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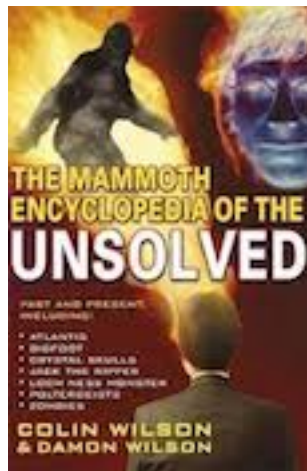
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Wilson, C., & Wilson, D. (2000). The skull of doom. *The mammoth encyclopedia of the unsolved*. London: Constable & Robson.

The Skull of Doom

The Strange Tale of the Crystal Skull

For the past twenty years the weirdest gem in the world has belonged to a lady who keeps it on a velvet cloth on a sideboard in her house. It is a fearsome skull, weighing 11 pounds 7 ounces (5.19 kilograms), carved of pure quartz crystal, and its owner believes it comes from a lost civilization. Its eyes are prisms and it is said, the future appears in them. It has been called the “skull of doom”.

That passage from Arthur C. Clarke’s television series “Mysterious World” may serve as an introduction to one of the most interesting mysteries of the twentieth century. The skull belonged to an explorer and adventurer named Albert (“Mike”) Mitchell-Hedges, born in 1882. On his death in 1959 it passed into the possession of his ward, Anna Mitchell-Hedges, born in 1910, who claimed to have discovered it in a “lost city” in South America – the Mayan city of Lubaantun, in British Honduras. According to her own account: “I did see the skull first – or I saw something shining and called my father – it was his expedition, and we all helped to carefully move the stones. [Lubaantun means ‘place of fallen stones’.] I was let pick it up because I had seen it first”. It was found, apparently, underneath the altar in the ruins of a Mayan temple. The date she gives – 1924 – conflicts with an earlier account in which she is said to have discovered it on her seventeenth birthday, which would have been three years later. What she found was the upper part of the skull; the jaw, she says, was found three months later under rubble twenty-five feet away.

Mitchell-Hedges, according to Anna, felt that the skull belonged to the local Indians, descendants of the ancient Mayas, and he gave it to them. But

when he prepared to leave for England in the rainy season of 1927, the grateful Indians returned it to him as a present for his kindness to them.

The ancient Mayas are themselves something of a mystery. Their earliest history seems to date back to 1500 BC, but their great “classic” period extends roughly from AD 700 to 900. During this period they developed a high level of civilization, with writing, sophisticated mathematics, a calendar, and impressive sculptures. Then, with startling suddenness, Mayan civilization collapsed – no one knows why. Disease and earthquakes have been suggested, yet there is no evidence for either. Neither is there evidence of violence. It seems that the Mayas simply abandoned their cities and melted away into remote places. And their great civilization reverted to a far more primitive level. Their partially deciphered writings offer no clue to the mystery.

Mitchell-Hedges believed that there was a connection between the Mayas and the legendary continent of Atlantis, which is said to have vanished beneath the waves of the Atlantic Ocean in prehistoric times. Another explorer, Colonel Percy Fawcett, believed that he had evidence that survivors from Atlantis had reached South America and that the evidence lay in Brazil. Fawcett vanished without a trace on an expedition to Brazil in 1924. Mitchell-Hedges believed that the survivors had come ashore farther north, in the Yucatán Peninsula of Central America, and one of the objects of his expedition to Honduras was to look for proof of this theory. He never found it, but he *did* find clues to the lost treasures of Sir Henry Morgan, a pirate who had captured Panama (with considerable brutality) in the seventeenth century.

What, in fact, do we know about the “skull of doom”? Remarkably little. It is made from a single block of rock crystal, or clear quartz. Mitchell-Hedges declared that it was probably 3,600 years old, but that would take it back a thousand years before the earliest date suggested for the Mayas. He also suggested that it must have taken 150 years to create, by the grinding and polishing of rock with sand. In *Chariots of the Gods?* Erich von Däniken has (predictably) taken an even bolder line, explaining (mistakenly) that “nowhere on the skull is there a clue showing that a tool known to us was used!” and suggesting that it was created by the “Ancient Astronauts” who (according to von Däniken) built the Great Pyramid. A modern crystal expert, Frank Dorland, has said that he could make a similar skull in three years, but that would be with the aid of modern technology.

Inevitably, the experts are divided on the subject of the skull's origin. Most seem to agree that it was probably carved in Mexico, from rock crystal found in Mexico or Calaveras County, California, and that it could have been manufactured in the past five hundred years. But if that date is correct, then it runs counter to the claim of Mitchell-Hedges that it was found in a Mayan temple that had been abandoned for a thousand years. The Aztecs – the likeliest manufacturers of the skull – founded their capital, Tenochtitlan, around AD 1325.

