

2010

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Spencer C. LeDoux

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Recommended Citation

LeDoux, Spencer C. (2010) "The Fall of Etowah, A.D. 1375: Warfare in the Iconographic Record," *Field Notes: A Journal of Collegiate Anthropology*: Vol. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://dc.uwm.edu/fieldnotes/vol2/iss1/4>

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The Fall of Etowah, A.D. 1375: Warfare in the Iconographic Record

Spencer C. LeDoux

The Etowah site, located in Northwestern Georgia, was the home of a Mississippian period chiefdom that rose to prominence very rapidly during the Wilbanks phase. Using artifacts from the elite mortuary of Mound C, iconographers have argued that the florescence of Etowah during the Wilbanks phase (AD1250-1325) was based upon the importation of a new religion by a Cult-Bringer. This new religion served as a mythic charter for elite control and power. However, the Wilbanks Phase Etowah polity vanished in AD1325, and archaeologists have used indirect evidence to argue that warfare was the cause of its demise. Currently, no iconographic studies have focused attention on the occurrence of warfare or to the threat it would pose to elite power and dominance. This article argues that if warfare was truly endemic, then the elite mythical charter would have been adapted to reflect a greater emphasis on prowess in war and this would be visible in the iconography from the Etowah site. This research demonstrates that there is a clear transition in the iconography from general ideological symbols found on gorgets to sociotechnic weaponry. Furthermore, this shift can be linked temporally to the existing archaeological evidence for warfare.

The Etowah site, near Cartersville, GA, was the capital of a Mississippian period chiefdom from AD1250-1375. At this time, several earthen mounds were constructed for elite and ritualistic purposes. Mound C at Etowah was the mortuary mound, where elites were interred after their deaths. During the 20th Century, Mound C at Etowah was thoroughly destroyed by a series of excavations but has since been completely rebuilt. The excavations unearthed hundreds of graves that contained individuals who were richly adorned with copper, shell, and stone artifacts. Previous iconographic studies have linked elite status and power at Etowah to the importation of a new religious ideology called the Cult-Bringer, symbolized by a mythical figure known as the Bird-Man (see Brown 2007a; Reilly 2007). This ideology is believed to have functioned as a mythic charter to support elite status and power by establishing authority over crucial areas of production such as agriculture and trade (see Keyes 1994). Archaeological research has identified circumstantial evidence for warfare in the north Georgia region. According to Dye (2004) and King (2004, 2007) warfare began around AD 1325 and eventually led to the destruction of the Wilbanks Phase Etowah polity. To date, no iconographic studies have linked the use of symbols to establish elite power with the possibility of increased warfare. This paper argues that endemic warfare would pose a serious threat to elite power and control over Etowah. If warfare was truly endemic, then the elite mythical

charter would have been altered to emphasize greater prowess in warfare and this would be reflected in the iconography from the site. Combining the burial data from Brain & Phillips (1996) with the grave seriation developed by King (2004, 2007), this project has identified a clear change in both elite burial practices and in elite mortuary goods. As will be argued below, Etowah's elites exchanged locally produced shell gorgets for sociotechnic weaponry to emphasize strength and power in warfare. This change can be temporally correlated with the archaeological support for increased warfare during the transition from the Early to Late Wilbanks phases.

The Etowah Site

Etowah is located in northwest Georgia on the Etowah River and was first occupied circa AD1000. In its final form, the site had six earthen mounds, now labeled A – F. Mound A is the largest of the earthen constructions and was likely the chiefly residence (King 2003). Mounds B is the next largest in size and was likely used as a location for ceremonial activity (Knight 1986). While mounds A and B have never been excavated, Mound C was clearly an elite mortuary mound may have had a charnel house on it. However, due to the poor standards of excavation at the turn of the 20th Century, we will forever be uncertain about the nature of its structures (Larson 1971; King 2003). The Etowah River runs along the south side of the complex. An examination of the map reveals at least two borrow pits on the northern edge of the site that were the source of earth used in mound construction. These pits were connected by a ditch or moat, on the inside edge of which was a palisade wall (Larson 1971; King 2007).

