



Science News-Letter

The Weekly Summary of Current Science

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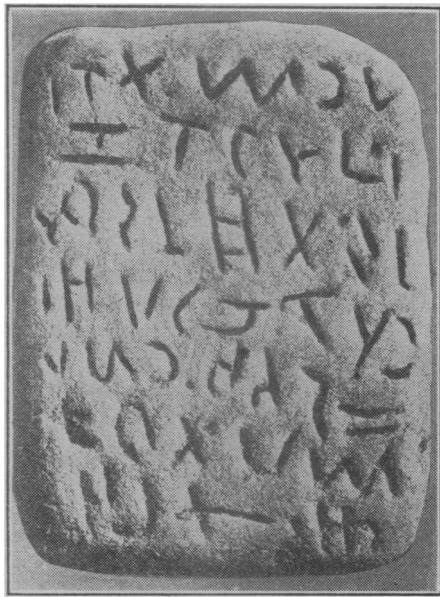
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ARCHAEOLOGY

New Finds Shed Light on Origin of Alphabet



A sample of writing from Glozel, said by some scientists to be evidence that prehistoric Europeans had an alphabet. Others say it is old Latin. Can you read it?

By **EMILY C. DAVIS**

Did Stone Age men in France have the brains and the background to evolve an alphabet? Some French scientists, who have been studying evidence dug up in a field at the French village of Glozel, believe that Stone Age men in France could and did make an alphabet long before the Phoenicians, or the Egyptians, or the Semites thought of using one.

If it is so, our patronizing way of emphasizing the crudeness of our Stone Age ancestors may be somewhat unnecessary. It has regularly been conceded that the first alphabet system of recording events came out of the east, and that it was a product of civilized men. The most daring students of the history of the alphabet have placed its origin at 2000 B. C., a date which many scholars regard as several centuries too ancient.

But out of the soil in this field at

Glozel have come small tablets of clay with rows of cryptic signs on them. From studying the appearance of the tablets, the layer of earth in which they were buried, and the objects of ancient appearance found in connection with them, some French scientists are convinced that by 4000 B. C. prehistoric France had an alphabet system to give the world, even though that enterprising Stone Age civilization apparently vanished so completely that centuries later the people of France and Spain had to be taught the writing of the Greeks.

This is a startling and revolutionary theory. But the remarkable collection of objects dug up at Glozel seems to call for startling pronouncements of one sort or another from French scientists, even from those who do not believe that prehistoric France can claim credit for discovering the alphabet. Few archaeological discoveries have aroused so much controversy in France, or have brought out so many decided and conflicting explanations, as the Glozel find.

The story of Glozel is in fact like a continued story of a prehistoric mystery, with a dozen French scientists playing the role of Sherlock Holmes, going down to the ploughed field where the evidence was unearthed, examining each fragment of pottery and primitive weapon, and trying to piece together from it all the true story of what happened in this quiet spot hundreds or perhaps thousands of years ago.

Every few weeks some French savant comes out with new light on the subject. The collection of tools, pottery, and cryptic writings found at Glozel has been enthusiastically termed the greatest discovery from prehistoric France in the past century of many important discoveries. Another expert, dealing equally in superlatives, says the whole thing is a huge and remarkable fake. Its age has been

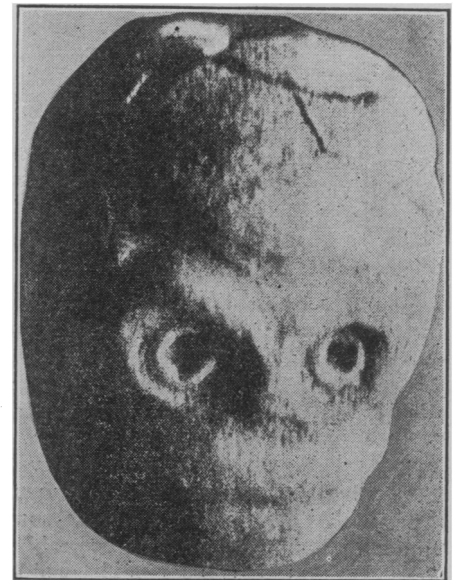
dated by various experts at the distant period of 4000 B. C. and at the recent time of 300 A. D.

