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“Snatched from oblivion”: John L. Stephens, wilderness, and Maya history

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Scientific knowledge and indigenous knowledge, that is to say the knowledge that inhabitants have gathered through the generations of the land they inhabit, have often been at odds. This paper aims to illustrate, through the example of John L. Stephens, the paradoxes that scientific travelers and traveling naturalists have embodied in the narratives they left of their travels, a form of writing that found huge audiences in the 18th and the 19th centuries.

In 1841, John L. Stephens, an American traveler and diplomat, published *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*, twelve editions of which were published in fifteen years. Two years later, he published a complementary work, *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*. Together, these books, illustrated by Frederick Catherwood's plates, constituted, according to Frank Hibben, who reviewed a 1949 edition of Stephens' work, “the groundwork for many later investigations in the Mayan area” (Hibben 454). Apparently, of the 44 Mayan sites Stephens and Catherwood explored, only Uxmal had already been reported (Bullard 571). Stephens was called “the father of Mayan antiquities” (Hibben 454). Another reviewer wrote that Stephens and Catherwood, his fellow traveler and illustrator of the volumes, “put the Maya on the map” (Thompson 471). In these two volumes, Stephens describes what he saw and uncovered in ancient Mayan cities such as Mayapan, Uxmal, Sayil (Zayi for Stephens), Macoba, Chichen Itza, Tulum, and many others.

Because Stephens' mission in Yucatan was political as well as scientific, a few words of the geopolitical context of his travels are necessary. Mexico became independent in 1821. In 1823, several newly independent countries in Central America—Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica—briefly united as the United Provinces of Central America, under the rule of Mexico. They soon broke away from Mexico, however, and formed their own federation with their central government at Guatemala City (Koch 102-103). Yucatan was a province of Mexico but was relatively left alone by the distant governmental center until 1835, when Santa Anna asserted his authority on the province. An insurrection advocating independence erupted in 1838. Santa Anna refused Yucatecan independence and sent an army to invade the province in 1843. During the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), Yucatan declared its neutrality.

Stephens was sent to Mexico and Central America by United States President Van Buren, in 1839, that is during a period of tension between Mexico and the US, which started with the success of Texas in gaining its independence from Mexico in 1836, with hope of being annexed by the US. In fact, tensions with Santa Anna's Mexico naturally brought together Texas and Yucatan, as Stephens himself explains:

Two days after our arrival at Merida the Texan schooner of war San Antonio arrived at Sisal, bringing a proposition for Yucatan to pay \$8000 per month toward the support of the Texan navy, and for the Texan vessels to remain upon the coast of Yucatan and protect it against invasion by Mexico. This proposition was accepted immediately, and negotiations were pending for farther co-operation in procuring a recognition of their mutual independence (Vol. 1, 81).

As an official representative of the US in Mexico and in the United Provinces (Leonard 558, Koch 102), Stephens travelled through the region during a time of crisis for the Confederation too, when Separatist Guatemalans violently opposed the federation.

Stephens received a letter dated August 13, 1839, from Secretary of State John Forsyth:

Sir: this department having occasion to send a confidential agent to Central America on business connected with our late diplomatic mission to the country, the President has selected you for the performance of the duty and the time has now arrived when you are expected to enter upon the discharge of it (Koch 103-104).

As a *chargé d'affaires* sent by the US, a fairly recently independent nation whose foreign policy was even more recently defined by the Monroe doctrine, it is likely that Stephens's secret mission was to establish ties with a government

in the fragile new nation to express the support of the big sister in the North. The Monroe doctrine, verbalized as such in 1823, was sympathetic to all Latin American nations which, in the first quarter of the 19th century, claimed their independence in the name of liberty and democracy, from European empires or other autocratic nations, in this case Santa Anna's Mexico.

This context allows us to reconcile the two apparently differing purposes of Stephens' travel, diplomatic and scientific. Intentionally or not, Stephens gave significant political weight to his scientific intuitions in the context of US foreign policies: on the one hand, he wrote a critique of the Spanish colonizers who reduced Mayan grandeur to ruins, thus undermining any Spanish attempt to come back were the Yucatecans tempted to welcome Spain back as a protector against Santa Anna's Mexico. On the other hand, Stephens showed the same condescendence toward contemporary Indians as other well-intentioned “Friends of the Indian” in his country, whose misplaced benevolence paved the way to a softer form of colonization.

