

# THE RITUAL KILLING OF SLATE GORGETS AT THE PIG POINT SITE (18AN50)

*Mandy Melton and Al Luckenbach*

## Abstract

The Pig Point site on the Patuxent River in Anne Arundel County, Maryland has proven to have been a highly significant ritual locale for prehistoric populations. Included are over five centuries of mortuary behavior associated with the Delmarva Adena as well as indications of other forms of ritual significance perhaps lasting millennia.

Five years of excavations at this site have produced a large number of slate gorget fragments, mostly recovered slightly downhill from the ritual mortuary hilltop. Like many of the objects contained in the ritual pits, the slate gorgets appear to be deliberately broken or “killed” and a number have undergone subsequent modification, mainly through fine-line incising, gouging, and battering. This paper examines the nature and meaning of this behavior, as well as the significance it might hold for the general interpretation of these enigmatic artifacts.

## Introduction

Investigations at the Pig Point site have revealed a number of interesting intra-site activity areas which all appear to be related to ritual behavior. At the top of a bluff overlooking the Patuxent River at least five large ritual mortuary pits have been discovered which contain materials related to the Delmarva Adena phenomenon (see Luckenbach 2013). Further downhill, two excavation blocks have been excavated. One revealed an area of superimposed unheated structures which appear to have some relationship to the adjacent ritual mortuary behavior, while the other has revealed evidence of ritual feasting. Both the structures and the feasting seem to have occupied the exact same locations going back millennia.

Within these lower excavation blocks a fairly large number of slate gorget fragments have been recovered. At least 27 pieces of gorgets have been found along with 150 small pieces of shattered slate. Some of the shattered pieces derive from plowzone contexts and may, in fact, be historic writing slate. The distribution map shown in Figure 1 demonstrates how the gorget fragments are physically discreet from the ritual hilltop.

Within the mortuary pits, Adena blades made of Midwestern lithic materials, pipestone tube pipes, and selected human remains all appear to have been deliberately broken. The same was the case for a small cache of quartz Delmarva Adena lanceolate blades on one of the pit edges.

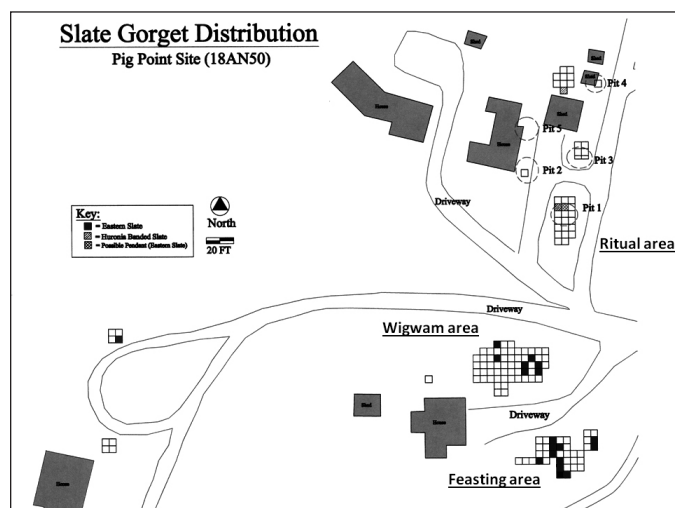


FIGURE 1. Distribution of gorget fragments throughout the various activity areas at the Pig Point site.

Given the propensity for the ritual “killing” of stone tools, pipes, and even human remains at this site, the presence of broken gorgets outside of the mortuary area leads one to suspect that the slate gorgets were also being “killed.”

## Killed?

It is quite common to come across broken objects in the archeological record. When these objects are found in good context, and not mangled by a plow, the question should be asked as to why these artifacts are broken. Did the object break from usage or unintentional damage? Has it been somehow broken during excavation, or was it deliberately destroyed by the people who once carried and used it? The answer could be several of these possibilities but it is the last that is most intriguing.

The term “killed” typically refers to a ceremonial object that has been purposefully broken and placed within or near a burial. In the Middle Atlantic region this term is often associated with the Delmarva Adena culture/complex. Yet, this trait rarely appears within the Adena heartland (Webb and Snow 1988:69).

