

Chapter 5. The Landa Conundrum¹

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“**T**he Indians of all Yucatan felt his death so greatly, that they not only showed it with tears, but wished to remain lamenting it forever.” So wrote Fray Bernardo de Lizana in the 1620s of the Maya reaction to the death of his fellow Franciscan, Fray Diego de Landa, some three decades earlier.² Lizana surely intended no irony, but it is difficult for us to hear such words without also thinking of the Landa-led campaign of torture during the summer of 1562—when thousands of Maya men and women were interrogated under torment, hundreds dying as a result. Yet Lizana’s claim was not an invention; it simply told but half of the story.³

A mere five years after the violent 1562 campaign, a group of Maya noblemen wrote to the king of Spain that they owed their conversion to Christianity—their very salvation—to Landa’s “great benevolence [*tibilil*] and his

1. I am grateful to the volume editors for inviting me to participate in the symposium, “The Franciscans in Mexico: Five Centuries of Cultural Influence,” at the Mexican Cultural Institute (Washington, DC) in October 2017, and for including this brief essay in the current volume, and for their insightful notes on the draft version; to symposium participants for their comments; and to Traci Ardren, John Chuchiak, and Amara Solari for permitting me to use sentences that may end up as co-authored material in our forthcoming volume, *The Friar and the Maya: Diego de Landa’s Account of the Things of Yucatan* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado).

2. “Los indios de todo Yucatán sintieron tanto su muerte, que no sólo lo mostraron con lágrimas, mas quisieron quedarse en lamentaciones perpetuas,” in Fray Bernardo de Lizana, *Historia de Yucatán, Devocionario de Nuestra Señora de Izamal y conquista espiritual* [1633] (Mexico City: Museo Nacional, 1893).

3. France V. Scholes and Eleanor B. Adams, eds., *Don Diego Quijada, Alcalde Mayor de Yucatán, 1561–1565*, 2 vols. (Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1938); France V. Scholes and Ralph L. Roys, “Fray Diego de Landa and the Problem of Idolatry in Yucatan,” in *Cooperation in Research* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution, 1938), 585–620; Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517–1570*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1987] 2003); Matthew Restall, *Maya Conquistador* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998); John F. Chuchiak, “In Servitio Dei: Fray Diego de Landa, the Franciscan Order, and the Return of the Extirpation of Idolatry in the Colonial Diocese of Yucatán, 1573–1579,” *The Americas* 61, no. 4 (April 2005), 611–45.

goodness [*utziil*].” Yet others wrote in the very same year that just hearing Landa’s name “causes our entrails to revolt.”⁴ Thus did Landa’s Maya parishioners unwittingly evoke the friar-bishop’s paradoxical reputation, whereby five centuries later he would remain both the most famous—and yet also the most infamous—of all the Franciscans, perhaps even of all the Spaniards, who came to Yucatan to proselytize, rule, and settle beside the Maya.

Of these competing opinions and opposite reputations, pithily summarized by the Maya petitioners of 1567 as “great benevolence” versus “great cruelty,” the former—not surprisingly—predominated during the three centuries of Spanish colonial rule in Yucatan. In the modern era, the cruel Landa triumphed, but that negative reputation never completely eclipsed the positive one. In the skilled hands of a historian such as the late Inga Clendinnen, an evocative portrayal of Landa emerged with the friar above all else as an inquisitor, utterly convinced of his own righteousness and divine mandate to torture Maya people in order to save them.

Clendinnen also imagined that for Landa, his 1562 campaign to extirpate idolatry in Yucatan had a personal dimension. She argued that between his arrival in the newly founded province in 1549 and his appointment as provincial of the Franciscans in Guatemala and Yucatan in 1561, Landa developed genuine friendships with Maya leaders that were possibly “the most emotionally rewarding of his life.” Thus, his apparent discovery of “their secret persistence in idolatry” struck him as a profound and personal betrayal, for which the friar “proceeded to punish them, and to strive to wrench the last root of opposition out of them.”⁵

Clendinnen’s interpretation may be problematic in some ways, but it is significant for its subtleties and it rightly remains at the heart of academic discussion over Landa’s legacy. However, her nuances have tended to be lost in the popular imagination. Over the past century—which roughly coincides with the growth of Mayanist studies and the Mexican Revolution’s encouragement of a romantic view of the ancient Indigenous past—the popular view of Landa has been bluntly negative. This can be seen in various literary and artistic genres, including portraits of Landa. Such paintings tend to use the infamous book burning of 1562 as the favored visual trope for his image as

4. Restall, *Maya Conquistador*, 151–68; Maya phrases that I translated appear on pages 157 and 167.

5. Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests*, 123. In my view, Clendinnen tends to sympathize too much with Landa. As she herself admits, he clearly manufactured evidence that recidivist Maya had committed human sacrifice, in order to justify to Francisco de Toral (the newly arrived bishop) his campaign and its brutality (88–92, 124–26). Maya noblemen surely perceived Landa’s true nature, understanding him to be a dangerous and duplicitous manifestation of a protracted invasion, one with whom genuine friendship was impossible.



Figure 1. Landa burning Maya books and religious statues (or “idols”) in 1562, as painted by Fernando Castro Pacheco. Palacio de Gobierno, Mérida, 1970s.

the bringer of hellfire to the Maya.⁶ The best known of these—the painting has been on public display in the Palacio de Gobierno in central Mérida since it was created in the 1970s—is by Fernando Castro Pacheco (see Figure 1). The friar’s face, grim and unflinching, is a mask of determined cruelty as he throws codices and effigies on the fire.

