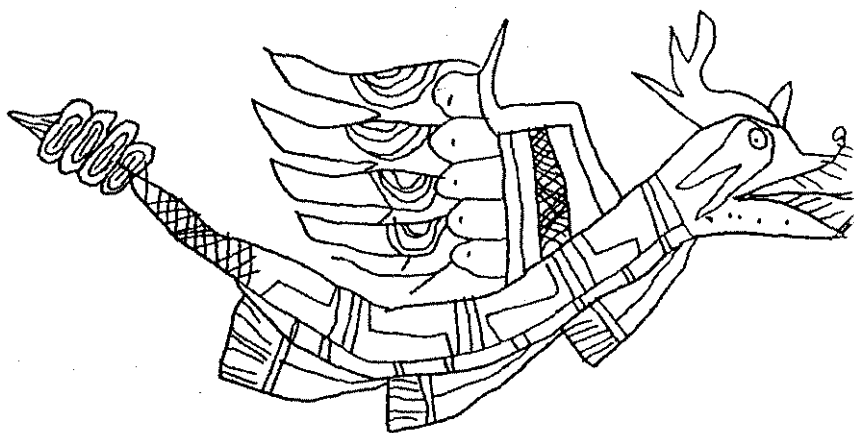


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## IDENTIFICATION OF SOME THEMATIC VARIATION IN THE ICONOGRAPHY OF MOUNDVILLE, ALABAMA

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Much of the iconographic imagery of those cultures of eastern North America described as Mississippian (ca. A.D. 1000-1600) has been referred to as the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex, or simply, SECC. The subject matter depicted in these designs is representational, mainly consisting of human figural components, anthropomorphic, and zoomorphic designs. Although it has been recognized that regional idiosyncrasies exist in style of depiction and choice of subject matter (see Brain and Phillips 1996; Gallo-way 1989; Phillips and Brown 1978, 1984), the reasons behind such differences are not well understood. I submit that this lack of understanding stems in part from an overemphasis on this imagery as being static and without contextually specific developmental histories.

It is preferable to look at the art of the SECC as fluid and dynamic in regard to both style and subject matter. Delineation of stylistic and thematic parameters and developmental trends within particular regions would allow for more information to be gained regarding differences in the "sociology of art" between major regional Mississippian centers (Phillips and Brown 1978:198). Furthermore, such characteristics of the art in specific contexts may be vital to interpreting social processes at work in polities such as that of Spiro in Oklahoma and Moundville in Alabama (see Brown 1985; Knight 1986, 1989). With an understanding of contextually specific social histories, the reasons for regional differences in the appearance of the iconographic designs may become clear when viewed in the larger frame of reference of Mississippian culture. The content of the SECC should be seen, therefore, as dynamic and we must study the iconography from specific regions as a process of development.

A small data set will be examined briefly in this paper to illustrate some of these ideas. The SECC designs I will discuss are from the site of Moundville in west-central Alabama. This site was the center for a major

southeastern polity along the Black Warrior river valley near what is today Tuscaloosa, Alabama. The SECC representational art at Moundville is found on Moundville Engraved *variety Hemphill* pottery (Steponaitis 1983:317–318) and consists of several fairly homogeneous themes of zoöomorphic and inanimate subject matter. As part of a recent thorough stylistic analysis of manner of depiction of the winged serpent theme (Schatte 1997a), six vessels were identified which contain subject matter that does not fit neatly in either the winged serpent or raptor themes at the site, although their style of execution is local. Space does not permit a discussion of the relationships to the winged serpent sequence here. Instead, the focus will be primarily on the stylistic and iconographic relationships between the raptor theme and the marginal images. The point of this brief paper is simple. There is a group of images at Moundville which is stylistically and iconographically similar to, yet distinct from, the raptor theme at the site and these designs exhibit something of an incremental progression toward composite reptilian and avian subject matter. Chronologically, these depictions seem to appear in the sequence around the middle of the fourteenth century (Schatte 1997a:100–110), during the Moundville II phase. Stylistically, they fall at the beginning of the seriation developed for the winged serpents (*ibid.*).

