor, was it from a burial, instead, maybe it is from a snake in Tennessee. The snake is a part of the environment, and they are just drawing from the world they find themselves in the midst of, and they use those things for their myths. And, when you look at the myths, there are so many myths about snakes. Underwater snakes, southeastern imagery is just replete with snakes. So, I sent this idea to Kent, about the snakes, and asked "Is there any reason no one has ever associated the ogee with snakes?" And, he said no one has ever thought of it. So, my next question was do you accept this, and he said yes, and now Jim Brown, and Kevin (Smith) have accepted it, and we think it works. So then, for me, and getting back to context, meaning the provenience of the object, I saw that the female effigy bottles are coming out of graves, but that maybe the markings on the vessels are coming from a different context—perhaps the natural world. So, if you look at the forked eye surround, and everyone agrees that the forked eye motif symbolizes the above world, then maybe the ogee symbolized a world as well. And, used

in a specific context on that bottle, makes it a portal symbol allowing things to pass through worlds. There are these great stories from the northern Plains, Siouan, about the old woman, and her husbands are serpents and when she baths in the river, every time she goes down and comes back up she gets younger. Also, that the birds that come back in the spring are her companions, the plants start growing in the spring, and the snakes come out of the ground in the spring and the ritual association with renewal and she is directly associated with that. So, the emergence of snakes, the emergence of plants, the next cycle of growth, and the return of birds. So, if I had a method, it would be to look for these points of connection.

Question 4: *What role does the holistic method play in your analysis?*

Sharp: “Well, to go back to the last question, and what I talked about, if anything is holistic, it says, take your archaeological evidence, your ethnographic, and your natural history and run them together. Keep them together. And, that is how you have to look at these things. Taking from all these different disciplines and points of contact. For example, Kevin (Smith) is working on the Triskele gorgets from Tennessee. You know them. He has analyzed them and divided them up and one of the central, core components of the gorget, is not just the three-wheel turning center, but the band that goes around it with the punctated circles. Those punctated circles, in Tennessee typically, have six or eight of those circles, but Kevin (Smith) recently showed me one with seven. And, he gave a talk on this last March, and in connection with this, I have often said that the Spiro Shell figure in Phillips and Brown at the Gilcrease Museum also shows those punctated marks in the same fashion. It surrounds the person. And, what

does he have on his body? The ogees. He is the man who passes through realms. He is transcendent. He can move through realms, come back from the dead. He can bring others back from the dead. So then, what is the ring that surrounds him with punctated images? So here is Kevin's idea, and I totally agree with it. You are going to love this. I hope I am not stealing his thunder, but it is so great and fits what we are talking about.



Figure 14; Ogee motif on engraved shell, Mississippian Period, Gilcrease Museum, 9025.1697

This is the Pleiades! These punctated circles are the stars of the Pleiades. The largest star cluster visible in the night sky. And, every culture throughout the world and down through time, has had a story about them. Some people perceive six, some seven, some eight. So, I think of the Spiro shell cup, you are looking at is the Pleiades and this is a portal in the night sky. Now, looking at other cultures around the world, you see the same grouping. For example, it is on the Nebra Sky disk from Northern Europe, and it was completed in 1600 BC. Looking at the North American historical period you can see it on a Southern Cheyenne shield at the Detroit Institute of Art. It belonged to Little Rock, who was killed in the Battle of the Washita River, in 1868. And, his shield was taken from the battle field and given to the Detroit Scientific Association, and then later the Detroit institute of Arts. And it's got Thunder Birds, and the moon and the sun, and the Pleiades! It is right there. It is the Pleiades. Plain as day. In the European world, it is the Seven Sisters. In the Native American world, they are children. They were starving children who floated up to the sky and became the seven children. So, what if they become a portal for the dead? Maybe that is why we are getting so many Triskele

gorgets in the burials of children along with the female effigy figures. And, this is then tied to the ethnographic literature and the Native American belief in rebirth. So, you don't just have the hand, tied to the belt of Orion that George Lankford has identified. You have this. So, some tribes might use Orion, but other may use this. Or use this in a different way. Maybe the Pleiades is where the souls of children go. I don't know. Maybe, this is where the souls come back. They go up through Orion and back down through the Pleiades. Again, I don't know, but there is something going on with these dozens and dozens of Nashville style Triskele gorgets and these other images. And, so again, when you see that these are connected with the deity (The Female Effigy Figure or earth mother) that is responsible for rebirth and the recycling of the child's soul, it starts to make you think. For example, you are a parent, your child dies, and you then beseech this deity for the return of your child. The children are buried under the house floor, and along paths to rivers, all the places that women work and live, so the soul can come back to you, in you, as you give birth to another child. Remember what Kevin (Smith) said, what if that dead child is needed to keep a clan going, especially in a time of drought, which is when most of these gorgets and vessels are being made, and they need those children to come back. So, maybe the female deity brings them back and the gorget shows them how, or where to return.

Question 5: - *Are there any fields which are not being employed that should?*

Sharp: "Well, I don't know. I would say the natural world, but I am using it, so I guess it is being used, but it doesn't always seem to be used extensively."

Questions 6: - *What role has the Texas State Iconography Conference played in the interpretation of Mississippian Iconography?*

Sharp: “Well, I can’t say exactly. As we discussed I came into this field late. But, I think, this discussion we’ve had, shows how far the field has come from the assumptions of Waring and Holder, where all this was a simple cult manifestation, where no one thought you could determine what this meant. It has provided the environment for a cataclysmic change, if you will.”

The interviews provided in this paper are intended to show different perspectives to a single methodological approach currently present in field of Mississippian Iconographic research. Furthermore, these interviews document the evolution of scholarship over the last fifty plus years and will be explored further in Chapter 5. Each interviewer was selected because they specialize in a particular field, yet bring an explicit aspect of their training to bear on the subject of Mississippian Iconography—adding substance to the holistic methodology employed by the Texas State Iconography workshop. Originally, the intention was to interview three additional conference members, James A. Brown, George Lankford, and Kevin Smith. However, as these interviews progressed, it was clear that the same methodology and scholarly evolution was at play, and additional perspectives were not needed.

CHAPTER IV

EVERYONE HAS A THOUGHT: LOOKING AT PAST APPROACHES

Section 1 – Determining Time and Space

This chapter will explore the evolution of thought prior to the introduction of the San Marcos School by assessing the various periods and paradigm shifts that occurred before a proper holistic methodology was adopted. This is no simple task. Nearly 500 years of documentation was necessary, with various shifts in thinking put forth, torn down, and then reworked before scholars could accurately apply a specific, and nearly unified, approach to assessing the data. Still today, there are those who argue for pure science, while others argue for a general, non-specific, ethnographic comparative model.¹³⁵ Separately though, neither presents a complete picture. The truth of this is seen by evaluating the various stages of scholarly application regarding a given method of thinking. Thus, unraveling the history of pre-Columbian North American culture is an ongoing and constantly evolving exploration.

To accurately judge these stages, we must start at the beginning, when Europeans began documenting and recording the cultures of North America. These early sources are now, the backbone of ethnographic and archaeological interpretation. Although they

¹³⁵ David S. Brose, “Changing Paradigms in the Explanation of Southeastern Prehistory,” in *The Development of Southeastern Archaeology*, ed. Jay K. Johnson (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1993), 6.

were not created with that intention, they are the only primary resources available that describe pre-historic Native Americans. These sources, the first of which were written in the Spanish American territories, were undertaken as both a survey and a way to capitalize on native resources, including people. Later, with the increase in exploration for colonization and trade, other European sources appeared. While the early sixteenth century expeditions, minus de Soto and a few others, were located near the coast, later seventeenth and eighteenth century accounts prodded into the North American interior. As European settlement increased in the colonial period, curiosity primarily drove interpretation. Little effort was made to scientifically deduce the pre-Columbian structures and material being discovered and unearthed. Instead, romanticized versions of a mythical past were laid forth. This near complete lack of acceptance for a Native American role in the creation of the mounds led to speculation that they were created by any number of European, Mediterranean, and Asian people. In the minds of many Americans, such dynamic and skilled engineers and artists could only have come from the “Old World.” To them, it was unfathomable that Native Americans might accomplish such feats. Unquestionably, this belief was rooted in racism and a desire to strip Native people of their land, culture, and past.¹³⁶ It was not until the late 1800s that the United States government, once the most enthusiastic proponent of removing and divesting Native people of their culture and heritage, finally acknowledged their archaeological past. From that moment on, a concerted effort was made to understand the archaeological past in a scientific or, at least, methodological way.

¹³⁶ Brose, “Changing Paradigms in the Explanation of Southeastern Prehistory,” 5.

This change opened the door to iconographic analysis of material unearthed in the pre-Columbian mounds and in various other structures. For researchers, the illustrated copper, shell, ceramic, and stone remained a mystery; although, it was no longer a question of who made them, but what they meant. However, could these images be connected to historic folklore and belief practices of contemporary Native Americans people? From the 1880s to the 1980s, mottled attempts were made to grasp some understanding of the ancient people who created the complex ceremonial centers as well as their iconographic writing. Moving through different systems and multiple paradigm shifts, academia investigated. In the twentieth century, archaeological techniques were solidified, scientific analysis such as radiocarbon testing was introduced, stylistic studies offered, and ethnographic sources investigated. However, it was not until the 1990s that a holistic methodology, known today as the San Marcos School, combined all of these practices and took its most ardent strides towards answering the mystery of who built the mounds and what the highly artistic and complex iconographic images found scattered through the eastern half of the United States represent.

Section 2 – Capricious Connections

When early European explorers made their way through the newly discovered continent, they recorded their interactions in government documents, personal journals, and drawings. Today, these documents are the closest mechanisms scholars have to seeing the pristine conditions that directed pre-Columbian Native American life. There is no Native American written documentation preceding European contact that can be referenced, and the vast ceremonial centers that controlled the region for nearly 800 years

prior to 1492 had already fallen or were in decline. Researchers are left sifting through early narratives trying to unravel the social, political, and economic structure of the ancient Native American people at the time of contact. These early documents, many argue, are the baseline for any interpretation of pre-contact cultures because they “may offer a glimpse of native lifeways in a relatively pristine state, before European contact had a chance to work its acculturative effect on the details of native custom.”¹³⁷

Early descriptions fall essentially into one of two categories—government documents or personal narratives. Each is unique. However, government documents are often more basic. Concerned more with accountability, these were used by European administrators to determine the degree to which Native cultures inhabited the “new” lands, monitor the actions of rampaging conquistadors, sailors, and missionaries, and to determine the profitability of the newly explored regions. Found primarily in European archives, these historical documents, when used correctly, are seen today as highly valuable sources. Yet, for all their benefits, they are typically very spartan. An example of this is the narrative of Luis Hernández de Biedma, who worked as a colonial administrator and submitted his report of the de Soto expedition to the Council of the Indies in 1544. Although informative, Biedma’s account is more concerned with distances traveled, soldiers sent into battle, the numbers of enemies, and obstacles traversed as they moved across a new landscape. What makes this account extra interesting is the neutral tone of the expedition and the lack of first-person descriptions. As Patricia Galloway remarks, scholars “frequently use it in their attempts to reconstruct

¹³⁷ Patricia K. Galloway, “Ethnohistory,” in *The Development of Southeastern Archaeology*, ed. Jay K. Johnson (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1993), 81.

the trajectory and experiences of the expedition, or the geography, culture, society, and economy of the native peoples the expedition encountered.”¹³⁸

Large descriptive narratives are usually found in personal accounts or edited works. These tales, and that is perhaps the most accurate description, discuss the native population encountered by Spanish, English, French, and Dutch explorers, but they are usually second-hand compilations and are fanciful in their descriptions. Such is the case of Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, who for eight years roamed North America as a captive, trader, and shaman before finding his way back to Spanish territory in 1536.¹³⁹ Like government documents from the period, these sources are critical tools for evaluating and contextualizing the pre-Columbian past. However, as Patricia Galloway again asserts, these materials “have never been considered value-free by historians...because the standards of historiography in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were so much different from our own.”¹⁴⁰

The critical difference between these documents and those of today are the methods employed and the assumptions of the period. First, these documents were written with a clear purpose. Exploitative, by both the authors and colonial governments, these documents were used to justify further exploration and the decisions made by explorers as they battled their way through unknown territory hunting for loot. They were also used to control the colonial operator so far removed from European seats of governance. Furthermore, these documents are inherently clouded by the prejudices of

¹³⁸ Ida Altman, “An Official’s Report: The Hernández de Biedma Account,” in *The Hernando de Soto Expedition: History, Historiography, and “Discovery” in the Southeast*, ed. Patricia Galloway (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 3.

¹³⁹ Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, “Chronicle of Narváez Expedition,” in *The Journey of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca and His Companions from Florida to the Pacific 1528-1536*, trans. Fanny Bandelier and ed. AD. F. Bandelier (New York: A.S. Barnes & Company, 1905), xvi-xxv.

¹⁴⁰ Galloway, “Ethnohistory,” 79.

the time and ruled by two basic assumptions, that “conquest colonialism is at least to some degree right and justified, and that a history is meant to be edifying rather than absolutely true to the facts.”¹⁴¹ An additional assumption may be posed as well. Most edited works are inherently flawed by virtue of their second-hand nature leaving those who edited the volumes little room to dispute outrageous claims made either to justify a wrong, or because the explorers were legitimately confused, and at times terrified, by what they saw and experienced. Regardless, early sources are far removed from the colonial era sources, as well as the pre-and post-civil war period interpretation, in that they were merely writing what they saw without necessarily giving thought to interpretation.

Following the early Spanish chroniclers came English, French, Dutch, Italian, and many other explorers who pushed into North America looking to exploit North American resources, find a waterway to Asia, and, eventually, colonize the recently discovered continent. Manuscripts from these early pioneers are truly helpful for today’s researcher, but again, the authors cannot be considered developers of interpretative methodology because that was not the objective. Instead, these men sketched, painted, and wrote about the people in their pristine state giving little or no thought to their past—archaeological or otherwise. And, the same can be said for almost every generation leading up to the late colonial period. From John Smith to William Bartram, each studied and wrote about the Native cultures they encountered documenting the current state of the Native nation. There were few exceptions, namely Bartram, and his investigations into the ancient mounds only came via interviews with Native Americans, who themselves had largely

¹⁴¹ Galloway, “Ethnohistory,” 82.

forgotten who built the ancient structures remarking in his diary on May 24, 1775, that “the Cherokees are as ignorant as we are, by what people or for what purpose these artificial hills were raised; they have various stories concerning them, the best of which amounts to no more than mere conjecture, and leave us entirely in the dark.”¹⁴²

For the most part, this 300-year period, from 1492 through 1770, was largely characterized by farfetched declarations regarding the pre-Columbian structures. No one had an answer, and aside from limited discussions with contemporary Native American people, no reasoned attempt was made to determine what exactly they were. The first true instance of a scientific and well-structured approach to investigating the North American pre-Columbian legacy came during the post-colonial period. Published in a 1785 book by one of our nation’s founding fathers and the third president of the United States, Thomas Jefferson detailed his investigations of the mounds littering the vast landscape of the eastern United States. Hoping to discover their purpose and gain insights into the pre-Columbian builders, Jefferson began to dig. His acumens were unprecedented for the time. Meticulously excavating and extracting thousands of remains, Jefferson reasoned that these “burrows,” his name for the mounds, were likely used by successive generations of people due to the presence of human remains in various states of decay and located in multiple strata. In his work, Jefferson also postulated that the lack of trauma and the presence of children dismissed the widely believed claim that the mounds were the locations of great battles.¹⁴³ Though not implicitly saying they were built by Native Americans, Jefferson certainly leans in that

¹⁴² William Bartram, *William Bartram on the Southeastern Indians*, ed. and annot. by Gregory A. Waselkov and Kathryn E. Holland Braund (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 84.

¹⁴³ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia: Illustrated with a Map, including the States of Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, and Pennsylvania* (Richmond, VA, 1853), 106.

direction noting, “on whatever occasion they may have been made, they are of considerable notoriety among the Indians.”¹⁴⁴ The constant scientist, Jefferson compares the “burrows” to those constructed by the ancient Greek and Persians; however, not willing to concede that they were built by the Europeans or Asians either, he goes on to speculate that boat travel from European ancient times was indeed possible, but that the likeliest connection was via the Bering Strait and that present Native Americans and Asians likely shared a common ancestor.

The late discoveries of Captain Cook, coasting from Kamschatka [sic] to California, have proved that, if the two continents of Asia and America be separated at all, it is only by a narrow strait. So that from this side also inhabitants may have passed into America; and the resemblance between Indians of American and the Eastern inhabitants of Asia would induce us to conjecture, that the former are the descendants of the latter, or the latter of the former.¹⁴⁵

Closing his analysis, Jefferson speculates that the most effective way to determine the origins of the Native American people, and in turn the mounds, is via language.

Lamenting the destruction of so many Native people and their languages, he concludes that the sheer number of different Indian languages indicates that more time had elapsed regarding human occupation in North America than Asia. Asians do not have as many languages, therefore, “a greater number of those radical changes of language having taken place among the red men of America, proves them the greater antiquity than those of Asia.”¹⁴⁶ Although today many may look back at Jefferson’s work and remark upon its flaws, this does not remove its importance in the historical evolution of scientific thought regarding the Mississippian people. Jefferson’s overall approach lacked a

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 108.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 110.

material culture analysis, but it nevertheless remains the first archaeological and therefore scientific attempt to interpret Mississippian culture.

Similar to Jefferson, Dr. J. H. McCulloh attempted to ascertain the origins of the Native people and mounds seen across the United States. Compiling his data into a volume forty years after Jefferson, McCulloh's work far surpasses any other at the time due to its enormity and depth. Like many modern scholars, he explored the contemporary and historic literature regarding the indigenous populations. Of most use today is his research on material found in the mounds and his research on historic Native Americans. This type of analysis appears to be the first of its kind and would remain an anomaly for the next sixty years. Even then, it would take an additional 100 years, roughly until the 1980s, for this technique to be a critical investigative tool for scholars.

The comparatives McCulloh makes between historic cultures and those of the pre-historic world deal directly with copper, clothing, mounds, calumet pipes, and housing. Using a variety of sources, the author repeatedly dissects Spanish colonial documents from North and Central America, as well as French sources—most specifically those from the Natchez—uncovering similarities between items used by Native people encountered by Europeans and those objects found in mounds or referenced by Native Americans in their mythology. Quoting a de Soto narrative McCulloh referenced only as “the Portuguese gentleman,” the author remarks on the “great mantles made of white, red, green, and blue feathers” used as clothing, then compares them to the descriptions of feather fans used by Natchez nobility in accounts by La Page Du Pratz 200 years later.¹⁴⁷ Further descriptions are referenced by McCulloh as he described copper and silver plates

¹⁴⁷ J. H. McCulloh, *Research, Philosophical and Antiquarian Concerning the Aboriginal History of America*, (Baltimore: Fielding Lucas, Jr., 1829), 154.

of various shapes and sizes used by the Natchez as ornamentation, which he then later compares to the extent of material being found within the vaults of many mounds. “The mounds that have been opened, almost universally contain human bones in greater or less numbers, with various stone ornaments, weapons, pieces of pottery, and occasionally plates and ornaments of copper.”¹⁴⁸ From a modern research point of view, this reference to copper and ornamentation is helpful. Yet, it does not provide descriptors or assess the subtlety of design, which we now know is apparent in nearly all image imbued artifacts from the pre-Columbian period.

Ever the pragmatist, McCulloh goes on to remark that individuals should be skeptical of all the oral traditions being recorded by the early sources, yet still used them to great effect in balancing his assessment of Native American origins,

Though we consider oral tradition to be of little authority, we can still admit that these accounts were originally true, but have been materially perplexed in being handed down from one generation to another; who have no means of ascertaining or correcting their chronology, frequently blend together events, that have been separated by an interval of many centuries.¹⁴⁹

His ability to look holistically, blending ethnology and archaeology (at least in terms of the period), of Native American communities is utterly unique and separates McCulloh from his peers. It also provides us with perhaps the first analysis of where the Natchez and, in turn, other Mississippian communities may have come from before entering the North American Southeast. Quoting La Page Du Pratz, he says the Natchez fled their enemies who lived in large villages made of stone that included large temples made with great labor and highly decorated with art. Therefore, he concludes that northern Mexico

¹⁴⁸ J.H. McCulloh, *Research, Philosophical and Antiquarian Concerning the Aboriginal History of America*, 503.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 171.

is one possibility. The other possibility is Casas Grande as he states the layout of the community matches that of the Natchez.¹⁵⁰ Moreover, the author concludes it is unreasonable to assume that the mounds came from only one nation. Likely it was many different nations. This is due in part to him juxtaposing his observations regarding the variety of mounds in both size and shape across the eastern half of the United States with the origin story of the Natchez,

A great part of our nation accordingly settled here [present day Louisiana], where they lived in peace and abundance for several generations. The Great Sun and those who remained with him, were tempted to continue where they were, by the pleasantness of the country, which was very warm, and by the weakness of their enemies...It was not till after many generations, that the Great Sun came and joined us in this country, and reported, that warriors of fire, who made the earth to tremble, had arrived in our old country, and having entered into an alliance with our brethren, conquered our ancient enemies, but attempting afterward to make slaves of our Suns.¹⁵¹

In conjunction with this story, but offered in the words of La Page Du Pratz, McCulloh adds, “that their empire after their removal to Louisiana, at the height of their prosperity, extended from the river Manchac or Iberville [river] to the Ohio [river], or about four hundred leagues; and that they had about five hundred Suns or princes to rule over the nation.¹⁵² Regardless of the accuracy of these quotes, the latter part is actually in keeping with what we know today of the Mississippian world. It was likely made up of hundreds of independent communities with a common ideology who were in turn ruled often by a “Sun”, or deified leader. This story also matches the descriptions of early explorers who described Native American communities in the 1500s with regards to the quantity of

¹⁵⁰ J.H. McCulloh, *Research, Philosophical and Antiquarian Concerning the Aboriginal History of America*, 171-172.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, 169.

¹⁵² *Ibid*.

independent communities they encountered and how they described the leader of many, if not all, villages they encountered.

As enlightening as this early work is for the modern historian, it is limited. Both Jefferson and McCulloh, although analytic with regards to their analysis and approach, were held back by an overall lack of data and support from others during the period. They were, to put it quite simply, nearly alone in their approach. Others during the late 1700s and early 1800s certainly provided a great deal of ethnographic fodder for the modern scholar, but their work was generally limited to their contemporary Native American populations. The bulk of the writing, as was mentioned earlier, was rooted in racism and a cultural justification for acquiring North American land. This is primarily what led these early writers to suggest that Native Americans were not the creators of the mound culture spread across the Eastern Woodlands.¹⁵³ For them, if it was determined that the creators of these mounds, and the highly stylized objects that came out of them, were foreign and not related to contemporary Native American tribes, then there was no moral deterrent to claiming the land—in fact, many argued that by claiming the land, they were merely bringing civilization back to an area once belonging to the civilized mounds builders.¹⁵⁴

Thus, the vast majority of the writing in the early first half of the nineteenth century dealt explicitly with the origins of the mounds and rarely discussed, in detail, the objects uncovered within or elaborated on the context in which they were found. Furthermore, there was scant evidence to corroborate any given theory being postulated at this time regarding a particular origin model. From Toltec to Maya, and Asian to

¹⁵³ Brose, “Changing Paradigms,” 4-5.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

Egyptian, nearly every old-world culture was considered. As no concrete answer was forthcoming, the vast majority of scholarly publications during this period offered instead, comparatives of the varied ideas regarding the countless derivation theories. The most popular belief was recorded by Samuel F. Haven in 1856: “of all the opinions having their foundations in sacred history, that which traces the origins of our Indians tribes wholly, or in part, to the lost tribes of Israel, has found the warmest and most numerous supporters.”¹⁵⁵ This notion, that the mounds were created by the lost tribes of Israel, indeed was the most prevailing theory amongst all the early writings.

