CHAPTER 9

Owls, otters and pelicans in watery realms

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Florida’s watery environments have not only preserved the state’s exceptional heritage of prehistoric wood sculpture, but have played a key role in inspiring its iconographic focus and range. Waterways both held, and were themselves, a vital resource to indigenous peoples – from rivers teeming with fish and shellfish, to shorelines rich in useful plants, to providing the routeways that connected people to wider communities. This cornucopia provided sustenance as well as visual and cognitive cues (following Lévi-Strauss’ famous dictum that animals are “good to think with”) for the remarkable artistry that flourished in the region. Animals, with their unique appearance, abilities and characteristics were depicted in ceramics, stone and wood the length and breadth of the region, reflecting people’s particular ontological understandings of their world. In time, they became symbols of group or clan affiliation, sources of power for religious and/or political leaders or, conversely, potent, liminal forces that required respect and appeasement (e.g., Knight 1984; Wheeler 2011). In order to explore some of the undercurrents of meaning behind Florida’s animal imagery, and specifically those objects associated with watery environments and the animals that inhabit them, this paper focuses on three large-scale wood sculptures recovered from the Hontoon/Thursby site complex on the St. Johns River in east-central Florida, situating them within a wider iconographic context in order to explore their possible symbolic currency (see Figure 1.1 for the site location).

<a> The Hontoon/Thursby bestiary: a brief history, chronology and context

In the summer of 1955, a nearly four meter long owl wood carving (most likely a stylized representation of the great horned owl, *Bubo virginianus*) was dredged from the St. Johns River during residential development work on the Beresford peninsula, opposite Hontoon Island (Figure 9.1a)(Bullen 1955; Purdy 2007). Over two decades later, in May 1978, two other large-scale sculptures were dredged from roughly the same stretch of river, near channel marker 55, adjacent to the outbound ferry landing to Hontoon Island. One depicted an otter (*Lontra canadensis*) clutching a fish to its belly, and the other a large bird, possibly a pelican (e.g., *Pelecanus* sp.) (Figure 9.1b-c)(Purdy 1991:104; Schwehm 1983:89-92).

{Figure 9.1 near here}

Like the owl sculpture, the otter and pelican are depicted perched at the top of their respective bases – a posture reminiscent of other large-scale animal sculptures found at Fort Center and Belle Glade (e.g., Purdy 1991; Sears 1982; Wheeler 1996; see also Seinfeld and Spivey-Faulkner, this volume). However, their style – distinctively blocky, voluminous and angular (Schwehm 1983:87-89; 93) – is in contrast to the more naturalistic carvings of southern Florida, leading some (Purdy 2007:61; Schwehm 1983:88; 92) to suggest that they may have been the work of a single artist/workshop or reflect a local style (Figure 9.2). However, radiocarbon dates place these three pine (*Pinus* sp.) carvings at ca AD 1280-1650, with the owl sculpture (cal AD 1281-1389, 95.4%) preceding the other two figures by more than a century (Otter: cal AD 1456-1635; Pelican: cal AD 1487-1644, both 95.4%)(Ostapkowicz et al. 2017); hence, if a distinctive carving style is in evidence, it was likely one that spanned several generations. Within a broader geographical and chronological context, the carvings date to the Mississippian era (AD 1000-1600) of the southeastern United States. We can find, however, few cognates with iconographies of the Mississippian world. Owls, pelicans, and otters do not appear in the iconography of the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex or Mississippian Ideological Interaction Sphere, though owls appear on prehistoric pottery from the Mississippian era in some parts of the Southeast (see below). In many ways these are suggestive of the animals depicted during the Middle Woodland period (AD 1-500)—many of the same creatures are included, and they exhibit a more naturalistic style to that known from the Mississippian Interaction Sphere.

{Figure 9.2 near here}

The river channel which yielded all three carvings separates the archaeological sites of Hontoon Island from the Thursby mound (8VO36) and midden (8VO35), together forming a large site complex. Hontoon Island's occupation extends back to the middle and late Archaic (the earliest radiocarbon dates ca. 5200-4760 BC; Randall and Sassaman 2005: iii; 206; 2009), with later periods showing attendant shifts in pottery, cultigens and, ultimately, the introduction of Spanish artifacts (Newsom 1987; Purdy 1987; 1991). In contrast, very little is known of the Thursby mound and midden, with the exception of Clarence B. Moore's (1894a, 1894b) antiquarian digging, which uncovered a minimum of 132 burials, roughly 800 ceramics as well as Spanish artifacts and a cache of unusual clay animal and plant effigies. Damage to the site at the mainland Hontoon Island State Park parking area uncovered further human remains and artifacts from the late Archaic (2000 – 500 BC) through St. Johns 1 (500 BC – AD 500) periods, including some worked wood (Groh 1989). While it is clear that the site complex had long-term occupation, the large scale sculptures were erected in its last phases, concomitant with several major events at the Hontoon site: the owl was carved around the time that pumpkins were first consumed there and the otter and pelican were made around the time corn first appears and during a ceramic shift (not to mention potential European contacts at this time)(Ostapkowicz et al 2017).

