



Type: Magazine Article

Ancient America

Author(s): Levi Edgar Young

Source: *The Young Woman's Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 9 (September 1917),
pp. 482-487

Published by: Young Ladies' Mutual Improvement Association

Abstract: Concentrating on archaeological finds in Mexico, Yucatan, Central America, and Peru, this article presents the civilizations of ancient America as evidence of the grandeur of pre-Columbian America.

Ancient America.

By Levi Edgar Young.

After the conquest of Mexico by Cortez in 1520, the Spanish government established its power in all the country southward as far as Peru; and northward along the Pacific coast indefinitely. All the present confines of the United States west of the Rocky Mountains was claimed by Spain until far down into the nineteenth century. In the sixteenth century of exploration and discovery by the adventurers and padres of the Court of Spain, the remains of great temples and cities were discovered as well as peoples who were descendants of civilizations that were well-nigh extinct. Much was written of this far past by the Spanish historians, and during the last century, the crumbling remains of Mexico, Yucatan, Central America, Peru, as well as the Cliff Dwellings and Mounds of the United States have offered up much of their stories, that had slipped away unrecorded from the knowledge of men. In the New World, written history can tell us only the story of men and nations since the days of Columbus. Beyond this, our "resources are limited to a meager body of untrustworthy tradition," and the scattered traces of the things that men have made. By a study of the latter, the history of the Red Race and its cultural achievements may be carried back through the centuries to the frontier of the great unknown. The virile genius of the people of ancient America is shown in their architecture, painting, sculpture, metallurgy, as well as textile and plastic arts.

We read about the temples and

pyramids of ancient Egypt; we admire the ruins of the Acropolis at Athens; we wonder about the life of the Romans at the time of the Caesars; but in America there is a problem for the archaeologist and historian which eclipses all other subjects of ancient times in interest and magnitude. Whoever these people were, they reached the zenith of their civilization, and went down before it was known to the white man. The reader may recall the sculptured frieze of ancient American life, by Mrs. Jean Beman Smith, which adorned the east balcony of the California Building at the Panama-Pacific Exposition. The frieze portrays scenes from the life of the ancient inhabitants of America—their industries, art, religion, etc. It is all a beautiful piece of work, but what is more impressive is the panel called "The Spirit of the Past." The theme is developed by means of a shrouded, brooding figure, looking out across the ruins of past civilizations—the Maya, Greek, Egyptian—"the spirit that has witnessed the growth, decline, and death of the great nations of the world, that has been cognizant of all the forces that have shaped human events, and that the artist conceives as eternally brooding over the affairs of men, from nation to nation and from age to age through all the cycles of time." On this panel are the words of Charles Kingsley:

"So fleet the works of men
Back to their earth again,
Ancient and holy things fade like a
dream."

Of the Aztec civilization of ancient Mexico, Prescott says:

"Of all the extensive empires which acknowledged the authority of Spain in the New World, no portion for interest and importance can be compared with Mexico; * * * the character of its ancient inhabitants, not only surpassing in intelligence that of the other North American races, but reminding us by their monuments, of the primitive civilization of Egypt and Hindostan."

In the United States we have the Cliff Dwellings in Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, and Arizona. Many hundreds of these dwellings are picturesquely located and were attractive sites for human settlements. Of the Mesa Verde Cliff Dwellings, Mr. Eugene Parsons says:

"The southwest has pre-historic monuments as remarkable as those of Babylon and Egypt. Southwestern Colorado has architectural wonders in the ruins of the Mesa Verde such as cannot be matched elsewhere in the United States."

The Cliff Dwellings of Utah are a mecca for the archæologist. Some of them, superb in their mountain fastnesses, leave an indelible impression on the mind. The San Juan district was once a centre of government and culture. The peoples inhabiting this part had homes and knew a well developed home life. The children played their games, and the parents, after providing for the meals by hunting, and tilling the soil, directed their thoughts to the Supreme Being. They used the wooden plow and raised corn, pumpkins, squash, and beans. The women used distaff and spindle, and the men filled large reservoirs for irrigating purposes. Water was carried in beautiful jars. The dwellings stand out here and there, clear and sharp against the sky, and one feels oneself transported to another age and living the life of another people.

The land of the Cliff Dwellings is like an old theatre. The scenery and settings are still present, but the men and women who enacted the drama of life have gone and left the stage setting behind.

Since the days of Columbus, and more particularly in the nineteenth century, archæologists have resurrected the ancient life of America to a very great extent. Scientific archæology which is slowly and patiently constructing the history of pre-historic America, enabling us to see the types of men, their industries and ideals of life, their governments and family life, is specifically a growth of our own day. The temples of Yucatan and Central America, as well as those of the Inca in Peru, bear evidence of the greatness of the people who built them. It was the Spanish conquerors who first wrote about them, and in the beginning of the nineteenth century, Lord Kingsborough brought to bear on the subject a rich fund of knowledge, and since his day, scientific research and co-ordination have revealed to us the wonders of ancient America.

