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## The Chibca Indians and Chiriquis

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“Mr. Stephens’ great developments of antiquities are made bare to the eyes of all the people by reading of the Nephites in the Book of Mormon. They lived about the narrow neck of land, which now embraces Central America, with all the cities that can be found.”—*Times and Seasons*, Vol. 3, p. 915.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### THE CHIBCHA INDIANS AND CHIRIQUIS

ON THE lofty table lands, at an altitude of about 10,000 feet, in Cundinamarca, now a part of the United States of Colombia, the *Chibcha* Indians had their chief settlements. They are also known as *Muyscas*, a word meaning "men." In their own estimation, they were *the* men. They are described as a strong, courageous, and industrial race, and their culture is said to have resembled that of the pre-Inca Peruvians on the south and the Nahuas on the north.<sup>1</sup> Like the Incas, they built roads and bridges; they erected temples and carved statues; they knew how to spin, dye, and weave cotton and wool, and to work metals, such as bronze, copper, tin, lead, silver, and gold.<sup>2</sup> There was such an immense quantity of costly ornaments among these Indians at the time of the Spanish conquest, that the so-called conquerors, in a few months, gathered up gold, silver, pearls, and emeralds to the value of 30 million francs, although a large part of the valuables of the natives had been deposited in the lake, Quatavita, and thus concealed from the greedy eyes of the invaders.<sup>3</sup> Their

<sup>1</sup>Dr. Holmes, *Handbook of Aboriginal American Antiquities*, Bur. of Ethn., 1919, p. 135.

<sup>2</sup>Nadaillac, *Prehistoric America*, p. 463.

<sup>3</sup>A few years ago, the newspapers were full of sensational reports to the effect that part of these buried treasures had been discovered. Among the things still hidden are, it was stated, a chain of solid gold, as thick as an anchor chain, and breastplates of beaten gold. Among the articles found were breastplates, bracelets, helmets, bells, nose and ear ornaments, etc., to enormous values.—*Salt Lake Tribune*, Oct. 24, 1920.



pottery gave evidence of artistic taste, and they are said to have carried on an extensive trade, importing shells from the Pacific coast and grain from the lower valleys, in exchange for rock salt and various manufactured articles.

*Did They Know the Use of Coins?* Opinions are divided as to whether these Indians used coins as a medium of exchange. Nadaillac<sup>4</sup> does not believe that they had coined money, but his reason for doubt is not convincing. Referring to certain little gold discs found, supposed to have been used as money, he says, "It is more probable that these were ornaments, for nothing that we know of the social state of the people of South America justifies us in supposing that they understood the use of money." What! Not even if the coins themselves are found?

The Hebrews did not have coins till long after the departure of Lehi. Their standard of value was, in all probability, cattle. Their "capital" consisted of so many "heads," *capita*, and their "fees" were so many heads of what the Germans call *vieh*, and the Scandinavians *fä*, or *fänad*, from the Gothic *faibu*, meaning, "cattle." As a medium of exchange silver was used, and also gold, but not as coins but as metals valued according to weight. (Gen. 23:16.) Coins were known in Asia Minor and Greece as early as about 700 B. C., but among the Jews they were practically unknown till after the Babylonian captivity. The first pieces of money coined in Palestine date from the time of Simon Maccabeus, about 140-131 B. C. They were shekels and half-shekels of silver and smaller coins of bronze.

<sup>4</sup>*Prehistoric America*, p. 464.



*Nephite Standard of Value.* The Nephites were an agricultural people, and they made grain, instead of cattle, the standard of value. Barley is especially mentioned as such standard. (Alma 11:7.) As mediums of exchange they used "pieces" of gold and silver, to which they gave names according to their value (Alma 11:4-19), determined in all probability, by the weight. However, the weights and measures and names were all changed, to meet the changed circumstances, and especially, we may suppose, the change of the standard of value, from cattle to grain. That alone would have necessitated a complete change of the size and names of the pieces of metal used as money.

While it may be probable, then, that the ancient Indians did not have "coins," as we understand that term, some of them may have had "pieces" of silver and gold, such as those used by the Nephites, and it is not improbable that the gold discs referred to as ornaments were used as such money, even if we do not call them "coins," which is immaterial.