Following Bullen’s (1956:61) initial interpretation of the Hontoon owl’s position at the site, the assumption has been that all three wood carvings were prominently placed along the river’s edge at the Thursby site, perhaps near the monumental burial mound (ca 13ft high and 90 ft in diameter, with a shell causeway leading to the banks of the St. Johns River; Milanich 1994:272; Moore 1894:159). Given their scale, they would have been visible for some distance when erected, and after a period of time they decayed and fell into the river where they were preserved in anaerobic muck (e.g., Bullen 1956:61). However, there is the possibility that they were located elsewhere within the site complex – possibly as part of a monumental structure, such as the ritual and charnel houses observed by the Spanish in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries in parts of Florida and the Southeast - and, when their use was served, were intentionally deposited in the river (cf.

Spivey-Faulkner, this volume, who’s work on the Fort Center corpus suggests a ritual deposit of the carved animal sculptures in the site’s mortuary pond with human remains). Indeed, strontium results indicate that while the owl and pelican were made from trees felled at or very near Hontoon, the otter figure was carved from wood acquired some kilometers distant (Ostapkowicz et al. 2017), which lends support to the possibility that it may have been made and used elsewhere, and brought to the site for deposit in the river (though, equally, it could have been brought to the site to be carved and erected there before being deposited). Further, it remains unclear if the carvings represent an accretion of images that were added to over generations or if they were used, discarded, and then replaced. If other carvings were also erected, what other animals might have been depicted? What is clear is that at both Fort Center and Hontoon/Thursby we see an association of human burials and the interment of wood sculptures depicting animals. As William Marquardt discusses in Chapter 8 of this volume, the recent interest in ontology and other-than-human persons has become more present in archaeological interpretation and may be at play here – perhaps the wood carvings were understood to be living members of the community and were afforded burial.

The animals depicted are closely associated with waterways, though they are not confined to water: pelicans and otters are rarely out of water, though the former takes to the air and the latter to land with equal dexterity. Owls, while mainly forest dwellers, often hunt over water, sometimes wading in the shallows for fish or crayfish (e.g., Backhouse 2008:36). Thus, all three have characteristics that may have been viewed as anomalous to some extent (Knight 1984) – liminal creatures moving between worlds. These and other aspects must have converged to make them appropriate iconographic choices for the monumental carvings at Hontoon/Thursby. Each is considered separately in the following paragraphs, in an effort to explore their local as well as regional importance and symbolism. Of the three, owl iconography appears more frequently (though this should not imply it is common), and is more often discussed in the ethnographic literature of the region; as such the following section focuses primarily on these raptorial birds.

<a> Florida owls and owl iconography

While bird iconography is fairly common in Florida’s indigenous art, depictions of owls are comparatively rare, with notable exceptions discussed below. Florida is home to a variety of owls, including two that appear to have been of particular interest to indigenous artists: screech owls and great horned owls. Eastern screech owls (*Megascops asio*), Florida’s smallest owls (ca. 16-25cm in length), range throughout the state with the exception of the Everglades and Palm Beach County (FFWCC 2003); great horned owls (*Bubo virginianus*) have a similar range, but are significantly larger (43-64cm in length). Both feature erect ear-tufts and large, yellow eyes, along with a distinctive facial disc (a concave collection of feathers on the face), and both are nocturnal hunters, beginning to forage at dusk; they are also known for their piercing, varied calls (Eckert and Karalus 1987).

{Figure 9.3 near here}

Owl imagery appears in various media, including wood, stone, bone and ceramic, with the widest variety of representation seen in Weeden Island and Fort Walton ceramics (Figure 9.3). Unusually, owls are the most frequently depicted of all animal imagery in the Weeden Island ceramics studied by Knight (1984:175). In terms of scale, depictions range from the monumental Hontoon/Thursby owl, originally nearly four meters in height (Bullen 1955), to the diminutive, 3cm long bone pin finial recovered during recent excavations at Turner River, Collier County, dating to ca. AD 750-1100 (Margo Schwadron pers. comm., 2016). The owl features emphasized in many of these depictions suggest that they were modeled on either the great horned (Figure 9.4) or eastern screech owl (Figure 9.5). For example, in many Fort Walton ceramic lugs, the beak is depicted as a sharply downturned, inverted triangle, the upper corners subtly referencing the ear tufts, and the lower tip covering the line of the mouth (the latter most often featured separately from the beak)(Figure 9.5). This triangular configuration may specifically reference the eastern screech owl, which has a large, sharply downturned triangular feather ridge encompassing the tuft ears and terminating in the beak. Stippling is also relatively common in the depiction of ceramic owls, and may serve as a visual reference to the distinctive mottled vibrancy of multi-colored feathers (Figure 9.6). While this variety of diagnostic features invites taxonomic identification, there is also the possibility that what is depicted may refer not simply to the physical representation of the animal, but also to its spiritual manifestation.

{Figures 9.4, 9.5, 9.6 near here}

In Florida, avian imagery – including owls – also appears to be associated with mortuary ceremonialism (Milanich 1994:274; Wheeler 1996:61) and other ritual contexts; for example, the large Weeden Island horned-owl ceramic recovered from Laughton’s Bayou Burial Mound B (Figure 9.7, left) was described by Moore (1902:192) as “ceremonial, ready-made, mortuary ware” with its modelled cut-outs made before firing, potentially suggesting a function as an incense burner. At Fort Center (Belle Glade II period, ca. AD 200-800), owls are thought to feature among the carved animal posts (including depictions of eagles, foxes, dogs, bears and cats) placed in a burial associated context (Schwehm 1983; Sears 1982; Wheeler 1996:90-1), though their presence on iconographic grounds has recently been questioned by Spivey-Faulkner (this volume). Numerous ceramics depicting owl heads (Figure 9.5) have been recovered at Fort Walton (from ca. AD 1000), a site yielding 61 primary, bundle, and single-skull burials in a mound used as a structural support for a temple (Gibbon and Ames 1998:193).

