

Who Speaks for the Gorgets? The Cloudy Future of an Indigenous Art Form

by

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Abstract

Engraved marine shell gorgets are an important category of American Indian art objects characteristic of the Late Mississippian period in the Southeast. Almost exclusively funerary objects, gorgets have been recovered from burials throughout the region, with a concentration in the watersheds of the Tennessee River and its tributaries. They divide into a number of distinctive styles, the most common of which depict, with decreasing frequency, rattlesnakes, human figures, masks, triskeles, crosses, and birds. An estimated 600-800 reside in museums and more (perhaps many more) reside in private collections. My investigations have documented hundreds of as-yet unreported engraved marine shell gorgets from Indian cemeteries in Southwest Virginia and Northeast Tennessee. Most of the private specimens were illegally dug decades ago for profit, and now typically belong to members of an aging cadre of collectors. Many such gorgets have been sold or traded a number of times. The fate of these gorget collections is problematic. Their origin as grave goods makes modern museum curators understandably reluctant to consider them for accession. This paper asks the question "What is the future for gorgets?" and speculates that only an improbable détente among professional archeologists, museums, relic collectors, and the American Indian community, might offer a way forward. The author's principal concerns (whatever the ultimate fate of the objects themselves) are that what still remains of their incredible artistic traditions and their invaluable cultural insights be recorded and preserved.

Mississippian Indian America

Mississippian Indian America existed in central and southeast North America (Power Point slide 2) circa 1000-1600 AD. Much, but not all, of the Mississippian cultural sphere was in the Mississippi River watershed, the region of the south Atlantic plain is the principal exception. The culture was characterized by extensive long-distance trade networks, mound building, and its art objects of copper, stone, shell, etc. It is sometimes called "The Southern Cult" or the "Southeastern Ceremonial Complex" or SECC.



Map from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mississippian_cultures_HRoe_2010.jpg

Image from Power Point slide 3* titled "Mississippian America Map with Mounds."

Modified from Herb Roe, *Map of Mississippian Cultures*. see the link under the map. Used here under a Creative Commons License.

The red-colored region is the author's principal study area which he calls "Holstonia."

*Not reproduced here are slide 1 was the title slide and slide 2, a list of bullets characterizing Mississippian Indian America, which is here done with prose in the text

Some (among very many) references that describe Mississippian culture broadly are the following: The "classic" work from 1945.¹ An important analysis of the "Ceremonial Complex" from 1968.² A groundbreaking book by a historian that one reviewer said "... created a new method of studying American Indian history."³ An essay in an American Indian "art" book.⁴ A multi-author compendium that addresses many aspects of the ceremonial complex.⁵ Also useful is an article that discusses the chronology of gorget styles from Tennessee.⁶ Overall trade in Mississippian world is described in a book by Jon Muller that includes a discussion of gorgets.⁷ Shell trade in the Mississippian world is discussed in a chapter in a book about prehistoric exchange systems.⁸ The geographic distribution of material culture artifacts throughout the Mississippian world is analyzed in a thesis by Ottesen that is discussed below in this article.⁹ The evolution of Mississippian culture as an example of a prestige-goods system has been analyzed from a World-System perspective,¹⁰ though this useful study does not take into account the work of Ottesen. The two classic American Indian relic collectors' books about Mississippian period artifacts are *Sun Circles and Human Hands*¹¹ and *Indians and Artifacts in the Southeast*.¹²



Image from Power Point slide 4 titled "Tennessee Mississippians." Author's photograph of a mural at the McClung Museum in Knoxville, Tennessee. Greg Hardin, artist.

Typical examples of art objects of copper, stone, and shell, are depicted lying on the ground of the figure holding the pole mounted by a Mississippian cross-in-circle-motif.

Mississippian Period Shell Objects

Stone Age cultures around the world valued mollusk shells for the purpose of making durable ceremonial and decorative objects. For example, Neanderthals 100,000 years ago on the Iberian peninsula were wearing painted cockle shells — long before the arrival in that region of modern humans.

Engraved marine shell gorgets are a high art product of Mississippian Culture. They are widely distributed throughout the central and southeast United States, with Tennessee having yielded about 40% of those presently published and documented. Many lie undocumented in private collections and it is a major purpose here to call attention to that fact.

In North America, engraved marine shell gorgets are one of the most attractive groups of artifacts that date from the Mississippian Period (900 - 1600 AD) of American Indian history and are characteristic of the cultures of that time who lived in the southeastern United States. Shell long endures in archeological settings, particularly in non acidic soils. Thus, they are valuable cultural markers.



Image from Power Point slide 5 titled "Mississippian Period Shell Objects."

Author's photograph of the shells and shell objects in the collection of the late Fred Sharpe. This collection is a fairly good representation of the range of Mississippian shell artifacts. It includes gorgets (upper left), disk beads, ear plugs, and plain shells into which small holes have been drilled so that they could be strung together or attached to clothing.

Tracking down collections of this kind and photographing them has been a prominent aspect of the author's work over the past 7-8 years.

Fred Sharpe collection.

Mississippian gorgets were (are) made from the shells of conchs and other marine mollusks and are mostly 2"-6" in size. Gorgets in modern collections were almost surely recovered from burials and were typically found in close association with the skeletons of the persons who likely wore them when alive. These persons were perhaps religious figures or leaders, and often women or children. The name gorget probably derives from the English use of the word to describe something worn at the throat. Archeologists, such as the artist Madeline Kneberg, have often pictured gorgets as being worn suspended on cords hung around the necks of their wearers.

