

## A Possible Interpretation of the Bird-man Figure Found on Objects Associated with the Southern Cult of the Southeastern United States, A.D. 1200 to 1350\*

by Lee Anne Wilson

Despite the large body of material that exists on Southern Cult<sup>1</sup> artifacts, little has been written about the iconography found on these objects. While a number of iconographic themes can be identified and isolated on Southern Cult objects, one theme that repeatedly appears on Southern Cult shell and copper work, and occasionally on incised pottery,<sup>2</sup> is a composite human and bird figure which may have been invested with mythic, ritual, and even political significance. To unravel some of the mystery surrounding this figure, information has been drawn from three separate sources—the visual record provided by the artifacts themselves: shell dippers, gorgets, and copper plaques, the archaeological record, drawn mainly from the burials at Spiro Mound, Oklahoma, and Etowah, Georgia, and the verbal record drawn from the mythology of the ethnographic tribes of the Eastern Woodlands. Alone, none of these methods is sufficient to provide more than a small portion of information, but by combining them, a more complete picture of Southern Cult iconography, especially the bird-man image, emerges. Of these three sources, the use of ethnographic material to explain archaeological images is the most controversial and uncertain method. A complete analysis and justification of the use of this method would fill another paper easily. There are, however, both

specific models as well as more generalized studies that can serve as precedents. For example, Waring's 1968 paper, "The Southern Cult and Muskogean Ceremonialism,"<sup>3</sup> and Howard's 1968 article "The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex and Its Interpretation"<sup>4</sup> both draw analogies between the ethnographic tribes of the Southeast and Southern Cult artifacts in an attempt to more fully interpret the Southern Cult images. Other studies such as Donnan's 1976 *Moche Art and Iconography*<sup>5</sup> and Linares's 1977 *Ecology and the Arts in Ancient Panama*<sup>6</sup> set standards for and define the limits of the use of ethnographic analogy. None of the interpretations in this paper can actually be proved correct or incorrect, but are offered here in an attempt to further our knowledge about certain images of the Southern Cult.

In the past various scholars have attempted to identify the bird-man image, both with actual birds found in the Southeast and in the mythology of the Southeastern Indians. In the mid-1940's Antonio Waring suggested that the bird-man figures were not "representations of people dressed as eagles, but rather . . . representations of a being with eagle attributes . . . [and] . . . that the object . . . was to represent a supernatural winged being rather than a man dressed up as an eagle."<sup>7</sup> Earlier, Charles Willoughby had attempted to use Creek legends and myths to explain the bird-man gorgets from Etowah and the surrounding area.<sup>8</sup>



Fig. 1. Spiro Mound, engraved shell dipper with bird-man design. Length: 13 inches. Museum of the American Indian 18/9121. Photograph courtesy of the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation.

While Waring disagreed with some of Willoughby's conclusions, both scholars agreed that the bird represented is the eagle because of the high esteem with which the Southeastern tribes regarded the eagle. Howard, however, disagreed and felt that the bird depicted is a hawk or falcon based on the forked-eye motif that is similar to the markings found on most New World *Falconidae*.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, the forked-eye motif does not appear regularly or with any particular pattern on either the copper or shell images. For at least the Spiro shell images, the basic rule seems to be that the more the bird characteristics are empha-



Fig. 2. Drawing of image on the shell dipper illustrated in figure number 1.

sized, the more likely we are to find the forked-eye design or a variation of it also appearing. For example, the shell dippers from Spiro that have mainly bird characteristics display the forked-eye (figures 3 and 4), while the bird-man images do not (figures 1, 2, 5). In Etowah-style shell work, virtually none of the bird-man gorgets display the forked-eye (figures 6 and 7), nor do several of the embossed copper plaques (figure 8) which do have other bird characteristics such as wings, tail, and a beak-like nose that appears to be part of a face mask. However, at least one Etowah copper plaque (figure 9), the majority of the Spiro copper plaques<sup>10</sup> (figures 10 and 11), and the eight Wulfing plates<sup>11</sup> have a forked-eye design or variant of it regardless of whether or not the figures are mainly bird forms or bird-human combinations. In fact, the forked-eye or a variant of it appears on humans (figure 14), birds (figures 3 and 4), felines (figures 15 and 16), and snakes, as well as on



Fig. 3. Spiro Mound, conventionalized bird image on shell dipper. Length: 12½ inches. Drawing after H. W. Hamilton, "The Spiro Mound" *The Missouri Archaeologist*, Vol. 14, 1952; Pl. 100.