*Their Extensive Domain.* According to Dr. Brinton,<sup>5</sup> the Chibchas belonged to a numerous family of tribes which extended north to the present boundaries of Nicaragua. A number of tribes, he says, such as the Guaymis in Veragua and the Talamancas, in Costa Rica, were either filially connected with, or deeply influenced by, the Chibchas. Dr. Brinton, furthermore, is convinced that these kindred tribes had gone north from South America. This conclusion is based on philological evidence.

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<sup>5</sup>*The American Race*, p. 184.



Dr. Holmes, also, speaks of the relationships of the northern Indians with those of the south. Referring to the Chiriqui Indians, Isthmus of Darien, he remarks that so far as the art of pottery has come under his observation, it indicated close relationship with the ancient Costa Ricans, but in their burial customs and their use of gold, they were like the ancient peoples of New Grenada. He also says that most of the Isthmian tribes are allied, linguistically and in many features of their material culture, with the peoples of South America.<sup>6</sup>

*Their Worship.* The Chibchas, like their Peruvian brethren, worshiped the sun, as the most glorious manifestation and abode of God. Their name for the Supreme Deity was *Bochica*, which seems to be a variant of the Peruvian *Pachacamac*.<sup>7</sup> They also revered the moon, as the manifestation of the wife of Bochica. *Chibchachimi* was the name of a divine personage after whom the Spaniards named them, and *Nehmquitiba* was a myth-hero of theirs. On rare occasions, the Chibchas sacrificed human beings.

Bochica was, in their theology, both a divine person and a human being. As a human he was to them what Votan was to the Mayas, Quetzalcoatl, to the Nahuas, and Manco Capac, to the Peruvians. He taught the people to make clothes, build houses, cultivate the ground, work metals, and live together in organized society. It seems that the conception of God

<sup>6</sup>*Handbook of Aboriginal American Antiquities*, Bull. 60, Bur. Am. Ethn., Part 1, p. 133; also his paper on the Chiriqui Indians, Bur. Am. Ethn. Washington, 1887, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup>I take *Bochi* to be the same as *Pacha*, and *Ca* to be an abbreviation of *Camac*.



incarnate in man was general among the cultured Indians of both hemispheres.

*Architectural Remains.* There are some remarkable remains in the regions once inhabited by the Chibchas. Near Tunja there are, or were, to be seen thirteen stone columns, each four or five yards in height, and not far from these, nineteen shorter columns, while stones with carved ornaments are found in great numbers over an area of two miles or more. It is supposed that these remains mark the site of an ancient city called Sogomuxi, and a temple erected in honor of, or perhaps by, Nehmquitiba.<sup>8</sup>

*Two Lineages.* The Chibchas, as some other Indian nations, were divided into two lineages. Some were under the rule of a chief called Zippa, and their capital was at Bogota. The ruler of the other division was called Zoque, and his headquarters was at Hunsa, now called Tunja. Their burial places have been found, as is supposed, in a cave near Bogota, where an immense quantity of articles of gold and silver has been discovered, and near Tunja, where rows of mummies and rich garments have been unearthed. The Chibchas interred, it seems, with their chiefs, their weapons, clothes, and various utensils, and sometimes the bodies of their favorite wives. Like the Egyptians of old they believed that in some inscrutable manner articles buried with the dead would be of practical use to the departed in the hereafter. Or, more probable, such offerings were their mode of expressing

<sup>8</sup>This name seems to be pure Hebrew: *Nahom*, "consolation," *katab*, to "write." If this is correct it would mean one who writes consolation, a comforter. Nahom was the name given to the place where Ishmael was buried. (1 Ne. 16:34.)



their love of their departed friends, just as we do by floral offerings, or the Chinese by contributions of rice, although we know that the dead do not eat the food or enjoyed the fragrance of the flowers.

It used to be taken for granted that there were no ruins of any consequence in Colombia, but in August, 1922, it was announced in press dispatches that the remains of a great city had been found by a Field Museum expedition from Chicago, in an almost inaccessible part of the South American republic. The statement was made, at the time, that the ancient city was comparable in size to Chicago, New York, or London, and that the inhabitants must have been far advanced in culture. Like the Peruvians, they were expert road builders. They paved their highways with large, flat stones, and on the inclines these were set as steps. Specimens sent to the Museum are said to include bells of gold, figures and jars of the same metal, and various articles of shell, carnelian, and agate.

