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## Who Were the Mayas?

Author(s): M. Wells Jakeman

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**Abstract:** This article recounts some of the archaeological discoveries found in Central and South American sites that date before the advent of the Aztecs and the Mayas. Archaeological exploration and the Book of Mormon provide clues as to the origin of the Maya people.

# WHO WERE THE MAYAS?

By DR. M. WELLS JAKEMAN

## The Itzan Society

IN THE great increase of knowledge that has come within the past hundred years, no advance has been more remarkable than that in the field of man's own past history.

The most spectacular addition to historical knowledge within this century has been that of the ancient Near Eastern beginnings, before the rise of Greece and Rome, for the unearthing of the ancient civilizations of Egypt and Babylonia has pushed back the horizon of history in these lands of the Old World by more again than all that had been previously recorded as history.

On the other hand, comparatively unheralded but just as important and interesting has been the equal extension backward of man's history in the so-called "New World" of America, through the slow but sure scientific reconstruction of the ancient civilizations of Mexico, Central America, and Peru.

In recent years this less-publicized work of historians and archaeologists in the early history of our own hemisphere has taken on a sudden and rapidly growing impetus. Time-honored theories of the origins of these ancient New World civilizations are being swiftly overthrown, and the entire perspective of their history revolutionized.

What has been the cause of this great upheaval in pre-Columbian American research? The answer to this question involves the consideration of a series of most surprising discoveries, and the perplexing problems which they have in turn produced.

AT THE beginning of the past hundred years, the history of America was thought by most Europeans and their colonists in that land as having commenced only with its discovery by the Europeans themselves a mere three and a half centuries previously. It was believed generally that nothing of importance had ever happened in the New World prior to this event at all worthy of distinction as "history." Moreover, the native inhabitants of the land were supposedly mere "Indians" or "red savages," without exception, and hence destitute of

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the higher art of writing, the essential accomplishment of civilization for recording the events of history.

True, a few informed persons spoke of the Aztecs and the Incas as great Indian nations conquered by the European invaders of Mexico and Peru. But even these famous peoples were dismissed as only partly civilized, at most, and as having had only a few decades or centuries of recorded history.

But strange rumors began to circulate at this time concerning the discovery of the remains of a great antique civilization which had flourished in the New World even long before the Aztecs and Incas, now buried under the tropical forests of "Middle America," the region of southern Mexico and northern Central America. Only a few years previously a report had been published of the finding of the ruins of a stone city near the little village of Palenque, which for size and utter

magnificence was as completely "un-Indian" as Oriental Babylon itself.

Even more recently, people began to talk of a remarkable work called the "Book of Mormon," which was also said to contain an account of an early civilization of America more ancient than that of the Aztecs and Incas, whose builders had come originally in ships from western Asia, had a written language, and possessed at one period in their history a perfect knowledge of the Christian religion!

Still more interest was aroused by the publication some years later of the narrative of a Yankee traveler in Central America, John L. Stephens, who described in exciting language the great ruined cities which he had visited in that country. Their condition, he reported, clearly bespoke an antiquity which far surpassed that of the Aztec and Inca remains. Moreover, many of the monuments were covered with





THE RUINS OF PALENQUE, MEXICO  
Time and the jungle enshroud an ancient Maya city.  
*Courtesy San Diego Museum.*

hieroglyphic writings, indicating that their builders were a literate people and must have therefore possessed a true written history!

The sensational news brought back by Stephens soon gave rise to many speculations as to the origin and identity of the ancient people who had been capable of producing such an advanced civilization in pre-European America. Unfortunately, their own story was sealed in the unreadable hieroglyphs of their writings. Certainly they were not "Indians," in the usual disparaging sense of that term, for the material and artistic achievements of their civilization were far beyond the poor cultural possessions of the Indian tribes, and disclosed few definite resemblances to them. But they also seemed just as foreign to anything known at that time in Old World history. This, then, presented a strange enigma. What could have been the origin or identity of these people if their civilization was derived from neither Indian America itself nor the Old World, at least as then known?

