

1

00:00:00,866 --> 00:00:18,227

This series presents information based in part on theory and conjecture.

2

00:00:18,227 --> 00:00:22,747

The producer's purpose is to suggest some possible explanations but not necessarily

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00:00:22,747 --> 00:00:25,747

the only ones to the mysteries we will examine.

4

00:00:37,748 --> 00:00:43,148

A thousand years ago Indian empires flourished in what is now Mexico and Guatemala.

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00:00:44,649 --> 00:00:47,949

People built incredible cities and awesome pyramids.

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00:00:48,949 --> 00:00:53,949

They often used these same pyramids however for a grim ritual.

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00:00:56,949 --> 00:00:58,949

The sacrifice of human beings.

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00:01:00,949 --> 00:01:02,950

What sort of men were these?

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00:01:04,950 --> 00:01:09,950

What dark secrets are entombed inside their massive pyramids?

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00:01:17,950 --> 00:01:21,951

Best areas of Central America are dense uninhabited jungle.

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00:01:22,951 --> 00:01:26,951

For centuries the only regular visitors have been men known as chicleiros.

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00:01:28,951 --> 00:01:33,951

They come in search of the chicle tree from whose sack chewing gum is made.

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00:01:34,951 --> 00:01:40,952

Often it was these chicleiros who first discovered towering, bine- shrouded mounds.

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00:01:41,952 --> 00:01:43,952

Ancient stone pyramids.

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00:01:44,952 --> 00:01:48,952

All over Mexico and Guatemala pyramids lie in ruins.

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00:01:49,952 --> 00:01:55,953

Remains of many separate Indian cultures, some dating back thousands of years.

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00:01:57,953 --> 00:02:02,953

The few pyramids that have been restored are among the most awesome works of antiquity.

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00:02:03,953 --> 00:02:07,953

In Chalula there is a pyramid which in volume is the largest building on earth.

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00:02:08,953 --> 00:02:13,954

1400 feet on each side it covers 45 acres.

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00:02:15,954 --> 00:02:21,954

To probe its construction archeologists dug four miles of tunnels inside the pyramid.

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00:02:22,954 --> 00:02:24,954

They found steps of the pyramid.

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00:02:25,954 --> 00:02:27,955

They found the remains of the pyramids.

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00:02:27,955 --> 00:02:29,955

Four miles of tunnels inside the pyramid.

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00:02:30,955 --> 00:02:35,955

They found steps of three earlier pyramids built one on top of another.

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00:02:36,955 --> 00:02:40,955

The oldest dates back some 1800 years.

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00:02:43,955 --> 00:02:48,956

In the heart of Mexico City workers are digging out an Aztec pyramid.

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00:02:48,956 --> 00:02:52,956

Covering two city blocks the ruins consist of nine overlapping pyramids.

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00:02:53,956 --> 00:02:56,956

Archeologists are restoring the original appearance.

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00:03:00,956 --> 00:03:05,957

It was here in 1520 that Spanish conquistadores led by Hernán Cortés,

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00:03:06,957 --> 00:03:10,957

marvels at the fact that the ruins were the first to be restored.

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00:03:11,957 --> 00:03:17,957

It was here in 1520 that Spanish conquistadores led by Hernán Cortés,

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00:03:18,958 --> 00:03:21,958

marveled at a gleaming white pyramid 100 feet high.

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00:03:24,958 --> 00:03:28,958

It supported temples dedicated to the chief Aztec gods.

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00:03:29,958 --> 00:03:35,959

The many temples and plazas comprised one of the great religious and ceremonial centers of ancient Mexico.

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00:03:36,959 --> 00:03:39,959

When the Spaniards arrived in the New World,

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00:03:40,959 --> 00:03:46,959

most of these pyramids were already in ruins, sources of mystery even to the native peoples.

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00:03:47,959 --> 00:03:53,960

Later, travelers in Mexico who knew that the Egyptian pyramids were burial monuments

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00:03:54,960 --> 00:03:58,960

asked whether the pyramids of Mexico might contain tombs or buried treasures.

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00:03:59,960 --> 00:04:02,960

When none was found they wondered what strange meaning

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00:04:02,960 --> 00:04:05,960

these pyramids might have had.

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00:04:07,960 --> 00:04:13,961

Ancient American pyramids are found in the ruins of great architectural complexes.