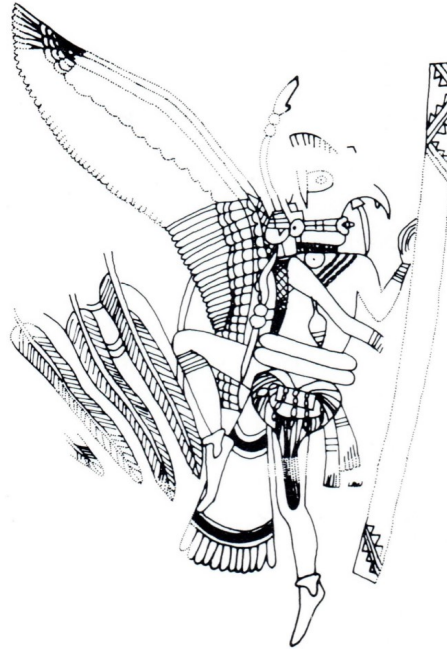


Fig. 5. Spiro Mound, bird-man design on shell dipper. Length: 8 inches. Drawing after photographs by author. United States National Museum 448825, 448861.



Fig. 4. Spiro Mound, conventionalized bird image on shell dipper. Length: 4¼ inches. Drawing after photograph by author. University of Oklahoma, Stovall Museum Lf40/33.

composite and/or unidentifiable creatures. Thus, it seems that the forked-eye is not solely associated with bird imagery.

Material from mythology as well as the shell and copper depictions suggests that the Southeastern Indians were aware of the various types of birds in their environment and may have utilized at least four distinct birds: the hawk or falcon, the eagle, the turkey, and the pileated or ivory-billed woodpecker. From the mythic descriptions of the turkey as well as several depictions of turkeys and pileated woodpeckers on shell gorgets<sup>13</sup> we may eliminate the turkey and pileated woodpecker as possible candidates for the bird-man depictions. However, it

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Fig. 6. Etowah, bird-man design on shell gorget. Diameter: 2½ inches. Drawing after various photographs. Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts 62042.

is more difficult to eliminate either the eagle or the hawk, since the bird-men have characteristics of both, and both played important roles in the mythology of the Southeastern tribes.

When studying the actual visual images of the bird-man figure on both shell and copper work, several phenomena become apparent. For example, two distinct types of bird-men can be identified despite wide stylistic variations in the images. The first type, Type A, always has feathered wings in place of arms (figures 1, 2), while the second type, Type B, has both arms as well as wings that seem to sprout from the figure's shoulder blades, similar to the wings of angels in Christian art (figures 5, 6, 7).<sup>12</sup> While both Type A and Type B bird-men are found on shell work from both Etowah and Spiro, Type A predominates at Spiro, while Type B is the most common in the Etowah area. However, on the embossed copper work Type B is the most common at both



Fig. 7. Hixon Site, Tennessee, double bird-man image (often referred to as two bird-men fighting) on shell gorget. Diameter: 4½ inches. Photograph courtesy of the Frank H. McClung Museum, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Spiro and Etowah (see figures 8-12), while the one anthropomorphic bird-human of the Wulfing plates is Type A.

There are, however, important differences between the copper work images at Etowah and Spiro. While the Etowah copper plaques generally depict the figure in a bent-knee stance, often referred to as a "dancing" posture representing movement (see figures 8, 9), the Spiro plaques frequently depict a limp, lax figure that suggests the lack of motion (figures 10, 11). Furthermore, the Spiro figures are shown from the front,<sup>14</sup> while the Etowah figures are shown in profile. The frontal posture, dangling arms and legs, and extended hands and feet of the Spiro figures not only indicate the loss of self-generated motion, but also suggest that these figures could represent deceased individuals laid out for burial, an impression strengthened by the manner in which the figures are superimposed



Fig. 8. Etowah, bird-man design on repoussé copper plaque. Length: 20 inches. United States National Museum 9117. Photograph courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.

