

# Early Female Effigies of the Middle Cumberland Region

by Robert V. Sharp, Chicago, Illinois



In the opinion of its organizers and numerous others, the 2015–2016 exhibition *Ancestors: Ancient Native American Sculptures of Tennessee* at the Tennessee State Museum in Nashville certainly fulfilled its primary goal: it gathered together and showcased the best surviving and available examples of one of the indigenous Native American statuary traditions of the pre-contact period (Weeks, Smith, and Sharp 2015). All of the works chosen for the six-month exhibition represent what has been called the Tennessee-Cumberland statuary style, one of three sculptural traditions of Native Americans of the Mississippian era. The other two recognized styles include the generally smaller-scale figurines and pipes carved of Missouri flint-clay and issuing from Cahokia, and the small group of human figures sculpted out of fluorite and found primarily at sites in the Ohio River confluence area. There are approximately 50 works in the Cahokian flint-clay corpus, and they are predominantly pipes, in designs representing humans (anthropomorphs), frogs, and birds. The Ohio Valley fluorite pieces number just about a half-dozen works, and, in marked contrast, all represent male figures. The Tennessee-Cumberland statuary tradition, on the other hand, is considerably larger, numbering approximately 80 works, and all are human statues and statuettes, not animals. And they are by and large temple statues, not pipes.

Not only did the *Ancestors* exhibition assemble more than two dozen examples of this distinctive and predominantly Tennessee-based art form, but also, by building on the solid foundation provided by the pre-eminent study of these works (Smith and Miller 2009), it clarified what the primary focus of this sculptural style

appears to have been. Indeed, one of the most celebrated aspects of the show was its success in reuniting long-separated male and female figures that were originally conceived as “ancestral pairs.” In nearly all cases, these pairs appear to have been carved by the same sculptor. Clearly these ancestral pairs are one of the distinguishing aspects of the group of sculptures carved in the Tennessee-Cumberland style. The most widely recognized male and female ancestral couple, from the Sellars Farm site in Wilson County, have now been joined in perpetuity at the McClung Museum at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. But there were at least three, and possibly four, other male–female pairs that were brought together for the exhibition. Like the Sellars Farm pair, these works, too, had never before been together since the time of their creation, and certainly never before exhibited in Tennessee. These reunited males and females included a pair from the Martin Farm site in Riddleton in Smith County, a pair from the Beasley Mounds site in Smith County, or a pair from Williamson County (see Figs. 2–4).

But it should be noted that the *Ancestors* exhibition achieved much more than the presentation of these male–female pairs of temple statuary. One unexpected benefit of the exhibition, perhaps, was the opportunity to include a small number of single female figures that the curators of the show interpreted to be not further examples of ancestors, but, instead, youthful images of the Earth Mother. These single female figures, of which there were seven in the exhibition, are of interest because, where records are available, they were found unaccompanied by male counterparts. Smith and Miller (2009:33) have noted that these females constitute

*At top:* Figure 1. An overall view of the gallery for the exhibition *Ancestors: Ancient Native American Sculptures of Tennessee*, which was on view at the Tennessee State Museum, Nashville, from October 30, 2015, to May 15, 2016.

Photograph by Kevin E. Smith



a distinct subgroup of Tennessee–Cumberland style sculptures. Though by no means uniform in their sculpting, these single females are not dramatically different in form from the female figures that are part of the ancestral couples. One noticeable way that they do differ, however, is that they are more likely to display their primary sexual characteristics in the depiction of their vulva.

The inclusion of these Earth Mother figures should show how limited the popular understanding of the Native American mythological deity identified in the 19th century as “Our Grandmother” or “The Old Woman Who Never Dies” really is. For far from being depicted as an old and humpbacked sacred figure, it must be observed that, like all the male and female statues in the ancestral pairs in Tennessee–Cumberland art, these Earth Mother females are not humpbacked. Instead, they are upright, straight-backed kneeling figures, most often with the same type of vertically elongated, saddle-shaped hair bun that is shown on the females in the ancestral pairs. Two of the single female statues, in particular, are especially important because they may well have influenced the form of the two most dominant

models of ceramic female effigy bottles that began to be produced in the Middle Cumberland region in the mid-13th century. Both of these sculptures are now in the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C. One of them, from an unidentified site in the Cumberland River valley (Smith and Miller 2009:203–204, CSS-045), was originally collected by Dr. Joseph Jones in 1868 during the two years he served as principal health officer in Nashville following the close of the Civil War. This female kneels with her arms lying along the sides of her body, with her hands resting at her knees (Figs. 5a,b). The other example was plowed up only a year or two later near McMinnville in Warren County (Smith and Miller 2009:209–210, CSS-024); it depicts a kneeling female figure with her arms bent inwards at the elbow, her forearms and hands resting against her slightly swelling abdomen (Figs. 6a,b).

