Embodying Ritual Performance: An Iconographic Analysis of Burial 38 at the Etowah Site

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Embodying Ritual Performance:  
An Iconographic Analysis of Burial 38 at the Etowah Site

By

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Abstract

This thesis is an iconographic study of Burial 38 from Mound C at the Etowah, a Mississippian mound site in present-day Northwest Georgia. The goal of this study was to gain an understanding of the iconographic meaning of the artifacts in Burial 38 as well as the significance of the arrangement of individuals within the burial and its relationship with Mound C more broadly. Applying theories of relational ontology, performance, and gender, I build on King’s (2010) interpretation of Mound C’s final construction phases as a ritual event that transformed the mound into a sacred center, melded foreign and local ideology, and created or legitimized new social roles. When viewed as ritual performance, the final Mound C burials offer an archaeological window into how people in the past used people, objects, space, and history to create or change their identity. Using iconographic analysis and osteological information, I argue that Burial 38 was a secondary burial made up of previously bundled artifacts. Once interred in the mound, Burial 38 itself became a larger bundle.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

A Native American cultural phenomenon that archaeologists have termed “Mississippian” produced some of the most beautiful, intricate, and ideologically laden art in prehistoric North America. These works of art, executed in shell, copper, stone, and organic materials such as wood and cloth, provide the basis for much of what archaeologists and other scholars know about Mississippian ideology and religion.

Thousands of excavations of Mississippian sites over the last century and a half have shown that roughly between the years A.D. 900 to 1500 Mississippian cultures grew, thrived, and declined in the Southeast and Midwest of what is today the United States. Besides a shared overarching worldview, Mississippian peoples generally used a subsistence base centered on maize agriculture, exhibited social stratification based on ascribed status, and lived in sedentary towns, often with one or more mound and plaza complexes (Blitz 2010; Blitz and Lorenz 2006; Cobb 2003; Holley 1999; Milner and Schroeder 1999; Muller and Stephens 1991; Pauketat 2007; Scarry 1993; Steponaitis 1986). Despite these general similarities, the term “Mississippian” encompasses a wide
range of regional diversity based on different historical trajectories (Griffin 1946; Muller and Stephens 1991; Pauketat 2001, 2007; Phillips et al. 1951; Smith 1984).

Etowah, located in present-day Bartow County, Georgia, is one of the most well known Mississippian sites. It was, for a time, the most powerful polity in the area between the Etowah River in Georgia and the Tennessee River in Eastern Tennessee (King 2011). Its Mississippian component, for which it is best known, spanned the period from about A.D. 1000-1500. It was during the Wilbanks phases from A.D. 1250 to 1375 that Etowah reached its peak of influence and when most of the mound construction took place, including the building of a large platform burial mound, Mound C. Etowah’s Mound C has been a source of intrigue for archaeologists since 1884 when John Rogan conducted the first excavations at this mound under the auspices of the Bureau of American Ethnology (C. Thomas 1894). Between 1884 and 1961 over 350 burials and hundreds of associated artifacts were removed from the mound (King 2010; Larson 1971).

Mound C has yielded some of the most elaborate artifacts from the site, specifically those that are considered part of the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex (King 2007b, 2010). Burials associated with the final building stages of Mound C are especially intriguing given their spatial arrangement and their contemporaneous nature;
many were likely interred within a matter of days or weeks of each other (King 2010; Larson 1971). Burial 38, which is the focus of this thesis, was one of the final burials interred in the mound. It contained the remains of at least five late adolescent females in a log-lined pit appended as a “lobe” to the northern side of Mound C. Accompanying the skeletal remains were several artistic artifacts that probably also served ritual purposes.

![Figure 1.1](image.png)

**Figure 1.1** Artist rendering of Etowah During the Wilbanks Phase (A.D. 1250-1375). Mound C is circled in blue.

Burial 38 is an important piece of the Mound C puzzle that has received very little attention until now. The burial is unusual in that the individuals have all been identified
as late adolescent females, but the artifacts they were interred with are generally associated with males. In fact, no other known Mississippian burials contain this combination of individuals and artifacts. This unusual and unique situation makes Burial 38 an ideal context to examine issues of gender, identity, and performance in Mississippian societies. I draw on theories of relational ontology, performance, and gender to inform my interpretations. These theoretical perspectives allowed me to explore issues of why and how this burial came into existence without simply equating grave goods to social statuses, as has often been the case for interpretations of burials in the prehistoric Southeast (King 2010; Mainfort and Sullivan 2010). Specifically, by viewing Burial 38 through the lens of relational ontology, I consider how all of the artifacts and humans in not only this grave, but all the graves in Mound C were connected to one another.

The methods used in addressing these questions were documentary research of the archaeological context of Burial 38, iconographic structural analysis, and ethnohistorical research. Before any other work could begin I had to collect field notes and other primary excavation documents to learn the archaeological context of the burial. With this information in hand, I was able to reconstruct what Burial 38 probably looked like when it was created. I then used structural analysis and other scholars’ interpretations of
Mississippian imagery to determine the meanings of individual artifacts in the burial.

Ethnohistorical research and previous research on Mississippian iconography that used ethnographic resources provided a culturally appropriate context for interpreting these elements and motifs.

This combination of theory and methodology allowed me to interpret a burial that, until now, was largely an enigma in the story of Etowah and Mound C. My interpretations go beyond simple questions of status in a chiefdom society to examine the ritual acts and religious meaning that led to the creation of this unique burial. This research is especially important because it addresses gender, which has often been ignored in Mississippian mortuary analyses. The results presented in this thesis add to the body of knowledge of Etowah specifically, and Mississippian cultures in general.

Chapter two contextualizes this study within the discipline of archaeology by reviewing key terms, concepts, and intellectual trends in Mississippian archaeology. Chapter two also summarizes previous archaeological work on Mound C and some interpretations drawn from that work. This chapter also explains the theoretical approach that informs my interpretations. Chapter three details the sources of data used in this study and the methods employed to interpret those data. Chapter four consists of my interpretations, which explain why Burial 38 was arranged the way it was, how it may be
connected to other Late Wilbanks burials in Mound C, and what it can tell us about gender at Etowah.
Chapter 2: Mississippian Mortuary Practice and Meaning

The “Mississippian Chiefdom”

The Mississippian cultural concept as proposed by archaeologists is much more complicated than the brief explanation of Mississippian cultures offered in the previous chapter suggests. It glosses over the long history of research and development in the discipline of archaeology in the United States that led to such generalizations. In order to better contextualize my theoretical and methodological approach to the study of Burial 38, here, I review the development and use of the terms “Mississippian” and “chiefdom” in the archaeological literature. I then move on to a broader overview of mortuary studies in the prehistoric Southeast.

The term “Mississippian” was first used in the early twentieth century to delineate a list of archaeological traits that archaeologists observed throughout the Mississippi River Valley of the American Midwest and later, in the Southeast. These were at first specifically ceramic traits such as shell-tempering and globular vessels, but the list soon expanded to include features such as flat-topped earthen mounds, wall trench architecture, larger populations (compared to the preceding Woodland phase) settled in...
towns, and importantly, maize agriculture (Blitz 2010; Blitz and Lorenz 2006; Cobb 2003; Holley 1999; Milner and Schroeder 1999; Muller and Stephens 1991; Pauketat 2007; Scarry 1993). Such a cultural trait list fit well with the goals of the cultural-historical paradigm popular in archaeology in the first half of the twentieth century, which sought to delineate past cultures based on their archaeological residues and define their changing characteristics through time.

Despite the particularistic nature of the cultural-historical paradigm, archaeologists as early as the 1920s were seeking explanations for why and where Mississippian cultures developed and how they spread. Although there was no consensus on the location, early scholars generally agreed that there was a “Mississippian heartland,” or a single core area for the development of Mississippian culture (Brain 1971; Hall 1967; Jennings 1968; Willey 1953; Willey and Phillips 1958). They believed that the culture spread to other parts of the Eastern Woodlands through migration or “cultural colonization” (Smith 1984). Although there was some debate in the early twentieth century about where such a developmental heartland might have been, “The identification of the Central Mississippi Valley as the source of the Mississippian cultural tradition had thus by 1940 become a popular and ubiquitous litany in the archaeological literature” (Smith 1984:18). Swanton’s (1928) suggestion that various Muskogean
speaking groups migrated to the Southeast from the Central Mississippi Valley late in prehistory provided archaeologists with a mechanism for Mississippian cultural diffusion. As Bruce Smith (1984) shows, this explanation did not fit well with the growing body of archaeological evidence, nor did it truly explain why or how Mississippian culture developed in any supposed heartland.

By the 1960s a major paradigm shift in American archaeology had begun to influence the definition and understanding of “Mississippian.” This processual approach rejected the historical particularities of the previous paradigm, focusing instead on patterns of behavior that could be discerned from the archaeological record and law-like generalizations that could be deduced from those patterns. Understanding the complexity and evolution of human societies was another hallmark of the processual approach. Due in large part to the influence of scholars from the University of Michigan, between the 1960s and 1980s the understanding of “Mississippian” changed from a trait list (e.g. Caldwell 1958; Griffin 1967) to a type of social organization (Blitz 2010; Cobb 2003; Pauketat 2007). Various scholars emphasized different factors that may have led to Mississippian social organization, such as ecological pressures (e.g. Anderson et al. 1995; Benson et al. 2009; Jeske 1992; Smith 1978), economic redistribution (e.g. Brown et al. 1990; Cobb 2000; King and Freer 1995; Muller 1997; Welch 1991), political
maneuvering (e.g. Anderson 1994; Blitz 1999; Peebles and Kus 1977; Steponaitis 1978),
or some combination of these and other factors.

The late 1980s and early 1990s marked another paradigm shift in American
archaeology. Practitioners of this new post-processual paradigm sought to bring the
agency of individuals in the past back into the explanatory framework of social behavior
and allow for some historical explanations of local variation. Although this paradigm
shift has not necessarily changed the current definition of “Mississippian” as a social
system, it has affected the lens through which that system is viewed and the social aspects
archaeologists are interested in studying. In fact, recognition of the large range of
diversity that exists between societies that are categorized as Mississippian is one of the
main reasons many archaeologists have rejected neoevolutionary concepts of social
organization in favor of more agency based approaches (e.g. Alt 2006; Beck et al. 2007;
Cobb and King 2005; Pauketat 2001; 2004; 2007; Pauketat and Alt 2003; Welch 2006;
Wilson 2008).

In his review of studies of complexity in Mississippian chiefdoms, Cobb (2003)
notes two general trends in Mississippian research since the 1990s. The first is the
expansion of concepts of political economy to include ideology, and the second is a focus
on horizontal rather than vertical power relations, including the power of commoners to
resist coercion by elites. I agree with Cobb’s assessment that, “Power also has an experiential quality; it is something that is acted out, reproduced, contested, and transformed in the daily interactions of others” (2003:65). My research on Burial 38 fits under the umbrella of such agency-based approaches because I interpret this burial and Mound C in general as a ritual performance that used ideology and the identity of the individuals interred in the burial as a way to reproduce Etowah society, albeit in an altered form.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to discuss “Mississippian” without also discussing chiefdoms. “Chiefdom” is the label that most scholars apply to the type of social organization groups throughout the Midwest and Southeast exhibited during the Mississippian period. Anthropologists began using the term “chiefdom” in the 1950s (Oberg 1955; Sahllins 1958; Steward and Faron 1959), but its use as a concept became popular after Elman Service (1962) more specifically defined and applied the term in his influential book, *Primitive Social Organization*. In Service’s conception, chiefdoms were a form of social organization with institutionalized social ranking and permanent political offices whose most important function was economic redistribution. On the social evolutionary scale he placed them above the complexity level of bands or tribes but below the level of states. Morton Fried (1967) published a book about social evolution
that also described chiefdom-like societies. While Service tended toward economic explanations for the development of chiefdoms, Fried favored political explanations that focused on the organizational power of the central authority and the hereditary nature of the office of Chief (Pauketat 2007). As Pauketat (2007) notes, the early works of these two authors influenced two general approaches in chiefdom research:

economic/redistribution oriented explanations and political/conflict oriented explanations.

At the same time as the chiefdom concept came into vogue among Mississippian archaeologists in the 1960s and 1970s, the amount of data being collected about Mississippian sites surged. This new information only confirmed the great degree of variation between polities labeled Mississippian chiefdoms (Muller and Stephens 1991) that an earlier generation of archaeologists in the Southeast had already noted (Smith 1984). To deal with this variation, archaeologists developed different ways of subdividing chiefdoms. The first and probably most widely used subdivision is the “simple” vs. “complex” chiefdom, first explicitly used by Vincas Steponaitis (1978).

According to Steponaitis (1978), simple chiefdoms only had one level of superordinate political office, and chiefs still had to participate in subsistence production. The chief’s (and his family’s) wealth and status was not much above that of the common
people. Complex chiefdoms, on the other hand, had two or three levels of political hierarchy. High-ranking chiefs did not participate in subsistence producing activities, and their office was generally permanent and inherited. Also, high-ranking chiefs exercised authority over lesser chiefs who controlled smaller territorial units.

Economically speaking, in simple chiefdoms, the primary role of chiefs is to collect surplus and redistribute it throughout the population. Chiefs of complex chiefdoms, however, collect tribute in the form of surpluses or labor and do not directly redistribute it back to the producers. Instead, “Obligations to reciprocate are fulfilled by the elites’ performing religious or secular duties that commoners cannot, or by presentations that are more symbolic than substantive” (King 2003:6).

More recently, Blanton et al. (1996) suggested a subdivision of network and corporate chiefdoms based on the different strategies and power sources that political actors may employ when consolidating and exercising power. The authors offer these two alternatives as a response to neoevolutionary theories of chiefdom development, which they critique for their lack of a “convincing theory of human behavior, especially the crucial behavior found in political competition” (1996:1) and their inability to explain variation among societies in the same evolutionary stage. They argue that their “dual
processual” theory differs from typical neoevolutionary explanations because they focus on processes rather than stages or social typologies.

