

BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTES

***The Friar and the Maya: Diego de Landa and the Account of the Things of Yucatan.* By Matthew Restall, Amara Solari, John F. Chuchiak IV, and Traci Ardren. Denver: University Press of Colorado, 2023. xiii + 396 pp. \$24.95 cloth.**

One of the first European attempts to translate the complexity of Maya hieroglyphs was recorded in the 1567 *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán* “Account of the Things of Yucatan,” attributed to the Franciscan bishop, Diego de Landa (1524–1579). I recall seeing folios of the *Relación* showcased in the documentary, *Breaking the Maya Code* (2008). But the manuscript, in fact, misled many seeking to read the glyphs (p. 328); it attempted to record an alphabet, rather than the syllabic structure of the Yucatec writing system. As it turns out, the *Relación* has misled scholars in even greater ways.

The Friar and the Maya is both an English translation of the famed *Relación* and a collection of essays detailing the text’s provenance and historical context. Whereas Landa’s legacy is controversial, what is attributed to him as the *Relación* is often praised as a feat of early modern ethnography. Together, Matthew Restall, Amara Solari, John Chuchiak IV, and Traci Ardren, painstakingly contextualize Landa and the manuscript attributed to him.

While previous translations of the *Relación* have been published, the edition in *The Friar and the Maya* improves on them in one major way: the authors transcribe, as closely as possible, the manuscript now held by the Real Academia de la Historia in Madrid. The problem is that “the original manuscript of the Account,” the authors write “lacks chapters, section breaks, and subheadings” (p. 21). The manuscript also clearly contains more than one penmanship, which is captured by the high-resolution figures added throughout their translation (e.g., pp. 176–177, 180–181). All this amounts to argue against Landa’s individual authorship. Compare this to the first translation of the *Relación* by Brasseur de Bourbourg in 1864, who “created chapters with long descriptive titles, and other editors and translators followed him (using his or inventing their own) all contributing to the misleading of the Account as a coherent ‘book’ written by Landa” (p. 21, parenthesis original). In 1937 William Gates published an English translation without changing much of what Brasseur added (p. 269). To make matters more complicated, in 1941 Alfred Tozzer published an English translation, but not based on the original Spanish, and rather on Brasseur’s Spanish transcription and French translation (pp. 271–272). *The Friar and the Maya* is a most welcomed edition to one of the most important texts on colonial Yucatec Maya history and ritual.

Beyond the English translation, the *Friar and the Maya* also explore what Matthew Restall has called “the Landa Conundrum.” This is a twofold problem. Diego de Landa is best known for his extirpation campaigns in the Yucatan Peninsula and as the author of the *Relación*. Thus the conundrum first questions the man himself. “Was Landa a monster, or was he simply a brilliant if overly zealous product of his time” (p. 8)? These extremes help conceptualize the authors’ argument, that Landa’s iconoclastic actions were not unique, but rather the norm, to Christian militaristic mission campaigns in the early

modern period (pp. 8–9). The friar thus took it upon himself to torture, to the point of death and irreversible trauma, the Native peoples he suspected of this Christian crime. Landa saw his “war of terror against a subject population” as “legal, regulated, and sanctioned” (p. 254). Landa’s extirpations came to a halt in 1562, but he was subsequently exonerated and then made bishop of Yucatan in 1572. The friar continued his campaigns thereafter. The essays contextualize how Landa went about commissioning inquisitorial measures to himself and his friars, and the aftermath they created thereafter.

The second aspect of the conundrum consequently questions the authorship of the *Relación*. Throughout the essays, the authors argue that Diego de Landa was not the author of what is today the *Relación*; or at least, he did not write any of it with his own hands. Instead, the manuscript is likely a copy of Landa’s *recopilación* “collection” and first-hand information from Maya scholars that is non-extant (307). The inconsistencies in tone and voice, and the overall sequencing of the manuscript, reveals the many hands that created, formatted, and bounded the *Relación* (p. 309). The authors propose that Bartolomé de Las Casas and Francisco López de Gómara contributed possible summaries, including royal historians that helped stitch portions together.

The Friar and the Maya, the translation and the essays, is a must have for anyone investigating colonial Mesoamerica. The author’s careful analysis of the *Relación*’s history will invite future works on Yucatec Maya scholarship.

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