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FALSEHOOD ON THE MOVE. THE AZTEC CHILDREN AND  
SCIENCE IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

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SUMMARY

*FALSEHOOD ON THE MOVE. THE AZTEC CHILDREN AND SCIENCE  
IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY*

*Allegedly kidnapped from a secret city in Central America, the “Aztec children” began a showman’s career in the early-1850s. They died around 1900, after being observed by countless pathologists and ethnologists from Europe and the US. Most of the literature on the “Aztec children” has emphasized racial theories, the imperial gaze, and the character of “ethnological shows”, where monstrosity and ethnicity were practically synonymous. Less attention has been paid to the fact that scientists continuously insisted that the case was false, an argument that instead of debunking the myth of the “Aztec children”, contributed to establishing the “Aztecs” as “a matter of fact”. In examining the case of the “Aztec children”, this essay aims to explore what can be called the shifting nature or elusiveness of falsehood.*

*The old newspapers appeared, together with the tea.  
Raskolnikov sat down and began to search through them.*

*Izler Mineral Waters. Izler. Aztecs.*

*Aztecs. Izler. Bartola. Massimo.*

*Pah, where the devil ...?*

*Ah, here are the news items.*

*Woman Falls Down Stairs – spontaneous combustion of a drunken shopkeeper, fire  
at the Sands, fire in Petersburg suburb, another fire in Petersburg suburb, Izler, Izler, Izler,*

*Izler, Massimo.*

*(Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Crime and Punishment)*

**Key words:** Microcephaly – Archaeology – Ethnological Exhibitions

*Introduction: Lilliput in London*

In 1851, a show to rival that of Madame Tussaud or the thousand wonders prepared for the Great World's Fair was on its way from the United States to London. The unprecedented event starred the last living survivors of an ancient order of priesthood called Kaanas, "little people from the Idol Temples of Iximaya, Central America, where they were kept sacred for the worship of Heathen Deities"<sup>1</sup>. They were two children, about eight and ten years old, with a tottering and feeble gait and an idiotic look about them<sup>2</sup>. Allegedly kidnapped from the secret and lost city of Iximaya, they had reached San Salvador and later, the United States, where – introduced as the "Aztec children" or the "last Aztecs" – they began a showman's career in Cincinnati and Boston, and were studied by several physicians<sup>3</sup>. In Boston, plastic surgeon Jonathan Mason Warren, a member of the prominent dynasty of Harvard Medical School physicians, led the observation. In this examination, he wanted to establish some simple facts about the so-called "Aztecs'" remarkably small stature and peculiar mental faculties. Warren, who had completed his clinical education in the hospitals of Paris and was a pioneer in rhinoplasty, was particularly intrigued by the children's profiles and head size, the smallest that he had ever observed. He compared the children with cases from his French universe: those described by Pinel in the Salpêtrière, Lamarck's ideas on the gradual development of the human being from the lower orders, and the examples of dwarfs provided by Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire in his *Histoire des anomalies*<sup>4</sup>. Warren opposed the idea that "these singular creatures belong to any peculiar tribe of dwarfs; for it is a fact universally allowed by physiological writers ... that dwarfs are impotent with individuals of ordinary height, and even among themselves"<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 1). His conclusion, however, did not prevent the children from being sent to England as "Aztecs," survivors of a nearly extinct race that had dwindled down to a few individuals, diminutive in stature and intellect<sup>6</sup>.

*The Aztec Children*

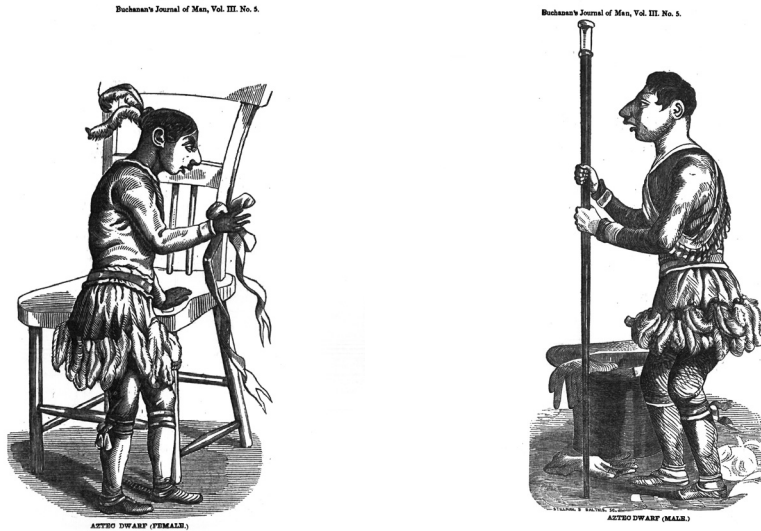


Fig. 1 - a and b: Maximo and Bartola, from *The Aztec Children* (1851).

