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by Matthew Restall, Amara Solari, John F. Chuchiak IV, and Traci Ardren,
Denver, University Press of Colorado, 2023, 396 pp. (ISBN 9781646425044)

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To cite this article: Alejandro Enríquez (2024) The friar and the Maya: Diego de Landa and the Account of the things of Yucatan, Colonial Latin American Review, 33:3, 415-416, DOI: [10.1080/10609164.2024.2403840](https://doi.org/10.1080/10609164.2024.2403840)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10609164.2024.2403840>



Published online: 20 Nov 2024.



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BOOK REVIEW

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The friar and the Maya: Diego de Landa and the Account of the things of Yucatan is more than a new translation of the text known in Spanish as *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, attributed—imperfectly, as we will see—to Friar Diego de Landa (1524–1579), the (in)famous sixteenth-century Franciscan missionary who played a significant role in the Spanish conquest of the Yucatan peninsula. It consists of an introduction; the new, well-executed and meticulously annotated translation of the Account (I maintain the authors’ decision to not italicize the presumed title of the manuscript); and seven accompanying essays. Four of the essays focus on the manuscript of the Account itself: its history, its paleography and iconography, and its problematic portrayal of Maya women and children. The other three essays anchor the Account in the wider historical context: the conquest of Yucatan, Landa’s biography, and his intellectual milieu and informants. In addition, *The friar and the Maya* includes several dozen illustrations, most notably 48 reproductions of the original manuscript, and several helpful tables connecting the Account to possible sources and to the text’s historiographic and scriptural allusions.

The new translation aims ‘to replace all prior editions of this influential text for English-speaking readers’ (xii), and it will. The Account has been published numerous times and translated into many languages, but as the authors indicate, the best of these prior editions are not easily accessible or lack detailed notes and accompanying explicatory essays. Most importantly, however, by tracing the story of the Account, the authors highlight how all previous editions have contributed to the mistaken idea that Landa himself wrote a book about the Maya titled *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*. They show, rather, that the *Relación*—its title, the arrangement of sections and even paragraphs, and chapter headings—is the invention of the French abbot Charles Étienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, who first published the manuscript after discovering it in Madrid’s Biblioteca de la Real Academia de la Historia in 1861. Further, by examining the original document, the authors describe what, exactly, Brasseur found: a manuscript with multiple authors, different parts of which were written in the last decades of the sixteenth century, the beginning of the seventeenth, and perhaps even the early eighteenth century. Some of it was composed by Landa, but the manuscript was cobbled together by anonymous copyists, drawing from different sources (262).

The authors make a convincing case that a new, thoroughly annotated English translation was sorely needed and the accompanying essays—the icing on the cake—seek to change the way the text has been understood and used. The organizing principle of the essays (and, to a lesser extent, the extensive footnotes) is to engage more thoroughly ‘the Landa conundrum,’ i.e. the friar’s seemingly incongruous legacy as both preserver (in writing) and destroyer (in real life) of Maya culture and civilization. They thus consider Landa through the lens of Franciscan ideology and practice in sixteenth-century New Spain, which helps explain this seemingly contradictory missionary practice: the study of native culture *not* to understand it, but to better eradicate it, not only through the destruction of its artifacts (temples, books, effigies), but through the suppression of its custodians (native priests and caciques) and punishment of backsliders.

Restall, Solari, Chuchiak, and Ardren's study of the Account itself and its history invites scholars to reconsider Landa, his legacy, and purported 'book' attributed to him. Their goal is not to knock the text down, but rather to better explain its origins and what we can actually learn from it. In so doing—and this I think is one of the most important insights of the work—*The friar and the Maya* invites the reader to reconsider not only the *Relación* but Landa himself, particularly the view that he composed this text to justify and vindicate his harsh (to put it mildly) persecution of the Maya, which was facilitated by his expertise in Maya idolatries (including human sacrifice, which would justify a state of inquisitorial exception), as well as his understanding of history, calendrics, and even natural history.

The friar and the Maya fruitfully sets the text and the record straight. The new English version is more readable, polished, and faithful to the original manuscript, which is not—and has never been—a coherent text written by Landa. Intriguingly, the authors posit that Landa may have in fact maintained a *recopilación*, a compendium of passages he wrote using the work of his native informants, and other Spaniards (friars or *cronistas*); a text that may have even been close to publication, given some possible printer's markings on the manuscript itself. In addition, the authors identify others possible authors (or compilers) like royal historians Juan López de Velasco (1530–1598) and Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas (1549–1626).

The authors' task was not an easy one: they deconstructed the *Relación* and then put the Account back together, masterfully. And yet, like the text that occupies them, the essays do not speak with a single voice, at times even contradicting one another. For example, in 'The history of the Account and Maya studies' the authors question Clendinnen's thesis that a nostalgic Landa composed the *Relación* in the peace and quiet of a Spanish monastery in 1566. But 'Gender and the Account as a colonialist reverie' re-opens the possibility of a remorseful Landa, writing sympathetically about chaste, submissive, and kind Maya women: 'If Landa wrote this passage while in isolation in Spain, as is often assumed (and discussed earlier), the friar may have returned to Franciscan teachings of compassion and empathy with Indigenous people' (298). Fair enough. But in the conclusion, they write: 'Consequently, the Account cannot be treated as an authentic window onto only Landa's thoughts and feelings of the 1560s' (343). In other sections, the authors air their disagreements openly. So, for example, in a footnote to a section of the Account dealing with purported human sacrifice the authors indicate that Restall interprets the passage as a clear exaggeration of Maya ritual practices, suggesting it falsely portrays widespread 'human sacrifice' among the Maya. He sees this as contributing to the prejudiced distortion of Maya civilization, notable evident in Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto* (2006). Solari, Chuchiak and Ardren, the note continues, have a less dismissive attitude toward the passage (179–82 n354).

At the end of the day, however, the subtle and open contradictions contained within *The friar and the Maya* are more a feature than a bug; they invite further study and reconsideration.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/10609164.2024.2403840>

