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THE BAT CREEK STONE REVISITED: A FRAUD EXPOSED

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An inscribed stone reportedly excavated by an employee of the Smithsonian Institution from a burial mound in eastern Tennessee, and published by Cyrus Thomas in his 1894 landmark report, has been promoted by transatlantic contact enthusiasts as incontrovertible proof of Precolumbian Old World contacts. The inscription is fraudulent, having been copied from a Masonic treatise. We present the source of the inscription and discuss other circumstances concerning the stone and its purported discovery.

Una piedra con inscripciones que fue reportada como excavada por un empleado del Smithsonian Institution en un túmulo funerario en la zona este del estado de Tennessee, y publicada por Cyrus Thomas en su reconocido reporte de 1894, se ha promovido por los entusiastas de los contactos transatlánticos como prueba irrefutable de contactos pre-colombinos con el Viejo Mundo. La inscripción es fraudulenta, ya que fue copiada de un tratado masónico. Nosotros presentamos la fuente de la inscripción y comentamos otras circunstancias relacionadas a la piedra y a su supuesto descubrimiento.

During the nineteenth century, when the study of prehistory was in its infancy, one of the most contentious issues in American archaeology was hypothetical Precolumbian contacts between the Old World and New World. Such alleged contacts were a key element in the debate over whether the numerous earthen mounds and enclosures found throughout eastern North America were constructed by the ancestors of contemporary Native Americans or by now vanished peoples unrelated to American Indians (Feder 2001; Silverberg 1968; Willey and Sabloff 1974; Williams 1991). The controversy was fueled in no small measure by the appearance of numerous fraudulent antiquities, such as the Davenport tablets and elephant pipes (McKusick 1970), the Kensington runestone (Blegen 1968; Wahlgren 1958), the Michigan Relics (Ashurst-McGee 2001; Stamps 2001), and the Newark Holy Stones (Lepper and Gill 2000).

Although largely laid to rest by the early twentieth century, during the last 30 years the assertion that the Americas were regularly visited, if not colonized, by Old World seafarers has seen a major resurgence, as witnessed by numerous mass-market books (e.g., Fell 1976, 1980, 1982; Gordon 1971, 1974). A considerable number of purported

ancient Old World inscriptions from virtually all parts of North America have been cited by proponents as proof that transatlantic voyages actually occurred. Over the years, numerous examples have resurrected, virtually all of which justifiably were dismissed as fraudulent over a century ago (e.g., Peet 1890, 1892, 1895). The circumstances surrounding their discoveries are dubious and the inscriptions invariably fail to stand up under close scrutiny by paleographers. The historical circumstances surrounding several highly publicized frauds are well documented (Ashurst-McGee 2001; Blegen 1968; McKusick 1970, 1991; Stamps 2001; Wahlgren 1958; Williams 1991).

Catapulted to prominence in the pages of *Biblical Archaeology Review* (McCulloch 1993a), the Bat Creek stone from eastern Tennessee seemingly represents the most convincing evidence for Precolumbian contacts by Old World cultures. This small, inscribed rock reportedly was excavated from an undisturbed earthen burial mound in 1889 by a Smithsonian Institution field assistant during the Bureau of Ethnology Mound Survey, and its likeness subsequently was published in 1894 in one of the landmark volumes in the history of North American archaeology, *Report on the Mound Explorations of the Bureau of Ethnology* (Thomas

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Figure 1. The Bat Creek stone. Reproduced from Thomas (1890b:36), but with the orientation inverted.

1894:394). Cyrus Thomas, director of the Mound Survey, claimed that the marks on the Bat Creek stone represented characters of the Cherokee syllabary and used the inscription to support his hypothesis that the Cherokee constructed many of the earthen mounds and enclosures in eastern North America (Thomas 1890a, 1890b:35–37; 1894:393–394). Here, we present what we feel is incontrovertible evidence that the Bat Creek stone is a forgery, specifically, that the inscription was copied from published sources readily available at the time of the stone’s “discovery.”

