

Mississippian Four-Crested-Bird Marine Shell Gorgets from Tennessee and Alabama

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Throughout the Mississippian world between about AD 1250-1450, birds were major elements in the iconography of circular gorgets engraved on marine shell (second only perhaps to the serpent theme of the Citico and other “rattlesnake” gorgets). Jeffrey P. Brain and Philip Phillips (1996) identified at least five “styles” of gorgets exhibiting significant avian themes (Cox Mound, Hixon, Jackson, Pearce, and Pickett). While Brain and Phillips (1996) only identified 23 examples of their “Cox Mound Style” gorgets, the Mississippian Gorget Project at Middle Tennessee State University has brought that total to 52 over the past decade. Created during a relatively brief period from about AD 1250-1400, they were first carved at workshops in Sumner County, Tennessee (ca. 1250-1350), and then at a slightly later date at workshops on the Tennessee River in northern Alabama (ca. 1325-1425).

The design of these gorgets consists of a series of four stacked concentric motifs (Figure 1; see also Lankford 2007) that define this set of objects: **1)** an equal-arm cross at the center; **2)** a rayed circle surrounding it; **3)** a looped square (aka “endless scroll”); and **4)** the four bird heads with sharp pointed beaks and crests. A final design element is, of course, the material on which the gorget was carved. Virtually all of the thousands of circular Mississippian gorgets are carved on marine shell – where

identified, always from the lightning whelk deriving from the marine waters of the southern coasts. Similar to my analysis and interpretation of the scalloped triskele gorgets (Smith 2018), I have divided the gorgets exhibiting four crested birds into “groups” based on their geographic distribution and chronology. Four-Crested-Bird Group I is the earliest (ca. AD 1250-1350), most numerous, and most coherent in their carving. The two most classic examples of Group I are from the central burial at the base of Mound 1 at Castalian Springs in Sumner County, Tennessee (Figure 2). All but one of the five gorgets in Figure 2 (the damaged triskele at lower left) were found in a bundle between the feet of the adult (female?) in that cedar-log-lined grave. Another early triskele (Group I) was found on the breast (see Smith 2018: Figure 1). These two Four-Crested-Bird gorgets (hereafter FCB gorgets) are so similar in execution that they were certainly made in the same workshop, if not by the same artisan. The only real difference is the absence of the rayed circle on one example – which I argue was an allowable “abbreviation” of the cross-in-circle/rayed circle that was probably determined by the size of the piece of marine shell available for carving. Also notable on these two is the creation of the central cross-in-circle motif through the use of fenestration – in this case, four holes drilled as large circles and then carved into “pie-piece” shapes on the front. This use of fenestration (negative space) on gorgetry is a hallmark of the artistic style of the Middle Cumberland Region (MCR) of Middle Tennessee (as can also be seen on the two triskeles). All five of the FCB gorgets from Mound 1 are similarly fenestrated. With one exception, all of the fenestrated FCB gorgets are from sites in the Cumberland River valley – and indeed most are similar enough to suggest they were made in the same workshop at Castalian Springs. The notion of those four pie-piece-shaped fenestrations was apparently important enough to at least one ancient person to add them at some point after completion of the gorget (Figure 3). This gorget was dug in the 1930s by Fain King at the Wickliffe Mounds in western Kentucky.

Unique among Mississippian complex gorget designs, there are two FCB gorgets from Cumberland River valley carved in a different medium – Chattanooga shale (Figure 4). Chattanooga shale is a soft sedimentary rock. As one moves eastward in Tennessee, the shale deposits grade gradually into slate – a metamorphic rock transformed from shale by heat and pressure. Although crudely executed, the shale gorget at left clearly represents an FCB gorget. Discovered in the plowzone at Castalian Springs, I suspect it was created towards the end of the site occupation around A.D. 1350 (the center cross is not fully fenestrated but rather highlighted by round rather than pie-piece-shaped pits). The second

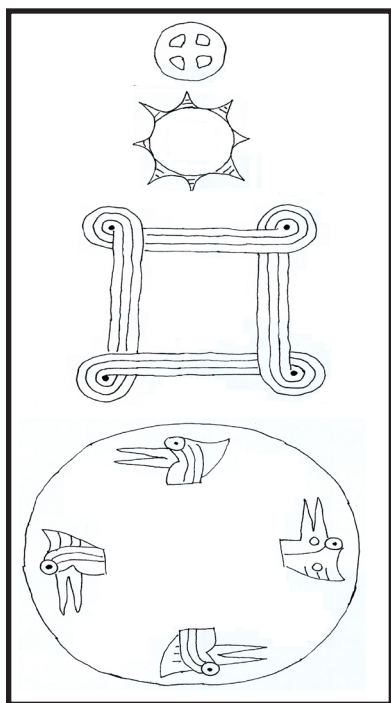


Figure 1. Design fields of the Four-Crested-Bird gorgets.

