

The Yeaman Shell Gorgets from Smith County, Tennessee and a Discussion of “Hand Gorgets”

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The three shell gorgets presented here were found sometime between the 1930s and 1950s (probably in the late 1940s) by Lillard D. Yeaman (1908-1961) in caves near the confluence of the Caney Fork and Cumberland Rivers in Smith County, Tennessee (Fig. 1). They include a rare “spider” gorget (the first documented from Middle Tennessee), a triskele (Triskele Group II, see Kevin E. Smith, this issue), and an even more rare “hand gorget” (with less than a dozen known from the entire Mississippian world). According to an interview in 1950 (Lipscomb 1950), Yeaman began his collecting career at the age of 5 while following his father around their Smith County farm. Encountering a strange rock, his father explained to him “that the thing was just an old Indian arrowhead and that just about everybody and his dog in Smith County owned from one to a dozen. Young Lillard wasn’t discouraged, and thereafter he scurried over the fields after every heavy rain to see whether the rushing water had disrobed a relic from its earthy clothing.” Over the course of his lifetime, Yeaman amassed a large collection of personal finds primarily from the fields, caves, and rockshelters of the area around Carthage in Smith County. On at least one or two rare occasions, he purchased an object from outside Smith County – including the incredible stone statue found at the Sellars Mound near Lebanon, Tennessee that he bought from the Sellars family (Figure 2; also see Kevin E. Smith and Robert V. Sharp, this issue). Both he and his father served as Sheriff of Smith County, but much of his collection of antique guns and relics was on display for many decades at his filling station. John C. Waggoner, Jr. of South Carthage lived across the street from Mr. Yeaman as a teenager and later acquired a significant part of the

Yeaman collection some years after Lillard’s death. He recalls Yeaman telling him that the hand gorget was found in a cave on the Caney Fork River, and believes the spider gorget was also found there. The triskele is believed to have been found in a nearby (but different) cave on the Cumberland River east of Carthage.

Each of these gorgets, previously unpublished, is important for future study in its own right. But here, we will focus specifically on the “hand gorget.” Shell gorgets depicting a “hand” are extremely rare with less than a dozen documented to date (most from the Tennessee-Cumberland region). There are probably at least three different “styles” of these gorgets, but their rarity prevents any detailed presentation of all three of these at this point. The Yeaman gorget, although ultimately buried in a cave in Smith County, was probably manufactured at the Castalian Springs Mounds in Sumner County between A.D. 1250 and 1350 (a nearly identical gorget dug at Castalian Springs in 1891 suggests the creation spot) – a number of ceramics and gorgets we also believe were made at Castalian Springs ended up being cached in caves and rockshelters up river near Carthage around 1350. A second group of these gorgets comes from the Holliston Mills site in Hawkins County, Tennessee – a site that dates primarily from A.D. 1450-1550. Thanks to the generosity of the owners, we were recently able to bring together four of these hand gorgets from Holliston Mills, Long Island, and Smith County for examination and photography (Figs. 3, 4).

Briefly, let’s turn to the often asked question – “so it’s a hand, what does it mean?” Like many of the Mississippian gorgets, we argue they present a two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional cosmos. They are cosmograms. George Lankford (2007)

At top: Figure 1. Yeaman Shell Gorgets: Spider, 2 inches in diameter; Triskele, 3 inches in diameter; Hand, 2.25 inches long x 1.25 inches wide. Collection of Byron McDonald, Mount Juliet, Tennessee. *Photograph by Kevin E. Smith*



Figure 2. Lillard D. Yeaman with the Sellars Farm female statue and other parts of his collection
(*Photograph courtesy of John C. Waggoner Jr.*).

has presented convincing arguments that these “hands” are representations of a constellation widely known throughout indigenous North America known as the “Hand Constellation” – part of what we would call today the “Orion Constellation.” While the folklore available to us from the historic period is complex and geographically widespread, the “Hand Constellation” is yet another way by which the souls of Mississippian peoples could travel from here to other worlds – to enter the Path of Souls after death or to obtain ritual power

from another part of the cosmos. To make what could be a really long story shorter, the chief of the Sky Village (a deity) captured one of the Hero Twins (also both deities) and brought him into the Sky Village to torture him. His twin traveled there to rescue him and did so. On their way back home, the “Long Arm” of the chief of the Sky Village descended to snatch one of the boys again. Using a “long knife” (Dover sword?) that he stole from the Sky Village, one of the Twins cut off his Hand and it lodged in the night sky as a constellation – the “Hand



Figure 3. Four “hand gorgets” recently brought together from three private collections. *Left to right:* #1 and #2 (Dr. Arthur Cushman Collection), Holliston Mills site (40HW11), Hawkins County, Tennessee; #3, Long Island, Jackson County Alabama/Marion County, Tennessee (Dr. Sandy Carter Collection); #4 Yeaman Gorget, Smith County, Tennessee (Byron McDonald Collection).

Photograph by Steven R. Cooper



Figure 4. *left to right*: Dr. Sandy Carter, Dr. Arthur Cushman, and Byron McDonald who shared their gorgets for this article. *Photograph by Kevin E. Smith.*

Constellation.” And so, it also became a “hole in the sky” – a portal through which human souls could enter the Path of Souls after death or during life call power from that Other World.

Whether you buy the cosmological interpretations or not, these three gorgets obtained by Lillard Yeaman decades ago offer astounding opportunities for current and future research. The collaboration between professionals and collectors is very important for these

rare and sometimes unique objects from the past.

References Cited

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Figure 5. Close-up images of the Yeaman Gorget, Smith County, Tennessee (Byron McDonald collection) (*left*) and the Hawkins County, Tennessee (Dr. Arthur Cushman collection) (*right*) hand gorgets.

Photographs by Steven R. Cooper



Figure 6. Close-up image of the Holliston Mills site (40HW11) hand gorget (Dr. Arthur Cushman collection) *Photograph by Steven R. Cooper*



Figure 7. Close-up Long Island, Jackson County Alabama/Marion County, Tennessee (Dr. Sandy Carter collection) hand gorget. *Photograph by Steven R. Cooper*