

EDITED BY

*George E. Lankford, F. Kent Reilly III, and James F. Garber*

VISUALIZING THE  
SACRED

*Cosmic Visions, Regionalism, and the Art  
of the Mississippian World*



UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PRESS | AUSTIN

2011

## CHAPTER 7

# Iconography of the Thruston Tablet

Vincas P. Steponaitis, Vernon James Knight, Jr., George E. Lankford,  
Robert V. Sharp, and David H. Dye

The Thruston Tablet—also known as the Rocky Creek Tablet—is among the most interesting and unusual artifacts ever found in the American South. It consists of an irregular limestone slab 19 inches long, 14 inches high, and 1 inch thick (about the size of a cafeteria tray). One side of the tablet (which we think of today as the obverse or front) is covered with engraved designs, consisting of many human forms arranged in multiple scenes. The tablet also has engraved images on the reverse, but these are faint and less distinct. The tablet is clearly Mississippian in age and probably dates to the late thirteenth or early fourteenth centuries AD.

Here we present our recent studies of the tablet's imagery. We begin by reviewing past research on this object and describing our own recent investigations. We then present our analysis of the tablet's iconography, a possible interpretation of its meaning, and a discussion of the tablet's thematic and stylistic relationships.

### Previous Studies

In *The Antiquities of Tennessee and the Adjacent States* (1890) Gates P. Thruston announced the discovery of an intriguing petroglyphic tablet in Sumner County, Tennessee, reportedly found on Rocky Creek, “near the stone graves and mounds of Castalian Springs,” and published a rendering (Fig. 7.1). The location he described is actually now in Trousdale County, just across the Sumner County line.<sup>1</sup>

The tablet was even then in the holdings of the Tennessee Historical Society, having been presented “about twelve years ago” (ca. 1878), and it remains today part of the collection of the Tennessee State Museum in Nashville.<sup>2</sup> A prosperous lawyer, Thruston himself had amassed a sizable collection of Native American objects, principally as supervising archaeologist for



FIGURE 7.1. The first published illustration of the Thruston Tablet (Thruston 1890:Pl. 2).

the excavation in the late 1880s of some 4,000 stone-box graves on the Noel Farm site on Brown's Creek just outside Nashville (Fletcher 1891; Kelly 1985). Although the tablet that has come to bear his name was neither his discovery nor even part of his collection, he devoted considerable attention to it in the study of prehistoric artifacts that he prepared at the request of the Historical Society.

Thruston characterized the tablet as “an ideograph of significance, graven with a steady and skillful hand,” that “probably records or commemorates some important treaty or public or tribal event.” He described in general terms the principal figures and scenes depicted on it: “Indian chiefs, fully equipped with the insignia of office, . . . arrayed in fine apparel.” Yet anyone intrigued by this limestone slab must recognize that Thruston's remarks nonetheless reveal a degree of prescience in his attention to particular elements inscribed on the stone surface:

The dressing of the hair, the remarkable scalloped skirts, the implements used, the waist-bands, the wristlets, the garters, the Indian leggings and moccasins, the necklace and breast-plates, the two banners, the serpent emblem, the tattoo stripes, the ancient pipe—all invest this pictograph with unusual interest. (Thruston 1890:91)

His own interest sufficiently piqued, Thruston applied himself to providing some context for understanding it. For the style of dress, he recalled a reference by A. J. Conant to a vessel from southeast Missouri depicting figures "clad in flowing garments gathered by a belt at the waist and reaching to the knees" (Conant 1879:94, in Thruston 1890:91–92). Thruston regretted the absence of details in the depiction of several of the faces, the hair ornaments, and more, "partly lost by the disintegration of the stone, owing to its great age." Despite its condition, however, he found other points of comparison: the depictions of waist-bands and garters were similar to those on the copper plates from Etowah, and the treatment of hair-knots reminded him not only of the Etowah plates but also of pottery heads and shell gorgets from Tennessee.

The tattoo marks on the faces were also of interest, and Thruston compared them to a head-pot from the St. Francis River area of Arkansas that bears four "strongly marked" lines on its face and to images recorded on other Native American pictographs documented by Garrick Mallery (1886:175). He observed as well that the pipe being smoked in the scene at the bottom of the tablet could be readily compared to one shown in his own book, a stone pipe also from Sumner County (Thruston 1890:208, Fig. 113). Finally, he addressed what he took to be three shields or banners: two on the primary side of the stone, the third on the reverse. What he took to be a "double serpent emblem" on one shield was thought perhaps to be "the badge or totem of the tribe, clan, or family that occupied the extensive earth-works at Castalian Springs . . . near where the stone was found" (Thruston 1890:96). He posited that such an emblem was a favorite of "the Stone Grave race of Tennessee" and a common element on local shell gorgets, just as the "circles or sun symbols" that appear on the figures and at the top of the stone are the most frequent design on gorgets found near Nashville. In summary, although he regretted the partial disintegration of some surface features, he remained impressed by its content: "We doubt whether any inscribed stone of more archaeological value has been discovered among the prehistoric remains of the Mississippi valley" (Thruston 1890:97).

In 1891 William H. Holmes published his own rendering of the Thruston Tablet, which was not based on Thruston's line drawing and differed from it in numerous details of major and minor significance (Fig. 7.2). From the shape of the stone itself to the position of principal figures with respect to each other to the inclusion of elements entirely missing from Thruston's

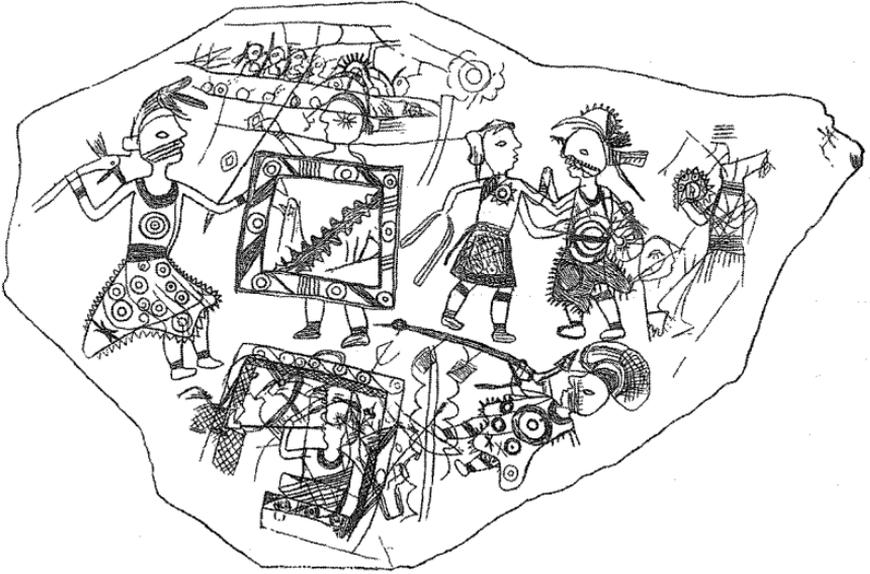


FIGURE 7.2. William H. Holmes's drawing of the Thruston Tablet (Holmes 1891:Pl. 1).

version, Holmes's treatment was both bolder in its delineation of these principal figures and subtler in the care with which ambiguous or obscure elements were captured. In fact, he presented a richer and more complex object overall. Nonetheless, the stone was not without its flaws:

The shape is unsymmetric and the outlines uneven, portions having been broken away in recent times. Both sides have been well covered with engravings, but the reverse side has been subjected to more active weathering and retains but imperfect traces of the devices.

(Holmes 1891:161)

But from his examination of it Holmes brought new information to the fore: "In a few cases parts of the costume were painted red, the color being now barely traceable." He also suggested that part of the complexity of the stone, part of the difficulty of rendering it, resulted from its use as a palimpsest:

The engraving appears to have been done at somewhat distinct periods, as indicated by differences in the degree of weathering of lines

within the same space. The more recently executed figures have been drawn over the earlier, resulting in places in great confusion. (Holmes 1891:161)

In attending to his basic description of what is visible, Holmes stated that, contrary to Thruston's interpretation of "friendly salutation," the four standing figures may actually have been engaged in a "warlike" encounter or at least a "mock contest" (Holmes 1891:162). Like Thruston, he placed great importance on the figures' costumes and accoutrements, in particular their headdresses of "knotted hair . . . plumes, and . . . lofty crests" and their skirts, "plain, scalloped, or fringed, and . . . decorated . . . with circles or scroll-work" (Holmes 1891:162-163). He noted their wrist-bands, anklets, moccasins, and gorgets as well as their tattoos and the "serrate band" that ornaments the large shield. But "as to the significance of the various devices upon the costumes and weapons, it is perhaps useless to speculate" (Holmes 1891:163).

Holmes took pains to describe some of the ambiguous, obscure, or underlying elements, among them the scene depicted in the upper left corner of the stone (where he detected rows of human heads, "each roundish figure [with] a suggestion of plumes"), the "delineation of the sun," roughly above the third of the four principal standing figures, and, in the lower part of the stone, "traces of at least five figures occupying parts of the space in common" (Holmes 1891:163). He noted the resemblance between the design of the enclosure in which one figure sits and that of the shield held by the figure above. Although somewhat puzzled by what the sixth figure is grasping ("a weapon, perhaps"), he remarked that this personage's headdress was distinctive.

Finally, on this face of the tablet, Holmes described what he believed to be, over to the right among the "confused and partly obliterated figures and parts of figures," a leg, the "most recent" of the images inscribed on the stone in this area. As to the reverse side of the tablet, Holmes described the elements simply: a figure with a bow and arrow and a figure seated within an enclosure holding "a weapon, rattle, or wand in the left hand" (Holmes 1891:164). He remained uncertain whether these figures were meant to be understood together or separately and concluded that "the significance, if there is any significance, of all or of any one must remain obscure." Yet "the differences in costume and markings are pronounced, but not so pronounced that all may not have pertained to one tribe" (Holmes 1891:164). He concluded with

the statement that the stone's "authenticity has not been questioned," and diminishing the merits of his own "rude sketch," he awaited the publication of an "elaborate illustration" of the tablet, forthcoming from Garrick Mallery of the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of Ethnology.<sup>3</sup>

Mallery's contribution to the study of the Thruston Tablet proved to be minimal, however, except in regard to the quality of the reproduction he provided in the Bureau of American Ethnology's Tenth Annual Report, the first published photograph of the object (Fig. 7.3). This photograph of the primary face of the stone did capture some of the surface blemishes that bothered both Thruston and Holmes, while successfully rendering the major features—as well as extraneous marks of pitting, scratching, and spalling and exfoliation—with great fidelity. He provided no commentary other than an extended quotation of Thruston's earlier description (Mallery 1893:733–734).<sup>4</sup>

A much more extensive analysis of the tablet was undertaken by William Myer (1928), Tennessee's first professional archaeologist. Based on Holmes's drawing, Myer interpreted the tablet as a storyboard: "the record of a war between the prehistoric Indians at Castalian Springs and some other band."

