



Moundville Art in Historical and Social Context

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Moundville in its prime was one of the largest civic-ceremonial centers in the Mississippian world, surpassed in monumental grandeur only by the great Cahokia site near modern St. Louis. Situated on the banks of the Black Warrior River in western Alabama, this site was founded around A.D. 1100, grew to regional prominence soon after 1200, and continued to be occupied until about 1600. Through most of that time it served as the political and religious capital of a powerful chiefdom. Among its residents were important political officials, priests, aristocrats, and their many retainers. It served as a place for ceremonies and rituals, including funerals, for much of the surrounding countryside. And in this context it produced and amassed a remarkable corpus of representational art—used as ornaments, regalia, symbols of power, ceremonial implements, and decorations on pottery. Indeed, this corpus remains one of the “big three” from the Mississippian world—the others being from Spiro, Oklahoma, and Etowah, Georgia—and has always played a key role in discussions of Mississippian art.

HISTORY

As its name suggests, Moundville's architecture was dominated by pyramidal mounds arranged around a large, rectangular plaza (figs. 2–5). Nowadays, twenty of these mounds are well preserved, but once there were at least thirty. At one time the site was protected by a bastioned

Fig. 1 Engraved circular palette with hand-and-eye motif and intertwined serpents; known in archaeological literature as the Rattlesnake Disk; Alabama, Tuscaloosa and Hale counties, Moundville, A.D. 1300–1450; sandstone, diam. 31.9 cm; Alabama Museum of Natural History, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa. Cat. no. 155. Research is revealing that the mysterious imagery of this disk formed part of a system of cosmological signs connecting the Moundville leaders to their ancestors and the forces of nature.

palisade or defensive wall. The area outside the plaza and within this wall was a residential zone that, at its maximum, may have housed some one thousand people. At its largest extent, this town covered some 75 hectares (185 acres).¹ Most of the earthen mounds were rectangular and had flat summits that originally supported elaborate wooden structures: public buildings and the residences of chiefs. Some of the mounds were quite large. Mound A, in the center of the plaza, covers .8 ha (2 acres) and is 6 meters (20 ft.) tall. Mound B, at the northern end of the plaza, is about 90 meters square at the base and 17 meters high (295 ft. square × 56 ft.). The labor invested in building these earthworks was enormous.

Ethnohistorical parallels suggest that Moundville was originally built as a sociogram—an architectural depiction of a social order based on ranked clans.² Paired groups of mounds along the plaza's edge were associated with specific clans, arranged according to social power and prestige. The highest ranking clans were situated along the northern edge of the plaza, and the ranks decreased progressively as one moved along both sides of the plaza to the south. Thus, it is not surprising that the largest mounds and the most elaborate burials were found at the site's northern end.

A century of excavations at Moundville, coupled with decades of scholarship focused on the collections



Fig. 2 View of Moundville, Tuscaloosa and Hale counties, Alabama.

yielded by these excavations, has resulted in a reasonable understanding of the site's history, at least in broad outline.³ The underlying chronology is based on five ceramic phases, each 100–150 years long, that span the period from A.D. 1000 to 1650 (see chronological chart, p. 12).⁴ Here we present a brief social history of this period, as prelude to our discussion of Moundville's art.⁵

Fig. 3 View looking south over Moundville as it may have appeared in the 13th century; rendering by Steven Patricia.



The eleventh century A.D. was a time of conflict in this part of the South. Archaeological evidence suggests endemic warfare, coupled with occasional food shortages. People lived in hamlets and villages, densely clustered in certain areas, with large buffer zones between clusters. These settlement clusters must have constituted autonomous political units—perhaps groups of related towns—that from time to time made war against each other. People at this time did not build mounds, and their burials showed few signs of social inequality. One gets the sense that political centralization was minimal. In this setting occurred two important economic changes that set the stage for later political developments.

The first of these changes was a rapid intensification of farming. In addition to the traditional wild staples of deer and hickory nuts, people began to eat maize in ever-increasing amounts. At A.D. 1000, maize was an insignificant part of the diet, hardly detectable in the archaeological record. A century later maize was ubiquitous and a major part of the diet. This rapid shift to a more agricultural economy ameliorated local food shortages, made possible denser concentrations of people, and, perhaps most importantly, created a source of wealth that could be mobilized and manipulated for political ends. Equally important at this time was an upsurge in local craft production, particularly in the manufacture of shell beads. These beads were sewn onto garments that were worn as regalia at ceremonial occasions. They were also undoubtedly a source of wealth. We suspect that this increase in craft production was fueled mainly by ambitious individuals and families who were competing economically and socially for prestige.

These trends culminated, shortly after A.D. 1100, in the first material signs of political centralization: two small mounds were constructed on the Moundville terrace, accompanied by a large, dispersed community of households stretched out along the terrace's edge. Clearly, Moundville had emerged as a center of political and ceremonial activity in the region, although still modest in scale. This pattern continued until about 1200 or shortly thereafter, when Moundville was suddenly transformed into a major regional center. A new, monumental plan was conceived and imposed on the landscape. A huge central plaza was laid out and leveled by cutting away high spots and filling in depressions. Some twenty new mounds were then built around the plaza's edge, formerly dispersed houses were relocated to the margins of this ceremonial precinct, and the entire settlement was fortified by a massive wall. Thus the sociogram described earlier came into being. A powerful individual or family, whose name we shall never know, took a particular vision of the social order and literally shaped its representation into the earth, thereby creating one of the grandest centers in the Mississippian world. The construction of this center clearly signaled, to all who saw it, the emergence of a great chiefdom, ruled by aristocrats whose power in the region was unrivaled. A number of smaller mound



Fig. 4 View of Moundville, Tuscaloosa and Hale counties, Alabama.

centers, subsidiary to Moundville, were also built in the region at this time.

Around A.D. 1300 the character of the Moundville center changed once again. Archaeological signs of this change were several: (a) the resident population at Moundville substantially declined, as people relocated to outlying settlements; (b) the number of burials interred at the site increased dramatically; and (c) the defensive palisade was dismantled and never rebuilt. Moundville stopped being a fortified, densely populated town, and instead became a "vacant" ceremonial center, inhabited principally by elite families, ritual specialists, and retainers. As residential precincts at Moundville were emptied, they were turned into cemeteries where people from outlying settlements were brought for burial. Indeed, the absence of cemeteries at contemporary outlying sites suggests that Moundville became a necropolis, the principal place of burial for much of the region's population.

