

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE PRESERVATION OF MESOAMERICAN ARCHIVES: AN ASSESSMENT

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the role of the Catholic Church in the destruction and eventual recreation of the manuscripts, oral histories, and other records of the indigenous civilizations of Mesoamerica (the nations of modern Mexico and Central America). It focuses on the time frame immediately after the conquest of Mesoamerica by the Spanish. The article addresses this topic from an archival, rather than historical, point of view.

Destruction and Recreation

The invasion and conquest of Mexico by a Spanish expedition under the leadership of Hernán Cortés could be described as the most consequential event in the history of Latin America. The events read like a work of fiction: a band of adventurers from European Spain brought the language, religion, and other institutions of their nation to established pre-Columbian societies which had rich traditions of their own. The technologically and militarily superior Spanish, along with their indigenous allies, conquered the then-dominant power in the region, the Aztec Empire. Nonetheless, pre-Columbian cultures and languages survived to influence and enrich their Spanish conquerors, ultimately forming the complex and fascinating modern nations of Mexico and Central America, or “Mesoamerica.”

The Spanish invaders and Catholic clergy who accompanied them destroyed many of the old documents and archives of the civilizations which preceded them. They carried out this destruction often for military reasons (to demoralize the indigenous fighters opposing them), or, in other cases, on religious grounds (to battle what they regarded as the false faith of the native peoples). On the one hand, the Spanish invaders were extraordinarily cruel, and they damaged, or even annihilated, indigenous people’s records and archives. On the other hand, after the brutality of the *conquista* subsided, clerical scholars from the Catholic Church performed invaluable work in

preserving Mesoamerican literature and histories, albeit in a form influenced by European traditions.¹

This article summarizes the role of the Spanish Catholic clerics in both destroying and preserving/recreating the archives, records, and histories of the indigenous civilizations of Mexico and Central America. The article focuses on the immediate post-conquest period—the early to late sixteenth century—and mostly on the work of several prominent members of the Catholic Franciscan order in Mesoamerica.

Advanced civilizations had flourished in what is now Mexico and Central America since ancient times.² The Olmecs, Mayas, Aztecs, and other ethnic groups had attained great achievements in mathematics, astronomy, and architecture, among other fields.³ In fact, at the time of the Spanish conquest, the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán (modern Mexico City) was likely the largest city in the world.⁴ Even Hernán Cortés admitted that it was more beautiful than any town in Spain.⁵

Tenochtitlán and its surrounding areas were home to archives and libraries that documented the history of the various pre-Columbian societies in the region, as well as their literature and other achievements.⁶ The civilizations of Mesoamerica, going back to the Olmecs, wrote documents in picture glyphs, or a hieroglyphic system.⁷ Writers kept these documents on scrolls or screen-fold books on a form of paper that they made from deerskin or the bark of fig trees.⁸ Charles C. Mann in his book, *1491*, describes these texts, which could be folded like screens or hung on walls like a mural.⁹ Various Spanish primary sources regarding the conquest of Mexico described the presence of documents made from bark paper or other materials. These sources include Bernal Díaz del Castillo, one of the soldiers in the army of Hernán Cortés,¹⁰ and Don Antonio de Herrera, a royal Spanish chronicler of the period.¹¹ The Spanish conquerors acknowledged Mesoamerican societies' intellectual achievements. For example, the earliest citation by a European about Mesoamerican civilizations' writing appears in a 1519 letter from a Spanish archbishop to the King of Spain.¹²

Tenochtitlán and the Aztec Empire fell in 1521, and in the ensuing decades, Cortés and other Spanish *conquistadores* invaded the heartlands of the Maya ethnic group to the south.¹³ The Catholic Church subsequently began the process of converting the Mesoamerican peoples to Christianity.¹⁴ In doing so, the Catholic clergy in the region destroyed an unknown number of pre-Columbian manuscripts that they regarded as demonic or superstitious.¹⁵

Perhaps the most destructive acts occurred in the town of Maní, located in the Yucatán Peninsula of Mexico, on the orders of Bishop Diego de Landa. In 1562, (possibly July 12), Bishop Landa ordered the burning of ancient Maya glyph texts, as well as thousands of monuments, which he viewed as vestiges of paganism.¹⁶ While many accounts of these events are unclear, Landa himself admitted in *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* that he supervised the burning of a “large number” of hieroglyphic books.¹⁷ Some other sources place the number of destroyed Maya manuscripts at Maní at 27.¹⁸ Still others claim that 40 or more of the books perished in the flames that day.¹⁹ The exact number of manuscripts that the Spanish destroyed is likely irrelevant; the loss to historical knowledge is incalculable.

