

Archaeology's Offerings to Jesuit History

Charles R. Cobb

University of Florida, Department of Natural History, Florida Museum of
Natural History, Gainesville, FL, USA

ccobb@flmnh.ufl.edu

Abstract

The contributions to the thematic issue of this journal address archaeological approaches to Jesuit missionizing in three contexts in the colonial Americas: substantial missions that also served as plantations, missions lacking full-time clergy, and short-term outposts on the edges of colonial empires. By relying on evidence from the landscape, the built environment, and objects, these studies demonstrate that the Jesuit enterprise was not subservient to, or a simple accomplice of, European colonial ambitions. Instead, missionizing by all Christian orders was intertwined with an evolution of both secular and religious philosophies that gave rise to modernity.

Keywords

Jesuit missions – plantations – colonialism – landscapes – built environment
– archaeology

Introduction

The Jesuit order is renowned for its rapid success in building an integrated, global framework to spread the Gospel soon after its founding in the mid-sixteenth century. Although the development of the Society of Jesus was in part a response to the rapid ascendance of the Reformation, its impressive growth was closely linked to the swift sprawl of European colonies in the Americas and elsewhere. Dominican and Franciscan friars accompanied some of the very first notable Spanish forays into the Americas, but soon after the founding of their order Jesuits were frequent companions of early Iberian and French

expeditions and outposts in the furthest reaches of European exploration. For this reason, missionization and colonization often went hand-in-hand.

Yet it is over-simplistic to assume that these endeavors were just two sides of the same proverbial coin. The first formal Jesuit missions were in Europe, not in emergent colonies.¹ Many Catholic regions were believed to have veered from orthodoxy by Renaissance times and Jesuit missions in those areas were intended to re-establish the canons of Catholicism. Concerns with spirituality underlay the genesis of this mission tradition rather than the more familiar trope of missionaries as witting or unwitting vessels for the political and economic oppression of Indigenous peoples. Even for the missionizing enterprise associated with colonizing the Americas, recent scholars of religion have veered away from the notion that missionaries were largely functionaries of the spread of imperialism.² While this may have been true in some cases, missionaries of all theological stripes reflected the diversity of the world around them. Many were deeply devoted to their faith and at the same time were rigorous advocates for the rights of Indigenous peoples, many were not, and many fell between the two extremes. As a result, despite the highly successful efforts of the Jesuits in creating a centralized system of missionizing worldwide, the agency of individuals within their given settings meant that no two mission settings would be exactly alike—nor would they even be very much alike.

Although beyond the scope of this thematic compilation, archaeological studies of missionization would benefit from exploring how diversity between missions was a complex intersection of local historical circumstance and the approaches of different Catholic orders toward conversion. In broad brush strokes, Franciscans were dedicated to social work and church reform while serving as exemplars of chastity, poverty, and obedience; Dominicans were strong advocates of theological education in church orthodoxy and were active in the Inquisition; and Jesuits were active in the Counter-Reformation and solidifying Catholicism, while also serving as proponents of learning and

- 1 By the mid-sixteenth century, the Jesuit order had built a mission in Naples, followed by a number more in southern Italy, France, Bavaria, and other regions. Well into the 1600s, the Jesuits had far more internal missions in France than they did in New France. See Dominique Deslandres, "Exemplo aequae ut verbo: The French Jesuits' Missionary World," in *The Jesuits: Cultures, Sciences, and the Arts 1540–1773*, ed. John W. O'Malley et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 258–73; Jennifer D. Selwyn, *A Paradise Inhabited by Devils: The Jesuits' Civilizing Mission in Early Modern Naples* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004).
- 2 Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution, Volume 1: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 7; Joel W. Martin, "Introduction," in *Native Americans, Christianity, and the Reshaping of the American Religious Landscape*, ed. Joel W. Martin and Mark A. Nichols (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 1–20, here 2–3.

education.³ One of the practical consequences of this variation in the early sixteenth century was that Franciscans embarked on large-scale, mass conversions in New Spain during the first major decades of missionization (1520s to 1530s), whereas Dominicans favored a more measured approach toward Indigenous populations that relied heavily on religious teaching and understanding before the administration of sacraments.⁴ The discipline of archaeology has yet to systematically address how these kinds of philosophical differences were manifested materially.