{Figure 9.7 near here)

Looking further afield, owl imagery has a long history in the Southeast – a component of major cultural traditions including Poverty Point (Louisiana, ca. 2100-700 BC), Hopewell (Ohio River Valley, AD 1-500) and Mississippian (AD 1000-1600), the latter two having significant influence over the artistic, as well as socio-political, trajectories of prehistoric Florida (Wheeler 1996). One of the earliest examples of owl imagery from Florida is a red jasper amulet recovered from the Withlacoochee River, bearing all the lapidary characteristics of similar objects known from

Poverty Point (Lein et al. 1974). The distance of this artifact from its Louisiana source – close to 800 miles (ca. 1300 km) – is not inconsiderable; the presence of one of these rare carvings in Florida reflect the Archaic period’s widespread exchange networks (Ford and Webb 1956; Lein et al. 1974:167-8; Sassaman and Anderson 2004:111). Hopewellian exchange networks may have inspired the avian imagery of Florida’s Weeden Island and Glades traditions as well (Milanich 2004:193; Wheeler 1996:32; 42; 59; Widmer 1989). Owl imagery is prominent during the artistic fluorescence of Hopewell culture, depicted in numerous stone platform pipes recovered from the sites of Mound City and Tremper Mound, Ohio (see examples illustrated in Brose et al., 1985:62-64, 66; Mills 1916; 1922; Squier and Davis 1848:251-271; Townsend 2004:29, 42, 49-55, 65-66). The owl’s unique characteristics are clearly captured in these works, including its disconcerting ability to turn its head in seemingly impossible angles: in several platform pipes, the owl’s body is depicted facing forward, with the head turned 90 degrees to face the smoker (McArthur 2012:32; Power 2004). Such pipes were deliberately broken and buried during ritual activities (Gehlach 2006:131). Later Mississippian traditions, which strongly influenced northwest Florida’s Fort Walton culture (ca. AD 1000-1500) (Milanich 2004:197), included the placement of large owl vessels with burials. At the Mississippian site of

Wickliffe in Kentucky, owl pendants, vessels, and owl bones, used mainly as ornaments, were recovered (McArthur 2012:33-36; Wesler 2001). Similarly, at Missouri’s Cahokia Mound 34 and Ramey Plaza the remains of great horned, barn, screech, barred and short-eared owls – as well as of white pelicans – were found; these were likely used as ritual paraphernalia (Kelly et al. 2007:81). Within this framework, it is clear that owl imagery was most closely associated with ceremonial and mortuary contexts both within Florida and the wider Southeast.

<a> The owl: protector, maleficent being and/or “insigne of wisdom and divination”?

Across many cultures, owls - as largely solitary night creatures - are linked closely with darkness and its unknowns, and the world of spirits and death. Their stealth and ability to see at night, combined with piercing yellow eyes, haunting calls and striking appearance and physiology, make a potent source of both inspiration and fear. On the one hand, they are considered dangerous, malevolent forces; on the other, guardians and messengers forewarning of events (albeit generally inauspicious ones) with their piercing cry.

Among many southeastern cultures, including the Creek, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Cherokee, owls were linked to witchcraft: sorcerers had the power to shape-shift into great horned owls, taking flight to cause mischief and spread fear (Krech 2009:146-8). The owl’s call was thought to signal the presence of a witches or ghosts, with the power to kill any who heard it (ibid). The Choctaw considered the variety of haunting owl vocalizations to portend various ends: the call of a great horned owl signaled a sudden death, that of a screech-owl’s meant the death of a child, while the call of the barred owl marked a relative’s death (Krech 2009: 147). Similarly, for the Cherokee, owl feathers were potent with power to prophesize death (Holmgren 1988:49). Their name for great horned owls – *ishkitini* – was the same for the supernatural beings who hunted both humans and animals in the dead of night (Holmgren 1988:48; Krech 2009: 147). Interestingly, Hunn (1975) discusses the widespread similarity in American Indian names for owls, evaluating the possibility that they are either almost universally onomatopoetic or loan words of great antiquity. The Creek also believed that upon death, the soul split in two – the interior soul, or ghost, travelling to the land of the dead, and the exterior soul, in the form of an owl or fox, wandering the land at night (Krech 2009:147). Among the Cherokee, if the sacred fire was not sufficiently placated through offerings, it would transform into an owl to seek vengeance (ibid:162).

Yet, for some groups, owls did not have solely negative connotations: among the eighteenth century Caddo, owls were linked to medicine men and curing, and their call could even portend an auspicious event: “…when the Indians hear the sound of the hoot of an owl they raise a shout of joy as if they had won a victory” (Isidro Espinosa in Krech 2009:148). Among the Catawba, the calls of a great horned owl or barred owl were signs of good news (ibid: 147), and their ability to shape-shift, and travel as an owl in the search of knowledge (e.g., to enemy villages in order to gather information) could bring benefits (ibid). Unsurprisingly, such beliefs had wide impact – from food taboos, to restrictions on access to owl remains (e.g., use of feathers, wings, talons, etc.), to how and when they were depicted (Krech 2009:39).

