

## Mussel Shell Effigy Bowls, Crested Bird Spoons, and Freshwater Pearls from the Cumberland River

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Given the vast quantities of mussels once found in the Cumberland River of Middle Tennessee and their use as crushed tempering agents in virtually all of the local everyday pottery, one might wonder why some local potters would take the care to craft naturalistic depictions of these bivalves as effigy pottery. And yet, several Middle Cumberland potters created just such a series of vessels between about AD 1250 and 1450. The dozen or so known examples from the MCR include depictions of both single valves (Fig. 1) and the complete bivalve depicted as a compound bowl (Fig. 2).

Another striking use of the “everyday” mussel shell was as a spoon or ladle, typically found buried inside effigy bowls of various forms. Most of these “spoons” were not noticeably modified or only minimally carved to provide a tab-like handle. However, in the,

Nashville area, a few shell artisans produced some truly spectacular iconographic spoons with a detailed crested bird head serving as the “handle” (Fig. 3; note: another example from the Doug Wall collection was featured on pg. 185 of the *Tennessee 50th Anniversary CSAJ*). While frequently identified as a pileated woodpecker others have preferred to identify them as a kingfisher or even a merganser. Most iconographers of Mississippian art have adopted the label “Crested Bird,” recognizing that these depictions are not faithful images of living birds, but rather represent “supernatural beings” or powers that are interpreted in different geographic regions in different ways. In the Nashville area, these spoons are certainly related to the four crested birds of the Cox or “woodpecker” gorgets, most of which were created at sites along the Cumberland River as well. This places

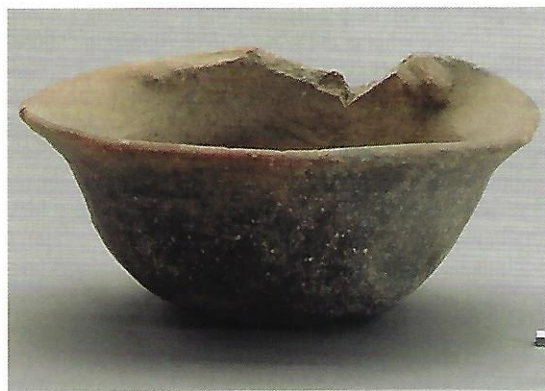


Figure 1. Single-valve mussel shell bowl from the Noel Cemetery, Davidson County (Penn Museum 41-24-347; Photograph David H. Dye).



Figure 2. Bivalve mussel shell compound bowl from the Noel Cemetery, Davidson County (Tennessee State Museum 82.100.247; Photograph Kevin E. Smith).





Figure 3. Two "Crested Bird" mussel shell spoons from Davidson County (Photographs by Kevin E. Smith).

my interpretation of the Crested Bird spoons as representative of one of the four cardinal directions, the four earth anchors, and the four winds (see Lankford 2007 for a full discussion of those concepts). Shell itself (whether freshwater or marine) indicates the Beneath World of Mississippian cosmology, and the carving of a Crested Bird in mussel shell suggests the calling of a specific power to mediate between the souls of the deceased in This World and their Beneath World afterlife destination. While some shells used as spoons might simply be utilitarian objects, these iconographic crested bird spoons almost certainly were not – they were vessels for dispensing spiritually-charged medicine from their associated bowls.

While we might just accept that carving on freshwater shell was "sacred enough," there is likely another reason that mussel shells were held in high and sacred regard throughout the Mississippian world – their production of pearls. As documented by early Spanish explorers of the Southeast, freshwater pearls were almost certainly the most highly prized and valuable of Mississippian "gems." While the modern production of cultured freshwater pearls has diminished our perceptions of them as rare and unusual, their natural production is indeed quite distinct. In the late 1800s and early 1900s on the Cumberland River, only one mussel in 10,000 yielded a pearl of any kind (mostly what were called "slugs" and valueless). Perhaps one in 40,000 yielded a "gem quality" pearl – i.e. nicely symmetrical and either oval or round. Perhaps one in 100,000 yielded a purely round natural pearl. Rarest of the rare when we look at those numbers. Assuming this was true in the prehistoric era as well, the nineteen pearls that William E. Myer found associated with a marine shell triskele gorget in Sumner County in 1891 (Fig. 4) suddenly seem more valuable and amazing. These 19 pearls are all gem quality and some are "perfection," suggesting that somewhere

between 750,000 and 1,500,000 mussels were harvested to produce this tiny set. Think about those numbers for a moment. There are quite a few more pearls from that single mound at Castalian Springs. The people buried with those seemingly tiny numbers of pearls were clearly uber-important. And there are lots more examples out there – time to remember and think about the fact that we tend to ignore how valuable and important small things like pearl beads were when they may have been the most prized possessions of ancient peoples.

#### References:

Lankford, George E.  
2007 Some Cosmological Motifs in the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex. In *Ancient Objects and Sacred Realms: Studies in Mississippian Iconography*, edited by F. Kent Reilly III and James Garber, pp. 8-38. University of Texas Press, Austin.

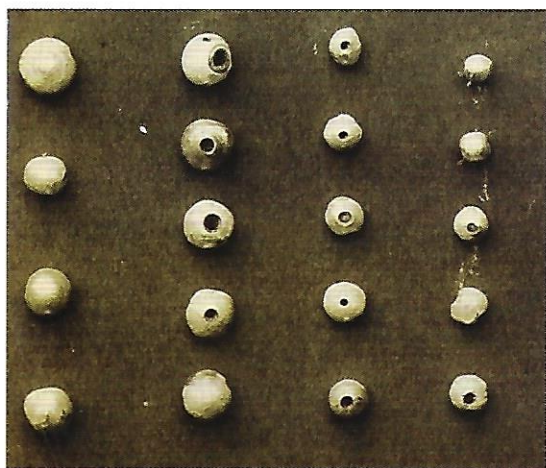


Figure 4. Freshwater pearls excavated by William E. Myer at the Castalian Springs Mounds, Sumner County, Tennessee (Photograph presumably by Myer, ca. 1919).