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Embedded

Five Thousand Years of Shell Symbolism in the Southeast

AARON DETER-WOLF AND TANYA M. PERES

In 1882/83, the Rev. J. Owen Dorsey recorded a description of mourning rituals and war customs among the Kansa, in which he described the contents of a sacred war bundle. This bundle contained five layers of wrappings, in the center of which was a "clam shell . . . brought from 'the great water at the east' by the ancestors of the Kansas" (Dorsey 1885: 673). Dorsey did not see the "clam shell" in person but records that the item was "made like the face of a man, with eyes, face, teeth, etc." This description and a sketch provided to Dorsey by the bundle keeper, Paha^{n}le-gaqli (figure 7.1) shell, reveal that the item included in the Kansa war bundle was a Chickamauga-style shell mask gorget. This distinctive late prehistoric artifact type, typically manufactured from the outer whorl of a whelk (*Busycon* sp.) shell, appears throughout the American Mid-South during the Mississippian period (circa 800–1500 BC).

The ideology and artifact complex of the Mississippian Ideological Interaction Sphere (MIIS; previously known as the Southern Cult and the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex) was centered in the southeastern United States and peaked 500–600 years before Dorsey visited the Kansa (Lankford 2011; Reilly and Garber 2007). This suggests that the Kansa were either reusing a Mississippian shell mask some 500 years after its creation (Howard 1956) or were manufacturing new objects reminiscent of the MIIS. Regardless, the principal significance of the shell artifact from

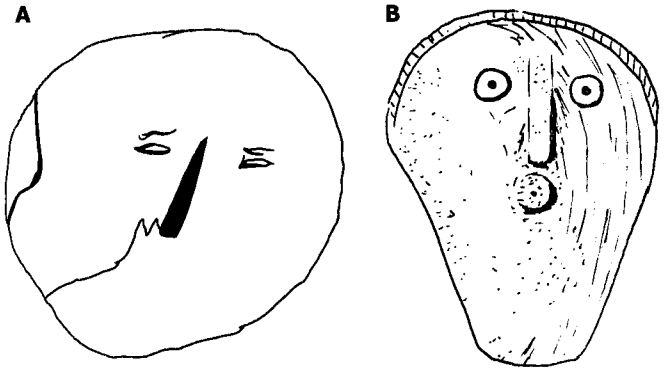

Figure 7.1. Sketch of the "clam shell" from the Kansa war bundle (*A*, after Dorsey 1885: 673, fig. 3) and a comparative Chickamauga-style Mississippian period shell mask gorget (*B*, after McCurdy 1915: 65, fig. 11).

the Kansa bundle as related to Dorsey was not the iconography depicted on its surface but rather the raw material the artifact was constructed from. That material, marine shell, was symbolic of the ancestral origins of the Kansa along the coastal Southeast.

The myriad of imagery depicted on marine shell during the late prehistoric period in the American Southeast was meaningful and significant and has provided the basis for important examinations of Mississippian art and iconography (e.g., Brain and Phillips 1996; Lankford et al. 2011; Phillips and Brown 1978, 1984; Reilly and Garber 2007). We argue, however, that the selection of marine gastropods by late prehistoric artisans as an iconographic substrate was explicit and deliberate. By the late prehistoric period, shells were embedded with 5,000 years of physical and symbolic geography. This chapter examines ancient Southeastern Native Americans' use of freshwater and marine shell to recall their ancestral origins; sanctify and lay claim to the landscape through the construction of deliberate landmarks; legitimize political power through the acquisition and display of symbolic, exotic material; and signify and enable access to supernatural power.

Ancestral Landscapes and the Consecration of Riparian Space

Recent research by Saunders and Russo (2011) shows that prehistoric occupants of the Florida panhandle were engaged in deliberate exploitation

of shell by at least 7200 BP. By two thousand years later, in the Late Archaic, shell was used as a raw material at sites throughout the interior and coastal Southeast. It is widely assumed that ancient inhabitants of the region consumed invertebrate animals and deposited the leftover calcium carbonate shell in specific locations, resulting in the formation of distinctive features identified archaeologically as shell middens, mounds, and rings. The specific social or ritual function of these constructions is not readily clear (e.g., Claassen 2010; Marquardt 2010a; Saunders and Russo 2011). Regardless, both freshwater and marine mollusks constituted convenient, plentiful, and durable construction materials that were deliberately selected for use in monument construction.

The available evidence suggests that concerted shell-bearing deposits appeared in the interior (noncoastal) portion of the Mid-South by at least 8000 year cal. BP. The earliest shell middens along the Duck River in Tennessee and Green River in Kentucky formed around 8000 and 6200 cal. BP, respectively (see summary in Claassen 2010). Radiocarbon dates recently obtained from shell-bearing sites along the Cumberland River in the vicinity of Nashville, Tennessee, indicate initial shell midden and mound formation during the period circa 6600–7000 cal. BP (Deter-Wolf and Peres 2014; Miller et al. 2012; Peres and Deter-Wolf 2013; Peres, Deter-Wolf, and Myers 2012).

