

Lost Tribes & Sunken Continents

*Myth and Method
in the Study of American Indians*

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LOST
TRIBES &
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I

INTRODUCTION: BATTLEGROUND OF THE THEORISTS

WHEN COLUMBUS DISCOVERED the natives of the New World in 1492, there was no doubt in his mind that they were east Asiatics, and he promptly began referring to them as Indians. He is said to have carried this belief with him to his grave. But long before Columbus died, a number of Europeans suspected that the new lands were not Cathay at all, a suspicion strongly reinforced when Balboa reached the Pacific shore in 1513 and confirmed beyond doubt by Magellan's voyage six years later.

The realization that another vast sea lay beyond the western limits of America led at once to speculations regarding the origin of the American Indian. Was he a native of this new continent, and had he always been? If not, where did he come from, and how? Thus began a great debate that has endured for over four centuries, and one that has involved not only scholars but organizations, nations, and even religions. For the origin of the American Indian, which along with ancient

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Egypt, Stonehenge, and the Easter Island monuments has always fascinated the mystics, is a subject highly charged with emotion, as are so many where science and religion, or amateur and professional, clash, and where racist, nationalistic, and ethnic values become involved. Although it is a body of theory much older than that of biological evolution, it has run a curiously similar course, with scientists often taking one broad position opposed to most lay and almost all religious hypotheses, yet finding no exact agreement among themselves, while the laymen, united in characterizing all professional scholars as either atheists or chuckleheads or both, are in turn accused of running off in all theoretical directions at once.

Just as the evolutionary controversy attracted such unexpected opponents as Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan, the American Indian debates have pitted against each other priests and professors, physicians and lawyers, businessmen and artists, even a president and a vice-president of the United States. The most dignified professors who have allowed themselves to become embroiled seem to adapt rapidly to the biting sarcasm and uninhibited idiom that enliven what might otherwise be a fairly dull field of investigation. For example, Professor Ralph Linton, late distinguished anthropologist of Yale, in a book review published in *American Antiquity*, the official journal of American archeology, said of Harold S. Gladwin, who had written a book suggesting, among other things, that survivors of Alexander the Great's wrecked fleet found their way to America in the fourth century B.C. and were responsible for some of the great prehistoric civilizations of this hemisphere: "Mr. Gladwin approaches the problem of American origins with the tentative jocularly of an elderly gentleman patting a new secretary's posterior. If she objects, he can lament her lack of a sense of humor; if she does not, the next moves are obvious."

Besides the individuals who have championed the various Indian origin theories, some famous institutions and organizations are more than casually interested—for example the

Rosicrucians, the Theosophists, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons), and of course the anthropological profession itself. In addition to the institutional positions are many others which have been urged in eloquent prose in hundreds of books over the last four centuries, or read solemnly before congresses of learned societies here and in Europe, by scholars who were sure that our redskins were once Tyrian Phoenicians, Assyrians, ancient Egyptians, Canaanites, Israelites, Trojans, Romans, Etruscans, Greeks, Scythians, Tartars, Chinese Buddhists, Hindus, Mandingoes or other Africans, Madagascans, the early Irish, Welsh, Norsemen, Basques, Portuguese, French, Spaniards, Huns, or survivors of the Lost Continents of Mu or Atlantis, the last a uniquely difficult theory to debate, since their alleged great civilizations conveniently sank beneath the ocean some eleven thousand or more years ago, with Plato possibly the earliest authority we have for their existence. A few have taken the position that our Indians are descended from none of these, but instead that Man originated in the Americas, and the Old World is then actually the New.

The popularity cycle of these multifarious schemes suggests that they have at least something of the nature of fads. The earliest explorers and historians of America tended to favor the Lost Tribes of Israel hypothesis, for in those days ancient Hebrew ethnology as described in the Old Testament was about the only well-documented "primitive" way of life known and therefore the first to occur to a seeker of Indian relationships. Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century classicists tended, on the other hand, to see Carthaginian-Phoenician traits in the art, architecture, language, religion, and political structure of the Central American Maya, the Aztec and pre-Aztec civilizations of Mexico, and the Inca and other high cultures of the South American Andes. With spectacular archeological discoveries in Egypt, there came a rash of writers convinced that all civilization stemmed from the Nile Valley and that our

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American prehistoric ruins are merely remnants of Egyptian colonists.