In network strategies individual political leaders gain power through “the development and maintenance of individual-centered exchange relations established primarily outside one’s local group” (Blanton et al. 1996:4). They then use these networks of social ties to gain access to labor, knowledge, marriage partners, or prestige goods. Network strategies offer a great deal of potential competition between different factions in a single polity, which often leads to the development of prestige-goods systems as mechanisms to divert material goods and potential followers away from political competitors. An international style may develop in the context of long distance exchange between distant social groups. The international style is a type of symbolic vocabulary that allows cross-cultural exchanges and reaffirms the elite status of both exchange partners, but its symbolic content is not controlled by any one political center (Blanton et al. 1996). Network strategies are also characterized by highly visible leaders whose wealth and prestige is much greater than the rest of the community. This focus on the individual, coupled with competition from others in the exchange network makes network chiefdoms volatile and open to political conflict (Blanton et al. 1996).
Corporate strategies, on the other hand, exhibit more wealth equality between leaders and followers as less emphasis is placed on prestige goods and their consumption by elites. According to Blanton et al. (1996:6), a corporate strategy “always involves the establishment and maintenance of a cognitive code that emphasizes corporate solidarity of society as an integrated whole, based on a natural, fixed, and immutable interdependence between subgroups and in more complex societies between rulers and subjects.” In corporate polities rituals and symbols are based on broad themes such as fertility and renewal that are applicable to all segments of society and even to other cultural groups. In corporate chiefdoms roles and statuses may be hierarchically graded, but the importance of individual accomplishments is downplayed, which tends to prevent internal political conflict.

One influential archaeologist, Timothy Pauketat, recently suggested doing away with the chiefdom concept altogether in his 2007 book *Chiefdoms and Other Archaeological Delusions*. Like Blanton et al. (1996), Pauketat (2007) critiques neoevolutionary approaches. He specifically points to two major theoretical problems with chiefdoms as they are conceptualized in Mississippian literature. The first is that the importance of political leaders in creating social change is overemphasized. The second is that archaeologists tend to “treat Mississippian chiefdoms like cookie-cutter copies of
each other” (Pauketat 2007:36). Despite Pauketat’s articulate criticism of the chiefdom concept, I agree with King (2003) that the word “chiefdom” is useful and even necessary to facilitate comparison between sites and societies as long as we recognize the variability that is often found between different Mississippian chiefdoms.

The research presented in this thesis does not directly address questions of chiefdom classification or even Mississippianization, but the background presented above is helpful in contextualizing the history of Mississippian mortuary studies. Mississippian mortuary contexts have been evaluated through the same changing theoretical lenses as Mississippian chiefdoms; in fact, mortuary contexts were essential in developing the “Mississippian” and “chiefdom” concepts.

Functionalist interpretations of funerary rites dominated anthropology during the first half of the twentieth century. Now-famous ethnographers such as Malinowski (1948), Radcliffe-Brown (1964 [1922]), and Evans-Pritchard (1948) believed that funerals and their material correlates affirmed social bonds and responsibilities of the mourners and strengthened “political authority in the face of the fear, fascination and repulsion caused by the presence of a corpse” (Parker Pearson 2000:23). Alfred Kroeber’s (1927) cross-cultural study of funerary rituals concluded that funerary practices and disposal of the dead were largely unrelated to other cultural practices. This
study was widely accepted and cited, which led to a generation of anthropologists who
were reluctant and cautious in their interpretations of funerary behavior (Parker Pearson
2000; Rakita and Buikstra 2005). Similarly, archaeologists operating under the cultural-
historical paradigm during this time cautioned against making interpretations of symbolic
and ritual aspects of human behavior based only on material remains (Hawkes 1954;
Smith 1955).

The deductive, hypothesis based approach of the New Archaeology, however, offered renewed hope of understanding these types behaviors as seen in the
archaeological record. Arthur Saxe’s (1970) influential dissertation tried to develop a
cross-cultural model of how mortuary practices were related to the society’s sociocultural
system. He tested eight hypotheses with ethnographic data from three cultures: the
Ashanti of West Africa, the Kapauku of New Guinea, and the Bontoc Igorot of the
Philippines. Most of the hypotheses dealt with how the deceased’s social persona or the
complexity of the society might have been symbolically or otherwise manifested in
mortuary practices. Saxe’s work inspired a flurry of new research into mortuary
practices, both in ethnography and archaeology.

The Society for American Archaeology’s Memoir 25, *Approaches to the Social
Dimensions of Mortuary Practices* (Brown 1971), has been particularly influential for
Mississippian mortuary studies. The volume’s editor, James Brown, applied Saxe’s approach to his study of Mississippian mortuary practices and status at the Spiro site in eastern Oklahoma. He concluded that at Spiro, precious grave goods corresponded to high status. Lewis Larson (1971) also published an article in this memoir about burials at the Etowah site. Much like Brown, he concluded that the Mound C burials that contained rare and exotic grave goods were evidence for social stratification at Etowah. He specifically argued that individuals buried with these items “control trade in certain exotic materials and objects that are used by them to express and validate their social position” (1971:67).

Probably the most widely cited and influential article of Memoir 25, however, was Lewis Binford’s (1971) “Mortuary Practices: Their Study and Their Potential.” Binford used ethnographic data from dozens of societies in the Human Relations Area Files to make cross-cultural comparisons of funerary practices. He believed there was a direct correlation between the social rank of the deceased and the number of people who had relationships to the deceased. The social identities or “social persona” of the dead were reflected in their funerary rites, and these identities should vary directly with the person’s rank. Using subsistence strategy as a proxy for social complexity, he concluded
that more complex societies recognized more dimensions of the social persona in mortuary rituals.

Despite the fact that Saxe (1970) and Binford’s (1971) studies were based on potentially problematic ethnographic examples, Mississippian archaeologists quickly began to apply their approaches and conclusions to the archaeological record. For example, in their study of burials at the Moundville site, Christopher Peebles and Susan Kus (1977) argued that aspects of the social persona represented in mortuary contexts could be used to distinguish social inequalities. They divided the social persona into the “subordinate” and the “superordinate.” The subordinate aspects included age, sex, and achievements in life. The superordinate aspects were reflected in energy expenditure in the mortuary ritual, grave goods, or other symbolism not related to subordinate aspects. They divided 2,053 graves into eleven clusters and divided those clusters into subordinate and superordinate groups. The superordinate group was considered the elite of Moundville society because of the rare grave goods and frequent burial in mounds.

Social evolutionary theory and the positivist outlook of the New Archaeology provided the underpinning for these and other research building on Saxe (1970) and Binford (1971). The goal of many of these studies was to determine the evolutionary stage of a certain society (Parker Pearson 2000). Lynne Sullivan and Robert Mainfort
have termed this theoretical approach the “representationist perspective” because its users view “nonrandom variation in mortuary ritual as representative of the deceased’s role in the social structure.” They argue that this perspective is based on two assumptions: As the number of social identities of an individual increases, so do the symbolic representations of those identities, and corresponding symbols are accurately reflected in mortuary treatment and funerary objects.

Mainfort and Sullivan were not the first to point out the assumptions of the representationist perspective. Beginning in the 1980s some archaeologists began to critique representationist approaches to mortuary studies on a number of methodological and theoretical grounds (Braun 1981; Hodder 1980, 1982; McGuire 1988; Parker Pearson 1982; Shanks and Tilley 1982). Much like the critiques of chiefdom studies, post-processual critiques of the representationist perspective argued that it provided only a few generalizations with many exceptions, and it failed to explain why people behaved the way they did (Metcalf and Huntington 1991; Pader 1982; Parker Pearson 1982). On methodological grounds, a number of authors have pointed out the need for greater temporal control when attributing different mortuary treatments to cultural (rather than temporal) factors (Brown 1995; Chapman 2005; Fisher-Carroll and Mainfort 2010). It is also important to consider the practices and behaviors for which certain material culture
is a signature rather than just comparing material culture traits (Brown 1995; Mainfort and Sullivan 2010).

A variety of post-processual approaches to mortuary studies have developed since the 1980s that try to restore agency to individuals in the past and bring the role of the living back to interpretations of mortuary ritual. These theories all have their own nuances, but as bioarchaeologists Gordon Rakita and Jane Buikstra (2005:7) argue, “They are all united, however, in their indictment of processual thought and their assertion that mortuary rituals are frequently utilized by the living to negotiate, display, mask, or transform actual power or social relations.” They also generally agree that the processual approach ignores variation in mortuary practices within a society.

Practice based approaches such as archaeology of the body have been successfully employed in many regions and time periods and are beginning to make appearances in Mississippian mortuary archaeology (Fowler 2004; Joyce 2005; Mainfort and Sullivan 2010). Ideology based inquires have also put a new twist on our understanding of supposedly elite Mississippian burials. These scholars (Mainfort and Sullivan 2010:9) generally argue that, “…The emplacement of these objects with certain individuals has less to do with their personal status than with the collective display of ritual, or spectacles, intended to connect the entire community to the worlds of the
ancestors and the cosmos.” Facets of identity such as ethnicity, age, and gender are also gaining attention in Mississippian mortuary studies, especially in how individuals negotiated multiple identities in different power relationships (Cobb 2003; Mainfort and Sullivan 2010).

Mortuary studies of gender in particular have become more commonplace, and Mississippian scholarship is no exception. One pertinent example comes from the Toqua mound site in Eastern Tennessee. Lynne Sullivan (2001) argues that men and women of prestige in Mississippian societies may have been buried in different locations owing to the differences in how prestige was achieved and symbolized for each. Most prior Mississippian mortuary studies had identified elite individuals as those who were buried with prestige goods and buried in public places, especially mounds. Since the majority of these individuals were adult males, archaeologists have typically interpreted this to mean that men were leaders and held the most political power in these societies (Sullivan 2001).

At the Toqua site young males and very old males are most likely to be buried in mounds, while old females are likely to be buried in domestic structures in the village. Based on this data Sullivan argues that in this society there were elements of inherited and achieved status. Men could achieve prestige through their abilities as warriors (when
young) and “statesmen” (when old). Women gained prestige as they aged and became leaders of households and clans; this form of prestige led to their burial in the village context rather than a mound. Christopher Rodning (2001, 2011) has drawn similar conclusions about how mortuary practices reflect different gendered pathways to prestige at the Coweeta Creek site, a late prehistoric and early historic Cherokee settlement in southern North Carolina. Historic accounts of Native Americans in the Southeast describe very different gender roles for boys and girls and men and women that greatly structured the lives of individuals, and the two above examples indicate that this was likely also true prehistorically.

Regardless of the theoretical perspective applied, the artifacts that accompany burials have always been essential for interpreting mortuary practices. Many Mississippian burials, especially those that are traditionally considered elite, contained artistic artifacts that share similar themes and motifs. These artistic expressions were executed in a variety of mediums including shell, clay, copper, stone, and probably wood (Reilly and Garber 2007), and were part of what archaeologists Antonio Waring and Preston Holder dubbed the “Southern Cult” (1945). In this important early article Waring and Holder compiled lists of artifacts in four categories: motifs, god-animal representations, ceremonial objects, and costume details. They and other Southeastern
archaeologists during this time perceived the Cult “as an internally consistent system of symbolic communication with a brief temporal duration” (Reilly and Garber 2007:2).

By 1947 some archaeologists began to question whether this corpus of artifacts represented a true cult (King 2007a). As new evidence came to light it became clear that these artistic expressions could be found outside of the geographical boundaries of the South and probably did not represent a religious cult similar to the nineteenth century Ghost Dance as originally thought (King 2007a; Knight 2006). “Southeastern Ceremonial Complex” (SECC) became the preferred term.

The processual influence of the New Archaeology “served to shift the emphasis of SECC studies away from the ‘cult’ as a monolithic entity to be defined and toward understanding how SECC goods functioned in larger social systems” (King 2007a:5). An important article in bringing about this shift was Brown’s (1976) “The Southern Cult Reconsidered.” Here Brown argued against the trait list approach used by Waring and Holder (1945) and instead considered the social context and functions of SECC objects. Brown also examined interrelationships between different elements of the SECC and identified the SECC as a regional interaction network that consisted of different geographically based styles (King 2007a).
Knight (1986) also avoided the trait list approach and placed SECC artifacts within the context of Mississippian religion, which he argued consisted of three distinct cults with associated “sacra.” The first of these cults, the communal cult, focused on earth/fertility and purification rituals. This cult was non-exclusive, and mounds were its primary sacra. The second type of cult was the “Chiefly cult,” which was focused on warfare and cosmology. This cult’s primary sacra were warfare related symbols found on SECC artifacts. Membership in the Chiefly cult was restricted and inherited only by certain persons or clans. The third, “Priestly cult” type focused on mortuary ritual and ancestor veneration, and their primary sacra were temple statuary. Membership in this cult was restricted, but not necessarily based on familial descent.

More recently, SECC studies have focused on style regions and the study of iconographic meaning using art history approaches and Native American myths and oral history. These efforts have largely been spearheaded by the Texas State Mississippian Iconography conferences. At this annual conference professionals from a variety of disciplines including archaeology, art history, and folklore, meet to compare the frequency and types of symbols used in Mississippian artifacts. They then use ethnographic accounts of the religious beliefs of historical and contemporary Native Americans to help infer meaning from the symbols. The analytical approach I use in this
thesis is based on the Conference’s four-fold method that includes, “recognition of style regions, visual structural analysis, archaeological content, and ethnographic analogy” (Reilly and Garber 2007:6). As I will discuss in the coming sections, interpretations and previous work that has come out of these conferences informs much of my interpretation of Burial 38. The four-fold method has also led me to view Burial 38 not only as a mortuary context but an image in itself that can be interpreted.

**Etowah and Mound C**

Although it has been recognized for some time now that SECC artifacts exhibit regional style variations, they also share many themes and symbols, which “suggests the sharing of some sort of belief system which lies behind and is manifest in the iconography” (Lankford 2007a:8). Based on this premise, regional variations in the iconography can be expected to reflect similarities and differences in the social and ideological environment of the areas in which the objects were made and/or found. One theme that is constant throughout the Mississippian geographic and temporal landscape and even beyond is the layered structure of the cosmos (Lankford 2007a). Based on ethnographic and archaeological evidence, the general conception of the cosmos for Native American groups across the Eastern Woodlands and Plains is that the universe is divided into three worlds. Humans, plants, and animals reside in the Middle World.
Above us is the Above World, which is characterized by order and stability, reflected in the steady movement of the sun; below us is the Beneath World, characterized by water, chaos, and instability (Hudson 1976; Lankford 1987, 2007a; Smith 1995; Swanton 1928; Vecsey 1983). Each of those worlds is divided further into layers, although the number of which varies from tribe to tribe and likely differed by region in prehistory. The Cedar tree connects all of these layers with its roots extending into the Beneath World, its trunk in the Middle World, and its branches reaching into the Above World (Grim 1983; Lankford 1987; 2007a; Smith 1995).

