

The Marcona Cipher Wheel

Description: a set of fifty small titanium wheels on a titanium spike, in the shape and apparent form of a cipher wheel (an archaic method for encoding messages). Each wheel has a set of fifty symbols embossed on its surface that correspond to no known language. Despite the fact that titanium is only weakly magnetic, the wheels 'stick' to each other fairly strongly.

They pulled this artifact out of an iron mine in Marcona District, Peru. "They" being the Shougang Group steel company; which is to say, the Ministry of State Security for the People's Republic of China. And "they" have no idea what the heck the Marcona Cipher Wheel really is besides the obvious, except that it has no business being in an iron mine. It's not so much the titanium, or the weird symbols, or the anomalous magnetism -- it's all of those things, plus the fact that the Marcona Cipher Wheel is by modern standards an obsolete method for encryption. Making this item would require a good deal of effort, or at least modern industrial techniques. Why did it end up in the middle of a mine?

The MSS was quite curious about that question, and many others; so they started up an investigation. ...Yes, of **course** the mine ate the investigation team. And the one sent to go look for them. That's when the PRC gritted its institutional teeth and called us in. For one thing, it's a lot easier for us to provide support to the next team to go in and have a look-see.

Naturally, we've agreed with the PRC to share findings. Naturally, they're sending somebody to keep us honest. And, naturally, we're expecting your team to keep *them* honest. Isn't international inter-agency cooperation fun?

PS: Don't assume aliens. The first two teams assumed aliens. We're assuming that's what got the first two teams disappeared. Yes, we're aware that we're assuming. Do as we say, not as we do.

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