Both of these erect, even youthful-looking statues may well have served as iconic representations of an Earth Mother deity who was venerated and supplicated as a guardian of women who cherished their fertility and sought aid and protection through the trials of their pregnancies. Such women may have



Figure 2. Ancestral pair of kneeling male and female stone figures; *left*, male, h. 13.4 inches; probably Williamson County, Tennessee, plowed up sometime prior to 1868; National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (007277); *right*, female, h. 12.2 inches, probably S.B. Frost Farm, near Brentwood, Williamson County, Tennessee, plowed up in 1881; Tennessee State Museum, Tennessee Historical Society Collection (1091).  
*Photograph by David H. Dye*





Figure 3. Ancestral pair of seated male and female stone figures; *left*, male, h. 14.2 inches; *right*, female, h. 13 inches; both from the Beasley Mounds site, Smith County, Tennessee, plowed up in 1898; National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution (334008 and 334012).

*Photograph by David H. Dye*



Figure 4. Ancestral pair of seated male and female stone figures; *left*, male, h. 15 inches; private collection; *right*, female, h. 13 inches; National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution (334009); both from the Martin Farm site, Riddleton, Smith County, Tennessee, plowed up in spring 1905.

*Photograph by David H. Dye*





Figure 5a. Kneeling Earth Mother figure, stone (*frontal view*), h. 11.4 inches; attributed to "Valley of the Cumberland," plowed up sometime prior to 1868; National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (007276).

*Photograph by NMAI Photo Services*





Figure 5b. Kneeling Earth Mother figure (*side view*), stone, h. 11.4 inches; attributed to "Valley of the Cumberland," plowed up sometime prior to 1868; National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (007276).

