

PATRIOTISM AND OLD STONES

In various parts of the world—of which Mexico is one example—archaeology has been not only an academic discipline but has followed other motivations and goals, some valid and others more disputable: formation of a nationality, a need to know ancient roots, importance of a distinct art for understanding past societies or simply the promotion of tourism by attracting people to visit recently-excavated monuments or those that are already famous. In this paper, I intend to present the case of Mexico.

There has been no lack of enthusiasts who, somewhat carried away by their zeal, have claimed that archaeology existed in the indigenous world prior to the Spanish conquest. Their claim is based on fortuitous discoveries of an Olmec object or a Teotihuacan jade mask in such late sites as the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan, dating from the 15th century, that is, 2000 years after the first of the above-mentioned artifacts was made. However, nothing indicates that the Indians thought of using these vestiges of the past to study vanished peoples; they were inherited ritual objects or found when a tomb was opened and piously replaced as an offering to the gods.

Except for some vague antecedents, the beginning of archaeology

Translated by Jeanne Ferguson

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in the Western world may be situated in Italy shortly before the Renaissance when, with an intent that was primarily esthetic, eager searches were made for classical statues that Italian popes and princes collected for their budding museums. Little or nothing like this occurred in Mexico when the Spanish conquistadors arrived in the 16th century. On the other hand, they left splendid descriptions of some monuments, such as those that formed the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan. We should not forget the admiring pages written by Cortez or Bernal Díaz on the city they were soon to destroy but that they had found intact and functioning. However, what they admired was the present, not the evidence of a past. We had to wait 150 years before we could speak of an excavation that dealt with the verification of some of that past. In fact, for a century and a half, and even longer, activity in this area consisted in destroying what remained, especially the statues of pagan gods that could not be allowed to survive in a society that was to be Christianized.

However, the interest that today we call archaeological is only one aspect of a more general interest with regard to the pre-Hispanic world. From the 16th century on, it was not exclusively for academic or erudite motives but for other practical reasons, inspired by various social considerations, that an interest was taken in uncovering remains of the past. After the military conquest, it was of primary importance to establish bases for colonization, to know and try to understand that conquered world, its political, social and economic organization, its religion and, of course, its history. A certain number of notable authors arose that have left us many chronicles of inestimable value, thus preserving not only indigenous history—although only that of the most recent centuries—but scrutinizing customs and ways of life in order to know how to govern those peoples. Some of the monks who worked the hardest in this regard, for example, Bernardino de Sahagún, were so enthusiastic about their work that they left large and marvelous volumes that went far beyond the practical necessities for governing the growing colony. To evangelize and better understand, it was essential to speak the native languages, without which it would have been impossible to preach to the future Christians. From this need came numerous grammar books, dictionaries and linguistic studies, thanks to which we know rather well the Náhuatl of the

16th century, so different from that of today. It must be remembered that not only monks and Spaniards participated in this task but also descendants of the indigenous kings who had learned to write Latin script and left works of great importance. Clearly, this is not archaeology, but thanks to all this paramount material today we can interpret many archaeological discoveries with greater validity and approximation of the truth, as far as it is possible. Thus, since that time archaeology in Mexico forms a part of a total of connected studies that have one goal, not solely academic, but to know an ancient world. Presently we shall see some other uses of archaeology in Mexico, with quite different intentions, to obtain ends that are not strictly proper to it.

Beginning with the second decade of the 17th century we observe, not the end of these studies, but a notable decline in their quantity and importance, due to various causes. At the close of that century occurred the first excavation of which we have information, when a great colonial scholar, Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, decided to sink a deep well in the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan. The principal interest for us is that Sigüenza was not searching for treasure as so many others had done but wanted to clarify a historical problem by investigating whether or not the pyramid was hollow. Humboldt affirmed much later that Sigüenza wanted to verify if the pyramid was entirely constructed by man or if it had been built on a natural hill, which would diminish the importance of the work.

