

# CRAIG-STYLE ICONOGRAPHY

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**T**he engraved shell art of Spiro has long been separated into two traditions, Braden and Craig. Braden represents a more naturalistic and figural style, similar in certain respects to broader patterns of representational Mississippian art in other mediums across the southeast. Craig, by contrast, is the more distinctive and characteristic form found at Spiro and related sites in the trans-Mississippi South; it is marked by robust and schematized designs that seem to denote rather than depict details of figures and their accoutrements.

Craig designs are relatively simple, with a strong tendency for the composition of the design to follow the long axis of the cup. Frequently, there is a secondary, perpendicular design axis following the shoulder of the cup as well. While Braden designs are often two-dimensional designs draped over the surface of a three-dimensional object, Craig artists frequently employed the shape of the cup to accentuate or complement the overall composition, especially of human figures. Craig engraved shell forms include cups, gorgets, cameos, and figurines; gorgets are rare in Braden, and cameos and figurines altogether absent. Perhaps the most immediately distinctive characteristic of Craig—especially in its more characteristic forms—is a blocky and angular depiction of the human form. Heads are larger relative to the size of the body, and the lower part of the head grows in size relative to the upper portion. Faces may be portrayed in profile or facing the viewer—a departure from Braden, which allows only portrayals in profile. Ears grow in size—exactly the opposite of trends in Braden—and stylized conventions develop for how ears are represented; they are depicted in the same way regardless of whether the figure is in profile or frontal view.

Thematically, Craig includes a broad range of individual motifs, depictions of human figures (human beings), humans performing secular or sacred tasks (human doings), human-animal composites or transformations, chimeric or hybrid animals combining parts of two or more taxa, and a much broader bestiary of animals than is found in Braden. Braden includes its share of fantastic beasts like amphisbaena, but they are fantastic creatures rather than hybrids or chimeric composites. Especially notable are the Craig chimeric creatures and juxtaposed elements of cat-bird-spider and snake-spider-raccoon. Birdmen are regularly portrayed in Craig shell art, and one of the most curious conundrums is the complete absence of birdman depictions in Braden, the tradition assumed to have closer ties to the broader Southeast, where birdmen are integral elements of canonical Mississippian iconography.

Craig is usually divided into three phases, Craig A, Craig B, and Craig C, with Craig C being the most immediately recognizable and iconographically coherent of the three. But

(counterclockwise from top)

Engraved shell cup in relief.  
Braden style. Le Flore  
County, Oklahoma, Spiro site,  
AD 1100–1250. Marine shell.  
National Cowboy & Western  
Heritage Museum. H.192.

Engraved shell cup depict-  
ing armadillos. Craig style.  
Le Flore County, Oklahoma,  
Spiro site, AD 1200–1450.  
Marine shell. Sam Noble  
Oklahoma Museum of  
Natural History, University  
of Oklahoma, Norman.

Engraved shell cup depict-  
ing eagle heads. Craig style.  
Le Flore County, Oklahoma,  
Spiro site, AD 1200–1450.  
Marine shell. Sam Noble  
Oklahoma Museum of  
Natural History, University  
of Oklahoma, Norman.



before taking up the elements of Craig iconography *sensu stricto*, it may be helpful to review how Craig came to be defined, and the very different intellectual purposes served by the two different engraved shell traditions—Braden and Craig—identified at Spiro.

## Background

Excavations at Spiro probably produced more engraved shell art than all other excavations across the Southeast combined. The sheer mass of material was overwhelming, and it would be hard to overstate the scale of Philip Phillips's magisterial effort to assemble all the known cups, gorgets, figures, cameos, and fragments of Spiroan engraved shell together for publication.<sup>1</sup> As part of this enormous task, he considered formal, stylistic, and thematic issues; located and refit fragments from private collections and public institutions alike; and with help from a team of assistants, provided both rubbings and line drawings of all the known examples of engraved shell from the site.

From the outset, however, Phillips's goal had been more than simply describing and documenting this extraordinary corpus. It had been, in his words, to "organize this abundance into intelligible units of style—not only to facilitate external comparisons, but, more importantly, to lay some preliminary groundwork for an eventual understanding of the internal processes responsible for such an efflorescence of creative activity."<sup>2</sup> He was, in other words, trying to map this creative explosion onto cultural developments, onto some kind of temporal progression or framework.