The act of ritually breaking objects, in fact, is visible as early as Paleoindian times, for example at the Caradoc and Crowfield sites in Ontario (Deller and Ellis 2001). With this being said, archeological sites in the Northeast

appear to display this phenomenon much more frequently. The Meadowood phase in New York for example, which predates Adena by about 200 years, has a mortuary complex where "...grave goods often include intentionally broken objects, as well as reworked fragmentary items" (Ritchie 1980:198). Similarly, it has been noted that in the Eastern Archaic Burial cult "objects were often deliberately broken, probably done to release the spirit of the artifact..." and later on in the Woodland period, the "Middle Atlantic coast practiced their own version of the Northeast burial cult... The presence of red ocher, [and] ritually broken artifacts... all seem to show a northern origin for basic elements of mortuary ceremonies" (Ricky 1999:11).

Within burial contexts it is quite common to see broken items gaining a "killed" designation without further proof being provided to substantiate the claim. Conversely, when broken objects are discovered outside of mortuary contexts, little attention is paid to whether they were deliberately broken. Had Pig Point excavations ceased prior to discovering the mortuary pits, the broken gorgets would perhaps not have been seen as ritually significant.

"In Terminal Archaic and Early Woodland times, non- utilitarian objects such as gorgets...expanded the Archaic inventory of polished items...a strong correlation exists between the initial appearance of these objects and the emergence of elaborate burial ceremonialism" (Taché 2011: 58). The gorget is just one artifact class that receives very little attention but is regularly found broken in the Middle Atlantic region in other than burial contexts.

### Gorgets

The arbitrary title of "gorget" has been a highly contested term for decades. The source of this terminology originates with the fact that their shape is similar to historically known objects of the same name. It is a label thereby given to highly polished objects made of ground stone, shell, or bone that have at least two drilled holes (though large forms with a single perforation in the middle have also been labeled as such). If only one perforation is present, the object is typically considered a "pendant." This paper will concentrate on the ground stone (specifically slate) versions recovered at Pig Point.

These ground and polished slate objects (from this point simply termed "gorgets") have a broad distribution but seem to cluster primarily in the northeastern and Great Lakes region of North America (Peabody and Moorehead 1906:46; Moorehead 1917:Fig. 202)

The actual usage of gorgets is unknown. Peabody and Moorehead's (1906:49-50) classic synopsis of the literature pertaining to gorgets lists an array of their possible uses, including ornamentation/decoration, functional in the molding of ceramics and as a spindle whorl, as well as an arm guard for archery, a fishing reel, a shaft straightener,

noise makers, etc. Upon examination of these objects, many have concluded that the variability in wear patterns does not suggest one single usage. Some examples present extensive wear around their perforations and others do not. Some display considerable use-wear and others appear to be unscathed.

Some clues as to these objects can be derived from their recovery in burial contexts. Gorgets have been found on and around human remains from many different sites ranging in position from on the chest, around the arm, as well as above and below the skull (Peabody and Moorehead 1906; Mills 1907, 1922; Powell 1894). This likely suggests their use has shifted throughout time. Typically, gorgets are highly polished and rarely exhibit decoration other than occasional notching around the edges colloquially referred to as "tally marks" (see Figure 2).

### Description of Gorget Fragments

With a single exception, all of the gorget fragments recovered from Pig Point have been broken, and none have been recovered from the ritual pits. The only whole gorget discovered at Pig Point was recovered just outside of a mortuary pit and is the only classic Adena form at the site (Figure 3). It is made of Huronia banded slate, presumably from Ohio. One other small fragment of banded slate was excavated from the farthest northern excavation block. All of the other gorget fragments have been biconically drilled and manufactured from what appear to be Pennsylvania slates (possibly of the Peach Bottom type).

As shown in Figure 1, most of the gorget fragments have been discovered in the Lower Block "feasting area" south of the mortuary pits, as well as near the Upper Block "wigwam area" (see Luckenbach 2013). In the feasting area midden, gorget fragments seem to cluster around a feature that has been identified as a large post, extending seven feet below ground surface that potentially stood as a "totem" marker along the path up from the Patuxent River. In the wigwam locale, all of the fragments are positioned outside of the structural postmolds. The absence of artifacts within the structural post patterns has been noted for other artifact



FIGURE 2. Gorget exhibiting "tally marks" along its edge.





FIGURE 3. Complete Huronia banded slate gorget.

classes, including ceramic smoking pipes, where broken examples surround a clear open space (see Figure 4). This phenomenon may represent a cleaning of spaces near the structures, perhaps for ritual purposes.

