

A "MIRACULOUS" METEORITE OF ARAB LEGEND

By HENRY W. NICHOLS
CHIEF CURATOR, DEPARTMENT OF GEOLOGY

A slice of a meteorite which, according to an ancient Arabian legend, was a block of gold when it fell to earth, and was twice changed by God—once to silver, and finally to iron—as a punishment to tribes who quarreled over its possession, was recently acquired by Field Museum. It is now on exhibition in Hall 34 which contains the world's most comprehensive meteorite collection.

The true history of this meteorite, known as the Tamentit iron, although not as strange as the Arabian Nights type of tales told about it by the natives of the region where it fell, is nevertheless also extraordinary. It arrived on the earth hundreds of years ago near the Tamentit oasis in the Touat, Sahara Desert, and it is the oldest iron meteorite, actually seen while falling, which has been preserved, according to the records.

THE LEGENDARY STORY

For hundreds of years this meteorite has been the mascot of the people of the Tamentit oasis, and if we could only believe all that is told of it in an old, undated Arabian manuscript it would be the most extraordinary object in Field Museum or any other museum. According to this manuscript, called *El Bassit*, a block of gold fell between Noum in Nas and El Tittaf in the Sahara during the time when the Oulad Nesslem, the Oulad Yacoub, and the Oulad Daoud occupied Tamentit. Each of these peoples prepared to take it home, but each encountered the opposition of the others. Quarrels arose, and God changed the gold to silver. As the quarrels continued, God next changed the silver to the iron of which the meteorite is now composed.

THE AUTHENTIC HISTORY

Digging into its authentic history, we find that the Tamentit iron fell toward the close of the fourteenth century—the exact year is not known. Sometime between 1392 and 1413 it was brought by order of the Sheik Amr' to Tamentit. Here it lay in the street in front of the mosque, projecting sixteen inches above the ground in which it was partly buried from about 1400 to 1827, when it was moved to France. Because the Arabs believed it to be a mascot of great virtue and importance they had constantly avoided touching it as far as possible, and tried to prevent animals also from touching it. Before the French could obtain the consent of the natives to take it away, they found it necessary to conduct long and difficult negotiations, lasting more than two years. After consent was obtained difficulties were encountered in transporting it from the desert over 1,000 kilometers to the coast. However, these were overcome and in 1827 the meteorite reached

Paris, where most of it now rests in the National Museum.

Complementing Field Museum's specimens representing the Tamentit meteorite as the first iron meteorite ever seen to fall and afterwards to be preserved, the institution also has a piece of the Ensisheim (Alsace) meteorite which was the first stone meteorite ever preserved after being seen to fall. The Ensisheim stone fell in 1492, or about one hundred years after the Tamentit iron arrived on the earth.

THINGS YOU MAY HAVE MISSED

Something to Think About on Thanksgiving Day

Whether you celebrate Thanksgiving on the traditional last Thursday of the month, or in accordance with presidential and gubernatorial proclamations which vary from that date, it is of interest to reflect how purely American this holiday is. Even the foods used in a typical Thanksgiving feast are practically all native to this country, and were unknown in Europe prior to the opening of the New World—the plant foods, as well as the turkey (regarding the latter, see *page 1*).

The important part the discovery of America played in augmenting the world's variety of foodstuffs is impressively illustrated in an exhibit of food plants of New World Origin in Hall 25 of the Department of Botany. By means of this display a visitor is enabled to see at a glance which of the numerous vegetables and fruits in common use originated on this continent. A large proportion of these are to be found at almost any Thanksgiving dinner-table.

Dr. B. E. Dahlgren, Chief Curator of the Department of Botany, writes:

"On his first voyage to the New World, Columbus found the inhabitants using vegetables that were strange to him, especially some starchy tubers, probably sweet potatoes and cassava. He carried these back to Spain and presented them to Queen Isabella, together with other products of the newly found land. The incident marked the first introduction of American food plants into the Old World, an event of considerable significance to the world's dietary, which has America to thank for many important contributions.

"After Columbus, the early explorers and conquistadores found other food plants in use and cultivation among the New World

Change in Visiting Hours

Effective November 1, and continuing until February 29, winter visiting hours—9 A.M. to 4 P.M.—will be observed on weekdays at Field Museum; 9 A.M. to 5 P.M. on Sundays.

Proceedings, transactions and publications of learned societies and universities throughout the world are among the books available to the public for reference in the Library of Field Museum.

inhabitants, especially the Aztecs of Mexico and the Incas of Peru. Cortez made the first acquaintance with chocolate and vanilla at the court of Montezuma.

"Early settlers in North and South America soon learned to use many of the vegetable foods of the Indians, such as corn, pumpkins, squashes, and cassava. Certain of the newly discovered food plants spread rapidly over most of the world. This was true of the peanut, which was carried to Africa from the east coast of South America, and to the Orient from the west coast, early in the history of world-wide navigation. Some American food plants, such as potatoes, were first carried to Europe and developed in cultivation there before coming into general use among the new population in the land of their origin. Others, such as tomatoes, were very slow in becoming adopted.

"The tomato was grown in Europe for several centuries as a curiosity and ornamental plant known as 'pomme d'amour' or 'love apple,' before it became, rather recently, the important food that it is today, with its juice also a popular beverage."



Food Plants of New World Origin

An exhibit in Hall 25 which enables a visitor to comprehend at a glance America's vegetable and fruit contributions to the world's diet. All of these plant foods were unknown in Europe prior to Columbus's voyages. Many will appear on typical Thanksgiving dinner tables throughout the United States this month.

Included among the products on display are maize or Indian corn, potatoes, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, pimientos, Jerusalem artichokes (which are the roots of a western sunflower), pumpkins, squashes, lima and kidney beans, cassava (which in the United States is best known in the form of tapioca), peanuts, cranberries, persimmons, papaws, papayas, avocado, pineapple, cacao, and vanilla. Uncommon products are omitted.



1939. "Food Plants of New World Origin." *Field Museum news* 10(11), 3-3.

View This Item Online: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/25712>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/364675>

Holding Institution

Field Museum of Natural History Library

Sponsored by

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Copyright & Reuse

Copyright Status: In copyright. Digitized with the permission of the Chicago Field Museum.

For information contact dcc@library.uiuc.edu.

Rights Holder: Field Museum of Natural History

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.