Phillips outlines the evolution of his thought with the singular clarity for which he was renowned (a colleague once described Phillips as the only person who could make pottery type descriptions entertaining). From the outset he recognized two markedly different forms of expression, which he initially termed "Ornate" and "Bold." Because his goal was to develop a seriation or progression as a way of getting at an actual sequence of events over time, he immediately added an "Intermediate" category to accommodate the assumed transition from one form to the other, while recognizing that the directionality of such a transition was unclear. At first he considered a transition from Bold to Intermediate to Ornate, but after encountering an Ornate cup reworked into a Bold figurine, he reversed the putative sequence.<sup>3</sup> Alas, that didn't work either, as he soon identified a steady breakdown in the Ornate style that led away from Bold rather than toward it, making the idea of a simple transition over time from one to the other unworkable. Try as he might, Phillips could not find a conceptual shoehorn large enough to squeeze all Spiroan engraved shell art into a single tradition.

Next he considered a divergence along two lines, "Breakdown" and Bold, both arising from a common Ornate source, a source that by this time he was already calling Braden. As he developed his Braden sequence, he set aside an increasing number of examples into a temporary category—really a conceptual shoebox—that he called "Braden X." But despite his best efforts, he could not derive the style, themes, and iconography of the cups, gorgets, and figurines that distinguished the Bold style from a Braden source. Reluctantly, he concluded that Braden and Bold, which he now renamed Craig, represented separate traditions with their own sequences and progression through time, and Braden X was reclassified as part of Craig.

This history has three implications for the purposes of this chapter. First, from the outset, Craig was recognized as a discrete and recognizable style; its canons were so distinct that Phillips initially assumed it must represent the opposite end of a developmental



continuum from the classic and gracile Braden A to the robust and stylized Craig C, or vice versa. That understanding was only abandoned as it became clear that Braden reflected a seriation or stylistic progression that led in a very different direction than that expressed by the corpus of Craig material.

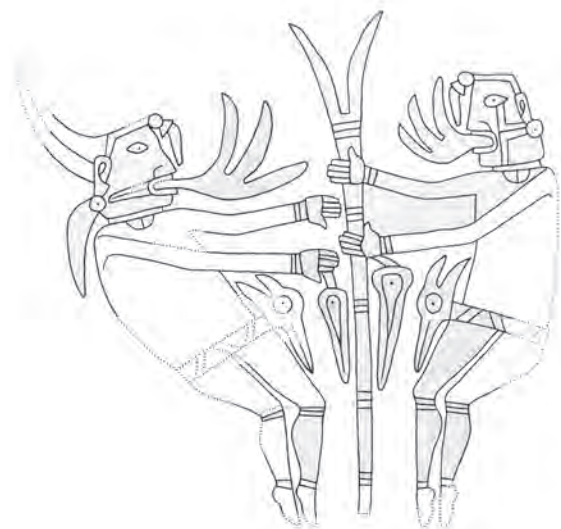
Second, and in a related vein, Craig was always defined in terms of what it was not—not Braden, not one end of a developmental sequence with Braden at the other, not one of two developments from a Braden base, not a grouping of depictions and symbolic expressions that could be either derived from or subsumed within Braden as a tradition. Because Craig was created as a residual category paralleling but distinct from Braden, it inherited the three-phase structure that Phillips had developed from the outset—Bold to Intermediate to Ornate, or vice versa—then when that proved impracticable, Phillips tried a bifurcated sequence of Ornate to Intermediate to Bold on the one hand, and Ornate to a different group of intermediate forms to Breakdown on the other. But in none of these cases was the tripartite scheme developed to reflect patterns clearly and immediately emergent from the Craig corpus.

Finally, Phillips's published organizational scheme itself reflected a developmental trajectory that changed over time, with portions published at different times and subject to later reconsideration, regarding the assignment of individual works to specific phases as well as the ways in which the various phases related to one another. Volume 1 of Phillips and Brown's *Pre-Columbian Shell Engravings from the Craig Mound at Spiro, Oklahoma*, which laid out the relationships between the Braden and Craig traditions, was not written until volume 3 had already appeared in print, and Phillips acknowledges that he chose in some cases to correct misclassifications, and in others, to live with infelicities rather than revisit them based on subsequent analyses.

