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For Fame or Fortune: Forgery of Archaeological and Palaeontological Artefacts

ABSTRACT

Stimuli to forgery have been manifold throughout history. This paper offers insight into two of such stimuli that prove primary significance: money and ego. It uses a series of case studies from the fields of archaeology and paleontology – namely, two religious relics, the Shroud of Turin and the James Ossuary, and two osteological remains, the Piltdown Man Skull and the Archaeoraptor Fossil – to expose the motivation and intention driving the mischievous acts in a comparative historical perspective. The paper also looks at the reception of these “discoveries” by the contemporary and later audiences, and how such a reception changed over time.

KEYWORDS. Archaeological forgery, paleontological forgery, James Ossuary, Shroud of Turin, Piltdown Man Skull, Archaeoraptor Fossil.

I. INTRODUCTION

Forgeries of objects of cultural or scientific interest tend to be examined one case study at a time, and extensive studies that seek to extrapolate theoretical superstructures based on analysis of numerous cases are few¹. But juxtaposing selected case studies can shed light on trends in forgery, particularly motivations, methodologies, and even criminal profiles, all of which were the focus of Noah Charney's recent book, *The Art of Forgery*.

This paper looks at a selection of famous forgeries of archaeological objects – the James Ossuary, the Shroud of Turin, the Piltdown Man Skull, and the Archaeoraptor Fossil – to consider how these artefacts were falsified for personal benefit, whether in terms of fame or finance. The Shroud of Turin was identified as a forgery as early as 1389, and yet its value in terms of income from pilgrims was so high that it continued to be displayed and venerated. The James Ossuary was forged for profit and notoriety; the Piltdown Man Skull was one of many alleged forgeries realised by a man who sought renown by finding the “missing link” between ape and Homo Erectus that could validate the Darwinian theory of evolution. The same motivation drove the scientists who tried to pass off the Archaeoraptor Fossil as the “missing link” between dinosaurs and birds.

These four case studies each purported to provide, in tangible form, a “missing link” to a theory or religious belief. When a tangible object fulfils the prophecy of a belief, it validates all those who maintained that belief without physical evidence proving it. For this reason, it is a clever thing for forgers to create. There is no need to convince people who already fervently wish to discover such an object: they are eager to find it because finding it provides tangible proof that their beliefs are valid.

II. FAKE RELICS: THE JAMES OSSUARY AND THE SHROUD OF TURIN

The Middle Ages saw a lively trade in fake religious relics. There are so many pieces of the so-called *True Cross* that one could build a small village. The rationale was simple: at the time, there was no way of knowing whether or not the bone or cloth shards in question belonged to the saint with whom their affiliation was claimed. This was accompanied by great thirst for religious relics among believers, the faith of whom a tangible artefact empowered. If there remained any doubt, pointing to a relic could be taken as proof.

The scale of the trade in relics, fake and ostensibly authentic, rose dramatically with the Crusades. Particularly the Fourth Crusade, in 1204, saw the redistribution of religious relics from the sacked Christian city of Constantinople, with major objects including the Shroud of Turin and the Holy Lance, looted by Christian knights and brought back home with them to Western Europe. Because of this redistribution of relics from the East, it was no leap of the imagination for pious Europeans of all backgrounds, incomes, and educational levels to believe that an errant knight or foot soldier had acquired this or that relic while on Crusade and that these objects were not genuine.

Among the famous Catholic relics, there are but a few more renowned than the Shroud of Turin. A linen cloth thought to have been used to wrap the body of Christ for his burial, the Shroud is still a major tourist attraction, both secular and religious.

And yet, as early as the fourteenth century, Pierre d'Arcis, Bishop of Troyes, wrote to the pope demanding that the Vatican declared the Shroud a fake. In the twentieth century, the Shroud underwent scientific analysis (Oxley 2010), a hugely rare event for a religious relic, and the bishop's suspicions were confirmed. It appeared to have been created – painted – circa 1300 to look like an ancient relic. But the discovery has not stopped tourists, pilgrims, and conspiracy theory novelists from stoking the flames of intrigue surrounding one of the most famous objects in the world.

The cult of miraculous clothes had begun in the thirteenth century, that is about a hundred years before the bishop's suspicions were raised, with the legend of the “Veronica Veil”: a *sudarium* (literally a “cloth for sweat”) that Veronica was said to have offered Christ on his way to Mount Calvary. The story, which does not appear in the *Bible*, goes that Christ wiped his sweaty, blood-stained brow with the cloth and handed it back to Veronica; but the cloth, or veil, miraculously retained the image of Christ's face upon it. The cloth became one of the most important relics held by the Vatican, where it is still stored and worshipped, although the public is not allowed to see it.

