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YET ANOTHER RATTLESNAKE DISK FROM MOUNDVILLE?

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In a recent survey of Mississippian iconography from the southeastern United States, Phillips and Brown (1978:137-138) note the existence of only two engraved stone disks--believed to have been used as palettes--that are decorated with the theme of "intertwined snakes". One of these is the famed "Rattlesnake Disk" from Moundville, Alabama, which has been illustrated in numerous publications and now resides in the collections of the Alabama Museum of Natural History (Brose et al. 1985:Pl. 121; Fundaburk and Foreman 1957:Pl. 20u; Holmes 1883:Pls. LVII-4, LXVI-6, 1906:Pl. 13b; Howard 1968:Fig. 4a; Moore 1905:Fig. 7; Phillips and Brown 1978: Fig. 199; Waring and Holder 1945:Fig. 4u; Webb and DeJarnette 1942:Fig. 93.16). The second is the so-called "Issaquena Disk", believed to have been found at the Grace site in Issaquena County, Mississippi (Holmes 1906:104, Pl. XII, Fig. 8; Brown 1926:Figs. 182-183; Phillips and Brown 1978:137-138, 203, Fig. 199). This tablet now resides in the Museum of the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society at Columbus.

My purpose here is to consider yet a third such disk (Figure 1), currently in the St. Louis Art Museum. Although a description of this disk has been previously published (Parsons 1974), it appeared in a journal that is not widely read by archaeologists, and thus (for better or worse) the existence of this artifact has gone largely unnoticed.

The artifact in question was donated to the St. Louis Art Museum in 1973 by Mr. and Mrs. Alois J. Koller. The Kollers had obtained it from a dealer in Fort Lauderdale, Florida named H.B. Greene. In 1974, David DeJarnette wrote to Mr. Greene to inquire about the provenience of this specimen. Mr. Greene replied:

The stone palette [sic] . . . was found in the spring of 1925 by a farmer plowing his field. I am quite sure this piece is from Hale County, Alabama. [H.B. Greene to D.L. DeJarnette, October 18, 1974; Mound State Monument files]

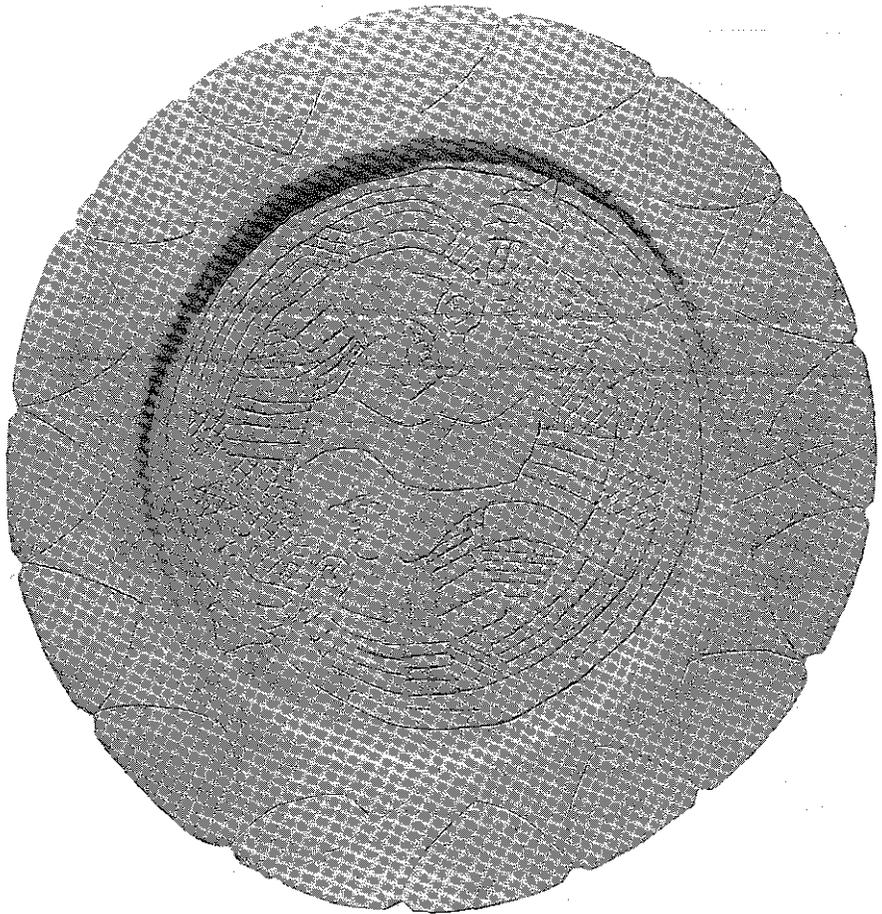


Figure 1. Engraved Stone Disk Allegedly Found in Hale County, Alabama, and Almost Certainly a Fake (St. Louis Art Museum Catalog Number 228:1973; Photograph Courtesy St. Louis Art Museum).

