

The Art of the Spiro Warrior: Engravings in Shell from the Spiro Site

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The Native artists at the Spiro site in eastern Oklahoma crafted exquisite shell drinking cups as one of their principal art forms. These engraved cups were used for drinking "black drink," a caffeinated beverage, during certain ceremonial occasions. While the utilitarian purpose of the cups is fairly certain, less progress has been made in interpreting the iconography of the engraved designs on the cups. The Spiro site, with the Craig Mound as its principal burial mound, has yielded an unprecedented amount of these shell art objects along with an unusual array of other artifacts not found in such profusion anywhere else in the southeastern United States.

Native American history and art history have received a great deal of attention in recent years. The general public has become fascinated with these people whose ancestors came here over 10,000 years before Europeans arrived. Their beliefs and lifeways have provided fertile fields for research by both anthropologists and art historians who have striven to explore the spiritual and aesthetic aspects of Native American cultures which are manifested in their art. However, most research into the artistic endeavors of the southeastern Native Americans has been written by anthropologists for an anthropological audience while the examples of actual art historical research on southeastern Native American art are few and far between. Lee Anne Wilson writes that

the slow development of modern theoretical and methodological considerations in the study of primitive art has been due in large measure to the twin parentage—anthropology and art history—of this new field of study as well as to the tendency of Western European oriented scholars to view this material as something less than art.¹

This attitude would explain the slighting of the Spiro site in art historical research along with other spectacular sites such as Etowah in Georgia and Moundville in Alabama. All of these sites have produced substantial quantities of art objects which are still, for the most part, unexplained through an art historian's perspective and methodologies.

"Mississippian" is a term used by archeologists to denote the native societies which emerged in the Mississippi River

Basin and spread throughout the southeastern United States from about A.D. 900 to A.D. 1540. The Mississippian culture was a complex development with a number of regional variants. However, there are a few basic characteristics of this period generally accepted by archaeologists. Mississippian people became increasingly dependent on corn agriculture, and in turn became more warlike. This phenomenon is fairly common in chiefdom level societies where regional polities compete with each other for fertile lands. These polities were ruled by semi-divine chiefs, who with members of their kin groups assumed power and prestige over the rest of the group. The practice of building large, truncated pyramidal earthen mounds, usually with a ceremonial or residential structure on top, appeared during this period and spread rapidly throughout most of the Southeast. These large earth mounds were one of the most distinctive features of the Mississippian period. In addition to supporting structures, mounds were also used for burials, usually for high-status individuals accompanied by elaborate grave goods. Such differentiation in burial practices can be taken as evidence for social hierarchy during the Mississippian period.

Mississippian societies traded for exotic materials such as mica, copper and large marine shells, which were fashioned into elite adornments and engraved cups, often placed in burials as symbols of status. Increasingly, the glorification of warfare figures prominently in the artistic expression of these objects. For example, increasing elaboration can be seen in objects such as war clubs made from non-traditional materials which were created solely for the purpose of symbolic display. An understanding of the importance of warfare in Mississippian society is critical in understanding the significance of its expression in Mississippian art forms. Violent images first appear during the Mississippian period on the engravings in shell, portraying such scenes as beheadings, the severing of limbs, and the breaking of bones. Also, the shell engravings provide evidence of a definite correlation between art, status, and warfare.

Wayne Van Horne recognizes two distinct types of warfare which probably occurred during the Mississippian period. First, there was the development of large-scale warfare, with sustained fighting by large, organized groups. But probably the more prevalent type of warfare was the continual, chronic raiding which was carried out by small groups of warriors. "The warriors' objective was to kill one or a few people and successfully return home with a trophy, such as a scalp, in order to

¹ Lee Anne Wilson, "Interpreting Southern Cult Iconography: A Methodological Synthesis," *The Journal of the Theory and Criticism of the Visual Arts*: 41.

prove their prowess and enhance their status as warriors."²

The entire group of mounds which make up the Spiro site (Figure 1) is located in Le Flore County, Oklahoma, seven miles north of the town of Spiro. The largest earthwork lies on the Arkansas River with satellite mounds extending to the northwest. The Craig Mound (Figure 1) was by far the largest and most intensively utilized of the mounds and housed a series of mortuaries, the largest and most recent of which was a roofed structure called the Great Mortuary. It was in this mortuary that the greatest number of grave goods was discovered, including the shell cups.

