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The Maya Resistance to Conquest

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ABSTRACT

Research done by scholars in this area has primarily focused on a one-sided narrative that supports the assertion that the Maya were conquered by the Spanish. It is important for us as historians to recognize the importance of delving into historical documents and reading between the lines in order to gather the “other side of the story.” Visiting Merida, MX helps historians better contextualize what occurred between these two entities. Though the Maya are referred to collectively, they are not a singular empire in the same way we would refer to the Inca or Aztecs as centralized units. Differentiating between empire and a civilization is paramount to understanding why the statement, “the Maya Empire was conquered by the Spanish,” is inherently false. We can say that some Maya cities were destroyed, but not the Maya as a whole given their continued presence and cultural dominance in the Yucatan Peninsula.

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Introduction

Throughout the course of history, there have been many civilizations who have gained notoriety for a variety of reasons. With the rise and fall of hundreds of empires on almost every continent, what makes a certain civilization stand out in history? Is it their religion and the way that it had come to be a staple of the American childhood experience like the Greeks and the Percy Jackson mythology series? Maybe it's the legacy of massive structures that have kept us guessing how they were built like the Great Wall of China or the Egyptians' Great Pyramid of Giza? Is it the captivating stories of extraordinary adventures made by seafaring explorers who were rumored to live lawlessly like the Scandinavian Vikings? The world has long since heard of the Maya civilization, however, what is it about this group of people that makes them truly stick in our minds? I would insist that it must be the Spanish colonization of the region they live in, and the highly popularized story of a Maya empire's "conquest" by famous conquistadors like Hernán Cortés or Pedro de Alvarado; conquistadors sent to explore the new world by the kings and queens ruling over the far and distant European lands. Though the Spanish have long since claimed their conquest of the Maya, recent historical evidence supports a different and unbiased narrative that counters this belief. But, contrary to all these famous stories, the answer to "if the Maya Empire was conquered by the Spanish" cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" phrase.

The definition of “conquer” according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary states it is, “to gain by force of arms.”¹ When one thinks of other civilizations that were conquered, the ancient empires of Persia and Greece come to mind; these are defeats that occurred through military domination or by bloody battles and campaigns. The 16th century is undoubtedly a period where conquest occurred around the globe, proved by the demise of the Aztec Empire through Spanish conquest and the height of the imperialistic European powerhouses. But the overall question of a Maya empire conquest is inherently flawed. Before, and even during the 15th and 16th centuries, the Mayas did not see themselves as a collective group of people the way we perceive them today. We group them together because of common features and similarities that scholars have found in hindsight, but at the time these civilizations flourished, they were spread apart, and disconnected from one another. Thus, to say “the Maya,” collectively grouping them together, were conquered, is a false statement since the reception of Spanish invasion varied from peaceful negotiations to bloody massacres. For example, many of the Maya kingdoms did submit themselves to Spanish rule, deciding not to take up arms and simply accept Spanish governance.² The genocide that occurred at the hands of the Spanish is undeniable, but a massive war waged between the two parties did not exactly occur. There were battles, but many of the Maya kingdoms simply relented, ready to give tributes in exchange for a semblance of peace and self-governance. Additionally, the fact that Maya culture survived, and their scattered communities remained overseeing themselves provides evidence towards adaptation to living under Spanish rule rather than a conquest of the Maya as a whole. In fact, as scholars M. Restall and A. Solari have asserted, “the Maya did not disappear at the close of the Classic era (no ‘Collapse’

¹ Merriam-Webster Dictionary

² Matthew Restall and Amara Solari, *The Maya: A Short Introduction*, p. 88.

encompassed all Mayas) or as a result of contact with the Europeans (no ‘Conquest’ encompassed all the Mayas). The Mayas persisted,” and still do today.³

Providing some background information, the Maya civilization was one of the greatest within the ancient American continent. Their existence is divided within three main categories: the Pre-classic or Formative, the Classic, and the Post Classic.⁴ The Pre-classic period spans back to 2000 BCE, depicting just how long this group of people have been around. Today, Maya people are spread around the globe but are mainly concentrated within the regions of “Southern Mexico and its Yucatan Peninsula, Guatemala, Belize, northwestern Honduras, and western El Salvador.”⁵ Mistakenly referred to as the “Mayans,” the Maya people did not have an empire, the Maya were never a unified or cohesive political group. This was due largely to the varied topographical features spread across the Maya inhabited regions. There were “flat, arid, riverless limestone peninsula in the north, to the hilly, tropical rainforest of the center, to the volcanic highlands of the south.”⁶ Although this did not help create a unified and coherent empire, these barriers did help to facilitate the development of different Maya communities, each with their unique languages; around thirty languages in total. Likewise, there “was no peninsula-wide Maya Empire when Europeans first arrived; there had never been one.”⁷ The formation of these independent states helped to prevent a complete conquering by the Spanish during their invasion of the American continent during the 16th century. The Spanish came because they were attracted to the prospect of finding resources that would greatly benefit them such as precious

³ Matthew Restall and Amara Solari, *The Maya: A Short Introduction*, p. 86.

⁴ Matthew Restall and Amara Solari, *The Maya: A Short Introduction*, p. 3

⁵ Matthew Restall and Amara Solari, *The Maya: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 1.

⁶ Matthew Restall and Amara Solari, *The Maya: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 1.

