FROM THE VINEYARD

Did Voyagers from China Reach Ancient Mexico?

H. Mike Xu, a Chinese language professor at Texas Christian University, claimed in 1996 to have found Chinese writing engraved on a set of jade celt figurines, part of a miniature ritual scene that was excavated years ago at the site of La Venta in southern Mexico. Xu also claimed to see related characters on other Mesoamerican finds. The signs meant in Chinese, he said, such things as the sun, rain, water, worship, sacrifice, wealth, land, mountain, and plants. Even names of kings and ancestors of the rulers of the Shang Dynasty in northern China are also found on the objects, he claimed. He hypothesized that refugees from the Shang territory in northern China fled there in 1122 B.C. when, according to Chinese records, that dynasty ended. Xu thinks that a group of them probably reached southern Mexico where they helped trigger the Olmec culture.

The immediate reaction from American archaeologists (none of whom were expert in Chinese language) who were queried by reporters was to deny with scorn any such possibility. However, Xu gained the support of prominent scholars of history and language in China that the characters are indeed Chinese. More recently he has discovered other examples on ancient objects and rock art in Mesoamerica and in western North America; he claims now to have found hundreds of examples. Many of these were shown at a FARMS-sponsored presentation given by Xu at BYU in April 1998. FARMS provided some support so that Xu could accept an invitation from Chinese government agencies to pursue his research with key scholars in China in summer 1998. As a result, a number of historians there have indicated interest in beginning work on the problem from the Asian end.

Ancient “White Men” in North America

The skull of a male, discovered on the shore of the Columbia River in Washington and called Kennewick Man, has generated a flurry of press publicity over the past two years. It has been dated at around 9300 years old by the radiocarbon method. Anthropologists who have examined the remains were struck that it shows features that relate it to caucasoids (“white men”). One of the experts who studied the find noted, “This skeleton would be almost impossible to match among any of the Western American Indian tribes.” Under U.S. laws governing the handling of ancient skeletal remains, a nearby Indian tribe has claimed this specimen as one of their ancestors and has blocked further tests; they plan to rebury it. However, certain studies had already been accomplished before the Army Corps of Engineers, in whose custody it remains, put it off limits pending settlement of a suit by prominent scientists to permit further study. The Corps proceeded to bury the site as part of routine flood control activities despite criticism, and a lawsuit, by scientists. Now other ancient skulls, from the Wizard Beach and and Spirit Cave sites in Nevada, have been dug out of museum storage and restudied. They date to the same period and likewise prove not to be “typical American Indians.” Forensic reconstructions of the appearance of the three specimens show, in addition to certain relationships to modern Amerindians, notable similarities to people of European extraction. Two researchers who reported on these results at the 1998 annual meeting of physical anthropologists, which happened to be in Salt Lake City, concluded that there must have been several waves of migrations from the Old World to America by 10,000 years ago rather than just one or two out of northern Asia as claimed by most anthropologists until recently. It remains to be learned why only “Indian” characteristics seem to have survived in later inhabitants of the area.

Other research reported at the same anthropological meeting offered “tantalizing support to a controversial theory that a band of people who originally lived in Europe or Asia Minor were among the continent’s first settlers.” The reporting team was led by Emory University DNA researchers Michael Brown and Douglas Wallace. They were searching for the source population of a puzzling genetic descent line known as haplogroup X. Reviewing previous studies and analyzing new samples from Native American, European, and Asian populations, they found to their surprise that X was confirmed only in a smattering of living people in Europe and Asia Minor, including Italians, Finns, and certain Israelis (and perhaps Turks, Bulgarians, and Spaniards), but “It’s not in Tibet, Mongolia, Southeast Asia, or Northeast Asia,” according to one scientist.

Ancient Church Unearthed

According to an Associated Press dispatch early in July, a basilica excavated at the Red Sea resort of Aqaba in Jordan may be the oldest Christian building designed specifically for use as a church. Until the mud-brick structure was discovered in June, the earliest churches in Jordan were dated to the late fourth century A.D.

The director of the Aqaba Antiquities Department was quoted as stating that the church was very likely built in the late third century, but closer study is required before settling on the date. Older churches have been found, at
Dura Europas on the Euphrates River in eastern Syria and near the Sea of Galilee in northern Israel, but they were constructed and used as houses before being converted to church purposes. Some 53 Jordanian and American archaeologists and historians are working at the Aqaba site. Experts in other countries plan to wait for further evidence before evaluating the significance of the structure.

"Egyptian" Figurines from El Salvador Apparently Fakes

For at least 85 years sketchy reports have circulated about two figurines in Egyptian style found in El Salvador, Central America. The very first issue of the FARMS newsletter, Insights, in 1984 reported on them in the hope of finding their current whereabouts so the objects could be examined first hand. Recently it was learned that they had been stolen from known custody in the city of San Salvador some years ago and have not been recovered. Meanwhile Egyptologist John Gee reported last year in the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies that these figurines seem to have been fakes. Early in the twentieth century, similar statuettes turned up not only in El Salvador but in distant parts of the world. Technical features in them show that they were not ancient Egyptian originals but quite certainly modern frauds from a single source.

New Periodical to Begin

The first issue of a new periodical slated to appear by the end of 1998 will be of interest to some Journal readers. Pre-Columbiana: A Journal of Long-distance Contacts is to be published under the editorship of Stephen C. Jett, professor of geography at University of California, Davis. The aim of this scholarly periodical is to provide an outlet for publishing high-quality research on the much-debated question of whether there were voyages across the oceans before Columbus's discovery that influenced the course of civilization in the western hemisphere. Conventional professional journals in the fields of archaeology, anthropology, geography, and history rarely consider this topic to be of value and so will not publish on the question. About the only outlet for studies of the problem have been unconventional periodicals that do not meet scholarly standards in the selection of their articles. Jett has assembled an advisory board of editors from Canada, the United States, and Mexico. This board includes several noted scholars with strong academic credentials in the field, such as Clinton Edwards, Carl Johannessen, Alice Kehoe, David Kelley, Mary Ritchie Key, and Paul Tolstoy. All articles must pass review by peer scholars before being accepted. Not just pro-"diffusionist" pieces will be used; responsible critiques from opponents will also be sought. John Sorenson, a long-time associate of Jett in this area of study, serves as book review and bibliographic editor. Each issue of Pre-Columbiana will include a section summarizing recent publications that were not abstracted in the Sorenson and Raish bibliography on pre-Columbian transoceanic contacts published by FARMS/Research Press in 1996. Subscription information can be obtained from ESRS West, P.O. Box 4175, Independence, MO 64050.