

# RE-EXAMINATION OF SPANISH COLONIAL PERIOD DOCUMENTS RELATED TO PREHISTORIC MAYA HISTORY AND MYTHOLOGY

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## *Resumen*

Siguiendo la conquista y la colonización española de Nueva España, las primeras crónicas e historias, relataban las expediciones militares de prominentes conquistadores con detalle, pero fue poca atención dada a la rica historia de los primeros habitantes y a su avanzada cultura. Los limitados reportes donde se relataba la prehistórica civilización Maya estaban contenidos en los escritos de los primeros clérigos españoles y los escritos de los primeros indígenas convertidos bajo su control. La interpretación (o la mala interpretación) de estos primeros documentos del periodo colonial español están a menudo en desacuerdo con la realidad histórica o con los resultados actuales antropológicos/arqueológicos basados en una evaluación limitada sobre ruinas abandonadas. Algo tan favorecedor al conocimiento de la prehistoria Maya, estos documentos del periodo colonial solo enlodaron el agua en muchos casos, reportando el último folklore como historia verídica y correcta. Este estudio es una reevaluación analítica de estos primeros documentos españoles para mostrar la verdadera relación con la prehistoria enigmática de la civilización Maya.

## *Abstract*

Following Spanish conquest and colonization of *Nueva España*, the early chroniclers and historians reported the military expeditions of prominent conquistadors in detail, but little attention was given to the rich history of

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the indigenous inhabitants and their advanced culture. The limited reports related to the prehistoric Maya civilization were contained in the writings of the earliest Spanish clerics and the writings of early indigenous converts under their control. The interpretation (or misinterpretation) of these early Spanish colonial period documents are often at odds with historical reality or with the findings of current anthropologist/archaeologists based on limited examination of abandoned ruins. Rather than contributing to knowledge of the prehistoric Maya, these colonial period documents only muddied the water in numerous instances, by reporting late fictional folklore as verified and accurate history. This study is an analytical re-examination of these early Spanish documents to show their true relationship to the enigmatic prehistoric Maya civilization

Following Spanish conquest and colonization of *Nueva España*, the early chroniclers and historians reported the military expeditions of prominent conquistadors in detail, but little attention was given to the rich history of the indigenous inhabitants and their advanced culture. The primary extant documents from the Spanish colonial period that relate to prehistoric Maya<sup>1</sup> history are the Chilam Balam books; the *Popol Vuh*; Diego de Landa's *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatan*; Diego Garcia de Palacio's *Relación hecho por el Licenciado Palacio al Rey D. Felipe II en la que describe la provincia de Guatemala*; and *The Florentine Codex*, by Bernardino de Sahagún. The works of Oviedo, Herrera, Las Casas, Gómara, Santa Cruz, Salazar, Antonio Chi, Diego Durán, and other lesser chroniclers were primarily concerned with historical Spanish exploration and colonial period events, and their limited coverage of prehistoric Maya history is of little value and was ostensibly taken from the writings of Landa.

The prehistoric history of the Maya is grossly distorted and inaccurate in the Chilam Balam books, the *Popol Vuh*, Herrera's *Historia*, and particularly Landa's *Relación*, although much of the inaccuracy stems from misinterpretation rather than content. In sharp contrast, the *Relación* by

<sup>1</sup> The definitive term "Maya" is used in this instance as a generic, historical definition to identify the dominant advanced and ethnically homogeneous polity in Mesoamerica that had internally developed writing, mathematics, public architecture, and other vestiges of civilization in the Formative period. By definition, this includes peripheral peoples that have the same root language and share the same cultural background, but have been arbitrarily compartmentalized as separate from the Maya because of largely superficial variances in language dialect, archaeological style, or use of different ceramic motifs and coloring.

Diego Garcia de Palacio contained more factual and accurate accounts related to the Maya pantheon of gods and rulers in the important Formative (Preclassic) and early Classic period. But unfortunately Garcia de Palacio's work has not been given the attention it deserves by scholars working in the discipline of prehistoric Maya history.

The twelve extant Books of Chilam Balam are copies written in Spanish in the late eighteenth-century from copies of earlier texts probably written in Latin in the fifteenth and sixteenth-century. The Chilam Balam books were named after the city in which they were written and only the *Book of Chilam Balam of Tizimin* and the *Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* contain historical information.<sup>2</sup> Edmonson notes in his introduction to the *Book of Chilam Balam of Tizimin* that the constant use of "Nahuatl" words in the text indicates the book was written in the basic western "Chontal dialect" of Yucatecan spoken by the Chontal Maya from Tabasco.

