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## Old America - Ancient Ruins

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**Abstract:** Series of articles dealing with archaeological, anthropological, geographical, societal, religious, and historical aspects of ancient America and their connections to the Book of Mormon, which is the key to understanding “old American” studies.

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## Old America.

BY G. M. O.

(Continued.)

### ANCIENT RUINS.

IT is now generally admitted by all who have investigated the early history of America that the nations and tribes inhabiting the country at the time of the conquest were then gradually sinking away from a higher position once occupied by their ancestors in the social scale. The melancholy fact cannot be denied that they were the descendants of a more civilized race, rapidly drifting into the conditions of savages. Nothing leads us more strongly to this conclusion than the abundant remains of ruined cities scattered over the southern part of Mexico, and still further south into central America. Here ruins of ancient cities have been discovered, which must have been deserted and forgotten years before the Aztec supremacy. Most of these ruins have been found in dense forests, where, at the time of the Spanish conquest, they had long been hidden from observation. These antiquities show that, anciently, the country was occupied by a people admirably skilled in the arts of masonry and building. Some of their architectural decorations cannot be excelled by the best of constructors and decorators of the present day. They were not only highly skilled in the appliances of civilized life, but it is a fact beyond dispute that they had the art of writing, as the many inscriptions testify.

One must know something of the wild condition of the country, to understand properly the condition and situation of most of the old ruins. Mr. Squier says: "By far the greater proportion of the country is in its primeval state, and covered with dense, tangled, and almost impenetrable tropical forests, rendering fruitless all attempts at systematic investigation. There are vast tracts, untrodden by human feet, or traversed only by Indians who have a superstitious reverence for the moss-covered and crumbling monuments hidden in the depth of the wilderness."

A great forest of like character covers the southern half of Yucatan, half of Guatemala, and extends into Chiapa, Tobasco and Honduras. There are ruins in this forest that none but wandering nations have ever seen, and some that possibly no human foot has approached for ages. According to the old books, the principal seats of the earliest civilization, the Colhuas, were in this forest-covered region. In their time the whole was cultivated and filled with cities and towns teeming with inhabitants. Here it is supposed the Colhuan city of Xibalba was situated, which, after a long existence, was destroyed by the Toltecs. Nearly in the centre of this forest is a lake called Peten. A solitary native town stands on its shore. This town was founded nearly a century before the arrival of the Spaniards, by a Maya prince of Itza, who, with a portion of his people, fled from Yucatan to that lonely region, to escape from the disorder and bloodshed of a civil war. This was the civil war which broke up the Maya kingdom, and during which the great city of Mayapan was destroyed. This was about the year A. D. 1420.

In 1695 Don Martin Ursua, a Spanish officer, built a road from Yucatan to Lake Peten, captured the town and destroyed it. He reported that, when building this road, he found the

"wrecks of ancient cities lying buried in the wilderness all along the route, stately edifices overgrown with foliage, and apparently very ancient." In fact, this vast forest covers an area considerably larger in extent than Ohio or Pennsylvania, and it remains as little known and unexplored as the heart of Africa; and the ruins of which something is known have merely been visited and described in part by explorers and travelers, who have brought away drawings of the principal objects.

In giving a brief account of the more important ruins we necessarily pass over "fragments from the wreck that befel the American civilization of antiquity"—thousands of other monuments, recorded and unrecorded by antiquarians, found in every sierra and valley of Mexico and Central America.

In the northern part of the valley of Mexico was the city of Tulha, the ancient capital of the Toltecs. At the time of the conquest its site was an extensive field of ruins. At Xochicalco are the remains of a remarkable pyramid, constructed with five stories. It stands on a hill consisting chiefly of rock, which was excavated and hollowed for the construction of chambers and galleries. These galleries are six feet high, and paved with cement. The sides and ceilings are covered with a durable preparation which makes them smooth and glistening. The main gallery is one hundred and eighty feet long, terminating in two chambers, which are separated only by two massive, square pillars. Over a part of the inner chamber is a dome six feet in diameter; it has a regular slope, and was faced with square stones laid in cement. From the top went up a tube or circular aperture nine inches in diameter, probably to reach the open air or some point in the pyramid. The basement is a rectangular building, measuring in the northern front sixty-four feet in length, by fifty-eight in depth on the western front. The height between the plinth and the frieze is nearly ten feet; the frieze is three feet and a half in breadth, and the cornice one foot, five inches. The bearings of the edifice correspond exactly with the cardinal points of the compass. The building is constructed of porphyry rock, in blocks, laid up in cement, and is carved and sculptured with singular figures and hieroglyphics, executed in a skillful manner. Mayer, who visited this ruin in 1842, says:

"We cannot fail to be struck with the industry, toil and ingenuity of the builders. Huge rocks were brought to form the walls supporting the terraces that surround the hill a league in circumference; and the whole of that immense mass was cased in stone. Beyond these terraces again there was still another task in the ditch of even greater extent, which had to be dug and regularly embanked. When you combine all the difficulties and all their labors, I think you will agree with me that there are but few works, not of essential utility, undertaken in the present age, by civilized nations, that do not sink into insignificance when contrasted with the hill of Xochicalco, from whose summit towered its lofty pyramid of sculptured porphyry."

Who the builders were, no one can tell; there is no tradition of them or the temple. When first discovered, no one knew who had built it, or for what purpose it had been built. It has out-lasted history and memory; yet, fragment as it is, it denotes that the people who built it were persons of taste and refinement, living in an age of civilization and architectural progress, that may well entitle the ancient inhabitants of our continent to the character of an original race.

