

Ancient Temples: What Do They Signify?

Hugh Nibley, *Ensign*, September 1972, 47

What most impressed me last summer on my first and only expedition to Central America was the complete lack of definite information about anything. Never was so little known about so much. We knew ahead of time that of the knowledge of the ancient cultures there wasn't much to be expected, but we were quite unprepared for the poverty of information that confronted us on the guided tours of ruins, museums, and lecture halls. It was not that our gracious guides knew less than they should. It is just a fact of life that no one knows much at all about these oft-photographed and much-talked-about ruins.

In the almost complete absence of written records, one must be permitted to guess, because there is nothing else to do; and when guessing is the only method of determination, one man's skill is almost as good as another's. An informed guess is a contradiction of terms, so our initial shock of non-discovery was tempered by a warm glow of complacency on finding that the rankest amateur in our party was able to pontificate on the identity and nature of most objects as well as anybody else.

One would suppose it to be a relatively easy thing to decide whether a given structure had served as a hospital, a monastery, a palace, a storeroom, a barracks, a temple, a tomb, or an office. But it is not easy at all, with everything stripped completely bare and all the interiors looking just alike. Usually, we do not even know who the builders were or what their names were or where they came from.

Stock phrases, such as, "We know as little about the history of the Mixtecs as we do about the Zapotecs," may confirm a scientist's integrity, but they hardly establish him as an authority. Admission of ignorance, though a constant refrain in guidebooks and articles, is really no substitute for knowledge. This writer is as ill-equipped as any ten-year-old to write about the people of ancient America, because he has never seen their records—but then who has?

The vast archives of the Old World civilizations that bring their identities and their histories to life simply do not exist for the New World, and so all we can do as we sit drinking lemonade in the shade is to gaze and emote and speculate and rest our weary feet.

There are two things, however, about ancient American ruins upon which everyone seems to agree: (1) the reliefs that adorn the walls of some of these structures with ritual games, sacrifices, processions, audiences, and well-known religious symbols leave little doubt that they were designed to be the scenes of religious activities; (2) some of these religious structures were laid out to harmonize with the structure and motion of the cosmos itself, as witness the perfectly straight axial ways that point directly to the place of the rising and

setting sun at solstices and equinoxes or the total of 364 steps and 52 slabs to a side that adorn the great pyramid of Chichén Itzá.

It is an eloquent commentary on the bankruptcy of the modern mind, as Giorio de Santillana points out, that we can find so little purpose or meaning in the magnificent and peculiar structures erected by the ancients with such immense skill and obvious zeal and dedication. These great edifices are found throughout the entire world and seem to represent a common tradition; and if they do, then we have surely lost our way.

Counterparts to the great ritual complexes of Central America once dotted the entire eastern United States, the most notable being the Hopewell culture centering in Ohio and spreading out for hundreds of miles along the entire length of the Mississippi River. These are now believed to be definitely related to corresponding centers in Mesoamerica.

Ranging further abroad, we see a convincing resemblance when we visit the famous ritual complex sites of the Old World and find the same combination of oddities on the same awesome scale. Pyramids and towers first catch our eye whether in Asia or America, and closer inspection reveals the familiar processional ways, stone alignments and colonnades, ceremonial gates, labyrinthine subterranean passages and chambers with their massive sarcophagi for priests and kings, reliefs depicting processions and combats, images of kings, gods, priests, and dangerous carnivores and serpents in stone.

While those who dig in the ruins of both hemispheres discover many similarities in the use of gold, turquoise, seashells, feathers, cotton textiles, and abstract designs, such as key patterns, spirals, and swastikas, the Western experts doggedly defend their domain as New World specialists. They are unencumbered by extensive knowledge of the Old World and still insist that "there was absolutely no similarity in the details of development in America and the Mediterranean countries." Then they mention similarity after similarity with, of course, the understanding that such likenesses are the result of mere coincidence.

As for the idea of possible contact between the hemispheres, a magisterial gesture toward the map has always been thought sufficient to explain everything, obviating the necessity of reading the rich and wonderful libraries of the ancients who could tell us a great deal about the real and possible intercourse over the waters if we would only give them our attention.

