

Tracking Design Variation within Late Mississippian Complicated Stamped Pottery Assemblages from the Georgia Coast

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Complicated stamped pottery has a long-lived tradition in the Southeastern United States that dates as far back as the Woodland period. Southeastern researchers have focused on Swift Creek complicated stamped pottery to identify and study designs, vessels, and paddles (Broyles 1968; Snow 1998, 2007; Saunders 1998; Smith and Knight 2012, 2014, 2017; Snow and Stephenson 1998; Stephenson et al. 2002; Stoltman and Snow 1998; Wallis 2007, 2011). While these analyses helped to provide a better understanding of Woodland period chronology, pottery production and use, social interactions, design construction, symbolic representation, and wood-carving technology, less attention has been given to Mississippian period complicated stamped pottery. Researchers acknowledged a variety of Mississippian designs and motifs (Caldwell and McCann 1941; DePratter 1991; Saunders 2000); however, very little has been done to quantify designs and variations or identify and track paddles at sites. My recent dissertation work focused on technological and stylistic attributes of Late Mississippian pottery on St. Catherines Island, Georgia. During these analyses, I targeted complicated stamped pottery, specifically the filfot-cross motif, to identify and quantify design variation and track paddles within and between five assemblages from St. Catherines Island. The objective of the analyses was to determine whether each site had unique or similar complicated stamped pottery manufacturing practices and designs. I identified 14 diagnostic filfot-cross designs, 21 partial designs, and 97 unique paddles. In addition, I determined that St. Catherines' Irene potters learned and practiced making

filfoot pottery with similar manufacturing techniques, which indicated a broad grit tempered pottery community of practice. However, design analysis showed that sites contained a variety of filfoot-cross designs and paddles, and many village middens contained more than one filfoot-cross design and paddle.

The St. Catherines research provides a baseline to explore regional filfoot-cross motif variation along the Georgia coast. Several questions drive this preliminary regional study. How do St. Catherines' filfoot-cross designs compare to other Late Mississippian sites on the coast? Do other sites have similar or different designs? Are there differences between mortuary and village sites? Are there paddle matches between sites? In this case study, I focus heavily on stylistic analysis to characterize regional Late Mississippian filfoot-cross variation; however, I also touch on the motif's referent and potential meanings. I draw on Knight's (2013a, 2013b) staged approach to iconographic analysis to provide a framework for examining Late Mississippian imagery and referents. Knight's recommended steps include assembling a large corpus from the same time period and genre, conducting stylistic analysis, incorporating natural history and archaeological field data, conducting configurational analysis, carefully applying ethnographic analogy, and developing and testing iconographic models. My research is also influenced by a communities of practice approach to examine technological and stylistic attributes. These attributes reflect Late Mississippian potters' manufacturing and decorating choices and provide an opportunity to explore regional social interactions and networks. The corpus for this regional study consists of Irene complicated stamped pottery, more specifically filfoot-cross stamped sherds and vessels recovered from village and mortuary contexts at the Irene Mound, Redbird Creek, Creighton Island, and five assemblages from St. Catherines Island (Figure 2.1). This dataset is not exhaustive but provides a foundation for future work. In this study, I use stylistic analysis to look at the overall motif, but also to breakdown the motif into its elements in order to characterize the variation. In addition, I use the variations to help track regional similarities and differences of the motif and explore social interactions. To be clear, this case study discusses Late Mississippian imagery and touches on iconography but goes beyond by exploring filfoot-cross networks along the Georgia coast.