Other destruction of pre-Columbian archives occurred, some under the direction of the Catholic Church. After the aforementioned fall of Tenochtitlán, the Spanish soldiers

and their native allies demolished a great many of the Aztec temples which contained archives of sacred texts and historical documents.²⁰ The Spanish also massacred most of the Aztec priests, many of whom were scholars who had preserved invaluable oral and written histories.²¹ During the chaotic Spanish conquest of Mexico, warriors from an indigenous ethnic group, the Tlaxcalans, who had sided with the Spanish against their traditional Aztec enemies, destroyed an archival repository in the town of Texcoco, near Tenochtitlán.²² In that same town of Texcoco, Juan de Zumárraga, the first Archbishop of Mexico City, ordered the burning of Aztec glyph documents and art in the 1520s or early 1530s.²³ In the years immediately following the Spanish conquest, other mass destruction of indigenous civilizations' documents probably occurred, even though the records of contemporary chroniclers did not record exact amounts. Without question, these events were archival catastrophes of incomprehensible proportions.

Just as the dust was settling from the Spanish invasion, another chapter in this story was beginning. A number of Spanish friars of the Franciscan order went to Mesoamerica, learned the indigenous languages, and spent decades with the native peoples translating and transcribing their histories in an effort to recreate the documents and artifacts that had been destroyed.

The two Franciscan friars who were most responsible for setting in motion this salvaging process were Andrés de Olmos and Alonso de Molina. They studied the indigenous languages of Mexico and developed a system to transliterate them into the Latin alphabet.²⁴ In 1547, Olmos published a grammatical guide for learning *Nahuatl*, the language of the Aztecs and some other native peoples, and Molina published a Spanish/Nahuatl dictionary in 1555.²⁵ These friars paved the way for other scholars to preserve and even recreate pre-Columbian oral and written histories.²⁶

Arguably the most prominent of the Spanish clerics who strove to recreate the archives of the Aztecs and other Mesoamerican civilizations was the Franciscan friar, Bernardino de Sahagún. Born in Sahagún, Spain, most likely in 1499, he studied at the venerable medieval University of Salamanca²⁷ and migrated to Mexico in 1529.²⁸

Fray Sahagún was extremely interested in languages; they seemed to be his passion in life.²⁹ After arriving in Mexico, Sahagún caught a glimpse of the academies that the Catholic Church was forming for the study of indigenous civilizations, as well as for the transmission of some European knowledge and traditions to the newly-conquered peoples. The most prominent of these, the College of Santa Cruz, opened in 1536 in the Tenochtitlán suburb of Tlatelolco, and Sahagún soon joined the faculty at that academy.³⁰ Under the leadership of Sahagún, native students, who were typically tri-lingual in Nahuatl, Spanish, and Latin, wrote (or rewrote) various histories of pre-Columbian Mexican culture, history, and religion.³¹

The favored format for Mesoamerican histories before the Spanish conquest was the codex, a volume of inscriptions with pictures. Sahagún and his students followed the codex pattern, and thanks to their efforts, some of the Mesoamerican codices are preserved in various museums, and are named for the cities where they are currently housed, such as Dresden and Paris. Sahagún's students, most of whom history will never know, were invaluable in saving the lost sources.

As Adrian Cunningham has written, records provide evidence of decisions and human activities.³² The Mesoamerican codices fit this definition superbly, recording

pre-Columbian monarchs, astronomical advances, genealogies, calendars, and even marriages.³³ Sahagún and his students finished a major work, *Primeros Memoriales*, around the year 1560. This publication recreated some of the information lost in the Aztec archives.³⁴ The most-celebrated work by Sahagún and his students is the 12-volume *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*, which has also become known as the “*Codex Florentino*.” This codex, the latest version of the *Historia general*, was an illustrated encyclopedia with Spanish and Nahuatl text.³⁵ The physical structure of the manuscript was a departure from Native Mesoamerican codices; it resembled a European-style book, in line with Sahagún’s students’ methods. The content, however, in many respects resembled the traditional Mesoamerican codex format with pictures in traditional forms.

