

Was America a Phoenician Colony?

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Cocaine and Tobacco found in Mummies

In Munich, in 1992, researchers began a project to investigate Egyptian mummies. Toxicologist, Dr Svelta Balabanova, joined the team to test for drugs, having gained a respect in her field for pioneering new methods for detecting drugs in hair and sweat.

Dr Balabanova ran samples from the mummies through a system which uses antibodies to detect the presence of drugs. The samples were also put through mass spectroscopy which can accurately identify substances by determining their molecular weight. The results seemed to be wrong! Nicotine and cocaine were present and Balabanova was sure it was a mistake.

She ran the tests again and sent fresh samples to three other labs. The results were confirmed—the drugs were there. So she went ahead and published a paper. No one believed her. Before Columbus these plants had not been found anywhere in the world outside of the Americas. Now they had been found in the 3000 year old 21st dynasty mummy of Henut Tau—*the Lady of the Two lands*.

The experts said:

This is just mad. It is wrong. There is contamination present. Maybe there is a fraud present of some kind. Cocaine cannot be present in an Egyptian mummy.

Balabanova was a forensic toxicologist who had worked for the police and had fully considered the possibility of contamination. She had checked all the equipment. She had been taught how vital it is when an autopsy is carried out to know whether the victim has consumed or been given any drugs or poisons. And she had also been taught that a special forensic technique exists which can show that the deceased has consumed a drug and rule out external contamination at the same time.

Anxious to ensure that her tests on the mummies were beyond reproach, she had used this very technique—the hair shaft test. Drugs and other substances consumed by humans get into the hair protein, where they stay for months, or after death—forever. Hair samples can be washed in alcohol and the washing solution itself then tested. If the testing solution is clear, but the hair tests positive, then the drug must be inside the hair shaft. If the hair shaft is found to contain a drug, then it is proof positive that the person has taken that drug—during their lifetime if they are now

dead. It is accepted in law. It is considered proof against contamination before or after death.

The hair shaft test on a couple in Jersey, showed their two sons had drugged them before killing them. The technique has been used in countless others over the last 25 years. Since it is also used for drugs tests on addicts, company employees and in sport, to suggest it could produce false results was for Balabanova unthinkable. She was 100 percent certain about the results.

If the fault was not in the tests, what else could lie behind the impossibility of mummies containing drugs from coca and tobacco, from a continent not discovered until over 1000 years after the end of the Egyptian civilisation? One of the UK's foremost authorities on mummies, a person who had spent years examining the bodies of ancient Egyptians, is Rosalie David, Keeper of Egyptology, Manchester Museum.

Like others, when she was informed that cocaine had been found in Egyptian mummies, she was astounded. It seemed quite impossible. Sceptical of Balabanova's results, Rosalie David decided to get some samples from her own mummies and have them tested.

Victorian Fake Mummies

Rosalie David's motive was not only to independently check Balabanova's methods. She also wanted to run the same tests but on different mummies. For she had some ideas about how Balabanova could have got a misleading result. One was that possibly something in the tests could give a false result. The second was that possibly the mummies that had been tested were not truly ancient Egyptian, that they could be some of these false, relatively modern mummies, and traces of cocaine could be in those individuals.

In Victorian times, dealers who did not have a genuine mummy, crudely mummified the body of a recently dead Egyptian instead. A shrivelled corpse would greatly increase the value of a genuine but empty sarcophagus. Thus they supplied the antique dealers of Luxor.

Sometimes collectors would buy only limbs or other mummified spare parts. These are doubly suspect for the trade in separate heads and limbs has an even older origin. Eating the flesh of mummies was a common 16th century practice in Europe. People believed that, because mummies contained a black tar called bitumen with healing properties, a powder made from the ground up bodies would cure illnesses.

The origin of the word mummy is from the Persian for bitumen, mummia and, although it made people sick, a roaring trade in powdered mummia grew, supplied from body parts and tissue shipped in bulk from Egypt. Very soon, the demand outstripped the supply and in the 16th century a French physician undertook a study of this trade. He found that they were burying bodies of convicted criminals in the sand—making mummies for their supposed medicinal value.

Could it be that the mummies Balabanova tested were fakes? Carbon dating on mummies often produces incorrect results, so archaeologists

often rely on the provenance—knowing what tomb and excavation the mummy comes from and on examination of the mummification techniques.

The only way for Rosalie David to check out her theory was to travel to Munich to see for herself the seven mummies that were the cause of all the fuss. The Munich mummies as they are known, belong to the city's Egyptian Museum, which is housed in the old palace of King Ludwig I of Bavaria, who started the collection.

Inside the museum, Rosalie David found the sarcophagus of Henut Taui. She discovered from the museum catalogue that the coffin was bought by King Ludwig from an English traveller called Dodwell in 1845. There was no record of an exact excavation, but Henut Taui was said to have come from a tomb reserved for the priests and priestesses of the god Amun in Thebes.

David discovered that apart from Henut Taui, most of the Munich mummies are of unknown origin, and some of the tested mummies turned out to be only detached heads. According to the museum, research had revealed inscriptions, amulets and complex embalming methods, which the museum said proved the mummies were ancient.