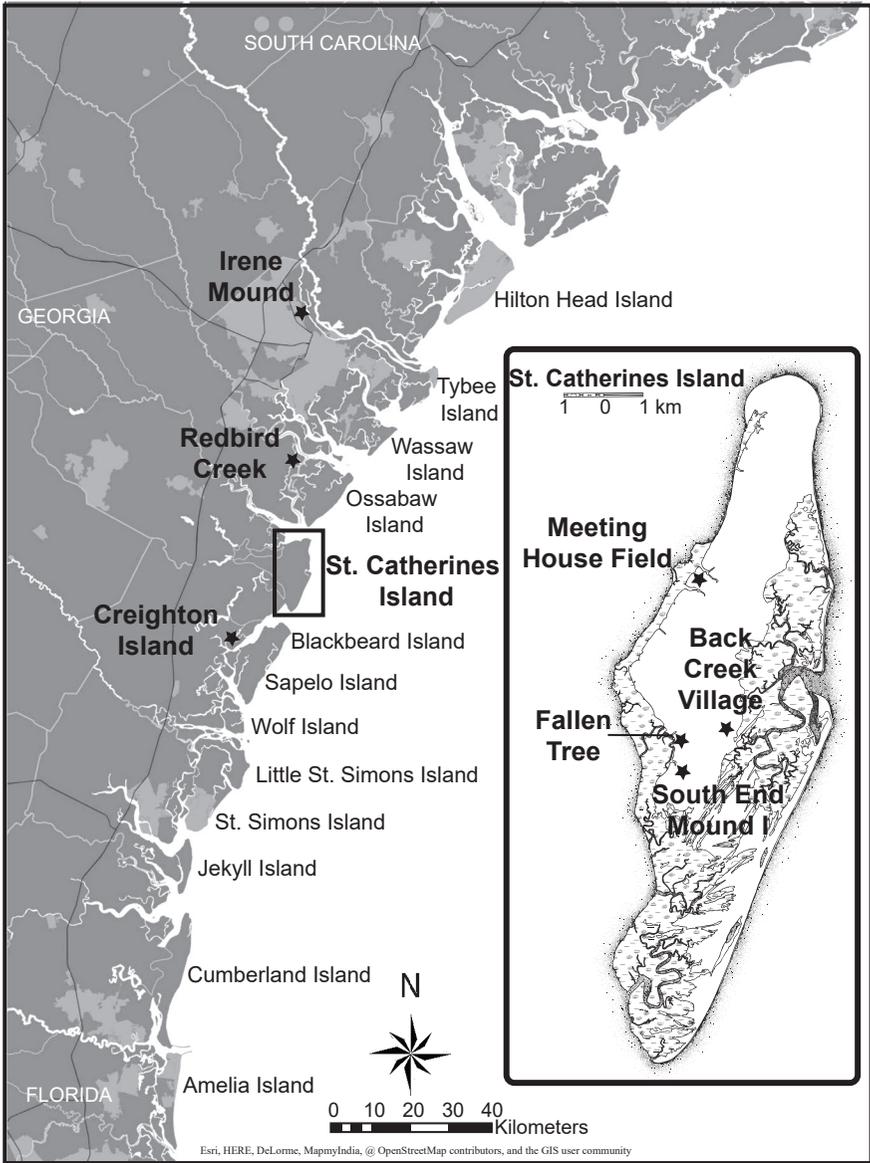


Figure 2.1. Map of coastal Georgia and sites discussed in this chapter. Base map by Esri, HERE, DeLorme, MapmyIndia, @OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS user community. Map labeled by Anna M. Semon.

Background

The Late Mississippian period on the Georgia coast is regionally known as the Irene phase and dates to A.D. 1300–1580. The Native Americans living on the northern Georgia coast at this time were known as the Guale. Although several conflicting interpretations about Guale settlement, mobility/sedentism, and subsistence exist (Crook 1978, 1986, 2012; Jones 1978; Larson 1978, 1980; Thomas 2008), most researchers agree that they were organized into chiefdoms and relied intensively on maize agriculture (Saunders 2000; Thomas 2008; Worth 1995). Late Mississippian coastal sites typically consisted of villages, resource processing hamlets, and low earthen burial mounds.

Irene pottery, a variant of the Lamar ceramic tradition, consists of coarse grit temper ceramics. Based on ethnohistoric data, researchers agree that women produced ceramic vessels for household use throughout the Southeastern United States (Saunders 2000; Wallis 2011). However, other household or community members were likely involved in the manufacturing process (Crown 2007; Wallis 2011). It is possible men collected the clay and temper or carved the wooden paddles for the stamped designs. Irene wares are either plain or decorated with stamping or incising. Surface treatments are smoothed or burnished, and vessel forms are primarily bowls and jars, but cups, bottles, and boat-shaped vessels have been identified (Braley et al. 1986; Caldwell and McCann 1941; DePratter 1991; Pearson 1984; Saunders 2000). Irene rim treatments include cane/reed punctations, rimstrips, rosettes, and nodes. Scholars identified temporal changes in Irene rim treatments and elaborations, which started with nodes and rosettes then transitioned to segmented, pinched, or punctated rimstrips followed by punctations directly on the body and lastly folded rims, which get wider over time (Braley 1990; Cook 1986; Pearson 1984; Saunders 2000). Irene stamped pottery is primarily complicated stamped, although check stamped sherds have been recovered from several coastal sites (Larson 1984; Semon 2015, 2019; Williams and Thompson 1999). Stamped decorations were applied with a carved paddle to the vessel when the clay was still malleable. Researchers have identified several complicated stamped motifs, including concentric circles, crosses, figure nines, line blocks, and the filfot crosses (DePratter 1991; Saunders 2000; Semon 2019). The filfot cross is the most common complicated stamped motif within Late Mississippian coastal ceramic assemblages (Figure 2.2).

