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GIANT DESERT FIGURES NEAR BLYTHE

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## GIANT DESERT FIGURES NEAR BLYTHE

George Palmer, an ex-aviator of the United States Army, was making a flight from Las Vegas, Nevada, to Blythe, California, soon after the World War, when he made an astounding discovery. Flying at an altitude of 5,000 feet over uninhabited semi-desert country, he glanced earthward and saw the outlines of gigantic human figures up to 167 feet in length. Circling low over the area, he took careful note of the unusual phenomena, the nature and location of the figures. Later he visited the scene again by plane and took some snapshots of it with a small camera. These pictures he presented to Arthur Woodward, curator of history of Los Angeles Museum.

In 1932, Woodward, recognizing the value of this discovery to anthropological science, secured the aid of Lieutenant Minton Kaye and Sergeant Stephen McAlko of the United States Army Air Corps at March Field. Following Palmer's instructions, the aviators rediscovered the figures, photographed them and noted the route by which they might most easily be reached by land. A few days later, a party consisting of Arthur Woodward, Dr. Charles Van Berger, honorary curator of archaeology of the museum, and Lieutenant Minton Kaye visited the place by automobile and took exact measurements and descriptions of the various designs.



The giant desert figures are located about eighteen miles north of Blythe on the high rim table lands one mile west of the Colorado River. Altogether there are four distinct groups of figures. One group consists of three designs: a man lying spread-eagled, with the body, from the knees up, within a huge circle; an animal looking somewhat like a horse with very long spindle-like legs and a very long tail, and serpentine coil presumably representing a snake. The figure of the man is 95 feet long from the crown of his head to the bottom of his feet. His arms, legs and trunk are well-proportioned to each other but the head is too small and the neck too long. The knees and elbows are greatly accentuated, giving a "knobby" or skeleton-like appearance to the arms and legs. The extreme thinness of thighs and calves enhances this effect. The circle, which appears to have been used as a dance ring, is 140 feet in diameter and strongly marked except in one place where it is being covered up by the erosion of an encroaching sand dune. The animal is 36 feet in length from the tip of its nose to the base of its tail. The serpentine coil is 12 feet in diameter.

Another group of designs consists of a man, an animal and a coiled serpent, but without the circle. In this instance, the figures reach truly gigantic proportions. The man is 167 feet in length, and, like the other gigantic



figure, is well-proportioned except for the head being too small, the neck too long and slender, and the knee and elbow joints too large and knobby. The animal and serpent are very similar in appearance to those of the other group.

A third mesa contains but a single figure, that of a man, 98 feet long. The torso is 17 feet wide and the arms outstretched over a span of 74 feet. Mel Wharton, in the Los Angeles Times Magazine, August 28, 1932, errs when he says, "three 'sets' of outlines feature the region. In each there is the gigantic flat figure of a man, an animal and a snake. This odd triune is found always together." It is possible that these three designs appearing in the same group may have had some symbolic significance to the Indians and that therefore it is well to emphasize their appearance together. Nevertheless, neither the serpent nor the animal seems to be a part of the third group or 'set' unless those figures are covered up by the sand and therefore do not show on the photographs.

The fourth and final group of designs consists of two straight intersecting lines, a circle inscribed within one of the angles made by this intersection, and a very heavy straight line beginning at the rim of the circle and extending across it and one of the perpendiculars, going to some distance beyond the vicinity of the circle and the intersecting lines. The whole has the general appearance of a camp



site but nothing is known about it.

An extraordinary technique was used in the construction of all the figures. The high plateaus on which they are found were once the bottom of the Colorado River. They are covered by smooth pebbles or cobble stones. These stones are somewhat rounded and shaped like double faced discs. Exposed for ages to the hot sun and desert wind, they have taken on a dark brown color. They vary in diameter from one to five inches. It was a comparatively easy task to remove these rocks and expose to view the lighter hue of the soil beneath. In this manner the designs were made. The removed stones were placed along the edge of the figures to accentuate their outlines and serve as a protection against drifting sand. The eyes, nose, mouth and other features, however, were formed in a different manner. They were represented by white stones brought from a distant wash. As these stones are of a different material, and, therefore, have developed a different color from those carpeting the mesa tops, they serve admirably for contrast.

According to Woodward, one of the oddest features of one of the man-like figures is "the long wavy appendages emanating from the head on either side. These were six in number on each side, and extended out for some forty-seven feet. Strangely enough, these wavy lines had not been made by scraping away the pebbles. Instead, it seemed that the



artisans had in some manner selected a series of brightly polished pebbles and laid them in a mosaic to form the waves. The effect was rather weird, the more so because the entire surface was covered with the shining dark stones, and to have these hair-like lines shimmering elusively in that expanse of already polished stones was a bit uncanny."

Naturally an effort was made to discover the creator of these Herculean silhouettes. The Mohave or Chemchueni Indians, who once inhabited that region, left no evidence of anything suggestive of the giant figures in their legends.

Designs of a different character but embodying the same technique have, however, been discovered in various places in the neighboring region. An Indian maze, built by removing the pebbles and piling them in a definite pattern or design, is found  $13\frac{1}{2}$  miles south of Needles, Arizona. It is thought the Indian used the maze as a runway in which to shake off the evil spirit which was following him. A somewhat similar construction is found in Death Valley about ten miles north of Stove Pipe Wells. It is built in several sections and seen from a nearby height it looks very much like gigantic floor plans for a house. It has been suggested that they were used in ceremonial activities and that each section represents a certain stage in a progressive ritual. The fact that these mazes are built with the same technique as that used in the creation of the desert figures



and the fact that the mazes and great figures are close together indicate that both groups of designs might well have been made by the same people.

This belief is strengthened by the report that the maze at Needles originally had two giant man-like figures incorporated with it but that these were destroyed by building activities of the Santa Fe Railroad in 1889 and 1892. The importance of the figures to anthropological science was not recognized at that time and therefore no accurate description of them is available. It is not known if these figures were accompanied by those of animals or serpents. The maze at Needles is known as the "Mohave Maze" but the Mohave Indians deny having built it and disclaim any knowledge of the builders.

Woodward also mentions another giant figure in this region: "Far down in the Gila Valley, Arizona, lost in the grease-wood tangle, just north of the Gila River, about five miles from the modern Pima town of Bacaton, is supposed to be a similar outline of a human being. This figure is definitely connected with Pima mythology, and relates to a fearsome, cannibalistic creature known as Haak Vaak, who, upon being pursued through the country by a culture hero rested at that spot one night, and where she rested, the Indians made the outline in stones."

Another interesting testimonial is that of James Walters, that he had been a resident of Palo Verde Valley



for about forty years, and is familiar with the Indian "rock pictures" eighteen miles north of Blythe and one mile west of the Colorado River, and that these looked the same to him forty years ago as they do today. This might well be true, as the pebbly surface of the mesa tops keeps the figures from being covered by drifting sand. Walters also says that the figures extend between the mountains and the river at different intervals for about twenty miles.

The great desert figures near Blythe are one more interesting feature of the empire which is California. They mark some period of the historical or pre-historical background of this region. What they signify can not be ascertained at this time. Perhaps with the increased study of anthropology, their secret will prove to be nothing more than one more mosaic in the recognizable pattern of man's endeavor.



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