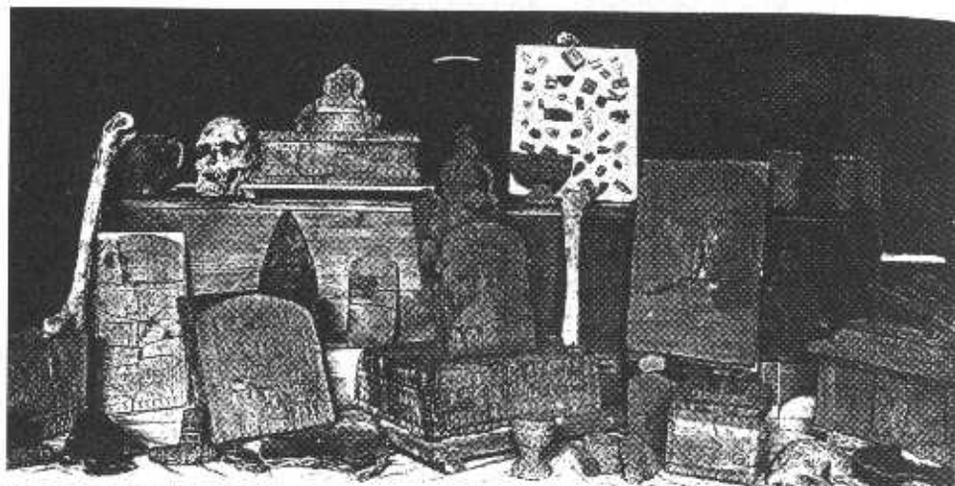


Trashing America's "Politically Incorrect" Prehistory

by Fred Rydholm

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Untypical artifacts which embarrass conventional scholars unwilling to consider the possibility of overseas arriving in America before Columbus. From the Michigan State University (East Lansing) collection. Exclusive, never-before-photograph ©, Val R. Berryman, Curator of History, Michigan State University.

Fred Rydholm is known throughout research circles in Michigan as "Mr. Copper" for his years of investigations into the state's ancient copper country. But his studies of the Upper Peninsula's prehistory broadened into the highly controversial "Michigan Tablets", discovered over the course of some eighty years by professional observers and amateur enthusiasts alike. Here, he describes how the academic authorities missed the chance to radically revise our conception of the past by ignoring and suppressing its most revealing artifacts.

I began to wonder why the powers-that-be in the archaeological world were standing so firm in their conviction that no one had ever come from Europe to America before Columbus. Their position seemed especially untenable, in the light of so much evidence to the contrary. Some Establishment folks mentioned "the great hoax" that took place in Lower Michigan about a century ago. I tried to find out about it, and information eventually arrived in the form of a clipping from the *Detroit News*, December 28, 1953.

The article mentioned "Piltdown Man" as singularly lacking in imagination. Someone placed the mandible of an ape beside some fragments of a human skull, thereby creating a phony "missing link," until the

hoax was exposed by carbon dating.

But Piltdown Man dwindled in significance alongside the vast number of religious tablets and copper artifacts by the hundreds in Michigan. Some of the objects were so hardened that they rang like steel when struck. All the items were overlaid with a fine green patina testifying to long burial.

The "Michigan Tablets" tale begins around 1885, in Big Rapids, where James O. Scotford, one-time sleight-of-hand performer turned sign-painter, was displaying an almost clairvoyant ability to discover Indian artifacts in prehistoric mounds.

He sold Indian "relics" (some of them authentic), and was assisted by a Mr. Soper. No one was suspicious until 1890, when Soper was elected Michigan's Secretary of State, not a very important job in those days. He got into trouble accepting kickbacks, and was promptly fired by Governor Edwin B. Wlans, in 1891.

Soper dropped out of sight until 1907, when he re-appeared in Detroit, living near Scotford. At that time, he was selling rare Indian artifacts to collectors in Michigan, Wisconsin, Indiana, Illinois and Canada. He offered hundreds of objects—copper weapons, ornaments and all kinds of copper implements, as well as clay pipes and bowls which he claimed had been unearthed by Scotford in Isabella County, near Big Rapids, at sites within three miles of Lansing, even in back of Palmer Park.

According to the *Detroit News*, on November 14, 1907, a reporter revealed that "the firm has added a new line of goods. It is selling copper crowns—found on the brows of prehistoric kings—whose forms crumble into dust when exposed to the air. It is peddling copies of the 'Noah diary,'...as well as the 'Tower of Babel' tablet and original Ten Commandments.

