

## II. Papers

### The First Congress on History of Archaeology in Latin América (México, 1984): between an Argentine *tango* and a Mexican *corrido*

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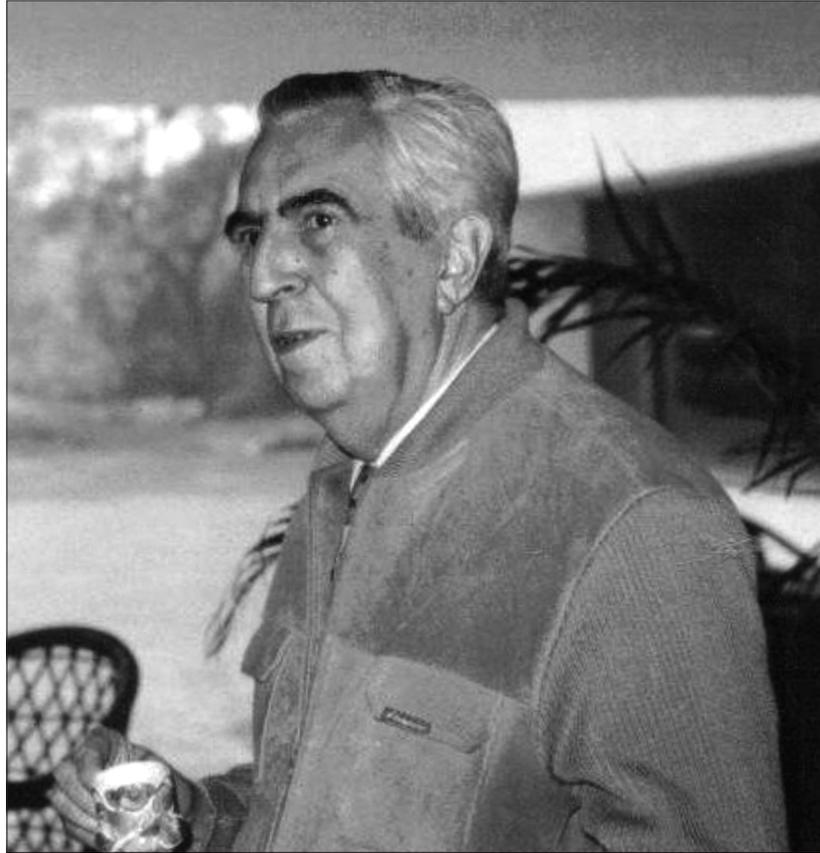
A *tango* is a type of traditional music that tells the story of a distressing and impossible love. Without a broken heart, a repentant *macho*, and without the narration of an unsuccessful love story, there is no real *tango*. A second usage of the word *tango* means an inadequate lie, that is, a lie about of some misfortune which is really an excuse for something else. The *corrido*, the contrary of *tango*, implies a violent altercation involving alcohol, with little opportunity for repentance or for the mourning of love, because when love is real, it is a matter of killing or dying. *Corrido* can also mean “to be thrown out, to be sent away”.

The following account includes abundant questions that have remained unanswered because there were no answers in sight. It is a story with no bad or good guys because no one knows whom, or where they were, a story where no one is guilty of anything, where everything dissolves, despite the remaining facts. Where, in the traditional Latin American way (so difficult for the Anglo-Saxon mentality to understand) these issues are resolved by “*what is your problem, my friend, if nothing has really happened here...!*” This is a good story about a congress of archaeology that took place twenty years ago in Mexico, that was rich in *tangos* and *corridos* in their both respective senses.

The lyrics of an Argentine *tango*, sung by the famous Carlos Gardel during one of the first Hollywood movies with sound, are “... *Si veinte años son nada...*” (... If twenty years is nothing...). The notion of twenty years ‘being nothing’, a mere blink, has similar meaning and consequence in the history of archaeology. More than twenty years has passed since the first meeting about the history of archaeology in Latin America took place, and few know that it ever happened. Given the fact that the proceedings were unpublished, it would be interesting to reconstruct this foundational event that some, for personal convenience, have preferred to erase from their memories.