Regrettably, this is also the view of practically everybody who has looked into the matter. Mike Mitchell-Hedges was undoubtedly a very remarkable man, and Anna's total devotion to him is understandable. When he met her in Toronto in 1917, she was a seven-year-old orphan by the name of Anna Le Guillon and was in the charge of some men who intended to put her into an orphanage. Mitchell-Hedges was touched by her plight and adopted her, a decision, as she later said, that neither of them had reason to regret.

But for all his kindness and erratic brilliance as an explorer, Mitchell-Hedges was not another Captain Scott or Colonel Fawcett; his character was altogether closer to that of the swashbuckling Sir Henry Morgan. He was a man with a keen sense of humor, and he enjoyed telling – and even printing – tongue in cheek tall stories. His life of adventure was inspired by his childhood reading of Rider Haggard stories and Arthur Conan Doyle's *Lost World*, and his own books – with titles like *Land of Wonder and Fear* and *Battles with Giant Fish* – reflect the character of a man who was, in some respects, an overgrown schoolboy. He was not so much a liar as an Elizabethan adventurer born out of his time.

It has been suggested that Mitchell-Hedges brought the crystal skull from London to Lubaantun and “planted” it under the altar for his adopted daughter to find on her seventeenth (or fourteenth) birthday, something of which he would have been perfectly capable.

Yet his autobiography, *Danger My Ally* (1954), suggests that all was not as straightforward as Anna's account suggests. You would expect a man who had made such an important find to describe it in some detail; instead, he dismisses it in a few lines, explaining; “How the skull came into my possession I have reason for not revealing”. But why not, if Anna's story about its discovery is accurate? After all, it would reflect credit on his adopted daughter. He also describes at length far less important artifacts he found in Lubaantun. Stranger still, he has removed *all* reference to the skull

from the American edition of the book. There can be only one reason for this: he does not want to be caught in a lie but is still not willing to tell the truth.

Anna Mitchell-Hedges stuck firmly to the Lubaantun story. *Daily Express* journalist Donald Seaman has described how he heard it directly from her own lips. In 1962 Seaman, who was writing a book about espionage, came upon a photograph of the recently convicted spy Gordon Lonsdale that showed him posing with two middle-aged women. Careful research revealed that one of the women was Anna Mitchell-Hedges. Curious to know what she was doing with a spy, Seaman contacted her at her home in Reading and went to see her, accompanied by photographer Robert Girling.

Anna Mitchell-Hedges proved to be a stout, formidable-looking woman in her fifties, and when they arrived she was still attired in her dressing gown. The story behind the photograph proved to be innocent enough; it had been taken at a historic castle, where she and her friend had fallen into conversation with the man who later proved to be at the centre of the Portland spy case; a passing commercial photographer had snapped them, extracted payment from Anna Mitchell-Hedges, and later forwarded the photograph to her. She hadn't seen Lonsdale since that time.

Perhaps feeling guilty that she had brought them to Reading on a wild goose chase, she asked them if they would like to see the "skull of doom". Neither had ever heard of it, but they politely said yes. She asked them to follow her and led them to the master bedroom, where she groped around under the bed. Seaman, who was expecting to see an object the size of an egg, was surprised when she brought out something that might have been a large cabbage, wrapped in newspapers. They accompanied her back to the sitting room, where she unwrapped it on the table.

Both Seaman and Girling stared with amazement at the magnificent and bizarre object that lay on the table. The life-size human skull seemed to be made of polished diamond – in the dim light it had a greenish hue, as if lit from the inside or from underneath. Its lower jaw moved like that of a human jaw, adding a gruesome touch of realism. They agreed later that neither had seen anything at once so beautiful and so oddly disquieting. This, Anna Mitchell-Hedges told them, was the "skull of doom", found in a Mayan temple in 1927. It had received its nickname from the local natives, who were convinced that it had magical powers and should be treated with the respect due to a supernatural being. It had become the focus of a number of legends about people who encountered misfortune after showing it insufficient

respect.

She went on to tell them that in 1927 her father had been looking for the treasure buried by the pirate Henry Morgan in 1671. They had learned that in the area of the Mayan city of Lubaantun, in British Honduras, natives had names like Hawkins and Morgan. Her father was also convinced that the remains of the lost civilization of Atlantis were in the same area. But the skull was the only ancient artifact he had found.

Now that her father was dead (he died in 1959), Anna wanted to return to Honduras to look for the treasure, and in order to raise the money, she was willing to sell the skull, as well as a drinking mug that had been presented to King Charles II by Nell Gwyn (and that had been authenticated by scholars).

“How much is the skull worth?” asked Seaman.

“Probably about a quarter of a million”.

