

THE MONSTER AND ME: BELLAIRE PANTHER PIPES AND RELIGIOUS SODALITIES  
IN THE LOWER MISSISSIPPI VALLEY

by

Seamus Vaughn Anderson, B.A.

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Committee Members:

F. Kent Reilly, III, Chair

David H. Dye

Christina Conlee

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## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this work to the many native peoples of the Lower Mississippi Valley and beyond, whose artistic works, philosophical and political heritage, and sacred narratives deserve to be recognized as living traditions with a long and complex antiquity.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Description
LMV	Lower Mississippi Valley
nLMV	northern Lower Mississippi Valley



## **ABSTRACT**

Water spirit veneration has a long history in the Lower Mississippi Valley (LMV), as seen by the large corpus of ritual wares depicting Beneath World powers that are sourced to this region. In particular, Bellaire style pipes from the Early and Middle Mississippian periods (AD 1100-1400) are found throughout the Southeast, especially in the LMV. Recent scholarship has sourced much of the stone used to craft these pipes to specific areas around the Mississippi River in the LMV. Thus, it is clear that some sort of institution, probably a group of religious sodalities with a shared belief system, produced these pipes and circulated them throughout the LMV and beyond. However, little is known about the form this particular institution took -- its scale, its membership, and its ultimate objectives. Why would such an institution arise to promote the circulation of these pipes as inalienable possessions and potentially as other-than-human persons? This thesis seeks to understand the formation and elaboration of the religious sodalities behind the construction, circulation, and eventual deposition of the Bellaire pipes. As a result, it focuses on the 16 panther-themed pipes of the Bellaire style. An iconographic and ethnographic analysis of these pipes as well as a review of relevant archaeological literature suggests that the Bellaire panther pipes served as ritual paraphernalia used in a Midewiwin-like religious sodality. This group of societies was likely created to mitigate the loss of intergenerational status caused by the peculiar kinship system of Southeastern native groups that involves ranked matrilineal clans and noble exogamy.

## I. INTRODUCTION



**Figure 1. Recreation of “Piasa” rock art northwest of Alton, Illinois. The original figure did not include wings (see Parkman 1869). Photo from Wikipedia Commons, taken by user Burfalcy.**

In 1673, the French explorers Jacques Marquette and Louis Joliet were searching for the mouth of the Mississippi River with five other men packed in two canoes when they came upon a disturbing sight. Painted on a steep bluff at the mouth of the Illinois River was what appeared to be a pair of horrible chimeric monsters. These monsters frightened both Frenchmen and their native companions, who continued to discuss the terrible sight for hours. That night, Joliet described what he saw in his journal as follows:

“They were painted in red, black, and green, a pair of monsters,

each as large as a calf, with horns like deer, red eyes, a beard like a tiger, and a frightful expression of countenance. The face is something like that of a man... and the tail so long... ending like that of a fish.” (Parkman 1869)

While certainly frightening and dangerous, the supernatural beings that these French explorers saw painted so vividly on this steep bluff were not merely evil monsters -- they were Beneath World powers known in archaeological and anthropological literature as “Water Spirits”. In fact, if Marquette and Joliet had traveled up the Mississippi River a century or more before, they may have encountered dozens of polities led by elites who venerated and worshipped these menacing supernatural beings.

Recent archaeological research into the ritual practices has focused on understanding this Water Spirit veneration. Steponaitis and colleagues (2019) argue that a group of 41 effigy pipes found within or around the Lower Mississippi Valley (LMV) represented a single style of pipes that they named the Bellaire style. Prominent among the style’s 11 themes are identifiable Water Spirits such as the Underwater Panther and other, related chimeric forms that would likely resemble the rock art witnessed by Marquette and Joliet. Due to the inherently ritual nature of smoking pipes amongst indigenous Americans and the masterful craftsmanship on display, it is clear that a group of elites conducted rituals that invoked the watery Beneath World and its denizens, leaving behind only the pipes. The form of the pipes suggests they were used in rituals that involved multiple people, with a large, voluminous pipe bowl and effigy figures facing away from the smoker. The danger and power attached to Water Spirits would require rituals involving specialized knowledge and roles, as well as the observance of taboos. Furthermore, the 41 effigy pipes in question come from disparate sites that occasionally cross-cut cultural boundaries. This

suggests the Bellaire pipes represent a group of related religious institutions, likely non-kin-based sodalities, that centered around Beneath World powers.

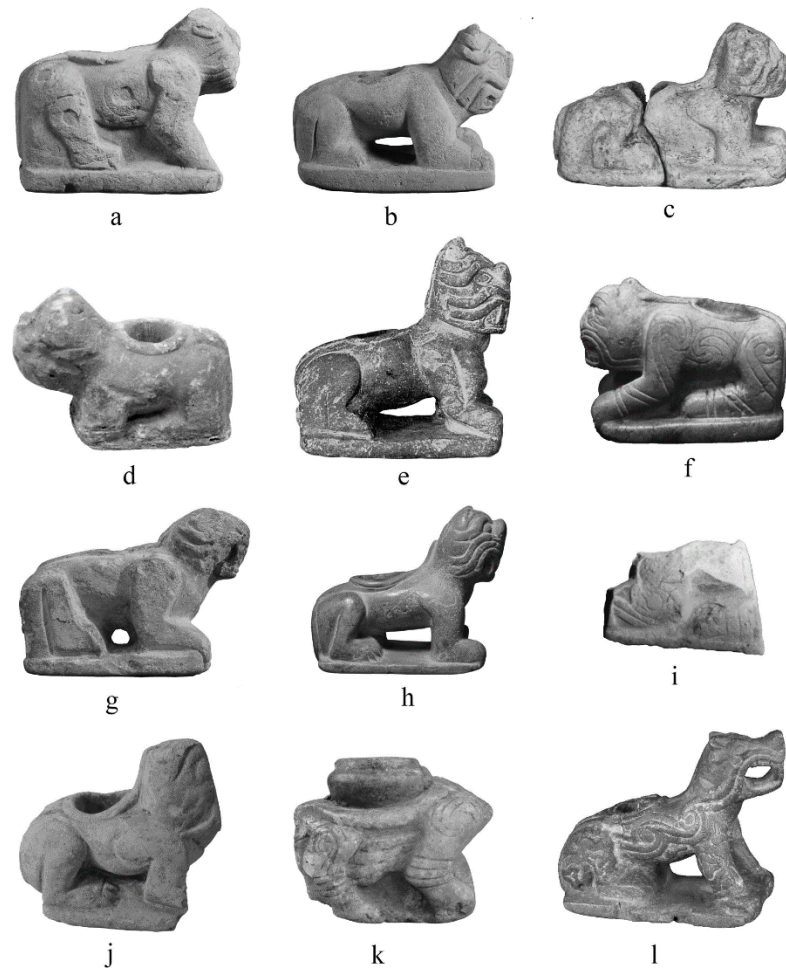
This thesis seeks to understand the underlying institutions that created, used, circulated, curated, and ultimately deposited these pipes. This study takes two main avenues of understanding. The first is through iconographic analysis and ethnographic analogy. Because of the complexity displayed by the overall style's 11 disparate themes, this iconographic analysis focuses primarily on the 16 pipes that Steponaitis and colleagues (2019) identified as possessing a "panther" theme. This theme evokes powerful supernatural beings that have correlates in the ethnographic record of descendant and related peoples. A review of this ethnographic record reveals that powerful Water Spirits were often venerated by secret societies like the Midewiwin and related sodalities, non-kin-based groups that could be manipulated for political advantage. The second avenue that is used to understand the Bellaire institutions is archaeological context. This avenue is fraught with uncertainty, as few pipes received well-documented excavations. Most were recovered by landowners or archaeologists from the early twentieth century who did not provide extensive documentation. As a result, this analysis combines an understanding of the general regional archaeological record as well as a review of the available provenience surrounding specific pipes.

Ultimately, this thesis concludes that the group of related ritual institutions behind the Bellaire pipes were most likely organized into non-kin-based sodalities that invoked the powers of the Beneath World as a part of mortuary and eschatological rituals that drew from the Beneath World, much like those of *Midewiwin*-like societies that focus on health and death issues. These sodalities could be manipulated by aggrandizers to elevate their status and to maintain inter-generational status in the face of the peculiar system of noble exogamy in the LMV. This is

evidenced primarily by ethnographic analogy and identifiable trends in the archaeological record of the LMV. These institutions were created at the end of the Coles Creek period (AD 700 - 1150), associated with relatively little ascribed status and hierarchy, and the beginning of the Plaquemine period (AD 1100-1500), associated with much more ascribed status and hierarchy. The Bellaire style and associated ritual practice were an important part of the political, ritual, and spiritual economy of the LMV, and it should be understood as an integral part of the Plaquemine experience.

### **Bellaire Pipes: Style, Function, and History**

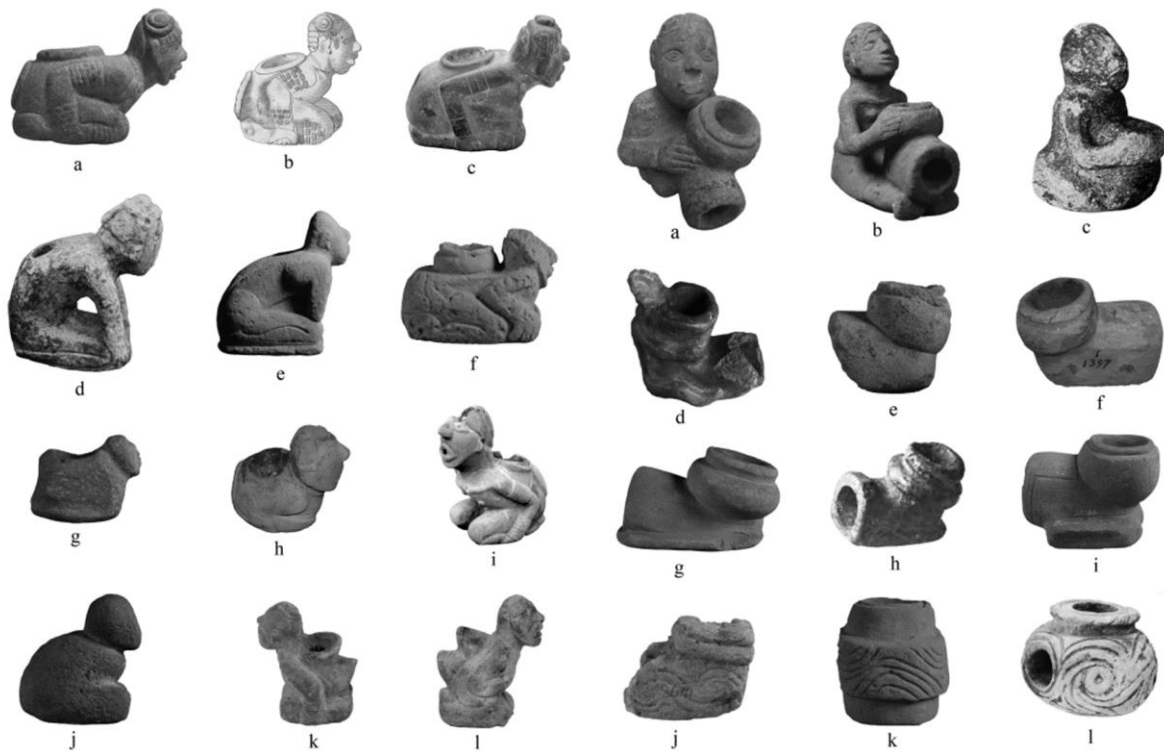
While recent research attention has been placed on these pipes, archaeologists working in the LMV have been interested in them for some time. The Bellaire pipe type was found in 1886 at the eponymous “Bellaire Mound” on the Anderson Plantation in Chicot County, Arkansas, but unfortunately, its archaeological context is not known. Similar pipes have been recovered at Moundville, in west central Alabama in a similarly non-scientific manner around 1860, but the first one published was by Clarence B. Moore (1905). Philip Phillips (1970:944-945) designated what he called a “particularly tentative” Bellaire phase of Plaquemine archaeology, which he perceived as representing a cultural shift in the region. However, more recent scholarship has cast doubts on this particular interpretation. The so-called “Bellaire phase” seems to fall apart when other indicators of the cultural phase, such as pottery construction, are analyzed alongside the chronology of the Bellaire pipes (Jeter 2007:167-169). It seems more likely that Bellaire pipes are representative of some institution or ritual practice that cross-cuts temporal and geographical cultural boundaries rather than constituting a cultural phase.



**Figure 2. Bellaire style effigy pipes with the Panther theme (Steponaitis et. al. 2019, Figure 2).**

Vincas Steponaitis has devoted many years of research to the Bellaire pipes. His research culminated in the recent article entitled *Effigy Pipes of the Lower Mississippi Valley: Iconography, Style, and Function*, co-written with Vernon J. Knight and George E. Lankford (2019). They analyzed all effigy pipes recovered in the southern Lower Mississippi Valley made from local materials and dating between AD 1000 - 1500. They identified 41 pipes that shared a formalistic style and depicted a variety of themes - mainly panthers and other zoomorphic images (Figure 2). Within this corpus, they divided the style into Bellaire A and Bellaire B based on formal differences within the corpus. Then, based on the date of abandonment of the sites

where the pipes had been found, they broadly dated Bellaire A to AD 1100 - 1350 and Bellaire B to AD 1300 - 1500.



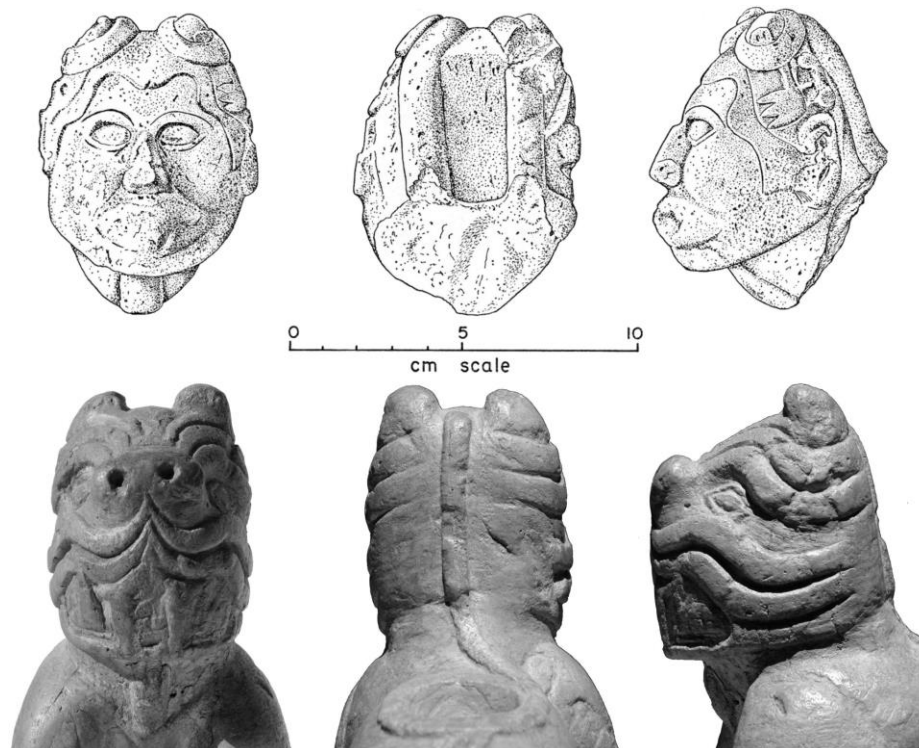
**Figure 3. Bellaire pipes with the Crouching Human and Pot Bearer themes**

**(Steponaitis et. al. 2019, Figures 3 and 4)**

After defining the style, Steponaitis and colleagues (2019) identified 11 themes. By far, the most common theme is a panther figure, followed by the image of a crouching human attired in regalia. Following this, the Pot Bearer and Pot themes are numerous in the corpus (Figure 3). The remainder of the pipes comprise zoomorphic forms, such as a raptor holding a human head, a frog, and even a monstrous combination of a panther, a raptor, and a snake. Steponaitis and colleagues argue that these themes display a great deal of stylistic unity. For example, a panther pipe and a crouching human pipe share remarkable formal qualities (Figure 4). Thus, the pipes are likely connected and were possibly employed in congruence with each other, even if most are individual finds recovered without archaeological context. Furthermore, Steponaitis and



colleagues (2019) note that Bellaire A is dominated by anthropomorphs and only includes panther zoomorphs, while Bellaire B is dominated by a variety of zoomorphic forms, not limited to the panther. They also note that Bellaire A anthropomorphs are always in a particular position -- a full crouch with hands placed on the shins, and adorned with beads. On the other hand, Bellaire B anthropomorphs do not have beads and may be in a full or a half-crouch.



**Figure 4. The heads of two Bellaire A pipes that may be carved by the same person. The top pipe is Miss-Ad-F1 and the bottom pipe is Ala-Tu-M1 (Steponaitis et. al. 2019, Figure 6)**

Steponaitis and colleagues (2019) also argue that Bellaire pipes were components of shamanic practice involving smoking tobacco, possibly alongside other psychoactive plants, and communicating with or conjuring other-than-human persons represented or embodied by the pipes. They attest that the figure on the pipes either contains the pipe bowl as their body and faces the same direction as the smoker, or, in the case of the Potbearer theme, the figure holds



the pipe bowl and faces the smoker directly. In both cases, the portrayed being takes on an active role by the ritual practitioner when in the act of smoking, and thus also in the ritual action in which the pipes are involved. Furthermore, they cite the work of Ted Brasser and Alexander von Gernet, who outline a pattern of smoking ritual in North America that involved smoking tobacco and other narcotic plants to obtain power or knowledge from supernatural beings or ancestors, often depicted directly on pipes (Brasser 1980, von Gernet 1995). This argument is bolstered by several ethnohistoric accounts from eighteenth-century French explorers, where religious practitioners of descendant communities in the LMV used pipes as a means to communicate with powerful supernatural forces (Swanton 1918, Bossu 1962).

Finally, Steponaitis and colleagues (2019) assert that the pipes themselves were spiritually-charged objects whose very material held power. Many of the distinctive panther pipes are made from the Glendon limestone that outcrops along the Mississippi River near Vicksburg, Mississippi. These researchers argue that Glendon limestone may have carried spiritual power or an important association with the Underwater Panther. Unfortunately, little may be ascertained about the interconnected relationships between the limestone and its associated supernatural figures. Furthermore, the association between material and theme extends to other pipes in the corpus, with sandstone and ceramics being associated with the Crouching Human, Potbearer, and Pot themes. Additionally, Steponaitis (Personal Communication, July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021) suggests much of the sandstone used to construct these pipes outcrops is close to the Glendon Limestone, which outcrops on the Mississippi River near Vicksburg. Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that the material used to construct the other pipes in the corpus was equally spiritually charged and tied to particular effigy themes.

Due to constraints on scope, this thesis will focus on the panther-themed Bellaire pipes,

considering these 16 pipes as a real, emic category representing one iteration of a group of related institutions behind the creation, curation, and deposition of these pipes. This assumption is not without drawbacks -- for example, Steponaitis and colleagues (2019) distinguish Bellaire A and B based on qualitative observations, and these categories have not been verified independently by statistical analysis. Additionally, the dating of the pipes does not provide a great deal of chronological control. While I ultimately agree with their conclusions and believe their groupings will be verified in the future, it is important to note that much of this thesis is based upon assumptions that may prove to be erroneous.

Setting aside these epistemological concerns, when the proposed chronology of the Bellaire substyles is considered, a few interesting points arise. For one, Bellaire A includes a much narrower array of themes as opposed to Bellaire B, only including the Panther, Crouching Human, Potbearer, and Pot themes. Additionally, most of these themes are anthropomorphic, except for the Panther theme. This contrasts quite sharply with Bellaire B and its variety of zoomorphic effigies. Similarly, most of the Bellaire A pipes with known provenience come from the southern Lower Mississippi Valley except for two Panther pipes found at Moundville, while more Bellaire B pipes are found outside of the LMV, including the Caddo region to the west as well as Moundville to the east. This suggests the ritual institutions in question may have begun with a focus on the Underwater Panther as the dominant supernatural being within its ritual practice, and then took on additional zoomorphic forms over time, possibly as a result of its growing interregional connections characteristic of the Mississippian period. This thesis will focus on the Panther pipes within this style. For reasons that will be elaborated upon later in this work, feline zoomorphic forms are most likely associated with the most elite members of the institution that produced the Bellaire pipes and thus serve as an appropriate starting point to

understand the fundamental structure of this institution.

### **The Institutional Approach, Religious Sodalities, and Political Authority in the Lower Mississippi Valley**

The primary goal of this thesis will be to analyze the institutional context of the panther-themed Bellaire pipes. Within the archaeology of the Southeast, there has been an increased focus on identifying specific institutions from their associated religious *sacra*, or sacred and inalienable ritual objects that are considered to be living embodiments of the supernatural figures that they represent. Much of this began with Vernon J. Knight Jr.'s 1986 work *The Institutional Organization of Mississippian Religion*, in which Knight argued that archaeologists should look beyond what was once called "cult institutions," an extremely general term that encapsulates everything from ancestor cults, medicine societies, and secret societies to fraternal orders, specialized priesthoods, and churches. Knight contends that archaeologists of religion and ritual should seek to more deeply understand the institutions behind the religious *sacra* that we find in the archaeological record. He went on to analyze three categories of religious *sacra* that have received a great deal of attention over the years: 1) portable Mississippian decorative art (shell gorgets, copper plates, and greenstone), 2) temple statuary, and 3) Mississippian platform mounds. According to this model, Mississippian decorative art represents an institution of select, elite families that held a monopoly on supernatural power, that was also tied to success in warfare, while temple statuary represents an exclusive cult of ancestors that may cross-cut the institution of Mississippian decorative art but is distinct from it. On the other hand, platform mounds are communal and inclusive, involving everyone in the community. Thus, these three assemblages of religious *sacra*, once thought to be essential aspects of the same "Southern Cult", represent three intersecting but independent institutions.

Since Knight's landmark work, there has been a greater focus on identifying and attempting to understand religious institutions in the Southeast. Much of this research has focused on further delineating institutions within the three broad categories laid out by Knight and discussing their particular purpose within a region and its archaeological sequence (Dye 2017, 2018, 2020a, Howey 2020, Knight et. al. 2017, Steponaitis 2016). In a recent work, Holland-Lulewicz and colleagues (2020) argue for an analytical framework for defining archaeological data into political, economic, and social institutions. Drawing from Knight (1986), they advocated for a theoretical approach in which researchers seek to identify and define institutions and understand them through their material remains. They defined institutions as "organizations of people that carry out objectives using regularized practices and norms, labor, and resources" and argued that archaeologists can and should try to identify particular properties of institutions, such as the resources, knowledge, and labor forces that they control, the durability of institutional forms, the scale of their operations, particular activities that they undertake, their membership and organizational structure, and their ultimate objectives (Holland-Lulewicz et al. 2020). Thus, the primary goal of this thesis will be to apply this analytical framework to the Bellaire panther-themed pipes. What resources, knowledge, and labor did the people who maintained these pipes as religious *sacra* control? What activities did they undertake, and to what ends?