Site Chronology

King (2003) has divided the Etowah site into several temporal phases (see Table 1). While hard evidence is lacking, it is likely that the construction of Mound A began during the Early Etowah phase. King concludes that the Etowah site was first occupied by a simple chiefdom based upon a corporate political-economic structure. King (2007) later noted that this Early Etowah phase chiefdom lacked representational art, other than general cosmological themes such as the cross in circle motif. After nearly one hundred years of occupation, the site was briefly abandoned for unknown reasons.

Starting in the Early Wilbanks phase around AD1250, the site was suddenly reoccupied on a large scale. The majority of construction at the site occurred at this time.

Mound A reached its maximum size and a plaza was installed at its base (Dye 2004).

Date	Period	Regional Designation	Phase
A.D. 1475–1550	Late Mississippian	Late Lamar	Brewster
A.D. 1375–1475	Late Mississippian	Early Lamar	Unoccupied
A.D. 1325–1375	Middle Mississippian	Late Savannah	Late Wilbanks
A.D. 1250–1325	Middle Mississippian	Late Savannah	Early Wilbanks
A.D. 1200–1250	Middle Mississippian	Early Savannah	Unoccupied
A.D. 1100–1200	Early Mississippian	Late Etowah	Late Etowah
A.D. 1000–1100	Early Mississippian	Early Etowah	Early Etowah

Table 1. Etowah Site Occupational Sequence (after King 2003: 281)

At the same time, Mound C was founded as an elite burial structure (King 2004). Mound C is centered above two dense midden pits that were filled with potsherds and animal bones. There were also at least two structures associated with these pits, indicating communal feasting and sacred space.

The iconography from this period also shows dramatic changes. One of the primary sources of iconography at the site is shell gorgets. Gorgets are round disks made from the bell of a *Busycon* sp. shell from the Gulf of Mexico. These gorgets were incised with imagery of the supernatural and were worn around the neck. During the Wilbanks phase, there is an introduction of new gorget styles. The Hixon style gorgets carry symbols and motifs connected to general cosmological and supernatural patterns (Lankford 2004, 2007). However, the Hightower gorgets carry images of a cult specific deity known as the Bird-man (Marceaux & Dye 2007). Around the beginning of the Late Wilbanks phase in AD1325, the bastion wall around the site was constructed. The function of this wall is unknown; however, it has been speculated that the wall was defensive or perhaps used to isolate sacred space similar to the wall at Cahokia (Larson 1971; Brown 2004; King 2004). The large plaza at the base of Mound A has also been dated to the transition between Early and Late Wilbanks phases (Dye 2004). The Late Wilbanks phase of Etowah came to an end in AD1375, when the site was abruptly abandoned. The wall was destroyed by fire at the same time, and Mound C appears to have been deserted.

Previous Research

The first archaeologist to excavate at Etowah was John P. Rogan, an employee of the Smithsonian Institute (Thomas 1894). Lacking modern archaeological methods and controls, stratigraphy was ignored and went unrecorded (King 2003). Rogan dug a circular pit in the center of Mound C. At a depth of nearly 3m, he unearthed several graves containing shell beads, carved gorgets, and the spectacular set of copper plates known today as the Rogan plates. Warren K. Moorehead (1979) was the next excavator to explore Mound C. He began work in 1925 and continued over the next two seasons. He used an unusual numbering system, and his records continue to pose problems for modern archaeologists (King 2007). Additionally, many of the artifacts he described and illustrated cannot be located (Brain & Phillips 1996). Like Rogan before him, Moorehead focused extensively on the elaborate burials and often ignored or neglected the simple ones. After removing the entire summit of the mound and excavating its southeast flank to ground level, Moorehead identified a total of 110 new graves. He found stone celts, copper badges, shell gorgets, and repoussé copper plates similar to those recovered by Rogan.

Lewis H. Larson was charged by the Georgia Historical Commission to recommence excavations at Mound C in order to discover its original dimensions (Larson 1971, 1989). At the time, most archaeologists believed that Moorehead had discovered the vast majority of the burials in Mound C. However, in a series of excavations from 1954 to 1962, Larson discovered an additional 244 burials (King 2007). He used careful stratigraphic controls and

provided a detailed map of the burials that ringed the mound. Larson also recognized that the mound was built in seven stages. He divided the burials into an earlier group from the center of the mound and a latter group that ringed the mound (Larson 1971). He named these the “pre-final mantle” and “final mantle” groups, respectively. Despite his excellent work, the inconsistent and vague records left by Rogan and Moorehead have made it nearly impossible for Larson to combine his data with that from the previous excavations (Larson 1971).

