

## CANNIBALISM

### In Meso-America and Amongst the Maya

There has been an on-going discussion about whether or not cannibalism was a common practice in Meso-America. From the very beginning of the Spanish conquest of Nueva España writers who wrote various accounts of the period of conquest affirmed that there was cannibalism. Bernal Díaz del Castillo in his *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico* has several mentions of the practice.<sup>1</sup> Concerning the Maya of Yucatan Fray Diego de Landa in his *Relación De Las Cosas De Yucatán* has a reference to this practice on pp. 2r-2v where he describes what happened to the people on the Valdivia expedition:

Que los primeros Españoles que llegaron a Yucatan segun se dize fueron Ger[oni]mo de Aguilar natural de Eciya y sus companeros los quales el año de MDXI en el desbarato del Darien por las revueltas entre Diego de Nicueça, y Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, siguieron à Valdiuia que venia en vna caravela a S[an]to Domingo a dar cuenta al almirante y al governador de lo que passava, y a traer XX mil ducados del rey, y que esta caravela llegando a Jamaica dieron en los baxos que llaman Vibores donde se perdio que no escapando mas de hasta XX hombres q[ue] con Valdiuia entraron en el batel sin velas, y con vnos ruynes remos, y sin mantenimiento ninguno, y que anduvieron XIII dias por la mar despues de muertos de hambre q[ue] casi mitad llegaron a la costa de Yucatan a vna provincia que llamavan de la Maya de la qual La lengua de Yucatan se llama Mayathan que quiere dezir lengua de Maya.

Que esta pobre gente vino a manos de vn mal caçiq[ue] el qual sacrificio a Valdiuia y a otros quatro a sus idolos, y despues hizo vanquetes de ellos a la gente, y que dexo para engordar a Aguilar, y a Guerrero,<sup>2</sup> y a otros cinco, o seis los quales quebrantaron la prision y huieron por vnos montes, y que aportaron a otro / señor enemigo del primero, y mas piadoso, el qual se sirvio dellos como de esclavos, y que el que sucedio a este señor los trato con buena gracia pero que ellos de dolencia se murieron quedando solos dos Geronimo de Aguilar, y Gonçalo Guerrero de los quales Aguilar era buen Christiano, y tenia vnas horas por las quales sabia las fiestas, y que este se salvo con la ida del marques Hernandó Cortes año de MD.XVIII, y que el Guerrero como entendia la lengua se fue a Chectemal, que es la Salamanca de Yucatan,<sup>3</sup> y que alli le recibio vn señor llamado Nachan can,<sup>4</sup> el qual le

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<sup>1</sup> Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1956), pp. 85, 102, 129, 178, 181-182, 209, 436-437.

<sup>2</sup> These two named survivors later played important roles in the conquest of Mexico and Yucatan, with Gerónimo de Aguilar helping Cortez as an interpreter and Gonzalo Guerrero marrying into a chieftain family from Chetumal and helping defend his adopted homeland against the Spanish.

<sup>3</sup> Marginal note in the facsimile: chectemal. Note that here Landa equates Salamanca with present-day Chetumal whereas the Mayan texts equate Salamanca with the present-day Bacalar.

<sup>4</sup> Properly, **Ah Na Chan Can**. See Landa, pages 18v-19r, for the manner in which Mayan names were constructed. It is not clear if the word **na** refers to "house" or "mother", but various clues would indicate that "house" is meant.

dio a cargo las cosas de la guerra en que se vuo muy bien venciendo muchas veces a los enemigos de su señor, y que enseñó a los Indios pelear mostrando les hazer fuertes, y bastiones, y que con esta, y con tratar se como Indio gano mucha reputacion, y le casaron con vna muy principal muger en que vuo hijos, y que por esto nunca procuro salvarse como hizo Aguilar, antes labraba su cuerpo, y criava cabello, y harpava las orejas para traer çarçillos como los Indios y es creible que fue idolatra como ellos.<sup>5</sup>

On page 23v of Landa's *Relación* there is this commentary about the fate of the sacrificial victims' bodies:

Algunas vezes hazian este sacrificio, en la piedra y grada alta del templo, y entonces echavan el cuerpo ya muerto las gradas abaxo a rodar y tomavan le abaxo los oficiales, y defsolavan le todo el cuero entero salvo los pies, y las manos, y desnudo el sacerdote en cueros vivos se aforrava de aquella piel, y vailavan con el los demas, y era cosa de mucha solemnidad para ellos esto. A estos sacrificados comunmente solian enterrar en el patio del templo, o si no comian se los repartiendo por los que alcanzavan, y los señores, y las manos y los pies y cabeça eran del sacerdote, y oficiales, y a estos sacrificados tenian por santos.<sup>6 7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Tozzer translation: The first Spaniards who reached Yucatan were, they say, Geronimo de Aguilar, a native of Ecija, and his companions.(29) In the year 1511, at the time of the trouble at Darien caused by the dissension between Diego de Nicueza and Vasco Nuñez de Balboa,(30) they followed Valdivia, who set sail in a caravel for Santo Domingo to inform the admiral and the governor of what was going on and to bring twenty thousand ducats of the king's. As the caravel approached Jamaica, they struck upon the shallows called Viboras;(31) where she was lost and not more than twenty men escaped.(32) These, together with Valdivia, took to the small boat without sails and with poor oars and without any food. They wandered over the sea for thirteen days. After nearly half had perished from hunger, they reached the shore of Yucatan at a province which was called Maya, from which the language of Yucatan takes the name of Maya than, which means "the language of Maya."(33)

These wretched men then fell into the hands of a wicked cacique, who sacrificed Valdivia and four other companions to his idols, and gave their bodies to his people for a feast. He spared Aguilar and Guerrero and five or six others to fatten them.(34) They escaped and fled into the forests and reached the country of another ruler, who was the enemy of the first one and more merciful, who made use of them as slaves.(35) The successor of this lord treated them with kindness; but they all, with two exceptions, Geronimo de Aguilar and Gonzalo Guerrero, died of an illness. Of the two, Aguilar was a good Christian and had a breviary with which he kept run of the feast days; and he was saved in the year 1518 on the arrival of the Marquis Hernando Cortes. Guerrero, since he understood the language, went to Chetumal,(36) which is Salamanca of Yucatan.(37) There a lord named Nachan Can received him and placed him in charge of the military affairs; in which he distinguished himself, gaining many victories over the enemies of his lord, and he taught the Indians to fight, showing them how to construct forts and bastions.(38) In this way, as well as by adopting the habits of the natives he gained a great reputation and they married him to a woman of high rank, by whom he had children; and for this reason he did not try to escape, as Aguilar did. On the contrary he tattooed his body and let his hair grow, and pierced his ears, so as to wear earrings like the Indians,(39) and it is probable that he became an idolater like them.

<sup>6</sup> Tozzer translation: Sometimes they made this sacrifice on the stone and high altar of the temple, and then they threw the body, now dead, rolling down the steps.(545) The officials below took it and flayed(546) it whole, taking off all the skin with the exception of the feet and hands, and the priest, all bare, covered himself, stripped naked as he was, with that skin, and the others danced with him. And this was considered as a thing of great solemnity amongst them. The custom was usually to bury in the

Confirming Landa's description of the fate of the body of the sacrifice victim, Sahagún's *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*<sup>8</sup> has the following comment:

Auh ynieuhquj yn oaxitiloque tlacpac, ixpan in vitzilobuchtli: njman ie ic ceceniaca qujmonteca intechcac, ic inmac intlamacazque, qujn chiquacencaujala, qujmaquetztiteca, qujmeltetequj, yca ixquaoac, patlaoac tepac. Auh yn jniollo, mamalti qujtocaiotia, quauhnochtli tlaçotli: conjoalia in tonatiuh xippilli, quatleuanjtl qujtlamaca, quizcaltia. Auh yn oventic quauhxiccalco contlalia, quauhxiccalco contlalitiuj: auh in iehoantin mjquja mamalti, qujntocaiotiaia, Coauhteca: çatepan qujnoalmjmjloa, qujnoaltetecujchoa, chachalcatiujtze, maiotzin cueptiujtze, motzotzoni quetztiujtze, mocuecueptiujtze, ynjc oalaci apetlac: auh vncan, qujmonana: auh ieinmac in veve'tzitzin quaquacujlti, calpulveuetque: vmpa qujnujca ynin calpulco, yn vmpa omotlatlalili, omjto, omonetolti male: vmpa conana, ynic qujjujca ichan, ynjc qujquazque: vmpa qujxexeloa, qujtetequj, qujueueloa: oc ie achto qujtonaltia in motecuçuma ce ymetz, mantiuh in qujujqujla.<sup>9</sup>

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court of the temple those whom they had sacrificed, or else they ate them,(547) dividing him up among those who had arrived (first) and the lords, and the hands, feet and head were reserved for the priest and his officials, and they considered those who were sacrificed as holy.

