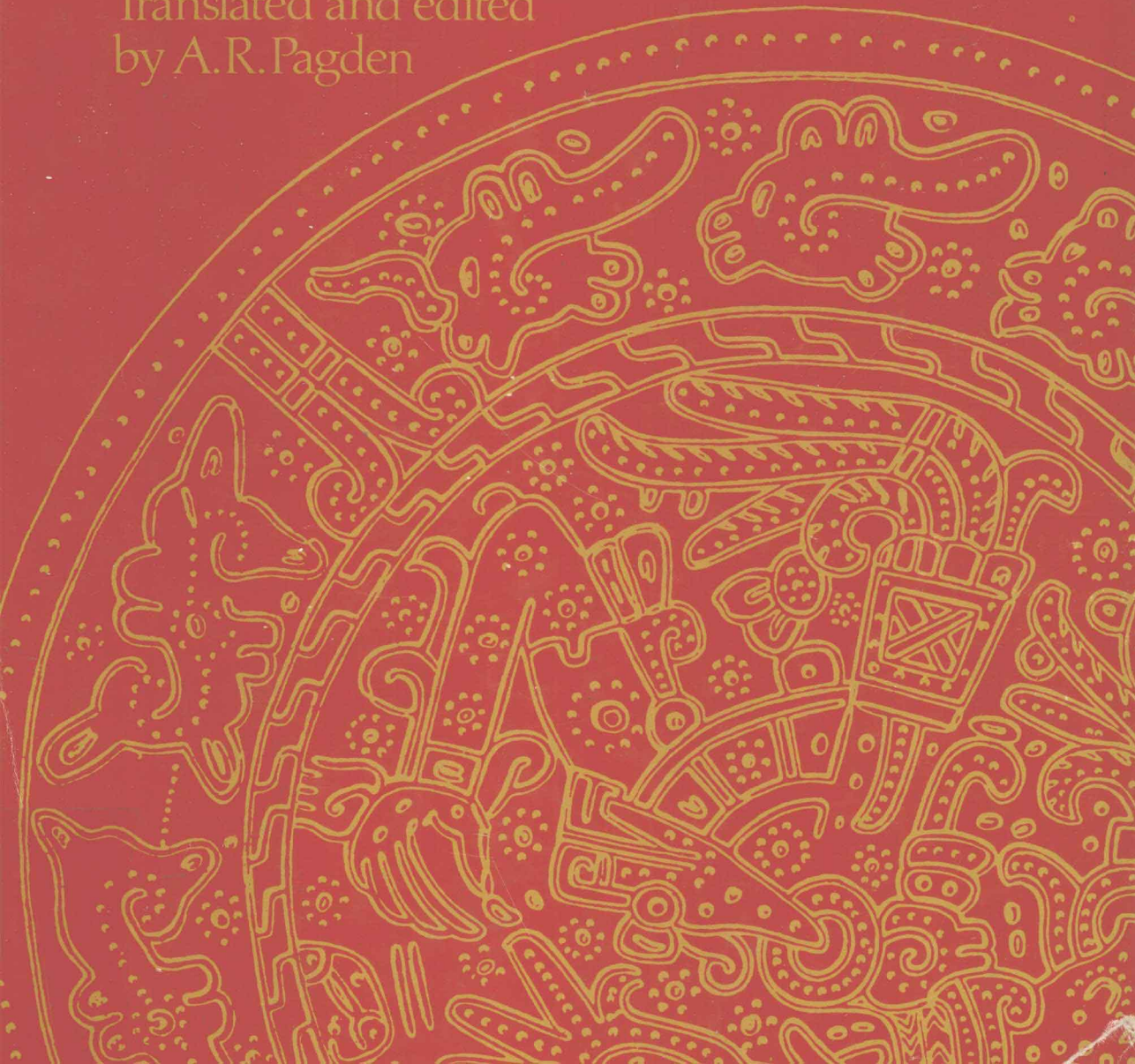


THE

MAYA

Diego de Landa's Account of the Affairs of Yucatán

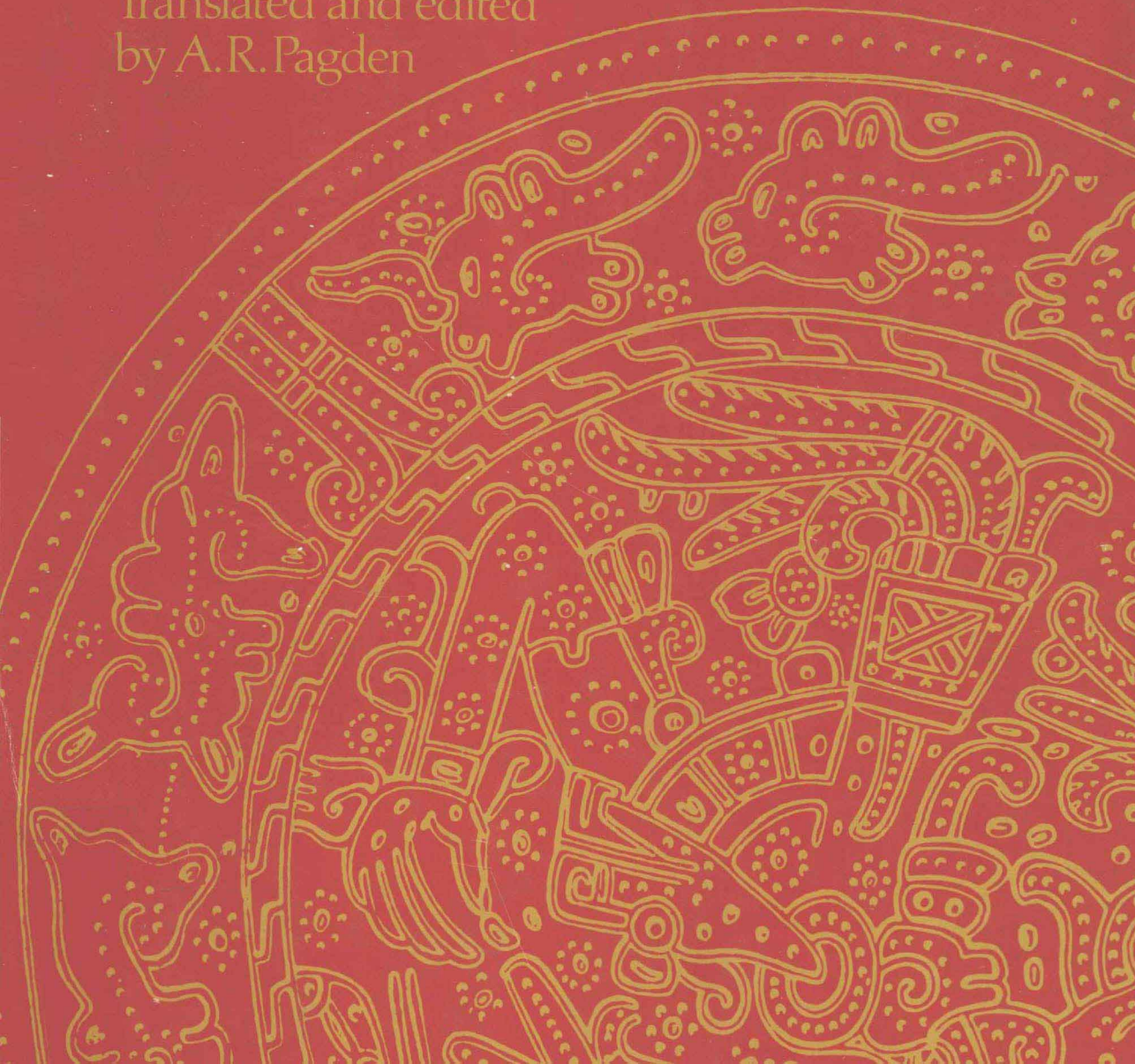
Translated and edited
by A.R. Pagden



THE MAYA

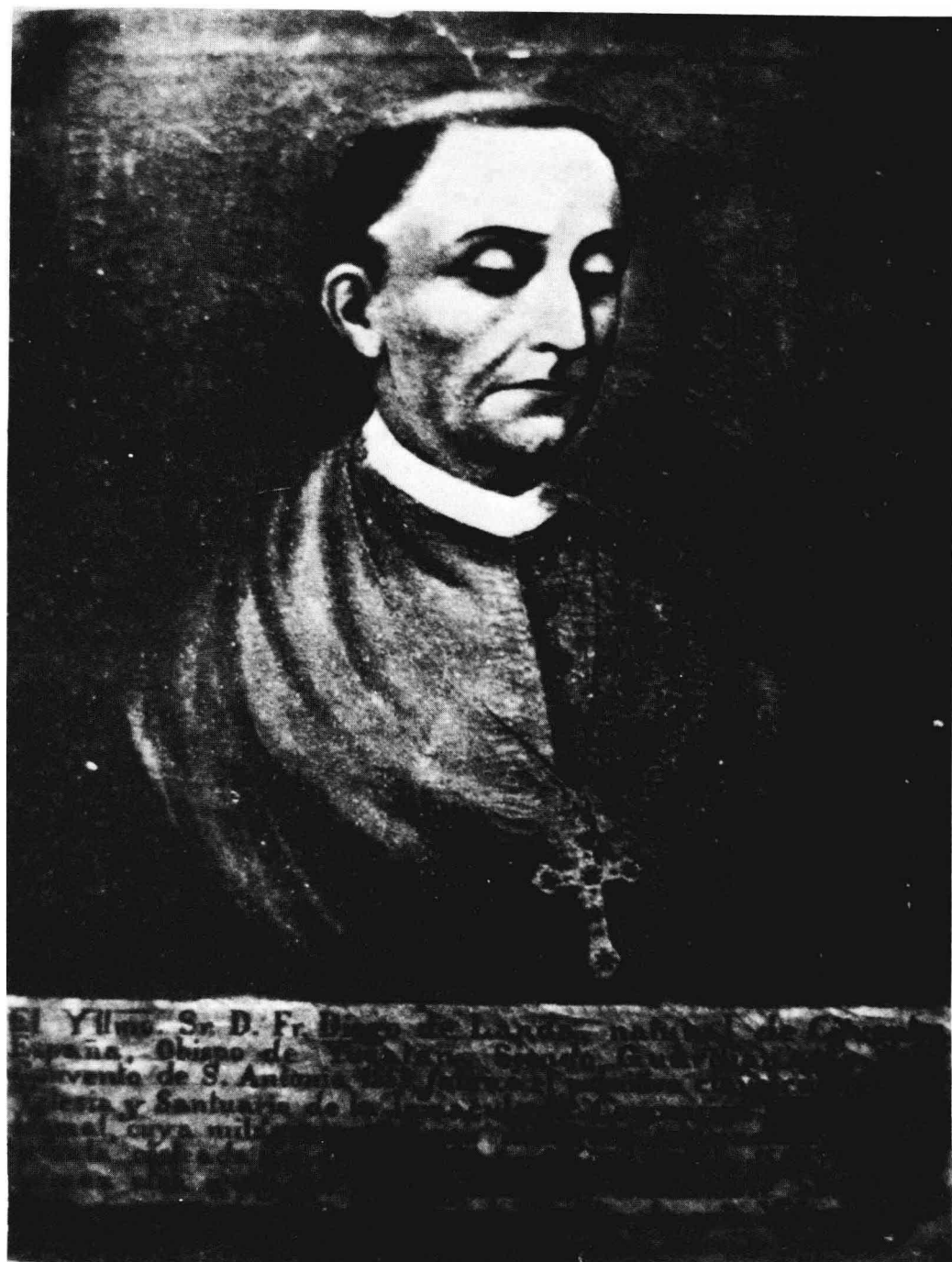
Diego de Landa's Account of the Affairs of Yucatán

Translated and edited
by A.R. Pagden





The Maya:
**Diego de Landa's
Account of the
Affairs of Yucatán**



Diego de Landa's Account of the Affairs of Yucatán

THE MAYA

Edited and Translated by A. R. Pagden

A Howard Greenfeld Book

J. Philip O'Hara, Inc. • Chicago

Text © 1975 by A.R. Pagden

All rights reserved. Nothing herein may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher. Manufactured in the United States of America.

