

Boca Iglesias

Where The Conquest of Mexico Began

(The following is a translation of the text written by Fidel Villanueva, Official Historian of Isla Mujeres and former Mayor of the municipality of Isla Mujeres. This article was sent to the present Mayor, Lic. Paulino Adame Torres in January 2003. The work was prepared in conjunction with Adriana Velazques Morlett, the director of the National Institute of History and Anthropology and with Archeologist Luis Legra Guillermo. This translation was made by Carina Molfese, August, 2003.)

Historical Data:

Situated in the extreme northeast of the Yucatan Peninsula, 6 kilometers south of Cabo Catoche is found the last vestiges of what was the village of Ekab which existed as a prosperous community until the middle of the 17th century. The settlement disappeared as a result of constant attacks from Mayan rebels and pirates of French and English origin.

According to historians of the Spanish conquest, this was the place where the army of Francisco Hernandez de Cordoba disembarked and became considered the official discoverer of the Yucatan and Isla Mujeres, in the first days of March 1517. The natives of the place convinced the intruders to visit their homes, but after disembarking, the discoverers were ambushed and forced to retreat.

The following years of 1518 and 1519, two other expeditions captained by Juan de Grijalva and Hernan Cortes, respectively, went by without visiting the place since their main interest was to find gold, rather than discovering land. However, the Spanish Crown, pressured by rivals France and England, allowed Holy Catholic church, in 1519, in a precipitous move, to form a papal presence by instituting a bishop in the place where Hernandez de Cordoba disembarked .

And so, the Catholic Church, inheritors by divine commandment of all the lands discovered by its daring marines, established its power over the territory, without having any knowledge of its vast surface and of the individuals that were inhabited the place. The rights and customs of the indigenous people were subordinated by decree of Catholicism. Julian Garces was designated as the bishop of the new church with the holy see of Ekab, today called Boca Iglesias, but the compassionate clergyman never took physical possession of his charge, finishing some years later as bishop of Tlaxcala, where the holy see was moved to, given the relative seclusion near Cabo Catoche. The order to build a church in Ekab was completed. The architecture is one of most medieval style, similar to styles used by in Spain in times of the crusades against pirates.

Their fences were made in the form of arrows. This can best be appreciated around the Convent, a building adjacent to the main church, recognized as a parish for the Indians. To build these Catholic structures, the pagan temples of the natives were demolished to provide sufficient material to start the construction.

Today, it is possible to see the impressive church belfry from the sea. A rocky structure that seems to challenge centuries, the skies, and the predators that are always hunting the site for lost treasures.

The most relevant episode in the history of Ekab was the attack that happened in the village in 1571 when the French pirate Pierre Sanfroy whom with twenty other pirates took the village by surprise during the holy week of that year. Intent on extorting the villagers and offending the catholic religion, he used the altar as his bedroom and damaged fine ornaments on the walls of the building. Sanfroy was persued by the Yucatecan government until he was captured in Cozumel where most of his men died in combat. Sanfroy and 3 of his men were taken to the Holy Inquisition and subjected to a long a stifling judgement. Finally, they were condemned not for the damage caused to the village of Ekab, but for being rascals and being enemies of the Church.

During the subsequent centuries of colonial times, other settlements developed in Ekab. Known as Boxchen and Hon Hon, they were the last communities to occupy the place until and during the “War of the Castes” according to the historian Michel Antochiw.

The Destruction by Time and Ignorance

Ekab, now known as Boca Iglesias, like all of our cultural patrimony has suffered sever agresions by the abandonment that has prevailed all these centuries. There are trials by hurricane, rain that wears down everything, the sun that cracks with time, the wind with its strength to collapse, and the trees that encrust in search of humidity in the wall until collapsing them. But the worst damages that Ekab and other archeological sites have suffered are those through ignorance – principally due to those who undermine the foundations in search of easy riches. But more ignorant are those in the role of authority with little knowlede of our past, and who do nothing to restore, preserve and celebrate this historical legacy in our municipality.

New Municipal Interest

Following instructions of the Mayor of Isla Mujeres, Lic. Paulino Adame Torres, investigations have been made concerning Boca Iglesia. There is a new interest in restarting the program of restoration that was halted three years ago. We hope that the report of this study stimulates political will that the governor actually has in relation with our historical asset.

In the meantime, we suggest a cleaning brigade and a reinstallation of security at the entrance of the Ruin of Palo Bravo. We also suggest to ask help from the Mexican Armada in assisting us in providing security for the vestiges. We respectfully propose that the municipality donates at least one hundred thousand pesos annually for the labor of restoration. Personally I do not think that the municipal finances would be affected. We also suggest that the Laws of Archeological Monuments would be reviewed with the purpose of promoting private investment via fideicomiso.

