

Tennessee Scalloped Triskele Gorgets

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On a September day in 1877, the famed explorer John Wesley Powell and his workmen uncovered one of the finest classic Nashville Scalloped Triskele gorgets from a mound on the Bowling/Bosley Farm site in Nashville, Tennessee. Over the past decade, the Triskele Project has documented over 200 of these kinds of gorgets which were created between about A.D. 1250 and 1425 – first carved at a series of shell workshops along the Cumberland River in Middle Tennessee and then at a slightly later date at workshops along the Tennessee River in the Southern Appalachians of East Tennessee and adjacent states.

Although the triskeles (and related gorgets) have been studied several times over the past century, the current project systematically combines a detailed analysis of the stylistic features of a large number of gorgets with detailed geographic distribution and archaeological dating of where they were found. Our analysis suggests there are five significant groups of the gorgets with chronological and geographic importance (Fig. 1). Triskele Group I (TGI) is the earliest as best we can currently determine – probably engraved primarily by artisans at the Castalian Springs Mounds in Sumner County, Tennessee around A.D. 1250. They are set apart by triskele “arms” almost always separated by broad fenestrations cut through the shell in a unique crescent moon shape. They are followed by a much larger group of gorgets (TGII) that are much more formalized and include a complex set of five design fields (Figure 2). These are distributed primarily in Middle Tennessee, but include a significant representation in Hamilton County in southeast Tennessee. We suspect that most of these were created first in workshops in Sumner and Williamson counties, Tennessee – but that one or more shell artisans from Middle Tennessee relocated to Hamilton County

in the 1300s and continued to produce them for another decade or so. While we divide our triskeles into groups differently than Brain and Phillips (1996), many of our TGII are what they designated the Nashville I style.

Although many Triskele Group III gorgets are very fine examples of shell work – they all omit what we think is the critical plain band surrounding the triskele (Field C). We argue that this is the beginning of a loss of a coherent understanding of the overall design structure of the gorgets. While a few of these are to be found in Middle Tennessee, an increasing number are probably created by artisans in southeast Tennessee. This pattern reflects the beginnings of a major migration of people (and objects) from Middle Tennessee to East Tennessee in the mid-1300s – probably due at least in part to a series of major droughts and subsequent social disruptions. The final two of our groups are recovered almost entirely from southeast Tennessee and adjacent counties along the Tennessee River in Alabama and Georgia. These represent a sequential reduction of the circles in the “ophidian band” (Field D) from generally 6-8 in TGII and III to only 5 in TGIV and finally to only 4 in TGV. By AD 1425-1450, the triskele theme is replaced by the earliest versions of the even more popular “rattle-snake” gorgets of the southern Appalachians.

One of the most commonly asked questions about triskeles is “But what does it represent?” Because they contain a very abstract set of motifs, we will perhaps never have a clear idea of what the creators and users intended to represent. However, the best (speculative) interpretation we can propose to date is a cosmological one. Based largely on the decades of work by iconographers involved with the Mississippian Iconographic Workshop at Texas State University, San Marcos, a number of types of Mississippian shell

At top: Three triskele gorgets found in Tennessee. At left: Davidson County, Tennessee. Group II. Center: Stewart County, Tennessee. Group I. (Note: the prehistoric repair on the left side) At right: Polk County, Tennessee. Group V.

