

SOME ARCHEOLOGICAL FORGERIES FROM MICHIGAN¹

By FRANCIS W. KELSEY

The interest of the spurious relics to which I have the pleasure of inviting your attention is, in last analysis, more psychological than archeological; so novel are their designs and so crude the workmanship that an archeologist of training in any field could hardly fail to recognize at a glance their true character. Nevertheless, the efforts made to exploit these objects have been so persistent, and the success so surprising, that it seems worth while to state briefly the facts in regard to them as evidencing not less the credulity of collectors than the activity and perseverance of a forger who under some circumstances might do much harm.

Toward the middle of the year 1891 rumors became current regarding marvelous discoveries near Wyman and Edmore, villages in Montcalm county, Michigan, about sixty miles northwest of Lansing. The region was formerly covered with pine forests. The had been cut away for the greater part, and the sawmills removed but on account of the sandy nature of the soil the farmer had been slow in following up the lumberman, and the land presented a desolate appearance. The low rounded elevations produced by the uprooting of trees in the primeval forest and the decay of the roots which pried up the soil, had not yet been leveled by tillage, and scattered among them were occasional mounds such as are found in other parts of Lower Michigan. On account of the newness of the soil, which in many places had never been turned, the openness of the country stripped of its large trees, and the paucity of inhabitants, the conditions seemed not unfavorable for the perpetration of an archeological fraud.

The alleged discoveries had commenced in October 1890, when

¹ Presented at the joint session of Section H of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and Affiliated Societies in Chicago, January 1, 1908. The writer is indebted to Dr N. E. Bachman, of Stanton, Michigan, for the kind verification of statements in regard to the earlier "finds."

a man digging post holes in a field near Wyman found a small cup of clay. When in the following spring other and more remarkable objects began to be brought to light the people in that part of the country passed into a state of great excitement. Scores of surface undulations and mounds were dug into ; one man, it was reported, digging into a greater depth than usual, was caught and killed by the caving-in of sand. The relics were found at a depth varying from a foot and a half to four feet, and over an area three or four miles in diameter ; most of them, however, were unearthed within a mile and a half from Wyman. The discoveries were in many cases authenticated by the affidavits of witnesses.

At Stanton, the county seat of Montcalm county, an archeological society, or "Syndicate," was formed, which purposed to make explorations and exploit the finds. Some of the pieces that had been discovered were bought outright, and a refusal was obtained for the purchase of others ; but before committing them-



FIG. 20. — Michigan forgeries, First series. Casket. Cover ornamented with a section of a city wall and gate.

selves irrevocably to the enterprise members of the "Syndicate" had photographs of the finds made which were submitted to Professor F. W. Putnam and one or two other experts ; and near the end of June 1891, Professor Alfred Emerson, then at Lake Forest College near Chicago, was brought to Wyman to make a first-hand

study. "The articles were bad enough in the photograph," wrote Professor Emerson afterward; "an examination proved them to be humbugs of the first water. They were all of unbaked clay, and decorated with bogus hieroglyphics in which cuneiform characters appeared at intervals. These were all stamped. By way of economizing labor the characters were turned upside down sometimes, or laid sideways. On the back of one piece the same character was represented whole lines at a time. There were incumbent lions on some lids of the caskets. Of these one or two had no tail. I told one of the gentlemen that a *primitive* artist would never make such an omission. He said that the Society had found the same fault,

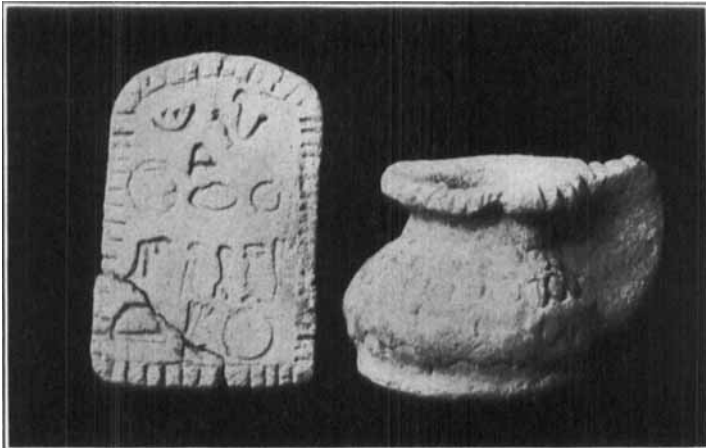


FIG. 21. — Michigan forgeries, First series. Tablet and cup.

