

The Role of the Great Spirit in North American Geomythology

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Abstract

The Great Spirit played a wide variety of roles in North American geomythology, involving volcanoes, earthquakes, floods, fossils, springs, and caves. This is the first time that the hitherto scattered geo-feats of the Great Spirit have been brought together as a group, forming a geomythic presence of major stature. References to a supreme sacred agency translated into English as the “Great Spirit” recur throughout the North American geomythological literature. I examine that recurring narrative pattern as it appears in foundational works by Dorothy Vitaliano and Adrienne Mayor, supplemented by additional historical and site-specific materials. By assembling these dispersed cases, I clarify a structural feature of North American geomythology while situating it within the colonial history of translation and interpretation.

Keywords: Great Spirit, geoheritage, geomythology, fossil legends, Carver’s Cave, Wakan Tipi.

1. Introduction

1.1 Comparative geomythology

While reading Dorothy Vitaliano’s classic account of geomythology, *Legends of the Earth: Their Geologic Origins*, I was struck by some things. One of them was that certain characters played outsized roles in the creation of geologic features, and hence geoheritage. The most prominent named example is the Hawaiian fire goddess Pele, of the Pacific islands. Not only are there multiple stories in which she features, but they are adorned with elaborate details such that we get a sense of her personality (Kane, 1996).

But Pele is uniquely Polynesian in origin. In North America, the only comparable figure, as featured in Vitaliano’s book, is the Great Spirit, a Native American sky god. Moreover, this god is responsible for a wide range of geophenomena, not merely volcanism, but things like earthquakes and floods. Unlike Pele, however, detailed personality attributes are not usually assigned to this entity. Despite its repeated occurrence in her book, Vitaliano does not even assign a separate index entry to the term “Great Spirit.” In this article, I will explore the various roles that the Great Spirit plays in North American geomythology, based on the two most prominent foundational classics in the field: Vitaliano’s *Legends* and Mayor’s *Fossil Legends*, as well as additional examples drawn from my own research and personal experience (Fig. 1).

- The concept of geomythology, popularized by Vitaliano (1973), proposed that some myths encode cultural memories of geological events.
- Subsequent work by Mayor (2005) expanded this framework to fossil legends and other paleontological phenomena.
- The Great Spirit played a wide variety of roles in North American geomythology, involving volcanoes, earthquakes, floods, fossils, springs, and caves.
- This is the first time these hitherto scattered geo-feats of the Great Spirit have been brought together as a group, forming a geomythic presence of major stature.



Figure 1. Map of select geosites associated with the Great Spirit in North America, mentioned in the text, revealing how widely this geomythology extends. Modified from Wikimedia/U.S. Geological Survey.

1.2 Scope and terminology

Among the Indigenous nations of North America, spiritual traditions deeply inform understandings of the world. Despite extraordinary diversity across tribal cosmologies, a shared concept emerges: the Great Spirit, named Wakan Tanka (Lakota), Gitche Manitou (Algonquin), or Orenda (Iroquois), among others. The Great Spirit is understood as creator and sustainer, intimately woven into all creation (Gill, 1982: 40). The concept reflects an animistic and relational worldview, where divinity is present in all aspects of life and existence.

Indigenous cosmologies across more than 500 federally recognized tribes in the U.S. reflect unique narratives, yet share recurring motifs: world as animated by spirit and bound by relational ethics (Vecsey, 1983: 11). Unlike the monotheistic God of Western religions, the Great Spirit is conceptualized both as a singular force and as multiple manifestations (Gill, 1982: 48). Oral traditions have preserved these cosmological systems over generations without reliance on written scriptures (Deloria, 1994: 66). Embodying complex theological systems, these traditions are deeply tied to place, seasonal cycles, and the experience of living in harmony with the land.

The stories, while diverse, frequently echo similar themes of creation and balance, underscoring the foundational role of the Great Spirit in Native worldviews.

Many Native American creation stories position the Great Spirit as the origin of life. To the Lakota of the Great Plains, the Great Spirit is called *Wakan Tanka*, translated by some as the Great Mystery. Wakan Tanka represents the sacred power behind all creation, rather than a single personified deity (Deloria, 1994: 49). In the Anishinaabe tradition, he is Gitche Manitou, whose home was Michilimackinac Island, in Lake Michigan, to which pilgrimages were made. Gitche Manitou breathed life into humans, animals, and the world, and his presence remains within all beings. These cosmologies emphasize kinship between humans and nature and view creation as an ongoing relational process. In Iroquois mythologies, the emergence of life from the mud brought up by animals highlight a shared sacred duty to maintain the balance established by the Great Spirit.