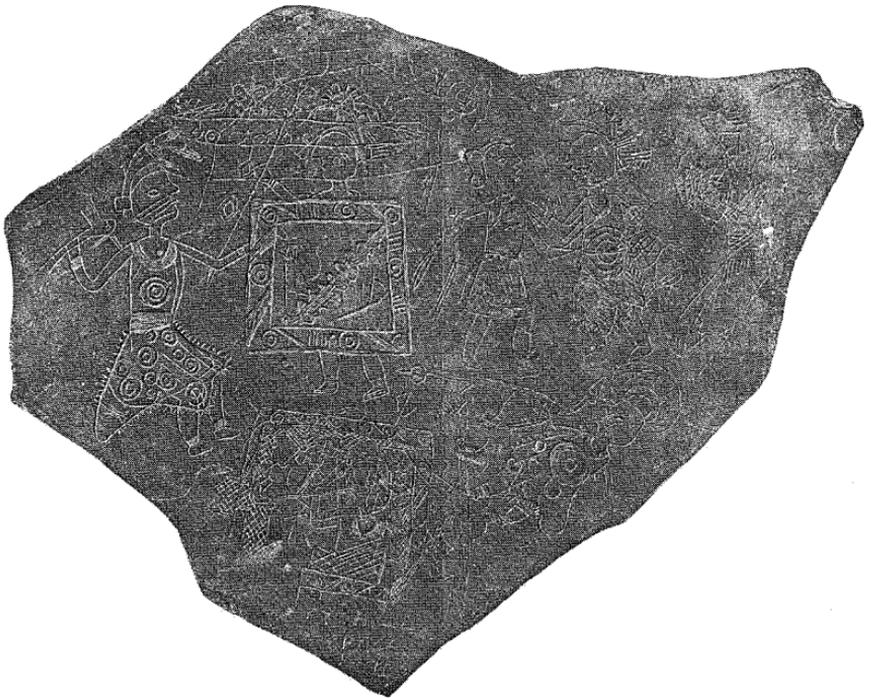


FIGURE 7.3. The first published photograph of the Thruston Tablet (Mallery 1893:Pl. 51).

He discussed the Thruston Tablet alongside the Castalian Springs Tablet, another engraved limestone slab that he had published some years earlier (Myer 1917:100). He also compared its designs to those on pottery and shell artifacts found elsewhere in the Cumberland River basin.<sup>5</sup>

Significantly, Myer offered a more detailed description of the imagery on the reverse face, previously mentioned by Holmes:

About all that can be made out with any reasonable certainty is the nearly nude figure, with possibly a trace of a breech cloth . . . He holds an undrawn bow and an unplaced arrow in his left hand. A figure can also be seen, seated, either in a building or on a mat . . . He appears to hold something like a string of wampum or a rattle in his left hand. The mat or house has similar decorations to those on the border of the shield and on the house on the opposite side of the tablet. (Myer 1928:104)

He explicitly referred to a figure illustrating this panel, but regrettably this figure was not included in the printed article.

The Thruston Tablet has been reproduced and studied several times since Myer (Parker 1949; Fundaburk and Foreman 1957:Pl. 56; Verrill and Keeler 1961; Keeler and Verrill 1962; Phillips and Brown 1978:181–182, Fig. 253; Drooker 1992:Fig. 18), but, surprisingly, the images upon which some of the later examinations were based were greatly inferior in quality to those of Holmes and Mallery. Moreover, several of these later studies were handicapped by the very lack of visual information provided by Holmes's and Mallery's reproductions.

Malcolm Parker's (1949) study in *Tennessee Archaeologist* is a case in point. Parker, an amateur archaeologist, was aware of Thruston's description of the tablet but not of those by Holmes, Mallery, and Myer. He published photographs of the obverse and—for the first time—the reverse sides (Fig. 7.4). Yet the engraving was so hard to see in these photographs that the journal's editor (T. M. N. Lewis) highlighted the lines on the photographs with white ink. Despite Parker's belief that "accuracy in following the original engravings can be regarded as fairly reliable" (Parker 1949:14), elements are missing from Parker's reproduction that were visible in both Holmes and Mallery and that are still visible on the face of the stone today. In addition, a comparison with Holmes and Mallery shows that many of the inked lines are at best only an

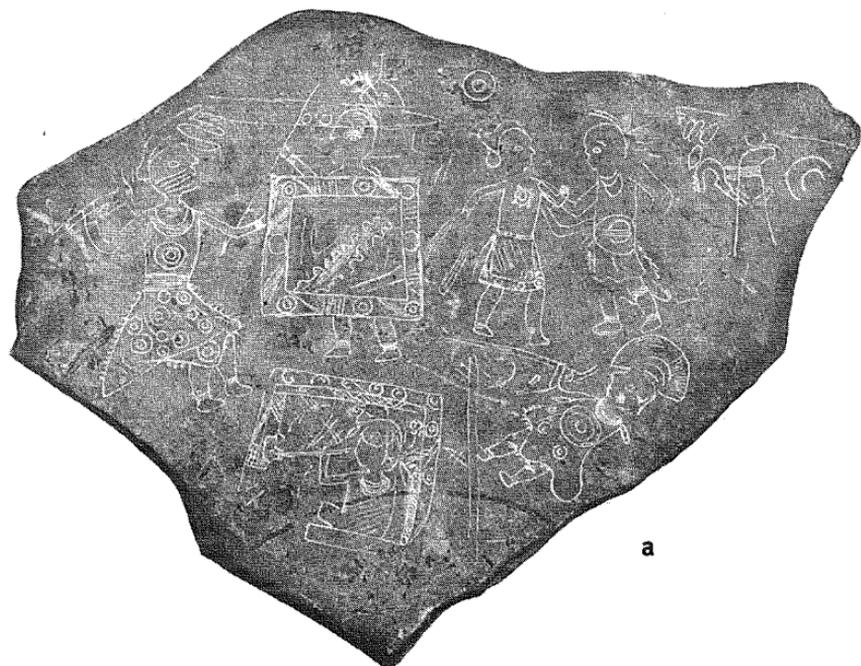
approximation of the underlying designs.<sup>6</sup> Parker attempted at the end of his brief study to explain the presence of initials (“H S”) that appear at the bottom of the stone, concluding that they were scratched upon the tablet in 1937 by “a careless W.P.A. worker” charged with cleaning and repairing museum objects. In fact, these initials are visible in Mallery’s 1893 photograph, so Parker’s conclusion was incorrect. Even so, as we shall see presently, the tablet was indeed damaged between Mallery’s and Parker’s times, albeit in a different way.

Fundaburk and Foreman (1957:Pl. 56) relied upon Parker’s illustration of the Thruston Tablet’s obverse panel for their catalog, showing it redone as a line drawing. In their brief caption, the authors cited Thruston but none of the other early descriptions. Because their catalog has been so widely used as a reference, we suspect that this omission has contributed to the general loss of memory regarding the work of Holmes, Mallery, and Myer on the tablet.

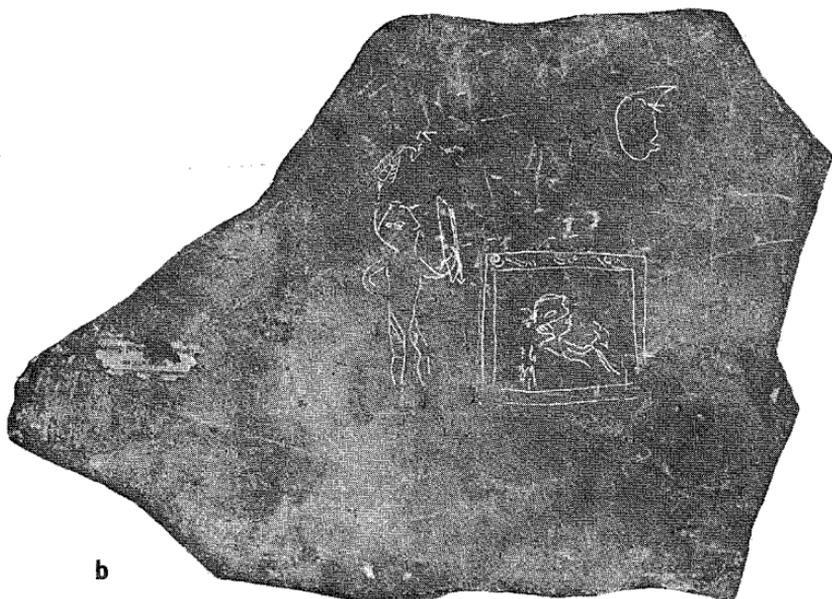
By far the most unusual treatment of the Thruston Tablet appeared in a pair of articles written by Ruth Verrill and Clyde Keeler (Verrill and Keeler 1961; Keeler and Verrill 1962). Initially unaware of the work of Holmes, Myer, and Parker, these authors produced a drawing of the obverse panel traced from Mallery’s photograph. They interpreted the images as portraying a battle fought between local Indians and Vikings. Among the engravings they saw glyphic inscriptions, a Phrygian helmet, and a Viking longboat. By the time of their second article they had found the Holmes and Parker references and had examined the stone firsthand, yet none of this changed their interpretations.<sup>7</sup> They did, however, provide some useful information on the stone’s condition, which echoed, in part, Parker’s earlier remarks:

The soft stone had been badly damaged, mainly by W.P.A. workers, detailed to “clean it” in 1937. It appears as though someone had coated this stone with varnish and then, thinking better of it, had tried to scrape or sand off the varnish, thus removing all traces of some of the important lines shown clearly on the Smithsonian photograph published in 1893. A wide arc was gouged across the lower figures on the stone and in this, as well as elsewhere, some of the varnish remains. (Keeler and Verrill 1962:29)

The “wide arc” they described can be seen in Parker’s earlier photograph (1949:Fig. 1) and is still visible today.



a



b

**FIGURE 7.4.** The Thruston Tablet as illustrated by Parker (after Parker 1949: Figs. 1-2): (a) obverse face; (b) reverse face. The engraved lines are inked on the photograph.

