INTERPRETIVE ISSUES AND THE CALIFORNIA MISSIONS

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This paper explores the ways in which the history of the mission period is presented to the general public at mission sites in California. Discussion centers around two case studies, Mission San Francisco de Asís and the Santa Cruz Mission State Historic Park. These sites are used to examine issues such as audience and resources that affect public presentations at mission sites. The potential of archaeology to add to a more nuanced and pluralistic public interpretation of the mission period will also be considered.

From the arrival of the first Spanish colonists to San Diego in 1769 until the period immediately following Mexican independence, Franciscan missionaries were the main colonizing agents in Alta California. The Franciscan padres, under the leadership of Junípero Serra, founded a chain of twenty-one missions that ran along the Pacific coast as far north as the San Francisco Bay. For their flocks, the missionaries drew on local Native populations, as well as other Native Californians whom the padres relocated from outlying areas. The missions were often the scene of devastating epidemics, as well as tightly controlled social practices that were aimed at "civilizing" Native peoples by converting them to both Christianity and European lifestyles. Underlying the Spanish program of forced relocation and coercive social controls was the fact that the expansion of the mission system was not only the pursuit of souls, it was also a way to supply cheap labor and to clear the land of an uncontrolled indigenous population (Costello and Hornbeck 1989; Jackson 1994; Jackson and Castillo 1995; Milliken 1995). As such, the mission system in Alta California was an integral part of the Spanish colonial enterprise.

Today, however, life at the California missions has been romanticized in the collective imagination, and the missions themselves have become popular tourist attractions (Thomas 1991). An estimated one million people from all over the globe visit the 21 California missions each year (Pedelty 1992), making the public interpretation of mission sites an important topic for archaeologists who study the mission period in California. Seeking to better understand the issues that affect public interpretation of the mission period, I visited two mission sites in Fall 2003—Mission San Francisco de Asís in San Francisco (also known as Mission Dolores) and the Santa Cruz Mission State Historic Park in Santa Cruz. By picking these two missions, I deliberately chose sites that were divergent in most respects, including ownership, audience, post-secularization history, and archaeological resources. My object here is not necessarily to compare or critique the particular interpretive programs of either site, but to use the differences between the two missions to draw out certain issues that affect interpretation of mission sites in general. The contrast between the interpretation at the two missions illuminated several issues pertinent to public engagement with the colonial period, and further highlighted the relevancy of archaeology as a significant tool for making public interpretation a more pluralistic, and realistic, representation of the past.

Mission Dolores and the Santa Cruz Mission Adobe differ in both ownership and audience. Mission Dolores, which is owned by the Catholic Church, caters primarily to domestic and international tourists, as well as to school groups and self-described Catholic tourists (Nixon 2002). The Santa Cruz Mission Adobe, on the other hand, is owned by the California Department of Parks and Recreation and is set up to accommodate casual tourists and groups of California fourth-graders, whose schools take them to the missions as part of the California history curriculum requirement (California Department of Parks and Recreation 1985; Kimbro 1988). Because no one agency or institution is responsible for the administration of all the missions in California, the public interpretation of mission sites varies widely. Issues of ownership, audience, history, and resources all influence the public interpretive program at a given mission site.

Although ownership and audience steer interpretation in certain directions, the interpretive

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programs at both Mission Dolores and the Santa Cruz Mission State Historic Park are also shaped and constrained by the resources available to them. At the Santa Cruz Adobe, for example, archaeologists conducted extensive excavations of the former neophyte quarters (Allen 1998; Felton 1987), and thus materials relating directly to Native Californians figure largely in the public interpretation there. Moreover, the research conducted at the Santa Cruz site is itself a focus of the museum, and several displays showcase archaeological methodology and preservation techniques. In contrast, the archaeology at Mission Dolores is not a prominent part of the interpretive program, primarily because the archaeology conducted near the site has been limited to mitigation projects (Ambro 2003).

The two structures also have varied histories in our own society, and these site histories can be seen as another factor in the complex and reciprocal relationship among resources, ownership, audience, and interpretation. Mission Dolores remains a place of worship, a role that it has served since its construction in 1791. Mission Dolores is, for many, a very spiritual place, although it also has a high status as a secular landmark and tourist destination.

The Santa Cruz Mission Adobe, however, does not have the public history that Mission Dolores does. Although the adobe is the only surviving structure from Mission Santa Cruz, it was a private residence until the mid-1980s and has only recently been restored. Its public history, unlike Mission Dolores, is only that of its most recent incarnation—a historic site, a history museum. The original church at Mission Santa Cruz was destroyed in 1857 and is commemorated by a half sized replica built in the 1930s. This structure effectively assumes the role of the "mission" at Mission Santa Cruz, leaving the Adobe to be seen as something else entirely. The Santa Cruz Mission State Historic Park, then, represents a more or less secular take on the mission period. Through historical accident this particular structure exists outside of the religious framework that surrounds most of the Spanish missions in California, allowing the public interpretation to instead focus on the lived experiences of Native Californians as well as on the broader context and ramifications of the colonial period in California and western North America in general.

