

Try to approach the Los Lunas Mystery Stone with an open mind. That's not easy to do anymore, ~~so~~ so much has been written and said about this one lonely rock, ~~so~~ so many wonderful claims have been made for it only to be subsequently ridiculed and debunked by other, more skeptical investigators that the very air around Hidden Mountain seems charged with controversy and fogged with deceit.

Part of the problem is that the Mystery Stone offers no room for that cautiously-hedged middle ground so beloved by professional archeologists. The inscription carved on that rock is either a hoax or one of the most astounding discoveries in American archeology.

If the amateurs are right, the professionals are spectacularly wrong. In no other science has that happened as often as in archeology, and the pros are understandably sensitive on the subject; they're equally aware that no other profession has been as bedeviled by frauds and hoaxes.

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So the Mystery Stone leaves any serious student of archeology with ~~some~~^a tough choices. Pick the wrong side, and you could find yourself in the same position as the respected academics who laughed when Heinrich Schliemann set out to find Troy. Or, even worse, you could be grouped with the equally august experts who ~~hied~~ hailed Piltdown Man as the "Missing Link."

Given those high stakes in an atmosphere murky with folklore, gossip and outright fraud, it's no surprise that only a very few facts are accepted as unquestioned by everyone familiar with the case.

The Mystery Stone lies about halfway up the single, deep arroyo that cuts into Hidden Mountain, a low, isolated mesa in the Rio Puerco drainage west of Los Lunas. Like the caprock above, the Stone ^{is} basalt, a dull and unattractive but very hard volcanic rock common throughout the area.

On one three-by-five foot face of the Stone, someone has carved an inscription. The characters are Semitic, unrelated to any known Indian rock art style, and were carved with a metal tool by someone who was either unpracticed at the work, in a hurry, or unfamiliar with the characteristics of the native rock.

Beyond that, it's impossible to make any[^] statement about the Stone without having someone step forward to shout, "Wrong!"

Who carved it?

An exiled Greek philosopher? A wandering Phoenician sailor? A band of Lost Tribesmen on their way to found a new civilization in Meso-America? A Secret Jew among the early Spanish colonists? A fanatic Saint intent upon vindicating the Book of Mormon? A couple of fun-loving UNM anthropology students? All these and ~~some~~^{other} candidates even less likely have been proposed over the years.

When was it done? The dates proposed vary from 2,500 B.C. to the 1930s, depending upon the chronologist's preferred answer to "Who?"

What does it mean?

Although the letters are Semitic, a great many widely divergent cultures have used variations of that alphabet to write as many different languages over a very long period of time. The majority of both believers and non-believers in the authenticity of the Stone accept it as a rendering of the Ten Commandments in archaic Hebrew. But ⁺that opinion is far from unanimous. Others have identified the language used as Navajo, Roman, Egyptian, Etruscan and Greek.

It was the Greek rendition, as deciphered by Dixie⁺ Perkins in her 1979 book, The Meaning of the New Mexico Mystery Stone, that Arvil Howard Elam II adopted as the ⁺ basis for the web of lies he wove around the Stone.

Perkins translated the Stone as the epic travelogue of one Zakyneros, an exiled Greek who supposedly voyaged across the Atlantic and up the Rio Grande some time around 500 B.C. Elam, possibly the most audacious and persuasive confidence man New Mexicans have seen since James Addison Reavis set himself up as Baron of Arizona in the 1880s, took Perkins' already-improbable tale and embroidered upon it for his own purposes.

In Elam's version, the Stone was not just "Zak's" epitaph but one of a series of clues in an elaborate treasure hunt. With the aid of bogus artifacts planted around the western part of the state, Elam sold this imaginative ~~fiar~~ fairy-tale to M.D. "Don" Shockey, a local optometrist and amateur archeologist.