The cruel, iconoclastic Landa also features in a cluster of literary genres. In poems, novels, and even guidebooks, he is a colonialist caricature. A particularly vivid example is a 1999 novel by Rikki Ducornet, titled *The Fan-Maker’s Inquisition*, in which Landa is seen as a fitting subject for a book by the Marquis de Sade, who is fascinated by what is presented as the fear-driven perversity of the Inquisitor. Tainted by the Spanish-Inquisition stereotypes of the Black Legend, Landa becomes even more twisted than the marquis after whom sadism is named. Ducornet’s semi-fictional Landa is never a proselytizer and writer, but only a destroyer and purifier. The burning of books and the

6. See, for example, the 2007 painting by Leonardo Paz, chosen to illustrate the Wikipedia entry on Landa and a prominent section titled, “Inquisition: Suppression of Maya” (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diego_de_Landa; accessed August 2017 and June 2018).

execution of Maya become one: "So great was the stench of burning flesh, of deerskin curling up like fingers."⁷

Few Mayanists can (or arguably should) write in the way of a novelist, but Ducornet's phrase evokes for scholars of the ancient Maya something of the agony that accompanies the contemplation of Landa's bonfire of codices. That act has made the friar a figure of loathing in modern academia. Yet those same detractors have for a century and a half treated Landa's writings as gospel, as a sort of bible on ancient Maya culture to be quoted and cited without thought for the purpose and context of those writings. Extant descriptions of Indigenous life in the era of Maya-Spanish contact are precious few, to be sure. Landa and his Franciscan colleagues in Yucatan apparently wrote much about the Maya and their mission among them, but none of it was published at the time and almost all of it is lost.⁸ The fact that most of the lone surviving Landa manuscript—the so-called *Relación* discussed below—describes Maya history, society, and culture shortly before and during contact makes it understandable that Mayanists have long treasured it as an invaluable source of ethnographic information. But the age-old paradox of Landa's reputation has thereby been perpetuated and deepened, creating what I call "the Landa conundrum."

The Landa conundrum is two layers deep. The first layer relates to his actions and the motivations behind them. The core question is: Was Landa a monster, or was he a brilliant if overly zealous product of his times? Was he a leering, racist sadist, or was his love for his Maya converts and parishioners a sincere and spiritual one, albeit the impatient and unforgiving affection of a Franciscan caught up in the millenarianism of the sixteenth century?

The second layer connects Landa's actions to his writings, specifically to his single surviving work—which modern scholars have consistently, but misleadingly, called a "book." It was not published in Landa's lifetime, but has

7. Rikki Ducornet, *The Fan-Maker's Inquisition: A Novel of the Marquis de Sade* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1999).

8. The earliest surviving *doctrinas* in Yucatec Maya date from ca. 1620. See William F. Hanks, *Converting Words: Maya in the Age of the Cross* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 242–76. Other late sixteenth-century writings by Franciscans in Yucatan survive in the form of seventeenth-century excerpts or copies, such as Diego López de Cogolludo, *Los tres siglos de la dominación española en Yucatán, o sea Historia de esta provincia* [1688], 2 vols. (Mérida, Yucatan: Manuel Aldana Rivas, 1867–1868); or as *informes* such as the so-called *Códice Franciscano* [1533–1569], published in the *Nueva Colección de Documentos para la Historia de México, Siglo XVI* (Mexico City: Editorial Salvador Chávez Hayhoe, 1941), 55–72. There are also letters and reports stored in archives; a handful of these have been published, including Francisco de Toral, *Avisos del Obispo Fr. Francisco de Toral* [1563], in France V. Scholes, Carlos Menéndez, J. Rubio Mañé, and Eleanor Adams, eds., *Documentos para la Historia de Yucatán* (Mérida, Yucatan: Compañía Tipográfica Yucateca, 1938, vol. 2), 25–34).

been available for the past one hundred and fifty years in numerous editions and languages, variously titled *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, *Relation des choses du Yucatan*, *Yucatan Before and After the Conquest*, and—most commonly in English—*Account of the Things of Yucatan*. The questions here, then, are: How could Landa write so fondly of the Maya while treating them so brutally? Why does his so-called "book" fail to justify the events of 1562? Why does it dismiss these events so coldly? Why did Landa write such a manuscript at all?

Solving the Conundrum: The Friars and the Maya

I suggest five "solutions" to the Landa conundrum, or five ways to approach the study of Landa's life and writings so as to better understand them. The five solutions are intertwined and overlapping.

The first solution involves a recalibration of our lens: we need to zoom both further in and further out. Let me explain. By narrowing our focus too tightly on Landa and his writings and actions, we create the illusion of Landa as an exception, thereby fostering the conundrum. At the same time, there is a tendency to zoom backward and attempt to place Landa either as a medieval figure or as an early or proto-ethnographer. (A similar debate has been conducted, but in far greater depth and detail, about Bernardino de Sahagún—and, to a lesser extent, about Bartolomé de las Casas.)⁹

The solution, I suggest, is to analyze Landa as a sixteenth-century figure, without pushing him back into the Middle Ages or pulling him forward into modern times—or even early modern times (meaning the period initiated by the intellectual upheaval of the seventeenth century). Landa lived fifty-five years in the middle of the sixteenth century (1524–1579), a time when almost the entire Franciscan order was swept up in a millenarian fervor, convinced that the conversion of the Indigenous peoples of the New World was the precursor to the Second Coming of Christ. Landa was not unique, but typical, in believing that his mission was ordained and urgent; he saw it as of his time, and he was right.

