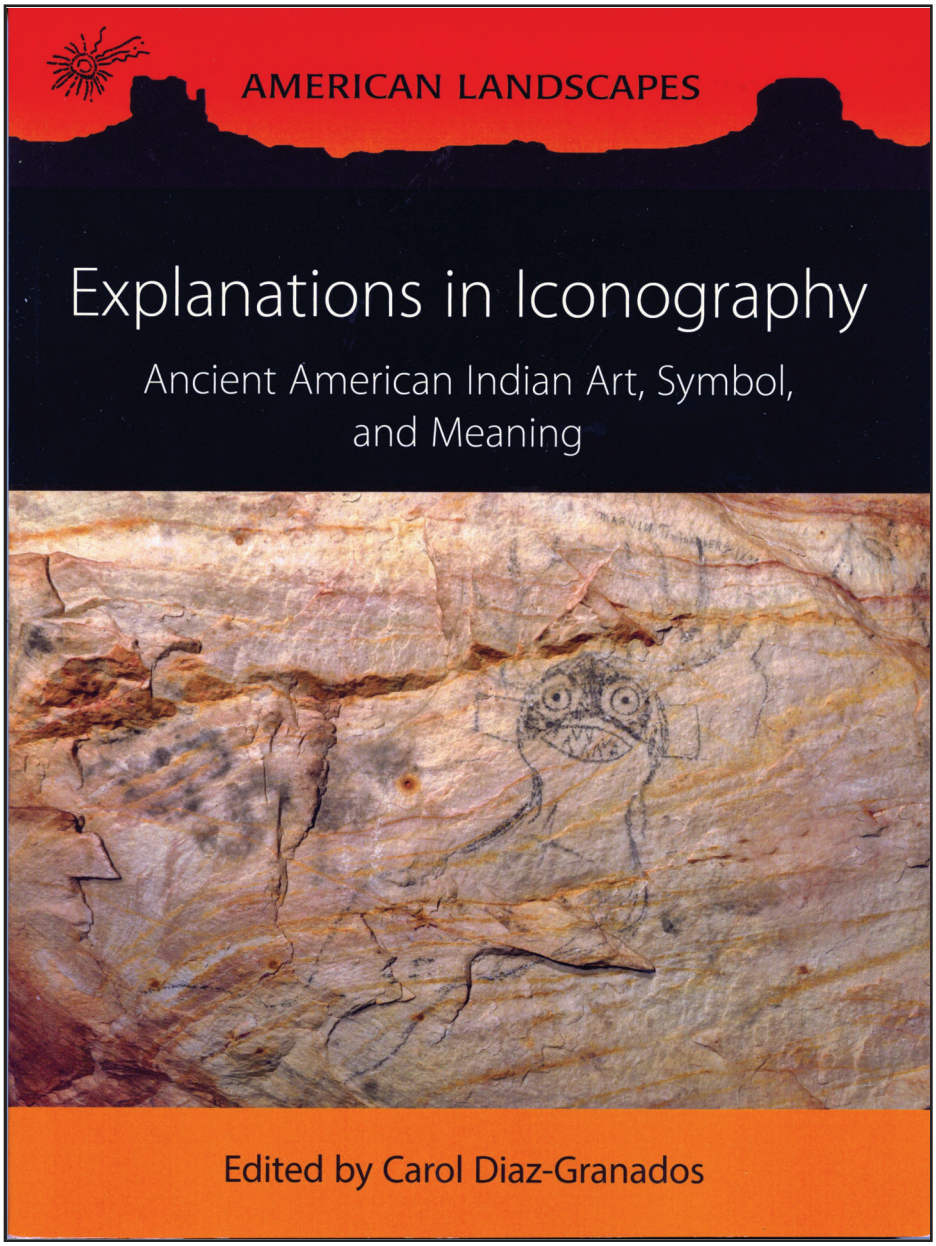

# Contents

*Explanations in Iconography: Ancient American Indian Art, Symbol, and Meaning* is a significant contribution to the field of archaeology – a contribution in iconography studies that has gradually been coming into its own. Iconography is a rich and fascinating field, as applied to the complex, and heretofore enigmatic, imagery on many ancient Pre-Columbian artifacts. When viewed through the lens of early ethnographic records and American Indian oral traditions, as well as information from knowledgeable American Indian elders, it opens a world of understanding and clarity until recently unknown in the field of anthropological archaeology. It brings us closer to the people who created the artifacts and offers a glimpse into the symbols and beliefs that were important to them. Chapters cover a wide variety of artifacts and imagery from several ancient American Indian cultures. These artifacts include petroglyphs and pictographs (rock art), mounds, engraved shell cups and gorgets, burial architecture and grave furniture, pottery, copper repoussé, and other media. Ancient graphics, engravings, mounds were all created to deliver a message to the viewer – and many of those messages are finally coming to light. The artifacts included are from a variety of regions, mainly in the Midwest and Eastern United States. We hope that this volume will encourage others to look more deeply into the meaning behind the ancient imagery and arts and give the past a chance to be known.

**Carol Diaz-Granados** is a professional archaeologist and Research Associate in the Department of Anthropology, Washington University, St Louis, where she has lectured for 39 years. Her major research focus is American Indian rock art, symbolism, and iconography, and associated oral traditions. Carol has written, edited, or co-edited five books and has chapters in various edited volumes and two museum exhibition catalogues. Her 2004 volume, *Rock-Art of Eastern North America* won an Outstanding Academic Title award. Carol was senior editor of *Transforming the Landscape: Rock Art and the Mississippian Cosmos* (2018).

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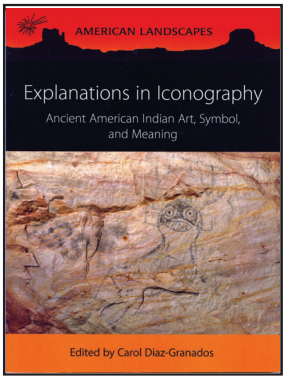


# Explanations in Iconography: Ancient American Indian Art, Symbol, and Meaning

Carol Diaz-Granados, Ed. 2023. Oxbow Books, Haverstown, PA. 226 pp., 75 figures, references, index. $39.95 (Paperback).

Reviewed by Dr. Thomas E. Emerson, Institute Affiliate, Illinois State Archaeological Survey, Prairie Research Institute, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Carol Diaz-Granados, long known for her work with rock art, has assembled a diverse set of studies, designed to reach a broad audience, on American Indian symbolism and its interpretation (Ch. 1). For her, iconography is the recognition of patterned motifs/symbols interpreted through the lens of ethnography. To provide perspective, this tack incorporates the traditional archaeological methodologies of formal typologies and ethnographic analogies. Thus, iconographers' research is subject to the well-established critiques of typologies and analogical reasoning.