In fact, the “Lost Tribes” theory helped catapult a New York farm boy in the early nineteenth century to new heights and left a lasting legacy on the world. That boy was Joseph Smith, and the theory of a lost Israelite kingdom was taken up handedly by the future Mormon Prophet. Born into a world now embracing the *Second Great Awakening*, Smith was surrounded by religious zeal and compelling stories of a lost race in North America. These two social obsessions, coupled with an active imagination likely led to his later role as a prophet. Raised by a father who often took him exploring with “divining rods and seerstones” Smith and his father moved throughout the area looking for gold, artifacts, and Indian burial mounds.¹⁵⁶ Joseph soon began telling family and friends stories of their discoveries and the history of the lost, mythical race. As described by in one biography,

he would describe in colorful detail the “ancient inhabitants of the continent”: the Indians, their dress, mode of travel, the animals they rode, their buildings and cities, their mode of warfare and religious worship—all of it conjured up through his lively imagination. He knew next to nothing about such things other than what was common folklore and what could be culled from the artifacts of Indian

¹⁵⁵ Samuel F. Haven, *Archaeology of the United States* (Philadelphia: T.K. and P.G. Collins Printers, 1856), 5.

¹⁵⁶ Robert V. Remini, *Joseph Smith* (New York: Penguin Group, 2002), 33.

mounds in the area...But what he did know he could describe with such vivid particulars and precision that his listeners believed he had a vast store of information on the subject.¹⁵⁷

Smith's humble beginnings were eventually eclipsed by his discovery and translation of golden tablets, which he alone could translate using a seerstone, and his claim that the prehistoric mounds, and the copper, stone, and ceramic artifacts inside, belonged to the lost tribe of Israel.¹⁵⁸ Once again, the true origins of the mounds were removed from their rightful descendants—Native Americans. In an ironic twist, nearly sixty years after the Mormon prophet originally claimed the mounds, it was the government's resistance to the new religion that led to the unequivocal determination of the mounds true origins. Therefore, no analysis regarding the history of Mississippian mounds is complete without a reference to the Mormons and their farfetched interpretations of the mounds and Mississippian culture.

Leading up to and following the American Civil War, theories regarding the mounds had changed little. Fanciful musing abounded. However, not everyone during this period was looking explicitly for the builders of the mounds. Many were merely trying to understand their purpose. Using both European military fortification principles and Enlightenment theories, several writers examined and compared mounds across the eastern half of the United States. These writers offered a justification for the circular entrenchments found around certain mounds, claiming their height, trenches, and design were only used for defense.¹⁵⁹ Although we now know this general assessment is incorrect, it does show that a change, albeit limited, was occurring. More writers were

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 42.

¹⁵⁸ Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 137.

¹⁵⁹ Brose, "Changing Paradigms," 6.

applying reason to advance their ideas surrounding the unknown structures rather than simply imagining it. The most informative of these were Albert Gallatin, Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, George Squier, and Dr. Edwin Hamilton Davis. The contribution each scholar made to future historians and anthropologists is invaluable. From skull analysis, topography, and organizational digging, each of these scholars constructed a highly methodological approach to examining the mounds. However, they were still limited by the views of the period and continued using European modeling and not approaching the problem from a Native American point of view. Therefore, the vast majority of mounds became forts, and human remains found with elaborate and foreign material, such as copper and shell, were either religious missionaries bringing enlightenment to the barbaric communities or the graves of wealthy merchants from far off lands.

Although the conclusions presented in the myriad of writings often argued for a false conclusion regardless of the data, the adoption of reason and methodology was beginning to take hold. The authors were merely stuck in a world defined by a European point of view and the early stages of Manifest Destiny. Methodological digging, scientific reasoning, and the rise of the geosciences was pushing nineteenth century academia into a new world, but it would still take time for archaeology to catch-up.

Section 3 – The Bureau of Ethnology

The first devoted strides to determining the origins of the mounds and therefore connecting them to contemporary Native American people were made via the March 3, 1879 mandate by Congress to create a Bureau of Ethnology. This new government

office, later the Bureau of American Ethnology or BAE, served as a complement to the United States Geological Survey and was molded into the Smithsonian Institute before being added to the Department of Anthropology at the National Museum of Natural History in 1965. The Bureau “was designed to serve government informational needs by comprehensively surveying North American Indian cultures so that effective and informed policies could be developed.”¹⁶⁰ Led by famed geologist and explorer, John Wesley Powell, the Bureau of Ethnology began a lengthy and systematic compilation of ethnographic, linguistic, and historic information on Native American communities across the United States. Each year, it expanded its scope and eventually began collecting physical artifacts for the United State National Museum. However, the newly founded organization was subject to yearly funding by Congress and contrary to the wishes of Powell, Congress in 1882, ordered that \$5,000 of the \$25,000 budget be spent on investigating the mystery of the mounds.¹⁶¹ The root of this investigation was not scientific, nor was it made to benefit Native Americans. It was done to counter the growing influence of Mormons. “Nascent feminism and smoldering resentment over recollected Mormon adventures had converted the former heartland of absolutism to a hotbed of anti-Mormonism,” and it was the rise of Radical Republications in Utah, in conjunction with other congressional leaders that made the difference and demanded the newly founded Bureau of Ethnology investigate the mounds.¹⁶²

The creation of the Bureau of Ethnology, and the directive to determine the origins of the mounds, effectively silenced the widespread and highly fanciful theories

¹⁶⁰ Marc Rothenberg, ed. *The History of Science in the United States* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2001), 98.

¹⁶¹ Brose, “Changing Paradigm,” 5.

¹⁶² Ibid.

regarding the Mississippian and Hopewell Mounds spread across the United States. Although, there are still some, even today, who believe they were made by a mythical race of giants, or, yes, even aliens (thank you History Channel), the vast majority of writing grew out of the original work of the Bureau of Ethnology and the research of certain scholars in the 1700s and mid-1800s. Additionally, it was the creation of the Bureau of Ethnology that initiated the true beginning of iconographic analysis in the early 1880s. Although not done intentionally, scholars connected with the Bureau of Ethnology began looking at material culture items from Mississippian, and older, sites and noticing the complexity of design and the unique anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures embossed, painted, and engraved into them. A desire to understand this imagery dovetailed perfectly with the recently created BAE and led a few ethnologists and early archaeologists to present the first papers discussing the iconographic elements seen on the Mound Builder materials.

Knowing that the Mound Builders were the ancestors of modern Native Americans, late nineteenth and early twentieth century scholars began using ethnographic sources collected by John Swanton, James Mooney, Francis La Flesche, Clark Wissler, Alice Fletcher, as well as many others, to investigate the iconographic depictions seen on the material unearthed across the eastern United States. These specialists concluded that the symbols found on the material could possibly be identified using Native American folklore and interviews with tribal members. Results were promising, and the first paradigm shift occurred. As encouraging as this breakthrough was, most ethnologists continued studying only modern communities and not bothering to dive into their pre-Columbian roots. Investigations into the ancient past were left to a select few, and a

limited amount of data was collected. Most of the studies were conducted on ceramic and shell material—items found in much larger quantities than copper and stone.

William Henry Holmes, who later succeeded Powell as director of the Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE), published his first article on the iconography of engraved shell found at many Mississippian sites. In his paper, “Art in Shell of the Ancient Americas,” Holmes attempted the first typology of shell looking at the various designs associated with each known gorget, then divided them into themes. Holmes isolated eight categories based on the designs engraved upon the shell—the cross, spider, scalloped disk, serpent, bird, human figure, the human face, and the frog. From there, Holmes reasoned,

That no single design is without its significance, and that their production was a serious art which dealt with matters closely interwoven with the history, mythology and polity of the people...[and] although these objects were worn as personal ornaments they probably had specialized uses as insignia, amulets, or symbols. As insignia, they were badges of office or distinction...as amulets, they were invested with protective or remedial attributes...as symbols they possessed, in most case, a religious character, and were used as *totems* of clans.¹⁶³

His assessment was far ahead of his time. In fact, only today are scholars interpreting these items as objects of distinction, or society affiliation, as he did. Although Holmes freely admits that he is lost to the potential meaning behind each piece, he does reference the mythology of modern Native American people and admits that there is a similar



Figure 15; Spider Gorgets, Bureau of Ethnology, Pl. LXL, 1881.

¹⁶³ William H. Holmes, “Art in Shell of the ancient Americas.” In *the Second Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology of the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1883), 267.

eneration and that “every line has its purpose and every figure its significance.”¹⁶⁴ Where Holmes became lost was in a determination of time. “It is impossible to determine the great antiquity of any of these relics...specimens obtained from the mounds of the Mississippi Valley have the appearance of great antiquity...[but] we have no reliable data upon which to base an estimate of time.”¹⁶⁵ Time, we now know, is critical to understanding the art and its relationship to society. It gives researchers a baseline for the development of specific designs and offers an interpretation as to the regional variance seen in similar motifs. Time also allows us to see the rise, fall, and spread of ideology across a given locality and in turn who may have been wearing, using, or acquiring these objects.

Following Holmes, several other scholars began publishing work dedicated to analyzing material found by amateur archaeologists and looters. The first was Charles C. Willoughby, whose 1897 essay “Analysis of the Decorations Upon Pottery from the Mississippi Valley” was printed in the *Journal of American Folklore*. His work was revolutionary because it analyzed symbols that were then cross referenced against the beliefs of contemporary Native American cultures. Willoughby believed it was important to determine the symbols on the ceramic vessel, which could then illuminate the culture and purpose. As he remarks,

It seems probable that the design, which we find carved upon shell, painted upon pottery, and occasionally wrought in copper, was closely associated in prehistoric times with sun or fire worship. Sun worship, as it is known, constituted an important part of the religion of the historic tribes of the central Mississippi religion...[and are] found among the remains of the great earthwork-builders of

¹⁶⁴ Holmes, “Art in Shell of the ancient Americas,” 281.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 287.

the Ohio valley, some of them cut from Native copper, and with the exceptions of the swastika they are represented in the earth earthworks themselves.¹⁶⁶

Much of Willoughby's analysis was conducted on Caddoan ceramics found in the lower Mississippi Valley and present day Arkansas. Examining old data for comparatives, he surveyed Thomas Ashe's notes regarding his 1806 visit to an Ozark village and commented that each person, man, woman, and child, held an offering to the sun. However, Willoughby does not indicate that the vessels he is describing, imbued with potential sun motifs, were actually used in the offering.¹⁶⁷ He is therefore correlating a design to an action that may or may not be connected. Moreover, instead of adopting a regional ethnographic approach, he references Mayan and Pueblo designs as well as personal correspondence with Alice C. Fletcher, a member of the BAE, who informed him that the symbols were still in use among the Omaha and Sioux and that they represented the sun and wind.¹⁶⁸ What we know today that was not known then, is that there is a regional diversification of the various Mississippian groups. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, though, Mississippians were looked at as a

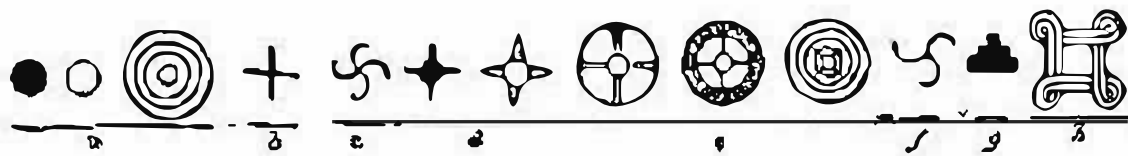


Figure 36; Symbols from which were derived most of the decorations upon the mound pottery of the Mississippi valley. a. Sun symbols; b. Symbol of the four directions and the four winds; c. American swastika or four-wind symbol; d. Symbols of the sun and four winds; e. Cosmic symbols; f. American triskele; g. Cloud symbol; h. Looped band.

¹⁶⁶ C.C. Willoughby, "An Analysis of the Decorations upon Pottery from the Mississippi Valley," in *The Journal of American Folklore* 10, no. 36 (1897): 10.

¹⁶⁷ Willoughby, "An Analysis of the Decorations upon Pottery from the Mississippi Valley," 11.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

common culture. It was therefore logical to conclude that any contemporary belief could be matched to prehistoric sites regardless of location.

Using the ethnographic approach, a number of scholars attempted a systematic evaluation of sites and exhumed material. The first was George Grant MacCurdy, whose brief paper, “Shell Gorgets from Missouri,” embraced and expounded upon Willoughby’s previous writings. MacCurdy’s significant contribution was his inclusion of ethnographic sources from Siouan and Dhegihan speaking cultures from the Northern Plains that connected Missouri shell gorgets to particular mythological and real-world practices. The result of MacCurdy’s analysis, and separating it from Willoughby’s, was his use of a regional connection model that directly connected the historic to the pre-historic. This allowed him to reject a wide-spread belief that the Mississippian people came from Mexico. MacCurdy’s study gave

weight to the “importance of ethnology as an aid to the correct interpretation of archaeology...[and] increase the difficulties in the way of those who would invoke Mexican influence in order to account for the symbolism on shell gorgets and copper plates from the Mississippi valley.”¹⁶⁹

For example, MacCurdy connects a gorget from Perry County, Missouri, to the Skidi Pawnee

Morning Star sacrifice based on ethnographical accounts of the ritual and the symbolism on the gorget. He comments that, “this gorget is full of symbolic import. The stag horn,



Figure 17; Shell gorget, Perry County, Missouri, Yale University Collection

¹⁶⁹ George Grant MacCurdy, “Shell Gorgets from Missouri,” *American Anthropologist* 15 (1913): 413-414.

as suggested to me by Mr. Stansbury Hagar, might be considered as an attribute of the sky-god, and the four stars as the four quarters of the sky. The arrows are suggestive of sacrifice and might point to some such ceremony as the Skidi rite of human sacrifice as described by Dorsey.”¹⁷⁰

As groundbreaking as these analyses were, they were lacking. Ethnographic sources allowed scholars to connect ancient symbols to modern Native American rituals and beliefs, but there was no archaeological component that isolated and contextualized them within the pre-Columbian framework of the Mississippian period. The reason for this absence of archaeological examination was the government’s support for the Bureau of Ethnology and the deficiency of a defined methodology. Ethnology was therefore the only means for attempting an iconographic analysis and remained the dominant force in southeastern anthropology until the 1930s. Furthermore, due to scholar’s reliance on ethnology “Southeastern archaeology bears the legacy of the reckless application of ethnolinguistic labels to archaeological societies,” which linked prehistoric communities to modern tribes regardless of their actual connection.¹⁷¹ This utterly confounded what little chronology there was and continued to do so through the 1960s. Based on this labeling, chronology was viewed solely in term of artifacts and their level of refinement and not stratification or any other now-understood dating method.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ MacCurdy, “Shell Gorgets from Missouri,” 412-413.

¹⁷¹ Brose, “Changing Paradigms,” 6.

¹⁷² Brose, “Changing Paradigms,” 7.

Section 4 – The Rise of Archaeology

In the early 1900s, most scholars viewed archaeologists as antiquated and singularly attracted to the spectacular.¹⁷³ Franz Boas, father of modern anthropology, was credited with saying, “If a man finds a pot, he is an archaeologist; if two a great archaeologist; three, a renowned archaeologist!”¹⁷⁴ As the foremost trainer of a generation of anthropologists, Boas was in a position to direct the field, and he and his “followers opposed any role for cultural evolutionism in anthropology leading to emphasis on cultural relativism and historical particularism.”¹⁷⁵ Consequently, the overall lack of understanding and support for archaeology can be laid at Boas’s feet. This greatly influenced early iconographic analysis, as researchers examined artifacts via space but had no understanding of time. In other words, there was an overall understanding of the geographic outline separating regions and cultures but not a firm understanding of *when* these cultures created the items. This sentiment was echoed by Alfred Kroeber, who commented that Native American cultures “have come to us virtually in momentary cross section, flat and without perspective. In general, there are few historical data extant about them.”¹⁷⁶ Consequently, the limited support and a lack of archaeological training meant that southeastern archaeology developed slowly and was, at least initially, left to amateurs and looters.

¹⁷³ Edwin A. Lyon, *A New Deal for Southeastern Archaeology* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996), 5.

¹⁷⁴ J. Alden Mason, “Franz Boas as an Anthropologist,” *American Anthropologist*, 45 (1943): 58. In Lyon, “a New Deal,” 5.

¹⁷⁵ Lyon, *A New Deal*, 5

¹⁷⁶ Alfred Kroeber, *Anthropology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1923), 335-336.

The most notable amateur archaeologist of the time was Clarence B. Moore. Moore centered his work in the American South—specifically Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee. The son of a wealthy industrialist, Moore was able to self-finance his excavations, which “were planned with an almost military precision.”¹⁷⁷ Moore, however, was only interested in associated burial items and not developing a cultural history for the sites as was being done by museums and universities. Examining burial items was something Moore concluded was needed because it had not been done. A prolific researcher and writer, he produced some of the best research material for iconographic studies by focusing on notable sites, such as Etowah in Georgia, and collecting shell, ceramic, copper, and stone. Within this vein, he focused on copper composition and attempted to ascertain if it was pre-Columbian or historic. Although Moore was said to have “skimmed off the cream in the form of the best artifacts available,” if it were not for him, much would have been lost to private collections.¹⁷⁸ He was intent on collecting, preserving, and donating the associated objects he excavated to museums. This allowed others, such as Holmes, Willoughby, and MacCurdy, to develop their initial analysis by not only referring to his notes but also by studying the objects themselves. Moore, in turn, studied these scholars’ analyses of the material he and others had collected and tried to build on it during his next excavations.¹⁷⁹

Professional archaeology conducted in the early 1900s came via universities and museums in the northern United States. Lyon Edwin describes it as “the museum era of

¹⁷⁷ Dan F. Morse and Phyllis A. Morse, ed. *The Lower Mississippi Valley Expeditions of Clarence Bloomfield Moore* (Tuscaloosa, The University Alabama Press, 1998), 2.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

American anthropology” and that “much of the southeastern archaeology before the 1930s was supported by non-southeastern museums such as the Smithsonian Institution, the Peabody Museum, the American Museum of Natural History, and the Heye Foundation.”¹⁸⁰ By the 1920s, the Smithsonian was sponsoring more excavations in the American Southeast and limiting their support for the Southwest—a region where they had previously focused the bulk of their resources.¹⁸¹ This created a resurgence of archaeological activities specifically focusing on mounds and the material contained within them. A direct result of this increased activity was the creation of the Division of Anthropology and Psychology and their sponsored programs, the National Research Council (NRC) and the committee on State Archaeological Surveys. Each platform standardized techniques and “recommended using uniform methods and records with similar archaeological remains.”¹⁸² This, it was argued, “will lead to a greater mutual understanding of problems and to a wholesome cooperation between students.”¹⁸³ As beneficial as this was as a statement, in practice, it took years for Southeastern archaeology to catch-up with standards being employed elsewhere.

As excavations increased, results were still limited, as vast amounts of information were collected, stored, and considered, but no true understanding emerged of time and its role in the development and cultural hierarchy of the Mississippian communities being investigated. As Kroeber remarked later in 1951, “Incredible as it may seem now, by 1915-1925 so little time perspective had been achieved in archaeology

¹⁸⁰ Lyon, *A New Deal*, 8.

¹⁸¹ J. Walter Fewkes, “Report of the Chief,” *42nd Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1924-1925* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1928), 4.

¹⁸² Lyon, *A New Deal*, 17.

¹⁸³ Carl E. Guthe, “The Ceramic Repository for the Eastern United States, at the University of Michigan, under the Auspices of the National Research Council,” Box 7 United States National Museum, Division of Archaeology Office Files, in Lyon, *A New Deal*, 17.

that [Clark] Wissler and I, in trying to reconstruct the native[sic] American past, could then actually infer more from the distributions and typology of ethnographic data than from archaeologist determinations.”¹⁸⁴ This meant there was no way to compare and contextualize the artifacts being found outside of a pure ethnographic interpretation. A new method needed to be employed that could accurately date the sites being investigated. The solution was stratigraphy and the direct historical approach.¹⁸⁵ Although used in a limited capacity in the 1920s, stratigraphy was a breakthrough that had immense ramifications on the field of southeastern archaeology. It argued, quite simply, that the bottom of a site is the oldest part and the youngest is the top. When applied using geological strata (layers) as a guide, you can then determine successive eras.¹⁸⁶ However, stratigraphy was not as accurate an indicator as it was in Europe, because many of the sites being excavated were occupied hundreds of years apart, and archaeologists were using artificial levels as measurements, then comparing their layers to the natural strata.¹⁸⁷ Thus, it was critical to apply a secondary method, which was the historical approach. In this period, the historical approach was defined as “working from the known to the unknown by locating historic sites, then determining their cultural complexes and finally working backward in time to the protohistoric and prehistoric cultures.”¹⁸⁸ This two-fold approach brought together, for the first time, the fields of ethnology and archaeology.

¹⁸⁴ Alfred Kroeber, “The History and Present Orientation of Cultural Anthropology,” in *The Nature of Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 151.

¹⁸⁵ Edwin, *A New Deal*, 55-56.

¹⁸⁶ Gordon R. Willey, “Time Studies: Pottery and Trees in Georgia,” *Proceedings of the Society for Georgia Archaeology I* (1938): 18.

¹⁸⁷ Lyon, *A New Deal*, 55.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 56.

Although these fields were now being used in combination, by the 1930s, the monumental shift in archaeology was applied more to historic and protohistoric sites—displacing ethnographic sources as the principle tool for examining the pre-Columbian Mississippian past. The occurring excavations were being viewed in a larger cultural way, and without emphasis on iconographic meaning. Additionally, many archaeologists were using incorrect theories regarding cultural evolution and applying strongly held beliefs, which contended that ancient America was populated by successive waves of Eskimo, Algonquian, and Iroquoian people roaming back and forth across the land.¹⁸⁹ Naturally, this created large interpretive flaws. But archaeologists were persistent in their “critical unwillingness to attribute the behavior of living people studied by ethnographers to the remains of prehistoric groups.”¹⁹⁰ This myopic view continued to color the next generation of southeastern scholars and is even still in play today in limited forms.

Underpinning this change from ethnology to archaeology was the Great Depression and President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal. Shortly after his March 4, 1933 inauguration, Roosevelt enacted multiple programs, three of which had large ramifications on Southeastern archaeology—the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the Civilian Works Administration (CWA), and later the Works Progress Administration (WPA).¹⁹¹ These government sponsored programs allowed trained archaeologists to take the field with a large workforce and excavate hundreds of sites. Due to the labor-intensive methods required for excavation, these programs were ideally suited for “putting people back to work on excavation projects around the country. Field and

¹⁸⁹ Brose, “Changing Paradigms, 7.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Bernard K. Means, Introduction to *Shovels Ready: Archaeology and Roosevelt’s New Deal for America*, ed. Bernard K. Means (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2013), 4.

laboratory personnel were often large in number, reaching a scale not seen previously in American archaeology and rarely seen since.”¹⁹² This meant that during the New Deal, “a whole generation of archaeologists concentrated on native and historic period cultures in the United States.”¹⁹³ The largest impact was on southeastern archaeology, as the enormous quantities of data produced provided dividends for future researchers. The principle user of these funds at the onset was the Smithsonian Institution. By January 1934, the Smithsonian had implemented eleven excavations in seven states and employed 1,500 people directly through the CWA.¹⁹⁴

Archaeology, as a direct result of New Deal legislation, now held sway as fieldwork in the American Southeast intensified and was brought up to modern standards. In 1935, the United States Government passed the Historic Sites Act. This provided for the protection and preservation of buildings, objects, and antiquities. Coupled with the CCC, CWA, WPA, and many other programs, this act increased the archaeological boom, but also included the added effect of focusing the public’s attention on the hundreds of historic and prehistoric sites discovered through educational programs and services. The American public was enamored, as large amounts of data was collected and dispersed. In fact, so vast was this undertaking that excavation reports on New Deal projects are still being produced today.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹² Nick Merriman, ed., *Public Archaeology* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), no page number – The Great Depression relief program section.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Carl E. Guthe, “Twenty-Five Years of Archaeology in the Eastern United States,” in *Archaeology of Eastern United States*, ed. James B. Griffin (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1952), 5.

¹⁹⁵ James A. Brown. “Forty Years of the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex,” in *Histories of Southeastern Archaeology*, ed. Shannon Tushingham, Jane Hill, and Charles H. McNutt (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2002), 30.