Dr Alfred Grimm would not let David see the mummies, only the empty sarcophagi, claiming they would not allow the mummies to be examined out of religious respect! David had to make do with research papers and books from the museum.

Were the Munich mummies fakes? From the documentation and the research which has been carried out on them, it seemed they were genuine because they have packages of viscera inside, some with wax images of the gods on them. And also the state of mummification itself was very good. Despite her initial suspicions she decided that on balance, they probably were the real thing. The detached heads were uncertain, but the complete bodies seemed to be genuine.

Tests for Exotic Drugs in Ancient Bodies

If that was not enough, it turned out that the results from the Munich mummies were not the only evidence from the dead. Balabanova, alongside her normal research into the metabolism of drugs, started requesting samples of other ancient human remains from universities. She got more results from Egypt.

She tested tissue from 134 naturally preserved bodies from an excavated cemetery in the Sudan, once part of the Egyptian empire. Although from a later period, the bodies were still many centuries before Columbus discovered the Americas. About a third of them tested positive for nicotine and cocaine.

Balabanova was mystified by the presence of cocaine in Africa but thought she might have a way of explaining the nicotine. As well as Egypt and the Sudan, she tested bodies from China, Germany and Austria, spanning a period from 3700 BC to 1100 AD. A percentage of bodies from all these other regions also contained nicotine.

The percentage of bodies with positive result for nicotine were Egypt:89%; Sudan:90%; China:62.5%; Germany:34%; Austria 100%. After 3000 samples it seemed certain that the tobacco plant was known in Europe and Africa long before Columbus.

Far from being solved, the mystery that began in Egypt was spreading. Balabanova was suggesting that an unknown type of tobacco had grown in Europe, Africa and Asia thousands of years ago. But every schoolchild knows that tobacco was discovered in the New World. She was asking for a substantial slice of botany and history to be completely rewritten. Would anyone back her up?

Dr Balabanova thought the secret of the mysterious presence of nicotine and cocaine in Egyptian mummies was in the ancient plants of Africa. Perhaps there had been drug plants which the Egyptians had used but had vanished along with their civilisation. This led to a much more basic question. Were the Egyptians, the great Pharaohs and pyramid builders really users and abusers of drugs?

The clues can be found hidden in the walls of the grand temple of Karnak. The entire building is covered in depictions of the lotus flower from the tops of the vast columns to the pictograms on the walls. Until recently, Egyptologists took this most commonplace Egyptian symbol to have only a religious meaning. But, according to some, the true significance of the lotus has been overlooked.

The lotus was a very powerful narcotic which was used in ancient Egypt and presumably, was widespread in this use, because we see many scenes of individuals holding a cup and dropping a lotus flower into the cup which contained wine, and this would be a way of releasing the narcotic.

The ancient Egyptians certainly used drugs. As well as lotus they had mandrake and cannabis, and there is a strong suggestion they also used opium. So although it is very surprising to find cocaine in mummies, the other elements were certainly in use."

So the Pharaohs clearly indulged in drugs. Hashish—which Balabanova also found in the mummies—is an Egyptian tradition which has survived for thousands of years, although nowadays, in public, pipes tend to be filled with nothing more than tobacco.

By contrast, the narcotic blue lotus flower, once so essential at parties, is now on the verge of extinction. And if it could disappear, why not other drug plants? Balabanova's unusual theory that an ancient species of tobacco might once have grown in the Old World needed examination.

Small amounts of nicotine are present in a wide variety of plants and foods, but the high concentrations sought by smokers can only be found in tobacco. Concentrations of nicotine in bone samples of modern smokers in nanograms/gram: China: 55; Germany: 65; Sudan: 45. Egyptian Mummies exceeded all these by 35 times!

The idea of a lost species of tobacco came to Balabanova because the concentrations in the bodies from Asia and Europe were similar to

modern day smokers. But one thing had puzzled her. At 35 times the dose for smokers, the amounts of nicotine she had found in Egyptian mummies were potentially lethal.

But first, Balabanova was baffled, but then she had a thought. The high doses of nicotine in Egyptian bodies could be explained if the tobacco—as well as being consumed—had also been used in mummification.

Over their 3000 year history the Egyptian preists kept the recipe of spices and herbs used to preerve the thousands of people and millions of animals they mummified a closely guarded secret. The high levels of nicotine in tobacco can kill bacteria. Could it have been one of their secrets?

Balabanova looked through old literature about the bodies of the great Pharaohs and queens themselves. No longer under the care of the priests the fragile royal mummies are now kept in strict atmospheric conditions in the Cairo museum. But Balabanova discovered a story from the days when scientists could still tamper with them—a story that had almost been forgotten.

Rameses II died in 1213 BC, a few hundred years before Henut Taui. When he was mummified, every possible skill and every rare ingredient was used by the embalmers to try to preserve his body for eternity. For where Henut Tuai was only a preistess, Ramses was arguably the mightiest of all the Pharaohs. His imposing image adorns most of Egypt's famous sites for he presided over the Golden Age of its civilisation, and as a skilled military commander, won the conquests that made it into a powerful empire.

Smoking Archaeologists

What interested Balabanova was what happened to Rameses 3000 years later, when he went on his final royal visit. On september 26th, 1976, amid all the pomp and circumstance—due a visiting head of state—French TV cameras recorded the arrival of the mummy of Rameses II at an airport in Paris. An exhibition about him at the museum of mankind was planned. But the body was found to be badly deteriorated, so a battery of scientist set about trying to repair this damage.

