

North America's Sacred Serpents

Exploring Connections through Rock Art, Ethnology, and Cosmology

Robert Crifasi October 2025



Nine Mile Canyon



Uxmal (Maya)

Native American animists believe in the existence of an omnipresent and omniscient force or presence that permeates the everyday world but emanate from the spirit world. They believe this profound force is all encompassing and universal in scale.

Mexican people call this spiritual force "teotl,"

Maya call it "k'uh,"

Lakota call the supreme life force "Wakan Tanka,"

Algonquin people call this force "Manitou."

Sacred serpents represent a powerful manifestation of the omniscient universal force.



Sacred serpents go by numerous names:

Quetzalcoatl (Mexico, Aztec)

Avanyu (Tewa)

Kolowisi (Zuni)

Unktehi (Lakota)

Sisiutl (Kawkiutl)

Aishibizhii (Algonquin)

etc.,

Across the continent sacred serpents possess strikingly similar iconographic and cosmological qualities.

The Pacific Northwest



Sisiutl or "Lightning Snake" Atlatl Handle ~1700
+/- 100 BP

Source: UBC Museum of Anthropology Photo Derek Tan

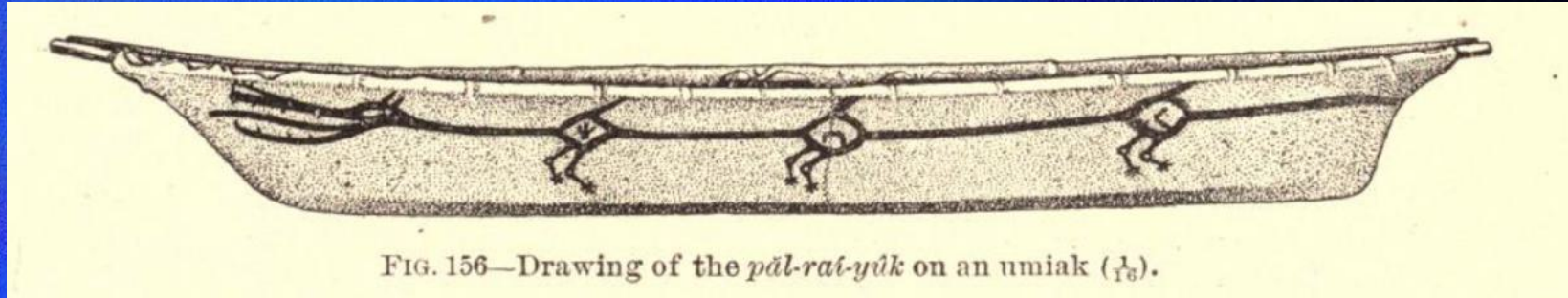


FIG. 156—Drawing of the *pāl-raí-yûk* on an umiak ($\frac{1}{8}$).

Eskimo "Pāl-raí-yûk" 19th Century

Source: E. Nelson, 1899.

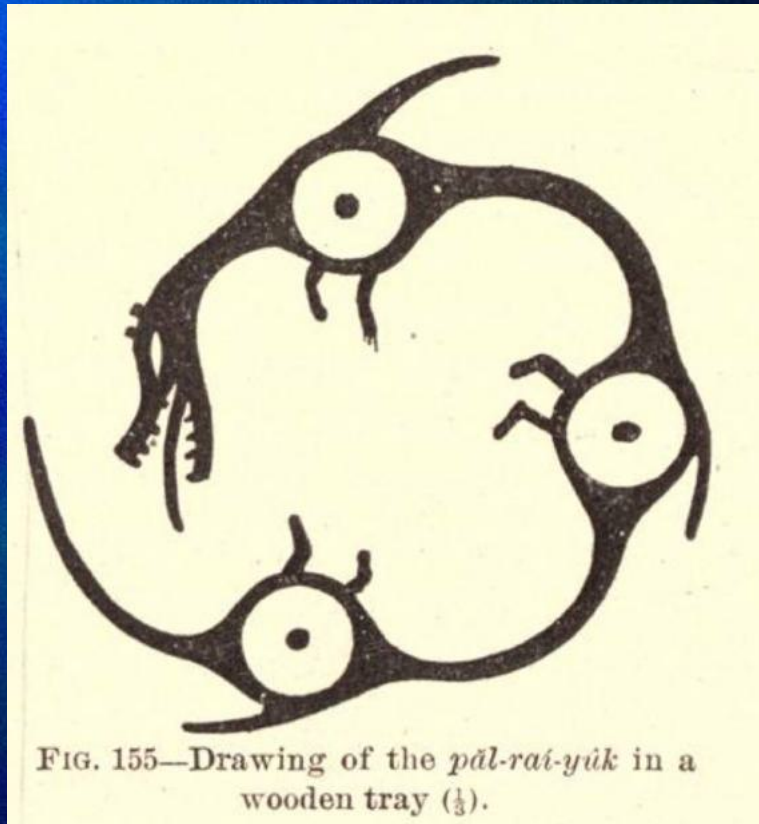


FIG. 155—Drawing of the *pāl-raí-yûk* in a wooden tray ($\frac{1}{3}$).



“Sisiutl” 900-1600 CE

Petroglyph Provincial Park, Nanaimo, Canada Source: Flickr



Kwakwaka'wakw Sisiutl and Thunderbird ~1920 Watercolor
by Joanna Simpson Wilson RBCM



Detail of a Kwakiutl theatrical screen of a Seésioohl (sic). 19th Century

Field Museum, Chicago

Charlie Nowell
demonstrating
The War
Dance or
Hawíñalah
while holding a
Sisiutl carving

Early 20th Century

Image courtesy of
the Field Museum



Shamans from Northwest tribes call on the
sisiutl to access spiritual realms.

Whenever it moves beneath the earth,
“rocks burst, and slide down the sides of
mountains.”

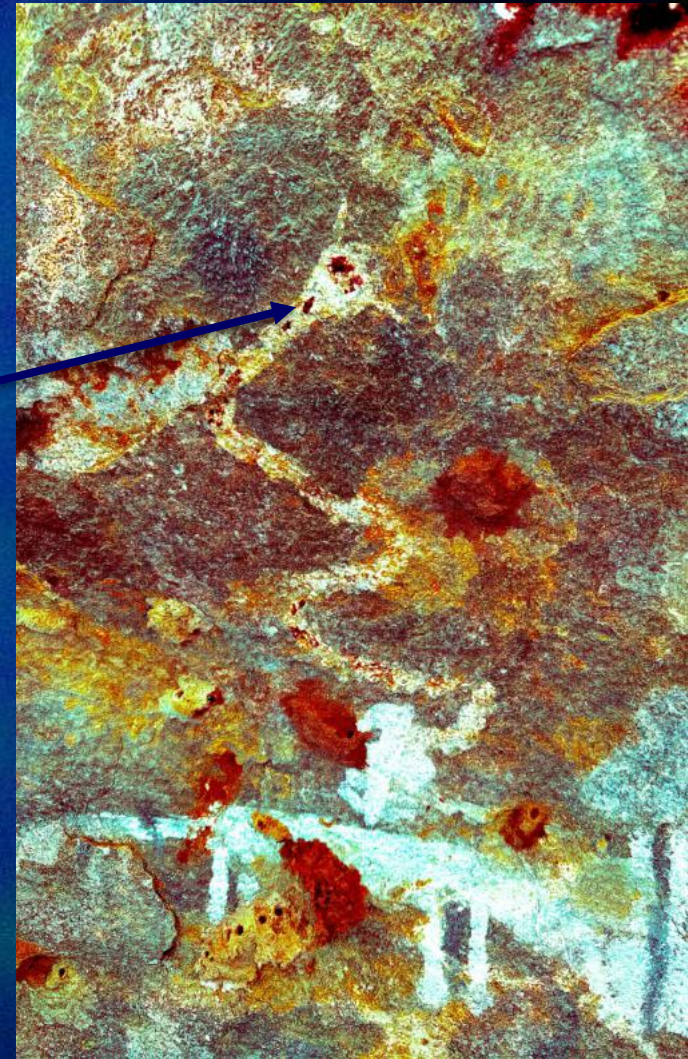
Franz Boas, 1891

The Great Basin and California

Milton, UT



Horned Serpent?