As beneficial as this was, though, the increase in publications and excavations had a dark side—looting. As one researcher commented, “this growing public appreciation of the subject also made more acute the ‘amateur’ problem, inherited from pioneers of the nineteenth century, which runs like a sinister thread through the archaeological story of the twentieth century.”¹⁹⁶ To curtail this, the government passed the Federal Antiquities Act of 1906, which prohibited the collection or sale of Native American artifacts from land owned by the United State government. Many states followed the passage of this act by passing similar legislation; however, enforcing the law was difficult. Moreover, it did not stop the pillaging of material on private lands. As two archaeologists related in 1936,

The present actual status of archaeological conservation in the United States, however, is deplorable...from motives of mere curiosity or greed, dealers and relic hunters in practically every state are destroying an irreplaceable heritage. The Antiquities Act of 1906 forbids unauthorized archaeological excavation on public lands, but the law is difficult to enforce and, so long as archaeological specimens can be sold on the open market, can have at the best a very limited effect. This annihilation of our readable past which, due to the great popularity of relic hunting, is steadily growing worse, indicates the need for a carefully planned archaeological program before it is too late. At present a race between the scientist and the curio seeker is on. Scientist are relatively few in number and must work slowly and carefully, whereas relic hunters are extremely numerous, and loot sites with great rapidity. The probable outcome, unless definite action is taken very soon, is only too obvious...it is a sad paradox, that at this time, when trained men are becoming available and new techniques for determining archaeological history are reaching a high pitch of development, the materials themselves should be vanishing like snow before the sun. It is even more tragic since enlightened national policy in this regard could save them for all time.¹⁹⁷

Although some amateur archaeologists did thrive, such as C.B. Moore, the vast majority were untrained, uncaring, and only interested in relics, treasure, and making money at the

¹⁹⁶ Guthe, “Twenty-Five Years of Archaeology in the Eastern United States,” 7.

¹⁹⁷ Frank M. Setzler and Duncan W. Strong, “Archaeology and Relief,” in *American Antiquity* 1, 4 (1936): 308-309.

expense of Native American history. Compounding the rise in “amateur” archaeology was likely the rampant unemployment rates of the Great Depression.

Unfortunately, both looting and New Deal excavations came together in a near perfect storm at a place called Spiro. In 1935, the public’s imagination was peaked when the *Kansas City Star* called the site’s discovery a “King Tut’s Tomb in the Arkansas Valley” and identified it as the greatest source of Mississippian iconographic material ever found.¹⁹⁸ Located in southeastern Oklahoma, the Spiro Mounds are named after the small town in which they were revealed. First identified in 1914 by Joseph Thoburn, the location was owned by Choctaw and Chickasaw freedmen who initially prohibited digging on their land.¹⁹⁹ By 1933 that changed. The families, perhaps feeling the effects of the Great Depression, relented to the repeated requests to excavate their property and leased part of the site to a group of commercial diggers calling themselves the Pocola Mining Company. Coveting the money ancient artifacts brought on the open market, this group targeted one of the twelve mounds occupying the ancient ceremonial center. Identified today as Craig Mound, this earthenwork is the crown jewel of iconographic research. Inside were thousands of fresh water pearls, 800 engraved and unengraved marine shell cups, flint clay statuary, painted basketry, feathered textiles, stone and ceramic pipes, wooden masks and statues, and literally countless other objects.²⁰⁰ Large ceremonial centers such as Cahokia outside modern St. Louis, Moundville in Alabama, and Etowah in Georgia were identified and excavated both by amateur and professional

¹⁹⁸ A.B. MacDonald, “A King Tut’s Tomb in the Arkansas Valley: On a Negro’s Farm in Eastern Oklahoma are Unearthed Relics from the Mound Builders of Past Centuries,” *Kansas City Star*, December 15, 1935.

¹⁹⁹ Dennis A. Peterson, “Spiro Mounds,” *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, accessed December 31, 2016. www.okhistory.org.

²⁰⁰ Philip Phillips and James A. Brown, *Pre-Columbian Shell Engravings from the Craig Mound at Spiro, Oklahoma*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Peabody Museum Press, 1978), 6.

archaeologists, but even they pale in comparison to the amount of material unearthed at Spiro. Nothing remotely close has since been discovered. In fact, 90% of all Southeastern Ceremonial Complex ritual artifacts come from Spiro, specifically Craig Mound.²⁰¹

Complicating this discovery was the manner in which it was first excavated. Not concerned with historic preservation, the mining company dug with reckless abandon—applying no methodology and taking no notes. The goal was simple. Extract the material inside. To accomplish this, they tunneled horizontally and soon discovered a hollow chamber. Inside this cavity, now described as a “Spirit Lodge” by James A. Brown and others, were thousands of painted, engraved, and embossed objects laid out in a ritualistic manner similar to an historic Arikara temple.²⁰² Moving swiftly, these men grabbed all the ancient relics they could sell and tossed the textiles, pot sherds, broken shell, and cedar elements onto the ground.²⁰³ As described by Forest E. Clements, head of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Oklahoma, in 1945,

Sections of cedar poles lay scattered on the ground, fragments of feather and fur textiles littered the whole area; it is impossible to take a single step in hundreds of square yards around the ruined structure without scuffing broken pieces of pottery, sections of engraved shell, and beads of shell, stone, and bone.²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ James A. Brown, “On the Style Divisions of the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex: A Revisionist Perspective,” in *The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex: Artifacts and Analysis*, ed. Patricia Galloway (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 185.

²⁰² Melvin R. Gilmore, “The Arikara Tribal Temple” in *Paper of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts and Letters*, 14 (1930): 47-70.

²⁰³ David La Vere, *Looting Spiro Mounds: An American King Tut's Tomb* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 146.

²⁰⁴ Forest E. Clements, “Historical Sketch of the Spiro Mound,” in *Contributions to the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation*, 14 (1945): 48-68. Cited in April K. Sievert and J. Daniel Rogers, *Artifacts from the Craig Mound at Spiro, Oklahoma* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2011), 15.

What the looters considered valuable was sold on-site, out of the trunks of cars, and through relic magazines. Quickly, this material dispersed into private hands across the world. The loss was incalculable. Because of this, this singular site, which held the keys to understanding Mississippian iconography, religion, ceremony, and countless other social, political, and trade practices, will now always remain a fractional mystery as there is no way to reassemble all the items sold or place them in their correct context within the mound.

Owing to the renewed interest in archaeology brought about by the New Deal, the state of Oklahoma stopped the commercial digging at the Spiro site. In November of 1935, Oklahoma passed legislation requiring a license for all excavations in the state and placed control of the site in the hands of experienced archaeologists at the University of Oklahoma. Unfortunately, employees of the Pocola Mining Company, angered that they were denied their lease to dig, dynamited the mound. “Amazingly, Craig Mound didn’t burst open, nor did it implode on itself. Still the explosion broke many of the remaining items in the chamber, caused a moderate cave-in, and created a huge crack in the mound.”²⁰⁵ Culturally, archaeologically, and historically, the damage was done, and no amount of legislation could repair the destruction caused by the Pocola Mining Company. The looters were gone, but only devastation remained. Yet, even after nearly two years of pillaging, Spiro remained the most object-laden mound ever discovered. Professional WPA sponsored excavations at the Spiro site began in 1936 and continued until 1941. Subsidized by wealthy philanthropist Frank Philips, academic institutions—specifically the University of Oklahoma, the University of Tulsa, and the Oklahoma Historical

²⁰⁵ La Vere, *Looting Spiro Mounds*, 144.

Society—slowly mined what little remained of the mound’s depths, searching for objects and information.

Newspapers from Salt Lake City, Utah, to Ada, Oklahoma, ran stories about the discovery. Many were outrageous. They harkened back to the early myth builder legends of the nineteenth century. They included stories of curses, legendary civilizations, and connections to the ancient Maya.²⁰⁶ Giving credence to the Mayan connection was Clements. After returning from the 1937 Society of American Archaeologists meeting in Denver, he is quoted in the *Ada Weekly News* as saying the “Spiro discoveries form the missing link which proves the original Indians in Oklahoma came from central and South America...[and the site] is designated as the northernmost point to which Mayan culture penetrated in America.”²⁰⁷ The paper goes on to point out that this debunks previous theories that Native Americans came to America via the Bering Strait. This however, was mere speculation on the part of Clements and the newspaper. The connection to Central and South American cultures was based only on the similarity of the iconographic designs, the engraving method in which many of the items were completed, and the presence of large quantities of marine shell, identified as the genus *Busycon*, which are only found around the Gulf coast.²⁰⁸ Unconsidered was the possibility of trade in raw or finished goods, kinship and political alliances, or a unified religious ideology that permeated most of North and Central America similar to Abrahamic or Christian faiths in Europe.

²⁰⁶ A.B. MacDonald, “Mound Builders’ Mystery Remains Unsolved Despite Discovery in Oklahoma: Archaeologist Puzzled by Century-old Relics of Copper Harder than Iron and Queer Images of Long-forgotten People,” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, Sunday Morning, January 5, 1936, 12D.

²⁰⁷ Alfred Wall, “Archaeologists Laugh At Tall Story of Curse: Excavators Find Amusement in Rumors Death Due to Indian Gods,” *Ada Weekly News*, July 8, 1937, 3.

²⁰⁸ Philip Phillips and James A. Brown, *Pre-Columbian Shell Engravings from the Craig Mound at Spiro*, Oklahoma, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University, Peabody Museum Press, 1978), 15-18.

Section 5 – The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex

Based on this new and unexpected wealth of information coming from Spiro and various other WPA, CWA, and CCC excavations, scholars commenced a reevaluation of the pre-Columbian Mississippian people and the iconographically saturated objects found at various sites. The quantity of data provided to scholars through government, museum, and university sponsored excavations undertaken during the 1930s was distributed in print across the nation and unified large amounts of previously disjointed research. Moreover, it increased discussions among professional archeologists at conferences and led to articles that attempted to explain the uniformity of material and designs.²⁰⁹ Put forth were connections to Mesoamerica, revitalization movements, cults, and religious reactions to population decimation brought on by climate change and European disease. Nevertheless, there was still no accurate way to determine chronology. Many of these theories relied on the notion that the iconographic material was produced just prior to European arrival or even in the historic period up to the year 1700.²¹⁰

The first work addressing the amalgamation of information was produced by J.A. Ford and Gordon Willey. They began by looking at regional variation and comparing it with known cultural evolution models beginning with the Pleistocene and moving through the historic period. The ultimate goal of this article was not to make a recommendation supporting a given idea, but to offer the first comprehensive outline for Eastern archaeology.²¹¹ By the conclusion of their paper, they acknowledged the

²⁰⁹ J.A. Ford and Gordon Willey, "An Interpretation of the Prehistory of the Eastern United States," *American Anthropologist*, 43, 3 (1941): 325.

²¹⁰ J.A. Ford and Gordon Willey, "An Interpretation of the Prehistory of the Eastern United States," 325.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

uniformity of designs appearing on objects across the southeastern United States and, perhaps unwittingly, proposed a suggestion as to its genesis.

During the Temple Mound II stage there appears to have arisen a curious cult which shows little relationship to anything which previously transpired, and which spread rapidly over the entire Mississippi Valley area, although most common in the south. The paraphernalia from which the presence of this cult is deduced show a high degree of similarity over the area. Included are such items as conch shell masks marked with winged or “weeping” eye symbols; copper and shell pendants with circles and crosses engraved, repousse, or with background cut out; engraved conch shells or thin copper plates in which are depicted dancing figures wearing eagle masks, carrying a human head in one hand and a peculiar shaped baton in the other; shell gorgets showing fighting turkey cocks or rattlesnakes; monolithic stone axes; large stone batons; the horned and winged rattlesnake engraved on circular paint palettes or on pottery; and fairly large stone figures with negroid faces and characteristic arrangement of hair in two rolls on the top of the head.²¹²

For the authors, the idea that a cult was the creative force behind the unified iconographic designs was an intriguing characterization and impacted perceptions for decades. It does not appear that the idea of a cult was their principle intention or attempted long-term categorization of the material because they discuss, without refutation, ideas regarding Mesoamerican influence, epidemics, and cultural displacement.²¹³

Resulting from this paper, and via the archaeological excavations of three principle mounds centers—Moundville, Etowah, and Spiro, Antonio Warring and Preston Holder produced what was, perhaps, the most influential paper ever written on Mississippian iconography. This article, titled “A Prehistoric Ceremonial Complex in the Southeastern United States,” was completed in 1945 and isolated, categorized, and expounded the concept of a “cult” complex they believed permeated the American Southeast. The term for this was “Southeastern Ceremonial Complex” or “Southern

²¹² J.A. Ford and Gordon Willey, “An Interpretation of the Prehistory of the Eastern United States,” 358.

²¹³ J.A. Ford and Gordon Willey, “An Interpretation of the Prehistory of the Eastern United States,” 358-359.

Cult.” For the first time, archaeologists created a defined categorization for pre-Columbian iconographic symbols across a specific region and postulated a reason for their uniformity. As Warring and Holder describe,

in our efforts to demonstrate the existence of this complex it is necessary to examine carefully those sites which contain sufficient amounts of the material for systemic analysis...[and] to demonstrate the main points of this paper: (a) that the motifs and ceremonial objects appear as a cult complex in association with platform mounds, (b) that the complex is found virtually intact over a wide geographic area, and (c) that the complex is chronologically late.²¹⁴

In order to do this, the authors briefly outlined and described the motifs, god-animal representations, ceremonial objects, and costumes present, regardless of medium, in the suggested complex. With regards to motif, they identify eight characteristics—the cross, sun circles, the bi-lobed arrow, the forked eye, the open eye, the barred oval, the hand and eye, and the death motif. These motifs are then noted as being applied to one of four

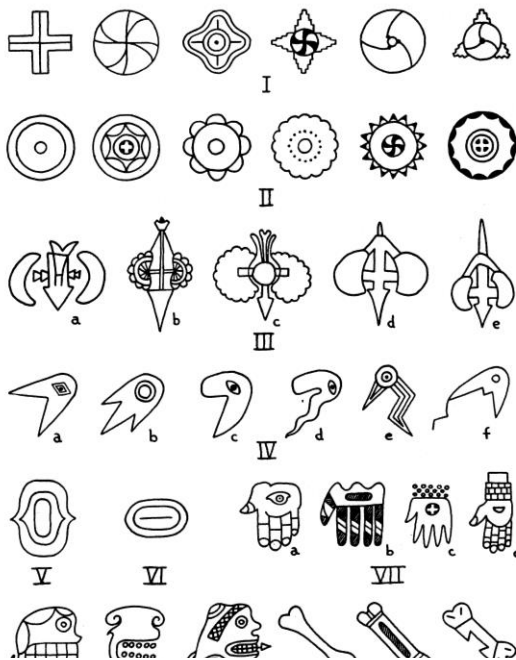


Figure 18; Motifs, American Anthropologist, 1945.



Figure 19; God-Animal Representations, American Anthropologist, 1945.

²¹⁴ A. J. Warring, Jr. and Preston Holder. “A Prehistoric Ceremonial Complex in the Southeastern United States,” in *American Anthropologist*, 47, 1 (1945): 2-3.

representations—birds, rattlesnakes, cats, and humans.²¹⁵ The representations are subsequently applied to images seen on a variety of objects including shell and copper gorgets, flint clay, ceramic, and stone pipes, ceramic vessels, and wooden masks and statues. Various costume types were then worn by the characters seen on the aforementioned material.²¹⁶ Through examination of these symbols, motifs, etc., the authors concluded that while themes and motifs can be determined, a style analysis cannot be completed. There is simply too much diversity of technique between the three principle sites. Regardless, this paper created a paradigm shift within the field of Mississippian scholarship and was a direct result of both early ethnography and an increase in archaeology. Without either, this paper is not possible. The work of Waring and Holder is differentiated from the early work of Willoughby, Holmes, and MacCurdy in that they are looking at the iconography as a whole, irrespective of material or location, and identifying common elements. By doing this, they are also able to see diversity within the commonality of design. In essence, Waring and Holder created the first iconographic framework for contextualizing almost all ceremonial material found at Mississippian sites.

For the most part, a determination of when this “cult” complex occurred was impossible, but several scholars made proposals all the same. Almost uniformly they argued that it took place in the late pre-historic or early proto-historic period. James B. Griffin even suggested that the cult was a direct result of “proselytizing efforts of escaped Mexican Indian servants imported with the De Luna expedition (1559-1561)...[and]

²¹⁵ A. J. Waring, Jr. and Preston Holder, “A Prehistoric Ceremonial Complex in the Southeastern United States,” 3-6.

²¹⁶ A. J. Waring, Jr. and Preston Holder, “A Prehistoric Ceremonial Complex in the Southeastern United States,” 8.

might well have furnished the impetus that resulted in the adoption in the Southeast of various Mexican art styles and concepts.”²¹⁷ This idea found little favor, but the thought that this material was stylistically linked to Mexico had been discussed for nearly sixty years and continued as the most popular explanation for the origin of this artwork. The problem though and argued earlier in this paper, is there was no accounting for time within the field of Mississippian studies. The conclusions drawn by Waring and Holder, and by many others, were therefore mere supposition.²¹⁸

Not everyone agreed with Waring and Holder that these images could be viewed as a singular cult manifestation with a specific origin. Nor did they believe that Mexican culture largely influenced the iconographic designs. Perhaps the greatest detractor was Alex D. Krieger. Krieger argued that although Waring and Holder’s paper gives us a real analysis of the “cult” material and a “solid basis on which to carry on the fascinating problems raised by this material...I am unable as yet to shake off the impression that the Southeastern material as a whole represents the operation of several interrelated ritualistic complexes.”²¹⁹ This is predicated on the fact that certain motifs appear in greater numbers in certain areas and on certain media. For example, in Tennessee, and the Cumberland area

there is a decided preoccupation with making conch-shell gorgets on which are engraved such motifs as the rattlesnake...the spider, the woodpecker, and the

²¹⁷ Antonio J. Waring, Jr., “The de Luna Expedition and Southeastern Ceremonial,” in *American Antiquity* 11, no. 1 (1945): 57.

²¹⁸ It should be noted that the conception of iconographic studies was not taken up by the vast majority of academics at this time. Most archaeologists still preferred raw archaeology and largely ignored the symbols seen on the unearthed artifacts. Consequently, as promising as this paper was, it was not actively used by the majority of Southeastern scholars at the time. Still today, iconography is not a principle investigative tool for many Southeastern archaeologists, yet the title *Southeastern Ceremonial Complex* found near universe use as an identifier of the general Mississippian religious world view for the next 60 years and is even still in use today.

²¹⁹ Alex D. Krieger, “An Inquiry into the Supposed Mexican Influence on Prehistoric “Cult” in the Southern United States,” in *American Anthropologist*, 47, 4 (1945): 485-486.

turkey...[but are] evidently absent from the association [at Etowah]. Where birds are directed at Etowah, they are executed in very different manner on the two media copper and shell. On the gorgets, small birds such as the woodpecker are carved in identical, opposed pairs in side view. On the copper plaques, a large aggressive-looking bird usually referred to as an eagle is embossed in full view centered in the underside, with large oval spots on the body and the head turned to either the right or the left side. Other embossed plates show the dancing figure or “anthropomorphized eagle” holding a trophy head, which, together with the bird plates, form a striking Etowah trait very rarely found elsewhere. Moundville likewise reveals many distinctions and shifts in emphasis which lend it an artistic and ceremonial character of its own...turning to Spiro, much of the “capriciousness and abandon” discussed by Waring and Holder was probably due to the fact that Spiro artists used the greater surface provided by the whole conch shell and trimmed-down conch bowls, rather than gorgets. These differences, though admittedly given very sketchily, could be multiplied.²²⁰

These motifs, he goes on to argue, are likely the manifestation of Mississippian mental patterns and a defined religion that will likely become apparent through the increase in use of ethnographic literature. Additionally, when contrasted with the Mexican artistic styles, they are absolutely unique. Although similar ideas, or themes, are apparent, these may suggest a general religious ideology that permeates North and Central American cultures. In fact, Krieger compares these motifs to iconography from the Hopewell period, nearly 1,000 years prior to their Mississippian creation, and finds similar material use and symbolism.²²¹

Krieger’s counter arguments to Waring and Holder’s paper should not be taken as overly critical. Many scholars, with the unearthing of Spiro, were in the beginning stages of a new interpretative model and a natural back and forth ensued regarding how to understand and contextualize the symbols and “cult” material. Large quantities of artifacts, excavated by way of the WPA and other programs, were yet to be analyzed and, when completed, led to a constant reevaluation. For instance, when Waring and Holder

²²⁰ Krieger, “An Inquiry into the Supposed Mexican Influence,” 487-489.

²²¹ Krieger, “An Inquiry into the Supposed Mexican Influence,” 490-504.

first published their paper they did not have access to the complete object list from Spiro.

As James A. Brown describes, they

took a good operational point of view in attempting to be just specific enough on some traits to exclude others that were similar. The latter were those cultural elements that had desirable distributions or excessively long time spans. This strategy of trait selection, which we can call here the art of “judicious exclusiveness,” had been very effective in the early history of archaeology in establishing formal interconnectedness among assemblages where vagueness and ambiguities existed.²²²

This meant that the analysis provided by Waring and Holder was highly discriminating yet also vague enough to allow a great deal of iconographic elements to fall into a given thematic category regardless of whether or not it actually belong. Moreover, the authors were choosing to look at the imagery on the objects irrespective of their archeological context. However, the concept of a “cult,” identified as the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex, was a term that had staying power and continues to influence Mississippian studies today regardless of its accuracy. The benefit of Waring and Holder’s paper was its insistence that iconography was a valuable tool for interpreting culture in Mississippian society. The disadvantage was that there was not a greater understanding of how these objects fit within the cultural framework.

Perhaps the most influential work to follow Waring and Holder was James B. Griffin’s edited volume *Archaeology of Eastern United States*. It is here that he departs from the connections derived by Waring and Holder and even his own earlier suggestion. For Griffin,

It would probably be a mistake to attribute all of the southeastern art forms to a single major ceremony of which we [do not] have...an adequate record. We can, however, be quite sure that the general social organization and religious beliefs and practices of the southeastern Indians were sufficient to account for all of the paraphernalia and expressions which were found in the Mississippian stage

²²² Brown, “The Southern Cult Reconsidered,” in *Midcontinental Journal of Archaeology*, 1, 2 (1976): 117.

archaeology. Most of the elaborate art forms so often figured in southeastern archaeology have come from a relatively few major centers, the big towns of tribal groups, with lesser amounts from outlying villages. This is an indication of the ceremonial importance of these objects to tribal units. Their production and interpretation and display rested in particular clan groups for ceremonial names and as well, were the property of specific clans.²²³

This, too, was mere supposition, but unlike Waring and Holder it was based on ethnology and updated archaeological data. Griffin argues that instead of assigning all iconographic material to a singular “cult” manifestation, we should view it as an artistic expression of the Mississippian period as a whole. Although generic in many ways, this opinion ran counter to many ascribed modes of thinking, but was essentially correct, and in many ways, remains true today. From an iconographic point of view, though, this book did not deal with themes, motifs, or style, but rather presented a different way to view the items as a whole. For instance, this assessment suggested that if a singular manifestation was connected to a revitalization movement, then the material distributions should be limited and stylistically remain the same. However, if they were part of the Mississippian religious ideology, then they would show a stylistic diversification, an assertion that research now supports.

Until a chronological model could be developed, any discussion of themes, motifs, and styles was deficient. Most scholarship in the 1940s and 1950s was therefore inherently flawed. It wasn't until 1952 that Griffin, in only a very limited capacity, introduced radiocarbon dating for certain Mississippian sites that determined that Cahokia was in its development stages between 700 and 900 C.E. This date pushed back against the understood SECC chronology of the time. However, as Griffin remarks,

²²³ James B. Griffin, “Cultural Periods in Eastern United States Archaeology,” in *Archaeology of Eastern United States* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), 363.

“very few samples have been dated from this period. The radiocarbon laboratories have been somewhat reluctant to accept carbonaceous material because of the difficulty of distinguishing specimens from the relatively recent past from contemporary carbon.”²²⁴ Therefore, most analysis still relied on stratigraphy to try to contextualize and date the symbolic material found in mounds and burials.

