

Missionary and Mercantile Colonialism in Alta and Baja California

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In the summer of 2005, archaeological work was initiated at the historic Dominican mission of Santa Catalina in Baja California. The project is a collaboration between the University of California at Berkeley, el Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH), the Native Cultures Institute of Baja California (CUNA), and the indigenous community of Santa Catarina. The purposes of this paper are twofold. One is to present the broader theoretical framework in which the research at Mission Santa Catalina is situated. The archaeological investigation will be integrated into a broader comparative program that is examining the diverse practices of colonialism in Baja and Alta California and the implications they had on Native Californian peoples. The other purpose is to outline briefly the field strategy and preliminary results of our first season of fieldwork at Mission Santa Catalina.

The archaeology of colonialism in the Californias

The research at Santa Catalina is part of a broader program that is examining the long-term implications of European and other forms of colonization on indigenous populations along the Pacific coast of North America. We believe that a broader comparative approach to the archaeology of colonialism in Alta and Baja California presents an unparalleled opportunity to examine the effects that Spanish, Mexican, Russian and American colonization had on coastal hunter-gatherer peoples. Nowhere in the world have hunter-gatherer societies been subjected to a greater range of colonial programs than in the two Californias. Here Native peoples became entangled in three separate mission systems, a fur trade outpost, and a variety of military and secular settlements. What makes the Californias particularly attractive for the study of the processes and implications of colonialism is that they are spatially intermediate between the intensive Russian and British mercantile programs of the Northwest Coast and the classic Spanish and Mexican missionary and secular programs in mainland Mexico.

The three mission systems, founded and administered by Jesuit, Franciscan, and Dominican fathers, incorporated thousands of Indian people into more than 50 distinct mission settlements across Baja California and southern and central Alta California. Although Catholicism was practiced in all three mission systems, each one differed in how its padres attempted to convert and civilize the Indian neophytes under their charge. Native people were also subjected to Spanish (and later Mexican) secular colonial policies as implemented in the presidios, pueblos, and ranchos. Other Pacific coast hunter-gatherers became entangled with Russian merchants at Colony Ross in Alta California, worked on Anglo-American ranches and/or were herded into American government Indian reservations.

Our study of colonialism is focusing, at this time, on the comparison of the missionary and mercantile colonial programs in Baja and Alta California (Figure 1). There are three primary research issues guiding our program of study. The first issue is delineating the colonial programs

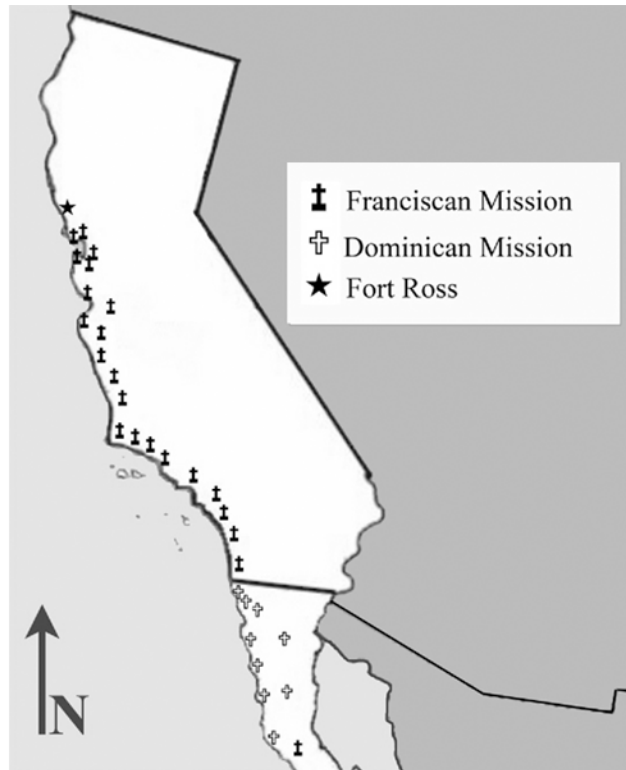


Figure 1. Franciscan and Dominican missions in Alta and Baja California.

of the three missionary systems and Colony Ross. What were the goals of the colonizers and how were specific administrative organizations and policies established to meet these goals? We are particularly interested in how the policies and practices concerning the control and treatment of Indian populations differed within the various missionary and mercantile settlements.

