



**CA Forum on Anthropology in Public: Robbing Native American Cultures:
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CA☆ FORUM ON
ANTHROPOLOGY IN PUBLIC

Robbing Native American Cultures

Van Sertima's Afrocentricity and the Olmecs

by Gabriel Haslip-Viera,
Bernard Ortiz de Montellano,
and Warren Barbour

In 1976, Ivan Van Sertima proposed that New World civilizations were strongly influenced by diffusion from Africa. The first and most important contact, he argued, was between Nubians and Olmecs in 700 B.C., and it was followed by other contacts from Mali in A.D. 1300. This theory has spread widely in the African-American community, both lay and scholarly, but it has never been evaluated at length by Mesoamericanists. This article shows the proposal to be devoid of any foundation. First, no genuine African artifact has ever been found in a controlled archaeological excavation in the New World. The presence of African-origin plants such as the bottle gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*) or of African genes in New World cotton (*Gossypium hirsutum*) shows that there was contact between the Old World and the New, but this contact occurred too long ago to have involved any human agency and is irrelevant to Egyptian-Olmec contact. The colossal Olmec heads, which resemble a stereotypical "Negroid," were carved hundreds of years before the arrival of the presumed models. Additionally, Nubians, who come from a desert environment and have long, high noses, do not resemble their supposed "portraits." Claims for the diffusion of pyramid building and mummification are also fallacious.

In his 1976 book *They Came Before Columbus*, Ivan Van Sertima argued that "Negroid" Africans had come to the Americas at various times before the European discovery and had either inspired or influenced the development of the first civilizations to emerge on these continents. Like other pseudoscientific writings that

1. We thank David Grove, Jaime Litvak-King, Luis Vargas, Carlos Viesca Trevino, Ann Cyphers, Michael Coe, Frank Yurco, and Mark Weiss for their assistance. We also thank the anonymous referees for comments and suggestions that materially improved the paper. None of them should be held responsible for any errors or omissions.

had been published up until that time, the book was either completely ignored or generally dismissed by anthropologists, historians, and other academic professionals. Except for a brief reference by Glyn Daniel (1977), it was never reviewed in any of the professional journals. Daniel, who also reviewed Barry Fell's *America B.C.* (1976), dismissed it, but neither he nor any other academic professional ever developed a detailed or cogent response to the main thrust of Van Sertima's ideas. As Daniel himself predicted, the book became a profitable venture for both Van Sertima and his publisher.²

Readers were apparently attracted by the real mysteries that surrounded the subject: the origins and evolution of civilizations in the Americas. At the same time, the book also received the attention and enthusiastic support of a small but increasingly influential group of "cultural nationalists" in the African-American community. By the late 1980s Van Sertima's ideas were being heartily endorsed by Molefi Asante, one of the gurus of the Afrocentric movement (Asante 1988:48; 1990:158, 197 n. 43; 1993:136-37; Asante and Matson 1991:15-19). This movement in all its complexity³ emerged from the cultural nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s with clearly articulated theories of human development that incorporated Van Sertima's ideas on the origins of civilization in the Americas. According to the Afrocentrists, all of the world's early civilizations, including the those of ancient Egypt, ancient Mesopotamia, India, China, Europe, and the Americas,⁴ were created or inspired by racially "black" peoples.

In articulating their claims, the Afrocentrists relied very heavily on the ideas of Cheikh Anta Diop (1974,

2. See Daniel's reply to the letters written in defense of Van Sertima and Fell in the *New York Times Book Review*, May 1, 1977, pp. 60-62. For other critiques of *They Came Before Columbus* and the Van Sertima thesis, see Sabloff (1989:144-46) and Feder (1990:78-79). Despite acknowledged errors (Van Sertima 1992b:53-54; Jordan 1992) including the consistent misspelling of the name of his primary source, Leo Wiener (1920-22), it remains unchanged and is still being sold in bookstores as the latest word on the subject.

3. "Afrocentrism" has been defined in various ways by artists, educators, scholars, political activists, and other interested persons. According to Molefi Asante, its leading theoretician, Afrocentrism is simply a "philosophy," a "worldview," a guide for "personal and social transformation," and "a theoretical instrument for the examination of phenomena" which places African people at the "center" of inquiry as "subjects" rather than as "objects" on the margins of the European experience (see Asante 1988:vii, 2, and passim; 1991:270; 1992:20 and passim). On the complexity of the Afrocentric movement, see also Wiley (1991:1, 20-21), Karenga (1993:35), and Marable (1993:120-22). On the complexity of the Afrocentric movement, see also Wiley (1991:1, 20-21), Karenga (1993:35), and Marable (1993:120-22 and passim).

4. Despite his recent attempt to distance himself from the Afrocentrists (1995:68, 73), Van Sertima has been an enthusiastic supporter of the Afrocentric view of human development. He is the editor of and a contributor to a series of books (also known as the *Journal of African Civilizations*) which include essays that consistently promote a racialist and hegemonic view of the role allegedly played by "black peoples" in the formation of civilizations throughout the world (see, for example, Van Sertima 1985, 1989, 1992; Van Sertima and Rashidi 1988).

1991), Chancellor Williams (1987), John G. Jackson (1970), George James (1976), and others.⁵ These writers reformulated the standard 19th- and early 20th-century European and North American racial concepts in such a way that the Afrocentrists could promote a hegemonic "black" model of human development. In his 1974 book, *The African Origins of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, Diop accepted the standard tripartite division of the human species into "Caucasoid," "Negroid," and "Mongoloid" and subdivided the "black race" into persons with predominantly straight or wavy hair, such as the Dravidians of India, and persons with predominantly curly or tightly coiled hair, such as the Ibo of Nigeria (Diop 1974:164–65, 237). In an attempt to incorporate as many groups as possible into the "Negro" category, Diop also accepted the racist Western definition of "blackness" as any degree of "black" or African ancestry.⁶ Of course, once these race concepts were reformulated, they could be applied to a reinterpreted history of civilization and human development with predictable results.

Accordingly, civilization was said to have originated with the "black" peoples of the Upper Nile in Ethiopia and the Sudan and to have been transmitted from there to the ancient Egyptians, also defined as "black" regardless of their skin color and their other physical characteristics. From its alleged African homeland, civilization was presumably bequeathed to other "black" peoples throughout the world through either direct contact or indirect diffusion. These alleged "black" recipients included the ancient Sumerians of Mesopotamia, the Sabaean of South Arabia, the Elamites of southwestern Iran, the Dravidians of India, the Shang of China, and the Minoans of ancient Crete, among others.⁷ In the case of the Americas, a more complicated scenario had to be advanced in order to account for the

relative isolation of these continents and the geographical obstacles posed by the Atlantic and the Pacific. This scenario, developed most completely by Van Sertima, was incorporated into the emerging Afrocentric view by the late 1980s.⁸

According to Van Sertima's hypothesis, the Nubian rulers of ancient Egypt (25th dynasty, 712–664 B.C.) organized an expedition with the help of the Phoenicians to obtain various commodities, including iron, from sources on the Atlantic coast of North Africa, Europe, and the British Isles during the late 8th or early 7th century B.C. This expedition allegedly sailed from the Nile Delta or the Levant across the Mediterranean, through the Pillars of Hercules, and down the Atlantic coast of North Africa, where it was caught in some current or storm that sent it across the Atlantic to the Americas. Following the prevailing wind and ocean currents, the expedition allegedly sailed or drifted westward from some unspecified location in the eastern Caribbean or the Bahamas to the Gulf Coast of Mexico, where it came into contact with the receptive but inferior Olmecs. According to the scenario at this point, the Olmecs presumably accepted the leaders of the Nubian/Egyptian expedition as their rulers ("black warrior dynasts"), and these individuals, in turn, created, inspired, or influenced the creation of the Olmec civilization, which in turn influenced Monte Albán, Teotihuacan, the Classic Maya, and all the other Mesoamerican civilizations that followed.⁹

In Van Sertima's scenario, the Nubians became the models for the colossal stone heads which the Olmecs produced in the years that followed the alleged contact. They also presided over a mixed crew of voyagers that included Egyptians, Phoenicians, and "several women." The Nubians subsequently provided the impetus for the building of pyramids and ceremonial centers and introduced a number of technological innovations and practices (mummification, cire-perdue metallurgy, the symbolic use of purple murex dye, weaving, etc.) which presumably influenced Mesoamerican religion, mythology, customs, and even the calendar. This is an enormous number of claims, and several large volumes would be needed to deal with all of them. In this essay we will discuss the evidence that would be most significant if it were true. We will deal elsewhere with Van Sertima's historical methodology, his use of sources, and his writings on iconography and linguistics (Ortiz de Montellano, Haslip-Viera, and Barbour 1997).

Van Sertima (1992a:16; 1992c:65; 1995:73) occasionally says that the Olmecs were not pure Africans or that the African voyagers only influenced and were not the main catalyst for the rise of civilization in the Americas, but these disclaimers are merely pro forma. The cu-

5. In addition to those listed, other important precursors of the Afrocentric movement include Blyden (1869), Delaney (1878), DuBois (1965), Houston (1985), Rogers (1936, 1972), and Ben-Jochannan (1970, 1972).

6. The common view that "one drop of black blood makes you black" is the extreme variant of this definition. In response to Coon's claim that the ancient Egyptians were a varied or mixed population, Diop states that "Coon's work contributes nothing new. If all the specimens of races and sub-races described by him lived in New York City today, they would reside in Harlem, including those whose heads and faces 'are those of a smoothly contoured fine Mediterranean form'" (Diop 1974:238; see also 241).

7. This is a revised version of the old "Heliolithic hypothesis" that was so popular among racialist scholars in Western society during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In essence, its proponents believed that civilization arose only once, in a "white" ancient Egypt, and diffused from there to the other parts of the world. They also believed that the "non-Caucasian" peoples of the world were incapable of creating their own "advanced civilizations" because of their alleged biological inferiority (Elliot Smith 1915, 1923, 1929; Perry 1923, 1937; Massey 1907; Churchward 1913, 1921). It is curious that this hypothesis has resurfaced in the late 20th century in revised form, with the biologically superior people now being identified as "blacks" (see Ortiz de Montellano 1993). For examples of the Afrocentric variant of this type of literature, see Van Sertima (1985, 1989, 1992) and Van Sertima and Rashidi (1988), among other works.

8. Van Sertima was not the first to articulate the hypothesis that "black" Africans came to the Americas before Columbus. Among African-American writers, see, for example, Lawrence (1962) and Clegg (1969, 1972).

9. On "black warrior dynasts" and other references to the alleged Nubian-Egyptian rule over the Olmecs, see Van Sertima (1976:261, 264, 267–69 and pls. 23, 29).

mulative total of his claims amounts to a decisive influence on most aspects of the Olmec culture (religion, language, pyramids, customs, weaving, metalworking, dyeing, etc.). If the Nubians were not "godlike" or superior, why would the Olmecs on short acquaintance put forth the herculean efforts required to transport and carve their likenesses in basalt? If the Nubians were not superior, why would most of Van Sertima's followers attribute the "sudden" rise of the Olmecs to Egypto-Nubian influences?¹⁰

Van Sertima also claimed that "black Africans" made other journeys to the Americas at various times after the 7th century B.C. The most important of these alleged voyages was that of Abu-Bakari II, the Mandingo emperor of Mali, in A.D. 1311. According to Van Sertima, Abu-Bakari embarked from some unspecified location on the western coast of his dominions (Senegambia) with a large fleet of ships and sailed across the Atlantic to the Gulf Coast of Mexico, where his expedition came into contact with the peoples of the Vera Cruz region, the Valley of Mexico, and the Valley of Oaxaca. These peoples were profoundly influenced by Abu-Bakari and his Mandingo agents in the areas of technology, religion, and the arts in the period after contact was established.

