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REVISITING THE CANEK MANUSCRIPT

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Abstract

I conclude that Hanns Prem's article in this issue is correct in the assessment that the Canek Manuscript is a forgery. This evaluation resulted from extensive communication with Prem and from additional research suggesting that the author of the Canek Manuscript used a 1917 publication by Philip Ainsworth Means and the writings of Sylvanus G. Morley as aids in constructing the text of the document. The forger's references to the Itza capital as Tayasal and to the Tayasal peninsula follow modern, not seventeenth-century, conventions, an error that reinforces Prem's conclusions. The discovery of a family of forgeries, of which the Canek Manuscript is a particularly convincing one, should make future researchers wary of single documents that differ significantly from others of the Colonial era.

On February 26, 1996, Hanns Prem sent me the first of many e-mail messages regarding his doubts about the authenticity of the manuscripts discussed in his article in this issue, "The Canek Manuscript and Other Faked Documents." At the time I was nearing completion of the manuscript of *The Conquest of the Last Maya Kingdom*, a critical historical study of the 1697 Spanish conquest of the Itza Mayas (Stanford University Press, 1998). I had already spent considerable time inspecting Solís Robleda and Bracamonte y Sosa's *Fray Joseph de San Buenaventura: Historias de la Conquista del Mayab* (1994), as well as a photocopy of the document that formed the basis of that study (the Buenaventura Manuscript). In fact, I had reached the independent conclusion that this was clearly a forged document. This assessment, not published, was based on several of the same observations about it that Prem makes in his article, in addition to a content analysis of substantial portions of it pertaining to historical events related to the Itzas that contradicted or were inconsistent with the large known body of genuine primary source material (Solís Robleda and Bracamonte y Sosa 1994:107–150).

Prem's contention that the Canek Manuscript was also of questionable authenticity, however, surprised me, as I had not seriously contemplated this possibility. Believing it to be a late seventeenth-century or early eighteenth-century document and recognizing certain similarities between it and the Buenaventura Manuscript (especially in portions of the handwriting and the use of language in certain passages of the latter), I had hypothesized that the author of the Buenaventura Manuscript had used the Canek Manuscript as one model for the construction of that text. I continued to subscribe to this hypothesis, with gradually diminishing commitment, over the weeks and months that Prem and I exchanged dozens of e-mail, facsimile, and mailed paper messages in which we shared ideas, observations, and reports of our continuing study of these issues. I eventually found myself in agreement with Prem that the Canek Manuscript was also a faked document, one of the family of four known cases that he details in his article.

When Prem first raised doubts to me about this manuscript, the portions of *The Conquest of the Last Maya Kingdom* pertaining to the activities of the Franciscan missionary Andrés de Avendaño y Loyola as reported in that document had already been completed. In fact, my conclusion, based on the content of the document, that Avendaño had made an earlier, previously unknown and secret visit to the Itza capital of Nojpeten, informed much of my analysis of the entire process by which the Spanish conquest of the Itzas had unfolded. Once I came to share nearly all of the doubts expressed by Prem, I decided to face the probability that the document was fake and set about rethinking my analyses and rewriting extensive passages of the work. The only remaining mention of the Canek Manuscript is in an explanatory end note (Jones 1998:426, Note 5).

During this period, Prem supplied me with a microfilmed copy of the Roldán Manuscript, which I also recognized almost immediately as a forged document. I did not study the Gonzalo Guerrero Memorias, however, because, unlike the other three documents, this one did not pertain to Itza-related materials with which I was already deeply familiar. As time passed Prem and I actually became collaborators on portions of the project that resulted in his article, and I provided assistance in translation and editing. On several occasions he generously offered to include me as co-author. I declined this invitation, however, as I considered my own participation to have been limited in scope in contrast to the breadth of the topics addressed in the article. Instead, I suggested that, in light of my earlier writings on the Canek manuscript, it would be more appropriate for me to write a brief response. We were both pleased that William R. Fowler, the editor of *Ancient Mesoamerica*, also embraced this proposal.

Throughout much of our correspondence I played the role of devil's advocate, not a surprising strategy in light of the effort that I had invested in seeking to understand the Canek Manuscript. My principal arguments in favor of the authenticity of the document were as follows, with additional comments on the resolution of these arguments that resulted from our correspondence.

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A FRAGMENT

The Canek Manuscript appears to be a fragment of a larger document, whereas the other three documents discussed by Prem are complete and intact. Unlike the others, this document does not have an identified author or date of production. It seemed unlikely that anyone seeking to write a fake document for presumable sale would create a partial, unsigned piece of work.

We did not, in my view, reach a satisfactory resolution to this question, although Prem argued that, although a partial, unsigned fake document would seem on the surface to be more legitimate, it could just as easily have been created in such a way as to convince gullible readers of its authenticity. It is also possible, however, that there originally existed a complete document from which the four folios became separated.

COMPOSITIONAL FORMAT

Each individual folio of the Canek Manuscript, unlike those of the three others, has a distinctive subject matter and discrete compositional quality. In addition, the unusual syntactical forms in the Spanish composition employed in the Canek Manuscript are consistently applied throughout the document, whereas they appear more sporadically in the other documents. William Hanks, of course, discussed these and other characteristics of the manuscript (Hanks 1992).

