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The Mississippian Site of Origin for the So-Called Moundville Spider

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ABSTRACT

For 60 years, the origin of an iconographically significant example of Southeastern Mississippian symbolic art has been enmeshed in error and ambiguity. A trail of sleuthing over 25 years provides information used to assess museum curation records and published clues from 1887 to the present, contextualizing the mystery and finally allowing identification of a specific Mississippian period cemetery of origin for the so-called Moundville spider.

KEYWORDS

Moundville; Perry; Spider; Motif; Gorget

The so-called Moundville spider is an approximately 8 cm by 14 cm plaque alternately reported as made of walnut wood or bark (Figure 1). The plaque is engraved with the image of a Mississippian period spider, an iconographic theme more typically found on shell or copper. A definitive 1957 identification listed the artifact as from “Moundville, Alabama” (Fundaburk and Foreman 1957: Plate 142), describing the plaque as catalog 50639 at the “Chicago Natural History Museum” (the Field Museum of Natural History). Following this, scholarly attribution of the plaque to the Moundville site became routine as the artifact was compared to other items in the broad corpus of Southeastern Mississippian iconography (e.g., Brain and Phillips 1996:371; Esarey 1987, 1990; Hamilton et al. 1974:165; Howard 1968:57; Mellown 1976: 5, Figure 5; Phillips and Brown 1978:202; Power 2004:97; Walthall 1977:37–38, 1980:219).

Alabama Sleuthing

In the decades after Fundaburk and Foreman’s unprecedented compilation of Southeastern Mississippian artifacts, the lack of any published detail about the source of the Moundville spider plaque did not escape the notice of Alabama archaeologists. When this particular spider design was considered as a logo for the Moundville Museum, curatorial due diligence triggered a productive sleuthing episode by Ian W. Brown, who went searching for more information



Figure 1. 1992 photo from a Field Museum exhibit case (by Duane Esarey).

on the artifact's history. The results are recorded in a detailed memo sent by Brown to the late Dr. Douglas Jones, then director of the Alabama Museum of Natural History. At the time, Brown's May 21, 1991, memo to Dr. Jones was marked "CONFIDENTIAL" because of Brown's worry that a number of people had already invested a great deal of time in and were committed to the new logo being accepted.

After learning from the Field Museum that neither the catalog number nor the recorded origin for the wooden plaque matched Fundaburk and Foreman's description, Brown was able to determine that, according to John Walthall, the attribution of the item to the Moundville site had been provided to Fundaburk and Foreman by Dr. David DeJarnette. Walthall related to Brown that, as he understood it, DeJarnette had become familiar with the artifact during his time at the University of Chicago in the early 1930s and understood it to be from Moundville.

Instead, Ian Brown's query to the Field Museum revealed that the plaque was actually catalog 51425 and that it was part of a collection acquired from C. W. Riggs in 1894. Subsequent record checking in Chicago indicated its origin was listed simply as a "mound in Alabama." This information was instrumental in leading the provenience trail away from Moundville.

Some years earlier, David Brose (1980) had noted that artifacts from C. W. Riggs's colorful prequel to C. B. Moore's grand excavation tours were predominately obtained between 1876 and 1891, but these materials were typically from midwestern states, especially Arkansas, and nearly all were well north of central Alabama. Another detail eventually important in unlocking the mystery of the spider plaque was Brose's discovery and publication of two letters found in a box of artifacts he unpacked in 1976 at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History (Brose 1980:146–148).

One was a letter demonstrating that on September 4, 1893, William Henry Holmes acknowledged that he had examined, and validated the authenticity of, Riggs's Arkansas collection of "mound-builder remains, pottery and implements." This letter was thus written partway through the May through October 1893 tenure of the World's Columbian Exposition. And Riggs's letterhead trumpets his own participation as an exhibitor in that venue in Chicago. The lower part of the same letter—dated November 3, 1893, four days after the close of the exposition, and presumably penned as Riggs began marketing his exhibited collections—was Riggs's unaddressed note transmitting Holmes's pronouncement of authenticity. Presumably Riggs supplied these conjoined letters to prospective buyers, which was the context of the two letters Brose discovered in Cleveland in 1976. For our purposes, this demonstrates Holmes inspected at least the Arkansas portion of the Riggs collection, as delivered to the Field Museum. More broadly, it implies Holmes was conversant with the Riggs collection in 1893, the same year the spider plaque was sold to the Field Museum as part of that same collection.

