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The Holly Bluff style

Vernon James Knight ^a, George E. Lankford ^b, Erin Phillips ^c, David H. Dye ^d, Vincas P. Steponaitis ^e and Mitchell R. Childress ^f

^aDepartment of Anthropology, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL, USA; ^bRetired; ^cCoastal Environments, Inc., Baton Rouge, LA, USA; ^dDepartment of Earth Sciences, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN, USA; ^eDepartment of Anthropology, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, USA; ^fIndependent Scholar

ABSTRACT

We recognize a new style of Mississippian-period art in the North American Southeast, calling it Holly Bluff. It is a two-dimensional style of representational art that appears solely on containers: marine shell cups and ceramic vessels. Iconographically, the style focuses on the depiction of zoomorphic supernatural powers of the Beneath World. Seriating the known corpus of images allows us to characterize three successive style phases, Holly Bluff I, II, and III. Using limited data, we source the style to the northern portion of the lower Mississippi Valley.

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The well-known representational art of the Mississippian period (A.D. 1100–1600) in the American South and Midwest exhibits strong regional distinctions in styles, genres, and iconography. Recognizing this artistic regionalism in the past few decades has led to a new appreciation of the diversity of these art forms, and the basically local religious, social, political, and linguistic histories that produced them (Lankford 2011a). Much progress has been made in the formal definition of geographically delimited, named styles of representational art, such as Classic Braden (Brown 2007), Craig (Phillips and Brown 1975–1982), Stack (Brown 1989), Hightower (Muller 1989), Lick Creek (Muller 1966, 1989), Hemphill (Knight and Steponaitis 2011; Phillips 2012), and Bellaire (Steponaitis et al. 2009). Here we add to that tradition by defining yet another regional style, called Holly Bluff. The name is taken from Holly Bluff, Mississippi, a small town near the Lake George site in the Lower Yazoo Delta from which a noteworthy specimen of the style was recovered.

One of the key breakthroughs in the study of Mississippian art styles was the recognition by Brown (1989) that a large proportion of the engraved shell cups and gorgets from Spiro, Oklahoma, were not locally made. In their original study, Phillips and Brown (1975–1982) had divided the body of Spiro engraved shell art into two artistic “schools,” named Braden (A, B, and C) and Craig (A, B, and C). Later, Brown (1989) concluded that, of the two major style groups identified at Spiro, only the Craig style was native to the Caddo

area in which Spiro is found. Using stylistic homologues in pottery and copper, Brown sourced the Braden A style, which he renamed Classic Braden, to Moorehead phase Cahokia at ca. A.D. 1200–1275 (Brown 2007; Brown and Kelly 2000).

One large group of Spiro shell cups that is orphaned by Brown’s realignment of Classic Braden is a stylistically coherent set featuring snakes as its subject matter. Most of this material was originally classified on stylistic grounds as Braden B (Phillips and Brown 1975–1982), but it is culturally out of place at Cahokia since ophidian subjects are almost unknown in the art of that site. Moreover, there are no engraved shell gorgets in this style, which, as a matter of sourcing, casts doubt not only on Cahokia and its environs, but also on many other areas of the Southeast that possess local gorget styles having little or nothing in common with this material. We have re-cast this style as Holly Bluff, and we point to a likely source in the northern portion of the Lower Mississippi Valley. If this sourcing is correct, the style joins Bellaire (Steponaitis et al. 2009) as a second representational style native to the Lower Mississippi Valley.

The corpus

The heart of the Holly Bluff corpus (Table 1) consists of all of the shell cups and matched cup fragments from Spiro that depict snakes and other Beneath World creatures, and that were previously classified as belonging stylistically to the Braden B school by Phillips and

Table 1. Holly Bluff artifacts used in the analysis.

Designation	Genre	Site	County	Site context	Subject	Category	Symmetry	Style phase	Centering function?	Published illustration
P&B 8	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Bird snake	Singles?		HB2	No	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:2:Plate 8)
P&B 24	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Intertwined pelimocs	Identical multiples	Double axis	HB1	Yes	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:2:Plate 24)
P&B 25	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Intertwined pelimocs	Identical multiples	Double axis	HB1	Yes	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:2:Plate 25)
P&B 26	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Intertwined pelimocs	Identical multiples	Double axis	HB1	Yes	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:2:Plate 26)
P&B 27	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Intertwined pelimocs	Identical multiples	Double axis	HB1	Yes	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:2:Plate 27)
P&B 27.1	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Intertwined pelimocs	Identical multiples	Double axis	HB1	Yes	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:2:Plate 27.1)
P&B 28 A	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Intertwined pelimocs	Identical multiples	Double axis	HB1	Yes	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:2:Plate 28 A)
P&B 29	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Intertwined pelimocs	Identical multiples		HB1	Yes?	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:2:Plate 29)
P&B 31 B	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Pelimoc	Singles		HB2	No	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:2:Plate 31 B)
P&B 32	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Bird snakes, interacting	Identical doubles	Single axis	HB2	No	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:2:Plate 32)
P&B 33 D	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Bird snake	Singles		HB2	No	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:2:Plate 33 D)
P&B 57	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Snake, interlace	Singles		HB3	No	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:3:Plate 57)
P&B 68	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Intertwined bird snakes	Contrasting multiples	Single axis	HB3	Yes?	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:3:Plate 68)
P&B 69	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Intertwined pelimocs	Identical doubles	Double axis	HB1	Yes	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:3:Plate 69)
P&B 70	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Intertwined pelimocs	Identical doubles	Double axis	HB1	Yes	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:3:Plate 70)
P&B 71	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Intertwined pelimocs	Contrasting doubles	Single axis	HB1	Yes	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:3:Plate 71)
P&B 71.1	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Intertwined pelimocs	Contrasting doubles		HB2	No	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:3:Plate 71.1)
P&B 72	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Intertwined snakes	Contrasting doubles		HB2	Yes	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:3:Plate 72)
P&B 73	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Intertwined snakes	Contrasting doubles		HB3	No	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:3:Plate 73)
P&B 74	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Intertwined bird snakes	Contrasting doubles		HB2	No	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:3:Plate 74)
P&B 75	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Intertwined pelimocs	Contrasting doubles		HB1	No	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:3:Plate 75)
P&B 76	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Intertwined snakes	Contrasting doubles		HB3	No	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:3:Plate 76)
P&B 77	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Snake	Singles		HB2	No?	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:3:Plate 77)
P&B 78	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Snake	Singles		HB3	No	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:3:Plate 78)
P&B 79	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Snake	Singles		HB3	No	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:3:Plate 79)
P&B 80	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Snake	Singles		HB3	No	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:3:Plate 80)
P&B 81	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Snake	Singles		HB3	No	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:3:Plate 81)
P&B 82	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Snake	Singles		HB3	No	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:3:Plate 82)
P&B 83	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Snake	Singles		HB3	No?	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:3:Plate 83)
P&B 84	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Bird snake	Singles?		HB2	No	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:3:Plate 84)
P&B 91	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Fishes, panther, bird?	Contrasting multiples		HB1	No	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:3:Plate 91)
P&B 92	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Deer fish	Identical doubles	Rotational	HB2	No	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:3:Plate 92)
P&B 93	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Snake, fish	Contrasting multiples		HB2	No	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:3:Plate 93)
P&B 115	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Snake	Singles		HB3	No	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:3:Plate 115)
P&B B-5	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Snake	Singles		HB3	No	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:6:Plate B-5)
P&B B-6 A	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Intertwined snakes	Contrasting doubles		HB3	No	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:6:Plate B-6 A)
MAG	Shell cup	Magness	Independence Co., AR	Unknown	Intertwined pelimocs	Identical multiples		HB1	Yes	Unpublished
BOW	Shell cup	Bowman	Little River Co., AR	Mound 2, Bu. 2	Pelimoc mandibles, tongues	Contrasting multiples		HB1	No	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:1:Figure 219)
CHU	Ceramic bottle	Chucalissa	Shelby Co., TN		Intertwined snakes	Contrasting doubles		HB2	Yes?	Nash (1955:50)
LKG	Ceramic bowl	Lake George	Yazoo Co., MS	Mound A, intrusive	Snakes, interacting	Contrasting doubles		HB3	No	Williams and Brain (1983:Figure 12.20)
NE63	Ceramic bottle	Moundville	Tuscaloosa Co., AL	Bu. 59, N. of Md. E	Snakes	Singles		HB3	No?	Knight and Steponaitis (2011:Figure 9.11b)
HWD 1	Ceramic bowl	Hollywood	Richmond Co., GA	Mound B, lower	Intertwined snakes	Contrasting multiples		HB3	Yes	Holmes (1903:Plate 119)
HWD 2	Ceramic bowl	Hollywood	Richmond Co., GA	Mound B, lower	Intertwined snakes	Contrasting multiples		HB3	Yes	Unpublished

Brown (1975–1982:3:x–xiv; see also discussion in Brown 2007). To these we have added the so-called “amphisbaena” cups previously classified as Braden A. These amphisbaena cups depict intertwined bird-headed snakes, often with bird heads shown on either end of a single snake body. We note that Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:2:vii–viii, 3:Plate 69) themselves recognized the stylistic distinctiveness of the amphisbaena group in relation to the remainder of their original Braden A material, and they were somewhat ambivalent about their assignment to that style. Further, we have reassigned to Holly Bluff the following Spiro shell cups and matched fragments from their original Phillips and Brown (1975–1982) style assignments: cups 8, 32, and 33 D (from Braden A), and cup 115 (from Braden C). Engraved shell cups with other-than-Spiro provenances that we assign to Holly Bluff include the Bowman cup from the Bowman site, Little River County, Arkansas (Phillips and Brown 1975–1982:1:167–168), and an unpublished amphisbaena cup in the Arthur R. Cushman collection, reportedly from the Magness site, Independence County, Arkansas.

