
Review: Central America

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REVIEWS.

AMERICA.

CENTRAL AMERICA.*

IN the *Journal* for February, 1901, a notice appeared of Frau Seler's 'Auf alten Wegen in Mexico and Guatemala,' containing a popular account of Prof. Seler's expedition of 1895-97 to Central America, undertaken at the instance and at the charge of the Duc de Loubat in the interest of archæology and ethnography. In the present volume are embodied the scientific results of a long visit paid on that occasion to the secluded and hitherto almost unknown district of Chaculá, in the Guatemalan department of Huehuetenango, on the frontier of the Mexican state of Chiapas. The discoveries here made proved to be of quite exceptional importance, and so numerous were the monuments surveyed and the objects found in them and in the neighbouring limestone caves, that no less than 50 photographic plates and 282 inset figures and plans have been required to reproduce and illustrate them adequately. The volume, which is of quarto size and printed in bold type on stout paper, is further equipped with a large sketch-map of the district and a very fine map of the surrounding South Mexican and Central American lands.

Chaculá itself is at present a mere hacienda, or farmstead, standing about 5260 feet above sea-level in a thickly wooded, hilly tract which presents geological features analogous to the calcareous Karst formation of the Balkan peninsula. Although now almost uninhabited, except by a few Indians of the Maya-Quiché family, there are abundant indications in the groups of remains scattered over a wide area that the whole district was at one time densely peopled by settled and more or less civilized communities allied to the cultured inhabitants of Palenque, Coban, and the other ancient cities of Chiapas and North Guatemala. These all belonged to the same Maya-Quiché connection, and the remains of all kinds unearthed and examined by Prof. Seler, while often showing interesting signs of independent local developments, present on the whole the same general features as those of the Maya as distinguished from the Aztec types.

This is true, not only of the objects brought to light at Chaculá itself, but also of those found in the Uaxac canal valley, in the Yalambhoch woodlands, in the Cueva de los Pájaros, amid the crumbling monuments of the ancient settlement of Quen Santo with its Temple of the Sun and numerous caves, and in all the other localities visited by the author. Thus the symbols of the Yucatec water-goddess, *th bolon ts'acab*, were recognized on the stone at Cimarron. The god figured on the Piedra redonda near the same site was identified as the Maya god *Oxlahun tox*, the deity of the West, the war-god worshipped by all the Maya peoples, but unknown to the Aztecs, unless he can be brought into some kind of relation with the terrible Tezcatlipoca, called also Yaotl, the "warrior."

But there are, of course, many points of contact between the two cultural systems, and Prof. Seler describes the sites and ground-plans not only of temples, palaces, and pyramids, but also of several *tlachtli* ("tennis-courts") which still exist in the Chaculá district, and correspond in their main features with those already described by himself and other observers both in Mexico and Mayaland. The Mexican enclosures are, as a rule, in a much more dilapidated state than those of Yucatan and Guatemala, and it is interesting to note that from a careful study

* 'Die alten Ansiedelungen von Chaculá . . . Guatemala.' Von Dr. Eduard Seler. Berlin: 1901. 'Mittelamerikanische Reisen und Studien aus den Jahren 1888 bis 1900' By Dr. Karl Sapper. Brunswick: 1902.

of the latter he has been able to clear up the Aztec text of Sahágun, who describes the Mexican ball-courts in somewhat vague language. He has much to say on this subject, and we are here reminded that the rubber ball was tossed, not with the hands or feet, but with hips and shoulders, just as Mr. A. R. Wallace tells us the game is still played by the Papuans in some parts of Malaysia. So much for like usages as a test of racial affinities and contacts.

From the general character of the objects found amid the ruins, in the caves and graves—plain and decorated earthenware, clay masks, stone figures of men and animals, musical instruments of human bones, carved stelæ, incense-burners, rattles, and the like—it is evident that the Chaculá people had made less progress in the arts than the kindred Mayas of Chiapas and Yucatan, whose civilization is represented by the great monuments of Palenque, Coban, Uxmal, Chichen-Itza, Copan, Quiriguá, and the other ancient cities of Central America. By means of the fragments of two inscribed stelæ now embedded in a wall at Sacchaná, but originally from Quen Santo, Prof. Seler essays to determine the approximate date of the Chaculá settlement. These are compared with the hieroglyphs sculptured on the stele M of Copan, to which they are strictly analogous, although more clumsily executed and much more weather-worn. From an elaborate study of these documents, and on the now established principles of the Maya calendric system, it is inferred that all the known Maya monuments, those of Chaculá included, and the temples of Palenque alone excepted, were erected within a period of a few centuries before the discovery. Specialists will find much to interest them in this long essay on Central American chronologies, and some will be surprised to find that the Katunic cycle, for instance, was not 20 years long, as stated by the early writers, nor 24 years, as held by Mr. Cyrus Thomas, but 20×360 days, or 19 years + 265 days, the solar year being reckoned at 365 days without bissextile or other intercalary corrections. Needless to say that the seven week-days of Bishop Nuñez de la Vega, corresponding to "the seven planets of the Gentiles," are here also finally disposed of. As the author states emphatically, "Of such a week nothing was known in ancient Mexico or elsewhere in Central America" (p. 95). The more the salient features of the native systems are subjected to critical analysis, the more they are found to diverge from those of the Old World, thus plainly showing that the various civilizations of the aborigines were locally developed independently of all extraneous influences. Were any further proof needed to establish the intimate connection of the Chaculá culture with that of the surrounding Maya populations, it would be supplied by the hieroglyph of the planet Venus, which Prof. Seler found inscribed on a stone at Quen Santo exactly as it occurs on the monuments of Copan and Chichen-Itza and in the still extant Maya pictorial documents.