In the years since the publication of *They Came Before Columbus*, Van Sertima has revised his hypothesis only slightly and with great reluctance. For example, in the early 1980s he pushed back the date for the earliest possible contact between the Olmecs and the Egypto-Nubians to the early 10th century B.C. in an attempt to account for the revised dates established for the origins of Olmec civilization at that time (see Coe and Diehl 1980, Rust and Sharer 1988). The revised chronology was also used by Van Sertima to claim that the Nubians had had a strong influence over the Egyptians from the early 11th to the middle of the 7th century B.C. (Van Sertima 1992c:60–61, 67, 69).¹¹ More recently, he has grudgingly accepted the Olmec chronology by emphasizing the alleged importance of the "black-Egyptian" in pharaonic society and by claiming that "the black African . . . played a dominant role in the Old World at

either end of the dating equation, be it 1200 B.C. or 700 B.C." (Van Sertima 1992b:38–39; 1995:74, 76).¹²

Van Sertima has nurtured a coterie of enthusiastic supporters among the Afrocentrists and the cultural nationalists in general.¹³ These individuals are inclined to promote his concepts as historical truths. They have also launched impassioned attacks against the academic establishment for not supporting Van Sertima's and other questionable theories.¹⁴ The recent publication of one of his essays by the Smithsonian Institution Press (Van Sertima 1995) has conferred some academic respectability on his views, and he has been praised by St. Clair Drake (1987:312) and Manning Marable (1991:22), two non-Afrocentric scholars with considerable reputations. His hypothesis has become almost an article of faith within the African-American community. It is taught across the country in African-American and Africana studies programs that use Maulana Karenga's *Introduction to Black Studies* (1993) and similar texts. It is taught in the large urban school districts that have adopted Afrocentric curricula (Clarke 1989; Kunjufu 1987a,b; see also Ortiz de Montellano 1991, 1995). The presumably "Negroid" Olmec heads have become staples of African-American historical museums and exhibitions. It is therefore no wonder that students in colleges and universities across the country are mystified by the dismissive statements occasionally uttered by academic professionals when Van Sertima's ideas are discussed. African-American students, in particular, have not been impressed by the abbreviated critiques that have been published thus far. They are also generally suspicious of the academic establishment, with its record of "neglect" and "distortion" with regard to Africa, and have called for a detailed response to Van Sertima's ideas. This article is an attempt to address the issues articulated by students and concerned educators with regard to the validity of Van Sertima's hypotheses and the failure of the academic establishment to confront them in a systematic way. It is important for anthropologists and archaeologists to deal with this question because of its prevalence and because it diminishes the real accomplishments of Native American cultures. As Robert Sharer and Wendy Ashmore (1979:45) put it, "Archaeology has a responsibility to prevent pseudo-archaeologists from robbing humanity of the real

10. An example of this more extreme position with regard to "black" hegemonism in pre-Columbian America is that of Clyde Ahmad Winters (1982:78–84), who says that "the first civilization to appear in America, called the Olmec culture, was founded by Africans. The Olmecs spoke one of the Mandé languages. . . . The Olmecs' script had its origin in the Western Sahara. . . . In addition to teaching the Indians how to grow crops, the Olmecs also taught them how to make calendars and built step pyramids. . . . The original Maya were probably Africans. . . . The Aztecs, Zapotecs, Toltecs, and Maya usually occupied urban centers built by Africans or Afro-Indians. Once the Indians were bound to African colonists for trade goods which they themselves could not produce, they settled in the urban centers where they learned architecture, writing, science, and technology from African technicians. As a result, the technology being brought to the Amerindians was of African origin."

11. Van Sertima (1992c) is a reprint of a 1983 article that originally appeared in *Dollars & Sense* (vol. 8, no. 6). On the actual relationship between the Egyptians and the Nubians in this period, see Kitchen (1973).

12. Van Sertima has not defined "blackness" with any kind of clarity in any of his writings. This is particularly troublesome when the term "black" is applied to the ancient Egyptians. However, in his 1976 book Van Sertima distinguished between the Egyptian, the "Negro-Egyptian," and "the overwhelming 'Negro-ness' of the Nubians" as follows: "The use of 'Negro-Egyptian' is even more necessary in the light of the mixed and confused racial situation in the North during certain dynasties. These racial distinctions would not need to be so heavily emphasized were it not for the attempt, deliberate and sustained over the centuries, to deny the contribution of the black African to ancient Egyptian civilization" (1976: xviii).

13. At the present time, there are other groups of cultural nationalists, such as the Nation of Islam and the Black Israelites, who can be separated from the Afrocentrism of a Molefi Asante or a Leonard Jeffries.

14. For example, see any of the works listed in n. 5.

achievements of past cultures." This essay will examine Van Sertima's claims to determine whether they have any validity or foundation in the evidence that has been collected thus far by scholars in the humanities and the social and physical sciences.

It is necessary to limit our discussion here to the most important claims and the most convincing types of evidence. Authentic artifacts found in controlled archaeological excavations provide absolute proof of contact; however, *no such artifact of African origin has ever been found in the New World*. The archaeological discovery of nonnative plants can also provide good evidence of contact. Van Sertima's crucial claim deals with the influence of the alleged Nubian/Egyptian visitors of the 25th dynasty on the Olmec culture, because at this time and in this culture a number of definitive Mesoamerican traits presumably appear. If Van Sertima and others are correct, Mesoamerican civilization owes a great debt to Egypt. If the idea of Egyptian contact with the Olmecs is invalid, then other claims by Van Sertima and his colleagues are greatly weakened. For example, the proposed A.D. 1311 expedition from Mali to Mexico, even if it were true, would be less meaningful because the most significant Mesoamerican cultural traits (worldview, calendars, deities, etc.) can clearly be shown to have been present prior to that time, and this violates a cardinal rule in the classic diffusionist argument—that the diffused traits must be present in the donor culture and absent in the recipient culture prior to the presumed contact.

For the most part, our arguments will deal with this presumed earliest contact, because only contact at this stage of development might have been able to have a real impact on Mesoamerican cultures. There is still some question whether Egyptian contact with the Gulf Olmecs would have been sufficient to achieve this impact. Although some scholars (Diehl and Coe 1995) still argue that the Gulf Olmecs represent the "mother culture" of Mesoamerica, others, among them Flannery and Marcus (1994:389), prefer the term "sister cultures" because it is clear that parallel developments were taking place in other regions of Mesoamerica. Clark (1991; Clark and Blake 1994) claims that the Mesoamerican tradition began among the Mokaya of the Soconusco region of Chiapas, who by 1650 B.C. were the first to reach a chiefdom level¹⁵ and who influenced the subsequent Gulf Olmecs. Flannery and Marcus (1994:385–90) show that the 8°-west-of-true-north orientation of ceremonial

buildings and the use of stucco at La Venta and elsewhere appeared first in Oaxaca between 1650 and 1520 B.C. Grove (1989) has proposed that much of the iconography of the Early Formative is merely the first representation in ceramics of a body of beliefs shared by the common ancestors of many Formative societies. Marcus (1991) claims that the earliest dated stone monuments appeared not in the Gulf Olmec zone but in the Zapotec region of Oaxaca.¹⁶ Nevertheless, we will deal with the Gulf Olmecs because we agree with Tolstoy (1989:289) that by San Lorenzo times they "had reached a point on the evolutionary scale that was beyond that at which San José [Oaxaca] or Tlatilco [Central Mexico] can be placed." During the Early Formative (1793–1011 B.C.) many of the definitive Mesoamerican traits were present both in the Gulf Coast Olmec and in other contemporaneous cultures. Because relatively little information is available about the Olmecs, Van Sertima is able to make iconographic claims which, if made for the Aztecs, could be unequivocally disproved on the basis of texts and codices gathered after the conquest.

The Colossal Olmec Heads

The main pieces of evidence presented by Van Sertima are the monumental carved basalt Olmec heads. To a lay observer, it seems at first glance that these grey, "black"-looking heads, with their thick lips and flat noses, *must* be images of Africans. This impression makes the other claims appear to be support for an obvious conclusion. However, this is a fundamental error. The people claimed by Van Sertima and other Afrocentrists to have influenced the Olmecs (and to be the models for the heads) are Nubians or Egyptians, that is, North and East Africans, whereas the slave ancestors of African-Americans came primarily from tropical West Africa. These groups are very different and do not look alike.¹⁷ Flat noses are particularly inappropriate as racial markers, because the shape of the nose is primarily a function of climatic factors such as the ambient tem-

16. Cahn and Winter (1993) have disputed this claim.

17. Anthropologists have labored long and hard to refute the existence of biological races. We are all *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Latter (1980) compared the variation in 18 polymorphic gene loci in 180 populations representing the major racial groups. Eighty-four percent of the total genetic diversity of humankind is due to differences between individuals belonging to the same tribe or nation, while only 10 percent occurs between "racial" groups. The difference between East African populations and West African populations, which is more than 6 percent, is almost as much as the differences between the various "races." Lewontin (1972) came to the same conclusions, "Social races" do exist, and the public considers them biological. If, however, one is going to use a "Negroid" racial stereotype to claim an African identity for Olmec iconography, why should thick lips and flat noses be privileged over other equally characteristic traits such as dolichocephaly and prognathism? Brace et al. (1993), using a number of trivially adaptive cranial measurements, concluded that Nubian and Egyptian populations differ significantly from sub-Saharan Africans, and Cavalli-Sforza, Menotti, and Piazza (1993) reached the same conclusion using DNA analysis and linguistics. These results support our point that West African morphological characteristics are inappropriate to support claims of Egyptian contact.

15. Coe and Diehl (1980, vol. 1:395–96) point out that whenever radiocarbon dates are to be compared with dates obtained by a different procedure, such as the historical dynasties used to determine Egyptian chronology, they should be corrected. The international radiocarbon dating community has recommended the use of the tables published by Pearson and Stuiver (1986) as the standard (Bowman 1990:43–44). The recommended convention is to denote real years as "B.C." and radiocarbon years as "b.c." Here we will use corrected dates in sections where Egyptian dates are being compared with radiocarbon dates. In sections where only radiocarbon dates are being compared, those dates will be cited. The corrected date for the Early Formative in Mesoamerica is 1793–1011 B.C. (1500–900 B.C.). The Middle Formative extends from 905 to 400 B.C. (800 to 400 B.C.).



FIG. 1. *Kpeda man from Benin.* (Photo West Africa Study Trip/Guerin Montilus.)

perature and the moisture content of the air. One of the functions of the nose is to moisten the air before it goes to the lungs. In areas where the air is very dry, such as deserts, a larger mucous area is required to moisten inspired air, and this necessitates a longer and narrower nose (Molnar 1983:71–73). Both the Olmecs and the West African ancestors of African-Americans have short, flat noses because they lived in wet, tropical areas; Nubians and Egyptians have longer, thinner noses because they have lived in a desert.¹⁸ Comparison of figures 1 and 2 with figures 3–5 reveals that although these two groups differ in the shape of the nose and the lips, both are dolichocephalic and prognathous. Most of the colossal Olmec heads are not; only 3 of the 16 Olmec heads show a degree of prognathism. Figures 6–9 clearly show that these heads do not resemble Nubians (having flat noses, thick lips, and epicanthic-folded eyelids and lacking dolichocephaly or prognathism) or, for that matter, West Africans (having epicanthic folds and lacking dolichocephaly or prognathism). The people represented in the Olmec sculptures had short, round, flat faces with thick lips, flat noses, and epicanthic folds; that is, they resembled people who still live in the tropical lowlands of Mexico (see figs. 10 and 11).

