

THE MAYA APOCALYPSE AND ITS WESTERN ROOTS

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Apocalypto

The Millennium Comes to the Maya

A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head.

—Book of Revelation 12:1

Ask a devout Maya and he might answer in words which sound very much like a prophecy, “The Cross sleeps.” And as the reader knows, that which sleeps might also awaken.

—from the prologue to Hubert Smith’s 2009 novel,
Maya Apocalypse: A Nelson Cocom Thriller

These characters have to be utterly believable as pre-Columbian Mesoamericans.

—Mel Gibson, on the Maya protagonists of his 2006 movie, *Apocalypto*

In 1549, at the young age of twenty-five, Diego de Landa set out on an adventure that would define the rest of his life. Having become a Franciscan friar eight years earlier in Spain, he joined a new expedition of three other young priests sailing for the New World. Their mission was to assist their order’s Catholic conversion of the Indigenous population of the Americas. Led by an older Franciscan friar named Lorenzo de Bienvenida, Landa was sent to the province of Yucatan. This small colony, in the northwest of the peninsula of that name, was considered perilous and challenging; the province’s capital of Merida had only been

founded seven years earlier, the dust was still settling after twenty years of invasion warfare and colonial rule, outside a few Spanish towns, had yet to be firmly established.

The two priests, Landa and Bienvenida, were assigned to missionize in the Chel region of the peninsula—east of Merida in a former kingdom where most of the local people had yet to see a Spanish priest, let alone be converted to Christianity. They were expected to establish a mission town at an appropriate locale, a base from which to spread the word.

After traveling through the region for several months, the duo came upon the ancient Maya metropolis of Itzmal (destined to become the colonial and modern town of Izamal). Although the town's population was a fraction of what it had been a thousand years earlier, and many of its older structures lay in ruins, Itzmal was still inhabited and—most importantly—still functioned as a major religious pilgrimage site. At its peak in early Classic times, Itzmal had been a monumental city, consisting of numerous vast pyramids, sparkling paved plazas, and large-scale



Figure 5.1. Frederick Catherwood, *Ruins at Izamal*, from the book *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*, 1843. (Image in the public domain.)

public artwork (seen in figure 5.1, a nineteenth-century lithograph of a stucco sculpture that once decorated the side of a building). Straight, raised, white roads (called *sacbeob*) still linked the town to other important sites in the peninsula, such as neighboring Aké.

The chief object of the pilgrimages to the pyramids of the town was the Indigenous deity Itzamnaaj, the god of sacred knowledge and healing. Inspired by the sacred heritage of the town, Bienvenida and Landa began construction of a monumental church and monastery, erecting a Christian building directly on top of the Maya pyramid known to have originally housed Maya priests dedicated to the Itzamnaaj cult. Over the course of the next two decades, the church complex became the most elaborate in the province, eventually situating itself as the “jewel” of the Franciscan evangelical campaign. The complex was positioned sixteen feet above plaza level on the base of the original pyramid (seen in figure 5.2). In its finished form (which it had reached by the mid-seventeenth century), the complex consisted of a barrel-vaulted nave church, two double-storied cloisters, and a one thousand-square-foot atrium (seen in figure 5.3). This scale was an impressive feat by any colonial standards but particularly so in the relatively poor province of Yucatan.



Figure 5.2. The precontact pyramidal base of the monastic complex of Izamal, Yucatan, Mexico. (Photograph by the authors.)



Figure 5.3. The atrium of the monastic complex, Izamal, Yucatan, Mexico. (Photograph by the authors.)

The church's success stemmed partly from the ingenuity of Landa himself. Recognizing the site's sacred importance to the Maya population, he installed a carved Virgin Mary in the church, which for all intents and purposes began to take on the religious roles held by Itzamnaaj in the previous centuries. She was a healing Virgin, acclaimed to have numinous powers, and within a matter of years was visited by thousands of pilgrims annually. Landa's foresight was clearly well-grounded; today, the Virgin of Izamal is the patron saint of the Yucatan Peninsula.