An article in *Household Words*, the journal edited by Charles Dickens, reported on their arrival in London and set great expectations for the power of British science: “Let us hope that among the first visitors will be a categorical committee from the Ethnographical Society and that a deputation from the Royal Geographical Society will exact from the showman a strict account of ... latitudes and longitudes”<sup>7</sup>. These scientists proved once again the falsehood of this supposedly “new race”. The reports were very clear: the children were not Aztecs and, therefore, must be excluded from the fields of Ethnology or Geography. Instead, they were dwarfs, cases of hemi-cephalic development, idiots, and, as such, belonged to the realm of either “teratology” or “pathology”. The existence of a nation of such creatures was impossible. New evidence on their origin came to light; they had been bartered for the exhibitions, sold by their creole parents.

By the time they died around 1900, the enterprise of exhibiting the “Aztec children” had produced a countless number of photographs, pamphlets, and posters that shaped a new product in the realm of sideshows. “Pinheads”, “birds”, “rabbits”, and “Aztec children” would prosper in the century to come; for example, Natalia and Aurora Jaramillo or Schlitzie, one of the most famous, who was immortalized in Tod Browning’s 1932 cult film, “Freaks”. Billed as “The Last of the Aztecs”, “What is it?”, “Mexican Wild Boy”, and “the Aztec Sisters”, these were labels and beings created by a system where burlesque, falsehood, and science continuously fed upon each other in the search for new objects and novelties.

Most of the literature on the “Aztec children” has emphasized racial theories, the imperial gaze, and the bizarre character of this kind of show, where monstrosity and ethnicity appeared almost synonymous<sup>8</sup>. In this kind of cultural criticism, science and scientists are considered as allies of a racist discourse. Less attention has been paid to the fact that scientists insisted that the case was false, an argument than rather than dispelling the myth of the “Aztec children” – as the editors of *Household Words* had expected – fed the interest in them and contributed to establishing the “Aztecs” as “a matter of fact”. In examining the case of the “Aztec children”, this essay aims to explore what can be called the shifting nature or elusiveness of falsehood.

*“What is the truth?”*<sup>9</sup>

In June 1853, London was wallpapered with colorful posters promoting the “Aztec Lilliputians” show, featuring two stunted children, Maximo and Bartola. As predicted in 1851, representatives of several learned societies soon visited them. Such was the enthusiasm that they were even received at the residence of Benjamin Brodie, a celebrated surgeon devoted to pathology and then president of the Royal Ethnological Society. Richard Owen and many others went there to observe them and take measurements of their teeth and heads<sup>10</sup>.

Very few scientists resisted the draw of the Aztecs and refused to see their show<sup>11</sup>. French antiquarian Adrien de Longpérier was one of the few who chose not to go, and who denounced the effects of legitimizing this type of quackery:

*Étant à Londres au mois d'août dernier, je fus très-vivement sollicité d'aller voir les nains aztèques. Sur mon refus motivé, on m'accusa de vouloir me singulariser et de professer une incrédulité systématique. Mais je n'aime pas à encourager les charlatans et surtout les mystificateurs, même par une contribution de deux schillings, et me m'abstins opiniâtrement. A mon retour en France, j'eus encore à essuyer quelques reproches au sujet de mon scepticisme. L'Académie des sciences avait bien voulu entendre une communication relative aux nains merveilleux; comment un simple anti-quaire pouvait-il se montrer plus rétif qu'une si honorable compagnie!<sup>12</sup>*

De Longpérier, curator of the American collections at the Louvre, insisted on another point. He disagreed with the popular supposition that both the public's credulity and the doubts that the "Aztec children" aroused among scientists could be explained to some extent by the ignorance at the time regarding the ancient history of the Americas. The Aztecs were not any less known than the Persians or the Assyrians. "Mais, qu'importe! – followed de Longpérier – quand une assertion joint au mérite d'être mensongère celui d'être ridicule, elle a toutes chances de succès en ce bas monde, dans le vieux comme dans le nouvel hémisphère"<sup>13</sup>. The "earthly world" included showmen, the public, and those scientists who were eager to link their name to the novelty represented by Maximo and Bartola. One can say that de Longpérier's criticism expressed both the problem of ascertaining the truth of the facts beyond the limits of a specific realm of expertise as well as the multiplicity of factors involved in the emergence of scientific objects. As de Longpérier suggested, "the comedy of the dwarfed Aztecs" was part of a series of mechanisms to achieve success and notoriety in the new bourgeois culture described by Balzac in "la comédie humaine".