As a first step in this direction, though, it is necessary to more fully appreciate the ways in which specific Catholic orders pursued their ambitions. Appropriately, the contributors to this thematic issue on the archaeology and ethnohistory of Jesuit evangelism in the Americas adopt a bottom-up perspective to understand the variability in these efforts—necessary not only due to the differing aims and practices of individual missionaries, but also because of the diversity of peoples they encountered and how those cultures resisted, accommodated, and made compromises with new theological overtures. Importantly, these case studies leave their own distinctive imprint in the vast realm of mission research, to raise questions related to the materiality of that experience: how did objects, the built environment, and landscape mediate Jesuit attempts to convert Indigenous peoples?

Collectively, the contributions force us to rethink the stereotype that a mission was a discrete cluster of buildings and neophytes. In North America, our notion of a mission is swayed by those well-known iconic chapels surrounded by the lodgings and activity areas of its residents—the Alamo in Texas and San Xavier del Bac in Arizona are two famous examples. In her study, Laura Masur emphasizes the fleeting and mobile nature of Jesuit missionary activity in Maryland. For this reason, she finds it important to focus on missions as activities rather than their physical expressions. The historical documents for Fort St. Joseph in Michigan (Brandão and Nassaney, this issue) indicate that missionaries rotated in and out on a periodic basis. Putative missions to the Abenaki in modern-day Vermont described by Andrew Beaupré are seemingly ephemeral, their presence known only by vague allusions on maps, sketchy documentary data, and indirect archaeological evidence. Nevertheless, the power of their evangelical activities continues into the present as tribal entities

3 Brian Aviles and Robert L. Hoover, "Two Californias, Three Religious Orders and Fifty Missions: A Comparison of the Missions Systems of Baja and Alta California," *Pacific Coast Archaeological Society Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (1997): 1–28.

4 Fernando Cervantes, *The Devil in the New World: The Impact of Diabolism in New Spain* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 13.

such as the Abenaki seek to use mission histories as proof that Jesuits taught their peoples on homelands long since lost. Even the larger missions described for South America, when viewed as loci of activities and practices, extend well beyond a simple cluster of buildings. The Jesuit haciendas in Peru described by Weaver were composed of a core property with numerous "attachments" dispersed across the landscape that provided access to water, grazing lands, and other key resources. The more typical mission complex of Loyola (Auger et al.) nonetheless had a distinctive regional footprint in that its population was largely composed of enslaved people of African descent whose labor provided the resources that allowed missionaries to radiate into outlying areas to evangelize Native Americas.

These studies emphasize that missions are best understood in a regional and global context of connectedness rather than as circumscribed entities.⁵ This larger framing of Jesuit missions also reflects the reality that their activities far transcended conversion efforts. As a result, they served important economic functions both to a colony and to the religious order.⁶ These are also the circumstances most closely associated with the dark side of colonialism, where, as Laura Masur notes, missions were simultaneously sites of evangelization and of coerced capitalist production.

Missions-cum-plantations (or haciendas) were an extreme example of the foregrounding of the economics of conversion. In South America, in particular, the deaths of so many Native Americans from epidemics and violence fueled the African slave trade and the development of Jesuit missions dependent on African enslaved labor. Brendan Weaver in his contribution points out that, by the mid-eighteenth century, the Jesuit order was one of the largest owners of slaves of African descent in the Americas. These laborers produced commodities like wine, sugar, and tobacco to feed the growing appetite of an emergent global economy, and transformed missions in Nasca, Peru (Weaver, this issue), coastal Guiana (Auger et al., this issue), and rural Maryland

5 Lee Panich and Tsim Schneider have promoted a similar point, arguing that missions should be defined by their role in mediating regional interactions rather than as physical clusters of buildings and people. Lee M. Panich and Tsim D. Schneider, eds., *Indigenous Landscapes and Spanish Missions: New Perspectives from Archaeology and Ethnohistory* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2014).