There should have been no question about the authenticity of the relics because Scotford always had the presence of witnesses—usually the local editor, blacksmith, druggist, storekeeper and a neighboring farmer or two. All men of high repute, they signed statements that they personally saw the articles taken from the earth. "The scheme," wrote *The News* reporter, "is so unique as to win absolute admiration for the perpetrators. If committed in a spirit of humor, it is the most colossal hoax of the century."

That every piece of copper bore a curious cunelform-like inscription seemed to have escaped the reporter. There are three vertical wedge-shaped marks on which a fourth is superimposed, horizontally, while a fifth slants off by itself. *The Detroit News* interpreted this as a crude "IHS," the cabalistic sign of the cross. "Indeed, these fakirs would have callow collectors believe that Michigan was the seat of the original inhabitants of the earth," the *News* concluded, "and Noah's Ark floated somewhere around these parts and, finally coming to land, settled on one of Michigan's low-lying hills as the genuine Mount Ararat."

Interviewed, Scotford took umbrage at the reporter's insulting questions, while Scotford's 19-year-old son, Percy, "just laughs. Scotford

declares the finds are genuine. He says some syndicate of sharpers once did offer him \$500 to duplicate the article, 'but I would not sell my honor for \$10,000', he exclaimed."

The reporter called on Fr. James Savage of the Most Holy Trinity Church, 116 Porter, who bought 50 of the Indian and Biblical relics, as well as one of the pre-Christian crowns. Says Fr. Savage, True, I may be duped. In buying them I felt this way: It is getting the most wonderful discoveries of the centuries, or it is getting fakes. I took the chance."

The director of the Detroit Museum of Art, to whom Soper offered a representative collection, declared them frauds. When the University of Michigan was given an opportunity to buy "two caskets, a prehistoric beer mug, a bowl, three goblets and some copper coins" at \$1,000 and refused, the items were offered at \$100, and when the University again declined, Soper left them in Ann Arbor.

From Port Huron a collector said he had branded Soper a faker in 1889. Then from Big Rapids came testimony that Soper had victimized Charles H. Throp, a real estate agent, in 1895. From Owosso came word that museums and private collectors were hurriedly going over their possessions, and "many relics are disappearing by way of the ash heap."

From the Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, W. H. Holmes, chief of the Bureau of American Ethnology, wrote, "I am exceedingly glad that you have succeeded in exposing this traffic, and hope that some means may be found to break it up."

The story ought to end there, says the paper, but it doesn't. The relics were thereafter being sold in greater numbers and at greater distance from Detroit.

Four years later, on July 27th, 1911, a Professor J. O. Kinnaman of Benton Harbor, told a *News* reporter that "discoveries had been made which will compel archaeologists to revise their theories of the origin and development of all civilization, as it exists today. Tentatively speaking, we may say that, historically and geologically, when the Detroit River and Lake St. Clair extended many miles inland from where they do now, a Caucasian race, with civilization developed to a point equal to any developed in the valleys of the Nile and Tigris-Euphrates, existed all over the present continent of America. Our knowledge of the Caucasian race will likely extend thousands of years back of the wildest dream of the most enthusiastic archaeologist."

On August 10th, 1911, *The News* reported that Dr. James E. Talmage, Deseret Professor of Geology at the University of Utah, came to Detroit, examined Fr. Savage's collection, and pointed out that the battle axes bore file marks, the copper was commercially smelted and had none of the characteristics of native Michigan copper; the corrosion had been effected with acid, and was so thin that it could be rubbed away; all the objects were recovered within two feet of the surface—and it was mighty funny that none had been found except by Scotford or under his guidance.

Perhaps it was Granny Mary Robson who really gave the "Dawn Race of Caucasians" their quietus. She told *The News* on September 6th

that one winter she had a room at 313 1/2 Michigan, next to the one occupied by Percy Scotford and his brother, Charles, age 21.

She said "Hammering went on day and night." She went to the boys' room to borrow something and "they warned me out." Then they relented and told her that she was in Detroit's ancient relic factory.

Next day, Charles denied this and said that Percy had hypnotized Granny Robson using skills gained in a correspondence course. "Never hypnotized me in their lives," said Granny firmly. Later files of *The News* are silent on the subject.

This, then, was the great fraud—people digging up "Indian mounds" and finding any number of strange things that should have been completely unknown to Indians—copper crowns, pipes, small caskets, bowls and weapons, all with a strange mystic symbol imprinted on them, a symbol which seemed to be the Christian IHS.

The tablets were of clay, stone, slate and copper, and all were inscribed with some type of illegible lettering. The tablets featured illustrations with definite Christian Bible stories, and taken from mounds which were generally found in the southern part of the state. About two of every ten opened mounds contained a tablet and other artifacts.

At first, the tablets were sent to archaeologists and scholars, receiving much acclaim in the process; many were purchased by museums and universities.

