

CHAPTER 12

THE ETCETERA
OF ASTRONOMICAL SEISMOLOGY

THE DISCOVERY OF LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY MØD MAN[†]

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[†][EDITOR'S NOTE: This unusual communication, purportedly from the year 2986, was received too late for inclusion in our regular program. However, by a remarkable coincidence, ancestors of the authors were present in Aarhus, and one of them could not be dissuaded from delivering this earliest of late papers in a post-prandial session held at Varna on Thursday, 10 July.]

1. INTRODUCTION

Greetings! We who now salute you from the year 2986 are members of the species Homo tachyones, the first human generation to learn how to use the tachyon. Naturally, following this discovery, the immediate question arose, "To what great purpose shall we put this knowledge?" After much deliberation, we decided on the interesting experiment of communicating about some of our more puzzling archaeopsychological discoveries with the subjects of those discoveries themselves, back in the distant and hitherto inaccessible past.

This deceptively simple aim initially presented us with an apparently insoluble problem -- how to find a body of even primitive humans so gullible that they would not immediately throw away such a message as the obvious work of pranksters, or worse still, cranks? However, we now believe we may have finally found the solution. Recent extensive excavations in the neighborhood of our house [Aarhus?-Ed] appear to confirm what had hitherto been interpreted as folk-lore, i.e., that in the late twentieth century the area was inundated by scores of happy, smiling, confident and apparently unwittingly doomed astrophysicists. Further research suggests that your group contained the greatest concentration of likely message recipients in recorded history, particularly since one artifact we unearthed contains a reference to the WIMP, the tachyon's ground state. Accustomed to receiving manifestly nonsensical communications, yet patiently treating them with serious attention, indeed unusual reverence, you clearly represent the ideal group for our purposes.

2. THE BODY OF DATA

Our main discoveries consisted of first one, and then a second, well-preserved human body. Because of their most noticeable characteristic, a strange distribution of wrinkles left on these bodies, they have been given the scientific name Homo pulsatus. However, just as in your own time the Grauballe Iron-Age discovery (Bibby, 1974) was popularly known as "Bog Man" (Glob, 1969), so Homo pulsatus has acquired the common name of "Mød Man."

[EDITOR'S NOTE: But possibly "Måd Man"? The message here is a trifle obscure, owing to some ambiguity in the vowel. It could be "ø". Our superchairman informs me that "Mød" means "to meet" in current Danish. This interpretation would confirm what the message has already suggested, that the authors were -- or rather, will be -- aware that the exhumed corpses were caught in an unanticipated catastrophe while they were present at a meeting. However, there is some contra-indication, in a confirming transmission, that "å" is intended. Although this is nonsensical in present day Danish, it may represent a failed attempt to transmit the highly appropriate English term "Mad Man." Then again, should the Danish language change somewhat in the next millenium, an alternative pronunciation ("Mode Man"?) would strongly suggest some familiarity with our pursuits here. But we digress. The message continues:]

Mød Man has been further subdivided into two main forms, according to not only the distribution of wrinkles, but also the different locations and attitudes in which the examples were discovered. The superior chamber (see Figure 1) yielded the first specimen (an unusually appropriate term, in view of the common, yet archaeologically rare act in which he was engaged), with wrinkles increasing in amplitude to the extremely furrowed forehead. Here, clearly, was someone of self pronounced intellect. Further excavation revealed at lower depths an inferior form, face apparently flattened, indeed, crushed by forces far beyond his control. This form's face was turned upwards, and bore an evanescent expression which can only be described as one of surprized, yet strangely accustomed resignation (see Figure 2). At first, it was supposed that these were, in their different strata, quite independent finds, but they were finally and brilliantly linked together. Thus the upper form, caught in the act of urinating on the lower, has been named "P-Mød Man"; while the inferior example, with the astonished yet resigned and subdued expression, is designated "G-Mød Man."

More detailed forensic examination, coupled with vague references in the ancient literature, seem to confirm the appropriateness of these designations. Thus, P-Mød Man appears to have lived a life of relative ease and luxury. He was richly arrayed. His fingerprints were unusually distinct, and indeed, the papillary ridges of P-Mød Man show no signs whatever of hard manual labor; life's trappings came easily to him. The intestinal contents were analyzed. His last meal, presumed typical, included delicately smoked fish, succulent meats and sumptuous dessert, all washed down with fine wines. In contrast, G-Mød Man was forced to content himself with cast-offs. The papillary layers of his hands, almost completely worn down and obscured, show that G-Mød Man generally

