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Archaeology and the Book of Mormon, Part II: Visiting Bonampak and the Lacandon Indians

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Abstract: This series is a comprehensive compilation of archaeological artifacts in Mesoamerica that relate to Book of Mormon places and peoples. It is copiously illustrated with photographs of buildings, pottery, statues, and carvings. The series includes evidences of Christ's appearance to the Americas and reviews ancient Mayan writings, including *Title of the Lords of Totonicapan*, the *Popol Vuh*, the *Annals of the Cakchiquels*, and the *Works of Ixtlilxochitl*. The author also discusses white and dark people in ancient America. The second part records the author's visit to the Mayan site of Bonampak and the Lacandon people.



Juan (one of the Lacadon Indian guides) paddling the boat taking Milton R. Hunter and José Dávila across the river near José Petit's home, and Nabor (another Lacadon Indian guide), sitting on the log.

PART II

Visiting Bonampak and the Lacadon Indians

A DRAMATIC chapter in the story of American archaeology was broadcast to the world in 1947 when the recent discovery in the southern jungles of Mexico of scenes depicting dark-and light-colored Indians painted on the interior walls of a temple was announced. The Mayan name *Bonampak*, meaning "painted walls," was given to this archaeological site.¹

A succession of interesting events resulted in the discovery of Bonampak. Approximately fifteen years ago when war clouds were hovering over the United States, Charles (Carlos) Frey, a young man in Chicago, decided to get completely away from what we term civilization; and so he left the United States with the hope of finding a spot where he could enjoy peace and contentment with

complete freedom from the multitude of worries and problems attached to modern society. In the jungles of the Usumancinta River basin near the southern borders of Mexico, he joined a group of Mayans, the Lacadon Indians, who were living under very primitive conditions.² He married one of their women and made his home with them.

After living with them for a few years, he won their confidence, and they told him about Bonampak, situated some ten to fifteen miles from their jungle huts. As a result of much persuasion, the Lacadon Indians guided Mr. Frey to the temple of the "painted walls," and these he examined with intense interest. Soon thereafter he visited Mexico City and reported his discovery. Archaeol-

Archaeology Book

ogists hurried to Bonampak and published articles describing this unusual, ancient temple with its "painted walls."

When I read those articles, I secretly and eagerly hoped to visit Bonampak and examine this marvelous discovery which could provide valuable evidence in helping to confirm the claims made by the Book of Mormon that there were dark and light colored peoples in ancient America.³ My chances to go there seemed re-

¹Sylvanus G. Morley, *The Ancient Maya* (Palo Alto, California, 1947), p. 415.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 208, 381, 410.

³2 Ne. 5:21-25; 30:6; Jacob 3:8; 3 Ne. 2:15.

mote; however, rather unexpectedly I received the opportunity to go.

At 5:30 a.m. on the morning of January 18, 1955, Otto Done, a photographer working for the Church, José Dávila, a Mexican guide and former branch president at Puebla, and I alighted from a train at Tenosique, Tabasco, Mexico, waited anxiously for daylight to come, and then hired the owner of a small plane to fly us to an airstrip near Bonampak. By 10 o'clock we had flown over the jungles of Mexico nearly to the extreme southern limits of that country and had landed on an airstrip cut for the use of workers in the chicle industry which provides the substance from which chewing gum is made. The place we landed was called El Sedro. We were now in one of the most densely wooded regions in the world, where there are no civilized people and no laws to govern the few primitive Lacadon Indians who live there. Before he left, our aviator informed us that we were crazy if we attempted to hike to Bonampak. He said, "If you get lost, you won't be the first nor the last ones. Recently an American was lost in these jungles for fifteen days." In spite of his efforts to discourage us, we were still determined to go to Bonampak.

And so the aviator remarked, "If you still insist on going, there is your

and the of Mormon

by *Dr. Milton R. Hunter*

OF THE FIRST COUNCIL OF THE SEVENTY

Photographs by Otto Done

trail leading out of the southwest corner of the airstrip; however, I still think you are fools."

We arranged with the aviator to meet him at the airstrip three days hence at 10 a.m., waved adieu as he flew away, and then commenced hiking along a very indistinct and difficult jungle trail.

After approximately one hour's time had passed and Otto, José, and I had almost reached the conclusion

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Top: Airplane view of jungles and clouds, shortly before the arrival at the airstrip fifteen miles from Bonampak. Center: A stream of water used for a jungle trail, and Nabor, Milton R. Hunter, and José Dávila. Bottom: Lacadon Indians studying a photograph of themselves, Milton R. Hunter, and José Dávila. Observe height of Indians. The three on the left are the Indians who first met us.