To answer these questions, it is important to understand the political economy and the known institutions within the LMV during the Mississippian period. Recent scholarship in Mississippian political economy has defined three primary types of institutions in the American Southeast: corporate descent groups, ritual sodalities, and social houses (Dye 2020b). These institutions developed alongside the rise in sedentism and the introduction of agriculture, major

societal changes that placed new emphasis on controlling land, forming advantageous marriages, and making connections with others in neighboring polities. Social institutions such as ritual sodalities and corporate descent groups became important means of improving or justifying one's position within a developing hierarchy by facilitating long-distance relationships and marriage alliances as well as the control of land and other resources (Dye 2020b).

Many of these changes are concurrent with shifts in the material expressions of ritual that may be observed through the archaeological record. For example, the rise of corporate descent groups may first be seen through the circulation of birdstone atlatl weights in the early Woodland period, followed by the Adena tradition (1000 - 200 BC) and the Hopewell interaction sphere (200 BC-AD 400), the latter centered in the Ohio River Valley but extending to far-flung areas such as Illinois and the LMV. Their rise brought the widespread circulation of ritually significant goods like copper, shell, and exotic cherts as a part of elaborate funerary complexes (Clay 1998, Abrams 2009, Dye 2020). At the same time, tobacco smoking also exploded in popularity. The Adena period is associated with tubular smoking pipes that are found most often in burial contexts. These pipes were made from a specific source of soft limestone from the central Ohio Valley and were small, suggesting they were used by individuals and not likely shared, unlike the Bellaire pipes.

Hopewell is associated with finely-crafted platform pipes commonly associated with burials or are buried en masse. The pipes occasionally feature zoomorphic forms, most commonly depicting birds (Rafferty 2016). The pipe designs often feature an effigy that faces the smoker suggesting a more personal orientation of use as opposed to the Bellaire pipes of a later period that face an "audience" (Brasser 1980). Furthermore, recent research on the Havana Hopewell of Illinois found that pipes were often interred with specific individuals to mark status

as opposed to Scioto Hopewell sites in the Ohio River valley where platform pipes were often interred en masse (Farnsworth et. al. 2021). Similarly, the Hopewellian Marksville people of the LMV used platform pipes made with local materials and buried them with individuals (Toth 1974:25; Rafferty 2016), perhaps suggesting a degree of regional differentiation on broadly shared ideas as well as a focus on individual aggrandizers. Additionally, the variety and use of pipe forms and other *sacra* indicate a high degree of ritual elaboration and the existence of specialists who possibly codified various ritual sodalities to create or rationalize social and political hierarchy and inequality.

The Troyville culture, associated with the Baytown period (AD 400 - 700), succeeds the Marksville culture in the LMV and reflects a notable shift from individual aggrandizers towards a more collective focus. Troyville architecture is notable for its communal burial mounds, in which there are few artifacts of status. burials within them reflect charnel house activities and mass mortuary activity. The area surrounding these mounds often provides evidence of feasting events in the form of burned pits and large deposits of animal bones (Belmont 1984, Kidder 2008). There is some evidence for long-distance circulation of ceramics, but it is not a consistent pattern throughout the LMV and is mostly associated with the early Baytown period. Furthermore, the general settlement pattern does not reflect a site hierarchy (Kidder 2008). This kind of assemblage suggests there was relatively minor ritual elaboration that did not require specialists as well as a general emphasis on the community, not specific individuals. Ritual practice most likely focused on the community and de-emphasized individual differentiation and on social cohesion over aggrandizement, more indicative of social institutions like corporate descent groups and social houses than religious sodalities.

Many social practices changed in the Coles Creek period (AD 700 - 1200). There was a

general increase in the population that came as a result of changes in diet and subsistence technology beginning in the Baytown period around AD 400 and gradually increasing until around AD 800 (Buikstra et. al. 1986). This increase in population precipitated a shift toward a more centralized and possibly socially ranked society as evidenced by the emergence of site hierarchy and the rise of large mound centers like the Toltec, Emerald, and Osceola sites (Kidder 2008). Pipes from this period display a transitional morphology between the platform pipes of the Hopewell and the elbow pipes of the Mississippian, called “distal bowl” pipes (Brose 1985; Rafferty 2016).

During this period, Troyville communal feasting and mortuary complex expanded in scope and frequency. The reasons behind this expansion have divided scholars. Some, like Brian Hayden and David H. Dye, attest that communal feasting shifted to a competitive feasting complex, where individuals of status funded feasts and sought to raise their status through this expression of conspicuous wealth. At the same time, mound centers changed from mass mortuary sites to elevated areas for individuals of status (Dye 2020b; Hayden 2014, 2020). Much of their argument is based around global, cross-cultural patterns of feasting events involving competition and concepts of debt, which are manipulated by individual aggrandizers seeking to raise their social status and precipitate a social hierarchy.

On the other hand, Megan Kassabaum and others argue that Coles Creek feasting and mortuary complexes are more consistent with a relatively egalitarian society in which social differentiation was minimized in favor of group solidarity. She argues that Coles Creek mortuary patterns emphasize age-graded differentiation and thus attained rather than ascribed status based on an overview of mortuary data at the Greenhouse, Lake George, and Mount Nebo sites (Kassabaum 2011). Additionally, in a recent work, she argues that botanical, faunal, and ceramic

remains at the Feltus site, another major Coles Creek mound center, are more suggestive of community-oriented feasting that emphasized group solidarity over competition (Kassabaum 2019). She contends that feasting events focused on competition and hierarchy leave behind specific material markers such as rare and exotic foods, high-quality ceramic vessels, monumental construction, and markers of elite status.

The Feltus ceramic assemblage includes some decorated wares, but the distribution of plain to decorated wares does not significantly differ from Coles Creek domestic sites. Furthermore, the food remains display a heavy reliance on nuts and seeds as well as large mammals and fish, all resources that are part of the standard Coles Creek diet albeit with a specific focus on the kinds of foods that can be gathered en masse. As a result, Kassabaum concludes that much of the Coles Creek feasting complex was oriented around forming and reinforcing group solidarity and was characterized by a low frequency of competition (2019).

Hayden (2020) refutes Kassabaum's interpretation of the Feltus site. He points out that there are monumental constructions in the form of four large platform mounds. Effigy pipes were also found at the site, including one of the Bellaire A pot-bearer pipes, suggesting the existence of ritual specialists or at least social differentiation. He also challenges Kassabaum's interpretation of food remains, suggesting that the domination of every-day foods in the assemblage does not rule out the possibility that a small group of elite individuals consumed special foods, the remains of which would be miniscule and susceptible to archaeological invisibility and sample bias (Hayden 2020). Kassabaum (2020) argues that Hayden's analysis relies too heavily on cross-cultural patterns and does not utilize regionally relevant sources. She also refutes the claim that elite food remains were underrepresented in the sample, stating that "[w]e must interpret the data we have, not those that might hypothetically exist" (Kassabaum



2020:800).

At first glance, these two interpretations of Coles Creek feasting seem antithetical and irreconcilable. However, I suggest that patterns of Southeastern social organization allow for large-scale feasting that both emphasizes group solidarity and competition. Research into Southeastern social organization suggests society was organized into three categories (Knight 1990). Each person belonged to one of several matrilineal totemic clans that were often ranked. Within these clans were small-scale matrilineages that were strongly corporate and tied to estates. The clans were themselves grouped into a moiety system that divided society into two equal but opposing groups focused on some dichotomous concepts like day/night, war/peace, life/death.

Knight (1990) suggests this moiety system could be a source of hierarchy as one of these moieties comes to be seen as superior to another. Thus, in some more heavily stratified groups like the Natchez of the early post-contact LMV, a class system involving “nobles” and “commoners” developed, where “nobles” were members of the highest-ranking clans, and the most paramount matrilineages within those clans became political elites like local and regional political and martial leaders. All of these segments of society were exogamous, a topic that has spurred much debate because noble/commoner exogamy is a rare social form (see Swanton 1911; Josselin de Jong 1928; Brain 1971; Knight 1990).

Within this context, it would be possible for elements of competition to be introduced into a feasting complex while leaving behind material remains consistent with a non-competitive communal feast described by Kassabaum (2019). In this view, local matrilineages tied to estates of land were most likely the mechanism that would gather and provide the resources required for the communal feast. Over time, certain matrilineages would consistently provide more resources

than others, creating debt and possibly precipitating the ranking of clans and the formation of paramount families within these clans. Furthermore, the moiety system that is so intricately tied to the ritual and ceremonial functions of events like feasts and mortuary rituals could become ranked through a similar mechanism, where one moiety's ritual function is seen as more valuable than another's. Within this context, a religious sodality like those behind the Bellaire pipes could be instrumental in the creation of this ranking and accompanying social hierarchy, and the presence of at least one Bellaire Potbearer themed pipe at the Feltus site in a late context suggests that this may indeed be the case.

The well-known and much-discussed "Mississippian" period, now called the Plaquemine period in the LMV and considered distinct from the Mississippian culture to the north, follows the Coles Creek period. The social organization of the Plaquemine period is by no means fully understood, but there is no debate on the level of social and political hierarchy. Many scholars have argued that the Natchez of the early post-contact period serve as the model for the social organization of the entire Mississippian Southeast, especially of the Plaquemine (Swanton 1911, Josselin de Jong 1928, Knight 1986, 1990, Dye 2020b). Political and economic power were divided broadly into three social institutions – corporate descent groups in the form of ranked and exogamous matrilineal clans that controlled marriages, strongly corporate social houses in the form of noble matrilineages that held landed estates and controlled regal descent as well as access to the ancestors, and religious sodalities like those that created the Bellaire pipes that controlled ritual life and served to cross-cut other institutions.

Knight (1990) argues that in any given Southeastern polity, there would be one paramount clan and several other, lesser ranked clans. This paramount clan would contain all nobles by birth. Within these clans were several subdivisions of matrilineages that were also

ranked by the amount of land that they controlled. The highest ranking matrilineage within the highest-ranking clan would act as a kind of royal family of which all political and martial leaders descend. Religious non-kin-based organizations by their nature, would cross-cut this clan and matrilineage system. Both post-contact clans and religious sodalities were often oriented around *manitou* or powerful supernatural beings that provided and regulated spiritual power. Each clan had a central, totemic *manitou* from which they drew their power and served their ceremonial duty. On the other hand, each religious sodality supplicated one or many *manitou*, often made material through ritual *sacra*, that directly provided power to the society at large and each individual member (Dye 2020a, 2020b).

Religious sodalities were particularly important for powerful Plaquemine elites and aggrandizers alike. Membership in one such group could provide noble males a means to maintain the status of their children. One inconvenient aspect of Mississippian exogamous and matrilineal social organization is that the children of male nobles are commoners by birth, as children are part of their mother's clan and not their father's. Knight draws attention to the practice of placing disinherited children into positions of authority in various social institutions in the ethnographic record of the Timuca, Apalachee, and Muskogee peoples (Knight 1990). Thus, generational status could be maintained through membership in a religious sodality.

Additionally, given that styles of ritual regalia associated with this kind of institution are found across whole geographic regions, it is likely that Mississippian elites could use their association with this group to form relationships with other elites in neighboring polities (Dye 2018, 2020a, 2020b). Membership could also provide commoners with a means of aggrandizing their status in society. Position within a religious sodality is often attained rather than ascribed by birth and is only limited by the wealth of the disciple in question. One need only to afford the

cost of higher levels of initiation into the society to obtain status within it (Hayden 2018). As a result, individuals from lower ranked clans but well-landed matrilineages could use the wealth provided by their estate to buy status denied to them by birth. Furthermore, these aggrandizers could build relationships with members of noble clans to set up advantageous marriages, ensuring an increase in generational status for their children. On the other hand, the congregation of a religious sodality would provide exogamous nobles with access to a variety of ideologically aligned commoner families with which to set up advantageous marriages (Dye 2020b).

For these reasons, religious sodalities bloomed in popularity during the Mississippian period in the LMV and on other regions of the Southeast. The creation and circulation of ritual goods, such as incised shell cups and gorgets, cold-pressed copper plates, and exquisitely sculpted effigy pipes, explode in popularity. Furthermore, this explosion in political complexity and competition is also associated with a similar increase in pipe styles that feature a wider variety of effigy forms (Rafferty 2016). Thus, I argue that the Bellaire pipes, particularly the panther pipes, represented the *manitou* of a ritual sodality that served to connect important political actors in the Plaquemine world.

## II. METHODS AND LITERATURE REVIEW

To more fully understand the Bellaire pipes, this work draws from iconographical analysis in archaeology. This subfield deals primarily with the underlying meaning of representational imagery and art found in the archaeological record. Much of this subfield borrows from art historical methods and models, especially that of the foundational art historian Erwin Panofsky. In his groundbreaking work *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (1939), Panofsky details his method for interpreting art that involves three levels of analysis: Primary or Natural Subject Matter, Secondary/Conventional Subject Matter, and Intrinsic Meaning or Content. The first of these levels deals with the most direct and factual meaning of a work, what Panofsky calls its “pure forms”. Thus, the Primary or Natural Subject Matter involves a careful and detailed description of the work in which the researcher uses their own practical experience and emotional understanding of art to understand exactly what it depicts.

The Secondary or Conventional Subject Matter involves the connection of identifiable symbols or motifs to larger themes, concepts, and mythological or historical stories. This level of analysis is significantly more difficult, involving an understanding of literary, historical, and/or mythographic sources as well as the typological history of how particular themes or concepts are depicted in representational imagery. The final level of analysis, or the Intrinsic Meaning, involves understanding and analyzing how the work in question fits into larger aspects of the society and the individual that produced it, what Panofsky calls “the general and essential tendencies of the human mind.” This intrinsic meaning could refer to some larger philosophical, religious, or political question or argument, and it is often difficult to get to this level of analysis

with archaeological studies in iconography. However, Panovsky's method generally has been influential for archaeological studies in pursuing meaning behind representational imagery found in archaeological contexts because of its meticulous separation between levels of meaning and understanding.

Within the study of iconography in the Southeast, two scholars, in particular, have been influential as a whole and for this thesis in particular: F. Kent Reilly III and Vernon James Knight Jr. Reilly defined his methodology in the introduction to the 2010 book *Visualizing the Sacred: Cosmic Visions, Regionalism, and the Art of the Mississippian World*. In this chapter, he discussed the importance of the Mississippian Iconographic Workshop, where scholars from a wide range of backgrounds meet to directly discuss the iconographic meaning of the art and representational imagery of the Mississippian world. Participants of this conference are not exclusively archaeologists and anthropologists; folklorists, art historians, and Native American religious practitioners are involved in this conference as well, bringing new and fresh perspectives to the field. Furthermore, Reilly elaborates on this methodology by describing the actual organization of the workshop, where subgroups are organized around specific problems or questions and each piece of art or representational imagery is examined using Panovsky's method and drawing from the diverse perspectives of the experts in each subgroup. Thus, large-scale patterns of motifs, symbols, and themes can be better understood through collaboration between experts in various fields (Reilly 2014). Reilly's methodology has been influential for Mississippian iconography, and many of the most influential papers written in this area began as conversations among scholars who participated in the Mississippian Iconographic Workshop, including Steponaitis and colleagues (2019) with their focus on the Bellaire style.

Vernon James Knight Jr. detailed his method in his foundational work *Iconographic*

*Method in New World Prehistory* (2013), in which he details the history of iconographic studies in archaeology and art history and discusses the state of the field, arguing that

“The iconography of ancient images is a peculiar area of scholarship and not one with a stellar reputation. Its literature is relatively disorganized. Its important concepts are published in scattered places. At the moment, the field has no primary journal... [and often] ‘results in some of the worst archaeology on record.’”  
(Knight 2013:xi-xii).

Knight attempts to remedy some of the problems in the field through his model, which begins with compiling a large corpus of like images that can be separated into styles and substyles. From there, knight then details a method of configurational analysis which involves taking a large corpus of images that have been tied together stylistically and breaking them down into meaningful elements that can be analyzed with methods like cluster analysis, correspondence analysis, and multidimensional scaling that provide the researcher with an understanding of how motifs are used in a given style. Then, styles can be sorted into appropriate themes. Only after this, Knight argues, can iconographers hope to make sense of past imagery through ethnographic analysis.

Knight advocates for a relatively conservative approach in identifying the “referent” in representational imagery or some natural prototype to which the artisan or the beholder of the image may be referring. He argues that iconographers should be cautious about tying modern or historic beliefs or ideas to older ones, as the link between image and referent is ever-changing. Knight calls this the Principle of Disjunction, where imagery may remain the same while it is constantly reinterpreted by new generations as well as new communities and ethnolinguistic

groups as it is transmitted (Knight 2013:76). Furthermore, Knight calls for iconographers to incorporate both natural history and archaeological field data to gain “intimate knowledge of... the physical environment experienced daily by ancient artisans and beholders” (Knight 2013:163-164). Overall, the work is an important codification of more than 100 years of iconographic methodology and theory, and it is a must-read for any iconographer working with assemblages from the Americas.

This thesis will draw from both Reilly and Knight’s theoretical and methodological approaches. On one hand, Knight’s conservative approach of identifying generalized “referents” only after intensive formal analysis seems apt to deal with the problem of disjunction, especially with effigy pipes like the Bellaire pipes, which have had a long history of research and have been deeply “read-in” by previous researchers like Brain and Phillips (1996:384-386) and Lankford (2007c:112). In addition, Reilly draws from a wide variety of scholarship including indigenous knowledge and perspectives. While the iconographic workshop will not factor into my contributions to understanding the Bellaire pipes directly, the codification of the style by Steponaitis and colleagues (2019) is a direct result of the workshop and deserves mention in this section of this thesis, and thus the methods used in the workshop are woven into this work at its very core.

In essence, I will conduct a formal iconographic analysis of the Bellaire A panther pipes using the theory and methodology laid out by Panofsky, Reilly, and Knight. The configural analysis that codifies a style and separates it into themes and substyles has already been completed as part of Steponaitis and colleagues (2019). While this work touches on the use and meaning of the pipes, the analysis was preliminary. It did not discuss the larger cultural sequence and the political economy of the region, nor its natural history. Because of this, the institutional



context of the Bellaire pipes has been unexplored. My formal analysis seeks to fill this gap in the literature by considering the pipes as a material reflection of a group of related religious sodalities that may be partially understood by the iconographic form of the Bellaire pipes. Additionally, I will incorporate what is known about the LMV around AD 1100 – 1350, focusing particularly on the sites where Bellaire panther pipes have been found, incorporating specific archaeological contexts when applicable. By doing so, I hope to focus attention on why Bellaire pipes were created and what these pipes did for those who used them.

### III. ANALYSIS OF THE BELLAIRE PANTHER PIPES

The Panther theme pipes in the Bellaire corpus are definitive representations, having garnered the most research attention and interest. In their landmark study of Mississippian representational art, Brain and Phillips (1996:384-386) used the panther pipes as the basis for their definition of the Bellaire style. They began their analysis with the four panther pipes from Moundville, which they used as type artifacts to determine the formal attributes of their Bellaire style, which they defined as an “undeniably feline” form with an “open mouth with bared teeth, serpentine elements, and [a] prominent buttonlike nose.” They also recognized that the zoomorphic figures always sat on plinths, and frequently featured long tails that snaked across the body, sometimes encircling the pipe stem hole and pipe bowl. They then analyzed the Perrault cache from the Emerald mound near Natchez, which they used to argue that their Bellaire Style included other zoomorphic forms that also included some combination of feline and serpentine elements with the figure displayed on a plinth (Brain and Phillips 1996:384-386). However, they make no attempt to evaluate or understand the meaning or use of these pipes by the peoples who made and maintained them.

Steponaitis and colleagues (2019) generally agree with Brain and Phillips concerning their proposed stylistic attributes, but add that the animals typically lay on their plinths in a low crouch. Additionally, they build on the work of Brain and Phillips (1996) by seeking to better understand the people who used and maintained the pipes. First, they note that the panther pipes were primarily carved from limestone, especially the well-crafted examples. They remark that a number of these pipes were made from Glendon Limestone, which was most likely from a prominent outcrop near Vicksburg along the Mississippi River. Thus, while the pipes were

distributed widely, their production appears to be sourced to a specific area. Furthermore, Steponaitis and colleagues (2019) identify the referent as the Underwater Panther and observe that the pipes were employed to invoke the Beneath World as part of their ritual practice. They also suggest that the person possessing the panther pipes were likely “the most highly accomplished shamans.”

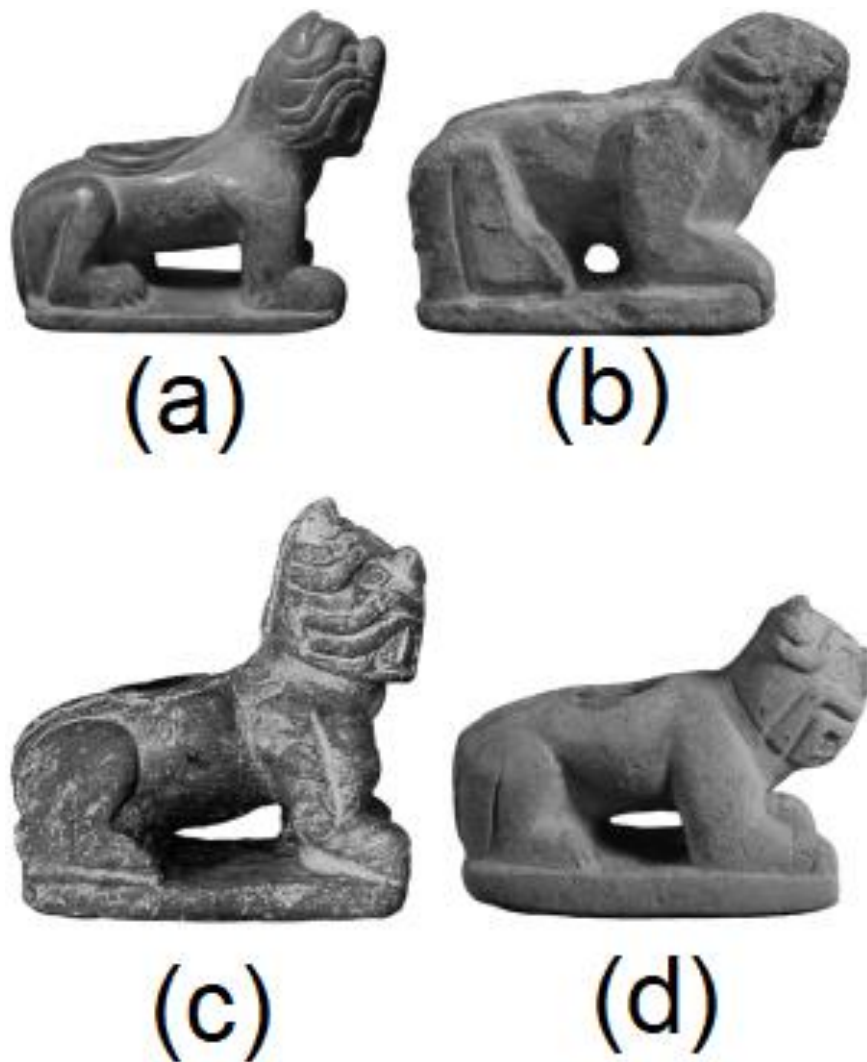
Because the panther pipes have had a long history of research attention and interest, certain assumptions seem inherent in their study. For example, in the literature, they are consistently referred to as “cat-effigies” with “undeniably feline” elements, or simply as “panther pipes”, as I have done as well. However, few studies define these terms or interrogate whether they are factual descriptions of the pipes’ morphology, or if they are “read-in” from the ethnographic or folkloric record. Additionally, only Steponaitis and colleagues (2019) offer an analysis of how the pipes may have been perceived, understood, and used by their beholders. This study will first analyze the form or morphology of the Bellaire panther pipes, and then will expand on how they were envisioned and used.