As part of the original building program, executed a decade or so after the church's completion in the 1560s, Maya artists painted a series of murals. In the small room that led from the open expanse of the atrium and into the semiprivate space of the cloister, local Indigenous artists completed a multicolor scene that wrapped around the small room's walls, reaching from floor to ceiling. The murals are now heavily deteriorated due to the province's humid climate, but the scenes have survived sufficiently to lend insight into the reasoning behind the heavy investment placed in the conversion campaign by the Franciscans in Mexico and Yucatan (indeed, by all the religious orders in the New

World—not just the Franciscans, but also the Dominicans, Augustinians, and later the Jesuits too).

On the north wall, a pastoral scene is apparent (figure 5.4). Franciscan friars, identifiable due to their long, brown robes and tonsured heads, mingle in a landscape reminiscent of the Yucatan itself, with its low-lying shrub forests. Among the priests, Maya neophytes themselves participate in the peaceful scene, wandering among the Franciscans, playing drums, collecting honey, and—perhaps most significantly—engaging in penitent rituals.

Across the small room, the murals on the facing wall are opposite in intention (figure 5.5). Here, the scene is not one of peaceful respite but instead is imbued with violence. Less legible than the north wall, the south wall still clearly depicts a troubled landscape. Red-skinned beings appear to beat objects with long poles. Like the idyllic scene across the room, this violent action seems to take place in the Yucatan, as similar trees have been included to give the audience a notion of place. It easily brings to mind the gruesome scenes, visited in the previous chapter, that decorate the walls of the open chapel at Actopan.



Figure 5.4. North wall mural of the Izamal monastery *portería*, sixteenth century. (Photograph and overdrawing by the authors.)



Figure 5.5. South wall mural of the Izamal monastery *portería*, sixteenth century. (Photograph and overdrawing by the authors.)

While these oppositional scenes could easily be read as a “good Indian/bad Indian” cautionary tale, another part of the mural cycle hints at the real significance of the paintings. On the east wall—the wall that connects the pastoral and demon paintings—a doorway leads directly into the cloister. Here, placed right above the doorjamb, a diminutive image of the Virgin was painted (figure 5.6). She is small, but she cannot be missed: one must walk right beneath her to enter the cloister (only later would she be bypassed by pilgrims wishing to pay homage to the Virgin of Izamal in her private chapel located behind the church’s nave and only accessible through the cloister); and one’s attention is grabbed by the bright hues that the Maya artist no doubt deliberately selected. Painted in a traditional red and blue robe, and then set against a vibrant yellow orb, this was no neutral or ordinary painting of the Virgin Mary. The Maya artists, undoubtedly under the direction of Izamal’s resident Franciscan priests, had painted the Virgin of the Apocalypse.

As discussed earlier, the Virgin of the Apocalypse references a section of the New Testament’s Book of Revelation in which the Second Coming of Christ is prophesied. “A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven,” wrote John, in the passages that inspired Dürer’s famous print series. As a sign of the impending Apocalypse, according to John’s vision, there appeared “a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon



Figure 5.6. East wall mural of the Izamal monastery *portería*, sixteenth century. (Photograph and overdrawing by the authors.)

under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head.” Placed in the context of the monumental Izamal monastery, and situated between the pastoral and devil murals, this small Virgin of the Apocalypse was far larger in import than her diminutive portrait suggests. She not only referenced the Doomsday warnings of Revelation, but she also provided justification for the entirety of the conversion campaigns launched in the New World. In short, the efforts of the friars were justified and urgent; the souls of the Maya had to be saved soon, so as to prepare for—or more, so as to hasten—the Second Coming of Christ, the accompanying Apocalypse, and the glorious millennium to follow.

Landa’s personal zeal for this millennial task continued to mount. After a dozen years of proselytizing the Maya and supervising the transformation of Itzmal into Izamal, the Spanish friar was called away to Merida. There he was promoted to head or “provincial” of the Franciscans in Yucatan, and as such he soon heard rumors of recidivism

in Maya villages; that is, efforts by local men to maintain traditional “pagan” rituals and practices after the community had supposedly been converted to Christianity. In the spring of 1562, two young Maya boys outside the town of Mani, the headquarters of the Franciscan evangelical campaign, accidentally came upon a cache of ceramic sculptures and human skulls collected in a cave. The youths immediately returned to the village and described their discovery to the local priest. He ordered the cached objects brought into the church’s atrium and commanded the Maya who lived close to the cave to come to Mani for questioning. They quickly admitted to using the objects to petition the native deities for rain, confessing that this was still a common local practice.