### Craig C

With that background in mind, it may be helpful to approach the Craig corpus from a slightly different perspective, working backward from the most easily recognized and dispositive group, Craig C. This was, after all, the nucleus from which the concept of Craig initially developed. Comprising more than fifty cups, cup fragments, and gorgets (plates 278–338, plus later additions), Craig C depictions are generally simple and bold, executed in deeply cut lines that sometimes overshoot their intersection. Excision is rare; rotational symmetry, court-card symmetry, and interlocking or circular designs are absent. Both frontal and profile depictions are employed, with right profiles strongly predominating over left profiles. Human figures either form the central axial element or confront it; no addorsed (back to back) or regardant (looking over the shoulder) postures are shown. Most figures are shown with a woodpecker-headed ax (sometime so stylized as to be little more than a blob) thrust through their belts. Hands are equally stylized, and when both are shown, they are depicted in an anatomically impossible form with both palms facing the viewer, and both thumbs either up or down. Eye surrounds, nearly ubiquitous in Braden and other phases of Craig, are absent on humans, although they do appear on both forked poles and on human-animal composites. That's not to say that human figures are not denoted by facial markings, but rather that other forms of marking are consistently employed.

Thematically, Craig C is dominated by the Forked Pole theme (see especially cups 314–22), in which two apparently human figures confront and appear to contest a forked pole. One figure—let's call him T-Bar—is nearly unique to Craig C and is identified by an engraved line or lines running vertically from eye to base of mandible, with a horizontal line



Drawing of engraved shell cup. Craig style. Le Flore County, Oklahoma, Spiro site, AD 1200–1450. From Philip Phillips and James A. Brown, *Pre-Columbian Shell Engravings from the Craig Mound at Spiro, Oklahoma*, vol. 6, pl. 322 (Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum Press, 1982). President and Fellows of Harvard College, courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology.

running perpendicularly from this vertical line to the ear. The other figure, Wedgemouth, is denoted by a triangular-shaped mouth surround; the only examples of excision in Craig C are used to emphasize this identifying feature. Both figures reach for a forked pole filling the central axial dimension of the cup. This is the most coherent and consistently portrayed theme in the Spiroan corpus, depicted on two dozen different cups, seventeen of which Phillips and Brown describe as “practically identical in design composition and configuration of major elements.”<sup>4</sup> Other cups, fragments, and gorgets complement this theme, depicting one or the other figure or elements associated with these figures and the broader theme.

T-Bar is rarely shown as anything but a solitary figure (exceptions are discussed below), but Wedgemouth is frequently shown in multiple, as a series of heads (cups 287G, 296, 297), as a wedge-mouthed figure confronting a bow with several wedge-mouthed heads on the opposite side (cups 286, 286.1), paired Wedgemouth figures facing each other holding bows as central elements (and essentially filling the place of the forked pole; gorgets 336, 337), as a Janus-headed figure with two wedge-mouthed faces (289), or as a human-antlered rattlesnake composite (cup 307). Wedgemouth is also shown as a Birdman (e.g., cup 300), with bird claws at the end of his outstretched feathered arms. The same figure morphs into the standing Wedgemouth holding serpent staffs (cups 278–80, 289, 291–92) on the one hand, and a cat-headed (cups 305–6) or bird-headed (cup 303) figure on the other. This latter figure is depicted with a one-prong truncate, one-prong wavy eye surround and the same accoutrements and posture as Wedgemouth.

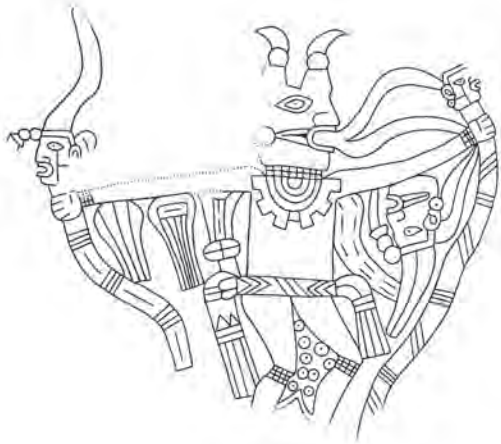
There is some evidence to believe that the forked pole is either a particular instance or a development of the serpent staff seen in other phases. Heads are sometimes associated with that pole or staff; in most cases, those heads are wedge mouthed (e.g., cups 278, 295), but in one instance (279), the heads have T-Bar markings. Characteristic of all these figures is a speech scroll or song, usually in the form of a trilobed design issuing from the mouths of both figures. While this or similar motifs occur in other phases (in Braden B, for example, it appears on cups 57, 59D, and 60), they are uncommon. In Craig C these speech scrolls or songs are the norm, and in the one instance in which T-Bar heads are shown with the serpent staff (cup 279), this speech scroll or song goes from the mouth of a Wedgemouth figure to the ear of the T-Bar head.