Shockey invested more than \$30,000 in Elam's fantasies before he tumbled to the hoax and called the cops. ~~For this and similar frauds,~~
~~Elam is now doing ~~time~~ 12 to 15 years in prison.~~ ^{Now,} ~~By a sad irony, he's~~ ^{Elam is}
serving ~~his~~ time at the Los Lunas Correctional Center, just down the road from the Stone.

But even though his inventions have been thoroughly discredited in a court of law, Elam's fabrications have already begun insinuating themselves into the legend of the Mystery Stone, where they are taking a place with the story of the fabulous Golden Bell or the mysterious Hidden Guardians supposedly associated with the Stone.

Joseph C. Winter takes a philosophical view of it all. The director of UNM's Office of Contract Archeology and one of the most respected archeologists in the Southwest, Winter is convinced that the Mystery Stone is a hoax, a practical joke perpetrated by UNM students in the 1930s, when Dr. Frank Hibben was first investigating nearby Pottery Mound.

In 1984, Winter presented that conclusion in a thoroughly-researched article for the ~~Albuquerque~~ Albuquerque Journal's "Impact" magazine in the hope that he could lay the old gag to rest once and for all.

"But there will always be true believers," he says now. "No matter what, there will still be people who want to believe in trans-Atlantic contact, ancient religious cults, aliens from outer space and so on.

"I'd say that two or three times a year they come wandering in," he continues. "A couple of weeks ago some guy came in and wanted to show me these stones like eyeballs he had found. 'The eyes follow you around the room!' he says.

"There's a lot of weirdos out there, whackos who will believe in anything," Winter sighs.

Winter is uncomfortable discussing archeological frauds and hoaxes these days. Last May, he published Investigations at Sites 48 and 77, Santa Rosa Lake, Guadalupe County, New Mexico, an expose^o that threatens more professional reputations than the Mystery Stone ever will, and Winter is still waiting to see if he's going to wind up defending his Site 48 conclusions in court.

Subtitled "An Inquiry into the Nature of Archeological Reality," the OCA's two-volume, 917-page report on the Santa Rosa ^{site} is the most comprehensive dissertation to date on what has become one of the most notorious controversies in Southwestern archeology.

Site 48 is located about seven miles north of Santa Rosa, on the east side of a prominent meander of the Pecos River called Horseshoe Bend. ^{It} and was first identified and numbered as part of an archeological survey ~~of the area~~ sponsored by the Corps of Engineers in 1974 as part of the environmental impact work required to construct Santa Rosa Dam.

Initially identified by the Southern Methodist University team conducting the archeological reconnaissance ^{Site 48} as a late-Nineteenth and early-Twentieth Century stage stop and store. ^{In that pedestrian guise, it} Site 48 was just one of several sites in the area that the Corps contracted to have "mitigated" before the waters of Santa Rosa Lake erased it forever.

The contract to excavate, map, photograph and report on Site 48 was awarded to the Center for Anthropological Studies (CAS), headed by Dr. Albert Ward, and Ward began work on the site in 1977.

Beneath the ~~pedestrian and fairly~~ commonplace ruins identified by the SMU archeologists, Ward found something much more surprising: an extensive complex of adobe ^{walls} ~~room blocks, walls and ~~hollow~~ plazas~~ that Ward identified as a comanchero base.

If Ward's interpretation is correct, Site 48 could shed valuable light on a little-known and sparsely-documented aspect of New Mexican history.

During the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century, Hispanic and Pueblo traders known collectively as "comancheros" carried on a lively commerce with los Indios Bravos of the Plains. Although the Spanish and later the Mexican government tried to regulate this trade closely, there was always a suspicion that some portion of the business was conducted illicitly.

In Texas, it was widely believed that the comancheros played an important role in stirring up the Comanche and ~~Kan~~^{Kan}owa against the Anglo settlers, providing guns and ammunition to the Wild Tribes in exchange for horses, loot and even captives taken upon the Texas frontier.

