Ancient Objects and Sacred Realms

INTERPRETATIONS OF MISSISSIPPIAN ICONOGRAPHY

Edited by F. Kent Reilly III and James F. Garber
Foreword by Vincas P. Steponaitis

Between AD 900–1600, the native peoples of the Mississippi River Valley and other areas of the Eastern Woodlands of the United States conceived and executed one of the greatest artistic traditions of the Pre-Columbian Americas. Created in the media of copper, shell, stone, clay, and wood, and incised or carved with a complex set of symbols and motifs, this seven-hundred-year-old artistic tradition functioned within a multiethnic landscape centered on communities dominated by earthen mounds and plazas. Previous researchers have referred to this material as the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex (SECC).

This groundbreaking volume brings together ten essays by leading anthropologists, archaeologists, and art historians, who analyze the iconography of Mississippian art in order to reconstruct the ritual activities, cosmological vision, and ideology of these ancient precursors to several groups of contemporary Native Americans. Significantly, the authors correlate archaeological, ethnographic, and art historical data that illustrate the stylistic differences within Mississippian art as well as the numerous changes that occur through time. The research also demonstrates the inadequacy of the SECC label, since Mississippian art is not limited to the Southeast and reflects stylistic changes over time among several linked but distinct religious traditions. The term Mississippian Iconographic Interaction Sphere (MIIS) more adequately describes the corpus of this Mississippian art. Most important, the authors illustrate the overarching nature of the ancient Native American religious system, as a creation unique to the native American cultures of the eastern United States.

KENT REILLY III is Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Center for the Arts and Symbolism of Ancient America at Texas State University in San Marcos. His publications include articles on the Olmec symbol system and several studies of Mississippian Period Native American iconography.

JAMES F. GARBER is Professor of Anthropology at Texas State University in San Marcos. His publications include books and articles on the archaeology of the ancient Maya and on Mesoamerican ritual systems and their role in the emergence of social complexity.

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8. The "Path of Souls": Some Death Imagery in the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex

George E. Lankford

The multiple-mound site at Moundville, Alabama, has produced a large collection of whole ceramic vessels, many of which bear engraved designs which are part of the iconography of the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex. The Moundville appearances of the interregional distribution of SECC images are useful for analysis because they are part of a large local collection which has been well studied and can thus be quantified (Steponaitis 1983). An examination of the Moundville SECC imagery reveals five images that seem to be closely related—hand-and-eye, skull, bone, winged serpent, and raptor (Fig. 8.1).

Of the five motifs, the winged serpent and the hand-and-eye appear most frequently. In Steponaitis's catalog they are listed thirty-three and thirty-one times, respectively. The hand-and-eye motif appears to be the connector for the cluster, appearing in connection with all of the other motifs. On twenty vessels it is found alone; on seven it appears with bones; and on two it has a skull with it. The hand-and-eye motif also appears once with a raptor head and once with a winged serpent, but the raptor is alone in its other eleven showings, and the winged serpent stands alone on its other thirty-two bottles. Finally, the skull and bone appear together on three vessels. Neither the skull nor the bone ever appears alone on the ceramics at Moundville, according to Steponaitis's listing (Steponaitis 1983).

This cluster of five motifs thus is distinctive in the Moundville iconographic corpus, for it has no other associations. Each of the motifs stands alone or in association with one of the other four. They appear together, but they do not appear randomly in conjunction with the many other images of the SECC. That pattern suggests that the five images are related—hand-and-eye, skull, bones, raptor, and winged serpent belong together in a single iconographic complex.

This discrete grouping of five SECC images is the focus of this chapter. Although the evidence is complicated, the argument is simple: the artistic cluster illustrates a complex of beliefs regarding the death of human beings. The mortuary belief complex in question manifests variation in ethnographic details from one tribal group to another, as might be expected, but there is a unifying metaphor which argues for a common core of belief across the Eastern Woodlands and Plains, and probably far beyond that area. That unifying notion is an understanding of the Milky Way as the path on which the souls of the deceased must walk.

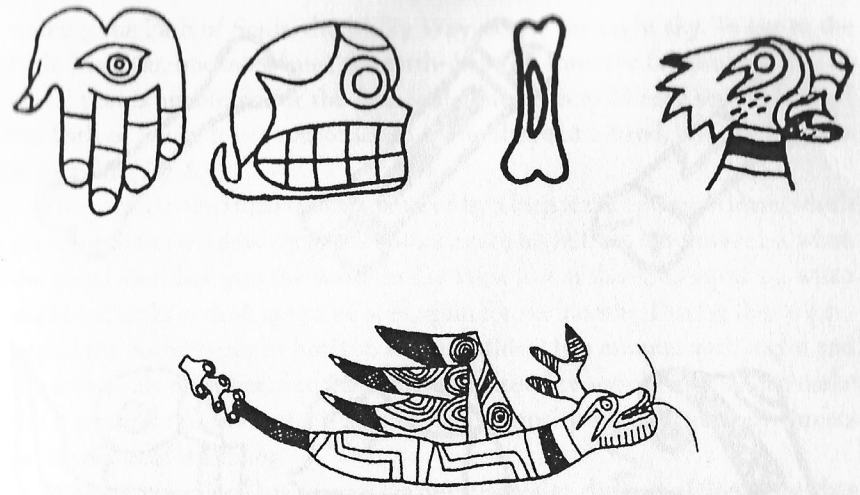

FIGURE 8.1. Examples of the hand-and-eye, skull, bone, raptor, and winged serpent as found on Moundville ceramics (Moore 1905:175, 226, 229, and Moore 1907:350).

Demonstrating this interpretation of the iconographic cluster is a complicated problem, for it involves analyzing ethnographic notes and myth texts from a large geographical area, coupled with ethnoastronomical considerations, to produce a synthetic model of the Path of Souls belief complex. That model must then be matched with the iconographic cluster to offer plausible meanings for the images as they were used in the art of Moundville and other SECC sites. What will be offered here is a generalized model of the Path of Souls complex, with examples of the SECC iconographic images from Moundville as they might have fit into the overall mortuary belief pattern.

The Path of Souls Model

At a crucial point in the dying process, the "free-soul," the one that is self-aware and has an identifiable personality in relation to the deceased, separates from the body, leaving behind the life-soul, a mindless force which can be dangerous to the living, trapped in or near the physical remains. The free-soul remains

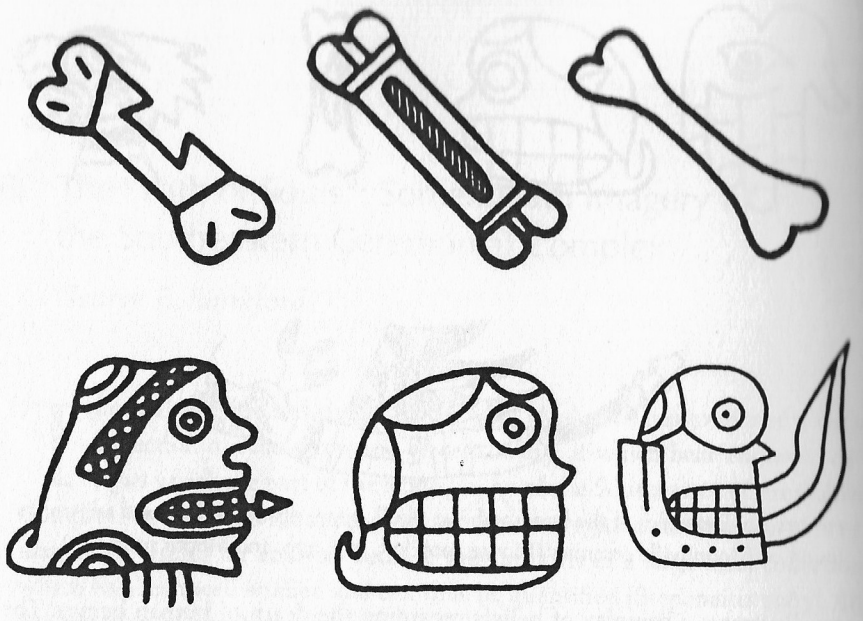

FIGURE 8.2. The dead person in iconography (Phillips and Brown 1978, and Moore 1905).

present in the vicinity for a brief time, then gathers the spirit version of various tools given to it by the living and sets off toward the west on its final journey (Fig. 8.2).

The path leads toward the west, the place of the setting sun, the end of the east-west cosmic passage, the point of the transition from day to night. The journey of the free-soul takes days, four or more. If at any time along the route the free-soul gains the power or will to return to earthly life, then it may retrace its steps and reenter its body. This happens not infrequently to the ill and the powerful who deliberately make spirit journeys—just as they are given up for dead, they awaken. During this period, the living take special care of the body, on the chance that death may not have arrived for the perhaps-deceased. If, however, the free-soul does not wish—or is not able—to return, then the soul reaches the edge of the earth-disk, the land mass which floats upon the water or upon the backs of water creatures.

There may be a camping place for the free-soul on the shore, for there may be a wait until conditions are right to continue the journey. What the free-soul must do to continue the journey to the realm of the dead is to make a terrifying leap. The realm of the dead is far to the south, and it can only be reached by

walking the Path of Souls, the Milky Way, across the night sky. To get to the Path, however, one must leave the earth-disk and enter the celestial realm. The portal that is appointed for the free-soul at death is to be seen on the edge of the Path of Souls. It is a constellation in the shape of a hand, and the portal is in its palm (Fig. 8.3).

The portal in the Hand must be entered by a leap at the optimum time, which is a ten-minute window which occurs once each night from November 29, when the Hand vanishes into the water in the West just at dawn, to April 25, when the Hand sinks at dusk not to be seen again for six months. During that winter period the portal is on the horizon for a breathless few minutes each night, and the free-souls must enter at that time or be lost. Free-souls who do not make the transition remain in the west and can eventually become unhappy threats to the realm of the living.

When the free-soul has entered the celestial realm, the Path of Souls stretches out before it. By most accounts it is a realm much like the earthly one left behind, but some describe it as a river of light with free-souls camped alongside. The free-soul must journey down the Path to the realm of the dead in the far south. The western entrance into the portal and the destination in the south are not inconsistent, because the Path in the west swings to the north, thus causing a serious directional shift. The physical change from east-west to north-south that the Path makes clearly has symbolic value, and it may be that a shift from

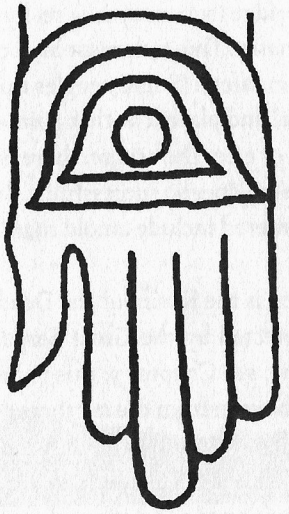

FIGURE 8.3. The Hand Constellation portal in iconography (Moore 1905:134).

FIGURE 8.4. The raptor in Moundville iconography (Moore 1907:390).

east-west to north-south marks a change from a life orientation to a death orientation, and the free-soul thus makes an important psychological shift at the same time.

The journey itself is characterized by some encounters with important beings who live on the Path. While there is disagreement on the number and nature of the encounters and the beings, there is widespread agreement on two features: a bridge and a dog. The free-soul comes to a stream which cannot be forded or swum, because ghosts cannot cross water (see Hall 1976). It must be crossed over, and there is a log bridge (some say it is really a serpent) which can be induced to fall across the chasm. This task must be accomplished by the free-soul, and the bridge traversed in safety. (Some peoples think the bridge is really a way of talking about the portal and place it at that point in their account of the journey). Then, either before or after the bridge, there is a ferocious dog which must be dealt with. If the free-soul does so successfully, then the path lies open. Other beings sometimes encountered include an old man, an old woman, serpents, or a raptor (Fig. 8.4).