Whole rooms full of ancient writings have been found in the Old World at actual ruin sites with which they were contemporary, and from such we may learn the nature and purpose of the great buildings. Strangely enough, it is only in the present generation that really extensive comparative studies among these documents and ruins have been undertaken. Serious study of the Egyptian temples, with the aid of inscriptions found in and near them, is only now being systematically pursued for the first time.

Because of this neglect, it is not surprising that comparison of Old World ritual complexes with their counterparts in the New World has hardly even begun, though resemblances between the two have never failed to impress even the most casual observer of the past 150 years. However, such studies as have been undertaken invariably suggest emerging patterns common to both worlds. Without committing ourselves to any dogmatic position (it is still too early for that), we can still indulge like stout Cortez in a few wild surmises from a peak in Darien.

In his recent study of a primitive Egyptian temple complex, Egyptologist Philippe Derchain declares that “one can almost compare the ancient Egyptian temple to a powerhouse where diverse energies are converted into electric current or to a control room where, by the application of very little effort ... one can safely produce and distribute energy as needed along the proper power lines.” (Le Papyrus Salt 5825 [Brussels: Memoirs of the Royal Academy], vol. 58 [1965], p. 14.) Such powerhouses were not confined to Egypt; we find them everywhere, in the Old World and the New.

The ruins of such centers of power and control still comprise by far the most impressive remnants of the human past. Today the great plants are broken down and deserted; the power has been shut off. They mean nothing to us any more, because we don't understand how they worked.

The most sophisticated electronic gadget in perfect working order is nothing in the hands of one who has never heard of electricity, and it would only frustrate even an expert if he found no power outlet to plug into. Perhaps the old powerhouses were something like that. And did they ever really work?

A great many people went to a lot of trouble for an unusually long time to set up these mysterious dynamos all over the world. What could they possibly have derived from all this effort? They must have gotten something, to have kept at it so long and so enthusiastically. For that matter, some of the holy places still carry on: pilgrims still travel in vast numbers to Mecca, Jerusalem, Rome, and Benares, hoping to experience manifestations of supernatural power.

Countless reports are on record at those famous sites of ingenious attempts to duplicate by fraud certain miraculous displays during the pilgrimages, attesting the fading or fictive nature of the vaunted powers from on high.

It is remarkable that some principal centers of world power are still located at the ancient sites where the corporate life of the race was thought to be renewed in the great New Year's rites presided over by the king as god on earth. These sacred centers flourished in the heart of Rome, at the Altar of the Sun in Peking, in the Kremlin, in Jerusalem, in Cairo (the ancient Memphis), in Mexico City, and elsewhere. Such pouring of new forces into

fossil molds is what the philosopher Oswald Spengler calls “pseudomorphs,” endowing a new power structure with a specious authority in which no one any longer believes.

The idea that divine power can be conveyed to men and used by them through the implementation of tangible earthly contrivances and that these become mere antique oddities once the power is shut off is surprisingly confirmed and illustrated by the Book of Mormon. Thus the Liahona and the Urim and Thummim were kept among the national treasures of the Nephites long after they had ceased their miraculous functions.

Before the finger of the Lord touched the sixteen stones of the brother of Jared, they were mere pieces of glass, and they probably became so after they had fulfilled their purpose. And the gold plates had no message to deliver until a special line of communication was opened by supernatural power.

In themselves these objects were nothing; they did not work by magic, a power that resided in the objects themselves so that a person has only to get hold of the magical staff, seal, ring, robe, book of Moses or Solomon or Peter in order to become master of the world. The aids and implements that God gives to men work on no magic or automatic or mechanical principle, but only “according to the faith and diligence and heed which we ... give unto them” (1 Ne. 16:28) and cease to work because of wickedness (see 1 Ne. 18:12).

Some have thought it strange that God should use any earthly implements and agents at all, when he could do all things himself just as easily. But even the Moslems, who protest that Christianity places needless intermediaries, notably Jesus and the Holy Ghost, between God and man, declare in their creed that they believe “in God and his Angels and his Prophets and his Books.” Does God need all of these to do his work with men? However we may rationalize, the fact is that he does make use of them.

