

# Archaeology and travelers in the Maya region

Carlos Alvarez Asomoza\*

**T**he fascinating world of 19th century amateur archaeology has captured the attention of many scholars of archaeological history such as Ignacio Bernal (1952; 1977; 1979). Important works about the Maya areas include those of Victor W. Von Hagen (1940; 1967; 1973), Robert Wauchope (1962; 1965), Elizabeth Carmichel (1973), Ian Graham (1963; 1977), Robert Brunhouse (1973; 1975) and David Adamson (1975).

For two hundred years after the Spanish Conquest, the only Westerners who occasionally described the ruins they saw in the jungles and mountains were clergymen and conquerors who thus laid the groundwork for future Mayan archaeology. Among these early forerunners are the works of Diego de Lada, Friar Lorenzo de Bienvenida <sup>1</sup>,

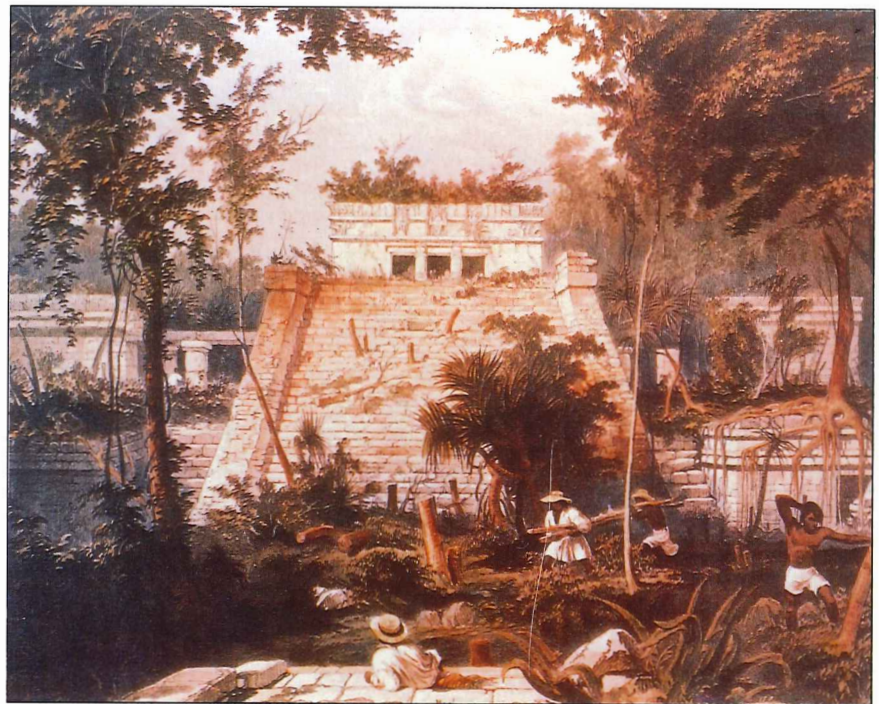
<sup>1</sup> In 1548, Friar Lorenzo de Bienvenida described Chichen Itzá and sketched the castle, as well as mentioning other settlements in ruins. The Judge of the Royal Tribunal, Diego García de Palacio, visited Copán in 1575 or 76. In 1558, Friar Antonio de Ciudad Real, in his account of the expedition of Friar Alonso Ponce, mentions the ruins of Uxmal.

\* Center for Mayan Studies, UNAM. Published in *Antropológicas*, No. 1, January-March 1992. Journal of the Institute for Anthropological Research, UNAM.

Diego García de Palacio and Friar Antonio de Ciudad Real (Bernal, 1979: 41-42).