and that afterward pieces with good tails had been found. On opening one casket we found that the lid had been dried on a machine-sawed board. I was in the woods one day and helped open a real sepulchral mound. The 'pottery' was found in mounds of a different sort, very low; but the natives, day laborers and ex-lumberman, declare that they are essentially different from 'turnouts.' "

Of this first lot of "finds" I am not able to show any examples; but the general character of the more ambitious pieces may be discerned in the accompanying illustrations (pl. VI and figs. 20, 21). Of



ARCHEOLOGICAL FORGERIES FROM MICHIGAN, FIRST SERIES. CLAY TABLETS AND CASKET

the caskets about thirty were reported, measuring from a foot to thirty inches in length, with a width of six to ten inches. The covers were in part ornamented with grotesque figures in bold relief; the sides with simulations of cuneiform characters and hieroglyphics arranged sometimes with iteration of a single symbol, sometimes in naïve confusion. Similar characters were impressed upon the tablets, of which about seventy-five were reported; most of them were small, not too large to be held in one hand. Some of the tablets were found in the caskets, as were also small pieces of copper, apparently made by beating common coins out smooth and impressing characters upon them with a small chisel. In one casket fifteen of the dies used in stamping on clay were said to have been

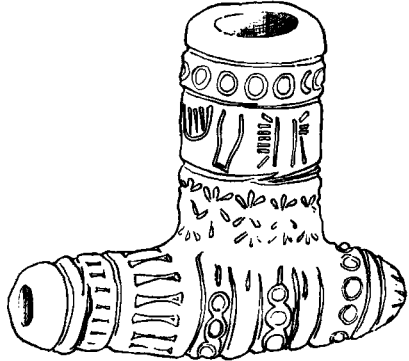


FIG. 22. — Michigan forgeries, Second series. Pipe of clay. (One-half size.)

found, but I know nothing of their character. A few crude vases and some other objects were brought to light. The material of the caskets, the tablets, and the small sphinx which after a time I myself examined, was a light-colored clay, containing so large a percentage of drift sand as to make the objects fragile. The drying, done either in the sun or by exposure to mild heat, had left cracks, the edges of which were sharp and fresh. The material disintegrated readily in water; the objects could therefore have been in the ground only a short time before they were dug out.

In consequence of the report of Professor Emerson, and of the vigorous utterances of other archeologists who had seen photographs of the finds, the "Syndicate" pocketed its losses on the objects already purchased and ceased to exist. But the persistence of the promoters and the misguided enthusiasm of others whom they were able to interest were not to be balked by an obstacle so inmomentous as expert testimony. Within three months after Professor Emerson's visit President Angell placed in my hands a long letter from a Mr William A. Blakely, of Battle Creek, a gentleman whose

probity could not be doubted, emphasizing the importance of the relics, protesting against the hasty judgment of those who had pro-



FIG. 23. — Michigan forgeries, Second series. Piece of slate. (One-half size.)

nounced against their authenticity, and asking that a representative from the University of Michigan, and if possible one also from the



MICHIGAN FORGERIES, SECOND SERIES. IMAGE OF BAKED CLAY, SUPPORTING A TABLET

Height of figure, including base, 21 inches. Wings, broken off, in front of base

Smithsonian Institution, accompany a party which would soon proceed to the region of the discoveries in order to make explorations.