Elder Joel Ricks, in a letter to the *Deseret News*, dated Dec. 5, 1925, gives the following information concerning this discovery:

"The region explored was on the northern slopes of the Santa Marta mountains which form an immense bench between 3000 or 4000 feet in elevation and extending from the mountain to the Caribbean Sea, a distance of about 15 miles. The elevation, and the fact that the trade winds sweep over it from the sea, give it a temperature which is very nearly perfect. For this reason it was a favorite resort of the ancient people. The report that ruins of a city larger than New York was found, is an exaggeration. What they did find was one of those communities covering large areas, found all over Colombia, and which I think



the Book of Mormon refers to as 'lands.' I have visited a number of these districts in the mountain valleys where their limits can be readily traced, and found them from seven to ten miles wide and 15 to 20 miles long. I once made a calculation of the population from the remains of the homes of the people, and estimated it at near 100,000. Charney says that in Yucatan the ancients had 'centers' not cities. It seems that is just what the Field party found. The report has not been published, but from conversation and advance sheets given me I cull these facts: 'Prehistorically, Colombia is one of the most unknown and neglected regions of America. Geographically intermediate between Mexico and Peru, the two culminations of native American culture, the ancient Colombians apparently attained the third apex, a high civilization based on the same fundamentals of highland culture as Mexico and Peru, yet differing in most details. All of their villages were connected by roads of excellent construction, frequently made by cutting and filling through the steep hill slopes. Whenever stream boulders of appropriate size were available, the roads were paved. \* \* \* On steep slopes, the stones were sometimes set as steps of a staircase and when crossing ravines, the latter were filled up with great boulders to carry the road across. The houses were undoubtedly made of posts, poles and thatch.' The dead were embalmed and buried in tombs and sometimes cremated and buried in urns. Gold ornaments and beads were found in the graves. One stela-like statue was seen, a column about 9 feet tall, the top carved in the form of a rude human face. On the rocks carvings of animals and human beings were found. Articles of copper were found, but no flint arrow points. The party brought back a number of breast plates of pure gold which are now on exhibition at the museum. Most of them are for women. They were attached to the body by strings and were fashioned by some one skilled in the art. Outside of the breast plate found by the Prophet with the plates, I have only heard of one other and it is preserved in the museum at Medillin, Colombia; the Field collection is both interesting and valuable. The report indicates that the inhabitants of Santa Marta were of the same stock as those who inhabited the mountain valleys in the plateau region about Bogota and those who built the great forts which



are found around the foot of the mountains between the Magdalena and Cauca rivers. Strange as it may seem, there were many things in common between these old Colombians and the old Arizonians and our Cliff Dwellers. Both practiced urn burial and the crouching position with hand and knees drawn up under the chin. They were of the same race. Their pottery is fashioned and decorated the same. Their houses and forts were built on the same forms, etc.”

*The Isthmus of Panama.* The Isthmus that forms the connecting link between the American continents belongs, geographically speaking, to North America, but from the ethnographic point of view the Isthmians are South Americans. Dr. Brinton<sup>9</sup> says the mountain chain which separates Nicaragua from Costa Rica, and the head waters of the Rio Frio from those of the more eastern and southern streams, is the ethnographic boundary of North America. Dr. Cyrus Thomas,<sup>10</sup> is practically, of the same opinion. He draws a line from the east end of Lake Nicaragua almost directly south to the mouth of the Gulf of Nicoya. The tribes east of this line—the Jicaque, Paya, and Ulvan tribes, Carib, Mosquito, Rama, and all the tribes of Costa Rica (except the Orotina), and those of Panama—he considers as belonging to South America. And his only doubt is as to whether the Xincan, Lencan, and Matagalpan tribes, west of the line, should not also be regarded as South Americans.

*Interesting Finds.* Some very interesting finds

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<sup>9</sup>*The American Race*, p. 164.

<sup>10</sup>*Indian Languages of Mexico and Central America*, Bur. of Ethn., Smith. Inst., Wash., 1911; p. 96. There can be no doubt, then, of an emigration, at some time, northward from South America.



have been made on the Isthmus. Dr. Wm. H. Holmes describes some of them in a pamphlet on *The Use of Gold and Other Metals Among the Ancient Inhabitants of Chiriqui, Isthmus of Darien*.<sup>11</sup> His description of their graves is especially interesting. They are pits, from ten to fifteen feet below the surface. Around the margin of the cyst are stones, a foot or more in length, supporting sometimes one stone, sometimes two or more stones, as a lid. The space above is filled up with earth and rocks, and in the cavity below the lid objects of art are found. The description reminds one in some particulars of the burial place of the Book of Mormon in the hill Cumorah.