### **Moundville's Raptor Theme**

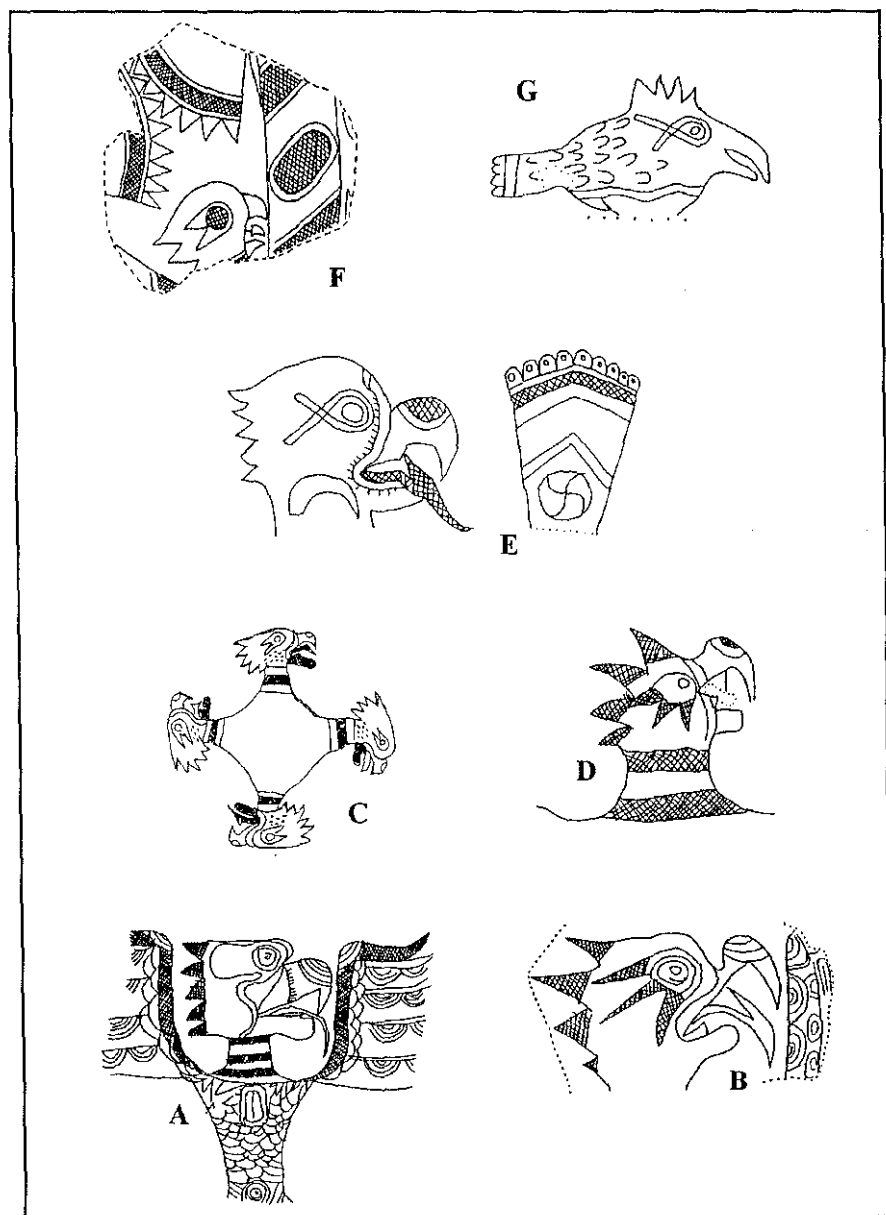
The analysis which will be presented is only preliminary. Although the styles of the transitional designs have been examined carefully and completely, photographs were relied upon in part for drawings of raptor designs, most of which do not show the entire depiction. The raptor category of iconography at Moundville is present on vessels EE416, SD54/M7, SD71/M7, SD362, SWG63, NR40, SW34, SD586, NE80, and WP'30 (cf. Steponaitis 1983:350). Additionally, a raptor head is visible on sherd MWp15695. Of these, the engravings on the latter three whole vessels have not yet been examined by the author, while the engraving on vessel SW34 is so badly preserved that it is of little use. For my purposes here, however, the poor nature of the raptor data is of little significance. This discussion does not represent a stylistic analysis of the raptor theme at Moundville. The primary purpose concerning these images in this paper is simply to show briefly that there are distinctive stylistic and iconographic differences, primarily in the head area, which indicate that something other than a simple raptor is being presented in the transitional images.