The publication of the great works of Torquemada y Herrera in the second decade of the 17th century marks the end of a remarkable period of study of pre-Hispanic peoples. During the subsequent centuries of colonial rule, archaeological references were uncommon, although López de Cogolludo mentioned

*The early archaeologists of Mayan ruins were a mixture of proto-scientists and romantics. European aristocrats, artists, doctors, soldiers, clergyman, diplomats and tourists shared a fascination for the mystery surrounding ancient Mayan relics and the light they could shed on a great and enigmatic civilization.*



F. Catherwood, Tulum Castle.

Chichén Itzá and Uxmal in 1688 and refuted the then fashionable theory of the Carthaginian origin of the Mayas. Fuentes y Guzmán described archaeological discoveries and the sites of Mixco, Uxatlán and Zaculeu, of which he drew a map (Bernal, 1952: 35).

By the 18th century the philosophical movement of the Enlightenment had postulated the corrupting effect of civilization upon man and proposed looking to primitive peoples in the search for the pure man or "good savage". This idea produced a resurgence of interest in exotic worlds and stimulated travel and descriptions of "strange" customs and objects.

Carlos III, King of Naples and a member of the Bourbon dynasty, brought the Enlightenment and a curiosity for archaeology to the Spanish throne. He and his wife, María Amelia, shared a passion for antiquity and had a marked influence on both Americanist and ancient Mayan

studies. Two basic trends emerged at this time: one of desk research and the other of travel and adventure (Bernal, 1952: 137; 1977: 25-26).

It became necessary to compile the many writings on ancient history that were lost in archives, a task undertaken by Lorenzo de Boturini. Juan Bautista Muñoz, Royal Chronicler of the Indies, was one such compiler whose vast collection of documents was published under the title *History of the New World*.

Also worthy of mention are such notable Jesuits as Francisco Javier Clavijero, Antonio Alzate and Pedro Jose Márquez (Bernal, 1952: 138).

Many office-based writers worked from materials extracted from books and manuscripts, demonstrating the need for a "museum," in Boturini's use of the word.

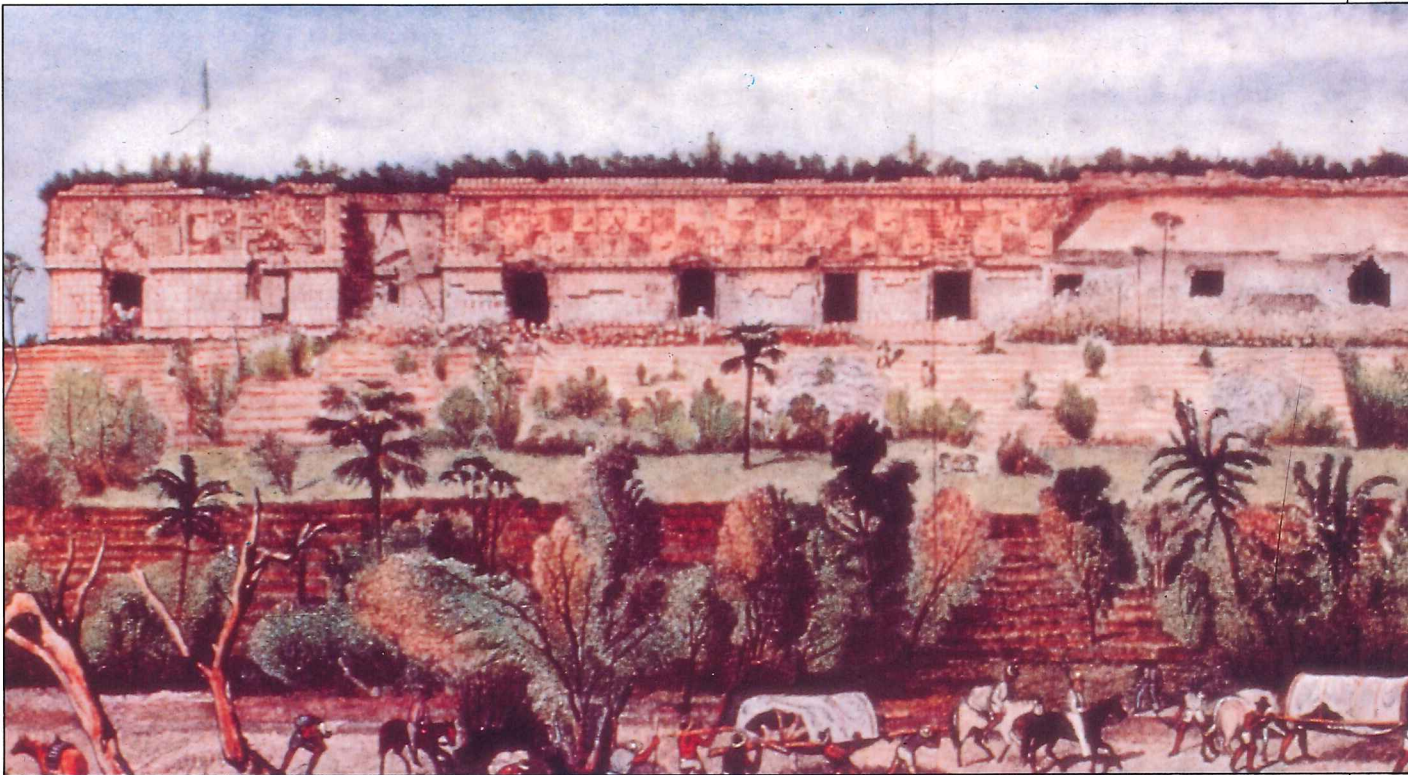
An important event was Viceroy Bucareli's order to gather together, in the Royal and Pontifical University, all the historic documents on Mexico for scholarly reference. Shortly

