History

Meteor Beliefs Project: Meteorite Veneration in the New World

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Examples of meteoritic objects from the Americas, primarily Central and North America, which were apparently revered or otherwise considered supernaturally important by the native peoples there, are discussed, with which to compare previous Meteor Beliefs Project examinations of Old World meteorite veneration.

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1 Introduction

In earlier Meteor Beliefs Project articles, we have examined examples of veneration of meteorites, or other objects believed to have fallen from the skies, from the Old World, primarily within the Classical European civilizations (McBeath & Gheorghe, 2004; McBeath & Gheorghe, 2005; McBeath & Gheorghe, 2009). We have also discussed the practical reuse of meteoritic iron as ornaments, tools and weapons from various parts of the world (Hendrix et al., forthcoming; Larsen et al., forthcoming), and whether this might sometimes have included a degree of supernatural belief, if not true worship, concerning the objects involved. Here, I wish to tackle examples of meteorite veneration and other potentially supernatural meteorite reuse from the New World, particularly by the native peoples of Central and North America, to complement those previous papers.

2 Items already discussed

Figure 1 gives a sketch-map of part of northern America, to illustrate the general distribution of significant meteorite sites involved in this article and earlier ones. To recap, the objects and sites described before (all from Hendrix et al., forthcoming), included:

- The reuse of metal from the Brenham, Kansas, USA, pallasites by the Hopewell culture ($\sim$ 500 BC to $\sim$ 500 AD) as ornaments, tools and weapons, as recovered from various of their burial mounds in the Ohio, USA area;
- One $\sim$ 1500 kg octahedrite found in a ruined temple at Casas Grandes in Mexico, and a second, much smaller and now lost, iron from there, which had been wrapped and buried like a human mummy bundle. This was apparently similar to depictions and descriptions of the Aztec god Huitzilopochtli (though Casas Grandes was never part of the Aztec cultural area);
- A ten-tonne octahedrite near Morito, Mexico, said in 1619 AD to have been venerated since the natives first moved south to settle in Mexico; and
- An octahedrite strewnfield near Toluca, Mexico, in the former Aztec heartland, whose fragments were recovered and made into tools by the natives for many generations, worked with considerable skill by the local smiths when first recorded by non-natives in $\sim$ 1776 AD, if not apparently revered beyond this.

To these might be added:

- The Campo del Cielo octahedrite strewnfield in Argentina, South America, which was still believed to have fallen from the sky in fire by the natives in 1576 AD, though the actual event probably occurred in $\sim$ 2000 BC (ibid.);
- The, in some cases immense, Cape York irons around the shores of Melville Bay in northwest Greenland, which the Inuit had used for many generations as a source of metal for tools and weapons, the Inuit having settled Greenland in $\sim$ 1000 AD (Larsen et al., forthcoming). Two of the meteorites, The Woman (three tonnes) and The Dog ($\sim$ 400 kg) were named by the Inuit, but they do not seem to have been revered beyond that action; and
- A metal axe-head made from a single kamacite crystal, from an unknown date and location, but found in a native ruin somewhere in New Mexico, USA (ibid.)

The remainder of this article introduces and discusses material new to the Project.

3 Meteorites wrapped and buried

Figure 1 shows an apparent concentration of sites near Meteor Crater (formed $\sim$ 50 000 years ago) in the Canyon Diablo region of Arizona, USA, comprising those at Camp Verde, Navajo and Winona, all in Arizona too. This is somewhat misleading, as the Navajo and Winona meteorites were unrelated to those near Meteor Crater, leaving only the Camp Verde object directly connected, identical in chemistry and structure to those irons from the Canyon Diablo strewnfield, if quite different in having a smoothly-rounded physical appearance, and its associations. Winona however, also had strong links in its find-circumstances to the object at Camp Verde.