The Franciscan response was to bring down on the Maya a virtual apocalypse; within months, Mani became the epicenter of a full-scale Inquisition, led by Landa himself. Surrounding villages were ordered to turn over sculptures of Maya deities (termed *ídolos* by the Catholic priests, classifying them as satanic superstition) and precontact, accordion-fold books. All items were burned in massive bonfires in Mani. Thousands of Maya were arrested and questioned under the threat of torture. Many were put to torment on the pulley and the *burro*, a wooden rack to which victims were tied. As many as two hundred died during the summer months, hundreds more were left permanently scarred or crippled, and dozens appear to have committed suicide to avoid the agonies of Inquisition interrogations.

For the Maya of Mani and neighboring towns, 1562 was an end-of-world date, the long summer a harrowing series of Judgment Days. Indeed, a famous modern representation of the 1562 Inquisition portrays it in Doomsday hues. The second floor of the Palacio de Gobierno, on the northern edge of Merida’s colonial plaza, is decorated with a mural cycle detailing Yucatec history from the precontact to the modern eras. Viewed by thousands of local inhabitants, schoolchildren, and foreign tourists each year, these images have become paradigmatic of the province’s defining historical moments, perhaps shaping public opinion more than any ancient, colonial, or modern textual source. In the scene that depicts that violent summer in Mani, Landa himself is depicted not as a beneficent protector of the Maya—as his writings, partly composed in Spain in the 1560s as part of his defense during the investigation into his 1562 Inquisition, would have us believe—but as an evil torturer (figure 5.7).



Figure 5.7. Fernando Castro Pacheco, *Diego de Landa and the Mani Inquisition of 1562*, located in the Palacio de Gobierno, Merida, Yucatan, Mexico. (Photograph by the authors.)

A mostly monochromatic scene composed of oranges and greyscale, Landa inhabits a full third of the composition. Poised above a vast fire in which carved statues of Maya deities can be seen succumbing to the tall flames, he presides over a figurative “end of the world,” as the events were surely understood by the Maya. The Franciscan seems to be of the flames himself, the ashes, as he holds the Bible in his right hand,

the ultimate justification for the unmediated violence, and a burning pole in his left, proclaiming his ultimate culpability for this tragedy. His facial expression is stern and unmoving, providing modern viewers a transparent, if not, perhaps, overstated, understanding of his religious convictions.



These moments from the first dozen years of Spiritual Conquest in Yucatan—the missionary zeal of Landa, the murals and structures of Izamal, the apocalyptic summer of 1562—are vivid symbols of the millenarian determination of the Franciscans to convert the Maya. In the Maya world as a whole, that process proved to be a protracted and complex one—begun in the late 1520s in Guatemala and stretching across the centuries of colonial rule into the modern period. Just as conversion efforts in central Mexico resulted in local Nahua versions of Catholicism, so did Maya Catholicisms emerge in colonies in Yucatan and Guatemala.

A core feature of the local form of Catholicism forged in Yucatan by Franciscans and Maya neophytes was millennial ideology—not simply imposed upon or injected into the Maya worldview but appropriated by Maya elders, scribes, and religious officials. In chapter 1, we discussed the tale of the destruction of the world from the *Books of the Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, primarily using the passage that one translator named “the ceremonial of the *baktun*” and another “the creation of the world.” Having deliberately presented this material in such a way as to emphasize the supposedly “pure” Indigenous apocalyptic nature of these texts, we now revisit them, placing them more fully within the historical and cultural context in which they were written and rewritten. Viewed as such, these passages tell a drastically different story, one in which Franciscan millennial ideology plays a far more prominent role than 2012ologists would have had us believe. These seemingly Maya passages are, in fact, directly channeled from medieval European preoccupations with the end of the world.

In a tragic irony of colonialism, the Spaniards who brought torture and slaughter, widespread enslavement, and waves of epidemic disease that reduced the Maya population by as much as 90 percent over several generations, also brought an ideology that helped Mayas understand

what was happening to their world. More than imminent, the Apocalypse had already arrived.

