An American Babylon in the Mexican Republic

Elaq’an chajq
ri ulew, ri che’, ri ja’.
Ri man e k’owinan taj
xa are ri’, ri Nawal.
Man kekuwin ta wa’.

—Humberto Ak’abal, “Elaq’” (Stolen), 1996

In September 1819, as Atwater was describing antiquities in Ohio, François “Juan Francisco” Corroy made his first excursion to see the casas de piedras (stone houses) near the town of Palenque in Chiapas. Corroy—a French physician who had lived in New Spain for almost twenty years—traveled inland over ninety miles from the lowlands of Tabasco to reach the dense cedar and mahogany rainforest concealing the ruins. Readers in Mexico and across the Atlantic world would become more familiar with Palenque’s “stone houses” three years later, when an illustrated translation of Antonio Del Río’s 1787 report would be published in London. But Corroy had already caught a glimpse of the structures in sketches drawn by Luciano Castañeda who, along with Captain Guillermo Dupaix, had stayed with Corroy after the Royal Antiquities Expedition’s visit to Palenque in 1808. In his attempt to capture the French Société de la Géographie prize for information about the place “once inhabited by the Toltecan, or Toltequan nation,” Corroy would ultimately make two more visits to Palenque during his lifetime. In 1833, an article about these efforts appeared in the New York monthly The Knickerbocker. Comprised of Corroy’s letters to Samuel L. Mitchell and other members of New York’s Lyceum of Natural History, the article described an “American Babylon in ruins,” hidden in the jungles of Mexico.

Corroy’s hemispheric correspondence gives a good indication of how widespread Atlantic scholars’ interest in Mexico’s past had become in the early years of Mexican Independence. Once “the rubbish has been cleared away,” wrote
Corroy in 1833, the ruins of Palenque would exhibit “evidences of a nation once existing there.” This past nation, Corroy was certain, had been “composed of Phenicians, Egyptians, Greeks, Asiatics, Arabs, and Chinese,” an Eastern Imperium. Antiquaries in the “Old World” had, at least since the Napoleonic Expeditions in Egypt, increasingly turned their eyes to focus on the Near East. In the 1810s and 1820s, agents of the British East India Company performed excavations at the sites of Babylon, Persepolis, and Ninevah, and their findings accelerated desires that ancient corollaries would be found in the New World. For centuries, European and criollo settlers heard and repeated rumors of ancient civilizations and cities “lost” in the jungle, tales that called soldiers, scholars, and tourists in search of hidden wonders. Indeed, much of the field of archaeology was built around the romantic allure of “ruins” and the narratives of declension they represented.

In the 1820s and 1830s, the Republic of Mexico’s “lost” Maya cities rewarded machete, paintbrush, and imagination. However, as antiquaries like Corroy or readers in the Atlantic world shook their heads at the “overgrown” sites, imagining who might have once lived there, local Indigenous residents were often using them: tending milpas (farm plots), respecting guardian spirits, and conducting renewal ceremonies. Savants’ calls to “clear away”—to discover, preserve, and rebuild—the cities, however, overrode the function that those structures continued to serve for the local communities. For Mexican antiquaries, the allegedly abandoned “wasteland” (“baldío”) recalled Indigenous traditions of ancient calamity and extinction—especially the cycle of Suns—and opened space for a new, “mexicano” civitas to move in, one that was disconnected from the realities of Indigenous sovereignty on the ground.

It was not until the turn of the twenty-first century that archaeologists found a way to see through the foliage without clearing it out. Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR) technology—pulsing laser beams sent from aircraft—has enabled three-dimensional maps of the landscape below the vegetation. With this tool, archaeologists have visualized thousands of Indigenous-made structures otherwise concealed by the jungle. Dramatic headlines—like “Laser maps reveal ‘lost’ Mayan treasure in Guatemala jungle”—regularly feature in mainstream and scientific press venues. In addition to revolutionizing archaeological and conservation work, LiDAR’s visualizations have also revived the discourse of “lost cities,” “hidden treasure,” and the mysteriousness of the American past.

It is no coincidence that the ersatz lost cities of Mexico are usually located in areas least penetrated by state control, places largely outside the capital: the volcanic highlands, coastal lowlands, and subtropical basins. These are regions
occupied, in the majority, by various Indigenous communities, the largest
groups of which are Maya. Before the twentieth century, “Maya” people rarely
identified as such, instead referring to themselves by language, lineage, loca-
tion, or in other ways; indeed, settlers frequently referred to “Maya” people by
region (i.e., “Chippinianese” from Chiapas) or polity (e.g., K’iche’) in the Spanish
colonial period. Even today, most “Maya” do not employ the term, although
it has picked up significance in Indigenous advocacy circles in the last quarter
century. The word is used much more frequently by archaeologists, the Mexi-
can government, and by the state-supported “Rivera Maya” tourism industry.
The continued visualization of these spaces as “lost”—or even as “Maya”—is
built on centuries-long histories of land and identity struggles that persist in
Mexico today.

For the most part, early national politicians and letrados of Mexico City knew
very little about Maya history. What they did know was largely centered on apoc-
ryphal narratives originating with Palenque, which they were always describing
as “mysterious” or “hieroglyphic” (as in secret or hidden). I gloss that sense of
secrecy and concealment as the “glyphic” aspect of ancient American history.
Shortened from the word “hieroglyphic”—which in the nineteenth century par-
ticularly referenced Mayan as well as Egyptian iconic writing—“glyphic” draws
from the Early Modern understanding of Egyptian script as mysterious, hidden,
or “secret knowledge.” In Mexico, “glyph” became an indeterminately Indige-
nous index that always pointed to the past and usually indicated outsiders’ imag-
inative interpretations of those pasts. The early Mexican identity, built upon the
discourse of “ancient Mexican cities”—as emblematized by the “glyph”—was a
tool of erasure and depopulation for the newly independent settler nation.

European and US scholars were attracted to the Maya past because it seemed
to confirm transatlantic migratory models of history, and the “lost cities” theme
operated similarly to that of archaeological stratiology, exchanging dirt for fol-
liage. Both visualized hidden yet distinct layers of history. That is to say, the
discourse of “lost cities” itself implies disconnection: founded by a people not
linked—racially, relationally, culturally—to the people now living in the re-
gion. Mexicans, however, initially resisted incorporating Maya pasts into their
national history because they did not confirm the migration hypotheses elabo-
rated in the eighteenth century: descent from Aztlán. Indeed, Maya traditional
teachings tend to emphasize autochthony rather than movement, which was less
aligned with the political goals of americanos and mexicanos.

Foreigners were especially interested in Maya sites because of their locations
on the periphery of the Mexican nation, where they could operate under the
least surveillance. The US writer-diplomat-archaeologist John Lloyd Stephens described his 1839 visit to Palenque—which he knew was prohibited—as only possible because fighting on the Guatemalan border and Indigenous uprisings in nearby Tabasco, Campeche, and Yucatán had not left “any spare soldiers to station there as a guard” to keep him out.19 In his 1841 travel narrative, Stephens recalled his time in Palenque, writing that its ruins were “the first which awakened attention to the existence of ancient and unknown cities in America.”20 Other foreign travelers also concentrated on the “overgrown” areas where national control was weakest, explaining their almost singular focus on Chiapas and the Yucatán in the 1830s and 1840s.

In the 1950s, Mexican historian Juan A. Ortega y Medina argued that Stephens and those who followed him deployed Maya archaeological material from the Yucatán to create a monolithic “Indian” past in support of a US hemispheric imperialism he called “Monroísmo arqueológico.”21 More recently, literary scholar Robert Aguirre argued that nineteenth-century archaeology in Mexico and Central America—and the way it represented current-day Indigenous peoples as “hopelessly backward and unknowable”—was an important arm of British “informal” power in Latin America.22 Adventuring for “hidden treasure” and “lost cities” in verdant “jungle” landscapes is practically canonical in archaeological history, although in the main the scholarship has focused on the ways in which an American archeological past—construct of the United States and Europe—aided the fiscal and political domination of Mexico.23 Yet although foreigners often articulated the myths of lost (and found) cities and civilizations—especially Maya ones—the discourse was first produced by nineteenth-century Mexicans as a crucial component of national consolidation.24

In the mid-nineteenth-century United States, figurations of an imaginary “Aztec” past were used to rationalize the invasion of Mexico and legitimate continental Indigenous displacement; but before this, those histories had already been used in Mexico to justify displacing or occupying Indigenous communities, especially those resistant to Mexican national rule. In 1820s and 1830s Mexico, the past represented by visualizations of Palenque emerged as a powerful tool of national consolidation, pushing the country’s identity southward (toward Guatemala) and westward (into Campeche and the Yucatán), rather than northward to the “barbarous” lands of Téjas, Nuevo México, and Alta California. National policies kept these southern and western territories within the central pull of the federal capital by attacking the Indigenous social structures that depended on specific relationships to place. This was not programmatic
extermination but was instead based on eviction and acculturation. That is, the Mexican state prioritized dislocating Indigenous populations in terms of political as well as cultural difference. Support for the “lost cities” mythology—not dissimilar to the Moundbuilder myth in the United States—thereby disconnected current-day, usually Maya, Indigenous peoples from the lands and legacies of their ancestors. Ancient cities were both imaginatively and literally depopulated of Indigenous lives in order to create space—real and imaginative—for new Mexican citizens.

Mexican anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla once argued that the early national emphasis on Mexica—and eventually Maya—histories promoted an “imaginary Mexico” by ignoring the realities and heterogeneity of Indigenous groups. In this way, a Euro-American (white or mestizo) “mexicano” identity—produced via the central government’s capital, land-owning, and cultural incentives that prioritized a white (i.e., American and European) settler indigeneity—simultaneously “de-Indianized”—to also use Bonfil Batalla’s term—Mexica and Maya ancestors.

Mexico’s official “imaginary” Indigenous identity that took shape after the war with Spain not only manifested the ideological rupture but was itself an active instrument of Indigenous peoples’ dispossession, erasure, and replacement. By adapting “rupture” or “displacement” narratives from the United States (i.e., no continuity of Indigenous communities over time), mexicanos become the imaginary inheritors of México-Tenochtitlan. This chapter considers the ways that (non-Indigenous) Mexicans—in the face of considerable imperial threats during the Republic’s early years and grappling with significant internal political, economic, and demographic changes—produced an imaginary “mexicano” past to strengthen their own hold on Mexico’s lands, resources, and peoples. I connect the legacy of “lost city” visuality to the first Mexican Republic’s concerted efforts at de-Indigenization (desindianizar).