The cultural and environmental forces that gave rise to the appearance of shell mounds and middens along the waterways of the interior Mid-South hundreds of years after the first coastal manifestations remain the subject of ongoing speculation and debate (e.g., Anderson 2010; Marquardt 2010a, 2010b). One possibility is that the initial construction of these features coincided with inland migrations of coastal populations during the later portion of the Archaic. Geomorphological evidence from the Florida Gulf Coast shows that rising sea levels resulted in a shoreline retreat of approximately 12 meters per year during the period circa 6000–7000 BP (Faught and Donoghue 1997; Saunders and Russo 2011). This massive environmental shift may have spurred the beginnings of a multigenerational movement northward (Anderson et al. 2007). The ancestors of these formerly coastal groups brought with them their traditional subsistence strategies and construction methods, manifested in the archaeological record by the appearance of intensive shellfish exploitation resulting in the formation of large shell midden deposits.

Specific evidence for the journey of the coastal-estuarine diaspora into

the interior Mid-South is admittedly sparse at this point, and whether future research will support the hypothesis of inland population movements remains to be seen. Ample data do exist in the form of artifact type/style similarities to suggest that by the later portion of the Middle Archaic (circa 5000 BP), sites below the Ohio-Missouri confluence were culturally oriented toward the Gulf Coastal Southeast. Examinations of projectile point styles (Nance 1986), bone pins (Jefferies 1997), and variations in burial cache inclusions (Deter-Wolf 2004; McNutt 2008) reveal patterns of association in which interior Archaic groups were "more closely affiliated" (Jefferies 1997: 481) with populations to the south.

Although traditional discussions of shell middens and mounds of the interior Southeast have focused on these sites as an Archaic phenomenon, recent research (e.g., Deter-Wolf et al. 2010; Peacock 2002; Peres, Deter-Wolf, and Myers 2012) reveals that in some areas of the Southeast, shell midden formation continued during the ensuing Woodland (circa 3000–1000 BP) and Mississippian periods, albeit with some interruptions. Radiocarbon dates from shell-bearing sites along the Cumberland River west of Nashville reveal that the regional variant of the Shell Mound Archaic spanned the period circa 4800–7000 cal. BP, after which shell-bearing deposits disappeared for more than seven centuries. Shell middens appeared again in the region around the onset of the Woodland period, circa 3800 cal. BP (Deter-Wolf and Peres 2013; Miller et al. 2012; Peres, Deter-Wolf, and Myers 2012).

Our recent examinations of shell-bearing sites in Middle Tennessee have led us to conclude that the formation of Archaic shell mounds and middens in that region represent deliberate modification of the landscape at the intersection of riverine and riparian resource zones (Peres, Deter-Wolf, and Myers 2012). By processing and depositing shell in specific locales, inhabitants of shell-bearing sites gradually altered the natural landscape. These areas continued to be used for mollusk deposition and burial of the dead for hundreds, if not thousands, of years and yet accumulated very little of the detritus of everyday life. Excavations by the Middle Cumberland Archaeology Project at site 40DV7 along the Cumberland River in 2012 revealed that the Late Archaic shell mound/midden was constructed between the period approximately 4100–5800 rcy BP (Peres and Deter-Wolf 2013). The shell deposit was composed principally of small aquatic gastropods and contained negligible amounts of lithic debitage, stone tools, and vertebrate remains. The upper surface of the shell showed

signs of exposure and weathering but no evidence of having functioned as a residential surface (Peres, Baluha, et al. 2012). Other Late Archaic shell middens along this same stretch of the Cumberland River exhibit internal stratigraphy and features but are similarly lacking in nonshell artifacts (Deter-Wolf et al. 2010; Miller at al. 2012).

While the near-absence of daily activity within the shell middens implies their function as formalized, symbolically loaded areas, the inclusion of burials within these landmarks affirms their role in consecrating and claiming the landscape. Shell-bearing deposits containing human burials within the interior Southeast served to mark territory and identify community ownership of land and resources. In other areas of the world, cemeteries have long been recognized as territorial markers through which groups laid claim to a specific habitation area or environmental zone by virtue of their ancestral presence (e.g., Renfrew 1976; Zevelebil 2008). This same pattern has been noted in the lower Illinois River valley, where Charles and Buikstra (1983) suggest that the presence of formal cemeteries implies group membership and that these sites functioned as territorial boundaries. Claassen (2010: 213) suggests that shell midden mortuaries created sacred places and boundaries that transcended social and territorial ones. The inclusion of ancestral remains within the shell monuments of the interior Mid-South is critical to the role of those constructions not only as territorial (whether physical or spiritual) markers but also as monuments to consecrate group identity and recall the ancestral homeland in the "great water."

