

Insight Through Icons

Gregory D. Wilson

Certain formal ceramic wares from the Lohmann-phase American Bottom were the media for a distinctive form of iconic engraving. An analysis of iconic design, ceramic form, and the archaeological context of engravings provides important clues to the development and regional expression of a Cahokian elite ideology. The predominance of falconid symbolism in this inventory of engravings suggests that Upper World themes, in particular the "thunderer", were pivotal to the legitimation of Cahokian elite political authority.

The chiefly control of symbols has been proposed as a primary mechanism by which emerging relations of social inequality were legitimized in hierarchically ranked, prestate societies (see Anderson 1994; Earle 1991; Helms 1992, 1994; Muller 1989:26; Wright 1984). Although many archaeologists have stressed the importance of symbolism in the context of a sanctifying, elite ideology, such analyses have tended to focus upon formal iconography, often related to ritual contexts (Earle 1989; Hodder 1986; Pauketat and Emerson 1991; Shanks and Tilley 1982). The focus here is on the significance of informal symbolism as it relates to the appropriation of elite political and religious authority in hierarchically ranked, prestate societies. This issue will be addressed through the analysis of an array of discrete iconic engravings from the late-prehistoric, Mississippian polity of Cahokia in the American Bottom.

Analyses of Lohmann-phase (A.D. 1050–1100) ceramic assemblages from throughout the American Bottom region (Figure 1) have revealed an isolatable variety of engraved sherds (Emerson and Jackson 1984:313–315; Holley 1989:86–87; Koldehoff 1989:55). These iconic engravings appear informal in both the quality of engraving and artistic style (Emerson 1989:80–81; Emerson and Jackson 1984:315). I will argue that the seemingly incidental nature of these engravings does not entail that they are somehow less significant than more formal styles. Viewed from a political-ideological perspective, it is the informal quality of these iconic engravings that points to their archaeological importance. Admittedly, the full cultural meaning of these iconic engravings is ultimately inaccessible. The goal here is to relate these engravings to specific iconic themes that may have been pivotal to the postulated political consolidation of Cahokia.

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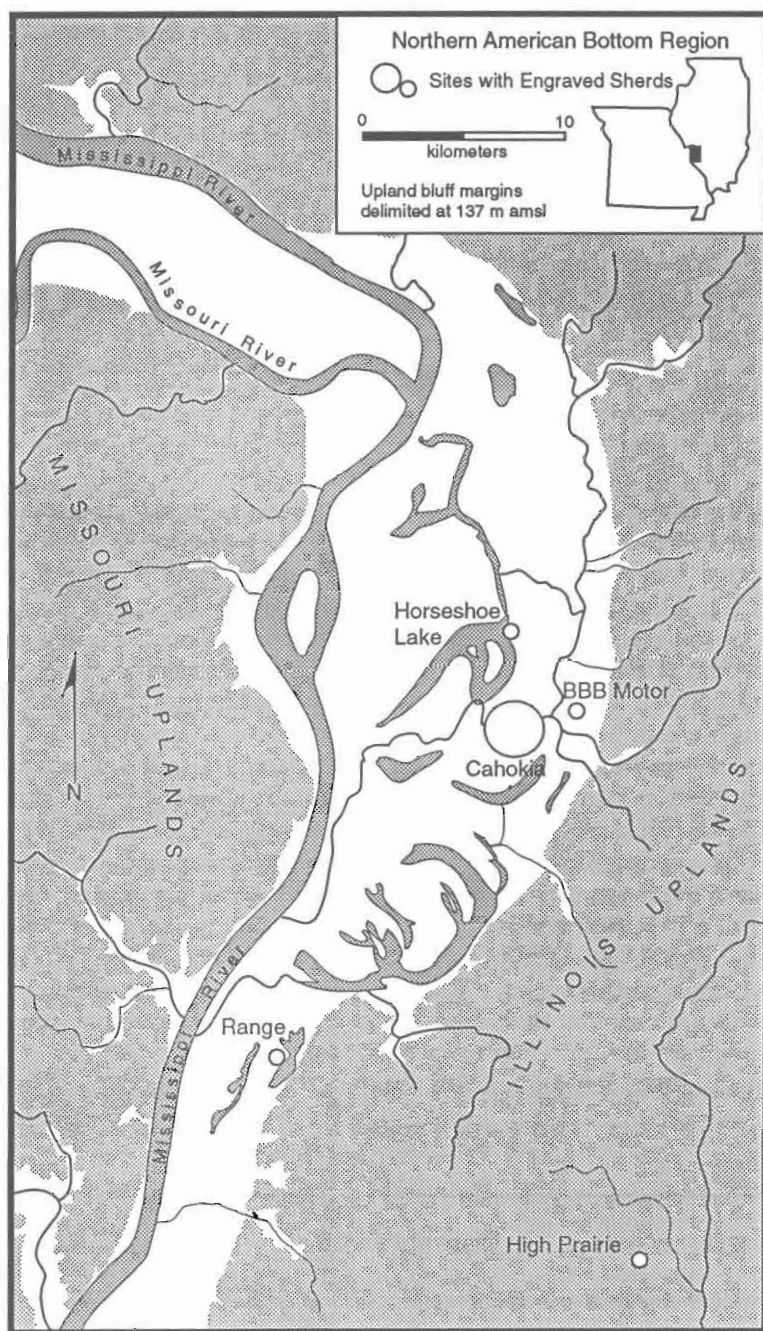


