

They Shall Take Up Serpents

by Toby Herbst



“THEY SHALL TAKE UP SERPENTS”
- MARK 16:18

Further Adventures at the Painted Caves of Shalmirane: An Inquiry Into Horned Serpent Imagery in Late Prehistoric Pueblo Art

First Encounter

There is something that has long fascinated me about snakes. I caught my first snake when I was 6 or 7, while walking in a woods called the “Old Boot” with my Dad and our German Shorthaired Pointer named, Baron. It was one of those spring days in New Jersey where the leaves are just coming out and the air has a sharp/stringent herbal smell of new life. Neither my Dad nor my Dog was fast enough to get between me and that Garter snake.

I remember a well meaning neighbor reciting, “Red touches yellow, kills a fellow. Red touches black, friend of Jack.” What the heck was this guy talking about? There was neither red nor black on this snake and, as I found out later, we were a thousand miles out of the Coral snake’s range. Anyway, so started my fascination with snakes, and the realization that most people are totally ignorant about them and scared shitless. *Every* snake

On the Cover:

Now don't try this at home, Fellow Seekers. This photo was taken long ago and not too far away. I had just picked up some friends at the airport and we were driving on a little known road following the Puerco.

We had just talked to a Laguna Indian who told us that the next stretch of road went through land that was owned by a powerful Witch and we had better be careful. No Shit!

We were pretty stoned at the time, when I spied this four foot Western Diamondback Rattlesnake, *Crotalus atrox*, crossing the road. I couldn't help from showing off.

Photo Credit: Brent Borges

that was in the water in New Jersey was a Water Moccasin and *every* snake on dry land was a Copperhead! In fairness, there were Copperheads in New Jersey, though very rare. I never saw one. However, the Moccasins are hundreds of miles to the south.

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The Case of the Missing Ring Neck

Here's another story from my early childhood - I had caught a beautiful little ring neck snake (*Diadophis punctatus*), so called for the bright orange ring right behind the head. I had a terrarium in my room with an old screen window on the top weighed down with rocks, sort of a Rube Goldberg affair, to keep the snake in. I'm sure you can see where this tale is headed. My Mom had just broken-in a new house cleaner, Matilda, and it turned out she was deathly afraid of snakes. Of course, the snake got out and was hiding somewhere in the house.

My Mom's dad happened to be on the Board of the St. Louis Zoo, so she called him up. He called up his good buddy, Marlin Perkins - remember Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom - yes, that Marlin Perkins. “Well Larry,” Marlin said, “Some escapees can live for years in a house. We have a missing Cobra in the Reptile House at the Zoo and he gets sighted every couple of years.”

Well, my Mom hated to say goodbye to Matilda, but she did not want her death on her conscience. From then on it became a prerequisite for working at the Herbst house to not be scared of snakes.

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Trains, Planes and Snakes

Remember a movie from 2006, “Snakes on a Plane”, starring Samuel L. Jackson? I never saw the movie, but I did see the trailer. It seems the plot was that some assassin puts a crate of deadly snakes on a plane and every time someone opens an overhead luggage compartment, they come tumbling out.

Well, this story takes place back in 1969 or 1970. I was returning from a summer in the Southwest and had caught a 5ft long Great Basin Gopher Snake out in Southeast Utah. I was going to take it home to New Jersey and then release it back in

Utah the following summer.

When transporting snakes, you carry them in pillow cases so they can breathe through the cloth while the darkness and amorphous shape keeps them calm. Anyway, we had taken the train from Gallup, New Mexico to Chicago, Illinois. I then had to catch a plane from Chicago to Newark, New Jersey.

So far so good...

In Chicago, I boarded a TWA flight, got my seat, gently placed my snake bag under the seat in front of me and started to put stuff in the overhead compartment. The plane was taxiing out to the runway - back then they did not wait for all passengers to be seated - when the friendly stewardess came by and scooped up my pillow case and said, "Would you like to put this in the overhead?" I said "No." She laughingly said, "It feels like there is a snake in here." I said, "Yes, indeed there is a snake in that bag." She freaked out, screamed, and threw the bag in the air.

The whole plane turned into chaos. The woman in front of me was hyperventilating and screaming at the top of her lungs. The copilot came back to see what was the matter and the plane turned around and went back to the docking berth. I was escorted off the plane with my snake and snake bag.

