

The Diffusionists Have Landed

You've probably heard of those crackpot theories about ancient Phoenicians or Chinese in the New World. Maybe it's time to start paying attention

by Marc K. Stengel

IT is arguably the biggest discovery never to have elicited any reaction whatsoever. In November of 1994 a small monthly newspaper called *Y Drych* (*The Mirror*), which serves as an expatriate journal for North America's Welsh diaspora, published the following curious item among a batch of breezy tidbits:

According to [Alan] Wilson and [Baram] Blackett... the court of Camelot is more likely to be found in Kentucky! They claim that [King] Arthur was killed in North America by Indians after emigrating there ca. 579 A.D.

With telegraphic brevity the *Y Drych* contributor, Don John, ran through the few salient points: There were *two* Arthurs, who lived centuries apart. "It was King Arthur II who died in America. He was embalmed and taken back to Wales to be buried at Mynydd-y-Gaer, near Bridgend." Oddly, John failed to mention the discovery a few years earlier, by a man antiquing in Pennsylvania, of a two-edged sword of the Norse *spatha* type. That finding had recently been discussed in the pages of another obscure journal, *The Ancient American*, which quoted the same Alan Wilson. The sword was inscribed with seven letters of a script that Wilson identified as Coelbren y Beirdd, presumed to have

been used by ancient Welsh divines in casting lots (*coelbren* = "lots, sortilege"; *y beirdd* = "of the bards"). Wilson proposed a rough translation ("The Lord ruler well beloved, the duty of the army mutually together to you") and posited a connection between this sword and Arthurian immigrants in North America circa A.D. 570.

John's scoop has apparently remained an exclusive for *Y Drych*: the big dailies and newsweeklies have run no follow-ups; no national television crews have combed Kentucky for relics of the Once and Future King. The silence, in the United States, at least, has extended even to a book on the subject, *The Holy Kingdom*, in which the popular paranormalist Adrian Gilbert elaborates on the Wilson-Blackett proposition in exhaustive textual, photographic, and genealogical detail. The book, brought out in England in 1998, has yet to find an American publisher.

It was ever thus, judging by the sentiments of those attending a recent annual conference of the Institute for the Study of American Cultures, held in Columbus, Georgia. ISAC members are accustomed to the professional and popular disregard that greets their unorthodox inquiries into the pre-Columbian history of the Western Hemisphere—inquiries, generally known as diffusionist studies, that suppose intentional contact

with the Americas by civilizations across both the Pacific and the Atlantic, beginning sometime in the late Stone Age (7000–3000 B.C.).

Arrayed against the diffusionists stand the so-called independent inventionists—mainstream scholars who regard Western Hemisphere aboriginals as having been essentially free of cross-cultural contamination until 1492. What the inventionists and the diffusionists are fighting over is the right to propose—or, better yet, to define—the prehistory of the Americas. The two camps, it seems, agree on little before Columbus's landing. The Norwegian archaeologists Helge and Anne Stine Ingstad's famous identification, in 1961, of a Viking settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland, from just after A.D. 1000 is, of course, a notable exception, no longer in dispute. But that discovery has so far gone nowhere. The Norse settlers, who may have numbered as many as 160 and stayed for three years or longer, seem to have made no lasting impression on the aboriginal skraellings that, according to Norse sagas, they encountered, and to have avoided being influenced in turn. The traditions of the Micmac people, modern-day inhabitants of the area, have not been seriously investigated; another people historically associated with this area, the reputedly fair-skinned Beothuks, have been extinct

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since 1829. The Vikings came, kept to themselves, and left—that appears to be as much revision of the long-standing history of New World settlement as the hard-core academic establishment will entertain.

To many, the inventionists have clearly gained the upper hand, having marshaled shards, spearpoints, and other relics that indicate the independent cultural development of a native people whose Ice Age ancestors came overland from Northeast Asia. Still, the diffusionists have a habit of raising awkward questions—questions that even some mainstream scholars find hard to ignore, much less to explain away. Who carved Phoenician-era Iberian script into a stone found at Grave Creek, West Virginia? How did a large stone block incised with medieval Norse runes make its way to Kensington, Minnesota? Why would a rough version of the Ten Commandments appear in Old Hebrew script on a boulder-sized tablet near Los Lunas, New Mexico? Conversely, how could the sweet potato, known to be indigenous to the Americas, have become a food staple throughout Polynesia and the Pacific basin as early as A.D. 400? And why would dozens of eleventh- to thirteenth-century temple sculptures in Karnātaka, India, include depictions of what appears to be American maize?

At the ISAC gathering Mike Xu, a professor of modern languages and literatures at Texas Christian University, raised the possibility of direct Chinese influence on Mesoamerica's Olmec culture. Xu is young, quiet, and almost dif-

fidant about the bold proposition he came to reveal. Drawing on linguistic scholarship in his native China, he suggested that carved stone blades found in Guatemala, dating from approximately 1100 B.C., are distinctly Chinese in pattern. Moreover, they bear ideographic writing that has uncanny resemblances to glyphs from the contemporaneous Shang Dynasty, which ruled North China from its center in the lower Yellow River valley.