*Photograph by NMAI Photo Services*



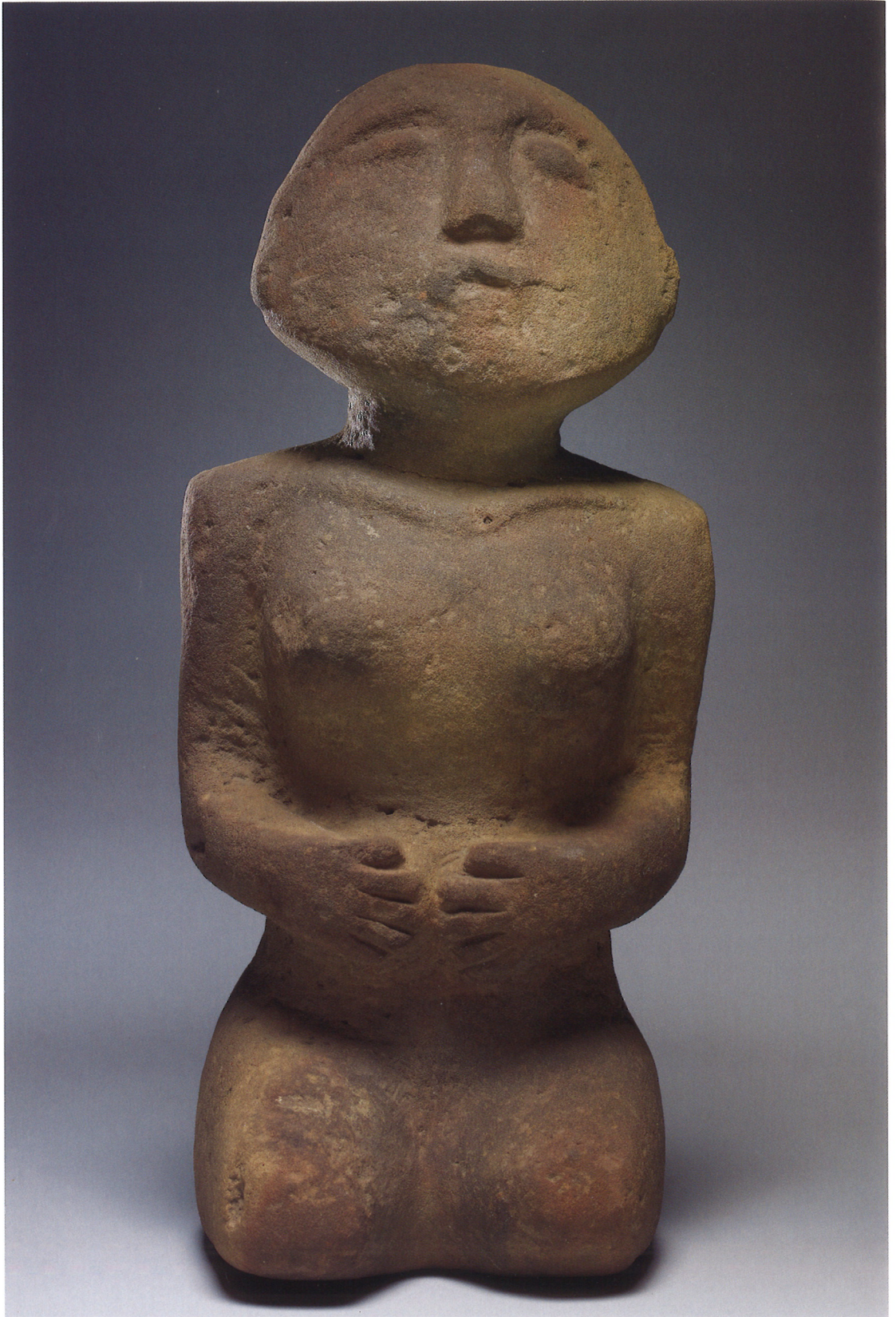


Figure 6a. Kneeling Earth Mother figure (*frontal view*), stone, h. 13.75 inches; near McMinnville, Warren County, Tennessee, found sometime around 1870; National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (210965).

*Photograph by NMAI Photo Services*





Figure 6b. Kneeling Earth Mother figure (*side view*), stone, h. 13.75 inches; near McMinnville, Warren County, Tennessee, found sometime around 1870; National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (210965).

*Photograph by NMAI Photo Services*





Figure 7a .Kneeling Earth Mother effigy bottle (*frontal view*), ceramic, h. 6.75 inches; Oscar F. Noel Farm cemetery, Davidson County, Tennessee; Tennessee State Museum, Tennessee Historical Society Collection, Gates P. Thruston Collection (82.100.14).

*Photograph by David H. Dye*





Figure 7b. Kneeling Earth Mother effigy bottle (*side view*), ceramic, h. 6.75 inches; Oscar F. Noel Farm cemetery, Davidson County, Tennessee; Tennessee State Museum, Tennessee Historical Society Collection, Gates P. Thruston Collection (82.100.14).

*Photograph by David H. Dye*





Figure 8a (*frontal view*) Kneeling Earth Mother effigy bottle, ceramic, h. 7 inches; Oscar F. Noel Farm cemetery, Davidson County, Tennessee; Tennessee State Museum, Tennessee Historical Society Collection, Gates P. Thruston Collection (82.100.15). Photograph by David H. Dye





Figure 8b. Kneeling Earth Mother effigy bottle, ceramic, h. 7 inches; Oscar F. Noel Farm cemetery, Davidson County, Tennessee; Tennessee State Museum, Tennessee Historical Society Collection, Gates P. Thruston Collection (82.100.15). *Photograph by David H. Dye*





Figure 9a. Kneeling Earth Mother effigy bottle (*frontal view*), ceramic, h. 7.5 inches; Oscar F. Noel Farm cemetery, Davidson County, Tennessee; Tennessee State Museum, Tennessee Historical Society Collection, Gates P. Thruston Collection (82.100.13). *Photograph by David H. Dye*





Figure 9b. Kneeling Earth Mother effigy bottle (*side view*), ceramic, h. 7.5 inches; Oscar F. Noel Farm cemetery, Davidson County, Tennessee; Tennessee State Museum, Tennessee Historical Society Collection, Gates P. Thruston Collection (82.100.13). *Photograph by David H. Dye*



invoked the Earth Mother for comfort and support in the face of childhood sicknesses or infant mortality. Like the other examples of Tennessee–Cumberland statuary, these two female figures in the NMAI are thought to have been carved during the middle period of the Mississippian era, between roughly A.D. 1200 and 1400 (Smith and Miller 2009:177–178).

A third, very similar sculpture that was most likely discovered in Williamson County and is now in the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History (catalogue no. A19932-0) may provide, us a further clue to understanding a moment in time in the sacred rituals and practices of precontact Native Americans. Although it was not included in the *Ancestors* exhibition, what this third example of an upright straight-backed female figure with a perforated hair bun on the back of her head and her forearms and hands resting against her abdomen contributes to this whole story is the report by Dr. William M. Clark of Franklin, the original collector of the piece, that it was plowed up from a grave (Smith and Miller 2009:204–205). This is not the sole example of a stone statue in the Tennessee–Cumberland art style reported to have been found in a burial, but the context of its discovery in Middle Tennessee, probably interred early in the 13th century, seems consistent with what we now know about the earliest ceramic female effigy bottles: that is, that they seem to have appeared in mortuary contexts across the Middle Cumberland Region of Tennessee by the middle of the 13th century and continued to do so for the next century or more, until around A.D. 1450. And this practice seems to have moved quickly across the Middle Cumberland Region, from Stewart and Montgomery counties in the west to Sumner and Smith counties in the east and to have been well established throughout Davidson and Williamson counties in the heartland of the Middle Cumberland. The female effigy bottles that appear earliest are slender, upright, straight-backed examples, very consistent in their modeling with the form of these Earth Mother figures in the Tennessee–Cumberland art style.