In their monumental study of shell engravings from Spiro, Philip Phillips and James Brown briefly discussed the Thruston Tablet, making reference to an illustration redrawn from Parker's inked photographs (Phillips and Brown 1978:181–182, Fig. 235). After mentioning the possibility that the tablet had been altered, they expressed doubts about the “stylistic purity” of the incised images—not realizing that much of the problem was due to the poor quality of Parker's depictions. Even so, their overall assessment was prescient:

Possibly this accounts for the little there is to be said about Spiro connections from the standpoint of style. On the other hand, a glance at these drawings will sufficiently convey the amount of exegesis that would be required for iconographic comparisons with Spiro. A whole chapter could easily be devoted to the subject, but this is not our primary concern. (Phillips and Brown 1978:182)

The tablet's thematic connections with Spiro engravings will indeed be considered in a later section of this chapter.

One additional mention of the Thruston Tablet worth noting was in a study of Mississippian textiles from Wickliffe by Penelope Drooker (1992:77, Fig. 18). Relying on Holmes's early drawing, she describes the garments worn by the principal figures and concludes that three of these garments with jagged fringes were “more likely to have been made from skins than from cloth.”

### Recent Investigations

Our own work with this tablet began in June 2005, at the Mississippian Iconography Workshop sponsored by Texas State University's Center for the Study of the Arts and Symbolism of Ancient America. Our baseline for this initial work was the drawing of the tablet that Holmes published in 1891. We agreed with Holmes's assessment that the tablet was a palimpsest, so our first task was to separate this palimpsest into its constituent elements. We accomplished this task by manipulating Holmes's drawing with Adobe Photoshop, pulling apart the drawing, line by line, into what became three distinct layers. While this operation was helpful, it also left us with an awareness that certain issues could not be resolved by working with the drawing alone. Hence we made plans to examine the tablet firsthand.

In August 2005 we spent two days at the Tennessee State Museum in

Nashville doing just that. We examined the tablet under raking light, sometimes assisted by a hand lens. In order to record the fine incisions of the Thruston Tablet, we tried several approaches. First, a laser scanner was used, but the image obtained was not sufficiently clear. Next we attempted to produce a "rubbing" of the tablet, but many of the lines were too faint and indistinct to leave a trace on the paper. Finally, we tried old-fashioned photography. We shot the tablet with a medium-format camera (Hasselblad 553ELX) mounted with a Zeiss macro-planar 120 mm lens. A fine-grained film (Kodak Ektachrome ASA 64) was used to record as much detail as possible. With raking light from an overhead soft box we moved the tablet into position in order to record the various undulations in their best possible light. Once the numerous exposures were taken and the film was developed, the transparencies were then scanned with a Nikon Super CoolScan 9000 ED film scanner, which produced digital images with great clarity. We also took numerous photographs with a Nikon D-70 digital camera. The resulting images allowed us to examine the tablet with a high degree of detail. This examination, together with the extensive published record of this artifact, led us to the following conclusions.

1. The tablet has sustained considerable damage since the 1890s. For one thing, the surface has been eroded, especially on high spots on the stone, so that many of the details depicted in Holmes's drawing and clearly visible in the Mallery photograph are now no longer visible. The obverse face has suffered a number of gouges or cuts, including a large arc at the bottom of the obverse face, which were later painted over to make them less visible. Moreover, the lines engraved on both sides of the stone have been highlighted on at least two occasions, when it appears that ink—visible as two distinct colors—was used to fill the fine channels of incising. The ink lies *within* the incised lines; it has not been used to draw images *upon* the tablet. Exactly when this damage and highlighting took place is unknown. Parker's photograph indicates that the gouges and repairs had taken place by 1949, photographs in the museum files show that the inking had occurred by the 1950s, and Keeler and Verrill's account places the surface erosion prior to 1962. Perhaps, as the published accounts suggest, a careless Works Progress Administration worker was at fault, but we found no independent confirmation of this story in the museum's records. Nor did we see any evidence of varnishing and sanding or of fresh incising that might have been done to "improve" the figures after the tablet's discovery (cf. Keeler and Verrill 1962; Phillips

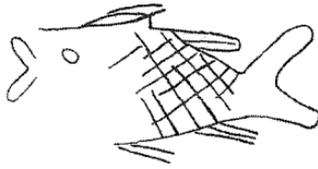
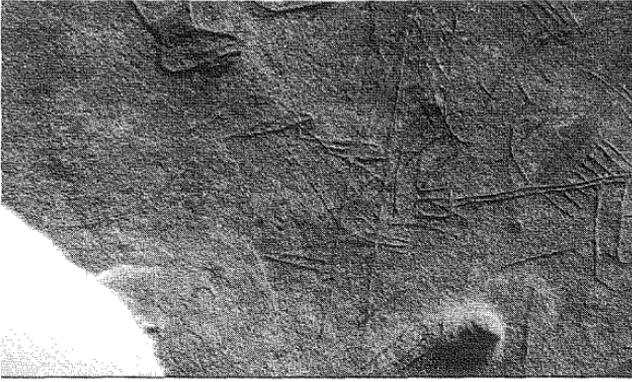
and Brown 1978:182). The damage we saw may well have occurred as a result of either surface exfoliation or careless handling over time. The “varnish” described by Keeler and Verrill appears to be a brownish paint that was selectively applied (sometime prior to 1949) over nicks and gouges on the surface in order to make them less visible.

2. Holmes’s drawing (1891) and Mallery’s photograph (1893) are currently the best depictions of the tablet in print. Parker’s inked photographs (1949) and all subsequent derivative illustrations are far less faithful to the original. Because of the erosion and highlighting just described, it would be impossible to make a fresh drawing from the original that captures all the details visible in those two early illustrations.

3. Despite the quality of the Holmes and Mallery images and the subsequent damage, our recent examination revealed a few details that Holmes missed. The most important of these is the head of a fish on the obverse side. The body and tail of this fish had been drawn by Holmes, but their meaning was enigmatic until we found the missing head. This element is so faint that it is not surprising Holmes missed it. It can only be seen when raking light is applied to the surface at just the right angle (Fig. 7.5). Our examination of the reverse face also revealed many details that were not picked up in Parker’s published photograph.

As a result of these observations, we decided to use a slightly modified version of Holmes’s drawing for our iconographic study of the obverse panel (Fig. 7.6). We recognize that Holmes’s drawing is not perfect. A comparison with Mallery’s photograph clearly indicates that the outline of the stone is not exactly rendered and that the “aspect ratio” of the drawing is slightly compressed vertically. Nevertheless, Holmes was a trained artist and careful observer, and he captured most essential features of the composition with great fidelity. The only things he missed were the head of the fish and a few insignificant lines. He also deliberately omitted some recent additions to the tablet which are irrelevant to our study. Hence, by simply adding the head of the fish, we produced a line drawing that served us well for present purposes. Informed by our observations and taking into account this modification, we then refined our initial separation into layers, using the same image-editing software as before.

The reverse panel was a different story. The only published drawings were based on Parker’s inked photograph, which was a very poor depiction of images on the stone. So we created an entirely new drawing of the reverse



**FIGURE 7.5.** The head of a fish on the obverse face, made visible by raking light: *top*, photograph taken in 2005; *bottom*, line drawing of the fish, framed as in the photograph. This element was missed by Holmes (1891) but discovered in our recent investigation.

panel, based on the photographs and notes we made during our visit to the museum (see Fig. 7.17). This new drawing is far more accurate than anything previously published.

Using these drawings as a baseline, let us now turn to a description and analysis of the tablet's imagery.

### The Obverse Panel

To call one face the “obverse” presupposes information about the original artist’s (or artists’) intent that we simply do not possess. Thus we have arbitrarily assigned this designation to the side that, by virtue of the boldness and clarity of its designs, has historically attracted the most attention. Alternative interpretations are certainly possible. Myer, for one, assumed exactly the opposite. He called the other face the “top side” because it was more eroded and therefore must have been facing upward in its original context (Myer 1928:104).

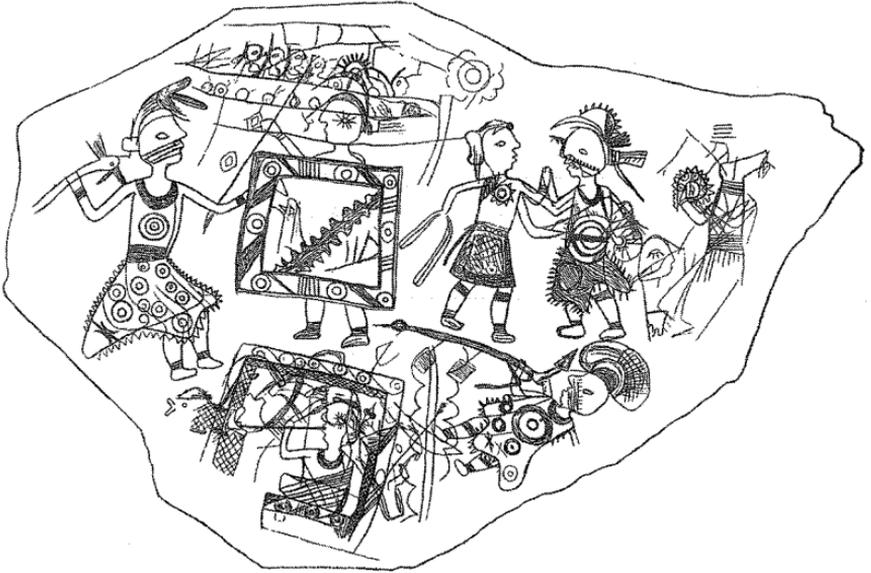


FIGURE 7.6. The obverse panel, based on Holmes (1891) with minor additions.