Among some Southeast groups, the use of owl remains was reserved for only certain members of society, such as medicine men or women or war prophets, who according to Choctaw legend, carried taxidermied owls with them (in Krech 2009:140). “Priests,” wrote William Bartram used “…a great owl skin…stuffed very ingeniously…. [and] so well executed, as almost to represent the living bird, having large sparkling glass beads, or buttons, fixed in the head for eyes; this insigne of wisdom and divination, they [wore] sometimes as a crest on the top of the head, at other times the image [sat] on the arm, or [was] borne on the hand” (in Krech 2009:140). An owl’s ability to see at night may have been viewed as an allegory to a medicine man’s ability to see and harness power in dreams (Holmes 2011); only those spiritually powerful enough could control the owl’s augural power.

The above accounts, from cultures chronological and geographically separate from those of ancient Florida, serve to underscore the variety of beliefs surrounding owls in the sixteenth through eighteenth century ethnographies of the Southeast. In fact, in a fairly broad and deep survey of beliefs about owls in native North America, Wilson (1950) concludes that “in many sections the owl is a portentously sacred bird,” noting a continuum of ideas from ill omen to beneficial messenger. It is likely that the ancient Floridians had equally varied beliefs. Indeed, some early historical accounts – such as those collected among the Timucuan-speaking peoples of the St. Johns region – suggest that owls were malevolent symbols (Milanich 1994:273; 1996:177). As such, the expectation would be that there were culturally prescribed taboos in place against using their remains or depicting them (except for witches, who of course inverted the cosmological order). Yet, early accounts also indicate less negative connotations: among the Timucuan, owl calls could bring “pity on the listener”

(Milanich 1996:177), and owl ears could be used to remove spells cast by a witch (Milanich and Sturtevant 1972).

How ever they were viewed, in some of the ways recounted above, or in others unknown, the fact remains that owls featured in a variety of material culture across Florida and these were clearly meant to be seen – from personal, small-scale objects (pendants, hair ornaments) to ceramic vessels of varying size to monumental carvings erected at important sites. Some of these forms may have been created for especially powerful individuals able to control such sources for their own or their community’s ends; others may have been amulets, valued for their protective powers; still others may have served solely for use in specific contexts (e.g., mortuary ceramics), and were meant to be seen by only a select few before being interred. Yet others – such as the Hontoon wooden sculptures, erected on or close to the banks of a major river, near long-term settlements – were unavoidable parts of the landscape, prominently and clearly visible, especially from the water. The river separating the Thursby and Hontoon sites may well be of significance here, as villages were separated from associated cemeteries by waterways in order to protect them from wandering spirits (Hall 1979:361; Schwehm 1983:61; see Seinfeld this volume). The most obvious assumption – given the widespread association between owls and night, ghosts and death – is that the Hontoon/Thursby owl was a burial marker or part of a charnel house, a safeguard for the site. The ambivalence of both protector and threat is perhaps fitting given the owl’s diverse potential meanings. However, the Owl was not the only carving erected in the area: the Otter and Pelican sculptures, although dating to a somewhat later period, do not share these overtly negative/threatening overtones, though that being said, and as discussed below, there is far less information available relating to these animals. As with Fort Center, there is undoubtedly more to their associated presence and role at the site (cf. Schwehm 1983:58; see also Spivey-Faulkner, this volume).

Further, the anthropomorphic aspects of the owl carving – five (as opposed to four) clawed talons (Bullen 1955), human-like eyes overlaying the owl’s large circular eyes (Schwehm 1983), the guilloche treatment of the wings and back, more suggestive of a textile than a patterning of feathers (Wheeler 1996:263), and the circular disk at the chest, reminiscent of the large shell gorgets worn by the elite – also offer insights into meaning. This form of therianthropy has parallels in other Florida iconography – chief among them the Key Marco cat, which combines animal and human aspects. These departures from the more naturalistic depictions which characterize Hopewell, Weeden

Island, and many other Florida iconographies begs the question – is this a Mississippian influence? Indeed, ornithanthropic imagery is a frequent theme in the art of the Southeast: “Birdman” images are at the core of the spectacular art associated with the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex (SECC; Mississippian period, ca. AD 1000-1600), featuring a human encased within the body of a raptorial bird, its sharp beak, wings and tail clearly depicted (e.g., Brown 2004:106, 118). While these specific depictions are considered a representation of mythic hero Morning Star in the specific context of the SECC (ibid.), the wider depiction of ornithanthropic imagery may reference other powerful beings, or perhaps even shape-shifters, who could transform themselves (or others) into owls – and the integration of anthropomorphic elements in the Owl carving may hint at this. Alternatively, it could be a reference to the transmigration of human souls to animals, as was the belief among the Calusa (Hann 1991:238), assuming such a belief was also shared by the late prehistoric communities settled along the St. Johns River.