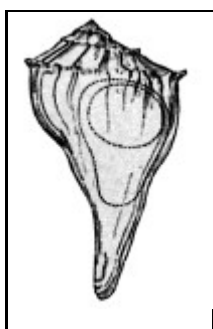


Image from Power Point slide 6. Titled "Gorgets Were Made from Large Marine Mollusk Shells. Mississippian Period Shell Objects."

Broadly speaking, engraved gorgets divide into two groups: circular and pear- or mask-shaped, as illustrated by Holmes¹³ and shown at left. Disk beads also were made from conch outer shells, and the so-called chunky beads were made from the central stem (columella) of large mollusk shells.

This image was titled in the presentation "Gorgets *in situ*. William Henry Holmes, 1883, Plate XXIX, detail."

Many gorgets are "plain" or unengraved. The engraved ones discussed here were cut with stone tools to have characteristic designs. The engraved designs fall into a number of distinct types which are called gorget styles.



Image at left from Power Point slide 7 which was titled "A Mask-Style Gorget: Northern Virginia." This image was published in *The American Indians: The European Challenge*.¹⁴ The legend for this published image reads "This haunting, enigmatic mask of carved shell, which was discovered in Virginia, is similar to works of the ancient Mississippian Indians, an indication that the tribes dwelling in Virginia during Powhatan's era were influenced artistically by the distant mound building civilizations."

This mask style gorget is about 18 cm tall. On its back, the inked inscription reads "Found in Stafford County Va from the head of a skeleton of a supposed chief by L. S. Prince of Page county 1869." I showed my photograph of this obverse side notation in the Power Point presentation.

Charles Burnette collection. Author's photograph, 2005.

Image at right from Power Point slide 8. The slide was titled "Spider Gorget, Virginia or Illinois?"

The spider style of this gorget makes it almost surely from Illinois. It was obtained by purchase in western Virginia and currently in a private collection in Virginia.

If it traveled from Illinois to Virginia, did it travel in the sixteenth century or in the twentieth century?

Charles Burnette collection. Author's photograph, 2005.



Image at left from Power Point slide 9. The slide was titled "Rattlesnake, Citico Style Gorget."

Citico style specimens are among the most numerous and widely distributed category of gorgets.

Author's photograph, 2006. Photographed in the presence of its then owner, who has since died.

Private Virginia collection.

Image at right from Power Point slide 10. This slide was titled "A Lick Creek/Brakebill Style Fenestrated Rattlesnake Gorget." Fenestrated means windowed. Informally, such gorgets are said to be "cut out" or "chop out."

This specimen was excavated circa 1980 near Kingsport, Tennessee. It remained unseen in a private collection until I located it and asked to photograph it and other gorgets in the owner's collection.

Author's photograph, 2007.





Image at left from Power Point slide 11. This slide was titled "A Quadrilobed Gorget."

Gorgets in this style are informally called "Mickey Mouse" gorgets. They are culturally associated with Southern Appalachian Mississippian subdivision of the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex. Many specimens in this style are known to me from southwest Virginia, including some provenienced to specific find sites. Some gorgets in this style are as small as 2 cm diameter.

Charles Burnette collection. Author's photograph, 2005.

Image at right from Power Point slide 12. This slide was titled "A Punctillated Star Style Gorget."

This example probably came from western Virginia, which seems to be the center for the handful of known gorgets in this style.

The term "punctillated" means that the design has been executed by drilling a series of small pits.

Charles Burnette collection. Author's photograph, 2005.



Image at left from Power Point slide 13.

Saltville Style Rattlesnake Gorget. Saltville style gorgets were once regarded as very rare with only nine being published in 1996. Over 50 specimens are now on record though not yet all published.

This specimen was photographed by the author in 2007 in the presence of its owner Dr. Presley Rankin Jr., and is now a permanent part of an exhibit in the Rankin Museum of American heritage in Ellerbe, North Carolina. As was the case with the unnamed owner of the Citico style gorget shown in slide 9, Dr. Rankin is now dead.

This specimen is slightly unusual for a Saltville style gorget because it has a center hole.



Survey of Engraved Marine Shell Gorgets¹⁵

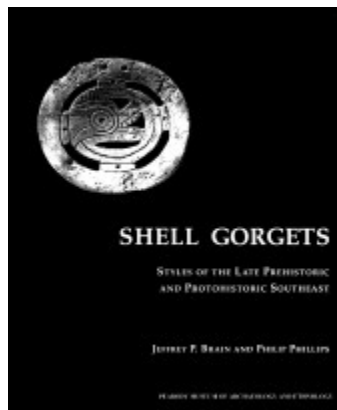
There are hundreds of articles that mention or picture shell gorgets scattered widely throughout both the professional and relic collectors' literature. In his 125-page, 1883 article for the Bureau of American Ethnology mentioned above (and available for on line viewing),¹⁶ William Henry Holmes initiated gorget studies with a loud fanfare by showing seventy specimens divided into seven style classifications.

