

A New Eddyville Gorget from the Illinois River Valley

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The discovery of a rare artifact from Illinois's frontier days conjures up an image of early settlers moving here from Indiana, Kentucky, and other eastern areas. Yet, Illinois was a frontier in more ancient times as well. Between 600 and 1000 years ago, much of Illinois was inhabited by societies similar to those that occupied the southeastern United States. These people, the Middle Mississippians, had the most highly developed culture north of Mexico, and their sites in the Illinois River valley can be likened to stable frontier outposts.

In the Illinois River valley, items are sometimes found indicating that the local Middle Mississippians were very much in contact with the centers of their culture to the south. Some artifacts are trade items of ceremonial or traditional artwork, whereas others are locally manufactured but show ideas and symbols shared with other groups of people. These kinds of artifacts are generally rare, but they are quite useful in assessing the degree to which frontier settlements were affiliated with the more southerly centers.

Thus, it was particularly rewarding when archaeologists from Dickson Mounds Museum recovered a gorget from excavations at the Morton Site complex during the summer of 1985. This circular disc was a status-indicating ornament that adorned the chest of an important person. The gorget was cut from a large marine shell and bears an incised rendering of a spider. Only five other gorgets with this symbol have ever been found in the Illinois River valley — all of them much earlier in this century.

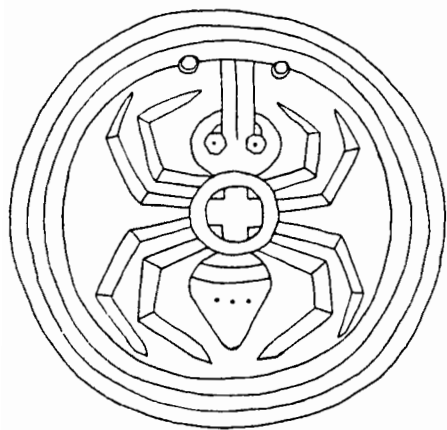
The gorget can be assigned to the Eddyville (also called McAdams) style of gorgets, which have concentric

circles framing either spiders or human figures. In addition to their presence in the Illinois River valley, Eddyville gorgets have been found along the lower reaches of the Ohio and Tennessee rivers and along the Mississippi River from New Madrid, Missouri, up to the St. Louis area. The Morton Site gorget is the northernmost Eddyville gorget known. Including the six from the Illinois Valley, about twenty spider gorgets have been found in the Eddyville style area. Many were found as much as 120 years ago.

At least six other gorgets with spiders have been found in the southern Appalachian Mountains (eastern Tennessee and northern Georgia and Alabama), and two examples have been found in eastern Oklahoma. Because these other Middle Mississippian gorgets lack concentric line borders and are often fenestrated (carved with holes through the disc that accentuate the pattern), they are artistically very different from the Eddyville gorgets.

Several Indian myths pertain to the spider. Some Indians saw the spider as the first creature or as the symbol of life. Others believed it was a spider that brought them the gift of fire by carrying it on its back from an island. The spider that bore the fire was thereafter marked with a cross. It may be that spider gorgets are symbolic of one of these fables, for on the spider's cephalothorax is an equal-arm cross, often used by the Mississippians to symbolize sacred fire or the sun — especially important religious symbols for Mississippian groups.

The portrayal of the spiders on these gorgets is surprisingly true to life. George G. MacCurdy identified the spiders on those gorgets collected before 1913 as some variety of orb-weaving spider and suggested they might represent the marbled spider *Epeira insularis*, which is currently named *Araneus marmoreus*.



The spider gorget found at the Morton Site near Dickson Mounds Museum. (Drawing by Kelvin Sampson)

MacCurdy noted that *Epeira insularis* had a distinct cross on its abdomen, similar to the spider of the gorgets. Dr. Everett Cashatt, Associate Curator of Zoology at the Illinois State Museum, verified that the spiders on these gorgets represent orb-weavers (genus *Araneus*, which includes the obsolete genus *Epeira*). However, another orb-weaver, such as the cross spider *Araneus diadematus*, the grey cross spider *Araneus sericatus*, or one named *Araneus nordmanni* might be the particular species portrayed.

Although the Morton Site gorget is very similar to many of the other Eddyville gorgets, there are two interesting differences. Previously, these gorgets have been associated only with Middle Mississippian cultures. However, by the 14th century A.D. (from which the Morton Site gorget dates), the nature of the Mississippian frontier was changing. This gorget was apparently traded to people of the Oneota culture. Oneota people practiced a lifeway similar to the Middle Mississippians, but with less obvious social stratification. At this time, the Oneota people were spreading southward from Wisconsin and eastern Minnesota into Iowa, Missouri, and northern and western Illinois.

A second difference between the Morton specimen and all but two of the other spider gorgets in the Eddyville area is that most have the suspension holes drilled so that the spider hangs head-downward. Of course, head-downward is the natural position of a spider on a web. Perhaps significantly, the Crable Site, where the other two "upside down" gorgets were found, is just fifteen miles downstream from Morton. There, less than a century later than Morton, Oneota people appear to have lived alongside the Middle Mississippians. Perhaps the Oneota people were simply making imperfect copies of the Middle Mississippian gorgets. But, the stylized portrayal of the palpii and "fangs" of the mouth, the over-prominent "eyes" (spiders have eight very small eyes), and the cross on the cephalothorax (most markings are actually on the spider's abdomen) on the Morton Site

spider gorget are nearly identical to the other specimens. When all the spider gorgets are considered together, it seems more likely that this newly found specimen was made by the same school of artisans who made most of the others.

In this case, what does it mean that this Middle Mississippian status-indicating ornament was traded to Oneota people? During the early phase of the Middle Mississippian expansion into the Illinois River valley, small settlements were rather evenly scattered along the valley. Later, Middle Mississippian occupation sites were not only larger and more numerous, but many were fortified. After A.D. 1250 the influence of the great Middle Mississippian center near East St. Louis (the Cahokia Site) waned considerably. Although still in contact with centers further south, the Middle Mississippians remaining in the Illinois

River valley formed ties with Oneota people in spite of the cultural distance between the two groups.

From Morton and other late sites in Illinois, there is compelling evidence that the Middle Mississippian frontier was beginning to shrink by the late 13th century. In fact, this period appears to have been a time of great unrest and cultural fragmentation throughout the Midwest. Rather than merely an item of commercial exchange, the Middle Mississippian and Oneota people probably saw the Morton Site Eddyville gorget as a highly desirable status symbol traded to encourage political stability. Six hundred years later, this gorget is a symbol to us of those difficult times when outposts of the highest level of prehistoric culture ever attained in Illinois were becoming increasingly isolated.



The artifact was found intact and in excellent condition.