<a> Otters, fish and watery realms

The smallest of the three Hontoon/Thursby wood carvings features the elegantly streamlined physical characteristics of an otter; short legs, muscular neck (same diameter as head), elongated body that is broadest at the hips, tapering tail, broad muzzle, flat head and upright, round ears. Another feature is the presence of a fish held to its belly between the front paws: otters typically eat their prey (which includes amphibians, shellfish, snails, crayfish and turtles) on the surface of the water, often floating on their backs. This combination of predator and prey occurs in other media at the site: Moore identified several otters among the modelled ceramic figures recovered from Thursby Mound, one of which was holding a round object in its mouth (Moore 1894a:69-70, Figure 45), possibly a reference to shellfish. A figure from Fort Center carved from a naturally twisted wood suggestive of an otter’s “sinuous motion” (Sears 1982:55, Figure 4.10, b) also features an object in its mouth (see also Schwehm 1983:81, 92). Further afield in both time and space, Hopewellian stone pipes – such as those from Tremper, Ohio – feature “fishing otters,” their prey between their jaws (Mills 1916:292-296). Without this pairing, the otter’s identification is somewhat less secure, based largely on interpretations of its lithe, graceful body: two further wood carvings – another from Fort Center (Sears 1982:55, Figure 4.10a) and one from Belle Glade (Willey 1949b, Plate 13i) are more tentatively identified as otters. Outside of these contexts, however, otters are rare within the iconography of pre-Columbian

Florida: they do not appear in the wood carvings of Key Marco, for example, nor in the rich zoomorphic imagery of Weeden Island and, unlike the owl, the ethnohistoric sources from Florida are mute on their ceremonial or symbolic significance.

Also unlike the owl, which is rarely encountered in Florida midden contexts, otters were hunted with some frequency since the Archaic period. Otter remains have been found at Windover Pond dating back some 7000 years and were also recovered from Bayonet Field (a Safety Harbor period site), post-dating AD 900 (Milanich 1994:74; 92; 394). Indeed, Wing (1997:81-82) notes that the otter (along with deer, raccoon, pond turtle, and alligator) was among the most important hunted species, accounting for 10 percent or more of the faunal assemblage at 43 Southeast coastal ridge sites (predominantly in Florida), spanning 1000 BC to AD 1715. Larson (1980: 191) suggests that they were probably caught with traps, and it is likely that they were hunted mainly for their pelts, which were potentially the prerogative of chiefs (see Fradkin 1988:351-352).

Turning to the Southeastern ethnographic literature provides some insight into the ways in which the otter was perceived by various neighboring cultures. According to the Cherokee, beavers and otters – as aquatic animals – were associated with the underworld (Fradkin 1988:348-352;

Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick 1966:424-425; Mooney 1900:399, 400). In Cherokee sacred formulas, otters were considered chief of the “penetrators” and grouped with such animals as the weasel and mink due to their similar appearance and capabilities, key among which was their ability to hold their prey (Mooney and Olbrechts 1932:270-271). The term “penetrator” refers to animals that can seize and hold their prey or suck its life blood, such as leeches, ospreys, kingfishers, weasels, minks, and otters. As such, otters were invoked with other penetrators for removing “pains shifting about” in a patient’s body and for treating “breast aches” planted by a ghost (Mooney and Olbrechts 1932:270-271). The otter could also be called on to treat other maladies, including pains caused by the implantation of an object, and rheumatic or pleurisy type pains, and for healing cuts. Otter skins were worn by individuals of high status or power, including the chief, war chief, and high priest and religious leader (Fradkin 1988:351-352). Further north, among the Seneca of New York, the otter was also considered a powerful medicine animal. The otter was patron of fisheries and there was a special Society of Otters – composed solely of women – their role was to propitiate the otter and other water animals who have an influence over the health, fortunes, and destinies of humans (Parker 1913:40, 121-122).

If similar beliefs can be attributed to the peoples of east-central Florida, the otter's perceived healing powers may resonate with the placement of an otter carving near Thursby Mound. As a burial mound, the area undoubtedly had cultural restrictions and taboos, linked as it was with death, burial and by association, disease; the presence of an otter carving on the banks of the river may have served to visually underscore the spiritually-charged area and its dangers. Further, watery realms, to which the otter had natural affinity, were metaphorically equivalent in Southeastern cosmology to the "Beneath the World," a chaotic realm filled with malevolent beings (Knight, pers. comm., 2016). The Otter figure, placed on the banks of the river at this potential threshold between this watery realm and the burial mound, may have, as with the Owl, also functioned as a symbolic guardian. As has been argued by others (Bullen 1955; Schwehm 1983:58-59, 92), it could have referenced the protective, spiritual powers of a clan or family totem. The fact that the otter is depicted with a fish in this specific context may also be relevant here: as voracious hunters, their predatory skills may have been symbolically referenced for their ability to circumvent the roaming of malevolent or wayward spirits, whether from the river or the burial mound. And, as largely nocturnally active creatures, they – like owls – may have been associated with darkness and the night, the natural realm of ghosts and witches.

<a> Pelicans

The last of the carvings is the least complete, with most of the head missing, making its attribution as a pelican tentative; however, the presence of the long tapering beak resting on the great swelling chest is suggestive of the posture of pelicans in repose, whether on land or in the water. Exactly such a pose is featured in ceramic representations of the bird, as seen in Fort Walton (Figure 9.8) and, indeed, the elegant wood figurehead and bone carving from Key Marco (Clark 1995:22, 78; Cushing 1897:424-5; Wheeler 1996:161). However, like the owl and otter, pelicans are relatively rare in the iconographic bestiary of pre-Columbian Florida, despite the predominance of other bird imagery in ceramics, wood, stone and bone carving. Pelicans also are largely absent from ethnographic sources on the Southeast and the archaeological record, with the few notable exceptions already mentioned. Interestingly, pelican bones are known, again quite rarely, from archaeological contexts in Illinois and Iowa representing a range of cultures and time periods, from 2,500 years ago through Hopewell to the contemporary Sioux (Hamon 1961:209; Parmalee 1958:170). The bird appears elsewhere, as clan totems, among the Anishinaabeg (Ojibwa) for example, and there is evidence of hunting pelicans in the Great Basin, where pelican and other bird decoys were found in Lovelock Cave (Bailey 1940:18). Among the Chumash, the pelican appears along with the other birds, sea mammals, sharks, and sailfish as distinctive stone effigies, all regarded as ritually and economically significant species in California (Hoover 1974). Overall, our archaeological and ethnographic data on pelicans are limited, making an interpretation difficult. Perhaps the most we can say at this point is that the Hontoon/Thursby pelican carving represents a denizen of the upper or sky world within the context of local and Southeastern cosmology. The specifics necessarily allude us, though we suggest that since the owl and otter are perceived as powerful animals among other Southeastern tribes, the pelican may have had similar associations for the prehistoric carvers and inhabitants of Hontoon.

