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Found: An Ancient Chinese Ideograph Integrated Into Native American Rock Writing

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It would be a relatively simple matter if the Chinese Buddhists had been as thoughtful as “Kilroy” and had taken time out to have carved their names in Chinese characters on solid rock.... If they did, perhaps we have not yet recognized it. - Henriette Mertz

Abstract: On the top of a small hill, above the Little Colorado River in Arizona, there is a unique petroglyph of an ancient Chinese boat ideograph merged with the common Native American rock art illustration of people. This synthesis of local artistry with Chinese writing confirms that this glyph is an embellished form of the Chinese Small Seal ideograph, zhōu, and provides written evidence for the influence of the Chinese in pre-Columbian America.

An Early Journey from China to the Americas

One of the earliest descriptions of a journey from China to America is preserved in the Kuen 327, an official Chinese court record from the year AD 499. This document contains the observations and recollections of a Buddhist monk named Hwei-shin who, with several companions, traveled in AD 458 to a distant land called “Fusang.”¹ (Translated, Fusang means a “land to the east.”)² Significantly, Hwei-shin gave specific details for the final portion of his trip to Fusang, stating that to reach his destination, he had to sail eastward 20,000 Chinese li (~5,000 miles) from a location believed to have been on the Kamchatka Peninsula.³ This distance for the last segment of Hwei-shin’s trip across the northern Pacific Ocean agrees with modern measurements, as at that time, one li equaled 0.2583 miles.⁴

The detailed description of Fusang documented in the Kuen 327 clearly indicates that it was not a reference to Japan or another nearby island east of China. These destinations are all considerably closer to China than the 20,000 li distance Hwei-shin recorded for the last portion of his journey. At the time of Hwei-shin’s voyage the Chinese were already great mathematicians, astronomers, mariners, and engineers; hence, they were not likely to preserve in any official record a large error in navigation. Therefore, the likelihood that Hwei-shin and his companions actually traveled to somewhere in the Americas must be considered.

The possibility that the Chinese were the first visitors to the Americas has been a topic written about and debated for over 250 years. In 1761 Joseph de Guignes published a detailed analysis of the Kuen 327 in which he compared each item in it with the historical record and the geographical features of the lands bordering the Northern Pacific Ocean.⁵ In his paper, de Guignes tentatively identified many of the items and places described by Hwei-shin, as well as the probable sea route he took to reach Fusang. He concluded that Fusang could only be located somewhere in the Americas. In the late nineteenth century, Charles Leland, Edward Vining, and others wrote extensively in support of de Guignes' conclusions.

In his 1973 book *The Asiatic Fathers of America*, Dr. Hendon M. Harris, Jr. used previously unstudied ancient Asian world maps to identify the location of Fusang as America.⁶ In 2006 his daughter, Charlotte Harris Rees, published an abridged version of *The Asiatic Fathers of America*. Her own *Secret Maps of the Ancient World*, 2008, springboards from Harris' research and brings together multiple academic studies indicating that the Chinese made pre-Columbian expeditions to America. Such journeys from Asia may have been official or accidental. Even today, a boat set adrift in Asia may be transported solely by the ocean currents to North America in about fifty days. (Note: The distance from the Kamchatka Peninsula to San Francisco is approximately 5,000 miles, and the Northern Pacific ocean currents which flow between these two areas have an average speed of about 4 miles per hour.)

The Small Seal Style of the Chinese Boat Ideograph

The Small Seal style of Chinese writing was instituted by the Ch'in (Qin) dynasty in approximately 221 BC.⁷ As an early form of symbolic writing, Small Seal pictographic images (ideographs or radicals) preserved many of the identifiable characteristics of the item they symbolized. That is, this script generally looked like what it represented.⁸ For example, the Small Seal ideograph for a boat, zhōu (chou), depicts the basic structure of a boat or canoe (Figure 1). It is drawn as is the outline of a boat (Figure 2) and preserves several of a boat's other unique features. One end of the image is rounded to illustrate the boat's curved bow, or possibly an attached rope or anchor line. Within the figure several of the boat's thwarts (cross braces) are depicted as they perpendicularly connect both sides of the image. Finally, the Small Seal zhōu ideograph has extensions of both sidelines drawn beyond the last cross brace (stern) of the image. In rock art settings the presence of these unique protrusions are an important identifying characteristic of the zhōu boat image.



Figure 1.

Chinese Small Seal ideograph, zhōu

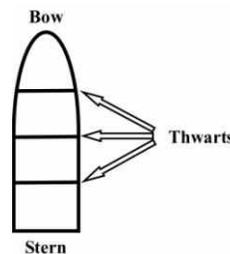


Figure 2.