The second issue is examining the diverse kinds of social interactions that took place between the colonizers and the colonized. Throughout Alta and Baja California, the majority of the “colonists” were not Europeans, but rather other Native peoples, mestizos, or mulattos from northern Mexico, or they were Native peoples (especially Native Alaskans) or people of mixed Native and Russian ancestry from the north Pacific. How did these non-European colonial people relate to local Native Californians? What happened to these foreigners after the collapse of the colonial settlements: did they return home, disappear or contribute to the roots of our contemporary multiethnic population of the Californias?

The third issue concerns the long-term implications of Native Californians who became integrated into the missionary and mercantile settlements. How did Native peoples negotiate the colonial structures and cultural practices of the missionary and mercantile settlements? And how did these varied colonial experiences help shape the identities, organizations and cultural practices of contemporary California Indians on both sides of the international border?

Colony Ross

The cornerstone of our comparative program is Colony Ross. Established in 1812 by the Russian-American Company, Colony Ross was the southernmost settlement of a chain of Russian colonies that stretched across the north Pacific. As Russia’s official agent in the

lucrative maritime fur trade, the Russian-American Company founded Colony Ross as a convenient place to mount expeditions to harvest sea otters and other marine mammals from California waters. The location was also selected for its agricultural potential and proximity to the Franciscan missions of Alta California. The Russians traded merchandise to the missions for foodstuffs that were then shipped to their colonies in the north Pacific. Colony Ross was a relatively short-lived phenomenon, lasting only 29 years before its doors closed in 1841 due to significant financial losses with the extermination of the local sea otter population and relatively meager agricultural production.

For more than 15 years, Colony Ross has been the centerpiece of our attempt to develop an integrated approach to the study of colonialism. In close collaboration with the local Kashaya Pomo Indian tribe and California State Parks, we are employing the holistic approach of historical anthropology that takes a long-term diachronic perspective that spans from prehistory through colonial times to the present. Historical anthropology involves the integration of detailed analyses of historical archives, archaeological research, and Native narratives. We are experimenting with an archaeological program that involves survey, detailed topographic mapping, geophysical survey, intensive surface collection, and selected excavation. Collaboration with local Indian tribes is a critical part of the program, as they may provide important information from oral traditions that present an “Indian” view of the past.

Comparative approach

Our approach to the study of colonialism involves the integrated use of historical sources, archaeological findings, and Native narratives to define seven dimensions of colonial encounters that serve as common variables in the comparative analysis. These dimensions consider the enculturation practices, resettlement plans, social organizations and labor systems of the different colonial programs, as well as the nature of the inter-ethnic relationships, demographic parameters and chronology of encounters that unfolded in specific colonial contexts. The seven variables structured a detailed comparison of Colony Ross with the Franciscan missions of Alta California. The comparative analysis highlighted some of the differences in how Indians were integrated into the mercantile and missionary programs, and how these differences may have influenced the outcomes of colonial encounters in Alta California.

For example, at Colony Ross, the commercial agenda of the Russian-American Company involved no concerted efforts to enculturate local natives in Russian values, meanings, or lifeways. Indian laborers were supposedly paid for their work, and the Russians exerted little effort to resettle Native villages, so long as Indians were available for work when needed. Although the treatment of Indian neophytes varied greatly within the 21 Franciscan missions, a fundamental purpose of this missionary enterprise was to transform the population of pagan Native Californians into a peasant class of devout Catholics. A stringent enculturation program was initiated by padres to teach neophytes the Catholic faith, European crafts and trades, and new subsistence practices.

The Franciscans implemented in some, but not all the missions, the *reducción* or movement of Native settlements to the centrally placed mission settlements, where they worked as part of communal labor system. Given the limitation of time, we cannot describe the results of this comparison here, which are outlined in detail elsewhere (Lightfoot 2005); but we can say that key differences in the mercantile and missionary colonial programs appear to have played critical roles in shaping diverse outcomes for the Indian communities in Alta California.