{Figure 9.8 near here}

<a> Discussion

The semiotic load of the carvings rests with their scale, context, and iconography. Their considerable size implies that they were intended for a public, rather than private audience, and as such, held a large degree of shared symbolism (though this need not exclude the possibility of deeper, hidden layers of meaning open only to a few ritual specialists). It is thus likely that their meanings were widely understood, not just to the local and nearby communities, but also to those visiting from further afield. In this sense, the scope of ideas from neighboring regions as discussed above have some heuristic utility in providing a framework within which to consider their significance. This is perhaps best illustrated by Bullen's (1955:72) interpretation that the presence of the Owl carving marked the village as the "Owl Clan village," with the carving in this sense functioning as a local identity/territorial marker. Hontoon/Thursby's position near the frontier between Timucua and Mayaca peoples in the contact era (Hann 2003:69-70; Milanich 1996:15), may also suggest their role as larger-scale cultural identity markers. The local community would have their own understanding(s) of the carving, its history (perhaps knowing the carver or his/her descendants) and its meaning(s), and neighboring peoples might conceive it in different terms, though the subject matter (an owl, or "Owl" – the idea/meaning of the animal) was known and familiar. The possibility of multivalent meanings challenges a single interpretation for these carvings, supporting multiple ways of viewing and understanding.

The role of the owl as powerful and threatening predator resonates with its position at Thursby as an obvious deterrent in the service of protecting the burial mound/village site – not simply from humans, but animals and potentially spirits. An owl’s association with night and its superb abilities to see in the dark would support the guardian interpretation; further, the apparently close association of owl imagery with mortuary ceremonialism and ritual contexts in wider Florida appears to support this scenario (Sears 1982; Willey 1949a; see Seinfeld and Spivey-Faulkner, this volume). This would also make more sense when the Otter and Pelican are taken into account, neither of which appears to have such ambivalent connotations as the Owl. In contrast, what the figures – at least the Owl and Otter – do have in common in some historical accounts is their medicinal/curative powers: owl remains were used to cure patients suffering from cast spells, while otters were thought to have the ability to remove sources of illness. Positioning such figures at a burial site (or actual interment of the figure at or near a mortuary site) may have served to underscore the potential dangers to the spiritually charged nature of the site, and its association with the dead.

Indeed, on the subject of medicinal powers, Bullen (1955:72) briefly entertained the idea that the Owl was a “totem” of a prominent medicine man, based on ethnographic analogies to the Creek where the owl was a symbol of the shaman’s office – before dismissing such a literal reading of the figure. However, he did favor the possibility that the Owl was a totemic or clan symbol. Of course, this was before the Otter and Pelican carvings were recovered, and one wonders whether Bullen would then have suggested the presence of several clans, the carvings’ differing sizes potentially reflecting an internal hierarchy. But despite its problems (e.g., Insoll 2011), the “totem” label appears to have had some mileage in the literature on this and other large-scale sculpture in Florida (e.g., Purdy 1987; Schwehm 1983). The term totem – to return to the original Ojibwa expression – means “He(she) is a relative of mine,” suggesting that the signifier (in this case an animal) is a guardian or emblem (Insoll 2011:1007), with a history of association/ancestry referring back to mythic time. Milanich (1994:273-4) posits that as harbingers of evil or bad luck, owls could not have been viewed as totems, though this relegation solely to the “dark side” may not reflect the reality of their varied meanings (even in Florida – see Milanich 1996:177). These various interpretations begin to blur and circle back to the concept of powerful animal protectors and guardians.

Another link between the three carvings – all representing animals closely associated with the water (particularly in the case of the otter and pelican) – is their placement or interment in close proximity to the St. Johns River. Watery realms, and the animals that naturally inhabit these liminal spaces, were important physical and interpretive foci in Florida. These were the gateways to both natural resources and neighboring communities; they were also the final resting place of the dead, a practice that in Florida stretches back millennia (e.g., Wentz and Gifford 2007). Beginning with Windover Pond, “wet cemeteries” have considerable time depth in Florida, suggesting a significant association between water and the dead. The placement (or interment) of the Hontoon/Thursby carvings on the banks of a river, in close proximity to a burial mound, depicting as they do animals closely associated with water, is more than mere coincidence. It indicates a pattern – seen in comparable sites such as Fort Center and Belle Glade – linking the iconography of large-scale, wooden sculpture to burial places (e.g., see Seinfeld and Spivey-Faulkner, this volume). Whether an artificial pond or natural river, the presence of water and, by association, animals linked to water (including ducks, otters, pelicans), was clearly important.

