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The Kaministikwia Intaglio Dog Effigy Mound

ABSTRACT

The search for and subsequent location and excavation of a zoomorphic intaglio effigy mound near Port Arthur, Ontario, is described. Absence of artifacts prevent positive identification as to cultural affinity.

INTRODUCTION

Ontario has been well endowed with prehistoric Indian sites dating from early to late and including several cultural affinities. Yet it has few effigy mounds; the Serpent Mound on Rice Lake being the out-standing exception. The writings of explorers, however, refer to another effigy lying northeast of the old Nor'Westers mesa range on the portage route of the Kaministikwia River (Fig. 1).

W. H. Keating's "Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of the St. Peter's River," a report of 1824, makes reference to the figure of a dog carved upon a hill on what was then known as Dog Portage. Other early writers such as Simpson, Hind and Kane, also make mention of the figure. Stories of the dog impression have persisted in the lore of the area and local historians such as Denis (1959) and Bertrand (1959) make reference to it, and as recently as 1924, W. S. Piper, in his book, "The Eagle of Thunder Cape", reported its presence.

In the summer of 1962 following interest expressed by Kenneth E. Kidd, then Curator of Ethnology at the Royal Ontario Museum, now Associate Professor of Anthropology, Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, the writer undertook a search with the assistance of Trevor Page, Associate Professor of Geology at Lakehead University, to find and record the site. Early references indicated that the impression was located at the end of the climb just on the crest of the hill on the portage at Great Dog Falls, near Dog Lake, at the headwaters of the Kaministikwia River, or Kaministiquia, as it is known locally (Fig. 2).

DISCOVERY AND EXPOSURE

Proceeding up the Kaministikwia River from Lake Superior some twenty-six miles, one first comes to Kakabeka Falls, a height of about 120 feet. Twenty miles further upstream and after several small portages, another impassable water falls, Dog Falls, is reached. To make this portage it is necessary to climb 347 feet up a steep incline to a small

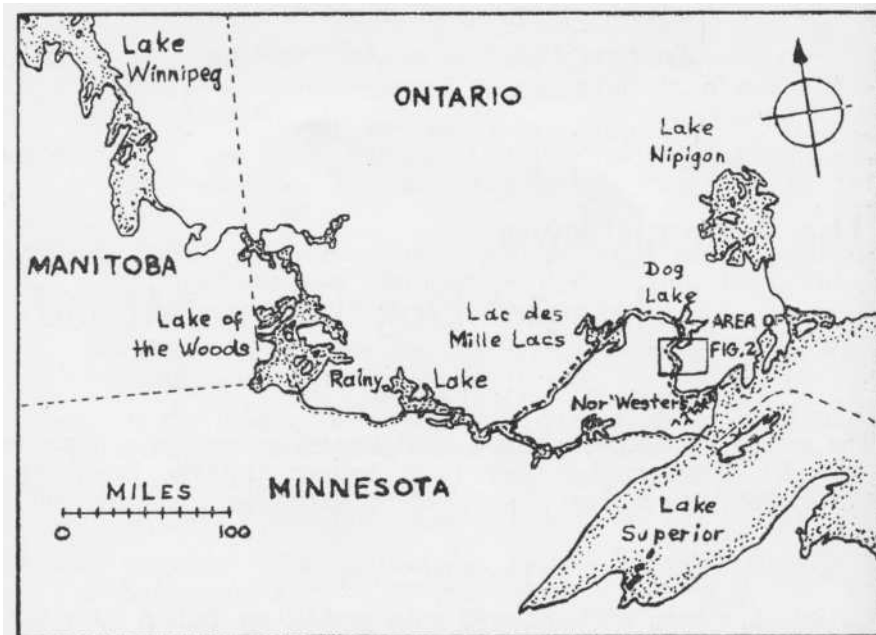


FIGURE 1

Map of northwestern Ontario showing the portage route from Nor'Westers, through Dog Lake, Lac des Mille Lacs, Rainy Lake, and Lake of the Woods to Lake Winnipeg.

plateau from which it is another mile and one-half to the end of the portage. This height of land is known as Dog Mountain ; geologically it is a ridge of glacial outwash (Fig. 3) .

The first task was to locate the old portage route. Since the falls was made the site of a hydro-electric generating station in 1959, many lines have been slashed through the bush over the height of land trans-versed by the portage. This made the problem of locating the old route decidedly more difficult. After several fruitless attempts, a portion of the trail over the crest of the hill was clearly established. We are indebted to Ken Tuominen, a local resident familiar with the area since boyhood, for rendering the final insight on the location. Early reports indicated that from the location a viewer could look straight down the Kaministikwia River. Tuominen was able to visualize the location, although a grove of small trees now obscures the view and the effigy was located.