More specifically, Landa's missionary vision was influenced by the Franciscans who a generation earlier had initiated the conversion of Nahuas in central Mexico, such as that mission's founder, Fray Martín de Valencia. That meant a tripartite, simultaneous emphasis on (1) baptism; (2) two-way language learning (i.e., young Indigenous noblemen should be taught Spanish and Latin, while friars should learn Indigenous languages so as to better proselytize "the Indians" and to study the culture the Franciscans sought to erase);

9. As entry points into these substantial literatures, see, for instance, John F. Schwaller, ed., *Sahagún at 500: Essays on the Quincentenary of the Birth of Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún* (San Francisco: Academy of American Franciscan History, 2003); and Lawrence A. Clayton, *Bartolomé de las Casas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

and (3) destruction (of physical manifestations of Indigenous religion, such as temples, books, and effigies) and punishment (of backsliders).¹⁰

When viewed within the context of Franciscan ideology and practice in sixteenth-century New Spain, Landa's activities seem less contradictory. They seem even less so when compared to other sources, far less renowned than Landa's *Relación*, that lend insight into how Franciscans in Yucatan perceived their mission in the late sixteenth century. The so-called *Códice Franciscano*, for example, a mid-sixteenth century compendium surviving only in the form of a later copy of excerpts (like the *Relación*, but much shorter), is an *informe*, or a sort of friars' manual. Its emphases match many of Landa's own, such as separating noble and commoner parishioners for preaching and teaching, and building vast churches and convent complexes (so that "the ornament and splendor of the churches" can fully replace "the sumptuous temples" of the past). The *Códice* also notes that the Maya are "like children, and in order to be well governed[,] . . . should they fail or not take to the lesson, or commit a transgression, they should be punished with a half dozen lashes."¹¹

This is not to say that all Franciscans in early Yucatan shared Landa's views. As Martin Nesvig has warned, it is important not "to flatten the considerable ideological diversity of the order" in New Spain. Indeed, the province's first bishop, Francisco de Toral, stopped Landa's extirpation campaign, sent him back to Spain, spent 1563 conducting a *visita* of all the parishes, and wrote a set of *avisos* (notices) that heavily emphasized pedagogy over punishment. In Toral's vision of the mission, there is much rigor of teaching, ritual, and due process, but no violence.¹²

10. See a summary in Martin Austin Nesvig, *Forgotten Franciscans: Works from an Inquisitional Theorist, a Heretic, and an Inquisitional Deputy* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2011), 3–5. Classic works on the topic include John Leddy Phelan, *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970); José María Kobayashi, *La educación como conquista (empresa franciscana en México)* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1974); and George Baudot, *Utopia and History: The First Chroniclers of Mexican Civilization (1520–1569)* (Niwtot: University of Colorado Press, 1995). For a study of Franciscan millenarianism that ties the phenomenon to sixteenth-century Mexico, Yucatan, Landa, and the Maya, see Matthew Restall and Amara Solari, *The Maya Apocalypse and Its Western Roots* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2021).

11. *Códice Franciscano*, 58–59: "el ornato y aparato de las iglesias . . . sumptuosos templos . . . porque ellos son como niños, y para bien regirse . . . que en faltando o en no dando la lección, or en haciendo la travesura, luego los escarmientan con media docena azotes"; see also Hanks, *Converting Words*, 63–66.

12. Toral, *Avisos*; Nesvig, *Forgotten Franciscans*, 5. For a perspective on Toral's relationship with his Nahua parishioners in the 1540s and 1550s, see Camilla Townsend, *Annals of Native America: How the Nahuas of Colonial Mexico Kept Their History Alive* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 102–18.

Landa and Toral can therefore be best appreciated as individuals whose particular emphases represented variants within the Franciscan ideology of sixteenth-century Mexico and Yucatan. But, while Landa cannot be said to stand for all his fellow friars, his vision prevailed. As William Hanks concluded, Toral "failed obviously" and, denied his petition to be relieved of his post in 1566, lived long enough to see Landa replace him as bishop.¹³

For our second solution, we do not need to ponder Landa's putative sadism to understand how Indigenous peoples could be studied, valued, and protected, while at the same time being derided, abused, and murdered. That dichotomy had been at the heart of European reactions to the native New World population beginning in the 1490s. (It is, arguably, at the heart of Western colonialism in the Age of Empire.) Most obviously it took the form of the division of Caribbean islanders into two invented races, the "good Indians" (passive converts) and "bad Indians" (the cannibals or Caribs, who resisted conversion and colonization).¹⁴

But the dichotomy—of Indigenous peoples respected or abused, seen as good or bad—also functioned on a broader plane, being central to how Spaniards viewed and treated every ethnic group encountered in the Americas. For example, the Spaniards slaughtered and enslaved the Nahua by the tens—perhaps hundreds—of thousands, and yet admired and valued them, taught their nobles Latin, and (for a brief while, at least) considered ordaining Nahua to the priesthood. Nor do we need to stop with the Spaniards: the noble/ignoble, good/bad dichotomy extended to how Europeans and Euro-Americans have been seeing Indigenous peoples for centuries.¹⁵