There are a few artifacts of decorated pottery that we include in the Holly Bluff style. These include an engraved bottle from Chucalissa, Shelby County, Tennessee (Phillips and Brown 1975–1982:1:200); an incised bowl from the Lake George site, Yazoo County, Mississippi (Williams and Brain 1983:418–419); an engraved bottle from the Moundville site, Tuscaloosa County, Alabama (Knight and Steponaitis 2011:Figure 9.11b); and two engraved barrel-shaped pots from the Hollywood site, Richmond County, Georgia (Phillips and Brown 1975–1982:1:194). All of these artifacts bear intertwined and/or sinuous snakes as their subject matter. Table 1 lists the 43 Holly Bluff artifacts with designs complete enough to judge aspects of symmetry, depiction of single zoomorphs versus multiples, and style phase. In addition to these, Phillips and Brown (1975–1982) illustrate 28 additional small, unmatched shell cup fragments that can be readily assigned to Holly Bluff by comparison to the more complete designs (Table 2). Thus, taken together, the Holly Bluff corpus as presently recognized consists of 71 specimens.

Style characterization

Holly Bluff is a coherent style that may be characterized by a series of stylistic conventions, or canons. The following will be sufficient to compare and contrast Holly Bluff with other Mississippian styles. In their original characterization of Braden B at Spiro, Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:3:vii–xiv) anticipated a number of these.

- It is a two-dimensional style of depiction exclusively using shallow, fine-line engraving or incising on the hard exterior surfaces of vessels – whether whelk shell cups or pottery containers. In keeping with this emphasis on containers as the carriers of the style, Holly Bluff does not find its way onto shell gorgets, unlike most other styles of Mississippian engraving. Holly Bluff also has no known counterpart in the medium of embossed sheet copper.
- Careful control of line work is usual.
- The style depicts zoomorphic subjects in a manner mostly true to perspective and proportion, as one’s eye would see the subject, although we must remember that the subjects are not natural creatures. *Pars pro toto* (“part for the whole”) depiction is avoided.
- Subjects are well adapted to the objects on which they occur, filling most available space within design fields, sometimes in creative ways. A *horror vacui* (“fear of the empty”) is evident in compositional design.
- Generally, a single animate subject is prioritized, dominating the field and placed central to it. This single subject is not necessarily a single zoomorph; it often consists of an assemblage of multiple zoomorphs in close interaction.
- Compositions are unbounded by any artificial framing devices.
- Overlapping of subject matter is especially common as a depth cue.
- The convex surface of the vessel itself is commonly used to convey a further sense of three-dimensionality, as though the depicted subject is to be seen as enveloping the vessel on which it appears. For example, on whelk shell cups, the subject can be seen to wrap around the convex surface, continuing up onto the spire of the shell, so that the full composition cannot be seen without turning the object.
- There is a preference for curvilinear outlines and contours, as opposed to straight or blocky forms.
- Cross-hatching is frequently used as filler within bounded sections of animate subjects. It is never used exterior to these subjects.
- Similarly, excision is sometimes used to highlight small areas within animate subjects, generally within corners created by converging lines.
- Ticked or hachured lines are common within subjects. Specifically, the fins, crests, and tongues of zoomorphs are often fringed with a ticked border.

In addition to these conventions, in Holly Bluff there is an avoidance of “standard” design structures. Instead, there is an individuality or eclecticism in the arrangement of the subject. Similarly, there is artistic license to “play” with theme and motif in distinctive ways. Some Holly

Table 2. Unmatched shell cup fragments assigned to Holly Bluff.

Designation	Genre	Site	County	Site context	Subject	Style phase	Published illustration
P&B 28 B	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Intertwined pelimocs	HB1	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:2:Plate 28 B)
P&B 28 C	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Pelimoc	HB1	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:2:Plate 28 C)
P&B 28 D	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Pelimoc	HB1	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:2:Plate 28 D)
P&B 28 E	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Pelimoc	HB1	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:2:Plate 28 E)
P&B 28 F	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Pelimoc	HB1	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:2:Plate 28 F)
P&B 28 H	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Pelimoc	HB1	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:2:Plate 28 H)
P&B 28 I	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Pelimoc	HB1	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:2:Plate 28 I)
P&B 31 A	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Intertwined pelimocs	HB1	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:2:Plate 31 A)
P&B 31 C	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Intertwined pelimocs	HB1	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:2:Plate 31 C)
P&B 31 D	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Intertwined pelimocs	HB2	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:2:Plate 31 D)
P&B 96.1 B	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Bird snake	HB2	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:3:Plate 96.1 B)
P&B 96.1 H	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Pelimoc	HB1	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:3:Plate 96.1 H)
P&B 96.2	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Pelimoc	HB1	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:3:Plate 96.2)
P&B B-3 A	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Snake	HB2	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:6:Plate B-3 A)
P&B B-3 I	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Snake	HB3	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:6:Plate B-3 I)
P&B B-3 J	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Pelimoc	HB1	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:6:Plate B-3 J)
P&B B-3 K	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Pelimoc	HB1	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:6:Plate B-3 K)
P&B B-3 M	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Pelimoc	HB1	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:6:Plate B-3 M)
P&B B-3 O	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Pelimoc	HB1	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:6:Plate B-3 O)
P&B B-3 P	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Intertwined pelimocs	HB1	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:6:Plate B-3 P)
P&B B-3 Q	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Pelimoc	HB1	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:6:Plate B-3 Q)
P&B B-3 U	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Pelimoc	HB1	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:6:Plate B-3 U)
P&B B-4 A	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Intertwined pelimocs	HB1	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:6:Plate B-4 A)
P&B B-4 T	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Pelimoc	HB1	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:6:Plate B-4 T)
P&B B-7 B	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Intertwined snakes	HB3	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:6:Plate B-7 B)
P&B B-7 G	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Intertwined snakes	HB3	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:6:Plate B-7 G)
P&B B-7 I	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Snake	HB2	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:6:Plate B-7 I)
P&B B-8 B	Shell cup	Spiro	Le Flore Co., OK	Great Mortuary	Snake	HB1	Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:6:Plate B-8 B)

Bluff compositions are organized symmetrically on one or two axes so that a centering function is suggested,¹ perhaps related to the ritual use of the vessels bearing the images. However, although the compositions may be organized relative to axes of symmetry, few compositions are truly symmetrical in the sense that all major components are mirrored on these axes. For example, on intertwined snakes, one of the heads may be turned relative to the others, or a tongue diverted into an empty space. Only one instance of rotational symmetry is known. Other compositions are asymmetrical, even wildly so, but some of the latter still envelop the container – as noted above – in ways that also suggest a centering function.

We can discern five categories into which Holly Bluff compositions may fall. There is no particular numerical dominance of any one of these. (1) Singles, in which the main subject is a lone zoomorph; (2) identical doubles, featuring two identical zoomorphs in interaction; (3) contrasting doubles, in which two zoomorphs with differing body, head, and/or fin embellishment are depicted in interaction; (4) identical multiples, in which more than two identical zoomorphs are shown in interaction; and (5) contrasting multiples, in which more than two zoomorphs are shown in interaction, each having different embellishment.

Visual themes and motifs

Up until now we have focused on characterizing the style, which requires paying attention to the manner of

depiction rather than what is depicted. Turning now to iconographic matters, we may begin with the observation that the style appears to be fixated on the powers of the Beneath World (Hudson 1976:122–173; Lankford 2007).² These powers are most often visualized as intertwined creatures with snake bodies, sometimes fitted with bird heads or deer antlers, and other times with fish fins and/or bird tails. Some Holly Bluff snakes are explicitly equipped with rattlesnake tails, while others are explicitly not. In addition to these snake-based Beneath World powers, there is one composition (Phillips and Brown 1975–1982:3:Plate 91) that juxtaposes a jumble of fish-like creatures, a long-tailed panther with fish fins, and a creature with a bird's head and a fish fin. Another composition juxtaposes two deer-fish composites (Phillips and Brown 1975–1982:3:Plate 92). On snake bodies, Holly Bluff artists generally distinguished the ventral from the dorsal aspects and embellished them differently. Snake bodies are decorated with a variety of motifs including chevrons, diamonds, ogees, concentric ovals, terrace and lunettes, and “three finger” motifs (for a guide to motifs in Spiro shell, see Phillips and Brown 1975–1982:1:145–156).

In addition to the main subjects, many Holly Bluff compositions possess free-floating motifs that occupy otherwise vacant spaces. These include such things as maces, arrow feathering, ogees, trilobate forms, and cross-in-circle motifs. Only as free-floating motifs does Holly Bluff offer any fully human subject matter, and it is mostly confined to disembodied heads, skulls, hands,

and forearm bones. Thus, there is a complete avoidance of whole human subjects in Holly Bluff, and those human parts that do appear are subordinate motifs.

Figure 1 will serve as an introduction to some common Holly Bluff thematic variations and motifs. In this figure and the following discussion, shell cup designs from the Great Mortuary at Spiro are designated by their plate number as presented in Phillips and Brown (1975–1982). These design labels are prefixed by the notation P&B; full citations for each can be found in Table 1. Our descriptions owe much to the detailed prior descriptions of these same designs by Phillips and Brown, to which the reader is referred for additional information.