Diagram of a boat

Boats in Southwestern Rock Art

Across the American Southwest, there are numerous ancient rock art images of boats. Typically, these illustrations depict the boat's profile with a semi-circular shaped hull, a flat deck, and multiple vertical lines representing people, extending from the topside of the vessel (Images 1 & 2).



Image 1. Boat petroglyph
Little Lake, California



Image 2. Two boat petroglyphs
Natural Bridges National Monument, Utah

Less frequently, ancient rock art images depict boats with flat bottoms, as they appear when they float on water (Image 3). If such a glyph is particularly well-drawn, it is sometimes possible to discern details which can be used to estimate the boat's length and the shape of its bow and stern. The ancient artist who drew Image 4 (below) embellished his depiction of the passengers within the boat by painting each of them holding an oar.⁹ Nevertheless, most ancient boat glyphs reveal very little additional information about the structure of the vessel or the people who traveled upon it.



Image 3. A profile view of a boat upon water.
Pictograph Cove, California.

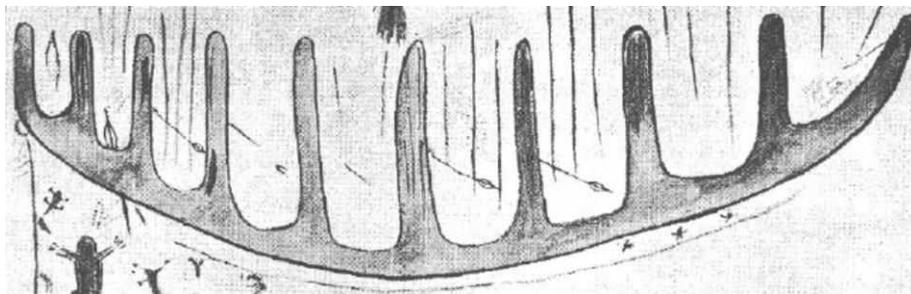


Image 4. A boat illustration with people holding oars.
Eagle Cave, Texas

Of particular interest are the unusually detailed pre-Columbian petroglyphs that depict boats with a mast, sail, and an active passenger located at Three Rivers, New Mexico (Image 5). These sailboat images are curious as they date from about AD 1,000 and are located in the desert over 500 miles from the nearest ocean or large body of water.¹⁰ One interpretation of these glyphs states that the ancient people of the Water Clan drew them as a “story of their Emergence or arrival to this continent by island-hopping across the ocean in boats and rafts.”¹¹ Unfortunately, this explanation stops short of suggesting who actually made this sea voyage or when it likely took place.



Image 5. Primary sailboat petroglyph
Three Rivers, New Mexico

The Small Seal Boat Glyph at Lyman Lake

On the top of a hill, overlooking the Little Colorado River in Lyman Lake State Park, Arizona, there is a petroglyph of a boat with people riding upon it (Image 6). In the same manner as they are commonly illustrated in other ancient rock art images, the passengers riding

on this vessel are drawn as vertical lines. However, to depict the boat in this image, the artist did not use a semi-circular or profile image. Rather, this boat is portrayed by the Chinese Small

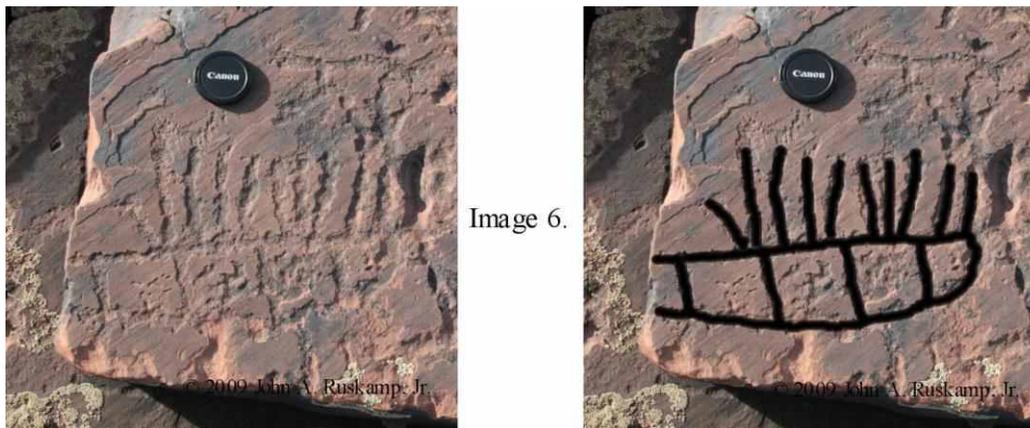


Image 6.