Although transverse medial or radial fractures are generally enough evidence to label a flaked stone object as killed, slate gorgets pose a different case. Physically, slate is not the toughest material, and its cleavage planes make it rather easy to split; moreover, anthropologically—because it is not certain what these artifacts were used for—deciphering whether their breaks were deliberate or accidental is rather hard to prove and many researchers have yet to tackle this issue.

The gorget fragments of Pig Point display a variety of characteristics that strongly suggest they have been deliberately broken. This can be seen in the fact that many of the fragments display breaks suggesting snapping or intentional bashing via impact scars, as well as in a variety of modifications that were made post-breakage. These modifications include patterned incising, random incising, superimposed images, parallel scraping, gouging, and battering.

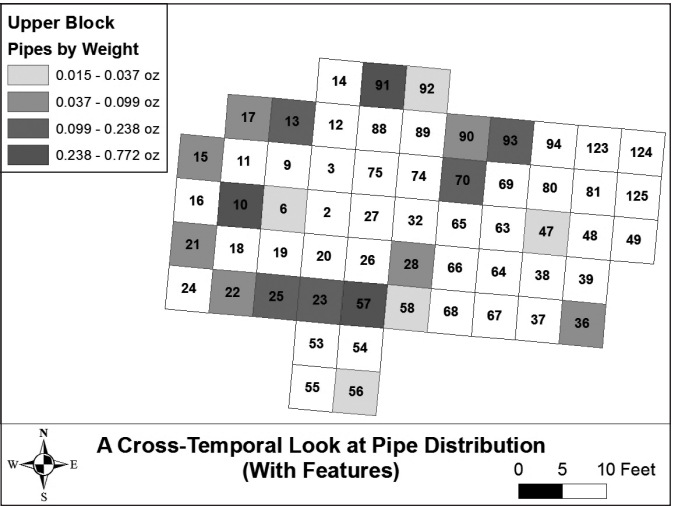


FIGURE 4. Distribution of ceramic smoking pipes at Pig Point.

Additionally, several of the fragments have perforations present which has led Converse (1978:3) to suggest that “drilling was apparently the final step in making pendants and gorgets since numerous examples are completely finished except for the perforations.” Since a finished gorget is identified as a smoothly polished surface, the presence of modifications accompanying a perforation would mean both the break and modifications were performed after the object had been whole.

Parallel scraping, gouging and battering marks are the most common of modifications. The parallel scraping (Figure 5) appears as if the object’s face was being sanded

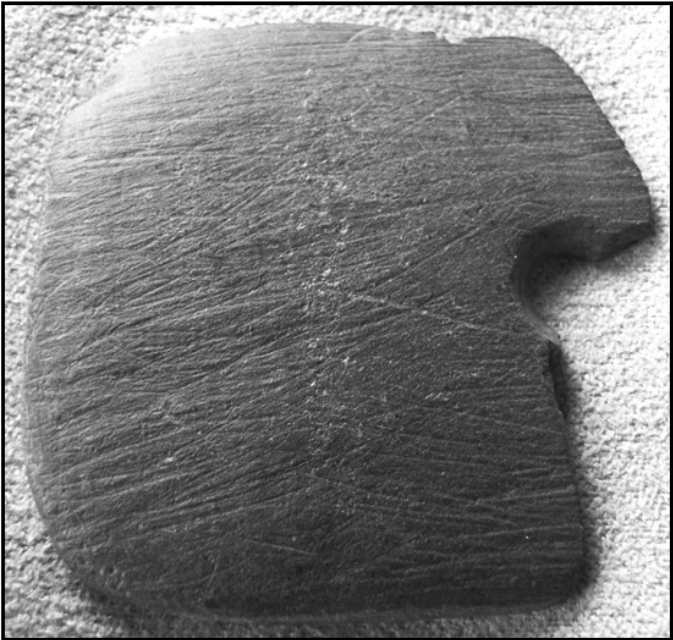


FIGURE 5. Gorget fragment exhibiting parallel scraping.

down/scratched as if to erase the symbolism of the polishing but not to alter the general shape of the object. The constancy of the scratch markings suggests a deliberate attempt to modify the face. Gouging and battering marks typically appear in clusters, representing many repeated blows to the object with a hard, relatively sharp object. Other individual battering marks tend to overlay previous modifications which may have been caused unintentionally.

