

5-2013

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Publication Info

Published in *Legacy*, Volume 17, Issue 1, 2013, pages 4&8-5.

<http://www.cas.sc.edu/sciaa/>

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Research Division

The Lord of Death on the Savannah River

By Adam King

The Hollywood site is a Mississippian period (AD 900-1600) mound town located on the Savannah River near present-day Augusta, Georgia. Excavations conducted there by Henry Reynolds in 1889 have become part of the lore and knowledge of Southeastern archaeology since the publication of Thomas's *Mound Builders* volume in 1894 (Thomas 1894). During his investigation of Mound B, Reynolds uncovered two distinct mound surfaces on which were laid human remains and elaborate objects now known to be part of a widespread set of ritual themes and artistic styles called the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex. It is those objects—

open, tooth-filled mouth (Fig. 1). Closer inspection of the image shows that the eyes have a three-pointed surround and a series of parallel lines extending from the nose to the edges of the plate. Enough details of this image are present to connect it thematically to a fairly widespread set of images dating to the Mississippian period found from the caves of Missouri and pottery of the Central Mississippi Valley eastward to northern Georgia and the Hollywood site. The same theme seems to have its roots in the Middle Woodland period, and it has persisted into the present as it appears in current Native American art and belief.



Fig. 1: Copper Underwater Panther plate from Hollywood site. (Photo by Adam King)

embossed copper, celts made of copper, and foreign pottery that is engraved, painted, or shaped into effigies—that have captured the interest of archaeologists for over a century. Those objects and their dating more recently have shown that Hollywood, and in particular the rituals conducted at Mound B, played a foundational role in the formation of Mississippian societies of the middle Savannah Valley of South Carolina and Georgia (King and Stephenson 2012).

One of the most interesting objects found in the Mound B deposit is a small embossed copper plate cut into the shape of a face with wide eyes and an

Fig. 2 presents an image engraved on a ceramic bottle found at the Berry site in Arkansas. Note the eyes with trefoil eye surround, bulbous nose, toothy mouth, and parallel markings. The same figure appears in the round as the famous limestone cat pipes found at Moundville and the Lower Mississippi Valley.

Two other small copper plates very similar to the Hollywood example were found at Etowah (Fig. 3) and eastern Tennessee completing a set of three that likely were made by the same hand.

George Lankford (2006) identifies this figure as the Underwater Panther, a supernatural inhabiting Native American beliefs from the Prairie Plains to Great Lakes and Atlantic Ocean. From contemporary beliefs and ethnographic accounts, we learn that the Underwater Panther inhabits one of the three realms of the Native American cosmos—the Underwater or Beneath World that lies



Fig. 2: Engraved Underwater Panther on a ceramic bottle. (From Reilly 2004, Drawing by Terry Childs)

under the ground and under water. It is a realm of chaos and death, but is also the place from which the powers of growth, regeneration, and life come in the form of water, souls, and the power to influence both. The Underwater Panther is one vision of the lord of this realm. At night, this realm switches places with the Above World and becomes the night sky. In that night sky is visible the Milky Way, conceived of as the Path of Souls by many people throughout the Americas. The Lord of Death occupies a place along that path, and when there has wings.

There are many descriptions of the Underwater Panther and even more images of it in European written history, Native American oral history, and Native American art. Probably the most famous image and description came from Father Jacques Marquette. While traveling among Native Americans of the Mississippi River in 1673, Marquette encountered and described two images of the Underwater Panther painted on a limestone bluff overlooking the Mississippi River near present-day Alton, Illinois in 1673. Below is Marquette's description of the painting:

While Skirting some rocks, which by Their height and length inspired awe, We saw upon one of them two painted monsters which at first made Us afraid, and upon Which the

*boldest savages dare not Long rest their eyes.
They are as large As a calf; they have Horns on
their heads Like those of a deer, a horrible look,
red eyes, a beard Like a tiger's, a face somewhat
like a man's, a body Covered with scales, and so
Long A tail that it winds all around the Body,
passing above the head and going back between
the legs, ending in a Fish's tail. Green, red,
and black are the three Colors composing the
Picture. Moreover, these 2 monsters are so
well painted that we cannot believe that any
savage is their author; for good painters in
France would find it difficult to reach that place
Conveniently to paint them.*

In his master's thesis recently completed at Texas State University, Alex Corsi (2012) discovered that the Hollywood Underwater Panther plate was part of an elaborate headdress that likely was constructed by covering a leather cap and bone or wooden frame with feathers. Around the base of the headdress was placed a ring of small ornaments made of copper in the shape of arrowheads. The Underwater Panther image was likely mounted on the forehead in the center of the headdress as shown in Fig. 4. The Underwater Panther plate found at Etowah was mounted in a similar headdress, and it seems likely that the same can be assumed for the plate from eastern Tennessee.

You might wonder why a person would want a headdress bearing the image of the Lord of Death. Keep in mind that these headdresses were part of

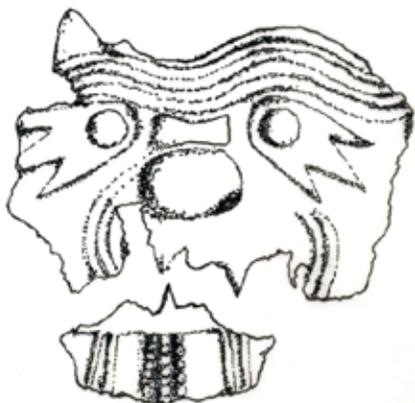


Fig. 3: Copper Underwater Panther plate from Etowah. (Drawing by James Ducan)



Fig. 4: Hollywood Underwater Panther headdress. (Reconstruction by Alexander Corsi)

regalia—special dress often with emblems of a particular role or office—worn by important people. Possession of such regalia might be an indicator of elevated social standing, but it is clear that this standing was derived from control of ritual. In other words, the regalia indicates an important role in particular rituals. In this case, those rituals likely dealt with the realm of the dead. Remember that the realm of the dead was not only the place where the souls of the deceased went, but it was a place that also contained the powers of growth, water, and even the return of souls to living bodies. For agriculturalists and people interested in the continuation of their family line (through the return of souls), the realm of the dead was a place with very important powers. Native American narratives are filled with stories of people seeking out and receiving gifts of power from the Underwater Panther and his avatar the Great Serpent (Lankford 2006).

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