Since no mention is made of any comanchero base on the Pecos in New Mexico's colonial archives, the ^{physical} evidence that such a ~~base~~^{place} did exist would go far toward confirming the significance of a shadowy, extra-legal comanchero trade.

But Ward's three-year, ~~\$144 thousand~~^{143,900} investigation of Site 48 wasn't complete before other archeologists were raising serious questions about his findings ~~his methods, and his professional integrity.~~ Ward's adobe walls were sculpted from the native earth with a spade, critics charged; the whole site had been fabricated.

The controversy drew in some of the most ~~respected and~~ prestigious names in Southwestern archeology and confronted them with the same reputation-endangering choice presented by the Mystery Stone: is it, or isn't it?

In 917 carefully-written pages, Winter examines all ^{the} evidence, quotes Longfellow ^{and} Plato, ~~and Kant~~, muses like Pontius Pilate on the meaning of "truth," and finally concludes that ~~"we cannot even begin to understand 'truth'"~~ "the work at Site 48 has shown that we cannot even begin to understand 'truth' -- the meaning of our artifacts, our features and our sites -- as long as we approach ~~them~~^{them} with preconceived notions of what they should look like and what they should mean."

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Archeological reality is more plastic than most, Winter argues, and everybody is entitled to their own opinion. ~~Still and all,~~ the OCA's opinion is that Site 48 is nothing more than "a multicomponent ~~Indian~~ Indian site, a small Hispanic campsite, and a ~~late~~ late nineteenth century ranch."

The Corps of Engineers, having spent \$116,400 on Winter's study to balance the \$143,900 they paid Ward, hopes that's the end of it. Site 48 has disappeared under the waters of Santa Rosa Lake, and the Corps has moved on to new construction projects and new controversies. But Ward's lawyer says his client is going to sue "everybody in sight" -- the Corps of Engineers, Winter and the OCA, and maybe this magazine for publishing this.

There may be room for a divergence ~~in~~ of opinion over the interpretation of Site 48, Winter concedes, even if that extends to a difference over what is and what is not an adobe wall. But he sees no such ambiguity in the Los Lunas Mystery Stone.

To Winter, the truth there is "self-evident," he says.

"If you just look at the rock and the scars, they're very fresh," he says, and he's right. To anyone familiar with the appearance of genuine Indian rock carvings, the Stone appears newly-cut, with none of the patination or "desert varnish" prehistoric Indian petroglyphs nearby exhibit.

But believers in the Stone's antiquity argue that this appearance is misleading, since the rock has been cleaned, chalked, copied, molded and cleaned again several times ~~in~~ within the last 20 years.

And patination is a chemical process not fully understood by geologists, the Stone's defenders continue. No one really knows how rapidly it proceeds or what factors influence its formation, and the believers contend that because of the inscription's position it was covered by lichen and moss until very recently, thus protecting the carvings from the elements and retarding patination.

Skeptics counter that there is not a single first-hand account nor a shred of documentary evidence for the Stone's existence prior to 1936, when it was seen by Frank Hibben.

~~Even if it could be demonst~~

In fact, there is at least one very considerable piece of negative evidence, according to Winter. Pioneer Southwestern archeologist Adolph Bandelier visited Hidden Mountain in the 1880s, but doesn't mention a word about the Stone in his writings. If the inscription had been there then, how could Bandelier have overlooked or ignored it?

Even if it could be demonstrated that Bandelier did see the inscription, or some plausible reason advanced to explain how he missed it, the Stone's provenance as a genuine, pre-Columbian message would be far from proven.

Both the Mormon and the Secret Jew theories have some circumstantial plausibility, for example. General Stephen Watts Kearney's Army of the West was composed in large part of a Mormon Battalion recruited for service in the Mexican War, and those Mormons arrived in New Mexico less than a generation after Joseph Smith had launched their religion based upon the astonishing revelations which he said an angel had guided him to, written upon golden tablets and buried on a hillside near Palmyra, New York.