In 1959, and building on the work of Griffin, the first time-based artifact analysis was circulated. This study allowed scholars to view the evolution of certain iconographic elements by looking at incised shell. Written by Madeline Kneberg, “Engraved Shell Gorgets and Their Associations” explored the development of specific artistic themes from the Dallas Culture based on their chronological advancement identified through stratigraphy.²²⁵ The Dallas Culture, incidentally, was the name given to this regionally specific Mississippian cultural group who appeared in Tennessee around 1000 C.E. and continued into the eighteenth century. Kneberg was able to use updated archaeological data from various excavations, associated burials, ceramic styles, and various iconographic forms to analyze “77 gorgets, all of known temporal provenience from 17 properly-excavated eastern Tennessee sites.”²²⁶ This allowed her to provide a layout of the thematic progression within a specific region. Although Kneberg could not produce specific dates for the sites being considered, she was able to demonstrate using stratigraphy that the earlier model offered by Waring and Holder needed to be updated. If, for example, the cult model postulated by Waring and Holder were true, and it

²²⁴ James B. Griffin, “Radiocarbon dates for the Eastern United States,” in *Archaeology of Eastern United States* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), 369.

²²⁵ Madeline Kneberg, “Engraved Shell Gorget and Their Associations” in *Tennessee Archaeologist*, 15, 1 (1959): 1.

²²⁶ Antonio Waring, “Review of Engraved Shell Gorgets and Their Associations” in *American Antiquity*, 25, 4 (1960): 620.

occurred late in prehistory or the early protohistoric period, then how could similar iconographic symbols originate in various layers dating back hundreds of years? For almost everyone in the academic field, this paper made large strides towards developing an iconographic sequence for ceremonial Mississippian artifacts. However, large quantities of radiocarbon dates would not be satisfactorily applied until the 1990s and early 2000s, meaning most analyses moving forward continued to deal only with themes, motifs, and style irrespective of an accurate and all-encompassing chronological model.

This continued deficiency of a conclusive time-based categorization led to another model of interpretation—the art historical approach. In his unpublished Harvard Ph.D. dissertation, Jon D. Muller created the first stylistic analysis of marine shell gorgets using an “artistic” framework as his guide. He concluded that by examining an artifact by means of the same principles that art historians utilize, archaeologists could determine the provenience of an artifact regardless of its current state—be it found through excavations or housed in a museum collection. Like Impressionism or Baroque, a specific style can be used to isolate its formal characteristics and identify a precise individual or society within the larger culture who produced it. In other words, Muller reasoned that like a linguist, using this technique, a formal level of inquiry can be established, similar to a “grammar,” which can then be used to identify where it actually belongs within the overall Mississippian cultural realm, similar to a word within a sentence.²²⁷ For Muller, this type of approach illuminated the style distribution of religious objects and allowed scholars to investigate trade and temporal connections throughout the various Mississippian cultural areas—something that was currently not possible. The reason for

²²⁷ Jon D. Muller, “Archaeological Analysis of Art Styles,” in *Tennessee Archaeologist*, 22, 1 (1966): 26-27.

this interpretative approach was described by Muller in an article released in conjunction with his dissertation.

Despite a relatively large literature on the “Southern Cult,” the nature and the character of the complex cannot be regarded as having been determined. Indeed, there may be some room for the questioning of the concept altogether. This is true despite the wealth of material which appears to be the result of “Cult” activity. There is, however, a paradoxical lack of really adequate information about context and relationship for much of this material. Thus, even with the great amount of material, the information which would be necessary for the traditional archaeological analysis is often not available. It is precisely at this point that art analysis, or more properly stylistic analysis, can make a real contribution to American archaeological studies.²²⁸

As great as this was, there were still problems within the field of Mississippian studies that confounded many anthropologists, and almost all of it could be boiled down to a single issue. Everyone worked in a vacuum. Anthropologists and ethnologists studied people, archaeologists excavated, and historians explored the written record. Only a few scholars combined these fields, and those that did, rarely were able to accurately fold them together into a working methodology for understanding not just where and when objects originated, but what they meant and how they were used. Because of this, there was no true conduit between pre-Columbian people and the historic descendants that could be used to accurately apply the ethnographic literature within a prehistoric framework and, in-turn, a stylistic analysis. This problem eventually gave rise to a new school of thought. Known as the Annales approach, this historical thought movement had three principle aims. First, it outlined a series of events. This is counter to other approaches that were more problem oriented. Next, Annale historians looked at a wide range of human activities. Finally, they incorporated interdisciplinary approaches

²²⁸ Muller, “Archaeological Analysis of Art Styles,” 25.

to their examination.²²⁹ Scholars who championed this approach believed anthropology was missing an essential understanding of how modern and historical people were connected to their Mississippian ancestors, which was creating a problem regarding the interpretation of Mississippian culture and the ritual objects. As Charles Hudson remarked following the release of his widely acclaimed book, *The Southeastern Indians*, “When this book went to print, I was acutely aware of not having the foggiest understanding of how Etowah, Moundville, Cahokia, and Spiro mounds that dominated the Southeast in the late prehistoric Mississippian era were connected to the Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, Catawbas, and Seminoles.”²³⁰ What was needed, he argued, was a change in the way anthropologists viewed and studied the Southeastern cultures. And, the best way to do that was to develop a multidisciplinary approach that heavily incorporated history into the archaeological examinations of sites, cultures, and objects.

For Hudson, this journey began as a graduate student at North Carolina. It was there he realized that the methods he was taught were limited. Anthropologists were not incorporating history or even ethnohistory into their investigative processes and, subsequently, they were removing the inherent connections between pre-historic and historic period people. Hudson’s response to this was swift and all consuming. He immediately began working with historians and was actively involved in the field of ethnohistory. This, he argued, was the path to understanding the prehistoric cultures. These cultures were still around at the time of Spanish contact; thus, they should be

²²⁹ Thomas J. Pluckhahn and Robbie Ethridge ed., *Light on the Path: The Anthropology and History of the Southeastern Indians* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2006), 15.

²³⁰ “Research on the Early Southeast: Retrospective and Prospective,” Presidential Address to the American Ethnohistorical Society, Chicago. In Thomas J. Pluckhahn and Robbie Ethridge ed., *Light on the Path: The Anthropology and History of the Southeastern Indians* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2006), 11.

studied via the historical literature more critically.²³¹ Now, this is not to say that investigations of the historical literature had not already been undertaken. They had. But, these early ethnographers were tied to the Swanton model of interpretation and the ethnographic present—an approach that was inherently limiting.²³²

Embracing these new approaches, scholars began reevaluating and officially challenging Waring and Holder's thesis that a Southeastern Ceremonial Complex or "Southern Cult" was the genesis of the rich iconographic material found across the Southeastern United States. Although years of scholarship had put forth contrarian arguments, the lack of radiocarbon dating, defined stylistic analyses, and a more accurate ethnographic assessment left little room for a direct challenge. However, in 1976, James A. Brown formally issued a call to reevaluate their conclusions in the light of new data. According to Brown, in his paper, "The Southern Cult Reconsidered," he argues that

the concept has been notably unfruitful in archaeological research. It has been unsuccessful in organizing new bodies of data and it has given rise to many conflicting cultural-historical theories that are unsubstantiated in the archaeology and are unsustainable from the modern culture theory. Those researchers that have seriously studied Cult materials have usually gained their insight through the use of different conceptual tools.²³³

The reassessment of the cult complex transformed the academic perceptions of not only the artistic images, but the Mississippian people as well. For researchers, it was not enough merely to evaluate the objects, they needed to understand the culture and appraise the material within those terms. To do this, researchers continued their iconographic analysis but framed it in a cultural model. Perhaps the greatest attempt to accomplish this

²³¹ Pluckhahn and Ethridge, *Light on the Path*, 19.

²³² Galloway, "Ethnology," 92.

²³³ James A. Brown, "The Southern Cult Reconsidered," in *Midcontinental Journal of Archaeology*, 1, 2 (1976), 115. For bib 115-135.

came from Philip Phillips and James A. Brown in their six-volume work *Pre-Columbian Shell Engraving from the Craig Mound at Spiro*. This epic undertaking explored the engraved shell found at Spiro and isolated six distinct styles—Braden A, Braden B, Braden C, and Craig A, Craig B, and Craig C. For Phillips and Brown, this work provided not only a stylistic analysis, but also offered a regional model for differentiating the diverse images on shell. Moreover, they determined that the bulk of the ceremonial goods found at Spiro were not made at the site or anywhere else in the region. Instead, Spiro was something unique and likely, as the western most ceremonial center, a center for trade. Based on the material recovered in burials, the authors were able to determine that all the ceremonial goods found at Spiro were in their finished form, used material not native to the region, and that the control of these goods was likely the primary economic system of Spiro and its chieftainship organization.²³⁴

Complementing these varied new approaches was a 1984 exhibition and academic conference (later turned into a publication) from the Cottonlandia Museum in Greenwood, Mississippi. Here, nineteen scholars convened to discuss the current state of Mississippian studies and offer new suggestions on how to interpret the culture, ceremonial material, and stylistic diversification. The root of this perceptual change came not only from a better understanding of chronology, distribution, and social processes but also how these items may have been used economically, politically, and religiously. To accomplish this, these scholars divided the conference publication into three parts—Definitions, Regional Manifestations, and Interpretations. Each of these sections presented evidence that refuted the previously established Waring and Holder

²³⁴ Phillips and Brown, *Pre-Columbian Shell Engravings from the Craig Mound at Spiro, Oklahoma: Part 1*, 19-20.

postulation of a “Southern Cult” and offered a counter. Not everyone agreed with each other. But, that was not the point. This volume’s goal was to present a dramatic and formal shift in thinking that would shape the next generation of academics.

The first section of this volume dealt specifically with definitions. In separate chapters, Jon Muller and David Brose proposed systematic approaches to explain the rise and use of iconographic material. Both scholars approached this task using new data and offered persuasive reasons for the limitation, or abolition, of the original “cult” postulation. For Muller, the problem was that society was complicated; based on the widespread use of ceremonial material, it was clear that a single term could not explain “a complicated phenomenon that was partly religious, partly economic, and partly a system of exchange.”²³⁵

He offered concrete definitions for style, theme, and motif—terms often confused. Style, he remarked, denotes the overall characteristics of an entire artistic tradition. Theme is the design

elements within that overarching organization, and motifs are the smaller designs within the specific theme. For example, “a theme would be something like a “dancing human form,” while the term motif might be applied to decorative forms...such as the “bilobed



Figure 20; Copper Plate, Etowah, National Museum of Natural History, A91113

²³⁵ Jon Muller, “The Southern Cult,” in *The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex: Artifacts and Analysis*, ed. Patricia Galloway (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 11.

arrow.”²³⁶ Within this stylistic layout, Muller harkened back to Krieger and commented on the symbolic connections to earlier Hopewell art, completely removing connections to Mexico. He further noted the extensive trade in raw materials, which date back to 1 C.E., used to make ritual objects. Once transported to their final location, these objects were crafted and a distinct style created. Muller believes each object, because of this, was tied to the Mississippian political and ritual economy. His reasoning was a strong departure from previous interpretations and postulated that the symbolism was indeed autochthonous.

Somewhat at odds with Muller, and with the bulk of new literature, was David Brose. At this time, Brose held fast to the “Southern Cult” as a concept, but placed the origin of the heavily imbued artifacts within the framework of new chronology. He agreed that the creation of stylized objects occurred at an early stage in the development of the Mississippian culture and agreed they were likely tied to elites. However, he postulated that the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex was of mostly Mesoamerican origin and that their meaning was likely transformed by way of climatic fluctuations, which again, occurred in the late prehistorical and early historical periods. Brose continued to argue that changes in the natural world directly impacted the meaning of symbols and it is unlikely that environmental changes were not reflected upon the religious material so venerated by Mississippian people.²³⁷ Brose also remarked that

I remain equally unconvinced that there is any compelling evidence for assuming that either ritual meaning attached to the Cult motifs or behavioral responses to the social persona bearing them would have been the same at Spiro as it was at Etowah...It seems equally obvious to me that such changes would have caused

²³⁶ Muller, “The Southern Cult,” 12.

²³⁷ David Brose, “From the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex to the Southern Cult: You Can’t Tell the Players without a Program,” in *The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex: Artifacts and Analysis*, ed. Patricia Galloway (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 31.

reinterpretations of, and additions to, the existing cosmologies, so that older social roles and sacred symbols took on new behavioral poses and ideological meanings.²³⁸

Although well-reasoned, this argument does not accurately reflect the ethnographic literature or give credence to Native American oral traditions, which many argue today were passed on to new generations with an almost scientific rigidity.²³⁹ However, Brose was responding to the evidence as he saw it and essentially believed that Southeastern Ceremonial Complex and the Southern Cult should be viewed as two separate creations instead of one—each feeding into the other out of necessity.

The next section of the publication deals exclusively with regional manifestations of the iconographic images and discusses them primarily through their four dominant media—copper, stone, ceramic, and shell. With these materials, scholars recognize the regional variation of style and imagery but also speculate as to their development in relation to technological and political changes.²⁴⁰ Moreover, multiple chapters deal specifically with symbolic associations with political or religious practices and speculate as to their meaning. For Thomas Emerson, the goal was to go beyond the chronological and social data being studied by past scholars and begin connecting certain motifs with their cosmological mates.

From this perspective the problems are identical to those that archaeologists have in interpreting the rest of the artifact assemblage. The difference between the two realms of interpretation come from the fact that traditionally it has been acceptable to make the leap from artifact to chronology, function, or definition of specific cultures. Archaeologists have been trained to accept the ambiguities in such transitions as inevitable and unobjectionable in their research. This is not the

²³⁸ Brose, “From the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex to the Southern Cult,” 33.

²³⁹ Adrienne Mayor, *Fossil Legends of the First Americans* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 296.

²⁴⁰ Dan Morse and Phyllis Morse, “The Rise of the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex in the Central Mississippian Valley,” in *The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex: Artifacts and Analysis*, ed. Patricia Galloway (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 41.

case with the transition from artifact to symbolism, except at a very superficial level.²⁴¹

To do this, Emerson compares previously recognized shell, stone, and ceramic symbols and looks for commonality and comparatives. He then examines objects, formerly viewed independently, and concludes that when measured together, regardless of location, in a tableau format certain symbolic meanings become evident. These symbols are then compared to archaeological, historical, and ethnographical literature to determine an underlining meaning. Specifically, he looks at flint clay statuary, ceramics, and shell. With the shell, Emmerson focuses on the rattlesnake motif and the bird-man imagery, noting that when looking that the mythology of historic Native American people, the bird persona represents aggressive warfare, and as a Thunderbird it is also tied to rain, lightening, and water—characteristics of both the upper world and the beneath world. In rituals, it is also recorded that these shell cups and ceramic vessels were used as containers for Black Drink and other hallucinogenic substances and even used in Green Corn festivals. Therefore, the iconography can be used as a vehicle for understanding culture and not relegated to a simple chronological or style-based system with no known meaning.

Within this publication, other authors began expanding the physical boundary of the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex and isolating the stylistic differences that arose region by region, yet still remained connected to a specific symbolic representation. Originally, the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex was defined within the framework of the large ceremonial centers—namely Etowah, Cahokia, Moundville, and Spiro.

²⁴¹ Thomas E. Emerson, “Water, Serpents, and the Underworld: An Exploration into Cahokian Symbolism,” in *The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex: Artifacts and Analysis*, ed. Patricia Galloway (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 45.

However, as archaeological investigations increased, other styles and regions came into play, specifically the North American Great Plains. The most unique location was Nebraska, where an elk antler bracket with images of outstretched hands and circular motifs within the palms and a bird effigy pipe was found at the Graham Site in Harlan Country, Nebraska.²⁴² These items, so far outside the defined parameters of the original complex, were slowly becoming less of an anomaly. This, in-turn, led to a reevaluation of the regional model and intensive investigations into stylistic differences.

Consequently, this allowed James A. Brown to postulate that a great quantity of Spiro material, in almost every media, was imported and not original to the site. An example of this regional diversification can be seen in bird-man images on cups and gorgets. Both appear to be thematically similar but are stylistically very different. Moreover,

the pattern of stylistic matches between marine shell engraving, copper repoussé work, and engraved pottery, a geographical uniformity emerges that is far more ordered than that indicated by the unsorted assemblage provided by the archaeological record. The stylistically mismatched assemblages found at the major Mississippian period centers can be intelligibly divided into indigenous and exotic items once we can solve the problem of reliable sourcing.²⁴³

Furthermore, Brown was able to look at each region as a specific style, similar to identifying an artist by their handwriting, and show that long-distance trade and not just similar ideology was occurring throughout the region and among the various ceremonial centers.

²⁴² Robert E. Neuman, "A Note on Southeastern Ceremonial Complex Artifacts from the Great Plains," in *The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex: Artifacts and Analysis*, ed. Patricia Galloway (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 203.

²⁴³ James A. Brown, "On the Style Divisions of the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex: A Revisionist Perspective," in *The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex: Artifacts and Analysis*, ed. Patricia Galloway (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 122.



Figure 21; Birdman Copper Plate; Lake Jackson, Florida



Figure 22; Birdman Shell Gorget; Etowah, Georgia



Figure 23; Birdman Stone; Cahokia, Illinois

Another interesting proposition was offered by Vernon J. Knight regarding a method for investigating the meaning of symbols. Ethnohistorical approaches, like those of Robert Hall, were critical to interpreting Mississippian period images and placing them within the social or political realm. However, what should be made of the images that do not have symbolic or historic connections? To answer this, Knight took a deeper look at these themes and motifs, specifically monster imagery, and postulated that they were created by political elites and used as objects of control. This idea was briefly introduced by Phillips and Brown in their six-volume Spiro shell engraving book, where they observed “mystifications rather than communication may have been the object of some of the designs that have proved so impenetrable...Lakota shamans used a special language unintelligible to all but members of their own professional society. Designs in shell may have been invented for a similar purpose.”²⁴⁴ For Knight, these images were likely power transformed and that by creating these images and using them in a ritual manner, elites

²⁴⁴ Philip Phillips and James A. Brown, *Pre-Columbian Shell Engravings from the Craig Mound at Spiro, Oklahoma: Part 2* (Cambridge: Peabody Museum Press, 1984), xx.

were the sole possessors of esoteric knowledge. Essentially, this was their way of controlling the commoner class, something that is done in every society.

With the publication of this book, the study of Mississippian culture and iconography made a dramatic leap forward. Here was a series of essays that challenged conventional thinking, offered well-reasoned alternatives, and provided arguments in a manner that took into account multiple viewpoints and various fields of study. In essence, it was the first multidisciplinary approach—albeit, done through various scholars and not using a defined methodology. Regardless, this work shows how far the field of Mississippian studies had come over the last 500 years. From mere narratives to racist supposition, the field underwent multiple paradigm shifts leading to a scientific, and reasoned, approach to looking at the past. However, these attempts were merely setting the stage for today's multidisciplinary approach.

CHAPTER V

FINDING A NEW PATH FORWARD

Section 1 – Changing the Rules

To say that the field of Mississippian iconographic studies has undergone profound changes in the last twenty years is an understatement. Since the opening of the Cottonlandia exhibition in 1984 and the subsequent 1989 exhibition publication, the ideas surrounding the interpretation of Southeastern iconographic material have grown exponentially. Without question, these new ideas represent the most significant paradigm shift to affect the field since its inception. Underpinning this change is a growing understanding of the Mississippian political, economic, and ceremonial culture through increased archaeology, a more comprehensive reading of ethnological material, increased access to scientific testing, and a defined methodology for approaching the field of study. Together, these changes have yielded more results and at a faster rate than at any other time in history. Even though a change in interpretation had been afoot since the 1960s, the large-scale transformative process really began in the 1990s and can be traced to F. Kent Reilly III and the Texas State Iconographic Conference (TSIC) he founded. Building on the Maya Meetings held annually at the University of Texas, the TSIC created an environment where scholars from across the country, who had previously worked in a near vacuum, could congregate and investigate cultural and iconographic

theories together. This one act provided researchers from different fields a venue to support and challenge ideas, feed off each other's discoveries, and integrate their separate lines of thought into a singular transformative methodology. This new way to approach an old problem is termed the multidisciplinary approach and the San Marcos School of Thought.

Although simplistic in theory, applying the multidisciplinary approach, and truly understanding its principles, was not an easy undertaking. Too many scholars were trained to rigidly apply their own specific field of study to concepts that actually needed a broader outlook. This inflexibility had old roots. As described in the previous chapter, a strict application of inquiry was the defining characteristic of each previous paradigm in Mississippian studies dating back to the 1700s. For instance, in the 1700s and 1800s, it was the application of rudimentary archaeology coupled with burgeoning scientific theories in geology, paleontology, and other fields originating in Europe that captured the academically minded and fanciful stories of a lost civilization of mound builders for the vast majority of others. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the ethnographic method was the reigning technique for studying Mississippian symbolism of engraved, embossed, and painted copper, stone, ceramic, and shell. By the 1930s, archaeology was the preferred practice for studying this material, as New Deal programs dramatically increased excavations, university and museum artifact collection efforts, and provided greater access to academic publications. Yet, during this period, academic training was not preparing students to utilize multiple academic sources to investigate and interpret this material. History, ethnology, and other fields were left by the wayside as raw archaeology was singularly applied. In the 1960s, the Annale School of thought was

introduced into anthropological study, but it was slow to take hold, and many scholars were unsure how to apply it. Moreover, the vast majority of Mississippian researchers still followed the hypotheses presented by Antonio J. Waring, Jr. and Preston Holder in 1945, where, after the discovery of Spiro in 1933, they identified a Southeastern Ceremonial Complex (SECC) as the originating force behind all Mississippian iconographic representations.

For many scholars, even with Waring and Holder's SECC hypotheses in place, the meaning behind this material remained unknowable. Largely forgotten were William Henry Holmes, Charles C. Willoughby, George Grant MacCurdy, and others who used ethnographic descriptions to describe these items nearly fifty years earlier. Efforts instead focused on stylistic analyses and were largely limited to a single medium. The reason for the stylistic focus was simple. Time-based analyses remained generally elusive, as archaeologists continued to use stratigraphy for time and geography for space to formulate their conclusions. Consequently, this process did not result in a monumental shift in thinking, but it was nevertheless groundbreaking. Stylistic analyses showed that SECC art had indeed evolved over time and, in turn, provided alternatives to the previous model offered by Waring and Holder. Today, the bulk of the contrarian ideas to Waring and Holder's original thesis comes directly out of the TSIC through a combination of articles, conference papers, and books that are usually co-authored by scholars from different fields of study.

To understand these broad changes, it is important to look back at what Waring and Holder originally postulated. They suggested that these striking SECC images of various media occurred late in the Mississippian period, were Muskogean in origin, tied

to a single cult, and organized around a trait system that identified four central pillars—motifs, god-animal representations, ceremonial objects, and costume regalia.²⁴⁵ The problem, as identified previously, was that these conclusions were built on an absence of time-based studies and undertaken without a completed Spiro inventory. Knowing both of these variables, scholars are now directly challenging the Waring and Holder model and understand that the previous hypotheses vastly understated the origins, relationships, and principle use of art objects within the Mississippian cultural world. Moreover, TSIC workshop scholars are able to show “that SECC images are expressed in a variety of divergent styles tied to specific geographic areas inhabited by a mosaic of ethnic and linguistic groups.”²⁴⁶ Archaeology, rock art analysis, and scientific testing has shown that the varied media were created early in the period—perhaps as early as 1100 AD—rather than late, and that the concepts expressed on them may go back to the Archaic Era.²⁴⁷ It is also likely the symbols were not Muskogean, or Southeastern in origin, but spread-out from Cahokia, present-day St. Louis, in the Midwest. Furthermore, these scholars believe that a wide application of folklore and artistic analyses demonstrates that nearly every element depicted in the art can be tied to a cosmic, or supernatural, representation and were often not meant to be viewed as 2-D models but rather as 3-D renderings that convey action as well as meaning.²⁴⁸ Lastly, there is a “recognition of the significance of ethnographic literature in the recovery of meaning from the ancient Native

²⁴⁵ A. J. Waring, Jr. and Preston Holder. “A Prehistoric Ceremonial Complex in the Southeastern United States.” In *American Anthropologist*, 47, 1 (1945): 2-3.