afterwards, Viceroy Revillagigedo ordered that two marvelous Mexican monoliths discovered in the city's main square, the *Zócalo*, should be preserved at the university.

This was the origin of the Mexican national museum; founded by Lucas Alaman in 1831 and moved to a palace in the present street of Moneda in 1865 by Maximilian (Bernal, 1979).

The dispersal of many collections throughout Europe due to the French Revolution made the early 19th century a particularly decisive moment for English collectors (Graham, 1977: 45).

Earlier writings were often simple chronicles that provide insight into the development of European perceptions about the unity of diverse Mayan groups, their origins, language, history, ethnology and physiognomy; as well as revealing the Europeans' great admiration for the Mayan buildings scattered across the territory.



F. Catherwood, Governor's house, Uxmal.

At this time, scientific societies and some universities began to publish periodicals that occasionally included works on archaeology.

Various factors combined to determine the characteristics of this period. One was the so-called 'black legend' intended to belittle the Spanish triumph in America by minimizing the importance of the conquered. Another lay in the great changes postulated by Enlightenment philosophy (Bernal, 1977: 25). Some of these ideas were reflected in the opinions and works of late 18th and early 19th century antiquarians.

The successful explorations of Palenque by Antonio del Río encouraged Carlos IV, follower of the policies of Carlos III, to order more research, this time throughout all of New Spain. Guillaume Dupaix, Captain of Dragoons, was commissioned to lead three expeditions between 1805 and 1808, only the last of which took him to the Maya region.

Publication of the works of Dupaix and Humboldt aroused increasing interest in pre-Hispanic archaeology and native peoples among European and North American travelers. French and Englishmen began to show interest in American antiquities, which soon were considered part of universal cultural development, comparable with India and Egypt, on the basis of objects and drawings discovered at new ruins (Bernal, 1979: 93).

The upheavals of the War of Independence were detrimental to archaeological research, preventing field excavations during the period (Bernal, 1952: 141).

After 1830 new figures emerged with a special interest in research, such as Juan Galindo, who between 1831 and 1836, visited Palenque, Utatlán, and Copán. The same period saw the publication of Count Frederick Waldeck's account of his travels through Yucatán.

The period in Mexican archaeology that I address below spans eight decades, from the early 1800's to the closing years of the past century. Although this appears arbitrary, it links preceding events to the consequences of a century characterized by scientific positivism.