At some point in the mid-13th century, then, the switch was made: women across the Middle Tennessee area began fashioning ceramic representations of the Earth Mother that were virtually identical in form and posture to what had been carved in stone. Perhaps the single most evident change was in scale: the stone sculptures of the Earth Mother range between 11 and 17 inches in height, while the ceramic effigy bottles tend to be only half that height. But what they lose in size, they more than make up in the quality of their crafting and ornamentation. For the earliest ceramic female effigies are often negative-painted on their buff surface, or slipped with a white coating and then negative-painted (Sharp, Knight, and Lankford 2011). Then, after using them in ceremonies or rituals of some sort, the women who made these highly ornamented effigy vessels and figurines deposited them in burials or gave them to others across the greater Nashville area to use in burials (Sharp 2018). Furthermore, we know now, where records have been preserved, that women in the

Middle Cumberland region placed these effigy bottles and figurines in the burials of infants and children, doubtless entreating the Earth Mother for the recovery of their children's souls and their eventual reincarnation.

Thus, there appears to have been in the mid-13th century a shift from the general supplication of the Earth Mother for fertility by means of a statue in an ancestors temple, to the direct, explicit placement of an effigy figure of this supernatural in the grave of a child as perhaps a personal invocation to this deity for the return of a lost child's soul in a future pregnancy. The Earth Mother is the supreme female deity of the Mississippian period, and beginning at this time, around A.D. 1250, numerous representations of her will be made, in various styles, in ceramic form throughout the Middle Cumberland region, and very soon thereafter in southeast Missouri and eventually in northeast Arkansas, where the practice will last into the early 17th century.

While numerous examples of these upright, straight-backed negative-painted ceramic female effigies can be found from seven or more counties in Middle Tennessee, including ones from private collections as well as museums, I want to close this discussion with images of three female effigy bottles from Davidson County (Figs. 7ab, 8ab, 9ab). All three were excavated from stone-box burials on the grounds of the Oscar F. Noel farm in south Nashville and all three appeared in Gates P. Thruston's 1890 volume *The Antiquities of Tennessee and the Adjacent States*. All three are now in the collection of the Tennessee State Museum, and they range in height from 6  $\frac{3}{4}$  to 7  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches. Like the stone statues discussed above, these effigies have their arms lying alongside their bodies, with their hands resting against the abdomen or against their thighs. These ceramic figures appear, to this author, to be the handwork of different women, though women quite possibly in close contact with each other, or who at least shared belief in a religious ritual practice that was spreading across Middle Tennessee. Their beliefs and their engagement in a cultic practice brought these women and their departed loved ones, most likely children, to the largest sacred burial ground in all of ancient Tennessee. And it was there, in what we call today the Noel cemetery, that they interred their deceased family members and placed in their graves a handmade image of the deity they petitioned for return and reincarnation of their souls.

## References Cited:

- Sharp, Robert V.  
2018 Our Lady of the Cumberland: Styles, Distribution, and Community. *Tennessee Archaeology* 10 (1), in press. Sharp, Robert V., Vernon James Knight, Jr., and George E. Lankford  
2011 Woman in the Patterned Shawl: Female Effigy Vessels and Figurines from the Middle Cumberland River Basin. In *Visualizing the Sacred: Cosmic Visions, Regionalism, and the Art of the Mississippian World*, edited by George E. Lankford, F. Kent Reilly III, and James F. Garber, pp. 177–198. University of Texas Press, Austin.
- Smith, Kevin E., and James V. Miller  
2009 *Speaking with the Ancestors: Mississippian Stone Statuary of the Tennessee–Cumberland Region*. University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa.
- Weeks, William Rex, Jr., Kevin E. Smith, and Robert V. Sharp (curators)  
2015 *Ancestors: Ancient Native American Sculptures of Tennessee*. An exhibition at the Tennessee State Museum, Nashville, October 29, 2015–May 15, 2016.



# Central States Archaeological Journal

**Volume 65**

**October 2018**

**Number 4**



## The Tennessee 50th