Figure 1. Lohmann-phase sites with engraved sherds.

A Changing Landscape

Regional similarities in artifact assemblages and patterns of social organization suggest that, communities within the American Bottom had come to share certain fundamental elements of a social identity by the Emergent Mississippian period. Kelly (1990:129–130) has interpreted the repetitive occurrence of the courtyard and central post or pit features at Emergent Mississippian occupations of the Range site as indicating the incorporation of cosmological order into the basic social organization of the Range site community. These central marking features, thought by Kelly (1990:129–130) to be a variant of the cross and circle motif, have been documented at the Emergent Mississippian occupation of the Westpark site and the Cahokia site as well. The level of localized political centralization within Emergent Mississippian society is still unclear. However, the presence of a number of localized ceramic subtraditions seems to reflect some level of political autonomy and bounded social identity (Kelly 1990).

At around A.D. 1050 a number of abrupt changes occurred across the regional landscape (Pauketat 1994:171–174). A recent population estimate has revealed that in the immediate decades framing the Lohmann-phase consolidation, Cahokia's population expanded from 1,000 to 2,000 in the Edelhardt phase to about 10,200 to 15,300 in the Lohmann phase (Pauketat and Lopinot 1997). Evidence of this significant demographic shift has been detected in the Horseshoe Lake peninsula, several kilometers north of Cahokia. Many Emergent Mississippian settlements in the peninsula, including a possible Edelhardt-phase mound center, were apparently abandoned about the time that Cahokian dominance was extended over the region (Lopinot 1993:5–7; Pauketat et al. 1993:3; Wilson 1994:10). A demographic centralization of this magnitude is suggestive of a dramatically restructured regional social organization. The integration of local immigrants may have been a major factor in the struggle to establish and maintain the centralization of Lohmann-phase authority (Pauketat 1994:180–182). While the full significance of this demographic shift is still unclear, the political and demographic centralization occurring at the Cahokia site would have necessarily involved the social integration of groups similar to those which evacuated the Horseshoe Lake locale.

Ushering in this new era of Cahokian regional dominance was the rapid implementation of a number of highly visible, fundamental changes in the regional landscape (Pauketat 1994:171–174). Large scale excavations at the Cahokia site (e.g. Tract-15A) and at rural sites (e.g. BBB Motor site) have revealed significant alterations in community organizational patterns, material culture, and architectural techniques, all of which date to the decades surrounding the Edelhardt/Lohmann regional transition (Emerson and Jackson 1984; Milner 1990; Pauketat 1994). Also dating to this transition is the large-scale transformation of the Cahokian landscape itself, in the form of massive land levelling and mound construction (Dalan 1993:184–186).

Iconic Engravings

An isolatable variety of iconic engravings may be identified in the Mississippian pottery assemblages from the American Bottom (Emerson 1989:78–81; Emerson and Jackson 1984:315; Holley 1989:86–87; Koldehoff 1989:55). Lohmann-phase iconic engrav-

ings appear almost exclusively on formal Cahokian wares, such as Monks Mound Red bowls, seed jars, and grog tempered, fine-ware pots. This pattern may indicate that these particular vessel types were selected for iconic engraving by the Lohmann-phase inhabitants of the American Bottom. The standardized pastes and morphological attributes of these vessels are suggestive that they were centrally produced by a limited number of Cahokian potters (Kelly 1980; Pauketat and Emerson 1991). Moreover, they are consistently represented at Lohmann-phase rural homesteads throughout the American Bottom (Koldehoff 1989:55; Milner 1983:135–144; Pauketat 1994:58–60).