Background

The Bat Creek mounds were located near the confluence of Bat Creek and the Little Tennessee River in Loudon County, Tennessee. The inscribed stone (Figure 1) allegedly was found beneath the smallest mound in the group, Mound 3, which reportedly was “composed throughout, except about the skeletons at the bottom, of hard red clay, without any indications of stratification.” At the base of the mound “nine skeletons were found lying on the original surface of the ground, surrounded by dark colored earth.” According to the excavator, John W. Emmert, “two copper bracelets, an engraved stone, a small drilled fossil, a copper bead, a bone implement, and some small pieces of polished wood soft and colored green by contact with the copper bracelets” were found under the skull and mandible of the individual designated Burial 1, and the “engraved stone lay partially under the back part of the skull” (Thomas 1894:393). Unfortunately, the mound was leveled prior to the 1970s and the

locality has not been reinvestigated archaeologically (Schroedl 1975:103).

Following publication of Thomas’s (1894) tome, the Bat Creek stone was ignored by the North American anthropological and archaeological community for three-quarters of a century, probably because Thomas himself became aware that the stone was a fraud within a few years after publication of *Report on the Mound Explorations* (Mainfort and Kwas 1991).

If the Bat Creek stone was regarded as authentic by contemporary scholars, it would have been of considerable importance, both to archaeologists and Cherokee scholars, and should appear or be mentioned in numerous publications. Yet, we have located only five references to the Bat Creek stone in contemporary and more recent professional literature. Three of these are Thomas’s (1890a, 1890b, 1894) own publications. In his *Archaeological History of Ohio*, Fowke (1902:458–459) briefly mentioned the Bat Creek stone. Fifty years later, Whiteford (1952:218) mentioned the “enigmatic” engraved stone in his regional overview, and was highly critical of the fieldwork conducted in eastern Tennessee under Thomas’s direction. Among the significant publications on Cherokee archaeology and ethnology lacking any reference to the stone are Gilbert (1943), Harrington (1922), Mooney (1907), Moorehead (1910), Setzler and Jennings (1941), Shetrone (1930), Swanton (1946, 1952), and Webb (1938). The lack of published references alone strongly hints that contemporary archaeologists and ethnologists did not regard the object as genuine.

More telling, Thomas did not discuss the Bat

Creek stone in any of his later substantive publications (1898, 1903, 1905 [with W. J. McGee]). In *Study of North American Archaeology* (1898: 24–25), Thomas provides the most conclusive, albeit indirect, indictment of the Bat Creek stone's authenticity:

Another fact that should be borne in mind by the student is the danger of basing conclusions on abnormal objects, or on one or two unusual types. Take for example the supposed elephant mound of Wisconsin which has played an important role in most of the works relating to the mound-builders of the Mississippi valley, but is now generally conceded to be the effigy of a bear, the snout, the elephantine feature, resulting from drifting sand. Stones bearing inscriptions in Hebrew or other Old World characters have at last been banished from the list of prehistoric relics. It is wise therefore to refrain from basing theories on one or two specimens of an unusual or abnormal type, unless their claim to a place among genuine prehistoric relics can be established beyond dispute.

It is unfortunate that many of the important articles found in the best museums of our country are without a history that will justify their acceptance, without doubt, as genuine antiquities. It is safe therefore to base important conclusions only on monuments in reference to which there is no doubt, and on articles whose history, as regards the finding, is fully known, except where the type is well established from genuine antiquities. One of the best recent works on ancient America is flawed to some extent by want of this precaution. Mounds and ancient works are described and figured which do not and never did exist; and articles are represented which are modern reproductions.

We believe that the “best recent work” that Thomas alludes to is *his own* final report on the Smithsonian mound explorations (1894), and that the “articles whose history . . . is fully known” is a veiled reference to the alleged discovery of the Bat Creek stone. There were few (if any) other “recent works” on North American prehistory worthy of notice; Peet's *The Mound Builders* (1892) is perhaps the only example. Thomas was not shy in his

writings about naming names, whether by way of praise or criticism. That he did not mention the author of the publication he was criticizing suggests he himself was the offending author.

This inference begs the question of why Thomas did not admit to the failings of his magnum opus in a more direct manner. We believe that the answer is straightforward. Thomas, and indeed the Smithsonian Institution itself, had placed themselves in a position such that they really could not afford to pronounce the Bat Creek stone a forgery after publishing it. It was Thomas (1885, 1886a, 1886b, 1894:633–643) who authored several sharp criticisms of the fraudulent inscribed tablets and elephant pipes from Davenport, Iowa. The Smithsonian's role in the Davenport controversy, especially the sarcastic comments of Henry Henshaw (1883), produced considerable hostility from many antiquarians (McKusick 1970, 1991; Williams 1991:96).