⁷ Matthew Restall and Amara Solari, *The Maya: Short Introduction*, p. 68

metals (). And while a majority of Maya communities eventually were colonized by the Spanish, what many people do not realize is that this colonization happened mainly in certain areas like the perimeter of the peninsula and only after a “series of failed invasions in the 1520s and 1530s.”⁸ It was during these decades that the colony of Tihó, now referred to as Merida, was founded.⁹ Thus, when the Spanish did invade the Maya territories, they did not find an empire managing taxes, tributes, or with a hierarchical system of government. One could undeniably argue that **some** kingdoms or cities were “conquered,” but to say that the people as a whole collapsed is wrong given that the characterization is only applicable to a certain population of Maya kingdoms. The question, “was the Maya Empire conquered” is therefore flawed in yet another way.

Commonly popularized in contemporary media for their “prediction” of the end of the world, the Maya are not some unintelligent group of indigenous peoples as described by European colonizers, but rather were a very advanced civilization, capable of adapting following Spanish invasion of their lands, not a conquest.

One of the most important ways historians are able to gather a better understanding of the topic in which they discuss is by visiting archives, or if possible, ancient sites. Luckily, the Maya still have some very important sites and cities still standing, granted many cities were unfortunately destroyed by the Spanish. Over this past summer, I traveled to Merida, Mexico, one of the main Maya cities that the Spanish transformed to a still-thriving uniquely semi-blended society. Here, I was able to gain better knowledge and understanding of what exactly

⁸ Matthew Restall and Amara Solari, *The Maya: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 67

⁹ Matthew Restall and Amara Solari, *The Maya: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 67

“happened” to Maya culture and people. And it was here that I saw firsthand how alive the civilization remains. Seeing the beautiful pyramids at Chichen Itza and Izamal, it was clear how proud the locals were of their Maya history and cared deeply for its preservation. For example, while visiting the pyramids within Chichen Itza, one is guided through by the local Maya people with explanations given on the importance of various Maya cultural aspects such as deities and practices like the ball game. Using first-hand experiences like conversations with Maya as well as hearing the history through locals, certainly provides me with a distinctive angle to demonstrate how the Maya are an adaptive civilization because I am no longer using the accounts of others but rather my own experiences within a few of the most important Maya cities to date.

By looking at how the Spanish came to the Americas and who sent them, one can clearly see why the Maya would want to remain politically and culturally autonomous. Thus, using the information gathered through this experience coupled with the primary and secondary sources discovered, it is undeniable to see how one must consider the secondary “historical story” and realize that the Spanish did not conquer the Maya, but rather they were able to preserve their unique history that remains today.

The Spanish Facilitators

It is important to note the important Spanish actors who spear-headed the invasion in Mexico and Central America. Their accounts along with the documented Maya voices provided through manuscripts like the *Popol Vuh* and through oral accounts give us insight into the overall question and provide evidence towards a “yes AND no” answer rather than a clear-cut assertion that there was a Maya empire that was conquered by the Europeans and did collapse. Hernán Cortés, Spanish conquistador and leader of the Aztec Empire’s downfall was sent to the Americas by the Spanish king, Charles V, in order to claim land in his name and find resources that they could take advantage of such as gold.¹⁰ Cortés was instrumental because he facilitated the contact between Spanish conquistadors and the Maya people following the demolition of the Aztec Empire. During 1525, “an expedition of some 300 Spaniards and African slaves, and more than 3,000 Nauhau warriors, traveled across the base of the Yucatán Peninsula.”¹¹ Cortés was a leader of this exploration further into the southern parts of Mexico, with other European members of the Aztec conquest present as well.¹² Through these explorations, the Spanish first made contact with the Maya kingdoms. In fact, Cortés sent Pedro de Alvarado and his brothers, all Spanish conquistadors, to explore further south into the peninsula and even into the border area of Guatemala. Referred to as “Tonatiuh” in Maya written accounts, Pedro de Alvarado and his Spanish men were less violent to some communities, making them provide tributes or gifts of

¹⁰ Bill of Rights Institute, Cortés' Account of Tenochtitlan, 1522.

¹¹ Matthew Restall and Kris Lane, *Latin America in Colonial Times*, p. 83.

¹² Matthew Restall and Kris Lane, *Latin America in Colonial Times*, p. 83.

resources while to other communities they simply massacred the people.¹³ His actions are key in providing scholars confirmation that Maya interactions between conquistadors were not a “one-size fits all” approach but rather varied dramatically.

The Maya, however, were not new to the notion of attack or conquest attempts. In fact, before the Spanish had arrived onto the shores of the American continent, all the indigenous groups in and around Central America had their fair share of invading and battling one another. Maya kingdoms, communities, and states “had previously experienced empire and the violence expansionism that is intrinsic to it,” as the central American region, home famously to the Aztecs, was a popular location for centuries and saw “rise and fall of empires.”¹⁴ Similarly, were it not for the collapse of the Aztec empire, “an Aztec invasion would surely have taken place.”¹⁵ When it came to relations between the Mayas themselves, some kingdoms had no qualms throwing others under the bus and allowing the Spanish conquistadors to massacre them. In an account from the Spanish invasion of the Kaqchikel Maya, Pedro de Alvarado asks them who their enemies are. They answer with the names of two neighboring groups of Maya, the “Tz’utujil and those of Atakat,” after which these people are massacred by de Alvarado and his company.¹⁶ Again, demonstrating how disconnected each community was from one another, generally speaking the Maya seriously saw themselves as solely responsible for those in their own communities. It clearly did not matter that “the Tz’utujil were also a Maya people, close cousins in every way to their neighbors, the K’iche’s and Kaqchikel; their languages and were

¹³ Matthew Restall and Florine G. L. Asselbergs. *Invading Guatemala: Spanish, Nahua, and Maya*, p. 106.

¹⁴ *The Maya: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 68.

¹⁵ *The Maya: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 69.