The goal of the journey is the Realm of the Dead, which lies at the southern end of the Path. It is protected by the Great Serpent with the red jewel in its forehead (Fig. 8.5)(Scorpio; see Chapter 5, this volume).

The Serpent can only be seen from the northern hemisphere during the summer months, but the soul on the Path can encounter it at any time. If the free-soul knows how to deal with the Serpent and is permitted to pass, then it enters the Realm of the Dead, envisioned as a perfected version of this world, where village life is always pleasant and happy. Some think that the free-souls who have

made a successful journey and are happy in their new home are then available to their living descendants for counsel and power; others think the successful free-soul is then ready for rebirth, possibly *as* one of its descendants.

This is the generalized model of the understanding of the death process in eastern North America. SECC images which are thought to be illustrations of key elements in the process have been inserted in the narrative in order to make clear the argument of this chapter. As has been indicated, the support for this model is lengthy, and so only a brief summary will be offered here.

Who Used the Path of Souls?

In the scientific worldview, the galaxy within which the earth is located can be seen only by looking from our position close to the edge toward the center, and it appears as a streak of intense starlight across the night sky. From a more traditional descriptive view, that galaxy is simply the "Milky Way," a white path across the dark sky. In the worldview of many (perhaps all) of the Native Americans of North America, that distinctive feature of the night sky is identified as the "Path of Souls," and had to do with death.

That identification is virtually universal in the early ethnographic literature of North America. It is recorded from the Ojibwa, Fox, Sauk, Menomini, Miami, Delaware, Shawnee, Powhatan, Cheyenne, Huron, Iroquois, Oglala, Osage, Omaha, Quapaw, Saponi, Caddo, Pawnee, Chickasaw, and Creek, and

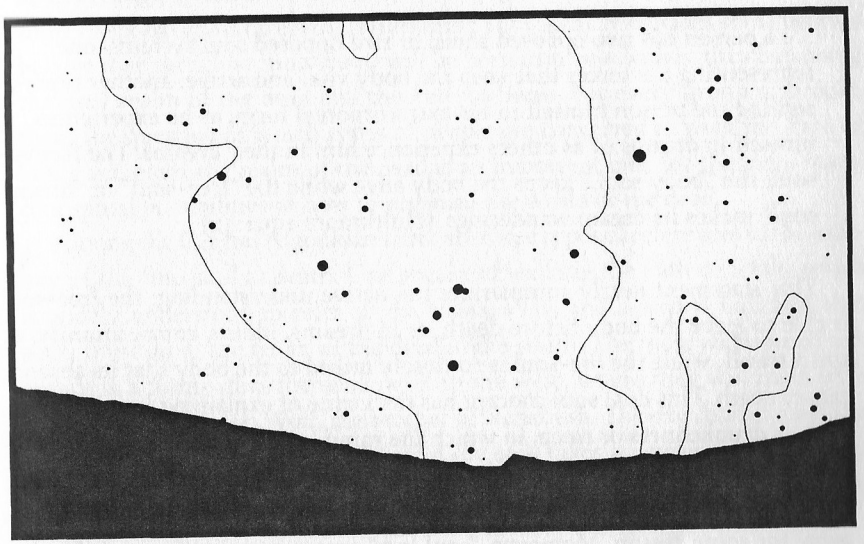

FIGURE 8.5. The Great Serpent (Scorpio) in the southern sky.

the designation extends at least as far south as the Andes (Sullivan 1996:58–75), as far north as Siberia (Eliade 1974:188, 248–251, 295, 466), and as far west as California (see Krupp 1995). It seems certain that this aggregation of peoples, which cuts across geographic and linguistic boundaries, is only a partial listing of Native Americans who considered the Milky Way to be the Path of Souls. The universality of this identification is not news, of course, for it has been a standard bit of ethnographic information for centuries. What may be surprising, however, is the notion advanced in this chapter—that the Path of Souls is not a poetic metaphor, but a literal understanding of the relation of humans to the sky.

The ethnographic information about the process of transformation of a living person into a dead one, sketchy though it often appears in a particular tribal collection, seems remarkably similar from one tribal group to another. When all the information is gathered together, in fact, despite the inevitable ethnic variation, there is a general agreement upon the nature of the death process across the Eastern Woodlands and Plains.

Basic to the vision of death is the concept of souls. Ake Hultkrantz did the classic study of the beliefs in souls among Native Americans (Hultkrantz 1953). He found that while some people (especially Siouan-speakers) believed in as many as four souls, two was the basic number for most of North America. Even where there was testimony in belief in four souls, he determined that the functions were still basically twofold:

> . . . a person has two opposed souls, or two opposed soul systems, one representing the forces that keep the body vital and active, another representing the person himself in his extracorporeal form, as he experiences himself in dreams or as others experience him in their dreams. The former soul, the "body soul," keeps the body alive while the "free-soul" or "dream soul" makes its dream wanderings. (Hultkrantz 1992:32)

This statement neatly summarizes the native understanding: the free-soul is able to leave the body before death, as in dreams, illness, coma, insanity, or spirit travel, while the life-soul is so closely linked to the body that its absence causes death. This dual soul concept has the virtue of explaining human states, such as drunkenness or sleep, in which the mind is absent or less able to function than normally. It also provides an explanation for the recovery of people who had been ill, demented, or in a death-like coma—the free-soul had been away for some reason. Moreover, "soul loss" serves as an explanation for disease and supplies the framework for understanding the tasks and skills of the healers. The location of the two souls in the body apparently differs from group to group, but all seem united in the belief in the dual nature of the human spirit.

Mortuary ritual must therefore include at least two different tasks, taking care of the two different souls. Their fates are not considered to be the same. Referring to Jones's data on the Ojibwa, Landes observed that one soul leaves the dead body and goes to the realm of dead spirits, while the other remains with the body. The life-soul comes and goes from the grave for a time, but the key question is whether the free-soul will return. If it does not, then death has occurred. Thus the "dead" are almost never buried immediately, and most people have a ritually specified time of waiting. Jones spoke of the Ojibwa "habit of keeping the dead four days, in the hope that the soul of the spirit world would return and the person come back to life" (Landes 1968:190–191n; see Hultkrantz 1953:480).

There is an additional complexity with some peoples, in that not everyone was treated the same way after death—that is to say, their fates were not conceived to be the same. The Central Algonkian give some signs that it was true for them. Hultkrantz noted that the Ojibwa on Parry Island "are able to decide the fates of the various souls after death according to the age and occupation of the deceased and the manner in which he met his death. The ego-soul of the wicked sorcerer succumbs on its way to the realm of the dead, but his shadow-soul—the ghost, the wraith—goes on. The unburied and the too early deceased do not reach the realm of the dead, but their ego-soul, like the shadow-soul, becomes a spook-ghost on earth" (Hultkrantz 1953:478). Moreover, some peoples believe that particular individuals will be born into new bodies, thus bypassing the final realm of the dead and the Path of Souls. For every group of people, then, the question of which types of people are conceived to walk the Path of Souls and enter the realm of the dead is an important one, for there are many conceptual possibilities of how to organize the world of the dead.

Among the Central Algonkian there are three types of references to the journey of the free-soul at death. One speaks of walking the Path of Souls, which is widely understood to refer to the Milky Way, and a second indicates that souls must go to the realm of the dead in the south. The most widespread reference is a third—that the souls walk to the west, where they will meet with the first person to die, Wolf, the brother of Nanabush. The one characteristic on which all informants are agreed is that the soul takes a journey, and the journey is described in many variants within a basically uniform structure. Barnouw collected a short version of the mythic form:

Wenebojo buried his brother for four days, but forgot to come back for him, and he died. "I will make a road for the people to travel along when this thing [death] happens to them . . . I am leaving you our dish, and this is what the people will do when this thing happens to them." . . . He went toward the sunset.

As he went along, he made four signs of places. He put four manidog along the way . . . [Otter on right-hand side, owl on left, hills (snakes) on both sides, river with snake/log.] When it's referred to, it's spoken of as a log, but the Indians know it's a snake. The water is swift there. The log bobs up and down all the time. [Then the road forks: a short path, which is bad and forever, and one which continues on] behind the sky, behind the sunset. (Barnouw 1977:17–19)

This mythic description provides the way in which the path was originally created, but it becomes more elaborate when it is described as a set of guidelines for the dead soul from the perspective of the Medicine Lodge. Information from Ontario's Manitou Indians establishes a sequence of events: (1) a dark tunnel and (2) a race across land to (3) Our Grandmother, who directs the soul to (4) four "Grandfathers," who warn about (5) a log bridge over a river; the soul deals with (6) a log which blocks the path, then (7) shoots arrows toward the realm of the dead and follows them in, where it meets (8) Shell Woman or Man (Landes 1968:196–197).

The first step is an important one, because it defines the location of the Path, and, unfortunately, this "tunnel" is not helpful, because it is a unique variant and simply obscures the issue. The Fox indicated their basic agreement on the initial movement of the soul. "Mortals go beyond the setting sun when they die. They stay about the earthly home 4 days, and then go west along a deep, narrow path until they come to a river which flows along with great rapidity" (Jones 1939:16). The westward movement and the river are clear, but Jones was not certain of the connection with the celestial path of souls. He pointed out the importance of the Milky Way in their scheme. The "White River" is a river of stars along which are the dwellings of the manitous, former human beings who were spirit travelers in life and have now become manitous in the sky. That connection seems to bring the soul's journey to the west together with the celestial path of souls. The Sauk version is similar: the soul "follows the Milky Way (Wabise'pu, the White River), until it arrives at the river which all Sauk must cross before entering the Afterworld, which is controlled by Ya'pata, brother of Wi'saka" (Skinner 1923a:36).

This excursion in Central Algonkian cosmology is frustratingly imprecise, a situation that is probably caused by a combination of ethnographers' lack of gathering information and secretiveness on the part of the Medicine Lodge, a powerful religious force in the life of all of these peoples for centuries. The importance of the latter in the death process is indicated by several comments. It is the Medicine Society that makes the journey possible for the dead, for Landes spoke of the soul's "dangerous path to its final haven, one beset by evils insurmountable *without midé aid*" (Landes 1968:189–190). Hoffman, too, suggested a crucial role: "There is another body among the Ojibwa termed the Ghost society . . . [which initiates a substitute into the Midewiwin, then celebrates] a feast of the dead, designed to release his 'shadow' and to permit it to depart to the land of mysteries, or the place of the setting sun" (Hoffman 1896:67–68). There seems to be a general belief that the soul is provided with a guide (Smith 1995:58), and the Medicine Lodge is probably the source of that guidance. The Lodge's major role in this process suggests that there are reasons for the general lack of knowledge about the details of the route and the spiritual methods of making the journey successful.

These clues, sparse though they may be, at least permit the conclusion that the Central Algonkian saw the process of dying as including a journey of the soul from the body to the west, where the soul waits until the proper time for departure from the Middle World to the Milky Way, a journey along that path (among manitous) to a river which must be crossed to pass into the realm of the dead. The neighboring Miamis believed in a Path of Souls which included the log bridge and a dog, while the Shawnee understanding included the four-day wait, a rising and falling sky which could crush the unwary, the Milky Way path, a fork in the path, the log bridge across the river, and four dogs which attack souls on the bridge (Kinietz 1938:52–53; Schutz 1975:95–97).