Why, then, did antiquarians and archaeologists attend such a show? As *Household Words* remarked, the successful shaping of the false story of the “Aztecs” was a result of two editorial successes: Austen Henry Layard’s *Nineveh and its Remains: with an Account of a Visit to the Chaldean Christians of Kurdistan, and the Yezidis, and an Inquiry into the Manners and Arts of the Ancient Assyrians* (1848-9) and John Lloyd Stephens’ *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatán* (1841) and *Incidents of Travel in Yucatán* (1843)<sup>14</sup>. In fact, the pamphlet distributed at the show named Stephens as the discoverer of the city of Iximaya, or at least as the first person to have heard of this sacred and lost place where a forgotten race was still alive. The first pages of the brochure displayed “profile illustrations from Central American Ruins of Ancient Races still existing in Iximaya”, i.e. three figures reproduced from engravings seen by Stephens in his travels in Central America, which “will be found to bear a remarkable and convincing resemblance, both in the general features and in the position of the head, to the two and living Aztec children” (Fig. 2). Furthermore, “an American gentleman” had provided the alleged discoverer of the children with a copy of Layard’s work, where he also found a resemblance between the faces engraved in it and the inhabitants of Iximaya and its surrounding regions<sup>15</sup>. The impresario who organized the show not only wrote the pamphlet, he also highlighted a resemblance that shaped the gaze of the public and of ethnologists for years in such a way that when some of them first saw the “Aztec children”, they were “struck with their similarity of head to those figures copied from the sculptures” featured in those works<sup>16</sup>. In the earliest shows, the impresario claimed that the children would, in time, recover their native language and memories of their life as idols of the “last Aztecs”. Thus, they could be a kind of living Rosetta stone, a connection with lost clues to the past and the answer to questions regarding the temples and ruins of Spanish America.

OUTLINE ILLUSTRATIONS, FROM RUINS OF CENTRAL AMERICA,  
OF  
ITS ANCIENT RACES.



The above three figures, sketched from engravings in STEPHENS' "Central America," will be found, on personal comparison, to bear a remarkable and convincing resemblance, both in the general features and the position of the head, to the two living Aztec Children now exhibiting in the United States, of the ancient caste of *Kamux*, or Pagan Mimes, from the city of Iximaya. (See the following *Memoir*, pages 30-31.)



These two figures, sketched from the same work, are said, by Senor VELASQUEZ, in the unpublished portion of his narrative, to be "irresistible likenesses" of the equally exclusive but somewhat more numerous priestly caste of *Mahabooms*, still existing in that city, and to which belonged VAALPEOR, the official guardian of those children, as mentioned in this memoir. VELASQUEZ states that the likeness of VAALPEOR to the right-hand figure in the frontispiece of STEPHENS' second volume—which is here also the one on the right hand—was as exact, in outline

Fig. 2 - Sketches from engravings in Stephen's Central America, from *Memoir of an Eventful Expedition in Central America* (1850).

During the years between Stephen's publication and the discovery of the so-called "Aztec" children, the traffic of documents stored in the colonial archives of the former Spanish empire increased. Prizes such as the Golden Medal offered by the Société de Géographie de Paris, valued at 2,400 francs, encouraged this growth. The Medal was offered in order to obtain a more complete and exact description than the existing ones of the ruins of the ancient city of Palenque, located in the country of Chiapas and called Casas de Piedras. The prize required that the traveler provide illustrations of the monuments, with blueprints, sections, and the main details of the sculptures that had been engraved in the colonial manuscripts published in London and the German countries in the 1820s. In 1832, however, the prize was still available.

London provided "new" documentation on the ruins of the ancient city in 1830. Under the patronage of the Irish Catholic antiquarian and member of Parliament Edward King (1795-1837), better known as Lord Kingsborough, seven imperial folios were published, comprising the facsimiles of "ancient Mexican paintings and hieroglyphics preserved in the Royal Libraries of Paris, Berlin, and Dresden, in the Imperial Library of Vienna, in the Vatican Library, in the Borgian Museum at Rome, in the library of the Institute at Bologna, and in the Bodleian library at Oxford together with the publication of *The monuments of New Spain* by M. Dupaix"<sup>17</sup>. Most reviewers of this work concluded that its significance was in the images of the objects and monuments copied from Mexican paintings using transparent paper. By insisting on the "graphic power" of a work "whose achievements alone constitute all that this work must be admitted to possess of value and importance in the eyes of the present or future generations"<sup>18</sup>, the reviews recalled that the "eye" was the most important instrument of the antiquarian.

