

Ignacio Bernal García Pimentel: archaeologist and teacher

Ignacio Bernal, the distinguished archaeologist and teacher, whose contribution to the study and interpretation of Mesoamerican cultures was recognized both nationally and internationally, died in Mexico City on January 24th, at the age of eighty-one.

Bernal was born in Paris on February 13th, 1910 and spent his childhood and adolescence in Mexico, Europe and Canada. He learned French from an early age at the same time as he was learning Spanish and later acquired fluent English. At 27, he travelled through Europe and North Africa. He began to study archaeology after dropping law at university when he was already over thirty.

According to Bernal, the decision to become an anthropologist sprang from his interest in Mexican history. Convinced that he would begin at the beginning, pre-Hispanic Mexico held a particular fascination for him.

In 1942, he enrolled in a course at the National School of Anthropology with Dr. Alfonso Caso, with whom he began working on the Monte Albán excavations in January of 1943. Bernal was one of Dr. Caso's most outstanding students. Heir to his teacher's passion for archaeology, he continued to work with him on the Monte Albán excavations, during the fourteenth and fifteenth excavation periods, in 1946 and 1947 respectively.



Tourists at Teotihuacan.



Ignacio Bernal at Monte Albán, Oaxaca.

In 1943, he began studying anthropology formally at the National School of Anthropology. In 1947, he obtained his Master's degree, with a specialization in archaeology, for which he wrote a thesis entitled *Pre-Classical Ceramics in Monte Albán*. That same year he began teaching, and taught "The Archaeology of Mexico and Central America II". In 1949, he wrote *The Ceramics of Monte Albán III A*, for his doctoral thesis at the Faculty of Humanities of the National University of Mexico. Bernal was the first Mexican to receive a doctorate in anthropology.

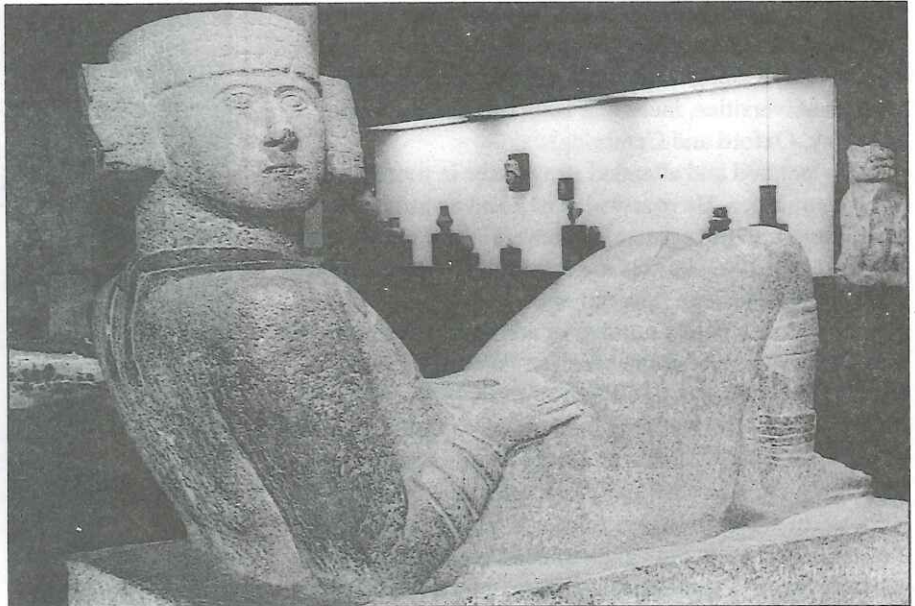
Although his work did not begin to appear in print until he was 38, his publications include some 270 books, articles and reports.

His works, written clearly, profoundly and in an immensely readable style reflect his very personal concept of archaeology and his passion for pre-Columbian cultures. In *A History of Archaeology* (1979) he discusses the importance of archaeology as a social science, whose scope should not be limited to the description and classification of objects. Instead, he argues, it should attempt to interpret them in order to understand the culture

of which they are a product. An archaeologist's behavior, he suggests, should be governed by enthusiasm, reasoned passion and imagination.

