**California Dreaming: The State Highway 54 Mastodon Blues**

**By Drutakarma das**

Some time ago, in the news there were many reports about mastodon bones found in San Diego, California. Their age challenges current scientific ideas about the peopling of the Americas. I wrote about these discoveries in 2005 in one of my columns for Atlantis Rising magazine (the column’s name is The Forbidden Archeologist). Here is that column:

California Dreaming: The State Highway 54 Mastodon Blues

By Michael A. Cremo

Atlantis Rising

In 1992 and 1993, paleontologists of the San Diego Natural History Museum were monitoring the construction on State Highway 54 in San Diego County. In the road excavations they found some interesting fossils that raise the possibility that humans have existed in North America for far longer than most archeologists now think possible.

According to the current consensus, humans entered North America no earlier than 20,000 years ago, maximum. A recent genetic study puts the date of entry at about 12,000 years. But the report by the San Diego paleontologists suggests that humans were present much further back in time than that.

The lead author of the July 28, 1995 final report, prepared for California’s department of transportation (Caltrans, District 11), was paleontologist Thomas A. Deméré. On May 31, 1990, I met Deméré at the San Diego Natural History Museum. I was doing research for my book Forbidden Archeology, which was published in 1993. In that book there is a section about incised animal bones, such as whale bones. There can be questions as to whether cut marks on such bones were made by human hunters or by sharks. So my coauthor Richard Thompson and I visited Deméré, who showed us collections of whale bones with marks of shark teeth on them. Richard and I concluded that it was possible to distinguish marks from shark teeth from marks made by stone tools on bone. And thus we included in Forbidden Archeology some reports of whale bones bearing marks of flint tools. Originally reported by Italian geologist G. Capellini in the late nineteenth century, the whale bones date back to the late Pliocene (2-3 million years).

While in the San Diego museum, I asked Deméré if he had heard of some discoveries made by George Miller in the Anza-Borrego Desert east of San Diego. In 1988, Miller had reported finding some mammoth bones with cut marks made by stone tools. The United States Geological Survey used the uranium isotope method to date the bones and obtained an age of about 300,000 years, according to a report published in the San Diego Union (October 31, 1988). Deméré told me he did know about the finds but cautioned me that a report like that would never make it through peer review into any scientific journal. That is how the knowledge filtration process works in science.

It is interesting that a few years later Deméré himself was involved in a similar discovery of ancient elephant bones. In the State Route 54 excavations Deméré and his paleontologist colleagues found parts of a mammoth skeleton. The bones they found, according to the report, were “right and left tusks, two molars, three vertebrae, 10 ribs, portions of both femurs, at least two phalanges, and numerous large and small bone fragments.” The bones were scattered. Some of them were arranged in a way that suggests deliberate human action. For example, the report said, “Of special note was the discovery of both isolated femur heads side-by-side.” One of the tusks was found buried perpendicular to the bedding planes, extending from Bed E down in Bed D, as if someone had deliberately pushed it into the ground. Some of the bones also showed signs of having been deliberately broken. The report said, “a large, sharply fractured piece of long bone was found with a distinct impact scar on its internal surface.” Some of the rocks found along with the bones appeared to have been brought to the site and broken for use there. The scientists were able to gather broken pieces of rock from among the bones and put them back together. The report said, “Pieces of a single granitic boulder were found scattered over an area of approximately 16 square meters.” This small boulder and others like it were found in fine-grained silty sandstones, indicating that they did not belong there naturally, and were probably transported there.

Although this discovery has lots of features characteristic of human action, the authors of the report were quite cautious in their statements. They admitted that the mammoth bones showed “no convincing evidence of carnivore activity or trampling.” Is it possible the bones were broken by natural processes in the earth, long after their deposition? The authors noted, “The spiral fracturing and angular transverse breaks noted on some specimens does suggest green bone breakage.” In other words, the bones were broken when the animal was alive, or shortly after its death. Could boulders have fallen on the dead animal? The report said that at the site there was “no evidence for boulder fall.” The authors added, “The mastodon skeleton was recovered from an overbank silty fine sandstone that was deposited away from any topographic high such as a stream cut bank or cliff.” Could the bones have been broken by action of swift water? The report noted that the bones show no signs of abrasion, as would be the case if they had been transported in a rapidly flowing stream. In the end, they decided that breakage by torsion (twisting of the limbs or falling) was possible. But this seems unlikely, given that that the bones were found away from cliffs or other places that could have resulted in such a fall. The authors conceded that “this type of breakage can also be produced by human activity.” And to me, given all the evidence, this seems the most likely explanation.

A sample of ivory from the mastodon site was dated using the uranium series method at the geochemistry lab of the department of geological sciences of the University of Southern California. The age obtained was 335,000 years. So it appears that we have evidence for some kind of mastodon hunters in southern California over 335,000 years ago. Richard Ku, the geologist who reported the dates to Deméré, said in a letter to him (January 7, 1994) that “one cannot completely rule out the possibility that the sample could be older than 375ka [375,000 years].” Ku said that the safest thing to say is just that the ivory sample is more than 300,000 years old. How much older is anyone’s guess.

So who were these mastodon hunters? According to current views, anatomically modern humans, humans like you and me, go back one or two hundred thousand years at most. Before that there were no humans like us. So perhaps the San Diego mastodon hunters were representatives of Homo erectus. Even that would be quite revolutionary, because according to current ideas that apeman never came to the New World. But if we go beyond the evidence mentioned in the current textbooks, we see that there have been archeological discoveries indicating the presence of anatomically modern humans in the New World that go back two or three hundred thousand years or more.

I have already mentioned the butchered mammoth bones found by George Miller in the Anza Borrego Desert not so far from San Diego. These bones, liked the State Highway 54 mastodon, yielded an age of 300,000 years. Furthermore, in the 1970s American archeologists working at Hueyatlaco, near Puebla in Mexico, found artifacts of the type that archeologists routinely attribute only to anatomically modern humans. The archeologists called in a team of geologists to date the site. Mammal bones with butchering marks were found in the same layers as the stone tools. The bones were dated using the uranium series method. According to a report published in Quaternary Research (1981, vol. 16, pp. 1-17), the age of the butchered bones was 245,000 years. (Actually, it was Virginia Steen-McIntyre, one of the geologists involved in dating the Hueyatlaco site who sent me the copy of the report on the State Highway 54 discoveries.) In the early twentieth century, the Argentine paleontologist Florentino Ameghino reported the discovery of an anatomically modern human skull in an excavation at Buenos Aires (Forbidden Archeology, pp. 413-418). It came from a formation that modern geologists say is about one million years old. And if you really want to back far in time, there are the California gold mine discoveries reported by J. D. Whitney, chief government geologist of Calfironia, in the year 1880, in a book published by Harvard University’s Museum of Comparative Zoology (The Auriferous Gravels of the Sierra Nevada of California). Those human bones and artifacts go back to the Eocene, the geological period that extends from 38 to 55 million years ago.

The State Highway 54 discoveries are not very well known because they can only be found in an obscure report in the files of the California department of transportation. Because state and federal laws now mandate that there must be archeological and paleontological reports in connection with road construction and other construction projects, there are thousands of such reports, and who knows what’s in them. Somehow, because of some inside connections, I got wind of this particular report, which gives evidence that humans were in California over 300,000 years ago. I wondered what they called California back then.