Augustus Le Plongeon (1826-1908): Early Mayanist, archaeologist, and photographer
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Augustus Le Plongeon, a nineteenth century Mayanist, was born on the Island of Jersey on May 4, 1826, and attended the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris. In his twenties he became intrigued by life in the Americas and traveled to Chile where he taught mathematics, drawing, and languages at a college in Valparaiso. On hearing of the Gold Rush, he sailed for San Francisco in 1849. He then applied his technical skills as a surveyor and drew a plan for the layout of the town of Marysville in the Central Valley of California in 1851. By 1855 he had moved to San Francisco and opened a Daguerreotype portrait studio on Clay Street.

In 1862, Le Plongeon left San Francisco and moved to Lima, Peru where he began using the wet collodion glass-plate negative process for studio portraits, and to record the ancient ruins. It was this same photographic process that he was to use in the 1870s and 1880s in Yucata'n to document archaeological sites because of its superior sharpness and long tonal range.

He traveled extensively in Peru for eight years visiting and photographing the ancient ruins. After reading the works of the French scholar Brasseur de Bourbourg he began to consider seriously that civilization had its origin in the New World. While Stephens and Catherwood had never proposed any connection between New and Old World civilizations, Le Plongeon became motivated to investigate the Maya as a possible source of world civilization after he read the beautifully illustrated account of their exploration of the Maya ruins in Yucatan.

He left Peru in 1870 and traveled to San Francisco where he gave a number of illustrated lectures at the California Academy of Sciences on Peruvian archaeology and the causes of earthquakes. It was at this time that Le Plongeon began full time
research on Maya civilization, and started to use photography as a tool for his research rather than as a commercial enterprise.

He left California and traveled to New York; and by 1871 he was at the British Museum in London to study Americanist manuscripts. He hoped these would give him a deeper understanding of the Maya and backup his growing belief that they were the chief bearers of culture throughout the world. It was while he was in London that he met and married Alice Dixon with whom he would collaborate for the rest of his life.

Alice, born in London in 1851, was well educated, and had been taught photography by her father Henry Dixon. Dixon was recognized in the late nineteenth century for his contribution to the development of panchromatic photography, and for his photos of London architecture taken for the Society for Preserving the Relics of Old London.

In Yucatan, Alice collaborated fully with Augustus on both camera and laboratory work. Her writings include accounts of their explorations for New York newspapers, and articles on Maya ethnology, history and religion for professional journals. Toward the end of her life she began to look inward, and her writings became more spiritual and poetic.

By 1873, after Augustus had made what he considered to be a complete comparative study of Maya and Egyptian religion, linguistics, and architecture, he concluded that Maya culture had been diffused throughout southeast Asia by Maya travelers who had then gone on to the Middle East where they founded Egypt. While most archaeologists of the early and mid-nineteenth century placed Maya civilization later than Egypt, the chronologies were still uncertain and Le Plongeon’s theory found some limited acceptance.

In 1873, the Le Plongeons traveled to Yucatan, and remained there almost continuously until 1885 in search of cultural connections between the Maya and Egypt. They used photography to record what they considered evidence of those connections, but also attempted a thorough photographic record of the sites for future research.

Their photographic work was methodical and systematic, and they took hundreds of 3-D stereo
photos. They documented entire Maya buildings such as the Governor’s Palace at Uxmal in overlapping photos by placing the camera on a tall tripod or scaffold to correct for perspective, and then processed the plates in the dark rooms of Maya buildings.

In addition to entire facades of buildings, they also photographed small artifacts, and architectural details such as bas reliefs, hieroglyphic texts, and sculptures. Each negative was exposed and processed with great care, and often it took several attempts before the sharpness and exposure were considered acceptable.

Convinced that they had found the source of world civilization, the Le Plongeons spent a total of ten months at Chichen Itza’ during two seasons, and lived at Uxmal for several months during the course of three expeditions making photos and molds. At Chichen Itza’ they excavated a chacmool from the Platform of the Eagles and Jaguars, and documented their excavation of the Platform of Venus with photos as well as plan and cross-section drawings. They also visited and photographed other Maya sites such as Izamal, Isla Mujeres, Cozumel, Cancun, and Ake, and traveled to Belize (British Honduras).

By the 1880s, while other Americanists fully accepted that the Maya post-dated Egypt, Le Plongeon refused to yield to the new findings. He stood by his years of field and archival studies, and challenged those he considered “arm chair” archaeologists to debate the issues. But the chronology and evidence
against cultural diffusion was overwhelming, and he very quickly found himself ignored, his theories condemned to the fringe of the new profession.

Augustus Le Plongeon spent his final twenty-three years in Brooklyn, New York, writing about the Maya and Egypt and defending himself against detractors. He died in Brooklyn in 1908 at the age of eighty-three; Alice died two years later when she was fifty-nine. While the conclusions of Augustus Le Plongeon have not stood the test of time, the photos of Augustus and Alice remain an important contribution to American archaeology.

Annotated Bibliography

Brunhouse, Robert L. *In Search of the Maya*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1973. This book presents chapters on seven early Mayanists. While limited in scope, the chapter on the Le Plongeons is the first account by a historian of their archaeological work and lives.

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Desmond, Lawrence Gustave. "Augustus Le Plongeon: A fall from archaeological grace." In, Alice B. Kehoe and Mary Beth Emmerichs, editors, Assembling the Past: Studies in the Professionalization of Archaeology, University of New Mexico University Press, pp. 81-90, 1999. In this book chapter Le Plongeon's downfall as an archaeologist is attributed to his stubborn refusal to accept the chronologies of Egypt and Mesoamerica, and to his direct and personal challenge to university members of the new professional field of archaeology.


Le Plongeon, Alice. *Queen Móo’s Talisman*. Peter Eckler Publisher, New York, 1902. Presents a book length account in poetic form of kingship, political intrigue, murder and the loss of empire at Chichen Itza’. Parallels the account given in Queen Móo and the Egyptian Sphinx by Augustus Le Plongeon.


Le Plongeon, Augustus. *Queen Móo and the Egyptian Sphinx*. By the author, New York, 1896. Considered by Augustus to be his most important work in which he sets forth his evidence that the Maya were the founders of Egyptian civilization.

Le Plongeon, Augustus. "The origin of the Egyptians." The Word Magazine, Vol. 17: 9-20, 70-83, 161-176, 196-209, 273-281, 345-360, 1913; Vol. 18: 47-60, 67-84, 181-190, 224-228, 1913-1914. Published after his death, this serialized account sets forth his theory that the Maya diffused their culture by traveling across the Pacific to south Asia, and then to the Middle East where they founded Egyptian civilization.

Wauchope, Robert. *Lost Tribes and Sunken Continents*. University of Chicago Press, 1962. The book includes a short chapter on Augustus and Alice Le Plongeon in which Augustus is characterized as little more than an deluded explorer and troublesome eccentric, and Alice as an unthinking wife who did no more than parrot his unfounded diffusionist theories on the Maya.