6 As an extreme example of this process, it is estimated that Franciscan missions in the Peruvian region congregated hundreds of thousands of Native American peoples onto missions in a process known as *reducción*. See Parker Van Valkenburgh, "Unsettling Time: Persistence and Memory in Spanish Colonial Peru," *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 24, no. 1 (2017): 117–48; Steven A. Wernke, *Negotiated Settlements: Andean Communities and Landscapes under Inka and Spanish Colonialism* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013).

(Masur, this issue) into key nodes in the Atlantic World, despite their locations on the fringes of empire. The multiple objectives of these institutions in some cases led to a certain evangelical irony. As both Masur and Auger et al. point out, the oppression of enslaved labor on mission plantations was foundational to the economic enterprises that supported efforts to convert Native Americans. At the same time, there were still attempts to organize the plantations along Christian principles. Weaver, for instance, observes that the Nasca estates were unlike secular plantations in that missionaries attempted to have a balanced sex ratio. This provided the enslaved the opportunity to marry and have families.

There is some variation among archaeologists in their interpretations as to how the built environment of major missions and plantations may have influenced the world view of their inhabitants. The productive and residential centers of the Nasca haciendas in Peru were structured so as to enhance surveillance and bodily discipline over laborers, and the Loyola plantation in French Guiana likewise reflects an adherence to symmetry and order. These reflect the spatial geographies of management that are one of the hallmarks of the intertwining of modernity with the colonial project.⁷

In contrast, Stephan Lenik's comparative work on the built environment of Jesuit mission plantations in the Caribbean suggests to him that the key buildings and complexes were built in prominent places, not as a form of social control, but to attract the gaze and to display their aesthetic wonder (also see Auger et al., this issue).⁸ This pattern may have drawn on Jesuit tradition in Central Europe where churches were distinguished by features that commanded the attention of the congregation.⁹ "On both sides of the Atlantic, the Jesuit method consisted principally of attracting people and moving them sufficiently to induce them to convert. This explains the character of the missions as full of wonders and spectacle [...] [Jesuit] Missionaries were great connoisseurs of the heart."¹⁰

7 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977); Michael Given, *The Archaeology of the Colonized* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "North Atlantic Universals: Analytical Fictions, 1492–1945," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (2002): 839–58.

8 Stephan Lenik, "Mission Plantations, Space, and Social Control: Jesuits as Planters in French Caribbean Colonies and Frontiers," *Journal of Social Archaeology* 12, no. 1 (2011): 51–71.

9 Thomas Dacosta Kaufman, "East and West: Jesuit Art and Artists in Central Europe, and Central European Art in the Americas," in *The Jesuits: Cultures, Sciences, and the Arts 1540–1773*, ed. John W. O'Malley et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 274–304.

10 Deslandres, "Exemplo aequae ut verbo," 263.

The two models of built environment as coercive versus seductive are not necessarily antithetical. They may suggest that the optics of colonialism worked both ways within different spatial sectors of a mission complex: grandiose architecture and fancy interiors may have struck awe into those visiting or living on missions, whereas the spatial layout of missions may have facilitated surveillance by overseers. One was meant to convert, the other to control.

In addition to mission plantations with their considerable investments in infrastructure, another form of mission was a place visited by itinerant clergy, typically lacking any formal infrastructure except perhaps for a chapel. These subordinate missions—referred to as *visitas* in Spanish colonies—often fell on or beyond the frontiers of direct colonial and church control. The activities in these places often fell into a “middle ground,”¹¹ where a more balanced dynamic of power existed between priests and community residents. The mission at or around Fort St. Joseph (Brandão and Nassaney, this issue) would seem to fall in this category. Jesuits seemed to have visited the military outpost and associated Native American village as part of a round they followed among a number of outlying settlements. Brandão and Nassaney note that a number of religious artifacts have been recovered during the course of their investigations, but then raise a provocative question for archaeologists (or theologians, for that matter): lacking a permanent ecclesiastical presence at an outpost, does the presence of religious objects necessarily translate to a highly successful tradition of conversion? Indeed, how can one even be sure in the here and now whether a professed convert has truly adopted the faith?