Prestige Goods and Differential Access

The earliest appearance of shell middens and mounds along the waterways of the interior Southeast, during the Middle to Late Archaic, coincided with changes in social structure, including but not limited to the spread of exchange networks, a rise in social stratification, the appearance of corporate burial grounds, and the presence of highly skilled craftspeople. All of these trends are exemplified by the exchange of, and differential access to, exotic marine shell objects originating in the Gulf of Mexico.

Research by Claassen and Sigmann (1993) used trace-element analysis to identify the probable source of marine shells from nine archaeological sites in the interior Southeast. Their findings reveal that marine shells distributed throughout the region during the prehistoric period originated

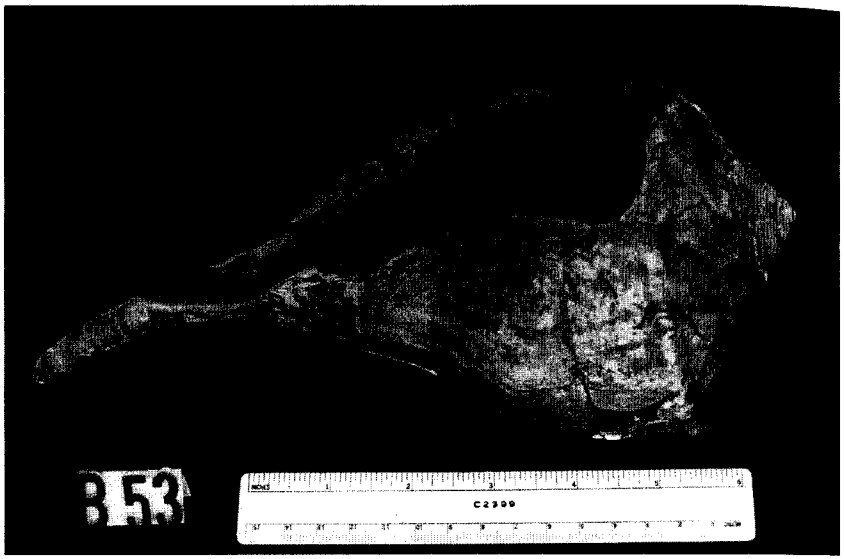

Figure 7.2. Lightning whelk "cup" from an Archaic burial at the Anderson site, Tennessee. (Photo courtesy of the Tennessee Division of Archaeology, Nashville.)

in a variety of locales around the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean. At least one artifact from the Archaic period site of Indian Knoll in Kentucky originated along the Florida Gulf Coast, probably the Tampa Bay locale (Claassen and Sigmann 1993: 344). Marine shell from the Ward site in Kentucky originated in tropical Gulf waters similar to those found in southern Florida and northern Mexico (Claassen and Sigmann 1993: 344).

While the exact sources of marine shell and precise routes along which it traveled into the interior Southeast during the Archaic are the subject of ongoing research, the importance of these materials as indicators of social status is clear within the archaeological record. By the late Middle Archaic, marine shell artifacts including gorgets, pendants, pins, beads, atlatl weights, and "cups" began to appear in mortuary assemblages from shell midden sites. Notable examples of marine shell burial goods from the Archaic include the impressive inventory of artifacts fashioned from "conch,"[1] which were recovered during the 1940s at Shell Mound Archaic sites along the Green River in Kentucky (Watson 2005: table 23.12; Webb 1974). Several late Middle Archaic burials from the Anderson site, along the Harpeth River in Middle Tennessee, included an extensive assortment

of marine shell artifacts, including marine shell columella beads, atlatl weights, and whelk (*Busycon* sp.) "cups" (figure 7.2) (Dowd 1989).

While the variable inclusion of exotic artifacts in burial contexts throughout the midcontinent provides evidence for the florescence of trade and exchange networks and increasingly stratified societies during the Archaic, marine shell also carried ritual and ancestral significance. The Fernvale site, located along the South Harpeth River in Tennessee, was occupied principally during the terminal portion of the Late Archaic following the cessation of shell midden construction along the middle portion of the Cumberland River (Deter-Wolf 2013). Feature 71 from Fernvale consisted of a shallow pit that contained an undecorated, center-drilled lightning whelk (*Busycon sinistrum*) gorget (figure 7.3). That artifact was placed in the eastern end of the feature covering 52 marine shell beads. While similar undecorated, center-drilled marine shell gorgets appear at Archaic

Figure 7.3. *Busycon sinistrum* gorget from the Fernvale site, Tennessee. (Photo by Teresa Ingalls, courtesy of the Tennessee Division of Archaeology, Nashville.)

sites along the Green River in Kentucky, including at Indian Knoll (Webb 1974) during the period circa 4000–5000 BP, the Fernvale gorget is the only known example of this artifact type from the Middle Cumberland region.

