

# Colonial History of Yucatán

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Today's city of Campeche was founded in 1541 by the Spanish conquistador Francisco the Montejo and his son.

The Yucatán peninsula was discovered by Europeans when Francisco Hernández de Córdoba arrived in 1517, but it was not until 1527 that Francisco de Montejo, the Elder, attempted to conquer it for the first time. In late 1530 or early 1531, he tried again but was repulsed by the indigenous three years later. It was in 1541 when, together with his son —also named Francisco de Montejo— that he founded the town of San Francisco de Campeche. Later, on January 6, 1542, they founded the city of Mérida, and in May 1543, the city of Valladolid near the port of Conil. But,

since the site was unhealthy, in spring 1544, they moved the town to the pre-Hispanic capital of Sací. Finally, that same year, the conquistadors founded the town of Salamanca near the Bacalar Lagoon. Nevertheless, the Spanish presence was tenuous; in late 1546, the eastern Mayans rebelled against them, but were defeated. It was in March 1547 that most consider that the process of colonization properly began.

The native Mayan population was scattered, so the first activity of colonization consisted in congregating it, but not without meeting with resistance. This task was taken on by the Franciscans, the order that had the monopoly on evangelizing the Yucatecan Mayans. By 1560 they had already organized approximately 165 towns like Izamal, Maní, Tizimín and Calkiní. Simultaneously, they fostered what were called

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“community boxes”: wooden boxes with three keys where they kept money to support the schools of the faith, where the children went to learn to read, write and sing.

At the same time, crown authorities began to change the new political structure by organizing the municipal council (*cabildo* or *cuero de república*). To do that they appointed local indigenous leaders or *caciques* as governors; they also appointed sheriffs, scribes and stewards. Colonization seemed to

The discovery of idol worship convinced the crown authorities that the Mayan elite still had influence, prestige and political power among the population, so they decided to replace the indigenous governing *caciques* with other indigenous. The indigenous nobility resisted these new appointments and complained to the Crown. Although the demographic crisis caused by the epidemics of plague, smallpox, measles and murine typhus complicated the situation for the Mayan nobil-



Portrait of Francisco de Montejo, The Young, at the Government's Palace in the city of Mérida.



Façade of the Montejo's residence, now a bank, also in Mérida.

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move forward without a hitch, but in May 1562, when Friar Diego de Landa, then provincial head of the Franciscan order, found idols and skulls in a cave near the town of Maní, he ordered indigenous leaders, principals and teachers from the doctrine schools to be detained and tortured, accusing them of encouraging and officiating idol worship. On July 12, he held an auto-de-fe, a huge gathering at which the indigenous were forced to confirm their Catholic convictions.

ity, as the eighth decade of the sixteenth century began, its resistance to the creation of the *cabildos* was patently clear.

In 1583, Diego García de Palacio, a judge of the Courts of New Spain, put an end to the period of the great political realignments after the conquest by ordering that the indigenous *cabildos* be made up of a governor appointed by the colonial authorities, two mayors, four councilmen and a steward. He assigned their functions and ordered that half these posts should be held by non-noble indigenous, called *maceguals*, who thus were promoted to positions of power and given economic privileges.

The economic obligations forced on the Mayas were innumerable. The most important were tribute and alms, known from the seventeenth century on as *obvenciones*. The *reparti-*



The Izamal Monastery, one of the most important Colonial missions in Yucatán.

*miento de bienes* was another, which consisted of forced indebtedness for a certain amount that they paid back with cotton blankets and wax. They were also forced to buy bulls of indulgence from the Holy Crusade to raise money to pay for the wars against the Moors. And, of course, they had to labor as servants in the homes of the Spaniards.

Throughout this period, the Spaniards gradually began to appropriate the indigenous lands, to found modest cattle ranches. This would be their most important economic activity, the production of meat and suet destined for the consumption of the Spaniards living in the province, since Yucatán was far from New Spain's main trade routes. These ranches also cultivated corn and produced honey.

Beginning in the second third of the seventeenth century, Yucatán's colonial institutions began to show their limitations. Pirates arrived on the east coast of the peninsula and the Términos Lagoon to try to exploit the *palo de tinte*, or logwood. The Spanish authorities were faced with indigenous resistance movements from the town of Tipú in the southeast of the peninsula, forcing them to abandon the town of Salamanca de Bacalar and fostered the British occupation of what is now Belize. In addition, the Mayas' obligations spurred them to emigrate toward the southern part of the peninsula to escape colonial domination. They also sought refuge in other

indigenous towns or on the Spaniards' cattle ranches, where they were exempt from their tributary obligations.

In Spain, meanwhile, things were changing with the ascent of the Bourbons to the throne. The dynasty decided to restrict the power of the corporations (the Church, the *cabildos*, religious orders, consulates) because it thought they put the brake on political and economic development. Between 1770 and 1789, the Crown incorporated the province into the free trade regime, expropriating the community savings funds and the *encomiendas*,<sup>1</sup> and suppressed the *repartimientos de mercancías*.

The most important reform was the 1786 reorganization of the political and administrative apparatus that divided the Viceroyalty into intendencies and sub-delegations.

Yucatán became an intendency, divided into 13 sub-delegations. In 1787, Lucas de Gálvez was appointed the first intendente, and in 1789, the Crown named him governor and captain general, which remained the top posts in the province until independence.