The *Coloquio de la Arqueología en Mesoamérica: homenaje a Ignacio Bernal* was held at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), by the Institute of Anthropological Investigations, on January 30 and 31, and February 1, 1984. Jaime Litvak and I jointly organized this event. Its purpose was twofold: to discuss the history of the discipline, and to simultaneously pay homage to Ignacio Bernal, who was very ill at the time. Bernal was one of the founders of ‘scientific archaeology’ in Mexico and his career was rich in achievements. He was one of the founders, along with Alfonso Caso, Eusebio Dávalos and others, of the National Institute of Archaeology. He contributed to the building of the National Museum of Anthropology in Chapultepec. Bernal came from a powerful and traditional family, like that of Caso, and together Bernal and Caso created the monolithic power structure that still prevails in Mexican archaeology. Since he had retired from INAH, Bernal had been at home writing articles and a good book on the history of archaeology.

The truth is that Bernal, just like Alfonso Villa Rojas, Daniel Rubín de la Borbolla, Antonio Pompa y Pompa and Arturo Romano, among others, had been forcibly retired by INAH. In fact, considering



Ignacio Bernal

their age at the time, and under normal circumstances, they should have retired long before they did. But there was a strong generational, political and ideological shift in process. The political structure of INAH was cracking as a consequence of its own growth, and because of the new directions of young graduates from the School of Anthropology, as well as from the usual pressure from those who were attempting to occupy the already occupied senior positions in the organization. The exit of the generation of founders caused huge conflict, and gave way to long-term struggles for power among successors. As in such circumstances no one really knew who they were fighting against and ultimately, they all had an affiliation with the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party). And like so many other times in Mexico, no one was to blame for what was happening – it just happened. In the meantime, complete archives of archaeological information, such as those created by Bernal on Oaxaca, went missing, making the situation increasingly tense.

To some extent, Bernal's well-known book *Historia de la arqueología en México*<sup>1</sup> was written to explain the history of a science he had personally helped to establish, and to justify the role he had played in that history. Ultimately, as an evolutionist history, Bernal and his contemporaries were the end and apogee of such a great history, and they had established the issues that really mattered in the history of Mexican archaeology. It was a great book.

In the end, whether consciously or unconsciously, or with or without a plan, all of the old retired INAH researchers were invited to work at the Institute of Anthropological Investigations (IAI) at UNAM in the early 1980s. The IAI was created by Jaime Litvak, to compete with INAH, and for many in those years, it was regarded as INAH's only rival, a parallel structure challenging INAH's monopoly of absolute power. Bernal only actively worked there from 1980 until the end of 1982. He

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<sup>1</sup> Ignacio Bernal, *Historia de la arqueología en México*, Editorial Porrúa, Mexico, 1979; this was among his greatest works, never published by the INAH.

was already 70 years old when he started at IAI, and he was forced to retire from it after only two years due to ill health. While the presence of Villa Rojas, Romano, Pompa, Bernal and others at IAI caused a lot of criticism from many in Mexican anthropology, for a few it was regarded as beneficial. For some, the battle with Marxist notions had been lost, and had replaced them. For others, it was the increase in UNAM's power that grated, and for the rest it was the proper acknowledgement of those who had been so difficult to depose. In short... each group chose the interpretation that suited them best.