J. Philip O'Hara, Inc. 20 East Huron, Chicago, 60611.
Published simultaneously in Canada by Van Nostrand Reinhold Ltd.,
Scarborough, Ontario.

LC Number: 70-190752

ISBN: 0-87955-303-0

First Printing B

For my Mother and Father

Account of the Affairs of Yucatán,
taken from the writing of Padre Fray
Diego de Landa of the order of St.
Francis.

Here there is another account of
the affairs of China.¹

Very little so far has been discovered about the early life of Diego de Landa. He was born in 1524 in Cifuentes, a small town in the Alcarria, to the northeast of Madrid.¹ At the age of sixteen he entered the Franciscan convent of San Juan de los Reyes in Toledo, and in the summer of 1549 went to Yucatán in the company of six or seven² other friars led by Nicolas de Albalade. Cogolludo³ speaks of him not only as a zealous preacher but also as a skilled linguist who simplified and improved Villalpando's original grammar of Yucatec Maya. His abilities seem to have been quickly recognized, for in 1553 we find him as custodian of the monastery of San Antonio at Izamal.⁴ From there he extended his missionary activities into eastern Yucatán, traveling, as was the Franciscan habit, on foot and discalceate. In 1551, however, he was recalled from the field to attend an interim chapter held at Mérida in April of that year. After this he appears to have spent some time at the convent at Conkal in the province of Ceh Pech, although by 1556 he was again in residence at Izamal. That same year the general chapter of the Franciscan order merged the separate *custodia* of Yucatán and Guatemala into a single province, independent of that of Santo Evangelio in Mexico, to which they had previously been attached. On November 13, the first chapter of the province elected Landa as its custodian, a post which he occupied until September, 1561, when he was chosen to become the first provincial. Cogolludo⁵ depicts him at this period as bold and somewhat overconfident. On one occasion he is said to have marched into an Indian village, called Zitaz, where no white man had been previously and, before the startled gaze of three hundred armed men, to have released the sacrificial victim from the pole to which he had been bound. Intimidated by his courage and aura of sanctity, the Indians "did nothing but gaze on each other in wonder." Shortly after his election a number of incidents occurred which brought him into conflict both with his religious superiors and with the Spanish crown: from that moment on the amount of information about his activities multiplies.⁶

Early in 1562, Landa began a series of investigations into the

suspected continuance, among the Indians of the province, of idolatrous practices long since outlawed by the friars. His suspicions that the readiness with which the Maya had embraced the new religion amounted to little more than the addition of the Christian god to an already flourishing pantheon had first been aroused the previous year when Fray Pedro de Ciudad Rodrigo had discovered the recently buried corpse of a child with the marks of crucifixion on the body. Fray Pedro himself considered that these were natural, or miraculous, a view with which Landa—who later accused his co-religious of attempting to shield the Indians from discovery—did not concur.⁷ In May, 1562, two Indian boys discovered some idols and a skeleton in a cave near Mani; these they brought to Fray Pedro, who passed the information on to Landa. Alarmed by what promised to be evidence of widespread idolatry, the provincial ordered Fray Pedro to hold an inquiry. During the following months a large number of Indians were questioned and tortured; many of these confessed to possessing idols or to having performed idolatrous rites. The punishments imposed at this time were relatively mild; but the friars were by now convinced that the land to which they had come was another Canaan and, anxious to extirpate all further idolatry, called upon Landa to come in person to Mani and take charge of the proceedings. He arrived in early June and set up an inquisitorial court comprising three other members apart from himself: Pedro de Ciudad Rodrigo, Miguel de la Puebla, and Juan Pizarro. Throughout June this body questioned and tortured hundreds of Indians whose recorded testimonies soon led Landa to the conclusion that the *caciques*,⁸ the chieftains, and other Indian headmen were the principal offenders and that the common people (*macequales*), though guilty of error, were to a great extent the victims of their leaders. "Some," he remarked, "[have] destroyed Christianity among the simple people to such a degree that several of these have said that they were never so idolatrous even when they were heathens; and they have given instruction to others, teaching them false doctrines."⁹ He immediately arrested some forty