Being centrally manufactured and distributed items, variants of these wares could have functioned as Lohmann-phase precursors of Ramey Incised pots. Pauketat and Emerson (1991:935) have interpreted Ramey Incised pots as an example of an "elite-commoner discourse" in the Stirling-phase Cahokia polity. Similar to Ramey Incised pots these Lohmann-phase wares might have embodied cosmological meaning relevant to the appropriation of elite authority. In a domestic context they could have served as daily reminders of the sanctity of central Cahokian authority and would have been well-suited media in which to express ideas related to such matters.

The style of these iconic engravings is dissimilar to that found on Cahokian fine ware and other decorated pots. Their incidental nature contrasts with the exceptional quality of the pots on which they are found. There seems to have been little emphasis on the neatness of these engravings, as many consist of crudely executed, overlapping lines (Emerson 1989:80–81). In regard to the informal nature of these engravings, Emerson and Jackson (1984:315) have stated that the "often sloppy execution seems to indicate that they were not formal ritual items. They resemble sketches, in the nature of amulets for a folk magic context." Indeed these engravings appear secondary to the principle form of the pots. This stylistic contrast supports the idea that the manufacture and engraving was performed by different individuals.

The recovery of two partial pots exhibiting this style of engraving presents the possibility that these engravings were primarily performed on unbroken vessels, with engraved fragments perhaps being saved after breakage. Alternatively, because many of these icons are found on individual sherds, it remains possible that engravings were also performed on fragments after breakage.

Sub-Mound 51 Icons

Six iconic engravings were recovered from the sub-Mound 51 borrow pit at Cahokia, excavated by Charles Bareis of the University of Illinois, and the subject of ongoing analysis by Timothy Pauketat. This borrow pit, adjacent to the central plaza of the Cahokia site, had been excavated prehistorically for use in the construction of other monuments. It was filled-in relatively quickly and Mound 51 was constructed over it during the Lohmann phase (Bareis 1975; Chmurny 1973:1–4). Five of the six engraved sherds were confined to the Zone D2 stratum of this pit, characterized by an abundance of likely high-status refuse.

Among these Zone D2 engravings is an elongated, bi-pointed oval (Figure 2a), which was engraved on the interior rim of a finely burnished, black-slipped, shell-tempered bowl. Extending from the rim of this high-quality bowl is a decorative lug, which could have served as a handle when the vessel was intact. A second bi-pointed oval motif (Figure 2b) on a sherd recovered from Zone D2 is located on the interior of a red-slipped,

