

FIRST
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Ken Sassen fell in love with Utah's Pre-Colombian rock art. From the moment a colleague showed him a wall of petroglyphs his first semester as a postdoc at the University, he coveted every free day and stole more than a few working days to get out into the field.

Utah was Ken's empire and so rich are its walls that he was rarely tempted to cross the state border. As an engineer with a sense of time and history, he was fascinated not only with rambling thoughts about the mysterious vanished peoples who created this art but with its elusive meanings. He was particularly taken with the astronomical symbols.

His love for the petroglyphs has never dimmed but it was in 1977, his fourth year as a postdoc, that he made his great discovery. He was hiking up the modest Rochester Creek Canyon a few miles from the famous rainbow glyph when he noticed an incomplete glyph whose bottom had sheared off, exposing a sheet of much lighter, unvarnished sandstone below. The fallen rock fragments were relatively large and had not slid very far from the wall. Something appeared odd about the top section and that intrigued Ken. He had a few days – it was spring break – so he decided to play the game of jigsaw puzzle. Taking multiple trips, he hauled the fragments to the level mesa above, where he could assemble them. It was tough work so it was a good thing it was only April and both cool and dry.

Piecing the jigsaw fragments was easier and much faster than he had hoped. Early on he had noticed some of the fragments contained writing, which pissed him off. Already he was something of a purist. The Indians who carved the glyphs created art. The White men who defaced the walls created graffiti.

When all was assembled, the glyph was relatively complete. Ken took two rolls of slide film and also made a tracing. Normally, he would have done everything possible to ignore the graffiti. But this graffiti was different than anything he had seen before. The characters were Latin and there was some calligraphic writing that resembled Arabic. Ken had taken Latin in school but couldn't make sense of the words. It had the sound of Arabic, which Ken did not know at all. But the writing block ended with four symbols that looked like the number, 1⁰⁰⁶.

Ken flushed. What a gross attempt at forgery, likely by some 19th century priest. Perhaps it was a good thing the rock surface had exfoliated. But something didn't quite jibe with his initial skeptical assessment. The writing had to be ancient because the desert varnish had darkened the written surface too much to be mere century old graffiti.

Ken decided to haul the fragments of the written section the five miles back to his van so that they could be analyzed at the University. That took him three days so, when he returned to work two days late several senior professors gave him dirty looks.

Ken was too excited to be upset. The first free moment he got he contacted the Catholic priest on campus. When the priest saw the writing he confirmed it was a transliteration and was almost sure it was Arabic. Finding someone who knew Arabic was difficult in Utah back in the 1970's. Then the priest recalled that the Campus Rabbi was Israeli.

The Rabbi was fluent in Arabic, as so many Israelis were in those days. As he translated, Ken wasn't sure he could believe it. The essential part read as follows.

In faith of completing my mission in honor of His Holiness Gerbert Pope Sylvester II•I, Matthias of Rheims certify I have reached this canyon of the stone rainbow▪The year of our Lord 1°°6▪

Ken was incredulous, but knew the writing was old. He took one of the fragments to the geology department. When the sedimentologist estimated that it was about 1000 years old, Ken went wild. He was convinced he had made a great discovery. Little could he have suspected the scorn and ridicule he would endure. His announcement made a few waves but he was soon denounced as a forger and his discovery was labeled an amateurish hoax. Exhausted by his humiliating crusade, he settled into a sullen silence and confined his professional talks to the research specialty that paid his salary.

Professor Chaim Irmay had long been driven to discover a find that ranked with the Dead Sea Scrolls. A desert rat, he spent months at a time in the forbidding landscapes of the Dead Sea and Sinai. Even with good leads, most searches were frustrating. But he had something vital going for him – inherited wealth. By paying top prices for manuscripts and artifacts of modest archaeological value, he had acquired a reputation for generosity that gained him a substantial following in the shady world of grave robbers and archaeological pillagers.

So when Chaim got a call one morning in the spring of 1979 to meet Suliman Tarabin, a trusted Bedouin chieftain and scoundrel, late that afternoon in the garden outside the wall of the Santa Catarina Monastery, he was on his way instantly. Santa Caterina, the world's longest continuously operating Christian monastery, is a World Heritage Site. Located in the barren heart of the remote and forbidding Sinai Peninsula at the base of Jebel Musa, the mountain where they say Moses received the Ten Commandments, it is also the site of the proclaimed Burning Bush, where God first spoke to Moses. The Monastery is also home to a mosque that was converted from an early chapel almost 1000 years ago.

