Traditions and Receptions in Sixteenth-Century Yucatán’s Visual Culture: The Maya and the Creation of Tihó-Mérida

Data Forms:
Then I, Ixnakuk Pech, was the head, and when the Spanish came to Tihó, I paid tribute to the conquerors in Tihó.

Ixnakuk Pech, Crónica de Chac Xulub Chen

13 Etznab [was the day] when the land was established. 13 Cheneb was when they measured off by paces the cathedral [of San Ildefonso], the dark house of instruction, the cathedral of heaven. Thus it was also measured off by paces here [on earth at Tihó]. Thirteen katuns was the total count, [that is,] thirteen feet in heaven. Then it is again measured off by feet from the face of the earth. Four feet separate it from the face of the earth.

Anonymous Maya Author, Chilam Balam of Chumayel

The city of Mérida was built on an ancient populated site . . . The natives called it Tihó, which means the same as birth or beginning . . . It seems to have been a provincial capital . . . on the account of the stone buildings that the conquerors found there . . . The buildings . . . were large and fine and the main one was where the present monastery of San Francisco is . . . The buildings were of hewn, vaulted stone constructed with a very strong mortar, [which] for this reason the conquerors . . . gave it the name of Mérida.

Pedro García, Relación de Chuncluchu y Tabí, 1581

Project Description Continued:
In the Chac Xulub Chen document, Ixnakuk Pech indentifies the city as the locus of Spanish economic and political authority, but yet he privileges the city’s Maya name over its Spanish. Additionally, the Chumayel manuscript describes the building of Mérida’s cathedral and its spatiality, while subtly referencing its Pre-Columbian foundation. In the both texts the city and its features are described in Maya terms and from Maya perspectives. These references are informative as they allow for a consideration of how the Maya understood Mérida in relation to their Iberian contemporaries.

In this project, I address the cultural multivalency of Tihó-Mérida from art historical perspectives to consider how the Maya understood and engaged with Yucatán’s new cultural capital. I suggest the Maya thoughtfully navigated Tihó-Mérida’s multiculturalism to substantiate their social standing in the colony. I explore these ideas by examining various forms of data including texts and images. When combined with modern research, it is possible to chart the deliberate strategies the Maya used to secure their political and social standing during times of social unrest. With purposeful references to and representations of Tihó-Mérida, these texts are locations where indigenous agency is enacted, revealing the role of the Maya in the formation of Yucatán’s society.

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Background Photo: Cathedral of San Ildefonso, Mérida, Yucatán, ca. 1562–99 (Photo: author 2011)