

Lizard Effigy Vessels from Virginia and North Carolina

by Jim Glanville, Blacksburg, Virginia

This article tells how two excellent condition lizard appliqué effigy vessels were recently located. Both originated far from the traditional homeland of such vessels, providing a challenge for conventional professional archeology. The discovery, which doubles the known number of unbroken vessels of this type, grew out of an accidental meeting at an artifact show.

Pottery vessels with elaborate and distinctive forms, engraved marine shell gorgets, and embossed copper plates are the artifacts that most commonly display the iconography of the Late Mississippian Period (circa 1200-1600 AD) in the US Southeast and Midwest. Mississippian iconography or symbolism was an important part of the American Indian way of life often called the "Southeastern Ceremonial Complex," or SECC (Howard 1968; Reilly and Garber 2007). The vessels (Walker 2004) and the gorgets (Brain and Phillips 1996) represent an artistic high point of North American Indian culture. Many relic collectors are familiar with the photographic essays showing a broad range of SECC vessels and gorgets published in *Sun Circles and Human Hands* (Fundaburk and Foreman 1957, plates 41-45 and 119-124).

Among the many thousands of decorated, effigy pottery vessels, found over the past 200 or so years, have been eight reasonably complete specimens with appliqué lizards, along with about thirty lizard shaped fragments from vessels. Only two of the eight vessels are in excellent condition.

Information about the eight known lizard vessels has been summarized by Penelope Drooker (1997). One came from a mound near Nodena, Arkansas, and the others from either the Madisonville, Ohio, or Orchard, West Virginia, sites, whose principal occupations are assigned to the Fort Ancient culture. All these vessels date to the Late Mississippian Period, probably to within 75 years plus or minus of 1575 AD.

Background

As an outgrowth of his study of the sixteenth century Spanish attack on American Indians at Saltville in Smyth County in Southwest Virginia (Glanville 2004), the author developed a strong archeological research interest in the marine shell gorgets characteristic of the culture of those Indians. Researching in the professional literature and in the relic collecting community, he discovered that gorgets from the vicinity of Smyth County, made in the Saltville style (Brain and Phillips 1996; Maus 1999), closely matched gorgets in the same style found at the Early Upper Sauratown site in Stokes County, NC. From this match, he concluded there was a cultural connection between those two places in the sixteenth century (Glanville 2007a).

At the Clemmons, NC, artifact show in April of 2007, during a conversation with a knowledgeable relic collector (John Smith, personal communication), the author was stunned and amazed to be told that a completely independent archeological connection between Smyth County, Virginia and Stokes County, NC, had been established decades earlier by an almost matching pair of lizard appliqué effigy vessels, one found at each of those places. So the author tracked down those two vessels and photographed them. They are described below and pictured in this article.

Two Recently Located Lizard Effigy Vessels.

The Smyth County lizard appliqué vessel (Figure 1) is a round-bottomed, two plain loop-handle, three-lizard, one-snake effigy specimen. It measures approximately 6" wideboth at its rim and equator, and stands approximately 5" high. It is in the collection of Kevin Pipes of Sevierville, Tennessee. The author believes that it is shell tempered. Two

of its three appliqué lizards have their heads pointing upward, are approximately 2½” long from head to tail. The third lizard is approximately 4” long and peers over the rim into the bowl of the vessel. The fourth appliqué is a 4” snake which is applied vertically with its head peering into the bowl. The body of the snake zigzags. A Smyth County provenience for the vessel is fairly certain, however the specific find site within the county is indefinite. The author has been told that this vessel was found simultaneously with a frog effigy pipe—an artifact he wishes to see and photograph. It is difficult to assign this lizard vessel a date. However, we know from ethnohistoric evidence that the Spaniards encountered and attacked a substantial body of American Indians in Smyth County in 1567, which proves that people were there at a time when they could have been trading for Fort Ancient lizard effigy vessels.

The Early Upper Sauratown lizard appliqué vessel (Figure 2) is a flat-bottomed, four loop-handle, four lizard effigy, specimen. It measures approximately 5” wide at its rim and stands approximately 4” high. It is at present on display at the Rankin Museum in Ellerbe, NC. The author believes that it is shell tempered. All four appliqué lizards have their heads pointing upward. They are approximately 2½” long from head to tail, and have their heads located about a half an inch or less from the vessel rim. It was taken from the Early Upper Sauratown site (31Sk1) in the late 1960s, and purchased by the Rankin Museum about eight years ago. The dating of the Early Upper Sauratown lizard vessel can be inferred from the standard archeological description of its find site. According to Ward and Davis (1993:419), the site was occupied from 1450–1620 AD, in good agreement with the dating of the Fort Ancient lizard vessels.

Conclusions and Discussion

The principal conclusions are: Stylistically the two newly located vessels clearly belong,

with the eight known Fort Ancient lizard vessels. The find sites of these two specimens significantly broaden the geographic range of lizard vessels and indicate late prehistoric contacts or trade among Fort Ancient people in Ohio and West Virginia and the peoples of the Holston River drainage and the North Carolina Piedmont. As a pair, the two newly located lizard effigy vessels lend significant support to the hypothesis – derived from earlier studies of the find sites of Saltville style marine shell gorgets – that there is a sixteenth century Saltville to Early Upper Sauratown connection.

Thanks to the willing and enthusiastic cooperation of members of the relic collecting community, these two important and significant vessels have now been brought to the attention of professional archeologists (Glanville 2007b). One professional familiar with this story commented: "This is material that it will be very good to have published."

Mississippian artifacts with strong iconography (decorated vessels, engraved gorgets, etc.) in private collections, whose find sites are known, retain considerable archeological value even if their detailed archeological contexts went unrecorded. Members of the relic collecting community perform a useful service when they collect and aggregate information about categories of such artifacts. For example, an early book about pipes by a collector remains a classic in the field (West 1934).

The author would very much like to hear about any other previously unpublished specimens of vessels bearing lizard effigies known to readers of this article.

The author can be contacted at:

*Jim Glanville
201 Graves Ave., Blacksburg, VA, 24060
He can be reached by phone at
540-953-1866, or email at:
jglanvil@vt.edu.*

Figure 1: The Smyth County lizard appliqué vessel



Front view



back view

Figure 2: The Early Upper Sauratown lizard appliqué vessel



Front view



back view

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