

The Spanish conquest and the Maya collapse: how 'religious' is change?

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Abstract

The phenomenon of the Spanish Conquest of the Maya region suggests strongly that, in the process of socio-cultural transformation, 'religion' has no meaning as a concept with its own particular dynamic. There is no such thing as 'religious' change that is not also tied to other sorts of changes and indeed to continuity. One dramatic change was the adoption by whole communities, or large segments of communities, of Christian burial practice in which the body was placed in the supine position, head to the west, facing east. Christian burial is seen to represent 'religious conversion' but it was one of a broad sweep of changes in how power was gained and wealth appropriated, and the way in which killing was socially sanctioned through warfare. Evidence is accumulating from sites in Belize that a significant change in burial practice also took place at time of the Maya collapse in the ninth and tenth centuries. The question that remains to be answered is whether or not the new interment practices were part of a pattern which, like the burials of the Conquest period, reflected broader socio-cultural transformations.

Keywords

Maya; Spanish Conquest; Christianity; burial practices; religion; Classic Maya collapse.

Introduction

The theme of the papers in this volume is archaeology's contribution to the study of religious change; a main sticking point regarding the theme is whether or not we can identify change that is 'religious' without also being something else. Most would concur that we cannot easily make this distinction (Boyer, e.g. 2001, is perhaps an exception), yet 'religion' as a term remains widely used (e.g. Bowie 2000; Geertz 1973; Graham 2011a; Insoll 2004; Rowan 2012). Joyce (2012: 180) cautions that a pragmatic archaeological approach should ask not what religion *is* but what it *does* (emphasis in original). The

nagging question nevertheless remains: if there is doubt about what religion is, how can we know what it does?

What then is ‘religion’? Why does it retain such a powerful hold on us as a descriptive or even explanatory concept, particularly when strong arguments can be made that the concept as we use it contributes instead to fragmentation (Lambek 2000)? We address the first question because the outcome guides inquiry into the material manifestations of the Spanish Conquest and the changes that took place at the time of the Maya collapse. We have yet to be able to answer the second question, except to say that ‘religion’ has served well, both today and in the past, as a convenient term for ring-fencing difference, especially by reference to beliefs that believers claim are foundational to truth and to human existence.

In the discussion that follows, we situate the reader by introducing the topic of sixteenth-century Christianity and the eighth to tenth-century Maya collapse. We proceed to discuss the concept of ‘religion’ and, to some extent, what we use ‘religion’ to describe. We then extend the meaning to suggest an interpretation that would obviate any necessity to distinguish between, say, ‘secularism’ or ‘atheism’ and ‘religion’. Although this may not seem to have relevance to Maya history, we hope to show that it does.

Finally, we turn to the dynamics of the Classic to Postclassic transition and to the Spanish Conquest to argue that both periods of transition are characterized by phenomena, reflected in material remains, that may represent similar adjustments to structural change, social disruption and insecurity. We propose that both transition periods involved changes in how people positioned themselves in the cosmos, but such positioning involved more than the character of supernatural beings or the incense people burned in rituals or the way individuals chose to be buried – it also involved the nature of violence that was socially sanctioned, the imagery that was used to reinforce power and position, and individuals’ justification for their social roles in warfare, governance, commerce and geo-politics.

The Spanish Conquest and the Maya collapse

It is no small matter that the Mayan languages of the pre-Columbian and Contact periods have no category equivalent to our term ‘religion’ (Pharo 2007). Ideas that are generally understood to represent ‘Maya religion’ in the literature, such as gods or divine representations (Taube 1992; Vail 2000), human sacrifice (Tiesler and Cucina 2007), the ballgame (Tokovinine 2002) or narratives or myths such as the *Popol Vuh* (Christenson 2003), are set aside here in favour of what might be learned from the Mayas’ sixteenth-century encounter with Christianity. Information on Maya-Spanish interaction during this period comes largely from documentary sources (Jones 1989, 1998), but archaeology has also played a role, particularly in Belize, through the excavations of two Maya towns, Tipu and Lamanai (Fig. 1), sites that were occupied early in Maya history (Tipu from at least the Late Preclassic and Lamanai from the Middle Preclassic) to the time of Spanish contact in the sixteenth century (Table 1) (Graham 1987, 1991, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2011a; Graham and Bennett 1989; Graham et al. 1985, 1989; Howie 2012; Pendergast 1981, 1982a, 1986, 1990, 1991, 1993; Powis 2004; Simmons 1995, 2002; Simmons et al.



Figure 1 Map of Belize showing locations of Tipu and Lamanai and other known Spanish-period communities in northern Belize (drawing by Debora Trein and Emil Huston).

2009; White et al. 1994). Lamanai went on to be occupied during the British colonial period (Mayfield 2010; Pendergast 1982b).

The description of the excavations of the mission churches established at Lamanai and Tipu and integration with what is known from the documents are laid out in a recent publication (Graham 2011a). Here we focus on questions that arose when the archaeological evidence (e.g. continued use of the church cemetery after Spanish

Table 1 Belize Maya chronology.

<i>Period</i>	<i>Approximate calendar dates</i>
Belize Independence	1981 to present
Self-governing British Crown Colony	1964–81
British Crown Colony	1862–1964
British colonial settlement	1660s–1862
Spanish colonial	1544–1648/1708 (Spanish sovereignty claimed to 1798)
Terminal Postclassic/Contact	1450/1492–1544
Late Postclassic	1350–1450/1492
Middle Postclassic	1200/1250–1350
Early Postclassic	1000 to 1200/1250
Terminal Classic (Maya collapse)	800–1000
Late Classic	600–800
Middle Classic	450–600
Early Classic	250–450
Terminal Preclassic	100 BC–AD 250
Late Preclassic	400–100 BC
Middle Preclassic	900–400 BC
Early Preclassic	1500–900 BC
Archaic	pre-1500 BC

withdrawal, appropriation of Christian sacred space, skeletal indicators of health, diet and faunal remains, architecture, material culture) provided a picture of Maya lifeways and worldviews that differed from what was claimed in the documents, a case which makes clear how archaeology can be seen to contribute the study of religious change. Practices and behaviour, including ritual behaviour, often leave traces in the archaeological record, and artefacts or architecture or other features can be linked with cultural practices (some of them religious) of groups that we can identify or at least describe in part (Insoll 2004; Rowan 2012).

