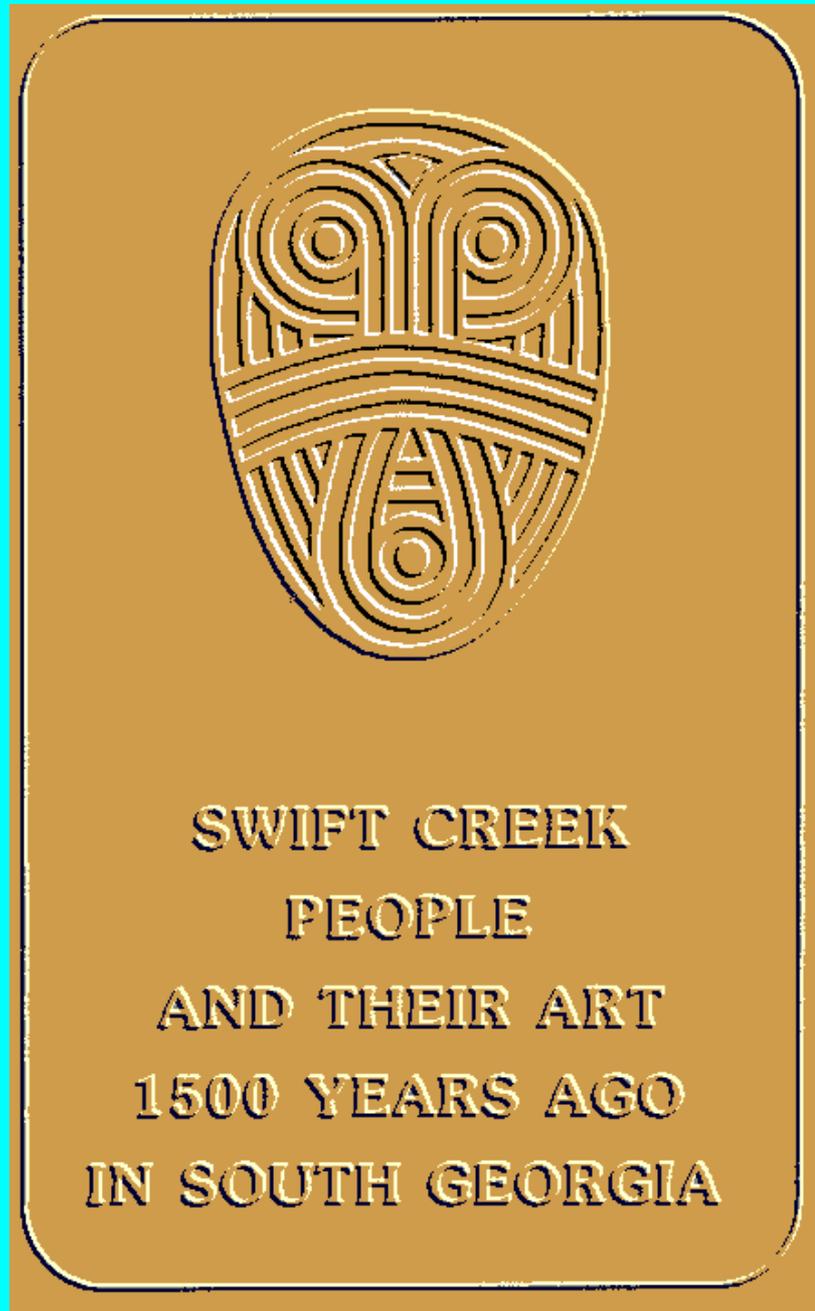


Archaeology Page

Swift Creek Period -- AD 200 - AD 700



*Swift Creek People and Their Art
1500 Years Ago in South Georgia*

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Douglas, Georgia

Thousands of years after man came to Georgia a distinctive group of American Indians, the Swift Creek people, thrived in a large area of southern Georgia. Within a few centuries following the death of Christ these Swift Creek people had developed an art style that involved the carving of elaborately complex designs into wooden paddles which were then used as stamping tools during the construction of pottery. These designs which were impressed onto their clay pots survive today as broken fragments of ornate vessels and have been reconstructed in a jig-saw puzzle fashion to produce the collection of ancient Indian art illustrated in the following paper.

Design Reconstruction

The tedious process of reconstructing paddle designs involves carefully sorting through pottery fragments searching for design overlaps until as much of the entire design is found as possible. The process is facilitated by using special lighting which enhances subtle design data. As each piece of the design information is discovered it is carefully measured and transferred to paper. Many factors complicate the process. Overstamping, paddle slippage and the practice of obliterating the design on certain areas of the pot by some artisans make the reconstruction of the designs a very slow process.

Where They Lived

The term "Swift Creek" refers to the location where their pottery was first isolated as a kind of Indian pottery. Swift Creek is a small tributary of the Ocmulgee River near Macon. Today, a map of the distribution of Swift Creek pottery reveals that its range extends from near the Fall Line at Macon southward into northern Florida as far as Jacksonville and Tampa. In an east-west direction it has been found from the Georgia coast to the Northwest Florida coast near Pensacola.

