

It seems logical that when humans choose animals as main characters in folklore and mythology they have done so for a reason. Often times it is because of a specific behavior pattern, habitat, or physical characteristic that sets the animal apart and suggests a certain mythological role for that animal to play. For example, birds fly through the air, therefore it becomes natural for them to become dwellers of the upper world. However, a deeper analysis of the major characteristics of frequently represented images in contrast to those which occur less frequently suggests that artistic images represent idealized social traditions. In his article, "Art Styles as Cultural Cognitive Maps,"<sup>1</sup> the anthropologist John Fischer contends that social conditions are determinants of art styles and further suggests that the art forms of a culture reflect either real or imagined social situations that give pleasure or security to the community. He believes that it is important to ask, "Why do these people notice items A and B and ignore items C and D in their environment?"<sup>2</sup>

Utilizing Fischer's approach as part of a study of Precolumbian Panamanian ceramics, Olga Linares<sup>3</sup> discovered that despite the variety of flora and fauna found in this geographic area, only certain species were represented on the pottery with any regularity, implying that these Precolumbian artists deliberately chose to depict specific types of animals and not others. Analyzing those animals repeatedly depicted on the ceramics, she found that they have certain characteristics in common: they are "repellent; . . . dangerous; . . . have hard body parts; . . . 'charge'; . . . have a 'pinch' or 'sting' . . . are cryptic . . . eat people; . . . or are predatory."<sup>4</sup> She also found that the animals not represented generally had soft body parts, were vulnerable to attack, or were eaten.

Using Fischer's proposition that art styles represent real or fantasized social situations, Linares concludes that:

. . . the central Panamanian art style was centered on a rich symbolic system using animal motifs metaphorically

to express the qualities of aggression and hostility that characterized the social and political life of this and later periods in the central provinces.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the types of plants and animals represented, the frequency with which they occur, and their major characteristics allow inferences to be drawn about both the social conditions as well as the psychological attitudes of the people who created and used these visual images.

This type of analysis can also be applied to archaeological remains in North America. For example, a study of the animals represented on Southern Cult artifacts from the southeastern United States between 1200 and AD 1350 reveals a preponderance of certain animals over others, suggesting that the Southern Cult artists intentionally chose to depict certain types of animals and not others.

The list of animals known in Mississippian times includes various species of birds, mammals, and fish, yet only certain forms appear periodically as motifs on such items as shell engravings, stone tablets, incised ceramics, copper plaques, and wooden artifacts. For example, the following animals were hunted and used as foodstuffs in Southern Cult times: white-tailed deer, buffalo, black bear, rabbits, squirrels, raccoons, opossum, wild turkey, passenger pigeons, and various types of waterfowl. In addition, certain water animals such as the alligator, sea cow, and occasionally even the whale were also hunted as well as such fish as catfish, sturgeon, pike, shad, bass, perch, sunfish, and mullet.<sup>6</sup>

Comparing this list to the animals, animal-human, and animal-animal composite figures found on Southern Cult artifacts, especially the incised shell work, reveals some important correspondences as well as dichotomies. Of the list of animals, birds, and fish used as foodstuffs, only the turkey, passenger pigeon, pileated woodpecker, raccoon, and a generalized fish form can be identified with any certainty as appearing on the shell work, and even then they appear very infrequently.

Significantly none of the animals used as foodstuffs appear on Southern Cult objects in any great numbers. Instead, many of the most frequently-appearing animals seem to have been the predators instead of the prey, or at least to have had such predator characteristics as sharp claws, beaks, teeth, or pincers. One frequently depicted animal is a snake, generally a rattlesnake shown either with large fangs or obvious rattle, or both. Spiders, usually shown with enlarged pincers are also regularly depicted (fig. 1). Birds of prey, most likely



Figure 1. Incised shell gorget from Illinois depicting a spider. Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago. Photograph by author.

Figure 2. Drawing of incised shell design from Spiro Mound, Oklahoma depicting a fanged feline with rattlesnake tail and bird claws. Approximate size: 10 to 12 inches. Stovall Museum, University of Oklahoma, Norman. Drawing by author.



hawks or falcons, are usually depicted with prominent beaks and large talons. In addition, various long-tailed felines, generally shown with extra-long incisors, sharp claws, or both, are also illustrated.

Besides individual animal representations, various combinations of these animals are found (fig. 2), as well as an anthropomorphized animal form, and a human costumed to represent this anthropomorphic form. Although this latter possibility can be demonstrated for feline-human and snake-human combinations, it is especially evident with the bird-man image where one bird-man type always has feathered wings in place of arms (fig. 3), while the second type has both arms as well as wings that seem to sprout from the figures shoulder blades, similar to the wings of angels in Christian art (fig. 4).<sup>7</sup> A similar typology can also be made for the human-feline and human-snake images. For example, both an anthropomorphic feline with a human head and joints (see fig. 2), as well as a human wearing a feline mask appear (fig. 5) on Southern Cult shell engravings. In addition, both a rattlesnake with a human head (fig. 6) as well as humans wearing capes made of rattlesnake skins (fig. 7) are also depicted.