By the mid 1830s, the antiquarian discoveries in Spanish America had been accepted as equally interesting and important as those of



the Egyptians and the triumphs of Champollion. Yet, in contrast with the subject of Egyptian antiquities, the New World was still considered virgin territory, “a golden ore that remains in the mine”<sup>19</sup>. The exploration and study of these ruins were compared with new and successful mining systems that promised fantastic profits. While the ruins and the mines shared both the attraction of “virginity” and the danger of fraud, it seems that by the 1830s, antiquarians and traders of antiquities had decided that the Spanish American ruins were a reality that could provide them with revenue in a less risky way than the mines. The popularization of the subject, i.e. recruiting traveling and local-based agents who could act as commissioners and correspondents in order to establish a constant flow of data and objects, was still pending.

The Société de Géographie prize helped a great deal in achieving that kind of popularization. Once the objects and documents began being exported, the ruins of the “Casas Viejas” became an entity defined by transactions and translations, published or stored in different media and cities. The ruins of Central America became an object to be composed of a comparison of images, written sources, eyewitness’ reports, and pieces scattered throughout a 19th century global world, shaped by the commerce and the interaction of human and non-human agents. Some of these images, combined with those of Layard, would shape not only the gaze of “this earthly world”, but also the postures and garments that the poor “Aztec children” adopted in their shows. Thus, popularization did not only mean an increasing awareness of the importance of Central American ruins: archaeological inquiry encouraged the most diverse kind of undertakings and the production of objects situated close to or beyond the boundaries of falsehood. Frauds abounded and propagated.

In the case of the Aztec children, the pages of Household Words and Adrien de Longpérier denounced the fraud by invoking the authority of those devoted to the study of Central American peoples, only

a few of whom were members of the Royal Ethnological Society or the Royal College of Surgeons. In particular, the journal quoted Jean-Frederic Waldeck, a traveler who had worked for fifteen years as an antiquary in Central America, was acquainted with the Maya and Aztec languages, and had published in Paris his “Picturesque and Archaeological Travels in Yucatan” (1838), after living for six months in a village of “pure Aztecs”<sup>20</sup>. By citing Waldeck, *Household Words* was acknowledging the efficiency of the mechanisms acting in the production of truth, scientific objects, and evidence: Waldeck also came from the publication and show-business world of London and had gone to Mexico attracted by the possibility of new discoveries to be marketed in Europe and the United States<sup>21</sup>. Moreover, Waldeck, who requested the Société de Géographie’s award, would be treated as a charlatan as a result of his drawings depicting elephants on the walls of the Central American ruins and claims that those animals existed in that region. At stake was the reliability of the facts observed by the agents that the learned societies promoted and, therefore, the very enterprise of 19th century ethnology<sup>22</sup>.

### *The Shows*

The public was charged two shillings to enjoy the Aztec children’s performance. It began with them running very obediently together, “like horses in a circus,” around the long platform in the middle of a room. A little boy played with Maximo and Bartola, and sold the *Illustrated History of the Aztec Lilliputians*<sup>23</sup>, priced at one shilling, and a daguerreotype of the children, at half a guinea. The “Aztecs” were put upon a platform and played tricks for the amusement of the public, who continuously tried to kiss them and feel their heads. The show, as the reporter from *Household Words* experienced, was continuously interrupted by the enthusiastic cries of several ladies, who visited them over and over again to check on their developments and improvements, applauding with excitement. “Kiss me, darling

– Come, Maximo, dear – kiss me, dear. Say cat, dear! Say cat”, requested the ladies to check on how the children’s language had developed. They were exhibited six or seven hours a day, six days a week in large, poorly ventilated rooms. They seemed well-fed and cared for and were kept scrupulously clean<sup>24</sup>.

Despite de Longpérier’s admonition, many anatomists took the opportunity to take measurements of Maximo and Bartola’s heads throughout their lives; they were inspected and photographed as children, young adults, adults, and old people. The scientists could do this without travelling as the living Aztecs toured Europe and the United States constantly with their impresarios, visiting the same cities several times. Their shows, as well as those of other persons shown as specimens of this or that race, created a new scenario where inspection was possible, as promoted by the Ethnological Society of London. There, “very interesting specimens of the inhabitants of countries little known to us arrive nearly in every year, are exhibited for money for a time, are even invited for inspection in fashionable drawing-rooms among the novelties of the Spring”<sup>25</sup>.