Like the Canyon Diablo meteorites, the 61.5 kg Camp Verde was a coarse octahedrite. It was found

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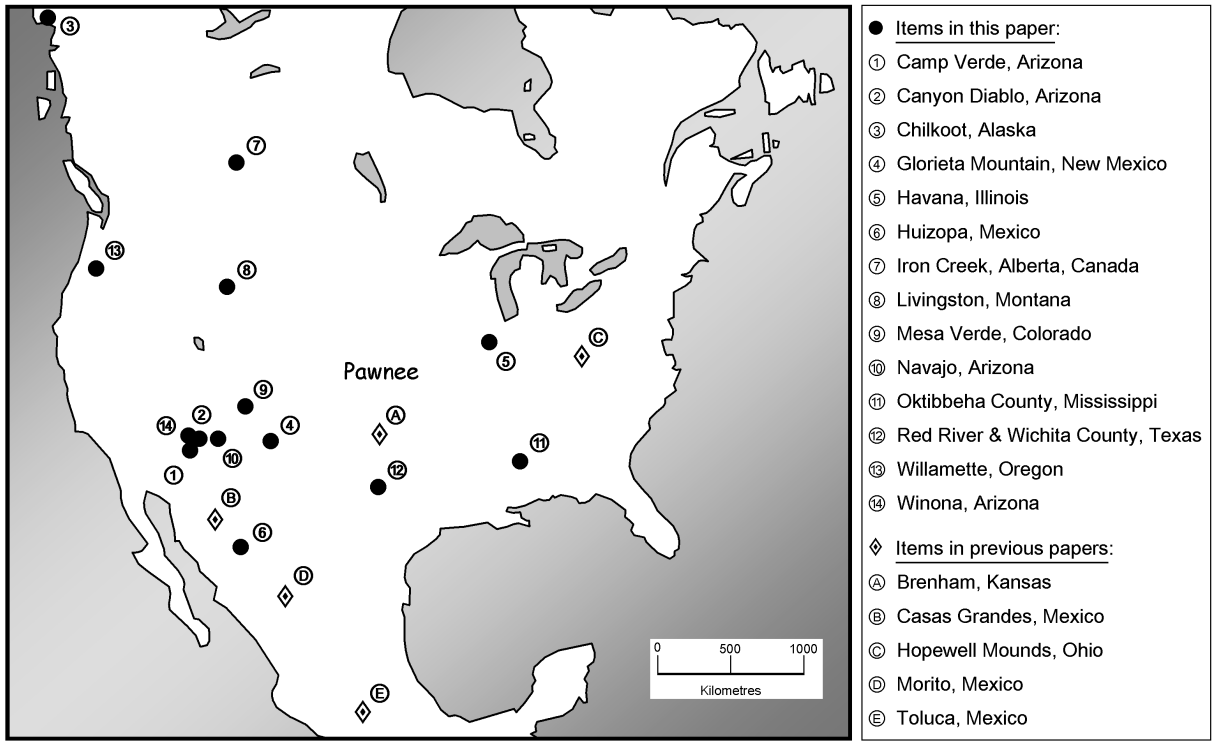

Figure 1 – A sketch-map of part of northern America, giving approximate locations for the find-sites of material discussed in this paper, and earlier Project ones where similar topics were investigated.

by an itinerant construction worker and amateur archaeologist, George E Dawson, while he was digging for treasure in the ruins of a native pueblo-style dwelling near Camp Verde in 1915. In what seemed at first a child's stone burial cist under the floor, he discovered the meteorite wrapped in a blanket of feathers. Subsequent investigations found pottery that could be dated to roughly 1100–1200 AD associated with the burial. Initially thought that the pueblo was likely inhabited by the native Sinagua then, a more recent suggestion is it was built by people from the Salado culture, originally from the Salt River valley, around 75 km southeast of Camp Verde. Why the meteorite was treated with such reverence is unknown. It has been speculated that it may have been a fragment that spalled-off and landed in this region as the Meteor Crater main body came through the atmosphere originally, since it is difficult otherwise to imagine how, or why, such a substantial object would have been deliberately carried so far from the Canyon Diablo area, just to be buried intact. (See: Buchwald, 1975, Vol. 2, pp. 399–401; Burke, 1986, p. 224. On the more recent information, several online news and discussion forums confirmed the general findings, cf. Ayers, 2009, for a useful, if journalistic, summary. Ayers gave the date of Dawson's find as 1927, however.)