The bandages wrapped around the mummy needed replacing, so botanists were given pieces of the fabric to analyse what it was made of. Dr Michelle Lescot, Natural History Museum, Paris, found some plant fragments in her piece, and took a closer look. Emerging on the slide, according to her experience, were the unmistakable features—the tiny crystals and filaments—of a plant that could not possibly be there. Tobacco.

Amid a storm of publicity, people alleged—just as they did with Balabanova's results—that this must be a case of contamination. It is a view shared today by Rameses' keeper, the Chief Curator at the Cairo museum, Professor Nasri Iskander, who suspects there is a straightforward explanation. Most of the archeologists and scientists, who worked on these fields, smoked pipes. Maybe traces of the tobacco

dropped by chance.

To combat the allegations of careless smoking, Michelle Lescot extracted new samples from deep inside the body of Ramses' mummy and took care to document it with photographs. And as far as she was concerned, these samples again gave the same result—tobacco.

So was Lescot's discovery the proof Balabanova needed for an ancient species of tobacco? An expert on tobacco, Dr Sandy Knapp, who had seen Lescot's published work gave a second opinion from the herbarium at the Natural History Museum. Lescot's evidence would only identify the family from which tobacco comes, and not the specific plant.

Sandy Knapp thought the plant from Ramses was more likely to be another member of the tobacco family, which is known to have existed in ancient Egypt, such as henbane, mandrake or belladonna. She thought they had taken the evidence one step farther than it allowed. By pushing evidence too far, they had started to make something up.

It is very unlikely that tobacco has an alternative history, because, we would have heard about it. There'd be some mention of it in literature or temple carvings. Somewhere there would have been evidence to point and say that is tobacco, but there is nothing.

But Lescot counters that there are species of tobacco in Australasia and the Pacific Islands. There could have been other varieties, ancient varieties that once existed in Asia. Why not Africa? Varieties that have now disappeared, so it is not sacrilege to challenge the official theory.

The jury was still out on the vanished species of tobacco though Michelle Lescot was convinced that her identification had been correct. But she could not help with the cocaine, for it seemed not even one botanist believed in a disappearing coca plant.

"Dr Sandy Knapp says finding cocaine in these Egyptian mummies—botanically speaking—is almost impossible. There is always a chance that there might be some sort of plant there, but more likely is some mistake.

In Manchester, the mummies under the care of Rosalie David, the Egyptologist once so sure that Balabanova had made a mistake, produced some odd results of their own. David gave results from the tests on the mummy tissue samples that showed two of the samples and the one hair sample both have evidence of nicotine in them.

The tale of Henut Taui shows that some scientists will reject facts if they do not fit with our beliefs, while what is believed proven may actually be uncertain. Little wonder then, that a story that began with one scientist, a few mummies and some routine tests, in no time at all could upset whole areas of knowledge we thought we could take for granted.

For thousands of years people in the Andes have been chewing coca leaves, to get out the cocaine with its stimulant, anaesthetic and euphoric properties. There are actually species of the coca family which grow in Africa, but only the South American species has ever been shown to contain the drug. Since cocaine is not in any African or Asian plants,

Balabanova was completely mystified, but she thought she might have just one possible idea. Indians in America have also indulged the pleasures of smoking tobacco and chewing coca leaves for millennia. Perhaps, there were trans-oceanic trade relationships long before Columbus, and coca plants had been imported into Egypt even then.

An ancient Egyptian drug trade stretching all the way across the Atlantic Ocean? This idea was so far-fetched it could only be considered when all the others had been eliminated. They had been! The Egyptians had therefore obtained imported drug plants from a place thousands of miles away from a continent supposedly not discovered until thousands of years later.

Was it possible that coca—a plant from South America had been finding its way to Egypt 3,000 years ago?

America Appears on Phoenician Gold Staters

The Numismatist, a leading journal in the study of coins, published Mount Holyoak geologist, Mark McMenamin's, findings, based on computer-enhanced images of gold coins, called staters, minted in the North African city of Carthage between 350 and 320 BC, in its November 1996 issue.

McMenamin interpreted a series of designs appearing on the Carthaginian coins, the meaning of which has long puzzled scholars. He saw the designs as a map of the ancient world surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, including the Americas.

If this is true, these coins not only represent the oldest world maps found to date, but would also indicate that Carthaginian explorers had sailed to the New World a good 1,300 years before the Vikings.

McMenamin's interest in the Carthaginians and Phoenicians as explorers led him to study the coins. The Carthage being an outpost of Phoenicia was linked to the Phoenicians of the Middle East in terms of culture, language, and naval enterprise. Both peoples are widely credited with significant sailing exploits through the Mediterranean, to the British Isles, and along the coast of Africa.

On one of the coins studied by McMenamin, a horse stands atop a number of symbols at the bottom of the stater. For many years, scholars interpreted these symbols as letters in Phoenician script. When that theory was discounted in the 1960s, scholars were baffled. Using a computer to enhance these images on the coins, the geologist—familiar with land masses—interpreted the design as showing the Mediterranean, surrounded by the land masses of Europe and Africa with, to the upper left, the British Isles. To the far left of the representation of the Mediterranean is what the geologist believes is a depiction of the Americas.

