

FORGERY

Chapter X

Throughout the long bitter controversy over the authenticity of these artifacts, blatant charges of fraud and forgery bespattered these Michigan artifacts with unmitigated odium. Like any mass furor once taking hold, rumors multiply and whether factual or fabricated rarely seems to make a difference.

In rendering an expert opinion, a leading anthropologist, Prof. Morris Jastrow, of the University of Pennsylvania, declined to view the actual specimens since a photograph appeared to him sufficient saying: "In view of the wide publicity given to the report of the discovery of 'Assyrian' antiquities in a Michigan mound, I beg you to announce that the tablets and monuments claimed to have been excavated are willful forgeries remarkable only for their clumsy character and the great ignorance of the forger. Photographs of the objects have been sent to me and a glance is sufficient to reveal the true character of the find. The inscriptions are largely a horrible mixture of Phoenician, Egyptian and ancient Greek characters taken at random from a comparative table of alphabets such as is found at the back of Webster's Dictionary. As for the cuneiform characters found on the tablets, they are in the main, variations of a single letter which the forger happened to stumble across perhaps in the article 'Cuneiform' of Appleton's Encyclopedia . . ." This opinion of Prof. Jastrow accepted as "expert" by others, colored statements of all others that followed. "Fraud" said Prof. Dorsey—"Humbug of the first water" asserted Prof. Emerson. Newspapers, as well as the academic community,

thrive on scandal such as this and Detroit papers particularly let no opportunity slip by in order to keep the controversy geared to fever pitch.

Suppose for a moment that these engraved characters had in fact been copied from a table of comparative letters taken from Webster's Dictionary or Appleton's Encyclopedia, as Prof. Jastrow assures us. Did Prof. Jastrow explain how one could form a word or a sentence, given such a table of letters, if he lacked knowledge of the language? Could a house-painter such as James Scotford, with little formal education, be presumed to assemble strange characters from a table in order to write words and sentences correctly in Greek, Phoenician or Egyptian? To be able to inscribe this material would not such acumen be a prerequisite? Would he not need to know the language? Were the inscriptions "horrible mixtures?" Was the cuneiform character I H S such a variation? The academic world so charged and would have us so believe.

Under no circumstances should any forger be considered stupid. To do an expert job, and a forger needs to be expert, he must possess knowledge and guile far above that of his contemporaries. Ordinary skill is insufficient. Witness, as an example, one of the most superb deceptions of our time—or probably of any other time—forged paintings alleged to be from the brush of Vermeer, put on canvas by the Dutch painter van Meggren. Masterful beyond conception—his was a skill that demands utmost admiration rather than scorn.

Ancient Egyptians were past masters in the art of deception. Copper turned to gold under their skilled hand. The Leyden Papyrus and that in Stockholm, describe hundreds of ways of duplicating precious gems—ruby, emerald, topaz—the most fantastic being a perfect pearl. Human ingenuity being what it is, no field long remains free of circumvention. Because this known human weakness permeates the civilized world, any charge of forgery and deceit automatically is accepted as fact and attempting to prove otherwise requires more than a Sisyphus.

All substances or writings alleged by "experts" to be fraudulent or forged, are not in fact fraudulent or forged. Sometimes a

pendulum swings both ways—writings alleged to be forged turn out to be authentic while that accepted as authentic later is found fraudulent. The famous “Cardiff Giant” earned a small fortune before tests proved it to be gypsum; the equally famous “Pitdown Man” long hailed by top echelon anthropologists as the “missing link” was exposed as a hoax—and surprisingly enough one committed by a member of their own profession! Tablets known as the Tel el Amarna tablets, recovered from a Nilotic site—held by every outstanding museum director and archaeologist both in Europe and America, to be rank forgeries—are now recognized as priceless diplomatic correspondence dating from about 1500 B.C.; lid of an Egyptian sarcophagus resting in one of our better known museums—authenticated and dated by experts at 300 B.C.—registered a date of less than a century when subjected to carbon-14 tests; the Dead Sea Scrolls, authenticity of which had been roundly denounced for seven long years by archaeologists—and when offered the originals for a pittance of their present value, Yale experts said “No thank you, we have photographs”—had their early date confirmed when carbon-14 tests of linen wrapping gave readings placing beyond all doubt that these hidden records had actually been written 2,000 and more years ago. These samples typify “expert” opinion—opinion such as that confronting the Michigan artifacts.