The modern history of the village of Glozel began, so far as the world in general is concerned, just three years ago, when Emile Fradin, a resident of the neighborhood, was ploughing up a field by a stream, on a spring day. His ploughshare struck two small strange looking pieces of brick. M. Fradin was curious. He dug for more strange objects, and he unearthed a number of broken bits of pottery and then a little tablet of clay marked with a kind of writing which he could not read.

These peculiar articles, which suggested that men had long ago occupied the site, came to the attention of Dr. A. Morlet, an archæologist of the town of Vichy. Eventually the two began to explore the land in more systematic fashion.

The result is a collection of stone axes, spearheads, clay lamps, cleverly

(Just turn the page)



A riddle of Glozel—a mysterious death's head vase carved in clay.

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New Light on Alphabet

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shaped vases like gaunt death's heads, pebbles with pictures scratched into them, and clay bricks with more of the unreadable writings, all in such profusion that visitors to the collection have said, "Why, it's a museum in itself."

With this unlabeled and undated "museum" about him, Dr. Morlet began the first attempt to unravel the past of Glozel. One of the most surprising and puzzling exhibits was a flat pebble on which was engraved a picture of an animal with branching horns. If this is meant for a reindeer, and Dr. Morlet concluded that it is, then the artist who scratched the outline of the picture must have seen reindeer about him. Now, reindeer were plentiful in France during thousands of years of the Old Stone Age, when Europe was cold from the glaciers which crept down from the north. When the ice finally retreated to the mountain tops and to the Arctic regions, the reindeer and other heavily-coated animals found the climate of France too warm for their liking and they too retreated northward. So this reindeer picture, if it is indeed a reindeer, would mean that the people of Glozel were decidedly prehistoric, dating back to the end of the Old Stone Age or the beginning of the New Stone Age.

Turning to the tablets of clay, Dr. Morlet found over 80 different characters on them, crosses, bars, circles, angles, used over and over. He declared that these must represent an early form of writing, before it was simplified down to a comparatively small set of letters, such as the Phoenicians had. He pointed out that some of these same signs used on the tablets were cut on harpoons and pebbles bearing pictures of animals, and all reminiscent of the late Paleolithic Age.

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New Light on Alphabet

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So, altogether, he concluded, the people who did the writing must have lived at the transition between the Old and New Stone Ages. He said that, instead of writing being a comparatively late creation of man, these prehistoric people must have devised a way of making signs stand for sounds about the same time that they learned to harden their pottery in fire.

Dr. Morlet's deductions at once aroused interest and curiosity. French scientists, many of them skeptics, began journeying to the Glazel field to investigate this reported archaeological treasure trove. Time after time, at the invitation of Dr. Morlet, one of these French scholars has selected his own site to dig in. He has been given a spade and has proceeded to make or direct an excavation for himself.

Those who suspected the whole discovery to be a "plant" with faked antiquities went to work critically looking for signs of deception. Most of them lost their skepticism when they cut through roots of grass and trees, indicating that the surface had not been recently disturbed, when they saw bricks with roots of plants growing into them, and when they

unearthed for themselves all sorts of clay, stone, and bone articles of the sort associated with prehistoric men. If this was a fake, and this profusion of objects was hidden long before, then an enormous amount of labor was expended in the "planting."

Besides making sample excavations, the visiting scientists have studied the collection which Dr. Morlet and other excavators have amassed. And they have gone away finally to write their opinions on the subjects in which they specialize—ancient writing, geology, prehistoric man, or Roman antiquities.

Some of them agree with Dr. Morlet that there were Stone Age men at Glazel.

Most of them agree that the Glazel field in ancient times was not a place where people lived and cooked and had their homes, but a place where mystic or sacred rites were performed.

"A very curious point that I have confirmed with my own eyes," said Dr. Salomon Reinach, a noted French archaeologist, recently, "is that the objects in bone, stone, or clay are not accumulated or tossed in disorder, but are placed in rows horizontally or vertically. It is as if a sacred place near a stream had been respected through a number of generations, left

as it was and gradually covered up by thin layers of earth."

