

## Walam Olum Hokum

*American Literature*

*Eccentric 19<sup>th</sup>-century scholar Constantine Rafinesque composes a Native American epic*



### The Tale

According to the 19th-century scholar Constantine Rafinesque, an ancient Delaware Indian tradition preserved the memory of the tribe crossing the frozen Bering Strait from Asia into America thousands of years ago. Rafinesque said his source, which he translated himself, was the Walam Olum or "Red Record," a bundle of wooden plaques engraved and painted with supposed Delaware symbols. It told how the Delaware entered the New World, overcame a Midwestern mound building people, and continued eastward, giving rise to the Algonquian-speaking tribes.

### The Doubts

But there are gaps in Rafinesque's story. He claimed that he got the plaques in 1822 from a Dr. Ward (a physician untraceable in any historical source), who had received them two years earlier from a Delaware patient (name unknown). The symbols each stood for a verse in the Delaware epic, and Rafinesque said that he obtained the actual 183 verses two years later (from whom is unknown). Rafinesque published his translation in his 1836 book *The American Nations*, but the wooden plaques were lost (Rafinesque doesn't say how).

At that time, many people believed Indians were descended from the Lost Tribes of Israel and that the mounds (the Delaware were one of many mound-building cultures) were built by a vanished non-Indian race. However, scholars saw the Walam Olum as evidence supporting a different origin—an Asian origin, as Rafinesque believed. Initially, there were some doubts about the Walam Olum's authenticity, but it was nonetheless republished in 1849 and a new translation came out in 1885.

In the 1950s, a study of the Walam Olum funded by pharmaceutical magnate and amateur archaeologist Eli Lilly (a staunch believer in the Asian-origin theory) gave it a passing grade and produced another translation. But the study revealed how problematic the Walam Olum was, and some prominent archaeologists began questioning it. Carbon dating, newly developed, further called it into question. Rafinesque's timeframe for the Bering Strait crossing, based on the legend, put it about 3,600 years ago, while carbon dating placed it at least 12,000 years ago. Still, many scholars took the Walam Olum as genuine, if historically inaccurate.

### The Truth

It was another 40 years before David Oestricher was able to clearly identify the Walam Olum as hoax. Oestricher went to the right sources, Rafinesque's original papers and the Delaware themselves, and presented his results in his 1995 Rutgers University doctoral dissertation and in a popular article in *Natural History* in 1996.

Oestricher asked elderly Delaware in Oklahoma about the Walam Olum. They told him they had heard of it only recently, from anthropologists and archaeologists, and "found its text puzzling and often incomprehensible." Oestricher reviewed the translation with Lucy Parks Blalock (a descendent of the Delaware, born in 1906, who was fluent in the language). They found many problems with it, such as the inclusion of English idioms that did not exist in the Delaware language. In the original manuscript, Oestricher also found that Rafinesque had repeatedly crossed out Delaware words, replacing them with ones that better matched his English "translation."

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But if not an original Delaware epic, where did the tale come from? The story told in the Walam Olum resembles one in Rafinesque's own book, *Ancient History, or Annals of Kentucky* (1824), which says the Delaware were a refugee tribe fleeing after the fall of "Oghuzian Empire." Driven into northeast Asia, they crossed the frozen Bering Strait into North America, overcame a powerful midwestern mound-building tribe, and passed east over the Mississippi, eventually arriving at Delaware Bay.

For the language, Rafinesque appeared to have drawn on the works of Moravian missionaries, specifically an 1827 grammar and an 1834 word list. But mixed in with genuine Delaware words were others borrowed by Rafinesque from other Indian languages, Aztec, and even Chinese. The symbols were likewise mixed: Ojibwa, Egyptian, ancient Chinese, and Maya. Rafinesque had apparently added other symbols in order to linguistically link the Delaware to Asia and support his own theory about the origins of Native Americans.

### The Reason

Why the faking? Stephen Williams labels Rafinesque "complex" and "erratic and difficult" but "not insane." He notes Rafinesque's breadth of knowledge, and publications in many fields. Oestricher believes he might have been inspired by, and reacting to, the 1830 claim by Joseph Smith, founder of Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, of finding golden plates inscribed in Egyptian and saying Indians and Mound Builders were the descendants of Israelites. Passionate in his belief that Indians were of Asian origin, Rafinesque had denounced it as a hoax.

Perhaps, says Oestricher, lack of money also played a role. Rafinesque had entered a competition, with a substantial cash prize, sponsored by the Royal Institute of France. He submitted in October 1834 an essay about the Delaware language with no mention of the Walam Olum, despite his supposedly having studied it more than a decade.

### The Consequences

Whatever the case, the Walam Olum demonstrates the damage that hoaxes and fakes can inflict. Not only were scholars duped, but also many decades later younger Delaware, who could not read or speak the language, had, according to Oestricher, "eagerly seized upon [the Walam Olum] as a glorious remnant of their culture."

But Rafinesque had simply invented it--whether to promote his view of Native American origins or to win a handsome cash prize makes little difference. Despite his scholarly achievements, Rafinesque let his own beliefs or financial need override his scruples, deceiving the world, misleading a people and robbing them of their history.

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