A radiocarbon assay for the gorget from Fernvale returned a date of 5870–5970 cal. BP, which predates the Green River specimens (Deter-Wolf 2013). A radiocarbon assay for one of the shell disk beads recovered from beneath the gorget returned a date of 3550–3690 cal. BP (Deter-Wolf 2013). The date from the bead clusters tightly with other Late Archaic radiocarbon assays from the site and reveals that the origin of the gorget significantly predates its ultimate deposition. The Fernvale gorget is unlikely to have remained in active use as a piece of body decoration for nearly two millennia. Instead, the artifact was probably obtained from an earlier mortuary deposit and deliberately placed in the dedicated feature alongside recently created shell beads. The gorget's level of preservation suggests that it was surrounded by a very low-acid matrix in its original context, a condition notably found within shell middens and shell mounds.

Regardless of its specific origins, the curation of the marine shell gorget at Fernvale directly recalls the prehistoric gorget contained in the late eighteenth-century Kansa war bundle. Marine shell gorgets (albeit of unknown type and antiquity) were also present in other Historic period Kansa bundles, as well as in examples from the Osage and Crow (Lowie 1922: 421; Skinner 1915: 748). The placement of the Fernvale gorget and beads suggests that these artifacts were originally contained within a biodegradable wrapping, and it is possible that they constitute the remains of a sacred corporate bundle (Deter-Wolf 2013). As with historic examples, the Fernvale gorget undoubtedly carried ancestral and geographic significance for the terminal Archaic period inhabitants of the site.

The widespread distribution and symbolic importance of marine shell during the terminal Archaic and early portion of the Woodland is also exhibited by the Glacial Kame/Red Ocher Mortuary Complex located in northwestern Ohio through southern Ontario. Although this complex has not been thoroughly examined, one defining characteristic is the inclusion of distinctive "sandal sole" gorgets made from the left-handed lightning whelk (*Busycon sinistrum*) (Cunningham 1948; Keller 2009; Ritzenthaler and Quimby 1962). Until recently, the most southerly Glacial Kame gorget recorded was from Christian County, Kentucky, north of the

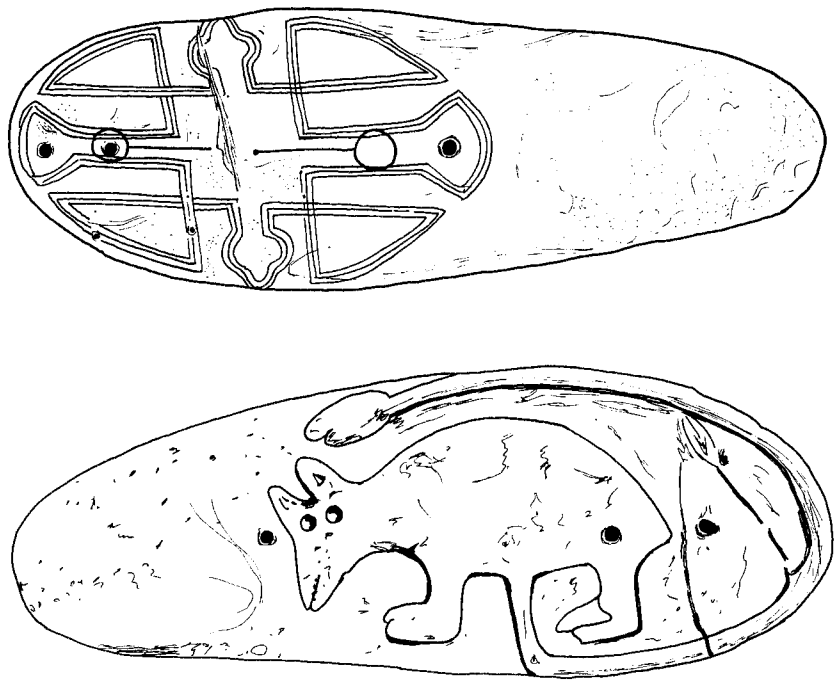

Figure 7.4. "Sandal sole" marine shell gorgets from the Glacial Kame Mortuary Complex, in the collection of the Ohio Historical Society.

Kentucky-Tennessee state line (Keller 2009). However, a recent examination by the authors of unpublished material from the Qualls Cave site resulted in the identification of a sandal sole gorget in a mortuary assemblage from northern Middle Tennessee. Glacial Kame gorgets also appear to be among the earliest examples of already symbolically loaded marine shell artifacts being further supplemented by the addition of iconographic motifs (figure 7.4).

It is widely accepted that the Archaic to Woodland transition (circa 3000 BP) generally coincides with cultural shifts throughout the interior Southeast, including declines in artifact diversity, general paucity of grave goods, and scarcity of exotic raw materials (see discussion in Kidder 2006). Throughout the interior Mid-South, sites witnessed a general shift from earlier southern/Gulf Coast trade goods toward increased value of prestige goods originating from the Ohio Valley. Despite the widespread distribution and apparent dominance of Hopewell and Adena artifacts

and culture, marine shell remained an important symbolic, albeit less-intensively employed, material throughout the Woodland period.