Before 1950, opinions biased or bigoted, stood without challenge—no one dared to challenge—just as no one dared to challenge Prof. Jastrow. Today, the situation with reference to dating has taken a right-about face due to Dr. Willard Libby’s invention of a nuclear time-clock—carbon-14 dating which has completely outmoded the dogmatic *ipse dixit* former method. In addition to dating, analytical methods of detecting forged handwriting now also exist.

Anciently, Chinese worked out a method to detect forged characters. This in itself is no mean feat considering that they have over 39,000 different combinations. Our own methods of detection however, only emerged since the turn of the twentieth century. Since 1900, several notorious cases involving identification

of handwriting received world-wide publicity—the famous Dreyfus case, the Lindbergh case and the Weinberger case. Due to wide-spread public interest involving forged handwriting, a more scientific approach to the study was undertaken early in the twentieth century to determine whether or not identity of writing, or lack of identity, could be accurately analyzed and forgery detected.

Study in this field gained momentum shortly after the Dreyfus trial in France where handwriting had played a provocative role. Dreyfus, a French army officer, had been accused of turning over secret military information in the form of a written *bordereau* to the German Embassy in Paris. Evidence turned on a point of handwriting which experts of the day identified as being that of Dreyfus. As a result of their testimony, Dreyfus was convicted and exiled to Devil's Island in the Caribbean. Sensational aspects of the case kept it alive—many influential persons, including Emil Zola, believed Dreyfus was innocent. After an interminable lapse of twenty years, handwriting on the *bordereau* was reexamined and conclusively proved to be that of another. As an outgrowth of that case and the international scandal accompanying it, serious study of a systematic analysis was undertaken by which handwriting of any individual could be established and disputed documentary material evaluated.

Perhaps most celebrated example, still fresh in mind, is the Lindbergh kidnapping case. Several handwritten ransom notes had been received—three or four of which appeared to have been written by the same hand. The writing bore unmistakable earmarks of foreign schooling. In questioning suspects, police interrogated many persons including Hauptmann. Provided with paper and pencil, each suspect was required to write from dictation a paragraph containing several words that included the letter "X"—of obvious foreign extraction on the ransom notes. Hauptmann's writing produced the only specimen containing the idiosyncratic "X"—duplicating that written in the ransom notes.

Again, in the kidnapping case of the Weinberger baby, Federal agents checked handwriting of over two million persons on file in

the automobile licensing division of New York State and picked out one—who in fact was the actual kidnapper—through a quirk in his writing identical with that on the ransom note. One against two million!

How do they do it? Procedure is not highly complicated—actually the basic principle is comparatively simple. Most persons recognize writing of those they know without stopping to analyze reasons. Each individual's writing has certain unmistakable characteristics peculiar to himself. Those characteristics rarely change. One person's letters may be tall, angular, thin and distinguished—another's may be heavy, short and untidy. Letters may be tightly grouped or arbitrarily spread loosely over a page. Long letters from one line frequently intermix with high letters of a lower line—long tail of a "y" might curl into a tall looped "h" or "l" from the line below. Endings, such as that on an "e", string out with a long tail—other tails go up or down, some end abruptly with no tail. No one normally writes with premeditation—script flows unconsciously. Frequently, one runs into messy writing, not alone illegible but with letters of uneven size or slant or even smeared—and he who writes that way is oblivious to its untidiness. Professional examiners of questioned documents spot the letter "t" for cross-bars. Cross-bars may fly high above the stem, others cross low—some extend far to the right, others far left, some look like a star while a few curl over the top. Little circles crop up over a dotted "i"; "g" may appear as a figure eight. Such individualistic idiosyncracies examiners of questioned writing recognize instantly. Federal agents checking over two million applications for driver's license, picked out only one—foreign letter "X" was quickly spotted from the Lindbergh ransom notes.

Why would it not be possible to apply these same principles to the Michigan inscriptions?