Figure 1a introduces the character we call the *pelimoc*, a bird-headed and bird-tailed snake.³ The non-raptorial head appears to be that of a crested water bird, or perhaps some visionary amalgam of water birds. Because artists depicting *pelimocs* more often than not chose to emphasize a gular pouch below the bill, we are persuaded

that at least part of the natural referent must be the pelican, as originally suggested by Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:3:Plate 71.1). Their common depiction with small round eyes and a bulb at the end of the bill with a downward hook reinforces that impression.⁴ The creature in this case also has ventral fins that mimic the head crest, as well as a bird tail, partly hidden behind the tongue of one of the pair. On one of the snake bodies, the dorsal side bears a distinctive series of crosshatched shield-like panels separated by diagonals, while the ventral side has a version of the element we call “piano keys,” referring to perpendicular lines accentuated by rectangular excisions, the combination of which recalls the black and white keys of a piano. Although a variety of southeastern snakes have “piano key” ventral patterns (Gibbons and Dorcas 2005), it is their appearance on a common, large, dangerous water snake that inclines us toward the water moccasin as the most likely natural prototype (Figure 2). In our view, then, at least some artists understood this creature

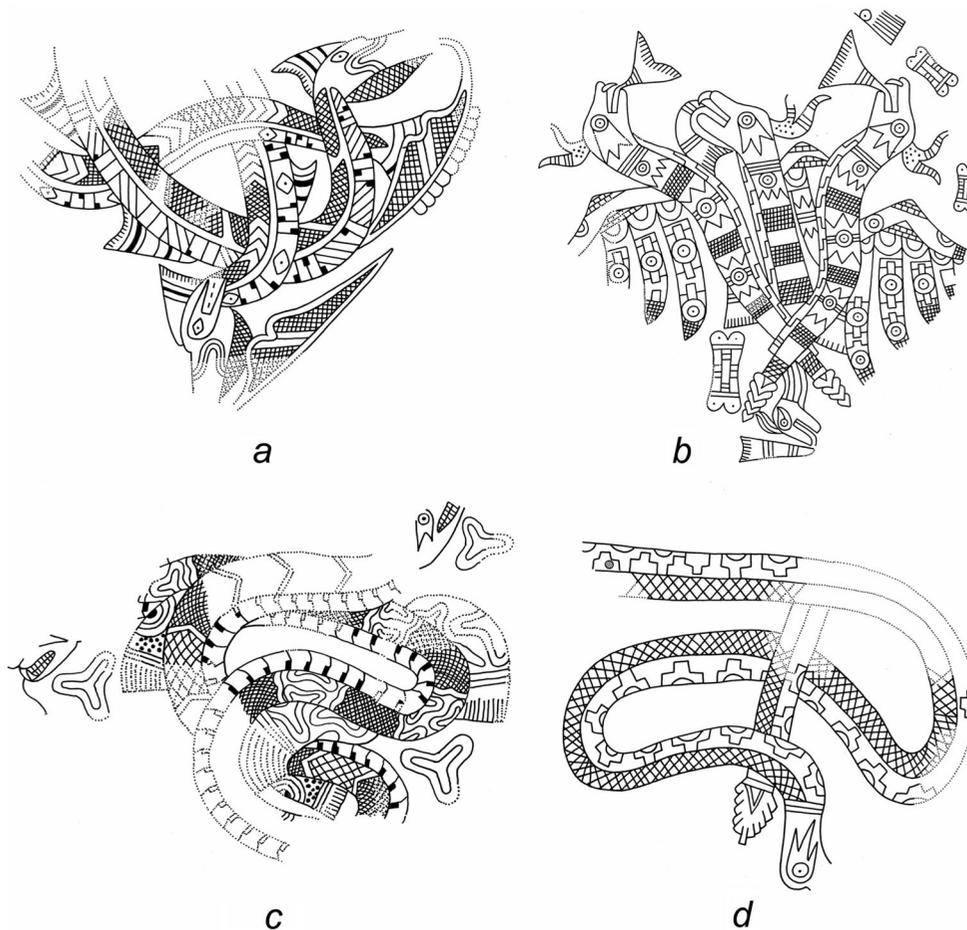


Figure 1. Holly Bluff style compositions on engraved shell cups from the Great Mortuary at Spiro. (a) P&B 71.1; (b) P&B 68; (c) P&B 73, line drawing based on published rubbings; (d) P&B 79. (a), (b), and (d) from Philip Phillips and James A. Brown, *Pre-Columbian Shell Engravings from the Craig Mound at Spiro, Oklahoma*, Vol. III. Peabody Museum Press. Copyright 1975 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.



Figure 2. Male water moccasins in “combat” display, showing ventral markings. Photograph by Mark Edwards, used by permission.

as looking something like a water moccasin with a pelican head and tail – a *pelican-moccasin*. We must bear in mind, of course, that the creature is a spirit-being and has no obligation to conform to any natural species. Pelimocs have elongated “tongues” ending in a peculiar enlarged feature, completely unnatural and inexplicable to us, having one straight side and the other recurvate, ending in a point. In this instance, two pelimocs are loosely knotted in a nonsymmetrical structure. They are not identical: one has a forked eye surround and intermittent dotted diamonds within the ventral pattern; the other does not, having instead diagonal hachures interspersed at intervals between the ventral piano keys.

Figure 1b depicts four snakes in interaction, arranged in single-axis symmetry. In this case they are antlered, winged snakes with dorsal fins and rattlesnake tails. The three upper snakes have three-pronged eye surrounds, mammal-like snouts with open mouths and a single fang shown in profile, and fringed “fan-tongues.” The wing feathers of the lateral pair show dotted concentric circles and what seems to be an unusual version of the three-fingers motif. The same motif seems to be referenced in the dorsal body patterns of the three upper snakes and the feather pattern of the central snake. While the two lateral snakes are identical, the other two differ: the central snake has a different feather pattern and the lower snake a different body pattern. Finally, we have extraneous elements used as fillers: three human forearm bones and a lone fringed triangular element.

Figure 1c is a partial design from six matching cup fragments, but enough of the composition is present to

illustrate several Holly Bluff design features.⁵ The subject again is intertwined snakes of similar character but contrasting body patterns. There are two intertwined snakes, both having piano key ventral motifs offering a point of continuity with the pelimocs, but the dorsal patterns are different. One snake has fine crosshatched panels with chevron-shaped boundaries alternating with bold crosshatched panels, while the other substitutes panels of trilobate motifs with wavy boundaries. Both snakes have fringed triangular dorsal fins, but these contrast as well, one embellished by trilobates and the other by concentric semicircles and dots. In this composition, a single-axis symmetry is still discernible but it is imperfect; the snakes are positioned in a seemingly novel way. As in the previous example, there are also free-floating motifs in the leftover spaces, in this case trilobate forms mirroring those seen on one of the snake bodies.

Figure 1d is a much simpler composition that introduces us to the single snake as a Holly Bluff subject. In this case it is a rattlesnake, with both head and tail arranged at the base of the design. The head has a three-pronged eye surround as Holly Bluff snakes often, but not always, do. The body systematically and creatively wraps over and under itself, encircling the spire of the shell cup and descending again, nicely illustrating the three-dimensionality of many of these compositions. The ventral body pattern is a row of terrace and lunette motifs, an uncommon element that is sometimes featured on Lower Mississippi Valley pottery (e.g., Moore 1909:Figure 57; see also comments in Phillips and Brown 1975–1982:3:Plate 79). The dorsal pattern is a continuous band of cross-hatching.

As a great deal of design diversity is already on display, we ought to suspect that there is a degree of time depth to the Holly Bluff corpus, so let us now turn to matters of chronology.

Sequencing and chronology

Over 90 percent of the known Holly Bluff corpus was recovered from a single archaeological context, the Great Mortuary in the Craig Mound, Spiro, Oklahoma. Because that context dates to the beginning of the fifteenth century A.D. (Brown 1996:85), the Great Mortuary deposition of these shell cups provides a *terminus ad quem* for most of the corpus. This fact, however, tells us nothing about the duration of the style, as there is considerable evidence that many of the artifacts assembled within the Great Mortuary at Spiro were already “antiques” at the time they were deposited (Brown 1996:98–103). Given our initial sense that the duration of the style might be considerable, we have devoted much effort to developing a sequence based on internal evidence.

We began that exercise by printing out some 30 of the more complete designs and attempting a crude seriation, visually arranging them along an axis – the wall of a conference room – based on perceived likeness. Having done this, we compiled a list of traits, a mix of stylistic and iconographic features that appeared to connect various subsets of the whole. Next, we created a matrix that coded each of the 30 objects by the presence or absence of each of these 19 variables.

Given the nature of the data in this form, we chose to attempt a more objective sequencing using a numerical technique. We chose nonmetric multidimensional scaling (MDS), which seeks an optimal ordering of the objects based on a measure of the “distance” between each pair of objects and a predetermined number of dimensions, in our case, two. The output can therefore be viewed as a map-like graph where the relations among the objects are translated into distances in two dimensions, and where any inherent order should appear as a single, usually curved, dimensional pattern. A graphic output of the result is shown in Figure 3.⁶ In this graph, the objects are arrayed in an arc that is typical of seriations found by this technique (Kendall 1971; Steponaitis 1983:87 and references therein). The order starts on the lower left, arches around the top of the graph, and ends in a tight cluster of related designs on the lower right. Because, as we will review further on, there are good reasons to think that this order is chronological (instead of spatial, or cultural, for example), we divided the graph into three zones which we now interpret as a sequence of style phases – Holly Bluff I, Holly Bluff II, and Holly Bluff III.

Working with this new ordering, we revisited and revised the traits that generated it, producing a bar chart (Figure 4) that shows the distribution of traits across the sample. In this chart, the horizontal limits correspond to the x -axis values of designs in the numerical solution shown in Figure 3. The labels that appear at the right or left of each bar are the design designations of the earliest and latest appearances of that trait in the series. Two things are apparent from this chart. First, the number of traits that link across major portions of the corpus reinforces the notion that we are dealing with a true series, not several independent clusters of designs. Second, the arrangement reveals at least two inherent breaks representing strong shifts in style and content, which reinforce our subdivision of the corpus into three segments. The initial break is between P&B 69 and 72. Here, two of the early traits drop out while seven new traits appear for the first time. A second break occurs in the vicinity of CHU, P&B 73, 74, and 78, at which three more early traits drop out and the five latest traits appear for the first time.

