

## CHAPTER XX.

The Indians of the Isthmus—Their early Intercourse with Mexico and Peru—Dorachos—Savaueries—San Blas Indians—Bayanos—Cholos.

HAD the invasion of the Spaniards been delayed a few centuries, the Isthmus would probably have witnessed a collision between the two greatest nations of America,—the ancient Peruvians and the Mexicans. While the Incas were pushing their conquests to the north, the Aztec monarchs extended their empire toward the south-east, and ere long they would have come in contact. Although there is a difference of opinion amongst historians as to whether these nations possessed a knowledge of each other's existence, there can be no doubt that the aborigines of the Isthmus were aware of the opulence and power of both. At the time of the discovery a constant intercourse was kept up between Veraguas and Central America, which was intimately connected with, or, as others assert, formed a part of the Mexican empire. Peru was equally known to the Isthmians. Balboa, long before reaching the Pacific Ocean, received informa-

tion concerning an empire of great wealth; and after he had arrived at the Gulf of San Miguel, the Indians traced on the sand the outline of the llama, an animal peculiar to Peru. As pictorial illustrations, to which the Incas were strangers, could not have conveyed to the Dariens an idea of the animal, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the informers had actually visited the dominions, the productions of which they described, for which their never-sinking rafts of balsa-wood and the light winds of the south-west coast offered great facilities. Cundinamarca was still nearer; and if they were acquainted with regions so distant, they could hardly be ignorant of that degree of civilization which the inhabitants of those parts enjoyed in which at present the city of Bogotá stands.

But the aboriginal Isthmians, however extensive their knowledge of foreign nations may have been, had derived little benefit from it. They were rude and barbarous savages, who, divided into many hostile tribes, waged continual warfare with each other. It is only in Western Veraguas that traces of a more civilized people are found. These parts were inhabited by a numerous tribe, the Dorachos, and still show their remains,—tombs, monuments, and columns of different sizes, covered with fantastic figures, or representations of natural objects, differing entirely from either the hieroglyphics of Mexico or those of Central America. At Caldera, a few leagues from the town of David, lies a granite block, known to the country-people as the “Piedra pintal,” or painted stone. It is fifteen feet high, nearly fifty feet in circumference, and flat on the top. Every part, especially the

eastern side, is covered with figures. One represents a radiant sun, it is followed by a series of heads, all with some variation, scorpions, and fantastic figures. The top and the other sides have signs of a circular and oval form, crossed by lines. The sculpture is ascribed to the Dorachos, but to what purpose the stone was applied, no historical account nor tradition reveals; it seems probable however that it was intended to commemorate their annals. Many Indian nations claim descent from the sun, and perhaps on that account a representation of that body is placed first; the heads may possibly denote the different chiefs, and the various appendages be meant to express particular occurrences of their reigns. What the other characters may signify is difficult to say, but they are too irregular and too much scattered about to be mere ornaments: symmetry is the first aim of the savage in beautifying. The characters are an inch deep; on the weather side however they are nearly effaced. As they no doubt were all originally of the same depth, an enormous time must have elapsed before the granite could thus be worn away, and a much higher antiquity must be assigned to these hieroglyphics than to the other monuments of America. Several columns are seen in the town of David, where they are used for building purposes; the characters on them differ from those of the "Piedra pintal," by being raised and considerably smaller.

The Guacos, or tombs, of the Dorachos are of interest; they are extremely numerous, and attest that the country was thickly populated. They are of two descriptions: those upon which the most pains have been bestowed,

and which probably enclosed members of the wealthier classes, consist of flat stones put together, resembling in shape and size the coffins used in Northern Europe; they are slightly covered with mould, and earthen vases are found within; the vessels are of good workmanship, and in the shape of basins or of tripods, the legs being hollow, and containing several loose balls. Occasionally round agates, with a hole in their centre, and small eagles have been met with. It seems to have been customary among the Doracho tribe to wear these eagles around the neck, by way of ornament; Ferdinand Columbus frequently mentions them when speaking of Veraguas and the adjacent Mosquito shore. Several have been found in the last few years; most of them measure from wing to wing about four inches. Tombs of the second class are more frequent: they consist of a heap of large pebbles, from three to four feet in height, and descending as much below the surface; no vases or ornaments are found in these graves, but always one or more stones for grinding Indian corn, made, like most of the vessels, with three legs. The present inhabitants, who still pursue the same method of making bread as those who formerly occupied the country, value these stones highly, and pay a high price for them. In several instances bodies have been met with, which however at the slightest touch crumbled into dust. The inhabitants of the canton of Alanje speak of other remarkable remains in the Northern Cordillera, one of which is said to be a rocking-stone, but no satisfactory account could be procured.

