



WHO GOT TO AMERICA FIRST? A VERY OLD QUESTION

As most of us are now very aware, 1992 is the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' famous voyage to the "New World." The assertion that Columbus "discovered" America when his trio of ships made a landfall in the Bahamas has been questioned, however, by a number of concerned individuals. Native Americans are understandably disturbed that their priority of being the "first" Americans is somehow challenged. Most scholars now insist that the first human settlers of this continent were indeed the ancestors of the contemporary Indian tribes. Their first migration (from Asia via the Bering Strait area) probably occurred more than 15,000 years ago, with several more waves of migrants arriving some thousands of years later.

But if that is the widely-held explanation, what is all the argument about? Most of the

debate surrounds hypothetical later arrivals in the New World, especially during the last 3000 years, and purportedly mainly from locations to the east across the Atlantic. A smaller number of proponents look to trans-Pacific connections during this same period of time. What sort of evidence and how we evaluate it is the subject of concern for many anthropological scholars today. As our review will indicate, these are not new questions, nor are they ones that can be settled for "all time"--the same ones keep reappearing over the centuries.

The century following Columbus' well-documented voyages, none of which actually reached North America, was one of questioning too. Had Columbus reached Asia or the West Indies? Who were these inhabitants that met him as he stepped ashore? We still refer to them as "Indians" because of the mistaken view that the islands, and later the



" AT THIS RATE IT'LL PROBABLY TAKE THEM 500 YEARS TO SORT IT OUT..."

mainland, were part of the Asian continent, not a "New World" at all. Magellan's circumnavigation of the world in the 1520s would establish the Western Hemisphere as a separate land mass, but then the question arose as to the origin of the inhabitants.

Here speculations ran wild. By the end of the century (1590) a Spanish church scholar, Joseph de Acosta, would publish a marvelously well-constructed answer: the inhabitants of the New World came from Asia across a land bridge, arriving as hunters, then developing agriculture and later high civilizations such as he had seen in Peru and Mexico. He specifically discounted possible trans-Atlantic connections to the Lost Tribes of Israel or the mythical sunken continent of Atlantis.

Modern scholars would agree with this Acosta scenario, but just about a decade later another Spanish cleric, Gregorio Garcia, wrote a two-volume work that would open the gates of migration to the Lost Tribes, to refugees from Atlantis, to Carthaginians from North Africa, and many more. He refused to be partial to any on his long list, but they were almost all Trans-Atlanteans, bringing seeds of civilization with them. Thus in 1607 the battle was joined: the New World native cultures were either derived from land-based Asian migrants (Acosta) or transplanted from the Old World by trans-Atlantic seafarers (Garcia). The argument has lasted until today.

METHODS OF INQUIRY

The origin of the earth's inhabitants is a central question in anthropology. The answer is also one that requires careful evaluation of all the information available to us each time the question is asked. Acosta and Garcia were limited in the facts they had at hand, although both had lived in several parts of the New World before addressing the problem--no armchair scholars here. But what kind of evidence do anthropologists bring to bear on such questions today?

First, we look at the people themselves: what do they look like, whom do they resemble? Simple questions in the 1600s: outward appearances were all they had. Now in Biological Anthropology, we turn to sophisticated analysis of genetics and DNA to try to see way back in time as human

populations spread across the globe. We can clearly tie all basic Native American origins back to Asia, although we may quibble about exactly at what time and with which Asian groups they are genetically most closely linked.

Second, we consider the cultures of the Native Americans, especially those aspects of culture that will allow a long look back in time. In this case, linguistics, the study of languages, is an important information source. Native American languages represent enormous diversity, much more so than in comparable areas in the Old World, where diversity has decreased over time. This pattern of diversity suggests both internal diversification and repeated migrations from North Asia. According to one scholar, the degree of linguistic diversity in the New World points to a history of "tens of millenia."

Third, when we look at the artifactual content of New World cultures, we conclude that most of these myriad artifacts, covering thousands of years, are definitely of New World origin, although certain aspects of some material cultures do show north Asian connections, especially in the Paleo-Indian period, 7-10,000 years ago.

Finally, we turn to a rather different category, that of the plants and animals associated with New World cultures. Here too just a few specific Asian connections exist: dogs are clearly long-time associates of humankind and quite surely accompanied some of the very first Americans from Siberia. Plants are quite another matter, and here we are discussing agricultural items only. All the major food plants, such as corn, potatoes, and beans, are derived with the help of human intervention from native American domesticated plants. Only a few questionable items await further study concerning a possible outside origin; these are the bottle gourd and cotton. The sweet potato, another enigma, seems to have gone from South America to Polynesia, just to confuse the issue.