Figure 6 displays one fragment that exemplifies many of these modifications. Careful examination of this fragment revealed parallel scraping/incising continuing onto the breakage plane. The random clusters of direct impact scars that are present on many fragments leads to the question of why one would further damage a fragment after the whole object had been broken. Perhaps it was one extra precautionary act in a ritual act to further release the spirit held within the object as many have speculated (Ricky 1999:11; Thomas 1976; Ellis 2002:37). Mills (1922:255) even suggests that “this ‘killing’ ceremony seems to have been widespread and... may have carried with it something of the idea contained in the cremation ritual—the release of the spiritual essence of the object.” At Pig Point, however, this behavior cannot be tied directly to any mortuary contexts as the fragments are found over 85 feet away from the mortuary pits.

Incised modifications are infrequent, but when they appear they tend to be patterned. On two, possibly three, fragments this patterned incision creates a crisscrossed/helix design. The repeated symbolism has a meaning unfathomable as of now. Random incisions are represented by arbitrary lines or unidentifiable images. Because the purpose of these objects is unknown, the presence of several of these “random” incisions, though seemingly deliberate, may be the result of use-wear (Figure 7).

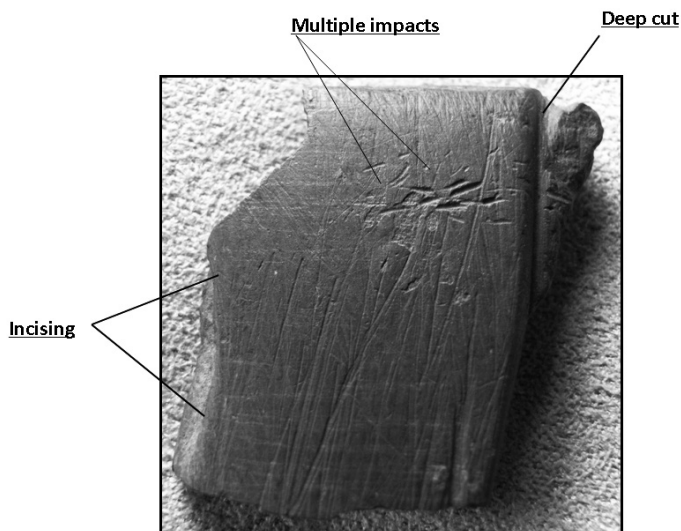


FIGURE 6. Gorget fragment exhibiting multiple forms of modification.

The presence of carefully incised decorations is present on at least four, possibly six fragments, all of which do not proceed past the break (e.g., Figure 8). Of the four that have patterned incisions, the decoration is placed in the middle of the fragment following the contour of the break. These incisions do not continue past the break and were more than likely placed after the original object had been broken. Furthermore, Figure 9 displays a gorget that may have a representation of a bird superimposed by a series of crisscrossed lines. If this is the case, this fragment is one of only a handful of known gorgets that display any sort of representational image.

The concept of killed gorgets is best represented by two fragments that mend. As Figure 10 shows, after the whole object was broken (probably snapped), one half was transformed into what may be a pendant. When these fragments are together, it is obvious that the decorations on both halves have been placed after they were separated. The “pendant” half appears to have many series of superimposed images and was reshaped as evident where the edges have been ground down. The second half also seems to have been processed after it was detached—visible where the extremities of each face have been considerably battered. This wear pattern is reminiscent of unfinished smoothing



FIGURE 7. Gorget fragment exhibiting random and patterned incisions.



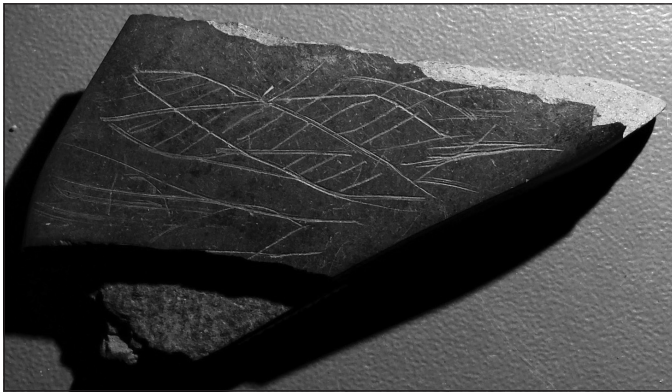


FIGURE 8. Gorget fragment exhibiting careful incision.

