The Great Serpent Mound and the Milky Way

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The Great Serpent Mound is a monumental earthen sculpture representing a snake, situated on the top of a narrow, rocky bluff overlooking Ohio Brush Creek in southern Ohio (Figure 1). The entire sculpture is 427 m long and 1.5 m high.

The date of the effigy’s original construction is a subject of debate, with some arguing for an early date of 300 BC by the Adena culture (800 BC–100 AD) (Herrmann et al. 2014) and others for a late date of 1100 AD by the Fort Ancient culture (1000–1650 AD) (Fletcher...
et al. 1996). Establishing the cultural context for the original construction of Serpent Mound is crucial for attempts to understand its purpose and meaning.

The Adena culture lived in small groups of hunter-fisher-gatherers who supplemented their diet with horticulture. Their ceremonial lives were focused on burial mounds of varying size and small, circular earthen enclosures (Lepper 2005). They are not known to have built any effigy mounds (Lepper et al. 2018). In contrast, the Fort Ancient culture lived in large, palisaded villages supported by maize farming (Lepper 2005). Influence from the contemporary Mississippian culture in the American Midwest and Southeast is indicated by the presence of the occasional platform mound as well as wall trench houses and ceramic styles (Cook 2017). The Fort Ancient culture built a small number of effigy mounds, including the so-called Alligator Mound, as well as a number of putative stone serpent effigies (Lepper et al. 2022, 9).

Support for the proposed Adena culture affiliation depends entirely on a series of problematic radiocarbon dates (Lepper 2020b), whereas the Fort Ancient culture attribution is supported by a smaller number of more reliable radiocarbon dates in addition to numerous iconographic connections between Serpent Mound and Fort Ancient culture and contemporary Mississippian serpent imagery (Lepper et al. 2018, Lepper 2020a).

The head of the Serpent Mound is aligned to the sunset on the summer solstice (Hardman and Hardman 1987), and some have claimed the three major curves of the body are aligned either to three key sunrises, namely the northern curve to the summer solstice sunrise, the middle curve to the equinox sunrise and the southern curve to the winter solstice sunrise, or to three key moonrises, namely the northern curve to the northernmost rise of the Moon, the middle curve to the moonrise at the mid-point in its cycle and the southern curve to the southernmost rise of the Moon. The importance of solar alignments at other Fort Ancient culture sites (e.g. Heilman and Hoefer 1981; Lepper et al. 2018, 441) adds plausibility to the idea that Serpent Mound might incorporate multiple solar alignments in its design, and provides additional support for a Fort Ancient culture affiliation for the Serpent. In regard to the alignments associated with the curves of the Serpent’s body, however, Anthony Aveni (2004, 251) has noted that “the huge latitude of choices regarding figural alignments” precludes our ability to determine whether or not they are intentional.

Lepper and colleagues (2018) compared the iconography of the Great Serpent Mound with the extraordinary pictographic record of Picture Cave in Missouri, which co-authors James Duncan and Carol Diaz-Granádos had interpreted through the lens of Dhegiha Siouan oral traditions (Figure 2). The Dhegihan Sioux are a group of related tribes that occupied the Midwestern Plains at the time of European contact and who were closely associated with the great Mississippian city of Cahokia. According to their traditions, they originally lived in the Ohio Valley (Swanton 1943). Based on the shared iconography of Serpent Mound and pictographs at Picture Cave, Lepper and colleagues (2018) concluded that Serpent Mound actually included two distinct effigies – the Great Serpent and First Woman.

The Great Serpent is “the Chief of the Underwater Spirits. He is the rainbow in the daytime sky; the Milky Way in the night sky” (Duncan 2015, 214). Duncan (2015, 230) asserts that his identification with the Milky Way “is foundational to the cosmology of the Dhegiha”.

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First Woman “is the most powerful female spirit, the spirit of the earth […] She is also the night sky” (Duncan 2015, 212). A pivotal moment in the Dhegihan genesis story occurred when First Woman had coitus with the Great Serpent, thereby acquiring his powers of regeneration, which she used to create all life on Earth (Lepper et al. 2018). Lepper and colleagues (2018) view both the Picture Cave and Serpent Mound tableaux as representations of this episode in the Dhegiha Siouan creation story (Figure 2). Both have the same basic elements: the Great Serpent, a more or less stylised anthropomorph with spread legs and an oval motif. The same authors (Lepper et al. 2018, 442) interpret the oval as First Woman’s vulva.

According to Dhegihan oral tradition, First Woman’s vulva is the portal through which the Sun passes when it sets in the evening. It is also the entrance to the Path of Souls/Milky Way, along which the souls of the dead travel on their journey to the Realm of the Dead, which lies at the southern end of the Path (Lankford 2007, 175, 178; Duncan and Diaz-Granádos 2018, 61). The belief that the Milky Way is the “highway to heaven” (Joyce Bear, quoted in Reilly 2004, 188) is nearly universal among the Indigenous tribes of North America (Lankford 2007, 179).

The interpretation of the Serpent Mound oval earthwork as First Woman’s vulva and a portal to the Land of the Dead (the Lower World) finds support in its location explicitly
between the legs of the earthwork identified as First Woman, as well as in its similarities to the Osage Big Moon peyote altar (Figure 3), which also is said to represent First Woman’s vulva (Duncan and Diaz-Granádos 2004, 207). In addition, both Serpent Mound and the altar are oriented to the west, which is consistent with the idea that they were intended to evoke “the realm of First Woman – and death” (Duncan and Diaz-Granádos 2018, 61).

George Lankford (2007, 212) notes that there appears to be considerable time depth to the idea that the Milky Way was the Path of Souls, an observation that might appear to provide some support for an early date for Serpent Mound. The particular configuration of Serpent Mound, however, clearly situates it within a Mississippian artistic milieu (Lepper 2020a).

Mississippian representations of the Great Serpent are distinctive in “their unique size, placement, elaboration, and at times function” (Power 2004, 177). In particular, “the Mississippian artistic tradition features often-bizarre configurations of dragon-like creatures whose images invoke mystery and hidden knowledge” (Reilly and Garber 2007, 2).

The Great Serpent Mound, therefore, represents a fusion of Mississippian/ Dhegihan ideology and artistic styles, Upper Midwestern Late Woodland modes of telling sacred stories with effigy mounds and Fort Ancient culture traditions. This cultural confluence could not have happened prior to 1100 AD (Lepper et al. 2022). This amazing earthen sculpture of the Great Serpent, which is an overwhelming presence in the night sky as the Milky Way, is equally overwhelming as a landscape experience (Figure 1, above) and as an epic story of creation.
References