Next, we printed copies of all the Holly Bluff designs in Table 1 on cards and arranged them on a large table by style phase (Holly Bluff I, II, or III) in order to visually refine the position of those designs that had entered into the quantitative analysis, and to classify the hitherto unassigned specimens. This done, we attempted a classification of all remaining smaller unmatched fragments (Table 2) by style phase, comparing these with more complete designs. We found that such assignments could be made in nearly all cases. Finally, we found

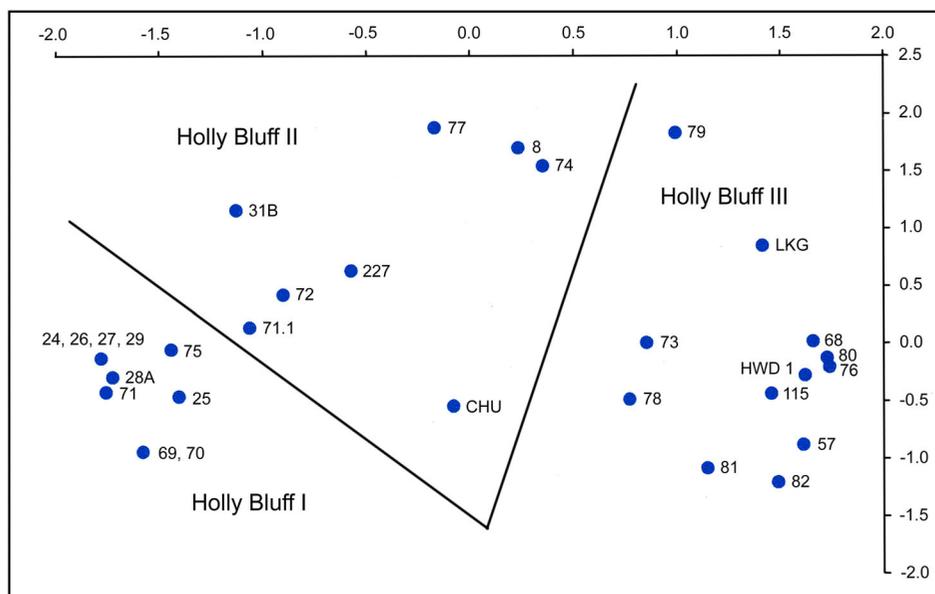


Figure 3. Results of nonmetric multidimensional scaling (MDS) analysis using 19 traits from a subset of 30 Holly Bluff compositions. Distance metric is the Dice distance coefficient. Kruskal's stress = .139.

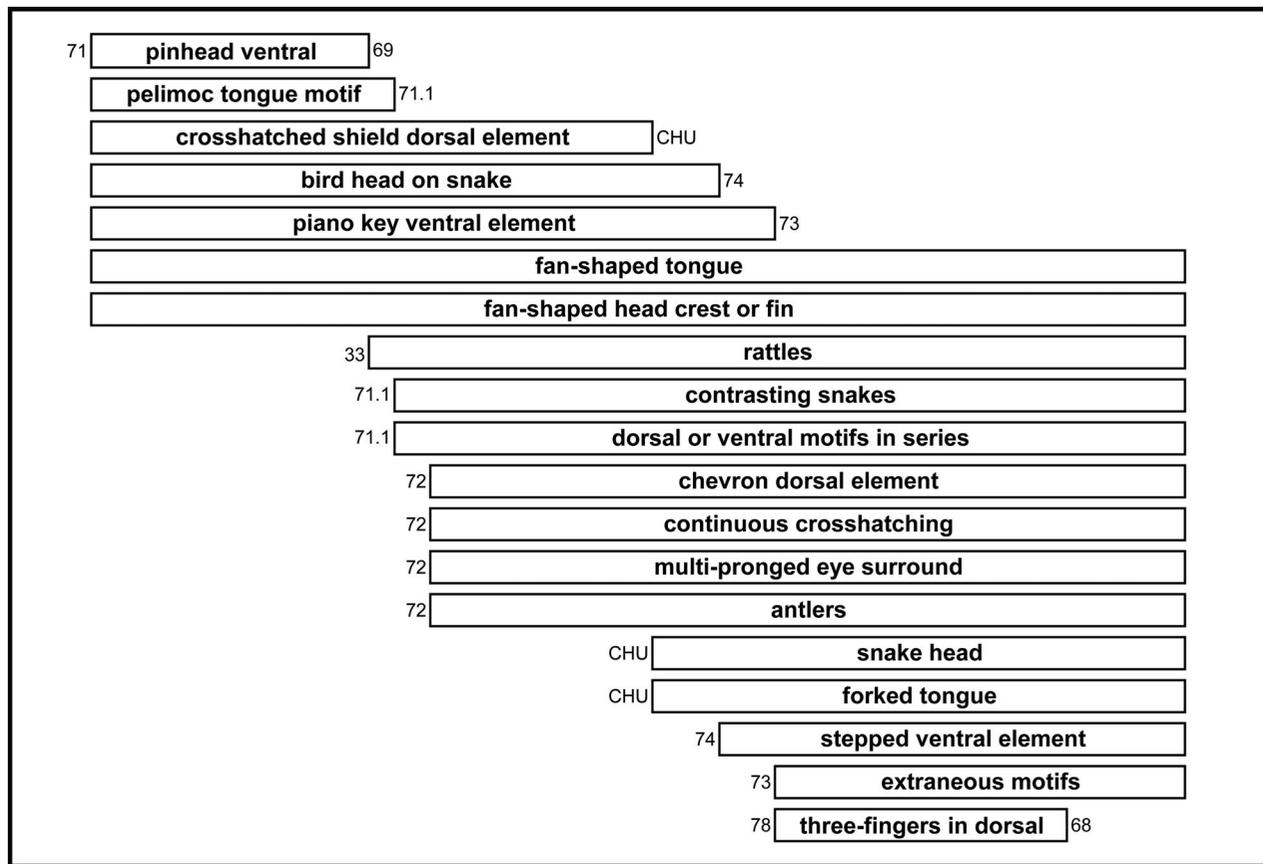


Figure 4. Bar chart showing continuity of traits through the sample, from early (left) to late (right).

grounds to delete four objects from the corpus that we originally considered as Holly Bluff pieces.⁷

Holly Bluff I

The Holly Bluff I style phase debuts the intertwined serpent theme in its presentation of identical, knotted pelimocs (Figure 5a–c). Here the snake bodies are double-headed, but because elsewhere we find full-bodied pelimocs exhibiting bird tails, we conclude that double-headedness is not inherent to the creature but is instead an artistic convention. We think that the function of the knot is to create a center, and the four heads provide a quadripartite structure serving to reinforce that centering function. The center can be conceived in two ways – as the empty square formed by the knot at the base of the shell cup, or alternatively as the interior of the cup itself, “centering” whatever was placed within.

Holly Bluff I cups were engraved by competent artisans, many of whom seem to qualify as master engravers. These artisans were not numerous. Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:1:138) comment that one large group of Holly Bluff I pelimoc compositions was the product of “a perfect workshop situation: we think that three of the cups are by the same artist, and possibly two more by

another; there must have been about seven or eight individuals’ work in the sample altogether.” Other knotted pelimoc compositions deviate from this “standard” version. For example P&B 69, shown in Figure 5c, has a slightly different knot, “pinhead” rather than piano key ventral treatment, heads without gular pouches, and fringed, fan-shaped tongues. Holly Bluff I artisans were also capable of non-structured, chaotic compositions such as that seen in P&B 91 (Figure 5d). Here the subjects include at least four fish-like creatures with contrasting body, fin, and tail elements; a spotted feline with fish fins and both a curled tail and a fish tail; a bird-headed creature, and multiple pelimoc tongues presented in an indisputably Holly Bluff I manner. The Bowman cup (Phillips and Brown 1975–1982:1:Figure 219), not shown here, has a similarly non-structured composition featuring only pelimoc mandibles and tongues. If the Bowman cup uses a *pars pro toto* strategy, it is the only design in the Holly Bluff corpus to do so.

Holly Bluff II

In the Holly Bluff II style phase (Figures 1a and 6) the image of the pelimoc is still present, but fades rapidly in favor of other subjects, just as there is a much reduced

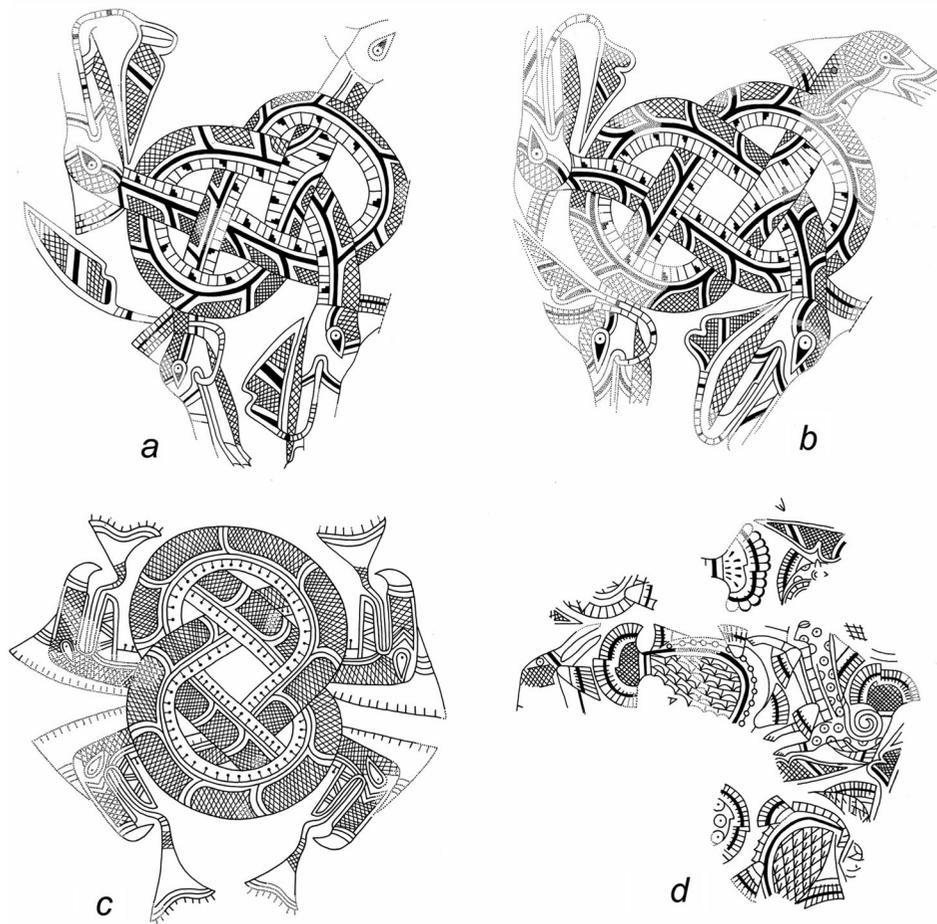


Figure 5. Holly Bluff I style phase. (a) P&B 24; (b) P&B 26; (c) P&B 69; (d) P&B 91. From Philip Phillips and James A. Brown, *Pre-Columbian Shell Engravings from the Craig Mound at Spiro, Oklahoma*, Vols. II and III. Peabody Museum Press. Copyright 1975 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

