

## Rewriting

# ANCIENT HISTORY

### European visitors may have left their mark on the New World before 1492

By S. J. GUFFEY  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

**T**HEIR PILGRIMAGE starts early in the pre-dawn chill, with the men's Western hats pulled low against the wind. Past the gravel roads of the Comanche National Grasslands, Colo., their four-wheel-drives bounce and inch over the ruts and gullies that are the canyons' trails. The urgency increases as sunup approaches and clouds linger overhead.

Rewriting history isn't supposed to be easy. They cluster finally at the crack in the sandstone wall. The wind pushes the cold through the down vests, the denim jackets.

They pull out a jug of coffee and pass it around, shivering as their eyes search the ridge to the east for signs of light. Sunup this morning will be at 5:51. Bill McGlone figures it will be visible over the ridge three minutes later.

#### Astronomical markings

Inside the cave, someone sets up a tripod on the sloping sandstone floor. Guided by flashlights and matches, the photographer trains the lens on the buff-colored wall, where a pattern of grooves marks this as a special place.

Sunup. The clouds have drifted away from the ridge and the light streams down.

"There it is! Look! Oh, it's perfect."

"Come see!" Taking turns, they crouch inside the narrow space and stare up at the pattern on the wall. The equinox sunrise has lit the carving and Phil Leonard traces the lines as he translates the ancient Celtic message.

"Sun strikes here on Day of Bel."

In a few minutes, the sun has traveled past the marks and the "Crack Cave" is dark.

It will be six months before the sun lights up the carvings again.

Most of these pilgrims plan to be back. In between, they will visit a clutch of other places where carvings and paintings trace the lives and priorities of people who preceded them to this windswept sweep of canyons at the edge of the prairie.

#### Souvenirs of the past

Among the fretwork of canyons that connect the Cimarron and Arkansas rivers lies a vast open-air natural history museum. Dinosaur bones lie jumbled on one rancher's land. Delicately outlined figures mark spots where Indians gave birth, ground flour, hunted game or

fought the U.S. cavalry.

Cottonwoods shade what's left of stone houses and barns that belonged to homesteaders in the last century.

But what draws McGlone, Leonard and their band of believers are rock carvings that they say show a European and Middle Eastern influence in the New World long before Columbus.

#### Stonehenge in the Southwest

They contend that Ogam, a system of symbols found in 2,200-year-old relics near Great Britain's Stonehenge, shows our history books are wrong. The weight of scholarly and scientific opinion runs counter to that theory.

With one of their major sources a book written by Irish monks in the 12th century, this motley band of revisionists eagerly explains what they consider evidence that Celts and others visited America long before 1492.

The marks along these sandstone walls, they say, give directions to travelers and track the solar year.

The Crack Cave carvings light up on the equinox sunrise. Sunset the same day illuminates a series of carved lines and figures in caves just across the Oklahoma state line.

Below a cliffside eagle's nest several miles away, a giant calendar explains when various crops should be sown.

Still other sites are illuminated only on the solstices of June and December.

#### A global language

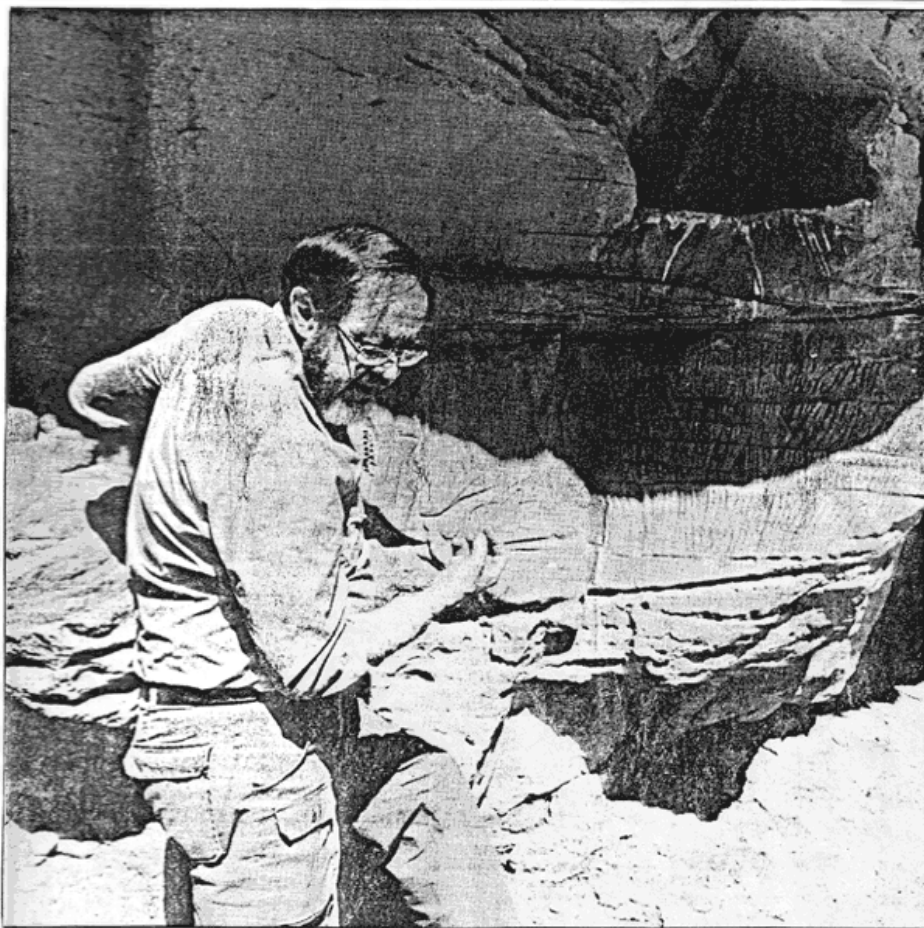
A number of cultures — including the Celts, Phoenicians and Norsemen — have used the writings now known collectively as Ogam. It consists of a horizontal stem line with one to five strokes, some crossing the line and others just touching it.