It opens with the travels of Guillaume Dupaix (1805-1808) and culminates with the researches of Alfred Percival Maudslay (1881-1894), considered to be the founder of modern scientific Mayan archaeology, whose publications recovered valuable information for posterity.

During those years, Mexican archaeology could hardly be regarded as an academic or scientific discipline, for it was neither taught in universities nor studied at many research centers.

The random presence—at ruins in Mexico and Central America—of American and European travelers, who traveled more than Mexican scholars, was due to personal interest and curiosity rather than to any

defined scientific or academic program. Most were not archaeologists but antiquarians; foreigners and Mexicans alike from all walks of life arrived in large numbers and some achieved renown.

Del Río and Dupaix were both military men, Galindo a politician and adventurer, Waldeck an artist, Stephens a lawyer, Brasseur de Bourbourg a clergyman, Catherwood an architect, Le Plongeon called himself a doctor but was involved in many mysterious activities, Thompson studied business and served as a diplomat, only Desiré Charnay was an archaeologist.

Their errors were often due to lack of professional training, but all shared a passionate desire to explain the mysteries surrounding the objects and monuments they discovered at the ruins.

Their main stumbling block was trying to interpret relics in the tradition of Western classical antiquity. They had to abandon their preconceived ideas and acknowledge an indigenous and original culture unrelated to ancient Egypt, Chaldea, Rome or Asia.

It was due to lack of knowledge about Palenque architecture that Captain del Río, visiting the area in 1787, thought the inhabitants of the city were of Greek, Phoenician, or Roman ancestry, although he had probably never seen a Roman building in his life.

Although most of Guillaume Dupaix's hypotheses were mistaken, two are worthy of consideration. First, he believed that the hieroglyphics engraved on Mayan stone tablets were quite unrelated to Egyptian or Central Mexican glyphs. Secondly, the characteristic cranial deformation depicted on stone reliefs convinced him that he was dealing with an unknown race.

While the drawings of Luciano Castañeda, the artist who accompanied Dupaix, appear clumsy and naive compared to the work of Frederick Catherwood, recent originals discovered by José Alcina French





F. Catherwood, Bolonchen cenote.

(1970) prove more faithful than subsequent reproductions published by English and French artists.

In the early 19th century, Doctor McQuay took back to England a copy of a report by Captain Antonio del Río containing illustrations by Ricardo Almendariz. The report, "Critical American Theater," was published in Guatemala by the Italian, Paul Felix Cabrera, later accused by Canon Ordoñez de Aguilar of plagiarizing his work.

In the second decade of this century, the London bookseller Henry

Berthoud bought copies which he translated and published in 1822. Berthoud employed F. Waldeck to engrave Almendariz' 16 illustrations, thereby assisting Waldeck's public debut as future artist and archaeologist (Brunhouse, 1973: 53).

Another important figure was Edward King, Viscount Kingsborough, who dedicated much of his life to the collection and publication of Mexican codices and classical manuscripts.

His nine volume *Antiquities of Mexico* was published between 1831

and 1837. Thanks to the artist Augustine Aglio, to whom he entrusted a copy of the Dresden codex, he was able to preserve numerous details that would otherwise have been lost. He also sponsored Waldeck and published his work (Carmichel, 1973).

When Juan Galindo visited Palenque in 1831, he discovered no difference at all between the ancient builders of the ruins and the Mayas living in the surrounding area at the time. He was also the first to consider the Copán and Palenque scripts unique Mayan cultural achievements.

Some writers argue that the publication of his *Description of the ruins of Copán* (around 1834-35) inspired John Lloyd Stephens to travel to Central America in 1839 (Graham, 1963: 11-36).

John Herbert Caddy, a career soldier and artist of Canadian descent living in England, was sent to British Honduras with the Royal Artillery garrison in 1838. His diary contains lively descriptions of rural life in Belize.

When Caddy's commanding officer, Colonel McDonald, learned that the American diplomat J.L. Stephens and Frederick Catherwood were about to visit the Palenque ruins to compile a report, he quickly organized an inspection of the city on behalf of the British Crown (Carmichel, 1973).

