

Archaeological perspectives

It may be Gertrude Stein's most quoted quip. In her 1937 autobiography, Stein indicated that she didn't have any desire to visit Oakland, the city where she was born and raised, simply because "there's no there there." She meant that very narrowly, that her childhood home was no longer standing so there was nothing to draw her back, but people have applied the phrase ever since much more broadly and metaphorically to places that don't seem to have any strong personality, individuality, or unique sense of place. I will now take further liberties with Stein's phrasing and apply it to an archaeological site. Though thousands of strange and unique ancient artifacts are alleged to have been recovered from Burrows Cave, ostensibly in Illinois, the fact is, no one other than the individual claiming to have discovered the artifacts has been there, and he hasn't taken anyone there to see it. Further, his story about its location and disposition have changed dramatically through time. Though the artifacts are here for us to marvel at, it has never been proven that they were recovered from Burrows Cave and, in fact, there's no evidence that Burrows Cave exists in the first place. It would appear, in my application of the Stein quote, there literally is no there there.

To characterize the story behind Burrows Cave as a hot mess would be a vast understatement. It's more a molten shitstorm. This is largely because there is no single "story" but a bunch of differing and contradictory tales, none of which make any sense. Oh, and there is no evidence to confirm any of the myriad versions of the story concerning the cave's discovery or location.

Burrows Cave is yet another example of an ostensibly spectacular archaeological site in North America that contradicts the standard histories of our continent. It is supposed to be a secret cave chock-a-block with remarkable ancient artifacts traceable to the Old World—a combination of the **Grand Canyon Secret Cave** (also of no known location) and the **Moberly Subterranean City** (lots of artifacts said to have been witnessed but never produced), but with a plethora of actual objects, however fake they may be. So where is Burrows Cave, and what do the artifacts allegedly recovered there imply about the history of North America?

Here's what we know

The story of the discovery of Burrows Cave—actually, the two different and contradictory stories—originates with one man, the ostensible discoverer, Rus-

sell Burrows: and yes, the cave is named for him. There is absolutely no way to verify his story as there were no eyewitnesses to any of it. According to that story, Burrows was walking around somewhere—the exact where has never been revealed—in Illinois in April 1982 (as described in Wilson 2012; Wilson's article is a fantastic and detailed summary of the Burrows Cave tale). Burrows states that he was looking for artifacts, maybe with a metal detector, when either he simply found the entrance to a cave or nearly fell into a trap designed to kill whoever dared disturb the sanctity of the site. Wilson notes the similarity between that version and the original *Indiana Jones* movie. Anyway, after either falling or walking in, he noted a staircase hewn into the stone and, upon descending that staircase, he breathlessly encountered the presence of hundreds upon hundreds of artifacts strewn about. As he entered a series of chambers, he encountered numerous crypts, life-size statues of Egyptian deities made entirely of gold, gold coins, suits of armor, and lots more.

Most of the objects Burrows said he found in the cave were stones with inscriptions that have later turned out to represent messages in various ancient Old World scripts, including Egyptian, Etruscan, Greek, and Sumerian (note that these languages date to wildly different periods in the Old World, so their presence together in one place, no matter where, represents a series of extraordinary anachronisms). Also among the inscriptions were drawings of oared boats, helmeted warriors, profiles of individuals who appear to be wearing Egyptian headgear, Egyptian gods and goddesses, people with Nubian (south of Egypt) hair types, and lots of other images, none of which would appear to belong in an authentically ancient site in Illinois. If genuine, a heretofore entirely unknown chapter of the history of North America is revealed and all of us archaeologists and historians are going to need to obey the cliché, tear up our archaeology and history books—and it might not be a bad idea to tear up our PhDs while we're at it—and start them afresh, leaving plenty of room for the cosmopolitan, multicultural lost civilization of Illinois.

Why are archaeologists skeptical?

It is fair to say the scientists are skeptical about claims that turn our knowledge of any particular subject on its head. And it is reasonable to be skeptical. Skepticism is not cynicism, and doubt isn't denial. After all of the work archaeologists have done excavating at thousands of places in North America, we have a pretty good idea of what happened here and when. Not perfect, of course, not complete, certainly, but pretty good. Of course, we're willing to revise our consensus, tweak our reconstructions, and yes, even throw out what we thought we knew and start from scratch. But we need—I should even say we demand—definitive and convincing proof. In the case of Burrows Cave, that proof has been neither definitive nor convincing.

Here, our understanding of the history of human movement into and through the New World would certainly need to be reevaluated and completely revised if the artifacts claimed to have been found in Burrows Cave—including evidence that ancient Egyptians, Etruscans, Greeks, Nubians, and Sumerians were all living together as one happy family in a cave in Illinois—were genuine. It is important to add, however, that scientists are also intrigued by game-changing discoveries, and many want to investigate them more deeply. And following the discovery and revelation of those discoveries of Russell Burrows, there certainly was an interest on the part of researchers, some sympathetic to the possibility that ancient Europeans, Africans, or Asians traveled to the New World in antiquity and left behind artifacts confirming their presence here. Unfortunately, however, none of these interested researchers have ever been shown the cave. Burrows has steadfastly refused to take anyone to the site or reveal its location. Ostensibly it is located near the Embarras River (write your own joke) somewhere in Richland County, Illinois, but that's all we know. And we don't even know that. By the way, the existence of an actual cave in Richland County, Illinois, would be mind boggling to geologists; there are no known caves there, and local geology simply isn't conducive to the creation of actual caves or caverns. I won't waste time here going into the personality of Russell Burrows, but if you're interested, check out the late Rick Flavin's detailed description of his personal experiences with Burrows and the, um, interesting cast of characters involved with Burrows Cave (Flavin 2012).

