

Philip Coppens

Feature Articles

American Metal Plates

For decades, metal sheets with writing have been recovered from various archaeological sites in South America. Until recently, all were labeled "frauds", but slowly, archaeologists are beginning to change their opinion. The ancient Americans, it seems, knew perfectly well how to work with metal... and had a complex system of writing.

Philip Coppens

Father Crespi amidst his collection



After a visit in 1981 to an eccentric Italian Catholic priest living in the Ecuadorian town of Cuenca, retired US Army Colonel Wendell Stephens became convinced that he had just met Adolph Hitler. As bizarre and outlandish as it may seem, the story that this enigmatic priest was somehow Hitler post-World War II in disguise, is one of the most commonly heard comments whenever the name of Father Crespi is mentioned: "Did you know that some people believe he was Hitler?"

The story of Father Carlos Crespi and his enigmatic museum became even more popular and controversial when the likes of the Swiss "ancient astronaut author" Erich von Däniken focused their attention on his collection of metal plates and various related artifacts. Over the years, Crespi had accumulated a vast collection of metal plates, which had been brought to him by the locals. The plates displayed various images, and strongly suggested that the real history of the region was far more interesting than the archaeologists claimed. To them, "of course", the artifacts in Crespi's possession, were all fakes.

Von Däniken wrote up his visit to Crespi in "Gold of the Gods", adding that the various pieces in the collection possessed certain common traits: "All the pyramid engravings have four things in common: a sun, but more frequently several suns, is depicted above the pyramid; snakes are always flying next to or over the pyramid; animals of various kinds are always present." Such consistency between artifacts collated over a number of years and from different sources, suggested a common origin. But where did they come from?

When Crespi questioned the people that brought him these artifacts, they told him that they had removed them from subterranean cave systems in the jungles. Crespi therefore made sure that the extra-ordinary collection remained intact, using the courtyard of the church of Maria Auxiliadora, of which he was in charge of, as his museum.

Alas, many of the artifacts were destroyed in a fire on July 20, 1962, an act of arson, possibly engineered to destroy the collection. Today, even less remains of the Crespi collection, which was placed in various locations following the priest's demise in January 1980. It is said that there are active attempts to reopen a museum that has all of the collection that still remains.

From the moment the collection became known to the world, it has commonly been labeled a fraud. It is true that Crespi was primarily a missionary, and not an archaeologist. When poor people brought him these plates or other artifacts that the local people knew he collected, he made sure they were rewarded for their efforts. He knew several local families were poor but that pride prevented them from asking for money, unless it was as payment for something. And hence, more and more metal plates found their way to the priest. Some, Crespi was sure, were fakes – and they were often the crudest executed. The most elaborate, were clearly not made by his parishioners. Amongst the latter category were vast quantities of precious metals, like gold and silver. Those artifacts were unlikely to be fakes, especially when we know that the collection was estimated to be worth at least one million dollar – far more than Crespi was able to pay, or paid, the locals.



Richard Wingate visited the collection in the late 1970s, when the 70,000 pieces took up three rooms. He described it as follows: "Rolls of intricately figured sheet metal stood haphazardly piled around the shed. The priest explained that it had been torn off the interior walls of long abandoned, vine-choked buildings in the inaccessible eastern jungle. The Indian artifact hunters bring this wallpaper in three different metals: gold, a metallurgically unique, untarnished silver, and an unknown alloy with the appearance of shiny aluminum. Every square inch of the peculiar sheet metal is decorated with intricate designs, some of them depicting long-forgotten ceremonial occasions and some of them humorous and cartoon like. The rolls come in heights that vary, for the most part, from eight to twelve feet, and they are often fifteen to thirty feet long. These lengths are composed of many individual four-foot sheets which have been artfully riveted together."

To the armchair archaeologists, the Crespi Collection was a fraud; to anyone visiting it, it provided ample evidence that at some point in the past, Ecuador

had a highly developed metallurgy. Of specific interest were the metal sheets, which contained writing – something that in the 1970s had only been observed in the Crespi Collection, but which since has been found elsewhere and has been embraced as "authentic" by the archaeological establishment. Nevertheless, the technical proficiency in metallurgy of this civilization remains one of the more controversial topics in archaeology. The sheets are therefore perhaps the best evidence that the Crespi Collection is indeed genuine, though archaeologists continue to label it a hoax.

