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Research Notes

Conch Shell Cups and Black Drink

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Conch shell cups appear during Caddoan times as part of trade with other Mississippian groups. Approximately one thousand engraved conch shell cups and at least two to three thousand unengraved cups were found in the Great Mortuary at Spiro (Brown 1975:15). It is assumed that Black Drink (made from *Ilex vomitoria*) was drunk from the conch shell cups because two shell cups were found that contained possible tea residue (Milanich 1979:83). Adair (1968:22-23) relates how the Muskogee (Creeks) honored a wooden statue of an ancestral warrior by drinking tea from a conch shell cup. It appears there is some question that conch shell cups were used because Fairbanks (1979:132) states that both Adair's and Swanton's informants swore that the conch shell cups

were held sacred by the Muskogee. Fairbanks adds that there is enough ethnographic as well as archeological evidence to associate conch shell drinking cups with the Black Drink Ceremony. What Fairbanks doesn't appear to do is to discuss the ethnographic evidence to support his contention. He is correct, however. William Bartram, in his discussion of the Black Drink Ceremony among the Creeks, states that two middle-aged men came in together at the door carrying large conch shells full of black drink and that the person who drank the tea from the shell must do so as long as the middle-aged person sings two notes for as long as the singer's breath could hold out (Van Doren 1928:358-359).

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