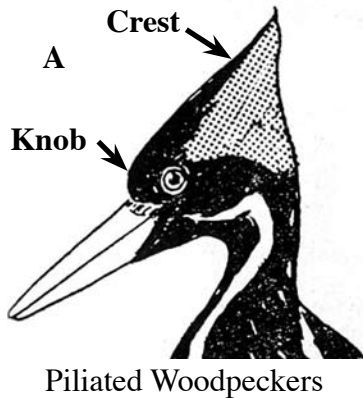


Bird Heads

By Frank and Nancy Hoff

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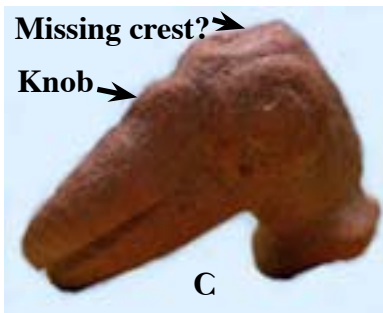
Dryocopus pileatus

Bird effigies are made from several media, especially pottery, but exist in stone, wood and shell. Clay figurines are fairly common in Central and South America but not in North America especially in the Eastern United States. Nine birds seem to dominate prehistoric art in Eastern North America. The species include Piliated woodpeckers (Figure A), crows, turkey, vultures, hawks, eagles, owls, the extinct Carolina parakeet and perhaps the red cardinal.

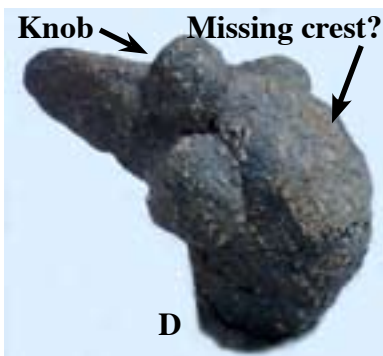
While looking at some of our artifacts and pictures of other collections we were fascinated by a picture of a bird head (Figure D) found by Don Ball at a coastal shell mound in St. Petersburg, Pinellas County, Florida in 1960's. Comparison of Myan bird heads (Figure B & C) in our collection from Zihuatanejo, Guerrero Province, South West Pacific Coast of Mexico looked very similar. All examples have bubble-type eyes and long drawn beaks. The Florida example (D) and the Mexico example (B) have knobs on the forehead region. All three have a flat area on top that appears as if a piece was broken off or purposely removed. This may have been a crest as shown in the Figure A and photo of Piliated Woodpeckers. Whether or not these were ceremonially removed is only conjecture. Examples range in size from 3.6 to 5 cm in length.



Bird heads E and F appear to be vultures and were found by Eric Fleming in the Terra Ceia area, Manatee County, Florida. Head E appears to be made of pottery but is carved from coarse grade sandstone. It has a drilled suspension hole and was probably a plummet or pendant. Head D is a highly stylized vulture made from pottery and was apparently attached to a bowl or cup. Head G is much more obvious as to what bird is depicted. This example is somewhat questionable, possibly a historical piece, that was reported to have been found in Murray County around Eton Georgia (Hoff collection #0365). This has the typical attachment groove found on plummets. There is also a black vulture in North America but it appears the one most depicted is the Turkey vulture. Watching a vulture soar into the sky without hardly moving their wings easily inspires the awe, grace, and beauty of being able to fly. These birds can soar for hours on thermals of warm air to conserve energy in flight.



An interesting question is whether or not the bird heads from Florida (D, E, F & G) were trade items, a copy of something that was seen or a independent occurrence. We suspect it was first a trade item and then a copy. Florida is ideally situated for communication and trading from the Caribbean regions and along the Gulf of Mexico. In addition, years ago we were shown a clay head like those from Central America that was found at another site in St Petersburg, Florida.



Item (H) is made from shell and is a effigy of a bird head which may represent a turkey, vulture, perhaps the extinct Carolina parakeet or a cardinal. This head was made from the rim area of a whelk or conch shell and a attachment hole was provided indicating it was probably worn and attached in some manner. Other bird-like shell crests and talons are shown by Hoff (2007) .



Side View



Turkey Vulture
(*Cathartes aura*).



F



Top View

Left top & bottom E - Sandstone pendant in form of a vulture. Right top F - stylized pottery vulture head. Right bottom G - carved marble vulture plummet.

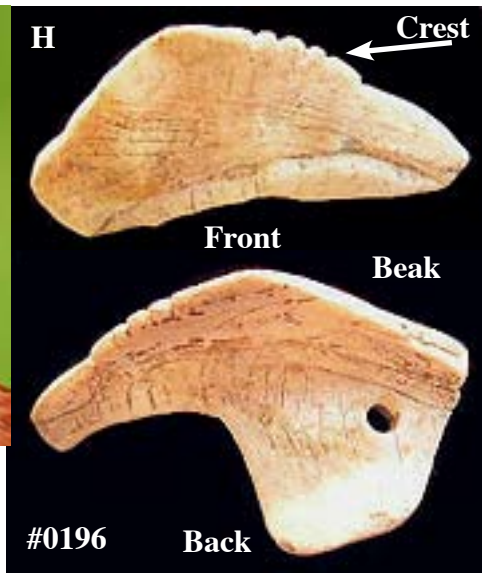


G

#0365



Red Cardinal
Cardinalis cardinalis



#0196

Back

References:

Hall, Francis W. 1945, Birds of Florida. Commercial Printing Co.

Hoff, Frank & Nancy 2007, Shell Artifacts, Emphasis on Southeastern Collections. Pasttime Artifacts, ISBN 0-9662960-5-2

Wikipedia The Free Encyclopedia. www.wikipedia.org (Bird Pictures)

H - Bird head effigy made from shell that has a turkey, vulture, Carolina parakeet or perhaps a stylized cardinal type crest. Found in Morgan County, Tennessee