Style is defined here as fixity of form and structure. On this basis the raptor theme does possess a sizable amount of variability for such a small number of vessels. In regard to form, the theme is held together primarily by the presence of three elements; a hooked upper "beak," a toothless mouth area, and plumage on the top or back of the head (Figure 1A–G). There are several other elements which are salient to the theme but are not necessary for inclusion. In regard to the beak area, the lower beak of images on at least four vessels is notched or stepped.<sup>1</sup> An eye surround is present on every example although that of the EE416 specimen is distinctive (Figure 1A). Neck banding is present on five or possibly six of the seven specimens (neck of SD362 [Figure 1B] cannot be seen from the photograph). A barbed "tongue" is present on four of the vessels. It should be noted that on vessel SD54/M7 (Figure 1C), where more than one raptor head is depicted, not all of these forms are portrayed in the same manner. According to Moore (1907:351), the same is true for the eye surrounds on vessel SD71/M7 (Figure 1D).

The structural aspect of style in the raptor theme is perhaps even more varied. Vessels EE416 and SD362 possess images which are depicted in the round. The body of the creature on the former vessel is engraved on the base of the vessel and this is presumably the case with SD362. Vessels SD54/M7 and SD71/M7 have four disembodied raptor heads that are arranged in a quadripartite design around the body of the vessel. The raptor image on vessel SWG63 (Figure 1E) consists of a disembodied head and tail. Sherd number 15695 (Figure 1F) may contain a similar structure.

Lastly, the raptor component engraved on vessel NR40 (Figure 1G) is quite distinctive. In fact, this creature deserves further discussion. Although the entire engraving is not reproduced here, this raptor is depicted as emerging from or going into what appears to be a ceramic vessel. Additionally, there are curvilinear rayed bands associated with this design. It might be the case that the appearance of this creature is a function of the message conveyed in the iconography of the vessel. In fact, this may also be the case for the quadripartite arrangement of the engravings on vessels SD54/M7 and SD71/M7, the latter of which is also associated with four hand and eye elements (see Moore 1907:351). Such quadripartitioning has been inferred to have special significance in Ramey iconography from Cahokia (Pauketat and Emerson 1991:929–932). In any case, this is a level of iconographic meaning which I am not able to elucidate here. It is only mentioned to draw

**Figure 1.** Raptors from Moundville: (A) EE416; (B) SD362; (C) SD54/M7, after Moore (1907:Figure 8); (D) SD71/M7; (E) SWG63; (F) sherd MWp 15695; (G) from NR40; scales are variable.



attention to the possible dynamism of identification or meaning involved in the manner in which supernaturals are represented in Mississippian iconography.

Of course, transformation through time likely would be another influencing factor. As far as I am aware, no dates are available for any of the various styles of raptor depiction at Moundville. This, combined with the fact that the raptor images have not been examined in their entirety, causes me to be hesitant about suggesting any type of stylistic seriation. As previously stated, this work does not represent a thorough stylistic analysis of the raptor theme. Concerning the transitional images, however, more can be said concerning stylistic change through time.