It should be mentioned that this volume is the first of a series in which the gifted author proposes to work up the rich materials collected by him during his memorable expedition of 1895-97 to Mexico and the Maya lands.

No name has in recent years been more prominent than that of Dr. Sapper in connection with the geographical and economic relations of the Central American States. A sojourn of over twelve years in the Isthmian regions entitles him to speak with some authority on these relations, and the two volumes in which he has given permanent form to his impressions and experiences must be accepted as valuable contributions to our knowledge of these volcanic lands and their turbulent inhabitants. In the first book—*Das Nördliche Mittelamerika*, Brunswick, 1897—was embodied a great mass of valuable information on the southern parts of Mexico and the conterminous states. The second, here under notice, forms a direct sequel and complement to that work, covering the whole of Central America

properly so called, from South Guatemala and British Honduras to Costa Rica inclusive. It is by no means a systematic treatise, and the form in which its copious materials are thrown together betrays little regard for the requirements of the general reader. The absence of an index is poorly compensated by a very meagre table of contents, with no numbered chapters, but only a few short headings disposed in two parts, which are not even indicated by any special typographic device, but run together in the body of the text. There is, however, a complete list of the sixty photographic illustrations, which add greatly to the value of the book, some being of very large size, folding in like maps, while all are clearly reproduced by the new processes brought to such perfection in Germany. Quite a panoramic view is thus presented of Antigua, for instance, with its dangerous neighbours, the "Fire" and "Water" volcanoes; of the city of Guatemala; of the Cerro del Tigre in Fonseca bay; of San José, capital of Costa Rica; of Bocas del Toro and its harbour; of the coast district near Aspinwall; and of the flourishing coffee plantations at Coban. Equally welcome are the four large-scale biogeographical maps, one of which shows a new departure in diagrammatic cartography. It must prove of great value to travellers and intending settlers, showing at a glance for the whole region between Tehuantepec and Panama the time required to traverse any given measured distance, this varying from one to as many as fourteen days according to the physical character of the district, the state of the highways, and so on. Hence its name, "Isohemerenkarte," *i.e.* Isohemeral Chart, or, in plain English, Map of Timed Distances.

The first and larger section of the volume is entirely occupied with the various expeditions undertaken from time to time to all parts of the country. But what the descriptions thus necessarily lack in coherence and unity they gain in the charm of a simple unaffected style, and especially of a genuine sympathy with the people and their primitive ways. Volcanic eruptions and earthquakes are welcomed as affording opportunities for scientific investigations "on the spot;" political revolutions break out to clear the atmosphere, or *zur Abwechslung*, "by way of change;" even the interminable hecklings of inquisitive natives are endured with exemplary patience. When about to ascend the Cerro del Tigre, he is asked, "Why do you want to clamber up this mountain?" "And wherefore?" "And for what reason?" "And for what purpose?" "And what do you expect to find up yonder?" "A gold-mine perhaps?" And so on, until the traveller is driven almost mad, and begins himself to wonder why he wastes "so much time and money in such unprofitable studies."

In the second part a measure of unity is given to the volume by the opening sections, in which are ably summed up the results of his observations on the geography, the geology, natural history, and ethnology of the whole region. These are followed by some remarks on the rival Panama and Nicaraguan ship-canal projects, and by a series of essays on the natural resources of the country, the prospects of the coffee, rubber, and indigo industries, with practical suggestions on the laying out of plantations, rainfall records and statistical tables, agricultural and commercial, for all the Central American States.

A. H. K.

OCEANOGRAPHY.

THE VOYAGE OF THE "GAUSS."

The newly founded Institute of Oceanography and the Geographical Institute of the University of Berlin, both presided over by Baron F. von Richthofen, have