The increasing physical separation of elites from commoners at Moundville was also accompanied by



Fig. 5 Plan of Moundville.

an increasing symbolic separation. During the fourteenth century some of the most elaborate elite burials were placed in Mounds C and D, accompanied by beautifully crafted copper and shell regalia. We see this as a time when the power of Moundville's chiefs was expressed most clearly in ritual, and may well have reached its zenith in practice. Subsequent centuries saw Moundville's gradual decline. By 1400 most of the mounds along Moundville's southern flank were no longer in use, and over the next century, most of the remaining mounds were "decommissioned." By 1450 the truly elaborate burials were no longer being made, and the scale of mortuary activity across the site was greatly reduced. A few mounds were still occupied and used in the 1500s, and by 1600 the site was no longer inhabited.

Throughout this period people continued to live in the Black Warrior region, so Moundville's decline was not a matter of regional abandonment. Quite the contrary, for, as the political and religious importance of Moundville diminished, that of other, smaller mound centers in the region seemed to increase. Mounds at these outlying centers became larger, and at least two of these outlying centers were marked by the appearance of cemeteries of the kind that had formerly been found only at Moundville. Initially, Moundville's decline signaled not so much a disappearance, but a redistribution of political and religious power in the region, as outlying centers gradually became more autonomous. But by 1600 all the mound centers were gone, leaving only villages with few material signs of chiefly power.

In sum, Moundville emerged as a political and religious center in the twelfth century; became a fortified, densely populated town in the thirteenth century; and evolved into a less-populated ceremonial center in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which, among other things, served as a necropolis, a special place of burial for the dead from the surrounding countryside. Most of the elaborate representational art that has survived archaeologically at Moundville dates to the last of these periods, which correspond to the late Moundville II and early Moundville III phases in the ceramic chronology (A.D. 1300–1450).

REPRESENTATIONAL ART

Broadly speaking, the artifacts considered here fall into two classes. One consists largely of work in stone, marine shell, and copper—mostly ritual items (such as pipes and palettes) and regalia (such as gorgets, headdress elements, ear disks, and beads). These were generally found in elite contexts, associated with high-ranking individuals or with places where such individuals carried out their public or ritual activities. The other class consists of engraved or painted pottery decorated with representational motifs. Such pottery initially was used only in elite contexts, but by the late fourteenth century also started to appear more broadly, both in non-elite burials at Moundville and at outlying sites.



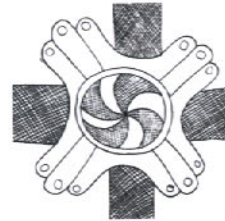
a.



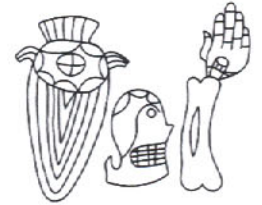
b.



c.



d.



e.

In the sections that follow we describe Moundville's art, organized into categories based on material and function. We also consider evidence of provenance, that is, whether particular items were locally produced or imported. As James Brown has persuasively argued,⁶ the assemblage of elaborately crafted objects found archaeologically at any major Mississippian site is likely to contain items from multiple, geographically dispersed sources. Such "stylistically mismatched assemblages" can only be sorted out by tackling questions of provenance. Here, we make such discriminations based on both geological and stylistic evidence. Needless to

Figs. 6a–e Common themes on Hemphill-style pottery from Moundville: a) winged serpent; b) crested bird; c) raptor; d) center symbols and bands; e) trophy; from Moore 1905, figs. 9, 147, and 152; Moore 1907, figs. 5 and 8.

Fig. 7 Jar with incised hands: Alabama, Tuscaloosa and Hale counties, Moundville, Rhodes site (northeast of Mound F), A.D. 1300–1450; ceramic, h. 16.6 cm; Alabama Museum of Natural History, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa. Cat. no. 265.





Fig. 8 Cup with incised skull motif; Alabama, Tuscaloosa and Hale counties, Moundville, southeast of Mound H, A.D. 1300–1450; ceramic, h. 11.5 cm; Alabama Museum of Natural History, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa. Cat. no. 263.

say, our comfort in making these assessments varies according to the strength of this evidence, which differs from item to item. Even so, we believe that the available information is now sufficient to make this line of inquiry productive. While future research may refine the picture and possibly revise some of our more tentative assignments, we are confident that, at least in broad outline, these attributions will hold up under further scrutiny.

Pottery

No artifact is more ubiquitous at Moundville or has been more thoroughly studied than pottery. Typical Moundville vessels range from purely utilitarian cooking pots—mostly jars—to beautifully made serving wares—mostly bowls and bottles. The latter were often decorated with either geometric or representational designs, executed by means of engraving, incising, or painting. It is the representational work, with its evocative subject matter such as the winged serpent and the hand-and-eye motif, that has attracted the most attention as art. We admit that it is not an easy matter to draw a strict distinction between the symbolic art and the merely decorative. We suspect that at least some, if not most, of the designs that appear to us as purely geometric originally had widely understood conventional meanings. For present purposes, however, we focus on the two categories of decorated pots that show the most elaborate representational designs: the engraved wares for which Moundville is

justifiably renowned, and the bichrome or polychrome painted wares.

Typologically, the engraved wares with representational designs constitute a variety called Moundville Engraved, *variety Hemphill*.⁷ Such vessels are typically thin-walled bottles and bowls, which were tempered with finely ground shell, polished, and “smudged” in firing to produce a glossy black surface. Chemical studies leave no doubt that these vessels were made of local clays.⁸ The engraved designs on these vessels are executed in a distinctive manner that has come to be called the Hemphill style.⁹ Approximately one hundred and fifty whole or restorable vessels engraved in this style are known. Most of these pots were found as grave accompaniments, although it is clear that they were not made strictly as mortuary vessels, having been routinely used and broken in domestic settings. The Hemphill style can be distinguished from closely related engraved Mississippian pottery from the Tennessee River valley, the central and lower Mississippi valley, and the northern Gulf Coast. This style is highly conservative and is confined to a small, repetitive range of subjects drafted in accord with rather rigid artistic canons. Its subject matter, although it overlaps with that of other contemporary Mississippian centers, reflects a distinctive Moundville vision of the cosmos.

