

The Bennington Parian Project
An Analytical Reevaluation of the Bennington Museum Collection
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The Bennington Museum is well known as a center for the study of the ceramics produced by two potteries in Bennington, Vt., during the Nineteenth Century - the Norton Pottery and the United States Pottery Company. The scope, diversity and size of the museum's collections of Bennington pottery and porcelain is unequalled. In addition, the museum owns an extensive collection of documentary material relating to these potteries. The Rockingham, flint enamel wares, and Norton stonewares have been a primary focus of the museum's exhibition and publication activities since the 1920s. However, while the museum's collection of Parian has grown in numbers over the years, this portion of the collection has received analytical attention only recently. Beginning in 1997, the Bennington Museum conducted a scholarly examination of its Parian collection.

Left: Snowdrop Pitcher, 1845-1847
Fenton's Works
Purchased for the Museum by Mr. & Mrs. Harlan

For many years, antiques dealers and collectors of Parian have accepted the attributions of Bennington Parian published by Richard Carter Barret, Bennington Pottery and Porcelain (1958). Scholars, on the other hand, have questioned the breadth of production ascribed to the firm, particularly the vast numbers illustrated by Barret. How, many have queried, could a pottery produce such a diverse array of different Parian and porcelain forms in so short a time? Deborah Federhen, curator of collections of the Bennington Museum (1996-1998), and ceramics scholar Ellen Paul Denker, with the assistance of scholars and curators in America and England, conducted a study of the Parian collection in an effort to answer these questions and determine, with as much accuracy as possible, which pieces of Parian were actually produced by the Bennington potteries.

The earliest reference to porcelain production in Bennington occurs in a letter from Christopher Webber Fenton to C.B. Adams, dated September 15, 1845. Fenton writes that a fire at the pottery has "suspended all my experiments in the manufacture of porcelain, to an indefinite period." Porcelain making in Bennington resumed in about 1846 when John Harrison began to work at the Norton Pottery. Harrison, a skilled porcelain craftsman, is said to have worked at Copeland's Works in England before relocating to America. Research by Judith Ziller, director of education at the Bennington Museum, has determined that he worked first in New York, where his son was born in 1846, and had moved to Bennington by 1847, when he appears in the town land records. The museum owns a few small Parian figures believed to have been made by Harrison. However, it does not appear that the pottery was making porcelain as a commercial product. These first experiments in porcelain probably ended with the dissolution of the partnership of Julius Norton and Christopher Webber Fenton in June 1847. By 1849, Harrison was living in Shusan, N.Y., and in 1850, in Mechanicville, N.Y.

By the fall of 1847, Fenton was in business making "White Flint Ware" and "China" along with a variety of decorative and utilitarian earthenwares. Contemporary advertisements and newspaper descriptions of the products of Fenton's subsequent partnerships continue to list "White Flint" wares, however, Parian is not mentioned until a price list dated 1852 that included ten figures, four pitchers, door knobs, door plates, and a mustard cup in this material. These items make up approximately ten percent of the 162 objects listed on this document. Fenton's pottery exhibited five Parian figures, pitchers, a clock case, and a sugar bowl in Parian at the New York Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1853 under its new name, the United States Pottery Company. Extensive descriptions of the wares appeared in reviews of the exhibition.

The factory closed in the spring of 1858 due to financial problems. Thus, the actual period of time in which Parian was made in Bennington could have been as little as six years and was certainly no more than 12 years. Although the factory was large by contemporary standards, employing as many as 175 workers in 1853, they were making many other types of wares. The company was most famous for its patented flint enamel wares. Kiln inventories for all three kilns in 1855 and 1856 record large quantities of yellowware, common white, "white granite," agateware, flint enamel, and cream-colored ware, a heavy-duty utilitarian ware used primarily for chamber pots, urinals, bedpans and bread bowls, but no Parian. Given this information, the sheer volume and variety of work attributed to Bennington by Barret seemed improbable.