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00:04:16,961 --> 00:04:21,961

At the top of each pyramid is a platform reached by a steep staircase.

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00:04:22,961 --> 00:04:26,961

Here stands a temple consisting of a few dark rooms.

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00:04:32,962 --> 00:04:36,962

Why did these tiny temples require such massive bases?

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00:04:39,962 --> 00:04:43,962

Near Mexico City sprawled the sun-baked ruins of Teotihuacan,

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00:04:44,963 --> 00:04:47,963

largest and most mysterious city of ancient America.

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00:04:48,963 --> 00:04:51,963

Dominating its avenues are huge pyramids.

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00:04:52,963 --> 00:04:54,963

Here the enigmas begin.

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00:04:55,963 --> 00:05:01,964

Facing west, the largest pyramid of Teotihuacan was dedicated to the sun god.

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00:05:02,964 --> 00:05:05,964

Only half the height of the largest Egyptian pyramid,

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00:05:06,964 --> 00:05:09,964

the pyramid of the sun nevertheless covers the same immense area,

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00:05:10,964 --> 00:05:13,964

almost 600,000 square feet.

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00:05:14,964 --> 00:05:18,965

If the builders had contact with Egypt, no one can say.

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00:05:18,965 --> 00:05:22,965

Recently an ancient tunnel was discovered under the sun pyramid.

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00:05:23,965 --> 00:05:27,965

It leads to a natural cavern where only a few pottery shards have been found.

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00:05:28,965 --> 00:05:32,965

To Mexican Indians, caves symbolize Mother Earth.

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00:05:33,965 --> 00:05:38,966

Some archaeologists believe the cave was the legendary birthplace of the pyramid builders tribe.

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00:05:42,966 --> 00:05:45,966

Its discovery has fueled some of the most recent discoveries

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00:05:46,966 --> 00:05:53,967

Its discovery has fueled speculation that somewhere in the huge bulk of the pyramid are hidden chambers,

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00:05:54,967 --> 00:05:56,967

perhaps even a tomb.

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00:05:59,967 --> 00:06:04,967

300 meters from the sun pyramid is a group of ancient holes forming a triple cross.

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00:06:07,967 --> 00:06:11,968

From this spot on June 21st, the longest day of the year,

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00:06:11,968 --> 00:06:15,968

the sun can be seen to rise over the pyramid's third notch,

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00:06:16,968 --> 00:06:18,968

precisely marking the summer solstice.

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00:06:25,968 --> 00:06:29,969

Of the people who built Teotihuacan, little is known.

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00:06:30,969 --> 00:06:33,969

To their origin, we have scarcely a clue.

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00:06:34,969 --> 00:06:40,969

The city flourished for centuries, then suddenly, 1200 years ago,

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00:06:41,969 --> 00:06:44,970

it was burnt and abandoned for reasons unknown.

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00:06:48,970 --> 00:06:51,970

No other great city left so few traces of its demise.

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00:06:52,970 --> 00:06:56,970

No hieroglyphic writing or apocalyptic legends record the city's end.

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00:06:59,970 --> 00:07:01,970

Did the climate change suddenly?

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00:07:03,971 --> 00:07:08,971

Could disease, hunger and civil strife have made the city vulnerable to invaders from the north?

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00:07:12,971 --> 00:07:16,971

Why was their city of over 200,000 laid out in such precise grids?

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00:07:19,972 --> 00:07:21,972

What was their religion?

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00:07:22,972 --> 00:07:24,972

Who were their gods?

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00:07:25,972 --> 00:07:28,972

We are still searching for clues.

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00:07:30,972 --> 00:07:33,972

One pyramid is decorated with great serpents.

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00:07:34,972 --> 00:07:40,973

The snake heads resemble Quetzalcoatl, an important Mexican deity of later centuries.

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00:07:41,973 --> 00:07:47,973

A strange blend of God, man and beast, he was revered for introducing learning and art.

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00:07:50,973 --> 00:07:54,974

He shares the pyramid with Flaloc, the fierce Mexican rain god.

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00:07:56,974 --> 00:08:00,974

Remarkably, the same goggle eyes are the same as the other.

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00:08:00,974 --> 00:08:08,974

Remarkably, the same goggle eyes are found 700 miles to the east, in ruined cities whose people we do know.

