

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

America: The New World or the Old? By Werner Müller.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2x09d09m>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 16(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Lambert, Bernd

Publication Date

1992

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

America: The New World or the Old? By Werner Müller. Translated from the German by Anne Heritage and Paul Kremmel. Frankfurt-am-Main and New York: Verlag Peter Lang, 1989. 295 pages. DM 50.80 paper.

Werner Müller's thesis is that during the final phases of the last glaciation, there was a close tie between the cultures of North America and northwestern Eurasia. He denies that the ancient link between the peoples of the Eastern and Western Hemispheres ran through Siberia and across Bering Strait, pointing to the cultural discontinuity between North America and all but the eastern tip of Siberia. Instead, he maintains that similar traditions in the American Indian and European daughter cultures indicate that they had a common parent in the subpolar region of North America. He has drawn on his own extensive research on Dakota and Woodland religion, which has made him Germany's senior scholar in the cultural anthropology of the North American Indians. He also refers to a vast interdisciplinary and multilingual literature on the prehistoric and contemporary native cultures of Siberia and North America; the archeology, folklore, and architecture of Europe; and the ancient civilizations of the Near East and South Asia.

Müller's principal assumption is that certain key resemblances between cultures, even when they are scattered in space and time and appear in different contexts, must be due to a common origin and subsequent migrations. Conversely, regions that do not share these traits must always have been occupied by unrelated ethnic groups. Müller virtually leaves out of consideration the possible effects of diffusion, independent invention, and other historical events on the distribution and patterning of the cultural inventory. Although material culture is taken into account, the traits that are crucial to his argument are mostly ritual symbols, especially those that measure or mirror the cycles of time. He assumes that all symbolism must have begun with entities—that is, with observations of natural phenomena—and not with attempts at representing abstract concepts and categories in material form. A trait that was adaptive or had a concrete referent in its place of origin may come to symbolize an abstraction when it is taken to an area where it no longer corresponds to the environment. The argument loses some of its force when any of these assumptions are rejected, even though cultural parallels can be recognized on the two sides of the North Atlantic.

Müller's treatment of what he calls the "Siberian gap in ethnology" is a critical step in his argument and illustrates his method. He cites a list of traits, first noted by Danish anthropologists early in this century, that prehistoric Europe shared with North America and that are absent from the major part of Siberia. Of course, he tries to show that the shared traits must be ancient and that other traits found both in Siberia and in North America can be attributed to relatively recent migrations. The artifacts that link North America to Europe include moccasins (as against Siberian boots), poncho-like garments (as against the caftan), and snowshoes (as against skis). Even when the traits do not obviously resemble one another, they may be representations of a single principle that had to be expressed in different ways for ecological reasons. For example, migrants from the Arctic who had used whale ribs as roof supports supposedly replaced them with cross-trusses in northern Europe. The author also proposes psychological interpretations, finding similar motivations on opposite sides of the Atlantic and dissimilar ones elsewhere. Thus he argues that the archaic fiber-tempered pottery of eastern North America may well have had a common origin with early European pottery, because both wares were strictly utilitarian. On the other hand, traits occurring on both sides of Bering Strait, such as a number of folklore motifs, might have been brought to North America by the Inuit (Eskimo), who, everybody acknowledges, arrived only a few thousand years ago. According to Müller, other traits were introduced into easternmost Siberia as far as the Kolyma River by migrants from North America, a theory that had some support at the time of the Jesup North Pacific expedition in 1897.