Smith's Book of Mormon, with its wholly alternate view of American pre-history, was still under vigorous gentile attack in 1846. It's not impossible that an over-zealous Saint might have carved the Los Lunas Stone as a way of corroborating the Book of Mormon. ~~Other, similar~~
~~frauds have been unmasked in Utah in recent years.~~

And there were Secret Jews among New Mexico's Spanish population from the earliest colonial times, although their existence has scarcely been guessed until very recently. Forcibly converted to Catholicism but still stubbornly practicing their own faith in secrecy, these conversos fled to this farthest frontier of the Spanish empire in an attempt to escape the long arm of the Inquisition.

It's not impossible that one such troubled, persecuted man may have found reason to carve the Ten Commandments on a remote, concealed rock in the desert. Yet another of the mysterious rumors surrounding the Stone speaks of a retablo, a carved wooden copy of the Stone made in the colonial style. If it were to come to light, such a tablet might corroborate the converso authorship of the Stone itself.

In other words, just because the Mystery Stone is not a contemporary fake doesn't mean it's not bogus. The 19th Century, after all, was a kind of golden age for such archeological hoaxing. Before archeology was a science or even a profession, amateur enthusiasts felt far more free to improve upon and even invent the evidence to support their pet theories.

The famous Kensington Stone, a Norse/Runic inscription supposedly commemorating a Viking expedition into the area of present-day Minnesota, surfaced in that state in 1898. The Davenport Stone, a number of inscribed slate tablets variously identified as "Egyptian," "Iberic," and "Phoenician," were dug out of an Indian burial mound in Iowa in 1877.

There are more such anomalies scattered around the country -- megaliths, tombstones and inscriptions claimed to be in just about every known and several unknown ancient European, Mid-Eastern and African language. Some have been exposed and discredited as fabrications; most of the rest must be regarded with the most severe suspicion.

Here in New Mexico, the Flora Vista Tablet turned up near that town in central New Mexico in 1909. Some said the carvings on the tablet looked like elephants, and identified the inscription as Phoenician. Others said the script used bears a startling resemblance to carvings found on Easter Island, 1,000 miles off the coast of Peru.

[ED NOTE: The Flora Vista tablet is said to be in a museum at the University of Northern Arizona, but no longer on display.]

Tony Latonski, an archeologist with the BLM office in Albuquerque, rummages in his lower desk drawer and pulls out a photocopy of a photo of a shard of pottery. The letters on the fragment, like the carvings on the Mystery Stone, are Semitic. The man who sent him the photocopy claims the shard was found in Chaco Canyon, Latonski says. ~~Latonski has his own heretical theories on the Chaco Phenomenon; he's not particularly interested in commenting on this one.~~

Up near Waterflow there's a rock with "what some people say are authentic writings of the Libyan people," says Manton Botsford, ^a ~~the~~ BLM archeologist in Farmington. The Waterflow site is one of several in the Western United States that epigrapher Barry Fell has identified as the work of Bronze Age explorers from the city of Carthage in North Africa.

There's another carving "presumed to be Phoenician" at Pierre^t's Outlier, a Chacoan site about 20 miles south of Farmington, and two more anomalous petroglyphs in Chaco Canyon itself. "I'm keeping an open mind regarding these things," Botsford says.

"It's like a kid's game. You know, 'You made that up!' 'Did not!' 'Did so!' It's kid stuff," sniffs Curtis Schaafsma, the state archeologist. Schaafsma has been digging in the Southwest for 25 years; his wife is a recognized authority on prehistoric rock art. And in all ^{their} ~~his~~ travels and investigations he has never seen anything to make him think that Europeans -- or Africans, or Asians, or little green men from Mars -- were here before the 16th Century A.D., Schaafsma says.

"The problem with all of these is the same as with Mystery Rock," Winter says. "You may have real pottery shards with Hebrew writing on them; the Mystery Stone may be a real carving of the Ten Commandments. The problem is, there's nothing associated with them to substantiate that evidence.

