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Diego de Landa in Mexico

In the sixteenth century a Spanish bishop of Yucatán was active in preserving and also in destroying the records of Maya civilization

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When, in 1527, the first Spanish colonizing expedition under Francisco de Montejo landed on the eastern coast of the Yucatán peninsula, it encountered a people whose manners and customs suggested little or nothing of a once flourishing culture. True the Yucatec Maya, unlike the savage Chichimeca Indians and other nomadic tribes in the north of Mexico, lived in villages in adobe huts; but for Montejo there was none of the wonder and surprise with which Cortés came upon the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan or Pizarro marched into Cuzco. And yet of the three major Amerindian civilizations, the Azteca, the Inca and the Maya, the Maya were the most outstanding in almost every field. Unlike the Mexican and Peruvian empires, however, that of the Maya had mysteriously vanished sometime around the tenth century A.D., leaving behind it vast edifices in stone, a handful of writings, gold and silver trinkets and a quantity of household utensils. Why these early peoples left their great cities, and where they went, we shall perhaps never know; but go they did, so that, when the Spaniards arrived, they found only the descendants of the empire-builders whose contact with the past was now by means of legends and stories only.

Our present-day knowledge of the aboriginal peoples of America derives from two main sources: archaeology and a number of written accounts, sometimes set down in the Indian language, sometimes in Spanish, collected together by Castilian missionaries in the first half century following the conquest. The missionaries were often talented linguists and able historians; and they developed a method of inquiry which is still used by ethnographers to this day. This consisted of questioning a number of witnesses about a certain event and then editing and piecing together the most reliable sections of each account. The Franciscan missionaries in Mexico, Bernadino de Sahagún, Andrés de Olmos and Toribio de Motolinía, to name but three, excelled in this. Sahagún's *General History of the Things of New Spain*, written first in Nahuatl, the language of the Azteca 'Empire' and later translated by the author into Spanish, covers every single aspect of Mexican life from religion to fire-making, from the calendar to the Indian's own account of the Spanish conquest. Sahagún's work is unique in its scope and dispassionate concern for the facts; but in form it was a model for all subsequent 'histories' of this kind.

The Franciscans had a purpose behind all this. Sahagún and his colleagues were possessed of genuine scientific curiosity, but they had not gone to the New World on an expedition of enquiry. They had gone to convert the natives to Christianity. In order to do this with any degree of success, it was first necessary to learn as much as possible about their culture and their language. It would be foolish to imagine, as some have done, that because the friars spent much time in recording the civilizations with which they came in contact that they considered them worth preserving. Like all educated men of the sixteenth century, they were able to recognize merit even when it was presented in the most unfamiliar form. When they saw signs of monotheism or rituals that resembled baptism, above all when they witnessed the devotion of the native priests and the severity of the laws dealing with 'crimes against nature', they thought they recognized the presence of spiritual virtue. But despite these enlightened views, the friars were content to allow the culture which, if it had fostered certain

By courtesy of the Bodleian Library, Oxford

FATHER DIEGO DE LANDA (*lower right*) *as Bishop of Yucatán; engraving from an account of his life by Marianus, 1625*

From: 'The Arts of Ancient Mexico' by Jacques Soustelle; Thames & Hudson, 1967

Pottery figure from the island of Jaina, Yucatán

manifestations of the truth, also harboured such evils as human sacrifice and idolatry, to fall into ruins. The Franciscan vision of a new apostolic church in America was conceived in terms of the old apostolic church in Europe. Its flock would be composed of devout Indians, more sincere in their beliefs than any contemporary European; but they would wear trousers and a hat and worship in a stone church in Latin.