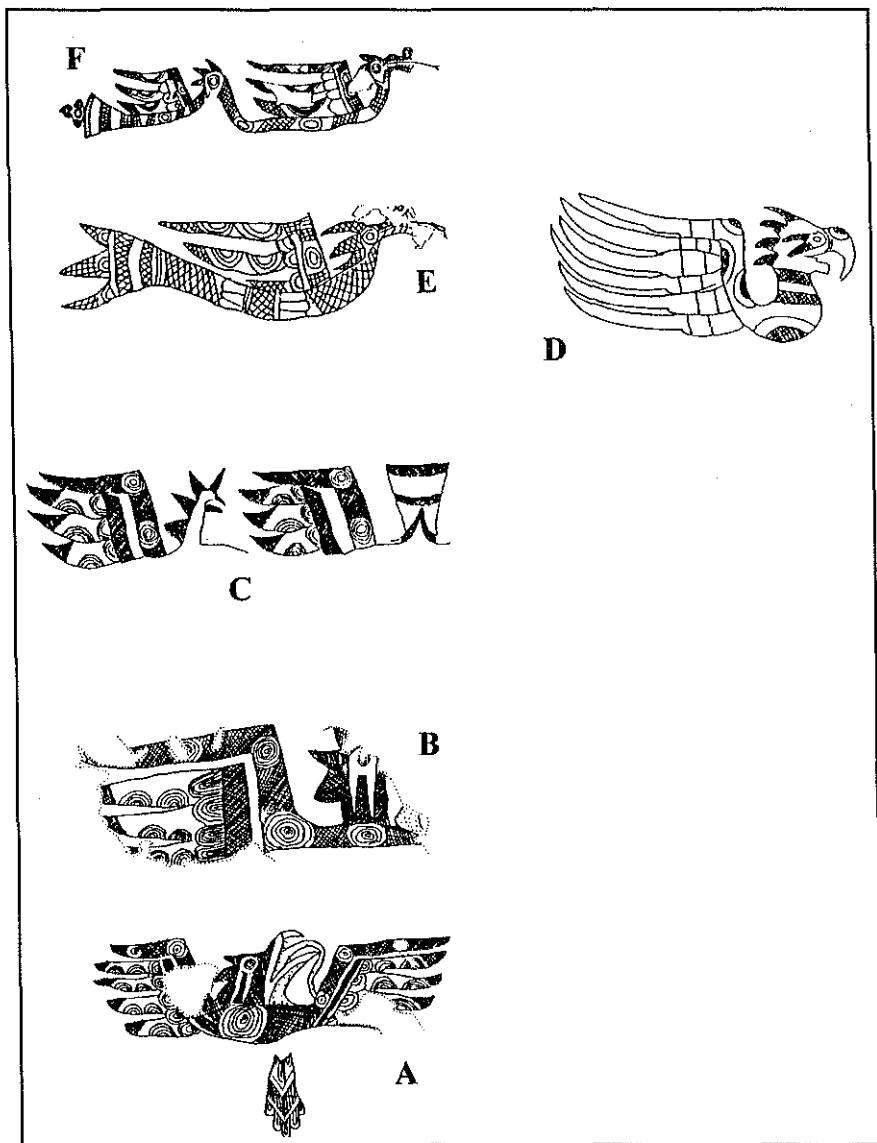
### Raptor/Serpent Transitional Images

The creatures on vessels SE8 (Figure 2A) and WR59 (Figure 2B), which appear to have been engraved by the same artist, are considered to be the earliest stylistically of the transitional images. Based on a stylistic comparison to the earliest winged serpent styles (Figure 3), which themselves date to around ca. A.D. 1350 or earlier, vessels SE8 and WR59 date to the same style phase, or may actually be slightly earlier (Schatte 1997a:55–56, 100–103).