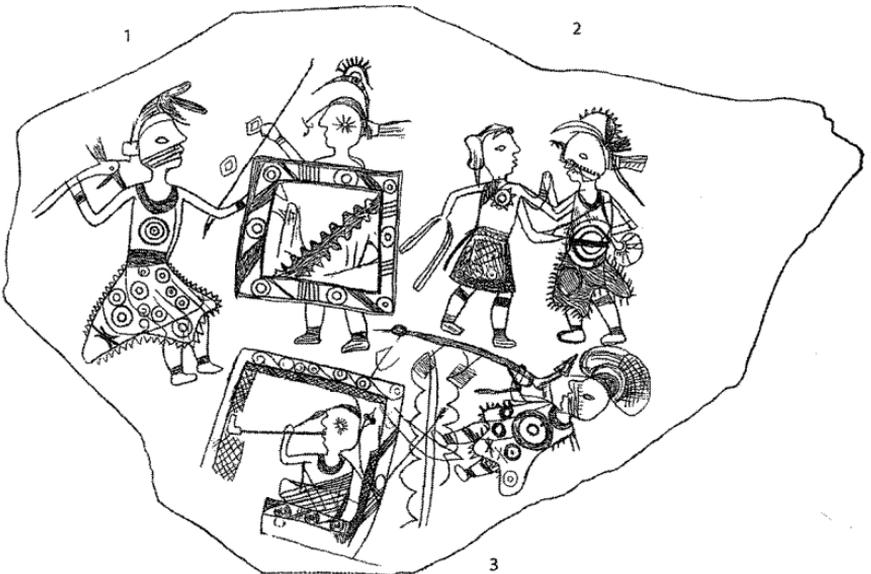


FIGURE 7.7. The Foreground layer on the obverse panel. Numbers along the tablet's margin identify the three Foreground groups.

As mentioned previously, our analysis starts from the premise, first articulated by Holmes (1891:161), that the tablet's obverse panel is a palimpsest—a drawing that consists of distinct superimposed layers. Understanding the tablet's iconography requires that we “unpack” the layers and study each one separately.

For present purposes we recognize at least three layers on the tablet's front. There may be more, as some layers show a clear internal consistency, while others may be palimpsests in their own right. But three is the minimum number that we can confidently recognize based on superposition, execution, and thematic coherence. These serve as the starting point for our description. For convenience, we call these layers the *Foreground*, the *Background*, and the *Leg*.

### THE FOREGROUND

Of all our layers, this one is visually the most prominent and stylistically the most coherent (Fig. 7.7). The boldness of the lines in the Foreground layer, particularly in comparison to the Background, suggests that the former was applied on top of the latter, as if the artist was making sure that the designs were visible against the “noise” of the lines already there. In every instance of overlap between these layers, we carefully examined the lines with a hand lens, looking for direct evidence of superposition. Suffice it to say that the evidence was never definitive, but in a number of cases it suggested that our stratigraphic hypothesis was correct. Needless to say, the erosion of the surface and the inking of the lines made resolving this question much more difficult than it would have been in Holmes's time.

The details of form and execution argue strongly that all the figures comprising this layer were engraved by a single artist. The heads are bulbous, balanced on skinny necks, and have a pronounced occipital bulge. The bridge of the nose connects to a high forehead in a peculiar way. The eyes are almond-shaped, without pupils, and are placed too far to the rear. The artist seems to have an aversion to ears, and there are none of the ear spools so characteristic of Mississippian figural art. The arms are skinny, almost rubbery at the elbows, with little attempt to portray hands. The feet are clumsy lumps.

The Foreground consists of three distinct scenes, each involving two different characters. In fact, the characters in each scene may be the same, but appearing in different guises.



FIGURE 7.8. Three depictions of "Line Face" in the Foreground layer.

One character we call *Line Face*, because of the multiple lines that run from the nose to the back of the jaw, presumably either a tattoo or face paint (Fig. 7.8). *Line Face* always wears shoes without any fill or color. His garment is fringed, with an irregular hemline that suggests it is made of hide (Myer 1928:103; Drooker 1992:77). In one case a texture (perhaps fur) is indicated by hachures. His garment also bears round figures in all three cases. He wears a collar or necklace in all three images and has concentric circles on his chest or stomach. In two cases his garment bears an unusual device shaped roughly like an asterisk. This character thus has six diagnostic traits: horizontal facial marking, light moccasins, a fringed garment with irregular hemline, a necklace, concentric circles on the torso, and an asterisk motif.

The second character we call *Star Eye* (Fig. 7.9). He usually has a rayed eye-surround, although in one case this device seems to be replaced by a rayed gorget worn on the chest. When shoes are visible, they are darkened with hachure and in one case with red pigment, which was first noted by Holmes (1891:163) and traces of which are still present. In each of the scenes on the obverse panel *Star Eye* is associated with a distinctive border of roundels and lines, albeit in different locations. In one case the border appears on a shield; in another it is found on the garment; and in a third it occurs as the border of an enclosure in which *Star Eye* sits. These three motifs—rayed eye, dark shoes, and roundel border—appear to be the diagnostic traits identifying this character.

We recognize the possibility that the figure with the gorget instead of the eye surround may be yet a third character (Fig. 7.9, middle). Indeed, most

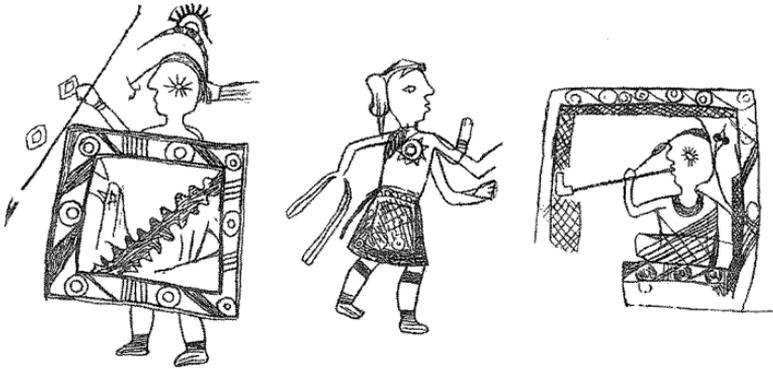


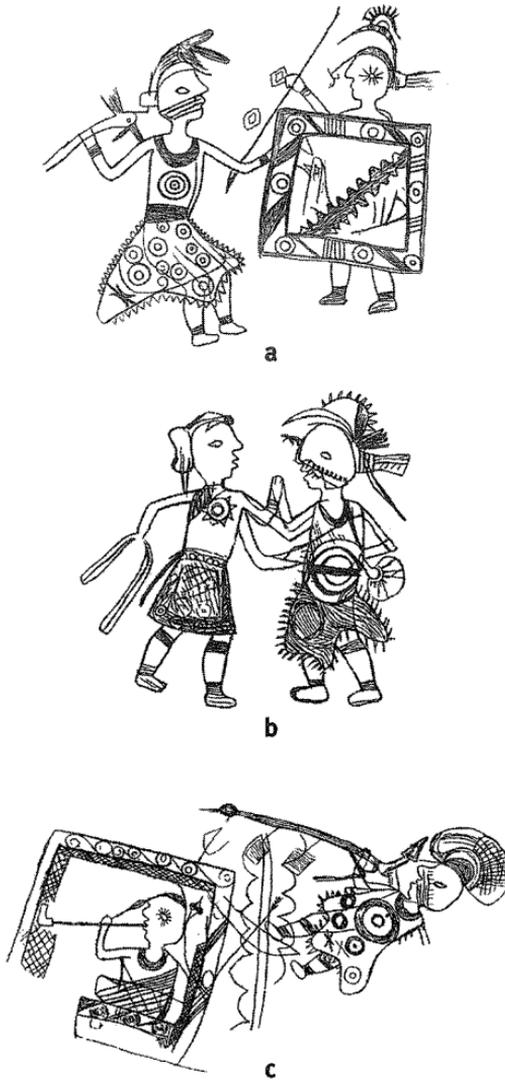
FIGURE 7.9. Three depictions of “Star Eye” in the Foreground layer.

previous commentators have assumed that this figure is female, presumably because of the “skirt” (Thruston 1890:91; Myer 1928:101; Parker 1949:16; Verrill and Keeler 1961; Drooker 1992:77). As Phillips and Brown (1978:95) have noted, however, “the presence or absence of skirts has nothing to do with male and female” in Mississippian art. There are many examples of apparently male figures wearing such kilts in the shell engravings from Spiro (see Phillips and Brown 1978:95–97). Given the absence of definitive female characteristics and the similarities to the other figures (including shell beads at the knees and ankles), we lean toward seeing this figure as being male and another manifestation of Star Eye.

The other motifs present with the two characters are not consistent, and their variability suggests that they are thus part of the story rather than identifiers of the individuals. Some appear only with Star Eye: a shield, a spear, and a sash or belt (held in the hand). Line Face, on the other hand, bears a woodpecker axe, a serpent staff with tassels, and a fan-shaped bustle. Every figure wears a headdress of some kind. Each of the two characters appears once with a feather headdress and once with a raccoon binding. Star Eye wears a bilobed arrow in his hair once, and Line Face appears in a bulbous headdress once. Such variability suggests that the headdresses indicate social roles rather than identity, and they are thus probably part of the story.

For convenience we refer to the three scenes as Foreground Groups 1–3, numbered clockwise from the upper left.

*Foreground Group 1.* The left figure, Line Face, is turned in profile to Star Eye (Fig. 7.10a). His left hand reaches behind the shield edge, and his right



**FIGURE 7.10.** Scenes in the Foreground layer: (a) Foreground Group 1; (b) Foreground Group 2; (c) Foreground Group 3.

holds a woodpecker axe. Star Eye, mostly hidden behind the shield, holds a spear in his right hand.

*Foreground Group 2.* Star Eye is on the left with a sash or belt in his right hand (Fig. 7.10b). He faces Line Face in profile. Line Face's left arm is difficult to characterize, but he may be holding a bustle or rattle in his hand, which is on his side. The two of them appear to be greeting each other, because Star Eye's left hand is raised in a "high-five" with Line Face's right hand, and each

figure has an extra arm in a different position: Star Eye's second left hand is at Line Face's side and Line Face's second right hand is on Star Eye's shoulder. The double arms suggest an indication of motion or multiple locations, a hint of an artistic convention illustrating action.

*Foreground Group 3.* On the left side Star Eye sits facing left in a square enclosure defined by a roundel border, smoking a long pipe held in his right hand (Fig. 7.10c). He wears a bilobed arrow in his hair, a necklace, and a robe gathered around him. Separating him from the figure of Line Face on the right is a petaloid staff with a bow and arrow across it. The figure of Line Face wears a large bulbous headdress and bears a broken staff or spear with dangling objects (which may also be present in Foreground Group 1). He is turned almost on his back away from the staff and Star Eye. That position is unique in the storyboard, and it may have more to do with the remaining amount of space for the design than with any special meaning.