With regard to Maya conversion to Christianity in the sixteenth century, the writers of the documents categorized Maya behaviours – such as rituals carried out in churches – as evidence of apostasy and rebellion (see Jones 1989, 1998). Excavation of the traces of such rituals, such as cached¹ ceramic effigy figures (Figs 2a, 2b), reflect, however, a complex situation. Like the groups evangelized in Europe in late Antiquity, the Maya of Belize continued to carry out rituals that had been part of their cultures for centuries because the rituals were familiar and had meaning for them (Graham 2011a: 279–84). There is little question, nonetheless, that the rituals represented by the caching had undergone change, at least in terms of ritual space if not also in terms of what people envisioned in acting out the rituals. Cache contents were carefully and deliberately deposited within Christian sacred spaces in churches or on the axis of church stairs (Graham 2011a: 208–24), and individuals continued to be buried according to Christian practices even when, in one case, the church itself had collapsed (Graham 2011a: 17–19).

In this circumstance archaeology has contributed a nuanced picture of change, one that reflects Mayas' active involvement in the refashioning of the cosmos and their place in it.

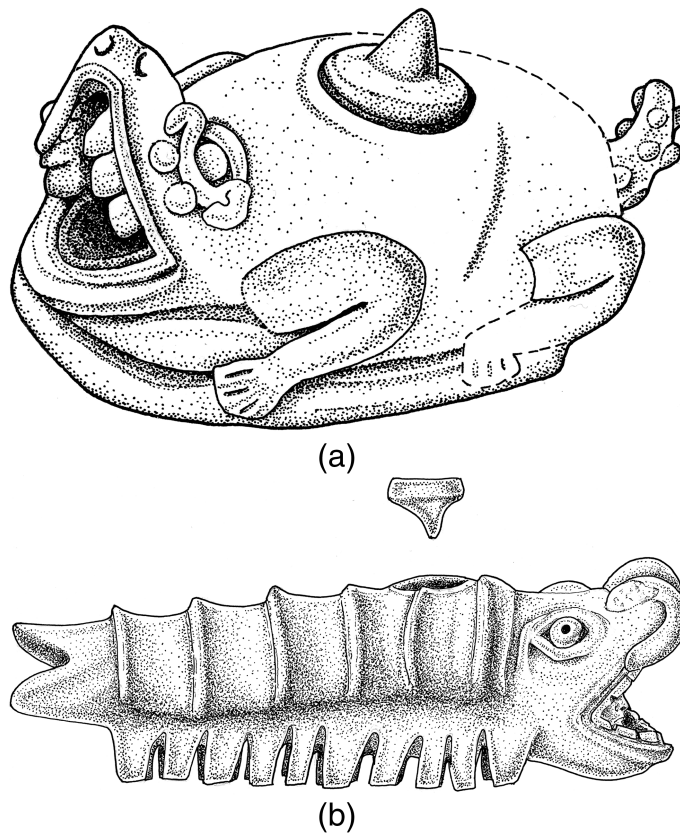


Figure 2 (a) Lamanai, crocodile-like effigy vessel cached at the base of a stela (Stela 4). The stela was erected at the junction of the nave and sanctuary of the second church built at Lamanai (YDL II). Also found were a re-cut jade pendant in the form of a human face and a fragmentary jade bead. LA 423/4. Length of figure = 9.7cm (drawing by Louise Belanger). (b) Lamanai, centipede-lobster effigy figure (Cache N12-11/3, LA 3035/1) found at the base of the north stair of the first church at Lamanai, YDL I. The contents of the vessel comprised two chert bifaces (LA 3035/2,3), a stingray spine (LA 3035/4,5 (in two fragments) and three shark's teeth (LA 3035/5,6,7). Length of the effigy = 21cm (drawing by Louise Belanger).

Rich as the documentary sources are, they are written from the point of view of the mendicant friars or the conquerors. With respect to the capacity to engage with Christian ideas, the picture they paint is largely monochrome because the friars and Spanish authorities assumed that the Mayas would be receivers of information and thus reactive rather than proactive.

The events known as the Maya collapse occurred several centuries before Spanish contact, although they are generally recognized to have taken place during an extended period from about AD 750 to 1050 (Rice et al. 2004: 2). Evidence from Lamanai (Graham 2004, 2006, 2007; Pendergast 1981, 1986) and from Marco Gonzalez, a site off the coast of northern Belize on Ambergris Caye (Graham 1989; Graham and Pendergast 1989; Graham and Simmons 2011; Pendergast 1990; see also Guderjan and Garber 1995) (Fig. 1), demonstrates occupation through the time of collapse to a post-Classical period

characterized by lively commerce and trade (Graham 2011a: 29–58). Material evidence provides no indication of problems arising from environmental degradation or drought (Diamond 2011; Gill 2000) but suggests political change (who held power and how) accompanied by shifts in social status hierarchy and to some extent in cultural values (Graham 2006). Parallels can be drawn between the Classic to Postclassic transition and the transition from the Postclassic period to the Spanish Conquest in that Spanish contact provides a model for the kinds of connections that can develop between social, cultural, political or religious currents and changes in material culture. Unfortunately, data from communities that weathered the transition to the Postclassic are meagre in comparison to data from the Classic or even the Conquest period, which admittedly makes the basis for our hypothesized parallels weak. These parallels can be tested by future research, however. Because research interest in Postclassic Maya history is burgeoning, it is useful even at this juncture to draw attention to connections between religion and warfare as a stimulus to inquiry. To validate the basis for our comparison, however, we need to deconstruct ‘religion’.

Religion: our experience or yours?

William James (1982) linked religion to varieties of experience which he clearly felt amounted to a distinctive and intriguing ‘package’, but he wrote about the phenomenon as an outside observer. Likewise, when we archaeologists or historians study or explore ‘religion’ we are not *experiencing* in a phenomenological sense but instead are describing what others have experienced (Graham 2011a: 313). In cases in which writers see themselves as sharing the experiences of those they write about – for example, when Roman Catholics write about New World evangelization and conversion (Bayle 1950; Lopetegui and Zubillaga 1965; Lopez de Cogolludo 1971) – they do not express their standpoint as a ‘religion’ (one among many that are equally valid) but as truth (Graham 2011b).