Thus the Path of Souls journey seems to be a general understanding among the various groups of the Central Algonkian. An interesting check on this material is the ethnographic information from the Delaware, or the Lenape, who were originally from the Atlantic Coast. Their importance is suggested by the fact that other Algonkian-speaking peoples considered them the oldest tribe of them all. The ethnographic data from the Lenape generally support the model and suggest that the traditional image of the Path of Souls is ancient, rather than just a recent development among the Central Algonkian peoples. As has been seen to be the case among other Algonkian, there are also two different explanations of the outcome of the journey: "Sun and everything else goes toward the west, even the dead when they die, [and] the Land of the Spirits lies in the

Southwest, in the country of good hunting." But "once the [free soul] had departed from the body, it traveled along the Milky Way and eventually joined the Creator in the twelfth heaven" (Kraft 1986:189, 192). Even though the "twelfth heaven" is a new specification, the journey is apparently much the same, for there are several references to the bridge and the dogs which guard it, and even a mention of the fork in the Path.

On the northeastern side of the Central Algonkian cluster, the Iroquois Six Nations and the Huron appear to fit into the same Path of Souls pattern. Since their cosmogonic myths have different beginnings, in that the Iroquoians tell of the Woman Who Fell through the Hole in the Sky to the water world, where her daughter gave birth to the Twins who then created the earth by means of the Earth-Diver and various creative exploits, the Iroquoian group might be expected to have a different view of the fate of the dead, but it seems remarkably close to the Algonkian understanding. Accounts from 1610 on make it clear that the Huron believed in the Milky Way as the Path of Souls, despite the journey to the west, and their vision of the path was characterized by the standard Algonkian motifs of the Brain-Taker, the river, the log bridge, and the dog (Thwaites 1896–1901:vol. 1, 263, 287, 289; vol. 10, 147). It seems clear that the Huron, who are otherwise different from their neighbors, both Algonkian and Iroquoian, in their emphasis on the Feast of the Dead (Tooker 1964:134n), participated in the standard Path of Souls model.

The Iroquois nations, proper, apparently believed much the same. A nineteenth-century report indicated the basic model, which included a gulf and a "great dog" which had to be crossed on a "small pole" (Beauchamp 1976 [1922]:158–159). Tooker confirms that this image of the Path is celestial, both for the Huron and the Iroquois, pointing out that the Iroquois believe both that the journey to the village of the dead is to the west and that "the souls travel along the Milky Way to the land of the dead" (Tooker 1964:140).

The cosmological ideas of the Siouan-speaking peoples do not contradict Algonkian cosmology, and the myths and a few of the stated beliefs suggest that the Siouans are aware of the traditions of the Algonkian and that they share them in different degrees from group to group. Despite some differences between Algonkian and Siouan cosmological visions, the Oglala understanding of the journey of the soul is similar to that of the Algonkian peoples. Black Elk explained that the souls of "bad people" wander about on earth, but that others ascend to Wakan Tanka (Brown 1953:11). The ritual symbol of this journey is a tripod, which indicates that the above world and the south are the destination of the soul (Brown 1953:17n). Other details confirm the similarity to the general model:

> It is held by the Sioux that the released soul travels southward along the "Spirit Path" (the Milky Way) until it comes to a place where the way divides. Here an old woman, called *Maya owichapaha*, sits; "She who pushes them over the bank," who judges the souls; the worthy ones she allows to travel on the path which goes to the right, but the unworthy she "pushes over the bank," to the left. Those who go to the right attain union with Wakan-Tanka, but the ones who go to the left must remain in a conditional state until they become sufficiently purified. (Brown 1953:29n)

The Lakota data thus show basic agreement with the general understanding of the Path of Souls—the Path is on the Milky Way, they go from north to south, where they will pass beneath the earth-disk, and they encounter an Old Woman who makes the judgment whether they are permitted to pass (Powers 1975:52–53, 93, 191–192).

The Omaha and Osage also participated in the general model. According to the standard ethnographic information for the Omaha,

> The Milky Way was regarded as a path made by the spirits of men as they passed to the realm of the dead . . .
>
> It was said that at the forks of the path of the dead (the Milky Way) there sat an old man wrapped in a buffalo robe, and when the spirits of the dead passed along he turned the steps of the good and peaceable people toward the short path which led directly to the abode of their relatives, but allowed the contumacious to take the long path, over which they wearily traveled. It is probable that the difference in the treatment believed to be accorded the good and the bad indicates white influence as does also the story that there is a log across a chasm over which the dead must pass; the good experience no difficulty, but the bad in crossing find the log so unstable that they sometimes fall off and are lost. The simple and ancient belief seems to have been that the Milky Way is the path of the dead. (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911:588, 590)

The Omaha were reported as identifying the four winds as psychopomps, coming to escort the soul on its journey (Hultkrantz 1953:184). The Omaha believed that communication can be achieved with the departed souls, who are thus "able to come near their kindred on the earth and to lend their assistance." Moreover, they believed in levels of the sky: "It was said that there are seven spirit worlds, each higher than the one next preceding, and that after people have lived for a time in one world they die to that world and pass on to the one next

above." They did not, however, believe in reincarnation, and they denied multiple souls (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911:588–589). The Osage defined "wa-çi-da u-zhon-ge" as both "harvest path" and the Milky Way (La Flesche 1932:186). Their closely related neighbors, the Quapaw, have left only the record of their belief that "the Milky Way is called the Road of the Ghosts" (Dorsey 1895:130).

The Siouan-speaking peoples apparently experienced a major prehistoric separation, because a significant group of them were found living on the Atlantic coast at the time of contact (Swanton 1946:23–24, 30). That separation, presumably over centuries, could well have led to significant deviation in belief systems. It is therefore of great interest to find indications of the same model of beliefs about the dead existing among the eastern Siouans. William Byrd reported that an "orator" at a Saponi mortuary ritual told him of their beliefs about the journey of the soul which included the same basic elements: the Path to the south, where a power reigns over the South, the fork in the road, an Old Man who makes the judgment, the Old Woman who receives the malefactors, and ultimate reincarnation (Swanton 1946:750, 752).

The Winnebago, from their unusual position as Chiwere Siouan speakers living in the midst of the Central Algonkian peoples, might be expected to share in elements of the journey of the dead from both Algonkian and Siouans, and so it appears to be. Radin reported that the Winnebago testified to a fairly abstract theology centered around Earthmaker and focused on life in this world as lived by souls reincarnated many times. The recycling process is so strong that Radin noted, "In the myth of the journey of the soul to spirit land the ghost is not entirely a spirit until the old woman whom he meets brains him, thus, by destroying the seat of consciousness, depriving him of all corporeality and carnal desires. The ghost then becomes a spirit, in some cases of the same type as the true spirits" (Radin 1923:266–268).

Other than to note that the Plains Siouans formed a special group in their common belief in four souls, Hultkrantz was fairly dismissive of the Siouan deviation from the two-soul model, on the grounds that the Siouan four souls were functionally equivalent (Hultkrantz 1953:116–118). The evidence from the Mandan and Hidatsa is confusing, for there was disagreement on the fate of the soul. The dispute was over the question of a celestial location of the realm of the dead. As Bushnell noted, "Some of the inhabitants of the Mandan Villages are said not to believe all these particulars, and suppose that after death they will live in the sun or in a certain star" (Bushnell 1920:70).

Among the Hidatsa the disagreement was even more focused, because one whole village was said to believe in a celestial model different from that of their neighbors: "Awatixa village, however, thought they came from the sky

(not emergence, like the other Hidatsa). 'Sometimes a person would say that he came from above when he was born and that, when he died, he would return to the land above. Then the people would say that he talked just like an Awatixa' " (Bowers 1963:127). They believed that "on death they returned to the sky," and at least some people believed in a special treatment or fate of the soul of a religious specialist: "[W]hen a prominent medicine man died, his spirit father would come to meet him and escort him to the village of his spirit people" (Bowers 1963:174). Further, in this apparent amalgamation of two different understandings of the fate of souls is a clue of a special adaptation of the Path of Souls model. According to Bowers, both the Mandan and the Hidatsa believed that the souls of children lived under hills until they were born again, when they had to take a miniature version of the journey:

> Each hill was believed to be an earth lodge in which the babies lived and were cared for by an old man . . . According to native beliefs, children desiring to leave the hill and be born, must crawl across a ditch within this earth lodge on an ash pole. If they succeeded in reaching the opposite side without falling into the ditch, they would be born into the tribe soon afterward. (Bowers 1963:126)

A few final clues support the hypothesis of a special adaptation of the model. In the mythology of the Mandan and Hidatsa, there appears to be a double origin myth, an emergence/migration legend and the Sacred Arrows myth in which there were thirteen lodges in the sky. In the Grandson myth, the boy came from the sky and returned there at the end of his story, accompanied by six clans which became constellations. There thus appears to be a complicated special development in the belief system of the Village Siouans.

The Caddoan-speaking Pawnee, especially the Skidi, are generally recognized as the most astronomically oriented people north of Mexico. Their mythology is characterized by clear astronomical references, and their fundamental set of myths and rituals is focused on the conflict and joining of Morning and Evening Star. This sets them apart from the other peoples whose deathlore has been examined thus far. For those groups, their astronomical interests are encoded in their myths in a few obvious ways, with many more subtle references. The Pawnee tend to be blatant in their concern for the celestial world and its relations to the world of humans, although specific identification of stars is far from simple or conclusive.

The most thorough analysis of the ethnographic information about the Pawnee ethnoastronomy has been done by Von Del Chamberlain, who has ventured

an identification of most of the stars and constellations mentioned in the material (Chamberlain 1982). Because of the extensive elaboration of astronomical lore in the Pawnee data, the question of their participation in the Path of Souls model is as complicated as it is important. The basic interpretive choice is whether to see the Pawnee ethnoastronomy as a completely different system from the general understanding in the eastern Woodlands, or whether it is a special development which embodies that general ethnoastronomy. Because there are clues which suggest the Path of Souls model, the position taken here is the latter—that the eastern Path of Souls was known to the Pawnee and was incorporated in their more elaborate astronomical vision.

As seems to be so frequently the case, there are two understandings of the Milky Way, and probably the progress of the soul after death, as well.