Thanks to Allen S. Bray, then Regional Director of the Ontario Department of Lands and Forests who supplied a crew of woodsmen, the bush consisting of spruce, birch, aspen and hazel brush was cut and cleared to permit the more meticulous work of establishing the original surface of the mound. Tree roots were carefully cut off level with the contour and about six inches of leaf mould removed by trowel from the centre of the form to expose the original surface.

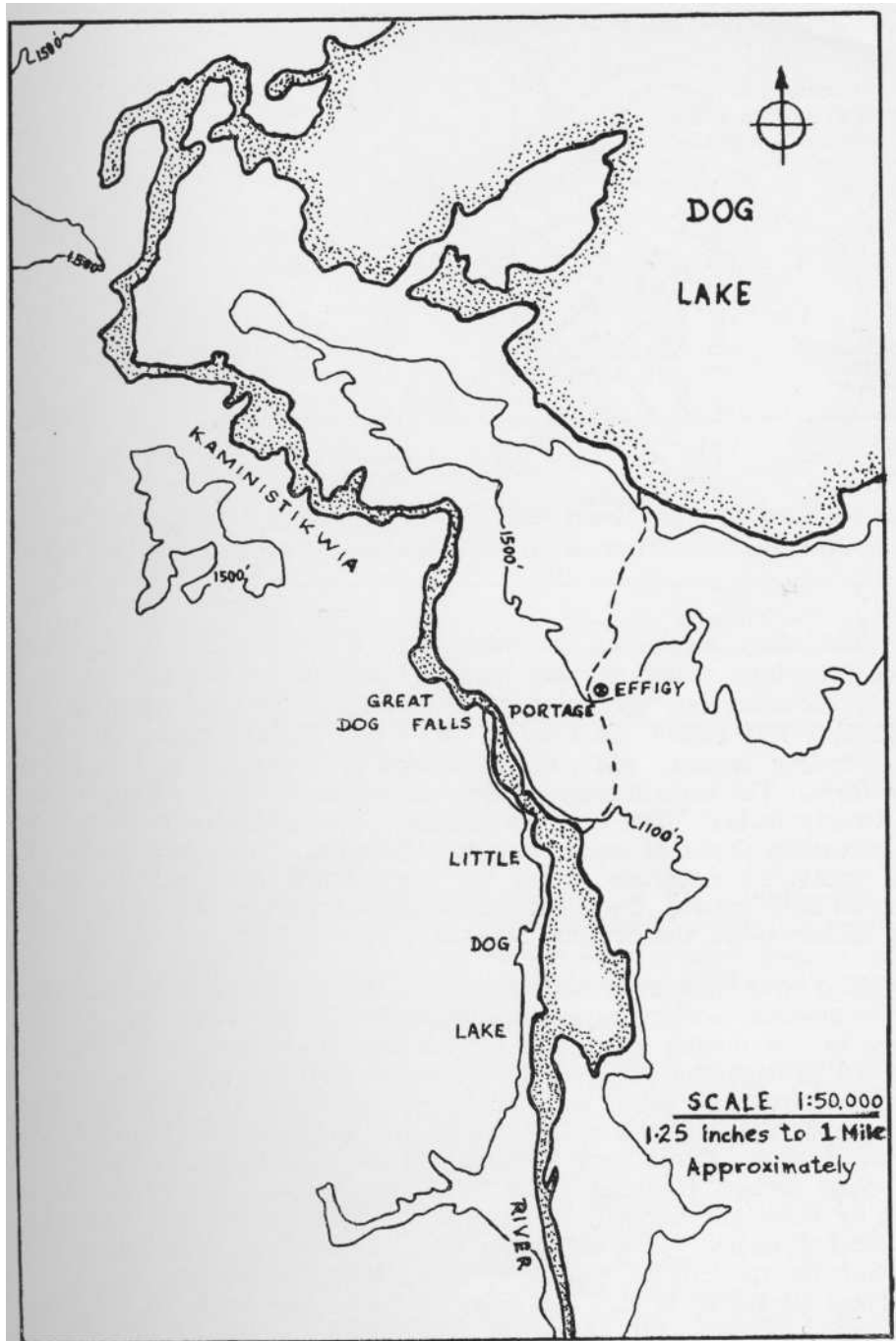


FIGURE 2

Map of the Kaministikwia River showing the positions of the Dog Effigy Mound and the Dog Lake Portage. Slightly reduced from scale given.

