



# THE GREAT SERPENT MOUND

THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS EFFIGY



**A CHANGING LANDSCAPE** Approaching Serpent Mound from the west, the leading edge of the Appalachian Plateau will be prominent, bringing fundamental changes in the geology, ecology, flora, and fauna. Many of Ancient Ohio's greatest earthen monuments seem to cluster along this ecological seam (prominent from here, through Chillicothe, to Newark), where the abundance of multiple landscapes could be combined and celebrated. The change in scenery is most welcome, and the rolling hills and narrow valleys offer wonderful vistas.

**SERPENT MOUND** Ohio's famous serpent effigy is best visited early or late in the day, when shadows are deep. Site interpretation is much enhanced by the small museum, and by the old iron tower allowing visitors to get an overhead view of the sprawling creature. Most beautiful are the snake's spiraling tail, the 3 main coils (which some claim offer astronomical alignments), and the head (or egg, or eye, or the sun) which faces the summer solstice sunset during celebrations every June 21.

The quarter-mile-long snake occupies the saddle of a ridge, near a set of ancient burial mounds. Its earthen form seems to slither westward, its head abruptly overhanging the edge of an enormous crater. This snake has rested here for 1,000 years, with its summer solstice sunset suggesting that one of the effigy's purposes was to mark the turning of the year so that planting and gathering and hunting could be planned.



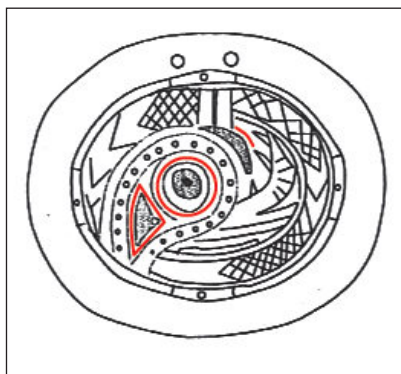
**THE GREAT SERPENT MOUND MAP**

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**SITE HISTORY AND DATING**

In 1883, Frederick Ward Putnam of Harvard University first visited the Serpent, and began a successful campaign to buy and restore it. Harvard gave the Serpent Mound to the State of Ohio in 1900, and today it remains a State Memorial open to the public, and managed on behalf of the Ohio History Connection by staff and volunteers of the Arc of Appalachia Preserve System.

The effigy has been connected to the widespread "Mississippian" cultural world. Some carbon dates have indicated the Great Serpent was built by people of the "Fort Ancient" tradi-

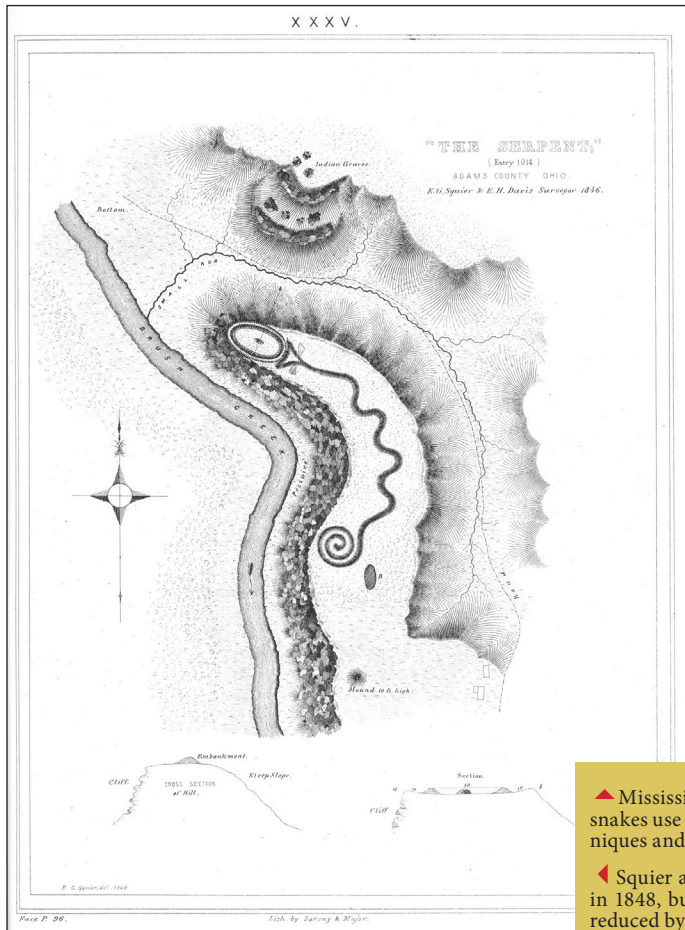


tion, who followed centuries after the Hopewell. And parts of the creature's head can be compared to drawings of rattlesnakes incised on shells by related Mississippian peoples: the great eye, the poison glands, the heat-sensing organ.