Various powerful supernatural actors reside in the different realms or in specific layers, and are often at odds with one another. The two most commonly at odds are the Thunderbirds of the Above World and the Great Serpent(s) of the Beneath World. It is important to note, however, that the nature of the conflict between these two powers was not of good vs. evil or light vs. dark (as is often the case in Western mythology), but of predator vs. prey, “and thus an extension of the natural order and its ecological rules” (Lankford 2007a:28), and it is the job of humans to act as mediators between the two opposing worlds. Some humans are capable of traveling to the different realms through portals and communicating with the spiritual actors in that realm. The visiting humans can also bring back the spirits’ power for use on earth (Lankford 2007a).
Iconographic artifacts from Etowah constitute an important part of SECC imagery. Adam King (2011) provides a succinct summary of Etowah’s iconographic history and offers convincing interpretations of its meanings and uses. Etowah falls into what King calls the “Hightower region,” which extends from the Etowah River Valley in Georgia to the Tennessee River in eastern Tennessee. In this style region SECC representational art is found almost exclusively in the mediums of shell and copper. The cross-and-circle theme figures predominantly in shell engravings of the early and middle Mississippian periods (A.D. 1100-1375) in the Hightower region. The earliest form of this theme is the Bennett Style (A.D. 1150-1250), which exhibits a cross-and-circle enclosed by a square (King 2011; Sawyer 2009).

By about A.D. 1200 the Hightower Style of shell engraving appears. This style includes three themes: the turkey cock, spider, and anthropomorphic figures. The engravings of anthropomorphic figures are of particular interest. These appear slightly later than the turkey cock and spider themes (about A.D. 1250), and they all focus on some aspect of the Birdman (King 2011). There are 28 known examples of the Hightower human figural gorgets, and the largest concentration of these was found in Mound C at Etowah, usually in the most elite mortuary contexts (Reilly and Garber 2011). At the end of the 14th century the Lick Creek and Williams Island style gorgets
replace the Hightower style. Lick Creek gorgets feature an open-mouthed rattlesnake, while the Williams Island style features one or two anthropomorphic figures, generally interpreted as depicting portions of the twins narrative found in the ethnography of many Native American groups throughout the Southeast. By the 16th century engraved shell face masks and Citico style gorgets representing a coiled rattlesnake supplant Lick Creek and Williams Island gorgets (King 2011).

Copper artifacts in the Hightower region date only to the Middle Mississippian period (1250-1400), and it is significant that their appearance corresponds to Etowah’s rise to regional prominence. The earliest copper artifacts in the region, the Rogan Plates, depict the Birdman theme in the Classic Braden style and come from the Early Wilbanks Phase of Etowah’s Mound C. James Brown has argued in a number of publications (Brown 2004, 2007, 2011; Brown and Kelly 2000) that the Classic Braden style originated in the American Bottom, probably at Cahokia, by about A.D. 1100. Therefore, the Rogan Plates and other copper with Classic Braden imagery brought a foreign style and mythology to the region that by the Late Wilbanks Phase (A.D. 1325-1375) also had considerable time depth (King 2007b). By the 14th century the region had developed its own short-lived style of copper working that represented supernatural beings from the Above and Beneath Worlds and an ogee, which is a type of portal (King 2011).
King (2011) offers a convincing explanation for the appearance of certain themes in the imagery at specific times. Symbolism on Early Mississippian gorgets in the Hightower Region refers to what King calls “universalizing themes.” He argues that, “This kind of symbolism and the ideas behind it, such as fertility and a proper and orderly world, are not exclusive but instead refer to themes in which all people in Mississippian society likely had a stake” (2011:289). When Etowah was reoccupied in about A.D. 1250 after a 50 or so year occupational hiatus, it quickly rose to prominence as a chiefdom with ranked social order. Part of the creation and justification of this new social order probably involved an appeal to foreign beliefs and imagery. The evidence for this is the appearance of Classic Braden imagery in the early stages of Mound C. The Classic Braden style had its roots in the American Bottom, probably at Cahokia (Brown 2007). This is about the time that the anthropomorphic theme appears in the Hightower gorgets, suggesting that the Birdman theme was integrated into a locally existing twins narrative (King 2011).

When Etowah began to rise to power in the middle of the 13th century, the themes on copper and shell artwork in the Hightower region shift from universalizing themes to more individualizing ones. These pieces of SECC imagery refer to a specific individual or individuals, namely the Birdman and his twin sons or nephews. The stories depicted
in this artwork show the twins rescuing their father’s (uncle’s) head from the Beneath World and their eventual triumph over death as they go to reside in the Above World.

These stories could have been used to justify the social elevation of specific individuals or corporate groups. When the Etowah site was abandoned again in the late 14th century, new universalizing themes appear in the imagery from the region. The Lick Creek style gorgets use the rattlesnake to allude to water, fertility, and the Beneath World. The Williams Island style gorgets depict the twins, but in their role as supernaturals of the Above World rather than individuals attempting to ascend to the Above World or prove their place (King 2011).

Two supernatural figures that are found in Mississippian imagery and in later Native American narratives are particularly important for interpreting imagery found at Etowah in general and in Burial 38 in particular. These are the Birdman or Morning Star and his mother/grandmother Old Woman. As noted above, Birdman imagery dominates the Classic Braden style at Etowah and is later incorporated into local traditions in the Hightower representations (King 2011; Reilly and Garber 2011). Using narratives from Dhegian-speaking peoples of the prairie-plains (who are the descendants of people living in and around Cahokia in Mississippian times), James Brown (2007) has shown that the Red Horn or Morning Star narratives of these groups correspond closely to the Birdman
of Classic Braden imagery. This figure is associated with the sun, the Above World, warriors, and most importantly, the ability to rejuvenate life. His mother (or sometimes grandmother, depending on the narrative) is First Woman or Old Woman who is also closely associated with rejuvenation. She has the ability to transform herself into a young woman again by bathing, and she is associated with This World and the Beneath World, agriculture, birth, death, and pottery making (Duncan and Diaz-Granados 2004).

Although depictions of women are generally absent from the imagery at Etowah, Old Woman representations may be present in less obvious ways, such as in spider or cross-and-circle images or in stone statuary. If nothing else, she is present through her familial connection with Birdman, and narratives associated with her could be important in understanding why the females of Burial 38 were placed in Mound C and what they represent.

**Previous Excavations and New Interpretations of Mound C**

John Rogan, under the direction of the Bureau of Ethnology, was the first to carry out excavations on Mound C in 1884. Rogan’s excavations were rather limited; they focused on the summit and only went about three meters deep. He encountered only 11 burials (fig. 2.1) (C. Thomas 1894). Warren K. Moorehead (1932) was the next archaeologist to dig on Mound C, from 1925-1927. He removed all of the summits from
the mound and excavated a portion of the Southeastern flank. He uncovered a total of 110 burials (King 2007b). Between 1954 and 1961 Lewis H. Larson excavated the rest of Mound C under the auspices of the Georgia Historical Commission.

![Figure 2.1 Mound C Burials (King 2010)](image)

Although Moorehead was confident that he had excavated all of the graves from the mound, Larson uncovered 244 burials over the course of his fieldwork, one of which was Burial 38 (King 2007b; Larson 1971).
Despite the difficulty of integrating the data sets of these three excavators, King (2003, 2004, 2010) combined their information to show that Mound C was constructed in seven stages, the first three during the Early Wilbanks phase, and the last four during the Late Wilbanks phase (fig. 2.2). A palisade encircled the Mound during most of the construction phases (King 2003, 2004, 2007b, 2010). At about A.D. 1250 when Etowah was reoccupied after being abandoned for approximately fifty years, major construction efforts at the site began. It was after this point that most of Mound A was built, Mound B tripled in size, and construction on Mound C began. Construction in the Late Wilbanks phase focused on the plaza and moat and palisade that surrounded the site (King 2007b).

The Early Wilbanks graves in Mound C were placed in the summit of the mound and on its periphery. By the Late Wilbanks phase graves were no longer placed in the
summit, but were instead placed around the periphery and in a small lobe appended to the northern side of the mound (King 2007b, 2010; Larson 1971). Burial 57 marked the beginning of construction on the northern lobe. This grave consisted of a log tomb built partially above the ground surface and partially below it. It contained the remains of “a large and robust adult male” (Larson 1971:64). He was interred with eight large conch shell bowls, an engraved gorget in the Hightower anthropomorphic theme, two copper axes, five or six embossed sheet copper plates, two copper covered wooden ear discs, a large copper bead, and hundreds of shell beads (Larson 1971). The construction of Burial 38 was part of one of the last construction phases of Mound C, and it enlarged the northern lobe. This burial was placed into the fill of King’s construction phase 5. A one and one half high meter mound of yellow clay was built over the burial and was then enclosed by a single-set post palisade (King 2007b).

Burial 38 was a log-lined tomb that, like Burial 57, was built partially above and partially below the surface level (Larson 1971). Burial 38 contained at least five individuals represented by five skulls and several other post-cranial elements. All five skulls were identified as female. Each individual skull was associated with a pair of copper covered wooden ear discs and the remains of an elaborate headdress. Elements of these headdresses included embossed sheet copper symbol badges, hawk bones, and
wooden splints and leather that were likely used as supports (Larson 1959, 1971). A partial shell gorget exhibiting the cross and circle motif was found in association with one of the skulls and may have been part of that headdress. Four copper celts with wooden handles and a scalloped stone palette with remnants of galena and graphite were also found with the individuals in Burial 38 (King 2007b; Larson 1971). These iconographic objects make up the bulk of my dataset for this analysis.

King (2010) has shown that the Late Wilbanks burials in Mound C consist of five distinct groupings in the northeast, southeast, southwest, and northwest corners, and the lobe appended to the northern edge. The directional groups are very similar in regard to artifacts and demographics. The lobe group stands out because it has fewer people, they are nearly all female, and they have lesser artifact diversity compared to the other directional groupings. All groupings contain headdresses with copper ornaments, stone palettes, and some form of sociotechnic weapons such as chert blades, monolithic axes, and copper celts.

King (2010) argues that the final stages of Mound C were constructed as a cosmogram, similar to Mississippian house layout and historical and contemporary Creek square ground layout; all of which are depictions of the cross and circle motif. Based on the records of Rogan and Moorehead’s excavations, it is unclear if the summits contained
temples with a central hearth and fire, but if they did, this would have functioned as an axis mundi, or portal to other realms, and the burials around the edge of Mound C would have represented the benches around the central hearth in both the houses and the square ground (King 2010). Ethnohistoric and contemporary examples show that specific clan members sit on specific benches at the square ground, so this may indicate that the burials around the edges of the mound represent distinct clan groups (King 2010).

Another important facet of the Late Wilbanks burials is that they were likely created over the course of a generation or less (King 2010). Larson (1971) has argued that all of the Late Wilbanks burials were created within two to three weeks of each other, and the precipitating event was the death of the male in burial 57. Given this short time period and the similar demographic makeup of the groupings (that do not reflect natural life cycles of a population), King believes that the purpose of these final burials was to transform Mound C into a sacred center (2010). Specifically, he believes that the inhabitants of Etowah were reenacting sacred narratives, possibly by choosing individuals of the proper age, sex, and social group to be killed during this reenactment and placed in the mound.

These ritual performances and their resulting presence on the landscape would have made Etowah a prominent sacred center. Sawyer and King (n.d.) have expanded on
this argument in a soon to be published chapter in *Binding and Wrapping the Sacred: Sacred Bundles and Religious Communication in the Mississippian Period Eastern Woodlands*. Here they examine the archaeological evidence for bundles included with burials in Mound C, but also argue that Mound C itself can be interpreted as a bundle on a larger scale. The location and contents of bundles in the Late Wilbanks burials suggest they were part of a larger ritual that was meant to bring together foreign peoples from the Central Mississippi Valley and local North Georgia and Eastern Tennessee populations by creating a new sacred place at Etowah, Mound C. Burial 57 is key in this interpretation, as this individual was buried with regalia linking him to Classic Braden Birdman imagery, but was also buried with a Hightower gorget. He is the only individual buried in Mound C with foreign Classic Braden imagery and a local stylistic depiction of the Birdman. Because burial 57 was also the first Late Wilbanks burial, Sawyer and King (n.d.:13) argue that this marked the beginning of a ritual that, “was meant to recreate the world where a lineage descended from the Birdman in the west ruled Etowah.”

**Theoretical Approach**

The theory informing this study is largely postmodernist and post-processual. In evaluating my data I draw specifically from theories of relational ontology, performance,
and gender. Relational ontology is a logical starting place for the theoretical approach to this study because allows me to approach the data from Burial 38 in a way that is more culturally in line with how the people of Etowah would have seen, experienced, and interpreted Mound C. It also led me to give greater consideration to how the various objects and humans in Burial 38 and Mound C were connected to one another.

Performance is a useful theoretical entre to this study because Mound C, especially its Late Wilbanks burials, was undoubtedly the scene of some type of ritual performance. To avoid portraying Mound C burials as simply a special type of cemetery for the elite of Etowah, I emphasize the performative nature of the events that created the mound and the different roles of the performers and audience members, including the Supernatural audience. Relational ontology and performance theory fit together well in this aspect as a relational perspective opens up the possibility for other-than-human actors in a ritual performance.

Gender is the final theoretical thread that I have chosen to weave into this study. I am applying gender theory to Burial 38 because it presents an unusual gender situation for Mississippian archaeology: several young individuals osteologically identified as females interred with artifacts that archaeologists have usually considered markers of
men. Any kind of adequate explanation for this situation must take into account developments in gender theory, especially as they have been applied in archaeology.

Relational Ontology

Relational ontology is one productive theoretical lens through which I evaluate Burial 38 and Mound C. I define relational ontology as a way of knowing the world that stands in contrast to modern, Western ontology in that it focuses on the connections and immediate experiences between subjects, both human and nonhuman. A relational ontology is something that is in a general sense common to all Amerindian belief systems (Viveiros de Castro 2004). Studies of relational ontology have a long history in anthropology due to the field’s early interest in animism among indigenous peoples. E. B. Tylor, one of anthropology’s founding fathers, discussed animism and “primitive” religion at length in his defining work, Primitive Culture (1958 [1871]). Tylor (1958 [1871]) defined animism vaguely, as simply the belief in souls or spirits, and he pitted such religious belief against “true” scientific knowledge of the world. Influenced by nineteenth century evolutionism, Tylor believed that animism in indigenous religions was a symptom of cognitive underdevelopment among “primitive” peoples; they were like children and could not distinguish conscious beings from inanimate objects (Bird-David 1999).
Publishing only a few decades after Tylor, Emile Durkheim did not write off
Indigenous religion as a delusion in the way Tylor had. Rather, Durkheim regarded
animism as a mistake. By considering animals and (to him) nonliving objects to be
relatives and friends, Durkheim (1915) argued that “primitive” peoples were mistakenly
considering the spiritual unity that one feels as a member of society to be “real” flesh and
blood kinship that extended to nonhuman beings. Like Tylor, though, he believed that
this mistake was due to the child-like mental capabilities of “primitive” people (Bird-
David 1999). Claude Lévi-Strauss was another important early anthropologist who
explored animism. His (1962) explanation of animism accepted indigenous knowledge
of the world as legitimate. He argued that indigenous peoples perceived the world in the
same nature/society dualism as Westerners, but their “totemic thought” led them to draw
analogies between nature and society that intermingled the two and resulted in stories of
kinship with animals and objects.