The Inevitable Judgement of History

From our trench, we will continue to insist in the necessity of saving our cultural and historical patrimony. It is an obligation that marks the Organic Law of the Municipality.

Without any political desire, we should give the example and be the first ones to grasp an axe and the machete.

Let us take a group of college students and sit in the shadow of a sapote tree and tell the rich history of Ekab. I am certain they would stand courageously and defend our vestiges and at the same time remove the many branches and roots that grow in and around the structures. Let us plant the love of what is ours in our young people today, so that tomorrow, we do not have to confront the inevitable judgment that will condemn us. We still have time to rescue our cultural inheritance that our ancestors left as a legacy. Let us assume our obligation!

The following are 3 collected postings from the internet that offer some historical background for Boca Iglisias and the Ekab area.

Excerpts taken from www.cafecancun.com, and "A Brief History of Ekab" an article written by Jules Siegel

Lost in the Thorn Forest

Despite the disappearance of the ancient Mayas, by the 16th Century, Ekab was thickly populated again. The earliest recorded Spanish landings on the North American continent took place in Quintana Roo. In 1511, Gonzalo Guerrero and Jeronimo Aguilar were the sole survivors of a group of Spaniards who landed at Xcaret and were taken captive by natives. In 1513, Ponce de Leon came ashore west of Cabo Catoche, but he returned to Cuba without knowing where he had been.

The official discovery of the Yucatan Peninsula (and Mexico) is attributed to Francisco Hernandez de Cordoba, who disembarked at Boca de Iglesia in 1517. This was then the site of Ekab, a principal town in the province of Ekab, which stretched as far south as Tulum. Fifteen natives were killed and fifteen Spanish soldiers injured. The Spanish took two prisoners.

When Cortés arrived in 1519, Aguilar became his interpreter, but Guerrero, who had married into a noble Maya family, refused to be rescued and later fought against the Spaniards. It has been suggested that Guerrero might have built the wall around Tulum as a defense against invasion. Although some historians have asserted that Tulum was a watch point toward the sea, the principal buildings and public spaces are oriented toward the West. You sometimes see it called the City of the Rising Sun, but it was more likely the City of the Setting Sun.

One of Cortés' soldiers, Bernal Diaz, later wrote that the city of Ekab was more populous than Seville. The Spaniards called it the Grand Cairo, he said. Other historical accounts mention warehouses filled with fine cotton clothing and spools of thread of a quality then unknown in Europe. Although the Mayan scriptures were lost, many Aztec tax records

have survived. They show an abundance of goods. Not until after World War II, did Mexican food and cotton production surpass these levels. During the years following the Conquest, most of the Mayas, who at one time numbered in the millions, died of disease and starvation. After various expeditions, the Montejo family defeated the Mayas in 1541 and founded the city of Mérida. One portion of Quintana Roo held out until 1545 at Bacalar, near Chetumal, now the state capital. Another group fled to Guatemala, where they were finally subdued in the 17th Century.

After the early religious and military excesses, life in Yucatan stabilized under Spanish and *mestizo* rule. The *batabes*, leaders elected by consensus from a more-or-less hereditary ruling class, were recognized as nobles and were exempted from the taxes and work-services which the commoners were obligated to provide. The position was made hereditary, but a bad *batab* could be removed by the community. The relatively fluid and more-or-less democratic traditional style of Mayan government, with its minimal concepts of private property, was replaced by proto-capitalist European authoritarian rule.

Following Mexican Independence, Yucatan, which then included the entire peninsula, declared itself a separate country in 1821. There were repeated armed conflicts between centralists and federalists. The rebels were often supplied by the British, and they enrolled the Mayas in their cause by promising to restore their lands and privileges. Instead, the Mayas were subjected to even heavier abuses. The *batabes* were forced to legalize land grabs by the white and mestizo Yucatecans. The Mayan deeds that did exist were called into court for examination. Like the scriptures, they disappeared.

The Church of Ekab Today

Although it is so close to the resort, the site of the original Spanish landing at Ekab has received little notice to the present day. In 1570, Spanish friars built an open-air church there with a palm-thatch roof. It was destroyed by English "corsairs" in the 17th Century. Over the centuries people remembered that it had once been their capital and they walked many miles through the jungle to worship in the ruins.

Land access to Ekab has been overwhelmed by the jungle and it is now approachable only by sea in a shallow draft boat. In 1918, Thomas Gann visited Ekab and found fresh offerings on the altar, "good luck" beans, flowers made from conch shells of different colors, and an embroidered image of the Virgin on a wooden panel. Pinned to the panel were many brilliantly colored butterflies.