Lost Atlantis has been a continuing favorite for generations, stimulated anew every few years by editions of the Spence and Donnelly best sellers; and the Israelite theory, too, commands a large and consistent following since it is a matter of Mormon church doctrine that our aborigines are descendants of the Hebrews and that their wanderings over Asia and the Americas are faithfully described in the divinely dictated *Book of Mormon*. The latest craze, the notion that American Indians sailed westward across the Pacific and populated the Polynesian islands, has a tremendous current following thanks to Thor Heyerdahl's great adventure narrative of his daring voyage on the balsa raft, *Kon-Tiki*. Some of the same museum visitors who used to corner uncomfortable scientists twenty years ago and berate them for their lack of faith in drowned Atlantis, now shake the same scolding fingers at those who do not express enthusiasm over *Aku-Aku*.

Strangely enough, the many and varied explanations of American Indian origins have not competed with one another too militantly. Supporters of the Carthaginian theory have also approved an Israelite movement to America (to account for the wilder tribes, however); some of the Egyptianists are quite willing to recognize also Lost Atlantis; the Rosicrucians and Theosophists have a lot to say about both Atlantis and its Pacific counterpart, Mu. But in stark contrast to this permissive tolerance of other theories in general, the lay writers on these subjects have one great bias in common: they all scorn, ridicule, and complain bitterly about the professional anthropologists of American museums and universities, whom they regard variously as stupid, stubborn, hopelessly conservative, and very frequently plain dishonest.

This puzzles the professionals, who find nothing particularly offensive about their concept of an Asiatic cradle for the American Indian, much as Thomas Jefferson outlined in his *Note on the State of Virginia*, with the peopling of America taking place in a series of invasion waves via Bering Strait and

Alaska over the twenty-five to fifty thousand or so years since the middle and closing stages of the Ice Age. A growing number of anthropologists also think that certain American high civilizations, like the Maya, received some additional stimulus from trans-Pacific contacts with southeast Asia. To the mystics this is an intolerably conservative and unimaginative theoretical position.

These are the warring theories and this is their battleground. The fighting has been fierce, the casualties heavy. The famed nineteenth-century scholar, Abbé Brasseur de Bourbourg, lost his friends and his reputation. The English nobleman, Edward King, Viscount Kingsborough, about whom we shall read in a later chapter, spent a fortune on his obsession with the Lost Tribes of Israel theory and died, some say of a broken heart, in a Dublin debtor's prison. The French adventurer, sometime doctor of medicine, engineer, lawyer, and archeologist, Augustus Le Plongeon and his worshipping young wife, Alice, after spending many years in the thorny thickets of the dry Yucatan peninsula, exploring the ancient ruins of the forgotten Maya past, lived their last years disappointed and deeply embittered over the rejection of their wild theories about American civilization moving to Egypt many thousands of years ago. James Adair devoted forty years of his life to firsthand study of the American Indians, but his claims that they were the Lost Tribes of Israel brought him ridicule and even accusations of dishonesty. Stung by scientific criticism, Thor Heyerdahl braved the Pacific on a balsa raft to support his theories that the South American Indians peopled the Pacific, and today several devout Mormon scholars stand, like some of their ill-fated predecessors, against the world of science and learning in their belief that *The Book of Mormon* is the true history of Israelite peoples in America.

An ever increasing number of people in this country and abroad are intrigued, in some cases compulsively obsessed, with all forms of symbolism, especially if it is somehow esoteric, and best of all if it can be related to the culture and origins of the American Indian, particularly the Maya, Aztec, and Inca,

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to whose colorful prehistoric civilizations they are drawn like flies to honey. Here they can delve spellbound in bizarre symbols, the most dramatic and sacred rituals, mysterious hieroglyphs, jungle-shrouded ancient temples, non-Indo-European languages whose strange syllables lend themselves to endless games of linguistic blind-man's buff, and polytheistic religions with strong mathematical, astrological, sadistic, and phallic overtones. Their fascination with these becomes an addiction, in some cases literally a religion, and in holding fast to their beliefs about aboriginal America, in the face of often brusque rebuffs from professional anthropologists, they feel persecuted, martyred to a sort of semi-scientific, semi-religious destiny that must not be denied. Their writings are frequently larded with references to the Almighty, theology, and ethics in passages where the uninitiated reader fails to see the relevance. Dealers in used books are well aware of them, for they haunt the sections in bookshops marked "Esoteric, Occult, and Curiosa."