The *Codex Florentino* chronicles in detail the history of ancient and medieval Mexico, as told in Aztec accounts. The codex, which Sahagún and his students probably finished around 1555 (the original manuscript has been lost), has served as an invaluable source for the pre-Columbian history of Mesoamerica, especially the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs. For the narration of this last event, Sahagún used primary sources, painstakingly interviewing and gathering information from native elders who had actually witnessed the conquest. Sahagún and his students’ contributions greatly assisted the later study of indigenous Mesoamerican societies. The renowned historian of pre-Columbian Mexican literature, Ángel María Garibay Kintana, has noted that Sahagún’s works were the best sources for the study of Aztec history.³⁶ Miguel León-Portilla, another prominent Mexican historian, has gone so far in his biography of the Franciscan as to label Sahagún “the first anthropologist.”³⁷

Some scholars of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica have a decidedly more negative view of the efforts of the Catholic Church in Mesoamerican archival preservation. Ethnographer Marc Zender has detailed Aztec scholars’ and historians’ objections to the work of the Spanish clerics. Philipp Valentini, Zenia Nuttall and other critics have argued that Spanish transliterations did not reflect the Nahuatl language, and were written primarily for the purpose of evangelization. In their view, Spanish clerics’ scholarship may have, in fact, delayed the deciphering of Aztec scripts.³⁸ The Catholic Church was not the only source of scholarship; other non-clerical and even non-Christian scholars wrote chronicles of the conquest during this period. Among them was Fernando Alvarado Tezozómoc, a grandson of the famous Aztec emperor Montezuma II. Tezozómoc wrote two chronicles of the Spanish conquest of Mexico: *Crónica Mexicana*, and *Crónica Mexicáyotl*.³⁹

While Catholic clerics intended to use Mesoamerican archival scholarship to gain the trust of native peoples and convert them to Christianity,⁴⁰ the unintended consequence was to salvage pre-Columbian records and histories. Even Bishop Landa, who led the destruction of archives in Maní, wrote a history of the Maya peoples called *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*. Like the *Codex Florentino*, this work provides a detailed portrait of the Mayan culture which Landa had spent years studying. By writing *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, Landa preserved, perhaps unintentionally, many of the very same Maya languages, customs, and religious practices that he had been responsible for obliterating at Maní.⁴¹ Ironically, Mayalogists have for decades used passages from *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* to aid their efforts to decipher Maya glyphs.⁴² Michael

D. Coe, the leader of the team who translated the Maya glyphs, criticizes historians such as Valentini, arguing that Valentini's opinions have prevented scholars from fully utilizing Landa's work in deciphering Maya glyphs.⁴³ Deciphering the Maya glyphs has, in turn, opened an entire new world of Maya history. The prominent Maya historian George Stuart wrote that the study of pre-Columbian Mesoamerican history would have been far more difficult without Landa's contributions.⁴⁴

Sahagún and others' scholarship laid the groundwork for the eventual translation and publication of indigenous Mesoamerican literature and oral histories, such as the *Popol Vuh*, which details the histories of the Quiché Maya ethnic group. Catholic scholars originally took the *Popol Vuh* from Quiché oral histories shortly after the conquest, and in later centuries, other scholars preserved and translated it.⁴⁵ Another recreated Maya work of similar origin is the *Books of Chilam Balam*, which also provides a vivid description of Mayan history and spirituality.⁴⁶ A renaissance of literary and historical scholarship about the various Maya peoples occurred during the mid-sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Just a partial list of these histories includes the *Codex Perez*, the *Texto Chontal*, *Anales de los Cakchiqueles*, and *Historias de los Xpantzay*.⁴⁷ The authors of *The Ancient Maya* provide a description of some of the Maya codices, noting that the Mayas used natural gums to bind pulp derived from trees to make codex paper, and coated the pages with white lime.⁴⁸ The authors elaborate:

The pages were divided into horizontal sections by red lines, and the order of the reading was usually from left to right, top to bottom, remaining in the same horizontal section through one to as many as eight folds, then descending to the next section. The books were thus organized into chapter-like sections, and since they were painted on both sides, read all the way along one side of the strip, then turned and read along the reverse. They were bound between decorated boards, and when completely opened were quite long.⁴⁹

The Spanish Franciscans who established a system for recreating pre-Columbian archives provided a foundation for subsequent scholarship. Numerous other Catholic clerics, among them Diego Duran, Francisco de Las Navas, Toribio de Benavente Motolinía, and Martin de la Coruña, dedicated their lives to learning indigenous languages and recreating pre-Columbian histories.⁵⁰ A partial sampling of the ethnographic histories from this period include: *Relacion de Michoacán*, *Historia de los indios de la Nueva España*,⁵¹ the *Codex Ramirez* and *Codex Aubin*.⁵² While many different works exist, the pattern of Catholic clerics' scholarship and archiving remained constant.