Following Holmes' magisterial 1883 synthesis, many years passed before a new work entirely devoted to engraved marine shell gorgets appeared. However, in the interim, widely scattered pictures of individual gorgets were published both in the

professional and relic collectors' literature. Gorget studies were finally rekindled by the publication in 1959 of an article by Madeline Kneberg that pictured sixty-two specimens of Tennessee gorgets.¹⁷ The Mississippian Period scholar A. J. Waring, in his review¹⁸ of her article wrote: "At last someone has done a long-needed job," of arranging eastern Tennessee shell gorgets into a "sensible chronological sequence." At about this same time, widespread collector interest in gorgets was generated by the appearance of the books *Sun Circles and Human Hands* (mentioned above) and *Tribes That Slumber*.¹⁹ Both of these books, which prominently feature pictures of gorgets among many other artifacts, proved extremely popular with the public at large and collectors of Indian relics. Both books remain in print today, over half a century after they were originally issued.

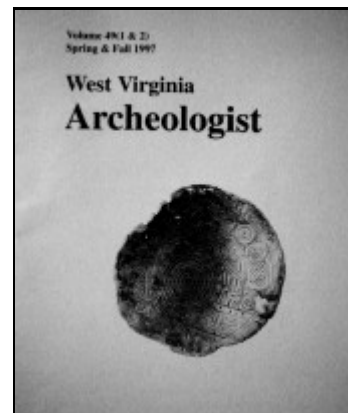
In 1966, Jon Muller's Harvard Ph.D. dissertation²⁰ was the first thesis devoted to engraved marine shell gorgets. That thesis, together with Muller's contemporaneous article in the *Tennessee Archeologist*,²¹ developed the concept of gorget style and defined the names of the sub-styles of the rattlesnake gorget genre. Arguably, Muller's key advance was to demonstrate the manner in which a study of artistic style (with the case of gorgets as a particular example) could contribute to the development of American archeology and understanding of the Mississippian Indian world.

The first professional article dedicated to a "pilot study" of engraved pear-shaped, mask style marine shell gorgets appeared in 1989.²² The authors of this study noted that mask style gorgets were geographically widespread (ranging from Alabama to North Dakota) during the Mississippian Period and interpreted the symbolism of the sixty-nine examples they described as suggesting that mask gorgets functioned in a warfare- or hunting-related role.



Images from Power Point slide 14 which was titled "Two Important Gorget 'Catalog' Publications." The slide showed the front covers of the two extant gorget catalogs. they are Jeffrey Brain and Philip Phillips (1996) Peabody Museum book (at left) and Darla Spencer's (1997) *West Virginia Archeologist* double issue (at right).

These catalogs are discussed in the text here.



In 1996 Jeffrey Brain and Philip Phillips authored a book largely devoted to marine shell gorgets published by the Peabody Museum.²³ This book serves as catalog of the exhibited and published specimens of gorgets known to these authors at that time. As such, it is a benchmark publication and today the starting point of any serious study of engraved marine shell gorgets. The book pictures about 1,100 gorgets. A few of the author's specimens are shown front and back, a few are inadvertently duplicated, and seven "frauds" are included—so the precise total is somewhat uncertain.

A year later Darla Spencer published a magnificent survey of West Virginia gorgets²⁴ in which she described seventy specimens. The preceding year, Brain and Phillips had reported just eight West Virginia gorgets, so her work was a major advance. She achieved this in large measure by seeking out the private collectors who owned over 80 percent of the gorgets she studied. Her work convincingly demonstrated the potential value to archeology of aggregating images of, and provenience information about, privately held gorgets. My own gorget work has proceeded along similar lines. In Power Point slide 14 I showed the covers of these two important gorget catalog publications. I refer to these works as catalogs because they list and picture many gorgets and classify them. Spencer published a follow up article in 2001.²⁵

Power Point slide 15 (not reproduced here) was titled "About Engraved Marine Shell Gorgets." The bulleted list of items that I used to summarize the characteristics of the gorgets on that slide is covered in the text here.

Power Point slide 16 (not reproduced here) was titled "My Efforts" and noted some of my own publications about gorgets and listed in this paragraph. The first article I wrote after I began writing about history and archeology that pictured a gorget appeared in 2005.²⁶ In 2007 I described a large collection of engraved marine shell gorgets on permanent display in a New Jersey museum that had never been described in print²⁷ and an article telling of the earliest documented excavation of a gorget

in southwest Virginia by the well-known archeologist Richard Slattery.²⁸ In an attempt to convince Virginia historians of the potential value of gorget studies for the Spanish period of Virginia history I presented a paper at the 2007 Virginia History Forum at the Library of Virginia in Richmond.²⁹ I described the source and methods I use to find gorgets and gorget pictures at a meeting of the West Virginia Archaeological Society in 2009.³⁰ In 2010 in a relic collectors' magazine I published some data tables amplifying and summarizing the information in the Brain and Phillips gorget catalog and wrote of the plight of the gorgets in anticipation of this Power Point presentation.³¹ Immediately below I reproduce the first three tables from that last publication:

The Brain and Phillips book catalogs, describes, and pictures about 1,100 engraved gorgets. It also includes useful maps showing the geographic distributions of gorgets in particular styles. Of their gorget total, roughly 900 are circular and 200 pear-shaped. Table 1 shows the book's major gorget style classifications and their subdivisions. Most gorget sub-style names were taken from places where gorgets in that sub-style were found.