Albeit aware that the shows could be fraudulent or deceptive, or include specimens that were merely money-making schemes, scientists were the first to attend the shows every time that Zulus, Earthmen, and Australians showed up in their cities. Without much travel, they studied the life, manners, and customs of the families of mankind<sup>26</sup>. If trustworthy, the exhibitions were considered instructive, worthy of critical notice. People in general had to be directed on what to observe. Learned visitors should therefore guide the attention of young people to points of real interest, substituting correct information for the extravagant descriptions usually associated with the shows.

Thus, these itinerant exhibitions were also an opportunity to instruct potential travelers and to advocate for more ethnological collections based in the metropolis. In this sense, one can say that the traveling ethnological shows modeled what to observe and what to collect.

They circulated models of visualization. Traveling shows, as well as traveling museums, represented a kind of transnational undertaking; they carried ideas and exhibits from country to country, from town to town, from the fair to the academic museum, from the hospital to the theater, from sideshow to science. In this sense, the itinerate museums and shows of the late nineteenth century should be understood as providing a space for the mobilization and creation of objects for both science and the entertainment industry<sup>27</sup>.

In the case of the “Aztec children”, in 1853, ethnologists had examined Maximo and Bartola, their habits and physical constitution, and concluded that they represented no separate species or variety of man, ergo the story must be false. With the permission of their guardian, Professor Richard Owen examined them one early June morning of that year. Owen, the famous anatomist from the Royal College of Surgeons, concluded that “the chief peculiarity of these children, and that constitutes their attractiveness, from its strangeness, is the combination of an abnormal restriction of general growth, and a more special arrest of development of the brain and cranium, with their deep olive complexion, and fine features in regard to the eyes and nose”<sup>28</sup>. Contrary to the great expectations of the dissuasive power of the scientist’s conclusions, the public’s interest in the children continued to grow. A new article in *Household Words* would express its disappointment: “The English public has of late been distinguishing itself by astonishing excesses of credulity. If we do not grow wiser we shall get a reputation on the continent for eating camels, not beef-steaks”<sup>29</sup>. As examples of interrupted growth, continued the reporter, the dwarfed children were extremely interesting for physicians and surgeons to observe, much as the observation of cancer was of interest to the physiologist. They had been put forward as “a new race of people”, an argument immediately discarded by scientists. Nevertheless, they were popular with the public and for that reason the article applauded the astuteness of the impresarios and their shows.

No one cared that “the Aztecs” were a fake. The scientists’ opinions did not remain in small circles of specialists, quite the contrary: the confirmation of the story’s falsehood was even incorporated into the advertising strategies of the showmen in charge of the “Aztec children”. An excerpt of Owen’s article was displayed in the exhibition arena and the interest shown by scientific men was turned into another reason for putting Maximo and Bartola on display for the nobility, gentry, and general public<sup>30</sup>.

And the Ethnological Society was right: the shows did end up informing travelers, and the idea of a possible dwarfed race expanded to other regions. From Peru, a correspondent of the *Spectator*, reported in July 1853 on the dwarfs or “little people” from the province of Chiquitos, “apparently the same (race) as the Aztecs now shown in London”<sup>31</sup>. De Longpérier would likely have found a confirmation here of his opinions regarding the mechanisms of falsehood to move and survive.

### *Engravings*

For the public, it was self-evident that Maximo squatted with his legs turned out “in idol attitude, the way he was worshipped”<sup>32</sup>. In one part of the exhibition, the children were placed on pedestals to pose in the way they had been discovered and that could be observed in the *Illustrated History of the Aztec Lilliputians*. In the realm of archaeology and ethnology, 25 years after the first London shows, French anthropologists still discussed the similarities between the bas-reliefs in Palenque and Maximo and Bartola’s profiles:

*Il est certain que les caractères pathologiques qu’il (Broca) a observés sur Maximo en particulier donnent à croire que ce malheureux a longtemps vécu dans l’attitude où le montre le dessin joint à ce mémoire. Mais il pourrait se faire que cette position lui ait été imposée par son maître espagnol, et non par les pontifes hypothétiques de la sacrificature de Kaana. Maximo et Bartola rappellent d’ailleurs, bien plus encore par leurs caractères crâniens et faciaux, que par leur poses bizarres, les bas-reliefs palenquéens<sup>33</sup> (Fig. 3).*

