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# Signposts of Prehistoric Time

by

W. D. Lighthall, F.R.S.C., F.R.S.L.

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*Signposts of Prehistoric Time.*

By W. D. LIGHTHALL, F.R.S.C., F.R.S.L.

(Read May Meeting, 1916).

How old are the mask-customs of American Indians? How old are their sweat-baths? How old their totemism, their scalping, their drumming, their canoe "eyes," their offerings to root-spirits, the scalp-lock, the warpaint, the costume, the forms of armor, of weaving, of basketry? How far is it possible to estimate the age, or at least the relative ages, of some of the successive waves of their tribal advents in America, by way of the Japan Current, the Aleutians, and possibly other directions? I have not the temerity to attempt answers to such questions as these, which crowd in from that fascinating past—but only to briefly note a few suggestive points, because I know enough of the profound and painstaking work of the students of primitive man to shun the worst form of impertinence. Has not the age of Man upon the earth, from his first prehistoric representative been variously estimated at from a quarter of a million to a million years, and the process of his development been sketched for us in the masterly review of Professor Hill-Tout in 1914 here? From another end it is possible to roughly estimate the age of Egyptian, Akkadian, Cretan, Hittite, and early Aryan, and some other forms of early civilization, in the combined light of history and excavations.

But another form of calculation on the subject, though much less clear and exact, is yet very valuable if it could be carefully studied. This is the estimation of the time taken by the spread of various types or strata of culture throughout the world, especially those which overflowed into America. For example, it is one thing to attempt to estimate the age of man in general calculated by the earliest and crudest forms of stone implements. It is obvious and trite that such an advance as the polished and well-shaped neolithic kfts of tools, represent an immense period of time to develop and spread. Again the presence of forms of large and well-shaped barbarian pottery bowls would indicate another immense advance in point of time—and even the appearance of any pottery at all would mark the lapse of vast ages since the first development of neolithic tools. And when we come to the sacrificial pyramids and handsome rock carvings of Chichen-Itza and compare their resemblance with early Japanese building we can note a wave of culture preceding the six thousand

years or so B.C., of the first civilizations of Mesopotamia, and concerning which the mere spread of such a civilization to the American continent and its development here indicates another interesting hurdle in the race course of time. I think we can lay down these principles in the matter:— (1) That the forms of culture in the American continent constitute various waves of advent from the Old World<sup>1</sup> and perhaps Polynesia; (2) that they had not greatly changed in the New World, up to the arrival of Europeans; (3) that each pictures for us a whole separate age of culture derived from some once dominant Old World race, whose original habitat, diffusion and relative age might be sought by piecing the American and Asiatic portions of the facts together. It is obvious that the Iroquois peoples, with their palisaded villages, and crops of maize, beans and tobacco, possessed a culture of the "higher barbarian" type which was much in advance of that of the wandering Algonquins and similar tribes, and yet that even the latter possessed institutions (such as the sweat-bath and fine basketry) which indicated a wave of culture that, although simple was still considerably beyond those of for example, the Bushmen and Tasmanians, and at any rate was distinctive and later. I have estimated that the Mohawk tribe, who were pure Hurons, and had come from the Island of Montreal and surrounding country, arrived there from the Huron country between Lakes Huron and Simcoe somewhere about the year fourteen hundred. If conjecturally it might be said that the Hurons of that region and their relatives, the Tobacco Nation, the Senecas, and the Nation-of-a-Speech-a-little-Different, had taken, say, three or four hundred years more to develop their dialectic and other differences out of a common local tribe, this would bring us to say one thousand A.D. And if they and their more distant relatives the Cherokees, whose language was very much further removed, might be conjectured to have met in a common origin, let us say 500 years before—that is to say bringing us back to about 500 A.D.—we would have some dim notion of a relative chronology, admittedly incorrect, but yet illustrating the course of my meaning. Indian scholars differ as to the origin of the Iroquois, who were certainly an intrusive element from the south—probably by way of the west—into the great Algonquin territory, just as the Algonquin peoples were at a very early day intruders into the territory of the Eskimo, the Athabaskans, and possibly other primitive races.