In this context, and even with the presence of Bernal, I thought that it would be possible to achieve the two aims of the congress, that is, to pay Bernal some kind of homage, and to bring together the few scholars interested in the subject matter of his recent book on the history of Mexican archaeology. Litvak agreed to organize the event, which was to include three scholars invited from abroad: Gordon Willey, Lawrence Desmond<sup>2</sup>, and Keith Davis<sup>3</sup>, as their books and research had greatly contributed to this subject at that time. Other participants were Elizabeth Baquedano, Fernando Cámara Barbachano, Marcia Castro Leal, Daniel Rubin de la Borbolla, Beatriz de la Fuente, Manuel Gandara, Joaquin Garcia Barcena, Paul Gendrop, José Luis Lorenzo, Leonardo Manrique, Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, Augusto Molina, Julio Cesar Olive, John Paddock, Jose Perez Gollan, Antonio Pompa, Arturo Romano and Alfonso Villa Rojas, together with Litvak and myself. Gordon Willey, who submitted a paper, encountered last minute travel problems, but his paper was both translated and read. Subsequently all of the papers were compiled into a volume with a foreword written by the editors, which thereafter entered some kind of a 'parallel universe' and was never published.

It is true that Mexican bureaucracy, like Kafka's literature, is not always easy to understand, but it is real. Everyone who had contributed a paper to the congress saw the collection of papers but in the end no one actually had a copy of it, and no one was responsible for it. Over time, several of the papers were published elsewhere. Those by Baquedano, Schavelzon, de la Fuente and Matos were integrated into their later books<sup>4</sup>. Gordon Willey's paper had mysteriously disappeared, including all of the photocopies of it. There were a number of articles on the legacy of Bernal, on the origins of the congress<sup>5</sup>, as well as several reviews<sup>6</sup> of Bernal's book and its subject, the history of Mexican archaeology.

Now that many of those who attended the congress have died, we can state that history of archaeology in Mexico was written by those who were directly involved in it. At the congress twenty-three lectures were delivered. At that time the scenario set by Gordon Willey was unfolding, one in which the archaeologists who were doing archaeology in the second half of the twentieth century also wrote its history, describing themselves as the final stage in the evolution of archaeological knowledge, superior to the preceding stages. Curtis Hinsley<sup>7</sup> has already described this history writing

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<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Desmond and Phyllis Messenger, *A Dream of Maya: Auguste and Alice Le Plongeon in XIXth Century Yucatán*, University of Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1988, with a foreword by Jaime Litvak.

<sup>3</sup> Keith Davis, *Désiré Charnay, expeditionary photographer*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1981.

<sup>4</sup> Such was the case with Eduardo Matos', which turned into *Las Piedras Negadas: de la Coatlicue al Templo Mayor*, Consejo Nacional para la Ciencia y la Cultura, México, 1998; Daniel Schávelzon, La primera excavación arqueológica de América: Teotihuacan en 1675, *Anales de Antropología*, vol. XX, no. 1, pp. 121–134, UNAM, México, 1983.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Schávelzon, La contribución científica de Ignacio Bernal: bibliografía, in *Boletín de la Escuela de Ciencias Antropológicas de la Universidad de Yucatán*, no. 81, pp. 20–34, Mérida, México, 1986.

<sup>6</sup> Juan A. Siller, Historia de la arqueología en Mesoamérica, *Cuadernos de Arquitectura Mesoamericana*, no. 2, pp. 93–94, México, 1984.

<sup>7</sup> Curtis Hinsley, Revising and Revisioning the History in Region and Context, in *Tracing Archaeology's Past* (A. Christenson, edit.), Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, 1989, pp. 79–96; quoted after Curtis M. Hinsley, Antropología e identidad nacional: reflexiones acerca de los Estados Unidos en el siglo XIX, in *La historia de la antropología en México: fuentes y transmisión* (M. Rutsch, comp.), Universidad Iberoamericana, pp. 17–35, Mexico, 1993.

as typical of an age and a process undertaken by 'elderly protagonists of the different disciplines, partly as a retirement pastime, partly as fragments of their memories or perhaps as definite words on old disputes'. And such a process was not new in Mexico, as anthropology, which was undergoing a severe crisis, had done something similar four years earlier regarding the history of the National School of Anthropology and History<sup>8</sup>, when each generation had recorded their work, struggles and experiences<sup>9</sup>. Mexican ethnology had long before gone down the same path with its monumental *Historia de la etnología*<sup>10</sup>, by Angel Palerm, which remained unfinished at the time of his death.

