

by Eric Powell

BIRDMAN and FRIENDS

Never dismiss a design as just a design. Here's why!

No one knows exactly who he is, but Birdman has haunted archaeologists for decades. A half-man, half-falcon, Birdman is sometimes seen carrying a severed head.

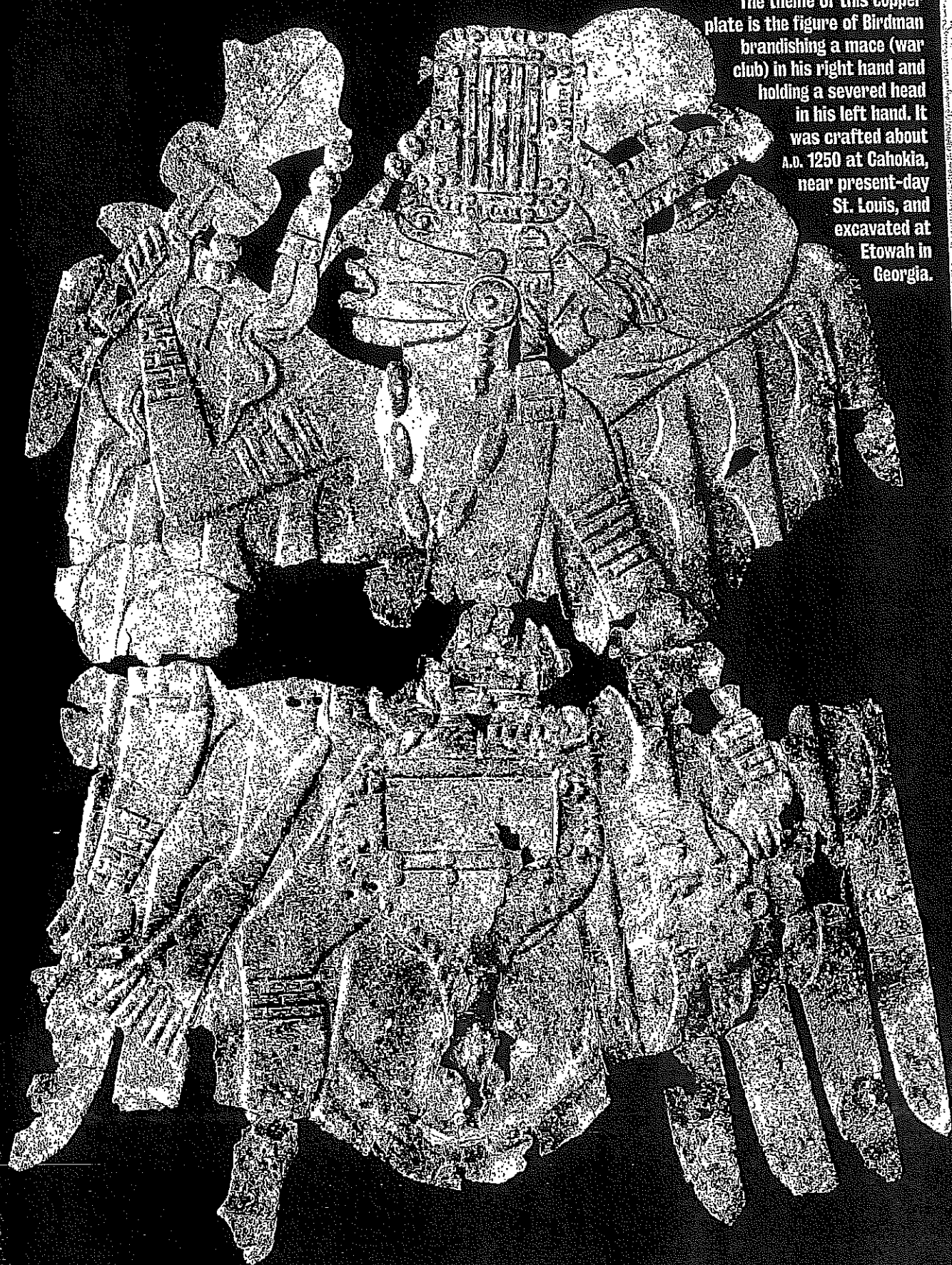
Yet, as fantastic as he is, Birdman is not a figment of any archaeologist's imagination. Artifacts decorated with depictions of the

mythical figure have been found at dozens of archaeological sites across the southeastern United States. The most famous Birdman was found on a copper plate excavated at the Etowah site, Georgia, in 1884. Discovered by archaeologist John Rogan, the plate shows a fierce birdlike man with a fork shape surround