The Santa Cruz Mission Adobe State Historic Park effectively integrates archaeological data and methods with public interpretation of the colonial past. Visitors are shown not only what was found at the site, but also how it was excavated and evaluated. Many artifacts associated with Native Californians are displayed, along with a written, and often pictorial, explanation of their uses and significance for Native peoples. While the physical structure of the Santa Cruz Adobe, which was used originally as neophyte housing, and the archaeology conducted there allow for a presentation that foregrounds the experiences of Native Californians, interpretive panels along the tour also place the mission system in its historical, colonial context. These texts highlight the interconnected nature of all the Franciscan missions in California, as well as the historical importance of the missions of Baja California, the Spanish presidios, and the Russian mercantile outpost at Fort Ross. The wider context of the colonial period and of the mission system provides an excellent companion to the archaeological materials from the Adobe itself, and makes for a clearer understanding of the colonial processes that brought the Franciscans to Santa Cruz in the first place.

The example of the Santa Cruz Mission State Historic Park clearly demonstrates the relevancy of archaeology for public interpretation of mission sites. It is widely acknowledged that the public is interested in seeing "the real thing" (Edson and Dean 1994), and this inherent curiosity provides the perfect point of departure from which we can begin to focus our attention, and that of the visitor, on the lifeways and experiences of *all* the people who lived at the missions, not just the friars. Unfortunately, many of the California missions do not share the wealth of archaeological resources available to the Mission Santa Cruz State Historic Park. Not all excavations at California mission sites have focused on neophyte quarters, and some sites—Mission Dolores for example—are in urban areas where large-scale, research-oriented excavations are not always feasible. But it is important to remember that, as one display text at Mission Dolores states, the missions were in essence "Indian Towns," even if those Indians where unwilling participants in the colonial enterprise. As a result, nearly any artifact unearthed at a mission is in some ways a link to the Native experience there. The trick is making this link. Unfortunately, archaeologists themselves are often divorced from the process of creating and maintaining interpretive exhibits (Baugher and Wall 1997), but archaeologists working in the mission period are in a unique position to highlight the fact that missions were primarily "Native" places, even in the absence of traditional "Indian" artifacts.

This, however, is not necessarily a critical archaeology as it is commonly understood (Leone et al. 1987; Wilkie and Bartoy 2000). In fact, I would argue that a truly critical archaeology of the Catholic Church and its New World missions would be exceedingly difficult and potentially unpopular with those who

control the historic resources dating to the mission period. While I tend to agree with authors (Pedelty 1992) who see public interpretation at some mission sites as a kind of "new mission system" that acts to cover up and naturalize the violence perpetrated against Native Americans by the Spanish, I recognize that Catholic people are also stakeholders in the archaeological process and that archaeologists interested in the mission period often need to work with the Church, not against it. This is the route followed by most archaeologists who, rather than take a confrontational stance, have formed constructive relationships with the institutions that own and control Mission period resources (and for a discussion of Franciscans interested in archaeology, see Harkins 1990). This is to be applauded, but I think it is time that we, as archaeologists, begin to find ways to gain more say in the interpretive process, and to ensure more inclusion of archaeological materials in public interpretations.

To my mind, archaeology is crucial for building a more nuanced public understanding of California's colonial history, but within the popular discourse regarding the mission period, archaeology is not seen as being particularly relevant (Thomas 1991). If we seriously take stock in the ethics statements put forth by our professional organizations (Smith and Burke 2003), then we need to work as a profession to make sure that in the future, public interpretation programs incorporate a wider array of resources, particularly archaeological materials. For years historians of the Mission period have written about the histories of the colonizers; archaeology on the other hand is uniquely positioned to write the history of the *colonized*. This is a worthwhile goal, and I think it can be attained without burning the bridges that already exist between archaeologists working in California and the Catholic Church. An excellent example of this is the fact that Andy Galvan, an archaeologist whose Ohlone ancestors witnessed missionization firsthand, has been hired to lead the interpretive program at Mission Dolores. The California Department of Parks and Recreation have shown their willingness to include archaeology, but this too can and should be expanded to include parks where the interpretation has focused primarily on the religious aspects of the missions. Of course, budget shortfalls and institutional personalities will always pose problems, though these can be overcome through an emphasis on the relevancy of archaeology to any public presentation of the Mission Period. In the final analysis, we have seen that the public is interested in archaeology—the next step is making archaeology more accessible to them.

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