²⁴⁶ Vernon James Knight, Jr. James A. Brown and George Lankford, “On the Subject of Southeastern Ceremonial Complex Art,” in *Southeastern Archaeology*, 20, 2 (2001), 130. for bib 129-141.

²⁴⁷ Janet C. Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 79.

²⁴⁸ Vernon James Knight, Jr. James A. Brown and George Lankford, “On the Subject of Southeastern Ceremonial Complex Art,” 133.

American art has proved the Rosetta Stone that led to many of the interpretations” seen today in Mississippian iconographic literature.²⁴⁹

Section 2 – Understanding their World

Unlike the previous Mississippian studies paradigms, scholars today realize that through scrutinizing ethnographic and archaeological literature and by employing cultural models, the social and religious structures of the Mississippian people can be better identified. This understanding provides the framework for iconographic analyses because it allows objects to be seen in their proper, real world, context. Moreover, TSIC members, such as Robert Hall, George Lankford, F. Kent, Reilly III, James Duncan, and others have looked beyond the prior assumption that the Mississippian people and their beliefs were Muskogean in origin and have instead tied the art to various linguistic and ethnic groups across the Midwest and South. Religious similarities to Siouan, particularly Dhegihan, and Algonquian oral traditions have also been proven to match many pre-Columbian artistic elements and illuminate the social and religious structure in which they were created.²⁵⁰

In Mississippian period communities, social organization was directly linked to their religious viewpoints and understanding of the supernatural world. Underpinning this belief was the concept of a tri-layered cosmic system connecting preternatural beings

²⁴⁹ George Lankford, F. Kent Reilly III, and James Garber, ed., Introduction to *Visualizing the Sacred: Cosmic Visions, Regionalism, and the Art of the Mississippian World*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), xii.

²⁵⁰ James R. Duncan, “The Cosmology of the Osage: The Star People and their Universe,” in *Visualizing the Sacred: Cosmic Visions, Regionalism, and the Art of the Mississippian World* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 18.

to people, animals, rivers and mountains. This celestial structure controlled life and death, day and night, earth and sky. It also balanced the power of the gods, Above and Below, who were mortal enemies and continuously battled one another on a cosmic stage. The supernatural forces brought forth rain, lightening, crops, and ensured a successful hunt. The Mississippian social structure was defined by these beliefs and organized in a religious elite hierarchy. Those at the top could commune with the gods and exploit the natural and supernatural powers of the universe for the good of the community. Because people lacked god-like abilities, it was necessary to have intermediaries that could utilize the supernatural power of the Above and Below realms. Essentially, in the Mississippian world, religion and reality were the same and could not be separated from one another.

Therefore, scholars must know how Mississippians defined, navigated, and controlled that religious reality. As described by Thomas Emerson, “religion is a symbolic system that creates a societies conception and interpretations of their interactions with the world... [and] is the specific correlation of an idealist cosmological universe with its materialistic expression in the real world through multitudinous material symbols.”²⁵¹ In examining the archaeological evidence from the early phases of Mississippian culture, researchers have noted that there are examples of quadri-partitioning in the community squares arranged around a central post. According to Lecretia Kelly, the partitioning of these squares “appears to embody certain symbolic elements that underline Mississippian belief systems. The central fourfold pit complexes accompanied by a central post, could well reflect the initial emergence of the cross-in-

²⁵¹ Timothy R. Pauketat and Thomas E. Emerson, *Cahokia: Domination and Ideology in the Mississippian World* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 191.

circle complexes.”²⁵² This quadri-patterning continued in the late periods of Mississippian society and is discussed in Muskogean, Caddoan, and other ethnic descriptions of the universe. In fact, this design runs parallel to their viewpoints regarding the design of the world, which has the earth embodied as a flat disk with four sides—signifying the four cardinal directions.²⁵³ Another component of this connection between the natural world and cosmological world is the creation of wooden circles, otherwise known as “woodhenges.” These post circles were constructed to track the changing of the seasons, for planting and harvesting and, presumably, religious festivals. These “woodhenges” with their center pole were also a physical representation of the universe and cosmic axis, which is noted by Robert Hall as being “seen as a Spirit Trail, a route to the hereafter.”²⁵⁴

In addition to objects, such as square grounds and woodhenges, symbolizing the connection to the supernatural realm, ceremony played an important role as well. Purification rituals associated with war, including the ingesting of Black Drink and other sacred substances, were undertaken by chiefs, priests, warriors, and society members as a way to harness and use the power of the supernaturals that inhabited the universe.²⁵⁵ Using stylized pots and engraved shell cups, these privileged persons ingested sanctified beverages, which connected them in some way with the preternatural realm. The annual ceremony of the “Busk” or “Green Corn,” still practiced in many modern Native

²⁵² Lecretia S. Kelly, “Faunal Remains” in *The Archaeology of Cahokia Palisades: East Palisades Investigations*, ed. William R. Iseminger and George R. Holley (Springfield: Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, 1990). 109-134.

²⁵³ Pauketat and Emerson, *Cahokia: Domination and Ideology in the Mississippian World*, 191.

²⁵⁴ Robert Hall, “The Cahokia Site and Its People,” in *Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand: American Indian Art of the Ancient Midwest and South*, ed. Richard Townsend and Robert Sharp (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 99.

²⁵⁵ Thomas E. Emerson, “Materializing Cahokia Shamans,” in *Southeastern Archaeology* 22, no. 2 (2003): 137.

American communities, is believed to have ushered in a new year in Mississippian societies and is connected to that other worldly realm. This ceremony was performed in conjunction with rites expressing group health, animal propitiation, and to ensure success in hunting and warfare. Visual manifestations of this ceremony are displayed in the iconography of the period and are connected to artistic depictions of the Corn Mother, or Old Woman Who Never Dies, who is typically symbolized with a sacred bundle and portrayed as having maize grow from her palm, feet, and thighs.²⁵⁶ She is also Evening Star, and in this form, she is the wife of Morning Star, a mythical hero and the god of war, in Pawnee and countless other traditions and a central character in Mississippian mythology.²⁵⁷

In what amounts to a monumental shift in thinking, today's researchers no longer see the Busk ceremony as the central focus of SECC. Although iconographic elements are indeed connected to the Busk ritual, these items were not inspired by that ritual. Previous research by Antonio Waring, Preston Holder, James Howard, and many others through the 1990s concluded that "nearly all of the motifs and ritual objects of this Complex could be fit into a slightly more elaborate version of the Busk as it is still practiced today by the conservative Creek, Seminole, and Yuchi groups."²⁵⁸ However, TSIC research now indicates that SECC imagery is "distinctive as a Native American art system for its lack of agricultural imagery or overt vegetal imagery of any kind."²⁵⁹ In

²⁵⁶ Joel W. Martin, "The Green Corn Ceremony of the Muskogees," in *Religion of the United States in Practice, Vol. 1*, ed. Colleen McDannell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 49.

²⁵⁷ F. Kent Reilly III, "People of earth, People of Sky: Visualizing the Sacred in Native American Art of the Mississippian Period," in *Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand: American Indian Art of the Ancient Midwest and South*, ed. Richard Townsend and Robert Sharp (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 133-134.

²⁵⁸ James H. Howard, "The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex and Its Interpretation," in *Missouri Archaeological Society* (1968): 80.

²⁵⁹ Vernon James Knight, Jr. James A. Brown, and George E. Lankford, "On the Subject Matter of Southeastern Ceremonial Complex Art," in *Southeastern Archaeology*, 20, 2 (2001): 139.

fact, nearly all of the associated motifs can be connected to supernaturals and mythic stories, and not one specific ritual.

Regardless, Mississippian chiefs and elites controlled these objects and ceremonies. Based on evidence collected at some of the earliest Mississippian sites, scholars have noticed that the rise of the first pole-circle monuments coincides with the introduction of supernatural iconography. The likely conclusion is the chief and ruling elites needed a physical representation of remembrance for the local inhabitants to help ensure their continued governance over the community. As described by Timothy R. Pauketat “this elite ideology was not simply a short-lived political tactic; it was authority transformed.”²⁶⁰ Vernon J. Knight expounded upon this idea further and explained the nature of the underwater serpent motif heavily associated with Moundville. As he describes, the esoteric symbols were created to be visual markers yet obscure enough that only elites could properly interpret what was essentially a secret language.²⁶¹ Many of the iconic artifacts found at these sites, therefore, reinforced the political power established by the ruling elites as “control of political symbols would have played a crucial role in the social relations among individuals within Mississippian societies.”²⁶²

Further evidence for this power structure and its cosmic connection came during the historic period and is documented in Spanish narratives. In these narratives, the chief is usually carried in an elevated manner. Usually, this takes the form of a litter, but that is not always the case. In one example from the narrative of Cabeza De Vaca, this

²⁶⁰ Timothy R. Pauketat, *The Ascent of Chiefs: Cahokia and Mississippian Politics in Native North America* (Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 1994), 174.

²⁶¹ Vernon J. Knight, Jr. “Some Speculations on Monsters,” in *The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex: Artifacts and Analysis*, ed. Patricia Galloway (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 122.

²⁶² John Scarry, *Political Structure and Change in the Prehistoric Southeastern United States* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida), 15.

chiefly elevation was performed in a different way, yet with the same intention. “Then on this [June] 17th, there appeared in front of us a chief in painted deerskin riding the back of another Indian, musicians playing reed flutes walking before, and a train of many subjects attending him.”²⁶³ When Europeans first saw this act, as well as the use of litters, they assumed that the chief was being raised due to his rank within the community. This conclusion may be correct. However, George Lankford theorizes that a closer inspection and interpretation of Native American beliefs may yield an alternative significance.

It is possible that the carrying of chiefs on litters is a symbol with quite a different meaning, referring to a symbolic world that is not primarily one of rank and status, but of domains of cosmic power held in balance. Two major lines of thought support this interpretation: (1) the ritual nature of the behavior, and (2) the widespread observation of this practice through both time and space.²⁶⁴

When looking at the archaeological record, the use of litters is pervasive. In nearly every mound complex, these items are identified and associated with elites. Therefore, elites may have been using these as icons, coupled with belief, to reinforce their position, and stabilize the world—a concept reminiscent of Earth Diver creation myths. Robert Hall has also noted the use of litters in Mississippian burials from Spiro to Cahokia and acknowledges their connection to social status, but also that “the total symbolic context of the litter burial extends into the area of rebirth [and] world renewal.”²⁶⁵ If these scholars are correct, then this relationship once again reinforced through display their understanding of the natural and cosmological universe, centered on the society’s

²⁶³ Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, *Adventures in the Unknown Interior of America*, ed. Cyclone Covey (New York: Collier Books, 1961), 7.

²⁶⁴ George Lankford, *Looking for Lost Lore: Studies in Folklore, Ethnology, and Iconography* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2008), 129.

²⁶⁵ Robert Hall, “The Cultural Background of Mississippian Symbolism,” in *The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex: Artifacts and Analysis*, ed. Patricia Galloway (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 261.

understanding of the celestial dome and how people and deities factored into that universe.

Interpretations of the celestial dome were the fundamental tenet of the Mississippian religious world, and “just as a modern map conveys both geographic and cultural functions, so the art of the

[SECC] reflects a coherent vision of an observed, ideologically generated, cosmic model.”²⁶⁶ This cosmic model,

or celestial dome, was comprised of three layers—an Above World, a Middle World, and a Beneath World.

In some instances there were layers within layers, but for the most part, these three realms acted upon each

other to create the universe.

Running through these realms was a central axis, known as the sacred

tree, cosmic pole, or axis mundi. This provided passage between the realms as deities and religious practitioners interacted, and at times, battled each other for control of sacred knowledge. Moreover, “deeply embedded in this trilevel cosmology was the dynamic concept of dualistic opposition. This notion—as fundamental as gravity is to our world vision—expresses the tension of the natural balance against the supernatural, or the

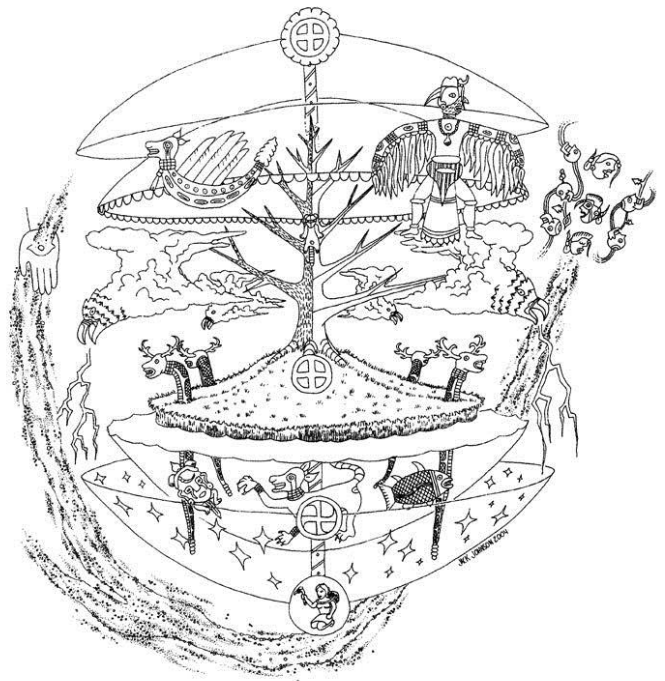


Figure 24; A modern representation of the Mississippian cosmos, showing the three layers and the beings that inhabit them (after Reilly 2004: figure 2). Drawing by Jack Johnson, courtesy of F. Kent Reilly III.

²⁶⁶ Reilly, III, “People of Earth, People of Sky,” 127.

Above World poised against the Beneath World.”²⁶⁷ The Mississippians expressed this tension and described its forces in their art, actions, religion, and rituals. Variations of this three-layered world are found in the ethnographic literature, from both North and Central America, which speaks to the antiquity of the concept and its near universal acceptance.²⁶⁸

Atop this dome was the Above world. Representations of the dome include the day sky, which was the domain of “supernatural birds called Thunderers. As their name implies, Thunderers were associated with weather events, such as lightening, storms, and

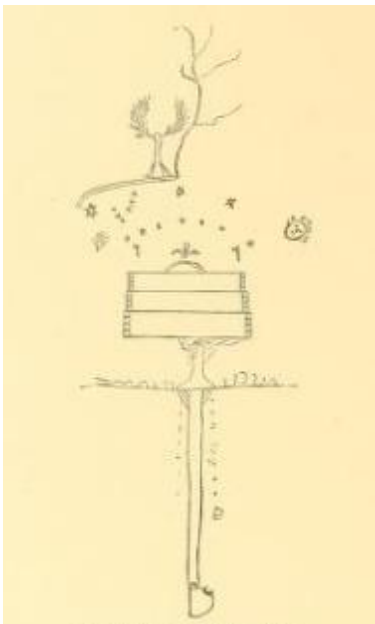


Figure 25; 1883 Drawing of Osage Tattoo, Tsi-Zhu, Secret Society Chest Tattoo of the Cosmic Realm. By Owen Dorsey. BAE 6th Annual Report.

winds.”²⁶⁹ The mythological characters who resided there were often personified in the stories of Morning Star, otherwise known as Red Horn or He-Who-Wears-Human-Heads-In-His-Ears.²⁷⁰ Morning Star was a supernatural hero in the cosmic world and navigated between all three realms. The individuals deified in the Above World, represented through the falcon character or Birdman, opposed the powers of the underworld realms.

Ethnographic literature and oral traditions are awash with stories of these battles between the forces of Above and Below.²⁷¹ The night sky could also be viewed as part of

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ George Lankford, “Some Cosmic Motifs in the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex,” in *Ancient Objects and Sacred Realms: Interpretations of Mississippian iconography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 15.

²⁶⁹ Vincas P. Steponaitis and David T. Dockery, “A Tale of Two Pipes,” in *The Gilcrease Museum Journal* (2014): 43.

²⁷⁰ Reilly III, “People of Earth, People of Sky,” 133-134.

²⁷¹ Scarry, *Political Structure and Change in the Prehistoric Southwestern United States*, 15.

the Above World in the celestial dome, and was the home of the female moon deity.²⁷² The night sky included the Milky Way—known in folklore as the Path of Souls and the route the dead must take to reach the underworld. This day and night relationship represented the dualistic nature of the cosmological map in Mississippian belief, with the day sky being the realm of the creation force and the night sky being the realm of the dead. It has been speculated that iconography represented by the serpent is both that of the creator and underworld deity with two strips around the eyes representing day—connecting it to the forked-eye motif of the falcon and Birdman, and three strips around the eyes representing the night; in essence the same deity in different forms.²⁷³

The Middle World is the domain of man in the celestial dome. It is characterized as floating on a primordial sea and represented with an anchor or tree through the center. This same representation is found physically in the community centers of the Mississippian people or in the “chunky circles” found in Mississippian villages. Historically, the “chunky circles” were identified with Muskogean villages by William Bartram in the 1770’s as being “Slave Posts, because to these are bound the captives condemned to be burnt; and these pillars are usually decorated with the scalps of their slain enemies.”²⁷⁴ Also, these posts, and how they are arranged, are stylistically identical to the central posts described previously by Lecretia Kelly, which gives additional credence to the ancestral link and religious symbolism shared by the two culture periods. In the iconography of the Mississippian culture, the middle world is identified by a flat disk, which represents the earth and the four cardinal directions. This disk is balanced,

²⁷² Reilly, III, “People of Earth, People of Sky,” 127.

²⁷³ F. Kent Reilly, III, Personal Communication, October 2009, Gilcrease Museum.

²⁷⁴ Gregory A. Waslkov and Kathryn E. Holland Braund eds. *William Bartram on the Southeastern Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995): 154.

pinned, or stabilized by ropes from the Above World and/or by serpents or turtles from the Beneath World. At its center is a cosmic access point often identified in the ethnographic literature as a central pole or tree.²⁷⁵

The Underworld or Beneath World was an underwater realm and the domain of the underwater deity, sometimes called Piasas or Uktena. This deity was typified as a serpent, panther, cat, or horned beast and was the creator of whirlpools and waves. The ancients thought that this realm, being an underwater realm, was penetrated through portals found in rivers, lakes, and caves.²⁷⁶ George Langford has speculated that this supernatural deity is also represented in the night sky as the constellation Scorpius. Because of this, the Uktena has the ability to pass into the multiple dominions in the celestial dome. The underwater realm is also the giver of shamanistic powers and its lord was the founder of the Central Algonquian Midé society. In these society ceremonies, “native doctors, if courageous and fortunate, received power from the Great Serpent, power that was made concrete by substances from the body of the Beneath World Creature—parts of a horn, red powder from the jewel on the head, copper and shell from the scales.”²⁷⁷

The ability to identify the multiple realms in the celestial dome is evidenced by scholarly analysis of circular iconic imagery seen in pottery, shell, and copper engravings. The celestial tree that was discussed in the Middle World imagery, “chunky circle” themes, and physically manifested in woodhenges, is for all intents and purposes a

²⁷⁵ Reilly III, “People of Earth, People of Sky,” 127.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ George Langford, “World on a String: Some Cosmological Components of the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex,” in *Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand: American Indian Art of the Ancient Midwest and South*, ed. Richard Townsend and Robert Sharp (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 214.

gateway or portal to the multiple realms in the dome. This tree, or axis mundi, has been described as an “elevator shaft... that can offer access to each of the levels of the cosmos, at least to those who are able to move through the axis, such as religious visionaries.”²⁷⁸ These symbols are differentiated from each other by the nature of their design in the iconography. The Above World symbol is circular with rays from the sun appearing on the outer edges of the circle. The Middle World symbol is circular with four distinct cardinal points, almost resembling a cross, located in the middle. And, the final circle motif is a “swastika” or swirl pattern and is identified with the Underworld.



Figure 26; Cosmic Tree Image, Reproduced from Spiro engraved cup. Phillips and Brown, Pl. 236.

To understand how the symbols are represented through the three layers of the axis mundi it is best to examine how the symbols are depicted. Many times, they appear to be at odds with each other, or our understanding of how humans, animals, and objects fit into the celestial dome. However, very simple assumptions create a detailed narrative of the Mississippian religious iconography. The symbol for the underwater realm, for example, is seen on different items throughout the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex. It is seen on items used by tribal medicine men and, as described above, with pottery that contained spiritual medicine retrieved from the Beneath World. In addition, this symbol is found on



Figure 27; Beneath World Motif, Arkansas, Nodena, Gilcrease Museum, 53.343.

²⁷⁸ Ibid, 215.

depictions of woodpeckers, or more importantly their tail feathers. As George Lankford explains, the appearance of a swastika on any bird seems odd. However, when you consider that in Muskogean folklore the bird sits with its tail feathers in the water, a known portal to the underwater realm, it begins to make sense.²⁷⁹ Woodpeckers are also seen on engraved gorgets depicting the universe, and birds of many forms are identified in the ethnographic literature as creatures that support the world and keep it balanced. Taken together this swirl pattern, seen on all these items, becomes invariably linked to the underworld.

The sun represents the Above World. This is apparent in the deification of the Mississippian chiefs and their status as the sun deity. The sun is important to the



Figure 28; Above World Sun Motif, Stone Earspools, Spiro Mounds, Private Collector

Mississippian cultures because it is the most dominant characteristic of the sky, providing light, warmth, and direction. Therefore, any representation of this realm would reflect that feature of the sky and the Above World.

When looking at several iconographic pieces, a similar circular motif tends to have numerous rayed edges, almost in the fashion of a rudimentary drawing of the sun. In addition, these circular rayed reliefs are found only in supernatural forms, therefore dismissing the possibility of it reflecting any known earthly relationship.

²⁷⁹ George Langford, *Native American Legends: Southeastern Nations: Caddo, Creek, Cherokee, Seminole & More* (Atlanta: August House Publishers, 1998), 109-110.

A cross within a circle represents the Middle World symbol. Because it is the third of three symbols and considering that circles are used to depict the three levels of the celestial dome, it becomes clearly evident that this design belongs to the Middle World or Living World.

In addition, the cross-circular motif was identified by James Howard in *Memoir of the Missouri*

Archaeological Society as being the same as the Creek

four-log fire.²⁸⁰ Other scholars have also pointed to this

design as not being that of a cross but rather a four-block section that simply resembles a cross and is identified in Mississippian community centers. These ancient city centers were arranged in a square with clan huts surrounding a central pole, a physical manifestation of the Middle World within their community. This design is also common with the modern Muscogee tribe and mimics their ceremonial sites found in eastern Oklahoma.²⁸¹



Figure 29; Middle World motif, Engraved Shell gorget, Gilcrease Museum, 90.234.

In the end, connections demonstrate the complicated societal structure that tied the Mississippian physical world to that of the supernatural. This preternatural world directed the growth of their crops, aided them in war, and facilitated their journey into the afterlife. By examining the beliefs of modern tribal communities, a more in-depth analysis of the Mississippian world is possible and indicates that these symbols were often used as control mechanisms that preserved the status of the chief and elite. It also provides a framework for understanding the regional manifestations of specific supernatural themes, the dispersal of material from an originating location, the context in

²⁸⁰ Langford, "World on a String," 209.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

which they were used, and how the framework can be inferred through archaeological and ethnographic literature.

Section 3 – A Regional Diversification

Recently, TSIC specialists have identified regional variations within the SECC artwork that both connect and separate most Mississippian artistic expressions fashioned in copper, stone, ceramic, and shell. These variations emphasize similar motifs, yet stylistically are unique to certain geographic regions and specific cultural centers throughout the Midwest, Northeast, and Southeast. Additional research indicates that particular motifs, first identified in the SECC trait list produced by Waring and Holder, were not always present at certain ceremonial centers yet found in great quantities at others. The principle centers where the largest quantity of iconographic material was produced and/or utilized were Cahokia, Spiro, Etowah, and Moundville.²⁸² Each ceremonial site either created or imported iconographically infused objects that were manifestations of the greater Mississippian mythic traditions, allowing scholars to look at ethnographic literature to determine their potential meaning, but often dissimilar enough to warrant a discussion regarding how they were actually being used or, more specifically, what warranted the political, social, or religious application of a certain motif at an individual location. Comprehending the regional diversification via

²⁸² Another major site is Castilian Springs. Located in present day Tennessee, it was first excavated in the late 1800s. But digs soon ceased. It was not until 2005 that the now state owned Castilian Springs Mound Site was once again excavated by Middle Tennessee State anthropologist Kevin Smith. Although there is much to still discover, Dr. Smith is convinced that Castilian Springs was a large center that likely rivaled Cahokia, Etowah, and Moundville in size.

archaeological and ethnological sources is critical to interpreting the iconography and a fundamental shift from previous paradigms, which believed Mississippian artwork could be tied to a singular belief structure.

