

Augustus Le Plongeon: A Fall from Archaeological Grace

by

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Poor Man [Augustus Le Plongeon]! why are some people accepted & not others? Dr. Seler often makes mistakes, & changes his opinions, but he founds a school & is thought a shining light. (Adela Breton, Feb. 15, 1909. In Giles and Stewart 1989:18)

Why was Augustus Le Plongeon, a pioneering Mayanist, renowned for having made the earliest thorough and systematic photographic documentation of archaeological sites in Yucatan, later regarded by archaeologists as no more than a troublesome eccentric who proposed preposterous theories about the Maya? Let us look first at his work and accomplishments to see if there might be clues there.

Le Plongeon's initial contact with archaeology came in the 1860s while he was working in Peru as a photographer. The use of photography for documentation and research was obvious to Le Plongeon who was familiar with the pioneering photographic work of Maxime du Camp and Francis Frith in Egypt.

He had departed in 1862 for Lima after ten years in San Francisco as a photographer, and spent eight years in the Andean region working as a commercial and archaeological photographer. His travels were extensive. He photographed all the important archaeological sites in the region and took photos of artifacts in his studio. He was hired as a photographer by diplomat-archaeologist Ephraim G. Squier to make illustrations for his book, *Peru: Incidents of Travel and Explorations in the Land of the Incas*.

It was while Le Plongeon was in Peru that he became intrigued with the civilizations of the New World, and sought to understand their origins and development. He found photography to be an excellent tool to record archaeological subjects, but soon realized

there were no easy answers to questions of civilization and origins.

In search of ideas, he read the works of important Americanists of the time such as the French scholar Abbe Brasseur de Bourbourg. Brasseur, writing on the civilizations of the Americas in the 1850s, provided the foundation for Le Plongeon's developing theory that the New World was the place of origin of world civilization. Later we will see how he applied that theory to the Maya, and how its acceptance was short lived.

Leaving Peru in 1870, Le Plongeon returned to San Francisco and lectured on his Peruvian finds at the California Academy of Sciences, and then traveled to London for research at the British Museum. While at the museum he met the photographer Alice Dixon. Alice Dixon had learned photography from her father Henry Dixon who was known in London for his photographs of important buildings and monuments, art objects, and as one of the inventors of panchromatic film.

Intrigued with both modern and ancient Maya civilization after her long talks with Le Plongeon, Alice Dixon concurred with him that an accurate and systematic photographic record should be made of the Maya ruins for later analysis and to illustrate their writings. The living Maya of the nineteenth century also captivated her imagination, and she began a life long study of their language and culture.

Before leaving for Mexico, Augustus Le Plongeon stated he was going there "with the fixed intention of finding either proof or the denial of an opinion formed during my ramblings among the ruins of Tiahuanuco, that the cradle of the world's civilization is this continent on which we live" (1879:69). Thus, his first step into the world of Mesoamerican studies was controversial. Brantz Mayer, writing for the Smithsonian Institution in 1857, had admonished scholars to be strictly inductive: "The American antiquarian should, as yet, avoid the peril of starting in his investigations with an hypothesis..." (Mayer 1857:2). Mayer was expressing the view of most scholars of the time including Samuel Haven, librarian for the American Antiquarian Society and manuscript reviewer for its Proceedings. Le Plongeon knew he was on a collision course with the scholar Haven, but seems to have disregarded the potential consequences.

As expected, Haven rejected one of Le Plongeon's first articles for the Proceedings, "Archaeological communication on Yucatan," submitted in 1879, but Stephen Salisbury, Jr., son of the founder of the American Antiquarian Society and influential in Latin American studies, disregarded Haven's rejection and approved publication.

Salisbury had a great interest in the Maya which had been developed through his friendship with David Casares, a Yucatecan, during their days at Harvard College. After college Casares invited Salisbury to visit his family and the Maya ruins, and he spent considerable time traveling in Yucatan.

After Salisbury became president of the American Antiquarian Society, he continued for many years to support archaeology in Yucatan and backed the appointment of Edward H. Thompson, known for his archaeological work at Chichen Itza, to replace Louis Aymé as American Consul in Merida in the mid-1880s. The position of consul provided Aymé, and then Thompson, with financial support while they carried out their archaeological investigations.