In fact, we could argue that the placement of the Hontoon/Thursby animal carvings is at a number of significant interfaces – the territorial boundary between Timucua and Mayaca (Hann 2003:69-70; Milanich 1996:15), as well as the transition between land and water, life and death, animal and human, even the temporal boundary exhibited by the shell sites themselves, encapsulating older deposits and habitation going back to the Archaic, and perhaps other boundaries unknown to us. Cheryl Claassen (2010: 198, 218-219) makes a convincing argument that shell-bearing sites in the so-called Shell Mound Archaic of the Ohio River represent something other than villages and food refuse, but rather were locales of mortuary and feasting rituals – early monuments that were part of a system of sacred sites. She proposes that these sites were reused by later, Mississippian peoples reflecting an interest in ancestor worship (Claassen 2010:218-219). Fish and his colleagues (2013:121; 140) make a similar argument for monumental shell sites in Brazil, citing the concept of “persistent place” in relation to these large sites that were constructed incrementally and enfold ancestors and founders, creating visible reminders of demarcated territories. Asa Randall (2015) builds on Claassen’s ideas in his study of Archaic shell sites in the St. Johns River of Florida, arguing that the people who constructed the shell bearing sites were using these deposits to create, manipulate and interact with histories that gave these places significance and agency. Further, he notes that at one point during the late Archaic Mount Taylor period communities were made of people from a multiplicity of places throughout Florida and the Southeast, and that this is reflected in material culture as well (Randall 2015:247-248). While it is unclear if similar trends in belief continued through time, shell-bearing sites continued to be used and manipulated, supporting our contention that the owl, otter, and pelican carvings were situated in a place on the landscape that likely was imbued with considerable power and that the figures may have been involved in mediating relations at this important physical and metaphysical junction.

It also is interesting to consider the broader corpus of owl imagery in Florida and the Southeast. Owls are not one of the animals typically discussed in the iconography of the Mississippian Southeast, where hawks, serpents, and anthropomorphic images dominate. But there are frequent depictions of owls in Mississippian cultures and their antecedents, especially in the ceramics of Late Woodland Weeden Island. Typically we consider Mississippian influences on Florida, but perhaps owl imagery in the Southeast has origins in the opposite direction?

<a> Conclusion

If, as Howard Morphy (1989:1) notes, art “more readily than most other sources of archaeological data, provide[s] access to past systems of thought, values and perception, to qualitative aspects of peoples’ lives,” what insight can the three Hontoon/Thursby sculptures provide? This selected iconography – including, but potentially not restricted to, carvings of an owl, otter and pelican – was strategically placed in a specific, potent location: intervening/mediating between the river (a watery realm), a large village and a burial mound. In this liminal space, these were not simply representations of inanimate “nature;” these were encoded, cultural signifiers, reflecting people’s understanding of the world and their place within it. Each carving was a referent – a type of iconographic shorthand – not to the concrete reality of an “owl,” for example, but to the beliefs and/or potentially mythic associations linked with it (cf. Muller 2007:23) including possible ancestral/totemic undercurrents (á la Bullen 1955:72). In this way, each has become a metaphor for relationships between the supernatural and the human (cf. Ucko 1989:xiii). At the same time, and in Viveiros de Castro’s (2004:11) concept of multiple ontologies, these carved “beings” – along with the animals whose form they took - became points of view themselves. According to this concept, animals that perform a key and symbolic role have their own personhood, or capacity to occupy a point of view, and perceive their place within the world (Viveiros de Castro 2012); so too do objects have agency (Gell 1998). It is not simply through these carvings and animals that meanings were “lived,” it was with them (Ishii 2012). As

Ishii (ibid:372) notes, "…[spiritual] worlds are created through concrete relations and actions among persons, things, spirits and deities that take tangible as well as intangible forms." This connection between people, animals and spiritual power sources is manifest in the erection of these monumental carving posts at Hontoon/Thursby, the site's nexus during the thirteenth through seventeenth centuries.

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Captions

Figure 9.1a. The Owl carving, shortly after its recovery in 1955, with R. Bullen standing at right. Image courtesy Florida Museum of Natural History, PN2016-1-4. 9.1b-c. The Pelican and Otter carvings at find site on St. Johns River. Images courtesy Florida Division of Historical Resources.

Figure 9.2a. Owl carving; *Pinus* sp., AD 1281-1319 (68.5%; calibrated and modelled), Hontoon-Thursby site group; H: 366cm (cut down to 282 cm); W: 43cm Depth: 28cm; Image courtesy Florida Museum of Natural History, Catalogue no. FLMNH ANT92928; the carving is part of the Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve collections (FCA 493). 9.2b. Otter carving; *Pinus* sp., AD 1456-1635 (95.4%), H: 88cm; W: 17cm Depth: max 15cm. Image: Ostapkowicz, courtesy, Florida Department of State, Division of Historical Resources, Catalog no. 81A.37.2.1. 9.2c. Pelican carving; *Pinus* sp., AD 1487-1644 (95.4%); H: 194cm; W: 31cm Depth: max 32cm. Image: Ostapkowicz, courtesy, Florida Department of State, Division of Historical Resources, Catalog no. 81A.37.2.2.