This may be a feature exclusive to proselytizing faiths. After all, one way to solve the problem of the existence of untruths – and the people who perpetuate untruth – is to get others to believe what you do. Were Maya religions proselytizing religions? It is generally assumed that they were not, but this view derives from the fact that the known proselytizing religions – Christianity, Islam, Buddhism (Smith 1998: 279) – are late in date and to some extent rest on political, social or other factors that reflect crossroads in global history that are not believed to have been present earlier. The short answer is that we do not know, but the inscriptions and pictorial representations we have give no indication that Maya rituals or beliefs were centred on individuals, like those central to Christianity or Islam or Buddhism, who lived as human beings and who feature repeatedly in texts or images or both and are instantly recognizable through a widely known set of traits. On the other hand, we are not ancient Maya, so how would we know? Some have entertained the idea that Quetzalcoatl filled this bill (Borhegyi 1971: 84; Braswell 2003: 9; Farriss 1993: 155). Perhaps the key trait that identifies Christians and Buddhists is burial practice, rather than a focus on an individual from history.

Although ‘religion’ is defined in the dictionary, which accords it legitimacy, its use as a term may be rooted not in any effectiveness in explaining people’s behaviour but in its

utility, as noted above, in justifying the existence of difference and hence ‘otherness’ (Graham 2011a: 69–71), often in a way that feeds self-gratification. As a nod to Wittgenstein, it can be argued that the concept’s history confounds its use as a meaningful analytical tool (see Hacking 2002). The etymology of the term ‘religion’ is uncertain, it is true, but the extant idea that it stems from a root meaning ‘to bind’ (*religare*) makes anthropological sense (*OED*, cited in Smith 1998: 269). ‘Religion’ is used in this sense in a text from the Roman period (Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* [On the Deaths of the Persecutors] XI, 6) in which Christians are distinguished from other Romans and their practices (Schott 2008: 1).

Smith (1998: 269) claims that in both Roman and early Christian Latin usage, the noun and adjectival forms were terms that referred to the careful performance of ritual obligations. This is supported by Rebillard (2003: 71), who states that followers of Cybele and the goddess Isis used *religio* to describe the practices related to their beliefs, and styled themselves *religiosi*. In the same vein, Roman Catholics use ‘religious’ as a noun to refer to those in an order, such as the Franciscans or Dominicans, in which members take public vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and live the common life (Graham 2011a: 383; oec.catholic.com). Even the line from an old Christian spiritual – ‘Give me that old-time religion . . . it’s good enough for me’ (Tillman n.d.) – suggests that practices and behaviour can be emulated, whereas beliefs can be experienced and shared but not easily explained or defined. The content of the ‘old-time religion’ is not particularly clear, but the song implies that there are observable ways to express one’s faith that are preferred over others.

That ‘religion’ has utility only as a scholarly construct has been argued (King 1999: 210); one simply has to define what one means, as James (1982) has done, and stick to it (Smith 1998: 281). On the other hand, because the word has been bandied about for a long time, there are individuals who proceed on the basis that consensus exists concerning a category of ‘religious ideas’ in order to legitimize a search for the cognitive foundations of such ideas (Boyer 1994: 30–1). Our concern is, however, the notion that there is such a thing as a religious idea that is not also something else, and, perhaps more critical, that we feel justified in referring to ‘religious ideas’ as a cluster that is causal in human behaviour.

Although the term ‘religion’ is found in both native categories (as in the ‘old-time religion’) and in the scholarly literature (Smith 1998: 276), separating ideas that are ‘religious’ from ideas that are not may be easier for the observer than for the observed (e.g. Hitchens 2007). We repeatedly hear practising Roman Catholics or Methodists or Muslims say, when speaking about themselves, that their beliefs are holistic: they do not separate decision-making into religious or non-religious components. The question then arises, *outside* writing about religion in a way you have defined it for yourself in order to apply it to people who are not you, where is the logic in employing a concept of ‘religion’ in trying to resolve conflict or in attempting to resolve situations in which creationists oppose evolutionists or Anglicans pit themselves against atheists or Muslims confront Christians? Even the idea of a ‘secular’ state does not stand up under scrutiny if one rejects ‘religion’ as a viable concept (see Lincoln 1998: 56).

How, then, are we to approach the question of religious change among the pre-Columbian and colonial-period Maya? Perhaps we should simply explore ‘change’ and how it is manifested. Working from an assumption that a ‘religion’ existed which had a dynamic all its own is unlikely to be useful because it is unlikely to get at how the Maya

made decisions, especially given the fact that prior to contact with Europe there was no concept of ‘religion’. How, when or where the people we call ‘Maya’ changed their minds, or remained obdurate, did not rest on recognition of the existence of a ‘religion’, new or old.

If we attempt to remember, having been raised in a particular faith as children, what being a Roman Catholic or Presbyterian or Methodist meant, but also keep our scholars’ hats on, we might say that what other people would call our ‘religion’ is our way of integrating criteria of personal choice – and sense of self as part of a larger cosmos – with criteria of social, political and cultural participation. Hindmarsh (2005: 8–10) would say that we are talking about identity – an identity that is in part bestowed supernaturally. We see his point, but in a sense it does not matter if we believe in a god or in spirits or in paganism or in Jedi knights or in evolution. The fact remains that we have to make decisions every day in all realms of life, and we somehow develop a way to do this that draws on experience. If we can get close to describing this way of drawing on experience, then perhaps we are talking about religion, although this sense of ‘religion’ can be problematic in that it obviates any necessity to distinguish between, say, ‘secularism’ or ‘atheism’ and ‘religion’; it also makes science ‘god-like’ as regards use of it as a referent for the source of truth.

With regard to the Maya, a view of religion as decision-making that draws on a wide range of experience means that why war was waged or how people were buried or where people lived, how they made a living or how individuals justified killing are all related. If there was change in the way individuals integrated criteria of personal choice and sense of being with criteria of social, political or cultural participation, and expressed this change materially (they would have to have done so if we have evidence of it), then there was religious change. (Smart’s [1983] concept of ‘worldview’ covers these sorts of changes, and we rely on his usage.)

The catch is that the knowledge gained through archaeology, even via Maya inscriptions and texts, does not tell us what went on in an individual’s mind, and it is at the level of the individual that change is initiated. As more individuals’ minds change, however, we assume that beliefs were acted out in ways that we can detect, and our antennae are up. There are two periods in which such change looms large: the Spanish Conquest and the years spanning the Maya collapse.