It is though possible the Camp Verde meteorite was so transported, because there were native dwellings found close to Meteor Crater, including some dating to the circa twelfth century AD on the southern slope of the Crater's rim. How much, if any, use was made of the iron meteorites there, which are still to be found scattered over the countryside near the Crater, cannot be judged, as there are no surviving archaeological examples of meteorite reuse there, but it seems "The place was not taboo to the Hopi Indians, and it is quite unlikely that they witnessed the fall" (Buchwald, 1975, Vol. 2, p. 382). Despite this, it seems very probable the Hopi were aware of such a handy source of iron, readily-available on the surface near their homes.

At Winona, a few kilometres northeast of Flagstaff, Arizona, in 1928, another meteorite was found in a similar stone cist to that at Camp Verde, again buried under the floor of a native, probably this time Sinaguan, pueblo ruin. This was an egg-shaped achondrite, what became the type-stone for the rare 'winonaite' class. Although intact when first uncovered, it fell apart on attempting to remove it, but $\sim$ 24 kg of meteoritic fragments were eventually still saved and preserved. Based on the dating of associated pottery, the pueblo site overall was probably occupied from the late eleventh to the thirteenth centuries AD (Heineman & Brady, 1929).

Considerably further south, one of the two Casas Grandes, Mexico irons was apparently wrapped and buried like a body too, perhaps suggestive of a general practice among the pueblo-dwellers in this part of southwest North America. Several different cultures have been recognised here archaeologically, often only approximately dated (cf. Bahn, 2000, pp. 164–165; Haywood, 2000, both pp. 3.26). If this was so, perhaps the concept was carried further south as people migrated into more of Central America, leading to tales of the Aztec god Huitzilopochtli being perceived as a wrapped meteorite bundle as well.

Whether all such objects were genuinely meteoritic cannot be confirmed. Burke (1986, p. 224) reported tales from the Skidi Pawnee tribe – whose former home range is roughly demonstrated by the "Pawnee" label on Figure 1 – that suggested "They wrapped objects believed to be meteorites in bundles that they considered sacred and that belonged either to individuals or to the tribe." This degree of uncertainty also reflected the fact there were no surviving potentially meteoritic objects known from Pawnee contexts available for modern identification. Burke noted the Pawnee named meteorites 'the children of Tirawhat', their leading deity, and that one legend foretold a marvellous being called Pahokatawa would come from the sky in the form of a turtle-shaped stone. The regmaglyptic markings often seen on larger meteorites due to the melting and recrystallisation of the surface during the object's atmospheric flight, could certainly give a patternation reminiscent of that seen on a turtle's shell, while meteorites can be almost any shape, of course. A conical or lenticular form, something like a turtle, would not be unusual. When such an object duly fell, the tribe carried it with them wrapped in a bundle. Afterwards, to ensure success in battle, the warriors offered prayers and smoke to the meteorite, and it was said there was no disease in the camp while the stone was with them. When they were made to relocate to Indian Territory in the nineteenth century (modernly the area of Oklahoma, USA, just east of the Brenham and Wichita sites on Figure 1), they left the stone on a high hill in western Nebraska, west of their earlier homelands in east-central Nebraska, a site and object that have not been located, regrettably. The Pawnee area was a long way northeast of the pueblo-dwelling peoples who also wrapped meteorites in bundles, so whether such beliefs may have been linked is unprovable.