With the Bourbon reforms and the expansion of markets stemming from the industrial revolution, the Yucatecan criollos intensified their appropriation of indigenous lands. The cattle ranches expanded and became farming-ranching haciendas, making their owners the most powerful social, polit-



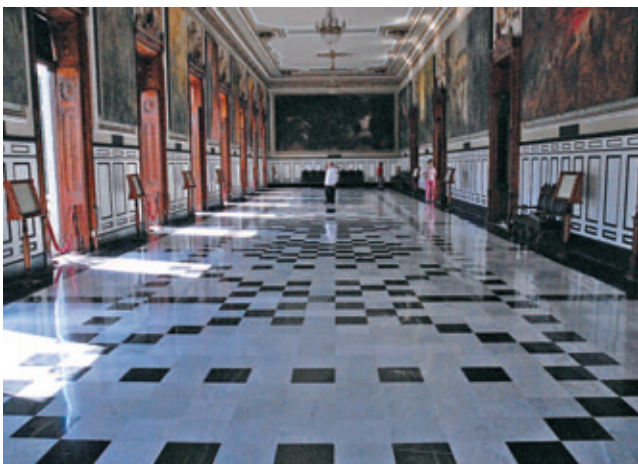
ical and economic group in the region. Yucatán possessed extensive stands of *palo de tinte* or logwood, used for making dye for the textile industry and incorporated it into the European market. However, cheaper English cotton weaves flooded the provincial market, destroying the Mayan textile production that had been exported to New Spain. This led them to begin to manufacture sisal sacks and to weave palm leaves into hats for the New Spain market.

These were the economic, administrative circumstances of the Yucatán Intendency when the French army invaded Spain in 1808. Given the vacuum of power, the Supreme Governing Central Council of the Realm convened an extraordinary session of Spain's Cortes or legislature in Cádiz and asked every province to send deputies. Yucatán sent Miguel González Lastiri, who returned in late July 1812 with seven copies of the Constitution. In the face of pressure from the Liberals grouped together in the association of Sanjuanistas or constitutionalists, and with the opposition of the *serviles* or absolutists, on October 14, 1812, the province swore to uphold it. The important thing about this new Constitution is that it made the indigenous citizens and suppressed the Crown's tutelage that compelled them to comply with religious and economic obligations like going to mass, accept-

ing Church doctrine, practicing the sacraments and performing personal service both for private individuals and institutions. In February 1813, the political head of the region relieved the Mayas of the obligation to perform these services and to pay *obvenciones*, measures which were enthusiastically received by the Mayas and opposed by the *serviles*. The Constitution established a new, three-level political and administrative arrangement: the political head of the region, the provincial chamber of deputies and the constitutional city councils that replaced the old *República de Indios*.<sup>2</sup> The king appointed the political head, and the citizens indirectly elected the deputies and directly elected the councilmen.

With the liberation of Fernando VII, the absolutist regime was reinstated, and on July 23, 1814 the chamber of deputies and the city councils were dissolved and the *Repúblicas de Indios* reinstated, while the *serviles* incarcerated the main Sanjuanista leaders. The priests forced the Mayas to pay their back *obvenciones* and reestablished whipping, which had been banned in 1761. The restoration also marked the end of freedom of the press established in the 1812 Constitution.

In 1821, all the Franciscan monasteries were secularized, but the indigenous continued paying the *obvenciones* and maintaining the Catholic Church for several decades.



The History Room at the Government Palace in Mérida, Yucatán.



The mural depicting the burning of the idols by Friar Diego de Landa.

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This political atmosphere prevailed until 1817 when the Sanjuanistas were freed and organized the first lodges to conspire against absolutism. The arrival from Spain of a group of officers and émigrés with liberal ideas consolidated the lodges in the city of Mérida and, possibly, the ones in other towns like Valladolid and Izamal, except in the port of Campeche, where the absolutists dedicated themselves to wiping them out. Despite the persecution, the political, social, ideological and cultural changes sparked by the movement of Cádiz had already taken root in the Yucatecan mentality. In this atmosphere, news arrived to the province that the Spanish liberals had forced Fernando VII to swear allegiance to the Constitution of 1812. Yucatán, despite the opposition of the absolutists, also swore to the Constitution, reinstating the constitutional city councils and the provincial chamber of deputies.

With the return to constitutionalism, the *Repúblicas de Indios* and the *Tribunal de Indios* (Court of the Indians) were suppressed. In 1821, all the Franciscan monasteries were secularized, but the indigenous continued paying the *obvenciones* and maintaining the Catholic Church for several decades.

Given the distance that separated Yucatan from the parts of Mexico convulsed by the war of independence from Spain, the province's transition to independence was peaceful. It was sufficient for the political head of the region to be inform-

ed on September 15, 1821 that the independence forces were in Tabasco to convene that very day a session of the chamber of deputies and another of the Mérida City Council to be able to make the decision. With the presence of the colonial bureaucracy, its military commanders, the ecclesiastic authorities and representatives of the liberals, constitutionalists and *serviles*, the province proclaimed its independence.

The first eight years of independence were politically calm in Yucatán. The peninsula's criollo elite was able to build the first institutions of a federal regimen and peacefully begin independent life, although their concerns revolved around the terms under which Yucatán would become part of the budding republic: how it would participate in the integration and formation of the new nation-state. **MM**

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The *encomienda* was trusteeship labor system instituted by the Spanish Crown in its colonies whereby up to 300 indigenous people were put under the "care and spiritual guidance" of the *encomendero*, who could command their labor in exchange for his military protection and Catholic teachings. [Editor's Note.]

<sup>2</sup> The *República de Indios* (Republic of Indians) was part of an autonomous political-social entity linked to the Crown under the Spanish Empire called the Indian Political Society. The other part of the society was the *República de Españoles* (Republic of the Spaniards). [Editor's Note.]



The Open Chapel in Dzibichaltún's archaeological site shows how far the Franciscan went in their efforts for colonizing and congregating the indigenous population.