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## OU professor studies controversial relics

By **Jeff Samoray**, *OU Web Writer*

In 1890, James Scotford unearthed a clay cup while digging postholes on a farm near Wyman, Mich. He subsequently discovered more than a dozen other objects during other digs in the area. Many of the objects were said to have come from burial mounds that were common to the region. Through 1920, Scotford and his associates discovered thousands of clay, copper and slate objects – subsequently dubbed “Michigan Relics” – in at least 16 Michigan counties. The objects often depicted various scenes from the Bible and contained mysterious inscriptions and symbols similar to Egyptian hieroglyphics.

At the time, many people believed the Michigan Relics were irrefutable evidence that a lost civilization migrated from the Middle East and settled in Michigan sometime after 722 BC. The relics received worldwide acclaim and were hailed as the greatest archeological discovery since Pompeii in Italy. But one question remained: were these objects fakes?

Associate Professor of Anthropology Richard Stamps has been studying the Michigan Relics since 1977 and is now guest curator for the exhibit, “**Digging Up Controversy: The Michigan Relics**,” currently on display at the **Michigan Historical Museum** in Lansing. Exhibit visitors can see a wide assortment of relics, including tablets, pipes, boxes, figurines, coins and more. The exhibit also contains information on Scotford, his close associate and former Michigan Secretary of State Daniel Soper, and Father James Savage, former pastor of the Most Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Detroit, who firmly believed the relics were authentic.

After thorough examination, the data Stamps compiled on the relics led him to the same conclusion held by many archaeologists since the 1890s.

“The evidence irrefutably shows that the relics are fake,” Stamps said. “It was easy for me to look at them on the surface and say they were unlike anything discovered by archaeologists over the last 100 years. I just had a gut feeling and they didn’t look right. But to prove it I subsequently took microscopic measurements of them and had them analyzed by metallurgists. I also analyzed how the lines were cut, how the pieces were polished and what quarries the slate came from. I found that tools such as circular saw blades and planing devices readily available in the 1890s were used to manufacture them.”

The consensus among many historians is that Scotford and Soper teamed to manufacture and sell the relics. They also duped Father Savage into purchasing many relics, thus giving them further credibility. Scotford and Soper never admitted to the forgeries and Savage died believing they were genuine. However, Scotford’s step-daughter signed an affidavit in 1911 saying she saw him making the relics. In addition, no further relics were discovered after Scotford and Soper’s deaths. Still, there are many who believe the relics are authentic.

Stamps was instrumental in helping the Michigan Historical Museum acquire the relics last year from a Mormon church museum near Salt Lake City, where they were held after several exchanges over the years. Though the relics are forgeries, Stamps said the exhibit is a valuable example of how modern science can solve the mysteries of the past.

“The role of a museum is to educate the public,” said Stamps, who spoke of his findings in his exhibit-opening lecture. “The relics are examples of the benefits of science and how modern-day technology revealed this hoax. The exhibit is also an opportunity to relive part of Michigan’s past. It’s a 100-year-old example of how people could perpetuate fraud of a great magnitude.”

Stamps published his findings in an article, titled “Tools Leave Marks: Material Analysis of the Scotford-Soper-Savage Michigan Relics,” in the journal “BYU Studies” in 2001. National Public Radio also interviewed him for two news reports on the relics. Stamps currently is working on a book manuscript on the relics and his findings.

“Digging Up Controversy” will be on display through Aug. 15. For more information, visit the **Michigan Historical Museum** Web site or contact Richard Stamps at (248) 370-2425 or [stamps@oakland.edu](mailto:stamps@oakland.edu).

### SUMMARY

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