Religious change in the sixteenth century: war

There is little question that change took place during the period of Spanish contact in Belize in the way individuals saw themselves and their place in the world (Graham 2011a). Documentary evidence indicates that Belize communities, at least as far south as Tipu, became part of the Spanish tribute system in 1544 (Jones 1989: 44). There is, however, archaeological evidence from the Belize atolls (in the form of Maya and Spanish ceramics), supported by inferences that can be drawn from documentary evidence on voyages to the Caribbean, that the coastal Maya, such as those on Ambergris Caye, were affected from the early sixteenth century, not long after Columbus’s voyage to the Bay Islands (Graham 2011a: 107–9, 122–4). The same was true of communities in regular contact with coastal

traders, such as Lamanai, where reduction in the quality of ceramic forms and slips is clearly in evidence.

Contact would have affected the Maya of coastal regions in two major ways. First, coastal trade would have been disrupted owing to attacks by seafarers for the purpose of obtaining supplies and/or slaves; second, European diseases are highly likely to have been transmitted through contact (Jones 1994; Graham 2011a: 123). This interaction, as well as the Christian proselytizing with which we are more familiar, would have triggered a reassessment of worldview (Smart 1983). With regard to mendicant preaching, it is hard to know whether it was the message or the medium that had more effect; it was probably both.

Maya from a range of towns and villages were increasingly in contact with people whose ways of looking at the world and ways of doing things were unfamiliar, at least in some respects. What is normally categorized as a 'religion', i.e. Christianity, was probably *not* at the top of the list, especially because everyday behaviour by Spanish Christians included practices familiar to the Maya: praying, lighting wax candles and incense, using censers, burying the dead under building floors, keeping statues and effigies of various kinds in the houses as parts of household altars, using altars as foci of various kinds of rituals, kneeling as an act of respect, chanting, holding priests up as ritual leaders and designating sacred spaces or places (see also Thompson 1960). Contrary to what is generally believed, it was not in its practices that Christianity represented change so much as in its entailment in the acts committed by the Spaniards, such as war. What is likely to have had a profound effect, first and foremost, is the behaviour that was sanctioned by the Spaniards as warfare. The term 'sanctioned' is critical here because it means that Spanish culture and attitudes towards supernatural beings and not just Spanish politics upheld the behaviours of conflict and killing. The Spaniards and the Maya approached war in ways that reflected their worldviews, which would have included social, cultural and supernatural justifications. Although Jesus of Nazareth preached turning the other cheek and murder is prohibited by one of the Ten Commandments, it did not take long for early Christians to see themselves as an army (*militēs* versus non-militants or pagans (Graham 2011a: 89) and to find ways to use their standpoint, as many others have done (Lincoln 1998: 65), to sanction killing under the umbrella of war.

For the Spaniards, winning the war involved killing as many people as possible until opponents either fled or 'surrendered'. 'Winning' in this view gave Spanish victors the right to the products of the land and to the labour of the people who occupied the land and were fought against and killed in the 'war'. Economic motives were therefore critical in war.

Spanish warfare tactics permitted attacks at any time, and the raiding and burning of towns. Individual soldiers and their captains were not condemned for killing because death in war was socially sanctioned by society and spiritually sanctioned by God, often through a particular saint on whose day a battle was won (e.g. Chamberlain 1948: 130–1). But, even without the help of saints, 'just wars' were supported by various interpretations of Christian doctrine (Lincoln 1992: 55), and with regard to the sixteenth-century Spanish Conquest of Mesoamerica, the medieval church was the dominant and defining institution of society. By emphasizing this role for the medieval church, it would seem that we are arguing for an extraordinary role for religion in the Spanish Conquest, but not so. What we argue instead is that – because Christianity, or what we would now call Roman

Catholicism, served as the dominant worldview in the Iberian Peninsula in the sixteenth century – the church was set up historically, structurally, culturally and socially to serve as the institution that could most easily and practically provide the justifications for conflict stimulated by economic and political factors. In the modern world, this integrative role has been taken over by the nation-state (Lincoln 1998: 56), which, in order to wage war, must provide the right ‘mix’ of economic benefits with moral and spiritual justification, such as defending against an axis of evil.²

Insights into Maya warfare from the Conquest experience and the implications for our understanding of Classic and Postclassic conflict

Our hypothesis is that Maya warfare operated in the same way that Spanish warfare operated.

Economic gain was the critical impetus, there were cultural rules to follow and killing was sanctioned both socially and spiritually. Because vast differences existed in the cultural rules of fighting, Maya (and Aztec) warfare has long been misinterpreted as being dominated by religion, and religion has been assumed to have had a unique role (e.g. ‘human sacrifice’).

Among the Maya, as among the Aztecs,³ there was no such concept as ‘surrender’ in the sense that an entire ‘army’ or group would yield to another. Despite countless Spanish claims that the Maya or Aztecs sought to slay war leaders such as Montejo the Adelantado, Cortés, Pedro de Alvarado or Dávila (Chamberlain 1948; Díaz del Castillo 2011; Pagden 1986), closer readings reveal that individual Mayas or Aztecs were in fact trying to take particular Spanish individuals (leaders) captive. None of the above-mentioned Spanish war captains was killed in the conquests of Mexico and Yucatan, yet, according to the Spanish accounts, natives repeatedly surrounded them (e.g. Chamberlain 1948: 129). In one of the first skirmishes with the Tlaxcalans, Cortés recounts:

as we approached them [the Tlaxcalans] . . . they banded together and began to throw spears and to call to others of their people who were in a valley. They fought so fiercely with us that they killed two horses and wounded three others and two horsemen. At this point the others appeared who must have been four or five thousand. Some eight horsemen were now with me . . . and we fought them making several charges while we waited for the other soldiers . . . and in the fighting we did them some damage, in that we killed fifty or sixty of them and *ourselves suffered no harm*, although they fought with great courage and ferocity.

(Pagden 1986: 58, emphasis added)

Still in Tlaxcala:

Before they had time to rally, I burnt five or six small places of about a hundred inhabitants, and took prisoner about four hundred persons, both men and women; and returned to the camp having suffered no loss whatever . . .

The following day I left before dawn by a different route, without being observed, with the horsemen, a hundred foot soldiers and my Indian allies. I burnt more than ten villages, in one of which there were more than three thousand houses, where the inhabitants fought with usAs we were carrying the banner of the Cross and were fighting for our Faith and in the service of Your Sacred Majesty in this Your Royal enterprise, God gave us such a victory that we killed many of them *without ourselves receiving any hurt*.