The Spiro Mortuary complex emerged in what is called the Spiro phase (A.D. 1200-1350). This is the final phase of this site before historic occupation and is the phase in which Spiro ceased to exist as a population center, becoming solely a burial ground. It is also the phase in which the Great Mortuary was constructed and dismantled.³ The main function of a mortuary was to serve as a temporary location for housing the remains of the deceased elite until their permanent interment within a mound. In the case of the Great Mortuary, this interment never took place. According to the archeological record, around A.D. 1400, the roof was dismantled and the entire structure with bodies inside was covered with dirt.⁴ There are at least forty bodies housed in the Great Mortuary, thirteen of which are lavished with dozens of shell cups and other burial goods. James Brown believes one notable aspect of the Spiro mortuary goods is

the degree to which objects developed from weapons of war dominate symbols of prestige and authority, as well as the pervasiveness of war-related symbolism in decoration and costumery. A conclusion justified by the Spiro mortuaries is that a substantial component of political power vested in the elite was due to, and maintained by, military prowess or, at least, managerial effectiveness in warfare.⁵

The Spiro site, along with Etowah, Moundville, and other Mississippian period sites in the Southeast have yielded so many similar examples of imagery that anthropologists in the 1940s

interpreted the material as representing a regional phenomenon, termed the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex (SECC). Antonio Waring and Preston Holder in 1945 were the first to analyze the basic list of motifs and objects included in the SECC. Their research was the initial attempt by scholars to outline the group of elements comprising the SECC. These elements were the ones which were identified with a fair degree of certainty as being present throughout the Southeast. The motifs selected for discussion by Waring and Holder are (1) the Cross, (2) Sun Circles, (3) the Bi-Lobed Arrow, (4) the Forked Eye, (5) the Open Eye, (6) the Barred Oval, (7) the Hand-and-Eye, and (8) Death Motifs (Figure 2). These motifs were used either individually or in combinations to decorate a majority of the burial goods at Spiro and other Mississippian period sites.

Making a drinking cup from a marine shell was a relatively simple procedure. It was done by making two cuts in the shell and removing the columella, the central pillar of the shell. In addition, the shoulder spines were removed and the ridges and grooves along both the horizontal and vertical axes were smoothed down. In this way, the entire surface of the shell was prepared for decoration.⁶ The design was incised in the shell surface with stone tools and then a dark pigment was rubbed into the incisions. It is thought that these cups were primarily used in the black drink ceremony. Black drink, so named by Europeans because of its black color, is a caffeinated beverage similar to coffee or tea. It was made from a Yaupon holly, *Ilex vomitoria*, indigenous to parts of the Southeast. Produced from the roasted leaves of this plant, it was used frequently as an emetic in purification rituals.

The use of both shell cups and black drink can only be understood against the background of the belief system of southeastern culture groups. Charles Hudson has done pioneering work in reconstructing the basic beliefs that were commonly held by the prehistoric southeastern peoples.⁷ Through researching the written accounts of southeastern peoples observed by Spanish, English, and French explorers, as well as some visual documentation, such as engravings by Theodore de Bry,⁸ we are able to propose tentative interpretations of these prehistoric belief systems. Hudson concluded that one of the aspects of the prehistoric southeastern belief system was that hierar-

² Wayne Van Horne, *The Warclub: Weapon and Symbol in Southeastern Indian Societies*, diss., University of Georgia, 1993, 32.

³ Dennis Peterson, et al., "Archeological Survey of the Spiro Vicinity, Le Flore County, Oklahoma," *Archeological Resource Survey Report No. 37* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1993) 11.

⁴ Peterson, et al 11.