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00:08:09,974 --> 00:08:14,975

They were a separate culture, the Mayan, and were somehow connected to Teotihuacan.

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00:08:16,975 --> 00:08:21,975

Within a century of the end of Teotihuacan, the Mayan Empire also collapsed.

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00:08:24,975 --> 00:08:29,976

At the Mayan center of Chichen Itza, there is a temple known as the Caracol.

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00:08:30,976 --> 00:08:36,976

It was a solar and astronomical observatory used a thousand years ago by Mayan priests.

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00:08:40,976 --> 00:08:48,977

Night after night, astronomer priests charted the movements of heavenly bodies, making sightings with sticks or hollow tubes.

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00:08:49,977 --> 00:08:59,977

Despite their lack of modern instruments, these early astronomers created a solar calendar whose accuracy was unrivaled until the 19th century.

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00:09:01,977 --> 00:09:09,978

They recorded the rising of stars, had an excellent lunar calendar, and could warn of eclipses years in advance.

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00:09:10,978 --> 00:09:21,979

The Dresden Codex, an ancient Mayan manuscript, preserves their calculation of the motions of Venus, accurate to one hour in a span of 300 years.

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00:09:22,979 --> 00:09:30,979

For the Maya, the cycle of day and night was linked to the supernatural world of life and death.

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00:09:31,979 --> 00:09:37,980

The nine tiers of their pyramids represented the nine levels of the underworld.

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00:09:38,980 --> 00:09:44,980

Why, if the pyramids were connected with death, did they not have tombs?

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00:09:45,980 --> 00:09:53,981

In 1949, archaeologist Alberto Rouse was exploring a pyramid at the Mayan center of Palenque.

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00:09:58,981 --> 00:10:04,981

To his surprise, he uncovered a rubble-filled staircase leading down to the heart of the pyramid.

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00:10:14,982 --> 00:10:22,982

At the bottom of the staircase, Rouse found skeletons of several youths, perhaps placed there as guardians.

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00:10:24,982 --> 00:10:28,983

Then, he broke through to a large vaulted room.

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00:10:28,983 --> 00:10:34,983

Around the walls were stucco reliefs of Mayan gods known as Lords of Darkness.

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00:10:35,983 --> 00:10:43,983

In the center of the chamber, Dr. Rouse saw a huge stone monolith covered with carvings.

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00:10:47,984 --> 00:10:55,984

We lifted the flat and scribe stone and found a large opening that was covered with another stone.

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00:10:56,984 --> 00:11:06,985

We lifted that one too and found a sarcophagus in which appeared a skeleton of a man with all his jade jewelry.

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00:11:08,985 --> 00:11:16,985

Over the man's face was a mask made of 200 jade pieces to the Mayans more precious than gold.

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00:11:17,985 --> 00:11:24,986

The sarcophagus lid, its colors restored, shows a priest looking up through sacred trees.

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00:11:24,986 --> 00:11:29,986

It appears the lid was intended to help the deceased to heavenly paradise.

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00:11:33,986 --> 00:11:37,987

The pyramids, however, had another more grisly connection with death.

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00:11:37,987 --> 00:11:42,987

They were often the scene of grim ceremonies ending in human sacrifice.

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00:11:43,987 --> 00:11:50,987

Why were such technically advanced people so mesmerized by blood and death?

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00:11:59,988 --> 00:12:07,988

When archeologists excavated the Karakol at Chichen Itza, they found 14 skulls on a platform adjoining the main stairway.

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00:12:08,988 --> 00:12:12,989

The skulls belonged to victims of human sacrifice.

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00:12:12,989 --> 00:12:21,989

The most common form of sacrifice, the heart was torn still beating from the victim's chest by the heart.

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00:12:21,989 --> 00:12:37,990

The most common form of sacrifice, the heart was torn still beating from the victim's chest by the high priest and offered to the gods.

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00:12:39,990 --> 00:12:47,991

The victims were prisoners of war, slaves, or even devout women like the Chichen Itza.

113

00:12:47,991 --> 00:12:52,991

were prisoners of war, slaves, or even devout volunteers.

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00:12:54,431 --> 00:12:59,431

Often, the body was divided among priests and populists and eagles.

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00:13:03,112 --> 00:13:10,112

According to Dr. Ruse, we don't know whether the Mayans perform sacrifices on the tops of the

pyramids.