(Pagden 1986: 60, emphasis added)

In Yucatan, Chamberlain (1948: 129) describes the Battle of the Day of San Bernabé in which natives surrounded the Adelantado Montejo on all sides. Some tried to tear him from his saddle; others tried to take away his lance or seize his reins and stirrups, and others wrapped their arms around his horse's legs. The question is, does anyone honestly believe that this was the Maya way to *kill* a man? That Maya warriors and war captains were trying to capture Montejo without killing him on the battlefield makes much more sense, and fits with Maya warfare (and spiritual, moral and religious) tactics. Yet many scholars persist in believing that a group of battle-hardened Mayas armed with spears and short-range weapons were unable to kill a single mounted horseman.

Let us quote from the probanza (evidence) of the soldier Blas González, which provides an original account of the incident:

A great number of Indians gathered where the Adelantado was and attacked him. Some seized him and others took hold of the horse and reins in such a manner that they would have carried him off or killed him, since they were so many, had it not been that I . . . Blas González, placing my own life in risk, had not gone ahead and set upon them with my horse and killed many . . . [I did this] with the aid of God and with the wish to serve . . . [Him], knowing that if [the Indians succeeded] the land would be lost. And I did so much that I brought the Adelantado away from the Indians live and whole, [although] I and my horse were badly wounded. In [this] I gave great service and risked myself muchAnd if I had not done what I did, I hold it to be certain that the Indians would have killed the Adelantado . . . since they [the Spaniards] were few and the Indians would have killed them.

(Chamberlain 1948: 129–30 and note 5, the Probanza of Blas González, C1567, AGI, Patronato 68-I-2)

What is certain is that the Maya were not trying to kill the Adelantado; they were trying to capture him to kill him later. It is not clear that killing on the battlefield was ever a goal of Maya warfare; if it occurred, it is more likely to have been a kind of collateral damage that resulted from elites engaging commoners whose role was to protect their lords from capture (Graham 2011a: 42). We know that capture was the *raison d'être* of Maya warfare (Martin and Grube 2008; Roys 1943: 67), and Graham (2011a: 41) has argued that the emphasis on capture and its attendant humiliation was the result of the social sanctioning of capture as a vehicle for tribute transfer. When captives were killed, they were

despatched in temples by priests as part of the institution of war. That warriors were not always killed but lived on as vassals of their captors is known from the hieroglyphic record (e.g. Martin and Grube 2008: 56–7, 62–3, 120–1), although we do not know by which criteria warriors' fates were determined.

Warfare both for the Maya and for the Spaniards was an acceptable vehicle of wealth appropriation at the same time that, as a social institution with considerable time-depth, it provided sanctioning for killing. In other words, no Spaniard or Maya was accused of doing anything morally unacceptable by killing other human beings under the rubric of war. The spiritual backing – supernatural beings in the case of both Mayas and Spaniards – seems to have served mainly to permit individuals to rationalize their actions multi-dimensionally or cosmically – that is, not just in this world or in this time but with regard to human existence, the human past (ancestors, saints), life and death (see Lincoln 1998: 65).

According to the Spanish/European worldview (culture, religion) of the time, warriors killed warriors on the battlefield; according to the Maya/Mesoamerican worldview of the time, priests killed captured warriors in temples, although there is evidence from the Contact period to suggest that rulers, not priests, were the decision-makers in cases in which the life or death of a war captive was concerned (Scholes and Roys 1938: 607). The only other socially sanctioned venue for killing warriors, particularly those of high status such as kings, seems to have been the ball court (Scarborough and Wilcox 1991; Whittington 2001).

To the Spaniards, the first demand made of an opponent, or a potential opponent if war was to be avoided, was fealty (see, e.g., Montejo the Adelantado in Campeche in 1531 [Chamberlain 1948: 98]). The concept of a pledge of fealty as enduring, in and of itself, does not seem to have existed as such in Mesoamerica. As Clendinnen observes, 'We cannot know at what point the shift from the Indian notion of "he who pays tribute", usually under duress so carrying no sense of obligation, to the Spanish one of "vassal", with its connotations of loyalty, was made, but we know the shift to be momentous' (1991: 71; see also Restall 1989: 10). The Spaniards would have expected such a shift once the Maya were baptised as Christians, and by all appearances this shift did indeed occur because the purpose of fealty, which involved tribute in goods and services, was understood by Mayas and Spaniards alike. Thus 'religious change' was effected at one level in that tribute was paid to overlords with whom one shared 'being Christian'.

Pledges of tribute among the Maya were, however, made under duress. If the pieces on the chess board could be moved and power dynamics altered, Maya lords never lost the chance to take advantage. Such attempts were well within the bounds of acceptability on the Maya side and, we propose, had deep roots in Mesoamerican warfare and politics. On the Spanish side, however, Maya attempts to change the game were seen as acts of disloyalty, deception and *apostasy*. When the Maya of Canpech and Ah Canul conspired to attack Montejo the Adelantado in 1531 after initially peacefully giving allegiance, they were judged treacherous (Chamberlain 1948: 98, 128–9), whereas under Maya (and Aztec) social dynamics, constantly pushing the tribute envelope, so to speak, was characteristic of inter-city and inter-community dynamics (Houston 1993; Martin and Grube 2008; Smith 1986).

At one level, then, cultural disjunction reigned. At another, or at least from our vantage, we can identify similar Maya and Spanish cases of entanglement between religion and the motivations to increase wealth and expand power. It is therefore not hard to understand why the Maya who were baptised as Christians in the early days of contact continued to

consider their wars, in which men were captured and killed later in temples, to be supernaturally sanctioned. Their observations of Spanish behaviour gave them no reason to believe otherwise. Given Spanish tactics, however, which involved massive killing on the battlefield, 'religious change' in the Mayas' case meant that they eventually had to move away from attempting to take captives, which involved high-energy, intensive fighting focused on a relatively small number of men, to killing large numbers of men wantonly on the field of battle, because this was part of the Christian package.

Continuity and change

Outside warfare, Graham (2011a: 263–306) has argued that there were so many aspects of Christianity that did not clash with Maya worldviews that 'becoming Christian' was not nearly as black-and-white a matter as it is often made out to be. If one adheres solely to the voice of the documents, success in conversion is described as (complete) change whereas failure sees the Maya as reverting to pre-Christian beliefs. The archaeology suggests a more complex picture. The appropriation of Christian sacred space in caching practices (Figs 2a, 2b) shows both change and continuity, as does burial practice.