### **Structural Analysis:**

#### **Natural or Factual Description**

The Bellaire A pipes identified by Steponaitis and colleagues (2019), comprise four pipes included in this theme (Figure 5). The first of these pipes is the type artifact for the style – the Bellaire Pipe from Anderson Plantation, also known as the Bellaire Mound (Figure 5a). The second appears to be a crudely made specimen of the style from an unknown provenience in Mississippi (Figure 5b). This pipe may be the equivalent of a pre-form deposited before the final decorative touches could be made as it appears to follow the general conventions of Bellaire A but differs in the level of detail on the figure’s face and limbs. The final two panther pipes are

from the Moundville assemblage and are carved from the distinctive Glendon Limestone (Figures 5c, 5d).



**Figure 5. The Panther theme pipes included in Bellaire A: (a) Ark-Ch-AP1; (b) Miss-X5; (c) Ala-Tu-M1; (d) Ala-Tu-M91. Images derived from Steponaitis et. al. 2019: Figure 2.**

These four pipes show a remarkable adherence to form across this theme. All four zoomorphic figures sit on a plinth in a half-crouch with their head facing forward. The hindlegs are carved in an almost identical fashion with the crease between the thigh and forelimb heavily

emphasized. The form of the front legs shows some variation, with the elbows bent so the forelimbs lie on the plinth as seen in Figures 5b and 5d, and the front legs being extended with prominent paws lying on the plinth in Figures 5a and 5c. The body of all four pipes is free of any kind of additional ornamentation or decoration like that of the Bellaire B panther pipes (see Figures 2a, 2f, and 2l). The heads of each pipe also display an adherence to strict form, with rounded ears, a bulbous nose, bared teeth, and several incised lines etched across the face, which creates what appear to be otherworldly whiskers. Three are included between the mouth and eyes, and three are included between the eyes and ears except for Figure 2b, which shows the beginning of these lines in relief that were likely not completed. The tail of the zoomorphic figure depicted in these pipes tends to come up the figure's back and wrap around both the pipe's stem hole and its bowl before terminating at the back of the head.

The eight Bellaire B pipes differ from the Bellaire A pipes in their variation within the substyle, the inclusion of ornate carving details, as well as the formal qualities of their carving. Bellaire B Panthers often include swirl motifs or circles on their legs and the sides of their bodies, sometimes with three-pronged eye surrounds (Figure 6a, 6b). The most defining characteristic of the Bellaire B Panthers is the lack of negative space between the front limbs and torso of the feline figure. Instead, pipes of this substyle have deep inlets around the torso and limbs that imply negative space without being fully carved out. Overall, the variation within the Bellaire B Panthers is significant, perhaps representing a wider group of carvers who rendered the pipes than the Bellaire A Panthers, who may have been carved by a relatively smaller group with greater control and restriction of form and method.



**Figure 6: Three Bellaire B Panther-themed pipes: (a) Miss-Ad-E5; ( b) Ala-Tu-M161; (d) Ark-Ga-HS1; and one of indeterminate substyle: (c) SE-X302**

Four of the Bellaire Panther-themed pipes are of an indeterminate style. Some, like SE-X302 (Figure 6c), include elements of both styles like swirl motifs along the sides and legs and fully carved out negative space below the torso. Others were recovered in states of poor preservation or include unclear iconography so that a confident determination of substyle could not be made.

The zoomorphic figure depicted by these pipes is undeniably fierce: with bared teeth large fangs, and flared nostrils - a clear sign of aggressive behavior by a large predatory animal. The otherworldly whiskers that cover the figure's face add to the sense of danger and anger. The body of this zoomorphic figure leans forward, its head positioned in front of the plinth and its

forearms bent as if ready to strike. The tension depicted is emphasized by the tail coming over the top of the animal's body, a behavior often seen in agitated predatory animals like mountain lions. The figure's lower body remains firmly seated, a pose often held by felines before a sudden and deadly pounce. There is a clear thematic preference for limestone, with 12 out of the 16 panther themed pipes being made this particular type of stone. Limestone is an interesting medium to render these pipes in because it is a particularly fossiliferous kind of sedimentary rock, especially the Glendon variety. This has a direct aesthetic effect on the pipes as fossils of ancient sea creatures - pectens, gastropods, and Foraminifera fossils - are visible on their surface (Steponaitis and Dockery 2011). The appearance of shell within stone could have some significance to the beholders of the Bellaire pipes because shells were an important part of ritual life in the LMV and certainly reflect beliefs in the Beneath World or watery realm. Lightning whelk shells were also highly prized, used as mediums for important *sacra* such as cups, decorative gorgets, and shell beads often worn in death (Phillips and Brown 1978, Kozuch 2022). Much of this *sacra* carried iconography that thematically ties it to the Beneath World and eschatology (Knight et. al 2017; Kozuch et. al. 2017). The visual effect of fossiliferous stone may carry similar associations, especially as many of these fossils would have to be ground away during the creation of the pipes' distinctive effigy forms.

As previously mentioned, these pipes are consistently referred to as the "panther" pipes, but could they represent another quadrupedal predatory mammal native to the Southeast, such as a canine or a bear? After all, wolves and bears both have large fangs and bare their teeth when aggressive, and the rounded ears and large paws of the figure could be interpreted as that of a Canid or Ursidae. However, this seems unlikely. Species of the Canid family, like wolves and foxes, and the Ursidae family of bears all have long and relatively thin snouts that protrude

significantly from the face. Only the Felidae family has short and stout snouts like that seen in the effigy pipes. Additionally, the figure's slender torso could not be mistaken for the rather rotund body of a bear, or the often stiff and relatively inflexible body of canids. Furthermore, the large paws and rounded ears closely match that of many of the North American cat species, and the zoomorph's exceptionally long tail could not be mistaken for the relatively small and stout tail of a bear or the bushy tail of canids. It seems quite reasonable to assume that, however supernatural and otherworldly the referent of these pipes may be, it is certainly some kind of feline.

While it may be somewhat erroneous or impossible to guess what species of Felidae might be referenced in the form of these pipes, it is at least worth discussing. There are six species of cats that are indigenous to North America: Canada Lynx (*Lynx canadensis*), Bobcat (*Lynx rufus*), Mountain Lion (*Puma concolor*), Ocelot (*Leopardus pardalis*), Jaguarundi (*Herpailurus yagouaroundi*), and Jaguar (*Panthera onca*). Of these, the Jaguar, Jaguarundi, and the Ocelot can be ruled out as potentially influencing the Bellaire pipes. In post-contact times, these species were confined to Mexico and parts of the Southwest, and there is nothing to suggest that their ranges extended northward since the onset of the Holocene. The Canada Lynx similarly lies far north of the LMV (Laliberte et. al. 2004). While people of the LMV may have been familiar with these animals through travel or trade, that access was undoubtedly limited, and it is unlikely that these species influenced the form or conception of the Bellaire panther. The Bobcat and the Mountain Lion, on the other hand, are native to the LMV and surrounding areas in both current and historic times (Laliberte et. al. 2004). Archaeological investigations at Moundville substantiates this claim, as both mountain lion and bobcat remains have been found in the faunal assemblage of Mound Q (Jackson and Scott 2003: Table 1, 565).



Furthermore, the behavior of bobcats and mountain lions may illuminate some aspects of the artistic forms of these pipes and what they are meant to invoke in their intended beholders. Because there are no known domesticated animals in the Southeast (aside from the dog), Indigenous people had to hunt animals for meat and animal products. As a result, it is reasonable to assume that they had an intimate knowledge of the behavior of the animals in their environment. This is especially true of predators like bobcats and mountain lions that compete against human hunters for deer and smaller prey animals.

A review of behavioral ecology literature on bobcat and mountain lion populations reveals interesting insights. Both feline species tend to be most active at twilight (crepuscular) but become more active at night when around humans. They are opportunistic ambush predators that often attempt to kill with a well-timed pounce and a single bite to the neck. Kills are then often cached under trees, bushes, or leaves to protect them from scavengers (López-González and González-Romero 1998, Hansen 2007). Like many large predators, mountain lions are thinly distributed across the landscape and mostly solitary. They have also been known to avoid areas of human settlement and agriculture (López-González and González-Romero 1998). While rare today, bobcats were much more common in the post-contact period, only reaching their current state of scarcity as a result of known historic processes, like the fur trade, intentional eradication by Anglo settlement, and modern patterns of land use and wildlife management (Hansen 2007).

In summary, a strictly formal analysis of the Bellaire panther pipes reveals that they feature what is undeniably a feline zoomorphic figure. This cat bares its sizeable fangs in an aggressive pose, imparting a feeling of fear or awe embraced by the beholders. The most likely mental templates for this feline form are the Mountain Lion (*Puma concolor*) and the Bobcat (*Lynx rufus*). These species would have interacted with hunters, and their behavior likely

influenced the characterization of the supernatural being depicted in the Bellaire pipes.

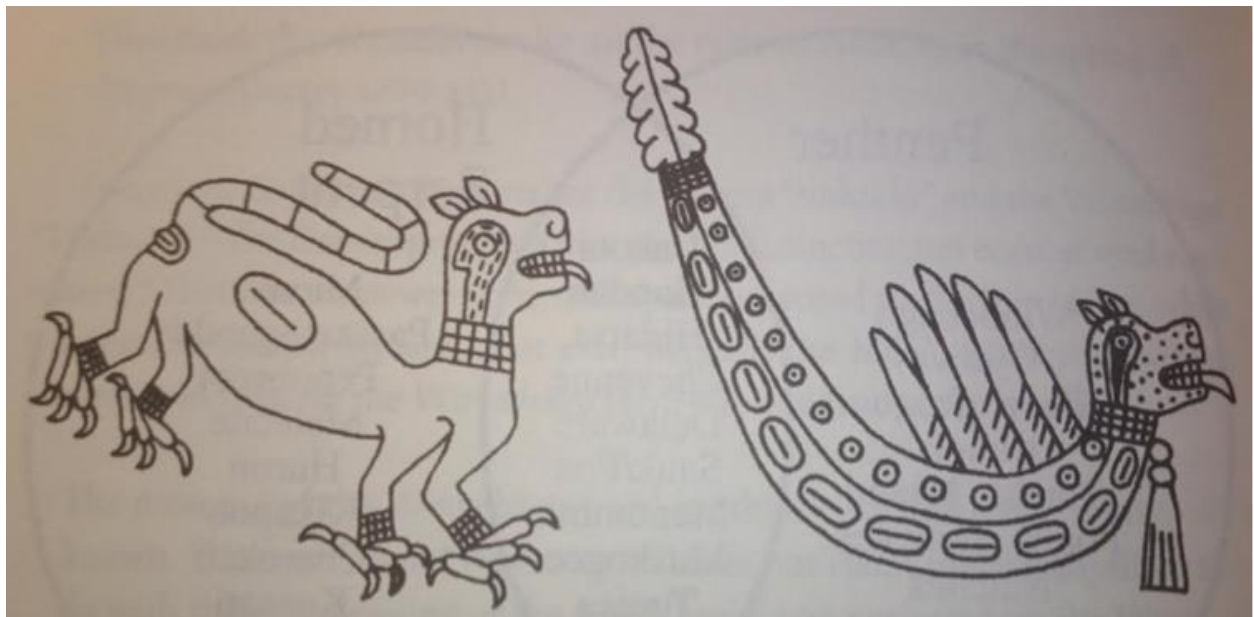
### **Secondary or Conventional Subject Matter**



**Figure 7. A generalized view of the cosmology of the people of the Eastern Woodlands and Plains. This image visualizes cosmology that is broadly shared by Siouan, Muscogean, Algonquian, and Iroquoian speaking peoples as well as the unique language families of the LMV – Natchez and Tunican (Photo Courtesy of F. Kent Reilly III, originally illustrated by Jack Johnson).**

As previously mentioned, Steponaitis and colleagues (2019) identify the referent as the Underwater Panther – a powerful supernatural being that inhabits the Beneath World. In

Southeastern cosmology, the watery Beneath World is one of the three planes of existence along with the Above World of the daytime sky and sun, and the Middle World inhabited by humans. The Beneath World is associated with bodies of water, caves, and the night sky, especially the Milky Way, also known as the “Path of Souls”, where dead souls travel to the next life (Lankford 2007a, 2007b, 2007c; Reilly 2004, 2015). A visualization of this cosmology may be viewed in Figure 6. Beneath World beings – also referred to as Water Spirits – often take the form of serpents, reptiles, amphibians, fish, felines, canines, or composite beings that are chimeric combinations of these animals (Carr 2013; Dye 2018; Radin 1923; Reilly 2015). This section explores the history of artistic representations of these Water Spirits in the Eastern Woodlands and their implication for the conventional meaning of the Bellaire Panther pipes.



**Figure 8. Two depictions of presumably the same supernatural being, one in Panther form and the other in Serpent form found on Craig style shell cups from Spiro (Phillips and Brown 1975-1982: Plates 228, 229). Note the similar composition of the heads between the two figures, suggesting that they share the same referent. Additionally, the circular motif on the Panther’s side bears a similarity to that**

**found on the Panther pipe shown in Figure 2a and 6a. (Lankford 2007c: Figure 5.4).**

Lankford argues that Water Spirits that take on panther or serpentine forms, often with barred teeth or an extended tongue and sometimes horns or antlers, refer to the dominant supernatural forces of the Beneath World. This claim is evidenced by an exhaustive study of Woodlands and Plains mythology and shared imagery depicting panthers, snakes, and panther-snake chimeras, one example of which is shown in Figure 8 (Lankford 2007c). The Bellaire Panther pipes may refer to these dominant powers due to their panther-like form and barred teeth, along with other shared motifs that draw from the same tradition. To better appreciate the conventional meaning of this supernatural figure, it is necessary to broadly overview Water Spirit imagery in the Southeast to understand the tradition within which Bellaire Panthers existed.

The earliest recognizable depictions of monstrous Water Spirits date to the Middle Woodland period. Notable examples include the Horned Beneath World Spirit, also known as the Serpent Monster effigy (Figure 9). This figure displays the characteristic chimeric aspects of Beneath World Spirits through its mix of serpentine elements, like a rattlesnake's rattle, crosshatching reminiscent of scales, and a snake-like head, and mammalian elements, like its thick body with clawed legs and horns (Reilly 2015:139). The figure is made of petrified wood and includes a hollow chamber on its underside that could have been used for placing some means of ritual imbibement. The effigy also includes holes in its face where teeth would have been inset. Notably, this figure shares many similarities to the Bellaire panther, namely its crouched stance, barred teeth, and its combination of serpent and mammalian forms, all of which suggest Lankford's model of Beneath World spirits holds true.



**Figure 9. The Horned Beneath World Spirit, also known as the Serpent Monster Effigy, found at the Turner Site (33HA26) in Hamlin County, Ohio, dating to around AD 300 (Reilly 2015). Picture property of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Object # 82-35-10/29685.**

Another noteworthy example of pre-Mississippian Beneath World spirit iconography is the Oenaville gorget from Bell County, Texas (Figure 10). This gorget displays a panther-like figure with barred teeth, an extended tongue, and a vaguely serpentine form, which faces off against a raptor. Townsend (2004: Figure 8) argues that this gorget as well as other related imagery symbolizes the conflict between the Above World and the Beneath World, and this gorget in particular charters a dualistic moiety system of human society often seen in Southeastern social structures. Additionally, the composite nature of this panther-snake suggests a deep history of use for Water Spirits in the Southeast and provides context for the Panther-



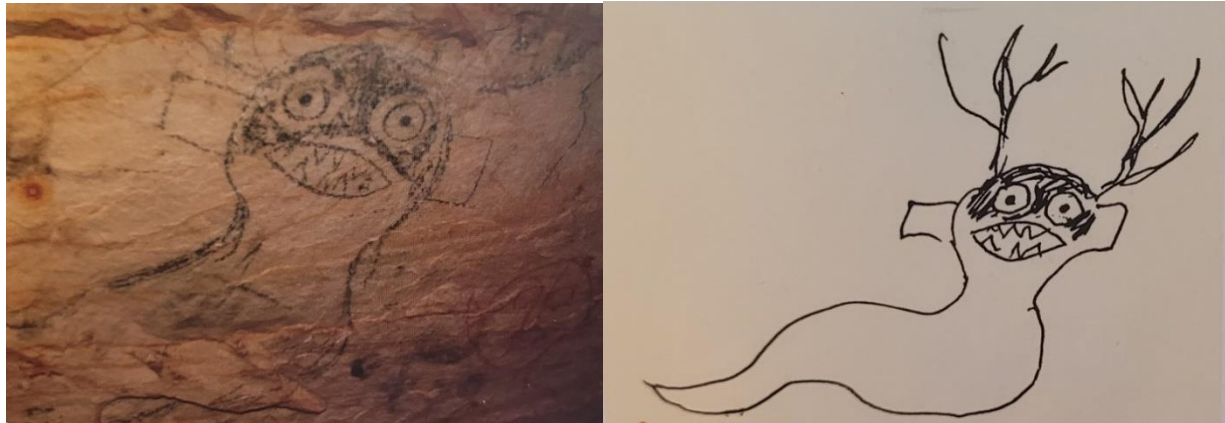
Raptor-Snake themed Bellaire pipes.



**Figure 10. The Oenaville Gorget from Bell County, Texas, dating to about AD 300-700 (Townsend 2004:Figure 8).**

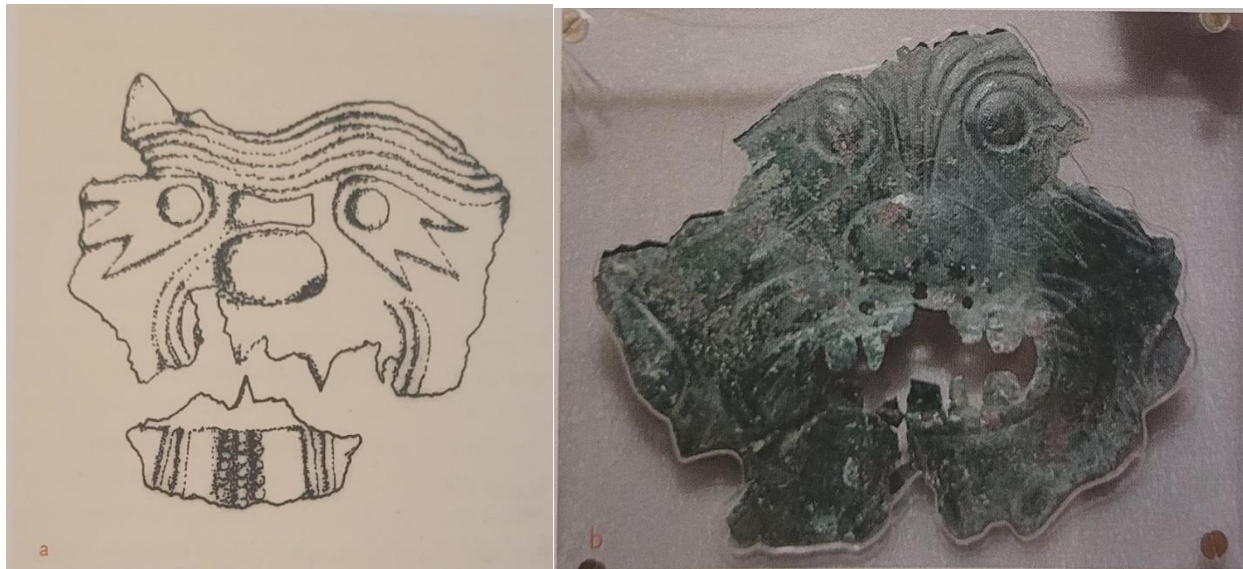
An important example of Water Spirit symbolism in the Early Mississippian period comes from Picture Cave in Missouri. Deep within this cave lie several rock art panels that depict various scenes that are identifiably Mississippian. These panels feature important supernatural characters, such as Morning Star, the Hero Twins, and most importantly to this study, several Water Spirits with striking similarities to the Bellaire panther pipes, the most striking of which is shown in Figure 10. Thankfully, the paints used include a charcoal pigment that can be radiocarbon dated. This places the creation of these pictographs to between AD 900 - 1200 with a weighted average between AD 985 - 1165 (Diaz-Granados et. al. 2015:54, Table 5.1). The Water Spirit depicted in Figure 11 shows a continuity with the previous Woodland

Water Spirits and connects these themes to those seen later in the Bellaire panthers. The serpentine figure faces the viewer with barred teeth, implying imminent danger, while ear flares and an antler rack on top of the figure's head mark them as spiritually powerful.



**Figure 11. Beneath World Spirit I from Picture Cave, in Missouri. (a) A photograph of the rock art panel. Due to the slant of the rock wall, a complete photograph was difficult to acquire. (b) a rendering of the complete figure, drawn by F. Kent Reilly III (Reilly 2015:Figure 10.2).**

Reilly notes that the figure's open and toothy mouth bears a striking similarity to two copper plates found at the Etowah and Hollywood sites in Georgia (Figure 12). Both copper plates date broadly to AD 1325-1375 (Reilly 2015:136), and they are worth discussing because they are broadly contemporaneous with the Bellaire panther pipes and share a striking resemblance. These Water Spirits are much more feline in character, with bulbous noses and sharp fangs inside a cat-like mouth. They also feature three-pronged eye surrounds and wavy lines emanating away from the face, both of which are undeniably reminiscent of the Bellaire B panthers, implying some relationship or shared understanding connecting these copper plates from Georgia with the latter Bellaire ritual institutions in the LMV.



