

Origin of the Maya...or where did those dudes come from anyway

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Origin of the Maya...or where did those dudes come from anyway - by Dr. Herman Smith

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With the coming together this week of five Mundo Maya Countries to celebrate the Costa Maya Festival we thought it appropriate to re-run this article. The story is one of the many that Dr. Smith, an Archeologist, wrote specifically for the San Pedro Sun about the Mayan culture. Dr. Smith compiled these stories into a book entitled "Archeology Without Tears" which is available at the Ambergris Museum.

When the Spanish arrived in the New World in the sixteenth century they were stunned by the astonishing beauty of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan (now the site of Mexico City). The architectural and engineering achievements were compared to Venice and other great cities of Europe. Later, as the Spanish explored the continent they encountered the long abandoned cities of the ancient Maya, which proved to be even more impressive. The problem for the Europeans was how to explain the high culture of the New World in terms of what was known about their own history. There was an incredible European conceit that the pagan, godless people of the New World could not have possibly built these magnificent cities without some sort of inspiration and guidance from the Old World. Consequently, the first attempts to explain the achievements of the ancient people of the New World were couched in terms of what was known at the

time about the rise of civilization in the Old World. Of course, the source available to the scholars of the day, namely the priests of the Catholic church, was the Bible.

In searching for an explanation as to how the New World became populated, reference was made to the Lost Tribes of Israel. It seems that around 700 B.C. or so, the Syrians made life very unpleasant for the Israelis, to the extent that three tribes (really large extended families) disappeared altogether. Whether they were annihilated in combat or absorbed into the dominant Syrian culture will probably never be known, but thereafter, reference was made to the "Lost Tribes" and scholars in the sixteenth century believed that they would someday be found intact in some remote part of the planet. Now here were the inhabitants of the New World who physically bore a striking resemblance to people from the eastern Mediterranean, so hey, they must be the descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel. Further investigation revealed that the Lost Tribe deal wasn't going to fly. For example, it was eventually revealed that the Native American languages bore absolutely no resemblance to the languages of the Old World. Moreover, the people of the New World lacked many of the things common to their European counterparts such as a utilitarian wheel, the use of metals, sailing craft, etc. The notion of the Lost Tribes, in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, has been kept alive to the present day by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints- the Mormons.

The Book of Mormon, sort of the Mormon Bible, holds that there were a series of migrations from the Old World to the New, the first following the collapse of the Tower of Babel, around 2500 B.C. These visitors were supposed to have shown the local savages how to build pyramids and get right with the correct religion. Evidently the interlopers from the eastern Mediterranean left all of their cultural baggage on the beach around Veracruz somewhere. Eventually Jesus Christ himself visited Mesoamerica after his resurrection, en route to heaven. Now regardless of what one chooses to believe or not believe about the Book of Mormon, there isn't one shred of evidence in the archeological record to even suggest European contact with the New World prior to 1492 A.D.

As early as the sixteenth century, at least one Spanish priest suggested that the Maya and their counterparts all came from Atlantis, the fabled continent in the Atlantic Ocean that was supposed to have been a highly advanced civilization that disappeared in a great earthquake and volcanic eruption many thousands of years ago. If there was such a sunken continent beneath the waters of the Atlantic, you can bet your last pair of tennis shoes that the United States Navy Submarine Service would know all about it.

More recently it has become fashionable in certain circles to favor extraterrestrial origins for not only the ancient Maya but just about every Precolumbian culture in the New World. Little green men in flying saucers have been held responsible for everything from the lines in the desert in Nasca, Peru to the huge substructural pyramids at Tikal. Somehow that conceit that plagued the sixteenth century Europeans is alive and well. It is difficult for many people today to accept the fact that the people of the New World evolved independently and achieved a greatness that eclipsed the European culture of the time. It is a very sobering fact to realize at the zenith of the Maya experience, say around 800

A.D., London was a small Roman outpost and my ancestors in northern England were running around naked and living in trees. So if the Maya didn't take a boat from Europe or wander into the continent after being lost in the desert of the eastern Mediterranean, where did they come from? The reality is every bit as exciting as the UFO from Mars and says a great deal about the determination and courage of the human race.