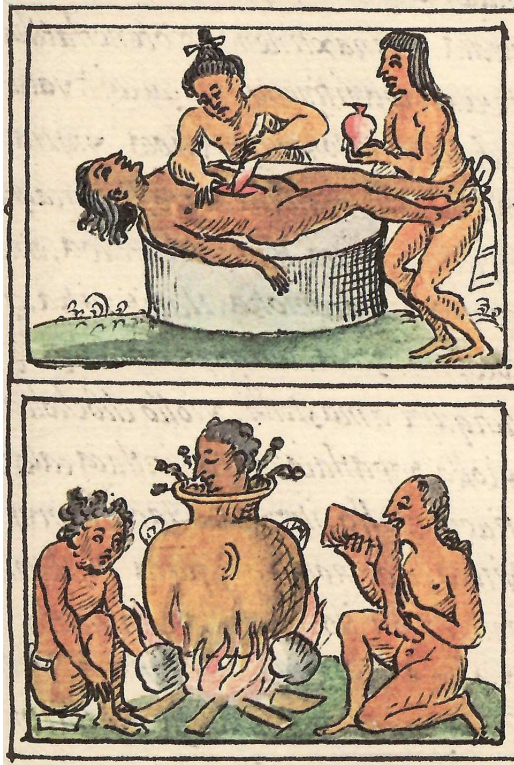
<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of cannibalism see Tozzer's *Landa's Relacion De Las Cosas De Yucatan*, footnote 547. Although rarely mentioned in the Mayan texts cannibalism was very much a part of Meso-American and Antillean culture.

<sup>8</sup> p.18v-19r. It should be remembered that most of the texts in Sahagún's *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* were written first in Nahuatl by native speakers of the Nahuatl language who were gathered together by Sahagún in order to accomplish this great work. Therefore it is not the work of Spaniards who were trying to discredit the native peoples of Nueva España with barbarous practices, a claim made by those who claim that cannibalism was not a common practice in the Meso-American region.

<sup>9</sup> Anderson and Dibble translation: And things being so, they were made to arrive at the top [of the pyramid], before [the sanctuary of] Uitzilopochtli: Thereupon one at a time they stretched them out on the sacrificial stone. Then they delivered them into the hands of six offering priests; they stretched them out upon their backs; they cut open their breasts with a wide-bladed flint knife. And they named the hearts of the captives "precious eagle-cactus fruit." They raised them in dedication to the sun, Xippilli, Quauhtleuanitl. They offered it to him; they nourished him. And when [the heart] had become an offering, they placed it in the eagle vessel. And these captives who had died they called eagle men. Afterwards they rolled them over; they bounced them down. They came breaking to pieces; they came head over heels; they each came headfirst; they came turning over and over. Thus they reached the terrace at the base of the pyramid. And from here they removed them. And they were in the hands of the old men, the quaquacuilti, the old men of the calpulli. They took them there to their calpulco, where the taker of the captive had made his undertaking, had said his say, had made his vow. From there they removed him in order to take him to the house of [the captor], in order to eat him. There they portioned him out they cut him to pieces; they distributed him. First of all, they made an offering of one of his thighs to Moctezuma. They set forth to take it to him.



Florentine Codex, Book 2, p. 19r



Florentine Codex, Book 4, p. 25r

### The Excavations at Zultepec-Tecoaque

Recent evidence, for example from excavations at Zultepec-Tecoaque (quail hill-where people were eaten), substantiate what earlier seemed to be exaggerated reports by various Spanish sources such as Sahagún and Bernal Díaz del Castillo about cannibalism amongst the Mesoamericans.