We still respect and fear poisonous snakes, but to the builders of this effigy, the serpent had more meanings, probably connected with the sun's control over the growth of crops, and the cycle of the seasons.

The Adena-era mound nearby indicates this site was important for centuries before, and recent research has raised new questions and possibilities that the effigy itself dates back to Adena-Hopewell times. Indeed, long before humans were here at all, the vicinity of Serpent Mound was a geological anomaly, a crater likely the result of a collision or explosion. The serpent's head looks out over the western rim of this 4-mile wide formation.

Walk the serpent's elegant length from the spiraling tail (overlooking a steep section of the Brush Creek cliffs), along the 3 main coils and down past the head.

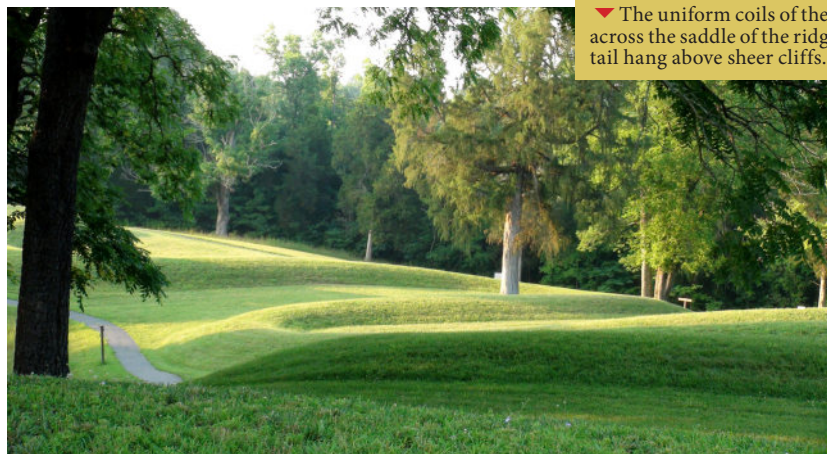


**THE BEAUTY OF THE EFFIGY** Nobody is indifferent to snakes. Whether it was veneration or trepidation that inspired its builders, this creature's beauty and power are obvious. Like all great art, it appeals to us by blending the recognizable with the abstract: its stylized precision speaks to us of "all serpents," and more generally of "the serpentine" as an aesthetic quality. The three coils seem perfectly uniform from above, and yet as they unwind

across the saddle of the hill, they gently undulate, giving the creature's body a slithering, lifelike energy. The tail is a perfect spiral, angled gently outwards toward the cliff and valley below.

- ▲ Mississippian depictions of rattlesnakes use the same representational techniques and abstractions as the effigy.
- ♦ Squier and Davis recorded the Serpent in 1848, but by 1860 it was already being reduced by farming and treasure hunters.
- ▼ The uniform coils of the body undulate across the saddle of the ridge; the head and tail hang above sheer cliffs.

The head is so beautifully abstracted that it has baffled its archaeological interpreters for decades: is it an egg, a frog, or the sun? Is it the snake's open mouth, its giant never-blinking eye, or its poison glands? Squier and Davis described how the builders modified the ground considerably in order to create symmetrical, ten-foot-wide surfaces along both sides of this







▲ A trail accessible from both sides of the body leads to the bank of Brush Creek, and views of the cliffs beneath the head and tail.

▼ A model in the museum shows how the body of the serpent was constructed over a stone-reinforced clay surface.

▼ ▼ The stone “head” is a jutting fragment from the “crypto-explosion” – the most cataclysmic event that ever happened in Ohio.



oval figure. The refined geometry has attracted, yet baffled, all interpreters: typical analyses can get close to finding rational, or numerical formulae, including the oft-cited solar alignments, but everything is just a little bit off – perhaps too subtle for our methods today.

We know that the design was laid out all at once, with a layer of clay and ash, and reinforced with stones. The genius of its designers remains apparent: this blend of beauty, familiarity, abstraction, power, precision, and mystery, make Ohio’s Serpent Mound one of the great, iconic images for all of human antiquity.

**THE RIVER TRAIL** The serpent lies across a dramatic bluff. Both the head and the tail stand atop steep cliffs. Below winds Ohio Brush Creek, through the wide bottom of the ancient crater. On either side of the snake’s body, trails lead down through the forest to the riverbank. From down here, especially in the winter, the undulating shape of the bluff is visible: most prominent is a sharp, head-like formation, directly beneath the serpent’s head.

