

Deciphering Ancient America

Barry Fell's claims of ancient New World settlers fall before scholarly analysis

Marshall McKusick

A retired professor of marine biology from Harvard, Barry Fell, attracted an immense lay following with his best-selling book, *America B.C.: Ancient Settlers in the New World* (1976). The book created a sensation because the author combined Harvard credentials with very unorthodox conclusions: he claimed that pre-Columbian America had been colonized by Celts, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Libyans, and other ancient peoples. Its commercial success may be judged by the fact that the American Booksellers Association presented it to the White House library as one of the 250 best books published in the United States during 1973-1977.

Has the reading public both here and abroad been victimized by archaeological fiction posing as legitimate research? Some professional archaeologists have claimed that Fell is a deluded scholar whose statements represent compounded errors. Nevertheless, *America B.C.* obviously offered the reading public something it wanted, perhaps the hope that American prehistory was an ethnic record of European and Mediterranean ancestors. Others enjoyed the vigorous style with which Fell attacked traditional archaeological research. The conflict between the professionals and Fell has continued with the publication of his most recent book, *Saga America* (1980), which introduced Vikings and other adventuresome peoples as an explanation for the past [see John R. Cole's review in the Fall 1980 *SI*].

In the midst of claims and counterclaims Fell has been able to convince a large number of followers that American prehistory is a record of Old World civilization. Among the claims that Fell makes are:

1. Egypto-Libyans left stone memorials, such as the Long Island

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Tablet and the Davenport Tablet from Iowa, or had been the source of the pictographic writing on these stones, taught the Canadian Micmac pictographic writing, left written messages in the greater Southwest and elsewhere, and explored Polynesia. Later, the Greeks and Libyans mingled and were responsible for the Greco-Libyan place names found in New England. To assist in overseas Pacific voyages, Libyan-Americans established a naval academy in Nevada and schools in Colorado and California, and they mapped Hawaii.

2. Celto-Phoenicians established an international fur trade between the hemispheres, shipping lumber, silver, copper, gold, furs, and other commodities to Europe and the Mediterranean in exchange for manufactured goods. The Celts of Spain taught the Phoenicians an Irish form of ogham alphabet, which was used for American inscriptions written in both Celtic and Phoenician. Iberian Celts established commercial banks in the west.

3. Other inscriptions and coins found in America demonstrate that many nations influenced pre-Columbian America, including Greeks, Romans, Jews, Islamic Arabs, North African Christians, and Byzantines.

4. Scandinavian Vikings, later joined by Irish and other Celts, traveled extensively in North America by circumnavigating Florida and exploring the Mississippi and western tributaries. The Norse left written inscriptions in the Southwest, Oklahoma, and elsewhere, as well as building Newport Tower in Rhode Island.

Scripts and Languages

Successful decipherment of a text depends upon the correct identification of the alphabet or the other characters used. Where these are phonetic in value, as in alphabetic or syllabic scripts, the pronunciation of the word identifies the language. While this is a simplification of the complexities involved in a true decipherment of a previously unread script, it does represent a fundamental necessity. If the script is incorrectly identified, there is no chance of a successful decipherment. On these grounds the attacks by scholars on Fell's identifications of scripts lie at the heart of their rejection of his work. Scholarly challenges have been made of Fell's identification of ogham, Egyptian, Libyan, Punic, runic, and petroglyphic characters.

Fell contends that ogham (or *ogam*) script was used in New England and elsewhere in North America by ancient Celts and, in addition, that the Phoenicians learned to use it from these Celts, writing their Punic language without vowels. However, two British archaeologists familiar with Celtic ogham have demonstrated that these scripts have not been correctly

identified in America (Ross and Reynolds 1978). Irish ogham developed after the fourth century as a system using groups of linear marks to represent 15 consonants and groups of dots for 5 vowels. Although this script is innovative and separate from traditional European alphabetic characters, the phonetic values of the signs are derived from written Latin. The distribution of ogham was restricted to one part of Ireland and adjacent colonies in Wales and Scotland and was largely limited to writing funerary inscriptions on stone. Because of its Latinized origin, it is impossible for ogham to have been known and used by Spanish Phoenicians or American Phoenicians 1,000 years before it was invented in Ireland. The two British archaeologists visited Vermont where the alleged ancient ogham was reported. They found that some of these marks were of comparatively recent origin. At the Crow site in Vermont, Ross and Reynolds (1978) positively identified the marks; they were not ancient writing but were marks left by some Yankee farmer who ran his plow across a field boulder. The archaeologists identified the plow as a single share, the Gloucestershire type, and the plow marks paralleled the stone fence row. Other so-called ogham marks were identified as erosional grooves and natural striations. At the New Hampshire site named Mystery Hill, Fell's reported appearance of a Roman numeral "thirty" on the Beltane Stone was alleged to be part of a Celtic calendar. More recently Cazeau and Scott (1979) demonstrated that some of the markings on this stone were caused by granite veins that were misidentified as an intentional inscription.