One of the contributors to the Chumayel manuscript—a late seventeenth-century Maya scribe who goes unnamed—wrote into the book a twenty-page summary of Maya mythistory. This ranged from texts detailing the origins of the ancient gods to the creation of human beings and calendrical rituals of his own day (we quoted from it in chapter 1). Much of it was, no doubt, copied from earlier alphabetic versions of ancient glyphic texts, such as the Dresden Codex. But much of it was influenced by Christianity, directly drawn from sources brought to Yucatan by Franciscan friars.

The creation-of-the-world narrative is an example of this Maya blending of European material with local traditions. The reworking of the old Oxlahuntiku/Bolontiku myth so that it concludes with a Christian-style Apocalypse obviously made sense to the colonial-era Maya scribe. As we saw in chapter 1, the destruction of the world is presented as a cosmic battle between the deities associated with the celestial realm and the Underworld, Oxlahuntiku and Bolontiku. Bolontiku destroys Oxlahuntiku, heaping upon him a series of abuses until his rain god aspect is removed from the heavens. This sets the stage for a monumental flood that destroys—or will destroy—the world.

Immediately after Oxlahuntiku's destruction, however, the world flowers with a variety of edible plant species. This destruction/creation sequence, culminating in the flowering of the next era, parallels Maya agricultural techniques of slash and burn, whereby the naturally occurring flora of a *milpa* (cornfield) must be destroyed for more useful plants to be cultivated and flourish. After the mythic flowering, the corn plant is stolen away, resulting in the collapse of the world. Cosmic destruction is ushered in by the anticipated deluge. Whether read as "a rush of rain, one sharp burst of rain" (our translation) or "one fetching of rain, one lancing of rain" (as one Maya scholar has it), the phrase hints at the violence of the apocalyptic flood as it wipes out the "heartless people." The deities called the *bacabob* (the Bacabs) then reestablish the geographical limits of the world's terrestrial plane, setting up a colored tree in each of the four corners and in the center of the universe.

The details of the story have obvious precontact roots, and the agricultural metaphor is likewise highly localized. But the apocalyptic tone suggests the Book of Revelation, an impression confirmed by the passage

that immediately follows. Here we defer to the translation by Timothy Knowlton (an anthropologist who specializes in colonial period Maya creation mythology):

And thus the word of this *katun* may be accomplished / And then it was given by Dios / A deluge occurs for the second time / This is the destruction of the world / Then this ends / That Our Lord who is Jesus Christ may then descend / Upon the valley of Jehoshaphat beside the town of Jerusalem / It occurred that he redeems us by his holy blood.

The references to the Apocalypse and the Second Coming are explicit; but, do we know exactly how they made their way into Maya alphabetic writings composed far away from overseeing friars and for specifically Maya-only purposes? Knowlton has determined that two versions of a popular European account of apocalyptic lore were translated into Yucatec Mayan during the colonial period. This text, titled *Fifteen Signs before Doomsday*, appears in the *Books of the Chilam Balam* kept by the village of Tusik and in another Maya text that scholars call the Morley Manuscript (a little-studied text that is akin to a *Chilam Balam* book). Of these fifteen signs, the first is a global flood that leads to the Last Judgment.

Of particular relevance to our argument here is the fact that the prophesy of the Second Coming of Christ is the climax to these Maya passages. This was not inserted to mollify Spanish priests; Europeans were never intended to see the highly guarded, clandestine books written by and exclusively for Maya authors and readers. In fact, the Maya of Chumayel, Tusik, and other villages could safely assume that if a Franciscan happened to stumble upon the manuscript, they would have destroyed it; the friars continued to burn suspect texts of Maya authorship for some two hundred years after Landa's great Inquisition bonfire of 1562. So how then can these explicit references to Christianity be explained? We cannot assume that they were afterthoughts merely tacked on to the end of an otherwise purely Maya creation story because they were deemed "interesting" or perhaps "innovative" to the Maya authors.