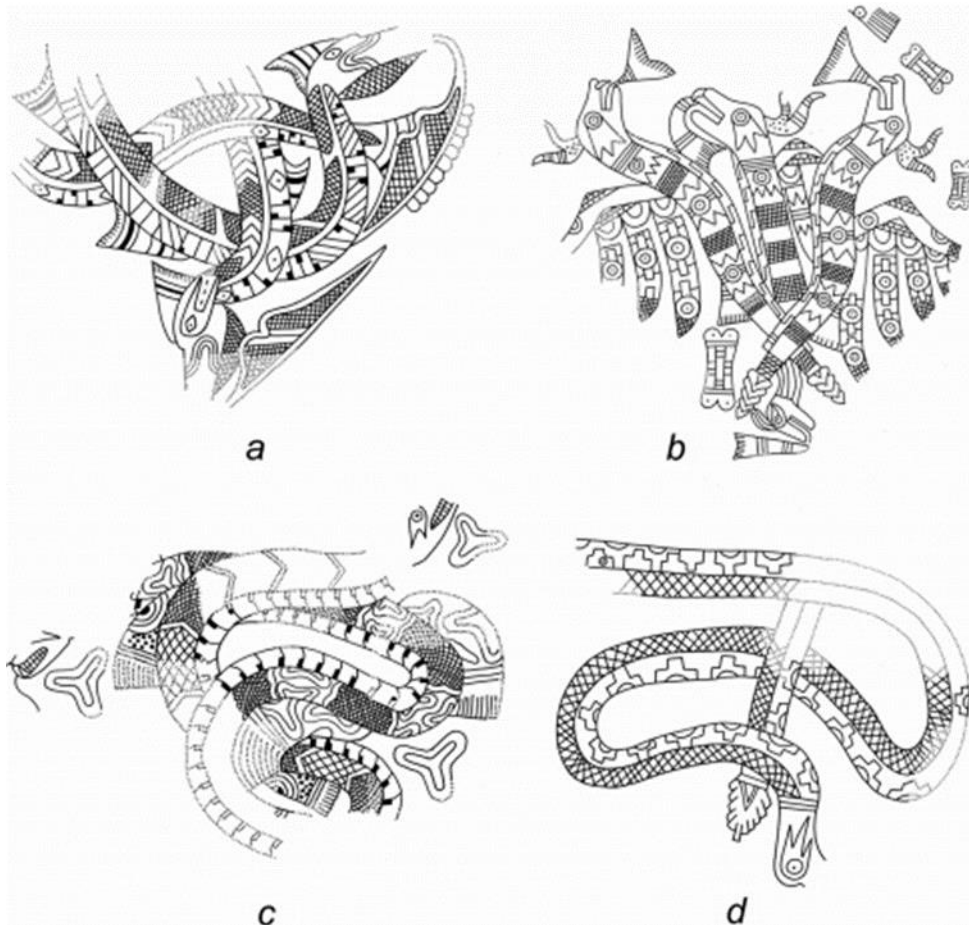
**Figure 12. Two copper plates of a panther-like zoomorphic figure from Georgia.**

**(left) Rendering of a copper plate found at Etowah, Georgia, AD 1325-1375.**

**Drawing by James R. Duncan. (right) Copper plate found at the Hollywood site, Georgia, AD 1325-1375. These figures display a much more feline aspect than those at Picture Cave .**

An important example of contemporaneous Water Spirit imagery is the Holly Bluff style defined by Knight and colleagues (2017). This style appears primarily on whelk shell cups and a few ceramic vessels. These vessels frequently depict winged and horned serpents, long-tailed panthers, and combinations of raptors, serpents, panthers, and fish, clearly invoking powers of the Beneath World along similar conventions as previous styles (Figure 13). The style has recently been separated into three sequential sub-styles, dated broadly to AD 1200-1450, and sourced to the northern Lower Mississippi Valley (nLMV) due to its stylistic similarity to Walls Engraved pottery found in the Memphis area (Knight et. al. 2017). Interestingly, most of the Holly Bluff corpus was found in the Great Mortuary at the Spiro site in east central Oklahoma, far from the

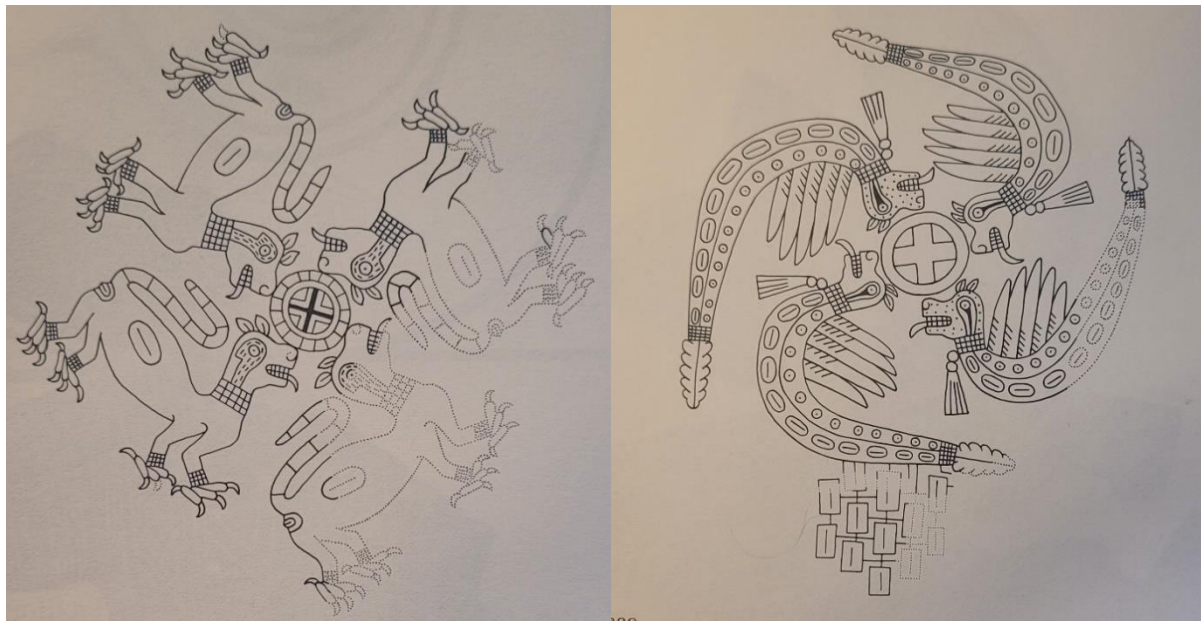




**Figure 13. Some examples of iconography on Holly Bluff style shell cups (Knight et. al. 2017:Figure 1).**

area of the Holly Bluff and Walls Engraved styles, i.e., between the boot-heel of Missouri and the northern Yazoo basin. Several Bellaire pipes including a Bellaire B panther pipe (Okla-Lf-S65, Figure 2k) were found alongside these Holly Bluff cups in the Great Mortuary (Brown 1996; Steponaitis et. al. 2019). This suggests that the Holly Bluff style is yet another material representation of a religious sodality whose ritual sacra was heir loomed across generations and geographical space, much like the religious institutions behind the Bellaire pipes. Additionally, the style's geographic and temporal proximity to the Bellaire pipes and their shared context in the Great Mortuary is worth discussing. The ritual institutions behind both the Bellaire pipes and

the Holly Bluff shell and ceramic cups almost certainly were aware of each other and perhaps drew from similar stylistic and religious themes.



**Figure 14. Two complete renderings of Craig style engravings on whelk shell cups found at Spiro: (left) four panther-like zoomorphs that form a swirl cross around a circle-cross motif (Phillips and Brown 1984:Plate 228), (right) four winged serpents that also form a swirl cross around a circle-cross motif (Phillips and Brown 1984:Plate 229).**

Other contemporaneous Water Spirit imagery may be observed at Spiro and Moundville. At Spiro, for example, the locally produced Craig-style shell cups include panthers and snakes among other themes. Two particularly striking examples of this are shown in Figure 8, and complete renderings of these shell cups are shown in Figure 14. The similarities in form between the feline zoomorphs and the serpentine zoomorphs seen in Figure 14, particularly in the face of the four figures and their configuration around a central circle-cross motif, suggest that this class of elite Water Spirits often combined feline, serpentine, and avian forms. More generally, the locally produced Hemphill-style is dominated by Beneath World motifs, such as skulls, hand-

and-eye motifs, and winged serpents (Steponaitis 1983; Lankford 2007c; Knight and Steponaitis 2011; Phillips 2016). One particularly important example of this imagery is the Rattlesnake Disc, which features two entwined rattlesnakes that form a circle with their bodies, and a hand with an eye located at the center of the circle (Figure 15). In addition to these locally produced ritual objects, two of the four Bellaire A panther pipes and two of the Bellaire B panther pipes were found at Moundville, perhaps suggesting ritual practitioners at Moundville possessed a particular interest in eschatological concepts and Water Spirits, especially serpents and panthers.



**Figure 15. The Rattlesnake Disc from Moundville, Alabama, dated to AD 1300-1450 (M1922). Assigned to the local Hemphill style, this artifact was likely used to mix pigments used to mark the faces and bodies of ritual supplicants (Steponaitis 2016).**

**Photo courtesy of David H. Dye.**



**Figure 16. A Berry Group ceramic vessel from the Early Contact period (AD 1550-1650) in the LMV. Part of a series of four vessels found at the Berry site in the Pemiscot Bayou of southeastern Missouri. Photo courtesy of David H. Dye.**

In the Early Contact Period (AD 1550-1650) that followed the Mississippian period, Water Spirit imagery continued to be central to ritual practice in the LMV. Striking examples of this include several ceramic vessel styles produced by Tunican speakers in the nLMV. Many of these took the form of panthers and snakes, reflecting a continuity with earlier traditions (Dye 2018). The Berry Group (Figure 16) shows a remarkable similarity to the Mississippian-era copper plates from Etowah (Figure 12) as well as the Bellaire pipes with their emphasis on the face of a terrible monster that bares its teeth. The addition of incised lines that emanate from the creature's face above the eyes and around the mouth is remarkably similar to the "whiskers" of the Bellaire panthers. The emphasis on a monster with bared teeth and incised lines is also seen

in the Campbell Group (Figure 17). These ceramic vessels include a monstrous “rim rider” with bared teeth and an undeniable feline aspect to its face, coupled with a general serpentine form in the shape of the neck, vessel, and the twist of its tail. The swirl motifs included on the sides of these vessels are also reminiscent of the swirl motifs along the side of the bodies of the Bellaire B panther pipes. Several additional styles of ceramic vessels, occasionally referred to as “cat serpents” by researchers both professional and avocational, from the Early Contact period in the nLMV have been discussed and illustrated (Bogg and Bogg 2016). Dye has argued that these styles of ceramic vessels are material reflections of unique religious sodalities focused on Water Spirits that were transformed during political and socioeconomic disruptions (Dye 2018).



**Figure 17. A Campbell Group ceramic vessel. Part of a series of four bowls and a bottle found in northern Mississippi County, Arkansas and southern Pemiscot County, Missouri. Photo courtesy of David H. Dye.**

Overall, a brief review of Water Spirit imagery in the Southeast reveals that Water Spirits, especially panther and serpent zoomorphs, were often depicted in monstrous forms that

seem intent on invoking a terrifying aspect for their beholders. Across geographic and cultural regions and long stretches of time, Water Spirits have been depicted with open mouths revealing sharp, deadly teeth, suggesting imminent danger and aggression. Ear spools, antler racks, or horns often accompany these monsters, indicating their spiritual power, which ties them to elites through regalia. The genre of these works as objects of ritual imbibement, regalia, or cave art, all of which requires a specialist to produce, suggests these beings could only be accessed through proper practice, protocols, training, and access to sacred spaces. Thus, the Bellaire ritual institutions, through its invocation of a Water Spirit, like the Underwater Panther, likely involved shamanic specialists as ritual practitioners who could commune with dangerous and powerful supernatural beings. They may have had access to certain sacred spaces in which to do so, perhaps suggesting that this institution, this religious sodality, was both esoteric and restrictive in its membership.

### **Intrinsic Meaning or Content**

When looked at through a cross-cultural perspective, large cats are often associated with positions of power, particularly political power. This can be observed globally, but it is especially true for the peoples of the Americas. Examples include the Chamula Maya of Mexico, who believe the most powerful shamans and political leaders share a spiritual kinship with jaguars. Likewise, the Kogi of northern Colombia attribute linguistic phonemes associated with jaguars to political leaders and men of status (Saunders 1998:26, 28). Nicholas Saunders notes that feline imagery “shows clear concentrations in situations relating to the expression of dominant power - particularly in relation to hunting, warfare, supernatural aggression, and representation of pre-eminent social status” (1998:33).

Furthermore, felines are often involved in concepts of shamanic transformation and the

act of tobacco smoking. Johannes Wilbert (1987) discusses this curious connection for the Machiguenga of Peru:

“...[T]he shamanic neophyte, who through ingestion of tobacco receives acute near vision during the day, and the mature shaman, who as a result of advanced nicotine intoxication obtains night vision and improved capability of distinguishing large shapes in the dark, need little convincing to consider themselves related to such keen-eyed animals as the feline...”  
(195)

He goes on to discuss several examples of South American culture groups that use tobacco smoking as a vehicle for shamanic transformation into jaguars, including the Machiguenga of Peru who practice rituals where shamans smoke great quantities of tobacco before chasing and killing others (197).

Panthers are also important symbols of political and spiritual power amongst living descendant communities of the Eastern Woodlands. As part of my studies with Dr. Kent Reilly III, I had the honor of speaking with Dan Penton, the *mico* of the Hitichi-Creeks, a Muskogean community residing in Florida. When asked about the importance of panthers in his practices and his position as the most prominent leader in his community, Penton claimed there are some panther elements within his personal sacred bundle and the sacred bundle of his community. He explained that panthers are good hunters. This hunting prowess sets them apart from other animals and makes them spiritually relevant in his practices (Dan Penton, personal communication, April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2022). As previously discussed, large felines are apex predators and one of the only species that can threaten humans. This biological behavior makes large felines particularly potent magical metaphors. As Saunders (1998:31-32) notes:



“The power of jaguar is such that its supreme spirit form, i.e. as shaman, appears to be regarded as omnipotent in ritual as its physical form is in the natural world. Where no animal can withstand *Panthera onca*’s attack, no illness-bearing spirit can withstand the onslaught of the supernatural jaguar.”

While this model of magico-religious feline imagery references predominately South and Central American cultures, I see no reason why the same logic ought not to be applied to the North American Southeast and *Puma concolor*, especially given the primacy awarded to supernatural powers like the Underwater Panther. Unfortunately, Penton could not discuss the complexity of his relationship to panthers. He explained that much of this complexity is esoteric and cannot be revealed to the uninitiated (Dan Penton, personal communication, April 12, 2022). This esotericism is a common trait of religious sodalities generally and is a frequent part of panther imagery and *manitou*, powerful spirits, in the cultures of the Eastern Woodlands.

In the Eastern Woodlands, panther imagery is often identified as the “Underwater Panther,” a powerful Beneath World *manitou* associated with eschatological concepts and death. At first glance, Water Spirits like the Underwater Panther and the Great Serpent seem to be strange powers to embrace and even supplicate and venerate. In many sacred Muscogee, Anishinaabe, and Caddo (among many others) narratives, these powers drown unsuspecting victims in whirlpools and flood entire towns when incited or even mildly disturbed (Lankford 2011). Additionally, many contemporary native people generally characterize these Water Spirits as highly dangerous (Howard 1960). The Underwater Panther is even known by some Anglo Americans in southwestern Illinois as the “Piasa”, where Marquette and Joliet’s harrowing story that began this thesis is something of local folklore. In fact, in Alton, Illinois, there is a



reconstruction of the rock art they found that includes a single dragon-like figure with wings, scales, bird talons, and an incredibly large tail (Figure 1) (Duncan 2016). While inaccurate, this reconstruction has made the Underwater Panther known to some Anglo Americans as a horrible Native American monster.

Thus, it might be logical to ask -- why would the Bellaire supplicants align themselves with the dangerous and potentially maleficent powers of the night and the water and not the powers of the day? To address this question, we must first understand that Water Spirits are not seen as universally malevolent because the good/evil dichotomy so prevalent in our Western worldview does not necessarily translate into Indigenous conceptions of duality, ritual power, and danger. It is more accurate to describe Water Spirits as dangerous and powerful forces in the world that, if handled foolishly, can cause great harm, rather than as inherently malevolent beings akin to the Christian devil. Additionally, Indigenous ritual practice surrounding Water Spirits emphasizes the need to supplicate these dangerous and powerful supernatural forces to maintain cosmic balance. The modern Potawatomi Tribe, for example, conduct an annual ceremony venerating the Underwater Panther to maintain peace in the world. Howard (1960) interviewed James Kagmega, the bearer of the Potawatomi sacred bundle dedicated to the Underwater Panther. Kagmega said:

“We are taught that there is continual warfare between the Powers Above and the Powers Below. Their conflicts affect the lives of the different Indian tribes here on the earth. When they are quiet and at peace, the Indians are peaceful too. When there is battle in the heavens and at the bottom of the waters, then there is warfare among mankind too.”

Howard adds that “Both the Thunderbirds and the Underwater Panther were powerful, though diametrically opposed forces to be placated, honored, and in some cases controlled by the proper ceremony” (Howard 1960:218-219). Additionally, Howard notes that there does not seem to be any inconsistency about participating in rituals venerating the powers of the day and the powers of the night. Contemporary expressions of Indigenous theology seem to corroborate this view. Native scholar in theology and member of the Osage Nation, George “Tink” Tinker argues that traditional Native American beliefs emphasize cosmic balance (Tinker 2018). Thus, the supplication of dangerous and powerful supernatural beings like Water Spirits in the LMV may be oriented toward maintaining cosmic balance.

Alternatively, or possibly, in addition, recent scholarship on the Late Woodland people in the Great Lakes region, of which the Potawatomi are a descendant group, suggests that the supplication of the Underwater Panther was based around the protection of individuals engaged in dangerous aquatic resource harvesting. Meghan Howey (2020) argues that the *Mishepishu*, or Underwater Panther, was a seductive figure that appears to individuals in dreams and “seduces” them into seeking these dangerous but ultimately necessary resources, such as early-spring fishing in inland lakes while the ice cover breaks apart. As a result, these “seduced” individuals would create small figurines of the Underwater Panther as a means of protection from drowning while obtaining these resources. Additionally, Howey (2020) argues that these small figurines were considered other-than-human persons, or *Manitou* due to their intrinsic power, danger, and relationship to those who used them.

Steponaitis and colleagues (2019) conclude that the Bellaire panther pipes served as instructional tools within a shamanic ritual practice, as Victor Turner (1964) first described them. In this view, the panther pipes operate as part of complex initiation rites, in which the initiate is

unsettled by a unique configuration of familiar elements in the form of a monster and encouraged to rethink the world and reimagine it in new or novel terms. Within the Indigenous American worldview, these *manitou* are often bestowers of power and prestige in addition to monsters that recontextualize the world. Thus, Steponaitis and colleagues (2019:20) argue that the Bellaire pipes represent “multi-power divinities who would...be patrons of only the most highly accomplished shamans”. When considering the Indigenous worldview of ritual *sacra* being alive and imbued with agency, the relationship between the ritual practitioner and the pipe becomes more than mere ownership. The feline monster effigy becomes a benefactor and shamanic spirit guide, leading the supplicant into the proper vision or trance.

Furthermore, Steponaitis and colleagues (2019) suggest the Bellaire corpus, with its inclusion of the anthropomorphic Crouching Human pipes, may ultimately depict the act of shamanic transformation, an act possible only by the most highly achieved shamans. Interestingly, stylistic features crosscut the Crouching Human and Panther themes, an example of which can be seen in Figure 4. Here, a crouching human and a panther share many remarkable formal attributes, like the proportion of the head, the placement of the hair coils and ears, and the laryngeal ridge on the neck. Steponaitis and colleagues (2019) argue that this formal similarity implies the ritual act of transformation from human to panther, possibly as the result of the imbibement of tobacco and other psychotropics through the pipes.

While these are all logically sound inferences that illuminate some things about the intrinsic meaning of the Bellaire panther pipes, more information may be gleaned from the folkloric literature. For this, I will draw from the sacred narratives of the Eastern Woodlands compiled by George Lankford (2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2007d, 2011) as well as ethnohistoric sources such as Jean-Bernard Bossu (1962, 1982) and Alice C. Fletcher and Francis La Flesche

(1972) to glean more information on the intrinsic meaning of the Underwater Panther.

An important fact that becomes clear to anyone studying Water Spirits is that they rarely take on a set form. Lankford, for example, discusses serpent or panther spirits interchangeably. He points to several Indigenous narratives that feature a supernatural panther in one cultural tradition and a supernatural serpent in another cultural tradition. Lankford argues that both forms comprise a “plural person,” where the same or similar supernatural beings can be viewed with a variety of symbols that embody the same concepts. He cites Theresa S. Smith’s (1995) work with the Anishnaabe, where informants related that the Mishebeshu, or Great Panther, also could refer to great snakes found both in water and in the ground. In her own words:

“Mishebeshu is at once a manitou and a class of manitouk (powerful spirits), the ogimaa (boss) of all underwater and underground creatures, and any of these creatures that might be termed extraordinary. He is not a person with a plurality of forms like Nanabush but a kind of ‘plural person’ who is met with in a complex of symbols and realities” (Smith 1995:97). From Lankford 2007a:242, Lankford 2007c:117).

In a sense, Lankford’s “Great Serpent”, the Underwater Panther, and the Piasa seen in other literature can be considered as a singular figure that may take on many guises. This becomes apparent when considering the Craig style shell gorgets that depict supernatural panthers and winged serpents that share many formal qualities (see Figure 13) as well as the Panther-Raptor-Snake themed Bellaire pipes included in this study. When considering Knight’s conservative iconographical approach, and his focus on the problem of disjunction between referents over time and space, it is preferable to recognize the referent in question as a powerful

Beneath World spirit, regardless of the particular name given in each tradition or the specific form depicted in the iconography.

Furthermore, the ethnographic record on powerful spirits, often called “manitous”, or “Manitouk” by the Anishnaabe and others suggests they only appear to trained adepts in a trance or vision and often require specific ritual acts, payments, and the observation of particular taboos. Jones (1911) records narratives from the Algonquin-speaking Meshwakiug (Fox) people of northeastern Wisconsin in which they describe the political structure of the manitous of the Above World and the manitous of the Beneath World:

“Above the manitous, far up on high, are others who are in great number. They keep themselves familiar with affairs on earth, and look down upon the people with compassion. They have a chief, and he is called the great manitou. Beneath the earth are other manitous. They have charge of water and fire. They supply the people with trees and with the fruits of every kind of plant. They are also acquainted with the people on earth and with the manitous of other worlds. Among them is a manitou who is like a chief; he, too, is a great manitou.” (Jones 1911:213)

Here, the dichotomy between the powers of the Above World and the powers of the Beneath World can be seen in stark contrast. Beyond this, each realm is ruled over by a chief in a manner paralleling the organization of human society, perhaps serving as a charter for political power in human institutions. Jones’ informants go on to note: “These manitous often come upon earth and pass among the people; they are not always visible to the eyes of everybody” (Jones 1911:213), implying a degree of esotericism and restricted access to these powerful spirits.

The practices surrounding Manitou extended into the Southeast and were often tied to political power and aggrandizement. The eighteenth century French dignitary and American explorer, Jean Bernard Bossu wrote about an Osage manitou that took the form of a large serpent, this one materialized in a large taxidermied snake that was maintained by a specialized priest. This snake had been seen swallowing a wildcat and was regarded as a danger to the community. So, the Osage group in question tracked the serpent and attempted, unsuccessfully, to kill the creature by firing guns and arrows at the body, which could not penetrate the hard, alligator-like scales. Eventually, one of the Osage men killed the monster by shooting the serpent's eyes. This man was then honored by having the image of the monster tattooed on his body, and he became the priest residing over the manitou. Bossu attempted to buy the taxidermied serpent from this man, but he explained that his relationship to the manitou brought him spiritual and political power. He would commune with the manitou at night and could be heard speaking to it. Other Osage people would bring him food and animal skins as a means of payment to appease or supplicate the manitou, and as a result, the priest became rich (Bossu 1962:94-97). In this segment, spiritual power ties directly to political and economic power, and a supplicant can obtain power and achieve some degree of aggrandizement through a relationship with the manitou.