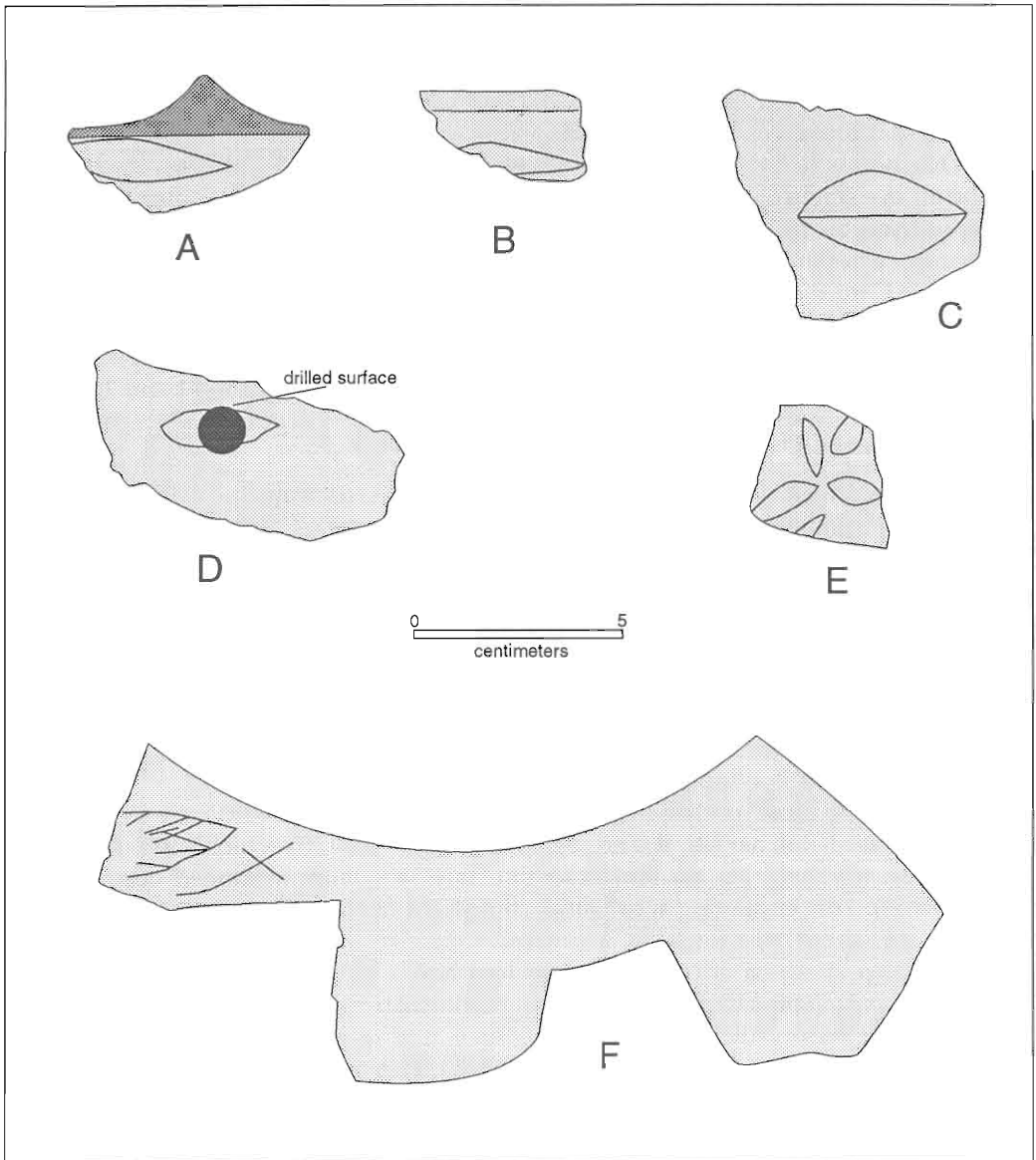


Figure 2. Lohmann-phase engraved sherds from the Cahokia site. (a-d, f) engraved sherds from sub-Mound 51; and (e) engraved sherds from the Interpretive Center Tract-II (after Holley 1989).

shell-tempered jar. Similar to the first, this bi-pointed oval was engraved directly under the rim of the vessel. Another bi-pointed oval engraving, this time barred (Figure 2c), was found on a red-slipped, shell-tempered bowl in the Zone D2 stratum. Unique among the Zone D2 engravings is a possible feather or wing icon (Figure 2f) located on a red-slipped, shell-tempered seed jar. The complete design of this engraving is unknown, since the rim of the vessel is broken through the motif.

Originating from the Zone G stratum was a sherd engraved with the design of what may be an eye (Figure 2d). This dark-slipped, shell-tempered sherd displays a partially drilled out section which marks the center of a bi-pointed oval. A similar sherd with an engraving of a bi-pointed oval cluster (Figure 2e) was recovered from the Cahokia Mounds Interpretive Center Tract-II (Holley 1989:87). This sherd, also dark-slipped and shell-tempered, was found in a large T-shaped structure. Collins (1990:118) has stated that this Lohmann-phase structure was "situated at the southwest corner of a proposed public plaza and appears to be located in a position that separates Lohmann Clusters 1 and 2."

Additional Lohmann-Phase Icons

A Coles Creek fine-ware bowl (Figure 3a) recovered from the High Prairie site exhibits two engraved arrow feathering motifs on the exterior of the vessel (Koldehoff 1982, 1989:55). The asymmetry of these icons is a stylistic feature shared with the Braden school arrow featherings at Spiro (Phillips and Brown 1978:146-147). The bowl was apparently plowed out of a Lohmann/Lindhorst-phase house basin in the uplands of the Richland Creek drainage. Much of this vessel was recovered, suggesting that the engraving was performed prior to breakage. The exotic origin of this bowl suggests that it was acquired via interaction with a center such as Pulcher or Cahokia, and may provide insight into the way upland communities were connected with the emerging Cahokian political order in the adjacent floodplains.

Perhaps the most fundamental design among this iconic inventory was recovered from the Lunsford-Pulcher site; it is an engraved cross (Figure 3b), which is a common icon related to widely held Native American beliefs of a quadripartioned cosmography (Waring 1968). This engraving was found on a sherd from a Monks Mound Red bowl. Although this sherd was found in a general surface collection conducted by Timothy Pauketat, the prevalence of Monks Mound Red bowls in the Lohmann-phase strongly argues for an A.D. 1050-1100 origin for this engraving. An engraved sherd (Figure 3c) from another Monks Mound Red bowl was recovered from a general context near the east palisade wall of the Cahokia site (Pauketat 1990:55). This probable Lohmann-phase bowl fragment exhibited engravings on both sides. Unfortunately, the small size of this sherd hinders the recognition of a clearly discernable, iconic pattern. On one side of the sherd is a circular design with gently curving lines extending perpendicularly from it; this engraving may be an iconic representation of the sun. On the other side of the sherd is a straight line intersected by a series of regularly spaced lines. This design is reminiscent of the arrow-feathering engraving on the fine-ware bowl from the High Prairie site.