THE BACKGROUND

The Background layer shows much less thematic consistency than the Foreground (Fig. 7.11). To some extent it was defined by process of elimination: once the Foreground and the Leg were removed, this is what was left. So we cannot be certain the scenes comprising the background were drawn at the

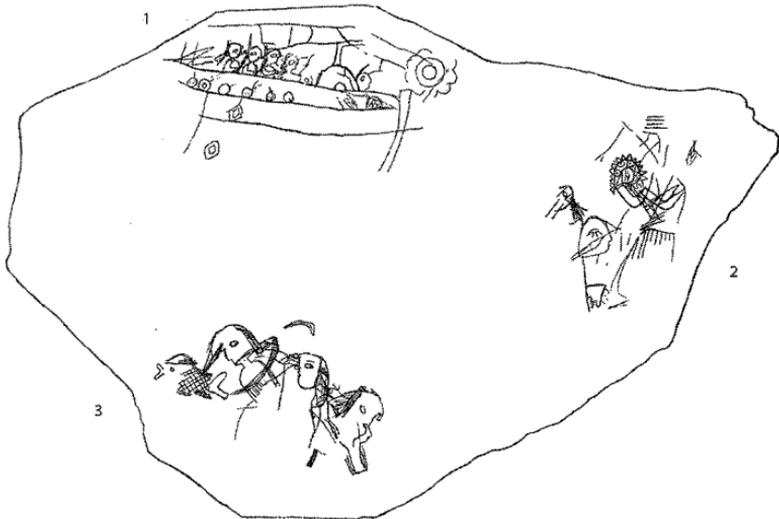
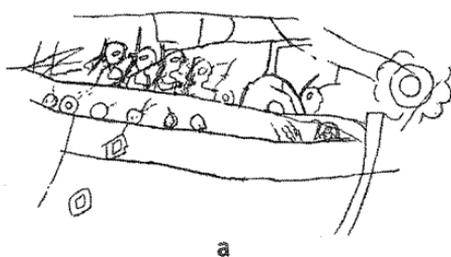


FIGURE 7.11. The Background layer on the obverse panel. Numbers along the tablet's margin identify the three Background groups.



a



b



c

**FIGURE 7.12.** Scenes in the Background layer: (a) Background Group 1, the "Gallery"; (b) Background Group 2; (c) Background Group 3.

same time or that they are thematically related. They do, however, share a certain crudeness in execution (as compared to the Foreground) and are done in a shallower incision (whether by intent or due to erosion is not clear). Moreover, the three scenes do not overlap in a way that would suggest temporal discontinuity. So for now we will treat them as a set, while readily admitting the possibility that they might not be.

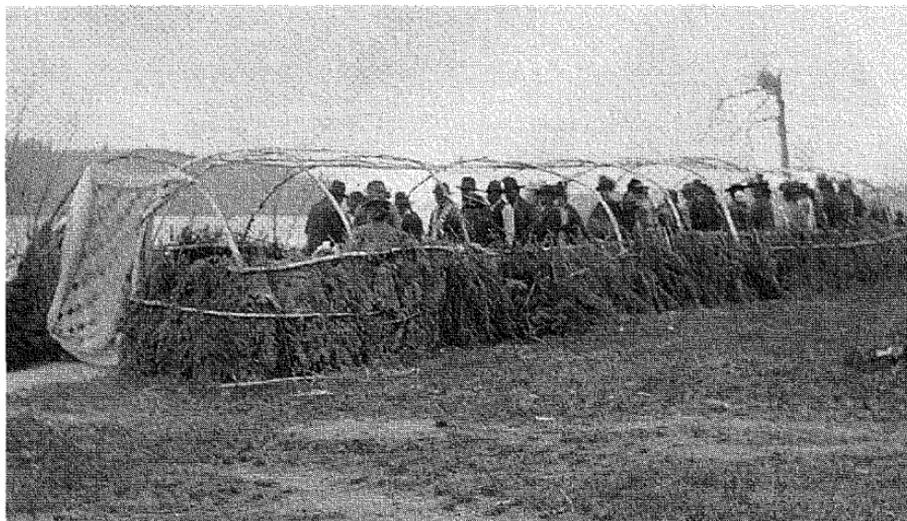
The fact that the middle area of the tablet is blank in regard to background images calls for interpretation, but little can be said. The empty middle may have been intended as a working area for some ritual activity, such as mixing

sacred substances. It may have resulted from the erosion of an earlier engraving, as the stone does show evidence of wear, particularly on the high spots. Yet even if some erosion took place, it seems unlikely to have obliterated all traces of an earlier composition. Thus we are inclined to believe that the blank area was intentional.

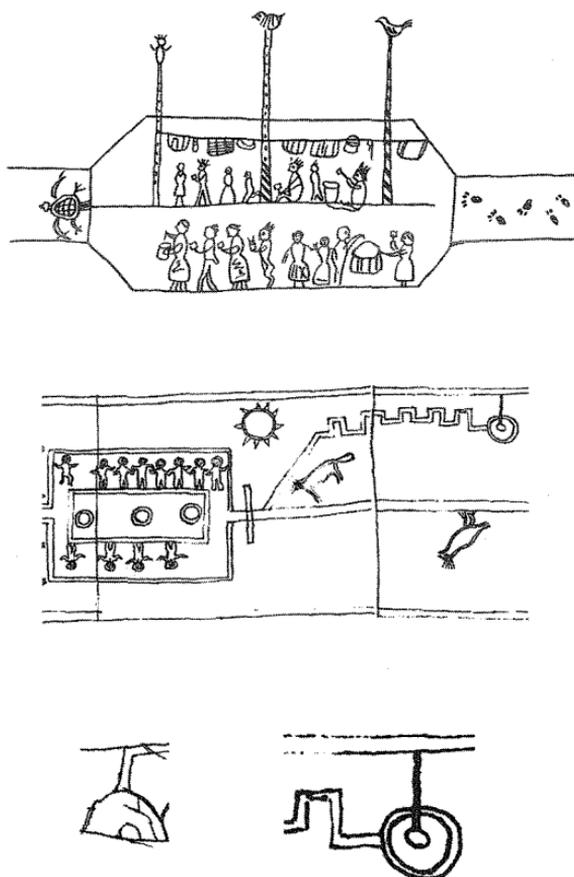
As before, we refer to the three clusters of images as Background Groups 1–3, numbered clockwise from the upper left.

*Background Group 1.* This is the scene we call the “Gallery” (Fig. 7.12a). It depicts a row of people, viewed from the side, with only their upper bodies and heads visible. Their lower bodies are obscured by a horizontal device drawn with parallel lines. Interspersed among the figures is a semicircular object, and above them are two more parallel lines and a petaloid motif.

This scene has previously been interpreted as a Viking longboat (Verrill and Keeler 1961; Keeler and Verrill 1962), an idea that we may safely set aside as being historically implausible. One might also interpret it as a canoe, yet it bears little resemblance to the one definite canoe image we have from Mississippian times (Phillips and Brown 1978:Pl. 160). Moreover, a canoe fails to



**FIGURE 7.13.** An Ojibwa Midé lodge meeting (after Grim 1983:132). The published caption reads: “Exterior view of midewiwin lodge at Elbow lake, White Earth reservation, Minnesota, in 1909. Cedar boughs line the lower four feet of the 80-by-20-foot lodge, which was made of overlapping lodge-pole pine. The ritual processional movement follows the east-west orientation.” The photograph is from the collections of the National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.



**FIGURE 7.14.** Images from Ojibwa Midé sacred scrolls: *top*, a portion of the White Earth Scroll (after Dewdney 1967:Fig. 62); *middle*, a portion of a Ghost Lodge scroll (after Dewdney 1967:Fig. 103); *bottom*, an object from the Gallery (*left*) compared with a detail from the Ghost Lodge scroll (*right*).

account for certain features, such as the dome-shaped structure and the petaloid circle that seem to be part of the same composition.

As an alternative, we would suggest that this may be a depiction of a medicine lodge. Note the similarity to the photograph of a medicine lodge ceremony taken at the turn of the last century in Minnesota (Fig. 7.13). We also see a connection to the famous birch-bark scrolls created as ritual guides for the conduct of Midé ceremonies. Beyond the overall similarity to the drawing, there is at least one detailed parallel. The birchbark symbols are not realistic drawings but pathways, and the semicircular object on the Thruston Tablet does not seem so alien when seen in the light of the Midé symbols

(Fig. 7.14).<sup>8</sup> While this reading is far from certain, it is at least as plausible as the canoe.

*Background Group 2.* The most identifiable elements in this composition are a headless torso and a disembodied head, both apparently human (Fig. 7.12b). The torso wears a kilt and its arms are clearly depicted. In the right hand is an object that is unusual but not unknown in Mississippian art. It has been identified elsewhere as the proboscis of a moth held in the same manner (Knight and Franke 2007). We assigned the disembodied head to the Background but not with great confidence, as it might fit equally well with Foreground Group 2. Differentiating the lines belonging to the kilt and those belonging the Leg (a separate layer described below) was also difficult.

*Background Group 3.* This is a roughly drawn group of three human heads, a fish, and a small headless human body, connected with a band of lines (Fig. 7.12c). Once again, there seems little to say about this strange composition, except that (as we shall discuss presently) it has numerous parallels in Mississippian art. The meaning of this design is unknown.

### THE LEG

This incongruous feature seemingly sits alone, out of scale and out of place relative to the other images on the panel (Fig. 7.15). Holmes was convinced that it was the last element added to the panel. While we could see no direct evidence of it being stratigraphically last, we also saw nothing to contradict Holmes's assertion. Perhaps the matter was clearer in the 1890s, before the

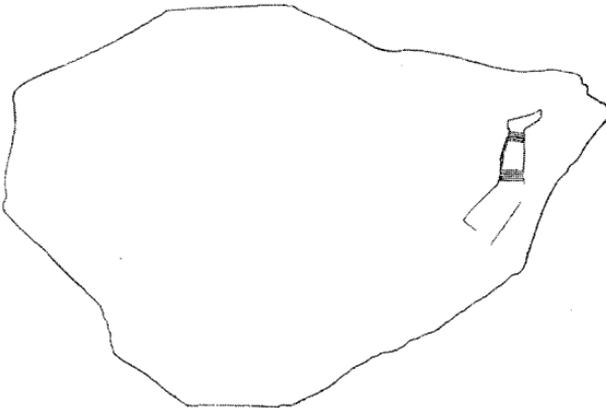


FIGURE 7.15. The Leg on the obverse panel.

tablet's degradation. Be that as it may, we agree with Holmes that this element does not fit comfortably with either the Foreground or the Background and should be treated as a distinct layer. Beyond that, we have little to add.

