STONE INSCRIPTION FOUND IN TENNESSEE PROVES THAT AMERICA WAS DISCOVERED 1,500 YEARS BEFORE COLUMBUS

Cyrus Gordon, with Roy Bongartz

WHO really were the first to settle America? Columbus and his followers? The Vikings? Ireland's St. Brendan and his successors? Exciting new information based on an eighty-five-year-old Tennessee grave dig indicates that it was none of these, but may well have been ancient Canaanites from the Eastern Mediterranean.

Proof? The only authenticated pre-Columbian artefact ever found in North America. A hand-sized, inscribed stone tablet first found in 1885 by Smithsonian Institution archaeologists who misidentified it as a Cherokee tablet. The stone was found in an undisturbed tomb which had been ingrown by tree roots in such a way as to make any sort of error or fraud as to its identification a virtual impossibility.

Here, the expert who identified it, tells the story of this fabulous discovery.

An old Canaanite inscription on a stone found in Tennessee eighty-five years ago has become the cornerstone for a revolutionary new history of ancient America that explodes the traditional theory that early Western Hemisphere civilizations rose in isolation from the Old World. The Bat Creek Stone found in a tomb in Loudon County, Tennessee, in 1885, until last summer lay in a drawer in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, its fabulous message ignored.

But then Dr. Joseph Mahan, of the Columbus, Georgia, Museum of Arts and Crafts, who for years had been searching for evidence of Mediterranean people in ancient America, happened to spot a photograph of this stone, published upside down in an old book, with its inscription identified as Cherokee. He sent a copy to me, as an expert on early Mediterranean languages, for translation. Its message was immediately clear; its full impact on our understanding of our own history may not be felt for another hundred years.

This inscription, which contains a clear sequence of five letters meaning "for Judah," is not only the oldest text ever uncovered in North America but – more importantly – it is the first time a Mediterranean inscription has been found anywhere in the Western Hemisphere, in its original site with all the original objects connected with it in place.
Other clues like this have been found, but always separated from their original locations. This tends to make them suspect in the eyes of archaeological experts.

Dr. Mahan came upon the picture in a description of archaeological excavations carried out at Bat Creek, Tennessee, (under the auspices and published by the Smithsonian Institution) by Cyrus Thomas, a science professor and Protestant clergyman, who assumed that the nine skeletons he found in a mound had to be Cherokee Indians. A sketch of the skeletons appears with the photograph of the stone in the Twelfth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1890–91, published in 1894.

Dr. Mahan, who specializes in American Indian archaeology and ethnology, has been studying the history of the Yuchi tribe and the Mounds Indians for many years. The tribe lived in our Southeast until they were banished to the West by white men in the nineteenth century. Mahan finds sharp racial and linguistic differences between Yuchis and other Indians. Surviving tribesmen have claimed they originally came from the East by sea, and their annual Green Corn Ceremony strongly resembles the feast of Sukkoth, as described in the biblical book of Leviticus, Chapter twenty-three.

Dr. Mahan has for a long time seen connections between Mounds Indians and the Near East. Great discoveries are often made simple. All he did was to turn this photograph upside down, then get a chart of the Canaanite script, and match up the letters. He couldn't read them, but he told me, "I don't know how to pronounce these things, but they're on the chart and cannot be accidental."

The stone, kept by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C., is 11.5 centimetres long (about four and one-half inches) by 5.1 centimetres (two inches) wide; it is slate-like ironstone, with a brownish surface. The letters are very clear and beautifully carved. The stone has a dark, thin layer that, when penetrated, reveals a layer of a lighter colour. On the right-hand part of the stone, the engraver did not quite get down to the lower layer, but farther along, he did. Until Dr. Mahan came across it, the stone was just one of those little curiosities that no one was concerned about.