leading Indians, among whom were ten governors and *caciques* of the Mani area, including Francisco de Montejo Xiu, a member of one of the oldest and most powerful Indian families of Yucatán, whose antecedents Landa describes at some length in the *Account*. This act precipitated some unrest among the Indian population, and at the end of June Landa turned for assistance to the secular arm: Diego Quijada, *alcalde mayor*¹⁰ of Yucatán, was called upon to order a column of Spaniards to Mani. This force was to be composed largely of those colonists who held *encomiendas*¹¹ in the area and whose loyalties therefore might be relied upon. On July 11 Landa pronounced sentence in most of the cases, and on the following day held an *auto de fe* where these sentences, which ranged from simple acts of public penance to long periods of forced labor, were read and confirmed by Quijada, who, as his *residencia*¹² was to show, by this act stepped—for the first time—beyond the limits of his legal authority. Thousands of idols collected by the friars during the course of their investigations, and the disinterred bones of suspected heretics already deceased, were publicly burned: the entire proceedings then closed with a solemn mass of penitence. Twenty-five leading figures, however, whom it was thought impolitic to expose to public obloquy, were removed to the care of the secular authorities in Mérida, there to await further trial.¹³ The assize now shifted its attention to the former Indian states of Sotuta and Hocaba-Homun, where the proceedings at Mani were repeated. Landa presided over the hearings at Sotuta while those at Hocaba-Homun were left in the care of Fray Andrés de Bruselas, head of the monastery at Homun. Again the friars concentrated their attentions on local dignitaries. Among these was one Lorenzo Cocom¹⁴ (a brother of Juan, or Nachi Cocom, who gave Landa much of the information for his *Account*), a *cacique* of Sotuta who hanged himself as a consequence of these inquiries. The more prominent offenders were sent to Mérida to join the victims of the Mani proceedings.

On August 14, 1562, Fray Francisco de Toral reached Mérida. Toral was appointed bishop of Yucatán in 1560 and consecrated at

Puerto de Santa María in Andalusia in 1562. The first resident bishop of the Peninsula, he was a confirmed moderate in his missionary policies and could not abhor the methods of inquiry—particularly the use of torture—employed by Landa.¹⁵ He took no pains to hide his dislike for the provincial, and exaggerated accounts of his benignity seem to have circulated rapidly among the Indians. Quijada testified in September of 1562 that one Juan Ku of Mani “declared and made public in the aforementioned town and province . . . that the lord bishop had sent for the provincial in order to send him under arrest to Castile and that it was right that everyone should engage in their idolatries and be permitted their idols and other scandalous things against the lord our God.”¹⁶

With the arrival of the bishop, Landa’s already questionable authority as ecclesiastical judge terminated, but Toral now found the province divided for and against him. In the one camp were Landa, Quijada, and most of the Franciscans, in the other the *encomenderos*—whose labor force was being seriously threatened by the possibility of open rebellion¹⁷—some of the lay clergy, and a few of the friars. After a hurried consultation with Quijada, with the clergy, and with representatives of the *cabildo*, or municipal council, of Mérida, Toral reached a compromise: Landa was to be permitted to continue with his inquiries for the time being but was forbidden the use of torture. Landa, however, replied that nothing could be extracted from an Indian without torture and withdrew from the proceedings. He now set out for Mexico to put his case before the *audiencia*.¹⁸ On September 30 he reached Campeche, where Hernán Cortés’s son Martín, now marquis of the valley of Oaxaca, detained him in an attempt to bring about an agreement between the two parties. Toral arrived on December 12 and after a heated discussion with Landa, during which a practical demonstration of the efficacy of torture was suggested, the bishop dispatched Francisco de Montejo and Joaquín de Leguízamo, both men of long-standing experience in the colony, to examine the way in which the proceedings had been conducted.¹⁹ Nothing, however, appears to