Rocky Hill, likely Yokuts

In the Kitanemuk creation story, a circular world “floated on a surrounding ocean supported by two gigantic serpents whose movements caused earthquakes.”

Bial and Newsome, 2016

Mesoamerica



Olmec Monument No. 19. (Formative ~ 1200-900 BCE) La Venta, Mexico



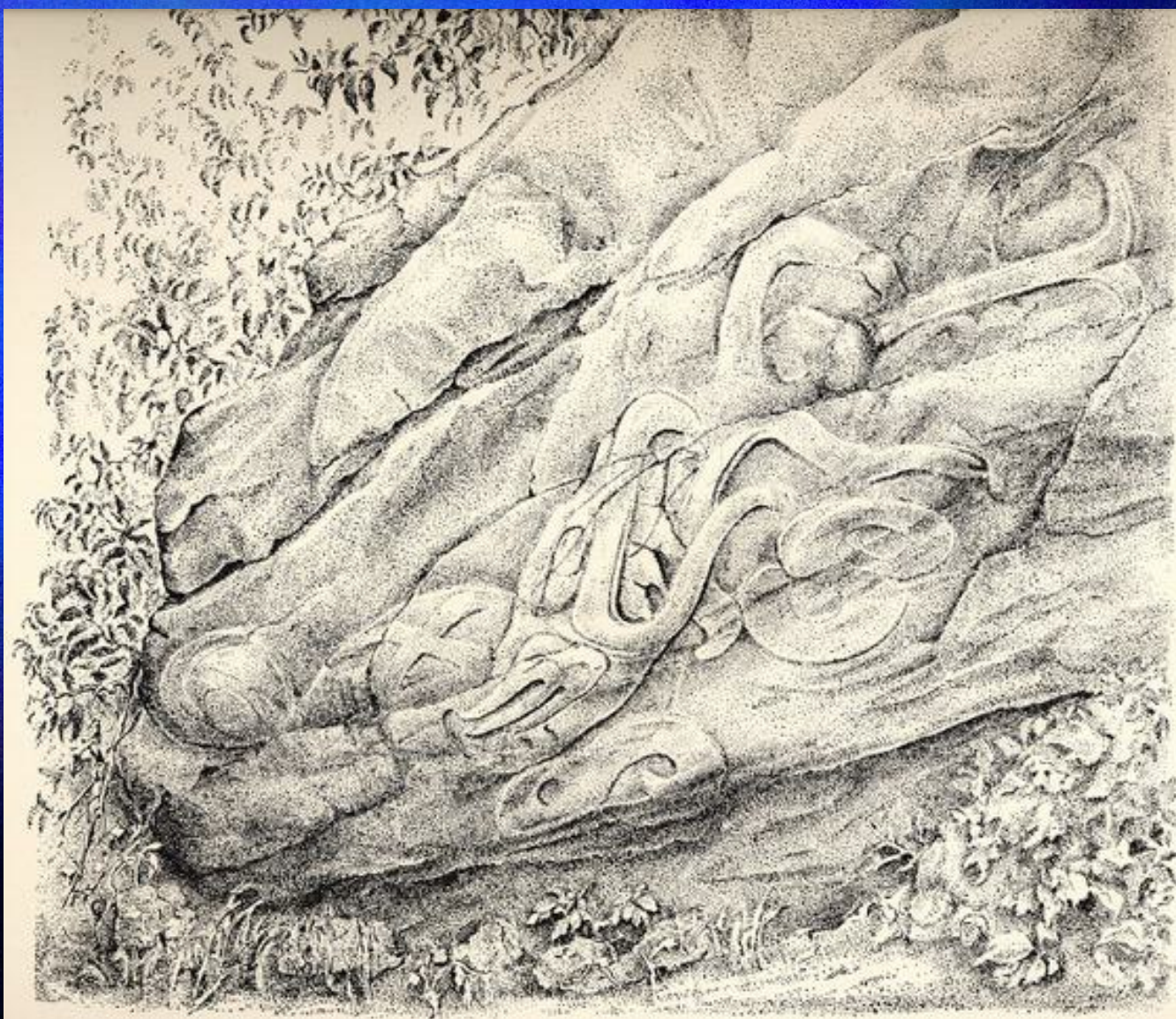
Mural Detail Teotihuacan (Classic ~1 – 500 CE) Source: Flickr



Xochicalco, (~ 700 – 900 CE)



Feathered Serpent Mural Cacaxtla (~ 650– 900 CE) Source Flickr



Chalcatzingo,
Morelos, MX
900-500BC

Image courtesy
of Karl Taube



Quetzalcoatl in the Aztec Codex Telleriano (AD 1561-1600)

The Spanish annotation reads: "To express that it is the feast of fear they depict this dragon devouring a man." Keber, 1995: 265.



"The Aztecs regarded death through ritual sacrifice as a prelude to continued existence or rebirth."

Eloise Quiñones Keber, 1995

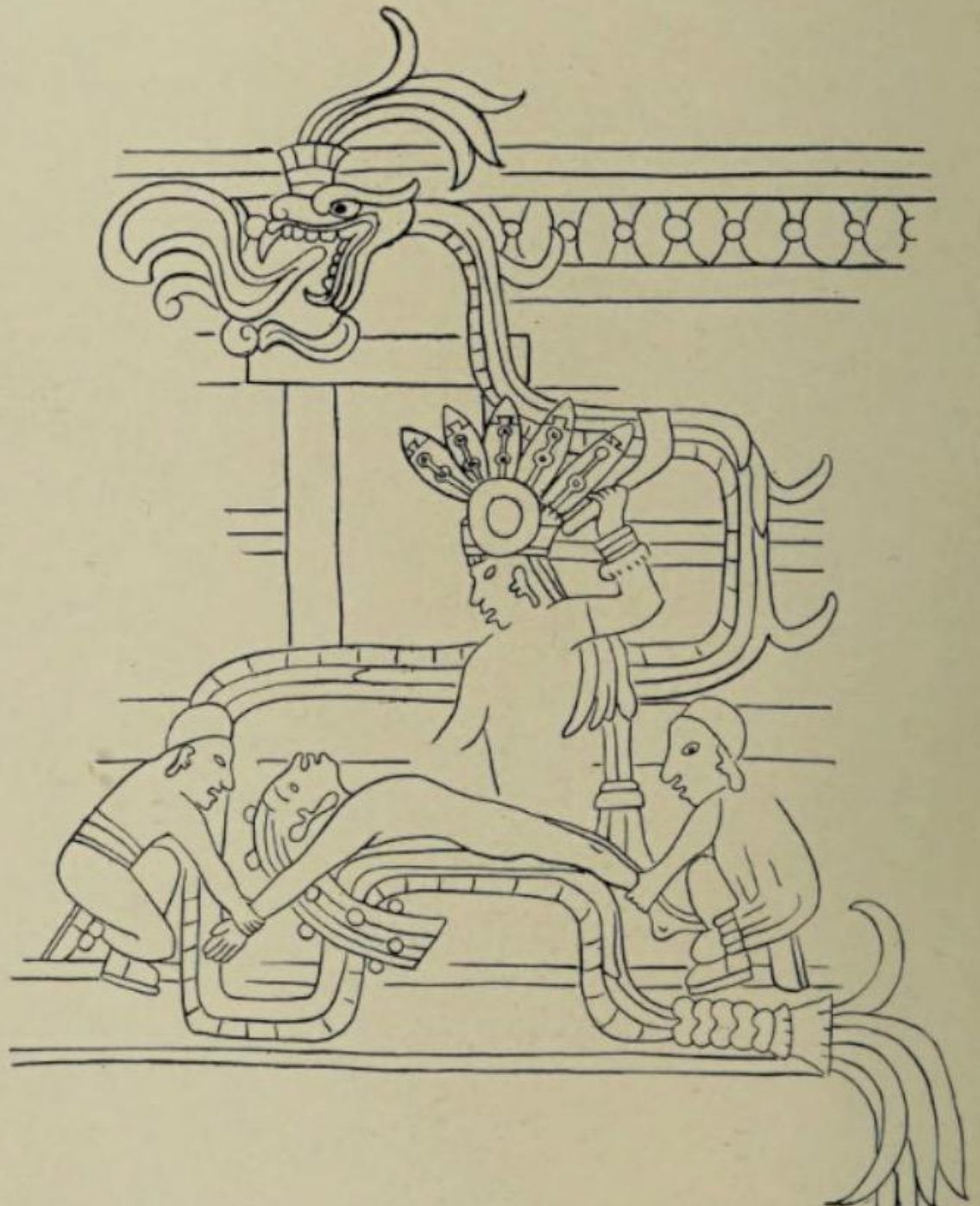
Aztec Codex Borbonicus
(late Preconquest)