**Figure 18. A drawing of the Underwater Panther that was placed on James Kagmega's water drum, used in the ceremony of the Underwater Panther bundle of the modern Potawatomi (Howard 1960:Figure 2)**

Howard (1960) recorded a ceremony involving the Underwater Panther bundle at the permission of James Kagmega, mentioned earlier as the keeper of said bundle amongst the Algonquian-speaking Potawatomi. Elements of this ceremony involve the aggrandizement of Kagmega in a similar tradition as described by Bossu. The ceremony involved a specialized canvas-covered lodge that was oriented along an east-west axis and decorated with fish motifs. The ceremony began with a large feast of which all community members were invited to participate. Kagmega and his assistants sat at the west end of the lodge, the place of honor, and prayed to the Underwater Panther while the feast was conducted over the course of an hour. After the feast, only the older members of the community remained for the ceremony. A large water drum like that used by the Midewiwin Society but with the visage of the Underwater Panther printed on it was brought in along with several gourd rattles (Figure 18). Here, familiar elements of the Underwater Panther, such as the figure facing the viewer with an open mouth, an extremely long tail that frames the body, and the inclusion of chimeric features like horns, are

included. Kagmega sang several songs while playing the drum and used birch bark scrolls to remember each part of the songs. At a known point in the proceedings, one of Kagmega's assistants began to dance in a circle around the room in a clockwise direction and was eventually joined by all attendants at the ceremony, save Kagmega and his remaining assistants, who continued to sing and play the drums and rattles. After the dancing, the festivities ended, and all attendants returned to their homes. Kagmega dismantled the drum and poured the water out. The next morning, the Underwater Panther bundle was opened, and ritual was completed to renew the elements contained within the bundle. Unfortunately, Howard was not able to attend this part of the ceremony. However, the inclusion of feasting that involved all members of the community, the honor given to Kagmega, and his use of esoteric knowledge in the form of songs recorded on birchbark scrolls and proper ritual supplication of the Underwater Panther, all served to increase Kagmega's position within the community.

The ethnographic record also reveals that, in some traditions, Beneath World spirits are the creators and protectors of fire. Jones' informants note: "Our fire comes from the manitous who live in the world under the earth. They created the fire, and it is theirs. All their time they spend watching after and caring for it. The fire that people use first came from this place under the earth" (Jones 1911:214). This is particularly noteworthy considering that smoking pipes require the introduction of fire to imbibe. A Beneath World origin of fire may relate to the sacred fire complex tied to priestly institutions in the LMV (Knight 1986). The Natchez kept sacred fires within their temple, and in one story the replacement of this sacred fire in one of two temples led to the death of many Suns, the chiefly role of the Natchez (Lankford 2011). Bossu recorded stories of Natchez priests who would blow a puff of smoke from a sacred pipe in the direction of the rising sun before dawn. This ritual was accompanied by community members



who “prostrated themselves” as the sun rose (Bossu 1962:31-33), a practice that may relate to the Crouching Human themed Bellaire pipes, though this is unclear.

Other sacred narratives detail a more emic understanding of Water Spirit veneration and the nature of human-spirit relationships. Perhaps the most significant episode that includes the Underwater Panther is the widely dispersed legend of the flooding of the town of Coosa. Lankford (2011) found that the “Snake-Man’s Flood” is a common episode in many traditions, especially the Natchez, Muscogee, Yuchi, and Caddo. In it, a town called Coosa was flooded and destroyed by a supernatural being that took the form of a panther in some traditions and a snake-man in others. This episode often involves an unmarried woman of the town who goes to draw water alone and meets a powerful Water Spirit, who takes the woman as his wife who becomes pregnant, but the woman’s brothers, and some of her relatives and the townsfolk seek to kill the child. This angers the Water Spirit, who floods the town after saving those that defended the child, killing the rest. From then on, the town was submerged by a lake with a whirlpool at its center (Lankford 2011:94-96). It is debated if this episode recounts a historical tale, but it regardless characterizes Water Spirits, especially panthers, as powerful, dangerous beings who can create much destruction if improperly respected. However, it also reveals how humans may maintain relationships with powerful Water Spirits and thus receive power, protection, and prestige.

Another important element of Water Spirits in the Southeast is their stellar representation. Archaeoastronomy is a relatively new avenue of understanding the cosmology of the ancient world, and our understanding is necessarily preliminary and limited. Lankford has written on this subject in *Reachable Stars: Patterns in the Ethnoastronomy of Eastern North America*, as well as in chapters of other books (Lankford 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2007d). In these works, Lankford

argues that the night sky is tied directly to the watery Beneath World in which Water Spirits dwell and hold dominion. He describes folkloric and astronomic traditions that identify the Milky Way as “The Path of Souls,” where the spirits of the dead travel at the end of life in the Middle World. Along the Path, there are several supernatural figures that interact with and test the dead as they travel. Many traditions tell of a general movement along the Path beginning with Orion, seen as a Hand constellation with a portal in its palm in the southwestern sky. From there, souls move along the Milky Way until they reach the Village of the Dead beyond the horizon. Lankford argues that the constellation Scorpio, usually at the southern end of the night sky, can easily be seen as a serpent with its tongue extended and its body curved in an almost bowl shape, much like the serpentine forms shown in many Southeastern iconography (Figure 7, and 13) (Lankford 2011:240-244). For comparison, an image of the constellation of Scorpio is superimposed over the Milky Way (Figure 19). Due to its position in the night sky and its relationship to the Path of Souls complex, we may understand how the Great Serpent or Underwater Panther is intrinsically tied to eschatological complexes.



**Figure 19. The constellation Scorpio superimposed over the general shape of the Milky Way in the southern sky. Produced with Voyager II software for May 16, AD 1500 over St. Louis at 1:20 A.M. (Lankford 2007a:Figure 10.1).**

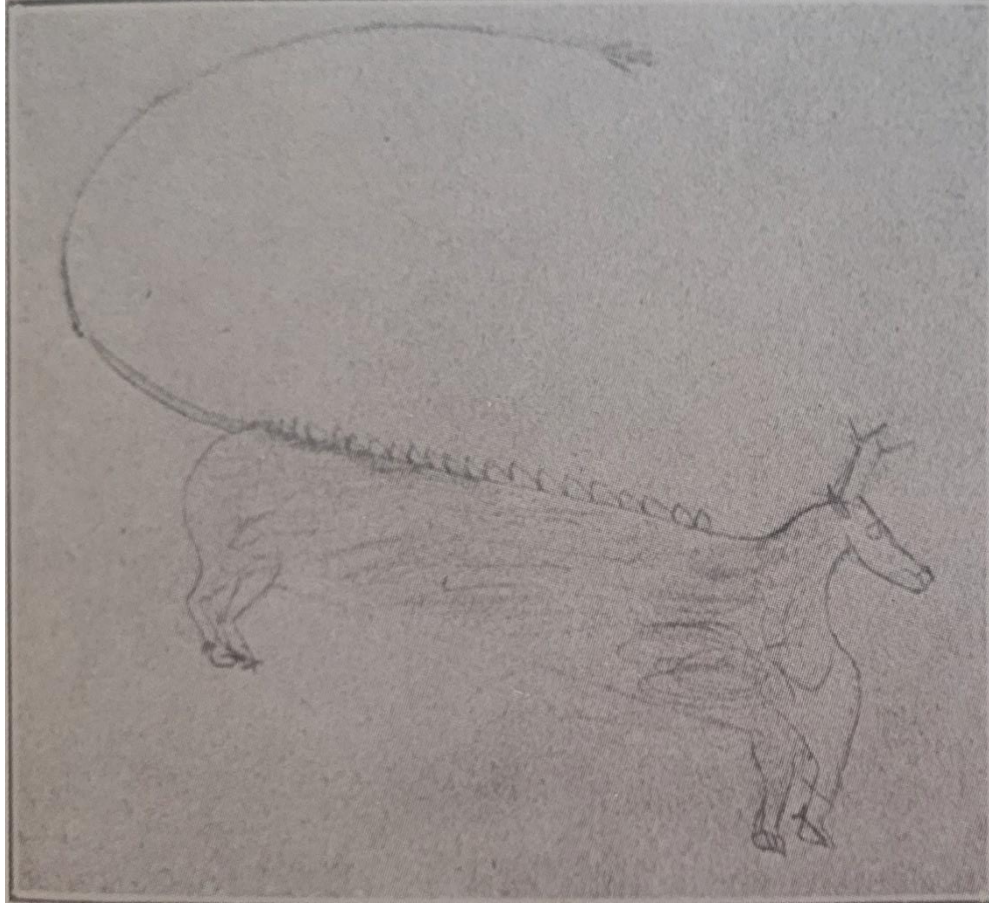
One interesting quirk of the constellation of Scorpio is that it disappears below the horizon line during the winter months. In response to this astronomical phenomenon, there is a widely held taboo amongst native peoples of the Eastern Woodlands, such as the Anishnaabe and the Pawnee, that myths involving Beneath World powers should not be told in the summer months. According to Pawnee belief, if this taboo is broken, the Great Serpent may send snakes to punish the tellers. Thus, these myths are told only in the winter when the Great Serpent descends below the horizon line (Lankford 2011:254-256). It is unclear if these taboos or concepts extended to the Bellaire ritual institution, but their widespread distribution points at least to widely held beliefs regarding Beneath World spirits as well as a shared ethnoastronomy.

Beneath World powers are often tied directly to the power of particular institutions codified within founding charter narratives. A case study for this is the founding narrative of the Shell Society (*Washis'ka Athin*) of the Dhegihan Siouan-speaking Omaha, recorded by Fletcher and La Flesche (1972:509-516). Here, a family that apparently possesses some wealth but holds no status hosts a stranger who visits the village every spring for four years. Each time, the family feeds the man deer meat cooked with raccoon fat. On the fourth visit, the stranger discloses his status as a “being of mysteries” and begins to share his great knowledge of medicinal plants and the realm of animals with them. This being takes a special interest in the family’s four children. Eventually, he reveals that he is an envoy of the animal world who will help them establish a great medicine society if the parents allow the stranger to kill and take their four children. The parents reluctantly oblige, and the stranger, now understood to be a great manitou, kills each of the children in birth order. The children are then ritually dressed and laid out head to toe at the edge of a great lake at night. The manitou instructs the parents to seek shells after he takes their children’s bodies, as shells are akin to stars in the night sky and are filled with spiritual power.

He then walks across the water, disappearing at the point where the water and the sky meet. A wave comes and consumes each of the children one at a time. After they are gone, the parents find shells in their place. Then, they see their children standing along a path in the lake. Their children say “Do not grieve us. We are content. Death is not to be dreaded. It is not as you think it to be. In course of time, you will be coming and then you will know for yourselves” (Fletcher and La Flesche 1972:514-515). At this point, the true form of the manitou is revealed to the parents (Figure 20). The image is described as

“big as the great lake. Its skin was covered with hair and was brown like that of a deer. The ridge of its back was serrated with tufts of hair. It had branching horns and hoofs like the deer, and a slender tail with a tuft at the end, which swept toward the sky to the farthest end of the lake” (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911:515).

While the specific details recorded are especially deer-like, the figure has some panther-like qualities. The length and the position of the figure’s slender tail held upwards over its body are typically feline characteristics. Furthermore, the dissemination of medicine and power from a chimeric otherworldly being who holds power over life and death and controls the water suggests that the Shell Society chartered by this myth was focused at least in part on Beneath World powers.



**Figure 20. Manitou at the heart of the Omaha Shell Society charter myth, drawn by a native informant and collected by Fletcher and La Flesche (1911:Figure 107).**

Institutions like the *Washis'ka Athin* of the Omaha have also been recognized amongst Central Algonquian and Western Siouan speakers of the Northern Plains and Northeastern Woodlands. A list of native groups having some ritual society like this has been compiled by Rex Weeks (2009:4), who refers to these kinds of secret societies as “Midewiwin-like,” following the most famous and well-researched example from the Algonquian-speaking Anishnaabe peoples. Weeks defines a Midewiwin-like society as a secret society focused on healing and control over death through the supplication of *manitou*. Other common traits include feasting, tobacco offerings, and initiation into higher levels of a hierarchical clergy (Weeks: Table 1).

The Bellaire ritual institution, with its focus on Beneath World powers evidenced in the panther pipes, likely took a similar form to these Midewiwin-like secret societies. The Bellaire ritual institution may have been organized along various positions of power and status with an internal hierarchy mediated by ritual responsibilities, roles, and taboos. Additionally, such ritual organizations likely had their own Beneath World charter myths tied to a panther other-than-human being depicted or represented in the pipes. Unfortunately, the specifics of these narratives or their hierarchical structures that were charted may never be known. While one may see these similarities as supposition, there is some evidence that Midewiwin-like societies and the supplication of the Underwater Panther specifically share a common prototype in the distant past.

Howard (1960) notes that many elements of the Underwater Panther ceremony of the modern Potawatomi conducted by James Kagmega share similarities to the Midewiwin, particularly its use of a water drum and birch bark scrolls that record sacred knowledge. Furthermore, Howard notes that Kagmega was familiar with the rituals and songs of the Midewiwin and had travelled to visit Winnebago Midewiwin priests to share his Underwater Panther songs, but did not consider himself to be a part of this organization. As a result, it is likely that such other-than-human beings (i.e., supernatural panthers) were an intricate component of Midewiwin-like societies in the pre-contact past, but over time diverged and transformed.

The effects of these kinds of religious sodalities on the social organization and political hierarchy of their societies may be indirectly studied through Midewiwin-like societies. Members of secret societies among the Omaha were often of the highest status and wealth, and the Shell Society was the premier ritual institution, which included chiefs in its ranks. Shell Society membership was open to anyone who experienced a dream/vision of the “Water

Monster” as seen in the founding myth, but membership was also hereditary. Similarly, leadership within the society could be gained by hosting expensive feasts that carried a variety of specific esoteric rules and events that must take place. Fletcher and La Flesche (1972:516-517) attest that leadership roles may be acquired by anyone who could afford to rise through the ranks, but the most elite positions had become hereditary for several generations. Reo Fortune (1932) argues that the Shell Society was entirely hereditary in practice and controlled through increasingly esoteric barriers that became family secrets.

The Medicine Society of the Winnebago was similarly structured. Theoretically, the Society was open to anyone but it was expensive to gain access due to a variety of barriers such as hosting expensive feasts and memorizing esoteric and secretive knowledge. However, the number and scale of feasts could be waived or expedited when a new member sought to take the place of a deceased relative, which was the most common method of attaining membership. Similarly, restricted esoteric knowledge became the secrets controlled by particular families (Radin 1923:359-60).

The literature around the Midewiwin Society of the Anishnaabe is broadly analogous. *Mide* members of the Society were considered to be the most powerful class of shamans and healers and gained their power through communion with various *manitou*. Walter J. Hoffman, who studied the Menominee in the late nineteenth century wrote that a key purpose of the Society was “to give a certain class of ambitious men and women sufficient influence through their acknowledged power of exorcism and necromancy to lead a comfortable life at the expense of the credulous,” (1891:151). While this characterization of the *Mide* reflects nineteenth century values, there is evidence that *Mide* could use their position to incur significant economic and sociopolitical gain. The *Mide* were considered experts in the creation of hunting, love, and war

medicine and were paid handsomely for their cures (Hoffman 1891:157-8, 197, 257-8; Hayden 2018; Miller 2010:159). Much of *Mide* knowledge was esoteric, restricted to the highest degrees of initiation (Miller 2010:159). Although initiation into the society was theoretically open to anyone who had the appropriate dream, family connections could be used to fast-track the process (Miller 2010:155). Initiation was also prohibitively expensive, requiring gifts of particular meats, pelts, and, of course, tobacco (Warren 1984:264-65). Anishnaabe scholar Cary Miller (2010:165-166) argues that the Midewiwin was “an avenue to charismatic leadership,” where aggrandizers could receive “an opportunity gradually to join the ranks of community leadership as they advanced within the society.” However, she asserts that the nature of this leadership was oriented around and mitigated by community interests:

“Each individual initiation added to the spiritual support of the community, contributing to the well-being of the community as a whole. And in turn, the community endowed those seeking advanced degrees, and the elite knowledge and manidoog relationships that accompanied them, with sociopolitical power due their enhanced ability to help the people” (Miller 2010:165).

While the Midewiwin was not exclusively a self-serving enterprise for aggrandizers as Hoffman wrote, there was a hereditary element to higher offices as in the Omaha Shell Society, so that certain offices were consistently held by a few families, and thus highly restrictive (Miller 2010:167). Thus, what are in theory institutions driven by attained spiritual power are in fact vehicles for ascribed status and personal access to power and wealth.

The symbolic and ceremonial importance of shell was integral to Midewiwin-like sodalities, in which the initiation process of the Midewiwin involved “shooting” initiates with



pieces of shell. This act would ritually “kill” the initiate, who would then be revived through the power of the society’s ritual practitioners (Hoffman 1891:169-170, 220). The Winnebago have a similar ceremony in which members swallow sacred shells, die, and then are revived, spitting up the shells before shooting other members, a process that involves a great deal of legerdemain (Radin 1923:367) A similar “simulated death” rite was documented amongst the Omaha Shell Society, where shells were an intricate part of Society performances and practice. When members reenacted the Society’s origin myth through song and dance, those who stood in for the children would place shell in their mouths, symbolizing their death and journey to the sky with the manitou (Fletcher and La Flesche 1972:531). Important members carried otter-skin bags filled with, among other things, shells, and the kinship between the shell and water was cited as the reason for its great reverence (Fletcher and La Flesche 1972:519-20,565).

Shell-spitting more generally denotes a powerful individual who possesses great medicine. This is demonstrated in one widely distributed myth called either “The False Bridegroom” or “Bead Spitter”, recorded among many Siouan, Muscogean, Algonquian, and Caddoan-speaking peoples, as well as some Athabaskan and Uto-Aztecan-speaking peoples of the Southwest and Great Basin. Lankford records the Iowa version of the myth, which recounts the story of a chief who sought a suitor for his daughters who could spit up shells. There was another chief’s son who could do such a feat, and the chief sent his daughters to be married to this man. However, the women were intercepted by the servant of the Shell Spitter, who had stolen some of his shells and spit them up using legerdemain. He takes the women as his wives, but they quickly discover his trickery and leave to be wed to the true Shell Spitter.

The servant is angry and appeals to his chief and his son, the Shell Spitter, three times for the women to be returned to him. On his fourth appeal, he reveals “great but hitherto unknown

power,” killing and beheading the chief and the Shell Spitter before rising up into the sky and hiding in the black shadow of the moon, clutching both heads (Lankford 2007a:107-110). This widely distributed myth is worth discussing because it highlights the power of legerdemain and the ability to use shell spitting to attain status. The false Shell Spitter is explicitly a person without status who seeks to raise his status through elite marriage. He attains this goal, if temporarily, through spitting shell like he had seen from an elite who knew the rites. Additionally, he truly possesses spiritual power that he demonstrates by murdering the chief and the Shell Spitter and then ascending into the night sky.

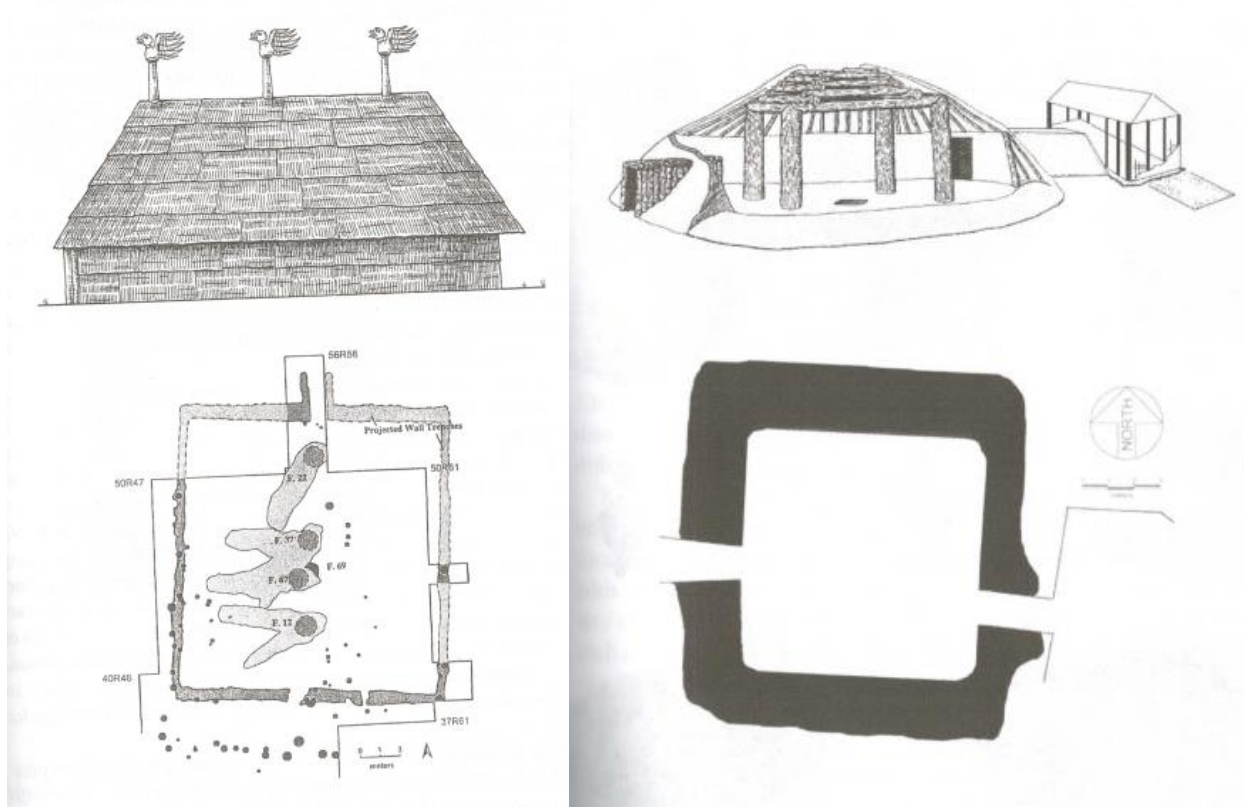
There is also evidence that the Midewiwin-like societies have an ancient origin in the distant past, possibly as far back as the Mississippian period. Early scholarship attested that the Midewiwin Society originated in the post-contact period as a native revitalization movement, based primarily on the absence of corroborating historical descriptions from seventeenth century Europeans (See Keesing 1939, Hickerson 1962). However, a growing body of archaeological evidence and interpretation now suggests ritual sodalities like the Midewiwin may extend to the early tenth century as evidenced by recovered birch bark scrolls and otter skin medicine bags filled with white shells, the remains of long rectangular structures, and rock art sites bearing distinct Midewiwin iconography (see Angel 2002; Weeks 2009). Miller (2010) further argues that the oral tradition within the Midewiwin claims an ancient origin, while documented revitalization movements like the Ghost Dance do not claim such an origin. Similarly, Lankford (2016) points out that, unlike documented revitalization movements, Midewiwin-like sodalities never have an identified “prophet”.