The political contexts within which nineteenth-century “Mexicanness” was produced and circulated reveal its role in cohering the settler citizenry. As the nation’s elites—most formerly criollos-americanos—found themselves at the pinnacle rather than penultimate level of social hierarchy, their imagination of Mexicanness underwent the process of blanqueamiento (whitening), which in turn undergirded early national demographic and power shifts. The invention of a civic, racially-unmarked mexicano (Mexican) cultural identity in the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s—a precursor to the twentieth century’s raza cosmica—was expurgatory and even genocidal to real Indigenous peoples, who were largely considered obstacles to republican national unity.
Nationalizing Ethnic Landscapes

Like their eighteenth-century counterparts, americanos of the early nineteenth century drew freely from Nahua—largely Mexica—histories to create their “mexicano” inheritance. When the autonomist americano Fray José Servando Teresa de Mier, in exile during the Independence struggle, glossed New Spain as “formerly Anáhuac” in the title of his *Historia de la revolución de Nueva España, antiguamente Anáhuac* (1813), he was emphasizing that the Spanish had merely renamed an enduring former polity. In 1821, Fray Servando exhorted his “Anáhuacan countrymen” to honor their country’s past by writing “Mexico” with an “x” rather than the Hispanicized “j,” and more generally to “protest the suppression of the x in the Mexican or Aztec place names.” Preserving an orthography matching the original pronunciation—“the Indians do not say anything other than Mescico”—would help perpetuate an Indigenous, rather than Spanish, lineage for their new patria. Historian Benjamin Keen has called this imagined continuity of independent Mexico and imperial Tenochtitlan the “revival of Anáhuac.”

When the insurgent leader José María Morelos convened the Congress of Chilpancingo—also known as the Congress of Anáhuac—in September 1813, he detailed the transfer of sovereignty to the People, acknowledged the supremacy of Catholicism, and affirmed the inviolability of property. He proclaimed: “We are about to re-establish the Mexican Empire [el imperio Mexicano].” Links between the original imperio mexicano (1428–1521) and the short-lived Imperio Mexicano (1821–1823) were most obvious, but the invocations continued into the federal Republic (1824–1835). During those years, the elites in charge—especially the Federalist politician Lucas Alamán and Centralist Carlos María de Bustamante—also drew on the Mexica past regardless of political faction, both supporting projects to increase Anáhuacan patriotism through increasing the public’s knowledge of Mexican antiquity.

Although the protection of landed property was long at the center of the movement for a new Mexican state, it was frequently hidden by this rhetoric of imperial antiquity. It is crucial to recall, however, that Anáhuac references territory not just temporality. Evoking the lands where the first Nahua families finally settled, “Anáhuac” not only indexes their migration history but also places Mexico in a specific, prophesized locale. Its Nahuatl name—“surrounded by water”—not only signals the five lakes of the altiplano where the Mexica and others settled—Lakes Texcoco, Zumpango, Xaltocán, Xochimilco, and Chalco—but also the waters of Aztlán and the oceans around the Mexican
Thus not just a synonym for the “Valley of Mexico” or even “New Spain,” this term linked directly to Indigenous territory and the precedent of Nahua settlement.

Like “Anáhuac,” the so-called “tierras mayas” (Maya lands)—as both a specific region and an abstract foil to Mexico’s Nahua center—have deep roots running to the imaginative and political management of territory. Unlike well-rehearsed Mexica history, however, little Maya history had circulated outside Chiapas and the Yucatán by the outbreak of the Mexican War for Independence in 1810. Partly, this was because the lands on which Maya peoples live, even in the nineteenth century, are relatively removed from the nation’s center. Furthermore, these peripheries were not rich in the gold and silver initially pursued by the Spanish invaders. (However, the settlers soon found that the lands were rich in space for cash crops and people for forced labor.) For this among other reasons, most non-Indigenous Mexicans in the 1820s continued to identify almost every aspect of Indigenous history and material culture as “Mexican” despite ample evidence that Nahua was not the only Indigenous group or history around.

It was not until the 1830s that outsiders began to recognize the Mexica-Maya division that had already been in use locally for centuries. Although the commonplace that “Maya civilization” was “discovered” in the nineteenth century was developed particularly through the exploits John Lloyd Stephens, “Maya” identity was merely “invented” then for the rest of the world. In the early colonial period, the categories “Maya” and “Mexican” were spatial shorthand designating Indigenous populations by region: *mexicanos* lived west of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec while *mayas* lived east and south, even though many other Indigenous groups live within this geographical stretch as well. Initially, “Maya” mainly applied to peoples living in the Yucatán, but this was eventually extended to other Mayan-language speakers in the highlands (e.g., Chiapas, Petén).

When Cortés and his assigns—who first disembarked on Maya lands and negotiated with Maya peoples—eventually asserted Spanish authority, it was through Nahua (mainly Mexica and Tlaxalteca) and Otomí force. Their subjugation of Maya highlanders in the 1520s even retraced some of the roads tread—and kingdoms vanquished—by the Triple Alliance. Results of the Spanish invasion included immense loss of life, many Mayas sent into slavery, the destruction of cities, villages, and agricultural fields, and the creation of large numbers of refugees. Many lowland Mayas left their ancestral seats in the Yucatán and fled to the Selva Lacandona (Lakandon Jungle), which stretches across the lower Yucatán, middle of Chiapas, Guatemala, and Honduras. In the
mid-sixteenth century, Dominicans pursued a policy of reducción (congregation), in which they rounded up disparate Indigenous converts and relocated them to new parish towns. The Spanish village of Santo Domingo de Palenque, for example, was founded in 1567 on Tzeltal and Ch’ol Maya lands to evangelize displaced Ch’ol families. By the end of the seventeenth century, after long and punishing campaigns of conquest—in which Maya peoples were subject to torture, murder, and other violence causing many to flee and thus changing the demography and ecology of the whole region—the Spanish proclaimed their control over the Maya lands and peoples.41

The ways in which “Maya lands” and “Maya” identity came to have meaning for the Spanish were deeply implicated in Indigenous conceptions of the past. Indeed, long before the Triple Alliance asserted its power to the southeast, Nahua and Maya peoples had interacted—through trade, kinship, war, and the exchange of ideas—for hundreds of years. By the time of Teotihuacan’s dominance in central Mexico—c. 1–500 CE—Mayas were adopting Nahuatl loan words and adapting aspects of Teotihuacano material culture such as chacmool basins and tzompantli (skull racks). Likely this exchange accounts for the commonality of feathered serpents—embodied by Kukulcán, Qu’umatz, and Quetzalcoatl—across Mexica and Maya regions.42 By the time the Spanish arrived, almost all the other Maya nobles, including those in the southeastern highlands, were marking these connections to Tolteca, Teotihuacano, and other pasts.43

In their campaigns for dominance, Spanish settlers adopted some of the chauvinism of their Nahua mercenaries. They learned, for example, that Nahuas considered Mayan speakers inferior: in the manuscript created under the direction of Fray Sahagún in the 1570s, the Florentine Codex, the scribes reported that elders called people from the Yucatán Peninsula nonouacat, the speechless.44 Malinzin, Cortés’s consort and interpreter—who had been purchased by Chontal Mayas and knew Yucatec Mayan as well—likely shared her own views as a cultural broker.45 Nahua soldiers also told stories of the “lost city” of Mayapán, the twelfth-century power center of northwest Yucatán said to have been founded by the feathered serpent deity K’uk’ul’kan and Itzá ancestors after the fall of Chichén Itzá. The Spanish misappropriated the city’s name and the language spoken there—maaya t’aan—to refer to all the region’s people.46 Mayapán, in fact, was an important Toltec-Maya link that brought Maya and Nahua worlds together, although the Spanish had no real sense of this when they extended the “Maya” identity to all lowland and highland Mayan-speaking peoples and the places they lived.
Writing (Out) Maya Lands

To stamp out traditional Maya ways of life, the Spanish destroyed countless votive entities—including stone deities, World Tree effigies, and stone mounds—as well as “ancient paintings” or the bark-and-lime screenfold books inscribed in a phonetic and logographic script that settlers later called “hieroglyphics.” The systematic devastation continued until at least the late seventeenth century: in 1690, for example, the Dominican friar Francisco Núñez de la Vega recalled ordering one particularly “dangerous” manuscript to be burned. Today there are no highland Maya texts dating before the Spanish invasion (known to the general public) and only four from the Yucatán. This process of cultural extermination was called “conquista pacífica” to disguise and distinguish it from other forms of violence against Indigenous peoples. During those years, Maya individuals and communities guarded their ancient documents. Some Spanish priests even complained about their “secretiveness,” all the while actively trying to root out the “devil”—traditional belief systems—in the communities they occupied.

Some Dominicans—whose order was founded to counter heresy and was in charge of the Inquisition—also attempted to document local histories: like their Franciscan counterparts in México, Dominicans worked with Christian Maya nobles to compile grammars and books of cosmology as well as to translate Catholic religious texts into local languages. Due to the missionaries’ presence, Maya leaders—who like their Nahua counterparts were looking to preserve their previous standing—gained familiarity with Spanish and a new alphabetic script and were thus—also like the Nahua caciques—able to protest land seizures, unjust levies, and other abuses in colonial courts. They also produced documents to substantiate land claims—such as the Título de Totonicapán, created by Diego Reynoso in 1554—and tribute rights, some of which ended up in the Dominicans’ collections as well. Also in the 1550s, a selection of widely memorized sacred histories were set to paper in alphabetic K’iche’ by three anonymous authors. A century and a half later the Dominican friar Francisco Ximénez copied this manuscript, now called the Popul Vuh, and stored it among the other Indigenous documents amassed by the black-robed Preachers.

At about the same time, Núñez de la Vega wrote that, as part of his Inquisition duties, he assembled “history booklets written in the Indian language,” “painted blankets,” calendars, and interrogation reports of “suspected nagualistas” or Chiapan “shapeshifters.” When Núñez de la Vega, who was bishop of Chiapas, read the Popul Vuh manuscript, one of the aspects that most interested
him was its account of the voyage made by the K’iche’ founders—the “Aj Tolte-
cat” (Toltecs)—to visit their Nahua brothers at “Tulan,” where these ancestors
established the K’iche’ lineage and received their patron deities. Combining
his previous research with biblical teachings and population hypotheses, Núñez
de la Vega deduced that this was an account of Adamic descendants who had
settled in Maya lands after the Flood, perhaps in the deep “selva” (jungle) of
Chiapas. He even went so far as to identify a Tzeltal (batzíl’op) Maya deity,
Votán—whom he claimed had witnessed the fall of the Tower of Babel—as No-
ah’s nephew. Although considerably more interested in eradicating evil than in
understanding the K’iche’ writings, Núñez de la Vega bequeathed his successors
an enduring image of an Old World colony hidden somewhere in the dense rain-
forest homeland of the Lakandon Maya.