Scholars often interpret the accounts of Maya history recorded in the *Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* and in the *Book of Chilam Balam of Tizimin* as related to the ancient history of the Maya in the Formative and early Classic period. Contrary to this view, the two books are concerned only with a small group of theocratic nobles and priests in the late Post-Classic period who were keepers of the calendrical cosmology which established the seat of the *Katun* cycle and gave legitimacy to their limited temporal rule. When the calendrical cosmology required the seat of the *Katun* be moved to another designated city, this small group of priestly nobles moved and the city they vacated was declared "destroyed", a term frequently misunderstood and misinterpreted by historians.

When the seat of the *Katun* (equivalent to a mini Vatican) was moved from a city, the language in the *Chilam Balam* books infers that both the city and the "roads" to the city were "destroyed". But in both cases that was an abstract or religious symbolic destruction and not a literal or actual destruction. In the simple unsophisticated Mayan language, one word had several meanings according to the context in which it was used. The correct translation or interpretation in this instance —rather than "destroyed"—, should be that the authority of the ruling priestly nobles of the city to administer the *Katun* cycle was "terminated" or relocated to another city. This small group of priestly nobles and their entourage and family members constituted a small fraction of the merchant nobles and warrior lords that

<sup>2</sup> Munroe S., Edmonson, *The Ancient Future of the Itzá; The Book of Chilam Balam of Tizimin*, Univ. of Texas Press, Austin, 1982; *Heaven Born Merida and its Destiny: The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, Univ. of Texas Press, 1986; Ralph L. Roys, *The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, Univ. of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1967.

ruled the city under the multepal form of government. Accordingly, the local population, power, and provincial rule of the city would be little effected; —in short, the city was far from being “destroyed” or abandoned.

And the worded “destruction of the roads” should be interpreted as the “means” or “path of communication” of rural priests to and from their purely religious governing center (as in the Vatican) was terminated and relocated to the new chosen city. If the word “destroyed” in the Chilam Balam books is taken literally as applying to the entire city and its roads (which is the consensus of most Maya scholars) then according to the Chilam Balam books the cities and roads of Chichén Itzá, Champotón, and Izamal were “destroyed” on several occasions in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and early fifteenth centuries. Yet Francisco de Montejo and his captains found all three cities heavily populated and flourishing in the sixteenth-century and the inhabitants of the cities had no knowledge of any previous “destruction”.<sup>3</sup>

Current consensus expressed in archaeologist’s reports agree that Chichén Itzá was destroyed and abandoned in the twelfth or thirteenth-century, but details of the event are unclear.<sup>4</sup> Adams asserted Chichén Itzá was destroyed in 1187 after which the Itzá migrated to Lake Peten, and Sharer places this event in the thirteenth-century.<sup>5</sup> Contrary to this view, verifiable historical documents indicated it was still a large and important city occupied by the populous and powerful Itzá into the sixteenth-century and the Itzá warlords had no knowledge of previous destruction and abandonment of the city.<sup>6</sup> And further the Chilam Balam books, when correctly interpreted, indicated it remained an important city requiring tribute from a wide surrounding area well into the eighteenth-century.<sup>7</sup> The unrealistic and inaccurate history concerning destruction of cities and roads that never took place has resulted from flawed interpretation of the Chilam Balam books together with and bolstered by the inaccurate dating of

<sup>3</sup> Robert S. Chamberlain, *The Conquest and Colonization of Yucatan, 1517-1550*, Unabridged reprint of the 1948, Publication #582, Carnegie Institution of Washington, Octagon Books, New York, 1966, pp.136-144; Diego Lopez de Cogolludo, *Historia de Yucatan*, Translation of the original 1658 document into modern Spanish, Biblioteca Cultura, Merida, 1867, pp. 2-8; Douglas T. Peck, *Yucatan: From Prehistoric Times to the Great Maya Revolt of 1546*, Xlibris Corporation, 2005, pp. 295-353.

<sup>4</sup> David Drew, *The Lost Chronicles of the Maya Kings*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999, pp. 378-379.

<sup>5</sup> Richard E. W. Adams, *Prehistoric Mesoamerica*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1991, pp. 297; Robert J. Sharar, *The Ancient Maya* (fifth edition), Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1994, pp. 46-47, table 2.1.

<sup>6</sup> Chamberlain, 1966, 136-144; Peck, 2005, pp. 295-353.

<sup>7</sup> Edmonson, 1982, xx, p. 166.

damaged artifacts and buildings in archaeological investigation of long abandoned, vandalized and stripped ruins. Sweeping conclusions have been reached based on archaeological investigation without consulting accurate and verifiable historical documents related to the city under investigation.