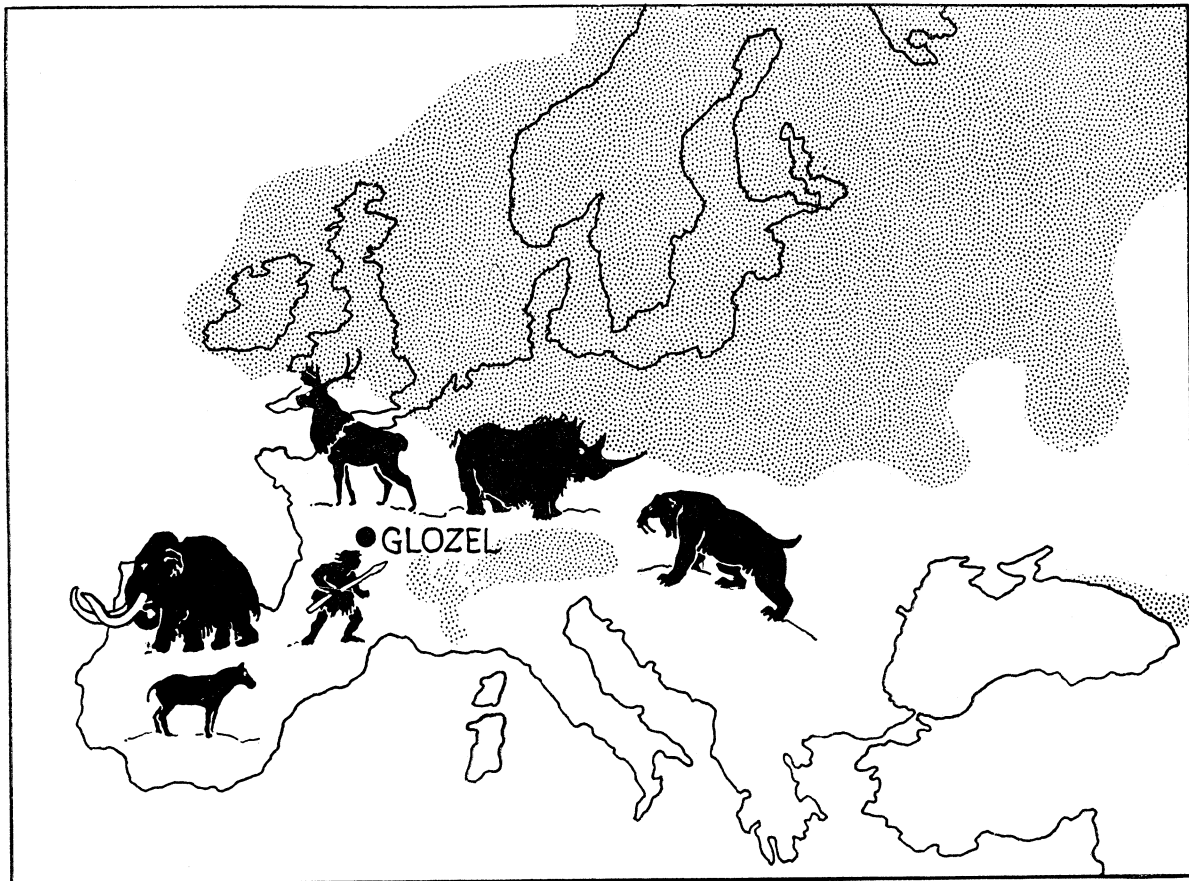
One kind of article which especially suggests this sacred character is the death's head vase. The excavations have revealed a number of these clay vases carved to show hollow eyes, heavy eyebrow ridges, short nose bones, but strangely enough with no sign of teeth or mouth.

"These vases show a top surface rounded off in the form of a skull and with an opening too little to serve for daily use," Dr. Morlet says. "It seems likely that the tribes of Glazel, struck by the change in their dead, the head becoming a bony skull, may have tried to reproduce this to characterize their burial pottery."

Primitive men must have noticed that an outstanding change in the dead person was that he could not talk. So these funeral vases were made without mouths, Dr. Morlet believes, to represent the "great silence."

