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Letters

Enigmatic engravings

Archaeoastronomy is by nature controversial, often reflecting differences in how archaeologists and astronomers interpret their respective data. Do the stones at Namoratunga II ("What Mean These African Stones?" SN: 9/15/84, p. 168) mark an ancient Cushitic calendar? Doyle's work strongly supports this interpretation.

It is unlikely, however, that the faint engravings on the pillars at the site are glyphs that have a bearing on deciphering ancient Cushitic writing. Some of the symbols at Namoratunga II also appear quite clearly at Namoratunga I, where there are many more of them, and where there is convincing evidence that they are animal brand symbols. The late Mark Lynch found that many of the same symbols are used by the Turkana people to brand their livestock. Excavations at Namoratunga I demonstrated that only the graves of males had marker stones

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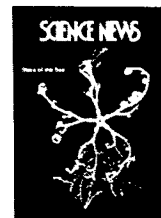
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Cover: Scientists using a submersible have for the first time observed marine creatures living on the steep slopes of underwater mountains near the Bahamas. The investigators photographed and videotaped the animals in the natural environment and collected specimens to take back to the laboratory. One such specimen is this juvenile basket star, named *Asterogordius*. (Photograph: Smithsonian News Service, courtesy of John E. Miller, Harbor Branch Foundation)



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Equality vs. liberty

Re "Home computers and school equality" (SN: 9/22/84, p. 185), the case in which a teacher attempted to prohibit home computer use illustrates the essential conflict between equality and liberty. The liberty to pursue knowledge must be infringed, as in this example, when equality of knowledge is pursued.

Would a teacher also forbid the use of a home encyclopedia or a SCIENCE NEWS subscription? Not everyone has such advantages.

I have a suggestion as to why "educational" software is rarely used at home. Typically, it has a small set of concepts to be mastered, a narrowly defined process for mastering them and no room for individual creativity. On the other hand, a programming language provides an almost inexhaustible supply of elements with which to construct and experiment. A favorite starting point: "How can I make my own video game?"

Charles T. Dorcey
Laurel, Md.

with symbols engraved on them. This led Lynch to conclude that the ancient Namoratunga society was most likely characterized by patrilineal descent. Thus, the symbols appear to be a different kind of "Rosetta stone." Rather than shedding light on Cushitic writing they provide significant clues to the meaning of "enigmatic" rock engravings as well as the interpretation of past social organization.

Lawrence H. Robbins
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Fire hits a snag

Janet Raloff did a very fine job in summarizing my views ("Estimating nuclear forest fires," SN: 9/29/84, p. 204). There is only one minor glitch in the second-to-last paragraph. Fires will occur in the tops of snags (dead treetops) above the forest canopy, not in living treetops.

Craig Chandler
Arlington, Va.

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