Tylor’s, Durkheim’s, and Lévi-Strauss’ explanations of animism all fall short
because they rest on Modern, Western ontology for their explanatory framework, which
is a way of viewing the world that is fundamentally different from most indigenous
perspectives (Bird-David 1999; Groleau 2009; Hill 2011; Viveiros de Castro 2004;
Zedeño 2008, 2013). Modern Western ontology is a product of the Enlightenment,
especially Cartesian rationalism (Watts 2013). It assumes a dualistic split between nature and culture as well as a single, bounded individual as the basic unit of society (Bird-David 1999; Viveiros de Castro 2004; Watts 2013). In his discussion of Amazonian animism, Veveiros de Castro (2004:466) explains that while the Modern West is “…founded on the mutually implied unity of nature and multiplicity of cultures… the Amerindian conception presumes a spiritual unity and a corporeal diversity. For them, culture or the subject is the form of the universal, while nature or the object is the form of the particular.” Similarly, in animist ontologies the relationship between humans and non-humans is social; in Modern Western ontology the relationship between nature and society is natural (Viveiros de Castro 2004).

After conducting fieldwork among the Ojibwa in the 1930s, Irving Hallowell (1960) recognized that the Ojibwa sense of personhood was fundamentally different from the modernist sense. Hallowell explained Ojibwa ontology on its own terms, without trying to fit it into a modern, Western framework as Lévi-Strauss had. Despite Hallowell’s early contribution, Tylorian concepts of animism have persisted in anthropology and religious studies (e.g. Endicott 1979; Feit 1994; Gardner 1991; Guthrie 1993; Morris 1981; Riches 1994). Many anthropologists, however, are beginning to take a different approach to indigenous ontologies and religions. Falling under a theoretical
umbrella I refer to as “relational ontologies,” these scholars seek to problematize the dualities in modernist ontologies (Watts 2013). Their research is concerned with the relations between things and people (however defined), and how entities evolve together through time. Archaeologists practicing along this theoretical grain use material culture to understand how past peoples recognized their place in the world. A relational perspective is a logical place to begin understanding past lives because, as Christopher Watts (2013:4) argues, “The world is always already understood as relational and meaningful because situations are experienced, first and foremost, not as atomized and idealized events instilled with meaning by the ‘mind,’ but rather as immediate and suffusive encounters.”

The move toward relational archaeologies began in force with “linguistic turn” of the 1980s. Especially prevalent in Britain, archaeologists began to see artifacts as communicative devices with imbued meaning that could be “read” rather than simple byproducts of human processes (e.g. Hodder 1982, 1989; Tilley 1990). Although this was an important step in reexamining human-object interaction, the linguistic model soon fell out of favor, and by the mid 1990s relational archaeologies were inspired more by phenomenology and practice theory (e.g. J.C. Barrett 1994; Bender 1993; Bradley 1998; Gosden 1994; J. Thomas 1996; Tilley 1994). Actor Network Theory builds on these
theories and takes them a step further by arguing that agency is a collective and hybridized process that does not come from human subjects but from the networks that unite people and things (Callon 1986; Latour 1993; Law 1992). In this model, anything from humans to animals to forces of nature can be considered agents.

Although Actor Network Theory has declined in popularity in recent years (Watts 2013), a number of archaeologists have used the theoretical perspective of relational ontologies to gain insights into the beliefs and practices of Native American peoples. Anthropologists and archaeologists have successfully employed relational ontologies in Amazonia (Fausto 1999, 2004, 2007; Viveiros de Castro 1992, 1998, 2004), the Arctic and Subarctic region of North America (Hallowell 1960; Helander-Renvall 2010; Hill 2011; Ingold 2000, 2006), and the American Great Plains (Zedeño 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2013) to better understand the worldview and experiences of the Native peoples living in those places.

Although the concept of relational ontologies was first developed by ethnographers, archaeologists have been able to apply this theory to their unique, material data sets. One example of this application is Erica Hill’s (2011) study of relational ontologies in prehistoric Alaska and Chukotka, a peninsula immediately across the
Bering Strait from Alaska. She argues that archaeologists can get at past ontologies because:

…ritual activity is one way in which this triangular relationship between humans, non-humans, and the world was constituted and materialized. In this sense, ritual is ontology embodied and performed. Archaeological evidence of past ritual behaviour, then, represents the material remains of ontologically informed behaviour [Hill 2011:412].

Using ethnographic and ethnohistoric information as a guide, Hill shows that prehistoric hunters in Alaska and Chukotka maintained intersubjective relationships with their prey animals by wearing animal shaped amulets and by creating caches of specific bones of prey animals. These forms of material culture indicate that prehistoric hunters of Alaska and Chukotka, and their families, sought to attract and gain the favor of prey animals by wearing amulets that bore their likeness and by treating their bodies with respect by observing butchering taboos (Hill 2011).

Another example of relational archaeology is Amy B. Groleau’s (2009) study of house floor deposits at Conchopata, a Wari site in the Central Andes of Peru. She studied the depositional pattern of simple anthropomorphic ceramics (probably used in everyday
cooking and storage) in four connected rooms of a domestic structure at the site. She found that in one of the rooms, the faces of the ceramics had been removed and placed in a pit with groundstone implements and camelid bone, while the smashed bodies of the ceramics were scattered in a different room. Groleau argues that archaeologists have generally defined ritual contexts based on the presence of “special” objects (i.e. items with restricted circulation, rare materials, or ornately decorated objects). Such a definition of ritual space is too restrictive, though, because as this structure’s fill indicates, “mundane” objects used in everyday life could be transformed into animate beings through associations with restricted objects or incorporation into ritual (Groleau 2009). Depositional contexts at Conchpata as a whole indicate offering practices among non-elites that are analogous to those seen in highly decorated ceremonial ceramics, but using regular, domestic pottery. Furthermore, these were animated objects that indicate the proliferation of ritual into everyday life at Conchopata (Groleau 2009).

Maria Nieves Zedeño’s (2008, 2013) work on relational ontology in Blackfoot bundles most closely parallels the present study of Burial 38. Among the Blackfoot and many other Native American groups, bundles function as repositories of knowledge about specific rituals and histories, and they are often regarded as powerful persons (Zedeño 2008a, 2013). Zedeño (2008a) sorts bundles into one of three categories: personal,
medicinal, or ceremonial. Personal bundles belong to individuals and often contain items that relate to the biographical events of that individual. Personal bundles can be sold or given away. Medicinal bundles also belong to individuals and can be given away or sold. The contents of a medicine bundle, though, are chosen to target specific outcomes such as curing illness or bringing rain. Ceremonial bundles stand apart from the other two categories in that they cannot be owned by any one person. Ceremonial bundles are associated with rituals that deal with the creation of the world and the foundation of human society; they are considered the embodiment of the physical, social, and cosmic order.

Bundles are a particularly good example of a relational ontology because they are composed of what Zedeño (2008a, 2013) calls “index objects.” An index object is a distinctive type of object that can alter the properties of anything associated with it, including humans, objects, and places, and “When two or more index objects are put together in a bundle or deposited in an index place, for example, the combined life-force becomes a portal that humans may tap to become powerful or transfer animating power to other humans and things…” (Zedeño 2013:124).

Although Zedeño’s work with Blackfoot bundles is geographically and temporally removed from Etowah, it still provides an applicable framework for my
research. Native American groups from the Southeastern United States have historically used ritual bundles and continue to do so today (Capron 1953; Howard 1981; Sturtevant 1954, 1960). Furthermore, Sawyer and King (n.d.) have made a compelling argument that Mound C should be interpreted as a large-scale bundle. If the people who created Mound C viewed it as a bundle, they probably considered everything in it to be animated and connected in some way. Therefore, approaching Burial 38 through the lens of relational ontologies is more in line with how the people of Etowah probably saw and thought of Mound C.

Performance

When considering the religious and ritual behaviors that surrounded the creation of Burial 38, performance theory is another useful perspective born in part from practice theory (Bourdieu 1977; 1990). Sullivan and Mainfort (2010:9) succinctly summarize the utility of performance theory to Mississippian mortuary studies: “…The emplacement of these objects with certain individuals has less to do with their personal status than with the collective display of ritual, or spectacles, intended to connect the entire community to the worlds of the ancestors and the cosmos.” Although I suggest that the identity of the individuals in Burial 38 has some significance, I believe their identity was created and reinforced through their participation in a mortuary performance on Mound C.
Many early studies of ritual performance dichotomized thought and action and saw thought as the motivator of action (Burke 1945; Goffman 1959, 1967; Eliade 1978; Levi-Strauss 1969); however, most scholars now recognize that ritual is complex and communicates different things to different participants (Inomata and Coben 2006; Rappaport 1999; Tambiah 1979; Turner 1967; Valeri 1985). Anthropologists’ definitions of performance have varied widely. On the broad end of the spectrum, Erving Goffman (1959, 1967) defined performance to include the everyday interactions of individuals. In this view a person’s identity is flexible and situational, and the actors and observers may not be conscious of the performance (Goffman 1959, 1967; Inomata and Coben 2006).

Although Goffman’s work predates Bourdieu’s, it is much closer to practice theory (as defined in the daily interactions of people within the habitus) than more strict definitions of performance. For example, folklorist Dell Hymes (1975) defines performance as an event that is out of the ordinary and is creative, realized, and interpretable for the people involved; an actor assumes responsibility to an audience, even if that audience is the supernatural (Inomata and Coben 2006).

Takeshi Inomata and Lawrence Coben (2006) take an approach that falls somewhere between the two extremes outlined above. They include public rituals, ceremonies, festivals, and courtly interactions under the umbrella term “theatrical
performance.” An audience is a prerequisite, but the role of the audience may vary (Inomata and Coben 2006:15). They also add, “Another necessary condition of theatricality is the use of material images in dynamic motion as media of expression and communication. The human body takes a central role in this process.”

In interpreting Burial 38 I use Inomata and Coben’s middle-of-the-road approach to performance theory because I think it best suits the context surrounding the creation of the burial and Mound C generally. Mound C mortuary activities were undoubtedly public rituals that involved an audience in some capacity. Furthermore, Inomata and Coben (2006:11) argue that the development of large centralized polities would not have been possible anywhere without frequent public events or performances in which powerful individuals “presented themselves in front of a large number of spectators and the participants shared experiences through their bodily copresence.” I agree with this assessment, and suggest that performance was an integral component in bringing Etowah to regional prominence.

Recently, Victor Thompson (2009) applied performance theory to his interpretation of monumental construction at the Irene site, a Mississippian and protohistoric site on the Georgia coast. He argues that changing uses of space at the site, specifically the cessation of mound building, had more to do with how leaders performed
and legitimated power than with increasing egalitarianism. During the Savannah Phases (A.D. 1150-1300) at Irene, elites used exclusionary tactics to solidify and reify their power (Thompson 2009). Mound construction was an important part of this strategy and “can be seen as an appropriation of exclusionary space” (Thompson 2009:454).

Archaeological evidence indicates that performances on the Irene mound during the Savannah Phase were hidden by fences. This exclusion was itself part of the theatricality: people gathered below the mound could hear what was going on but did not know the exact nature of the events and could thus not easily contest them (Thompson 2009; see also Cobb and King 2005). The Late Wilbanks burials on Mound C can similarly be viewed as an exclusionary performance. Cane fences or palisades were constructed around the base of Mound C after each construction phase; Burial 38 was enclosed in its own palisade on the summit of the mound (King 2003, 2004, 2007, 2010; Larson 1971). This means that while everyone at the site would have known that important rituals were occurring on Mound C, most people would not have been privy to their details. Control of such esoteric knowledge would therefore have been another way for elites to reinforce their status and privilege.

As noted earlier, the performance that led to the creation of Burial 38 is unique in that several females were interred with regalia usually associated with males. In
interpreting this situation I am drawing heavily from gender theory in archaeology. An article by Margaret Conkey and Janet Spector (1984) was arguably the most important work in making gender an acceptable area of study in archaeology.

In the opening paragraphs Conkey and Spector (1984) explain that the goal of the paper is to bring gender into the archaeological discourse. They argue that we need to create an explicit framework for the archaeological study of gender. Because archaeologists lack this framework, they have drawn upon contemporary gender roles and identities, projecting them inappropriately onto the past. If as archaeologists we are simply reiterating our own society’s assumptions about gender, we are not any closer to understanding cultural differences or similarities in the past; we are only “justifying our own gender ideology” (Conkey and Spector 1984:13). They suggest that reliance on ethnographic sources that privileged the viewpoint of male informants is part the reason for the lack feminist ideologies in archaeology. The types of questions archaeologists asked about gender arrangements are also part of the problem (Conkey and Spector 1984).

Conkey and Spector (1984) argued that archaeology could contribute to the study of gender in the areas of cultural diversity and change through time. Archaeology of gender is also well suited to previously developed feminist theories because feminist
scholars conceptualize gender as a complex and variable social (as opposed to biological) construct. In the final pages of the essay, they critique systems theory (and processual archaeology in general), which was the dominant paradigm in archaeology in 1984. They argue that this perspective has led to a focus on broad processes and a generally functionalist outlook. The result has been that as sources of change, the roles of individuals and personal or small group choice have been almost completely ignored. In addition, systems theory does not pay attention to the contexts of social formations or change and is therefore ahistorical. It also relegates material culture to a passive role (Conkey and Spector 1984). This is a critique common among most post-processual archaeologies, including performance and embodiment; it is partially rooted in practice theory and agency theories.

