The Lost Civilizations of North America
Found … Again!

Alice Beck Kehoe

Glenn Beck, the Fox Network talk-show personality, recently featured the DVD *The Lost Civilizations of North America* on his show and exclaimed, “I was blown away”—not, apparently, by the Midwest’s impressive earthen architecture of Hopewell, Cahokia, and Mississippians documented in the video, but by their apparent affirmation of a Mormon claim that the Lost Tribes of Israel inhabited North America. Beck, brought up Roman Catholic, converted to Mormonism (http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/politics/1885/), which teaches that Jesus Christ as well as the biblical “lost tribes of Israel” came to America, and “that Zion (the New Jerusalem) will be built upon the American continent” as written in the Book of Mormon revealed to Joseph Smith in New York state during the 1820s. The artifacts discovered in the Midwest during the 19th century and the surviving earthworks were all the evidence Beck needed to fulfill this prophecy.

Beck held up a copy of one of the Smithsonian’s Bureau of American Ethnology Reports to quote a few words of its founding director, John Wesley Powell, and pointed to a blackboard inscribed “Science, Government, Commerce, Religion = Collusion of Power”. Because, he told viewers, Powell had stated that “only the savage would be considered” by the Smithsonian, Beck reasoned that that evidence of the civilized Lost Tribes of Israel would be ignored. Jumping to the supposition that such evidence had been collected, he asserted that Powell, as an employee of the federal government, must have relegated it to the obscurity of boxes in the Smithsonian’s basement. Shades of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and Area 51!

In an approach familiar to readers of *RNCSE*, the producers of the DVD, Barry McLerran and Rick Stout, interviewed researchers with expertise on North American archeology—Terry Barnhart, Kenneth Feder, Sonya Atalay, Deborah Bolnick, Bradley Lepper, Alice Kehoe, and Roger Kennedy—at length. Then they skillfully edited the interviews to make it appear that we agreed with the film’s thesis: that various artifacts shown in the film gave evidence supporting the Mormon story. The producers sent the scholars a rough version of the film in March 2010, provoking immediate e-mail demands for rectification of this misrepresentation. Two of the younger scholars contacted legal counsel at their universities about possible lawsuits, should the film be released with distortions of their interviews.

What especially disturbed the scholars was that the connection to the Mormon legend had not been disclosed; the producers had said the film would be about appreciating First Nations’ achievements. Proof of the Mormon evangelical purpose of the DVD—and not just poor documentary making—is apparent at the Book of Mormon Evidence website (http://www.bookofmormonevidence.org/index.php), which describes the DVD as offering...
new evidences for the Book of Mormon as a literal historical record of real people and places. ... Watch ... Glenn Beck on FOX NEWS referencing this documentary film. ... This hour long film will forever change your view about the strength of the claims of the Book of Mormon relative to where it may have taken place.

The finished DVD that Beck saw did re-edit the non-Mormon scholars’ interviews to modify the apparent links between Mormon claims and their words. However, little was changed overall: Beck began his talk-show segment recommending the DVD by telling viewers that the Hopewell Octagon earthwork at Newark, Ohio, has the same esoteric dimensions as the Great Pyramid at Giza (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yMyyFq1pM04), implying a direct connection between the two. Beck was particularly enthusiastic over the Newark Holy Stones, an odd set of small stone objects with Hebrew inscriptions discovered in 1860 in Newark, Ohio, by a local surveyor. He presumed the Lost Tribes of Israel would have made inscriptions in Hebrew, and that the stones dated from Book of Mormon scriptural times corresponding to Old Testament first millennium BCE, and the lifetime of Jesus of Nazareth. Since Newark is a major Hopewell site, the objects are inferred by archeologists to have been deposited in Hopewell times (100 BCE–400 CE), although there is no direct association with other artifacts of reliable age, nor reliable dating of the objects themselves. The stone is local. Given the many Jewish peddlers in the Midwest from its earliest settlement in the 19th century, the parsimonious secular interpretation is that the set of “Holy Stones” was carved at that time by one of them, as a pastime or marker of Jewish presence on the frontier, and then later preserved in the archeological record as so many other durable artifacts are known to be. Greater antiquity can be neither demonstrated nor invalidated.

In response to Beck’s program, archeologist Bradley Lepper of the Ohio Historical Society described Beck’s distortions in the Columbus Dispatch (2010 Dec 29; http://www.dispatch.com/live/content/local_news/stories/2010/12/29/dvd-stirs-up-archaeological-spat.html). The newspaper noted, “Beck’s program did not respond to requests for comment.” Within the Mormon church, fierce controversy rages over whether the Midwest or Mesoamerica is the location of the Book of Mormon history (see, for example, the FIRM Foundation newsletter, 2010 Jun–Jul, http://archive.constantcontact.com/fs022/1102686658457/archive/110358743076.html). The Lost Civilizations of North America DVD is ammunition in that war.

The Lost Civilizations of North America DVD can be ignored since it misrepresents reputable interpretations of Midwest archaeological data—except, perhaps, by those interested in the persistence of pseudoarcheological claims about the cultures and peoples of North America before European colonization. It is unfortunate that Glenn Beck did not use his forum to emphasize the true charge that Manifest Destiny propaganda fed the racist denigration of America’s past and its First Nations citizens, a story well told in Roger Kennedy’s Hidden Cities: The Discovery and Loss of Ancient North American Civilization (1994). Readers interested in archaeological controversies, serious or pseudoscientific, will enjoy my Controversies in Archaeology (2008).

References


**About the Author**

Alice Beck Kehoe is Professor Emerita of Anthropology at Marquette University and Adjunct Professor of Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. She is the author of several books on indigenous cultures of North American and North American archeology. She is also a long-time activist in support of evolutionary science and has been active in opposing and refuting pseudoscientific claims. She recently published *Controversies in Archaeology* (Walnut Creek [CA]: Left Coast Press, 2008).

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