on top of the costume elements. Considering the elaborate burials found at Spiro this is a likely possibility. For example, James Brown has identified at least three distinct types of burials at Spiro of which the most prestigious was the litter burial upon which were deposited the skeletal remains of the deceased along with large amounts of grave goods.<sup>15</sup> Brown also suggests that these burials “may represent succeeding paramount rulers.”<sup>16</sup>

Like the Spiro burials, those at Etowah also suggest some sort of stratified society. In excavations at Etowah, both Willoughby<sup>17</sup> and Larson<sup>18</sup> uncovered burials of humans wearing some of the paraphernalia depicted on the copper bird-man plaques. Larson suggests that



Fig. 9. Etowah, bird-man design on repoussé copper plaque. Length: 15½ inches. United States National Museum 91113. Photograph courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.

these burials represent some sort of kinship group that used exotic goods “to legitimize and emphasize their position in the society.”<sup>19</sup>

Despite Waring’s conclusion that the bird-man images were meant to represent some sort of bird-human supernatural, the presence of humans buried at Etowah wearing elements of the bird-man paraphernalia suggests that certain humans may have dressed in bird-man costumes. Larson’s conclusion that the

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Etowah bird-man burials were not based on any kind of achieved status, but rather represented some sort of kinship group,<sup>20</sup> seems to preclude the idea that these individuals belonged to some sort of priesthood or shamanistic group. Instead, both Larson<sup>21</sup> and Brown<sup>22</sup> suggest that the burials at Etowah and Spiro reflected an elaborately stratified hierarchy that was probably hereditary, with the most elaborate burials such as the Etowah bird-man burials and Spiro litter burials reserved for those individuals at the top. Since at Etowah these individuals wore elements of the bird-man costume, the Spiro and Etowah copper and shell Type B bird-man images may have been intended to depict this group of individuals. If Type B bird-man images represent a human costumed as a bird, then, perhaps, the Type A bird-men were meant to represent some sort of supernatural anthropomorphic bird as Waring had suggested earlier, since the existence of masked and/or costumed humans often implies the existence of a supernatural model for the costumed humans.<sup>23</sup>

One image in the mythology of the ethnographic tribes of both the Eastern Woodlands and the Plains that could fit the Southern Cult bird-man image is the supernatural figure known as the Thunder, Thunderer, or Thunder Bird and variously referred to as a human, bird, anthropomorphic bird, and disembodied spirit in the mythology of this area. While Alexander described the Thunder Birds as “great birds of the hawk family,”<sup>24</sup> Jones believed the Thunder Bird was “most commonly typified by the eagle,”<sup>25</sup> just the same identity problem found with the shell and copper work where Howard believed the bird-man represented the hawk or falcon<sup>26</sup> while Waring felt it was the eagle.<sup>27</sup> A

visual comparison of both the shell and copper bird-man images with actual hawks and eagles suggests that it was the falcon or hawk which was intended to be depicted. Both the scalloped design on the wings as well as the banded tail are characteristic markings of certain falcons (*Falconidae*) and hawks (*Accipitridae*).<sup>28</sup>

Despite regional variations, the Thunder Bird was closely associated with thunder and lightning, as well as with storms, clouds, rain, wind, the rainbow, and weather in general.<sup>29</sup> A number of myths tell of the great importance of the thunder and lightning caused by the Thunder Bird. In one Cherokee myth lightning flashed from the eyes of a Thunderer<sup>30</sup> and the belief that the Thunder Bird caused the lightning simply by blinking or flashing its eyes was common among the Algonkians of the Great Lakes as well as the Plains tribes.<sup>31</sup> Another common belief was that the Thunder Bird could cause the thunder simply by flapping its wings<sup>32</sup> or by snapping its beak,<sup>33</sup> while both the Creek Indians of the Southeast and the Ojibwas of the Great Lakes thought the Thunder Bird possessed thunderbolts similar to arrows.<sup>34</sup>

The Cherokee further believed that both the lightning as well as the rainbow were part of the Thunderer's costume<sup>35</sup> and the Natchez believed the rain was the Thunder's child.<sup>36</sup>

The Thunder Bird also had important cosmological associations. Virtually all the tribes of this region believed in a cosmos composed of three areas—an upper world generally somewhere in the sky, an earthly world often seen as a floating island, and an underworld often located under water.<sup>37</sup> Often this cosmology was divided further into a series of tiers or levels extending from one



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Fig. 10. Spiro Mound, exact reproduction of repoussé copper plaque depicting bird-man image. Photograph by author. University of Arkansas Museum, Fayetteville.