emphasis on the creation of a center. Pelimocs and other characters are used together, but not always for centering. Holly Bluff II artists were capable of depicting a single pelimoc, as in P&B 31 B (Figure 6a), or dual pelimocs in interaction with contrasting body patterns and eye surrounds, as in P&B 71.1 (Figure 1a). The idea of forming a center using knotted snake-beings is still present, but with new content. Figure 6b shows two snakes that are knotted in much the same manner seen in Holly Bluff I, this time including an explicit center symbol at the middle of the knot. It is a cross-in-circle motif, seemingly out of place in otherwise Beneath World imagery (Lankford 2011b). The two snakes have contrasting body patterns, only one of them in standard pelimoc format, the other having continuous cross-hatching on the dorsal side. Rattles appear at the tail of a snake whose head has a three-pronged eye surround and possibly a schematized antler. The other, less complete head appears to be that of a pelimoc, with a beak, gular pouch, and the appropriate eye form. The fan-shaped dorsal fins and tongues,

though gaudy in this case, are holdovers from Holly Bluff I.

P&B 32 (Figure 6c) introduces what may be yet another subject, visually a different creature altogether. Here, rather loosely posed in relation to one another along the main axis of this cup, are two bird-snakes that are unlike pelimocs. This design is too fragmentary to visualize the entire creature, but fortunately we have additional examples similar enough in composition and layout to interpolate some of the missing elements.⁸ That exercise gives us a winged serpent with a rattle tail and hindlimbs with raptor talons. A closely cognate form in the Craig B style adds a serpent head with possible feline attributes and a pelimoc tongue (Phillips and Brown 1975–1982:5:Plate 227). In a Holly Bluff II composition not shown here (Phillips and Brown 1975–1982:2:Plate 8), a similar creature has bat-like wings that end in strings of rattles, a detail that Reilly (2011:132) has usefully compared with a Belaire-style stone pipe from the Emerald Mound, Adams

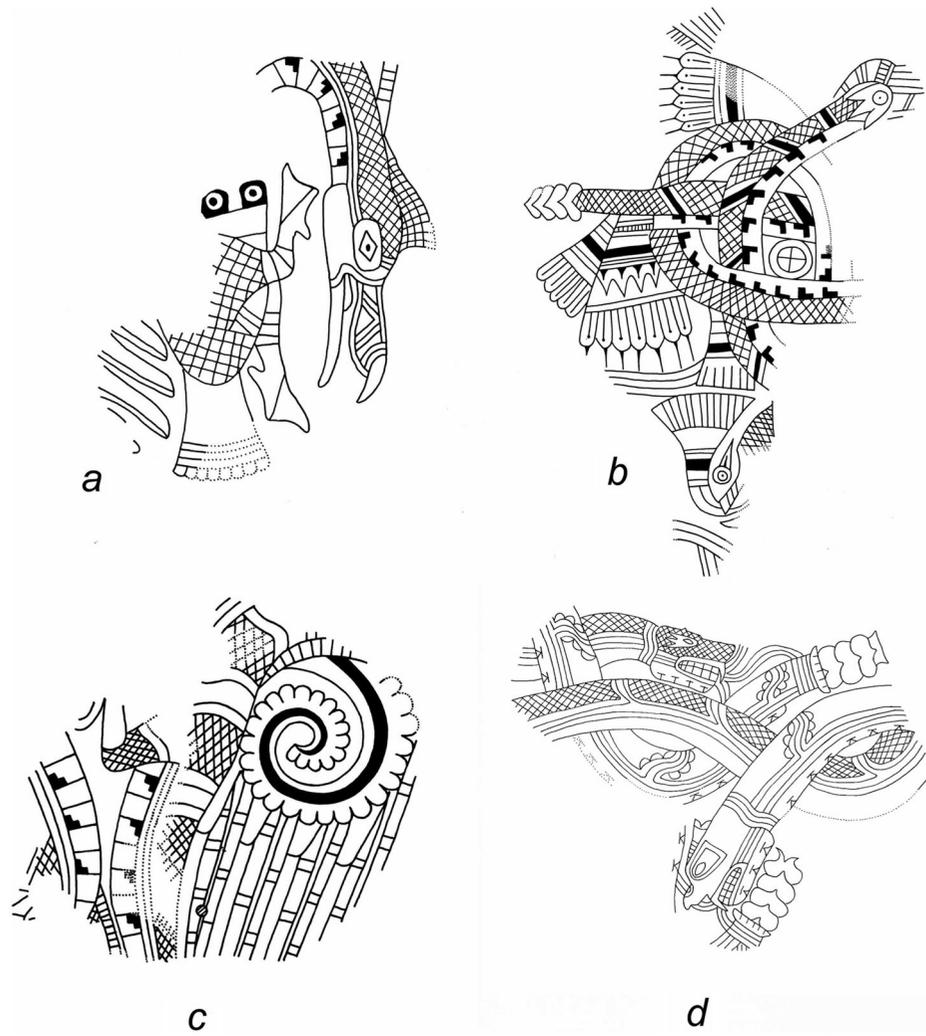


Figure 6. Holly Bluff II style phase. (a) P&B 31 B, line drawing based on the published rubbing; (b) P&B 72; (c) P&B 32; (d) Chucalissa (CHU), line drawing by Mitchell Childress based on photographs by David Dye. (b) and (c) from Philip Phillips and James A. Brown, *Pre-Columbian Shell Engravings from the Craig Mound at Spiro, Oklahoma*, Vols. II and III. Peabody Museum Press. Copyright 1975 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.



Figure 7. Engraved bottle from Chucalissa (CHU). Photographs by David H. Dye, courtesy of C. H. Nash Museum, University of Memphis.

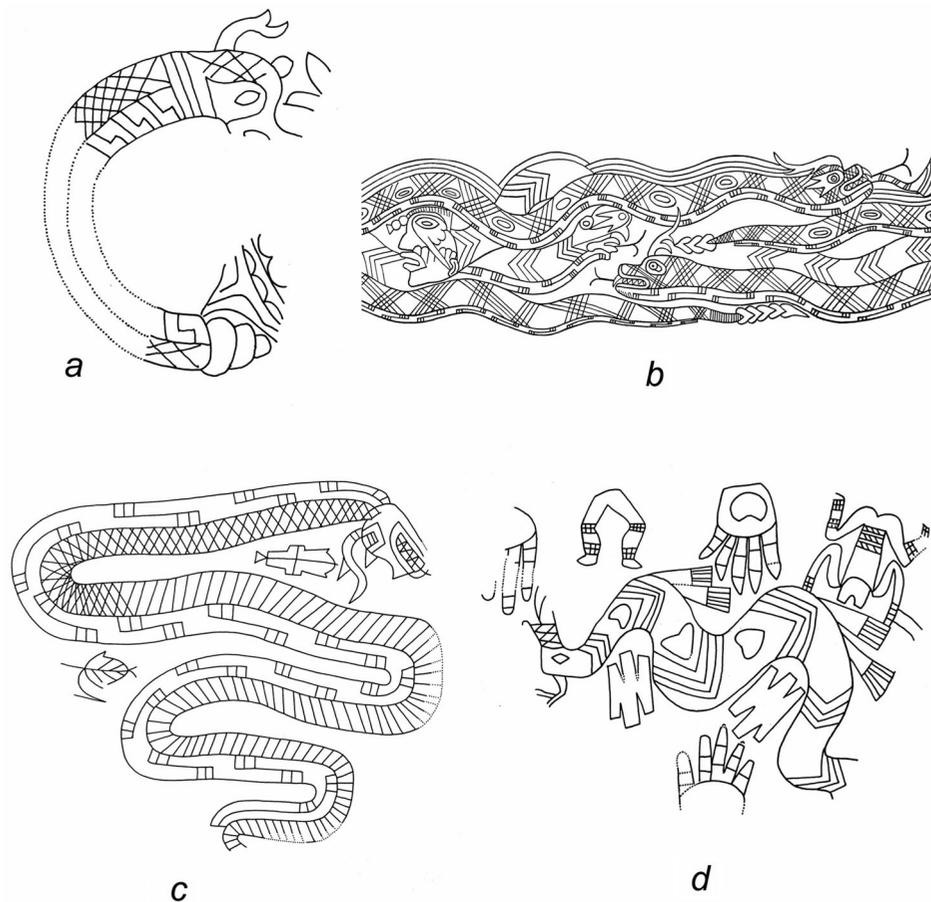


Figure 8. Holly Bluff III style phase. (a) Lake George (LKG), from an incised pottery bowl (line drawing based on Williams and Brain (1983:Figure 12.20); (b) Hollywood (HWD I), from an engraved pottery bowl (Holmes 1903:Plate 119); (c) P&B 80; (d) P&B 115. (c) and (d) from Philip Phillips and James A. Brown, *Pre-Columbian Shell Engravings from the Craig Mound at Spiro, Oklahoma*, Vol. III. Peabody Museum Press. Copyright 1975 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

County, Mississippi (Brown 1926:Figures 223–224). That pipe depicts a panther-raptor-snake (Steponaitis et al. 2009).

