

A Photographic Trip through Ancient America

BENJAMIN URRUTIA

Early America and the Book of Mormon: a Photographic Essay of Ancient America. By Paul R. Cheesman. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972. xiv + 109 pp. \$6.95.

There are beautiful pictures in this book. Some, like the take of Monte Albán at dawn, are works of art. The volume could make a valuable gift or an adequate addition to a photographic library. It provides a good substitute, or a companion, to a tour of the fallen cities that were built on the soil of the American continent long before our more recent ancestors so rudely invaded these shores.

Nevertheless, there are flaws. I mention them here only in a spirit of helpful criticism, in the hope that the author will be able to correct them in a future edition, and that other writers will avoid making the same mistakes.

Although the maps on pp. xvi, xvii and 68 are fairly accurate, those on pp. xi, xiv and 64 are atrocious. Why use bad maps when good ones are available? Furthermore, Dr. Cheesman defines "Mesoamerica" as "Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and Salvador" on page xiv, but the accompanying map contradicts him, as it leaves out Baja California and Honduras. The definition, at any rate, is different from the geographical one (all of Central America and Mexico) and the anthropological one (which leaves out most of Mexico and reaches down to Costa Rica).

The words "thought by some" on page xix are superfluous. It is not a matter of opinion, but a fact, that the Maya calendar was "more accurate than the Christian calendar in use at the time of Columbus." That was the hopelessly inaccurate Julian calendar. The Gregorian calendar, developed a century afterwards, is much better, but still not as good as the Maya.

Another needed correction, I'm happy to say, does *not* stem from an error of Dr. Cheesman's. On page xvii, the terminal date for the peak of the "Olmec" flourishing is given as 400 B.C. However, the development of dendrochronological calibration of C-14 dates—a system that gives radiocarbon a far greater accuracy in dating than it ever had before—sets the termination at ca. 600 B.C. This reinforces the view that 600 B.C. must be seen as the dividing line between the Middle Preclassic and the Late Preclassic (the chart on page x also needs correcting on this point).

Coming to Chichen Itza, Dr. Cheesman discusses the ritualistic Ball Game and correctly notes that the use of hands was forbidden, though neglecting to mention that the feet and head were also banned—making it very unlikely that the game will ever be in vogue again.

Monte Albán does *not* mean "sacred mountain" (p. 23). It means "white mountain." It is regrettable that the section on Palenque (pp. 24-26) contains two photographs of the Palace (the second adding nothing to the first) but none of the interiors of the Temple of Inscriptions or the Temple of the Cross. The Teotihuacán section (pp. 38-41) omits the information that the city's ceremonial center suffered severe destruction around 400 A.D.