

## A CASE OF PAREIDOLIA

By Justin Scherma Parscher

(The following is excerpted from the preface of a 415-page book, self-published by an anonymous author and left in cafes, restaurants, and waiting rooms across Alabama.)

...since then, I have been able to support myself through teaching. Sometimes, though, I have had to pad out my finances through other means. A few years ago, I was hired to consult on a project on the history of Auburn University's campus. Looking through old issues of the student newspaper, I came across something strange. Over and over again, they had trouble with landscape. Lawns failed, over and over again; healthy ornamentals would suddenly die off; trees were found cut down. This happened at regular intervals, sometimes minor, sometimes at huge scales.

This especially got my attention since it was 2011, and the oaks at Toomer's Corner had just been murdered. The oaks, of course, were the symbolic heart of the campus, faithfully toilet-papered by crowds of Tigers fans as a ritual of celebration after every victory. As it turned out, they had been poisoned by a fan of the University of Alabama's Crimson Tide - a turning point in a long history of rivalry between the two institutions, made more violent by their close proximity.

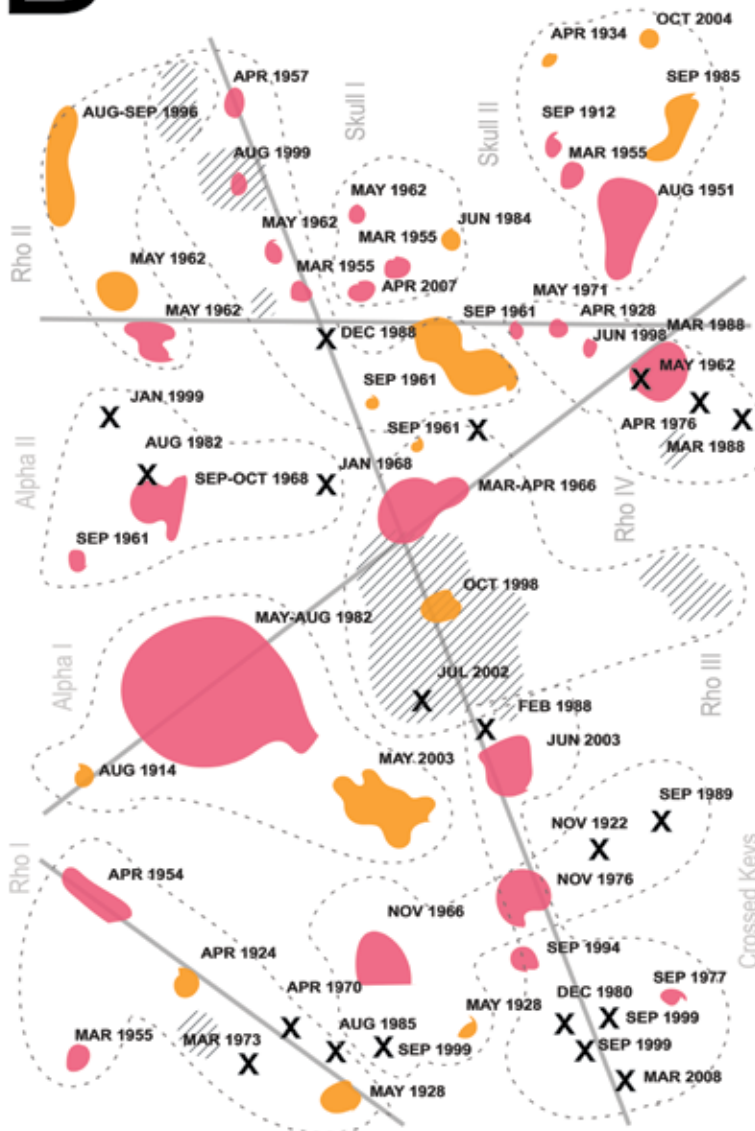
As I began to add up this series of landscape failures, I realized that there was very possibly a thread here. I began to ask myself: had Bama been after Auburn's trees for much longer? But who would have the means and the interest, and also the necessary character, to undertake such a campaign?



# EXHIBIT B

## AUBURN CORE INCIDENTS

- defoliant applications
- herbicide applications
- X tree fellings
- symbol constellations
- proposed axial lines
- /// evidence of past excavation



My thoughts immediately went to The Machine – the shadowy operating council of a group of white fraternities and sororities, starting out as the renegade Alpha Rho chapter of the Theta Nu Epsilon chapter at Bama. Often denying their own existence, they have been alleged to fix student government elections at Bama, but also, through their connections, actually pull the strings of Alabama politics. Sure enough, when I went over aerial photographs of Auburn, and started to mark the locations of the events, I began to make out patterns. They were suspiciously orderly, and in places reminiscent of the Machine’s symbolism – skulls, crossed keys, Greek letters.