Fig. 11. Spiro Mound, exact reproduction of repoussé copper plaque depicting bird-man image. Photograph by author. University of Arkansas Museum, Fayetteville.



Fig. 12 Spiro Mound, exact reproduction of repoussé copper plaque depicting human figure. Photograph by author. University of Arkansas Museum, Fayetteville.





Fig. 13. Sumner County, Tennessee, engraved shell gorget depicting human figure. Diameter: 4 inches. Museum of the American Indian 15/853. Photograph courtesy of the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation.



Fig. 14. Spiro Mound, composite feline-human creature depicted on engraved shell dipper. Length: 8 inches. University of Arkansas Museum, Fayetteville 37-1-43, photograph number 000243. Photograph courtesy of the University of Arkansas Museum.

realm to the other. For example, the Cherokee of the Southeast believed that the cosmos was composed of seven levels that stretched from the upper world to the lower world. In this scheme, the Thunder Bird, like other supernaturals of the air, occupied the upper levels.<sup>38</sup> The Menomini and other tribes of the Great Lakes thought the cosmos had eight tiers, four in the upper world and four in the lower, separated by the earth in the middle. Each tier was occupied by specific supernaturals whose power intensified as their distance from the earth increased. For example, the Thunder Birds occupied the third tier above the earth and symbolized good.<sup>39</sup>

By relating this information to the Southern Cult bird-man images we may be able to suggest possible interpretations for these images. For example, the

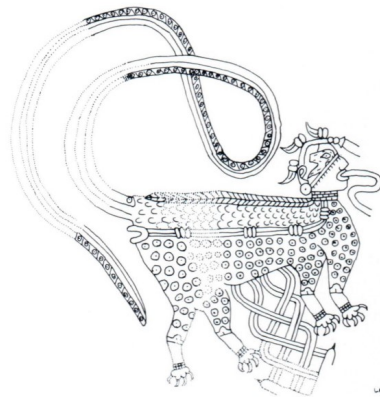


Fig. 15. Reconstruction of complete image of which figure 15 is one fragment. Remaining fragments in the Oklahoma Historical Society and other collections. Drawing by author.

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description of the Thunder Bird as both eagle and hawk matches the confusion found when trying to identify the shell and copper images. The importance of the flapping wings for creating thunder could account for the displayed posture of the bird-man emphasizing his wings. The large beak-like nose of many bird-man figures could be a further allusion to his bird characteristics, but could also be related to the mythic belief that the Thunder Bird causes lightning by snapping his beak. The forked-eye design found on some, but not all, bird-man figures might indicate that the bird represented is the falcon, but it might also represent the lightning that flashes from the eyes of the Thunder Bird.<sup>40</sup> The stepped lines above the head of at least one bird-man (figures 1, 2) may be meant to represent the various levels of the cosmos as described in Eastern Woodlands cosmology.<sup>41</sup> Thus, one possible identification for the mythic bird-man depicted on Southern Cult shell and copper work could be the supernatural Thunder Bird.

In conclusion, the existence of two types of bird-men figures has been suggested for Southern Cult objects, Type A, a supernatural being, and Type B, a human costumed to represent this supernatural figure. Based on mythology and folklore the Type A image may be seen to represent the mythic being known as the Thunder Bird. Finally, using the archaeological findings, especially the data from the Spiro litter burials and the Etowah Mound C bird-men burials, the Type B depictions of costumed humans may be seen to have represented actual people buried at Etowah. Since Larson has suggested that the figures buried with bird-man paraphernalia belonged to some sort of official grouping that represented "the remains of a descent group

that occupied a superordinate position in the total society",<sup>42</sup> the depictions of the bird-men on the copper plaques and shell work from both Etowah and Spiro may be representations, perhaps even stylized portraits, of the members of this group, who also may have been the ruling class.