The excavations at Zultepec-Tecoaque have verified the accounts that some 550 persons were captured by warriors from Texcoco in 1520. Earlier that year Hernán Cortés had to march from Tenochtitlan to Cempoala in order to beat back an incursion by the army of Pánfilo de Narváez. After defeating Pánfilo de Narváez's army at Cempoala, Hernán Cortés incorporated Narváez's soldiers into his army. Supporting this army there was also an entourage of auxiliaries and civilian escorts serving as porters, cooks and traders. They were to accompany him on his way back to Tenochtitlan and bringing the goods captured by the victory to the capital. On the way more and more local people, who wanted to participate in a fight against the Aztecs, joined the train, which slowed it down more and more. As Cortés wanted to get back to Tenochtitlan quickly because of reports of trouble brewing there, he finally hurried ahead with his best soldiers. The slow column of allies and the carriers continued to march behind, escorted by comparatively few Spanish soldiers. This second group was attacked and captured on their way to Tenochtitlan by Texcoco warriors.

The prisoners which numbered approximately 550 were taken to Zultepec and sacrificed there to the Aztec gods. From reports the sacrifices lasted for six months. According to the archaeologist Enrique Martínez Vargas, the prisoners were held in jail cells without doors so the food was thrown to them through small openings. Each day before dawn Aztec priests who had come from Tenochtitlan selected some prisoners to be sacrificed that day. As part of the cult ritual, the bodies of the sacrificial victims were then also partially consumed.

Based on the excavated remains the victims were Spaniards, African slaves, mulattos, mestizos, Taínos from the Greater Antilles, Totonacs, Tlaxcaltecs, indians from the Tabasco area and Mayas. Amongst them were women, including pregnant women, and children.

Shortly after this incident Cortes learned about it from one of his servants who was part of this convoy. However, at the time Cortes was in no position to do anything about the situation because he had just escaped from Tenochtitlan in the event called Noche Triste.<sup>10</sup> In a letter to Carlos V Cortes states that after the defeat and departure from Tenochtitlan, when he arrived at the town of Hueyotlipan which is within the provincial limits of Tlaxcala he learned about what happened to the caravan from a servant of his who was a part of the caravan. The servant came to him and stated that he, the servant:

... que trama mantenimientos, y cosas para mí, y con él, cinco de caballo, y quarenta, y cinco peones, el cual había llevado asimismo consigo a los otros, que yo allí había dejado con toda la plata, y ropa, y otras cosas así mías, como de mis compañeros, con siete mil pesos de oro fundido, que yo había dejado allí en dos cofres, sin otras joyas, y mas otros catorce mil pesos de oro en piezas, que en la Provincia de Tuchtebeque se habían dado a aquel capitán que yo enviaba a hacer al pueblo de Quacualco, y otras muchas cosas, que valían mas de treinta mil pesos de oro: y que los indios de Culúa los habían muerto en el camino a todos, y tomando lo que llevaban; y asimismo supe, que habían muerto otros muchos españoles por los caminos, los cuales iban a la dicha Ciudad de Temixtitán,<sup>11</sup> creyendo que yo estaba en ella pacífico, y que los caminos estaban, como yo antes los tenía seguros.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> June 30-July 1, 1520.

<sup>11</sup> Meaning Tenochtitlan.

<sup>12</sup> ... who was maintaining watch over things for me, and with him, five cavalry soldiers and forty-five foot soldiers, who stayed with him along with others, which I had left there with all the money, and clothes, and other things of mine, as well as of my comrades, with seven thousand pesos of gold ingots, which I had left there in two chests, without other jewels, and another fourteen thousand pesos of pieces of gold, which in the Province of Tuchtebeque they had given to the captain which I sent to the town of Quacualco to collect, and many other things, that were worth more than thirty thousand pesos of gold: and that the Culua Indians had killed them all along the way, and taken what they carried; and I also knew that many other Spaniards had died on the roads, which were going to the said City of Temixtitán, believing that I was there peacefully, and that the roads were safe since as I had made them safe prior to this.