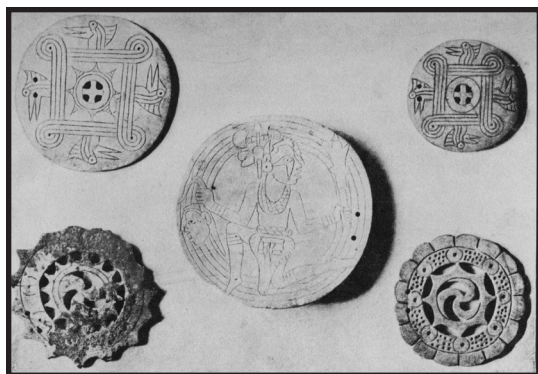


Figure 2. Five gorgets excavated by William E. Myer from Castalian Springs Mound 1, including two FCB Group I gorgets (this photograph was published in reverse as Plate VII in Myer 1917).

shale gorget comes from the upper disturbed contexts at the Bilbrey site in Putnam County, excavated as part of the major pipeline project. The engraving on the Bilbrey gorget clearly places it in Group I – even down to the carved “pie-piece” shaped pits in the equal-arm cross. Evidence from the MTSU archaeology project clearly indicates that shale gorgets were being manufactured at several locations at the site – with at least five whole or fragmentary gorgets, a circular gorget “blank,” and many fragments discarded during the manufacturing process. Among the more fascinating gorgets fragments is one (Figure 5) showing a central petaloid circle on the front and part of a “spider” on the reverse.

Another notable distinction between the FCB gorgets and other Mississippian gorgets is the placement of the engraving. The FCBs are the only circular shell gorget carved consistently on the convex (outside) of the marine shell rather than the more typical concave (inside) location. Their relatively frequent pairing with triskeles suggests a complementary relationship between triskeles and crested birds – and, in fact, the only other gorgets that are sometimes (but only rarely) carved on the convex surface are triskeles. To my mind, that relationship was undoubtedly extremely important to their prehistoric creators and users, but thoughts and interpretations will have to wait for additional analysis and consideration.

Group II (Figure 6) of the FCB gorgets (at least a dozen) come from a series of sites along the Tennessee River in northern Alabama (primarily Jackson County including the eponymous Cox Mound site, but also in Lauderdale and Limestone counties). While clearly very closely related to the Group I FCB gorgets, their execution is consistently different in a few ways. The crested birds are still there, but expressed in highly variable ways – one interesting difference suggesting a different set of artisans is the filling of the areas around the central cross with punctations and lines (Figure 4). This movement of the Four Crested Birds from the Cumberland River valley to northern Alabama represents precisely the same pattern I presented concerning the triskeles – a significant migration of people from Middle Tennessee to southeast Tennessee and northern Alabama in the mid-1300s (Smith 2018).

Attempting to identify the specific species of bird represented by the four heads has led to “frustrating disputes over species and varieties (‘Exactly which bird is intended in the Crested Bird?’)” (Lankford 2007:14). Many, if not most, have concluded that the birds on these gorgets are one of the large woodpeckers – either the pileated or ivory-billed woodpeckers that once had a very wide distribution in North America (hence the frequently used synonymy of “woodpecker gorget”). Before offering an alternative possibility, it is worth reiterating that the creatures depicted in Mississippian shell art are not natural animals – they are powerful mythological creatures frequently exhibiting the characteristics of multiple animals (for example, the “horned serpent”). In other words, native peoples from across much of the Midwest and Southeast shared a belief in four supernatural personages located at the four cardinal directions who frequently manifested themselves in an avian form with a crest.

As argued by George Lankford (2007), these gorgets probably present a model of at least part of the cosmos as understood by their creators. The equal-arm cross and rayed circle respectively represent the sacred fire central to Mississippian towns and the world axis connecting it (through the rising smoke) to the sun itself in the Above World. Lankford (2007) also argued that the looped square was an indicator of the world on which we live as humans – a world in which many indigenous cultures of the early historic era perceived as square rather than the more widely known round or oval of “Turtle Island.” That square world floating on the waters of the beneath world was anchored at the four corners by many different things either driven into the bottom of the Beneath World (e.g. giant supernatural serpents) or suspended from the Above World (e.g. giant supernatural ropes) – perhaps indicated in the corners of the loop by the nearly ubiquitous dot. That leaves us with the four birds – which appear to be placed at the four cardinal directions (and perhaps more centrally than the corners of the looped square). In his extensive analysis



Figure 3. FCB gorget, Wickliffe Mounds, Kentucky (Photograph Kevin E. Smith; courtesy Murray Hughes).

