

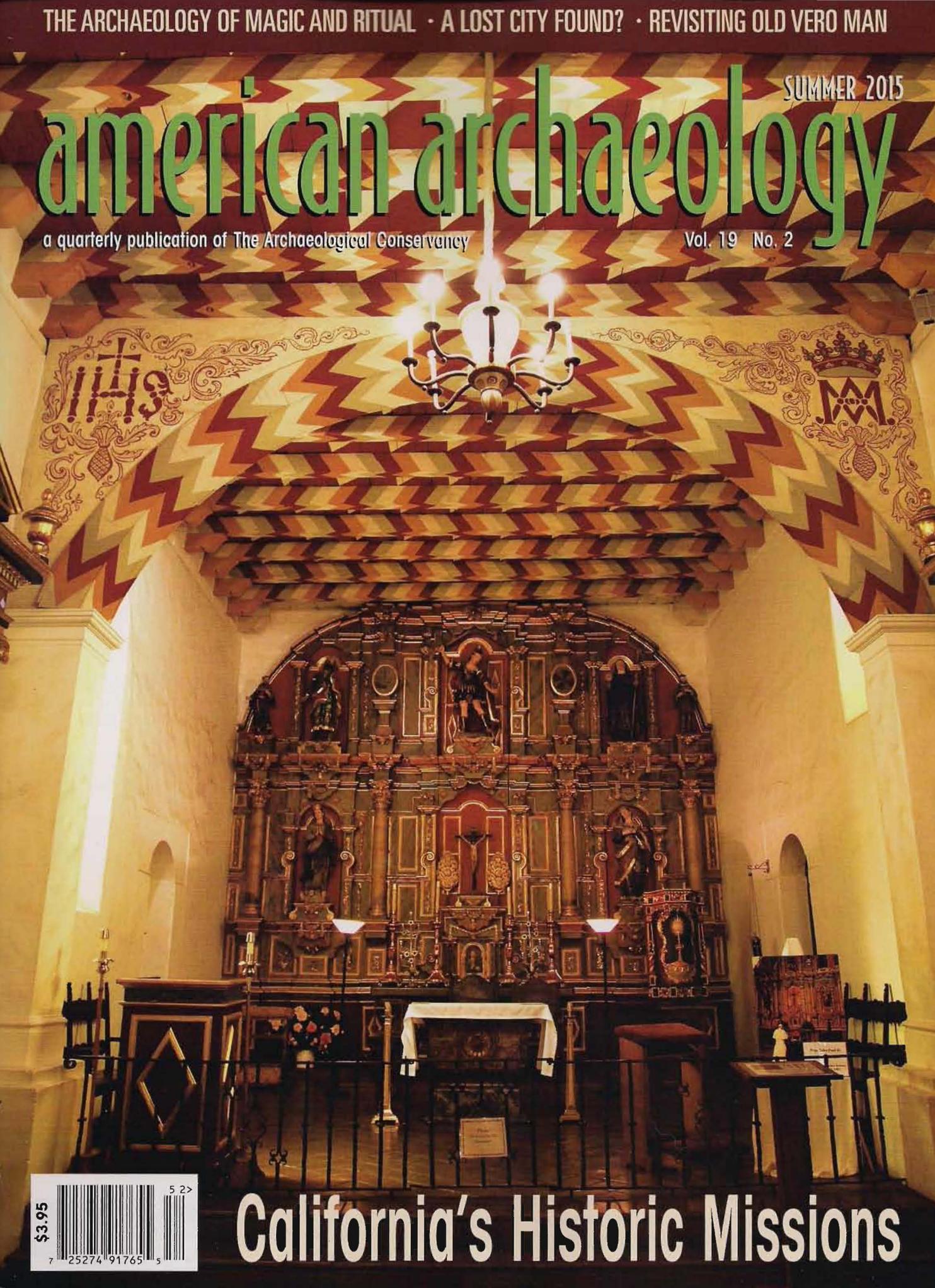
THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF MAGIC AND RITUAL · A LOST CITY FOUND? · REVISITING OLD VERO MAN

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California's Historic Missions

UNEARTHING MAGIC



This tiny clay skull was uncovered at the Demory site in northern Virginia. The skull dates to circa 1830-1860 and is less than an inch in height.

