Goldsmiths of Ancient Times

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Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
Page(s): 206–208

Abstract: This article discusses Spanish libraries containing historical accounts that describe a chamber in which gold plates were found. Ancient American goldsmiths made plates of gold that were thin like paper and on which ancient hieroglyphs were engraved.
GOLD and precious stones and jewels have from the dawn of civilization played a large part in the worship and adoration of the divine. The goldsmith's art is one of the oldest arts practised by man and was brought to a high degree of excellence at an early period. The writings of the prophets of the Holy Bible give many examples of the love that men had for gold and precious metals and jewels. A famous passage in the Book of Job proclaims this truth:

As for the earth, out of it cometh bread: and under it is turned up as it were fire.

The stones of it are the place of sapphires: and it hath dust of gold. (Job 28:5-6.)

... (Now Hiram the king of Tyre had furnished Solomon . . . with gold, . . .) And Hiram sent to the king six hundred talents of gold. (I Kings 9:11, 14.) . . . And (the Queen of Sheba) came to Jerusalem with a very great train, with camels that bare spices, and very much gold, and precious stones. . . . And she gave the king an hundred and twenty talents of gold, and spices very great store, and precious stones. . . . And the navy also of Hiram, that brought gold from Ophir. (I Kings 10:2, 10-11.)

In the book of Genesis, we are told that when Abraham went into Mesopotamia to find a wife for Isaac, he gave to Rebekah "a golden earring of half a shekel weight, also two bracelets for her hands of ten shekels weight," and after the betrothal was made, presented her "jewels of silver and jewels of gold." Pharaoh wore a ring upon his hand which he took off and put upon Joseph's hand, and he also put a gold chain about his neck. Gold—alluvial gold washed from the sands of rivers—was used from earliest times. Gold ornaments wrought 3,000 years before the Christian era have been discovered in Egyptian tombs, and of most exquisite workmanship. The sacred scarabaeus, or beetle, considered by the Egyptians the emblem of eternal regeneration, has been found in golden models. From Greece came noted goldsmiths of ancient days who, invited to Rome by the Emperor Cæsar Augustus, and others, were the fashionable artificers of golden brooches, necklaces, bracelets, and earrings, as well as elaborate objects studded with precious stones. Quantities of wonderful jewels were accumulated by the Emperor Justinian and his successors in the Church of St. Sophia in Rome. The Emperor Charlemagne brought from Byzantium noted jewelers and goldsmiths. His crown and sword are still preserved in the Imperial Treasure of Vienna. His crown was composed of eight plates of gold, four larger than the others, joined together by hinges. The large pieces are studded with different gems, while the smaller are enameled with figures and in-
scriptions. Britons and Anglo-Saxons alike wore necklaces of beads, often made of gold and silver. Amethysts set in gold and hanging from a band have been found. The belts and girdles of the Anglo-Saxons were ornamented very elaborately. Not only were the buckles by which they were fastened of the richest workmanship, but they were sometimes enriched with plates of gold beautifully chased and set with precious stones or jewels.

The word jewel is significant. It means a "thing of joy," the diminutive of the French word joie. It was applied to precious stones and precious metals because they have been used from the earliest stages of civilization to commemorate and signalize human joy.

"In ancient days," says Maurice Maeterlinck, "the search for gold was only a symbol concealing the search for the divine faculties in man." Gold was the emblem of purity and formed a part of the offering of the Wise Men to the infant Savior.

Peter Martyr was the first chronicler of events of Spanish history in America. His book, De Orbe Novo, tells how the Spaniards through their "... insatiable desire for gold, oppressed these poor wretches with extreme labor and toil to find gold, although before the Spaniards came, the natives lived pleasantly and at liberty, given only to plays and pastimes, as dancing, hunting, fishing..."

Chaplain Juan Diaz mentions that in the first voyages along the coasts (Yucatan), "a mask of gold was obtained." He says that one day the "cacique told an Indian that he should clothe the Captain (Crijalva), and the Indian dressed him in a corselet and some armlets of gold, and on his head he placed a crown of gold, only that the crown was made of very thin gold leaves."