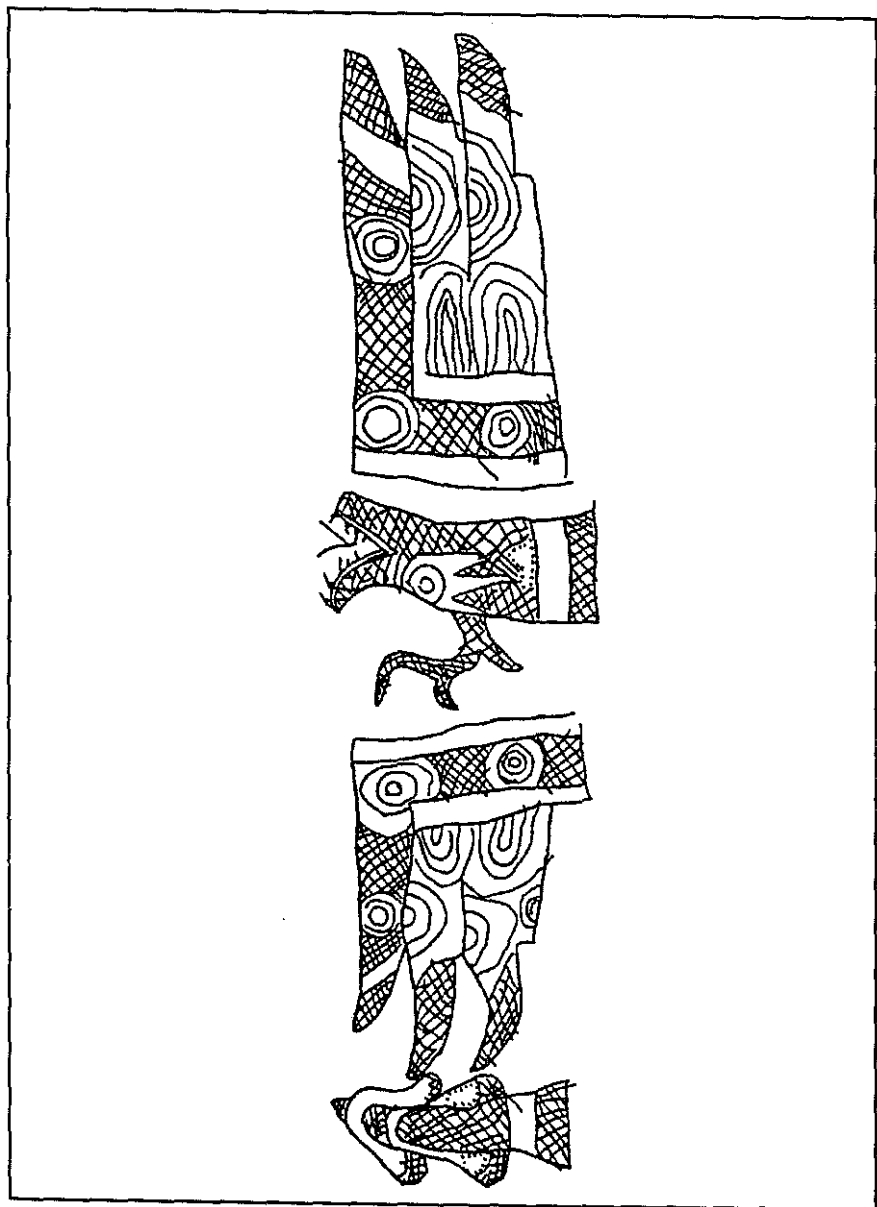
On the engraving from vessel SE8, the depiction of teeth and an extremely elongated tongue indicate that something other than, or in addition to, a simple raptor is being indicated. These characteristics are not found on raptors either in their iconographic form at Moundville or in their natural state. Concerning the other two distinctive features of Moundville's raptors, a hooked upper beak and plumes on the head, the latter is present, but the former is problematic. The jaws and head of the creature are somewhat elongated. The hooked element at the end of the upper jaw may represent a beak, but the overall depiction of these elements is certainly altered. I am inclined to see the element at the tip of the jaw as a large fang, given the presence of teeth, a reptilian tongue, and a "gums" element similar to that identified on many of Moundville's early style winged serpents (Schatte 1997a). Although most of the mouth area of the WR59 creature cannot be seen, what is present almost directly matches that of the image on vessel SE8.

It seems evident then that the content of what is depicted on this pair of vessels is different from the grouping of vessels known as raptors, even though Steponaitis (1983:350) has classified vessel SE8 as depicting a raptor. The image on vessel WR59 was classified by Steponaitis as a winged

**Figure 2.** Raptor/serpent transitional imagery: (A) SE8, tail is between wings opposite head; (B) WR59; (C) SD18, after Moore (1907:Figure 11); (D) O9/M5, after Moore (1905:Figure 115); (E) SD87/M7, after Moore (1907:Figure 65); (F) SD44/M7, after Moore (1907:Figure 64); scales are variable.



**Figure 3.** Winged serpent image on vessel SL31, earliest style phase; actual size ca. 7 x 25 cm.





serpent (*ibid.*), although this likely may be due to the incorrect reconstruction of the image on the bottle itself. When the engraving on this vessel is analyzed stylistically and placed in context with vessel SE8 and with the seriation of winged serpent vessels, the error becomes apparent. The inaccurate reconstruction is also reproduced in Fundaburk and Foreman (1957:Plate 39, upper-left corner). Elsewhere (Schatte 1997a:55–56), these images have been referred to as the Pseudo Raptor style group. The changes and additions of elements in this style phase indicate what is believed to be a critical turning point in the diachronic trajectory of zoöomorphic representation at Moundville.

