

TREASURE SEARCH

Gorget acted as battle protection

BY NANCY AND FRANK BOOS
SPECIAL WRITERS

Dear Nancy and Frank:
I bought this at an antique show. It is about five inches high, three inches wide and 1/8-inch thick. Please tell me something about it.
Daniel,
Birmingham

Dear Daniel:
What you have there is probably an American Indian gorget (pronounced "gor-jit").

A gorget is a piece of armor or some other protective device or crescent-shaped ornament worn around the throat. It originated with medieval armor and at that time consisted of a neck defense made in two halves that wrapped around the entire neck just under the helmet and just above the torso armor. Often the two halves were again made of several parts to allow flexibility and movement of the neck. The halves were fastened with pins or studs to hold them in place.

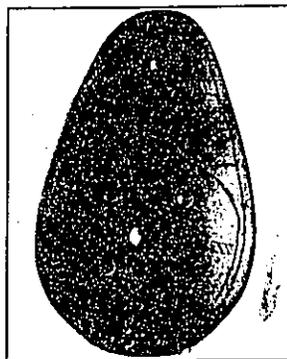
Obviously, the purpose of the gorget was to protect one of man's most likely areas to receive a death blow in battle, his throat. As a point of interest, these suits of armor were heaviest in the

parts covering the most vulnerable areas and would weigh between 25 and 100 pounds, requiring the knight to have a valet's help to put it on and take it off.

The American Indian also had some protective battle devices, such as shields, helmets of wood (painted with designs meant to frighten the enemy), bows and arrows, knives, clubs and the well-known tomahawk. Around the 1880s, they began to acquire rifles. Some tribes also had wooden slats tied together and wrapped around their bodies and held up with shoulder straps. Some used carved wooden collars (gorgets) that they wound around their necks.

As the Europeans began trading with the American Indians in the 17th century, they began influencing the Indians in their dress styles. By the 19th century, many Indian garments were copied directly from European dress.

However, there was one major exception, that being that the Indian refused to copy Western European style men's trousers. Leggings were de rigueur leg wear for the American Indian male, which makes sense. It would be difficult to wear form-fitting trousers to ride bareback, sit cross-legged on tepee



Defensive device: A gorget ("gor-jit") was worn around the throat to protect it in battle.

floors, run in the woods, fish, etc. We believe the gorgets worn by American Indians at this time were mostly of silver, mostly decorative and received in trade with the Germans. Your piece,

however, could be a pre-European gorget, probably of slate. It is possibly pre-Columbian (before the time of Columbus) or prehistoric (for our purposes meaning before the time of written history in the United States). It has absolutely no European influence that we can see.

You'll notice the use of words like "could be," "probably," "possibly." This is because this is all conjecture, as there is no written or visual record of this time in our history.

It is also conjecture as to the purpose of this gorget. It seems to us that when suspended from the neck, it would be too small to provide much protection in battle. We therefore believe that it was ornamental and strictly a personal enhancement. We think it's possible that the engraving represents someone's status or a historical happening in the wearer's life, but the engraving looks somewhat contemporary compared to the piece and may have been a later addition.

We know one thing: You don't see gorgets of this type every day. If it's real and in good condition, we think a good auction value would be around \$300 to \$400 and possibly somewhere double that at retail.

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