¹⁶ Restall, Matthew, and Florine G. L. Asselbergs. *Invading Guatemala: Spanish, Nahua, and Maya* p. 106

related [and] they had common ancestors.”¹⁷ Unfortunately, the Spanish were able to use this to their advantage and pit Maya against Maya, meaning some communities survived while many others didn’t. “The Tz’utujil Maya nobles of Santiago Atitlan emphasized that they were allies of the Spaniards—offering friendship, fighting and suffering for them, remaining loyal ever since.”¹⁸ All in all, Maya peoples like the aforementioned one, who could easily set up other kingdoms for destruction by the Castilians, can be seen as adapting to this new way of life. The phrase, “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” truly does resonate with the way Maya were able to use the Spanish to their advantage. Simply submit to the Spanish, name your enemies, and the Spanish will take care of them for you. Proving that the Maya did not collapse, nor were they conquered; they simply were smart and adapted quickly.

¹⁷ Restall, Matthew, and Florine G. L. Asselbergs. *Invading Guatemala: Spanish, Nahua, and Maya* p. 110.

¹⁸ *Invading Guatemala: Spanish, Nahua, and Maya*, p. 111.

Maya Settlement Patterns

Fractal settlements are similar to that of many modern-day civilizations.¹⁹ With the idea of smaller scale “copies” of each other, a fractal settlement implies congruence in shape, but not necessarily in size. It is these factors from which one can imply the socio-economic differences of the Maya. While Maya settlements are very recognizable and distinct, there lay multiple variations influenced by many factors which included regional, economic, and social factors.²⁰

For many, the idea of indigenous resilience to conquest lay in the form of warfare, rebellion, etc. But for the Maya, resistance to the everyday life that Spanish conquistadors desired them to conform to was key in their survival and the continuation of their culture in the 21st century. The Spanish, and many other European colonialists, at the time used the idea of the church or religious conformity as a key tool. Those who were presented with Christianity had different reasons for why it not only suited, but also improved their lives.²¹ For the Mayas however, while religion certainly played a part in their early “conquest”, the Maya were able to circumvent a total cultural genocide through their resistance to colonial rule in their social organization. Due to their fractal settlement patterns, religious conversion on a mass scale proved extremely difficult for Spanish conquerors.²²

¹⁹ Clifford T. Brown, Walter R.T. Witschey, The fractal geometry of ancient Maya settlement, Pages 1619-1632,

²⁰ Rice, P. M. (2013). Texts and the Cities: Modeling Maya Political Organization. *Current Anthropology*, 54(6), 684–715

²¹ Kaplan, Steven (1995). *Indigenous Responses to Western Christianity*. NYU Press.

²² Ruz, M.H. (1994), Maya Resistance to Colonial Rule in Everyday Life. *The Latin American Anthropology Review*, 6: 33-40.

Maya settlement patterns were largely affected by economical, agricultural, and other aspects. Although, many patterns are consistent with those produced by warfare which helped develop claims of ancient warfare within ancient Maya culture.²³

This “fractal” form of the Maya settlement that although many aspects of each settlement were “self-similar”, conformity at a mass scale was nearly impossible. These patterns not only helped bolster local autonomy for the Mayas but nearly guaranteed generational continuance.²⁴ These generational consistencies mirrored the “houses” of medieval Europe with certain localizations by class and economic standing present as well.²⁵

Analyses of these patterns have led to the idea that Maya culture was largely urban with ideas of zoning and individual neighborhood structure but using lineage and hierarchy as the lens to view the settlement patterns show the social dynamics which existed within the lowland Maya settlements. When juxtaposed to similar indigenous empires, e.g., the Aztecs, one can see that although “cities” existed within these empires, the Maya had significantly less population density, creating a “low density urbanism” phenomena.²⁶

Other Mesoamerican civilizations may have had higher population density, but cultural practices were largely similar amongst these respective people. The Maya however, developed regional traditions due to various factors. While there was an overarching “Maya Empire”, there

²³ Houk, Brett A.. (2017) The Ancient Urban Maya: Neighborhoods, Inequality, and Built Form. *Journal of Field Archaeology*, 42

²⁴ Rice, P. M. (2013). Texts and the Cities: Modeling Maya Political Organization. *Current Anthropology*, 54(6), 684–715.

²⁵ Maya Nested Houses Susan Gillespie p. 136-137

²⁶ Michael E. Smith, « Classic Maya Settlement Clusters as Urban Neighborhoods: A Comparative Perspective on Low-Density Urbanism », *Journal de la Société des américanistes*, 97-1 | 2011, 51-73.

was no singular centralization which led to different trade relations, infighting, cultural and political autonomy, which proved to be a major factor in their cultural survival in post-conquest times.²⁷

²⁷ Clifford T. Brown, Walter R.T. Witschey, The fractal geometry of ancient Maya settlement, Pages 1619-1632

Lack of Unification and Maya Resistance

Spanish conquest of other indigenous peoples in the Americas could be seen as simpler due to the more "unified" nature of other empires. Conquistadors would find themselves waging war on these larger empires with the goal of toppling armies rather than complex social structures. For example, when contrasting the conquest of the Incan empire in present-day Peru to the Maya "empire"; while the area was geographically similar to the Yucatan Peninsula with ports and coastal settlements being areas of interest, the Spanish, namely Francisco Pizarro, were more concerned with defeating a brutal Incan army to succeed in conquest.²⁸ For the Mayas, despite their cultural, scientific and economic achievements and status, the Spanish still believed they had to be "pacified", therefore while there was traditional warfare between the Spanish and a technically sound Maya "army", it was the lack of social conquest that proved difficult.