Table 1: Principal Brain and Phillips Circular Gorget Major and Sub-styles

Major Style	Sub-styles or Subdivisions
Plain (unengraved)	Subdivided by size, shape, edge treatment, and number of holes and hole placement
Annular (ring-like)	Subdivided by their size and the size of their center hole
Bird or Turkey cock	Cox Mound, Hixon, Jackson, Pearce
Square cross or Crib	Bennett, Donnaha, Moorehead, Warren Wilson, Quadrilobed
Circular cross or Cruciform	Circular cross
Geometric	Crabbe, Dunning, Lenoir, Pickett, Pine Island, Ruffner, Russell, Tibbee Creek, Younge
Human figure, dancer	Big Toco, Cartersville, Eddyville, Hamilton, Houston, Hull, Philbrook, Rhoden, Spaghetti
Mask or human face	Buffalo, Chickamauga, McBee
Rattlesnake	Lick Creek, Brakebill, Carter's Quarter, Citico, Saltville
Spider	McAdams, Orton, Rudder
Scalloped disk or triskele	Nashville I, Nashville II

Table 2 shows the counts and percentages of the principal styles of gorgets listed in Brain and Phillips' catalog. Rattlesnake style gorgets account for 28% of the total and are the dominant style—being over twice as common as gorgets in any other style.

Table 2: Principal Circular Gorget Styles by Count and Percentage According to Brain and Phillips

	Count	Percent
Rattlesnake	260	28.2
Human figure, dancer	125	13.6
Mask or human face	114	12.4
Scalloped disk or triskele	109	11.8
Cruciform (crib) square or circular cross	109	11.8
Bird or turkey cock	78	8.5
Geometric	42	4.6
Spider	32	3.5
Unclassified	18	1.9
Annular (ring-like)	17	1.9
Plain	17	1.9
	921	100.1

From Brain and Phillips catalog of gorgets listed by style, pp. 9-128.

Table 3 (on the following page) shows the counts and percentages of the find states of gorgets. The Brain and Phillips catalog lists 379 Tennessee gorgets, which account for about 40% of the total. Over 90% of the gorgets in the catalog come from just nine states: Tennessee, Oklahoma, Georgia, Alabama, Illinois, Virginia, North Carolina, Arkansas and Missouri. Within those states, gorget distribution is typically highly localized. For example, sites along the Tennessee River account for most of the gorgets from Tennessee and Alabama, all gorgets from Oklahoma come from the Spiro site, and Georgia gorgets were concentrated at the Etowah mounds site.

Table 3: All Styles of Gorgets Count and Percent by Reported Find State.*

State	Count	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Tennessee	379	39.1	39.1
Oklahoma	130	13.4	52.5
Georgia	111	11.5	64.0
Alabama	90	9.3	73.3
Illinois	46	4.7	78.0
Virginia	37	3.8	81.8
North Carolina	35	3.6	85.4
Arkansas	28	2.9	88.3
Missouri	22	2.2	90.5
Kentucky	21	2.2	92.7
Texas	16	1.7	94.4
Florida	11	1.1	95.5
Mississippi	11	1.1	96.6
North Dakota	10	1.0	97.6
West Virginia	8	0.8	98.4
Indiana	6	0.6	99.0
Ohio	4	0.4	99.4
Louisiana	2	0.2	99.6
South Dakota	1	0.1	99.7
South Carolina	1	0.1	99.8
	969	99.8	99.8

*Data from Brain and Phillips pp. 405-503. Some gorgets (not included in this table) lacking specific find states are simply reported by them as being from the "Southeast."

Tennessee was the source of slightly over 50% of the specimens in the Brain and Phillips catalog and just five states (Tennessee, Georgia, Virginia, North Carolina, and Alabama) accounted for over 92% of the total of 260 rattlesnake style gorgets. Rattlesnake gorgets, are abundant in Holstonia (which covers portions of southwest Virginia, northeast Tennessee, and northwest North Carolina) and constitute the single most important category from that region.

Unconventional Sources of Gorget Information

I will discuss Power Point slide 17 later in this article.

Power Point slide 18 (not reproduced here) was a short bulleted list and took the title of this section: "Unconventional Sources of gorget information." Since 2004, I have located and obtained pictures of many gorgets not in the Brain and Phillips catalog by three principal methods: 1. A detailed study of the relic collectors literature (books and magazines). 2. By visits to collectors shows and the private homes of collectors. 3. By monitoring the gorgets which have been offered for sale by relic dealers, particularly via what they have shown on line. I noted that these sources have been largely unstudied by professional archeologists, who in my opinion should be studying them.

Books illustrating gorgets that have been published for the relic collectors' community fall into two groups: 1. The important ten-volume series of works with the generic title *Who's Who in Indian Relics*³² and, 2. Various other works that picture gorgets. The ten *Who's Who* books deserve to be widely known, as collectively they represent a remarkable photographic record of American Indian artifacts. A complete study and thorough compilation of the evidence in these volumes would require a huge effort.³³

Other books published for the relic collectors' community that contain images of gorgets are Fundaburk and Foreman's and Bert Bierer's books, both mentioned earlier. Lar Hothem's shell artifact "value guide"³⁴ shows many examples of offered-for-sale engraved shell gorgets, some of which are perhaps reproductions. A 2007 book about shell artifacts by two Florida-based marine biologists is a significant work and both its many color pictures and its sensible approach to artifact cataloging commend it.³⁵ Unfortunately, it was not carefully edited.