#### NINETEENTH-CENTURY ADDITIONS

Before ending our description of the obverse face, it is worth noting the presence of some nineteenth-century additions, which can be seen in Mallery's 1893 photograph and are still visible today. These consist of some initials and a date inscribed just below the roundel border in Foreground Group 3 (Fig. 7.16). As best we can determine based on the old published photograph and our recent examination under strongly raking light, the inscription reads as follows:

HS

PM

1877

The "M" in the second line is very indistinct and may be something entirely different. It is also possible that the date is actually "1879," as a faint line closes the loop on the "9," but we are not sure whether that line is deliberate.



**FIGURE 7.16.** Enlargement of the lower portion of Mallery's 1893 photograph, showing recent additions to the obverse face. Note the initials "H S," the letter "P," and the date "1877." A faint "M" is also present to the right of the "P" but cannot be seen in the photograph.



FIGURE 7.17. The reverse panel, redrawn from a photograph made in 2005.

### The Reverse Panel

The scene on the reverse panel portrays an unidentifiable figure on the left with a bow, possibly shooting an arrow above a roundel border containing a second figure (Fig. 7.17). The activity of the figure (Line Face?) inside the border cannot be discerned. Numerous lines appear in the area immediately above the two figures, but they do not seem to form any recognizable designs. In the upper right, where Parker (1949:16) saw the “man in the moon” and Keeler and Verrill (1962:32) discerned the “head of a dead, ray-eyed ‘Viking,’” we also see the possibility of a disembodied head, facing left (just to the right of and silhouetted against Parker’s man in the moon). Perhaps this image is a counterpart to the disembodied leg on the obverse, but it is so crudely incised and surrounded by so many other lines that it is difficult to be sure what it represents.

Stylistic examination makes it appear that the reverse panel should be considered a continuation of the three Foreground scenes on the obverse face. The peculiar ways in which the heads, arms, and feet are depicted (as detailed

previously) argue for a common artist of the Foreground and reverse scenes. The fact that the storyboard narrative may be continued on the reverse side is probably significant, but what does it mean in regard to function that the tablet must be turned over to see the additional image? It seems more productive to focus speculation on the meaning of the storyboard as a whole.

### Possible Mythic Interpretation

A number of previous authors saw the Thruston Tablet as a record of historical events: an “important treaty . . . or tribal event” (Thruston 1890:91), a “war between the prehistoric Indians at Castalian Springs and some other band” (Myer 1928:100), a “historical event of considerable importance” (Parker 1949:16), and last, but not least, a battle between local Indians and marauding Vikings (Verrill and Keeler 1961). We take a different view, based on recent advances in understanding Mississippian imagery (Knight et al. 2001; Reilly and Garber 2007). Specifically, we believe that much of the representational art from this period relates not to historical events but rather to beliefs about the cosmos and the beings that inhabited otherworldly realms. Such imagery often represents “snapshots” of mythic narratives that were widely known throughout eastern North America, some of which survived, perhaps in altered form, into recent times.

As is well known, any attempt to match fourteenth-century images to nineteenth-century texts is faced with almost insurmountable issues, such as the time gap, the radical alteration of the Native societies and belief systems, and the lack of ethnic identifications of archaeological sites. Even so, it seems inadequate to discuss a storyboard without some attempt to delineate a story. In the full recognition that this attempt is speculation, we therefore offer a few reflections on a possible mythic interpretation of the Thruston Tablet storyboard.

Each of the scenes is composed of two males in relation to each other, which immediately suggests a mythic category: the widespread narratives of the Twins. As Paul Radin (1950) pointed out in his discussion of what he termed “the basic myth of the North American Indians,” the Twins myths in the Eastern Woodlands and Plains come in two versions. The most widely distributed one is “Lodge-Boy and Thrown-Away” (LBTA), but there are Eastern examples of another one, “Children of the Sun,” the version common among the Southwestern tribes. Here are some possible episodes that

might be illustrated by the drawings of the tablet scenes. They seem best read in this sequence: Foreground Group 2—Foreground Group 3(—Reverse Panel?)—Foreground Group 1.

*Foreground Group 2.* If the rayed headdress is interpreted as a solar sign, then Line Face on the right may be identified as closely related to the Sun. The figure on the left may also be related to the Sun, as indicated by the rayed ornament on his chest. If the peculiar multiple arm movements (?) can be taken as greeting or caressing activity (Lankford 1984, 1988), then the scene is one of a meeting between the brothers. The contrast in their clothing—a woven kilt and an animal skin—may indicate the cultural difference between them. In most of the LBTA narratives, the opening episode is the story of the separation of the Twins at their birth, with one of them being brought up by animals or water powers. Even in the Children of the Sun version the two boys are frequently portrayed as only half-brothers, one of them being born from water powers. Both forms emphasize the distinction between them, and the opening episode of LBTA makes a point of the wildness of the more powerful brother, underlined by his capture and domestication. Foreground Group 2 appears to capture at least the spirit of the contrast of the Twins as well as the amity between them. One Winnebago Twins narrative portrays the culture-versus-nature theme as a meeting of a well-garbed boy with a naked boy; after the first gives his clothing to the second and restores his own, the two appear almost identical (Dieterle n.d.b).

*Foreground Group 3.* In order to determine the truth of the boys' claim that he is their father, the Sun subjects them to some tests. One of the tests is smoking a pipe, a process that will be lethal if they do not possess adequate power. In a Southwestern telling of the Children of the Sun, the Twins survive the test only by the help of a caterpillar, but the same smoking test appears multiple times among the Winnebago in another myth (Matthews 1897:112; Dieterle n.d.a). On the left side Star Eye sits in an enclosure smoking, while on the right Line Face stands arrayed in a peculiar headdress and holds a broken or forked spear, signs that he has already received symbols of his power.

*Reverse Panel.* Although difficult to read in detail, the roles of Foreground Group 3 appear reversed in this scene. Line Face is now in the enclosure for testing, while his brother stands outside with bow and arrow. The presence of a bow and arrow in both Foreground Group 3 and the reverse panel suggests a possible episode coded in these two scenes: the resuscitation of one deceased

brother by the other during their tests; one popular way of accomplishing this in the narratives is by shooting an arrow over the body of the dead boy.

*Foreground Group 1.* Having survived the tests, the boys have been acknowledged as the Children of the Sun and given weapons befitting their station. Line Face now wields a sacred axe with a woodpecker head and wears a raccoon headdress, while Star Eye now wears the solar headdress originally worn by his brother and bears a spear and shield. It is at this point in the myth, when they are armed with power, that the Twins are charged with their task: to rid the world of the monsters who threaten the existence of human beings.

We offer this speculative reading only as an example of the sort of narrative that probably stands behind the imagery. Nonetheless, it illustrates the kind of search process that needs to be undertaken when the meaning of “storyboard art” is pursued after the structure of the art has been determined, based on empirical examination.

### Comparisons and Chronology

The scenes and their details do not stand alone in Mississippian art but show many similarities with images found across the Mississippian world. Indeed, there are enough parallels from other locations to raise the possibility that the Thruston Tablet is a portrayal of stories, characters, and concepts sufficiently well known to have produced multiple attempts at graphic depiction. Here we present a brief survey of examples to illustrate this point.

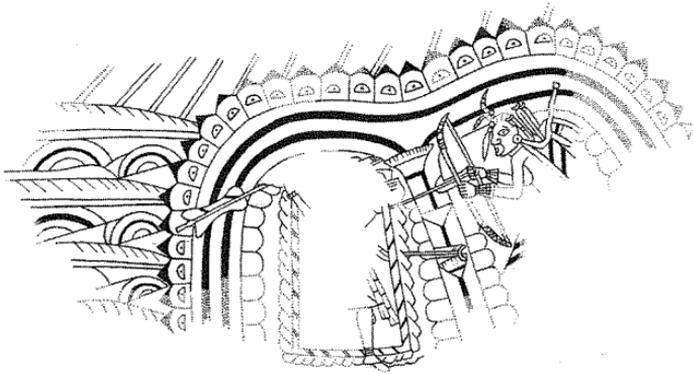
Let us begin with the level of whole compositions or themes (*sensu* Phillips and Brown 1978:104–105):

- An engraved shell from Spiro—the Lightner Cup (Fig. 7.18)—shows a scene that is strikingly parallel to the Thruston Tablet’s Foreground (Phillips and Brown 1978:Pl. 20). There are two figures, differently dressed. One has a woven tunic, while the other has a fringed or skin garment. Note also the fragment of what may be a roundel border across the top. The cup is assigned to the Braden A style. The same contrast in clothing appears on another Spiro cup assigned to Craig A (Phillips and Brown 1984:Pl. 187). There has been little discussion of the Twins mythology in connection with the Spiro art, but the topic seems fruitful, given these parallels with the Thruston Tablet.

- Foreground Group 3 is composed of a figure in an enclosure on the left separated from a figure on the right by a petaloid staff. That same



**FIGURE 7.18.** The Lightner Cup from Spiro, Braden A style (after Phillips and Brown 1978:Pl. 20).



**FIGURE 7.19.** Shell cup from Spiro showing an occupied enclosure, petaloid staff, and figure with bow and arrow, Craig A style (after Phillips and Brown 1984:Pl. 165).

composition, in a quite different style, is found on a shell engraving from Spiro (Fig. 7.19; Phillips and Brown 1984:Pl. 165). Two other engravings from Spiro also depict similar enclosures (Phillips and Brown 1984:Pls. 153, 161). All are Craig A in style.

- The humanlike figure holding a rayed spiral seen in Background Group 2 brings to mind comparable scenes in Hightower-style gorgets from northern Georgia and adjacent parts of Tennessee (Fig. 7.20; Phillips and Brown

1978:Figs. 177 [top row], 232; Power 2004:Fig. 16; for a definition of this style, see Muller 1989:20).