Interestingly enough, the northern neighbors of the Maya, the Aztec Empire also suffered the same fate as the Incan Empire, with the Conquest of Tenochtitlan taking place over the span of three years. Within the swift conquest of the Aztecs lay key cultural advantages that led to the Spanish victory. While the Aztec empire was large, complex and expansive, their empire was bound together by the military and the influence of Tenochtitlan with many cities and areas on the periphery both geographically and socio-economically.²⁹ This allowed for the integration of Aztec soldiers into Hernan Cortes' army and the nearly instant colonization of local tribes due the tension that existed within the smaller city-states and the political divisions between Tenochtitlan and its constituents.

²⁸ Meddens, Frank M (03/20/2023). "Ploughing up the battlefield; Inca warfare, conquest and resilience". *Estudios latinoamericanos (Wroclaw, Poland)* (0137-3080), 42 , p. 71.

²⁹ Lazerowitz, Evan, *The Rapid Fall of an Empire: How Hernán Cortés and His Small Band of Brothers Felled a Mighty Empire* (December 15, 2008)..

Spanish conquistadores regularly had to adapt to both the terrain and the cultural practices of those present in the region in order to be successful. Similar to the conquest of the Aztec empire, while the Incan empire was vast and militarily sound, their lack of adjustment to the fundamentals of Spanish warfare proved to be detrimental to their efforts to defend their empire. The Incan army followed many different rituals and traditions which they felt were imperative in their success. Whether it be their binary systems of organizations in increments, which represented the dualistic nature in almost all aspects of their society, or their military dress being directly representative to what socio-ethnic group a soldier was from (an act that if diverged from would result in death).³⁰

For the Maya, while warfare existed within their culture (mostly due to infighting) due to neighboring settlements cultural differences) violence was not a means for conquest rather to strengthen political authority, with war prisoners being victims of ritual sacrifice.³¹ Therefore, when faced with impending conquest from the Spanish, there was no singular army in place to symbolize the power and strength of the people. For the Spaniards, victory was consistent with total eradication of the opposing side. The spoils and economic stratification of war was a more than adequate motivation for the Spanish. For the Maya however, while economic gain was a benefit of war, violence was still another ritual even in the face of conquest. For the Maya the idea of surrender was nonexistent, not just to keep morale high, but it is believed that the idea of one force capitulating to another was not a concept they abided by. Even in direct conflict, it is documented that the Maya did not attempt to kill Spanish military leaders on the battlefield

³⁰ Douglas, Daniel (1992). "Tactical Factors in the Spanish Conquest of the Aztecs". *Anthropological Quarterly*. 65 (4): 187–194

³¹ Kim, N., Hernandez, C., Bracken, J., & Seligson, K. (2023). CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF WARFARE IN THE MAYA WORLD. *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 34(1), 266-279

regardless of the casualties on their end. Rather it seemed as if the Maya were attempting to capture the Spaniards alive, in order to sacrifice them at a later time.³² It is this major difference about the Maya that made the general “rules” of conquest and war nearly obsolete in the Spanish quest to colonize the region. It is due to this that the Spanish began to attempt a sociological change amongst the Maya peoples through economic and religious means.

If Maya resistance in the form of settlement patterns and military means proved difficult for the Spaniards, a theological dismissal of Christianity also proved to be an obstacle. While other aspects and occurrences happened within the Maya culture that helped reinforce this feeling, namely a drought that occurred in the northern Yucatan region at the time, it was not uncommon for various settlements to attribute Christianity with disasters and suffering.³³ For many of the Maya, Christianity was not just a disruptor, but a direct opposition to deity’s they already worshiped. While many indigenous peoples in the Americas had various monotheistic, polytheistic and even shamanistic, Maya religion was largely animistic with some polytheistic aspects. For them, the new prospects of Christianity only meant a new form of suffering for them.

For many indigenous peoples in both the Americas and non-western civilizations, the idea of Christianity was met with different forms of resistance. Each being influenced by varying factors. In general, Christianity seemed to have more success amongst smaller tribal nations rather than larger empires. This was largely due to the already established religious systems in these nations which almost always was coupled with military force in regard to the larger

³² The Lowland Mayas, from the Conquest to the Present. In R. Adams & M. MacLeod (Eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas* pp. 346-391

³³ Chi to Fancourt 23 April 1849 in Rugeley, *Maya Wars*, p. 54

empires.³⁴ As mentioned before, Maya society was largely based around the idea of ritualism, but there were religious figures within each settlement as part of larger religious organizations. There were also curers, seers, and other shamanistic aspects as part of a large and complex religious system.³⁵ While there were some aspects of Christianity that “integrated” themselves into Maya culture it is worth noting that the religious diversity within the empire made a large-scale implementation nearly impossible.

³⁴ Kaplan, Steven *Indigenous responses to Western Christianity*, 1995

³⁵ Rafael Girard, *Los Chortis ante el problema maya*. Guatemala: Editorial Cultura. 1949.

Political Autonomy

After the Spanish invasion, some Maya communities were able to maintain their political systems and hierarchical organizations. Playing into the submissive role that their overseers wanted them to be under, the Maya cleverly fooled the Spanish by pretending that they were using the European's form of government. For example, compliance to Spanish political practices was actually illusionary; Maya traditions in local politics persisted in secret, "as was common in colonial Mesoamerican towns, a veneer of compliance with colonial procedures covers the real machinations of local politics and traditional practices."³⁶ Even so, in order to maintain this sense of independence, the Maya did go along with European practices that actually benefitted them, such as transforming communities into towns that were "oriented around a central plaza and a monastic complex."³⁷ The Maya not only built these buildings and incorporated churches into their evolving cultural practices, but also "became sites of civic pride for many Maya populations, and the resulting Catholicism was truly Maya as it grafted Christianity onto a substrate of indigenous belief."³⁸ Therefore, there were things that were willingly and enthusiastically incorporated into the Maya kingdoms, practices that did not harm their own customs or traditions, but rather were a benefit to their overall evolution as a people. Given this, a petition coming from the Maya of Xcupilcacab to the Spanish officials during the later years of colonization, 1812, demonstrates that even if time had passed from the original

³⁶ *Mesoamerican Voices: Native Language Writings from Colonial Mexico, Yucatan, and Guatemala*, p. 80.