Later researchers have attempted to combine the data from all three excavations. Brain & Phillips (1996) created a composite map of the burials at Mound C based on their analysis of the shell gorgets interred with each burial. Using a relative sequence, they placed most of Moorehead and all of Rogan’s burials in the pre-final mantle group. Unfortunately, the chronological model developed by Brain and Phillips has been rejected by most other researchers (see Brown 2007b; Hally 2007; King 2007; Sullivan 2007). King (2004) combined a stylistic analysis of shell gorgets with burial practices. While most Mound C burials were in simple pits, many of the higher status burials were in stone box graves or wood and reed lined tombs. From Larson’s notes, King found that stone box graves were isolated to the pre-final mantle group. King was then able to link the all of the Rogan and Moorehead burials with Larson’s “pre-final mantle” group since the majority of their burials were in stone-lined tombs or pits.

After combining data from the three different excavations, King was able to reconstruct some ideological implications of the burial practices. Elites were only buried in the center of the Mound C during its initial three stages. The lack of burials in the first three meters below the summit supports this hypothesis, since the arrangement of burials and the creation of stone box tombs would have been highly challenging (King 2004). It is more likely that these burials were interred before the mound height had risen from a ritual burial of the mound itself (see Knight 1986). King has later speculated that the Rogan burials were the first burials in the mound and were laid out in the circle-in-cross cosmogram, or a geospatial representation of the cosmos (Adam King, personal communication, May 2009). After mound construction stage 3, burials shift to the periphery of the mound.

The Cult-Bringer and the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex

The Etowah polity in the Wilbanks phase is unusual because it formed into a complex chiefdom very rapidly. Based on archaeological evidence, the Etowah site was reoccupied after a 50 years period of abandonment. Intensive mound construction began immediately in connection with the appearance of new iconographic forms (Brown 2007a; King 2003). At the same time, elite status became associated with the Birdman imagery crafted on locally produced gorgets and imported copper plates. Keyes (1994) has shown that there is a link between myths and elite power. Myths underscore the supernatural basis used by the ruling class to charter their elite social positions and associated ceremonies. Keyes writes, “If mythology links the creation of ceremony to the elite, the

position of the elite is further justified” (1994: 112). In other words, Keyes is claiming that mythology can function as a mythical charter for the creation and maintenance of elite power.

Brown (2007a) writes that mythological stories are not enough to ensure the maintenance of elite power, so the reproduction of Birdman symbols as elite paraphernalia is highly significant. He argues that elite power must be visible in the form of ritual icons that display the social charter myths as a reminder of the origin of elite power. This same imagery must act as a medium that maintains exclusive access to the supernatural realm. Generally, the power of an individual leader can be measured by his success in limiting all forms of access to the supernatural. Brown claims an effective method for increasing power is by claiming direct descent from a godhead (2007a:64). He has long argued that the ritual items found in elite burials throughout the Mississippian world represent an embodiment of the sacred (Brown 1985, 1997, 2004). The iconographic representations of the Birdman found in the burial goods in Mound C would have provided a visible reminder of why the Wilbanks phase elites at Etowah were accorded special status.

The relationship between the Muskogean myth of the Cult-Bringer and the copper plates from Etowah and other sites throughout the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex was first identified by Antonio Waring (1977). Citing ethnographic sources, Waring writes that the Natchez and many other tribes claim direct descent from a supernatural known as the Cult-Bringer. In many of the myths, this being was linked directly to brass and copper plates that were imbued with supernatural power. F. Kent Reilly, III (2007) and James Brown (2004, 2007a) have built upon the ideas presented by Waring that link the Cult-Bringer directly to the spread of the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex (SECC). Brown claims the Muskogean cult-bringer was an anthropomorphic supernatural who introduced a new religion symbolized by these copper plates. After living with the people and imparting his wisdom, the individual died. Brown argues that the copper plates found throughout the Southeast demonstrate the spread of the Cult-Bringer religion and form the basis of the SECC. Based on these lines of evidence, many researchers now believe that the Rogan plates symbolize the introduction of a new religion and elite charter to Etowah at the beginning of the Wilbanks phase (Brown 2004, 2007a; King 2007). The construction of mound platforms, the rapid shift to elite burials, and the interment of copper plates in the earliest of these burials (Rogan A-F) indicate a marked shift in the organization of the social and political nature of their society.

