

# Epigraphy: The Study of Ancient Inscriptions

by **James L. Guthrie**

Epigraphy is the study of ancient inscriptions, usually found on hard surfaces such as stone. NEARA members use epigraphy to study contacts between Americans and other people before the late 15th century.

Some archaeologists say that the case for early voyages to America rests almost entirely on epigraphic evidence (e.g., Lepper 1995), but inscriptions account for only a small part of the evidence. The annotated bibliography *Pre-Columbian Contact with the Americas Across the Oceans* by Sorenson and Raish (1996), the best key to the literature on Pre-Columbian contact, has more than 5000 entries but only about a hundred that concern epigraphy. With so much evidence of other kinds, the presence of a few Old World inscriptions is to be expected.

## Is This a Legitimate Subject for Study?

The majority opinion of American archaeologists is that there are no authentic Old World inscriptions in the Americas and that none should be expected because there were no proven foreign contacts except by the Norse at Newfoundland. Even the Norse inscriptions are considered spurious by opponents of early voyaging. Evidence indicating early sea travel is not welcomed by those already convinced that it did not or could not have happened. Common arguments against early contact are as follows:

The Oceans were barriers to travel, not highways, and people simply lacked the capacity to sail or paddle more than a few miles from shore before the exploits of the great European navigators of the 15th century.

There is no convincing archaeological evidence for the presence of foreigners except at L'Anse aux Meadows. Foreign intrusions invariably leave evidence in the archaeological record, and other kinds of evidence must be rejected until we find material goods that are diagnostic of a foreign society. Furthermore, such evidence must be found in good archaeological context by a qualified expert. It is argued that in the absence of such evidence, it is pointless to attempt analysis

of any American inscription which, almost by definition, must be spurious.

All non-archaeological evidence (mythology, language, art styles, technology, etc.) is merely impressionistic and based on superficial comparisons. Biological evidence (genetics, viruses, parasites, etc.) is ignored because of its unfamiliarity and technical nature.

Almost every case that involves an "inscription" has been labeled a hoax, and a debunking story has been concocted about how it must have happened. These "proofs" of fraud, though contrived and based on selective use of information, have been taken at face value by scholars who lack the time or background to make their own investigations. Foolish "translations" and fanciful reconstructions of prehistory based on inscriptions have created the impression that this whole subject is best avoided by the respectable scholar.

Many reputable scholars have demonstrated the weaknesses of these arguments and hold that early travel to and from America probably was not unusual, and that a number of convincing demonstrations are on record. Inscriptions themselves are artifacts, and it is unrealistic to expect diagnostic in-ground evidence for every intrusion, a point that has been explained quite well by David Kelley (1995). In a few instances, artifacts from contacts known from the historical record have been found after decades of searching in the right places.

What Can be Learned from an "Inscription?"

LYCIAN

Symbol	Transliteration
Ⲁ	a
ⲁ	e
Ⲃ ⲃ	b
Ⲅ	β
ⲅ Ⲇ	g
ⲇ	d
Ⲉ	i
ⲉ	w
Ⲋ	z
ⲋ	θ
Ⲍ	y
ⲍ	k
Ⲏ	q
ⲏ	l
Ⲑ	m
ⲑ	n
Ⲓ	m̄
ⲓ	n̄
Ⲕ	u
ⲕ	p
Ⲗ	r
ⲗ	s
Ⲙ	t
ⲙ	ā
Ⲏ	e
ⲏ	h
Ⲑ	x

CYPRIOΤ

Symbol	Translit.								
Ⲁ	a	ⲁ	e	Ⲃ	i	ⲃ	o	Ⲅ	u
ⲅ	pa	Ⲇ	pe	ⲇ	pi	Ⲉ	po	ⲉ	pu
Ⲋ	ta	ⲋ	te	Ⲍ	ti	ⲍ	to	Ⲏ	tu
ⲏ	ka	Ⲑ	ke	ⲑ	ki	Ⲓ	ko	ⲓ	ku
Ⲕ	sa	ⲕ	se	Ⲍ	si	ⲍ	so	Ⲏ	su
						ⲏ	zo		
Ⲑ	ma	ⲑ	me	Ⲓ	mi	ⲓ	mo	Ⲕ	mu
ⲕ	na	Ⲍ	ne	ⲍ	ni	Ⲏ	no	ⲏ	nu
Ⲑ	wa	ⲑ	we	Ⲓ	wi	ⲓ	wo		
Ⲕ	ya					ⲕ	yo		
ⲕ	ra	Ⲍ	re	ⲍ	ri	Ⲏ	ro	ⲏ	ru
Ⲑ	la	ⲑ	le	Ⲓ	li	ⲓ	lo	Ⲕ	lu
ⲕ	ksa	Ⲍ	kse						