The vast majority of compositions engraved in the Hemphill style are variations on only five themes, or categories of subject matter (figs. 6a–e). The first of these is a winged serpent, depicted as having the body of a rattlesnake with either a reptilian or a mammalian head affixed with deer antlers (fig. 6a; see also fig. 12 in the essay by George Lankford in this volume). Feathered wings sprout from the back of this dragonlike creature. Second is a crested bird, typically shown in multiples knotted together in pairs around a central medallion or knot, with four birds to a vessel (fig. 6b). This bird has a long, sinuous neck, a straight beak, and a distinctive flattened head crest. The third and last of the major zoomorphic themes is a raptor, a bird of prey with a hooked beak, a serrated crest, and characteristic eye markings (fig. 6c). Unlike raptor depictions elsewhere in the Mississippian world, these birds show no signs of being combined with human features or human costume. A fourth theme is called center symbols and bands (fig. 6d), comprising a number of geometric-looking compositions that exhibit fairly obvious cosmological references by incorporating strategically placed center symbols intercepted by wide, ribbonlike bands, referencing four quarters or quadrants. Other motifs, such as three conjoined fingers, sometimes radiate outward from the center symbols at the semi-cardinal points. The range of motifs that can act as center symbols in these compositions include the cross-in-circle, concentric circles, the swastika, the radial T-bar, and the dimple. The fifth major category of subject matter is the so-called “trophy” theme: compositions that show, in varying combinations, a small checklist of motifs that include the human hand, the



forearm bone, the skull, and the scalp stretched on a hoop (figs. 6e and 7–8). Depictions of skulls show what are arguably scalp marks at the back of the head. Occasionally the head of a raptor is included in the mix of motifs. The meaning of this set of associations has proven especially difficult to penetrate, but George Lankford has argued that most elements of this theme, together with the winged serpent and raptor, allude to the Path of Souls, a journey taken by the dead that is well documented in the Native American traditions of the Great Plains and Eastern Woodlands.¹⁰

Chronologically, Hemphill-style engraved pottery spans much of the fourteenth century and the first half of the fifteenth. Within this span there were probably never more than a few potters working in this style at any one time. The total number of known vessels is not large, and duplicate vessels bearing "signature" characteristics of the same potter have been identified in several cases. The most elaborate, expertly composed, and competently drafted pieces with winged serpent and crested bird figures were made in the fourteenth century.¹¹ These earliest pieces are also those with the most obvious external stylistic connections, particularly with certain early Walls and late Braden style engraving from the central Mississippi valley. The style was probably originally inspired by engraving in other media and was adapted to pottery. By the fifteenth century,

Hemphill engraved vessels generally show a breakdown in competency, a rather poor control of the medium, and more stylistic independence, suggesting a dispersal of potters and workshops away from the Moundville site proper and less importance attached to the engraver's skill. There is no indication that the circulation of Hemphill engraved pottery was restricted only to elites. The vessels are found in seemingly ordinary graves in all parts of the Moundville site. While these vessels are most abundant at Moundville, Hemphill-style vessels and sherds have also been found at a number of outlying sites including small farmsteads.

The second kind of pottery with representational motifs consists of bichrome and polychrome vessels painted with red, white, and/or black pigments. The first two are applied in the form of slips of colored clay, while the last is a carbon pigment often applied with a negative or resist technique. As with the engraved wares, this painted pottery also tends to be a relatively thin ware, tempered with fine shell and burnished on the exterior. Two vessel shapes dominate this category. The first is a bottle with a spherical body, usually equipped with narrow, curving "carafe" neck. The second is a terraced rectangular bowl, a Moundville specialty. This kind of bowl is a vertical-sided, flat-bottomed, rectangular vessel that has an eccentric rim, with one side lower than the others as if to display the vessel's

Fig. 9 Long-necked globular bottle with negative resist design; Arkansas, Scott County, A.D. 1300–1500; ceramic, h. 20.3 cm; Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma. Cat. no. 230.

Fig. 10 Tripod vessel with negative resist design; Missouri, Mississippi County, A.D. 1300–1500; ceramic, h. 23.2 cm; Dr. Arthur Cushman Collection, Old Hickory, Tennessee. Cat. no. 229.



Fig. 11 Engraved circular palette with intertwined plumed serpents; known in archaeological literature as the Issaquena Disk; Mississippi, Issaquena County, probably Grace Mounds, A. D. 1250–1500; sandstone (?), diam. 21.6 cm; Ohio Historical Society, Columbus. Cat. no. 158.

Fig. 12 Engraved circular palette with hand motif, one of the earliest examples of this type; Illinois, Naples Winchester Mound, 100 B. C.–A. D. 300; siltstone (?), diam. 31.8 cm; Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of Natural History, Washington, D. C. Cat. no. 157. Mississippian circular palettes had precedent in the earlier Woodland tradition, as seen in this disk featuring the motif of an open hand. The simple, abstract rendering of the hand in this instance bears a resemblance to the famous Hopewell mica cut-out hand from Ross County, Ohio (see Seaman essay, fig. 8).





Fig. 13 Engraved circular palette; known in archaeological literature as the Willoughby Disk; Alabama, Tuscaloosa and Hale counties, Moundville, A.D. 1300–1450; shale (?), diam. 22.2 cm; Harvard University, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, gift of F. E. Hyde and Charles P. Bowditch, 1896. Cat. no. 156.

contents. Stylistically, much of the painted pottery found at Moundville closely resembles that found in other parts of the Mississippian world. The resemblance is particularly close with the painted pottery found along the Tennessee, Cumberland, and lower Ohio River valleys to the north of Moundville, and in the central Mississippi valley to the west (figs. 9–10). That much of this pottery, long suspected of being imported, was not made of local clays has recently been borne out by chemical provenance studies.¹² Yet these same chemical studies show that some painted pots were made locally as well, including terraced rectangular bowls and designs duplicated in Moundville copper and stone pendants. The negative-painted pottery, whether locally made or acquired from external sources, circulated only in restricted contexts. Such vessels often ended up as grave goods in elite cemeteries at the Moundville site, and neither negative-painted vessels nor sherds are so far known from any of the sites in Moundville's hinterlands.

Stone Palettes

Although notable examples of decorated stone palettes have been unearthed in other contexts—including one from Mississippi with plumed serpents now in the Ohio Historical Society collection (fig. 11) and one of impressive size with an engraved hand design at the Smithsonian Institution (fig. 12)—it is safe to say that such palettes constitute another distinctive Moundville artifact. Dozens of complete specimens and hundreds of fragments have been found, more than at any other Mississippian site. These palettes are typically circular, about 20–30 cm (8–12 in.) in diameter, and 1–2 cm thick; a few rectangular examples of comparable size are also known.¹³ They are incised with designs on one or both sides and usually show patches of red, white, or black—traces of distinctively colored minerals that were placed on these flat surfaces.¹⁴ We suspect these palettes were used as ritual furniture, portable altars on which medicines and other supernaturally powerful mixtures were prepared.