Image source:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Codex_Borbonicus

Chichén Itza
Temple of the
Warriors
(~800-1050 CE)

Source: Earl Morris,
1931



Quetzalcoatl:

- Close association with water: lakes, springs, rivers, storms, the sea
- Pass seamlessly back and forth between worlds and dimensions.
- Travel between the underwater/underworld, the Earth's surface, and the celestial realm.
- Change appearance, variously becoming a human or remaining a serpent.
- Association with Venus, swim among the stars,
- Control and manipulate water.
- Hold power of life or death and abundance or poverty over humans.

Northern Mexico



Paquimé (~1130-1450) Pot Detail

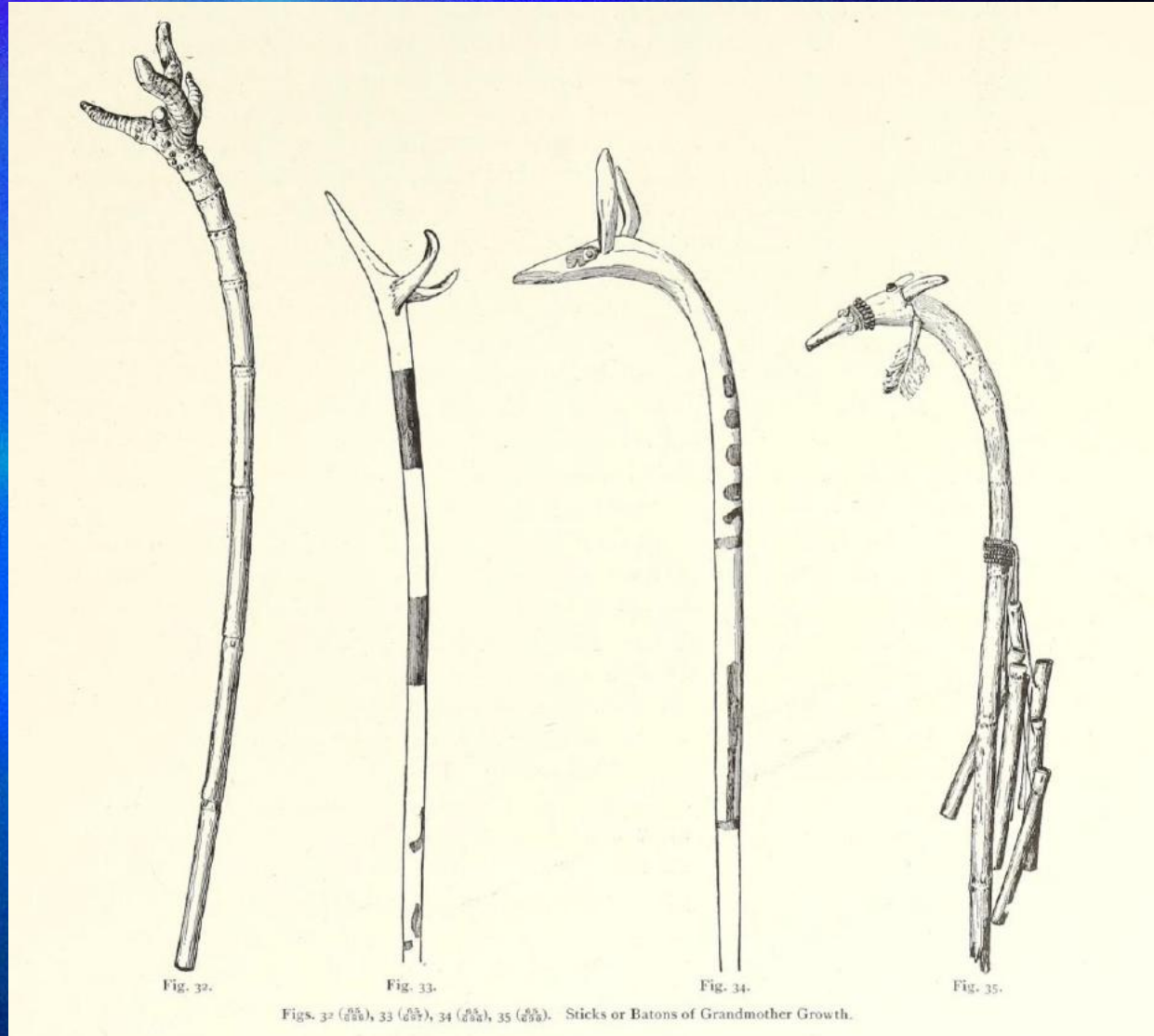
Lumholtz, Unknown Mexico V1 plate 2

Horned Serpent Geoglyph Paquimé, Mexico

Paquimé was
“the focus of
regional
pilgrimages,”
for water-
related rituals.

-Todd L. VanPool
and Christine S.
VanPool, 2018





Huichol "Serpent sticks" relating to Grandmother Growth, Lumholtz, 1900



Fig. 23 (⁶⁵/₁₈₈₄). Grandmother Growth and her Attributes. (Height, nearly 38 cm.)

