

# New Methods and Theories for Analyzing Mississippian Imagery



Edited by  
**Bretton T. Giles and Shawn P. Lambert**

## CONTENTS

List of Figures ix

List of Tables xi

1. Introduction: New Methods and Theories for Analyzing Mississippian Imagery 1

*Bretton T. Giles and Shawn P. Lambert*

### **Part I. Variation in Design and Style**

2. Tracking Design Variation within Late Mississippian Complicated Stamped Pottery Assemblages from the Georgia Coast 35

*Anna M. Semon*

3. The McAdams Style Revisited: Matching Spider Iconography with Material Culture 60

*J. Grant Stauffer*

4. A Preliminary Stylistic Assessment of the Ceramic Imagery of the Late Prehistoric Peoples of Choctawhatchee Bay, Florida, and Its Implications 91

*John F. Scarry*

### **Part II. Interpreting Mississippian Iconography**

5. Local Eyes: Recognizing Cosmological Motifs 111

*George E. Lankford*

6. Fire Burn and Cauldron Bubble: Mississippian Witchcraft Agency, Animism, and Materiality 131

*David H. Dye*

### **Part III. Situating and Historicizing Mississippian Symbols**

7. *Mnemonic Parallelism* and the Cosmologies Materialized in Late Mississippian Pecan Point Headpots 165

*Bretton T. Giles*

8. From Enwrapped Worlds: A Peircean Semiotic Approach to Early Caddo Ceramics 193

*Jesse C. Nowak*

9. Imagery in Motion: Object Itineraries of Spiro Engraved Vessels 219

*Shawn P. Lambert*

### **Part IV. Concluding Remarks**

10. Merging Art Historical and Anthropological Approaches in Pre-Columbian Iconography 247

*Vernon James Knight*

List of Contributors 259

Index 261

"In chapters ranging from the Georgia coast to the Caddo area, readers will engage with detailed analyses of motifs and designs, move back and forth between archaeological artifacts and Native American narratives, and gain new perspectives about the use and meanings of objects."—MARY BETH TRUBITT, University of Arkansas

"This volume takes Mississippian imagery studies to the next step, going beyond the important concerns of defining methodology and identifying styles and referents to ask topical questions and explore alternative theoretical frames."—ADAM KING, editor of *Archaeology in South Carolina: Exploring the Hidden Heritage of the Palmetto State*

IN THIS VOLUME, contributors show how stylistic and iconographic analyses of Mississippian imagery provide new perspectives on the beliefs, narratives, public ceremonies, ritual regimes, and expressions of power in the communities that created the artwork. Exploring various methodological and theoretical approaches to pre-Columbian visual culture, these essays reconstruct dynamic accounts of Native American history across the U.S. Southeast.

These case studies offer innovative examples of how to use style to identify and compare artifacts, how symbols can be interpreted in the absence of writing, and how to situate and historicize Mississippian imagery. They examine designs carved into shell, copper, stone, and wood or incised into ceramic vessels, from spider iconography to owl effigies and depictions of the cosmos. They discuss how these symbols intersect with memory, myths, social hierarchies, religious traditions, and other spheres of Native American life in the past and present. The tools modeled in this volume will open new horizons for learning about the culture and worldviews of past peoples.

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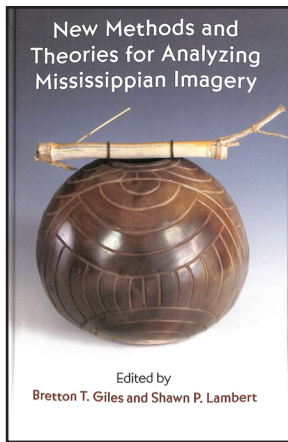
Front: contemporary Spiro Engraved vessel; back, traditional Spiro Engraved vessel. Courtesy of Master Caddo Potter Chase Kahwinhut Earles.



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## New Methods and Theories for Analyzing Mississippian Imagery

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As a discipline, archaeology is justly famed (or defamed) for its penchant for the uncritical adoption of other disciplines' theories and methods—often leaving behind the parameters that constrained those theories' emergence. Historically,

archaeological practitioners have also freely recycled earlier problematic approaches, seemingly forgetting or simply ignoring the shortcomings that lead to their earlier abandonment. So the last several decades' fascination with the methodology of art history and problematic ethnographic analogies bearing vestiges of the direct historic approach shouldn't surprise us—but to some degree they do. These approaches have, for the most part, been generated under the influence of the Mississippian Iconography Workshop (MIW). The products of this Workshop form the background and context against which Bretton T. Giles and Shawn P. Lambert set a group of nine essays in *Analyzing Mississippian Imagery*.

In their introductory chapter, Giles and Lambert provide a thorough background for historically situating the recent studies of Mississippian iconography. Most researchers who undertake North American iconographic studies tie their approaches back to the seminal studies of art historians, Erwin Panofsky and George Kubler, and more recently to Vernon J. Knight. In this context it is useful to read Knight's observations (Ch. 10) and Lankford's (Ch. 5) admonitions in conjunction with the Chapter 1 introduction before approaching the remainder of the volume. Generally, Vernon Knight (p. 247) identifies the studies of past art as, 1) identifying form, a.k.a., style, 2) interpreting subject matter, a.k.a., iconography, and 3) determining the social context in which the forms were embedded—although he admits the lines between these discrete topics often become blurred. Importantly, these three chapters identify key concerns that, from my perspective at least, have faded from the minds of many of the interpreters from the MIW. Art historians, especially Kubler, and folklorists such as Lankford have identified those weaknesses of iconographic studies as the uncritical use of analogy based on historic ethnography and ethnohistory, the common discounting of the disjuncture between symbol and meaning, both through time and across cultural boundaries, and the failure to acknowledge that which Lankford (p. 117) labels dissonance, i.e., the shifting of mythical referents through time, is likely the cultural norm. Not accounting for dissonance leads researchers to ignore the dangers of Lankford's "Black Box" of mythic transformation (Figure 5.2) that interjects itself between archaeological icons and ethnographic accounts from hundreds of years later. A reading of Chapters 1, 5, and 10 are useful in preparing the reader to evaluate the volume's other contributions.