The vast majority of the palettes at Moundville are made of a fine, gray, micaceous sandstone that occurs in great abundance at outcrops only 30 km (18.8 miles) north of the site.¹⁵ So there can be little doubt that these artifacts were made locally. The obverse face of the palette is usually decorated with a notched or scalloped edge and concentric lines drawn parallel to the rim. This simple design shows clear iconographic parallels to the scalloped edge and multilinear band often found on copper gorgets.¹⁶ The palette's reverse face is usually undecorated, but the few known exceptions to this pattern are iconographically spectacular. One such exception is the aptly named Rattlesnake Disk, which is decorated on the reverse with a masterfully executed design showing two horned rattlesnakes knotted together into a circle (fig. 1). This ophidian circle, in turn, surrounds a hand—a symbolic portrayal of a portal into the celestial realm.¹⁷ A second exception is the Willoughby Disk, made of a dark gray, shale-like stone (fig. 13). Although the specific geological source of its material has yet to be identified, it is consistent with the kinds of rocks that occur nearby and our best current guess is that this palette was made locally as well.¹⁸ Its reverse face is covered with a *mélange* of motifs: a central rope-like element bearing two skulls, flanked on one side by two hands and a bilobed arrow, and flanked on the other side by a curious creature with the spiral proboscis and wing of a moth.¹⁹ The meaning of this *mélange* is not at all clear, but iconographic elements

are all ones that occur in some form on local pottery (the engraved and painted wares discussed earlier) and are consistent with local styles. These stylistic links strengthen our suspicion that the Willoughby Disk was decorated by a Moundville artist, despite its atypical raw material.

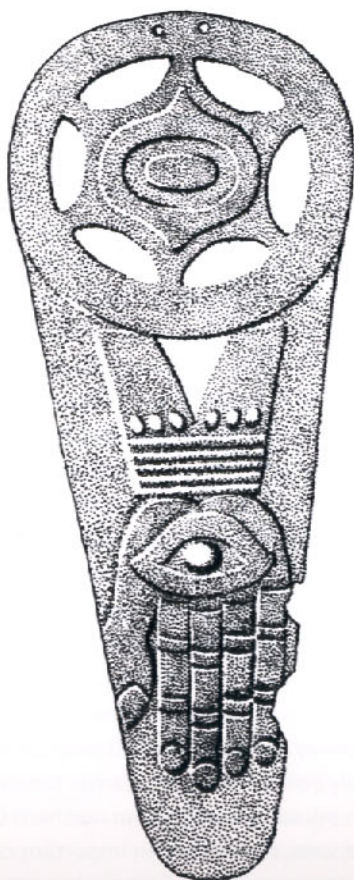
Stone Pendants

A specialty of Moundville's lapidary work is the production of small, tabular, engraved stone pendants. Fashioned from thin stone of uniform thickness, these pendants were shaped, polished, and engraved to represent standard symbols. In most though not all cases the material of manufacture is a blood-red, fine-grained ferruginous stone. Although this material has not yet been securely identified geologically, tabular rock of similar appearance has been noted in the superficial geology of the upper Coastal Plain hills only a short distance from Moundville. At any rate it is abundantly clear that the manufacture of these pendants was local, in that partially finished blanks, partially engraved specimens, and specimens bearing evidence of having broken during manufacture have all been found at the Moundville site, along with a majority of the finished specimens.²⁰ Blanks and unfinished specimens show that the stone was first ground to a uniform thickness, then sawn into shape by a groove-and-snap technique. Edges and surfaces were then polished, fenestrations and suspension holes were drilled, and the outer surface

Fig. 14 Oblong pendant with swastika and hand-and-eye motif. Alabama, Tuscaloosa and Hale counties, Moundville, southwest of Mound M, A. D. 1250–1500; stone, h. 9.8 cm; Alabama Museum of Natural History, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa.

Fig. 15 Oblong pendant with rayed circle, ogee, and hand-and-eye motif. Alabama, Tuscaloosa and Hale counties, Moundville, south of Mound D, A. D. 1250–1500; copper, h. 13 cm; Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, D. C., no. 17/3107; from Moore 1907, fig. 101.

Fig. 16 Hair ornament; Alabama, Tuscaloosa and Hale counties, Moundville, Mound H, A. D. 1250–1500; copper, h. 16 cm, with bone pin; Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, D. C., no. 17/0147.



was engraved. No such production evidence has been found at any of the other sites in Moundville's hinterland, and, to date, only one site in Moundville's hinterland has yielded an example. Two other sites, one in the Tennessee River valley and the other in the Tombigbee valley, have produced one specimen apiece, both no doubt originating at Moundville.²¹

The most common type, the oblong emblem (fig. 14), is a design of central importance to Moundville iconography, shared with other media including sheet copper and negative painted pottery.²² This design's original prototype is an older Mississippian motif consisting of a human scalp stretched on a frame, which also shows up as an item of regalia called the "bellows-shaped apron" in the literature.²³ Here the design has become conventionalized over time beyond immediate recognition of its scalp prototype. As translated in time and space into Moundville art, the design had become an independent emblem, and the upper and lower registers were now fields for a standard set of locally important motifs. As with the corresponding copper artifacts, the upper register of the oblong stone pendants is occupied by either of two circular motifs: the rayed circle or the swastika-in-circle. The lower register may be blank, or may contain the hand-and-eye motif with the fingers downward, plus terrace motifs. Extraneous "eyes" may appear in either the upper or lower register.

Copper Ornaments

Moundville's decorative arts include copper in a variety of forms, including items of regalia cut from sheet copper, copper-clad wooden ornaments, and copper-bladed axes made for display.²⁴ All were manufactured of native copper, that is, relatively pure nuggets that were cold-hammered into thin sheets and cut into the desired shapes. Native copper occurs naturally in many parts of eastern North America, but nowhere close to Moundville. Trace-element studies suggest that most of the copper found at Moundville came from geological sources in the southern Appalachian Mountains, while some came from sources near the Great Lakes.²⁵ In this case, however, the source of the raw material bears little relationship to where a particular artifact was crafted, as native copper from many sources circulated widely across the Mississippian world, and was turned into artifacts at many different places. Thus, conclusions on the place of manufacture must currently rest on the grounds of style, iconography, technology, and distribution. It seems clear that at least some copper-working was done at the Moundville site, as sheet-copper scrap has been found in midden contexts, particularly where there is other evidence of craft activity, as at Mound Q.²⁶ It is also likely on the basis of stylistic and distributional evidence that some copper artifacts at Moundville were imported from other Mississippian chiefdoms.