Assessment Of Previous Scholarship

In order to determine the origin of these attributions, Denker and Federhen surveyed previous publications on Bennington Parian. The earliest Bennington scholars were appropriately cautious in their discussions of Parian. Ceramics collector Albert Pitkin in Early American Folk Pottery including the "History of Bennington Pottery" (1918) and Bennington Museum director John Spargo in The Potters and Potteries of Bennington (1926) ascribe very few pieces of Parian to the USP. They included only marked objects or those with a local provenance, which was presumed to indicate proof of local manufacture. Subsequent scholarship has documented the extensive worldwide trade in ceramics that distributed objects from England, China, France, Germany, and other United States potteries throughout New England. Local ownership, therefore, is no longer sufficient evidence to support an attribution of local manufacture. In fact, the museum accession cards that Spargo prepared for many of the locally owned Parian objects do not claim that these were made in Bennington, but merely state their provenance. An example of Spargo's ambivalence can be seen in the caption of the ewer illustrated in plate XXIV of his book. In spite of its history of ownership by Reverend Anson Graves, rector of Christ Church in Bennington, Spargo observes that he has "sometimes doubted whether, after all, it was actually made at Bennington - whether, indeed, it may not be one of the English pieces brought here...".

The Parian Myth

Much of the responsibility for the mass attribution of unmarked Parian to the Bennington pottery must lie with Barret, who transmuted Spargo's ambivalence into unassailable fact. Barret published Reverend Graves' ewer as a rare Bennington-made piece of Parian, without any further explanation or substantiation. Similarly, there is no documentation given for any of the hundreds of unmarked Parian objects illustrated by Barret as

Bennington wares. Barret's assumptions grew out of a mythology that developed simultaneously with, but separately from, the early work of Pitkin and Spargo. The Bennington Parian myth seems to have originated in the 1920s with Dr. Charles Green, a New York physician and ceramics enthusiast, who amassed a large collection of Parian trinket boxes and vases during his antiquing forays throughout New England. Without the benefit of current scholarship documenting the importation of European ceramics into New England, Green reasoned that anything found in New England must have been manufactured there. Since the Bennington pottery was known to have made some Parian, Green reasoned that all his unmarked Parian must have been made there as well. Green promoted his collection through numerous articles published in newspapers and magazines during the 1930s. Although he occasionally cautioned other would-be collectors of the similarity of his "Bennington Parian" to wares made in England, as well as in South Boston, Trenton, and Baltimore, he continued to expand his attributions to the Vermont pottery with no documentation other than personal opinion and geographic proximity of acquisition.

There was concern about the validity of Dr Green's attributions as early as 1934, when the following poem was published:

Dr Charles Green, the Parian King
Forswore Chelsea and Derby and Ming,
Sought for a porcelain rather more native,
Settled on Parian, got speculative.
Bought all he found and filled up a room -
Started in fact a regular boom.
Then, as befitted a true antiquarian,
Wondered if what he had gathered was Parian.
Whispered an instinct derived from the Aryan,
"Maybe your vases and pitchers are Parian."

By his own admission, in letters now preserved at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Dr Green reveled in his ability to find Parian pieces to be Bennington-made when others rejected them as English.

Elizabeth McCullough Johnson of Bennington was one of Green's most avid followers. Her scrapbook in the Bennington Museum contains dozens of his articles, including the above poem. She began to collect Parian in 1931 on buying trips throughout New England and New York State, eventually purchasing most of Green's own sizeable collection. In addition, her collecting records indicate that she purchased ceramics, including Parian, from Barret. Following Green's example, Johnson attributed all the unmarked Parian to Bennington, and by the 1950s, had accumulated hundreds of pieces. Barret courted her as a benefactor of the museum. She served as a member of the board of trustees from 1956 until her death in 1965, along with her brother, Hall Park McCullough, who was the president of the board during the 1950s. Bennington Pottery and Porcelain is primarily a catalogue of her collection. In 1958, the year of its publication, and in 1959, Johnson and her brother made sizeable donations to the museum for the construction of a new wing.

In 1966, the museum acquired the Johnson collection as a bequest. The 1,521 objects included examples of Rockingham, flint enamel, stoneware, agateware, and white graniteware, in addition to Parian, both marked and unmarked. Barret's motive in publishing Bennington Pottery and Porcelain appears to have been the

cultivation of a valuable patron for the museum, rather than the advancement of ceramics scholarship. The format of the book as a picture book with minimal text of only 18 pages suggests that this was more of a "vanity" publication than a scholarly work.