The Rogan plates probably originated at the Cahokia site in modern day Illinois. Brown (2007b) identifies the plate from Rogan burial “a” as part of the corpus of artwork known as the “Greater Braden Style”. Other plates found by Moorehead are in a different style, indicating local reproduction. The presence of both imported and locally produced copper plates in the assemblages of Mound C points to a rapid adoption of the Birdman iconography. The Rogan plates have elicited a great deal of discussion in the analysis of their themes

(Moorehead 1979; Strong 1989; Dye 2004). The current interpretation links the Birdman figure to the mythical hero Morning Star or Red Horn (see Brown 2007b). These different avatars embody themes such as warfare, physical prowess, fertility, and the soul's journey to the afterlife (Brown 2007a).

Burials during the Early Wilbanks phase also include shell gorgets. The most common style at Etowah was the Hightower Anthropomorphic style (see Figure 1). Brain & Phillips subdivided the Hightower style (which they called "Big Toco") into four subtypes: Buddha, headsman, Morning Star, and mortal combat (1996:44). Many researchers reject the Brain and Phillips nomenclature but find their sub-divisions useful (see Brown 2007a; King 2007; Sullivan 2007). Marceaux & Dye (2007) perform a closer analysis of the headsman and Morning Star themed gorgets. They believe that this style is local to the southern Appalachians in eastern Tennessee or northern Georgia, suggesting that it is a local reproduction derived from the Rogan Plates. The use of Birdman symbols as elite paraphernalia demonstrates that elite status was based on the religious ideology imported by the cult-bringer. These regalia create a physical and visible link to an imported supernatural power (see Helms 1993).

Warfare in the Late Wilbanks Phase

The identification of prehistoric warfare relies primarily on indirect evidence drawn from site patterns and mortuary studies (Gilchrest 2003), making it difficult to identify in the archaeological record. However, researchers have identified several patterns at Etowah that lead them to believe that warfare was endemic to northern Georgia in the Late Wilbanks phase (Dye 2004; King 2003, 2007). By the beginning of the 14th century, most major mound centers in northern Georgia had been abandoned indicating some form of widespread social unrest. As will be discussed below, the archaeological evidence for the destruction of Etowah by warfare is indicated by three main factors: the destruction of Mound C, the construction of a palisade, and the creation of a plaza at the base of Mound A.

The final burials in Mound C, Larson burials 1 and 15, strongly suggest a desecration of the temple by enemies. Larson burial 15 appears to be a hastily constructed pit with the mortuary goods placed indiscriminately in the pit (Larson 1971). Evidence from two marble statues that are unique to Etowah suggests that the deposition of these goods was hurried. The statues were dumped into the pit on top of one another with enough force that an arm was broken off one of them. These statues are believed to be representations of the ruling elites' ancestors and would have resided in a ceremonial building on top of



Figure 1: Hightower style gorget. Photograph taken at the Etowah Mounds Museum.

one of the mounds (Knight 1986). Larson burial 1 was located over the ramp to the summit of Mound C. Ear spools and shell beads were mingled with disarticulated human bones. These objects appear to have been flung down the ramp and were later covered with a thin layer of dirt. King (2007) argues that this is distinct evidence of the desecration of the building on the summit of Mound C.

The cybernetic model of chiefdoms theorized by Peebles and Kus (1977) demonstrates that chiefdoms have extensive organized methods for alleviating the unpredictable problems that occur in their society. For example, if rainfall varies widely from year to year, then elites might mandate a centralized system of surplus food collection and storage to ameliorate possible shortages. Likewise, Peebles and Kus (1977) state if warfare is the least predictable occurrence in society, chiefdoms can be identified through the existence of elaborate defense mechanisms to protect against unpredictable raids or attacks. Since Etowah has been established as a chiefdom level society through several other lines of research (Larson 1971; King 2003), the model can be reversed to look for evidence of warfare. If warfare increased during the Late Wilbanks phase, it can be identified through evidence of an organized method of prevention by that site's elites.

The Etowah site displays several possible controls for increased warfare. Around the transition from the Early to Late Wilbanks phase, the two borrow pits used for mound construction were connected with a ditch that ringed the site. Then a bastion wall was constructed on the inside of the ditch. Both of these projects were done during the Late Wilbanks phase (King 2007). Increased warfare and raids would be an obvious reason why the Etowah polity's elites would have mandated the building of these labor intensive structures.