Figure 6d marks a shift to a new genre, that of engraved pottery. The image appears on a polished bottle found in a Walls phase grave at the Chucalissa site, Shelby County, Tennessee. The composition is masterfully laid out across all design fields of the vessel including the base, crowding the whole (Figure 7). The sensation of rotating this vessel is that fully intertwined snakes are writhing around every part of it. Thus, although there is no design symmetry, there is still a sense that these snakes retain a centering function for the open vessel or its contents. These rattlesnakes have contrasting body patterns and eye surrounds. In the case of one snake, the dorsal pattern is that inherited from the Holly Bluff I pelimoc series.⁹

Although there were still master engravers in Holly Bluff II, they appear to have been less common than before. Holly Bluff II artisans were probably a more diverse lot than was previously the case. There are no

longer any “standard” compositions as was the case in Holly Bluff I.

Holly Bluff III

With the advent of Holly Bluff III (Figures 1b–d and 8), all vestiges of the pelimoc idea, having already diminished in the previous style phase, are gone. There are no bird-headed snakes of any sort, nor examples of the pelimoc shield-form dorsal pattern. Beginning with the Chucalissa bottle just discussed, snakes now tend to have forked tongues (Figure 8b,d). Many are explicitly antlered rattlesnakes, some bearing a new form of step-like ventral element (Figure 8a–c). Snakes tend to be more sinuous than earlier examples, and are sometimes shown as singles instead of in pairs or multiples (Figures 1d and 8c,d). The idea of a visual center in the design has been lost, but some compositions may still achieve an implied centering function for the vessel itself by creatively surrounding the whole with snake imagery. The

transition to engraved pottery as a genre is now more firmly established.

A major Holly Bluff III innovation is the addition of free-floating motifs in the spaces not occupied by the main subject. These motifs include a variety of things: arrow feathering (Figure 8c), trilobate forms (Figure 1c), ogees, maces (Figure 8c), “three fingers” motifs (Figure 8d), skulls, heads, hands (Figure 8d), and forearm bones (Figure 1b). As already noted, the latter context is the primary venue for human content in Holly Bluff art.

Figure 8a shows a key piece from an impeccable archaeological context, the latest construction level in Mound A at the Lake George site, Yazoo County, Mississippi. It is the location of Lake George near the community of Holly Bluff, Mississippi, that lends its name to the style. Although partial, the composition is pure Holly Bluff III: two contrasting snakes in interaction, the more complete being an antlered rattlesnake with a bell-shaped eye surround (resembling that seen in one of the Chucalissa snakes), continually crosshatched dorsal, and stepped ventral body markings. The other snake, only a small portion of which survives, has a triangular dorsal fin. This composition is incised in the interior of a shell-tempered bowl, the exterior of which is incised with a series of loops. Regarding the paste of the bowl, the rim form, and the exterior incising, Williams and Brain (1983:418–419) are confident that the bowl is a locally made, lower Yazoo Basin product corresponding to the type Leland Incised, *variety Russell*.

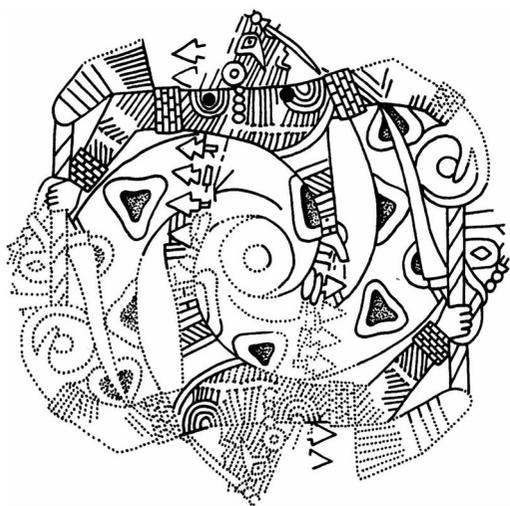


Figure 9. Chunkey player gorget, Classic Braden style. Plate 7 from Philip Phillips and James A. Brown, *Pre-Columbian Shell Engravings from the Craig Mound at Spiro, Oklahoma*, Vol. II. Peabody Museum Press. Copyright 1975 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

Figure 8b illustrates another case of a Holly Bluff design on pottery, again from a well-documented archaeological context, but this time in northern Georgia. The context is the lower burial zone in Mound B at the Hollywood site in Richmond County, excavated by Henry Reynolds in 1891 for the Smithsonian’s Bureau of Ethnology. There are actually two Holly Bluff style pots from this context with highly similar designs.¹⁰ The illustrated vessel is a barrel-shaped pot showing an engraved composition of contrasting intertwined snakes, either three or four, depending on whether or not both human heads belong to opposing ends of the same being (Brown 2007:236; Phillips and Brown 1975–1982:1:194). The other two serpents are snake-headed, antlered, and rattled. They possess forked tongues, as does one of the human heads. One of the snakes has, in addition to the forked tongue, a fan-shaped tongue (which is a sure indication that such appendages are not “tongues” at all). As with the Chucalissa bottle already discussed, these intertwined snakes envelop the vessel in such a way as to imply a centering function.

Of the remaining images in Figure 8, both 8c and 8d, are from shell cups from Spiro’s Great Mortuary. The composition in 8c features a single antlered snake with a continuously crosshatched (though unfinished) dorsal pattern and a step-form ventral pattern. Free-floating filler motifs include a mace and arrow feathering. The remaining composition in 8d again features a single snake, with tassel-like, fringed ventral elements. This latter composition is perhaps as broken down as Holly Bluff artistry gets, with its ineptly drafted mouth, antler, and surrounding motifs. This snake lacks any dorsal-ventral distinction; the unique heart-shaped motifs alternating with the multi-line chevrons on the body are perhaps poorly drawn trilobates. The human body parts on display here as free-floating motifs are unique in the Holly Bluff canon but have counterparts in Walls phase pottery engraving from the St Francis River and Memphis subareas of the Mississippi Valley.

The Holly Bluff III style phase continues the trend begun earlier in Holly Bluff II, toward greater stylistic heterogeneity and growing diversity of subject matter. As before, although some compositions are well planned and competently executed, others – a perfect example being the composition just discussed (Figure 8d) – are not executed at anything like a high level of competency.

Dating

We are well aware that demonstrating an order is not the same thing as demonstrating a chronology. Let us make the case for chronology now. We have already said that the latest possible date for the vast majority of the corpus,

including most of our Holly Bluff III specimens, is that of Spiro's Great Mortuary, near the beginning of the fifteenth century A.D.

Of the specimens assigned to Holly Bluff I that are not from the Great Mortuary, only one, the Bowman cup, has a reasonable archaeological provenience. The cup comes from Burial 2, Mound 2 at the Bowman site, Little River County, Arkansas. As reported by Hoffman (1970:173), the burial group from Mound 2 is assignable to the Haley phase of the Red River sequence, ca. A.D. 1200–1350.

Although we have split off Holly Bluff I from Classic Braden (formerly Braden A), with which it was formerly lumped, we do not deny that there are genuine ties between the two style phases, of a nature that suggests at least partial contemporaneity. Both are dominated by elaborate, carefully planned, sometimes masterfully executed compositions. The best example of a direct linkage is an engraved shell gorget (Figure 9) assigned to Braden A by Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:2:Plate

7). Both the gorget itself and its subject matter, chunky players depicted in court-card symmetry with rollers, tasseled chunky sticks, and severed human heads, are comfortably at home in Classic Braden but are strongly out of bounds in the Holly Bluff canon. And yet this artisan has added coiled snake bodies to the chunky players, a completely novel idea. Moreover, those snake bodies are embellished by trilobates of precisely the same form as one of the Holly Bluff bird-snake composites (Phillips and Brown 1975–1982:2:Plate 8). The trilobate motif is primarily found in the lower Mississippi Valley and adjacent areas of the northern Gulf Coast. So here we seemingly have a Classic Braden gorget engraver who was also familiar with Holly Bluff subjects and their manner of depiction. Assuming contemporaneity, we may cite the dating of Moorehead phase Cahokia, a source for Classic Braden in the American Bottom and adjacent areas (Brown 2011:38): A.D. 1200–1275.

Moreover, the common use of excision to accentuate the intersections of engraved lines in Holly Bluff I is

