



SHELL GORGET WITH ENGRAVED FIGURE OF A DISCUS THROWER, FROM AN ANCIENT GRAVE NEAR EDDYVILLE, KENTUCKY. (Diameter, 5 inches.)

## SHELL ORNAMENTS FROM KENTUCKY AND MEXICO

By W. H. HOLMES

Among the many interesting relics obtained from mounds and burial places in the Mississippi Valley are the engraved shell gorgets, a number of which are now preserved in our museums. The most recent addition to this class of objects was obtained by the National Museum from Mr. C. A. Nelson of Eddyville, Lyon County, Kentucky, and comes from a burial place encountered in opening a stone-quarry near Eddyville. It is a symmetric saucer-shaped gorget (plate xxix) five inches in diameter and made apparently from the expanded lip of a conch shell (*Busycon perversum*). It is unusually well preserved, both faces retaining something of the original high polish of the ornament. Two perforations placed near the margin served as a means of suspension. The back or convex side is quite plain, while the face is occupied by the engraving of a human figure which extends entirely across the disk. It will be seen by reference to the illustration that this figure is practically identical in many respects with others already published.<sup>1</sup> It is executed in firmly incised lines and is partially inclosed by a border of nine concentric lines. The position of the figure is that of a discus thrower. The right hand holds a discoidal object, the arm being thrown back as if in the act of casting the disk. The left hand extends outward to the margin of the shell and firmly grasps a wand-like object having plumes attached at the upper end, the lower end being peculiarly marked, and bent inward across the border lines. The face is turned to the left; the right knee is bent and rests on the ground, while the left foot is set forward as it would be in the act of casting the disk. The features are boldly outlined; the eye is diamond shaped, as is usual in the delineations of this character in the mound region. A crest or crown representing the hair surmounts the head; the lower lobe of the ear contains a disk from which falls a long pendent ornament, and three lines representing paint or tattoo marks extend across the cheek from the ear to the mouth. A bead necklace hangs down over the chest and the legs and arms have encircling ornaments. The lower part of the body is covered with an apron-like garment attached to the waistband, and over this hangs what appears to be a

<sup>1</sup> Holmes in *Second Annual Report Bureau of Ethnology*, pl. lxxiii.

pouch with pendent ornaments. The moccasins are of the usual Indian type and are well delineated. A study of this figure strongly suggests the idea that it must represent a disk thrower engaged, possibly, in playing the well-known game of chungkee.

Reference has occasionally been made to more or less well-defined analogies existing between the shell gorget engravings of the Mississippi Valley and similar designs from Mexican engraved gorgets and others occurring in various ancient manuscript books. The resemblances are indeed striking and deserve the attention of archaeologists. In plate xxx is presented an engraved gorget obtained in Mexico, probably in the state of Guerrero, and now owned by the Field Columbian Museum, Chicago, which will serve to illustrate the resemblances and the differences in the delineations of the two regions. The discoidal gorget is the most common form in both Mexico and the United States; but this specimen is oblong, being wide above and narrow below, conforming in a measure to the tapering form of the lip of the shell from which it was carved. The gorget is rather roughly worked out and the upper margin has been perforated for suspension, but two of the perforations have been broken away. These perforations are in the plain border which surrounds the design, but there are seven additional holes within the engraved surface; these may also have served for attaching the ornament to a garment. The human figure, engraved in rather crudely executed lines, faces to the left; the right knee is bent as in the Kentucky specimen, and the left leg extends forward. The position of the arms is not readily made out, owing to the cramped position imposed by the contracted space. What appears to be the left hand, supplied with an enormous thumb, rests against the right border of the design and grasps some kind of an implement pointed downward. The right hand extends in front of the figure against the left border and is partly broken away; it appears to have grasped a staff terminating in what may be a rattle or possibly a symbolic device such as is often seen in ancient Mexican drawings. The mask-like features of the personage are drawn with the usual boldness of the Mexican work, and the eye is a conical depression surrounded by a curved line the ends of which open backward. The lower part of the face is covered with several groups of straight lines and a row of large teeth is shown. The ear and the ear disk are almost identical with corresponding features of the Kentucky specimen already shown. The somewhat elaborate headdress is well engraved, and the body and legs are covered with markings representing costume. At the waist there is a belt, and the legs show encircling ornaments and indentations suggesting buttons. The de-





SHELL GORGET FROM MEXICO WITH ENGRAVED HUMAN FIGURE  
(Length,  $6\frac{1}{2}$  inches.)



vices occupying the space beneath the human figure are carefully drawn but are so crowded together as to make interpretation difficult.

These objects are presented here not that any discussion is to be based upon them but rather for the convenience of students engaged in comparative studies of the native art of the various regions. A comparison of these with two other recently described specimens will prove interesting.<sup>1</sup>

It may not be amiss to present in this place a somewhat remarkable design engraved on a thin piece of dark wood or bark which is about three and one-half inches in width and five and one-half inches in length (figure 2). It was obtained from "a mound seven miles inland, opposite Sheffield, Alabama," and belongs to a collection obtained by the Field Columbian Museum from Mr. C. W. Riggs. The excellent state of preservation shown by this fragile specimen is due to association with objects of copper. The design includes a border three-fourths of an inch in width filled in with obliquely placed oval figures with central depressions, alternating with obliquely placed straight lines—the whole combination suggesting a current scroll. Within this border is the boldly drawn figure of a giant spider, the spaces on the ground being filled in with incised lines running at various angles. The treatment of the insect is highly conventional, but the character is well preserved. The resemblance of this example to certain delineations of spiders engraved on shell gorgets found in various parts of the same general region is very marked.



FIG. 2.—Spider engraved on a bark tablet from an ancient grave near Florence, Alabama. (Length  $5\frac{1}{2}$  in.)

<sup>1</sup> M. H. Saville: "A Shell Gorget from Huasteca, Mexico"; *Bulletin American Museum*, vol. XIII, p. 99. F. Starr, "A Shell Gorget from Mexico"; *Proceedings Davenport Academy*, vol. VI, p. 173.