Apart from the differences between the Pseudo Raptors and the raptor theme at Moundville, there are both formal and structural similarities and continuities. As mentioned, the Pseudo Raptors do possess plumes on the head. Other formal similarities can be seen in the treatment of the forward wing bar and trailing feathers and the eye surround. The tail feathers of the SE8 creature appear to be a continuation, albeit in a different style, of the manner of depiction represented on sherd number I5695 (Figure 1F) and on vessel NR40 (Figure 1G). Vessels EE416 (Figure 1A) and SD362 (Figure 1B) most likely also possess similar tail feathers.

This leads us to the structural similarities. Both vessels EE416 and SD362 are represented in the round with their wings spread, as are the two Pseudo Raptor vessels. The tail apparatus of the SE8 creature is engraved between the wing feathers on the opposite side of the vessel as the head. Although these attributes on vessels EE416 and SD362 have not been examined by the author, it appears from the photographs shown in Futato and Knight (1986:83) that the body does begin to fan out into a tail form just at the edge of the underside of the vessel on the side opposite the head. Interestingly, then, the body seems to have been merely eliminated on vessel SE8. Either intentionally or by mistake, the artist who engraved this image depicted the tail upside-down; a characteristic which was not replicated on the next transitional image, vessel SD18/M7 (Figure 2C).

The SD18/M7 creature is less elaborate than the Pseudo Raptors and it is suggested that it is transitional between this group, the two virtually identical images on vessel O9/M5 (Figure 2D), and the Bird Tailed Serpents group (Schatte 1997a:56–58; Figure 2E, F). Stylistically, the SD18/M7 image is simplistic, with no mouth area elaboration and no eye surround. The neck has been greatly elongated and the tail apparatus is squared at the end with simple cross-hatched and blank bands alternating along its length. What may be most intriguing about the depiction of SD18/M7 concerns the struc-

tural aspect of style. The wing elements trail in the same direction rather than being depicted as one "bird-like" creature with its wings spread. With the tail linked to the wing apparatus on the right, this image looks somewhat abstract. On the other hand, it is compelling that the head and neck are connected to the other wing apparatus.

The reason why the SD18/M7 creature is so interesting stylistically is because it may provide a better understanding of the "mechanics" of the merging of a serpentine body with "bird-like" attributes in the iconography of Moundville. When SD18/M7 is placed in context of comparison with another intriguing Moundville vessel, O9/M5, there are significant implications. Although the heads of the O9/M5 creatures are those of raptors, the addition of what might be seen as an abbreviated U-shaped body connecting the head and wing bar is not far removed structurally from what is shown on vessel SD18/M7. The form of the wing bar and trailing feathers of O9/M5 are quite similar to many of the winged serpents. These transitional characteristics are offered as justification for not classifying this image as a "true" raptor (*contra* Steponaitis 1983:349), although it displays more raptor attributes than the other transitional images, and appears to post-date SD18/M7 in terms of style.

When the images on vessels SD18/M7 and O9/M5 are compared with that of vessel SD44/M7 (Figure 2F), more connections are indicated, although the incomplete sequence is complicated further still. The structure of depiction shown on vessel O9/M5, where an image is duplicated on the opposing side of the vessel, is much the same as the structure of SD44/M7. It should be noted that none of the raptors or any of the other transitional images share this structure. The fact that the tail of one serpent merges into the head of the other probably has more to do with lack of space than conventionalization as Moore (1907:377) suggested.

In any case, the wing orientation is the same as that shown on SD18/M7. In fact, for two such creatures to trail each other around the vessel, this would have to be the orientation. Furthermore, once the serpentine body was added, for whatever reason, it would have been a simple matter to depict the bird tail as emerging from the end. It is interesting to note, as Moore (*ibid.*) did, that rattles have been added to the bird-tail. Other serpentine attributes are seen in the form of teeth and a forked tongue on the serpent to the right. The other vessel in this style group, SD87/M7 (Figure 2E), was engraved by the same artist as SD44/M7 (Hardin 1981:109). It appears to carry the same mouth-area attributes, although the state of preservation makes this difficult to discern. Why the artist chose to engrave only one creature on

this vessel is not known, although it takes up all of the available space on the fairly small bottle and it appears that this person was not accustomed to or skilled at engraving vessels with this type of subject matter.