Toward the end of 1891 specimens were brought to the University in order to convince us that, since they had been found in the presence of presumably reputable witnesses, they must be genuine. The jumble of ancient Oriental writing was explained as due to the composite character of a colony, comprising Egyptians and Phœnicians, as well as Assyrians, which in a remote period found its way from the drainage area of the Euphrates and Tigris across the seas, up the St Lawrence and the Lakes to Michigan. As a writer in the *Christian Herald* naively declared: "They [the colonists] must have left there in a period of remote antiquity. It must have been before the Exodus, for Moses speaks of the iron furnace and iron bedstead of Og, king of Bashan. But these people used bronze or copper instead of iron, showing that the arts of iron were not known to them." Since honest people were being deceived and efforts were still put forth to sell the "finds," it seemed best to give to the local papers a statement in regard to the true character of the discoveries and to send a somewhat fuller account to *The Nation*, which published in the same issue (January 28, 1892) a letter from Professor Morris Jastrow, of the University of Pennsylvania, denouncing the forgeries and warning collectors against them. The agitation of the matter soon ceased, and at the University, at least, there was no expectation that it would ever be revived.

In the summer of 1898 a man who presented a general appearance of dilapidation brought to the University museum in Ann Arbor a couple of wooden trunks containing a few human bones and a miscellaneous collection of objects resembling those that had been unearthed in 1891. He had also an upright box in which was a seated figure of baked clay holding a large tablet; the front of the box opened like a door (pl. vii). The curator was given to understand that the objects had been transported from place to place as an itinerant exhibit; that the owner had pressing need of funds, and that therefore the University might have the privilege of purchasing the entire collection for one thousand dollars. Being laughed at, the man after a time reduced the price to one hundred

dollars; finally, assured that he was dealing in forgeries, and engaged in a hazardous undertaking, he begged leave to deposit the trunks and the box in the storerooms of the museum until he should come for them. The curator deemed that he would be rendering a service to the public by withdrawing the spurious relics from circulation, and took the collection in charge; and the owner has not

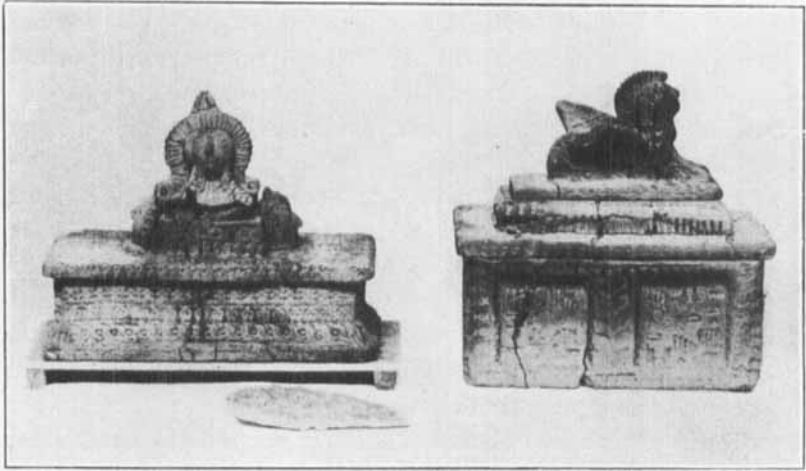


FIG. 24. — Michigan forgeries, Second series. Caskets. In the foreground, an implement of flint ($7\frac{7}{8}$ in. long), genuine.

yet come to claim the property. In the trunk, besides the objects mentioned, there were found some admission tickets, and a certificate attesting to the discovery of one of the caskets, with four signatures, all in the same handwriting;¹ also a handbill with the head-

¹ "history of The Winchester Casket

"i myself helped dig this Beautiful Casket this Casket has 3 faces of human Representation upon the Cover. this Casket Contained Some Stone tools [paper torn] and 2 peices of Copper Coin and [torn] bonised Cloth the Casket Sat upon the altar in a Bed of Charcoal ashes and Burnt Bone the altar was made of Clay Burnt Very Hard over 13 Skelletons."

"yours

"Daniel Worthington

"Jacob Swartz

"Isaac Seinholtz

"Wm. H. Scotford

"Winchester

"Mecosta Mich"

ing "Deposits of Three Thousand Years Ago!", advertising "The Finest Collection of Pre-Historic Relics Ever Exhibited in the United States."

