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Schoolcraft and Morgan on the Hyperbole of Aztec Historians

Robert E. Bieder

Probably you advocate patience; but I am annoyed, at times, by the tiresome squibs about the "silliness of the suggestion" of paleolithic man. Such rubbish, as you know, finds facile birth in Philadelphian and Washingtonian atmospheres. You know all of this, as well as I do, yet you have the coolness to say nothing will hurry you in making any report. But does it not occasionally enter your mind that something may hurry me? I can just as easily as Volk or yourself--more so, as I command a far more ready pen than either--publish a report of the explorations here in last eight years, and render your report totally unnecessary. I do not throw this suggestion as a threat, but please bear in mind that self-preservation is the first law in nature, and if you continue to refuse to put Volk's work before the public, I will be forced to. . . . Years ago, when I was toiling in the field and building up the collection I gathered, you did not keep so close-mouthed, and I fail to see that there is more reason for it now. . . . Leave to the Angel Gabriel the trumpeting of the truth as to paleolithic man; the facts and the end of the world coming together. Such is your admirable plan . . .

(Abbott to Putnam, May 22, 1899)

(The 1878 and 1881 letters are in the Peabody Museum Papers; the 1899 letter is in the F. W. Putnam Papers. They are printed with the kind permission of the Putnam family and the Harvard University Archives.)

II. SCHOOLCRAFT AND MORGAN ON THE HYPERBOLE OF AZTEC HISTORIANS

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When Lewis Henry Morgan wrote "Montezuma's Dinner" in 1876, ostensibly as a review of Hubert Howe Bancroft's Native Races of the Pacific States (1876:263-308), his thesis countered a tradition which saw the Aztecs as an advanced civilization. Morgan, of course, was quite critical of such claims and of the Spaniards who advanced them. Recently writers have taken Morgan to task for his interpretation. Although Morgan's antipathy for the Aztecs is generally seen in the context of his theory of social evolution, one factor which has been overlooked is the possible influence of his ethnologist friend, Henry Rowe Schoolcraft. During the 1840s Morgan was often in close contact with Schoolcraft and may have imbibed some of the latter's views on the subject of Aztec civilization. While this is of course difficult to prove, there is nevertheless a rather close parallel between Morgan's denigration of the Aztec civilization as expressed in "Montezuma's Dinner" and Schoolcraft's views as presented in his Personal Memoirs of a Residence of Thirty Years with the Indian Tribes on the American Frontiers (1851:160-161).

Nothing is more manifest, on reading the "Conquest of Mexico" by De Solis, than that the character and attainments of the ancient Mexicans are exalted far above the reality, to enhance the fame of Cortez, and give an air of splendor to the conquest. Superior as the Aztecs and some other tribes certainly were,

in many things, to the most advanced to the North American tribes, they resemble the latter greatly, in their personal features, and mental traits, and in several of their arts. . . . I have thought, on reading this work, that there is room for a literary essay, with something like this title: "Strictures on the Hyperbolic Accounts of the Ancient Mexicans given by the Spanish Historians," deduced from a comparison of the condition of those tribes with the Indians at the period of its settlement.

Morgan, Lewis Henry.

1876 "Montezuma's Dinner," The North American Review, 122 (April, 1876):263-308.

Schoolcraft, Henry Rowe.

1851 Personal Memoirs of a Residence of Thirty Years with the Indian Tribes on the American Frontiers (Philadelphia, 1851).

BIBLIOGRAPHICA ARCANA

I. A BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

A certain maturity is reached in any field when it can boast its own published bibliography. The growing interest in the history of anthropology has prompted such a publication. While HAN has not so far reviewed works in the field, the publication of Robert B. Kemper and John F. S. Phinney's The History of Anthropology: A Research Bibliography (Garland Publishing, Inc., New York, 1977. \$22.00) calls for more than a mere mention as a recent work by a subscriber. Citing a total of 2,439 works culled from standard texts and from 45 journals, Kemper and Phinney divide their bibliography into five sections: "general sources," "background," "modern anthropology," "related social sciences," and "bibliographical sources." Although press limitations constrained the authors from including all 5,000 items originally collected, the bibliography, which contains an index of authors cited, is a useful basic reference. Inevitably, there are some important omissions, and unfortunately some references are included that have little value for the history of anthropology. If there is interest among our subscribers, HAN could periodically publish contributed bibliographical material that would help fill the omissions and prove useful in providing for an expanded bibliography at a future date. (R.B.)