Above: Cypriot Syllabary

Left: Lycian Alphabet

If the signs correspond to an Old World alphabet or syllabary and the inscription predates historic contact, we have strong evidence for the presence of someone in antiquity who used that script. It is not necessary to "read" the inscription or even to determine the language in order to have valuable information. Sometimes the approximate date of use and probable region of origin can be deduced from the signs themselves. However, identification of the language does not follow from identification of the script. For example, Japanese sometimes is written phonetically with Latin letters. Popular writers often use "language" to mean script, stating, for example, that the Grave Creek and the Davenport inscriptions have letters from several different "languages."

It is very unusual to derive a satisfactory literal "translation" from the typical short inscription. The long, formal, inscriptions of the Old World are familiar, but most inscriptions worldwide are graffiti, often a single name, crudely made with non-standard signs, and are essentially indecipherable. It is only the long, well-made, potentially decipherable ones that are apt to be recorded and publicized.

## What is the Difference Between Decipherment and Translation?

Decipherment consists of figuring out how the system works and, in the best cases, to recognize a word or two and what kind of language is involved. The language itself is likely to be extinct or far removed from any current language. The first words to be identified have been the names and titles of important people, place names, items of trade, or words that can be guessed from the context. Good guesses lead to an expanding corpus of apparently correct words, much like what happens in solving a crossword puzzle except that only a small percent is likely to be reconstructed with confidence.

In contrast, a successful translation requires a literal reconstruction of the exact intent of the author, rendered in a modern language in a manner that is acceptable to other competent epigraphers. This rarely happens, giving the impression that epigraphy is a highly subjective matter. But even translations of the classical Greek writers into English are controversial, and the translation of poetry even more so. That is why it is relatively unimportant to be able to "read" American inscriptions. If authentic, they may be in an American language expressed only approximately with modified foreign signs.

## How Does a Competent Investigator Proceed?

The first step is to make sure the marks are not natural features in the stone (this can be very deceptive) and to estimate the approximate age of the cuts from patination and weathering. Some experienced geologists are very good at this. Under certain circumstances, patina can be dated chemically, but this expensive method has not yet become standard practice. A high percentage of short "inscriptions" turn out to be initials, cattle brands, survey marks, indigenous signs, and other such carvings made within the last 300 years. It is ridiculous to believe, as some skeptics maintain, that every conceivable alternative explanation must be eliminated before it is permissible to consider the possibility of writing.

A long inscription or cluster of short inscriptions that use the same signs provide an opportunity to test for the presence of writing. Two basic procedures are to construct a frequency table for the signs and to identify repeated sequences indicative of writing. The use of only 20-30 signs indicates an alphabet, whereas most syllabaries (signs representing both a consonant and vowel combination) have at least 50 characters and often many more. The frequency distribution can be compared with those of sets of the same signs in other places in order to identify the signary or signs and obtain clues about the language.