In 1773, when Chiapan guides led Friar Ramón Ordóñez y Aguiar to see the
rumored casas de piedras in the jungle—in a location that “the succession of
many centuries has erased from man’s memory”—Núñez de la Vega’s ideas resur-
faced. Ordóñez compiled all he could to explain the ruins, including a Tzeltal
Maya lineage for Votán and the Popol Vuh, which he translated from K’iche’
into Spanish in 1796. Although the collected writings describe genealogies
and deities—such as Q’uq’umatz, who helped to create humans out of maize—as
well as cycles of destruction and rebirth—like Núñez de la Vega before him—
Ordóñez focused most intently on supporting his conviction that Votán’s ances-
try proved the correspondence of American and biblical chronologies. In 1794
Paul Félix Cabrera in Guatemala City claimed that Palenque was the capital of
“Amaguemecan,” the alleged Toltec homeland, which apparently was also called
Anáhuac. Cabrera also drew on Núñez de la Vega, Ordóñez, Ximénez’s Popol Vul,
Del Río’s 1787 report, and Clavijero to solve “the Grand Historical Prob-
lem” of America’s original peopling. All of this work was done to account for
the same casas de piedras that Captain Guillermo Dupaix in 1807 attributed to
a race of men unknown to ancient or modern historians.

“Discovering” the Stone Houses

The allegedly unknown peoples’ stone houses were located about five miles out-
side the Spanish village of Santo Domingo de Palenque, at the site of the pow-
erful former “city-state” now also called Palenque. Palenque had been founded
by the ajaw (lord) K’uk’ Bahlam I (reign 431–435 CE) and expanded under
ajaw K’inich Kan Bahlam II (reign 684–702 CE). At the instigation of the
latter, three large talud-tablero-style stone pyramids topped with temples were
constructed at the site; inside, basalt blocks carved in relief depicted Palenque’s dominant histories and teachings, including portraits and ancestral lineages that linked K’inich Kan Bahlam to the era of creation and Palenque’s patron deities. One particularly notable set of carvings there, now referred to as the “Cross Group,” depicts not a Christian symbol but more probably a World Tree, representing the axis of Earth and Sky. After war and defeat to a rival city-state, Palenque declined; by the tenth century the former ruling line’s adherents had largely abandoned it. Although the site did not regain its influential political power or cultural reach, Maya individuals continued to live in and around old Palenque, using the land for maize milpas and structures for ceremony.

When Ordóñez reported his “discovery” of the stone houses in the 1770s a notice made its way into the hands of Royal Historian Juan Bautiza Muñoz who spread word of the “large city in Chiapas” in Spain. The Crown deemed the news sufficiently important to order official explorations, of which there were three (1784, 1785, and 1787) in rapid succession. The 1787 visit was conducted by criollo soldier Captain Antonio Del Río, who forwarded copies of his report to officials in Guatemala City and Madrid that year. These included a sketch of the “Cross Group,” which he described as pertaining to the “idolatry of the Phoenicians, the Greeks, and the Romans.”

The place Ordóñez “discovered” (after having been led there by Maya guides) was far from forgotten: on the third Royal expedition Del Río had even commandeered seventy-nine Maya laborers from the nearby village of Tumbala to guide him and clear the site—stripping and burning the brush—and to break off samples of the stone architecture for the Royal Cabinet. For various reasons, the Crown did not send another expedition to Palenque until Dupaix and Castañeda visited as part of the Royal Antiquities Expedition. And with the outbreak of war in Europe—and Dupaix’s arrest as a supposed revolutionary—their reports and drawings remained in America, “forgotten” for another decade.

At the end of the Spanish era, Spanish and criollo scholars mapped information about Palenque and its peoples onto their existing interest in American origins. The suggestion that Maya peoples may have had ties to the Holy Land or ancient empires of North Africa gave the Americas a place within universal Christian history. And if Palenque’s supposed old-world origins indicated to criollos-americanos an initial transatlantic Indigenous population, that same history later proved to nationalist Mexicans that the continent’s past was rooted in a Europeanized “Toltec” heritage. As in the United States, this belief viti- ated contemporary Indigenous claims of American aboriginality. Moreover, the
specific Toltec-Palenque connection would be elaborated contemporaneously by Benjamin Smith Barton and Baron von Humboldt, then later repeated by people like Corroy in the 1830s. But it was not until well after Mexico became a Republic that Palenque’s stone houses again found an important place in Mexico’s historical discourse. During the Revolution and its aftermath, nationalists kept their attention on the “Aztec race.”

That Spanish knowledge of Palenque was enabled by the violent displacement of Maya families farther into the Lakandon Jungle—likely also a factor that kept the casas de piedras’ location largely unknown to the Spanish for two centuries—meant that understanding Maya history depended on understanding the difference between ancient and current Palenqueños in terms of colonialism. Spanish observers, however, took the difference as evidence of a lost colony. Their descriptions of it as such went far to enable the dismissal of contemporary residents’ cultural and historic ties.

Uniting Anáhuac and Teaching Patriotism

Despite Mexico’s new geographic unity after Independence, the country was otherwise politically fractured: partisan disagreements over the role of federal, state, and municipal governments, an economy on the verge of collapse, destroyed infrastructure, and a population exposed to epidemics and hunger created an environment of hardship and instability. Historian David Brading describes the earlier independence period as one determined by the deep ideological fissures of creole patriotism, insurgent nationalism, and liberal republicanism. One of the deepest splits was between those who favored a centralized versus a federal (individual state-based) government, although their shared ideological commitment to the settler nation usually transcended faction. There were also dissident actors with no interest in a united Mexico, among these guerilla bands in the central plateau’s mountainous peripheries and Yaqui and Mayo defenders in Sonora. Powerful caciques and wealthy merchants in the South and Southeast also threatened succession, and a constant state of quasi-war with Spain—Mexican independence was not officially recognized until 1836—as well as the prospect of invasion from France and the United States and defections to Central America made for a precarious confederation.

Independence posed the challenge of creating a new national people from a patchwork fabric of castas, white, and Indigenous identities. The politically powerful tended to come from the army and landowning classes, usually wealthy whites (formerly criollos) and elite mestizos. Castas and Indigenous
peoples—like the insurgents José Morelos and Vicente Guerrero—were hardly in the majority; and the few Indigenous politicians there usually maintained ties to the elite cacique class, whose politics were often at odds with those of the “masses.” The interests of the rural and Indigenous peoples calling for land reform and respect for pueblo autonomy—one of the major desires motivating Father Miguel Hidalgo’s supporters in 1810—were also generally underrepresented in formulations of Mexico’s, and Mexicans’, future.

At least a tenth of the colonial population perished during the war with Spain and much of the colonial infrastructure that supported the population—roads, aqueducts, mills, haciendas, etc.—was destroyed. In a post-war attempt to recover its decimated finances, the Republic continued the practice of encouraging foreign investment by specifically allowing for joint Mexican-foreign holdings. Britain particularly made a concerted political effort to involve itself in the recently opened markets and this was encouraged by government officials like Lucas Alamán. From a mining family himself, Alamán believed that mining was crucial to the economy. Yet while this courting of foreign capital stimulated the economy, it all placed Mexico in a delicate relationship with predatory investors and resulted in a sizeable—and potentially seditious—foreign population. Furthermore it opened Mexico to other kinds of predation: the United States, which recognized Mexican independence in 1822, concentrated less on encouraging (or regulating) private investment by its own citizens and more on exploiting its neighbor’s weakened position to angle for territory along the US southern border. It looked to Mexico’s lands (and to the Mexican polity) much as it had to other lands in the “west”: as underutilized wasteland to be made productive under the stars and stripes. Thus Mexican officials were well aware of their nation’s tenuous hold on the extractive industries of mining, manufacture, and agriculture and the importance of maintaining muscular control of the territory.

During the war, much of the demolition came at the hands of Indigenous and underclass insurgents looking for reform. Indeed, the populist insurgency that led to Mexican independence had originally been motivated by the severe inequality of the Spanish colonial era, during which much of New Spain’s economy had been powered by the extraction of mineral wealth and the export of crops such as cochineal, sisal, and Campeche wood. All of these industries were labor-heavy and depended on the colonial labor structure of the encomienda and hacienda systems.

As Spain’s colonial wealth had come from Indigenous peoples and their lands, the new nation’s plans for an independent economy depended on Indigenous “resources” as well. Initially, wealth would be generated through the sell-off of
communal land holdings, the civic transformation of displaced “indios” into laboring “campesinos” (peasants), and the reintroduction of taxation requirements. However, a series of droughts and famines as well as falling population and the casualties of war led to labor shortages in the countryside. For Indigenous communities in particular, the reduction of communal land holdings and changes to the traditional tribute structure left many—especially those in decentralized areas such as Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Yucatán—in dire straits. To survive, the newly “landless” were forced to work on haciendas and silver mines for wages rather than support themselves from the commons. But as the market contracted during and after the war—and especially the valuable cochineal market—and credit evaporated, Indigenous workers had to work for subsistence, not trade (their own or others’). Unable to find dayworkers for their plantations, the ruling-class-aligned merchants, lenders, and hacendados blamed the economic instability and inequality not on the war or market but on “Indian idleness.”

In 1824 José María Luis Mora—the early Republic’s representative to Congress from Mexico state—was so convinced that the solution to the nation’s economic and political instability was Indigenous assimilation that he asked Congress to eliminate the very word “indio” from its legal vocabulary.

If the politicians, hacendados, and capitalinos thought that the widespread poverty was due to cultural “backwardness,” Euro-American visitors overwhelmingly attributed it to racialized traits. Largely barred from New Spain during the colonial era, foreign investors began traveling to Mexico en masse after 1821, especially encouraged by Humboldt’s glowing—but outdated—words and the independent nation’s market incentives. During the 1820s, foreigners consistently commented on the nation’s poverty. The anonymous author of A Sketch of Customs and Society in Mexico, During the Years 1824, 1825, 1826 (1828), for example, noted the “strange mixture of squalor combined with luxury” that marked Mexico City homes. William Bullock—an English silversmith and museum proprietor who traveled to Mexico in 1823 to take over the abandoned Del Bada silver mine but who only stayed for six months—contrasted the “poverty of the present Mexicans and the wealth of their ancestors.” Visitors also spread unflattering descriptions of Indigenous peoples in their portrayals of Mexican life. Although commentators foreign and domestic seemed to trace the nation’s ills to its Indigenous communities, few connected their immiseration to Mexican politician’s attempts at “solving” the “problem” of Indigenous particularity.