BY JULIAN SMITH

WHEN EUROPEAN AND AFRICAN IMMIGRANTS CAME TO AMERICA THEY BROUGHT WITH THEM SPIRITUAL PRACTICES THAT IN SOME CASES SUGGESTED MAGIC. IN THE LAST FEW DECADES A NUMBER OF ARCHAEOLOGISTS HAVE FOUND EVIDENCE OF THESE PRACTICES.

In the late 17th century, Annapolis enjoyed a thriving economy as the capital of the Maryland colony. An average of at least 300 enslaved Africans were brought in every year between 1695 and 1708, many from the west coast of Africa. By the middle of the 18th century, slaves made up a third of the city's population, and the number of free African Americans was growing as well.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, archaeologists discovered

a bundle of objects buried under the floor of a house in Annapolis once owned by Charles Carroll, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. The objects were in the northeast corner of a room that at one point had been occupied by slaves. About a foot and a half beneath the floor, roughly two dozen items were found in an area approximately six inches in diameter. The assemblage included shell discs, straight pins, buttons, two pierced coins, a tiny faceted glass bead, a smooth black stone, and

14 large rock crystals. The collection was covered with an overturned pearlware bowl with a blue sunburst painted on it. Two more crystals were found in a nearby room, the largest of which was six-inches long and weighed about four pounds. All the objects were dated around the beginning of the 19th century.

At first people thought it was a garbage deposit or rat's nest, says archaeologist Mark Leone of the University of Maryland. But the assemblage reminded him of similar groups of items he had excavated at Native American sites in the Southwest. He consulted with scholars of African American history, who pointed him to historic descriptions of charms from West Central Africa called *minkisi*. These bundles of carefully chosen items were used to invoke the supernatural for healing and protection. It appeared that the bundle as a whole was a spiritual artifact, rooted in African traditions but transformed as a result of the journey across the Atlantic.

Since the 1990s, archaeologists have recognized many such signs of private ritual in the New World. Even as Christianity emerged as the nominal religion of the American colonies, both European and African immigrants continued to practice non-traditional forms of spirituality throughout the colonial period. Sometimes called "magic," these practices illustrate the complex interactions between races, and show how widely different cosmologies combined to create

a spectrum of uniquely American folk beliefs.

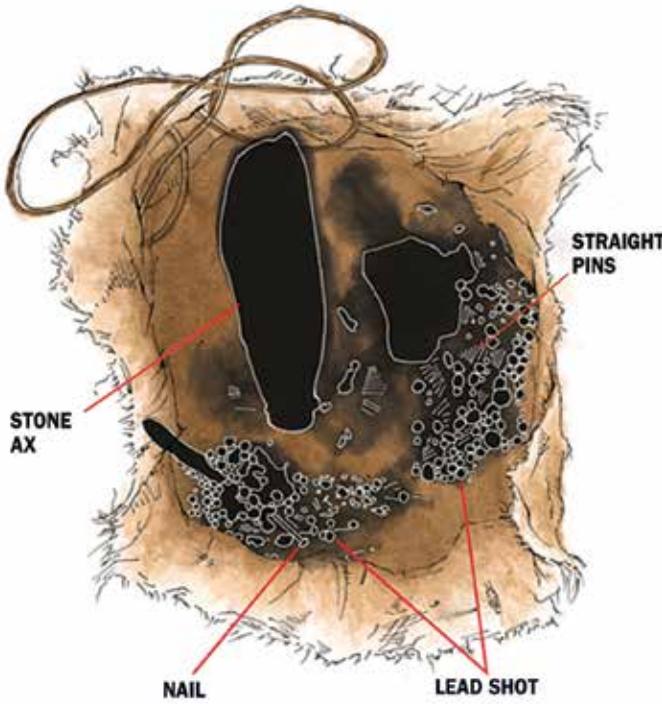
Researchers subsequently identified other bundles all around Annapolis. Almost all were placed under doorsteps or hearths, or, for unknown reasons, in the northeast corners of rooms. But there were exceptions: in 2008 a bundle was found in what was once a gutter along Fleet Street near the state capitol building. Impressions on its surface showed that the compact lump of hard clay was once held together by cloth or leather. X-rays revealed it contained a carefully organized assemblage of over 300 pieces of lead shot on the bottom, overlaid with dozens of nails and about two dozen straight pins, some bent at 90-degree angles. A stone ax protruded from the top.

