Case 12-US-Cul-SECC-Shell Gorgets-Synthesis

The Engraved Shell Gorget is one of the rarest artifacts made during the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex or SECC (also called the Southern Cult, the Mississippian Period, and the Temple Mound Period).  The prehistoric natives began cutting and engraving pieces of conch and whelk shell as early as around AD 1000 in the current states of Oklahoma, Arkansas, Illinois and Tennessee.  As the SECC advanced chronologically, it also moved geographically and eventually reached the Carolinas and Virginia around AD 1300-1400.  This cultural manifestation was dominated by kingdoms composed of ordinary citizens and elite family rulers who required the lower class society members to raise their crops, hunt for their food, and also make religious/ceremonial/political prestige objects for the ruling family members.  These objects included effigy pottery vessels, zoomorphic stone pipes and, of course, shell gorgets.  Around AD 1450 the natives, living in the Appalachian Mountains from Georgia to Virginia, began engraving rattlesnakes on their shell gorgets.  These mound building and gorget making societies continued to flourish in the mountainous region until the sixteenth century when the Spanish began to enter their lands.  At that point the native cultures began to crumble.

The shell gorget was made by laboriously cutting a piece of the whorl of a marine gastropod shell, usually in a circular shape, and then drilling two holes along one edge so it could be suspended around a person’s neck.  They were normally made in the size range of two to three inches in diameter but some extraordinary examples up to six inches across have been found.  They are named gorget from the French word “gorge” which was a medieval piece of armor used to protect the wearer’s throat.  Most Indian made shell gorgets were not engraved but some were embellished, usually on the concave surface, with various motifs.  In the case of the Lick Creek style gorget, the motif was a stylized snake.  The body of the serpent was engraved as coiled around the circular perimeter of the gorget and had cross hatching to simulate the snake’s scales and body markings.  At the small end of the body, there are several chevrons to replicate the snake’s rattles and near the center of the gorget are concentric circles used to simulate the head and eye.  One or more large triangles are adjacent to the eye circles (pointing to the left or right) and are considered to be a representation of the serpent’s mouth, often complete with teeth, but there are never examples of sharp reptile fangs in the mouth engravings.  On the opposite side of the eye, some of these gorgets have two oddly placed small triangles pointing toward the gorget edge. These are generally construed as the “weeping eye” motif, which is a documented style of ceremonial art from the SECC.  A few of these gorgets have elongated cutouts or fenestrations and/or simple holes adjacent to the body to further delineate the overall shape of the snake.

The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex (SECC) is a term used by archaeologists to refer to a suite of artifacts that often includes iconographic imagery or symbols, finely-crafted and exotic materials, and/or connotes high status. SECC objects were used by Native Americans throughout the Southeast during the Mississippian period (ca. AD 1000-1600). The origins of the symbols and the places of manufacture and dates of use of these artifacts in various subregions of the Southeast are debated topics.

The currently accepted chronology for eastern Tennessee divides the Mississippian period into the Martin Farm (AD 900-1100), Hiwassee Island (AD 1100-1300), and Dallas (AD 1300-1600), plus Mouse Creek (AD 1400-1600) phases. There are readily recognizable changes in pottery, architecture, and burial practices throughout the period. General trends in pottery attributes are from predominately limestone-tempered to shell-tempered, from loop handles to strap handles, and an increasing amount of decorative treatments. Architectural styles change from wall trench to single-post construction buildings, and burial practices shift from burial mounds, built incrementally by adding individuals over time, to individual pit graves located both in mounds and villages. These changes happen over 600 years, between the tenth and the beginning of the sixteenth centuries.

Many of these changes can be observed in the archaeological evidence from the Davis, Hixon, and Dallas sites. In fact, the evidence indicates that these three sites were sequentially used between ca. AD 1100 and 1450. The Davis site is the earliest in the sequence. This site included one large platform mound, but little evidence of a village. No burials or shell gorgets were found in the mound. The pottery from Davis is consistent with an Early Mississippian context and wall trench buildings occur throughout the mound. Wood charcoal from a hearth just above the initial mound level produced a radiocarbon age of AD 1160 (Note 1). Using an estimate of 15 to 20 years for the average use-span of a platform mound summit (Hally 1999) and the dated layer in the mound as a reference, the Davis mound dates from about AD 1120 to 1200, the early part of the Hiwassee Island phase.

The Hixon site is next in the sequence. It also included one platform mound and little evidence of a village. The pottery from Hixon is a later Hiwassee Island through early Dallas phase assemblage, and from the earliest to the latest mound levels, the buildings change from wall trench to single post construction. Numerous burials found in the lower levels suggest a thirteenth century date, the latter portion of the Hiwassee Island phase. This is the time period when the use of burial mounds ceased, but is before single post buildings became most common. Burials in the upper mound levels are with the single post buildings typical of the Dallas phase.

