



Type: Magazine Article

Old America - The Muyscas

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Source: *Juvenile Instructor*, Vol. 10, No. 23 (13 November 1875), pp. 266–267

Published by: George Q. Cannon & Sons

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.

the moon accompanied the earth, the inhabitants of the plain of Bogota lived like barbarians, naked, without any form of laws or religious worship. Suddenly appeared among them an old man, who came from the plains on the east of the Cordillera of Chingasa, and who appeared to be of a race unlike that of the natives, having a long, bushy beard. He was known by three distinct appellations, Bochica, Nemquetheba, and Zule. This old man instructed men how to clothe themselves, build huts, till the ground and form themselves into communities. He brought with him a woman to whom tradition also gives three names, Chia, Tobecayguaga and Huytheca. This woman was extremely beautiful and no less malignant, thwarting every enterprise her husband proposed for the benefit of mankind. As a punishment she was driven from the earth and she became the moon. Bochica built towns and improved the land in various ways, introduced the worship of the sun, named two chiefs to lead the people, between whom he divided the civil and ecclesiastical authority, and then withdrew himself to the holy valley of Iraea, where he lived in the exercise of the most austere penitence. The same tradition also relates that Bochica, who had established himself high priest of Sogamozo or Iraea, advised the people to choose for a sovereign Huncahua, revered on account of his wisdom and justice. Bochica lived a hundred Muysca cycles, or two thousand years. He then disappeared mysteriously. He was represented as having three heads, being a triplicate deity, who nevertheless formed but one divinity. He was not only considered the lawgiver and founder of the religious system of the Muyscas, but to him was attributed the invention of their peculiar calendar arrangement of time. A week consisted of three days, ten weeks making a month, twenty months a year and twenty years an age. They also used a rural year of twelve or thirteen sunas or months, which was reckoned from one season of rain to another. They engraved on stones the signs which presided over the years, moons and lunar days. These stones reminded the priests in what Zoem, or Muysca year, such or such a moon (sun) became intercalary (McCulloh, p. 352). At the time of the celebration of the ceremony which marked the opening of a new cycle of fifteen years, the barbarous sacrifice of a human victim, called guesa, was performed. The victim was a child, carefully educated in the temple of the sun at Sogamozo till the age of fifteen. He was then led in procession to the sacrificial altar, accompanied by masked priests, some representing Bochica, others bearing the countenance of his wife Chia; others resembled frogs, and the man carrying the symbol of evil, figured with one eye, four ears and a long tail. The blood of the victim was received into an oval shell. This barbarous ceremony has several striking relations with that celebrated by the Mexicans at the end of their great cycle of fifty-two years.

Under the fanaticism of the Spaniards everything but resting in the history and religion of the Muyscas, beyond the few particulars mentioned have been lost, and the researches and dissertations of modern travelers and authors convey but an imperfect idea of what the Muysca civilization was in times preceding the Spanish conquest.

Running due north from the Andes Mountains, near Popayan in New Granada, are two great rivers or one great river with a parallel branch. They empty into the Caribbean Sea, and are called Magdalena River and (the branch) Cauca River. The Magdalena is undoubtedly the Sidon of the Book of Mormon, and somewhere on the banks of this river was located the historical city so often mentioned in that book called Zarahemla (See pages 139-40, 193, but more particularly 27-4).

No extensive ruins have been discovered by modern travelers in this region of country. Herrera (i. p. 16) speaks of large houses that conveniently contained above one hundred and fifty persons, and mentions a territory in this neighborhood called Zeno, where, in a field near a large temple, "were found abundance of graves, some of them so ancient that large trees had grown over them. These graves or tombs were large and magnificent, adorned with broad stones and vaults, into which the dead bodies were laid." Many of these tombs were large rooms. Humboldt (Personal Narrative, iv., 314) says in Venezuela on the plains of Variñas are monuments of the industry of a nation that has disappeared. He also mentions tumuli that he examined, and describes a road constructed by this extinct nation, five leagues long and fifteen feet high, crossing a plain often overflowed.

(To be Continued.)

REMINISCENCES.

BY ELDER JOHN TAYLOR.

(Concluded.)

A CIRCUMSTANCE occurred in Germantown which is not without interest. A gentleman called upon me one day, and, begging to be excused for the liberty which he was about to take, said: "Mr. Taylor, you do not act as most preachers do, you have said nothing about your circumstances or money; yet you have been here some time sick and have frequently preached to us, in which we have felt very much interested. Your doctors' hotel and other bills must be heavy, and I and some friends have been speaking about this matter, and would like to assist you, but have been afraid of giving offense; I, however, have taken the liberty of speaking to you on this subject and of informing you that if you will accept something at our hands we shall take great pleasure in contributing it." I thanked the gentleman kindly for his offer and his friends through him, and told him that I preached without purse or scrip leaving the Lord to arrange these matters; and as they were prompted by the Lord as well as their own generous impulses I should receive with gratitude what they felt disposed to give, and thank the Lord and also them. This was really very opportune for I needed it very much to meet my expenses.

As soon as I was able to move I took the stage, and, stopping at Richmond, Iowa, I held meeting in a public hall where I preached to a large congregation, two hours after my arrival, and the next day proceeded to Dayton, Ohio. I there was invited to preach, and also went with a brother a little outside of town, and while preaching was attacked by a violent fever and had a serious relapse, being again confined for some time. While there Elders George A. Smith, Theodore Turley and one or two others came about with whom I went to Kirtland, Ohio, at which place I had another relapse; I again fell into kind hands and was very well treated. While there I met President B. Young, Heber C. Kimball and others. We preached in the Temple, and certain ordinances having been attended to by President Young, I started in company with those I rethren for the East; they to visit some friends and I to pursue my journey to New York city, where I found P. P. Pratt, who, although having left after I did had arrived some time before. He was presiding over a large branch there and was engaged in publishing his "Voice of Warning" and "Millennial Poems." He welcomed me to his home and he and his good lady treated me with every mark of kindness.