Most of the chapters represent traditional methodological approaches leaning primarily on stylistic analyses, e.g., Anna Semon (Ch. 2), J. Grant Stauffer (Ch. 3), and John Scarry

(Ch. 4). Here I use the descriptor “traditional” not in a pejorative way but to emphasize their employment of detailed stylistic attribute analyses as the basis for their interpretations of social context. Semon’s well-designed, tightly-focused study of the Irene phase filfot-cross motif on complicated stamped pottery on the Georgia coast stands out for its constrained interpretive approach. She analyzed filfot-cross motif variation (or stasis) to understand its implications for ceramic production, exchange, chronological and contextual change, and social aggregations and dispersions. She, not unreasonably, links the filfot-cross with the square grounds prominent among historic groups. Stauffer (Ch.3) employs Panofsky’s structural analysis to examine the iconography of the McAdams shell gorget style and trace its spread from the Illinois region to the Southeast where it results in producing hybridized Orton and Rudder style gorgets. He sees the hybridization process as an important tool in understanding the spread of SECC as did Susan Alt’s earlier examinations of hybridization in creating Greater Cahokia. Center-periphery stylistic influences and variations form the basis for Scarry’s (Ch. 4) examination of pottery in the Florida Panhandle’s Choctawhatchee Bay area. Attribute analysis led him to identify the selective adoption and unique recombination of motifs by groups on the fringes of hierarchical chiefly societies. This is a topic that has long challenged Midwest archaeologists attempting to understand Cahokia-hinterland relations.

Detailed stylistic analyses are also foundational for Chapters 7–9. The design and structure of Pecan Point headpots is determined by Bretton Giles (Ch. 7) to possess potential mnemonic parallels referencing cosmic and traditional configurations—his interpretive endeavor relies heavily on the expansive Dheghian ethnography. Interpretations of these artistically complex ceramic vessels have varied but Giles proposes that they depict specific individuals whose designs represent facial tattoos or painting indicating their social, religious, and cosmic relationships. Jesse Nowak (Ch. 8) introduces Peircean semiotics to the analysis of Early Caddo fineware bottles which he argues can, through understanding their imagery and the context of use, be seen as bundles. Such bundles may have agency, animacy, and personhood and therefore can be channels for cosmic forces. I would note, however, earlier post-processual linguistic models for “reading” material culture have generally not met with favor. Understanding the production, movement, and meaning of Spiro Engraved vessels concerns Shawn Lambert (Ch. 9). He employs the concept of object itineraries to trace the production of such vessels in the Southern Caddo area and their movement to Northern Caddo villages. Strikingly, at their production locale Spiro Engraved vessels appear in the context of domestic and ritual activities whereas among the Northern Caddo these vessels are generally restricted to ritual deposits—suggesting, as Mary Helms has, that foreign objects may be imbued with increased power and prestige.

Mississippian witches and owls occupy the thoughts of David Dye in his contribution to the volume (Ch. 6). From a fascinating documentation of early twentieth century witch executions among the Choctaws, he broadens his perspective to the widespread belief in witches among American Indian groups. In seeking a material manifestation of witchcraft Dye examines the various spiritual beliefs, both positive



and negative, concerning owls. He suggests that in late Mississippian societies under stress from climate shifts, regional migrations, social disruptions, and increased violence, fear of witches may have accelerated and been expressed in the creation and possession of owl effigy vessels in the Central Mississippian River valley. He assembles a significant sample of such owl vessels (Table 6.1) interpreting their context to indicate they were significant objects of power wielded by political/religious elites.

The contributions to *Analyzing Mississippian Imagery* represent an interesting and somewhat eclectic cross-section of ongoing scholarly concern by Southeastern archaeologists to delineate and interpret a rich and diverse Mississippian symbol-laden material record—a continuing process that is now nearing the century mark. During that time, methods have changed but a critical aspect of the process still depends on the traditional identification of symbolic attributes, their presentation, and recombination—i.e., the identification of style that Knight identifies as the foundation for generating further understanding. The majority of contributors to this volume follow that pathway which, in turn, ensures the lasting value of such studies. As typical for most research on Mississippian iconography there is a heavy dependence on historic ethnographies, often fueled, I suspect, by the irresistible urge to “flesh-out” the bare bones of the archaeological material culture. How reflective these typically late nine-teenth century accounts are of Mississippian people remains a mystery (i.e., Lankford’s Black Box). *Analyzing Mississippian Imagery*’s contributions add both new and traditional approaches to the growing literature on iconography and will be of interest to those involved in such studies. On the technical side, for a volume of this price, there were annoying copyediting errors especially regarding some bibliographies. If UFP is going to continue to price their volumes out of most students’ reach, the least they could do is ensure they follow quality production standards.