Although “Archaeology and the Study of Gender” was the most important work in popularizing the archaeology of gender, other subfields of anthropology such as paleoanthropology had already begun to problematize scholarly conceptions of gender in the past. Some of the first articles that were explicitly critical of male biases in anthropology and archaeology were essays and books that critiqued the “Man the Hunter” story of evolution (Conkey and Spector 1984; Geller 2009; Nelson 2006; Wylie 1991). One often cited example of this type of work is Sally Slocum’s essay “Woman the
Gatherer: Male Bias in Anthropology” (1975). In this paper Slocum argues that models that explain human evolution solely, or even primarily, through male hunting are inherently flawed. She believes that many of the questions asked by anthropologists are the result of Western, male bias, and that these biased questions will lead to biased results. Frances Dahlberg (1981) also took up the critique of “Man the Hunter” in her edited volume Woman the Gatherer. In this book she enlists the help of ethnographers and primatologists to show how studies on current foraging societies made important data contributions that highlight the importance of women in those societies. These data also show that such societies are highly variable and no one specific model can be applied uniformly to the past (Dahlberg 1981).

In the years following the publication of “Archaeology and the Study of Gender,” gender and feminist archaeologies have been taken up with vigor by many archaeologists. These studies have taken a number of different theoretical paths over the years, and if current scholarship in archaeology at large is any indication, it will only continue to become more nuanced. Many of the studies published in the subsequent years have sought to make women visible in the archaeological record (Conkey 2003; Geller 2009; Wylie 2002). This is sometimes referred to deridingly as the “add women and stir” approach, but as Sarah Milledge Nelson (2006) points out, making women visible was a
critical first step because women in the past from cultures all over the world had been
treated as if they did not exist or as if they never did anything important. Because these
studies made women visible as subjects, we have been able to pursue ideas of gender
further and in different directions.

Several scholars point out, however, that continuing to simply add gender as
another variable in the archaeological record without adequate theory to back it up can
continue to perpetuate androcentric biases (Conkey 2003; Conkey and Spector 1984;
Geller 2009). When women are simply added to the mix it is often in “roles, activities,
and significances that are unproblematized” (Conkey 2003:876). For this reason, some
archaeologists have come to insist that any archaeology of gender must take place within
a framework of feminist theory (Conkey 2003; Conkey and Spector 1984; Geller 2009).
Archaeological studies of gender that distance themselves from feminist theory tend to
ignore the advances of third wave feminism and continue to rely on ideas such as duality
of genders and universality of sexual division of labor (Geller 2009).

Ideas from third wave feminism parallel nicely with many ideas of postprocessual
archaeology and postmodern anthropology. For example, both take into consideration
social and political processes as they intersect with gender (Wylie 1991). As Pamela
Geller (2009:70) notes, “Consideration of age, sexuality, ethnicity, race, class, etc.- not
added but relational to gender- captures the complexity, contradiction, and plurality of lived experiences.” It is in these recreations of lived experiences that feminist archaeology and postprocessual archaeology can go hand in hand (Geller 2009; Trigger 2006; Wylie 1991). For instance, one important critique of processual archaeology has been its lack of individuals or choice in its reconstructions, and peopling the past has been an important part of feminist archaeology since its inception (Conkey 2003; Conkey and Spector 1984; Spector 1993). The subject of gender in the past has also figured prominently in archaeologies of embodiment and performance. This partnership is logical since gender is a complex part of identity, and aspects of gender are often inscribed on the body and enacted in performance whether casual daily interactions or formal public displays.

Rosemary Joyce (2008) makes a compelling case for the use of gender and feminist perspectives in iconographic interpretations using an example from the Classic Maya site Piedras Negras. Classic Maya women were thought to be largely absent in public settings until the 1960s when Tatiana Proskouriakoff (1961) showed that certain individuals depicted on monuments at Piedras Negras were actually noblewomen based on their dress and a specific written symbol associated with the figures. Proskouriakoff’s findings were widely accepted by the scholarly community, but the female rulers that
were depicted were considered an anomaly, as it was commonly thought that rulership
and succession was patrilineal in Maya society.

Joyce argues that viewing female rulers as an anomaly is illogical since Maya
rulers had huge stone monuments of these females erected- if female rule was a “flaw” in
the system, why constantly remind people of it? It is more likely that these women’s
social status was a more important basis for their identity than their gender or sex. She
(Joyce 2008:77) explains that, “Studies of women’s lives in societies with high degrees of
difference in social rank make more sense if the women involved are not automatically
treated as representative of a single categorical group united with all other women.”

Archaeologists studying the Maya had long assumed and argued that women were
economically disadvantaged because of the burdens of pregnancy, birth, and childcare.
They also assumed that childcare tied them to the “private” sphere of the home, thereby
negating any possibility for gaining social, political, or economic power (Joyce 2008).

Iconographic study of Mayan monuments first allowed Proskouriakoff (1961) to
“find” Mayan women in the archaeological record and later allowed Joyce (2008) to
reexamine assumptions about gender roles and to develop an explanation that fits better
with the archaeological evidence. Similarly, my study of Burial 38 will use iconographic
and archaeological evidence to form an understanding of gender roles. This example is
especially applicable my study because it examines women’s roles in a ranked society, which Etowah was at the time the women in Burial 38 were interred. Joyce’s emphasis on the intersections of different aspects of identity in various situations also parallels my theoretical approach.

In summary, as I evaluate data and draw conclusions throughout the following chapters, I do so through the theoretical lenses of relational ontology, performance, and gender theories. This combination of theories will allow me to draw the most meaningful interpretations from my available data in a culturally appropriate framework.
Chapter 3: Methods and Data

Because this research is based on materials that were already excavated, my methods revolved around gathering data about the excavations and the artifacts recovered and finding a suitable approach for the iconographic analysis. To analyze and interpret Burial 38 I gathered data from a variety of sources, including Lewis Larson’s field notes and published articles, osteological inventory forms, illustrations of Burial 38 and some of its artifacts, and finally, by examining some of the artifacts themselves. From these sources of information I was able to reconstruct what Burial 38 probably looked like when it was created. I then used visual structural analysis and the work of other Mississippian iconographers to infer meaning from the artifacts and human remains associated with the grave.

Sources of Data

The first resource I was able to access was Lewis H. Larson’s field notes. He was the principal investigator who uncovered Burial 38 in 1955, and his are likely the only surviving field notes. I obtained a copy of most of Larson’s 1955 notes from Dr. Adam King of the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology. They contained
day-to-day details of excavations in June 1955, including artifact measurements, sketches of certain artifacts, and some maps with varying degrees of detail. Unfortunately, even the most detailed map of Burial 38 is still lacking information about skeletal material and a few key artifacts such as the “eagle plate” that Larson mentions in his notes.

I was able to obtain other primary excavation data that is housed at the Antonio J. Waring Jr. Archaeological Laboratory at the University of West Georgia. I located Larson’s original report on the burials uncovered during the 1955 field season here, along with burial cards filled out by the excavators that contained information on what objects were found with each individual and in some cases the position of the skeletons. Larson’s report contained approximate distances between artifacts and sometimes their directional orientation. I also found photographs of the excavations, although the visibility of Burial 38 is poor in most of them (fig. 3.1).

Prior to discovering the above information, I had obtained the skeletal inventory forms completely by Robert L. Blakely and students in 1975. At the time, Blakely was a professor and biological anthropologist at the University of West Georgia. The task of inventorying and studying all of the human remains that Larson excavated at Etowah fell to Blakely and his students. These inventory forms were important sources of
information because they told me exactly what skeletal elements were present, whereas Larson’s notes and reports only described “skulls” and occasionally “long bones.”

![Figure 3.1](image.png)

**Figure 3.1** The only known photograph that directly shows Burial 38 during excavation (parts of Burial 38 can be seen in the background of some other photos). The arrow points to the log-lined pit.

In compliance with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, the state of Georgia and Native American tribes affiliated with Etowah reached a Memorandum of Agreement regarding research on human remains from the site. This agreement stipulates that the skeletal material from Etowah is no longer available for viewing, examination, or testing, which means these records contain the only osteological information currently available for Burial 38. Knowing what skeletal elements needed to be accounted for was important for reconstructing Burial 38, but this osteological information is also key in understanding the ritual significance behind the burial.
At the Waring Lab I was also able to view the Etowah Burial Book, illustrated by George Stuart. This book contains sketches of many of the burials excavated by Larson and many close-up drawings of individual artifacts from the burials. This book had been missing for a number of years until very recently. Stuart’s sketches of Burial 38 were undoubtedly the most important source of information on archaeological context for this study. The Burial Book contained a large plan view drawing of Burial 38 that included notes about the artifacts, such as descriptions of organic material that is no longer preserved and depths below surface throughout the burial. Although similar to my own reconstruction that I had drawn based on Larson’s report described above, this map was much more detailed and almost certainly more accurate. Stuart also made close-up sketches of the area around each of the skulls. These sketches are especially useful because they were drawn as layers of sheets of translucent paper that reflect the way the artifacts were layered on top of one another when excavated. The book also contained large sketches of the copper artifacts from Burial 38, which are essential for the structural analysis part of this study, as the copper artifacts have deteriorated over the years and many have been lost.

Information on Burial 38 was also gathered through viewing and photographing artifacts from the site. This was important as it provided a good visual record of the
iconographically significant artifacts. Most of these had never before been photographed, and those that have been are low quality images, making detailed interpretation impossible. Some of the artifacts are housed at the Waring Laboratory and include, fragmented copper symbol badges, a conch shell, and a phalanx of an unidentified bird of prey. Others are on display at the Etowah Indian Mounds Museum. These included the stone palette with graphite and galena, the partial shell gorget, and a few of the copper celts. These modern photographs are potentially useful for future research, but the available drawings of the copper symbol badges proved more useful for my iconographic analysis because so many of the copper artifacts are now missing or badly decayed.

**Reconstructing Burial 38**

Based on the above sources of information and two published articles by Larson (1959; 1971) I have been able to piece together what Burial 38 probably looked like when it was created. This burial was a log-lined tomb with cane matting on at least parts (and perhaps the entirety) of the floor. It was built partially below the ground surface, sealed with a mound of yellow clay, and then enclosed by a small wooden palisade. It was constructed after Burial 57 on the northern “lobe” of the mound. The grave measured ten feet eight inches north to south (3.25 meters) and nine feet nine inches east to west (2.97 meters). The log walls of the tomb were once about five feet (1.5 meters)
high. Five skulls were initially interred in the grave, but only four of these skulls were available for osteological analysis because one was so badly decayed that it was unable to be preserved after excavation.

**Figure 3.2** Reconstruction of Burial 38 using close up images from George Stuart’s illustrations in the Etowah Burial Books
Figure 3.3 Simplified reconstruction of Burial 38.

Skull 1 was located in the southeastern corner of the burial. A copper covered ear disc lay on either side of the skull, which was facing downward, and a copper celt was underneath the skull. Probably the most interesting artifact associated with this individual was a carved partial shell gorget with a cross in circle motif. Skull 2 was located a few feet to the north and slightly east of Skull 1. The Burial Book illustration describes this skull as “very badly crushed, facing south.” Two copper covered wooden ear discs were also associated with this skull, along with fourteen copper symbol badges, all in the shape of an arrow. These were found in a semicircle around the skull, but with
some of the badges on top of one another. Two phalanges of some type of bird of prey were next to one of the ear discs. About one foot north of Skull 1 and one foot west of Skull 2 was a circular stone palette that was found upside-down over a lump of galena and a lump of graphite. Based its location in between the two skulls and the lack of post cranial skeletal elements mentioned, it is impossible to tell which if any individual this palette was meant to be associated with.

Skull 3 was the skull mentioned above that was so badly preserved it could not be removed and curated. It was located in the northeastern corner of the burial. Two copper covered wooden beads were associated with skull three. Six copper mace symbol badges were associated with this skull. Skull 4 was located immediately southwest of Skull 3. Underneath Skull 4 were two copper covered wooden beads and four copper pieces in the shape of a raptor, which Larson described in his field notes and 1955 report as pieces of an “eagle plate.” Three copper covered wooden ear discs surrounded Skulls 3 and 4, but the close proximity of these two skulls makes it impossible to sort out which of these was meant to be associated with each skull.

Skull 5 was located near the southwestern corner of the burial. Around and underneath the skull were a total of nine copper symbol badges, three of the arrow variety and six of the mace variety. Several small wooden pieces were preserved because of
their proximity to the copper, and Larson (1955; 1959; 1971) interpreted these as supporting parts of a headdress. Two copper covered wooden ear discs were associated with Skull five, as well as a phalanx from a bird of prey. Two long bones (it is impossible to tell which from the drawings) and a pile of shell beads were located less than one foot to the west of this skull.

![Figure 3.4 George Stuart’s sketches of the copper celts from Burial 38.](image)

Larson (1971) described five copper celts, each associated with one of the individuals from Burial 38 (fig. 3.4). Each of the celts were wrapped in some type of fabric. Five copper celts were indeed interred in the burial, but their association with individual skulls is more uncertain than this article indicates (with the exception of Skull...
Copper Celt 1 was located 1.25 feet southwest of Skull 2; Copper Celt 2 was approximately one foot north of Skull 5; Copper Celt 3 lay one foot south of Skull 4; Copper Celt 4 was one and a half feet west of Skull 3; Copper Celt 5 was located underneath Skull 1. Although it may be tempting to interpret this situation as each individual “holding” a copper celt as the Birdman figure is often depicted in Mississippian iconography, the archaeological context of the human remains and copper celts does not support such a conclusion. No hand or arm bones were found immediately surrounding any of the celts, and the proximity of the celts to the skulls does not indicate that each individual was interred in a similar anatomical position with regards to the celts. Skull 1 clearly illustrates this, as Copper Celt 5 was located underneath this skull.

