Known as the Willoughby disk, this engraved shale palette from the period A.D. 1300-1450 was found in Moundville, Ala. It measures 22.2 centimeters in diameter and resides at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University. It is named for Charles C. Willoughby, the archaeologist who made the original line drawing of the disk that was published in 1905. Photo by David Dye, courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.
Creating a new Rosetta Stone

Scholars seek lost meanings of Native American symbolism

by Ann Friou

This 700-year-old stone object, found at the archaeological site of Moundville, Ala., is an important piece of American art.

Called the Willoughby disk, it is a portable altar whose engraved symbolism showed America’s ancient Mississippian peoples how to find their way into the afterlife. The engravings on the disk were interpreted by scholars who meet annually at Texas State to recover the lost meanings of Native American symbolism.

Known in several academic circles as the San Marcos School of Iconographic Interpretation, this high-powered group of archaeologists, anthropologists, art historians, folklorists and Native religious practitioners is creating a “Rosetta Stone” for deciphering the symbols of the pre-Columbian Native American peoples who populated America’s eastern woodlands during the Mississippian period.

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**High art and cultural decline**

Between A.D. 850 and 1731, these Mississippian produced art of incomparable style and quality: delicate implements in rare and colorful stone, engraved shell jewelry, boldly decorated ceramic vessels, detailed wooden animal sculptures and highly styled copper portraits of individuals, rulers, mythical heroes and deities.

The artworks, found at hundreds of archaeological sites dotting the great river valleys from Ohio to the Gulf of Mexico and from the southern Piedmont west to the Arkansas and Red rivers, attest to a major civilization with a common religious belief system as sophisticated as any in the ancient world. Like the Maya, the Mississippian envisioned a multi-layered cosmos populated by a pantheon of deities whose activities in the celestial world above and the underworld below affected the fates of the humans in the middle world.

Beginning in 1539, however, the year of its first contact with Europeans, the vast Mississippian civilization began a sudden and rapid decline, and the meanings of most of its art and symbolism were lost. After European contact, Mississippian culture underwent such an abrupt and profound change — brought on by disease, warfare and economic shifts introduced by Europeans and by the large-scale movement of tribes from one part of America to another — that the culture soon became unrecognizable as Mississippian. Consequently, it has taken archaeologists almost a century to establish that the Mississippian, whose artifacts they began to find in the 1800s, were not a mysterious “lost civilization” but in fact the ancestors of the Native American tribes now living between the Atlantic and the Rocky Mountains.

**Unlocking the symbols’ secrets**

Since his first encounter with Mississippian art on a fourth-grade field trip to the ancient Native American site of Moundville, Texas State archaeologist Kent Reilly has wanted to understand it. “I was absolutely blown...”
away,” he said. “I looked at all of the artifacts in the museum and wanted to know what they mean, and nobody could tell me.”

So, in the 1990s Reilly invited a group of well-known Mississippian scholars to meet at Texas State and share their varied experience in a workshop — the Mississippian Iconographic Workshop — geared to shedding light on Mississippian symbology. The workshop is the only one of its kind in the field of Native American studies. It has met at Texas State annually for 15 years, and its successful body of work has become known in academic circles as the San Marcos School of Iconographic Interpretation.

Reilly is now one of the principal scholars unlocking the symbols’ secrets. The director of Texas State’s Center for the Arts and Symbolism of Ancient America, he began his career as a scholar of Central America’s Olmec culture, studying with the prominent Mesoamericanist Linda Schele and making successful interpretations of Olmec symbolism. Remembering his fascination with Moundville, he has believed that the same methodology used to decipher Olmec symbols could be used among the artifacts in the museum and wanted to know what they mean, and nobody could tell me.”

The wooden 15-centimeter kneeling human-feline figure from the A.D. 1400-1500 period, found in Key Marco, Fla., is now part of the collection of the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, D.C. The 1.3-centimeter whelk shell with Birdman engraved on it was discovered in the Spiro Mounds in Oklahoma and is part of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian collection. Photos by David Dye, courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.
successfully in the workshop to recover the meanings of Mississippian symbols. And he was right.