A number of classical texts bolster this theory. For example, in the first century BC, Diodorus of Sicily wrote:

...in the deep off Africa is an island of considerable size... fruitful,

much of it mountainous... Through it flow navigable rivers... The Phoenicians had discovered it by accident after having planted many colonies throughout Africa.

McMenamin is trying to gain access to a number of coins or casts of them held in European collections to help him prove the world map theory's validity. Explorers from Africa, not Europe, might have "discovered" the New World. McMenamin hopes his theory will focus new scholarly attention on this and ancient Carthaginian culture.

The article renewed interest in the theory that the Phoenicians or their western brethren, the Carthaginians, discovered America, nearly two thousand years before Columbus. Of all ancient peoples, the Phoenicians were the only ones with the skills and the sea-going capability required for a trans-Atlantic crossing. Tyre and Sidon, their home ports, were cities of immense wealth. Living in a narrow coastal strip, they were busy traders, with little else to sustain them. Commerce was their livelihood.

They had invented the keel, streamlined their ships, covered their decks and improved sails and rigging. Their ships were from 80-100 feet long and used a single square sail besides oars. By 600 BC, they were building ships that could carry 50 to 100 tons, making them comparable in size and tonnage to the Portuguese caravels of the 15th century. They could average 100 miles in 24 hours. Did ancient Phoenicians reach the New World? The evidence is suggestive.

Epic Voyages of Discovery in the Classic Period

Dr Michel N Laham (sfslac.org), tells us there were two historic occasions when the Phoenicians or the Carthaginians could have been blown from the coast of Africa to the coast of South America. A Phoenician fleet, commissioned by the Egyptian pharaoh, Necho, around 600 BC to circumnavigate Africa, sailed out of the Red Sea and returned home through the Straits of Gibraltar—the pillars of Hercules.

Necho was an ambitious king of the twenty-sixth dynasty who strove to expand Egypt's boundaries and influence. He attempted the construction of a canal between the Nile and the Red Sea and challenged the powerful Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar for control of Syria. He failed at both enterprises. But according to the Greek historian Herodotus, his hired Phoenician fleet successfully completed its mission of circumnavigating Africa.

It sailed out of the Red Sea into the Indian Ocean, rounded the southern tip of Africa and returned to Egypt and the Mediterranean by way of Gibraltar. The expedition supported itself by putting in along the African coast every autumn, sowing a patch of ground, and waiting for the next year's harvest. Then, having gotten their grain, they would sail on to the next harbor. It took them nearly three years to complete the mission.

It was a feat of epic proportions, one that was difficult for their contemporaries to grasp, let alone to believe, since the prevalent opinion at the time was that there was no body of water that completely

surrounded Africa. The idea was so preposterous it was unlikely to have been invented. For a long time afterwards, it was felt that Herodotus had been taken in by the tall tales of the Phoenicians.

Ironically, one of the details of the trip provided by Herodotus, which was considered absurd by his contemporaries, has served to establish the authenticity of the story. The Phoenicians stated that, as they sailed west around the tip of Africa, the sun was to their right: seamen from the Mediterranean who had not actually been to the southern hemisphere could not have imagined such a phenomenon.

By the beginning of the 5th century BC, the Phoenician outpost of Carthage, on the North African coast near the site of present day Tunis, dominated the western Mediterranean. In about 450 BC, the Carthaginian king, Hanno, sailed with a fleet of 60 ships through the Straits of Gibraltar and down along the western coast of Africa at least as far south as present day Guinea and Sierra Leone, the point on the continent closest to the shores of Brazil.

King Hanno's famous expedition is recounted in vivid detail in a tablet found in the ruins of the temple of Cronos at Carthage. Known as The Periplus of Hanno, it is a Greek translation of a Punic text which chronicles Hanno's mission.

The Carthaginians set out with 60 ships and thousands of settlers. They sailed south along the African coast, establishing colonies or trading posts along the way. They traveled past the "Horn of West", probably Dakar or Cape Palmas, until they reached a towering volcano in full eruption, which they called "The Chariot of the Gods" and which most experts agree was probably Mount Cameroon, with its 13,000-foot volcanic peak.

On either of these two great African expeditions, or on some similar expedition that we know nothing of, a ship or two could have become separated from the fleet by a storm, or attempted to explore too far offshore and not been able to find its way back. Such a ship or ships could have been blown westward by the southeast trade winds and the South Equatorial Current across the narrowest part of the Atlantic Ocean to the coast of South America.

Finding themselves on such inhospitable shores as the rain forest of equatorial Brazil, with its stifling heat and humidity, our Phoenician sailors would have marked the place of their landfall with a monument, such as an altar to their gods or a stele bearing witness to their arrival. Then, they would have sailed on in search of more congenial shores and climate.

Chances are they would have sailed north, both to seek relief from the heat and to retrace their steps homeward. They would have skirted the coastline, putting in at safe harbors along the way to replenish their supplies, carried along by the Caribbean Current toward the Yucatan Peninsula and the Gulf of Mexico.