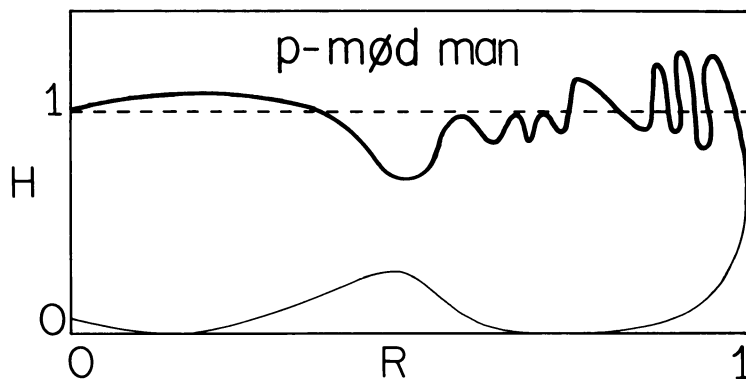


Figure 1. P-Mød Man: the superior form. Although discovered in a vertical orientation he is illustrated in a horizontal position for clearer comparison with Figure 2. For reasons of decorum (see text) only the upper portion of his anatomy is exhibited.

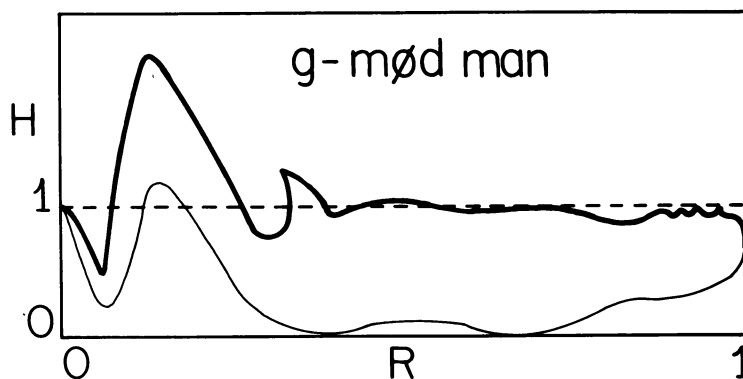


Figure 2. G-Mød Man: the inferior form. Note the almost orthogonal character of his distribution to that of Figure 1.

scratched a living from rigid, unyielding surfaces. The stomach contents suggest that he survived somehow on a few meager scraps from the tables of P-Mød Man, supplemented by other fare that the latter would abhor. His last meal consisted largely of crow, which he evidently had to eat quite frequently.

We may now picture this markedly stratified society, with P-Mød Man walking proudly upright in full sunlight while G-Mød Man stumbled along blindly in the near dark, knees buckling from the gravest burdens. To judge from the murals in the respective chambers, their occupants were well aware of their relative strata and prosperity. In addition

to the common symbols "κ" and "ω" (evidently religious symbols pertaining to the beginning and end of their earthly pursuits?), one chamber bore the repeated motif "P_{l,n}", in shining gold leaf, the other crude and hardly decipherable scratchings of "g_{l,m}" -- transparently veiled references to the one living a life of Plenitude, the other only a glum existence.

3. REMAINING INTERPRETIVE PROBLEMS

Some problems of interpretation still remain, and your assistance in settling these puzzles would be much appreciated. We are accustomed to finding in ancient burial sites objects of value, or artifacts thought to be of some use in the afterworld. The artifacts found here, however, seem to have no value or purpose whatsoever, and that is where your help comes in. We note the following:

a) Each of these bodies was accompanied by vast copies of something called "The Astrophysical Journal." We have examined these closely. We can see no obvious utility for their detailed contents, either in life or in death. Only one possible bulk use has suggested itself. Are they intended to line walls, unopened, as a form of insulation from the outside world? Can you enlighten us?

b) One piece of paper was found on which was written, cryptically, "8.8/21.1 \cong 5/12 to 0.095%!" What is the significance of this?

c) Finally, one last scrap says, "If you cannot study a white dwarf observationally, all is not lost. Using theory, you can 'Winget'." What does this mean?

We hope you can confirm the general conclusions we have reached and answer the questions posed above. Please bury your responses at a suitably deep level. We have deliberately called a temporary halt to our excavations in order that renewed digging, to be pursued by us after sending this message, may unearth your replies without violating causality.

4. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We owe a great debt to your contemporary Gregory Benford (1980), who first conceived the idea, in principle, of tachyonic pre-communication. We also acknowledge the deep sense of kinship we feel with you primitives. We see our own task as not merely to interpret history, but to shape it; just as you see yours, not to understand reality, but to misrepresent it! From across the centuries, we, your descendants and authors of the very early, late poster paper 10.1, send you greetings.

REFERENCES

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