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# Cultural Identity and Continuity at the Missions of New Spain: Examining the Native American Experience at the Spanish Missions of Texas

William E. Altizer

*Abstract: The Roman Catholic missions of New Spain were an essential component of the Spanish colonial enterprise, and the effects of the missionization process on the Native American populations of the Americas were profound. How did these native populations respond to the new imperatives of colonization and religious conversion? In what ways were they able to maintain their cultural identity under the mission system? This paper examines the ways in which archaeology can address these questions of cultural continuity, with particular emphasis on the eighteenth-century Spanish missions of San Antonio, Texas.*

## *Introduction*

One of the most important components of the Spanish colonial presence in the Americas was the network of missions, outposts operated by a number of Roman Catholic religious orders tasked with the conversion and indoctrination of the Native American inhabitants of new Spanish territory. From the early days of Spanish colonization in the sixteenth century through widespread secularization at the end of the eighteenth century, these missions played a critical role in establishing the Spanish presence in the New World. To the native inhabitants, the missions represented a profound change in their traditional ways of life. For some groups, disease ravaged their newly concentrated populations; many, like the Coahuiltecan hunter-gatherers of South Texas, did not long survive the missionization process (Newcomb 1961).

Archaeological research at these Spanish mission sites has the potential to reveal a great deal about the details of day-to-day life for both Spanish settlers and Native Americans under the Spanish regime.

Of particular interest is the issue of native cultural identity and cultural continuity within the mission context. Native American tribes were forcibly separated from their accustomed lifeways and immersed in what must have seemed like baffling agricultural and (especially) religious practices. How would they have held on to their own conceptions of identity under these circumstances? Can matters of identity and cultural continuity be detected in the archaeological record? This paper represents an initial exploration of these questions, beginning with a look at the field of mission archaeology. I pay particular attention to the work of David Hurst Thomas, an archaeologist who has approached his investigations of the missions of La Florida with a sensitivity to questions of cultural identity. This is followed by a brief discussion of theoretical issues raised by archaeologist Elizabeth Graham based on her work in Mesoamerica. My own interest is focused on the eighteenth-century missions of south-central Texas, particularly those in San Antonio. I will introduce these missions within the context of the role Spanish missions have played in the national historical imagination, and conclude with a case study from Rancho de las Cabras, one of the ranches associated with the San Antonio missions.

### *Mission Archaeology*

Mission archaeology has a rich and distinguished history; indeed, missions were among the first historic sites to which archaeologists turned their attention in the early twentieth century (Thomas 1991). Although mission investigations have sometimes been driven by the needs of reconstruction efforts (a theme that will be explored further below), a number of excavations stand out as attempts to understand issues of culture contact and Native American cultural identity within the context of the mission experience. The work of David Hurst Thomas at the site of Santa Catalina is a prime example of this kind of mission archaeology (Thomas 1988).

Between 1981 and 1988, Thomas (1988) led a series of excavations at the site of Mission Santa Catalina on St. Catherine's Island, Georgia. One of the Franciscan missions in the Spanish province of La Florida, Santa Catalina was established among the local Guale population in the late sixteenth century and abandoned by the 1680s (Thomas 1988). Although nothing remained standing of the mission complex, Thomas and his team managed to locate and plot the outlines of most of the mission buildings, in the process uncovering a great deal about mission layout and construction as well as the subsistence patterns and material culture of the inhabitants.

Of particular interest in terms of cultural identity and cultural continuity are the graves discovered within the site of the mission church. All told, some 400 to 450 individuals were buried under the church, accompanied by a profusion of grave goods (Thomas 1988). These grave goods are interesting because of the rich quality which is uncharacteristic of Spanish graves of this period as well as the sheer quantity of religious artifacts recovered. Among the grave goods were

12 crosses of metal and wood, 10 small glass and gold leaf cruciform ornaments, 10 bronze religious medals, 1 gold medallion, 1 silver medallion, 2 mirrors, 15 finger rings, 2 hawk bells, 1 rosary, 8 shroud pins, 2 copper plaque fragments, 1 clay tablet (with depictions of saints on both sides), a large piece of shroud cloth, and glass trade beads numbering (at least) in the tens of thousands [Thomas 1988:99].

Since, according to Thomas (1988), “simple pauperlike burials” devoid of grave goods were the common Spanish custom of the seventeenth century, how can the Santa Catalina burials be explained? Thomas suggests that what these grave goods represent is essentially the physical manifestation of one stage of the missionization process. To understand this explanation, it is important to understand the common stages of the typical Spanish colonial mission enterprise.