Drawing of engraved shell cup. Craig style. Le Flore County, Oklahoma, Spiro site, AD 1200–1450. From Philip Phillips and James A. Brown, *Pre-Columbian Shell Engravings from the Craig Mound at Spiro, Oklahoma*, vol. 6, pl. 286.1 (Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum Press, 1982). President and Fellows of Harvard College, courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology.

At the (perhaps grave) risk of pareidolia, the Craig C corpus can be arranged into a single narrative. A series of cups identify the main actors, each holding serpent staffs (e.g., cups 280 and 280.1). The collective nature of Wedgemouth is established (cups 286, 286.1, and 297), while another set of cups underscores the supernatural dimensions of Wedgemouth (e.g., cups 298 and 300 as Birdman composite, with cup 298 associating the Birdman with snakes, cup 307 as snakeman composite, and cups 296 and 297 further associating Wedgemouth with ophidian elements). As we shall see, this supernatural nature is made clearer in Craig B. The importance of the bird-man-snake axis is emphasized in a series of Craig C cups depicting bird talons and snakes in register (cups 326–33), and by cup 304c, which shows a wedge-mouthed Birdman with ophidian elements.

Wedgemouth speaks or sings, denoted by the bifurcate design issuing from the figure's mouth (e.g., cups 278–79, and perhaps the double streamers on some Birdman cups); in at least one instance (cup 279), the speech act enters T-Bar's ear. T-Bar approaches Wedgemouth and the forked pole (e.g., cup 313). No speech act is indicated, and Wedgemouth holds the forked pole securely with hands in normal orientation for Craig depictions, thumbs facing upward. T-Bar reaches for the pole but does not grasp it. The position of the hands as grasping seems to be significant; a single cup depicts registers of hands as the hand-in-eye motif; the top register of hands is placed so that the heel of the hands are on the wall of the cup, the fingers closing over the spire. Another Craig C gorget (338B) shows two hands, volar (i.e., palm facing the viewer), joined by a continuous band of brickwork presumed to represent beading.



Drawing of engraved shell cup. Craig style. Le Flore County, Oklahoma, Spiro site, AD 1200–1450. From Philip Phillips and James A. Brown, *Pre-Columbian Shell Engravings from the Craig Mound at Spiro, Oklahoma*, vol. 6, pl. 279 (Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum Press, 1982). President and Fellows of Harvard College, courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology.

Engraved shell gorget of human hands. Craig style. Le Flore County, Oklahoma, Spiro site, AD 1250–1400. Marine shell. Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa Oklahoma.





T-Bar and Wedgemouth then confront the pole, each speaking or singing, the act denoted by a three-pronged design element issuing from the figures' mouths. In these instances, T-Bar grasps the pole while Wedgemouth releases it, the release expressed by both the physical separation of Wedgemouth's hands from the pole and the reversed, downward-facing position of the hands (cups 314–22, plus fragments). Whether this transfer is voluntary or a seizure is unclear. Finally, T-Bar holds the pole wearing a Craig C diadem, analogous to the Craig C collar worn by Wedgemouth, and engraved with a double outline eye; a second T-Bar figure (or a second depiction of the same T-Bar figure) with a single outlined eye and a standard Craig C collar dances nearby (cup 309). The importance of this collar or diadem is reinforced on a cup repeating the motif in register.

This, then, composes the Craig C corpus. As noted elsewhere in this volume, we believe this depicts a transfer of power or knowledge. Specifically, we believe the T-Bar figure represents a human actor, possibly specific to Spiro and integral to the creation of the Spirit Lodge, who receives power or esoteric knowledge embodied by the forked pole from a supernatural or ancestral collective, represented as the Wedgemouth figure or figures from whom T-Bar takes the pole.