Like the Spanish Constitution of 1812, the Mexican Constitution of 1824 assumed the republican ideal that all citizens were equal and subject to the same laws. This was a de facto repudiation of the Laws of the Indies, whereby
Indigenous subjects of the Crown were endowed a different set of legal rights than those held by Spanish subjects. With these separate “rights”—which included separate political representation, some degree of self-government through the cacicazgo system, and the right of semi-autonomous pueblos to hold land in common (ejidos)—also came the responsibility to pay annual tribute and the inability to assume debt or participate in certain commercial transactions.\textsuperscript{97} Certain Mexicans saw this separate set of laws as discriminatory; most non-Indigenous politicians agreed that they were damaging to the assimilationist goals of the nation. Doing away with the legal separation, as Representative Mora put it, would “hasten the fusion of the Aztec race with the general body of citizens.”\textsuperscript{98} Thus Mora, on one side, believed that the answer was to set “the white race”—rather than the Indigenous one—as “the concept that must shape the Republic.”\textsuperscript{99} On the other side, supporters of the Indigenous populations saw land redistribution as a form of ancestral restitution, although the more revolutionary calls for reform were thought to be redolent of race or caste war.\textsuperscript{100} The problem of poverty began to be seen more and more as a characteristic intrinsic to Indigenous Mexicans and therefore one only “solvable” via “whitening”—in both physiognomic and cultural terms—and assimilation into the Republic.\textsuperscript{101}

The early national politicians intent on transforming Indigenous peoples into capitalist workers and consumers were also operating under the assumption that if Indigenous Mexicans would disavow their traditional “usos y costumbres” (uses and customs), they would “mexicanizar” (become Mexican), which is to say, whiten.\textsuperscript{102} According to eighteenth-century theories of racial degeneration it took at least three generations of “crossing” to “improve the race.”\textsuperscript{103} The early Republic’s leaders were looking for a more rapid solution: they found it in dislocation and deterritorialization.

“Improving the Race” to Secure the Nation

The Mexican Republic did not just occupy the footprint of New Spain: its lands stretched from the southeastern border with Guatemala north to the United States and the Oregon Territory. But these borders were not stable. When Guatemala broke away from the Mexican Empire in 1823, the neighboring region of Chiapas followed. The minority community of criollo elite in Chiapas overwhelmingly expressed their desire for Mexican annexation, believing Chiapas would do better with economic ties to Mexico City. They were also swayed by concerns over Guatemala’s supposed inability to control “Indian insurrection.”\textsuperscript{104} A month before the 1824 Constitution was promulgated, the Chiapas
region—formerly part of the Kingdom of Guatemala—was annexed to Mexico and admitted as a “Free and Sovereign State.” The new Constitution reserved for the General Congress the right to add or consolidate new states and territories, regulate borders, and maintain the peace both inside and outside national boundaries. Mexico’s central government stationed military forces in Chiapas for three years in order to enforce the border and help with the region’s “Mexicanization,” which in this case meant both pacification and integration into the central economy. Yet even after annexation and military occupation, these Maya lands remained peripheral to the nation.  

At the end of the colonial period, Spain had still been recruiting Indigenous and Euro-American settlers to its northern borderlands, particularly those that became the state of Coahuila y Tejas, as a form of imperial occupation. In early 1821, lead-magnate Moses Austin was granted land on which to settle three hundred US families, a plan fulfilled by his son Stephen in 1825. In terms of its reach into the Indigenous lands of what Mexico imagined as its northern frontier—“La Gran Chichimeca,” as it had been called in colonial times—Mexico had inherited New Spain’s spatial imaginary, as well as its system of border diplomacy. During the war for independence, however, Spanish forces had been unable to uphold their diplomatic relations with northern Indigenous groups—especially Apache groups—and thus independent Mexico found itself with a particularly uncertain borderland. The Republic struggled to maintain control over the northern lands it claimed, especially Sonora y Sinaloa, the Californias, and Coahuila y Tejas.  

Although some Mexican leaders such as Lorenzo de Zavala looked at US and European colonists as New Spain had—as salubrious influences—others, like Lucas Alamán, were not so sure. Under the Mexican Empire, this problem had been addressed by a law explicitly requiring immigrants to become Catholic and only provided naturalization upon marriage to a Mexican citizen. This was supposed to guarantee that Anglo settlers in Tejas would remain loyal to Mexico and to “Latin” (i.e., Roman Catholic) culture. The point was for Hispanicized white settlers to serve as a buffer to the United States and to absorb conflicts with Indigenous groups—mainly Apaches and Comanches—along the northern border. In 1822, Mexican diplomat and Tejas colonization enthusiast Simón Tadeo Ortíz wrote of the disturbing violence on the borderlands and his concern for the “integrity of the national territory,” warning that the north risked “being lost if there is not a change in the system.” The next year, Foreign Minister Lucas Alamán specifically addressed the necessity of “calming” the “barbarous tribes” then “infesting our northern borders,” recommending a reenergized
federal militia along the northern presidial line. A strengthened missionary presence, he also predicted, would “civilize and establish a more peaceful kind of life” and help residents in the north become “useful members of our Nation.” Additionally, concerns about the border increased immigration as a technique of national security, for colonization schemes were punitive and militarily strategic as well. After the Yaqui uprising in Sonora (1825–1832), for example, the governor of Occidente issued tax incentives to promote white settlement among the Yoeme (Yaquis), whose common lands the government privatized. White colonization was explicitly meant as a technique for addressing the ongoing violence between settlers and Indigenous peoples in the borderlands, not dissimilar from New Spain’s policy of settling “friendly” Nahuas on its frontiers in the sixteenth century.

The 1824 General Colonization Law also established new rules for territory that the national government termed “wasteland,” enticing colonists with promises of guaranteed land grants. This followed Alamán’s suggestion of the previous year, in which he advocated for the distribution of Indigenous lands (“freed” as a result of missionary reducciones) so as to establish emigrant colonies. Yet Mexico’s officials were suspicious of pockets of foreigners such as those forming in the central mining towns; thus, the new law also placed an encomium on Mexicanization. Moreover, the 1824 law also prioritized internal colonization; that is to say, it encouraged the movement of (Hispanicized) Indigenous groups and other Mexicans from central Mexico to the peripheries. It aimed at incorporating these peripheral lands and residents—especially Indigenous residents—into the larger “Mexican family.”

Possessing Patrimony as Mexico’s Property

As another technique of national security and unity, Republican nationalists prioritized an Anáhuacan “Mexican” identity. This homogenized, common civic identity they invented drew from previous iterations of an idealized Tenochca-Mexica past, which they took pains to teach to Mexico’s non-Indigenous citizens. But Indigenous citizens, believed Foreign Minister Lucas Alamán, needed a different kind of education to “de-Indigenize” them (“desindianizarlos”) before they would be receptive to civic instruction: first, they required lessons focused on the idealization of a white European cultural—and private property—base.

When Alamán returned to Mexico after spending much of the war away on the “grand tour” of Europe—visiting the great museums of Madrid, Paris, and
London—one of his early actions was to survey the nation’s cultural and scientific institutions.\textsuperscript{118} After an inventory of the remaining Boturini materials, he learned that many of the famous documents—including the \textit{Codex Boturini}—were gone; those that remained were deteriorating.\textsuperscript{119} In his initial speech to Congress in 1823, Minister Alamán revealed that “many very valuable monuments of Mexican antiquities have disappeared,” and he urged the legislators to take action.\textsuperscript{120} He proposed a National Museum, a model for which letrado Isidro Rafael Gondra had already established as the small Museo de Antigüedades in the library of the university.\textsuperscript{121} A space to educate and cohere the national citizenry, the National Museum of Mexico would become a site to inculcate a new, civic “mexicanidad” while also sideling past and present Indigenous political particularity by transforming Indigenous items, places, and peoples into entirely historic objects of national instruction. In a sign of Mexico’s continuing commitment to the past—even as the city faced an uncertain future—Alamán’s plan to found a national antiquities museum was eventually approved by President Guadalupe Victoria in 1825.

Of the two projects meant to mark the establishment of the National Museum in the 1820s—a catalog as well as a longer publishing project—both were based on the contention that Mexican citizenship and mexicanidad could be taught. In 1823 Alamán had also recommended the new government establish a system of public instruction—from primary school to university—and open public reading rooms.\textsuperscript{122} He advised Congress to retain the collection of Classical statues and drawings at the shuttered Academia de San Carlos de las Nobles Artes—“which had been the font of good taste in our Nation”—and to send young Mexican artists to Rome for further training. A national museum, library, and archives would be connected to the revitalized hospital and botanical garden to create a nucleus of learning.\textsuperscript{123} This centralized venue would provide visual examples of “good” (i.e., European) taste as well as the curriculum for producing a free, liberal, and united Mexican citizenry. The former viceregal complex on the Plaza Mayor would become a place in which Mexicans could learn to be Mexicans.\textsuperscript{124}

Installed within the new National Palace, the museum’s very collection would facilitate the nationalists’ narrative of a selectively continuous Indigenous past, one that was disconnected from living aspects of indigeneity in Mexico. It would contain three categories of objects: “Mexican monuments from prior to or contemporary with the Spanish invasion”; “Monuments from ancient people of other continents, and the other American nations”; and “Statues, paintings, hieroglyphics, etc., according to the taste and use of the Indigenous peoples.”\textsuperscript{125}
This collection policy’s insistence on keeping “ancient people” separate from “Indigenous peoples” hints that the museum was expected to serve as a reference for the temporal segregation between “ancient” and “modern” Mexicans. Material would be amassed from locations all across the nation, lending an expansive territorial and cultural vision to the “modern” version of ancient Mexico.

In addition to physical monuments, the museum would also house the “drawings and antiquities of Dupaé [Dupaix] yet to be published.” The pre-eminence that Alamán and others placed on Dupaix’s archive attests to the fact that Mexico was committed to nationalizing all kinds of Crown property, not just Mexica sculpture or mapas. Remarkably, however, the monuments so celebrated in the 1790s hardly figured in the new museum’s plan at all. In fact, Coatlicue would remain buried in the University’s courtyard into the 1830s (although unearthed for Humboldt and Bullock), and the Sun Stone would stay cemented to the Cathedral until 1886. Their omission from the museum project signals that the unifying work of ancient Mexico in the 1820s was wholly distinct from the exceptionalizing work it had performed for turn-of-the-century americanos.