To tackle this second aspect of the Landa conundrum, then, we need to re-orient our approach, placing Landa's perspective within the larger context of how native peoples were a conundrum in the minds of Spaniards. The highly complex Indigenous reaction to colonization—which has arguably been the primary focus of the entire field of ethnohistory for the past three generations—was not well understood by Spaniards, who so often distilled their own reaction down to a dichotomy of satisfaction and frustration. Therefore, Landa's satisfaction over his proselytizing and parish-building campaigns of the 1550s, combined with his frustration over apparent outbreaks of recidivism, placed him firmly in the center of the larger sixteenth-century phenom-

13. Hanks, *Converting Words*, 67.

14. A good introduction to the relevant literature is Massimo Livi Bacci, *Conquest: The Destruction of the American Indians* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008).

15. The dichotomy is reflected, for example, in the art and sculpture of the US capitol in Washington, DC; hundreds of artworks at this locale were primarily created in the nineteenth century, but their perspective is reinscribed in the minds and hearts of millions of Americans who have visited the building every year since then.



Figure 2. Bishop Landa, in a late-colonial portrait likely copied from a damaged or faded earlier one in the Mérida Cathedral.

enon of how Spanish friars and priests, settlers and administrators, responded to the paradox or conundrum of “the Indian.”

The third solution can be found in the topic of factional politics. Much of the history of the Yucatan peninsula in the first colonial decades of the 1550s to 1570s, a history in which Landa plays a central role, and which is often seen as heavily Landa-centric, is in fact a story of factional rivalries within the fledgling colony—more specifically, a nexus of rivalries spread across the Spanish and Maya communities.

Landa had first reached Yucatan in 1549. He remained there until the first bishop arrived and sent him back to Spain in 1563, but then returned to serve as bishop himself from 1572 to his death in 1579 (see Figure 2). Therefore from 1550 to the summer of 1562—when he ran his notoriously sweeping and violent campaign to extirpate “idolatry”—as well as in the 1570s, Landa benefited from alliances with other religious and with conquistador-settlers. Meanwhile, he also faced enemies within the Church and among the colonists. Loosely speaking, the Church and the *encomendero*-settler establishment were in opposition throughout colonial Yucatan’s history, with governors and bishops often caught up in bitter feuds. But as soon as one investigates the details of such conflicts, the battle lines multiply and shift,

determined by individual personalities and relationships.¹⁶ As mentioned earlier, Yucatan’s first two bishops, Landa and Toral, were political arch-rivals with differing interpretations of the Franciscan mission and the methods required to turn the Maya into Christians.

At the same time, Maya nobles were no more homogenous in their loyalties and political positions than were the Spanish colonists. To take Maya descriptions of Landa from petitions to the king and use them to underscore the Landa conundrum—as I did at the beginning of this essay—is in fact misleading. The Maya polities or small kingdoms that existed in the first half of the century more or less survived the protracted Spanish invasion—more accurately the series of invasions that I have called the Maya–Spanish Thirty Years War (1517–1547).¹⁷ Those polities functioned in the century’s second half as clusters of *cahob* (Maya municipalities; *cah* in the singular) centered on capital towns ruled by dominant dynasties (the Pech, Xiu, Canul, Cocom, and others). That survival was made possible by political gamesmanship, with Maya noblemen jostling for advantage both within their own dynastic networks and inside the world of Spanish factionalism.¹⁸

For our fourth solution to the conundrum, we turn to the fact that Landa did not burn *all* the codices, especially not in 1562 (see Figure 3). The image—especially the visual image (see Figure 1)—of a cultural conflagration is appealing for its reduction of a complex process to a dramatic, cinematic moment. But the reality was a far more protracted process of destruction, survival, and cultural evolution. Ritual burnings of codices, religious statues, and other figurines (so-called “idols”) were carried out on multiple occasions by Landa and other ecclesiastical officials, including Bishop Toral, despite the fact that Toral had put an end to the 1562 campaign. More significantly, such destruction continued into the early eighteenth century, meaning that the vast majority of Maya codices were almost certainly destroyed long after

16. This was true of the entire colonial period in Yucatan. On such conflicts among the settlers, see the work of Manuela Cristina García Bernal and Robert W. Patch, as well as Mark Lentz’s *Murder in Mérida: Violence, Factions, and the Law* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2018).

17. Matthew Restall, “The Wars of Invasion in the Caribbean and Mesoamerica, 1492–1547,” in *Cambridge World History of Violence*, ed. Philip Dwyer, vol. 3, ed. Caroline Pennock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 138–55; Matthew Restall and Amara Solari, *The Maya: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 76–86.

18. See Restall, *Maya Conquistador*; “The People of the Patio: Ethnohistorical Evidence of Yucatec Maya Royal Courts,” in *Royal Courts of the Ancient Maya*, vol. 2, ed. Takeshi Inomata and Stephen Houston (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), 335–90; Sergio Quezada, *Maya Lords and Lordship: The Formation of Colonial Society in Yucatán, 1350–1600* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014).