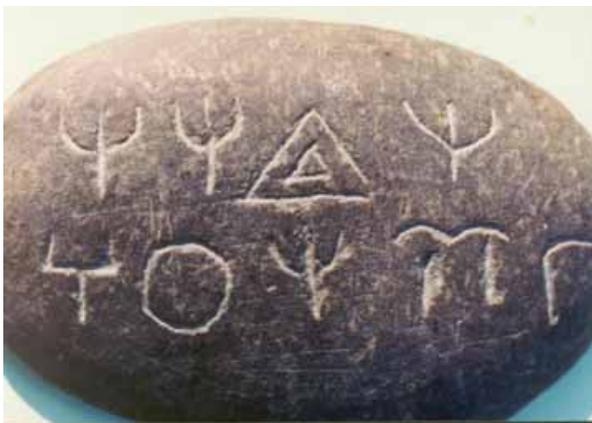
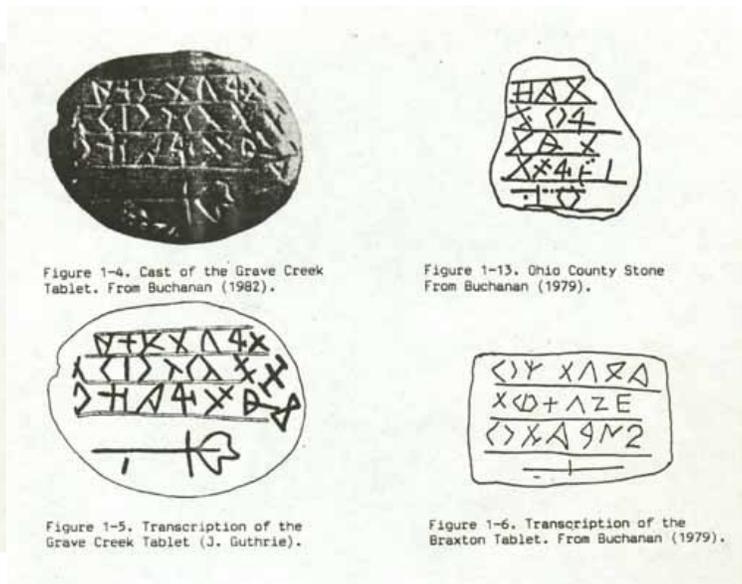
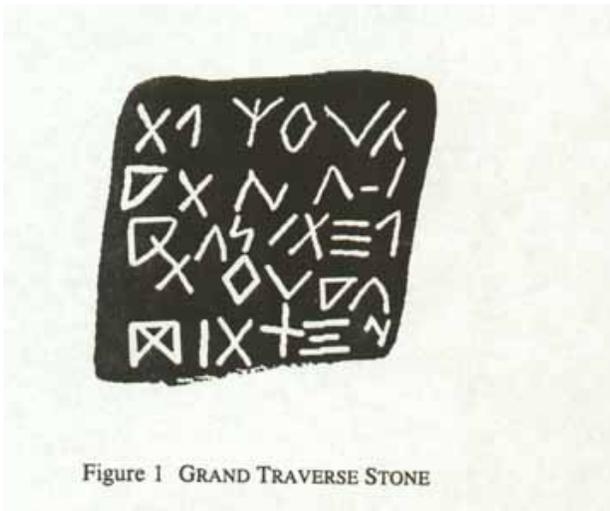
What Scripts are Involved?

PHOENICIAN	
Symbol	Transliteration
𐤀	ʾ
𐤁	b
𐤂	g
𐤃	d
𐤄	h
𐤅	w
𐤆	z
𐤇	ḥ
𐤈	t
𐤉	y
𐤊	k
𐤋	l
𐤌	m
𐤍	n
𐤎	s
𐤏	ʾ
𐤐	p
𐤑	ṣ
𐤒	q
𐤓	r
𐤔	š
𐤕	t

HEBREW			
Old Hebrew	Modern Hebrew	Name	Transliteration
𐤀	א	aleph	ʾ
𐤁	ב	beth	b
𐤂	ג	gimel	g
𐤃	ד	daleth	d
𐤄	ה	he	h
𐤅	ו	waw	w
𐤆	ז	zayin	z
𐤇	ח	ḥeth	ḥ
𐤈	ט	teth	t
𐤉	י	yod	y
𐤊	כ (ך)	kaph	k
𐤋	ל	lamed	l
𐤌	מ (ם)	mem	m
𐤍	נ (ן)	nun	n
𐤎	ס	samekh	s
𐤏	ע	ayin	ʾ
𐤐	פ (ף)	pe	p
𐤑	צ (ץ)	ṣade	ṣ
𐤒	ק	qoph	q
𐤓	ר	reš	r
𐤔	ש	šin	š/s
𐤕	ת	taw	t

The Phoenician Alphabet Compared With The Hebrew Alphabet

A large number have been claimed, but most seem to be varieties of Mediterranean and Aegean scripts from about 300 BC to the early centuries AD. Most derive from the early Semitic alphabets, which developed differently in various places over hundreds of years, and some seem to incorporate Cypriot signs. Unless there is a nearly perfect correspondence with a well-attested system, it is a common mistake to be too specific about identity. There almost certainly were many short-lived local scripts, with no surviving examples. Some form of Iberic script seems most common in America such as those found in the Grave Creek, Braxton, Ohio County, Grand Traverse, Genesee stones, as well as several from Paraguay. The dates indicated by the Iberic, Libyan, and Hebrew inscriptions that I think may be authentic cluster around the time of Christ, plus or minus about 300 years.