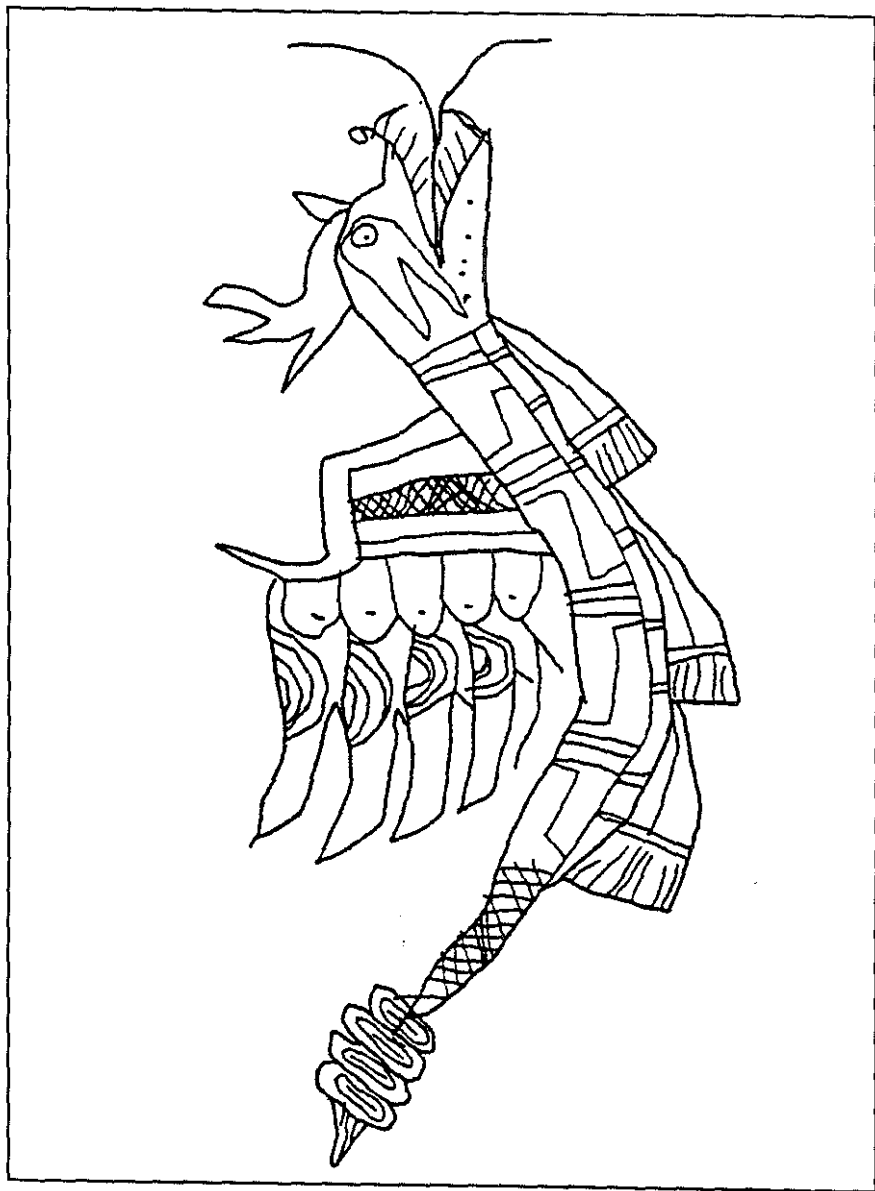
### Discussion and Conclusions

It is argued that the evidence presented clearly indicates some sort of stylistic and iconographic progression from imagery which solely represented raptors (at least superficially) to something which was more of a composite being or zoömorph. It is suspected that once the transitional imagery began to be made, there would likely have been other artists in Moundville society who were still producing more traditional, "true" raptor imagery. This is indicated by the presence of such designs as those present on vessel O9/M5 (Figure 2D), which are considered to be late in the transitional sequence, yet which possess definite raptor heads.