No recent scholars have focused more on the connections of Mississippian symbols with late historic and modern Dhegihan oral traditions than John Duncan (of Osage heritage) and Carol Diaz-Granados have, especially through the medium of rock art. In their chapter (Ch. 2), they have concentrated on two specific themes central to a wide array of prairie-plains American Indian oral traditions—the Making of the Earth and First Woman. Their observations deserve consideration given their elaboration on the social roles that these tales play in defining father–son and nephew–uncle kin relations, the origins of tribal divisions, the key role of women in the creation of the world, the role of adoption rites, the path of souls to the afterlife, and more. They acknowledge a recognition that modern American Indian oral traditions represent greatly simplified versions that may "[retain] the key chartering points that govern and instruct . . . about important cultural values" (p. 18). Duncan continues (Ch. 9) the discussion of First Woman and the Great Serpent in a highly sophisticated interweaving of archaeological remains, ethnographic records, and modern beliefs of the Native American Church, or Peyotism. The contribution seeks to integrate a wide array from multiple sources covering thousands of years and a large regional scope but is stacked toward Dhegihan ethnographic traits as well as hampered by a lack of awareness of the recent two decades of Cahokian bioarchaeology and archaeological findings—in some cases supportive of and in others adverse to his interpretations.

The reexamination of legacy collections comes into play in chapters by King and Stauffer. The symbolically rich elite mortuary features from Mound C at Etowah are suggested by Adam King (Ch. 3) to be best explained by Siouan cosmological and political themes related to the Birdman figure. The inherent concepts in the regalia

are said to have provided elites the supernatural and political power to transform the social history of Etowah to create a ranked social structure. The salvage of Mound 3 at the Lake Jackson site in the Florida panhandle revealed a stunning array of exotic funerary objects and unusual interments studied by J. Grant Stauffer (Ch. 4). He identifies a unique subset of mortuary features of adult women entombed in wooden coffins and accompanied by elaborate repoussé copper plates. Stauffer perceives the spatial organization of interments and accompanying materials as being linked to fertility ceremonialism. This supposition is reasonable and could have been strengthened by referencing the last 40 years of richly detailed published research by several authors on early Mississippian female fertility symbolism.