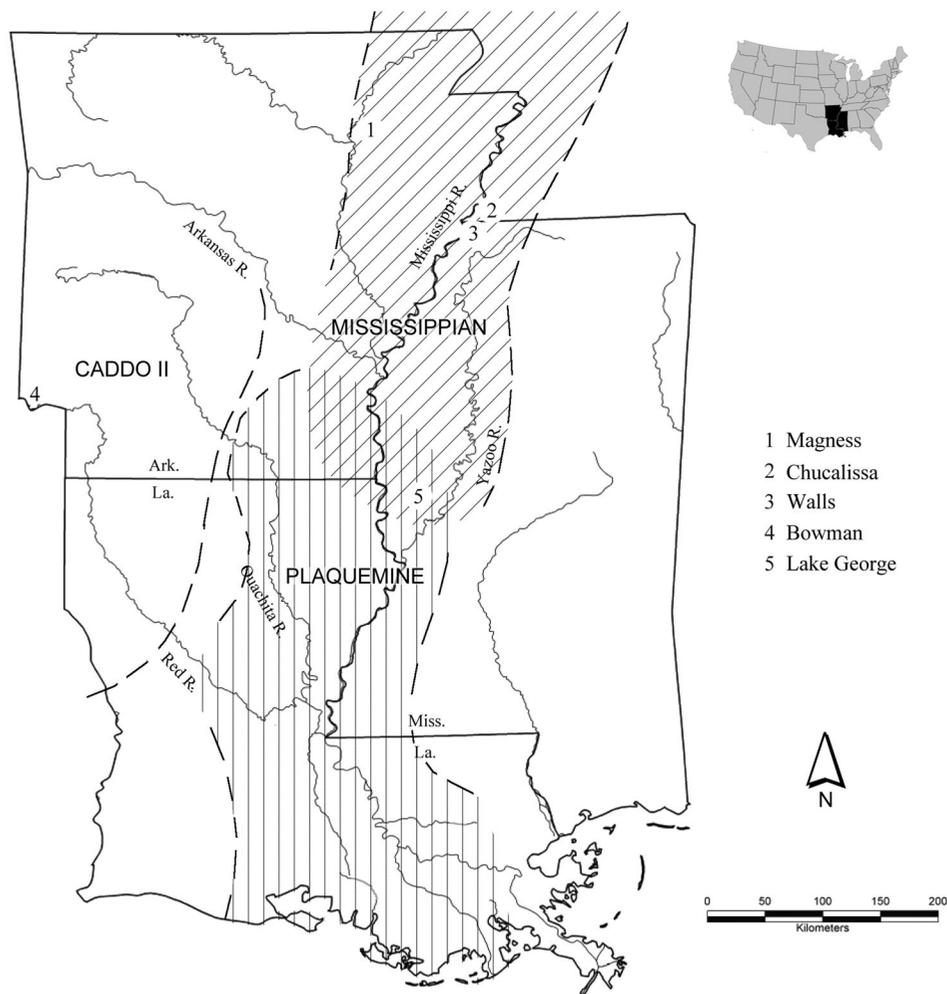


Figure 10. Provenienced Holly Bluff locations other than Spiro. Also shown is the Walls site, for which the ceramic type Walls Engraved is named. Map based on Jeter and Williams (1989).

reminiscent of the same tendency in a pan-southeastern North American horizon-style in engraved ceramics of ca. A.D. 1150–1250 (Steponaitis and Wilson 2010).

In the Holly Bluff II group, the vessel from Chucalissa illustrated in Figures 6d and 7 was recovered from one of the later Walls phase burials at the site. The Walls phase component at Chucalissa is rather securely dated to A.D. 1350–1550 (McNutt et al. 2012). Thus the vessel was deposited sometime in the latter part of that age range.

The Holly Bluff III style phase offers further possibilities. One is the late Lake George phase dating, on stratigraphic grounds, of the vessel already discussed from Mound A of the Lake George site, whose interior design is shown in Figure 8a. This vessel was found in an intrusive pit into the latest portion of the mound, overlying a burned floor with two radiocarbon dates both reported as A.D. 1420 ± 115 (Williams and Brain 1983:419). Although the large standard deviation renders these dates less helpful, we are comfortable with Williams and Brain's general dating of the phase to ca. A.D. 1350–1500, with the pit in question dating “no earlier than the fifteenth century” (Williams and Brain 1983: Figure 10.16, 419).

The lower burial zone in Mound B at the Hollywood site, Georgia, from which two Holly Bluff III engraved ceramic vessels (HWD 1 and HWD 2) were recovered, is assigned to the Hollywood phase of the middle Savannah River sequence, which according to Anderson et al. (1986:40–41) dates to about A.D. 1250–1350. Organic material from this context has been directly dated, and a Bayesian analysis of five assays results in a more specific age range for Hollywood Mound B of A.D. 1270–1320 (Smith et al. 2017).

As for external relationships of Holly Bluff III, at Moundville in west Alabama the strongest stylistic ties are with the engraved ceramics of the Early Hemphill style phase, estimated by Phillips (2012:124) to date to ca. A.D. 1325–1375. The relationship of Holly Bluff III to some Walls Engraved ceramics of the early Walls phase, central Mississippi Valley, is even more striking. The Walls phase is an expansive archaeological unit that dates from approximately A.D. 1350 until well into the seventeenth century at some sites. The relationship between Holly Bluff III and Walls Engraved is so specific, in both style and subject matter, that we find it likely that some representational engraving on Walls pottery is a direct inheritance from the Holly Bluff style, completing the transfer of the style from engraved shell to pottery.

All things considered, we conclude that the Holly Bluff sequence as outlined above is in fact a chronology, and one with considerable time depth that we are now in

a position to estimate, conservatively, as ca. A.D. 1200–1450.

Source area

It remains to try to situate the Holly Bluff style on a map. We might narrow this down considerably by the simple observation that Holly Bluff stylistic details do not transfer to engraved shell gorgets. That fact would seem to cast doubt on a number of archaeological zones in the Mississippian world: the Caddo region of the trans-Mississippi South, the American Bottom and surroundings, the lower Ohio River Valley, the Nashville Basin, the middle and upper Tennessee Valley, the southern Appalachians, northern and coastal Georgia, and central Alabama. Engraved gorgets considerably different from Holly Bluff in their stylistic mannerisms were made in each of these areas.

Of the documented sites other than Spiro where Holly Bluff pieces have been reported, we can rule out Hollywood in northern Georgia as a locus of manufacture. Engraved pottery of this sort is utterly out of place in the local Mississippian sequence there; the two Georgia vessels are obvious imports. Regarding the Moundville example from Alabama, it too is a stylistic outlier in the local Hemphill style canon. This leaves four further localities (Figure 10): Lake George in the Lower Yazoo Delta, Mississippi; Bowman, on the Red River in southwest Arkansas; Magness, on the White River in northeast Arkansas, and Chucalissa in the Memphis area.¹¹ That distribution is not much to go on, but it suggests a source area in the northern portion of the Lower Mississippi Valley, somewhere between the Missouri boot-heel and the northern Yazoo Basin. That general location is consistent with our sense that Holly Bluff is strongly implicated in the emergence of representational art on Walls Engraved pottery of the Memphis area. It also suggests that Holly Bluff is a “Middle Mississippian” (Griffin 1967) product as opposed to a Plaquemine, Caddo, or south Appalachian phenomenon.

Also relevant to the question is the strong stylistic relationship to Holly Bluff of certain engraved shell cup designs assigned to the Craig B style phase. Two Spiro cup designs from the Great Mortuary (Phillips and Brown 1975–1982:5:Plates 226 D and 227) show that some Craig B artisans of the Caddo region were acquainted not only with the taloned, rattled, and winged bird-snakes of Holly Bluff, (e.g., Figure 6c) but were also familiar with their conventional layouts and even with the piano key ventral element and pelmoc tongue motif. This relationship is reinforced by the Belcher bird-snake cup, an engraved Craig style shell cup from the Red River Caddoan Belcher site

(Webb 1959:Figure 58), whose composition shows a winged pelimoc knotted together in court-card symmetry with a winged rattlesnake of Holly Bluff III affinity. These designs stand out within a Caddoan style overtly obsessed with human and avian subject matter. They suggest, perhaps, a spatial contiguity of Holly Bluff with the Caddo region of the trans-Mississippi South.

Review of trends

At this point it will be helpful to review some of the changes implicated in the evolution of the style over time.

- Artistic skills trend from a high competency in Holly Bluff I to much diminished in Holly Bluff III. Echoing this trend, subjects are drafted in a more veristic, true-to-the-eye manner early on, trending to more schematic drafting in later style phases. This same diminishment in competency over time can be seen in other styles of the Mississippian era, a well-documented example being the shift from Early to Late Hemphill (Phillips 2012; Schatte 1997).
- A small number of master artisans appears to be responsible for much of the Holly Bluff I output of engraved shell cups. The same cannot be said of Holly Bluff II and III, where many more hands appear to be involved in the mix, possessing skills ranging from masterly to slovenly.
- The number of layouts is small in Holly Bluff I, including one – bird-headed snakes knotted in a double carrick bend – that might qualify as a “standard” form. Layouts, however, become much more diverse in Holly Bluff II-III. Similarly, the subject matter becomes more diverse over time, not only with new content in the main subject but also with the appearance of a variety of free-floating filler motifs in Holly Bluff III.
- In the evolution of Holly Bluff we witness an apparent thematic change, first emerging full-blown in Holly Bluff II, in the artistic vision of Beneath World spirits. From a beginning in what we have called pelimocs, we begin to encounter other sorts of bird-serpents and panther-bird-serpents, including versions with wings, raptor talons, and rattlesnake tails. Human-headed snakes eventually appear in Holly Bluff III. Pelimoc tongues give way to fan-shaped tongues, resolving finally into simple forked tongues. A number of Holly Bluff III creatures are presented as pure snakes, without any visually monstrous parts or appendages.
- Symmetry gives way, gradually, to lack of symmetry in the sequence. Some Holly Bluff compositions may be described as exhibiting a chaotic lack of order, arranged only according to artistic whim. This tendency is already evident at the beginning of the sequence, but it becomes more frequent in the later style phases.
- An explicit function of Holly Bluff I pelimocs is that they cooperate in a quadripartite arrangement to create a center, probably cosmological in nature. This centering function becomes merely implicit in later compositions, where there is no visible center but the creatures nonetheless are depicted as enveloping the container on which they appear, “centering” that container.¹² In many Holly Bluff II and Holly Bluff III compositions, this centering function is entirely absent.
- By the beginning of Holly Bluff III, the style is no longer confined to engraved shell cups. It is now, more inclusively, evident on a small number of engraved and incised pottery vessels. This shift in genres is completed in subsequent art, in an only slightly revised style: Walls Engraved pottery of the Memphis and Lower Sunflower River regions of the Mississippi River Valley.

Holly Bluff iconography

In the spirit of configurational analysis (Knight 2013; Kubler 1969) we have included in the list above certain apparent shifts in the subject matter of Holly Bluff over time. Although our primary concerns are stylistic, we cannot completely ignore some of the main iconographic issues raised by this material – even if in the end we will have little definitive to say. The following should at least introduce a discussion that deserves much fuller treatment.

To apply the most obvious ethnographic homology, a central concept that infuses Holly Bluff imagery is the depiction of Beneath World powers, spirit beings believed to inhabit an unseen, watery realm of the cosmos. We see this as evidence of the considerable prehistoric time depth of that cosmological belief in the American South. Such powers are visualized primarily as serpents – bird-headed snakes, raptor-snakes, panther-raptor-snakes, human-headed snakes, or just snakes.¹³ One Holly Bluff composition (Figure 5d) shows that its artists knew other forms as well, including the Beneath World long-tailed panther and fanciful fish.