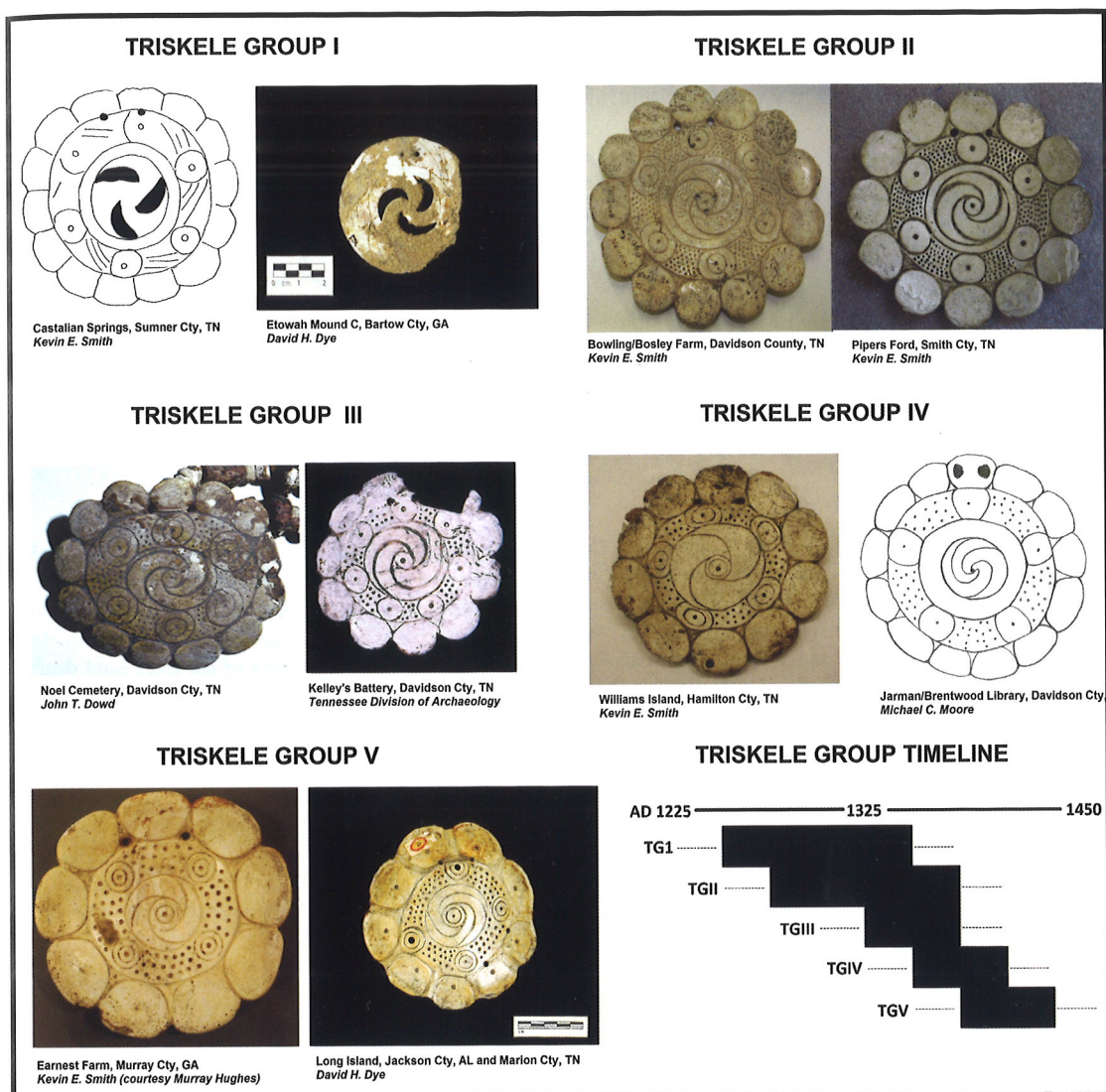


Figure 1. Triskele Groups and Timeline.

gorgets with concentric design fields have been interpreted as two-dimensional representations of a three-dimensional indigenous cosmos – a cosmos generally divided into three realms: a) This World where humans reside; b) an Above World (representing the daytime sky); and c) a Beneath World (representing the nighttime sky). These worlds are connected by an axis mundi (world axis) along which power and souls can travel. Other gorgets previously interpreted as cosmograms include the Hightower Turkey Cock and Cox crested bird gorgets (Lankford 2007a), the hand gorgets as a constellation (Lankford 2007b), and the “rattlesnake” gorgets (King et al. 2018). We begin with the hypothesis that the triskele gorgets (particularly TG II) include a concentric series of motifs representing various aspects of the cosmos (Figure 3). The outer “sun circle” and scalloped border are readily interpretable as motifs for the Above World (Reilly 2007). The more central “plain band” on the TGII gorgets has been interpreted on other gorgets as representing a “dance circle” (Reilly

2004). If we accept those propositions, at least for the sake of argument, the combination of the center circle, triskele, and ophidian band might perhaps represent the axis mundi and a constellation in the night sky (Beneath World).