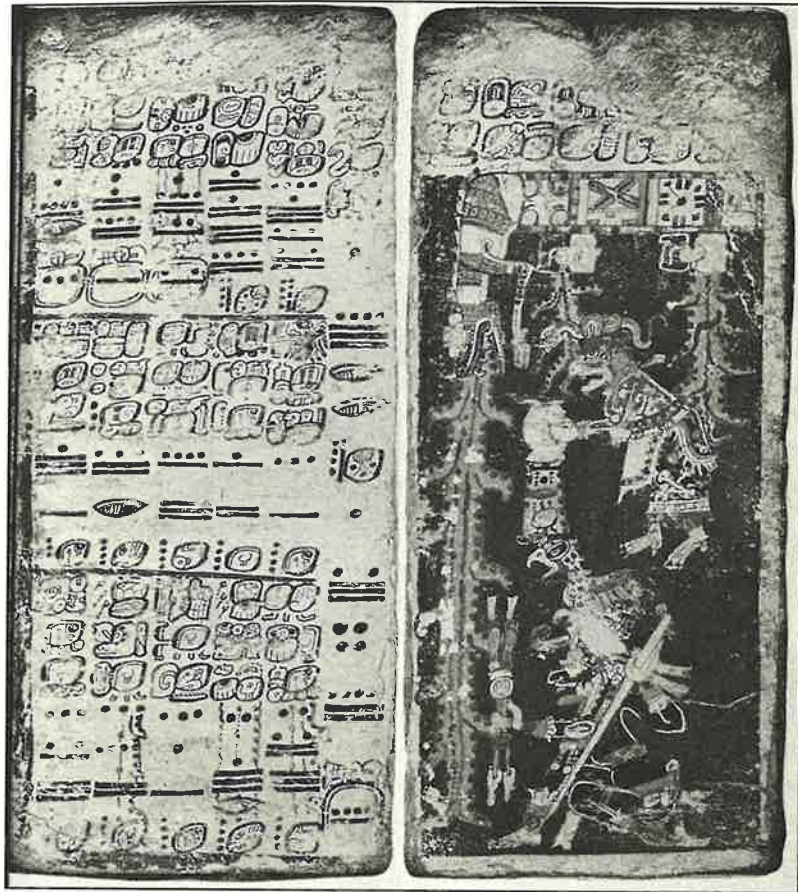


Figure 3. Page from the Dresden Codex (left), one of only four Maya codices that survived codex-burning campaigns by Franciscans and other religious in colonial Yucatan, and a page from the Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel (right), one of about a dozen extant colonial-era, alphabetic copies made by Maya notaries of the fast-disappearing glyphic books.

Landa's death. Some of the Maya codices were also transcribed into alphabetic books; that is, Maya scribes transcribed their glyphic content into alphabetic Maya texts, which were then repeatedly copied and maintained by the elite in each *cab*. More than a dozen of those have survived, all mid- or late-colonial copies, most of them known to us as the Books of Chilam Balam.¹⁹

19. The historical literatures here are extensive, but good starting points on the colonial-era campaigns to locate and destroy religious statues and books are John F. Chuchiak's PhD dissertation (2000) and various of his related articles, such as "Toward a Regional

Solving the Conundrum: The Book That Never Was

For the fifth and final aspect, and suggested solution, to the conundrum, let us turn at greater length to the so-called *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*—introduced above as writings by Landa misleadingly called a "book." It is almost certain that no book by the friar-bishop was published in his lifetime. Nor is it clear that he ever wrote one—as no book manuscript has survived—although various references by other Franciscans to long-lost religious works by Landa leave open the possibility of a manuscript yet to be discovered (the possible location of such a near-mythic manuscript, Landa scholars speculate, is the Vatican Library).

But there is strong seventeenth-century evidence that Landa maintained a *recopilación*, or great compendium of passages that he authored in Yucatan and in Spain, mixed with passages written or dictated to him by informants in Yucatan, and passages copied by him from other books and manuscripts. The compendium must have been assembled between Landa's arrival in Yucatan in 1549 and his death there in 1579, and it may have been steadily compiled over those three decades. It has never been found. Instead, a small set of disjointed excerpts was made by at least two different copyists, at an unknown date, a copy of which was found in Madrid in the late nineteenth century by a Frenchman styling himself the Abbé Brasseur de Bourbourg.

The manuscript that Brasseur de Bourbourg found has very little integrity as a cohesive book. Not only is it a contrivance stitched together by anonymous colonial-era copyists, but its very authorship is inconsistent. Some of it is in the first person, some in the third; some of it appears to have been written by Landa himself, but several passages are clearly by other authors. Some appear to be taken from manuscripts, and others appear to be from a published book that has yet to be identified, or from a manuscript that was ready for publication during Landa's lifetime. Perhaps most damning of all, at least one lengthy passage does not even describe the Maya, but refers instead to the Nahuatl—without identifying its subjects as such.²⁰ Brasseur's decision not

Definition of Idolatry: Reexamining Idolatry Trials in the *Relaciones de Meritos* and Their Role in Defining the Concept of *Idolatría* en Colonial Yucatán, 1570–1780," *Journal of Early Modern History*, 6, no. 2 (2005), 1–29; and "In Servitio Dei." On the Books of Chilam Balam and colonial-era Maya-made books in related genres, see publications by Mark Z. Christensen, such as *The Teabo Manuscript: Maya Christian Copybooks, Chilam Balams, and Native Text Production in Yucatan* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016).

20. Matthew Restall and John F. Chuchiak, "A Re-evaluation of the Authenticity of Fray Diego de Landa's *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*," *Ethnohistory* 49, no. 3 (summer 2002), 651–69. We did not fully emphasize then the fact that the cultural content of several passages clearly relates to the Nahuatl, not the Maya, and that others were clearly not written by Landa. Details are to be included in Restall et al., *The Friar and the Maya*.