To the less advanced natives of the lands they visited, these lighter skinned and bearded strangers, arriving aboard their mighty sea-going vessels, would have seemed like gods rather than mere mortals. And

when at last they would leave with a promise to return, their visit and their departure would in time assume the proportions of myth. If there were among them some who decided to stay with the natives, they would become the sages and the teachers of their communities.

Necho's lost mariners might have imparted to the natives the religion of ancient Egypt, with its priestly caste and its sun-god, and its practice of embalming its dead and of entombing its kings in huge pyramidal structures. They would also perhaps teach them the astronomy of Egypt, with its 365-day solar calendar, and that of Mesopotamia, with its more complex lunar calendar.

In a year when the harvest seemed on the verge of failure, or the community was threatened by a powerful enemy, they might pass on to them the singular practice of child sacrifice. Eventually, they would instruct them in the Phoenician language and to a select few, they would teach their alphabet, the key to efficient communication between their far-flung trading posts and the secret of their commercial success.

Of the civilizations of the New World, Teotihuacan, the Toltec, the Maya and the Aztec, all used some variation on the pyramid to erect monuments to their gods. The idea of a stepped pyramid reaching up to the heavens might be obvious enough to have occurred separately to different peoples. A developmental history of them has been excavated in central America, but it remains possible that the thought was planted by visitors from the east.

The American Indian pyramids were actually more like those of the other great civilizations of the Near East, the Sumerians, the Babylonians and the Assyrians, who built pyramidal ziggurats with a temple at the summit, whereas Egyptians pyramids had no temple at the top even if, besides as tombs, they were sometimes used as temples otherwise as has been controversially suggested—not by Egyptologists.

However, Mayan pyramids were sometimes designed for the specific purpose of housing the bodies of their dead kings. The discovery in southern Mexico in 1952 of the remains of Lord Pacal, ruler of Palenque from 615 to 683 AD, in a massive sarcophagus deep within the Temple of the Inscriptions, left no doubt as to the purpose of the pyramid. The face was covered in a mosaic mask of jade and the body was festooned with necklaces, pendants, bracelets and rings. A jade object representing the sun god was placed alongside the body.

In his 1974 book entitled *Ancient Egyptians and Chinese in America*, R A Jairazbhoy found 21 such parallels between the myths and religious practices of ancient Egypt and those of Mexico. Astronomy provides another interesting parallel: the Mayas' calendar incorporated a 365-day solar calendar like the Egyptians' and a 260-day lunar calendar like that of Mesopotamia, which were linked by means of a scale spanning 52 solar years or 73 lunar years.

The practice of mummification provides another link between Egypt and the pre-Columbian civilizations of the New World. At the turn of the century, Sir G Elliot Smith, a prominent Australian neuroanatomist, found parallels in the specific methods used to embalm the dead. He proposed

that jade, pearl and gold, which were deemed capable of protecting the corpses from decomposition, were an integral part of the mummification process.

A Trans-Oceanic Trade in Cocaine and Tobacco?

Contact between the ancient civilizations of the Mediterranean and the nascent cultures of pre-Columbian America would explain why nicotine and cocaine were detected in the hair shaft of Egyptian mummies in Germany and Manchester when both tobacco and coca are native American plants that were not grown anywhere else before Columbus.

To obtain incense, myrrh and other valuable plants used in religious ceremonies and herbal medicines, the Egyptians were ready to go to great lengths. If the cocaine Balabanova found in mummies could not be explained by contamination, or fake mummies or by Egyptian plants containing it, only one remaining possibility remained...a drug trade extended all the way to the Americas.

Even if traders, like today, made all sorts of exotic claims for the source of their products, there is, nevertheless, clear evidence of ancient contacts as far east as Syria and Iraq. They extended north into Cyprus, south into Sudan and Somalia and west into Libya, but America? To the majority of archeologists, the idea is hardly worth talking about.

Professor John Baines, an Egyptologist from Oxford University, says the idea that the Egyptians were travelling to America is, overall, absurd. No one professionally employed as an Egyptologist, anthropologist or archaeologist seriously believes in these possibilities, and no one spends time doing research into these areas because they're perceived not to be areas with any real meaning for the subjects.

But on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, where the moving current of the Gulf Stream arrives in Mexico directly from the west coast of Africa, there is a professional anthropologist who does seriously believe in such possibilities.

Professor Alice Kehoe, an Anthropologist at Marquette University, thinks there was both trans-atlantic and trans-pacific travel before Columbus. Standard archeologists do not want to pursue the subject at all. They seem to feel that it's some kind of contagious disease they do not want to touch, or it will bring disaster to them.

Why was the mere contemplation of voyages before Columbus or the Viking crossings to America, thought to be some sort of curse? It was in 1910 that some early anthropologists began to theorise that the stepped pyramids in Mexico might not have been the invention of the American Indians. Could the technology have come from the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, from Egypt, where there were also stepped pyramids?

After spotting other trans-atlantic similarities, anthropologists began to argue that all civilisation was invented in Egypt and later handed down to what they regarded as primitive societies. The implication that Old World culture was superior was thought acceptable at that time.

But the arrival of modern dating techniques showed that the similarities were far more likely to be independent developments. The Egyptians abandoned pyramids with steps in favour of smooth ones 2,000 years before the first stepped pyramids occur in the Americas. What is more, the suggestion that American Indians could not build their own civilisations became highly unpopular.

