



### THE DIARY OF FRANCISCO DE LA BELALCAZAR

Edited by Professor Austen Cokes of the University of Texas and published in 1911, this is an English translation of an original 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish text discovered by Cokes and now held by the university's library.

Francisco de la Belalcazar was a Spanish Conquistador sent to the Yucatan peninsula by Hernando Cortez in the autumn of 1518 to scout the terrain in preparation for Cortez' 1519 invasion of the Aztec Empire to the west. Belalcazar was following in the footsteps of Francisco Hernandez de Cordoba (who had landed on the peninsula in 1517) and Juan de Grijalva (who had explored the coast in early 1518). He spent a great deal of time studying the writings of Cordoba and Grijalva, and the early part of his diary is (according to Cokes) a valuable insight into how the earliest intimations of the Aztec Empire were first received by the Spanish explorers.

When Cortez passed through the Yucatan in February 1519, Belalcazar remained behind to continue his own conquests on the peninsula itself. He consolidated his power around the small estates he held under Cortez' original grant in an area near the future location of the city of Merida.

Over the next three years, it is clear that Belalcazar viewed Cortez' triumphant campaign against the Aztec Empire and his subsequent establishment of New Spain with envious eyes. Although some entries burn with bitterness, many others take a more positive outlook as the conquistador attempts to model his own efforts in the Yucatan on Cortez' example.

In this vein, around 1522, Belalcazar becomes increasingly fascinated by tales of a place that the Mayans name "Chichén Xoxul": Like the fabled cities of gold pursued by others in the west, this Chichén Xoxul is treated as a deeply held secret by the natives. Belalcazar becomes convinced that the reason the city has been "hidden from Christian eyes" is because of the great wealth it must contain. Wealth that would fund his greatness.

Belalcazar's avarice for Chichén Xoxul only increased as he became convinced that its wealth was not limited to gold. "Great troves of knowledge must be inscribed upon its stones, and I suspect now that a great library must lie hidden there." One diary entry refers to Belalcazar's desire to "enter the Black Stone and learn all that it has to say".

Belalcazar resolves to mount an expedition to locate the city, conquer it, and exploit it. Surprisingly, however, he has great difficulty in securing a local guide. His diary quotes one guide – utterly reliable on some of Belalcazar's other expeditions – as saying, "I am no Xoxul and I will not go to their place."

In any case, Belalcazar finally organized an expedition in late 1523 and vanished into the jungle. Neither he, nor any of his men, were ever seen again. It would take another 160 years before the Yucatan was at last vanquished by the Spanish.