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THE PALIMPSEST

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Who and Whence

Myths concerning "vanished races" die very hard. When the pioneers of the white race discovered the great mounds and earthworks of prehistoric man in the Mississippi Valley, they formed the apparently spontaneous judgment that the country had once upon a time been occupied by a race of "mound builders", superior to the painted redskin. In the middle forties of the last century, excavations in the mounds of Ohio which produced finely wrought implements and ornaments of stone, shell, pearl, and copper seemed to be conclusive evidence that predecessors of the Indians had reached a high level of civilization and then vanished before the onslaughts of their savage inferiors.

Surely, thought the pioneer, no wild Indian could ever have constructed works of such colossal proportions or wrought art objects of such delicacy and beauty. In part this judgment was justified

by the fact that the Indian of the nineteenth century was no longer the Indian of primitive times and customs; in part the judgment was falsified by prejudice and superficial observation. At best it is difficult for one race to understand another and when, after the first friendly greetings, the contest for land engenders hatred and then warfare mutual understanding becomes quite impossible.

But, as the evidence now stands, neither North or South America has any vanished race to record. The American Indian, by every test that it has been possible to apply, is the same man who built the great earthworks of the Mississippi Valley, the cliff dwellings and pueblos of the Southwest, the towering temples of Mexico, and the ruined cities of Central America and Peru. The native peoples from Alaska to Patagonia were of one race. Inasmuch as a number of the Indian tribes are known to have built mounds since the coming of the white man, it is quite unnecessary to look farther for a race of mound builders. When Julien Dubuque died in 1810 he was buried in Iowa soil by his friends, the Fox Indians, who erected a mound over him.

Not only is the lost race of mound builders a fanciful myth, but up to this time there is no proof that the New World ever had a race of men who, in the physical sense, were really primitive. The oldest known remains show a high type of physical development, indicating that man had no such independent origin and long history on our side of the

ocean as he is known to have had in the Old World. In short, he must be looked upon as an immigrant from Asia, not Mongolian, though similar to some of the Mongolian peoples — a foreigner whose migrations by way of Bering Strait, or perhaps rather at the same place by land before the two continents became separated, were accomplished sometime during the early stages of the neolithic, or new stone age. The long eras of the paleolithic, or old stone age, are apparently not represented in the Americas at all. As compared with the antiquity of man in Europe and Asia, the American Indian migrated at a comparatively late date, whether he arrived as long as a hundred thousand years ago, as some students think, or as recently as ten thousand years ago, as others believe. But in any event, it was a long, long time ago as measured by human progress.

For the Indian came as a savage, apparently with the spear and the stone ax as his only weapons and the faithful dog at his side as his first-found and only friend from the animal world — a hunter and not a tiller of the soil. The home folks had evidently not yet tamed the familiar domestic animals of a later period of husbandry, nor had they developed those grains that were later to become the staples of Old World agriculture. If they had done these things, then surely these easy means of a livelihood would have migrated with their hosts. As it was, the Americans were destined to develop arts

and crafts and an agriculture that were almost entirely their own.

As yet not even an approximate date can be assigned to the discovery by early man of the region of the upper Mississippi. Probably he first journeyed down the Pacific Coast and into Mexico before some stream of migration turned eastward and finally entered the great valley from the southwest. Not only would this seem to be the more practicable route of travel, but in some of the caves and rock shelters of the South are found, in addition to evidences of later and more advanced populations, the remains of an early people still in the hunter stage and clearly more primitive in customs than any of the known historic or prehistoric cultures to the northward. Whatever the migration routes may have been, however, it is certain that diffusion over a large part of the two continents must have taken place at an early period, for the great divergences in languages, arts, and customs which developed in the different areas necessarily imply long isolation of the many groups and the lapse of many centuries of time.

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