It is important to realize that the vast majority of Native communities in the Midwest, Northeast, and Southeast share a common ideology. There are, of course, differences, but overall, they are similar enough to assume that the core mythology had a single origin. Examples are the stories of *Earth Diver* and the *Hero Twins*. It is impossible for such specific stories to have originated independently in nearly every Eastern North American culture, the American Southwest, and Central America. On the other hand, you can also not readily apply any one story to a certain motif and expect that the story held the same connotation or was used in a universally like manner. Instead, “iconographic connections demand to be empirically demonstrated rather than assumed...[and there must be an understanding] that the meanings attached to symbols tend to change as they diffuse across ethnolinguistic boundaries.”²⁸³ In fact, it has only been through the acceptance of this regional model that the swiftest headway has been made with regards to interpreting this material. For example, by stepping back from the previously offered interpretative SECC model and isolating regional and site-specific motifs certain provincial symbols begin to emerge. For instance,

winged serpents and hand-eye motifs are staples at Moundville, [yet] these are entirely absent at Etowah. Conversely, the bird-man figure is an Etowah staple and is widely recognized as the core image of the original Southern Cult, [but] it is, however, entirely absent at Moundville, as are depictions of the full human figure in general, including any trace of the shrine figure so important at Etowah. Many of the engraved shell cups in the Craig style (previously identified in

²⁸³ Vernon James Knight, Jr. “Farewell to the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex,” in *Southeastern Archaeology*, 25, 1 (2006): 3. For bib 1-5.

chapter 4) at Spiro bear thematic material only dimly connected to anything east of the Mississippi.²⁸⁴

Using regionally-specific information the single cult manifestation proposed by Waring and Holder, and utilized for nearly sixty years, is not accurate. Moreover, communities were often tied to a given motif that was used by the ruling elites as an esoteric control devise.

Analyzing regional differences, by comparing artistic elements to their associated archaeological context, indicates that specific themes were directly related to the social and political changes of a given center. At Etowah, for example, excavations have shown that multiple occupations of the site coincided with a change in social and political power, as each successive period displayed different burial preferences and accompanying SECC art. The newly introduced art work was physically expressed in elite clothing such as headdresses and other accessories that were identical to the regalia donned by supernaturals depicted on copper plates and engraved shells.²⁸⁵ Today, this regional style is known as Hightower, but manifestations of other styles, specifically Braden (identified in Chapter 4) are apparent. The most noticeable change came during Etowah's Wilbanks phase (1250 – 1375 AD) when the Braden Birdman figure came to the site and was directly associated with many of the 350 Mound C burials dug during this period. Art, in this case, was a political and social tool to reinforce the position of elites by directly tying them to supernatural characters. As Charles R. Cobb and Adam King describe, “the return of people to Etowah marked the creation of a new chiefdom with its own justification for the clearly ranked social order. The charter for that new

²⁸⁴ Ibid, 2.

²⁸⁵ Charles R. Cobb and Adam King, “Re-Inventing the Mississippian Tradition at Etowah, Georgia,” in *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, 12, 3 (2005): 182. For bib 167-192.

ranking system appealed to beliefs, imagery, and art work that were [previously] foreign to the Hightower (Etowah) region.”²⁸⁶ However, when introduced, it was the principle emblem used to separate commoners from the elite.

In addition to Etowah, Moundville, located in present-day Alabama, shows signs of a regional art preference and an increase in representational art, which correlates to “the transformation of that site from a fortified capitol town to a vacant ceremonial center and necropolis in the fourteenth-century.”²⁸⁷ The bulk of the iconographically infused items at Moundville were ceramic, stone, and copper with motifs, in general, displaying images of death, supernatural animals, and the hand-eye symbol. The style of art developed here is known as Hemphill. What is striking about the Hemphill animal imagery at Moundville is that it is mostly associated with the underworld serpent and shows an absence of human transformation features, which is a hallmark of SECC imagery and seen in some form at nearly every major ceremonial site.²⁸⁸ Just like at Etowah, with the Birdman depictions, research indicates the adoption of a new artistic assemblage at Moundville is being tied directly to the transformative period—in this case, the conversion of Moundville from a large



Figure 30; Reproduction of Rattlesnake Disk with hand-eye motif, Moundville, 1300 – 1450 AD, Alabama Museum of Natural History.

²⁸⁶ Ibid, 183.

²⁸⁷ Vernon James Knight, Jr. “Farewell to the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex,” 2.

²⁸⁸ Vincas P. Steponaitis and Vernon J. Knight, Jr., “Moundville Art in the Historical and Social Context,” in *Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand: American Indian Art of the Ancient Midwest and South*, ed. Richard Townsend and Robert Sharp (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 171.

chiefdom to a necropolis, or place of the dead. This alteration corresponds to an increase in death and serpent motifs, as well as the hand-eye symbol.

The use of a death design and its connection to the otherworld at a necropolis seems obvious, but recent ethnographical investigations by George Lankford suggest that the hand-eye symbol has otherworldly connections as well. Almost universally, Native Americans connect the Milky Way to the Path of Souls and a journey taken by all who die. During their passage, the dead must overcome various obstacles and ultimately have their soul judged—similar to the Orpheus myth from ancient Greece. In another parallel to that of Orpheus, the Path of Souls is not limited to the dead. Once again, and almost universally, Native American folklore describes the ability of shamans to traverse the Path of Souls and visit this realm. While there, they are given sacred knowledge that can be brought back and used in this world. Directly through TSIC investigative efforts, Lankford has connected the hand-eye motif to the path of souls.

The essential background information for the interpretation of the art motif is that one of the Twin heroes, who had gone above through a hole in the sky, cut off the hand of a sky chief and hung it in the sky where he had tried to block the portal. The stars that compose the sky chief's hand may be familiar to many readers as components of the Greek constellation Orion. This constellation, known explicitly today by the Mandan, Hidatsa, Crow, and Lakota as a hand is adjacent to the Milky Way. More to the point, it sets precisely in the west, just before the Milky Way falls like a wall below the horizon. The Hand constellation with its galactic "fuzzy star" (the "eye") is thus situated to be a portal into the sky, an entry point onto the Path for the souls that have moved west to reach that conjunction of the portal, the beginning of the Path of the Milky Way, and the edge of the earth disk.²⁸⁹

When trying to connect this motif to Moundville, Lankford identified the star Deneb, known as the Swan, which is found at the direct center of the Milky Way. Consequently, by studying legends of the historic Alabama and Seminole (Muskogean speakers who are

²⁸⁹ Lankford, "World on a String," 212.

likely the closest in descent to the Native people who occupied Moundville) he found reference to this star being identified as a raptor or eagle.²⁹⁰ In addition to the hand motif, the raptor is heavily used in mortuary contexts at Moundville. As Lankford remarks, “if this reading of the situation is correct, then it emphasizes an important fact about iconographic meanings—that is, that they may be site-specific, even though the symbol itself is widespread.”²⁹¹ In this case, regardless how animals were used at Spiro, Cahokia, Etowah or elsewhere, here it is being used as an identifier of the bird who confronts the dead on their journey through the path of souls.

The benefits derived from regional modeling also comes from Cahokia. As previously mentioned, Cahokia was the largest Mississippian chiefdom and located just outside of present day St. Louis. Although large parts of the site have been destroyed by modern development, excavations still continue and have revealed a wealth of information. Perhaps, the most startling discovery is that Cahokia was likely the originator of the Braden artistic tradition—first identified by Phillip Phillips and James A. Brown in their six-volume work *Pre-Columbian Shell Engravings From The Craig Mound At Spiro*. The authors identified six unique stylistic types found at Spiro—Braden A, B, and C, and Craig A, B, and C. Each one is distinctive, and each has certain subject and motif identifiers that separate it from the other styles. Through further examination of these items, and through radiocarbon dating, examination of rock art sites near Cahokia, and by way of the Panofsky stylistic method, it was determined that Cahokia was the first to produce the classic SEC iconographic items and was the foundational art form of the Hightower style at Etowah, the Hemphill style at Moundville, and the Craig

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Ibid, 213.

style at Spiro.²⁹² This, without question, eliminates the original supposition made by Waring and Holder that the SECC was produced late, and was Muskogean in origin. Moreover, it firmly places Cahokia at the center of this artistic tradition and offers intriguing possibilities as to how and why the art form spread from the site.

To fully recognize this artistic development at Cahokia, TSIC members used the Panofsky method, an art historical approach that separates primary, secondary, and intrinsic content, combined with radiocarbon dating and oral traditions to investigate rock art in the region. This was then compared to the overwhelming number of embossed copper plates and engraved shell gorgets and cups unearthed at Spiro. The results were conclusive. Rock art predated all other known forms of SECC iconographic material with artistic traits matching forms found at Etowah and Spiro. Visual markers and iconographic themes correlate to the early rock art seen surrounding Cahokia, indicating “experimentation in ritual imagery that centuries later would become important SECC themes.”²⁹³

Scholarly investigations at Picture Cave, located in Warren County just west of St. Louis, as well as additional discoveries of rock art on the eastern prairies and the Gottschall rock shelter in Wisconsin, have concluded that images created at these locations go back to 800 AD, if not earlier, and were the forbearers of the classic Braden style developed at Cahokia and introduced into various cultural centers.²⁹⁴ In situ rock

²⁹² Knight, “Farewell to the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex,” 3.

²⁹³ James A. Brown, “The Cahokian Expression: Creating Court and Cult,” in *Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand: American Indian Art of the Ancient Midwest and South*, ed. Richard Townsend and Robert Sharp (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 113.

²⁹⁴ F. Kent Reilly, III, “Identifying the Face of the Sacred: Tattooing the images of Gods and Heroes in the Art of the Mississippian Period,” in *Drawing with Great Needles: Ancient Tattoo Traditions of North America*, ed. Aaron Deter-Wolf and Carol Diaz-Granados (Austin: University Texas Press, 2013), 184. And, James A. Brown, “The Cahokian Expression: Creating Court and Cult,” 113.

art is an ideal stylistic baseline since “each example of the iconography can be considered site specific...[but also] petroglyphs and pictographs...have an unquestionable association with the creator’s oral traditions.”²⁹⁵ Carol Diaz-Granados and James Duncan have worked at Picture Cave for the last twenty years and made groundbreaking discoveries linking art from this cave to Cahokia and the larger SECC corpus. On the walls, they have identified a Birdman figure with a Long-Nose-God Maskette, mythical battle scenes between the forces of the Above World and those of the Below, and images of Thunderbirds, which are almost identical to those seen historically on Great Plains beaded and painted material. As Diaz-Granados describes, “this cave was a hallowed

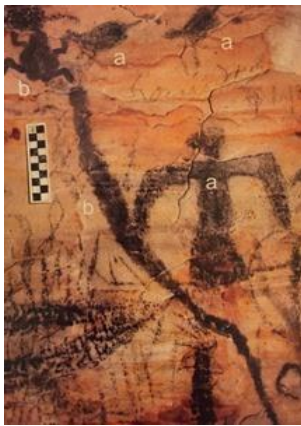


Figure 31; Thunderbird Motif, Picture Cave Missouri.

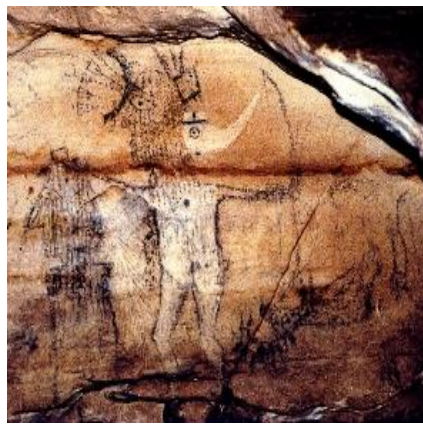


Figure 32; Morning Star holding bow and human head, Picture Cave Missouri.



Figure 33; Warrior with mace, Picture Cave Missouri.

locale that served not only as a place to practice sacred rituals, but also for rites of passage, for explaining the multi-layered cosmos, for vision quests, to commune with spirits in the “other world”, and to bury the dead.”²⁹⁶ Using archaeology, oral traditions,

²⁹⁵ Carol Diaz-Granados, “Early Manifestations of Mississippian Iconography in Middle Mississippi Valley Rock Art,” in *Visualizing the Sacred: Cosmic Visions, Regionalism, and the Art of the Mississippian World*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 65.

²⁹⁶ Carol Diaz-Granados, “Preface,” *Picture Cave: Unraveling the Mysteries of the Mississippian Cosmos*, ed. Carol Diaz-Granados, James R. Duncan, and F. Kent Reilly III (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), xv.

and linguistic markers, James Duncan believes that these images are Dhegihan in origin and connected to modern Ponca, Osage, Quapaw, and others, and that “these populations created Picture Cave and the three large centers, including Cahokia, just east of the confluence of the Missouri and the Mississippi Rivers.”²⁹⁷

Once established at Cahokia, these motifs spread throughout the Mississippian region. The most remarkable site in which they were recovered was Spiro. Here, archaeological evidence has shown that 90% of the SECC material presently identified comes not only from the site but also from a single mound at the center, identified today as Craig Mound.²⁹⁸ The enormity of material unearthed at Spiro has led to the greatest breakthroughs in SECC research to date. It has provided the framework for style identification, theme interpretation, regional art variation, trade networks, and the ritual antiquing of material. It is not difficult to argue that without Spiro, the breakthroughs that have been made in the field of Mississippian studies would not be possible.

Perhaps the most important volume ever produced on the subject of Mississippian Iconographic studies was Phillip and Brown’s *Pre-Columbian Shell Engravings from the Craig Mound at Spiro*.²⁹⁹ This volume was, in many ways, a precursor to the TSIC workshop. It provided researchers from across the country a single source that identified, isolated, and interpreted various styles, themes, and motifs that could then be used as a comparative to SECC art found across the entire Midwest and Western Woodlands. The

²⁹⁷ James R. Duncan, “The Origin of Picture Cave: An Essay on the Artist/Priests Who Made the Drawings, as interpreted From the Salvaged Cultural Materials,” in *Picture Cave: Unraveling the Mysteries of the Mississippian Cosmos*, ed. Carol Diaz-Granados, James R. Duncan, and F. Kent Reilly III (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 110.

²⁹⁸ James A. Brown, “On Style Divisions of the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex: A Revisionist Perspective,” in *The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex: Artifacts and Analysis* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 185.

²⁹⁹ Reilly, III, “People of Earth and Sky,” 129.

publication, as previously described, brought together all the known Spiro shell engravings from museums across the country—both whole and fragmented. This allowed the authors to identify six different schools, which were later referred to as styles. In addition, this provided for the first time, large-scale evidence that common themes and motifs were being produced in distinctly different ways—specifically the Craig school, which was later identified by James A. Brown as, unquestionably, Caddoan in origin.³⁰⁰ The volume also provides what F. Kent Reilly III has identified as the needed symbols to read the iconographic coding in each SECC art object. “Most maps contain keys to legends or blocks that interpret, for the map reader, the symbolic information from which that map is constructed...[and] many of the symbols currently being interpreted derive from a particular artistic corpus documented in this critically important volume.”³⁰¹

In addition to providing a large quantity of artifacts, Spiro brought to the forefront the idea of religious, political, or artistic trade networks, and the concept of antiquing. Although the large object cache at Spiro was not needed for a determination that trade was being conducted during this period, it provided unquestionable evidence that SECC material was being sent, traded, etc., to sites in a refined or finished state. This is evidenced by Spiro’s complete lack of workshops and the identification of shell cups and gorgets, copper plates, and flint clay statuary from Cahokia, woodpecker gorgets originating from Tennessee, and “nearly identical copper repoussé plates with a “forked eye and blade” motif...[from] the east Florida mound center of Mount Royal.”³⁰² Objects

³⁰⁰ Brown, “On Style Divisions,” 194.

³⁰¹ Reilly, III, “People of Earth and Sky,” 129.

³⁰² Brown, “On Style Divisions,” 187.

from far outside the currently recognized Mississippian area were found as well at Spiro, including 13,948 shell beads from the Gulf of California identified as *Olivella dama*, and an obsidian scraper from the city of Pachuca in the state of Hidalgo, Mexico.³⁰³ This obsidian scraper was identified using energy-dispersive x-ray fluorescence (EDXRF) and is particularly important as researchers are “not aware of any Mesoamerican sources for obsidian [in] Oklahoma sites regardless of cultural affiliation or time period...and none associated with Caddoan or Mississippian occupations sites,” making this item, perhaps, the most unique object at the Spiro site and the entire Mississippian cultural sphere.³⁰⁴ Moreover, examinations of copper plates, stacks, and headdresses with rivets, recycled cups and gorgets, and noticeable long-term wear exhibited on pipes suggest that this site is “composed of items of significantly different age at the time they became part of the permanent archaeological record,” offering intriguing questions as to the ritual use of items over the course of multiple generations and why this large diversity of material, over multiple generations, came to Spiro.³⁰⁵

Through a systematic examination of the large quantities of material from Spiro and by rigidly applying a regional stylistic model, TSIC members have recently identified a previously unknown regional art style at the site. This new style, named Holly Buff, was once thought to have been part of the larger Braden School—Braden B specifically—and therefore had originated at Cahokia. However, we now know that the previous identification was incorrect because stylistically these items do not match

³⁰³ Laura Kozuch, “Olivella Beads from Spiro and the Plains,” in *American Antiquity*, 67, 4 (2002): 697-709. And, Alex W. Barker et.al., “Mesoamerican Origin for an Obsidian Scraper from the Precolonial Southeastern United States,” in *American Antiquity* 67, no. 1 (2002): 107.

³⁰⁴ Barker et al., “Mesoamerican Origin for an Obsidian Scraper,” 107.

³⁰⁵ Brown, “On Style Divisions of the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex: A Revisionist Perspective,” 185-186.

anything else at or near Cahokia and are almost identical to ceramics found in the Lower Mississippi Valley. Therefore, this breakthrough was made directly through the use of a regional model and through an identification of style types first at Spiro but then later seen at a variety of other locations in

Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee. What this TSIC group found was that unlike other style groups, Holly Bluff had no true form, but “instead, there is an individuality or eclecticism in the arrangement of the subject.”³⁰⁶ Moreover, the themes are

overwhelmingly Beneath World oriented, focusing primarily on snake motifs with an assortment of fish, deer, and panther

extremities mixed or used in a combination of ways to form a unique supernatural form.³⁰⁷ Without an understanding of the regional separation of art forms, this conclusion would be impossible.

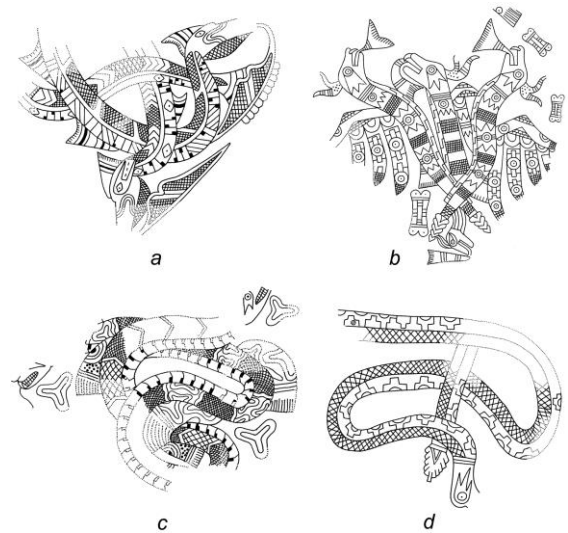


Figure 34; Holly Bluff Style Snake motifs, Spiro Mounds, Engraved Shell cups, Phillips and Brown.

Section 4 – Mystic Modeling

Understanding a regional model within the larger framework of the SECC corpus has provided a much clearer understanding of how to interpret certain iconographic

³⁰⁶ Vernon James Knight, et al., “The Holly Bluff Style,” due for publication in *Southeastern Archeology* (2017): 2.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

images, themes, and even the media itself. As explained in the previous section, through a multidisciplinary approach, TSIC scholars are able to identify the region in which specific styles were created, provide perspective for their use as trade goods and/or cultural and political signifiers, then work with ethnohistorical sources to identify the probable meaning behind the iconography. This holistic perspective has shown that it is necessary to understand both the general Mississippian belief system and the regional separation of beliefs and rituals in order to properly deduce the intrinsic iconographic meaning. Applying this methodology, it is also possible to interpret the general religious locatives that convey meaning to the entire group, or even a specific ritualistic item that likely held hidden, esoteric meaning.

With the proper application of the San Marcos methodology, the process of deciphering the ideological content for a specific item becomes less daunting. In fact, this system has often revealed the meaning behind highly symbolic and multidimensional items once thought to be unknowable—including gorgets, pipes, ceramics, and stone tablets. This realization is accomplished through a stringent use of ethnographic resources and by understanding the general belief system that underpinned the cultural practices of the Mississippian peoples and their descendants.³⁰⁸ As George Lankford describes,

ethnographic evidence from various groups across several centuries provides many clues to such similarities in beliefs, and the clearest focus for such commonalities is the structure of the cosmos. The belief that the world is layered appears to be universal across the Woodlands and Plains. That layered cosmos is inhabited by a fairly small number of Powers, most of whom are recognizable as they shift their forms and meanings from one group to another. Both the

³⁰⁸ George Lankford, “Some Cosmological Motifs in the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex,” in *Ancient Objects and Sacred Realms: Interpretations of Mississippian Iconography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 9.

structural elements of the cosmos and the Powers which inhabit it, furthermore, have qualitative meanings, as is to be expected in a religious belief system.³⁰⁹

To prove this point, Lankford dissected the various motifs engraved upon two shell gorgets from the Tennessee Valley. The first is identified as the Cox Mound style and the other is referred to as the Hixon style or “Turkey-Cock” gorget. Various interpretations were applied to each of these pieces over the years, but Lankford believes that what is actually being described is a cosmological view of the world from two different angles—above and from the side. The cosmological layout utilized by Lankford and other TSIC members was explained in detail in Section 2 and describes the world as being made of three different realms—the Above World, Middle World, and Beneath World—all of which are bisected by the axis mundi. This axis acts as an elevator, allowing shamans and deities passage between the three worlds.



Figure 35; Cox Mound Style Gorget, Engraved Shell. Castilian Springs, TN, National Museum of the American Indian



Figure 36; Hixon Style Gorget, Engraved Shell, Hixon Site, TN, Frank H. McClung Museum. 508/1Ha3.

³⁰⁹ Ibid, 8.

For years, the Cox Mound gorget was merely referred to as a “woodpecker gorget.” Its meaning was never studied in detail. William H. Holmes described the gorget in an 1883 BAE report, but he did not elaborate on the nature of the gorget’s meaning beyond the idea that the center motif represented the sun.³¹⁰ While still lost to its overall meaning, others over the years associated the woodpecker and its red head with war. Lankford, however, reasons that this postulation is incorrect and that the gorget is actually meant to be viewed as an aerial depiction of the cosmic realm and a physical expression of belief. Viewed in another way, this gorget could be seen as a map of the universe and a device for relating to others the story of the birth of the world.