Patrick Walker, an Englishman, was commissioned to guide the expedition which included J.H. Caddy because of his talent as a watercolorist. The group was able to reach Palenque before Stephens and produce good drawings of the monuments.

Frederick Catherwood, architect and artist, traveled through Greece, Turkey, and Egypt drawing fascinating architectural relics. In 1836, while in London, he met Stephens, a young well-traveled American lawyer appointed by his nation's president to lead a confidential mission to Central America (Hagen, 1967; 1973).

It is a matter of record that by the time they arrived at their destination, the Republic of Central America had been dissolved, leaving them no government to which to present their credentials. This allowed both men to devote more time to their main objective of exploring the entire territory for lost cities.

Besides being a talented artist, Catherwood was also equipped with the photographic instruments then available: a camera lucida and a daguerreotype, to record their findings.

One reason why Stephens' writing is accessible and not exclusively concerned with archaeology is that his descriptions of local native customs were to him ethnographic relics reaching back into the past.

He also compiled linguistic information, in many ways making him a pre-anthropologist. He was also interested in the Mayan chronology established by Juan Pío Pérez, with whom he had a close relationship (Bernal, 1952: 144).

One significant error in the work of Stephens and Catherwood is the mistaken association of the tablet of the Temple of the Sun at Palenque, designated House Number 3, with the jambs in the chapel of the Temple of the Cross (Stephens, 1841: 354-355).

In 1923, Franz Blom measured the sanctuary walls of the three temples in Palenque and discovered that the stone tablets embedded in the facade of the Church of Santo Domingo of Palenque could only correspond to those of the Temple of the Cross (Blom, 1923: 74-76).

During the 1952 dig at the Temple of the Foliated Cross directed by Rafael Orellana, it was proposed that the stone tablets, which had been fragmented when the wall into which they were set collapsed, be replaced in the jambs of the sanctuary (*Tlatoani*, vol. I (3-4), p. 43). This dilemma was mentioned in the section "Enigmas of the past" in the subsequent edition of the same journal (*Tlatoani*, vol. I (5-6) 1952: 44).

Modesto Méndez Flores, chief magistrate of El Petén, visited the Tikal ruins and refers, in his report of 1848, to the wooden lintels that Stephens also described at Uxmal (Bernal, 1979: 107).

After Stephens, there were other less distinguished visitors to the Maya areas who contributed little to studies of the area. One was Arthur Morelet who traveled through Central America, Cuba and Yucatan in 1846.

During the French Intervention, Napoleon III founded the Scientific Society of Mexico, as Napoleon I had done for Egypt. The soul of this society was Abbé Charles Etienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, who during his stay in Mexico and Guatemala translated the *Popol Vuh* into French and published the work of Friar Diego de Lada (Bernal, 1979: 94).

Cesar Daly, another noteworthy member of the society compiled catalogues of ancient documents to record the history of Mexico and Central America (Bernal, 1977: 36).

Desiré Charnay exploited a great invention of the time: the photographic camera. It should be remembered that these explorer-antiquarians forced their way through the rain forests, carrying heavy

equipment that included delicate glass plates and chemicals. Each photograph was therefore a triumph and many of high quality have been preserved to this day.

A German baron, Emmanuel Friedrichstal, was actually the first to obtain reproductions of Mayan ruins with a camera lucida. They were exhibited in the United States and Europe but disappeared after his death.

Photographic comparison of monuments in different regions, convinced Charnay that they represented branches of the same civilization, with origins in Tula, and that the Toltecs had come from Asia or the Antilles. Desiré Charnay continued the tradition of Humboldt and Stephens, publishing his work in France in the form of travel journals between 1863 and 1885.

In 1870, Augustus Le Plongeon and his wife Alice made excavations in Chichén Itzá, Yucatán, where they discovered the famous sculpture of a *chac-mool*. Doctor Le Plongeon was the most mysterious of the antiquarians. He practiced medicine, parapsychology, tried out strange therapies and was a fierce defender of the Atlantis theory.