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00:13:11,112 --> 00:13:19,112

For the Aztecs, we have information from the writings of the chroniclers, including some drawings.

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00:13:22,113 --> 00:13:30,113

And there you can see that they made human sacrifices in front of the temple on the tops of the pyramids.

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00:13:31,113 --> 00:13:36,113

After they killed the sacrificial victims, they threw them down the stairs.

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00:13:41,114 --> 00:13:47,114

In front of the pyramid of Mexico City was a bizarre structure called the Skull Rack.

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00:13:51,114 --> 00:13:57,115

According to Spanish reports, it contained 136,000 human heads.

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00:13:58,115 --> 00:14:03,115

The Aztec obsession with sacrifice was no isolated example.

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00:14:04,115 --> 00:14:11,115

Five centuries earlier, the Mayans of Chichen Itza also practiced sacrifice.

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00:14:12,116 --> 00:14:19,116

It is believed that this platform once supported poles on which were stacked the heads of sacrificial victims.

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00:14:26,116 --> 00:14:29,117

There were many situations that called for sacrifice.

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00:14:30,117 --> 00:14:32,117

The rain god had to be appeased.

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00:14:33,117 --> 00:14:42,117

And to protect the sun during its nightly passage through the underworld, priests felt compelled to make daily offerings of human hearts and blood.

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00:14:45,117 --> 00:14:50,118

Ancient Mexican and Mayan art is rich in death-inspired images.

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00:14:51,118 --> 00:14:56,118

Nightmare visions of the grotesque, the fantastic and the terrifying abound.

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00:15:11,119 --> 00:15:19,119

The famous calendar stone found near the Aztec pyramid embodies the highest flowering of their science and art.

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00:15:20,119 --> 00:15:22,120

At its center is the sun god.

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00:15:23,120 --> 00:15:30,120

Sticking out in the form of a knife, his tongue depicts the god's incessant demand to be fed with human hearts and blood.

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00:15:33,120 --> 00:15:36,120

Why were these people so preoccupied with death?

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00:15:37,120 --> 00:15:43,121

How could cultures so advanced in art and science be so obsessed by blood and sacrifice?

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00:15:44,121 --> 00:15:49,121

They were a people who invented zero and counted time in the millions of years.

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00:15:51,121 --> 00:15:55,122

Yet slaughter fascinated them more than anything else.

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00:15:57,122 --> 00:16:00,122

In the shadow of the pyramid was the bustling marketplace.

137

00:16:01,122 --> 00:16:06,122

Amidst clay pots and garden vegetables, a young man leads a procession.

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00:16:07,122 --> 00:16:10,122

He is dressed in the garb of the god to whom he will be sacrificed.

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00:16:11,122 --> 00:16:18,123

Such sacrificial victims felt especially honored since their souls would rise to the house of the sun.

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00:16:20,123 --> 00:16:25,123

For ancient Mexicans, there were no absolute barriers between the living and the dead.

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00:16:26,123 --> 00:16:30,124

They feared death but believed that flowed naturally from life.

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00:16:31,124 --> 00:16:38,124

We know their descendants, simple corn farmers living in the torrid plains and jungle villages of Central America.

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00:16:41,124 --> 00:16:45,124

In the Yucatan, most of the villagers are pure Mayans.

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00:16:48,125 --> 00:16:53,125

Today the Mayans' descendants remain suspended between ancient and modern worlds,

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00:16:54,125 --> 00:16:59,125

... tied to unfathomed mysteries in the buried cities of their ancestors.

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00:17:04,126 --> 00:17:09,126

Deep in the Guatemala jungle is the most awesome of all Mayan ruins.

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00:17:10,126 --> 00:17:12,126

It is the fabulous city of Tikal.

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00:17:13,126 --> 00:17:18,126

Like ancient skyscrapers, its huge pyramids pierce the rainforest canopy.

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00:17:19,126 --> 00:17:24,127

They support dark, narrow temples with walls up to 40 feet thick.

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00:17:25,127 --> 00:17:30,127

Crowning the temples are giant roof cones, covered with ornate but decaying sculpture.

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00:17:32,127 --> 00:17:35,127

Once, gleaming white plaster coated the pyramids.

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00:17:35,127 --> 00:17:38,128

The temples were painted a gaudy red.

