

# Archaeologist uncovers historic solstice marker

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One professor's dire curiosity is what led to the uncovering of two prehistoric effigies in North America.

Dr. John R. White, anthropology, explained how the

digging team stumbled upon the effigies, defined as a likeness or image, by sheer luck. "You just don't know from one project to the next when something is going to be significant. That's what makes archaeology fun."

The actual dig began in 1981 in a 25-acre test pit near Fort

Ancient along the Little Miami River. At the sight several members of the digging team, consisting of White and several students, began to uncover large stones again and again.

It took three summer seasons of hard work and dedication to uncover the first effigy. At first

**See White, page 6**

# White

Continued from page 1

"we had no idea what it was. We knew it was purposely built. It was clear—it wasn't accidental," said White.

During the summer of 1983 the team finally reached the end of the effigy. They discovered the tail, shaped like a "pronounced rattle," at the end of the snake-shaped effigy.

Upon further investigation, the team discovered the snake to be a summer solstice marker. White explained: if you place a pole at the top end of the snake, when "the sun comes up in a gap about a mile away, only on this one day of the year [June 21, summer solstice], it hits this pole and throws a shadow right through the center of [the snake's body]."

The pole used is called a gnomon pole which acts as the raised part of a sundial at the head of the stone serpent.

As days pass, the sun causes the shadow to walk down the tail of the snake's body.

After the uncovering, the diggers also found two samples of burnt wood. The samples were sent to the Smithsonian Institution and determined to be from approximately 1200 A.D.

White recalled "now we had an effigy that is a solstice marker; that's the only one of its kind in the U.S.," and it has been entered in the National Register of Historic Sites.

After the discovery of the summer solstice marker, the team found a second one — a winter solstice marker.

White has concern that the ef-

figies will be destroyed, however, and because of his concern, he has developed an important plan to save the historic site: "This summer we hope to go back and bury them so they don't get destroyed. Now that they are exposed, they are subject to erosion, people picking up rocks for souvenirs, and this great wonderful site is being destroyed each year by the seasons."

White is trying to get proper funding to cover the original effigies with plaster. Markers will be erected to show the shape of the effigy as it was discovered by the digging crew. On top of the plaster, White said he hopes to build a reconstruction of the effigy as it would have appeared in 1200 A.D.

By doing this he said he hopes to please everybody: scientists will be able to study the landmark and tourists will be able to see not only what the original effigy looked like, but also how it appeared upon discovery.

So why did the Indians and builders of the effigy choose a snake? White explained that in ancient mythology the snake was the "separator of seasons."

White explained that, "rattle snakes, when they come out of hibernation in the spring, always orient themselves with the sun and take off in the opposite direction." This explains the orientation of the snakes to the sun's position during the summer and winter solstices.

At this time, White has applied for a University of Research Council grant to cover the effigy and help in its preservation.