It should not surprise us, therefore, if we find in the same man an implacable enemy of idolatry, a destroyer of Indian artistry, and an assiduous chronicler of Indian affairs. The subject of this essay, Diego de Landa, was just such a man; indeed, it could be said that he is the classic, certainly the most notorious, example of the dual nature of the Franciscan missionary ambition. Landa is perhaps best known as the man who, in 1562, made a bonfire of every scrap of Maya writing and every piece of Maya handicraft he could lay his hands on; he is also the author of the *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatan* or *Account of the Affairs of Yucatan*[1], which is the most detailed account of the ancient Maya to have survived from the early colonial period, when some contact with the pre-Hispanic past was still possible. Together with a handful of 'native' writings, written in Yucatec Maya, but taken down in the Latin script long after the conquest, this work is virtually the only written evidence about that once flourishing culture. The *Account* has detailed information about Maya religious practices, descriptions of the architecture of some of the more important of the ancient cities as they were before the Spaniards began to dismantle them for building material, of Maya customs and social organization, as well as a description of the flora and fauna of the country. Landa's methods were similar to those of Sahagún. He even mentions some of the witnesses he questioned by name; these were members of the oldest Maya families, representatives of which still survived at the beginning of this century, the Xiu, ancient rulers of Mani in the north-west of the peninsula, the Cocum and the Chel.

Like Sahagún also, Landa's intention was not to interpret, only to record. On occasion he refers to the Devil as the historical agent responsible for the plight of the Indian; but this is never allowed to interfere with the description of events. The *Account* is, therefore, something like an anthropologist's field notes and can be used in that way. In his description of Maya warfare, for instance, he explains that chieftains were only elected for the period of hostilities, and after-

[1] I have recently completed an English version of this work; *The Maya: Diego de Landa's 'Account of the Affairs of Yucatán'* (Chicago [J. Philip O'Hara Inc.], 1975).

wards returned to their former social position. This is a vital piece of information because it demonstrates that the Maya, in common with many African tribes, did not maintain formal leaders, but elected them in times of need, from certain powerful families. This kind of knowledge provides a valuable alternative to the traditional Spanish account which sees everything in European terms, translating village headmen into nobles and princes; and it is gradually leading to a re-interpretation of the so-called 'Indian Empires' of Meso-America. For all that Landa's bonfire was a calamity, we owe him an enormous debt. Without the *Account* the wonder and the mystery that surrounds those imposing jungle ruins might be impenetrable. With his assistance we can still reconstruct large fragments of a once impressive civilization.

Diego de Landa would be an important historical figure if he were only the author of the *Account;* but his turbulent career also covered an important stage in the history of the relationships between the friars and their Indian charges, between the ancient Indian peoples of America and their European conquerors.

We know very little about Landa's early life and education. According to the nineteenth-century Mexican historian, Cresencio Carillo y Ancona, he was born in 1524 in the small town of Cifuentes in the Alcarria region to the north-east of Madrid. At the age of sixteen he entered the Franciscan convent of San Juan de los Reyes in Toledo, where he remained until 1549. In that year the missionary Nicoles de Albalete, who had reached Spain from Mexico two years previously, recruited him along with five other Franciscans for service in Yucatán. Why Landa chose to become a missionary in America we have no means of telling. The order was, of course, zealous in its missionary aims and the reforms that had been affected during the regency of Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros (1436-1517) had equipped them admirably for the task; but Landa might, nevertheless, have contemplated a more promising career in the safety of Toledo.

Landa's talents, however, seem to have been considerable; and it was no doubt his zeal, of which we have abundant later evidence, and his linguistic gifts, that recommended him to Albalete. The seventeenth-century Franciscan historian Francisco de Cogolludo[2] paid tribute to both these qualities, and claims that no sooner had Landa arrrived in the peninsula than he set about learning the language. In this he was soon proficient, and able to simplify and improve the Maya grammar which his fellow Franciscan, Luis de Villalpando, had written some years earlier.

