

Floating Islands: The Lake and Its Peoples

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 09 Oct 1999

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Mitchell A. Bailey — 09 Oct 1999, 15:26

Greene, Carlton wrote:

Just wanted to cast my votes for those who argue that the backdrop for the events in TBOTNS is a much transformed So. Am.

In addition to Severian's description of the autochthons, the town of Apu-Punchau, pampas, jungles at the waist of the world, blood bats, mate (so. am. tea -- very good), and countless other references, ...

This seems to illustrate a principle of culture I vaguely recall from school: the history and traditions of a ruling class, often arising and being deposed cyclically, tend to pass into legend and even be forgotten (like present day Earth, and much of the future history of the stellar empires and empire of the Monarch will be forgotten by the Commonwealth). In contrast, what is condescendingly called the "low culture", the way the common people live their lives, on the other hand may persist virtually unchanged for chiliads- er- millenia. The continued existence of mate and handwoven alpaca wool and bola-type weapons and yes floating reed islands in a future so distant Chile and Argentina and Peru are long forgotten is not unrealistic.

...I note that lake

Diuturna bears a strong resemblance to Lake Titicaca at the border between Peru and Bolivia. In SOTL the lake is described as an enormous freshwater body at an elevation significantly above sea level. Lake Titicaca fits this description. But the real clincher is the existence of floating islands made by binding river rushes together to form platforms... The Aymara Indians of the lake Titicaca area make such rafts, and a small few still live on such islands to this day.

My impression is that the Titicaca lake dwellers are called Uros, although it is said the original authentic Uros are extinct and the present-day "Uros" came from Aymaru and possibly Quechua migrants who took up the lifestyle. You may have better info on that than I do, though. The governments of Peru and Bolivia supposedly once tried to persuade them to leave, but now encourages them to stay and lead their tourist-attracting lifestyle. Some of the largest floating islands could support enough soil for tiny kitchen garden plots, which I think Wolfe's island people were said to do.

They also make and use reed boats of the type Severian describes in the Hetman's village.

This is where the designs for some of Thor Heyerdahl's "living archaeology" ocean-crossing experiments came from. The Andean design held together in the ocean much better than the Egyptian design, if I recall correctly. Not very resistant to metallic sodium-water explosions, though!

Another note: I believe, though

it's been a while, that the Aymara in the Titicaca area have a long running rivalry with the land based Quechua that inhabit the shore regions around the lake, ...

Thus, I believe Wolfe's depiction of the rivalry between the

lake people and the shore people is based on this real, historical rivalry between Quechua and Aymara.

The Inca were in wars of conquest with everybody in sight after they started their rise to empire around 1200. The greatest asset the Bros Pizarro enjoyed in their conquests was the fact that many tribes such as the Canari held grudges against their Inca overlords and were often happy to ally themselves with the Spaniards.

I may be incorrect, but I had the impression most of Titicaca's shore people were Aymaru. A Quechua-speaking people occupy one largish island in the lake. The male weavers are famous for their textiles.

...the same Quechua who inhabit Peru's Cuzco -- ancient home to Inti, the head of day. These same Quechua appear to be the model for Wolfe's autochthons.

I was interested to find that although Cuzco was the location from which the Inca nation established an empire, the tradition of the Quechua peoples say that they originated from Lake Titicaca, specifically the Isle of the Sun (there is an island of the moon, also). The avatar or incarnation of the sun god Inti and his consort came forth from this island, such island said to have been formed from the corpse(?) of a (divine?) puma or mountain lion, as the first Inca to found the original Quechua nation.

Archeologically there had been a series of earlier civilizations in the area since around 1500BC, most notably the Tiahuanco people of the Altiplano who left all those enigmatic ruins, from whom the later Inca inherited much of their tradition and material culture. Tiahuanco in particular, and the lake, were considered sacred by the imperial Inca and by the Quechua and Aymara peoples to this day.

The lake is also said to be mostly shallow. During a recent drought many Uro floating islands ran aground on mudbars, becoming what some tourists described as huts on piles of reed mats scattered on little muddy knolls.

I tried, but so far failed, to find an unambiguous translation of the word "Titicaca". (other than from Beavis and Buttthead <g> heheheheh) The best I could come up with was that "titi" is possibly Aymara for "puma". I guess that could be a reference to the aforementioned Quechua tradition. Unless there is a really obscure cultural linkage (the Great Cat of Longevity?), it would not appear the name "Diuturna" ("long-lasting", per LexUrth) has anything in common with "Titicaca".

One final note: Cuzco (which I believe is the stone town of Apu Punchau) lies to the north of Lake Titicaca. ...

So there are a number of ways we could try to reinterpret this situation:

1. Perhaps Severian/Apu_Punchao's town actually was south of the lake, being the place from which the Quechua trace their origins in legends, rather than Cuzco. Severian/Apu-Punchao could be remembered in the story of Inti's emergence. It is tempting to try to connect this avatar of Severian to perhaps the mysterious Weeping God of Tiahuanco rather than the Inca of Cuzco. The stone town of Claw seems to have been well south of Thrax as well, and not near or among any true mountains, which makes Cuzco problematic but the Altiplano south of Titicaca at least possible. Being close to the pampas, though, I keep thinking the stone town should be eastward and lower in altitude. A description of La Paz, Bolivia, located in a canyon BTW kind of reminded me of Thrax although there doesn't seem to be a river comparable to Acies running through it.

2. Lakes, particularly shallow ones, are not long-lived geographic features as a rule. They tend to either fill in with silt, develop an outlet large enough to drain them, or dry out over mere tens of chiliads. Perhaps Diuturna actually will lie well north of present Titicaca, to be formed similarly in a shallow basin in a high plateau, maybe in northern Peru near Ecuador? Bear in mind the drastic unnatural geologic upheavals between now and the time of the Commonwealth implied by BNS. The culture of eventually-vanished Titicaca can be expected to migrate to Diuturna in the interval.