A reconstruction of daily life at Etowah Indian Mounds

The theme of this copper plate is the figure of Birdman brandishing a mace (war club) in his right hand and holding a severed head in his left hand. It was crafted about A.D. 1250 at Cahokia, near present-day St. Louis, and excavated at Etowah in Georgia.



his mouth. Some archaeologists think the fork shape is actually based on the dark patch around a peregrine falcon's eye. Like other Birdmen, the one from Etowah carries a severed head in his hand: (See photo page 25.) The head is that of Birdman's father, which Birdman retrieved after his father was decapitated in mortal combat. The combat symbolizes the struggle of life over death, and Birdman will bring his father back to life.

Birdman was part of a mysterious religion, or group of related religions, that played an important role in the lives of a people we call the Mississippians. They lived from around A.D. 900 to 1600 throughout the eastern United States, from Wisconsin to Florida, and as far west as Oklahoma.

If Symbols Could Talk

The Mississippians created huge mounds, the



About 100 years ago, locals digging in a mound near Mount Sterling, Kentucky, uncovered a stone that measured 3.7" by 3.2" and had carvings on one side. Today, the stone is known as the Gaitskill Stone Tablet, and many believe that the carvings represent a water spirit.

highest of which were 100 feet tall. Sometimes these mounds were built in the middle of large towns and had houses as well as ritual buildings on top of them. The Mississippians also grew corn and had a sophisticated grasp of astronomy.

Although there are important differences among the various Mississippian groups, they all seem to have shared certain symbols. Bird is just one. Other symbols—and they may be characters from important myths—include snakemen, underwater panthers, horned

serpents, woodpeckers, spiders, insects, a

even hands with crosses or eyes in middle of them. These symbols are often found carved into shell jewelry. They also adorned pottery, pipes, and other pieces of Mississippian art.

Together, the symbols tell a story. What that is is not yet clear, as the Mississippians left behind no written records. Therefore, to interpret the mysterious symbols, scholars study the stories of present-day descendants of the Mississippians. One symbol that occurs repeatedly is a cross within a circle.



Recovered at the Etowah site, these seated male and female marble figurines would have been venerated as the founding ancestors of the royal family. They were placed in a sac prior to the sack of the temple and the destruction of the town about A.D. 1375.

Although the symbol appears by itself on shell artifacts, it is often found portrayed on the back of a spider.

What Does the Circle Mean?

According to present-day American Indian myths, it was a little spider that brought fire to people (see pages 12–13). So, does the cross in the circle on the spider represent fire? It seems likely that it does. The same symbol occurs in depictions of woodpeckers, whose task may have been to guard the fire. Yet, nothing is ever simple. There are scholars who think the cross in the circle depicts the world in which we live, as opposed to the “sky world” and the “underwater world” found in some American Indian myths.

This division of the world into three sections—earth, sky, and underwater—occurs in other Southern Cult art as well. At the Alabama site of Moundville, which was used as a cemetery, archaeologists have found numerous depictions of hands and serpents. American Indians of the eastern United States today associate the hand with an entryway to the Path of Souls; that is, the journey the dead travel to reach the world beyond. There are actually two different depictions of the serpent. The first shows a rattlesnake, or great serpent, and is associated with the underworld. When shown with wings, it is in the night sky, a symbol of the underworld, as the Mississippians believed the world turned over at night. The second, which depicts a serpent as a half catlike animal, was also probably associated with the underworld. In American Indian myths, the underworld is sometimes associated with panthers and other cats.

Living Heads as Earlobes

Often, the figures found at archaeological sites closely resemble mythical figures in modern American Indian myths.

For example, Red Horn, the mythical hero of today's Winnebago people, is also known as “He-Who-Wears-Human-Heads-as-Ears.” Winnebago say Red Horn has tiny living heads instead of earlobes.