European missionaries and settlers frequently misunderstood or misrepresented the Great Spirit, equating it simplistically with the Christian God (Gill, 1982: 102). Although syncretic religious expressions developed in some communities, blending Indigenous and Christian elements (Vecsey, 1983: 21), many Native peoples resisted spiritual assimilation. Government policies such as the banning of ceremonies and the imposition of boarding schools sought to dismantle traditional beliefs. However, the survival of ceremonies and sacred conceptions of the Great Spirit, even in the face of suppression, demonstrates its enduring resilience. Erdoes and Ortiz (1984), which has been called by Philip (2001) the “best collection” of North American mythology, records many contemporary Native voices that embrace the notion of the Great Spirit.

There were dissenting voices in the scholarly community, who suspected that the English phrase “Great Spirit” was a colonial-era gloss. Brinton (1876: 53) famously asserted that the American Indian idea of a Great Spirit was post-Christian, that such beings “are entirely of modern origin, coined at the suggestion of missionaries, applied to the white man's God.” Hodge (1959: Pt. 2, p. 284) was even more dismissive. Under the heading “Popular Fallacies,” he wrote of the Great Spirit that “Very far removed from this tremendous conception of one all-powerful deity was the Indian belief in a multitude of spirits.” But others disagreed. For additional context, see Riggs (1883), Conard (1903), Schmidt (1933), Hultkrantz (1966), and Paper (1983).

The present study does not claim that Lakota, Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, Pawnee, Osage, and other nations share a single theology. Nor does it reduce culturally specific cosmologies to a continental template. Instead, it identifies a recurring narrative function: across multiple recorded traditions, supreme or high sacred powers (however locally conceptualized) are associated with catastrophic or origin-generating geological events. My article asks how and why that pattern appears in the geomythological record and what it contributes to contemporary understandings of geoheritage.

1.3 Geomythology and the problem of aggregation

The concept of geomythology, popularized by Vitaliano (1973), proposed that some myths encode cultural memories of geological events. Subsequent work by Mayor (2005) expanded this framework to fossil legends and other paleontological phenomena. In both bodies of scholarship, references to a translated “Great Spirit” recur across multiple case studies, yet they are treated episodically rather than analytically as a pattern.

I build upon that literature while addressing a gap: the absence of a synthetic analysis of how high sacred powers (rendered as “Great Spirit”) are repeatedly linked to geophenomena in North America. The objective is not to construct a typology of Indigenous religions, nor to adjudicate theological debates concerning the pre- or post-contact origins of high gods, a controversy well documented in the comparative religion literature (Schmidt, 1933; Hultkrantz

1966; Paper 1983). Rather, the focus lies at the intersection of narrative, landscape, and geoheritage interpretation, informed by scholarship emphasizing the cultural situatedness of knowledge about nature (Livingstone, 2003; Naylor, 2005).

At the same time, aggregation carries risks. Comparative projects in Native North American religion have often been criticized for flattening cultural specificity into pan-Indian abstractions (Deloria 1994; Jones 1999; Smith 1999). I therefore adopt three safeguards:

1. **Textual Explicitness:** Each example is tied to a cited historical source, with attention to its mediation (missionary, explorer, ethnographer, or Indigenous author), following methodological cautions in the history of anthropology (Hultkrantz, 1966; Kuklick & Kohler, 1996).
2. **Local Grounding:** Geomythological accounts are situated in specific landscapes (e.g., Big Bone Lick, Waconda Spring, Wakan Tipi), rather than abstracted into general mythic types, consistent with scholarship emphasizing the emplacement of knowledge and belief (Livingstone, 2003; Naylor, 2005).
3. **Analytical Modesty:** My article does not claim doctrinal uniformity across nations; it identifies a recurrent narrative role attributed to supreme sacred power in recorded accounts of geological features, avoiding the typological overreach critiqued in comparative religion (Smith, 1999).

The resulting synthesis is thus descriptive and historiographical rather than theological.