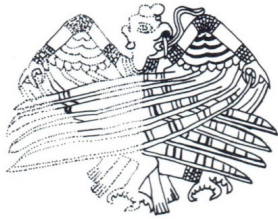


Figure 3. Drawing of incised shell gorget from Spiro Mound, Oklahoma depicting a bird-man. Approximate size: 6¾ by 4½ inches. University of Arkansas Museum, Fayetteville: 37-1-5. Reconstructed drawing by author.

In addition, these human-animal images (especially the bird-man figure) may be related to the archaeological context from which many of the objects were recovered. While all three major Southern Cult sites (Etowah, Georgia; Moundville, Alabama; and

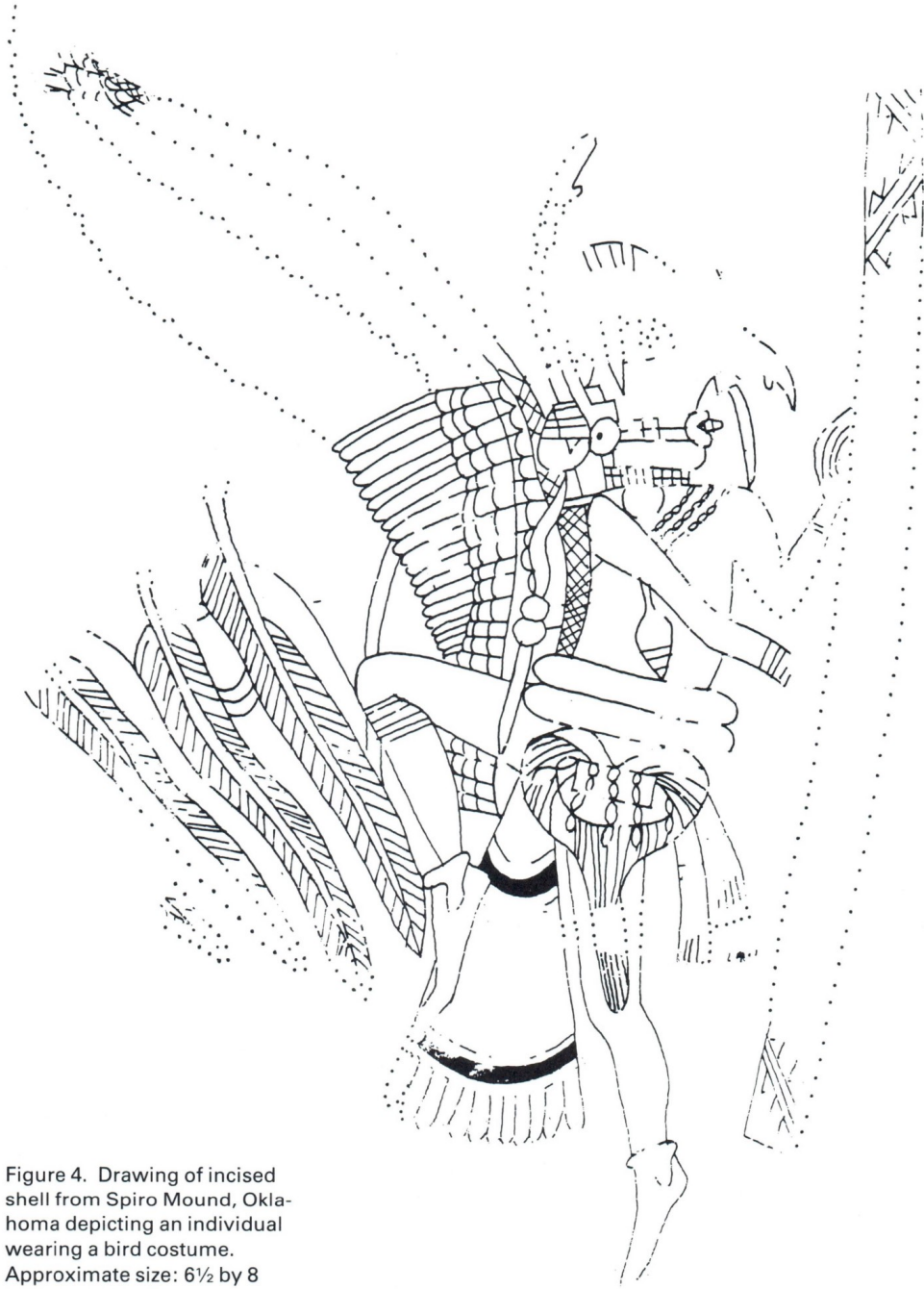


Figure 4. Drawing of incised shell from Spiro Mound, Oklahoma depicting an individual wearing a bird costume. Approximate size: 6½ by 8 inches. United States National Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Museum of Natural History, Washington, D.C.: 448825, 448861. Drawing by author.



Figure 5. Drawing of incised shell from Spiro Mound, Oklahoma depicting a human wearing a feline mask. Approximate length: 12½ in. Museum of American Indian, Heye Foundation, New York: 18/9310.