On the contrary, Christian passages and ideas permeate the entire *Chilam Balam* text. For example, the flood and subsequent creation of the world is itself presided over by a Christian, not Maya, protagonist. This is not made clear in the classic translation of the passage by the

late Ralph Roys: “There would be a sudden rush of water when the theft of the insignia [of Oxlahuntiku] occurred. Then the sky would fall, it would fall down upon the earth, when the four gods, the four Bacabs, were set up, who brought about the destruction of the world.” However, the supposedly Mayan word that Roys translated as “insignia”—*cangel*—is in other Maya documents used as a version of “Archangel.” The difference may seem small—a case of Mayanists arguing over minutiae—but it actually transforms the passage into a highly hybridized account of creation in which, directly following the Flood, the Archangel of the cornfield arrives to oversee the setting up of the new creation.

Dissatisfied with Roys’s version, a later scholar, the late Munro Edmonson, reinterpreted the Oxlahuntiku creation story as a passage about the calendar. The result was a kind of chain reaction that resulted in a further misrepresentation used to support the supposed 2012 evidence found in colonial Maya sources. In chapter 1, we quoted Edmonson’s translation and comments on the “millennial words” that marked the celebration in Merida of the *baktun* ending in 1618. The impression that Edmonson gives, and which we deliberately echoed, is that as recently as the start of the current *baktun*—which ended in December 2012—the Maya were still ritually celebrating the four-hundred-year cycle; indeed, he states bluntly that the Long Count lasted this late. In the decades since Edmonson translated the *Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, this impression has been cited numerous times and has worked its way into the fabric of Maya calendar studies and 2012ology.

It is, however, misleading. The passage does *not* record a Long Count date, nor is there any evidence in this or any of the *Chilam Balam* books that the Maya were still maintaining the Long Count of Classic times. The passage does not describe a *baktun*, or ever use the term; the book refers only to the *tun* (the solar year) and the twenty-year cycle of the *katun*. It was Edmonson himself, not the Maya authors, who dubbed the passage *The Ceremonial of the Baktun*; in the original manuscript, it has no title, unless one counts the title on the previous page, *Quinto: 1620 (Fifth: 1620)*. Edmonson dismisses this, unconvincingly, as “a late addition,” but close examination of the handwritings reveals it to have been written by the same person (see figure 5.8). The passage in fact describes the ritual ending of a *katun* cycle, but because that cycle happened to be the final one in a *baktun*, Edmonson inferred (in effect, invented) the larger “ceremony.”

As for the text itself, it is heavily imbued with the influences of Christian and Spanish culture. One of the officials at the ritual is described as being the *Antachristo* (the Antichrist, representing the Maya who refuse to convert to Christianity), and the presiding officer claims to be called Ceçar Augusto (Caesar Augustus). There is no corroborating evidence to prove these ceremonies actually took place in Merida in 1618 or 1620. But assuming they did, they represented a stage in the centuries-long process whereby the rituals that marked the old Maya calendar were reconciled to the rituals of the Christian calendar. The result in modern times (that is, roughly the past century and a half) is a hybrid set of rituals. Some of these have clear ancient Maya roots (like the Chachac ceremony marking the onset of the rains; Chac is an old rain god), some look like old rituals heavily colonized by Christianity (Good Friday replacing the earlier rites of ritual execution).

How does it relate to 2012ology? There are three key points regarding this *Chilam Balam* source. First, it is a speculative stretch to read it as being focused on the celebration of a *baktun* cycle, as representing ongoing Maya concerns with a calendar marked by beginnings and endings in 1224, 1618, and 2012. Second, to interpret the language as “millennial” is to add an implication of specific apocalyptic awareness and expectation—not just a knowledge of Second Coming ideology but a timetable for it—that is not in the original text. Third, while we can detect ancient Maya and early modern Christian elements in the passage, it is ultimately best understood as colonial-period Maya literature, written by people who saw their culture not as piecemeal, a patchwork of two contributing cultures, but as something singular, coherent, traditional, and local—as theirs.

Why did the Maya intellectuals in the colonial period intentionally incorporate Christian theologies into their cosmologies by choice? And more specifically, why were Christian accounts of the Apocalypse so appealing to these Maya authors, when for thousands of years a non-millennial creation mythology had successfully served the needs of the Maya culture? As Knowlton has stated, “The Christian apocalypse made sense to Colonial Maya scribes within the context of an otherwise Post-classic mythic narrative itself.” In other words, when Christianity was introduced to the Yucatec Maya, they intentionally adopted aspects that could most easily be dovetailed into their preexisting worldview. The

mixing of the two contributing ideologies resulted in a third cultural system, completely independent of the original two.