Further mitigating the book's value as a reliable tool for identifying Bennington Parian are the dozens of inaccuracies it contains. Some of the pieces illustrated by Barret as being made in Bennington are actually marked by English potteries. Others published as bearing a Fenton or United States Pottery mark are either unmarked or marked by an English company. Even those correctly identified as marked Bennington pieces are frequently described with an incorrect mark. Barret published seven pieces of Parian with English marks as being made in Bennington (plates 334, 339a,b, 352c,e, 356d,f). He claimed that 12 pieces have Bennington marks, when they are in fact unmarked (plates 54a, 55a, 55b, 60a, 60b, 71b, 83, 113b, 234, 235a, 235b, 356d) and published the wrong Bennington mark on an additional five pieces (plates 21, 50, 71c, 92c, 99a). Still other pieces were published by Barret with complete disregard for historical accuracy. For example, his attribution of vases bearing portrait medallions of a bearded Abraham Lincoln and General Ulysses Grant to a factory that closed in 1858 defies historical fact. With regard to Parian, Bennington Pottery and Porcelain combines Dr Green's unsupported opinions, Mrs Johnson's collecting enthusiasm, and Barret's inaccuracies and presumed fundraising agenda with unfortunate results. The book erroneously introduced hundreds of Parian shapes into the Bennington lexicon.

Project Protocol

Under these circumstances, using the published source material as a starting point for the reassessment of the Parian collection was out of the question. Instead Federhen and Denker had to develop a different method of looking at the objects and analyzing the primary evidence in the light of more up-to-date ceramics scholarship. Intensive documentary research on the potters and potteries of Bennington began in 1988 when Catherine Zusy joined the Bennington Museum as curator of decorative arts. Zusy, Ziller and research assistant Marietta Hibbard culled information relating to Bennington's pottery industries from contemporary newspapers and magazines, as well as from the museum's large collection of manuscript materials for Norton Stoneware and American Redware: the Bennington Museum Collection (1991). Within this large body of newly accumulated and organized documentary evidence was a great deal of information on Christopher Webber Fenton and the United States Pottery Company. Key documents pertaining to the Parian reevaluation project included the 1852 price list (discovered by Charles Messer Stow in the 1930s), numerous period newspaper and magazine descriptions of the pottery's products and operations, and the notes made by pottery collector Burton Gates from interviews with surviving potters in the 1910s. The museum also has a large number of marked objects in its collection, which had been acquired through donations and purchases over the years, as well as the unmarked objects collected by Spargo with local histories of ownership.

The Control Group

First, Federhen and Denker isolated all the marked pieces to establish a control group of incontrovertible Bennington Parian ware. This appears to have been the first time that the pottery's marked wares were studied as a coherent group. Denker and Federhen discovered that, aside from one pair of deer mantel figures, all the marked pieces are pitchers. There are 16 different patterns, 15 of which are represented in the

museum. The earliest pitchers are marked with a raised square impressed with the words "Fenton's Works;/Bennington,/Vermont." Although this mark clearly identifies the American origins of the piece, the general appearance of this mark was copied from that used by the English firm of Jones & Walley, which appears to have supplied the prototypes for several of the pitcher patterns as well. The pitchers that bear this mark would have been made prior to 1853, the year in which the pottery changed its name. There were seven patterns made during this early period: Love and War, Bird's Nest, Snowdrop, Panel Flower and Vine, Rib Flower and Vine, Wild Rose, and Tulip and Sunflower. Aside from a few handpainted versions of the Wild Rose design, these pitchers are all white. The 1852 order form includes four pitchers numbered in descending order of price per dozen, \$12, 10, 8 and 4. It is likely that the Love and War and Bird's Nest are pitchers 3 and 4, respectively, since their small size would correspond to the lower prices. Four of these patterns are copied from English precedents - Love and War, Bird's Nest, Snowdrop, and Tulip and Sunflower. It is possible that the other two pitchers mentioned on the 1852 list are Snowdrop, and Tulip and Sunflower. Working in a new material, Fenton probably copied English prototypes for his earliest pieces before attempting original designs such as the Wild Rose and the two Flower and Vine variation.