The “Veronica Veil” story was largely spread by the hugely popular collection of the saints' biographies called *The Golden Legend*, published in 1260 by the Archbishop of Genoa, Jacobus da Voragine (1230-1298): the book was actually the best-seller of Medieval Europe, after the *Bible* itself. The “Veronica Veil” episode, as related in *The Golden Legend*, became part of the *apocrypha*: stories that are not in the *Bible*, but have been so repeatedly associated with the life of Christ that most people assume they come in fact from the *Bible*. Jacobus himself ends his “Veronica Veil” story with a *caveat*: “And hitherto is this story called *apocryphum* read. They that have read this, let them say and believe as it shall please them”.

The Shroud of Turin draws from the tradition, largely boosted by the popularity of the “Veronica Veil”, of an *acheiropoieton*: a spontaneously-generated image, not made by human hand. In particular, the Shroud is associated with the idea of a *mandylion*, a version of the “Veronica Veil” story in which an ill king was sent the veil, or *mandylion*, by Veronica and was miraculously healed (Kemp 2011).

The Shroud is a linen sheet of the kind used to wrap a body as it was prepared for burial. This sheet bears the impression of a bearded man, arms folded across his groin. Most importantly, one can clearly see wounds in his wrists, as if he had been crucified. However, it is far easier to see the shape of a man's body on a photographic image of the Shroud than in person, since the details are difficult to make out to the naked eye.

We encounter the first record of the Shroud in Lirey, France, during the 1350s, when the Lord of Savoy established a church dedicated to its veneration. It was said to have been brought to France from the Holy Land by a French knight, Geoffrey de Charny, who died at the Battle of Poitiers in 1356.

Pierre d'Arcis, Bishop of Troyes, wrote to Pope Urban VI in Avignon in 1389, requesting that the Shroud be declared a *false* relic. The bishop's explanation – Martin Kemp writes in *Christ to Coke* – was that his predecessor as Bishop of Troyes, Henri de Poitiers, “eventually, after diligent inquiry and examination” had concluded that “said cloth had been cunningly painted, the truth being attested by the artist who had painted it, to wit, that it was a work of human skill and not miraculously wrought or bestowed” (Kemp 2011).

The bishop's word was insufficient to quell the enthusiasm of the worshipping masses to get in touch with holy relics. The fact that there was an active trade in fake relics throughout the Middle Ages did not stop the worshippers' desire to see tangible “proof” to support their beliefs. The Shroud remained part of the House of Savoy's heritage and lasted as a tourist attraction until the sixteenth century when it was even moved to Turin in 1578 so that pilgrims could see it more easily. In 1958, the Vatican officially approved of the Shroud as a legitimate means of Catholic devotion.

Art historian Martin Kemp, who authenticated Leonardo's *La Bella Principessa*, offers an analysis that does not support its authenticity. Kemp notes that the linen, had it been placed on a corpse, would have sunken around the body, moulding to it. When the linen was stretched flat afterwards, impressions of the flanks of the body, the top of the head, the soles of the feet, would have likely been seen, not just the front of the body – as on the Shroud. Further, the limbs of the corpse are stick-like, and even the fingers look more like Gothic painted anatomy rather than any real body. Kemp declares that, if asked to estimate the date of the Shroud as an *artwork*, he would suggest the late thirteenth / early fourteenth century².

The art-historical analysis matches the scientific studies. In 1988 the authorities in Turin did something extraordinary – they allowed the Shroud to undergo scientific testing from three different international laboratories. Carbon-dating from scientific labs placed the Shroud circa 1300. The University of Oxford, University of Arizona, and the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology all agreed that the Shroud dated from 1260-1390 AD with an excellent 95% confidence in this date range. It appears that the Shroud was fabricated around 1300 to look like an ancient relic. A separate study in 1999 by renowned forensic scientist Walter McCrone suggested that the image of the body on the Shroud was made of microscopic pigment particles, and therefore that the image had been painted with hematite, an iron oxide otherwise known as “blood ore”.

The debate rages, as it occurs when objects of devotion clash with scientific studies, and imagination and romanticism duel with empirical evidence. The forger surely succeeded beyond his wildest expectations in creating an object of devotion for millions of people which lasted over hundreds of years. Belief in relics such as the Shroud is a choice that anyone is free to make, although too often we forget that the Church does not allow the worship of idols: any image or relic is meant as a devotional aide through which one is brought closer to God – the object itself must not be worshipped.

