

ARCHAEOLOGICAL REPORT
2003

In 2003, a road grader working for an Australian oil company in the south-west Libyan desert broke through what turned out to be the roof of a cave long-buried under a dune. On one of the cave walls, archaeologists found a charcoal drawing, which, oddly, combined Jewish, Christian and Essene symbols into a single icon. The charcoal was carbon-dated with high accuracy to the year 33 AD plus or minus 1 year, but this date was immediately disputed by the Vatican as being too soon after the crucifixion to be correct. On the floor of the cave a single bronze coin was also discovered, dating back to the mid-seventh century, the time of Muhammad. Other items which could be accurately dated proved the cave had been continuously occupied from at least 33 AD to about 650 AD, after which it was abandoned, apparently in great haste. Fragments of pottery scattered on the cave floor had Greek, Hebrew and Latin letters inscribed on them in a jumbled pattern, which has eluded full translation to this day.

One of the deciphered phrases tells of the rebirth of 'an anointed one' which did not go according to prophecy, and will only occur when the right conditions are met. One such condition is that a femina cilicis (literally: stone woman) must first fall from heaven. Scholars agree that the translation should not be taken literally.

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A MESSIANIC ICON

To disguise something? What on earth are you talking about?' Parker asked Maggie as they walked across Broadway to Cambridge Street.

Maggie shook her head. 'You will not want to believe me if I tell you without filling in the background first. Perhaps then you might understand.'

'All right,' he agreed. 'Tell me who you are first.'

'I was born in Pisa, Italy,' she explained. 'My father still lives there. He owns a small masonry, specializing in restoration of religious buildings. My mother died when I was seven, and I grew up with my father, watching him working with stone. I loved to play with anything that had fossils in it. It used to fascinate me that true history is recorded in rocks for all to see if they are willing. I suppose that is what got me interested in archaeology. My father expected me to stay in Pisa and take over the business, but my high school teacher convinced him I would never get far in this world unless I could read, write and speak English. Papa paid her to teach me. She was an Australian woman of Italian descent working her way around Italy. I am told I have an Australian accent because of that. Her name is Lucia Forgione, and she is

like a mother to me. We still speak from time to time on the phone. I hardly remember my own mother.' She gave a slightly embarrassed smile.

Parker smiled too and realized this was already the longest conversation he had had with a woman since he left the priesthood. Maggie continued talking as they walked up Massachusetts Drive.

'I graduated from the University of Milano, *Centro per Archeologia Africana*. Through Lucia, I got a job with an Australian oil company and I worked for them for five years in Libya, helping them to map and avoid damaging archaeological sites while they built roads for their drilling rigs. The company is funding my PhD, and I still consult to them when they need me.

'While I was working in the south-west Libyan desert, one of our graders cut through a dune exposing an outcrop of limestone. The grader broke through what turned out to be the roof of a cave. The driver only just managed to drive out before some of the roof collapsed. Of course I recommended that the company abandon that route and divert the road elsewhere while I studied the cave. I then convinced a couple of guys to help me dig out the sand. Luckily it was only partially filled with sand. Inside, I found evidence of human habitation. There were distinct areas for eating, sleeping and storage. On the floor were broken pieces of pottery that I couldn't date by sight. There was also a hearth and evidence of cooking, so I sent some charcoal off to the lab for dating. The earliest dated at 33 CE plus or minus a year. The latest dated at 650 CE.'

Parker winced at her use of the modern terminology of CE meaning Common Era, instead of AD, *Anno Domini*, that Parker had been brought up with.

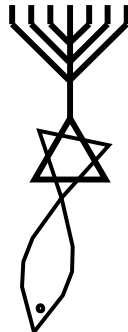
'Six hundred years is a long time to inhabit a cave!' he remarked. 'How exciting for you. An amazing discovery. I'm surprised I haven't read about it.'

'Exciting and devastating,' she said. 'While I was in Tripoli supervising the carbon dating I learned that the roof collapsed completely. The desert sand poured in. It will cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to excavate properly.'

They turned off Oxford Street and cut across the park by the zoological herbarium. When they reached a park bench, she stopped.

'But I took photographs. Look.'

