

The Newark "Holy Stones": the social context of an enduring scientific forgery

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The Newark "Holy Stones" are one of the most infamous frauds in Ohio archaeology. Long dismissed by professional archaeologists simply as a crude effort to support the ethnocentric notion that the so-called "Lost Tribes of Israel" built the mounds and earthworks of eastern North America, when examined in their social context, they actually shed light on an historically significant debate in 19th century anthropology (Lepper 1992; 1999; Lepper and Gill 2000). The champions of polygenesis believed African Blacks and American Indians were separate species and legitimately could be displaced from their homelands and enslaved. Supporters of monogenesis argued that all humans were descended from Adam and Eve and human slavery was a moral and spiritual outrage. When viewed in this context, the "Holy Stones" appear to be scientific forgeries designed to refute arguments for polygenesis and to undermine the scientific support for slavery promulgated by the "American School" of Physical Anthropology. With the outbreak of the American Civil War, which ultimately would end slavery in the United States, and the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, the monogenesis vs. polygenesis debate became irrelevant and the "Holy Stones" dropped out of mainstream anthropological discussions.

The profound impact of these epic cultural and scientific revolutions so changed the intellectual landscape that it has become difficult for us now to appreciate the context in which the "Holy Stones" forgery was conceived. Yet if some early supporters of abolition thought that by crafting these stones and planting them in mounds they could subvert the dubious scientific doctrine that appeared to justify slavery and possibly prevent a prolonged and bloody war, they could have felt more than justified.

Early Ohio archaeologist Matthew Canfield Read wrote that frauds "will always in some way represent the ideas of the time of the forgery." This is particularly true of the "Holy Stones." Nevertheless, the "Holy Stones" continue to find support in some contemporary special interest groups, such as some fundamentalist Christian sects and supporters of extreme cultural diffusionism. What keeps this forgery, seemingly tailor-made to address an arcane 19th century debate, alive and well in the 21st century? Ironically, while some Biblical literalists still are championing monogenesis and see the "Holy Stones" as "scientific" proof of this doctrine, some extreme diffusionists see them as proof that the indigenous peoples of America did not build the architectural wonders of this continent and that some "lost race" (or "races") of white people properly deserve the credit. Although certainly not all diffusionists are racists (though some incontestably are), assertions of this kind, especially when founded on such weak evidence, are consistent with and give considerable aid and comfort to those who deny the aboriginal American

people the ability to have come up with domesticated plants, systems of writing, and/or monumental architecture on their own.

The principal Newark "Holy Stones," when considered in their historic context, may deserve the sobriquet "Holy," but they were hastily conceived and rather sloppily executed scientific forgeries. It is surprising, but revealing, that they were taken so seriously by so many in the 19th century. It is even more surprising, and correspondingly more revealing, that some today still take them seriously as supposed relics of an ancient Israelite presence in 21st century Ohio.

Two later additions to the "Holy Stones" corpus clearly are hoaxes and are widely, if not universally, recognized to be such (Lepper 1991).

References

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