As noted by Thomas (1894:642), the Davenport tablets were in part suspect because they seemingly offered ironclad proof regarding the two most contentious issues in archaeology during the late nineteenth century, namely that a “lost race” was responsible for constructing the mounds observed throughout eastern North America and that mammoths roamed the continent during the time of these vanished peoples. But even as the Davenport finds “proved too much” (Farquharson 1877:103) with respect to these key issues, so too did the Bat Creek stone regarding Thomas's own pet hypothesis that the immediate ancestors of the Cherokee constructed most of the burial mounds in eastern North America (e.g., Thomas 1890b).

Thus, there is strong, albeit circumstantial, evidence that the Bat Creek stone was recognized as fraudulent by 1898. More conclusive proof has been wanting until now.

Fantastic Archaeology and the Bat Creek Stone

In 1970, the Bat Creek stone was “rediscovered” by Dr. Cyrus Gordon, professor of Mediterranean Studies at Brandeis University and a proponent of Precolumbian contacts between the Old and New Worlds (e.g., Gordon 1968, 1971a, 1972, 1974). Gordon claimed that by inverting the published illustration of the stone (Thomas 1890, 1894), the

incised characters were recognizable as Paleo-Hebrew and could be translated as “for the Jews” or some variant thereof, even though he acknowledged that three signs “are not in the Canannite system” (Mahan 1971). Gordon’s assertion was presented in articles published in *Newsweek* (1970a) and *Argosy* (1971b), as well as a newspaper wire story. In the Nashville *Tennessean* (1970b), Gordon was quoted as saying that: “Various pieces of evidence point in the direction of migrations [to North America] from the Mediterranean in Roman times. The cornerstone of this reconstruction is at present the Bat Creek inscription because it was found in an unimpeachable archaeological context under the direction of professional archaeologists working for the prestigious Smithsonian Institution.” These sentiments were echoed by Gordon (1990:71) in his final paper on the stone.

In 1988, Ohio State University economist J. Huston McCulloch published a discussion of the Bat Creek stone and the allegedly associated brass bracelets in *Tennessee Anthropologist*, which is notable for including the results of a radiocarbon assay on some copper-stained wood fragments claimed by the excavator to have been found with the same burial as the inscribed stone. Although differing with Gordon in several particulars, McCulloch concluded that the inscription was legitimate Paleo-Hebrew of an age consistent with the radiocarbon assay. With some assistance from Frank Moore Cross, we responded to McCulloch’s paper in the same journal (Mainfort and Kwas 1991). Our major points were that there were legitimate questions surrounding the discovery of the Bat Creek stone, that there are difficulties with several of the inscribed characters, and that there was considerable circumstantial evidence that by the late 1890s Cyrus Thomas and other scholars realized that the inscription was a fraud. A few years later, a paper by McCulloch on the Bat Creek stone appeared in *Biblical Archaeology Review* (McCulloch 1993a), along with a relatively brief counterpoint by Semiticist P. Kyle McCarter (1993) in the same volume. The paired articles generated considerable response from the *BAR* readership, including ourselves (Mainfort and Kwas 1993b), with opinions about the stone’s authenticity fairly divided.

As of 1993/94, the opinions of the principals in the debate may be summarized as follows. Cyrus Gordon was the earliest credible proponent of the

Bat Creek stone as an authentic Paleo-Hebrew inscription, though he acknowledged “problems” with three of the inscribed characters. Frank Moore Cross and Kyle McCarter pointed out additional paleographic difficulties and argued that too many of the characters were problematic for the inscription to be authentic. Huston McCulloch considered all of the inscribed characters to be legitimate Paleo-Hebrew (but disagreeing with Gordon about three of them) and presented radiocarbon evidence supporting an age for the stone in the first several centuries A.D. Finally, Mainfort and Kwas (1991, 1993a, 1993b) questioned the veracity of the find itself and presented evidence suggesting that Cyrus Thomas and his contemporaries recognized the Bat Creek stone as a fraud by the end of the nineteenth century.