Figure 4. Two FCB gorgets engraved on Chattanooga shale. *Left:* Castalian Springs Mounds, Sumner County, Tennessee (Photograph Michael C. Moore); *Right:* Bledsoe site, Putnam County, Tennessee (Photograph Mark R. Norton).



of indigenous folklore, Lankford (2007) concluded that the birds of these gorgets were representations of weather spirits – perhaps the Four Winds or the Four Thunderers (or even both). Ultimately, while the clues are not sufficient to be specific, I am relatively confident that much of the Mississippian crested-bird iconography is related to weather in some fashion.

Although the central idea behind the crested bird concerns a set of powerful mythological personages, there are possible natural referents that artisans had in mind when visualizing those beings on gorgets. As mentioned previously, a top choice has been one of the large Southeastern woodpeckers. While certainly very plausible and I don't reject the woodpecker, I offer another possibility that seems in my mind to fit better with the overall themes of Middle Cumberland Mississippian iconography – the kingfisher. Almost all of the iconography of the Middle Cumberland Region emphasizes the watery Beneath World (or its rotation each day to become the Night Sky World). Even the seemingly more naturalistic depictions in locally-produced animal effigy

bowls are centered on animals associated with the watery underworld such as frogs, fish, mussels, and waterfowl. The kingfisher readily fits into this creature typology – living in earthen burrows in riverbanks, flying admirably well, and diving into the water to hunt fish. Essentially the kingfisher exhibits the ability to cross the major boundaries of the universe, including a special association with the Beneath World in its burrows and fishing habits. The two kingfishers shown in Figure 7 are part of a colony of the birds living on Bledsoe Creek about two miles from the Castalian Springs Mounds – what may not be apparent is that he is fishing in the rain, a habit I have noted on several occasions. This might be the most appropriate point to examine why the Four Crested Birds can be carved on dark colored shale rather than white marine shell. The most likely source for the Chattanooga shale at the Castalian Springs Mounds is Bledsoe Creek – the current home of the kingfisher. Gravel bars in the creek still occasionally yield water-polished shale disks of approximately the same size as the finished gorgets. So, perhaps both shell and shale were substances perceived to derive from and have connections with the underwater world.

The suggestion that different artists in different geographic areas may have had different natural referents in mind when depicting the “Crested Bird” is clearer if we look at another kind of avian gorget found in East Tennessee, north Georgia, and north Alabama – the Hixon style (Brain and Phillips 1996:9-15). Frequently referred to as “turkey cock” gorgets with little dispute, many of the birds do look very turkey-ish in their features (Figure 8). George Lankford (2017) suggests that these gorgets are a profile view of exactly the same cosmological model depicted on the FCB gorgets: 1) the cross and sun circle become a decorated pole (another common depiction of the world axis in Mississippian iconography); 2) the looped square becomes either a flat disk or pot on which the birds stand (the water of the Beneath World frequently envisioned as being contained in a giant supernatural Earth Pot); and 3) the four birds become two (as depicting four birds in such a profile view would be artistically challenging). While the



Figure 5. Gorget fragment from a wall-trench structure, showing a petaloid circle on the front and spider on the reverse (Castalian Springs Mounds, Sumner County, Tennessee; Photograph Kevin E. Smith, Castalian Springs Archaeological Project).

Figure 6. Two FCB Group II gorgets. Left: Limestone County, Alabama (Photograph Kevin E. Smith, courtesy Murray Hughes); Right: Lauderdale County, Alabama (Photograph Kevin E. Smith, courtesy Arthur Cushman).



Figure 7. Kingfishers in action, Bledsoe Creek State Park, Sumner County, Tennessee (Photographs Kevin E. Smith).

natural referents for these avians may well be turkeys, one thing would seem to clearly suggest they are not really turkeys – they exhibit pronounced crests, which turkeys do not have. From this perspective, these artists were depicting the “Four Crested Bird” supernaturals at the four corners of the earth, but had a turkey in mind for their basic model. Similarly, when presenting the “Holly Bluff Style” of the Lower Mississippi Valley, Knight et al. (2017) introduced the pelimoc, a supernatural character engraved on marine shell cups and looking something like a water moccasin with a pelican head and tail (pelican-moccasin). So, a different crested bird and perhaps not related mythologically to the Four Crested Birds, but

nonetheless another crested water bird. They also remind the reader that “we must bear in mind, of course, that the creature is a spirit-being and has no obligation to conform to any natural species” (Knight et al. 2017:200).

In closing, while I suggest we are now closer to understanding something meaningful about the Four-Crested-Bird gorgets, many questions remain to be examined further. What were the religious contexts in which these Four Crested Birds were important? Why were they carved on the convex side of the shell? What was the apparent relationship among the FCB and triskele gorgets? Who got to wear these objects of sacred regalia, and for what purpose? We will continue to pursue those questions as our understanding of the distinctive styles of the Mississippian world continues to expand.

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Figure 8. Hixon style “turkey cock” gorget excavated by Cyrus Thomas and J.W. Emmert (Bureau of Ethnology) in 1886 at the Toqua site, Monroe County, Tennessee (NMNH A115561-0; Photograph Kevin E. Smith).