

Ancient Writing in the Americas

Ancient Writing in the Americas

Paul R. Cheesman

People are funny. Let anyone whom they distrust present a new concept not yet provable, and they will immediately reject it as false and fraudulent. Then let someone who is respected say the same thing, and the response will be positive. A good example of this unfortunate facet of human nature can be seen in the reactions of both general and scholarly circles to claims made by two different men concerning the nature and origin of ancient writing in the Americas.

In 1830 Joseph Smith stated that the ancient inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere were of Hebrew origin, and that they had left a number of metallic plates inscribed with their language—a language which he was able to translate by the power of God. This claim was considered by most to be purely nonsensical, not only because of disbelief concerning the ostensible source of these materials, but also because it didn't happen to fall within the pale of current archeological opinion. Scientists of the time insisted that the ancient peoples of North and South America were not of Hebrew origin, did not leave a written language, and if they had, would certainly not have left it on metal plates.

Since that time a number of artifacts have been discovered which seem to substantiate Joseph Smith's claim, but people have rather steadfastly refused to accept these artifacts as proof of the existence of literacy among the pre-Columbian Americans. Recently, however, Dr. Cyrus H. Gordon of Brandeis University, said that people, possibly of Jewish origin, may have made transoceanic voyages and landed in America one thousand years before Columbus, leaving evidence of their existence on an inscribed stone which was discovered recently in Tennessee and named, appropriately enough, the Tennessee Stone.¹ Although somewhat less assured in his contention than was Joseph Smith over a hundred years earlier, Dr. Gordon seems to have said essentially the same thing. The only apparent difference lies in the public and scholarly responses to the idea, as Dr. Gordon's supposition, unlike Joseph Smith's, was greeted with interest and belief.

After approximately 140 years, public and scholarly opinion are finally beginning to concede the possibility that writing did indeed exist among the ancient Americans. While I have been waiting for this shift to occur among those who don't have the Mormons' axe to grind, I have been collecting every available evidence to support my belief in the existence of such writing. My own findings and the findings of others not only establish

the fact that writing did exist in ancient America, but they also indicate that metal plates were frequently used as a medium for this writing and that the writings themselves often denote Old World, specifically Hebrew, origins.

Although the existence of writing in the Eastern Hemisphere has been traced as far back as 3,000 B.C., claims for the existence of writing in ancient America began, so far as we know, with Joseph Smith in 1830. For the most part, archaeologists in America have found it necessary to rely on non-written artifacts in order to reconstruct the family life, government, and religious beliefs of the ancestors of the American Indian. The only other sources of information concerning these people have been the writings of the early Spanish chroniclers and the observations of Indians who, upon becoming literate, recorded the oral traditions and legends of their fathers.

Joseph Smith's 1830 declaration, then, was archaeologically significant, not only for the American continent, where it was assumed that no ancient written language existed, but also for the entire world, because ancient writings had never before been found on metal plates. Since that time, however, hundreds of examples of writing on metal plates have been discovered.² In addition, writings in various forms—linear symbols, glyphs, alphabet, picture—have been found in all parts of America on a variety of mediums ranging from stone tablets to crude forms of paper.

As early as 1842 nine men signed an affidavit which attested to the discovery of six bell-shaped metal plates with writing on them at Kinderhook, Illinois.³ These have consequently been called the Kinderhook Plates (see Fig. 1).

A pamphlet written and distributed in 1878 declared the authenticity of the "Cincinnati Tablet," a tablet, found in 1841, containing some pictographic symbols. It is five inches long, three inches wide, and about one-half inch thick.⁴

In 1952 the Arizona State Museum acquired two quarter-inch-thick slabs of very hard quartzitic sandstone which had peculiar signs carved on their surfaces.⁵ Both stones were found at a ruin on the south side of the Animas River, opposite the settlement of Flora Vista, New Mexico, and both appear to have come from a cave site rather than from an open area. The find was made before 1910, and the slabs themselves have been dated at approximately A.D. 1100, based on an association analysis with potsherds. They are still housed in the Arizona State Museum where I saw them. The writing on the tables is a picture-and-glyph combination which, interestingly enough, includes a pictographic elephant (see Fig. 2).