Now back to the archaeology, such as it is. Burrows was approached by the Early Sites Research Society, a group dedicated to the idea that there's lots of evidence of the presence of Old World people in North America in antiquity. Members of that society can in no way be characterized as mainstream, skeptical naysayers, so Burrows couldn't claim that they were a group of unfair skeptics predisposed to reject his discoveries. Yet Burrows turned them down flat simply because they wanted to document the discoveries made in the cave, something that scientists and historians might be able to assess for themselves (Joltes 2003). Burrows has explained his reluctance to show anyone the cave as resulting from his fears that once its location becomes widely known, it will be looted. As a working archaeologist I sympathize with that perspective, but I also know that there are ways of protecting the site, so Burrows's explanation simply doesn't ring true. Burrows has gone further to suggest that he won't take anyone into the cave because there's \$60 million worth of gold artifacts hidden there. Of course there is.

If you need to ask why scientists are skeptical of the claims made about Burrows Cave, you haven't been paying attention and need to go back and read the opening chapters of this book. You might end up failing the course and will have to attend summer school to repeat it.

When trained scientists have had the opportunity to examine artifacts allegedly extracted from Burrows Cave, the verdict has been unanimous: they aren't ancient, the drawings are absurd and childish, and the writing is nonsensical.

And there's this: several of the Burrows Cave-inscribed stones are made of marble. On one side of those marble artifacts is a carving of a woman squatting on one knee. Above her head, with her hair done up in a very ancient Egyptian look, is a circular image of what almost certainly is intended to represent the sun with a series of lines representing rays descending from it. It has been proposed that the woman in the carving is a representation of the Egyptian goddess Isis, the mother of the falcon-headed god Horus.

Of course, an image of Isis or, for that matter, any other Egyptian deity, is completely out of place in an Illinois cave, at least in terms of an existing archaeological consensus about the history and prehistory of the American Midwest. However, it fits nicely within the assemblage supposedly found in Burrows Cave. But this artifact can easily be shown to be a fake, and an obvious one at that. The person who used the particular piece of marble to craft the Burrows Cave artifact made a very big mistake.

That mistake was first noted by Dorothy Hayden (1993) and later confirmed by Scott Wolter (2010), whose cable show *America Unearthed* was not exactly a model of skeptical inquiry. Wolter is a geologist, but you really don't need a degree in geology or anything else to prove the fakery here. All you need is a working pair of eyes. Or even one working eye. As Hayden noted, one of the Burrows Cave-inscribed artifacts was actually made on a fragment of a marble, historical gravestone! Wolter confirmed this, finding on the reverse side of the stone with a carving of Isis cursive letters spelling out the word *there*. Anyone even passingly familiar with eighteenth- or nineteenth-century cemeteries will recognize that the Isis carving was made on the back side of a gravestone, in all likelihood one not more than about 250 years old. Looking at a photo of the back face of the stone, it appears that someone attempted to remove the text carved there by striking the surface, perhaps with a rock hammer, but they weren't entirely successful. Wolter goes on to conclude that ten more marble objects found in the cave bear properties that similarly suggest that they were made from the same gravestone material. He suggests that all of these artifacts were frauds made after the discovery of the cave in 1982.

Now, in fairness I should add that Wolter continues to at least entertain the possibility that Burrows Cave and many of the artifacts said to have been found there are authentic and ancient. For him, evidence that eleven of the Burrows Cave artifacts aren't genuine but twentieth-century fakes manufactured from a repurposed gravestone does not reflect on the authenticity of the rest of the assemblage. Okay, but this clear evidence of fakery seems pretty damning. In the article, Wolter pleads with Burrows to actually take people to the cave to clear up these issues. Yeah, Wolter's never been to the cave either.

The only rational conclusion to reach concerning Burrows Cave is that it is a big fat fake. The archaeology and history books are safe.

Whodunit?

Let's see: Russell Burrows discovered the cave; Russell Burrows is the only person who has ever entered the cave; Russell Burrows is the only person who has actually seen artifacts in place in the cave; Russell Burrows is the only person to have recovered artifacts from the cave. Whodunit? Hmm. Not sure.

Why?

The motive behind the Burrows Cave fake artifacts—I can't bring myself to call it "the Burrows Cave Site" because there simply does not appear to be a cave or an actual site—is pretty simple, a combination of money and attention. There are people who admit to having purchased artifacts either directly or indirectly from Burrows. And Burrows and his followers certainly have garnered quite a bit of attention from the place; a cursory glance at issues of the magazine *Ancient American* shows quite a bit of coverage concerning Burrows Cave and, with the exception of the piece by Scott Wolter, it's all been credulous as hell. Ultimately, as Rick Flavin (2012) succinctly put it, the Burrows Cave humbug is: "Talk-radio silliness, financially motivated fraud, outrageous religious agendas, and amateur historical revisionism is what this is all about. It's never been about history or science."

Fake-o-meter

One hundred.

Getting there

This one is easy. To get to Burrows Cave first, think happy thoughts. Then, fly off to the second star on the right and straight on till morning. Be careful though. The cave might be guarded by pirates. Sorry for the snark, but it's easy to wipe that snark right off my face; reveal the location of the cave, bring in a film crew from *National Geographic*, photograph the fabulous array of artifacts in situ. Done. Until then, scientists are going to figure that the cave is located in Neverland, as the directions indicate.