

Introduction

The Biblical phrase “wheels within wheels” (Ezekiel 1:16) is often used as a metaphor for complex phenomena with multi-layered levels of meanings in which one must look beyond the superficial appearance of an object to discern its deeper hidden meaning. This metaphor applies well to the Mississippian period Millstone Bluff site (11Pp-3) in Pope County, Illinois, at which three rock art panels combine to form a cross-and-circle “cosmogram” or graphic representation of the cosmological beliefs of the Native American peoples who once lived there. This cosmogram expresses a belief in a multi-directional universe divided into Upper and Under World realms (cross) as well as the totality of that same universe (circle). At the center of the cosmogram are two human-like figures—a large male and pregnant female—who may represent mythological beings associated with the Upper (male) and Under (female) Worlds of Native American cosmology.



Millstone Bluff

Millstone Bluff (11Pp-3) is an isolated mesa-like hill within the Shawnee Hills of southern Illinois (Figure 1). The bluff top is ringed by a sandstone escarpment, above which is located an unplowed ca. A.D. 1275-1450 Mississippian village (Cobb and Butler 1998:3, 63). The village contains at least 25 house depressions distributed around a central plaza with two cemeteries located on the hillside below the house basins. The three petroglyph groups are located on flat slabs along the sandstone escarpment on the northern hillside.

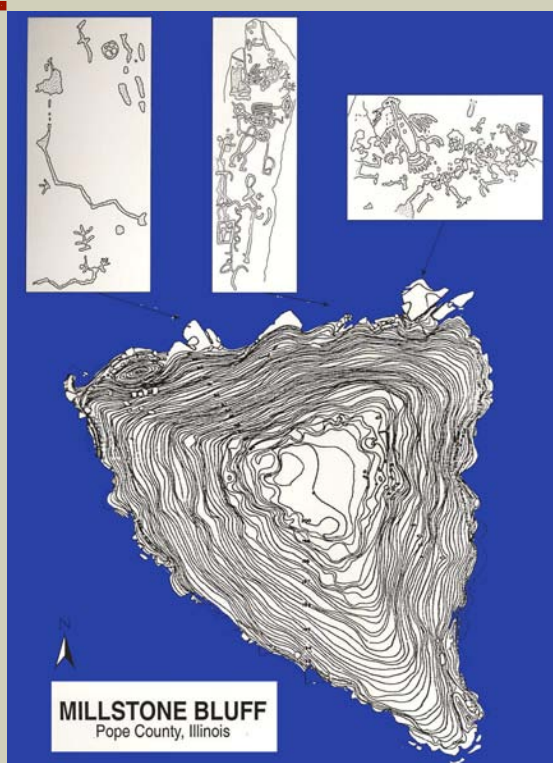


Figure 2. Location of Petroglyph Panels, Millstone Bluff

Petroglyphs

The petroglyphs are located on three sandstone blocks spaced 25 to 70 m apart along a 100 m area of the northern escarpment (Figure 2). Limited descriptions and photographs of the petroglyphs appeared in a series of articles from the 1950s to 1990s (Dearing 1956:13; Johnson and Rackerby 1975; Pulcher 1974; Wagner 1996) with the first detailed map not completed until 1997-1998 (Wagner et al. 2004). The mapping resulted in the discovery of an underlying pattern to the distribution of rock art images at the site consisting of Upper World motifs in the east; Under World motifs in the west; and a combination of Upper and Under World motifs in the center (Table 1).



Wheels Within Wheels: The Millstone Bluff Site Cosmogram

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Discussion

Millstone Bluff is believed to have been established as a “full-blown” village ca. AD 1275 by emigrants from the collapsing Mississippian period chiefdom at the Kincaid site in the nearby Ohio River Valley of southeastern Illinois. This emigrant group may have arrived at Millstone with the remnants of a chiefly hierarchy or some form of political or religious structure still intact (Butler and Cobb 2004). One of the first acts of the leaders of this group may have been the creation of a complex planned ritual landscape comprised of three interlocking rock art groups that form a symbolic cross-and-circle cosmogram. The presence of such a cosmogram at Millstone Bluff may reflect the local importance of the site, which is assumed to have been the nodal community of a small post-Kincaid polity of several hundred people dispersed in small settlements within the southern Illinois uplands. Although Millstone Bluff lacks the earthen platform mound characteristic of such nodal sites, the distinctive mound-like shape of the bluff containing the site may in itself have represented a symbolic platform mound (Butler and Cobb 2004:7).