This did not quite line up, though. The events started long before the early 1970s, when the oaks were first used in celebrations. Why would Bama try to get at Auburn through its landscape? Why not just give their quarterback ipecac, if you were so concerned about a football game? Why make symbols visible from the air, where hardly anyone would even think to look for them?

Another possibility suggested itself – one so strange that I hesitate to discuss it even now. Had forces around Bama themselves been trying to use occult means to influence the Iron Bowl? They call Tuscaloosa the Druid City – supposedly referring to its many oaks. But was something more sinister present? Impossible – I started to doubt myself. As a simple means of comparison, I applied my method to Bama’s campus – and found the same pattern. Same die-offs in the record, same relative frequency, right down to the symbols made visible through the patterns of disturbance. The two sets of activities were symmetrical.

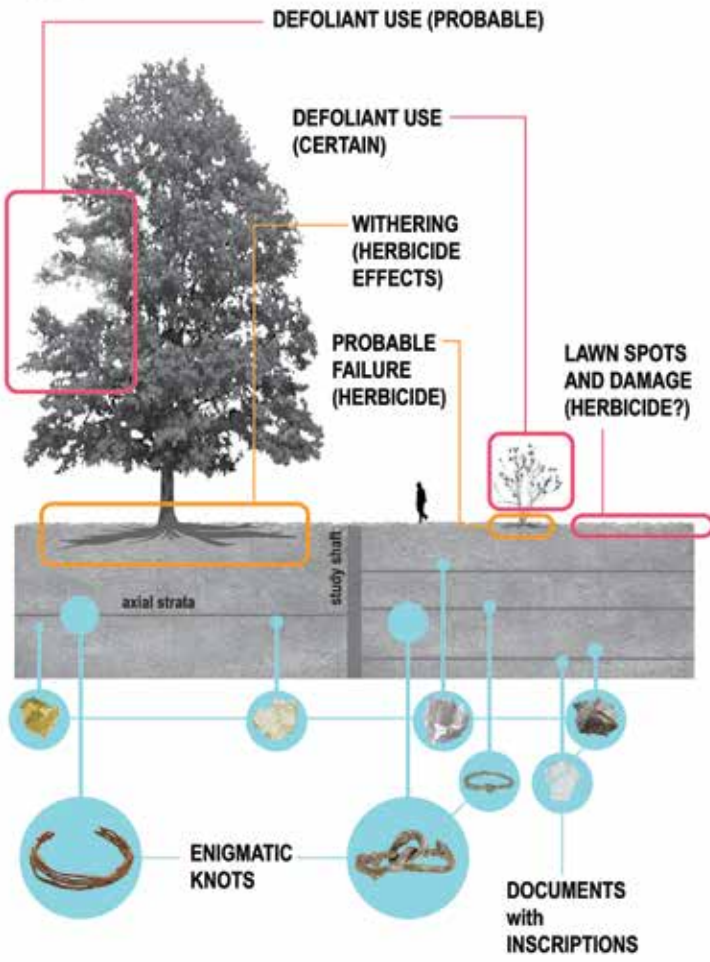
Perhaps, I thought, each one knows the other is undertaking this sabotage, and they are only exchanging provocations? No. Undertaking a statistical analysis of a series of major public events against the incidents of sabotage leads to the unmistakable conclusion that this campaign of poisonings is in fact coordinated between the two universities in secret. How could this be? And what could be the significance of these activities breaking out into the open in the case of Toomer’s Oaks?

For the past few years, I have been going back and forth between Tuscaloosa and Auburn, doing fieldwork on this phenomenon. My contacts at Auburn’s landscape architecture department and the Davis Arboretum have been polite but not supportive; the University of Alabama has not shown any interest whatsoever. This is despite the astounding discoveries