A second key concept in Holly Bluff art is that Beneath World powers are multiple. This concept is apparent in the simultaneous depiction of differently envisioned creatures.¹⁴ For example, the composition

shown in [Figure 5d](#) demonstrates that Holly Bluff I artisans were at once familiar with pelimocs, underwater panthers, and other aquatic monsters, and that all were relevant to the implied ritual purposes of shell cup use. In Holly Bluff II, simple pelimoc bird-snakes are found, as are other bird-snakes that are both winged and taloned, emphasizing the more aggressive raptor over the water bird. In Holly Bluff III, where bird-headed snakes are forgotten and rattlesnakes are the norm, there is an apparent distinction between simple rattlesnakes which may or may not bear antlers (e.g., [Figures 1d](#) and [8a–d](#)) and the winged renderings that often have more than a hint of mammal in the snout ([Figure 1b](#)). These latter are the versions that in other places and times come to populate the engraved art of Walls and Moundville.¹⁵ All this being said, we cannot lose sight of the possibility that Holly Bluff artisans knew distinct “aspects” or morphs of spirit beings they considered as one – for example, benign versus aggressive identities – and depicted such identities using different artistic conventions.

The dominant subject in Holly Bluff I art is a striking one: that of the cooperation of multiple Beneath World powers in the creation of a knotted, thus fixed, center. Cooperation and the creation of order is an unexpected role for Beneath World spirits. In historic southeastern Native American belief, such spirits are commonly described as the denizens of a chaotic, unpredictable realm of confusion and ambiguity – one hardly capable of ordering the cosmos (see, e.g., Hudson 1976:128, 2003:41). To speculate, in the present case one role of the bird-snakes we have called pelimocs may have been the benign one of anchoring the *axis mundi* at the base of the cosmos.

We are unsure of the significance of the shift in perspective from explicit to implicit centering, and the further shift from centering to the absence of it. Similarly, we are unsure of the meaning of the switch, beginning in Holly Bluff II, from visually identical creatures to similar but differently marked creatures in interaction. The latter exhibit contrasting body patterns, fin configurations, and eye surrounds. Both combinations are capable of centering (e.g., [Figure 5a](#) vs. [Figure 6b](#)).

As for the chaotic picture of the Beneath World familiar from ethnographic sources, such a vision seems already fully realized in early Holly Bluff, as in the image to which we have several times called attention in [Figure 5d](#). Even so, such a chaotic vision seems more common in later works, in the wildly intertwined snakes that seem to yield to personal artistic whim in their layout, and in such images as [Figure 8d](#) where the main subject, an undulating snake, is surrounded by human body parts in apparent disarray.

Final thoughts

The objectives of this paper are primarily descriptive: to add Holly Bluff to our vocabulary of Mississippian styles and assign it a place in space and time. To do this, we have had to extract these compositions from their former stylistic assignment within the Braden style tradition. Our definitional effort has been framed in such a manner that Holly Bluff might be fruitfully compared and contrasted with neighboring styles.

One of the needs going forward is to refine Holly Bluff's relationships to other imagery in other styles. For example, the relationships between Holly Bluff and Braden, Craig B, Walls, and Hemphill imagery, while already apparent, need to be examined with greater specificity. Part of the present difficulty in doing so is that we can only vaguely specify the geographical reach and chronological dimensions of the style. The aspects with which we feel most comfortable at present are the internal relative chronology consisting of three style phases, and the relatively clear developmental relationship between Holly Bluff III and some Walls Engraved pottery.

Much more can be said about Holly Bluff iconography than what little we have attempted. We have not speculated at all about the religious contexts in which this imagery was important. For what ritual or rituals was it important to drink from a cup adorned with Beneath World powers? Was it a supplication to these powers, and if so, to what end? What did it signify for a mourner to place such a cup with the dead? Do the shifts in subject matter over time in Holly Bluff reflect changes in cosmological beliefs? Social changes? Although we must leave such questions unanswered, we look forward to those discussions.

Notes

1. By centering, we refer to compositions arranged to embody a focal point that serves as a symbol of the center. Such embodied compositions imply that local centers can be created ritually, and that some things, substances, or persons need to be “centered.” See Knight and Steponaitis (2011:219).
2. We admit to the possibility of circular reasoning here, in that the exercise began by extracting the “serpent” material from Phillips and Brown's (1975–1982) Braden B presentation.
3. Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:2:Plate 24) called this same creature an “amphisbaena,” a mythical double-headed snake, choosing to place emphasis on both its double-headed nature and its intertwined articulation in a specific knot, the double carrick bend. As many depictions of what we think is the same creature exhibit neither of these criteria, we have taken the liberty of renaming it.

4. The bulb and downward hook at the end of the bill is best illustrated by Phillips and Brown in a design not shown here (1975–1982:2:Plate 29), and by P&B 31 B, our Figure 6a.
5. We substitute here our own reconstruction from the published rubbings (Phillips and Brown 1975–1982:3:Plate 73). In the original, at least two of the cup fragments (“d” and “f”) seem misplaced. We have rotated fragment “d” 180 degrees and moved it upward on the cup so as to avoid merging two different snake bodies and two different dorsal fins. Likewise, we have moved fragment “f” to a position closer to the spire, avoiding the conflation of a free-floating trilobate motif with another one decorating a dorsal fin. Although our reconstruction may not be entirely accurate either, it creates a more satisfactory solution to a highly fragmented specimen.
6. The MDS solution shown here does not include a number of items shown in Table 1 that were added to the corpus after the quantitative analysis was completed and the stylistic groups were identified. These are P&B 27.1, 32, 33, 83, 84, 91, 92, 93, B-6 A, MAG, BOW, NE63, and HWD 2. The solution also shows a design (Phillips and Brown 1975–1982:5:Plate 227) that has since been deleted (see note 7).
7. These deletions included the Issaquena Disk (Brown 1926:228–231), a sandstone palette believed to come from the Grace site, Issaquena County, Mississippi. That deletion, importantly, leaves the style entirely confined to containers. Also deleted was the Perino Piasa (Perino 1960), an image from an engraved ceramic bottle from the Pecan Point site, Arkansas, and Spiro cups 226 D and 227, which we are now convinced are correctly assigned to the Craig B style phase.
8. These cognate examples are P&B 8, likewise assigned by us to Holly Bluff II, P&B 33, assigned by us to Holly Bluff I, and two designs assigned to the Craig B style phase by Phillips and Brown (1975–1982:5:Plates 226 D, 227).
9. It is this unusual combination of the early crosshatched shield dorsal element with such late traits as snake heads, rattles, and forked tongues that forces the Chucalissa image into its outlier position on the MDS plot (Figure 3), positioned directly between the main Holly Bluff I and Holly Bluff III image clusters.
10. Keith Stephenson (personal communication 2012) informs us that the catalog numbers published for these vessels by Thomas (1894) are incorrect. The correct numbers are A135196 (the illustrated vessel) and A135204.
11. Although the Chucalissa bottle has a rare shape for the Memphis area in which it was found, there are at least two other vessels from that area that have that shape. At this point we consider it more likely locally made than an import.
12. The concept of intertwined snakes artistically enwrapping the containers on which they are put is not unique to Holly Bluff in the Mississippian world. Published examples of the concept in other styles include a painted bottle from northeast Arkansas, and a Caddoan bottle, also from Arkansas (Townsend and Sharp 2004:216, Figure 18; 248, Figure 3).
13. At least the panther-raptor-snakes in Holly Bluff would be called “piasas” in the usage of Phillips and Brown (1975–1982). We have, however, decided to avoid this term because of an uncomfortable vagueness about the way it has been used elsewhere to refer to any number of composite creatures.
14. This multiplicity of Beneath World powers finds a comparable expression in the contemporaneous Bellaire style of the Plaquemine archaeological culture of the Lower Mississippi Valley, there confined to smoking pipes. Bellaire artisans had a different vision of Beneath World spirits: long-tailed panthers, panther-raptor-serpents, and owl-fish-serpents (Steponaitis et al. 2009).
15. We are aware that the depiction of rattles on snakes in this art may be less a direct reference to the genus *Crotalus* than an allusion to the shaman-like possession by these creatures of gourd rattles (Hamell and Fox 2005).

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Data availability statement

The variable list used in the MDS analysis and the fully coded data for the objects in Table 1 may be had upon request from the corresponding author.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Vernon James Knight is Professor Emeritus in Anthropology and Curator Emeritus in American Archaeology at the University of Alabama. His research interests lie in social structure, political organization, and artistic style and iconography of the eastern United States and the Greater Antilles.

George E. Lankford is Professor Emeritus in Folklore from Lyon College, Batesville, Arkansas. His research interests are in Mississippian iconography and its relation to Native American mythology.

Erin Phillips is Regional Laboratories Manager at Coastal Environments, Inc. in Houston, Texas. Her research interests are in the archaeology of complex societies in the southeastern United States, and in art in archaeological contexts.

David H. Dye is Professor of Archaeology in the Department of Earth Sciences at the University of Memphis. His research interests include Mississippian ceramic analysis, conflict studies, and belief systems.

Vincas P. Steponaitis is Professor of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His research focuses on the precolonial and colonial Indian cultures of the American South, the origins of political centralization, studies of ancient art, and the analysis of ancient ceramics.

Mitchell R. Childress is an independent researcher living in Memphis, Tennessee. His archaeological work has focused on sites in the Cumberland, Tennessee, and Mississippi drainages. His primary research interests are anthropological archaeology, population dynamics, quantitative methods, and art history.

ORCID

Vernon James Knight  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0791-000X>

Erin Phillips  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4789-959X>

David H. Dye  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0338-8982>

Vincas P. Steponaitis  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0000-3979>

Mitchell R. Childress  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6419-6258>

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