Rediscovery:
Scholars, early travelers and excavations in Mesoamerica before the twentieth century

by

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Bibliographic citation:

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After the Conquest of Mexico in 1521, the following two hundred years produced only sporadic writings on pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican civilization by Mexican scholars, and virtually nothing by Europeans or North Americans. In the sixteenth century Bishop of Yucatan, Diego de Landa recorded much of Maya civilization in his Relacion de las Cosas de Yucatan, and on the cultures of Central Mexico Fray Bernardino de Sahagun wrote, Historia general de las cosas de Nueva Espana.

In the seventeenth century, Franciscan Diego Lopez de Cogolludo described the ruins of Uxmal and Chichen Itza in his Historia de Yucatan. And in the eighteenth century, Jesuit scholar Francisco Xavier Clavijero wrote Historia antigua de Mexico which rebutted European detractions of indigenous peoples and the flora and fauna of the Americas.

Stimulated by Enlightenment thought, the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth witnessed a rebirth of interest in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica. Archaeological sites became the exclusive focus of published reports, and archaeological materials were used for interpretation rather than written and artistic sources alone. A pioneer of this approach was the Mexican intellectual Antonio de Leon y Gama who provided interpretations of the Coatlicue sculpture and Aztec Sun Stone based on first hand observation.

Jose Antonio Calderon's documentary report on the Maya site of Palenque in 1784 is the first of its kind. Following shortly after, Jose Antonio Alzate published a descriptive paper on the Gulf Coast site of Tajin in 1785, and on the highland site of Xochicalco in 1791. Palenque was explored again, this time in 1787 by Antonio del Rio, a military officer under orders from the governor of Guatemala. His report, published in London in 1822, generated considerable interest in the Maya which, in turn, led to more extensive exploration of Yucatan, Guatemala and Honduras.

Commissioned by the Spanish King Charles IV, Guillermo Dupaix with the Mexican droughtsman Luciano Castaneda, explored archaeological sites from Mexico City through Oaxaca to Tehuantepec (1805-07), and published a lengthy report in 1834.
Soon the numbers of North American and European traveler-explorers increased. Alexander von Humboldt spent 1803 in Mexico and wrote for his European audience, Researches concerning the Institutions and Monuments of the Ancient Inhabitants of America. Jean Frederic Waldeck, traveler and illustrator, in 1838 published *Voyage pittoresque et archeologique dans la province d'Yucatan...1834 et 1836*. His writings are speculative, and his drawings reflect the Classical influence of the day.

Juan Galindo, born in Ireland, and governor of the Department of Peten in Guatemala, led an official party of exploration to Copan, Honduras in 1834. He based his documentation on what he observed and avoided the excessive personal interpretation so often found in reports of this period.

In 1839, the experienced American writer-traveler John Lloyd Stephens, and Frederick Catherwood, an English illustrator already known for his drawings of ancient ruins, explored the Maya sites of Copan, Palenque and Uxmal, and then in 1841 Chichen Itza, Uxmal, Kabah, Labna, Sayil and other sites in Yucatan. Their published works, *Incidents of travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan* (1841), and *Incidents of travel in Yucatan* (1843), set a standard of documentary narrative unequaled in the nineteenth century. Catherwood's drawings of Maya buildings, facades and stelae are outstanding in their accuracy and esthetic sense.


Stephens, Catherwood and other travelers attempted, with limited success, to use the Daguerreotype photographic method to document the ruins. It was not until the development of the collodion glass-plate negative in the 1850s that serious photographic documentation began. And, after the 1860s archaeological excavations were increasingly carried out for the purpose of gaining historical knowledge about pre-Hispanic cultures.

The French explorer Desire Charnay made three photographic trips to Mexico (1857-60, 1880-82, 1886), and was the earliest to photograph archaeological sites in Mesoamerica using collodion glass-plate negatives. He made excavations at Teotihuacan, and his books and articles helped to increase popular interest in ancient Mesoamerica.

The self-styled archaeologist Augustus Le Plongeon, spent from 1873 to 1884 in Yucatan and Belize exploring, excavating and photographing archaeological sites, ethnographic subjects, cities and the landscape. His most important excavations were at Chichen Itza where he uncovered a statue he named Chacmool. Anticipating twentieth century documentary photography, he spent months at Chichen Itza, Izamal and Uxmal making a detailed photographic record of the features of those sites.
London born Alice Dixon Le Plongeon, one of the first women to investigate Maya archaeological sites, worked with her husband Augustus in Yucatan, making photographs, and excavating. Her writings are accounts of their travels, descriptions of their excavations, and ethno-historical articles on the Maya.

After the 1880s the pioneers in pre-Hispanic studies were gradually replaced by growing numbers of university trained archaeologists.

A few “amateurs” still made important contributions: American Consul Edward H. Thompson dredged the Sacred Cenote at Chichen
Itza; English aristocrat Alfred Maudslay published extensive written and photographic documentation of Maya archaeological sites in his *Biologia Centrali-Americana*; Austrian Teobert Maler traveled extensively for Harvard University's Peabody Museum documenting Maya sites in Mexico and Guatemala, and at the end of the nineteenth century Englishwoman Adela Breton laboriously copied the decaying Maya murals at Chichen Itza. Archaeologist Leopoldo Batres carried out vast excavations for the Mexican government at Teotihuacan from 1885 to 1910.

Mexican scholar Manuel Gamio introduced modern archaeology to Mexico by the use of stratigraphic interpretation of his excavations at Atzcapotzalco in 1911. In the Maya area in the 1920s and 30s, the North American, Sylvanus Morley directed Carnegie Institution of Washington archaeological research in Yucatan; and in the 1930s and 40s, the eminent Mexican intellectual Alfonso Caso established the importance of the cultures of the Valley of Oaxaca to Mesoamerica by his excavations at Monte Alban.

Sylvanus Morley