³⁷ *The Maya: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 89.

³⁸ *The Maya: A Short Introduction*, p. 89.

Spanish invasion of the 16th century, there was still a discrepancy in the “loose relationship between Spanish requirements and local native practices and traditions.”³⁹

³⁹ *Mesoamerican Voices: Native Language Writings from Colonial Mexico, Yucatan, and Guatemala*, p. 80.

Contemporary Writings

One of the difficulties with reading historical documents and narratives told by a singular side is that the reader can fall victim to biased writing. Biased writing is when the author “[favors] or [disparages] one person, group, thing or point of view over another. The ideal communication contains language that is sensitive to race, age, physical condition, sexual orientation, gender identity and other categories where terms used to describe them can change.”⁴⁰ In this case, because the Spanish were a flourishing empire at the time of their colonizing efforts during the 15th and 16th centuries, it’s no surprise they’d want to portray a narrative in which they were victorious in conquering the Maya. However, this claim is inherently biased, much like other European claims regarding indigenous groups in Latin America. For example, the Maya people persist today, and even when the Spanish invaded the Yucatan Peninsula, there were still many Maya communities essentially left “untouched” by the Spanish. Hence, one cannot claim to conquer a civilization that was able to live on. Overall, the ideas presented by Douglas Peck in his “Re-Examination of Spanish Colonial Period Documents Related to Prehistoric Maya History and Mythology” mirror these notions of bias presented through Spanish colonial documents.⁴¹ In fact, he specifically describes the way in which the reports on the Spanish’ military campaigns were detailed and exaggerated, and that the Spanish failed to adequately document the Maya’s “advanced culture.”⁴²

⁴⁰ Jennifer Singleton, “How to Avoid Bias in Your Writing,” *GovLoop*. 23 May 2022.

⁴¹ Douglas T Peck, “Re-Examination of Spanish Colonial Period Documents Related to Prehistoric Maya History and Mythology,” *Revista de Historia de América*, no. 136 (2005): 22.

⁴² Douglas T Peck, “Re-Examination of Spanish Colonial Period Documents Related to Prehistoric Maya History and Mythology,” *Revista de Historia de América*, no. 136 (2005): 23.

Peck specifically cites misinterpretation of prehistoric practices and customs as being the primary reason for inadequate documentation. One cannot document the importance of something if there is no recognition of its importance in the first place. With that, we get a loss of history. The tragic reality of relying on one side to tell the story of a civilization so complex and advanced. Likewise, Peck further delves into why misinterpretation occurred, noting that “in the simple unsophisticated Maya language, one word had several meanings according to the context in which it was used.”⁴³

The *Popol Vuh*, is known to contain the “most detailed version of the Maya creation,” and is “written in K’iche’, one of highland Guatemala’s Maya languages.”⁴⁴ Within its translation, there are words such as “destruction” that Peck notes are mistranslated and should translate instead to “termination.”⁴⁵ A simple word change can go a long way in changing the meaning of something. It is through instances as straightforward as these that a story is changed, and perspective lost. When it comes to the Maya, it is so important that we, as historians, acknowledge our own flaws in documenting history. And while it may be easy to fall victim to taking what one reads as being true, acknowledging the setback caused by inaccurate or incomplete historical writing is key.

⁴³ Douglas T Peck, “Re-Examination of Spanish Colonial Period Documents Related to Prehistoric Maya History and Mythology,” *Revista de Historia de América*, no. 136 (2005): 23.

⁴⁴ Restall, Matthew; Solari, Amara. *The Maya: A Very Short Introduction* (Very Short Introductions) (p. 11). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

⁴⁵ Douglas T Peck, “Re-Examination of Spanish Colonial Period Documents Related to Prehistoric Maya History and Mythology,” *Revista de Historia de América*, no. 136 (2005): 23.

Another group we must consider when discussing Maya history is Maya women.

Incorporating women within written history is paramount in order to create a more accurate and complete understanding of not just history in general, but in this case, Maya history and their interactions with the Spanish conquistadors. Maya women are unique in this story, given the fact that not only were they dealing with a patriarchal society, but also because we do not yet see the arrival of Spanish women to give their own account or act as witness. Thus, the weight that the voices of Maya women carry during this time period is truly monumental and provides historians a better image of what exactly occurred.

Overall, women's voices often tend to be overlooked, even omitted in early historical documents just because their presence was not valued in society the way it is today. However, by leaving out their stories, one gets a biased perspective on historical events that overemphasize the achievements as well as the experiences of men over women. They were not "just" participating in "gender based" activities like weaving and caring for children within the different settlements, they are still an equation to the story.⁴⁶ Incorporating not only the perspectives of Maya people, but also Maya women, people are able to gain a better understanding of the various roles they played in society, especially as leaders during the "age of conquest" and learn more about what challenges they encountered. For example, many people do not know of the treatment Maya women received at the hands of the Spanish. Women were subjected to terrible torture, "women suffered the usual appalling sexual abuse at the hands of the Spaniard and Mexican allies. There are the standard horror stories which we have no reason to doubt, of women hanged, with their children hanging at their feet; of sexual mutilations; of

⁴⁶ *The Maya: A Short Introduction*, p. 59.