Recall that ancient Mesoamerican cultures conceived of time as largely cyclical, divided and charted in a series of interlocking cycles of varying lengths. They also saw creation and re-creation as a continual cycle, with previous worlds stretching out behind our own current lived reality, as having occurred three or four times previously. With this as a starting point, it is easy to see how Christian accounts of the Apocalypse, with the Second Coming of Christ and the creation of a new world, would have made a “New Jerusalem” appealing to a Maya audience. In the new reality of their colonial world—many thousands of Indigenous peoples felled by disease, tried and punished for their religious beliefs, forcibly removed from land they had inhabited for centuries—there must have been some kind of comfort in finding links between their traditional worldviews and those being forced upon them by Catholic priests. The incorporation of Christian themes was not necessarily a succumbing to colonial forces; it can also be seen as a socially savvy way to maintain cultural continuity amid the psychological trauma of the early colonial period. Apocalyptic narratives and their associated millennial theology were an ideal avenue through which converted Maya could make sense of the violence and cultural upheavals of the Spanish conquest and its chaotic aftermath.

The colonial Maya literature of the *Books of Chilam Balam* thus tells us much about Maya history and culture; but it does not support the notion that the Maya anticipated 2012 with any sort of anxiety, if at all, either before the Spanish invasion or after. On the contrary, it shows how Spanish–Franciscan views of Christianity influenced the Maya intellectual landscape, infusing some European millenarian concerns into their Indigenous perception of creation and time.



What happened to this imported Maya millenarian tradition? As a product of the colonial encounter of the sixteenth century, did it survive the centuries that followed, including the early nineteenth, when Yucatan ceased to be a Spanish colony? And if it did not die out, is there a thread of continuity through to Maya-based 2012ology?

As it turned out, Maya millenarianism *did* survive throughout the colonial period and into the nineteenth century (when Yucatan became

part of the Mexican republic), and it manifested itself in a way that was vibrant, violent, and distinct to the Maya of the Yucatan. In ways that would have shocked the Franciscans of earlier centuries, the millenarian ideas they had introduced came to the fore within the context of the peninsula's prolonged nineteenth-century civil conflict dubbed the Caste War. Although the war began in 1847 as a political and regional struggle, with Hispanic and Maya protagonists on both sides, it soon evolved into a kind of race war. Most fascinatingly—and most significantly for our story—one group of Maya rebels maintained an independent state in the east into the twentieth century, ruled by a religious-political government that became known as the Cult of the Talking Cross.

Let us step back again into the colonial centuries for a moment. While the northwest section of the peninsula had been heavily influenced by a strong Spanish presence since the earliest days of contact in the sixteenth century, the eastern half of the peninsula remained largely uncolonized for three hundred years. Brief forays were made into this region by Franciscans and other Spaniards—motivated primarily by commercial interests—but, for the most part, the Maya maintained a fairly traditional way of life. Spanish maps called the region *despoblado* (uninhabited), which of course it was not. A major Spanish conquest expedition against independent Maya in the 1690s largely bypassed the kingdoms of the east in order to destroy the larger Itza Maya kingdom in the Peten region of northern Guatemala.

This is not to say that the Maya of the peninsula's southeast (its east, the Peten, and Belize) were not impacted by Franciscan ideologies or by Spanish colonization. On the contrary, they undoubtedly were, but unlike Maya communities to the north and west, the Mayas of the southeast were entirely or largely independent—and free to incorporate specific aspects of the new religion into their traditional worldview on their own terms. The entire culture of the eastern villages of the peninsula might be likened to the self-conscious appropriations of relevant biblical material into the clandestine, Maya-authored *Books of the Chilam Balam* discussed earlier. Meanwhile, Maya leaders in cities like Lamanai, in what is today Belize, maintained a local form of Christianity for generations after Franciscan friars had left. We cannot know for sure how infused with millenarian thinking Maya Christianity in Belize was, but there were likely efforts to reconcile Franciscan apocalypticism with local Maya mythology and ideology—as there was both within

the Spanish colony of Yucatan and in the independent kingdom in the Peten. Indeed, despite the tendency by scholars of the Itza kingdom to see the history and culture of Maya prophecy as a causal factor in its defeat in 1697, it seems very clear—both from the larger context outlined here and from the specifics of Franciscan expeditions into the Peten throughout the seventeenth century—that the prophetic tradition of the Itza was yet another example of how Mayas accommodated or appropriated Franciscan millenarian ideas in order to help make sense of the disruptive, often disastrous, presence of Spaniards in the Maya world.