Elite Mexicans like Alamán, who now considered items of Mexican antiquity—“statuary, paintings, hieroglyphs”—as vital to the prosperity of the young Republic, were increasingly concerned about the removal of archaeological objects from Mexico. Although the drain across the Atlantic had begun long before—at least with Cortés’s first shipment to the Hapsburgs—the condition worsened without the patrol of Spain’s navy. For years, Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents had sold notable items—clay figurines, for example, or stone carvings—to “idol men” who then hawked them to more upscale clientele. After the war, the clients were increasingly from overseas. In emphasizing the citizenry’s patriotic duty to protect Mexico’s Indigenous heritage, Alamán’s program also indicated a change in the way antiquities would be valued by the Republic: Indigenous materials were now a part of Mexico’s patrimony, a valuable inheritance from its ancestors. Drawing from what he had learned in Europe—especially France, where the concept of “patrimoine” had been consolidated under Napoleon—Alamán transformed items that had formerly been the property of the Crown into national treasure. That nationalists placed so much importance on formerly Spanish-held Indigenous materials demonstrates the value of Indigenous pasts to the imaginative processes of nation building in the first years of the Mexican Republic. At the same time, it exposes the fact that another competing group of people—namely foreigners—also considered those Indigenous items valuable, although not in patrimonial terms.
Indeed, in the 1820s, foreign arrivals began to sense in ancient Mexico a more lucrative investment opportunity than those presented by the struggling markets of modern Mexico. Moreover, as Spanish subjects left the country during and after the war—some by force—many took their collections of antiquities with them. First, in 1822, an illustrated English translation of Del Río’s 1787 Palenque report was published in London, *Description of the ruins of an ancient city discovered near Palenque, in the Kingdom of Guatemala.* The official report and original sketches—now thirty-five years old—had been spirited away from the Guatemalan archives during the war, stolen in reaction to what the publisher called “the jealousy entertained by that nation [Spain] with regard to their possessions in Mexico.” After learning of these events, an incensed group of citizens in Mexico City unsuccessfully demanded the manuscripts’ return. What is more, the following year it became clear that William Bullock had stolen the precious *Codex Boturini* and taken it to London. He only surrendered the document thanks to Alamán’s intercession. But when Dupaix’s documents and antiquities were sold at auction in 1824—to a French buyer who had outbid the English competition—there was little Mexico’s General Congress could do. Ultimately, however, this export problem lent support to the museum’s establishment.

In a country so divided and insolvent, the thefts and exports were more than just an insult to patriotic spirit: they endangered a key national resource—the past—and challenged the new nation’s jurisdictional reach. Finally, in 1827 Congress passed a law explicitly prohibiting the exportation of “monumentos y antigüedades mexicanas,” along with the export of three other national treasures: gold and silver specie and cochineal bugs. Like Mexico’s major natural resources, Mexico’s nationalists considered monuments and antiquities strategic to the nation’s patriotic strength and political development.

Unfortunately, however, the National Museum itself had few resources to seize, purchase, or relocate antiquities, especially before 1827. As a solution, the museum’s leaders encouraged private citizens to contribute their own collections and deposit any newly uncovered antiquities with government agents. Wealthy capitalinos opened their cabinets and extramuros hacendados ordered Indigenous workers to excavate and transport items to the federal capital. This directive not only concerned the nation’s elite: in 1825, for example, Mexico City’s “honest old plumber” Diego de la Rosa y Landa gave to the museum, among other items, a coiled feathered serpent figure carved of deep green stone. The message both implicitly and explicitly was that all antiquities by right were property of the Republic, a reversal of the doctrine of private
property that the same nationalists contemporaneously preached to Indigenous citizens in communal pueblos. The patriotic donation program worked so well that the director received enough donations in the spring of 1825 to make separate inventories for March, May, and July.\footnote{140}

With its growing collection, in 1825 the Museo Nacional—forerunner of today’s Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia in Chapultepec Park—was opened in a suite of rooms at the nationalized University.\footnote{141} There, the first director Ignacio Cubas—as historian Miruna Achim has summarized—sought to “bring together as many things as possible” as based on eighteenth-century Enlightenment protocols of knowledge-as-domination.\footnote{142} Some of the first items installed were from the defunct Academia de San Carlos, including four Mexica statues recovered in the 1790s from beneath a house of the Mayorazgo de la Mota (these had formerly been housed at the fine arts academy, where they had been seen and sketched by Dupaix in 1794).\footnote{143} Most of the other items came from the university or the former viceroyal secretariat. The new museum contained antiquities as well as documents, engravings and paintings, mineralogical and zoological specimens, mummies, and suits of armor.\footnote{144} The natural history cabinet at the College of Mines—which had consisted “principally of copper and stone adzes, spears, arrow-heads, &c.” as well as much of Dupaix’s antiquities—was also absorbed into the national collection.\footnote{145} To provide for acquisitions, the federal government sent collecting teams alongside military and diplomatic outfits, such as the Comisión de Limites expedition meant to set the border with the United States.\footnote{146} By 1828, Mexico’s prime minister claimed that the museum contained “600 paintings and drawings on the history of indigenous peoples, 200 stone and 400 clay ‘monuments,’ 60 manuscripts, 42 paintings by Mexican artists, 200 kinds of shells and minerals, wood samples, maritime productions, and extraordinary bones.”\footnote{147}

Although some criticized its eccentricity and seeming lack of order, there was a clear nationalist logic behind this diverse collection. Individual contributions from different states visually reinforced the Federalists’ vision of a successful federal union, transcending geographical division.\footnote{148} Another large selection of objects came from as far away as the Isla de Sacrificios in the Gulf and in 1829 officials in Alta California dispatched “a feather-lined tunic . . . an ‘exquisite’ leather belt; the model of a canoe with rowers and huntsman, a harpoon handle, and an impermeable shirt of bear intestine. . . and a bow, strung with nerve fibers, and arrows, used by the Indians of California.”\footnote{149} Combining minerals, shells, fish, and megafaunal bones with paintings, antiquities, and mapas, the National Museum exemplified a composite past for a sprawling country. This
unified heterogeneity was useful in cohering “Mexico” as itself a distinct collection of objects, lands, and peoples. Although for years it would seem to visitors that the National Museum had no real order, in fact it was this *Mexicanizing* effect of its heterogeneous contents, not their arrangement, that was important.\textsuperscript{150}

While the National Museum was presumed to comprise “antigüedades mexicanos,” its actual holdings included items created by many peoples, over many times, from across many regions. Moreover, because most items were recovered from areas surrounding Mexico City, the antiquities were all largely assumed to be Mexica, whether or not that was truly the case. They were functionally, if not *ethnically*, Mexica in the minds of early nationalists. For example, the inventory of two house altars, two clay figurines, a coral amulet, and a carved-agate figure purchased from hacendado Martín Corchado, which were all noted as coming from Santiago Tlatelolco—a formerly Indigenous-only neighborhood of Mexico City and once host to the altepetl’s large market—were likely of Toltec, Zapotec, and Tlatilco artisanry.\textsuperscript{151} The effect is that all Indigenous-made objects were presented as belonging to the same “mexicano” people, a homogenizing transformation by which all antiquities became “Mexican.”\textsuperscript{152}

Despite the government’s attempt to monopolize its antiquities, the anti-exportation laws were notoriously disrespected. Representative Carlos María de Bustamante was so concerned about the ongoing loss of antiquities that in 1829 he proposed and helped pass additional protective legislation.\textsuperscript{153} Yet at times, the federal government facilitated international exchanges.\textsuperscript{154} It is worth considering this antiquities traffic in the context of inter-imperial US-Mexico politics rather than—as it is usually conceived—a struggle between the US and Britain highlighted by the Monroe Doctrine. For President James Monroe did not just warn Europe off the Western hemisphere; his declaration to the emerging republics was that the US would be the hemispheric hegemon. Occasional US-Mexico diplomacy was even performed via antiquities: “in return for manuscripts and idols of little value,” US Minister Joel R. Poinsett gave the National Museum “the attire of natives from New Mexico, an engraving of the American Declaration of Independence, and the portraits of six US presidents.”\textsuperscript{155} In 1825 Monroe had offered to purchase the disputed Sabine-Red River lands and when that offer was rejected, he sent the botanist-diplomat Poinsett back to Mexico City to negotiate a new border treaty.\textsuperscript{156} While this exchange did not settle the border, it did cause some Mexicans to look more favorably on the neighboring settler nation for seemingly recognizing Mexico’s cultural parity.\textsuperscript{157}
Championing Private Property

Originally, the Mexican elite had “envisioned a republic composed of yeoman farmers cultivating small plots of land,” and their debates over national and private property—in terms of real estate—were at the heart of discussions for “modernizing” Mexico. Like their northern neighbor, Mexican elites imagined that their nation’s progress “could only come from the ‘individual interest’ of a numerous class of proprietary farmers.” Centralist liberals—like Fray Servando Teresa de Mier, Carlos María de Bustamente, and Lorenzo de Zavala—pushed a “radical” republican solution that emphasized individual self-interest and centered on the importance of personal property. After spending the years 1829–1831 in exile in the United States, Zavala became particularly impressed by what he saw as the “grand majority of [US] inhabitants [being] landowners,” and he thought the United States provided an apt model for how Mexico might grow to be its own regional power.

The liberals saw the massive plantations (haciendas) and large Church holdings, as well as the pueblos, as obstacles to economic “progress.” But to seize Church funds would require liquidating private collateral (in the form of property) and potentially destabilize an entire swath of mortgage-holding citizens, to which the more conservative representatives objected. Liberals also maintained that the integration of Indigenous farmers into the central market—as producers and consumers—was necessary for an economically healthy new nation. Others, like Alamán, believed the nation needed an independent banking system first. The push for civic equality meant the political specificity of Indigenous ethnicity—although not day-to-day racial discrimination—was erased with the goal of breaking up communal pueblos and encouraging a more self-interested, agrarian citizenry, a compromise that suited them all. But in order to create a united citizenry of farmers, Mexico first had to remove the farmers already there.