George Lankford (2007c), in a chapter titled “The Star Cluster,” examined the distribution of Native American folklore relating to the asterism called the Pleiades. While we are unable to substantiate in any definitive fashion an association between this asterism and these gorgets, there are some indirect lines of evidence that merit consideration. As described by Lankford (2007c:162), “of the asterisms in the sky, the most universally recognizable is the Pleiades.... As opposed to most of the constellations, which are spread out across the sky in large unique patterns, the Pleiades is visibly a cluster, readily identifiable by even the most untrained eye. There is no other asterism that remotely resembles it. The cluster itself makes no particularly memorable pattern, so the fact of the cluster is the focus

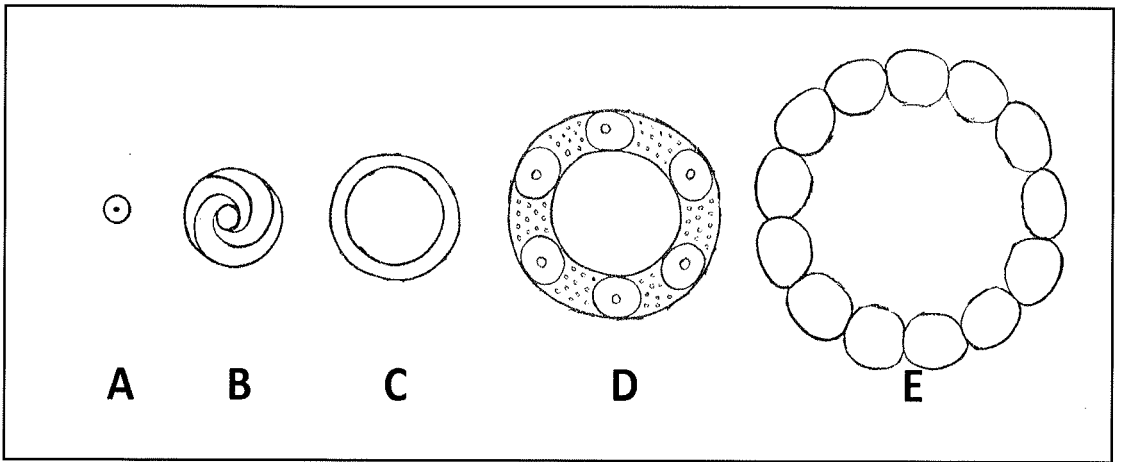


Figure 2. Triskele Design Fields.

of attention.”

As described by Bob King in *Sky and Telescope* (2014): “[the Pleiades are] called the Seven Sisters, but can you see all seven? ... When asked how many stars they see in the cluster, beginning observers will usually say five. That’s what most of us see at a glance, and it makes sense because the five brightest Pleiades... range from magnitude 2.9 to 4.2, well within the grasp of most observers from a reasonably dark sky site.... The bright five plus two not-so-difficult core cluster stars make seven. Add in seven more faint hanger-ons... and you’ve got 14.”

The number of circles (stars?) in the ophidian band range from four to thirteen (in most cases accompanied by a center circle making the effective range five to fourteen). By far the vast majority of the triskeles show six to eight circles in the ophidian band, with the center circle making that seven to nine – the number of stars visible to most observers.

What do Native American myths throughout the Eastern Woodlands have to say about the origin and nature of the Pleiades? While there are perhaps hundreds of different versions of this story, some basic motifs of the myth involve seven (or more) children dancing around a central pole. As their dance proceeds, they begin to rise into the sky. The mother of one of the children hears the music, rushes outside, and calls out to him. When he looks down, the magic of the dance is broken and he plunges earthward at great speed – penetrating it and leaving only a scar where the earth came together. The other boys continued to rise into the sky to become the “dancing stars” of the Pleiades.

When springtime arrived, a tiny green shoot appeared where the eldest child had fallen back to earth. This grew into a great tree – in some stories, a pine tree and in others a cedar. The resinous wood of these evergreen trees is often perceived in indigenous mythology as containing “fire-stuff-within” – a connection between the wood, the sacred fire, the smoke rising from it, and the sun and stars. If one accepts all of these propositions, then perhaps the triskeles are a two-dimensional cosmogram that relates an ancient version of the story of the Dancing Children and the origin of the Pleiades.