Back at the terminal, someone from baggage



came over and told me the snake would have to be boxed and put down in the hold. I said, "He will freeze to death down there." They assured me the snake would not freeze and that he was insured for \$250, which was an awful lot of money back then. I called my folks and told them I would be on a later flight. And thus my Gopher snake and I arrived in New Jersey.

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▲ Glossy Snake, *Arizona elegans*, a member of the Family Colubrid. A beautiful snake which is rarely seen. They are burrowers and eat lizards and small mammals. He lives by my pond and as you can see he just wanted to check out the time.

▼ Western Diamondback Rattlesnake, *Crotalus atrox*. This one is a beautiful reddish color and big. He easily spans two tire ruts and must be 4 or 5 feet.



Snakes and the Law or Snakes and Cops

Already by the age of 15 or 16, my view of the police was changing from, "Officer Friendly" to a less trusting, less friendly relationship.

I had gotten my Gopher snake back to New Jersey from Utah. I kept my reptiles down in the basement for two reasons: one, my Dad did not want to see them and two, the furnace was down there, so it was warm. My folks were having the house painted and some of the painters were fascinated by my menagerie. Well, one of these idiots left the top off the gopher snake's cage and once again we had an escapee. By this time it was September, I was back at school, Ugh! I felt very bad about the snake. I had taken him from the beautiful rock formations of southern Utah to Suburban New Jersey. I was sure he was not going to like it in suburbia, but what could I do?

By October, I had begun to forget about the Gopher snake, when what should appear on the front page of our local newspaper, *The Summit Herald*? There was a photo of two burly cops posed with pistols crossed and my dead Gopher snake draped across the hood of their patrol car. The caption read, "Six feet of Deadly Poison Visits Summit, New Jersey."

The brave cops had dispatched my pet a block from our house with their pistols thinking he was a Copperhead. Again, Copperheads are very unusual in our part of New Jersey, and rarely over 3ft long. The next week, we sent into the paper a photo of my little sister with the same snake draped over shoulders. This time the caption read, "Copperhead, Bull" - the pun being that Gopher Snakes are a type of Bull snake.

I learned three lessons back then: first, snakes are best left in their natural environment; second, that you can't trust all cops; and third not everything you read in the paper is true. All lessons which have left me in good stead.

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The Movie Star Snake

I have lots of snake stories, but I will tell one more short one. When I was in High school I got a beautiful little Red Tail Boa from a fellow snake enthusiast who's name was, Dana Streep.

The snake found its way up north to New Jersey in a banana boat. When they used to harvest bananas in Central America, they were unprocessed or packaged and in the bunches would be all sorts



▲ Western Diamondback Rattlesnake, *Crotalus atrox*, just moving along minding his own business.

of creatures snakes, spiders, you name it. Well, in one of the bunches was a Red Tail Boa. Someone caught him on the docks and I ended up with him - part cash, part trade. My friend Joe Shelby, who always had a great sense of humor ended up naming him, Julius Squeezer. The movie star



connection is that Dana's older sister turned out to be Meryl Streep. She was not famous at the time.

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The ultimate serpent has to be the Horned or Feathered Serpent. The two are related but not necessarily synonymous. The Feathered Serpent is a product of Mesoamerica, and is known by his Aztec name Quetzalcoatl or his Mayan name Kukulcan. This deity / composite creature, combines the feathers of a bird, symbolizing the Sky, and the body of a snake that is in constant contact with the Earth. Thus, Earth and Sky, a Duality, a recurring theme in Mesoamerican art and religion.

It has always been assumed that the Horned Serpent so prevalent in Prehistoric and Historic Pueblo art and religion is derived from the feathered serpents of Mexico and further south. However, the Horned Serpents do appear first in rock art in the southwestern United States during the Archaic period. These pictographs of the Barrier Canyon style date between 5400 BC and 2000 BC.

The earliest dates for the Barrier Canyon period is thousands of years earlier than the Mesoamerican Olmec period (roughly 1500 BC), where we first see the origins of the Feathered Serpent. The relationship between the two types of composite serpents is unclear. My personal feeling is that both share an ancient Asiatic tradition which was further strengthened through contact and exchange between Mexico and the Southwest United States from roughly AD 900 to AD 1600.

◀ Part of a large Barrier Canyon style pictographic panel. The weird alien like images are clearly supernaturals, either ancestors or gods which, at some point become interchangeable. Is this what we look like when we shed our mortal coils?