Smith (2005:217-224), in a recent critical review of the identification of cosmograms by archaeologists, has noted that interpretations of this type need to be demonstrated empirically through rigorous research including the identification of recurring sets of iconographic elements that serve as representations of the cosmos. We believe that Millstone Bluff provides such empirical evidence in the form of (1) the repeating pattern of three Upper World iconographic elements—falcon, human-like figure, and bi-lobed arrow—in the eastern group that in combination represent the winged-being depicted on Mississippian shell and copper art throughout the Southeast; (2) the symbolic opposition of the eastern and western groups which contain Upper (winged beings) and Under (underwater monsters) World motifs, respectively; (3) and the symbolic opposition between the motifs in the upper (northern) and lower (southern) portions of the central panel, which again reflect the dual nature (Upper and Under Worlds) of the universe. It is our conclusion that these symbolic directional positions indicate that in combination the three rock art groups comprise a graphic expression or cosmogram of the belief of the Millstone Bluff villagers in the four-directional spiritual universe of the late prehistoric and historic period Native American peoples of the southeastern United States (Hall 1996). The creation of such a cosmogram would have linked the newly-arrived emigrants to their mythic past, served as a public expression of identity, and acted to remind the villagers on a daily basis of their cosmological view of the universe.

References

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Figure 3. Elk-Antlered Serpent, Western Group



Western Panel

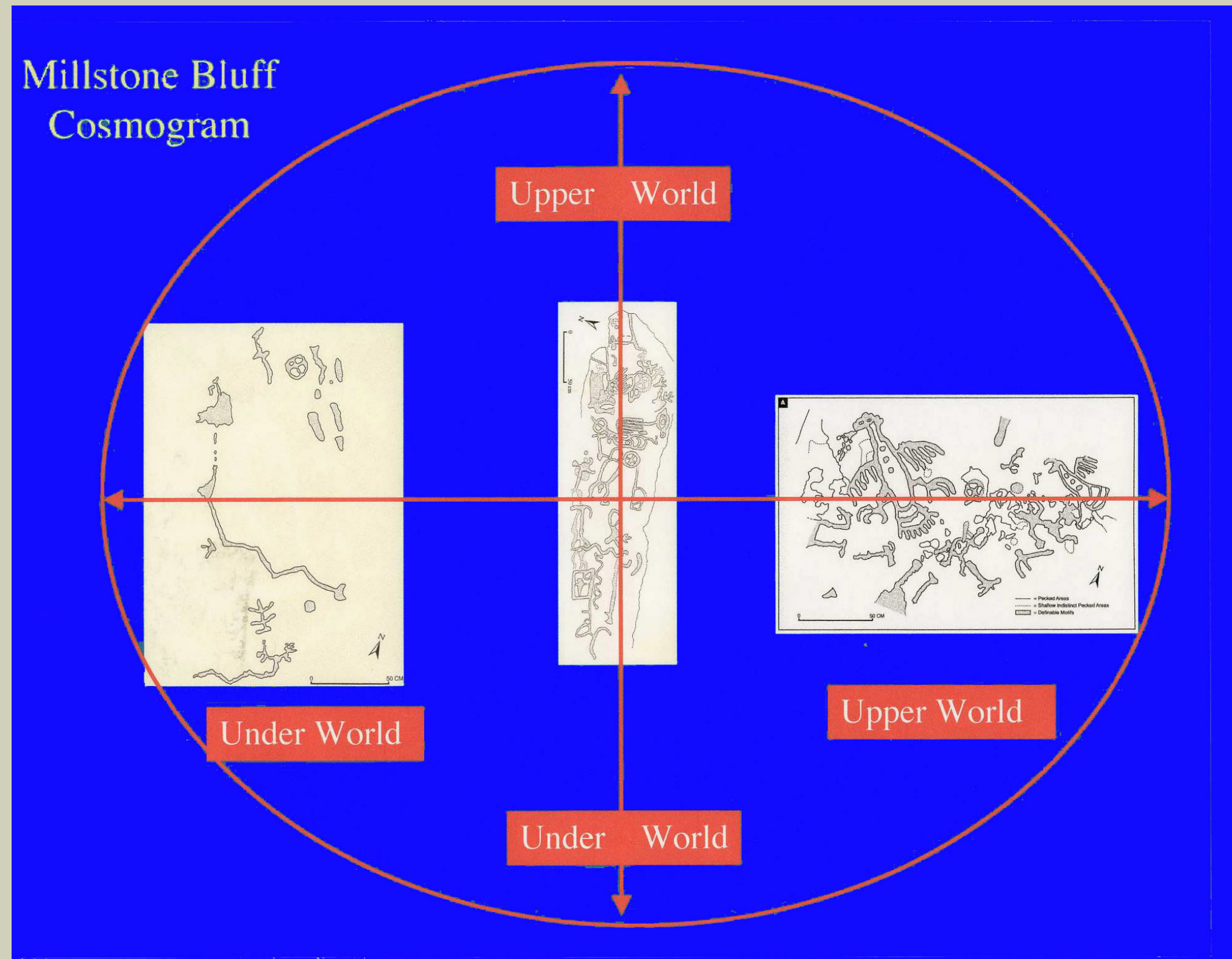
This panel is dominated by Under World motifs including a piasa-like elk-antlered serpent (Figure 3), a possible winged serpent, and a bilaterally symmetrical design consisting of a cross-and-circle flanked by two serpent-like petroglyphs. The winged serpent is indicated by a bisected chevron (wing) located next to a serpent (Figure 4). The interpretation of this chevron as a wing is based on its use in just such a manner on the body of a piasa-like creature on the neck of a Late Woodland jar from the American Bottom (Sampson 1988:176). The cross-and-circle flanked by serpent-like images (Figure 5) is reminiscent of the design on a marine shell cup from the Spiro site where four horned serpents surround a central cross-and-circle (Phillips and Brown 1984:228-229).