Xu was candid about the skepticism, even disdain, that his proposal engenders among orthodox archaeologists. With an engaging smile, he pointed out that no less an authority than Michael Coe, a Mayan-glyph decipherer and an emeritus professor of anthropology at Yale University, considers the Shang hypothesis totally spurious. Xu remains unbowed. "The problem," he told his ISAC audience, "isn't *whether* Asians reached Mesoamerica before Columbus. The problem is *when* they arrived and what they did here." Any proposal that smacks of diffusionism in today's academic climate, Xu continued, is immediately dismissed as irresponsible at best, malevolent at worst. "Here are all these American scholars," he pointed out slyly, "speaking European languages, and they dare to say 'No, there was never any diffusion; and yes, all Western Hemisphere cultures are indigenous.' "

The two-day ISAC conference passed quietly enough for a symposium that juggled such unorthodox topics as the Bat Creek Stone—whose inscription, in what seems to be a second-century Semitic alphabet, complicates the stone's official provenance in nineteenth-century East Tennessee—and certain Native American Earth Mother symbols that resemble icons from prehistoric Europe and Asia. Gloria Farley, whose book *In Plain Sight* (1994) has become a standard reference work among diffusionists, summarized the latest inquiries into the origin and the decipherment of rock carvings at an Oklahoma site known as the Anubis Caves. A self-taught archaeologist, still dauntless in her early eighties, Farley reviewed a career in which she was among the first to posit, fifty years ago, that the caves' myriad jum-

bled symbols represent pictographs and epigraphy with proto-Celtic, Iberian, and Phoenician affinities to a time predating Jesus by centuries. The dramatic hypotheses being proposed by Farley, Xu, and other speakers stood in stark contrast to the humble setting of a small rented conference room in western Georgia.

CRANK SCIENCE

THERE is a reason, according to the academics who uphold anthropological orthodoxy at universities and research institutes, why the diffusionists have elicited nothing but enmity or disregard for their views: they are crackpots and lunatics. "Crank" is the term employed for these scientists by Stephen Williams, a retired curator of North American archaeology at the Peabody Museum of Harvard University. Williams's *Fantastic Archaeology: The Wild Side of North American Prehistory* (1991) is virtually a catalogue of outlandish theories about pre-Columbian transoceanic visits to the Americas. Williams set out to debunk them all. Wielding sarcasm like a shiv, he was relentless in attack. He scuttled the "lost continents" of Atlantis and Mu; deconstructed the latent racism that he perceives beneath the nineteenth-century fascination with Moundbuilder cultures, whose barrows freckle the great river valleys of the Ohio, the Tennessee, and the Mississippi; and squashed speculation about Norse, Semitic, and Celtic letters carved in stones from New Hampshire to New Mexico.

Similarly, for Brian Fagan, an influential professor of anthropology at the University of California at Santa Barbara, diffusionism is exasperating. "Why do such lunatic ravings persist?" he asked in his book *The Great Journey: The Peopling of Ancient America* (1987). "To read the crank literature on the first Americans is to enter a fantasy world of strange, often obsessed, writers with a complex jargon of catchwords and 'scientific' data to support their ideas." The Colgate University astronomer and anthropologist Anthony Aveni tends to be more sympathetic, perhaps

because the field of archaeo-astronomy, which he has helped to ennoble, was itself an academic pariah until recent years. Nevertheless, Aveni's sympathies go only so far. "I think there is, beneath all this dialogue about diffusionism, a will to believe in bizarre ideas," he says. "This is a romantic idea that we're talking about here, after all. These are bizarre tales of an imagined era in an imagined past. And like the occult beliefs they resemble, they're really just wishful thinking. It's a belief that we can wish into existence the universe we desire and deserve."

The universe that we appear to be stuck with, however, at least as far as the peopling of the Western Hemisphere is concerned, is unromantic and fairly unambiguous. Fagan's book provides a succinct summary of establishment thinking:

The most conservative viewpoint argues that no humans lived in the Americas before the end of the Ice Age. Tiny numbers of big-game hunters moved south of the great North American ice sheets as the glaciers retreated after 14,000 years ago. The newcomers followed large Ice Age animals into more temperate latitudes. They expanded rapidly over vast tracts of virgin hunting territory, their immediate descendants [being] the famous Clovis people, whose distinctive stone spearpoints have been found over much of North and Central America.

For decades these Clovis immigrants have been assigned a settlement date around 10,000 B.C., in what Stephen Williams, an adherent, calls "the Clovis hard-line position." Williams and other mainstream scholars contend that the wide distribution of the distinctive stone spearpoints first discovered in Clovis, New Mexico, in 1932 supports their theory that all pre-Columbian experience throughout the Western Hemisphere ultimately derives from an Ice Age monoculture with exclusively Siberian origins.

Lately, however, archaeological finds at various digs in North and South America have begun to call the Clovis-only scenario into question. For instance, the archaeologist Tom Dillehay, of the University of Kentucky at Lex-

ington, has uncovered intriguing evidence that human beings reached Monte Verde, in southern Chile, 12,500 years ago—in other words, that the extreme southern limits of the Western Hemisphere were settled at about the time that the supposed first Americans were crossing the Bering land bridge, more than 9,000 miles to the northwest. It is generally accepted that settlement across this distance would have required progressive immigrant waves over some 7,000 years. Moreover, Dillehay and his team have come across a campsite near Monte Verde that they believe may be 30,000 years old.