She dived into her bag and pulled out a photograph. It was an image of the inside of a large cavern. There was a fat workman in the picture to give it perspective. He was standing up against a wall pointing at something that was not clear in the image. She showed him a second photograph of what the workman was pointing at. Parker studied the photo more closely. It took him a few seconds to make out the fading grey marks in the limestone. The camera flash had thrown spotty shadows across the wall from the small rock protuberances studding the wall. Gradually he pieced together the image. He squinted, disbelieving what he saw. It was not vertical, which is why he hadn't picked it out immediately:



'Good heavens! Is that a Messianic icon?'

The seven branches of the Jewish menorah were straight, not curved the way they were normally depicted

in modern times, but the shape was unmistakable. The base of the stem was a small equilateral triangle which would have served to stand the menorah upright, had it been the candle holder that the menorah has come to represent. Overlaying the triangular base was a second, identical triangle, turned a few degrees so it formed a rough Star of David with the base of the menorah. That triangle was the tail of a Christian fish symbol, but the fish was upside down, its head pointing downwards to the left at an odd angle, as if the artist meant it to be imperfect.

'Your carbon dating must be wrong,' he said, shaking his head. 'Or the drawing was done long after the cooking charcoal got there.'

'That was my initial thought too. So I scratched away some of the markings. They turned out to be charcoal as well. Same age. Thirty three CE!'

'But this is a fantastic find,' he said. 'You won't have any trouble getting money to excavate!'

'More than you might think. Libya is not easy to get people and equipment in and out of. And corruption drains what money goes in. Oh, the cave will get excavated one day, but probably not in my lifetime. Luckily I searched the cave and photographed everything I could before I left. The inner cave was a storage area for wine and oil. Most of the pots were rough and poor quality, made of local clay. But there was one broken pot that was different from the rest. Look here.'

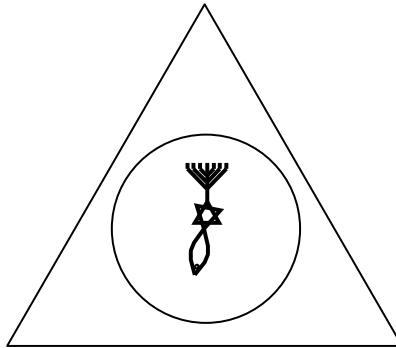
Another image appeared from her seemingly bottomless bag. The photo showed fragments of pottery strewn across the floor of the cave.

'See? Most of the pieces are yellow clay from the eastern clay pits, but notice the reddish colored pieces? These were in a scatter pattern on the floor, as though the pot was dropped while being carried out of the cave. And there were markings on the fragments. I am still trying to piece the words together.'

'I wonder why the fish is tilted?' said Parker. 'I've never seen that done before. The whole thing is carefully drawn, so I doubt the artist misjudged the vertical.' He was wholly engrossed.

Maggie was also excited. 'You are the first person to ask that question. Look closer; or should I say, look wider.'

He held the print up into brighter light. Around the edges of print he noticed some faint lines.



'Holy Mother of God!' he exclaimed and sat down on the park bench with a thud.

Around the Messianic icon was a perfect circle, and around the circle was another equilateral triangle which enclosed everything.

'But that's the... that's the symbol... that's impossible! That's the Trinity Symbol of the Essenes, representing Sun, moon and earth. I lectured about it just an hour ago! What's it doing wrapped around a Messianic icon in a first-century cave in Libya? It has to be a hoax, a joke of some kind.'

Maggie laughed. 'Well if it is, the joker had a good sense of long-term humor. He would have had to wait nearly two thousand years to get a laugh! Besides, you would know better than most that people didn't mess

about with sacred symbols in those days. They all believed that their particular God was standing behind them waiting to smite any sacrilegious behavior. No, this symbol was revered, not ridiculed. I'm sure of it.'

'But, it's too incredible! You said this cave was in south-western Libya. But the centre of Essene culture at Qumran was almost two thousand miles away, alongside the Dead Sea. I know a lot about Essene culture, but I've never heard of it spreading to Libya, or Cyrene as it was called then. The Essenes were a closed cult. They actively discouraged rapid expansion. It required intensive learning of all manner of things to become an Essene, not just blind obedience. But why would they enclose a Messianic icon?'

'Why indeed,' she said excitedly, resisting the urge to blurt out her theory too soon. 'In my opinion, this cave was a shrine of some sort. I'm almost sure of it. On the floor below the drawing was a flat stone, too low to be an altar. I think it was a plinth for a statue or something large which was probably plundered by thieves. Of course, I just guessing.'