have come of this, and Toral now took personal control of the affair. He proceeded to reexamine some of the Sotuta findings, and to this end dispatched his notary-public, Juan de Magaña, with an interpreter, Juan Bautista de Campo, to the area. Magaña reported that many of the sacrificial victims were said never to have existed, and that a number of witnesses claimed to have made false statements in order to escape torture. But he seems to have had little faith in the validity of his own report. In a letter to Alonso de Zurita, *oidor* of the *audiencia* of Mexico, he confided, "I believe more in what the Provincial did because of the confidence I have in him, for what I did was achieved without force or any other means of persuasion."²⁰

Early in September, Toral had commissioned Andrés de Bruselas to reopen the Hocaba-Homun inquiries. The testimonies extracted on this occasion—supposedly without recourse to torture—confirmed the earlier Sotuta findings but produced little to compare with the spectacular results at Mani. The reliability of at least the details of these cases appears to be fairly well-attested; but the mere similarity between the two reports, given that the witnesses in both cases had once followed the old religion, does not prove the continuation of idolatrous practices.²¹ Toral, however, seems to have been convinced that cases of idolatry had occurred but not that these justified Landa's use of torture and over hasty *auto de fe*.

The struggle between the bishop and the provincial had now become a focal point for the rival factions within the colony, whose interests were unconnected with the need to averruncate idolatry. As Landa's position became increasingly insecure, Quijada, who had provided him with secular aid and sat in judgment at Mani, began to come under attack from *encomenderos* and ambitious crown officials. In his *residencia*,²² conducted by the governor Céspedes de Oviedo in 1566, he was accused, among other things, of causing the death of numerous Indians, misappropriation of funds, and immorality. Toral, on the other hand, now found that he enjoyed a wide measure of popularity. His abolition of torture and widely-known opposition to Landa had reduced the threatened unrest

among the native population; and he opposed the *alcalde mayor* on other matters relating to Indian affairs, particularly on the issue about the use of native carriers.²³ He was now able to turn his attention to the *caciques* and other headmen whom Landa had incarcerated at Mérida and who were still awaiting trial. The bishop moved slowly, using the full resources of the law, and it was not until January 2, 1563, that the sentences were announced. Although no record now survives of these, they seem, for the most part, to have been mild forms of physical punishment and ecclesiastical censure. The struggle between Landa and Toral now entered its final phase, and both parties set about preparing to defend their cases before the Royal Council of the Indies in Spain.

In January, 1563, Toral drew up a report on Landa's behavior,²⁴ alleging misuse of authority, corruption, and careless handling of the missionary program. This *probanza*, and a summary of the events surrounding the dispute, was dispatched to Spain with two covering letters²⁵ to Philip II. Landa prepared his own defense, resigned as provincial, and in order to be able to plead his case in person departed for Spain in March or April of 1563;²⁶ among the large number of papers which he took with him must have been the notes on Maya customs and beliefs which he later used for the composition of his *Account*.

His arrival in Spain, however, was delayed for almost a year and a half by illness and shipwreck, by which time the council had already had time to consider the accusations made by Toral and was inclined to treat Landa with severity. But the complexities of the case, and the fact that much of it impinged upon the internal affairs of the Franciscan order, led to its being remitted by the council to the provincial of Castile. In the spring of 1565, a group of canon lawyers and theologians²⁷ gathered to consider the evidence. They did not reach their verdict, however, until January 26, 1569: Landa was acquitted on all charges.

While he remained in Spain Landa stayed first at the convent of Ocaña: later, when his case had been decided, he moved first to