Swift Creek Indian Lifestyle

Because Swift Creek people lived in prehistoric times (before written history) we do not know tribal names nor do we know very much about the people themselves. Archaeologists have excavated some of their villages and burial places in an effort to learn more about their lifestyle. Careful excavation has revealed an elaborate ritual associated with the death of their religious and or political leaders. The burial ceremony sometimes included the sacrifice of individuals to assist their dead leader in the next life. Weapons, ornaments, and tools are personal items that are usually placed with their fallen leader along with many specially constructed pieces of effigy pottery often shaped to represent the animals and plants illustrated here as paddle stamp designs. These "sacred" effigy pots were also "killed" by either punching a hole through their bottom or by smashing entire vessels, thereby releasing the spirit of the pot to go to the next life with the dead leader.

The largest and most important Swift Creek site is preserved today at Kolomoki Mounds State Park in Southwest Georgia near Blakely. Many smaller Swift Creek Sites have been found and studied in southern Georgia, northern Florida and southern Alabama. Occasionally, Swift Creek pottery has been found throughout the eastern United States associated with the Hopewell people whose sphere of influence and trade centered on the Ohio River but encompassed distant lands such as Georgia, Florida and Alabama.

The Designs

The wealth and variety of complex and often highly attractive designs created by Swift Creek people are

unmatched by other Indian groups in southern Georgia. The intricate and beautifully proportioned combinations of curved and straight lines are arranged to conform to the design field dictated by the rectangular-shaped paddle head. No doubt, each design had meaning to the ancient artisan. Unfortunately, as we look upon them they seem unintelligible. Their meaning, possibly linked to a belief system, has been obscured by the passage of time. However, some designs contain enough naturalistic elements to suggest what was being depicted. One abstract design, seen on the introductory page of this paper, is suggestive of an owl in view of two large opposed P-shaped eyes and a beak-like element beneath the four-lined arc across its face. The circular element at the bottom of the beak gives the owl an open-mouth or hooting appearance. Other examples of abstract representations include birds, insects, snakes, flowers and ceremonial human masks.

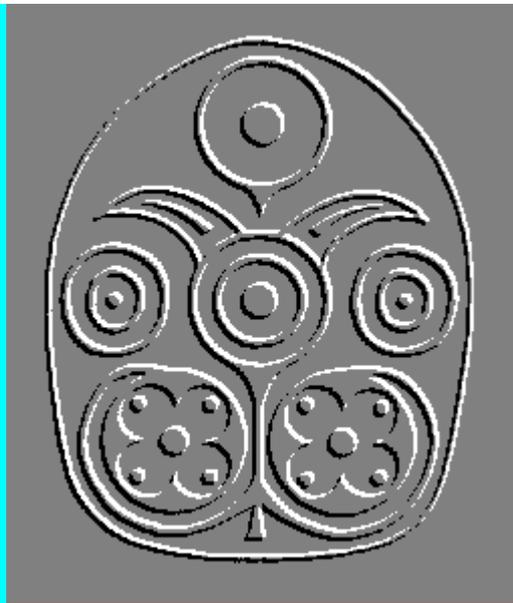
The designs that were incised into wooden paddles are suggestive of a more widespread woodworking tradition that probably included other wooden utensils and art or religious objects which have decayed through time. Totem poles were possibly carved by these people. Unfortunately these perishable items failed to survive the wear of time. However, at Key Marco in southern Florida a wealth of wooden artifacts were preserved in coastal muck. This rare assemblage of often highly ornate artifacts gives insight into the kinds of perishable wooden artifacts that Swift Creek people may have possessed.

A small sample of the Swift Creek designs discovered in the Ocmulgee Big Bend Region along with possible interpretations are below.



Mask Design

The figure above represents a lugubrious human mask. Several similar mask-like designs have been recovered. A Carbon-14 date of A.D. 580 has been recorded at a site (9Tf37) which has many examples of broken pottery bearing this design. This identical design is known from four other sites located in southeastern Telfair and northwestern Jeff Davis Counties. By recording many sites that have the same pottery designs made by one individual wooden paddle it is possible to determine land utilization and a sphere of social interaction of a specific group of Indians hundreds of years ago.