Throughout the Mississippian world, figurines are found that have what archaeologists call Long-Nosed God masks worn in pierced earlobes. These figurines appear to be the ancestors of Red Horn's living earlobes.

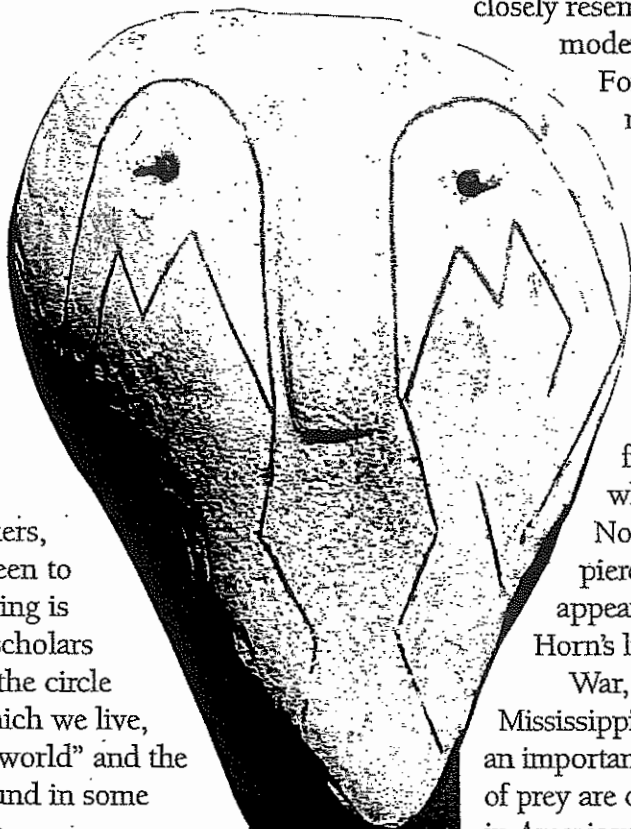
War, which played a major role in Mississippian society, also seems to be an important recurring motif. Since birds of prey are often associated with warfare in American Indian cultures, it seems that Birdman, himself half a bird of prey, is probably a symbol of a successful mythical warrior. Certainly, the severed head he carries could be a gruesome trophy from the battlefield.

Some artifacts show two Birdmen locked in combat. It is possible that the story of this battle was told and retold by the Mississippians, much as the

ancient Greeks repeated the story of the Trojan War over the centuries.

Mississippian myths were probably as different and as varied as the number of people who told them. And, it is likely that we will never know the richness of the stories depicted in artifacts. The mysteries of Birdman and the hands with eyes will likely remain the property of the Mississippians who created them. Still, by working together, archaeologists and American Indians can piece together a retelling of the old tales that comes close to the original.

Eric Powell is a senior editor at *Archaeology* magazine.



This face mask shell gorget was the source of underworld power. The triforked eye design is a Beneath World symbol.

Level 1 - Remembering

- 1) Identify the people in this reading. Who were they and what is their connection to the overall topic?
- 2) Identify the vocabulary words in the reading and define them.
- 3) Identify the words and phrases that show up over and over again in the reading.
- 4) Create a timeline of at least five events in the reading.
- 5) Identify 3 locations from the reading. How are they connected to the topic of the reading?
- 6) Describe what happened at one event in the reading.
- 7) Make a list of all the headings and subheadings in this reading.
- 8) Describe a graphic, illustration or diagram in the reading.

Level 2 - Understanding

- 1) What is the main idea of the entire reading? Write this in a complete sentence.
- 2) Pick a paragraph in the reading. What is the main idea of this paragraph?
- 3) Pick two people from the reading. How are they similar?
- 4) Pick two people from the reading. How are they different?
- 5) Draw a picture for each of the vocabulary words in this section that helps explain the definition.
- 6) Write a five sentence summary of this reading
- 7) Identify a cause and effect relationship in the text.
- 8) Create a graphic or diagram that could be added to the reading to help with understanding.