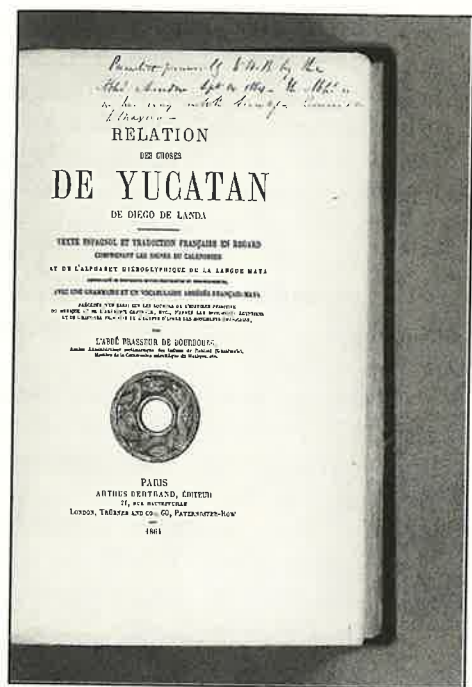


Figure 4. Title page of the first complete edition of Landa's so-called book, transcribed and translated into French by the Abbé Brasseur de Bourbourg, published in Paris in 1864.

to highlight and explore the disjointed nature of the manuscript, but to disguise it with a heavy editorial hand, had long-lasting consequences.

Although he was an amateur and somewhat eccentric scholar, Brasseur has arguably been misunderstood and given insufficient credit for his discoveries and extensive work on numerous Mesoamerican topics (most scholars of his day were technically amateurs by our reckoning).²¹ That said, his relevance here is that he discovered the sole extant Landa writings and shared them with the world—publishing a partial transcription in 1860, and then a full transcription and French translation in 1864 (see Figure 4)—while at the same time inserting an editorial hand that altered how the world would read and understand those writings. His contribution was itself a contradiction (yet another little paradox within the Landa conundrum): he founded Landa studies, while at the same time misleading readers of Landa from the very start.

21. The argument is made in Charles Étienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, *The Manuscript Hunter: Brasseur de Bourbourg's Travels through Central America and Mexico, 1854–1859*, Katia Sainson, trans. and ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017).

Brasseur misled readers from the very start by taking as the title of the manuscript an annotation from one of its pages—which read “Account of the things of Yucatan taken from the writings of the padre fray Diego de Landa of the order of St. Francis.” Two dashes followed in the original manuscript, and then, “Here is another account of the things of China” (meaning “the Far East”). From that Brasseur created a title. He then re-ordered the fragments into a sequence that made sense to him, giving them all chapter numbers (in Roman numerals) and titles. Almost all editions have treated that structure as integral to the original, translating the chapter titles along with the rest of the text. In short, Brasseur created a book by Landa.

The influence of Brasseur's Landa on the first generation of scholars to read it was massive. The timing was just right: in the final decades of the nineteenth century, international scholarship was assuming its modern form, with its multiplicity of disciplines and built-in institutional growth. At the same time, an intense interest in the ancient civilizations of the Americas had developed, with the Maya prominent among them—a phenomenon of which Brasseur was a part.

These early Mayanists tended to be men of means, such as Stephen Salisbury III. A wealthy Massachusetts landowner, banker, state senator, and collector of Maya artifacts, Salisbury would eventually serve as president of the American Antiquarian Society—which he addressed in 1876 on the topic of Landa's *Relación*. Salisbury declared, “Among the historical records relating to the aborigines of Spanish America, there is none more valuable than the manuscript of Diego de Landa.”²² By way of proof, he quoted extensively from Brasseur's edition, as if the book's details on Maya life were evidence of Landa's objective observations and unfiltered knowledge. “Bishop Landa [was] an eye witness of expiring Mayan civilization,” enthused Salisbury, and the “truthfulness of [his] account is attested by its conformity . . . to the customs and usages of the Yucatan Indians of to-day, as described by recent travelers.”²³

Men like Salisbury laid the foundation for a view of the *Relación* as a book crafted by the friar-bishop himself, with its “truthfulness” (as Salisbury put it) fully corroborated, to be consulted and quoted as gospel—a view that has survived to the present day, underpinning how the *Relación* has been used by multiple generations of Mayanists and other scholars.

There have always been countervailing opinions, cautioning how Landa is used. As early as 1880, the pioneering archaeologist Adolph Bandelier warned the American Antiquarian Society (with Salisbury in attendance) that “the picture which Landa gives us of the customs and organization of the

22. Stephen Salisbury, *The Mayas, the Sources of Their History: Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society of April 26, 1876* (Worcester, MA: Charles Hamilton, 1877), 32.

23. *Ibid.*, 46.

Mayas is completely at variance with some of his other statements. Much close attention is required.”²⁴ But such voices have tended to be drowned out by the sheer weight of references to the *Relación* as an unquestionable “eyewitness” source. Bandelier had spotted the internal contradictions of the *Relación*. Yet from Bandelier’s day to the present, most scholars have missed those contradictions, because they have tended to use the manuscript as if it were a bible or encyclopedia, to be consulted on a particular topic and a particular passage cited.