4 Sacred meteorites

Wrapped and/or buried meteorites were clearly regarded as objects of significance to be treated with such reverence, even if we now cannot tell exactly why this was so. Other meteorites, including those too massive to be moved, were treated as sacred objects, sometimes noted as presented with tribute gifts. One of the better-recorded examples was the Iron Creek octahedrite in Alberta, Canada. It was first reported by William F Butler, who saw it in 1871 at the mission station of Victoria, around 140 km east-northeast of Edmonton, apparently a turtle-shaped, somewhat conical, mass, weighing ~ 175 kg. He noted it had been moved there not long before he saw it, from its original site on a hilltop somewhere south of Victoria, and related the tale "that it had been known by the Cree and Blackfoot Indians longer than any man could say. The mass was highly venerated, and tribute was paid in form of beads, trinkets or knives" (Buchwald, 1975, Vol. 2, p. 686). Burke (1986, p. 225) called it a "medicine-stone", and remarked that the local tribes believed it had fallen from heaven. He also reported an old medicine-man as having predicted its removal would bring sickness, shortage and war, and that these warnings seemed to have been fulfilled within a few months. Buchwald (loc. cit.) mentioned the tribes were plagued by smallpox soon afterwards.

In Texas, USA, the ~ 150 kg Wichita County octahedrite 'defeated' the Comanche tribe before they chose to venerate it, although it seemed to have been first discovered during the Spanish exploration of the modern Texas-Oklahoma areas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Spaniards had tried to move it with pack mules, but to little effect, and it was some time later that the Comanche encountered the iron, and tried to melt it with huge fires, unsuccessfully. They then attacked it with tools to try to break it up, again ineffectually, and following this failure, they decided it was a powerful medicine-stone, and left it alone. "They regarded it with the highest veneration, and it was the custom of all who passed by to deposit upon it beads, arrowheads, tobacco, and other articles as offerings" (Buchwald, 1975, Vol. 3, p. 1305). Burke (1986, pp. 224–225) described the nearby Kiowa and Apache tribes as venerating the Wichita County meteorite too, believing it had come from the Great Spirit, while well-worn trails led to the site, suggesting it was very frequently visited. Buchwald related it was moved south to San Antonio in 1836, and then to Austin in 1859, where it was kept in the Capitol building. When that building burnt down in 1881, the meteorite dropped into the basement, where it was sheltered from the rubble and heat, until it was later rescued. It was then taken to the University of Texas elsewhere in Austin, where it still resides.

Somewhere nearby in Texas, Buchwald (1975, Vol. 3, pp. 1010–1012) noted that a ~ 800 kg octahedrite was found by a Pawnee tribesman around 1800, now called the Red River meteorite. Its find-location in that area is not known, and it had been taken to New York already by 1810, so although Buchwald (1975, Vol. 1, Appendix 6, p. 165) stated tribute had been paid to it by the local native tribes, it is unclear whether this was really the case, or if someone had conflated tales of the Wichita County iron with that at Red River. There is the possibility both were so-venerated, as it seemed when Western prospectors first went to the area in 1810, there were known to be three 'platinum ore' (actually meteoritic iron) masses in this region, Red River and two smaller ones. Buchwald suggested one may have been Wichita County, and that the other could have been the $\sim$ 18 kg Denton County octahedrite, first found in Texas in 1856 (Vol. 2, pp. 530–531). No such tales seemed to have been recorded in respect of Denton County, however.