The placement of this vessel, and for all of the transitional images, was determined in concert with the formation of the stylistic sequence for Moundville's winged serpents (Schatte 1997a). The feather forms of O9/M5 are more diagnostic winged serpent attributes than raptor ones. The short vertical lines separating the feathers can be referred to as feather notches. This attribute is not clearly demarcated on any of the raptors to this point. The Pseudo Raptors (Figure 2A, B) provide the earliest hint of this treatment, although it is crude and poorly developed in this style phase, perhaps indicating the onset of its use. The third style phase of the winged serpent sequence, which is only one style phase subsequent to the level of the Bird-Tailed Serpents group style, is the latest in which this type of feather treatment is found in the winged serpents at Moundville (Schatte 1997a:Figure 37). An example of a winged serpent from this style phase with this stylistic feature is shown in Figure 4. Given the evidence, then, it would seem that the style of the O9/M5 creatures falls between the level of vessel SD18/M7 and just above the Bird-Tailed Serpents group (see Figure 2).

Given the styles in which the raptors are engraved, and the stylistic progressions from the raptors to the marginal or transitional depictions, it is suspected that the former predate the latter. If the raptor images were still being produced when the transitional designs were engraved, they probably did not continue for long given their small number overall. In fact, since there are so few raptors which have been recovered, and those that we do have are not depicted in ways which conform to the formation of homogeneous style groups, it appears that what this iconography represented was

**Figure 4.** Winged serpent image on vessel SD836 showing feather notch; actual size ca. 9.5 x 20 cm.



not a static concept, nor was it equally shared or understood by all of those who engraved (or viewed) the imagery (see Boas 1955:123–124; cf. Knight 1986). This means that we as archaeologists cannot group the SECC imagery simply according to subject matter and believe that it existed *en masse* at any one specific time or over any duration of time.

Stylistic analysis is necessary to delineate the regional and subregional parameters of SECC art. Such studies provide understanding of the nature of change within a specific theme (see Muller 1966, 1979) and may also be used to identify the range of categories of representation at a particular site (see Phillips and Brown 1978, 1984) or area (see Childs 1991). These analyses have the potential to bolster data from which regional and pan-regional comparisons (e.g. Brain and Phillips 1996; Galloway 1989; Phillips and Brown 1978) of various areal SECC manifestations are made, in efforts to describe the nature and place of this imagery in Mississippian culture (e.g. Brown 1985; Knight 1986; Muller 1989).

However, studies of style and iconography can also be used to address internal mechanisms of change which, of course, may be affected by or even affect external sources. It is suggested here that one way to approach issues from this perspective is to address the place of any marginal or transitional imagery which cannot be easily categorized in relation to a corpus of material from a particular site, polity, or area. This type of imagery, if it is present, might be identified through the process of stylistic analysis. In order to understand the relationships between homogeneous style and subject matter types which have been described from previous research,<sup>2</sup> the potential that such marginal images may represent a process of change should be recognized and accepted.

The Moundville data analyzed here indicate an incremental progression away from simple raptor imagery to composite reptile and bird imagery. Such a dynamic and processual viewpoint has the potential to address social implications regarding the production of the art and who might have been responsible for such a change and why (see Earle 1990; Knight 1989). If ideologies were an important component of the rise, continuation, and fall of Mississippian societies, then the historical development of cosmological representation should be studied in context with other issues of social organization (Emerson 1997a, 1997b; Pauketat 1994; Pauketat and Emerson 1991, 1997). The timing of the changes in depiction of snake and bird subject matter in Moundville iconography, as well as the styles in which they are executed, have important implications for external connections concerning stylistic similarities of SECC material (Schatte 1997a; see Brown 1989) and

internal social processes, when considered in relation to the winged serpent designs and the broader social context at Moundville (Schatte 1997b). Developmental histories of SECC imagery are as yet poorly understood partially because of a lack of thorough, systematic study but also due to the application of overly static perspectives regarding the parameters of the art.

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### Notes

1. Interestingly, this type of notched beak can be seen on various parrot species.

2. In fact, the themes themselves could be seen simply as continua of variation rather than strict types. The raptor theme, with its wide range of variability of depiction, might be an example where such a perspective could be applied. However, the typological approach is useful in initially organizing the images.

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