Less ancient but potentially more problematic for the Clovis hard-liners is the revelation in Brazil of what appear to be the oldest human remains ever found in the Western Hemisphere. Last October, Brazilian scientists announced evidence suggesting that the skull of a young woman found at Lapa Vermelha, in the state of Minas Gerais, is some 11,500 years old. Moreover, sophisticated reconstructive techniques performed on the skull in England indicate that Luzia, as the woman has been named, might have Negroid origins—or at least is not Mongoloid, as any descendant of Bering Strait pilgrims must necessarily be. Luzia's remains were discovered in 1975, but it was not until twenty years later that anthropologists examined the skull closely and thought to question the Clovis-only hypothesis on the basis of the unusual cranial features.

How might the pre-Clovis settlers have arrived? One explanation is that early immigrants floated down the western coast of North and South America in small boats. This theory, considered heretical when, nearly three decades ago, it was proposed by the archaeologist Knut Fladmark, of Simon Fraser University, has been gaining adherents of late. Researchers such as Dennis Stanford, the chairman of the anthropology department at the Smithsonian Institution; Carole Mandryk, an associate professor of anthropology at Harvard University; and Daryl Fedje, an archaeologist with Parks Canada, are urging their colleagues to consider that canoe-like or skin-covered boats—prototypes of Inuit kayaks, perhaps—might

have aided migration toward the end of the last Ice Age, around 14,000 years ago. Jon Erlandson, an anthropologist at the University of Oregon, has pointed out that boats were used in Japan 20,000 years ago. By Fladmark's estimate, travelers paddling six hours a day could have made the trip from the eastern Aleutians to Chile in just four and a half years. This route might also help to explain Luzia's presence in Brazil: the anthropologist who first noted her unusual features believes that her forebears originated in Southeast Asia and migrated "northward along the coast and across the Bering Straits until they reached the Americas."

Xu, for one, is amused by this archaeological approximation of a drag race backward in time. Although he welcomes any willingness among traditional academics to question the established settlement dates, he is puzzled by their apparently exclusive fascination with older contact. "It amazes me," he told his ISAC colleagues in Columbus, "that while there are authorities who propose visits to North America by boat some twenty-five thousand years ago," most orthodox academics insist that contact across the sea in the past 3,000 years is "simply unthinkable."

THE CASE OF BARRY FELL

THE chief diffusionist culprit is the late H. Barraclough ("Barry") Fell. A Harvard biologist turned epigrapher, Fell acquired a following in 1976 with the publication of *America B.C.*, which discussed the archaeological implications of epigraphy—the study of ancient man-made markings incised in stone, clay, wood, or bone. Part adventure tale, part introductory textbook on linguistics and anthropology, *America B.C.* energized a generation with its talk of "Druids in Vermont?" and "Phoenicians in Iowa before the time of Julius Caesar?"

Despite a penchant for berets and a breezy, teasing manner, Fell was no mere dream-spinner, in the style of nineteenth-century seekers after the Lost Tribes of Israel or after survivors from

Atlantis. A scholar of high standing at one of the world's most imposing academic institutions, Fell endeavored to bring a scientist's objective discipline to the process of identifying mysterious alphabetic scripts and pictographs, translating them from their ancient languages, and interpreting their meaning in the context of their surroundings.

When Fell came across an archaeological anomaly, he gnawed at it relentlessly until an explanation issued forth. For instance, his curiosity aroused by oddities at the Comalcalco temple site, on the coast of Tabasco, in southeastern Mexico, Fell prepared reams of comparative analysis in support of a Mediterranean role in the temple's origins. The key, he insisted, was the use of fired bricks in the construction of the temple walls—an anomaly in the region. Comparing supposed masons' marks at the site with analogues from Rome, Crete, and Libya, Fell disputed mainstream assertions that this was a Classic Mayan site. With characteristic bravado he wrote that it was designed and probably built by "visitors from Europe and North Africa, trained in the manufacture of fired bricks in Roman brickyards." Moreover, these visitors came "during the first three centuries of the Christian era." Fell's absolute certainty, in this and myriad other epigraphic "explanations," inflamed mainstream scholars. But although another researcher has identified a few other instances of fired-brick construction in Mesoamerica, mysteries remain about Comalcalco and the profusion of its scripts. Fell's ghost is not easy to exorcise from this place.

For many general readers *America B.C.*, together with Fell's subsequent *Saga America* (1980) and *Bronze Age America* (1982), rewrote the cultural history of the Western Hemisphere. Fell's clear message was that Europeans, Africans, and Asians had made routine yet historically unremembered visits to North and South America for at least 3,000 years prior to Columbus's celebrated landfall.

To the academic establishment, however, Fell was a self-promoting pseudoscientist who threatened to undo more than a century of careful progress in archaeological and anthropological re-

search. His critics charge that instead of observing protocols and rules of evidence required by traditional archaeology, Fell promoted esoteric claims to a nonspecialist—and therefore credulous—audience. A minor industry developed for the express purpose of debunking Fell.

Both before and after Fell's death, in 1994, his critics were merciless, citing a variety of errors of chronology and interpretation and also Fell's perceived distaste for peer review by specialists. Unable to trust some of his discoveries, mainstream academics have generally elected not to trust any of them. In *Fantastic Archaeology*, Stephen Williams argued that the case of Barry Fell amounted to a single question: "How many of Fell's inscriptions in North America, which now must number in the thousands, are real messages from scribes writing in non-Native American languages (Eurasian scripts)?" Williams was scathing in his answer: "The real count, I fear, is few or none."