Because Landa’s writings became available late in the nineteenth century, a long mythology or historiography on him and his work had not yet been developed—compared, for example, to what Francisco Palou did for Junípero Serra.²⁵ Furthermore, as a Franciscan writing about a Mesoamerican civilization, Landa soon faced competition from Bernardino de Sahagún and his 12-volume, bilingual, richly illustrated study of the Aztecs. Like the *Relación*, Sahagún’s *La historia universal de las cosas de Nueva España* (as he called it) was a manuscript that remained unpublished and effectively unknown until the closing decades of the nineteenth century, when it acquired a modern name—the “Florentine Codex”—even more misleading than the *Relación*. Although it took far longer for the Florentine Codex to see full publication in multiple languages, its sheer length and richness (its parallel texts in Nahuatl and Spanish are fully illustrated) inevitably drew more twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholars than Landa’s single manuscript.²⁶

Meanwhile, the emerging wealth of unworked, ancient Maya sites ensured that twentieth-century Maya studies would be overwhelmingly oriented toward archaeology. As the *Relación* became increasingly available in translation, archaeologists mined it casually as a reference work. Landa himself, usually dismissed in passing, was seen in the context of the new Hispanophobic tradition that had prompted a Spanish historian in 1914 to coin the phrase, in protest, “the Black Legend.”²⁷

24. Ad. F. Bandelier, *Notes on the Bibliography of Yucatan and Central America. Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society, October 21, 1880* (Worcester, MA: Charles Hamilton, 1881), 6.

25. Fray Francisco Palou, *Relación Histórica de la Vida y Apostólicas Tareas del Venerable Padre Fray Junípero Serra. . .* (Mexico City: Zúñiga y Ontiveros), 1787.

26. Although it took thirty years, for example, for the first English edition (by Arthur J.O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble) to see publication, the *Codex*—all 2,400 pages and over 2,000 illustrations—were placed online at the World Digital Library in 2012 (www.wdl.org). There is no digital version of Landa’s *Relación* on the website of the library that owns the original manuscript (the Real Academia de la Historia, in Madrid), nor is it available anywhere else.

27. Julián Juderías y Loyot was that historian. Recent studies include J. N. Hilgarth, *The Mirror of Spain, 1500–1700: The Formation of a Myth* (Ann Arbor: University of

By the 1920s, then, the foundation for the Landa conundrum had been laid. A clear, early expression of that paradox—whereby Landa’s knowledge of the Maya was unequaled, yet so was his destruction of Maya knowledge—appeared in an early textbook on the Maya, by legendary early Mayanists Thomas Gann and J. Eric Thompson (first published in 1931). “Landa, Bishop of Yucatan soon after the Conquest,” they wrote, “probably knew more” about the Maya “than any other European. To his bigotry, unfortunately, we owe an irreparable loss of the great mass of aboriginal Maya literature, burned in Merida by his order.”²⁸

That single sentence is packed with some of the errors that would reappear in textbooks and other sources over the next century. In fact, Landa was not a bishop until the 1570s, not “soon after the Conquest.” He thus was not a bishop during the 1562 campaign. The burning of codices took place in Mani, not Mérida, and we now know that “the great mass” of such literature was destroyed over the course of centuries, not in 1562. But more significant here is the tone in which Landa would be represented in textbooks: a brutal, hypocritical Landa, who “protests in his book of the horrors perpetrated” by the conquistadors, yet “himself was not over squeamish” in his willingness to torture recidivist Maya parishioners, versus a Landa whose writings offer “full descriptions” of Maya civilization and are “of great importance” to our understanding of it.²⁹

In my survey of twenty-eight textbooks on the Maya, stretching from Gann and Thompson into the 2010s, I found a remarkable consistency in how Landa and his so-called “book” were mentioned, with virtually no shift in tone or usage across the past century.³⁰ On the one hand, Landa has been

Michigan Press, 2000), and María José Villaverde Rico and Francisco Castilla Urbano, eds., *La sombra de la leyenda negra* (Madrid: Editorial Tecnos, 2016). See also Matthew Restall, *When Montezuma Met Cortés: The True Story of the Meeting That Changed History* (New York: Ecco, 2018), 52, 63, 245–46, 250–52, 320.

28. Thomas Gann and J. Eric Thompson, *The History of the Maya: From the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1931), 14.

29. *Ibid.*, 15, 94, 118.

30. Textbooks surveyed included those by Elizabeth Benson, Frans Blom, Michael Coe, Arthur Demarest, Charles Gallenkamp, Gann and Thompson (cited previously), Norman Hammond, John Henderson, Heather McKillop, and Sylvanus Morley. I paid attention to possible changes over time between and within books (e.g., nine editions of Michael Coe’s *The Maya* were published between 1966 and 2015; and six editions, published by a series of editors, of Sylvanus Morley’s *The Ancient Maya*, published between 1936 and 2006). Listing all the textbooks consulted and providing specific citations of the quotes that follow would be tedious; the intention here is not to point fingers but to convey a consistent pattern. Suffice to note that the quotes in these paragraphs are drawn from twelve of the textbook editions consulted, all of which were published in English between 1936 and 2015.

harshly judged for his actions: he was “a fanatical and sometimes brutal bishop and inquisitor”; his “fanaticism” led to “wanton destruction,” the “spirit of the Inquisition burned brightly in the young cleric’s determination” and on his “frequent crusades” among Maya villagers; he “presided over a horrible auto-da-fé” and his book-burning was “a holocaust.” The “bibliophilic” bishop was “a severe and narrow-minded man, who appointed himself to lead the Inquisition in Yucatan and then carried out a notorious program of floggings and imprisonment.”