In both kidnapping cases a known sample existed on the ransom note with which to compare later writing. While authors of those notes were not known, known specimens of their writing existed. Examiners could isolate one person given a known specimen. This procedure however would not hold true of the Michigan

inscriptions since no one was actually known—but that does not mean that we are helpless before we start. True, one man had been accused by the academic community—but accusation is not proof and no proof was offered. We may not be able to pin-point any one person and identify that person as the one who inscribed these tablets but most assuredly we can, by isolating any single tablet, determine whether the person who wrote that tablet also wrote all of the others. In other words, by comparison of one plate with another, a determination can be made as to whether the person who made our sample also inscribed the entire collection—or whether no two specimens are alike indicating that a number of persons did so. That we can do.

Two dissimilar methods of incising appear on these plates—first by carving direct on copper, slate or stone and second by stamping on wet clay. Stamped impressions on clay will be found on Plates 12 and 12A. In order to impress a letter or character on wet clay by stamping, a die-stamp would first need to be made. On these two plates, clean-cut sharp edges bespoke use of a metal stamp which, being cast, would imply something analogous to our cast type font. Again, if only one tablet required inscribing, obviously it would have been simpler to scratch it direct with a stylus. Of clay tablets on which die-stamps had been used, no two have like letters of the same size or thickness which indicates that many sets of die-stamps had been employed and in all probability many more plates must once have existed—for labor in casting die-stamps would imply more uses than one. If these die-stamps had been cast in metal and cast in various sizes, here then is evidence of movable type before Gutenberg. If these plates had been forged, any person so doing must first have troubled to fabricate a mold or pattern from which to cast these letters and characters in metal—both Egyptian hieroglyph as well as cuneiform. No forger wastes time—he acts quickly expecting substantial returns. Casting requires time, knowledge and skill—no forger could afford that time.

The second method of inscribing was done with a very sharp instrument—probably of copper—and applied direct to slate, cop-

per or hard granite. Most of the collection takes this form. Engraving tools, again, show different cutting points—some graving with a fine, delicate line, others blunt. One beautifully lettered plate, shown in obverse and reverse as Plates 16A and 16B, had been engraved in a highly distinctive style. Letters carved on hard granite, wedge-shaped, imitated cuneiform—redrawn as Figure 13. Each line, carefully spaced as with ruled guide lines—each letter stands alone, uniform in height, thickness, spacing and slant. Wedge-shaped horizontal strokes were not attached to the vertical stem but left small spaces between—each letter left an exact amount of space. Inscribing is fluent in that no hesitation appears—as would have been apparent had spacing between letters been irregular. Measured symmetry further indicates that whosoever engraved Plate 16 was familiar with that language which he wrote. Had he not been, lack of knowledge of the language would reflect itself in irregular spacing between letters or in size or shape of letter. Forgers, unfamiliar with a text or a language, unconsciously pause before proceeding in order to check copy and each time a pause occurs, momentary hesitation alerts a trained eye. When writing with pen and ink, little unsuspected “puddles” collect when hesitation occurs and any suspicious puddle reveals a wealth of information. In engraving, no “puddle” of ink collects but that same moment of hesitation reflects itself in irregular spacing. Copied writing lacks fluency. On Plate 16 letters are uniform as to spacing, size, weight of line and simulated cuneiform. No one could doubt but that one person engraved both sides and that he understood what he wrote with fluency, sureness and no slight hesitation.

Even the untrained eye of an inexperienced amateur must detect a wide margin of contrast between Plate 16 and Plate 17.

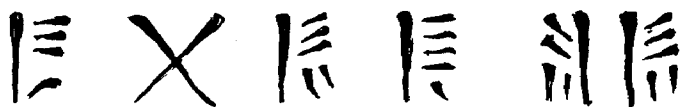


Fig. 13



Plate 16A

Lettering on one bears no slight affinity for the other—yet both specimens spring from the hand of a highly trained letter-artist. Yet—how different. Figure 14 betrays an architectural hand—clean, sure, fine line stripped of unessentials, decisive and dignified. Horizontal strokes join the vertical with no space between—contrary to that noted in Figure 13. These fine lines suggest knowledge of mechanical instruments—T square, triangles and ruling pen of a draftsman. This writing exemplifies fluency with no “feathering” or “patching” of any single fine stroke—a most difficult assignment in thin line lettering where a draftsman could not under any circumstances erase or alter a letter once it had been carved on slate. Fixed permanently on first stroke—practically a human impossibility for a forger lacking