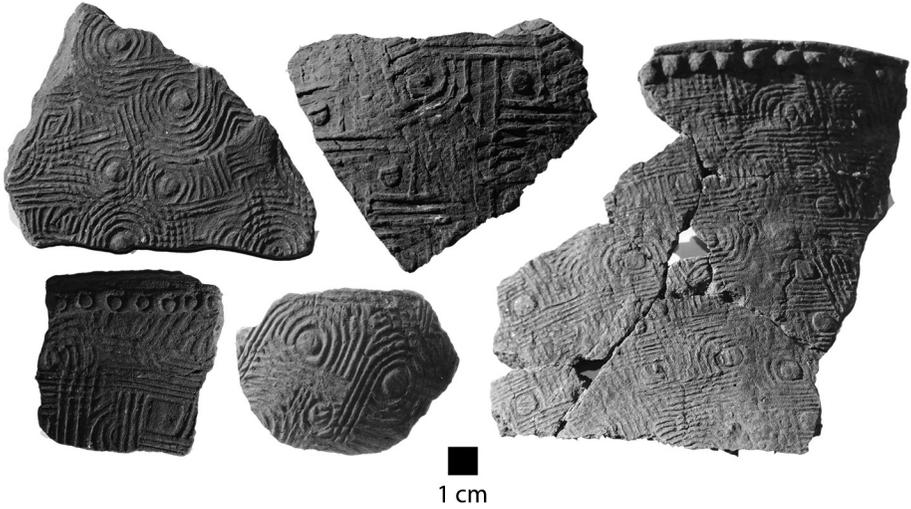


Figure 2.2. A selection of filfot-cross sherds from St. Catherines Island. Photograph by Anna M. Semon. Courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History.

The Filfot-Cross Motif

The filfot-cross motif was first described by Caldwell and McCann in 1941 as part of the Irene Mound site assemblage. To summarize their description, the filfot cross is a symmetrical design, consisting of four elements: the center element, scrolls (arms), the end/terminal element, and a number of lands and grooves radiating off the center element (Figure 2.3). Execution of stamping varies from clearly depicted to over stamped. Caldwell and McCann acknowledged and illustrated four filfot design variations; however, they did not provide information on the total number of filfot designs at the Irene Mound site. Although the filfot designs are not as elaborate as the Swift Creek designs, the elements can be characterized and tracked. In addition, flaws or cracks can provide clues to identify unique filfot designs and paddles. Tracking designs and paddles can help us better understand coastal Late Mississippian pottery practices and social interactions.

The filfot-cross motif was meaningful to Late Mississippian coastal people, based on the high sherd and vessel frequencies in both village and mortuary assemblages. Rebecca Saunders (2000) argues that the filfot-cross motif is similar to other Lamar designs, such as the square ground motif. The square ground motif consists of a center element with four radiating

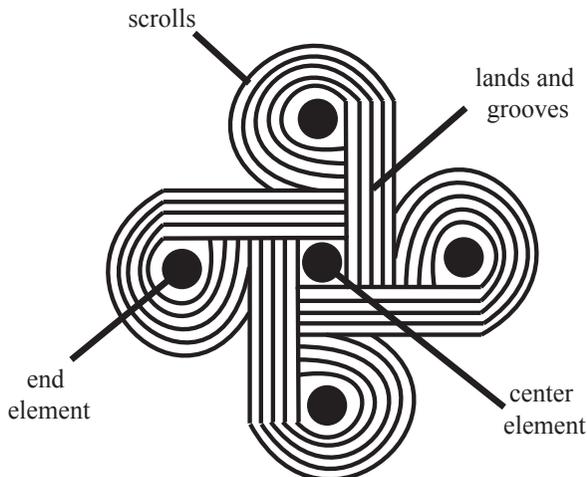


Figure 2.3. Filfot-cross elements. Illustration by Anna M. Semon.

lines, which has been interpreted as the central fire and plaza of Mississippian communities (Saunders 2000; Snow 1990). In addition, Saunders (2000) interprets the filfot cross as a representation of southeastern Late Mississippian cosmology, specifically a “world symbol” due to the motif’s frequency on pottery and long-term use. She draws on research and discussions by Hudson (1976), Fundaburk and Foreman (1957), and Waring and Holder (1968) about southeastern design elements and referents, specifically the southeastern circle and cross motif. Typically, this motif has a center element representing the current world or possibly the sun and four radiating lines from the center to indicate the four cords/winds/directions. In addition, Lankford’s (2007) description of the Cox Mound style gorget, which includes a center cross, rayed circle, looped square, and crested birds, contains elements similar to the filfot cross.

The filfot-cross center elements and scrolls resemble a condensed version of the central circle and looped square found on the Cox Mound style gorgets. Lankford interprets the Cox Mound style gorget as a cosmological model in plan view, which links the Above, Middle, and Below worlds together. According to Lankford, who draws on relevant ethnographic information, the cross and rayed circle represents the sun and the Above World, the looped square and crested birds are symbols for the Middle World reflecting cardinal direction and stabilizing forces, and the shell disk represents the Below World.