

## ENGRAVED SHELL GORGETS FROM ILLINOIS

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It is common knowledge that the various forms of pierced engraved shell gorgets and shell gorgets with plain surfaces, which probably had different designs painted upon them, were worn by the Indians as ornaments. Doubtless these gorgets were not worn for mere personal adornment but had certain specialized uses: such as, Insignia, Amulets, and Symbols. As Insignia they were doubtless badges of ceremonial office or of distinction. It seems evident that the designs engraved upon them were indicative of the official position held, were specific records representing brave deeds accomplished, or were awards for some notable feat of strength or cunning. As Amulets they were supposed to be invested with supernatural protective power. The designs if any, were usually derived from dreams or imaginary visions, hence, as a result of these individual experiences and ideas, it is seldom that any two are discovered bearing identical designs. As Symbols they were intended to possess a religious character and were generally indicative of clan or totem. Many are inscribed with mythological characters and a few specimens contain geometric designs which may be suggestive of the Hieroglyphic, or the Order of Ceremonial work.

Other designs, of which The Cross, The Spider, The Serpent, and The Scalloped Disk are examples, have been found in Indian burials in southern Illinois. These are not simply inscribed individual ornaments but more elaborate ones on which many fairly accurate duplicate designs were used. The large number of these precludes the theory that they were products of idle fancy and made entirely for individual gratification. This is very evident when we consider the amount of labor and patience required to engrave them. The frequent recurrence of the same design and the wide distribution of individual types or forms, although varied to some degree, still retain enough of the original "type design" to be easily classified as belonging to one of the above mentioned groups.

The Illinois River area has been especially productive of the Cross type gorget.

Many of these specimens are cut entirely through the shell. All attempts to connect the use of this design by the aborigines with that of the "white man's cross" have failed. However, it is known that the first explorers were accompanied by Christian zealots, who made a gallant attempt to root out native superstitions and as a substitute to introduce the Christian faith. The Cross being the insignia of this religion, the emblem was doubtless accepted by the natives as the only tangible feature of a belief too intellectually profound for their comprehension. Although other phases of Christianity may have been forgotten by the savages, the Symbolic Cross could have remained in the "Mind's eye," and they may have copied this design upon the shell and worn it in the same manner as they had been accustomed to wear their beads or other ornaments.

That the Indian would select a spider as a basis for ornamental design is not strange when we consider it was from the spider that the Indian was supposed to have learned to weave, make nets for catching fish, etc.; thus the spider would be held in high esteem. Because of the resemblance to the tarantula, with its deadly powers, the spider would be likened to the rattle snake, which was used very extensively in design ornamentation.

It is well known that the serpent plays an important part in the ceremonial life of the Indian, which may account for the fact that more Serpent or Rattlesnake gorgets are found in Illinois than any other engraved design.

The Scalloped Disk design, possibly including a circle or Sun Symbol, must have had some special significance in the mythology, customs or religion of the Indian. Many of the tribes were Sun Worshipers, especially the Natchez, and it therefore seems possible that this rosette or Scalloped Disk gorget may have been designed for religious use.

As a general rule the engraved shell ornaments are found in rock crypt burials and are considered as belonging to the "Stone Grave People."