Milton R. Hunter and Nabor examining a broken Mayan stele at Bonampak.

dred feet upward and growing closely together, were interwoven with vines of various species. These not only climbed the trees from the ground to their tops, but also grew crosswise from tree to tree, making the vegetation practically a solid hedge. We observed that certain varieties of plants, such as philodendrons, which are grown as house plants in Utah, climbed one hundred feet high to the tops of the trees. Words are inadequate to describe the density and the beauty of the tropical jungles of southern Mexico. Thousands of orchid plants are attached to the trees. When in full bloom, these flowers would be a gorgeous sight.

Occasionally vines grew across the trail only four or five feet from the ground. This necessitated much stooping on our part, especially in the case of Otto Done who is six feet two inches tall. Because of the masses of leaves which were packed on the ground, the trail at times was extremely difficult to distinguish. We could have gone one direction almost as easily as another and still thought we were on the trail.

The tropical vegetation was so dense, regardless of how brightly the sun shone in the heavens, that it resembled dusk throughout the entire

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that we were lost, we met some Indians on the trail and they became our guides.

Our rescuers consisted of two Indian women and a boy, the latter whom I estimated to be approximately fifteen years old. These Indians, having heard our plane, had left their home and hurried down the trail to meet us.

They spoke Spanish and Mayan, having learned the former language from chicle workers, and so Otto and José conversed with them in Spanish.

After proper introductions had been made, the Indian women announced that they were formerly the wives of a man named Corranza who had been killed recently by another member of their tribe named Obregon. This news was disheartening. Here we were miles and miles from civilization, with no law enforcement officers nor laws to protect us, and suddenly we were informed that this had happened. With concern we asked, "Why did Obregon shoot Corranza?"

The reply was, "Because Obregon was loco in the head."

In each of our hearts was a strong hope and a sincere prayer that we three would not become Obregon's next victims. Nevertheless we were very thankful to have the Indians

as our guides; and so we proceeded onward, putting our trust in the Lord.

Never in my life before making this trip have I known what jungles and jungle trails really were. What a trail! The trees of numerous varieties, towering approximately one hun-

José Petit, a red-headed Lacadon Indian — practically white, with his wife and baby. José is the brother-in-law of of Frey, discoverer of Bonampak.



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A white, redheaded Lacadon woman.

course of our journey. The heat was intense and the humidity high. I was unable to wear my glasses at all in the jungles.

We soon learned that the Lacadon Indians were decidedly in favor of using streams of water for the trail whenever opportunity afforded itself. Occasionally during the earlier portion of our journey the trail crossed streams of water. We picked our way very cautiously, endeavoring to find logs or rocks on which to walk. Soon our feet were thoroughly soaked, and from then on we merely waded in the water in Indian fashion whenever we encountered a stream. As we continued our journey toward Bonampak, the trail on a number of occasions actually went in the streams of water, following their courses for nearly one hundred yards at a time before coming again onto the land. At certain times the water in which we waded was knee-deep. The trail was so indistinct and difficult to follow that without our Indian guides, we would have never reached Bonampak.

Our progress was made more difficult in certain places by muddy trails, causing us to sink ankle-deep; in other places our progress was hampered by four or five logs which had fallen on top of each other and were lying stretched across the trail. If it so happened that there was a hole large enough underneath the logs to squeeze through, the Indians would drop on their stomachs and crawl. Unfortunately, we found it impossible to follow suit, since we were carrying

so much equipment, and so we were forced to climb over the logs. I had a large movie camera strapped around my neck and hanging in front of me, with another camera hanging down my back, and water canteens hanging on each side. Otto and José were equally heavily laden, their packs including food, hammocks, and several additional cameras.

As we continued our journey along the jungle trail, it seemed as if every vine reached out and grabbed hold of our feet, tripping us over. It was really laughable to see how many times each of us fell down, but our Indian guides never stumbled. My first really exciting fall occurred shortly after the Indians had joined us. We were attempting to cross a stream on a log covered with slick, green moss. When I reached the middle of the stream, my feet slipped, and I fell into the water. As quickly as I could I held both cameras as high out of the water as possible, while I struggled to my feet and out of the stream. How the Indians laughed! That mishap furnished them the most fun they experienced while we were with them.