1.4 Geoheritage, sacred landscape, and catastrophic agency

Geoheritage studies increasingly recognize that geological sites possess not only scientific value but also intangible cultural and spiritual significance (Gray, 2004: 77-79; Reynard & Brilha, 2018). Caves, fossil beds, volcanic mountains, springs, and flood-sculpted terrains have long been embedded in Indigenous sacred geographies (Deloria, 1994; Westerman and White 2012). In some recorded traditions, these features are attributed to actions of a supreme sacred power, whether as creator, destroyer, protector, or judge (Schmidt, 1933; Hultkrantz, 1966).

Such attributions often emphasize catastrophic agency: earthquakes triggered by divine stamping, floods unleashed in response to moral disorder, lightning destroying monstrous megafauna, springs erupting in anger. Rather than reading these accounts as naïve proto-science, I approach them as cosmological interpretations of landscape, embedded in relational ethics and place-based memory, in keeping with interpretive approaches to Indigenous environmental knowledge (Deloria, 1994; Smith, 1999).

Importantly, relational cosmologies do not necessarily operate within the binary logic of Western consistency. Multiple explanations for a single site, such as Wakan Tipi being associated both with sacred emergence and with powerful water beings, should not be construed as contradictions but as layered narrative associations within a living sacred geography. Contemporary scholarship cautions against imposing systematic coherence where Indigenous traditions may accommodate plurality and contextual variation (Jones, 1999; Smith, 1999).

1.5 Methodological considerations

Methodologically, this study undertakes a critical literature review of geomythological and ethnographic sources in which a supreme sacred power, translated as “Great Spirit,” is explicitly linked to geological phenomena. The primary analytical corpus includes the works of

Vitaliano (1973) and Mayor (2005), supplemented by nineteenth- and twentieth-century ethnographic accounts and, where available, Indigenous-authored scholarship.

All such sources are historically mediated. Many were recorded by missionaries, settlers, or government-affiliated ethnographers whose translations and interpretive frameworks were shaped by Christian theological categories (Schmidt, 1933; Hultkrantz, 1966; Deloria, 1994). My article therefore treats these texts as documents of encounter as well as repositories of tradition, following historiographical approaches that analyze scientific and ethnographic knowledge as culturally situated productions (Livingstone, 2003; Kuklick & Kohler, 1996).

Additionally, I draw upon direct familiarity with certain geoheritage sites, including Wakan Tipi (Carver's Cave) in Minnesota. These observations are not presented as ethnographic authority over Dakota tradition, but as phenomenological reflections on landscape experience relevant to discussions of geoheritage interpretation, in line with scholarship on embodied experience in field sciences (Kuklick & Kohler, 1996; Naylor, 2005).

My study does not claim to speak for Indigenous communities, nor to exhaust the diversity of their cosmologies. Its purpose is analytic and historiographical: to trace how a translated category, "Great Spirit," has functioned within geomythological discourse and to consider the implications of that pattern for contemporary geoheritage scholarship.

1.6 *Argument and structure*

My article proceeds by examining geomythological cases in which supreme sacred agency is associated with:

- Volcanism and mountain formation,
- Earthquakes and seismic disturbance,
- Glacial and catastrophic flooding,
- Fossil accumulations and megafaunal extinction,
- Trackways and paleontological traces,
- Springs and groundwater phenomena, and
- Caves as sacred or origin sites.

By assembling these cases, I demonstrate that high sacred power, however locally conceptualized, repeatedly appears as a narrative agent in the cultural interpretation of North American geosites. The conclusion reflects on what this recurrent attribution reveals about the entanglement of sacred cosmology and geoheritage, and about the historiographical consequences of translating diverse sacred powers under a single English designation.

2. Materials and methods

2.1 *Corpus and selection criteria*

This study undertakes a critical literature review of geomythological accounts in which a supreme sacred power, translated into English as "Great Spirit," is explicitly associated with geological phenomena. The core corpus consists of two foundational works in geomythology: Dorothy Vitaliano's *Legends of the Earth* (1973) and Adrienne Mayor's *Fossil Legends of the First Americans* (2005). These texts were selected because they are widely regarded as establishing the modern field of geomythology and because they repeatedly reference a translated "Great Spirit" in connection with volcanoes, earthquakes, floods, fossils, and trackways.