So was the First Congress on History of Archaeology in Latin América in 1984 the beginning or the ending of different phases in Mexican archaeology? Did it mark any changes? Was it the beginning of the writing of a true history of Mexican archaeology? It was intended to be the beginning of a different view of the history of archaeology, a way of describing the past using techniques more able to ascertain unknown details. It was a past where everything was more heterogeneous and confusing, rife with more controversies and struggles for power than those described in Bernal's pioneering book. There could have been a new way of describing it. But in reality many of the papers were largely only the memories of participants looking back on their times and accomplishments. We see now that in spite of this, some of those who attended the congress began to produce studies specialising on the history of archaeology. It was indeed a time we can today consider as 'foundational' for Latin American archaeology in general and for Mexican archaeology in particular, a time when 'the Great Founding Fathers' of the discipline completed their work and made way for those who were coming next.

From today's perspective the fact that the papers from the congress were not published can only increase interest in them. The congress and its outcome were suspended in time, caused firstly, by my return later that same year to Argentina after a ten years in Mexico, and secondly, because the file with the original congress texts has only just fortuitously reappeared and been located in the archives at INAH. From today's perspective this latter event, and the initial disappearance of this congress publication-to-be, can be regarded as the probable result of the power struggles between two institutions. In 1985 we were informed 'off the record' that some INAH officials considered the congress as 'outrageous', notwithstanding the fact that several members of the same institution had participated in it. They considered that the founders of the INAH could have been left out of the congress, and they thought that UNAM had hired them as a charitable act, and that the organization of any homage to Bernal was a political error.

Much later in 1997, after Bernal's death, INAH decided to publish its own homage<sup>11</sup> to him, in which the history of Mexican archaeology was a minimal part of the volume. This book was quickly published and included Willey's lost text, in the same form that had been submitted and read at the original and first congress in 1984, but with no bibliographical references<sup>12</sup>. The only other paper included in this new book that had already been presented was that by Marcia Castro Leal about the National Museum of Mexico. Except for these details, the new book completely ignored the 1984 congress and the previous attempt to publish its papers. A new and complete bibliography about the work of Bernal was prepared. In this new published homage to Bernal, only a single citation by Eusebio Dávalos referred, in three lines, to the 1984 congress<sup>13</sup>. Needless to say, no other citations

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<sup>8</sup> *Cuatro décadas de la Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia*, ENAH-INAH, México, 1982.

<sup>9</sup> Julio César Olivé Negrete, *La antropología mexicana*, Colegio Mexicano de Antropólogos, México, 1981.

<sup>10</sup> Angel Palerm, *Historia de la Etnología*, SEP-INAH, México, vol. 1, 1974, and vol. .. 1976.

<sup>11</sup> *Homenaje al doctor Ignacio Bernal*, L. Manrique y N. Castillo (coord.), INAH, México, 1997.