‘uncooperative’ women torn apart by the great dogs which were feared more than the Spaniards themselves.”⁴⁷ The way that these accounts are not told or prioritized when speaking of Spanish and Maya interactions is troubling. To have more of these accounts and more accounts from women in general would mean a more precise representation of history as well as a clearer picture of what took place centuries ago between vastly different groups of people.

Given this, we must be cognizant of how biased writing may affect not only the story of the Maya and Spanish, but how it may have affected other recorded histories. History in general is usually written by the winning side. Very rarely do we have the account of the losing party giving accurate details of what actually occurred. Hence, it is very important to view history from multiple perspectives, especially Maya history given that much of the information we have comes from the accounts of Spanish conquistadors and missionaries. Accounts that usually display biases and negative opinions in Spanish accounts the Maya were portrayed often as unintelligent, uncivilized. The Spanish tended to invalidate many of Maya’s accomplishments in their accounts of the natives.⁴⁸ Instead of focusing on who the Maya were and what they did, the narratives were usually focused upon the Spanish themselves. Here is where the significance of including Maya perspectives in historical documents is made abundantly evident. A more thorough and nuanced picture of the civilization and its history can be gained by studying the records kept by the Maya as they had their own record-keeping methods.

⁴⁷ Inga Clendinnen, “Yucatec Maya Women and the Spanish Conquest: Role and Ritual in Historical Reconstruction,” *Journal of Social History* 15, no. 3 (1982): 429, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3787156>.

⁴⁸ Elman R Service, “Indian-European Relations in Colonial Latin America,” *American Anthropologist* 57, no. 3 (1955): 411–25, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/665439>.

The significance of studying history from a plethora of angles cannot simply be emphasized enough. We can develop a better and more accurate understanding of the past by simply combining the voices of oppressed peoples like Maya women with the accounts of both winning and losing sides. To do this, is to help eliminate the biases in historical writing and records. For if we do not, then it must be necessary to reevaluate all stories of the past in order to determine the reliability of those who wrote about their own conquest like the Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians.

Numerous civilizations have made their mark throughout history for a variety of reasons, including their architecture, religion, or expeditions of distant lands. But what makes one civilization stand out from the rest? For the Maya civilization, it is unquestionably their supposed downfall at the hands of their conquerors: the Spanish. Stories of Hernán Cortés and Pedro de Alvarado conquering the Maya people have been massively popularized and taught from a one-sided perspective for centuries. However, as argued, we cannot jump to this conclusion. Conquest means total annihilation, something not seen with the Maya. The fact their communities persisted despite claims of “conquest” is a clear indication that these people were not completely defeated. While walking the streets of Merida, Mexico, history is preserved within the architecture, food, and language. There are many different restaurants and food places within this city and the surrounding areas where one can see a clear preservation of Maya gastronomy. Even so, one must also consider the possibility of bias and question the reliability and authenticity of these accounts. How much can one truly take as fact what the Spanish conquistadors and missionaries wrote about the Maya as fact? Hence, it’s imperative to not ignore the possibility of a whole other side to the story.

Thankfully, historians have recently begun to challenge these traditional narratives of Spanish conquest. Now, there is emphasis on hearing the voices of the other side and traditionally marginalized groups such as Maya women. Their experiences and accounts matter just as much as the Europeans' and Maya men. According to this narrative, the Maya were not a passive group of people who simply allowed themselves to be taken over, but rather actively interacted with the Spanish in a complicated manner of alliances, negotiations, and even battles.

Present-day Merida

Visiting present-day Merida, one is instantly overwhelmed with how much history the city has. It seems like almost every square is named after a famous figure in Merida's history. The people certainly pride themselves on their Maya heritage, with restaurants boasting Yucatecan cuisines; delicious meals centered on the Maya food staples like venison and maize creating dishes such as Sopa de Lima or Poc Chuc. A popular dish within the Maya Yucatan, Poc Chuc is a grilled pork dish known to have originated from the ancient civilization. Aside from looking at the cuisine found in Merida and surrounding past Maya cities, residents are clearly proud of their Maya heritage and the sheer amount of history that the region holds.

Walking tours run several times daily, within Merida, each filling up with tourists who have traveled halfway across the world to hear the stories of indigenous suffering and Spanish "conquest." Even traveling to other Maya cities such as Progreso, Celestún, or Izamal, the Maya pride is evident. Though tourism is a clear way for the remaining Maya to make a livelihood, through their accounts of preserving culture through language, religion, and food, the Maya people are more than happy to share a piece of their history with those that come to visit. When visiting Chichen Itza, the Maya line both sides of the winding paths, setting up small shops that hold Maya-made artifacts like calendars and small statues of deities for sale. It is through encounters like this that I was able to speak with one man who was more than willing to provide me with information on his family's experiences in exchange for a few Mexican pesos. While he spoke of how his family remains speaking the Maya language and educating the new generation of history and religion, one can clearly see how much they value the continuance of their heritage. However, no longer are the Maya limited to remaining in the Yucatan, with children

and grandchildren leaving the area in search of better education and opportunities than their predecessors had.

Truth be told, even those that come to live or work within the Yucatan Peninsula near Merida with no Maya heritage, remain because of the clear allure that the region holds. A walking tour I had in Merida was given by a man who moved from central Mexico to Merida because of the historical significance the city carries within the nation. So, while there may be Maya who leave the area, there is no shortage of people there committed to the preservation of the culture, something not many historical places in the world can boast.