### *The Missionization Process*

Initial Spanish contact with native populations was typically an event referred to as an *entrada*, and was marked by ostentatious displays of military power (by the *conquistadores*) and religious majesty (by the missionaries) (Thomas 1988). In this way, the Spanish hoped to overawe native populations and impress upon them the irresistible might of the Spanish crown and the Spanish church. After this first contact, a mission would be established among the native inhabitants with the financial support of the Spanish government. The local settlements were often moved to the vicinity of the mission, or else scattered bands (like those of the Coahuiltecan of South Texas) were consolidated and introduced to village life.

The friars taught the natives agriculture and Spanish customs, and inculcated them in the mysteries of the Roman Catholic faith. This second stage of the missionization process, the stage of the mission proper, was marked by a rich visual presentation of religious imagery (Thomas 1988). In this way, the natives were continually surrounded

by tangible representations of their new faith, daily visual reminders that would become less necessary over time as the natives internalized Christian beliefs and no longer needed to be reminded of them.

The third stage of the process, secularization, involved the shutting down of the missions, the distribution of mission lands to individual natives, and the conversion of the former mission churches to local parish churches (Thomas 1988). The hope was that by this time the neophytes would have become more or less agrarian Spanish peasants and that the need for the active teaching and guidance offered by the missionaries was at an end.

This, of course, was an idealized sequence of events; the “official” estimate of ten years between mission founding and secularization was seldom a reality. In any event, Thomas (1988) sees this process as providing an explanation for the graves at Santa Catalina. In particular, he believes that the graves represent neophytes (new religious converts) who died during the second, or mission-proper, phase of the process. The elaborate grave goods, largely of a religious and iconic character, suggest that the natives at this time were living in an environment rich in visual reminders of their new faith. The religious medallions are well crafted and individually produced, and presumably carry a more significant religious content than mass-produced Jesuit rings, for example, which have been found in parts of northern North America and which have more of the quality of trade goods (Thomas 1988). If the custom for the native Guale groups was to be buried with grave goods, the friars could have allowed them to do so within the mission context provided that those grave goods were Roman Catholic religious items. It is an interesting hypothesis, and suggests another avenue of expression for native cultural identity within the mission context and the way that identity, as manifested through the material expression of religious beliefs, was changing over time to become a more syncretic, multifaceted concept.

### *Religious Conversion and the Mission Experience*

Elizabeth Graham (1998), an archaeologist at York University in Ontario, used her work in Belize as a starting point from which to examine the field of mission archaeology in general (for a discussion of some of these issues from the perspective of an eminent Borderlands historian see Weber 1992a:115-120). In her view, a persistent weakness of this field is its lack of focus on the dynamics and complexities of religious conversion on the part of Native Americans. Specifically, Graham sees a persistent binary conception of acceptance/rejection of Christianity that oversimplifies the case. Many

accounts, she writes, portray the missions as components of a Spanish hegemonic system and the missionaries as agents of political domination. This they certainly were, but they had other roles and meanings as well. Graham argues that the missionaries were attempting to change the native “cultural imagination”, or as she puts it, undertake a “restructuring of the native conceptual universe” (1998:28). Christianity was introduced to the native imagination, which then reimagined it in a new fashion, resulting in not just a creolization of customs and a mixing of gods, but a new intellectual synthesis.

Along the same lines, Graham (1998) sees a persistent representation of the Christianity brought by the Spanish as a static monolith, a mass of unchanging and unadulterated beliefs. Native Americans were then offered the false choice of “denying” or “accepting” this European construct in its entirety or in part. Such an account, she argues, ignores the fact that Christianity was in many ways already syncretic in nature, an amalgamation of local European customs that were integrated into the faith as it spread across Europe. Interpretations of mission archaeological remains that fail to consider these issues, Graham concludes, are in danger of missing the very real complexity of culture contact in the mission context.