Meanwhile, within the Spanish colony of northern Yucatan, the persistence of nativist millenarian thought was revealed starkly in 1761, when a disaffected Maya villager named Jacinto Uc declared himself to be a returning, liberating king. He was, he claimed, not only an envoy and manifestation of Christ, but was also both a returning Canek (the last king of the Itza Maya of the Peten) and a returning Montezuma (a deft reversal of the myth, invented by Franciscans two centuries earlier, that Moctezuma had surrendered to Cortés because he took him for a returning deified Indigenous king). The uprising was short-lived and localized, crushed with extreme violence by Spanish officials; Jacinto Canek King Moctezuma received his own apocalyptic ending, tortured slowly to death in Merida's central plaza. But he had persuaded a significant number of the region's Maya leaders and villagers of the efficacy of his vision of a new millennium—one free of Spanish colonists but loyal to the Virgin Mary, to be ruled by a regime totally Maya but more resolutely Christian than the one he sought to overthrow.

The Maya transformation of Franciscan millenarianism into something autochthonous and nativist was thus deep-rooted, and it continued after the wars that led to Mexican independence from Spain. In the wake of Independence, problems began to arise across the Yucatan Peninsula. Regional rivalries, political factionalism within the ruling Hispanic elite, disputes over whether Yucatan should be part of the Mexican republic or an independent nation—these conflicts ensnared attempts by Maya elders to protect communal lands from private incursion. What ensued was a complex half-century of sporadic warfare that pitted the underprivileged Maya population against the powerful Hispanic elite. While the fight may have begun as a messy political endeavor, it was soon transformed into a social and racial war that eventually took on religious dimensions.

Early on in the war's history, in 1850, the Maya leaders of the rebel movement in the east established a new headquarters at a *cenote* (a natural sinkhole) called Chan Santa Cruz, Little Sacred Cross. Near the cave a large mahogany tree grew, upon which was carved an image of a cross, lending the site its name. A native religious cult emerged centered on veneration of this cross, quickly gaining support among the Indigenous rebels. A sanctuary was built nearby to house the religious icon referred to as X-Balam Na, the Jaguar House, now largely destroyed.

Shortly after the Jaguar House was built, the cross began to "speak" to the local Maya. Historical records later revealed that the Cross had several interpreters who voiced the Cross's concerns and petitions. This Talking Cross soon became highly influential. It urged the Maya not to end their battle with the Spanish population, "Because it has come / The time / For an Indian Uprising / Over the Whites / Once and for all." Through his interpreters, the Talking Cross offered God's protection, even promising them invincibility in battle. The cult's followers were called the Cruzob (the Spanish for "cross" with a Mayan plural, *-ob*).

Despite the power of the Talking Cross, many Cruzob rebels lost their lives in the attacks and skirmishes that followed. The Hispanic state's mixed-race army then moved in on Chan Santa Cruz, stealing the Cross and killing one of its interpreters, a rebel leader named Manuel Nauat. But millenarian belief tends to be remarkably resistant to disappointment, and this was as much the case in nineteenth-century Yucatan as it was elsewhere. The rebel Maya simply installed a new Cross to replace the confiscated original, with the new one communicating in writing via the assistance of a handful of scribes. There were also a group of smaller, proxy crosses, carried into battle for divine protection. Like the Talking Cross, the proxies tended to be draped in an *ipil* (or *huipil*), the traditional garment worn by Maya women. This was a Christian cross, its symbolic power derived from the faith introduced three centuries earlier by Franciscans; but the cult had a distinctly Maya identity, forged by Maya to serve a local movement, the cause of the Cruzob.