Dating to the 1740s, this was the oldest bundle found in the city, Leone says. It was originally placed in the open, as opposed to the secretive burials of other bundles, suggesting that African religions were more tolerated in that time period. The bundles were thought to possess a power of their own, allowing practitioners to control powerful spirits who intervened in daily life. "It's an active management of the spirit world, not passive invocation," Leone says.

The arrangement of a set of deposits unearthed in 1998 in what is known as the Brice House revealed a significant spiritual pattern. The objects were found under the brick floor of two rooms, a kitchen and laundry, in the east wing. Each room had a hearth on the wall opposite the central



Objects from the Carroll House cache included shell discs, straight pins, buttons, two pierced coins, a tiny faceted glass bead, a smooth black stone, and large rock crystals. The collection was covered with an overturned pearlware bowl.



This illustration shows the nails, lead shot, straight pins, and stone ax that X-rays revealed in the Fleet Street bundle.

wall that divided them. Two caches, one associated with each hearth, contained hundreds of objects, including doll parts and a bundle of feathers. A pierced coin was discovered in the corner of one room near the central wall. All were dated to the end of the 19th century, after slaves were emancipated.

The two caches and the coin form three of the four ends of a cross that is oriented north and south by the hearths, and east by the pierced coin. It's assumed that the deposits marking the west end of the cross were destroyed when a staircase in that part of the house was removed. Near the doorway between the rooms was a series of caches that contained shells, matchsticks, a button from a Civil War uniform, a perfume bottle, glass buttons and beads, and coins dating to 1870-1900.

The pattern resembled a cosmogram or *dikenga*, one of the most important symbols in the Bakongo religious tradition of West Central Africa, according to Leone. Often surrounded by a circle, the pattern symbolizes the universe and the intersecting worlds of the living and the dead. The woman who lived in this part of the house and worked for the owners of the house spent 30 or 40 years systematically building a cosmogram below the floors of the rooms, he says. It may have been meant to turn the rooms into a safe space for African Americans, who faced Jim Crow segregation and other forms of intense racism in former slaveholding areas even after emancipation. The entire collection may have included 500 to a thousand items, of which half to two-thirds were excavated. In all, it was probably the most complex set of African American objects excavated in the city.

Signs of African and African American spirituality like **american archaeology**

cosmograms and bundles went unnoticed by archaeologists for decades, Leone says. "Once you understand that Africa and its religions didn't disappear, but were reshaped in North America, you can find the archaeological expressions everywhere you find African Americans," he says. "Annapolis becomes an African city as much as it is a patriotic European city."

Researchers long dismissed remnants of African culture and spirituality, often for racial reasons. The word "magic" itself has too many negative connotations, especially when it follows the word "black." But in fact "it's a culture of beliefs of how the world works," says Leone. "It's usually positive, involved in protecting people or enticing them into loving relationships." Over time these practices have persisted and changed, and still exist today in the form of voodoo and hoodoo.

In 1997, during excavations at a farmstead in Loudoun County in northern Virginia, Chris Fennell of the University of Illinois found a small clay sculpture of a human skull under the floor of a small cabin. Roughly the size of a thumbnail, it was buried six inches below the floorboards between two doorways. The object was inscribed with four letters—M, D, R, and S—separated by two crossed lines forming an X. Associated artifacts suggested the sculpture dated to the early 19th century.