The church's crosses were last seen by Loring Hewen in 1961. Antonio Benavides C. and Antonio P. Andrews came to Ekab by helicopter in 1976. The crosses and ritual objects had disappeared. The church was now visited only by hunters and fishermen, who left beer cans and soda bottles. Today, trees have grown up through the front walls and

platforms. Embraced by the forest, the rough-cut stone battlements, as much mediæval fortress as temple, recall Sleeping Beauty in the Castle of Thorns. There is a movement to declare it a national monument and much work is being done to make it look like one. "Here began the Conquest of Mexico"? Maybe it is better to let it sleep

Excerpts from Yahoo communications (credits at bottom)

First the Caribbean Coast of Ekab, which the old scholars of Merida when quoting from colonial sources (cite: many sporadic and random readings in the bookstores around Autonomous University of Yucatan in Merida :-), was thought by them to be the most populous region of the Peninsula at the time of the Spanish Arrival. The Spaniards were certainly impressed by their description of 'Gran Cairo' - "13 legues inland", and the initial resistance offered in the area to Cordoba and Grijalva in cities (towns) to which they simply walked to from their launches in search of water.

The total of Ekab must have been reduced in short time though after the Spaniard's arrival. Today this area is the largest and most thoroughly wild area of the peninsula (and certainly more sites will be found there).

The coastal colonial settlement of Boca Iglesia, now choked behind mangrove, appears to have been representative of the Spaniards' effort for settlement in the area. By, perhaps, imposing their models of agriculture, afar from base (Campeche and Merida) exposed to pirates, and problems fishing what must have been the swifter currents of the Gulf Stream funneling through the Yucatan Channel along their very shoreline, they abandoned the colony by the late 1500s.

Heading South, the origins of the Rio Manatee (not a fresh water river though fed in part by underground streams) must have been the most populated area of northern Ekab facing the Caribbean. Just south of the mouth and leeward of Isla Mujeres -a fine fishermen's station which was populated when first visited by Grijalva- lies the coastal ruin site of El Mecco, also,

now, behind extensive mangrove which appears to have filled in (unlike its northern counterparts) what was then a large bay.

The coast southward is mostly an iron-coast of jagged limestone with occasional inlets, such as the one-time ruin site of Xcaret and Xel-Ha, which would have been serving Coba. Such places appear to have been ports for both intracoastal trade, fisherfolk and ferry services to Cozumel. Tulum by contrast (though it has what appears to be an artificial break in the reef fronting it) could have served as a port for intracoastal trade, but with protected Chemuyil so close, I doubt it was much more than a well-garrisoned palasade commanding the Northern Caribbean's intracoastal trade. Chemuyil appears to have originally been built on water's edge, now receded to form large lagoons with artificial cuts to for waterborne transportation.

The whole area of which, though, gives over quickly to rugged wilderness. When Francisco Montejo's Nephew attempted the first foray into the area from Campeche, the Maya helped him until arriving to what would have been the furthest afield he could be from his base camp in Campeche -to there abandon him and his soldiers.

Although within 'abandoned' town of Xel-Ha (or within arm-reach) they were left there to easily languish until half their numbers were reduced by starvation and illnesses brought their inability to hunt, fish and on by barely potable water.

They ended up having to mauraud their way back to Campeche to survive, while, along the way, having a battle in Chichen-Itza from which, I contend, they were allowed to escape. The chronicles do not, however, mention the structures of Chichen-Itza as if it was even then 'abandoned', and was merely used as a site for ambush.

- > These were not the "largest" sites in the sense of huge pyramids, but they
- > were certainly among the most populous cities in the north. Both sites
- > relied, to an uncertain extent, upon external trade (largely thought to
- > have been focused upon the exportation of salt, though other products were
- > probably exported as well). The main question here would be how much of
- > this trade (whether in salt, other marine resources, or crafts) brought in

> food to this agriculturally handicapped region.

Quite a bit, but it would have been most accessible and harvestable at the same time as the growing season.

During the non-growing, non-fishing seasons here, there is really not much to do. In those days I would suspect, that after the harvests were dried or salted, they were given over to construction, battles, crafts production in the most defense needed cities within a subdomain and, hunting and vigilance -as in keeping sites not being used for fishing, farming, groving, etc. even skeletally populated as to maintain claim.

> Nicholas Dunning wrote, in his work on Puuc settlement patterns and subsistence strategies:

>
> "Of particular significance are the ideas that the Puuc may have periodically functioned as the 'breadbasket' of northern Yucatan and that control of the region's resources was an essential aspect of the political geography of the Northern Maya Lowlands. The primary evidence for the possible agricultural importance of the Puuc in prehispanic times is indirect: the population of the neighboring coastal plains appears to have been much higher in Late Classic - Terminal Classic times than could have been supported by the relatively poor plains soils (Vlcek, Kurjack, and Garza, 1978) and the Puuc is the most likely potential surplus-producing area that could have supplied the subsistence needs of this population" (Dunning 1992:3).

