Lost Shores, Forgotten Peoples: Spanish Explorations of the South East Mayan Lowlands

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This book is a collection of Spanish documents in translation, mostly from the
seventeenth century, regarding the Spanish conquest of the southeast Maya lowlands, and
in particular the Manchu Chol people. Geographically, this region comprises the drainage
of the Usumacintla River in northern Guatemala and southern Belize and, according to
Feldman it is, historiographically, a neglected area—a condition he hopes to rectify with
this volume. The Spanish conquest of this region began in 1574 but was not completed
until the late seventeenth century, when the Manche Chol were congregated into mission
villages. The documents tell the story of this conquest in the words of Spanish, but not
Maya, actors. Unlike the Maya to the south or the Nahuatl speakers of central Mexico,
the Manchu Chol never committed their history to paper nor, according to the editor,
produced any other documents either in their own language or in Spanish. Still, there is
much here to interest both the novice historian and the specialist.

Feldman has selected documents by Spaniards who participated in the conquest of
the Manchu Chol over the course of more than a century. They include four Spanish
governors, a scribe, a notary public, two Spanish military men, one parish priest, and
Fernando de Altamirano y Velasco, the captain general of Guatemala from 1654 to 1657.
Over half are accounts by Dominican missionaries, whose order had charge of the
conversion of the natives in this region beginning in the sixteenth century. Feldman’s
choice of documents reflects his view of the Spanish conquest of the Maya as an exciting
adventure in an exotic land rather than as a tragedy for the inhabitants or as an encounter
between different cultures. The account of Martin Tovilla, who arrived in the Verapaz
region to assume his duties as governor in 1630, is a particularly vivid example of this
point of view. Tovilla describes his voyage from Spain to America, which he clearly
enjoyed, in a lively account of daily life aboard ship during a seventeenth-century ocean
crossing. Tovilla was interested in everything he saw, and his account of his first weeks
in the New World reveal a man of a sympathetic, inquisitive intelligence. His
descriptions of New World natives, flora, and fauna seem to be a preview of
Enlightenment mentality. In later documents, however, Tovilla casually describes
torturing some natives, and he published laws providing for the brutal exploitation of the
Indians under his jurisdiction. The accounts of the Dominican missionaries’ travels in the
lowland forests and villages are also presented as adventure stories in which missionaries
confront both friendly and unfriendly natives, English pirates, and forbidding rain forests
with difficult terrain. However, because missionaries worked directly with the natives,
the missionary accounts reveal more about native life and also occasionally give a sense
of the native perception of events.

The Dominicans preceded the Spanish military and royal presence in the region,
arriving the seventeenth century. The arrival of royal governors beginning in 1628 began
a period of raids by the unconquered Itza, a revolt by the pacified Manche, and the
abandonment of native villages. Exactly why these events occurred is not explained in
this volume. Later documents recount the eventual reconquest of the Manche territory
and the congregation of these people into mission villages. Readers familiar with the Spanish Conquest in America will note how the patterns of conquest in the Maya lowlands differed little from the conquest in other areas. In this respect, this volume would be a useful introduction to the conquest in general as seen through the eyes of the Spanish participants. These documents also complement Matthew Restall’s translations of sixteenth and seventeenth Maya (although not Manche) documents regarding the conquest in his *Maya Conquistador*. This volume joins the editor’s two previous monographs on the history of the southeast Maya lowlands in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This book provides the specialist information on the Manchu Chol previously unavailable in print, and is therefore an important addition to the documentation on the Maya in translation. It provides no new information on the general pattern of native reactions to conquest but would be useful to undergraduates and general readers desiring an introduction to the general themes of the Spanish Conquest in America, and the conquest of the Maya.

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