> The Milky Way is called by the Pawnees "The Pathway of Departed Spirits," because after death the spirit passes on this pathway to the Southern Star, the abiding place of the dead. A star that stands in the north first receives the spirit and sends it onward to the Southern Star. This is the sacred belief, known to the priests, but the common people say that the Milky Way is the dust of the Buffalo (the Spirit-Buffalo). The Southern Star is not always seen. At a certain time in the summer, just at dusk, it rises like fire for a moment, and then disappears. When the star rises thus, it means that a great man will die. (Chamberlain 1982:21n)

Priestly lore thus affirmed that the Milky Way was the path of souls, that the entrance is a star in the north, and that the soul goes to a specific star in the south, which is seen in the summer. Moreover, embedded in the myth of the conflict between the Evening and Morning Stars is the information that Evening Star's major supporters were the four direction powers (Bear, Panther, Wildcat, and Wolf), and that "there was also a great serpent group of stars" (Murie 1914 and 1981, quoted in Chamberlain 1982:58). These astronomical details sound very much like the Path of Souls model and suggest closer examination. There are hints in the Pawnee mortuary lore that there were different outcomes of the death process for different people. Dorsey and Murie left this note:

> At death, the soul goes off the way a cloud comes up and disappears, or the way a wind blows up and dies down. The souls of people who have been seen by the Star of Disease and who have as a result died of illness are taken by the South Star to his home in the south. The disposition of all other souls is determined by the Morning Star, who decides whether they shall be restored to life, taken with him to the east, or sent to the south. And it is the Morning Star's importance in this matter that caused the Skidi to bury their dead with the head toward the east. (Dorsey and Murie 1940:102, in Chamberlain 1982:91)

This additional bit of information adds Morning Star as a power who makes determinations of the direction each soul should take, a role similar to that of the Old Man or Old Woman in other versions of the Path of Souls. All those who died of illness went to the south, and others were directed there by Morning Star. Thus the Milky Way was a major path for a significant group of Pawnee souls; there was a portal toward the northern end which provided access to the souls, and a South Star was found at the southern end of the Path. This general layout was confirmed by Fletcher when she was examining the role of the winds in the death process: According to her, the wind of the spirits "takes the spirits of the dead from the north, from some star in the north to which the dead immediately pass from the earth, and blows or drives the ghosts along the way, to the star at the southern end of the path . . . The Milky Way is the path taken by the spirits as they pass along, driven by the wind which starts at the north, to the star in the south, at the end of the way" (Fletcher 1903:13). The winds here have a special role in regard to the souls, but some Dhegiha Siouans regarded the Four Winds as psychopomps, so this reference may be simply the Pawnee version of that same belief. Fletcher spoke of this passage of souls down the Path in such a general way that it appears she thought of this as the major way in which souls were treated in the Pawnee afterlife. She also added the fact that the Pawnee recognize the fork in the Path, as did Murie: "There are two paths in the Milky Way. One of these is for warriors killed in battle, the other for those who die of disease or in bed" (Murie 1981:42). Their destination was "the star in the south where the spirits of the dead dwell."

It seems reasonable to conclude that the Pawnee, despite extensive elaboration of their ethnoastronomy and the accompanying mythology, participated in the general Path of Souls model for their understanding of the fate of souls. The Milky Way was the path that the souls took, either led or driven by the winds, to the guardian star in the south.

For other Caddoan speakers there is sparse information. For the Caddo, there is at least a suggestive note from the eighteenth century. Espinosa wrote in 1746:

> They say that as soon as the spirits leave the bodies, they journey at once to a place in the west, then ascend into the air, and pass near by the place of the Great Chief, whom they call Caddi Ayo. From here they go to stop at a

house, situated in the south, which, they say, is the house of Death. (Bolton 1987:146)

Even though there is no explicit mention of the Milky Way, it is an appropriate description of the Path of Souls. It mentions the journey to the west, the ascent into the celestial sphere, the continuation of the journey past the dwelling of the Great Spirit, and arrival at the realm of the dead, which is located in the south. Further, the burial ritual for important persons, such as the grand *xinesi*, included a speech to the dead man instructing him to "go peacefully to 'that other house' to join the other dead, and take up their life." At the grave, volleys of arrows were shot into the air to "arouse the keeper of the house 'on the other side'" (Newcomb 1961:301–302). It thus appears that at least some of the Caddoan peoples—the Skidi Pawnee and the Caddo, for certain—participated in the Path of Souls model, despite the fact that all of them were believers in the emergence myth, a theoretical stance that separates them from almost all other Eastern Woodlands peoples and would appear to be in opposition to a celestial worldview concerning death.

In the Southeast the unusual mixture of peoples, their many languages (even though Muskhogean was the primary family, there were many linguistic isolates and isolated representatives of other families) and the early date at which they began reacting to European influences have left the cultural traditions difficult to interpret. The Cherokee, as might be expected of the Southeastern representatives of the Iroquoian peoples, were participants in the Path of Souls mythology. Hagar identified two "dog stars," Sirius and Antares, as guards of the two "opposite points of the sky, where the Milky Way touches the horizon." The souls cross a torrent on a narrow pole, and some fall off. The souls go east, then west, following the Milky Way trail to a fork at which a dog must be fed. If they are successful at passing that dog, then they follow the trail to a second dog, which must also be fed. If a soul does not have enough food to feed both of the dogs, then it is trapped between them, a clear warning to the living to make sure they provide ample burial offerings of food for the journey (Hagar 1906:354–356).

Among the Muskhogean-speaking peoples there are only a few hints of participation in the Path of Souls model. The Creek name for the Milky Way was *poya fik-tcalk innini*, "the spirits' road" (Swanton 1928a:479). Swanton's summaries of the Creek view of the journey are brief:

> All accounts agree that after the soul had been induced to leave the neighborhood of his living relatives he traveled westward, passed under the sky and proceeded upward upon it to the land of The One Above or the Breath Holder. The name "spirits' road" given to the milky way shows that this was regarded as the trail upon which souls ascended. (Swanton 1928a:256)

Swanton later added to this spare account, noting that some spirits did not make the transition to the sky and remained in the west as malevolent ghosts, and that unavenged spirits haunted the family members until they did their duty (Swanton 1946:776). The Milky Way as the Path of Souls seems clear, but there is little of the detail of the general model. The dog is also found in Southeastern lore, but in an unusual way. The Natchez and the Cherokee both tell a myth of the origin of the Milky Way in which a dog spilled maize flour across the sky, creating the path (Swanton 1928a:479; Mooney 1900:259). Although the texts were not collected, the linguistic clues (Milky Way = "white dog's road") suggest that the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Yuchi also knew the myth (Byington 1915; Munro and Willmond 1994; Speck 1909). This story, which seems to be almost at the level of a tale for children, does enshrine a dog in connection with the Path, but whether the connection to the model is real or illusory is impossible to judge.

Of the river, the log bridge, the fork, the Old Woman, and the snake there is no mention. If the Southeastern peoples participated fully in the Path of Souls model at some time in the past, it has left little imprint on the ethnographic record. That is disappointing, since the SECC images from Moundville which are the focus of this chapter were almost certainly created by some Muskhogean group. Nonetheless, the clues indicate Southeastern belief in some form of the Path of Souls model, and it is not too great a leap to use that general model to interpret the icons.

Icons of the Soul

A survey of the SECC imagery reveals two icons in particular that suggest the dead—the skull and bone. Some of the skulls are characterized by a "tongue" or an arrow which protrudes from the mouth, and that same tongue appears a few times in Spiro images as emanating from the center of a broken bone. The importance of the mortuary complex in Native American culture makes it a reasonable leap from the dead bones to the identity of the tongue and arrow as icons of the soul (Fig. 8.6).

It seems likely that the tongue shape at Spiro represents soul-stuff, because it is believed by some of the Eastern Woodlands peoples that the life-soul, and perhaps the free-soul in some cases, resides in bones. Thus the taboos surrounding hunters' treatment of the slain bodies of the quarry—if the bones are bro-

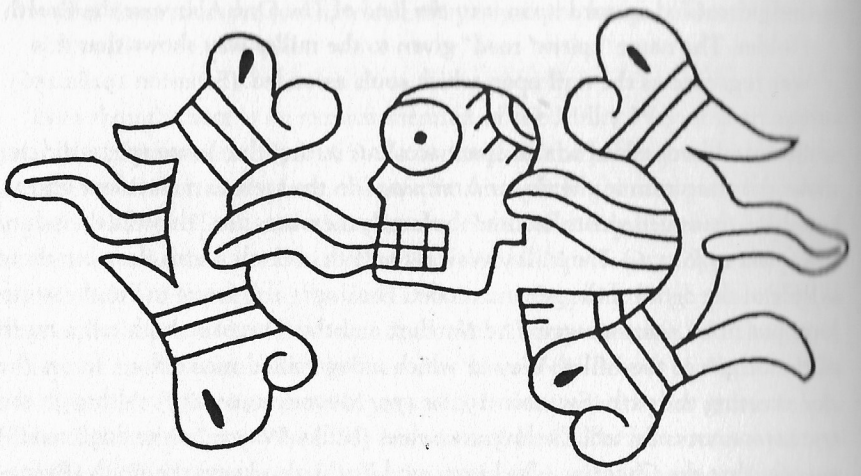

FIGURE 8.6. A skull and two bones, with "tongues," from Spiro (adapted from Phillips and Brown 1978:Pl. 57).

ken, the animals cannot be resuscitated or reborn. If the tongue shape represents soul-stuff in the broken-bone image, then it may be assumed to mean the same when it emerges from the mouth of the skull, and the arrow point appears to be an allomorph of the same thing. Myths of various peoples speak of heroic figures who are able to fly through the air or up to the sky by transforming themselves into feathers or arrows (motif Magic Arrow Flight:D1092, D1526.1 [Thompson 1956:Note 145a]). With the soul-stuff emanating from a skull or bone, the specification would be the soul of a deceased human, rather than the free soul of a religious specialist on an out-of-body journey. In these images the basic meaning is probably the obvious one: the soul is released from the physical body. Within that general field of mortuary symbolism, the precise meaning in the iconography is not clear: the skull and bone may be simply indicators of death (the cultural mortuary context), or signs of the Realm of the Dead or the Path to it (place indicators). Either would work well in this context. The skull has long been interpreted as a death sign, of course, even leading the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex to be called a "Death Cult" many years ago (Howard 1968:7; Muller 1989:11). This interpretation based on the Path of Souls model differs only in that it is more specific—the reference is to the journey of the soul or the end of it, and the skull and bone are part of the larger conceptual model of the Path of Souls.

How Does the Soul Get on the Path?

While the evidence just summarized makes it clear that most peoples of eastern North America believed that the free soul walked the celestial Path of Souls, it does not answer the problem of how the journey to the West, an almost equally prevalent belief, correlates with the Path. Where and how does the soul make the transition from the western land path to the Milky Way? There are various clues which suggest a solution to the problem.

Just off the edge of the Milky Way there is a readily identifiable constellation within which is the portal into the sky world. That constellation, part of what is known in the celestial system derived from Greek mythology as Orion, is the Hand. Inside that constellation lies a galaxy (Messier 42) visible as a fuzzy star that is understood to be a hole in the sky, a portal. Unlike some of the other Native American constellations, such as the Path of Souls and the Great Serpent, there is a restricted quality to the Hand identification. The major focus appears to be Siouan, and not even all of the Siouan peoples. It is found clearly among the Lakota, Mandan, Hidatsa, and Crow, with suggestive references from the Kansas and Arapaho. A brief survey of the material will clarify the nature of this shared constellation (Fig. 8.7).

In the Mandan version of the "Lodge-boy and Thrown-away" myth, there is a mythological charter for the Hand constellation. Spring-boy was captured by the chief of the sky village, Long Arm, but his brother Lodge-boy rescued him in the form of a spider. As they fled to the hole in the sky through which they would escape to earth,

> Long Arm went and placed his hand over the hole by which they passed through so as to catch them. Spring-boy made a motion with the hatchet as if to cut it off at the wrist and said, "This second time your hand has committed a crime, and it shall be a sign to the people on earth." So it is today that we see the hand in the heavens. The white people call it Orion. The belt is where they cut across the wrist, the thumb and fingers also show; they are hanging down like a hand. "The hand star" it is called.
>
> The boys went back to the place where they had left the arrows sticking in the ground, pulled out the arrows and went home to their mother. She told them that the people in the sky were like birds, they could fly about as they pleased. Since the opening was made in the heavens they may come down to earth. If a person lives well on earth his spirit takes flight to the skies and is able to come back again and be reborn, but if he does evil he will wander about on earth and never leave it for the skies. A baby born

with a slit in the ear at the place where earrings are hung is such a reborn child from the people in the skies. (Beckwith 1930:41f)

This myth is connected to the Mandan *okipa*, a ceremony with similarities to the Sun Dance of other Plains tribes, and in that ritual the Hand is present in trophy form.