5400 BC to 2000 BC

Detail of Horned Serpent. ▶
This is one of the earliest representations of Horned Serpents in the New World.





The Horned Serpent at Shalmirane

At this point I would like to start my analysis of a Late Prehistoric Pueblo image of a Horned Serpent from the painted caves of Shalmirane. This image is on the wall of a shallow winding canyon. I will try to dissect and analyze the image starting with the head. The head is not that of a serpent. It is painted black and has a forehead and good sized snout, both features not found on snakes. First, I got out my trusty field guides to both reptiles and mammals of North America. The only southwestern reptile that I found, that had any sort of possibility of a match was the Collared Lizard, (*Crotaphytus collaris*) which has a sort of forehead and a nice round eye but not much of a snout.

Next, I went on to the mammals and several had features that were similar. For example, mountain lions and bobcats both had that nice sloping forehead, but not much of a snout. Coyotes, foxes and ringtails have the sloping forehead and snouts, as do black bears; but the Horned Serpent has no surviving indication of ears which are fairly prominent on most of these mammals.

My favorite mammalian candidates for the inspiration of the shape of the head were: the bear, because he is black; and the ringtail, because he has round eyes; both of which are seen in this image of the Horned Serpent. Suffice it to say, I think a mammal was the inspiration for the shape of the head of this Horned Serpent, but that the artist took license and that no one particular mammal was his model.

From the upper part of the serpent's mouth extend

two blue, vegetal elements, which I believe represent the male inflorescence or flowers of the corn plant. Below these, fall white dashes either representing corn kernels, drops of water, or semen. These dashes are falling on another vegetal element, possibly corn tassels, which are rendered in black. Perhaps these represent a dead corn plant that he is bringing back to life? Corn, water, and semen are all connected and, I believe, represent the power of life which is issuing from this horned creature.



▲ Collared Lizard, (*Crotaphytus collaris*)

Above the head, part of the image is missing. Above this missing area is clearly illustrated a forward curving blue/green horn and at least three feathered sticks. The shape of the horn is clearly taken from a buffalo horn, (*Bos bison*), the American Bison. Bison were not common in the more arid sections of New Mexico favored by the Pueblos; however, they did live on the plains just to the east. Furthermore, buffalo petroglyphs



▲ Buffalo dancer's dance kilt with Horned Serpents, Pueblo, late 19th Century

Detail of Horned Serpents from Dance Kilt ►
Note the lightning tongues issuing from the serpents' mouths

and artifacts made from buffalo have been found in the Galisteo Basin just south and east of Santa Fe and other Pueblo sites throughout the Southwest.

This association between buffalo and serpents is still present in the buffalo dance costumes associated with contemporary Pueblos. The "Buffalo Dancer" wears a horned buffalo head dress and a kilt decorated with horned serpents. Perhaps part of the association between buffalo and serpents is due to the thundering noise the moving buffalo herds made and the fact that horned serpents are associated with thunder, lightning and rain.

In fact, the "Buffalo Dancer" carries a lightning stick. Regardless of the association of buffalo and serpents, horns by themselves are a symbol of supernatural powers. My old professor, Peter T. Furst, first postulated this back in 1965 when writing about clay figurines with a horn protruding from the center their foreheads. These figurines



▲ Buffalo petroglyph, Northern New Mexico

were found in shaft tombs in the west Mexican state of Colima. Furst was the first to postulate that these horned figurines represented shamans. In 1998, Furst went on to state, "Horns are one of the most widespread - indeed, universal - insignia of supernatural, priestly, and shamanic power, so much, from the Paleolithic to the ethnographic present..." (Furst 1998: p. 180).

I also believe that in the case of the Horned Serpent of Shalmirane, the color of the horn is significant. Generally, the color green is associated with life. Green plants furnish food, which is necessary for sustaining life, and as we can see from this pictograph out of the blue/green horned serpent's mouth fall drops water or semen, both life producing elements. (refer to pg. 7)

Amongst the Zuni, as recorded in the late 19th century by Frank H. Cushing, the blue/green color represents the direction west. Additionally, white represents east; yellow, north; red, south; spotted/many colors, above; and black, below.

The color designations used by the Zuni Indians are not necessarily the same as those used by these prehistoric pueblos, but I think it is possible to postulate that color choices were significant and probably associated with directions as well as other concepts. In this image, I believe the color choice of blue/green for the horn also represents the horn's power of creation and life.