'But this is a fantastic find! You must publish immediately!' he repeated.

'I would publish if I had more evidence. If I already had my PhD, then these photos and the carbon dating might be taken seriously. But without the cave to show anyone, and no more solid evidence, I'm just a PhD student with an overactive imagination. I would be laughed out of Harvard, or accused of forgery.'

Parker had to agree that academics could be a vindictive and unforgiving lot. He himself was still recovering from ridicule by his one-time peers. He would not wish the same upon the young woman.

'Maggie,' said Parker as they started walking again. 'I agree this is a very intriguing find, but what does it have to do with me? I'm a theologian, and an unpopular one at that. Someone at the lecture even had the temerity to

call me a fallen priest! I may be that, but I am certainly no archaeologist. I can't supervise a thesis on archaeology. Why come to me?'

'Oh, no. You misunderstand me,' she said. 'I already have an archaeological supervisor. I have come to you because this is no longer just about archaeology. If I am right, this goes much, much deeper. Remember I said I am convinced that the New Testament was written to deliberately mislead. If I am right, and my theory is true, it will shake the earth like a scale 10 earthquake. And you are the only expert I know with a mind open enough to help me. You see, what I have discovered cuts right to the heart of Christianity itself!'

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BRUNELLESCHI'S DOME

'Thank you again for flying across on such short notice, Detective Sergeant. And thank you for believing me. This was the only way I could ever hope to clear my name and bring this madman to justice. I trust you heard enough?'

'Oh yeah. Enough to put the Monseigneur away for around twenty years. It took a little setting up with the *Carabinieri*, but with Cardinal Maglieri's assistance they issued me a temporary license to legally make an arrest on Italian soil.'

'Maglieri? The Vatican!' said Viticaro. 'Oh God, David. What have you done?'

That was Maglieri's cue to appear. He stepped out of the box and confronted Viticaro with contempt in his eyes.

'You bring disgrace to the Church and to the name of God, Diego. Return the seal, and perhaps God will have mercy on you.'

He reached out to take the bag but in doing so stepped across Joel's line of fire. Viticaro saw his chance. He swung the bag into the side of Joel's face, striking him in the eye. Joel cried out and instinctively brought both

hands to his face. Before Joel could re-aim his weapon, Viticaro pulled a gun from his own pocket.

'Drop it now, or die now. Your choice,' shouted Viticaro.

'Diego! How dare you?' said Maglieri. 'How dare you bring a gun into...!' But Viticaro was in no mood for a sermon. Before Joel could raise his weapon Viticaro shot him point-blank into the chest. The small gun resonated like a cannon in the huge cathedral, but the thick stone walls trapped the sound inside. Maglieri turned and ran as Joel fell back against the confessional box, sliding to the floor clutching his chest.

'Polizia! Polizia!' screamed Maglieri, running for the door. Viticaro took aim and fired, but Parker tackled him, spoiling his aim and sending them both skidding across the floor. The shot was off the mark. Maglieri dropped, screaming in pain with a bullet lodged in his thigh. Viticaro landed hard, still gripping the gun with one hand and the plastic bag in the other, but he was winded badly by Parker's weight. Before he could get his breath, Parker wrenched the plastic bag from his hand and ran.

'Davi... Davi...' he wheezed. 'We can... we can still... No. Come ba...It's mine. Bring it back. David!'

He raised the gun to shoot but it waved wildly in the air as he coughed and wheezed, trying to get a full breath. Parker ran across the nave. He knew the doors were unlocked but dared not draw Viticaro outside where Maggie was waiting. His only thought was to get away from Viticaro and to hide the seal somewhere where Viticaro would never find it.

But where do I hide it in an empty church?

He reached the opposite aisle just as another shot rang out. A bullet ricocheted off the sandstone column near his right leg, taking a chunk of sandstone with it.

Think, man, think!

At the wall he turned ninety degrees, away from the door and past a small booth that looked like the ticket

office of an old-time cinema. A sign over the booth said *Cupola Tours €10.00*. A fourth shot rang out, taking a splinter of wood out of the door of the booth. He ducked instinctively and saw a discarded tour brochure on the floor.

The tour! Of course! The tour!