From the scanty information left by historians, it is

impossible to decide whether the tribes who inhabited Northern Veraguas at the time of its discovery were connected with the Dorachos. Ferdinand Columbus says, "They are divided into several small communities, and governed by caciques. The principal towns of the district are Zobraba, Urra, Veragua, Dururi, and Cateba. The customs are for the most part the same as those of Hispaniola and the adjacent islands. The people of Veragua and the neighbouring country, when talking to one another, are constantly turning their backs, and they are always chewing an herb, which we believe to be the reason that their teeth are rotten and decayed. Their principal food is fish; they have abundance of maize, from which they make red and white *chicha*, or beer; they also prepare several sorts of wine from the pith of palms and the fruit of several other trees. They are skilful in manufacturing golden ornaments, and keep up a constant intercourse with the inhabitants of Central America\*."

At the time of the discovery the Indians of Darien and Panama had made less progress towards civilization than those of Veraguas, though they were more polished than the aborigines of Santamarta and the coast previously explored by the Spaniards. There were no monuments, nor any towns or villages, the houses being scattered at irregular distances. War was frequent between the different tribes, and the flesh of the enemies was devoured by the victors. The men, when not engaged in fighting, occupied themselves with fishing, hunting, and cultivating the fields, while the women performed domestic duties. Both sexes had some kind of dress, differing in

\* Kerr's Voyages and Travels, vol. iii. chap. i.

this respect considerably from the natives of the West India Islands; the men wore around their loins a covering composed of sea-shells, the women garments of cotton, which reached to the feet. Polygamy prevailed, but only the eldest son of one wife was considered legitimate. When a chief died, the heir and twelve of the chief's people, wrapt in sheets, sat all night around the corpse, singing in a melancholy tone the exploits and history of the deceased; the canoes, arms, fishing implements, etc., were burnt, in the belief that the smoke ascended to the place whither their lost friend was gone. All the concubines were interred with the chief, it being believed that they would go with him to a place where their services would again be required. The corpse, after being enclosed in the best blankets (*mantas*), and decorated with golden ornaments, was suspended over a fire, and the grease dropping out carefully collected into earthen vessels; when dry, the body was interred, or, in some districts, preserved above ground.

The natives seem to have had some knowledge of a Supreme Being, to whom was attributed the power of causing the celestial movements, sunshine, rain, etc., and they attached much faith to certain men called Masters, who were supposed to be gifted with supernatural powers, and capable of foretelling the future. Each of these "Masters" possessed a hut, without either door or roof, and on being consulted went into his hut, whence, after repeating a prayer, he returned with an answer. The belief in witchcraft also existed, the witches being thought to be connected with the devil, and capable of injuring infants, and even adults. Evil spirits were

seen in different shapes, generally in that of a beautiful youth, the latter appearance was adopted not to frighten the victims, and secure them more easily. There was a tradition of a deluge: when the flood came a man with his wife and three sons escaped in a large canoe, and afterwards peopled the world\*.

The Indians who at present inhabit the Isthmus are scattered over Bocas del Toro, the northern portions of Veraguas, the north-eastern shores of Panama, and almost the whole of Darien, and consist principally of four tribes, the Savanerics, the San Blas Indians, the Bayanos, and the Cholos. Each tribe speaks a different language, and they are not unfrequently at war with each other. A campaign of some duration took place in 1847 between the Bayanos and San Blas Indians, and engaged the energies of the former to such an extent that for some time their trading voyages to Panama were suspended, which caused a scarcity of provisions amongst the inhabitants of that city.

The Savanerics occupy the northern portion of Veraguas, and appear to be most numerous in a district situated a few days' journey from the village of Las Palmas. One of their chiefs has adopted the pompous title of King Lora Montezuma, and pretends to be a descendant of the Mexican Emperor conquered by Cortez; almost every year he sends ambassadors to Santiago, the capital of Veraguas, to inform the authorities that he is the legitimate lord of the country, and that he protests against any assumption on the part of the New-Granadian government. These ambassadors, who appear in mean dresses, and make known

\* Herrera, 'Historia General,' Dec. IV. libro i. cap. 10 y 11.

their mission in broken Spanish, are generally treated with ridicule. Although no credit can be attached to the assertion of King Lora that he is a descendant of the great Montezuma, yet there is reason to suppose—and future investigations may tend to corroborate the supposition—that his subjects are a remote branch of the great family of Anahuac. Direct intercourse existed at the time of the discovery between the southern portions of the Mexican empire and Veraguas; little eagles, the national emblem of Mexico, are frequently met with in the tombs of the district, and chocolate is still the prevalent drink. Such facts are, in themselves, important enough to draw upon this tribe the attention of the ethnologist. Unfortunately no European has as yet had time to study it, and the Spanish inhabitants are too indolent, and, it may be added, too much prejudiced against the Indians, ever to arrive at correct conclusions, or to make proper use of the rich materials scattered around them. How they reason may be inferred from the following: A gentleman, more intelligent than the generality of his countrymen, said, “The very fact that that Indian takes the name of Lora, that of a parrot, is sufficient to show what a man he must be.” I told him however that “Lora,” in the language of the natives, might have an entirely different signification, and that the mere similarity of sound was no proof of identity of meaning, and that the proceedings of this Indian chief looked so business-like, that, in my opinion, he must either be himself a superior man, or must have some European counsellor to direct his movements.