Level 3 - Applying

- 1) Find an event in the text and explain how it is like another event in history.
- 2) Find an event in the text and explain how it is like something that has happened in your own life.
- 3) Choose a historical figure from the text. After you have read about them, what question do you have to ask them?
- 4) Find an event in the text. Could this have happened in modern times? Why or why not?
- 5) Pick a choice that was made by a historical figure in the text. Would you have made the same choice? Why or why not?
- 6) Identify a historical figure in the text. How were they significant in history?
- 7) Identify an event in the text. How was it significant in history?
- 8) Identify an event in the text. What question would you have asked of someone who was there?

Bloom's Taxonomy: Nonfiction Questions

Level 4 - Analyzing

- 1) Choose an event from the text. What were some other possible outcomes?
- 2) In the text, what examples can you find of individuals struggling over power?
- 3) In the text, what evidence can you find of geography influencing events and culture?
- 4) Explain a cause and effect relationship in the text.
- 5) In the text, what evidence can you find of economics influencing events and culture?
- 6) Build a diagram to explain a process or event found in the text.
- 7) Create a brief outline of the important information from the text.
- 8) Look at the people in this text. Could you sort them into one or more category? (i.e. leader, inventor, woman, etc.)

Level 5 - Evaluating

- 1) Find a choice made by an individual in the text. Do you agree with their choice? Why or why not?
- 2) How would you feel if you were a teenager living in the time period from the text?
- 3) Identify the time period of the text. Why would it be better to live in that time period than today? Cite textual evidence.
- 4) Choose at least three individuals from the reading and rank them in order from most influential to least. Cite textual evidence.
- 5) Identify the time period of the text. Why would it be better to live today than then? Cite textual evidence.
- 6) Find a conflict within the text. Which side do you think you would have been on? Why?
- 7) Choose three different events from the text. Rank them in order from most important to least important. Cite textual evidence.
- 8) Find a decision made in the reading. Who will gain and who will lose from this decision?

Level 6 - Creating

- 1) Choose a vocabulary word from the text. Create two questions where that word would be the answer.
- 2) Choose a person from the text. Create two questions where that person would be the answer.
- 3) Create a Twitter conversation between two or more individuals in the reading.
- 4) Write a poem about the information in the text.
- 5) What changes would you have made to solve a problem from the text?
- 6) Write a three minute play discussing the main ideas of the text.
- 7) Create a magazine cover about the events in this text.
- 8) Create a mini graphic novel about the events in this text.
- 9) Create a social media page for an individual in the text.

Bloom's Taxonomy: Nonfiction Questions

Name _____
Directions: Choose one question from each part of the menu and answer it in the appropriate box below.

Remembering

Understanding

Applying

Analyzing

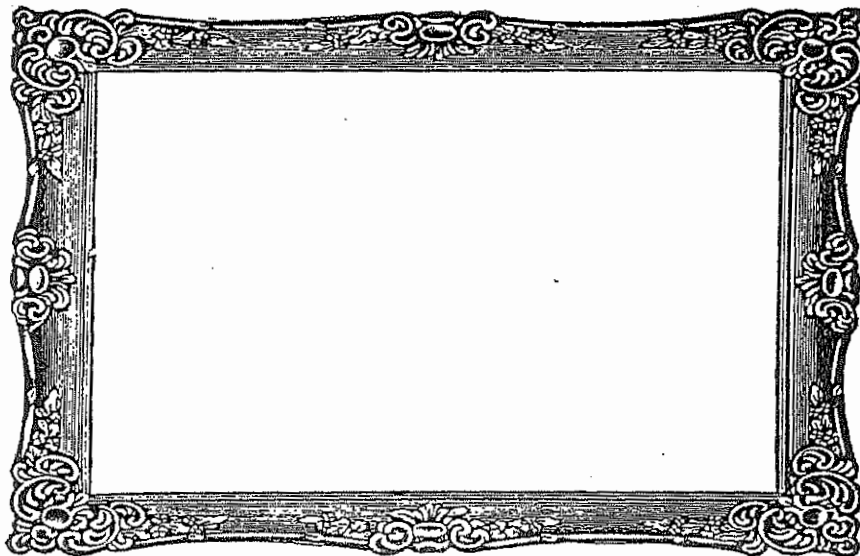
Text Features

Textual Evidence

Sentence that stood out to me.

This sentence supports the main idea because.....

Describe It



The Beginning and End

First Sentence

Last Sentence