Figure 4. Serpent with Possible Adjacent Wing (Bisected Chevron), Western Group



Figure 5. Cross-and-Circle Flanked by Serpents, Western Group



Millstone Bluff Cosmogram



Figure 6. Lichen-Covered Central Panel (Left).



Figure 7. Large Male Anthropomorph (Center) and Falconid Bird With Bi-Lobed Arrow Headdress (Top), Central Panel (Below)

Central Panel

The central panel (Figure 6) contains both Upper and Under World-related images including falconid birds with bi-lobed arrows emerging from their heads in the upper part of the panel and badly eroded serpentine lines in the lower part of the panel that may once have depicted Under World creatures such as winged or antlered serpents. Located in the center are a large male anthropomorph who holds a possible chert knife in his upraised arm (Figure 7) as well as an armless figure with a swollen abdomen interpreted as pregnant female.

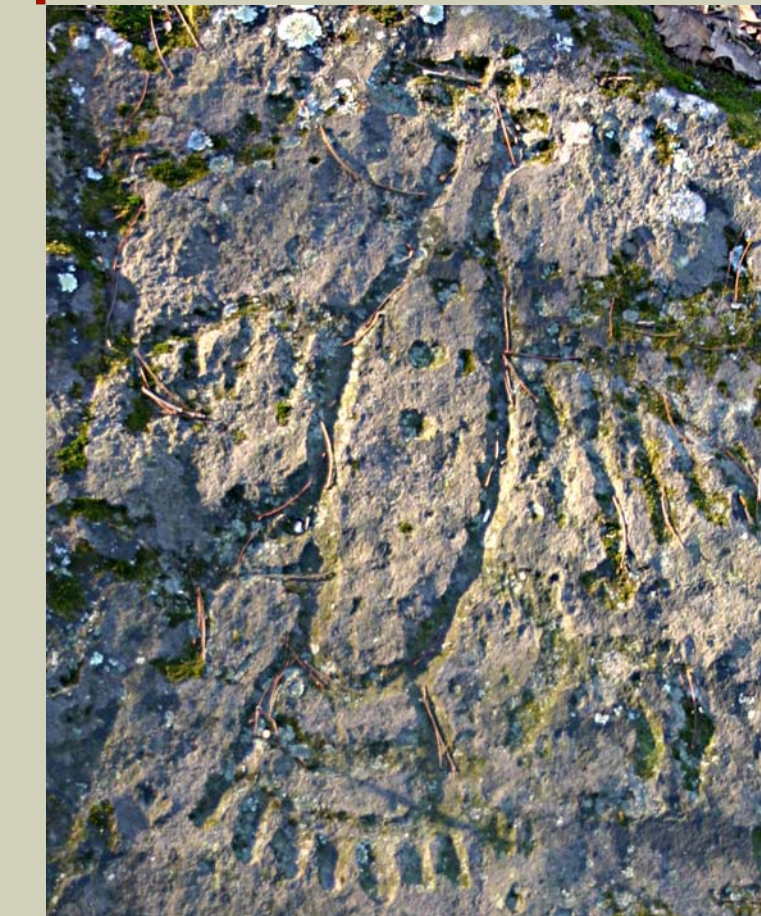


Figure 9. Falconid Bird, Eastern Group

Eastern Panel