Then the professionals began to yell "Fraud!" The inscriptions were said to be a hodgepodge of Egyptian, Phoenician, Greek and cuneiform, probably gleaned from Webster's dictionary. People were wondering how these men were finding so many artifacts, and so often with star witnesses. Soper and Scotford were tried in the press and found guilty. People of repute, like Adolphe B. Covert, curator of the University of Cincinnati Museum, who at first had authenticated the finds, soon backed off and became silent in light of the bad publicity. Testimony mounted against Soper and his friends, and their followers soon left him like rats leaving a sinking ship.

Having acquired some of the newspaper articles from around 1907, I found it hard to imagine that anyone would go to such tremendous lengths to dupe the public. By the time the press had condemned Soper and his accomplices as out-and-out frauds, many controversial items were quietly disposed of. Anything suggesting Caucasian or pre-Columbian Christian themes was pitched from museums, universities and secondary schools as fraudulent.

In 1984, Jon Clark, my colleague, obtained a group of 10 x 12 glossy print photographs of 14 or 15 of the Soper "frauds." At one glance I was convinced. They resembled drawings that could have been made by seventh or eighth grade children, a mixture of religious symbols and nonsensical attempts to mimic hieroglyphics from the tombs of Egypt. None of them seemed to make sense, except a few of the tablets that obviously recounted Bible stories in pictures. Like the learned professors of a century before, I scoffed at these crude attempts.

Following the Michigan Tablet "hoax," U.S. history textbooks were

rewritten to exclude any possibility of overseas' visitors to the American continent, even by chance, prior to 1492. In fact, American history started with the voyages of Columbus. To the average American educated in our public schools over the past 80 years, there just was no history in America prior to the late 15th Century. We learned that great civilizations thrived in Central and South America over the past 4,000 years, but nothing remotely resembling civilization was supposed to have occurred in North America until the arrival of modern Europeans.

To be sure, there were always a few small voices crying out to the contrary. Among them were the readers of the Norse Sagas, the American Indians, the defenders of the Kensington Runestone, and anyone who wondered about a multitude of strange and unexplainable artifacts and unreadable inscriptions in stone that still kept turning up.

One of these unsatisfied critics was Henrietta Mertz. She was fascinated with my story of Upper Peninsula copper, and questioned me thoroughly on the subject. Little did I know that she was probably just testing me, for she knew the story of Michigan Copper much better than I did.

"You'll be interested in a book I'm writing about Michigan," she told me. "It should be on sale in a year or two. There'll be some very enlightening facts in it for you," but she gave me no clue, other than hinting that some of it dealt with Michigan copper.

When I said goodbye to Henriette in Albuquerque, I had a sinking feeling that I would never see her book in print, for while her mind was keen, physically she seemed very feeble. I remembered helping her from the dining room to her hotel room. She confided in me that she was nearly 90 years old, had diabetes, and could not autograph my copy of her book, *Pale Ink*, because of arthritis in her hands. I noticed, too, that her ankles were very swollen. The next day she made a special effort to sign the book and succeeded beautifully. I was filled with admiration for her. Who, under these conditions, would leave the protection of friends and a nice apartment in Chicago to fly alone to Albuquerque for a three-day meeting?

Henriette Mertz was a patent lawyer. She was admitted to practice before the United States Supreme Court, the United States Patent Office, the Canadian Patent Office, and the Supreme Court of Illinois. She served as a Lieutenant-Commander in the U.S. Navy during World War II as a special assistant to the Advisor on Patent Matters at the Office of Scientific Research and Development. She possessed great knowledge; had an avid interest in ancient history, and wrote a half-dozen or so scholarly books, all highly acclaimed.

Her best-known works were *The Wine Dark Sea* (translated into Greek by the Greek government and published in Athens), and *Pale Ink*, which received an award from the Society of Midland Authors. Her other well-remembered, although difficult to obtain titles are *The Nephthali* and *Atlantis, Dwelling Place of the Gods*.

Henriette Mertz was born on June 22, 1896, in Chicago, and graduated from Marshall Law School there. She worked on the Manhattan Project; was advisor to Cordell Hull, Secretary of State; and contributor to

the Greek Encyclopedia. She was also a world traveler, photographer and artist. Henriette died in Chicago on August 17, 1985. Her book on Michigan, *"The Mystic Symbol"* (no longer in print), was published posthumously by a nephew, Herbert Mertz.

