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Superimposition in Central American Architecture

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Abstract: A series of brief comments in which the author presents archaeological findings, architectural notes, and myths and legends that deal indirectly with the Book of Mormon. Dibble discusses the wheel, ancient irrigation methods, metals, Mexican and Mayan codices, Quetzalcoatl, ancient buildings, and numerous other related items. The twenty-fifth part covers some characteristics about Central American architecture.

Superimposition

in CENTRAL AMERICAN ARCHITECTURE

By DR. CHARLES E. DIBBLE

A VERY important architectural feature of Central American ruins is the superimposing of one building over and upon older structures.

It is to be remembered that most Central American ruins are pyramid-shaped bases flattened on top to accommodate a small super-structure dedicated to one of the gods. Stairways



RUINS AT MONTE ALBAN, OAXACA, SHOWING THE MANNER OF SUPERIMPOSITION.

were provided on one, two, or four sides of the base as approaches to the sanctuary. Since a basal pyramid entailed much human effort, an old building became the core of the new one. The whole structure was capped with a more recent one, new stairways were added, and slight modifications were made. Each superimposed pyramid was higher and covered a greater area.

There were numerous causes for this practice of superimposition. Some buildings deteriorated; others were partially destroyed by conquest. The Aztecs, in particular, had the belief that the sun would cease to appear and the world would come to an end every fifty-two years. Consequently, at the close of each fifty-two-year period, they often ceremoniously defaced their buildings to rebuild them at the beginning of the new cycle.

It is the task of the archeologist to peel off these successively superimposed structures, and to study their architectural composition. It often happens that the innermost structure at one ruin is architecturally identical with an outer structure at another site. This enables the archeologist to establish sequences and to study the diffusion of various diagnostic architectural features. The importance of this line of research is that it is enabling us to establish relationships over an extended Central American area.

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