In writing about this subject, we wish for convenience to divide it into four parts: First, the Incas of Peru; second, the Aztecs of Mexico, with the Maya of Yucatan; the Cliff Dwellings within the present confines of the United States; and fourth, the Mound Builders.

The Incas developed a distinct culture without any influence from the outside. The territory occupied by these people comprises what is now Peru and Bolivia in South America. When they were discovered by Pizarro in 1532, they formed a mighty empire, composed of several nations, all of which had been brought under one central government, and having one language. They built cities and homes

on the lofty plateaus of the Andes, and in the fertile valleys. The empire at its zenith measured 2,000 miles by 300 miles in extent, and varied from high plateau and mountain to sea level. The land had a diversity of animals and plant life. In their agricultural pursuits, irrigation was carried on in the valleys, as most of these were arid. Maize was cultivated to a high degree of perfection, and many different kinds were grown. Great fields of cotton were cultivated, and in the homes were the carding and spinning wheels. With the maize and cotton, went the cultivation of the melon, beans, squash, gourds, pumpkins, cocoa, pepper, and potatoes, and the llama, alpaca, and dog comprised the principal domesticated animals. The peasantry cultivated every available piece of land, and indications are that there was a large population in some parts. The remains of large canals and reservoirs have been found, and it is said by one authority (Robertson: "History of America") that the canals may be followed for days, and show plainly the result of careful engineering. Skilful workers in metals, they knew the uses of copper and gold, iron and silver, the smelting of which they understood. Recent discoveries show that they built large blasting furnaces.

Judging from the size of the ruins, the population of the Inca cities was large. The question of population is determined approximately by the size of the dwellings and castles. One author (Ruge: "Geschichtedes Zeitalters der Entdeckungen") describes a castle near the village of Tishuanacu, near Lake Titicaca. It is nearly 13,000 feet above the level of the sea, and covers an area of 140,000 square yards. The masonry is beautiful,

and the workmanship very artistic. Its rooms are counted by the hundreds, and the building must have housed thousands of people. Like the castles of Europe in the Middle Ages, it shows how people built to defend themselves, and every castle had its religious shrines and sacred chambers.

Of fortress and castle, Professor Hiram Bingham of Yale University says that the one overlooking the old city of Cuzco, known as Sacsahuaman, is the most stupendous example in America of what prehistoric man accomplished. Its builders had no better tools than stone hammers and fibre ropes, and understood no more advanced mechanical principles than the lever and inclined plane. "Like the ancient Greeks, they were aware of the strange value of salients and re-entrant angles, a knowledge which had been lost in Europe before the First Crusade (1095 A. D.) The facing of the terraces was done in colossal boulders, some of which weighed over twenty tons. Several stones in the lower tier were over twenty feet in height. Notwithstanding the enormous rocks, they were fitted together with great precision. No cement was used, but the strength of the walls was due to the irregularity of the blocks and the methods in which they were locked together. It is almost incredible that a primitive people should have had the courage and patience to carry out such an enormous undertaking. Sacsahuaman is, indeed, one of the 'Wonders of the World'."

The Incas had a monarchical form of government. Their records show long lists of kings and dynasties, and like all such governments, there was the aristocracy on one side, and the serfs and slaves



Copyright by Underwood & Underwood, N. Y.

TERRACED WALL OF FORT WHERE IN THE 16TH CENTURY, SPANIARDS DEFEATED NATIVE INCA KING, CUZCO, PERU.

on the other. Even the religion was autocratic and encouraged class distinction. Cuzco was the center of a great confederacy, and in this city was gathered all the chief officials of the king, together with his great council. One very eminent author (J. J. von Tschudi, in his ((*Reisen Durch Sudamerika*")) holds that the empire of Peru is the most absolute theocracy the world has ever had. The Inca was the representative of the Great Deity upon the earth, and the organization of his government made it a "colossal bureau-

cracy," ramifying into the very homes of the people. The empire was divided into provinces, and over each was a governor of the royal house. Like the ancient Spartans, all males belonged to the State, and were drilled as soldiers, and directed by the State in their vocations.

These ancient people believed in a Deity who worked miracles. He was the Creator of all things—the Sun, Moon, and Stars, and lastly—Man. Man was made of the clay of the earth, and the Great Miracle-God breathed on him, and he lived.

The priesthood received divine powers from God, and as there were various phases of it, there naturally grew up a great administrative system, both in the government as well as in the religion. Religion was solely directed by the State, and there was absolutely no individual right to believe as one pleased. Like all primitive peoples, the forefathers of the developed Incas believed that every family and village had its own god, and these gods were trees, rocks, mountains, rivers, etc. It was developed Totemism, and led in time to a higher form of religion. Lakes, rivers, mountains—all were regarded by the Peruvian tribes as places whence their ancestors issued from the greater world and to such places they paid deference and prayed. In all their religion, one finds the idea of a creative agency. A word or proper name is used much in their worship, according to the old Spanish writers. It is *Contissi-Viracocha* (He who gives origin or beginning), and the Incas believed themselves children of the Sun, which they worshiped as Creator. The name "Incas" means "People of the Sun." Another fundamental to their religion was the immortality of the soul, and for this reason, they carefully buried their dead.