The serpent’s builders may have understood, from generations of their ancestors, that this unusual formation was already charged with the spiritual powers of serpents: that a giant snake was already embodied in the cliff forms, or slithering out of them.

**THE CRYPTO-EXPLOSION CRATER** The valley beneath the effigy is really the western rim of a mysterious, four-mile-wide, circular crater – the eroded remains of a huge, catastrophic event geologists call “The Serpent Mound Disturbance.” About three-hundred million years ago, either an asteroid collision or an underground explosion blew apart more than seven cubic miles of rock. The central area was uplifted more than one thousand feet, while an outer rim dropped more than four-hundred feet.

What we see today results from eons of erosion, although the shattered fragments of the “Central Uplift” remain among the hills above Serpent Mound. The distant ridge tops, visible from the overlooks, stand high today because they are the much harder Ordovician bedrock that was offset by the event.

The strange geology of this spot was first noticed in modern times by Dr. John Locke of



▲ Native Americans and others, with many interpretations of the site's meaning, gather for the annual summer solstice sunset.

Cincinnati, who named it “Sunken Mountain” in 1838. Yet, it’s not hard to imagine that the ancient effigy builders could have recognized the unusual land forms. The serpent looks out from the edge of the Central Uplift zone.

**THE SERPENT’S MYSTERIES** From the diversity of its modern visitors, it is clear that Serpent Mound means many things to many people, yet it remains little understood by archaeologists today. Questions persist about its date, its builders, and its meanings. Indian stories also vary widely: some even consider it an evil place! Arc of Appalachia Director Nancy Stranahan ponders this sense of mystery:

*Serpent Mound is truly a powerful sacred site. I actually feel very humble trying to give voice to it, but I can tell you how it affects me. A serpent is the symbol of mystery, we don’t understand it, we know almost nothing about it. When we interpret it, we mostly tell what we don’t know. In that, I think, lies its power. We feel we know so much, and yet we mostly live in an unknown universe, and I think Serpent Mound is that gateway to remembering that, we don’t really know anything. What we know is a particle or grain of sand on a beach.*

Even for scholars of the site, its meanings are uncertain: It may be the “Horned Serpent” of Native American legend, perhaps in the act of swallowing the sun, as in an

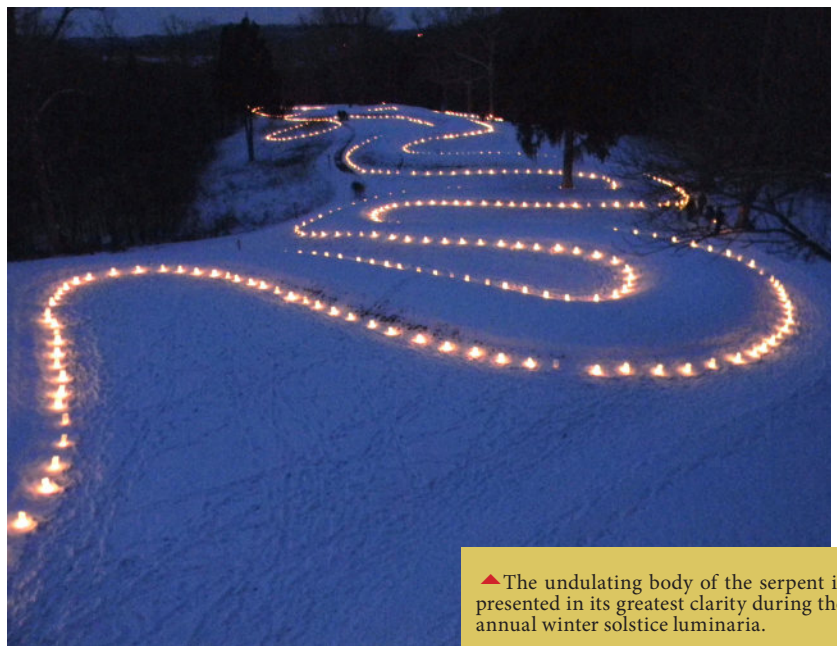
eclipse. If built around 1066, it may be related to the “blazing serpent in the sky” that we call “Halley’s Comet” – its brightest known appearance was that year. The iconography resembles Mississippian serpents from the same time period, found on artworks from among the urban cultures farther west.