Van Sertima (1992*b*, 1995) places great emphasis on Tres Zapotes head 2 (also known as the Nestepe or Tuxtla head)¹⁹ because it has seven braids dangling from the

18. Some Afrocentrists have argued that modern populations of Egyptians and Nubians look different from those of antiquity, but both Trigger (1978) and Berry, Berry, and Ucko (1967) point to a “remarkable degree of homogeneity” in this area for 5,000 years.

19. Ironically, Soustelle (1985[1979]:56) finds this face, with its “relatively narrow nose and prominent cheekbones,” more “Mongoloid” and less “Negroid” in appearance than the other colossal heads, in particular its neighbor Tres Zapotes 1. It should also be noted that all such stereotypes are rooted in the old Anglo-American and European concepts that linked certain “races” with specific physiognomic traits. Thus, for Van Sertima, the colossal stone heads are “portraits” of “Negro-Africans” or the descendants of



FIG. 2. *Adja men from Benin.* (Photo West Africa Study Trip/Guerin Montilus.)



FIG. 3. *Nubian from Koyekka.* (Photo Friedrich W. Hinkel.)

unions between Africans and Native Americans because they allegedly exhibit the somatic traits of “Negroids.” There is no discussion of the fact that so-called Negroid features are commonly seen in combination in East Asian and Pacific populations. For example, broad noses, prognathism, and full or everted lips with “Mongoloid” eyes are quite commonplace among the Burmese, Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Thais, Malays, Filipinos, and Polynesians (see Davies 1979:90–92).



FIG. 4. Nubian woman. (Photo Friedrich W. Hinkel.)



FIG. 5. Nubian from the village of Semna. (Photo Friedrich W. Hinkel.)

back, which he claims (1992c:57; 1994:296, fig. 1c), citing no supporting evidence, to be a characteristically Ethiopian hairstyle.²⁰ He also asserts that the braids are "probably the best hidden secret in Mesoamerican archaeology" (1992b:37), that the "head was never published outside of Mexico" (1992a:7), and that "this photograph was kept in the dark [and I think the blackout was deliberate]" (1992b:38; 1995:74).²¹ To support his

20. Argument by assertion is common in Van Sertima's work. People from all over the world (including Europeans) have been braiding their hair for thousands of years. Is he arguing that an Ethiopian was included in the ship that reached America and provided the model for the Olmec head? Why would the Olmecs not have used an Egyptian hairstyle? Frank Yurco (personal communication, 1995), an Egyptologist at the Field Museum in Chicago, points out that the Olmec braids do not look like either Egyptian or Nubian ones. What evidence is there that a seven-braided hairdo was characteristic of Ethiopia in the period 1200–700 B.C.? If Van Sertima's evidence comes from colonial or modern Ethiopia, why should we believe that this hairstyle has prevailed unchanged for thousands of years? Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. None is provided.

21. The Afrocentrists share with cult archaeologists what Cole (1980) calls "intimations of persecution." They allege a conspiracy by the Establishment to conceal the truth, which they claim that they are trying to reveal. A full description of Tres Zapotes head 2 was published, as one would expect, in the reports of the archaeological expedition (Clewlow et al. 1967) and in the literature (Heizer, Smith, and Williams 1965) ten years before Van Sertima's first book.

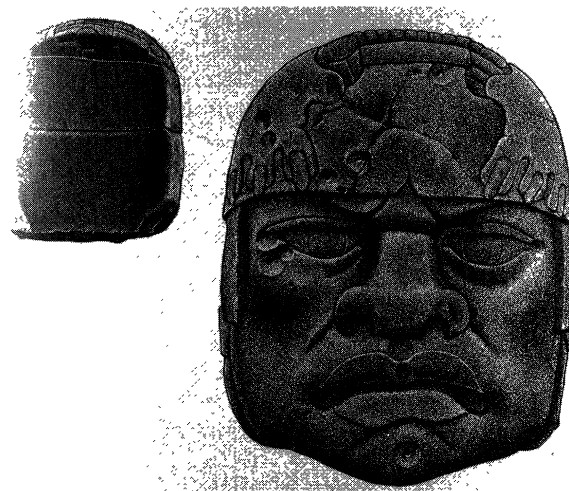


FIG. 6. Monument 5, San Lorenzo, front and rear views. (Drawing by Felipe Dávalos, reprinted from Coe and Diehl [1980], courtesy of Michael D. Coe.)

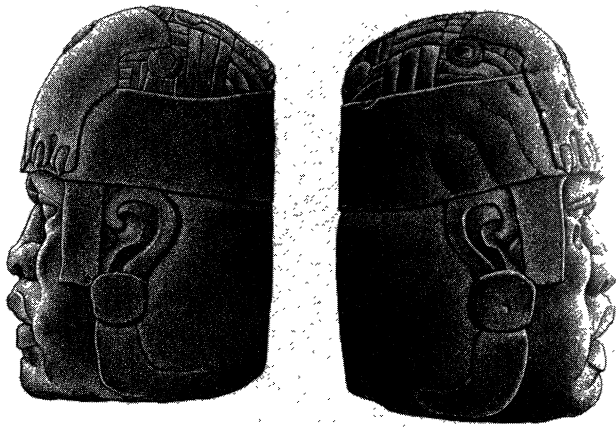


FIG. 7. Monument 5, San Lorenzo, side views. (Drawing by Felipe Dávalos, reprinted from Coe and Diehl [1980], courtesy of Michael D. Coe.)

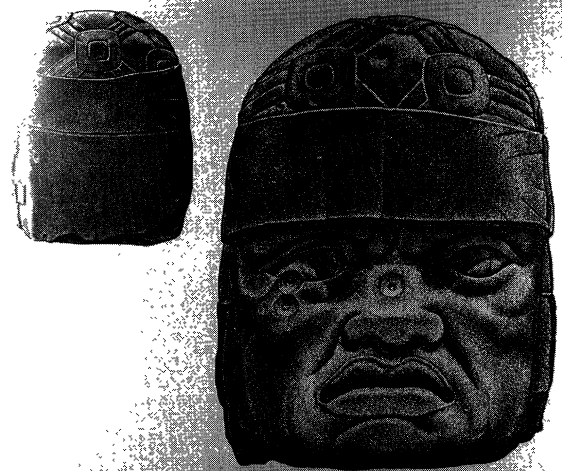


FIG. 8. Monument 17, San Lorenzo, front and rear views. (Drawing by Felipe Dávalos, reprinted from Coe and Diehl [1980], courtesy of Michael D. Coe.)

claim (1992c:37; 1995:74) he quotes the Mexican Olmec scholar Beatriz de la Fuente, who states, "If at any time, one could imagine that there were Negroes in Mesoamerica, it would be after seeing Head 2 of Tres Zapotes, the one that is most removed from the physiognomy of our Indian ancestors" (de la Fuente 1971:58, our translation).²² However, he overlooks her comment on the next page that "certainly the colossal heads do not represent individuals of the Negro or Ethiopian race as José Melgar, the first Westerner to see one more than a hundred years ago, supposed. We have to agree that in them are recorded, on a heroic scale, the ethnic characteristics of the ancient inhabitants of Mesoamerica, characteristics that are still preserved in some contemporaneous natives" (de la Fuente 1971:59, our translation).²³

Archaeological Evidence

Some Olmec heads are dark not because they represent black people but because they were made of dark stone.²⁴ If Luckert (1976:41–49, 70–76, 90–107) is cor-



FIG. 9. Monument 17, San Lorenzo, side views. (Drawing by Felipe Dávalos, reprinted from Coe and Diehl [1980], courtesy of Michael D. Coe.)

22. "Si en algún momento se pudiera pensar que existieron negros en Mesoamérica, es después de haber visto la cara de la Cabeza 2 de Tres Zapotes, la más alejada de la fisionomía de nuestros antepasados indígenas."

23. "Ciertamente las cabezas colosales no representan individuos de la raza negra o etiópica, como dio por supuesto hace más de cien años aquel José Melgar, primer hombre del mundo occidental que tuvo la oportunidad de ver una. Hemos de convenir que en ellos están plasmados, a escala heroica, los rasgos étnicos propios del antiguo habitante de Mesoamérica, mismos que todavía conservan algunos indígenas contemporáneos."

24. The six heads from La Venta and Tres Zapotes are made from a basalt that darkens over time with exposure to the elements. The ten San Lorenzo heads are made from lighter-colored basalt (de la Fuente 1971:11). The last two San Lorenzo heads discovered (Monument 61, Head 10) were buried for a long time and are practically white (D. C. Grove, personal communication, 1991; Cyphers 1995).

rect and the Olmecs associated volcanoes with rain and fertility, then volcanic rocks (basalt, jade, and serpentine) would have had symbolic importance and would have been appropriate for important sculptures. These heads represent an enormous amount of work, having been transported from quarries as much as 70 kilometers away without the use of wheels or beasts of burden and then carved with stone tools, bronze and iron being unknown. The implication that Afrocentrists draw from this is that the Egyptian civilization was so superior that the Olmecs regarded its "black" representatives almost as gods and dropped whatever they were

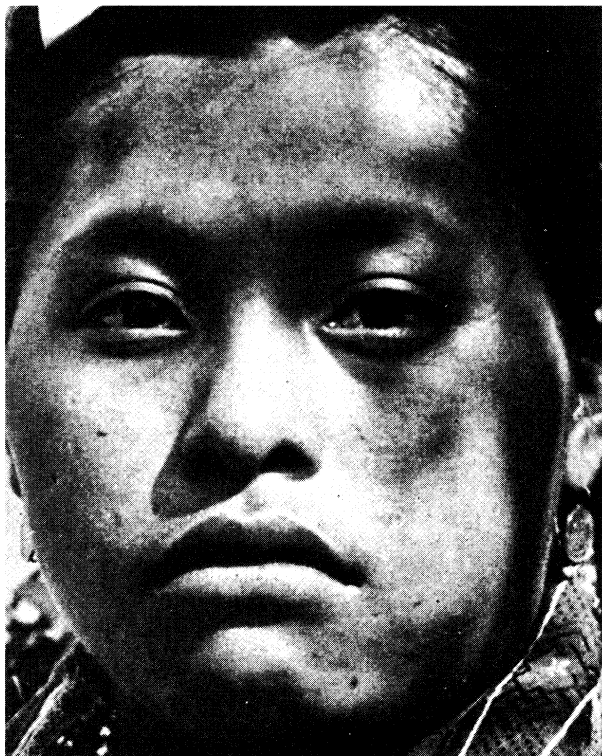


FIG. 10. Woman from Olmec area. (Photo Donald Corddry, reprinted from Bernal [1968].)



FIG. 11. Tzotzil from Chiapas. (Photo B. Reyes, reprinted from Morley [1947].)

doing to devote enormous effort over many years to quarrying, transporting, and carving their likenesses.

Van Sertima's description of the contact between the Nubian-Egyptians and the Olmecs makes it appear as if the Olmec civilization arose suddenly after the period in question. However, the civilization of the Olmecs had a long period of gestation in situ. San Lorenzo was occupied from the beginning of the Formative, 1793 B.C. (Coe and Diehl 1980), and La Venta was occupied from 1658 B.C. onward (Rust and Sharer 1988). San Lorenzo flourished from 1428 to 1011 B.C. (1200–900 B.C.), a period characterized by three-dimensional monumental sculptures including the colossal heads (Coe and Diehl 1980, vol. 1:395–96). There was also a San Lorenzo phase at La Venta, 1150–800 B.C., during which monumental sculpture was produced. La Venta rose to prominence during the Middle Formative, 905–400 B.C., a period characterized by low-relief sculptures.