### Craig B

Working backward, we can compare this Craig C corpus to that of its nominal predecessor, Craig B. Craig B has less-directed designs, with central vertical axial elements present but not as frequently employed; bilaterally symmetrical designs are common. Rotational and court-card symmetry are both used, and in addition to registers of motifs, Craig B includes staggered registers or rows in which the elements are offset. Human figures are somewhat less blocky or oblong than in Craig C, although both B and C feature figures with a waistline dropped so far that the separate legs, shortened concomitant with the lengthening of the torso, sometimes reach all the way to the belt. Hands are a common motif, and they have their own characteristically nonanatomical element. Hands are shown palm out, but the volar presentation is contradicted by the fingernails, which are shown on the inside of the fingers. Only in one case (cup 258) is a proper volar perspective maintained. Hands are also shown on several gorgets (277A–D) arranged in bilateral or rotational symmetry, associated with tetraskelia.

Ears in Craig B and Craig C are depicted in a distinctive form called the *closed-9* and are different from Craig A and all Braden phases. While Craig B and C share the same form, they are executed in different ways, allowing a Morellian distinction between the two to be drawn—notably a thicker, bolder design in C, the helix of the ear curling backward in Craig B, but dropping vertically in Craig C, while the exaggerated size of the head in Craig C forces the more or less natural location of the ear in Craig B to be shifted markedly upward in C.

Thematically, Craig B is dominated by a remarkable bestiary of chimeric animals and human-animal composites, including cats, snakes, spiders, bison, deer, fish, raccoons, and birds of several types. Pride of place goes to intertwined snakemen, addorsed, often above a coiled snake, with the intertwining of the two forming the central axial element. While often depicted (twenty-three times in one or another form), they are represented with less hieratic coherence and consistency than the forked pole theme in Craig C. Birdman depictions are also common, depicted on thirteen whole or fragmentary cups. Piasas (narrowly defined) occur on six cups, and a series of cups are covered in intricate designs that seem





Engraved shell gorget with hands and spider. Craig style. Craig style. Le Flore County, Oklahoma, Spiro site, AD 1250–1400. Marine shell. Courtesy of the Oklahoma History Center.

to recapitulate pottery types such as Spiro Engraved (cup 261), Haley Engraved (cup 260), and Crockett Curvilinear Incised (cup 259). Cups also depict individual motifs, including the bilobed arrow (cups 271, 271.I, and 272A and B), arrows (cup 270), bows (cup 269), the pear-shaped appendage (cups 266–268), and the petaloid cross (cup 263).

While the intertwined snakemen may be portrayed with different details, the differences between the two figures in each pair are always emphasized. On cup 192, for example, both figures are snakes with a full human body in place of a head; the right figure is shown with a body covered in spotted circles, the left with a divided body of brickwork bands on one side and barred ovals on the other. The belts and sashes of the figures differ, and even the rattles at the ends of the snake tails are depicted differently. Both figures, however, wear a version of the Craig C diadem, and one of the figures (at least) holds a serpent staff.

Birdmen are depicted throughout the Craig tradition, but in Craig B they have the greatest consistency in presentation. Cup 203 serves as an exemplar: the head is shown with



Engraved shell with four winged serpents surrounding a cross-in-circle motif. Craig style. Le Flore County, Oklahoma, Spiro site, AD 1250–1400. Marine shell. University of Arkansas Museum, Fayetteville. 37-1-39. Drawing from Philip Phillips and James A. Brown, *Pre-Columbian Shell Engravings from the Craig Mound at Spiro, Oklahoma*, vol. 5, pl. 229 (Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum Press, 1980). President and Fellows of Harvard College, courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology.



Engraved shell cup with two supernatural figures with snake extremities dancing above a coiled snake. Craig style. Le Flore County, Oklahoma, Spiro site, AD 1200–1450. Marine shell. National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution. 2189083. Drawing from Philip Phillips and James A. Brown, *Pre-Columbian Shell Engravings from the Craig Mound at Spiro, Oklahoma*, vol. 5, pl. 192 (Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum Press, 1980). President and Fellows of Harvard College, courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology.