Pictographs and petroglyphs are pictorial symbols which record certain events and provide another method of communication. Examples of this form of writing are found throughout the southwestern United States. Many interpretations of the symbols are available; however, no key exist

which provides exact definitions for all these colorful character-glyph writings (see Fig. 3).

Besides numerous finds in the Southwest, a number of other artifacts have been unearthed in areas as widely diverse as Michigan and the Southern States. In 1966, for instance, Mr. Manfred Metcalf discovered a stone in Georgia which was called to the attention of the Columbus Museum of Arts and Crafts. Mr. Mahan, of the museum, worked on the Metcalf Stone and concluded that the inscriptions were produced by the Yuchi Indians, who maintained oral legends which implied a transoceanic origin. Mahan's research placed the arrival of the Yuchi tribe from the Mediterranean near the middle of the second millennium B.C. (see Fig. 4). Dr. Cyrus Gordon joined the Metcalf Stone researchers and concurred with Mahan's theory about a possible connection between the inscriptions on the stone and the Aegean linear script. Dr. Gordon made further news recently by expressing the bold opinion that the Phoenicians had at one time landed in Brazil and left inscriptions on what is now called the Parahyba Stone.⁶

Other areas of the South have been fruitful in producing written artifacts of pre-Columbian America. Stephen Peet, for example, has reported the finding of hieroglyphics on tablets near the banks of the Mississippi River, as well as the discovery of picture writing in Tennessee in the 1890s.⁷ Recent publicity has been given to the Bat Creek Stone, also found in Tennessee (London County). This engraved stone was discovered in 1885 during a Smithsonian Mound exploration program under the direction of Professor Cyrus Thomas. The recent publicity was due to the fact that the irrepressible Dr. Gordon examined this stone as well and suggested that the inscription was made between A.D. 70 and A.D. 135 and that the language on the stone could be linked with the Roman Empire during the first and second centuries A.D.⁸ (see Fig. 5).

Other Southern artifacts include the Grave Creek and Wilson Tablets, located in West Virginia, which have long been controversial objects and which contain characters considered to be Phoenician, Libyan, Celtiberic, and Runic.⁹

The northern United States has likewise contributed evidence in support of pre-Columbian written language theories. At Neward, Ohio, a man by the name of Wyrick discovered two stones which were covered with old Hebrew inscriptions, and M. E. Cornell has published an undated manuscript at Battle Creek, Michigan, which contains several drawings of caskets and tablets found in the vicinity of Wyman, Michigan. Many of these objects have inscriptions on them.¹⁰ In addition, the January 1969 edition of *Science Digest* reports the finding of runic messages on stones discovered in Kensington, Minnesota; Poteau, Oklahoma; Bourne, Massachusetts; and the province of Nova Scotia.

This impressive, not to say convincing, catalog of North American finds may be equalled, if not surpassed, by a similar listing of artifacts uncovered in Central and South America. Hieroglyphics cut into stone were part of the Mayan culture, and inscriptions on the lintels of buildings in Chichen Itza, as well as the tablets at Palenque, and the stelae, or stone slabs, of Tikal, explain certain calendrical and astronomical hieroglyphics (see Figs. 6, 7, and 8).

Recently a roller stamp from Tlatilco, Mexico, was found bearing clay designs which formed three registers with sequences of arbitrary symbols that could very well have been part of a writing system among the ancestors of the American Indian, specifically of the Olmec culture (see Fig. 9).¹¹

In 1968 I was viewing a private pre-Columbian artifact collection in Lima, Peru. Hanging on the wall was a thin gold plaque that bore an interesting embossed design which, upon closer observation, revealed eight distinct symbols. This plate has since been examined by several experts throughout the United States and has undergone neutron, X-ray, and spectrographic analysis to determine its composition. It was found to be ninety percent gold. Although some have labeled this plate a fake, others are less skeptical, and studies to determine its authenticity continue. A comparison of the markings from this plate with certain characters from an ancient Old World text, the Cyprite, taken from a study by Luige Palma Cresnola, reveals striking similarities (see Fig. 10).