The caskets and other objects of clay in this collection differed from the first lot in two respects: There was an improvement in the workmanship, and the clay was baked hard. The forger had benefited by criticisms and was improving in his technique. Nevertheless the symbols and designs were for the greater part identical. Here, for example, is a pipe, laboriously stamped with cuneiform

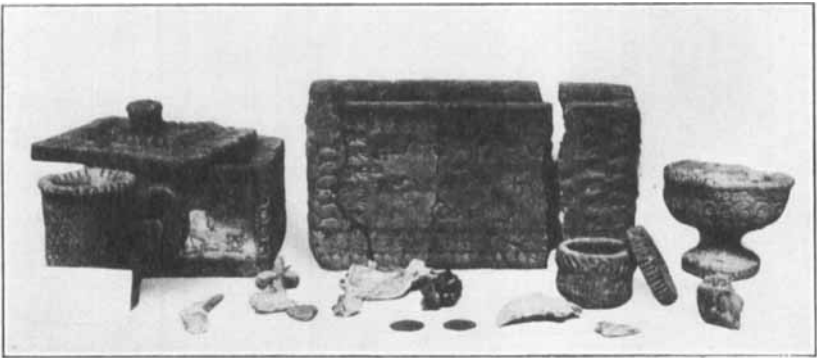


FIG. 25.—Michigan forgeries, Second series. Two caskets, cups, two coins, fragments of arrowheads (genuine), bits of metal slag, and clay.

and other characters (fig. 22). But greater ingenuity is manifested in the large "Deluge" tablet the design of which is repeated from a similar tablet in the first series. It is shaped like a diminutive tombstone with a rounded top (height 11.5 inches, width 10 inches). It is divided by parallel horizontal lines into four fields or bands. At the top we see the same cuneiform character as on the later copper tablets; at either side are human figures in an attitude of adoration, represented perhaps as worshipping false gods. In the scene below there is a city gate with high towers at the right; in front of it are figures of men with upraised hands, on whom the rain is descending. In the third band the Ark appears, floating; in the last it has come to rest, and the animals seem to be passing out from it toward the right; in the corner at the bottom the designer perhaps intended to represent Noah and his three sons offering thanks. Less elaborate

is the adornment of a crescent-shaped piece of slate, which presents on one side the same cuneiform character and on the other a head and profile with a headdress resembling a jockey cap (fig. 23). Still other objects are shown in the illustrations (figs. 24, 25).

During the past year the energies of the same forger have again become manifest. From different and widely separated points have come reports that copper implements and tablets of a unique character were being offered

to collectors, and that the distributing center was Detroit. Some success in disposing of the specimens seems to have been met with; at any rate within a month I have visited a collector who had purchased not far from fifty, and had added them to a very creditable collection of genuine prehistoric types. The surface of these specimens had been corroded to give the appearance of age; but notwithstanding the difference in material, the designs are in part identical with those familiar from the previous forgeries.