The influential archaeologist David Kelley, of the University of Calgary, has his own concerns about Barry Fell's methods—and yet, unlike Williams and Brian Fagan, in the end he is unable simply to dismiss Fell's work. Kelley is a Harvard-trained scholar of catholic interests, which range from ancient calendars and archaeo-astronomy to the prehistory of the Celts to the decipherment of Mayan glyphs. In conversation he seems to guide by indirection, answering questions with questions or with references to the writings of his peers. His wispy eyebrows sit above eyes undimmed by more than forty years of serious scholarship; a tight-lipped smile suggests that there are many things he will not say about himself or his accomplishments. Indeed, he is almost painfully reticent about what most scholars now consider to be a monumental achievement in the field: his having broken a century-old logjam in Mayan epigraphy. Prevailing amid a hail of academic and personal attacks, Kelley made a persuasive argument for a phonetic, as opposed to an ideographic, method of interpretation. Drawing on the work of the Russian linguist Yuri Knorosov, Kelley's work offered a

way to unlock the sounds and meanings of glyphs that had stood mute for centuries—inaugurating a new age of decipherment that is transforming Mayan studies.

Kelley, who is a contributing editor to *The Review of Archaeology*, complained in a 1990 essay that "Fell's work [contains] major academic sins, the three worst being distortion of data, inadequate acknowledgment of predecessors, and lack of presentation of alternative views." Among the embarrassments that Kelley and other critics often use against Fell are a series of Celtic ogham inscriptions that were sent to Fell from McKee, Kentucky, in 1988. He dutifully translated the scripts, which later proved to be forgeries. Although Fell was the one to spot that they were fake, the damage was done.

Nevertheless, Kelley and others do credit Fell with raising the possibility of Celtic, Iberian, and North African connections to certain unexplained American inscriptions. The Grave Creek Stone, from West Virginia, is a typical example. Mainstream archaeologists, puzzled by the carvings on it, have long

Even some traditionalists now accept that there was overseas contact, a prominent scholar concedes. "What we doubt is the impact of the contact," he says. "These visitors simply didn't transform the societies they found."

dismissed it as a forgery; but Fell suggested that its symbols derive from an ancient Punic, or Phoenician, alphabet used on the Iberian Peninsula during the first millennium B.C.—a script unknown, and thus presumably unforgeable, at the time of the stone's discovery, in 1838. Kelley disagrees with Fell's theory that the Grave Creek symbols represent

some sort of astronomical text. But the similarity of those symbols to obscure but undisputed Phoenician letters, he believes, is much more than coincidence—and, at the least, Fell deserves credit for emphasizing the comparison.

It is unusual to detect even this much tolerance for Barry Fell in a member of the academic mainstream. But Kelley can be more enthusiastic yet. With regard to a celebrated (or notorious) hypothesis of Fell's that the stick-figure letters carved into stones at sites ranging from Vermont to Oklahoma are Celtic in origin, Kelley wrote in his *Review of Archaeology* essay, "I have no personal doubts that some of the inscriptions which have been reported are genuine Celtic ogham." These are the very markings that most orthodox scholars dismiss as plough marks or forgeries or the figments of febrile New Age imaginations. In addition, Kelley resists joining the many of his peers who take potshots at Fell's Druids of New England. He continued,

Despite my occasional harsh criticism of Fell's treatment of individual inscriptions, it should be recognized that without Fell's work there would be no [North American] ogham problem to perplex us. We need to ask not only what Fell has done wrong in his epigraphy, but also where we have gone wrong as archaeologists in not recognizing such an extensive European presence in the New World.

The way Kelley is described by his friend Michael Coe in *Breaking the Maya Code* (1992) suggests that he might secretly revel in his controversial, if guarded, support for Fell. Coe wrote,

[Dave is] a lively mixture of Irish puckishness and New England Yankee sobriety [whose] large frame, bald head, and leprechaun smile are familiar features at [academic] meetings, where he can always be expected to present a paper that may be unusual and even outrageous, according to one's lights, but is usually grounded in the most impeccable scholarship.

In one such paper, titled "Writing in the Americas," published in October of 1998 in a special edition of the *Journal of the West*, Kelley focused on a "deci-

pherment" that detractors consider to be one of Fell's most outrageous: the Peterborough Stone, in Ontario. This is a flat table rock measuring hundreds of square feet, upon which a riot of curious incised graffiti are interlaced, seemingly at random. To Fell, who made the stone the focus of his *Bronze Age America*, the layout consisted of meaningful groups of symbols and letters, carved primarily to document the visit and the commercial enterprise of a Bronze Age Nordic king whom Fell identified as Woden-lithi. "Woden-lithi, of Ringerike the great king, instructed that runes be engraved," reads one section of Fell's ambitious translation of this curious saga in stone. "A ship he took. In-honor-of-Gungnir was its name. . . . For ingot-copper of excellent quality came the king by way of trial."

Fell believed that Scandinavian visitors circa 1700 B.C. incised the Peterborough Stone with words and symbols that have distinctly Scandinavian pronunciations and meanings. However, the letters themselves are not depicted with recognized medieval Norse runes. In Fell's, and now Kelley's, view, a *pre*-runnic alphabet was used—a little-known script called Tifinagh, preserved by a Saharan Berber people known as the Tuareg. It is as if Woden-lithi's scribe used symbols from the Classical Greek alphabet to put together English-sounding words.