The use of marine shell as a high-value social currency clearly peaked during the Mississippian period with the Braden art style, which originated at Cahokia in the American Bottom (Brown 2011). As Cahokian culture and associated artistic motifs spread through the Southeast, there began an ongoing negotiation of collective memories between the existing inhabitants of the region and those Pauketat (2007: 118) calls "foreign would-be rulers." This invention/reinvention of communal traditions resulted in the blending of creation stories (Brown 2005; Pauketat 2007) and visual markers linked to the ancestral homeland in the "great water to the east" (that is, shell middens and marine shell artifacts) to legitimize the Cahokians' right to rule and occupy territories in the Mid-South. This claim was strengthened through trade and fictive kin alliances (Hall 1991; Pauketat 2007) with groups along the Florida panhandle and possibly as far south as the Calusa-dominated region of southwestern Florida.

As the Mississippian cultures of the interior Southeast again focused their attention toward the Gulf Coast as an important source for symbolic and prestige goods, they apparently relaunched and expanded Archaic trade networks. Trace-element analysis of three marine shells recovered archaeologically from Monks Mound, the principal mound construction at Cahokia, in Illinois, revealed chemical signatures representative of different marine waters (Claassen and Sigmann 1993). One of these artifacts likely originated from the Atlantic Ocean, one from the central or western portion of the Gulf of Mexico, and one from warm tropical waters such as those found off of the northern Mexican Gulf Coast.

Mississippian artifacts crafted from marine shell include a variety of objects that were worn, displayed, exchanged, and consulted. These gorgets, beads, cups, and pendants are most often recovered from Mississippian burials, although they are sometimes found in elite or elite-associated household contexts (e.g., Trubitt 2005). It is widely understood that during the Mississippian period, marine shell items were created for elites within elite-associated production areas (Trubitt 2003, 2005). Trubitt (2005) found that after AD 1200, shell-working areas were brought into Cahokia proper from the periphery, so that the elites could effectively control the access to both the exotic raw material (marine shell) and the finished objects (though see Meyers, chapter 4, this volume).

The use of marine shell during late prehistoric times became part of an evolving political history that Pauketat (2007: 118) refers to as the "elaborate retelling of the Middle Mississippian narrative through art and mortuary theater," in which Mississippian elites were grafting their own mythology onto the traditional symbolic medium of marine shell (e.g., Cobb and Giles 2009). This was done both through the inscription of these beliefs onto the shell itself (as epitomized by shell artifacts from Spiro) and in the reimagining of the mythical role these materials played.

Embedded Meanings

Recent research (e.g., Brown 2005, 2011) has established linguistic and cultural continuity between the late prehistoric Mississippian culture and early historic Siouan speakers, in particular the Dhegiha and Chiwere linguistic branches. Consequently, it is now widely accepted that careful analysis of Siouan beliefs can inform our understanding of late prehistoric art and culture. Various Siouan groups incorporated both marine and freshwater shells as principal components of their sacred bundles. During his 1819 expedition to the Rocky Mountains, Edwin James (1823: 325) described an Omaha sacred bundle that contained a large shell that had been "transmitted from the ancestry" of the tribe. He describes the ritual deployment of that artifact as follows:

> Previously to undertaking a national expedition against an enemy, the sacred shell is consulted as an oracle. For this purpose, the magi of the band seat themselves around the great medicine lodge, the lower part of which is then thrown up like curtains, and the exterior envelop is carefully removed from the mysterious parcel, that the shell may receive air. A portion of the tobacco, consecrated by being long suspended to the skin mats, or coverings of the shell, is now taken and distributed to the magi, who fill their pipes with it, to smoke to the great medicine. During this ceremony, an individual occasionally inclines his head forward, and listens attentively to catch some sound which he expects to issue from the shell. At length some one imagines that he hears a sound like that of a forced expiration of air from the lungs, or like the noise made by the report of a gun at a great distance. This is considered as a favourable omen, and

> the nation prepare for the projected expedition with a confidence of success. But on the contrary, should no sound be perceived, the issue of the expedition would be considered doubtful. (James 1823: 326)

In addition to serving as oracles, sacred shells were believed to hold extraordinary power over life and death. This is exemplified in the origin legend of the Omaha Shell Society, in which the acquisition of paired white (female) and dark (male) shells summons the spirits of dead children watched over by a shadowy being:

> Just then as they stood holding their shells, the mist parted, making an opening down the lake like a path and in the path stood the four children, well and happy. As the parents stood gazing in wonder, the children spoke, and said: "Do not grieve for us. We are content. Death is not to be dreaded. It is not as you think it to be. In course of time you will be coming and then you will know for yourselves." And as their voices died away the mist closed the path and they were seen no more but in the mist, as through a veil, they saw the outline of a strange animal [figure 7.5]. It seemed as big as the great lake. Its skin was covered with hair and was brown like that of the deer. The ridge of its back was serrated with tufts of hair. It had branching horns and hoofs like the deer, and a slender tail with a tuft at the end, which swept toward the sky to the farthest end of the lake. At last this mysterious shadowy figure melted away and the lake lay quiet before the astonished couple. (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911: 514–15)