Grandmother Growth surrounded by serpent sticks, Huichol. Lumholtz, 1900

- Affiliated with the underground
- Rain
- Venus
- Fertility
- Power over humans

West Texas



D-Stretch

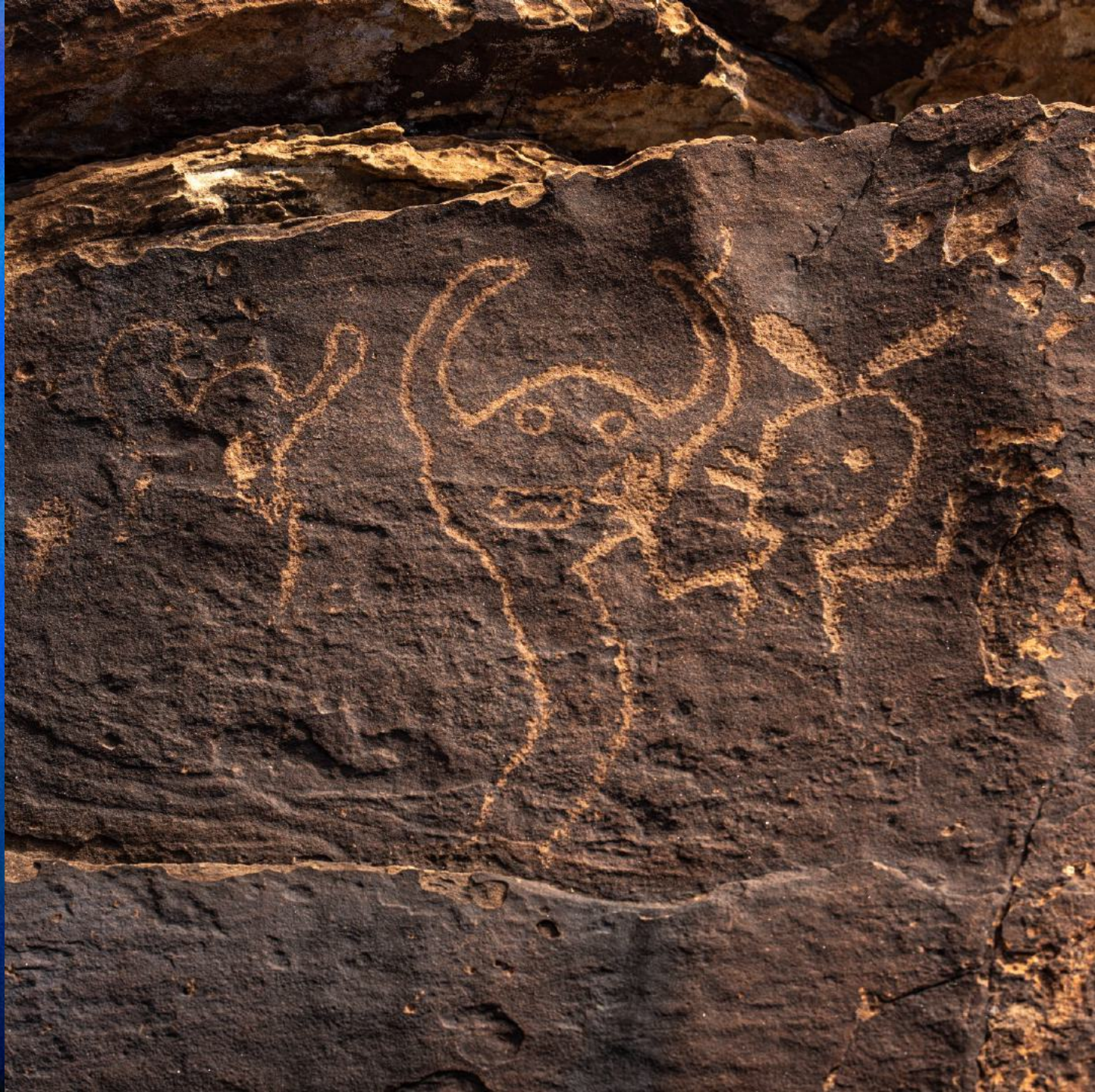
Hueco Tanks
Starting about
650CE



Jaguar Cave

Santa Fe
County

~1300s

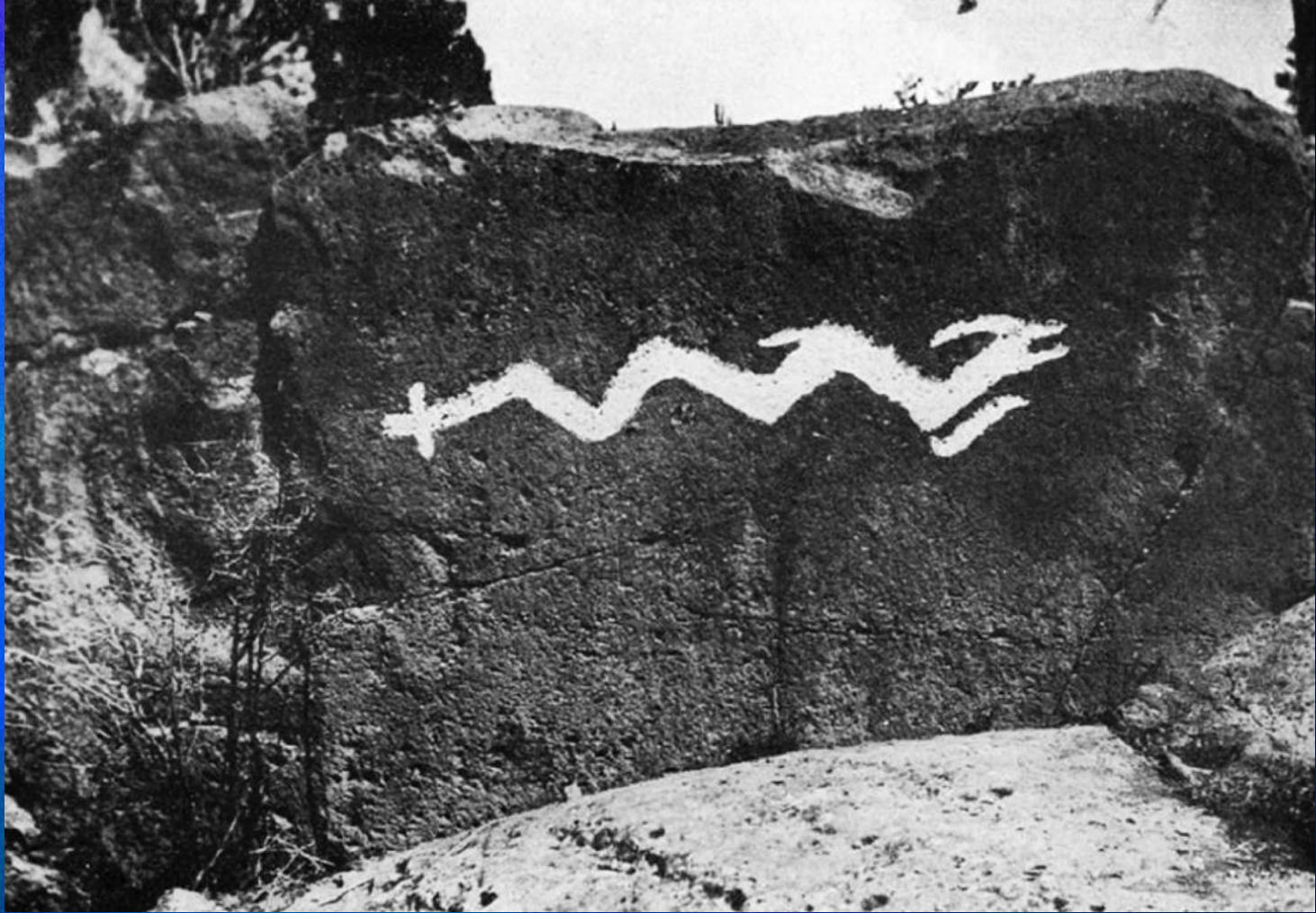


Los Alamos
County

~1300s CE

Notice Venus
stars





Tsirege Pueblo (Los Alamos) ~1325 -1600 CE
Source: Edgar Hewett, 1904



Northern New Mexico

(notice Venus star)

Northern New Mexico



- Affiliated with the underground
- Water, streams, springs
- Rain and lightning
- Venus
- Holds power over humans
- Passes through different dimensions