Over the past fifty-odd years, the relic collecting community has produced many magazines. Some have been long lived; others have been fleeting. Also, various groups of collectors have produced, and continue to produce, newsletters. Among

long-lived magazines are the *Journal of the Illinois Archeological Society*, the *Central States Archeological Journal*, *Indian Artifacts Magazine* (a quarterly currently in its twenty-ninth year of publication), and the journal which began life in a black-and-white format in 1966 under the title *The Redskin*, in 1982 became *Prehistoric Art*, in 1985 became *Prehistoric Artifacts*, and which today is published in a handsome, full color format, under its current title of *Prehistoric American*. An example of a collectors' magazine that became defunct is the onetime Ohio-based publication called simply *Artifacts*.

Internet gorget resources and auction catalogs reflect the activities of auction houses that deal in Indian relics. Some of these houses publish elegant, glossy catalogs available by postal mail subscription. Others, offer on line auctions with their catalogs being posted on the internet. Some publish both paper and on line catalogs. Relic collections from the estates of deceased collectors constitute many (perhaps most) of the archaeological artifacts that are offered at auction. In recent years, the author has seen numerous gorgets offered for sale, even on the general interest auction sites such as eBay. It is a reasonable guess that over the course of a year dozens of gorget images, and possibly hundreds, appear in printed catalogs or at the websites of on line sellers. Simply attempting to monitor and record all gorgets among the flood of American Indian artifacts coming onto the market is a time consuming endeavor. Checking to see if they have previously appeared in an earlier, alternative publishing format is additionally time consuming.

Difficult Issues for Students of Gorgets

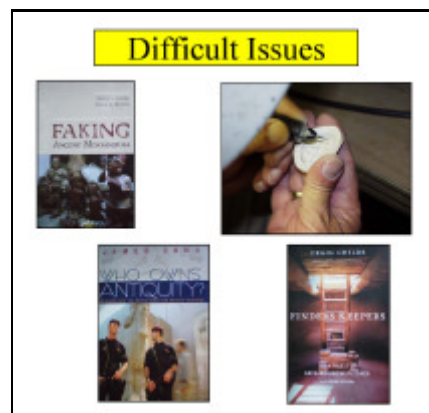
When I stumbled into gorget studies about seven years ago I was completely ignorant of the complicated, difficult, and troubling ethical issues that surround these objects. It was not my purpose in my presentation in Indianapolis to do any more than mention these issues and make the point that is necessary for any student of gorgets to be aware of the issue and think about them. In the image from Power Point slide 19, titled "Difficult Issues," the upper left image illustrates the issue of fake or reproduction objects by showing the front cover of a book titled *Faking Ancient Mesoamerica*,³⁶ which describes the fake artifact manufacturing industry of Central America. The upper right image shows a shell disk cut from of the envelope of a marine shell being engraved with a Dremel tool. As in the world of "museum quality" art works in general, even skilled persons find difficulty in judging what is a fake and what isn't, and particularly in knowing where the line falls between fakes and reproductions.

At the lower left of the image from Power Point slide 19 is the front cover of James Cuno's book that asks the question *Who Owns Antiquity?*³⁷ At the lower right is the front cover of Craig Childs' recent book that tells a "Tale of Archaeological Plunder and Obsession."³⁸ Both of these books discuss the difficult issues of museums and the ownership of artifacts of cultural heritage. See also Roger Atwood's 2004 book,³⁹ and the 40-year-old book about the *tombaroli* — which was the first book that I read on the subject.⁴⁰

The image at right is of Power Point slide 19 titled "Difficult Issues." The upper two pictures illustrate the issue of fake or reproduction objects. On the upper left is the front cover of Kelker and Bruhns' book titled *Faking Ancient Mesoamerica*.

On the upper right is the author's picture of a marine shell disk being engraved with a Dremel tool.

At the lower left is the front cover of James Cuno's book that asks the question *Who Owns Antiquity?* At the lower right is the front cover of Craig Childs' book that tells a "Tale of Archaeological Plunder and Obsession." Both of these books discuss the difficult issues that surround artifacts of cultural heritage.



Responsible American Indian art collectors and dealers have an acute need to be aware of the complicated legal situation in the United States that surrounds the acquisition and buying and selling of American Indian art. In this context, the Antique Tribal Art Dealers Association has made a strong effort to educate its members. Instructive educational information that is useful for anyone interested in these issues is published at the Association's web site.⁴¹

While the broader issues of high-value, international art objects in the upscale art world are very well known and widely discussed, the narrower parallel issues that surround Mississippian Period artifacts are much less known. The categories of

Mississippian artifacts that edge into the "art world" scene are engraved shell objects, ceremonial axes, copper plates, stone statues, and pots.⁴² Present day dealing in Mississippian art is at a small scale compared with that in Mesoamerican art.⁴³

The farmer who picks up arrowheads from his fields and casually stores them in a jar in his barn scarcely seems to be violating any principle of ethics. When a similar farmer rents his property to relic hunters during the fallow season and they dig up and loot American Indian burials it is an entirely different matter, as exemplified by the digging at the Slack Farm site near Uniontown, Kentucky, in 1987. That looting received wide spread publicity thanks to a article in *National Geographic Magazine*.⁴⁴ In between these two extremes lies a whole spectrum (a grey-scale if you will) of difficult-to-classify, intermediate situations. Situations at various points on that spectrum have time and time again occurred in southwest Virginia and northeast Tennessee. In Virginia, the issues surrounding American Indian funerary objects have been discussed by professional archeologist Keith Egloff.⁴⁵ Probably the most prominent example of the destruction by looting of a Mississippian heritage site was what happened to the Craig Mound at the Spiro, Oklahoma, site.⁴⁶

In summary, as Craig Childs says:

We have no choice but to live among contradictions. If anyone tells you there is only one right answer to the conundrum of archaeology, he is trying to sell you something. At this point, considering all that has been removed, it is worth leaving the last pieces where they lie. As for what is already out of the ground, by all means, move it around, whether you repatriate it or pass it on to the next collector.⁴⁷ *Finders Keepers* page 239.