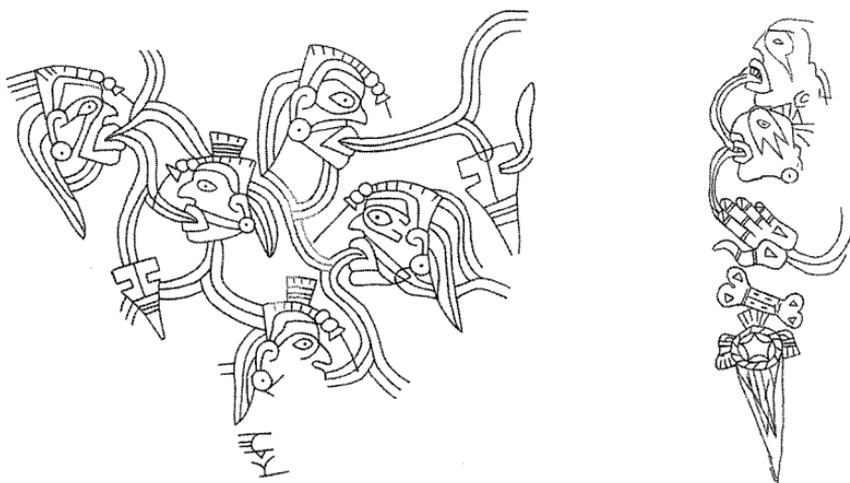
- The interlace of heads, torso, and fish in Background Group 3 also has parallels elsewhere (Fig. 7.21). Similar bands of heads occur on Braden B shells at Spiro (Phillips and Brown 1978:Pls. 58, 60), as do fish (Phillips and Brown 1978:Pl. 90). The small headless figures are a feature of Braden C (Phillips and Brown 1978:Pls. 113, 115, 116). Fish also make appearances on shells decorated in the Craig B style (Phillips and Brown 1984:Pls. 234, 234.1, 325). Another Braden-like band of heads is engraved on a monolithic axe from the Wilbanks site in Georgia (Waring 1968a; Phillips and Brown 1978:193; Dye 2004:Fig. 29).

- The Foreground layer on the Thruston Tablet bears a generic resemblance to the wall painting found at the Gottschall Rockshelter in Wisconsin (Fig. 7.22). The latter shows multiple figures with rayed headdresses together with a single “smoker.” Dieterle (2005) has argued that the Gottschall imagery represents a story of the Twins, although this interpretation remains in dispute (Salzer 1987; Salzer and Rajnovich 2001).



**FIGURE 7.20.** Shell gorget from Etowah showing figure holding a rayed spiral, Hightower style (after Penney 1985:Pl. 134).

• The Leg that constitutes a layer by itself has parallels in ceramic leg effigies from both the Middle Cumberland region and the Central Mississippi Valley (Jones 1876:Fig. 28; Thruston 1890:Fig. 43; Power 2004:Pl. 18; Hathcock 1983:Fig. 321, 1988:Figs. 577, 577a, 577b, 578, 578a, 579, 581). Severed



**FIGURE 7.21.** Interlaced heads from other sites: *left*, shell cup from Spiro, Braden B style (after Phillips and Brown 1978:Pls. 58, 60); *right*, monolithic axe from the Wilbanks site in Georgia (after Waring 1968: Fig. 17).



**FIGURE 7.22.** Wall painting from Gottschall Rockshelter, Wisconsin (after Salzer and Rajnovich 2001:Fig. 23).



body parts are known to have served as war trophies (Dye 2004), and we may speculate that this composition was an allusion to that practice.

At a finer-grained level, elements of clothing and regalia also present some fruitful avenues for comparison:

- The head of Line Face in Foreground Group 1 is adorned with a raccoon binding that juts forward. Such headdresses are commonly depicted in shell gorgets of the Hightower style (see Fig. 7.20) (Willoughby 1932:Fig. 29; Phillips and Brown 1978:Figs. 177–178, 232; Power 2004:Fig. 16). They are also found at Spiro on shell engravings assigned to Craig A (Phillips and Brown 1978:154–155).

- The figures on the right in Foreground Groups 1 and 2 both wear a second type of headdress, which consists of a featherlike element arching forward from a bun at the back of the head and a rayed semicircle on top. A similar rayed element is worn by three of the figures at Gottschall Rockshelter (see Fig. 7.22) (Salzer 1987:Figs. 16, 18, 21; Salzer and Rajnovich 2001:Figs. 24, 25, 29). Minus the rayed semicircle, this headpiece closely resembles the headdress on two of the Wehrle copper-repoussé plates from Spiro, both Braden A in style (Phillips and Brown 1978:191, Figs. 249–250).

- The strange bulbous headdress of Line Face in Foreground Group 3 is replicated in a variety of contexts. At Picture Cave in Missouri two identical figures, the mythical Twins, are shown with this headdress, which has been identified as a “bladder” (Fig. 7.23; Duncan and Diaz-Granados 2000:14–15). The same interpretation has been suggested for a rim-effigy design found in large numbers in the Central Mississippi Valley (Lankford and Dye, personal communication). The mythic reference is to the use of bladders by the father of Lodge-Boy and Thrown-Away to prevent the wild boy from escaping to the waters of the Beneath World. It became an element of ritual costume in one version of the Sun Dance.

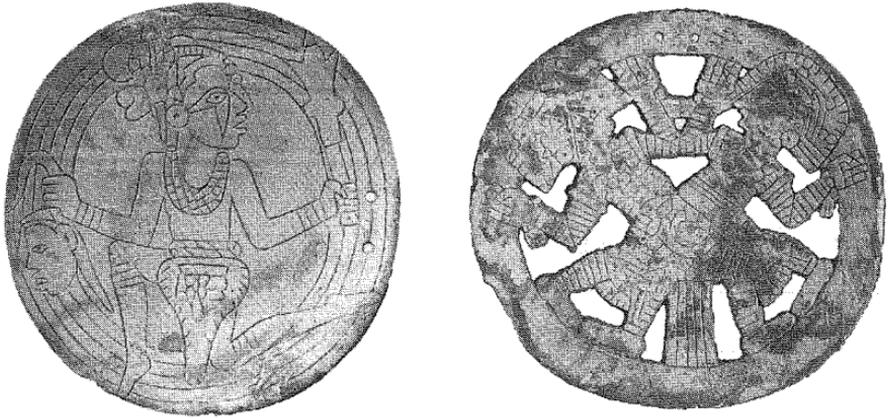
- The smoker in Foreground Group 3 wears a bilobed-arrow hair ornament. Such head ornaments have been found throughout the Mississippian world, either as artifacts (typically made of sheet copper) or as depictions on pottery, shell, copper-repoussé plates, and rock. The individual instances are too numerous to list. For present purposes, suffice it to say that at Spiro the depictions of such headdresses occur on shells assigned to Braden A and Craig B, and bilobed arrows as stand-alone motifs are found in Braden B



**FIGURE 7.23.** Wall painting from Picture Cave, Missouri (after Diaz-Granados and Duncan 2000:Fig. 5.48).

(Phillips and Brown 1978:86, 148). Other Braden-style examples include the Castalian Springs Gorget (Fig. 7.24) and the Rogan Plates from Etowah (Phillips and Brown 1978:Figs. 243–244). Hightower gorgets often show bilobed arrows above the central figure's outstretched arms, not as part of the head-dress (Phillips and Brown 1978:Figs. 177–178). At Moundville the bilobed arrow is found as a stand-alone motif on Hemphill-style pottery (Steponaitis 1983:59).

- Four of the Foreground's figures and the standing figure on the reverse panel all wear skirts that are broadly similar to those commonly seen in Braden and Craig art at Spiro (Phillips and Brown 1978:95–97). Interestingly, the skirt on the reverse panel and perhaps the one worn by Line Face in Foreground Group 1 are of the "divided" type more typical of Braden imagery (Phillips and Brown 1978:Fig. 126). The loose-fitting tunic on Line Face in Foreground Group 3 has no analogs elsewhere so far as we know. The wide necklaces on many of the Foreground figures may be allusions to the twisted, multistrand necklaces worn by Braden figures, including the one on the Castalian Springs Gorget (Fig. 7.24; Phillips and Brown 1978:180).



**FIGURE 7.24.** Shell gorgets from Sumner Co., Tennessee: *left*, Castalian Springs Gorget from the site of the same name, Braden A style (after Dye 2004:Fig. 1); *right*, Cushman Gorget from the Rutherford-Kizer Mounds (also known as Saundersville), Hightower style (after Brown 2004:Fig. 22).

- The fan-shaped object behind Line Face in Foreground 2 is a mystery. Phillips and Brown (1984:Pl. 281) call it a “club,” but not with great confidence. It is also quite rare, although not unique. The two other examples known to us include a Craig C shell from Spiro (Phillips and Brown 1984:Pl. 281) and the Piasa gorget from Moundville, the stylistic affinities of which are not clear (Phillips and Brown 1978:196–197, Fig. 257).

- In Foreground Group 3, Line Face holds a broken staff or spear. Broken staffs, as well as the closely related broken arrows and broken maces, are common in the Spiro collection and seem to be most commonly associated with Braden shells (Phillips and Brown 1978:148–149, 178–179, 1984:Pl. 149). Only a few marginal examples are known from the Craig corpus.

- Finally, the roundel border occurs in a variety of contexts on the Thruston Tablet: on a shield, a skirt, and a rectangular enclosure. Perhaps the closest analog elsewhere shows up in a set of Moundville pottery designs that characterize Moundville Engraved, *var. Cypress* (Fig. 7.25; Steponaitis 1983:Figs. 18a, 55h, 62d). Even the jagged band within the shield of Foreground Group 1 is found in the Moundville design, where it is more competently drafted as a rayed guilloche. Another instance of the roundel border appears on a wooden spider plaque from eastern Tennessee (Fig. 7.25; Fundaburk and Foreman 1957:Pl. 142).<sup>9</sup> We note that the roundel border is made up of segments similar to those in the “striped panel” of a great many

shell engravings from Spiro (Phillips and Brown 1978:155–156). Such panels also appear as vertical dividers in negative-painted designs on ceramics from Angel (Hilgeman 2000:Figs. 5.21, 5.22).

From a stylistic perspective, the Thruston Tablet is unique. Its manner of depicting human figural elements does not conform to or closely resemble any of the currently defined styles in the Mississippian world. Nonetheless, a few commonalities of style and subject matter help with relationships and dating. The bilobed arrow headdress on the smoking figure in Foreground Group 3 is a highly simplified version in which the lobes are drafted as circles close to the central arrow. This unusual form seems to be a rock-art specialty and is found from eastern Missouri to northern Alabama (Diaz-Granados and Duncan 2000:191–192; Henson 1986:Pl. 28). Simplified bilobed forms with plain circular lobes are also found in shell gorgets of the Hightower style from northern Georgia and eastern Tennessee (Phillips and Brown 1978:Figs. 177–178). The simple rendering of the raccoon hindquarters as a headdress element, without internal details, is also shared with Hightower-style gorgets (Phillips and Brown 1978:Figs. 177–178). The nose-lips-mouth-chin profile line of the human head is drafted as a continuous smooth squiggle, with a weak chin and no teeth. This treatment is most similar to heads in Hightower-style shell gorgets. The figures themselves are stout and stiff, shown in



**FIGURE 7.25.** Roundel borders from other sites: *left*, ceramic bottle from Moundville, Moundville Engraved, var. *Cypress*; *right*, wooden plaque from eastern Tennessee (after Mellow 1976:Fig. 2).

three-quarters view with avoidance of severe angles. The torsos are parallel-sided, as in Hightower-style shell engraving and to some degree in Craig. This short list of formal similarities leans primarily to the Hightower style centered to the east and south of the tablet's locality, although there are also hints of a relationship to Craig style shell engraving, whose home is far to the west.