The Context of the Find

Before presenting conclusive proof that the inscription is a fraud, it is important to consider the circumstances of the alleged discovery. Only one individual truly knew anything about the context of the find—John Emmert, the Smithsonian field assistant who worked alone and in isolation. For the veracity of the find, we have only Emmert’s word. There was and is no independent corroboration. There are no field photographs or detailed field records, notwithstanding the fact that several weeks *after* the alleged discovery, another “member of the Bureau [of Ethnology] was sent to the field where Mr. Emmert was at work, to learn the whole history of the find” (Thomas 1890b:37). The context of the find cannot, therefore, be considered “unimpeachable,” at it was pronounced by Gordon.

Moreover, neither Emmert nor the other Smithsonian field assistants who worked on the Mound Survey can legitimately be called “professional archaeologists.” In the late 1800s, archaeology as a profession essentially did not exist in the United States. The first Ph.D. in anthropology with a specialization in North American archaeology was not awarded until 1914, and the first formal American university field school in archaeology was undertaken in the mid-1920s (Guthe 1952:5). Thus, while it is true that John Emmert and other Mound Survey field assistants were hired to conduct archaeological fieldwork, by no means can these individuals be considered “professional archaeologists” in the modern sense. In fact, the field meth-



Figure 2. The source of the inscription (Macoy 1870:169).

ods employed by the Smithsonian field assistants, such as Emmert, were denigrated by Charles Metz in an 1884 letter to Frederic Ward Putnam (Browman 2002:200).

The Source of the Inscription

In the intervening years, a piece of evidence came to our attention that we believe proves conclusively that the Bat Creek stone is a fraud. The Bat Creek inscription, illustrated in Figure 2, appears in the *General History, Cyclopedia, and Dictionary of Freemasonry* (Macoy 1870:169). There can be little doubt that this was the source of the inscription and that the inscription was copied, albeit not particularly well, by the individual who forged the Bat Creek stone.

Professor Emeritus Frank Moore Cross graciously examined the script in the *General History* and observes that it is copied from the coin script of the First Jewish Revolt against Rome and is fairly well done. The *General History* correctly translates the inscription “Holiness to the Lord,” though “Holy to Yahweh” would be more precise. The inscription appears on the high priest’s forehead in Exodus 39:30 (“And they made a plate of the holy crown of pure gold, and wrote upon it in a writing like to the engraving of the signet, Holiness to the Lord”), and the expression appears elsewhere in Exodus and Leviticus, applied to various things set aside for the Lord. “Lord” is used as a substitute for the ineffable divine name YHWH, which modern scholars render “Yahweh,” and some older translations mistakenly transcribe “Jehovah.”

Would the *General History* have been available to the Bat Creek forger? Definitely. The volume was extensively reprinted during the latter half of the nineteenth century, sometimes under a slightly different name, but contents changed little. In fact, the *General History* is still being reprinted today. It may not be going too far to suggest that a Mason recognized the inscription in one of Cyrus Thomas’s publications and brought it to his attention. Further,

that the fraudulent inscription was copied from Masonic lore would have given Thomas and the Smithsonian another reason not to publicly denounce the Bat Creek stone as a fraud.

Who Was the Forger?

Clearly the Bat Creek inscription is a forgery, but who was the forger? While this probably cannot be known with certainty, the most likely suspect remains Smithsonian field assistant John Emmert (Mainfort and Kwas 1991, 1993a). In 1883—six years prior to his “discovery” of the Bat Creek stone—Emmert conducted excavations for the Harvard Peabody Museum in North Carolina and Tennessee. At a cave site in Sullivan County, Tennessee, Emmert claimed to have found an extraordinary suite of artifacts spanning the entire known cultural sequence from Paleoindian times (circa 10,000 B.C.) to the historic period (Peabody Museum Accession no. 83-14-10). As detailed by Stephen Williams (1993), today the find is easily recognizable as preposterous, though 120 years ago its legitimacy probably was taken for granted.

