Ancient Ocean Crossings: Reconsidering the Case for Contacts with the Pre-Columbian Americas. Stephen C. Jett. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2017, 538 pp. \$49.95, cloth. ISBN 978-0-8173-1939-7.

On the dust cover of this book, Stephen Jett tells us that he wishes to encourage readers “to reevaluate the common belief that there was no significant interaction between the chiefdoms and civilizations of Eurasia and Africa and peoples who occupied the alleged terra incognita beyond the great oceans.” That alleged terra incognita is the Americas.

Jett attacks the issue with considerable energy, laying out a sizeable body of circumstantial evidence. Of course, some cases of transoceanic contact are nowadays unarguable. Yes, there was contact between Polynesia and South America (or vice versa, or even both ways), and between Alaska and Siberia across Bering Strait. No one seems to doubt these instances, but they are not the real issue. More contentious are those claims about the cultures of Africa, India, Japan, China, and Southeast Asia, and their possible impacts on the Americas (or again, vice versa).

Jett approaches the problem through 32 chapters organized into four parts, each dealing with a separate body of background information. Part I deals with topics such as winds and currents, diet aboard ships and circumstances of survival, the transmissibility across wide oceans of contagious diseases, domesticated animals and plants, and some shadowy documentary evidence for contacts going back into Classical times. Also dealt with is the issue of why a lack of archaeological or biological evidence need not mean that no contact occurred. Jett points out how some Old World “crowd diseases” such as mumps and measles, while no doubt lethal for those with no resistance, would not have survived long sea voyages because those who survived also acquired immunity to reinfection. Hence, it might not be surprising that they are not attested in the Pre-Columbian New World, even if contact did occur.

More than one hundred pages are spent in Part II on sea craft of different times and places, their technologies, and the chances of their crossing an ocean with survivors. Most of the evidence presented is from secondary sources, but I have no trouble in believing that many coastal populations in the Old World had the ability to cross wide oceans by at least 5,000 years ago. I was also intrigued to read that double canoes, according to Jett, might have preceded outrigger canoes in the settlement of Oceania. I have often suspected the same myself, without actual evidence, and certainly not everyone agrees with this view. The voyage from the Philippines to the Marianas, made around 3,500 years ago, across 2,300 km of empty ocean if direct, could be relevant here. Jett is incorrect, however, to state that Proto-Austronesian was spoken in southern China. The linguistic reconstruction is sourced to Taiwan, not the Chinese mainland.

The final sections of the book deal with physical evidence, both biological and archaeological, that Jett thinks demonstrates that Old World to New World contacts occurred. Polynesian chickens in Chile are still under debate, and interhemispheric disease transfers in Pre-Columbian times are uncertain owing to lack of definite evidence. As for peanuts in Neolithic China and maize cobs carved on the walls of Medieval South Indian temples, not to mention tobacco and coca products wrapped in Egyptian mummies, we seem to be swirling in a cloud of disagreement and an absence of directly dated radiocarbon contexts. And we must wonder how a crop as significant as maize, if it really was once significant enough to be carved on temple walls in India, should have disappeared so thoroughly from the rather substantial archaeobotanical record of the Indian subcontinent, not to mention its voluminous historical records. Why was no one competent to propagate it given the suitability of the monsoonal climate of South Asia for the plant to thrive, not to mention the considerable agricultural skills that existed in the subcontinent at the time?

Jett also has a coverage of human genetic data, mostly from fairly old literature and mostly inconclusive. To my knowledge, outside the Siberian origins arena for indigenous Americans, no one has compared Old World and New World populations using modern genomic information, including autosomal ancestry components. Jett refers to HTLV, blood group, and mtDNA data that could suggest links to the Americas from all over the Old World, including China, Jomon Japan, Ptolemaic Egypt, and the “Cele-

bes” (Sulawesi) Sea. But he tends to regard all cases of genetic parallelism as due to transfer, not common ancestry or independent mutation. I am not sure where all this leads to, but I suspect that the cases that he lists will need to be studied very carefully by an independent panel of geneticists using modern genomic methods.

This book is very much about possibilities, claims and counterclaims. There are no proven, dated, sourced, and securely contextualized finds of Old World origin in New World sites, or vice versa (excluding accepted items such as dogs, and sweet potatoes in Polynesia). This makes it extremely hard to gauge the significance of contacts, even if we can agree that some occurred. If transoceanic contact was as important as claimed, why is there no absolutely unequivocal evidence? Given the excellence of European ships from at least Roman times and onwards, why were the Scandinavian settlements of Greenland and Newfoundland so late in time (relatively) and so impermanent? Why did those hardy Vikings not simply sail on and conquer at least part of the American mainland, like the Conquistadors a few centuries later?

Unfortunately, that much-desired Roman or Ptolemaic pot in that totally sealed and never-looted Preclassic Maya tomb does not appear to have emerged. Maybe it will one day, in which case I will be extremely impressed. Even so, I am impressed with Jett’s attention to detail, and fairly convinced by some of it, but still unsure as to quite where we are in this grand debate over transoceanic contact. Who influenced whom, and exactly what happened when they did? Without transoceanic contact, would the Classic Teotihuacanos and Maya have built elite ceremonial centers and massive pyramids, or would they all have lived quietly in small acephalous village communities? Indeed, would they even have had agriculture, given that Jett claims at one point that farming was only invented once in the world (p. 328)? Therefore, did Neolithic Chinese spread agriculture to Mesoamerica? If so, why didn’t they take rice and millets, not to mention pigs and soybeans, given that both regions have similar monsoonal climates with summer rainfall? My credulity is stretched to its limits at this point.

Having stated this, however, I should also point out that the introduction of the sweet potato to prehistoric and temperate New Zealand, and to the post-AD 1500 New Guinea Highlands, led to substantial demographic and social changes since it allowed cool-climate forms of agriculture to increase productivity far above that allowed by the original tropical crops of those regions. So, diffusion of this type (without substantial population migration) could often be very important. The missionary John Williams described in 1823 how a garbled version of Christianity was introduced by a drift voyage from then-converted Tahiti to then-undiscovered, hence completely prehistoric, Rarotonga in the Cook Islands. The Rarotongans built a *marae* (shrine) to Jehovah and Jesus Christ, but the heresy was soon stamped out when the real Bible landed on their shores in the hands of businesslike missionaries just a few years afterwards. Nevertheless, the potential was there, perhaps for something interesting to occur had prehistory continued.

I think the upshot of all of this is that transoceanic “contact” between peoples in different hemispheres occurred along a scale of significance. That it sometimes could have occurred is not in doubt, but was it always *relevant* from broad perspectives of

cultural and biological evolution? Stephen Jett has done a good job, but endless questions remain.

PETER BELLWOOD, *Australian National University*