To this foundation are added supplementary ethnographic, historical, and Indigenous-authored sources in which geological features are linked to a supreme sacred agency rendered in English under comparable terminology. Inclusion required:

1. An explicit association between a geophysical feature or event and a high sacred power.
2. A geographically identifiable site or landscape.
3. A traceable textual source (ethnographic, missionary, Indigenous-authored, or historical).

The aim is not to exhaust all Indigenous geomyths, nor to construct a comprehensive theology of any nation. Rather, the goal is to identify a recurring narrative pattern within the documented geomythological record.

2.2 Translation and mediation

A central methodological concern is the status of the term “Great Spirit” itself. In many cases, the English phrase represents a missionary or ethnographic translation of culturally specific terms such as Wakan Tanka, Gitche Manitou, or Orenda. These translations were often shaped by Christian theological assumptions and may not accurately convey Indigenous ontological categories.

Accordingly, this study treats “Great Spirit” as a historically mediated analytical category rather than as a transparent theological equivalence. When nineteenth-century or early twentieth-century sources employ the phrase, it is understood as part of a colonial encounter text, reflecting both Indigenous narrative content and Euro-American interpretive framing. The analysis therefore proceeds with caution, recognizing that what is being traced is partly a pattern within the colonial archive.

This historiographical awareness does not invalidate the accounts but situates them. The sources are read as layered documents: at once repositories of Indigenous tradition and artifacts of translation.

2.3 Comparative strategy and limits

Comparative aggregation carries well-known risks of flattening cultural specificity. To mitigate this, the present study adopts a limited comparative strategy focused not on theological equivalence but on narrative function. The question posed is not whether different nations share the same conception of a high god, but whether recorded traditions repeatedly attribute major geological transformations to a supreme or creator-level sacred power.

Each case is therefore grounded in its specific landscape and source context (e.g., Big Bone Lick, Waconda Spring, Wakan Tipi). The analysis refrains from inferring doctrinal unity across nations and avoids extrapolating beyond the textual record.

The scope is explicitly historiographical and geomythological. It does not claim to represent contemporary Indigenous belief in its full complexity, nor to substitute for community-based scholarship or consultation. Rather, it examines how geomythological literature has documented and translated sacred agency in relation to geosites.

2.4 Field observation and phenomenology

In selected cases, most notably Wakan Tipi (Carver's Cave), I draw upon direct experience of the site. These observations are presented as phenomenological reflections relevant to geoh heritage interpretation, not as ethnographic authority over Dakota tradition. The experiential dimension is used solely to illuminate how particular physical environments (darkness, echoing water, enclosure) may contribute to the perception of sacred presence in landscape.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Vitaliano's legends

Historically, there was sometimes an assumption among Indigenous peoples that the Earth is flat and featureless unless the Great Spirit intervened to create some topography, as in this example: "The Great Spirit leaned down from heaven and scooped up a great mass of earth, and with it fashioned the Cascades; Ocean flowed into the hole whence the material had been removed, making Puget Sound" (Vitaliano, 1973: 53). The Cascades being volcanic mountains of course.

Then there are earthquakes. Here's an explanation for the famous New Madrid earthquake which shook central North America during 1811-12, involving the Great Spirit (Vitaliano, 1973: 87):

"According to this legend, there was a handsome Chickasaw chief named Reelfoot, who unfortunately was born with a club foot. Because of Reelfoot's deformity, the father of the beautiful Choctaw princess whom he loved refused to entertain his suit for her hand. Not easily discouraged, Reelfoot and his friends carried off the princess and proceeded with the wedding, thereby incurring the anger of the Great Spirit. In the midst of the festivities the Great Spirit stamped his foot and caused the earth to tremble. The Father of Waters (the Mississippi River) reversed his course and flowed overland and submerged Reelfoot, his bride, and the whole wedding party under the waters of a new lake."

We note that Pele, too, can call up a volcanic eruption by stomping her foot, reflecting the ground tremors preceding an eruption (Vitaliano, 1973: 112).

Flooding is another major category for geom mythologic interpretation. It fits most naturally in the glaciated part of North America, especially the meltwater floods associated with the waning of the ice ages. "The ice dams...failed...meltwater floods...inspired some North American Indian flood legends" (Vitaliano, 1973: 146-147). The ponded meltwater that formed Glacial Lake Missoula in Montana carved out the Scablands of Washington State upon its catastrophic release, and there are many other examples.