Once Cortes was able to regroup in Tlaxcala, in March of 1521 he sent a punitive expedition headed by Captain Gonzalo de Sandoval. When the people of Zultepec heard that the Spanish were coming they quickly tried to hide all of the evidence of the sacrifices and cannibalism. From the archaeological point of view this was a fortuitous event because the Zultepecs buried a treasure trove of artifacts which date from the time of conquest.<sup>13</sup>

In the *Books of Chilam Balam*, so far as can be ascertained, there is only one reference to cannibalism:

g270<sup>14</sup> Ho Ahau ulci ɔul ti chibil uinic  
ix ma pic ɔul u kaba;  
ma paxi peten tumenel

g270 5 Ahau was when foreigners arrived to eat people.  
Their name is foreigners without skirts.  
The region was not depopulated by them.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.finanzas.com/noticias-001/todos/20180826/gonzalo-sandoval-capitan-espanol-3898286.html> : Cuando los zultepecos supieron, en marzo de 1521, que una tropa de españoles al mando del capitán Gonzalo de Sandoval se acercaba para castigar el asesinato de sus correligionarios, se apresuraron a deshacerse de los despojos más comprometedores arrojándolos a las cisternas, lo que ha permitido la conservación de todo un tesoro testimonial consistente en espadas, botones, anillos, camafeos, perdigones, clavos, bocados de caballos y herramientas diversas. No obstante, con las prisas, olvidaron retirar dos caras que habían desollado y adobado con sus barbas así como varios cueros de caballos que habían colgado en un templo con sus cascos y herraduras. Mas comprometedor resultó que pasaran por alto un comprometedor grafito garrapateado en la pared: «Aquí estuvo preso el sin ventura Juan Yuste con otros muchos de su compañía», obra de uno de los españoles inmolados cuyos huesos están desenterrando los arqueólogos desde 1990.

Translation: When the Zultepecs learned, in March 1521, that a troop of Spaniards under the command of Captain Gonzalo de Sandoval approached to punish the murder of their co-religionists, they rushed to get rid of the most compromising spoils by throwing them into the cisterns, which has allowed the conservation of a whole testimonial treasure consisting of swords, buttons, rings, cameos, pellets, nails, horse bites and various tools. However, in haste, they forgot to remove two faces that had been skinned and marinated with their beards as well as several horse hides that had hung in a temple with their helmets and horseshoes. More compromising, it turned out, was that they did not destroy a compromising graphite scrawled on the wall: «Here Juan Yuste was imprisoned with many others of his company», the work of one of the immolated Spaniards whose bones are being unearthed by archaeologists since the beginning of excavations in 1990.

<sup>14</sup> This line number refers to a line in *Post Conquest Mayan Literature*. The source text is from the *Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>15</sup> Roys' translation: "5 Ahau was when foreigners arrived to eat men. They were called foreigners without skirts. The land was not depopulated by them." Roys' footnote to these lines reads as follows: Brinton and Martinez both consider these invaders to have been Caribs because of the cannibalism and nudity mentioned. Down to the middle of the Eighteenth Century Mosquito Indians in canoes from Rio Tinto, Honduras, were still making raids on the east coast of Yucatan. (MS. map of Yucatan by Juan de Dios Gonzalez, 1766.) It seems likely that similar incursions took place in pre-Columbian times. The skirt (Maya pic) referred to is certainly a woman's garment. Possibly ppic is intended. This was the sobre carga, a bundle carried above the usual traveler's pack. Cf. Motul.

This is the only overt reference in the collection of texts called *Books of Chilam Balam* to the very common practice of cannibalism amongst the Maya and other Mesoamericans. In this instance though it appears that some non-Mayan group, probably Caribbean, raided the coast of Yucatan to carry out the practice of cannibalism.



Codex Magliabecchiano, p. 141  
Note the symbols for Quetzal Coatl / Kukul Can on top of the temple.



Codex Magliabecchiano, p. 147



Codex Tudela, p. 64r

Showing the sacrificial priest presenting offerings to Mictlantecuhtli.<sup>16</sup>  
 The caption reads: *Aqui comen carne humana* / Here they eat human flesh.  
 Again note the symbols for Quetzal Coatl / Kukul Can on top of the temple.

<sup>16</sup> “Lord of the place of the dead”, from Mictlan = “place of the dead” and tecuhtli = “lord”.