In the stratified cosmos envisioned by Mississippian society, the Great Serpent (Misehbeshu, in Ojibwa) was the Master of the Beneath World. This creature existed in opposition to Above World beings such as the Thunderers and could assume the guise of the Underwater Panther, the Horned Water Serpent, or the Piasa described in the Omaha Shell Society legend (Lankford 2007a, 2007b, 2011). In exploring the role of the Great Serpent in eastern North America, Lankford (2007b) relates that Misehbeshu bestowed his blessings in the form of gifts of his own body, including his scales, which appear in the Middle World as shells and copper. These physical remains of the Great Serpent functioned as first-order relics among Mississippian society.

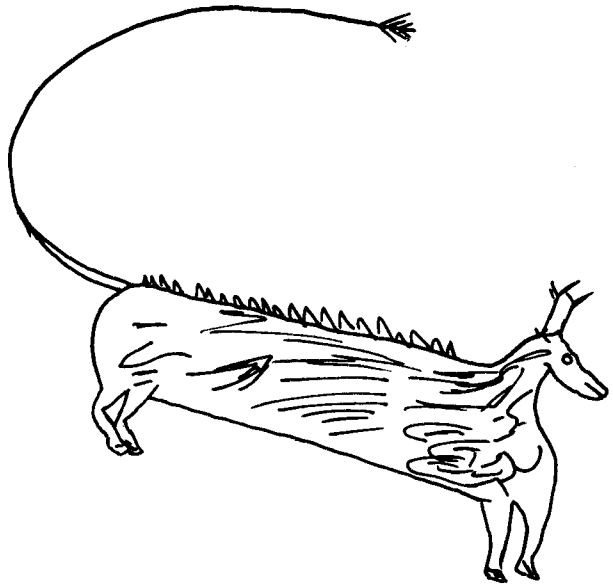

Figure 7.5. Misehbeshu, the Great Serpent (after Fletcher and La Flesche 1911: 515, fig. 107).

In his discussion of Catholic symbology, Speirs (2004: 167) notes that relics by their very nature are "old" and removed from their original living context. They are meant to stir emotions and responses in those who manipulate and view them and thereby create a contemporary context that keeps the relic alive. In this manner, marine shell artifacts are intimately associated with the body of Misehbeshu and the Beneath World. Lankford (2007a: 29) notes that apart from the designs on their surface, shell gorgets "intrinsically represented the Beneath World and its power." This connection is reiterated by Fletcher and La Flesche (1911: 457), who, in their discussion of the Omaha Shell Society, relate that shells were "connected with death and the continuation of life after death, as well as with water and the beginnings of life." The implicit correlation between shell and the Beneath World precluded the need for placement of explicit Beneath World motifs upon their surface and freed that space for the inscription and invocation of additional celestial forces and/or specific other-than-human-persons.

In the late nineteenth century, Fletcher and La Flesche (1911) documented that the Omaha kept the Sacred Shell wrapped in a bundle and

Figure 7.6. Female effigy seated in a helmet shell, recovered from the Sequatchie Valley, Tennessee (after Troost 1845: 361).

stored within the Tent of War, directly associated with the sacred Cedar Pole. Unfortunately, the specific origin and symbolic value of these items had been lost before they were documented in the 1870s. Legends of the Omaha Shell Society suggest that the Sacred Shell was connected with death, the recycling and continuation of life, and water, "the medium for transmitting power from the Above to the mother earth" (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911: 187). According to Fletcher and La Flesche, the Cedar Pole was associated with the first appearance of humans and with the Thunderers. The juxtaposition of the pole and shell within the Omaha Tent of War created balance between the Above and Beneath Worlds, as well as between male (pole) and female (shell) concepts (Myers 1992). Duncan (2011: 31) identifies such earth/sky, male/female juxtapositions as "unified dualism" and notes that they are "an ever present theme in Dhegihan cosmology."

There is strong ethnographic evidence that ancient Native Americans associated shells with female principles (Claassen 2008, 2011). Representational evidence of this association comes in the form of several figurines

from the Mississippian period. In his early discussion of prehistoric art from Tennessee, Troost (1845: 361) illustrates a find from the Sequatchie Valley consisting of a female ceramic effigy seated within the outer whorl of a marine gastropod that he identifies as a flame helmet (*Cassis flammea*) (figure 7.6). The interior whorls and columella of the shell had been removed to create a "sanctuary" for the figurine (Troost 1845: 360–61).

