Archaeological discoveries that challenge previously accepted theories of the history of civilization are found all over the world.
Finding Things Where They Are “Not Supposed to Be”

Less than one lifetime ago, school textbooks considered ancient civilization as that of the Greeks and Romans, with bits on the Egyptians and Mesopotamians thrown in. Periodically since then, successive cohorts of students have been exposed to one or another “canned” version of history that they have accepted uncritically as truly “what happened.” But in recent years the pace of discovery has quickened; new finds exceed the abilities of the textbook writers to even come close to keeping up. Here are a few items of “news” about the old.

In the extreme northeast tip of Syria at the site of Hamoukar, an international archaeological team has discovered evidence that a genuine city existed by 3700 B.C.E.

A widely accepted theory has been that cities developed in northern Mesopotamia well after those in the south, where Uruk, “the Rome of ancient Mesopotamia,” gives its name to the archaeological period around 3500 B.C.E. Yet, Hamoukar already had a wall around it, indications of an elite class and government, and signs of specialized division of labor, like large ovens that hint at industrial cooking and brewing.¹

Far to the south, archaeologists are unearthing a temple and city that appear to have been the home of the fabled Queen of Sheba. The Mahram Bilqis temple near the ancient city of Marib has long been thought to be associated with “Sheba.” Recent finds there prove that the sanctuary, also known as the Temple of the Moon God, existed as early as 1500 B.C.E. and was in continuous use until the sixth century A.D. It likely was a pilgrimage center during the famous queen’s rule and also a significant political and economic force at the time Lehi’s party was in the area. If Lehi’s and Ishmael’s families were “in bondage” in that vicinity for several years, as S. Kent Brown has argued,² then the new excavations should shed light not only on relations between King Solomon and the “Queen of Sheba” but also on conditions prevailing when the Book of Mormon group was thereabouts. Bill Glanzman, an archaeologist at the University of Calgary, is heading the excavation of the sanctuary. He says that the site is packed with artifacts, pottery, artwork, and inscriptions. The full extent of the site, which is mostly covered with sand, has been revealed by ground-penetrating radar.

Near this capital of the kingdom of Saba is the ruin of a 2,230-foot-long dam, built in the seventh or eighth century B.C.E., that allowed irrigation of a large area of Saba for centuries. It could take another 15 years to get a full picture of the city. Excavation first began in 1951 under American archaeologist Wendell Phillips, but within months members of his party were forced to flee for their lives because of threats from the local governor who accused them of failing to decipher inscriptions that, he claimed, told where gold was buried. Dangers exist even today for the new excavators because the central government is not in full control of local tribesmen, who have been known to take hostages for ransom.³

“Noah’s Flood” has been a renewed topic of discussion also. In 1998 geophysicists William B. F. Ryan and Walter C. Pitman published a daring but heavily documented claim that they believe explains many questions about ancient life in the center of Eurasia. Building on the work of many other physical scientists and archaeologists, they have utilized sea-bottom cores and other
The reigning interpretation of the “development of civilization” has been that that level of human attainment was reached earliest in the Near East, whence it spread into Europe and elsewhere. Ryan and Pitman’s picture calls much of that explanation into question. The Near-East–was-first notion also fails to meet the challenge of other new data. For example, the earliest pottery in the world is now known to have been developed in northern Japan by the Jomon people about 12,700 years ago. (They are considered to be ancestors of the non-oriental Ainu people of Japan.)

Other archaeologists are now claiming a role for Africa in the pottery sweepstakes. The first African pottery is now claimed to date to the eighth millennium B.C., within the zone now known as the southern Sahara and Sahel. That is long before any such craft is evident in the Near East.

British archaeologists have discovered further unexpected facts about the Sahara, although from a much later time. In an oasis zone 100 miles long and 2 to 3 miles wide roughly 700 miles south of Tripoli, Libya, dwell the Garamantes people mentioned by classical historians Herodotus and Tacitus. The first to fourth centuries A.D. were the heyday of the Garamantes. They constituted enough of a threat to the empire that Rome sent an army against them. The area boasted flourishing agriculture made possible by tapping an aquifer with a system of underground channels (the foghara or chain-well system). They traded with both the Roman world and sub-Saharan Africa, and they built tombs shaped like the Egyptian-stepped mastaba structures as well as pyramid tombs. Recent research has identified “a series of significant botanical horizons in their area—including a late medieval ‘maize horizon,’ which represents the arrival of certain plant species from the Americas (before the time of Columbus). The Garamantes also wrote in a Libyan script, a version of which, called Tifinag has persisted to modern times among the nomadic Tuareg people of the Sahara.

In the Americas, too, data have come to light about unexpected human achievements. In a critical reexamination of past research on the pottery of the Amazon basin, North American archaeologist Anna C. Roosevelt has put together a plausible argument that the making of pottery in that area dates much earlier than has been acknowledged before. To support her case, she has published 22 radiocarbon dates that were done at the Smithsonian laboratory between 1972 and 1986 but were never published. It seems that Amazonian pottery began between 5000 and 6000 B.C. (some have suggested that it came from Africa) and is now the most securely dated New World ceramic tradition, existing at least 1,000 years before the next earliest, from Colombia.

Furthermore, a dried-up human corpse, radiocarbon dated to around 5200 B.C., has been found in northeastern Brazil, not far from the early pottery center. There was evidence that the intestinal tract of this person had been infested with hookworms. The nature of the reproductive cycle of the hookworm rules out their having reached the New
World via a cold country (the Bering Strait, as is usually supposed). Specialists on parasites are absolutely sure that the only way for those organisms to have reached the Americas from the Far East, where they are known much earlier, was inside human hosts who traveled from East Asia by boat.9

Finally, the press, television, and the Internet have widely reported the discovery of a different kind of city in northern Guatemala. Excavation at a Maya center anciently named (according to inscriptions) Cancuén began this year. The archaeologists, from Vanderbilt and other universities and the Guatemalan government, report that what they have found is not the usual administrative or holy settlement of the Maya but a very wealthy commercial center. Some mundane manufacturing and trading activities not usually associated with sacred places were central to life at Cancuén and its wealth. This is the first time that a special-function city has been discovered in Mesoamerica; small settlements for specific purposes—making salt, fishing, and mining—have been found before, but nothing so massive and economically crucial as this place.10

All these examples of recent investigations warn us that the string-wrapped packages of knowledge we may have bought at the learning store—our places of education—a few years back may now be out of date. Our old contents need to be reexamined in the light shed by more recent discoveries. How these latest finds and claims will work out over time remains to be seen. Their significance will no doubt change as more research is done. The inevitable tentativeness of scientific or scholarly knowledge displayed in these cases underlines the wisdom of Brigham H. Roberts in counseling that "we need not follow our researches in any spirit of fear and trembling. We desire only to ascertain the truth; nothing but the truth will endure."11 But it also whets our appetite for further challenging discoveries "out of the dust."