Forgery of religious relics continues to this day. Israeli archaeologist, Oded Golan, claimed to have purchased an ossuary, a limestone box from the first century AD said to contain bones, from an antique shop in Jerusalem in 1976 (Rose 2003). In 2002, he applied for a permit to ship the ossuary abroad for exhibition in Toronto. He also showed it to Andre Lemaire, a scholar

at the Sorbonne in Paris. Lemaire noted an inscription that Golan claimed not to have seen. It was written outside the ossuary in Aramaic: *Ya'akov bar Yosef akhui di Yeshua*: “James, the son of Joseph, brother of Jesus”. It suddenly occurred to both Lemaire and Golan that this might be the ossuary containing the bones of James, believed to be the brother of Jesus Christ.

Lemaire published an article in “Biblical Archaeology Review” stating that there was a very high probability that this was indeed an authentic inscription (Lemaire 2002). But Golan had not mentioned the inscription in his application for a permit to export the work – if it were indeed an important religious relic, then Israel would be less inclined to allow it to be sent abroad. The permit was accepted, and the ossuary shipped to Toronto for the exhibit.

Though Golan claims to have paid only \$200 for the ossuary, he insured it at \$1 million for transport. The Toronto museum to which it was shipped, the Royal Ontario Museum, estimated that it was worth \$2 million because of its cultural significance. Suspecting that something was amiss, the Israeli Archaeological Association (IAA) began an investigation.

In March 2003, Israeli authorities arrested Golan on suspicion of forgery and dealing in fake antiquities. A board of IAA experts determined that, while the ossuary itself was an authentic artefact, the inscription had been added to it in the modern era. Thus, it was a fake, not a forgery. As defined in *The Art of Forgery* (Charney 2015), a forgery is an object created wholesale in fraudulent imitation of something else, whereas a fake is a pre-existing object altered in some way to make it appear more valuable.

After the natural aging process that occurred to the limestone box, the result of centuries buried in a damp cave, someone had added the inscription to the back side of the box, covering the freshly-cut lettering with a homemade “patina of age, based on a mixture of water and ground chalk. A five-man team of forgers, led by Golan, were found to have counterfeited a number of biblical artefacts by adding inscriptions to authentic objects. A search of a storage facility rented by Golan unearthed forged ancient seals and a series of inscriptions in various stages of production, as well as engraving tools and soil from excavation sites that would have been rubbed into the inscriptions, to give the illusion of age and long burial⁹. Golan and his team were carrying on a centuries-old tradition. Money might have been their ultimate goal, but it was never clear if they planned to sell the ossuary – possessing what seems to be a famous relic shot them into the headlines and brought them power, ephemeral though it proved to be.



SCIENTIFIC FORGERIES: THE PILTDOWN MAN AND THE ARCHAEO RAPTOR FOSSIL

The same motivations that prompted artists to turn into forgers have also led scientists to “discover” more than the natural evidence presented. While our focus is on the art world, the parallel motivations of fame and having-gotten-away with fooling a community of so-called experts may be found in the world of science as well.

In 1912, scientists learned of an unusual skull and jawbone said to have been excavated at a gravel pit in the town of Piltdown in East Sussex, England. The bone fragments were purchased by collector Charles Dawson and given the Latin binomial nomenclature *Eoanthropus dawsoni*,

named after him. It seemed, for several decades, that these bone fragments came from a previously unknown early human, a link between apes and Homo Erectus that confirmed the theory of evolution.

It was not until 1953 that this discovery was found to have been a forgery: the lower jawbone of an orangutan had been coupled with a modern human skull.

Hybridizations of natural remains were nothing new in 1912. During the Renaissance and Enlightenment, collectors of natural curiosities gathered together authentic wonders (Rudolf II of Prague kept a giant octopus in a glass tank and had a gaggle of penguins running around his castle), alongside manufactured supernatural creatures. Narwhale tusks were sold as unicorn horns, and whale bones were thought to be from dragons (Evans 1997; Marshall 2006).

It is not always clear when an over-enthusiastic naturalist was guilty of nothing more than wishful thinking or when a crime was committed. Pre-modern scientists stumbling upon dinosaur bones might reasonably think that they had discovered the skeleton of a dragon – after all, what is a dinosaur, if not an embodiment of our concept of a dragon? Hanging behind the altar of the church of San Donato, on the Venetian island of Murano, are a pair of colossal bones that are called “the Dragon Bones of San Donato”⁴, the saint supposedly, and oddly, having slain a dragon by spitting on it. While the bones have not been scientifically tested, they almost certainly came either from a whale or a prehistoric skeleton. No one was wilfully practicing deceit when the bones were ceremonially arrayed in the church.