**Figure 21. A comparison of two LMV temples from the Contact period and a *Mide* lodge. (top) a Natchez temple drawn by Le Page du Pratz in 1725; (middle) Acolapissa temple painted by DeBatz in 1732; (bottom) a drawing of a *Mide* lodge from the Red Lake scroll (Lankford 2016:Figure 5.5).**

While the Midewiwin and similar societies discussed above reside primarily in the Northeastern Woodlands, there is some evidence suggesting similar societies existed in the

Southeast in the post-contact period and may have extended to the early Mississippian period. Lankford (2016) calls attention to similarities between Midewiwin Medicine Lodges, which frequently feature closed tops with bird effigies placed on posts atop them, with drawings of Natchez temples that have similar constructions (Figure 21). In these drawings the two post-contact temples from the LMV have a similar design to the *Mide* lodge, with several central poles, mounted with bird effigies, extending from the roof. Lankford also points out that, at Moundville, several excavated structures appear to have the same or similar designs. For example, Structure 3 on Mound E (Figure 22), includes four central posts that bisect the building. Elizabeth A. Ryba (1997) reconstructed this structure (Figure 22), adding bird effigies to the tops of the posts based on the historic drawings shown in Figure 21. Knight notes that this construction is also like Cahokian great houses, possibly indicating an architectural continuity (Lankford 2016:93-94). Another structure at Moundville that was unearthed from Mound V displays analogous construction to an Earth Lodge, another Midewiwin design, with its square shape held up by four large postholes at each corner and subterranean tunnels on the east and west sides (Figure 22). Lankford argues these structures, as well as several recovered owl effigies in burial contexts, suggests a Midewiwin-like society may have existed at Moundville (Lankford 2016). Considering the recovery of Bellaire pipes at Moundville, especially Bellaire A panthers, Lankford's hypothesis is noteworthy.



**Figure 22. Two structures from Moundville in Alabama that may resemble specialized *Mide* lodges. (left) Plan map and reconstruction of the structure on Mound E; (right) plan map and reconstruction of the structure on Mound V (Lankford 2016:Figures 5.6, 5.7)**

In conclusion, the feline imagery displayed in the Bellaire pipes should be understood both as a powerful Water Spirit of the Beneath World intrinsically tied to eschatological concepts, as well as a symbol that denotes authority, hierarchy, and undeniable power. Cross-culturally, feline imagery is directly associated with political and spiritual dominance, especially in the Americas. A review of the mythology and ethnohistory of the Eastern Woodlands suggests large zoomorphic figures with feline, serpentine, or chimeric characteristics are associated with the powers of the watery Beneath World reflected in the night sky. Similar *manitou* were supplicated by members of religious sodalities in the post-contact period, and these members

used their position and relationship with *manitou* to enrich themselves and grant charismatic political authority. These societies could also be used to establish hereditary status and authority across generations. Panther pipes may represent one such *manitou* that gave Bellaire ritual society members their power, and this society may have resembled Midewiwin-like societies found among Siouan and Algonquian speakers. The emphasis of such ritual sodalities typically focuses on health and death issues.

### **Archaeological Context**

This section will discuss the archaeological context of the Bellaire panther pipes that have some known provenience. Unfortunately, many of the known Bellaire panther pipes were recovered with no archaeological context. As a result, this section will focus on the 12 Bellaire pipes with known sites. My analysis will focus on the context in which these pipes were found and the social and ritual organization of the site during the associated phase. In some cases, little context is given for certain Bellaire panther pipes other than the sites where they were recovered. In these cases, my analysis will discuss what is known of the site during the range of the given substyle defined by Steponaitis and colleagues (2019): AD 1100-1350 for Bellaire A and AD 1350-1500 for Bellaire B. This method of analysis is not without its drawbacks. Clearly, very little chronological control can be exercised over these pipes. Additionally, the lack of strong context for all pipes in a sample this small poses significant epistemological problems. However, crucial information may yet be derived from the Bellaire panther pipes by considering their known archaeological context, and this study would be critically incomplete without attempting to do so.

Most of the Bellaire corpus defined by Steponaitis and colleagues (2019) was recovered in the LMV. The source of the Glendon limestone and some of the sandstone used to

manufacture the pipes can be sourced to a nearby location close to Vicksburg as discussed earlier. Considering these two facts, the Bellaire ritual institution almost certainly originated in this region, a supposition that was definitively made by Steponaitis and colleagues (2019). As a result, a general discussion of the region's culture history and sequence is in order focusing on the period between AD 1000 and 1500.

The Plaquemine dominates the LMV during this period. The culture history of this region has been touched on earlier in this work (See Introduction), but this section will go into greater depth on the Plaquemine period in particular. Plaquemine archaeology has had a contested history due to the region's position between the Caddo to the west and the Mississippian culture to the east and the generally mixed context of many assemblages. Once defined "more in terms of what it lacks than in what it possesses," (Jennings 1952:267), it was originally understood as "post-Coles Creek, pre-Natchez, non-Caddo, and non-Mississippian pottery assemblages" (Rees and Livingood 2007:5), or as a regional variant of the Mississippian culture. It is now understood to be its own culture with a straightforward regional sequence that connects it to the Coles Creek peoples of the Late Woodland period. Plaquemine culture is defined by the following characteristics: 1) grog tempered pottery 2) vessel styles that include plates with interior incising and grass-brushed jars, 3) wattle and daub houses that sometimes feature surrounding wall trenches, and 4) ritual centers with pyramidal mound architecture organized around a central plaza. Significant similarities to the Mississippian culture to the north and east and the Caddo to the west are clear, and the degree of interaction and exchange between Plaquemine peoples and their neighbors is complex and not fully understood. However, the Plaquemine concept -- a distinct group of cultures in continuity with the Late Woodland Coles Creek is clear (Phillips 1970, Jeter and Williams 1989, Rees and Livingood 2007).

The transition from Coles Creek to Plaquemine is of particular interest to this thesis. As previously discussed, the causes of the transition from relatively egalitarian Coles Creek to the starkly hierarchical Plaquemine is debated. The driving factors behind the precipitation of hierarchy during the eleventh century in the LMV may be due to new food technology, changes in the climate, and the introduction of new organizations of ritual life like the Bellaire sodalities. Many researchers point to the effect of the Medieval Warm Period (AD 950 – 1250), a time where agriculture may have been more productive, to explain the development of hierarchy as well as the production of effigy pipes in the Southeast (Anderson 2001; Van De Kree 2018). The possible introduction of new cooking methods like the hominy foodway, which produces a more nutritious and filling food from maize, may have transformed competitive feasting dynamics, precipitating hierarchal social changes. Rachel Briggs (2015) argues that the hominy foodway was an important part of many Southeastern foodways as evidenced by ethnohistoric records, including those of the contact period Natchez. She also asserts that the hominy foodway was introduced to Moundville, east of the LMV, around AD 1020 based on shifting designs of ceramic vessels (Briggs 2016). As yet, a similar study has not been conducted on LMV. However, the intensification of maize agriculture and the development of novel ceramic vessel forms introduced in the eleventh century suggest that Plaquemine economies may have invested in hominy production as a part of a wider diet, possibly as a part of a competitive feasting complex. Gayle J. Fritz (1998) argues that maize may have been used primarily in ritual contexts during the Coles Creek Period, which intensified during the twelfth century. This development is relatively late when compared to other regions. Fritz contends that this late development of maize agriculture is due to the rich natural resources available in the LMV.

Indeed, Plaquemine lifeways were adapted to the dynamic riverine and wetland



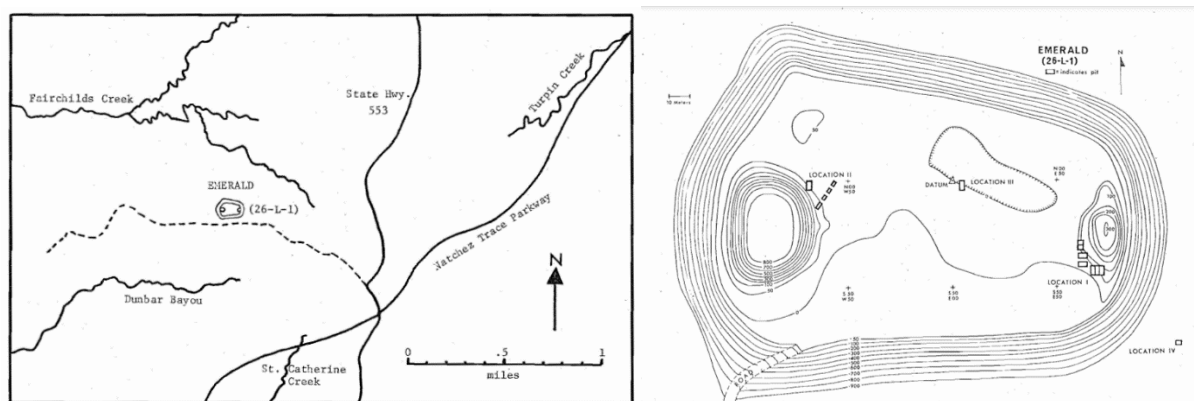
environment surrounding the Mississippi River. The LMV is a large floodplain with many tributaries and side channels, and the size and force of the Mississippi River creates oxbow lakes and back swamps. As a result, fish, waterfowl, and shellfish were a staple in the Plaquemine diet even after the adoption of maize agriculture intensified in the LMV's rich floodplain soils (Jeter and Williams 1989:215-216). However, the wealth of resources provided by the Mississippi was not without significant dangers. The Mississippi River's strong currents create whirlpools and water boils. Floods were also common as were shifting river banks, which may have destroyed villages and disrupted life in the dynamic landscape of the LMV. In this phenomenological context, Water Spirit veneration – especially that of the most powerful Water Spirits -- would be crucial for daily life as well as the accumulation of wealth (Dye 2018).

Plaquemine social organization is mostly understood from historical documents of the Natchez of the early contact period, who succeeded Plaquemine culture and display significant continuities. These historical documents form the basis of the kinship system of ranked and exogamous matrilineal clans discussed earlier in this work (Introduction; Knight 1990). Additionally, regional site hierarchies appear in the Tensas Basin, the Natchez Bluffs, and the Lower Yazoo Basin, while ceremonial mound centers become larger and less numerous, implying a centralization of political and ritual power in the hands of fewer individuals (Rees and Livingood 2007). Undoubtedly, a variety of climatic, economic, and technological changes drove this centralization, though the exact dynamics of these transformations is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Some Bellaire A pipes of non-panther themes were recovered in early contexts of LMV sites, such as an exquisitely carved Potbearer themed pipe that was recovered from the Feltus site in Jefferson County, Mississippi. The Feltus site was occupied between AD 700 – 1100 and is

primarily a Coles Creek site. Excavations at the Feltus site reveal centuries of communal feasting events, terminating in a Plaquemine component at the end of the site's occupation in the eleventh century (Kassabaum 2014). Steponaitis and colleagues (2019:Table 3) argue that a Bellaire A Potbearer themed pipe dates to this late phase. It is of note that the Potbearer theme itself suggests important ritual activity surrounding feasting, perhaps representing an early ritual sodality focused on feasting that produced the Potbearer pipe. Some Bellaire A Crouching Human themed pipes come from early contexts in LMV sites, but just as many come from late contexts. Steponaitis and colleagues (2019) argue that the Bellaire A pipes share striking formal qualities that suggest they were carved by the same individual or a closely related workshop of craftsman at a yet unidentified site, justifying their chronology of Bellaire A as the earliest substyle in spite of the late contexts of some Bellaire A pipes. A discussion of the validity of this argument remains outside of the scope of this thesis.

As yet, only two Bellaire B panther themed pipes have been recovered at Plaquemine sites in the LMV. Miss-Ad-F2 was recovered at the Fatherland site, also known as the Grand Village of the Natchez, and Miss-Ad-E5 was recovered at the Emerald site. The following paragraphs will discuss these large sites and the context of each Bellaire B panther pipe.



**Figure 23. The Emerald Site. (left) The position of the Emerald site in the**

**surrounding region, displaying its central location relative to important creeks and bayous. (right) A topographical map of the Emerald site, showing its large platform mound and two secondary mounds as well as excavation units from fieldwork in 1972. (Steponaitis 1974:Figure 1, Figure 6.**

Miss-Ad-E5 was recovered at the Emerald site in Adams County, Mississippi. This site is positioned on a high ridge in a central position on the landscape. The site features one massive 9 meter tall pyramidal platform mound with a 7.7 acre base and a large platform that measures 195 meters east-west and 105 meters north-south. The west end of the platform features a secondary mound that rises an additional 9 meters off the platform. The east end of the platform features a much smaller and poorly-preserved mound that may have been about 3 meters tall from the platform. The function of the Emerald mound may have been ceremonial in nature, as there are no large residential areas or middens, suggesting the population lived primarily in the surrounding countryside (Steponaitis 1974).

Miss-Ad-E5 was found in context with several Bellaire B pipes of various themes, including two panther-raptor-snake pipes, one Owl-fish themed pipe, and one Crouching Human themed pipe, all of which were made from Glendon limestone. These five pipes were found by Vincent Perrault in the early twentieth century while digging on the southern embankment of the smaller secondary mound on the east side (Brown 1926). During the 1972 excavation at Emerald, three burials were found, and Steponaitis (1972) argues that these burials were likely associated with the pipes. Further excavation and stratigraphic analysis around this location suggest that the burials and the associated Bellaire pipes were interred sometime between AD 1400-1600 just before the Emerald phase, when the site presumably rose to the zenith of its power and influence (Steponaitis 1974, Steponaitis et. al. 2019).

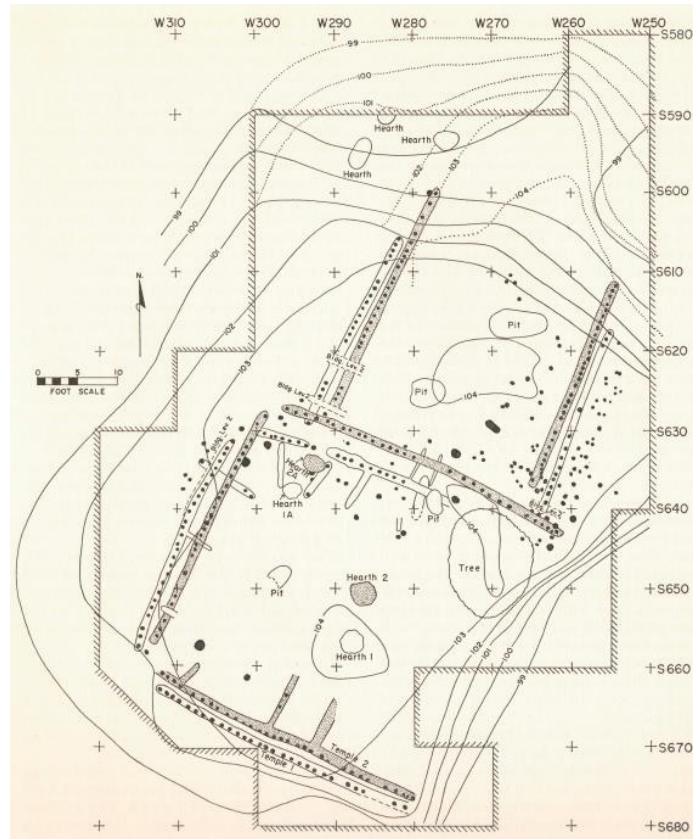


**Figure 24. Photo of the five Bellaire B pipes found in the Perrault Cache. The Bellaire B panther themed pipe included in this sample is the second from the right. Note the bulbous nose, barred teeth, swirl motifs on the figure's sides, and long tail that wraps around the pipe's stem and pipe holes, terminating at the base of the figure's head. (Brown 1926:Figures 218-222)**

Now referred to as the “Perrault Cache”, the close association of these five pipes, all made from Glendon Limestone, is a cornerstone of Steponaitis and colleagues’ (2019) argument that the Bellaire corpus may represent a single institution that employed a collection of symbols represented by the pipes’ disparate themes. An interrogation of this claim is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, the iconographical relation between a Bellaire panther pipe and other clear references to chimeric Water Spirits like the two Panther-raptor-snakes and an Owl-fish suggest a similar focus on health and death issues. Furthermore, the correlation between the ethnoastronomical knowledge of the Great Serpent constellation (Scorpio) and its position in the

southern night sky and the Perrault cache's orientation on the south side of the eastern secondary mound at Emerald is worth considering. Within this context, the relationship of the Crouching Human pipe and the other four pipes is somewhat unclear. All five are made with Glendon Limestone, suggesting all are associated with the Beneath World in some way. Perhaps when considered together, the pipes are meant to represent a Beneath World narrative that involves a human figure and several powerful supernatural beings, but this remains speculative without additional examples of Bellaire pipes in context with each other.

Miss-Ad-F2 was recovered about nine miles away at the Fatherland site, also known as the Grand Village of the Natchez, in Adams County, Mississippi. The site itself features three mounds of various sizes positioned on a high terrace overlooking the St. Catherine Creek. The site's three mounds are in line with each other and positioned in a northeastern-southwestern orientation. Mound A at the most northeastern point is the largest, followed by Mound B in the center, with Mound C being the smallest. Excavations have dated the earliest occupations at the site to AD 1200, with major construction phases through the Emerald phase, terminating in the early contact Natchez phase. Robert S. Neitzel (1965, 1972) connected the Fatherland site to French colonial descriptions of the Grand Village of the Natchez. The social organization of the Natchez has been discussed in detail (Introduction).



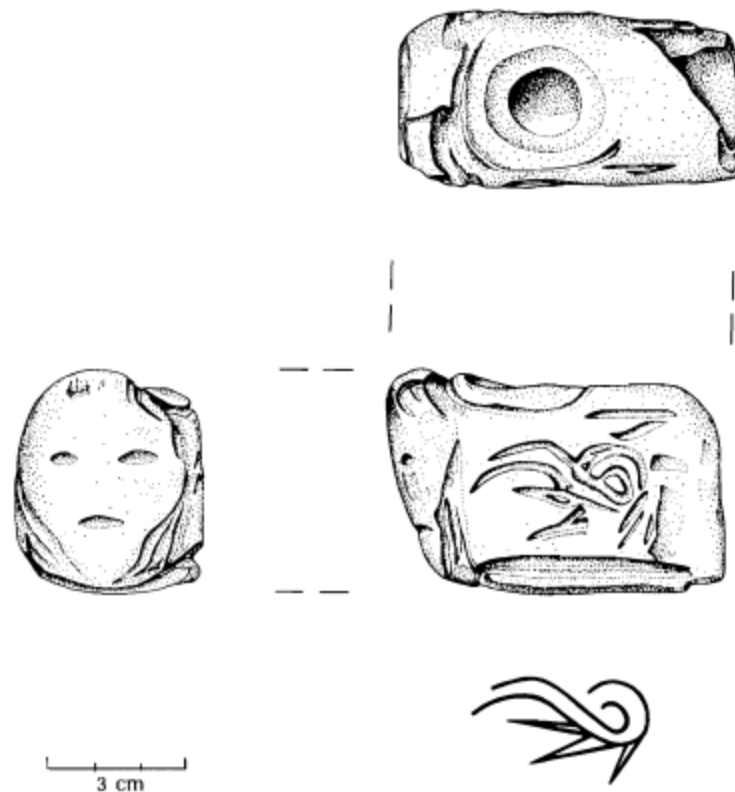
**Figure 25. Archaeological plan map of Mound C, showing excavations and features uncovered by Neitzel (1965:Figure 12). Miss-Ad-F2 was recovered at the southeastern corner within the inner room.**

Using archaeological data and French colonial records, Neitzel (1965, 1972) determined that Mound A had no identifiable use, Mound B represented the residential mound of the paramount chief while Mound C represented the temple mound. He determined that the architecture of Mound C divided it into two rooms, a northern room that was not enclosed and a southern room that was closed off, suggesting an esoteric space meant only for the most elite priests. The architecture of the temple atop Mound C was discussed earlier and shares many similarities to *Midewiwin* medicine lodges and the analogous Mound E at Moundville, and may have been a medicine lodge (Figure 21; Lankford 2016)

Miss-Ad-F2 was recovered by Neitzel (1965) in an outwash of Mound C. A fragment

from a Bellaire A Crouching Human pipe made of unspecified limestone was also recovered in a similar context, though the exact context or relationship between these two pipes cannot be determined. Both were likely interred in the southeast corner of Mound C within the southern enclosed room and may be associated with burials (Neitzel 1965). Steponaitis and colleagues (2019:Table 3) date the interment of both between AD 1500 - 1730, the period between the Emerald and Natchez phases. Neitzel (1965, 1972) found Emerald phase pottery in the initial construction and use of Mound C and Natchez phase pottery in latter contexts indicating a continuity between the archaeological Plaquemine and the contact period Natchez. I add that this continuity naturally extends to the use of ritual space between the phases.

The presence of a Bellaire panther pipe interred within a known medicine lodge lends credence to the central argument of this work. Furthermore, the enclosed nature of the southern room of Mound C suggests that the Bellaire Panther themed and the Crouching Human themed pipes were used, possibly in tandem, during secretive rituals not meant to be shared with the general public. Clearly, aggrandizers at the Fatherland site were manipulating esoteric knowledge for personal gain beginning in the Emerald phase of the site's occupation.



**Figure 26. Miss-Je-L1, a potential Panther themed pipe from the Lookout site (22Je544). The pipe’s iconography and craftsmanship differ greatly from other Bellaire Panthers in the sample (Modified from Brown 1985:Figure 11).**

One unspecified Bellaire pipe, Miss-Je-L1, was found at the Lookout site in Jefferson County, Mississippi, just north of the Emerald and Fatherland sites on a high bluff. It was recovered alongside several burials by avocational archaeologist Robert Prospere in 1980 while the site was being unknowingly bulldozed. The pipe was recovered alongside several burials that were disinterred by the bulldozing event that led to the discovery of the site. Ian W. Brown (1985) excavated the site shortly after its discovery and notes that the area where Miss-Je-L1 was recovered had the remnants of several burials within a 4x4 meter area. No architecture was found, but Brown (1985) notes the presence of three large looting pits. A diagnostic ceramic



assemblage of the Panther Lake, Gordon, and Anna phases, potentially dating the pipe to AD 1000 – 1350 as well as a strong Natchez assemblage dating broadly to around AD 1700.

Steponaitis and colleagues (2019) argue the latter assemblage is more likely to be associated with Miss-Je-L1.

Just northeast of this area of the site, Brown (1985) uncovered the remains of several structures. Structure 1 was a circular building defined by a series of spaced post holes covering a diameter of 9.5 meters. Further investigation revealed that this structure may have been built by Coles Creek people. Structure 2 was a smaller rectangular building southwest of Structure 1. Structure 2 featured wall trench architecture with likely Emerald or Natchez pottery within. Structures 3 and 4 were also rectangular buildings that employed wall trench architecture uncovered within the circular perimeter of the much earlier Structure 1, with Structure 3 being built atop Structure 4. No artifacts were found within any of these four structures that would suggest a designation of ritual space. Two additional structures were uncovered in the southeastern area of the site that resemble Structures 3 and 4, and likely date to the Natchez or Emerald phase occupation at the site. Brown (1985:57-58) notes a generally poor state of preservation of middens and other features at the site due to plowing and the bulldozing that led to the discovery of the site. However, he points out that the structures from the latter phases of the site have a northeastern-southwestern orientation, paralleling the Fatherland site.

Given the size of each building and the lack of accompanying sacred architecture like platform mounds or plazas, it seems likely that the Lookout site was a hamlet or small village, and the structures excavated by Brown (1985) were residential in nature. As a result, Miss-Je-L1 may have been the vestige of a matrilineage that lived some distance from the sacred grounds, and the pipe was ultimately interred with an individual at the end of its period of use given the

poorly-preserved burials found in association. However, the southeastern-northwestern orientation of the latter structures at the site may represent some significance to ritual life at the Lookout site, though the connection is unclear and outside of the scope of this thesis.

