

Spanish Attitudes Toward Indians

The following selection describes Spanish treatment of the Mayas. It was written by a Spanish Franciscan monk, Diego de Landa, who had been sent to convert the Mayas to Christianity. In July of 1562 he himself committed one of the most notorious crimes against Mayan culture: he burned, as the "works of the devil," all the written Mayan manuscripts that he could find. Thus, vast amounts of information about hundreds of years of Mayan culture and history were destroyed in a few moments of religious zeal.

The Indians took the yoke of servitude grievously. The Spaniards held the towns comprising the country well partitioned, but there were some among the Indians who kept stirring them up, and very severe punishments were inflicted in consequence, resulting in the reduction of the population. Several principal men of the province of Cupul they burned alive, and others they hung. Information being laid against the people of Yobain, a town of the Chels [Mayas], they took the leading men, put them in stocks in a building and then set fire to the house, burning them alive with the greatest inhumanity in the world. I, Diego de Landa, say that I saw a great tree near the village upon the branches of which a captain had hung many women, with their infant children hung from their feet. . . .

The Indians of the provinces of Cochuah and Chetumal rose [in rebellion], and the Spaniards so pacified them that from being the most settled and populous it became the most wretched of the whole country. Unheard-of cruelties were inflicted, cutting off their noses, hands, arms, and legs, . . . thrusting the children with spears because they could not go as fast as their mothers. If some of those who had been put in chains fell sick or could not keep up with the rest, they would cut off their heads among the rest rather than stop to unfasten them. They also kept great numbers of women and men captive in their service, with similar treatment. . . .

In their defense the Spaniards urge that being so few in numbers they could not have reduced so populous a country save through the fear of such terrible punishments. . . . On the other hand, the Indians were right in defending their liberty and trusting to the valor of their chiefs, and they thought it would so result as against the Spaniards.

They tell of a Spanish crossbowman and an Indian archer, who being both very expert sought to kill each other, but neither could take the other unawares. The Spaniard feigning to be off guard, put one knee to the ground, whereupon the Indian shot an arrow that entered his hand and going up the arm separated the bones from each other. At the same moment the Spaniard shot his crossbow and struck the Indian in the chest. He, feeling himself mortally wounded, cut a withe [a thin, flexible branch of a willow tree] . . . and hung himself with it that it might not be said that a Spaniard had killed him. Of such instances of valor there are many.

Questions

1. What did the Mayas do rather than accept Spanish conquest and enslavement peacefully? What happened to them?
2. What excuse did the Spanish give for treating the Mayas so cruelly?
3. Why did the Mayan archer hang himself? What was de Landa's attitude towards the Mayas?

Friar Diego de Landa, *Yucatan: Before and After the Conquest*, translated by William Gates, Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1978.

Pronunciation Guide: Diego de Landa [dē ā'gō də lān'də]; Cupul [cū pūl']; Yobain [yō bā'ēn]; Chels [chāls]; Cochuah [kō'chwə]; Chetumal [chā tū məl']