Scientific forgeries run along similar lines, although in the case of the Piltdown Man, the fraud was an active one. It was also one of the most enduring scientific frauds, in that it lasted for over forty years, resonating with the much-discussed theory of human evolution.

The discovery began with Charles Dawson’s announcement of his acquisition of bone fragments at a meeting of the Geological Society of London on 18 December 1912. A workman at the site had found the skull and had, at first, believed it to be a fossilized coconut. Dawson found further fragments at the site and took them to the geology department of the British Museum. The curator there, Arthur Smith Woodward, studied the fragments for several months alongside Dawson. Their analyses were presented, to great excitement, at the Geological Society meeting.

Dawson claimed that the skull was remarkably similar to modern man’s, but for the occiput (where the skull meets the spine) and for the brain size, which was two-thirds that of a modern man. Two human-like molar teeth in the jawbone looked indistinguishable from a chimpanzee’s, and the fragments included ape-like canines. Dawson claimed that this new discovery seemed to provide a missing evolutionary link between apes and modern man.

This assertion was contested from the start. While the British Museum, Dawson and Woodward had developed one reconstruction of the skull, the Royal College of Surgeons, led by Arthur Keith, had produced a very different-looking one, from copies of the same bone fragments – in which the brain size was precisely that of modern man. This alternative reconstruction was called *Homo piltdownensis*, the word *homo* reflecting its nearer proximity to *Homo erectus*.

While searching the gravel pit in August 1913, Dawson, Woodward, and a Jesuit priest called Teilhard de Chardin found a canine tooth that fit the jaw. Teilhard soon left to return to France and never again participated in the discoveries, a fact which struck some as suspicious at the time.

The canine tooth seemed to fit perfectly with the jawbone but, as soon as its discovery was announced, it raised further questions. Keith pointed out that human molars are meant for lateral movement, to grind food when chewing. The canine now integrated into the Piltdown jaw made no evolutionary sense because its verticality meant that it would get in the way of the lateral movement that the molars required. The molars found on the jawbone were worn down, meaning that the creature had been using them extensively. The canine that Dawson had added to the skull would, essentially, have blocked this creature from eating the food it had gathered. Something was not right.

In 1913 David Waterson of King's College London solved the mystery of the *Piltdown Man* hoax. In "Nature" magazine, he wrote that he believed the bones to be a combination of an ape's mandible with a human skull. French palaeontologist Marcellin Boule published the same conclusion in 1915, as did an American zoologist, Gerrit Smith Miller. In 1923, Franz Weidenreich noted that the skull was simply a human *cranium*, and the mandible was from an orangutan whose teeth had been filed down. But it took decades before this was conclusively proven and believed.

In 1915 Dawson claimed to have found fragments of another skull, two miles from the gravel pit: this was referred to as "Piltdown II" or "the Sheffield Park find"⁵. Dawson passed away in August 1916, at which point Woodward presented the new discoveries as if he had found them himself. President of the American Museum of Natural History, Henry Fairfield Osborn, declared that the two finds, Piltdown and Piltdown II, belonged together "without question". The second Piltdown fragments seemed to confirm the authenticity of the first ones, at least to the majority of interested bystanders reading about this popular affair in the newspaper. But now Dawson, the only man who knew the truth, was dead.

Scientists, however, were not so convinced. The *Piltdown Man* discovery did not fit with other fossil and evolutionary discoveries. Either this is some strange mutation of the ape-to-man continuum or a fake.

The hoax was definitively proven in the "Time" magazine, but not until 1953. Evidence gathered from a wide array of renowned scientists proved that the *Piltdown Man* bones came from three distinct species: a medieval human skull, a five-hundred-year-old lower mandible of a Sarawak orangutan, and fossilized teeth of a chimpanzee. The medieval human skull was the only piece of bone that had actually been discovered at Piltdown. All fragments had been "aged" by bathing them in iron and chromic acid. Microscopic examination showed that the molars had been filed down with a metal file so that the chimpanzee teeth would look more human.

