

REVIEWS

Edited by Davis Bitton

Recent Scholarship on New World Archaeology

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Man Across the Sea: Problems in Pre-Columbian Contacts, edited by Carrol L. Riley, J. Charles Kelley, Campbell W. Pennington, and Robert L. Rands. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971, xvii + 552 pp. \$12.50. *Before Columbus: Links Between the Old World and Ancient America*, by Cyrus Gordon. New York: Crown Publishers Inc. 1971. 224 pp. \$6.50.

Latter-day Saints have long had an interest in pre-Columbian ocean travel. Americanist scholars, with a few notable exceptions such as Gordon Ekholm, J. Charles Kelley and a few others, have in the past either rejected such contacts outright or have been highly skeptical of them. However, in the last decade a number of Americanists have begun to look with more favor on the possibility of pre-Columbian contacts across both oceans. Both of the volumes under review reflect this increasing acceptance.

Man Across the Sea contains the contributed papers of 24 scholars who originally presented their ideas before a symposium at the Society for American Archaeology in 1968. The editors have divided the papers into three sections — theory, alleged contact, and plant dispersal. A paper by Jett on “Diffusion versus Independent Development” is an important contribution to the first section. After a brief review of the controversy he points out that in the long run the theoretical importance lies not so much in whether contact between the Old and the New World took place, but rather in the degree of impact such contact might have had on New World culture.

Latter-day Saints have usually assumed that a great deal of evidence for cultural parallels with the Near East should exist in the New World archaeological record. Our “Book of Mormon archaeologists” go to great lengths to establish such parallels, apparently believing that unless we can demonstrate contact the Book of Mormon is in trouble. While I certainly agree that Near Eastern artifacts in a pre-Columbian archaeological context would be beneficial to Book of Mormon claims, I do not agree that they are necessary nor that their absence constitutes a refutation of the volume. Before we get too disturbed over the lack of Near Eastern archaeological parallels with the New World, we had better learn some basic principles of culture change and contact. Just how long would it take the Nephites, for example, to learn that their wheat wouldn’t grow in tropical America and adopt maize from their neighbors? Those areas of culture with which archaeology can best deal (technology, cultural ecology, etc.)

are precisely those areas of culture which change the fastest, and those areas of culture with which archaeology has the most trouble (world view, religion, etc.) are those areas which seem to change the slowest. It is naive to assume that New World Nephite technology (and many other Nephite cultural traits for that matter) was a simple Old World transplant.

Section Two of *Man Across the Sea* contains eight articles and a comments section which deals directly with the diffusion process. Of special interest to L.D.S. readers are the articles by Basil C. Hedrick and John Sorenson. Sorenson was a most happy choice to "bell the Near Eastern-New World diffusionist cat," as he is the best qualified Latter-day Saint to deal with the complex archaeological and anthropological problems. He was also the only Mormon participant in the symposium. Besides offering a most interesting working list of possible parallels between the Near East and the New World, Dr. Sorenson points out how important the "trait complex" (rather than the isolated trait) is to a demonstration of contact. In scanning his list of comparisons one cannot help but be impressed by the number of complexes which rely on anthropological rather than strictly archaeological understanding.

Hedrick's article on Quezalcoatl will probably put off those Mormons who are wont to see the Toltec culture hero as evidence for Christ's visit to the New World. The equating of Christ with Quetzalcoatl by many Mormons is another example of our naive myth building using trait comparisons, and our overcompulsion to find Book of Mormon "evidence." In the search we have either missed or ignored evidence which doesn't fit. For example, there is no documentary evidence to support the birth of Quezalcoatl prior to about 800 A.D., well outside the Book of Mormon time period. Furthermore, he got a girl in trouble, performed ritual suicide by cremating himself, and did a number of other things unbecoming the resurrected Christ. A good example of how our myth building has warped evidence is the Mormon notion that Quetzalcoatl had a white skin. Both he and white are associated with the east in Toltec religious symbolism, but this has no necessary connection to his skin color. In fact, on the Codices he is usually painted black.

Section Three deals with more technical matters in the world of plants. Evidence for transoceanic contact prior to 1492 is presented, although the general tone is one of caution. Since most of the present evidence creates more problems than it solves, the botanists want more data before they start giving answers. A concluding chapter by the editors summarizes the current situation and makes several recommendations for future research. The volume concludes with an excellent bibliography and an adequate index.

Gordon's *Before Columbus* is a disappointing attempt to link Old and New World civilizations in one grand oecumen. The hypothesis is worthy of serious consideration, but unfortunately Gordon has made many errors of logic, theory, and unwarranted assumptions. Space permits us to give only a few examples.

Chapter One is an attempt to show New World-Old World contacts on the basis of evidence from New World clay figurines. Of the millions of these artifacts which have been discovered, some do look very much like Africans or Semites, but Gordon would have us believe that every one is a "sculptured portrait" and that prior to 300 A.D. none of them looks like an American Indian (p. 21). Gordon presents no evidence for these assertions. I see no reason to assume that figurines are necessarily portraits of people any more than dolls

or political cartoons in our own culture faithfully portray the physical characteristics of the individuals they represent.

Chapter Four develops the notion that world-wide trade was established by at least 4000 B.C. Little evidence is presented to support such an early date, and most of the chapter resorts to dogmatic pronouncements. Unfortunately, this technique is common throughout the book.