The Importance of Gorget Studies

Power Point slide 21 was titled "Gorget Studies are Important Because." It stated that studies of gorgets are important because they enable us to study relationships among the subdivisions of Mississippian culture using the styles of the gorgets. The image shown in Power Point slide 21 was the map titled "Locations of the Late Woodland and Mississippian Traditions" taken from page 214 of Ann Ottesen's thesis and colored by the author. The regions selected by Ottesen are listed in table 4:

Table 4: Locations of the Late Woodland and Mississippian Traditions according to Ottesen, 1979

Tradition	Color on Map in Power Point slide 20.
Upper Mississippian	Uncolored. It's the tiny region at the southwest corner of Lake Michigan
Langford	Uncolored. It's the slightly larger region to the southwest of Lake Michigan
Albee	Colored gray
Kincaid	Colored dark green
Fort Ancient	Colored red
Cumberland	Colored dark blue
Mississippian 1	Colored purple
Mississippian 2	Colored yellow
Mississippian 3	Colored light green
Mississippian 4	Colored light blue

In her exhaustive study, Ottesen cataloged categories of artifacts from 253 sites across the entire Mississippian traditions region. She included in her study thirteen classes of lithic materials (bauxite, cannel coal, catlinite, chlorite, fluorite, mica, shale, etc.), three classes of metals and metallic ores (copper, galena, and hematite), and nine classes of organic materials: pearls, seven species of shells, and the shell part columella. With respect to the gorgets Ottesen wrote "Although the stylistic data for these gorgets is incomplete, many of the so called 'Southern Cult' motifs: eagle dancer, serpent, scalloped disc, cross, cross and pair of birds (turkey or woodpecker), and masks with the weeping eye (Kneberg 1959: 5-27) seem to have been found throughout much of the area under study." Ottesen also made a five-page survey of engraved gorgets⁴⁸ with some being briefly assigned to styles. She reported that gorgets came from all the Mississippian tradition regions — see the detailed listings in Table 3 on page 8 here.

The main importance of the gorgets, apart from their intrinsic value as culture markers and distinctive works of art that honor their makers, is that they suggest two hitherto unremarked of Mississippian tradition regions. These regions are shown on the image from Power Point slide 22. Black region 1 is the West Virginia Mississippian tradition and black region 2 is the Holstonian Mississippian tradition. Both regions are characterized principally by the engraved marine shell gorgets: about a hundred in the former (due entirely to the work Darla Spencer) and over two hundred in the latter (due to my work). How has this situation been missed? I believe for two reasons: 1. Professional, or proper archeology, in these regions has been quite

sparse, and 2. The gorget making cultures of these region were not particularly mound builders, and in my opinion mounds have been often been regarded implicitly as a necessary component of a Mississippian tradition. Not so.

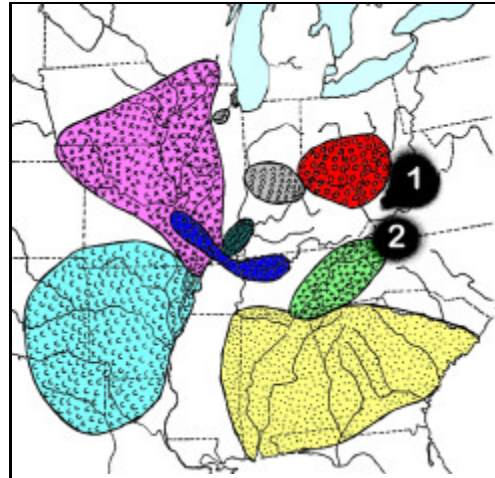
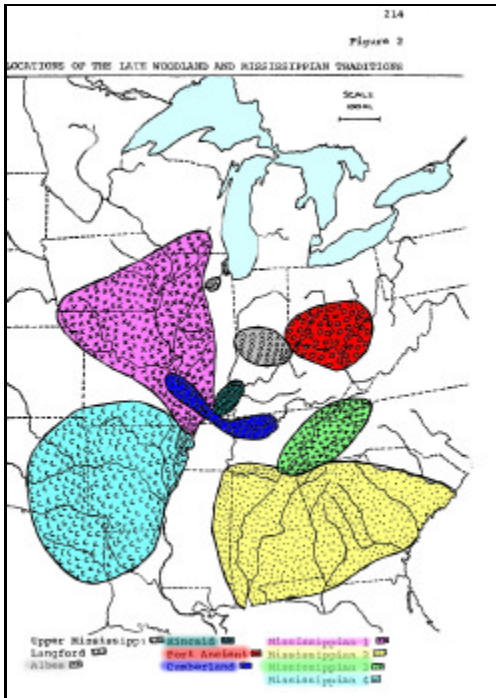


Image from Power Point slide 21. Titled "Gorget Studies are Important Because." This is the map titled "Locations of the Late Woodland and Mississippian Traditions" from page 214 of Ann Ottesen's thesis. Colored by the author.