Four Corners

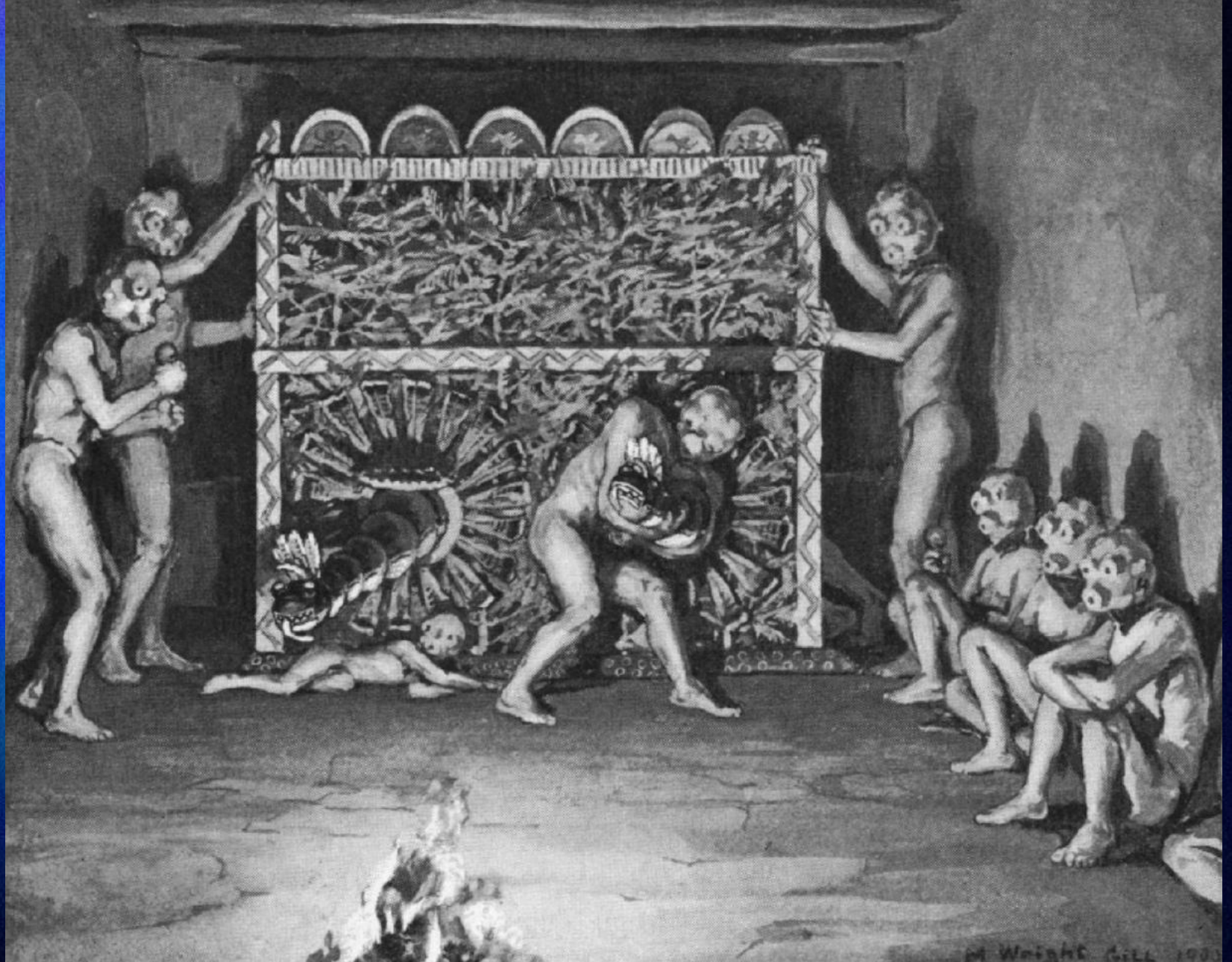


Little Singer Hatatsi Yazhi Navajo Snakes Wind Altar 1903 Brooklyn Museum

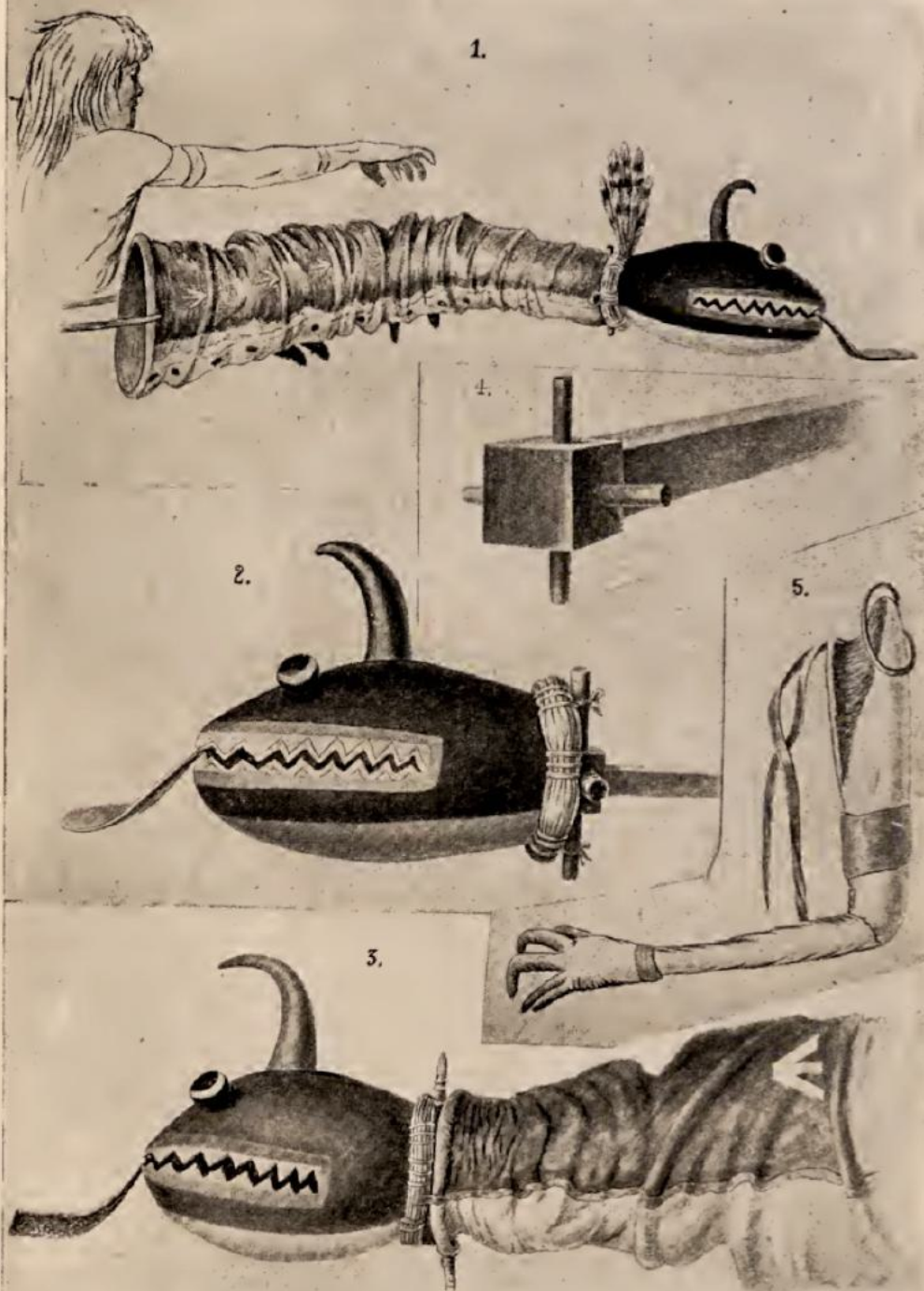
Zuni Pueblo Sacred Prayer Bowl
with frog and plumed serpent
~1900 CE