Much of the “destruction” in Chichén Itzá, attributed by archaeologists to unclear perpetrators and questionable dates, could have occurred when Montejo the Younger with a sizeable military force attempted to occupy the populous and important city in 1533.<sup>8</sup> López de Cogolludo reported that Montejo, “set his headquarters in a centrally located plaza”, and later when besieged for several months had torn down many of the city’s buildings to provide a barricade defense against an overwhelming force of Itzá warriors.<sup>9</sup> This documented destruction by Montejo the Younger in the sixteenth-century would cast a shadow on the popular view of archaeologists that damage to the buildings was due to a postulated and questionable Toltec invasion.

The confused, unclear, and inaccurate history of the demise or destruction of Chichén Itzá has spilled over into the rise and fall of Mayapan. Sharer presented the consensus of Maya archaeologists and historians when he stated: “Mayapan was built *after the fall of Chichén Itzá*, and had been abandoned before the Spanish Conquest about 1450” (emphasis added).<sup>10</sup> The latter part is correct, but the first part of Sharer’s statement that Mayapan was built “after the fall of Chichén Itzá” is categorically untrue and without historical foundation. Mayapan was built by a small rebellious faction within the broad Itzá polity who sought to wrest power from the dominant warlords in the then *existing and powerful Chichén Itzá*. The architecture of the city was patterned after that in Chichén Itzá in a vain attempt to emulate and thus replace Chichén Itzá as the de-facto capital of Yucatan. Mayapan was doomed from the start by being built in a rocky, unfertile area without a reliable source of water. Its fall, after a relatively short existence was due to a rebellion within its own people rather than destruction by an outside invading force. The inaccurate and untenable view that Mayapan was a dominant power in the Yucatan is due to gross misinterpretation of the Chilam Balam books. David Drew voices this faulty interpretation in reporting:

“The city-state of Chichén Itzá may have begun to decline soon after 1000. Still very little is known about how or why the city met its end. The books of

<sup>8</sup> Chamberlain, 1966, pp. 136-144.

<sup>9</sup> López de Cogollado, 1867, pp. 2-8.

<sup>10</sup> Sharer, 1994, p. 408.

Chilam Balam talk of much political and inter-family intrigue among the Itzá and suggest that around 1220 it was attacked and defeated by the emerging city of Mayapan, one hundred kilometers to the west. There is now some archaeological evidence that this is indeed so; signs of destruction and the sudden [?] appearance of ceramics of typical Mayapan form. The name of the lineage that ruled Mayapan, Kokom, is mentioned in the inscriptions of Chichén Itzá. What seems to have occurred was a transfer of Itzá leadership from one city to the other, Mayapan now becoming the head of a similar kind of confederacy”.<sup>11</sup>

It is difficult to see how the understandable and irrelevant appearance of typical Maya ceramics found in both Mayapan and Chichén Itzá, and finding the inscribed name Kokom (Cocom), one of the many common Itzá family names in inscriptions in either city, constitutes “archaeological evidence” that “around 1220” Mayapan “attacked and defeated” the large and powerful city of Chichén Itzá. This is a classic example of drawing sweeping conclusions from interpretation of a few random bits of evidence. Contrary to this current consensus, Mayapan was a minor and insignificant factor in the long history of Chontal Maya/Itzá dominance of Yucatan from the capital city of Chichén Itzá. The Chilam Balam books (when properly interpreted) reveal that Chichén Itzá, Uxmal, Ti Ho (Merida), Champotón, and Izamal were dominant cities before, during, and long after the brief rise and fall of the relatively unimportant Mayapan.<sup>12</sup> This pattern of history derived from reliable historical records, including but not limited to the Chilam Balam books, differs sharply from current consensus supported primarily by examination and questionable dating of abandoned ruins and artifacts from limited archaeological investigations.

The political seating of the *katun* cycle temporal authority in Chichén Itzá and neighboring cities in the Post Classic period, controlled by the priestly *Chilam Balam* theocrats has no relevance to the earlier military conquest of the Yucatan by the Chontal Maya/Itzá in the early Classic period. Nor does the seating of the *katun* cycle by a small group of Itzá priests have a significant bearing on the overall control and power by the Itzá warlords during the late Post Classic period covered in the Chilam Balam books. An example of how this political process of seating the *katun* cycle can become confused with the broad picture of Maya history can be seen in the story of the small group of renegade Itzá priests who attempted to set the *katun* cycle in Champotón early in the thirteenth-century. This

<sup>11</sup> Drew, 1999, pp. 378-379.

