



Type: Magazine Article

Who Were the Builders of the Lost City of Nevada?

Author(s): George C. Sutherland

Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 28, No. 6 (April 1925)

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Page(s): 529–534

Abstract: This article is an examination of archaeological discoveries unearthed in the Moapa Valley of southern Nevada. The author compares the demise of the culture that built the Lost City to Book of Mormon descriptions of similar cultural deteriorations.

WHO WERE THE BUILDERS OF THE LOST CITY OF NEVADA?

BY GEORGE C. SUTHERLAND

Discovery in the Moapa Valley of southern Nevada of the ruins of an ancient city which is believed to have flourished about the beginning of the Christian era is attracting the attention of archæologists and ethnologists in all parts of America. For evidences unearthed to date indicate that the inhabitants of that city possessed a degree of culture and refinement which had lifted them far above a state of savagery. Sections of old canals in the valley of the Rio Virgen, a few miles east of the ruins, show that the prehistoric inhabitants of that locality were acquainted with the science of irrigation. Five miles west of the old city are numerous hieroglyphs carved on imposing columns of red sandstone. Those are believed to form part of the recorded history of the ancient residents of the valley. Let us take a brief survey of the old town and the discoveries made there to date, and then try to determine who its inhabitants were and whether their culture was near its crude beginning, as the archæologists declare, or close to the end of a long period of decline, as the writer believes is possible.

It is the opinion of such eminent authorities as M. Raymond Harrington, investigating archæologist in charge of the excavating, and F. W. Hodge, prominent ethnologist, both of The Museum of The American Indian, Heye foundation, New York, that this recently discovered city was at the zenith of its glory about 1,500 or 2,000 years ago. This belief is based upon a comparison of the evidences of culture found here with that culture known to have existed among other ancients of the southwest at a date which is thought to have been established quite definitely. After careful consideration of everything brought to light so far, the archæologists have decided that this prehistoric city was one of the places where the culture of the Pueblo Indians originated.

The ruins, which have been named "Pueblo Grande de Nevada," by archæologists excavating in their midst, start at a point two miles north of St. Thomas and extend up the east side of the valley of the Muddy river for about six miles. Other ruins have been found north of this point, but these do not seem to have belonged to the main pueblo as there is a vast difference in the evidences of culture unearthed in the two places. The northern limit of the large town seems to have been about two miles east of Overton. The ruins uncovered at present lie principally on top of a low range of clay hills between the Muddy river and the foot of "Mormon" mesa.

Five or six houses and a kiva—a circular ceremonial chamber—

have been unearthed to date. The houses are shaped like horseshoes, some of them containing ten or more rooms. The majority of these rooms are about 8x10 feet in size and rectangular in shape, exception to this rule being found in the end rooms which are oval or circular.

Three types of houses have been found in this city. The single room, pit type; the communal house with rooms of the pit type, and the houses with rooms built from the surface of the earth up and no pit dug at all. In fact, some of the houses contain each of the types of rooms. Archæologists say the single-room, pit type house is one of the most primitive constructed dwellings of mankind. As the houses found at the old ruins north of the main city are of the latter type entirely, scientists believe they were occupied prior to the building of the large pueblo and at a time when enlightenment was just beginning to lift the minds of the ancient Nevadans to a higher plane of life and living.

The houses in the Pueblo Grande de Nevada were built of adobe bricks shaped like loaves of bread. These bricks were set in adobe mortar and the entire structure plastered with the same material. The floors were made of adobe and many of them remain in excellent condition still. While most of the walls of the old buildings have crumbled into decay, sections eighteen inches or two feet high have been found in some instances, giving the investigators a good idea of the appearance of the whole. The finding of several floors beneath some of the rooms has led to the conclusion that parts of the city were built up four or five different times at periods quite remote from each other.

In each of the rooms small bowl-shaped fireplaces have been found. Some of these are in the centers of the rooms and others in the corners. It is not the opinion of archæologists, however, that these fireplaces were used for cooking purposes, as much larger ones have been discovered in the court of each of the houses. The weather here is very mild in the winter and the small fireplaces are thought to have been used only to take the chill out of the rooms on unusually cold nights. Charcoal and ashes have been found in each of the fireplaces, and in several, half-burned corn cobs have been discovered. The presence of these is believed to furnish conclusive evidence of the cultivation of the soil and the production of this grain by the residents of the prehistoric town.