A raised clay plaza was also installed in front of Mound A during the Early to Late Wilbanks transition. The plaza would have been the center of community rituals. Dye (2004) argues that there is a link between warfare regalia, ritual, and the power of the elite status. Warfare art is a clear representation of the warriors' prowess in battle and serves as a physical reminder of their battle deeds. Warriors would have been accorded battle honors in elaborate ceremonies that took place in public plazas (Dye 2004). Since the plaza was built concurrent with the palisade, the research from Dye (2004) suggests that this structure is a further indication of an increase in the frequency of warfare.

King (2003) recognizes that the destabilization of any wide geographic region likely has many causes, but he feels that the Prestige Goods Network was the catalyst for Etowah's demise. King writes that chiefdoms founded on trade economics are inherently unstable, because they are unable to avoid entering into regional conflicts over control and distribution of goods. The same desire for material wealth that stimulates expansion and craft specialization also motivates political rivals to attack those in power in order to gain access to their resources. King concludes that Wilbanks phase Etowah elites' control of the Prestige Goods Network could have led to war.

To summarize the disparate lines of evidence so far, research has shown that the Wilbanks Phase Etowah polity formed rapidly. Its appearance was concurrent with the arrival of a new religious ideology of the Birdman that was introduced via another supernatural known as the Cult-Bringer. The Etowah elites used this ideology as a mythical charter upon which they based their power. Elites tied themselves to Birdman themes, such as physical prowess, fertility, and the afterlife. These myths were displayed symbolically through gorgets and copper plates with imagery of the Birdman. At the same time, other lines of evidence suggest that warfare became a prominent feature of the Late Wilbanks phase. The construction of moats and palisades indicate that the elites of Etowah were under pressure to maintain their control.

The evidence for the Cult Bringer at Etowah indicates that elites were linking themselves to generalized supernatural themes as a method for establishing control over the Etowah chiefdom. Their gorgets and other regalia would have linked them generally to the Birdman. However, warfare would have placed a great strain on these elites because mythic charters are highly susceptible to challenges from upheaval in the social order (see Wallace 2004). Increased warfare would create a need for elites to demonstrate focused control over this area of their society. A generalized supernatural charter would not be sufficient. Therefore, these theories suggest a method of establishing generalized control over society occurring concurrent with a specific and detrimental challenge to elite authority.

Discussion

For my research I hypothesized a method to connect these two lines of evidence. Since warfare would have been highly unpredictable, mostly consisting of small and sporadic raiding groups, elites would have attempted to ameliorate its effects. However, an elite charter based upon physical prowess in battle would have become less tenable as the threat of warfare endured. Therefore, I hypothesized that an iconographic change would occur that would emphasize elite prowess in warfare. In order to test this model, I chronologically charted the burials in Brain & Phillips (1996) according to King's temporal scheme (2003). I focused primarily on shell gorgets, stone weaponry, and copper artifacts; I excluded burial information regarding ceramics because of other studies already completed in that area (see King 1997). Several patterns emerged that I want to note.

A sharp decline in shell gorgets occurs at the dividing point between the Early and Late Wilbanks phases, circa AD 1325. Only two of the thirty-plus excavated gorgets were found in Larson's final mantle burial (Brain & Phillips 1996; King 2007). One of these gorgets was found in Burial 57, which is the first of the Late Wilbanks burials in mound construction stage 4 (Jones and King 2008). Only one other shell gorget was recovered from construction stages 5 to 7 of mound C. While this gorget is anomalous, heirlooming (or the process of passing an object from generation to generation) could account for its placement in the archaeological record.

One possibility for the decline of gorgets in elite burials is that they became readily available to commoners due to a dramatic cultural change. Brain & Phillips (1996) researchers place their temporal model at the arrival of the Spanish in the area circa AD 1540. They suggest that the decline in gorget usage was due to both the disruption caused by the European conquest and the availability of the gorgets to non-elites. However, Hally (2007) argues that elites either ceded or lost exclusive control over the gorgets no earlier than the middle of the 14th century. Since gorgets were being used by the average populace, elites were no longer interred with them as signs of power. Knight has written that non-elites seemed to gain access to shell gorgets, but only at the beginning of the 15th century after the decline of Etowah (Hally 2007:220). Elites ultimately lost control of the exclusive right to shell gorgets; however, this change did not occur until after the fall of Etowah circa AD1375.

