

Cult Archaeology Strikes Again: A Case for Pre-Columbian Irishmen in the Mountain State?

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ABSTRACT

Articles in the March 1983 issue of *Wonderful West Virginia* regarding the interpretation of two petroglyphs as a form of pre-Columbian Irish script have captured the public's imagination and sparked interest in West Virginia's pre-history. Though intriguing, in this author's opinion the findings presented are not based on any hard evidence and serve only to mislead those who earnestly seek to understand our State's prehistoric past.

PRE-COLUMBIAN IRISH

Over the last century, many existing archeological "discoveries" have been made, from the Cardiff Giant to Erick von Daniken's ancient astronauts (Sagan 1979: 58, von Daniken 1970). These excite popular interest and would be of tremendous significance, if only they were true. Now, articles in the March issue of *Wonderful West Virginia* concerning two petroglyphs in Boone and Wyoming Counties have aroused great interest due to their representation as early Celtic script which suggests pre-Columbian Irish contact (Pyle 1983; Gallagher 1983; Fell 1983). If only it were true.

Claims or belief such as this are often so absurd that scientists dismiss them instantly, and do not bother to comment in print. In fact, they sometimes fear that simple mention of some wild claim or theory in a rebuttal may give the belief some further undeserved credibility. They prefer to simply let the whole thing "blow over" (Kaupp 1982: 4).

But this is a mistake. Scientists must spend more time helping the general public understand their work and should not be afraid to discuss controversial issues.

The idea that ancient Irishmen were carving inscriptions in West Virginia between the 6th-8th centuries A. D. has captured the public's imagination and generated an interest in West Virginia's prehistory, which is to be applauded. But while the proposition may charm and stir us, this does not guarantee its truth. Its truth depends only on whether the evidence is compelling. My own judgment, as explained below, is that compelling evidence for claims of early Irishmen, Berbers, or Iberians, etc. in North America does not exist, at present.

A distressing impression emerges when reading the articles by Robert Pyle, Ida Jane Gallagher, and Barry Fell in the March issue of *Wonderful West Virginia*. These are not unbiased researchers carefully scrutinizing their observations, and asking critical questions of their findings. They want to believe, and are seeing what they want to see. Pyle and Gallagher "instantly" recognized the rock carvings as a form of ancient writing. Dr. Fell "immediately" identified the script as Celtic Ogam and translated it to English with apparent ease (Pyle 1983: 3-6; Gallagher 1983: 7-8).

Such "fantastic breakthroughs" are common in what is often called "cult archeology," a form of pseudoscience. The "true believers" diligently (almost religiously) pursue their theories, all the while ignoring contrary archeological, historical, and linguistic evidence as they announce their latest

"breakthroughs" (Kaupp 1982: 3-4; Cole 1980). Some of them, such as Barry Fell, have a large and dedicated public following. Whole societies of such "true believers" have been founded, including the Epigraphic Society, of which Barry Fell is president. The New England Antiquities Research Association (of which Ida Jane Gallagher is a member) has previously supported such far-out claims as the existence of "Viking runes" in Oklahoma. Sadly, such well-meaning organizations often deal more in romance than in substance (Fell 1983: 19; Gallagher 1983: 11, Cole 1980; Morison 1971).

As I understand it, the only "proof" Fell, Gallagher, and Pyle have for their claim of early Irishmen in West Virginia is 1) their feeling that the petroglyphs are a form of ancient Irish script, and 2) that their decipherment is somehow validated by the sunrise at winter solstice striking a sun symbol on the Wyoming County petroglyph (Pyle 1983; Gallagher 1983; Fell 1983).

Dr. Fell based his decipherment on tracings sent by Pyle and Gallagher and photographs taken by Arnout Hyde, Jr., editor of *Wonderful West Virginia* (Gallagher 1983: 7-8). The tracings were chalked by Pyle and Gallagher after they agreed upon which grooves were the ancient script. As Gallagher states, "This was a decisive step, because graffiti added over the centuries of natural cracks in the rock are hard to distinguish from the original incised markings when photographed or transferred to a latex peel" (Gallagher 1983: 7). A decisive step indeed, since to my knowledge Dr. Fell has not personally visited the sites; he has deciphered these inscriptions from the interpretations of Pyle and Gallagher. Their interpretations are dubious, as I have met both Pyle and Gallagher, and neither has professed to me any expertise in Ogam or any other "ancient script."

Regardless, Dr. Fell seems able to easily translate the carvings. Because Ogam letters consist mainly of simple strokes, and since Dr. Fell claims the American Ogam has no vowels, it would indeed be easy to give random series of marks or grooves an Ogam interpretation (Goddard and Fitzhugh 1978: 2; Stephen Williams, personal communication 1983; Gallagher 1983: 8-11; Fell 1983).