To advance their agenda, Congress passed a series of land reform laws from 1826 to 1832 that focused on parceling out communal landholdings, a process called “desmortización” (confiscation). These reforms gave the state the right to break up ejidos as well as to market “terrenos baldíos” (wastelands)—where Indigenous individuals often lived without colonially sanctioned title—to private landowners. For the right to continue working their milpas, Indigenous individuals—who eventually became known as “baldíos” themselves—owed rent or labor to the new owners. In addition, in 1827 Congress passed an
anti-vagrancy “Servitude Law,” allowing for “vagrants”—i.e., adults “without steady employment”—to be pressed into labor contracts or conscripted into the military. As a result, many Indigenous residents not only lost their lands but also found themselves in conditions of servitude either as baldíos or soldiers for an unforeseeable period of time.

Nationalists saw the more peripheral areas like the Yucatán, Chiapas, and the south (i.e., Oaxaca, Guerrero, parts of Veracruz, and southern Puebla state) as a challenge to their unifying project because those lands remained majority Indigenous. For years, the nation would attempt to change the demographics of all these areas, pulling them closer to the center and attempting to integrate their resources into the Mexican economy. In response, individual states enacted desmortización legislation as well: Veracruz state passed a confiscation law in 1826; Michoacán in 1827; Puebla in 1828. These confiscated lands were then slated for grants to immigrants from Europe or the United States. Nonetheless, Indigenous farmers in more isolated areas were better able to avoid state surveillance and therefore stay put, their presence not always registering with those who sold or bought their lands.

A second federal colonization law in 1828 was meant even more explicitly to entice European colonists to Mexico’s “under-populated” territories. It made land grants of three hundred square leagues and defrayed starting costs under the condition that entrepreneurs establish vineyards, olive groves, silk farms, and other prescribed agrarian activities. This was an attempt to combat the challenge to Mexican economic and ethnic power that the European mining colonies represented. The colonization policies of the first Republic all were aimed at increasing agricultural (as opposed to mining) output and integrating outlying areas of the country as well as “Mexicanizing” the citizenry. Besides highlighting a contradictory immigration policy that desired emigrant settlers but suspected foreign interference—in a country that was already fighting its own battles against national disunity—the legislative emphasis on Mexicanization reveals another aim as well: immigration was not only meant for security, finances, or to increase the country’s population, but to “whiten” it as well. Blanqueamiento—in terms of “mejorar la raza” (improving the race)—is often dated to the late nineteenth century in Mexico and is thought to underlie the twentieth-century celebration of mestizaje and cultural pluralism, but these policies have their precedent in this earlier moment.

France took particular advantage of the new colonization laws, still looking to Mexico for investment—it was already Mexico’s third most important trading partner—and as a “Latin” (i.e., Roman Catholic) sibling. A telling example is
the case of the French Goazacalco Colony. In 1828, two years after Veracruz passed its confiscation orders, the state awarded a large plot of land to the French lawyer Jean François Giordan and his associate, the politician Gabriel-Jacques Laisné de Villévêque. The grant was on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (near present-day Coatzacoalcos) where Simon Tadeo Ortíz de Ayala was already planning to establish a colony and inter-oceanic canal. After receiving their grant, the two Parisians quickly founded the Society for the Goazacalco Colony and recruited an eager priest named Henri Baradère as a scout. Giordan met with Baradère in Mexico City, where the two solidified their plans.

At the same time that he was scouting for Giordan, Baradère also managed to visit the site of Palenque from his base in Veracruz, and he collected a large number of antiquities. Knowing of the anti-export laws, Baradère approached Isidro Ignacio Icaza of the National Museum to arrange a trade: in exchange for permission to excavate and take away “anything worth presenting in a museum” and export half of whatever he collected from Palenque, Baradère would leave the other half with the National Museum. While there he also purchased copies of the Castañeda drawings and arranged for Icaza to send him, in three months’ time, copies of Dupaix’s reports and itinerary from . Icaza was particularly protective of the latter and made Baradère swear not to share copies with just anyone. The General Congress was called to approve this arrangement, which it did in November . The following summer the Society for the Goazacalco Colony began soliciting colonists. Baradère wrote a prospectus filled with exaggerated claims and misinformation: “All the Indians near the concession [grant] are sweet, civilized, and farmers,” he promised. “They will help the new colonists, even at low salaries.” His words doing their work, from November 1829 to June 1830 the society sent three ships from Le Havre, bringing a total of 328 French immigrants to “Goazacoalcos.” By 1831, however, the French colony had failed miserably and Baradère came under considerable scrutiny for his role in the scheme. As Baradère’s case demonstrates, foreign investment in Mexico was not limited to financial and colonization ventures but instead frequently overlapped or amplified interest in the Mexican past.

Dislocating Indigenous Identity

To complement the explicitly anti-Indigenous property legislation of the late 1820s, the new National Museum deployed multiple methods prioritizing Indigenous assimilation and annihilation. For one, its catalog made a clear point of separating ancient Mexicans from contemporary indios. Using words from Dupaix,
one page reminds the viewer of “the knowledge and perfection that the Mexicans had achieved in geometry, architecture, and sculpture,” and contrasts this with “the rough simplicity that characterizes the miserable huts of mild and uneducated peoples” (“los pueblos salvajes é incultos”) in current-day Mexico. Indeed, the only people whose objects and histories were selected for inclusion in the catalog were the noble, intelligent “antiguo pueblo mexicano,” whose beginnings trace back to “the old continent.” For example, the catalog identifies a large “Clay Vessel” as a “doubtless Etruscan” piece that proves “the logical idea put forth by a distinguished savant who derives for the ancient Mexicans a Carthaginian origin.”

Similarly, the catalog’s title page models a “civilized” Mediterranean-American past through its imagery depicting a Mexican eagle grasping a cactus and perching upon an easel draped with a garland of grapes set atop a pedestal decorated with leonine and human heads. The unusual composition blends neoclassical and Indigenous aesthetics that are the publication’s hallmark: the eagle and cactus pay homage to the flag of the First Republic while the swag recalls Hellenistic and Roman statuary; the pedestal is a nod to the Phoenician sphinx. The imagery provides an interpretive framework that dislocated current Indigenous peoples from their own pasts by moving those pasts into the realm of European myth.

In addition, the museum also dislocated Indigenous communities from their particularized place-identity (altepetl, tlaxilacalli, pueblo, ejido, etc.), which nationalists saw as competing with national allegiance, through its collecting program. Among the museum’s “200 stone and 400 clay ‘monuments’” were those identified in the catalog as “gods called [Dii] Penates by the Romans,” a definition marking them as a “special protector of the family.” These votive objects or god images—usually labeled “idols”—had responsibilities to a community (like an altepetl) and community members owed reciprocal responsibilities to their patron god-image (e.g., performing ceremony). Within Nahua philosophy, figural “objects” like god images or other patron deities are not representations but instead are inhabited by the real presence and power of the deity. As such, the god images provide not only protection but also cosmic, ethnic, and socio-spatial identity. Excavating, collecting, and displaying those “idols,” however, alters spatiotemporal as well as interpersonal coordinates and as a result also alters the relationship of people, place, and power. That is, when the “idol” leaves the community the power it enjoyed in relation to its people and the community’s sense of order goes with it. Their removal (intentionally or not) therefore decenters the Indigenous communities they anchor. In this sense, removing votive objects from the locations in which they were imbued with power was also a means of removing Indigenous identities from those communities.
There is some indication that the curators understood a certain sense of the ritual power conducted by some of the objects in their care, if not the consequences of their collection. Indeed, the fact that the National Museum possessed hundreds of examples of votive figurines and family altars described as “household gods” meant that the curators at least understood them to be the loci of Indigenous cultural memory and community cohesion. Moreover, the catalog’s evocation of Rome signals that any belief in the “power” of the “idols” should best be left in the “pagan” past, sounding distinct echoes of the early colonial period. As sixteenth-century Spanish missionaries had believed that removing “idols” would destroy the “idolatry” that kept Indigenous peoples from becoming Christians, the National Museum’s consolidation of “idols” and their recoding as national property similarly targeted Indigenous particularity for destruction. The very accumulation of these “idols” in the national collection is a pointed method of Indigenous dislocation.
These cosmic removals are akin to what anthropologist Patrick Wolfe termed the “elimination of the Native,” or what social scientist Eva Sanz Jara and historian Inmaculada Simón Ruiz have termed “la negación de lo indio” (the disavowal/negation of the Indian). While elimination or rejection can be effected by overt genocidal acts, it is also accomplished through the transformation of Indigenous places and peoples—politically and cosmically—into national ones. Thus, the museum’s collection and preservation of social objects like god-images was an explicit destruction of Indigenous social structures as well as a depopulation of Indigenous places. In effect, the processes of collecting—collecting for public consumption, not just as private scholarly resources—transformed ordinary and sacred items of Indigenous life into mere historic objects. These processes—and the resultant collections—were instruments of cosmic and social, if not physical, displacement, deterritorialization, and thereby de-Indigenization.

Writing Alphabets and Reading Glyphs

At the same time that the National Museum was consolidating a Mexica identity through its Indigenous collection, two similar but distinct processes of objectification and dislocation were taking place: the first was the catalog, which would allow Mexicans to learn by sight. Whereas previously only a select few had been able to access the materials now in the national collection, a catalog would figuratively open it to everyone who could read or—if the illustrations were good enough—see the images. The second was a project aimed to place “Mexican history” directly in the hands of literate Mexican citizens: publishing the colonial-era manuscripts that had long been held in the viceregal offices. This democratizing move would demonstrate that Mexica history was not intrinsically mysterious but only that it had been deliberately hidden from the people for political gain during the colonial period. Initially, Minister Alamán and Oaxaca’s Representative Bustamante assumed the job of locating and republishing the colonial-era texts. Eventually Bustamante, who had been conducting research into the Mexica past for at least a decade, worked on it alone. Thanks to him, Mexico’s history would be alphabetic, that is to say, written in Spanish and alphabetized Nahuatl script.