In January of 1970 I learned of the existence of seven inscribed metal plates belonging to a Catholic priest in Ecuador who for many years has been collecting artifacts from Indians in surrounding areas. I visited this gentleman shortly after, and secured photographs of the plates, six of copper and one of an alloy of copper, gold, and zinc or tin (see Fig. 11). Tests and analyses to establish the authenticity or invalidity of these plates will take many months, or even years, but the prospects at this point are encouraging.

On 17 May 1960 a UPI report released by the Colombian Anthropology Commission, printed in the Cuban newspaper, *Information*, stated that Hebrew and Chinese letter-characters had been found in the La Macarena mountain range. Ten years later the *Miami Herald* reported the finding of Mayan-like hieroglyphics in a cave on the Dutch Antilles island of Bonaire.

Paper was also a notable medium for writing in ancient America. Montezuma reportedly kept his revenue records on books which were made of a type of paper called amatl, and the Toltecs, Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Totonacs were also known to have had paper and writing.¹²

Furthermore, a type of paper has been found and dated back to the pre-Columbian period of Mexican history. It is currently on display in the anthropological museum in Mexico City. In 1968 Thomas Stuart Ferguson

discovered a scroll of paperlike material with inked characters inscribed on it. In his book, *The First Americans* (n.d.), G. H. S. Bushnell discusses the findings of manuscripts painted on barkcloth, which was then sized with lime and screen-folded. These manuscripts are called codices and contain bar and dot numerals and other glyphs. The various codices on display in major museums have been declared to be a very stylized form of writing, and certain pictographic representations in the New World Codex Vaticanus, one of the remaining New World manuscripts, have been interpreted to include the characters of Adam and Eve, Cain, Abel, and a serpent (see Fig. 12).

Perhaps the most interesting discoveries in the search for pre-Columbian writings have been the inscriptions on bowls found near Guadalajara, Mexico (see Fig. 13), and the artifacts found in Peru, which depict Mochica couriers carrying small sacks apparently containing incised lima beans painted with strange markings. Other painted pottery portrays men studying such beans. It is supposed that these persons were decoders and that the markings were some form of communication.

As the results of this study have indicated, scholars were apparently too hasty in claiming that there was no writing among the ancient inhabitants of the New World, as they were equally hasty in scoffing at the idea of possible Hebraic origins and the use of metal as an instrument for the preservation of written language. Consequently, Joseph Smith's account of reading inscriptions on golden plates does not sound so farfetched today as it did many years ago.

Dr. Cheesman, associate professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University and director of the Book of Mormon Institute, has spent many years searching for artifacts in Central and South American ruins. This article is based on that research.

1. *San Diego Union*, Monday, 9 October 1970.

2. Curtis Wright, "Metallic Documents of Antiquity," *BYU Studies* 10 (Summer 1970):457. See also footnote of Wright's article which refers to Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, p. 251, and Helen McClee, "Inscription in the Classical Collection," *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* 19 (1924):167.

3. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1949), 5:372-77.

4. Robert Clarke, "The Pre-historic Remains" (Cincinnati, 1876).

5. *Manuscripts* 21 (Summer 1969).

6. Cyrus H. Gordon, *Before Columbus* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1971), pp. 119-27.

7. Stephen Peet, *Prehistoric America*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Office of the American Antiquarian, 1892), 1:44-45, 374.

8. *Science* 2 (May 1971): 14-16.

9. *Western Reserve Historical Society Tracts*, 9 (February 1872).

10. J. Ralston Skinner, *Key to the Hebrew: Egyptian Mystery in the Sources of Measures*, p. 55.
11. *SEHA Newsletter*, 112.0.
12. Victor Wolfgang von Hagen, *The Ancient Sun Kingdoms of the Americas* (New York: World Publishing Co., 1961), p. 38.