We hiked through the jungles for approximately two hours after the

Indian women and boy met us before we arrived at their *casa* or home. We invited them to continue on to Bonampak, but they declined, stating that the two men of that particular household probably would go with us if we would wait until they returned from hunting birds. Naturally to wait was our only choice; however, this afforded us an unusual opportunity to study the Lacadon Indians firsthand.

The two men, their several wives, and the two boys were living in two thatched houses which stood in the center of a beautiful spot that had been carved out of the jungles. A river of sparkling water ran nearby. Approximately ten acres of land produced bananas, sweet potatoes, corn, sugar cane, gourds, tobacco, and papayas for the Indians' subsistence. We observed that this small group of natives had twelve dogs, a herd of goats, a large flock of chickens, several turkeys, and a pair of parrots. The latter perched in a tree and served as decoys to attract wild parrots which the Indians shot for food according to their desires and needs.

Since there were only two boys of approximately fifteen years of age in

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Lacadon Indians eating dinner before the departure for Bonampak.

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those two families of probably eight women, it was apparent that the infant mortality is terrifically high. The Lacadon Indians are a vanishing people. The late Dr. Morley stated that there are approximately two hundred of them,⁴ but our careful inquiries led us to conclude that there are probably not more than one hundred.

Upon being invited into the Indians' small thatched houses, we observed that they had no bedding nor furniture; however, they did possess a few dishes and a grinder used for grinding corn. It appeared that the entire family would probably cuddle together at nighttime on a little straw mat which lay in the corner of the room. Their extreme poverty touched our hearts, and so we gave them all the small articles that were in our pockets and regretted that we hadn't more to give; for example, I gave a wooden clothespin to the woman the group called "Grandma." She seemed delighted and two days later was still holding it in her hand. We also gave them such items as pocket combs, pocketknives, pill bottles, soap, salt, flashlight batteries, a pistol, and several boxes of bullets. These primitive folk were as happy as children on Christmas morning.

While waiting for the men to return from hunting, Otto Done, using a minute camera, took photographs of the Indians. They beheld their own likeness with astonishment, each one exclaiming, "Who is this?" when shown his own likeness. This seemed to be a new experience for them.

Probably the one thing which impressed me most about the Lacadon Indians was the whiteness of their skin. One of the women actually had red hair, and her skin was as white as ours. José Petit, a man, also had red hair and white skin. The color of all the others whom we saw ranged from white to a slightly darker cast.

While visiting in Guatemala approximately three weeks before our trip to Bonampak, I was informed by an official guide that, generally speaking, the Quiché Maya Indians of Guatemala were nearly white and that there was another tribe of Indians—a primitive, wild people, living in the jungles of southern Mexico,

known as Lacadons—who were really white. When I received the foregoing information, I had no idea that I would have the privilege of associating for three days with the latter people, but suddenly and unexpectedly we found ourselves being entertained by them.

The Lacadon Indians are very small in stature: the men are approximately four and one-half feet to five feet tall and the women approximately six inches shorter. The majority of them have black hair. Both the men and the women part their hair in the middle, permitting it to grow long and fall loosely down their backs. They merely push it back from each side of their faces. Their hair has the appearance of seldom having been combed and rarely if ever having been washed, and so José Dávila gave the women a bar of soap and taught them how to wash their heads.

The clothing worn by both sexes is made of canvas, which appears to be the same type we use in making tents. Possibly these Indians inherited tents left in the jungles by chicle workers from which they made their clothing; but since the late Dr. Morley maintained that the Lacadon Indians did a certain amount of weaving of coarse cloth from a wild cotton which grows in the jungles, they could have actually woven this canvas-like cloth.⁵

Men, women, and children all wear similar clothing, their dresses fitting loosely and hanging from their shoulders nearly to their ankles. Since the men are practically beardless, it is difficult to distinguish them from the women; however, the men are slightly taller and larger.

Naturally, my experiences with these Indians caused me to recall the Book of Mormon account of the Nephites being "a white and delightful people."⁶ Although the Lacadon Indians are quite white in color, it is evident that they have degenerated greatly from the cultural standards of their predecessors of Book of Mormon days.

We waited more than an hour for the men to return from hunting. Upon their arrival, the oldest one—father to the other men, announced

his name to be Nabor and that of his son to be Juan. They readily consented to guide us to the temple of the "painted walls" on condition that we wait while they ate.