"There's no site," he continues. "There's no Roman site, there's no Etruscan site, there's no Hebrew site. There's no village that shows the people were there."

"Of course they want a site," Bill McGlone says with an air of weary reasonableness. "But I'm not sure they're going to get one. They might get it along the seashore, but not in this country. By the time people got this far from landing, much if not most of their diagnostically characteristic artifacts would probably have expired."

A retired engineer fascinated by Barry Fell's controversial books, America B.C. and Bronze Age America, McGlone spent seven years wandering ~~z~~ the deserts and mountains like some Biblical prophet. He emerged from the wilderness with his own book, Celtic America, which documents what McGlone argues are pre-Columbian Celtic inscriptions in southeastern Colorado.

McGlone has found what he identifies as Ogam, a writing system using nothing but straight strokes above, below, and across a stem-line in groups of one to five strokes.

The orthodox scholarly view is that Ogam was developed by Irish monks sometime during the Fourth Century, A.D., based upon late Latin. Accepted Ogam inscriptions in Ireland are funerary in nature, usually using the vertical corner of a standing stone as the stem line, with the strokes on the two faces forming the corner of the stone.

Although McGlone's Colorado Ogam differs significantly from the recognized Irish version, he and co-author Phillip M. Leonard argue that it is Ogam nonetheless. Even more surprising, the inscriptions they have deciphered are not funerary but archeo-astronomical, marking the equinox and winter solstice as well as various constellations and planetary conjunctions which they tentatively date to around 450-750 A.D.

McGlone and Leonard fought a long, uphill battle to get themselves taken seriously by the professional archeological community in Colorado, and they have only recently won some limited recognition. Stung by public criticism for their orthodoxy, archeologists in Colorado have at least conceded that McGlone is entitled to his own opinion on what mainstream archeologists identify as tool-sharpening or counting marks or some other variation of known Indian petroglyphs.

Not to be treated like a nut is a major step forward for McGlone, and he's reluctant to tarnish his new-found status by discussing the Los Lunas Mystery Stone or similar phenomena. It's his view that the Stone, like the Shroud of Turin and Stonehenge, is now so inextricably tangled in a web of folklore that no evidence, no matter how conclusive, will ever convince everybody.

And the Stone draws controversy like a lightning rod, diverting and polarizing the debate over the broader and more significant question: is there evidence of pre-Columbian, trans-Oceanic contact between the Americas and Asia, Africa or Europe?

"There's certainly more than adequate evidence to support a Scandinavian Viking presence in Greenland, Newfoundland and upper New England," Joe Winter says. "That's beyond question, that the Vikings were here in the Leif Ericson era and that they were the original European discoverers of America.

"Also, there's no question that there was very limited Oriental ~~contact~~ contact, probably Japanese-Chinese, on the coast of Peru and so on -- fishermen, probably, blown off course and half-dead, washed up on the coast. Maybe that happened over and over again, perhaps even having introduced certain pottery types and so forth.

"But these are events that, while they may have been significant historically, probably didn't have much effect on the already-existing cultures," Winter continues. "Other than that, nothing."

There are a couple of reasons why no compelling evidence for trans-oceanic contact has ever been found, McGlone protests.

The first is the scarcity of diagnostic artifacts likely to have survived from the limited, exploratory visits he theorizes. ~~Take iron axes, for example, McGlone argues.~~

"We might have had the second ~~and~~ or third generation people got to Colorado," he says. "They might not have been the first generation, and even if they were, they still had a long way to go. Over that distance, how many axes per mile are they going to leave behind?"

For such explorers, operating at the end of a very long and tenuous supply line, an iron axe would have been irreplaceable. "You're not going to find a Celtic cultural center here like you did in Europe," he continues. "They didn't set up and smelt iron and bronze here. So how many of these things are you going to find in one place?"