Five feet below the top of the mound, when it was excavated in 1885, was a circular pit, twenty-eight feet in diameter, containing nine skeletons, seven of then lined up toward the northeast part of the circle with their heads pointing north, and two lying in the southwest portion. One of these also had the head pointing north, but the head of the other pointed south; he is labelled number 1 in the sketch, and he was the one who carried the message chiselled into the little stone under his head when he was buried here. He also had a number of objects, including two brass bracelets, a knife or awl bone, and a hematite stone that, when scraped, gave a red dye for body painting.
Cyrus Thomas, who was in charge of the digging, wrote that the writing on the stone was "unquestionably Cherokee." Now, the Cherokee script, invented only in 1821 by the Cherokee leader, Sequoyah, was perfectly well known at the time of the excavation. If it were Cherokee, it would have been perfectly clear and it would logically have had to date from after 1821. But there was an old dead tree on top of the mound, with roots twisting down among the skeletons that, from the evidence in the published report, makes it appear that the tomb could not have been of a recent time. (How long does it take for a tree's roots to penetrate five feet and grow thick enough to create an obstacle?)

I would say that Thomas's interpretation of the text came about simply because he was brainwashed by the theories of the day, which held that modern Indians had come down through the ages changeless, pure, pristine, without influences from the outside world. Scientists did not bother with the stone. They figured: "You find it in Cherokee country. What could it be but Indian?"

When I first saw the photograph, there was an immediate, instantaneous recognition. Reading from the right, the first two letters caused a little difficulty, and then comes a word divider which resembles a comma, and then the letters are clear: Here is a perfect lamed or "l": then a perfect yod, or "y": then a perfect he or "h".

Then comes a letter which permits us to fix the period of the inscription as between 70 A.D. and 135 A.D. It is a waw or "w", which in this distinctive form, appears only on coins in the time of the Rome period. Then comes a daled or "d". So, to the left of the word divider, we have "l", meaning "to" or "for" and then YHWD, yehud or "Judah." The first two letters, reading from the right, may be, first, a sade or "s", and next a qof or "q", but these need more study before a definite translation can be made of them. The two vertical lines in the top left-hand corner of the inscription may be numerals, but we are not sure. However, the sign, made of two cross-bars on a vertical line followed by a dot just under the "y" is, in the style of coin lettering, an aleph (the first letter of the alphabet) which can stand for the numeral "1" and designates the first year of an era. What is also telling is the tiny round embellishment at the end of each line forming some of the letters. Made with a tiny drill, these are also typical of the inscriptions on coins of that period. One thing was abundantly clear: that any forgery or fraud was absolutely ruled out because the stone came from an unrifled tomb, excavated under the supervision of archaeologists.

I immediately reported my finding to Dr. Mahan and I also discussed it with students and friends. I don't like to keep things secret, but I felt that the news could leak out before Mahan had been given credit. Finally, he released the story to the press last October. Now this is the first time, north of the Rio Grande, that we have an inscription that actually says something. Of course, it means there was a population here, a literate
people, and it also means that people were already coming here regularly. It is not a question of whether these were the first, or most important colonists. The ancient past is like darkness, intermittently illuminated by rays of light. And this is a ray of light of a very specific kind. No one can say that this was the most crucial contact with the New World, or the first - simply that it is the first clear evidence that these early people visited America.

The inscription itself may say more than its short length might suggest. This is not a funerary inscription at all, of the kind that might read that "this sepulchre is that of so-and-so," and would be engraved on a stone and set up over a grave by a man's son.

To me, this appears to be the most prized personal object that expresses the person's identity, the thing that is most precious to him. He felt something special about this stone, expressing what we may call an ethnic identity. He was in the midst of strange peoples, far from home. And his own country had come to a terrible end, crushed by the ruthless legions of Rome. But this end could only be a harbinger of a new era of salvation for God's people.