"That little item opened up a world of research," says Fennell. Like other properties in the region, the farmstead was owned by several generations of German-Americans between the mid-18th and mid-19th centuries. Documentary evidence showed that one of those owners, the Demory family, had two male slaves. This raised the question of whether one of them may have had experience in invoking spiritual powers. The letters MD matched the initials of one of the Demorys, and identifying the subject of a curse by name corresponded with African American spiritual traditions.

On the other hand, many European cultures brought



Punched or drilled silver coins are common at African-American slave sites. This coin was found in a historic component of the Burning Spring Branch site in western West Virginia.

non-Christian folk beliefs with them to the New World, Fennell says. German-American traditions included practices known as *hexerei*, or powwowing, used for things like curing fevers, warding off witches, or keeping cows' milk from going sour. Frowned on by mainstream church leaders, these practices would have been kept private. The inscriptions on the skull, and its location in a spot where it was guaranteed to be walked across frequently, strongly suggest it was placed there as part of a malicious curse. (Walking over a charmed object was generally thought to activate its power.)

But who placed it there? The R and S didn't fit the names of any known owners or area residents, but they did recall a 25-letter Latin palindrome found in Roman ruins called the Rotas Sator. Palindromes, words and sentences that read the same forwards and backwards, have long been viewed as magical, and were thought to confuse the devil. The Rotas Sator palindrome was known to have appeared in "charm books," otherwise written in German, that were in circulation in the region in the early 19th century.

Based on the evidence, Fennell thinks the curse was probably left by another German-American family who built the cabin, but was evicted when the Demorys took ownership of the land in 1806. "It looks like someone left behind a curse with the initials of the new family," he says. But that doesn't mean that the folk beliefs of European and African American cultures don't often overlap. Spiritual items could have been meaningful to both, perhaps even used in similar ways. "You have to look at all possibilities of a site," he says.

Archaeologists have often assumed that "exotic" artifacts found in certain places and timeframes were African American, he says. Only in the past decade have they started to accept that European Americans had similar folk belief systems and used similar objects. Cultures mixed and borrowed

from each other, but they may have also developed parallel beliefs independently.

One example can be seen in the personal amulets some slaves made for protection from harm, such as pierced coins. Pierced coins were a common enough charm item that they appeared in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, where Mark Twain wrote how "Jim always kept that five-center piece around his neck with a string and said it was a charm the devil give him with his own hands and told him he could cure anybody with it and fetch witches whenever he wanted to."

Since overseers considered any expression of African cultural identity as a threat, and perhaps a first step toward coordination, or even rebellion, they likely would have objected to the open display of such objects—but only if they recognized them for what they were. While some archaeologists would say that European-Americans' narrow view of religious beliefs meant that slaves would have been free to display the charms, Fennell argues the opposite: "People across two cultures could at least both recognize they were for spiritual use." As a result, slaves likely had to keep the charms hidden under their shirts.

In both cultures, "what we call magic and superstition is the private exercise of religion that got pushed under by a dominant religion," he says. Continuing practice of the folk religion "was done in a very circumspect way, at home." Folk religions tend to use intermediary spirits to make personal requests, as opposed to groups that come together in a church to address a higher power directly.

Artifacts found in New York City show how European immigrants may have mixed ancient folk beliefs with practical methods, at least in matters of health, says Meredith Linn of Barnard College. Like the Africans and Germans before them, Irish immigrants in the 19th century also brought their own cultural practices to America. Among those practices were a variety of strategies that employed household items for medicinal purposes. Many of these immigrants left Ireland because of the potato famine of 1845-1852, and as a result they were both poor, and in poor health. Due to prevailing prejudices, they often had to live in neighborhoods with minimal sanitation and housing, and could only find the most menial or dangerous jobs. "There was a great need for healing," Linn says.

