

THE PLUMED SERPENT IN NORTH AMERICA

By Richard Balthazar

The feathered, or as I more poetically call it, plumed serpent is covered in Wikipedia as a mythological figure of Mesoamerica, though some Internet sources claim it's encountered in Chile and Peru as well. But search as I may in Google Images, I can't identify a single instance of such an iconographic symbol from South America.

Regarding Mesoamerica, the plumed serpent is attested from Olmec times in the relief sculpture shown below, but since the Olmec language is a mystery, we don't know what it was called. The deity was known by the later Maya in Guatemala as Kukulcan and by the Quiché Maya in Yucatan as Gucumatz, but images for it are rare or abstracted as in the Vision Serpent below.

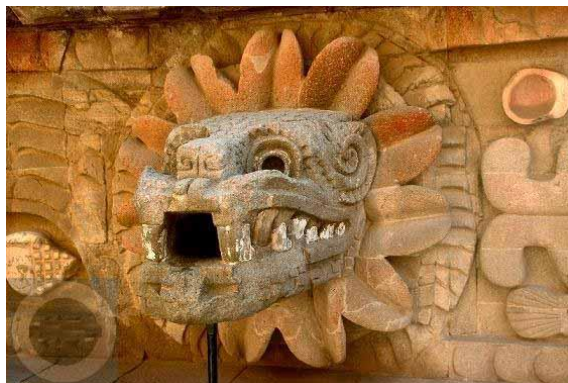


Olmec Plumed Serpent (*Wikipedia*)



Mayan Vision Serpent (*Wikipedia*)

Roughly contemporaneous with the Maya was the enormous civilization of Teotihuacan in the Valley of Mexico (Anahuac), where the plumed serpent was revered with a pyramid temple ornamented with a frieze of heads. After the collapse of the Maya and Teotihuacan around 800 AD, later Mexican cultures carried on the plumed serpent cult, as seen at Xochicalco, below.



Head of Plumed Serpent, Teotihuacan
(*Photo: Crystalinks.com*)



Plumed Serpent bas relief, Xochicalco
(*Photo: yumping.com.mx*)

The Toltec successors to Teotihuacan worshipped the plumed serpent as Quetzalcoatl, both at their capital Tula in Anahuac and at Chichén Itzá in northern Yucatan, but there are few iconographic remains of that militaristic civilization. Some centuries later, the Aztecs worshipped Quetzalcoatl as a creator deity and represented him in their picture-books (codices):



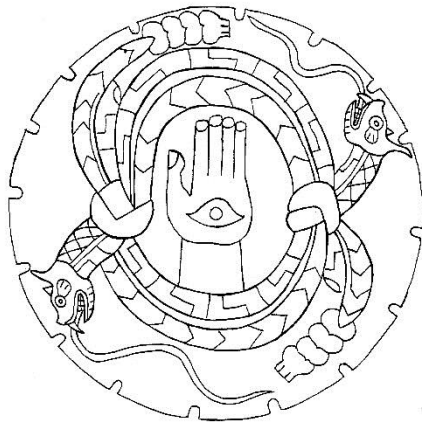
Aztec Quetzalcoatl, Codex Telleriano-Remensis



Aztec Quetzalcoatl, Codex Borbonicus

Per this article's title, I will now discuss the presence of the plumed serpent in North America. It's complicated by the fact that in North America the serpent was generally portrayed with horns, a common motif in the Mississippian era (the so-called Southern Ceremonial Complex). Mysteriously, the horned serpent is evidenced from all over the world from as long ago as Sumer (3,000 BC), always in connection with water.

The Mississippian example of horned serpent below is from Moundville, Alabama, and the other drawings are from my Gallery of Pre-Columbian Artifacts at www.richardbalthazar.com. In the Desert Southwest, the horned serpent was known by the Tewa/Tiwa as Avanyu (as on the "Maria" pot below); by the Zuni as Kolowisi; and by the Hopi as Paaloloqangw, which I won't even try to pronounce.