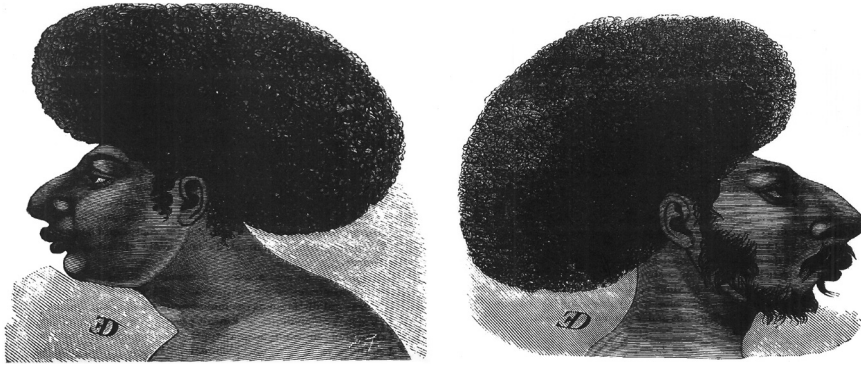


Fig. 3 - Maximo and Bartola, from E. HAMY, *Quelques observations ethnologiques au sujet de deux microcéphales américains désignés sous le nom d’Azèques* (1875).

New engravings taken from Palenque were compared with the observations and measurements taken from “the living Aztecs”, and continued to propagate the possibility of a former Mayan cult of idiots and microcephali. Paraphrasing Rheinberger, the “Aztec children” were turned into “preparations, images of themselves,”<sup>34</sup> as though the “resemblances” between the engravings and the two individuals were not a result of human intervention.

Armand de Quatrefages, the French physician in charge of anthropology and ethnography at the Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle in Paris, would recall once again that the “Aztecs” dubious story discarded the existence of any race with those characteristics. He discredited the engravings using the museum’s skull collections, which did not support the hypothesis of frequent microcephali in Central America<sup>35</sup>. Moreover, travelers did not provide a single testimony to the existence of such a race. The case of the Aztec children, however, questioned even the nature of what one could see: “on ne voit jamais dans un pays que ce qu’on va y regarder, et ce qu’on sait d’avance qu’on y verra”<sup>36</sup>. With this, French anthropologists did not mean that travelers only saw microcephali in Palenque because they were induced to see them; rather:

*The Aztec Children*

*L'existence d'idiots ou de microcéphales dans un pays quelconque ne peut donc être infirmée par le témoignage négatif des voyageurs qui ne se sont pas donné pour mission spéciale de la constater; c'est une statistique difficile à faire, et qui ne peut être bien faite qu'officiellement, comme elle l'a été pour la Suisse et le Valais, où, entourée de crétins, je n'en ai pas aperçu un seul<sup>37</sup>.*

It was argued that societies did not normally parade their idiots around town, thus one could not expect to meet them when traveling. Until statistical surveys were made, shows and asylums were the few spaces where microcephali could be observed. The shows, scientific inspections, pamphlets, news, and engravings shaped each other in such a way that they created a special entity in the realms of anthropology and pathology, contributing to provide visibility to other similar living cases.

Throughout their lives, Bartola and Maximo were passed from keeper to keeper<sup>38</sup>. At the same time, some impresarios incorporated them as wax models and exhibited their modeled heads in their traveling anatomical museums in South America and elsewhere<sup>39</sup>. Replicated as wax models or as a new generation of “last Aztecs”, their lives expanded into the twentieth century. As Barnum’s museum advertised, it continually added temporary exhibitions and objects of interest from around the world, creating “the rapid succession of novelties”, such as the Siamese Twins, the “What is it?” (a curious half-man, half-monkey creature from Africa), the Albino children, and the living Pigmy Aztec children. As *Crime and Punishment* reflected, the Aztecs Maximo and Bartola were even present in the press of Saint Petersburg. Mixed with other extraordinary daily events, they became ordinary, something to be expected in certain months of late nineteenth century urban life. As the ethnologists from London said, they arrived with springtime and departed when the season was ended. German anthropologist Rudolf Virchow observed Maximo and Bartola on their two visits to Berlin in 1877 and 1891, simultaneously complaining about the faked history while thanking the