In 2009, excavations in East St. Louis uncovered the so-called Exchange Avenue Figurine, a flint clay figurine depicting a kneeling woman with a gastropod positioned cup-up at her knees (Caba 2011) (figure 7.7). The shape and positioning of the outer whorl suggest to us that the Exchange Avenue Figurine is holding a modified helmet shell (*Cassis* sp.) with the central columella and interior whorls removed, just as seen in the Sequatchie Valley example. The Exchange Avenue Figurine differs significantly from the three other examples of Mississippian female flint clay figurines (the Westbrook, Keller, and Birger figurines) in that it holds a shell

Figure 7.7. The Exchange Avenue Figurine, East St. Louis (after Caba 2011: 12).

rather than a sacred bundle (Sharp 2012) (though see below). Conversely, none of the other female figurines exhibit explicitly marine motifs.

Both the Sequatchie Valley effigy and the Exchange Avenue Figurine undoubtedly depict one of the other-than-human-persons who inhabited the Mississippian cosmos. Other examples of female figurines, pipes, statues, and effigy ceramics from the Mississippian period have been identified as the Old-Woman-Who-Never-Dies, also known as First Woman or Corn Mother (Brown 2011; Duncan 2011; Duncan and Diaz-Granados 2004; Smith and Miller 2009). Reilly (2004) connects the entire flint clay figurine corpus to the Morning Star myth cycle and suggests that all the depicted individuals represent specific characters within that narrative. While we are at present unable to identify the Exchange Avenue Figurine or the Sequatchie Valley effigy as a specific other-than-human-person or female character in the Morning Star cycle, the shell symbolism present in both pieces reveals a connection to the Beneath World, the home of the Old-Woman-Who-Never-Dies.

Our recent analysis of material excavated in the 1970s at the Qualls Cave site in northern Middle Tennessee resulted in the identification of another modified helmet shell. Much like the Sequatchie Valley specimen, the Qualls Cave shell had the columella and interior whorls removed in antiquity. The shell contained portions of several turtle shell rattles that appeared to have been burned and ritually "killed" prior to interment, along with the cremated remains of a human child. Ethnographic evidence from Southeastern Native American groups shows that turtle shell rattles, like gastropods, are associated with females (Hally 2008).

As already discussed, ethnographic data from the Great Plains reveal that shells were often included within sacred bundles. However, the shells themselves could also function as bundles. The Sacred Shell from the Omaha Tent of War consisted of a freshwater bivalve secured within an outer covering (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911). When the shell was opened at the Peabody Museum, it was found to contain two layered wrappings holding a scalp lock and "a small skin receptacle, greatly compressed, containing a dark substance, probably earth, in which were a few seeds, fragments of what may have been grass, and some hairs" (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911: 457). This evidence, combined with the archaeological example from Qualls Cave and the use of a shell to enshrine the Sequatchie Valley effigy, indicates that shells could function as ritually significant containers and, in some instances, may themselves have served as sacred bundles.

This latter function is affirmed by the juxtaposition of the shell held by the Exchange Avenue Figurine with bundles carried by other females in the flint clay corpus.

For the shells of large marine gastropods to function as containers (or "cups," as they are typically identified in the archaeological literature) required the removal of their inner whorls and central columella. Once separated from the shell, columellae were employed in the creation of beads, ear ornaments, and pendants, which held specific symbolic value by tying them to the male aspects of the cosmos.

The concept of the axis mundi appears in the cosmology of various Native American groups and functioned as a vertical support separating the stratified levels of the cosmos, as well as a conduit along which celestial energy, humans, and other-than-human-persons were able to travel. The axis mundi was typically manifested in the Middle World as either a tree or a wooden pole, such as the Cedar Pole from the Omaha Tent of War (Duncan 2011). This pole was wrapped and decorated with embellishments and ritual paraphernalia (Hall 2004) and often appears in Mississippian art as a spiral striped column (figure 7.8A). In other instances, the

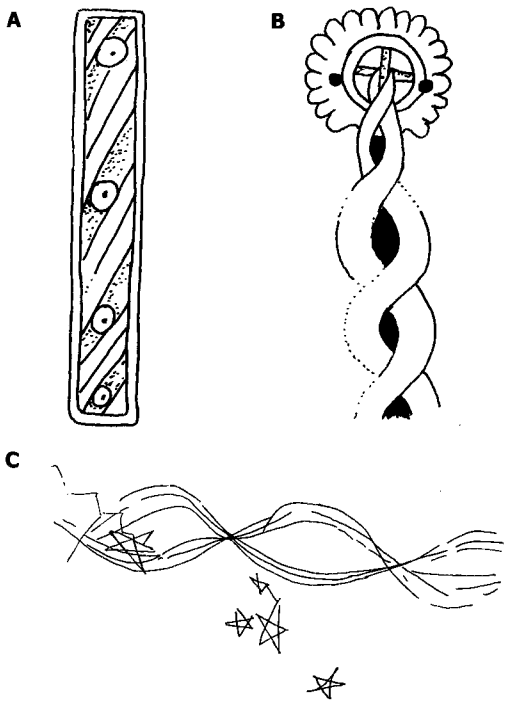

Figure 7.8. The spiraling axis mundi or central pole, as depicted on shell gorgets from Spiro, Oklahoma (*A* and *B*, after Phillips and Brown 1984: plates 128 and 130), and in Micmac rock art (*C*, after Wellmann 1979: fig. 909).