Close to each group of houses a large flat rock with deep circular holes in it has been found. This was the mill at which the grain was ground. The grinding was accomplished by placing the grain in the holes and crushing it with rock plungers known as metates. Several of the latter have been found in the houses and graves of the former residents of this city, for not only the kiva and houses have been unearthed, but numerous graves have been uncovered. Skeletons have been found in all of the graves.

Some of the burials have been found outside, a short distance

from the houses, but the majority of them have been discovered beneath the floors of the rooms. The condition of the skeletons is excellent, some of them being almost in a perfect state of preservation. The extreme aridity of the climate is said to account for that condition. While one skeleton measuring about five feet eight inches in height has been uncovered, the rest of those found have been only about five feet in stature. Their bones are not large and in many instances they appear to have had almost perfectly even features. Their foreheads were high and well developed. The facial bones of many suggest faces that were slender and of some refinement. The teeth of some are small and even, indicating that they were not great meat eaters. This is considered another argument in support of the theory that they were primarily an agricultural people.

The inhabitants of this ancient city believed in a conscious existence after death, in which existence they should live much the same as in the flesh and should require the same things needed here. This is indicated by the fact that all of the deceased's personal belongings were interred with him. Squash seeds, beans and other seeds found in the graves of some point to the expectation that those seeds would be needed in the spirit world, while the ancient dice of a gambler found in one grave would lead one to think that the departed was expected to ply his profession there as here.

Beautiful pieces of pottery have been found buried with each of the skeletons. Many of these dishes were not even cracked and were removed intact. These consist of bowls, water jugs and bottles. The majority of these are decorated with artistic black and white patterns of attractive design, although some have patterns of black on a rich red background. Three layers of clay were used in the construction of the latter, the inner layer of white and the two outer layers of red clay. The surface of the pottery is as smooth as any on the market today.

Beads and pendants of shell and turquoise have been found in some of the graves, and in others small black beads of unknown material. Mr. Harrington says he recalls no beads so small having been discovered in any of the ruins of ancient America with the exception of some small gold beads found in Ecuador. In one grave, that of a woman, the skeletons of two babies, evidently twins, were found. In other graves skeletons of dogs have been unearthed lying by the side of the person who was probably master or mistress of the animal in life. Bones of deer, mountain sheep and rabbits found in some of the graves indicate that while these ancient Nevadans may have been farmers they were not strictly vegetarians. Arrow heads and knives of flint taken from the graves show how those animals were killed and prepared for use.

Shreds of blankets apparently of fine texture have been found in some of the graves, showing that the art of weaving was not unknown to these early residents of the Moapa Valley. Remnants of

woven sandals have been discovered also. Both of these were in a bad state of decomposition and were covered immediately with paraffin wax to preserve them as much as possible.

The majority of the skeletons unearthed so far have been buried again, this time at the foot of those hills on which they once resided. Several have been sent to the museum in New York, and still others have been left in their graves for the benefit of tourists, many of whom call at the lost city each day en route east or west.

Indians living in the Moapa Valley today exhibit great interest in the work of excavating. Although some of these have traditions, handed down to them by their parents and grand-parents, of things which occurred two or three centuries ago, not even the eldest of them had heard of the presence of the city now being brought to light until the work of excavating began. This is believed to furnish corroborative evidence of the great antiquity of the ruins.

Numerous conjectures as to why the city was deserted have been advanced but the ones most commonly accepted are these: The people were primarily an agricultural race who had to depend upon water from the Muddy river with which to irrigate their crops. As the river shrunk in size each year, and as the population of the old town probably numbered several thousand souls, it became more and more difficult to raise the grain necessary to provide them with food. So they probably left this valley for more fertile fields, possibly in the valley of the Rio Virgen. The other theory is that the inhabitants were conquered by a stronger though less advanced people, exterminated or taken into captivity. The former is the theory which finds greatest favor with those now excavating among the ruins.

From an archæological standpoint, the discovery of these ruins is considered of great importance. Up to the time they were found practically nothing was known regarding the prehistoric inhabitants of Nevada and the knowledge concerning the origin of Pueblo culture was not considered extensive. Articles brought to light in this city, however, have added much to that knowledge and it is expected that much more will be learned as the excavating progresses. The work is to continue for another six months, at least, for it was so voted by the board of trustees of The Museum of The American Indian at a meeting held in New York February 3. What will be done after that depends, to a great extent, upon what the intervening time brings forth.