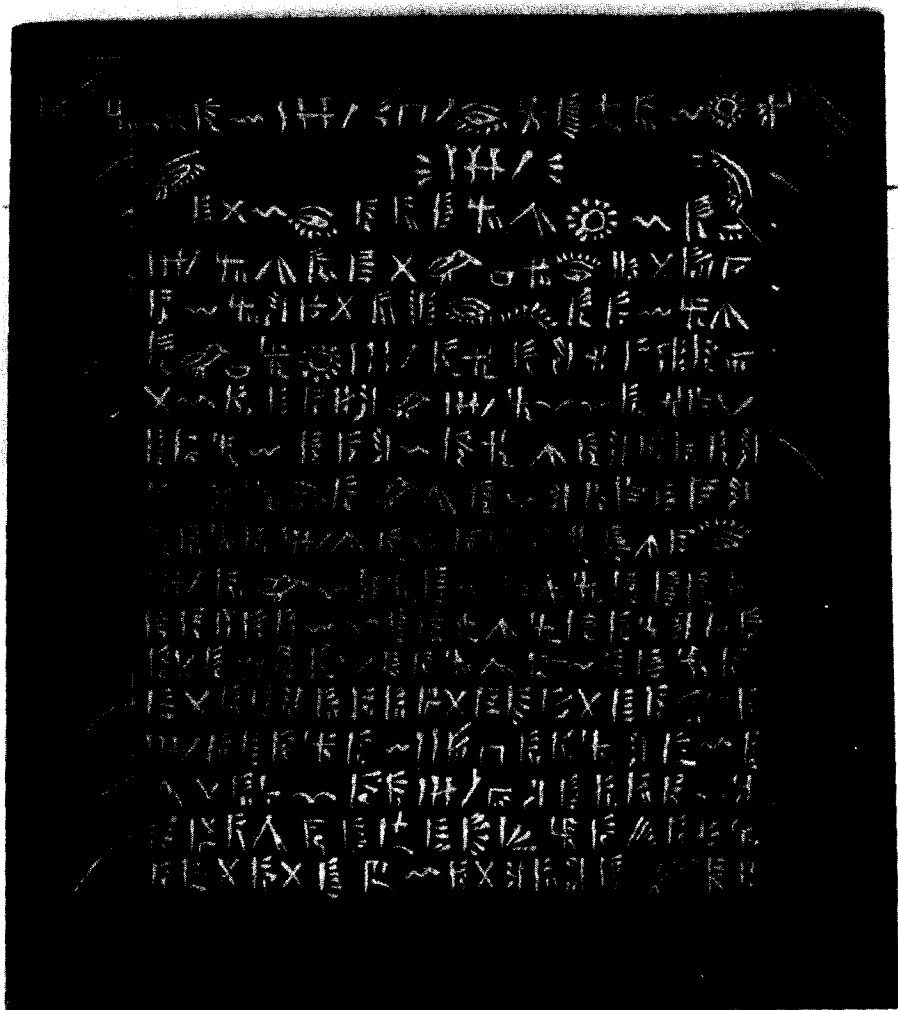


Plate 16B

knowledge of the language. Like the preceding plate, the person would need to understand what he was writing. Otherwise, how could any one be expected to come up with fifty or a hundred perfect specimens showing no erasures, no hesitation of spacing, no "feathering" "patching" nor error? How long might it take for a



Fig. 14

forger to attain fluency necessary to perfect a flawless plate? These two plates are superb examples of fluent writing by different trained hands neither having hesitation, puddle or error.

Other major stumbling blocks here confront any forger. Many of these Michigan tablets read from right to left—a customary practice anciently in certain areas and at certain periods of time. If one believes that he could copy characters with sufficient éclat and not be detected, let him try writing them backward as is done here—a matter where no dictionary table would guide him. Some plates read from left to right, some from right to left but others read boustrophedon—up one line and down the next, one line from right to left, the next line from left to right—quirks that only one with long familiarity in writing a language would understand. In accusing one man of forgery, some thought might well be given to matters of this nature.