With such a system of religion, there would naturally be built great temples for worship as well as altars before which the priests offered prayers and sacrifice. One of the most remarkable discoveries made in Peru is that of the Town of Gold, at Cuzco. It is literally a Golden Temple. Situated on an eminence eighty feet high, the temple "looked down upon gardens filled, according to the conquering Spaniards, with treasures of gold and silver." The inner and outer walls of the temple were covered

with plates of pure gold, the doorways were formed by huge monoliths, and within, behind an altar of gold, "was a huge plate of shining metal, engraved with the features of the sun-god. The surface of this plate was enriched by a thousand gems, the scintillation of which was almost insupportable." Surrounding this temple of gold were smaller ones, all of which impressed the Spaniards with their dazzling beauty. In the temple of the Moon, the mythic mother of the Inca dynasty, was a great silver plate, corresponding to the gold plate in the Temple of Gold. In the rainbow temple of Cyucha, heaven was represented by a great arch of gold, skilfully painted in wonderful colors. In other places in the land, great temples and altars have been found, all indicating the wonderful, but mystic religion of these ancient peoples.

In recent years, many cities have been discovered, among which is the old city of Mach Picchu, the houses of which were well built of faced stone. It had been lost for many generations, and with the exception of a few local Indians, no one knew anything about it. It contained large temples and public buildings, and the roads leading to the walls of the city were all well paved, and the surrounding hills were beautifully terraced, in flowers and trees. Their art gives a perfect picture of their racial mind. In their architecture, painting, and sculpture, they expressed their deepest thoughts concerning life and the world. Their pottery and bronzes are among the most unique and artistic that have been discovered in the New World. The potter's art was well developed, and silver and gold utensils have been extensively found. In the Berlin collection which is in the National Museum are specimens of pottery

which are indicative of developed æsthetic tastes and ideals. It betrays no foreign influence, and is strictly characteristic of the people. It was all hand-made, and the color of the vessels was determined in part by the actual color of the clay utilized. Some specimens are red, others black, while many are a gray-black.

Like the Indians of today, the Incas handed down their annals from father to son. The descendants of the sovereign formed a society or *Ayllu*, whose duty it was to hand down the history to the children in the form of narratives and hymns. Pictures were also used. These were done in color, something as the Sioux preserved their annals in pictures upon tanned buffalo skins. The Pawnee Indians have a drama, called the *Hako*.^{*} This drama depicts the entire religious and social ideals of the tribe, and is played annually near the banks of the upper Missouri. So the Incas had their plays, many of which have been preserved in their traditions. Some of them were as beautiful as the old Greek tragedy of "Antigone," written by Sophocles, others were as profound in thought as the "Prometheus Bound" of Æschylus. The Inca plays were given before the family hearth, as well as in the public temples. A complete play has come down to us in the drama of Ollantay, first reduced to writing and staged in 1781 by Dr. Don Antonio Valdez, a scholar and priest of one of the South American provinces. Valdez's manuscript was copied and finally translated into English. A late interpretation in Spanish was published in Buenos Ayres, in 1907. Very briefly, the story of the play is this. The scene is laid

in Cuzco. Apu Ollantay, a young soldier, is in love with Cusi Coyllur Nusta, the daughter of the reigning Inca. His gallantry, however, is recognized, and he holds a prominent place at court. The lovers are secretly married, and then it is that Ollantay prefers his suit to the monarch, but is rejected with scorn. Ollantay declares himself the enemy of Pachacuti, the Emperor, and is pursued into the mountains by the imperial army. Ollantay gives battle to the Inca forces, and is proclaimed Inca by a large following. Meanwhile, Cusi Coyllur disappears and becomes the mother of a baby girl, who is named Yma Sumac. The father imprisons his daughter to punish her for her treachery. A son of Pachacuti succeeds to the throne, and his army captures Ollantay, and others of his followers, who are immediately condemned to be executed. However, they are all pardoned, Ollantay is made one of the chief officers in the Inca army, his wife is released from prison, and the father, mother, and daughter take up their abode in the Imperial palace, and all ends happily. There are some very pretty poetic touches in the play. Ollantay, at one time hiding in the mountains, sings to his loved Coyllur Nusta:

"In a moment, I lost my beloved,
She was gone, and I never knew
where;

I sought her in fields and in woods,
Asking all if they had seen the
Coyllur.

"Her face was so lovely and fair,
They called her the beautiful Star.
No one else can be taken for her,
With her beauty no girl can com-
pare.

"Both the sun and the moon seem to
shine,
Resplendent they shine from a
height,
Their rays to her beauty resign
Their brilliant light with delight."*

^{*}See "Young Woman's Journal,"
Vol. 23, p. 13.

^{*}From Markham's "Incas of Peru."