The reasons for these differences among the manuscripts remain unresolved. Perhaps the unique compositional characteristics of the Canek Manuscript represented an experimental effort by the author better to deceive future readers or perhaps customers. Or perhaps, but less likely, the manuscript was written by another author who was familiar with the others but had a distinctive strategy and style.

HISTORICAL CONTENT

I had initially interpreted nothing in the historical events described in the Canek Manuscript as a certain warning sign that it was a modern invention, although, from the individuals and groups identified in the text and from the route taken via Tipuj, it was immediately obvious that the visit described could not have been Avendaño's well-known one to Nojpeten in 1696 (Jones 1992:249). However, historical interpretations regarding the events leading to the military conquest of Nojpeten would have to be revised in light of its new information, and an elaborate explanation would have to be proferred as to why Avendaño did not refer to this trip in his later descriptions of his 1696 visit to Nojpeten.

Although my previous efforts to resolve the historical inconsistencies that emerged from a reading of the Canek Manuscript seemed plausible to me at the time I wrote the article, my subsequent writing and research on events surrounding Avendaño's two known trips along the Camino Real to Peten made the proposal of an prior, secret trip seem less and less convincing. It seemed increasingly unlikely to me that any such trip via Tipuj—or anywhere else—could have been kept a secret, given the rapidity with which news of such an important event would have spread throughout the colony.

Two other historical inconsistencies emerged as we considered the document in detail. The first of these should have been a warning signal from the outset, i.e., that the author of the Canek Manuscript refers to the Itza capital by the Hispanicized name Tayasal, which is virtually absent in Colonial-period writings. Bernal Díaz de Castillo used this spelling in the sixteenth century (1977:2:209–10), and he may have been the source for Villagutierre Soto y Major's possibly only citation of the name in his lengthy history of the conquest of the Itzas (1933:381, Book 8, Chapter 12). My own searches in the extensive seventeenth- and eighteenth-century primary sources, however, have not yet produced a single instance of this spelling, which had become standardized in the scholarly literature (including Morley's writings) by the early twentieth century. *Tayasal* seems to have been Díaz del Castillo's hearing of *Tajitza*, which appears over the centuries as several variants in the primary sources, e.g., *Taiza*, *Taiça* (as used by Hernán Cortés), and *Tah Itza*, each meaning roughly "at [the place of] the Itza."

Related to this inconsistency is the manuscript author's reference to the canoe party's arrival at the "peninsula of Tayasal," from where they "passed on to the city of Tayasal" (folio 7, lines 45–47). Knowing that the capital was the island, not the peninsula, I had initially been aware of this problem but attempted to explain it by suggesting that the author simply omitted reference to traveling on from the peninsula to the island by canoe (Jones 1992:259). It now seems more likely that the passage was intended to convey that Tayasal was on the peninsula itself. If it is the case, as Prem argues, that the author drew information from one of the editions of Morley's *The Ancient Maya*, this might explain why, in hindsight, the text locates Tayasal on a peninsula. Morley is among those who believed that the Tayasal peninsula, not the island, was the location of the Itza capital, as noted in his text by the phrase "on a promontory at the western end of the lake," but without using the term *peninsula* (1946:95). In a well-known 1917 publication, Means, citing as authorities Teobert Maler, Morley, and Alfred M. Tozzer (but noting no published references), argued more explictly for a location on the Tayasal peninsula, suggesting that the author of the manuscript may also have derived this information from Means, who includes extensive translated passages from Avendaño's principal account of his visit to Nojpeten (Means 1917:16–17). The author's use of this version of the Avendaño account, until quite recently the only one in print, would explain some of the details in the Canek Manuscript, including a reference to one Fray Antonio. Fray Antonio Pérez de San Román did accompany Avendaño on portions of both of his journeys to Peten, and his name appears in that context in Means's translated passages (1917:103–104, 124) but it is not mentioned in Morley's brief chronicle (1946:125–129). Other such indications might include Means' notation that "visitors to Tayasal usually either came or left by way of Tipu" (the route followed in the Canek Manuscript) (1917:17) and the manuscript's emphasis on the Chacan Itzas' hostility toward the Canek (i.e., Ajaw Kan Ek') (1917:149–154).

The second inconsistency, identified first by Prem and further confirmed by me as an incorrect date for the feast day of Santa Isabel for a document that would have been written no later than the early 1700s, would have been far less obvious as an item for suspicion but now appears to be a strong piece of evidence indicating that the document post-dates the events by some years (also see a discussion of this change of date in Garcia Ribeiro de Vasconcellos 1894:2:523). Nonetheless, because it is *possible* that information about the new date reached Yucatán relatively early in the eighteenth century, this evidence taken alone is not, in my view, absolute proof that the document is fake. When combined with other evidence, especially the use of "Tayasal" and "peninsula," however, the case that it is a forgery is certainly stronger.

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NAME GLYPHS

The small glyphic collocation in the Canek Manuscript, unlike many of those in the Roldán and Buenaventura Manuscripts, could not be traced as having been copied directly from a relatively recent published source but instead appear to be original or unique.