The Navajo, Arizona, USA, coarse octahedrite was too massive to move at ~ 1500 kg, which may be why it was reported as buried in scree at the foot of a sandstone ridge, when it was initially found by a Westerner, R K Thomas, in 1921. He indicated the rocks had been piled over it apparently deliberately, to prevent its accidental discovery by others, and that this had been done by the Navajo tribe. Thomas suggested the Navajo had known of the object, and considered it sacred, perhaps

since as early as 1600 AD. In the 1927 "Appendix to the Catalogue of Meteorites" in the British Museum, G T Prior recorded a letter as having stated Native American beads had been found with the meteorite. Another octahedrite weighing 685 kg was located less than 50 m northwest of the larger mass in 1926, buried in soil washed off an adjacent ridge, but seemingly deliberately marked with an upright rock standing by it (Buchwald, 1975, Vol. 3, p. 878). It was thus less clear how strong the veneration was in this case, nor was it obvious why such huge masses needed to be concealed at all, perhaps merely reflecting a different local custom.

If the native meteorite beliefs were uncertain at Navajo, those associated with the still-more massive Willamette, Oregon, USA, octahedrite, which weighed about fourteen tonnes, were dismissed in a court-case. It was located in 1902 by a miner originally from Wales, Ellis Hughes, but on land owned by the Oregon Iron and Steel Company. Working secretly for months, he uncovered the whole object, an enormous cone-shaped mass, very heavily pitted, and in a further three months, with a good deal of ingenuity, Hughes and his fifteen-year-old son managed to move the meteorite the 1.2 km to his own house and land. He then announced his find in 1903 October, and charged people who came the five kilometres out from nearby Oregon City twenty-five cents each to see it. A lawyer for the Oregon Iron and Steel Company was among them. He spotted the cleared track leading to Hughes' house from the Company's land, and by the end of November, Hughes was defending a court case over ownership of the object.

Hughes' defence revolved around it having been an abandoned Indian relic, and thus personal property, not part of the land it had been found on. If this was so, the meteorite would have been his, as its finder. He called two Native American witnesses in his favour, one from the Klicktat tribe, seventy years old, the other a forty-seven-year-old Wasco tribesman. They both testified that the meteorite had been sacred to the, by 1903 extinct, Clackamas tribe, who knew it as "Visitor from the Moon" (*Tomanowos*). Apparently, the Clackamas' washed their faces in water collected in the pits in the meteorite, and dipped their arrows in the water before a battle. It was said to have been owned by the tribe's medicine-men, who had continued to use it to practice various beliefs until about 1870. The jury rejected the native tales, and found in favour of the Company, however, a decision which was upheld by the US Supreme Court in 1905 July, ruling that all meteorites in the USA were the property of the land-owner where they were found (Buchwald, 1975, Vol. 3, pp. 1311–1313). Interestingly, the Supreme Court ruling made no comment regarding the veracity of the claimed native beliefs, but it remains uncertain how much reliability may be placed upon them regarding this meteorite.

Other meteorites had still vaguer claimed Native American reverence associated with them, such as the Morito iron previously discussed, or the Chilkoot, Alaska, USA, $\sim$ 43 kg medium octahedrite, first recorded in 1881, but whose fall was said to have been witnessed by the natives around 1780, and who preserved it afterwards (Buchwald, 1975, Vol. 2, p. 457). Buchwald (1975, Vol. 1, p. 165) regarded tales of these as convincing enough to include them in his listing of "26 Venerated Iron Meteorites", though it was less obvious if the finding of five fine octahedrites in a native ruin dating to circa 1400 AD near Huizopa, Mexico were necessarily in such a class, despite his listing them as venerated too. The largest was around 108 kg, but the other four were much smaller, weighing between $\sim$ 5–10 kg each, three of which are now lost, while neither of the two surviving ones are still intact (Buchwald, 1975, Vol. 2, pp. 668–670). He gave there as well the $\sim$ 114 kg Caperr, Argentina octahedrite, likely known long before $\sim$ 1871, but as an object regarded "with superstitious awe" by the native Patagonians, rather than straightforwardly venerated. The outer surface showed signs of having been damaged by hammering, which too might imply less-than-reverential treatment for the meteorite (Buchwald, 1975, Vol. 2, pp. 409–410).

