

Foreword

From time to time, a book appears that completely changes the landscape in a field of study. This is such a book. For more than sixty years, scholars have tried to make sense of the corpus of pre-Columbian art known as the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex (SECC) or “Southern Cult.” The studies presented in these pages sketch out a new paradigm for understanding this imagery, a paradigm that is based on rigorous methods and is deeply grounded in American Indian ethnography. The new interpretation that emerges sees these images not as depictions of “real-world” actors and rituals, but rather as representations of a larger, multilayered cosmos populated by heroes and supernatural beings whose exploits and powers were widely known by Indian peoples throughout eastern North America.

This book took shape through a series of workshops that were organized by Kent Reilly in the 1990s. Having been trained as a Mesoamerican archaeologist by the late Linda Schele, Reilly had experienced firsthand the breakthroughs in deciphering Maya iconography and script that happened during the 1970s and 1980s. He reasoned that the same methods might lead to similar breakthroughs in North American archaeology, so he decided to give them a try.

A key factor in the Mesoamerican advances had been the annual Maya Meetings hosted by Schele at the University of Texas in Austin. These advanced workshops would bring together a relatively small group of scholars with diverse perspectives, who would spend the better part of a week working intensively on a set of specific problems. Reilly adopted this model for attacking the problems of the SECC. The first of his workshops was held in March of 1993, in conjunction with the Maya meetings in Austin. Two years later, in 1995, the SECC workshop moved to Texas State University–San Marcos and took on its own identity as the Texas State Mississippian Iconography Conference. One hallmark of these workshops has been the diversity of participants: archaeologists, folklorists, art historians, anthropologists, and Native religious practitioners all

have come to these gatherings. Besides Reilly himself, those who attended the first meeting were Alex Barker, James Brown, C. Randall Daniels-Sakim, Judith Franke, James Garber, Robert Hall, Mary Helms, Alice Kehoe, Vernon J. Knight, George Lankford, Patricia O'Brien, Mallory M. O'Connor, and Amy Trevelyan; later meetings included Garrick Bailey, M. Kathryn Brown, Christopher Carr, Carol Díaz-Granados, David Dye, Mary Johns, William Johnston, Adam King, Shirley Mock, Dan Penton, George Sabo, Clay Schultz, Robert Sharp, Dee Ann Story, Richard Townsend, Chet Walker, Sam Wilson, Kenneth York, and me. Many of these individuals have contributed chapters to this book.

Although their subject matter differs, all the chapters share elements of a common approach that was fostered by these workshops. The first is a rigorous formal analysis that searches out all occurrences of a given theme or motif and critically examines the range of variation and substitution. The second is a heavy reliance on ethnographic texts from throughout eastern North America as a way of interpreting these images and giving them meaning. Indeed, a key insight is that ethnographic texts from the eastern Great Plains and western Great Lakes are a valuable resource in understanding the imagery of the pre-Columbian Southeast—in a sense, these texts proved to be the Rosetta Stone that led to many of the interpretations presented herein.

Whether one agrees with these interpretations or not, this book has clearly laid the groundwork for a new approach to iconographic problems in eastern North America. The interdisciplinary approach and creativity fostered by these workshops has set a tone and direction that is likely to continue generating insights for many years to come.

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