⁵ James Brown, "Spiro Art and its Mortuary Contexts," *Native North American Art History* (Palo Alto: Peek Publications, 1984) 475.

⁶ Jerald T. Milanich, "Origins and Prehistoric Distributions of Black Drink and the Ceremonial Shell Drinking Cup," *Black Drink: A Native Ameri-*

can Tea, ed. C. Hudson (Athens: University of Georgia, 1979) 85.

⁷ The following publications by Charles Hudson contain information regarding the prehistoric southeastern belief system: *Elements of Southeastern Indian Religion* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1984); *Black Drink: A Native American Tea* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979).

⁸ These engravings are published in *The New World: The First Pictures of America, made by John White and Jacques le Moyne and engraved by Theodore de Bry*, A new revised edition, edited and annotated by Stefan Lorant (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1965). One of these engravings shows shell cups being used in a ceremony honoring a deceased chief and another shows warriors returning from a successful raid bearing the heads and limbs of their enemies on sticks.

chical structures in This World were reflected in both the Upper World and the Under World. This system included disharmony among people as well as among beings of the spirit world. The prehistoric southeastern peoples apparently believed they resided somewhere between complete order and utter chaos. Warfare was evidently believed by the prehistoric societies to be the physical embodiment of this chaos. While warfare was a means of gaining status for individuals and for the chief to enhance his own prestige, it also seems to have been an attempt to reach a certain balance, not only in This World but in the entire cosmos.⁹

There are numerous examples in which actual or implied warfare is depicted in the Spiro shell engravings. One such example shows fragments of four individuals dressed in warrior regalia who are either preparing to engage in battle or perhaps displaying the courage and prowess they will soon demonstrate on the battlefield (Figure 3). By raising and shaking their fists and shouting at their enemies, southeastern warriors displayed their bravery and willingness to engage in battle. All the figures bear extensive tattoos or body paint, and each warrior (at least the two whose heads can be seen) wears an elaborate headdress. In addition to the headdress and tattoos, both of the lower figures wear what are likely shell bead bracelets and necklaces, and the figure on the left also wears what appears to be a human bone around his neck, perhaps that of a prior defeated enemy. The figures whose legs can be made out wear the same shell bead bracelets around their ankles. The beaded forelock was a common form of hair ornamentation for warriors, and both of the lower figures wear such a decoration. On the back of the head of the left figure can be seen another hair or headdress decoration, the bi-lobed arrow. The bi-lobed arrow is a stylized arrow with two kidney shaped objects on either side of the shaft. It is likely that this is a representation of a weapon of some sort. In the case of hair ornamentation it probably symbolized the fact that the individual so decorated was a warrior of some rank. There is, in fact, archeological documentation of burials being discovered with bi-lobed arrows, usually made of copper and wood, included in the burial with the body.

Another depiction of warfare is one which includes several severed heads (Figure 4). All but one of the heads has a jagged edge along the neck, symbolic of decapitation. Among the heads are scattered the points and feathered ends of arrows, which may establish a correlation between these individuals and the weapons causing their demise. Decapitation was a common practice of southeastern war parties who used the heads as a means of intimidating their enemies or as trophies, bringing

the severed heads of defeated enemies home with them after a successful battle.¹⁰ The beaded forelock can again be seen on several of the heads in addition to the bi-lobed arrow. There are also various forms of earrings, most often a simple disk made of stone or shell. The two heads on the left, however, exhibit more interesting forms of ear decoration. The head on the far right which is upside down is wearing an earring made of what appears to be beads, a sharp sliver of bone, and a feather. The lowest figure which is more difficult to make out, wears an earring carved in the shape of the so-called Long-Nosed God. One figure on the left also wears some sort of human effigy decoration on the top of his head. It is possible that the various adornments may be identifying marks for specific individuals.