Above the horn and draping to the back of the head are banded stick-like elements which I believe are feathered sticks, called "pajos" by the Hopi. (refer to pg.7) These feather decorated sticks represent prayers. They are found in a number of other pictographs in the region where they are worn in the hair, and probably also functioning as some sort of adornment.

The two clearest examples in this image of the Shalmirane serpent, are copper blue/green sticks with white, red, surmounted by yellow either feathers, pigments or a combination of both. There also seem to be traces of red sticks, but these are less defined. In any case, I believe these stick like protrusions both adorn and emphasize the supernatural aspects of the Horned Serpent.

Another feature of the Horned Serpent of Shalmirane to note are swaths of white below the serpent's neck. I believe these represent shell necklaces and shell beads, both symbols of water, which is the key to all life in the arid Southwest.

The Mesoamerican deity of Quetzalcoatl is a

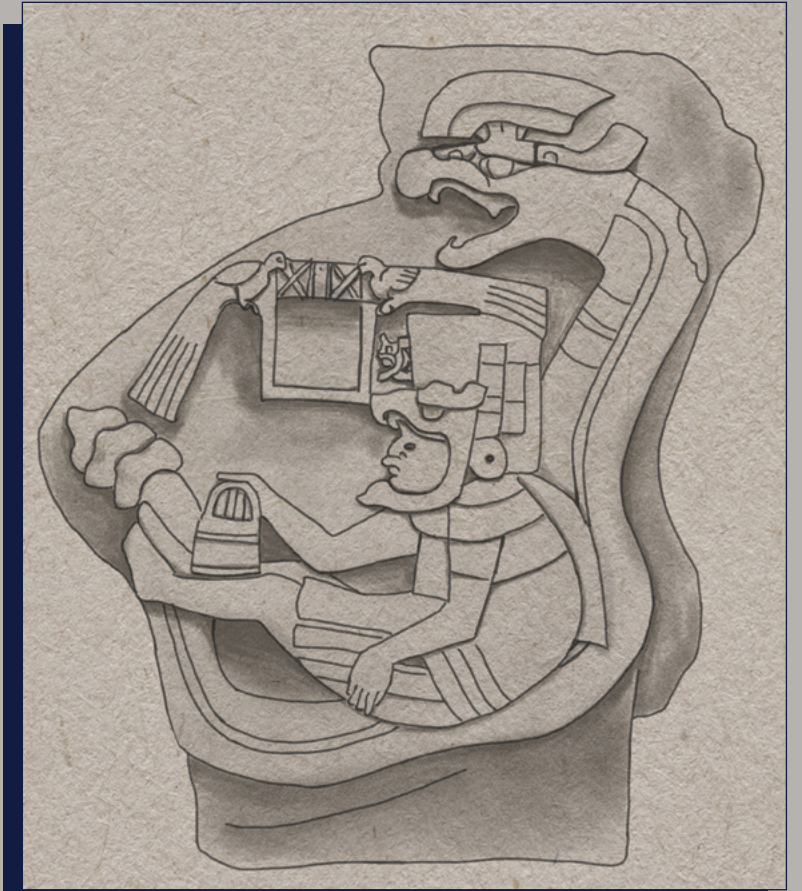


▲ Petroglyph of two Horned Serpents, Galisteo Basin, AD 1350-1500. The serpent on the left has a very lupine appearance as well as a shell collar.



very complex subject which I will only cover superficially. The name comes from the Nahuatl language (Aztec and related peoples). Quetzal is a long tailed bird of the family Trogonidae with rich iridescent, emerald green feathers. Since pre-Columbian times, these feathers have been considered one of the most valuable and sacred commodities of Mesoamerica. The Quetzal is combined with Coatl, which means snake in Nahuatl.

Quetzalcoatl or feathered serpent is a deity that unites earth (the serpent) and sky (the bird). Like many Mesoamerican concepts, the feathered serpent is an example of duality, where opposites are combined to make a whole. The earliest example of a feathered serpent in Mesoamerica is at the Olmec site of La Venta where, on Stela 19, a serpent with flaming/feathered eyebrows and feathered crest protectively surrounds a helmeted humanoid (1000-600 BC)



▲ Sketch of Stela 19

By the Post-classic period, roughly the mid-tenth century (AD), Quetzalcoatl has been identified as a mythical cultural hero and divine ruler among the Toltecs of Mexico. He is often identified with the hero twins, who are represented by the planet Venus which is both the morning star and evening star. Again the Mesoamerican concept of duality comes into play, as the Morning Star, Quetzalcoatl is fertility, order and learning. As the Evening Star he is war and aggression.