Is Dr. Fell's translation validated by observation of the winter solstice sunrise striking a sunburst design on the Wyoming County petroglyph? The distinguished amateur archeologist Sigfus Olafson made several interesting observations in a letter published in the March 3 edition of the *Charleston Gazette* (Olafson 1983). Mr. Olafson is familiar with both the Wyoming and Boone county petroglyph sites, as well as many other petroglyphs in our state (Olafson 1950, 1951, 1952, 1953; Archeology Section Files) (See Figure 1). He even published an article on the Horse Creek petroglyph in the *West Virginia Archeologist* 33 years ago (Olafson 1950).

Mr. Olafson pointed out in his letter that there was an overhang existing at the Wyoming County site when the designs were carved. This overhang has since broken off and is lying at the foot of the petroglyph. Before the overhang broke off, sunlight could not reach the sunburst design (Olafson

Four representations of the 'Incarnation Initial'



Top, Pyle's cloth tracing (1983:5)
Next, chalked by Pyle (Fell 1983:16)
Then, Fell's Figure E-8 (1983:14)
Bottom, chalked by unknown party, 2002

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1983). Thus, Dr. Fell's translation is not validated at all.

If Irishmen, Libyans, or others were in North America before Columbus, leaving inscriptions in such relatively isolated areas in Wyoming and Boone Counties, then confirmation should surely be found through the discovery of their artifacts in association with such carvings. For example, early settlers in the 1600s left a wealth of iron tools, glass, ceramic fragments, and other artifacts at Jamestown, Virginia, and many other well-known sites (Cotter 1958; Cotter and Hudson 1957; Noel Hume 1982).

But the only accepted case of pre-Columbian European contact in North America is the Norse site of L'Anse aux Meadows in northern Newfoundland, dated about A.D. 1000. Most significantly, there is not a single case of European artifacts dating from pre-Norse times, despite the tremendous amount of archeological work done on this continent (Goddard and Fitzhugh 1978: 9; Morison 1971).

Petroglyphs are, however, often associated with **Indian** artifacts. Robert Pyle himself dated the Wyoming County petroglyph from the discovery of Indian artifacts found nearby (Pyle 1983: 4).

The most likely conclusion we can currently reach is that these two petroglyphs were the result of Indians sharpening or polishing stone or bone tools by rubbing them against the sandstone (McMichael 1968: 49; Olafson 1950) (See Figure 2). Some grooves do appear to be in patterns such as "turkey tracks" but there is absolutely no evidence to suggest these grooves are any sort of ancient script, much less a Christian Celtic message. Of course, if one **wants** to see Celtic messages in the stone, then one **will** see them (Molyneaux 1983).

Barry Fell and his colleagues have also continually demonstrated poor scholarship in their research in these *Wonderful West Virginia* articles. The Grave Creek tablet and the Newark Decalogue tablet, illustrated on page 4 of the March issue, have long been recognized as frauds (Whittlesey 1872; 1876; 1879). Yet here they magically reappear as Hebrew and South Iberian inscriptions (Pyle 1983: 4). This may fire the imagination, but it seriously misleads many who read the articles.

I do not wish to make personal attacks. Dr. Fell's work has already been judged by leading scientists in the fields in which he purports to have expertise (Cole 1980; Daniel 1977; Goddard and Fitzhugh 1978; Ross and Reynolds 1978; Stephen Williams, personal communication 1983). I will only say that he is not an ancient language expert as proclaimed on the pages of *Wonderful West Virginia*, nor has he any formal training in archeology or in the field of linguistics (the study of the nature and structure of language). Dr. Fell is a retired professor of marine biology at Harvard University (Stephen Williams, personal communication 1983). As mentioned, I have met with Mr. Pyle and Ms. Gallagher. They are well-meaning people, filled with enthusiasm and curiosity. But, their work at these sites is sadly unscientific and they are misleading the public.

The fascinating possibilities presented by Dr. Fell's theories must be tempered with some hard-nosed skepticism. An openness to such new possibilities and a willingness to ask hard questions about the supporting evidence are both required if we hope to advance our knowledge of prehistory. This balance between creativity and skepticism is what makes science work. The character or beliefs of the scientist should be irrelevant; all that matters is whether the evidence supports the claims. Such extraordinary claims as these require extraordinary evidence. If Dr. Fell and his colleagues have that evidence, they have yet to reveal it.

I have also been amazed and chagrined by the wide acceptance these claims have gotten from the general public (Letters to the Editor 1983: 18-19; Kaupp 1982: 2). The public should be exposed to such controversial and thought-provoking views as these, but they must also ask the hard questions and demand the evidence for such views. In short, they must be skeptical, not naive believers of anything in print. Perhaps the popularity of cult archeology and other pseudoscience is a rebuttal to our schools and the media for their sparse and often ineffective efforts at science education (Kaupp 1982: 2). It is certainly a rebuttal to most scientists for doing so little to popularize their subject fields.

I believe those who claim that Irishmen were in the Mountain State before Columbus have an obligation to prove their contention before skeptics, not just the "true believers." The burden of proof is on them, not on those who might be dubious. This is how the scientific method works (Sagan 1979). Their claim is too important to think about carelessly. Persons who make uncritical observations or claims lead us into error and deflect us from the major goal of understanding our prehistoric past. Playing fast and loose with the truth is a serious matter.

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