His abilities, indeed, seem quickly to have been recognized; for in 1533 we find him as *custodio*, or head, of the monastery of San Antonio at Izmal; and in September 1561 he was elected Provincial Vicar of Yucatán and Guatemala. Our information about Landa during these years is scanty, as most of the records were destroyed when the friars were evicted in 1820 and, later, during the Mexican Revolution. He seems, at all events, to have been a brave and zealous worker, travelling miles over inhospitable terrain, on foot and discalceate, as was the Franciscan custom. On one occasion he is said to have marched into an Indian village called Zitaz, where no white man had ever set foot before and, in the startled gaze of some 300 armed men, released a sacrificial victim from the pole to which he had been bound. Intimidated by his courage and aura of sanctity – and, no doubt, by his bizarre appearance – the Indians 'did nothing but gaze on him in wonder'. According to Cogolludo, a star was sometimes to be seen to rest above the pulpit where Landa was preaching as a sign 'of the splendour of his virtue and the holy zeal for the conversion, the divine light of which he wished to shine upon the souls of all these natives'.

Shortly after his election as Provincial Vicar, Landa became involved in a struggle to wipe out old Maya customs which obstinately refused to die. Never before had Europeans been so rudely forced to consider the consequences of attempting to impose their culture upon an alien society, which they only imperfectly understood and which possessed flourishing traditions of its own.

Early in 1562, Landa began a series of investigations into the suspected continuance, among the Indians of his province, of idolatrous practices, which the friars believed they had

[2] Diego Lopez de Cogolludo, *Historia de la provincia de Yucatán* (Madrid, 1688).

By courtesy of the Bodleian Library, Oxford

A section from one of the three surviving Maya codices, Tro-Cortesianus, now in Madrid

successfully eradicated long since. His suspicions that the readiness with which the Maya had embraced the new religion amounted to little more than the addition of one new God to an already flourishing pantheon of pagan deities had first been aroused the previous year, when Fray Pedro de Ciudad Rodrigo, guardian of the monastery at Mani, had uncovered the recently buried corpse of a child with the marks of crucification on its body.[3] The Maya, before the arrival of the Spaniards, had sometimes used a form of crucification to dispatch sacrificial victims; accounts of Christ's passion had led consequently to innumerable misunderstandings. The curious blend of ancient beliefs and a garbled understanding of Christianity, with which the friars found themselves in conflict, is exemplified by one particularly gruesome account. According to an Indian called Antonio Pech, he had witnessed two members of the powerful Cocom family crucify two girls with the words, 'Let these girls die crucified as did Jesus Christ, he who they say was our Lord, but we do not know if this is so'. Having thus placated a possibly powerful deity, they killed the girls in the conventional manner by having their hearts removed, and handed over to the native priests, the *ah-kins* for dedication to the idols.

Landa's fears that any number of awful rituals were being practised daily were confirmed later in the year. In May 1562, two Indian boys discovered some idols and a skeleton in a cave near Mani; alarmed by what promised to be evidence of widespread idolatry, the Provincial Vicar ordered Fray Pedro to hold an enquiry. During the following months a large number of Indians were questioned and tortured; many of the victims confessed to possessing idols or to having performed idolatrous rites, although many also claimed later that they had invented these to satisfy their inquisitors.

The friars were by now convinced that the land they had thought so speedily won over for Christ was, in fact, another Canaan. Anxious to extirpate all remaining traces of idolatry, they called on Landa to come in person to Mani and to supervise all further proceedings. Landa arrived in early June and set up an inquisitorial court. This now questioned and tortured for confession hundreds of Indians, whose written testimonies led Landa to the conclusion that the chieftains and other local Indian headmen were the principal offenders, and that the common people (whom the Spaniards designated by the Aztec word *maceguales*), though guilty of error, were to a great extent merely the victims of their leaders. 'Some', he reported, 'have destroyed Christianity among the simple people to such a degree that some of them have said that they were never so idolatrous even when

[3] For a detailed account of the events leading up to the heresy trials, see F. V. Scholes and R. L. Roys, *Fray Diego de Landa and the Problems of Idolatry in Yucatán* (Washington, 1938).

they were heathens; and they have given instruction to others, teaching them false doctrines.' It was, of course, the local chieftains and the once powerful Maya priesthood, the *ah-kins*, who stood to suffer most by the introduction of the new religion.