153

00:17:39,128 --> 00:17:44,128

Great crowds gathered in the plazas to watch spectacles of pomp and sacrifice.

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00:17:47,128 --> 00:17:52,128

The population didn't have access to the temples, which were on tops of the pyramids.

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00:17:53,128 --> 00:17:55,128

The only ones allowed were the priests.

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00:17:57,129 --> 00:18:02,129

For the ordinary people, the pyramids were proved

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00:18:03,129 --> 00:18:09,129

that the ruling class had great power, that they had better obey.

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00:18:11,129 --> 00:18:18,130

Perhaps the pyramids were symbols of ruling class power, designed to awe and frighten the populace.

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00:18:20,130 --> 00:18:25,130

The pyramid stairs are so steep that some tourists have slipped and fallen to their deaths.

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00:18:26,130 --> 00:18:31,131

Perhaps they were built so that bodies of sacrificial victims would roll unimpeded to the ground.

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00:18:33,131 --> 00:18:40,131

Everywhere at Tikal are altars paired with vertical stones called stile.

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00:18:41,131 --> 00:18:47,132

A common theme of altar carvings is the bound prisoner destined for decapitation.

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00:18:50,132 --> 00:18:58,132

On one stone, skull and thigh bones represent the captive, dispatched by two executioners with stone knives.

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00:19:02,132 --> 00:19:05,133

Why are there so many altars at Tikal?

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00:19:06,133 --> 00:19:09,133

Could it have known the horrors of mass sacrifice?

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00:19:10,133 --> 00:19:14,133

More than 50,000 people once lived in Tikal.

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00:19:15,133 --> 00:19:20,133

But in 889 AD, the dates carved in stone suddenly stopped.

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00:19:21,133 --> 00:19:23,134

The city was mysteriously abandoned.

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00:19:24,134 --> 00:19:29,134

The whole Mayan empire collapsed. No one knows why.

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00:19:32,134 --> 00:19:35,134

The jungle has today reclaimed its territory.

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00:19:36,134 --> 00:19:39,135

Once gleaming temples have crumbled to ruin.

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00:19:43,135 --> 00:19:47,135

No other civilizations vanished so mysteriously.

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00:19:50,135 --> 00:19:57,136

Most experts believe the city dwellers fled to small villages, leaving the ceremonial centers empty.

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00:19:58,136 --> 00:20:01,136

Why did they leave? What chased them out?

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00:20:03,136 --> 00:20:06,136

The city was destroyed.

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00:20:08,136 --> 00:20:12,136

In ancient America, gods and men met in ways we may never understand.

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00:20:15,137 --> 00:20:20,137

Animalistic, fatalistic and magical ideas ruled supreme.

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00:20:21,137 --> 00:20:27,137

With these peoples, reality was multileveled, like the steps of their pyramids.

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00:20:28,137 --> 00:20:36,138

In a system of mystical thinking alien to us, pyramids were symbolic stairways to heaven, the ultimate in spiritual technology.

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00:20:38,138 --> 00:20:47,138

Somewhere in the vast gulf between the pyramid builders' accomplishments and their practices, lies the myth of the pyramids.

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00:20:47,138 --> 00:20:53,139

The pyramids' accomplishments and their practices lies the answer to their mysterious disappearance.

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00:20:57,139 --> 00:21:01,139

Primeval jungle spreads around Tikal in every direction.

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00:21:02,139 --> 00:21:07,140

The dense rainforest covers 20,000 square miles concealing countless ruins.

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00:21:09,140 --> 00:21:14,140

Archaeologists are just now uncovering what could be the greatest ruin of all.

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00:21:15,140 --> 00:21:25,141

50 miles north of Tikal, an old Mayan road stretches toward the unexcavated city of El Mirador and its giant rubble-covered pyramids.

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00:21:26,141 --> 00:21:30,141

Today, El Mirador is almost completely concealed by vegetation.

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00:21:31,141 --> 00:21:37,141

Both larger and older than Tikal, it may be the first true city of the Americas.

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00:21:37,141 --> 00:21:47,142

At El Mirador, archaeologists hope to find crucial clues to the strange fate of the lost civilization of the Americas.

189

00:22:07,143 --> 00:22:17,144

Morgan, Rockefeller and other captains of industry and robber barons who shape the world we live in at 9 here on the History Channel, where the past comes alive.