



Rattlesnake gorget

Not on display

Title/Description: Rattlesnake gorget

Object Type: Mask

Materials: Shell

Measurements: h. 85 x w. 95 x d. 20 mm

Accession Number: 840

Historic Period: Mississippian (c. 1300-1600)

Production Place: Mississippi, North America, The Americas, USA

Credit Line: Purchased with support from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1982

Shell gorgets of this kind have been found in many parts of the southeast. They represent a rattlesnake with large head, gaping jaws and short body ending in a hatched design representing the rattle. Holmes (1883:290) noted that it is very rare for the snake to be facing the viewer's left - as in this example (see also one from Georgia in Moore, 1897: fig. 19). The serpent occurs frequently in the iconography of the southeast, and Penney (1985:189-92) discusses its symbolic association with death and the underworld. When found in controlled excavations these gorgets are usually associated with burials. Similar examples have been found in mounds in Tennessee (Holmes, 1883: pl. Lxn, 2; Kneberg, 1959: nos. 39-44; Dickens, 1982: no. 44).

The shell is probably a section of the outer whorl of *Busycon perversum*, the concave inner surface of the shell being used for the engraving. This has been considerably eroded, and a former owner has attempted to emphasise with graphite the markings of the eye, teeth, tail and other features. The gorget was worn suspended from the two small holes at the top.

Steven Hooper, 1997

Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art*, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) p. 296.

Provenance

Note in the Sainsbury Centre archives suggesting the object was collected in De Soto County, northwest Mississippi.

Formerly in the collection of Ralph Olson, Deerfield, Illinois.

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from John Arieta on the advice of Robert Sainsbury in 1982 from the income of the Sainsbury Purchasing Fund.