This concept of duality is also found in other painted images of Horned Serpents in the caves of Shalmirane. As discussed earlier, the green Horned Serpent is clearly linked with fertility (refer to pg. 7). In a nearby cave is another example of a Horned Serpent. In this case, he has a red horn and is falling from the sky like lightning. He is active and aggressive, the opposite of the green horned serpent. Amongst the Zuni, red is

the color associated with the south, the direction from which the summer monsoons flow. These are often active storms with lots of lightning and thunder, causing dangerous floods and sometimes forest fires. This destructive nature is counter balanced by the life and growth after the storm, again Duality, life/death and destruction/creation.

The Horned Serpent is often represented with a rattlesnake's tail. This rattle can be represented as a series of stacked, stylized mountains or clouds, both things associated with life giving water. Water to drink, water to grow crops. The main Puebloan crop was and is corn, and the shape of an ear of corn is similar to the shape of a rattlesnake's rattle. Again the concept of Duality in the Native American "World View" is clear, one end of the rattlesnake is Life while the other is Death.

◀ The Red Horned Serpent at Shalmirane can be seen striking like lightning down the center of the photo.



The Meeting of the Children of the Horned Serpent

Dateline: 1400 AD

They followed the Rio Grande south to near present day El Paso and then headed south and west to the Rio Santa Maria and further west to the Rio Casas Grandes, where the great village of Paquime stood.

The northern Puebloan traders came into the village at dawn. They came in a long line, their long hair loose and flowing over their shoulders and down their backs. Their bodies were naked from the waist up, but covered with splotches of black and white pigments. Their kilts and sashes swayed with their shuffled steps, the rhythm accentuated by the turtle shell rattles tied to their ankles and the gourd rattles that shook in their hands. "Uhmf, uhmf uhmf," they grunted as they came into the great plaza.

This was the ritual the two peoples of the horned serpent performed whenever they met. Those

from the North performed for those from the South, which was reciprocated when the Southern people of the serpent visited the north.

The Pueblos of the North brought Turquoise, salt, buffalo hides, magic spells, rituals and medicines from their distant homelands for exchange. The people of Paquime had beautiful parrot feathers, shells, copper bells and their own powerful spells and rituals to exchange. They exchanged not only goods but ideas, one of which was that of a horned and plumed serpent. A deity so powerful that it transcended earth and sky and brought destruction and life.

Well fellow seekers, that about wraps things up. It is clear that we are dealing with very special type of serpent, one that has a great forward arching horn, sometimes surrounded with feathers or feathered decorated sticks. He is a composite creature, the



▲ Casas Grandes, Ramos Polychrome, AD 1280-1450. Note the Horned Serpent with the feathered splays behind the horn is very similar the Horned Serpent pictograph from Shalimirane.



head having a mammalian like shape, possibly a bear. Because bears dig tubers and roots, they are associated with medicine and healing amongst some Pueblo peoples. Could medicine and healing also be associated with the Horned serpent?

This Horned Serpent is both a beneficent bringer of rain and corn, and a dangerous, deadly, uncontrollable entity in his form as lightning and as the poisonous rattlesnake. Devoid of appendages like arms and legs, trunk and neck, serpents don't fit into the basic morphology of your average land dwelling vertebrate. Add to that the special features of the rattlesnake: poisonous fangs and a tail that ends in a rattle, and you have

a rather unique and unusual creature. Further, add a horn and feathers and you are really going Supernatural. A Creature that, "crawls on its' belly like a reptile" in constant contact with the earth and one with its' magic horn and feathers that can fly through the sky. Earth and Sky...Duality. Cue the sound of distant wind. Cue the music. Cue my theme song. This is the Lone Prospector saying, "Adiós," fading out and slithering away.

▲ Aggressive nature of the Horned Serpent.

Petroglyph of Twin Horned Serpents. ►
Note how their bodies mimic lightning bolts, as well as squash vines, an important food source.





Crotalus viridis, The Prairie Rattlesnake.
Under heaven's vast skies few creatures have a more stone-cold, menacing stare than that of the rattlesnake. Unlike two-legged snakes, the rattlesnake almost always gives you a warning and a choice, walk away and all is well or mess with me at your own peril.

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