## Notes

\*This article was originally presented at the first annual *New Directions in Native American Art History* symposium held at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico, October 24-26, 1979.

<sup>1</sup>The concept of the Southern Cult has been defined, redefined, criticized and even abandoned. For a summary of these problems see J. Brown, "The Southern Cult Reconsidered," *Mid-Continental Journal of Archaeology*, I, II (Kent, Ohio, 1976), pp. 115-135. For the purposes of this paper, the Southern cult can be described as a series of "special artifacts, iconographic themes, and basic motifs" (J. Brown, "Spiro Art and its Mortuary Contexts," *Dumbarton Oaks Conference on Death and the Afterlife in Pre-Columbian America*, ed., E. Benson (Washington, D.C., 1975), p. 3) found at the three major sites of Etowah, Georgia, Moundville, Alabama, and Spiro Mound, Oklahoma between A.D. 1200 and 1350. This paper further emphasizes the copper and shell work from the Spiro and Etowah areas.

<sup>2</sup>C. B. Moore, "Moundville Revisited," *Journal of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia*, XIII (Philadelphia, 1907), fig. 38.

<sup>3</sup>A. J. Waring, "The Southern Cult and Muskogean Ceremonialism" in S. Williams, *The Waring Papers, Papers of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology*, LVIII (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 30-69.

<sup>4</sup>J. H. Howard, *The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex and its Interpretation*. *Missouri Archaeological Society, Memoir*, VI (Columbia, Missouri, 1968).

<sup>5</sup>C. Donnan, *Moche Art and Iconography* (Los Angeles, 1976).

<sup>6</sup>O. F. 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 Archaeology* XVII (Washington, D.C., 1977).

<sup>7</sup>A. J. Waring, "The Southern Cult and Muskogean Ceremonialism," p. 41.

<sup>8</sup>C. C. Willoughby, "History and Symbolism of the Muskogean and the People of Etowah" in *Etowah Papers* (Andover, 1932).

<sup>9</sup>J. H. Howard, *The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex and its Interpretation*, p. 37.

<sup>10</sup>H. W. Hamilton, J. T. Hamilton, and E. F. Chapman, *Spiro Mound Copper*, *Missouri Archaeological Society, Memoir*, XI (Columbia, Missouri, 1974).

<sup>11</sup>V. Watson, "The Wulfing Plates, Products of Prehistoric Americans," *Washington University Studies, New Series, Social and Philosophical Sciences*, VII (St. Louis, 1950).

<sup>12</sup>Phillips refers to these two types as "composite" and "nonarticulated" and does not think such a division is especially meaningful iconographically. (P. Phillips and J. Brown, *Pre-Columbian Shell Engravings from the Craig Mound at Spiro, Oklahoma*, Part I (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1978), pp. 124-131).

<sup>13</sup>For examples see T. M. N. Lewis and M. Kneberg, "The Prehistory of Chickamauga Basin in Tennessee," *Tennessee*

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*Anthropological Papers*, I (Knoxville, Tennessee, 1941), plate III; L. M. Fundaburk and M. D. Foreman, *Sun Circles and Human Hands* (Luverne, Alabama, 1957), plates 27 and 45; P. Phillips and J. Brown, *Pre-Columbian Shell Engravings from the Craig Mound at Spiro, Oklahoma*, fig. 192; W. H. Holmes, "Art in Shell of the Ancient Americans," *Bureau of American Ethnology, Annual Report*, II (Washington, D.C., 1883), plate LIX.

<sup>14</sup>There are, however, a few profile dancing figures from Spiro. See Hamilton, Hamilton & Chapman, *Spiro Mound Copper*, plate 4 (figs. 8 and 9) and plate 13 (figs. 24 and 25) and figs. 66A, 67, 69 as well as figure 12 of this paper.

<sup>15</sup>J. Brown, *Spiro Studies, Volume 2: The Graves and their Contents* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1966) and J. Brown, "Spiro Art and its Mortuary Contexts."

<sup>16</sup>J. Brown, "Spiro Art and its Mortuary Contexts," pp. 9-10.

<sup>17</sup>C. C. Willoughby, "History and Symbolism of the Muskogean and the People of Etowah."