AFTER many years of speculation, it was finally decided that perhaps the best way of solving the mystery of these ancient civilized Americans would be a more careful or scientific examination of their remarkable civilization itself. Accordingly, before the end of the nineteenth century, many explorers and archaeologists began to follow the trail of Stephens into the Central American wilderness, for the discovery of more ruins of the civilization and their study by scientific methods. Since then, over two hundred stone cities have been found and charted, in Yucatan, Guatemala, Honduras, and southern Mexico

(see accompanying map). Many more have been uncovered in other parts of Middle America as having had ethnic or cultural connections with them, amounting at present to over four thousand sites—more, in fact, than the total number in all the ancient Greek world! Some of the central cities proved to be of such great size that they must have had populations ranging well into hundreds of thousands. Altogether, they comprised probably the most populous and flourishing empire of its time and area in all the world.

The highly advanced and complex nature of this great antique civilization of America as revealed by these ruined cities has been thoroughly detailed in the numerous publications of recent years. We need mention here only some of its more surprising and spectacular features, such as the lofty stepped pyramids, the temples and many-chambered palaces, the towers, theatres, observatories, colonnades, baths, fortifications and ball stadia, the thrones and arched gateways, the cement-paved roads, bridges and aqueducts, the statues of rulers and emblems of priesthood and caste, the widespread grain and cotton plantations, orchards and gardens, the universal monetary system and land and sea trade, the rich textiles and ceramics, the sculptures and mural paintings, the varied metal work, the delicate wood-carvings, jewelry and mosaics, the hieroglyphic writings and paper books, and the pure scientific achievements in mathematics and astronomy.

As now generally known, this

great classical civilization of pre-Columbian America has been called for convenience the "Maya" (see "Let's Say It Correctly," January *Era*, p. 64), because that is the name of the people who were still living in some of its cities when the Europeans came. By extension, its builders, the ancestors of these people, have been also given this name by the archaeologists. But whether this was also their original historical name remains to be seen.

Despite this extensive archaeological investigation, however, the problem of the origin and identity of the "Maya" people and of the sources of their amazing civilization has remained unsolved down to the present day. The great separation between the advanced Maya culture, for example, and the other cultures of pre-Columbian America is still as unbridgeable as ever. The borders of the Maya area, demarcating it from the different and less advanced cultures roundabout, is becoming even more sharply defined with each new discovery.

Even more puzzling is the location itself of this vigorous civilization in the climatically unfavorable lowlands of Middle America, a region of enervating tropical heat, excessive rainfall and scourging diseases—just such an environment, in other words, as is generally considered to exert a retarding rather than a stimulating influence on a people and culture. And yet this was the very region of the peak-development of pre-Columbian American civilization! Who were the Mayas, or what could have been their physical, mental, and spiritual resources, that enabled them to build or maintain such a high civilization in so hostile an environment?

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THEN there is the difficult chronologic problem of the Maya civilization, for, strange to say, its earliest discovered traces in this region reveal a culture already fully developed, and in possession of all the essential traits of an advanced and sophisticated society. Everything discovered subsequent thereto represents either a superfluous elaboration or an outright decline, a sequence that is directly contrary to all theories of culture history! Were the Mayas the master geniuses of all world history, that they should have thus been able to invent a civilization full-fledged out of their own free intelligence?

This conclusion of the innate superiority of the Maya people over the rest of mankind is difficult to accept, however, especially when we take into account their much humbler status of the present day. It is true that their ancient scientific, artistic, and engineering achievements mark them as one of the most brilliant peoples of world history. But to suppose that they accomplished them not only in opposition to the forces of an inimical environment, but even without the grace of initial stages of experiment and development, would be contradicting the major lessons of human history.

We are forced, then, to the adoption of the only other conclusion possible, namely, that the Maya civilization must have had its preceding stages of development in some more favorable region outside the Middle American lowlands, as yet undiscovered, and that its transference into the lowlands came about through the historical accident of colonization of that region by the Maya people. Its increasing degeneration during this later lowland phase in Middle America must have therefore been the result of the gradual sapping of the vitality and morale of the Maya people by the enervating climate, despite all their efforts to maintain the initial level.

The search for this original home of the Maya people and civilization outside the Middle American lowlands has been already proceeding for many years, but so far without any notable success. The regions which are now considered by many scientists as the most likely sources of at least their culture are the climatically favorable highlands of

Mexico and Guatemala. At any rate it is now known that in these regions and particularly in the former, a culture once flourished even long before the Maya, known as the "Zacatenco" or "Early Archaic." Indeed, to this earlier development have been traced rather certainly such basic features of the Maya civilization as maize agriculture, cotton textiles, and the pyramid-temple. But at the same time, many others of its features have not been found in this archaic culture of the highlands, so that this hypothesis can be accepted as only a partial solution of Maya origins.