Despite a brief revival in the 1970s when anthropologist Thor Heyerdahl crossed the Atlantic in a primitive reed boat, research into ancient contact with America was frowned on, even if connected with theories of cultural superiority.

But the idea that the ability of the ancients to cross the oceans might have been underestimated continues to be quietly whispered about. Over the years evidence has grown which suggests it might be time to look again at such voyages. To imagine that the Egyptians, who apparently only sailed up and down the Nile or into the Red Sea, might get as far as the Americas perhaps sounds fantastical. But in science, what is one day thought absurd, can next day become accepted as fact.

Martin Bernal, a historian of Cornell University, says it is important to remember that before the discovery of this Norse settlement in Newfoundland in 1965, theories about Viking voyages to America were dismissed as nonsense. What we have seen is a shift from the idea of Viking landings in America being seen as completely fantastic or partisan, to being accepted by every scholar in the field.

The fact that evidence of the Viking crossings was hidden has encouraged Martin Bernal to contemplate even earlier voyages that are likewise dismissed as impossible. That trans-oceanic voyages were possible seems overwhelmingly likely.

A likelihood Bernal believes is reinforced by some Roman jars found in 1975 in a place called the Bay of Jars in Brazil. They cannot have been planted because the bay was known as the Bay of Jars since the 18th century, so that Roman jars had been turning up. It has been suggested that a Roman galley could be buried under the sea. But the interpretation of such finds is heavily disputed.

Professor Baines thinks they fit the possibility that the odd ship, by mistake, ended up on the other side of the Atlantic. What they're not going to fit is the idea of sustained two way contact, because there is a huge amount of historical evidence from the Roman world, but there is nothing to suggest any such contact existed. But, for Bernal this links up with indirect Roman documentary evidence of contact.

The Bay of Jars is only one of several oddities claimed as evidence of trans-atlantic contacts. Also in Brazil, there is an inscription said to be in an ancient Mediterranean language. Meanwhile, in Mexico, there are 3,000 year old figurines with beards, a feature unknown in native Americans, plus colossal statues that are said to look African, and an apparent picture of a pineapple—an American fruit—has been found in Pompeii.

But if tobacco from Mexico or coca from the Andes was carried across an

ocean, it apparently need not have been the Atlantic. According to Alice Kehoe, a number of other American plants mysteriously turn up outside the "sealed" continent. But they are found on the other side of the Pacific.

The one that absolutely proves trans-pacific voyaging is the sweet potato. There are also discoveries of peanuts more than 2,000 years ago in western China. There is a temple in southern India that has sculptures of goddesses holding what looks like ears of maize or corn.

And if American maize might have got as far as India, why could not tobacco or coca have reached Egypt? They could have come across the Pacific to China or Asia and then overland to Africa. The Egyptians need not have travelled to America at all, or known where the plants had originated, but could have got them indirectly, through a network of world trade. But any ancient trade route that includes America is unacceptable in archeology.

Professor Baines asserts that it is not at all likely that there was an ancient trade network that included America. The essential problem with any such idea is that there are no artefacts to back it up that have been found either in Europe or in America. People produce examples of possible things, but they're really very implausible.

Yet discovery of minute strands of silk found in the hair of a mummy from Luxor could suggest the trade stretching from Egypt to the Pacific. For silk at this time was only known to come from China. Martin Bernal argues that it would be a pity to replace earlier cultural arrogance with an arrogant belief in progress.

Bernal says we're getting more and more evidence of world trade at an earlier stage. You have the Chinese silk definitely arriving in Egypt by 1000 BC. Modern scholars have a tendency to believe rigidly in progress and the idea that you could only have a worldwide trading network from the 18th century onwards, is our temporal arrogance—that it is only modern people that can do these things.

The evidence for ancient trade with America is limited, and most of it is disputed, but it cannot be completely ruled out as explaining the apparent impossibility of Balabanova's results, results that at first seemed so absurd many thought they would be explained away by a simple story of a botch-up in a lab, results that still without firm explanation continue to crop up in unexpected places.

Why should it seem strange that the notable sailors of the ancient world, the Phoenicians, reached the New World? Most of us are arrogant enough to think that people before Columbus were superstitious savages, who thought they would sail off the edge of the earth. The Phoenicians had actually sailed beyond the Pillars of Hercules, by 1200 BC.

Early contact between the Old and New Worlds would explain why a ball court in the Mayan city of Chichen Itza, in the Yucatan, has a running motif of lotus blossoms, a flower unknown in the area, but sacred to the ancient Egyptians and a traditional design in Egyptian art. A stone carving discovered at Copan, Honduras, seems to depict an elephant, an

animal unknown in the New World at the time.

An Olmec relief carving features a bearded figure, wearing the upturned shoes typical of the eastern Mediterranean, yet the Olmecs and the other native peoples of the Americas had sparse facial hair and usually plucked what little bit they had. An incense burner unearthed in Guatemala is shaped like a bearded face with strikingly Semitic features.