At the time of Stephens's travels, there had been a long tradition in America of naturalist travelers. However, if Stephens was a traveler for sure, he was hardly a naturalist. As a matter of fact, to him vegetation was only an obstacle to overcome in order to uncover the ruins concealed underneath. I will argue in my first part that, as a typical 19th-century American explorer, Stephens did not see nature in any other way than a wilderness to conquer. Second, I will show that, although he was sent by United States President Van Buren for geopolitical reasons, Stephens's primary aim in his quest was scientific. Finally, I will argue that, to reach his goal, Stephens reenacted the imperialist gesture that was at the time the national mantra at home. As a scientist coming from a colonizing nation travelling through a colonized one, he played a similar role that the 18th-century English naturalists played when they explored the territories that would become the United States. He encountered indigenous people and heard of their territorial knowledge, but dismissed it in order to impose his own Western and colonizing worldview. Thus, Stephens' work illustrates an old ambiguity that is not yet clarified today, as regards the exploitation of indigenous knowledge throughout the world: science wields power both of emancipation and of submission. In Stephens's work, one can see an equation between clearing out the vegetation off the ruins and subduing his Maya employees' knowledge of them. To the explorer, they both plunged science into darkness.

Stephens and wilderness

Fig. 1. “Frontispiece” (detail; Vol. 1), Casa del Gobernador, Uxmal.

Stephens described nature as an obstacle to overcome:

The ruins of Mayapan cover a great plain, which was at that time so overgrown that hardly any object was visible until we were close upon it, and the undergrowth was so thick that it was difficult to work our way through it (Vol. 1, 131).

To Stephens, at least as he appears in his writing, nature is wilderness, before wilderness became, in his countrymen’s mindset in the last quarter of the 19th century, something to preserve and cherish. Stephens was a man from 19th century United States, and he explored Central America at the same time that the Manifest Destiny doctrine was articulated, in the context of the Mexican-American tensions over Texas, culminating in the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848. In 1845, John O’Sullivan, a popular editor and columnist,

published an essay criticizing those who opposed the annexation of Texas for “checking the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of your yearly multiplying millions.” At the time, in the American mind and politics, it was the manifest destiny of civilization to conquer wilderness, in the same movement consisting, on a political plane, in supporting democracy against dictatorship.

Throughout his pages, Stephens expressed how important the purpose of his mission was, that is saving the Mayan cities from oblivion, or, as he states in his preface, “snatch[ing] from oblivion these perishing, but still gigantic memorials of a mysterious people” (Preface).

Fig. 2. “Circular edifice”
(Vol. 1, 136), Mayapan

Fig. 3. Trees over vestiges,
in Coba. Photo by author.

On a very down-to-earth plane, this meant saving them from the state of decay provoked by wilderness:

now we had mingled feelings of pain and pleasure: of pain, that they had not been discovered before the sentence of irretrievable ruin had gone forth against them: at the same time it was matter of deep congratulation that, before the doom was accomplished, we were permitted to see these decaying, but still proud memorials of a mysterious people. In a few years, even these will be gone; and as it has been denied that such things ever were, doubts may again arise whether they have in-

deed existed. So strong was this impression that we determined to fortify in every possible way our proofs. [...] No time was lost, and [the Indians] began work with a spirit corresponding to their numbers. Many of them had hachas, or small axes, and the crash of falling trees was like the stirring noise of felling in one of our own forests (Vol. 2, 50).

At the end of this passage, the parallel with the conquest of the US wilderness, “our own forests,” is explicit. Recurrently, Stephens expressed his satisfaction to see trees cleared away: “At the foot of the terrace was a tree, hiding part of the building. Though holding trees in some degree of reverence, around these ruined cities it was a great satisfaction to hear them fall” (Vol. 2, 59).

The image of a struggle between the ruins and wilderness, and the sense that Stephens and his team were pioneers on the frontier where this struggle took place, are recurrent in his pages, as when he writes, for example: “Our’s was the first visit to examine these ruins. For ages they had been unnoticed, almost unknown, and left to struggle with rank tropical vegetation” (Vol. 1, 131).

Fig. 4. “Rankness of tropical vegetation” (Vol. 1, 393).