A radiocarbon assay on a wooden grave covering from a burial interred in Floor O of mound stage B1 (Figure 2) yielded a date of AD 1235 (Note 2), placing this mound level squarely in the Hiwassee Island phase.

Another burial, interred in the same floor, contained a shell gorget with a turkey cock motif. This association links the Hixon mound gorget sequence to absolute time. Using this date as a reference and an estimated 15-20 year use of mound summits, construction of the Hixon mound began just before AD 1200 and ceased in the mid-fourteenth century. These estimates, the pottery, and the architecture all point to a late Hiwassee Island through early Dallas phase context for the Hixon mound and its sequence of gorgets. The original field records show that Kneberg made two errors in assigning gorgets to mound layers, but these do not substantially alter her findings. Figure 3 shows the revised gorget sequence in relation to the mound levels and the radiocarbon date.

The Dallas site, the type site for the Dallas phase, had one mound surrounded by a village enclosed by a palisade. Layered deposits found in some areas indicate two Dallas phase occupations of differing time and duration. The mound, palisade, and the majority of the single post-style buildings in the village are associated with the later occupation. Nearly all of the buildings from this last occupation were burned, suggesting that the village burned and was abandoned.

The Dallas site can be bracketed between AD 1350 and 1450, squarely in the phase that bears its name. A charcoal sample from a burned house dated to AD 1410 (Note 3). Another radiocarbon assay on a wooden grave cover produced a date of AD 1405 (Note 4). This burial also was from the later occupation of the site. These dates place the later occupation in the early fifteenth century, which makes the late fourteenth century the likely time period for the earlier occupation. Shell gorgets were with several burials at the Dallas site; six can be assigned to the later occupation (Figure 4: plowzone/stratum I and stratum II), and two to the earlier (figure 4: stratum III). The earlier styles correspond to those in the upper levels of the Hixon mound.

The sequence of use of the Davis, Dallas, and Hixon sites is thus as follows: Davis, AD 1100–1200; Hixon, AD 1200–1350; and Dallas, AD 1350–1450. The occupations associated with gorgets at these sites concentrate in the thirteenth through early fifteenth centuries. Kneberg’s suggested time span for the gorget sequence certainly is too long, but the late twelfth/early thirteenth century beginning date that fits the archaeological contexts of these artifacts is much earlier than the fifteenth century date proposed by Brain and Phillips (1999).

The sequence of use of the Davis, Hixon, and Dallas sites also brackets the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex. The Davis site has no gorgets or SECC artifacts in the mound; it predates these items. In contrast, the Hixon mound contains many SECC items, including copper headdresses and copper-covered ear plugs, a monolithic axe, Dover chert blades, and shell cups, as well as the large number of gorgets. This site obviously was occupied at the height of use of such objects. Far fewer SECC objects were found at the Dallas site than at Hixon. The Dallas site postdates most of the SECC materials. Based on these sites, the peak of the SECC in the Chickamauga Basin is between AD 1200 and 1400, corresponding to the use-span of the Hixon mound.

**Notes**

1. 900+/-50 BP; cal AD 1020 and 1250 (2sigma) Beta 127866
2. 810+/-50 BP; cal AD 1155 to 1285 (2sigma) Beta 128375
3. 540+/-60 BP; cal AD 1300 to 1450 (2sigma) Beta 127867
4. 560+/-30 BP; cal AD 1310 to 1360 and AD 1385 to 1425 (2sigma) Beta 128660

**References Cited**

Brain, Jeffrey P. and Philip Phillips. 1999. *Shell Gorgets: Styles of the Late Prehistoric and Protohistoric Southeast*. Peabody Museum Press, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

Hally, David J. 1999. Platform Mound Construction and the Instability of Mississippian Chiefdoms. In *Political Structure and Change in the Prehistoric Southeastern United States*, J. F. Scarry, ed., pp. 92-127. University Press of Florida, Gainesville.

Kneberg, Madeline D. 1959. Engraved Shell Gorgets and Their Associations. *Tennessee Archaeologist* 15(1): 1-39.

Lewis, Thomas M. N., Madeline D. Knebert Lewis, and Lynne P. Sullivan, Eds. 1995. *The Prehistory of the Chickamauga Basin in Tennessee* (2 vols.). The University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville.