With those basics in place, we can enter the fray of evaluating other sources of evidence for trans-oceanic connections with one certain understanding: if an hypothesis is bolstered by strong emotional concerns, almost everything can and will be believable to some supporters. Recognizing that each of us has a personal bias that influences our

own view of the world does not make us immune to its force, but at least we can make a conscious attempt to make our evaluations as bias-free as possible.

MOUNDBUILDERS

Archaeological evidence to answer the question of "Who Got Here First?" would necessarily have to await the development of the discipline of archaeology in North America. Thomas Jefferson is very often cited as the "father" of American archaeology, and he certainly attempted one of the first archaeological explanations of the question when he wrote in his famous "Notes on Virginia" (1787) about an Indian Mound that he had excavated some years before. However, his strongest evidence to support his belief in an Asian origin (via the Bering Strait) of the Native Americans was from his study of Indian languages. He cited the diversity of these languages as proof that they had been here a long time.

Other scholars joined Jefferson in this well thought-out view. Yet, in the early nineteenth century the westward expansion of settlement into the Ohio Valley produced a great deal more archaeological evidence from Indian Mounds. As interpreted by some new voices, the accumulating data supported the supposition that these mounds and the rather elaborate artifacts found in them were made by the exotic "Mound-builders," purportedly an advanced and extinct culture not connected to Native Peoples. The hypothesis spawned some very popular books, such as those by Josiah Priest (1833), that were fanciful in their interpretations and careless in their evaluation of the data.

The voice of reason came from Samuel Haven in a Smithsonian-sponsored volume (1856) that supported the Bering Strait hypothesis and called some of the wilder notions "Vagaries." We now know that much of the Moundbuilder hypothesis was based on fraudulent documents, such as the Grave Creek and Davenport inscriptions, which tried to give support for literate Trans-Atlantic cultures making inroads on the prehistory of the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys. It just wasn't so, and again thanks to the Smithsonian's major research project of Mound Exploration under John W. Powell, the Moundbuilder Myth was laid to rest by 1900. The mounds, the earthworks, and the artifacts were the handiwork of

American Indians, not that of Trans-Atlantic invaders.

VIKINGS IN AMERICA

However, there was much more than just mounds and Native Americans to argue about. By 1891 a volume entitled "America Not Discovered by Columbus" by Rasmus B. Anderson would contain a lengthy bibliography with some 350 sources on the topic. It listed claims of America's discovery by Chinese, Arabs, Welsh, Venetians, Portuguese, and Poles. However, the majority of these references supported the notion of Vikings as the ones who got here first in the race across the Atlantic. This hypothesis came into being more than 150 years ago, and really had only the literary evidence from the Norse Sagas to support the idea.

Not that it was not a worthwhile idea. Few doubted that Vikings in North America could or did happen. There just was no archaeological evidence to prove it. Again frauds came to the rescue; if you can't discover the data you need, just manufacture it! Thus was born the fake Kensington Rune Stone in the 1890s and the "salting" of the Beardmore site in Canada with real Norse artifacts to be used to support a pre-Columbian Norse presence in North America. But good archaeology by Helge Ingstad would finally come to the fore in 1960 with the right answer: Norse ruins at L'Anse Aux Meadows on the northern tip of Newfoundland, complete with sod huts and artifacts such as a brass pin, a soapstone spindle whorl and iron nails, all dated to about AD 1000. Was it the home of Leif Erickson? Archaeologists are not sure, but we know that the Vikings certainly made it to the New World long before Columbus.

OTHER SOURCES OF NEW WORLD INFLUENCES

With an affirmative reply to the Viking presence, one might think that much else might logically follow. What about Chinese voyagers in junks across the Pacific, Lost Tribes from Israel still looking for a homeland, Phoenicians from the Mediterranean, Celts from Ireland or Wales, or West Africans in Mexico? Well, all of the above and more have been suggested by various writers in the twentieth century alone. Some of the best known authors

among recent long-range diffusionists are Harold Gladwin, Barry Fell, and Ivan Van Sertima.

First, let us consider whether or not such voyages were possible during the last 3000 years. The answer is a very strong yes. The maritime exploits of the Polynesians during this period are well-known and documented by excellent archaeology in the Pacific. They colonized the entire eastern Pacific area. Much earlier (50,000 years ago) migrants from Southeast Asia made their way to the great island continent of New Guinea/Australia; part of that trek quite probably included water crossings.

Some of the proposed trans-Atlantic crossings were supposedly made by cultures known to have had maritime skills. Indeed the fact that Atlantic crossings (especially in summer) in small boats, even in solo attempts, have been successfully made is well-known. The Pacific, too, has been conquered in recent times, but with a fair number of casualties, although the latter fact is not as well advertised. So we may accept that it can and could have been done with the maritime expertise available from 1000 B.C. on, although the modern successes have benefitted from navigational and safety aids not available to all would-be travelers in earlier times.