It is worth noting that Miss-Je-L1 is a very peculiar Bellaire Panther pipe. It is the only Panther themed pipe made from sandstone, and its iconography and craftsmanship significantly differ from the corpus of Bellaire pipes. Steponaitis and colleagues (2019:6) describe Miss-Je-L1 as “crudely done, with indistinct facial features and no limbs.” Steponaitis and colleagues (2019) postulate that it may be a Crouching Human themed pipe, which are more frequently crafted in sandstone. In fact, their Panther theme designation hinges on the scrolls included along the side of the figure’s body illustrated in Figure x, which only occur on Panther themed pipes. Brown (1985) attests that it may represent a regression from the Bellaire pipes found at Emerald in the Perrault cache. I interpret Miss-Je-L1’s diverging iconography and craftsmanship required in its construction as a mark of differing levels of wealth between ritual practitioners at larger sites like Emerald and the Fatherland site and practitioners at smaller sites like Lookout. It may also represent a syncretic transformation given the presence of Mississippian style shell-tempered pottery and Brown’s (1985) suggestion that Lookout may have been settled by Tunican Mississippian groups seeking refuge amongst Emerald or Natchez people.

Returning once more to the regional scale, a distinctly “Mississippian” culture with similar pottery and architecture to Cahokia and other sites in the American Bottom flourished in the northern LMV (nLMV) and in late contexts the Yazoo Basin during the range of dates given for the Bellaire ritual institution. Archaeological study in the nLMV has suggested a general “spread” southward of this Mississippian culture over time (Jeter and Williams 1989:172-180). This view is undoubtedly simplistic, obscuring complex migrations and cultural changes that

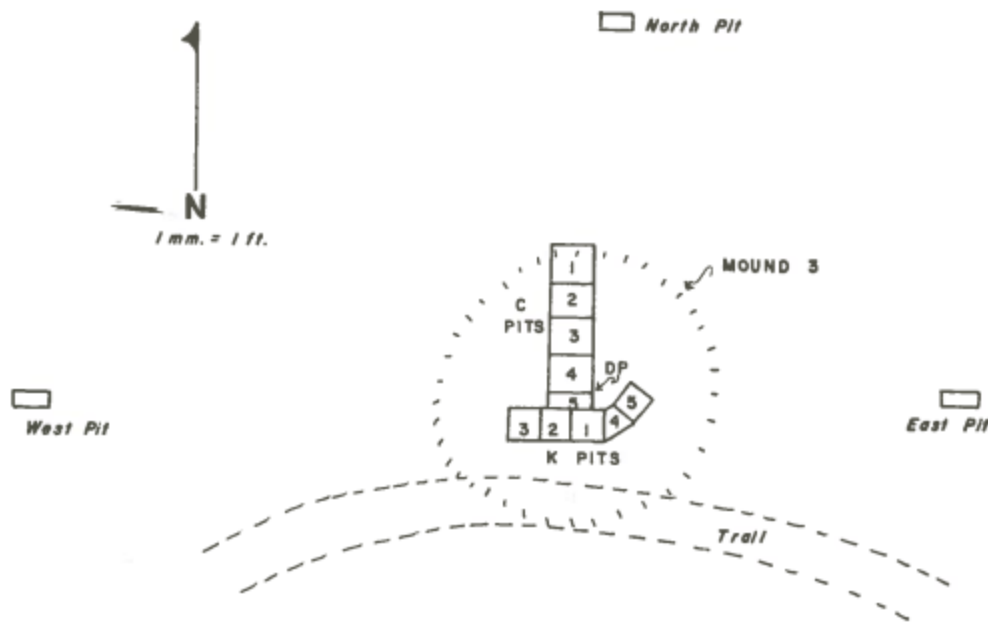
took place over 500 years. Phillips cautions against a strict adherence to the north-south movement, arguing “against the too easy assumption that Mississippian culture... marched down the [Mississippi] River in so regular a procession that individual phases can be dated by reference to degrees of latitude” (1970:940). However, the general trend remains that an identifiable Mississippian-type culture was most dominant in northeast Arkansas with many sites in the Cairo Lowland as well as Cherry Valley, Mangrum, and Hazel appearing between AD 1100-1300, and similar Mississippian type sites appear in southern Arkansas and western Mississippi such as the Bellaire site as well as the Winterville and Lake George sites between AD 1300-1500 (Jeter and Williams 1989: Tables 7-8). This archaeological culture is often attributed to Tunican speaking peoples (Kaufman 2019).

One Bellaire A Panther themed pipe (Ark-Ch-AP1) and two Bellaire B Panther themed pipes (Ark-Wh-F1, Miss-Yo-LG1) were found in this region (Steponaitis et. al. 2019:Table 3). Ark-Ch-AP1 was recovered at the Bellaire site, and is the pipe that gives the Bellaire style its name. Ark-Wh-F1 was recovered at a small site in Arkansas known only by its trinomial, 3WH4. Miss-Yo-LG1 was found at the Lake George site, a large ritual center in the Yazoo basin. The next section will discuss these sites and the context with which the Bellaire pipes were recovered.

The aptly named Bellaire site by Harry J. Lemley and Samuel D. Dickinson in 1935. The site lies along Bayou Macon, a long wetland region that runs just east of the Mississippi River in the northwestern corner of the LMV (Ford 1935). The Bellaire site consists of a single mound that was described by Lemley and Dickinson (1937:18) as extending about 80 feet in diameter and 12 feet high. They remark that the mound was badly damaged and had already been extensively looted. Lemley and Dickinson did conduct a single day’s worth of excavations on the

mound, but unfortunately did not elaborate on their methodology in much detail, merely writing that they “dug into parts of the tumulus for the purpose of ascertaining whether it had been used by the people of the older or later culture” (1937:18). Given this, it is likely that they dug relatively vertical test pits, emphasizing depth over horizontal distribution. Doing so yielded exclusively what they describe as “Tunica ware,” using James A. Ford’s regional seriation published just a few years before. Ford defined “Tunica wear” as a regional style of the nLMV that began to be used at the end of the Deasonville period (regional analogue for Coles Creek) and continued until after AD 1700 (1935: Figure 2). Scholars today designate this type of pottery as Mississippian that likely dates between AD 1000-1400, noting that the Tunica people did not migrate to the LMV until around the fourteenth century (Jeter and Williams 1989:178, Hoffman 1992). When Lemley and Dickinson arrived, the panther pipe (Ark-Ch-AP1) had already been collected by the landowners. As a result, there is little chronological control in the dating of this pipe, but its relation to other Bellaire pipes and its direct association with Mississippian pottery suggests its chronology as an early Mississippian production.

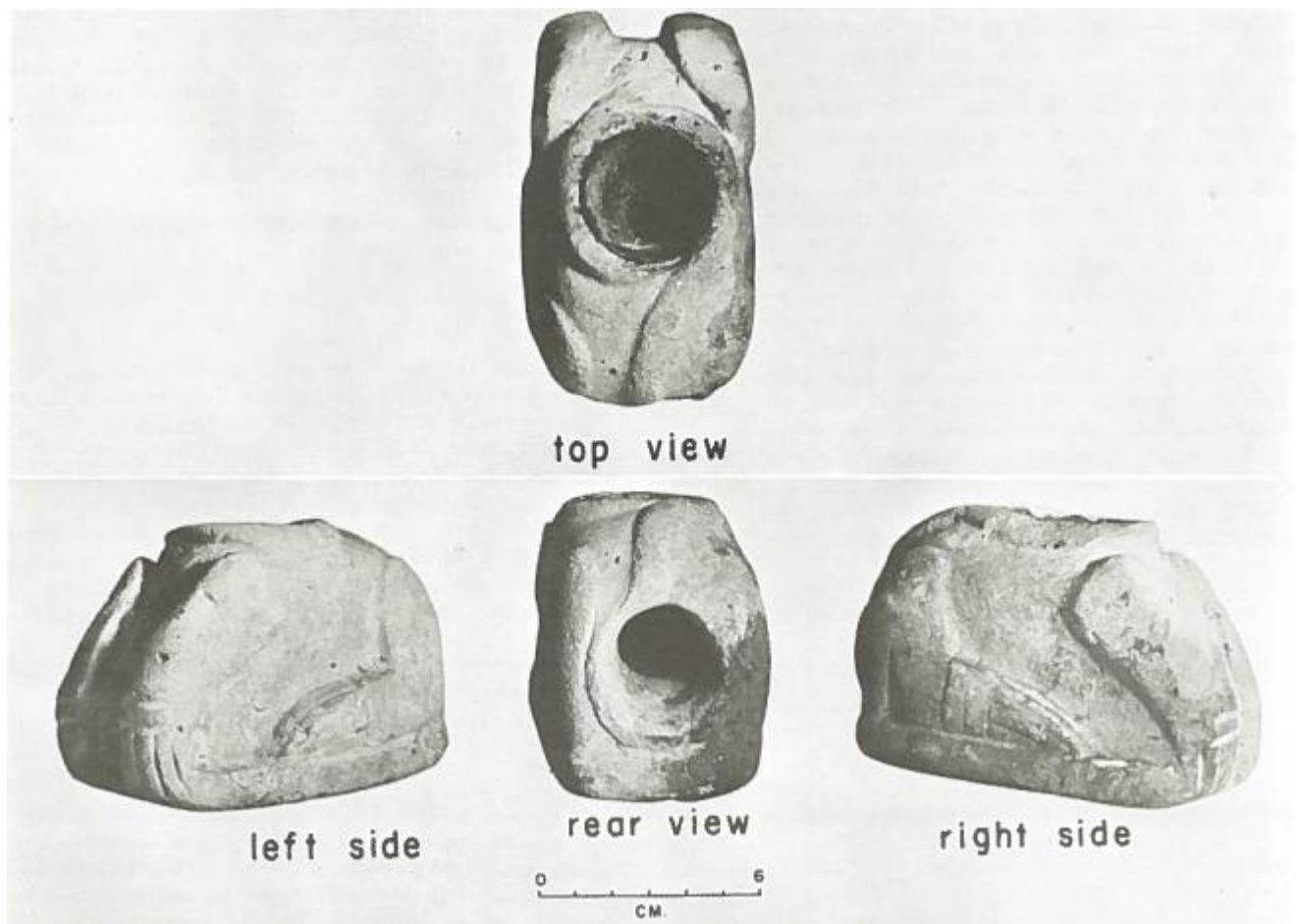
Two Bellaire B panther pipes were recovered at Mississippian sites in the nLMV. The first, Ark-Wh-F1 was recovered by Charles R. Figley Jr. (1966) at a small mound site in White County, Arkansas known only by its trinomial, 3WH4. This site consists of three low mounds positioned along the Little Red River organized in a triangular pattern with the river running along the southern end of the site. Figley (1966) first tested Mound 1, a 54x48 inch mound with a 14 inch rise from the surface (~1.4x1.2 meter, 36 cm rise). From this testing, he determined that there were likely three occupations at the site, with early projectile points at the lowest levels, followed by cord-marked pottery, and capped with a large amount of shell-tempered pottery.



**Figure 27. Sketch map of Mound 3 from Figley (1966:Figure 1). Ark-Wh-F1 was recovered in Mound 3, in Pit 2 on the northern side of the mound.**

During the subsequent season, Figley (1966) tested Mound 3, a conical mound on the western side of the site measuring 30x36 feet with a rise of two and a half feet (~9.1x11 meters, 76 cm rise). Figley (1966) notes a degree of disturbance from looting as well as bioturbation from tree roots. He notes that the mound was likely built in two stages separated by two burned zones with different types of daub and evidence of intentional burning and destruction. Furthermore, only shell-tempered pottery was found in Mound 3, suggesting that it may have been utilized primarily by the latter occupation of the site. At least four burials were interred in Mound 3, all disarticulated and evidently secondary. Some of the fragmentary bones showed signs of abnormal thickening and thinning, though this is generally unclear given the state of preservation of the bones. Ark-Wh-F1 was found in Pit 2, in association with an “inverted” skull that faced east and showed bony ridges on the neck that Figley (1966) argues suggests some kind of kyphosis. Figley (1966) notes that the head of the panther effigy was missing, and the pipe

may have been reworked so that it could continue to be used. Several pottery vessels, all shell-tempered, were recovered from Mound 3, including two small bowls in direct association with burials and a bottle with some engravings on its neck. An additional pipe made from clay was also recovered with differing design to Ark-Wh-F1 and an unclear iconography. Further research comparing 3Wh4 to other sites in the region attribute the assemblage recovered by Figley (1966) to the first half of the regionally relevant Little Red River Phase (Akridge and Akridge 2000). Steponaitis and colleagues (2019:Table 3) use this attribution to date the deposition of Ark-Wh-F1 to AD 1400 - 1550



**Figure 28. Four views of Ark-Wh-F1 recovered from Mound 3 by Figley (1966:Figure 4). Note the visible tail that wraps around the pipe stem hole and the**

**pipe bowl, the prominent claws, and the underlying plinth.**

Mound 3 at 3Wh4 shows many markers of a charnel house. In particular, Figley (1966) notes that the distribution and articulation of vertebrae suggest scaffold burial followed by a secondary burial, with special care given only to the placement of the skull. Figley (1966) notes the presence of at least six post molds within Mound 3, which may represent the placement of a scaffold burial atop the mound but could equally represent the posts that supported the structure itself. In any event, the individuals interred in Mound 3 display a marked difference in burial practice when compared to contemporaneous burials in Mound 1, suggesting that these individuals may have possessed a marked difference in status from their neighbors at 3Wh4 (Figley 1966).

Miss-Yo-LG1 was recovered at the Lake George site in the lower Yazoo Basin. The Lake George site itself is a major mound center with a Coles Creek Period component followed by a mixed Plaquemine and Mississippian component between AD 1100 – 1600 (Williams and Brain 1983). The site's position in the borderlands between the Mississippian and Plaquemine horizons may explain the mixed assemblage found at the Lake George site. Furthermore, the Lake George site's mixed assemblage and its position suggest a complex culture history of interactions between disparate groups that archaeology can only understand to a limited extent. The site itself consists of a large, centrally positioned mound (Mound A) a smaller mound to the southwest (Mound B), a yet smaller mound lying directly east of Mound A (Mound C) and several smaller mounds surrounding these central three (Williams and Brain 1983).



**Figure 29. Miss-Yo-LG1, a Bellaire B panther pipe that was recovered from Lake George (Steponaitis et. al. 2019:Figure 2j).**

Stephen Williams and Jeffrey P. Brain (1983) note that Miss-Yo-LG1 was recovered at the base of Mound A. It is unclear in their report when or by whom the pipe was recovered. Several similar pipes, likely of the Bellaire style, were recovered at the Lake George site. Unfortunately, these pipes suffer from significant preservation issues. In their 1958-1960 excavations, Williams and Brain (1983:255) recovered a “badly battered” limestone pipe of no clear effigy form from the surface of Mound B as well as ten pieces of limestone that they believed may have been related to the Bellaire pipes. Furthermore, Calvin S. Brown (1926:263) reports that two additional “mutilated” limestone pipes were recovered from a mound at the Lake George site. E. G. Squier and E. H. Davis (1848) also report that Miss-X5, a Bellaire A panther pipe, was recovered in the Yazoo Basin, near the Lake George site.





**Figure 30. Drawing of Miss-X5, recovered near the Lake George site. Drawing by Squier and Davis (1848:Figure 75)**

The number of Bellaire panther pipes found at the Lake George site, including potential pre-forms in the form of the 10 amorphous limestone pieces, suggest that the Lake George site may have been one place where Bellaire panther pipes were crafted. The Lake George site is only about 35 miles from the modern town of Vicksburg, Mississippi, where the Glendon limestone was likely sourced. Steponaitis and colleagues (2019) argue that the Bellaire pipes may have been crafted with the following process: ritual supplicants would source the stone themselves and bring a pre-form limestone chunk to a specialized artist who would then render the effigy form. This claim was evidenced by ethnographic accounts as well as crafting “handwriting” visible between several pipes, suggesting that particular pipes were carved by the same person. If this is true, the Lake George site, with its location in the lower Yazoo basin nearby to the source of the Glendon limestone, its political importance on the landscape which would come with at least several highly skilled craftspeople, and its long occupation that

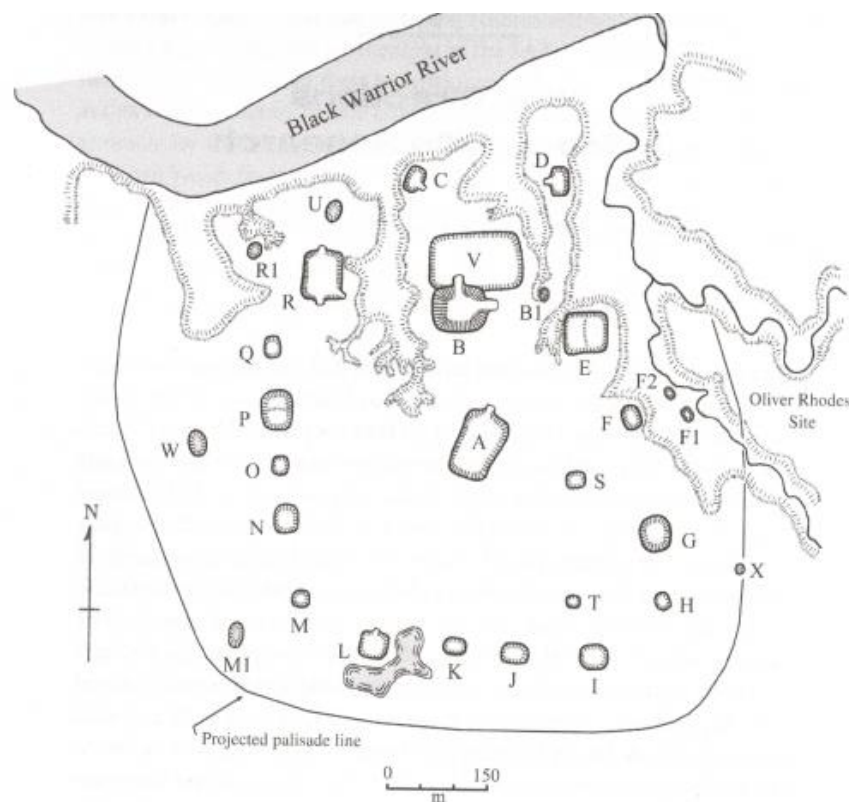
involved both Plaquemine and Mississippian assemblages, would be an ideal place for this crafting to take place.

Southwest of the LMV, in the four corners of the modern states of Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas, and Oklahoma are the homeland of the Caddoan culture, sometimes thought to be a regional development of Mississippian culture, but distinct in its language and its ceramic sequence. Strong continuities have been observed between the preceding Fourche Maline culture and the Caddo in ceramic forms, architectural styles, and settlement patterns, and the archaeological study of this culture group over the last 100 years had more and earlier success in defining its type and region than its peers of the Mississippian and Plaquemine culture groups (Jeter and Williams 1989:195-197). While this area lies outside of the LMV both geographically and culturally, Okla-Lf-S65, a Bellaire B panther pipe made from flint was found at Spiro, a northern Caddoan site. Spiro is a large mound center that is known for the immense collection of carved shell artifacts and other forms of ritual *sacra* that have been found there (Singleton and Reilly 2020).

Okla-Lf-S65 was recovered in the Great Mortuary within the Craig Mound (Hamilton 1952; Steponaitis et. al. 2019). The Great Mortuary included dozens of disarticulated remains alongside split cane culms and other artifacts. James A. Brown, Alex W. Barker, and George Sabo III (2020) argue that this location within the Craig Mound represents many secondary burials interred over several subsequent burial episodes, reflecting the valorization of ancestral Spiroans over time. They suggest that it may represent clan membership tied together by kinship or the activity of a ritual sodality at Spiro. Brown (1996) dates the use of the Great Mortuary to sometime around AD 1400.

The Great Mortuary rests just beneath the Spirit Lodge within the Craig Mound. This

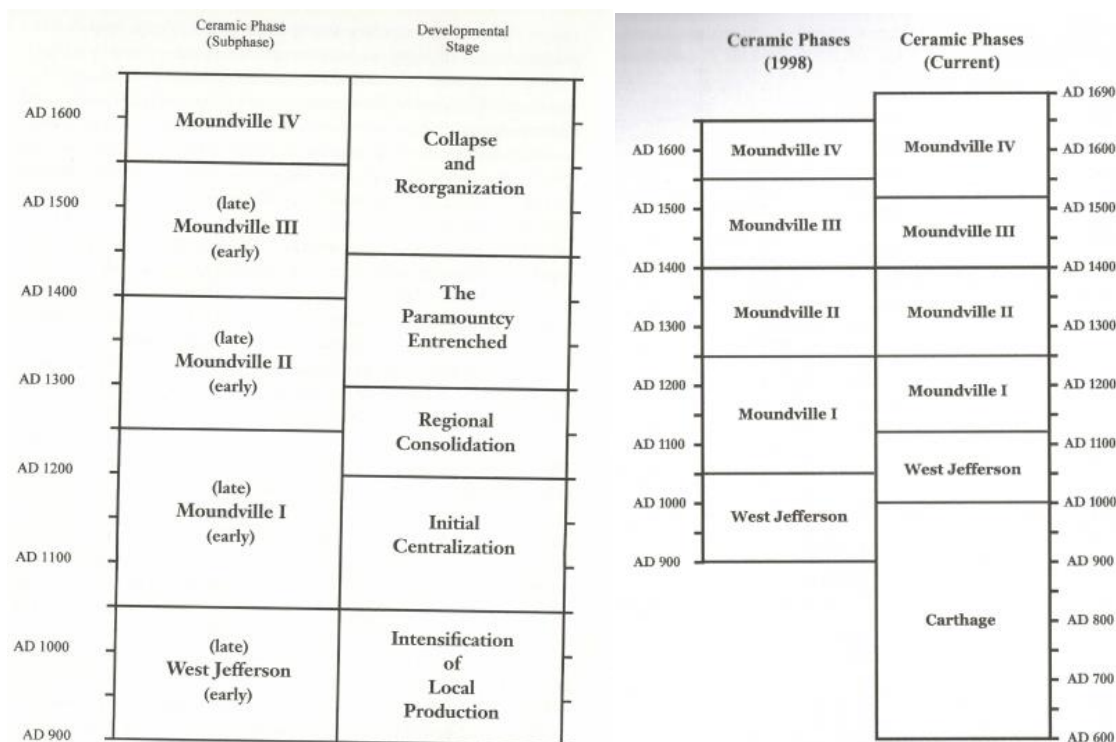
special location, once called “an American King Tut’s tomb”, included a chamber that was filled with a collection of ritual goods from the LMV and the American Bottom, including Holly Bluff-style whelk shell cups and large flint clay pipes crafted at Cahokia in the twelfth century (Brown et. al. 2020). However, no other Bellaire style pipe of either substyle or any theme has been recovered from another Caddoan site (Steponaitis et. al. 2019). As a result, Caddoan people of the past were likely aware of the Bellaire ritual institution as they were aware of sodalities related to the Holly Bluff cups, but they were less involved in the institution itself than their Plaquemine and Mississippian neighbors to the east and may have acquired Okla-Lf-S65 through warfare or limited inclusion in the organization.