Source: Brooklyn Museum





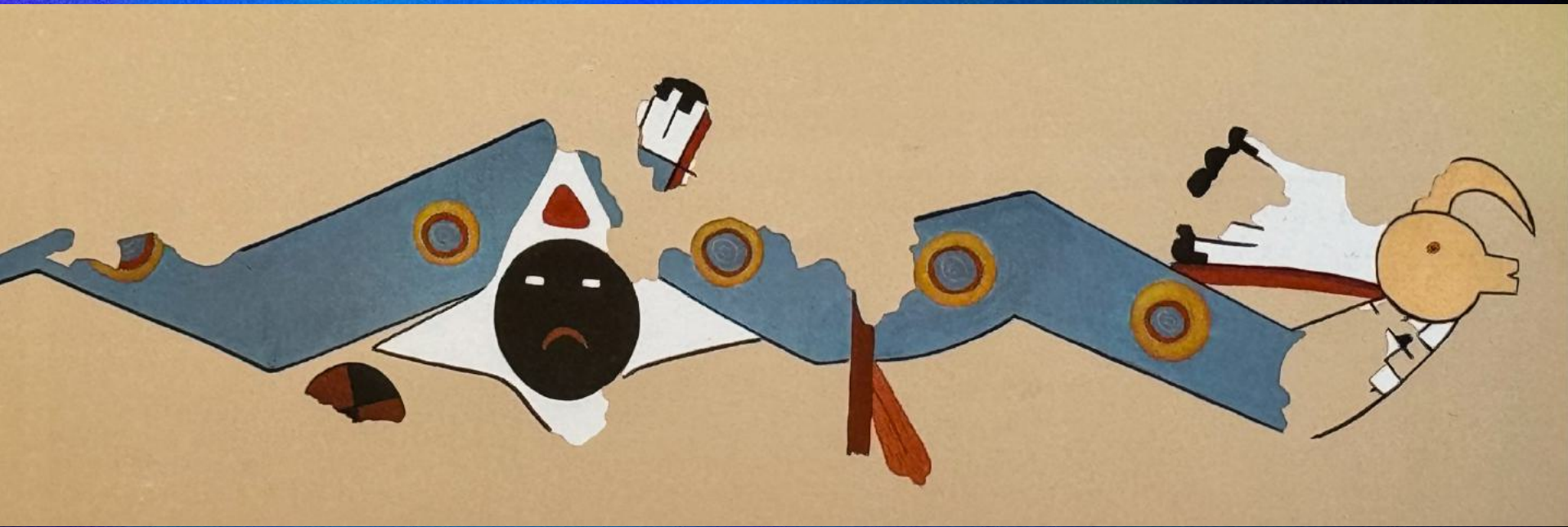
Source: Fewkes, 1920



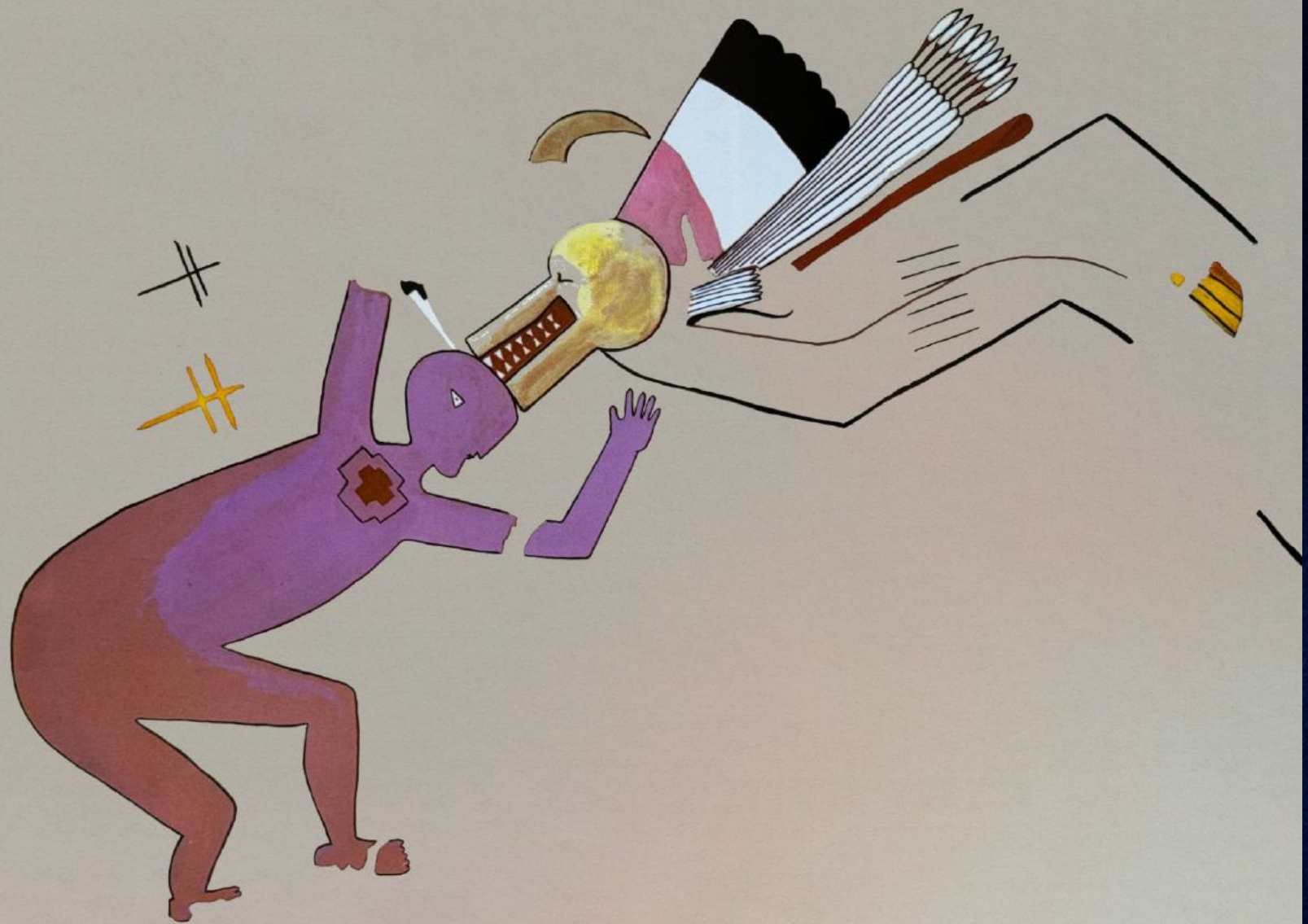
Horned Serpent Effigies

Fewkes, 1894

Horned Serpent and Venus Star



Pottery Mound, NM ~1300 - 1475 CE
Source: Hibben 1975 fig 34 Kiva 7 Layer 9.



Pottery Mound, NM ~1300 - 1475 CE
Source: Hibben 1975 fig 42 Kiva 9 Layer 8.

- Associated with wind water rain
- Travels underground
- Associated with lakes and springs
- Travels between dimensions
- Power over people
- Affiliated with Venus

Utah



Green River



River House,
Bluff

Pueblo III



Fremont Culture Henry's Fork



Fremont Culture
Nine Mile Canyon, UT



Fremont Indian State Park



Grassy Creek Archaic?