One of the key indicators of Spanish contact, and presumably conquest or at least evangelization, is burial position, in which individuals are buried supine with head to the west, facing east. The arms meet somewhere over the torso, and are often crossed over the chest (Graham 2011a: 25, fig. 1.10, 209, fig. 8.6; see also Jacobi 2000). Christian burials were either laid out beneath the floors of church naves or placed in graves in church courtyards. There were sometimes burial 'goods', mainly jewellery worn in death, but in one case at Tipu a censer or 'thurible' (Graham 2011a: 233, figs. 6.2, 8.28) was placed in the grave of an adolescent.

In Postclassic times, burial was variable: people were interred seated (sometimes in large jars), flexed or even face down with legs bent back at the knees (e.g. Graham 2004; Pendergast 1981). At the same time, burying individuals beneath floors of dwellings or public/ritual buildings (churches) and thus living with the dead (Brown 1981, 1993) was a common pre-Columbian Maya practice; what was different during the colonial period was the supine, westward-oriented burial position, its relative invariance and to some extent the concentration of burials in a single public/ritual structure (585 burials at Tipu, 230 at Lamanai: Graham 2011a: 232–3).

The persistence of Christian burial practice at Tipu suggests that rebelling against Spanish tribute obligations did not mean – indeed could not mean – a return to pre-Columbian worldviews or 'religion', as is assumed in the documents. In fact, despite what is recorded, logic tells us that once Spanish ships appeared pre-Columbian thought *had* to account for the foreigners in some way, and once the friars arrived with their pictures and their stories, change was inevitable. One could even argue that the evidence for a pan-regional struggle to maintain pre-Columbian ways of life (see Jones 1998) itself constituted religious change because new integrative mechanisms, both social and spiritual, had to be found in the face of European attempts at domination.

Why is there scant if any information from the documents (as opposed to archaeology) that explores complexities in the ways the Maya internalized Christian ideas? Although the

Inquisition in Europe recorded testimonies of the people charged with heresies (e.g. Ginzburg 1979), idolatry trials such as those conducted by Bishop Landa in 1562 in Yucatan contain little direct testimony; where the Maya were questioned, they responded according to what they thought their inquisitors wanted to hear, and in any case their narratives were passed on not by them but by Spanish religious authorities – the people who brought the word ‘idol’ to Mesoamerica, and who had already decided what the Maya had done and why they had done it (Graham 2011a: 63–4). To draw directly from Tedlock (1993), the stories were fashioned by their tellers instead of springing from events.

The Maya collapse

What relevance does the complexity of the Conquest experience have for the Maya collapse? We preface our remarks by noting that the evidence we put forward is preliminary and thus far reflects only a small area of northern Belize. Nonetheless it may prompt archaeologists to think about the events of the collapse, and the significance of burial position, in new ways.

From the Terminal Classic period or late eighth through tenth centuries at Marco Gonzalez, on Ambergris Caye, and from the Early Postclassic or late tenth century at Lamanai, we begin to find individuals interred face down with the legs bent back at the knees. Burials at both sites occur under house floors or under the floors of buildings that may have functioned as community structures of some sort, either civic or ceremonial.

At Lamanai, there were fifty-one face-down burials (fifty-two individuals) from nine structures. The legs of the face-down individuals seem to have been tied back in antiquity to keep them in place with the feet on the pelvis (Figs 3a, 3b). At Marco Gonzalez, the burials were recovered from two structures on which excavations were concentrated, Strs. 12 and 14 (Graham 1989; Graham and Pendergast 1989). In these cases the knees were splayed with the lower legs crossed (Fig. 4). There is some indication that the lower legs may have been loosely tied back (in one burial in Str. 12, one of the feet still rests on the pelvis) but not with the regularity of the Lamanai burials.

The Lamanai burials cannot all be unequivocally dated because not all contain ceramics. Taking into account, however, the pottery found with a large number of the face-down burials as well as the burials’ stratigraphic positions in their respective structures, all but nine can be dated to the Early Postclassic or Buk phase. Of the nine exceptions, two are Terminal Classic–Early Postclassic; four were originally categorized as post-abandonment interments but three may be associated with wholly perishable structures and hence could be anywhere from Early to Late Postclassic; and three were found in the area of the camp along the lagoon and are likely to be Late Postclassic.

Structures 12 and 14 at Marco Gonzalez have yielded pottery from the Terminal Classic to Early Postclassic periods. Only the Terminal Classic pottery is derived from primary contexts – burials – whereas the Early Postclassic pottery, similar to the Early Postclassic Buk-phase pottery found at Lamanai, was densely scattered on the surface, although some came from the core of platforms that were greatly disturbed by root action and looting.

Of the six burials from Str. 12, three were too fragmentary and eroded to permit determination of burial position; of the other three, a juvenile was buried face down and

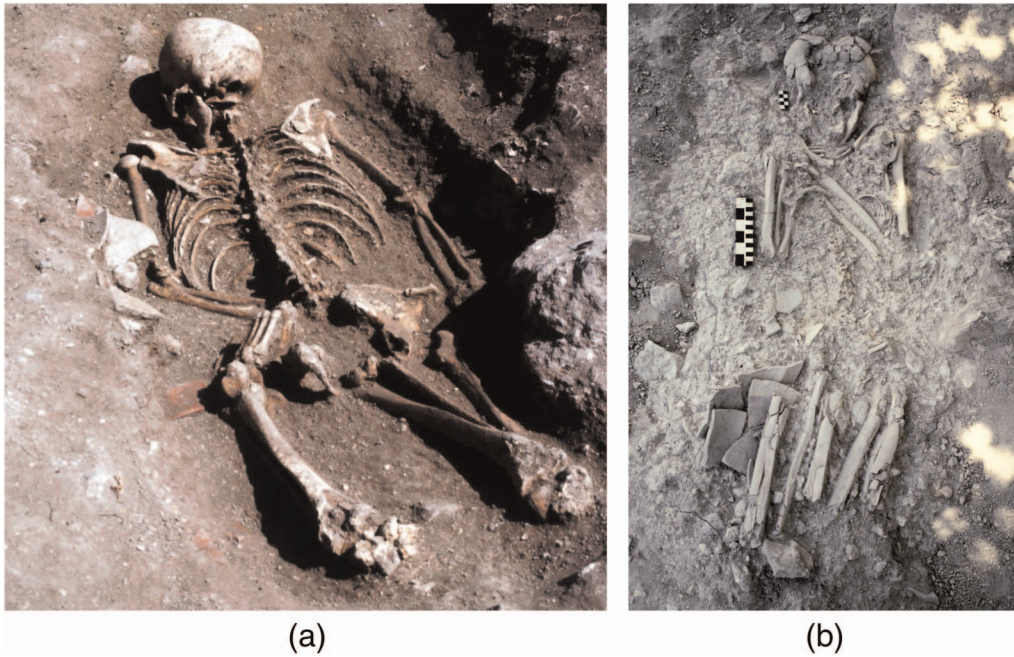


Figure 3 (a) Lamanai Burial N10-4/19, lkg N. (b) Lamanai Burial N10-12/7, lkg W.

extended; the other two individuals were buried face down, knees splayed and legs tightly crossed.