Created by artisans spanning two centuries across a very large part of the interior South, the triskeles represent one of the most popular and long-lasting gorget themes in Mississippian iconography. Buried almost exclusively with children and women, they were clearly very important aspects of the lives (and deaths) of many ancient people of Tennessee. While our current research has offered some new insights, we are far from finished with what the triskeles have to tell us about the Mississippian peoples of Tennessee.

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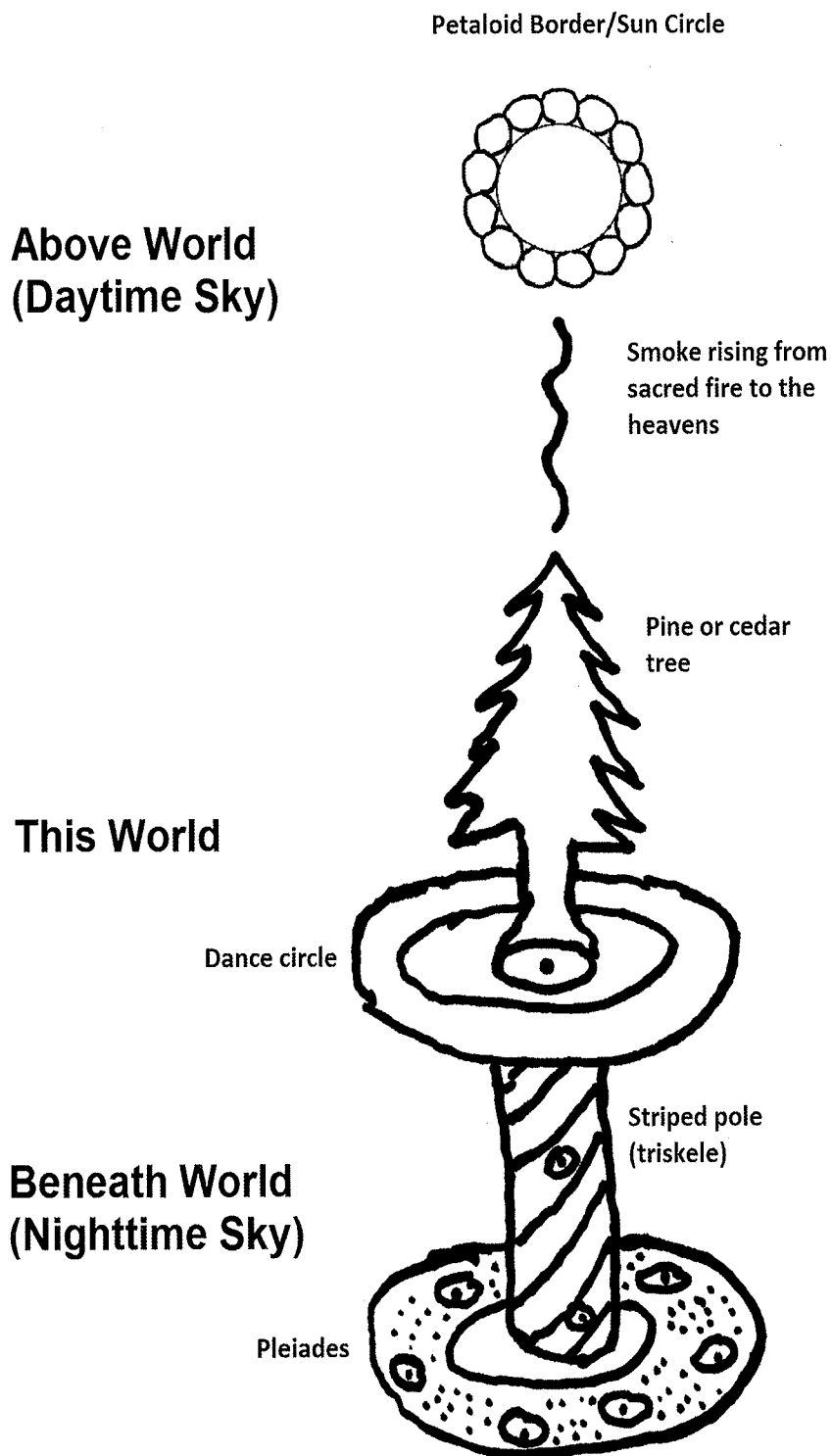


Figure 3. Speculative 3D Dimensional Interpretation of the Triskeles.