Engravings of Heads

Three engravings of human heads (Figure 4a-c) have been unearthed from Lohmann-phase contexts at the Horseshoe Lake site, the BBB Motor site, and the sub-

shell-tempered jar. Similar to the first, this bi-pointed oval was engraved directly under the rim of the vessel. Another bi-pointed oval engraving, this time barred (Figure 2c), was found on a red-slipped, shell-tempered bowl in the Zone D2 stratum. Unique among the Zone D2 engravings is a possible feather or wing icon (Figure 2f) located on a red-slipped, shell-tempered seed jar. The complete design of this engraving is unknown, since the rim of the vessel is broken through the motif.

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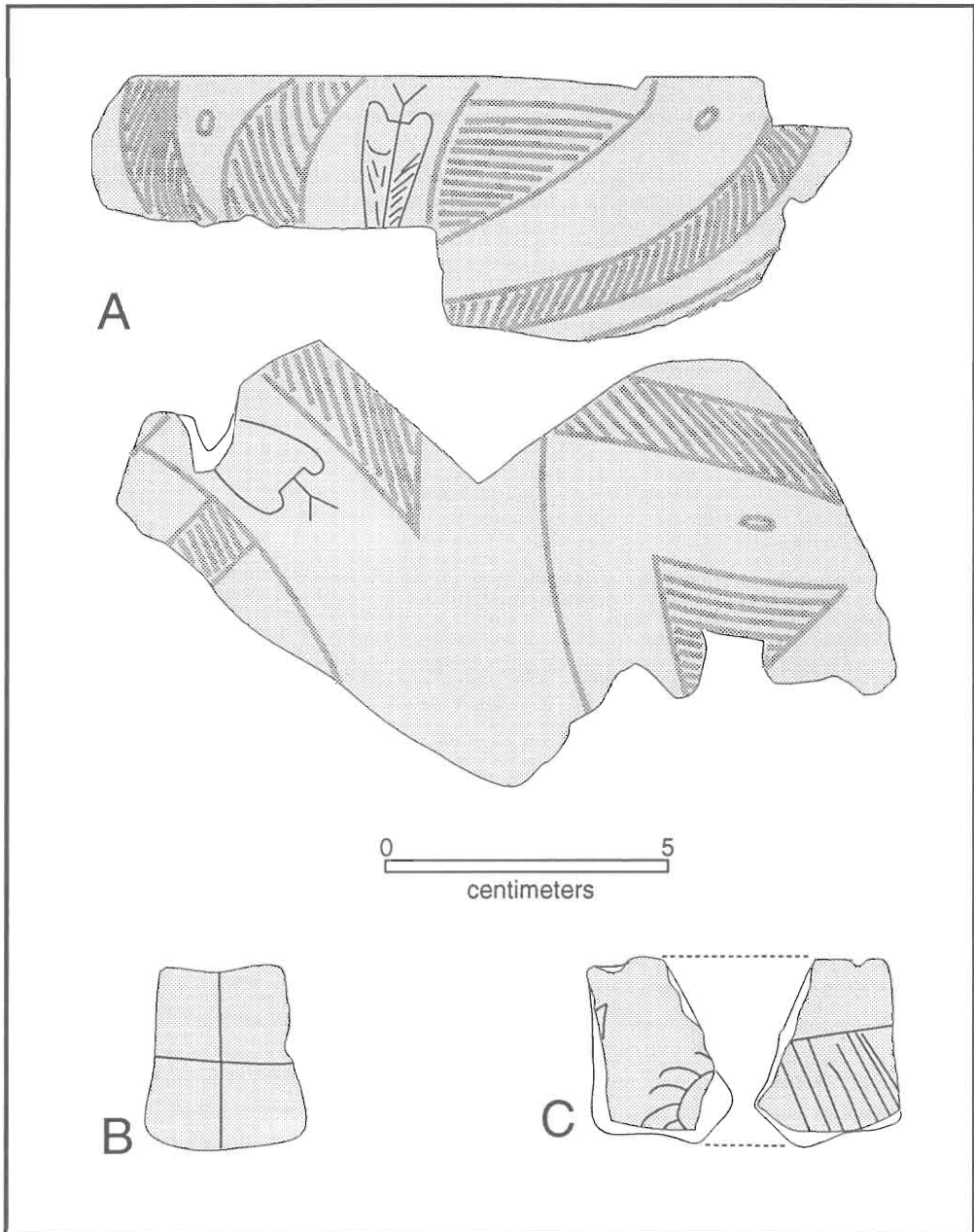


Figure 3. Lohmann-phase engraved sherds from throughout the American Bottom. (a) engraved Coles Creek bowl from the High Prairie site, (after Koldehoff 1982); (b) engraved sherd from the Lunsford-Pulcher site; and (c) engraved sherd from the east palisade wall at the Cahokia site (after Pauketat 1990).