impresario for allowing the inspections. Virchow took the children to be specimens of “microcephaly”, a “very rare case of idiotism” that up to the 1860s was uncommon in medical collections and museums. The seminal work by Carl Vogt on this “congenital insufficiency of the cerebral system” counted 41 cases in the early 1860s: 10 from Germany and England, 9 from France, 1 from Holland, 5 from Switzerland, 2 from Italy and America (“the Aztec children”), and one from Asia and Africa. “Microcephaly” was the arrested development of the embryo’s brain during the uterine life of the fetus. As a result, the infant was born with a brain considerably smaller in volume and modified in its essential forms. Most of the evidence used by Vogt to describe his “ape-men” consisted of small crania molded around defective brains<sup>40</sup>. Maximo and Bartola, with their lives as wonders of fairs and scientific inspection, provided the possibility for long-term observation of how microcephaly developed in living people. In London, ethnologists compared them with similar people held in the asylum for idiots at Highgate and the Colney Hatch Lunatic Asylum, discovering about 15 microcephali<sup>41</sup>. As it turns out, Maximo and Bartola had actually been discovered in the asylums of Ohio, the state where they began being displayed in 1850, and not in the lost cities of Central America<sup>42</sup>. None of the observations made about them recorded the dates when they were born or died. In 1856, the president of the Ethnological Society of London wondered what would become of these creatures when either the novelty of their exhibition wore off or they grew too big and troublesome to be carried around. The answer was that Maximo and Bartola were returned to the asylum where they were found and died there sometime around 1900.

When Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire presented dwarfs and giants in his *Histoire des anomalies*, he remarked on the paradoxical relationship existing between “simple objects” and scientific observation:



### *The Aztec Children*

*C'est un fait très-remarquable dans l'histoire des sciences naturelles, que les sujets les plus accessibles à la observation, ceux qui se trouvent le moins entourés de difficultés, sont précisément ceux qui ont donné lieu aux erreurs les plus nombreuses et les plus graves. Cette contradiction frappante entre ce qui est et ce qui devrait être, peut, si je ne me trompe, s'expliquer d'une manière très-simple. Les sujets compliqués et vraiment difficiles ne sauraient être compris et ne sont presque jamais étudiés que par les naturalistes ... Il en est tout autrement des questions plus faciles: les personnes même les plus étrangères en sciences, se croient compétentes pour les traiter et prononcer sur elles, et de là vient que les erreurs les plus grossières de voyageurs ignorants et crédules, quelquefois même des allégories et des fables poétiques, sont admises sans critique et placées sans hésitation au rang des faits. C'est précisément ce qui a eu lieu pour l'histoire des géants et des nains ... L'étude de ces êtres anomaux est aussi facile que curieuse, et il semble même presque impossible de se tromper à leur égard, tant qu'on se renferme dans les limites de l'observation, car, les observer, c'est presque uniquement les mesurer<sup>43</sup>.*

In Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire's terms, one could say that the "Aztec children" were "accessible to observation" and, thus, turned into objects of scientific inquiry. Daston, building on Bachelard, contrasted the "quotidian objects" - "the solid, obvious, sharply outlined, in the way things of quotidian experience" - with the elusive nature of scientific objects<sup>44</sup>. The story of the "Aztec children" shows how scientific objects emerged in a trajectory that incorporated everyday things and even falsehoods. The "Aztec children" became embedded in a system that included literature, illustrations, entertainment, and the press, blurring their biographies and their history as objects of barter. And thus, they became "easy to observe" for the public and for scientists. Yet - as the articles in *Household Words* reflect - the "Aztec Children" were also a mirror of Victorian society. If Lilliput served Jonathan Swift to mock his contemporaries' vices and ridiculous conventions, the Aztec Lilliputians reflected the "astonishing excess of credulity" of Charles Dickens's age. In the exploitation of these children, one observes not only the racist gaze towards Latin America, but also

the manipulation of thousands of European and American people, including the upper classes. When the circus impresarios credited their success to the fact that “there is one born every minute,” they did not refer to the freaks and monsters they recruited or bought in asylums or from poor families. Indeed, they were referring to the audiences that were willing to pay to see the frauds and false stories they created and propagated all over the world.

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2. *A Mysterious City.* Household Words 1851; 7: 189-193. Cf. ALTICK R., *The Shows of London.* Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1978. The