Most anthropologists who have studied the area, however, would object that the cultural boundary along the Kolyma or in the middle of Bering Strait was not as sharp in historic times as Müller asserts and that it may not have existed at all in prehistory. For example, the belief that shamans have special powers to communicate with the spirit world occurs in the northern regions of both hemispheres, notwithstanding Müller's contention that shamanism is absent from Siberia but represented by the winter ceremonials of the Northwest Coast. And although even less is known about the prehistory of Siberia than about that of Alaska, the earliest cultures in the northwestern corner of North America, which are conservatively estimated to be between twelve and fifteen thousand years old, are likely to have been "an easterly extension of long-flourishing Siberian hunting traditions, perhaps the little-

known Dyukhtai tradition" (Brian M. Fagan, *The Great Journey: The Peopling of Ancient America*, p. 133). The connection was later obscured by geographic separation and ecological and cultural change, and still later by the migration of new peoples into Siberia, especially the speakers of Turkic and Tungus languages. In short, I do not think that we have to grant Müller's assumption that the cultures of northern North America and northern Asia have been absolutely distinct as long as humans have inhabited these areas.

Müller presents the core of his argument in the seven chapters dealing with his research on nonliterate calendars and on symbolic representations of temporal cycles. He begins by pointing out that the same word means "year" and "earth" in many North American Indian languages. He explains this polysemy by describing constructed arrangements for marking the progress of the sun along the horizon, from north to south and back again, and for charting stellar paths. For example, the Dakota and some other peoples used lines of stones arranged like the spokes of a wheel to point to the position of the sun at intervals of about thirty days. An Anasazi observatory has been discovered in New Mexico where the sun's rays passed between slabs to split spiral glyphs at the solstices and equinoxes. Such structures, Müller believes, were the sources of the far more elaborate solar and stellar observations of nuclear America. He also relates them to various devices for sighting key sunrises and sunsets, especially at the solstices and equinoxes, that are known from medieval Europe. In both Europe and North America, carefully placed stones and openings were used to schedule important festivals, whether Christmas and St. John's Day or the Sun Dance. Diffusion must have been from north to south in America and from Arctic North America to Europe because "only below the polar circle" (the translation sometimes sticks close to German idioms) are the solstices far enough apart to make much of an impression. Any method that represents the vertical circle of the sun's apparent path in temperate latitudes by a horizontal circle on the ground must have originated in the Arctic, where the midsummer sun traces a ring around the sky. But this conclusion seems forced, since indigenous observers have noted the locations of sunrise and sunset along the horizon even in the equatorial Pacific. The recurrent possibilities of discovering regularities in celestial motions, which were utilized by both Mesopotamian and Mayan astronomers, make it unnecessary to

explain all parallels by prehistoric migrations.

The discussion of architecture in chapters 5, 6, and 7 has the same general strengths and weaknesses as the preceding discussion of horizon calendars. Müller is informative when he summarizes the literature on American Indian dwellings as microcosms and on the alternation of winter and summer house types. But he is unconvincing when he insists on tracing all these features to the Arctic (for instance, by claiming that seasonal nomadism is required only in high latitudes), when he decodes prehistoric symbolism, and when he draws parallels between very general European traits and specific North American ones. The same holds true for his association of a corpulent Algonquian deity who is rolled over to produce summer and winter with any ancient or medieval drawing showing a circle divided into halves or quarters, a figure within a circle, or even concentric circles (chapter 8).

In presenting his conclusions about the transatlantic roots of European culture, Müller urges us not to be blinded by the "evolutionary dogma" that places the cradle of humanity in Africa. He describes the Calaveras skull, which is generally considered recent, "as a very early American sapiens" and accepts an age of forty-eight thousand years for some human bones from La Jolla, another California site. In fact, he insists that *Homo sapiens* could have developed in the Western Hemisphere before the beginning of the Quaternary. He then hypothesizes that people crossed the frozen ocean to Scandinavia during one of the interstadials of the Wurm glaciation, bringing Upper Paleolithic culture and Indo-European languages with them. To adopt this theory would mean discarding the logic that makes a land bridge across Bering Strait the point of entry for the earliest Americans and substituting poorly attested or downright speculative dates for more reliable later ones. It would also mean ignoring most of the available paleontological, linguistic, and climatological evidence. Despite Müller's erudite discussion of ethnoastronomy and mythology, his argument is not very persuasive.

Bernd Lambert
Cornell University