But, as Mayor (2005: 170) pointed out:

"Even in the relatively arid Southwest there are flood traditions. According to the Papagos [of Arizona], the Great Spirit first created the earth and all living things except man. Next he made the hero Montezuma, with whose help he made all the Indian tribes. The first world was a happy and peaceful one, but it was destroyed in a great flood. Warned by his friend Coyote, Montezuma had built a boat and when the waters rose the two of them were saved. After the waters receded, the Great Spirit, with Montezuma's help again, created men and animals anew."

3.2 Mayor's fossil legends

Mayor (2005, xxix) emphasized that “Vitaliano did not analyze fossil legends as such,” and made that the mainstay of her own book, *Fossil Legends of the First Americans*. The Great Spirit plays into North American native stories in two major ways Mayor's book: as the destroyer of megafauna (primarily mastodons and mammoths), and as the cause of dinosaur trackways. Let's look at each in turn.

To explain the megafaunal remains at Big Bone Lick, a famous salt spring on the Ohio River, in what is now Kentucky, and considered the beginning of American paleontology, Mayor (2005: 24) wrote: “The red man was perfectly happy for ages, but foolish young people, at length forgetting his rules, became exceedingly ill-tempered and wicked.” Therefore, “the Great Spirit created the Great Buffalo, the bones of which you now see before us. These made war upon the human species alone, and destroyed all but a few, who repented and promised the Great Spirit to live according to his laws if he would restrain the devouring enemy. Whereupon he sent lightning and thunder, and destroyed the whole race [of giant bison] in this spot.” But a pair of these great bison, male and female, “he shut up in yonder mountain, ready to let loose again should the occasion require” (Mayor, 2005: 24).

The use of lightning by the Great Spirit to destroy such threatening giant buffaloes is a recurrent theme. Mayor (2005: 46) claimed this made sense because “the sky spirit [is] translated by Europeans as Great Spirit” and is depicted as such in illustrations (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. “The Great Spirit destroying carnivorous mastodons at Big Bone Lick with lightning bolts” (Mayor 2005, p 60). Engraving from Anonymous (1898).

The Osage tradition of “the Battle of the Monsters” a so-called “gigantomachy,” also involved the Great Spirit (Mayor, 2005: 201). Large fossil accumulations in the western USA seemed to have inspired these stories, as on the Big Bone River (what is now the Pomme de Terre River), in the state of Missouri (Mayor, 2005: 201):

“After the battles, the Osages ‘gathered together many of the slaughtered animals, and offered them on the spot as a burnt-sacrifice to the Great Spirit,’ while many other immense carcasses were buried by the Great Spirit in the Osage and Big Bone rivers. Every year the Osages gave thank-offerings at a table rock overlooking the Big Bone River.”

In other cases, the Great Spirit seemed protective of these very same bones. Ferdinand Vandiveer Hayden (1829-1887), described as “the first white fossil hunter the Sioux [Dakota] encountered,” was presumed to have special powers. “His ‘madness’ was thought to render him ‘safe from the wrath of the Great Spirit which smote any man in his right senses who became so inadvised as to disturb the great bones of the Thunder Horse’” (Mayor, 2005: 249).

Apart from geoheritage sites such as Big Bone Lick, the other category of fossil geophenomena associated with the Great Spirit are trackways. A legend of the Delaware Indians was thought to explain a trackway in Kentucky (Mayor & Sarjeant, 2001). In Connecticut and Massachusetts, dinosaur trackways are said to be “the footprints of the Great Spirit” (Mayor, 2005: 46-50).

3.3 Additional materials

Perhaps the largest geomythological endeavor the Great Spirit has been identified with, though discussed by neither author above, are “fishing up” myths, a topic addressed by Nunn (2003) for Pacific island origin myths. According to Schmidt (1933: 66-67), the Great Spirit assumed the role of creator: “The Creator himself changes into a duck; and diving together with the turtle—which in itself is regarded by the Indian as a symbol of the earth—he brings up a little mud, out of which he creates the great immense earth” (Schmidt, 1933: 66-67).