Half a millennium ago, when the Spanish conquistadors arrived in Peru and began the conquest of the Inca Empire, they saw silver and gold everywhere. The Spanish army captured the Inca ruler Atahualpa and demanded a ransom in gold and silver, which filled a room measuring 22 by 17 by 9 feet, amounting to 6.5 tons of gold and thirteen tons of silver. The gold was worth two million pesos; the silver, 350,000.

Alas, the Spanish were only interested in its monetary, not artistic value. They therefore melted the artifacts down to ingots for easier transportation to Europe, where substantial amounts of the booty never arrived; many of the ships were sunk by pirates – laying in wait for such ships to arrive – off the Spanish coasts. But from the little that is left in museums like the Gold Museum of Lima, it is clear that the Inca were indeed masters in metallurgy.

Across South America, there is clear evidence that metal was used, in important centers like Tiahuanaco, on the shores of Lake Titicaca (Bolivia). It comes in the form of small clamps, about six inches across, which are made from copper-base alloy, with some iron. The clamps can be seen as indentations in the stones and were meant to hold these even firmer together. However, none of these clamps will be found in museums; some are in the "private collection" of the participating archaeologists who, when challenged, nevertheless are willing to produce them.

One of the experts is Professor Javier F. Escalante Moscoso. He is clear that the people of Tiahuanaco and nearby Puma Punku had metal tools and were adept at metallurgy. He wrote: "Copper was the main native metal commonly used; but, being a soft metal its use was limited at first to the manufacture of personal or domestic objects. Later, tin was introduced to obtain bronze." Some clamps unearthed at Tiahuanaca are up to six feet long, showing the level at which metallurgy was used.

Unfortunately, however, the presence of metallurgy amongst the people of Tiahuanaco is not a widely accepted fact. In 2007, metals were found in lake mud in the central Peruvian Andes and revealed the first evidence that archaeologists were willing to study and conclude as native metal technology! As a result, the research at Laguna Pirhuacocha revealed that metallurgy was known and practiced between 1000 and 1200 AD, before the rise of the Inca Empire. The evidence suggested that metallurgy seemed aimed at the production of copper and copper alloys. The findings also indicated that when the Inca came to rule, they imposed a tax on local villages, which forced them to switch from copper to silver production. But with archaeology only willing to study the subject since 2007, it is clear that they have a long way to go still!

But what about iron? It has always been accepted that iron is plentiful in the Andean mountains, so it was not a lack of resources that would have stopped the Inca from producing these metal plates. The question had always been whether the Inca had the know-how, and that has now been answered positively. Indeed, archaeologist Heather Lechtman found that Inca metallurgy was as refined as what was being produced in Europe. The only difference was in the goal for which the metal was used.



The Inca saw metallurgy and the objects it created as a token of wealth, power and community affiliation. Specifically, it is now known that objects like the metal plates in the Crespi Collection were precisely what the Inca produced: they hammered metals into thin sheets, soldering the results into a "metal plate". The same technique was also applied to other metals, like gold. Indeed, it has now been established that the Inca were so refined in this process that they were able to apply this knowledge on the smallest of scales. A delicate bust Lechtman analyzed was only an inch tall, but was made of an incredible 22 separate gold plates. Lechtman also realized that luminous gold and silver were preferred over dull iron. However, pure gold and silver were too soft to hold shape, so these were often mixed with other metals, usually copper – further evidence of how developed South American metallurgy was.