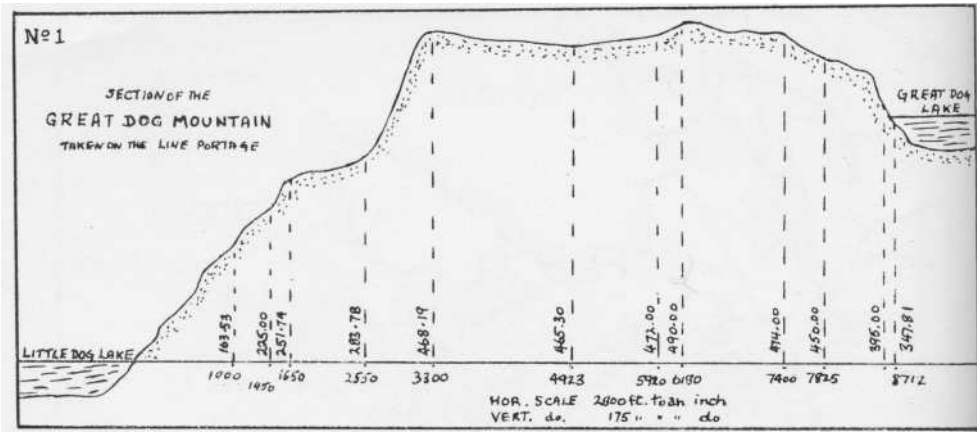


FIGURE 3

Section through Great Dog Mountain along the line of the Dog Lake Portage, taken from Hind (1860). Slightly reduced from scale given.

The effigy, located on the crest of the hill at a point where the trail turns right or eastward, was made by excavating the impression and using the materials excavated to form an outline of the figure. This technique has raised the level of the effigy slightly above that of the surrounding terrain, while the excavated area outlines and emphasizes the form. The central body portion was excavated to a maximum depth of twenty inches. The head and legs are comparatively shallow, having a maximum depth of seven inches. Except for the south sides where the excavated materials raised the level about eight inches above the surrounding ground the mounded outline appears to be no more than six inches above the original surface (Fig. 4).

The area has been perforated by soil test pits sunk during the hydro-electric power project construction period. Three of these pits were in the mound (Fig. 5). Fortunately they were not of sufficient size to damage the outline. Two, located virtually opposite each other on the north and south side of the outline about the shoulder region, measured approximately a foot square and were dug to a depth of about twelve inches. These were straightened and deepened to eighteen inches as cross section trenches. The third test pit was approximately four feet by three and one-half feet and was apparently excavated to a depth of twenty inches. The excavated area consisted of light yellow gravel permitting its careful replacement to bring the surface back to the original excavated level. The effigy was then surveyed. A longitudinal centreline through the body was established and angles and distances were taken at all points of abrupt change in contour. The figure is approximately thirty-two feet long by twelve feet wide; these measurements cannot be specific because the precise outline is rather vague (Fig. 6).