### *The Aztec Children*

- articles on the Aztec children published in “Household Words” (HW) were written by the hygienist and man of letters Henry Morley (1822-1894) and the journalist William Henry Mills (1810-1880), subeditor of HW. “Household words” was a two-penny miscellany of “instruction and entertainment,” a family journal for a middle class audience. The journal was designed also to add to the discussion of the most important social questions of the time. HW espoused the cause of the poor and the working classes. HW was extremely popular: it had a sale of some forty thousand copies a week. Cf. LOHRLI A., *Household Words. A Weekly Journal 1850-1859 Conducted by Charles Dickens*. Table of Contents, list of contributors and their contributions based on the Household Words Office Book in the Morris L. Parrish Collection of Victorian Novelists, Princeton University Library. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1975; in particular the introduction and the biographies of Morley and Mills.
3. *The Aztec Children*. Buchanan’s Journal of Man 1851; 3, 6: 1-22; *Memoir of an Eventful Expedition in Central America: Resulting in the Discovery of the Idolatrous city of Iximaya, in an Unexplored Region, and the Possession of two Remarkable Aztec Children, Descendants and Specimens of the Sacerdotal Caste (now nearly Extinct,) of the Ancient Aztec Founders of the Ruined Temples of that Country, Described by John L. Stevens, Esq., and other Travelers*. New York, Applegate, 1850.
  4. GEOFFROY SAINT-HILAIRE I., *Histoire générale et particulière des anomalies de l’organisation chez les hommes et les animaux. Ouvrage comprenant des recherches sur les caractères, la classification, l’influence physiologique et pathologiques, les rapports généraux, les lois et les causes des monstruosités, variétés et vices de conformation, ou Traité de Tératologie*. Vol. 1. Brussels, Encyclographique, 1837.
  5. WARREN J. M., *An Account of Two Remarkable Indian Dwarfs Exhibited in Boston under the name of Aztec Children*. The American Journal for the Medical Sciences 1851: 293. Cf. GEOFFROY SAINT HILAIRE, ref. 4, p. 54.
  6. Some contemporaries may ask why these children were called Aztec and not Maya, when they were constantly compared with the depictions taken from the Maya ruins. It is worth remembering that in the past twenty years, it has become clear that the term *Maya* is a twentieth-century construct. Cf. RESTALL M., *Maya Ethnogenesis*. The Journal of Latin American Anthropology 2004; 9 (1): 64-89; RUGELEY T., *Rebellion Now and Forever. Mayas, Hispanics, and Caste War Violence in Yucatán, 1800-1880*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2009.
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8. The “classic” work is OGDAN R., *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1990. See also QURESHI S., *Peoples on Parade: Exhibitions, Empire, and Anthropology in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2011; AGUIRRE R., *Informal Empire: Mexico and Central America in Victorian Culture*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2004. The literature on the “Aztec Children” is copious. Spanish anthropologist Juan Comas was one of the first to collect scientific papers on them. Exiled in Mexico after the Spanish Civil War, he published COMAS J., *Dos microcéfalos aztecas. Leyenda, historia y Antropología*. Mexico, UNAM, 1968. See also GORBACH F., *El monstruo, objeto imposible, Un estudio sobre teratología Mexicana*. Mexico, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2008.
9. *Lilliput in London*. Household Words 1853; 21: 174.
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*The Aztec Children*

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22. Cf. PODGORNY I., *The Reliability of the Ruins*. Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies 2007; 8, 2: 213-33; EAD., "Silent and Alone." *How the Ruins of Palenque Were Taught to Speak the Language of Archaeology*. In: LOZNY L. (ed.), *Comparative Archaeologies: A Sociological View of the Science of the Past*. New York, Springer, 2011, pp. 527-554.
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30. Cf. REIMERS J.W., *Catalogue of J. W. Reimers Gallery of all Nations and Anatomical Museum. Saville House, Leicester Square, London*. Leeds, Jackson and Asquith, 1853; *Life of the Living Aztec Children*, ref. 1; *Illustrierte Denkschrift einer wichtigen Expedition in Central-Amerika, aus der die Entdeckung der Götzenstadt Iximaya in einer ganz unbekanntem Gegend hervorgeht; und der Besitz von zwei merkwürdigen Azteken-Kindern, Maximo (der Mann) und Bartola (das Weibchen)*. Berlin, Ernst Kühn, 1860.
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36. HAMY E., ref. 16, p. 71.
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38. The different enterprises created to exhibit the Aztecs were short-lived, and the partnerships continuously dissolved.
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42. In 1884, a collector of Barnum's memorabilia added a newspaper clipping to his exemplar of *Life of the living Aztec Children*: "Speaking of the return of Gen. Henry S. Taylor, who has been visiting the insane asylums of Ohio in company with Superintendent Gundry, of a Maryland asylum, the Baltimore American says that he found in the idiotic department of one of them the two children who for many years traveled with Barnum's circus as the great and only genuine Aztec children. He was told that the pseudo Aztecs were idiots, who before Barnum got them, were in the idiotic department of one of the Ohio asylums, and after they no longer proved a curiosity were returned". In: *Life of the Living Aztec Children*. McCaddon Collection, Box 50, Folder 5, *An Illustrated Guide Book to Barnum's American Museum, Princeton Library*.
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