Because of its remote location and impregnable fortress walls, Santa Caterina's Abbot was able to disregard the order to destroy all artwork and non-sacred manuscripts during the Iconoclast period. As a result, the Monastery's famed library houses the greatest collection of old manuscripts in all of Christendom except for the Vatican and its collection of some of the oldest painted icons is priceless and irreplaceable.

Outside the inner fortress walls is a charnel house surrounded by a grove of cypress trees as well as gardens. This tiny green islet in the South Sinai's harsh blackened red granite sea was where Chaim had his appointment with Suliman. Each gave the customary, effusive Salaam. Chaim was nervous but Suliman had such a relaxed look that Chaim had to restrain himself from laughing. Endless obligatory small talk followed. It was Chaim's nature to get down to business immediately, but he well knew that in the world of the Bedouin spending time means saving time. And the bigger the transaction, the more time you save. Besides, he really liked the scoundrel. So, despite his excitement, Chaim found himself relaxing.

As they moseyed off to the Bedouin camp outside Santa Catarina's outer walls for a leisurely dinner, the outer layers of Suliman's tale slowly began to peel off. By evening's end all that Chaim could decipher was that Suliman was proud of his trusted position as foreman of a construction crew tasked with rebuilding a crumbling section of the inner wall of the Mosque. Just before heading off to bed, Suliman expressed the wish that Chaim accompany him the next day and observe the proceedings in the most casual manner possible. Chaim gladly accepted the honor. Of course, he was not casual enough to sleep well.

Finally, at breakfast, Suliman described his discovery. "The mosque contains a double wall. The space between the two walls is packed with insulating rubble. As we were removing this rubble my assistant struck a wide, flat rock, about a foot below ground level. That was the roof of a rock scaffold that holds an ancient box about the size of a seat cushion. We put the flat rock back in place, and covered it again with some rubble. As to what treasure that box may contain I have no idea. But it was buried during the original construction in such a way that it was intended to remain hidden for a long, long time. That is what made me feel you might find it worthy. So, today, we will return to the task of the wall, rescue that box and perhaps learn its secret.

After breakfast they headed to the mosque. Upon entering it, Suliman introduced Chaim to the Muezzin. Suliman gave Chaim a deliberately slow working tour of the mosque and the reconstruction project. When he reached the crumbled section of the wall, he gave Chaim a glimpse of the flat rock. This aroused the suspicion of the Muezzin, who scurried over to check that nothing was awry. By the time the Muezzin reached the wall, Suliman, in an almost motionless series of invisible strokes, had covered the rock with rubble. In that brief interval, Suliman remained facing the wall with his back to the Muezzin, losing nary a syllable in his description of the double wall's brilliant idea and design.

The Muezzin peered into the cavity. Seeing nothing, he stayed long enough to see a few shovels of rubble pitched into the waiting wheelbarrow. Finally, he returned to his post. The moment the Muezzin turned his back Suliman, with the speed and deftness of a magician, loaded the rock casing and treasure box into the wheelbarrow and disguised them under a protective veneer of rubble.

One of Suliman's assistants hauled the wheelbarrow away as Suliman, who never broke stride or lost a syllable, continued his dual role as foreman and guide. The Muezzin continued watching the pair but his suspicions gradually ebbed and had evaporated completely by the time he gave the call to Dhuhr, the noon prayer.

Chaim was dying to get to the box but once again, knew that patience would be rewarded. And patience was what he needed. Suliman told him to use the afternoon for touring the monastery. When work ended for the day, Chaim rejoined Suliman. As they strolled back to the Bedouin camp, Suliman informed Chaim, "We are being watched. This may take a day or two. So, continue here as my honored guest. Tomorrow we will wake you early to climb Jebel Musa for the sunrise."

Sunrise is always spectacular at the top of Jebel Musa, the legendary Mount Sinai. Chaim forced himself to enjoy it and the rest of the leisurely day. When he finally returned to Suliman's tent in the Bedouin camp the unopened box was waiting for him. Chaim got his camera ready.

Suliman addressed Chaim gravely. “To you I give the honor of opening the box.” Chaim countered, saying, “I am deeply honored but the honor, indeed the duty belongs to the discoverer.” Suliman bowed and accepted.

A single, ancient volume filled the space within the box. It was extracted by turning the box upside down. Chaim opened the cover with extreme care and great trepidation. Writing began on the second page in the form of what appeared to be a dedication.

From the first instant, Chaim recognized it as a transliteration of Arabic written with Latin characters. Chaim read the dedication out loud

By virtue of the great wisdom of His Holiness Gerbert Pope Sylvester II▪I Matthias of Rheims have completed the mission he commanded me▪In hope that this humble account may add to his eternal glory I dedicate it to his sacred memory▪The year of our Lord 1025▪