In order to make this claim and accurately interpret this gorget, it must be broken down into the five separate fields. Each of these fields are unique unto themselves. It is only when they are placed together that they tell a larger narrative. The first field is identified as a cross pattern. This pattern was first described in the late 1800s and early 1900s as two separate motifs, but Antonio Waring was able to identify it as a single symbol representing the four-log structure of the sacred fire used by Muskogean people at their ceremonial grounds. This motif can therefore be accepted as representing our world, or the physical realm. The second field, which appears to be a sun with eight rays pushing out from the center, has been described by various ethnologists, including Holmes, as being just that—a depiction of the sun.³¹¹ This is likely the correct conclusion as it is a simplistic design and can be seen in early watercolors and drawings by sixteenth and seventeenth century artists such as Jacques Le Moyne and Louis Nicolas. This second symbol is then an above world marker. Because these two symbols

³¹⁰ Holmes, “Art in Shell,” 282.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*

are drawn as a single motif, they are likely meant to be seen as acting in conjunction with each other. In that context, they would almost certainly represent the axis mundi and the shaft that connects the three realms.

The third field is a little harder to decipher. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the ethnohistorical literature specifically, Earth Diver myths. The Earth Diver legend is

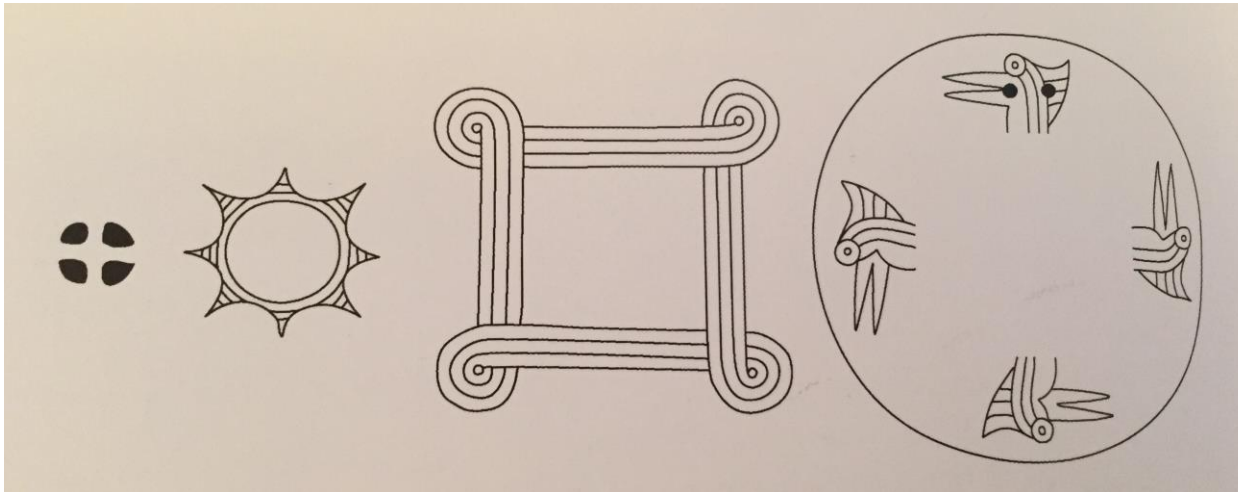


Figure 37; Drawing of the five field in Cox Mound gorget: cross, sun, loop square, crested birds (woodpeckers), and circle; Drawing by Elizabeth Reese Baloutine.

arguably one of the oldest creation myths in North America and is told in one form or another in virtually every tribe.³¹² Although parts of the legend change depending on the region, it nevertheless recounts the creation of the world by an animal, god, or other, who dove into the beneath world and brought forth dirt to create the earth. Once made, the earth, viewed as an island, became unstable and had to be steadied. Ethnographical material collected by James Dorsey, Alice Fletcher, James Mooney, Alanson Skinner and others, detail this near universal legend and, depending on the tribe, what was required to stabilize it. For example, the Delaware, Shawnee, and Iroquois believed the dirt brought-up from the beneath world was deposited on the back of a turtle shell, which sat on a

³¹² Lankford, "Some Cosmological Motifs in the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex," 21.

primordial sea. The shell provided the needed stabilization to the island, and thus the Middle World, or physical world, was created. Other tribes believed that stabilizing the world was a process and took more than one attempt and more than one animal. For the Mandan, balance was accomplished by the use of four turtles—each of which sat at one of the four corners of the earth.³¹³ For the Cherokee, the earth was “fastened to the sky with four cords” after its creation.³¹⁴ The Sauk believed that “Four of the great serpents support ‘this island,’ the earth, on their backs.”³¹⁵ In each of these stories, the four point of the earth, in which these creatures are planted, or held-up, are connected to the four cardinal directions. The exception to this story is the Winnebago legend of an Earth Maker, as opposed to an Earth Diver.

Earthmaker looked on the earth and he liked it, but it was not quiet. It moved about as do the waves of the sea. Then he made the trees and he saw that they were good, but they did not make the earth quiet. Then he made the grass to grow, but still the earth was not quiet. However, it was nearly quiet. Then he made the four directions (cardinal points) and the four winds. On the four corners of the earth he placed them as great and powerful people, to act as island weights. Yet the earth was not quiet. Then he made four large beings and threw them down towards earth, and they pierced through the earth with their heads eastward. They were snakes. Then the earth became very quiet.³¹⁶

Although these stories are not exactly the same, they clearly share a common heritage and, as Lankford concludes, “affords some reassurance that the basic cosmological principle was widespread.”³¹⁷ As this relates to the Cox mound gorget, the bird images

³¹³ George Catlin, *O-KEE-PA: A Religious Ceremony and other customs of the Mandans*, ed. John C. Ewers (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 75.

³¹⁴ James Mooney, “Myths of the Cherokees,” in *Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*, 19, 1 (Washington, D.C: Government Printing Office, 1900): 239.

³¹⁵ Alanson Skinner, “Observations on the Ethnology of the Sauk Indians,” in *Bulletin of the Public Museum of the City of Milwaukee*, 5, 1 (1923): 35, accessed January 14, 2017. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.32106008953710:view=1up:seq=25>

³¹⁶ Paul Radin, “The Winnebago Tribe,” in *37th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*, (Washington, D.C: Government Printing Office, 1900), 212.

³¹⁷ Lankford, “Some Cosmological Motifs in the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex,” 24.

that surround the Middle World motif are likely the mythical creatures that stabilize the earth. Knowing this, we can conclude that the third and fourth fields, the loop pattern with parallel lines and the birds, are referencing the earth and the creatures created or used to balance it.

This brings us to the fifth field, which Lankford argues is the gorget itself. Previously, researchers viewed the mediums used to create these artistic items as merely tools, or trade items, that provided a surface with which to engrave, display, and transmit to others sacred knowledge, social position, or some other real-world need. As a trade item, this material would be a prized good, limited to the elite, and consequently that was its value. However, there must be another reason. Realistically, if trade and elitism were the sole reasons for the selection of material, then any hard to find mineral, ore, or metal could be used in an elite context. Yet, this does not happen. Only certain materials are used to create these items. Knowing this, TSIC members now argue that there is a connection between the natural and supernatural worlds and have identified copper and shell as attached to the beneath world. This connection is clearly described in various ethnographical sources, but the one that seems most relevant to this narrative comes from the Ojibwa. In their mythology, *Mishebeshu* is described as the lord of the underworld and is covered in copper. As the lord of the beneath world, or water realm, he also has access to shell, which only comes from that realm. Copper and shell than are connected to him and that world in which he exists. Therefore, “part of the body of *Mishebeshu*, [was] a shell disk like the gorget [and] not just a display area for an engraving, but was itself an object of power.”³¹⁸

³¹⁸ Ibid, 24.

This then brings us to the second object, the Hixon style or “Turkey-Cock” gorget. If one accepts the interpretation of the Cox Mound gorget, then this analysis can be very intuitive. It is simply a profile, or side view, of the cosmic world. As Lankford describes, fields one and two form the axis mundi, which allows transmission between the three realms. This axis is present on the Hixon gorget and represented as the center pole with striped lines. This motif is extremely common and recognized on countless other SECC scenes. It is also mentioned with great frequency in the ethnographic literature. The Central Algonkian reference a cedar tree as being the world axis, and the Iroquois describe a tree of light, which stands in the center of the Above World.³¹⁹ This same tree was created on the previously described gorget as a

mystical axis mundi, one created by the invisible relationship between Sun (field two) and fire (field one). It is an easy leap from that concept to the microcosmic nature of the earthlodge, from the Plains to the Southeast, in which the central fire pit is directly below the circular smoke hole in the center vault, thus creating the same invisible conceptual column. Such cognate forms of world axes are not difficult to see once the basic cosmological model is understood, for poles in ritual life may very well carry symbolic burdens along with their pragmatic functional roles. Thus, the four poles supporting the dome of some of the earthlodges becomes recognizable as the Directional powers, surrounding the central axis of fire and smoke hole. Then, too, there is the rich symbolism of the pole used in the Plains Sun Dance ceremonies.³²⁰

Descriptively speaking, a similar tree is engraved on a shell from Spiro, which when compared to religious descriptions and to the birds, poles, and beneath world features of the Hixon gorget provide another compelling connection.

Fields three, four, and five are also present on both gorgets, but again, are slightly altered in order to provide a perspective from above and from the sides. On the Hixon gorget, field three, the middle world, is represented as the straight line, upon which the

³¹⁹ Ibid, 31.

³²⁰ Ibid, 31-32.

birds are resting. Although this may seem counter intuitive at first, the logical conclusion is this is merely an artistic choice that allows the clear manifestation of the below world to become relevant. This is necessary because the gorget itself is no longer the exemplifier of the Beneath World. Instead, the gorget is given a border, and the Beneath World is shown below the horizontal line. Beneath this line are roots as well, which are seen in the tree motif on the Spiro drinking cup.

Understanding intent is a critical aspect of the iconographic method. Wrapped up in any image are markers, or locatives, that convey certain meaning. Like language, these markings can be arranged in various ways to convey a specific implication. George Lankford demonstrated this with his analysis of the Cox Mound gorget. Viewed independently, each of those symbols carries one meaning, but taken together, they detail a larger story. As described by F. Kent Reilly, III

Within art historical analyses, locatives are important categories of motifs in systems of symbolic communication within literate and nonliterate societies. In such symbolic systems, locatives provide the initiated viewer with a visual key to identify the location of narrative imagery depicted in a work of art. Specifically, symbolic locatives in ancient artistic systems are used to identify the cosmological realm in which a certain action unfolds.³²¹

Linda Schele utilized this method in her decipherment of Maya art and language and described how this process as it related to Maya motifs in the exhibit and publication, *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art*. Using this same approach, Reilly has demonstrated how this tactic can undoubtedly be applied to Mississippian art. Using a shell gorget from Spiro, Reilly re-conceptualized the scene engraved upon the shell. This two-dimensional object shows two individuals on either side of a pole, now recognized as

³²¹ F. Kent Reilly, III, "The Petaloid Motif," in *Ancient Objects and Sacred Realms: Interpretations of Mississippian Iconography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 40.

the axis mundi, holding what appear to be drums. This scene is then framed by two circles. As a comparative, Reilly describes how these are interpreted in Maya art, by way of a “Ground Line,” which is used on painted vessels to indicate that the scene is taking place in the physical world as opposed to the spiritual realm. In the Spiro piece, that ground line is the two circles that frame the scene on the gorget. These ground lines are then, using a technique called “multiple-horizons,” laid down and what materializes is a three-dimensional image of a dance scene.³²² As Reilly comments, “if this interpretation proves correct, the recognition of a ground-line allows us to understand such scenes as actual depictions of a specific ritual moment within a Mississippian ceremonial dance.”³²³

The adoption of the locative technique has been further applied to numerous other motifs in SECC art. For example, Reilly has identified a Petaloid motif that appears to function as an above world emblem and is seen on stone, copper, shell, and ceramic



Figure 38; Dance Scene, Spiro Mounds, Engraved Shell, Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History.

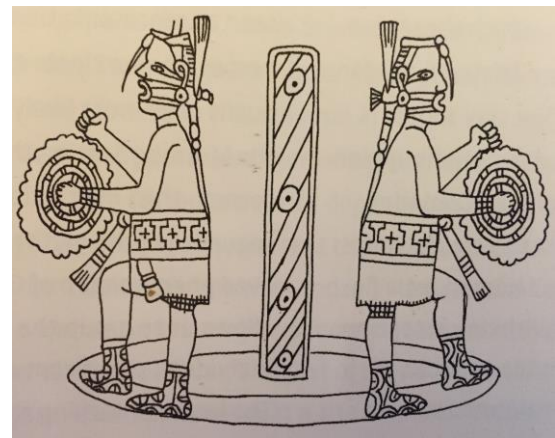


Figure 39; Drawing of Dance Scene from Engraved Spiro Cup, 3-Dimensional Depiction.

³²² Ibid, 41.

³²³ Ibid.

material at every major Mississippian ceremonial center.³²⁴ This motif was further described by Robert Sharp in Chapter 3 as being part of the Triskele gorget and related to Kevin E. Smith's iconographic interpretation of that object. Using ethnographic, archaeological, and art historical methodology, Smith analyzed the context in which these types of gorgets were found (there are around 30 known Triskele gorgets), then combined that setting with certain motifs found on each of the gorgets, to determine the likely meaning.

To review Robert Sharp's interview, these gorgets are found in Tennessee and often in the graves of children. The question then becomes, why are they found with children and is that in some way connected to the iconography? Looking at ethnographic descriptions of Native American beliefs concerning death, Smith has identified a near universal belief in rebirth.³²⁵ This idea is also tied to several figures in SECC iconography including the Hero Twins, The Old Woman Who Never Dies (Earth Mother), and Morning Star (He Who Wears Human Heads In His Ears). Of these, the most common and direct connection to resurrection is found in the story of the Hero Twins. As David Dye notes,

In this myth one twin who is civilized adheres to the basic tenets of society, while the other, uncivilized twin opposes society. The civilized boy is associated with thunder and can bring his wild brother back to life. He has arrows in a sacred bundle which have great powers and are used in healing and resurrecting the dead. Wild boy is decapitated and replaces his own head with a rattle, becoming a rattle head. The ritual death and reviving of the twins is an important mythic theme and is based on the power of the sacred medicine bundle and its ability to heal and resurrect, a pervasive idea tied to the reincarnation of elite individuals.

³²⁴ Ibid, 39-55.

³²⁵ Antonia Mills and Richard Slobodin, ed. Introduction to *Native American Rebirth: Reincarnation Belief Among North American Indians and Inuit* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 3-4.

Considering that Mississippian communities were tied to both a clan organization and an elite political hierarchy, it seems likely that there was a need for someone who had died to be reborn and assume their rightful place at the head of a clan or chiefdom.³²⁶ This idea is even more relevant in times of strife, and evidence indicates that this area was affected by dramatic climatic fluctuations likely associated with a Little Ice Age at the time of the gorget's production and the interment of the children.³²⁷

Concerning the gorget's specific interpretation, Smith correlated the burial of these items with children and ceramic depictions of Earth Mother who is known for her powers of resurrections by way of her association with the Busk ceremony, corn, crops, and revitalization. It is also known that the children are being buried under homes, specifically near cooking fires, where women congregate, and along paths to steams, where women walk daily to retrieve water.³²⁸ Being buried with the Earth Mother



Figure 40; Triskele Gorget, TN, Gilcrease Museum, 90.453



Figure 41; Earth Mother, TN, Frank H. McClung Museum



Figure 42; Chief Little Rock Shield with image of the Pleiades.

presents the child the opportunity for resurrection, but they would likely need a map or guide to show them the way to the heavens, or, possibly, a way back. This is the

³²⁶ Kevin E. Smith, Personnel Communication in Collinsville, IL, March 11, 2016.

³²⁷ Douglas B. Bamforth, "An Empirical Perspective on Little Ice Age Climatic Changes on the Great Plains," in *Plains Anthropologist* 35, no. 132 (1990): 359-366.

³²⁸ Kevin E. Smith, Personnel Communication in Collinsville, IL, March 11, 2016.

probable reason for the burial of the gorget. When looking at the various motifs, then isolating them into fields, similar to the deconstruction of the Cox Mound gorget, certain locatives become apparent. The Petaloid motif, identified by F. Kent Reilly, III is the surrounding feature of the gorget, indicating the Above World. At the center is the swastika or swirl motif, which is identified with the Beneath World, and in certain instances, the night sky, Milky Way, and the Path of Souls. Next, there are the two circles, previously identified by Reilly as a dance circle, indicating the physical world. The currently unknown symbol is the six punctated circles within a dotted circular motif. This Smith and Sharp believe is the Pleiades. Known as the seven children in Native American myths, this symbol matches other pre-historic and historic depictions of the Pleiades. If the hand and eye motif is a portal and access way to the Path of Souls, then perhaps this motif is another portal and the Pleiades may act as a gateway for rebirth.

The use of portals seems to be one of the most prevalent motifs and signifiers in Mississippian art. Although this chapter has only addressed shell art up to this point, ceramics too contain painted and etched positional symbols that convey a specific meaning or offer physical transformative properties. In the Lower Mississippi Valley and the Caddoan areas, ceramics were the principle medium for use in rituals. As described by David Dye, “representational art on ceramics appears to have been distinct from iconic three-dimensional arts, functioning as transformational devices for the preparation of sacred medicines.”³²⁹ Ethnographic literature is replete with descriptions of ritualistic drinks or medicines. Used in conjunction with war, dances, and worship, Native

³²⁹ David Dye, “Ritual, Medicine, and the War Trophy Iconographic Theme in the Mississippian Southeast,” in *Ancient Objects and Sacred Realms: Interpretations of Mississippian Iconography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 153.

Americans imbibed large quantities of snakeroot, Black Drink, Datura, as well as many other concoctions, some of which remain unidentified.³³⁰ Currently, TSIC conference members have identified ceramics with specific motifs that housed ritual drinks and acted as portals between the realms, providing transformative powers, and were linked to specific otherworldly creatures.

As has been discussed, the axis mundi was a cosmic tree or pole that allowed supernatural and real world people to move between the cosmic realms. The shaft has been identified on shell and presented in various metaphorical ways, such as lodge and tipi fires and the hole above them, by George Lankford. TSIC members have also recognized the spout on ceramic vessels as a cosmic axis, with the circular bottom of the pot acting as the underworld realm in ritual ceremonies. This determination came by way of the ogee symbol, which is viewed as a portal symbol.³³¹ The origin of the symbol comes from nature and is seen on both the eastern diamondback rattlesnake and the copperhead.³³² At Moundville, where snakes are a principle motif, the ogee symbol is used interchangeably with an actual depiction of intertwined snakes.³³³ During ceremonies, shamans or other practitioners took plants, roots, etc. from this world and via the vessel's spout (axis mundi) sent them into the Underworld to be transformed. Once, there, the plants mixed to form a sacred substance—an act that can only be done by a

³³⁰ David Dye, "Art, Ritual, and Chiefly Warfare in the Mississippian World," in *Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand: American Indian Art of the Ancient Midwest and South*, ed. Richard Townsend and Robert Sharp (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 191-205. And Patricia Crown, et al., "Ritual Black Drink Consumption at Cahokia," in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 109, 35 (2012): 1-4.

³³¹ F. Kent Reilly, III, "The Great Serpent in the Lower Mississippi Valley," in *Visualizing the Sacred: Cosmic Visions, Regionalism, and the Art of the Mississippian World* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 124.

³³² Robert Sharp, Personnel Communication, February 2, 2016. And, Roy Hathcock, *Ancient Indian Pottery of the Mississippi River Valley: A Pictorial Study of Prehistoric Pottery of the Mississippi Culture, 1000-1650 AD*. 2nd ed. (Marceline, MO: Walsworth Publishing Company, 1988), 160.

³³³ Reilly, "The Great Serpent in the Lower Mississippi Valley," 124-125.

deity in that realm—then those sacred medicines are brought forth from the Underworld by way of the axis mundi, and community members were presented the sacred substance.

Complementing this model, David Dye has identified other symbolic markers on ceramics that signify specific rituals associated with warfare, purification rituals, and societies. Warfare was common during the Mississippian period, and chiefs specifically tied their earthly power to their prominence in war and connections to their sacred war



Figure 43; Vessel with bones and hands motif, Field Museum.

priests. “Chiefly elites used ritual attire and ceremonial paraphernalia to communicate symbolically to the participants and audience alike the efficiency of the ability to draw upon otherworldly domains.”³³⁴ In that regard, war trophies, rituals, and human sacrifice were earthly manifestations of the mythic heroes and their narratives, with elite lead warfare an attempt to emulate those characters.³³⁵ The motifs placed on

ceramics were also an attempt to connect with those other worldly powers.³³⁶ Body parts, bones, and death motifs are heavily represented on SECC art due to the interconnectedness of religion, elitism, and warfare.

Central to this social and political process was the use of ceramics encoded with representational motifs to transform war medicines from profane to sacred. As portable icons of public display manipulated in ritual contexts, sacred ceramic vessels were ideal signifiers of individual social position, ritual authority, and warrior rank, effectively carrying the message beyond death when placed in mortuary contexts. The strong evidence of vessel wear in the form of extensive basal abrasion and lip chippage confirms that these vessels were extensively used in the preparation, transformation, and consumption of war medicines in ritual contexts.³³⁷

³³⁴ Dye, “Art, Ritual, and Chiefly Warfare in the Mississippian World,” 193.

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ Dye, “Ritual, Medicine, and the War Trophy Iconographic Theme,” 171.

This belief he argues was widely spread in the Mississippian system and the western hemisphere. These rituals and beliefs, therefore, connected real-world people to the supernatural entities of the Above and Beneath realms. These iconographically imbued ceramics were one means of connecting with those forces, and the symbol likely indicated what forces was being call upon.

Recently, Dye has noted the possibility of the hand motif in certain circumstance actually being that of the bear paw. The bear is described by many historic tribes as being the closet animal in relation to humans and “a primary source of medical knowledge, known throughout much of North America for bestowing healing and medicinal powers.”³³⁸ Consequently, it is very likely that in the Mississippian world, these motifs would also have directly corresponded to select societies, cults, and specific rites. In this instance, a bear paw motif may have been connected to something similar to the historic Bear Dreamer Societies, which according to several scholars entitled a member to don an actual bear’s head and preform ritualistic dances. The use of bears heads as a headdress has a long history, dating back at least two thousand years, and according to Midewiwin (Great Secret Societies), a specific connection to the bear, bundles, and specific rituals can be traced back to 1200 A.D., if not farther.³³⁹

Connecting the Bear to the Mississippians can be accomplished through investigations of the historic folklore. In one particular narrative,

The hero of the Iowa version of the Red Horn story was a man named Human Head Earrings. In this version, the principal companions of Human Head Earring were Turtle and Blackhawk... They Iowa story includes a ball game (lacrosse) with incidents closely paralleling those of the ball game in which the Winnebagos defeated the giants, but the opponents were a special race of bears. Bears were, of

³³⁸ David Dye, “Animal Pelt Caps and Mississippian Ritual Sodalities,” due to be published in *North American Archaeologist*, 30 (2017).

³³⁹ *Ibid*, 29.

course, lords of the Underworld for many Indians in the Midwest. Human Head Earrings and his friends defeated the bears, and the included a she-bear...who [in the Winnebago story] became the second wife of Red Horn.³⁴⁰

This story places bears in the Underworld, which is where the sacred medicines used by Mississippian shamans originates. Moreover, if indeed bear paws are the locative on that section of ceramic vessels, this may indicate that the supernatural bear lord is playing an active role in the substance, or sacred medicine, being created.

To prove this hypothesis, Dye suggested that chemical testing of certain vessels with corresponding iconography be conducted to determine if sacred medicines were being used. The vessels with substances should correspond to specific emblematic signifiers.³⁴¹ Though it is still not possible to test every vessel, Adam King, Terry Powis, and Kong Cheong have begun testing vessels in the Lower Mississippi Valley and engraved shell drinking cups from Spiro. Their goal, as Dye suggests, was to connect specific substances to corresponding symbols. While their overall tests are still not completed, presently, they have identified Datura, a vision-inducing narcotic with anodyne and hallucinogenic properties taken to induce visions to both ceramics and engraved shell with distinctive designs.³⁴² When the results of this test are compared to previous tests for Black Drink, certain vessel forms become apparent. For instance, recent tests for Black Drink were conducted at Cahokia and it appears that the drink was associated with a specific vessel form—the beaker. Although adequate testing of a larger area has not been done, it still “raises the issue of whether this form is consistent

³⁴⁰ Robert Hall, “The Cultural Background of Mississippian Symbolism,” in *The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex: Artifacts and Analysis*, ed. Patricia Galloway (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 246.