Brown was understandably intrigued as to whether this September 1893 interaction exposed Holmes specifically to the spider plaque, noting that, if it had, it was surprising that the item did not seem to have entered Holmes's subsequent voluminous writings. Given that Holmes (1883) had written specifically about Mississippian spiders, would he have failed to weigh in on the discovery of such a notable item if he had seen it? More importantly, if Holmes had seen it, did he have further knowledge of its origin than that which was preserved in the Field Museum records?

Brown also recorded his surprise that the Field Museum staff reported they saw no indication of the former presence of copper, which would be the standard explanation for the extraordinary preservation of the wooden spider plaque. For Brown, this detail heightened how especially unlikely a Moundville site origin would be for this artifact, given the soils of the Moundville site. Over the course of his sleuthing, Brown had corresponded with a number of archaeologists and curators (John Walthall, Vincas Steponaitis, Vernon J. Knight Jr., David Brose, Jeffrey P. Brain, James VanStone, and Wesley Cowan) before concluding the search in May 1991. But at this point the trail went cold. The matter immediately at hand was largely settled. The spider was unlikely to be from Moundville and, thus, an inadvisable logo for the on-site museum. The inconclusive results were that, at best, the plaque was from a "mound in Alabama." But exactly which mound, and how this Alabama item got into the Riggs collection, remained shrouded.

The Mississippian Spider Sample and a Moundville Origin Revisited

Two of the many citations accepting the Fundaburk and Foreman attribution for this spider plaque as Moundville are by the senior author (Esarey 1987, 1990).

Beginning in 1986, Esarey compiled all known cases of Mississippian spiders on a variety of media, examining the available corpus for geographic style and potential meanings. For Esarey, the first indication there was a problem with Moundville as the site of origin was Eugene Futato's (1992:78) mysterious note that the provenience of the plaque documented by Fundaburk and Foreman was "highly questionable." Futato's acknowledgment of Ian W. Brown for his notes on the spider motif links this skepticism directly back to Brown's sleuthing the previous year. There the matter languished until Jason Wyatt of the University of Memphis began to consult both Brain and Phillips's (1996) and Esarey's (1990) spider gorget compendia. Corresponding with Esarey, Wyatt assembled a sample of 28 McAdams-style spider gorgets for his analysis (Wyatt 2002). Subsequently, in March 2003, Wyatt passed along the information that it was now assumed that the Field Museum wooden spider plaque was not from the Moundville site but rather from an unknown Mississippian site, perhaps on the Tennessee River (reflecting Brown's knowledge that the Field Museum catalog was for a mound in Alabama and that C. W. Riggs was not known to have gone far south in Alabama).

Using Esarey's additions, Brain and Phillips had expanded the body of Mississippian spiders on various media to 48 examples by 1996 (after four duplicate examples are deleted). Esarey's preparations for a 2004 paper on Mississippian spider depictions brought the total on all known media to 60 (and presently over 75 spiders are known for all Mississippian media). In this expanding corpus, the original location of the Field Museum wooden spider plaque remains important since, even with so many new samples, none of the known Mississippian spiders is a particularly close match to the Field Museum spider. With Futato's (1992) and Wyatt's (2002) cautions in hand, Esarey's 2004 effort included another attempt at fact finding in the Field Museum records.

Esarey first photographed and examined the Field Museum spider plaque while it was on display in 1992 (see [Figure 1](#)) and at that time noted that a central vertical strip of the engraved detail was reconstructed. In August 2004, the aid of Anjaneen Coble, who was at that time working at the Field Museum, was enlisted. Coble found that the plaque was "between exhibits," pulled for the upcoming Americas exhibit, and thus happily available for full inspection. Her initial catalog check retrieved essentially the same information provided to Ian Brown 13 years previous. She reported "catalogue 51425 is a wooden plaque from an Alabama mound site, received in 1894 from C. W. Riggs. The plaque measures 8 cm wide and 14 cm long." A series of accompanying photos was provided by the Field Museum.