Let us first discuss the copper objects we believe were made locally at Moundville. Among the items strongly correlated with elite burials at Moundville are gorgets of embossed sheet copper, doubly perforated for sus-

pension along one margin.²⁷ They occur in only two shapes, circular and oblong. Like their more diminutive stone counterparts, the oblong gorgets feature a circular upper register that contains either a cutout swastika-in-circle or a scalloped circle motif (fig. 15). The circular gorgets, which tend to possess embossed concentric circles around the outer margin, share the same two motifs, the swastika and scalloped circle, as their central elements. Thus, all but one of the 32 known specimens fall into a scheme of only four possibilities: oblong with swastika-in-circle, oblong with scalloped circle, circular with swastika, and circular with scalloped circle.

Among these copper gorgets by far the most common type is oblong, with the upper register containing a cutout swastika enclosed by two embossed concentric circles, and a lower register containing a cutout triangle. It seems highly important that this design is the most frequently seen in copper at Moundville, that it has almost exact stylistic counterparts in other media known to be of local Moundville manufacture, and that the design, as executed in this style, is extremely rare outside of Moundville. Its combination with a hand-and-eye motif is again precisely duplicated in local stonework. These circumstances in our opinion render it unlikely that the oblong copper gorgets found at Moundville, and by extension the circular copper gorgets, were made at any other Mississippian center. Indeed this set of copper gorgets, or more precisely the iconography they convey, is the closest thing we can find to local emblems identifying Moundville's elites. In this connection it is revealing that this small package of elite symbols has so little in common with the iconography shown on Hemphill style engraved pottery, which is also indigenous to Moundville, but has a very different pattern of circulation.

It is useful to contrast these gorgets with other copper items at Moundville which are less common but which do have close, if not exact, external counterparts at other Mississippian centers. There are, for example, hair ornaments from Moundville made of embossed sheet copper which have a riveted socket at one end, made to receive a bone or bison-horn hairpin (fig. 16). One complete specimen is in the form of a curving feather notched on one side, another is in the shape of a key-sided mace, and a third is in the form of a bilobed arrow.²⁸ All three forms are immediately recognizable as closely identified with elite burials at Etowah and related sites. Although we are not aware of any detailed stylistic study of these artifact forms, the Moundville hair ornaments seem to us to conform stylistically to published examples from Etowah.²⁹ At the Moundville-related Lubbock site has been found a sheet copper plate bearing an embossed falcon that is unquestionably realized in the "Etowah copper style" as named by Philip Phillips and James Brown. In fact an exact duplicate is known from northern Georgia.³⁰ There is, in sum, evidence of an important copper connection between Moundville and certain eastern sites, including Etowah, that previously has been



underappreciated. Many of the artifacts in Moundville's copper inventory were probably fabricated in that area.

Stone Effigy Pipes

Moundville has yielded an array of massive effigy pipes made of stone, one of the biggest assemblages of such pipes in the Mississippian world. These pipes depict both animal and human forms in the round. They typically have two conically drilled holes connected by a narrow passage: a bowl in the top to contain the substance (presumably tobacco) being smoked, and a hole in the side to receive a stem. Four of these pipes are examples of the Bellaire style.³¹ As is typical of the style, they depict a piasa—a supernatural being that combines the features of a cat, a snake, and a bird, and sometimes a human or a deer.³² The Moundville specimens have a distinctly feline head and body and an unusually long, snakelike tail that runs up the creature's back and curls around the pipe's bowl (fig. 17).³³ Ethnographic and folkloric evidence leaves little doubt that this being was the "Great Serpent," a denizen of the Beneath World in the Mississippian cosmos.³⁴ All four of these pipes are made of a cream-colored limestone, which, based on distinctive fossils visible in the surface, has been identified as a type called Glendon limestone. Large outcrops of this rock occur near Vicksburg, Mississippi. Based on geological, stylistic, and distributional evidence, a strong case can be made that the Glendon limestone pipes were made in the lower Mississippi valley and imported to Moundville.³⁵

Another effigy pipe worthy of note is made of red flint clay and shows a squatting man with no clothing.³⁶ The raw material has been mineralogically linked to sources in eastern Missouri, and the pipe is of a style believed to have been made during the twelfth century in or near Cahokia (see the essay by Kent Reilly in this volume).³⁷ Like the others just discussed, this pipe is unquestionably an import.

Stone Effigy Bowls

Items in this category are rare, but they include two of the best known and most beautifully crafted objects at

Moundville. Based on their shape and decoration, they seem to be elaborated versions of the ceramic effigy bowls that are relatively abundant at Moundville. They may even have been used for similar purposes. A clue as to what these purposes may have been comes from the journal of Paul du Ru, a French Jesuit who traveled to Louisiana in 1700. Describing the temple in a Taensa village, he wrote:

At the door of this temple one sees only elders lamenting and shouting, cantors praying, people bearing offerings, and all with an extraordinary orderliness and restraint. Among other things there are six large wooden bowls with handles, of which one represents the tail of a swan and the other the neck, which are filled with [maize] flour and carried solemnly to the temple. The Athenian virgins did not carry their baskets of flowers to the temple of Juno with greater dignity.³⁸

Except for the material, his description of the bowls in which offerings were made fits well the stone effigy bowls from Moundville.

First and foremost is a spectacular vessel (fig. 18), carved from a massive piece of dark green, metamorphosed diorite, which the excavator called "a triumph of aboriginal endeavor, the 'Portland vase' of prehistoric art in the United States."³⁹ The object so praised is a very large hemispherical bowl, some 30 cm in diameter and 16.5 cm high (11¼ × 6½ in.), decorated with a band of incised parallel lines just below the lip—the same design that is usually found on ceramic effigy bowls. Rising another 12 cm above the rim on one side is the gracefully curving neck and head of a creature that was originally identified as a wood duck. Superficially, the head does indeed resemble that of a duck, but a closer examination in light of current understandings of Mississippian iconography leads to a very different conclusion regarding the creature's identity:

The neck is serpentine and of a length far out of proportion to that of any actual duck. This neck, moreover, is crosshatched and bears a trilobate motif on the back, not to be found on any living bird. In Braden style art the trilobate motif has snake associations. The design surrounding the eyes is teardrop shaped. This combination of details, along with the crest of the bird, align it strongly with the amphisbaena, a double-ended knotted snake monster in Classic Braden style engraved shell art at the Spiro site. We suspect . . . that the artisan of the diorite bowl intended not an ordinary wood duck, but rather a monstrous supernatural, one partaking of both snake and bird in its cognized form.⁴⁰

The geological source of this metamorphosed diorite is still unknown, but it could be somewhere in the southern Appalachian Mountains. At this point we are unwilling to say whether the artifact was locally made or imported.

