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Art & History

The Golden Ibex of Santorini - A Convergence of Cultures & Technologies
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Background
3,600 years ago the Island of Santorini (Thira) near Greece blew its top. In the most cataclysmic volcanic eruption in the recorded history of our planet, 30km2 of magma in the form of pumice and volcanic ash buried the Island and its civilisation.

Fig 1. The island of Santorini, sandwiched between Greece, Turkey and Crete, picture courtesy of NASA.

These dramatic events have given rise to a number of legends and myths. Firstly, the destroyed civilisation of the Island of Strongili (as the Island was known before the eruption) gave rise to the legend of the lost City of Atlantis. The apparent sudden destruction of the Minoan civilisation on the Island of Crete used to be ascribed to this catastrophic event although modern day archaeologists no longer believe this to be true. Finally, the timing of the volcanic eruption was undoubtedly close to the timing of the exodus of the Jews from ancient Egypt. A rational explanation for the ten plagues described in the Old Testament follows some of the predicted events with a volcanic eruption of this magnitude. For example, the column of ash above the volcano could produce a shadow long enough for the sun to be obliterated at noon over ancient Egypt. Furthermore, the inflow of the Mediterranean Sea into the volcanic cavity followed by the tidal wave might have accounted for the dry crossing of the Red Sea (The Nile delta) by Moses and the children of Israel, followed by the destruction of Pharaoh and his legions, shortly afterwards. Bible stories and legends of lost civilisations are beautiful but their reality might exceed the expectations of many sceptics.

Discovery
Approximately three years ago, a shaft was being dug to provide foundations for a permanent protective cover over the archaeological excavations at Akrotiri, a site at the southern tip of the crescent shaped island of Thira (Santorini) in the Cyclades. Amongst the rubble, a workman discovered a perfectly preserved wooden box that was thought to serve some late bronze age domestic role. On opening the box, the archaeologists were both surprised and delighted to discover a most beautifully crafted and perfectly preserved Golden Ibex about the size of a new born kitten (figure 3). Closer inspection revealed that it was hollow with all four limbs welded at the junction with the trunk. The local experts assumed it was fabricated by using the lost wax technique but the technique for welding the limbs onto the trunk was a mystery; as was its role within this lost Civilisation.

As an object, this sublimely proportioned artefact can be looked upon in three ways. Firstly, as an object venerated for its beauty and for all we know, venerated in its time as a household God, a pocket size adumbration of the Golden Calf worshipped by the children of Israel a few years after the exodus from Egypt. Secondly, it could be looked upon as an archaeological curiosity, capable of throwing light on the bronze age civilisations of the Cycladic Islands and their trading links with ancient Egypt to the South and the biblical Kingdoms to the East. Finally it was a technological tour de force to assay the gold and interpret the technique for joining the limbs to the trunk that in its own way would shed light on its archaeological provenance.

Old and New Civilisations Collide
In the last week of June 2001, a group of us assembled on the Island of Santorini as guests of Mr Peter Nomikos, the founder of Photoelectron Corporation for a scientific advisory Board meeting. I had been working with Photoelectron Corporation for

Figure 3. The Golden Ibex.
Robert Hamilton Russell, surgeon, and Percy Grainger, musician: an intimate relationship

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Introduction

The close relationship which developed between a Melbourne surgeon, Robert Hamilton Russell, and Percy Grainger, the most famous Australian composer, is referred to on at least eleven occasions in the biography of Grainger by John Bird.1 It is clear from these references that Russell was an important mentor to the young Grainger during his formative years in the early 1890’s and yet the details and significance of their friendship are not widely known. In fact the name Robert Hamilton Russell is rarely mentioned in writings or discussions on Percy Grainger.

The Grainger family were first introduced to Hamilton Russell as patients whilst he was working as a general practitioner in the Glenferrie suburb of Melbourne in 1890. John Grainger, who had suffered from increasing ill health left his wife Rose and the family again and Hamilton Russell took on some of the responsibility for Percy’s musical education.

Russell was a talented pianist, and achieved renown as a surgeon. Through his fine musical interpretations he introduced Percy to the music of Bach, Schumann, and Grieg. Bird quotes Grainger’s description of Hamilton Russell as “the first exquisite pianist of my life”. This was high praise from the very critical Grainger who, later in his life, again acknowledged the surgeon’s early formative influence on his musical development when he wrote that Hamilton Russell’s piano playing was - “a real boon to me, for it had a lovable richness and soft fullness......that I seemed never to have heard before.”

This paper includes a short description of the birthplace and family of Robert Hamilton Russell, and the background to his surgical fame. The origin of his life-long friendship with Grainger and his influence on the young boy’s musical development are also explored.

Birth and family of Hamilton Russell

Robert Hamilton Russell was born on 2nd September 1860 into a long-established family of farmers in the village of Farningham, Kent. It is not known for certain whether he was born in the family house known as Hop Pole Cottage at the Swanley end of Farningham parish, (recorded in the 1861 census), or in the larger house of Charton Manor, which was the residence of his uncle, Robert Russell. Charton Manor is quoted as the birthplace of Robert Hamilton Russell in ‘Lives of the Fellows of the Royal College of Surgeons of England’ but his birth certificate simply gives the place of birth as ‘Farningham’.

Hamilton Russell’s father, James, was born in 1820, the 4th son of James and Letitia Russell. He married Ellen Phillips on 27th July 1854 and they had 7 children, three of whom died at 15 months, 3 weeks, and 2 years of age, (James, Vincent, and Emily). Robert Hamilton Russell therefore had 3 siblings who lived into adulthood. Little is known about the career of his elder brother.

References


Conflicting Interests - None declared.

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