He lifted his head and focused beyond the altar, taxing his memory. But where was the door? He searched his memory, hard, trying desperately to remember which of the four columns was open to tourists. During his priesthood training he had taken the tour only once, climbing to the top of the cathedral through one of the enormous, hollow sandstone piers. He could still remember the dizzying view of Florence from the lantern atop the cupola. Then he remembered that his teacher had taken him up through the *Porta dei Canonici*, which was on the south side. He glanced back briefly and saw Viticaro staggering to his feet. The south-western pier was just twenty feet ahead. Inside it was the locked doorway to the steps that ran up the inside of the column.

He crashed through the flimsy door of aging pinewood and bounded up the spiral steps within. A warning sign in four languages reminded people with weak hearts that there were four hundred and sixty three steps to climb, and no elevator. As he ran up the steps he recalled how astonished he had been to learn that people could actually walk within the walls of the dome itself.

The extraordinary dome of the cathedral, designed and built by Filippo Brunelleschi in the fifteenth century, actually consisted of two separate brick and mortar dome shells, one inside the other, linked by an ingenious system of interlocking bricks. The space between the shells was wide enough to accommodate a single file of tourists, taking them to the top of the dome and into the open air to gaze out over the city. Of course tourist dollars had not been Brunelleschi's motive. Having been

presented the challenge of building the world's largest and strongest octagonal dome without the benefit of internal wooden supports, and refusing to resort to the ugly flying buttresses of traditional Gothic cathedrals, Brunelleschi drew inspiration from the humble chicken's egg. He showed his skeptics how the egg gained its incredible resistance from the internal membrane bonded to the inner surface of the shell. In building the dome based on that principle, Brunelleschi set a standard that could not be matched until the mid-twentieth century when high-strength metal alloys and composite materials were developed.

Parker ran up the first fifty steps. He began to tire rapidly, partly from lack of fitness and partly from the dizzying effect of the counter-clockwise spiraling steps. At walking pace they were mildly disorientating, but running was never envisaged in their design. In some places the steps were just a few inches wide, and slippery from centuries of use. A slip would mean a sprained ankle or fractured shin bone, or worse. Parker took some comfort that Viticaro was a heavier, older man who would not move as fast. It would give him time to hide the seal in the one place he knew Viticaro would never find it.

The first hundred and fifty steps took him to the base of the huge drum-shaped structure that sat above the crossing of the cathedral where the nave and the transept intersected. The enormous drum structure supported the dome itself, transferring all the outward thrust of the dome into vertically downward forces which could be supported by the massive stone pillars. Occasionally he stopped for breath and to listen for other footsteps, but all he could hear was the sound of his own breathing. After five minutes' more climb, he emerged from the claustrophobic stairwell onto the narrow balcony that encircled the inside of the lower rim of the dome. In front of him stretched a yawning chasm a hundred and

forty feet across and two hundred feet deep, the largest enclosed space that man had ever built in stone. The sudden reversal from claustrophobia to agoraphobia was overwhelming, and for several moments he swooned with intense vertigo, grabbing the hand rail to steady himself. He tried looking up to shake the dizziness, but looking up was a bad idea. The cupola's fresco of Vasari's *Last Judgment* loomed dizzily over his head. It was lit by powerful floodlights that magnified the giddiness imparted by the mural's perspective. The extraordinary painting gave the impression that the dome was actually missing and, instead, the viewer was looking at a midday sky filled with apostles, popes, angels and demons all sitting amongst the clouds, looking down and passing judgment on him.

Parker scanned the full circumference of the balcony looking for the door into the cupola itself. It was to his right, thirty paces away, but the balcony was blocked with a pile of scaffolding and wooden boards, forcing him to go in the opposite, longer direction. He ran two thirds of the inner circumference of the balcony until he reached the door. Inside were the steps that Brunelleschi had built into the space between the two shells of the dome.

Parker started climbing the inclined steps. This part of the climb was by far the most disorientating, because the lower, inner shell sloped away on the right while the outer, upper shell curved overhead, threatening to drop on top of him. To make reasonable progress, he found he had to lean forward and to the right to align his body roughly between the two curves. Moreover, the upper shell angled down awkwardly in places, to accommodate immense stone plinths. To avoid overbalancing or banging his head, he had to steady himself against the lower, inner wall forcing him to run in a semi-crouched position.