Some of these men have been out-and-out charlatans, opportunists interested less in the quest for truth than in the money and notoriety their writings and lectures brought them. Others have been stupid, unable to distinguish fact from fantasy. Still others were conscientious scholars, indefatigable workers, and men of great integrity, but victims of the ignorance of their time, often further handicapped by years of isolation from the scholarly world as they explored the vast jungles and remote highland Indian villages in their search for knowledge of the American past. Most of them—charlatan, clod, and scholar alike—have shared certain attitudes and personality traits that give them, as a group, a certain identity.

One wonders what theories are these that so capture imagination and fierce allegiance, and what sort of men are so obsessed with mystic and religious interpretations of the ancient American past that they will follow them, sometimes literally, to the death against all opposition. In the pages that follow we shall take a closer look at both the theories and the people who have so steadfastly championed them.

—2

ELEPHANTS AND ETHNOLOGISTS: EGYPT IN AMERICA

PERHAPS THE MOST popular theory about American Indian origins derives the famous ancient civilizations of Mexico, Central America, and the Andes from Egypt. There were pyramids in both America and Egypt, there were mummies in Peru and Egypt, sun worship was practiced in many parts of the New World as well as in Egypt, and both areas produced hieroglyphic writing, royal tombs, bas-relief sculpture, and a number of other similar customs and cultural traits. To most people the word "archeology" conjures up but one picture: towering pyramids, the brooding Sphinx, King Tut's tomb, and the Valley of the Nile. It is only natural that when they see ancient relics like these somewhere else, even in faraway America, they see a connection with the classic expression of ancient civilizations—Dynastic Egypt.

Of the numerous Egyptian enthusiasts, one of the most devoted, the most fiercely loyal, and the most militant was a French adventurer, Augustus Le Plongeon, whose bitter de-

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nunciations of his foes and whose arrogant flaunting of his own ego produced a lurid epoch in the history of American archeology. Let us meet this vivid character through a typical incident that he himself describes.

The stories differ, but Augustus Le Plongeon's own version is that he had just excavated the statue of an ancient Maya god from the tumbled debris of Chichen Itza's great stone ruins in the scorched thickets of northern Yucatan, and his superstitious Indian laborers refused to touch it, much less lift it out of the hallowed earth and marl that had concealed it for over six hundred years. It was a great archeological treasure, and the long-bearded Frenchman, his face and balding head almost black from his many years of exploration on the sun-baked tropic peninsula, was determined not to be cheated of his discovery.

Le Plongeon did not know then that Fate had already decreed he was not to have this huge reclining stone god after all; his immediate problem was to persuade the natives to do his bidding and get it out of the ground. Looking more like Moses after forty years in the wilderness than a fifty-year-old adventurer and mystic with a young and lovely bride, the self-styled doctor was a stubborn man, perhaps one of the most obstinate and ornery individuals who ever lived; he was also one of the most imaginative. A more prosaic person might have tried to persuade the Indians and reason with them, but this approach was completely foreign to Le Plongeon's unique and volatile personality. Stroking his long, gray beard and regarding his rebellious workers balefully, he suddenly had an idea. People obey gods: I shall convince them that I am a reincarnated Maya god! Imperiously he motioned them to follow him.

The little group clambered over the piles of whitened limestone ruins, through the tangled underbrush and thorny scrub thickets, and labored to the summit of a crumbling structure overlooking the drab olive-green plain of Yucatan. A sculptured stone panel stood exposed in the ancient wreckage. Let

Le Plongeon tell the story himself, as he recorded it in a book published in 1878:

In order to overcome their scruples, and also to prove if my suspicions were correct, that as their forefathers and the Egyptians of old, they still believed in reincarnation, I caused them to accompany me to the summit of the great pyramid. . . . On one of the antae, at the entrance on the north side, is the portrait of a warrior wearing a long, straight, pointed beard. The face, like that of all the personages represented, is in profile. I placed my head against the stone so as to present the same position of my face . . . and called the attention of my Indians to the similarity of his and my own features. They followed every lineament of the faces with their fingers to the very point of the beard, and soon uttered an exclamation of astonishment: "Thou, here," and slowly scanned again the features sculptured on the stone and my own. "So, so," they said, "thou too art one of our great men, who has been disenchanted. Thou, too, were a companion of the great Lord Chaacmol. That is why thou didst know where he was hidden and thou hast come to disenchant him also. His time to live again on earth has then arrived." From that moment on every word of mine was implicitly obeyed.