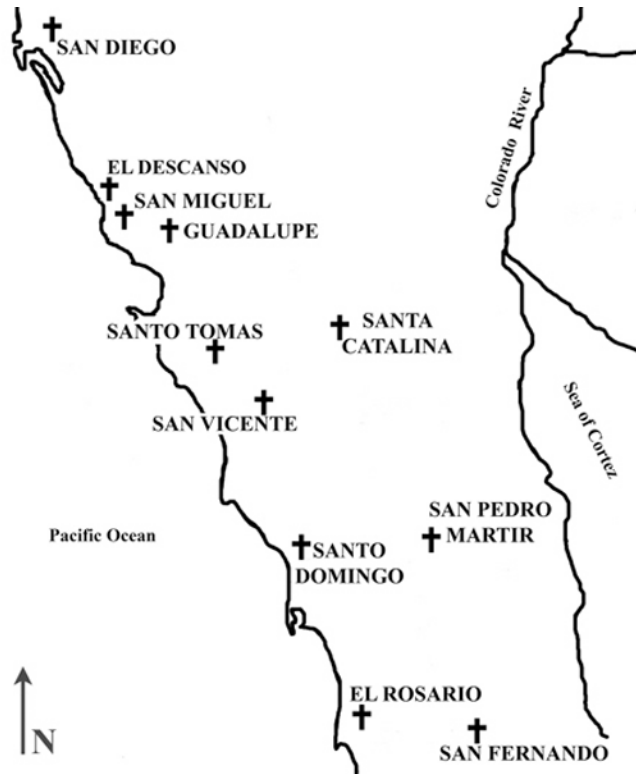


Figure 2. Missions of northern Baja California and vicinity.

Dominican missions in Baja California

The next major phase in our comparative program is to examine critically the Dominican missions of Baja California. Our plan is to compare the colonial encounters at Colony Ross with selected Franciscan missions of Alta California and selected Dominican missions of Baja California, using the seven dimensions. To provide the basic information needed to undertake this comparison, we have initiated work at Mission Santa Catalina in northern Baja California (Figure 2). The remains of this mission are located in the indigenous community of Santa Catarina, which is comprised mainly of Paipai families, although the mission itself likely incorporated individuals from various groups of Native Californians, including the Paipai, Kiliwa, and Kumeyaay. Established in 1797 by Dominican friars, the mission was originally part of the Spanish effort to expand the Dominican frontier toward the Colorado River in an attempt to forge an overland connection between the Californias and the rest of mainland Mexico (Mason 1978:277; Meigs 1935:119). Over time, this plan was abandoned, and Mission Santa Catalina remained on the margins of the Dominican mission system in Baja California.

Following the comparative approach outlined above, this research will address questions of how missionization affected long-term cultural change among the Paipai and other neighboring groups. We will also examine the how the multiple dimensions of colonial encounters unfolded on the Dominican frontier in Baja California, and how the colonial experiences of native groups from this region compare to those who lived and worked at other colonial outposts in the Californias.

The particular cultural and historical milieu of Mission Santa Catalina provides great potential for this type of research. Like the other Dominican missions in Baja California, Santa

Catalina is roughly contemporaneous with the Franciscan missions of Alta California, as well as the Russian Colony at Ross. Santa Catalina also mirrors the conditions of many of the colonial outposts in Alta and Baja California in that it was located on the fringes of a European colonial empire. Santa Catalina was originally home to a relatively large group of around 20 colonial soldiers as well as one or two missionaries (Mason 1978:279). Over time, however, the direct colonial presence declined sharply, and by the 1820s, Santa Catalina was just one of four missions administered by a single missionary (Nieser 1960:280). This likely had important implications for the loosely related Native Californian groups who comprised the diverse neophyte population at Santa Catalina, especially in terms of the Dominican enculturation program. Based on historic and ethnographic reports, it appears that these groups continued many of their traditional subsistence strategies and other cultural practices during and after the mission period (e.g., Hohenthal 2001; Jöel 1976; Meigs 1935; Owen 1969). A major component of this project, then, will be to examine archaeological materials that offer glimpses into the lives of the neophyte population. Faunal and botanical remains, for example, can be used to reconstruct diet, and these types of remains as well as obsidian artifacts and ceramics provide information about social networks that existed both within and outside of the mission community.