The Maya people present within the Merida region hold a very apparent knowledge of the Yucatan lands too; something that European outsiders clearly never learned how to navigate. While in Progreso, I had the privilege to take a boat tour of the coastal area, connected to the Gulf of Mexico. Directed by a local Maya man, he explained that his family has run a business there for decades. Their exclusivity to family showcased an affinity that Maya people have for their lands. The fact that they knew the different water routes connected to the ocean and that this tourist operation was not headed by European descended people demonstrates how the Maya were able to retain certain aspects of their life for themselves, autonomously. While walking in Progreso, one can see that the town remains largely populated by the descendants of indigenous peoples who work in these small shops.

Of course, the Spanish had visited these villages. As aforementioned, the areas closest to the ocean were the ones most explored by the Europeans, however some towns are just not populated by Spanish people or remain dominated by natives. This was most clear while taking a bus throughout the surrounding areas and seeing isolated “villages” that are only accessible by the undeveloped transportation systems. Progreso and Celestún were especially eye-opening.

The towns are equipped to handle tourists, but it is clear that they remain old-fashioned in keeping with tradition. Tradition seems to be a major importance to Maya people and those in the Yucatan altogether.

Visiting Merida, MX was imperative for me to do so as a historian. It was necessary for me to verify these stories of conquest and see if this was the reality within these present-day Maya cities. Keeping an open mind was important to maintain, given the fact that history has always skewed the story toward the Spanish. Quickly after arrival, it was evident to see that this was a living, thriving, and ever-evolving society and civilization. Though history seems to say that the Spanish have long since won the battle with these indigenous group of people, this is clearly not the case. They are alive in the words spoken between aging father and son. They are alive in the rich food served using the same techniques and ingredients Maya cooks utilized centuries ago. Finally, they are alive in the stories passed down from generation to generation.

Drawing comparisons to decimated empires like the Romans, historians do not see villages of these people remaining, however we do see this with the Maya. Why? The Maya are not a conquered people. Walking the streets of Maya cities present-today this is clear. Even if some cities were unfortunately destroyed and artifacts lost, the culture is ever evident and preserved with care by not only the Maya themselves, but by outsiders who equally value the culture as well.

Cultural Continuation

Another way that these Maya communities adapted was through the practice of using the Spanish conquistadors' names at baptism, specifically by utilizing the title of "don" as a way to adjust to the new Spanish authority. Important within Spanish culture, this "title" before a man's name is seen as a way of respecting another individual of equal or higher status. However, the use of Christian names was also applied during baptism. For the Maya, "the acquisition of Christian names, a potentially momentous break with the past that is frequently seen in the documentation, appears symbolic, almost superficial."⁴⁹ Thus, despite desperate attempts by the Spanish to force upon themselves upon the indigenous people, their efforts failed. It was merely all a façade. The Maya people were ensuring that they were able to remain autonomous in a world where they were expected to subjugate themselves.

Likewise, Maya scribes "wrote Mayan languages in a slightly adapted version of the Roman alphabet helping to maintain community autonomy by recording land titles, filing lawsuits, submitting petitions and engaging the colonial legal system in numerous ways.," and through these small rebellious actions, the Maya maintained their sense of identity.⁵⁰ Similarly, the Maya established militias during the colonial era, "their very existence hints at the level of autonomy that Maya communities were able to retain within the Spanish Empire." Being able to defend oneself was and still is important to modern states. Without protection, there was no hope of survival. So, to maintain defense was a major achievement. Independence was something the

⁴⁹ Restall, Matthew. *Maya Conquistador*. Boston: Beacon, 1998.

⁵⁰ *The Maya: A Short Introduction*, p. 91.

Maya clearly strived to achieve. They were able to retain despite being under Spanish rule.

Hence, these measures signify the adaptability of Maya communities and do not exemplify the actions of conquered people.

Modern Day Resistance

One of the biggest indicators of the lack of assimilation and the endurance of the Maya empire lie within the modern revolts in the 19th and 20th century. Much like other revolts at the time within Central and South America, one of the biggest motivators was classism and mistreatment of the indigenous peoples/lands of the Yucatan peninsula. As the region became more suited for labor due to the plantations developed to cultivate agave and sugar on a large scale. Although the region had undergone a major agricultural and economic shift, the presence of the Maya to toil the land remained largely unchanged.⁵¹ It is worth noting at this time, Maya military means became more brutal and intentional, with the Maya leaders at the time ordering all non-Maya to be extinguished for fear of those coming to put every “Indian, big or little, to death.”⁵²

At the time, although a part of the Yucatan government, a collection of people that operated under a legal caste system with hierarchies consisting of those with multiple backgrounds (both indigenous and European/Hispanic), the native Maya still resided in both reservations and areas that had not yet been developed.⁵³ However, during the multiple skirmishes and conflicts that broke out during the late 1800s multiple groups of Maya, who resided in various environments became a considerable foe for the European, mostly British,

⁵¹ Rani T. Alexander; Architecture, Haciendas, and Economic Change in Yaxcabá, Yucatán, Mexico. *Ethnohistory* 1 January 2003; 50 (1): 191–220

⁵² Church, Minette C.; Yaeger, Jason; Kray, Christine A. (2019). "Re-Centering the Narrative: British Colonial Memory and the San Pedro Maya". In Orser, Charles E. Jr. (ed.). *Archaeologies of the British in Latin America*. Contributions To Global Historical Archaeology. Cham, Switzerland: Springer. p. 92

⁵³ Rani T. Alexander; Architecture, Haciendas, and Economic Change in Yaxcabá, Yucatán, Mexico. *Ethnohistory* 1 January 2003; 50 (1): 191–220.

