

BOOK REVIEWS

A World Engraved: The Archaeology of Swift Creek Culture, edited by J. Mark Williams and Daniel T. Elliott. University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa, 1998. xviii + 356 pp., illus., tables, notes, bibliography. \$29.95 (paper).¹

Reviewed by Christopher B. Rodning

The fifteen chapters of this fascinating and very readable book explore the material culture and lifeways of Middle Woodland groups collectively known to archaeologists as Swift Creek culture. Swift Creek culture is represented by pottery bearing a variety of curvilinear complicated stamped motifs, which generally date between AD 100 and 750. Swift Creek groups were semi-sedentary communities in what are now Georgia, southeastern Tennessee, northern Florida, eastern and southwestern Alabama, and the westernmost corner of the Carolinas. This book spans the whole Swift Creek landscape and touches upon many different dimensions of the lives that these Middle Woodland groups led.

The culture to which archaeologists refer as Swift Creek is best known for its public architecture and for naturalistic and abstract iconography carved in wood, although archaeologists have not found carved wooden artifacts themselves. Woodcarving traditions are preserved on pieces of pots that were stamped with handheld wooden paddles. Potters carved motifs on these wooden stamps. They then slapped them against the wet clay after shaping but before firing their pots. Firing preserved a negative impression of the motifs on the carved wooden paddles. Stamp motifs on Swift Creek pottery include elements that may represent birds, insects, snakes, bears, wolves, rabbits, and other denizens of Southeastern forests (see drawings on pp. 64–94). Other designs on Swift Creek ceramics have cosmological themes, and some may represent precursors to the iconography added to pottery and engraved on gorgets by much later Mississippian groups (see discussions on pp. 69–96). It is likely that the imagery and symbolism conveyed through these ceramic designs was replicated in other forms of material culture, perhaps on baskets and wooden posts, for example. Archaeologists tend to think of Swift Creek and other Middle Woodland peoples associated with these ceramics as relatively egalitarian communities of hunters and gatherers dispersed across riverine and montane landscapes, but who often gathered

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at mound centers for mortuary and other rituals through which regional and panregional social ties were developed and renewed.

This book originated at an archaeological conference held at Ocmulgee National Monument in Georgia. One such conference in 1986 set the stage for *Ocmulgee Archaeology* (Hally 1994), a collection of essays about the whole spectrum of native cultural history along the Ocmulgee River and surrounding areas of central and northern Georgia. Another gathering in 1986 led to *Lamar Archaeology* (Williams and Shapiro 1990), a book about the late prehistoric chiefdoms in Georgia, northern Florida, eastern Alabama, eastern Tennessee, and the western part of the Carolinas. The conference on Swift Creek archaeology was put together by Mark Williams and Daniel Elliott and held in May of 1993 (see pp. xv–xvi). This event came more than fifty years after the original formal description of Swift Creek culture in 1939 (see pp. 1–9). All of these books are significant contributions to archaeology in Georgia and are certainly relevant to current archaeological pursuits in neighboring areas of the Carolinas.

Although the chapters in *A World Engraved* are not arranged in groups by the coeditors, they fit within the following sets of papers. The first group (Chapters 1, 2, and 15) outline the regional significance of archaeological studies of Swift Creek culture and other Middle Woodland cultural phenomena. The second set (Chapters 3, 5, 11, 12, 13, and 14) concentrate on the archaeology of Middle Woodland groups at the geographic core and edges of the Swift Creek cultural area. The third set (Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10) reconstruct spheres of Middle Woodland interaction from clues offered by complicated stamped motifs on Swift Creek pottery and analyses of the sources of ceramic raw materials from which pots were made. The very interesting chapter by Mark Williams and Jennifer Freer Harris about stone and earthen mounds does not really fit neatly within these categories—it explores the spacing of rock cairns and platform mounds and argues that these shrines were evenly spaced across the Swift Creek cultural landscape as were later Mississippian mound centers.

Williams and Elliott (Chapter 1) review the history of Swift Creek archaeology, and they introduce the main themes and common threads of each chapter in the book. They briefly compare and contrast the intricate designs stamped on Swift Creek pottery to later forms of complicated stamped ceramics (see pp. 1–2). They characterize these Swift Creek designs as forms of communication about group identity and group history (see pp. 10–11). From this perspective these motifs become valuable clues about Middle Woodland regional cultural and social interaction. The first

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chapter further notes the likelihood that Swift Creek groups applied their woodcarving expertise towards art forms other than the wooden paddles made for stamping clay pots.

National Park Service historian Alan Marsh (Chapter 2) reviews the early history of Swift Creek studies in archaeology, to which many unsung field hands contributed. There was considerable debate in 1935 about the appropriate roles of African Americans in federal archaeology programs in Georgia, soon after the very successful excavations at Macon Plateau had begun. The spring of 1936 found some thirty to forty African American women doing archaeological fieldwork along the Ocmulgee River, not at the Macon or Lamar mounds themselves but at the nearby mound and village where Swift Creek culture was originally recognized and described.

