



Speaking with the Ancestors: Mississippian Stone Statuary of the Tennessee-Cumberland Region (Dan Josselyn Memorial Publication)

Kevin E. Smith, James V. Miller

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When European explorers began their initial forays into southeastern North America in the 16th and 17th centuries they encountered what they called temples and shrines of native peoples, often decorated with idols in human form made of wood, pottery, or stone. The idols were fascinating to write about, but having no value to explorers searching for gold or land, there are no records of these idols being transported to the Old World, and mention of them seems to cease about the 1700s. However, with the settling of the fledgling United States in the 1800s, farming colonists began to unearth stone images in human form from land formerly inhabited by the native peoples. With little access to the records of the 16th and 17th centuries, debate and speculation abounded by the public and scholars alike concerning their origin and meaning.

During the last twenty years the authors have researched over 88 possible examples of southeastern Mississippian stone statuary, dating as far back as 1,000 years ago, and discovered along the river valleys of the interior Southeast. Independently and in conjunction, they have measured, analyzed, photographed, and traced the known history of the 42 that appear in this volume. Compiling the data from both early documents and public and private collections, the authors remind us that the statuary should not be viewed in isolation, but rather as regional expressions of a much broader body of art, ritual, and belief.

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