A companion to the stone vessel just described is another large bowl, 23 cm in diameter and 10 cm

Fig. 17 Piasa effigy pipe, Bellaire style, Alabama, Tuscaloosa and Hale counties, Moundville, A.D. 1300–1500, limestone, h. 10.2 cm; Tennessee State Museum, Nashville, Gates P. Thruston Collection of Vanderbilt University.



Fig. 18 Bowl with serpent/bird effigy, Alabama, Tuscaloosa and Hale counties, Moundville, north of Mound R, A.D. 1250–1500; altered diorite, h. 16.5, diam. 30 cm, Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, D.C. Cat. no. 160.

high (9 × 4 in.), that also portrays a subject with avian features (figs. 19–20).⁴¹ On this piece the neck emerges from the side of the rim and curves horizontally an eighth of the way around the circumference, where the tip of the beak meets the rim once again. The vessel's exterior is incised with lines showing feathers, wings, and talons in the round. Lines on the head and below the neck of the creature suggest the fleshy wattle and feathered "beard" of a wild turkey. But it also has features—an unusually long neck, two trilobate elements (incised on the neck), and the concentric semi-circles (incised on the legs)—that iconographically mark serpents.⁴² In other words, this bird can only be a supernatural one. The raw material is a limestone very different from the Glendon limestone often seen in the effigy pipes, and its source is unknown.

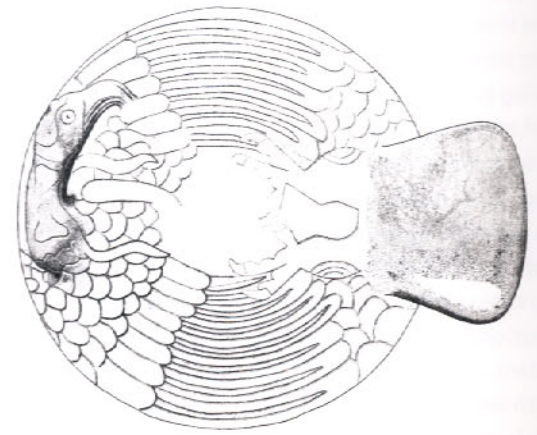
Marine Shell Ornaments and Cups

In contrast to other Mississippian centers, the medium of engraved marine shell was of only minor importance in Moundville's artistic repertoire. Well-appointed, elite burials at the site, while rich in copper, tend to lack engraved shell artifacts. That is not to say that marine shell per se is rare at Moundville, as strands of simple marine shell beads are common accompaniments of elite burials. As for engraved shell art, however, there are on record only eight shell gorgets and three shell cup fragments, among the 3,022 documented burials from the site.⁴³ Despite their relative infrequency, those gorgets and cup fragments that do occur at Moundville

are of much interest, because they exhibit a variety of styles having external connections.

The shells themselves originated in the Gulf of Mexico, but, just as with copper, knowing the source of the material tells us little about where these artifacts were crafted, as raw shell circulated widely across the Southeast and was worked in many places. Nevertheless, it can safely be said that the majority of such artifacts at Moundville are nonlocal. This is most clearly the case with the engraved shell cup fragments, all three of which have stylistic counterparts at the distant Spiro site in the west.⁴⁴ The best example of these shell cups is a fragment showing portions of at least two elaborately dressed individuals.⁴⁵ The style of depiction is unmistakably Classic Braden as designated by James Brown (see his essay in this volume), a style indigenous to the central Mississippi valley and one elsewhere dated considerably earlier than the context of the find at Moundville.⁴⁶

Engraved shell gorgets from Moundville are a highly diverse lot from the standpoint of style and subject matter. Some are obvious examples of documented styles having centers of distribution elsewhere, most prominently the central Tombigbee River valley to the west and the middle Tennessee area to the north.⁴⁷ A striking gorget found by Clarence B. Moore in 1905 depicts a supernatural piasa, in this case part panther and part human, with perhaps some bird and serpent components as well (fig. 21).⁴⁸ In this piece, while the style is unrecognizable, its foreign origin is nonetheless



style is unrecognizable, its foreign origin is nonetheless apparent. The subject matter, for one thing, is patently non-Moundvillian, being much more at home in the Mississippi valley. Human-animal composites in general are not among the subjects of local Moundville art. The depiction of the panther is otherwise known only in the stone Bellaire-style pipes that are independently sourced as nonlocal. The details of the depiction reinforce this assessment. At the hip of the figure is the object known as the "bellows-shaped apron" in the literature; at the neck is a whelk columella pendant, also a staple Mississippian image duplicated in actual costumery at other sites. Neither subject is known at Moundville, however, other than in this unique piece.

STYLES AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

Now that we have reviewed the various categories of objects found at Moundville, it remains for us to view this assemblage in broader perspective. Let us begin by sorting out the objects that we believe to be nonlocal. Perhaps the clearest examples are the Bellaire-style pipes, almost certainly made in the lower Mississippi valley, and the flint clay human-effigy pipe, probably crafted in or near Cahokia. Other likely imports include some (but not all) of the polychrome painted pots, and a great variety of items made of copper and shell that tend to be exceptional at Moundville but have close stylistic counterparts in other regions.

Once the "clutter" of these nonlocal items is stripped away, we are left with a numerically larger, but stylistically more coherent group of items that were almost certainly made locally, in or near Moundville. It would be incorrect to say that these items constitute a single style. Rather, we recognize several related styles, which are manifested in different kinds of objects. The best known of these local styles is the Hemphill style of engraved pottery. Many of these pots show considerable wear, as though they were used for a long time before being broken or buried.⁵⁰ It is reasonable to infer that they were used in ritual; whether they were also used as domestic serving vessels is still unclear. When buried as offerings, such pots are not confined to elite graves or cemeteries, but are found in seemingly ordinary



graves in all parts of the Moundville site.⁵⁰ Although Hemphill style pots and sherds are concentrated at Moundville, they are not confined to this major site. They have also been found at a number of outlying sites, including small farmsteads.⁵¹ We infer from these facts that Hemphill was a "public" style, which was accessible to, and used by, a broad cross section of Moundville society.