For Stephens's generation, the history of the United States was being written in terms of a conquest of wilderness by civilization. Wilderness had to be tamed for civilization to spread across the continent. Both “savage” people and savage nature had to be conquered. In a way, in Yucatan, Stephens reenacted the old struggle between wilderness and civilization that was shaping his nation. His work to uncover the Mayan ruins took the form of a confrontation against invasive vegetation in order to bring knowledge, scientific enlightenment to the world. It is an interesting irony that the civilization that Stephens endeavored to deliver from the entanglement of wilderness was a Native American civilization. I will show later, however, that this does not mean that Stephens was in any way different from his fellow countrymen regarding contemporary Native Americans, whom he treated paternalistically. When the Indians working for him disagreed about cutting a specific tree, he did not much heed their opinion:

They said it was so hard it would break their axes. These little axes seemed hardly capable of making any impression upon the trunk, and I gave them directions, perhaps still more barbarous, to cut away the branches and leave the trunk. They hesitated, and one of them said, in a deprecating tone, that this tree served as food for horses and cattle, and their mistress had always charged them not to cut down such. The poor fellow seemed perplexed between the standing orders of the rancho and the special instructions to do what I required (Vol. 2, 59).

Uncovering knowledge was the primary mission that Stephens gave himself. If knowledge was covered by wilderness, uncovering knowledge implied uncovering the Mayan cities concealed by wilderness:

It was at that time covered with trees and a thick growth of herbage, which gave a gloominess to its grandeur of proportions, and, but for its regularity [...] it would have passed for a wooded and grass-grown hill. Taking some Indians with me, I ascended this mound, and began clearing it for Mr. Catherwood to draw (Vol. 1, 253).

Fig. 5. “House of the Turtles” (Vol. 1, 184)

Fig. 6. House of the Turtles, Uxmal. Photo by author.

Uncovering knowledge

Stephens was one of the first to write about the Mayan cities. Just before him, Jean-Frédéric, Count of Waldeck, had explored some of the Mayan sites and had brought back some depictions, but their truthfulness seemed to have been questioned even by his contemporaries (*North American Review*, 89). Many of

the places Stephens visited had never been visited before—by which Stephens meant “by a white man” since these cities were abandoned by their original Mayan inhabitants—something he often reminded his readers of:

“We had received intelligence, however, of the ruins of Mayapan, an ancient city which had never been visited” (Vol. 1, 120).

“We had before us a new and unexplored region, in which we might expect to find new scenes” (Vol. 1, 120-121).

“one thing was certain, a large city had once stood here, and what its name was no man knew” (Vol. 1, 202).

Stephens was very well aware that he was a pioneer, and of the consequent significance of his work, comparing it to the discoverers of Ancient Egypt: “In Egypt, the labours of discoverers have given some light to subsequent explorers, but here all was dark” (Vol. 1, 276). He explicitly stated that his purpose was to shed what he calls “the historic light” on Uxmal, a place “not mentioned in any record of the conquest” (Vol. 1, 321).

In Stephens’s days, archeology did not quite yet exist as a discipline. Stephens can be said to have invented it by applying a serious scientific methodology to his visits. As an explorer, Stephens was nothing like fanciful Waldeck. Not only does he observe and describe, with the artful help of illustrator Catherwood, but he also interprets and advances hypotheses and conclusions: “Probably it was the great mound of sacrifice, on which the priests, in the sight of the assembled people, cut out the hearts of human victims” (Vol. 1, 133).

Fig. 7. Chichen Itza. Photo by author

Not only does he attempt to salvage forgotten sites of interest, but he endeavors to understand their history, thus paving the way not only to archeology but also to the historiography of the Maya. In the following passage for instance, he draws conclusions about the builders of Mayapan, whom he thinks were the same as the builders of Uxmal:

Of one thing, however, we had no doubt: the ruins of this city were of the same general character with those at Uxmal, erected by the same builders, probably of older date, and suffering more from the corrosion of the elements, or they had been visited more harshly by the destroying hand of man (Vol. 1, 138-139).

As a scientist, he speculates on ancient practices based on his observations of the present, as when he explains the ancient currency system based on grains of cocoa or how the local Indians cooked a pig, in “their own way of doing it, national, and derived from their forefathers, being the same way in which those respectable people cooked men and women” (Vol. 1, 252-253).

