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**NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER**



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A NON-POLYNESIAN INSCRIPTION FROM CALIFORNIA

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Older readers of this Newsletter may recall the controversy aroused in the mid-1970s by the theories of Professor Howard Barraclough Fell, who claimed to have deciphered ancient inscriptions revealing that the Maori were descendants of an Egyptian naval expedition which explored the Pacific in the third century B.C. (see, for example, New Zealand Herald, 15 Nov 1974, p.1, and 15 March 1975, Section 2, as well as articles and correspondence in the New Zealand Listener from 22 Feb 1975 to 24 May 1975).

Although born in England, Barry Fell has lived much of his life in this country, being a graduate of the University of New Zealand and, until 1964, Associate Professor of Zoology at Victoria University of Wellington. By the time his ideas first broke upon the world, however, he was Professor and Curator of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University.

Since 1975 Fell's interests have shifted from the Pacific to the New World and he has devoted his formidable energy and ingenuity to the study of North American inscriptions which, in his view, record the presence of Celts, Iberians, Phoenicians, Hebrews and others in Pre-Columbian America. It is these American matters that have been the subject of his three widely noted books (Fell, 1978, 1980, 1982). The Polynesian Epigraphic Society, which he founded in 1973, soon dropped the word "Polynesian" from its name as an indication of this shift of focus. It continues to publish voluminously, under the title Epigraphic Society Occasional Publications (ESOP), now devoted almost exclusively to American inscriptions and trans-Atlantic connections.

For this reason, readers will be interested to note the appearance of the first Fellogram for several years which originates from the Pacific. (A Fellogram may be defined as any set of markings identified as an inscription and deciphered by Barry Fell. Other observers commonly perceive Fellograms as meaningless doodles, natural markings, or texts in some other language. It is significant that even after 12 years of ESOP publications, with a lengthening list of correspondents and contributors, Barry Fell is still the only one who produces "decipherments".)

The object on which the latest inscription appears is a bamboo cylinder, 105 mm in length and 46.5 mm in diameter, with a stopper at one end and "a cream-coloured residue...

at its base". As for its provenance, co-author Jon Polansky describes it as "a Polynesian artifact that I purchased from an antique dealer in the San Francisco area" (Fell and Polansky, 1983:245).

Fell at once identified the script as Libyan, and compares it with Libyan inscriptions from Otaki and Whangarei described by Elsdon Best and Charles Devonshire. (Libyan was a favourite script for Fell during his Pacific period, and he found it in sites ranging from Easter Island to Java. I have been unable to trace Fell's exact references to the New Zealand inscriptions, but see Best, 1929:93-4). The bamboo, however, rules out a New Zealand origin, and after some further reasoning he concludes that the most likely source is "in or near the Tuamotu islands" (Fell and Polansky, 1983:249). There follows a Tuamotuan reading and translation:

"Hiri ina ngairo nati nore nau  
Ae huti manga karaini  
Nuwa i(h)o manga kataria nini  
Ngau te ika norea  
Manga kamo kana  
Inaina patea nira na."

"A charm for fishing with power to bewitch  
entice: invoke in this way:-  
"Haul up, hook and bait,  
Deep-sea line descend, let the hook go  
down deep  
The Fish takes a bite, is enticed  
By the hook, flashing and gleaming  
Behold, the line jerks - it is caught!"

This is a fairly typical piece of Fellography. The Polynesian text is, as usual, a kind of gibberish - though the individual words have, of course, all been fished up from the teeming depths of Stimson's dictionary (Stimson and Marshall, 1964). The gaps between inscriptions and reading, and between reading and translation, as always, allow virtually unlimited free play for the imagination.

Nevertheless, something continued to bother me after I had read the paper, - something other than the wild implausibility of the only known example of pre-European writing from the Tuamotus turning up in a San Francisco antique shop in 1983. Unlike many Fellograms, this one did actually look like some kind of writing, and I thought I had seen the script before. After some hunting in reference books, I concluded that it most closely resembled the Batak alphabet of north-central Sumatra (Diringer, 1949:428-9; Nababau, 1981:141-3). The Batak script

is one of a number of related semi-syllabic writing systems of Indonesia and the Philippines, whose main function was the recording of magical, astrological and mythological texts. They were traditionally written on bamboo with an iron stylus, but in the present century they have almost everywhere become obsolete, being replaced by ink and paper and the Roman alphabet.

The Batak hypothesis enabled me to assign a sound value to most of the letters and make one or two plausible identifications of words. My lack of familiarity with both script and language, however, made further progress impossible. At this point, I was very fortunate to meet Mr J. Peter Sarumpaet, of the Department of Indian and Indonesian Studies of the University of Melbourne - a linguist, a native speaker of Batak, and one of the last generation who learned the Batak script in school.

Mr Sarumpaet confirmed my identification of the language. He noted that some of the characters were not very well made, which suggested to him that the inscription was quite modern. He was nevertheless able to provide a complete and plausible reading:

"Di bagasan on	"Inside this
do pagarna	is the medicine.
Ia pagar on	This medicine
goarna	is called
Pagar Parsasuton"	"Pagar Parsasuton"."

The name of the medicine was slightly puzzling at first, but on the assumption that parsasuton is an error for parsusuton - the written difference would be very small - it can be translated as "medicine for copulation". Thus the "cream-coloured residue" referred to by Polansky was evidently of an aphrodisiac nature.

Alongside the inscription on the cylinder are drawings of a number of creatures, some vaguely fish-like in appearance. It may be that these stimulated Prof. Fell's imagination and suggested the theme of his decipherment. With a better knowledge of Batak iconography, however, Mr Sarumpaet was able to identify these as cockroaches, a centipede and a worm.

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