Chapter Seven deals with linguistic tie-ups. Again Gordon advances claims which are difficult to accept. For example, on page 131 he attributes the naming of a number of rivers (Paraiba, Parana, Paranaiba, Parapanema, Paragua, Paraguai) in the Gran Chaco and Eastern Brazilian areas of South America to some people (he doesn't say who) who named the Euphrates, all before 4000 B.C. If I have followed his reasoning correctly, it hinges on the notion that Euphrates means river (p. 129) and the South American rivers all begin with a word *para* which also means river (p. 131). The assumptions necessary to accept such reasoning are staggering. Is *para* an Indian word which was applied to those South American rivers prior to 4000 B.C. and remained unchanged for five and a half thousand years? Is *para* a Spanish word which means *for*, *to*, or *toward*, functioning here as a prefix to the river names? Or is *para* not the prefix at all but rather *par*? Note the difference this would make in the rendering of the word stems for Gordon's list of rivers: Par-ariba, Par-ana, Par-anaiba, Par-anapanema, Par-agua, Par-aguai. In each case the initial *a* makes the stem a meaningful word, as any second year Spanish student can see.

Chapter Eight on Cultural Transmission is perhaps the weakest chapter. On page 139 Gordon begins with the idea that ancestor worship was characteristic of the Maya and therefore shows contact with the Chinese. He uses two pieces of evidence to support his claim. First, he draws on artifacts known as "mushroom stones" and following Dr. Dennis Lou interprets these to be "a penis representing the male ancestor" (p. 139). Perhaps Gordon and Lou are right in assuming that the mushroom stones are actually male sex symbols. It does not follow that the Maya were therefore ancestor worshippers.

His second piece of evidence is even more difficult to accept. He interprets the lighting of candles in church by the Maya Indians of Chichicastenango, Guatemala, as a Chinese practice transferred to the New World in ancient times, rather than an adoption of the Catholic ritual. His designation of the lay Maya priesthood as "witch doctors" (p. 139) is a pejorative value judgment unbecoming a scholar.

In Chapter Ten Gordon attempts to show how the *Popol Vuh* (a Quiche Maya document) is a sort of New World bible whose inspiration is obviously the Old World Bible. Some Mormons have made much the same case. Gordon's interpretation follows the traditional Christian and Jewish scholarship on the subject of Biblical interpretation, however, and runs counter to Mormon ideas on many crucial issues. That Mormons and Gordon can interpret the same passages of the *Popol Vuh* so differently only argues for the futility of such an approach. Brigham Young was correct in urging that scripture be interpreted in light of the cultural background of the people who wrote it. Gordon's chapter fails to do so.

When Gordon argues against the independent inventionist position, he assumes that the only theoretical model underlying that position is psychic unity. If he were more familiar with current theoretical discussions among

American anthropologists, he would not slip into so simple a position. Much of Gordon's data are as well explained by viewing culture as an adaptive mechanism as by diffusion.

Gordon is guilty of a subtle putdown, however unintentional, of American Indians, when he states that they "could not" have invented civilization. The whole book conveys the impression that anything of merit in the New World got there from the Old.

Much heat and darkness have been generated over the independent invention-diffusion controversy. Unfortunately, Gordon's volume will increase the heat rather than shed light. Not because Gordon is completely in error, not because there was no contact between the two hemispheres before 1492, but because by making unwarranted assumptions he has pushed his data beyond the limits of good scholarship.

For Latter-day Saints the message of these volumes is not "Aha, we knew it all along," but rather "Wow, the situation is more complex than we realized." Clearly some of the basic myths we have built up about Book of Mormon peoples will need reexamination. For example, our simplistic reference to American Indians as Lamanites. If we agree with Gordon that Phoenecians, Chinese, southeast Asians, Japanese, Egyptians, and a host of others might have wandered into the New World, it is going to be difficult to maintain our narrow view of the Lamanites as a valid racial entity with all that other genetic material present before, during, and after Book of Mormon times. The same is true of the cultural situation. How, for example, does one separate a Nephite archaeological site or artifact from all the others?

Perhaps the Book of Mormon does not represent the great pan-hemispheric cultural tableau some have envisioned. Like the Biblical portrayal of Palestine in the Old World, the Book of Mormon may give an ethnocentric account of a small part of the New World's oecumenical civilization.

Until Mormons begin to deal with the Book of Mormon as a cultural record using all the tools of anthropology, and until we free ourselves from our limited historical-archaeological, trait-comparison syndrome, research in American prehistory of the kind reported in these two volumes will have only limited impact on Book of Mormon studies.

Faith, Folklore, and Folly

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Lore of Faith & Folly. Edited by Thomas E. Cheney, assisted by Austin E. Fife and Juanita Brooks. Salt Lake City, The University of Utah Press, 1971. ix + 274 pp. \$7.50.

A Guide for Collectors of Folklore in Utah. By Jan Harold Brunvand. Salt Lake City, The University of Utah Press, 1971. xi + 124 pp. \$6.50.

In a preface to *Lore of Faith & Folly*, William A. Wilson observes that while few states possess Utah's abundance of folklore, few have been more reluctant to collect and study their traditions. With the appearance of two volumes on Utah folklore, both published within the state (as many earlier studies were not), this reluctance seems happily to be disappearing.