Information from the skeletal inventory forms complicates the situation even further (Table 1). The inventory was completed 20 years after the remains were excavated, by individuals who were not present at the excavation, and it is not clear how they determined which postcranial elements went with which skull. The inclusion of a separate form for “NW corner of pit,” which Larson never mentions, and the scattered representation of elements in the Burial Book illustrations leads me to think that the association presented here should not be taken too literally.
Table 3.1 Summary of Osteological Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual 1</th>
<th>Individual 2</th>
<th>Individual 3</th>
<th>Individual 4</th>
<th>Individual 5</th>
<th>Northwest Corner of Pit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age: 18</td>
<td>Age: 19</td>
<td>Age: 20</td>
<td>Age: Late Adolescent</td>
<td>Age: 20</td>
<td>Age: 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex: Female (?)</td>
<td>Sex: Female (?)</td>
<td>Sex: Female</td>
<td>Sex: Female (?)</td>
<td>Sex: Female</td>
<td>Sex: Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cranium</td>
<td>Cranium</td>
<td>Cranium</td>
<td>Cranium</td>
<td>Cranium</td>
<td>Cranium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frontal</td>
<td>Occipital</td>
<td>Parietal (L and R)</td>
<td>Parietal (L)</td>
<td>Parietal (L)</td>
<td>Parietal (L)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethmoid</td>
<td>Frontal</td>
<td>Temporal (L and R)</td>
<td>Temporal (L and R)</td>
<td>Temporal (L and R)</td>
<td>Temporal (L and R)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasal (L and R)</td>
<td>Ethmoid</td>
<td>Sphenoid</td>
<td>Mandible</td>
<td>Sphenoid</td>
<td>Maxilla (R)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zygomatic (L)</td>
<td>Nasal (L and R)</td>
<td>Maxilla (L and R)</td>
<td>Mandible</td>
<td>Sphenoid</td>
<td>Mandible (R)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandible</td>
<td>Ethmoid</td>
<td>Mandible (L and R)</td>
<td>Mandible (R)</td>
<td>Mandible (L and R)</td>
<td>Teeth (25 total)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teeth (19 total)</td>
<td>Mandible (L and R)</td>
<td>Teeth (23 total)</td>
<td>Teeth (23 total)</td>
<td>Teeth (23 total)</td>
<td>Teeth (23 total)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thorax</td>
<td>Thorax</td>
<td>Thorax</td>
<td>Thorax</td>
<td>Thorax</td>
<td>Thoracic Elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cervical</td>
<td>Cervical</td>
<td>Cervical</td>
<td>Cervical</td>
<td>Cervical</td>
<td>No Thoracic Elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vertebra 1</td>
<td>Vertebra 1</td>
<td>Vertebra 2</td>
<td>Vertebra 2</td>
<td>Vertebra 2</td>
<td>No Thoracic Elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mesosternum</td>
<td>Mesosternum</td>
<td>Ribs (5 fragments)</td>
<td>Ribs (5 fragments)</td>
<td>Ribs (5 fragments)</td>
<td>No Thoracic Elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendicular Skeleton</td>
<td>Appendicular Skeleton</td>
<td>Appendicular Skeleton</td>
<td>Appendicular Skeleton</td>
<td>Appendicular Skeleton</td>
<td>No Appendicular Elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tibia (R)</td>
<td>Clavicle (L)</td>
<td>Ulna (R)</td>
<td>Ulna (R)</td>
<td>Ulna (R)</td>
<td>Femur (R)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fibula (L and R)</td>
<td>Scapula (L)</td>
<td>Radius (L)</td>
<td>Radius (L)</td>
<td>Radius (L)</td>
<td>Tibia (R)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navicular (L)</td>
<td>Navicular (L)</td>
<td>Lunate (L)</td>
<td>Lunate (L)</td>
<td>Lunate (L)</td>
<td>Tibia (R)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capitate (L)</td>
<td>Triangular (L)</td>
<td>Triangular (L)</td>
<td>Triangular (L)</td>
<td>Triangular (L)</td>
<td>Fibula (L)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calcaneous (R)</td>
<td>Greater Multangular (L)</td>
<td>Lesser Multangular (L)</td>
<td>Greater Multangular (L)</td>
<td>Lesser Multangular (L)</td>
<td>Calcaneous (R)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talus (L and R)</td>
<td>(L)</td>
<td>(L)</td>
<td>(L)</td>
<td>(L)</td>
<td>(L)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metacarpals (L1, 2, 3)</td>
<td>Capitate (L)</td>
<td>Capitate (L)</td>
<td>Capitate (L)</td>
<td>Capitate (L)</td>
<td>Talus (L and R)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hamate (L)</td>
<td>Hamate (L)</td>
<td>Hamate (L)</td>
<td>Hamate (L)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Metacarpal (L1)</td>
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<td>Metacarpal (L1)</td>
<td>Metacarpal (L1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tibia (L)</td>
<td>Tibia (L)</td>
<td>Tibia (L)</td>
<td>Tibia (L)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fibula (L)</td>
<td>Fibula (L)</td>
<td>Fibula (L)</td>
<td>Fibula (L)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The skeletal inventory does not explain the methods used to determine the sex of these individuals, but given the elements present, sex was probably determined based on the robusticity and size of cranial elements and possibly measurements of long bones (White and Folkens 2005). The inventory forms indicate whether teeth, epiphyseal unions, the pubic symphysis, cranial suture closures, or a combination of these features were used to estimate age. Teeth and epiphyseal unions were used to estimate the age of
Individual 1. Epiphyseal unions were used to estimate the age of Individual 2 and the individual labeled “Northwest Corner of Pit.” Individuals 3 and 5 were aged based on their teeth. Individual 4 was aged based on cranial suture closure. It is important to note, however, that determining the sex of juveniles and adolescents is more difficult and prone to error (White and Folkens 2005).

An examination of this skeletal inventory clearly shows the unusual nature of the represented elements. Barring unusual circumstances, in both primary interments and secondary interments, the largest and densest elements are usually the ones that are best preserved. However, in Burial 38 only one femur and no humeri (the largest and densest elements) were present, yet other smaller and more fragile elements such as carpals, fibulae, and even two ethmoids were recovered. Given that other Late Wilbanks burials in Mound C follow a more expected pattern of bone preservation and that Larson did not note any apparent disturbances upon excavation of this burial, it seems that some more explanation is needed in the case of Burial 38.

George Stuart’s drawings of Burial 38 do not depict all of the bones recovered, but the postcranial elements that are drawn in on the plan map of the burial (all long bones) are in such proximities to the skulls that they could not have been articulated as part of an entire body with any of the skulls at the time of burial. This situation, along
with the unusual numbers and types of skeletal elements represented led me to the
conclusion that Burial 38 could not have been made up of primary, extended individuals
as Larson (1971) thought, but rather some type of secondary burial. The presence of only
one side of entire appendages, sometimes including very small bones, is also unusual.
Individual 2, for example, is made up of only elements from the left side of the body, but
includes small carpals and metacarpals. If Individual 2 were a primary interment as
Larson believed, we would expect to also see some bones from the right side of the body,
though perhaps not any carpals or metacarpals.

The different degrees of preservation between individuals noted by the
osteologists is also unexpected for a primary burial of late adolescents. In the absence of
a taphonomic process that would make some bodies in this grave decompose faster than
others (an intrusive pit or later building episode, for instance), individuals of a similar age
who died and were buried about the same time and in the same place should be similarly
preserved. As Larson did not note any unusual taphonomic circumstances, this evidence
also suggests that Burial 38 consisted of secondary interments. The differential
preservation indicates that either the individuals did not die around the same time or that
they experienced different decomposition processes, or both.
I believe that the most likely explanation based on this osteological evidence is that certain portions of already deceased and possibly even skeletonized individuals were chosen for reburial in Mound C. That all of the individuals were identified as late adolescent or young adult females suggests that these individuals were not chosen at random. The identities of these remains were in some way kept alive in social memory.

**Iconographic Methods**

As described in the previous chapter, my analytical approach to the iconography is based on the four-fold approach used at the Texas State Mississippian Iconography Conferences, which includes recognition of style regions, visual structural analysis, archaeological content, and ethnographic analogy. One outcome of these workshops is that Etowah has been identified as part of the Hightower Style Region, so my analysis draws heavily on previous studies of Hightower imagery and on the historical context of the Hightower region. I used visual structural analysis to interpret the various SECC objects from Burial 38. This method of analysis was first developed and used by art historian Erwin Panofsky (1962). Panofsky’s method involves three steps. The first step is determining different types of primary subject matter in an image such as lines, colors, shapes, natural objects, and even motifs (Panofsky 1962). The next step in the method is to consider the secondary subject matter, which examines the connection between the
artistic motifs, themes, and concepts. After completing these steps, the scholar can move to the third step and begin to evaluate an image’s intrinsic meaning, which Panofsky (1962:7) defines as, “…Those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion- unconsciously qualified by one personality and condensed into one work.” For this level of analysis, the analyst must know something of the historical, religious, philosophical, or other context of the work.

The “ethnographic analogy” part of the four-fold approach complements Panofsky’s third step. This is how practitioners gather information about the religious and historical context of SECC objects. By using narratives, myths, and oral traditions from Native Americans of the Eastern Woodlands, the four-fold approach seeks to gain a more emic framework through which to interpret the images (Reilly and Garber 2007; Reilly et al. 2011). Fortunately, a great deal of ethnographic information can be found in the historical accounts of early European explorers and missionaries in the Southeast, and more importantly, from ethnohistoric and contemporary Native American narratives.

Contemporary and historic Native American beliefs and mythology undoubtedly differ from those of Mississippian times, so they cannot be applied indiscriminately to the archaeological record (Keyes 1994). They can, however, help archaeologists understand
some of the basic belief structures of Native American societies and provide a starting point for tracing these beliefs back in time (Reilly and Garber 2007; Reilly et al. 2011).

The four-fold approach of the Mississippian Iconography Conference also calls for an examination of the archaeological context of images, which is a key part of this project. Using the information in Larson’s field notes and his 1955 burial report, and most importantly George Stuart’s Etowah Burial Book, I have a decent idea of what Burial 38 probably looked like at the time it was excavated. Since this had largely remained a mystery to all except Larson, Stuart, and the other excavators, a significant portion of my research consisted of piecing together the archaeological context. This information was essential for interpreting the ritual and mortuary function of Mound C. It is only through this context that I could begin to see any patterns of cosmological or other cultural significance. This knowledge was also necessary for comparing Burial 38 to other burials in Mound C and for assessing possible similarities between Burial 38 and Mound C at large.

**Meaning in Individual Artifacts**

After reconstructing Burial 38, I began iconographic interpretation at the smallest scale. Structural analysis was used to break down the more complex artistic objects. Thousands of artifacts (the vast majority of which were shell beads) were recovered from
Burial 38, but this analysis focuses on a small group of artifacts that have apparent iconographic significance. These include the three varieties of copper symbol badges, the copper “eagle plate” associated with Skull 4, a shell gorget, a conch shell, five copper celts, and a stone palette. These are the artifacts for which structural analysis is a fruitful endeavor. However, this does not mean that they were the only artifacts charged with symbolic meaning.

Artifact Descriptions: Panofsky’s First Step

The copper symbol badges were likely part of elaborate headdresses at the time of interment (as is the case for several other burials in Mound C). Lewis Larson (1959) was able to identify the headdresses as such based on the placement of the symbol badges around the skulls of individuals and their association with small cedar rods and pieces of leather that were probably used to fasten the headdresses to people’s heads. This conclusion seems even more likely given that several historical accounts from members of DeSoto’s party describe elaborate headdresses worn by high status Native Americans that seem relatively similar to archaeological examples (Lewis 1907; Swanton 1911; 1946; Varner and Varner 1951). Several Late Wilbanks burials contained headdresses similar to those in Burial 38.
The first and probably most numerous type of symbol badge from Burial 38 is what I call the “lined arrow” (fig. 3.5). In total there are at least 13 symbol badges of this type associated with two skulls. They were cut out in the shape of the tip of an arrow with a rounded end and are embossed with two parallel lines that extend down the center of the arrow from base to just before the tip. The second type, the “eyed arrow” is only represented by two examples associated with one individual (fig. 3.5). These may be the only two examples of this type at Etowah (Larson 1959). George Stuart did not include this variety of symbol badge in his drawings, but Larson’s field notes contained large detailed drawings of it. These are shaped very similarly to the lined arrow symbol badges; however, they have a series of semicircles embossed in the center, creating the appearance of an eye, according to Larson’s drawings in his field notes.

Figure 3.5  From left to right: Lined arrow symbol badge drawn by Larson in his field notes; eyed arrow symbol badge drawn by Larson in his field notes; image of one of the lined arrow symbol badges housed at the Waring Laboratory.
Interestingly, two of the arrows in Stuart’s close-up drawings of the symbol badges appeared to have these markings drawn in with pencil but were then erased. The only surviving arrow symbol badges from Burial 38 are the lined type, so it is difficult to explain the discrepancy in the drawings. Perhaps the central markings were faint and thus not readily visible to everyone who looked at them. It is also possible that the copper began to rapidly deteriorate after excavation, making it seem as if two of the arrows had no markings by the time Stuart was able to make the drawings.

The third type of symbol badge, the “key-sided mace,” is represented by ten examples in this burial: four were found near Skull 3, and six were found near Skull 5. Its most defining characteristic is the terrace motif that was created through a cut out process on either side, giving the sides a stair step appearance (fig. 3.6). A non-equilateral, double lined cross is embossed through the center of this type, and a semi-circular node sits on top.

In his field notes Larson refers to a number of copper pieces surrounding Skull 4 that may have once been joined together as part of a single plate. He describes them as badly corroded and broken but does mention that he could make out a tail and possibly wings in four of the pieces and an eagle head with a forked eye surround in a fifth piece.
Figure 3.6 From left to right: A drawing from Larson’s field notes of what a complete mace symbol badge from Burial 38 probably looked like; fragment of the top of one of the Burial 38 symbol badges; body fragment of a mace symbol badge.

Although the provenience is unclear, Larson’s (1959) drawing of copper eagle “symbol badges” is almost certainly based on George Stuart’s close-up drawings of the symbol badges found in Burial 38 (fig. 3.7). Based on Larson and Stuart’s drawings, it appears that the tail portion is represented by pointed scallops and two semicircular embossed lines, elements that are common to most if not all depictions of Birdman in Mississippian iconography. The head portion is very fragmentary but did clearly have an embossed
forked eye surround and four parallel lines around the neck. The separated and layered nature of the pieces suggests that they were already broken when interred. Copper was also found near each of the skulls in the form of copper-covered wooden ear discs. Each skull seems to be closely associated with two such ear discs (one on either side of the skull) with the exception of skulls three and four, which have three copper ear discs spread out around them.

![Figure 3.7](image)

**Figure 3.7** Stuart’s drawings of the copper eagle plate near Skull 4.

One shell gorget was interred in this burial, associated with Skull 1 in the southeast corner of the tomb. Although partial, this gorget clearly once consisted of an equilateral fenestrated cross in the center surrounded by two engraved circles on a circular piece of marine shell (fig. 3.8). These engraved circles were somehow painted or
dyed black. As is the case with nearly all Mississippian shell gorgets, the engraving was
done on the convex side of the shell. A conch shell lay underneath Copper Celt 3, just to
the south of Skull 4. The conch shell in currently in two pieces and very fragile, but it is
possible that at one time it was an entire shell cup. Thousands of shell beads were
recovered from the burial, but George Stuart’s illustrations specifically noted
concentrations of shell beads on and around many of the long bones.