The Fenton pottery primarily used two marks after 1853, when the pottery was incorporated as the United States Pottery Company. The earlier of the two is a raised or applied lozenge impressed "UNITED STATES/POTTERY/CO./BENNINGTON, VT.," which appears on four pitcher patterns. These are Cascade, Climbing Ivy, Tulip and Sunflower, and Paul and Virginia without figures. The Bennington Museum owns Tulip and Sunflower pitchers with blue and brown backgrounds which have applied lozenge marks in corresponding colors. A raised ribbon mark with the initials "U.S.P." was the last mark used on Parian by this firm. The ribbon also features two numbers denoting the pattern number and the capacity of the pitcher. The pattern numbers in the Bennington Museum collection run from 9 to 16. Examples of all the patterns, except number 13, are represented in the museum. The number 13 may never have been used for a pattern due to superstition. The numbered patterns are as follows: 9- Tulip and Sunflower with Gothic pillar under spout; 10 - Paul and Virginia, with and without figures; 11 - Arabesque; 12 - Tulip and Sunflower with stippled background, palm tree under spout; 14 - Pond Lily; 15 - Oak Leaf, smooth background with palm tree under spout; and, 16 - Oak Leaf, with stippled background. Only two of these later pitchers, Paul and Virginia, and Pond Lily, in addition to the Tulip and Sunflower pattern retained from the earlier period, are copied from English models. The Bennington Museum owns a single example of a third mark used rarely by the USP Company after 1853. An incised oval mark "UNITED STATES/POTTERY CO./BENNINGTON VT.," is found on a Bird's Nest syrup pitcher in the museum collection. This version of the Bird's Nest pattern is slightly smaller than those bearing the lozenge mark, but otherwise identical.

The marked pitchers display a remarkable similarity in materials, manufacture and design esthetics. The body is fine-grained, creamy white, and usually free of impurities. The pitcher patterns are press-molded in low relief, with no applied decoration. Color is not found until after 1853, when blue and tan are used. This early blue, seen on Paul and Virginia and Tulip and Sunflower pitchers, is an unusual and distinctive dark navy blue color. Later pitchers with the ribbon mark exhibit a royal blue color. There is an aesthetic consistency among the pitchers, particularly with the patterns which appear to be new designs - Flower and Vine, Wild Rose, Climbing Ivy, Arabesque, and Oak Leaf. The foliate-type decoration is conceived as an overall pattern, without the horizontal or segmental divisions frequently found on European pitchers. The elements meander over the entire surface, with very little open space. Vines and branches are oriented naturally from the handle or the base of the pitcher. The small features and graceful curves create a delicate and refined appearance. Cascade is also a USP original design, though it is not a foliate pattern, and differs slightly in its esthetic orientation.

In addition to the pitchers described above, there are only two other known marked Bennington Parian objects. The museum owns a pair of mantel figures depicting a seated stag and doe that are stamped with the circular 1849 mark, a mark that was used frequently on Rockingham and flint enamel wares. The mark features incised letters with "Lyman, Fenton & Co./BENNINGTON, Vt." encircling "Fenton's/ENAMEL/PATENTED/1849.

Attributing Unmarked Parian

In order to determine what additional items could be attributed to Bennington with some certainty, Federhen and Denker carefully reviewed the artifactual and documentary evidence to establish criteria for attributing unmarked works. The authors used six methods for attributing additional Parian objects to the Bennington pottery: relationship to the marked Parian pieces; similarity to other types of marked Bennington ceramics; valid archaeological evidence; depiction in the engraving of the Crystal Palace Exhibition; inclusion in contemporary price lists or descriptions of the pottery's wares; and a reliable local Nineteenth Century provenance.

Attributions can be made by comparison with marked Bennington objects. Unmarked pitchers which are identical to marked examples can be attributed with some certainty. Although unmarked, a teapot, three sugar bowls and a creamer in the Rib Flower and Vine pattern have been identified as products of the USP by their similarity to the marked pitcher. The museum owns three unmarked Parian vases in the Paul and Virginia pattern. Barret erroneously published these vases and an unmarked redware vase in the same pattern as having a ribbon mark. The low relief and simplified design relate more closely to the Bennington pitchers in this pattern, rather than to the English versions that are more intricate and sculptural. It is, therefore, reasonable to attribute these to the Vermont factory. Similar care should be exercised in attributing any patterns that were made in England and Bennington. A mantel figure of a recumbent cow can be attributed to the USP Company based on its similarity to marked Rockingham and flint enamel examples of this form.