Emmert’s subsequent work for the Smithsonian’s Mound Survey was somewhat checkered, even prior to the Bat Creek affair (see Whiteford 1952 regarding other dubious “finds” by Emmert in eastern Tennessee that were published by Cyrus Thomas as legitimate). Cyrus Thomas, director of the Mound Survey, dismissed Emmert on one occasion because of drinking problems acknowledged by Emmert himself. Emmert begged for reinstatement, but was rebuffed by Thomas for nearly a year. McCulloch (1993b:15) notes that although Emmert was dismissed by the Smithsonian Institution because of problems with alcohol, “this did not stop his supervisor, Cyrus Thomas, who best knew the circumstances, from rehiring him [Emmert] in 1889 to do some additional work.” This is true, as far as it goes, but why Thomas rehired Emmert is perhaps another matter.

In the Mound Survey files are letters written by

John Emmert to President Grover Cleveland (April 9, 1888; Emmert cites Tennessee Governor R.L. Taylor as a reference) and Senator Isham Harris of Tennessee (September 12, 1888) asking for employment with the Smithsonian Institution Bureau of Ethnology. Senator Harris, in response, sent an undated note to Thomas's superior, Major John Wesley Powell, stating that he would be pleased if Emmert was rehired "if consistent with the public interest." Thomas declined Senator Harris's request (circa September 20, 1888; the actual day is not legible), but sometime between December 19, 1888, and early February 1889, Emmert was rehired. It seems reasonable to conclude that Emmert was rehired at least in part due to political pressure.

Emmert's letters from this same period show an eagerness to put himself in Thomas's good graces. For example, on December 19, 1888, Emmert wrote to Thomas stating: "I have just received and read your Burial Mounds [probably a reference to Thomas (1887)], and I certainly agree with you that the Cherokees were Mounds Builders. In fact, there is not a doubt in my mind about it."

In the first letter he wrote to Thomas after starting fieldwork again (Emmert to Thomas, February 15, 1889), Emmert reported the alleged discovery of the Bat Creek stone and included the curious statement "I will prove everything just as found," suggesting that he knew questions would be raised. Ten days later, Emmert included a drawing of the stone (shown in the orientation published by Thomas) with a letter to Thomas (Emmert to Thomas, February 25, 1889) that stated in part: "I think it a good idea to look into *every thing* near here that we might find something else like the stone, or that might have some connection with it." The letter closes with a request to "please inform me what the inscription on the stone is."

The limited available evidence suggests that, contrary to McCulloch (1988, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c), John Emmert was at least a partner in the fraud, even if he did not inscribe the characters on the Bat Creek stone himself. We believe that Emmert's motive for producing (or causing to have made) the Bat Creek inscription was that he felt the best way to insure permanent employment with the Mound Survey was to find an outstanding artifact, and how better to impress his employer than to "find" an object that would prove Thomas's hypoth-

esis that the Cherokee built most of the mounds in eastern Tennessee?

McCulloch (1988:114) has suggested that Emmert lacked sufficient education and command of the English language to forge the Bat Creek inscription, but as with similar arguments made in defense of the fraudulent Kensington runestone (e.g., Gordon 1974: 30), this assertion is not valid. For example, subsequent to his employment with the Smithsonian Institution, Emmert (1891) published a brief article on an archaeological site in Tennessee in *American Anthropologist*. That Emmert knew of and read this journal, much less had a research note published in it, indicates that he was a learned individual. Moreover, simply copying an inscription from a published source would require no special education at all.

Emmert was personally acquainted with the Cherokee of western North Carolina and expressed interest in their history (Emmert to Thomas, December 19, 1888). Thus, he may have had some familiarity with the Cherokee syllabary. It is very unlikely, however, that he could write acceptable Cherokee, so a passage in contemporary Cherokee script was not an option for the Bat Creek forgery. What was needed was an inscription containing several characters that superficially resembled some Cherokee characters. The Bat Creek inscription, whether viewed in the original published orientation (Thomas 1890a, 1890b, 1894) or in the "proper" Paleo-Hebrew orientation, fits the bill. From left to right, as shown in Figures 1 and 2, the first, second, third, fifth, and seventh characters have passable (but not actual) Cherokee counterparts. Using the "Thomas orientation," the same can be said for characters two, six, and seven (Mainfort and Kwas 1991:5-7; cf. McCulloch 1988:86-87). These resemblances were enough to fool Thomas, as well as McKusick (1979), though neither attempted to translate the inscription as Cherokee.