**Above left: Grand Traverse Stone**

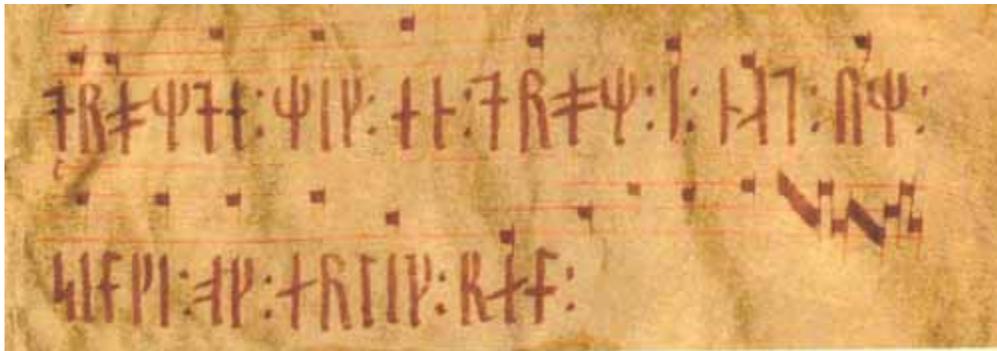
**Above right (clockwise from top left)**

- Grave Creek Stone
- Ohio County Stone
- Braxton Tablet
- Grave Creek Stone

**Bottom left: Genesee Stone**



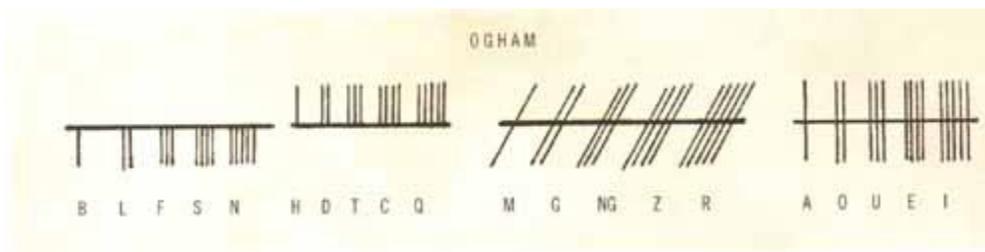
**Above: Anglo-Saxon Runic Alphabet**  
**Below: Medieval Norse Runes**



Dates for inscriptions in the Viking and Medieval runic alphabet, of course, are much later. The definitive catalog of purported runic inscriptions has been published by Carlson (1998).

What is the significance of Ogam in America?

Ogam is a type of tally system using parallel cuts on the corners or surfaces of stones. It may have evolved as a calendar device that assigned both numbers and names to months. Its origins have been debated for centuries without resolution, and the significance of American examples is that they seem to be of an older type than Ogams known elsewhere. If confirmed, this would be an important contribution to knowledge about its history and distribution.



**Ogham Alphabet**

At some point, it began to serve as an alphabet for recording names on gravestones. Almost all surviving examples are in Ireland where they were best preserved and, I think, most recently cut. Ogam appears in Irish mythology as secret, magical lore, leading to the claim that Ogam was invented in Ireland in about the fourth century, despite one Irish tradition

that it came from Iberia. As far as is known, Ogam never was used as a writing system in the literary sense, but merely to record names or to give secret signals.

Because of its simplicity, Ogam is easily confused with other kinds of engravings made with parallel lines. When Barry Fell called the Ogam alphabet to the attention of the American public in his book *America B.C.* (1976) claiming American examples, hundreds of Ogams inscriptions were found by his readers in such things as cattle brands, day counts and Plains Indian renderings of horse's manes. This gave critics much amusement as well as a sure-fire way of discrediting the whole field. This situation is treated in detail in *Ancient American Inscriptions: Plow Marks or History?* (McGlone, et al. 1993). The strongest professional support for American examples has come from archaeologist and epigrapher David Kelley (1990), who is known for important contributions toward decipherment of Mayan.