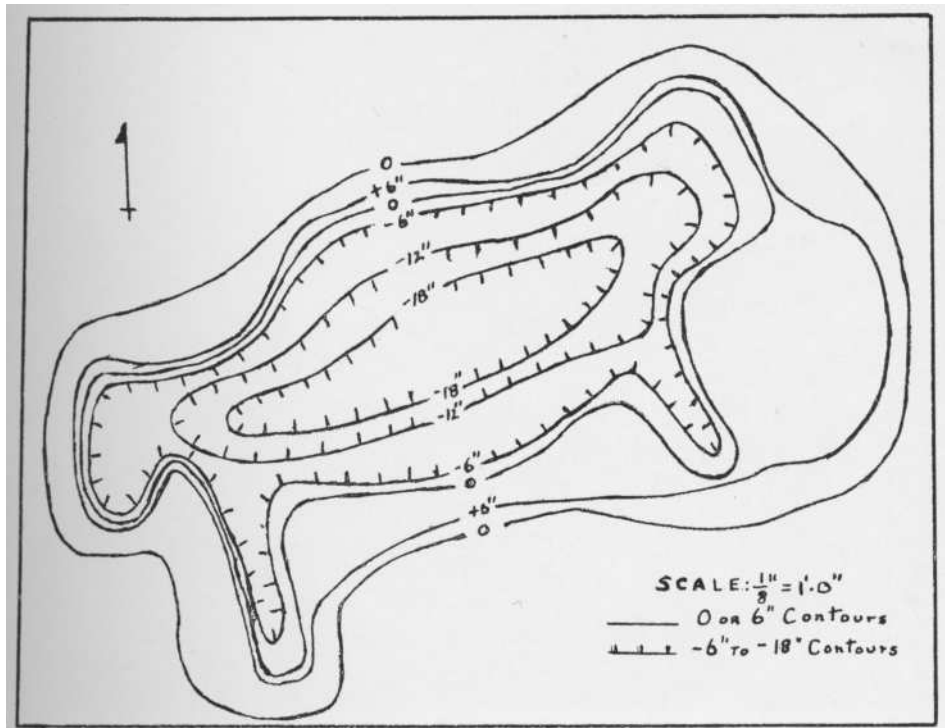


FIGURE 4

Contours of the Dog Effigy Mound

The feature is a well preserved example of an intaglio type of zoomorphic mound. It has the generalized outline of a dog-like creature though it could easily be interpreted as a wolf, a ground hog, or other beast. The tail is thick and could be mistaken for a second head changing the effigy to a Janus-like figure.

The soil exposed by the cross sectioning was a light pebbly sand, dark brown in colour, covered by about one inch of humus. No colour contrast suggesting an increase in organic composition left by an earlier sod line was evident below the humus line. To ascertain whether there was any marked increase in organic composition of the soil below the present humus level, three soil samples were taken, one from each side and one control sample from outside the impression. A soil analysis was performed in the laboratories at Lakehead University. The control sample showed a consistent decrease in organic composition with depth. The sample from the north side also showed a consistent decrease with depth. The organic composition, however, was slightly higher at the lower level than that of the control sample. The sample from the south side taken near the hind quarters showed an increase in organic composition between six to eight inches. The increase amounted to only 0.5%, but when it is considered that the maximum organic composition

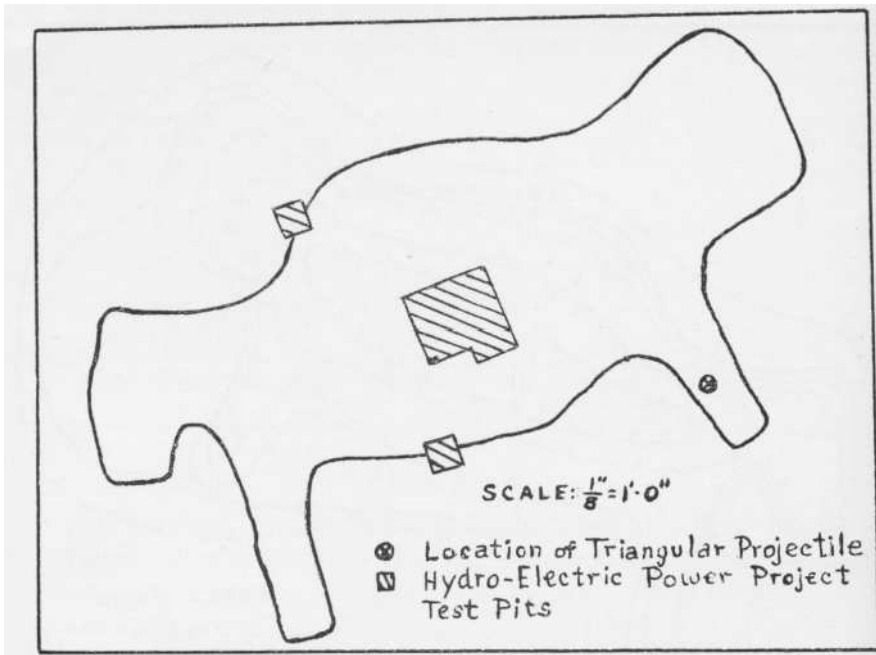


FIGURE 5

Location of previously excavated areas and the projectile point within the Dog Effigy Mound's outline.

at the humus level was only 6.7% , the increase is significant and suggests the original sod line. This supports the view that the effigy was made by excavating the body and throwing the materials excavated along the outline to form the dog-like creature.

The effigy faces west by southwest on a gentle slope of land which is probably sufficient to make it clear at a considerable distance if the underbrush were to be removed. Simpson (1847) compares it with the white horse at Bath in England and local stories contend that the effigy could be seen shining white, a conspicuous feature on the skyline as one paddled up the river. This suggests that the effigy must have been covered with some gleaming substance, probably fine beach sand. No evidence of this remains but this is not surprising since it would be well over a century since such a covering had been supplied. Considering the proximity of the site to Siouan territory a "white dog" might suggest a Siouan origin,

Clearing to expose the mound uncovered only one artifact ; a beige coloured triangular flint projectile point, toward the centre of the hind leg (Fig. 5) . It is in outline an isosceles triangle with slightly convex lateral edges and a straight base made from a thin flake fashioned by pressure flaking along the edges. The length is 30 mm, the width is 21 mm, and in thickness is 5 mm. MacNeish (1954) reports the type (Eastern Triangular) to have been in widespread use in North America in late prehistoric