The late Cyrus Thomas held that the Iroquoian stock was merely a continuation of that of the Mound Builders. But wherever they came from in later times, they certainly came and brought their

<sup>1</sup> Sir E. B. Tylor seems to still doubt this, from his article *Anthropology*, in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

peculiar agriculture and all their special forms of culture *from the south*, and perhaps another thousand years preceding 500 A.D. would have found them in the present territory of Mexico or proceeding in general from that direction. Even then we would not have touched the question of where their special forms of culture originally came to them, and they were certainly derived from the Old World and formed there, apparently partly in Africa and partly in western Asia. Some indication of the immense period of time, taken in the process will appear from the following slight examples:

The Caughnawagas are the descendants of Iroquois converts established in the latter half of the seventeenth century at the Jesuit Mission of Sault St. Louis or Caughnawaga, about ten miles from Montreal. Although Roman Catholics for so long and far advanced in the ordinary ways of civilization they still retain a number of their original ideas, somewhat as a rural community in the Highlands of Scotland retains the superstition of the second sight and the clan and chief ideas. They have only recently given up the system of a council of chiefs and of community of lands, and have a secret society of medicine-men who cure by the ancient methods. In the spring some of the women go into the woods to seek well-known medicinal roots. When they take up a root, they follow an ancient custom of dropping in the hole in the earth *some small metal button or other bright object* as a propitiation to the spirit of the plant. This of course is part of the beautiful Indian idea (and why is it not true?) that every plant and tree is a living being and has a soul. Originally an invocation was uttered to the spirit of the root, when it was extracted from the soil. Let us compare this system with one in western Asia. In the Syriac Book of Medicine, translated by the Orientalist, Dr. E. A. Wallace Budge, is a statement regarding the wonderful virtues of "the great Kahina root" "the King of all roots." The "Book of Medicine" is the encyclopædia of materia medica and medical practice which has been handed down in Syria from the most ancient times, probably starting with Egyptian science, adding Chaldean magic and astrology, and incorporating root lore, observations of disease, forms of incantation, zodiacal lore, omens, Greek ideas and other additions from age to age.

The passage on the Kahina (or sacred) root is one of these added passages, but evidently derived from very ancient origin. "Know thou that this root was the first born of all the roots which came up from the earth, and King Solomon was wont to use it. . . . When thou wishest to pull up this root cleanse thyself from impurity and eat not bread which hath been made by women. And wash thy head and array thyself in white apparel and keep fasting until thou seest the stars. And come thou to this root on the sixth day of the month Iyyar and

say thou to it "Peace be to thee, O Kahina Root." Then follow prayers to be said and after three days it is to be pulled in a certain manner. "And when thou hast pulled it up bring a *thin plate of gold or silver and bury it in the place where the root was and cover it over.*"

Through what vast ages of time has this custom travelled,—connecting in one origin the culture of the Iroquois and some allied culture which had a branch in early Syria. Some of the questions arising are: How wide is the entire spread of the custom? What space of time is involved in that general spread? And if the Iroquois stock were somewhere in northern Mexico about say 500 B.C., how long before did their ancestors (or those from whom they derived their custom) cross the Pacific Ocean and arrive from Eastern Asia? Did they come by the Black Current past Hawaii or—much more probably—by the Aleutians from Japan or Siberia? In either case how old was then that form of culture in Asia from which their ancestors derived this custom? Certainly it was there long before Chinese history began or the rudiments of Chinese civilization drifted over the mountains from Mesopotamia. The antiquity of the Iroquoian deposit of culture leads us back through immense vistas. Patient endeavor and speculation on facts like these might build up one phase of "prehistoric history" having considerable value and analogous to "geological history" from comparisons and stratifications.

