

# PREFACE TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE ON NEW RESEARCH AT SERPENT MOUND

Jarrold Burks, Editor

Like many who go in search of or stumble upon Ohio's most notable earthen effigy, my first Serpent Mound encounter was with a paper version of the Serpent—in Squier and Davis's 1848 compendium "Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley" (Figure 1). I was an undergraduate student in Anthropology at University of Illinois and I was doing research in the university library for my first term paper on

archaeology—a comparison of Hopewell settlements from Illinois and Ohio. That was the first time I had ever seen the wondrous maps in Squier and Davis's book. As a kid who recently left home (northeastern Illinois), the amazing number and variety of earthworks from Ohio depicted in this old book were almost beyond belief, especially the site from southern Ohio with a snake-shaped mound. Sure, I had seen the effigy

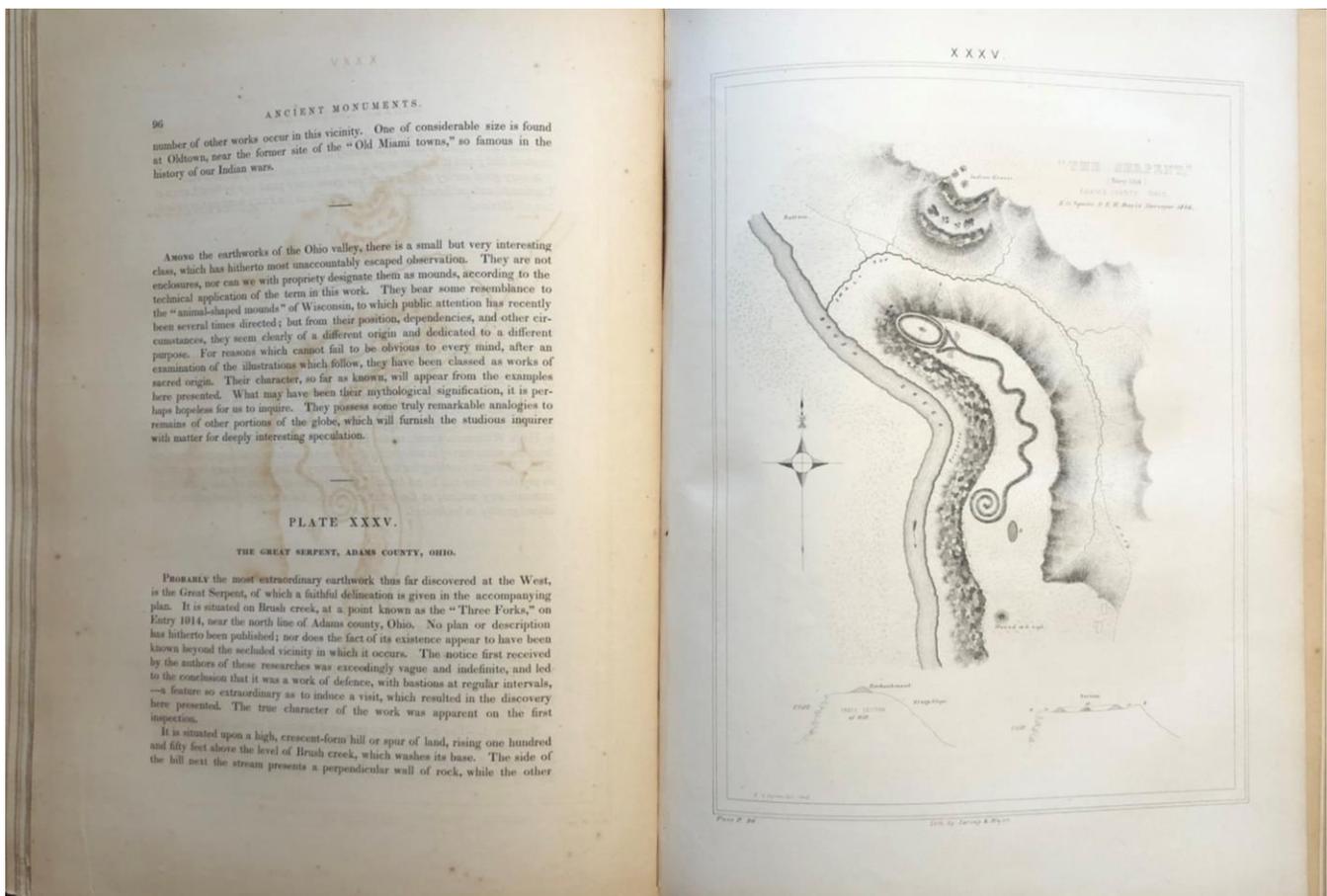


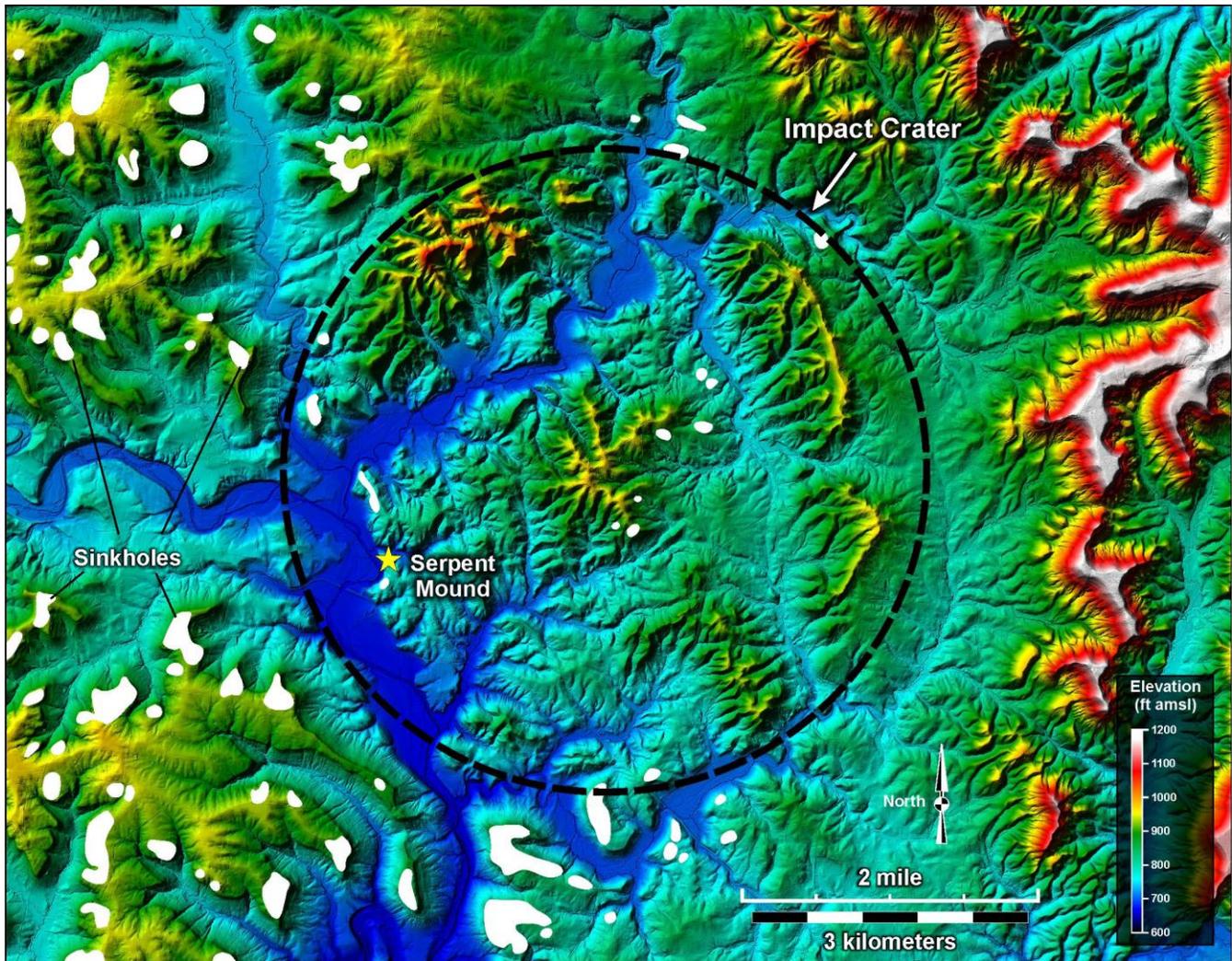
Figure 1. Map of Serpent Mound in Squier and Davis (1848), first edition New York printing.

