

Jabs & Jibes



Armadillos under the house

I am a keen peruser of internet newsgroups, long threads of connected email postings anyone can contribute to. It was late and I was in a learned discussion in one of the more scholarly newsgroups about whether the precession of the earth's axis could have been known before Hipparchus in 130BC. I'd argued against an earlier dating on grounds of lack of evidence, while swotting up on my ancient Sumerian astronomy. Whereupon a teenager with the *Big Book of the Ancient World* fresh from its Christmas stocking weighed in with an argument about a 30 000 year-old bone purported to have the phases of the moon carved in it. The upstart responded to me: "You will recall that you claimed ancient humans were sitting around in caves grunting, and had no knowledge of astronomy. I pointed out your vast ignorance of ancient cultures, and gave you some references to get you started. That was apparently futile."

As usual, these scholarly johnny-come-latelys are often flaky about giving references; they think an anonymous note on a webpage saying no more than they have already said is evidence, when it's clearly their one and only crib. Nonetheless, despite the lack of a picture there was a mention that the bone had been excavated in Dordogne, France. So the artefact that had our friend excited could only be the Abri Blanchard bone. I tracked down a photograph on the web and could instantly see that the idea it depicted the phases of the moon was a wild interpretation of the notches. I could imagine the author of the impossibly early lunar calendar sitting down by the fire craving nicks in the bone idly, with no rhyme nor reason, only to have his random carving interpreted as the phases of the moon in 30 000 years time.

I posted a URL leading to a photograph of the Blanchard bone and so-called "transcription", and gave my considered opinion: "Do they look like the phases of the moon to you? Have

you even seen a picture of what you are talking about ever? Perhaps if you had seen a picture of it you might have learnt to assess the quality of evidence with your own eyes instead of taking someone else's word for it sight unseen." I followed with a sharp thrust to his conscience: "You can be as patronising as you like, it doesn't make your case any stronger."

He'd ended his argument with a motto: "Everybody is born ignorant. Some people learn to be stupid." I responded with: "And others are too stupid to learn."

Before going to bed I turned my attention for light relief to a newsgroup devoted to knives and daggers. A gentleman, no doubt used to toting his serrated Spyderco about the place, was asking for help with armadillos under his house: "I have two armadillos that have burrowed under my home, they only come out early in the AM to feed; I've tried flooding, poisoning, smoking, bait and trapping, shooting, and stabbing them and still the lil buggers live UNDER my home!!!!"

A compatriot in the love of sharp blades suggested a chlorine bomb made with phosphoric acid and bleach. A man in Japan advocated blocking the burrow with two sacks of mothballs, adding that he'd had some success with squirrels in his loft. There ensued discussion on the news that a much loved regular to the group, Fred, who'd "had squirrels in his loft for years", had finally been "put in the nuthouse".

S J Marshall