“My God! Aren’t you afraid to keep it in the house?”

“I think I could deal with any burglars”. Anna Mitchell-Hedges opened her dressing gown, and revealed a Colt 45 revolver strapped to her waist.

There was some talk about the possibility of the *Daily Express* helping to finance the expedition to Lubaantun and allowing Seaman to go along to report on it. To his great regret, the proposal was turned down by the editor. But Donald Seaman has never forgotten that menacingly beautiful object that seemed to glow with its own light.

But, as we have seen, the Lubaantun story remains dubious. Norman Hammond, an archaeologist who also excavated Lubaantun, failed to mention the crystal skull in his book on Lubaantun, and he explained to Joe Nickell, a skeptical investigator (who figures in the introduction to this book) that this was because the crystal skull had nothing to do with the site. “Rock crystal is not found naturally in the Maya area” he writes and goes on to mention that the nearest places where it has been found are Oaxaca, in southern Mexico, and the Valley of Mexico, where some other small crystal skulls – of Aztec manufacture – have been found. He adds that as far as the documentary evidence shows, Anna Mitchell-Hedges was never in Lubaantun. This seems to be verified by others on the expedition. (Hammond is also on record as saying, “I have always thought that it is most likely a *memento mori* [something designed to remind us that we must all die] of sixteenth- to eighteenth-century origin. While a Renaissance origin is not improbable, given the sheer size of the rock crystal block involved, manufacture in Quing-dynasty China for a European client cannot be ruled out”.)

When we learn that Mitchell-Hedges himself was caught in a lie – his assertion that he served with the Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa and fought at the Battle of Laredo – and that he lost a libel suit against the *Daily Express*, which claimed in 1928 that he had staged a fake robbery for the sake of publicity, it begins to look as if the whole crystal skull story must be dismissed as pure invention. In fact, the first reference to the skull occurs in a journal entitled “Man – A Monthly Record of Anthropological Science” in 1936, in which two experts compare the skull with another in the British Museum and refer to the former as “the Burney skull”.

The Burney referred to is Sydney Burney, an art dealer, and Sotheby’s records show that he put the skull up for auction in late 1943; but since no one bid more than £340 for it, Burney decided to keep it. It was then, apparently, sold to Mitchell-Hedges in 1944 for £400.

When Nickell asked Anna Mitchell-Hedges about this story, he was told that Mitchell-Hedges had left the skull with Burney as security for a loan to finance an expedition and that Burney had no right to offer it for sale. But there is not a scrap of evidence to prove that the skull was in the possession of Mitchell-Hedges before 1944. Moreover, a letter from Sydney Burney, dated 21 March 1933 to someone at the American Museum of Natural History declares that before he (Burney) became its owner, the skull had been in the possession of the collector from whom Burney bought it, and before that, in the collection of an Englishman.

So it would seem almost certain that Mitchell-Hedges invented his story of finding the skull in a Mayan temple and that his daughter has continued to support this false version out of an understandable sense of gratitude and loyalty to her adopted father. Presumably this also applies to Mitchell-Hedges’s claim that the skull had been used to “will someone to death” (Anna Mitchell-Hedges explained that this should be regarded as an expression of his sense of humor) and to various other claims about the skull’s supernatural powers – like the newspaper report of a cameraman who fled in terror from the darkroom when his enlarging bulb exploded as he was trying to enlarge a photograph of the skull.

It all sounds rather disappointing – particularly when we learn that traces of “mechanical grinding” have been found on the teeth. The consensus seems to be that the “mystery” surrounding the “skull of doom” is a hoax.

Yet such a view would be premature. To begin with, the other – and far less “perfect” – crystal skull, which is in possession of the British Museum

(and sits at the top of the stairs in the Museum of Man, near Piccadilly Circus in London), is generally accepted as genuine, and it also shows traces of mechanical grinding. The Mexican Indians used a grinding wheel driven by a string stretched across a bow. It seems relatively certain that both skulls originated in Mexico. The Museum of Man skull was bought at Tiffany's, the New York jeweler, in 1898 and cost £120.

In 1963 Anna Mitchell-Hedges allowed the aforementioned scholar and crystal expert, Frank Dorland, to borrow the skull and take it to California for tests; he studied it for seven years. One of his most important conclusions was that the skull could well be as old as twelve thousand years, although more recent work has undoubtedly been done on it. Dorland sent the skull to the laboratory of the Hewlett-Packard Electronics company, which manufactures crystal oscillators. They suggested that the skull had taken a very long time to manufacture – perhaps three hundred years (twice as long as Mitchell-Hedges's estimate.) If this is correct, then it seems probably – almost certain – that it was a religious object, created on the orders of priests and kept in a temple. In that case, its purpose would be connected with divination. It would be kept on an altar – probably covered up (like the crystal balls of clairvoyants) – and exposed for certain ceremonies, probably lit from underneath.