These remanences of the past in the present are a way for Stephens to establish a clear link between the ancient inhabitants of the cities and the present Indians. For a long time, 20th century archeologists and other scholars assumed that at least some of the ancient cities of Yucatan had been abandoned before the arrival of the Spaniards, as a result of a pre-Columbian dramatic decline of the population. Only in the 1970s did scholars counter these claims, thus following Stephens. Sir J. Eric Thompson, for example, was one of the first to debunk

the belief that the Mayan Central Area was largely deserted when the Spaniards arrived, and he presented evidence for areas of relatively dense populations separated by very sparse populations, with indications of depopulations of 90 percent or more mostly within less than 100 years after contact, mainly from epidemics (Denevan 40).

Of course, we easily understand the impact of such evidence on the understanding of the effects of colonization in Yucatan. Thus, when Stephens, more than a century before Thompson, claimed that the contemporary Indians were actually the descendants of the inhabitants of the cities and that they had been reduced to their present degraded state by colonization, he both accused Spain and empowered Yucatan. Stephens’ writings were popular, and such theories were bound to have a political impact in the geopolitical context of their publication. According to the author of a review of the book when it first came out, in 1843, Stephens settled the important question of who built the ancient cities of Yucatan:

We shall not enter upon the vexed question of the antiquity of these structures; because Mr. Stephens has settled that as effectually as demonstration can settle

anything; proving that the ruins now existing in Yucatan and Mexico were entire and perfect edifices in the sixteenth century, occupied as temples for worship by the people whom the Spaniards fought, conquered, and enslaved (“Review” 88).

A reviewer of the 1962 edition by the University of Oklahoma Press claimed that with Stephens and Catherwood’s work,

Ancient Maya civilization for the first time was brought accurately to the attention of the educated populace of Europe and America, and proof was presented that the great ruins were, in truth, built by the ancestors of the contemporary impoverished Indians of the region (Bullard 571).

In long developments, based on archeological evidence and interpretations, Stephens was adamant in the conclusions he had advanced in his previous book, and that he repeats here with much force:

The conclusion to which I came was, that “there are not sufficient grounds for belief in the great antiquity that has been ascribed to these ruins;” “that we are not warranted in going back to any ancient nation of the Old World for the builders of these cities; that they are not the works of people who have passed away, and whose history is lost; but that there are strong reasons to believe them the creation of the same races who inhabited the country at the time of the Spanish conquest, or of some not very distant progenitors” (Vol. 1, 94-95).

He advances several pieces of evidence which, according to him, “destroy all idea of the extreme antiquity of these buildings” (Vol. 1, 280), “extreme antiquity” apparently referring to the time of the Egyptian pyramids.

Fig. 8. Chichen Itza. Photo by author.

It is beyond the shadow of a doubt in Stephens's mind that the Spaniards destroyed the cities and killed many of their inhabitants, and that the contemporary Indians are the descendants of the people who lived in Uxmal only 150 years before (Vol. 1, 324-325).

What makes Stephens' travel writing a pleasant read still today is that, between archeological and historical considerations, he describes Yucatecan society and social practices. Even these social comments show signs that the country he officially represents is at odds with Spain. He describes a bullfight, to him "a disgusting and degrading spectacle" (Vol. 1, 194). He writes of Latin America as a backward place because of the Spanish colonization:

the countries in America subject to the Spanish dominion have felt less sensibly, perhaps, than any others in the world, the onward impulse of the last two centuries, and in them many usages and customs derived from Europe, but there long fallen into oblivion, are still in full force" (Vol. 1, 190).

Not only does Spanish culture lag behind Europe, but also behind the ancient Maya's achievements: the seven ruined sites he visits on his way to Uxmal are "memorials of cities which had been and had passed away, and such memorials as no cities built by the Spaniards in that country would present" (Vol. 1, 223).

To Stephens, Uxmal, whose ruins "presented themselves to [him] as a home," "could transmit to posterity the image of an American city" (Vol. 1, 223). Not unlike 18th-century travelling naturalists such as William Bartram, Stephens seems to be working up an American identity, an American character and culture—or in any case a Yucatecan one—thanks to the ancient cities of the Maya, an identity that Spanish colonization has tried to crush but which can be uncovered at the same time that the cities are uncovered and this history disclosed to the public.