colonists in the area. The Ixchaha Maya and the Icaiche Maya were two notable groups of the indigenous population that regularly came in conflict with the British, with the culmination of such conflicts resulting in a series of treaties and coups that essentially declared the Maya people a sovereign nation.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Martínez, María Elena. "The Black Blood of New Spain: Limpieza de Sangre, Racial Violence, and Gendered Power in Early Colonial Mexico." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2004): 479–520

Evolution

To evolve is to be better than how one was before. I firmly believe no other word suits the Maya better. They truly had to change, adapt, and **evolve** in order to survive; a living culture. For example, “Maya religion today includes an increasingly broad array of beliefs and practices drawn variously from Catholicism, Protestantism, and traditional folk devotion.”⁵⁵ In particular, there were many, “aspects of Catholicism – particularly those that more easily were incorporated into Maya worldviews—were readily adopted and modified by the Maya to fit their own concepts. Specific examples include the Holy Trinity, with its co-essences.”⁵⁶ Though some forced conversion by Spanish friars, priests sent from Europe to convert the natives, did occur, much evidence points to a willingness in adopting ideals that could plainly fit in with their culture. On the other hand, it is clear that some traditions have long since been practiced. Nevertheless, despite incorporating and mixing beliefs, at the core the Maya remain Maya—true to their ancestral roots in every way possible. “The challenge of adaptation, like the struggle for autonomy, is not new to the Maya, nor was it new to them in the sixteenth century.”⁵⁷ Moreover, this ability to change with the times would become an important characteristic of the Maya, and integral for their civilization’s continued survival.

Overall, I’d say that the Maya may consider themselves far more unified now than when the Spanish first arrived. When the Spanish first arrived, the Maya were more concerned with making sure that they did not fall. However, it is paramount to note that this meant each individual Maya settlement. When we think of the Maya today, we know them as a collective

⁵⁵ *The Maya: A Short Introduction*, p. 107.

⁵⁶ *Maya Worldviews at Conquest*, p. 223.

⁵⁷ *The Maya: A Short Introduction*, p. 107.

group of people within the Yucatan Peninsula and the surrounding areas like in Belize and Guatemala. Now, instead of ensuring that the Europeans are no longer invading their lands, the Maya are more concerned with ensuring their culture lives on. Yes, the Maya have many different languages, and were never one concrete empire. But with technology and government regulation, the Maya are now more grouped together than they were ever beforehand. To sum, the objective has changed though with the same end goal of self-preservation. Certainly, an unintended consequence of history as the world has modernized itself through time.

Conclusion

There are many communities of Maya that are still alive and thriving, mixing the use of modern technology with more traditional practices. While some of the Maya communities remain in the same regions that they originally did when the Spanish invaded Mexico, the Yucatan Peninsula, Guatemala, and parts of Honduras, many have also immigrated to other parts of the world. The Maya kingdoms that were located and scattered throughout the Yucatan and Guatemala were smart and adapted to Spanish rule. Their customs and practices were hidden in plain sight; had they not done so much of their culture would have sadly been lost. Though history books and the classes taught using them want to remember the Maya as this amazing group of Native American people conquered and destroyed by Spanish conquistadors, we must recall how heavily flawed this statement is. They do not resemble the lost Babylonian civilization or those that disappeared from Easter Island. Consequently, it is wrong to categorize them the same as those that have been destroyed. When the Spanish invaded, the Maya did not lose hope or simply throw away their ties to their culture in order to survive. No, this was a strong civilization that maintained steadfast in their beliefs, despite the odds and the repercussions they could have potentially faced. In closing, the Maya people, whom we now group together because of similar characteristics and ethnic features, were not “conquered” nor did they “collapse”; they simply adapted and evolved to survive.

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ACADEMIC VITA

EDUCATION

The Pennsylvania State University
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B.A., History Expected Graduation Fall 2023

B.A., Political Science

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EXPERIENCE

The National Trust for Historic Preservation Virtual
 Development Communication Intern (Summer 2023)

- Conducted research and supported the development of communication materials such as fact sheets, newsletters, and brochures, ensuring accurate and compelling messaging to engage stakeholders and increase awareness of preservation initiatives.

The Schreyer Honors College University Park, PA
 Leadership Intern (Winter 2022 – Present)

- Develops and collaborates with the Dean to develop and execute strategic initiatives and student engagement programs.
- Generates, coordinates, and executes events that raise awareness and focus on the health and wellness of all Schreyer Honors College staff and students in collaboration with the college's Dean.

Penn State Division of Development and Alumni Relations University Park, PA
 Development Communication Intern (Summer 2022 - Winter 2022)

- Worked with the offices of Development Communications and Donor Relations and Special Events at Penn State in stewardship efforts that focused on researching donors and facilitating events that properly thanked them for their philanthropic contributions.
- Helped spearhead social media campaigns for university-wide philanthropic events such as Giving Tuesday and BIG 10 Week.

Senator Anthony Bucco Denville, NJ
 Legislative Intern (Summer 2021)

- Prepared, analyzed, and researched legislation for the Senator to introduce during committee meetings.

- Accompanied and aided Senator during legislative meetings and full Senate sessions in Trenton.
 - Administered constituent services within the district office.
-

CAMPUS LEADERSHIP ACTIVITIES

Paterno Fellows Program University Park, PA

- Student Advisory Board Member (January 2022 - Present)

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The Colombian American Student Association University Park, PA

- President (April 2023 - Present)
- Secretary (April 2022 – 2023)

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- Student Leader Representative (May 2022 – October 2022)

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- National Political Honors Society

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Hispanic Scholarship Fund Scholar (2021, 2022)

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