**Figure 31. Map of the Moundville site in Alabama. Four Bellaire panther pipes have been recovered at this site (Steponaitis and Scarry 2016:Figure 1.1).**

Four Bellaire panther pipes were recovered at the large mound center of Moundville, in

Alabama and also outside of the LMV. To understand the position of the Bellaire institution within Moundville, we must first understand Moundville itself. The site is one of the largest Mississippian residential and ritual centers, second only to Cahokia in size, population, and architectural achievement. The site lies on a natural high terrace along the Hemphill Bend of the Black Warrior River in the modern state of Alabama (Figure 31). It contains 29 earthen mounds organized around a central plaza within a 75 hectare area that, at one point in the site's occupation, was surrounded on three sides by a palisade. Knight and Steponaitis (1998) divide the ceramic sequence of the site into five phases, beginning approximately AD 900 and ending in the mid-sixteenth century. They broadly associate these ceramic phases with developmental stages, which were revised by Steponaitis and Margaret Scarry (2016) based on new chronological research (Figure 32).



**Figure 32. The Chronology and Development of Moundville. (left) Chronology from Knight and Steponaitis (1998:Figure 1.2); (right) Revised chronology from**

### **Steponaitis and Scarry (2016:Figure 1.5)**

The first of these developmental stages is “The Intensification of Local Production”, corresponding to the period between AD 900 and AD 1050. During this phase, population growth and a stress on available resources created an environment where warfare was common. In response to this, people began to settle in larger settlements where protection and defense could more easily be provided. This led to an intensification of agriculture and ceramic production to meet the needs of an increasingly centralized and continually growing population. During this time, Moundville exhibits little evidence of occupation (Knight and Steponaitis 1998:10-12).

The succeeding developmental phase, referred to as “Initial Centralization” (AD 1050-1200), involves the first construction of platform mounds, quadrilateral wall trench architecture, and the production of shell-tempered pottery in novel forms, as well as limited evidence of long-distance circulation and exchange of exotic and mundane goods. This phase also accompanies a greater reliance on maize agriculture and the introduction of the hominy foodway that likely drove ceramic technology (Briggs 2014, 2016). At about this time, the Moundville terrace began to be densely occupied, and its first platform mound, Mound X, was constructed. Another mound, the Asphalt Plant mound, was built during this period. Knight and Steponaitis (1998:13) argue that these mounds represent an emerging elite who used “the ritual of mound building and the accumulation and distribution of exotic goods as key elements of their efforts to expand and consolidate their authority”.

The next phase, corresponding broadly to AD 1200-1300, is called “Regional Consolidation”. In the first half of this phase, all of the major mounds at Moundville were constructed as evidenced by a strong representation of late Moundville 1 pottery sherds at the

lower levels of these architectural works (Knight and Steponaitis 1998). Thus, the essential form and structure of Moundville's sociogram was established, most likely organized around clans and powerful matrilineages that drove them (Knight 1998, 2016). The revolutionary shift observed in this phase cannot be understated – settlement changed from a relatively unorganized affair with few communal spaces and little protection from threats from without, to a strictly organized place with many mounds surrounding a communal plaza and protected by a palisade wall.

This process must have dramatically refocused or shifted the identity of the people who occupied the terrace overlooking the Warrior River as they formed a physical manifestation of their corporate body, even drawing a boundary around it with a palisade wall to strictly define “inside” and “outside”. The palisade wall suggests a concern for protection against attacks from the outside, and additional evidence suggests that all residential activity occurred within the wall. The palisade wall was so important to Moundville's new identity that it was constructed directly through Mound X, one of only two previously constructed communal mounds, which destroyed it in an act that John H. Blitz (2016) has suggested represents a “collective forgetting” of the past. Furthermore, the Asphalt Plant Mound, the other previously constructed communal mound, was left far outside the palisade wall and fell into disuse.

During this phase, the elites of Moundville began to look outward. Several secondary mound centers were built in the area north of Moundville to facilitate trade and tribute into Moundville and to produce goods for the center, such as ever-intensifying maize agriculture that became an even larger portion of the diet. At the center, evidence of an elite foodway in the form of specialized pottery appeared in deposits recovered north of Mound R, suggesting a shift towards small group size, high sociopolitical competition through feasting events (Kassabaum

2019) that is indicative of a competitive elite. This distinct emergent elite also sought to acquire non-local goods and artisanal works constructed with raw materials such as non-local chert, greenstone, copper, marine shell, and mica in specialized artisan areas in Mound Q and along the northwest riverbank as well as in burial deposits. Knight and Steponaitis (1998) suggest that the dramatic changes seen in this period may represent a shift from a more egalitarian clan structure to one where the clans were strictly ranked, and political power was wielded by a paramount chief.

The next phase, “The Paramountcy Entrenched” dates to AD 1300-1450, and is characterized by a sharply stratified political hierarchy and the apparent dispersal of the mound center’s population. Elite burials dating to this phase tend to feature a much more expansive assemblage of exotic grave goods such as marine shell beads, galena crystals, stone palettes, and various copper adornments. These elite burials show significantly more elaborate concentrations of exotic goods in Mounds C and D, suggesting these mounds were controlled by the predominant clan. At the same time, the population of Moundville appears to evacuate its grounds. There are few middens or residential buildings that date to this period, and the palisade wall seems to disappear. Many sites in the vicinity of Moundville appear or are occupied in a mostly unaltered continuity with the preceding phase.

Knight and Steponaitis (1998) argue that this evacuation could be due to either soil depletion as a result of agricultural intensification, diminishing demand for security against an outside threat, an elevation of the sanctity of Moundville’s grounds driven by elite aggrandizement, or some combination of these factors. Regardless of the cause, Moundville became a mostly vacant ceremonial center occupied by only the most paramount chiefs or religious practitioners. The site’s central purpose seems to be that of a necropolis, a place where

the dead are buried. This is evidenced by a surprising lack of burials in secondary sites in Moundville's hinterland and a significant increase in the frequency of burials dating to Moundville II and III ( Knight and Steponaitis 1998, Welch 1998). Some mounds, namely Mounds B, E, G, P, Q, and R, continue to be occupied while the others become exclusively used for burials. Knight and Steponaitis estimate that most of the iconographically complex materials associated with Moundville date to this period. By the same measure, it is likely that the Bellaire pipes were interred at Moundville, most likely in burial contexts, during this phase.

The final developmental phase, corresponding to the period between AD 1450 and the beginning of the contact period in AD 1650, is referred to as "Collapse and Reorganization". It is an apt name. This phase is associated with a gradual but continual abandonment of the site, even by the elite retainers of the previous phase. Moundville's grounds were still used for some burials, but at a much smaller scale. Instead, the outlying communities that had supported Moundville at its height display an increasing independence. Maize agriculture declines in favor of wild foodstuffs, and by the latter end of the phase, a localized burial urn complex develops that eliminates the hinterland's need for Moundville altogether (Knight and Steponaitis 1998).

As previously discussed, two Bellaire A panther pipes and two Bellaire B panther pipes were recovered at Moundville. These pipes were collected by legendary Southeastern archaeologist Clarence Bloomfield Moore during his 1905 expedition. Moore's work, by modern standards, leaves a lot to be desired. His work does not include site maps and often only provides a vague idea of where artifacts were recovered. Despite this, Moore's curation of the Bellaire pipes has allowed researchers to continue interpreting them for more than a century after their initial recovery.

The first two Bellaire pipes that Moore recovered were Ala-Tu-M1 (Figure 5c) and Ala-



Tu-M161 (Figure 6b). The latter unfortunately has no known location, but Ala-Tu-M1 was found sometime between 1857 and 1862 by two unnamed black men who worked for the Prince family, owners of the Moundville grounds at the time. Moore records that this pipe was recovered with several other artifacts, including a Bellaire B panther pipe and a Bellaire A Potbearer pipe, from the excavations near Mound M (Moore 1905:131, Figure 2).

Moore himself excavated several additional Bellaire pipes at Moundville, including a Crouching Human pipe recovered in Mound O. Most importantly to this study, his team excavated Ala-Tu-M91, a Bellaire A panther pipe, within a burial in the field east of Mound R (Moore 1905:215, Figures 131, 132). In classic Moorian fashion, he did not map the location or depth of this burial, nor did he accurately map the burial itself so that more information could be gleaned from its precise archaeological context or relation to the site and its cultural sequence. However, he at least described its recovery thusly: “...immediately against the skull was an effigy pipe of limestone... doubtless representing a panther.” He notes that the burial itself was an adult laid on the back and unfortunately disturbed by another burial, which had destroyed the lower half of the person. The area around the individual’s skull also included fragments of an undecorated vessel, shell beads, remains of sheet-copper, and interestingly, the broken-off head of the famous Bird-Serpent Effigy Bowl. Also known as the Duck Bowl, this artifact is a carved and incised stone vessel in the form of an avian figure, likely a crested duck, that also features many snake-like elements (Moore 1905:237-238). Its mixture of avian imagery with serpentine elements suggests some degree of synthesis between the Beneath World, represented by the snake, and the Above World represented by the bird. The bowl segment of the Duck Bowl was recovered “some distance” away but in the near vicinity, likely within the field east of Mound R.

The proximity of Ala-Tu-M91 and the Bird-Serpent Effigy Bowl and their association

with a single individual suggests the Bellaire ritual institution existed alongside other religious sodalities with different or varying cosmological foci, much like the ethnographic example of the Potawatomi provided earlier by Howard (1960). In that example, Howard's informant and collaborator, James Kagmega, discussed at length how his relationship with supernatural panthers and the Beneath World did not bar him from membership in sodalities focused on the Above World.

Ala-Tu-M165 was recovered in a burial on the northwest side of the site, along the bank of the Black Warrior River where the palisade wall intersected with what became a communal burial ground (Scarry 1995). In fact, Steponaitis and colleagues (2019:Table 3) used this location and the subsequent dating of the destruction of the palisade wall to determine that Ala-Tu-M165 must have been interred after the wall's destruction at the turn of the fourteenth century.

The fact that Bellaire panther pipes were recovered at a variety of locations at Moundville suggests that the Bellaire institution at the site was a ritual sodality and not associated with a particular clan. In recent works, Knight has suggested that Moundville was geospatially organized around ranked, autonomous kin segments or clans. In this model, each clan or kin group possessed a particular area of the site that featured corporate mounds and burial spaces. Religious sodalities crosscut these kin groups. This is evidenced by an analysis of 105 pottery sherds with identifiable representational themes. These sherds were grouped into several categories, including winged serpents, the crested birds, or depictions of raptors. This analysis did not find any correlation between specific mounds and themes, meaning that, in general, religious sodalities were open to any kin groups and were possibly open to individuals who were already members of other religious sodalities (Knight 2007, 2016). Linguistic evidence suggests that the Mississippian culture to the east of the LMV had a controlling interest in trade that may

have pulled goods from the LMV toward sites like Moundville. The linguistic diversity of the Lower Mississippi Valley has been called a “sprachbund” by linguists, meaning that is a region with a great deal of linguistic intermingling due to the proximity of its many cultural groups. Several language groups were spoken the LMV during the Mississippian period, including Tunican of the nLMV, Ofo, and Natchez of the northern LMV south of the Yazoo basin, the Caddo language to the west of the LMV, and the Atakapa , Chitimacha, and Biloxi of the southern and coastal LMV. Interestingly, several of these language groups belong to their own language families, including the Chitimacha, Natchez, Tunican, and Atakapa. The Biloxi and Ofo speak Siouan languages that may originate from the Ohio River Valley, while the Choctaw and the Chickasaw to the east of the LMV speak western Muskogean languages. A diverse linguistic environment such as this ultimately precipitated the formation of the Mobilian Trade Language at some point, which eventually became the lingua franca of the Southeast and allowed disparate linguistic groups to communicate with each other (Kaufman 2019). In an environment such as this, trade relationships between different groups of people may have been difficult to establish at first. A religious sodality that cross-cut ethnic groups like the Bellaire ritual institution could have enhanced these trade relationships.

However, the Mobilian Trade Language mostly derives from Western Muskogean languages that likely represent the Mississippian people who lived west of the LMV (Kaufman 2019). This suggests that trade in the LMV may have been dominated by these people, which would pull goods into sites like Moundville from the LMV. This has several implications for the Bellaire pipes. Religious *sacra* such as the Bellaire pipes are inalienable possessions of great importance, so it is not likely that they were traded like any common material or object. As a result, it is possible that Mississippian elites speaking Western Muskogean languages were

initiated into one or several of the local Bellaire societies as a means to facilitate trade relationships. However, the presence of trade between disparate peoples does not represent a state of peace between these peoples, and evidence of a dominant trade relationship favoring Western Muskogean speakers suggests that conflict, either threatened or actual, played a part in the relationship between peoples of the LMV and their eastern Mississippian neighbors. As a result, it is possible that Bellaire pipes made their way to Moundville through conflict as spoils of war.

In summary, Bellaire pipes are almost always found in association with burials, but they are otherwise not found in uniform contexts throughout the LMV and beyond. They tend to be found at major mound centers, but not exclusively. They also tend to be found within structures that have been identified as temples, sometimes within esoteric spaces like at the Fatherland site, but they are just as often found in communal burial grounds associated with different clans like at Moundville. Their manner of transmission from one site to another is not known, and perhaps unknowable, but it is likely that the facilitation of trade relationships and *sacra* as spoils of war explain the presence of Bellaire pipes outside of the LMV.

Furthermore, Bellaire panther pipes are often found at sites where Crouching Human themed Bellaire pipes are also found, sometimes even in a single context like at the Emerald site. As a result, it is likely that the Panther theme and the Crouching Human theme were used together in some ritual contexts, potentially alongside other themes within the style, as Steponaitis and colleagues (2019) suggest. While an exploration of the intrinsic meaning of the Crouching Human themed pipes is outside of the scope of this project, conducting a similar research project on the Crouching Human themed Bellaire pipes may allow archaeologists to better understand how they relate to the Bellaire panthers.

As previously mentioned, one consistent pattern seen across the LMV and beyond with the Bellaire panther pipes is that they are almost always found in association with burials. Seeing as the pipes are likely owned by the underlying ritual institution itself and not particular individuals, this fact is curious. It is possible that the Bellaire pipes were interred with specific individuals at their death when there was not another person from the succeeding generation to heirloom them to as the society continued to the next generation. Dye (2020b) argues that religious sodalities tend to be relatively short-lived institutions that serve to cross-cut clans and polities that do not otherwise communicate. If this is true, then the Bellaire panther pipes included in this study were likely interred with specific individuals after the underlying institution had served its function and was not carried on to the next generation.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Bellaire Panther-themed pipes included in this study represent the material remains of a religious sodality or a group of related sodalities that focused on forming connections with otherworldly beings. This is supported by a general trend within native North America in which pipes are used as a means of connecting humans to greater powers (Hall 1997; Nelson and Kassabaum 2014; Rafferty 2016). The Panther-themed pipes are the most direct expression of this idea. An analysis of the panther pipes may reveal some basic information about the nature of religious sodalities and their relationship to changes in the organization of society that are observable in the archaeological record.

The pipes take the form of panthers, large predatory cats with which the hunters of any past society would be familiar. Panthers are territorial apex predators that often kill their prey with a single bite to the neck and store their prey in underground caches. Ancient hunters of the Southeast likely observed mountain lions in the wild during their hunts and took note of how thinly they are spread across the environment, their territorial nature, and their hunting practices. As a result, panthers may serve as useful metaphors for hierarchical relations within society. Much like panthers, there are few paramount elites that control and protect their domain and take dominion over its inhabitants, including the power of life and death. Furthermore, supernatural panthers may be understood as undeniable spiritual allies that can destroy any ill, just as the panther kills its prey with a single bite to the neck. These interpretations of panthers can be observed cross-culturally, especially in the Americas where images of large cats often accompany paramount rulers.

An iconographical analysis of the panther pipes within the context of Southeastern belief

systems suggests they refer to the Underwater Panther, a well-known supernatural creature directly associated with death and the underworld. This figure was an important cosmological force that was an intricate component of the “Path of Souls” eschatological mythic cycle and was important for maintaining cosmic balance as a force of the night. The exact relationship between serpents and panthers is difficult to parse because of the seemingly plural nature of the Underwater Panther. However, there seems to be some archaeological evidence of a connection between the two in the distant past, as evidenced by the close proximity of Ala-Tu-M90 to the Serpent Bird Effigy Bowl at Moundville, the increasingly chimeric nature of the Bellaire B pipes that often mix panther and serpent forms, and Holly Bluff style whelk shell cups from the LMS. It is possible that the Great Serpent’s connection to the Scorpio constellation extends to the Underwater Panther, though ethnoastronomy is difficult to demonstrate archaeologically.

Panther pipes tend to be made from the same type of Glendon limestone that outcrops near the modern town of Vicksburg, Mississippi off the Mississippi River. This sacred medium is notable in its highly fossiliferous nature, an observation that would be immediately identifiable by those who obtained the raw material needed to create it, those who rendered the image of the panther into the raw material, and those who used and maintained the pipes for generations after their creation. Fossils within the Glendon limestone are noticeably marine in nature, suggesting that the medium of the panther pipes themselves is of the watery Beneath World, the realm of powerful Water Spirits who hold power over death and eschatological journeys. The Lake George site, a major mound center near the modern city of Vicksburg, may have served as a production center for the Bellaire pipes due to its proximity to the outcrop and its curious assemblage of both Mississippian and Plaquemine artifacts.

Similar otherworldly beings have been described as founders of Midewiwin-like

societies, ritual sodalities that focus on death and healing issues. Some ethnographic records suggest that documented Midewiwin-like societies may have involved the Underwater Panther at some point in the distant past. It is possible that the underlying institution behind the Bellaire pipes took a similar form as Midewiwin-like societies.

The connection between Midewiwin-like societies and Water Spirits suggests that the Bellaire institution that created and maintained the panther pipes were likely elite shamans or priests who used their relationships with a supernatural panther to signify their position within a similar society. This has several significant implications. The timing of the appearance of this ritual sodality likely correlates to the rise of more intense, archaeological visible forms of hierarchy. Such hierarchies were probably driven by the increased emphasis of maize agriculture as a storable surplus, the hominy foodway as a nutritious foodstuff that could be prepared on a large scale for feasting events, and the subsequent intensification of competitive feasting that shifted the organization of society from relatively egalitarian clans to ranked clans. This shift would precipitate the need for the preservation of status within the patrilineal line of elite males, whose children would otherwise be dispossessed by the peculiar social organization of the Southeast that involved exogamy between ranked matrilineal clans as described by Knight (1990). Ethnographic records of Midewiwin-like societies suggest the most paramount positions within these organizations were often controlled by a few families who manipulated the esoteric knowledge and legerdemain required to rise to this position. Thus, such sodalities would have had an important political and ritual function for elites.

Additionally, associated religious sodalities undoubtedly connected elites from disparate areas in the LMV and beyond. This was important due to the nature of the LMV as an area inhabited by a variety of different Bellaire style pipes not discussed in this work are found all



over the LMV as well as in sites outside of four Bellaire panther pipes are included in the Moundville assemblage, which represents some connection between practitioners from the LMV and those of Moundville possibly as the result of conflict and ongoing trade. Additionally, it may represent beliefs about death, the afterlife, and the connection between the living and the honored dead that have origins in the LMV and made their way to Moundville through the exchange and circulation of ritual *sacra*. In any event, one outcome of these connections is that members of this sodality would have had varying degrees of access to elites in other polities. These connections could be used to facilitate the long-distance circulation of ritual goods like Yaupon Holly and marine shell that often designates particular individuals as elite during the Plaquemine/Mississippian period. Thus, the Bellaire sodality could have been used as an avenue of aggrandizement for the individuals involved in it.

This ritual sodality could be appealing to non-elite individuals as well. Due to the exogamous nature of the clan system, elites would undoubtedly seek non-elite mates to form marriages with their children. A non-kin-based sodality like that of the Bellaire institution would be an ideal social gathering to find relatively wealthy but otherwise non-elite individuals who would share an ideological bond with said elites. As a result, non-elite individuals could seek to become involved with the Bellaire institution to increase their social and political standing. Knight (1990) postulates that the exogamous nature of the clan system remained a part of Southeastern social organization due to chronic political instability inherent in chiefly polities that lack the ability to enforce solidarity. He argues that society could “ill-afford the consequences of intrasocietal division into sharply contrasting interest groups.” Instead, it was necessary to tie nobles and commoners together in “webs of rights and obligations” (Knight 1990:18-19). The Bellaire institution could have been one such mechanism for forming these ties

and increasing intergroup solidarity. Furthermore, Dye (2020b) argues that the clans that comprise these polities do not often communicate or work together. As a result, the Bellaire institution could cross-cut these clans and add to this intergroup solidarity.

The emic understanding of water spirit veneration often emphasizes cosmic balance. This view bolsters arguments that read the Bellaire institution as one meant to alleviate rising tensions in the face of new hierarchies. James Kagmega of the Potawatomi stressed that his relationship with and veneration of the Underwater Panther kept the powers of the night and the powers of the day at bay, holding the cosmos in balance. Native theologian and practitioner, George Tinker of the Osage also argues in many of his works that the primary goal of native North American religious practice is to maintain balance, a goal that is also reflected in Indigenous political organization. As a result, the intergroup conflict mitigation function of the Bellaire institution is not merely an incidental effect of the institution's creation, nor necessarily a cynical power grab by self-centered elite aggrandizers, but may indeed be an intentional, widely understood aspect of the institution's creation.

While much of this is ultimately speculative, this view of the Bellaire religious sodality reflects recent studies in the ritual practice of the LMV. The Coles Creek period that precedes the Plaquemine Mississippian period saw the rise of large ritual centers. These ritual centers involved communal feasting on a huge scale that brought disparate ethnic groups into a common cultural experience. Large-scale feasting would likely create hierarchical elements in society that did not exist before, and these changes would have to be mediated to mitigate intergroup conflict and division into separate interest groups. Additionally, large-scale feasting often accompanied charnel house activities and mortuary programs, the building of burial places, and the construction of large platform mounds, features that would later define the Plaquemine

Mississippian period. Over time, practices like this one would have required specialized ritual practitioners. I argue that the specific symbols of the Bellaire sodality arose from the need to resolve growing tensions as political and social hierarchy increased through the creation of specialists of the Beneath World, who eventually codified these practices into a single institution oriented around the Underwater Panther.

### **Avenues of Additional Research**

This study has focused exclusively on the artistic form and structure of the Bellaire Panther pipes and their deposition as a means of understanding the institution behind their construction and use. However, there is much more work that must be done to understand this institution and its relationship to the larger LMV area and the Mississippian world as a whole. This research should begin with a statistical analysis of the entire Bellaire corpus, including all themes of both substyles as well as those pipes that could not be sorted into either A or B, to independently and scientifically verify its existence as a real, emic assemblage of pipes. I suggest that this begin with a structural analysis of the Crouching Human pipes due to their frequent contextual relationship with the panther pipes in this study. After that, it will be important for us to understand the relationship between the Bellaire sodality and the Holly Bluff style of marine shell cups. Both styles of ritual *sacra* have their roots in the LMV, albeit in slightly different areas, both are tied to important motifs of the Beneath World, and both cross ethnic boundaries and are commonly found in distant regions outside of the LMV. As a result, I argue that there may have been some interaction between these two underlying institutions. Furthermore, more research on mass spectrometry should be done on these styles of ritual *sacra* to further appreciate and understand the inherent ritual practice that was tied to these sacred objects.

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