Although the exact dating of the colossal heads is a complex matter, they pose a serious chronological problem for Van Sertima's hypothesis. To date, 17 heads have been found, 10 in San Lorenzo, 4 in La Venta, 2 in Tres Zapotes, and 1 in Cobata (Cyphers 1995:16). The majority of the heads in San Lorenzo were found in a ravine where they were deposited by erosion, have no clear stratigraphic association, and were dated by iconographic cross-ties. However, 16 other monuments had stratigraphic associations placing them in the final

stages of the San Lorenzo B phase (1011 B.C.), and therefore Coe and Diehl (1980, vol. 1:294–95; Coe, Diehl, and Struiver 1967) conclude that these heads cannot be younger than 1011 B.C.²⁵ However, San Lorenzo heads 6, 7, and 8 have original placements. Ann Cyphers has radiocarbon-dated the undisturbed context of head 7 and found it to be older than 1011 B.C. She concludes

25. Van Sertima doggedly continues to argue that, despite San Lorenzo's greater antiquity, the heads at La Venta were carved first and tries to use Michael Coe's authority for support. Despite Coe's numerous articles clearly pointing out the priority of the heads at San Lorenzo, Van Sertima (1992a:15; 1992b:61; 1994:292, 1995:74, 77) continues to cite as authoritative a letter from Coe to Ignacio Bernal first published in 1968 (Bernal 1968). He argues that the San Lorenzo carbon dates relate to the initial occupation of the site and not to the dating of the sculptures (an error) and that these dates are not determinative. He states that "the reason why archaeologists were able to establish a relative dating of the stone heads at La Venta was because they were rooted in a wooden platform which went through at least three phases of construction" (Van Sertima 1994:292). Elsewhere (1995:74) he again refers to the "carbon-dated" and "wooden [our italics] platform at La Venta (capital of the Olmec)." There is no wooden platform at La Venta. What the site reports refer to is the ceremonial colored-clay platform of Complex A, which indeed underwent several construction phases. Only head 1 was buried on that platform. The other three heads were buried on an east-west line north of the platform. The dates came from charcoal samples from different levels of the clay platform (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1967).

on the basis of the uniformity of sculpting technique and style that all these heads fall within the Early Formative (personal communication, 1995). A number of Olmec heads may be even older than they seem. Porter (1989) has good evidence that many were made by re-carving massive thrones and speculates that a ruler's throne was re-carved into his image after his death.

The excavators of La Venta also considered the heads to belong to the Early Formative, that is, earlier than 1011 B.C. (Holleman, Ambro, and O'Connell 1968), although this cannot be proven because they were relocated to a Middle Formative context. Lowe (1989:43) states that many Olmec specialists consider most or all of the colossal heads (at San Lorenzo, La Venta, Tres Zapotes, Cobata) to have been made in the Early Formative. De la Fuente (1971:11, our translation) speaks of "a point that everyone who has dealt with the problem agrees on: all the heads were carved during a relatively short period that varies between one hundred and, at the most, two hundred years."²⁶ Because it is impossible to date all the heads unequivocally, one cannot prove that the San Lorenzo, La Venta, and Tres Zapotes heads were contemporaneous. They might have been sequential, and carving might have extended into the Middle Formative. However, Cypher's definitive dating of San Lorenzo head 7 proves that "Negroid-looking" heads were being carved, mutilated, and buried between 1428 and 1011 B.C., that is, prior to 1200 B.C. and centuries before the alleged arrival of Van Sertima's Nubian voyagers.

Van Sertima's postulated crew included Phoenicians because of their sailing expertise and because he had identified a carved portrait of a "Phoenician merchant captain" on a stela at La Venta (Van Sertima 1976: pl. 22). Unfortunately, this "Phoenician" could not have been a shipmate of the Nubians (in 1200 or 700 B.C.), because sculpted stela were produced during the Middle Formative period, several hundred years later than the colossal heads (Lowe 1989:63-67).

In addition to seeing "Negroid" traits in the Olmec stone heads, Van Sertima tries to establish parallels between the pyramid complexes of the Nile Valley and the mounds or platform structures at La Venta. References are made to the "north-south" orientation of "pyramids," to "step pyramids," to their astronomical alignment, to the dual function of "pyramids" as both "tomb and temple," to a system of drains, moats, and "sacred pools," to the complex of walls which surrounded the ceremonial precincts, and to the "fact" that the Olmec "pyramid" complexes appear for the first time during the alleged contact period (Van Sertima 1976:32, 33, 155, 156; 1992a:12-13, 15; 1992b:48; 1992c:60, 76-79; 1995:87-89). In drawing these parallels Van Sertima is suggesting that the Olmecs were influenced by Egyptian and Nubian architecture, but the

evidence from the archaeological sites themselves fails to support this assertion in several important ways.

For example, large pyramids were not being built in Egypt or in Nubia at the end of the 13th century B.C.; the great age of pyramid building had ended much earlier. The last step pyramid was built in 2680 B.C., and the last large regular pyramid was Khenjefer's (ca. 1777 B.C.). In 1200 B.C. the Egyptians either buried their dead in secret, as was the case with all the pharaohs of this period, or constructed small tombs that might incorporate small, pointed pyramids into their overall design. All of these tombs, such as those at Deir el Medina, were quite small, and none of them were more than about 20 ft. in height (Edwards 1985 [1947]:225-30, 232-34; see also Fakhry 1961:251-53; Lepre 1990).²⁷

The evidence for Van Sertima's other presumed contact period (the late 8th and early 7th century B.C.) is likewise problematical or nonexistent. The Egyptians continued to bury their dead in secret or constructed the same kinds of diminutive tombs with small pointed pyramids that they had built in the 13th century B.C. In Nubia pyramids were built for the first time at El Kurru in 751 B.C. (Fakhry 1961:251-53), but these structures were also quite small and bore no resemblance to the rectangular, oval, or conical mounds or platform structures built by the Olmecs. Like their Egyptian counterparts of the same period, the Nubian pyramids were generally tall and pointed, with an average slope of 60-70° and an average base of 30-40 sq. ft. The Nubian pyramids were also connected to small Egyptian-style mortuary temples, which faced southeast, in contradiction to Van Sertima's claim that all such structures had a "north-south" orientation. The Nubian pyramids were also built with "gravel," "sandstone," and "solid stone masonry" and contained burial chambers in which were found figurines, painted mortuary scenes, written texts, and other artifacts in the Egyptian and Egypto-Nubian style (Edwards 1985:235, 236-39; Adams 1984:256-57, 266-67, 278-85; Dunham 1950). In contrast, the Olmec structures were built of different layers of carefully selected earth and clay in various colors and were apparently used primarily for ceremonial and religious rituals rather than for the burial of the dead. They also lack any evidence of figurines, painted mortuary scenes, written texts, or any other artifact in the Egyptian or Egypto-Nubian style.

The Olmec mounds or platform structures of the Middle Formative were relatively large compared with the Nubian pyramids of the same period. At La Venta they were mostly 200-400-sq. ft. rectangular structures with sloping sides and flat tops, which apparently served as platforms for temples and other structures made of thatch or some other perishable material. There were also courtyards, plazas with palisades, and circular, oval, or pentagonal mounds, but none of these structures resembled the Nubian pyramids and their af-

26. "un aspecto en que la mayoría de quienes han abordado el problema parece coincidir: se han considerado que todas las cabezas fueron talladas en un plazo relativamente breve, que oscila entre cien y, cuanto más, doscientos años."

27. Van Sertima does not explain why Egyptian visitors to the New World would have taught the natives to build pyramids that had not been built in Egypt for hundreds if not thousands of years.

filiated buildings. The La Venta stepped pyramid, although deeply eroded and conelike, is 120 ft. high and has a base diameter of 420 ft. (Heizer 1968; Soustelle 1985 [1979]:33). Van Sertima continues to use an old photograph of an outdated reconstruction of this edifice to insist that it was a four-sided pyramid comparable to those built by the ancient Egyptians and Nubians (Van Sertima 1995:88, fig. 3-16; Diehl 1981:76-78, 79-80; see also Lowe 1989).²⁸

Hyperdiffusionists often complain that Establishment scholars dogmatically refuse to admit that pre-Columbian contacts occurred at all, but this is not the case. It is now generally accepted that Vikings came to the New World about A.D. 1044 (Davies 1979:229-30; Morison 1971; Stiebing 1984:159-62; Wilson 1992). This acceptance is based on several genuine Scandinavian artifacts found by Ingstad in a well-conducted archaeological dig at L'Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland, and dated to approximately A.D. 1044 (Ingstad 1964, 1969). The archaeological discoveries at L'Anse aux Meadows validated the sagas of Leif Eriksson and Bjarni Herjolfsson describing their round-trip expeditions to the New World, which scholars had regarded skeptically prior to archaeological corroboration (Morison 1971). There are no such written records of the return of any expedition from Africa to the New World. Van Sertima (1976:77) dismisses the Viking contact: "The Vikings brought no new plant, influenced no act, introduced no ritual, left no identifiable trace of their blood in the Native Americans. Like waves, they broke for a moment on alien sands and then receded." What must be remembered is that not a single authentic African artifact has ever been found in a controlled archaeological context, and therefore the evidence for a Viking presence in pre-Columbian America is much stronger than all the supposed claims for a Nubian or African influence. Furthermore, if in fact all we had was an African site comparable to L'Anse aux Meadows, there would be little interest in Afrocentric circles for writing books about it. Their political agenda is not just to show that Africans arrived in the New World sometime in the past²⁹ but that, being a superior civilization, they deeply

influenced the native cultures. When two cultures meet there is a reciprocal exchange of words, foods, and customs,³⁰ but one searches in vain for examples in Van Sertima of Nahuatl words or Mesoamerican beliefs in African cultures. He does argue for a pre-Columbian introduction of maize into Africa (Van Sertima 1976:240-50; 1995), but given the speed with which maize and cassava became staples after the Portuguese introduced them into Africa, a pre-Columbian introduction should have produced a much wider distribution and importance than what Van Sertima claims.

Botanical Evidence

If no genuine artifacts are found, the next most credible evidences for contacts between peoples are plants, but, as in all these diffusionist arguments, the temporal sequence must be correct; the plant in question must be shown to have been used or domesticated earlier in the proposed place of origin than in the proposed destination. This is not the case for African plants. Baker (1970:62) summarizes his discussion of possible contacts thus: "On present evidence it can hardly be said that cultivated plants of the New World provide a foundation for the belief that there were important cultural exchanges between the Americas and the Old World in pre-Columbian days." A volume devoted specifically to the question of pre-Columbian contacts, in which a number of proponents of contact (including several upon whom Van Sertima relied for botanical evidence), participated, concludes as follows: "The consensus of botanical evidence given in the symposium seems to be that *there is no hard and fast evidence for any pre-Columbian introduction of any single plant or animal across the ocean from the Old World to the New World or vice-versa. This is emphatically not to say that it could not have occurred*" (Riley et al. 1971:452-53).

