INTRODUCTION

In this year of the 500th anniversary of the first encounter of great consequence between the Old World and the New, we offer a transcription and translation and a series of studies of an account of a remarkable meeting between Spaniards and Mayas in the late seventeenth century. Although occurring more than two centuries after Cristobal Colon and his men first landed on Guanahani, the contact described by the anonymous author of the Canek Manuscript is in many ways more graphic and more vivid than the earliest narratives of contact with "the other." This is not, of course, technically an account of first contact, yet it conveys a real sense of awe and wonder, palatable tension, and well-founded fear. It is only a fragment of a longer account, but in just a few folios it evokes more images, thoughts, and emotions than many of its longer predecessors. It is also unusual in that it is relatively free of the prejudice and sensationalism that pervades earlier accounts.

Readers familiar with primary accounts of discovery and conquest, such as Colon's journal or Bernal Diaz del Castillo's "true history," are acquainted with their unabashed ethnocentrism and lack of sensitivity to indigenous aspects of culture. Cultural bias formed the warp for the weft of fantastic or irrational claims. The royal chronicler Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo y Valdes, for example, claimed that Indians' skulls are four times thicker than those of Christians. Although it was written from a Spanish viewpoint, the account of the encounter with Canek and his people is remarkably devoid of such bias and exaggeration.

The author's ability to perceive native culture objectively provokes an interest in his identity and ethnic background. As Grant D. Jones points out in his opening essay, an analytical tour de force that puts the Canek Manuscript into ethnohistoric and historiographic perspective, the author seems suspended in a liminal position between Spanish and Maya worlds. He is sufficiently sensitive to certain aspects of Maya culture that one suspects he was a native of Yucatan, either a Maya or a mestizo, schooled in Spanish language and culture and the Catholic religion by Franciscan friars. Jones concludes that the author was probably a native Yucatec who became a lay Franciscan. William F. Hanks supports this inference in his painstaking study of the language of the manuscript, proposing that the author's mother tongue was Yucatec Maya, which would explain the oddities in Spanish grammar and syntax. It would also account for the respect and admiration expressed toward the person and dress of the ruler Canek. In the final study, David M. Pendergast and Grant D. Jones carefully analyze the references to late seventeenth-century Maya material culture contained in this extraordinary manuscript. Covering a wide range of items from beds to canoes, from musical instruments to royal attire, they succeed in extracting a wealth of information on Itza material culture within the comparative framework of Lowland Maya archaeology. Although lamenting the lack of detail in the manuscript, Pendergast and Jones show that the document actually carries a great deal of useful information on material culture.

In extending our knowledge of colonial Maya history and politics, and in offering an unusually thorough analysis of a single manuscript, these papers provide yet another forceful demonstration of the advantages of an approach combining archaeology, ethnohistory, history, linguistics, and other disciplines in the unified study of ancient Mesoamerica.

William R. Fowler, Jr.
Stephen D. Houston