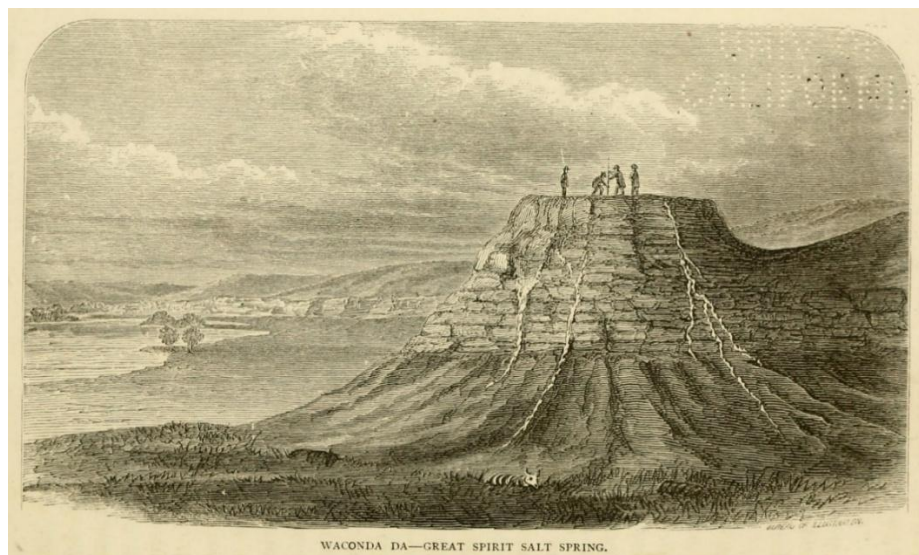


Figure 3. “Waconda Da—The Great Spirit Salt Spring” (Webb, 1874: 399).

The Great Spirit is also associated with groundwater phenomena. Webb (1874) devoted a chapter of his book, *Buffalo Land*, to a particularly striking example among the Pawnee tribes in western Kansas (Fig. 3):

“Waconda Da, Great Spirit Salt Spring, is among the most remarkable natural curiosities of the West,” he reported, being “a large conical mass of rock, about forty feet high, shaped like an inverted bowl, and smooth as mason-work. In the center of its upper surface, is the spring...about twenty feet in depth. Into this pool the Indians cast their offerings...to appease the Great Spirit.... All around the rim...were incrustations of salt, and the brackish water ...ran in little rivulets down the huge sides...the Great Spirit’s brackish altar.”

After this physical description of the travertine mound, Webb (1874) related “The Legend of Waconda,” which has parallels to the story of how Lot’s wife was converted into a pillar of salt in the Bible. Whether or not the story reflected actual events, he ascribed a geysering episode (called “the salt storm”) to the spring, apparently in response to human misdeeds. “An immense column of salt water shot out of Waconda high into [the] air,” he wrote, “the flood draining off, formed the famous ‘salt plains.’” And more poetically, giving us a clue as to when this all happened, the salty deluge drained as far as the Mississippi River, where it “caused such a violent retching by the Father of Waters, in 1811...phenomena then ascribed by the materialistic white man to an earthquake.”

Patrick (1879) provided an alternative version of the Waconda story, which again emphasized the episodic geysering:

“Through Indian interpreters I have the statement from various tribes visiting our spring, that Waconda, the daughter of a great Indian chief, at one time became infatuated with the son of another. The two tribes met at the spring, and being hostile to each other, the intimacy was strongly opposed by the parents, and a conflict ensued. The lover of Waconda, being wounded and weak from loss of blood, fell or was hurled into the pool, whereupon Waconda plunged in after him, and both were drowned. Ever since the spring has been called ‘Waconda,’ or the ‘Great Spirit’ spring, and the Indians believe that the spirit of Waconda still dwells in the mound, and sometimes becomes offended at bad Indians, and throws up vast volumes of water, drowning them.”

Unfortunately, after a long history as a sacred site for Native Americans and as a health spa with bottling plant for settlers, this unique geosite was submerged below the waters of the Glen Elder Dam in the late 1960s (Waconda Cultural Association, 2026).

In neighboring Dakota lands, the Unktehi water monsters also became associated with “bubbling springs,” as at Coldwater Spring in Minneapolis (Eastman, 1849: 2; Westerman and White, 2012: 92). The Mohawk believed that the carbonated water of Saratoga Springs, New York, was stirred by the Great Spirit, giving it medicinal properties (Sigerist, 1943).