"the accounts of the Indians were never reliable" (Vol. 2, 49)

Stephens's ambiguities reside in how he treats contemporary Indians. In spite of his insistence and conviction of a recent grandeur of the Maya people, he cannot help seeing the Indians he interacts with as mere victims of the Spanish conquistadors, and he has a tendency to dehumanize them, or at least, treat them with paternalism. The following passage best illustrates these ambiguities:

This proprietor was a full-blooded Indian, the first of this ancient but degraded race whom we had seen in the position of land-owner and master. He was about forty-five years old, and highly respectable in his appearance and manners. He had inherited the land from his fathers, did not know how long it had been transmitted, but believed that it had always been in his family. The Indians on the rancho

were his servants, and we had not seen in any village or on any hacienda men of better appearance, or under more excellent discipline. This produced on my mind a strong impression that, indolent, ignorant, and debased as the race is under the dominion of strangers, the Indian even now is not incapable of fulfilling the obligations of a higher station than that in which his destiny has placed him. It is not true that he is fit only to labour with his hands; he has within him that which is capable of directing the labour of others... (Vol. 2, 69-70)

Most of the time throughout his pages, the Indians are seen as debased and degraded, and he does not seem to be very sympathetic to individuals. When he witnesses an Indian being whipped, he does not appear to be particularly shocked. His only comment is that “his whole bearing showed the subdued character of the present Indians, and with the last stripe the expression of his face seemed that of thankfulness for not getting more” (Vol. 1, 146). Stephens himself makes the Indians at his disposal work hard uncovering the ruins of invasive vegetation.

To Stephens, the present character and situation of the Indians is one more consequence of Spanish colonization, which broke the Indians’ spirit as well as it destroyed the ancient cities. Ethnic pride is definitely absent from the social relationships he describes:

I [...] worked my way through the plaza and through a crowd of Indians, who fell back in deference to the colour of my skin [...] natives of the land and lords of the soil, that strange people in whose ruined cities I had just been wandering, submitting quietly to the dominion of strangers, bound down and trained to the most abject submission, and looking up to the white man as a superior being. Could these be the descendants of that fierce people who had made such bloody resistance to the Spanish conquerors? (Vol. 1, 206-207)

Stephens is very condescending towards the Indians, especially because, according to him, “the accounts of the Indians were never reliable” (Vol. 2, 49), and they do not know anything about their past and about who may have built these cities. He recurrently laments “the indifference of the people of all classes to the antiquities of the country” (Vol. 1, 213).

In fact, however, they had nothing to communicate; they had no stories or traditions; they knew nothing of the origin of the ruined buildings; these were standing when they were born; had existed in the time of their fathers; and the old men said that they had fallen much within their own memory (Vol. 2, 61).

Yet, they do have stories and traditions to communicate. When they do, however, Stephens dismisses them as superstitions: in Zayi, the Indians “had the same superstitious feelings as the Indians of Uxmal; they believed that the

ancient buildings were haunted, and, as in the remote region of Santa Cruz del Quiché, they said that on Good Friday of every year music was heard sounding among the ruins” (Vol. 2, 28). This raises the question of Stephens’ attitude regarding indigenous knowledge. He writes: “To many of these structures the Indians have given names stupid, senseless, and unmeaning, having no reference to history or tradition” (Vol. 1, 395), a passage reminiscent of Christopher Columbus who concluded that the Indians he encountered could not speak because he could not understand their language.

This lack of understanding completely closes Stephens’ mind to the Indians’ worldview and leads him to totally disrespect and dismiss their positions and opinions about what he’s doing in sites which may sometimes be sacred. When he discovers a subterranean chamber, he proposes to climb down in it:

but the old Indian begged me not to do so, and said apprehensively to the others, “Who knows but that he will meet with the owner?” I immediately sent for rope, lantern, and matches; and, absurd as it may seem, as I looked upon the wild figures of the Indians standing round the hole, and their earnest face, it was really exciting to hear them talk of the owner. [...] the Indians kept up a low conversation around the hole. A mystery hung around it, transmitted to them by their fathers, and connected with an indefinable sense of apprehension. This mystery might have been solved at any time in five minutes, but none of them had ever thought of doing it, and the old man begged me to come out [...] Their simplicity and credulity seem hardly credible (Vol. 2, 57-58).

When he finds a skeleton, the Indians express their disagreement when they realize he wants to take it away:

The Indians were excited, and conversed in low tones. The cura interpreted what they said; and the burden of it was, “They are the bones of our kinsman,” and “What will our kinsman say at our dragging forth his bones?” But for the cura they would have covered them up and left the sepulcher (Vol. 1, 278; cf. also Vol. 1, 296-7).