In *The Review of Archaeology*, Kelley supported Fell's identification (if not his exact translation) of proto-Tifinagh at Peterborough, and he amplified this position in his *Journal of the West* article. After comparing figures at Peterborough with inscriptions found in the Bohuslän region that once encompassed parts of Norway and Sweden; in the Tassili area of Saharan Africa, near Algeria's border with Niger; and at a southern terminus of the ancient Amber Route, in the Camonica Valley of northern Italy, Kelley wrote,

I have found that the late Bronze Age of Scandinavia, corresponding to the early Iron Age of Italy and North Africa, shows a lengthy series of innovations in all areas of iconography, including apparent Proto-Tifinagh inscriptions in both Scandinavia and It-

aly. . . . The date is about 800 B.C. (900 years later than asserted by Fell).

Kelley did not shy away from the diffusionist implications of his analysis: "It looks to me as if a single trade route united an area from the gold-mining zone along the Niger [River] to Scandinavia, and I think that oceanic voyagers from Scandinavia, linked into that route, reached Ontario."

Kelley's role in the Mayan-decipherment controversy of the 1970s has steeled him against the predictable rebukes of mainstream colleagues for his Peterborough hypothesis. "When it is clear that a 'fantastic' interpretation has many reasonable components *if the data are valid*," he has observed, "most professional archaeologists regard that as . . . adequate reason to *assume* that the data are invalid." Kelley believes that in the prevailing academic climate the challenge for diffusionists is not only to build a solid scientific case but also to win a fair hearing. "The problem I see with Barry Fell," he says, "is that the people who can evaluate him accurately are the people who are least likely to be reading him. It needs somebody with a professional understanding of linguistic evidence and a willingness to look at some quite unlikely-seeming material."

A DIFFUSIONIST REBUTTAL

THE material to which Kelley refers is not only confounding but also compelling. It ranges from small stones inscribed with ancient Semitic scripts, such as the Tennessee Bat Creek Stone and the West Virginia Grave Creek Stone, to the Phoenician-inscribed Paraiba Stone, found (and then lost) in the nineteenth century in Brazil, to Japanese-style pottery shards in Ecuador, to the "melanotic" chicken, a genetically unique strain indigenous to Southeast Asia but found in Mesoamerica as well. If Stephen Williams's *Fantastic Archaeology* gives the impression that such things are no more than a random series of strange delusions, that impression is robustly coun-

tered by the laborious research of John Sorenson and Martin Raish. Sorenson, an emeritus professor of anthropology at Brigham Young University, who also holds degrees in archaeology and meteorology, has published extensively on the topic of transoceanic contact with the Americas “before the Recognized Discoveries.” Concerning Barry Fell’s research, he says he is “appreciative of the enterprise but critical of the methods, logic, and resulting interpretations.” Raish holds a Ph.D. in art history; he also has a master’s in library and information sciences, and is an instructional librarian at Brigham Young University. It is perhaps the latter expertise on which he and Sorenson drew most heavily for the herculean task of collating, summarizing, and indexing diffusion-related texts.

Their 1,200-page, two-volume *Pre-Columbian Contact With the Americas Across the Oceans* is an annotated bibliography of more than 5,100 books, articles, dissertations, and presentations regarding the (mostly) serious scholarship devoted to matters diffusionist, pro and con. Originally published in 1990, by Research Press, of Provo, Utah, it was substantially revised and amplified in 1996. It is either a treasure trove or a refuse heap of pre-Columbian conundrums, depending on one’s perspective.

There are, for example, citations of the studies of Carl Johannessen, a professor emeritus of geography at the University of Oregon, which analyze the delicately rendered carvings that look like maize—a crop known to be indigenous to the Western Hemisphere—in the Karnataka temple sculptures. There are citations of painstaking linguistic evaluations by Richard Nielsen, a Houston-based engineer, of the inscriptions on the Kensington Rune Stone, in Minnesota. On what looks like a rough-hewn headstone are about sixty words (and some numerals) in the distinctive runic alphabet of medieval Scandinavia. They purportedly chronicle a bloody attack on a group of Swedish and Norwegian adventurers that is unmistakably dated in runes: “Year 1362.” Williams has dismissed the Kensington Stone as an obvious forgery because of amateurish “mistakes” in runic orthography. How-

ever, as Sorenson and Raish point out, Nielsen “brings forward extensive evidence that what critics have called ‘aberrant’ features in this text are not so. They were in fact found in the old south Norwegian province and dialect of Bohuslän at least by A.D. 1200.”

The bibliography also includes citations of the work of J. Huston McCulloch, a professor of economics at Ohio State University, who has written extensively on the Bat Creek Stone and collateral artifacts. A hand-sized dark-gray shard, the stone resides out of public view, in a back room at the Smithsonian Institution, to which facility it was delivered shortly after its discovery, in 1889. It bears an eight-letter script that has been identified—not without virulent controversy, of course—as a form of paleo-Hebrew from the first or second century. According to a 1970 interpretation by the prominent Semitist Cyrus Gordon, the text fragment reads “for Judea” or “for the Judeans.” Although charges of forgery or of confusion of the script with the Cherokee syllabary have been plausibly refuted by the diffusionists over the years, authorities contended that simple bracelets that were found alongside the stone amount to proof of the artifacts’ Native American origin: it was presumed—without testing, as it turns out—that the bracelets were made of pure copper from the Lake Superior region. McCulloch, however, brings to light chemical analysis by the Smithsonian revealing that the “copper” bracelets are actually made of brass. Furthermore, he found, as Sorenson and Raish note, that the bracelets “have parallels in the Mediterranean world only during the first and second centuries of the Christian era, supporting the reading of the inscription as Hebrew of that period.” McCulloch and other diffusionists argue that because no Native American populations are known to have smelted metals, the presence of brass—an alloy—suggests a foreign provenance, or at least a foreign influence.