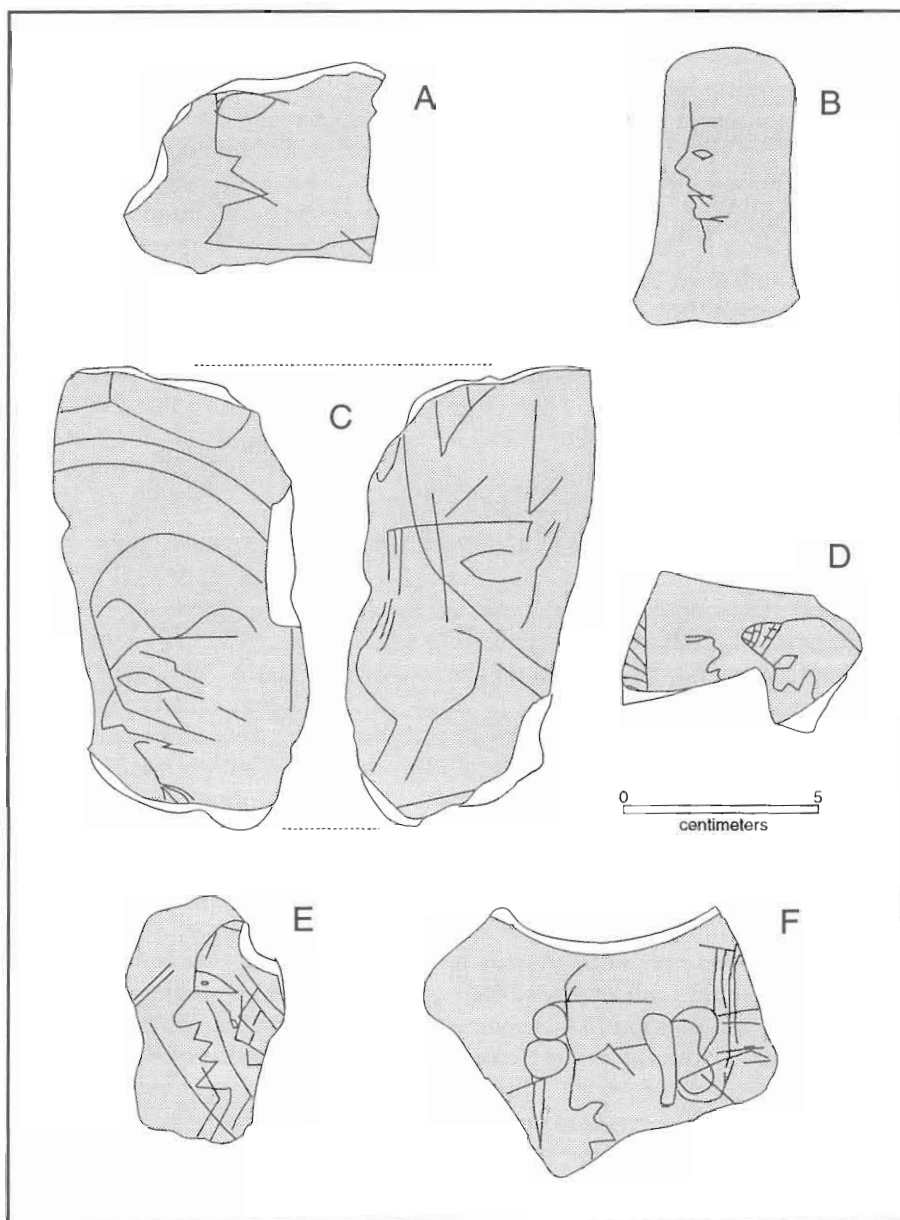


Figure 4. Engravings of human heads from the American Bottom. (a) engraved sherd from the sub-Mound 51 pit at the Cahokia site; (b) engraved ceramic appendage from the Horseshoe Lake site; (c) engraved sherd from the BBB Motor site, (after Emerson and Jackson 1984); (d) engraved sherd from the Range site (courtesy of Mark Mehrer); and (e-f) engraved sherds from Mound 34 at the Cahokia site (after Brown 1989).