Figure 3.8 Shell gorget found underneath Skull 1.

A stone palette was also interred in Burial 38 (fig. 3.9). It consists of rounded,
rectangular scalloped edges, three engraved concentric circles, and a circular center that
had been carved down below the outer edges. This palette was found face down over a
lump of galena and a lump of graphite. Steponaitis et al. (2011) thoroughly examined
several of the Etowah palettes, including the one from Burial 38.
They found that the palettes were made from mafic phyllite and gneiss; sources of both of these types of rock can be found within ten kilometers or less from Etowah, meaning that the palettes were almost certainly produced at or near Etowah (Steponaitis et al. 2011). Upon examining the Burial 38 palette at the Etowah Museum in February 2014, I noticed traces of red paint in the engraved circles and extending into the center of the palette, as Steponaitis et al. (2011) had noted. Steponaitis et al. (2011) also noticed...
textile impressions on the bottom of the palette, which is an important key to understanding its use.

*Artifact Meanings*

Panofsky’s second step calls for the iconographer to examine the connection between the artistic motifs and themes derived from the first step of the structural analysis. The surge in iconographic research of SECC objects over the last several decades has meant that many such connections have already been made in Mississippian iconography. For example, Lankford (2007b, 2007c) and (Reilly 2011) have demonstrated that serpents, including the winged serpent, are Beneath World powers and are closely associated with water, and Reilly (2007) has shown that a petaloid motif is a locative for the Above World. Therefore, rather than attempt to reinvent the wheel with only the artifacts from Burial 38, I build on the work of previous scholars that has identified meanings in particular motifs and themes across large corpuses of SECC objects and then apply these to Burial 38. In this way, Panofsky’s steps two and three will be addressed together.

A useful way to examine the meaning of the Burial 38 artifacts is to consider their connection to the three realms of the Mississippian cosmos. The copper eagle pieces are perhaps the most obvious example of Above World imagery in Burial 38. It has long
been recognized that falcon or hawk imagery played a central thematic role in SECC imagery (Brown 1976; Waring 1968; Waring and Holder 1945). In his thorough examination of falcon or hawk imagery in Southeastern Native American contexts, James Brown (2007) has shown that falcon imagery on SECC objects symbolically references the ethnographically known figure “Red Horn” or “Morning Star” from Dhegihan-speaking peoples of the Prairie Plains. This figure loses his head to Beneath World powers in a high stakes game of chance, but is resurrected with the help of his sons and eventually goes to reside in the Above World. His most important associations are with the ability to resurrect life, the triumph of life over death, longevity, and a long line of descendants (Brown 2007). Arrows in various forms are often associated with the Morning Star/Birdman figure and can symbolize the traits listed above. Therefore, we may also see the arrow symbol badges as being connected to the Above World and even to Morning Star or Birdman specifically. Also, although not included in the structural analysis, two of the headdresses apparently once contained the feet or talons of some type of hawk or falcon, leaving no doubt that falcon symbolism was intended at some level.

The copper celts are another, less obvious symbolic connection to the Above World. Birdman’s twin sons (or nephews) are often depicted with some type of weapon (either a mace, ax, or large knife) that they have used to vanquish the powers of the
Beneath World and bring back the severed head of their father (Brown 1976, 2007; Brown and Dye 2007; Dye 2014). Although these weapons are used in the Beneath World, they are used to defeat death and are therefore representative of the ascension to the Above World and its ultimate triumph. David Dye and others have argued that the weapons depicted in SECC imagery are symbolic weapons being used by supernatural figures in primordial times and that the myths depicted in the imagery served as charting narratives for warrior cults and explained proper behavior for warriors before and after battle (Brown 1976; Brown and Dye 2007; Dye 2004, 2007, 2014; Marceaux and Dye 2007).

This World imagery is present in the cruciform shell gorget associated with Skull 1. The cross and circle motif is found on artifacts in a variety of mediums throughout the Eastern Woodlands, dating back to the Mississippian period and continuing through Native American practices in the present day. Ethnohistoric and ethnographic records indicate that the square ground, a ritual space for many Southeastern Native Americans, was laid out to reflect the cross and circle, as were houses (Swanton 1928). The cross and circle is specifically represented in the square grounds by the sacred fire at the center, which has four logs coming out from it pointed in the four cardinal directions to form a cross (Waring 1968; Lankford 2007a). The sacred fire is “directly related to the sun, in
that it is a reflection of the light/heat/rays of the sun itself on the earthly plane” (Lankford 2007a:21) and as such can act as an axis mundi with the sun in the Above World. In the square ground, people belonging to different social categories sit on covered benches located at each of the four cardinal directions during ritual activities (historically, this was different clan groups; today it is usually different age groups). Even the house layout of the historic Creek reflected this cruciform layout, with a fire burning in the center and benches for sitting or sleeping along the four walls (Swanton 1928). King (2010) points out that Mississippian houses seem to have been designed in a similar fashion; even entire Mississippian towns throughout the Southeast and Midwest often reflect this cosmogram (see Lewis and Stout 1998; Polhemus 1990; Sullivan 1995).

What is particularly interesting about the cruciform gorget from Burial 38 is that, according to Jeffrey Brain and Philip Phillips (1996), it is a Younge style gorget. This is one of the earliest gorget styles, dating to the Early Mississippian period, yet it was found with one of the chronologically latest burials in Mound C. The geographically closest Younge style gorget is from the Cooper’s Farm site in what is now East Nashville, Tennessee. This means that when this gorget was interred it was already an antique, and it was foreign. This situation is similar to that of the famous Rogan Plates also interred in Mound C. King has argued (2010) that the purpose of the final burials in Mound C was
to transform the mound into a sacred center, one that brought together foreign ideas and possibly people with the already existing people and beliefs at Etowah. This gorget seems to support that conclusion and may also indicate foreign influence on Etowah from the Cumberland region in addition to Cahokia.

Beneath World imagery is present in the terrace motif on the sides of the mace symbol badges. Alexa Trechock (2013) has argued that the terrace motif is a locative for the Beneath World based on its association with snakes and water, both things that George Lankford (2007b) has shown to be definitive of the Beneath World for Native Americans across the Eastern Woodlands in prehistoric and historic times. Beneath World imagery may also be present in other less obvious ways. The eyed arrow symbol badges may have multiple meanings or connections in that the “eye” in the center of the arrow is very reminiscent of the hand and eye motif that is so prevalent at Moundville. George Lankford (2007c) has convincingly argued that the hand and eye represents the portal to the Path of Souls. This portal is only passable at night when the cosmos is turned upside down and the Beneath World is in the sky. Lankford argues that the raptor at Moundville is associated with death imagery and the Path of Souls, as well. Finally, the shell gorget may have Beneath World connotations as well, even though it contains the cross and circle that marks the sacred fire in This World. Lankford (2007a) has
shown that the marine shell that shell gorgets were carved out of are intrinsically connected to water and therefore, to the Beneath World. According to Ojibwa narratives, shell symbolically represents the scales of Mishebeshu, a supernatural creature that ruled the watery Beneath World (Lankford 2007a; Smith 1995). This would also mean that the conch shell and shell beads were connected to the Beneath World.

The stone palette from Burial 38 can be viewed as a portable altar that would imbue certain individuals with power or allow them to travel through various realms (King 2010; Steponaitis et al. 2011). Steponaitis et al. (2011) argue that the palettes found in Mound C at Etowah (and in other Mississippian contexts) were used to mix pigments in ritual rather than utilitarian contexts. They argue (Steponaitis et al. 2011:99) that the stylistic themes of the palettes solidify their ritual connection: “In essence, the concentric lines and petaloid edge define a ritual center or axis mundi, which, in the Mississippian cosmos, was by definition a sacred place that facilitated contact with otherworldly powers.” The fabric impressions visible on the underside of many of the Etowah palettes (including the one from Burial 38) and their close association with metallic rocks and mineral pigments indicate that these items were interred as ritual bundles (Steponaitis et al. 2011).
Taken together, many of these artifacts can be viewed as ritual regalia. The ear discs, copper celts, shell beads on long bones, and a generalized headdress are all markers of the Birdman or his twin sons in the Classic Braden style and its later regional derivatives such as Etowah’s local Hightower style (Brown 2007, 2011; Brown and Dye 2007; King 2011; Marceaux and Dye 2007; Reilly and Garber 2011). A comparison of the depiction of Birdman on the Classic Braden Rogan Plates (fig. 3.10), found in an Early Wilbanks grave from Mound C, to the artifacts found in Burial 38 clearly illustrates the connection. The figures on the Rogan plates both wear large ear discs, like the ones found in Burial 38. They also both wear conch shell columella necklaces, like the conch shell found near Skull 4, and they wear strings of beads around their arms and legs, similar to the piles of shells around the long bones in Burial 38. The Rogan plate Birdmen are both holding symbolic weapons, specifically a mace; the copper celts from the burial are also symbolic weapons. Finally, both of the Rogan plate figures are wearing elaborate headdresses, albeit different in form from the ones found around the skulls in Burial 38.

On the surface, all of this evidence would seem to suggest that the individuals in Burial 38 were being “dressed up” as Birdman and/or his twin sons to reenact a moment of creation, but two confounding factors make such an interpretation unlikely: 1) These
individuals were females, and Birdman and Sons are never described as females or being associated with females and 2) These are secondary burials, so they could not have been killed on the spot as part of a dramatic ritual reenactment. A different and more complex interpretation is needed to explain the existence of Burial 38.

Figure 3.10 The Rogan Plates (Brown 2007: Figure 4.1)

*Burial 38 as a Composition*
Now that some meanings have been derived from the individual artifacts in Burial 38, it is possible to consider the burial as a sort of tableau, or composition in itself. Even though there are no complete individuals in this burial, many of the artifacts can be confidently associated with a skull (Table 3.2). Each of the skulls had a pair of copper covered wooden ear discs associated with it. Although the copper celts are not placed as closely to the skulls in most instances, the matching number of skulls and celts seems to indicate that one celt was associated with each skull. Despite these similarities, though, no two individuals are alike in the overall combination of their associated artifacts. All but one of the skulls was associated with a headdress containing some type of copper ornamentation, but the composition of each headdress was unique. The one skull that did not have an obvious headdress was Skull 1, which is instead associated with the shell gorget. Since the gorget was found on the skull, though, it may have once been part of some type of head ornamentation, albeit different in form from the others.

It was traditionally thought that the female who did not have a headdress was in the center of the tomb and was associated with the stone palette. Instead, this analysis reveals that this female was clearly placed in the southeast corner of the tomb, and it is unclear whether the stone palette was originally associated with Skull 1 or Skull 2. Based on the structural analysis results Skulls 2 and 5 are associated with artifacts that contain a
combination of Above World and Beneath World references, while Skull three is only associated with Beneath World imagery. Skull 4’s association with a particular realm is ambiguous given the different ways that raptor imagery can be interpreted (see Lankford 2007c). Skull 1 is the only individual associated with This World imagery. Finally, it should be noted that Skulls 3 and 4 were placed so closely together that they and their associated artifacts may have been intended to be viewed together, as one entity, rather than as separate skulls.

Table 3.2: Skulls and Associated Artifacts

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<th>Skull 3</th>
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<td>Copper Covered Ear Discs</td>
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<td>Arrow Symbol Badges</td>
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<td>Mace Symbol Badges</td>
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<td>Raptor/Hawk Claws</td>
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<td>Copper Eagle Plate</td>
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<td>Conch Shell</td>
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<td>Shell Gorget</td>
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In summary, using data from various sources, including Larson’s excavation notes, George Stuart’s illustrations, Blakely’s skeletal inventories, and the artifacts themselves, I have shown that Burial 38 was a secondary interment of five females between the ages of eighteen and twenty. The artifacts included in the burial were symbolically laden with references to all three realms of the Mississippian cosmos. In the following chapters I explain how I interpret these findings and what the implications of my findings are for Etowah and Mississippian scholarship.
Chapter 4: Interpretations

Burial 38 as Bundles

When I first began this study, I expected to find that the layout of the individuals in Burial 38 would be a cross in circle cosmogram as King (2010) and Sawyer and King (n.d.) argued. Based on Larson’s (1971) published description of Burial 38 as four individuals laid out against the four walls of the tomb with a stone palette somewhere in the center, this conclusion would make perfect sense. As explained in the previous chapter, this was not the archaeological reality. Taking all of this evidence together, I believe that the individuals represented in Burial 38 were already included in small, portable bundles immediately before they were interred in the mound. We know from historic and contemporary ethnographic accounts of Southeastern Native Americans that bundles are often opened and displayed at specific ritual ceremonies (Capron 1953; Howard 1981; Sturtevant 1954, 1960). Bundling would also explain why only parts of individuals, especially near-complete appendages, would be found: if limbs were placed into bundles when they were still fleshed, there would be much less of a chance for the small and fragile bones to be lost. I suggest, then, that each skull and some other skeletal
parts and even artifacts were included in each of the bundles, which were probably opened and then interred in the mound. This essentially made them bundles within a bundle (Burial 38) within a bigger bundle (Mound C).

The somewhat scattered arrangement of the artifacts and skeletal elements in Burial 38 makes it difficult to tell which objects were originally bundled together. Some cane matting was preserved around some of the copper artifacts, but it is impossible to tell if the matting was used to bundle only those artifacts or if it extended across the entire floor of the tomb. The placement of the bundle contents within the burial does not suggest any intended cosmological symbol such as a cross and circle, but this seemingly haphazard placement is not unique in Mound C. Artifacts from the Late Wilbanks Burial 15 were scattered across the floor of the tomb, and the broken statues suggest that they were thrown or dropped in (Larson 1971).

Even though the arrangement of artifacts and human remains lacks a clear pattern, it does not mean that they lacked meaning or symbolic significance. By being enclosed within what could be interpreted as a small log house and then covered with a mound of clay, the bundles were being regrouped to create a bundle on a larger scale (Sawyer and King n.d.). As Zedeño (2008) points out, ritual bundles are more than the sum of their parts; particular objects become more powerful in the presence of other certain objects.
By combining the contents from multiple bundles to form Burial 38, perhaps the goal was to increase the ritual power of the objects when in the presence of each other. If specific clans or lineages were in charge of caring for the individual bundles, bringing them together in Burial 38 would be a way of symbolically consolidating these groups and their power.