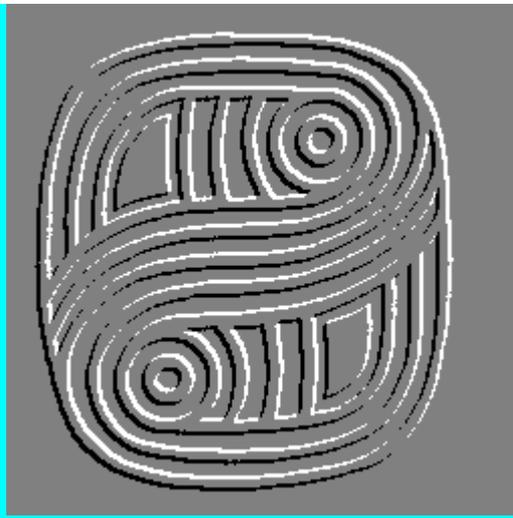
Flower Design

Here one can see two dogwood-like flowers connected to the base of an abstract representation of a plant. The trunk is seen as a vertical line. Atop this are concentric circles with arched projections left and right that probably represent the leaves of this plant. The uppermost motif element is a solid dot enclosed by an eccentric circle which suggests the sun shining downward upon the plant. Smaller concentric ovals to the left and right of the plant may be interpreted as fruit. This design occurs at four sites in Jeff Davis (JD10 and JD20), Wheeler (W1 7), and Telfair (Tf51) Counties and dates from the middle Swift Creek period around 400 A.D. Three other versions of a four petalled flower are recorded from the Ocmulgee River valley. At Kolomoki in southwestern Georgia a red and white painted vessel had this motif incised into its surface.



Plumed Serpent

Often southeastern Indian art combined traits of more than one animal in a depiction. This snake-like design bears a plume common to some types of birds. The large bullseye head is in profile with the sinuous body terminating just above and to the right, with a motif suggestive of rattlesnake rattles. In Cherokee mythology the rattlesnake was credited with saving the human race from a disease sent down by the sun and thus reverence was shown to this animal. This design was found in northeastern Coffee County (9Cf28). It is also reported by archaeologist J.R. Caldwell to be present at the Fairchilds Landing Site in southwest Georgia approximately 150 miles away on the Chattahoochee River!



Buzzard Heads

Ethnologists have recorded that the buzzard was symbolic of the shaman or with doctor in Cherokee mythology. This design has two buzzard-like heads with one rotated 180 degrees beneath the other. It has been found on two Indian sites east of Douglas and on one site in Wheeler County.



Insects

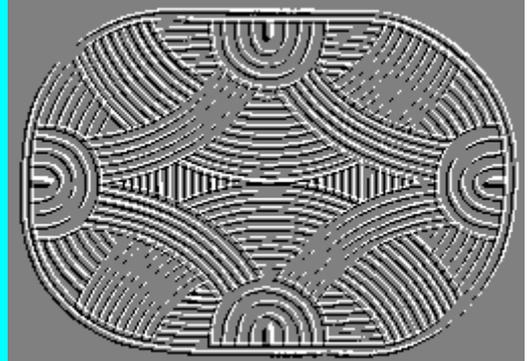
These two designs are suggestive of winged insects. On the right can be seen a mosquito representation. Consider the two exaggerated eyes above which are loops arranged to appear as wings. Extending beyond the wings is an element representing the insect's abdomen. Below the eyes is a ladder-shaped element that serves as the proboscis of the mosquito. Two sites in Jeff Davis (JD22 and JD8) and two in Wheeler (wl 1 and Wl 7) Counties have been located that bear this design. The other design is locust-like (cicada?). Large eyes are placed forward on the body similar to the cicada. Below the eyes are figure eights used to signify wings. This design is noted for its occurrence on sixteen sites in Coffee, Jeff Davis and Telfair Counties.

Abstracts

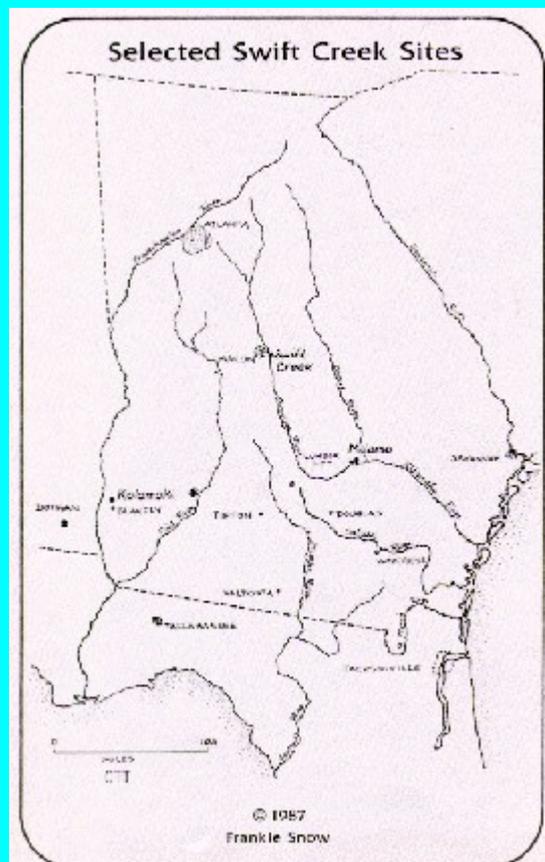
Because no naturalistic elements are included in the above designs we consider them to be total abstracts. They had meaning to the people that carved them into wooden paddles centuries ago but that meaning has



since been lost. The unique character of each design, however, permits them to remain as powerful tools in the study of primitive boundaries and interactive areas.



Map of Selected Swift Creek Sites





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