As Beupré observes, the meaning of religious objects (rosary elements, crucifixes, medallions) in Indigenous contexts (Native American house remains, burials, and so forth) has been a longstanding point of contention among archaeologists. In one camp, are those who assert that these may have been merely valued items of gifting and exchange. In the other, are those who think they were endowed with spiritual meaning attached to Christianity. These are not necessarily antithetical ideas. Most archaeologists now believe that so-called Jesuit rings were produced in such abundance that they must have been intended as items that likely served as important gifts for social transactions and that their religious meaning was only secondary. Yet other items may have represented personal gifts in recognition of someone's converted status.

11 The notion of the middle ground was developed by ethnohistorian Richard White for the Great Lakes region in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, where logistical hurdles to the penetration of colonial powers afforded Native Americans considerable sway in dictating the conditions of co-existence. See Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

Archaeologists must be cautious about applying a double-standard in our interpretation of religious paraphernalia. When such items are recovered from contexts that we believe had otherworldly significance to Native Americans (e.g., earthen mounds, burials) we are prone to believe they were spiritually meaningful in some way. If they are found in domestic or other mundane contexts, we often argue that they did not hold any particular elevated status.¹² However, it is common for Christians today, as it has been for many centuries preceding, to signify their beliefs in a range of media and circumstances, ranging from rosaries to lapel pins to bumper stickers. To play devil's advocate, the deposition of objects displaying Christian symbolism into mundane archaeological contexts may in fact reflect the successful normalization of such beliefs into everyday life.¹³

A third type of mission might be viewed as one defined more by spiritual undertaking rather than by any kind of formal installation or dedicated space. Many intrepid individuals traveled well beyond colonial frontiers to settle in communities with minimal direct support from church or state. Here the notion of mission is somewhat ambiguous since this institution may have simply been represented by one or a few individuals living in a community—one that may have had very mixed sympathies toward the newcomers. This seems to have been the case in New England for many of the missionizing efforts among the Abenaki, which have led to the modern frustrations with documenting their presence as emphasized by Beaupré. Beaupré also reminds us that death or martyrdom was not an uncommon consequence of these fraught circumstances. The well-known Isaac Jogues (1607–46) suffered two sets of unimaginable physical trials in the American Northeast before he was killed by the Mohawks. A number of Jesuits in the larger colony of La Florida fell to similar fates.¹⁴

It should be emphasized that the deaths of Jesuit missionaries do not necessarily reflect unyielding attitudes toward the acceptance of Christianity among Indigenous people, which in turn led to extreme reprisals on their part. There were many spiritual accommodations made by Jesuits that led to fascinating

12 Diana DiPaolo Loren, "Christian Symbols in Native Lives: Medals and Crucifixes in the Tunica Region of French Colonial Louisiana," in *Foreign Objects: Rethinking Indigenous Consumption in American Archaeology*, ed. Craig N. Cipolla (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2017), 94–109.

13 Charles R. Cobb, "Indigenous Missionization and Religious Conversion," in *Routledge Handbook of the Archaeology of Indigenous-Colonial Interaction in the Americas*, ed. Lee M. Panich and Sara L. Gonzalez (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

14 Jerald T. Milanich, *Laboring in the Fields of the Lord: Spanish Missions and Southeastern Indians* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999).

syncretic traditions. As one example, a number of Wendats in Canada were unable to grasp the notion of baptism as an initiation into a new faith tradition, and came to interpret it as a curative rite important for restoring health. For the short term, Jesuits were willing to accept this belief as a way of normalizing this practice among the Wendats, until such time as its meaning could be rendered culturally comprehensible.¹⁵ The expression of mixed practices, and possibly belief systems, are commonly found by archaeologists on colonial and theological frontiers: Mayan-style caches in Mesoamerican Christian churches; Southwestern rock-art synthesizing the Virgin Mary and a kachina mask; the conjoining of Catholic with Indigenous architecture; these are just a few of innumerable instances of the imbrication of faith traditions that occurred far from the centers of European authority and power.¹⁶