In 1873, the recently married Le Plongeon's left New York for Merida, capital of the state of Yucatan. Warned by authorities against landing at the port of Progreso because of Yellow Fever, the Le Plongeon's recklessly disembarked and soon were on their way

to Merida. Shortly after their arrival Alice Le Plongeon contracted the fever, but luckily survived. Their first two years were spent near Merida learning local customs and the Maya language, writing about life in the capital, working in the archives, and visiting the ruins at Uxmal.

At Uxmal, determined adhere to their plan of systematic and thorough recording, the Le Plongeon's photographed, surveyed and drew plans of all important architecture including the Adivino Pyramid, Nunnery Quadrangle and Governor's Palace, and made molds of and photographed the most important motifs and iconography. In a tour de force of early wet plate photography, the Le Plongeon's photographed the intricate stone motifs of the entire length of the Governor's Palace east facade in overlapping stereo photos using a twenty foot tall tripod to raise the large view camera high enough to make distortion free photos.

Uxmal provided Le Plongeon with his first evidence that the New World was the source of world civilization. A Freemason, Le Plongeon noted a number of motifs on Temple IV of the Adivino Pyramid which he related to Masonic iconography. These included crossed-bones and skeletons with hands raised, and a carved hand on an apron on the lower half of a sculptured bust.

But for Le Plongeon, the most important evidence of cultural diffusion was the Mayas' corbelled arch. The arches of Temple V atop the Adivino Pyramid, he believed, had proportions that related to the "mystic numbers 3.5.7" which he stated were used by ancient Masonic master builders (Le Plongeon 1886:37). Those same proportions, he also noted, were found in tombs in Chaldea and Etruria, in ancient Greek structures and as part of the Great Pyramid in Egypt, and were due, he said, to Maya influence. While some scholars already had reservations about Maya influence in ancient Egypt there was little serious opposition to his views until the chronology of Egypt was fully developed.

Inspired by their exciting finds at Uxmal, the Le Plongeon's traveled to Chichen Itza in 1875 with a small force of armed soldiers to begin their work. There had been considerable danger from the Chan Santa Cruz Maya who controlled large areas of the Yucatan peninsula east of Merida, so the Le Plongeon's had waited two years until they could muster armed protection for their work. As at Uxmal, they began with documentation of all standing architecture, motifs, and iconography, by photography and molds, and surveyed and drew plans of the most important structures.

While Uxmal provided a link to the Old World through Masonry, it was at Chichen Itza that the Le Plongeon's thought they had found the Mayas' own account of their history, including an exodus to Egypt by a Maya queen. The key pieces of evidence were murals in the Upper Temple of the Jaguars, and a statue they called Chaacmol or "Thunder Paw" (now called Chacmool) which they had excavated from the Platform of the Eagles and Jaguars.

In his book *The Mayas and the Quiches* Le Plongeon wrote, "There [at Chichen Itza], we not only see their portraits carried in bas-relief, on stone or wood, or their marble statues in the round, or represented in the mural paintings that adorn the walls of the funeral chamber [Upper Temple of the Jaguars] built to the memory of the victim, but we discover [in the Platform of the Eagles and Jaguars] the ornaments they wore, the weapons they used, nay, more, their mortal remains" (1886:84).

In short, his interpretation of the murals and iconography at Chichen Itza and Uxmal

allowed him to develop a single generation account of the Maya elite at those sites. He also concluded that the Platform of the Eagles and Jaguars was the burial place of Chaacmol, prince consort to a dethroned Maya queen who had escaped to Egypt. He excavated the mound, and to his delight the statue of Chaacmol was recovered. The find was fortunate because it brought to light an outstanding example of Maya sculpture, but unfortunate because it convinced Le Plongeon that his iconographic interpretation, and therefore, diffusionist theories were correct. He would defend those ideas to the day he died.

After several months at Chichen Itza, the Le Plongeon's returned to Uxmal, and work there provided Le Plongeon with additional support of his regional history of the Maya.

Uxmal, according to Le Plongeon, was a rival to Chichen Itza under the control of a Maya Prince he called Aac who occupied Chichen Itza after he defeated his brother and sister, Chaacmol and M'oo. The evidence Le Plongeon found to bolster his history of two cities was a carved stone profile near the north end of the east facade of the Governor's Palace which he identified as the Maya Queen M'oo, the sculpture of another brother he called, Prince Cay, and a sculpture of Aac over the center door of the Governor's Palace.