BCS Rochester Panel



BCS San Rafael Swell, UT



Horned snakes on these BCS figures and to the side

Colorado



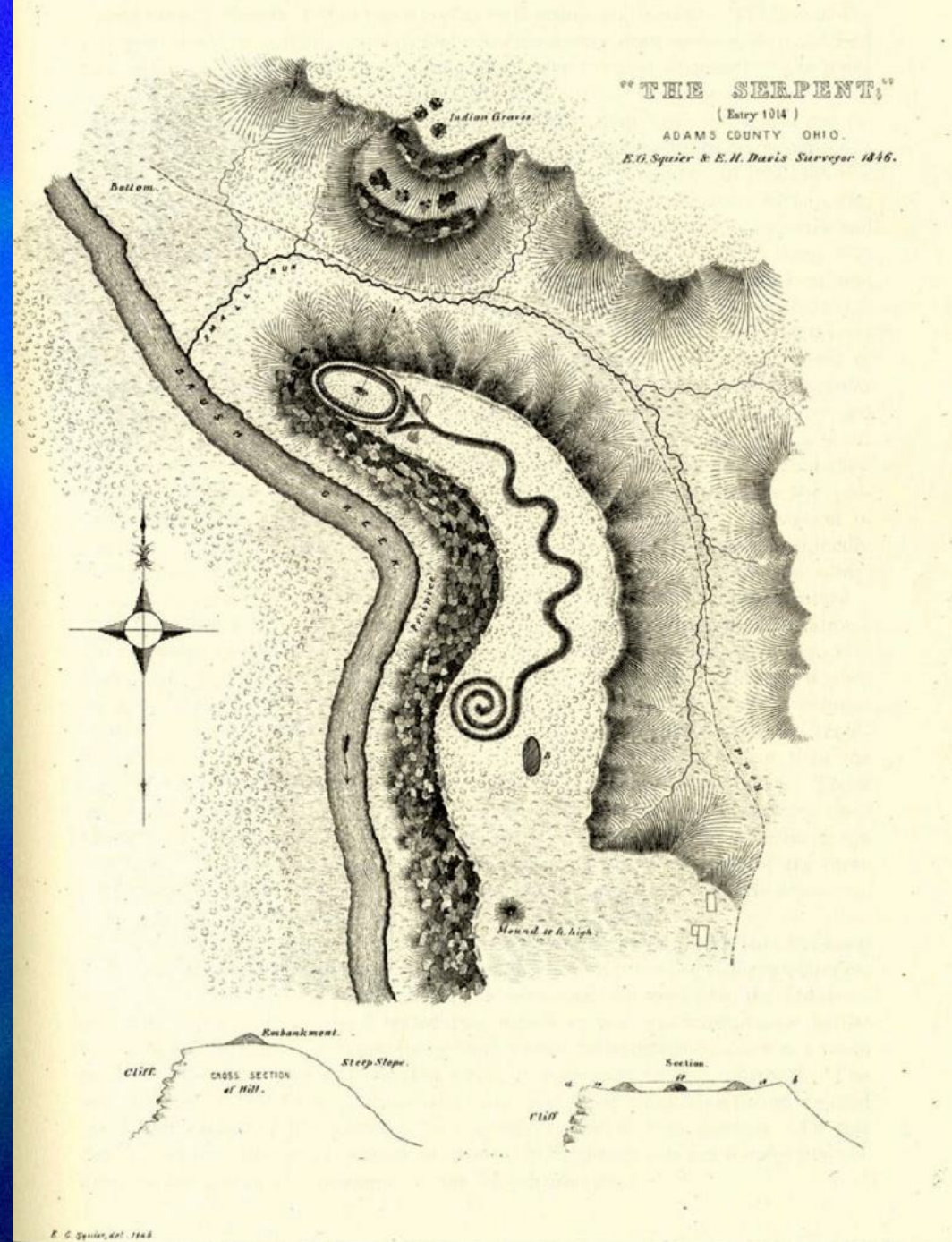
Snake Geoglyph

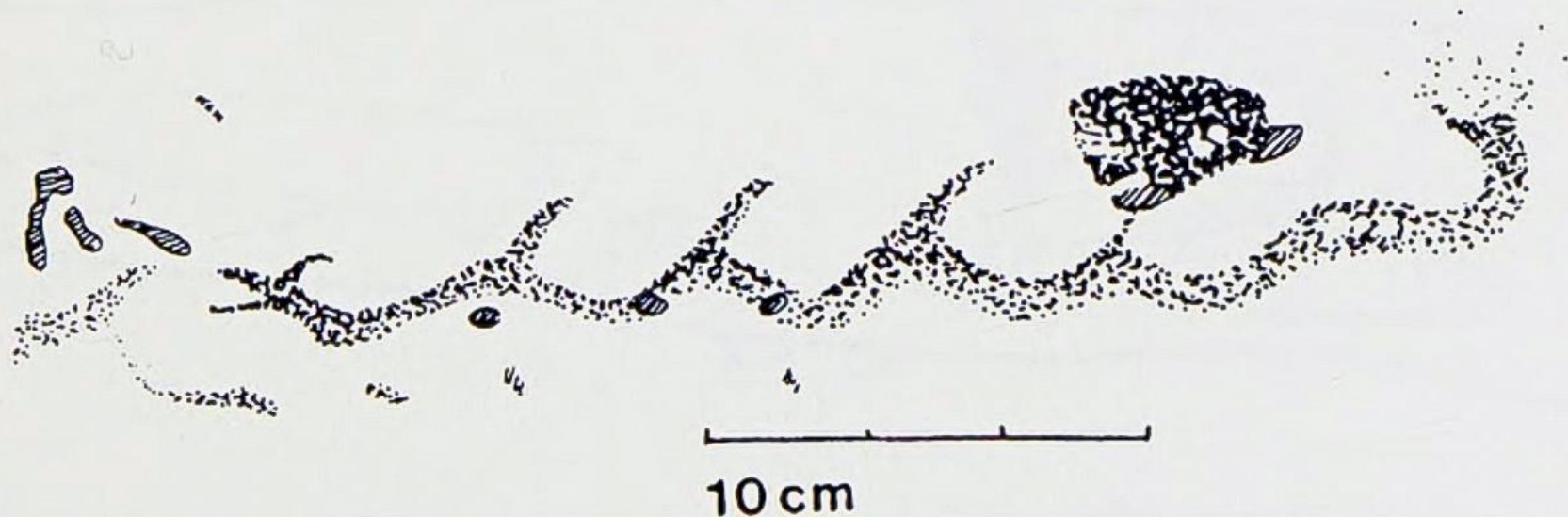
Pueblo III?

Midwest

Serpent Mound, OH
~800 BCE-1070 CE

Source: Squier, 1846





Horned Serpent, Groeper Shelter, Missouri ~ 1030-1270CE

Date: profmichaelfuller.com

Source: Carol Diaz-Granados, 2000 p. 155.



"Serpent Dancers" wearing Venus headdresses,
Spiro, Oklahoma. ~800 to 1450 CE

After Susan Powers, 2000: 94.