The numerous monumental stone heads left by the Olmec depict helmet-wearing men with unmistakably Negroid lips and noses. Could this mean that black Africans crossed the Atlantic? The *Periplus of Hanno* says the Carthaginians befriended some African natives whom they called Lixitae. They took some of them along as interpreters as they sailed southward down the African coastline. Did the Carthaginians, as was their custom, also hire some Africans as mercenaries, hence the war helmets?

The Gulf Coast Olmecs practiced child sacrifice, a fairly uncommon and rather shocking custom which the Phoenicians and the Carthaginians, especially, were known to resort to in times of war or famine in order to propitiate their gods.

In 1872, a slave belonging of Joaquim Alves de Costa, found four pieces of a stone tablet inscribed with strange characters on a Brazilian plantation near the Paraiba River. Costa's son, who was a draftsman, made a copy of it and sent it to the Brazilian Emperor's Council of State whence it was sent to Dr Ladislau Netto, director of the Museu Nacional in Rio de Janeiro who declared the writing to be Phoenician. The inscription recorded the arrival of Phoenician mariners in Brazil centuries before Christ.

Unfortunately, an Indian rebellion broke out in the Paraiba region that same year and in the ensuing confusion, the plantation in question was never located and the stone itself was never recovered. A copy of the inscription was sent to the eminent French historian and philologist, Ernest Renan, author of the famous *Life of Jesus*, who declared it a fake, and Netto was ridiculed by the academic establishment of his day.

Renan based his conclusion on the fact that the text contained certain grammatical errors and incorrect expressions that forced him to question its authenticity. In 1966, Dr Jules Piccus, professor of romance languages at the University of Massachusetts, bought an old scrapbook at a jumble sale containing a letter written by Netto in 1874, which contained his translations of the markings on the stone and a tracing of the original copy he had received from Costa's son.

Piccus brought these to the attention of Cyrus H Gordon, an American scholar, head of the Department of Mediterranean Studies at Brandeis and an expert in ancient Semitic languages, and author of 13 books. Comparing the Paraiba inscription with the latest work on Phoenician writings, he discovered that it contained elements of Phoenician grammar unknown to a 19th century forger. The document could not have been a fake.

Gordon translated the inscription as follows:

We are sons of Canaan from Sidon from the city of the Mercantile King. We were cast up on this distant shore, a land of mountains. We sacrificed a youth to the celestial gods and goddesses in the nineteenth year of our mighty King Hiram. We sailed from Ezion-geber into the Red Sea with ten ships and were at sea together for two years around Africa. Then we were separated by the hand of Baal and were no longer with our companions. So we have come here, twelve men and three women, into New Shore. Am I, the Admiral, a man who would flee? Nay! May the exalted gods and goddesses favor us well!

Others exploring the Amazon have found allegedly Phoenician inscriptions but they cannot be confirmed as genuine. If the Phoenicians, those hallowed inventors of the alphabet, did in fact discover America, is it not improbable that the lost and controversial Paraiba Stone should be the only written evidence of their passage on these shores?

Interestingly, the many inscriptions recovered so far that are purported to be of Phoenician origin were found in areas of North America that have been extensively surveyed and cultivated. In the 18th century, a rock was found near Dighton, Massachusetts, bearing a strange inscription which Ezra Stiles, then president of Yale College, claimed were Phoenician. In the 19th century, a tablet unearthed at an Indian mound near Tennessee's Bat Creek was thought to represent Canaanite writing from the 1st or 2nd century AD. These, and similar finds, were deemed to be of questionable authenticity, the product of excessive zeal or overactive imaginations.

The Davenport Tablet, found in Iowa in 1877, is a case in point. It was considered to be a hoax until it was recently scrutinized by the eminent epigrapher Barry Fell, professor of biology at Harvard University. Applying the esoteric skills of epigraphy, Fell claims he has been able to decipher three individual languages on the tablet: Egyptian hieroglyphics, Carthaginian, and Iberian Punic. This and other linguistic evidence have led him to the conclusion that the Phoenicians colonized Massachusetts briefly around 400 BC. Perhaps the definitive evidence of a Phoenician presence on these shores still awaits the farmer's plow or the laborer's hoe in some untamed corner of the Amazon or the Yucatan.

Why the Aztecs Yielded so Easily to Cortes?

In 1519, Hernan Cortes sailed from Cuba with a small band of Spanish adventurers and fortune seekers, intent on conquering Mexico. The task he had set for himself was a formidable one. The enemy he confronted was the fiercest and the most war-like of the peoples of the New World, the Aztecs. He arrived on the Mexican coast near the site of present-day Veracruz where he organized his forces and marched on the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan.

Reaching the highlands, he made an alliance with the Tlaxcalan, and began to pose as the god Quetzalcoatl. This deity was variously depicted as a plumed serpent, as the personification of the planet Venus, and as a legendary ruler of old who had come from the east. In the latter incarnation, he was pictured as a white man with black hair and flowing

beard who, having lived among the Aztecs and taught them wisdom, had departed by sea with a promise to return someday.

As Cortes and his allies approached, the Aztec king, Moctezuma II, wavered and despaired until it was too late. In November 1519, the Spanish entered Tenochtitlan virtually unopposed. They were received with great pomp and welcomed into Moctezuma's palace where they placed him under house arrest. Although there are some who claim that it is only following the Spanish conquest that Quetzalcoatl is shown as having white skin, Moctezuma's hand-wringing and despondency cannot be explained as the normal response of a powerful warrior-king to a small band of adventurers.