## One Hundred Fifty Years of Rejection

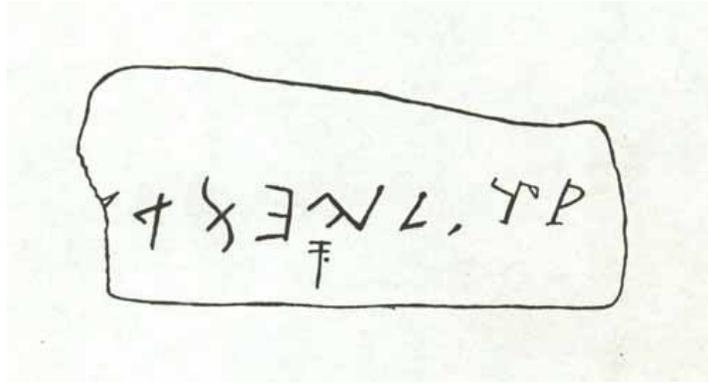
Two quotations from Fowke (1901) illuminate the origins of skepticism about engraved stones. Squier and Davis wrote in 1847:

"Hardly a year passes unsignalized by the announcement of the discovery of tablets of stone or metal bearing strange or mystical inscriptions ... But they either fail to withstand an analysis of the alleged circumstances surrounding their discovery, or resolve themselves into very simple natural productions."

And according to Garrick Mallery (1886):

"Any inscriptions purporting to be pre-Columbian, showing apparent use of alphabetic characters, signs of the Zodiac, or other evidences of culture higher than that known among the North American Indians, must be received with caution, but the pictographs may be altogether genuine, and their erroneous interpretation may be the sole ground for discrediting them."

With these principles in mind, Cyrus Thomas included twelve pages on inscribed tablets in his influential Smithsonian treatise of 1894, and the die was cast.



**Bat Creek Stone**

Modern skeptical writers have stuck with these nineteenth century views, adding few new insights. Their dismissals of American inscriptions are basically paraphrases of Thomas.

### Fixed Versus Portable Inscriptions

Most famous American inscriptions are "portable;" i.e., they are on small stones or metal objects that can be carried around, inviting the claim that they were "planted." For this reason, their value as evidence for early voyaging is compromised. Even the Bat Creek Stone, found in a sealed mound by the Smithsonian Institution has been claimed as a "plant," and the evolution of debunking stories devised to explain it is a textbook example of this process.

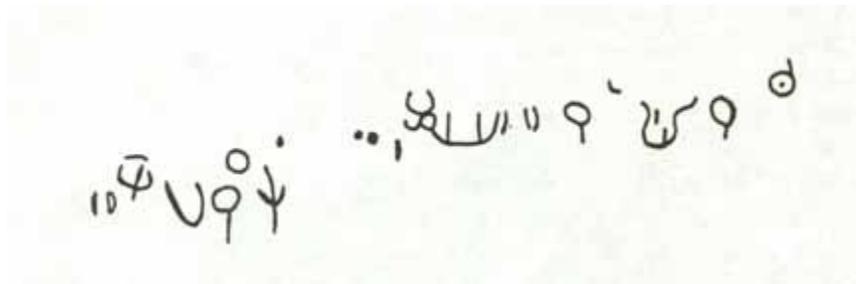
Inscriptions on fixed objects such as boulders or canyon walls are another matter. They are not easily made and are subject to weathering and patination so that in some cases they have been demonstrated convincingly to predate historic contact. Despite their potential importance, they are known to relatively few people because of their typically remote locations, but they may provide stronger evidence than portable inscriptions.

### Who are the Epigraphers Who Work on American Material?

They are primarily amateurs who lack formal credentials in epigraphy, although some have backgrounds in cryptanalysis, linguistics, geology, or other specialties that are useful in making judgments about the age of rock carvings and the nature of the scripts involved. A few, such as Cyrus Gordon and David Kelley, are professional epigraphers. Certainly, several avocational epigraphers have published far-fetched "translations," reinforcing the perception that American inscriptions are not to be taken seriously. Barry Fell was the most

famous of these. In essence, Fell made a number of insightful discoveries that deserve serious study, but his tendency to create off-the-cuff "translations" of a great many engravings from questionable drawings and photos has undermined his credibility. Recitation of his errors has become a standard and effortless way to dismiss the whole field.