<sup>12</sup> Edmonson, 1982, pp. 15-22.

troublesome group was thrown out and was forced to wander in the backwoods (“beneath the trees, beneath the bushes”) for forty years (doubtful) before they could find a city or town that would accept them.<sup>13</sup> Historians mistakenly view this small insignificant group (probably a related family group) as the entire Itzá polity perhaps because the Chilam Balam referred to them with the misleading term *Ytzaob* which infers the broad Itzá peoples rather than a small, relatively unimportant group, within the populous and widespread Itzá polity. The powerful Itzá warlords centered in Chichén Itzá during this entire period were probably quite unconcerned with the political intrigues of the sparring theologians fighting over what small group in what city would control the *katun* cycle which had little relevancy to military and political control of the particular city or province.

The *Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* started the history of the Maya in the first sentence of the First Chronicle with “the appearance of Chichén Itzá in 6 ahau,” which is generally interpreted as AD 711.<sup>14</sup> This is probably the basis for the popular view that Chichén Itzá was founded on that late date, but the Chilam Balam was speaking only about the seating of the *katun* on that date which is not relevant to the much earlier date the city was captured and founded by the Chontal Maya/Itzá.<sup>15</sup> Archaeologists are prone to date Chichén Itzá in the late Classic or Post Classic period based primarily on the style of architecture of the latest buildings examined, together with misinterpretation of the Chilam Balam books, neither of which has relevancy to the earlier date the city was founded and flourished. Recognizing that this late dating of Chichén Itzá is questionable, Michael Coe noted that some scholars infer Chichén Itzá may have flourished at a much earlier date and stated: “Only modern excavations at Chichén Itzá, a site which —despite years of excavations— is still poorly known, will tell us whether this view is tenable”.<sup>16</sup> Gates reported that the sacred religious centers of Izamal (Ytzamal, Itzamal) and Chichén Itzá (Chi Chen Ytza) traced their lineage to the “most ancient times (Formative period) of the Itzá.”<sup>17</sup> And the *Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* contains the sermon of

<sup>13</sup> Edmonson, 1982, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Edmonson, 1986, p. 51.

<sup>15</sup> The capture and founding of the powerful Itzá capital of Chichen Itzá is covered in detail in: Douglas T. Peck, “The Geographical Origin and Acculturation of Maya Advanced Civilization in Mesoamerica”, *Revista de Historia de América*, Número 130, Mexico City (2002:9-28); and, Peck, 2005, pp.43-95.

<sup>16</sup> Michael D. Coe, *The Maya*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1993, p. 154.

<sup>17</sup> William Gates, *Yucatan Before and After the Conquest*, translated with commentary of Diego de Landa’s *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán*, Producción Editorial Dante, Mérida, 1990, p. 165.



the high priest Xopan Nahuat, given in Mani in the sixteenth-century, which related the ancient history of the Maya before the Spanish conquest, and spoke of a deity (Kukulcan/Itzamna) originating (“roused”) in the west (Tabasco) and the “coming of our fathers, the Itzá”.<sup>18</sup>

In his discussion of the “Aboriginal History of Acalan”, Roys has confused the late convoluted history contained in the Chilam Balam books as relevant to the ancient Formative period history of the Yucatan.<sup>19</sup> An example of this misreading of history is Roy’s assertion that: “The Cupul, who ruled the region around Chichén Itzá, *after the Itzá had been driven out*, claimed descent from the Mexican invaders” (emphasis added).<sup>20</sup> The Chilam Balam books are filled with the name Itzá, but do not mention a people known as the Cupul, and instead it is listed as a province in north central Yucatan inhabited and controlled by the Itzá.<sup>21</sup> Edmonson also refuted this fiction that the Itzá were “driven out” in reporting that during this period “the Itzá constituted the aristocracy of thirteen of the eighteen provinces [including Cupul] in Yucatan”.<sup>22</sup> Reliable and later historical records show that the Itzá were not “driven out” since the lords of the large and powerful city of Chichén Itzá in 1532 claimed their descent from ancient Itzá kings of Tabasco rather than “Mexican Invaders” when they proudly announced to Montejo the Younger that “we here are the Itzá!”.<sup>23</sup>

Bishop Diego de Landa in his *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatan* supplied valuable information on the social traditions and religious dogma of the sixteenth-century Maya he encountered in the Yucatan.<sup>24</sup> But his several instances of reporting the early history of the Yucatan are flawed and inaccurate because of unreliable sources. Since Landa was in the same area and wrote his book only a relatively short time later, he must have drawn heavily from the sources of the Chilam Balam books as his *Relación* contains, almost verbatim, the errors regarding the role of the Chontal Maya god Kukulcan in the history of the Chontal Maya/Itzá. Landa set in motion the historically erroneous notion that in unspecified prehistoric times

<sup>18</sup> Edmonson, 1986, p. 74.

<sup>19</sup> France C. Scholes and Ralph L. Roys, *The Maya Chontal Indians of Acalan*, Reprint of Carnegie Institution, 1948 edition with commentary, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1968, pp. 74-87.