By contrast to these, the Canyon Diablo meteorites near Meteor Crater seemed to have attracted neither positive nor negative native attention like this, while although the 3.5 kg Mesa Verde, Colorado, USA medium octahedrite was found in a native shrine house being restored by archaeologists in 1922, it seemed to have been left there quite disregarded, among a number of discarded rocks. It was estimated the iron and other rocks were probably placed in the building by the cliff-dwelling natives when it was initially constructed, likely in the thirteenth century AD, but it presumably had no especial significance for them (Buchwald, 1975, Vol. 3, p. 826).

5 Grave goods

Archaeologists have long debated why some human burials were accompanied by a variety of objects, and others not. Much of the reasoning originally seemed to have related to beliefs in a supernatural afterlife, where such objects would retain their utility. While the objects themselves might not have been venerated directly, they were clearly considered important enough to the dead person to need to be kept with their physical remains. Thus they gained a degree of 'proxy sanctity' simply by being buried with the corpse.

In the case of the manufactured objects and the raw iron from the Brenham pallasites, brought almost halfway across the continent to their eventual home, and subsequent burial sites in the Hopewell Mounds of Ohio, the difficulties in obtaining the metal alone suggested a probable degree of significance in itself. This seemed further indicated because it would almost certainly have been better for the tribe to have recycled and reused the iron, not to have disposed of it permanently, having already carried it so far.

Some objects were perhaps small enough to be more readily expended this way. The Hopewell-age burial mounds at Havana, Illinois, USA, radiocarbon-dated to $\sim$ 336 BC $\pm$250 years, were found to have contained twenty-two heavily-oxidised iron beads in Burial 10 of Mound 9, each around 0.5–1.5 cm in diameter, with

more than a thousand similar-sized beads of shell and pearl. The iron beads had been cold-worked, the metal first beaten into thin sheets, then bent into cylinders, before being heated to ~ 650°C to anneal them. The internal dimensions of the holes through the cylinders suggested they had once all been carefully strung, and likely graded by size. Analysis further suggested the originating meteorite had been a fine octahedrite (Buchwald, 1975, Vol. 2, pp. 635–637).

Another was a small pallasite fragment weighing 128 g, found buried in a pottery bowl, whose worn, bright exterior suggested perhaps that it had been long handled, maybe carried in the pouch of a medicine-man. Its chemistry and structure identified it as being part of the nearby Glorieta Mountain meteorites. It was found in a pueblo ruin near Pojoaque in New Mexico, USA, probably dated to ~ 1200 AD, and for a while after its discovery, it was called Pojoaque as a result. The Glorieta Mountain area hosts one of world's more important iron strewnfields, around four kilometres long by one kilometre wide, and from which twenty-eight pallasitic octahedrites have been recovered, up to ~ 67 kg in weight. The total weight of all the meteorites located there was ~ 190 kg (Buchwald, 1975, Vol. 1, Table 11, p. 28 & Vol. 2, pp. 597–601). As noted when discussing the Brenham pallasites previously, the nature of pallasites makes the iron much easier to extract and reuse than that from a solid iron meteorite. In the case of Glorieta Mountain, this extraction was still easier, because the original object seemed to have fragmented in the air, the veins of iron breaking apart into 'finger'-shaped individual pieces. Buchwald (Vol. 1, Fig. 35, p. 48 & Vol. 2, Figs. 793–796, pp. 597–598) showed photographs of several of these shaped roughly like knife blades, $\sim$ 10–30 cm long, though none had been reworked at all.

A tumulus in Oktibbeha County, Mississippi, USA, contained an extraordinarily high-nickel-content probable meteorite ($\sim 60\%$ nickel, more than twice the quantity found in other nickel-rich meteorites). From the surviving 156 g piece, it was clear about half the original mass had been cut-off and removed before burial, while the remaining piece had been artificially reheated since its formation. Why only part of it had been, presumably, used before it ended in this burial is unknown (Buchwald, 1975, Vol. 3, p. 947).