The Great Serpent, through its fame, has been opened up to many interpretations, for many people, groups, and traditions. A visit during the sunset celebrations on any June 21 tells the story: Indians from many tribes and groups, new-age mystics, earthworks enthusiasts, among others, together have many ideas about what makes this place sacred, or somehow spiritually-loaded.

**DECEMBER LUMINARIA** New rituals are adding contemporary

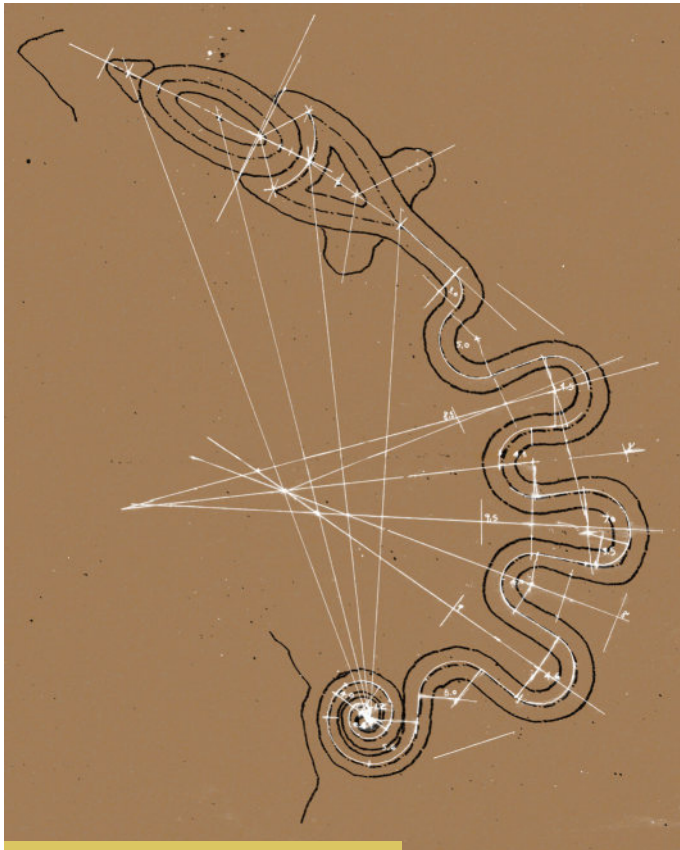
meanings to the mix: Each year on the winter solstice, the volunteer group “Friends of Serpent Mound” organizes a luminaria festival here. Through the late afternoon, dozens of people walk the serpent’s quarter-mile length, patiently outlining its coils, head, and tail, with these tiny points of light. By nightfall, the ritual is complete, and the giant creature comes to life, more vividly than at any other time.

In 2010, the snake’s body was blanketed by a beautiful, recent snowfall. And as night fell, the colors changed slowly to deep blue, then black. The aura of reverence and wonder created by this modern ritual seems to echo the connections, and the respect, felt by the effigy’s builders long ago. The mid-winter celebrations



▲ The undulating body of the serpent is presented in its greatest clarity during the annual winter solstice luminaria.





▲ Modern scholars have tried to identify the geometrical and astronomical ordering of the serpent's complex forms.

continue with a bonfire, fellowship, warm cider, and drumming.

**THE SERPENT OF EDEN** So recognizable was the figure of the snake, that some early visitors “knew instantly” that they could explain exactly what the Serpent Mound was about, conforming it to their own specific cultural traditions. Dr. Brad Lepper offers a prime example:

*The epitome of that is the Reverend Landen West, who right around the turn of the century, right around 1900, saw the serpent, this magnificent serpent, with what he thought was something in the serpent's jaws, and he said, “This isn't just any serpent. This is the serpent of the Garden of Eden with the apple in its mouth, and this was built by God to mark the location of Eden.” Now Adams County is a beautiful, beautiful natural area, natural environment, but I think the notion that it's the Garden of Eden is telling us a lot more of what was on the Reverend West's mind, than what was in the mind of the people who built it originally.*

**THE SERPENT PATH** Various native traditions and stories are associated with Serpent Mound. Mekoce Shawnee Chief Frank Wilson tells one that connects the mound with a ritual of spiritual cleansing:

*If you count the curves in the Serpent, there's seven of them, you know, there's seven curves before it gets to the head. And seven, the way I was taught, for the Shawano people, is the seven gates that one must go through to reach spirituality, or enlightenment, as people call it. To become a dawan, a medicine person. So each curve, a person walked the snake. They walked the serpent. And there were certain things they had to accomplish on each curve of the snake's back. And as they accomplished this they moved on, and when they reached the head, they reached a point where everything was completely stripped away except their spirit.*