One way of determining what objects an exotic culture considered to be important is to note the frequency with which it is represented in its art forms.¹¹ For animals, the frequency with which some animals are represented compared to the almost total disregard of other species would seem to indicate which animals held the highest prestige in the southeastern belief system. Citing Olga Linares' study of pre-Columbian art we find that the pre-Columbian artists of Panama specifically chose animals which shared certain characteristics. Similar to the animals depicted by southeastern societies, the Panamanian animals chosen "were repellent, dangerous, have hard body parts, charge, have a 'pinch' or 'sting,' are cryptic, eat people, or are predatory."¹² By the same token, the animals most often ignored by both societies were those which are preyed upon, have soft body parts, and were considered to be vulnerable.

The rattlesnake, believed to be one of the "chiefs" of the creatures of the Under World, appears frequently in the art of Spiro. Snakes of all types, not surprisingly, appear just as frequently in later southeastern mythology as they do in visual art. During the nineteenth century, James Mooney recorded the myths of the Cherokee people. A number of myths that the Cherokee maintained could still be linked to the ideas of their prehistoric ancestors. Mooney noted that

the generic (Cherokee) name for snakes is *inadu*. They are all regarded as *anida'wehi*, "supernaturals," having an intimate connection with the rain and thunder gods, and possessing a certain influence over the other animal and plant tribes...The feeling toward snakes is one of mingled fear and reverence, and every precaution is taken to avoid killing or offending one, especially the rattlesnake. He who kills a snake will soon see others; and should he kill a second one, so

⁹ Charles Hudson, personal communication, 1994.

¹⁰ Charles Hudson, personal communication, 1994.

¹¹ Lee Anne Wilson's method of psycho-social comparison is discussed in full in "Interpreting Southern Cult Iconography: A Methodological Synthesis" (see n. 1).

¹² Olga Linares, "Ecology and the Arts in Ancient Panama: On the Development of Social Rank and Symbolism in the Central Provinces," *Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archeology* 17 (1977): 65-67.

many will come around him whichever way he may turn that he will become dazed at the sight of their glistening eyes and darting tongues and will go wandering about like a crazy man, unable to find his way out of the woods.¹³

An extremely interesting and beautiful engraving is one of a rattlesnake which has been divided into four sections but shares one head and one tail rattle (Figure 5). Two of the sections have been decorated with the barred oval motif. The other two sections are decorated with a series of "U" shapes which could have been used by the artist to differentiate between the top and bottom side of the snake. It seems possible that these "U" markings represent the tougher scales on the underside of a snake's body. We are also shown the shell bead bracelets, this time around the neck of the snake (having no wrists or ankles on which to wear it), that we have seen on several of the warrior images. The snake's head is equipped with deer antlers, perhaps referring to the antlered and sometimes winged snake, the Uktena. The Uktena was a creature believed by the Cherokee to bear the Ulunsuti, a crystal which enabled the person who possessed it to foresee the future. These underwater creatures were believed to have been "Kings of the Waters," in essence, Kings of the Under World. The Uktena seems to have occupied a very prominent position in the *prehistoric* southeastern belief system as well.

The importance of the connection between rattlesnakes and warfare is made obvious in a complete shell cup showing two warriors impersonating rattlesnakes, with their tails intertwined (Figure 6). This exquisite engraving seems to combine several elements of the belief system, warfare, and the important role certain animals played in these two cultural realms. These two warriors appear to be engaged in a ceremonial dance dressed in full warfare regalia. A fully coiled horned rattlesnake can be seen at the feet of the two figures, perhaps establishing the connection between warfare and chaos, symbolized by the Uktena.

The figure on the right holds a serpent staff in one hand and a flint knife in the other, while the figure on the left holds the same type of flint knife and what appears to be the rattle of a snake in his other hand. Both figures have protruding tongues (perhaps imitating snakes) and some type of mask or facial painting around their eyes. The different waistband decorations of the two figures are worth noting. The figure on the left is decorated with the shell bead bracelets, perhaps representing a snake-like element which is a symbol of the Under World. The figure on the right bears the circle and cross motif, commonly a symbol of the Upper World. Could the engraving represent, then, warriors playing the roles of two deities, straining against one another (yet still in perfect balance), but hopelessly and forever intertwined? This identification of warriors with specific deities or natural elements (the snake) gave them roles symbolic of the dynamics of the belief system. Judging from representations such as this, to the prehistoric southeastern societies, deities and elements of nature were entangled in a perpetual struggle. The heroes imitating this struggle gained valor, prestige and status. In addition, they gained the respect of their comrades.