A second category of local items—copper gorgets and pendants, stone gorgets, stone palettes, painted pottery, and stone bowls—had distributions that were much more limited and were probably used mainly by the society's elite. These comprise what we call the "restricted" sphere of Moundville art. The pendants and gorgets in particular show a remarkable homogeneity in style, so much so that we suspect they were emblematic of a particular social status or sodality, such as a dance or medicine society. The palettes, painted pots, and stone bowls, on the other hand, likely had different meanings and uses. We suggest that these items, together with the imported massive effigy pipes, were ritual paraphernalia—objects used in ceremonies and personal ritual, only by select practitioners who had the necessary knowledge and training.

Taking an even broader view, we also see a thematic unity that crosscuts the "public" and "restricted"

Fig. 19 Bowl with serpent/bird effigy; Alabama, Tuscaloosa and Hale counties, Moundville, south of Mound D, A.D. 1250–1500; limestone, h. 10, diam. 23 cm; Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, D.C., no. 17/0020.

Fig. 20 Drawing of the incising on the underside of the limestone bowl shown in fig. 19; from Moore 1907, fig. 79.

Fig. 21 Engraved shell gorget with piassa; Alabama, Tuscaloosa and Hale counties, Moundville, northeast of Mound C, A.D. 1250–1500; marine shell, diam. 7.6 cm; Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, D.C., no. 17/1042.

is manifested by a strong predominance of motifs and themes that have meanings connected with death and the Beneath World.⁵² Specifically, we point to the following patterns: the dominance of the swastika, a symbol associated with the underworld, as the central motif on the local pendants and gorgets made of copper and stone; the frequent appearance of the hand motif, which was seen by Indian peoples as a portal to the Path of Souls traversed by the dead; and the frequent appearance of serpents and feline piasas—alternate incarnations of the Great Serpent, widely regarded by Indians in the Eastern Woodlands as master of the Beneath World and protector of the realm of the dead.

This iconographic emphasis fits perfectly with what we know about Moundville's history at the time this art was being made and used: in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Moundville was a necropolis, a place where the dead were brought for burial from throughout the surrounding region. It is reasonable to speculate that at least some of the priests and chiefs who lived at Moundville had a special connection with the Beneath World. It is also possible that Moundville itself may have been seen as a propitious point of entry to the Path of Souls, which would explain the iconographic emphasis on the hand motif. In either case, such beliefs would have provided powerful ideological support for the social and political power wielded by Moundville's elite residents.

It is interesting to note that depictions of the Great Serpent differ consistently between the public and the restricted spheres at Moundville. In the public sphere, which largely consists of Hemphill pottery, the Great Serpent is always shown as a winged rattlesnake, the wing being a locative that iconographically places this being in the sky—the Above World in the Indian cosmos. Depictions of Great Serpent on other artifacts at Moundville are quite different. The creature may be shown in feline or serpentine form—as in the Bellaire pipes and stone palettes, respectively—but it never appears with wings. This was the Great Serpent as it might be encountered in the Beneath World, a potentially dangerous place with which only individuals having the requisite knowledge and spiritual power dared to communicate. It is not surprising, therefore, that these wingless depictions appear exclusively on artifacts in our restricted sphere, that is, on ritual paraphernalia that were probably kept in sacred bundles and used only by ritual specialists or priests—some of whom may also have been Moundville's chiefs.

Also striking is the thematic distinctiveness of Moundville's art when compared to that of other Mississippian centers. For example, human figural representations are plentiful at Spiro and Etowah, but virtually absent at Moundville. Conversely, the hand motif, so prevalent at Moundville, is rare at Spiro and absent at Etowah. Also, unlike elsewhere in the Mississippian world, no shrine figures have ever been found in the Moundville region.⁵³ Taken together, these differences point up the fact that there never existed a single

Southeastern Ceremonial Complex. Rather, the art and iconography of the Mississippian world comprised a set of regional complexes that shared certain themes and motifs, but at the same time retained a distinctiveness that was rooted in local history, as well as the various social and ritual contexts in which the objects were used.

NOTES

Many of the ideas presented in this paper were developed at meetings of the Mississippian Iconographic Workshop at Texas State University in San Marcos. We thank Kent Reilly for inviting us to these meetings and wish to acknowledge the stimulating discussions and ideas prompted by all the participants, but especially those who have taken part in the Moundville working groups: Jim Brown, Jim Garber, Bob Hall, Mary Helms, George Lankford, Shirley Mott, Clay Shultz, and Ken York. We are also grateful to Steve Williams for his comments on an earlier draft and to Pat Galloway for translating the passages from Father du Ru's journal that are quoted herein.

1. Knight and Steponaitis 1998a, pp. 2–6; Steponaitis 1998.

2. Knight 1998.

3. For a history of scholarly work at Moundville, see Peebles et al. 1981 and Knight and Steponaitis 1998a, pp. 1–9. For a collection of articles that summarize current knowledge about the site, see Knight and Steponaitis 1998b.

4. The published chronology for Moundville, based on uncalibrated radiocarbon dates, places the span of each phase as follows: West Jefferson, A.D. 900–1050; Moundville I, 1050–1250; Moundville II, 1250–1400; Moundville III, 1400–1550; and Moundville IV (formerly Alabama River), 1550–1650 (Steponaitis 1983a; Knight and Steponaitis 1998a). Recently, Knight, Konigsberg, and Frankenberg (1999) have revised these spans using more dates, which have been both corrected for isotopic fractionation and calibrated for fluctuations in atmospheric carbon. This more sophisticated analysis has yielded a new set of calendrical spans: West Jefferson, A.D. 1020–1120; Moundville I, 1120–1260; Moundville II, 1260–1400; Moundville III, 1400–1520; and Moundville IV, 1520–1650. In effect, the two earliest phases have been shortened and their starting dates have been moved about a century later than previously estimated, while the three latest phases have been left more or less the same. This revised chronology is the one we have adopted for present purposes.

5. Our historical account is abstracted from a more complete synthesis that has been published elsewhere; see Knight and Steponaitis 1998a, pp. 10–25 and references therein. The calendrical chronology, however, has been altered as explained in the preceding note.

6. Brown 1989.

7. Steponaitis 1983a, pp. 54–63, 317–18.

8. Neff et al. 1991.

9. The parameters of the Hemphill style have recently been worked out in a series of master's theses written under the direction of Vernon J. Knight: see Lacefield 1995, Schatte 1997, and Gillies 1998.

10. Lankford 2005c.

11. Lacefield 1995; Schatte 1997.

12. Neff et al. 1991; cf. Steponaitis, Blackman, and Neff 1996.

13. For illustrations and discussion of these palettes see Moore 1905; Moore 1907; Webb and DeJarnette 1942; Mellown 1976, pp. 9–10; Krebs et al. 1986, pp. 48, 52, 102. Specifically excluded from this category are two artifacts, also made of fine micaceous

sandstone, that are decorated but irregularly shaped. We refer to these as "tablets" and suspect that they are functionally different from the palettes. One is illustrated by Moore (1907, fig. 89, upper left) and the other by Knight (1992, fig. 14).