An exemplary study has been published recently by McGlone and Leonard (1996) who studied 119 petroglyph panels in Colorado with groups of letters that correlate almost perfectly with those of a North Arabian alphabet. The patina on six of these signs was dated chemically to 1900-2300 years ago, the approximate time of use of similar alphabets in the Near East. After more than ten years of work, the provisional conclusion is that these panels probably contain writing, but in a language that has yet to be identified. A more definitive outcome was expected, but the implied Arabian influence fits with linguistic and genetic evidence developed by others, and further progress is to be expected. This kind of work is not for those who lack patience or who demand quick solutions.



**North Arabian Correlation to Petroglyphs in Colorado**

What About "Proven Hoaxes?"

Anyone who studies the scripts of the better known cases is apt to be chastised for working with "known frauds" or "proven hoaxes." This situation is due to repeated assertions that the Kensington, Grave Creek, Davenport, Newark, Bat Creek, Spirit Pond, Paraiba and a few other inscriptions have been demonstrated beyond doubt to be modern productions.



**Newark Holy Stone**



**Kensington Stone**



**Spirit Pond Inscription Stone**

Such assertions depend on selective use of data, often misrepresented. It is not uncommon for debunkers to embellish their stories with speculation presented as fact. A recently published analysis of events connected with the Newark Decalog can only be described as a fantasy. However, the "proofs" can seem convincing to people who lack more complete knowledge of the case. They are taken at face value by detractors and repeated as a way of discouraging further research. In every case named above, careful re-examination has raised serious questions about the quality of prior studies and the veracity of some of the investigators. There is a tendency to want every case to be "closed" in a legalistic way, never to be reopened. Although there seldom is enough hard evidence to make a final judgment, there usually is material that can be selected to bolster a previous belief, one way or the other.

It would take many pages to give a complete bibliography for each case with the traditional "proofs" of fraud and the more recent rehabilitating research, but I will comment briefly on four cases that, in my opinion, best illuminate what goes on.

The analysis of the Grave Creek case presented in *The Review of Archaeology* (1994) by David Kelley (Epigraphy and Other Fantasies: Review of Williams) would be my choice as the most instructive single study because it illuminates what can happen when bad epigraphy couples with sloppy historical research. Every student of epigraphic controversy should read this paper.

The Kensington Stone has generated by far the most extensive literature, but those who maintain it is a "proven hoax" seem to rely almost entirely on the sometimes preposterous claims of Erik Wahlgren (1958). Authenticity is demonstrated (convincingly to me) by the

work of Richard Nielsen (1986-89), Robert Hall (1982, 94), and Rolf Nilsestuen (1994), all listed in the extensive bibliography by Suzanne Carlson (1998).

The Bat Creek case is unique, having been presented recently in the widely circulated *Biblical Archaeology Review* (1993) by chief rehabilitator J. Huston McCulloch. Early commentators, following Cyrus Thomas, thought the inscription was Cherokee. It has only recently entered the hoax category, due to the contorted claims of Mainfort and Kwas (1991, 93) and the milder but facetious treatment of McCarter (1993). McCulloch gives a complete bibliography in the account he assembled for NEARA (1998).



**The Davenport Calendar Stone**



**Davenport "Cremation" Scene**

This author has worked on the case of the three Davenport inscriptions. Several years of study, helped considerably by exchanges with the chief debunker Marshall McKusick, have convinced me that whoever inscribed the stones was familiar with early scripts of Morocco, and that events at Davenport were considerably different from those imaginatively reconstructed by McKusick.

It is interesting to note that most debunking stories hinge on the character and veracity of the finders and their associates and show confusion about the nature of ancient scripts. The typical story requires respectable people, sometimes a great many, to have lied. On the other hand, the rehabilitations tend to involve scientific tests, modern linguistics, and a much more complete understanding of ancient signaries. Anyone with a serious interest in this phenomenon is encouraged to pick a case and to spend a year or two becoming familiar with the pertinent script(s), digesting what has been published, and critically evaluating the arguments. If nothing else, this exercise will give an appreciation for the fragility of received wisdom.

## Conclusion

Apparent Old World writing in the Americas has not been taken seriously by academic scholars because incompetent presentations and fanciful claims far outweigh sober studies by more cautious and better-informed investigators and because of the stigma attached to the study of a politically incorrect subject. Many Americanists now accept the possibility that early explorers and traders left a few inscriptions, but the subject is considered trivial and without a potential payoff that would justify the effort required to obtain the background and funding necessary for professional evaluation. It remains to be seen whether recent revelations about seafaring skills of ancient sailors on both oceans will change this situation.

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