But what about all these ancient powerhouses—what would happen if they were restored? Nothing, in my opinion. They might be repaired and put in working order, but that would no more make them work than setting up a Liahona or Urim and Thummim, with all of the working parts in order, would enable us to use them. Without power from above, nothing will happen, for this is not magic.

It is doubtful if any of the known powerhouses ever really worked, except for the temple at Jerusalem (of which duplicates were made all over the Christian world as centers of pilgrimage in the Middle Ages), where the key manifestations in the life of the Savior took place. But what of the others? If they enjoyed no real dispensations of heavenly power, they really did not need to justify their existence, with all the trouble and expense of building them or keeping them in operation as the focal centers of the world’s religious life.

The gesture of faith was not without its reward, however, and the by-products of the ancient temple were easily worth the time and effort that went into constructing and operating it, since the result was nothing less than civilization itself.

Ancient civilization was hierocentric, so that everything came from the temple. The Egyptians carried on for centuries like “a people searching in the dark for a key to truth,” as I. E. S. Edwards put it.

Abraham, while he pitied the futility of Pharaoh’s zeal, respected his sincerity: though “cursed ... as pertaining to the Priesthood,” Pharaoh was nonetheless “a righteous man, ... seeking earnestly to imitate the order ... of the first patriarchal reign.” In return he was blessed “with the blessings of the earth, and with the blessings of wisdom ...” (Abr. 1:26), and with the most stable, humane, and enlightened of civilizations.

If the Egyptian religion fed on its hopes, so do all the others; the Jews ever hoping for Jerusalem, the temple, and the Messiah; the Latter-day Saints still hoping for the fulfillment of the promises of the tenth Article of Faith.

One thing that leads us to suspect that most of the great powerhouses whose traces still remain were never anything more than pompous imitations or replicas is their sheer magnificence. The archaeologist finds virtually nothing of the remains of the primitive Christian church until the fourth century, because the true church was not interested in buildings and deliberately avoided the acquisition of lands and edifices that might bind it and its interests to this world.

The Book of Mormon is a history of a related primitive church, and one may well ask what kind of remains the Nephites would leave us from their more virtuous days. A closer approximation to the Book of Mormon picture of Nephite culture is seen in the earth and palisade structures of the Hopewell and Adena culture areas than in the later stately piles of stone in Mesoamerica.

C. Northcote Parkinson has demonstrated with withering insight how throughout history really ornate, tasteless, and pompous building programs have tended to come as the aftermath of civilization. After the vital powers are spent, then is the time for the super-buildings, the piling of stone upon stone for monuments of staggering mass and proportion. It was after the disciples of the early church decided to give up waiting for the Messiah and to go out for satisfaction here and now that the Christians of the fourth century took to staging festivals and erecting monuments in the grand manner, covering the whole Near East with structures of theatrical magnificence and questionable taste.

How unlike the building program of the Church today which can barely erect enough of our very functional, almost plain chapels to keep abreast of the growing needs of the Latter-day Saints.

Though such piles as the great pyramid-temple of Chichén Itzá yield to few buildings in the world in beauty of proportion and grandeur of conception, there is something disturbing about most of these overpowering ruins. Writers describing them through the years have ever confessed to feelings of sadness and oppression as they contemplate the moldy magnificence—the futility of it all: “They have all gone away from the house on the hill,” and today we don’t even know who they were.

Amid the ruins of the New World, as in Rome, we feel something of both the greatness and the misery, the genuine aspiration and the dull oppression, the idealism and the arrogance imposed by the heavy hand of priestcraft and kingcraft, and we wonder how the ruins of our own super buildings will look someday.

The great monuments do not represent what the Nephites stood for; rather, they stand for what their descendants, “mixed with the blood of their brethren,” descended to. But seen in the newer and wider perspective of comparative religious studies, they suggest to us not only the vanity of mankind and the futility of man’s unaided efforts, but also something nobler; the constant search of men to recapture a time when the powers of heaven were truly at the disposal of a righteous people.