Before the conquest, Maya society had been divided into two social classes, the common people who lived on independent small-holdings, and a ruling élite that relied for its existence upon tribute received from the villages over which it ruled. The élite was both religious and secular; and its members lived in the vast stone complexes that were less residential cities than ceremonial centres, interspersed with palaces and dwellings for the temple officiants. The priesthood played as important a rôle as the secular rulers. As in all primitive societies, the priest not only mediated between the gods and man; he also provided all forms of education, and held the secrets of the universe, the sciences of astronomy and astrology, computation and divination. After the arrival of the Europeans, something of the old secular order was retained. The Spaniards ruled through the native chieftains, although these were often reduced in practice to little more than tax collectors. But the priests not only found themselves out of a job; they were obliged to see their traditional skills derided as mere superstition and replaced by the Christian liturgy, the Latin alphabet and Aristotelian cosmology. The friars usurped the religious and intellectual rôle of the *ah-kins;* and, like the *ah-kins*, they had taken upon themselves the task of educating the Indian aristocracy. In the Yucatán they had attempted to repeat the experiment that had been tried with such notable success in Mexico. Indian schools had been set up to teach the sons of the chiefs, while still at an impressionable age, the fundamentals of Christian knowledge and the European way of life. If they proved, as they had done so often in Mexico, to be particularly able, they might end up with an education comparable to any given to a young man in Spain.

Landa now saw how ineffective this policy had been. You may teach a man to be a Christian Spaniard, but, so long as he continues to live in a society that, only less than half a century before, was pagan and Maya, the temptation to revert to the older more easily understood beliefs will always be present. To combat this growing evil, he immediately arrested some forty leading Indians, among whom were ten governors and rulers from the Mani area, including Francisco de Montejo Xiu, a scion of one of the oldest Maya families, whose history Landa later described at some length in his *Account*. On July 11th Landa passed judgement in most of these cases and, on the following day, held an *auto da fé* where the sentences, which ranged from simple acts of penance to long periods of forced labour, were read and confirmed by Diego Quijada, Lord Mayor of Yucatán. Thousands of idols collected by the friars during the course of the investigation, an unknown quantity of Maya writings and any artifact, no matter what its quality, that seemed to have religious significance, together with the disinterred bones of suspected heretics already deceased, were all publicly burnt.

The 'burning of the books' at Mani has ac-

Genealogical tree of the Xiu family of Mani, one of the oldest Maya families; from a manuscript of 1557

By courtesy of the Peabody Museum, Harvard

quired great significance in later accounts of the Spanish destruction of Maya culture, and has earned for Landa the unenviable, as well as the improbable, reputation of having obliterated single-handed all the records of an entire civilization. Like all such notorious acts, it was not quite so simple as later generations suppose. The only evidence, indeed, we have that Landa did burn any of the Maya books at Mani comes from Cogolludo and his near contemporary Bernardo de Lizana.[4] The latter's account is admittedly rather horrifying:

> 'He collected together all their books and ancient writings and had them bound together and burnt. Many books on the history of ancient Yucatán which told of its beginning and history; and these would have been of great value to us, had they been translated into Spanish because they would have been something original; for all we have now are the traditions of these Indians.'

The editor of the 1842 edition of Cogolludo's work, one Dr Justo Sierra, provided a list, derived from a rather dubious Jesuit source, giving the quantity of material destroyed at Mani. This ran as follows:

> '5000 idols of different form and dimension.
> 13 great stones which served as altars
> 22 small stones of various forms
> 27 rolls of signs and hieroglyphs on deer skin
> 167 vases of various sizes and shapes.

The figures are certainly exaggerated – 5,000 idols seems particularly incredible – but, if Landa destroyed anything like 27 codices, he had got his hands on most of the surviving records of northwest Yucatán.

It must be said, however, that neither Landa, himself, nor any of the contemporary accounts of the Mani trials make any mention of books having been destroyed on that occasion. But Landa does admit to burning books; and the destruction of all Maya writing was most likely a slow and thorough process. Landa himself describes one bonfire in a dismissive tone that expresses all the contempt he would have felt for the civilization he was nevertheless so carefully recording for posterity.