Prem and I placed little emphasis on resolving this issue once it appeared that other evidence was sufficient to discredit the manuscript. More recently, however, Mark Zender, a graduate student at the University of Calgary, communicated with me his own detailed reading of the manuscript's glyphic collocation (personal communication October 24, 1998). After I informed him that the manuscript was evidently forged, he offered several plausible suggestions of possible inspirations in the published literature of the 1950s and early 1960s for the author's drawing (personal communication October 25, 1998). The following paragraph is a distillation of our combined ideas on this topic.

It is possible that the author drew inspiration for the first glyph (reading it as "Ek") from the head of God C in Morley's *The Ancient Maya*, identified there as "Xaman Ek, the North Star-god" (see first English edition, 1946:Plate 1[h], facing p. 240). The second glyph may be a stylized version of the "zero" shell glyph topped by a dot, which would resemble Morley's example of the Maya sign for the number 20 (1946:281, Figure 24). The serpent is obvious, and Zender plausibly regards what I had identified as a star as the neck opening of the stylized cape. The resulting reading of the three glyphs, "star twenty serpent," which resembles a Mexican day name, may reinforce Prem's observation that in other manuscripts the author drew on central Mexican cultural information. This interpretation follows a different line of reasoning than that proposed by Prem in his article.

FINAL OBSERVATIONS

During the course of my correspondence with Prem, I made some efforts to determine the date and origin of the paper used and to determine whether the fading of the ink over time had any possible significance for dating the writing itself. George Stuart's drawing of the watermark found on folios 7 and 8 (Stuart 1991:8–9) led me on a incomplete and inconclusive search of the literature on historical watermarks. I was unable to match the precise watermark, although it appears similar in several respects (initials around a heart inside a cartouche) to examples produced in France during the second half of the seventeenth century (see, e.g., Churchill 1935:341, Figure 455; Heawood 1950:Plate 308, no. 2298, and Plate 310, no. 2323). That finding suggested that the paper was possibly of an appropriate age for a manuscript written around the time of the conquest of the Itzas. Discussions with several specialists with knowledge of historical inks were more inconclusive, although these tended to raise my suspicion that the fading of the ink may well indicate a relatively recent date of writing. As it turns out, it is now quite unnecessary to rely on such physical evidence to determine the forged status of the document, nor would appropriately dated paper constitute evidence for the date of writing, because all a forger needs is a small supply of antique blank paper (a point ignored by Bracamonte y Sosa and Solís Robleda in their continuing defense of the Buenaventura Manuscript [1997:279–281]).

It is particularly ironic that Bracamonte y Sosa and Solís Robleda (1997:281–98) have recently cited similarities between the Canek Manuscript and the Buenaventura Manuscript in support of their argument that Prem is incorrect in regarding the latter as a forgery. Many of these similarities are the very ones that Prem had already presented as evidence that both are faked, and I must agree that Prem appears to be correct in his assessment. Their sometimes hostile defense presents a additional irony in that, as I first contemplated these issues, the evidence for the forgery of the Buenaventura Manuscript appeared considerably more compelling and clear-cut than that for the Canek Manuscript. I was not fully convinced about the latter's forged status until I came to terms with the manuscript author's use of "Tayasal" and its location on a peninsula (evidence that Prem did not consider) and the inappropriate date assigned to the feast day of Santa Isabel. All in all, the Canek Manuscript, when read in the absence of knowledge of the other three forgeries, is a remarkably convincing fake, whereas the Buenaventura Manuscript is not.

One of the most important strengths of Prem's claims that all four of the documents in question are forged rests in the marked similarities among them. Although the Canek Manuscript differs in significant ways from the rest, it also bears striking resemblances in others. Examining the documents as a family has enabled Prem to discover elements in them that collectively seal their status as forgeries. Those of us who studied and wrote about the Canek Manuscript served as peer reviewers for these writings, double-checked the paleography, and published the articles as editors had borne few or no suspicions. In hindsight, we should all have been suspicious from the outset, and I have no doubt that when next a new and exciting, but odd and uncharacteristic, "colonial document" appears, we will exercise skepticism and carry out far more rigorous background analysis.

RESUMEN

Se concluye que es correcta la evaluación de Prem que el Manuscrito Canek es un documento falsificado, de elaboración reciente. Esta evaluación resultó de una comunicación extensiva entre el autor y Prem y de investigaciones adicionales que sugieren que el autor del manuscrito usó una publicación de Philip Ainsworth Means de 1917 tanto como los trabajos de Sylvanus G. Morley para ayudar en construir el texto del documento. Las referencias del falsificador a la capital itza como Tayasal y a la península de Tayasal siguen las convenciones modernas y no las del siglo XVII, un error que apoya las conclusiones de Prem. El descubrimiento de un grupo de documentos falsificados, de los cuales el Manuscrito Canek es un ejemplo especialmente convincente, debe ser una advertencia para los investigadores en el futuro a que sean más cautelosos en cuanto a documentos individuales que difieren mucho de los demás de la época colonial.

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