The book puts a whole new light on the Soper tablets, and dramatically changed my previous skepticism on the subject. Immediately, I realized that I had been guilty of the same reaction I accused in others. Her thorough reasoning and courtroom-like procedures proved her case very convincingly—that the Soper tablets and other artifacts, the "fakes" from lower Michigan which turned up by the thousands between 1850 and 1911, may have been authentic after all. They were placed in those graves by the mysterious "Mound Builders" of Southern Michigan. They were being burned, fed to the lions, crucified and killed before audiences in amphitheaters. Phoenician sailing masters, who transported some Christians able to pay for their services, knew ocean routes to a distant land across the sea with its secret source of copper.

But I had made no attempt to analyze the manner in which the Michigan Tablets were executed, the materials of which they were made, or what was written on them. I didn't even try to imagine what they were supposed to represent, but blindly went along with expert opinion. The words "Noah's Diaries" were on my mind, and with them was my ingrained disgust for the perpetrators of such a fraud.

Some years ago, Judge Claude Stone of Peoria, Illinois, who was well aware of Henriette Mertz's expertise in the field of ancient history, asked her if she would re-examine the surviving Michigan specimens according to the rules and procedures of law—to give them a fair trial, so to speak, which they had never received. No one had ever put them to the test; archaeologists refused to even look at them.

But Henriette began to seriously research them, only to discover that no less than 3,000 to 10,000 Michigan artifacts had been recovered; probably many others were unknown. The tablets were made of copper, slate and clay. She believed the copper came from Michigan's Copper Country, and the slate from Arvon Township's slate beds in Baraga County.

Experts told her that no two of the known tablets were completed by the same person. The tablets were turned up between 1870 and 1911 in Indian mounds, across seventeen counties. The artifacts had been fashioned differently, using a variety of techniques. No forger or team of forgers could have carried out such an elaborate plan.

The inscriptions did feature a mixture of ancient Mediterranean languages and alphabets, such as Phoenician, Egyptian and Greek. But Mertz pointed out that if they represented a variety of people, they would have had disparate languages and alphabets. We don't have to look far for a parallel, as our own English is a mixture of many origins. We commonly use words from Latin, Greek, German, French, Indian, Swedish, Finnish, Spanish, and other sources, as these early people did when they came together to live in prehistoric Michigan, perhaps sixteen centuries ago.

I will not try to defend the authenticity of the Michigan tablets here, but merely ask readers to consider *The Mystic Symbol*, titled after a prominent glyph on every Michigan tablet and artifact; it is the cuneiform character for IHS, the Christian sign for Jesus. In two phone calls to Dr. Barry Fell, he stated emphatically that the Michigan tablets were proven fakes. According to him, one of the copper tablets is made of modern alloys with other metals. This may be true, but I believe the final analysis should come from a transcription of the actual inscriptions on the other tablets themselves, a monumental task.

Mertz's concluded, after lengthy tests and research, that the Michigan Tablets evidenced no sign of fraud. She believed the artifacts and inscriptions were the work of possibly 20,000 refugees "fleeing from Decian or Diocletian (Roman Emperors of the 3rd and 4th Centuries A.D., respectively), who sailed from the harbors of Rome, Naples, Alexandria, Carthage and other Eastern Mediterranean ports and were assumed lost in the turbulent waters of the North Atlantic."

Mertz wrote of a huge storage pit, discovered by Edwin J. Hulbert, in 1858, and opened by him in 1865. The pit was found in the Torch Lake region near the Keweenaw Peninsula, where the Calumet and Hecla Mining Company sank a shaft through the storage area. She believed this was the site where ancient copper was mined more than 3,000 years ago from Isle Royale was kept. More likely, that copper was shipped out from the mines to customers overseas (pp. 43-46, *The Mystic Symbol*).

She also described the mysterious, copper-bearing, red-skinned Keftiu (an Egyptian name for the Minoans of ancient Crete), who were often referred to in ancient literature as coming from "the Isles." All references to them ceased about 800 B. C. (*The Mystic Symbol*, pp. 50-57). Fellow researcher, Warren Dexter, believes they may have been Indians from North America. He sent me a photograph of Keftiu men painted in the Rekkamara tomb at Thebes, on the Nile River. Dexter wrote in his accompanying letter, "If the Phoenicians took Indians from our Eastern Seaboard, that may explain how the Micmac Indians came up with their Libyan-Egyptian hieroglyphs." These hieroglyphics were described in the Epigraphic Society's *Occasional Papers*.

Circumstantial evidence for Asian, African and European people arriving at Michigan's Upper Peninsula to mine copper in ancient times seems overwhelming. But in the halls of archaeology, the experts keep looking for hard evidence, ignoring the 3,000 to 10,000 artifacts that were removed from Michigan's Indian mounds. They return each year to St. Ignace. But nobody digs in the Copper Country where the answer to the mystery lies. 

