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The Glory of Ancient Mexico

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The Glory of Ancient Mexico.

By Levi Edgar Young.

Were you making a trip from the Rio Grande river on the north of Mexico to the Panama Canal, passing from valley to valley, you would discover many ruins of ancient cities and temples, as well as the remains of viaducts, canals, and reservoirs, used in the arid lands of the country, now known as Mexico and Central America. The present city of Mexico was Tenochtitlan, the proud city of ancient Aztec days, when King Montezuma ruled over the land. Had you been one of the Spanish adventurers of the days of Columbus, you would have marched with the soldiers of Cortez, who in 1520 conquered the land and brought Mexico under the complete subjugation of Spain. You would have been interested in the country. The people would have been new to you; their manners and customs, religious beliefs and ceremonies most novel. You would have written a letter back to your people in Seville or Madrid, and couched in the beautiful Spanish of the day, you would have described the wonderful land with its people of mysterious origin and life. With closer study, however, you would have discovered that they, too, were children of the same God you worship—children with a well developed industrial, civic, social, and religious life. In fact many of their religious beliefs were the same as yours, and were you to have gone further into the study of them, you would have discovered that they had been worshipers of one true and living God, Father of heaven and earth, and the

Creator of all things. The complete novelty of every thing would have allured you into far-away parts—Yucatan, Central America, and still farther south, and like all those Spanish adventurers, you would have conjectured much as to the people whom you had found in this New World. With your companions you would have written many treatises and descriptions of the country, to be read by the historian of future days.

The Spaniards of the days of Cortez made a study of the ancient city of Mexico, although there can be no doubt but that thousands of historical documents were destroyed, for the Spanish priests looked upon the Mexicans as pagans, and unworthy of the God of the Christians. The ancient city of Mexico occupied the same spot as the modern city. The great causeways touched it at the same points; the streets ran in the same direction, and the large and imposing Catholic cathedral stands on the same ground as did the temple of the Aztec war-god. In those days a police provided for the health and cleanliness of the city, and the streets were immaculately clean. Water was brought from a hill over four miles away through a water-pipe made of clay. That there might be no failure in the supply, when repairs of the pipes were going on, a double course of pipes was laid. In this way, a body of water the size of a man's body was carried into the city to supply the fountains and reservoirs. The city, like Venice in Italy, had its canals, so that people went from place to

place in small boats.* When the Spaniards took Mexico, Montezuma, an Aztec, was king. Descendant of a long line of rulers, he spent his time in beautifying the capital city which had had such a long period of history behind it. Let me tell in the words of Prescott something of its glory. No wonder the Spaniards were amazed and mystified as they passed through its streets.

"While Montezuma encouraged a taste for architectural magnificence in his nobles, he contributed his own share toward the embellishment of the city. It was in his reign that the famous calendar stone, weighing nearly fifty tons, was transported from its native quarry, many leagues distant, to the capital, where it still forms one of the most curious monuments of Aztec science. Indeed when we reflect on the difficulty of hewing such a stupendous mass from its hard basaltic bed without the aid of iron tools, and that of transporting it such a distance across land and water without help of animals, we may well feel admiration for the mechanical ingenuity and enterprise of the people who accomplished it.

"Not content with the spacious residence of his father, Montezuma erected another on a yet more magnificent scale. Remarkable were its decorations, its fanciful draperies, its roofs inlaid with cedar and other odoriferous woods, held together without a nail, and probably, without a knowledge of the arch, its numerous and spacious apartments, which Cortes declared superior to anything of its kind in Spain.

A remarkable description is this, and one that gives a vivid and lucid picture of conditions in Mexico four hundred years ago. Wherever the Aztecs went they built places of worship. So in the city of Tenochtitlan (Mexico) there was a temple of great size and dimensions. The word temple in Aztec was *teocalli*, meaning "House of

God." The great Teocalli or temple of Mexico is described by an old Spanish writer, Bernal Diaz. He tells us that the great edifice was built in the middle of the city, and was in the form of a truncated pyramid, with smaller buildings annexed. A wall, large enough to contain five hundred houses, surrounded the temple. Its masonry of stone and mortar showed careful planning and workmanship, and upon it were great battlements. Lucien Biart, the celebrated French archaeologist has described it in versatile language:

"The interior court, enclosed by this wall, was paved with stones so highly polished that the horses of the Spaniards could not venture into it without running the risk of falling. In the middle of this court arose the vast truncated pyramid. This pyramid, covered with bricks, was composed of five steps of equal height, but not of equal length or width, for the higher were narrower than the lower. . . . The stairway of this edifice, placed on the exterior, on the southern side, was composed of a hundred and thirty steps a foot in height. . . . Having reached the top of this singular monument, a flat place so large that five hundred Mexican nobles were able to fortify themselves there and defend themselves against the troops of Cortez, two towers fifty feet high composed of three stories could be seen on the eastern side. The first of these stories was composed of stone and mortar, the other two of wood artistically carved. In the story made of stone was what may be called a sanctuary; and there on an altar five feet high, the protecting divinities were ranged in a row. One of the sanctuaries was consecrated to the war gods. The higher stories served as storage rooms for the utensils used in the ceremonies. The ashes of the kings and many high dignitaries were deposited there. . . . From the top of towers a part of the valley of Mexico could be seen, presenting a view of marvellous beauty."

*Adapted from Prescott: "Conquest of Mexico."

The people of Mexico were agriculturists. The fauna and flora

were varied so that the country could support a large population. From their traditions, we learn that when the forefathers of the Aztecs marched into the new land, they remained in different valleys for a short period of time and tilled the soil. They conquered tribe after tribe, before establishing their permanent abode and building their great city. They cultivated maize, allspice, vegetables, and various cereals, and plowed with a stick, edged with copper. In some parts, large canals were dug, and ditches lined with cement have been discovered. Their fields were surrounded with stone walls to protect the grain and graneries, where they stored their food supply for years. The Aztecs were fond of gardens, and "filled them with fruit trees carefully planted in rows, with medicinal plants, and flowers, which they used at times in ornamenting their temple domes."

Trade and commerce were carried on with other tribes both north and south. They hunted in the forests, fished, made roads and bridges, mined gold and silver with which they made various kinds of jewelry. They wove woolen and cotton cloth, and like the Incas and ancient Greeks, they had their theatres and dances, and encouraged the development of eloquence and poetry. Bernal Diaz tells us that when the great Montezuma was made emperor, a tribal king, Alcolhuas, addressed Montezuma thus:

"The happiness which presides over the destiny of the Mexican nation is doubly shown in the election of today, by the unanimity of the votes and by the universal joy with which their results have been received. This joy is proper, for the empire of Anahuac has reached such a degree of grandeur that nothing less, O lord, than the strength of thy invisible heart, and the

wisdom which we admire in thee could sustain it. I clearly see with what love the sreme God regards this nation, since he has enlightened us in such a manner, that we have chosen him who can govern it the best. . . . Who can doubt that, where exists so much courage and wisdom, the support of the orphan and widow can be found? The Aztec empire has certainly just reached the zenith of its power, since its king inspires respect in all those who see him. Rejoice, happy nation, in having for master a sovereign who will be the support of thy happiness, in whom all thy children will find a father and brother As to thee, noble lord, take confidence and be assured that the Creator of heaven, who has just raised thee to such a high dignity, will give thee strength to fulfill the duties which it imposes."

Sculpture was known and practiced by these people. Many of the stone statues of ancient days have come down to us, and are valuable for study as they were made of hard stone implements. The dwellings of the poor people were made of bamboo and bricks dried in the sun, while the houses of the wealthier were much more pretentious. The walls of the better houses were polished and whitened, and the rooms, decorated with mosaics. From the tops of the walls on the exterior, hung festoons of flowers, giving the dwellings an artistic and beautiful effect.

The Aztecs had a monarchical form of government. That is they had kings, who ruled by divine right, and had at times communion with the gods, whom they worshiped, for at the time of the conquest by Spain, the Aztecs were polytheists, that is worshipers of many gods. Their religion was similar to the Mayas, described briefly further on in this paper.

In passing from the Valley of Mexico to Yucatan, the home of the ancient Mayas, we find a still greater civilization, said by some to

have been the highest culture in all America. The Mayas inhabited the Atlantic coast plains of southern Mexico and northern central America. The northern part of Yucatan depends on wells (cenotes) for water, and is lacking in running streams; yet from these wells water was run and carried by the people, and beautiful gardens were made, and much grain raised.