In some instances, Stephens’s work in the ruins amounted purely and simply to cultural plundering: “being first on the ground, and having all at my choice, I of course selected only those objects which were most curious and valuable; and if I were to go over the whole ground again, I could not find others equal to them” (Vol. 1, 180).

Thus, as it happened often in similar cases of a Western explorer “discovering” ancient vestiges of an old civilization, there is a clear disconnection in Stephens’s mind between what he uncovers under the lush forest of Yucatan and his contemporary cultural and territorial environment. Although he explicitly links the Maya whom he meets and who work for him to the former inhabitants

of the ancient cities, he considers that they have been submitted by the Spanish empire to the point that they got disconnected from what defines their indigeneity, the deep cultural and spiritual connection to their land. At some point of his journey, on his way to the Lake of Peten, he has the hope of finding a mysterious city, still inhabited, which would have allowed him to connect past and present:

We were on the frontier of the inhabited part of Yucatan, and within a few leagues of the last village. Beyond was a wilderness, stretching off to the Lake of Peten, and that region of Lacandones, or unbaptized Indians, in which [...] lay that mysterious city never reached by a white man, but still occupied by Indians precisely in the same state as before the discovery of America. [...] among intelligent persons there was a universal belief that beyond the Lake of Peten there was a region of unconverted Indians of whom nothing was known. [...] I had some hope of being led on from place to place until we should reach a point which might unravel all mystery, and establish a connecting link between the past and present; but this hope was accompanied by a fear, and, perhaps fortunately for us, we did not hear of ruins beyond (Vol. 2, 191-192).

Here again, wilderness hides the truth, but this time, it may be for the best.

Fig. 9. Uxmal. Photo by author.

Conclusion

The paternalism imbued in Stephens's prose and attitude, his lack of consideration for indigenous knowledge and lack of respect for indigenous beliefs, his insistence on the damages that Spain caused on grand civilizations now

reduced to debased and degraded remnants are all unmistakable signs of a form of imperialism not unlike the one practiced by some travelling naturalists who, in the previous century, explored Native American territories that would be soon colonized. In the 1830s and 1840s, in the wake of the 1823 Monroe doctrine—which concealed imperialism under a protective guise on behalf of democracy—the young nations newly independent from Spain had to be either partly colonized—Texas, the Southwest area—or at least economically and politically rallied to the US cause.

The subjugation to Spain that remained in the people's mindset could be a problem for democracy to flourish:

These men were free and independent electors of the State of Yucatan, but one of them took in his hand Don Simon's foot, picked off the burrs, pulled off the shoe, cleaned the stocking, and, restoring the shoe, laid the foot back carefully in the hammock, and then took up the other. It was all done as a matter of course, and no one bestowed a thought upon it except ourselves (Vol. 1, 234-235).

The impression that Stephens conveys, whether he tackles politics and social issues or archeology and history, is that Yucatan needs the US to escape both the Spanish and the Mexican yoke.

Stephens's expedition was clearly culturally imperialistic, as one of the purposes of the expedition was to collect artifacts and bring them back to the United States, even if this implied more damages to the buildings Stephens saved from the vegetation, or more antagonism with the Indians, as over decorated lintels:

The next day I saw them, and determined immediately, at any trouble or cost, to carry them home with me; but this was no easy matter. Our operations created much discussion in the village. The general belief was that we were searching for gold. [...] The lintel consisted of two beams [...] and were as firmly secured as any stones in the building, having been built in when the wall was constructed. Fortunately, we had two crowbars [...] The beams were about ten feet long, and to keep the whole wall from falling and crushing them, it was necessary to knock away the stones over the centre (Vol. 1, 403-404).

If Stephens's work was key to the future discipline of archeology, this achievement certainly came with a drawback. Knowledge was indeed recorded for the benefit of all mankind, but without much consideration for indigenous knowledge, mistaken for ignorance.

John L. Stephens illustrates the paradox of the 19th-century enlightened Westerner: he understood the urgency of disclosing the ancient cities of the Maya to the world, but he had no respect for the indigeneity of the contemporary Maya.