The only archaeological evidence used for the study was from professionally-conducted archaeological excavations, since surface finds and undocumented boxes of broken Parian lack a dependable geographic or temporal context. For example, a box of Parian shards that Federhen and Denker examined which were said to have been collected from the USP Company site by a local antiques dealer included pieces of broken shop stock, identified by having a stock number and price, which had been tossed into the box, thereby compromising the validity of the entire collection. In addition to shards recovered from earlier archaeological surveys conducted on the site, the Bennington Museum received thousands of ceramic fragments found during an archaeological excavation organized by ceramics scholar Catherine Zusy and conducted by archaeologists David Starbuck and Victor Rolando in May 1997. The dig was specifically sited near the South Wing of the pottery where the Parian was produced. All but one of the 12 pits contained Parian and a total of 3,802 Parian shards were found.

These shards corroborate the attributions which Federhen and Denker made based on the artifactual and documentary evidence. The Zusy/Starbuck/Rolando report confirms that all but a few of the fragments were from parts of ten different pitchers that are all represented by marked examples in the museum's collection. There were no fragments found of any of the other forms published by Barret, including vases, figures, and trinket boxes, nor were there any fragments found with applied grapes or flowers. Two subsequent digs were conducted in April and August 1998 by Zusy, Starbuck and Rolando. Although thousands of Parian shards were

recovered, there were no vases, trinket boxes, or applied grapes or flowers found. Zusy's preliminary press release on the 1998 digs and examination of the shards by Federhen and Ziller suggests that almost all of the Parian shards were from the marked pitchers.

The archaeological digs have provided tantalizing evidence of several unknown Parian objects made by the Fenton pottery. Two "mystery" shards from the 1997 dig could not be matched to any of the Parian in the museum's collections. One is a fragment of the rim of a syrup pitcher with a portion of an acanthus leaf. The other small piece has a floral design and is glazed on the inside; the thickness of the body suggests that it was also part of a pitcher. The August 1998 dig yielded several fragments that may have come from one or more pitchers - pieces of an octagonal body with lilies-of-the-valley, shaped rims with pendant diamonds, and a raised rib with bellflowers. An S-shaped fragment of a handle shaped like a branch entwined with flowers may have come from a teapot or a creamer. Archaeological evidence documents the production of two additional pitcher patterns in Parian. The 1997 dig found pieces of an octagonal pitcher with ribs accented by a climbing plant of the geranium family. The museum owns two similar marked pitchers in flint enamel, botanically misidentified by Barret as Ivy Vine pitcher (plates 62, 63). Large fragments of an octagonal cream pitcher in an acanthus leaf pattern were recovered in an earlier dig; small fragments of this pattern were found in the May 1997 and August 1998 dig. These fragments also provide documentation for the museum's unmarked acanthus creamers in Rockingham and white graniteware. In addition, archaeological evidence documents a new variation of a known pattern. The archaeology team found a fragment in the Wild Rose pattern with a stippled background, the first indication that this variation was made. The August 1998 dig uncovered a fragment of a spaniel against a floral background, which documents a small figure of a standing boy playing with a dog in the museum collection as being made by Fenton. The Bennington Museum owns flint enamel and stoneware versions of this figure as well. Fragments of cane terminals in the form of human heads and a curtain tie-back were also found in the August 1998 dig.

Documentary evidence exists for several unusual forms. An elaborate clock case is illustrated in the engraving of the Crystal Palace exhibition published in Gleason's Pictorial in October 1853. The museum owns an unmarked Parian clock case with molded urns and foliate decoration which corresponds to the engraved example and can be solidly attributed to the Bennington pottery. Fenton created a large scale Parian allegorical group of a woman holding a child, identified as "Justice" and "Mercy," for the top of his earthenware monument, the centerpiece of his display, which can also be seen in the Gleason engraving. This appears to have been a unique object, made specifically for the Crystal Palace exhibition. The 1852 price list includes door knobs, door plates, and a mustard cup in Parian, however, there is no visual or archaeological evidence to suggest the appearance of these items. None of the door knobs or name plates in the museum collection can be identified as Bennington as yet. There is documentary evidence for the figures made by the USP Company. The 1852 price list includes ten figures: Adoration, Cupid, Indian Queen, Good Night, Grey Hound, Swan, Sailor Boy and Dog, Sheep, and Bird's Nest. The illustration of the 1853 Crystal Palace exhibition depicts four figures: a baby and eagle on a rock, a reclining boy, and two female figures standing on plinths and dressed in classical drapery. These are the only figures which can be reliably associated with the Fenton pottery. The Bennington Museum owns several examples of the bird and baby grouping shown in the engraving which match the marked Parian in the color and texture of the ceramic body. These are undoubtedly Bennington products. The 1853 engraving illustrates several mantel ornaments in the form of deer, lions, and poodles carrying baskets of fruit. While usually made in Rockingham and flint enamel, the museum collection includes Parian examples of the poodles that can be attributed to Bennington with some certainty. A tentative attribution has been given to a figure of a girl bending to tie her shoe, which has been