Some have saying what science is now confirming for decades. In as early as 1945, Polish engineer-archaeologist Arthur Posnansky argued that amalgamation – mixing liquid mercury with ground gold or silver ore – was used at the Inca site of Machu Picchu. At the time, his claims were attacked by the archaeological establishment, which argued that the process was only introduced by the Spanish Conquistadors. Now, Posnansky's claims about amalgamation have been confirmed by geologist William Brooks, who analyzed residual mercury levels in seven samples of pre-European-contact gold foil and found that amalgamation was indeed used throughout the Andes, centuries before it was not only brought from Europe to America, but before it was commonly used in Europe itself! Once again, the New World seems to have been "older" at things than the Old World.

Metallurgy in America in pre-Columbian times may go back thousands of years. Europe had a "Bronze Age", which began in ca. 3000 BC. Archaeologists have accepted that much more copper was used than what they have been able to attribute to European mines. So where did an extremely large part of the copper produced in Europe come from? The answer, as bizarre as it may sound, could be America. It is known that during the European Bronze Age, large quantities of copper were mined in North America. However, no-one is able to answer as to what became of the copper that was mined there. If we were to add the two problems together, do we have the solution?

Of course, the answer for the accepted scientific dogma is "no", as it argues that there were no transoceanic contacts in the Bronze Age, and hence copper could not have been traded from the New to the Old World. But perhaps there is sufficient scientific evidence available that will alter the assumptions of the scientists.

The chief ingredient for bronze is copper. The era around 3000 BC saw more than 500,000 tons of copper being mined in the so-called Upper Peninsula, in the American state of Michigan. The largest mine was on Isle Royale, an island in Lake Superior, near the Canadian border. Here, there are thousands of prehistoric copper pits, dug thousands of years ago by ancient peoples unknown. The Minong Belt on Isle Royale has a distance of one and three quarter miles in length and is nearly four hundred feet wide. The copper pits range ten to thirty feet deep with connecting tunnels; one archaeologist estimated that their digging would take the equivalent of 10,000 men working for 1000 years.



The only piece of "hard evidence" that shows transoceanic contact with Europe is a statue discovered in ca. 1660 by a missionary, Allouez, who travelled through the region and stumbled upon a 30 cm copper statue, depicting a man with a beard – the native Indians do not have beards. However, the Menomonee Indians of north Wisconsin possess a legend that speaks about the ancient mines. They described the mines as being worked by "light skinned men", who were able to identify the mines by throwing magical stones on the ground, which made the ores that contained copper ring like a bell.

This practice closely resembles a similar practice that was used in Europe during the Bronze Age. Bronze with a high concentration of tin indeed resonates when a stone is thrown against it. The legend might have confused the start of the process with the result of the process. Furthermore, S.A. Barnett, the first archaeologist who studied Aztalan, a site near the mines, believed that the miners originated from Europe. His conclusion was largely based on the type of tools that had been used, tools which were not used by the local people.

Finally, in 1922, William A. Ferguson discovered a harbor on the north coast of Isle Royale. Ships could load and unload, aided by a pier that measured 500 meters in length. This suggests that the type of ships that anchored here, were large ships – and that there were many. The most likely explanation as to the purpose of this harbor was that they formed the point where the copper was loaded... to be transported to other regions. The presence of the harbor further shows that the people working the mines were not local, as the local Indians only used small canoes.

It is therefore clear that metallurgy in pre-Columbian America goes back thousands of years. It seems to have started in 3000 BC, when North America was mined for copper by Bronze Age Europeans. From them, metallurgical knowledge entered, or flourished, in America, and seems to have begun a progression southwards. Sites such as Tiahuanaco and nearby Puma Punku showed clear evidence of metallurgy, and at the time of the Spanish Conquest in the early 16th century, the Spanish encountered numerous types of advanced metal use, including metal plates, in which they had no interest. The local civilizations were either labeled to be of the devil, or of no value, while the Spaniards were merely interested in the raw value of the gold and silver.

But it is clear that not all of the metal treasures of the Inca disappeared. In the faraway reaches of the Inca Empire, like around Cuenca (Ecuador), vast amounts were clearly secreted away. And it is indeed said that not all of the Inca treasure was surrendered to Pizarro, but that an Inca envoy began a trek north – to Ecuador – where the Treasure of Atahualpa is said to have disappeared... in what some believe became later known as the legend of the Tayos Cave...

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