The most substantial of these native-grave-buried meteorites was found in 1936, about ten kilometres south of Livingston, Montana, USA, where a medium octahedrite weighing 1.6 kg was discovered with human remains plus various objects and weapons, all entombed in a deliberately-piled cairn of rocks. There seemed to have been no other burials nearby, certainly not of comparable type, so it is not known why this cairn was there, who made it, nor why such a significant meteorite should have accompanied the burial (Buchwald, 1975, Vol. 2, pp. 776–777).

6 Discussion

In general, the quantity and distribution of the items detailed above, and previously for North America, is about what would be expected from a simple consideration of the random nature of meteorite falls. The somewhat greater concentration of items in the southwest of North America seemed to reflect a practice of deliberately burying meteorites by the people who dwelt in pueblos around the twelfth to fourteenth centuries AD there. Presumably, those meteorites were chosen because there was some particular significance about them, perhaps their size or shape, or perhaps because they had been witnessed to fall.

The lack of meteorites revered from parts of the Americas south of modern Mexico City, by contrast to places to its north, is very striking. It is not clear why this should have been so, but it may have related to differences in burial customs, the preservation of oral tales and beliefs, or simply that there has been insufficient detailed examination of sites and recording of tales in the southern half of the Americas.

Perhaps the most unusual aspect was the great predominance of meteoritic irons among the venerated objects, with scarcely any stony meteorites involved at all. Given that stones seen to fall vastly outnumber the irons so-observed (Buchwald, 1975, Vol. 1, Table 19, p. 37 suggested just $\sim 5\%$ of all witnessed meteorite falls were irons) seemed to argue strongly against any kind of importance in a perceived heavenly provenance for meteorites overall, perhaps excepting a few specific cases. Irons are far more often found without being seen to fall (ibid. gave $\sim 49\%$), largely because their survival times against earthly weathering processes are significantly longer compared to stony meteorites, plus they have much greater reuse potential, and are easier to identify as unusual compared to earthly surface rocks.

Too few cases here had tales recorded about them to indicate whether their celestial origins were generally even known, let alone if they played a role in helping select the objects for veneration and preservation. Sometimes, it was reasonably definite that the objects could not have been seen to fall, judging by their estimated arrival times. Overall, it seems likely that, as has been identified in the Project before, simple pragmatism in taking advantage of a readily-available surface source of iron, was of greater moment than where the material may once have come from.

However, there have been a number of reports of stony meteorites found on Native American campsites. Nininger (1938) mentioned having recovered four from such locations during 1936–37 alone, two each in eastern Colorado and western Kansas, USA, for example, though he approximately located only the two in Colorado as found near Karvel, Lincoln County, and Springfield, Baca County. The latest British Natural History Museum's "Catalogue of Meteorites" (Grady, 2000) listed just three objects found in similar locations, but two of those – from Apex Gulch, Jefferson County, Colorado, an L6 chondrite found in 1938, and Leslie, Hall

County, Texas, an H5 chondrite found in 1968 – were different to those Nininger had found. The third was one of Nininger's 1936 finds, from Rolla, Morton County in Kansas, another H5 chondrite. Quite what significance can be attached to such finds, whose locations in the campsites, and dating or associative evidence, was typically unrecorded, is unclear. As Nininger himself stated (ibid., p. 39), "it must be admitted that without additional evidence, these associations could be regarded as accidental."

7 Conclusion

In contrast to the examples of ancient Old World meteorite veneration, where there were many tales describing the objects and sometimes the rituals associated with them, but no surviving objects to confirm the nature of any, in the New World, there were plenty of confirmed meteoritic objects found in contexts suggestive of religious or supernatural significance, but often supported by vague or uncertain tales regarding what practices they may have been involved with. That meteorites were among the objects considered sacred in both regions has been well-confirmed, although it is less certain their heavenly origins were always known, or even necessarily thought important, in the New World.

8 Acknowledgements

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