To me, the stone means that this man was looking for a new order to replace the old one. There had been (as Hesiod records) the legendary Golden Age, Silver Age, Bronze Age and Age of Heroes, and now there was the terrible Iron Age, in which men had hearts and souls of iron. But there would be hope ahead, in the sixth age. The Aztecs had a similar picture of five successive ages with the sixth on its way. If this interpretation is correct, I believe the inscription may lead us to discovering one of the central historical developments of the American hemisphere. We are now adding a chapter connecting our own Southeast with the Roman Empire during the first and second centuries A.D.

We know from a number of ancient sources that there was an awareness of the Western World in the Old World, but it got little publicity because the ancient mariners, who were all employed by governments, kept a high degree of secrecy about their travels. The Greek geographer, Straho, tells of a Carthaginian ship heading for the Tin Islands, sometimes identified as Great Britain: the tin was required in the making of bronze. A Roman ship trailed the Carthaginian vessel, hoping to find out the secret source of the tin, but the Carthaginian skipper wrecked his craft on a reef, luring the Romans also to destruction, in order to keep the knowledge away from them.

There are many traces of interchange between east and west. James Adair, the eighteenth-century writer on American Indians, noted that Indians of the Southeast had cities of refuge, which meant that if you should kill a man by accident, and his family came after you to exact the blood revenge, you could go to a city of refuge for protection. After looking into the matter, the elders of such a city of refuge would shelter you, if you were
innocent; but if they found you were guilty, you would be turned over to the avenger. Now this institution is also biblical; there we six such cities, according to the five books of Moses. This is far from being a universally known institution. Adair found twenty-three points – I agree, incidentally, with only about a third of them – that he claimed showed kinship between ancient Canaanites and Indians. I would also say that not all those who introduced these customs had to be Canaanites; there were other people from the Near East who came and could have brought similar institutions.

But there was a community of Near Eastern visitors in Tennessee almost 2,000 years ago and they had a written language, and I have a feeling than memories of this language may well have been transmitted from father to son. In Central America, there are monumental inscriptions that the Indians cannot now read, that are being presently deciphered by scholars. Some people wonder how these people could have lost all knowledge of the script of their ancestors, but this is a common phenomenon. The Egyptians also forgot Egyptian writing; it had to be rediscovered by a Frenchman, Jean- Francois Champollion. The Persians also forgot their old script.

Now, this Tennessee community may have gotten sidetracked by everyday pressures, such as making a living by hunting and fishing, and forgotten the civilization of its ancestors, who had just blended into the landscape, absorbed with day-to-day activities, and had intermarried with the other inhabitants. A small community cannot survive assimilation. These fellows must have been a small but I think an influential minority, because they came with a technology from the cradle of Western civilization. Their influence far exceeded their numbers.

There are many mounds like the one at Bat Creek in Tennessee, and then are general resemblances to tombs of the Near East, but the main importance in all this is that a specific and known script is not general. A script tells you much more than any other kind of evidence can. In prehistoric archaeology they go by tools, by architectural forms, things; but as soon as you get inscriptions, the things become less important. Suppose, for instance, that we compare a modern American house with another house, with a thatched roof, in some English village; you might conclude that the houses came from two different civilizations, since the architecture looks different. But if you look at the newspapers from these same places, then you see that the language is the same, and that all belong to the same culture. Now, for the first time we have an authentic inscription in a specific language and in a specific script which we can read and understand and all the rest becomes of secondary importance.

The debate has been between the internationalists and the isolationists or, as they are called in archaeology and ethnology, the diffusionists and the independent inventionists. The diffusionists say that striking similarities between the Old World and
New World civilizations are due to transoceanic migrations of peoples. But the independent inventionists maintain that the many similarities are accidental. What was always needed to give the diffusionists a firm foundation was an Old World inscription professionally excavated in an intact American archaeological context. Dr. Mahan ransacked the scientific literature from beginning to end in order to find such an inscription. Now we must consider other material that has come to light in past accidental discoveries.