The most surprising aspect of these photos ([Figure 2](#)) was that the back side of the artifact now consists entirely of plaster. As noted, the front had been subjected to a skillful but aggressive restoration at an unknown date, and the 2004 photos make the boundary of that reconstruction even more clear. With the 1992 and 2004 photos in hand, it can be observed that the reconstruction



Figure 2. 2004 images supplied by the Field Museum.

predates Fundaburk and Foreman's published photo. The other surprising attribute (which had also been reported to Ian Brown) was the absence of copper-based staining. But now it could be observed that this assessment might possibly have been affected by the reconstruction.

Two months later, Anjaneen Coble sent word of a breakthrough in researching the Field Museum records. In accession file 1894:146 were ancillary records bearing on the Riggs Collection. C. W. Riggs had obtained part of the collection he sold to the Field Museum from a trade with the Cincinnati Museum in 1888. Field Museum catalog 51425 cross-checks as Item 145 on a list of 187 artifacts (having been willed to the newly established Cincinnati Museum in 1887 as part of the estate of Thomas Cleneay), which were then in the following year traded to C. W. Riggs for pottery vessels. Cleneay's collection of over 20,000 artifacts is known to have included other notable Mississippian items from Tennessee (Dillingham and Griffin 1976).

Item 145's location ("Tennessee, East") was not more satisfying than the Field Museum's "mound in Alabama" had been. Given the peregrination of the Tennessee River across northern Alabama and the presence of numerous major Mississippian sites along the river there and in Tennessee proper, this revelation was not seen as necessarily exclusive of the temporally subsequent Field Museum designation of the object as being from a "mound in Alabama." At nearly the

same time, input came from Ian Brown and his notes from 1991 were supplied. Overall, the issue was now more fleshed out, but it was no closer to a resolution at the close of 2004 than it had been when research had come to rest in 1991.

After 2004, with Mississippian iconographic citations to specific geography of motifs continuing to play a strong regional contextual role (Brown 2011:50), the acknowledged location of the spider plaque began to reflect these somewhat ambiguous findings: Reilly (2007:52–53) describing it as from the “central Tennessee River Valley”; Steponaitis et al. (2011:170–171, 176), as from “eastern Tennessee.”

An Obscure Publication, a Confusing Label, and a Firm Point of Origin

Ian Brown’s hopeful 1991 note regarding what we would expect William Henry Holmes to have done had he observed the wooden plaque turned out to be prescient indeed. In fact, 10 years after the letter testifying as to the authenticity of the Riggs artifacts at Chicago, Holmes posted a short, but obscure, note that fully resolved the question of the wooden plaque’s origin. A misread label rendered the site location opaque for the next 115 years, but Holmes did indeed inspect, draw, comment on, and record the origin of the spider plaque for posterity.

Brose (1980:146) noted that he had searched Holmes’s subsequent contributions (especially his massive opus on aboriginal pottery) looking for mention of further interaction with Riggs. But overlooked throughout the long search was the obscure solution to the problem. The same year as Holmes’s opus (Holmes 1903a) was published, he appended a less than one-page discussion and a now precious drawing (Figure 3) of our spider plaque



Figure 3. Holmes’s (1903b) drawing.

at the end of an unrelated article (Holmes 1903b). Holmes's main intent in that article had been to draw attention to the similarity between what we now recognize as the Eddyville, Kentucky, anthropomorphic gorget and another specimen held by the Field Museum, a marine shell gorget from Mexico. Subsequent consensus on the lack of relevance of this observation in discussions of Mississippian art accounts for Holmes's latter publication being largely ignored throughout the twentieth century as no more than the earliest notation of the Eddyville chunky player gorget (e.g., Phillips and Brown 1978:110–111).

Holmes described the spider plaque as three and one-half inches by five and one-half inches, being a "dark wood or bark item" and with "a somewhat remarkable design." He noted it was in a collection obtained by the "Field Columbian Museum" from Mr. C. W. Riggs. Apparently, at this time the spider plaque was not reconstructed, and better yet, it was accompanied by a highly specific label (apparently subsequently lost—perhaps during the item's reconstruction). Holmes relates that the spider plaque was obtained from a "mound seven miles inland, opposite Sheffield, Alabama." Further, he notes, "the excellent state of preservation shown by this fragile specimen is due to association with objects of copper." The accompanying technical sketch can be taken as the earliest-known image of the engraving.