The Catholic Church and the Preservation of Mesoamerican Archives: An Assessment

How, then, should we assess the role of the Catholic Church in preserving pre-Columbian civilizations' archives in Mesoamerica? As has been the case elsewhere, the Catholic Church has a mixed record. Certainly, the Church authorities destroyed innumerable Aztec, Maya, and other unique Mesoamerican documents. Many invaluable treasures were forever lost, thwarting our understanding of an important era of this

region's history. Nonetheless, Spanish and Mesoamerican Catholic scholars, working in the tradition established by Bernardino de Sahagún, have performed yeoman's work in re-making the archives and histories of the Aztecs, Mayas, and other pre-Columbian societies. The linguistic and ethnographic work of Sahagún, Andrés de Olmos, Alonso de Molina, and many others helped to preserve the area's indigenous languages, facilitating clearer and more precise documentation of pre-Columbian historical sources, particularly oral histories. Millions of people in Mexico and Central America still speak these indigenous languages, (indeed, today even Wikipedia is available in Nahuatl).

Had Sahagún and countless other anonymous Catholic scholars of indigenous, Spanish, or mixed descent not carried out their preservation efforts, contemporary archivists, historians and archaeologists might have far less knowledge of Mesoamerica's pre-Columbian history. This author concludes that in this sense, the Catholic Church has played a limited, but positive role.

Why should these events of centuries ago concern modern archivists? Unfortunately, because war is still a part of civilized society, the destruction of a people's archives and historical memory are very real possibilities. One recent example is the looting of the Iraqi National Museum during the 2003 invasion, when irreplaceable artifacts and documents were stolen. By studying how historians and archivists have worked to preserve lost records after wars or natural disasters, modern archivists can find new techniques to preserve this history. They can also educate the public about these losses, and hold political and military leaders accountable.

Certainly today's world is far different from that of the sixteenth century, but our need to preserve the history of war-torn areas continues. Education and technology may minimize senseless destruction, but until the human race abandons warfare, repressive regimes, and violence, contemporary archivists, like the sixteenth-century Franciscans, will likely have to repair the damage done.

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Appendix: Repositories with Prominent Mesoamerican Collections

George Mason University Mesoamerican Collections Research Project,
George Mason University.

Latin Americana Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California at
Berkeley.

Mesoamerican Manuscripts, Department of Rare Books and Special
Collections, Princeton University Library.

Latin American Collection, Yale University Library.

Spanish-American Colonial Manuscripts Collection, The Newberry Library,
Chicago.

NOTES

1. *Popol Vuh, las antiguas historias del Quiché*, trans. and ed. Adrián Recinos (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1995): 7.
2. Sylvanus G. Morley and George W. Brainerd, *The Ancient Maya*, 4th ed., rev. Robert J. Sharer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1983): 44–45.
3. David Webster, *The Fall of the Ancient Maya: Solving the Mystery of the Maya Collapse* (London: Thames & Hudson, Ltd., 2002): 77–80.
4. Buddy Levy, *Conquistador: Hernán Cortés, King Montezuma, and the Last Stand of the Aztecs* (New York: Bantam Books, 2008): 106.
5. *Ibid.*, 102.
6. Webster, *Fall of Ancient Maya*, 112.
7. Recinos, *Popol Vuh*, 8.
8. Webster, *Fall of Ancient Maya*, 112.
9. Charles C. Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005): 219.
10. Recinos, *Popol Vuh*, 8.
11. Miguel León-Portilla, *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, expanded and updated ed., (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006): 177.
12. Michael D. Coe, “The Royal Fifth: Earliest Notices of Maya Writing,” *The Americas* 61: 4 (2005): 2–5. The archbishop mentioned, among other things, that the books had wooden covers and that their paper was made from tree bark.
13. Morley and Brainerd, *The Ancient Maya*, 569–585. The Maya heartland was mostly in what now consists of Guatemala, El Salvador, and southern Mexico.
14. Levy, *Conquistador*, 324.
15. Recinos, *Popol Vuh*, 7.
16. Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatán, 1517–1570*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 77.
17. *Ibid.*, 70.
18. See, for example, Georges Baudot, “Las literaturas amerindias y la literatura en lengua española de México en el siglo XVI,” in *Historia de la literatura mexicana desde sus orígenes hasta nuestros días, Volumen I: Las literaturas amerindias de México y la literatura en español del siglo XVI*, ed. Beatriz Garza Cuarón and Georges Baudot (Mexico City: Siglo veintiuno editores, s.a. de c.v., 1996): 36.
19. John F. Chuchiak IV, “*In Servitio Dei*: Fray Diego de Landa, the Franciscan Order, and the Return of the Extirpation of Idolatry in the Colonial Diocese of Yucatán, 1573–79,” *The Americas* 61: 4 (2005): 614–615.
20. León-Portilla, *Broken Spears*, 184.
21. Levy, *Conquistador*, 324.
22. Baudot, “Las literaturas amerindias,” in Cuarón and Baudot, *Historia de la literatura mexicana*, 40.
23. Victor Wolfgang von Hagen, *The Aztec and Maya Papermakers* (Minneapolis, New York: Dover Publications, 1944): 31–32.
24. Baudot, “Las literaturas amerindias,” in Cuarón and Baudot, *Historia de la literatura mexicana*, 42.
25. Ascension H. de León-Portilla, “El despertar de la lingüística y la filología mesoamericanas: gramáticas, diccionarios y libros religiosos del siglo XVI,” in Cuarón and Baudot, *Historia de la literatura mexicana*, 368. In fact, Mesoamerican authors had already started writing the language in the Latin alphabet before Olmos and Molina began their translation work. Nonetheless, these Spanish scholars deserve great credit for providing a formal system for transliteration of Nahuatl, as well as some other Mexican languages.
26. Webster, *Fall of Ancient Maya*, 112–113.
27. Miguel León-Portilla, *Bernardino de Sahagún, First Anthropologist*, trans. Mauricio J. Mixco (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002): 37–38. Fray Sahagún changed his name to reflect his hometown.
28. *Ibid.*, 70.
29. *Ibid.*, 71. Apparently Sahagún began his study of Nahuatl by speaking with some Aztec passengers on the boat during his voyage to the New World.
30. *Ibid.*, 96.