The striking similarity between historic and contemporary Blackfoot bundles and the artifacts in Mound C further suggests that the mound and its contents were probably animated, connected, and influential forces or persons to the people of Etowah. Zedeño (2008:370) has shown that red paint is ubiquitous in bundles and rituals among Algonquian-speaking plains tribes, and that, “Both song and paint are the conduits of animating power and the executors of every power transfer.” Based on this evidence, it seems reasonable to interpret the red paint still visible on the Burial 38 palette as an animating force that may have brought to life other objects in the burial. In developing a methodology for relational archaeology, Zedeño (2013) created various “animic” categories that artifacts could be grouped into. Skulls, phalanges, and animal parts fall into her category of “objects that embody the soul of living beings.” All three of these types of objects are present in Burial 38 and probably had a similar function in the meta-bundle that was Mound C.
I do not wish to convey that the contemporary and historic Blackfoot and other Algonquian-speaking peoples of the plains were perfectly similar to Mississippian peoples at Etowah in their religious practices and beliefs because they assuredly were not. There is, however, reason to consider what is known about Blackfoot bundling practices and beliefs when interpreting Mississippian bundles. Zedeño (2013) believes that the practice of bundling may have begun among the Blackfeet as early as 1000 A.D. when Mandan peoples moved into the Middle Missouri River area. The Mandan at this time were horticulturalists who seem to have had Mississippian cultural traits thus may have also shared Mississippian religion and world view (Zedeño 2013).

I also argue that Blackfoot bundling practices are comparable to Mississippian bundling practices more generally because most, if not all Native American cultures share a worldview that is relational and animated (Viveiros de Castro 2004). I believe the various Mississippian caches of finished and partially finished objects that are especially prominent throughout the Greater Cahokia region demonstrate that such a worldview has great time depth in the Eastern Woodlands. Cached Mississippian objects have usually been interpreted in economic terms (Brown 1996; Cobb 2000; Muller 1997; Pauketat 1997). Pauketat and Alt (2004), however, have convincingly argued that a cache of 70 axe-heads at the Grossmann site represents a commemoration ritual that brought together
local and Cahokian products and people and redefined place and cultural identity at Grossmann. Without necessarily negating the interpretations of these scholars, I argue that caches like this can also be seen as a deliberate attempt to bring together animated objects whose power was greater when combined. In this sense, portable bundles, caches, and mounds are different physical manifestations of the same underlying belief system and should be treated as variations along a continuum rather than categorically different phenomena.

Viewing Burial 38 as the creation of a new, larger bundle supports Sawyer and King’s conclusions that the Late Wilbanks burials in Mound C were acted out as a ritual narrative that helped to define a new social order at Etowah. The anthropomorphic themes that developed in the local Hightower shell engravings during the Early Wilbanks phase suggest that this new order included some degree of social inequality, with elites legitimizing their power through connection to the Birdman figure from the American Bottom (King 2011). But in the case of Burial 38, rather than living individuals from Etowah reenacting creation narratives and then being ritually sacrificed, the individuals interred in this burial were already deceased and perhaps had been for many years.

Connections to the Rest of the Late Wilbanks Burials
Burial 38’s connection to the rest of the Late Wilbanks burials also gives clues as to why it was created and what it meant. As discussed above, King (2004, 2010) has shown that the Late Wilbanks burials in Mound C consist of five distinct groupings— one in each of the four corners of the mound and the group on the northern lobe, where Burial 38 is located. The groups in the four corners of the mound are very similar in demographic and artifact makeup, which leads King (2010:60) to argue that they “likely represent socially redundant corporate kin groups.” The northern lobe stands out as different because it consists of mostly females and because it contains fewer and a less diverse set of artifacts. King’s (2004, 2010) reconstruction of Mound C has shown that the burials in the northern lobe preceded the Late Wilbanks burials placed around the periphery of the mound. It is reasonable to believe, then, that the lobe burials had something to do with the founding and legitimating of a new set of social regulations that determined who was eligible for burial in Mound C.

One possible link between the individuals in Burial 38 and the rest of the Late Wilbanks burials is that the four skulls who had associated copper ornament headdresses were representative of the four distinct corporate kin groupings clustered around the four corners of the mound. Skulls 2, 3, 4, and 5 from Burial 38 were associated with elaborate copper headdresses (Larson 1955, 1971); similar headdresses were interred with some
individuals from all four of the other clusters. Since the copper ornaments from these headdresses were likely produced locally as part of a short-lived copper working tradition at Etowah (King 2011), it is possible that these elements of the bundles were added sometime after the bundles were originally created. Given the large-scale labor efforts and theatrical nature that went into the production of the lobe burials, it would be most logical that the copper symbol badges were added when the bundles were unwrapped and placed in Burial 38. In this context, the meaning-laden symbols in the headdresses would have united various kin groups under a single, cohesive symbolic system that drew power and legitimacy from ancestors and powerful ritual bundles. Furthermore, once the disparate bundles were bundled together under a mound of earth in Burial 38, those lineages or clan groups that donated individual bundles were inextricably tied together through these powerful symbols and rituals. When viewed as a form of theatrical performance, it is easy to see how Burial 38 could have served to broadcast these politico-religious alliances between important kin groups.

Skull 1, the individual associated with a shell gorget rather than a copper headdress, stands out as an anomaly. One possible explanation for her inclusion in Burial 38 is that she could have been from a founding lineage (either real or fictitious) common to all of Etowah or at least all of those buried in Mound C. The fact that the gorget
associated with this individual is much older than the burial itself makes the interpretation that this person was meant to represent an older, common ancestor more plausible. The nonlocal origin of the gorget further leads me to suggest that this individual was an important source of foreign influence and symbolism in much the same way that the Rogan plates were influential in inspiring and legitimizing a new and powerful lineage based on a foreign and supernatural ancestor (King 2011).

**Burial 38 and Gender**

Another goal of this study was to see what Burial 38 could tell us about gender and identity at Etowah and the Mississippian Southeast more broadly. I looked for previous studies that used mortuary data to answer questions about gender to guide my methods and interpretations in this area. Over the last few decades mortuary analysis has become an important entre to understanding gender and identities in general in past societies (Arnold 2006; Arnold and Wicker 2001; Eastman and Rodning 2001; Whitehouse 1998). A variety of methodologies and approaches have been developed to use mortuary data for this end, but unfortunately, many of these methods could not be used to help interpret Burial 38 because of its unique nature. For example, grave goods associated with male or female skeletons in cemeteries have been used to infer different genders or gendered division of labor (e.g. Crass 2001; Dommasnes 1982; Hamlin 2001;
A relatively large and contemporaneous sample is needed to discern these patterns, though, and such a sample does not exist for Etowah. Although Robert Blakely (1995) did some bioarchaeological analysis of a cemetery at Etowah, this cemetery dated to the later Lamar phase (A.D. 1475-1550) and should thus not be compared to Burial 38, a Wilbanks Phase burial. Furthermore, in his study, Blakely (1995) did not attempt to make any interpretations of gender.

Bioarchaeological studies are another way that archaeologists have used mortuary contexts to explore gender. Stable isotope analysis of male and female skeletons can be used to show patterns of differential access to resources based on sex and therefore possibly gender (e.g. Ambrose et al. 2003; Barrett and Richards 2004; White 2005). Patterns of bone robusticity and joint degeneration that vary by sex can be used to infer gendered division of labor or even to identify third genders (Hollimon 1996). However, these methods were not applicable to Burial 38 or useful for elucidating gender from this context. Other than the osteological inventory sheets completed by Blakely and students, no bioarchaeological analysis of the individuals from Burial 38 has been completed. Because the skeletal remains from Etowah are no longer available for study, such analysis is impossible at this time.
As I narrowed my literature research to Mississippian mortuary studies of gender, I faced similar problems in addition to a general paucity of research on this topic. Studies by Sullivan (2001) and Rodning (2001, 2011) use different male and female burial locations throughout a site to provide important insight into parallel gender hierarchies in some Mississippian societies, but without data from other burial contexts at Etowah, I cannot say whether or not a similar parallel gender hierarchy existed here. Alt and Pauketat’s (2007) discussion of sex and gender based on mortuary analyses from ridgetop mounds at and around Cahokia presented a situation that was more similar to Burial 38 than any other published sources I found. Alt and Pauketat (2007) argue that most of the mortuary activity from these ridgetop mounds was the result of a large theatrical spectacle that was used to legitimate new social relations, including new gender relations. Cahokia’s ridgetop mounds differ from Mound C in that dozens of females were clearly sacrificed while others were primary interments. Although Larson (1971) may have intimated that the females in Burial 38 were sacrificed to accompany the male in Burial 57, I have shown here that Burial 38 actually consisted of secondary interments. Furthermore, the females from these Cahokia mounds were not associated with artifacts normally attributed to men. Therefore, the ridgetop mounds at Cahokia are not an ideal analogy for understanding gender at Etowah either.
Ethnographic sources were another avenue of inquiry that I could use to draw interpretations of gender. We know from contemporary practices and ethnohistoric records that balance between male and female powers is and was important for Native Americans across the Southeast in maintaining a proper and functioning world order (Swanton 1946), meaning that females and/or women were integral to society. Archaeological and iconographic evidence attests to the importance and ubiquity of females as supernatural figures in Mississippian times or even before (Duncan and Diaz-Granados 2004; Emerson 2003; Hall 2000; Sharp et al. 2011; Smith and Miller 2009). The fact that many Southeastern Native American groups are matrilineal even to this day further exemplifies the importance of women to these societies.

Myths, narratives, and iconography of Southeastern and Plains Native Americans that deal directly with female supernaturals generally emphasize the importance of women in agriculture and fertility and also stress their connection to Evening Star, the moon, night, and the Beneath World (Duncan and Diaz-Granados 2004; Hall 2000; Lankford 2008; Smith and Miller 2009). For example, Lankford (2008) examined Native American myths from across North America that deal with maize, and he found that in most cases a supernatural female figure is responsible for bringing maize to people and teaching them how to care for it. Many Creek myths, specifically, recount how maize
came out the body of a woman. This woman eventually died or asked to be killed, and corn grew in the place where her body was buried, and thus began the Creek cultivation of corn (Lankford 2008; Swanton 1929).

Another supernatural female figure, Old Woman, or Old-Woman-Who-Never-Dies, is also strongly represented in myth and iconography. In the myths of the Dhegihan-speaking Sioux (and some other Plains tribes), it is Old Woman’s womb from where all life begins and all life returns after death; she is also the mother of Morning Star and grandmother of the Twins and participates in many of their mythic adventures (Bowers 1950; 1992; Duncan and Diaz-Granados 2004; Radin 1948). Although these stories exemplify the importance of women to Native Americans across the Eastern Woodlands, they do not seem very analogous to Burial 38. Rather, the individuals in Burial 38 seem more connected to the Birdman or Morning Star, Twins, warriors, and the Above World. Their biological sex may very well be female as Blakely and students identified, but the archaeological and ethnographic evidence seems to suggest that they were not necessarily women.

In short, Burial 38 is a truly unique interment, especially in terms of gender. It is a secondary burial of five late adolescent to young adult females who were interred in a ritually significant location with artifacts that were also ritually significant, and are in
other instances associated with males. Without any other similar instances to guide my interpretations and without being able to examine the human remains, this may be the extent of the information about gender that is knowable for Burial 38. Based on this alone, it would be misleading to draw any firm conclusions about Mississippian gender.

One possibility is that these individuals represent a third gender of biological females who took on some of the social roles of men. It is also possible that gender roles were simply more fluid in Mississippian societies (or at Etowah in particular) than archaeologists have considered; biological sex may not have been as deeply tied to one’s social role as is the case in most modern Western societies. If nothing else, Burial 38 serves to show us that males were not the only individuals who wielded ritual power at Etowah and that archaeologists need to examine their assumptions about why women were buried in sacred or elite spaces. Burial 38 is a good example and reminder that not all of the women buried in mounds were wives of important men or sacrificial victims.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

Through careful examination of its archaeological context, I have shown that Burial 38 was a much more complicated interment that once believed (King 2010; Larson 1971; Sawyer and King n.d.). Burial 38 consisted of secondary interments of five late adolescent females who were probably kept in sacred bundles before they were deposited in Mound C. These individuals were interred with dozens of iconographic artifacts, some of which were also likely included in sacred bundles prior to their interment in Mound C. Although connections to all three realms of the Mississippian cosmos can be found in Burial 38 artifacts, most show connections to the Above World and specifically, the Birdman theme. These Birdman and warrior themed objects such as copper ear discs, copper cels, and headdresses filled with copper symbol badges complicate the Burial 38 picture further, as these are symbols and objects normally associated with males and men in Mississippian iconography and burial contexts.

Although there is no single simple or clear explanation as to why these seemingly masculine artifacts were interred with young females, the recognition of this apparent discrepancy is still an important contribution to Mississippian archaeology. Even though
30 years have passed since Conkey and Spector (1984) brought archaeologists’ attention to Western male bias in archaeology, many practitioners in the field continue to project the binary sex/gender categories of our society onto the past. Burial 38 exemplifies the possibility that other sex and gender combinations were likely at play in the past.

The combination of masculine artifacts and females in Burial 38 may also mean that gender was not the most important aspect of a Mississippian person’s identity; the social rank or family or clan identity of an individual may have taken precedence in terms of how their body was treated after death. The fact that parts of their bodies were preserved in ritual bundles and then interred in a very important part of the Etowah landscape indicates that these individuals were important for reasons far beyond their gender or sex. The relationship of Burial 38 to the other Late Wilbanks interments in Mound C gives some clues to this significance. King (2004, 2010) has shown that the Late Wilbanks burials made up five distinct clusters in Mound C, and I argue that it is a strong possibility that the four skulls with copper headdresses from Burial 38 were ancestral representatives, so to speak, of the corporate-kin groups buried in the four clusters around the edges of Mound C. Skull 1, which was associated with a shell gorget rather than a copper headdress, may have been interred because she represented an ancestor common to all of those groups who were buried in Mound C.
Even though the human remains and artifacts from Burial 38 seem to be more scattered than intentionally patterned, this does not detract from their ritual significance. As a log-lined tomb that was covered over with a clay cap, I argue that Burial 38 became a bundle in itself. Following the interpretations of Sawyer and King (n.d.), I believe that Burial 38 was still only part of an even larger bundle- Mound C. By bringing together foreign and local imagery, Mound C represented a melding of foreign and local ideology that was probably used to create and legitimate new social roles based in inequality (King 2010, 2011). Burial 38 was an important part of this ritual performance that used the human remains of ancestors and sacred objects to broadcast this new ideology and solidify these political and social relations.
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