National Park Service archaeologist David Anderson (Chapter 15) reviews Swift Creek material culture from a regional perspective, relating the contributions of this book to other archaeological literature. He argues that broad trends in the evolution of stamp motifs on Swift Creek ceramics—which generally seem to become more and more abstract throughout the Middle Woodland period—reflect changes from egalitarian ceremonialism to ritual traditions guided by aspiring elites within Woodland societies (see pp. 295–296). He relates Swift Creek moundbuilding and other ritual traditions to Hopewellian ceremonialism—widespread across the Eastern Woodlands at this time—and argues that Swift Creek and succeeding Weeden Island mound centers offer excellent opportunities to study the rise and fall of regional community centers and to compare these patterns to cycling within later southern Appalachian chiefdoms (see pp. 297–298). Anderson reviews the geographic spread of Swift Creek material culture across southeastern North America (see pp. 278–282), and he argues that Swift Creek people were primarily hunters and gatherers whose foraging strategies probably became a stepping stone towards the village farming lifeways characteristic of later centuries. Anderson argues that Swift Creek moundbuilding is most elaborate in areas where people were clearly involved in trade and exchange with people from faraway places in eastern North America (see pp. 286–289), and he speculates that aspiring community leaders sought to conduct rituals and to build residences at and beside the mounds that formerly were settings for communal mortuary rituals performed by more egalitarian groups. His chapter ties the book together nicely, and it outlines several topics in Swift Creek archaeology worthy of further study.

Another set of chapters in the book are those that review the archaeology of different areas within the Swift Creek cultural landscape. Daniel Elliott (Chapter 3) describes Swift Creek and related material

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culture in the upper Tennessee and upper Savannah watersheds, where Swift Creek ceramics are found most commonly at mounds or other major regional centers. David Chase (Chapter 5) compares Swift Creek ceramics from different parts of Georgia and Alabama and areas much further afield, suggesting that the genesis of Swift Creek culture is archaeologically visible in the ceramics from mounds in central Georgia or eastern Alabama and that this tradition spread outward through time. Karl Steinen (Chapter 11) argues that the Swift Creek and later Weeden Island mound centers in southwestern Georgia were placed there not because of surrounding farmland but because of the accessibility and abundance of natural resources in the riverine and upland forests of the region. Keith Ashley (Chapter 12) argues that Swift Creek ceramics at sites in northeastern Florida may reflect the southward migration of Swift Creek people from their Georgia homeland or perhaps some other form of seasonal movement and regional interaction. Calvin Jones (Chapter 13) and colleagues figuratively reconstruct the early Swift Creek regional center at the Block-Sterns site in northwestern Florida, where once stood four mounds and a village of oval houses. Judith Bense reviews the Middle Woodland material culture complex known to archaeologists as Santa Rosa-Swift Creek in northwestern Florida, positing that Swift Creek ring middens like those at Bernath Place served as the centers for communities of people scattered across the surrounding landscape in relatively mobile household groups. Her chapter characterizes ring middens and plazas as public architecture, speculating that they may have been a precursor to the mounds and plazas characteristic of architectural centers within later Mississippian societies.

Other chapters develop models of Middle Woodland social and cultural interaction from the clues of decorative motifs carved on wooden paddles designed for stamping pots. One gem of this book are descriptions by Frankie Snow (Chapter 6) of different Swift Creek motifs found on potsherds from Georgia and his interpretations about regional social relationships and interactions as revealed by examples of potsherds bearing identical motifs but found at different sites—some of his reconstructions of whole motifs are admittedly speculative. Having dedicated many years to this interest, Snow can here reconstruct whole iconographic themes from the sometimes fragmentary stamp patterns visible on potsherds and can even recognize some impressions whose corresponding paddles were likely carved by one person. In other chapters, Snow teams up with Keith Stephenson and James Stoltman to differentiate between archaeological evidence of people moving pots or moving paddles across the landscape. Snow and Stephenson (Chapter 7)