The Coronado expedition illustrates McGlone's point. Don Francisco Vasquez de Coronado trailed through the Southwest in 1540-'42, just yesterday in archeological time. His ~~expedition was a large one of~~ ^{force included} more than 300 soldiers, with all the weapons, armor, horses, cooking pots and panoply of a 16th Century European military expedition.

And yet of that whole well-documented, well-equipped expedition only a single archeological trace has ever been found -- and that ~~single~~ site was accidentally uncovered during a road construction project in Rio Rancho in 1986.

If what archeologists believe may have been Coronado's winter camp yields no more than a handful of rusty nails and bits of corroded metal, how much less would remain to mark the passage of a less technologically-advanced and smaller party of explorers a millennium before that?

"And they haven't dug," McGlone complains. "They say they'd like to find a site, but I can't find an archeologist who will dig near the writing."

Stu Peckham, curator emeritus of the Museum of Anthropology, has little patience with this argument. Over a period of nearly a decade, he watched the Museum spend hundreds of thousands of dollars chasing one of New Mexico's most famous moonbeams, the Treasure of Victorio Peak.

They never found a treasure, or even proved to anybody's ~~satisf~~isfaction that there never had been a treasure. All that time and money was wasted, Peckham says wearily, and "there is just not enough time and money to fill out the gaps and get the answers to the really valid questions."

~~There are genuine mysteries to be solved here in the Southwest, Peckham~~
~~says, "interesting and much more valid archeological problems to be addressed,"~~
~~to waste time testing "possible but not really plausible" theories.~~

There are genuine archeological puzzles right at Hidden Mountain whose significance has been obscured by the notoriety of the Mystery ~~S~~tone.

In his 1984 book, Discovery of Ancient America, David Allen Deal claims that the ruins atop Hidden Mountain are the remains of an ancient Jewish military encampment[^] left by a band of Jews who were hurrying south to become the Toltecs. Deal draws on much of the Meso-American mythology that has intrigued Europeans since Cortez -- the legend of Quetzalcoatl, the sometimes bearded, sometimes bald, sometimes white god is only the most famous of these -- and buttresses his argument with parallels he finds between Mayan, Toltec, Aztec and Hebrew words.

Mike Marshall and Henry Walt surveyed the ruins atop Hidden Mountain as part of their work for an Office of Historic Preservation publication, Rio Abajo: History and Pre-History of a Rio Grande Province. While they didn't find anything to indicate that Hidden Mountain was once a Hebrew military camp, Marshall says that they did find much that is intriguing and puzzling about the site.

There's not just one but several scattered, small room blocks on the mountain, Marshall says. Pottery shards found in association with the ruins may date "from as early as 1300 to as late as 1450," he says. But one of the puzzles is the scarcity of such artifacts ~~he continues.~~

"There are all these little roomblocks up there, but only a few shards," Marshall says. "It's like it was built but never used."

Perhaps the Hidden Mountain dwellings were built as a fortified retreat for the inhabitants of Pottery Mound during times of trouble in the river valley, Marshall surmises. The answer may lie at Pottery Mound -- but that site, too, poses many questions even after years of investigation.

That's what Peckham means when he says that there are, "too many interesting and much more valid archeological problems to be addressed," to waste time testing "possible but not really plausible theories," about prehistoric visitors from Europe and North Africa.

But, as Winter says, there will always be true believers. Despite his experiences with Howard Elam, Don Shockey still bubbles with a scarcely-repressed enthusiasm.

"One of my patients was running cattle out near Mount Taylor, and he met a man who supposedly was taken to another inscription out there that was identical to the Los Lunas Stone," Shockey says. But the man can't remember just where that was, and Mount Taylor is "a mighty big mountain," ~~Shockey~~

But "there's a lot of other sites," he continues. "I'm getting ready to check out a possible 'boat' or 'ship' petroglyph down south of Corona."

Keep an open mind, Shockey urges. Someplace out there is the proof. "It's the most fantastic story you'll ever hear."