Ignacio Bernal. A History of Mexican Archaeology: The Vanished Civilizations of Middle America

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THREE MÉSOAMERICANIST WORKS


Ignacio Bernal is one of the internationally best known Mexican archaeologists having taught in several universities in the United States and in Europe. The writing of this particular book presents us with a text that in format and style shows one of his many estimable qualities: its pleasant readability, fully transmitted through Ms. Malet's excellent translation. In its organization of materials and abundance of reference Bernal's work not only shows the author's familiarity with internationally-produced archaeological work on Mesoamerican civilizations, but his own strong sense of providing the reader with an historical perspective of Archaeology as a developing science.

It is this reviewer's opinion that Bernal's book parallels, for Mesoamerica, Gordon Willey's and Jeremy Sabloff's *A History of American Archaeology* (London & San Francisco, 1974) in general concept and in usefulness for archaeologists as well as for colleagues from other disciplinary areas interested in or working with Mesoamerican materials. This commentary is meant as a tribute to both works. Both provide the reader with a sense of the evolution of archaeological knowledge as a developing field, historically framed and methodologically and interpretively alive.

Yet, Bernal's book gives us a dimension that is equally difficult to find in most books of this kind and in the treatment of the history of knowledge about Mesoamerican civilizations (or their aspects) that may be found in the works of scholars from other fields of inquiry (such as cultural anthropology, ethnohistory or literary criticism, all of which
recur to archaeological knowledge or documentary traces); his passion to extricate from every possible bit of archaeological or documentary trace about Mesoamerican civilizations not only whatever amplifies our knowledge of those areas of study but, as well, our sense of what a developing human science is.

The case in point: when we are before a text that suggests an analogy between the ritual interments by posterior Mesoamerican cultures of "dug-up" pottery and effigies of previous cultures unknown to them, yet found by them in their habitat, with the possibility of something like a dawn of "archaeological inquiry" in pre-hispanic Mesoamerican minds, to the modern purpose of archaeological science; when we read a text that utilizes the texts of Spanish "cronistas" not as a pretext for just another flurry of "Spaniard-bashing" because the chroniclers did not possess an archaeological science as we do now, but, instead, strives to understand why the finding of saurian bones in the Mexican plateau by sixteenth century "archaeologists," such as Diego de Landa, led them to speculate about the possibility of the existence of races of "giants," we are before a text that brings a refreshing view of what modern archaeological knowledge is all about, its historicity and its development. It brings a realization to the question of why we know more today, than they did then . . . and how much we owe to them.

The Postscript of Bernal's book ends by his stating that in his presentation and inquiry he has tried to bring in the history of Mesoamerican archaeology at a pace with the contributions of other human sciences to the common field of study but, he points out, "to study archaeology on its own becomes a virtual impossibility from about 1950 on; it so reduces the scale of the subject as to make even the whys and wherefors of the research incomprehensible." A statement that any civilizationalist can readily understand, specially in these, our "transdisciplinary" times. On a closing remark, I can only agree with the assessment of this book pronounced by a scholar who is no stranger to civilizational studies, Ashley Montagu, "the book once started is unputdownable—utterly absorbing," and, I may add, absolutely current and stimulating.

Elpidio Laguna


Miguel León Portilla, besides being an internationally known scholar on Nahuaat culture and Mesoamerican civilizations, is a pioneer in the field of research on pre-hispanic worldviews and philosophical conceptions by means of the study of extant documentary sources. A cultural anthropologist, linguist and thinker, he helped to bring the inquiry into Mesoamerican civilizations and post-encounter developments into the perspective of the human sciences as distinct from (but not unrelated to) contemporary, traditional interpretations. He pioneered, along