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The Ancient Cities of the New World

Beautifully illustrated throughout, this English translation of Désiré Charnay's record of his travels among the ancient cities of Mexico and Central America was first published in 1887. Born in France, Charnay (1828–1915) travelled extensively through commissions from the French government and with private patronage. He made several visits to the region between 1857 and 1886, producing in his work both a journal of his adventures and an archaeological examination of past civilisations. Beginning in Mexico, Charnay notably examines the ancient city of Tula and also the history of Yucatán, discussing aspects of Toltec and Mayan culture. He explores the ruins of Chichen Itza, Kabah and Yaxchilan (which Charnay dubbed 'Lorillard Town' after a benefactor), among many other settlements. Surveying art, pyramid architecture, ancient customs and history based on extant sources, this account was a major contribution in its field and remains of interest to scholars of Latin American archaeology.

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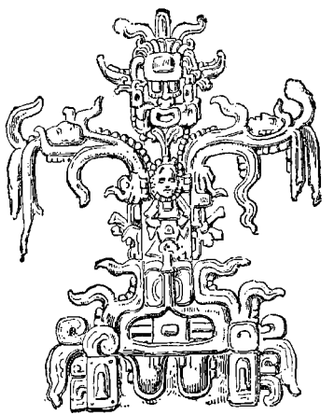

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TO

MR. PETER LORILLARD.

SIR,

WHEN the Minister of Public Instruction entrusted me with the study of the Ancient American Civilisations, you wished to become associated with my labours in a truly munificent spirit. You will find in the following pages the result of my discoveries, which, you are aware, were attended with perfect success. I strove, during the progress of these studies, to carry out the programme laid down by you towards the reconstruction of civilisations that have passed away. I think I have succeeded; and I hope to have sufficiently demonstrated that these civilisations had but one and the same origin—that they were Toltec and comparatively modern. If the learned world shall confirm my theory, and success crown my endeavours; if it shall be found that I have solved this vexed American question, so hotly controverted hitherto, it will be mainly due to your generous support.

Pray accept the dedication of this Work as a token of my deep gratitude.

DÉSIRÉ CHARNAY.

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TRANSLATORS' NOTE.

THE justification for having ventured to correct the spelling of some proper names, and other slight emendations, is to be found in the Author's Preface, where he states that "he often trusted an uncertain memory for his quotations, and that his book was written between two expeditions." There is more: it was deemed advisable, to suit a restless and exacting generation, to reduce the bulk of the volume, a task which was not undertaken without fear and trembling, the Translator being painfully conscious of shortcomings, and that retrenchment may have been where it should rather have expanded, and expanded where it should have retrenched.

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PREFACE TO THE ORIGINAL EDITION.

THE first notice upon this work appeared in the *North American Review*, the energetic Editor of which (Mr. A. Th. Rice) wished to be before all his contemporaries in giving his subscribers an *aperçu* of my labours. Unfortunately for them that publication contained my impressions of the moment, just as I dotted them down, which, as a natural consequence, had to be modified *pari passu* with my discoveries, whilst my quotations, owing to an uncertain memory, were not much to offer readers of such intrinsic merit. A second publication followed in the *Tour du Monde*, but although better thought out than the first, even that was too hastily written to do justice to the magnificent collection I now present to the public, in which the entire design I had at heart is revealed; and if the account of my discoveries, the issue which naturally follows, the theory I wish to establish, are still couched in language which may appear crude and incomplete, I ask the indulgence of my readers on the plea that this edition received the last touch between two expeditions. On the other hand the subject is so vast, that I only aimed at giving a broad outline, hoping for greater leisure at some future time.

My wish has been so to write as to be easily understood by all; to this end I have given my book the dual form of

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a journal as well as a scientific account: in it I recount the history of a civilisation which has long passed away, which is hardly known, or rather which has been systematically misunderstood and misrepresented. My explorations led me to the uplands of Mexico, the first establishments of the civilising race, and enabled me to trace the Toltecs step by step to their highest development in the various regions of Central America, and not unfrequently to give a certain date, to re-establish historical truth. There is nothing very extraordinary in this reconstruction, which, at first beautifully simple, became complicated with the countless contradictory accounts which have been published in regard to it. In the hands of the Spanish padres, origins, however obscure, were made to agree with the Biblical narrative both in their ponderous commentaries and their ridiculous systems, which, starting with the confusion of tongues, travelled on to the lost tribes of Israel, ending with the legend which ascribes to St. Thomas the apostleship of America. Modern historians have not been much better in this respect, and the last century has produced a stupendous amount of the most extraordinary publications, forming an inextricable labyrinth, of which the immense compilation of Bancroft may serve as an example.

The cause of this confusion is twofold: first and foremost, the destruction of nearly all the Indian documents by the conquerors; and secondly, the small degree of interest they felt for anything that dated before their advent. The first accounts, such as Ixtlilxochitl's for instance, were written from narratives more or less trustworthy, delivered from memory by the natives, in which, as might be expected, the most incoherent traditions are mixed up with certain historical facts, without discrimination or the slightest spirit of criticism; for science is but of yesterday, and archæology, anthropology, and philology were as yet unknown.