The situation with regard to the evidence has not changed since 1971. By A.D. 1400, Africans were growing five sets of domesticated crops: (1) plants first domesticated in the Near East, which were grown in North Africa, including Egypt (wheat, barley, peas, and beans), (2) plants domesticated in the Sahel zone of North Africa (cotton, sesame, watermelon, sorghum, and pearl millet), which became staples in sub-Saharan Africa, (3) plants domesticated in the wet, tropical climate of West Africa (African yam, rice, oil palm, kola nut), (4) plants domesticated and found only in Ethiopia (finger millet, noog, teff), and, finally, plants imported to Madagascar by the Southeast Asians who first settled that island (bananas, Asian yam, taro, Asian rice) (Diamond 1994). We will not discuss the last two groups.

Plants were first domesticated in the Near East

28. Van Sertima makes hardly any reference to the Nubian pyramids that should be the principal focus of his analysis.

29. If, perchance, some Africans had landed in the New World, rather than being regarded as gods they would probably have been sacrificed and eaten. All but the first Viking expeditions were planned, but they were repelled and driven off by the natives. The fate of unplanned expeditions would have been even worse. Davies (1971:248) points to a known instance in which "a Spanish boat with sixteen men and two women on board was wrecked on the coast of Yucatan six years before Cortés arrived; the crew were all sacrificed and ritually eaten, with the exception of Gonzalo Guerrero and Jerónimo de Aguilar who were instead enslaved by two local chieftains. Of these survivors, Guerrero had gone so far native that he adorned himself with the accoutrements of his adopted tribe, including elaborate nose plugs and earrings, and refused on any account to abandon his new life to join Cortés; even Aguilar, when first found by the Spaniards, had become indistinguishable from an Indian. Survivors of accidental landings are much more likely to adopt the local culture than to spread their own."

30. Appiah (1994) points out that both Afrocentrists and Eurocentrists are biased against cultures without writing. Why assume that a civilization, such as Egypt is automatically superior to a tribal society led by chiefs?

(7600–7000 B.C.) and spread from there to other areas (Zohary and Hopf 1993:228–34). Farming villages first appeared in the Nile Valley of Egypt between 5000 and 4500 B.C. (Burenhult 1993:42–43; Hassan 1988). The earliest-known wheat and barley in Africa were found in the Fayum and are dated about 4400 B.C. (Wendorf et al. 1992). In the Sudan, a site dated about 4800 B.C. showed evidence of the use of wild plants but not of cultivated forms (Krzyżaniak 1991). In the Sahara, the herding of cattle, sheep, and goats as well as the intensive use of wild sorghum and millet was seen at the earliest by 6000 B.C., with domestication taking place sometime after that (Wendorf et al. 1992; Burenhult 1993:42–43). Zohary and Hopf (1993:234) point out that the time and place of origin of rice, sorghum, common millet, and cotton are only partially understood but that agriculture came much later to sub-Saharan Africa. Domesticated plants are well documented in West Africa only from 1200 B.C. (the date of the earliest millet) onward (Burenhult 1993:44–46). Burenhult summarizes (p. 46): “Whenever various African plants were domesticated, plant cultivation was largely, if not entirely, restricted to the northwestern and southeastern parts of sub-Saharan Africa until between 500 B.C. and 300 B.C.” After the first century A.D., the great Bantu expansion spread the sub-Saharan domesticated plants across the continent (Diamond 1994). Since plant domestication in the New World began in 7000 B.C., it is clear that only Egypt and the Sahel are areas in which domestication preceded or was contemporaneous with that in the New World and that sub-Saharan African agriculture is too recent to have been a source of domesticated plants in the New World. The only plants that really require discussion are cotton, the bottle gourd, and maize.

The bottle gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*), although not a food plant, was domesticated early because of its usefulness as a container. The wild gourd is endemic to tropical Africa and originated there (Whitaker 1971, Whitaker and Bemis 1976). However, cultivated bottle gourds earlier than 7000 B.C. were recovered in the Ocampo caves in Mexico (Whitaker, Cutler, and MacNeish 1957, Whitaker and Bemis 1976), while the oldest cultivated forms in South America date to about 3000 B.C. (Whitaker 1971). Lanning (1963) reported a much earlier site, but the gourds there were probably gathered rather than cultivated. Remains of *L. siceraria* were found in Egyptian tombs dated about 3300–3500 B.C. (Whitaker and Bemis 1976). Thus gourds were cultivated in the New World much earlier than in Egypt. Whitaker and Carter (1954, 1961) have shown that gourds can float for as long as a year without the seeds’ losing the capacity to germinate. If a gourd on its arrival in the New World was tossed up on the beach by a storm and broken so that the seeds could escape or picked up by a curious person and transported inland, the gourd would spread. There is no need to posit human transport to the New World for this plant. Additionally, it makes little sense for persons accidentally making a sea voyage to load up the boat with these

bulky, nearly inedible fruits (Baker 1970:49–50). The presence of the gourd in the New World predates any domestication in West Africa.

Cotton presents a number of problems. There are four species of cultivated cotton: African cotton (*Gossypium herbarium*) and Asian cotton (*G. arboreum*) have 13 large chromosomes (AA), and the New World species *G. hirsutum*, of Central American origin, and *G. barbadense*, originating in South America, have 26 (13 large and 13 small) chromosomes (AADD). Since no cotton with 13 large chromosomes is found in the New World and no cotton with only 13 small chromosomes is native to the Old World, the New World tetraploid cottons must have arisen from a hybridization of a New World species (DD) with an Old World species (AA) leading to a doubling of the chromosome number (Baker 1970:57–61). The question is how and when this hybridization took place. Van Sertima (1976:180–91; 1992) argues, following Stephens (1966), that cotton seeds would not have floated and retained their viability long enough to cross the Atlantic or the Pacific, although they could have made journeys of up to 1,000 miles. He then argues that the “seeds of the African diploid cotton could *not* have drifted by themselves across the ocean but had to come to the New World in the hands of African men. . . . African man, bearing cottons, made the drift journey to the Americas in the fourth millennium B.C.” (Van Sertima 1976:191).³¹

In considering this argument, temporal relationships must again be examined. The earliest *G. herbarium* in Africa (2500 B.C.) was found in Afyia, Egyptian Nubia, where cotton seed and lint hairs intermediate between those of wild forms and those of cultivated species were obtained, but there was no sign of weaving at that time (Zohary and Hopf 1993:128). Cloth fragments (*G. arboreum*) dated to 3000 B.C. have been found in the Indus Valley (Hutchison 1962; Baker 1970:60; Phillips 1976). These dates are *later* than the dates for New World cottons and violate the temporal-sequence rule for diffusion. Junius Bird found evidence for the long use of cotton textiles (*G. barbadense*) at Huaca Prieta, Peru, dated at 2500 B.C. (Hutchison 1962, Phillips 1976). The oldest archaeological remains containing cotton cloth fibers and boll fragments of *G. hirsutum* come from Tehuacan, Mexico, dated about 3500 B.C. (Smith 1968). Phillips (1976) and Wendel, Brubaker, and Percival (1992) point out that this cotton was fully domesticated and does not represent the earliest domestication of *G. hirsutum*. Baker (1970:61) points out that wild *G. hirsutum* has been found on islands in the Caribbean and in Yucatan and that *G. barbadense* is found on the coasts of Ecuador and Peru and the wild form on the Galapagos Islands. Baker concludes that “all of this evidence suggests that man had nothing to do with the origins of tetraploid cotton, but that he domesticated *hirsutum* and

31. It is hard to see how a purely conjectural cotton-bearing voyage (from where, on what conceivable vessel?) in the 4th millennium B.C. supports or proves Egypto-Nubian contact in 700 B.C.

barbadensis separately in the New World." The time involved in forming hybrids and subsequently diffusing these tetraploid species as widely as they are found means that the time of initial hybridization was thousands of years prior to Van Sertima's postulated 4th-millennium-B.C. drift voyage (Phillips 1976). Cytogenetic studies by Phillips (1963) do not support the theory of a recent origin of New World cottons. Even Stephens (1971:406-7), upon whom Van Sertima relies, argued that cotton seed would have been transported by some form of natural raft and points out that an exclusively wild tetraploid species *G. tomentosum*, probably derived from an ancestor in Mexico, had somehow become established in Hawaii (a much longer distance than the one involved in a trans-Atlantic crossing).³² DeJoode and Wendel (1992) cite studies by Fryxell (1979) on the seed and capsule buoyancy and salt-water tolerance of *Gossypium* and a number of wild populations separated by salt water in concluding that oceanic dispersion of this genus has been important. Stephens (1971:406-7) also mentions research by Vernon Proctor, who fed wild cotton seeds to killdeers and showed that the seeds were retained in their guts for days without loss of viability. Van Sertima does not quote Stephens's (1971:407) conclusion: "Because of the possibilities of natural and accidental dispersal, one is forced to the conclusion that the geographical distribution of the 'wild' forms of cotton *per se* cannot be used critically as supporting evidence for early transoceanic cultural contacts. Archaeological evidence of spindle whorls, cordage, fabrics, or any other artifact indicating the *use* would be far more satisfactory." As we have noted, this is precisely the point. No such artifact has ever been found. Citing Stephens (1971), Van Sertima (1994) argues that feral cotton found in the Cape Verde Islands is derived from New World cotton introduced by the Portuguese from Guinea in A.D. 1462. This proves according to Van Sertima that round trips to the New World took place before Columbus. Stephens (1971:413) points out, however, that the Portuguese introduced many New World crops into the Cape Verde Islands in the 16th century and that New World cotton could also have been introduced after Columbus's voyage.

Van Sertima relies extensively on Jeffreys (1953, 1963, 1971), who claims that the Arabs had made a round trip to the New World and introduced maize to Africa prior to A.D. 1492. Jeffreys's arguments are primarily linguistic and mythological with little archaeological support and have been severely criticized because of this (Willet 1962 and 9 of 11 commentators on Jeffreys 1971). He concludes, on the basis of an article by Li (1961) that Van Sertima also cites, that Arabs had crossed the Atlantic well before A.D. 1100 and also described maize. Li identified the destination described in

two Chinese texts dated A.D. 1175 and 1225 as Maracaibo, Venezuela. He also identified melons described as "six feet round . . . enough for a meal for twenty or thirty men" as pumpkins and "grains of wheat . . . three inches long" as kernels of large-seeded Andean flour maize (Li 1961, quoted by Van Sertima 1976:238-39; see also Fritze 1993:179-80). How anyone could take as fact rather than as fanciful invention pumpkins 6 ft. in diameter is beyond us. Mangelsdorf (1974:205) points out that the proposed Andean maize is in fact post-Columbian and is not found in plant remains in archaeological sites or depicted in prehistoric ceramics. Although corn is particularly well suited to be preserved archaeologically and has been found in abundance throughout its range in the New World, including the wet tropics, "not a single corncob, unmistakably pre-Columbian, has yet been found in any part of the Old World" (Mangelsdorf 1974:206). Corn was grown in Spain by 1498. Giovanni Ramusio saw it growing in Venice in 1554, and by 1560 the Portuguese were growing it in the Congo (S. Coe 1994:15-16). Mauny (1971), citing an A.D. 1605 report by Pieter de Marees that he considers to be the first true reference to maize in Africa, argues that maize was brought by the Portuguese from the West Indies to São Tomé and then transmitted to the coast (where it had been unknown) and to other parts of Africa after A.D. 1550. In considering the rapidity with which the cultivation of corn was diffused throughout Africa after its introduction by the Portuguese, Miracle's (1966:196) observation that "regardless of how long maize may have been established in eastern Africa, it was little observed before the end of the sixteenth century" is quite revealing.