Ultimately, there is no simple correspondence between an object, its placement, and the meaning that it held for those who once possessed it before it entered the ground. The same could be said for the buildings and places that constituted Jesuit missions. Lacking written records, it seems that we are unlikely to discover material signatures of a distinct Jesuit complex or way of doing things—a Jesuit “pattern” in the terminology of Stanley South.¹⁷

But that should not be the point, anyway. Religious conversion was the primary aim of Jesuits in Indigenous lands, but our goal as anthropological archaeologists is to discover how conversion practices played an important role in constructing the larger world, then and now. As the preceding case studies emphasize, the archaeology of Jesuit missionizing informs on several levels of anthropological significance. It provides voice to the Africans and Native Americans who are often silenced in the documentary record but whose activities are embodied in the material record of missions and plantations. This research also emphasizes how missions and plantations were cauldrons of cultural coalescence, where peoples from different lands and backgrounds

15 Emma Anderson, “Blood, Fire, and ‘Baptism’: Three Perspectives on the Death of Jean de Brébeuf, Seventeenth-Century Jesuit ‘Martyr,’” in *Native Americans, Christianity, and the Reshaping of the American Religious Landscape*, ed. Joel W. Martin and Mark A. Nichols (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 125–58, here 145.

16 Elizabeth Graham, Scott E. Simmons, and Christine D. White, “The Spanish Conquest and the Maya Collapse: How ‘Religious’ is Change?,” *World Archaeology* 45, no. 1 (2013): 161–85; Matthew Liebmann, “Parsing Hybridity: Archaeologies of Amalgamation in Seventeenth-Century New Mexico,” in *The Archaeology of Hybrid Material Culture*, ed. Jeb J. Card (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, Center for Archaeological Investigations, 2013), 25–49; Wernke, *Negotiated Settlements*, 206–11.

17 Stanley South, *Method and Theory in Historical Archaeology* (New York, NY: Academic Press, 1977).

intermingled and gave rise to new ethnic forms. At an even larger scale, archaeological investigations of Jesuit missionizing tell us something about the emergence of the modern global condition. All of the attributes associated with the missions seen in the foregoing studies—time discipline, the regimentation of space, cosmopolitanism, the linkage with global economic systems, and so on—define modernity. These structural conditions also account for many of the adverse consequences of the mission system on Indigenous populations. Bioarchaeological research on Franciscan missions in La Florida demonstrate that heavy workloads were expressed in advanced osteoarthritis and that dietary deficiencies were reflected in skeletal markers such as porotic lesions and growth interruptions in tooth enamel.¹⁸ Epidemics exacted an even heavier toll. During the first major expansion of the Franciscan mission system into interior Florida from 1612 to 1616 it is estimated that half of the Native Americans may have perished from European-borne diseases.¹⁹ This calls to mind the point that Lenik has made with regard to Jesuit missions in the Caribbean: many of their associated plantations were precociously modern because they embodied many of the characteristics that anticipated the Industrial Revolution.²⁰

In this context, the Society of Jesus and other religious orders were not tangential to, or even reflective of, modernity; they were foundational to it. Archaeological studies of the Jesuit experience are well positioned to make this point.

18 Dale L. Hutchinson and Clark Spencer Larsen, "Enamel Hypoplasia and Stress in La Florida," in *Bioarchaeology of Spanish Florida: The Impact of Colonialism*, ed. Clark Spencer Larsen (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 181–206; Clark Spencer Larsen et al., in *Columbian Consequences 2: Archaeological and Historical Perspectives on the Spanish Borderlands East*, ed. David Hurst Thomas (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 409–28; Christopher M. Stojanowski, *Mission Cemeteries, Mission Peoples: Historical and Evolutionary Dimensions of Intracemetery Bioarchaeology in Spanish Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013).

19 John H. Hann, *A History of the Timucua Indians and Missions* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), here 174.

20 Lenik, "Mission Plantations," 65.