Bustamante’s publication project was squarely rooted in the criollo archive. The first volume he produced was criollo antiquary Mariano Fernández de Echeverría y Veytia’s unpublished *Tezozomoc en los últimos tiempos de sus antiguos reyes* (1826), which he compiled from Fernando de Alva Cortés Ixtlixóchitl’s materials in the 1770s. This was followed shortly by the seventeenth-century Franciscan
Manuel de la Vega’s *Historia del descubrimiento de la América Septentrional por Cristobal Colón* (1826), with notes by his contemporary Chimalpahin Quauhtlehuanitzin, as well as Francisco López de Gómara’s *Historia de las conquistas de Hernando Cortés*, rewritten by Chimalpahin.195 In 1829, Bustamante published Ixtlilxóchitl’s seventeenth-century memoir, *Horribles crueldades de los conquistadores de México*.196 After that, he brought forth three volumes of Bernardino de Sahagún’s *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* (1829–1830 and 1831), another multiauthor, seventeenth-century, criollo-Nahua text.197 With these self-consciously Nahua and criollo texts, Bustamante’s project anchored an identifiably Euro-American-Indigenous—Mexican—historical canon.198

Bustamante was particularly interested in training a generation of young Mexican men who would grow into their adulthood as Mexican citizens rather than colonial subjects. To do so, however, posed the question of whose histories were prioritized in Mexico’s initial creation of its past. Because the alphabetic histories of the sixteenth and later centuries were almost exclusively made by conquistadors, clerics, or Nahua elite, the selection of materials from which Bustamante drew inevitably emphasized Nahua-and “Azteca”-centric accounts, and these are the ones that Bustamante deemed most important for the new generation of Mexicans to access. His publishing program thus exposed the bifurcation of indigeneity in Mexican nationalist discourse: overexposure of “ancient Mexicans” but erasure of other Indigenous peoples living in the “new” Mexico.199 This bifurcation also reveals how different approaches to the past can be more or less advantageous to the expression of imperial—including settler-colonial—power.

In the 1820s, Mexica history served to define a successfully unified *nación* comprised of disparate inhabitants. But as portended by the Mediterranean-American past projected by the National Museum’s catalog, the Republic’s growing fracture lines called for an alteration to Anáhuacan exclusivism and demanded instead a Mexican inclusivism that not only grouped various Indigenous histories under the “Mexican” umbrella but also rooted Mexico itself in traditional universalist history as signified by Classical antiquity. For a nation in disunity, an implied connection with the biblical world was a useful device for consolidating and whitening Mexico’s past.

Foreigners and Mexican nationalists were not the only ones to call upon versions of the Indigenous past for help. In 1825, for example, renewed anti-occupation efforts in Sonora and Sinaloa were forwarded by the Yaqui leader Juan Bandaras, who carried a standard featuring the Virgin of Guadalupe and Motecuhzoma, attracting other Indigenous groups to his cause.200 The military officer and later president Vicente Guerrero—who claimed descent from
Texcoco nobility—also evoked Motecuhzoma in his quest for equality and land reform. Some historians have suggested that these Indigenous and populist uprisings were reasons why nationalists began to abandon their previous admiration for Mexican antiquity, especially after Guerrero’s rise in 1828. Yet Tlaxcala’s persistent autonomy, the Chumash Revolt in 1824, ongoing negotiations and violence with Comanche and Apache communities in the north, and Indigenous resistance in Chiapas, Tabasco, and the Yucatán also contributed to a growing sense among the elite that traditional representations of indigeneity and Mexicanness did not mix. Certainly the 1825–1832 resistance campaigns in the north led by Bandaras as well as the presidency of Guerrero—from 1829 until his execution in 1831—contributed to the sense that appeals to a strictly Mexica past were less useful for national cohesion than they had been previously.

Revealing the Hieroglyphic Past

In 1827, the two curators of the National Museum, Icaza and Gondra, approached artist and engineer Jean-Frédéric Waldeck to make the lithographs for their catalog. Having struggled to find support for their project, the curators hoped that Waldeck’s fame would help attract subscribers. Waldeck had been the in-house illustrator for the London bookseller who commissioned the English edition of Del Río’s 1787 Palenque report in 1822. When copies of the report and Almendáriz’s original sketches arrived in London, Waldeck drew the line lithographs for the volume. The translated and illustrated Description was the talk of the town; Waldeck received so much attention that a Mexico City advertisement later announced him as “Waldeck, whose talent we well know.” Although Waldeck would not reach Palenque in person until 1832, later in life he admitted that ever since 1822 he had aimed at “nourish[ing] the secret desire to see them [Palenque’s structures] for myself,” and soon after the 1822 publication was finished he made his way to Mexico.

When Waldeck was hired, José Luciano Castañeda was technically still the museum’s illustrator. Castañeda had traveled with Dupaix on the Royal Antiquities Expedition two decades beforehand, and when Dupaix died in 1817 he left his papers to his longtime collaborator. Castañeda kept most of the sketches, manuscripts, and objects until 1824, when he sold them at auction, although he did retain a few copies. At least one set was sold abroad while the museum kept another, which it had hoped to publish (but never did). Along with the earlier loss of the Del Río materials and the stream of foreigners now visiting Palenque,
hiring Waldeck was one of the few ways the museum could secure its own claim
to the Chiapas site.

The National Museum’s catalog had been planned as a serial imprint, and ini-
tially Waldeck was responsible for drawing copies of two Mexica mapas to be in-
cluded in each number, as well as producing “historical paintings” and portraying
the museum objects. Eventually, however, he became responsible for most of the
publication’s content, including its interpretive essays. Surprisingly, he was never
tasked with reproducing any of the Palenque imagery that had made him famous.
Despite this, Waldeck still brought a version of the “hieroglyphic” history he had
first seen in London to viewers in Mexico City. Indeed, the catalog’s title page
makes this clear: for when compared against the prior Castañeda and Almendáriz
illustrations, Waldeck’s unusual leonine and human heads as well as the sphinxlike
pedestal are revealed to be stylized renderings of a sculptured panel from Palenque
that he had drawn five years earlier. Palenque made it into the catalog after all.

Indeed, Palenque’s shadowy presence insinuates a glyphic past that unites the
peoples of the Mexican Republic within a historical narrative that combined
the worlds of Mediterranean, Mexica, and Maya antiquity between one paper
cover. Many of the items Waldeck depicted—such as the carved lizard found
“on the wall of an old home near the Camino Real de México”—were objects
that, by the time the stones for the first number were inked, had already been
lost to collectors abroad. Waldeck’s lithographs, however, based on memory
and previous publications, made the statement that these objects—while now
hidden from the public—were nonetheless still important national property.
The images emphasized the cypher-like quality of Mexico’s Indigenous past by
creating images that were both familiar and inaccessible.

Foreigners tended to be interested in Mexico’s “mystified” Maya past because
they believed the ruined structures at Palenque and its “hieroglyphs” represented
a cognate to European Classical heritage. Although scholars in New Spain, Mex-
ico, and the United States had been drawing connections between Mexico and
Egypt for hundreds of years, the specific context of post-Napoleonic Egyptiana
tended to place more of an emphasis on the graphic similarities of Mayan to
Egyptian “hieroglyphic writing,” especially after Champollion’s Rosetta Stone
breakthrough in 1822. As a testament to this event’s significance, the follow-
ing year the Parisian committee awarding the Prix Volney—a legacy left by the
comte—was focused on the study of “hieroglyphic” languages. Alongside
Champollion, much credit for the renewed Mexico-Egypt connection in the
1820s goes to William Bullock, whose “ancient Mexico” exhibit in London (at
which he displayed his ill-gotten lithograph of the *Codex Boturini*) was held, appropriately, in Piccadilly’s Egyptian Hall.\textsuperscript{212} Whereas in the earlier colonial period “Aztec writing” had been considered “hieroglyphic,” by the nineteenth century Nahuatl had been written in alphabetic (Latin) letters for over three centuries, and it was “Maya writing”—usually (but not always) in the form of stone inscriptions—that were considered to be mysterious because they were seemingly unreadable. This transformation of inscribed Mayan script and sculptured histories into “hieroglyphs” was predominantly performed by scholars in the United States and Europe.\textsuperscript{213}

In Mexico City the National Museum’s catalog—*Colección de las antigüedades mexicanos* (1827)—debuted the hieroglyph, visually and verbally, as something that could be useful for developing a Mexican past.\textsuperscript{214} Like much of its contents, however, the “hieroglyphic” aspect of “ancient Mexico” that circulated throughout the Atlantic scholarly sphere in the late 1820s and 1830s was largely produced at the hands of non-Mexicans who were introduced to the subject by way of Palenque. Indeed, Waldeck’s own “glyphic” contributions helped cultivate an enigmatic, spectacular version of Mexican history that would come to dominate representations of Mexico in the middle of the century.\textsuperscript{215}

**Identifying Palenque from the outside in**

In 1826, Paris’s elite Société de la Géographie announced a grand prize for “the most complete and exact description yet possessed of the ruins of the ancient city of Palenque,” to be submitted before January 1, 1830.\textsuperscript{216} At almost the same time—and after Waldeck was already in Mexico City—the new owner of the Dupaix collection, who was a French antiquary from New Orleans named François Latour-Allard, submitted descriptions and images of the over one hundred eighty Mexican objects and one hundred twenty drawings to Parisian and London periodicals as part of a marketing campaign.\textsuperscript{217} The already extensive attention abroad, the Geographic Society prize, and now this exposure promised increasing competition for Mexico’s national property.\textsuperscript{218} Indeed, it was not long before Palenque called to the foreigners already living in Mexico. When Waldeck saw the announcement for the Palenque prize in a July 1827 issue of *El Aguila Mexicana*, he was likely the person with the best knowledge of Palenque outside of Chiapas.\textsuperscript{219} But that did not stop Francisco Corroy in Tabasco, who also had his eyes on the award. And in Mexico City, Henri Baradère, a priest from the southwest of France, also began to dream of claiming the prize as well.\textsuperscript{220}
After learning of the sale and export of the Dupaix materials to France, Poinsett assured Stephen Duponceau—secretary of the American Philosophical Society (APS)—that he would “endeavor to obtain some drawings and some account of the Ruins of Palenque in the province of Chiapas” for the society. That same year, 1827, Constantine Rafinesque—the prolific scholar and nemesis of Caleb Atwater—sent an open letter to Philadelphia’s Saturday Evening Post concerning so-called Mexican hieroglyphs. Over the next six years, Rafinesque continued to send letters about Mayan script to the Post, thereby bringing even more attention to the subject of Maya glyphs to readers in the United States. Meanwhile Duponceau—a French-born US citizen—submitted a winning response for the Volney Prize in 1828 based on samples of “Mexican” writing that had first appeared in Humboldt’s 1810 Vues and again in the 1822 Del Río: that is to say, Mexican writing that was actually Mayan iconic script. In 1829 the Baltimore antiquary James Haines M’Culloh reprinted the Del Río hieroglyphs in his Researches, Philosophical and Antiquarian, Concerning the Aboriginal
History of America and identified them as “Guatemalan” (when Del Río’s report was made in the 1780s, Palenque was indeed located within the Kingdom of Guatemala).\textsuperscript{223} He also wrote that the “civilization of the Guatemalans could be fairly derived from the Toltecs alone.” In 1830, with no little delight, Duponceau accepted from Poinsett a donation of a large number of Dupaix’s notes, which Poinsett seems to have procured from the National Museum.\textsuperscript{224} These papers included a detailed tracing of a “cross” from one of Palenque’s “temples.”