Str. 14 has yielded more than thirty-seven burials representing about fifty-three individuals to date. It is difficult to be exact because there is so much disturbance of earlier burials by later ones. Several burials have been given single designations but contain individuals from earlier burials that have been disturbed, with the bones of earlier burials gathered together and placed alongside or on top of the individual interred in the latest burial (Fig. 4). Positions can be determined for twenty-two individuals, and of these fourteen are face down with the legs bent, knees splayed and lower legs crossed; seven are face up with the legs bent, knees splayed and lower legs crossed.

Arm positions vary: parallel to the sides of the body; bent under the body; one arm crossed over the chest with the hand resting near the shoulder; or arms behind the back. Individuals laid out in the face-down position with legs bent back also date to Late Postclassic times (*c.* AD 1300 to 1450) at Lamanai and on Ambergris Caye. On Ambergris Caye, of the forty-eight burials recovered from rescue excavations in the town of San Pedro, the bulk for which position could be determined (*c.* forty-five) were face down with the legs bent back (feet on pelvis, presumably tied back). Although these cannot be securely dated, the bulk of the ceramics recovered from San Pedro are Late Postclassic.

Other burial positions occur in the Postclassic at Lamanai such as seated and flexed (Pendergast 1981; Simmons 2004, 2005, 2006). At Marco Gonzalez, in addition to burials face-up with legs crossed, there may be other positions represented by the disturbed burials. Therefore we cannot point to as ‘global’ a change as seems to have occurred in the Contact period. In other words, the burial practices reflect the coexistence of a variety of



Figure 4 Marco Gonzalez Burials Str. 14/21-25, 10, 15, lkg N.

worldviews. The face-down, legs-bent-back burial position is, however, distinct from the Classic-period range and suggests an ‘intrusion’ into the Maya area of a new way of positioning oneself not just in burial but in the cosmos. It calls to mind the fact that the sixteenth-century supine burial position, also distinct from previous practices, is associated with changes in worldview that took place during the Spanish colonial period as the result of the adoption of Christianity. Our hypothesis, then, is that the face-down position with legs bent back may reflect a significant change in the way at least some members of Maya society thought individuals should be positioned in death, and hence also reflects a change in the way death (and the otherworld/afterlife?) was perceived and by implication the way in which killing was socially sanctioned.

Who were these members of Maya society and what role did they play?

The pattern at Marco Gonzalez began in the late eighth century and thus preceded the late tenth-century pattern at Lamanai. The Marco Gonzalez burials also fit Classic Maya patterns in which one to several whole vessels, presumably with contents, were placed alongside the individuals interred. At Lamanai, however, with the face-down burials we

see a significant change from Classic times in that many vessels, sometimes twenty-five or more, were interred with the dead but deliberately fragmented, without all pieces present (Howie 2012; Pendergast 1981). If the face-down burials represent a new worldview, then such a worldview with its practices reached the coastal communities before affecting Lamanai's population.

We must be careful not to build an entire case of 'religious' change on limited evidence, especially since we do not know the extent to which face-down burials with legs bent back are found at other sites in Belize or the lowlands. It is also not certain that the Terminal Classic face-down burials at Marco Gonzalez, with their splayed knees, are a parallel for the Early Postclassic burials at Lamanai or the Late Postclassic burials at Lamanai and on the caye in San Pedro, in which the effort was made to tie the legs back. Relatively few inland sites in the southern lowlands have evidence of continuity through the collapse into the Postclassic period, and we must await the results of further and more extensive excavation. Our own burial and skeletal analyses, too, are also ongoing. If, however, there occurred a change in the way the Maya or other individuals living in the lowlands perceived their relationship with gods or supernatural beings and death, the question arises concerning the origin of this altered perspective. As in the Contact period, was the new perspective related to disruption in which different cultural or ethnic groups were involved who followed different rules of warfare?

Are there other indications besides the burials that warfare patterns changed? Side-notching of the stems of bifaces appears in the Terminal Classic and continues into the Postclassic (Graham 1994: 276–7, 323). Such bifaces were used as spear or atlatl points, and it may well be that we are looking at changes in the way (some) warriors were accustomed to haft their weapons. Arrow points, though rare prior to the Late Postclassic, have been found earlier in the lowlands at Aguateca and Copan (Aoyama 2005, 2009).

The pattern at Marco Gonzalez precedes face-down burials at Lamanai, which suggests that the custom was introduced to Lamanai by coastal people, who travelled themselves and/or had circum-peninsular contacts that extended from Honduras to Tabasco, a pattern that is also indicated in the material culture associated with the Terminal Classic at Marco Gonzalez (Donis et al. 2011; Graham 2011a: 229–58; Graham and Simmons 2011). There is a range of ceramic and other traits that occur in Terminal Classic times (Fine Orange pottery, red-paste pottery, plumbate ware, green obsidian) and in the Early Postclassic period (incised decoration at the expense of polychromes, frying-pan censers) that suggests sustained contact with highland Guatemala and central Mexico, the former through the Bay of Honduras and the latter probably via Gulf Coast communities.