> 'We discovered a large number of books written in these characters of theirs and as they contained nothing except records of the superstitions and lies of the Devil, we burned them all which seemed to cause the Indians much affliction.'

The folly of destroying everything that appeared, at first glance, to contain 'superstitions and lies of the Devil' was obvious to Landa's contemporaries. The loss of so much information through the misguided zeal of Landa and like-minded missionaries was a constant source of complaint. The Jesuit historian José de Acosta, writing in the 1580s, remarked that, 'our people, believing that all the Indian books were mere superstition have destroyed a record of ancient and obscure matters from which we might have derived no little benefit. This stems from an ignorant zeal which, without either knowing or wishing to know the truth, asserts without evidence that everything about the Indians is the work of superstition'.[5]

Landa, it has been said, threw upon his inquisitorial fires the identity of an entire nation. When the flames had at last subsided, the Maya retreated into a stunned obedience before their new masters, until, in the nineteenth century, they recovered strength enough to rebel. This, too, is an over-simplification. The old Maya way of life was driven underground; but it survived, and Indian revolts were common throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The real impact of the fires, whenever they occurred, is difficult to calculate. To most of the Maya in the sixteenth century, the 'books' must have been objects of veneration rather than sources of information. Many of them must have been composed centuries earlier, and, in any case, contained little more than the record of events from year to year. Furthermore, only a very small number of the Indians were in a position to read them. Landa also over-estimated their religious significance. They were not, as he imagined, records of instructions dictated by Satan directly

[4] Bernardo de Lizana, *Historia de Yucatán, devocionario de nuestra señora de Izmal y conquista espiritual* (Valladolid, 1688).

[5] José de Acosta, *Historia natural y moral de las Indias*, ed. E. O'Gorman (Mexico, 1940).