<sup>20</sup> Ralph L. Roys, *The Indian Background of Colonial Yucatan*, Publication 548, Carnegie Institution of Washington (1943:58); Scholes-Roys, 1968, p. 77.

<sup>21</sup> Edmonson, 1982, 42, and chart p. x.

<sup>22</sup> Edmonson, 1986, p.146.

<sup>23</sup> Martínez Hernández, 1926, pp. 6-7; Peck, 2005, pp. 324-326.

<sup>24</sup> Gates, 1990; Alfred M. Tozzer, *Landa’s Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán*, Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge, 1941.



Chichén Itzá was ruled by a mortal king named Kukulcan, who came from central Mexico, where he was worshiped as the god Quetzalcoatl.<sup>25</sup> Kukulcan was not a late mortal king from Mexico, but a Formative period Chontal Maya/Itzá god with origins in Tabasco and associated with Itzamna and the creation mythology of bringing writing and the sciences to the Maya.<sup>26</sup>

Herrera gave a wordier and patently fictitious version of the origin of the Itzá people and their lord named Cuculkan (Kukulcan). Herrera did not recognize that Kukulcan was an ancient god and instead described him as a celibate man with no wife or children.<sup>27</sup> Herrera asserted that Cuculkan (Kukulcan) came from the west, ruled Chichén Itzá for an indefinite number of years, then moved his temples to Merida (Mayapan ?) where “the people were governed with justice and lived in great peace”.<sup>28</sup> Herrera then asserted that after an unspecified time Cuculkan departed Mayapan for Champotón, where he built a temple in his memory and then continued to Mexico whence he had come.

The accounts of Landa and Herrera that infer Mexican or Toltec influence in Chichén Itzá are unsupported fictional hearsay and have no foundation for historical accuracy related to the early history of the Yucatan. Yet prominent archaeologists/historians have accepted them and other similar accounts as reliable and thus have reported a distorted and inaccurate history of the conquest of Chichén Itzá by the Toltec rather than by the Chontal Maya/Itzá from Tabasco.<sup>29</sup> It is difficult to understand why archaeologist/historians have readily accepted this patently unfounded fiction from Landa and Herrera while rejecting the valid and accurate reports of Diego García de Palachio.<sup>30</sup> Some few archaeologists have questioned Toltec dominance in Chichén Itzá (David Drew and Jeremy A. Sabloff being the most prominent), but these narrow and highly technical reports (which only briefly touch on the Toltec question) have received

<sup>25</sup> Tozzer, 1941, pp. 22-23, note 128.

<sup>26</sup> Peck, 2002, pp. 7-15, 2005, pp. 26-90.

<sup>27</sup> Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas, *Historia General de los Hechos de los Castellanos en las Islas y Tierra Firme del Mar Océano* (1601-1615), edition in modern Spanish, 5 vols., Madrid, 1934, dec. IV, libro X, cap. II; Tozzer, 1941, p. 215.

<sup>28</sup> Tozzer, 1941, p. 215.

<sup>29</sup> Peck, 2002, pp. 9-28.

<sup>30</sup> Diego García de Palacio, “Relación hecho por el Licenciado Palacio al Rey D. Felipe II en la que describe la provincia de Guatemala”, in: *Colección de documentos inéditos de Indias*, vol. VI, Madrid (1866:5); Herbert J. Spinden, *A Study of Maya Art: Its subject Matter and Development*, Unabridged republication of the 1913 edition published by the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge, Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1975, pp. 8-9.

limited distribution or acceptance and the inaccurate view of Toltec conquest or strong influence in Chichén Itzá prevails in the large body of published historiography.

The *Popol Vuh* (Book of the People) also contains numerous errors that have contributed to a misunderstanding of the significant historical role of the Chontal Maya/Itzá in the ancient history of the Maya. The *Popol Vuh* has been labeled by some scholars as the “Maya Bible”, but that label gives it an air of authority that it does not deserve. Dennis Tedlock subtitled his translation of the *Popol Vuh* as: “*The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life*”.<sup>31</sup> The *Popol Vuh* can be construed as the “Bible” for the late Postclassic Quiché Maya, but it is far from being qualified as the “Bible” for the large body of Formative and Classic period Maya. In his introduction Morley correctly identified the *Popol Vuh* as a late sacred book for only “a branch of the ancient Maya race” and suggested that the real sacred book or “Bible” was destroyed in the wholesale destruction of books by Landa and other clerics.<sup>32</sup>