This brilliant beginning remained a long time without a sequel, until there was a resurgence of interest in archaeology that started in the second half of the 18th century. At that time, the interest was based on a nationalistic and Mexican ideal that at first did not aim at political independence from Spain but sought to give the creoles another justification that was in part based on their indigenous ancestors, that is, independently of the history and culture of Spain.

Here I refer to creole in the sense of a European born in Spanish colonies, a denomination that in the French Antilles has the same sense; I do not refer to other meanings that the word has taken with time. What was important was that the creole, until the end of the Viceregency, could not become a Viceroy nor assume any of the other high posts in New Spain, from which arose a desire of

this class to change the situation. Although not strong, this desire played a part in the tendency to favor studies on pre-Hispanic Mexico that would serve to strengthen the new nation. From this came a new search for pre-Hispanic ruins and objects that clearly began at the end of the 18th century. It was necessary to understand this indigenous world that formed one of the two roots of the growing Mexican nationality. It would allow Mexico a project to distinguish itself from Viceregent and conquering Spain.

To this stimulus was added, always more clearly, the influence of the Encyclopedia, especially the justified desire to show the Europeans how false were their ideas of America and its inhabitants. In recent years there have been publications on the curious positions of the philosophers of the Enlightenment, whether in England, Italy or France, or elsewhere.

The animosity of the Encyclopedists toward American natives went so far as to claim that America itself had only recently emerged from the sea and was still humid, that the animals were of inferior quality and those imported from Europe quickly degenerated, as did plants. In this "hostile nature" man had become diminished, dispersed and wandering. Nature had treated him more like a stepmother than a mother, and the result was a weak man who even lacked ardor towards his female companion. These affirmations will be met even in such an eminent author as Buffon, whose brilliant style made his works, with their errors, widely read. It is true that later he greatly changed his opinion.

Mexican historians were enraged by such affirmations, and a considerable number refuted them. It is clear that the Europeans of that time knew nothing of the ruins and monuments of Mexico, as well as very few inhabitants of the country itself; it was only much later they grasped the importance of these structures, which once more demonstrates conclusively the errors in thought of the *Illuminati*.

Here I will mention only a few examples referring to Mexico in the works of 18th-century authors who, infuriated by the excessive assertions of the *Illuminati* rebelled and refuted them. For example, Eguiara, to whom we owe the first bibliography of Mexico, assembled all his notes to demonstrate the falsity of the reputation for the incompetence of native Americans. He dedicated many of his

prefaces to refute a curious Dean of Alicante, Manuel Martí, as violent as he was ignorant. It is amusing to recall that the best-known work of Dean Martí is *Aringa in difesa del Peto*, first published in Italian in 1734 and then translated into other languages.

Eguiara, who was not interested in antiquities, none the less mentions the progress made by the Indian world in various areas in order to refute the unfounded accusations. He says to the Dean in the preface to his *Biblioteca Mexicana*: "To what an extreme the wise Dean is deluded and how great is his lack of knowledge of Mexican antiquities clearly appears in the excess and affectation of his discourse. If he had carefully examined the monuments of our ancestors and glanced at the chronicles written by our Spanish authors as well as by foreigners, surely he would not have classified Mexican Indians as ignorant". Further on he adds, after having dwelt for long on the illuminated manuscripts and other books, "Let us pass in silence over the two pyramids dedicated to the sun and the moon, decorated with images and carved in huge blocks of hard stone that withstood destruction by the Spaniards. All those monuments were saved from the ruin with which Spanish ignorance threatened them (this is a refrain that is constantly brought against us by foreigners)". Here appears another of the recurrent themes, the "black legend" that aimed at the destruction of Spain and as argument considered the conquest of Mexico of no value because it was accomplished against impotent and defenseless Indians.