Since the shift of gorgets to non-elites occurs later than the iconographic shift at Etowah, we must turn elsewhere for an explanation. Returning to my analysis of the grave assemblages, Table 2 summarizes the data of various burial goods separated by the Early and Late Wilbanks phases. Overall, there is an increase in sociotechnic weapons (*sensu* Binford 1962) interred with elites that is most marked by an increase in copper and stone axes. The same patterns tend to be seen with copper pendants and mica as well. Stone and mica were goods that were local to the Etowah site, while shell had to be imported from the gulf coast. As the source of shell disappeared, elites began to manufacture goods from local materials. In addition to a switch from shell to local material, my analysis also indicates a shift from engraved images of the Birdman to sociotechnic weapons. In their analysis of Hightower anthropomorphic gorgets and Duck River sword-form flint bifaces, Marceaux & Dye (2007) note the similarities between the gorget imagery and the sociotechnic weapons. Birdman

	Copper Axes	Stone Axes	Mono-lithic Axes	Flint Swords	Copper Mace/ Arrow Pendants	Celts (Stone and Copper)	Stone Palettes	Mica
Early Wilbanks	1	0	1	5	22	0	0	3
Late Wilbanks	6	8	1	7	29	10	7	17

Table 2: Artifact Patterning in the Wilbanks Phase (data taken from Brain and Phillips 1996 and King 2007)

gorgets often depict that supernatural holding either long, sword-like objects or falcon claw knives. Gorgets found at other sites depict the Birdman holding axes or maces. All of these objects have been found at Etowah, constructed from chert, copper, or local stone. While sociotechnic weaponry was present in both the Early and Late Wilbanks phases, stone axes, celts, and flint swords all increase sharply.

My research has shown that elites chose to shift to more explicit warfare imagery rather than inscribing images of the Birdman on stone gorgets or creating new copper plates. They produced sociotechnic tools as a visible image of their prowess in battle that derived from their supernatural links to the Birdman. Marceaux & Dye (2007) analyze the “uniform” of elites and note that

it is predominately males who are buried with sociotechnic weapons and copper weaponry badges, while women were buried with shell beads. They conclude that the activities and rituals related to warfare were integral in the maintenance of power during the Wilbanks phase. The Wilbanks phase Etowah elites struggled to maintain their power and thus adapted their ideology to explicitly reflect a stronger association with the warfare aspects of the birdman.

Conclusion

The Early Wilbanks phase at Etowah was a time of unparalleled growth and mound construction. A ruling elite class established authority during this time based upon the religion or mythology of the Birdman. This imported mythology provided an elite charter based upon power over warfare, fertility, and the afterlife. For approximately 75 years, the Etowah elites consolidated power and control over a Prestige Goods Network that flowed through Etowah from the Gulf of Mexico (Brown et al. 1990; King 2003). However, at the beginning of the Late Wilbanks phase (circa AD 1325), warfare increased throughout the region around Etowah. The elites at Etowah responded to the increased threat by constructing a moat, a palisade, and a large ritual plaza. I have also argued that elites chose to adapt their iconography to emphasize their ability to control war. They maintained their connection to the Birdman, and adopted physical representations of that supernatural's weapons in order to demonstrate that they had the authority necessary to vanquish their enemies.

I believe that elites were forced into an iconographic shift for two reasons. First, warfare was limiting or completely preventing the importation of marine shell to Etowah. The elites at Etowah during the Wilbanks phase were obliged to begin producing ritual regalia from local resources such as stone (Larson 1971, 1989); they were also forced to place heavier emphasis on imported goods such as copper or mica that came from other regions. This pragmatic approach is supported by the theoretical models of Peebles & Kus (1977) who demonstrate the ability of chiefdoms to protect their power when threatened by forces beyond their control. The second reason for this ideological shift is theorized by Brown (2007a). He argues that elite power is intimately connected to their regalia and it has a recursive effect. As warfare in the north Georgia region increased, I believe that images of the birdman and the cosmos incised on the gorgets were not sufficient to embody and maintain the power of Etowah's elites. Instead, they began to display sociotechnic weapons in order to make the link between supernatural power and warfare more explicit.

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