Plain image - The Lyman Lake boat glyph - Enhanced image

Seal ideograph, zhōu! The zhōu portion of the figure is clearly recognizable as it has the following characteristics: a round (bow) end; four transverse (thwart) lines drawn within the image; and carefully carved extensions of both sidelines at the stern end of the drawing. In addition, the vertical lines used to represent the people riding upon this boat are equally well-defined. Literally, this glyph combines elements from two separate pictographic languages to write the phrase “people riding upon a boat.” To date, this Lyman Lake boat glyph is the only example of this style of hybrid rock writing to be identified in the American Southwest.

Dating the Zhōu Image at Lyman Lake State Park

In his 1906 book, “Early Chinese Writing,” Rev. Frank Chalfant documented the historical development of Chinese ideographs from their beginning as oracle bone inscriptions to their modern forms. In his discussion, Chalfant identified the years during which Small Seal ideographs were the preferred style of Chinese writing. He wrote:

“The hair-pencil on paper did not lend itself readily to these shapes, and we find the ‘square character’ in the ascendancy until it entirely supplanted the older system of ‘seal character’ about A. D. 400. This change in penmanship so modified the appearance of the written signs as to greatly obscure and almost obliterate their pictorial character.”

Chalfant also stated:

“...modern editions show the old symbols analyzed by the author Hsu in the style called ‘Small Seal’—a refined form developed during the Han Dynasty (B. C. 206-A. D. 264).”

From the information contained in these two statements, it is possible to determine that the Small Seal zhōu glyph above Lyman Lake was created sometime between 206 BC and not long after

AD 400. Significantly, this range of dates overlaps with the time period modern archaeologists have assigned to many of the images at the Lyman Lake site (AD 300 to 700).¹² Evidently, Chinese expeditions to America were being made at the very same time that the glyphs at the Lyman Lake site were being produced.

Conclusions

The unique characteristics of the Small Seal zhōu petroglyph at Lyman Lake identify it as ancient Chinese writing. Nevertheless, some suggest that the indigenous people of America and the Chinese could have independently developed the same zhōu-like written symbol for a boat. However, there is no evidence to support this position. The dual creation of the same complex written symbol for the same object by completely independent populations has never been demonstrated. In fact, Mesoamerica is the only place in the Americas where indigenous writing was independently developed.¹³ Consequently, the ancient and embellished Small Seal zhōu image above Lyman Lake proves that this design represents a boat carrying people and that the Chinese were actively interacting with Native American populations during or shortly after the time of the Ch'in (Qin) Dynasty.

The sailboat petroglyphs at Three Rivers, New Mexico provide further evidence that individuals familiar with large boats were traveling deep into the American southwest in pre-Columbian times. To date, these images have not been linked with the Chinese or with any of the Small Seal zhōu illustrations that have been identified across the region. However, only a few feet away from these glyphs, there is the curious depiction of a human face (Image 7) which, unlike other facial images (or masks) at this location, has a pronounced mustache and beard. While beards and mustaches were not uncommon with the Chinese, they were very rarely worn by Native Americans. Therefore, further research to determine the extent, if any, of an ancient Asiatic presence near the Three Rivers site is greatly encouraged.



Image 7.
Three Rivers Facial Image with Mustache and Beard

Endnotes

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3. Edward P. Vining, *An Inglorious Columbus; or, Evidence that Hwui Shān and a Party of Buddhist Monks from Afghanistan Discovered America in the Fifth Century, A.D.* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1885), 20.
4. John E. Hill, *Through the Jade Gate to Rome: A Study of the Silk Routes during the Later Han Dynasty, 1st to 2nd Centuries CE* (Charleston, South Carolina: BookSurge, 2009), xx-xxi.
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7. Wikipedia contributors, "Small Seal Script," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Small_Seal_Script&oldid=321901537.
8. Frank H. Chalfant, "Early Chinese Writing," *Memoirs of the Carnegie Museum* 4, no.1 (1906): 2.
9. Terence Grieder, "Periods in Pecos Style Pictographs," *American Antiquity* 31, no.5 (1966): 713.
10. Bureau of Land Management, *Three Rivers Petroglyph Site and Picnic Area* (Las Cruces, New Mexico: Las Cruces District Office, 1995), 2.
11. Joe Ben Sanders, *Three Rivers Petroglyph Site: A Self Guided Tour Book, 2nd edition* (Bent, New Mexico: Center of the Universe Press, 2008), 12.
12. Arizona State University in collaboration with the Hopi Tribe, *Interpreting the Prehistory of Lyman Lake State Park* (St. Johns, Arizona: Lyman Lake State Park, 2000), 9.
13. John Noble Wilford, "When No One Read, Who Started to Write?," *New York Times*, April 6, 1999, sec. F, p. 1.

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