### *The Missions of San Antonio*

The missions of San Antonio, Texas, provide an interesting avenue of inquiry because by and large they have not been explored as fully as missions in other areas of North America. To understand why this is the case, it is necessary to briefly discuss the history of the mission, with its attendant evocation of the heritage of Spanish colonialism, within the American popular imagination. As David Hurst Thomas (1991) points out, the missions of California and the Southwest, particularly their atmospheric ruins, have since the late nineteenth century been appropriated as romantic symbols of America’s Hispanic past (also Weber 1992b). Beginning particularly around the time of the 1893 Columbian Exposition, missions were adopted as elements of a mythic image often at odds with the realities of the Spanish colonial period. This image was further popularized during the early twentieth century through the development of Mission Revival architecture in California, the Southwest, and elsewhere. As for the highly visible remnants of the mission buildings themselves, reconstructions (sometimes fanciful) along with architecturally-driven archaeological projects were often undertaken in an effort to “restore” these structures to their perceived Spanish-era grandeur (Thomas 1991).

The situation was a bit different with the missions of La Florida. Here, the original mission structures had not been constructed with the same solidity as the missions of California and the Southwest (Thomas 1988). Consequently, there are few physical remains of these mission sites; indeed, many had been lost to history before their rediscovery by archaeologists beginning in the middle of the twentieth century. In addition, while the Spanish heritage of California and the Southwest is still visible in the cultures and peoples of those regions, the Spanish occupation of the American Southeast has not left the same indelible stamp upon the landscape. Subsequent Anglo-American colonization has largely superseded that of the Spanish in popular perceptions of regional history. Southeastern missions thus never carried the same mythical connotations as those of California and the Southwest. Paradoxically, the archaeological record for the missions of La Florida is arguably superior to that of the Southwest, for the simple reason that more anthropologically focused excavations have been undertaken in the Southeast.

The missions of Texas lie between these ends of the spectrum, explaining to some extent their lack of prominence in the literature of mission archaeology. They retain, however, the potential to elucidate issues of culture contact and cultural continuity within the mission regime, particularly those missions in present-day San Antonio. The line of missions along the San Antonio River presently preserved as San Antonio Missions National Historical Park represent the final attempt by Franciscan missionaries to establish a presence among the native inhabitants of south-central Texas in the eighteenth century (Hester 1989a; Torres 1993). For many years this area was overlooked by the Spanish, as it offered neither complex local societies that could be easily subdued and converted into subject villages nor an abundance of exploitable natural resources. Indeed, Spanish interest in the native inhabitants of Texas was only sparked by a perceived threat of French encroachment on Spanish-claimed territory, specifically by the establishment of a French outpost by La Salle at Matagorda Bay in the 1680s. To counter French designs on eastern Texas, an expedition under Pedro de Leon was organized and dispatched to that distant region, accompanied by several missionaries (Hester 1989a). A number of missions were established among the Caddoan peoples of East Texas, but native indifference to missionaries' efforts as well as the diminishing French threat after the destruction of the Matagorda outpost led to a removal of the missions to South Texas in the early eighteenth century. Missions that had once been set up among the Caddo or along the Rio Grande were renamed and repositioned up and down the San Antonio River in an area centrally located near the

presidio and small Spanish settlement of San Antonio de Bexar (Hester 1989a). Largely abandoned after secularization in the 1790s, they slumbered in obscurity for many years until their acquisition and restoration by the State of Texas in the early twentieth century. Now administered by the National Park Service, the San Antonio missions retain many original structural elements, as well as considerable portions of their associated infrastructure, such as *acequias* (irrigation networks) and *labores* (agricultural fields) and even one of the outlying ranches used to supply the missions with livestock (Torres 1993).

### *The Coahuiltecons*

The native groups of what is now the San Antonio area belonged to a loose grouping called the Coahuiltecons, so named by twentieth century anthropologists after their linguistic affinities (Newcomb 1961; Hester 1989b). Beyond this, however, they appear to have been a disparate collection of independent bands, with little in the way of societal complexity or hierarchy. Bands were patrilineal, but band membership was loose and often shifted according to personal preference. The Coahuiltecons were hunters and gatherers who had to contend with the rugged environment of the South Texas brush country. They hunted deer and small game, as well as the occasional bison, and collected a wide variety of plant foods, particularly prickly pear. In terms of their cosmology, little is known of the details of Coahuiltecon beliefs. They were, however, known to participate in festive religious rituals known as *mitotes*, gatherings of the far-flung bands where peyote was consumed and visions were experienced as they danced (Newcomb 1961).

How did the Coahuiltecons react to the Spanish mission system? How complete was their acceptance of imposed customs and beliefs? One way to look at this issue is by examining a population of presumably enculturated Native Americans at a site associated with the missions but some distance from the watchful eyes of the friars – a mission ranch located near present-day Floresville, Texas.