14. Moore 1905, pp. 145-47; Moore 1907, p. 392.

15. See Whitney, Steponaitis, and Rogers 2002. Sites with abundant debris consisting of this sandstone occur near the outcrops, but this debris cannot as yet be definitively tied to the manufacture of the elaborate palettes found at Moundville (cf. Johnson and Sherard 2000).

16. For example, compare fig. 19 with fig. 25 in Moore 1905.

17. For previously published illustrations and descriptions of the Rattlesnake Disk, see Moore 1905, pp. 134-37; Mellown 1976, p. 9; Krebs et al. 1986, p. 48. The case for interpreting the hand as a portal has been made by Lankford 2005c (see also the essays by George Lankford and Kent Reilly in this volume).

18. For previously published illustrations and descriptions, see Moore 1905, pp. 131-34; Mellown 1976, p. 9.

19. Franke 1998; Knight and Franke 2005.

20. Webb and DeJarnette 1942, p. 58.2; Steponaitis 1983b, p. 138; Knight 2002, p. 116.

21. The Tennessee valley specimen comes from Seven Mile Island (1Lu21) in the Pickwick Basin (Webb and DeJarnette 1942, pl. 58.2). The other example was found at Wildcat Bend (22Lo558) in the central Tombigbee valley (Rucker 1974, pp. 85-86, pl. 4c).

22. Mellown 1976, p. 11; Krebs et al. 1986, p. 50; Marcoux 2000, pp. 57-58, figs. 7-8.

23. Brown 2005c.

24. For examples, see the numerous specimens illustrated in Moore 1905 and Moore 1907.

25. Goad 1978; see also Hurst and Larson 1958, Rapp et al. 2000.

26. Knight 2002, pp. 117-18; Markin 1997; Scarry 1995, p. 83.

27. McGhee-Snow 1999.

28. The first two types are described and illustrated by Moore (1905, pp. 162-63, 198, figs. 45, 105); the bilobed-arrow ornament is unpublished and resides in the collections of the Alabama Museum of Natural History.

29. See the relevant observations and comparisons in Brain and Phillips 1996, pp. 308, 329, 373.

30. Descriptions of and commentary on the Lubbug plate can be found in Jenkins 1982, pp. 130-32, fig. 22; Jenkins and Krause 1986, p. 97, fig. 26c; Brain and Phillips 1996, p. 285. For an extended discussion of the "classic Etowah" copper style, see Phillips and Brown 1978, pp. 185-93. More recently, Brain and Phillips (1996, pp. 368-71) have assigned the Lubbug plate to their "Wulfing style," which also has strong representation at Etowah. The Georgia counterpart of the Lubbug plate was found at the Shinholser site; see M. Williams 1990, fig. 35, pp. 232-33; Williams 1994, fig. 5, p. 189.

31. Brain and Phillips 1996, pp. 384-88.

32. Phillips and Brown 1978, pp. 140-43.

33. See published examples in Thruston 1890, fig. 84; Moore 1905, figs. 1-3, 165, 166; Mellown 1976, p. 12; Krebs et al. 1986, p. 104; Cox 1985, pl. 6; Scarry 1995, fig. 86.

34. Lankford 2005b.

35. Steponaitis and Dockery 1997.

36. Moore 1905, figs. 131-32.

37. Emerson et al. 2003, pp. 300-301.

38. Translated by Patricia K. Galloway from the original manuscript, which resides in the Newberry Library (Ayer MS 262, pp. 64-65). In French, the key passage reads: "*six grandes Ecuelles de bois dont une anse represente la queue d'un cigne et une autre le col qu'on remplit de farine. . .*" The word *ecuelle* typically refers

to a bowl with two handles, and *anse* is simply an alternate spelling of the word *anse*, meaning handle. The one previously published translation of this passage is unsatisfactory, in that it inexplicably leaves out the mention of handles (see du Ru 1934 [1700], p. 42).

39. Moore 1905, p. 238.

40. Knight, Brown, and Lankford 2001, pp. 133-34, internal references omitted.

41. Moore 1907, figs. 76-79.

42. Phillips and Brown 1978, p. 149, 156.

43. Brain and Phillips 1996, p. 296.

44. Brain and Phillips 1996, pp. 298-99.

45. Moore 1905, fig. 34.

46. Brown 2005b.

47. Brain and Phillips 1996, p. 301.

48. Moore 1907, fig. 98.

49. Good examples of Hemphill sherds from mound contexts are documented by Knight (1995, 2002); sherds from off-mound residential areas at Moundville are described by Steponaitis (1983a); and whole vessels from burials are illustrated by Moore (1905, 1907). The heavy wear that sometimes occurs on these vessels is evident in published photographs (e.g., Moore 1907, fig. 60) and has been observed by the authors in the collections they have studied.

50. See, for examples, the descriptions in Moore 1905 and 1907.

51. DeJarnette and Peebles 1970, pp. 98-101; Mistovich 1986, pp. 75-77.

52. These meanings have been persuasively reconstructed in a series of seminal papers by George Lankford. For his arguments concerning the swastika, see Lankford 2002; for the Path of Souls, see Lankford 2005c; for the Great Serpent, see Lankford 2005b. Although the Great Serpent was commonly viewed as master of the underworld (or, in Lankford's terms, the "Beneath World") and protector of the realm of the dead, it is not clear whether these two places were regarded as the same. In many of the stories that Lankford (2005c) cites, the realm of the dead is described as being "in the south," without reference to any specific layer in the Native cosmos. A few stories locate the realm of the dead in the Above World, and at least one places it "beneath the earth-disk," which seems to imply the Beneath World.

53. For comparative material from Spiro and Etowah, see Moorehead 1932a, Phillips and Brown 1978, Brown 1996, and Brain and Phillips 1996. Although the hand motif is absent at Etowah proper, it is engraved on the Wilbanks monolithic axe, which is said to have been found in the same region (Williams 1968, pp. 78-80). Yet here the exception proves the rule, for the engraving on this artifact seems stylistically out of place. As Phillips and Brown put it, the design on this axe "shows Spiroan and Moundville affinities in approximately equal strength, with Etowah—only twenty miles away—scarcely represented" (1978, p. 193). A thorough discussion of Mississippian shrine figures can be found in Brown 2001.