

# Prof claims he has found lost Ark of the Covenant

March 15, 2008

Posted: 3/14/08

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**By Brittani Hamm**

*Religion News Service*

LONDON (RNS)—Brushing back a thick layer of dust, Tudor Parfitt revealed a distinctive interwoven pattern carved around the outside of the “terribly, terribly damaged” wooden artifact tucked away on the bottom shelf of a Zimbabwe warehouse.

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Tudor Parfitt discovered this wooden drum, called a ngoma lungundu, in a Zimbabwe warehouse. Parfitt believes it is the Ark of the Covenant—or something like it—that was carried into Africa by the Lemba tribe.  
(RNS photos/Courtesy of Tudor Parfitt)

“The moment I saw it, I felt there was something weird about it,” said Parfitt, a professor of modern Jewish studies at the University of London’s School of African and Oriental Studies. “I wasn’t simply in the presence of a neutral object.”

Parfitt believes he has found the Ark of the Covenant—the legendary vessel that once housed the Ten Commandments—or at least something like it.

In his new book, *The Lost Ark of the Covenant: Solving the 2,500 Year Old Mystery of the Fabled Biblical Ark*, Parfitt describes how he found the artifact in a global trek that would have made Indiana Jones proud. He was shot at in Ethiopia, escaped capture by Islamist outlaws in Yemen and

enlisted the help of a cannibalistic tribe in Papua New Guinea.

Parfitt's 20-year hunt ended last year in Zimbabwe at the Harare Museum of Human Science, where he found his treasure in a dusty storeroom.

According to the Book of Exodus, the Ark of the Covenant—a gold-covered container carried on poles, topped with two golden cherubim facing each other—was crafted on orders from God given to Moses at Mount Sinai.



Tudor Parfitt, a professor of modern Jewish studies at the University of London, claims to have discovered the Ark of the Covenant—or something like it.

Parfitt, however, thinks it is unlikely a group of ex-slaves wandering in the desert had the means to create an object so elaborate. That's why the piece he found, a carved wooden drum, seems more likely, he said.

"It's not like anything that we encounter in our daily lives," Parfitt said. "I think it was both a musical instrument that goes into battle and some kind of weapon using technology we don't quite understand."

Parfitt began to suspect the Ark of the Covenant was a drum in the late 1980s while studying an African tribe called the Lemba.

Using genetic testing, he was able to verify a piece of their oral tradition, that they descended from Israelites. At the time, his discovery was featured on 60 Minutes and the BBC.

Another idea central to the Lemba's oral tradition was their sacred "ngoma lungundu," a wooden drum the tribe's Israelite priests brought with them from Jerusalem.

"At that time, I thought to connect (it) too close to the Ark of Covenant was too off-the-wall," Parfitt said. "There wasn't the remotest amount of evidence."

But after studying the similarities, Parfitt concluded the ngoma and the Ark of the Covenant were one and the same. Both were the dwelling place of God, carried on poles, forbidden to touch the ground and connected with death, fire, smoke and noise.

Lemba tribal lore says the ngoma exploded and destroyed itself, an idea Parfitt used to explain why his relic was radiocarbon dated to A.D. 1350. Parfitt believes the remains of the original Ark of the Covenant spawned the ngoma—an ark-junior, so to speak.

"It presumably is the son of the original," Parfitt said. "It had the same function. It was holy and had precious secrets kept inside, and it was also a weapon. Then it disappeared, and all that was left was the legend."

Some biblical scholars and archaeologists are skeptical; Parfitt is not the first person to lay claim to the lost treasure.

"It may be that this tribe developed their own Ark of the Covenant, but it doesn't quite line up with the Tabernacle," the Israelites' portable worship tent that housed the Ark, said Roy Bender, who gives tours of a full-sized model of the Tabernacle at the Mennonite Information Center in Lancaster, Pa.

Hershel Shanks, editor of the *Biblical Archaeological Review*, adds, "Many scholars regard his claims with a very jaundiced eye."

The original ark disappeared after the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem in 586 B.C., and finding it has become the obsession of thousands of adventurers who understand its significance to Christians, Muslims and Jews alike.

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