Here, the term “indigeneity” has to be understood in the full sense of the particular connection one has with a land. It is a connection that turns a land into a landscape as defined notably by Michel Collot: « Le paysage n'est pas seulement un milieu naturel, mais un bien culturel, auquel sont attachés de multiples valeurs et significations, qui concernent aussi bien l'individu que la collectivité » (Collot 9). It is a connection born of an irrepressible urge to give meaning to the world one inhabits, as illustrated by the Kiowa's urge to give meaning to Devil's Tower: “Two centuries ago, because they could not do otherwise, the Kiowas made a legend at the base of the rock” (Momaday 8).¹ The land of Yucatan had meaning to the Maya that Stephens met and employed, but Stephens was blind to it. To him, Yucatecan past history and culture were plunged into darkness by both wilderness and wild notions of the debased inhabitants of the place. He had to clear the land of trees and indigenous meaning in order to bring them into light.

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1. Devil's Tower is a sacred mountain located in northwestern Wyoming. It was featured in Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

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Résumé : Le savoir scientifique du colonisateur et le savoir indigène se sont souvent trouvés en conflit l'un contre l'autre. À travers l'exemple de John L. Stephens, l'objectif de cette contribution est de comprendre les paradoxes que les scientifiques et naturalistes voyageurs ont incarnés dans leurs récits de voyages, une forme d'écriture extrêmement populaire aux 18^e et 19^e siècles. En 1841, John L. Stephens, un voyageur et diplomate américain, publie *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*, réédité douze fois en quinze ans. En 1843, il publie un ouvrage complémentaire, *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*. Selon plusieurs commentateurs du XX^e siècle, ces deux livres, illustrés par Frederick Catherwood, constituent le fondement de la recherche scientifique sur les Mayas. À l'époque des voyages de Stephens, une longue tradition de voyageurs naturalistes américains était établie. Pourtant, Stephens se démarquait par sa conception de la nature, qu'il voyait davantage comme un obstacle à la connaissance scientifique. En cela, il était en phase avec l'évolution de la perception de la nature aux États-Unis, dans le contexte de la conquête de l'Ouest, où la « wilderness » devait être apprivoisée afin de laisser place à la « civilisation ». Ses voyages reproduisirent le geste colonisatrice des explorateurs qui, aux siècles précédents, avaient exploré ce qui deviendrait les États-Unis. Il rencontra les populations locales et écouta leur savoir territorial, mais ne le prit guère en considération pour imposer plutôt sur les territoires explorés une vision états-unienne et colonisatrice. Le travail de Stephens illustre donc une ancienne ambiguïté, toujours actuelle, au cœur de l'exploitation des savoirs indigènes à travers le monde : la science libère en même temps des puissances d'émancipation et de soumission. Pour Stephens, la végétation luxuriante qui recouvre les vestiges mayas et le savoir de ses employés mayas ont un point commun : ils empêchent la science d'éclairer le monde.

Mots-clés : Maya, Yucatan, John L. Stephens, Frederick Catherwood, savoirs indigènes, voyageur naturaliste, récit de voyage

Abstract : Western scientific knowledge and indigenous knowledge have often been at odds. This paper aims to illustrate, through the example of John L. Stephens, the paradoxes that scientific travelers and traveling naturalists have embodied in the narratives they left of their travels, a form of writing that found huge audiences in the 18th and the 19th centuries. In 1841, John L. Stephens, a U.S. traveler and diplomat, published *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*, twelve editions of which were published in fifteen years. Two years later, he published a complementary work, *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*. These two books, both illustrated by Frederick Catherwood, are said to be the groundwork for Maya studies. At the time of Stephens's travels, there had been a long tradition in America of naturalist travelers. However, if Stephens was a traveler for sure, he was hardly a naturalist. As a matter of fact, to him vegetation was only an obstacle to overcome in order to uncover the ruins concealed underneath. As a typical 19th-century American explorer, Stephens did not see nature in any other way than a wilderness to conquer. Stephens reenacted the imperialist gesture that was at the time the national mantra at home. As a scientist coming from a colonizing nation travelling through a colonized one, he played a similar role that the 18th-century English naturalists played when they explored the territories that would become the United States. He encountered indigenous people and heard of their territorial knowledge, but dismissed it in order to impose his own Western and colonizing worldview. Thus, Stephens' work illustrates an old ambiguity that is not yet clarified today, as regards the exploitation of indigenous knowledge throughout the world: science wields power both of emancipation and of submission. In Stephens's work, one can see an equation between clearing out the vegetation off the ruins and subduing his Maya employee's knowledge of them. To the explorer, they both plunged science into darkness.

Keywords: Maya, Yucatan, John L. Stephens, Frederick Catherwood, Indigenous knowledge, naturalist traveler, travel narrative

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