identified in English sources as "Good Night." Likewise, the sheep and bird nest figures in the museum collection which have ceramic bodies similar to the marked Parian have been attributed to Bennington. However, there is no evidence to document the appearance of the other figures included on the price list and no examples have been found to match the reclining boy or the female figures which were exhibited at the Crystal Palace. The figure of Little Red Riding Hood published by Barret (plate 356d) as bearing a Bennington mark is, in fact, marked by Minton; six other figures published by Barret are marked by Copeland, Minton or Robert Cooke, all English manufacturers (plates 334, 339a,b, 352c,e, 356f).

Provenance is the least reliable means of attributing a Bennington origin, as family histories can be inaccurate and local ownership does not necessarily indicate local production. Inventories of businesses and households in Bennington document the sale and ownership of English ceramics in considerable quantities as early as the late Eighteenth Century. Only a small fraction of the museum's Parian collection, and none of the pieces in the Johnson collection, have any provenance.

Scientific Testing

Denker and Federhen investigated the possibility of utilizing scientific testing, such as Energy Dispersive X-ray Fluorescence, as an additional identification tool. The authors determined that, while it would be possible to analyze the elemental composition of the ceramic bodies, this information would be useless without the supplemental data necessary to correctly interpret it. A representative sampling of documented pieces from every pottery producing Parian in the Nineteenth Century in America, Britain and Europe would be required in order to establish a baseline reference for interpreting the raw data from an unmarked piece. There were over 200 potteries in England and Scotland that were making Parian, in addition to those in France, Germany, and Ireland. In America, Parian was produced in Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Maryland, and Ohio. As there are no documented pieces for most of the British potteries, this baseline information is not available.

Furthermore, since many potteries were purchasing their clays from the same sources, any attempt to differentiate between them based on the composition of ceramic bodies would be impossible without complete and accurate documentation of the sources of raw materials used by all the potteries producing Parian during the Nineteenth Century in America, Britain and Europe. The analysis would need samples of the clay, feldspar, kaolin, etc. from the same strata as had been used in the Nineteenth Century. Neither the documentation nor the pit samples have survived. There was also a very real danger that others would attempt to extrapolate unwarranted significance from this unsupported data and create new Bennington Parian myths.

Conclusion

An extensive search of public and private collections has not found any vases, ewers, or trinket boxes which have a Fenton or USP mark, a fact which calls into question the enormous number of these objects that have been attributed to Bennington. Furthermore, there is no documentary or archaeological evidence to indicate that any of these forms were made in Bennington. In the absence of a single piece of evidence, it is impossible

to make the assumption that the hundreds of different vases, ewers and trinket boxes illustrated by Barret were made by Fenton. Indeed, just the opposite seems to be the case. Whereas Barret stated that Bennington Parian was rarely marked and difficult to identify, Denker and Federhen have found that Bennington Parian is usually marked making it quite easy to identify. Instead of making slavish copies of English pieces, Bennington's modelers were innovative and creative. Instead of hiding behind unmarked ware to trick buyers into thinking it of English make, Fenton was justly proud of the work produced by his pottery and clearly marked his wares in order to claim them as American.

The reevaluation of the Parian collection at the Bennington Museum was based on the systematic analysis of information from a variety of sources: documents, objects, and archaeology. By starting from the incontrovertible evidence rather than from the many attributions that have been made over the years, Federhen and Denker have been able to reconstruct a significant body of work that documents the production of the United States Pottery Company. This body of work now holds together unquestionably and waits for additions that are based on firm evidence rather than hopeful speculation.