Eventually, the strife faded and fizzled out. In 1901, the Mexican army advanced again on Chan Santa Cruz, taking it without a fight, occupying it and the surrounding Maya villages. The international border to the south, between Mexico and Belize, had been formalized in the previous decade, eventually resulting in the creation of a new Mexican state, Quintana Roo. But resentments, hostilities, and even

millenarian expectations persisted. The eastern half of the Yucatan Peninsula remained relatively dangerous for non-Maya peoples well into the twentieth century—the last recognized skirmish was recorded in 1933, giving the Caste War a total span of some eighty-five years. As late as the 1960s, Maya elders in the east expressed an expectation that an outsider would bring guns and encourage the Cruzob to rise up again.

And today? What has become of this seemingly isolated outpost of the Spanish Empire? Has the Cruzob cause seized upon the imminence of 2012 and emerged again to prepare the Maya for apocalypse and renewal? Are there any direct lines of influence and ideology between the ancient Maya of the Long Count, the Cruzob Maya of eastern Yucatan, and the 2012 phenomenon?

In short, no; there is no such direct line. Instead, the lines of influence run from medieval Christianity to colonial and Caste War-era Yucatan, and parallel (not in series) to that same medieval source for the modern phenomenon of interpreting the ancient Long Count to serve 2012ology. Ironically, the eastern coast of the peninsula has witnessed a Maya resurgence, but hardly the kind imagined by Cruzob elders. While the ancient Maya were appropriated by 2012ologists (admittedly, in a spirit of profound appreciation), international and Mexican business interests appropriated the ancient Maya (in a spirit of exploitation) in order to dramatically refigure the east into a tourist zone. They named it the “Riviera Maya.”

Centered around the modern development of Isla Cancún (as opposed to colonial Cancún, located a few miles inland), a largely North American and European tourist base can enjoy the natural splendor of the Yucatan’s east coast at scores of hotels and eco-resorts. For those visitors willing to take a break from suntanning, snorkeling, zip lining, and wet T-shirt contests, numerous agencies are set up to bring curious tourists on trips farther south and inland to fully restored ancient Maya sites. The most accessible are Chichén Itzá and Tulum, but the efforts of archaeologists and road crews have gradually been putting more cities in range for decades. At the time of writing, there are ongoing plans for a tourism train line to link vacationers on the eastern coast to archaeological sites as far away as Palenque, Calakmul, and the capital of Merida.

The 2012 phenomenon was expected to give such tourism a boost, and it did to some extent; that is, visitor totals increased around and after 2012, but the larger context was an explosion in tourism in Cancún and

the Riviera Maya from the late 1990s (when annual numbers crossed the half-million line) to the late 2010s (when they reached between seven and eight million, with an additional four million cruise ship passengers stopping at the island of Cozumel). But while it is unlikely that 2012ology inspired many of those millions to choose Yucatan, it did have an impact on specialty tourism; in particular, in the years leading up to and including 2012, various end-of-world celebrations and expeditions took place. One of these—a further twist of irony, in view of the argument laid out in this chapter—was an event called The Prophets Conference: 2012 Tipping Point, which took place in Cancún at the start of 2010. The speakers, or “faculty,” were prominent modern Gnostics and New Age 2012ologists who saw 2012 as marking “a new birth of human consciousness” (Graham Hancock), “the beginning of a new cycle into an expanded planetary being” (Cody Johnson), “a return of the feminine” (Christine Page), and an “apocalyptic passage” through which “we will conceive ourselves, increasingly, as fractal expressions of a unified field of consciousness and sentient aspects of a planetary ecology” (Graham Pinchbeck).

“The purpose of the Maya coming to this planet was very specific,” proclaimed José Argüelles on The Prophets Conference website, “to leave behind a definite set of clues and information about the nature and purpose of our planet at this particular time in the solar system and in the galactic field.” As he died in 2011, Argüelles did not live to see the end of 2012 bring “a brilliant explosion of knowledge” (let alone the return of the extraterrestrial ancient Maya). But, over a decade later, his words were still live on the conference website—as were the more measured phrases of the late John Major Jenkins, for whom the meeting of 2012ologists was “to explore a radically different, more optimistic interpretation of the Mayan prophecy—as referring to the end of the world as we have known it.” How the 2012 phenomenon got to this (tipping) point—considering the ancient Maya roots and medieval Christian sources detailed in the previous chapters—is the subject of our final chapter.