> The chief celebrant at these ceremonies has usually killed an enemy. He cuts off the hand, brings it home, skins it, removing the bones, and fills it with sand. After it dries he empties out the sand and wears it at the back of the neck, where it flaps up and down as he dances. It represents Long Arm's hand. (Beckwith 1930:43)

In this practice, the hand has several layers of meaning, including punishment for evil intentions, but the one of significance for this inquiry is the identification of the hand with the attempt to use it to close the portal into the sky and the labeling of that portal as a specific constellation. A Hidatsa note on the Sun Dance provides another link between the rituals and belief complexes: "The sacred objects needed for the dance included a buffalo skull, *an enemy's left hand*, a scalp, and one whole rabbitskin to be used for a crown" (Lowie 1919:421; emphasis added).

The Hidatsa also knew both the Hand constellation and the Long Arm mythic episode, as might be expected from their historic proximity to the Mandan. It is of greater significance, perhaps, that the Crow, who split off from the Hidatsa several centuries ago and adopted a quite different lifestyle, also know the myth and its constellation. As "Ben," one of Goodman's informants, explained,

> A constellation that is prominent in the stars is the Hand Star. It is usually in the east. The Crows used to look at that constellation. It is most prominent in the evening or early morning, so they looked at that star and when the hand was tilted to the left then they say that the birds will be coming soon. But in the evening the hand is straight up. Then, they will say that the birds will be leaving. So that's what they used the Hand Star for.
>
> The Hand Star is the lower half of Orion. To the Greeks, Orion looked like a man. But when the Crows saw it, it was actually a left hand with all the fingers stretched out. So that's what it looked like to the Crows and that's what they called it, they called it Ihkawaleische [Hand Star]. (McCleary 1997:21; see also text on 22)

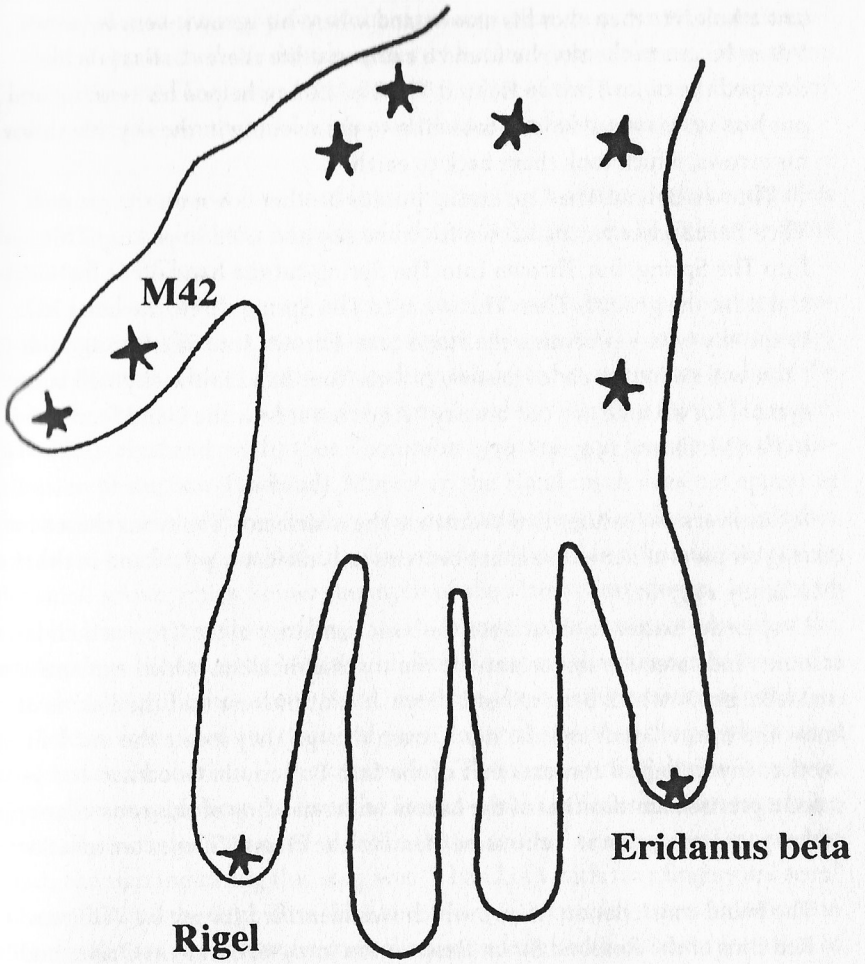

FIGURE 8.7. The Hand as it appears in the sky adjacent to the Milky Way. After Goodman 1992.

The Crow mythological explanation for the Hand is curious, in that there are alternate versions of the event. Here are three summaries. "In the first version, as told by Peter, an elder from Pryor, there is a close resemblance to the story as told by the Hidatsa" (McCleary 1997:51). The second is a bit altered:

> He thought about it and he figured that it must have been Baaáalichke [One with a Long Arm] who took [his brother]. He looked to the sky and

saw a hole. He then shot his arrows and where his arrows went he went. When he got to the sky, he found a camp and life there . . . Baaáalichke dropped the twin. Thrown Behind The Tipi Lining helped his twin up and put him on his shoulder and took him to the opening in the sky. He threw his arrows, which took them back to earth.

Thrown Behind The Tipi Lining put his brother down on the ground. Then Baaáalichke reached down from the sky and tried to pick up Thrown Into The Spring, but Thrown Into The Spring cut the hand off at the wrist and it hit the ground. Then Thrown Into The Spring threw the hand back to the sky where it became the Hand Star. Thrown Into The Spring said, "You will no longer eat or destroy others. Your hand in the sky will be a symbol for all time of your cruelty." And that is how the Hand Star came to be. (McCleary 1997:56–57)

A third version features Red Woman as the malefactor. The twins chased her, cutting off parts of her with a sharp beaver's tail and leaving the hand in the sky (McCleary 1997:61).

Despite the existence of variants, the basic similarity of the Crow and Hidatsa accounts indicates the importance of the mythic incident, which explains the constellation in which both tribes believe. It is of interest that the Lakota also know the constellation and the myth, even though they locate the incident in another mythological context, that of the Star Boy myth. Goodman has provided a precise identification of the Lakota understanding of this constellation's makeup, ensuring that it is the same Hand as the Plains Village constellation:

The Hand constellation (*nape*), which was identified for me by William Red Bird of the Rosebud Sioux Reservation in 1986, occurs in Orion, and represents the hand that the Chief lost when he lost his arm. The belt of Orion is the wrist. The Sword of Orion is the thumb. Rigel makes the index finger. The star for the little finger is the northernmost star in Eridanus, *Eridanus beta*. (Goodman 1992:219)

Goodman's informants connected the Hand constellation with the myth of the recovery of a chief's arm which was ripped off by the Thunderers, which is interpreted as dealing with the necessity for blood sacrifice in order to restore fertility to the world.

[T]he Lakota regard the disappearance from the night sky of The Hand constellation as a divine signal of impending loss of fertility . . . The reappearance in the night sky of the *nape* constellation occurred in autumn. It then approached the meridian shortly before winter solstice. Thus, at one time, the *nape* announced the imminent onset of the two great divisions of the year: the summer and winter solstices. (Goodman 1992:219–220)

This observation of the function of the Hand as a seasonal marker parallels that of the Crow informants, who said that it "indicated the beginning and end of winter" (McCleary 1997:21).

The incident of the cutting off of the chief's hand is curious for several reasons. First, it is clearly a free-floating myth, independent of its contemporary mythic context. This is demonstrated by the fact that it appears in both the Twins (Lodge-boy and Thrown-away) myth and the Star Boy myth (the sequel to the Star-Husband myth). (See Thompson 1956:126–130 for notes on the distribution of the Star-Husband). Moreover, the Hand myth does *not* appear in the majority of the texts of either of those famous myth cycles. It is, in other words, an incident of limited distribution that is found in different contexts in the small group which knows the myth of the Hand constellation. In light of this situation, it is not surprising that its interpretation varies even within the small group. Whereas the Mandan/Hidatsa/Crow emphasis seems to be on the calendrical significance of the Hand, rooted in the creative activity of the hero, the Lakota focus is on the theme of sacrifice for the good of the people, a view appropriate for the Sun Dance connection. That same sacrificial view, however, appears in a suggestive note from the Siouan-speaking Kansas, whose mourning ceremony includes a "song of sacrifice to the deities." On the ritual mnemonic chart, the sign indicating this song was "a hand of which four fingers are seen" (Dorsey 1885:676–677). This brief note is only a step away from an indication that the Kansas also knew the constellation and the sacrificial interpretation of the myth.

As if to confirm the point of the diversity in the mythic charter for the Hand constellation, the Arapaho have provided evidence of their belief. A description of their unique ritual object, the Sacred Wheel, provides a list of celestial phenomena symbolized upon it:

After the Wheel was nicely shaped, this man in the usual method, painted it, and placed the Four-Old-Men at the four cardinal points. Not only were these Old-Men being located on the Wheel, but also the morning star (cross); a collection of stars sitting together, perhaps the Pleiades; the evening star (Lone-Star); chain of stars, seven buffalo bulls; *five stars called a hand*, and a chain of stars, which is the lance; a circular group of seven stars

overhead, called the "old-camp"; the sun, moon, and Milky Way. (Dorsey 1903:205; italics added)

The Arapaho explanation of the hand is a brief reference to a heroic myth: "That small group of stars early at night, with a row of stars along the side represents the hand of Little-Star with his lance" (Dorsey 1903:228).

The Hand constellation thus appears to have been known to at least a small group of tribes in the Plains—Mandan, Hidatsa, Crow, Kansas, Arapaho, Lakota. Connected to the constellation was a myth explaining its origin, basically a heroic cutting off of the hand of a sky power who blocked a portal in the sky, but the mythic incident has found its home in different locations in the tribal mythologies. Although this ethnographic information now seems restricted to this small Plains group, it is possible that the Hand belief complex was more widely known in Mississippian times, or that, even without the mythic charter, the image of the hand-and-eye as constellation and sky portal was widely known to people who later lost the information. Such a possibility seems more reasonable if the Hand complex was associated with a widespread ritual which has become extinct in the Southeast. That link may be provided by an indication of a connection with the Plains ritual of the Sun Dance/*okipa*.

At the beginning of the twentieth century there was a concerted effort to record the ethnographic details of the Sun Dance as practiced by various tribes. The project culminated in Spier's attempt to do a comparative study of them all. He assessed the wide diversity of purpose, organization, ritual details, and beliefs involved in the Sun Dance, and he concluded that a lowest-common-denominator definition is a simple one: "[T]he essential performance is simply erecting a pole within an encircling structure, before which the votaries dance" (Spier 1921:491). He quoted Brackenridge's 1811 observation of a Siouan Sun Dance as a good summary: "a space, about twenty feet in diameter, enclosed with poles, with a post in the middle, painted red, and at the same distance, a buffalo head raised upon a little mound of earth" (Spier 1921:493). Additional details make it clear that this pole and circle are cosmological in nature, not just a utilitarian dance ground. The center pole is forked on top, it is painted (red or red-and-white striped), it has a Thunderbird "nest" placed at the fork, along with buffalo hide or skull, and it is raised in a ritual manner by magic or a mythical bird (Spier 1921:468–470; see Dorsey 1905:87 for a Ponca description). Although Spier did not discuss the details, since he was doing trait-list comparison, it is not difficult to recognize in the building of the Sun Dance lodge the reenactment of the cosmogony. That surmise is supported by statements of purpose such as this from the Cheyenne: the Sun Dance is to "reanimate the earth

and its life," an elegant description of the nature of ritual repetition of archetypes (Spier 1921:503). To assert this interpretation is to take a leap, of course, for even in recent years a researcher could comment that "very little is known of the ceremony's symbolism and its interpretation by religious specialists within each tribe: no adequate studies of these things have ever been made" (Liberty 1980:164).