To establishment charges that diffusionists are but a rabble of undisciplined intellectual guerrillas intent on archaeological anarchy, Sorenson and Raish’s bibliography represents an impressive

rebuttal—a dispassionate and comprehensive summary of the most serious diffusionist research and commentary to date. However, the bibliography is the product of a publishing house with Mormon ties—a fact that establishment scholars cite with disdain. After all, the Book of Mormon identifies three main peoples as having emigrated from the Middle East to the Americas: the Jaredites, of the Book of Ether (circa 3000 B.C.); the family of Lehi, of the Book of First Nephi (circa 600 B.C.); and the people of Zarahemla, descended from King Zedekiah of the Old Testament, who escaped the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. Anything that connects ancient Mesoamerica with biblical-era Palestine lends that much more credence to the Book of Mormon—support that in itself casts doubt on the bibliography’s objectivity, at least as far as most of its critics are concerned.

Explaining the criteria they used to select entries, Sorenson and Raish state that they “exclude only two categories as absolutely without redeeming scholarly value: Atlantis/Mu per se and ‘extraterrestrial contacts.’” Just the same, they have drawn fire on this very point. Anthony Aveni, of Colgate, says derisively, “This diffusionist topic is, at root, Atlantean. And I think this monomyth—what you might call the Simple Solution—goes back to the Tower of Babel, to the Old Testament. It’s biblical: the Lost Tribes of Israel, for example. The Mormons are still preaching that idea.”

WHOSE RACE IS IT ANYWAY?

HIDDEN denominational agendas are the least of the diffusionists’ problems in their ongoing struggle for academic legitimacy. Attempting to understand an archaeological outlook that he simply cannot accept, the celebrated Maya scholar Arthur Demarest, of Vanderbilt University, proposes a rather utilitarian inspiration for mid-nineteenth-century diffusionism. “That,” he says, “was the period of the frontier wars with the Native Americans—a period, especially after Custer, when there was a lot of

“There’s no effort to ask the tribes what they remember,” Vine Deloria Jr. laments. “And numerous tribes do say that strange people came through our land. Or they remember that we came across the Atlantic as refugees.”

enmity and hatred toward Native Americans. So that fed into the idea that these earlier societies, not only the Maya, Aztecs, and Inca but even the ones up here—the Moundbuilders, for example—were somehow the product of some other white race that came in, was less savage, and was able to achieve these monuments and other things. I don’t think contemporary diffusionists have any racist feelings, but that kind of sentiment did give diffusionism a boost back in the 1870s.”

Demarest may not ascribe racist intentions to his diffusionist contemporaries, but there are some, particularly in official circles, who may. The 1996 discovery in Washington state of an ancient skeleton, designated Kennewick Man, soon sparked controversy among archaeologists, Native Americans, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, because the skeleton does not appear to be of Native American origin. As the writer Mark Lasswell observed in *The Wall Street Journal*, “Scientific evidence that American Indian ancestors may not have been the first inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere is a ticklish subject, not only for Indians but also, apparently, for the Clinton administration, exquisitely attuned, as always, to the nuances of multiculturalism.”

Early studies of the remains led scientists to suspect that Kennewick Man arrived here some 9,300 years ago—long after the Bering land bridge disappeared—and bore certain “Caucasoid”

features that were said to distinguish him from Native American peoples of Siberian heritage. Last fall federally appointed scientists released a report concluding that the skeleton’s physiognomy is most closely linked to groups in southern and eastern Asia: the features originally described as Caucasoid are actually associated with a Japanese people known as the Ainu, they believe. If Kennewick Man is a member of the Ainu, that group’s ancient maritime tradition might explain how he got here. Scientists say that more tests are needed to reach any definitive conclusions about Kennewick Man’s origins; however, the government has not allowed any DNA testing of the skeleton to date, because Native Americans consider it intrusive and sacrilegious. If Kennewick Man was found on their land, area tribes insist, then he must be an ancestor, and his remains should not be disturbed. Moreover, because the religion and oral histories of these tribes hold that their people have lived in the Northwest “since the beginning of time,” they are resentful of any implication that they may have ancestors who migrated from another land—whether from Siberia, Japan, or elsewhere. Archaeologists, eager to pursue the questions raised by Kennewick Man’s discovery, have sued to perform DNA and other tests, and a U.S.

Kelley disagrees with the diffusionist theory that the Grave Creek symbols represent an astronomical text. But their similarity to undisputed Phoenician letters, he believes, is much more than coincidence.

magistrate has set a March deadline for federal officials to decide on the matter.

Meanwhile, in implicit acknowledgment that the race card had been played successfully, in April, 1998, the Army Corps of Engineers abruptly

dumped 500 tons of rock fill over the site where Kennewick Man was discovered, beside the Columbia River. Although archaeologists often restore digging sites to their original condition after extensive studies have been completed, this action, by the corps’s own admission, was meant to ensure “the protection of any additional skeletal material or cultural artifacts from further revelation.”

The diffusionist cause enjoys no better political tolerance north of the border. In 1990, reacting to the prospect that some Manitoba schools might introduce discussions of pre-Columbian contact with North America into their curricula, Jack Steinbring, an anthropologist then at the University of Winnipeg, wrote to the Minister of Education at the time, Len Derkach, with a plea that he intervene. “The view that Europeans created North American Native rock art . . . is dangerous,” Steinbring stated.