If the ancient Maya were not Egyptian immigrants or voyagers from the eastern Mediterranean, why did they build pyramids to bury their kings in like the Egyptians? The same question may be asked about the early Cambodians who also built large stone-masonry pyramids as well. One swallow does not a summer make, and since there doesn't seem to be any other cultural connections between the Old and New World in terms of language or other examples of material culture, the conclusion is the Maya developed in place in the New World.

As elsewhere, the road to civilization was long and rocky. Beginning around 15,000 years ago (some insist that the proper date is more like 20 to 30 thousand years ago) the earth was in the grips of the last Ice Age. Much of the ocean's water was locked up in the expanded polar ice caps, dropping the level of sea water to 100 to 300 feet below the present level. In the Bering Sea, between modern Alaska and Siberia, the sea was shallow enough that the reduced level of sea water would have resulted in a dry land bridge between the Asian and American continents. The so-called Bering Straits Land Bridge was at times over 1000 miles wide, permitting movement of humans and animals freely from the Old World to the New, and vice-versa. Now at the time there were no human inhabitants in the New World, but there were vast numbers of large game animals such as mammoths, mastodons, giant sloths, horses and several varieties of camels (some of which are still around in the form of llamas, alpacas and vicunas).

This remote period, known as the Late Pleistocene, was when the first hunters and gatherers from Siberia colonized the New World. Eventually these nomadic hunters followed the game herds as far south as the tip of South America, where radiocarbon dates have recently established their presence there by 12,500 years ago. Called the Paleo-Indian Period by archeologists, these bands of hunters roamed the continent until around 8,000 B.C.

In Middle America, small bands of nomads began to cultivate certain plants rather than merely collect them. The most important of these seed plants was corn (maize) which permitted the storage of surplus and allowed for the establishment of the first permanent villages by the close of this, the Archaic Period, by 2000 B.C.

The Pre-Classic Period lasted, more or less, allowing for regional variability, from 2000 B.C. to 250 A.D. With the spread everywhere of peasant hamlets and simplistic fertility cults the first Mesoamerican civilization established itself within this time-frame, at first with the Olmec and later the Zapotec and Maya. The Olmec, a full-blown civilization by 1200 B.C., were distributed over Mesoamerica from the Pacific Coast of Guatemala to the Gulf Coast of Mexico, and were responsible for the erection of huge carved stone monuments, masks, plaques of jade and the first attempts at a calendar (which has come to be known as the "Maya Calendar"). The Olmecs were not alone in their endeavors. The Zapotec, of the southern Pacific Coast of Mexico began to construct stone monuments to celebrate victories over neighboring chiefdoms, recording the name of the unfortunate victim, the name of his chiefdom and the date of his capture or sacrifice. So the Zapotec, not the Maya, invented writing in Mesoamerica.

The Period that followed is called the Classic Period, 250 to 900 A.D., in the minds of some, the "Golden Age" of Mesoamerican civilization. Dominated in Central Mexico by the great city of Teotihuacan and by the Maya of the Yucatan Peninsula, southern Mexico and Guatemala. It was during this period the Maya reached their zenith, with construction of the great ceremonial centers and the erection of carved stone monuments with the dates of the monuments expressed in the Maya "Long Count." The Classic Period began, as far as archeologists are concerned, with the establishment of a monument at Tikal, dated 292 A.D. and ends with the last such monument found at Uaxactun, dated 889 A.D.

The Post-Classic Period, A.D. 900 to 1521 saw the rapid decline of the Maya civilization followed by intrusions into the Maya World by elements from southern and central Mexico. While it is true the Maya made several attempts to reorganize and re-affirm their leadership, most notably at the large settlement of Mayapan in the Yucatan, they never achieved their former influence. The arrival of the Spanish, of course, extinguished the Post-Classic cultures.

So there it is in a nutshell. The Maya didn't come from outer space, Egypt, Greece, Rome, Africa, Polynesia, China, Norway or New Jersey. Instead their ancestors made the long journey from Siberia to Mesoamerica over many centuries, enduring the uncertainties and hardships of nomadic life until they opted for a more secure lifestyle as farmers. The outgrowth of this sedentary existence was the production of surplus food which freed up some of the more skilled craftsmen to produce things associated with permanent village life, such as pottery, textiles, and canoes that helped exploit food and other resources that enriched their daily lives. The ruins of the great cities and ceremonial centers of the Maya, only now being wrenched from the grip of the jungle, are testimony to their success- and failure.



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