Marshall H. Saville, in his Goldsmiths' Art in Ancient Mexico, gives the translation of a report of one of the soldiers under Cortez, F. Francisco de Aguilar. Sr. Aguilar "was a devout soldier and devout man." He was wealthy and had the support of many Indians. He joined the order of Dominicans, and, when over eighty years of age, he wrote his famous account of the Indians and Cortez. The manuscript has only recently been found in one of the old libraries of Spain. It was apparently written about 1579. He with other soldiers found the wardrobe and treasure of Montezuma and, after describing how they had discovered a secret chamber in one of the palaces of Montezuma, says:

When it was open Cortes and some of his captains went in first, and they saw such a number of jewels and slabs and plates of gold and other great riches, that

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Carl Lumholtz, entitled Unknown Mexico, Vol. II, p. 295, is a description of the finding of two skeletons: on the breast of one of the dead was a large plate of solid hammered gold which had been used as an ornament.

With the discovery of America, Spanish and Italian noblemen led expeditions to the Indies, Mexico, and South America. Through the search in ancient burial grounds, enormous quantities of gold, fashioned in a multitude of forms, have been discovered. The countries where gold is most abundant in graves, are Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru; and the ancient peoples of Ecuador were among the most proficient workers of gold in South America. The German archeologist, Dr. Max Uhle, is quoted in a brochure published by the Heye Foundation of New York City as finding an immense amount of gold in the province and town of Sigüí. One tomb alone contained forty-four pounds of gold and another over two hundred pounds. Dr. Uhle describes a shaft in which a skeleton was found covered with gold and silver plates, alternating regularly, as if they had been affixed to a cloak thrown over the body. "This cloak may have had a fringe formed of small tubes of gold. The arms were discovered with bracelets and the head with a crown all of pure gold. Choate-wood sticks were found covered with lamellae (leaves) of gold." We read further that gold leaf of the finest quality and as thin as paper has been found in great quantities. On some of the lamellae are carefully carved hieroglyphics. Gold plates, held together by small gold nails, are shown in the Museum at Quito. Gold bangles attached to crowns worn by ancient "kings" were fastened with gold wires. The article written by Marshall Saville from which we have obtained our information concerning the gold plates, crowns, and rings of ancient Ecuador and Peru, says:

We may say that the picture presented by the occurrence of vast quantities of gold artifacts in the various culture areas of South America...shows a glittering magnificence in connection with the ceremonial and civic life of the people, which perhaps were not excelled even in ancient Egypt or Etruria. In the native architecture there is evidence that precious metals were used to sheath the rooms of important buildings.

Beautiful gold plates were collected by the museums of Europe before World War I. The writer saw in the Royal Museum of Berlin, some years ago, a large and beautiful assortment of gold plates, some of them circular and others rectangular or square. Some were as thin as an ordinary sheet of paper and showed careful workmanship. There was no writing on them, but they were found in the old temples of the Mayas and were made ages ago.

Of recent date, the writer was shown the collection of gold plates now in the collection of the Museum of the American Indian in New York City. The plates were about twelve inches long by ten inches wide and as thin as ordinary paper. They were of beautiful workmanship, and quoting the words of the old historian, Las Casas, when he had seen the thousands of gold fabrics in Mexico, that the workmanship "...appeared like a dream, and not as if made by man's hands."

From the writings of the Abbe Francisco Clavijero, Antonio De Solis, Garcilasso de la Vega and other noted Spanish historians of the days of the Spanish Conquest of America, we learn that gold plates were made in all the ages of the history of the peoples of ancient America...

THE MORNING STAR
By Adrienne L. DeWitt

The Great Designer placed a flawless gem
Upon the trailing, velvet hem of Night.
He planned this perfect sparkling diadem
Upon her draperies to give delight
To countless millions of the human race
Who gaze upon this harbinger of light.
That lovely Night so gracefully displays.