All in all, considering both subject matter and style, we see the Thruston Tablet as having many affinities with Hightower and Braden material and fewer with Hemphill and Craig. Indeed, there is perhaps enough in common with Hightower to suggest a comparable date for the tablet: ca. AD 1250–1350 (King 2004:163; Sullivan 2007).<sup>10</sup> The Thruston Tablet probably represents a yet-unnamed style that, like Hightower and Hemphill, is an eastern offshoot or “branch” of the Late Braden style (Brown 2004:108–109).

### Discussion

In sum, like many scholars before us, we believe the Thruston Tablet is both a palimpsest and a storyboard. We have presented a separation of the palimpsest's layers—done electronically with image-editing software—and a new interpretation of the story represented in one of these layers. We see this story as mythic rather than historical in character and suggest that has to do with the Twins, supernatural heroes whose many exploits, in countless versions, were recounted by Native storytellers across North America. We also have argued that the Thruston Tablet shows strong thematic and stylistic connections to Mississippian imagery over a wide area. So a question remains: what might account for these connections?

One possible clue is found in a comparison of two artifacts: the Castalian Springs Gorget (see Fig. 7.24; Myer 1917:Pl. 7; Brain and Phillips 1996:53; Dye 2004:Fig. 1), which comes from the eponymous site just a few miles from where the tablet was discovered, and the Lightner Cup from Spiro (see Fig. 7.18) (Phillips and Brown 1978:Pl. 20). Phillips and Brown noted the great similarity in the way the figures are drawn in these two artifacts, likely done by the same hand (Phillips and Brown 1978:180–181). In this context it is interesting to note that the Lightner Cup depicts a Twins scene, reminiscent of the themes depicted on the Thruston Tablet. We are not suggesting that the Lightner Cup was engraved at Castalian Springs or that it was done by the same artist who did the Thruston Tablet. Rather, the presence of the Castalian Springs Gorget nearby suggests that the Thruston Tablet's

artist may have had access to the work of the Lightner artist, who was a master of the Braden A or Classic Braden style, which, if Brown (2004) is correct, may have originated in the vicinity of Cahokia. Thus the Lightner artist's work, and the Classic Braden corpus in general, may have provided a canonical model for aspects of the imagery on the Thruston Tablet.

It is also interesting to note that a second well-known shell artifact from Sumner County, the Cushman Gorget (see Fig. 7.24) (Brain and Phillips 1996:51; Brown 2004:Fig. 22), also depicts a possible Twins scene and is engraved in the Hightower style. As with the Lightner Cup, here we see direct evidence of connections with the products of another regional group of artisans, perhaps located in northern Georgia, which also may have provided prototypes for elements of the tablet.

We are also struck by the prevalence of the Twins in the representational art of the Middle Cumberland region. This imagery is seen not only in shell and stone, as we have just discussed, but also in the pottery: Lankford and Dye (2007) have suggested that the "dunce-cap" rim effigies commonly found on bowls in this region are also allusions to the Twins. It may well be that the story cycles involving the Twins had particular importance in the spiritual or political life of the people who lived in this region. This hypothesis does not require that all the artifacts with such imagery be made locally; indeed it is almost certain that the Cushman Gorget was an import. Even if it was made elsewhere, we may speculate that the local people especially sought items from far away that depicted the themes most relevant to them.

These observations also highlight an idea that is becoming ever more widely understood by Mississippian scholars, namely, that there is no single "Southeastern Ceremonial Complex" but rather a series of regional manifestations, each with its own style and thematic emphases. For example, the imagery in this part of Tennessee contrasts strongly with the images at Moundville. At Moundville the Twins are virtually absent (Steponaitis and Knight 2004), but here they are a dominant theme. We hope that this work on the tablet will contribute to delineating some of these regional distinctions in the overall mosaic of Mississippian art.

After more than a century, interpretation of the Thruston Tablet continues to be a work in progress. Our presentation of the imagery and interpretive speculations are obviously not the last word on the subject—and perhaps not even the last word from us. As other aspects of Mississippian art are unraveled and interpreted, they will offer new perspectives for the

understanding of the Thruston imagery. So the tablet remains a touchstone to which researchers will continue to return.

## NOTES

**AUTHORS' ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:** Our interest in this tablet was sparked at the Mississippian Iconography Workshop hosted by Kent Reilly at Texas State University in 2005. Stephen Cox subsequently allowed us to examine the tablet at the Tennessee State Museum in Nashville and provided valuable information from the museum's records; David Andrew and Marvin Stewart also greatly facilitated our research at the museum. Thad Wasklewicz, Monica Mihir, and Marcia Taylor aided in recording data on the tablet. Kevin Smith graciously shared his extensive knowledge of Nashville Basin archaeology throughout our investigations. Tracy Brown provided helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter, and Christopher Rodning kindly provided copies of relevant documents that reside in the Joseph Jones papers at the Tulane University Library. A preliminary version of this chapter was presented at the 2005 meeting of the Southeastern Archaeological Conference in Columbia, South Carolina; a number of those who heard this presentation offered useful advice. We are very grateful to all these individuals for their help. This research was supported in part by a Reynolds Fellowship and a Research and Study Assignment awarded to the first author by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

1. It is worth considering the question of exactly where the tablet was found. In his original description, Thruston (1890:91) simply said the tablet was discovered "on Rocky Creek, in Sumner County." Myer, who knew the area well, later added some more detail: "This interesting, somewhat weather-worn engraved slab of local, gray, fossiliferous, close-grained ordovician limestone, was found in the year 1877 on Rocky creek, in Sumner county, Tennessee, probably near where this creek enters Cumberland river" (Myer 1928:99). And again: "Unfortunately no record was kept of the name of the donor, nor any particulars of its discovery. The only information now obtainable is that it was found on Rocky Creek, probably at the old Indian settlement near the mouth of Canoe Branch, about 3 ½ miles from Castalian Springs" (Myer n.d.:485).

Yet only a few years after the original description Thruston changed his story: "In the same mound group, near Nashville, where the Myer gorget was found, an interesting pictograph in stone was discovered and illustrated by the writer, representing a group of Indian warriors—doubtless mound builders—and showing their dress, implements and general appearance" (Thruston 1897:98). Clearly by this time he believed that the tablet had been found at Castalian Springs itself. Later still, Keeler and Verrill offered some support for this alternative view: "After examining the Thruston Tablet, contact was made by telephone with Mr. Robert T. Quarles who was the son of General Thruston's

best friend. He had known about the Thruston Tablet since boyhood . . . He declared that the stone had been found in the water of the Creek at the site of the great Mound Builder excavation, as Thruston had said, and it does show marks of water erosion. Since there had been but one small mound on Rocky Creek and this had never been disturbed, and since the place of extensive excavation was on the banks of the next creek, we may feel certain that General Thruston was not quite accurate in his statement as to just where the stone had been found and that it was actually picked up at the famous Bledsoe Lick Creek Mound Builder site" (Keeler and Verrill 1962:32).

Bledsoe Lick is another name for the Castalian Springs site, which Myer himself had excavated (Myer 1917). If that had indeed been the location of the find, one would think that Myer would have heard about it. On the other hand, Thruston got his information closer to the time the tablet was actually found. So it is difficult to judge which version is correct. Either way, the general location of the find is not in dispute, as the two possibilities are only a few miles apart.

2. At least three sources claim that the tablet was discovered in 1874, but the evidence for this assertion is never made clear (Huddleston 1962a; Durham 1969:9; Traxel 2004:Fig. 20).

3. According to Myer (1928:99), the photograph later published by Mallery was actually made by Holmes. Holmes also produced a cast of the Thruston Tablet, which still resides in the National Museum of Natural History (catalog number A135919).

4. As this chapter went to press, an unpublished nineteenth-century illustration of the Thruston Tablet was brought to our attention by Kevin Smith. It resides in the Joseph Jones papers at the Tulane University Library, currently in Box 28. The print is entitled "Engraved Stone from Rock Creek Sumner Co. Tenn. (Medical & Surgical Memory of Joseph Jones M.D.)." At the bottom it is inscribed "J. H. Dowling, Del. N.O."—the last two letters presumably an abbreviation for New Orleans. A brief accompanying manuscript that alludes to the illustration is said by the library's catalog to date to 1895–1896 (Jones 1980:27) and Jones himself died in 1896, which provides a *terminus ante quem*. The illustration appears to be an independent rendering, not based on the images published by Thruston, Holmes, or Mallery. Neither the detail nor the accuracy of the drawing approaches that of Holmes. While having some historical interest, it adds no new information and sheds no new light on the iconographic issues discussed herein.

5. A generally similar discussion of the tablet was included in Myer's manuscript entitled "Stone Age Man in the Middle South" (n.d.), which was never published. The surviving manuscript also lacks the figure showing the reverse face.

6. According to one source (Huddleston 1962b), Lewis never saw the tablet firsthand. Given the faintness of the engraving and the quality of the photographs, it is not surprising that he had difficulty in following the lines with his pen.

7. In a recent book entitled *Footprints of the Welsh Indians*, William Traxel provides yet another photograph and drawing of the Thruston Tablet and suggests that the scenes

depict Welshmen, not Vikings (Traxel 2004:90–92, Fig. 20a–b). We take neither side in this dispute.

8. The dome-shaped object is also similar to a motif that occurs on Menomoni bark scrolls (Berres 2001:Fig. 13b [left]; Skinner 1913:Fig 7 [left]). This motif is said to represent a Thunderer or a Thunderer's power (Berres 2001:160; Skinner 1913:75).

9. This wooden plaque resides in the Field Museum in Chicago. It has often been said to come from Moundville (e.g., Fundaburk and Foreman 1957:Pl. 142), but the museum's records indicate that this piece actually was found in eastern Tennessee (Duane Esarey and Ian Brown, personal communication, 2004).

10. Based on recent excavations, Smith and Beahm (2007) date the main occupation at Castalian Springs—where the tablet may have been originally found (see note 1 above)—to ca. AD 1200–1325. Happily, our dates overlap nicely with theirs.