

## Time



Antonio de León y Gama (1735-1802).  
*Descripcion histórica y cronológica de las dos piedras  
que con ocasion del nueve empedrado que se está  
formando en la plaza principal  
de Mexico & Mexico City:*  
Felipe de Zúñiga y Ontiveros, 1792

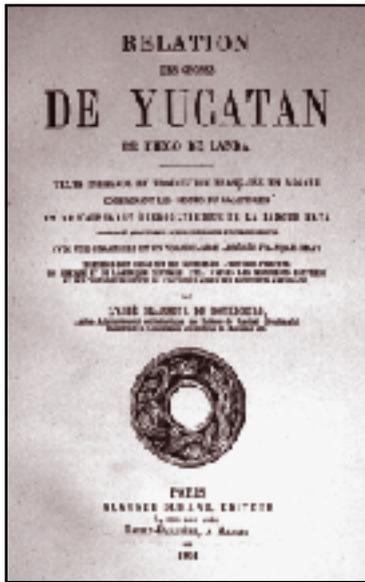
Diego de Landa (1529-1579).  
*Relation des choses de Yucatan.*  
Ed. & trans. by Brasseur de Bourbourg.  
Paris: Auguste Durand, 1864.

Few cultural artifacts were as interesting to sixteenth-century missionaries as the calendrical systems of the Indians. They were because, for Spanish and Indians alike, time was sacred, and indigenous calendars—like their Spanish equivalents—were calibrated to religious observances. To understand the calendrical system of the Indians was to understand their pagan liturgical cycles, if not the substance of their religion itself. For missionaries attempting to Christianize the Indians, this knowledge was particularly important since it could prove invaluable in deciphering the ways in which pagan traditions survived into a nominally Christian present. Understanding the calendar thus gave missionaries the ability to sort out sacred from profane rituals as well as to understand the ways in which the Indians sought to reconcile their traditional calendar with their changed circumstances.

Much of what is known today about the rich traditions of the Aztecs and the Mayas stems directly from the zealous labors of sixteenth-century missionaries. They observed, conversed, read, distilled, recorded, translated. But most of their efforts were unknown outside a small circle of contemporaries, remaining unpublished until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. That they survived so long in manuscript is almost as remarkable as the labor itself. But then again, these are works of careful, informed scholarship, and as such they held their own claims on Spanish and mestizo society. In a certain sense, the missionaries who compiled these ethnographic guides were doing what their brethren in Europe did as a part of their vocations: they were being good antiquarians, digging deeply into the material minutiae of ancient civilizations, seeking to unearth as much they could for the present and the future. Like the material remains of Greek and Roman civilization during the Renaissance, the legacies of the Aztecs and the Maya became objects of intense interest.

Landa is a curious figure. It is often asserted that 99% of what we know about Maya culture is contained in Landa's account. However, it is also the case that this most zealous of Franciscans probably destroyed more—much more—Maya culture than he preserved. In fact, if he had not run afoul of powerful interests in the Yucatan, he probably would have destroyed even more than he actually did!

Unlike Franciscans earlier in the sixteenth century, Landa was no friend of the Indians. He saw in the Maya around him not simple converts to the true faith but duplicitous idolaters unable to surrender their attachments to a pagan past. As Franciscan Provincial in the Yucatan, Landa set out to unveil and then eradicate all vestiges of paganism from the Indians. To do this, he needed to understand better the ways in which the old forms and ceremonies persisted and were being melded with Christian rites and beliefs. Thus, he brought in the suspects for interrogation and began compiling, in effect, a dossier. He instituted an



Inquisition, relied on torture, and, in a spectacular auto da fé, destroyed thousands of idols. For his troubles, he was upbraided by his superiors, accused of various crimes, and sent back to Spain to defend himself. It was there, in Spain, that he wrote the manuscript of the *Relacion*, probably for the benefit of future missionaries to the Yucatan. The heart of the manuscript consists of Landa's long descriptions of the Maya calendar together with Mayan glyphs.

The original manuscript has been lost. There survives solely an abstract of it, which was found and published in the nineteenth century by the French historian Brasseur de Bourbourg. This is its first edition.

Juan de Tovar (1540-?).  
 “Historia de los indios Mexicanos. [and]  
 The Tovar Calendar.”  
 Manuscripts in Spanish.  
 Spain and England, 1830-60.



The origins and history of Juan de Tovar's important manuscripts are tangled. Sixteenth-century contemporaries knew this humble Jesuit as the Mexican Cicero. His eloquence was as renowned as his prowess in mastering indigenous languages. He was indefatigably curious and industrious. Thus, when the Vice Regent asked him to write an account of the ancient Mexicans that he could take back to court with him, Tovar was only too happy to oblige. With characteristic thoroughness, he compiled a substantial history which, in turn, fellow Jesuit José de Acosta used freely and openly in his own history of the Indies. Unfortunately, that manuscript does not survive, but an abstract of it does, a copy of which is displayed here. Along with the brief version, almost certainly made by Tovar himself, was a magnificent Mexican calendar executed by Aztec artists. The calendar is important for the witness it bears to the process of religious syncretism that occurred in sixteenth-century Mexico. It attempts to amalgamate the sacred Aztec calendar with Christian saints' days. Thus, in its own striking way, this beautiful calendar confirms the worst suspicions of clerics like Landa.

The original manuscript as well as the calendar was once the property of the famous nineteenth-century collector, Sir Thomas Phillipps. They are now in the John Carter Brown Library. However, the present examples are also from the Phillipps collection. The manuscript was transcribed by “Elizth. Lady Phillipps 1860 from the unique original in the library of Sir Thos Phillipps, Bart. at Middle Hill 1862.” And it is possible that the calendar was acquired from Lord Kingsborough, whose library Phillipps had bought earlier.

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*(see Illustration on page 33)*

If the great works from the sixteenth century on Aztec and Mayan cultures remained hidden until relatively recently, there were other avenues into the sacred universe of ancient peoples. In 1790, while digging up the zócalo of Mexico City as part of a major drainage project, workmen discovered some amazing stones that were thought to relate to the Aztec calendar. The discovery of these antiquities coincided with a rising crescendo of Mexican nationalism whose goal was independence from Spain. That the stones did not really concern the calendar is perhaps less important than the great symbolic value they had for the restless mestizo population. They became nothing less than epitomes of the cultural sophistication of the Aztecs, icons to hurl back at the Spanish. As Don Antonio de León y Gama describes them, the stones are works of art and genius on a par with any European creations. Archeology and national identity are a potent combination.