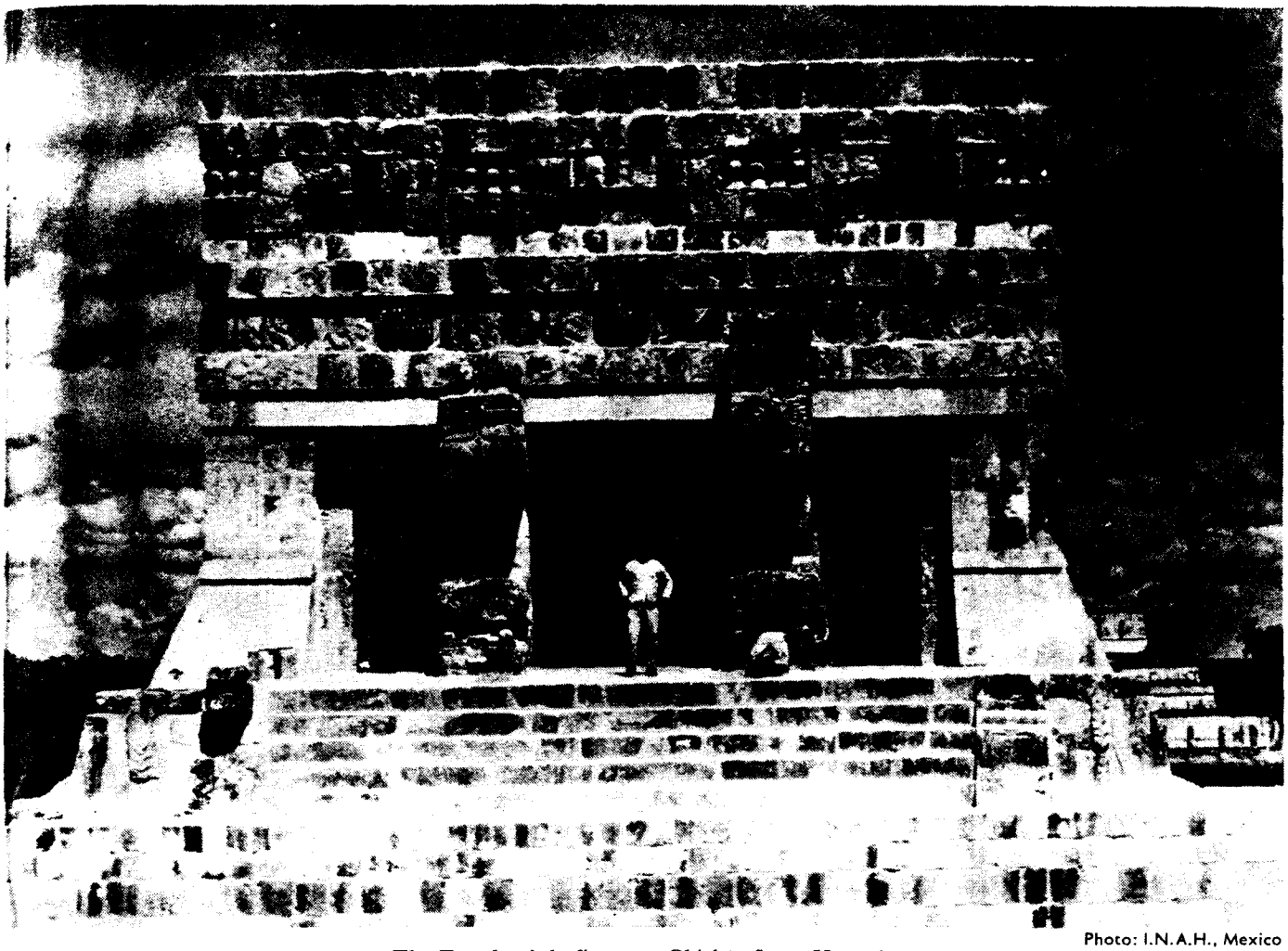

Photo: I.N.A.H., Mexico

The Temple of the Jaguars, Chichén Itza, Yucatán

to his servants, the *ah-kins;* but rather they were complex calendrical calculations, of which the purpose was to allow the priest to decide when the rituals, which permeated every aspect of Maya life, were to be performed. But without the priests whom the friars had driven into hiding, the books were of no use. As Lizana understood, Landa's bonfire did far more damage to our knowledge of Maya affairs than benefit to the cause of Christianity. Since the Indian did not regard his books as a revealed testimony, their destruction could not have had the same effect as burning every copy of the Koran might have had on a Muslim – a parallel that Landa doubtless had in mind. Nor would it be easy to supplant the native books by the Bible; for no Indian could envisage his gods dictating their will in a permanent form that might then be interpreted by anyone who took the trouble to learn to read. The Maya deities were erratic creatures whose commands were likely to be unexpected and pre-emptory.

The destruction by the friars of Indian 'books' was indeed thorough. Only three Mayan codices survive today. Like the few extant pre-conquest Aztec manuscripts, these are deposited in European libraries, having once formed part of a consignment of Indian curiosities sent home to Spain to demonstrate to the court the wonders of the new world that Castile has recently acquired. The Maya, however, unlike the Azteca, who wrote in pictograms, or the Inca, who used a collection of knotted and coloured strings called a *quipu*, had developed a system of writing in glyphs, the first step towards the creation of an alphabet. The Azteca and Inca systems were little more than mnemonic devices, designed to help the reader remember something that he already knew in outline. They could convey little or