Image from Power Point slide 22. Titled "Gorget Studies Add Two New Mississippian Culture Areas." The slide added that black region 1 is southern West Virginia and that black region 2 is southwest Virginia. These were NOT significant mound building culture. The map above is modified from the one shown above to the left.

My work on gorgets remains largely unpublished. I continue to discover additional specimens on a regular basis and plan eventually to publish a catalog of all of them. The map below was my Power Point presentation slide 17. It shows the distribution of Saltville style gorgets as it stood in 2006. The 1996 Brain and Phillips catalog showed nine pictures of Saltville style gorgets in this region (all derived from Jon Muller who tracked them down in 1964 and published them in his thesis⁴⁹ while at the same time defining the Saltville style).

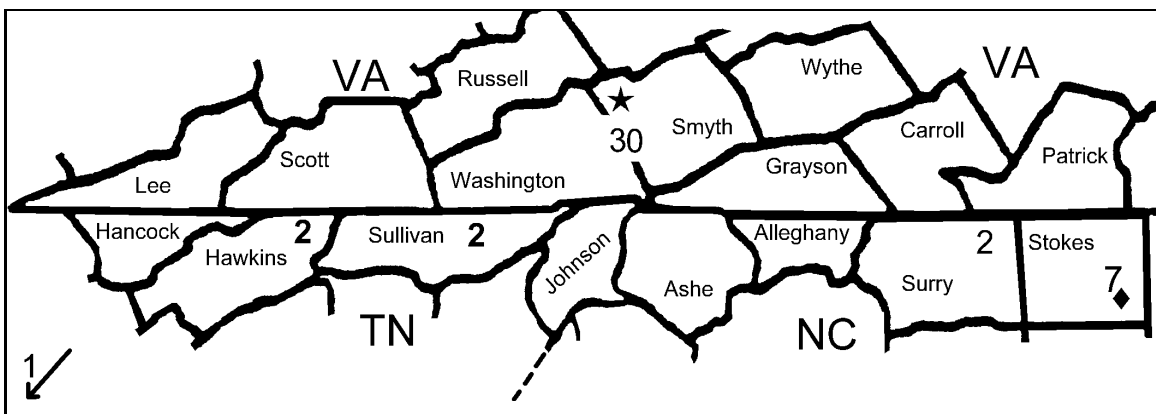


Image from Power Point presentation slide 17. Distribution of Saltville style gorgets in Holstonia. The star shows the location of the town of Saltville that gives them their style name. The diamond shows the early Upper Sauratown site which was a concentration point for this style of gorgets.⁵⁰ Author's map, here published for the first time.

The map above shows that I was able to assign four Saltville style gorgets to specific counties in northeast Tennessee, nine to specific counties in northwest North Carolina, and thirty to southwest Virginia, mainly to Smyth and Washington Counties and some that could not be localized beyond southwest Virginia generically. The total of 43 shown above has grown to over sixty since I prepared this map. The region in the map has also produced a large number of gorgets in styles other than Saltville. The Citico and the Lick Creek/Brakebill style specimens pictured above both come from the region on the map.

Power Point slide 23 (not reproduced here) was titled "Gorgets are Endangered Because," and listed the following bullets 1. Many are in the hands of aging men [sic] who have heirs lacking interest in them. 2. Some are in the hands of heirs who know not what they have. 3. Museums are reluctant to acquire them because of the grave goods issue. 4. They are fast becoming inaccessible.

With regard to aging men, again I quote Craig Childs.

"This is what happens to collections. They eventually fly apart. They are held as long as possible, but the owner's grip loosens. It is a principal dilemma of archaeology. Objects so much older than ourselves are bound to outlive our fascinations. Author Ernest Becker, in his book *Denial of Death*, proposed the notion of 'immortality projects.' According to Becker, these projects are what we create to outlast what he sees as the meaninglessness of our own deaths. Politics, philosophies, institutions, statues, anything we can pull together that will live longer than we do, are a bid for a kind of immortality. Artifact collections perfectly fit the bill. They are a way of reaching far beyond our era, into both the past and the future." *Finders Keepers* page 176.

The issue of the mortality of collectors is quite personal for me. As I note in the annotations to the gorget pictures above there are two collectors who allowed me to photograph their gorgets within the past five years who are both now dead. The fate of gorgets in the collections of persons who die is often problematic. Some get recycled by to other collectors via direct sale and purchase; some pass through the hands of dealers; and, many, I suspect, simply disappear.

Gorgets and Museums

Museums could have a crucial role in preserving these collections, and I have tried to interest the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA), pictured in the image from Power Point slide 24, in acquiring some of the gorgets in private collections in Virginia. However, there has been no progress so far in getting the museum to acquire any gorgets, despite the gorgets being a truly Native Virginia Indian art form. In May of 2011 the Board of the VMFA voted to repatriate to the Lúkaaxh.ádi clan of the Tlingit tribe of Alaska the Kingfisher Fort Headdress that the VMFA had purchased along with other Northwest Coast tribal objects from the Portland Art Museum in 1955.⁵¹ The repatriation ceremony (held in Suitland, Maryland) marked the first time that the VMFA had returned an object in its collection to a tribal entity under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990.