This of course leaves but one more possibility, namely, some region of earlier development entirely outside Middle America. To discover the location of such a home-land of the Mayas and their culture, however, it is necessary to call on aid from certain other lines of evidence besides the archaeological.

One of the most promising of these additional methods has been the study of the Maya language. By a comparison of its structure and vocabulary with those of the other modern dialects of the "Mayan" or "Mayance" linguistic stock (see map), it should be possible to discover in these relationships clues to the ancient migrations of the Maya people themselves, and to reconstruct the original speech of their ancestors, through which evidence may be gleaned in turn as to the lo-

cation of their original home outside Middle America.

**M**OREOVER, the comparison of the Maya language with the other languages of America not of the Mayan stock should also lead to important findings as to the more general linguistic affiliations of the Mayas. So far, however, the only apparent result of these studies has been the discovery that the Maya people were as "un-Indian" in language as they were in culture! Even when we look into the linguistic situation of eastern Asia, a region now proposed by some writers as their original home-land, there is no language which is demonstrably related to the Maya, ancestrally or otherwise. The Chinese is superficially similar, but actual connection has been disproved. Thus the enigma of the ultimate Maya origins grows still more baffling in view of the linguistic data.

There must also be considered the very fundamental decision of physical anthropology. It is obvious that all other lines of evidence as to the origins of the Mayas must agree with or give way to the evidence of their physical or racial ancestry. The Maya physical type, with its Hebrew-like features, has been well defined within the last few years as the result of extensive somatological studies of their skeletal and pictorial remains as well as liv-

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ing descendants. We should therefore be in a position to arrive at a conclusive answer as to the identity of their racial antecedents beyond Middle America. But here again we are confronted with a strange conundrum. For though the "Mayanoid" type approaches in several ways the "semi-mongoloid" cast of the other native peoples of America, it also includes many traits which are just as obviously "un-Indian" or non-American and non-Mongoloid or non-eastern Asiatic in origin! How or where then did the Mayas acquire these "alien" characteristics, if not in America itself or eastern Asia?

There is still one other possible means of solving the mystery of the Mayas and their civilization. This is the historical method proper, or the reconstruction of Maya and Middle American history through the evidence contained in the available written records, in conjunction with the data supplied by archaeology, linguistics, and physical anthropology. In fact, it is becoming increasingly evident that the final answer will come through this historical or documentary approach. For it is clear that only through a reconstruction of the documentary history of the Mayas, including ethnic and place names, migrations, social movements, dates, political events, and personalities, as well as religion and culture, will the arbitrary historical factors behind the Maya phenomenon ever be discovered, and thereby the key to Maya origins. Consequently the translation and historical criticism of the ancient Maya writings—inscriptions as well as manuscripts—are assuming an important place in the program of research in the Maya problem.

**S**LOWLY but surely this new light from the documentary sources is piercing the obscurity of early Maya history. The beginnings of the great "Old Empire" period of the stone cities, for example, have been traced back definitely to the Peten lowlands of northeastern Guatemala and southern Yucatan (see map), where its earliest monumental inscription has been found. Fortunately this inscription contains a decipherable date, which when translated by the now generally accepted Goodman-Thompson correlation of the Maya and European calendars, tells us that these beginnings of the

Empire took place there shortly before the year 328 A. D. In other words, at about the time in Old World history when Constantine was establishing Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire, a great American empire was flourishing in the tropics of the New World, destined to expand in power as Rome itself fell before the barbarian hordes of Europe.

As previously indicated, intensive excavations in the Peten have failed to reveal any earlier stages of the Maya civilization in that region. Only the remains of a different and inferior culture, called the "Q Complex," have been uncovered under the stone buildings and cement pavements of the Maya. It is therefore evident that the advanced Maya civilization had been brought into the Peten by a colony of the Maya people from some outside center of still earlier development.

Striking confirmation of this conclusion occurs in statements in the surviving chronicles, to the effect that such a colony of the Mayas did come to Yucatan at this time, ex-

plicitly 258 A. D., to establish there the civilization destined to flourish soon after as the Old Empire. This colony, moreover, is stated to have come from *Suyua*, the general region of the West, and more particularly the district of *Nonoual*. It is important to note that recent researches have generally identified *Suyua* with the western coastland of present Campeche, Chiapas, and Tabasco, and *Nonoual* even more exactly with the coastal region of Tabasco (see map).