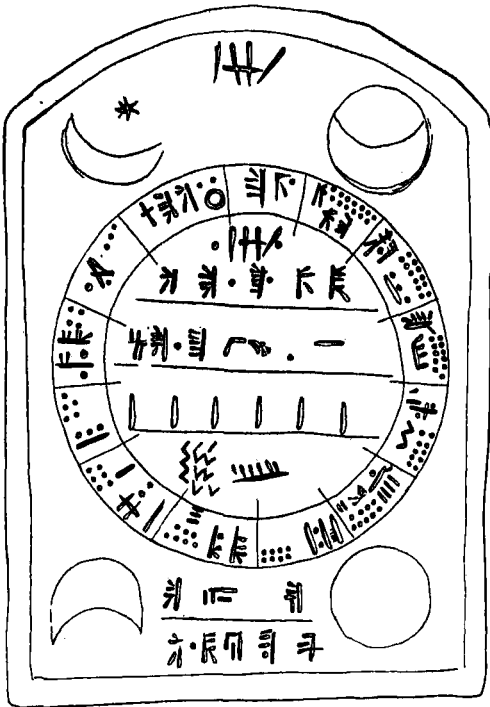
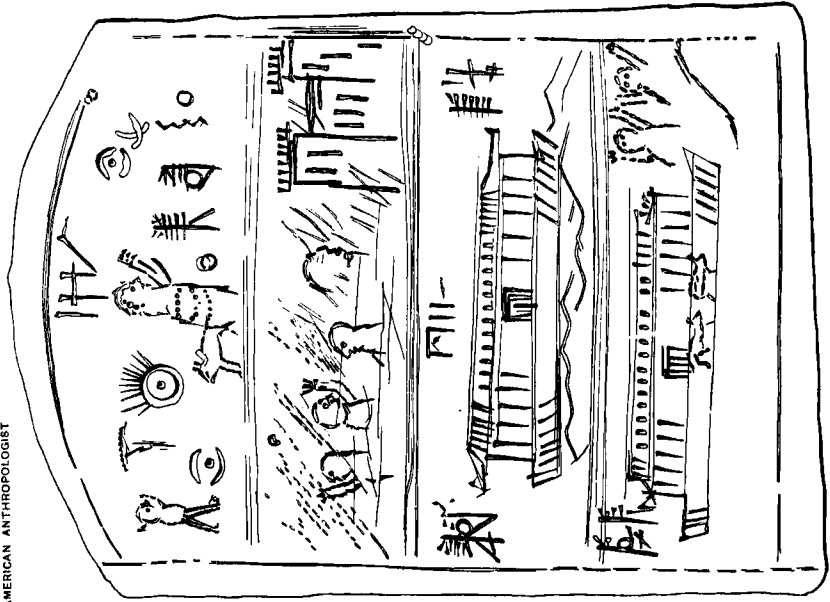
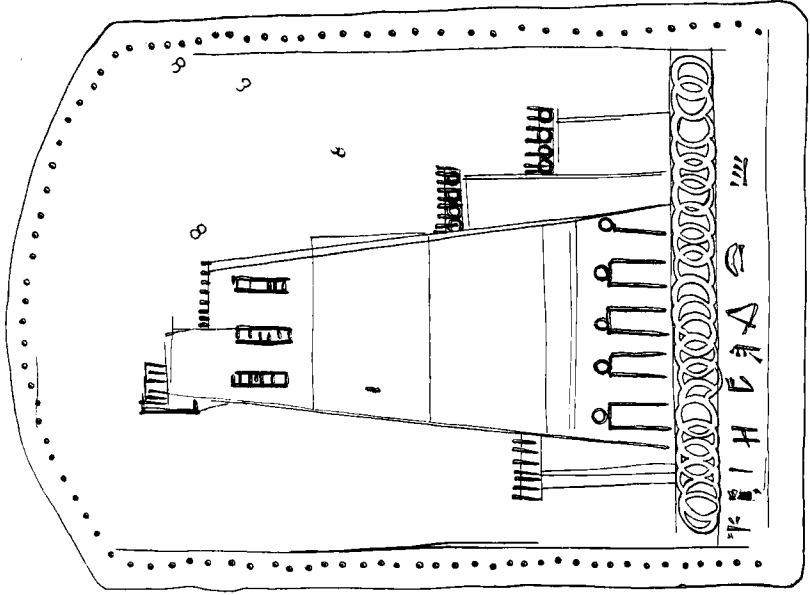


FIG. 26. — Michigan forgeries, Third series. Copper tablet (one-half size). "Calendar."

Here again we find the "Deluge" pictured in four bands, with only slight variations in detail from the representation upon the tablet of baked clay; on the back of the same tablet is a tower, which was probably intended to suggest the Tower of Babel. These two designs are shown in the accompanying plate VIII. Hardly less curious are the designs of the "Calendar" (fig. 26) and the double tablet





MICHIGAN FORGERIES, THIRD SERIES. "DELUGE" TABLET, COPPER (ONE-HALF SIZE)

suggested by some Biblical illustration (fig. 27). The copper crown (fig. 28) was reported to have been found upon a skull.