When the meal was served, all of the family members took several turns drinking gruel, or thin cornmeal mush, out of a large bowl.

The food having been consumed, Otto, José, and I, accompanied by Nabor and Juan, our guides, headed along the jungle trail toward Bonampak. After hiking for approximately two hours' time, we suddenly came to another garden spot with two picturesque, thatched huts standing on the bank of a beautiful river. These were the homes of José Petit and family.

We requested this family to permit us to take their pictures; thereupon José Petit (the other white Indian with red hair previously mentioned), responded. One woman of this household refused to pose for the picture, saying, "No, I haven't a pretty dress." I wondered what made her have such fancy ideas, since her dress was made of canvas and appeared exactly like the dresses worn by the other Lacadon Indians. The following day upon inquiry we learned from Nabor that this Indian woman had been the wife of the late Carlos Frey, the American discoverer of Bonampak.

Approximately two years before our visit to Bonampak, Carlos Frey was guiding a group of Mexican artists to the temple of the "painted walls," beginning a second trip there. While they were crossing the river about a mile below José Petit's home, the boat capsized, drowning Mr. Frey and one of the Mexicans. They were buried approximately a mile downstream from José Petit's home.

Juan paddled us across the river in a boat which had been made by hollowing out a log. We then continued our journey along the jungle trail for another hour. Suddenly our Indian guides stopped and said, "We are going home. We are nearly to Obregon's home. He will guide you to Bonampak. We do not want to see him."

We had no more desire to see Obregon than did our Indian guides, and so we replied, "We have hired you, not Obregon, to take us to

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 405-406.

⁵ *Ibid.* No. 30:6.

⁶Morley, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

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Bonampak, and you must do it, otherwise you will receive no gifts."

We gave them a box of bullets and exerted much persuasion. Finally they consented to continue with us on condition that we would not permit Obregon to join our party. We as-

sured them that we would not; in fact, we were as definitely opposed to having him accompany us as they were.

Soon thereafter the trail came into a small opening in the jungle and there in front of us stood two thatched huts. Obregon—a naked fellow ex-



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IT IS A wonderful, comforting, reassuring feeling when parents, mentally, can call the roll, and find all the family in—safe and secure. When families are young in years, it is comparatively easy to feel assured that they are somewhat safe, or at least to be assured that they are all in. But when they grow older, and their interests and activities widen, and they become more independent, the waiting hours of night are often long, as they come home, one by one. Sometimes children, young and old, wonder why parents worry so much and are so concerned about their unaccounted absences. But both caution and concern come with experience and responsibility—and not without reason. There are so many hazards, so many things that could have happened, and parents cannot, or should not, escape an acute sense of concern for all who are not present or accounted for. Children should and must expect to keep parents informed of their absences and activities. It isn't good for anyone of any age to be unaccounted for. Otherwise an unexplained absence or illness could go unknown and detected for far too long a time. Apart from love, apart from parental responsibility, it is simply a matter of good sense and safety for someone who has an interest in us to know always and at all hours, where we are, with whom we are, where we can be reached, and when we are expected to arrive. Less accountability than this, less responsibility, is much too loose. And in these matters, youth should not and must not think that parents are prying. It's just that they need to know, for theirs is an inescapable obligation which they cannot set aside if they would and should not if they could. This sure sense of responsibility is suggested in the Savior's parable of the shepherd and the sheep: "What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine . . . and go after that which is lost, until he find it? ¶ And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ¶ And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost."¹ It is a blessed thing, in the hours of the night, and at all other hours also, to have the sweet assurance that all are "present or accounted for," and we owe it, all of us, to all of us, to see that it is so.

"The Spoken Word"

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¹Luke 15:4-6.

cept for his breechcloth—was lounging on the ground in the shade of a bowery. His dogs barked vigorously at our approach. Upon seeing us, Obregon immediately jumped to his feet and ran to meet us, throwing his arms around me and giving me a firm caress. A chill went up and down my spine as I recalled that this man was a murderer. I was much relieved when he withdrew his arms and I found that he had no knife in his hand. My desire was to get out of the company of this aggressive Indian as soon as possible. He asked, "Where are you going?"

We replied, "To Bonampak."

He answered, "I will go with you."

With firm determination, we replied, "No, you won't; you can't go." Then he inquired, "Why not?"

To that we replied, "Because we have engaged those Indians to go with us."