Spier was eager to arrive at some acceptable hypothesis about the origin and diffusion of the Sun Dance. He was aware that the ritual was not restricted just to those who identified it as the Sun Dance, for he pointed to the similarities between it and the Omaha *hedewatci*, the Mandan *okipa*, the Pawnee four-pole ceremony, and the Osage mourning ceremony (all tribes without a Sun Dance, strictly defined). After comparing and analyzing the various traits as they were distributed across the Plains, he concluded that the tradition probably began with the Village Tribes (Hidatsa and Arikara), Cheyenne, and Arapaho, and then spread to the Oglala, after which it diffused to the rest of the Plains tribes (Spier 1921:480). His conclusions are not the last word on the subject, of course, for some of his assumptions bear reexamination, but it is provocative to note the overlap between Spier's core Sun Dance group and the group which has preserved memory of the Hand constellation.

The Pawnee also believed in a portal into the sky to gain access to the Milky Way, but its identity is not certain. Fletcher's comments, quoted above, shed no light on the nature of the portal. Chamberlain, however, suggested that Polaris was meant in the references:

> Fletcher (1903:13), Murie (1981:42), and Dorsey (1904a:57) all referred to a star at the north end of the Milky Way which guarded the pathway, received the spirits of the dead, and started them on their journey toward the south . . . The literature on the star at the north end of the Milky Way is somewhat confused, with statements which seem to suggest that the North Star (Polaris) is the one that received the spirits of the dead. Actually, this is a good possibility; Polaris is not too far away from the Milky Way, and Skidi mythology portrays the North Star as the son of the South Star, who received the spirits at the end of their journey. It seems quite logical to conceive of the son (the chief of all stars) as receiving the spirits, and then sending them on to his own father. (Chamberlain 1982:113)

Chamberlain's view may well be the correct identification of the northern portal, but the ambiguity of the materials makes that conclusion only a hypothesis. Evidence for the Orion location of the portal is missing, for there is

no allusion to a Hand constellation in Pawnee lore, and Chamberlain offers another identification for Orion, the three "Deer" stars in a row. That constellation could just as well be the Hyades, however—an identification which would leave Orion completely without identity in the Pawnee lore, and thus available for reassignment to an unmentioned "Hand." Polaris may be what was intended by the Pawnee, as Chamberlain suggests, but the Hand portal cannot be ruled out on the present evidence.

All this leads to a grand hypothesis which can only be stated here, since to follow it would take this exploration too far afield. An ancient prehistoric tradition involved a cosmogonic ritual which incorporated the creation of the axis mundi, whether solar or stellar, and the recognition of movement between cosmic levels (see Chapter 2, this volume, for a survey of the cosmic structure). This crystallized by Mississippian times into a ritual occurring outside of the normal architectural structures—the building of the microcosm was an essential part of the ritual, so old architecture would not serve. Such structures would look like circles of posts surrounding a center post, similar to the so-called "Woodhenge" at Cahokia. Such structures could not be torn down after use, logically, for that would be an act destructive of the cosmos, nor could they be recycled, so they would be left to the protection of the cosmic powers—precisely the treatment which is accorded to the Sun Dance lodges to the present day. This ritual/belief complex moved into the Plains by migration and by trade/communication, finding a core group in the Village tribes and their neighbors (see Schlesier 1994 for a summary of the close relationships of these peoples over the last millennium). Time, diffusion, and adaptation took their toll, and the result is the wide diversity in Sun Dance and related rituals, including the myths and celestial knowledge. Time also took its toll in the extinction of the lore surrounding the cosmogonic traditions, so that only a small group remembered the Hand constellation and its role. One of the major losses appears to be the awareness that the Hand also contains a portal, one that could be available to Sun Dancers at any time, but which would be available to all during part of the year—when the Hand touches the western horizon.

If this grand hypothesis has any merit, it would point to the existence of a regional oicotype, a particular type of cosmogonic ritual tied to a particular area. That argument has a corollary, in that the dynamics of mythological transformations suggest a prior "raw material" from which the Hand complex might be derived. From this viewpoint, it is instructive to note that the Hand is not completely unknown elsewhere. There are only two clues, but they suggest ancient Algonkian knowledge of the celestial meaning for the Hand. In her study of Ojibwa artistic designs, Coleman found the hand design used both in a cosmological pattern and by itself on peace pipes. Although one informant interpreted it as representing the hand of the gambler, it is likely that she had derived her understanding from its appearance on the side of a drum used in the gambling game, and there are cosmic uses and meanings of the drum which might indicate a more profound early meaning of the sign. "Other informants referred to the design as the hand of Kijé manito, representing universal power. It was also used on legal documents signifying the honor of the tribe. The hand strengthened an agreement or treaty, and consequently was used on the peace pipe" (Fig. 8.8) (Coleman 1947:12–13; cf. 86).

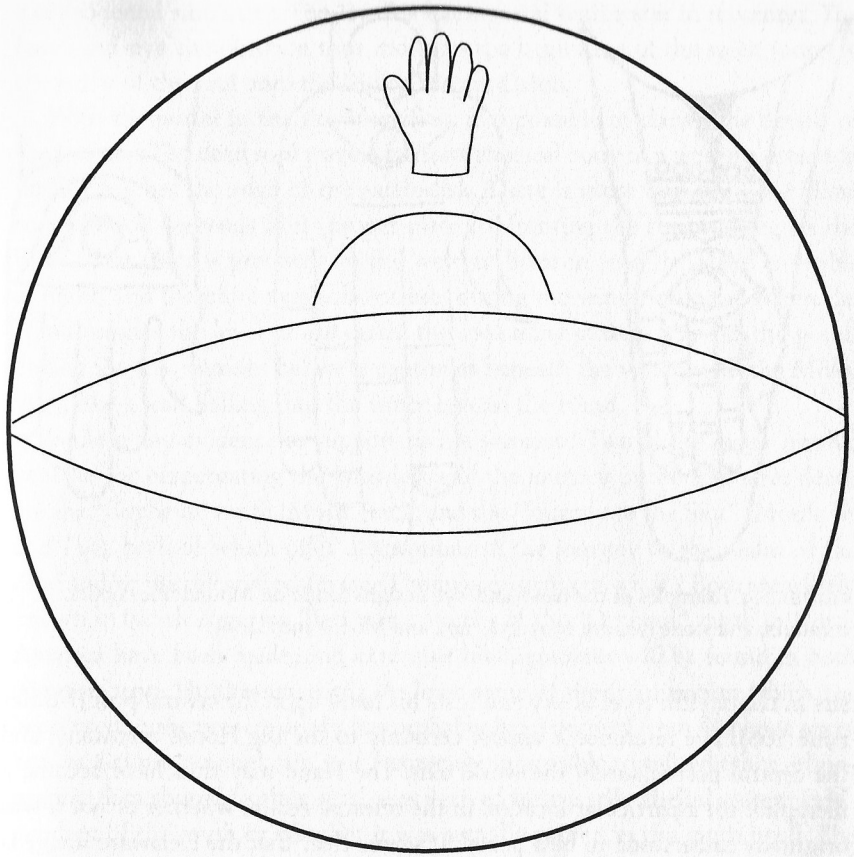

FIGURE 8.8. The Hand of Kijé manito stands in the sky above his dwelling. After Coleman 1947.

This Central Algonkian hand of the Great Spirit probably should be considered the same as the hand of the Creator, who, according to the Delaware,

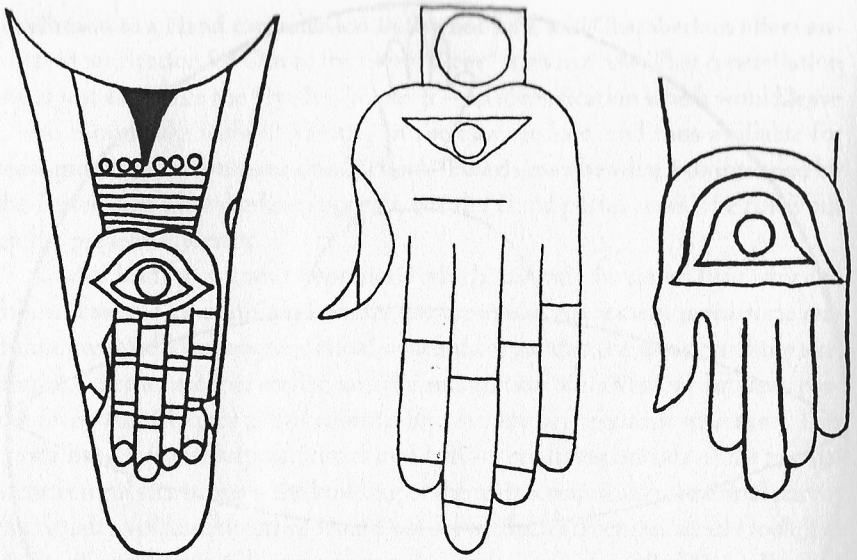

FIGURE 8.9. Examples of the hand-and-eye designs found on Moundville copper, ceramics, and stone (Moore 1905:134, 149, and Moore 1907:400).

sits in the twelfth level of sky and rests his hand upon the central post (Müller 1968:168). The reference is almost certainly to the Big House ceremony, and the central post is surely the world axis. The Hand may thus have become a metaphor for a particular location in the celestial realm, whether or not it was originally understood to be a portal. It seems clear that the Delaware image is cognate to the Hand pictured in Fig. 8.8, which is presented as a known iconographic object in the Ojibwa world; both are connected with the Great Spirit, who lives on the Milky Way. The hand is thus a celestial sign, and all that is missing is an indication that it is in fact a visible phenomenon in the sky. It is not a great leap to see this Eastern Woodlands Hand as an ancestor of the Hand which distilled out into the Mississippian Hand constellation, became known as a portal, and was eventually enshrined as the hand-and-eye design of the SECC. In a further elaboration, Robert Hall has pointed out the hand/portal connection in regard to face-painting and other manifestations (Fig. 8.9) (Hall 1997:126–127).

The hand-and-eye refers to the major portal for the passage of the dead from the earth to the Path of Souls. Iconographically, the hole in the sky is indicated as a slit being pulled apart, and the fact that it is celestial is frequently elaborated by the inclusion of a star circle or dot. The resulting double sign thus gives the appearance of being an eye, but the interpretation offered here argues that it is

a coincidental similarity. The "eye" is but a portal with a star in its center. The hand-and-eye combination thus indicates the beginning of the spirit journey, the entry of the soul onto the Milky Way at Orion.

With the portal in the sky identified, it is possible to clarify the details of the journey. The dead soul travels from its physical body in a western direction until it reaches the edge of the earth-disk. There it must wait until the Hand constellation descends to its proper place confronting the soul waiting on the bank. That place is precisely on the western horizon, and the Hand is visible at night, and therefore available for use, during the winter months. When the Hand reaches the level of the earth, the soul must make a leap for the portal during the few minutes before it continues beneath the water, with the Milky Way, like a wall, falling into the water behind the Hand.