Engraved shell cup with depiction of Birdman. Craig Style. Le Flore County, Oklahoma, Spiro site, AD 1200–1450. Marine shell. National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution. 189121.



a distinctive hook-beaked mask, the body follows the vertical axis of the cup, and the outspread wings form a zig-zag that follows the horizontal axis of the shell, using the transition from wall to spire to accentuate the effect. A streamer motif, possible indicating speech or song, emanates from the figure's mouth. In some cases these birdmen carry a woodpecker-headed ax in their belt, as do the paired figures of the Craig C forked pole theme; in one instance (cup 204Ab), the ax is so carefully depicted that we can recognize it as the same kind of copper-bitted, carved woodpecker-headed ax recovered from archaeological contexts in Spiro's Spirit Lodge, associated with complexly woven baskets.<sup>5</sup> In two cases the Birdman is shown with the one-prong truncate, one-prong wavy eye surround and the hooked-beak mask, and the same eye surround appears on human figures holding serpent staffs (cup 189), heads portrayed in register (cups 215 A, B, and C), heads frontally portrayed with small legs and rattlesnake rattles (cup 216), anthropomorphized birds or bird heads (not quite human enough to qualify as birdmen; cups 202, 207A, and 207B), snakes (cup 222B, 242), spiders (cup 244), piasas (cups 223, 228, and 230), cameos (cups 273B and C), and, in case its importance hadn't been adequately established, as a separate motif in register (cup 265).

Spiders are indicated by webs in Craig A, but in Craig B they appear as full-blown supernatural. They're characteristically shown with an anatomically incorrect three body parts, but this lack of representational verisimilitude is forgivable as they are also shown with raccoon skins wrapped around their legs (cups 245 and 246), wings and bird claws (cups 247A, 248), and rattlesnake rattles (cup 247B). The extra body part, inserted between the abdomen and cephalothorax, is represented as a cross in circle, probably identifying this spider as a fire bringer (although that is a topic for another essay). Spider heads also appear as a separate motif in Craig B, surmounted by a cryptic element ending in two human hands (cup 244), also marked by the one-prong truncate, one-prong wavy eye surround.

T-Bar appears in Craig B only twice; once on a fragment (cup 191Db), and once on a worn and broken cup with two addorsed T-Bar figures (cup 188). The figure on the right holds a bow, while the figure on the left wears what Phillips calls "an unsuccessful attempt to fabricate a Craig C collar"; it's unclear what this figure holds, although it may be a serpent staff. Wedgemouth appears more broadly, as at least one of paired intertwined snakemen (cups 193 and 191A, in the latter case with excision of the wedge-mouth element), part of an asymmetrical composition of figures holding serpent staffs (cup 191.1), heads in register (cup 213), and as the head of a snake (cup 222Ab).<sup>6</sup> If the correspondence of Wedgemouth with some of the birdmen, snakemen, and catmen of Craig C is meaningful, Craig B abounds with depictions relating to this figure or collective.

The Craig B bestiary is markedly different from the strongly focused theme of Craig C. In the latter, a series of relatively unique elements are drawn together into a single theme, likely representing a specific narrative. The former focuses on the transformation of polymorphic beings, who seem to become increasingly overlapping and substitutable; the beings tend not to be fantastic *sui generis* but rather as fantastic combinations and recombinations of more familiar creatures.

## Craig A

Craig A includes several design elements absent from later phases, including horizontal axial designs (cups 168 and 168.1), triaxial designs (the so-called St. Andrews cross; gorgets 147 and 148A), and cryptic, meandering petaloid zones dividing the design field of cups (cups 164, 165v, and 165.1). Human figures have a more naturalistic torso and ratio of head to body, and heads are more rounded with a more naturalistic ear placement. Ear form is generally simplified, and in many instances, ears are altogether absent, although an earspool may mark their approximate location. Human figures tend to predominate, although birds (including both raptors and woodpeckers), raccoons, and bison also feature. Chimeric animals are absent, and the only human-animal composite is the Birdman, with one exception (gorget 139) to be addressed shortly.