In Egyptian hieroglyphics, birds and animals face into the direction in which that line is to be read. On one plate birds face in opposite directions—indicating boustrophedon. In copying, if one unknowingly decided which way a bird faced, more obstacles than he suspects entrap him. Unconsciously set down detail of the nature, right or wrong, indicates knowledge of language and writing—fluency or lack of it. Likewise it presupposes a fair-sized group sufficiently intelligent to be able to read it.

Just as we find illegible script amongst our handwriting, so did it exist in years gone by. This example in Figure 15 so crudely done, could hardly have arisen with either of the letter artists creating the two plates noted above. Crude though this one may be, yet he who wrote it knew what he was writing. Crude work such as this

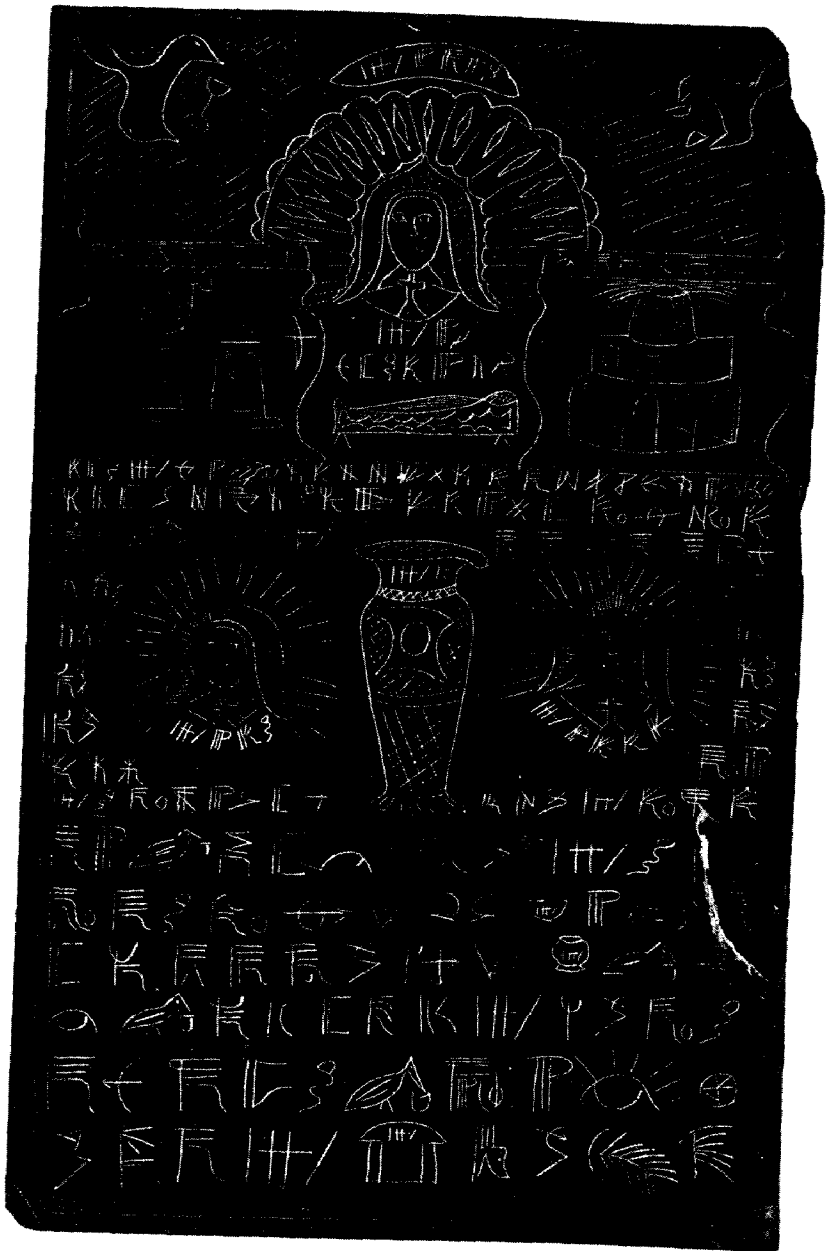


Plate 17



Fig. 15

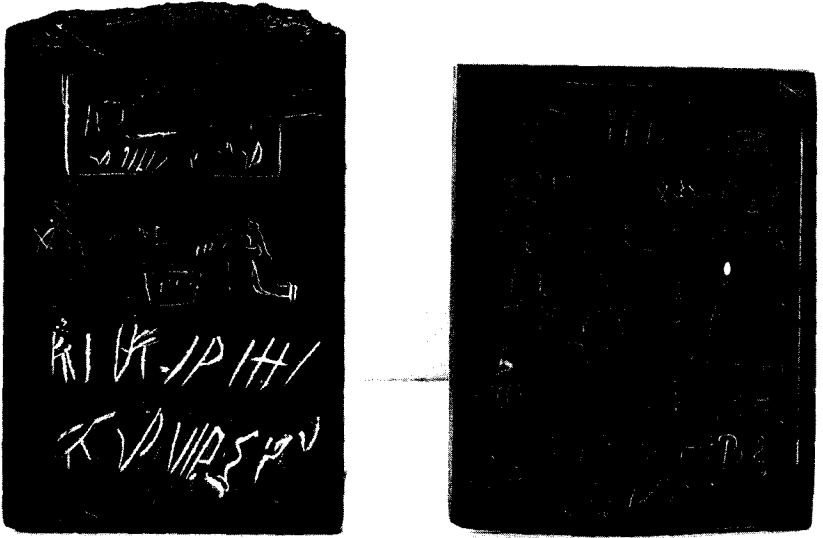


Plate 18

specimen is more difficult to forge—particularly so when the language itself is of foreign origin. Separate characters also confuse if one presumed to copy. One notable example appearing on nearly every tablet is the letter that resembles our letter “K.” Variations of this one character redrawn in Figure 17 speak for themselves in their own special way.

Again, we might consider the birds in hieroglyphic. Each specie of bird indicates variation in word, phonetic value or meaning—

but how different they are. In drawing a bird of one phonetic value, would not an artist draw it the same each time? We have picked out samples showing variations and redrawn them as Figure 16. Is it not evident that one and the same person could not have engraved all of these specimens? One bird lacks a neck; another has a neck twice the length of its body; one has legs scarcely noticeable; the next has legs long as a heron; bills stretch from a mere pin-point to long curving appendages similar to that of an ibis; some bills turn up, others turn down, most are straight; one bird looks like a ball of fluff; another a caricature of a square-headed mechanical mouse. No two are alike. A forger follows copy denying him the privilege of taking liberties such as this. By force of circumstances, he must make each letter identical with its model.

In questioning probability of forgery by one person, we applied general principles currently in use by professional examiners of