In the 1820s, John Haywood, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Tennessee, described Roman coins found in his state and in those adjacent to it, in a work entitled "Natural and Aboriginal History of Tennessee."

More recently, Canaanite coins of the Bar Kokhba Rebellion, 132–135 A.D., have been found by farmers around Louisville, Hopkinsville and Clay City, Kentucky.

The belief of the Melungeons, a small group of Mediterranean-looking people living around Sneedville, Tennessee, is that they came to America on Phoenician ships about 2,500 years ago.

I have many contacts with people in various fields who have been brought to the same conclusions by different lines of evidence. One professor has been working on marine life, as affected by currents, and has found that many species are known by the same name in far distant countries. Since fish do not carry their names with them, it must mean, if the names are the same here and abroad, that it was people who made the crossings. Another specialist has studied the history of astronomy, and has deduced that there had to be the pooling of celestial observations in various parts of the world to establish the science of astronomy and the art of celestial navigation. Celestial data was being fed in by mariners to what we can call the computer at home base in the Mediterranean. Herodotus, who never left the Near East, knew of a solar observation made by the Phoenicians thousands of miles away off the Cape of Good Hope around 600 B.C.

Yucatan, where the Mayans had observatories and developed the exact sciences of mathematics, astronomy and the calendar, probably contributed to the same global network of advanced civilizations as the Near East, India and the Far East. And there have been many others. It isn't only the Phoenicians, or Canaanites, or Minoans, or Greeks, or Etruscans, or Romans – there have been many, many people who have been visiting America since the earliest times. In fact, our earliest visitors apparently were the Japanese from the Island of Kyushu. Pottery of a very early type has been discovered on the coast of Ecuador, associated with a carbon-14 date of about 3,000 B.C.
And I do not believe in one-way traffic, either. There are traces of the New World in the Old World as well. Among murals of Pompeii, for instance, are pictures of the pineapple – a fruit native to Central America and unknown to Europe.

The Bat Creek Stone comes from a sealed context. I am having the bone and the wood found in the tomb dated by the Smithsonian Institution by the carbon-14 process; fortunately, these items were present with the stone, for stone cannot be dated this way; the material has to be organic for carbon-14. Then the geologists will tell us the geographical spread of the actual stone on which the inscription was carved. I would like to know whether it was made here or in the old country. And we want to go back to Tennessee to dig. Where there was one inscription there must be others.

A few weeks after I first received the photograph from Dr. Mahan, I had a visit from the noted archaeologist, Dr. Benjamin Mazar, of Hebrew University, Jerusalem. Without describing its origin, I showed the inscription to him, and he read off the first three letters, the lamed, rod and he, without hesitation, and then we discussed the other letters and soon agreed on them. Then I told him of the Tennessee origin, and he was amazed, but accepted its validity without question. When I showed it to Dr. David Neiman, of the Boston College Theology Department, he read the whole thing right off correctly.

The obstacles that may beset the way of progress were strikingly shown to me again a few weeks ago, after I had given a lecture on the subject of the Bat Creek Stone. An author telegraphed me that she had actually discovered the upside-down photograph of the stone in the Report back in 1964, had recognized the letters as being early Phoenician, and had even identified some of them correctly. She is Dr. Henriette Mertz, a Chicago patent lawyer, and she reported the existence of this incredible find in a book entitled "The Wine-Dark Sea" which she published at her own expense six years ago. She deserves credit for identifying the script of the stone, even though the discovery went unnoticed and had to be found all over again by Dr. Mahan.

The Bat Creek Stone cannot be unique: there must be more where this one came from. It is almost like some seemingly unique animal; there must have been more like it around somewhere, or else it could not be born.

It is clear that, over thousands of years, there have been many contacts between the Eastern and Western Hemisphere. I am going deeply into the question in my book "Before Columbus: Links Between the Old World and Ancient America," to be issued by Crown Publications this year [1971].

http://www.ensignmessage.com/batcreekstone.html