



2 | Making Sense of the Mound: Archaeological Interpretation at Godin

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We have here a new and exact method for dealing with all those vague ages as yet unfathomed, and for extracting all that is possible about their history. Prehistoric archaeology has made another step toward becoming an exact science. And now the responsibility of those who excavate is tenfold increased, as the extent of their care and exactitude will more than ever restore or ruin the history of the past.

—Sir Flinders Petrie, 1899

Interpreting the results of an archaeological excavation is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle of Monet's *Water Lilies* that is missing all the blue pieces, all the edge pieces, and some pieces that were swept off the table by a stray gust of wind. The assembled puzzle in some sense reflects what must have originally been there, and some of the gaps are either predictable or restorable, but it is impossible not to acknowledge that the holes in the picture are wide and gaping. At the same time, what is left has a beauty and logic of its own that can be appreciated without reference to the complete puzzle. The impact of the abstracted wings of the rampant eagle on a Godin Period III jar (Figure 2.1) stands on its own as a universally beautiful object and a testament to the potter who made it, without any knowledge about the society in which they lived. Even when we can piece together the puzzle itself, however, it is still a huge leap to move from the impressionist painting to the garden at Giverny. And yet, while some contemporary anthropologists would argue that there is no way beyond the daubs of paint that constitute the outward manifestation of societies even for living, observable, human cultures, most archaeologists still search to reconstruct not only the pond, but the frogs in it, the flies on the frogs, and even sometimes the fleas on the flies.