3.4 Cave investigation

Caves are important geotourism sites (Brick, 2017) and the Great Spirit was associated with them. It was reported, for example, that “The Cave in Rock [of Illinois] is well known to all navigators of the Ohio River.... It is a large cave, supposed by the Indians to be the habitation of the Great Spirit” (Curtiss, 1852: 252-253). Other caves around North America, with common names such as Devil’s Den and Thunder Caves, may also contain allusions to the Great Spirit.

The case of the historic Carver’s Cave, in St. Paul, Minnesota, is a peculiar one fraught with inconsistencies. The earliest published account of a cave in the Upper Midwest was by British colonial explorer Jonathan Carver (1710-1780). Carver visited what he called the “Great Cave” in 1766 and again in 1767. It achieved fame after his best-selling *Travels Through the Interior Parts of North America* appeared in 1778. Others, a generation later, renamed it Carver’s Cave. Dakota peoples have always referred to it as *Wakan Tipi*, translating as “the house of spirits.” Carver’s rendition of the name, however, is “the Dwelling of the Great Spirit” (Carver, 1956: 63).

It's possible, however, that "the Dwelling of the Great Spirit" was a later interpolation by Carver's editors, because it appears that way in his published Travels, but not in the earlier manuscript Journals, where it is simply called "the house of spirits" (Parker, 1976: 91).

Having personally explored this cave in a wetsuit (the subterranean lake is a chilly 10°C) it's easy for me to see how it was considered *wakan*, or mysterious, by the Dakota tribes—certainly one of the intangible values of geoh heritage. With the waters of the lake lapping against the rock walls, making gurgling sounds in the sumps, the reflections in the half light from the distant entrance, and the sense of earthy enclosure, Carver's Cave provides an uncanny, liminal experience (Rudwick, 1996; Brick, 2024). This cave constitutes a prominent geosite in the Bruce Vento Nature Sanctuary (Brick, 2009a) (Fig. 4).

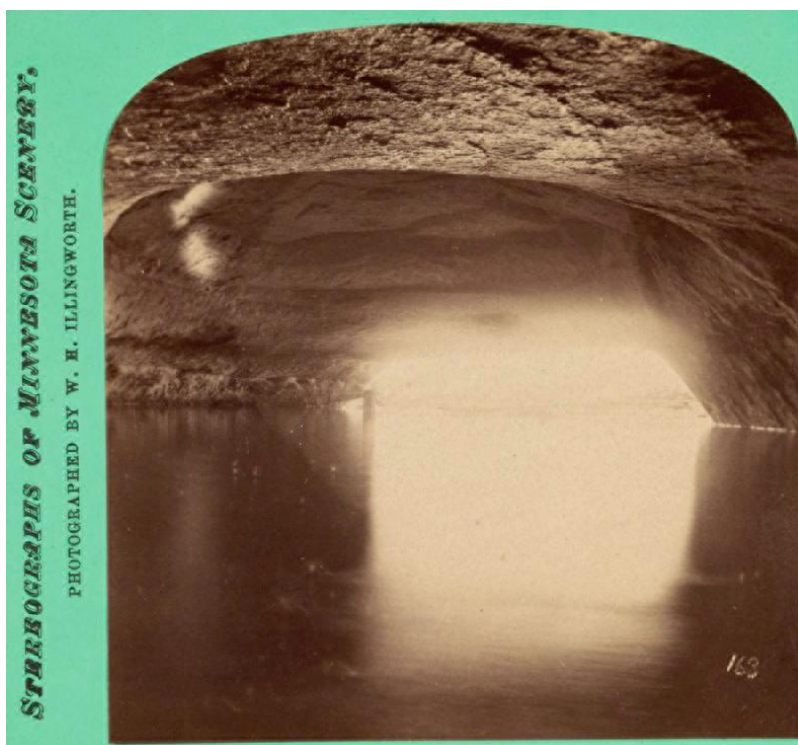


Figure 4. Carver's Cave, aka Wakan Tipi, "the Dwelling of the Great Spirit." Courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library.