A second illustration likewise is so striking that it can be easily followed in its spread. In Sir George Grey's "Polynesian Mythology" he relates a traditional story carefully handed down by the Maoris from the days—perhaps a thousand years ago—when their ancestors lived in that unknown island home "Hawaiki" (thought to be Savaii of the Samoan group two thousand miles distant), before the migration in the "six war canoes" to New Zealand—that the hero Whakaturia, being captured, was hung up in the roof of Uenuku's great house so that he might die by being stifled with the smoke; and they sang and danced beneath him, "but their dancing and singing were shockingly bad." Then his brother Tama climbed up to him in the night and said "Would it not be a good thing for you to say to them: I never knew anything so bad as the dancing and singing of those people." He did so, and Uenuku's people, curious to see better dancing, took him down, and he prepared himself for the dance with great ceremony, demanding a bright fire and flourishing his sword, and dancing down one side of the house and up the other. "Then Whakaturia *as is the custom in the dance, turned round on his right hand, stuck out his tongue, and made hideous faces on that side; again, he turned round on the left hand and made hideous faces on that side; his eyes glared and his sword and his red apron looked splendid.*"

This curious ceremonial *usage of making a wry face and sticking out the tongue on one side*, is of similar great antiquity to that of dropping the bright offering into the root-hole. It is frequent on Iroquoian masks. It appears on a British Columbian West Coast mask in my possession. And I have observed it even in a Swiss mask in the National Museum at Zurich, apparently derived from some remnant of the Lake Dwellers remaining in the hills. Europe, a few thousand years ago, was racially merely an extension of Asia. The nomadic Mongoloid tribes found no difficulty in passing the low Ural hills, and ranging far into the West, as we know from the incursions of the Huns, the Golden Horde, the Bulgars and other movements, and the customs of the Lapps and Finns, Ugric peoples, with their wigwams and sweat-baths, and other signs of far cousinship with the Kamtskatckan Tchuktchis or "Indians of Siberia" and the American Indians. Masks were used very widely in sacred dances, and were in fact regarded as endowed with mystic life, on the same principle as idols. That principle was that *if you made a shape, a corresponding spirit enters it*. But if the general connection of Iroquoian masks with Asiatic mask usages be obviously of vast antiquity, are we not ready to find a relatively long and more specialized and traceable age, in this distinctive wry-face-and-tongue form of them which unites in one history the Iroquois, the Maori, and that early Swiss folk? If the Maori having it had still scarcely moved five hundred years ago, and had been in Samoa say a thousand years previously, and the Iroquois had moved but little two thousand years ago, and that Swiss element had probably not migrated at all within say five thousand years, (I am merely using rough illustrative periods) how many thousand years beyond that again must we go back to find the common sacred dance at which their common forefathers were present and saw this rite for the first time? Will less than twenty thousand years compass this little link in anthropologic time?

Again, some light on those great datemarks, the migrations to America, ought to be derivable from studies of the indispensable conditions for crossing the Pacific, and particularly the stages of development of navigation. Savages in canoes came first the easiest way—by the Aleutians or Behring Straits. The first of them were the northernmost canoemen, the Eskimo, or some pre-Eskimo Neolithics. On the other hand, advents by the Japan current presuppose large vessels, of sufficient size to survive a long voyage. The study of shipbuilding in Egypt and along the coasts of Southern Asia, with the connected civilizations, apparently contain the clues to the Central American civilizations.

By putting together some such characteristic and persistent elements, perhaps some well-defined minor waves of widespread culture may be made out by which—comparing especially their Old World “stratification” with their New World “stratification,”—early human chronology might be considerably advanced. Geology began with just such crude hypotheses from estimates of stratification. History, archaeology, philology and geology all put together, need still whatever helps sociology can bring them in their gropings into the prehistoric developments of our race; but there and here it is possible to raise a few signposts even if the miles cannot be given.