But what is the basic evidence for this multitude of ocean-crossings to the New World that some chroniclers now insist took place in the past? There is certainly no biological evidence that can be used to support any such trips. One would have to admit that additions to the New World gene pool by these shiploads of mariners might be hard to detect; modern studies of prehistoric human skeletal remains in the New World have not shown any identifiable evidence, either, to support the presence of such overseas visitors.

Save for the Norse finds discussed above, no important archaeological discoveries have been made, if one means intrusive sites with buildings, artifacts, and trash heaps attributable to such voyagers. The evidence that has been used to support these hyper-diffusionist claims falls into two major categories: 1) inscriptions found either on cliffs, on rocks, or artifacts, or on crude stone structures where no other pertinent artifacts are found (ex. Dighton Rock in Massachusetts), and 2) stone sculptures and

other figurative pieces of art that are thought to depict foreign visitors or to resemble the artistic work of non-New World cultures such as the colossal Olmec head discussed in Professor Grove's article in this issue.

The inscriptions in a wide variety of purported Old World scripts have been found from one coast to the other, in the Rocky Mountains to the suburbs of Tucson, Arizona, from the Maine coast to the Great Basin of Nevada and Utah. Many of the inscriptions contain mixed texts with symbols of different times and origins. These finds also share another unusual characteristic; none have produced any nearby artifacts or associated living areas. They stand alone as sentinels of the past with no archaeological context--a very strange situation. Who left them? How did the ancient voyagers travel so far without leaving a single trace other than these inscriptions? Why did they do it? Unanswered questions and important to consider. One set of inscriptions with accompanying artifacts are the Michigan Relics or Soper Frauds manufactured by James A. Scotford between 1890 and 1920. Although debunked for decades, these pseudo-cuneiform messages are still being deciphered today.

The study of stone and ceramic sculptures to prove foreign connections has flourished in Mesoamerica, the area of high culture in Central America. Here these works of art are thought to demonstrate bearded voyagers from abroad, and in the case of the great stone heads from Vera Cruz, Mexico (some are eight to ten feet in diameter), they are thought to confirm trans-Atlantic travel from Africa to Mesoamerica and the Olmec at approximately 700 B.C. This African origins hypothesis has been supported for several decades by Prof. Ivan Van Sertima of Rutgers University, and is, in my opinion, based on a mixture of ethnic pride and personal bias. The facial features of these heads in particular were thought to represent Africans, however, they are also similar to the features of many Native Americans from the Olmec area. Any resemblance between the peoples of West Africa and Mesoamerica is more likely due to common adaptation to tropical conditions than a closely shared ancestry.

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The hypothesis that important cultural transfer from West Africa to Mesoamerica occurred was first put forward by Prof. Leo Wiener of Harvard University in several books published between 1920 and 1926. A professor of Slavic languages, Wiener thought that he had discovered important linkages based on "sound-a-like" resemblances between the languages of the two areas. He also found what he considered to be other important comparative resemblances in materials as varied as women's hair styles and tobacco pipes.

Wiener's researches were the impetus for Prof. Van Sertima's own involvement with this topic, and they now form an important bit of data for Afro-centrist historical arguments. Unfortunately current archaeological research in Mesoamerica fails to support any of the claims of Wiener and Van Sertima for direct connections between the two areas. Where were the African landfalls in Mesoamerica, and why are there no African cultural artifacts observable in the well-excavated sites of the Olmec of the Mexican coast? [Furthermore, the new chronology for the development of Olmec culture places its beginnings considerably before 700 BC (see David Grove's article).]

years. Instead, it was small bands of Native Americans who first "discovered" the New World via the Bering Strait many thousands of years earlier. At present, although certainly not an impossible hypothesis, there is no credible evidence so far discovered that links any of the oft-cited Trans-Atlanteans with any archaeological discoveries in North America. As far as is now known, the Native Americans were the masters of their own fate. They produced their myriad diverse cultures throughout the New World independent of foreign intervention.

FOR FURTHER READING:

Fagan, Brian M. *Ancient North America: The Archaeology of a Continent*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991.

Radner, Daisie and Michael Radner. *Science and Unreason*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1982.

Williams, Stephen. *Fantastic Archaeology: The Wild Side of North American Prehistory*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991.

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Until we have solid archaeological evidence to support other hypotheses, it can be said quite clearly that, No, Columbus was not the first to find America, nor were the Vikings, although they beat Christopher by about 500