Societal context must always be a main concern for art historians, particularly when we are dealing with images which reflect an exotic culture's ideas about its own society. Beginning in the 1960s, Native Americans and their ways of life have been both romanticized and sanitized. But recent research by anthropologists and art historians has served to de-mystify the assumption that prehistoric Native Americans were peace-loving naturalists. On the contrary, the Native Americans of the late prehistoric southeast had their share of warfare, terrorism, and bloodshed. The realization that warfare was in fact a pre-eminent part of their lives makes many aspects of their artistic endeavors more interpretable.

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¹³ James Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee and Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees* (Nashville: Charles Elder, reproduced from the 19th century version, 1972) 294.

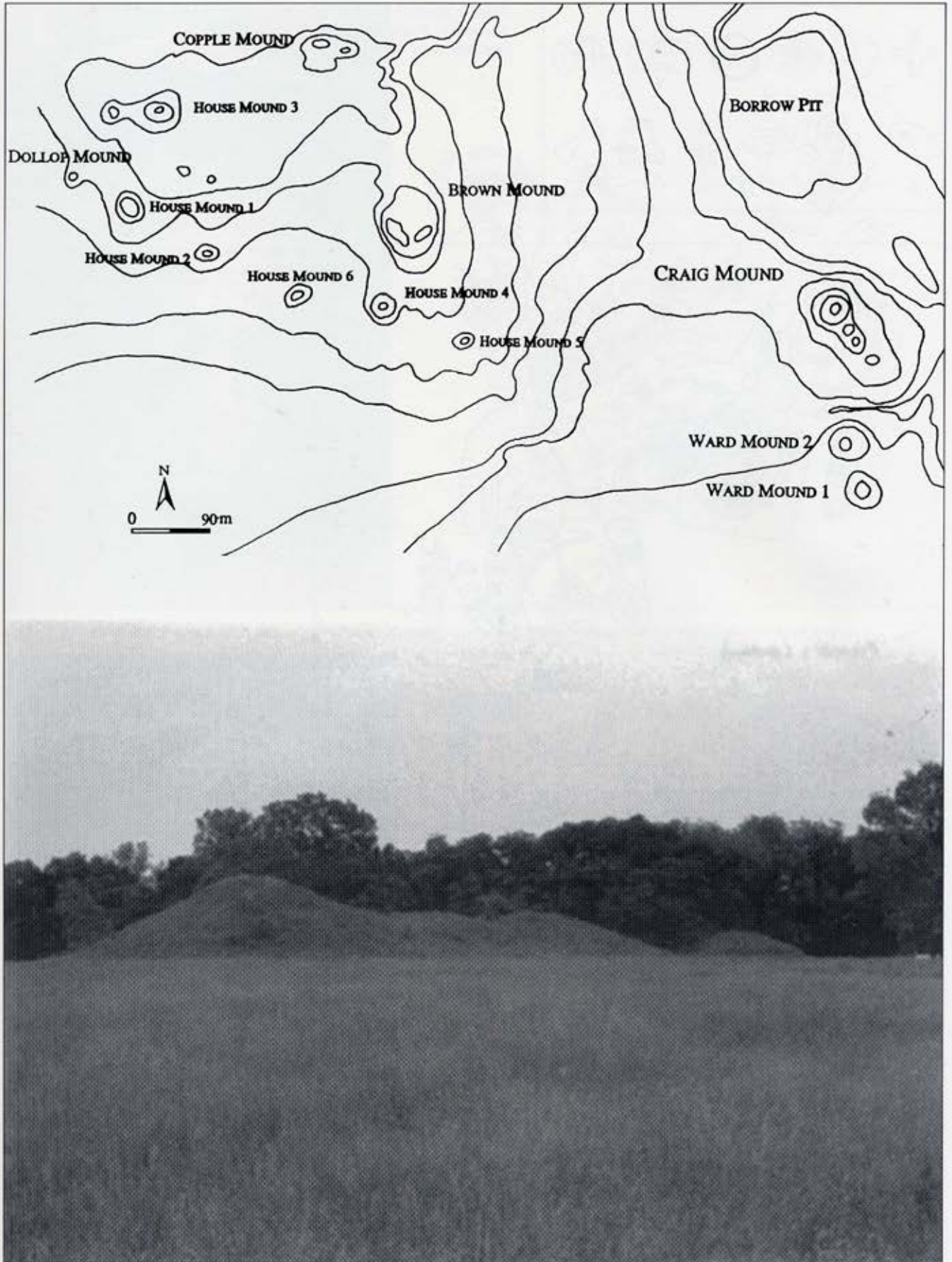


Figure 1. Plan map of the Spiro Site [top] and photo of the Craig Mound [bottom].

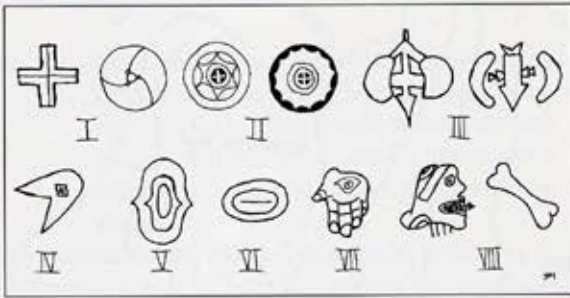


Figure 2. Motifs of the SECC as discussed by Waring and Holder (line drawing by author).

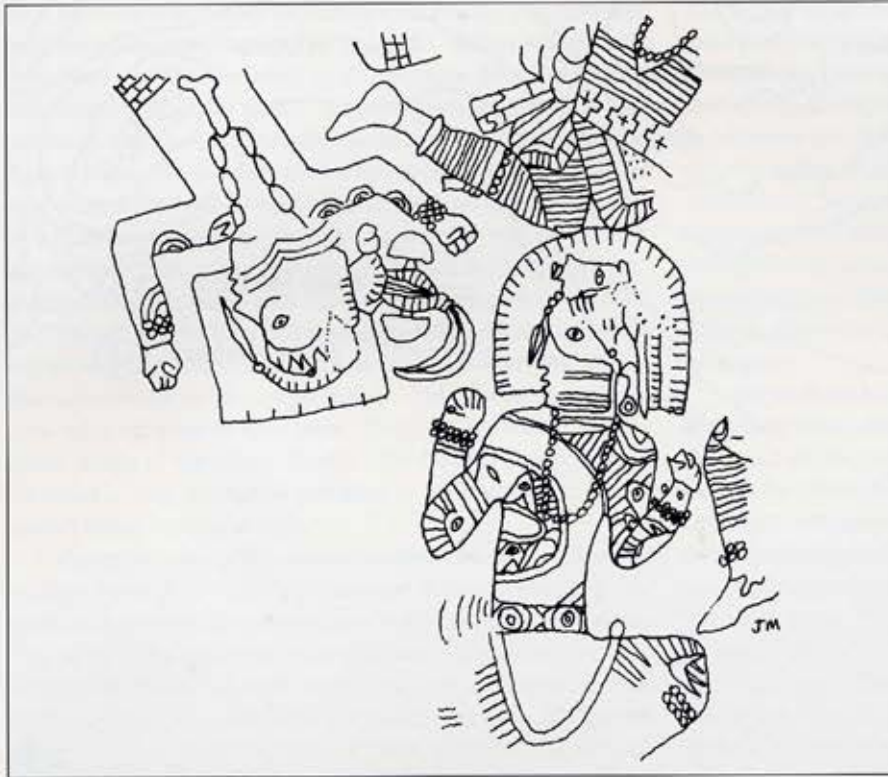


Figure 3. Shell cup engraving depicting warriors (line drawing by author).