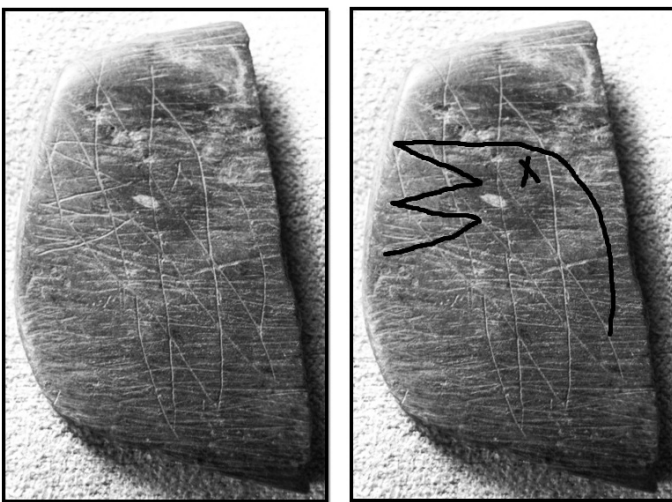


FIGURE 9. Gorget fragment exhibiting incised decoration, including a possible bird representation.

of broken edges.

The different engravings placed on each fragment of the broken gorget suggest that different individuals decorated the halves. If this was the case, after the gorget was broken and divvied up, it could be said theoretically that one individual who obtained the “pendant fragment” (Fragment A) proceeded to sand down/scrape only one side of Fragment A, then incised fine lines on both sides. Thick lines were gouged on top of the fine incisions on both sides of Fragment A and eventually turned into what may be a pendant. Because of the difference in style of the superimposed images, it is even possible that more than one individual altered Fragment A. Alternatively, the individual who received the second fragment (Fragment B) did not alter their piece as much as the modifier of Fragment A. This individual carved intricate crisscrossing lines on both faces of the Fragment B without sanding down either face beforehand. There may be some faint lines beneath the final session of incisions but it is indiscernible whether these were deliberate at this point. Apart from these incisions,

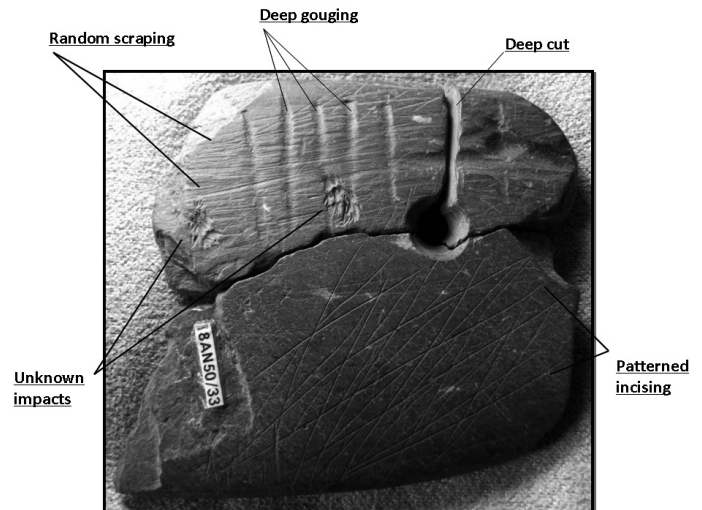


FIGURE 10. Re-fitted “killed” gorget fragments exhibiting multiple (and multi-episode) transformations.

very little appears to have been done afterwards to modify this fragment. Perhaps Fragment B had not been passed around as long as Fragment A?

### Discussion

Hypothetically, if the mended gorget can stand as a model for the “life histories” of the other fragments, it would represent several stages of the “killing” process occurring at Pig Point. What we can discern from this gorget alone is that a probably blank gorget had been snapped at least twice, with a divvying up of pieces between different individuals who further manipulated their portion. The fact that these two fragments were discovered at the same stratum but 15-20 feet apart suggests that the division of fragments was performed in small groups. Were they passed down through familial generations or to apprentices? Why are we not finding the mates to the other fragments? Are groups traveling here to perform these rituals or have they simply not yet been excavated?