As he crouched down on all fours to cope with the disorientating curves and angles he heard the echo of footsteps not far behind. Viticaro was gaining on him. He doubled his speed, running faster than he thought possible under the circumstances. He reached a bend in the passageway, the first of the eight corners in the dome's octagonal perimeter, but he turned the corner too quickly and struck his kneecap hard on a stone ledge protruding from the inner wall into the passageway.

'Arghh,' he yelled, the sound of his voice echoing along the narrow space. Gripping his knee and biting his tongue to suppress another cry, he sat on the ledge for just a second to allow the pain to subside. A sign above him warned him in four languages: *Watch out — Brunelleschi's Chain!* A diagram showed an eight-sided ring of stone, wood and iron beams embedded within the dome. Arrows drawn on the diagram showed how the force of gravity, which would otherwise cause the dome to spread at the base, was being countered by the enormous tension held in the ring.

'Like a belt holds in a fat man's belly,' his guide had explained. 'It is one of many secrets that Brunelleschi has hidden within these walls.'

But it was another of Brunelleschi's secrets that spurred Parker on – if only he could find it. He stood and took a step. Suddenly he heard Viticaro's voice.

'David. Stop. I beg you. Stop. We can do this together. We can.'

The words carried up from below. Viticaro was closing.

'Forgive me, David. I did not mean to shoot at you. The gun just went off. It was an accident. Just give me my seal and we can work this out. Damn it, David. We can save the world.'

Parker kept climbing, searching frantically. He reached the second corner and knew he had missed the first portal. *I should have found one by now. Where the heck are they?*

The light inside the annular space was getting dim; he had to be careful where he stepped. The sandstone steps were hard and sharp, despite the millions of tourists who had shuffled their feet on them. But he thought too much about not slipping, and he slipped on the very next step. He dropped the bag as he flung his hands out in front of him to break his fall.

'Ahh!' he cried out again, this time ripping his trouser leg open and gashing a six-inch wound along his shin bone. He tried to stand up, but pain and exhaustion were getting the better of him. He had been running up steps for over ten minutes now, and his body was complaining bitterly. He slipped down a couple of steps on his bottom, almost completely exhausted, and rested his head on the stone step to catch his breath. Then, right in front of him, was the very thing he had been looking for. *Of course! He put them low down for the painters to crawl through. How did I forget?*

It was a hole, or rather, a short tunnel just a little wider than a man's body, which penetrated the inner shell into the dome itself. Brunelleschi had left sixteen such tunnels, two in each of the cupola's eight sides, so artists could crawl through to paint the fresco. But when David saw the size of the tunnel, he began to doubt the wisdom of his plan. *What if I'm too wide to fit? Or worse still, get stuck?*

He fought back self-doubt. He was committed. There was no turning back. He crawled in.

At this height in the dome, the wall of the inner shell was well over a meter thick, giving his elbows plenty of support as he crawled. At the inside edge he looked down. It was a foolish thing to do because he was essentially hanging two hundred and fifty feet above a solid marble floor, with no visible means of support. It was the equivalent of lying on the window ledge of a twenty-five story building. He fought the vertigo and eased back a little into the tunnel, reaching out into the

dome with his right arm to feel the surface of the dome's ceiling. It was cold but not as smooth as he expected. The painted images gave the surface a rough texture. Sweeping his hand like a windscreen wiper, he covered a semicircle of area without finding what he was looking for.

It has to be here! It has to! Where is it?

He retracted his arm and extended the other to wipe over a different part of the ceiling. In the confined space the plastic bag caught on the lip of the hole and he lost hold of it.

'No!' he shouted as the bag and its precious contents disappeared over the edge. Instinctively he lunged to catch it, his hand grasping wildly into the void. By incredible luck the tip of his middle finger snagged one of the handles of the bag, preventing it from plummeting to the floor below. He held fast, refusing to open his grip for anything. But the lunge had been too great. His entire torso was out in the void and now he himself teetered on the brink. The gaping chasm of the cathedral loomed below him. The altar was directly below him. From where he hung, poised to fall onto it, it was a tiny matchbox, but he knew it was actually the size of a bus.

He tried to dig his shoes into the stone, to get some sort of a grip that would hold him in, but too much of his weight was hanging over the edge. He felt himself slipping with nothing to hold on to, nothing between him and the marble floor, two hundred and fifty feet below.

Dear God. Not like this. Not now.

He started to slide out, still clutching the bag. There was nothing he could do but place himself in God's hands.