Since Hale County is the location of Moundville, where more carved stone disks have been found than anywhere else, the implication is that the disk came from the site itself, or at least from its immediate vicinity.

The St. Louis disk has a diameter of about 27 cm. Its obverse (engraved) face has a circular central portion that is depressed about 6 mm to 7 mm below the rim; the raised rim itself is about 4.5 cm wide. The reverse face is smooth, strongly convex, and undecorated. At center, the disk is approximately 4.5 cm thick. It is made of a light gray, fine grained rock, perhaps a limestone or siltstone, that contains no visible traces of mica. The engraved design consists of two snakes curled around the center, surrounded by a scalloped border. The edge of the disk is notched.

In design, the piece bears a striking resemblance to the Issaquena Disk (cf. Holmes 1906:Pl. XII). The parallels include not only the relative positions and demeanor of the snakes, but also the outline of the heads, the distinctive eye surrounds, the shape of the mouths, the dorsal and ventral markings, and the bracket-like lines framing each snout. Both plates have a notched edge and a scalloped border, although on the Issaquena specimen the latter feature appears only on the reverse side. There is also a slight difference in the quality of execution. Generally the design on the Issaquena Disk seems more competently engraved, with cleaner lines and greater success at making the snakes' bodies seem continuous (note, for example, that on the St. Louis disk the coiled bodies break unnaturally as they pass under each tail).

Be that as it may, the two disks are sufficiently similar to raise interesting questions about their relationship. While some might consider the possibility of common authorship, I rather suspect plagiarism, and relatively recent plagiarism at that. In other words, there are good reasons to believe that the St. Louis disk is a fake. Having personally examined dozens of stone disks known to come from Moundville (particularly those in the museum of the American Indian, the Alabama Museum of Natural History, and the Smithsonian Institution), I can attest that the St. Louis disk differs markedly, and very suspiciously, from the norm of what is

otherwise a remarkably uniform class. Consider the following anomalies:

1. All the authentic disks I have seen from Moundville, including the Rattlesnake Disk, are made of the highly distinctive material: a gray, highly micaceous sandstone that outcrops locally near Tuscaloosa (Jones and DeJarnette 1936). The St. Louis specimen is not made of this material.
2. All of the authentic disks are flat, or nearly so, on both sides. Indeed, one usually finds traces of pigment on one or both faces, suggesting the use of these artifacts as palettes (Moore 1905:145-147, Holmes 1906, Webb and DeJarnette 1942:287). The St. Louis disk is unique in that its undecorated side is highly convex, not flat, thereby rendering it totally worthless as a palette. (Not surprisingly, no traces of pigment are present, although it is conceivable that such traces could have been washed off.)
3. On both the Rattlesnake Disk and the Issaquena Disk, the border design consisting of scallops and/or parallel lines occurs on the face opposite that with the engraved serpents (Moore 1905:136, Holmes 1906). On the St. Louis disk, the border design occurs on the same face as the engraved serpents.
4. The authentic disks from Moundville generally have a maximum thickness of 1 cm to 2 cm, never more than 3 cm in my experience. The St. Louis disk is more than double the usual thickness.
5. Other suspiciously unique features of the St. Louis disk include the pronounced depression in the center of the decorated face and the style of the scalloped border. In overall shape, this disk is more reminiscent of a modern serving dish than a Mississippian palette.

While any of these anomalies by itself might give one pause, all five together are compelling. It is virtually certain that the St. Louis disk is a relatively recent forgery based on the

Issaquena disk, an illustration of which was first widely published in 1906 (Holmes 1906:104, Pl. XII, Fig. 8). Indeed, most of the anomalous features--such as the raw material and the shape of the undecorated face--are precisely those that could not be seen in the published illustrations, and therefore could not be accurately copied.

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