Figure 5. Shell cup engraving depicting rattlesnake divided in four parts (line drawing by author).

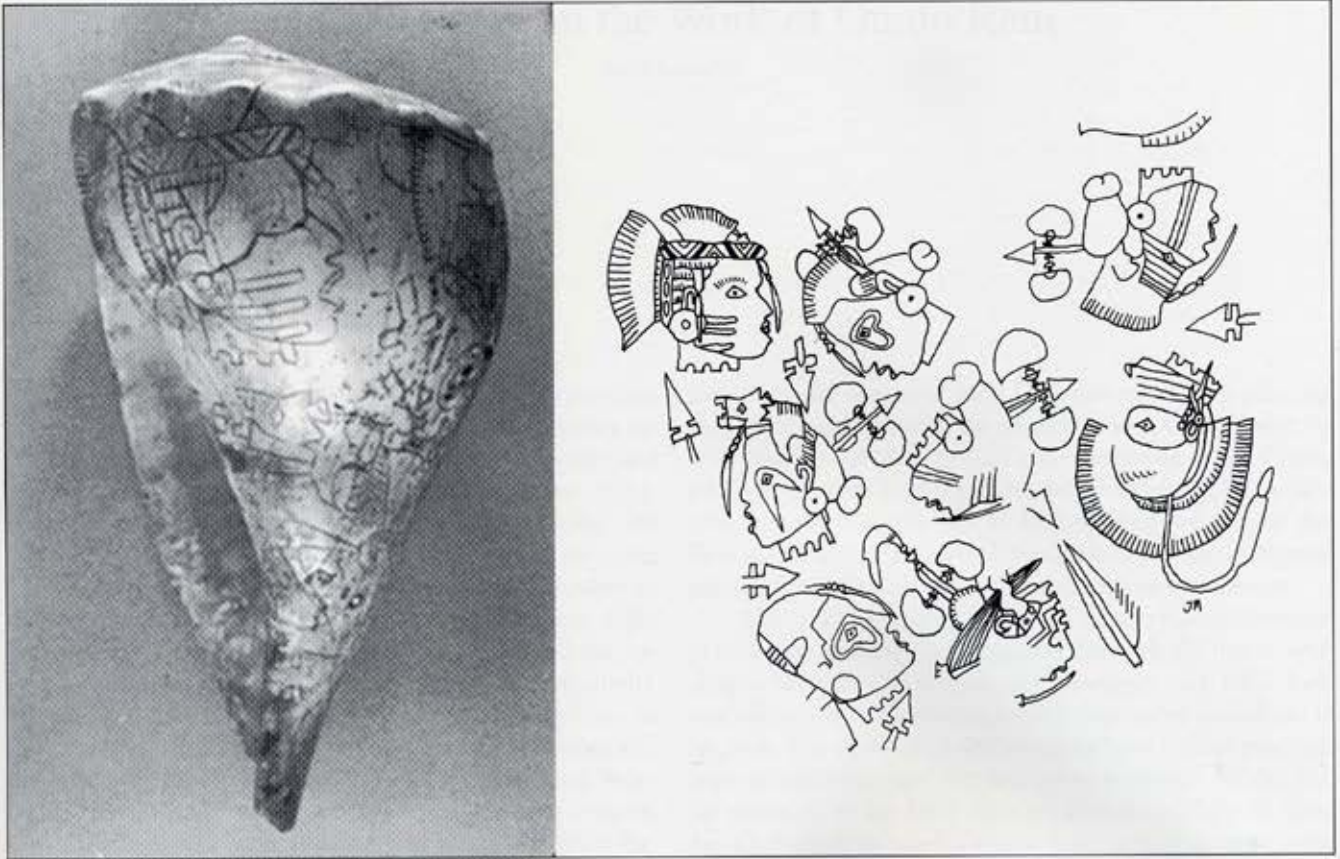


Figure 4. Engraved cup depicting severed heads (*left*: Courtesy of the University of Arkansas Museum: 37-1-4; *right*: line drawing by author).