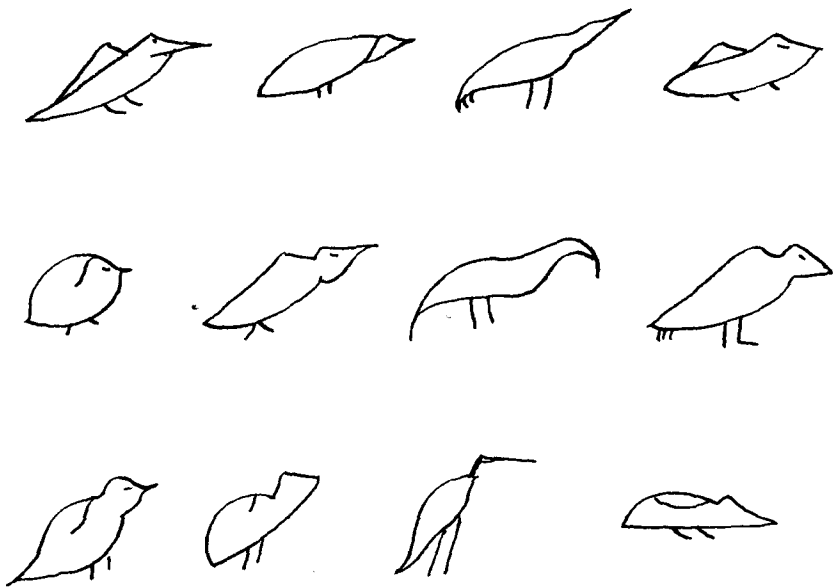


Fig. 16

Birds in hieroglyphic from various plates

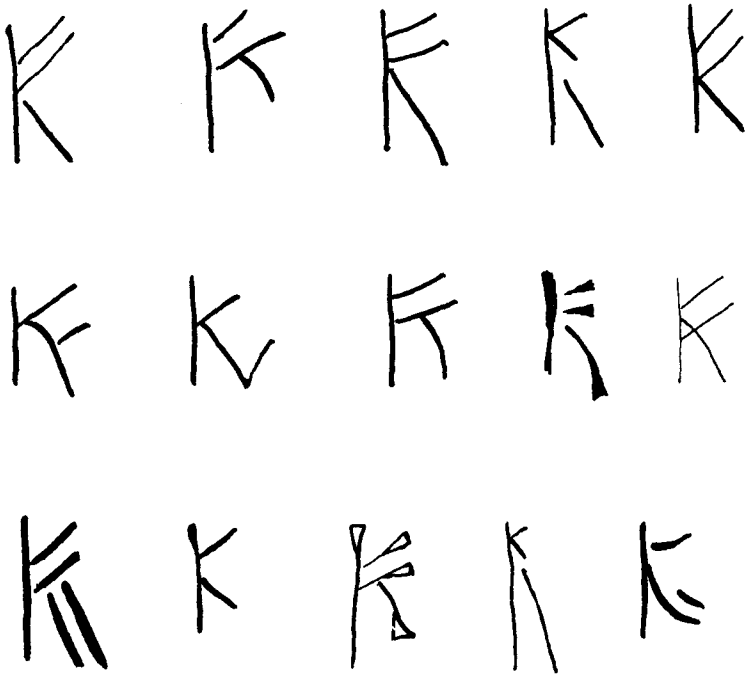


Fig. 17

Letter copied from various plates

questioned documents. Granted that in the Lindbergh and Weinberger cases known samples of writing existed with which to make comparison. We had none. Solution would have been unlikely if we needed to identify one individual as in both kidnaping cases—but our problem was different. Comparison is prerequisite to determination. We therefore compared one plate with another to determine whether any one individual, having given us a sample, inscribed the entire collection. We found cast metal characters stamped on clay as well as letters written in a free-flowing style; we found beautifully executed professional lettering as well as crude; we found letters reading in one direction—then in the opposite direction; we found birds of every size and shape; we found no lettered tablets engraved by the same hand; we found

no "feathering" "patching" or tell-tale "puddles"— all indicating that he who wrote each and every plate knew the language in which he wrote and wrote it fluently.

Where any written document is put in question, and one man stands accused of forgery, professional analysts instantly spot one outstanding characteristic appearing on the questioned specimen—as for example the foreign letter "X" on the Lindbergh ransom notes. A like analysis of inscriptions on the Michigan artifacts indicated that these writings stemmed from many hands—no single outstanding characteristic of one individual hand stood out. If each tablet had been written by a different hand as appears on these specimens, forgery by one person is obviously untenable. It must be borne in mind that self-appointed "experts" had passed on this question of forgery and sale of fraudulent material—a criminal act—without themselves having been trained in the law of detection or analysis. Little credence can normally be given to this type of opinion—for it is recognizable only as opinion and carries little or no weight unless supported by factual evidence.

Question raised by this chapter was—Did one man alone forge each and every artifact comprising this vast collection of some 3,000 pieces? During the long heated controversy, the academic world would have us so believe and isolated one man charging him with the perpetration of forgery and manufacture and sale of fraudulent material. No proofs were ever offered nor was the man brought to trial. Most of this inscribed matter has now been destroyed as a result.

The late Albert Osborn, dean of handwriting analysts, remarked under similar circumstances:

"It is well known that there are those interested in these matters who are dictatorial and domineering or unusually convincing and persuasive, who undertake at once to show those whom they seek to secure as witnesses either that a genuine writing is a forgery, or that a forgery is a genuine writing, as their interests suggest."