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argue that the presence of a stamp motif on sherds from many spatial contexts at a single site indicates that the carved paddle itself probably belonged to a local potter or group of potters, whereas the presence of a certain Swift Creek motif on sherds from only one context at a site indicates that the finished pot or pots were brought there. Stoltman and Snow (Chapter 9) apply the kind of petrographic analysis that Stoltman has pioneered towards pinpointing the clay sources for complicated stamp potsherds that Snow had recognized as having identical motifs, and their combination of design and petrographic analysis shows that both pots and carved wooden paddle stamps were brought to and traded from one Swift Creek community to another. Frankie Snow's interest (Chapter 6) in exploring the significance of Swift Creek complicated stamp motifs began with his study of ceramics from the mound and submound midden at Hartford along the middle Ocmulgee River, which then led him to comparisons with motifs found on sherds at Milamo and on sherds at sites much farther away from the Ocmulgee River itself. Betty Smith's paper (Chapter 8) builds upon this growing knowledge of shared Swift Creek iconography to test another archaeological method for studying Woodland period trade and exchange across southeastern North America, but her neutron activation analysis of ceramic artifacts from the Swift Creek and Mandeville sites offered ambiguous results about the raw materials with which potters in different areas made their pots. An interesting essay by Rebecca Saunders (Chapter 10) about Swift Creek complicated stamp motifs on ceramics from the southeastern Georgia coastal region traces the movement of one group of people from one settlement to another with reference to general similarities of complicated stamp designs on potsherds from the Kings Bay and Mallard Creek sites. It is unclear as yet whether these would have been seasonal movements or if they represent movements from one settlement to another every few years. This approach to the spatial distribution of complicated stamp motifs holds great promise for further study of these designs as they are represented in archaeological collections of potsherds from different kinds of sites in the western Carolinas and surrounding areas, especially in trying to trace the movement of different groups of people across the landscape and reconstructing networks of exchange and other forms of interaction.

This interest in complicated stamped ceramics is one of the significant links of the book to North Carolina archaeology, especially archaeology in the western part of the state. The southwestern corner of North Carolina is of course formed by crisscrossing mountain ranges between the headwaters of the Tennessee and Savannah rivers, which are the geographic focus of Elliott's chapter on Middle Woodland societies

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along the Swift Creek cultural frontier (see p. 19). Elliott (see p. 21; Keel 1976:116–120) notes the presence of some Swift Creek sherds at the Garden Creek and other Connestee phase sites in western North Carolina—the Connestee ceramic series of the Appalachian Summit province in western North Carolina dates from AD 200 to 800 (see Ward and Davis 1999:155).

Another significant link between this book and North Carolina archaeology are the interests of contributors in public architecture and patterns of trade and exchange. One mound and village at Garden Creek along the Pigeon River of North Carolina dates to the Middle Woodland period and has revealed the presence of some Swift Creek ceramics, and Garden Creek thus becomes an interesting point of comparison with the Swift Creek mounds noted in Anderson's concluding chapter (see p. 290). Anderson (see p. 289; Dickens 1976:12–13) notes the participation of Middle Woodland groups in southern Appalachia within the interaction sphere that linked many different societies with major Hopewell centers in the Ohio Valley and elsewhere across eastern North America. Connections with Hopewellian and Swift Creek interaction spheres must have affected settlement patterns and community development in southwestern North Carolina in some way during the period from AD 200 to 800 (see Ward and Davis 1999:153).

This book is an excellent and very readable introduction to Swift Creek culture and its place within the broad sweep of eastern North American archaeology. Some papers are more interesting than others—chapters that apply their findings towards specific aspects of the social history of Swift Creek groups are good reading. Several chapters would have benefited from maps or clearer maps—some regional maps and maps of individual Swift Creek sites are hard to read at the scale they are printed in the book. Descriptions and illustrations of Swift Creek carved paddle motifs are rich contributions to the archaeological literature. Descriptions and comparisons of different forms of Middle Woodland architecture likewise are very valuable. Practicing archaeologists and students should read this book for summaries of current knowledge about Swift Creek culture and insightful recommendations for further archaeological inquiries. I think that specialists and avocational archaeologists alike would appreciate these creative yet careful studies of such Swift Creek arts as pottery and moundbuilding. I commend the coeditors and chapter authors for their significant contributions to the archaeological study of native peoples of the southeastern corner of the Southeast during the four or five centuries before the emergence of hierarchical Mississippian chiefdoms across this diverse cultural and natural landscape.

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Notes

¹ For another review of this book, see the essay by Charles Cobb in *Southeastern Archaeology* 18:76–77.

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Reviewed by Christopher B. Rodning

The ten chapters in this book reconstruct the layouts of late prehistoric towns in different parts of southeastern North America in an effort to better understand the cultural rules guiding these architectural arrangements in different parts of the Mississippian cultural landscape. Mississippian cultures flourished across the Southeast from AD 1000 to 1700. These were the chiefdoms whose descendants encountered Europeans beginning in the sixteenth century. The late prehistoric and protohistoric native peoples of western and southern North Carolina lived at an edge of this Mississippian cultural sphere in communities comparable to some of those described and interpreted in the chapters of this book.

I would characterize this book as the third of a lineage of major scholarly studies of Mississippian settlement patterns. The first is *Mississippian Settlement Patterns* (edited by Bruce Smith [1978]) with a