The Aztecs were a deeply religious people and every phase of their daily lives, from sunrise to sunrise, was regulated by their religious rituals. The great Moctezuma, himself, was required to offer incense to the stars after dusk, around 3 am, and before dawn. His reaction to Cortes' arrival can only be explained if we assume that it had important religious significance for him.

The reason for his bizarre behavior becomes self-evident if, lost in the mists of the indigenous peoples' distant past, was the tribal memory of a visit to their shores by god-like men from the east, who had arrived in mighty sea-going ships, had spent some time with them, and had left them with a promise to return. In time, this visit could have been incorporated into their mythology, and the captain of the expedition could have become identified with their serpent god and their rising star. Quetzalcoatl was not the only god of pre-Columbian America who exhibited these features. Similarly, the creator-god of the Incas, Viracocha, after spending some time on earth among common men, was said to have left by sea with a promise to return.

Let us assume then that the story as told by Cortes and his followers is essentially correct. What better candidates can be found for the role of mariner gods from the east than the Phoenicians or Carthaginians? Certainly not the Egyptians whose timber was brought in from Mount Lebanon by Phoenician seamen and who commissioned a Phoenician flotilla to sail around Africa because they lacked the sea-going capability to do it on their own. Not the Persians whose great kings, Darius and Xerxes, commandeered the Phoenician fleet in their war against Greece.

Then perhaps the Greeks themselves? Whereas the Phoenicians and the Carthaginians went to great lengths to protect their geographical finds, the Greeks tended to publicize their discoveries in song and verse. Thus Jason's voyage was celebrated by Pindar, and Odysseus' journey by Homer. Had the Greeks discovered America, they would have announced it triumphantly to the world.

Conclusion

If McMenamin is right in his interpretation of the markings on the Carthaginian staters, and these actually represent maps of the known world at the time of their minting (350-320 BC), then the land mass portrayed on the far left, west of Africa, indeed represents South America. This would imply that the Carthaginians not only discovered

America, but they successfully completed the return trip home. Why then should they have kept this knowledge to themselves and hidden it in these cryptic markings at the bottom of their gold coins?

For the same reason they had kept secret their discovery of the sea route to the British Isles, a rich source of tin for their bronze handicrafts. Theirs was first and foremost a commercial empire. They had discovered a new market for their goods and a new source of raw materials, gold, cocaine and tobacco, and they did not want to share this information with their competitors, first the Greeks, then the Romans.

The Phoenicians of Tyre and Sidon will have destroyed any evidence of their trade before they were made part of Alexander's empire, leaving the knowledge only in Carthage. And when Carthage was destroyed by the Romans in the last of the three Punic wars, they carried their secret with them to the grave.

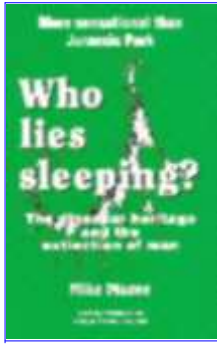
Or did they? An artefact found in Mexico is reliably of Roman origin, and it almost certainly arrived in the New World before the Spanish. Roman Hristov, formerly at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, decided to investigate a black terracotta head that was first unearthed in 1933 in the Toluca Valley, 65 kilometres west of Mexico City. The head, which is just a few centimetres tall, is of a bearded man different in style from any other known pre-Columbian artwork. Much had been written about the head since its discovery but no one actually knew where it was. Hristov, with the help of Mexican anthropologist Santiago Genove's, found it in 1994, locked away in a Mexico City museum.

To determine when the head was made, Hristov drilled some material from the remains of its neck, and took the sample to be tested at the Max Planck Institute for Nuclear Physics in Heidelberg using thermoluminescence. The terracotta was fired 1800 years ago. Hristov also consulted art experts, who agreed that the head was Roman, dating roughly to 200 AD. A review of the circumstances surrounding the head's original discovery confirmed that the head was placed in the burial ground where it was found no later than 1510 AD, a decade before the Spanish arrived in Meso-America. Crucially, the head was excavated from the site by professionals. Sealed under three floors. It was as close to archaeological certainty as possible.

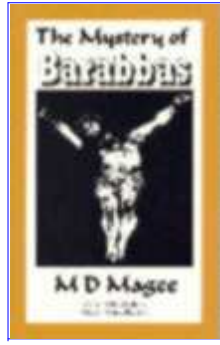
Hristov believes the head is the first hard evidence of pre-Hispanic transoceanic contacts between the Old and New Worlds. But it is unclear whether it will resolve what is one of the most contentious debates in modern cultural anthropology. David Grove, an archaeologist at the University of Illinois in Urbana, Champaign, agrees the head is Roman, but thinks it could have been taken off a Roman shipwreck on the Mexican coast. There is still no certain evidence of ancient cultures from Europe or elsewhere making a significant mark on pre-Columbian cultures.

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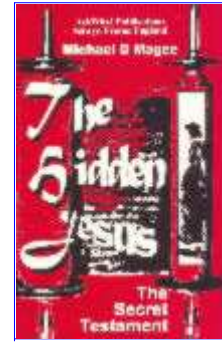
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