Steve Boles (Ch. 9) examines five examples of Cahokian and Tennessee-Cumberland style figures from the Mississippi-Ohio confluence regions, suggesting that all have some Cahokian source or influence in their crafting and recognizing them as religious sacra based on their distribution, context, and decommissioning. He provides previously unrecorded accounts that expand our understanding but, at the same time, illustrate the difficulty in validating and contextualizing such often-looted figures. Boles ties these figures to that common array of nineteenth-century figures of Earth Mother, Red Horn, Turtle, and so forth promoted by the Texas Mississippian Iconography Workshop. He suggests that the recovery of such objects outside of Cahokian contexts may signal the movement of sacred bundles and rites.

Two chapters (5 and 8) are reprints of previously published articles. These contributions, both by Bradley Lepper and colleagues, argue the symbolism of midcontinental rock art and effigy mounds is explicable through overarching Siouan mythology. Interestingly, while others recognize the interpretative value of local variation, these studies act to submerge regional and chronological variation. These two chapters contain a subtext of an unresolved controversy as to whether the cultural context of the enigmatic Ohio Serpent Mound is Early Woodland or Fort Ancient—a chronological variance of over 1,500 years. It is an insightful case study into the critical importance of secure context and chronological setting to iconographic interpretations.

In a striking contradistinction to the broad sweep of some chapters' interpretive venue, George Sabo and Alex Barker present (Ch. 6) compelling arguments based on the symbolic corpus and context of Spiro Mounds. They combine a meticulous and insightful examination of the Forked Pole leitmotif as a power symbol depicted on the Craig Mound engraved shell cups. Their interpretations combined an exhaustive review of the challenging contextual complexity with a focused assessment of the Forked Pole motifs and a well-reasoned review of potential Native traditions that may provide insights and act as "guides [for] inferring cognate forms reflected in Spiroan imagery"(p. 100). Sabo and Barker's interpretations are well reasoned and compelling, and their judicious approach may well serve as a model for iconographic studies in general.

Dye's (Ch. 7) interpretation of the social and political role of Hero Twins imagery among Tunican polities in the northern lower Mississippi River valley represents a mirror image of Sabo and Barker's approach but is equally fruitful. He incorporates an all-encompassing Eastern Woodland review of Hero Twins traditions, identifying shared attributes of one of the most pervasive religious concepts in the Western Hemisphere. Furthermore, Dye recognizes the regional and chronological multivocality of Mississippian symbols and uses that perspective to focus particularly on their social and political implementation among the Tunican populations. As always, what characterizes Dye's work is his interweaving of symbols in the context of social, religious, and political agendas, often through the institutions of religious sodalities, to present a fascinating reanalysis of precontact societies. The picture emerges as a complexly entangled or meshwork (to use current terminology) of constituents within the lives of living people rather than as discrete symbols and ethnographic analogies floating in a timeless social void, as is too often the case.

In the contributions to this volume, the key challenge is to validate the ethnographic links to the ancient symbols—the authors' interpretations rise or fall on that basis. All too often, the connections are presumed rather than demonstrated. This challenge is aggravated by a more than 1,000-year gap between the makers of the symbols and the oral-tradition analogues recorded in the nineteenth century from societies traumatized, decimated, fragmented, and then coalesced into new groups by centuries of devastating diseases, massive population loss, migration, climatic changes, and warfare.

There is an unevenness in the contributions. It seems that some chapters were earlier versions of papers with little attempt made to update their content. Some chapters are under referenced, and a number of images lack attribution. The failure of some authors to acknowledge the full range of recent research weakens their arguments. Conversely, contributions by authors such as Sabo and Barker and Dye are outstanding examples of the potential of well-designed and integrated iconographic interpretations. If the editor's primary goal was to expose readers to an eclectic and disparate assemblage of Explanations in Iconography, as the volume title suggests, then it is achieved. Those who follow the recent tacks and swerves in the interpretation of Mississippian-era symbolism will want to add this moderately priced volume to their libraries.