Chapman’s (2000) theory of fragmentation and enchainment may be used here to shine a light on this find. He presents the idea that an object’s deconstruction—symbolizing life and death—links objects and people through a sense of enchainment:

...people who wish to establish some form of social relationship or conclude some kind of transaction agree on a specific artifact appropriate to the interaction in question and break it in two or more parts, each keeping one or more parts as token of the relationship....the part of the object may itself be further broken and part passed on down the chain, to a third party...The example of

the enchained relations between the newly dead and close kin amongst the living is just one kind of enchained relation between kinsfolk which could be envisaged.

(Chapman 2000:6)

This fragmentation theory may explain why the objects were originally broken and why, with one exception, mendable fragments were not recovered. However, the variability in modifications seen on the mendable fragment does suggest that the two pieces went through multiple hands.

If these objects do represent the outcome of a ritual act, why would they have been discarded in such a seemingly meaningless manner? With a macro view of the entire Pig Point site, this may not be the case. Though the final deposition does not seem as obviously significant today, this does not mean the objects in question were not highly valued during their use. Deller and Ellis (2001:281) have concluded that “it is increasingly evident, however, that artifact offerings and ritual artifact breakage can occur in early nonburial contexts.” This is due to the fact that North American groups practiced a diversity of symbolic ritual/ceremonial performances that may or may not have included the presence of the physical body of the deceased.

Renfrew and Bahn (2000) have attempted to create a list of possible indicators of ritual places that correlate to many aspects of the Pig Point site. Several of these indicators include ‘a special building set apart for sacred functions’ that may display concepts of cleanliness and maintenance, as well as ‘rich in repeated symbols.’ They (Renfrew and Bahn 2000:408-409) further suggest that “animal symbolism may often be used with particular animals relating to specific deities or powers” and “other material objects may be brought and offered (votives). The act of offering may entail breakage and hiding or discard.”

Furthermore, the presence of incised decorations on the fragments is clearly significant, especially the possibility of the bird representation (see Figure 9). The image could possibly be seen as representing a thunderbird or raven—both common motifs in Native American mythology. It might also be seen as a clan representation or that of a shamanistic spirit guide. “Among Native peoples of North America... birds are powerful symbols perceived as mediators between the various cosmic realms. Bird motifs... are often part of a shaman’s regalia and/or paraphernalia, conferring on him the power to communicate with creatures and spirits inhabiting beyond the world known to human beings” (Taché 2011:60).

The lines that may be radiating through the bird are also reminiscent of many thunderbird tales and pictographs in which lightning bolts emit from the bird as a display of its great power (Cooper 2005:63,64;Lenik 2009:223-224). Cooper (2005:70), in an analysis of portable ground stone petroglyphs, states that “the reoccurring use of symbols

imbued with power, such as thunderbirds...indicate they were intended either to bestow power or protect an individual from malignant forces.” Because of the “power” often associated with such objects, it has been speculated that gorgets are tools/objects of religious practitioners (Ellis 2002:37; Hranicky 2009:322). No other clearly representative images have been identified on gorgets at Pig Point.

Additionally, the repetitive nature of the crisscross/hatched/helix pattern alone is worth noting. On three separate fragments this design is found. Though one seems a bit more haphazard than the others, the fragments examined under a microscope display lines that were thought out and sketched prior to the deep incision. Given the fact that these objects have vaguely similar symbols, and are dispersed through several generations at this site, the possibility that these are specialized ritual objects may be reinforced.

A recent article has sought to link the widespread usage of similar geometric patterns around the world to a ‘biologically determined hallucinatory experience’ (Froese et al. 2013). With hallucinogenic plants being a very well-known shaman tool, these designs may actually symbolize a shamanic journey. Edward Lenik, in his books accounting Northeastern Native American rock art, continually associates “the bird-like attributes of the figures [to be] consistent with the shamanistic belief of spiritual out of body flight and the function of shamans as intermediaries between the spirit world and humans” (Lenik 2009:136; see also Lenik 2002). Considering that ethnographic records have also shown that shamans tend to pass down their secrets to an apprentice, these gorget fragments might be seen as shamanic heirlooms.

## Conclusion

The Pig Point site presents clear evidence that stone gorgets were being deliberately “killed” and subsequently modified for unknown ritual purposes. The killing of many artifact classes at Pig Point, including Adena blades, tube pipes, and paint cups is quite extensive. The fact that the killed slate gorgets are being discarded at some distance from the Adena-related pits further uphill is quite significant. They might, therefore, represent a non-mortuary element of the Delmarva Adena ritual complex which has not been previously recorded. These clues also suggest that a possible shamanistic component exists at the site which has not been recognized elsewhere.

