

Stone Snakes

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"Petroforms" are cultural features formed by arranging (not piling) boulders and stones on the ground surface so as to create the outline of a figure. They take the shapes of animals, humans and geometric forms such as circles, squares, and ellipses. Most of the known Manitoba petroforms are situated in the Whiteshell area.

Researchers have sought answers to three basic questions concerning the petroforms: (1) how old they are, (2) why were built, and (3) by whom they were built. The petroform phenomenon received the attention of professional archaeologists in Manitoba during the latter half of the 20th Century in hopes of ascertaining age, function, and ethno-cultural affiliation. The results were inconclusive on all three counts (Pettipas 2004). For now, the only way we can reliably seek answers to any of these questions is to consult with Native traditionalists who still have knowledge of the petroforms' significance, or to seek out information in literature written by Indigenous historians whose information was gathered from traditionalist informants.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate snake features from two separate Manitoba sites. In 1979, Chief George Barker of the Hole River Ojibwa community published an autobiography that included a chapter titled "Medicine Dance." This ceremony was an integral part of Midewiwin healing procedure, and his brief description of it bears out the role of the snake petroforms: "A row of stones, placed from smallest to largest, was often used to aid the medicine man. These formed snakes of various lengths. The sick person was laid beside the snake, which would then begin to move. Often, this resulted in a cure" (Barker 1979:99).

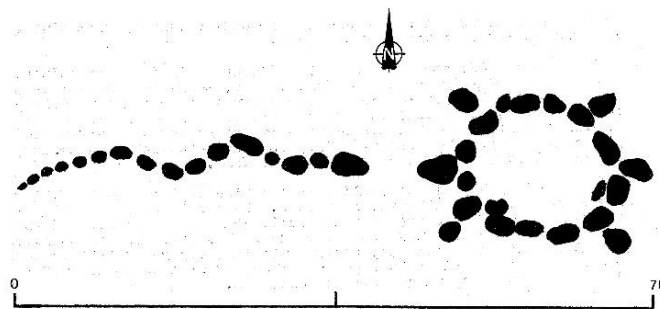


Figure 1. Combined snake and turtle petroform, Whiteshell Provincial Park. After Sutton 1965.

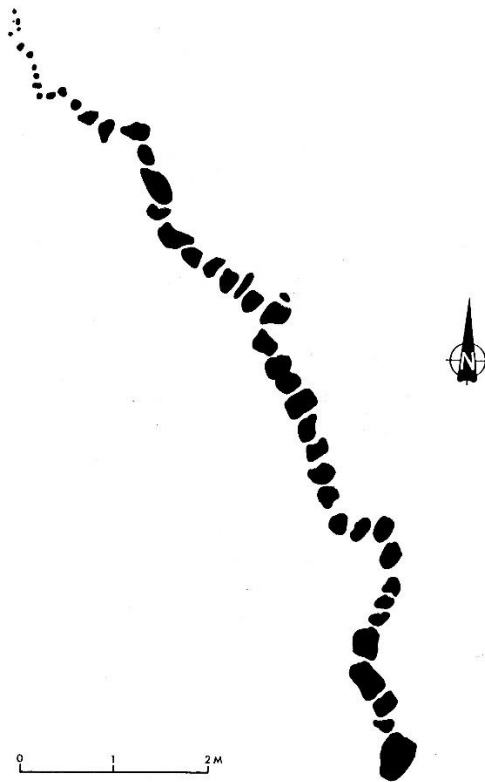


Figure 2. Isolated snake petroform, Whiteshell Provincial Park. Courtesy of Historic Resources Branch, Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Sport.

Chief Barker doesn't indicate just when these practices were taking place here in Manitoba, but it's reasonable to suggest that they were being conducted at least during the PostContact era, especially during the 19th Century CE and on into the early decades of the 20th (Hallowell 1936:32-51). Can anything be said about their broader historical context?

Perhaps a partial answer to this question is to be found in William W. Warren's *History of the Ojibway Nation* written in the early 1850s. He writes about a time when the Ojibwas' Anishinaabe forebears lived on or near the Atlantic seaboard and the "earth was new" (i.e., in late PreContact Terminal Woodland times). Warren says that the Ojibwas "have a tradition telling of a great pestilence, which suddenly cut off [killed?] many while encamped in one great village. They were saved by one of their number, to whom a spirit in the shape of a serpent discovered a certain root, which to this day they name Ke-na-big-wushk or snakeroot" (Warren 1974:67).

I would suggest, then, that the Whiteshell snake petroforms and their healing function has its roots in the far-away Eastern Seaboard prior to a long-range, multi-generational migration (chibimoodaywin) that brought Anishinaabe descendants to southeastern Manitoba and beyond. The snake petroforms were part of the local Medéwiwin infrastructure and its attendant rituals

that, according to tradition, originated "on the shores of a great salt water" many generations ago.

References

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