<sup>18</sup>L.H. Larson, Jr., "Archaeological Implications of Social Stratification at the Etowah Site, Georgia" in *Approaches to the Social Dimensions of Mortuary Practices*, ed., J. Brown, *Memoirs of the Society for American Archaeology*, XXIV (Washington, D.C., 1971), fig. 4.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup>J. Brown, "Spiro Art and its Mortuary Contexts."

<sup>23</sup>Compare with Hopi and Zuni kachina figures and Navajo Yei and Yeibichai figures.

<sup>24</sup>H. B. Alexander, *The World's Rim* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1953), p. 90.

<sup>25</sup>D. E. Jones, "The 'Thunder Motif' in Plains Indian Culture," *Papers in Anthropology*, VIII, I (Norman, Oklahoma, 1967), p. 5.

<sup>26</sup>J. H. Howard, *The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex and its Interpretation*, p. 37.

<sup>27</sup>A. J. Waring, "The Southern Cult and Muskogean Ceremonialism."

<sup>28</sup>Bill Holmes, personal communication, 1979.

<sup>29</sup>H.B. Alexander, *The World's Rim*, pp. 90 and 180; A. F. Chamberlain, "The Thunder-bird Amongst the Algonkins," *The American Anthropologist*, III (Washington, D.C., 1890), 51ff; D.E. Jones, "The 'Thunder Motif' in Plains Indian Culture," 2ff; C. A. Lyford, *Ojibwa Crafts* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1943), p. 84; A. Skinner, "Material Culture of the Menomini," *Museum of the American Indian, Notes and Monographs*, XX (New York, 1921), p. 48; J. Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee*. *Bureau of American Ethnology, Annual Report*, IX (Washington, D.C., 1900), p. 257; J. R. Swanton, "Social Organization and Social Usages of the Indians of the Creek Confederacy" and "Religious Beliefs and Medical Practices of the Creek Indians," *Bureau of American Ethnology, Annual Report*, XLII (Washington, D.C., 1928), p. 486; J. R. Swanton, *Myths and Tales of the Southeastern Indians*, *Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin*, LXXXVIII (Washington, D.C., 1929), pp. 239-240; W. J. Wintemberg, "Repre-

sentations of the Thunderbird in Indian Art," *Thirty-sixth Annual Archaeological Report, Ontario* (Ottawa, 1928), p. 27.

<sup>30</sup>J. Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee*, p. 346.

<sup>31</sup>A. F. Chamberlain, "The Thunderbird Amongst the Algonkins," p. 51; D. E. Jones, "The 'Thunder Motif'", p. 4; W. J. Wintemberg, "Representations of the Thunderbird in Indian Art," p. 27.

<sup>32</sup>A. F. Chamberlain, "The Thunderbird Amongst the Algonkins," pp. 51-52; D. E. Jones, "The 'Thunder Motif,'" pp. 4-5.

<sup>33</sup>D. Boyle, "Stone Pipes," *Twelfth Annual Archaeological Report, Ontario* (Ottawa, 1898), p. 46.

<sup>34</sup>J. R. Swanton, "Social Organization and Social Usages of the Indians of the Creek Confederacy," p. 486; A. F. Chamberlain, "The Thunderbird Amongst the Algonkins," p. 52.

<sup>35</sup>J. Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee*, p. 257.

<sup>36</sup>J. R. Swanton, *Myths and Tales of the Southeastern Indians*, pp. 239-240.

<sup>37</sup>J. Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee*, p. 239; A. Skinner, "Material Culture of the Menomini," p. 29.

<sup>38</sup>J. Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee*, p. 240.

<sup>39</sup>A. Skinner, "Material Culture of the Menomini," p. 29.

<sup>40</sup>W. J. Wintemberg, "Certain Eye Designs on Archaeological Artifacts from

North America," *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada, Third Series*, XVII (Quebec, 1923) p. 64; W. J. Wintemberg, "Representations of the Thunderbird in Indian Art," p. 33.

<sup>41</sup>C. Hudson, *The Southeastern Indians* (Knoxville, Tennessee, 1976), p. 123.

<sup>42</sup>L. H. Larson, Jr., "Archaeological Implications of Social Stratification at the Etowah Site, Georgia," pp. 65-66.