Fell's ogham hypothesis proved to be very attractive to the unwary antiquarians who reported linear markings in New England and throughout North America. As one example, Fell read three parallel lines as ogham script "BL" and, supposing it to be a Phoenician word, added the diphthong "AA," which he then identified as a dedication to the Canaanite god Baal. Another instance of self-deception is Fell's decipherment of some lines on the Bourne Stone from Massachusetts, marks allegedly "Phoenician-ogham" and translated as a report of the annexation of the territory into the Carthaginian empire by General Hanno—literally: "A Proclamation of annexation. Do not deface. By this Hanno takes possession" (Fell 1976, p. 160). No Phoenicians are known to have been west of Morocco, and no valid evidence exists for the speculation that they reached Massachusetts or that they wrote in an Irish script.

Where Phoenician-ogham cannot be made to serve the purposes of Fell's flights of fancy, other linguistic inventions are forthcoming. One of these is a rendering of the Grave Creek stone as the Phoenician "Punic" language written in "Iberic script." According to Fell (1976, p. 158), this small tablet was found in 1838 in a stream bed in central West Virginia and

reads: "The memorial of Teth. This tile (His) brother caused to be made." Because Fell either is ignorant of the relevant archaeological literature or rejects it without proper citations, a lay reader will be deceived by this interpretation. The Grave Creek tablet was thoroughly discredited as a hoax perpetrated to add an attraction to the public museum associated with the 1830s excavations of the Grave Creek mounds. Testimony from the workmen, obtained in later years, showed this artifact had no clear provenience; and the short inscription actually represents an assortment of letters from different alphabets. All of this information has been available since the evaluation by Thomas (1894).

Scripts that Fell identified as Libyan, hieroglyphic Egyptian, and hieratic Egyptian have fared no better than his decipherments of plow-mark ogham. The Davenport Tablet, which Fell identifies as a trilingual inscription in Egyptian, Libyan, and Punic, is thoroughly documented as a hoax made by members of the Davenport Academy of Science in the fall of 1876. This hoax became part of a broader conspiracy to deceive a local German clergyman who irritated Yankee academy members by his mound-digging activities. In the 1880s Smithsonian staff members exposed various Davenport frauds, and this affair became more thoroughly documented in the 1960s when confessions and other written testimony appeared (McKusick 1979a). Fell still defends his theory of Egyptians in Iowa (1980, p. 109), although Jonas Greenfield, professor of Semitic languages at Hebrew University, informs me that the scripts are not Egyptian, Punic, or Libyan. The Davenport Tablet is marked up with obvious Greek letters, musical cleff signs, ampersands, and a mixture of letters never associated with each other in the Old World. Cyrus Thomas, one of the Smithsonian archaeologists of the 1880s, suggested that the forgers copied this heterogeneous collection from the alphabets illustrated in *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*, 1872 edition.

The Long Island Tablet found in the 1880s is a bilingual record written, according to Fell (1976, p. 270), in Egyptian and Libyan characters. Anthropologists, beginning with Brinton in 1893, identify the marks as typical aboriginal petroglyphs, including a bow and arrow, a man and a canoe, a possible wigwam, and those resembling a bird, a deer, a fish, an eel, and a bear's paw. No mention or citation of the anthropological interpretation is made by Fell, who transformed the canoe into a Libyan galley and translated the inscription to read: "This ship is a vessel from the Egyptian Dominions."

The transformation of aboriginal petroglyphs into Old World scripts occurs throughout *Saga America*, where crudely redrawn sketches from standard anthropological studies are variously labeled and deciphered as Arabic, Libyan, Chinese, and even Scandinavian. These anthropological

studies were based upon petroglyphs from California and adjacent states in the Great Basin and Southwest, and even from British Columbia, locations that lead Fell to speculate about far-flung ancient conquests in western North America by Celts, Vikings, and various Mediterranean nations. No anthropologist familiar with aboriginal petroglyphs accepts any of Fell's identifications.