Imagine Native youngsters being taught that the countless *thousands* of aboriginal rock paintings across North America were the result of the Norse, or Canaanites, or Phoenicians. The cause of this situation, and [the] implications for the strengthening of Native identity in a stressful period of acculturation are appropriately compared with apartheid or any other form of racial supremacy.

In a follow-up letter Steinbring declared, “Please understand that there is no debate on this epigraphy issue in Anthropology. Anthropology as a profession rejects it.”

In any controversy about carvings on North American stones the name of Barry Fell inevitably surfaces. “In some rather twisted logic,” Stephen Williams wrote in *Fantastic Archaeology*,

Fell sees a failure by anthropologists to recognize that many American Indian languages are heavily larded with wholesale borrowing from Mediterranean peoples, and says that this “does a grave injustice to the cultural tradition of the Amerindian peoples.” . . . I can only suppose Fell means therefore that the only true happiness for the Amerindians is to realize that they too are a part of the great heritage of

Western civilization like ourselves. The Native Americans must want to ask, "Why have the anthropologists wanted to keep us apart?"

Why, indeed? asks Vine Deloria Jr., an outspoken Native American activist. Deloria is a member of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe of North Dakota, a former executive director of the National Congress of American Indians, and a professor of history at the University of Colorado at Boulder. His numerous books, which include *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969), *God Is Red* (1973), and *Red Earth, White Lies* (1995), voice a thorough dissatisfaction with the standard histories of European and Native American relations since Columbus. In a 1992 paper in the academic journal *American Antiquity*, Deloria chastised the archaeological and anthropological establishment for embracing the monocultural implications of the Bering Strait hypothesis. "This migration from Siberia," he wrote, "is regarded as doctrine, but basically it is a fictional doctrine that places American Indians outside the realm of planetary human experiences."

A natural storyteller, Deloria takes obvious pleasure in drawing a listener into his tales with dramatic turns of phrase and deft modulations of his gravelly voice. He delights in irony, savors the unpredictable, and rewards surprise that is expressed at his many unexpected opinions with a mischievous "Aha!" You might think an Indian wouldn't feel such a way, he seems to be saying, but you never bothered to ask, did you?

Deloria bristles at what he sees as the reverse racism implicit in the establishment's dismissal of all things diffusionist. To him, the mainstream academic position that defends the Clovis-only hypothesis smacks of paternalism. He marvels at "the isolation of archaeologists today," and has written, "I have in the neighborhood of 80 books dealing in one way or another with Pre-Columbian expeditions to the Western Hemisphere." These books, he says, range from utter nonsense to some quite sophisticated reinterpretations of archaeological anomalies in light of new findings. But the archaeological establishment will have none of it, to Deloria's frustra-

tion. He laments, "There's no effort to ask the tribes what they remember of things that happened." In contrast to tribes in the area where Kennewick Man was found, he argues, "numerous tribes do say that strange people doing this or that came through our land, visited us, and so on. Or they remember that we came across the Atlantic as refugees from some struggle, then came down the St. Lawrence River, and so forth. There's a great reluctance among archaeologists and anthropologists to break centuries-old doctrine and to take a look at something new."

He continues, "As for the history of this hemisphere from, say, five thousand B.C. forward to our time, the mainstream scholars just don't want to deal with that at all. Let me give you an example. Years ago I spoke at an academic archaeological conference, and at the end of my speech I asked, 'Why don't you guys just drop the blinders and get into this diffusionist stuff?' My host, David Hurst Thomas, just about lost it and said, 'Do you know how long and hard we've fought to get members of this profession to admit that Indians could have done some of these things? And now you're saying it was Europeans!'"

BEYOND DIRT ARCHAEOLOGY

IN the end, the issues dividing the diffusionists and the independent inventionists come down to an argument about what constitutes significant historical evidence. Arthur Demarest, of Vanderbilt, touches, perhaps unconsciously, on the crux of the matter when he proffers a twig of the olive branch. "Within orthodox academics," he says, "there are a lot of people who simply dismiss the argument out of hand on the ground that the mechanics of overseas diffusion themselves are too difficult. But there are others—and I put myself in that group—who don't doubt there's been contact. I don't think that the transport problems are such that they prevented people from moving between continents. What we doubt is the transformative impact of ephemeral contact. These visitors, whoever and wherever

they were, simply didn't transform the societies they found here."

For the so-called dirt archaeologists, transformative influence is above all material, technological, and measurable. It is manifest, for example, in the distinctively fluted spearpoints left like so many business cards by the Clovis-culture immigrants who crossed the Bering land bridge. If successive waves of other visitors did reach the shores of North or South America, where is their material bequest? Where, for instance, are the wheels and keystone arches that flourished in the Old World for many centuries before Columbus but don't appear in the material record of the New World until after 1492?

The diffusionists' rebuttal is, well, diffuse; but it is thought-provoking just the same. On the one hand, the feisty George Carter, an emeritus professor of geography at Texas A&M University, points to the case of Hernando de Soto, who traipsed through the New World from 1539 to 1542. De Soto and his army came in contact with hundreds if not thousands of Native Americans, traded goods, and introduced non-native livestock—and yet, as Carter points out in the book *Across Before Columbus? Evidence for Transoceanic Contact With the Americas Prior to 1492* (1998), "of that passage virtually no trace can be found."

