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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



A CONTEXT FOR THE VERO BEACH ENGRAVED MAMMOTH

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In 2009 the realistic image of a mammoth engraved on mineralized bone was found by James Kennedy, an amateur fossil hunter. It was discovered in the fossil-rich former streambed of the Indian River in Vero Beach, Florida, in or near a place known as the Old Vero Early Man Site that had long yielded bones of late Pleistocene megafauna including mammoths, mastodons and giant sloths. The bone on which the image had been engraved is considered to be the fossilized remains of one of those three animals. Some human bones also found there had given the site its name.

Especially because of the striking realism of the mammoth image it was assumed that, if indeed prehistoric, it must have been engraved when proboscideans still roamed that area. Since paleontologists have estimated that the mammoths in North America became extinct about 12 000 to 13 000 years ago, the bone would have been engraved before that date. No other realistic images of comparable antiquity have been discovered and authenticated in North America. The existence of this artifact, therefore, challenges the chronology for rock art in North America and calls into question the belief contended by some researchers that the earliest Paleoindian rock art in North America is non-figurative.

Because this engraved figure is so unique, one way to understand it is to find its place in the context of other mammoth images previously discovered in North America. There have been a number. In fact, compelling pursuit of mammoth imagery has been, in some sense, like a search for the Holy Grail.

The five most significant and purportedly ancient mammoth images that have been found in North America include:

1. the sculpted sandstone mammoth shaped pipes from Iowa which were thought to be from the Mound Indian culture;
2. the engraved two-sided slate piece from Pennsylvania, called the Lenape Stone after the Indians who lived in that area;
3. the once famous Holly Oak mammoth engraved on shell from Delaware;
4. the engraved bone from Jacob's Cavern, Missouri;
5. the engraving on a cliff in Utah known as the Moab Mammoth (as well as other parietal images in the Utah area).

I review the information about each discovery and find that the provenance of these artifacts seems extremely dubious at best. In terms of their graphic style, they are entirely different from one other. These mammoth images also differ from the Vero Beach image. These North American examples show no stylistic or apparent cultural continuity such as one finds in European and Asian examples.

A second line of investigation is comparison of the Vero engraving with the European and Asian mammoth images which were found beginning in the late 19th century. There are over 300 examples. Carved and modeled mammoth figurines have been found as well. Some of these are even more ancient than the drawn and painted examples. I do not include these in my research because only those art forms which attempted to translate a three dimensional form into a two dimensional representation were suitable for a specific comparison with the Vero mammoth engraving.



Vero Mammoth. Size is 7.5 cm top of head to tip of tail and 4.5 cm top of head to bottom of right foreleg (courtesy of J. Kennedy).

My first goal was to see how the individual European and Asian Pleistocene artists, who had worked over a vast chronological and geographic spread of time and space, had solved problems relating to perspective. Proboscidean images are unusually complicated when depicted in two dimensions. To this end I discuss in detail the use of foreshortening in these images as it relates to the depiction of mammoth tusks and trunk. I compare this range of solutions to that which was used by the engraver of the North American Vero mammoth. My conclusion is that the Vero mammoth is astonishingly skillful in the use of perspective.

For the authentication of the Vero mammoth, as for that of any art, one traditionally relies on two criteria. The first is scientific verification. Scientific tests have proved to be very convincing since the engraving has passed all of the tests to which it has been submitted. The second criterion is connoisseurship involving a broad art history approach, about which I am able to speak. The Vero mammoth image seems to fit well into the European opus but not so well that it can be called a copy of any particular example. In fact it has quite individual traits which seem to indicate that it is the work of a particular individual with unusual graphic gifts. But it is hard to believe that the artist could have accomplished this work without being part of a tradition.

If there was indeed a tradition it may be that artists worked on perishable material such as wood. But one can hope to find other examples on bone or stone. Further excavation of the Old Vero Beach Site with modern techniques, as is planned, may hold the key to this question. However, unless new scientific data or discoveries emerge to contradict what we now know, I believe that the Vero Beach Mammoth engraving should be considered authentic.





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