To assess the archaeological potential of the site of Mission Santa Catalina, preliminary fieldwork of the Proyecto Arqueológico Santa Catarina (PASC) was begun in the summer of 2005. This work lasted four weeks and can be divided into four research phases, including site mapping, geophysical survey, systematic surface collection and limited test excavations.

One of the primary objectives of the project was to create site map using an electromagnetic distance measurement (EDM) mapping system (Figure 3). In addition to a detailed topographic base map, the EDM was also used to map other aspects of Mission Santa Catalina, including individual rooms, mission walls, and modern disturbances. The mapping phase also helped to locate and estimate the extent of two significant midden features just beyond the northeast and southwest walls of the mission. These middens are recognizable by their dark, humic soils, scattered bone fragment, and ceramic and lithic artifacts. They offer tantalizing evidence of daily activities and possible neophyte habitation in close proximity to the mission.

A second important component of our fieldwork was geophysical prospection. A survey involving the use of a Geometrics G-858 cesium gradiometer was conducted to detect mission walls and other anomalous subsurface features associated with the site. In total, an area roughly 100 by 100 m was mapped using the gradiometer. When overlaid with our other site maps, results from the gradiometer survey contribute to a clearer picture of the site, including wall fall areas, individual room blocks, and activity areas both inside and outside of the main mission quadrangle.

The third and fourth phases of the project were conducted during the remaining two weeks of the field season. This involved approximately one week of surface collection and one week of sampling from six test excavation units. Using a systematic unaligned sampling strategy, we collected artifacts from a total of 103 2-by-2-m surface collection units in order to understand the spatial distribution of artifacts across the site and to distinguish different use areas. We also conducted test excavations in three areas of the site. We excavated two 1-by-1-m test units: one near the center mission quadrangle, and one in the midden outside the mission's northeastern wall. These units were designed to test areas of the site that showed high densities of surface artifacts as well as subsurface magnetic anomalies. Four additional 0.5-by-1-m test excavation