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This explains why, if we except those things which fell under their personal observation, later historians are so infinitely superior to the ancient.

Up to the present day authentic documents have been wanting; for without any fault or demerit on the part of the explorers, their drawings of monuments, however carefully done, could not cope with modern photographs and squeezes. On the other hand, each traveller writing, it is true, from actual observation, but confining himself to one district, could only describe a few of the principal ruins, so that his theory respecting them was untenable when compared or applied to the ruins of the whole country. Thus it came to pass that the various epochs of American civilisation were dealt with as so many distinct civilisations, producing the utmost confusion. Whereas a sound study of American civilisation should set aside preconceived opinions and commentaries, and confine itself to its monuments, original documents, and such passages in ancient writers descriptive or explanatory of the end and object of these monuments, not neglecting the powerful aid of photography and squeezes; when a judicious and intelligent comparison of the relation these monuments bear to one another, must soon force the conviction that, whatever the time which divides them or the difference in their details, they belong to one and the same civilisation, and that of comparatively recent date—namely the Toltec.

We shall leave the question of first origins as being unnecessary for our purpose; as also traditions, prehistoric legends, language, and religion, confining ourselves to what may be termed history; that is, beginning with the arrival of the cultured Toltecs in Mexico. We shall note their establishment in the valley of Tula, their development on the high plateaux, the disruption of their empire; how they transmitted their industries and mechanical arts to the people who succeeded them; and lastly, we shall

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follow them in their exodus and find the traces of their civilisation everywhere on their passage and in the regions of Central America.

With regard to my theory on the relatively recent period of American civilisation and its Toltec origin, I am far from being the first in upholding it, since Stephens and Humboldt affirmed it some fifty years ago, whilst all the ancient chroniclers implied it. Is ancient Egypt less interesting because her MSS. are now read and her origin known? Why then should the people who raised the American monuments be less deserving of our regard, because they built them ten centuries sooner or ten centuries later? Does it alter the character of the monuments, or destroy an art unknown to us hitherto?

The question of first origins has always seemed to me an idle pursuit; and if the evolutionist doctrine is true, a perfect moral microscope would be required to reach the remote past of man, whose countless generations, scattered in every clime, go back to the dark period when our rude progenitors were hardly distinguished from the brute creation. Will it ever be possible to penetrate beyond? Besides, our ancestors have nothing in common with the autochthones of America, whom I firmly believe to have come from the extreme East. My reasons for this opinion are based on the fact that their architecture is so like the Japanese as to seem identical; that their decorative designs resemble the Chinese; whilst their customs, habits, sculpture, language, castes, and polity recall the Malays both in Cambodia, Annam, and Java. The word "Lacandon," which is the name of a tribe in Central America, is also, according to Dr. Neis, that of a race in Indo-China, who spell it "Lah-Canh-dong." F. Garnier says that "the Cambodians build their huts on piles some six or nine feet above the ground. At first sight it might be attributed to the

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necessity for protecting themselves from inundations; but as this mode of construction is found in places where no such danger exists, it must be ascribed to the *instinct* of a *particular* race" (it is the instinct of the Toltecs which caused them to erect their edifices on esplanades and pyramids); and in his description of the *Khmer* monuments at Angor-Tom and Angor-Wat he adds: "They are placed on pyramids of three to five stories high," etc. The analogy is also seen in the ornamentation of the buildings, where the human figure is rudely treated, whilst great care is observable in the other decorative designs, a point which always struck us in American sculpture. It should also be remarked that bricks covered with plaster, stucco decoration, cemented floors, roads, and courtyards are common to the Malays and the Americans; whilst the corbel vault is found in Java, Cambodia, and America. Again, some temples at Lawoe, in Java, are built on pyramids, having a staircase on the slope leading to the edifice, like those of the Toltecs. This resemblance has struck every traveller, and is the more important that these monuments only date from the fourteenth or fifteenth century, and are far removed from those edifices which were introduced in Java by the followers of Buddha and Brahma; but the destruction of Indian temples and Indian beliefs was succeeded by an architectural atavism, a return to a Malay primitive type, evidenced by the monuments at Lawoe, which I visited in 1878, a fact which I think of vital importance.

Castes are purely Asiatic and unknown among the Red Indians, but they existed with the Toltecs, where the commonwealth was divided into distinct classes of priests, warriors, merchants, and tillers of the soil; whilst land was held in common, and a feudal system is apparent with both the Toltecs and Malays. Two languages are used in Java and Cambodia; one to address superiors, the other for the vulgar. This was

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also the case with the Toltecs, and gave rise to two different written languages. Finally, the worship of serpents as gods of wisdom, like Quetzalcoatl, is found in India, Greece, China, Japan, and particularly in Cambodia and Java. To us these points of resemblance are more than mere coincidence; something better than fortuitous analogies: they seem to point to a vast and novel field for the investigation of archæologists.

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