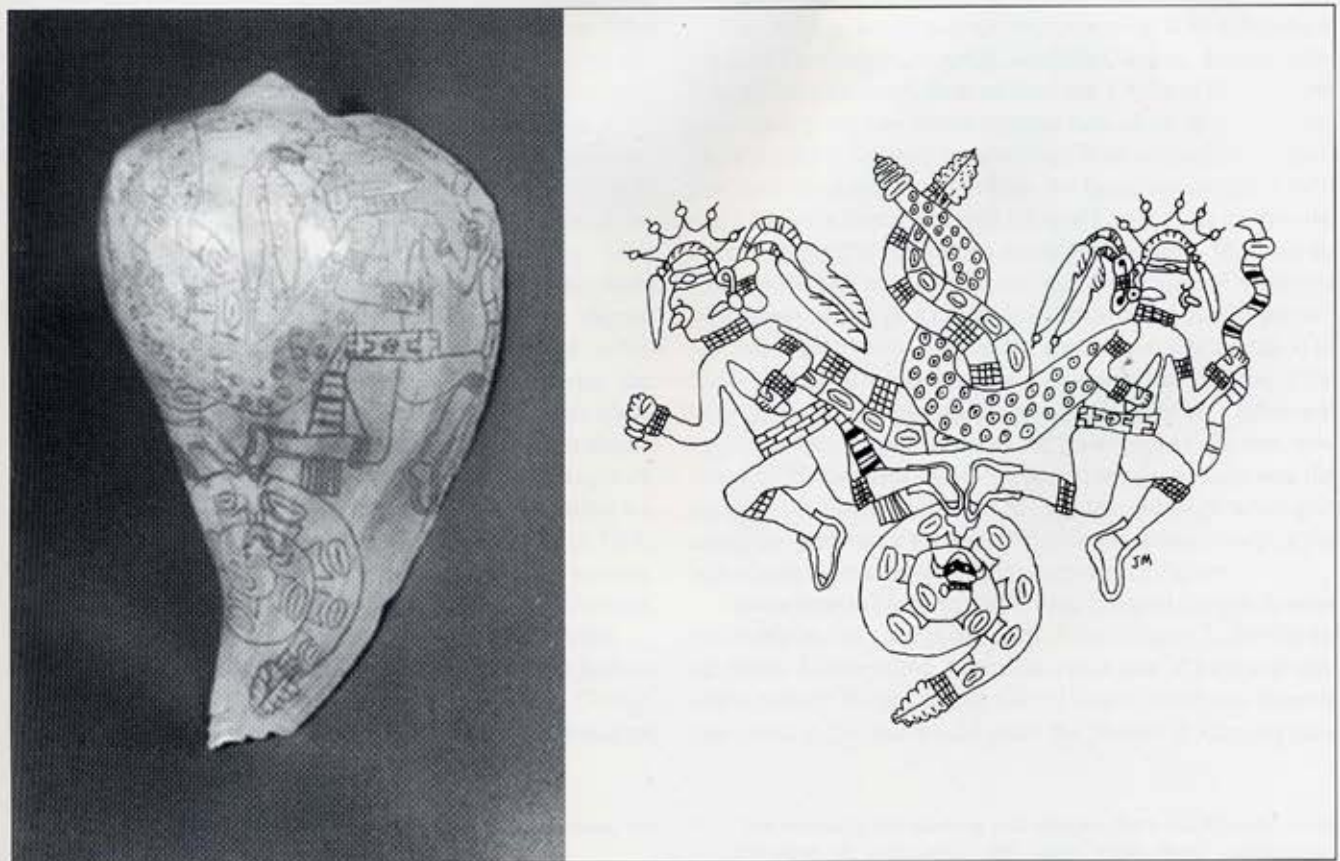


Figure 6. Engraved cup depicting intertwined warriors and rattlesnake (*left*: Courtesy of the National Museum of the American Indian/Smithsonian Institution: 18/9083; *right*: line drawing by author).