The *Popol Vuh* has endured a long and confused evolutionary history. The Preface and Introduction to the Goetz-Morley English edition of the *Popol Vuh* gives an overview of the progression of the book from its unclear origin and translation from the Quiché language to Latin by the Dominican Priest Francisco Ximénez followed by several translations in Spanish, French, and German well before the English translations were published.<sup>33</sup> The unknown author of the *Popol Vuh*, with unclear authority and foundation, attributed their historical origin to the highland city of Tula. However, two instances in the narrative contradict this origin, when several of the early kings made pilgrimages and stated: “We are going to the East, *there whence came our fathers*”, and in another place they identified their origin as “the other side of the sea” (emphasis added).<sup>34</sup> To the east and the other side of the sea would place their origin in the coastal areas of the Yucatan rather than Tula. This origin of the Quiché in the Yucatan is confirmed in the *Relación* of Diego Garcia de Palachio which recorded the ancient history of the Maya in the vicinity of Copán. Garcia de Palachio

<sup>31</sup> Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh – The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1985.

<sup>32</sup> Delia Goetz and Sylvanus Morley, *Popol Vuh*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1950, ix-x.

<sup>33</sup> Goetz-Morley, 1950; Munro S. Edmonson, *The Book of Counsel: The Popol Vuh of the Quiche Maya of Guatemala*, Middle American Research Institute Publication 35, Tulane University, New Orleans, 1971; Tedlock, 1996; Allen J. Christenson, *Popol Vuh – The Sacred Book of the Maya*, O Books, Winchester, UK, 2003.

<sup>34</sup> Goetz-Morley, 1950, 79-80, p. 207.

reported that: “In olden times people from Yucatan conquered and subjected ....the land of Chiquimula [Quiché province] and this of Copan”.<sup>35</sup>

Bierhorst noted that the author of the *Popol Vue* referred to a much earlier lost book of mythology that “described how earth and sky were divided into four parts by a primal pair called Mother and Father [Ix Chel and Itzamna], also known as Plumed Serpent, Green Plate Spirit [earth], and Blue Bowl Spirit [sky]”.<sup>36</sup> Since the author of the *Popol Vue* was familiar with this earlier and authentic creation mythology it is difficult to understand why it does not appear somewhere in his convoluted version of the Maya creation myth. The *Popol Vue* gives a detailed description of the creator grandparents Xpiyacoc and Xmucane from the Quiche that bears little resemblance to the earlier less complicated Maya mythology of the primal Father and Mother. The one common element in all of these many manifestations of the Quiché grandparents was the title “Sovereign and Feathered Serpent”,<sup>37</sup> which is reminiscent of the earlier Chontal Maya/Itzá creation mythology with Kukulcan/Itzamna as the primal Father or “Sovereign” and similarly with their emblem of a “Feathered Serpent” or rattlesnake. In confirmation of this view of Maya creation mythology, Coe reported that the primal Father and Mother were the gods Itzamna and Ix Chel and “all the other gods, including the Bacabs, were apparently the progeny of this pair”.<sup>38</sup> Karen Bassie-Sweet has pointed out that “Itzamnaah (Itzamna) and Ix Chel were the lowland parallels of Xpiyacoc and Xmucane,” the “grandparents” from the *Popol Vue*.<sup>39</sup> Itzamna and Ix Chel, the primal Father and Mother from the initial Maya myth of creation centered in Yucatan<sup>40</sup> were not only “parallel” but were the models for the “Grandparents” and preceded the late *Popol Vue* by centuries if not a millennium.

The popular romantic and fictionalized narrative in the *Popol Vue* written by an unknown and “Christianized” Maya, bears little relation to this original and ancient Kukulcan/Itzamna creation myth, and instead contains strikingly similar parallels to the Judaic-Christian creation mythology. In

<sup>35</sup> Garcia de Palachio, 1866, p. 5; Spinden, 1975, pp. 8-9; Peck, 2005, pp. 87-90.

<sup>36</sup> John Bierhorst, *The Mythology of Mexico and Central America*, William Morrow and Company, New York, 1990, p. 176.

<sup>37</sup> Tedlock, 1985, p. 327.

<sup>38</sup> Coe, 1993, pp. 176-177.

<sup>39</sup> Karen Bassie-Sweet, *At the Edge of the World*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1996, p. 53.

<sup>40</sup> Bierhorst, 1990, p. 176; Coe, 1993, p. 177.

commenting on the translation of the *Popol Vuh* by Brasseur de Bourbourg,<sup>41</sup> Adolpho Bandelier observed: “It appears to be, for the first chapter, an evident fabrication, or, at least, accommodation of the Indian mythology to Christian notions, a pious fraud, but the bulk is an equally evident collection of original traditions of the Indians of Guatemala”.<sup>42</sup> Bandelier was correct in noting that the stories in the *Popol Vuh* applied only to the “*traditions of the Indians of Guatemala*”, but historians have mistakenly viewed these late regional traditions and folklore as applying across the board to the much earlier Maya pantheon of gods and creation mythology.

