

The Findings After Two Years of Work at Serpent Mounds Site, Rice Lake, Ontario

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During the field seasons of 1956 and 1957 the Royal Ontario Museum has conducted full-scale archaeological investigations of the Serpent Mounds Site, on Roach's Point on the north shore of Rice Lake, in Peterborough County, Ontario. Although excavations were made at this site as early as 1895, the work of the last two years has been the first systematic and exhaustive examination of the mound group and related features.

The principal mound, from which the group takes its name, is an earth structure slightly less than 200 feet in length. The mound varies up to seven feet in height, the mean width being approximately thirty-five feet. Three distinct angles along the long axis lend a zig-zag appearance and account for designation of the mound as a "serpent". Just beyond the eastern, or head, end of the serpent is the second largest mound in the group, a flat-topped oval structure with approximate maximum dimensions at the base of thirty-seven by fifty feet. Six other smaller conical or oval mounds are included in the group. Four of these are located just south of the two main structures, one of which is apparently two conjoined mounds. Nearby, on the slope below the mounds closer to the shore line of Rice Lake, are extensive deposits of mussel shell containing habitation refuse. It may be logically expected and there are indications that a village area exists somewhere in the immediate vicinity but the present investigation has thus far been confined largely to the mounds.

The first documented excavations at this site took place in 1895 under the direction of Dr. David Boyle (1). He dug trenches in several of the mounds, recovering skeletal material and artifacts. Boyle, incidentally, at this early date, encountered considerable evidence of previous digging. Fourteen years later, in 1909, further test pitting was carried out in the Serpent Mound by Henry Montgomery (2). Written reports appeared after each of these excavations but they provide only a tantalizing glimpse of the work and results. It is difficult even, on the basis of these accounts, to precisely locate the old excavations.

In 1955 the current program of work was undertaken by the Royal Ontario Museum as part of the development, in cooperation with the Ontario Department of Lands and Forests, of a 70-acre Provincial Park centered around the mound group. A survey party spent three weeks that year at the site and completed preliminary excavations. During the past two summers work has continued with the excavation of ninety-three 5-foot squares in and around the eastern portion of the Serpent Mound.

Generally speaking, the effort has been mostly productive of burials. To date twenty-nine have been recovered, twelve of which came from various levels throughout the Serpent Mound itself. Nine of these were primary interments in a flexed position. Two individuals, a male

of 27 and a female 13 years of age, were found in a shallow grave in the old surface under the mound. They were buried in a flexed position, back to back and head to foot. A wolf mandible was included in the grave and three copper beads, indirectly associated, were recovered from the surrounding fill. An inch and a half long side notched isocetes flint point was found with another burial that was flexed and placed lying on its back with the face up and the knees drawn over the pelvic area. Another primary burial showed overall cremation while a second, found within a foot and a half of the surface in mound fill, was burnt about the head and neck. Two interments may be characterized as bundle burials while another secondary burial appears, except for the legs, to have undergone partial dismemberment. Various artifacts and refuse as pottery fragments, silver, copper and shell beads, beaver teeth, projectile points, animal bone and mussel shell have been recovered but only in mound fill where they cannot be associated directly with the burials.

Partial excavation of one of the small oval mounds adjoining the Serpent Mound revealed a mass grave containing primary and secondary burials of at least seventeen individuals. Again, grave goods were not found although some material was recovered from the shadow fill. Most of the burials appear to have been placed in a pile, ossuary fashion, along the long axis of the mound. Here again the practice of dismemberment is evident. Two primary burials, of three in the bottom of the grave, were placed face down with the legs fully flexed.

Four test squares have been completed in the shell deposits on the slope below the mound group. This exploratory excavation has shown the area to hold much promise as already considerable pottery and other refuse has been found in stratified deposits. As yet the exact cultural connection of the shell accumulation to the mound group has not been determined, although certain similarities have been noted.

The unique character of the Serpent Mounds Site is a major factor contributing to its importance to regional archaeology. To the author's knowledge it is the only serpent effigy in Canada and one of very few in North America. The cultural position of the component has not been fixed among a number of possibilities, including speculative reference to Adena-Hopewell cultures to the south in the Ohio Valley. Such connection would be of special interest in view of the site's geographic and cultural isolation from the Ohio Valley and the groups therein. Thus far we seem to be dealing primarily with and know most about the burial complex. Grave goods, other than previously noted, have been lacking and this paucity has tended to obscure cultural affinities. Ceramic analysis, when completed, will afford important additional evidence. More work in the field and with the material recovered will be necessary before an adequate appraisal of relationships can be made.

Literature Cited

1. BOYLE, DAVID. 1896-1897. Annual Archeological Report for Ontario, being part of Appendix to the Report of the Minister of Education, Ontario. Toronto.
2. MONTGOMERY, HENRY. 1910. "Recent Archaeological Investigations in Ontario." Transactions of the Canadian Institute, Vol. 9, Part 1.