Mound 51 borrow pit at Cahokia. The engraved head from the Horseshoe Lake site is located on the leg of a broken, red-slipped, shell-tempered effigy vessel (Wilson 1994:8). This engraved ceramic appendage was recovered from a Lohmann-phase bell shaped pit. The style of this engraving is similar to what Phillips and Brown (1978:72) have defined as "Braden A" at Spiro. Braden A attributes displayed by this engraving include a "relatively natural line from nose to upper lip, the mouth and lip seams, and sharp indentation below the lower lip" (Phillips and Brown 1978:72). The bi-pointed oval shape of the eye is nearly diamond shaped. Moreover, the position of both the mouth and eye are naturalistic in both position and proportion.

The engraved head from the Zone D2 stratum of the sub-Mound 51 pit is also very Braden-like; this engraving is on a fragment of a well burnished, black-slipped, shell-tempered jar. The angular and disjunctive features of this head, correspond to the phase C Braden school at Spiro (Phillips and Brown 1978:xiv-xvi). The large jutting chin and oversized lenticular eye creates an abstract, disproportionate overall appearance. Unfortunately, the sherd is broken directly above the eye, consequently inhibiting a complete description of the iconic design.

As described by Emerson and Jackson (1984:313) the BBB Motor site engraved head consists of a

human who has a falconid nose and a forked-eye design surrounding his eye. The top of his head is high, suggesting the depiction of fronto-occipital deformation . . . The hair line is also depicted on this figure. Above the individual's head is a set of parallel lines that arch forward. The meaning of this element is ambiguous, since the sherd is broken, and part of the design is obviously missing. It may depict a forward ponytail as seen in some of the Spiro art [Emerson and Jackson 1984:313].

Perino recovered two engravings of heads (Figure 4e-f) from a refuse pit north of Mound 34 at Cahokia (Brown 1989:194-196). Unfortunately no temporal context could be assigned to these engravings (Phillips and Brown 1978:172). Phillips and Brown (1978:172) assigned the engravings in Figure 4e and 4f to the phase C and phase B Braden schools respectively. Both of these engravings share some stylistic features with the Lohmann-phase heads. The trailed-eye design on Figure 4f can be compared to the forked-eye design on the BBB Motor site engraving. Likewise, the Figure 4e engraving, with its angular and disproportionate features is stylistically similar to the Figure 4a engraving. An additional engraving (Figure 4d) of a head was recovered from the Stirling-phase occupation of the Range site (Mehrer, personal communication 1995). The disjunctive character of this engraving is comparable to the Figure 4e and 4a engravings. This engraving has a diamond shaped eye, high forehead, and disproportionate shaped jaw and nose. To the left of the individual is a partial outline of a facial profile depicting a nose and two parallel lines which may represent a forward ponytail. On the far left of this engraving is a vertical line perpendicularly intersected by a series of regularly spaced lines. The complete design of this engraving is unknown, since the sherd is broken through the motif.

Iconic Themes

Several of these Lohmann-phase iconic designs seem to be stylistically and thematically related. The bi-pointed oval is a dominant feature in this iconic inventory. It is present in six of the eight Lohmann-phase engravings from the Cahokia site and seven of the 11 engravings from the entire American Bottom region. This bi-pointed, oval design clearly represents eyes in all three Lohmann-phase engravings of heads. As separate, free-floating motifs, bi-pointed ovals may have represented eyes as well. Similar to diamond-and-dot and forked-eye motifs, bi-pointed ovals may have been a synecdoche of the Thunderer theme (Emerson 1989:75; Hall 1977:501–502; Pauketat and Emerson 1991:927). The possible feather/wing icon on the Zone D2 seed jar and asymmetric arrow featherings from the High Prairie site may have also referenced the falconid-thunderer theme (Emerson 1989:74–77; Phillips and Brown 1978:146–147).

Falcon symbolism found throughout the Midcontinent and the Southeast is thought to relate to the mythical thunderer, an Upper World deity (Brown 1975:19–22; Emerson 1989:76–77; Hall 1977:501–502; Pauketat and Emerson 1991:929). Hall (1977:501) has characterized prehistoric, thunderer symbolism in the eastern United States as referencing “huge, birdlike sky powers believed by Indians to have been responsible for rain, thunder, and lightning . . . By metonymy the falconid eye referenced “warrior” or “warfare” because of the raptorial nature of falconids and perhaps “rain” because the Thunderer’s control of weather.”

It is important to recognize that Thunderer symbolism may have had multiple references for the Lohmann-phase inhabitants of the American Bottom. Phillips and Brown (1978:147) have emphasized the relationship of barred ovals with snakes, spiders, and eagle dancers or falcon impersonators at Spiro. Still others (Waring and Holder 1945:5) have associated barred ovals and ogees with bodily orifices. In reference to Cahokia, Emerson (1989:75–77) has related Thunderer symbolism to both Upper World and Lower World themes. These archaeological interpretations need not be viewed as mutually exclusive. Such a widely shared cosmological theme would have likely undergone regional and temporal variation. The apparent multivocality of the Falconid/Thunderer related theme may have permitted its use in the legitimation of political and religious authority.