Mummification

Van Sertima (1976:156-62; 1995:86-87) continues to claim that the Egyptians brought mummification to the New World. His only sources for this claim are the discredited hyperdiffusionist authors of the early 20th century, whom he quotes from Mackenzie (1923). All of his citations except for those that refer to Palenque ultimately derive from Grafton Elliot Smith, a prolific hyperdiffusionist who believed that all civilization derived from Egypt, or his disciple W. J. Perry (see n. 6). Elliot Smith proposed that this "Heliolithic" culture had first spread to Asia and was taken from there to America. The diffusion of mummification from Egypt to the rest of the world was central to his thesis. This thesis was thoroughly demolished in 1928 by Roland B. Dixon's *The Building of Cultures* (Wauchope 1962:21-25; Davies 1979:159-60)—a problem that Van Sertima ignores.

Citing no original sources, Van Sertima (1976:157) claims:

We have indisputable proof of Mexican mummification. . . . one of the best examples is the mummification.

32. Subsequent research (DeJoode and Wendel 1992) shows that *G. tomentosum* diverged early from *G. hirsutum* in Mesoamerica and dispersed by floating to the Hawaiian Islands. Seeds of this species retain viability even after three years of salt-water immersion.

fied figure in the sarcophagus at Palenque. Three features of this Palenque burial indicate an Egyptian influence. The jade mask on the face of the dead, the fact of mummification itself, and the flared base of the sarcophagus. . . . Egyptians made sarcophagi with a flared base to enable them to stand it up because their burials were vertical. . . . The Mexicans, like the Nubians, buried in a horizontal position, yet at Palenque the flared base is retained, although it serves no function. The retention of such a non-functional element . . . is among the clearest indications of an influence. A borrowed artifact often goes through an initial period of "slavish imitation" before it is restructured to suit local needs.

Van Sertima is wrong on all counts. Every basic text on the Maya states that the sarcophagus contained a *skeleton* not a mummy (Benson 1967:92; Thompson 1954:77–80). Any interested party can verify this by looking at the photograph of Pacal's³³ skeleton in the sarcophagus (Morley, Brainerd, and Sharer 1983:125, fig. 4.22; the photograph has been published in this text since 1956). From this or any other picture of the open sarcophagus one can also verify that the "flared base" is, in fact, a widening of the open interior of the slab, not the bottom of the sarcophagus or a "slavish imitation" of an Egyptian prototype. For Van Sertima's claim to be true, it would have required the Mesoamericans to imitate the Egyptians from 800 B.C. until A.D. 683 (almost 1,500 years) without any evidence of an intervening culture transmitting any trait. It should also be noted that jade death masks were never used by the ancient Egyptians.

Finally, if the source of diffusion is the oldest place where the practice is found, perhaps travelers from the New World went to Egypt and taught them how to mummify the deceased. The oldest mummies in the world are those associated with the Chinchorro culture of Chile (Arriaza 1995a). The oldest mummy there is dated 5050 ± 135 B.C. (Arriaza 1995b:42, 57). This is 2,000 to 3,000 years earlier than in Egypt, where artificial preservation of corpses began in the Old Kingdom (ca. 2686–2181 B.C.) (Davis 1993).

Conclusion

There is hardly a claim in any of Van Sertima's writings that can be supported by the evidence found in the archaeological, botanical, linguistic, or historical record. He employs a number of tactics commonly used by pseudoscientists (Cole 1980; Radner and Radner 1982: 27–52; Ortiz de Montellano 1995; Williams 1988), including an almost exclusive use of outdated secondary sources and a reliance on the pseudoscientific writing of others. One finds very few references to primary

sources, to archaeological site reports, or to up-to-date publications by scholars who have actually done original research or who have dug in the field. One might get the impression that there had been no research in Mesoamerica since 1920. He claims linguistic and cultural influences between peoples and cultures that existed thousands of years apart without any evidence of an intermediate transmitting culture. Chronologies and sequences are completely disregarded; for example, the use of purple in Mixtec codices of the 15th century A.D. is said to prove that Egyptians brought Tyrian purple to the Olmecs in 800 B.C. (Van Sertima 1995:80). The chronology offered produces contradictions to the arguments he advances. If Egyptians contacted the Olmecs around 1200 B.C. in accordance with Jairazbhoy's chronology and with the carving of the colossal heads, there is a problem with claiming that pyramids were imported, since none had been built in Egypt for years. If instead the time of contact is said to be 700 B.C., in agreement with the renewal of pyramid building in Nubia, there is the problem of the colossal "portrait" heads' having been carved hundreds of years prior to the supposed contact. Van Sertima uses photographs to support racial stereotypes in the portrayal of sculptured heads and other types of figurative art, and his work substitutes assertion and scenarios for evidence.

For the most part, the Afrocentrists and the other cultural nationalists have heartily endorsed Van Sertima's thesis despite its obvious weaknesses in methodology and evidence. Although they have called for an Afrocentric history that is accurate and well-intentioned, they seem to be more concerned with the need to raise the "self-esteem" of African-Americans, regardless of the impact on other groups.³⁴ By endorsing Van Sertima's writings, the Afrocentrists and cultural nationalists have accepted a hegemonic and racist view of pre-Columbian America that is completely lacking in historical accuracy. They have also accepted a theory and a methodological approach that grossly distort the historical record at the expense of Native Americans. Despite vehement protestations to the contrary, Van Sertima has, in effect, trampled on the self-respect or self-esteem of Native Americans by minimizing their role as actors in their own history, denigrating their cultures,³⁵ and usurping their contributions to the development of world civilizations.

33. We now know this ruler's name, the dates of his birth (A.D. 603) and death (A.D. 683), and other biographical details.

34. On the call for an accurate history and the need to raise the self-esteem of African-Americans, see Asante and Ravitch (1991: 270, 274) and *The Washington Post*, December 14, 1989.

35. Van Sertima claims that the alleged precontact "structures" at San Lorenzo are "slipshod, poorly planned, irregular, and uneven" and fail to "observe any axial orientation" whatsoever (1995:89). For a description of the San Lorenzo site, a large-scale modification of a natural landform by several levels of planned terraces, see Coe (1981:118–119), Coe and Diehl (1980, vol. 1:25–32), and Coe (1989: 80).

Comments

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Haslip-Viera, Ortiz de Montellano, and Barbour are bold in taking on the pseudoscientific writings of Van Sertima, for this kind of task surely is thankless. Most of us groan when another Von Däniken, Fell, or Van Sertima genre book appears, because these works see the world easily in yes-or-no terms and rely heavily on establishing evidence by mere repeated assertion. The question for academics is whether one should bother responding to such tracts, thus providing them with a certain level of respectability by seriously evaluating them, or simply ignore them. Most of us have chosen to ignore them, but as Haslip-Viera and colleagues point out this could be to our detriment, for rising ethnic self-images have provided a fertile locus for such works to thrive.

I am not convinced, however, that the kind of rebuttal that Haslip-Viera, Ortiz de Montellano, and Barbour make in this paper is the appropriate strategy to employ. For example, previously Ortiz de Montellano (1990) has cogently argued that the Aztec system of knowledge and the Iberian systems were based on different evidentiary concepts. Moreover, archaeologists are finding out, much to their dismay, that the First Americans do not subscribe to the same intellectual precepts regarding knowledge as they do and therefore many find archaeology of little utility in establishing their own cultural heritage based on the values of their cultural system. Meetings of the Society for American Archaeology now are rife with stories about how one or another tribe wishes not only to rebury human remains, utilizing the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) legislation, but also to reinter and/or reclaim all cultural artifacts, as they see no benefit in "scientific" study of bones or artifacts to "know" their heritage. The Afrocentrist models that this paper attempts to repudiate are of a similar nature, I argue, in that the intellectual bases for "knowing" are not those that are accepted in academia but rather based on other cultural definitions of "knowledge." Thus Haslip-Viera and colleagues' quest is in one sense futile, as they attempt to apply academic definitions of "knowledge" in a cultural situation where such standards simply are not seen as appropriate by the members of the group involved.

On another level, however, I think it is appropriate to point out the inherent "racism" of some of the assumptions that are involved in the arguments investigated. If one reports that there are pyramids in Egypt and pyramids in Mexico, or mummies in Egypt and mummies in Chile, the automatic response seems to be, "When did the Egyptians bring these ideas to the New World?" No one ever asks, "Did the Chileans or Mexicans bring these ideas to Egypt?" (a fair question, in light of the fact that the world's oldest prepared mummies in Chile pre-date Egyptian examples by two millennia). The as-

sumption of a wide range of pseudoscholars, as well as others, seems to be one of "mentally handicapped First Americans." Prehistoric New World peoples seem to be consistently seen not as having the intellectual capacity to invent or develop technology on their own but as waiting with open arms for some poor lost African, or Asian, or European to make a transoceanic voyage to bring them one or another cultural idea. This kind of thinking is repugnant to me and is the reason that many of us disregard the publications of Van Sertima and others of similar approaches.

If we do decide to comment on works like Van Sertima's, which adhere to a different cultural watermark of validation, we need to make sure that our own arguments are tight. In this respect Haslip-Viera and colleagues have not helped themselves by employing radiocarbon calibration factors incorrectly, using out-of-date sources on archaeobotany, etc. Western paradigms of validation of knowledge are not universally held; as anthropologists we need to be sensitive to the fact that while we might actively disagree with Vine Deloria or Ivan Van Sertima, based on our cultural biases of what involves knowledge, our perceptions and definitions of "truth" and "knowledge" are not the same as those held by such individuals. Thus while the faults of Van Sertima are self-evident to most readers of this journal, they will not be equally so to the audience he has targeted.

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The claim by Van Sertima and others that Africans created the Olmec culture of Mesoamerica belongs in the same historical dustbin as previous claims that the high cultures of the New World resulted from the migration of white peoples from Europe (i.e., the Welsh who were supposed to have left the mounds of the U.S. Middle West) or the Near East (i.e., the Mormon belief that the Maya cities were really made by white "Nephites"). Only recently have we been assured in press articles that the Olmec came from China!

As someone who has worked many decades with the Preclassic or Formative cultures of Mesoamerica and spent three field seasons excavating the great Olmec center of San Lorenzo, I would like to state unequivocally that there is nothing in these Olmec sites that looks African, Chinese, European, or Near Eastern. The Olmec culture was created and maintained by American Indian peoples with a completely Mesoamerican way of life centered on the cultivation of maize and other New World cultigens. Their pottery, figurines, and other artifacts show a strong heritage from even earlier Preclassic cultures on the Pacific coast of Chiapas and Guatemala, an unlikely region for a putative African landfall.

Van Sertima and his associates have committed the fallacy of taking a style of art as racial fact. If this kind

of reasoning were valid, then we should assume that all Hellenistic Greeks looked like Alexander the Great and that the women of Paris in the 1930s had three eyes and two noses. The colossal heads really are portraits of Olmec rulers, but the physiognomies of those rulers were altered to fit the prevailing Olmec canons of monumental art. Olmec jade carvers had somewhat different canons, producing slightly "Oriental"-looking figurines. Neither the great heads nor the figurines are to be taken as phenotypical fact.

The authors of this article are to be congratulated for challenging Van Sertima on his own ground, examining and refuting each one of his assertions in exemplary fashion. Their arguments are completely convincing.

I find two aspects of Van Sertima's Afrocentric thesis extremely disturbing. First, it demeans and trivializes the genuine cultural achievements of native Americans. The creation of Mesoamerica's first civilization, the Olmec, was a mighty achievement, and to attempt to take this away from the indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica on the flimsiest basis is an unworthy exercise. Secondly, it disturbs me as an American citizen to see this kind of wishful thinking imposed on our education system; it is only too similar to the attempt by creationists to force their own unscientific beliefs on biology classes.