Several overlapping themes are apparent. One involves paired humans facing, addorsed or regardant, a pot or similar object producing intertwining vapors. Birds, raccoons, and spiders are all referenced in these depictions (gorgets 126–28). In another, broadly similar group (gorgets 130, 131D, 133A, 133B, 135A, 135B, and 137), paired addorsed or regardant figures flank a central pole; the two groups have overlapping themes, as the same pole also appears in gorget 127, and in gorget 136, the twined vapors serve as the central pole. In a third related theme (gorgets 141 and 142), two figures holding bows face a central pole; in one case (141), that central panel or pole is filled with human heads. The figure to the right may have a wedge mouth, and the effect is similar in composition albeit not style to Craig C



Engraved gorget with two dancing figures holding rattles and drums. Craig style. Le Flore County, Oklahoma, Spiro site, AD 1200–1450. Marine shell. Courtesy of Woolaroc Museum and Wildlife Preserve.



cup 286.1, where Wedgemouth occupies the right side of the cup, holding a bow as a central axial element and facing three Wedgemouth heads in vertical register on the left side. More generally, the paired figures holding bows presage Craig C gorgets 336 and 337, which depict two Wedgemouth figures and are compositionally identical. These overlapping themes are subsumed within the Hamilton and Rhoden “styles” as defined by Brain and Phillips.<sup>7</sup>

The kinds of transformation apparent in Craig B are all but absent. Birdmen are the sole human-animal composite, with the dubious exception of gorget 139, which shows a human figure—possibly with a wedge-mouth surround—in the center, holding a serpent staff and flanked by raccoon skins; another raccoon skin serves as a central panel obscuring the figure’s torso, surrounded by a petaloid border. A second human head appears upside-down between the figure’s legs. Phillips suggests it signifies “gestation and birth of an alter ego, conceived as a raccoon but emerging into the outer world as a human being,” but I view this with friendly skepticism.<sup>8</sup> More likely, given the association of raccoons with the paired figure gorgets depicting vessels and intertwined vapor, and the association of these depictions with the emergence of twins in gorget 132, is that the depiction is another way of representing the *image dédoublée* of twins (another incomplete gorget or plaque [125] may use the same mode of depiction) in association with raccoons in their procyonid rather than protean form.

Birdman is a central subject in Craig A, but it likely does not represent a single, irreducible figure. There is considerable evidence that the Birdman, in at least one of his guises, represents twins or some form of paired being. Certainly the undulant division of the twins emerging from a drum or vessel in gorget 132, and the similar treatment of paired halves of Birdman figures in cup 165.1, seems to be indicative of this within the Spiro corpus, as is the Janus-headed birdmen of plaque 152E. Nor is the suggested association between the undulant twins of gorget 132 and the undulant birdmen of cup 165.1 based solely on that single shared attribute; an engraved shell gorget from Craighead County, Arkansas (Tommy

Beutel collection no. 143), depicts what is explicitly a Birdman similarly emerging from a vessel.<sup>9</sup> Further afield, the Janus-headed copper Wulfing plate B emphasizes this duality, and (although the reasons are sadly beyond the scope of this chapter) there is reason to believe the Birdman more generally indexes twins or reflexivity between two linked figures, on both iconographic and culture-historical grounds.<sup>10</sup> The forked mouth surround of the Birdman in cup 165.1 is of special note, as it further links this Birdman expression with the repoussé copper birdmen of sites like Etowah and Fort Jackson.

That a single collective of figures or correspondence of roles is intended by the two variants of the Birdman (one with a distinctive hook-nosed mask, one with the one-prong truncate, one-prong wavy eye surround)—and that these both correspond to or indicate Wedgemouth—is nevertheless suggested by cups 169 and 170A, where the masked Birdman is also shown with the wedge mouth. In Craig C the same accoutrements and postures could be identified for both figures and Wedgemouth, who was also depicted as a more generic birdman; in Craig B birdmen are shown with both the mask and eye surround, and in Craig A the masked birdman is shown with a wedge mouth. These complex relationships, in which some elements link Craig A and B, others Craig B and C, and some Craig A and C, constantly frustrated Phillips.

