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## PRE-COLUMBIAN SETTLERS: FACT OR FANCY

Native Americans are descendants of the "Lost Tribes of Israel". Meso-, Central, and South American pyramids, mummies and hieroglyphs demonstrate American Indian origins from Egypt. Celto-Iberians preceeded Columbus' arrival in America by 2,000 years! Ground drawings on the Nasca Plain in Peru clearly indicate an ancient landing strip used by visiting spacemen. A vanished European race preceding the Indians built the huge earthworks and mounds dotting the eastern United States.

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What do these statements have in common? First, they are claims regarding the pre-Columbian contact and colonization in the Americas. Second, these claims have not been validated by individuals trained and experienced in archeological research. And third, they are accepted as fact by a considerable segment of the public as well as by some in the anthropological profession. There are differences, of course, in that some are well meaning misinterpretations of evidence while others are based on hoaxes or conscious misrepresentations.

What is wrong with claims that, using cultural trait resemblance such as pyramids, suggest historical contact between the Old and New Worlds? Scholars point out several difficulties. 1) Resemblances are taken out of context in time and space. 2) While there is a similarity of form, there may be differences in meaning and function. 3) Only similarities are emphasized, never differences. 4) No attention is paid to the implications of such claims beyond their narrow focus. Unfortunately, racism is an element that still "rears its ugly head." Europeans considered Native Americans too "primitive" to be capable of such impressive cultural achievements as moundbuilding or massive Nasca ground drawings. Rather, these sophisticated technological creations must be of European origin.

North American culture history is not as well known as might be supposed. Historians have concentrated on individual histories and political events rather than on regional and ethnic studies, American material culture, and architectural history. For instance, a number of stone structures, attributed to an ancient culture by Barry Fell, were no mystery at all to local residents who identified them without question as root cellars. The stone structures are associated with 18th and 19th century house structures and food storage technology. Barry Fell, a marine biologist and self-proclaimed expert in ancient languages, has attempted to demonstrate that ancient peoples -- the Phoenicians, Carthaginians,

and Egyptians -- had contact with the New World long before the brief visits of the Norsemen in A.D. 1000. Fell's claims are based on stone inscriptions and stone structures found primarily in northeastern United States. Linguists, archeologists, and historians have shown these "inscriptions" to be for the most part, random marks or "writing" created by hoaxers, a not uncommon form of practical joke in the 19th century. But Fell, who has a large and dedicated following, continues to ignore archeological, historical, and other linguistic evidence.

In his book Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science (New York: Dover, 1957), Martin Gardner describes traits shared by pseudoscientists. First, a pseudoscientist works in almost total isolation from the professional ranks, and therefore, is outside the channels through which new ideas are introduced and evaluated. Second, a pseudoscientist has a tendency toward paranoia which is likely to be displayed in five ways: 1) considering oneself to be a genius, 2) regarding one's colleagues as ignorant blockheads, 3) believing oneself to be unjustly persecuted and discriminated against, 4) having strong compulsions to focus one's attacks on the greatest scientists and best-established theories, and 5) writing in complex jargon. An example of a pseudoscientist is Augustus Le Plongeon, a 19th century French adventurer, who spent his life unrelentingly determined to demonstrate ancient Egyptian contact in Central and South America. Robert Wauchope wrote of Le Plongeon, "he assumed unquestioningly that his own identifications were correct, [and] instead of questioning his own theories when he confronted a mass of contrary evidence, he merely admitted bewilderment and walked calmly away from the subject, still convinced of his original hypothesis" (1962:18).

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Unscientific claims regarding the prehistory of the Americas continue to receive publicity. Interest in what has been described as "cult archeology" appears akin to religious fervor (see Cole's article). One of the most frequent inquiries received by the Smithsonian's Department of Anthropology concerns the Book of Mormon and the hypothesis that the Lost Tribes of Israel help explain the origin of the American Indians. Pseudoscientists' revelations are appealing to the public and newsmedia alike, as is evident in Erich von Däniken's Chariots of the Gods? and other books selling over 40 million copies. For most of the general public, science is abstract and dull while pseudoscientists' spectacular interpretations stimulate the imagination.

What do these claims have to do with teachers, students, scientists, and the general public? It is the responsibility of educators to teach logical thinking and the process of critical analysis in order to create an educated, not a gullible, public. Scientists must keep the public informed of their work. They should not ignore what they may feel are fantastic and erroneous claims while the public is being swayed by the titillating media. Assertive counter-arguments by scientists might help stifle the speculations before they ferment in the minds of the public. Just as creationism is now threatening science teaching in American schools, so too pseudoscientific archeology prevents the public from understanding not only archeology in particular but science in general.

Below are a few references which might interest those who wish more detailed exploration into controversies concerning the prehistory of the Americas.

Cole, John. "Cult Archeology and Unscientific Method and Theory," In Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory, vol. 3, Michael B. Schiffer, editor. New York: Academic Press, 1980.

A provocative commentary on the characteristics of cult archeologies which contribute to their popular appeal.

Goddard, Ives and William W. Fitzhugh. Barry Fell Statement. Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution, 1979.

Goddard, a linguist, and Fitzhugh, an archeologist, refute Fell's interpretation in his book, America B.C., of stone "inscriptions" demonstrating ancient peoples' contact with the New World prior to A.D. 1000.

McKusick, Marshall. The Davenport Conspiracy. Iowa City: University of Iowa, 1970.

A true account of the Davenport tablets of Iowa which created one of the major controversies in the 19th century concerning the mound-builders and the prehistory of America.

Neudorfer, Giovanna. Vermont's Stone Chambers: An Inquiry Into Their Past. Vermont Historical Society, 1980.

An excellent example of a thorough archeological investigation of Vermont's controversial stone structures attributed to European Neolithic or Bronze Age settlers, with a good introduction on the general controversy by William Fitzhugh.

Ross, Anne and Peter Reynolds. "Ancient Vermont," Antiquity 52:100-107, 1978.

A negative assessment of the alleged evidence for pre-Columbian Celts in New England by British Celtic specialists.

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Stewart, T. Dale. THE PEOPLE OF  
AMERICA. New York: Charles Scrib-  
ner's Sons, 1973.

Excellent source on the physical  
anthropology of American Indians  
including the question of origins  
and the physical characteristics  
of Indian populations at the time  
of European contact and today.

Wauchope, Robert. LOST TRIBES &  
SUNKEN CONTINENTS: MYTH AND METHOD  
IN THE STUDY OF AMERICAN INDIANS.  
Chicago: University of Chicago  
Press, 1962.

A highly readable discussion of  
the various nonscientific myths  
and theories by a well qualified  
archeologist.

THE CASE OF THE ANCIENT ASTRONAUTS,  
1977. From Nova series. Avail-  
able from The Pennsylvania State  
University, Audio Visual Services,  
Special Services Bldg., Univer-  
sity Park, PA 16802; (814) 865-  
6314.

Film documents the unscientific  
inadequacy of Erich von Däniken's  
theory and book CHARIOTS OF THE  
GODS?

Ann Kaupp