FIGURE 6

The Dog Effigy Mound viewed from the southwest. The head lies in the foreground. The survey stakes mark abrupt changes in contour.

and historic times. It is the predominant type in the Manitoba Focus of southeastern Manitoba and the Blackduck Focus of Minnesota which MacNeish and Wilford (1941) attribute to Siouan-speaking Assiniboine, and to the Selkirk Focus of southeastern Manitoba which is attributed to Algonquin speaking Cree ; either cultural group could have been on the Kaministikwia.

For purposes of photographic record the outline was marked with flour and again, thanks to the Department of Lands and Forests who provided an aircraft, we were able to photograph the effigy from the air (Fig. 7). They also fenced in the site with a view to protecting it for use as a central theme in a future park development. The combination of location, flora and sandy soil has resulted in a minimum of erosion and it is expected that the mound form will remain relatively stable under these conditions.

DISCUSSION

Neither excavation nor the review of historical records clearly suggests who made the mound. Keating (1959) states that it was supposed to have been made by a party of Sioux on a warlike excursion into the area.



FIGURE 7

The Dog Effigy Mound viewed from the air from above the crest of Dog Mountain. The outline has been whitened with flour for visibility.

Hind, on the other hand, suggests that it was made by the Ojibwa in commemoration of the conflict between the Sioux and the Ojibwa which he understood took place near the location probably sometime before 1620. According to local lore this memory has been kept fresh in the minds of the Ojibwa living in the area and even to this day, the Ojibwa trappers continue to tell stories about the Dog on Dog Mountain. These stories suggest that the Sioux made the effigy and on their withdrawal the Ojibwa destroyed its supernatural powers by excavating a second head. This might account for the enlargement of the eastern extremity of what we have considered to be the tail formation.

Simpson, in 1847 states that, "According to the tradition, the portage derives its name from the circumstances that two enormous dogs, having taken a nap at the top of the hill, left the impression of their figures behind them." While it is not clear whose tradition he is referring to, it does suggest two dog impressions. An extensive search was undertaken in an endeavour to confirm this. Piper's (1924) book "The Eagle of Thunder Cape" includes a photograph of an impression taken about 1910 on the Dog Portage which clearly is not the same effigy. Apart from the obvious variation in outline, his picture shows a large pine stump immediately alongside the back of the dog. There was no evidence of this at the

feature which is the subject of this report. We must conclude therefore, that there were, in all probability, two dog impressions although we were unable to locate the second effigy.

In attempting to seek out the relationship of the zoomorphic form of the effigy a comparison with pictographs and petroglyph in the area is of little help. Dewdney reports only three dog-like creatures in the many hundreds of finds he has recorded and these bear no resemblance to the impression at Dog Lake. It is perhaps significant that Dewdney's dog finds all were west of the Kaministikwia River in the direction of the traditional Sioux territory.

The impression could be described by paraphrasing Boas' (1955) remarks in his book "Primitive Art" — it is a pictographic representation of a mythological concept, expressing the magical aspect of the life of the Indians which has value solely on account of its meaning rather than its form.

In historic times the route was first used by the early French explorers in the search west for furs. From Dog Lake the course is down the Savanne River through Lac des Mille Lac, Pickerel Lake, Sturgeon Lake and Lac la Croix, and thence to Rainy Lake and Lake of the Woods. In 1679, Daniel Greysolon Sieur Dulhut established a post at the mouth of the Kaministikwia River and it is likely that traders used the route from that date until La Verendrye opened the Grand Portage route in 1731. Its use was not resumed until after 1797 when the partners of the Northwest Company established their headquarters at the Lakehead following the American Revolutionary War. The route was in continuous use until the advent of the railway in 1882. Undoubtedly it was in use long before the white man first traversed the route. It seems apparent that the presence of the effigy has given the river and the lake their name; this being so, the features must have been associated with the river and the lake since the white man first heard of them. Considering the location and the stories associated with it, the age is probably no more than three to four hundred years and quite possibly more recent.

So far as is known to the writer, this is the only effigy of its kind to have come to light. There is a slight possibility that others may exist, for Keating mentions that similar figures were known near Lake Travers. If we assume that the Kaministikwia Dog Effigy is typical, then the small size of the features and their vague outlines, virtually indistinguishable from their surroundings, makes the finding of others unlikely and the rediscovery may well remain a unique find in the annals of Ontario Archaeology.

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