In Le Plongeon's words, "Aac caused his statue--the feet resting on the flayed bodies of his kind [members of the defeated royal family], their heads being suspended from his belt--to be placed over the main entrance of the royal palace at Uxmal" (1886:82).

Brantz Mayer included another admonishment to archaeologists in his 1857 article which Le Plongeon chose to ignore,

In the present state of archaeology, all labors should be contributions to that store of facts, which, in time, may form a mass of testimony whence future historians shall either draw a rational picture of ante-Columbian civilization, or be justified in declaring that there is nothing more to be disclosed [Mayer 1857:2].

Augustus Le Plongeon felt the extensive time he and Alice Le Plongeon had spent in the ruins and among the living Maya allowed him to disregard the prevailing moratorium on interpretation.

Had Le Plongeon done no more than document Uxmal and Chichen Itza, avoiding all but the most minor of interpretations, he might be regarded today as one of the fathers of American archaeology. Unfortunately, he considered his interpretations as important as his documentation.

When he began his writings on the Maya and Egypt he found few who would oppose his conclusions. He could juggle the origins of the two civilizations with little worry of contradiction. But, within a few years of his first pronouncements, he was faced with new data that placed the Maya much later than ancient Egypt. And even before 1896 when he published what he considered his most important work, serious doubts were being raised about his theories. But, it seems there was more to the dispute than a rarified theoretical argument about the merits of cultural diffusion. The feuds with colleagues that began in the 1880s may have also contributed to his downfall.

In 1881 Le Plongeon began writing to his patron Stephen Salisbury, Jr. about the incompetence of Louis Aymé, American Consul in Merida, as a photographer and archaeologist, but the complaints fell on what, he felt, were deaf ears. Thus in 1882 Le

Plongeon resigned from the Society with an angry letter filled with accusations against Aymé.

Two years later as part of their documentation at Chichen Itza, the Le Plongeon's made tracings of the murals in the Upper Temple of the Jaguars. The murals were already in a bad state of decay due to the tropical heat and humidity, but Alice Le Plongeon reported in an article published by the *Scientific American* in August, 1884, that she and Augustus Le Plongeon had been told by soldiers in their escort that the American Consul in Merida, Louis Aymé, had defaced the murals, attempting to clean them by "scratching" the dirt off with a machete.

Possibly having heard of the impending the *Scientific American* article through connections in the very small Merida community, Aymé wrote to Stephen Salisbury, Jr. in June 1884, "I have decided that I will not return to Merida as U.S. Consul," and petitioned his friends in high places for a position in Peru. "I shall invoke your aid and the powerful influence of Senator Hoar on my behalf" (Aymé 1884). Augustus Le Plongeon's victory over Aymé in 1884 solved nothing, and turmoil continued in his professional life.

Within a few months of Le Plongeon's resignation from the American Antiquarian Society in 1882, Phillip J. J. Valentini published his article, "The Olmecas and the Tultecas," in the *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, and in it, two of Le Plongeon's photographs of bearded figures in bas-relief taken at Chichen Itza.

The photos were published without the permission of Le Plongeon. And to make matters worse, Valentini's photo captions stated the beards on the photographed bas-relief figures had been retouched into the photos by Le Plongeon in order to bolster his diffusionist theories. It is interesting that the photos and captions have no association with his article! They appear to have been inserted to discredit Le Plongeon. The original negatives and prints are not retouched.

On a personal level, Valentini may have been stirred to action by Le Plongeon's letter to Salisbury in 1880 in which he states that Valentini had failed to cite the contribution of Alfredo Chavero, a Mexican scholar, to Valentini's 1878 article, "The Mexican Calendar Stone." It is also possible that Valentini believed the photos to be faked and saw this as an opportunity not only to discredit Le Plongeon the diffusionist, but to bolster the strong anti-diffusionist paradigm then developing in American archaeology.