Some cures came from people whose credentials as healers were merely accidents of birth. Children born after their fathers' deaths were thought to be able to cure thrush, an oral fungal infection, by breathing into the patient's mouth. Certain families were believed to have special powers:



This German charm book includes a common variation of the Rotas Sator palindrome.



**This bottle of Hyatt's
Infallible Life Balsam
was recovered from a site
in Jersey City, New Jersey.**

Cahills had a charm to stop bleeding, and blood from a Walsh or a Keogh was thought to cure the bacterial skin infection erysipelas.

Trained specialists such as herbalists, bonesetters, and midwives also provided cures, some of which combined natural remedies with religious and magical healing properties. Rope used in a hanging was considered a magical cure for scrofula, a bacterial infection of the lymph nodes that often affected children. Iron had the power to protect from supernatural creatures like fairies, so parents would sew iron nails into the hems of children's clothing, and place iron objects near cradles. Red cloths or strings could help treat coughs, earaches, or sprains. Fragments of iron, cloth, and plants traditionally used for healing were found in mid-19th-century Irish contexts at the Five Points in Lower Manhattan and in the Dublin neighborhood of Paterson, New Jersey, two major Irish sites.

Green bottles of Hyatt's Infallible Life Balsam, a patent medicine made from the aromatic resin of balsam trees, were also found at both sites. Linn suggests that this product appealed to Irish immigrants because it resembled traditional Irish plant-based cures and because its material properties signaled supernatural potency. For Irish immigrants, Hyatt's distinctive odor evoked the powers of the Church, where balsam-based incense was burned for spiritual purification. Its color conjured the powers of nature traditionally linked with green: growth, fertility, and healing. In the New World, balsam-based patent medicines were advertised to cure tuberculosis and scrofula, both of which were widespread in Irish immigrant communities and stumped physicians.

"It's hard to separate what's natural in a treatment from what is a supernatural element, and what is magical from what is religious," says Linn. For example, Irish folklore records indicate herbalists prescribed dandelion for edema of the legs. Some believed the flowers cured because they were one of the plants that Mary Magdalene gathered to treat Jesus's body before the Resurrection, while others noted their helpful diuretic effect, conveniently indicated by their yellow color. Either way, Linn says, "the patient had more

confidence in the cure because of the lore surrounding it."

The Irish had a worldview distinct from Americans, according to Linn, which could reinforce anti-Irish stereotypes and attitudes. Many came from rural areas and brought a syncretic way of looking at the world, combining Christianity with ancient Celtic beliefs. (Many also spoke only Gaelic.) This influenced how they approached healing: reciprocity was important, both with the natural and supernatural worlds, as well as the community. Sharing knowledge was emphasized, while boasting of one's skill or accepting money for treatment could nullify a healer's abilities. Curing was considered a dangerous profession in which careless practitioners could transfer illness onto themselves.

"It is a complicated topic and the evidence is hard—and sometimes impossible—to see in the archaeological record," Linn says. Historical records of Irish magical healing in New York City, especially from immigrants' own perspectives, are rare. "It's about expanding what we often take for granted to be indisputable and obvious uses of objects."

Chris Manning of Dovetail Cultural Resource Group in Fredericksburg, Virginia, says the key to finding these artifacts, whether European or African, is to teach archaeologists to identify larger patterns: what to look for and where to look, such as under hearths and foundations and inside walls. (A cat was recently found deliberately entombed in a chimney foundation in the John Carlyle House in Alexandria, Virginia, and more than 250 deposits of old shoes and boots have been found concealed within the walls and chimneys of buildings throughout the United States.) "Research can be tricky, because it can be hard to prove that an artifact was used for magic or ritual instead of a more prosaic function," Manning says.

In any case, Linn says it's important to try. From athletes who stop shaving during playoffs to anyone who walks around a ladder or picks up a penny for luck, "magic was, and still is, a critical part of many people's lives."

JULIAN SMITH is the author of *Smokejumper: A Memoir by One of America's Most Select Airborne Firefighters*. His article "Is It Really Pre-Clovis?" appeared in the Fall 2014 issue of *American Archaeology*.