Jarrold Burks, Ph.D., Ohio Valley Archaeology, Inc. [jburks@ovaigroup.com](mailto:jburks@ovaigroup.com)

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**Figure 2.** LiDAR-based digital elevation model of the Serpent Mound area, showing sinkholes and the approximate location of the impact crater.

mounds in southern Wisconsin, but nothing quite like Serpent Mound.

I saw Serpent mound in the flesh for the first time in June of 1995. I was a graduate student assistant working on the Ohio State University field school at the Overly site, a Hopewell occupation at the north edge of Chillicothe, Ohio. We brought the students from the field school to Serpent Mound as part of an excursion. I remember having lunch at the picnic tables near the small building that then served, and still does some 25 years later, as the museum. I distinctly recall my first impression upon seeing the Serpent was that it was smaller than I thought it might be...though it was still pretty darn cool.

Serpent Mound is nestled into the dissected hills of

southern Ohio, a two-hour drive from Columbus and about an hour and half from Cincinnati. It's perched on a bluff overlooking Ohio Brush Creek in a rural, semi-agrarian setting. Many are surprised to find that this most remarkable earthen construction occurs within one of the few large meteor impact craters within the United States (Figure 2). And given how hard it is to see signs of this crater even today, with so little forest to impede our view of the landscape, it's likely that the Serpent's builders would have been just as surprised to learn that a big rock from outer space crashed into the planet at that very spot in their forest some 300 million years earlier (Hansen 1994, 1998; Reidel, Koucky, and Stryker 1982). However, the many hundreds of smaller craters—sinkholes—that occur in dense clusters on



**Figure 3.** A drone's eye view of the Serpent on a foggy morning in August, 2016. (photograph by Jarrod Burks)

hilltops in the area would not have gone unnoticed. In fact, three prominent depressions occur just off the Serpent's tail.

For all the many maps made of the Serpent since that first one by Squier and Davis in 1846 (1848), surprisingly little archaeology has occurred below the surface within or around the earthwork. To be sure, Frederic Ward Putnam's excavations in the 1880s were extensive and quite invasive in many areas of the park now surrounding the Serpent. These excavations led to many important discoveries that were published in relative detail (Putnam 1889/90), though it is challenging today to precisely position Putnam's excavations on a map. Subsequent park buildings, utility lines, roads, and other infrastructure have been built and demolished in the 120-plus years since Putnam's work. However, most of these land modifications occurred prior to the implementation of laws requiring archaeology and before forward-thinking park managers who appreciated that much of what's important at these earthwork sites still lies buried beneath the surface. Based on minimally invasive work, more recent publications have begun to once again shine a light on the archaeology of Serpent Mound (e.g., Davis, Burks, and Abrams 2019; Fletcher et al. 1996; Hermann et al.

2014; Lepper 2018; Romain et al. 2018), showing us that there is much yet to learn about this famous place.

The contributions to this special volume of the *Journal of Ohio Archaeology* explore a wide range of topics related to Serpent Mound. The authors present new ideas and data based on previously unpublished or minimally discussed work. There is also quite a bit of new information on the history of the place. While we still have a long way to go to fully understand Serpent Mound and those who constructed it (Figure 3), the articles presented here add much to the conversation and provide a broader base for future efforts to come.

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