Holmes's (1903b:99) transcription that the spider plaque's label read a "mound seven miles inland" no doubt sowed the seeds of confusion. With the wisdom of hindsight, the original intent of the label is perfectly obvious (that is, *inland* should be *island*). Thus, the label should have been read "Mound, Seven Mile Island, opposite Sheffield, Alabama." Thirty-nine years later, Webb and DeJarnette (1942:43, Map 2) published a description of a large Mississippian cemetery on a shell mound in exactly these terms, as on the upper (east) end of Seven Mile Island, opposite the wharf at Sheffield, Alabama.

The Perry Site

The well-known Perry site (1Lu25) is unmistakably indicated as the site of origin for the so-called Moundville spider plaque. In 1914, 11 years after Holmes's obscure note, C. B. Moore visited Seven Mile Island, where he excavated predominately at the "Seven Mile Island Mound" (later designated 1Lu21 by Webb and DeJarnette) located downstream of Perry site, near the middle of the island. Moore paid only scant attention to the Perry site (1Lu25) at the upstream end of the island, noting that a "number of frame structures" stood over the mound there (Pohlemus 2002:251; Walthall 1980:230). Excavating between structures, Moore did find a few burials at the Perry site, but he did not persist. By the time Webb and DeJarnette began excavation there in the summer of 1938, the buildings had all been removed. A number of large blocks (60,000 ft²) were opened in the 3 m tall shell mound, with over 1,000 Archaic and Mississippian

burials eventually excavated (Herndon 2015:6–10; Webb and DeJarnette 1942: Map 2, 43, 58–91, Plates 70–128).

The site can be characterized as a large Kogers Island phase (AD 1200–1500) Mississippian cemetery, with over 450 Mississippian burials intruding on an Archaic shell midden that also included numerous burials of the earlier period. Herndon lists elite status Mississippian materials found in this cemetery as fine-ware ceramics, conch shell cups, columella beads, copper-clad wooden ear disks, copper beads, shark teeth, bear teeth, canine teeth pendants, bone awls, bone pins, engraved shell gorgets, greenstone celts, bone and antler projectile points, and terrapin plastrons (Herndon 2015:8–10, 21, 39). The Mississippian spider plaque, although a spectacular artifact in its own right, is completely coherent with the material attributes of this cemetery.

Are the Published Photos and Descriptions Reliable?

Comparison of the 2004, 1992, 1977, and 1957 images of the artifact indicate that restorations predate the first published photograph. This raises the question of how reliable the various photos and descriptions are in representing the original design and condition of the item. The design elements are sufficiently repetitive to largely mitigate this question, but Holmes gives us our only record of the item prior to restoration. His sketch (see [Figure 3](#)) is clearly careful and detailed, albeit idealized rather than absolutely exact.

[Figure 4](#) shows how much of the central axis has been replaced by reconstruction. Holmes noted the item's fragility—obviously the entire plaque was broken in two parts at some point. We can assess the loss of details via reconstruction as being no worse than any decorative elements that may have been positioned in the abdomen or the inner part of the central element (where a circle and cross might have been present). Yet, Holmes's sketch seems to reassure us even on these points. Some reconstructed detail between the hindmost legs and the abdomen is now without reinforcing documentation and the mouth parts vary slightly from Holmes's sketch, but otherwise we have strong agreement between images. The reconstruction has not done much violence to the engraved patterns.

Holmes attributes the object's preservation to its association with copper. When viewed and photographed a century later, in 1992, Esarey concluded that the plaque had general greenish staining that seemed to indicate a former association with copper, yet the 2004 photos reveal that much of the blackish green coloration present is now rendered questionable because of cosmetic adjustments. That is, color modification immediately adjacent to the fully reconstructed parts of the design (to reduce contrast) leaves little visual recourse on this issue had Holmes not spoken of it. But he did, and pending an elemental analysis, we should assume his practiced eye can be depended on.