Figure 9.3. Distribution of owl iconography. Left to right: Fort Walton screech owl ceramic lug (W: 14cm)(see Figure

9.5a), Indian Temple Mound Museum, Fort Walton Beach, FL; cat no 1415, acc no 72-5-179; Laughton’s Bayou large vessel (H: 25cm) with great horned owl iconography (see Figure 9.4b), NMAI 173754.000; Mound Field large vessel (H: 29cm) with great horned owl imagery (see Figure 9.4a), NMAI 173996.00; Spring Warrior Mound Owl vessel (W: 24cm), Museum of Science and History, Jacksonville, cat no 76441; Turner River bone pin finial (3cm), courtesy, M. Schwadron pers. comm., 2016; Hontoon Owl (H: 282cm)(see Figure 9.2a), Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve collections (FCA 493). Illustration: Ostapkowicz.

Figure 9.4. Various head characteristics of the great horned owl, including erect ear tufts, large, concentric circle eyes, and a large circle below the short, downturned beak, extending to the chest, referring to the bird’s white neck/chest feathers (this feature is enlarged to create the vessel’s cavity in the lower right image). Note also the facial stippling in the two top images. 9.4a: Detail of a large horned owl ceremonial vessel recovered from Mound Field, Wakulla County, Florida (8WA8). H: 29cm; W: 24cm; D: 26cm. NMAI 173996.00. 9.4b: Detail of a large horned owl vessel recovered from Mound B, Laughton’s Bayou, Bay County, Florida (8BY28); H: 25cm; W: 19cm (max); D: 6.2cm. NMAI 173754.000. 9.4c: Ceramic recovered from Mound Field,

Wakulla County, Florida (8WA8), AD 200/300-900. H: 21cm; W: 20cm; D: 27cm. NMAI, 174915.000. 9.4d: Ceramic recovered from Tucker Mound, Franklin County, Florida (8FR4). H: 14.5cm; D: 23cm; W: 17cm. NMAI 174087.000. Images courtesy, National Museum of the American Indian [NMAI], Smithsonian Institution; photographs: Ostapkowicz.

Figure 9.5. Fort Walton lug characteristics suggestive of a screech owl, including downturned triangular head and beak. 9.5a: lug. Point Washington Mounds, Walton County (8WL33), AD 1300-1500. H: 6.9cm; W: 14cm; cat no 1415, acc no 72-5-179. 9.5b: lug. Point Washington Mounds, Walton County (8WL33). H: 6cm; W: 10.5cm; cat 1091, no acc number. 9.5c: lug. Near Pickens Ceremonial Cemetery (8WL50); cat no 1505, acc no 73-1-23. H: 7cm; W: 11.5cm. 9.5d: lug. Point Washington Mounds, Walton County (8WL33). H: 6.4cm; W: 7.6cm; cat no 1368, acc no 71-5-1. All images courtesy Indian Temple Mound Museum, City of Fort Walton Beach Heritage Park and Cultural Center, FL; photographs: Ostapkowicz.

Figure 9.6. Stippling featured on owl iconography, particularly surrounding the key features of the owl’s face. Wings are depicted to the sides in full-body

depictions, though they may also be alluded to more subtly, as the stippled bands radiating from the bird’s eyes in the Weeden Island ceramic (9.6a). 9.6a: Rim sherd with owl head and flowing wings. West Bay Post Office Mound, Bay County, Florida (8BY23??). H: 18.3cm; W: 19.5cm; D: 15cm (reconstructed sherd). NMAI 173762.000. 9.6b: Nearly complete ceramic of owl with broken face. Mound A, Bird Hammock, Wakulla County, Florida (8WA9). H: 28cm; W: 19cm; D: 18cm. NMAI 082455.000. 9.6c: Round, highly stippled owl: Aucilla River, Taylor County, Florida (8TA1). H: 3cm; W: 6.5cm; D: 6.5cm. NMAI 180259.000. All images courtesy, National Museum of the American Indian [NMAI], Smithsonian Institution; photographs: Ostapkowicz.

Figure 9.7. Complete owl vessels, Weeden Island, Late Woodland, AD 200-900. Photos: Ostapkowicz, images courtesy museums listed. 9.7a: A large horned owl vessel, complete with customised breakages, all made before firing – identified by Moore as ‘ceremonial, ready-made, mortuary ware’ (Moore 1902:192); Mound B, Laughton’s Bayou, Bay County, Florida. H: 25cm; W: 19cm (max); D: 6.2cm; NMAI 173754.000. 9.7b: A large horned owl ceremonial vessel made with a pre-firing break in the base; Mound Field, Apalachee Bay, Wakulla County, Florida (8WA8). H: 29cm; W: 24cm; D: 26cm; NMAI 173996.00. 9.7c: Owl vessel; Buck Mound (80K11)

(no. 22), recovered from Pits 12, 13, 17. Max diam: 16.5cm. Indian Temple Mound Museum, Fort Walton. Images courtesy, National Museum of the American Indian [NMAI], Smithsonian Institution and Indian Temple Mound Museum, City of Fort Walton Beach Heritage Park and Cultural Center, FL; photographs: Ostapkowicz.

Figure 9.8. Fort Walton pelican rim lugs, featuring a long beak resting on the chest. 9.8a: Pelican lug, front view; Pickens Ceremonial Cemetery (8WL50), H: 5.1cm; cat no 1100. 9.8b: Pelican lug, side view; Johnson site (8WL30). H: 7cm; cat no 1074, acc no 66-10-24. Images courtesy Indian Temple Mound Museum, City of Fort Walton Beach Heritage Park and Cultural Center, FL; photographs: Ostapkowicz.