The Savaneries are a fine athletic race, but are hardly



distinguishable from their neighbours by any peculiarity of features. Their dress consists of short loose breeches, a kind of frock, and a broad hat. The garments are made either of wool, cotton, or the fibre of the Cucua. Dresses of the latter are common to all the Indians of the Isthmus, and, if well made, are perfectly waterproof. Their arms consist of bows, arrows, and spears, better adapted perhaps for hunting than for war. In their villages they live together in palenques, circular buildings, containing in the centre a spacious hall, and on the sides smaller apartments, in which the different families, or perhaps the branches of one large family, reside. Polygamy prevails universally, and, as in most communities where this institution exists, the women are considered as inferior beings; they have to perform all the hard labour,—however heavy the burden, however great the distance to which it has to be transported, the wives have to carry it, while their husbands, with their bows and arrows in their hands, leisurely walk by the side, and probably amuse themselves by playing with the dogs or shooting birds.

Their food consists chiefly of Indian corn. They catch fish by poisoning the water with the pounded leaves of the Barbasco, and make excursions which furnish deer, sajinos, pigs, and wild turkeys. Cacao and maize, roasted and reduced to powder, are used for making their principal beverage. Their mode of disposing of the dead is the same as that of their forefathers. The corpse is wrapped in bandages, slowly dried over the fire, then deposited on a scaffold, and for some time supplied with food and drink. Besides their own clothing, the Indians

manufacture from the fibres of the Pita (*Bromelia* sp) bags of all sizes and colours, known by the name of *chacarás*, and they collect the resin of the Saumerio (*Styrax*), which, emitting an agreeable odour, is burnt as incense in the churches of Veraguas. Mules, horses, donkeys, and cattle are bred by them in great numbers, and taken to the adjacent towns and villages. Whatever may be disposed of, they seldom accept money in exchange; the most welcome return are knives, machetes, and other cutting instruments, and above all dogs, for which they have a great liking; unfortunately their fondness does not seem to be exercised in the same manner as among civilized people; the poor animals, after having been some time with their new masters, become very lean and skinny.

In order to ascertain the height of an object, a peculiar method of measurement is in use. In measuring the height of a tree, for instance, a man proceeds from its base to a point where, on turning the back towards it, and putting the head between the legs, he can just see the top. At the spot where he is able to do this, he makes a mark on the ground, and then paces the distance to the base of the tree: this distance is equal to the height. This method, in which, from constant practice, the Indians have attained a skill almost approaching to geometrical accuracy, answers the common purposes of life, and is universally practised by the Spaniards of Veraguas.

The Manzanillo, or San Blas Indians, inhabit the north-eastern portion of the province of Panama. They occasionally visit Portobelo and the neighbouring vil-

lages, and live in almost constant feud with the Bayanos. It was probably this tribe that came in conflict with Columbus's crew during his fourth voyage of discovery, when, unlike most savages, they exhibited no fear at the discharge of the canons; the thunder of man probably appeared to them insignificant when compared with the terrible tornadoes that so frequently visit their coast. But this must at present remain a matter of conjecture, as our knowledge of the tribe is very limited; of its language we are totally ignorant.

The Bayanos inhabit the district about the river Chepo, and are a warlike people, who up to this time have preserved their independence, jealously guarding their territory against the white man. Their dislike of Spaniards and their descendants is intense, and strongly contrasts with their friendly disposition towards the English,—a feeling entertained since the days of Dampier and Wafer. British vessels annually touch at the northern coast for the purpose of trading, and it is probably from that source that some of the Bayanos have obtained a smattering of English. Their cacique has frequently paid visits to the British representative at Panama, but there the friendship ended: the consul, on asking permission to show the same mark of attention to the chief, was told that no Europeans were allowed to enter the country, and if he attempted such a journey it would cost him his life.

The Cholo Indians are a widely diffused tribe, extending from the Gulf of San Miguel to the Bay of Choco, and thence with a few interruptions to the northern parts of the Republic of Ecuador. They may be traced along the coast by their peculiar mode of raising their habita-

tions upon poles six or eight feet above the ground. Their wide range explains an historical difficulty. In reading of the discovery of Peru, how the Spaniards gradually pushed southwards, everywhere making inquiries about the empire of the Incas, and even obtaining information of the city of Cuzco, we are at a loss to understand how it was that the accounts given by the natives were intelligible to them. Even the best historians have left this enigma unexplained. But the fact that the same language is spoken from San Miguel to those districts where the Quichua commences, and that it was familiar to the Spaniards before they started, enables us to comprehend how the existence of the dominions of Atahualpa could be known on the banks of the Churchunque, how Balboa could receive information respecting the llama, and how Pizarro and his followers could converse with natives who had never before beheld the face of a white man.

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