With regard to the time-depth of some of these features, however, it does not appear that they result from armies with a set of customs overcoming other armies with other customs, as was the case during Spanish Contact. Instead, individuals among 'traditional' elite lowland communities displayed, via material culture, their ties to a variety of traditions, some of which originated outside the lowlands. Frying-pan censers, for example, are associated with elite special deposits in central Peten that date to the Late Classic period (Tobias 2011); some deposits have been known to contain frying-pan censers mixed with traditional lowland censers, which suggests the infiltration of non-lowland ritual practices into the lowlands by individual rulers or marriage partners. 'Infiltration' does not seem to match the Conquest-period pattern, and yet

monastery-educated elite Maya youth may well have been responsible for returning to their towns and villages with saints' statues or medallions of the Virgin which at first would have been placed alongside crocodile effigies and shark's teeth. At least one resistance movement in Belize was led by a Maya reared by friars, and in another, Maya priests wore Spanish-style priestly vestments (Jones 1989: 49, 1998: 47).

It is the relationship between religion and warfare that we have yet to nail down, however. It is unlikely that Christianity would have taken hold in Mesoamerica as completely as the friars envisioned without warfare. Had the Spanish Christians given Mesoamerica the several hundred years required for the Christianization of Europe (almost 1,000 years if we consider northern Europe; see Fletcher 1977: 64), religious change might have been effected with less violence, although such a change in worldview would nevertheless have affected the way society sanctioned killing in warfare. But in Belize, and to some extent in Yucatan, the 'spiritual' conquest covered a period of about 200 years, from 1500 (1492) to 1700. We know the extent to which warfare was involved and that the arm of God (religion) and the arm of the king (war), though separate, drew life from the body politic. This is not to say that the collapse and its aftermath (*c.* AD 750 to 1050 (Rice et al. 2004)) reflect a single foreign intrusion – far from it. Nor are we positing the catalyst of warfare as anything new (e.g. Golden 2003; Houston 1993; Martin and Grube 2008; Inomata 1997; Webster 2000). If we can draw, however, from what we know about the integration of power, conflict and religion at the time of the Conquest, then we should be sensitive to indications that warfare was not only a critical factor in the collapse but also, perhaps more important and less acknowledged, a reflection of cultural changes that played a significant role in structuring the political and socio-cultural landscape that characterized the centuries that followed.

Conclusions

At one level, what we propose is not new, because endemic warfare is believed to have been a major factor in the Maya collapse (Demarest 1997; Demarest et al. 2004). Such warfare, however, is posited as having occurred among lowland Maya, rather than as a product of 'foreign invasion' (Demarest 1997; Demarest et al. 2004: 551). It may be that we have to give both 'foreign' and 'invasion' another look (Ringle et al. 1998). If the Terminal Classic is indeed a 'cultural stew' (Tourtellot and González 2004: 80), the ingredients all have sources, and, even if 'invasion' seems an excessive term, it may nevertheless turn out that warfare and the worldview that rationalized it were major vehicles by which non-lowland Maya Classic cultural features spread throughout the lowlands.

In addition, given the prosperity in evidence in coastal and coastally oriented communities (Lamanai and Ambergris Caye) during the period of collapse, it is clear that there was a segment of Maya society that stayed up and running despite conflict. Trade and exchange remained brisk, and there must have been enough food grown on the mainland, perhaps around towns or cities such as Lamanai, to supply coastal traders with what they could not acquire on the islands. Important aspects of culture and religion had changed, however, within a relatively short period of 200 to 300 years – and the Contact period tells us that such a change was indeed possible.

Would endemic warfare among the bearers of lowland Maya culture have produced such an outcome? Given the importance of warfare among the Maya and among other groups in Mesoamerica in acquiring access to tribute, it is more likely that warfare was always 'international'. By this we mean that foreigners were always involved; not army vs. army but elites from far and wide challenging elites far and wide, with capture and shifts in wealth dependent on the successes of individuals, not armies. As a result communities would have come to be peppered with, or even ruled or governed by, people with worldviews that had not previously been well known or subscribed to. If individuals with non-lowland Maya worldviews followed rules of warfare in the way that Spanish Christians did, it is easy to see how change – political, economic, and spiritual – was simply a matter of time.

We do not propose that non-lowland Maya elites of the Terminal Classic killed wantonly on the battlefield in the manner of Spanish (or any European) Christians. The Aztec sources to which we refer make clear that this was not the case in Mesoamerica even in the early sixteenth century. What we propose is that, given what we know about Spanish battle tactics, the Maya were in a no-win situation not because they could not kill successfully but because their cultural/religious rules (their worldviews) did not allow them to kill in battle and thus 'win' in the way that Spanish rules dictated. This gave the Spaniards a tremendous edge because they could do away with scores of warriors while the Maya were struggling to capture individuals.

Furthermore, the Maya were unable to 'win' simply by adopting Spanish battle tactics overnight. Such a step would have required that they give up everything else – their views of the cosmos and their place in it, their understanding of how to gain supernatural sanction, their tactics for honourable wealth appropriation, their justification for power – which eventually, of course, they did.

Our hypothesis is that the change in burial position during the Terminal Classic and Early Postclassic periods at Ambergris Caye and Lamanai reflects a kind of qualitative change similar to the one that ultimately took place during the Conquest period. This remains to be tested, but even so, perhaps the attendant ideas will stimulate debate and discussion on several points: 1) 'religion' as part of a complex social package; 2) the time-depth of changes that led to collapse and to the culture(s) of the Postclassic period; 3) the economic motives for elite interaction – namely how, exactly, wealth was appropriated; and, not least, 4) the details of how killing was socially sanctioned in war among the Maya. Can we conclude that war was conducted European-style in which men as an 'army' simply attempted to kill as many other men as possible, and territory was thereby 'taken', or do we need to examine Maya history more closely? Such an examination will, we believe, allow us to learn how men fought and what constituted winning, and to understand why they did so and what they expected to gain.

Acknowledgements

Research in Belize has been supported by many organizations over the years, most recently by the British Academy and the Institute of Archaeology, University College London. We also thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

(SSHRC), the National Geographic Society, the Royal Ontario Museum, the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, the US embassy through the Institute of Archaeology (NICH) in Belize, York University (Ontario, Canada) and Claude Belanger. We are indebted to the Institute of Archaeology in Belize for permission to carry out the investigations, and for their support of the work. We also wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments.

Notes

- 1 Here I use ‘cache’ in the sense of something hidden or buried.
- 2 A good example is the war in Iraq (Ricks 2006).
- 3 See, for example, the description of Cortés’s siege of Tenochtitlan (Pagden 1986, especially pp. 260–5) with regard to the perpetual misunderstanding between Cortes and the Aztec rulers when Cortes continued to think that, because he had killed so many people, Tenochtitlan would surrender.

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