Regional Contexts of Engravings

Engraved sherds have been recovered from three sites in the southern half of the American Bottom—the High Prairie site, the Range site, and the Pulcher site (Figure 5). The High Prairie site was a large Lohmann-phase village, apparently the only one of its magnitude in the uplands of the Richland Creek drainage. This site may have played a key role in the integration of dispersed households and smaller communities throughout the drainage (Koldehoff 1989:60). Both the Range site and the Pulcher site were important communities in the southern half of the American Bottom. The Range site was the location of a long term Emergent Mississippian occupation and apparently functioned as a nodal community in the Lohmann phase and Stirling phase (Kelly 1990:110). The Pulcher site was perhaps the largest and arguably the most influential political center in the entire southern expanse of the American Bottom.

Three sites in the northern half of the American Bottom have produced engraved sherds as well—the BBB Motor site, the Horseshoe Lake site, and the Cahokia site

	Horseshoe Lake	Cahokia	High Prairie	Lunsford-Pulcher	Range	BBB Motor
Barred Oval		1				
Wing/Feather		2	1			
Face	1	3			1	1
Oval Cluster		1				
Oval		2				
Eye		1				
Cross				1		
Sun		1				

Figure 5. The regional distribution of Lohmann-phase engraved sherds.

(Figure 5). Due to the presence of ceremonial structures, carved stone figurines, and mortuary complex, Emerson and Jackson (1984:352–353) have interpreted the BBB Motor site as the home of ritual specialists for locally dispersed communities. The Horseshoe Lake site with its platform mound is a secondary political center less than four miles from the center of Cahokia (Gregg 1975). The Cahokia site has by far produced the largest number of iconic engravings. The Zone D2 strata of the sub-Mound 51 pit has produced five of these engravings. This refuse deposit consists of likely high status domestic debris from the heart of the Lohmann-phase Cahokia community (Pauketat, personal communication 1996). The engraving recovered from Cahokia's ICT-II comes from the post abandonment debris from a unique T-shaped structure at the center of this Lohmann-phase community subsection (Collins 1990:118). Another engraving was recovered from general contexts near the Cahokia site's east palisade wall (Pauketat 1990:55).

Discussion and Conclusions

Mississippian political dynamics have been characterized as involving elite factional competition played out through the symbolic processes of political legitimation (Anderson 1994:64–69, 71–74; Pauketat 1994:19–21). A critical aspect of this process is that

elements of popular religion can be deployed by subgroups pursuing their interests within the contexts of ongoing political struggles (Dirks 1994:500). By emphasizing strategic readings or interpretations of the cosmological order, aspiring elite agents could have legitimized their dominant social positions while simultaneously minimizing community factionalism. Legitimizing strategies of the Mississippian elite appear to have included the controlled production, acquisition, and circulation of certain meaningful goods and materials (Anderson 1994:71-75; Helms 1992:187-189; Pauketat 1992; Pauketat and Emerson 1991:922-924). Helms (1992:187) has argued that access to and control over these prestigious items would have demonstrated the sacred authority of chiefly individuals.

The upshot of this discussion, really, is that while certain Lohmann-phase "special vessels" may have been centrifugally distributed out among the greater population, only in certain circumstances were they engraved. It is important to note the special contexts in which these iconic engravings were found. Most if not all of these contexts have strong political and religious connotations and were the locations in which elite ideological themes might have been most intensely focused and subsequently channelled throughout the region.

The Lohmann-phase political consolidation of the American Bottom was characterized by the regional transformation of the political landscape (Pauketat 1994:171-184). As interpreted here, the legitimation of this transition was pursued through the emphasis of certain political-religious themes. Lohmann-phase, informal iconic engravings could be representations of those themes. The prevalence of falconid symbolism in the form of wings, eyes, and perhaps the "Braden" arrow featherings and head motifs is suggestive that Upper World themes, in particular the "thunderer" were very important to the Lohmann-phase inhabitants of the American Bottom. The development of an elite ideology stressing these cosmological themes would have had a profound impact on the worldviews of the regional inhabitants of the American Bottom. Through the top-down emphasis of selected readings or interpretations of these themes, American Bottom inhabitants would have come to share certain dominate or uncontested understandings and meanings of the cosmological order. The significance of these meanings was evidently important enough to express through iconic engravings.

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