F. Catherwood, Doves' house, Uxmal.

Alice Le Plongeon was equally interesting, developing an extensive bibliography on the Yucatan Mayas and well known for her interest in music and the occult (Brunhouse 1973:136-165).

Numerous essays on Mexico's ancient history were published in France during the first half of the 19th century such as the works of Ternaux-Compans (1837-38) and J.M.A. Aubin (1849).

According to Bernal (1952: 149), several compendia of Mexican archaeology appeared in the second half of the century. These include E. Taylor's *Anahuac* (1861) containing a description of Xochicalco, Adolph Bendelier's *Archaeological Tours in Mexico* (1864), and the works of Bancroft (1882) and Nadaillac (1883) who argued that the ruins of Palenque predated those of Yucatan. The works of Daniel Brinton (1883) and William Prescott (1874) are also worthy of mention.

Another important figure is Adela Catherine Breton, a linguist, talented watercolorist and inveterate traveler who visited Mexico and Central America on three occasions (1894-1899). Alfred P. Maudslay proposed the task for which she is remembered today: the reproduction of the mural paintings at Chichén Itzá, including the Temple of the Jaguars.

Annie Hunter is another contributor who, under Maudslay's supervision, produced magnificent illustrations for the volumes on archaeology of the *Biología Centrali-Americana*.

Another noteworthy figure was the Irish physician Thomas William Francis Gann, who was assigned to British Honduras in 1894 and quickly developed an interest in antiquities, particularly the frescoes of Santa Rita Corozal, Lubaantún and other areas in the district of Cayo, Belize (Carmichel, 1973).

Edward Thompson was the last of the forerunners of Mayan archaeology. He was self-educated and through personal connections obtained a diplomatic posting in the Yucatan peninsula where he devoted himself to archaeology. He lived with the Mayas from 1885 and attained considerable knowledge of their language and customs. As a youth he promoted the theory of Atlantis, about which he accumulated extensive bibliographic material (Brunhouse, 1973: 166).

In the century between the publication of Leon y Gama's work and 1890, little was produced that was strictly archaeological. The founding studies of Mayan archaeology were based on the collection and publication of

important manuscripts and documents. Travel also publicized, however superficially, the great cities in ruins and their relics. It could be described as a century of discovery rather than of analysis.

Important encyclopedists and collectors of ancient texts include Antonio García Buas, Manuel Orozco y Berra, and Joaquín García Icazbalceta.

Towards 1858, the latter, in his "Collection of Documents for the history of Mexico," stresses the importance of recovering all possible materials on the ancient history of Mexico. He also published Hernán Cortés' fourth documentary letter, the works of Motolinia, Mendieta and the Anonymous Conquistador, and *The history of the Mexicans according to their paintings*.

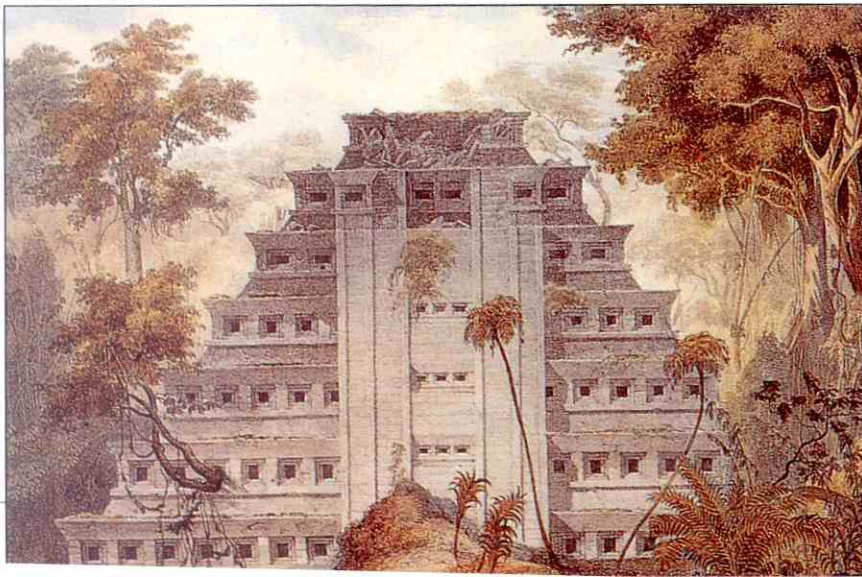
Carlos María Bustamente also collected important documents by Sahagún and fragments of Ixtlixóchtli, among others. Manuel Larraínzar, a lawyer, published five volumes of American historical studies in which he analyzed current ideas, particularly on the subject of Palenque.