On the other hand, Stephen Jett, a geographer at the University of California at Davis, says that such Old World inventions as the arch and the wheel are not the sine qua non of cultural exchange, as the establishment would have us believe. In an essay in *Man Across the Sea: Problems of Pre-Columbian Contacts* (1971), Jett repeated the caution of Douglas Fraser, an art historian at Columbia University:

If we judge West African culture by the absence of wheeled vehicles, the plow, the true arch, draft animals and milking, then the well-documented Islamic penetration of the western Sudan [which in earlier times reached from present-day Senegal to Chad] cannot have taken place. For these traits are all well known in Moslem North Africa. . . . the ancient Greeks also rejected [the true arch] though it

was known earlier in Sumer, Babylon, and Egypt.

For David Kelley, the wheel-and-arch conundrum is doubly perplexing. In his own contribution to *Man Across the Sea* he wondered “why neither the true arch nor the wheel [was] to be found in Egypt for more than a thousand years after Mesopotamian influences transformed Egypt from a Neolithic farming stage to a semiurban, literate society, although [those inventions] already had a long history in Mesopotamia.” Moreover, the ancient riddle has significant modern ramifications. “In the light of such evidence,” Kelley continued, “it is surprising to find scholars . . . arguing that the absence of the true arch and the wheel in the New World proved that there had been no contacts between New World and Old World.”

In short, the diffusionists and their sympathizers contend, it is the *nature* of acceptable evidence that perpetuates the debate. “The problem,” Kelley says, “is in the fact that there are influences, but they don’t show up in ‘dirt archaeology.’ Basically, they show up in ideological materials: mythology, astronomy, calendars. These are precisely the areas which are hardest to deal with archaeologically. And so they don’t get much attention from traditional archaeologists.”

Deloria echoes Kelley’s concern. “There’s the Stephen Jay Gould attitude out there,” he says, “that believes science can do whatever it wants unless it comforts religion—because religion is considered a mere superstition. But if you look at it, most things that they’re calling religious are not really religious. They’re oral traditions; they’re ancient memory.” If mainstream archaeologists and anthropologists are unwilling or unable to consider evidence of this type, Deloria suggests, perhaps they’re not the right ones for the job.

That is also the opinion of Jon Polansky, an editor of the *Epigraphic Society Occasional Papers*, a journal co-founded by Barry Fell and devoted to the study of transoceanic contact. Polansky concedes that orthodox archaeolo-

gists are certainly competent to perform excavations and to document the physical details of any artifacts they may find. He believes, however, that they are neither suitably trained nor philosophically inclined to test new hypotheses when it comes to nontraditional forms of evidence. “They’re just not concerned with methods they don’t use,” he argues. As a result, he says, mainstream archaeology is missing—perhaps even obscuring—many opportunities for discovering transoceanic contact by limiting the academic specialties deemed fit to evaluate the evidence.

Polansky is an associate professor of medicine at the University of California at San Francisco Medical Center and the director of the laboratory that first isolated and cloned the gene responsible for glaucoma; he was a student of Barry Fell’s at Harvard in the 1960s. His is an energetic, insistent, and even impatient personality; just the same, he frequently bites his lip, as if to avoid disclosing some secret or other that one has yet to earn. His quandary is this: he has an editorial responsibility to propagate the latest research about transoceanic contacts, and yet he harbors, understandably enough, a basic mistrust about how new findings will be received. Traditional academics are, he believes, less interested in new ideas than in safeguarding positions of influence and authority. In a 1998 essay in the *Journal of the West*, Polansky and his co-authors, Donal Buchanan and Norman Totten, wrote,

Part of the scientific approach . . . is the pioneering will to follow internally consistent data to [their] logical conclusions without concern for whether or not the conclusions overturn existing idea structures. We do not favor the bias often imposed on new information, requiring “extraordinary proof” for “extraordinary ideas.” Instead, we propose a level playing field in which data . . . are explored in an honest . . . application of scientific method . . . without bias as to whether [hypotheses] agree with prevailing academic thought.

The extraordinary ideas Polansky proposes include the possibility not only

of ancient contact between the hemispheres across both great oceans but also of reciprocal transfers of information and lore. It’s one thing to discover evidence of travelers to the Western Hemisphere, he says. But what influences and traditions might the Native Americans have diffused among these visitors in return?

Diffusionists like Polansky and Deloria are convinced that this kind of information will be revealed only when qualified experts outside archaeology and anthropology undertake to examine the available evidence. Linguists, classicists, Asianists, specialists in comparative religion, epigraphers, archaeo-astronomers, navigation historians, ethno-botanists, and ethno-geneticists—these are the sorts of scholars who, Polansky believes, must take responsibility for evaluating the evidence that traditional academics find either meaningless or troubling.

There is no denying, of course, that the official history of the Western Hemisphere did not begin until Europeans wrote their first documents about the New World, at the close of the fifteenth century. Before then was an undoubtedly rich but largely unremembered period of habitation by the descendants of unlettered Ice Age mammoth-stalkers—people who themselves had no written language. The Western Hemisphere is unique in this respect. What we know of the hundreds of generations who lived here before Columbus staked his claim is frozen in the archaeological record. It is for the most part a mute record, consisting overwhelmingly of pottery shards, pointed flints, traces of dwellings, monuments, rock drawings—in short, of virtually every product of human imagination except alphabetic writing. How fitting, then, that the diffusionists’ curious lettered stones and tablets would break the silence, inciting noisy protest from the curators of America’s past even as they suggest that ancient Americans may have enjoyed the occasional conversation with visitors from afar.