Barry Fell of San Diego, a retired Harvard professor of marine biology, is considered by many to be an expert at translating Ogam marks. His interest in epigraphy — the study of ancient writing — grew as he studied marine life on a variety of islands around the world and noticed rock writing that appeared similar, although separated by oceans.

Fell used the Book of Ballymote, written by Irish monks in the 12th century to explain Ogam marks with Old Irish equivalencies, to explain the first of many clusters of carvings found here in southeastern Colorado.

Such sites also are found in the East, particularly in New England and North Carolina.

When Robert Myer, professor of Celtic studies at Catholic University of the Americas in Washington, visited one



AP PHOTO

**BILL MCGLONE**, left, studies what he believes to be an ancient Celtic stone calendar in Colorado.

North Carolina site and studied the Ogam-like marks there, he called the discovery "as important to Celtic scholars as the Dead Sea scrolls."

Respected foreign scholars, such as Spain's Imanol Agire and Pennar Davies of the University of Wales, agree with Fell's translations.

#### Scholarly skepticism

In scientific circles, the notion of explorers from the East visiting America before the 15th century A.D. is generally greeted with amusement or worse.

Professor Gordon Willey of Harvard labels such theories "escapism, fable, fantasy, fun." Ives Goddard, curator of the Smithsonian Institution's department of anthropology, called Fell's work "the linguistic equivalent of alchemy."

Critics say the grooves along these sandstone walls are nothing more than random tool-sharpening marks or erosion caused by old roots and tree limbs.

"Nobody sees these marks and makes that kind of confusion," insists Rollin Gillespie, a former NASA engineer who has been part of McGlone and Leonard's forays on several occasions.

Erosion marks tend to be curved, he says. Tool-sharpening does not leave two-side grooves in rock: that would dull an edge, not hone it.

#### An ancient people

The Celts were an ancient people who spread their culture from the Iberian peninsula (now Spain and Portugal) north to what is now Ireland and France. Eventually, the Phoenicians took over the Celtic homeland of Iberia.

Among the purported Ogam marks here in southeastern Colorado are some

that appear to be Punic or other Mediterranean languages such as Libyan Numidian, Leonard says.

The wealth of cultures said to be represented by the rock writing here in the canyons reinforces these pilgrims' belief that it was once common for people to sail across the Atlantic, through the Gulf of Mexico, up the Mississippi and along mid-American waterways like the Cimarron and Arkansas.

While the bulk of the writing appears Celtic in origin, the presence of the other languages may mean that sailors from different cultures had banded together to cross the ocean, Leonard theorizes.

#### Amateur anthropology

Like Fell, the other believers in Celtic America come from a tangle of backgrounds.

McGlone is an engineer in New Mexico. Leonard is a former medical researcher turned stockbroker in Utah.

Gillespie lives in Washington state. As a NASA engineer, he helped develop the equations necessary for interplanetary trajectories — the formulas that helped put humans on the moon.

Erin Trekel is a retired U.S. Forest Service ranger who settled here in southeastern Colorado after being assigned to the Grasslands during his last tour. Earl and Margaret Goodrich are transplanted Texans who have ranched near here for nearly 60 years. Ava Betz is a former Peace Corps teacher turned small-town journalist.

Officially, though, they are all amateurs at this business, as their critics emphasize.

To Leonard and McGlone, the reluctance of American scholars to examine seriously the pre-Columbian

evidence stems from the long-standing scholarly fight between the so-called "isolationists and diffusionists."

#### Theories of culture

Someone who subscribes to the diffusion theory of culture believes cultural contact in the ancient world spread discoveries. Isolationists believe similar developments came independently, at innumerable sites around the world.

"The isolationists say we're insulting the American Indian with our theories — saying they weren't smart enough to come up with these things on their own," McGlone says, shrugging. "They say we're racist."

"But the Indians I talk to can accept what we're talking about. They tell us, 'That's what our traditions say.'"

Fell first advanced such theories 12 years ago in a book titled "America BC." In the years since, he and the others have grown accustomed to being called mavericks or fools.

Undeterred, the group has become increasingly eager to carry its case to the public. Hundreds of possible examples of Ogam have been catalogued in southeastern Colorado, Leonard says, and while there's risk in calling attention to such sites, "we need public pressure" to protect them.

The sites are not immune to graffiti. Cowhands marked the canyons' walls with names and dates in the 1800s. Trekel recalls chewing out a Boy Scout troop for doing the same thing a few years ago.

He points to a spot near a larger-than-life buffalo etched on one canyon wall. "Some idiot has drawn a face here," he mutters.