Is there any evidence to support such a scenario? Two of the major mythic vehicles for perpetuating the knowledge of the journey of the soul after death are the "Orpheus" myth (Motif F81.1) and the "Journey to the Sky" (Motifs Fo and F15), both of which offer descriptions of the journey to the realm of the dead and/or the celestial realm (see Thompson 1956:337, 330ff). Both are widely known in North America. Two major studies of the "Orpheus" myth in North America have been made, and extensive bibliographies will be found in both (Gayton 1935; Hultkrantz 1956). At least some of the information which has been used in the present study has probably been derived from Orpheus texts, but, as Gayton pointed out, it is frequently impossible to tell whether ethnographic data about life after death was derived from a tribal belief system independent of the myth or whether it was actually rooted in the myth itself. The "Journey to the Sky," the other widespread myth which tells of the passage to the realm of the dead, is very close to the Orpheus texts. In fact, both Gayton and Hultkrantz spoke of their difficulties in separating the two myths, particularly when both forms were recorded from the same ethnic group. In many cases the only difference between the two is the motivation in "Orpheus" of seeking to recover the dead person, with the motif of the broken taboo. In other words, the Journey to the Sky and Orpheus are in many cases virtually the same myth, the distinction depending solely upon the soul-recovery episode.

It should be noted that attempting to use these two myths as sources of Mississippian-era details about the Path of Souls is difficult, because the Orpheus myth was used in historic times as the charter myth of the late nineteenth century Ghost Dance, which accounts for its distribution with minimal variation as far as the Pacific coast. Despite differences in their approaches, however, the three major scholars who have studied the North American Orpheus tra-

dition all wrestled with the connection of the myth with the Ghost Dance and the evidence of its antiquity. Brumbaugh was the scholar who best articulated their conclusion, that the Orpheus myth as used in historic times was not a new creation, but an example of reuse of an old tradition (Gayton 1935, Hultkrantz 1957, and Brumbaugh 1995). Combined with the older dating argued in the Path of Souls hypothesis, Brumbaugh's thesis of the historic role of the myth as the "core text" of the revitalization movement provides both an impressive history of the myth and an explanation for the appearance of unusual similarity in the preserved form of the Orpheus myth—it had been refreshed in historic times, possibly suppressing differences or even oicotypes. The reuse of Orpheus in recent history thus explains the wide distribution and Gayton's "uniformity of plot," but it does not impeach the story as an ancient myth embodying a mortuary complex of beliefs in the Eastern Woodlands.

In many of the texts of both the myths is found a curious motif, referred to as "The Rising and Falling Sky" (Motif F791). It tells of the death of one or more of the travelers caused by the rising and falling sky. In one case, that of the Chitimacha text, more than twenty travelers set out on the journey, but all of them except six were killed in trying to pass through the dangerous conjunction of the earth and the sky (Swanton 1911:358). It is an important motif for consideration from the viewpoint of the Path of Souls, because it is the focus of a problem at hand. The motif of the rising and falling sky, found from the Plains Siouans to the Alabamas in "The Journey to the Sky," appears to be the mythic way of talking about this crucial point on the journey of the soul. From December to April, the Milky Way can be seen nightly to drop below the western horizon. As it falls, it assumes a basically horizontal position, and it thus could be described as a "falling sky." Native recognition of that phenomenon would square the simplistic metaphor with their astronomical knowledge that the celestial world does not end at the western edge of the world but continues down below it. The soul on its journey must gain access to the Milky Way by leaping through the portal in the western sky, but the window of opportunity each night is only a few minutes. If the soul leaps at the wrong moment, the result will be to miss the portal and to fall into the Beneath World or be condemned to remain in the west as a soul which did not make it onto the Path of Souls for the rest of the journey. The known distribution of this myth is spotty, but it seems certain that the coverage was more thorough than myth collection would indicate: Kaska, Tahltan, Ponca, Fox, Seneca, Navaho, Chitimacha, Alabama, Koasati, Yuchi, Cherokee, Choctaw, and Shawnee (Fig. 8.10) (see Dorsey 1904a; Swanton 1929; Thompson 1956:275–276).

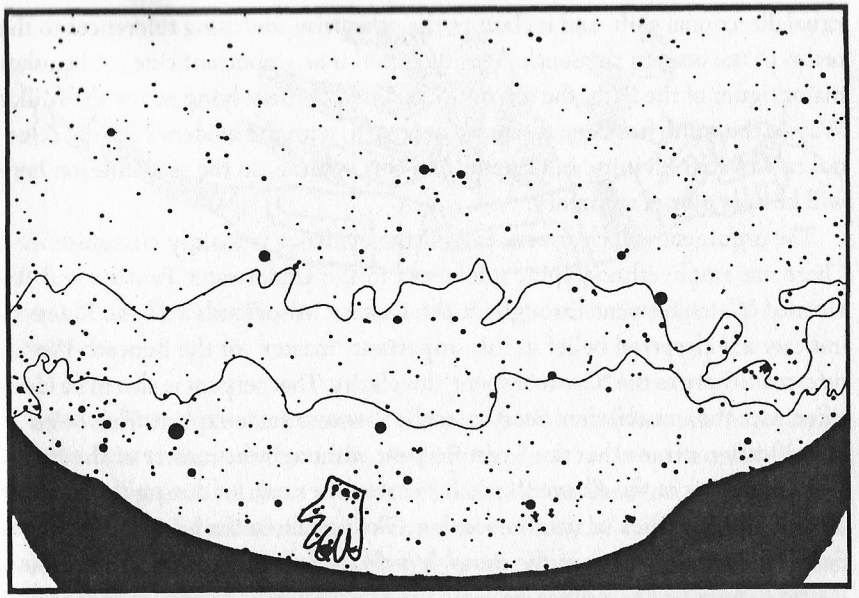

FIGURE 8.10. Falling sky. The Milky Way sinks into the west. Left of center is the Hand portal (Orion) just before it is available for the leap of souls through it onto the Path.

Where Does the Soul Go on the Path?

At the end of the Path, far to the south, lies the realm of the dead, which is related both to Wolf and to the Great Serpent. In Central Algonkian cosmology, as has been seen, the Wolf is usually located in the west, which is the direction of the soul's first leg of the journey, but there are also many references to the south as the preferred direction. How can the apparently conflicting testimony about the west and the south as the directions of the realm of the dead be explained? The answer lies in the apparent behavior of the Milky Way. The portion of the Milky Way that contains the portal in the west—the Hand—swings toward the north in the sky, so that the leg of the journey actually *on* the Path is no longer oriented east and west, but north and south (Fig. 8.11).

This direction change is noted in the ceremonial procedures of the Central Algonkian. When the Midé Society shifted to the Ghost Society for mortuary rites, the members physically changed location from an east-west long lodge to one constructed with a north-south axis. "The earth 'lodge' or Sky 'nest' became oriented north and south instead of the Life's east and west" (Landes 1968:189–190). The peculiar movement of the Milky Way is a neat explanation of this

ritual directional shift, and it clarifies the otherwise confusing references to the realm of the dead in the *south*. That direction is an important clue to the other major figure of the Path, the serpent. The Great Serpent lying across the Milky Way in the south has been discussed at length, with the evidence for the celestial role of that divinity, in Chapter 5 in this volume, so the presentation here will be only a brief summary.

The argument is a clear one, even if the evidence is mainly circumstantial. There are ample ethnographic references to the Underwater Panther and the Horned Water Serpent throughout the Eastern Woodlands and the Plains to indicate a widespread belief in this important "master" of the Beneath World, referred to here as the "Great Serpent" for clarity. That serpent is also to be identified with the constellation Scorpio, as the Pawnees made explicit. That celestial identification means that the Great Serpent, although the master of the Below World, appears in the Above World for part of the year, for during the summer months Scorpio "flies" across the southern sky just above the horizon. The Great Serpent, though master of the Below World, is thus sometimes in the Above World, where he has a different role. The Great Serpent (Scorpio) with its red jewel or eye (Antares) is the guardian and master of the realm of the dead at the southern end of the Path of Souls. The curious unnatural curved form of the iconographic snake, especially as seen at Moundville, may be another clue that it is the constellation Scorpio which is the basic image for this serpent, for it resembles the shape of the constellation itself (Fig. 8.12).

The Great Serpent, able to live in two worlds, has a dual role. As master of the Beneath World and the other Powers which inhabit that world, the Great

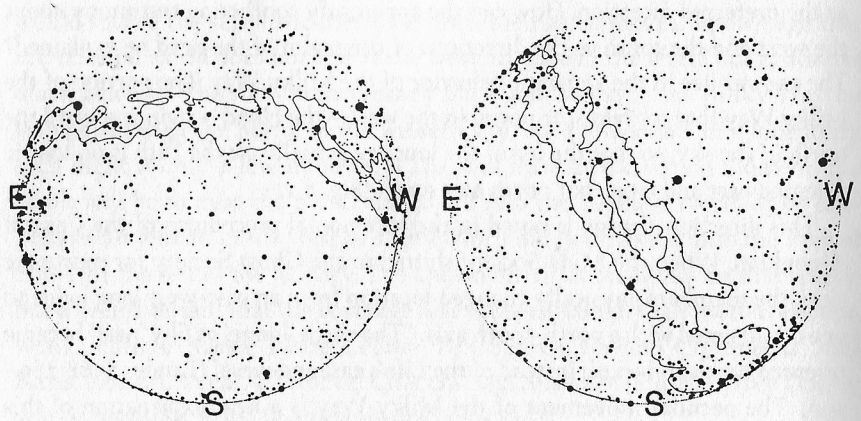

FIGURE 8.11. Two views of the Milky Way: east/west and north/south.

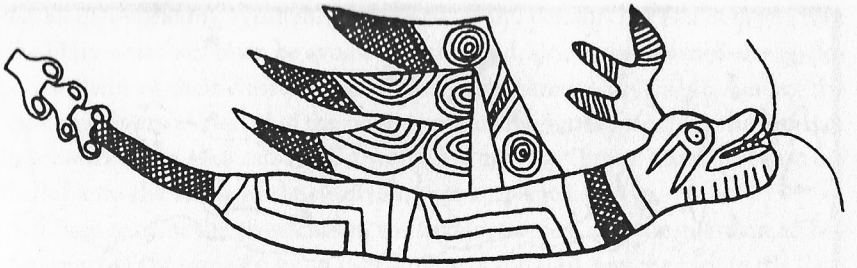

FIGURE 8.12. The Great Serpent in celestial mode on Moundville ceramics (Moore 1905:229).

Serpent is known as a major source of power, both for healers and for sorcerers. As the figure who rises from the water in the summer into the southern sky, the Great Serpent becomes the ruler of the realm of the dead, guardian of the southern end of the Path of Souls. This dual role may be connected to a prominent Mesoamerican belief that celestial figures have dual identities, one when they are seen in the Above World and another when they are below the horizon, in the Beneath World; some scholars believe that this belief was prevalent north of Mesoamerica as well (see, for example, Hall 1997:133–137). Iconographically the shift to the mortuary aspect of the Great Serpent is accomplished by the simple addition of a wing or feathers to the serpent's image. At Moundville, the prevalence of the winged serpent on the ceramics fits well with the circumscribed set of mortuary symbols which is the focus of this chapter.

What Adventures Occur on the Path?

There are other figures who are envisioned as having a role in the soul's journey on the Path. As befits the heroic style of myths which tell of men who dare to attempt to travel to the realm of the dead (especially Orpheus and Journey to the Sky), there are adventures and tests which the travelers must face, presumably reflecting the beliefs regarding the tasks of the soul on its journey. Many of them have been mentioned in the survey of the literature on the Path of Souls. Such figures as the Serpent/log, the Dog or dogs, the four manitous, the Old Woman, and the Old Man have been encountered several times in the survey.

