

In the mythology of many primitive nations, from the ancient Hindu to our own Indian tribes, the turtle or tortoise is the supporter of the earth, the atlas on whose back rests the burden of the whole living universe. A reason for this is found in the amphibious character of the turtle, which renders it equally at home on land and in the water, and in its peculiar shape, which was held to be typical of the world, the world itself being conceived as a huge turtle swimming in a limitless ocean, the dome of the sky being its upper shell, and the flat surface of the earth being the bony breastplate of the animal while inclosed between them was the living body, the human, animal, and vegetal creation. In Hindu mythology, when the gods are ready to destroy mankind, the turtle will grow weary and sink under his load and then the waters will rise and a deluge will overwhelm the earth.

The belief in the turtle as the upholder of the earth was common to all the Algonquian tribes, to which belong the Arapaho and Cheyenne, and to the northern Iroquoian tribes. Earthquakes were caused by his shifting his position from time to time. In their pictographs the turtle was frequently the symbol of the earth, and in their prayers it was sometimes addressed as mother. The most honored clan was the Turtle clan; the most sacred spot in the Algonquian territory was Mackinaw, the "Island of the Great Turtle;" the favorite medicine bowl of their doctors is the shell of a turtle; the turtle is pictured on the ghost shirts of the Arapaho, and farther south in Oklahoma it is the recognized stock brand by which it is known that a horse or cow belongs to one of the historic Delaware tribe.