I will admit that there are many things still to be learned about the Olmec, but they will only be learned through serious archaeological excavation.

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The real story of the ancient Olmecs is more exciting than any of Van Sertima's claims. At a very early time in Mesoamerican prehistory, the rapid sui generis development of a high degree of social complexity occurred in a geographically restricted area and was characterized by impressive monumental architecture and art. The people of Mexico are extremely proud of their Olmec heritage because they are cognizant that this first civilization was a foundation for even more advanced cultures arising throughout prehistoric and historic time in Mesoamerica.

Van Sertima's ethnocentric point of view inhibits him from realizing that ancient people of the Americas could have attained such a level without aid from elsewhere. Such distortion of the archaeological record takes advantage of public ignorance regarding archaeological method and theory. I believe that people are often confused by works such as Van Sertima's but lack the information necessary to understand the scientific method on which archaeology is based. The dangerous terrain of pseudoscience is a trap for the interested public and archaeologists alike, who generally do not take the time to publish scientific refutations of its validity.

Constant rebuttals to pseudoscience are essential to alert the public to its perils. For example, the creationist

position has been considerably weakened by the outrage and arguments expressed by the academic community. Making scientific results digestible for public consumption has been an endeavor spearheaded by Stephen Jay Gould and Carl Sagan, and in anthropology the widespread dissemination of recent analyses of Maya history by Linda Schele and collaborators is laudable. As far as the Olmecs are concerned, Michael D. Coe has consistently made his research results available to the English-speaking public. Communication with interested laypeople should be a corollary to all scientific research. When this does not occur, as Haslip-Viera, Ortiz de Montellanos, and Barbour point out, it is prime time for the rise to fame of pseudoscientists.

The present refutation of Van Sertima is much needed because of the pervasiveness and the insidious quality of his work. Publication in *CURRENT ANTHROPOLOGY* alerts professionals, provides sound evaluations of contrasting interpretations and the data on which they are based, and serves as an important educational text. Between the lines of this article, I perceive a clear plea to Olmec archaeologists (and all others) to counteract misrepresentations by making their research results readily available to the public.

The San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán Archaeological Project initiated an active campaign to communicate recent research results to interested laypeople in Mexico by creating a traveling exhibit of replicas, scale-models, photographs, maps, and a video (it contained no original artifacts!). Conferences and an illustrated text supplemented the information from the exhibit. This event increased public participation in the ongoing research and generated awareness regarding the nonrenewable character of archaeological resources. Over a one-and-a-half-year period, the exhibit covered a large part of southeastern Mexico, reaching more than 40,000 people. The public interest shown and generated made it clear that people in the provinces do not have ready access to such information. Although the exhibit was a costly investment sponsored by the National Autonomous University of Mexico as part of its community service goals and time-consuming for all the pressured academics involved, its educational value is incalculable.

Recent research in the Olmec heartland and U.S. museum exhibits are stimulating a resurgence of interest in this culture. I congratulate the authors of this timely article for entering into a polemic that most scientists have ignored. The benefits will be enormous for scientific archaeology, the Olmecs, and the Mexican heritage.

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Haslip-Viera et al. assert that Afrocentrism "in all its complexity emerged from the cultural nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s." Yet the complexity of Afrocentrism is that it is more than the result or supersession of

the cultural nationalism or Black Aesthetic movements that themselves arose from the civil rights movement. Afrocentrism is the result of a much older preoccupation of black Americans (and some of their white sympathizers) to provide a usable black past which would incorporate Egypt as a central image and place of origin. This has been called contributionist historiography; that is to say, blacks have insisted on a history that recognized their contribution to world history and American culture. Its first political moment was antebellum slavery and the defense of the black against the charge of being semi-inhuman and worthy of being little more than a slave in the world. Its next major moment was from 1890 to 1930, after the failure of Reconstruction, which saw the development of Pan Africanism from the first Pan African Conference in 1900 to the imprisonment of Marcus Garvey. The next major moment would come with the emergence of Malcolm X and the black student sit-in movement, both of which occurred between 1959 and 1960, at the same moment that African independence really seized the black American imagination. That the idea of what constitutes contributionist history should expand or become more and more politicized is not surprising. Most of the ideas of the Afrocentrists had been espoused by black nationalists for some time, at least as far back as the Harlem Renaissance. One could hear talk of a black Egypt or that the Olmec heads were set up in honor of blacks from the local street-corner nationalist in the barbershop. No one ever thought then that the day would come when these ideas would be taught in some white schools.

The widespread acceptance of some of the more crackpot assertions of contributionist history has also been made possible by postmodernism—the idea that truth is relative, that European dominance must be decentered, that all history is fiction, that knowledge is power. This movement helped to grant Afrocentrism, as a more intense version of contributionist history, some authenticity as a counter-white-hegemonic force. The multiculturalist movement, an outgrowth of affirmative action, postmodernism, and European Romanticism, was also a strong factor in Afrocentrism's gaining currency.

The authors are right in suggesting that Afrocentrism is Eurocentrism in blackface. One of the serious problems that oppressed people like African-Americans face is dealing with the sometimes destructive tendency to create parallel institutions that copy white ones almost entirely. In this case, here is an attempt at institutionalized history with all the racist prerogatives of European imperialist history. Afrocentrism is not only a historiography of decline, as Wilson J. Moses suggested, a history of defeat, but a historiography of resentment and jealousy of European history. Now, with the help of Van Sertima, we blacks have our Captain Cook myth. Indeed, it even goes the Cook myth one better, as the natives here not only worshipped the blacks as gods but never deigned to eat them.

Of course, Afrocentrism must be understood as a political expression or even a kind of mental or emotional

expression—therapy or “proper” history as the cure for false consciousness. It is impossible to say whether black people truly profit from this in the way of self-esteem. They have certainly profited insofar as many are willing to defend a great deal of misinformation. (But many Americans, not just blacks, suffer from this disease, especially right-wing ones who, like Afrocentrists, see history as the revelation of a set of God-ordained, unchanging, and unchallengeable values.) I have always advised my students to read Nietzsche's excellent essay on the uses and abuses of history. I particularly urge black students to do so.

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The racist implications of denying Native Americans the capacity to develop their own ancient civilizations without input from “gods from outer space,” Chinese or Polynesian seafarers, and emissaries from Egypt and Nubia have long been noted. So has the total absence of any objects of indisputably African origin in pre-Columbian contexts. But for some scholarly detective work in the 1960s, one such object might well have ended up in Van Sertima's bible of Afrocentrist cultural nationalism. The story is worth retelling.

Thirty years ago Stanley H. Boggs, then at the University of El Salvador, was shown an artifact of carved ivory that, though found in El Salvador, looked African rather than pre-Columbian and was for a time—though not by him—taken as “evidence” for early African influences in the Americas. Allegedly it had been excavated under nearly 6 ft. of undisturbed soil, near the city of Colón. The artifact, carved from what appeared to be a naturally curved piece of ivory 19 cm in length, represented a highly stylized reptilian or fish in the act of swallowing a naked woman.

Boggs was sufficiently intrigued to take it back with him to the United States, where the material was identified at Harvard University as hippopotamus tusk. Thus its African origin was now established zoologically as well as stylistically. Thus far, then, it would seem destined to add grist to the Afrocentrist claims of Nubian origins for the Olmec, Mesoamerica's most ancient civilization, then just emerging in the African-American community though Van Sertima's “definitive” compendium of the alleged evidence was still ten years in the future.

Boggs and E. Willys Andrews IV (1967) told the story 30 years ago. Though evidently little-noticed at the time, it can still serve as a warning flag to uncritical enthusiasts for transoceanic diffusion in pre-Columbian times. Indeed, the authors intended it as precisely that. Boggs returned to Mérida with his African artifact and showed it to Matthew W. Stirling and his wife, then on a visit to the Andrewses. The Stirlings, in turn, took it

back to Washington, D.C., to try and check out its age and place of manufacture with specialists in and outside the Smithsonian Institution. If everything—material, style, and archaeological context—checked out, it might after all be of some significance for pre-Columbian cultural history.

The hippopotamus identification was confirmed. Henry Collins put an end to any speculation that it might have come from the North Pacific. Nor was it scrimshaw carved by a talented seaman. One expert thought it had a European look, possibly medieval. Perhaps it was inspired by the biblical tale of Jonah and the Whale. Radiocarbon dating proved not to be feasible, for at that time the entire artifact would have had to be destroyed.

While all this was going on in Washington, Boggs undertook to investigate the alleged archaeological context in El Salvador. For this he had the full cooperation of the owner and the discoverer. Initially the early claims seemed beyond doubt: the artifact was said to have been found accidentally at a depth of 2.8 m in pure, undisturbed volcanic ash, low on a steep slope leading down to the Río Colón. So far so good. The old road to the capital ran along this stream, but Boggs learned that because it was frequently flooded, toward the end of the last century a new road had been constructed halfway up the slope, necessitating a deep cut in the side of the ravine. Boggs had his answer: It was almost certainly the large quantities of sterile ash thrown down the slope during road construction that had created the apparently "undisturbed" context for the artifact.

But he went farther. He was able to trace the original ownership of the artifact, which resembled a handle of some sort, with reasonable certainty back to a Colonel Avilés, who had built an opulent house directly above the site of the discovery and who was a well-known 19th-century collector of exotic weapons of all kinds, including several sword canes. After the colonel's death in the second half of the 19th century, the house was abandoned and fell into ruins that have since disappeared. Thus the mystery of the apparently undisturbed archaeological context was definitively solved.

There remained only the question of where in Africa it had come from in the first place and when. The motif of a monster swallowing a human is widespread in non-Western art, including that of the pre-Columbian civilizations. So the Stirlings brought the mystery piece to the Smithsonian's African expert, Gordon D. Gibson. And it was Gibson who had the answer: the style was unquestionably Congolese, and specifically Mangbetu; indeed, he showed the Stirlings photographs of Mangbetu harps with curved string arms of ivory carved in a style so similar to the Salvadoran find that they might have come from the same workshop. But Gibson also noted that the motif of a monster swallowing a human was almost certainly a late innovation, made for sale to Europeans rather than for indigenous use.

"Thus," write the authors, "we find that the 'Salvador' ivory was definitely of African material, very proba-

bly of African workmanship and probably dated from the period of thriving world trade in such objects . . . just what Boggs' re-analysis of the 'archaeological' background of the object would lead us to suspect."

The odyssey of this Congo sculpture, they conclude, "may serve as one more caveat to the over-enthusiastic diffusionist. Any attribution of early trans-oceanic diffusion needs not only a careful study of the date and origin of the piece itself, but a minute scrutiny of the exact stratigraphic context in which it was found."

Good advice. Africa had its own great civilizations worthy of the world's admiration without requiring denial of independent creative genius to the ancestors of Mexico's beleaguered indigenous peoples.

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4 x 96

A stone's throw from the 21st century, it is a sad reflection on our societies that we need to conduct this kind of discussion.

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Several comments and additions can perhaps be made. One, of course, is that whatever political intentions may underlie the claim of African origins or relationships for the Olmecs, anthropology has certainly had a lot of experience with theories that link peoples and cultures in extremely strange places. Finding exotic origins for pre-Hispanic American cultures is not new. The sport is older than archaeology. The ten lost tribes have been in place for several hundred years. Finds like the one described by Bradner (1875) of Hebrew inscriptions in the United States were reported at the First International Congress of Americanists in Nancy in 1875. By 1882, at the Second Congress, it was Danish kitchen middens (Beauvois 1882a; see also 1882b). At the Fifth Congress in 1885 there were papers on links with Asia, through Polynesia, and with the Gauls. More than 100 years of Americanist congresses have seen many papers like these.