Unfortunately, there is no standard set of figures. It seems a safe conclusion that the adventures on the Path will tend to be regionalized or even tribe-specific, since those adventures will need to fit the larger mythic corpus and the other Powers who are believed locally to play a role in the cosmic structure. The list of figures to be found along the Path is therefore one which contains more figures than are to be found in any single tribe's lore. What may be anticipated is

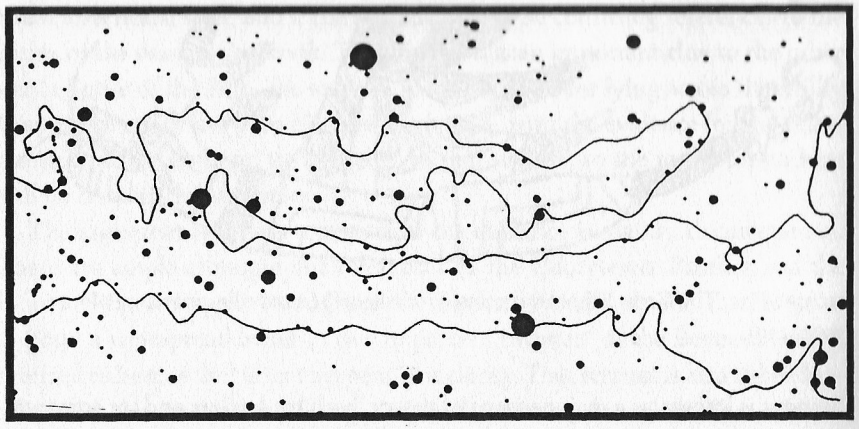

FIGURE 8.13. The Fork in the Path. Deneb in Cygnus is the bright star right at the split.

that the figures can be grouped into oicotypes or regional clusters which reflect diffusion within a coherent geographical or cultural set.

The conceptual focus is the decision about the soul which is made at some point along the path. It is possible that some of the souls will not be permitted to complete the journey to the realm of the dead. One way in which this idea is symbolized is the image of a fork in the Path of Souls. At that point a choice must be made, one path or the other, and the two are not quite the same. According to Barnouw's Algonkian informants, one path is short, and it does not go to the realm of the dead. It is a bad path, and it is a permanent diversion. The other continues on "behind the sky, behind the sunset" (Barnouw 1977:18). The identification of a bad path, or one which can be considered a punishment for some souls, sounds like Christian influence, and it seems impossible to determine whether this ethical interpretation of the fork is pre-contact or later. The fact of the fork, however, seems undeniable—the Milky Way does split, and there is one path which leads to an open gap before the main path can be rejoined. The other path simply continues on without hiatus. There is even a bright star—Deneb—that is placed right at the fork in the path and thus could serve as a marker for the decision point or a figure who does the deciding (Fig. 8.13).

It may be Deneb which is interpreted by a frightening image fairly widespread in Eastern Woodlands mythology. In considering the possibility of memory loss for the dead souls, Hultkrantz discussed "a guard on the road to the realm of the dead [who] deprives the recently deceased person who passes by of his brain by taking it out or smashing it." He noted that this idea occurs among the Penobscot, Huron, Iroquois, Ojibwa, Menomini, Sauk, and Fox and

the Siouan-speaking Winnebago. "The Sauk and perhaps the Fox believed that 'the brain-smasher' must be avoided by the dead, since with his measure he deprives them of their existence altogether" (Hultkrantz 1953:215). Among the Sauk this figure is located at the point at which the soul approaches the log over the chasm; if the soul can avoid a watchdog and the "Brain Taker," it can cross the log into the abode of the dead (Skinner 1923a:36).

In this account the river/chasm, the bridge, the dog, and the guardian all become part of the same event on the journey of the soul, and the fork in the Path of Souls appears to be the location for this expanded version of the event. Thus the site for the log bridge becomes situated at a reasonable point on the Milky Way—the gap (or "river") which blocks the path on one of the forks.

Iconographically, there are images that may be expressions of the various figures to be found at the fork on the Path, such as statues of kneeling men and women, dog effigies, quadripartite effigy ceramics, and so on. Such possible correspondences with figures on the Path should be explored, but this chapter is not the place for that extended examination. Since the focus of this current study is on the cluster of images from Moundville ceramics, however, it seems reasonable to explore one such regionalized figure. The image in question is the remaining one of the five originally identified—the Raptor (Fig. 8.14).

What is peculiar about the Moundville Raptor is its participation in this collection of mortuary iconography. The Raptor, whether modeled after an eagle or a hawk, does not seem to have the same associations at other sites, such as Etowah, where a chief was even buried in raptorial regalia. At Moundville, how-

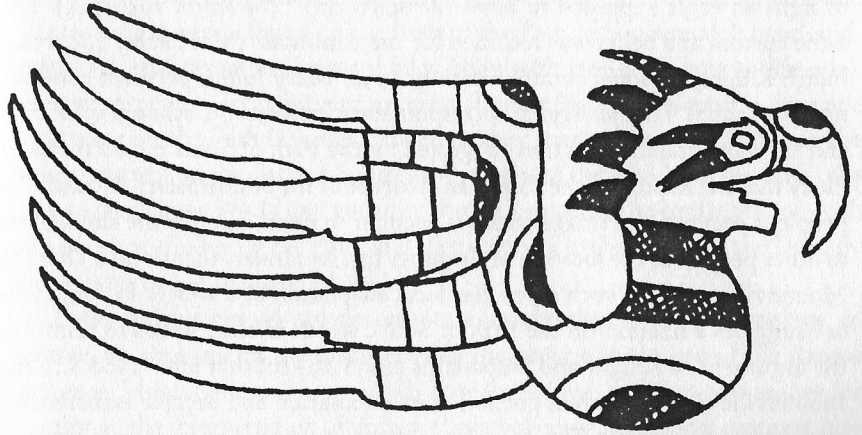

FIGURE 8.14. A special example of the raptor as seen on Moundville pottery (Moore 1905:206).

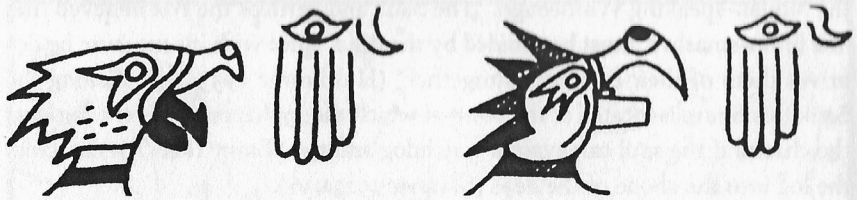

FIGURE 8.15. The raptor in conjunction with the Hand and Eye on Moundville ceramics (Moore 1907:351).

ever, the Raptor seems to be part of the Path of Souls group: it is found on the same type of pottery, it is located in graves with other Path engraved images, and it appears in a single instance on the same Moundville Engraved variety Hemphill bottle with the hand-and-eye (Fig. 8.15). In another example, the Raptor's head is attached to the same wing which, in the case of the Great Serpent, has been identified as a locative element indicating the celestial realm (Fig. 8.14) (see Chapter 5, this volume).

The Moundville usage of the Raptor seems to place it in the Path of Souls complex, and the most likely role for it would be as one of the adventures on the Path, since there is no other available slot in the literature surveyed. Astoundingly, there is a reference to an eagle in the role of the antagonist against the soul. It comes only from the Alabamas and the Seminoles, two groups who are major candidates for descendants of the prehistoric inhabitants of Moundville. The Alabamas specified that an eagle was encountered by the soul on the Path: "[A] knife is said to have been put into the hand of an Alabama Indian with which to fight an eagle supposed to beset the spirit trail" (Swanton 1946:724). The same custom and belief was recorded for the Seminoles (MacCauley 1887:522; Judith Knight, personal communication, 1996; Mary Johns, personal communication, 1997). That satisfying correspondence between the ethnographic data and the iconographic situation suggested by the Path of Souls model makes it likely that the Raptor on the Path is an oicotype of the Southeastern Moundville people, a regionalized image which is peculiar to them, but fills the slot known to other peoples as the location of the other figures already mentioned. That the Moundvillians made such a peculiar local adaptation of a widely known symbol suggests a fixation on the Path of Souls, which in turn serves to reinforce the argument of Knight and Steponaitis (1998:19–20) that after 1300 A.D. the Moundville site lost a great portion of its population and became transformed into a mortuary center. The use during that time period of a ceramic array of more than sixty vessels with mortuary iconography (counting Great Serpent, raptor, and the hand-and-eye groups) may be a reflection of that new cultural role for Moundville.

A further support for the identification is suggested by the nature of the constellation of Cygnus. The cross shape of the constellation, with Deneb as its alpha star, has led in Greek astronomy to the identification of it with a bird. It is a satisfying coincidental possibility that the people of Moundville saw it the same way, but with the identity of an eagle rather than a swan.

Summary

With that brief look at one of the possible adventures on the Path, together with its artistic representation, this interpretation of the five mortuary symbols in the Moundville cluster comes to its conclusion. It has been argued here that the Path of Souls astronomical vision was linked with a set of beliefs about the nature of death and the outcome of the transformation of the soul to the realm of the dead. Further, this survey, while not exhaustive, offers substantial evidence that the Path of Souls model was widely known in eastern North America. That model suggests that there was in the Eastern Woodlands and Plains a set of beliefs which interpreted some celestial phenomena of the night sky as the geography of the journey of the dead to their new home. Given the presumed antiquity of the belief complex, as suggested by the wide geographic area in which the complex can still be traced, the development of the details of the beliefs into oicotypal groups is an outcome to be expected.

One such group, the Moundville mortuary cluster, was identified by its statistical importance and its isolation from other iconographic images. Local meanings for the five symbols—skull, bone, hand-and-eye, winged serpent, and Raptor—have been offered on the basis of the Path of Souls model: hand-and-eye = celestial portal in Orion, skull = body with free-soul, bone = life-soul, winged serpent = Great Serpent in celestial mode (Scorpio), Raptor = the eagle adversary on the Path (Cygnus). Together they mark important points on the soul's journey on the Path of Souls—the release of the soul from the body, the leap to the Above World and entrance through a portal, the confrontation with the adversary/judge on the Path, and the reception to the Realm of the Dead by the Master of the Beneath World.

These conclusions do not necessitate a universality of those meanings, of course, because one of the discoveries in the process is the use of the Raptor image at Moundville in a way which appears unique, and that fact argues for caution in the interpretation of universal symbols used in regional contexts. Nor does this mortuary complex hypothesis suggest that all of the SECC imagery is

to be interpreted within this framework, even at Moundville. It is enough to conclude that some of these images—perhaps only these five—were part of the understanding of death in some places in the prehistoric Southeast.

While it is beyond the purpose of this chapter to indicate a time depth for the Path of Souls, it is surely significant that Krupp has surveyed the quite similar understanding of the Milky Way among Siberian groups and various tribes in California (Krupp 1995). That distribution, when added to the eastern occurrences discussed in this chapter, suggests an impressive time-depth. Furthermore, archaeological examination of various Eastern Woodland sites has revealed a long-term focus on death, a cultural concern which can be traced back at least as far as the Archaic. If the Path of Souls belief complex is part of the ideology which belongs with the physical remains of the ancient mortuary patterns, then the native peoples of North America have been familiar with a culturally important part of the skyscape—the Path of Souls—for millennia.