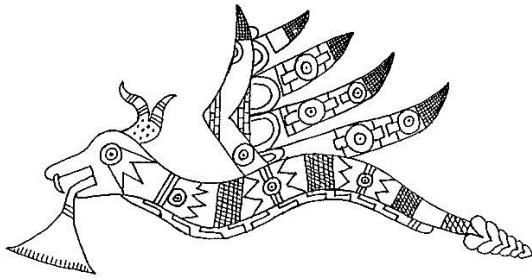
Horned Serpents, Moundville, Alabama
(drawing by author)



Avanyu pot by Maria Martinez
(c. 1887-1980), San Ildefonso Pueblo

However, intermediate between the Mississippians and the Desert Southwest, at a mound called Spiro in eastern Oklahoma, a shell cup was found incised with a startling design: a horned

serpent with full-fledged wings, as shown below. The Mesoamerican serpent's plumage has been transformed into North American wings on a horned rattlesnake.



Winged, Horned Serpent, Spiro, Oklahoma, c. 1200 AD; (drawing by author)



Algonquin Serpent pictograph, (drawing: *symboldictionary.net*)

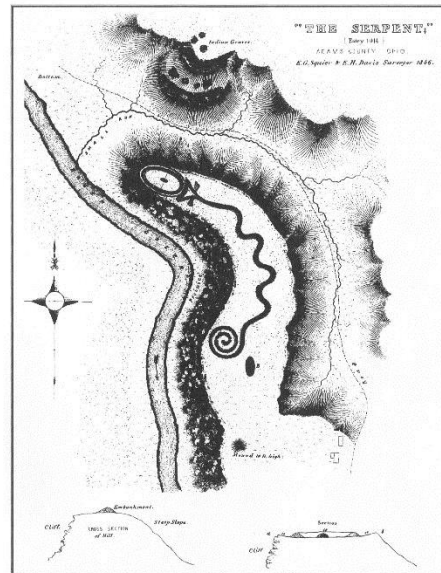
Some Internet sources, such as *symboldictionary.net*, claim there are widespread Algonquin pictographs depicting a winged, horned serpent known as Mishipizheu, as shown above. Yet Wikipedia says that mythical creature was actually a water-panther (?), and an image search for Algonquin artifacts finds no other motifs of this sort.

On the site *lostworlds.org* is another such graphic supposedly from Georgia, but with no citation of provenance, I don't find it very convincing either. Both of the images might be genuine, but I'd have to see more verifiable examples to believe their claim that "Similar icons are scattered across the North American continent." The Oklahoma item is indisputably genuine.

At the Spiro mound another shell cup (below) was also found incised with an even more startling design: feline-headed, winged serpents. (Notice that the Moundville horned serpents have vaguely feline heads!) Incidentally, the central cross design is the standard Aztec/Mexican symbol for Quetzalcoatl.



Feline-headed, winged serpents, Spiro, Oklahoma c. 1200 AD; (drawing by author)



Great Serpent Mound, Adams County, Ohio, (survey by Squier and Davis)

Here, the Mesoamerican plumed serpent has been transformed even further into a North American "piasa" monster. This mythical creature is none other than the Uktena monster, a

major figure in Mississippian (Cherokee) mythology in the Southeast. These two Spiro artifacts solidly prove the (transformed) presence of the plumed serpent in North America.

Meanwhile, we mustn't overlook the most spectacular effigy of a serpent in the world, the 1,348 ft.-long Great Serpent Mound in Adams County, Ohio, as shown above in the historic survey (1848) from "Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley."

Possibly inspired by a visit by Halley's Comet, the serpent effigy's date of construction is widely arguable, but I don't care about that. Take a look at those two little protrusions just below the "head." The author and surveyor, Ephraim G. Squier, a noted archaeologist in Meso- and South America, specifically commented on those features, noting that they might be plumes and relate to the Mesoamerican plumed serpent.

By the time many years later that the effigy came under conservation, those two crucial little parts of the earthwork had disappeared. When I walked the mound in 1978 with the survey in hand, there was absolutely no trace of them. Though its plumes have been forgotten now, I contend that the Great Serpent Mound is the world's epitome of the plumed serpent.

The two Spiro artifacts and the Ohio serpent effigy mound are dramatic proof of Mesoamerican influences in North America. They also support a material relationship between the ancient Mexican and Mississippian civilizations, which is now becoming ever more evident.

###