The Brass Bracelets

But what of the brass bracelets purportedly associated with the inscribed stone? McCulloch (1993c) claims that: "Indeed, even if the inscribed stone had never existed, the bracelets, together with the radiocarbon date, in themselves provide solid evidence of some kind of pre-Norse contact between the Old and New Worlds." McCulloch's reasoning is flawed

on several counts. First, he assumes that the bracelets and the dated wood fragments truly were found together and that the wood fragments are the same age as the bracelets. Since the inscription clearly was forged and the Bat Creek stone planted (if it ever was in the ground at all), there is ample reason to be suspicious of all artifacts allegedly found in Bat Creek Mound 3. Further, the brass bracelets appear to be of European origin, dating to the eighteenth or early nineteenth century A.D. (Mainfort and Kwas 1991, 1993a). McCulloch (1993a:51; caption to photo), who lacks experience in contact period archaeology (as well as historical linguistics and paleography), rejects this possibility, claiming that: “The way in which the bracelets were crafted favors an ancient origin because they do not resemble most modern trade goods, which were usually drawn or cast.” He offers no support for this statement.

By “modern trade goods,” McCulloch presumably refers to our (Mainfort and Kwas 1991:7) observation that brass wire bracelets are fairly common at eighteenth-century Euroamerican and Native American sites in eastern North America. Most reported specimens were not “drawn or cast,” but rather cut from lengths of brass wire of varying thickness (Brain 1979:193). The Bat Creek examples, however, exhibit a seam along their length and are similar to less-common eastern North American specimens that were “made by folding up the edges of a long, narrow strip of copper [or brass—*authors*] till the two rolls met in the centre of the strip, then bending the strip into a circle” (Kenyon 1982:198). There is no lack of similar, published examples (Birk and Johnson 1992:222; Kenyon 1982:215; Nern and Cleland 1974:8–9; Newman 1986:441; Stone 1974:135). To his contention that similar objects were “a popular ornament in the Mediterranean world,” McCulloch cites only examples of bronze, silver, and gold bracelets, none of which are structurally similar to the Bat Creek artifacts. In sum, the brass bracelets resemble eighteenth-century specimens from eastern North America, and stone proponents have provided no comparable Old World examples dating to the early Christian era.

Concluding Remarks

For over 30 years, proponents of Precolumbian contacts between the Old and New Worlds have

heralded the Bat Creek stone as the best evidence—indeed, proof—that such contacts occurred, but other claims of “proof” are legion (e.g., Fell 1976, 1980, 1982). If even a mere one quarter of the putative evidence for the Precolumbian contacts proposed by Fell and other Precolumbian contact enthusiasts had any basis in fact, then professional North American archaeologists should regularly find Old World artifacts and inscriptions. Yet, with the exception of the Norse settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows (Ingstad 1964; Ingstad and Ingstad 2001), not a single example of either has been found. This is certainly not due to the lack of extensive excavations. For instance, the massive site of Cahokia, Illinois, and environs have been the focus of numerous large-scale excavation projects during the last several decades. Over two dozen large, detailed technical reports on this work have been published (see Bareis and Porter 1984 for a summary), but not a shred of evidence for Precolumbian Old World contacts has been found. In fact, the last two decades probably have witnessed the most extensive archaeological investigations ever conducted in the United States, much of these conducted under government mandates concerning the protection of cultural resources (Green and Doershuk 1998), but evidence for Old World contacts is completely lacking.

Or consider the pioneering efforts of the antiquarian C. B. Moore who, during the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, excavated at many of the major archaeological sites throughout the Southeast and published numerous folio-sized reports on his work (e.g., Moore 1909, 1910, 1911, 1912). But Moore, too, found no Old World artifacts or inscriptions. Nor have any objects suggestive of Old World contacts been published in the *Central States Archaeological Journal*, a profusely illustrated amateur journal now in its fortieth year of publication. Is there, perhaps, a very clear message here, namely that such contacts did not occur?

McCulloch and Gordon are correct that the Bat Creek stone, if authentic, would provide the best evidence for Old World contacts with the Americas—unfortunately, the evidence is fatally flawed. The stone is a fraud. Its inscription was copied from a widely available published source.

To date, there is still no credible evidence that Judeans or any other Old World peoples contributed to the Precolumbian history we strive to retrieve.

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