Morley’s interpretation of the *Popol Vuh* suggested that it was Topiltzin Acxiltl Quetzalcoatl, the mythical Toltec king, who repopulated Chichén Itzá, founded the city of Mayapan, civilized the Yucatan peninsula, and then returned to Tula<sup>43</sup> There is no valid historical basis for Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl or any associated Toltec military expedition visiting or conquering Chichén Itzá and Yucatan, yet this inaccurate historical view has been accepted without question by prominent archaeologists/historians working in the discipline of Maya history.<sup>44</sup>

The legend of the god-king Topiltzin Ce Acatl Quetzalcoatl was bound in the *Codex Chimalpopoca* (1558) and titled *Legenda de los Soles* or Legend of the Suns. The narrative of the legend is filled with romanticized, often weird and violently bloody interactions of highland gods and ethereal demons, reminiscent of legends in the *Popol Vuh*. The action is confined to the highland area of Teotihuacan and Tula for most of the legend and involves many god-kings with nearly unpronounceable names such as Teahuizcalpantlenetli, Huitzilopochtli, Tonacacihuatl, Xochiquetzal, Nochpaliucue, and others. Even though the players in the legend are pictured as gods, it is apparent the legends were based on ancient mortal kings who morphed into gods after centuries of evolution in oral mythology. Topiltzin Ce Acatl Quetzalcoatl was ostensibly one such ancient king or warlord who embarked on a lengthy campaign of conquest confined mostly to the highland area of central Mexico. But near the end of

<sup>41</sup> Charles Etienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, *Popol Vuh: Le Livre sacré et les mythes de L’antiquité américaine*, collection de Documents dans les Langues Indigenes de L’Amérique Ancienne I, Arthus Bertrand, Paris, 1861.

<sup>42</sup> Adolpho F. Bandelier, “On the social organization and mode of government of the ancient Mexicans”, *Peabody Museum, Harvard University, 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Report*, Cambridge, vol. 2, pp. 557-699, 1880, p. 391.

<sup>43</sup> Goetz-Morley, 1950, p. 207.

<sup>44</sup> Coe, 1993, pp. 142-145.

the campaign he had reached as far east as Tlapallan (Tabasco?) where the legend reads: “And then in that place [Tlapallan] he became sick and was ill for five days until he died. And when he died in honor there, they immolated him; he was burned”.<sup>45</sup> After Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl’s death his followers returned to the highlands and the remainder of the legend is concerned with politically inspired battles between the last kings of Teotihuacan and Tula. A significant historical fact can be learned from the *unaltered* story in this legend. If the Toltec, under any highland king or warlord, conquered Chichén Itzá as popularly believed; it seems rather incongruous that *there was no mention of that fact* in the highland *Legenda de los Soles* from Teotihuacan and Tula.

In the Maya/Spanish text of the Chilam Balam books from northern Yucatan (Chumayel and Tizimin) the name Kukulcan (Kukul Can) appears numerous times, but the names of Topiltzin or Quetzalcoatl are not seen in the original Spanish editions of the books. The name Quetzalcoatl only appears when inserted (without foundation) in the English translation of the books. Edmonson explains this misleading anomaly in translation by citing the strained argument that *Nacxit* (which appears only once in conjunction with the name Kukulcan) is one of the four names for Quetzalcoatl in the Nahuatl dialect.<sup>46</sup> But in the Maya text, Ah Nacxit appears as a priest for Kukul Can and not as the unnamed Quetzalcoatl. And later in the Maya text Kukul Can is associated with the Itzá without mention of Ah Nacxit or Quetzalcoatl.<sup>47</sup>

Morley, Roys, and Tozzer, faithfully followed by other more recent archaeologists/historians have apparently accepted Landa’s hearsay rumors related to the Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl myth as historical fact without reference to primary conflicting evidence. And in more recent historiography, prominent archaeologists/historians have accepted the flawed secondary reports of predecessors without question and added details that seem to add to the authenticity of a Toltec invasion of Yucatan and Chichén Itzá led by a mythical warlord or king named Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl.<sup>48</sup> Contrary to this inaccurate view, which is kept alive in current historiography, it was not a late Toltec king named Quetzalcoatl who brought civilization to the Maya in Yucatan, instead, it was the Olmec/Chontal Maya/Itzá with their primal gods Kukulcan/Itzamna who brought “civilized” writing and mathematics to the Yucatan in the

<sup>45</sup> León-Portillo, Shorris, 2000, pp. 62-63.

<sup>46</sup> Edmonson, 1982, p. 16.

<sup>47</sup> Edmonson, 1982, p. 24.