Next day another group of Indians arrived to see the great man. He again took them to the bas-relief and went through his pose of the day before. The strangers "fell on their knees before me, and, in turn, kissed my hand."

One gets the impression from the doctor's writings that he was happiest in the field, where among humble and ignorant native laborers he found the real or fantasied adulation that he craved so vainly in the United States. Anecdotes that he tells on himself reveal an astonishing egotism amounting almost to delusions of grandeur. It would almost be kinder to Le Plongeon to regard this whole story as a fabrication, for I cannot think of any more comical and at the same time more pitiful scene than this, of confused and doubtless embarrassed Indians murmuring probably incomprehensible words while the

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Gallic Don Quixote struck heroic poses beside a stone god of the ancient Maya.

I am undecided whether Le Plongeon concocted these anecdotes from wishful fantasy or whether, as seems likely, he was so inept with spoken Maya that he simply misunderstood much of what the Indians said. There is considerable evidence favoring each of these possibilities. For one thing the stories evidently varied in the telling. A friend of Le Plongeon heard the above incident quite differently: that the Indians noticed the resemblance between Le Plongeon and the sculptured figure, and that all the Frenchman's disclaimers could not persuade the natives that he was not the reincarnated Maya. For another thing, the stories are inconsistent with what we know about the Maya at this period, and by now information about them from less fanciful travelers was abundant. In 1876 they were all Roman Catholics and had been exposed to Catholic instruction and supervision for over three centuries. They surely entertained no notions of reincarnation, which is and apparently always has been a concept foreign to their religious ideology, the story of Cortez being considered the reincarnated Quetzalcoatl to the contrary notwithstanding. Moreover, by 1880 probably no Yucatec Indian was superstitious about the Maya ruins and antiquities around him, in contrast to the highland Maya farther south in Guatemala, who even today are disturbed by desecrations of their ancient places of worship.

Indian laborers in Yucatan are very anxious to please their superiors in government or their employers in work; they try desperately to understand what is being said to them in poor Spanish (which they themselves often do not understand too well) or in worse Yucatec Maya. Perhaps because of the language barriers, they quickly learn to watch their employer's gestures and expressions and try to divine what he wants them to do or say. Anyone, with or without a long, pointed beard, going through the motions that Le Plongeon described, would doubtless get approximately the same co-operative response from Indian workmen hoping to please the boss. The words

and expressions Le Plongeon has them say were surely either put in their mouths by him, through an interpreter, or were completely misunderstood. Even their talk, as quoted by the doctor, is misleading; if they spoke in the second person to him, this was not out of formality or solemnity (as it sounds in English) but because that is the only construction they use. The respectful third person pronoun is rarely heard among them even today.

Whatever one may think of these tactics, or of the obvious satisfaction that the near-paranoiac Frenchman derived from his real or fancied adoration by these ignorant natives, the maneuver was apparently effective, and the stone god emerged from its pit—to be fought over again by Le Plongeon and the Mexican government officials who refused to let him take it from the country. This reclining statue was one of a series of similar figures that have since been discovered both in Yucatan and in Mexico proper, called Chac Mool figures, and though their identity is debated by experts today, Le Plongeon had no doubt that they represented an Indian prince-god who figured prominently in both ancient Egyptian and prehistoric Maya-Toltec history and religion. For Le Plongeon believed in a direct historical connection between the civilizations of Mexico, Central America, and Egypt. He maintained further that the shape of Maya temples was deliberately laid out to represent the Egyptian letter M, which, he said, was called “ma” and meant “place, country, and by extension, the Universe.” He was sure that the ancient sacred mysteries, the origin of Free Masonry consequently, originated in America and were carried by Maya colonists to the Nile, the Euphrates, and the shores of the Indian Ocean not less than 11,500 years ago.

Le Plongeon reconstructed in detail a blood-and-thunder rendition of Maya history based solely on sculptures, murals, and hieroglyphic texts that authorities on Maya epigraphy today do not pretend to be able to read. It is a lengthy story and its romantic impact suffers in synopsis: The king of Chichen Itza and Uxmal, now two Maya ruins in Yucatan, had three