But how is it that a sky god like the Great Spirit dwells underground in a dark cave? Perhaps sensing this incongruity, some Dakota tribal elders have claimed that the cave is inhabited by the water monsters known as Unktehi, which are described by Pond (1889), Dorsey (1894), and Brick (2009b). The presence of carved rattlesnake petroglyphs on the walls of Carver's Cave would tend to corroborate this interpretation (Lewis, 1898). Another pair of inconsistencies about Carver's Cave, at least to Western notions of logic, while not bearing directly on geomythology, is that while the cave has sepulchral associations (it's situated below Indian burial mounds on the cliff above) some Dakota representatives have asserted that the womb-like cave was the origin spot of the Dakota people (Gould & Rock, 2016). Indeed, several other North American traditions involve cave origin stories for tribes (Jones, 1885). Given the variation in beliefs and traditions among the Dakota, consistency is not expected in these matters. As others have observed from studying Lakota stories, trying to impose uniformity on a welter of inconsistencies, a process dubbed *museumification*, only distorts the record (Jones, 1999).

An alternative to the cave origin myth for the Dakota peoples can be found at Pipestone National Monument, a major geosite in western Minnesota, which features an outcrop of catlinite,

a reddish clay sandwiched by pinkish quartzite, and used to make peace pipes (whence, pipestone). According to Nydahl (1950):

“The first calumet, or peace pipe, was, of course, shaped at the quarry by the Great Spirit. In legends explaining the origin of pipestone, it is always blood which gave the stone its color—buffalo blood from animals slain by the Great Spirit for food, human blood from those who died in an ancient, great catastrophe. The Pipestone Quarry, too, in Indian lore was the site of the creation of man. Wakantonka took the red stone, and from it shaped first man, then woman, and the two walked off together.”

In creating humankind from geological materials, the Great Spirit brings the geomythological cycle to its culmination, demonstrating mastery over both the land and the life it sustains.

4. Conclusion

In this article, I have examined a recurring pattern in the geomythological literature of North America: the attribution of major geological phenomena to a supreme sacred agency translated into English as the “Great Spirit.” By assembling cases involving volcanoes, earthquakes, floods, fossil accumulations, trackways, springs, and caves, it demonstrates that high sacred power, however locally conceptualized, has frequently been positioned as a narrative agent in the interpretation of landscape.

The argument is not that Indigenous nations share a uniform theology, nor that Wakan Tanka, Gitche Manitou, Orenda, and other sacred concepts are interchangeable. On the contrary, these traditions emerge from distinct cosmological systems and linguistic worlds. What unifies the examples examined here is not doctrinal identity but a recurrent narrative structure within the recorded geomythological archive: dramatic or origin-generating transformations of the earth are attributed to supreme sacred agency.

Recognizing this pattern allows me to clarify two interrelated points:

First, it reveals something about the geomythological imagination as documented in works such as those of Dorothy Vitaliano and Adrienne Mayor. In their case studies, references to a translated “Great Spirit” recur but remain analytically dispersed. When viewed collectively, these instances suggest that the figure functions as a narrative fulcrum linking cosmology and geophysical transformation. The present synthesis thus identifies a structural feature of the geomythological corpus that has not previously been foregrounded.

Second, it underscores the importance of intangible sacred value in geoheritage discourse. Geological sites such as Big Bone Lick, Waconda Spring, and Wakan Tipi are not only repositories of paleontological or geomorphological data; they are embedded in sacred narratives in which landscape change is inseparable from moral, relational, and cosmological order. Attributing earthquakes to divine stamping or floods to moral imbalance is not merely catastrophic explanation; it situates geophysical processes within a relational universe.

At the same time, my study emphasizes the historiographical complexity of the category “Great Spirit.” The term often reflects colonial translation practices that compressed diverse sacred ontologies into a monotheistic frame. Any synthesis employing this terminology must therefore remain self-aware and analytically modest. What has been traced here is partly a pattern within Indigenous traditions and partly a pattern within the colonial archive that recorded and translated them.

Future research could profitably extend this inquiry in two directions: first, through closer collaboration with Indigenous scholars and communities to explore how sacred geographies

are articulated in contemporary contexts; and second, through comparative analysis of how high sacred agency functions in geomythologies globally. Such work would further illuminate how human communities integrate geophysical processes into cosmological narratives.

By situating supreme sacred agency within the documented geomythological interpretation of North American landscapes, this article contributes not a theological synthesis but a historiographical and geoheritage-oriented one. It highlights the persistent intertwining of sacred cosmology and geological imagination, while acknowledging both the diversity of Indigenous traditions and the mediated character of the textual record through which they have often been known.

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