31. de León-Portilla, "El despertar de la lingüística," in Cuarón and Baudot, *Historia de la literatura mexicana*, 358–363.
32. Adrian Cunningham, "Digital Curation/Digital Archiving: A View from the National Archives of Australia," *The American Archivist* 71:2 (2008): 532.
33. Webster, *Fall of Ancient Maya*, 112–113.
34. Ellen T. Baird, "Sahagún's *Codex Florentino*: The Enigmatic A," *Ethnohistory* 3:3 (1987): 288–89.
35. *Ibid.*, 289.
36. Víctor Manuel Hernández Torres, "Ángel María Garibay Kintana: La vida sencilla," in *Humanismo mexicano del siglo 20, vol. 1*, ed. Alberto Saladino García (Toluca: Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México, 2004) (online edition, Proyecto Ensayo Hispánico):281–292.
37. Leon-Portilla, *Broken Spears*, 266. During the course of his long life, Sahagún also produced numerous grammatical studies of the Nahuatl language and Christian works in Nahuatl, including translations of the Gospel and Epistles.
38. Marc Zender, "One Hundred and Fifty Years of Nahuatl Decipherment," *The PARI Journal* 8:4 (2008): 31–32.
39. Miguel León-Portilla, "Literatura en Náhuatl clásico y en las variantes de dicha lengua hasta el presente," in Cuarón and Baudot, *Historia de la literatura mexicana*, 160. The *Crónica Mexicana* was written in Spanish, while Tezozómoc penned the *Crónica Mexicáyotl* in Nahuatl.
40. John D. Early, *The Maya and Catholicism, an Encounter of Worldviews* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2006): 117–118.
41. David E. Timmer, "Providence and Perdition: Fray Diego de Landa Justifies His Inquisition against the Yucatecan Maya," *Church History* 66:3 (1997): 479–480. Mirroring Sahagún's work with the Aztecs, Landa lived for many years among the Mayas, learning their dialects and culture in an attempt to convert them to Catholicism. Scholars of this period in Mesoamerican history have speculated extensively on the apparently contradictory nature of Landa's mission.
42. Michael D. Coe and Mark Van Stone, *Reading the Maya Glyphs*, 2nd ed., (London, U.K.: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2005): 20.
43. Zender, "One Hundred and Fifty Years," 31.
44. George Stuart, "Glyph Drawings from Landa's *Relación*: A Caveat to the Investigator," *Research Reports on Ancient Maya Writing* 19 (1988): 23.
45. Recinos, *Popol Vuh*, 10–16.
46. *El libro de los libros de Chilam Balam*, trans. and ed. Alfredo Barrera Vásquez and Silvia Rendón (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1985): 10–16.
47. Mercedes de la Garza, "La expresión literaria de los Mayas antiguos," in Cuarón and Baudot, *Historia de la literatura mexicana*, 187–90.
48. Morley and Brainerd, *The Ancient Maya*, 514–515.
49. *Ibid.*, 515.
50. Georges Baudot, "Las crónicas etnográficas de los evangelizadores franciscanos," in Cuarón and Baudot, *Historia de la literatura mexicana*, 305–318.
51. *Ibid.*, 308–318.
52. Leon-Portilla, *Broken Spears*, 179–182.