Image from Power Point slide 24. The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia.

I have been warmly received here and the staff know about engraved marine shell gorgets and the remarkable specimens that I have documented for Virginia.

Author's picture, 2010.

Marine shell gorgets are displayed, however, in a number of public museums and I have seen and photographed them at such diverse locations as the Space Farms Museum in New Jersey; the Museum of the Cherokee Indian in Cherokee, North Carolina; the Museum of the Middle Appalachians in Saltville, Virginia; the McClung Museum in Knoxville, Tennessee; and the Tennessee State Museum in Nashville.

Discussion and Responses to "Questions to the Submitter"

Power Point presentation slide 25 "In Conclusion" returned to the beginning and reiterated the message that I believe only an improbable détente among professional archeologists, museums, relic collectors, and the American Indian community, might offer a way forward to saving the wisdom of the gorgets. Such is my general conclusion.

After the submission of the abstract of this paper I received four "Comments for Submitter." I reproduce these comments and my responses here.

Comment number 1 for Submitter. Will this paper clarify options beyond improbable? Answer: It is my opinion that all options are improbable. The practical situation is that there are important gorget collections in the possession of old men and that when they die there is typically little or no rational plan for the disposal of their gorgets (and the remainder of their collections). The current best case scenario is that the collection will be sold either as a whole or in pieces to other old men who will hold it for a few more years. Often dealers in American Indian relics will arrange for the disposition of and recycling of the collection. Sometimes entire collections are auctioned. In other cases the heirs of the old men hold the collection knowing that it is important, but being out of contact with either museums or other relic collectors have little idea what to do with the collection other than keeping it out of respect for their father or grandfather. The overall prospect seems to be one of slow decay, loss of information, and eventual dispersal of the gorgets beyond any accounting. Some of them I am sure have already been lost forever. Many of the gorgets in private collections lack accurate site of origination or provenience information. Each time they change hands it becomes harder and harder to track the origin of the gorgets, assuming it was even known and recorded in the first place.

Comment number 2 for Submitter. Is there any dialogue being engaged with or expectations held by indigenous source communities who now maintain customary authority over the originating landscapes? Narrowly, yes. I am an adopted member of the Remnant Yuchi Nation of Kingsport, Tennessee, and there is little doubt in my mind that the best "cultural affiliation" we can assign to many gorgets, especially those from Tennessee and Virginia, is Yuchi. The Remnant Yuchi Nation of Kingsport Tennessee would like to receive these gorgets for a tribal museum. However the Remnant Yuchi Nation is neither state nor federally recognized. The Yuchi people in Oklahoma are subordinated to the federally recognized Creek Nation in a long standing unsatisfactory situation, about which Ph.D. theses have been written. Broadly, since most of the gorgets are not assigned a cultural affiliation (for example specifically not by many Tennessee professional archeologists) the question of whom to engage in dialog is complicated and troublesome.

Comment number 3 for Submitter. This is an exploration of an important area faced by museums on a daily basis. Could submitter explore further the issues of professional ethics and valuation of these pieces on the market? I claim no expertise or authority on the matter of ethics. If a museum is offered a gorget I would hope that the museum would accept the gorget as a temporary custodian, attempt to gather all possible notes and provenience information about the gorget, and accurately document it with photographs. As noted above, my interest is in the history of the gorget and the story it tells, not in the gorget as an object. I clearly separate the issue of the object itself from the issue of the historic value of the object and the stylistic and iconographic information it contains. The dollar values of gorgets are established by the relic trading market (and are readily available via a well considered Google search). I realize that people will have various opinions, perhaps strong opinions, about that situation. On the internet, or at relic shows, I regularly see gorgets with offering prices. Cynically, I have observed that a museum could probably purchase every gorget on the market for a fraction of the price of some fashionable painting that I would personally consider not worth buying. As Craig Childs says: "We have no choice but to live among contradictions."

Comment number 4 for Submitter. Will you discuss repatriation? If (and I stress if) a sensible cultural affiliation can be established (a complex matter) gorgets should be repatriated. However, I firmly believe that all possible documentation, including photographs, should be obtained before repatriation, and that that information should be publicly available, preferably under a Creative Commons license or in the public domain.

Acknowledgments

My thanks to the professionals Duane Esarey David Fuerst, Jon Muller, and, Darla Spencer, who have encouraged me over the years in my gorget studies. Thanks to Harry Haynes at the Museum of the Middle Appalachians in Saltville for first introducing me to the possibilities of gorget studies. Thanks to Lawrence Richardson, the pioneer student of the Yuchi in Virginia. Thanks to Paula Rankin. Thanks to the many collectors of gorgets who have invited me to see and photograph their collections; those who were willing to be identified are credited in the photographs above. I particularly thank the World

Archeological Conference and Professor Larry Zimmerman for providing me with the opportunity to make this presentation. Thanks to Woktela the Yuchi historian for many helpful discussions. Thanks to Chief Lee Vest Vest and the Remnant Yuchi Nation of Kingsport, Tennessee, who understand what I am trying to accomplish. As ever, thanks to Deena Flinchum. All the opinions expressed here are mine and mine alone as are all errors of omission and commission.

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