³⁴¹ Dye, “Ritual, Medicine, and the War Trophy Iconographic Theme,” 153.

³⁴² Adam King, Terry G. Powis, and Kong F. Cheong, “Absorbed Residue Evidence for Prehistorical Datura Use in the American Southeast and Western Mexico,” Unpublished paper, Manuscript to be submitted to *Advances in Archaeological Practices*, 1.

evidence for Black Drink consumption...[if so] it suggests that the beakers [may have] spread as part of a religious package including a suite of ritual accoutrements such as flint clay figures.”³⁴³

The use of Black Drink is known historically as a vomit inducing purification substance associated with religious rites, but the addition of *Datura*—a potent narcotic that comes from a flower—raises some interesting associative connections between nature, iconography, and the toxic plant. Specially, how it corresponds to the Hawk or Sphinx moth, which pollinates and ingests *Datura* with no effect—something impossible for humans and most insects.³⁴⁴ While presently, a direct correlation between this hallucinogenic flower and moth-imbued ceramics has not been established, TSIC member Vernon James Knight, Jr., and Judith A. Franke recently identified a previously unknown moth figure. This absolutely brilliant examination shows the moth figure on ceramic, shell, and stone at Moundville, Etowah, and Spiro and correlates this previously unknown supernatural to Birdman—the most widespread and recognizable SECC figural form.

The identity of this moth supernatural was not recognized until recently and was due in large part to the methodological principles applied through the TSIC workshop. Previous scholarship, specifically Phillip and Brown’s work on Spiro engraving, which first identified the Braden and Craig styles, called this jumbled image of random lines “skillful doodling” and placed it in a style category known as *phantasmagoria*. The assumption being, this motif had purpose, but was likely lost to history and, therefore,

³⁴³ Crown, et al., “Ritual Black Drink Consumption at Cahokia,” 5.

³⁴⁴ Vernon James Knight, Jr., and Judith A. Franke, “Identification of a Moth/Butterfly Supernatural in Mississippian Art,” in *Ancient Objects and Sacred Realms: Interpretations of Mississippian Iconography*, ed. F. Kent Reilly III and James F. Garber (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 144.

unknowable.³⁴⁵ That assumption is now reversed, and this moth character is seen engraved on various media, is identified at numerous Mississippian sites, and can be traced ethnographically to groups across the eastern half of North America.

The most recognizable form of this character is located on the Willoughby disk



Figure 44; Willoughby Disk, Stone, Harvard University Peabody Museum. Moth image, Axis Mundi, Human Hands, Headdress motif.

from Moundville. Here the figure sits on the left side of the stone palette, with a death motif pole in the center and an engraving of two hands and a headdress motif on the right. At first, this does indeed appear to be doodles. Except, when this image is compared to a

Birdman shell gorget found at Etowah, the similarities between the two

images become apparent. To see this, both motifs must be disassociated from their original media and turned horizontally. This produces two images that are nearly identical—illuminating a body, antenna, dotted wings and proboscis. In fact, these depictions are accurate enough that Illinois State Museum entomologist Everett D. Cashatt was able to confirm that the insect motif was male.³⁴⁶

The identification of the Etowah gorget establishes a direct connection between Birdman and the moth motif. As was previously discussed, the Birdman figure, although pervasive and located at every other major ceremonial center, was not present at

³⁴⁵ Phillips and Brown, "Pre-Columbian Shell Engravings from the Craig Mound at Spiro, Vol 1," 143.

³⁴⁶ Vernon James Knight, Jr., and Judith A. Franke, "Identification of a Moth/Butterfly," 139.

Moundville. This connection, however, provides evidence that perhaps the character is present but simply used in a different form. To confirm this, Knight and Franke located additional gorgets from the region, specifically one from Hixon site in Tennessee and another from Etowah. Knowing what to look for, the authors were able to identify subtle characteristic within each gorget that show a figure that is both Birdman and moth, and another that is depiction of Birdman battling himself, or as Knight states,

the gorgets taken together show us a transformation series, in which Birdman in some sense becomes butterfly supernatural, or vice versa. They are in complementary opposition; butterfly supernatural is the alter ego of Birdman. And even though the two supernaturals are thus, at one level, the same thing, the complementarity is also depicted as a combat; one form overcomes the other (or itself).³⁴⁷

The identification of this motif and its corresponding identifiers in engraved shell gorgets raises another interesting aspect to the changing perspective in the interpretation of the Mississippian arts—the tableau. When these gorgets are laid side by side, they appear to tell a story that would otherwise go unnoticed. They show the transformation of one supernatural into two or two supernaturals becoming one. Either way, they are likely a single story that is being manifested in multiple pieces.

Diving further into their analysis, the argument for a moth seems likely. But, does it correspond to a specific species of moth? The answer is yes...and no! Both scholars identified the Hawk or Sphinx moth as the likely basis for the motif. Through additional discussions with various entomologist, they discovered the Hawk moth has a large tongue, which matches the long nose seen on an additional Etowah Birdman gorget, and the larva of the Hawk moth feeds on tobacco and *Datura*—a substance now being

³⁴⁷ Ibid, 143.

identified in some ritual vessels.³⁴⁸ Furthermore, and perhaps not coincidentally, the authors found that Hawk moth larva has a forked-eye motif similar to those of the falcon, which incidentally, shares that same character feature with the foremost Above World



Figure 45; Birdman with moth motif. Blue Line points to moth, Etowah

deity—Birdman—a supernatural that was identified as being directly connected to the moth in the various gorget scenes. The one aspect of the new motifs appearance that does not correlate to the moth is its wings. The wings are folded up, as if in a landed position. When seen in this way, the motif is actually reminiscent of the butterfly. Although this may at first be disheartening, as the authors point

out, this multi-animal amalgamation is normal.

We need not be too concerned; we reiterate our belief that the image is that of a *supernatural*, and most other supernaturals in the art system in question are manifestly portrayed as composites drawing from a variety of natural prototypes. One of our workshop group, having shown the design to an entomologist, was told that the dotted wing pattern is reminiscent of that of a buckeye butterfly.³⁴⁹

Adding to this is this supernaturals ability to transform not only into Birdman but in a real-world environment, change from caterpillar to moth as well. Coupled with its association with tobacco and *Datura*, this animal was likely highly valued by Mississippian shamans.³⁵⁰

³⁴⁸ King, Powis, and Cheong. "Absorbed Residue," 3.

³⁴⁹ Knight and Franke, "Identification of a Moth/Butterfly," 145.

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

Having identified this supernatural, the TSIC group members expanded their corpus to other Mississippian sites for corresponding symbols. The first image they located was from Spiro and is a fragment of a large, now broken, engraved shell drinking cup. Originally, identified as a snake, this image, with a curled upper section, is now viewed as undoubtedly being a Hawk Moth larva. The comparatives are almost exact. Next, the Knight and Franke identified a painted ceramic from Moundville with a curl



Figure 46; Hawk Moth Caterpillar



Figure 47; Hawk Moth Caterpillar motif, Spiro Mounds, Phillips and Brown, Pl. 145.



Figure 48; Moth Proboscis motif, Moundville, AL.

with raised nodes pattern accompanied by several other semi-circular node designs.

Although, initially identified as being a Nashville styled negative painted vessel, Knight believes that this vessel was likely made at Moundville and that this array is a moth proboscis.

“The whole design, we suggest, is a *pars pro toto* representation of the moth supernatural, in which only the two most distinctive traits, the dotted, fan-like wings and the feathered proboscis, were deemed sufficient to indicate the whole.”³⁵¹ Since this

identification, F. Kent Reilly, III has recognized additional motifs, identical to the moth symbol, in the American Southwest and has concluded that these were likely tied to a cult that permeated nearly all of southern North America.³⁵²

³⁵¹ Ibid, 149-150.

³⁵² F. Kent Reilly, III, Personal Communication, March 8, 2017.

The final study involves another multidisciplinary approach used by TSIC scholars to determine the meaning of a given grouping of artifacts. This model traces the connections between style, motif, and material in Mississippian iconographic objects, specifically limestone panther pipes, and highlights that only through this process of analysis can an accurate interpretation of the object be discovered. Typically found in the Lower Mississippi Valley, this pipe is from an art style called Bellaire and represents an underwater or Beneath World panther or cat. This style is almost entirely localized to Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama.³⁵³ Pipes of this type were used to smoke a powerful hallucinogen, *Nicotina rustica*, and, like the previously discussed ceramics, used by priests and shaman to obtain the mystical power of the supernatural creature in which it was carved to personify.

As has been discussed, the items that made up the SECC are seen in a variety of forms and media across the Eastern Woodlands and American Plains. Their common concepts indicate a near universal understanding of the preternatural perceptions for the people who created them. Yet, a regional separation of style can be directly traced to specific ceremonial centers or geographical locations. Complicating the regional concept then, are repeated instances of trade goods, both raw and finished ceremonial items, being found far from their supposed place of origin. Spiro is the greatest instance of this trade network and stylistic dispersion, as artwork, at least from a Mississippian point of view, was brought from literally across the known world to the site. But it is far from the only example. What then does this dispersion suggest, and how can the source of the items be directly tied to a specific local?

³⁵³ Vincas P. Steponaitis and David T. Dockery, "A Tale of Two Pipes," in *The Gilcrease Museum Journal* (2014): 43.

Currently, the only other materials used in SECC art that can be scientifically sourced to a specific location are copper and obsidian. Shell can be shown to have originated in a given region, such as the Gulf of California, but beyond that, it may be difficult to pinpoint the exact spot of their extraction from the water. Limestone,



Figure 49; Falcon with human head effigy pipe, limestone, Gilcrease Museum, 6125.18912



Figure 50; Location of fossil on pipe.



Figure 51; *Lepidocyclina supera*

however, can be traced to specific quarry sites based on the fossil deposits seen in the stone. Each deposit is unique. By teaming up, Vincas P. Steponaitis, an anthropologist, and David Dockery, a geologist, analyzed twenty Bellaire panther pipes and then looked at the limestone to determine if each pipe contained identical fossils. In nineteen pipes, they recognized the fossil *Lepidocyclina supera*, which is a one-celled amoeba-like creature with calcareous shells.³⁵⁴ This meant the limestone used to make these pipes was from the Oligocene Period (34 to 23 million YBP) and from a specific source known as Glendon Limestone—located just south of Vicksburg, Mississippi. The single exception to this study was the Gilcrease panther effigy pipe. Ironically, it was this pipe’s discovery outside of Bellaire, Arkansas, in 1886 that gave the Bellaire style its

³⁵⁴ Vincas P. Steponaitis and David T. Dockery, “Mississippian Effigy Pipes and the Glendon Limestone,” in *American Antiquity*, 76, 2 (2011): 349.

name.³⁵⁵ Investigations into this pipe revealed it held the fossil *Hindeoldella*, a primitive eel-like vertebrate and, therefore, was made from a much older limestone associated with the Paleozoic Era (540 to 250 million YBP) and located anywhere from Texas to Tennessee.³⁵⁶ Although a particular quarry site for this type of limestone is not presently located, its identification will aid other efforts to recognize additional SECC object made from limestone.

Knowing this information is extremely helpful and solidifies previous assumptions about Mississippian religious practices and artifact associations to parts of the trilayered cosmic universe. As was mentioned, these twenty pipes were used in ritualistic settings and intended to harness the power of supernatural beings. In many cases, the supernatural powers and imagery on vessels or pipes comes from the Beneath World. This underwater realm, it is argued, is the location where medicines were mixed and sanctified for ritual use. The cat or panther in this case can be connected ethnographically to the underworld and associated with water, rivers, and caves. Moreover, the limestone can be connected to the underworld as well, for “not far



Figure 52; Bellaire Panther Pipe, limestone, Gilcrease Museum, 6125.1204.



Figure 53; Location of fossil on back leg of figure.



Figure 54; *Hindeoldella*

³⁵⁵ Steponaitis and Dockery, “A Tale of Two Pipes,” 45.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

downstream from the Glendon outcrops along the Mississippi River [is] a giant, standing whirlpool that the French described in the eighteenth century; such whirlpools and any kind of turbulent water were considered hallmarks of this supernatural being.”³⁵⁷

As for the Gilcrease pipe, there is not yet a way to determine if the limestone used to make it came from a water-associated quarry site. However, additional questions are answerable about the artisan(s) who made this item and maybe one other. By having identified specific style regions, the authors determined that this pipe matches the Bellaire style and is almost identical to a second panther pipe discovered at Moundville. Seeing this suggests the potential that both are traceable to a single maker nearly 800 years ago, and lends credence to the suggestion that a distinct artisan class was present during this period and separate from the religious practitioners.

Although the examples presented in this study are limited, they still suggest that a new paradigm shift has occurred in the field of Mississippian studies. Before its development, researchers were trapped in a near myopic interpretative structure that suggested this material was unknowable. Today, we know this to be untrue. Now, through a rigid application of ethnographic literature, juxtaposed with archaeology and an art historical breakdown of style structure, these items can be identified, deciphered, and used as tools to shape our understanding of the past and present. Through the study of Mississippian art, researchers are better able to understand the world in which these incredibly complex and multiethnic people lived, as iconographic studies shed light on the social, religious, and political structure that made up the varied communities across the Eastern Woodlands and Great Plains. Although there is still a great deal left

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

unknown, it is only through a multidisciplinary approach, termed today the San Marcos School, that we are able to unravel the meaning and use of the religious objects they created to balance and control their world.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Section 1 – Summarizing Past Approaches

Native Americans have one of the richest artistic traditions in the world. Highly diverse, it dates back thousands of years. The cultural transformations that made up this long and distinct history culminated in the Mississippian period to produce what is arguably the height of North American pre-Columbian culture. The Mississippian people and the artistic heritage they left behind are equal to any other great civilization of the Americas—including the Maya, Aztec, or Inca. Producing religiously imbued objects in copper, stone, shell, and ceramic, these items were tied to their political, economic, and social structure. The meaning behind these items was largely forgotten as the Mississippian cultures declined, dispersed, or collapsed. Today, however, scholars are using new techniques to decipher Mississippian artistic masterpieces. They conclude that only through a multidisciplinary approach, utilizing ethnology, ethnographic literature, archaeology, art history, and scientific testing, can an accurate interpretation be reconstructed.

Because the Mississippian people left no written record, researchers must scientifically piece together their society and iconography. Attempts varied through the years. The first true efforts were made in the colonial period, as settlements increased

and inquisitive minds questioned the large mound structures scattered throughout the Eastern Woodlands. These early diggers noted the large quantity of artifacts found within the earthen structures and remarked on their likely origin. Misguided perceptions and outlandish conclusions marred early conclusions, as “Old World” civilizations, such as the Vikings or Egyptians, were credited with their creation. This erroneous perception changed little over the next 100 years.

It was not until the late 1800s that the United States government definitively linked the great mounds to historic Native American people, effectively ending any debate. This change in awareness marked the first of many paradigm shifts in Mississippian studies. Scholars such as Cyrus Thomas now integrated rudimentary archaeology, ethnology, and early European documentation, specifically personal narratives and government reports from Spanish, French, and English sources, to explain the nature of the Mississippian mounds and artifacts. Although intrinsically biased, the early descriptions were highly informative. Today, these reports are the baseline for modern researchers, as each narrative chronicles the movements and interactions between conquistadors, military personnel, explores, traders, Christian missionaries and Native peoples across the North American landscape.

This new approach to an old question provided a much clearer portrait of the mounds, ceremonial centers, and material being unearthed. However, interpretations were far from precise. The bulk of the work undertaken in the late 1800s and early 1900s was completed by amateur archaeologist and a very small number of ethnological investigators, who only recently came to understand the connection between Native people and the Mississippians. Amateur archaeologists at this time, such as C. B. Moore,

were typically wealthy entrepreneurs who often excavated in a haphazard manner. These men, for all their enthusiasm and devotion to archaeology, fixated on unearthing treasure rather than methodically digging and documenting. What few university and museum excavations that occurred during this period relied on a geographic separation of cultures, but they lacked an understanding of time. Stratigraphy was still a new concept and used with limited results. This left early scholars, such as Willoughby, Holmes, and MacCurdy, with incomplete data to investigate the symbolic nature of the ancient artifacts being discovered. Instead, they relied almost entirely on ethnography and compared the newly discovered objects, and the richly imbued motifs, to recent BAE reports that focused on contemporary Native people. This method was productive, but the tactic was inherently restrictive.

Eventually, a new paradigm took hold of Mississippian studies as the Great Depression brought forth Roosevelt's New Deal. Increased legislative acts meant to put people back to work boosted archaeological investigations across the American Southeast. Using WPA, CWA, and CCC funding, universities, museums, and government agencies excavated at a record pace. Silenced were previous interpretative methods utilizing ethnology as raw archaeology reigned supreme. Coinciding with the growth of archaeology was increased access to academic publications through New Deal programs. This improved communication between scholars but also captivated the American public and led to an escalation in the looting of Native American cultural sites. The most notable of these was Spiro. Following its discovery, Spiro was plundered by a group of local miners calling themselves the Pocola Mining Company. For two years, they dug, tunneled, and pillaged Craig Mound, before finally dynamiting it 1935.

Spiro changed the world's perception of Mississippian culture. Here was a single site that contained 90 percent of all known Mississippian artifacts. Using WPA funding, the University of Oklahoma, University of Tulsa, and Oklahoma Historical Society excavated what remained of the site and brought into public view thousands of ancient religious artifacts. The publication of this discovery advanced the thinking of Southeastern scholars. Many now saw the art produced on copper, shell, stone, and ceramic as tied to a single cult manifestation that spread rapidly throughout the American Southeast around 1500 AD, if not later. These ideas were formalized in 1945 by Antonio Warring and Preston Holder, who produced the most influential paper ever written in Mississippian studies, "A Prehistoric Ceremonial Complex in the Southeastern United States." This article defined, isolated, and categorized the Mississippian art found throughout the southeast and created the framework for all future comparative and contrarian studies relating to Mississippian iconography. For the next forty years, Mississippian scholars wrestled with this paper and its implications. However, without a true understanding of both time and space, any challenges to its findings remained elusive.

The largest change to initially affect the field following Warring and Holder's paper occurred in the 1950s. This transformation was the introduction of both radiocarbon dating and stylistic analyses. Radiocarbon dating was discussed by James Griffin in his 1952 publication, "Archaeology of Eastern United States," and for the first time offered dates that appeared to be considerably older than previous thinking. The problem with radiocarbon dating was that it was expensive and because the technique was still new, laboratories were hesitant to accept specimens. Therefore, it was used in a

very limited capacity. This opened the door to another idea. Using an art historical methodology, Madeline Kneberg and Jon Muller began looking at style in relation to stratigraphy and concluded that the art, once thought to have been created by a single cult, had evolved over time. This effectively meant that at least one aspect of Warring and Holder's hypothesis was incorrect. However, the idea of a Southeastern Ceremonial Complex was so entrenched in academia that style analysis did little to change the views of many researchers.

True change was gradual and began in the 1960s with Charles Hudson and others who believed that there was no clear understanding of how modern and historical people were connected to their Mississippian ancestors. For these new archaeologists, the question was simple. How can we accurately interpret Mississippian people and their art if we do not truly know how they are related? This new perspective was called the Annales School of Thought and was the first true multidisciplinary movement in Mississippian studies that heavily emphasized history or, more specifically, historiography. This new tactic also greatly influenced iconography and led to a much broader interpretation of the artifacts and people. The holistic approach was the focus of the 1984 Cottonlandia conference—the first museum sponsored exhibition to focus solely on Mississippian art and offer various viewpoints as to its development, use, and relationship to the Mississippian political hierarchy. The results were a direct counter to the previously held Warring and Holder model that still held a large portion of Mississippianists in its grip. The subsequent 1989 exhibition publication also provided scholars who were working independently, a glimpse at the profound changes taking place in the field with regards to art interpretation. Within three years of the book's

release, many of the volume's authors joined F. Kent Reilly III in forming a new methodology referred to today as the San Marcos School of Thought.

Using the techniques applied to the decipherment of Maya linguistics, these scholars wrought a new paradigm in Mississippian studies. Founded by F. Kent Reilly III and hosted by the Texas State University Department of Anthropology and its Center for the Study of Arts and Symbolism of Ancient America, this new methodology fundamentally changed the field of Mississippian studies. By combining multiple disciplines, such as history, ethnohistory, ethnology, archaeology, cultural anthropology, folklore, and art history, scholars were able to progress faster and more effectively than at any other time using any other investigative practice. A clear indication of its success is the large quantity of publications, conference papers, and journal articles produced. Moreover, within its framework, scholars are able to grapple with questions that took previous scholars decades to address. For example, prior to the conference, there was no understanding of a regional diversification of themes and art forms or how the cosmic model of the universe factored into iconographic motifs. In addition, many previous scholars speculated that the effigy figures emblazoned on the assorted media were real-world people, but now it is understood that these figures are supernatural characters and connected to the concept of a tri-layered universe. These efforts have also shown the unquestioned connection between historic tribes and the religious actions of Mississippians by comparing historic ritual activities to pre-Columbian ceramic vessels, their motifs, and the associated drinks they contained. Finally, this methodology has identified the existence of new styles and mythological characters and have suggested

that many of these themes, styles, and stories can cross mediums and be viewed as a tableau or larger mythological narrative or transformational process.

In the end, what this dissertation concludes is that the San Marcos approach to Mississippian iconographic and cultural studies is the most reliable and accurate methodology to date for studying pre-Columbian symbology, ideology, and culture. At no time in the past was scholarship able to systematically identify and relate the broader mythological stories of the Mississippian people to their real-world practices and identify the social complexity that framed this artistic expression. Therefore, the workshop created by F. Kent Reilly III must be viewed a true paradigm shift in Mississippian studies.

Section 2 – Complications

The largest problem that occurred while writing this dissertation was creating an easy to track flow of events that connected the chaotic changes underpinning scholarship in the successive eras. While researching the early precolonial and colonial period, it was clear that only a limited amount of scientific data was available, and what did exist was constantly being overshadowed by misguided “Old World” cultural conclusions. The work of Jefferson is a perfect example. He presented a highly methodical approach to determining who created the ancient earthenworks, yet no one built upon his research. He was followed by writers who, once again, only viewed the structures in terms of a mythic lost race. This produced a one step forward, two steps back process and created consistency issues in the pre-conference section of the dissertation. Once the government established conclusively that the ancient mound builders were the ancestors of modern

Native Americans, scholarship grew at an astounding rate. But again, this was problematic, as most of it was disjointed and difficult to collect. Moreover, scholarship evolved at varying rates, so it was difficult to trace a succinct chronology of thought. Where one scholar saw a connection to Mexico, others saw an independent cultural construct. When one group of specialists saw a stylistic evolution, others saw a singular manifestation. This made it difficult to construct an easy to follow blueprint of how the field changed. Moreover, because this field of study was not fully appreciated by the academic community at large, gaining access to transformative articles, significant papers, and groundbreaking dissertations, and other works was extremely difficult. For instance, Jon Muller's 1966 dissertation remains unpublished; however, it is one of the most transformative documents for the creation of a stylistic analysis of Mississippian engraved shell. Madeline Kneberg's article on the evolution of shell gorgets from the Dallas culture was published in the journal *Tennessee Archaeologist*, but this publication is no longer accessible. Luckily, Kevin E. Smith had copies of these resources that could be examined. The inaccessibility of these monumental papers makes it difficult to accurately identify the changes within the field and to contextualize the implications of their work. It also speaks to the general lack of iconographic understanding within Mississippian studies.

Even today, it is difficult to organize and present the vast quantities of new research that have been produced by the Texas State Iconography Workshop. It is changing too fast to be published in its entirety, meaning the vast majority of conclusions are presented in papers at conferences. That being said, the current publications produced by the conference are extraordinary for their ability to describe the change in

understanding and interpretation of specific items, but are deficient in that they cannot keep up with the volume of new interpretations being put forth. As David Dye described in his interview, “fifty-years from now, we will look back at the workshop as the golden age of iconography” and this is absolutely true. The hope is that we can document enough of it to make sure future generations can utilize and assess its implications.

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