The forger has never been identified, although – of course – the man whose notoriety came from its discovery, Charles Dawson, is the main suspect. Woodward at the British Museum, and the French Jesuit Teilhard, were also possibly involved in the conspiracy. A later examination of Dawson's once-renowned natural history collection found 38 indisputable fakes, including other species "discovered" by Dawson, like *Plagiaulax dawsoni*, teeth from a purported hybrid mammal/reptile. Other fakes and frauds that had contributed to Dawson's fame included the Pevensey bricks, which were supposedly the last datable discovery from Roman Britain; flint from the Lavant Caves, a fake flint mine; the Beauport Park statuette, a fake Roman-era iron

statue; the Brighton “Toad in the Hole”, a real toad inside a piece of flint; and a fake Chinese bronze vase. Dawson was thought to have been behind all of these. The motivation was his renown as a collector and amateur scientist and the attention that accompanied the discoveries⁶. The greatest harm caused by the fraud was that, for several decades, scientists wasted time investigating a step on the evolutionary ladder that did not actually exist.

A similar fraud was perpetrated in 1999 concerning palaeontology. A fossil found in China was featured in “National Geographic”, which described it as a missing link showing the evolutionary bridge between birds and terrestrial dinosaurs⁷. Only recently have palaeontologists determined that dinosaurs have more in common with birds than they do with lizards. For centuries, dinosaurs were thought to have been like giant reptiles, “thunder lizard” being the nickname for the Brontosaurus. Scientists now agree that birds are the most direct descendants of dinosaurs, but the discovery of this fossil in China seemed to prove the theory definitively and was a major *coup*, just as the Piltdown Man appeared to be the final proof of the human/ape evolution theory.

Sadly, it also proved to be a false one. In 2002, a team of scientists published verification that the Archaeoraptor fossil, as it became known, was a fake (Zhou *et alii* 2002, p. 285). Like Dawson’s Piltdown Man, this had been constructed, Frankenstein-like, from pieces of real fossils from different species. The tail was that of a winged *dromaeosaur*, nicknamed a “Microraptor.” The body was that of a prehistoric bird, *Yanornis*. The legs and feet belong to an unidentified dinosaur of a different species⁸.

The scandal certainly hurt reputations, not least that of the famous “National Geographic” magazine, but it also brought to light a busy trafficking in illegally excavated or forged fossils from China. The forgery was not even particularly skilful – in retrospect it seemed evident to palaeontologists that this “missing link” was in fact a cobbled-together jigsaw of other fossils. But the hunger to find tangible proof for “missing link” theories allowed the Archaeoraptor fossil and the Piltdown Man Skull to enjoy the authentication of experts and considerable success, before they were ultimately discredited.

IV. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

All four case studies, while superficially different, have common traits. All four brought fame to the discoverers, which would seem to be the primary motivation for creating the forgeries. Wealth, or the promise of it, followed, though the Archaeoraptor fossil was dismissed quickly enough to foil plans of fortune and the Shroud of Turin was a cash cow for the city in which it was displayed rather than for the individual who forged it or passed it off initially as an original religious relic.

All the above-mentioned fakes claimed to be “missing links” artefacts that proved beliefs. The Shroud of Turin and the James Ossuary sought to provide Catholics with tangible proof of the life of Christ and his family. The Piltdown Man Skull was meant to prove Darwin’s theory that modern humans evolved from apes and the Archaeoraptor Fossil fulfilled the same function for the theory that dinosaurs were related to birds. The takeaway from these cases is that any object that appears on the market as a novelty, or as a fresh discovery, and appears to ideally fulfil a theory should be looked at with extensive scrutiny. Too good to be true.



But the punchline is more complicated. In the case of the Shroud of Turin and the Piltdown Man Skull, a significant number of people refused to accept that their initial faith in the object was misplaced. The numerous, published, objective scientific tests showing the Shroud of Turin to be a medieval painting have not slowed down the outpouring of tourists visiting it over the centuries – despite a bishop stating that it is fake. We humans do not like to be shown that our beliefs are false, and our own stubbornness will override patent, incontrovertible evidence to the contrary – to the benefit of forgers.

Notes

- ¹ Charney's (2009) *The Art of Forgery* is the most recent significant addition to a very small group of such works. The current paper draws on selected extracts from this book.
- ² Thanks go to Martin Kemp, who provides many of the facts in this section in Kemp 2011. See also Oxley 2010 and McCrone 1999.
- ³ For more on this case, see Magness 2005 and Rose 2003.
- ⁴ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/11380746/Dragon-bones-on-a-Venetian-island.html>.
- ⁵ Dawson refused to reveal the exact location, even to his friend, Woodward of the British Museum. Many suspected that this was another fraudulent find.
- ⁶ For more, see Blinderman 1986 and Russell 2003.
- ⁷ The article in question was Sloan 1999. For more see Mayell 2002 and Thompson, Harrub 2004.
- ⁸ See Helen Briggs "Piltdown Bird Fake Explained" in *BBC News*, 29 March 2001.

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