The Mayas were the van-guard of the civilization in America, and we see them flourishing as early as the second century after Christ. City after city sprang up, and were you visiting the country about 500 A. D., you would pass through such cities and towns as Izamal, Palanque, Seibal, Tikal, Pegras, and

many others. All these places had reached their "golden age" by 800 A. D. The virile genius of the Mayas is shown in their architecture, sculpture, painting, metallurgy, textile and plastic arts. The historian Stephens in his *Ancient America* gives a splendid description of a temple at Labna, the beauty of which was very impressive to the writer:

"It represents a pyramidal mound, holding aloft the most curious and extraordinary structure we had seen in the country. It put us on the alert the moment we saw it. We passed an entire day before it, and looking back upon our journey among ruined cities, no subject of greater interest presents itself to my mind. The mound is forty-five feet high. The steps had fallen; trees were growing out of the



AZTEC WOMEN AT PUBLIC WELL.

place where they stood, and we reached the top by clinging to the branches; when they were cleared away, it was extremely difficult to ascend and descend.

"Above the cornice of the building rises a gigantic perpendicular wall to the height of thirty feet, once ornamented from top to bottom, and from one side to the other, with colossal figures and other designs in stucco, now broken and in fragments, but still presenting a curious and extraordinary appearance, such as the art of no other people ever produced. Along the top, standing out on the wall, was a row of death's heads; underneath were two lines of human figures in alto relievo (of which scattered arms and legs alone remain), the grouping of which, so far as it could be made out, showed considerable proficiency in that most difficult department of the art of design. Over the centre doorway, constituting the principal ornament of the wall, was a colossal figure seated, of which only a large tippet and girdle, and some other detached portions, have been preserved. Conspicuous over the head of this principal figure is a large ball, with a human figure standing up beside it, touching it with his hands, and another below it with one knee on the ground, and one hand thrown up as if in the effort to support the ball, or in the apprehension of its falling upon him. In all our labours in that country we never studied so diligently to make out from the fragments the combinations and significance of these figures and ornaments. . . . With

the full blaze of a vertical sun upon it, the white stone glared with an intensity dazzling and painful to the eyes, and almost realizing the account by Bernal Diaz in the expedition to Mexico, of the arrival of the Spaniards at Cempoala: 'Our advanced guard having gone to the great square, the buildings of which had been lately whitewashed and plastered, in which art these people are very expert, one of our horsemen was so struck with the splendour of their appearance in the sun, that he came back at full speed to Cortez, to tell him that the walls of the houses were of silver.'

. . . Its doom is sealed. Human power cannot save it; but in its ruins it gave a grand idea of the scenes of barbaric magnificence which this country must have presented when all

her cities were entire. The figures and ornaments on this wall were painted; the remains of bright colours are still visible, defying the action of the elements. If a solitary traveler from the Old World could by some strange accident have visited this aboriginal city when it was yet perfect, his account would have seemed more fanciful than any in Eastern story, and been considered a subject for the Arabian Nights' Entertainments."

The Mayas carried on a well organized system of agriculture. Irrigation was perfected by the building of canals, reservoirs, and cemented ditches. Corn and other grains were raised and stored in large communal granaries, and all the centers were more or less communistic, that is the people cooperated in the work, and mutually agreed to support and sustain one another. From the traditions, the women were very chaste and modest and had a high sense of religious feeling. They had their dances and theatres, and rare musical instruments, used in the religious ceremonies.

As far as can be told at present, the Mayas were polytheists. They had a number of gods just as the Greeks and Romans had in the days when those nations flourished. At the head of the Maya religion stood the god Itzamna, the father of all the gods and the creator of mankind. "He was the personification of the East, the rising sun, and was the father of light, knowledge, and life." Under Itzamna were a number of gods, all having their work to do in life. There were the God of War, the God of Death, God of the Harvest Fields, the Goddess of Child-birth, as well as many others. The Mayas believed in the immortality of the soul, and as a man lived in this world so would he be rewarded in

the next. In their worship, they had an endless succession of rites and ceremonies, and the first step in all the ceremonies was to get rid of evil thinking and words. Such an elaborate system of worship naturally required a well organized priesthood, at the head of which was the High Priest, who had associated with him men of priestly powers, all having their assigned work. The priesthood included within its ranks women as well as men. The priests taught science, healed the people, offered sacrifices, and gave blessings of the gods to the petitioners. "Religion was the very fountain-head of their civilization, and on its rites and observances, they lavished a devotion rarely equalled in the annals of

man. To its great uplifting force, was due the conception and evolution of the hieroglyphic writing and calendar of the Maya culture. To its need for sanctuary may be attributed the origin of Mayan culture; to its desire for expression, the rise of Mayan sculpture."

At the present time, archaeologists are making a study of all the southern civilizations of ancient days and are obtaining a large amount of information as to what types of people inhabited Mexico, Yucatan, and Central America. Everything indicates that by careful, scientific study, we will learn that at one time, great peoples with great ideals of life preceded on the American continent the present Red Men.



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