In this part of Mexico, among other ruins, are the very ancient pyramidal structures at Teotihuacan, and an uncounted number of "teo callis," or pyramids of smaller size. The

largest of these structures covers eleven acres. They are made of earth, and faced with brick or stone.

Captain Dupaix saw, not far from Antequera, two truncated pyramids, penetrated by two carefully constructed galleries, lined with hewn stone bearing sculptured decorations. He mentions also the ruins of elaborately decorated edifices, which stood on elevated terraces. At one place he excavated a mound, and discovered burnt brick; and he describes two ancient bridges, both built of hewn stone laid in cement, one of them being two hundred feet long and thirty-six feet wide. Obelisks, or pillars, forty two feet high, stood at the corners of these bridges. The pyramid of Cholula is in this part of the country, and at present seems little more than an artificial mound of earth. Originally, it was constructed in four stages, or stories. It covers an area of forty-five acres. When measured by Humboldt, it was fourteen hundred feet square at the base, and one hundred and sixty feet high. Its condition of decay indicates that it is much older than the Toltec period.

## SUNDAY LESSONS. FOR LITTLE LEARNERS.

ON THE HISTORY OF JOSEPH SMITH, THE PROPHET.—LESSON X.

- Q.—Did he tell Joseph where he could learn more about them?  
A.—Yes, out of a record written upon gold plates, and buried in the earth.  
Q.—Did he tell him there was anything else with the plates?  
A.—Yes, the Urim and Thummim.  
Q.—What is that?  
A.—Two stones set in silver bows fastened to a breastplate.  
Q.—What are they used for?  
A.—To translate from one language to another.  
Q.—Who used them formerly?  
A.—Servants of God called seers.  
Q.—Did the angel tell him anything else?  
A.—Yes, a great many things about the prophecies in the Bible.  
Q.—Did the angel visit him more than once during the night?  
A.—Yes, three times.  
Q.—What did the angel tell Joseph about the golden plates?  
A.—That he should receive them at some future time.  
Q.—How long did the three visits of the angel last?  
A.—Nearly all night.  
Q.—What effect did they and the loss of sleep have upon him?  
A.—He was very weak and feeble the next day.  
Q.—Did he go to his work as usual?  
A.—Yes, but his father saw that he was not well, and told him to go home.  
Q.—As he was going, what happened?  
A.—When he was getting over a fence he fell down and fainted.

**BE FAITHFUL.**—A man cannot afford to be unfaithful under any circumstances; a man cannot afford to be mean at any time; a man cannot afford to do less than his best at all times and under all circumstances. No matter how wrongfully you are placed, and no matter how unjustly you are treated, you cannot, for your own sake, afford to use anything but your better services; you cannot afford to cheat a cheater; you cannot lie to a liar; you cannot afford to be mean to a mean man; you cannot afford to do other than to deal uprightly with any man, no matter what exigencies may exist between yourselves. No man can afford to be anything but a true man, living in his higher nature, and acting from the noblest considerations.

NEVER either praise or dispraise yourself, your actions do this sufficiently.

## Correspondence.

FORT HERRIMAN, SALT LAKE CO.,

May 4, 1875.

*Editor Juvenile Instructor:*

DEAR BROTHER.—The 3rd of May was an interesting time to the juveniles of the Fort Herriman Sunday school. In the afternoon of that day the children of our beautiful place, together with some of their parents and friends, numbering in all about one hundred and fifty persons, met in our meeting-house. At a quarter past one the opening hymn was sung by the school children, under the leadership of E. Orgill, and prayer was then offered by the chairman, E. I. Stocking; the children then sang "All Hail, my Sabbath Schoolmates!" Our superintendent, D. M. Bowen, gave the opening address, and the rest of the afternoon was occupied in exercises, which lasted until five p. m.; they consisted of recitations, dialogues, etc., which had been carefully selected. When the children had sung "Our own Sunday School," President Ensign I. Stocking, and Counselors Charles Crump and James Crane, each addressed the scholars in words of encouragement, and expressed themselves as being happily surprised at the creditable manner in which they had acquitted themselves. Rewards were then distributed to the children. After singing the "Temple Song," the scholars formed a procession and marched around the city. They afterwards returned to the house, and a benediction was pronounced. In the evening we again met for a social dance in our school house, and all enjoyed ourselves, as we had through the day, excellently. Nothing occurred to mar the good spirit and the enjoyment of the occasion.

Yours truly,

JOHN M. BOWEN.

## ENIGMA.

BY J. D. IRVINE.

I am composed of nine letters:

- My 1, 8, 5, 4, 5 is a name we should hold in reverence;  
My 9, 6, 7, 8 is often used in distinguishing the sexes;  
My 6, 7, 2 is a liquor;  
My 6, 3, 9 is a member of the body;  
My 5, 6, 9, 4, 2, 7 is the name of an ancient prophet;  
My 1, 6, 9, 2, 5 is the name of a male person;  
My 5, 6, 7, 2, 5 is something made in all stores;  
My 5, 6, 7, 2, 9 is the name of one of our southern settlements.  
My whole is the name of an ancient city.

THE answer to the Enigma published in No. 9 is "DRONE." We have received correct solutions from E. Brooks and E. S. Elsmore, Salt Lake City.

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