It is also apparent that the similar treatment of gorgets—killing and then modifying for some ritual purpose—occurs over a widespread area of Eastern North America. Isolated examples of what seems to be the same behavior are fairly common in the literature. At Pig Point, however, the ability to place a relatively large sample of these objects, in good context, at a site with demonstrable intra-site ritual behavior, provides some of the clearest evidence yet for the nature of this behavior.

## References Cited

- Chapman, John  
2000 *Fragmentation in Archaeology: People, Places and Broken Objects in the Prehistory of South-Eastern Europe*. London: Routledge.
- Converse, Robert  
1978 *Ohio Slate Types*. Archaeological Society of Ohio.
- Cooper, Martin  
2005 Etched in Stone: Ground Stone as a Symbolic Medium. *Ontario Archaeology* 79, 80:63-71.
- Deller, D. B., and C. J. Ellis  
2001 Evidence for Late Paleoindian Ritual from the Caradoc Site (AfHj-104), Southwestern Ontario, Canada. *American Antiquity* 66(2):267-284.
- Ellis, Christopher  
2002 An Unusual Slate Gorget Fragment from Oxford County. *Ontario Archaeology* 74:22-42.
- Froese, Tom, Alexander Woodward; and Takashi Ikegami  
2013 Turing Instabilities in Biology, Culture, and Consciousness? On the Enactive Origins of Symbolic Material Culture. *Adaptive Behavior* 21(3):199-214.
- Hranicky, Jack  
2009 *Material Culture from Prehistoric Virginia, Volume 1*. AuthorHouse, Bloomington, IN.
- Lenik, Edward  
2002 *Picture Rocks: American Indian Rock Art in the Northeast Woodlands*. University Press of New England, Hanover.  
2009 *Making Pictures in Stone: American Indian Rock Art of the Northeast*. University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa.
- Luckenbach, Al  
2013 A "Delmarva Adena" Mortuary Complex at Pig Point on the Patuxent River, Maryland. *Journal of Middle Atlantic Archaeology*, 29:1-22.
- Mills, William C.  
1907 *Certain Mounds and Village Sites in Ohio*, Volume 1. Press of Fred J. Heer, Columbus, Ohio.  
1922 Exploration of the Mound City Group. *Ohio Archaeological and Historical Society Quarterly* 31:423-584.
- Moorehead, Warren K.  
1917 *Stone Ornaments Used by Indians of the United States and Canada*. The Andover Press, Andover, MA.
- Peabody, Charles, and Warren K. Moorehead  
1906 *The So-Called "Gorgets."* The Andover Press, Andover, MA.
- Powell, J.W.  
1894 Report of the Director. *Twelfth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1890-1891*.
- Renfrew, Colin and Paul Bahn  
2000 *Archaeology: Theories, Methods, and Practice*. Thames and Hudson Ltd., New York.
- Ricky, Donald E.  
1999 *Indians of Louisiana Past and Present*. Somerset Publishers, Inc., St. Clair Shores, MI.
- Ritchie, William  
1980 *Archaeology of New York State*. Revised Edition. Harbor Hill Books, Harrison, New York.
- Taché, Karine  
2011 New Perspectives on Meadowood Trade Items. *American Antiquity* 76(1):41-79.
- Thomas, R.A.  
1976 A Re-Evaluation of the St. Jones River Site. *Archaeology of Eastern North America* 4:89-110.
- Webb, R.S., and C.E. Snow  
1988 *The Adena People*. University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville.

---

**Mandy Melton** is a Field and Laboratory Technician with the *Lost Towns Project*. She is a graduate of Towson University with a B.S. in Anthropology focused in Archeology. She has completed several field schools across Maryland and continues to pursue her interests in researching primitive technology through prehistoric archeology. She can be contacted through Anne Arundel County's Office of Planning and Zoning, Cultural Resources Division, 2664 Riva Road, Annapolis, Maryland 21401.

---

**Al Luckenbach** is the Director of the *Lost Towns Project*. He has been the Anne Arundel County Archaeologist for 26 years, and holds a B.A. from the University of Virginia, and an M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Kentucky. He can be contacted through Anne Arundel County's Office of Planning and Zoning, Cultural Resources Division, 2664 Riva Road, Annapolis, Maryland 21401.

---