**Two key deities**

So far, the San Marcos School has identified several deities and at least 12 sets of other symbols. Two key identifications have been the deities Morning Star and the Great Serpent. Morning Star, also known as Birdman, is a hawk-like figure that brings up the sun from the Beneath World each dawn. Morning Star is associated with everlasting life, and rulers at sites such as Cahokia, Ill., and Etowah, Ga., seem to have taken on Morning Star’s divine identity.

In contrast to Morning Star is the Great Serpent — sometimes depicted as a winged and horned serpent and at other times as an underwater panther with a snake-like body — that lives both in the Beneath World and in the sky. The Great Serpent is associated with the realm of the dead.

Because the Mississippian people left no texts behind to explain their belief system, the identification of deities is enabling the scholars to “read” Mississippian ideology in its art.

For example, the Willoughby disk’s association with afterlife ritual can be seen in each of the symbols engraved on the disk. Morning Star is represented by his bi-lobed and feathered arrow, which appears to the right of the central column. The column, adorned with skulls, is not a column but a sacred bundle that would be unrolled during a religious ceremony. Actual sacred bundles, often comprising a woven reed basket or a piece of cloth tied with braided buckskin, contained arrows and other sacred objects used in rituals.

The symbols of the hands with eyes in the palms — called hand-and-eye motifs — are thought to be portals to the realm of the dead. The motif may very well represent the constellation Orion, as well as the Milky Way. The Milky Way itself was viewed as a highway of light that functioned as a celestial road to the realm of the dead. Even

**Mapping the mounds**

Etowah, Ga., was not the largest of the Americas’ mound cities, but at its zenith it was a pre-eminent center for the art and symbolism of Mississippian peoples, whose cultural achievements were comparable to those of the Aztec and Maya. “Etowah is one of the most important archaeological sites in the United States, and one of the least understood,” says Kent Reilly, whose work at Etowah was featured in the November/December issue of *Archaeology* magazine. Using ground-penetrating radar, Reilly and a group of Texas State students have mapped Etowah, whose principal mound measures 70 feet high, 4 acres at the base and a half acre at the top. In addition to plazas, fire pits and graves, the group has found the ruler’s palatial residence and a window of appearances — a balcony overhanging the slope where the ruler would have revealed himself to his people. When work is completed at Etowah, Reilly and his students will go to Alabama to map Moundville, the second largest Mississippian site. Recently, Reilly was invited to serve as guest curator for the redesign of the Moundville Museum.

Texas State archaeology graduate students Johann Sawyer, left, and Barry Kidder use a remote-sensing instrument to map the subterranean foundations of ancient structures at Etowah Indian Mounds Historic Site in Georgia. Photo courtesy of Johann Sawyer.
today, among many Native Americans, the Milky Way is known as the Path of Souls. In the context of the Willoughby disk, the hand-and-eye motif tells its “readers” that, when Orion rises in the sky, the souls of the dead are to leap through the hand-and-eye portal to the Milky Way, to start the journey to the realm of the dead.

**Skillful doodle reveals deity**

The last symbol on the Willoughby disk — the figure to the left of the sacred bundle — remained unidentified until last year. For at least three decades, scholars had puzzled over the figure, referring to it as “a skillful doodle” and an incomprehensible surrealistic design. Then two participants in the San Marcos School — Vernon James Knight of the University of Alabama and Judith Franke, retired from directing the Dickson Mounds Museum in Illinois — identified the figure as a design found commonly in the Mississippian world. There are at least 28 known examples, including two significant examples from major ceremonial sites: the Willoughby disk from Moundville and a shell gorget from Etowah.

