

Bishop Landa and the Mayan Calendar: An Unsolved Mystery
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Diego de Landa was born in Cifuentes, Guadalajara Province, Spain on the 12th of November 1524. In 1541 he became a Franciscan monk and in 1549 was sent to Yucatan to convert the Indians, who had just been conquered by the Spanish three years earlier. During a famine that plagued the region in 1553, he is said to have won the devotion of his parishioners for his generous assistance in their time of crisis. Also, by immersing himself in the study of their language and customs, he sought to learn as much as he could of their native culture – which likewise endeared him to the natives. However, when the Maya made the mistake of taking him into their confidence and showing him some of their sacred codices, he concluded that their writings were “nothing more than superstition and lies of the devil”, and vowed that, if the Indians were to become true Christians, all such profanity must be destroyed.

The first opportunity he had to carry out this resolution was in 1562 when he began his own “Auto da fe”, or Inquisition. While on a visit to the convent of San Miguel Arcángel in the town of Maní, he ordered the destruction of more than 20,000 cult images and 40 codices, while at the same time having had many of the Indian leaders severely punished. Landa’s heavy-handed behavior was strongly condemned as being both excessive and illegal, because at the outset of the Conquest, a royal decree had exempted the Indians from the Inquisition, stating that their “heresies were the result of childish innocence” rather than willful religious infractions. Indeed, the bishop of Yucatan, a cleric by the name of Francisco Toral, newly arrived in 1563, was so revulsed by Landa’s actions that he reversed many of the sentences that he had meted out. However, what began as a personal dispute between the two men soon grew into a contest between the higher echelons of both state and church concerning which of them had the ultimate authority in this matter.

During the years that this struggle dragged on, Landa not only continued his detailed studies of the land and people but also availed himself of the opportunity to write an “account of the things of Yucatan” (“Relación

de las cosas de Yucatán”). Completed in 1566, it was a literary work that one critic has termed “an ethnographic masterpiece”, containing, as it does, all manner of physical and cultural data describing this distinctive region.

In 1569, Bishop Toral finally managed to have Landa sent back to Spain to be tried before a royal court for his excesses, but anticipating this move, Landa had addressed a carefully drafted letter to his fellow Franciscans in Madrid, “stressing his unity of spirit with them as brothers” and pointing out that many missionaries in the Yucatan (virtually all of whom were Franciscans), had also been obliged to use corporal punishment on their back-sliding converts. When word was received that Landa had been absolved of his crimes by the court, Bishop Toral immediately asked to be transferred to Mexico City, pleading illness, but when his request went unheeded, he simply abdicated his position, and within two years he passed away. Although the bishop’s seat in the Yucatan continued to remain empty for two more years, when it was once more filled in 1573, it was Diego de Landa who was in the chair.

One of the first acts of the new bishop was to excommunicate the Governor of the province, Francisco Velázquez de Gijón, in effect exacerbating the struggle between the political and religious authorities to a much greater level of bitterness. In a further demonstration of his new power, Landa set off on a series of extirpation campaigns, by visiting many of the more remote areas of the peninsula where no bishop had ever ventured before. For the next four years, he made “visitations” throughout what today are the states of Yucatan in the north and Campeche in the west, as well as an incursion into adjacent Tabasco. Everywhere the goal was the same: not only to uncover as many “idolaters” as possible and to destroy as many of their cult objects and writings as he could find, but also to punish them as severely as he dared. Finally, in each of the regions he visited, he set up a Franciscan “guardianía, or fortified center, from which a continuous surveillance of the local populace could be maintained. During these depredations, he was a frequent object of native retaliation, but managed to escape and persist with his campaigns until his death on April 29, 1579.

One of the subjects that Landa had addressed at some length in his “Relaciones” was the Maya calendar, including how it was structured and how it regulated the people’s lives. Although he was well aware that the Maya celebrated the beginning of their New Year on July 16th, according to the Julian calendar then in use in the European world -- the equivalent of

July 26th in our present Gregorian calendar -- he had no inkling as to how or why they had chosen this date. This is all the more surprising because he appears to have been visiting Edzná, the center of Maya astronomic studies, at the very time of one of their New Year celebrations. This strongly suggests that by then the Maya were so suspicious of Landa's intentions that they shared nothing more with him than they were absolutely obliged to. In any case, they succeeded in keeping from him the fact that it was the southward passage of the sun through the zenith that determined this critical date, a choice the Maya made to emulate that of the Zoque people who had established the beginning of their own New Year at Izapa in the same manner as early as 1358 BCE. Indeed, this was the only addition the Maya ever made to the calendrical systems that they inherited from the Zoque, because at the latitude of Edzná -- namely 19.5° north -- July 26th had an recognizable significance to the local populace, whereas August 13th the day the Zoques had settled on, did not. Nevertheless, in deference to their Zoque mentors, the Maya had oriented the entire site of Edzná to the sunset position on the latter day, in dutiful recognition of their indebtedness for the calendar.

Ironically, at the very time that the Maya were in the process of establishing their own New Year's Day, the Zoque calendar was going through a period when the five so-called "unlucky" or "worthless" days at the end of the 365-day count were coinciding with the sun's zenithal passage. Recognizing this as a particularly inauspicious time to launch their new holiday, the Maya deferred its start until the year 48 CE, when the zenithal sun passage would occur on "0 Pop", the first "formal" day of their secular calendar instead. Even more ironic, and certainly quite unknown to Bishop Landa, was the fact that his Indian converts had just experienced a similar calendrical trauma that had only ended in 1548, the year before his arrival in the Yucatan. Every year for the preceding two decades, the Maya New Year had taken place on one of the five "unlucky" days, when everyone customarily kept as low a profile as possible, lest the gods inflict some misfortune on them. Actually, this prolonged period was the first (and only) time in a millennium and a half that the calendar had caused the Mayan New Year celebration to once again coincide with these five ominous days.

In his account of the Maya calendar, Landa describes the beginning of the New Year as having taken place on a day called 12 Kan, or 12 Snake. Where he obtained this knowledge or how he had acquired it, he doesn't say,

but after making a year-by-year analysis of the Maya calendar's New Year date, the present author has determined that at no time through the entire period of Landa's residence in the New World, did the calendar begin on a day named 12 Kan. In fact, during Landa's entire lifetime, the Mayan New Year took place on a Kan day only three times – on 5 Kan in 1538, on 3 Kan in 1557, and on 1 Kan in 1576. Inasmuch as each of these occurrences are spaced 19 years apart, to reach a date of 12 Kan, it would be necessary to go back to the year 1348 in order to match it with the passage of the zenithal sun on or near a date even approximating the equivalent of July 26th. Landa further states that in the same year, the beginning of the Christian year, January 1st, would have coincided with the Maya day named 12 Ben, which is perfectly correct. This implies that he well understood the structure of the calendar, but must have been misinformed as to what the true Maya date actually was. If he was correct in assuming that it was a Kan year, then it was most likely the year 1557, because he reportedly completed his book describing “the things of Yucatan” in 1566.

References and Notes

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