Valentini knew of the 1877 article published by the American Antiquarian Society where Le Plongeon used a description of the bearded figures to bolster his own diffusionist views, "Did the bearded men whose portraits are carved on the massive pillars of the fortress [Castillo Pyramid] at Chichen Itza, belong to the Mayan nation? The Maya language is not devoid of words from Assyrian" (Salisbury 1877:99). The statement was probably allowed in print by Haven because Salisbury is named as author, but the actual author is Augustus Le Plongeon and the article is a reprint of his letters from Yucatan.

He also resented the Society's financial support of the photographer Désiré Charnay. Charnay's photographic work had received funding from the French government for what Le Plongeon considered imperialistic purposes, but adding to the controversy Le Plongeon declared that he had heard from his Mexican colleagues that Charnay's writings and archaeological fieldwork were a kind of joke to the Mexicans.

Any support Le Plongeon received by aligning himself with the scholarship of the

Americanist Brasseur de Bourbourg was seriously eroded after 1882. The influential historian Hubert Bancroft, and others, were particularly put off by Brasseur's *Quatre Lettres sur le Mexique*, published in 1868 shortly before his death. Brasseur, whose earlier scholarship had been considered an important contribution to Americanist studies, and still is, fell from favor during this period. Bancroft wrote of Brasseur's *Quatre Lettres*, they are "a chaotic jumble of facts and wild speculations that would appall the most enthusiastic antiquarian" (1882:128). Le Plongeon would soon face similar reviews of his writings.

Le Plongeon's feuds with Aymé, Charnay and Valentini were followed by an even more outrageous conflict with Daniel Brinton. Brinton, one of the most powerful of Americanist scholars, was a major factor in his fall.

After the Le Plongeon returned to New York in 1884, Augustus Le Plongeon wrote a number of journal articles, and in 1886 published his book, *Sacred Mysteries among the Mayas and Quiches*, 11,500 years ago. At the time of the publication he seems on good terms with Brinton.

He then began work on *Queen M'oo and the Egyptian Sphinx*, published in 1896. Based on his earlier work, *Sacred Mysteries*, it presented all his evidence that the Maya were the source of world civilization.

Throughout his writings, including "The Origins of the Egyptians" published posthumously in 1913, he compares modern and ancient Maya and Egyptian ethnography, linguistics, iconography and religious practices to prove that the Maya were the founders of Egypt. He was basically on the right track methodologically, and he did make a number of intriguing observations and analogies, but his explanation of the proposed cultural links between the Maya and Egypt is inconsistent, does not fit what was known about the Maya, and is written in a style that makes analysis extremely difficult. By the late nineteenth century most scholars, with Daniel Brinton in the vanguard, were convinced that he had failed to prove his diffusionist theory.

Trouble began in 1887 when Le Plongeon concluded that Brinton was behind the suspicious circumstances that prevented the Le Plongeon from giving papers at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Then early in the 1890s, with his life's work in jeopardy, Le Plongeon went on the attack when Brinton made comments that contradicted his diffusionist theories.

Brinton, a noted scholar and first chair of archaeology at the University of Pennsylvania, had paid a visit to the Le Plongeon at their home in Brooklyn. He complimented them on the excellence of their photographs and drawings. But, Brinton took exception to Le Plongeon's theory that the Maya were founders of Egypt. The dispute reached a serious level when a frustrated Le Plongeon charged that Brinton, who in fact had never done fieldwork in the Maya area, was a "mere closet archaeologist" (1896:203). The level of conflict became absurd when Brinton labeled Le Plongeon an "eccentric" for proposing the Maya used the meter as a standard of measure, and Le Plongeon then replied that Brinton proposed the Maya had used the cubit!

Brinton withdrew from the battle by not responding to two challenges by Le Plongeon for a public debate on Maya history and religion. The second challenge in writing from Le Plongeon was personally handed to Brinton by a messenger as Brinton, president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, stood talking to colleagues

at a reception after the Association's annual meeting in Brooklyn in 1894. Brinton did not react to the dramatic challenge. During the next two years Le Plongeon found his views rejected by the academy, and he responded:

I have been accused of promulgating notions on ancient America contrary to the opinion of men regarded as authorities on American Archaeology. And so it is, indeed. Mine is not the fault, however, although it may be my misfortune, since it has surely entailed upon me their enmity and its consequences. But who are those pretended authorities? Certainly not the doctors and professors at the head of the universities and colleges in the U.S.; for not only do they know absolutely nothing of Ancient American civilization, but, judging from letters in my possession, the majority of them refuse to learn anything concerning it [Le Plongeon 1896:xxi].