Still he insisted on coming along also; but we flatly told him that we did not want him—definitely he could not go with us to Bonampak. It took all of the persuasion we could muster to convince him. Finally he relented by inviting us to come to his home on our return journey and, "write our names and addresses in his big book." It was obvious that his principle purpose was to provide another opportunity to try to get some gifts from us, which in the preceding conversation we had refused to give him.

As quickly as we could get away from Obregon, we continued our journey toward Bonampak. When we were approximately a hiking hour's distance from our desired goal, darkness came. We attached our hammocks to some trees. We had brought no bedding, and so, wet and exhausted, we crawled into our hammocks hoping to get a good night's sleep. The intense tropical heat of the day was soon replaced by the chill of the night. A wind arose suddenly and blew through the dense foliage, making the weather very chilly. In fact, to our surprise shortly after we had climbed into our hammocks, we were lying there shivering.

Nabor and Juan built a small fire and cuddled by it throughout the entire night. Several times I had strong urges to join them, but resisted, and lay in the hammock all night uncomfortably cold and most of the time wide-awake.

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Now and then during the long and dreary night the thought crowded itself into my mind: "What foolish men we are—both of those Indians have guns, and we are lying in these hammocks completely defenseless. They could easily shoot us at any moment, take our goods, and nobody would know where we had gone." Then I would push those disagreeable thoughts aside by reassuring myself that the Lord would protect us, which I acknowledge he did.

Another factor uncommon to us in sleeping in the jungles was the variety of weird sounds that continuously filled the air. Now and then a limb would fall from a tree and crash on the ground. Wild monkeys chattered, scolded at each other, and screamed; and a numerous variety of birds made diverse sounds according to their natures. Also, the thoughts of jaguars, snakes, spiders, and other inhabitants of the jungles were irritating factors in disturbing our night's rest. That was one of the longest and most disagreeable nights that I have ever spent. We were happy when morning came and we could continue our journey to Bonampak.

We finally arrived at the temple of "painted walls," which will be described in the next article. Our thrill surpassed description. We took photographs of the paintings of the dark and light colored people, and then hiked back to the Indian's homes, arriving at 3:30 in the afternoon.

It had been reported to us that the distance from the airplane landing strip to Bonampak and back was only thirty miles. After making the trip, and judging from our experiences and the way we felt, we concluded that one cipher had been omitted—making the distance "300" miles. If anyone doubts this statement, he is at liberty to make a similar trip and thereby verify or disprove our conclusions.

Upon arriving at the Indians' homes, naturally our first concern was food, since our rations had been limited to two small sausages each during that and part of the previous day. We immediately asked the Indian women to prepare us some food.

THE IMPROVEMENT ERA

In response, one of them brought us three eggs. José Dávila asked, "Cooked or raw?"

She replied, "Raw."

He then suggested, "Go back and cook them."

She immediately did so, and shortly thereafter returned not only with the three eggs but also with some tortillas. I gladly took the boiled egg, but upon looking at those Indian women, I remarked, "No, I don't care for any tortillas." But my stomach didn't believe the words my mouth had spoken, and so I reversed my decision, saying, "I will take one." I ate it and concluded that it was the most delicious morsel of food that I had ever tasted. Then I said, "I will be happy to take another," and it was as delicious as the first. After this the Indian women provided bananas for dessert.

Since we were not to meet the plane at the airstrip until ten o'clock the following morning, the Lacadon Indians insisted on our staying at their home that night, promising that they would guide us to the airstrip the following morning. They generously offered us, as a place to hang our hammocks that night, an open-air, thatched roofed shed which stood on the side of the river opposite to their homes.

Darkness came, and we crawled into our hammocks. By 10:00 p.m. we were again lying there shaking and shivering, as we had done the previous night. José got out of his hammock and built fires to keep us warm. Thereafter throughout the night we took turns keeping the fires burning, and so we were wiser than we had been the previous night.

About 6:00 a.m. we arose and, accompanied by Nabor and Juan, their wives, the two Indian boys, and all the dogs, headed for the airstrip. Approximately three hours later we arrived, observing that we were thirty minutes ahead of the appointed time. Our aviator, however, was four hours late. He blamed his tardiness on the fact that he didn't expect us to be there, thinking that surely we would be lost in the jungle.

Otto, José, and I are happy to have seen the "painted walls," which gave us additional confirmation of the Book of Mormon claims of dark- and light-colored peoples having lived in ancient America.

(To be continued)

MAY 1955

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