The greatest Mexican historian of that time was a Jesuit exiled in Italy, Francisco Javier Clavijero. He mentions in his book how one day, thinking of his position as a creole, he arrived at the conclusion that he was neither Indian nor Spanish, and therefore Mexican. He wrote, "The ancient history of Mexico that I learned in order to serve my country... and to restore to its splendor the truth clouded by an incredible number of modern writers on America...". For the first time he felt the importance of monuments and archaeological objects, as well as of other evidence of the past and understood the need to preserve them. He beseeched the professors at the university: "I hope that you who are, in this kingdom, the custodians of the sciences, will attempt to save the remains of antiquity in our country by establishing a museum in

which will be gathered the statues remaining to us or those that will be discovered in excavations...". He had already understood the value of those objects as evidence of the glories of Mexico throughout its history. This renewed interest in archaeological monuments proliferated, and a few years later various other scholars looked for and studied them. Particularly notable was Antonio de Alzate, who twice visited the now famous but then unknown site of Xochicalco in order to make a survey and publish a detailed description of it. He also reported on the discovery of Tajín. During those years also appeared interesting studies on some monoliths, such as those found in 1791 in the Plaza Mayor of Mexico City when the Viceroy Revillagigedo ordered its arrangement.

This movement was in part promoted by the kings of Spain themselves, which shows that they did not associate it with separatist ideas. Charles III ordered an exploration of Palenque that brought about several expeditions to the splendid city so recently discovered. Charles IV ordered a systematic reexamination of New Spain that was carried out by a retired officer originally from Luxembourg, Guillermo Dupaix. Humboldt, who strangely enough visited practically no sites but read everything on the question, greatly stimulated the movements interested in the antique, that is, pre-Spanish. At that time a group of serious amateurs had already been formed within the moribund colonial society—we cannot call them professionals yet—who obtained some important results, and whose works, different as they are from today's archaeology, have some importance.

All this covered a growing nationalism among the creoles that inflamed the zeal to prove past and present greatness.

Thus, the interest in objects and ruins clearly began at the end of the 18th century and was justified by the desire to know and understand the indigenous world that formed one of the principal roots of the dawning nationality. Certainly it was not the basic origin of the movement for independence, but it could be and was profitable to widen the necessary bases, at least at the ideological level.

The Independence of 1821 resolved the problem of separatist demands; nevertheless, the taste for exploration and discovery, description and even painting of ruins and excavated objects continued. It was no longer the creoles displeased with everything

coming from Spain, as happened in the 18th century, but the Mexicans taking stock of their heritage. Curiously, however, except in rare cases it was not the Mexicans who explored jungles and mountains, sketching ruins and objects and at times writing delightful accounts of their travels: it was foreigners. The best known among them is certainly John Stevens, an American who came to Guatemala as a diplomatic representative of his country. When he arrived, he discovered that the young republic of Central America no longer existed and after some failures in his search decided to abandon his plumed hat and embroidered uniform and go visit famous sites. His enthusiasm was so great that he began by buying Copan—for fifty dollars! His marvelous books were to attract and bring visitors to those and other sites in search for more ruins, whether or not they were Mayan. Although fantastic ideas about the early populations and other subjects continued to circulate, little by little serious studies were undertaken that, for the most part, do not reflect political ideas such as indigenous *versus* Spanish. This absurd dichotomy became fashionable much later, and we even encounter it today, at times as a narrow nationalism without a future.

In the final decades of the 19th century explorations began which we may call professional. They have intensified in this century and have made visible and accessible not only many of the monuments and vestiges spread all over Mexico but have also given us a less confused idea, although still full of incertitude, of some of the periods through which the ancient culture passed, its highs and lows, its triumphs and disasters, that is, a history that begins to be intelligible and comparable to other regions of the world, without the necessity of introducing strange customs or supernatural events.

This work continues. Important excavations have been made that allow a better understanding of the past, though much is still lacking. Some criticize the former tendency to explore monuments especially to remove works of art with a feeling that was more esthetic than historic. They would like to investigate only aspects of the life of the common people, leaving aside princes and priests. It is certain that there has been an excessive tendency to dedicate all efforts to the latter, because I believe that, aside from purely touristic aspects that are not important from the scientific point of view, we must not forget that if we want to understand a society

of the past we must investigate the hut as well as the palace. Only in that way will the mute stones be converted into a national history.