Brinton's unwillingness to debate or react to Le Plongeon led to his isolation, and we find very little mention of him in scholarly journals after the publication of *Queen Mío* in 1896.

Augustus Le Plongeon's support of the Woman's Movement during this period should also be mentioned. Alice Le Plongeon was asked to participate in a feminist symposium at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1896, but could not afford the travel expense. In a letter to the organizer she explained that the movement not only had her support, but that Augustus Le Plongeon had long been an active promoter of women's rights. While there is no evidence to support discrimination against Alice and Augustus Le Plongeon for their involvement in the Movement, it should be considered.

One of the few professional statements on Le Plongeon's work after the turn of the century is a review in 1904 of *Queen Mío and the Egyptian Sphinx* in the *American Antiquarian and Oriental Journal* by C. Stanisland Wake.

Wake wondered, as we do, 'While Wake clearly understood the effects of the professionalization of archaeology on the self taught generation, he sees more to the problem, "there is something radically wrong with the author's [Le Plongeon's] explanation of the facts" (Wake 1904:361). Augustus Le Plongeon defended his explanation of the facts to the end. He died of heart failure in 1908. Alice Le Plongeon died prematurely in 1910 at the age of 59.

In 1931, Carnegie Institution archaeologist Sylvanus Morley, and Frans Blom at Tulane University were offered the photographs and manuscripts of the Le Plongeon. Morley and Blom failed to conclude the purchase and the photographs and manuscripts were purchased by Manly P. Hall, president of the Philosophical Research Society in Los Angeles and sympathetic to Le Plongeon's views.

In 1962, archaeologist Robert Wauchope brought Augustus Le Plongeon back into the limelight in his book *Lost Tribes and Sunken Continents*. Wauchope, an important scholar, appears to have been particularly incensed by Le Plongeon and his theories. He devotes part of a chapter to a criticism of all aspects of Le Plongeon's life ending with: "his [Le Plongeon's] arrogant flaunting of his own ego produced a lurid epoch in the history of American archaeology" (1962:8). Le Plongeon may have had more influence on American Archaeology than has been credited to him if we are to accept

Wauchope's perspective.

After Wauchope, writers seem to stretch their imaginations to characterize Le Plongeon, and one wonders how they come to their conclusions. Were he alive today, C. S. Wake might ask again if something might be "radically wrong."

In 1973, the historian Robert Brunhouse in his book *In Search of the Maya*, presented a chapter on Le Plongeon, and characterized him as a kind of scholarly chameleon: "mysterious, preposterous, opinionated, haphazardly informed, reckless, and a remarkable figure" (1973:137 and 164). More recently, Charles Gallencamp described him as a "French antiquarian and mystic" (1985:32), and the important scholar Mary Miller sees him as a "master of self-deception" (1985:7). Mexican scholar Jaime Litvak King sees him as "bigger than life in his time, and today when the world is quite a bit blander, a reminder that things weren't always so" (Desmond and Messenger 1988:xiii).

Stubborn and outspoken, Augustus Le Plongeon refused to be silenced. He desperately fought until his death to keep his diffusionist ideas alive, but, unfortunately, even before this death he faced attacks by archaeologists on his honesty. There is little worse for an archaeologist than being accused of falsifying data, and more damning than being convicted by an invisible court.

C. S. Wake is correct in his assessment of Le Plongeon--he has the facts, but it is his explanation of them that does not fit. Charles Darwin in his *Origin of the Species* takes the position, "False views, if supported by some evidence, do little harm, as everyone takes a salutary pleasure in proving their falseness" (Darwin 1871:385). Augustus Le Plongeon's views were easily disproved once archaeology developed a firm chronology for the Maya and Egypt, but proving his theories wrong appears not to have been sufficient for the new field of scientific archaeology.

Darwin goes on to warn, "False facts are highly injurious to the progress of science, for they long endure" (Darwin 1871:385). Ironically, the supposed facts of Le Plongeon's mysticism, fakery and personality disorders, fostered by archaeologists, have long endured.

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