Runic letters of Scandinavia continued to be used for short inscriptions long after the more efficient and complete Latin alphabet came into use in medieval times. While some runic inscriptions have been found in the Greenland Norse settlements, and farther north, where one was found on a rock cairn, not one genuine runestone has been reported from North America. For years specialists in medieval Scandinavian studies have written about the famous American runic forgeries, such as the Kensington and Spirit Pond stones, and the misidentified "runes" from Oklahoma and elsewhere (Wallace 1971). Fell, in *Saga America*, accepts various types of false evidence as genuine. Some of these so-called runes are simply not Scandinavian letters, and among examples one can point to the misidentification of markings on Newport Tower, which Fell and others claim to be Scandinavian. Another group of errors is the identification of pictographs as Norse-inspired pictorial art, although no such drawings are found in Scandinavia. Finally, Fell has reported the Pelham Stone from New Hampshire to be an attempt by a Norse trader to contact the Indians by means of petroglyphs, a supposition unsupported by any known evidence. With such inventions, it is hardly surprising that he reports Welsh-ogham from Oklahoma and traces joint ventures in America by Celts and Norsemen.

Languages from the Scripts

Specialists in Amerindian languages have failed to find any trace of Old World grammar or vocabulary having a pre-Columbian origin (Goddard and Fitzhugh 1978). However, Fell ignores such conclusions and projects major contacts expressed in language relationships. Among the linkages he reports are so-called "interface tongues," which are represented as Old World and New World mixtures exemplified by Libyan-Zuni, Iberic-Pima, Basque and Celtic-Algonkian, and Greco-Libyan-Algonkian. Micmac-Algonkian "hieroglyphic writing" is said to represent the adoption of a writing style rather than a language transferral.

Since the scripts have been misidentified by Fell, much of his discussion about Celtic, Welsh, Iberic-Punic, and other languages is illusionary. Nevertheless, not all of his conclusions can be rejected on these grounds alone. Not all of his claims deal strictly with phonetic scripts from abroad

— for example, he identifies the modern spelling of New England place names as concealing more ancient Celtic root words. In this case, a Celtic specialist has shown that not one of the numerous examples mentioned by Fell represents a genuine pre-Columbian loan word of Celtic origin (Nicolaisen 1979). There is an aura of uninformed speculation surrounding such linkages as Libyan-Zuni and Libyan-Polynesian, but so far no professional linguist has published an analysis of such claims. Since the grammar and morphology of these three languages reflect totally different origins from the perspective of historical linguistics, the comparison must be considered fallacious, pending the application of orthodox linguistic methodology. The task may not be easy in one sense, because a linguist will have a great deal of difficulty with the “Libyan” part of the equation. Fell has scrambled together various scripts from North Africa, invented phonetics and vocabulary, and ignored grammar and has seemingly constructed the Libyan language without reference to known linguistic relationships from the Mediterranean area. It appears that “Libyan,” which he traces to locations throughout the world, is an illusionary and phantom language.

The Archaeology of Deception

The history of successful decipherments is littered with footnotes about unsuccessful attempts that for a time seemed somewhat plausible. From eighteenth century onward there were many attempts made to “read” Egyptian hieroglyphics and other scripts, and these efforts by well-intended antiquarians were frequently published. Fell’s numerous claims represent a culmination of amateurish speculations. He has ventured into American prehistory and attempted to rewrite the past by ignoring professional archaeological studies. His evidence has rested upon phony linguistics. However, in contrast to Fell’s claims of numerous foreign scripts, archaeologists have yet to accept a single valid case of a pre-Columbian inscription in the New World (McKusick 1979b). Fell’s well-illustrated books appear to present archaeological evidence, until one recognizes that most of the artifacts either are aboriginal petroglyphs or have some other explanation, such as plow-marked ogham, natural striations, or misidentified lines of recent origin.

It may be added that two other lines of inquiry also appear in his writings. Various Old World coins have been found in the New World, which he accepts as supporting proof of his claims of massive pre-Columbian trade and cultural contacts. A study of this coin evidence shows that some of the coins, such as “Hebrew shekels,” were recently minted souvenirs, and not one other example has a solid archaeological

context suggesting antiquity (Epstein 1980). Furthermore, the archaeological structures illustrated and described by Fell, such as those from New England, are not Celtic and Phoenician shrines. Those that have been studied in Vermont have a known Yankee origin and include stone cellars once put to a variety of uses, such as storing turnips for the sheep industry (Neudorfer 1979). Supporting excavations have been made in Massachusetts, where stone structures of various kinds are related to former Yankee settlements (Cole 1980). Because the Mystery Hill site in New Hampshire was extensively disturbed and rebuilt by a former owner, some of the structures are now difficult to identify; but there is nothing that suggests either a Phoenician or a Celtic origin and, in particular, Fell's "sacrificial altar" is a Yankee lye stone (Swauger 1980).

The challenges presented by Fell and his imitators are difficult to meet because traditional linguistics and archaeology lack the drama of the strange, mysterious, and the unexplained, which is the stock-in-trade of the popularizers. Until a greater effort is made to reach the public with more factual accounts of prehistory, the mythology about lost races and ancient nations will persist as a substitute for scholarship.

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