To give just one example, let us take the case of Teotihuacan, the largest city ever built in pre-Hispanic America. Its ancient population, between 250,000 and 300,000 inhabitants, does not much impress us today, accustomed as we are to cities of millions, but in the 5th century A.D. Paris and London were hardly villages, and Rome had fallen from its former splendor. The only known rival of Teotihuacan, though smaller in size, seems to have been Constantinople, the heir of Rome and capital of the Byzantine Empire. However, it is not only the size of Teotihuacan that is important: it is the tremendous influence it continued to exert on succeeding cities even after its decline. Toltecs and Mexicas took from Teotihuacan many of their ideas, not only in architecture and urbanization but also social organization, political institutions and even religion. We may say that with this great city the history of Mexico began, however much it changed under the Viceroy. From it, and this was understood by Sigüenza y Góngora, comes the importance of the site for knowing the history that still affects us today. We must not forget that, beginning with Teotihuacan and continuing thereafter, the valleys of the Altiplano became the political, economic and religious center of Anáhuac as they still are in the modern republic. Thus, although perhaps forcing things somewhat, it may be said that Mexico was born there.

The study of archaeology had to establish itself each time with more seriousness until it became a social science throughout the world, without nationalistic implications, today unnecessary in Mexico. On the other hand, as I said above, for some years there has been an insurgence of an indigenous and clearly anti-Spanish tendency that is losing ground but still has its adepts. Curiously derived from the liberalism of the mid-19th century and from anticlericalism, much in vogue here at that time, it has led to extreme cases, regrettable and fortunately rare, of trying to prevent foreigners, especially North Americans, from working on Mexican sites, with the unacceptable idea that only Mexicans should excavate in their native soil.

The interests of the archaeologist in Mexico may be compared to those of the Egyptologist or the specialist in antiquities of the Near

East, India or China, since aside from what it is popular to search for today, we must continue to concern ourselves with great monuments, pyramids, palaces and temples, with the works of art that are found in them and with pictographic and written documents.

It seems normal that foreign archaeologists are not interested or do not understand those ties—sometimes subtle but of primary importance—between excavations and Mexican culture in general, that is, mixed Indian and Spanish cultures.

Without knowing something about the origins of the indigenous past that constitutes at least half of the roots of Mexican culture, we will not succeed in reaching the historical reality of this country and its right to consider itself as the possessor of its own culture, no matter how much it is within the framework of Western civilization that naturally originated in Europe. In my understanding, the role of archaeology in Mexico today is no longer—as it was before the separation from Spain—an affirmation of an independence that is no longer contested but the existence of a mixed ancestral culture that is distinct from any other and thus has the right, not to an absurd nationalism, but to a valid interpretation that makes many modern events comprehensible within a larger and more complete reference than those of simple daily happenings.

This outline of the history of archaeology in Mexico seen from only one point of view is obviously inexact if we wish to understand it as a whole, but what I have intended to show here, among other things, is the part of archaeology in the birth of Mexico as an independent country and how it has made possible a more profound study of that indigenous past that except for the last few centuries we only know through the results of excavations and their study.

I have referred several times to how Mexico is a mixed country, from which it is obvious that its history and its present are not intelligible without reference to its double origin, to both civilizations that formed it. Contrary to Western Europe or the United States, where little remains of the possible influence of pre-Roman people, or pre-Colonial in the latter case, in Mexico, as submerged as it might seem to the casual visitor, indigenous culture still survives in innumerable traits that may be seen in many aspects of its modern culture. Here it is not a question of Stonehenge,

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Altamira or Lascaux, where admirable works of art exist with no relationship to the present or the history of those people. It is the same with the Gallic culture, the Walkyries and many other pre-Roman peoples, real or mythical, that have little to do with the French or Germans of today, any more than do the aboriginal peoples of the United States, detached from national life today. In Mexico there is a continuity that, however much altered by the arrival of the Spanish, has none the less remained alive and gives the Mexican nation an unmistakable character. To understand this, we must accept the fact that the history of Mexico began in Teotihuacan, if not before. This Indian-Spanish relationship, so evident in the national culture of today, is the dichotomy that must be appreciated if the soul of Mexico is to be understood.

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