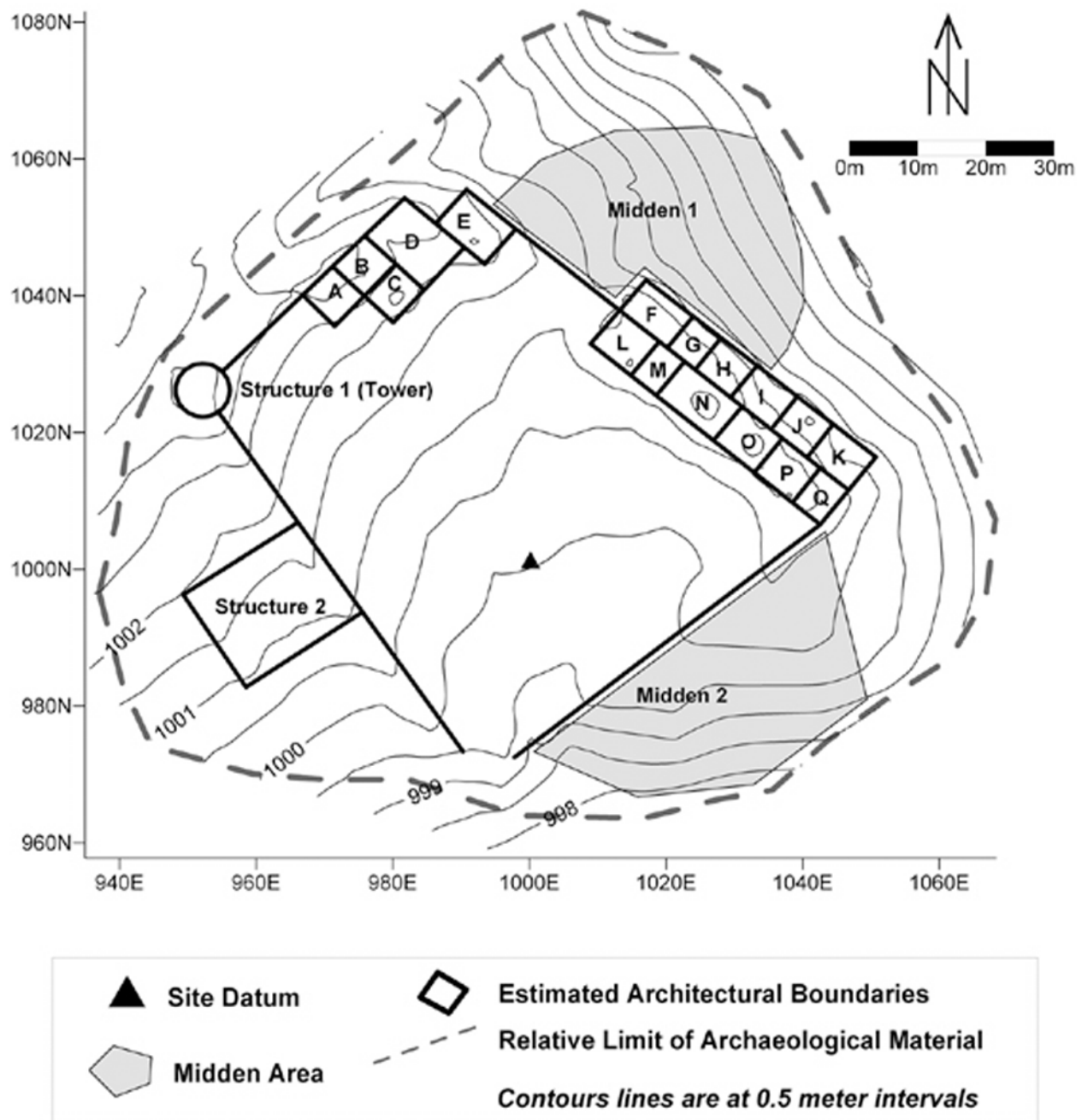


Figure 3. Site map of Mission Santa Catalina.

units were placed consecutively across a room wall in the northwest corner of the mission to gain an understanding of the mission architecture, wall fall, and site deposition (Figure 4).

The majority of the artifacts from the surface collection and test excavations were Tizon Brownware ceramic sherds, which show similarities to contemporary Paipai pottery. We also encountered large amounts of animal bone, lithic artifacts and burned wood, as well as smaller numbers of colonial objects such as metal, beads and ceramics such as Mexican majolica, Chinese porcelain and British whitewares. In all, the artifacts recovered from initial test excavations and surface collection units provide an excellent foundation for refining future



Figure 4. Excavation at Mission Santa Catalina.

excavation efforts, and will hopefully shed light on the cultural practices and social networks that shaped life at Mission Santa Catalina. Although we have not yet finished a detailed analysis of the artifacts from this field season, a preliminary examination of these objects suggests the continuation of traditional technology by mission neophytes as well as the incorporation of European goods into a hybrid native economy.

While we begin to synthesize the data collected during this first year of fieldwork at Santa Catalina, we are looking forward to expanding our investigation, not just through more extensive excavations, but also through examining relevant historical documents and indigenous oral traditions. We were honored to be the guests of the community of Santa Catarina this summer, and we hope that as our relationship develops we can contribute to the ongoing plans to develop the site of Mission Santa Catalina in a way that serves the needs of the community while simultaneously protecting this important cultural and historical resource (Wilken 2001). Similarly, we are grateful to the INAH for allowing us to conduct this research. We anticipate a long and fruitful exchange of ideas as we position our research among the ongoing historical and archaeological investigations of the Franciscan and Dominican frontiers that is currently being undertaken by scholars on both sides of the border.

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