When the design is turned on its axis, it’s easier to see that it is a butterfly or moth. Its segmented body has dorsal and ventral patterning ending in a forked tail, a head area reduced to a large eye represented by a dotted circle, and fan-like wings connected to the thorax and decorated with a circle-

The San Marcos School has identified Mississippian deities such as Morning Star (page 46, left), also known as Birdman, who was associated with the Above World and thought to make the sun rise. Scholars have also identified the Great Serpent (page 46, right), associated with the Realm of the Dead. The Etowah, Ga., ceremonial complex was focused on Morning Star and the Above World, and the Moundville, Ala., complex was focused on the Great Serpent and the Beneath World. Recently, the “skillful doodle” on the left side of the Willoughby Disk, above left, was identified as Mothra, a supernatural significant to Mississippian ritual practice. Morning Star (above center) is believed to have transformed himself into Mothra and vice versa (note Morning Star’s colorful Mothra wings). In the scene at right from Etowah, Morning Star holds Mothra by the snout and slays him with a sword (see caption, page 49). Drawings courtesy F. Kent Reilly III.
Knight and Franke believe that the rayed spiral is an exaggerated proboscis like that of the sphinx moth or “hawk moth” known to pollinate tobacco and narcotic plants such as datura — plants that were important in Mississippian ritual practice. Because the art of two major Mississippian centers where this symbol occurs — Moundville and Etowah — focuses on the supernatural and otherworldly, as opposed to the factual or historical, Knight and Franke conclude that this is not an ordinary butterfly or moth but a prominent supernatural.

**The meaning of “Mothra”**

In a reference to the giant moth fought by Godzilla in the Japanese movie, participants in the Mississippian Iconographic Workshop have dubbed the butterfly/moth as “Mothra.” Knight and Franke have identified symbols linking Mothra to the Morning Star supernatural and leading them to assert that Mothra can transform into Morning Star and vice versa.

They also point out that the larvae of sphinx moths are the tobacco hornworm and tomato hornworm. The tobacco hornworm, in particular, is noted for its ability to ingest, without harm to itself, alkaloids from such narcotic plants as datura, which are poisonous to other insects. It has also been noticed that the white abdominal markings on each segment of the tomato hornworm faithfully duplicate the “forked eye surround,” a motif commonly associated with the Morning Star figure. Knight and Franke conclude that this caterpillar, with its ability to metamorphose into a winged form — both Mothra and Morning Star — and its association with both tobacco and datura, offers itself as a consummate image of shamanic practice.

**The Cane Curtain**

Although Knight and Franke have not fully broken the code locked up in the association between Morning Star and Mothra, Reilly made an important observation about...
the relationship at the 2008 workshop. He pointed out that, while the Willoughby disk from Moundville depicts Mothra as an important supernatural, the shell gorget from Etowah shows Morning Star slaying Mothra with a sword.

"The art from the two sites indicates that Moundville and Etowah were not friendly with each other," Reilly said. "They literally had a Cane Curtain — a kind of Iron Curtain — between them. This is something brand new that no one had realized till now."

Other evidence of a Cane Curtain came to light at the 2008 workshop. Looking at a collection of snake imagery, Knight identified a distinct cultural area that had been unrecognized before — an area stretching from central Louisiana into Mississippi and from Baton Rouge to Memphis.

"From the serpent imagery associated with this area," Reilly said, "we begin to see that the ideology of the area seems to focus on the Beneath World, the realm of the dead. By contrast, the ceremonial complex to the east at Etowah is focused on Morning Star and the Above World. We don't know why one complex looks to the Beneath World for its source of authority and power and why the other complex looks to the Above World, but we want to know."

"We're on the cusp of making major discoveries about the nature of the Native American political and ethnic geography of the lower South between A.D. 1300 and 1400," Reilly continued. "We're right there. This year's workshop should be really exciting."

Books on Mississippian iconography

Reilly and workshop participants have produced two groundbreaking books containing their findings about Native American art and symbolism. The first, **Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand: American Indian Art of the Ancient Midwest and South** (Yale University Press 2004), is the catalog of an exhibition of Mississippian art mounted by Reilly and others at the Art Institute of Chicago and the St. Louis Art Museum. The catalog contains beautiful photographs and illustrations and detailed articles explaining the art and culture of the peoples of the Eastern Woodlands.

The second book, **Ancient Objects and Sacred Realms: Interpretations of Mississippian Iconography** (University of Texas Press 2007) presents 10 illustrated essays by scholars in the San Marcos School, analyzing the iconography of Mississippian art in order to reconstruct the Mississippian's ritual activities, cosmological vision and ideology. A second book of essays from the San Marcos School is due out in 2009, and a third collection is being compiled.