Incised upon the crown as well as the tablets is a cuneiform character associated with both the previous series of frauds (see figure 20 for the first series; the piece of slate (fig. 23 for the second), the sign manual, as it were, of the forger. This char-



FIG. 27. — Michigan forgeries, Third series, Copper tablet (one-half size). "Ten Commandments."

acter, as I am informed by my colleague, Professor J. A. Craig, is a curiously inverted combination of two signs. The first, , is a mark indicating the division of words in Old Persian; the other, , a syllabic form found in Babylonian and Assyrian. Both signs are reversed, as if the forger had worked from a tracing turned

wrong end to. Characteristic of the exploitation of this series of forgeries, as of the first two, is the use of certificates signed by those who were present at a discovery as evidence of the genuineness of the objects found.

The enterprise of a reporter for the *Detroit News*, Mr W. A. Benschoter, has established the fact that while a number of persons

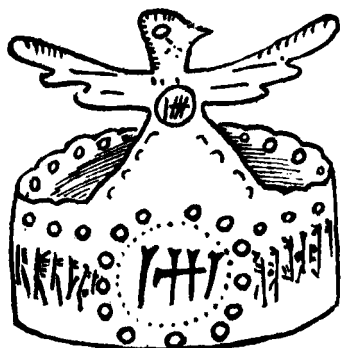


FIG. 28.—Michigan forgeries, Third series. Copper crown.

have been concerned with the exploitation either of the first or of the third series of forgeries, one man was intimately connected with both. This is James O. Scotford, a sign-painter, who formerly lived in Montcalm county; at the time of the wonderful discoveries near Wyman he manifested a skill in finding relics that made him the envy of the region. He is now living in Detroit and has been active in selling the bogus coppers. The name William

H. Scotford appears as the last of the four names (all, as previously remarked, in the same handwriting) upon the certificate of discovery which accompanied the second lot of frauds, being deposited with them in the museum of the University of Michigan.

Why, you will ask, have not steps been taken to put so incorrigible a scoundrel as the manufacturer of these spurious objects in an institution where his ingenuity and skill may be expended in the service of the state, without opportunity to deceive or beguile? Under existing laws this worthy end would be difficult to compass. Now that pure-food legislation is making progress we may perhaps hope for national regulations which will make the manufacture of objects of archeological interest as unprofitable as the adulteration of coffee or sugar. Up to the present time, however, the attitude of the various governments toward the manufacture of "antiques" of every kind has generally been lenient enough; all nations in these days are disposed to foster new industries, without being too inquisitive in regard to the disposal of the product. For the immediate future at least the principal weapons available for contending against archeo-

logical forgeries must continue to be skill in detection and publicity regarding the operations of forgers.

The forgeries of which I have spoken differ from all others which I have examined in this, that they are unsophisticated. The forger did not know enough about genuine relics of any class to make intelligent imitations. He had never seen the things which he undertook to reproduce; he translated roughly into substance a medley of representations which he had found in books or magazines and which, in his working sketches, he jumbled together after the manner of a child. It is fortunate for collectors that so wily a forger had not a better understanding of his business. His product is in a class with the "petrified man" of William Ruddock, which was alleged to have been found in 1876, in the Pine River region of Michigan, whence most of the Scotford "finds" have come. The "petrified man" was itself an echo of the Cardiff Giant, and may possibly in turn have suggested these ventures in a new field. One of my friends thinks "forgeries" too dignified a word to apply to such objects; he would call them simply "fakes."

The success that has attended these efforts at imposition — so far as they have been successful — is I think almost wholly due to the religious element in several of the designs. These are at the same time self-interpreting and mystifying; and their presence has seemed to turn the attention of many away from consideration of the material and the crass incongruities in design and technique. I have seen some of the pieces handled with unfeigned reverence.

There is no danger that by frauds such as these purchasers for museums will be imposed upon; but it is the duty of the expert to protect so far as possible the amateur collector, not only for his own sake but because he creates the market for archeological remains which without such a stimulus would be neglected or destroyed as of no value and so lost to science.