

The Material Past

Spanish authorities did what they could to erase the more obvious traces of the pagan past among the Indian populations: temples and temple art, ritual practices, etc. But deep in the jungles of the Yucatan, nature protected still other monuments, whose existence was not known until the eighteenth century. The discovery and recovery of Meso-American antiquities largely coincided with the surge of popular interest across Europe in archeology. The British in Italy and Greece, the French in Egypt, and the Germans everywhere were beginning to awe Europeans with stunning discoveries and lavish treasures. Even in North America, antiquarians in the young American republic turned their attention to the mound builders in an attempt to shed light on the origins and history of the Indians.

Interest in the antiquities of Mexico and Peru, and in the lost worlds present there before the Spaniards, was fueled by a variety of intellectual and cultural sources. None was more potent than the expectation that knowledge of these ancient civilizations might illumine larger questions of world history and world destiny. In short, the antiquities of the New World became themselves new worlds at a time when the New World had become well assimilated into European vision. America continued to bait Europe, to challenge it, to baffle it.

Antonio del Rio.
*Description of the Ruins of an Ancient City
Discovered Near Palenque in the Kingdom
of Guatemala.*
London: Henry Berthoud, 1822.

The New World of Columbus had yielded the new antiquity of the archeologists. In 1787, an obscure soldier named Antonio del Rio undertook the excavation of a Maya ruin near Palenque. The military governor of Guatemala had assigned him to this task, and he duly reported back on his mission in a short narrative. Del Rio seemed unimpressed by what he saw—rampant paganism and idolatry—but he at least knew enough not to plunder the site.

He described what he thought to be a temple in clear, concise terms. What is amazing about this *petit histoire* is that it was even published, and in London, of all places. How this happened is unclear. But had it not been for Henry Berthoud, Del Rio's letter would surely have languished in the governor's files. To the letter, Berthoud joined a windy treatise on the origins of the Indians by a Don Cabrera, whose imagination fixed on the Canaanites as the probable source of the Indians. To these two documents, the publisher added a suite of plates of Mayan scenes, which must have been among the earliest such representations available to a broad European public.

Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859).
*Vues cordillières et monumens des peuples
indigènes de l'Amérique.*
Paris: Schoell, 1810.



The happenstance appearance of Del Rio's important letter on the ruins at Palenque contrasts radically with the elaborate and methodically planned volume of Humboldt. Here for the first time, a major European scientist on a data-gathering trip through Central and South America suddenly brought to Europe's attention the antiquities of Mexico and Peru. In the text and in the nearly seventy plates that adorn it, Humboldt gives his readers an unparalleled tour of the area. Illustrations of vistas, of peoples, and of antiquities were executed under Humboldt's supervision with consummate care. What the polymath wanted to do was to present the cultural artifacts in their natural contexts and thereby suggest the ways in which nature and culture work together towards a higher unity. For Humboldt, the discovery of these New World antiquities was cause for celebration; they revealed the genius of man in his environment. Humboldt not only gave Europeans their first sustained look at New World antiquities, but he also shared with his audience selections from important codices in European collections. The early pioneering work of Spanish missionaries began to come to light.

Edward King,
Viscount Kingsborough (1795-1837).
*Antiquities of Mexico: Comprising
Facsimiles of Ancient Mexican Paintings
and Hieroglyphs.* 9 volumes.
London: R. Havell [et al.], 1830-1848.



Edward King was a man seized by a magnificent obsession: the Pre-Columbian civilizations of Mexico. Like many obsessions, King's resulted in something both wonderful and destructive. According to the American bibliophile, diplomat, and quondam bookseller, Obadiah Rich, a Mexican codex King saw in the Bodleian as a student transfixed him. He wanted nothing less than to possess the Mexican past and make it available to others. This was his life's work. To that end, he hired artists to visit the major collections of Europe and make copies of the relevant codices, and he worked with Rich to acquire what he could for himself. The result was a lavish set of nine folio volumes that he published at his own expense over a period of nearly twenty years. This extraordinary set has no real parallels in the annals of Meso-American scholarship. King was not really a scholar, however, and his forays into Mexican history were pastiches of myth and wild speculation. Thus, he argued that the Mexicans descended from the Israelites, a variation on the Lost Tribes theme. Nor was King much of a businessman. The project bankrupted him, and he spent the last years of his life in a Dublin debtor's prison. His project endures today not in spite of but because of the many quirks that animated this soul of a collector possessed by his collection.