From the outset Craig A was understood to be most similar to—but not the same as—the Braden tradition. In fact some of the chunky-player gorgets initially published as Craig A (e.g., 149A, 149B) were later recategorized as Braden A in the final captions—largely because of their supposed associations with styles elsewhere in the core Southeast. Ironically, however, while these gorgets fall within what Brain and Phillips call the Eddyville gorget style, all the canonical expressions of the fenestrated chunky-player gorget form actually derive from the trans-Mississippi South, with examples from Arkansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma.<sup>11</sup>

Through both its similarities to Braden A and its own unique depictions (such as birdmen), Craig A links the Craig tradition to the larger structures of belief shared across the Mississippian world, rooting the larger Craig tradition firmly in the larger Southeastern Ceremonial Complex, partaking in the same symbolism and visual grammar as expressed at sites far removed from the banks of the Arkansas. In such an arrangement Braden A and Craig A share many similarities but differ in detail—Craig A and Braden A tell similar stories, Braden with a southern drawl, Craig with a western twang.

Craig A also sets the stage for later Craig subjects and themes, including T-Bar (albeit only in a single small cameo of uncertain significance), Wedgemouth, and that figure's many guises: Birdman (who remains absent from the Braden tradition at Spiro), the range of entities bearing the one-prong truncate, one-prong wavy eye surround, the serpent staff, and by extension, the forked pole (especially in treatments like gorget 141). It also provides a metaphorical basis for understanding Craig iconography, both through its depictions of powerful beings emerging through and from the rites performed by celebrants (e.g., gorgets 126, 127, 128, and 132) and—through cups like 160, which depicts canoeists bearing iconographic standards plying unnamed waters—the spread of Mississippian cosmologies and cosmogonies to the geographic margins of the Mississippian world.

Engraved shell cup fragment of figure canoeing. Craig style. Le Flore County, Oklahoma, Spiro site, AD 1200–1450. Marine shell. Courtesy of the Oklahoma History Center.





### Discussion

Phillips's labors were by no means vain, and there are clear stylistic progressions and broad evidence for seriation in the Craig corpus, perhaps most apparent in the succession of specific motifs and his Morellian approach to changing depictions of ears, lips, hands, and other secondary body parts, and in the increasing schematization and stylization of the human form—especially the head and its relative shape and proportions—across the Craig tradition. That said, however, it is not at all clear that Craig A, B, and C can be adequately understood simply as successive phases, less because there's not temporal progression than because much more is going on. It may be better instead to see the three “phases” less in purely temporal than at least partially dialectical terms.

Craig A lays a groundwork of elements that connect the Craig tradition with the larger Mississippian symbolic universe and, if taken together with Braden A, seems like a fairly orthodox and conformist expression of Southeastern Ceremonial Complex constructs.

Engraved gorget with human head effigies in relief. Craig style. Le Flore County, Oklahoma, Spiro site, AD 1200–1450. Marine shell. National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution. 18/9084.



Craig B is another matter entirely, a heterodox and in some regards almost idiosyncratic reformulation, with elements reconnected as creatively as the recombination of real-world animals into fantastic chimera. Students of Mississippian iconography have long recognized differences in how symbolic forms were expressed or emphasized between major mound centers like Etowah and the core Southeast on the one hand (largely associated with Braden and, it is assumed, Cahokia), and Moundville and the Lower Mississippi Valley on the other. It is tempting to see Craig A as generally influenced by the former, and Craig B as the creative explosion generated by the tensions of artisans seeking to reconcile the humans and birdmen of the former with the piasas, cat monsters, and winged snakes of the latter.

Through the transformation and transmutation of creatures into chimeric composites, and the transformation of humans into other creatures and their polysemic polymorphs, later parts of Craig B and parts of Craig C reflect the syncretism of multiple entities into an ancestral collective—Wedgemouth and that figure's various aspects or guises—and the sublation or synthesis of those oppositions through the transfer of power and esoteric knowledge from that collective to an individual, expressed iconographically through the Forked Pole theme of Craig C, and archaeologically through the construction of the Great Mortuary and the Spirit Lodge.

Suggesting that the overall iconography of the Craig tradition can be understood or appreciated in these terms does not, of course, mean that this is its sole or even most salient significance. The Spiroan engraved shell corpus expresses and participates in a complex, dynamic, and changing symbolic dialogue with other mediums and across many generations, each artist inflecting and interpreting that tradition in unique ways with each work. But the very complexity of that iconography, and the challenges posed by understanding cryptic representations referencing narratives and constructs not immediately accessible to us requires that we begin by understanding the formal development of the tradition, and how these traditions, as reflections of changing ideational constructs, were simultaneously engraved in shell and inscribed in earth.