### *Rancho de las Cabras*

Located about thirty miles outside San Antonio, Rancho de las Cabras was the ranch associated with Mission San Francisco de la Espada, the southernmost of the San Antonio missions (Fox 1989). Here native neophytes from the mission were tasked with maintaining the mission's livestock herd. Each mission along the San Antonio River had an associated ranch, all located some distance away to spare



the mission fields the strain of grazing livestock. The site of Rancho de las Cabras, which is administered by the National Park Service as an outlying unit of San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, was investigated by University of Texas – San Antonio archaeologist Anne Fox in the 1980s. Fox (1989) believed that the archaeological investigation of a mission ranch would offer an excellent opportunity to examine Native American expressions of identity within the mission system. She reasoned that the neophytes sent to tend the livestock herds were away from the direct daily supervision of the friars. In this setting, they might have been more willing to dispense with their adopted Spanish customs and maintain their native lifeways, a choice that should be reflected in the archaeological record. As Fox writes,

Because of their relatively unsupervised situation, we have here an opportunity to examine how mission Indians would prefer to live after a period of training and indoctrination into mission life and Spanish customs. The houses they occupied, their living habits, and the tools and implements they used would be, to a certain extent, of their own choosing [Fox 1989:261].

Interestingly, she found that the archaeological assemblage from presumed living areas at the ranch compound were very similar to what would have been found at the mission itself. The Coahuiltecan were hunting and fishing locally, using an array of Spanish goods and practicing, as Fox describes it, “at least an outward form of [Spanish] religion” (Fox 1989:265). The presumption would seem to be that in a situation of enforced enculturation such as a Spanish colonial mission, the native converts would take advantage of a lack of supervision to continue their traditional activities. Why, then, does Fox’s archaeological evidence suggest that this was not the case at Rancho de las Cabras? Fox offers the intriguing suggestion that, in addition to simply being evidence of successful conversions, the archaeological assemblage at the ranch might suggest, “that only Indians of long standing and proven loyalty to the mission were chosen for this job, since it was so essential to the well-being of the mission residents” (Fox 1989:265). Thus, the evidence from Rancho de las Cabras, although appearing to argue against obvious cultural continuity in at least one mission population, might be explained in terms of decisions made by friars mindful of security concerns. It would be useful to compare this ranch data with findings from the native living quarters at Mission Espada and the other San Antonio missions.

## *Conclusion*

This paper has endeavored to discuss briefly some of the issues involved in examining Native American cultural identity and cultural continuity at the missions of Spanish North America. As Elizabeth Graham points out, the interaction between Spanish and indigenous “cultural imaginations” was complex and multi-faceted, a set of relationships not easily distillable into a simple binary opposition of accommodation and resistance, acceptance and rejection. How should we apply our understanding of these relationships to the archaeological record? If we were to devise a series of expectations for what we should (or shouldn’t) see in the material culture of mission communities, we would probably look for evidence of the maintenance of native religious beliefs and rituals; *mitotes* performed within the hidden spaces of the native living quarters would be one example. As Anne Fox’s work at Rancho de las Cabras makes clear, however, the archaeological record may not fit our expectations, in which case we would have to look for alternative explanations. Why do we see native influence expressed through the famous “mestizo sun” at Mission Concepcion in San Antonio, but none elsewhere? A comprehensive look by Jacinto Quirarte (2002) at the architecture and decoration, both internal and external, of the San Antonio missions revealed very little variance from what would have been fairly orthodox Franciscan conceptions of how things should look. Given that native artisans would have been involved with both structural and artistic aspects of mission construction, this is interesting in and of itself. Absence of data has its own story to tell, and the lack of obvious native influence on these components of the mission environment has implications for interpretations of native response to Spanish indoctrination (or simply the ubiquity of Spanish surveillance).

Ultimately, archaeological investigation of the Spanish missions of San Antonio offers the possibility of gaining insights into crucial questions of Native American agency and response under Spanish hegemony. The process of Christianization of native groups is a complex issue, with a component expressed through material culture that is accessible to archaeological inquiry. The hypotheses and expectations we develop to approach these questions, as Graham has pointed out, should keep that complexity in mind. In addition, archaeology has the potential to contribute in important ways to the historiography of the Spanish Borderlands, a region defined and initially investigated by historian Herbert Bolton (1917) and his students, and more recently examined in a more complex and holistic fashion by historians like David Weber. Hopefully, future enquiry will

succeed in applying archaeological data to these questions of cultural identity, culture contact and cultural continuity within the mission context.

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