This group contains a “hidden” repeating pattern of Upper World motifs—falconid birds, anthropomorphs, and plumed bi-lobed arrows—arranged in a V-shaped configuration (Figures 8 and 10). We believe that these repeating images comprise an “exploded” or schematic representation of the essential features of the “bird-man” or “falcon-impersonator” being depicted on shell and copper art throughout the southeast during the Mississippian period (Figures 10 and 11). Mississippian viewers, who would have been cognizant of the symbolic meaning of the three motifs, undoubtedly would have recognized them immediately as linked synecdoches (i.e., parts that stand for a whole) of the bird-man figure. The chevron or wing-shaped arrangement of the group may in itself represent a metaphor for the Upper World, the abode of celestial sky powers including the birdman being (Emerson 1989:73-75).

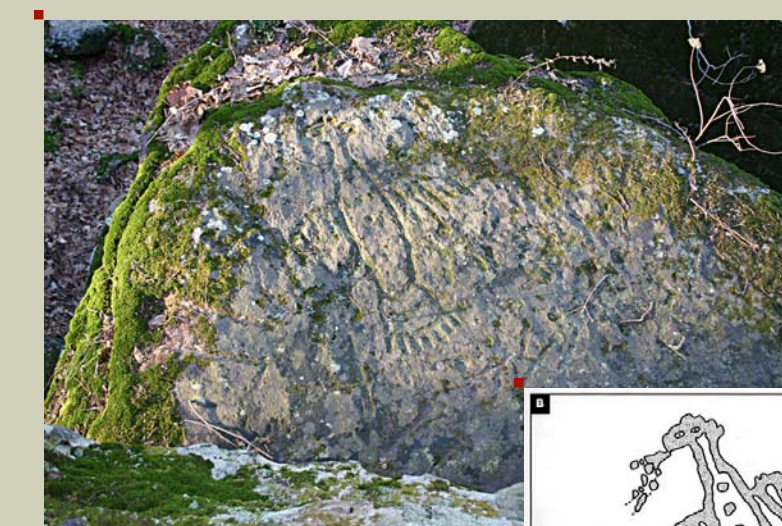


Figure 8. Eastern Petroglyph Group

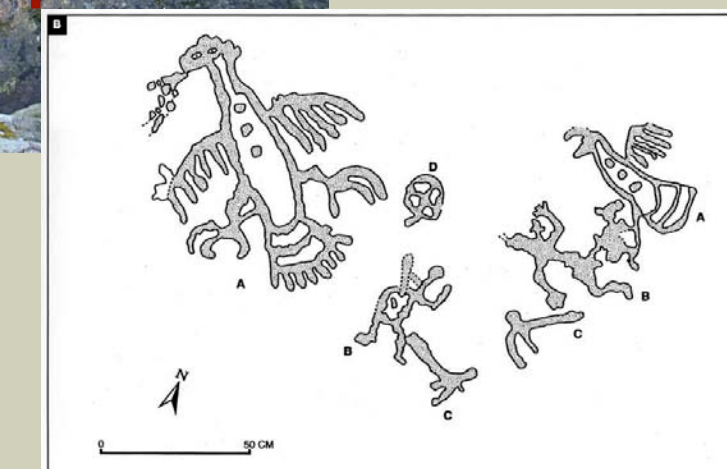


Figure 10. “Hidden” Repeating Pattern of Falconid Bird, Anthropomorph, and Plumed Bi-Lobed Arrow Comprising an Exploded View of the Mississippian “Bird-Man” Icon (Figure 8), Eastern Group



Figure 11. Mississippian “Bird-Man” Image on Copper Plate, Mound C, Etowah Site