# Sullivan, by Lynne P. 2001. Dates for Shell Gorgets and The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex in the Chickamauga Basin Of Southeastern Tennessee, [**McClung Museum**](http://mcclungmuseum.utk.edu/author/mcclungmuseum/) **&** filed under [**Research Notes**](http://mcclungmuseum.utk.edu/category/publications/notes/). http://mcclungmuseum.utk.edu/shell-gorgets/

The Cox Mound, or Woodpecker, gorget style is a particularly beautiful and enduring symbol of Tennessee's prehistoric inhabitants. A gorget was a pendant, or personal adornment, worn around the neck as a badge of rank or insignia of status and was thought to be symbolic of both earthly and supernatural powers. A variety of gorget styles, or designs, are known. As a class of artistic expression, this type of artifact falls within the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex, formerly known as the Southern Cult.

Just over thirty Cox Mound-style gorgets have been found since the late nineteenth century, primarily from prehistoric Mississippian stone box graves and villages along the lower Tennessee, Cumberland, Duck, Harpeth, and Buffalo Rivers of Middle Tennessee, and the middle Tennessee River valley of northern Alabama. As a result of the frequent mortuary association of Cox Mound gorgets with certain pottery types, namely Matthews Incised, as well as other artifacts, it has been postulated that Cox Mound gorgets date to the period A.D. 1250-1450. One rich grave from the famous burial mound at the Castalian Springs site in Sumner County produced two Cox Mound gorgets.

Typically, Cox Mound gorgets were manufactured on exotic marine shell and were white in color. Other materials, such as black slate in Putnam County and human skull fragments in Hardin County, were used rarely. Engraving the intricate design on the hard shell or slate without metal tools took many hours of skilled labor and is thought to have been a winter activity.

A Cox Mound gorget has three important iconographic elements. In the center is a cross inside a rayed circle or sun motif. The cross is symbolic of the sacred, or council, fire. The sun represents the sky deity and/or mythical ancestors. Surrounding the cross and sun is a scroll-like design element known as the looped square. This feature may represent wind, or possibly the litter on which subordinates carried a chief. Typically the looped square is composed of four lines, but in some cases only three lines are used. Four crested bird heads, which most scholars interpret as woodpeckers, are found on the outer edge. The woodpecker heads always are oriented in a counterclockwise direction, suggestive of the prehistoric Native American swastika.

The woodpecker, like the falcon, was probably a symbol of war to the prehistoric Mississippian Indians. The war symbolism of the bird probably derived from the red head of the bird, which resembled a bloodied scalping victim. The Cherokees associated the red-headed woodpecker with danger and war, and the woodpecker was always invoked for aid by the ball game players. The bird's pecking is similar to an Indian warrior striking the war post at the Victory dance. For the Cherokees, the color red is associated with male attractiveness and fertility, as well as bravery and war. Groups of woodpeckers are thought to be a sign of war to the Creeks and Seminoles. While war is typically associated with males in Native American society, it is important to note that Cox Mound gorgets have been found in both male and female burials.

Other interpretations include the identification of the four woodpeckers as the four thunders at the world quarters, and a folklorist has speculated recently that the Cox Mound gorget style is a prehistoric expression of the Yuchi myth of the Winds. Cox Mound gorgets are displayed by the Tennessee State Museum and Pinson Mounds State Archaeological Area.

## Suggested Reading

C. Andrew Buchner and Mitchell R. Childress, "A Southeastern Ceremonial Complex Gorget from Putnam County, Tennessee," Tennessee Anthropological Association Newsletter 16.6 (1991): 1-4; Madeline Kneberg, "Engraved Shell Gorgets and Their Associations." Tennessee Archaeologist 15.1 (1959): 1-39.

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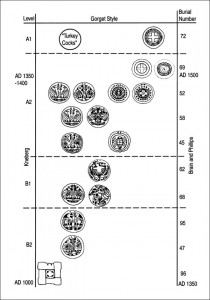


Figure 1. Kneberg’s gorget seriation with time contexts as proposed by her, Brain, and Phillips (1999).

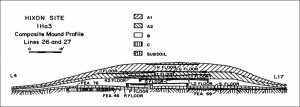


Figure 2. Stratigraphic profile of the Hixon mound, showing location of dated Floor O.

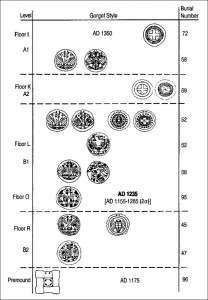


Figure 3. Revised gorget seriation in relation to the Hixon mound levels and radiocarbon date.

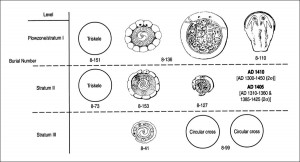


Figure 4. Gorget sequence at the Dallas site.