On the other hand, “Bishop Landa, an impeccable source,” is “our great authority on all aspects of Maya life.” His book is “an encyclopedic treatise,” an “encyclopedic account of native life in Yucatan,” offering “critical keys to understanding Maya civilization.” Consequently, he is typically quoted, uncritically, as an authority on various aspects of Maya culture (mostly the calendar and glyphic writing), usually in discussions of time periods prior to Landa’s lifetime (often by many centuries, even a millennium or more): he “reports” and “describes”; “from Landa’s pen comes the following,” or “Bishop Landa explained”; “his careful and thorough description of the way of life of the Maya” is “invaluable,” even “fascinating to the modern reader.”

The awkward connection made between these two threads in most of these textbooks speaks directly to the Landa conundrum. The common assumption made is that his actions were so extreme during the extirpation campaign of 1562 as to prompt his arrest by the incoming first bishop of Yucatan, Fray Francisco de Toral, who then sent Landa back to Spain to be tried. Hence, the disgraced friar “wrote his *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatan* in 1566 while on trial for his abuses of power”; the book was “prepared as part of his defense[,] a background document describing the people whom he was accused of oppressing.” As we have seen, the investigation into Landa’s actions did not constitute a trial (he was neither arrested nor prosecuted), and the *Relación* could not have been composed as a “defense,” as it consists of excerpts from a larger work that Landa compiled over many years and that various editors brought together long after his death. A variant on this scenario stems from Clendinnen’s imaginary depiction of Landa composing the *Relación* in a specific Spanish monastery in 1566—historical fiction often read as fact by Mayanists.³¹ All of which served not to resolve the conundrum, but to perpetuate it. As the author of one textbook on the ancient Maya insightfully remarked in 1967, “Landa appears as a very contradictory character in the history of Maya studies.”³²

It is therefore neither fair nor useful simply to pass judgment on Mayanists, who have been misled by the published *Relación* and by the hand-

31. Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests*, 116–19, 125–26.

32. Elizabeth P. Benson, *The Maya World*, rev. ed. (New York: Cromwell & Co., [1967] 1977), 3.



Figure 5. Page from the Landa manuscript, known to us as the *Relación*, that purported to depict the Maya “ABC,” and wrongly believed for a century by many to be a Rosetta Stone for deciphering Maya hieroglyphs.

ful of scholars who have purported to be authorities on the friar—from Brasseur to Clendinnen. Landa’s fragmentary, complex, and contradictory writings have from the start been packaged as a “book” for scholars who are neither historians nor scholars of literature or religion.

There is obviously a great deal that could be said about the content of the *Relación*, including analysis of where it is useful for Maya studies and where it is misleading on the Maya but revealing of sixteenth-century Franciscan culture. One final point regarding Landa’s manuscript and its reception and usage should be noted. Most of the cautionary commentary on the book has tended to focus on one small passage that describes the so-called Maya alphabet (see Figure 5). Back in 1880, Bandelier had noted that “the merits of Landa are certainly very great, but the real import of his so-called ‘A. B.

C.' ('De sus letras forme aqui un a. b. c.[,]' pp. 316–319), has been misunderstood and correspondingly misrepresented."³³

Indeed, it is now well known that Landa's Maya alphabet is not a Rosetta Stone. It is not, as Landa implied, the Spanish alphabet rendered in Maya glyphs, but a partial syllabary based on how the letters of the alphabet are pronounced in Spanish.³⁴ That fact, circulating as an argument since Bandler's day, became undisputed once the revolution in Maya epigraphy began in the 1970s.³⁵ But that knowledge was *not* used as a stepping stone to rethinking how the rest of the *Relación* was compiled and how it may have been misused; in fact, it had almost the reverse impact, with Mayanists breathing a collective sigh of relief that only the ABC passages were proven to be problematic.

Whose Conundrum?

Exposing and solving the Landa conundrum is inevitably an exploration of history and historiography that is tied to Yucatan and the Maya. But might the unpacking of the conundrum not reveal something larger about the Franciscans in New Spain or colonial Mesoamerica? For example, to what extent do Franciscan specialists think about how other scholars receive and use and perhaps misuse their work? In our fascination with particular Franciscans, and in our passionate interest in particular Franciscan-generated texts (e.g., the so-called Florentine Codex), is there not a danger in giving the impression of a kind of exceptionalism? We all love mysteries—we love to create problems in our sources, because their solving is fundamental to our methodology as scholars. But might it be possible to get carried away, to go too far? For in the end, it was surely we who created the Landa conundrum.

33. Bandler, *Notes on the Bibliography of Yucatan*, 6.

34. In other words, imagine Landa asking his Maya informant how to write the letter *b*: Landa would pronounce it *beb*, which a Maya speaker would hear not as a letter but as a syllable or as the word *be* (as it was written in the colonial period), meaning "road, path, way"; in the first row of glyphs in Figure 5, the fourth glyph is a pictogram of *be*, depicting a human footprint on a path.

35. Michael D. Coe provides a fine summary in *Breaking the Maya Code*, rev. ed. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 104–105, 193–258; see also George Stuart, "Glyph Drawings from Landa's *Relación*: A Caveat to the Investigator," in *Research Reports on Ancient Maya Writing* 19 (1988), 23–32.

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