Now, who were the builders of this ancient city? Was this one of the places where the Pueblo culture originated? Are the indications of the civilization which existed here conclusive proof that that civilization was near its crude beginning, or might the same evidence be used in support of the argument that these people gradually were sinking from a higher plane of civilization to the depths of degraded savagery as they wandered farther and farther from the centers of culture to the south and east and from the gospel of Jesus Christ?

The statement of scientists that here is one of the places where the culture of the ancient Pueblos began; that the people who occupied these adobe dwellings were just starting to grope from the abysmal darkness of the past towards indistinct rays of light ahead, is based on the fact that as one travels farther south one finds places in which the civilization was much farther advanced than it was here. Here only one-family dwellings are found; in Arizona and New Mexico are the ruins of great apartment houses. Here everything is in the rough, while there is found evidence of the polish and refinement of a most enlightened age. This, it is argued, is evidence that the culture and civilization originated in those places where the indications are most crude, and that those places are probably of a more remote antiquity than those where enlightenment was far advanced.

But is that argument invulnerable? We know that the farther south one goes the more abundant are the evidences of a great civilization until in Central and South America are found ruins of cities, which, as one writer on American antiquities expressed it, "would have rivaled Nineveh, Tyre and Sidon in their day." But does this prove that the civilization of those early inhabitants of Arizona and New Mexico, and perhaps of Central and South America, originated in the north and became more advanced as it spread southward until it culminated in the great cities of Copan, Uxmal and Palenque, and others in the south?

Absolutely not! The same ruins, the same indications of varying degrees of civilization, the same crudities found farther north, may be used with equal assurance to prove the theory that the civilization declined and waned as it spread north from the more populous centers, and the people sank into darkness and disbelief. Furthermore, the revealed Word of God will go far to support the argument of those who advance the latter theory.

In the Book of Mormon we read of the great centers of advanced civilization which flourished in the Americas in both the Jaredite and Nephite periods. Some of those have been identified as having been located in Central and South America. Of course the two civilizations flourished at widely different times, but each was destroyed in the end by similar causes. Contentions among the Jaredites occurred at various times in their history as the people forgot God and his kindness. These continued, and bloody wars were fought by the factionists until the chief nations were practically exterminated.

So with the descendants of Lehi. Hardly had they begun to prosper in the promised land until they began to quarrel. Everyone familiar with Book of Mormon history knows the final outcome of those contentions. The important point for this argument is the fact that continually there were factions breaking off from the congregation of the Lord, both in the time of the Jaredites and the Nephites. These factions would withdraw into the wilderness and refuse to

have anything to do with those who were living according to the light and truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Is it not perfectly reasonable to suppose that when those dissenters first broke away from the commandments of God and decided to walk in the ways of iniquity, they took with them much of the culture in which they had been reared? Is it not logical also to suppose that, as succeeding generations were born and grew to manhood, as the bands wandered farther and farther from the fold with their backs to the light, their minds became more darkened and their manners and customs more primitive? If that is a logical conclusion, one must expect to find the evidences of culture left by those people to be more and more crude as they became farther and farther removed from the source of all truth. If that is the case, then the evidences of culture found at the Pueblo Grande de Nevada could just as well prove that here was the demise of a great civilization as that here was one of the places where that civilization originated.

Therefore, if the archæologists are correct in assuming that the lost city was built 1,500 or 2,000 years ago, it is not unreasonable to believe that the evidences of culture found there point to a civilization which was declining rapidly and about to become extinct. And if they have been too conservative in estimating the age of those ruins, it may be that those walls of adobe were erected by certain branches of the Jaredites who had dwindled into darkness and disbelief.

Kaolin, Nevada.

Opportunity

Inviting one to enter in
Who has the will to work and win.
Abundant ways and means renew
The opportunity for you.

Seek inspiration by your thought,
As little comes to one unsought,
And whatsoever one requires
Is granted through intense desires.

In thoughts omniscient, let your mind
Soar into regions unconfined—
A vision see of things unknown
That through invention is your own.

Then in the fervor of its sway
Bring forth the plan you need today—
For opportunity controls
A thousand gates, a thousand goals.

Payson, Utah.

JOSEPH LONGKING TOWNSEND.