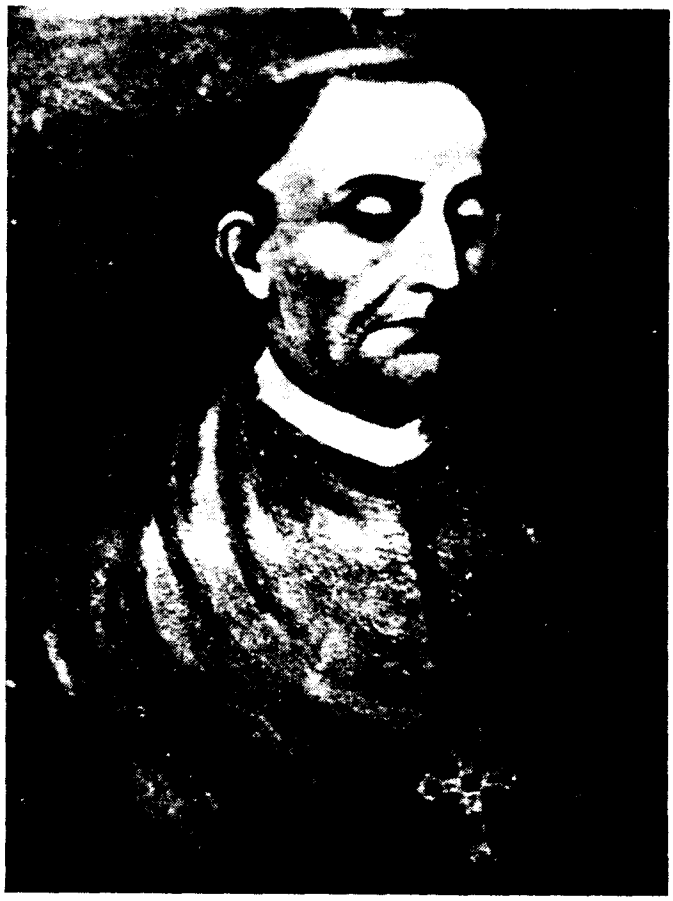

Photo by courtesy of the author

DIEGO DE LANDA, *1524-75; painting in the parish church of Izmal, Yucatán*

nothing to someone unfamiliar with the material contained in them. For this reason, it is impossible to know what the true meaning of the Azteca writings that we have may be. Many scholars have spent many hours in the labour of interpretation; but their work remains mere conjecture. With the Maya script, decipherment is possible, though extremely difficult. J. Eric S. Thompson, who has dedicated a long and productive life to the hieroglyphs, has deciphered a great many of them; but many more remain unclear.[6]

The importance of the Maya script did not fail to impress Landa; for he made repeated efforts to understand it; and in his *Account* we find an entire section dedicated to the Maya art of writing. Spanish evaluation of Indian and other cultures often depended on the presence – or absence – of a script. The Maya, together with the Chinese, occupied a middle position in the hierarchy; above the Aztec and the Inca, but below the Europeans. Landa, however, lacked any knowledge of the history of writing or of linguistics, a science that did not really become established until the seventeenth century; and he assumed that the Maya employed an alphabet comparable to the Latin one. He, therefore, read out the alphabet to his Indian informant, and ordered him to write down the Maya equivalent for each letter. No Maya could have made any sense of such instructions; and so instead the scribe copied out the signs that were as close as he could get to the names of the letters. Thus for *b* – pronounced *bay* in Spanish – he drew a foot, symbol for travel and roads, which in Maya is *be*. Landa's alphabet seems in retrospect a little naïve; but it has been of assistance to modern scholars, once the principles upon which it is constructed were understood. Professor Thompson, indeed, has described it as being 'as close to a Rossetta stone as we are ever likely to get'.

The destruction of the books may not have wiped out quite as much of the old Maya way of life as later historians have assumed. The religious beliefs survived because they depended on oral traditions rather than on the written word; and, despite the efforts of the Church for over 300 years, they survive to this day. What perished was a monument to a society's scientific interests, a unique opportunity to study a primitive people who were just beginning the enormous task of interpreting and ordering the universe that surrounded it. Diego de Landa's rôle in the destruction of Maya civilization has been exaggerated. In the end, it was the brute force of the conquest, in all the many ways where it intruded upon the old settled existence of the Indians, that finally cut them off from their own past. If the flames that this Franciscan friar ignited destroyed all but a few fragments of one aspect of Maya culture, his *Account* preserved many others. Paradoxically, it has also helped us to interpret those very same books which he attempted to destroy.

[6] See, J. Eric S. Thompson, *Maya Hieroglyphic writing* (Washington, 1950). The extant Maya 'books', usually called codices, are: The Codex Dresden, the Codex Madrid or Tro-Cortés and the Codex Paris.