For Bernal, archaeology in Mexico is not simply academic work or the result of intellectual curiosity. Ruins and archaeological objects should be preserved since they are symbols of our past and form part of our national heritage and therefore, our lives.

In his excellent book, *Tenochtitlan on an Island* (1959) Bernal undertakes to reconstruct the history of Tenochtitlan from earliest times, suggesting the processes and attitudes which made the Aztecs the "chosen people" until the arrival of the Spaniards. Of particular interest is his reference to the idea of the cosmos held by the inhabitants of the island, which is crucial to an understanding of the practice of human sacrifice.



A Chaac Mol in the Museum of Anthropology.

A History of **MEXICAN** **ARCHAEOLOGY**

THE VANISHED CIVILIZATIONS
OF MIDDLE AMERICA



IGNACIO BERNAL



One of Bernal's books in English.

The *Olmec World* (1968) was an attempt to interpret the bases of Olmec culture, which developed along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. This work summarizes all the archaeological information available at the time and organizes it in such a way as to explain the origin, development, rise and fall of the Olmecs. One of this book's main contributions was the historical dimension which it lent the Olmecs, with its hypothesis that civilization in Mesoamerica began with the Olmec world. This statement was a vital step toward providing a better understanding of the ancient world, since it established a principle of continuity between the various pre-Hispanic cultures known at the time.

Bernal felt a particular inclination towards the Zapotecs and Mixtecs, the inhabitants of what is now the State of Oaxaca. In addition to Monte Albán, he participated in and directed the exploration and excavation of the archaeological site at Mitla, Yagul, Dainzu and Coixtlahuaca, among others. The information provided by his research was crucial to an understanding of the development of the above mentioned cultures and their relationship with other pre-Hispanic cultures in Mexico and Central America.

As director of the Teotihuacan project, (1962-1964), Bernal directed excavation and restoration work on the archaeological site at Teotihuacan, just outside Mexico City. He proved that this site had not only been an important ceremonial center but also a great city with a sophisticated system of urban planning. The results of his research were always subsequently published.

As a professor, Ignacio Bernal won the respect and admiration of his students both at home and abroad. In

Mexico, he taught at the UNAM, the National School of Anthropology and History, El Colegio de México, and Mexico City College. He was a visiting professor at various universities, including Harvard, the Sorbonne, Berkeley, Oxford and Cambridge.

He lectured and attended congresses in more than twelve countries. He received prizes and awards from institutions and governments in several different parts of the world. In 1969, he was awarded the National Science Prize by the Mexican government.

Bernal also held a number of administrative posts. He was Cultural Attaché at the Mexican Embassy in Paris, the Mexican delegate to UNESCO from 1956-1957, and the Director of the National Institute of Anthropology and History, (1968-1971). It was during his time in this last post that he devised the idea of awards for scientific research in anthropology and history, and later set up the Fray Bernardino de Sahagún Annual Prizes for the best Anthropological and Historical Research on Mexican topics in Mexico or abroad.

Bernal was one of the main proponents of the National Museum of Anthropology and History, and after its completion was its director from 1962-1968, and again from 1970-1977. Bernal felt that museums had a twofold



Alejandro Novoa.

A vessel of the Zapotec culture, Oaxaca (Monte Albán II).



Alejandro Novoa.

Zapotec urn, Oaxaca (Monte Albán III).

purpose: to preserve objects and spread knowledge, and thereby have a profound effect on scientific research.

This gifted historian, anthropologist and writer was a distinguished member of several societies and academies both at home and abroad, including The Mexican Academy of History, The National Academy of Scientific Research, La Real Academia Española, La Société des Américanistes in Paris, The Royal Anthropological Society of Great Britain and Ireland, The American Academy of Science and Arts and The British Academy.

Ignacio Bernal had a long and successful life, on both a professional and a personal level. His relatives, friends and students remember him as a passionate, enthusiastic man, with a great capacity for synthesis and an open, critical mind. His wife and four children played an important role in his life, joining him in his adventures and discoveries.

During a ceremony organized by the Department of Public Education as a tribute to Bernal a month after his death, the Archaeologist Eduardo Matos Moctezuma remarked, "Ignacio Bernal searched in the past, lived in the present and left us the image of a scholar for the future" ✎

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