The earliest reference in the chronicles to the location of the Mayas in this western land is dated 179 A. D. However, there have been discovered even earlier *contemporary* documentations of this important fact, in the form of hieroglyphic inscriptions. One of these occurs on the famous "Tuxtla Statuette," discovered a short distance west of Nonoual in present Vera Cruz and dated 162 A. D. This western coastland, then, was undoubtedly the pre-Old Empire seat of the Mayas and their civilization.

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**N**UMEROUS data are to be found in the ancient writings concerning this earlier center of development. All that can be mentioned here, however, is a particularly outstanding event of the period which has special bearing on the problem of the origins of the Maya civilization. This is the related appearance in this coastal district of a great white personage from the East, called "Itzamna" in the Maya language, but better known by his later Toltec title of "Quetzalcoatl." Recent documentary as well as archaeological researches are indicating that it was from this great figure of early Maya history, later worshiped as the supreme Life and Peace-God, that the Maya people obtained that remarkable religion whose doctrines and rites so astonished the European invaders for their startling resemblances to those of early Christianity in the Old World. It was also from their worship of Itzamna as their patron Deity that the early Mayas became known especially as the "Itzas" or "Holy People of Itzamna," i. e., the "Christians of ancient America." The special significance this has for us here, however, is the fact that the Itzan religion became the basic impulse of the subsequent Maya civilization, as evidenced by the central role of the pyramid-temples and other monuments erected for his worship, especially during the Old Empire. Con-

sequently, the problem of the identity and character of the great Itzan god and the exact time and place of his related advent contains also the secret of the amazing vitality of this religious impulse, and hence also of the important religious basis of the Maya civilization.

Coming again to our brief outline of the documentary trail backward to Maya origins, we must note at this point the discovery only a few months ago of a still earlier inscription in this coastal region, at Tres Zapotes near the Tuxtla find and yielding the ancient date of 31 B. C.! This proves that the ancestors of the Maya Itzas had established themselves in this coastland of Middle America at least by the year of the Old World battle of Actium, when Octavius Caesar defeated Marc Antony and Cleopatra for the rulership of the Roman Empire.

However, the conventionalized forms of the hieroglyphs in even this ancient writing require the admission of still several centuries more of prior development, either in the coastland or in some other center as yet undiscovered. This therefore carries us back to at least the middle of the first millennium before the Christian Era for the acquisition of the hieroglyphic system by the ancestral Mayas, and for their arrival itself in Middle America.

At this point, unfortunately, our documentary or historical method also largely fails us. True, there is

the ancient report that the first colony came to this coastland in boats from across the sea. And we have already noted that some such origin is also indicated by the many alien or "un-Indian" traits of the Maya physical type, language, and civilization. But no traces of such a trans-sea homeland have yet been found, despite the most intensive explorations of many years.

Thus all lines of evidence as to the origin or identity of the ancient Mayas seem so far to end in complete bafflement.

**A**NOTHER avenue remains, however, which has not yet been thoroughly investigated. Reference is had to the ancient western Asiatic focus of culture, as this original homeland "across the sea."

In view of the comparative studies which have been recently undertaken in this direction—chiefly by English anthropologists—it is now beginning to appear quite possible that this final hypothesis may actually turn out to be the very solution we have been seeking! Future researches, in the history, racial type, language and civilization of the Mayas after their establishment in Middle America as well as in these aspects of their suggested ancestors in the Near Eastern center, should, of course, settle the question scientifically.

With the present beginnings already made in this program of research, the identity of the Mayas and the explanation of their pre-eminent role in early New World history should not escape the scientist much longer.\*

\*The important and fascinating problem of the Mayas, and of the ancient history of America generally, is attracting the increasing attention of scientists and the American public. Among the recent organizations for the promotion of research and study in this great field is the Itzan Society, of which the author of the preceding article is staff director. As its name indicates, the special interest of this organization is the problem of the origin, identity and early history of the Itzas, or original Mayas, the "Christians of ancient America." All persons interested in this important problem and in assisting toward its solution are invited to join the Society. Among its present members are several professional and amateur students of the field and contributing members in various states. Privileges of membership include free subscription to the Society's publications and certain other advantages described in the inaugural issue of its "Bulletin." Application forms and further information may be obtained by writing directly to The Itzan Society, 2067 S. Hobart Boulevard, Los Angeles, California.

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