Sounds reasonable in that the Puuc has the only terrain which could have served as catch-basin for dales which, for the serious lack of accessible water there though, was probably given over far more to orchards and groves than common field crops.

> Dunning is a soils specialist who supports the conclusions of other researchers concerning the extremely poor nature of the soils on the northern plains. One need not accept the idea that the Puuc was a "breadbasket" region in order to recognize the necessity for the northern plains sites to import food. This importation could have been conducted through coastal trade with other gulf coast regions, as may be implied by their locations. Overland transport from the Puuc or other locations, however, cannot be ruled out.

I can't imagine much importing of food except for the elite. The mazehual would have been left to fend as best they could, which would have been difficult, as no

amount or kind of agriculture could ever be expected to produce a surplus, while the macehual would have nothing much to offer in the way of trade to compensate.

> Jeff Baker wrote:

> >I find it somewhat ironic that we are arguing over whether the northern
> >lowlands could have been as productive as the southern lowlands, yet
> >historically, it is in the north that we find the biggest populations
> >and the most intensive utilization of the land.

>

> I find this less ironic, and instead see this as the crux of our
>disagreement. The old swidden hypothesis stated (roughly) that, since the
>Maya practiced swidden agriculture, the population of the Maya region must
>have been relatively dispersed, resulting in "vacant ceremonial centers".
>Increasing populations would therefore have resulted in decreasing yields
>and over-deforestation, eventually leading to collapse.

They are not taking into account the mobility and interchangeability of the city-to-outpost design. Leading to the greater irony how the old archaeologists were, at least, half right believing the cities were just the ceremonial cores, while more recent archaeologists are only half right believing the cities were always more than just their ceremonial cores.

The Toltecs must have interfered in that mobility much like the Spaniards, Ladinos and Mexicans after them by waging war off-season and immobilizing the population so as not to be left up to their own tried-and-true devices.

There's a lot of details to be gleaned.

Later,

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Excerpt from: <http://www.athenapub.com/cordoba1.htm>

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The Córdoba Expedition (1517)

The first documented Spanish exploration of the mainland west of the Antilles was led by three Cuban colonists, Francisco Fernandez de Córdoba, Lopez Ochoa Cayzedo, and Cristobal Morantes. Some sources, including Landa (1973) and Prescott (1843), characterized the Córdoba trip as a slaving voyage. Bernal Díaz, however, reports that, although ordered by Cuban governor Velásquez to raid the Guanaxes Islands for slaves, they set out instead to explore lands for colonization.

Three small ships (naos or caravels) set out under captain Fernando Iñiguez and the pilot Anton de Alaminos, who later also served as pilot for both Grijalva and Cortés. Departing from Santiago de Cuba on February 8, 1517, and passing Cabo San Antonio at the westernmost tip of Cuba 12 days later, they crossed the 66 leagues (about 200 miles) of the Yucatán channel in nine days. After a two day storm they made landfall probably at Isla Mujeres near Cabo Catoche (fig.1). There Bernal Díaz and Martyr describe idols of goddesses named Aixchel and Ixhunié ("ix" being Yucatec for "woman"). Landa reports they saw a "building of stone, such as to astonish them; and they found certain objects of



gold which they took."

Cape Catoche:

From the ships they saw on the mainland a large town about two leagues or six miles inland. Díaz reports "as we had never seen one as large in

Cuba or Hispaniola, we called it the Great Cairo," a town now identified with the archaeological site at Ecab. According to Martyr's informants, the town held magnificent temples; houses of stone, mortar, and thatched roofs; and regular streets, squares, and marketplaces. The natives wore garments "made of a thousand different kinds of cotton dyed in divers colors," recalling the cloth trade goods seen in Honduras in [Columbus in 1502](#).

[Fig.1: Route of Córdoba in 1517 (*Athena Review*).]

After a brief visit from natives in canoes on March 4, 1517, as Bernal Diaz reports, a cacique appeared next morning with 12 large canoes and "every appearance of friendliness." He repeatedly said "cones catoche," meaning "come to our houses," source of the name Cape Catoche. Landa reports, in another variant of this story from the sailor Blas Hernández, that Mayan fisherman, when asked how they called their country, said "Catoch," for "our houses, our homeland." When Spaniards tried to ask the same fishermen by signs "how was this country theirs," they replied "Ci uthan," meaning "how nicely he speaks," which Landa says is the source of the name Yucatán.

Accepting these apparent invitations, a party of Spaniards armed with 15 crossbows and 10 muskets went ashore and were ambushed en route to the town. In the skirmish, fifteen Spanish soldiers were injured, and two died. Two Mayans, meanwhile, were captured and (renamed Julian and Melchior) eventually learned Spanish and became interpreters.