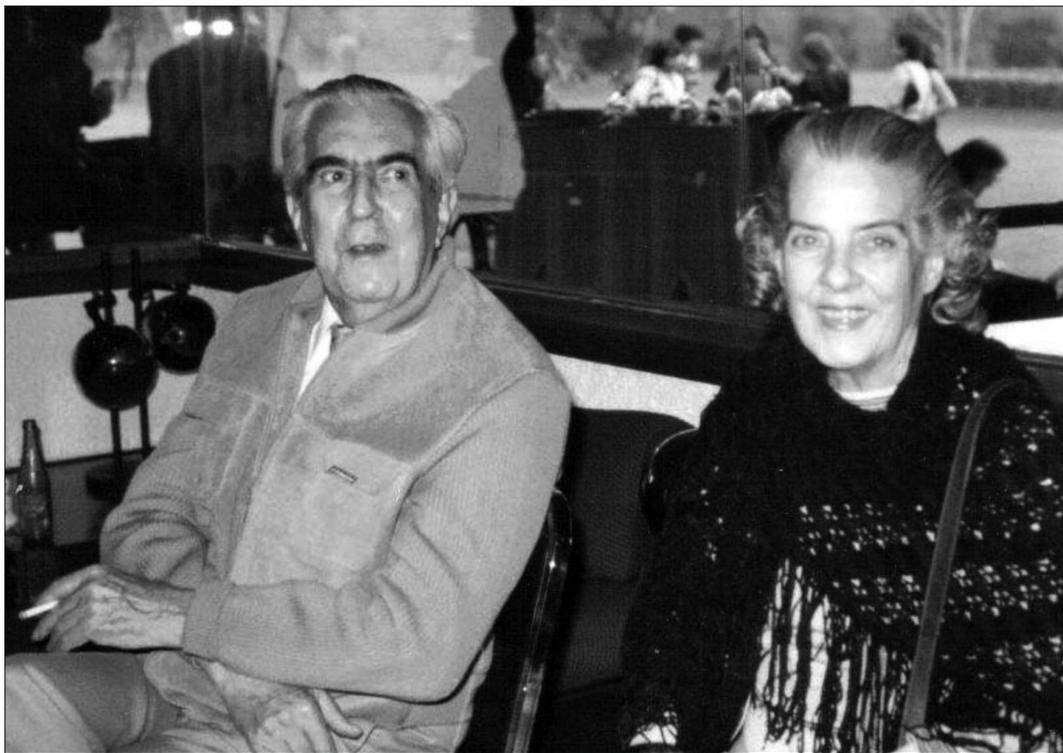
<sup>12</sup> Gordon Willey, *Mesoamerican Archaeology: 1950–1980*, *Homenaje al doctor Ignacio Bernal*, pp. 95–112, INAH, México, 1997 (the citations and bibliography remained in the hands of the translator).

<sup>13</sup> Wigberto Jiménez Moreno, *Semblanza del Dr. Ignacio Bernal*, *Homenaje al doctor Ignacio Bernal*, pp. 19–27, INAH, México, 1997; citation page 27.

appeared in subsequent publications. This constitutes one of those ‘significant silences’ in Mexican anthropology, and probably in anthropology worldwide, one of certain numbers of things not to be mentioned, that are to be kept silent about for a whole variety of reasons<sup>14</sup>. It was just another expression of the struggle for power and identity between archaeologists about the predominance of their institutions over one another, and the interpretation of their own history. Twenty years later, INAH and UNAM published a homage to Jaime Litvak, that coincidentally, was published in an identical format that of Bernal<sup>15</sup>.

Today, and in the attempt to create a better history of archaeology, we understand that these conflicts and events, both remembered and forgotten, are a part of the history of archaeology, or at least part of the history that has survived in writing, while others faded away. Can anyone be blamed? Yes, definitely. But no one can prove that the proceedings were stolen, that they were then reused as it was seen fit, or even that they were moved from one institution to the other. No one knows or remembers anything and so nothing has happened.

One final anecdote. Bernal was a few minutes late to the opening ceremony of the 1984 congress. There were so many attending that the participants had sat on the floor blocking the entrance and occupying all the available room. In his wheelchair Bernal watched the entire event, for hours, from behind a half-opened door. That indeed, may have been significant.



Ignacio Bernal and his wife

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<sup>14</sup> Leonardo Manrique, Comentario, in *La historia de la antropología en México: fuentes y transmisión* (M. Rutsch, comp.), Universidad Iberoamericana, pp. 325–331, México, 1993.

<sup>15</sup> A. Benavides, L. Manzanilla y L. Miranbell (coord.), *Homenaje a Jaime Litvak*, INAH (published jointly with UNAM), México, 2004.