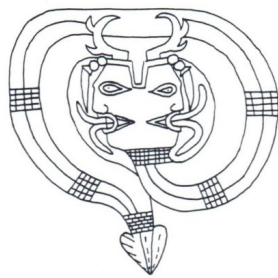


Figure 6. Drawing of incised shell from Spiro Mound, Oklahoma depicting a rattle-snake with a janus-head. Approximate size: 7½ by 12" University of Arkansas Museum, Fayetteville: 37-1-32.

Spiro Mound, Oklahoma) contain elaborate burials with large amounts of grave goods, a series of graves excavated at the sites of Etowah and Spiro Mound revealed a group of humans who had been buried wearing elements of the bird-man costume as depicted on various objects, especially the repousse copper plaques and engraved shells. These bird-man burials appear to have reflected an elaborately stratified society with the bird-man burials presumably reserved for those individuals with high status.<sup>8</sup>

Most importantly, all of these animals, whether depicted singly, in composite forms, or as anthropomorphic creatures, have certain characteristics in common. All are carnivorous predators. All strike swiftly often catching their prey unawares. All have some sort of sharp teeth, fangs, pincers, beak or claws. The repeated use of these particular motifs, especially in combination with the anthropomorphic forms representing individuals of high rank, suggests that the Southern Cult artists deliberately chose specific animal motifs that conveyed concepts of ferocity, boldness, aggression, and hostility. Since the Southern Cult elite probably maintained their position of authority by the use of force,<sup>9</sup> Southern Cult artists may have intentionally used specific motifs as costume elements designed to reinforce those behavioral characteristics important to the continued hegemony of the elite.

Other similar uses of this type of analysis may help us identify social changes. For example, Anasazi ceramics are predominately composed of geometric motifs during the Pueblo I, II and III periods in contrast to their neighbors', the Hohokam and Mogollon, use of life forms. However, between the years AD 1200 and 1600, or the latter half of Pueblo III (AD 1100 to 1300) and all of Pueblo IV (AD 1300 to 1550/1600) several dramatic changes occurred in Anasazi ceramics, including the introduction of life forms on polychrome or black-on-red or black-on-orange wares. Both these shifts appear to have had important meanings for the prehistoric Pueblo Indians. While the shift towards the use of red and



Figure 7. Drawing of incised shell from Spiro Mound, Oklahoma illustrating human figures wearing rattlesnake capes with a horned rattlesnake below their feet. Approximate length: 12½ in. Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, New York: 18/9083.

polychrome wares may have been associated with a ritual shift towards fertility and a plentiful water supply,<sup>10</sup> an analysis of the life forms employed may also provide information about the nature of this change.

Studying just the animal forms found on prehistoric Hopi pottery from Sikyatki, dated from approximately AD 1425 to 1650 suggests some interesting parallels. The major faunal forms depicted on this ceramic ware include lizards (fig. 8), snakes, tadpoles, frogs or toads (fig. 9), birds (fig. 10), butterflies (fig. 11) and sometimes dragonflies (fig. 9). As with the animals depicted on the Southern Cult objects, these animals are basically not used as foodstuffs. However, the most important characteristic shared by these animals or insects is their ability to change their form, alter their shape, or go through some other major metamorphosis. For example, lizards in the Southwest hibernate in the ground for the major part of winter. The snake sheds its skin periodically to emerge with its most brilliant coloration. Tadpoles change completely to become frogs, just as moths and butterflies start life as caterpillars, form cocoons or chrysalises, and finally emerge in the form of a moth or butterfly. Dragonflies go through a similar larval stage and metamorphosis before reaching adulthood. Birds, admittedly have the most tenuous forms of metamorphosis, but do hatch from eggs as unfeathered, reptilian-looking creatures. In addition, some species, such as eagles, undergo rather pronounced color changes in

Figure 8. Sikyatki polychrome bowl illustrating lizard-like creature. Private Collection.



Figure 9. Sikyatki polychrome bowl illustrating the transformation of a tadpole to a frog flanked by two dragonflies. Photograph courtesy of the University of Colorado Museum, Boulder.



Figure 10. Sikyatki polychrome bowl depicting bird or bird-insect combination. Photograph courtesy of the University of Colorado Museum, Boulder.



Figure 11. Sikyatki polychrome bowl illustrating a butterfly. Photograph courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.



their development from hatchling to adult. This suggests that each of these animals was selected for its ability to appear as if newly reborn after a rather drastic change in its coloration, form or metabolism.

In the past it has generally been thought that those images occurring on Sikyatki pottery were associated with water and therefore fertility. While tadpoles, frogs, and dragonflies do appear in watery contexts, both snakes and lizards are desert dwellers in the Southwest and none of the birds that can be identified with any certainty appear to be water birds or found associated with a watery habitat. This suggests that these animals may have been depicted for completely different reasons. One suggestion is that Anasazi culture itself was a culture undergoing a series of changes brought about by overuse of the land, climatic shifts, and a drying up of the water table. Since each of the animals represented was able to adapt to a changing environment or season by a change within itself, these animals may have reassured the Pueblos that they, too, could successfully adapt to the changed environment caused by drought and over-cultivation.