The politician José Fernando Ramírez kept a record of his visit to Uxmal and other Yucatan ruins with the party that accompanied Empress Carlota on her journey. He also collected pictographic writings now contained in more than twenty partially published volumes in the Library of the National Museum.

Ramírez recovered the Pilgrimage Strip, the Sigüenza Map and the Tolzin Map. He published the first volume of Diego Durán's work in 1867. Following his death, Alfredo Chavero published the second volume around 1880. Juan Pío Pérez was also interested in the ancient chronology of Yucatan and produced a dictionary of the Mayan language (Bernal, 1952: 147).

Two approaches to the past are evident during this period. The first was imaginative, exemplified by Le Plongeon, leading only into

Carlos Nebel, Pyramid of the Niches, Tajin.





F. Catherwood, Mayan arch at the governor's house, Uxmal.

labyrinthine confusion. The second method relied on documentation recovered from the 16th century on which, when increased by the wealth of new knowledge, studied architecture, art, records of hieroglyphics and published abundant written material. This was the archaeology of monuments that was preserved, until recently, in Mexico (Bernal, 1977: 39).

### Bibliography

Adamson David, *The ruins of time. Four and a half centuries of conquest and discovery among the Maya*. Praeger Publishers, New York, 1975.

Alcina Franch, Jose, "Las ruinas de Palenque a la luz de los viajes de Guillermo Dupaix", *Anuario de Estudios Americanos*. Vol. XXVII, Sevilla, 1970.

Bernal, Ignacio, "Cien años de arqueología mexicana, 1780-1880", *Cuadernos Americanos*. Año XI, Vol. 62, n. 2: 137-151, Mexico, 1952.

"Mayan Antiquaries", in: *Social process in Mayan prehistory (studies in honor of Sir Eric Thompson)*. Academic Press, London, 1977, pp.19-43.

*Historia de la arqueología en México*. Ed. Porrúa, Mexico, 1979.

Blom, Franz, *Las ruinas de Palenque, Xup y finca Encanto*, (1923). Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico, 1982.

Brunhouse, Robert, *In search of the Maya, the first archaeologists*. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1973.

Brunhouse, Robert, *Pursuit of the ancient Maya, some archaeologists of yesterday*. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1975.

Carmichel, Elizabeth, *The British and the Maya, trustees of the British Museum*, London, 1973.

Graham, Ian, "Juan Galindo, enthusiast", *Estudios de Cultura Maya*. Vol. III: 11-36, Centro de Estudios Mayas, UNAM, Mexico, 1963.

"Lord Kingsborough, Sir Thomas Philips and Obadiah Rich: some bibliographical notes", in: *Social Process in Maya Prehistory*. Academic Press, London, 1977, pp. 45-555.

Von Hagen, Victor, *Jungle in the Clouds*. New York, 1940.

Von Hagen Victor, *Maya Explorer, John Lloyd Stephens and the Lost Cities of Central America and Yucatan*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1967.

Stephens, John L., *Incidents of travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan (1841)*. Vol. II, Dover Publications, New York, 1969.

Wauchope, Robert, *The tribes and sunken continents, myth and method in the study of American Indians*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1963.

Wauchope, Robert, *They found the buried cities, exploration and excavation in the American tropics*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1965