Dorland also reported that he was told by friends of Mitchell-Hedges that the skull was brought back from the Holy Land by the Knights Templars during the Crusades and that it was kept in their Inner Sanctum in London until it finally found its way on to the antiques market.

This is in many ways more plausible than the Mayan temple story. The Templars, founded in 1118 by Hugh de Payens of Champagne, was a religious order whose members swore to devote their lives to the defense of the Holy Land and its Christian pilgrims. Their success was extraordinary and their wealth became legendary. This led to their downfall, for their money was coveted by King Philip IV of France, who organized a mass arrest of Templars on 13 October 1307. They were accused of black magic, of blasphemy, of renouncing Christ, and of sexual perversions. One of the major accusations was that they worshiped the demon Baphomet in the form of a stuffed head *or a human skull* and that the cords they wore around their robes were hallowed by being wrapped around this skull.

Some of the lesser accusations against the Templars are acknowledged to be true by scholars, among them the belief that they practiced ritual magic.

Hundreds of Templars were executed; yet the king never succeeded in laying his hands on their fabled “treasures”. Nothing seems less likely than that the “skull” worshiped by the Templars was an ordinary human skull, and the Mitchell-Hedges skull would certainly be a perfect candidate for the mysterious talisman.

And what of its “mystical” properties? Anna Mitchell-Hedges declared that Adrian Conan Doyle, son of Arthur, was unable to bear the skull and disliked even being in the same room with it. She said he could tell when it was around, even when it was not visible. Such assertions as these are usually dismissed as typical attempts at legend building. But Frank Dorland himself concluded, after seven years of contact with the skull, that it had mystical properties. He described hearing sounds of “high-pitched silver bells, very quiet but very noticeable” and sounds like an “a capella choir”. And staring into the skull, he saw images of “other skulls, high mountains, fingers and faces”. He stated that the first night he kept the skull in his house, he heard the sound of prowling jungle cats.

This, of course, could be pure autosuggestion. But what happened after a visit from “satanist” Anton LaVey could not be dismissed in this way. LaVey called on Dorland with the editor of an Oakland newspaper; he claimed that the skull was created by Satan and was thus the property of his church. (LaVey has a keen sense of humor as well as of publicity.) LaVey ended by playing at some length on Dorland’s organ, so that when he left, it was too late to return the skull to the safe deposit box where it was kept. That night, once again, there were many strange sounds that kept Dorland and his wife awake. But when they got up to investigate, they found nothing. The next morning they found that many of their belongings had been displaced, and a crystal rod used as a telephone dialer had leapt thirty-five feet to the front door.

Dorland’s theory is not that the skull itself possesses a “spirit” (or poltergeist) but that it had absorbed something from LaVey’s presence – that perhaps La Vey’s “vibes” and those of the skull conflicted, producing physical effects. This theory is not as farfetched as it sounds. Clairvoyants use crystals because they claim they can absorb living energies; they keep them covered with black velvet because these energies escape when exposed to daylight. Since the time of the oldest known magical beliefs, crystals have been held in special esteem because of their powers.

Oddly enough, there is now some kind of scientific backing for this notion.

For a decade or more the biologist Rupert Sheldrake has been arguing that learning among human beings and animals is “transmitted” by a process that he calls *morphic resonance*. The most famous story illustrating this process is of the monkeys on Kojima Island, off the coast of Japan, that learned to wash their potatoes in the sea because the salt improved the taste; subsequently, asserts zoologist Lyall Watson (in *Lifetide*), monkeys on other islands, with no connection with the original group, began doing the same thing. Morphic resonance might thus be regarded as a kind of telepathy, and Sheldrake believes that it plays an active part in evolution.

The strange thing is that this phenomenon applies not only to living creatures but to crystals as well. Some new chemicals are extremely difficult to crystallize in the laboratory. But once they have been crystallized anywhere in the world, the process suddenly becomes faster in all laboratories. At first it was suspected that this was because scientists were carrying traces of the crystal in their hair or clothes when they visited other laboratories; but this theory had to be discounted. It seems that crystals, like living creatures, can “learn” by morphic resonance. So the notion that they can absorb living energies and radiate them again is less outlandish than it seems.

It seems probable that we shall never know the truth about the “skull of doom”, but its resemblance to the British Museum skull suggests that it was probably of Aztec manufacture. What we know of the Aztecs – and their religion of human sacrifice – suggests that it was created as some kind of religious object, possibly used for scrying (short for *descrying*) – that is, for purposes of divination, as a modern clairvoyant uses a crystal ball. But for whatever purpose it was created, most of those who have seen it seem to agree that it is one of the most beautiful man-made objects in the world.