<sup>48</sup> Coe, 1993, pp. 145-146.

Formative and early Classic period.<sup>49</sup> One factor that promoted this inaccurate history is the early Spanish chroniclers had no concept of the Maya myth of creation and when the Maya attempted to acquaint them with their pantheon of gods the Spaniards assumed they were speaking of prehistoric mortal kings.

The *Relación*, written by Diego Garcia de Palacio in 1575 gave a far more factual and accurate account of early Maya history than the views expressed by Landa, Herrera, the Chilam Balam books and the *Popol Vue*. Quoting from oral history of the indigenous Maya and a bark paper book, since lost, Garcia had this to say: “They [Maya] say that in olden times a great lord of the province of Yucatan came here and built these buildings [Copán] and that at the end of some [many] years he returned to his home alone, and left them empty. According to this book [Maya Codex] it seems that in olden times, people from Yucatan [Chontal Maya/Itzá] conquered and subjected the provinces of Ayajal, Lacadon, Verapaz, and the land of Chiquimula [Quiché province] and this of Copán”.<sup>50</sup>

However, a recent compilation of archaeological investigations at Copán revealed that this documented historical view of early Yucatan influence into the southern lowlands and on into Guatemala from a reliable source has not been accepted, or has been arbitrarily disregarded, because it is contrary to current consensus of the academic community. The reported consensus among leading archaeologists is that similarities of art motifs and archeological styles in Copán, when compared with those of Teotihuacan, indicates acculturation from that source rather than from the Yucatan.<sup>51</sup> This popular view, which is contrary to documented historical evidence and logic, was reached in spite of the fact that the abundant examples of hieroglyphic writing in Copán have an affinity with the Yucatan rather than the relatively uncultured Teotihuacan area. Also the same art, sculpture, and archaeological styles in Copán that are claimed to have originated in Teotihuacan, can be found in the numerous archaeological sites in the Yucatan in far greater abundance and more finely executed than those in Teotihuacan.

The current consensus that Yax K'uk Mo, the founder of Copán (AD 426) and a dynasty that lasted for four centuries, was a warlord from Teotihuacan has been dealt a fatal blow by the nuclear physics research

<sup>49</sup> Peck, 2002, pp. 9-28, fig. 3; 2005, pp. 43-95.

<sup>50</sup> García de Palacio, 1866, p. 5; Goetz-Morley, 1950, p. 9; Spinden, 1975, p. 8.

<sup>51</sup> Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube, *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2000, pp. 191-213.

headed by Jane E. Buikstra of the University of New Mexico.<sup>52</sup> At Copán, Buikstra collected samples of the teeth and bones from Yax K'uk Mo's remains and sent them for isotopic analysis to the physics laboratories of the University of Wisconsin and Texas A&M University. Isotopic analysis of teeth and bones reveals the geographical area where the subject spent his childhood and early formative life. This archaeological investigation revealed that Yax K'uk Mo was not only an outsider, but the analytical evidence revealed that Yax K'uk Mo's homeland was in central Yucatan, quite probably Chichén Itzá, which confirms Garcia de Palacio's report that in ancient times Copán was founded by a great lord from Yucatan.

In summation, this study has revealed that anthropologist/historians in their archaeological investigations have failed to augment their findings with astute consideration of related colonial period historical documents. Three primary examples of this incomplete and inaccurate historical research are these:

- The patently fictitious and unfounded accounts of a Toltec invasion of Chichén Itzá and Yucatan written by Landa and Herrera, based on late Maya folklore, have been incorrectly viewed and reported as historical truth.
- The accurate and verifiable account of Garcia de Palacio that the high culture of the Maya in the Peten and Guatemala stemmed from the Yucatan rather than from the highland area of Teotihuacan has been arbitrarily disregarded because it is in conflict with current consensus based on examination of long abandoned, vandalized, and looted ruins.
- The *Popol Vuh*, containing the alleged Maya creation mythology, is popularly viewed as the “Bible” of the ancient Maya. Contrary to this view, the late and convoluted folklore of the Quiche, a small and relatively unimportant segment of the ancient Maya polity in both time and space, bears little relation to the original Maya creation myth of the primal gods Kukulcan/Itzmna as the “First Father” and Ix Chel as the “First Mother”.

<sup>52</sup> Jane E. Buikstra, T. D. Price, L. E. Wright, and J. A. Burton, “Revised Provenance of Yax K'uk Mo,” Chapter 10 of *Understanding Early Classic Copán*, University Museum Publications, Philadelphia, 2003; Charles Day, “Isotopic Analysis of Teeth and Bones Solves a Mesoamerican Mystery,” *Physics Today*, vol. 57, no. 1, 2004, pp. 20-26.