Later, he says, the Stone Age artists must have gone farther and allowed themselves to represent the living, since some of the clay vases have an imposing lock of hair standing up on the forehead, or a sort of ear on the side like a sugar bowl handle.

(Just turn the page)



The ice sheet which crept down upon Europe 100,000 years ago, and some of the animals familiar to Old Stone Age Men and Women.

New Light on Alphabet

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Some of the scientists have tried to explain the writings on the Glazel tablets by showing that these people were not primitive Stone Age individuals after all.

Dr. Marcel Baudouin, for example, believes that, even though no trace of metal tools has been found, the people who carved the cryptic little tablets must have had metal to work with. In his opinion the field is not a resting place for Stone Age men, but of the more advanced Age of Bronze. He fits the reindeer into the puzzle by saying that perhaps the Age of Bronze in this part of Europe might go back to 5000 B. C., which would bring it, in his opinion, back to a time near the close of the reindeer era.

Quite a different story is read in the clay and rock objects by M. Camille Jullian, an expert on Roman antiquities. M. Jullian has declared that some of the Glazel discoveries are ancient, but that the alphabetic writings date back only to the Roman Empire.

In the time of Rome, sorcerers held their magic rites in groves, and sometimes they used prehistoric relics as fetishes and charms. The mysterious tablets, he says, might thus be incantations written in cursive Latin by some expert in black magic. If the writing is indeed Latin, it might be deciphered. But so far no one has done more than to suggest possible meanings for a few separate signs or words.

M. Jullian believes that the death's head vases were not funeral jars, but fetishes, designed without mouths to aid in some charm whereby an individual would be bereft of speech.

Another archæologist, M. Esperandieu, disagrees with this theory of

DAYS OF ANCIENT MAN			
Age	Character	Estimated Beginning	Climate
Eolithic (Dawn of Stone Age)	Crudest stone implements	1,000,000 B. C.	Pre-glacial
Paleolithic (Old Stone Age)	Unpolished stone tools and weapons	100,000 B. C.	Alternating glacial and mild
Neolithic (New Stone Age)	Stone implements carefully shaped and polished	10,000 B. C.	Post-glacial
Bronze	First use of metal	3,000 B. C.	Modern
Iron	Iron began to supersede bronze	1,300 B. C.	Modern

Estimates by different scientists on the length of prehistoric ages vary considerably. The dates given here are widely used.

early and late objects being combined. He admits that "examples are not lacking of this custom of devotees taking curious objects to the sanctuary of a witch," but he points out that "the number of these curiosities is ordinarily very small compared to the real votive objects of the time, while at Glazel the ancient-looking objects are in the majority.

"One can imagine that a polished axe, pebbles of particular form, might have struck the imagination of primitive people and caused them to make of these objects offerings to a god or even to a sorcerer. But it seems to be entirely unlikely that the harpoons, the rings of slate, bone pins, and such things, where the workmanship of man is clearly shown—and on which in addition are alphabetic designs that are found again on the clay tablets—could have been regarded as wonders of nature and could have been used as votive offerings. With M. Salomon Reinach, M. l'abbé Breuil, and Dr. Morlet, I believe that the tablets of clay from Glazel are Neolithic like the rest. "But," adds M. Esperandieu cautiously, "to what date they belong, I do not state."

This scientist sees nothing incongruous in the thought of primitive Europeans evolving a system of recording events. Why not admit, he asks, that men who were intellectual enough and artistic enough to make the pictures of animals found at Glazel and other Stone Age stations, might have had the idea of expressing sounds with written signs?

Still another expert, Mr. Seymour de Ricci, who visited Glazel and observed excavations, found the place quite too remarkable.

"I will not conceal from you," he told Dr. Morlet, "that apart from the fragments of stone, and perhaps—though I am not sure—a piece of polished axe, all the rest is a fake."

The savants generally agree that some, at least, of the relics are old and genuine, but they are far apart on how the objects all came together here. American anthropologists who will spend their vacations in Europe are expected to take a look at the ploughed field and try their hands at guessing the riddle of Glazel.

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