Image source: Phillips and Brown, 1983 fig. 186

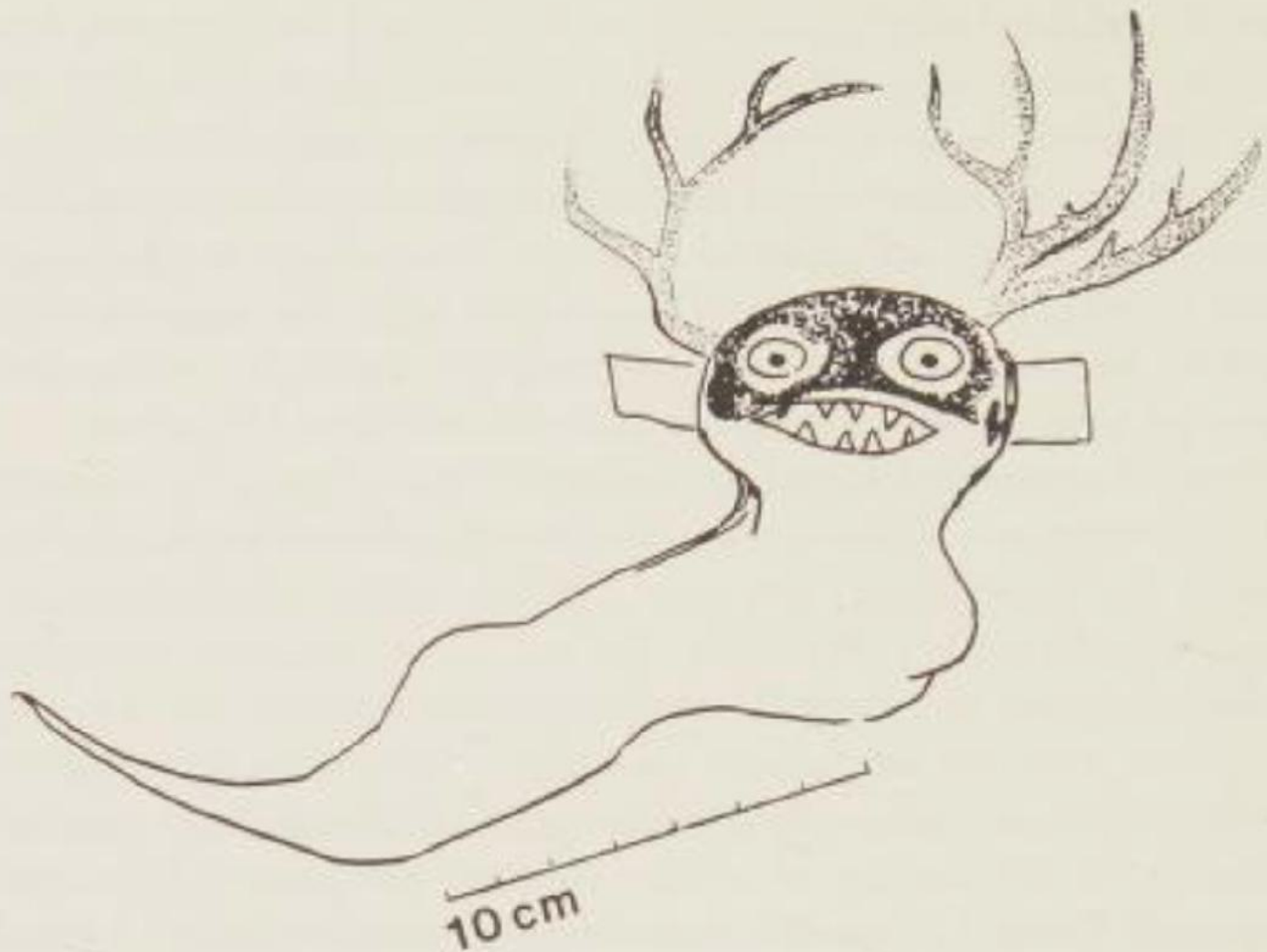
Coincidence?



Plumed Serpent
Shell Detail
Spiro, OK
Hamilton, 1952



Plumed Serpent
La Venta, MX



“Underwater Spirit” Picture Cave, MI

~940 - 1090CE

Source Granados-Diaz, p 126



Hide painting
by Silver Horn
aka
Haungooah
19th Century

“The Kiowa
Pantheon”

The two fish-like figures represent differing conceptions of the Zemoguani, or great horned fish, supposed to frequent deep water caverns, where sometimes appears for brief moments. According to some, it occasionally seizes and kills an unlucky swimmer and wears his scalp upon its horns. Source: Smithsonian Institute

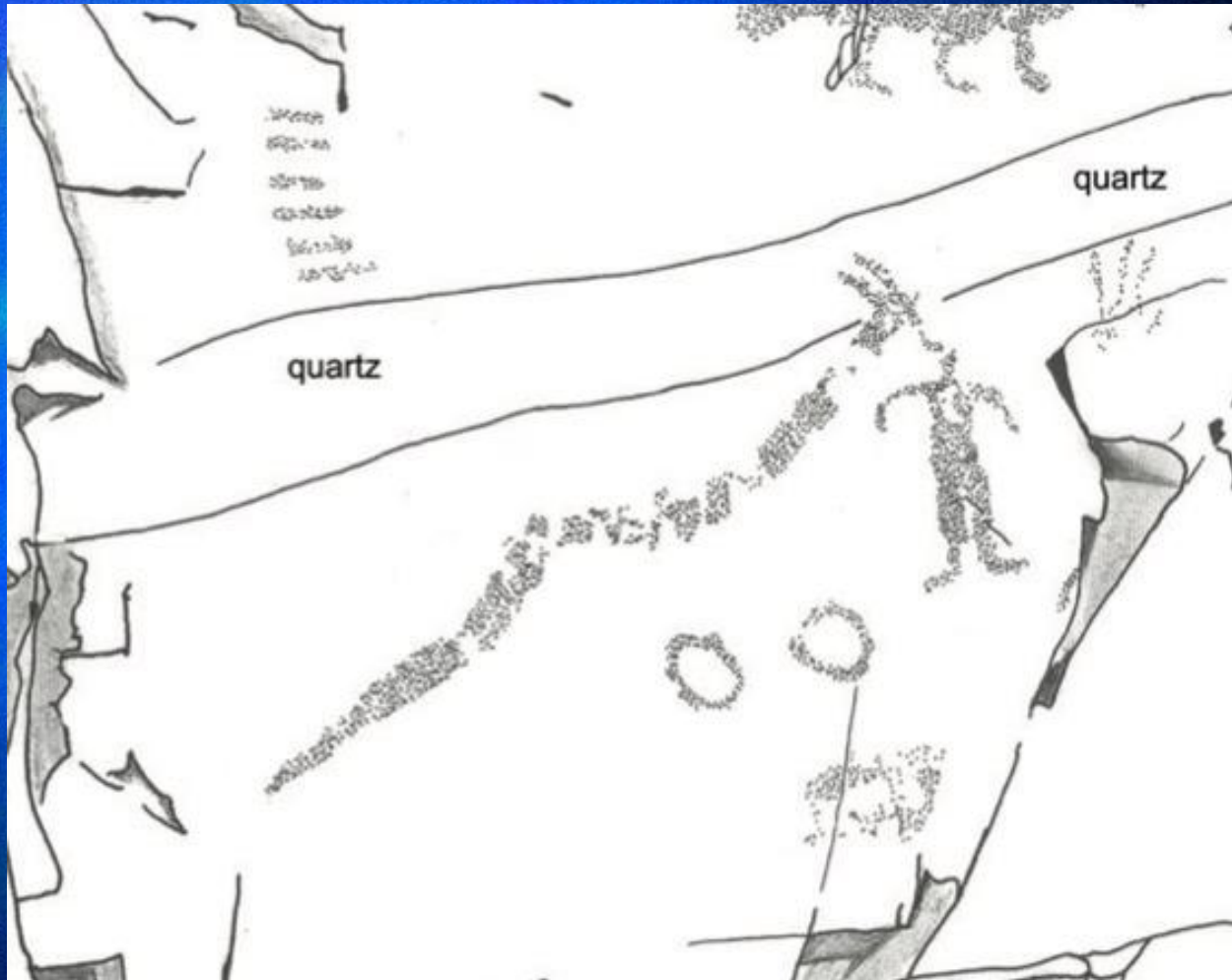


Horned Snake from a Kiowa Tipi Model 19th Century
Source: Smithsonian Institute



Horned Serpent Gorget, Moundville, AL
~1050-1550CE

Northeast



Detail of Horned Snake from Wizard Lake, Canada.
~1200-1700 CE? Source: Serge Lemaitre, 2021, fig. 3



The Brookhaven Tablet

~2500 to 1500 BP

Image Courtesy of Chief Harry Wallace, Unkechaug Indian Nation



Figure 3.8: Incised Mica from Southampton, New York depicting a horned sea serpent with the tails of fish swimming out of the way (Lenik 2009:159).

Continent-wide Shared Characteristics

Sacred serpents possess similar qualities in different cultures across the the North American continent. Overall, they embody the fundamental forces of the universe.

Wields Powerful forces (earthquakes, storms, floods)

Associated with water

Mediates or passes through worlds and dimensions (spirit worlds, underworld, celestial realm, underground)

Variously beneficent or malevolent (gives medicine or can harm)

Changes appearance (different guises: snake, human, Venus) Control and manipulate water.

Interpretation

The similarities in the iconography and cosmology of sacred serpents between disparate groups across the entire continent point toward a sharing of common religious ideas in the deep past, likely Early Archaic or Paleoindian times.

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