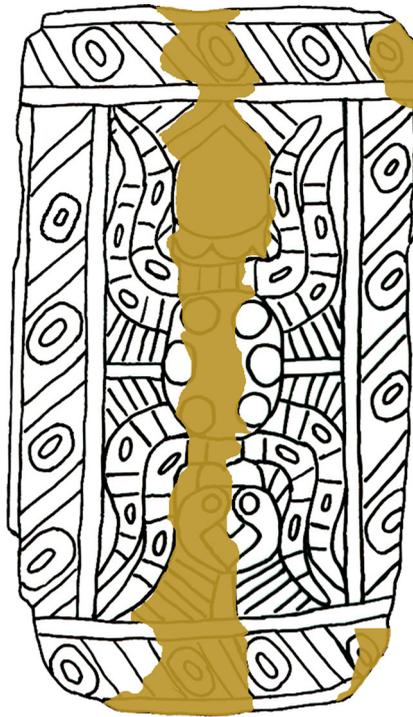


Figure 4. Extent of reconstruction (drawing by Kelvin W. Sampson).

Conclusion

One remaining concern is it that the earliest provenience (Cleneay collection) is less specific than both the Field Museum record and Holmes's assertion of the item's exact location. We are reassured by the fact that Holmes certainly had no way of knowing that this particular location at the upstream end of Seven Mile Island was a reasonable provenience (even if he had understood the label) since both C. B. Moore's and the Tennessee Valley Authority's excavations were in the future.

Thomas Cleneay was dead by the time this item passed into Riggs's hands in 1888 and cannot be the source of a revision. Yet somehow (probably via an attached label when he inspected the item), Holmes did have an exact provenience, and the Field Museum records henceforth preserved an accurate, albeit more generic, version of that same location. We can assume that reversion to the less specific location of a "mound in Alabama" came from confusion over the unclear writing (*island* having been misread as *inland*) on the now lost label.

As expected, Holmes's (1883) prior interest in the spider design almost certainly accounted for his desire to preserve somewhere in print a commentary about this spider plaque. We do not know who excavated the wooden spider plaque. We can only be sure that it was found before 1887 (when Cleneay's collection entered the new Cincinnati museum). Nonetheless, there is every reason

to suggest that the origin of the spider plaque has finally been determined. It is fortuitous that the obscure publication and incorrectly deciphered label led us back to such a well-documented site, in spite of having required over 130 years of research efforts to finally do so.

Acknowledgments

In a sleuthing endeavor with many interested parties and spanning such a long period of time, it becomes hard to recall all those to be acknowledged. In this case, most of those consulted have become joined to the narrative above. Perhaps in such a case, it behooves us to merely acknowledge a pioneer of our endeavor, William Henry Holmes, who in the early years of American archaeology showed the value of precision in our endless compilations and comparisons. His predictable response to these subjects spanned his career and beyond, to the point that over a century later we could accurately predict what he might have done after encountering this artifact and then have that prediction so well borne out.

Notes on Contributors

Duane Esarey (Ph.D. University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill 2013) worked at Western Illinois University and Dickson Mounds Branch of the Illinois State Museum, and is now Assistant Director of the Illinois State Archaeological Survey. His 40 years experience has focused largely on special attention to Late Woodland and Mississippian prehistoric and protohistoric, as well as Colonial period archaeology, with a recent dissertation on the the 17th century in the colonial Northeast.

Ian W. Brown (Ph.D. Brown University 1979) is Curator of Gulf Coast Archaeology at the Alabama Museum of Natural History and Full Professor in the Department of Anthropology at University of Alabama. He has over 40 years of experience in the archaeology of the Lower Mississippi Valley and the Gulf Coastal Plain.

Anjaneen (Campbell) Coble (B.A. Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago 2004) has been associated with a number of archaeological projects in Illinois, Michigan, and Kenya in affiliation with Western Illinois University, Northern Michigan University, and the Field Museum of Natural History. During the time referred to in this article, Angie was affiliated with the Field Museum and researched obscure files there, discovering this artifact's origination in the Thomas Cleaney collection.

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