In 1831, the Hispano-Irish military officer John “Juan” Galindo—then living in Guatemala and serving as governor of Petén—sent an account of his Palenque “discovery” to the \textit{Literary Gazette} in London, only one year before Waldeck would move into the same ruins.\textsuperscript{225} Also at that time in London the Castañeda illustrations made their publishing debut in volume four of Lord Kingsborough’s luxe series \textit{Antiquities of Mexico: comprising fac-similes of ancient Mexican paintings and hieroglyphics. . . (1830–1848),} although its extreme expense meant few could afford to see them.\textsuperscript{226} In Philadelphia, Rafinesque printed a selection of glyphs from the APS materials in his self-published \textit{Atlantic Journal and Friend of Knowledge} (1832–1833) on a chart comparing African or “Lybian” and American or “Otolum” (Palenque) languages in 1832.\textsuperscript{227}

Attempts to understand Palenqeno writings and identity were long running: Humboldt himself had called the Palenque inscriptions “Mexican” although he later corrected himself; he had also noted that the ruins there “prove[d] the predilection of the peoples of the Toltec and the Aztec race for architectural detail.”\textsuperscript{228} These words reveal a subtle, but important difference in Mexican and non-Mexican (neither one Indigenous) figurations of the ancient past.

Non-Mexicans like Humboldt only began to understand that there \textit{was} a difference between Mexica and Maya (or Mexico and any other group) people in the nineteenth century. A crucial figure in this differentiation was the “Toltec.” For centuries, rumors that Christian apostles had visited the Americas and met (or became) Toltecs was part of the attraction of the mythology: because conquistadors supposedly witnessed “crosses” in the Yucatán, this was assumed to be evidence that a “lost” population there had accepted apostolic evangelization.\textsuperscript{229} Poinsett’s gift of the Palenque “Table Cross” sketch, therefore, went a long way toward advancing the theory of Palenque’s connections to the Old World. The Philadelphia craniologist Samuel G. Morton even identified the circulating Palenque imagery as “Toltec sculptur.”\textsuperscript{230}

Evocations of Toltecas, in this context, recall the Dominicans’ hypotheses based on misread K’iche’ genealogies but also provide a separately racialized set of ancestors for Mayas (Toltecs) and Mexicans (Aztecs).\textsuperscript{231} Thus when Humboldt
wrote of the “peoples of the Toltec and the Aztec race,” he was expressing a racialized difference that was more important to scholars in the United States and Europe than to those in Mexico. By the 1830s, Toltecs—thanks to Palenque—had come to be associated with the Moundbuilders in the United States. In fact, in 1839 Morton even used skull measurements to “prove” that Moundbuilders were members of the “Toltecan Family” rather than the “American Family,” which was comprised of the continent’s “Barbarous Nations.”

Nationalist Mexicans, who were so well steeped in Nahua histories—especially those narratives of origin and migration—knew that Toltecs were avowedly Mexica ancestors but not necessarily Maya ones. Although few concretely understood the capacious way in which Toltecas related (and continued to relate) to Nahuatl- and Mayan-speaking peoples—both ancestrally and historically—Mexican nationalists at least understood that there was a difference between “Toltecs” and “Mayas,” whereas foreigners—who tended to treat Toltecs as purely historical subjects—readily confused the two. When Bustamante reissued León y Gama’s Descripción histórica y cronológica de las dos piedras in 1832—including the unpublished second volume from 1794 (along with previously unseen watercolors by criollo Francisco Agüera)—this reframing of
Mexica “hieroglyphic” inscriptions rerouted the nationalist Mexican gaze from Palenque and back to Nahua ancestors: that is, back to the country’s mixed and multilayered—but Mexican—pasts.

**Consolidating Glyphic Pasts**

In July of 1834, after he finished the first eight numbers of his folio album *Antiquités mexicaines*, Baradère sent a complimentary set to Mexico’s federal Congress. Baradère’s gift, in fact, was the fulfillment of an agreement made with Congress six years before. Writing from his sylvan retreat in Tacubaya outside the capital in December 1834, President Antonio López de Santa Anna thanked him and expressed his approval of Baradère’s centralized vision of a ruins-strewn “country of Anáhuac.” Santa Anna was evidently so pleased that he pledged an extravagant order of ten copies—which would have totaled 32,000 francs—for Mexico’s new National Library. He praised the sumptuously-colored “monuments that come to life” and proclaimed them “worthy of marching alongside the pyramids of Egypt.” *Antiquités mexicaines*, he explained, would “testify to the world” the greatness of the “ancient civilization of the country of Anáhuac” by “rais[ing] the veil” that had long covered a past “glorious to the Mexican nation.” With Dupaix’s reports translated into Spanish and copies of Castañeda’s sketches—borrowed from the National Museum—*Antiquités mexicaines* was a joint Mexican and French venture that would also prove useful to Mexico’s nationalists in their campaign of whitening and Mexicanization at home. Santa Anna’s invocation of a refigured Anáhuac included all residents living under Mexico’s banner, including Indigenous groups and heterogeneous white, mestizo, African, and immigrant populations. Projecting Mexican hegemony in the face of competing claims for lands and sovereignty, the Anáhuac of *Antiquités mexicaines* located the Republic in an enduring conception of “ancient Mexican peoples.”

Santa Anna’s Anáhuacan boosterism casually places Maya history inside Mexican space. Indeed, despite its title, Baradère’s *Antiquités mexicaines* is mainly focused on sites associated with ancient Maya rather than Mexica peoples: the two highlighted locations are Palenque and Mitla, sites located, respectively, in the southeastern states of Chiapas and Oaxaca. Neither was built, or majority inhabited, by Nahua ancestors. A map that outlines the three itineraries of Dupaix’s antiquarian expeditions gives a hint of this focus. Outlined in green, blue, and red, the itineraries all start in Mexico City and crawl eastward, visualizing the federal district’s centripetal pull. Baradère’s map makes Mexico’s
territorial and historical project clear: that is, to indexically consolidate all of the territory as nationally—if not ethnically—Mexican. Depicting a nation arching from Michoacán and Guanajuato across Veracruz and Oaxaca to meet Chiapas, Tabasco, and Yucatán and ending at the Sea of the Antilles on the far right, the cropped map is undoubtedly oriented toward the Atlantic. Watery gulfs above and below emphasize the slender Tehuantepec Isthmus, cracked halfway by the Coatzacoalcos River—its route the shortest overland passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific—to revive Europeans’ centuries-long dream of circumnavigation. By centering Tehuantepec, the majority Maya state of Chiapas and the largely Mixtec and Zapotec state of Oaxaca are drawn into the Mexican national space. The volume’s popularization of “Maya” pasts as “Mexican” ones thus facilitates a visual Mexican occupation of all Indigenous lands within Mexico’s claimed boundaries. The descriptor “mexicain,” therefore, refers to the Mexican patria—and implied whitened patrimony—rather than to specific Nahua, Maya, Zapotec (Ben’ Zaa), or Ñuudzahui (Mixtec) pasts.

In 1834, Santa Anna’s government suspended the 1824 Constitution and replaced it with a set of laws centralizing power in Mexico City. The next year, Santa Anna’s administration began increasing federal military forces in “rebellious” states—such as Zacatecas, Oaxaca, and Coahuila y Tejas—that protested his centralizing changes. Areas that resisted were punished: the state of Aguascalientes, for example, was split off from Zacatecas in 1836 in reprisal for resistance battles there the year before. Tejas, Tabasco, and Yucatán would eventually declare their independence from Mexico altogether, as would Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, Coahuila, and Tabasco. In the shadow of the Texas War (1835–1836) and other conflicts in the north, elites’ unexpected privileging of a “glyphic” representation of Mexican history became a new way of asserting an essential, centralized “Mexicanness.”

In the 1830s, a hybrid Mexica/Toltec/Mediterranean “glyphic” history became useful to the strengthening central state. This was especially true as the associations with both Maya and Mexica peoples shifted away from the former tendency to contrast Mexica peoples as urbane yet superannuated nobles versus mystical and elusive Maya rustics and toward one in which Mexica (or Nahua) peoples were seen as more aggressive, whereas Mayas, with their “lost cities,” were more sophisticated and pacific. But after the violence in the Yucatán turned into what was perceived as a “race war” of Mayas against white Yucatecos in 1847—the Caste War—nationalists in Mexico City again turned away from the glyphs of Maya Lands and returned to the histories of Aztlán.
IN 2018, THE volunteer advocacy group The Decolonial Atlas circulated a post on its Facebook page with the following caption: “The great cities of Maya civilization were ‘discovered’ under dense jungle. They were given names like Copán and Palenque. But their original names were never lost. #RenameReclaimDecolonize.”245 The post featured a list of forty-four glyphic place names with alphabetic translations, explaining: “All of the words written in the [L]atin alphabet are indeed from ‘discoverer’s’ languages. The original names are the Maya Emblem Glyphs.” Although the accuracy of some of the pictured glyphs and alphabetic names came under scrutiny, the larger point—about considering glyphic writing as language and not something that needed to be “discovered,” deciphered, or translated to have meaning—stood.246 The “great cities of Maya civilization” existed long before they were assigned alphabetic names or three-dimensional renderings, before it was discovered that they were “lost.”

A half century before this post, Mexican historian Juan A. Ortega y Medina argued that US interest in the “lost” Maya past was an extension of what he called “Monroísmo arqueológico,” that is, US hemispheric aggression.247 The Old World-New World debate resurrected by Waldeck, Baradère, Stephens, and others was a sign of this cultural-territorial struggle between European diffusionists and American “autochthonists.”248 Yet the imperial power struggles of “Monroism” have tended to obscure the ways in which Mexican nationalists also deployed the forces of empire within their own settler state. Moreover, the so-called autochthonists were never as singularly opposed to European diffusionism as it may appear; this is not to say that Mexican nationalists consented to the imperialist attempts against Mexican sovereignty, but rather to propose that they used multiple approaches to guarantee their own aboriginality, and with it, the success of the Mexican settler nation. In addition, Mexican theories about Indigenous origins recirculating in Bustamante’s books, about the disconnection of Comanches and Apaches from “Mexican Indians” and about “idolatrous,” “lost,” or violent Mayas assisted in the cultural justification for the United States’ annexation of Texas but rejection of the Yucatán.249 This is not to blame Mexico for US aggression or racism: instead, it is to point out a continuity of settler-colonial techniques deployed in both places but with different, yet interconnected, histories.