EXHIBIT

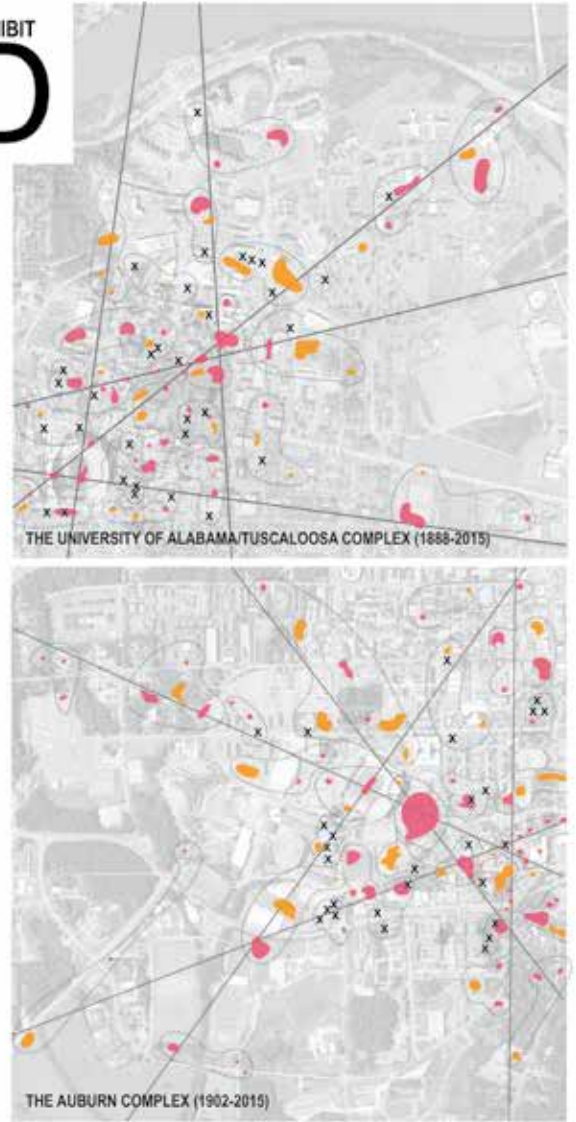
C

sample study section: QUAD SB26



EXHIBIT

D



from my digs, which I will endeavor to lay out completely in this book. I have field tests that show off-the-charts concentrations of teburhiaron, the same herbicide used to kill Toomer's Oaks. Following the core samples and the aerial photos, I managed to find an abundance of unmistakable alpha and rho symbols from above. More chillingly, I have any number of suspicious artifacts found buried in the same areas - vegetable fragments, fragmentary documents - hinting at same iconography.

But that's not all.

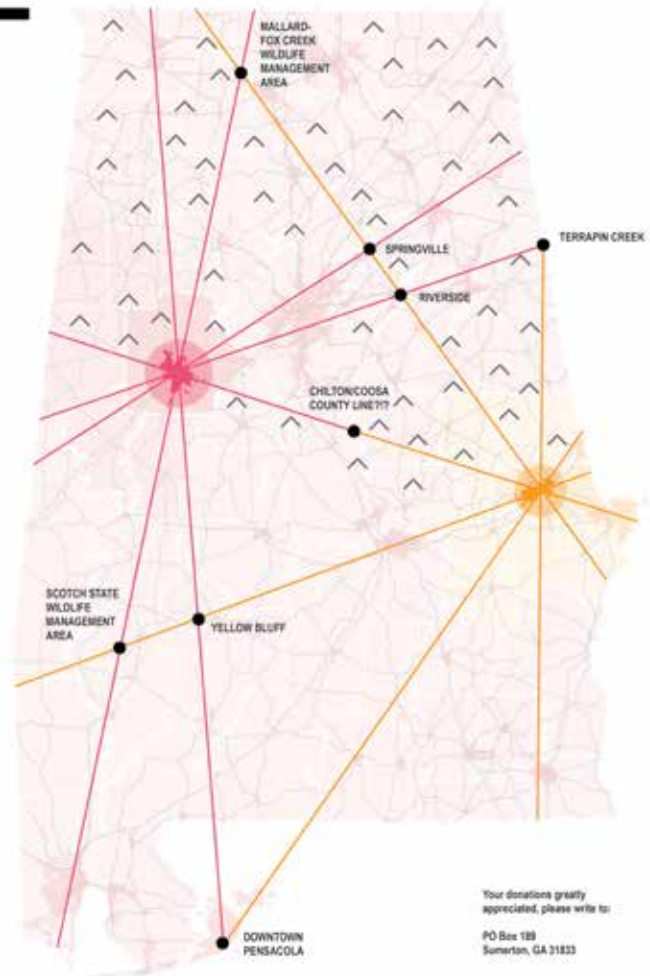
I am beginning to realize that in concentrating on defoliation, I have not been seeing the larger picture - that each incident of landscape sabotage must have been meant to influence the physical development of the two campuses. The development of each campus - which we think of as a series of moves by a series of more or less dissimilar administrations and consultants - began to look like something else, a series of patterned axes and ley lines periodically reinforced and disturbed by the landscape. And each of these patterns converges squarely on the sacred fields: Tuscaloosa's Bryant-Denny Stadium and Auburn's Jordan-Hare Stadium. Further, tracing out these patterns leads to the startling likelihood that the pattern extends far deeper into the state of Alabama.

Could it be that the entire symbolism of the two institutions, as it has developed through the 20th century - the elephant and the tiger, the War Eagle, the yearly Iron Bowl - has been orchestrated to strengthen the ritual? Any actual magical effect may be entirely imagined by the parties waging this invisible campaign. But what if it is not? Toomer's Oaks are dead and have been cut into pieces. And those pieces have been distributed all over, as bowls, Aubie busts, little War Eagles, pipes. What could possibly be next? (...)

EXHIBIT

E

sites for further investigation



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