*Extensive Trade Connections.* Dr. Holmes is of the opinion that there must have been considerable intercourse between the inhabitants of Chiriqui and those of Grenada on the south and Central America on the north, and that they obtained some of their ore from distant parts. They were expert workers in gold, silver, copper, etc., and a majority of the articles they made were cast in molds. Their work "exhibits close analogies with that of the mainland of South America," as to material, treatment, and scope of employment, but in the subject matter there is considerable originality. The author quoted concludes his paper thus:

"The sum of the art achievements of these peoples indicates perhaps, a somewhat lower degree of culture than that attained by the Mexicans and the Peruvians, the ceramic art alone challenging the world in respect to refinement of form and simplicity and delicacy of treatment."

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<sup>11</sup>Published by the Bureau of Ethnology, Smith. Inst., Wash., 1887.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 26.



In recent years, the San Blas Indians on the Isthmus have been visited by explorers. They have been found to be much farther advanced than some of the North American aborigines. Whether they trace their ancestry back to a time contemporaneous with the ancient Mayan civilization, or to the equally ancient South American civilization which antedates the Incas, is an open question among the students of pre-historic America, but there is no doubt of the high order of their culture or its antiquity.

*White Indians.* Stories of white Indians on the Isthmus have been published from time to time, and there must be some basis in fact for them. According to the published accounts, the white Indians are part of the San Blas tribe. They live in the mountains, a few miles from the coast. They are not permitted to mingle with their brown relatives. The reason for this is told as follows:

Years ago, before the Spaniards arrived in the New World, white and brown lived together. The Spaniard was welcome to the new land, but soon his mistreatment of the natives caused them to turn against him and expel him from the country. The hatred of the Indian for the white man was so violent that it extended to the white men of their own race who were forced to live apart. The laws forbid inter-marriage of white and brown Indians. Occasionally, however, a brown man of the mainland marries a white Indian woman. The first generation of this union are of an unusually light colored brown. These live with the other brown Indians and they marry.

In reading the accounts of the brown and the



white Indians, their animosity and struggles, one is forcibly reminded of the stories in the Book of Mormon of the wars and strife between Lamanites and Nephites.

The San Blas Indians are said to live in villages and to build houses, two stories in height, some of them 120 feet long by 60 feet wide with black palm walls. Each tribe has an hereditary chief and above all is a head chief, who is just as much a royal person as any king. They have their judges, police court, police officers, recognize the right of individual ownership of land, and have impressive ceremonies for marriage and burial. They cultivate plantations of bananas, yucca, corn, coffee, cacao, pineapples, oranges and various other kinds of fruit.

The well known explorer Erland Nordenskjöld, who, in company with his wife and eldest son, recently has explored parts of Central America, in a letter from Christobal reported that he had found on the Isthmus one of the richest Indian cultures still extant in America, and that he had gathered specimens, which when thoroughly studied would yield important contributions to the history of the wanderings of the race over the isthmus that connects South and North America.<sup>13</sup>

In May, 1922, the late John Q. Critchlow, president of the Panama Sugar Co., and a railroad director, born in Salt Lake City, ascended the mountain *El Volcan* in the province of Chiriqui, Panama, from the top of which the explorer, under favorable con-

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<sup>1</sup> Professor Marsh's account of the San Blas Indians appears in the *Kansas City Star*, Nov. 30, 1924.



ditions, can see the Pacific ocean in the west and the Atlantic in the east. The mountain is over 11,600 feet high, and the climb was one of considerable difficulty. But it paid well. For Mr. Critchlow was fortunate enough to discover evidences of a prehistoric race, consisting of the ruins of a large pueblo and some remarkable petroglyphs. Among the priceless works of art he unearthed, were articles of solid gold, pottery, and carvings in stone. Mr. Critchlow connected this ancient race with the Aztecs, but nothing is, of course, known for certain about their racial connections, or their history, except what may be inferred from the Book of Mormon.