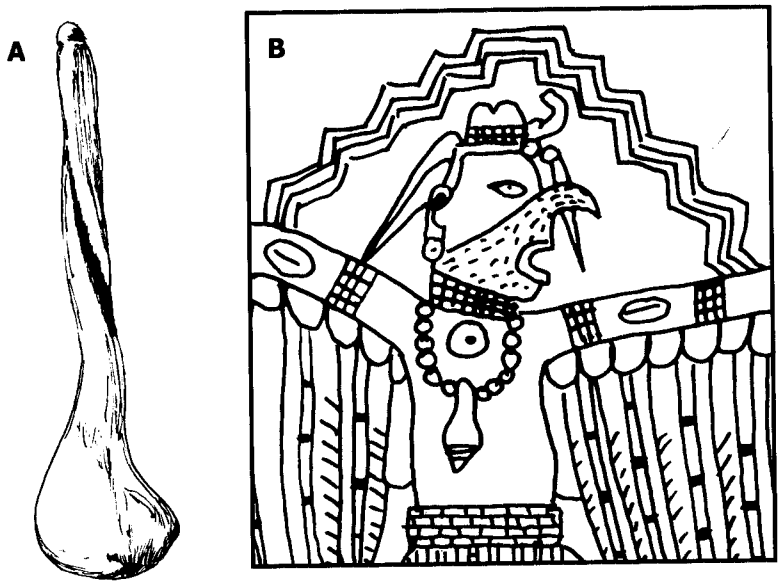

Figure 7.9. Marine shell columella pendant (*A*) and a similar pendant shown in Mississippian shell art worn by Morning Star, or the Birdman (*B*, after Phillips and Brown 1984: plate 203).

axis mundi is depicted as a spiraling double helix shape (figures 7.8B,C), representing the transmission of supernatural force between the levels of the cosmos.

The spiraling motion of the columella as it emerges from the center of a marine gastropod invokes the cosmic geometry of the wrapped central pole (figure 7.9A). As such, it was analogous to the sacred pole, functioned as a celestial conduit, and was connected to the male aspect of the male/female duality. This association is reiterated in the artistic record of the Mississippian period, in which columella pendants are worn exclusively by males and male other-than-human-persons. These ritual items often appear around the neck of the character of Morning Star, or the Birdman, as he appears on shell and copper media (figure 7.9B). The association of columella pendants with the Birdman character is so strong that it prompted Dye (2004: 195) to identify this artifact type as "the quintessential emblem of the warrior hero."

The male and female principles represented by different parts of marine gastropods reveal that the symbolic nature of shells was highly nuanced among late prehistoric peoples of the Mid-South. Marine gastropods, with their cave-like opening (female) and spiraling columella (male), presented the principles of unified dualism within a single creature and thus were particularly significant to Mississippian peoples.

It is also likely that specific marine and freshwater shell species held unique importance in the Mississippian realm. This may explain in part the apparently differential selection of lightning whelk for use in the construction of high-value shell artifacts as pendants, beads, gorgets, masks, and cups dating back through the Archaic. At present we do not have an in-depth understanding of Mississippian native taxonomy, and explicit identifications of species importance must await future research.

Conclusions

During the Mississippianization of the interior Southeast, marine shells became embedded with multiple layers of symbolism, yet they remained tied to the legitimization of power through the invocation of semimythical marine geography and coastal ancestry. As the new ruling class spread from Cahokia into the hinterland, they encountered the shell midden cemeteries and ancestral monuments of the region's inhabitants. As Claassen (2008: 235) states, "These early shell heaps became power points on the landscape symbolic of later peoples' origins from the beginning of time." The transplanted Mississippian elites did not formally bury their dead within the shell middens of the Mid-South, nor did they directly appropriate the shell midden phenomenon. Instead, they asserted their own ancestral ties and rights to govern this territory through a combination of conspicuous displays of marine shell jewelry and paraphernalia, extensive mortuary associations, and in some cases the construction of their own monuments and ceremonial spaces on top of the existing Archaic shell deposits.

Throughout human history, those seeking a higher status in society made blatant use of ancient or ancestral symbols to legitimize their power and prestige. The Mississippian groups that carried Cahokia's culture throughout the Southeast were no different. They appropriated existing symbolic materials and spaces to invoke a mythical ancestral homeland in the great waters of the Southeast and promote their legitimacy to control territory and resources. The creation of sacred landscapes and ancestral significance of marine shell that began in the Southeast during the

Archaic period became part of the Mississippian narrative and survived into the early Historic period.

Note

1. The raw material for many of these artifacts has been identified as "conch," a term that has been incorrectly used in a generic sense to mean a large marine gastropod. Upon examination of numerous shell gorgets and masks, Peres has determined they were crafted from the lightning whelk (*Busycon sinistrum*), not conch species. Conch species are in a different family from whelk and have distinct morphological differences.

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