It is important to keep in mind that Rivet's (1925) idea of multiple origins for pre-Hispanic American populations was based both on physical anthropology and on language and artifacts. Moreover, he was not the only one to look to multiple origins as an explanation for the complexity of people and culture in America. Gladwin (1947), whose work was controversial when published, entered into a heated discussion with academic archaeologists on the subject of multiple origins and relations. His explanation included Alexander the

Great's lost fleet. More recent attempts have included Robert Heine-Geldern's many articles seeking South-east Asian origins for American traits. Gordon Eckholm (1952, 1958) was in agreement. Alexander Von Wuthenau (1975) argued that the population of pre-Hispanic Mexico included blacks, Greeks, Asians, Jews, and others. His evidence originated in an interpretation of racial resemblances mainly of figurines but also of stelae, murals, and other representations. And this is not the last; an October 1996 article in *Time* reports a discussion of prehistoric Caucasoid features in the state of Washington.

The other side has been represented by researchers who, rightly, linked the question to the excesses of extreme diffusionism and its consequences. Juan Comas, in papers on diffusionism that are important because he was examining osteological evidence, was critical of such positions. In 1942, at the Second Round Table of the Sociedad Mexicana de Antropología, he made the point that Olmec anthropomorphic representations could only exceptionally be linked to data from burials (Comas 1945)—that whatever the statues looked like, the people whose bones he studied did not look like them (see also Comas 1964). Others also wrote on the subject. Caso (1964) presented an analysis of ideas about a supposed non-American origin for pre-Hispanic culture traits. His point, in his oral presentation, was that the underlying racist assumption was that American Indians were incapable of developing high culture. Rowe (1966) was also critical of diffusionist ideas. Another memorable work on the subject was Wauchope's (1962). Extreme diffusionism has been dealt with in the literature and shown not only to be wrong but also to contaminate what we know about cultures and peoples throughout the world. But the notion of a foreign origin for the culture of American Indians does not stop there. There are books that carry it even farther: perhaps Martians (Von Däniken 1969)?

Reply

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We are grateful to the colleagues who commented on our article. Their comments are basically in agreement with its thrust, but there are some points to be emphasized or clarified. Furst reminds us of the importance of controlled archaeological context in order to avoid being misled by apparently very solid "evidence"; we reiterate that there is *not one* genuine pre-Columbian African artifact recovered from a controlled archaeological excavation. Litvak briefly surveys a number of other theories about the exotic origins of New World civilizations and places Van Sertima et al. among them. So

many cultures are supposed to have influenced New World cultures (Egyptian, Roman, Shang Chinese, Carthaginian, Irish, Libyan, Polynesian, Hindu, alien, etc.) that one would have expected a cultural traffic jam to have developed. All these theories use the same type of evidence, often the very same items,¹ and all are invalid. It is curious, too, that this cultural traffic was only one-way; the purported visitors did not carry back either New World or each other's traits or artifacts. (For other reviews of various claims of pre-Columbian contact see Davies 1979, Fingerhut 1994, and Fritze 1993.)

We sympathize with González Lauck's annoyance with the need to discuss the topic at all, but perhaps, being in Mexico, she has avoided some of the postmodern "other-ways-of-knowing" debate that has so vitiated anthropology here. It is disappointing that she and Browman in different ways implicitly dismiss the possibility of reaching Van Sertima's audience. As his point of view is being widely disseminated among increasingly younger African-American audiences, more and more teachers of archaeology and anthropology will be confronted with the problem in the future. It is unfortunate that González Lauck did not choose to comment further; as the last excavator at La Venta, which is Van Sertima's linchpin site, her comment on his claims that the "Pyramid" at La Venta is modeled on an Egyptian stepped pyramid (1976:155–56; 1995:87) or that the florescence of La Venta predates San Lorenzo would have been most valuable.

Early makes the point that Van Sertima's writings and Afrocentrism are "contributionist history." This is very important in discussing alleged pre-Columbian contacts. As we pointed out, archaeologists agree that the Vikings did occupy the New World but that they had no influence on native cultures. This kind of contact is not sufficient for diffusionists, because it does not reflect the superiority of the visitors. For them, the Egyptian-Nubian-Mandingo visitors must "greatly influence" the development of New World culture. Similarly, it is not sufficient for an Old World plant to have drifted to the New World.² Diffusionists claim that plants were brought by people who taught the natives how to grow them. Although Browman chides us for using outdated material regarding the diffusion of plants, the debate is over among mainstream scholars.

1. A favorite is the celebrated 1513 Turkish map drawn by Piri Reis, which has fueled Van Sertima's (1976:pl. 39; 1995:91) and other pseudoscientific speculations ranging from Von Däniken (1968) and Hancock (1995) to the infamous 1996 NBC special "Mysterious Origins of Man." All these speculations are based on Hapgood's (1966, 1969) proposal not just of a pre-Columbian origin but of a prehistoric civilization that mapped the world before the Ice Ages. An accurate interpretation of this map that contradicts Hapgood's is presented by Hoye and Lunde (1980) and Soucek (1996). Well-documented and prolix critiques of all of these topics can be found on the Internet by doing a DejaNews search for Paul V. Heinrich or at <http://earth.ics.uci.edu:8080/faqs/mom/atlan-tis.html> and <http://earth.ics.uci.edu:8080/faqs/mom/oronteus.html>.

2. See our quote of Van Sertima's claim (1976:191) that "African man, bearing cottons, made the drift journey to the Americas in the fourth millennium B.C."

The diffusionist botanical argument culminated in the early seventies with the publication of Riley et al. (1971), and even this clearly diffusionist text concludes (pp. 452–53), as we have pointed out, that “*there is no hard and fast evidence for any pre-Columbian human introduction of any single plant or animal across the ocean from the Old World to the New World or vice-versa.*” The views of Carter (1977) and Lathrap (1977) were published in mainstream publications, but it was apparent that consensus had been reached that the evidence for all these allegations was weak (Reed 1977), and diffusionist claims of this nature are no longer being considered seriously. Recent reviews of New World diffusionist controversies (Fingerhut 1994, Fritze 1993) offer little on this subject after the 1970s. Mainstream texts on the origins of agriculture (Burenhult 1993, Cowan and Watson 1992, Harris 1996, Shaw et al. 1993, Zohary and Hopf 1993) ignore the matter completely. Recent work on cotton completely eliminates any possibility of human involvement in the hybridization of New World cotton. Wendel and co-workers (Wendel 1989, Percy and Wendel 1990, Wendel and Albert 1992) have proved that the hybridization of diploid African cottons and diploid New World cottons resulting in the tetraploid cottons found in the New World, claimed as evidence for diffusion, took place before the emergence of humans, 1 to 2 million years ago.

Browman’s objections to our dating are unclear. The important point to be made is that Van Sertima has a serious chronological and logical problem. As we pointed out, if one is to compare radiocarbon dates with dates obtained in another fashion, as is the case for Egyptian historical chronologies, then calibrated C¹⁴ dates must be used. The experts agree that the colossal Olmec heads were carved in a relatively short time-span and in the Early Formative. The Early Formative has been dated on the basis of *uncalibrated* radiocarbon to 1500–900 b.c. Cyphers has dated head 7 at San Lorenzo in an undisturbed context as earlier than 900 b.c. The calibrated C¹⁴ dates for the Early Formative are 1414–999 ± 80 years cal B.C.,³ quite close to the dates we cited previously. If Van Sertima wants to claim that pyramids in the New World derive from Egypt and that the Olmec heads resemble Negroid Nubians, then he is tied to the 25th Dynasty in Egypt, which had Nubian pharaohs. As we pointed out, pyramids had not been built in Egypt for hundreds of years and were revived in Nubia around the 8th century B.C. This was also the time when Nubians would have been in command of an expedition rather than serving as mercenaries. If Van Sertima (1995:82–86), following Jairazbhoy (1974), claims that

contact with the Olmecs occurred during the reign of Rameses III, then his claims about pyramids and the Negroid physiognomy of the colossal heads⁴ are void. The conventional historical dates, calibrated C¹⁴ dates, and 68% confidence ranges for these dynasties are Rameses III, ca. 1170 B.C., 1226 ± 91 cal B.C., and 1316–1137 B.C.; 25th Dynasty, ca. 715–575 B.C., 655 ± 165 cal B.C., and 813–424 B.C. (Hassan and Robinson 1987: 124). More recently, a dendrochronological sequence with radiocarbon wiggle matching (Kuniholm et al. 1996), which Renfrew (1996) calls the best prospect for an absolute time scale in the Near East, supports the conventional 14th-to-12th-century B.C. Egyptian chronology.

We differ somewhat with Browman on how scholars should respond to these kinds of claims. It is not a question of “different ways of knowing” but a question of facts and evidence. Browman cites Ortiz de Montellano (1990) as a study of “alternative ways of knowing.” The main point of the book, however, is that, although the Aztecs did not use Western epistemology, they were accurate observers of the natural world and that many of their medical practices could be verified *through the techniques and epistemology of bioscience*. This is certainly not a surrender to the postmodernist “all ways of knowing are equally valid” but rather a plea to test native claims with scientific rigor. We need to distinguish between religion, magic, and science. The second Law of Thermodynamics has no magical or religious component. Native Americans may believe that they emerged directly from sacred American soil, and fundamentalists may believe that the universe is 6,000 years old. We can respect these beliefs as religion. However, humans evolved in Africa, and the universe is billions of years old. Similarly, Afrocentrists may believe that Egyptians were the mainspring of Olmec civilization, but we must distinguish beliefs from facts. It is not acceptable simply to dismiss Van Sertima’s claims as a different worldview. By doing so we participate in the disenfranchisement and attack on the heritage of the many cultures on this continent that developed states, societies, art, and technologies that are comparable to many Old World civilizations.

We agree with Cyphers that archaeological pseudoscience can be fought only by making research results available to the public, and we had hoped that more Olmec specialists might take the opportunity provided to reiterate the view of the profession that Old World explorers did *not* come to the Americas before Columbus. Several leading Afrocentrists also chose not to comment, and Van Sertima himself, after submitting a detailed comment to which we made extensive efforts to respond, decided to withdraw it. Articles in *CURRENT ANTHROPOLOGY* provide a unique opportunity for dis-

3. Calculations were performed using a program based on Stuiver and Reimer (1993) downloaded from the Quaternary Isotope Laboratory at the University of Washington, using the latest revised dendrochronology data (Pearson and Stuiver 1993) assigning a typical error of ± 80 years for the hypothetical uncalibrated dates of 900 (2,850 B.P.) and 1200 (3,150 B.P.). According to these calculations, 900 B.C. equals 999 cal B.C. with a 68% range of cal B.C. 1121–906, and 1200 B.C. equals 1414 cal B.C. with a 68% range of 1511–1253 cal B.C.

4. Jairazbhoy (1992:10–14) maintains that Rameses III was in Mexico and that images of him can be found there. El Mahdy (1989: 87–89) points out that members of the Rameside dynasty had very strongly hooked noses—certainly not found in the colossal Olmec heads.

cussion and are most successful and educational when they involve sharp and academically rigorous differences of opinion. Our intention was to foster such discussion, but alas, it was not to be.

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