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Expanding mission archaeology: A landscape approach to indigenous autonomy in colonial California

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ABSTRACT

Rather than simply an arena for Euroamerican domination, recent archaeological research on Spanish missionization along the North American Borderlands points to opportunities for indigenous autonomy under missionary colonialism. We build from these discussions to foreground autonomy as it was expressed in multiple spatial contexts during the colonial period (ca. 1770s–1850s) in central California. Our goals are to evaluate freedom of action within the situational constraints imposed by Spanish missions in California and also to challenge archaeologists to move beyond prevailing narratives of decline to critically assess how native people negotiated colonialism across the landscape. Drawing on three archaeological examples from central California—including Mission Santa Clara de Asís, the marshlands of the San Joaquin Valley, and persistent Coast Miwok villages in the northern San Francisco Bay region—we outline a conceptual model comprised of three spatial zones: colonial settlements as native places; native homelands/colonial hinterlands; and interior worlds and interspaces. The model offers a way in which to expand mission archaeology by illuminating the opportunities for indigenous autonomy in social, political, and economic relationships that intersected colonial modes in various ways across time and space.

1. Introduction

In California, as elsewhere, the Spanish mission system had far-reaching effects for indigenous autonomy as broadly reflected in the use of space at different points on the landscape. More than 70 years ago, Sherburne Cook (1943:73) underscored this important dimension of the Spanish missionary program, writing, "The initial act of contact between the mission organization and the Indian was one involving spatial relationships." We contend that the crucial role of spatial relationships in structuring colonial encounters extended far beyond the missions themselves and the initial act of contact. Instead, the colonial entanglements that missionization set in motion unfolded in distinct ways across the landscape and over the course of the colonial period and its aftermath. This paper examines the relationship between indigenous autonomy and spatial organization within the context of Spanish colonialism in central California (Fig. 1). We suggest that by broadening the scope of mission archaeology to include not just mission settlements but also more distant areas where the colonial presence was impermanent, archaeologists can provide new insight into native autonomy under colonialism. Given the wide geographic range of Spanish missionization in the Americas—and the use of missions as part of colonial strategies worldwide—our findings point to avenues of future research that may be applied to other missionized regions.

Through three brief case studies, we examine how indigenous people organized and used space at mission establishments, along the shifting frontiers between native homelands and colonial hinterlands, and in areas outside of direct colonial control. Traditional scholarship positions the Spanish colonial missions of California as tightly controlled social spaces to which native people were inextricably bound. Yet recent archaeological and ethnohistorical research indicates that Spanish spatial hegemony was far from complete, nor was it negotiated in a uniform manner by the region's inhabitants. Based on our research in central California, we argue that native people living in the Spanish mission era exercised a considerable, if differential, degree of control over their organization and use of space at different locales on the landscape. These practices complicate traditional understandings of the spatial relationships of missionization, and further demonstrate the importance of empirically grounded archaeological research to counter the seeming disappearance of indigenous people in colonial California.

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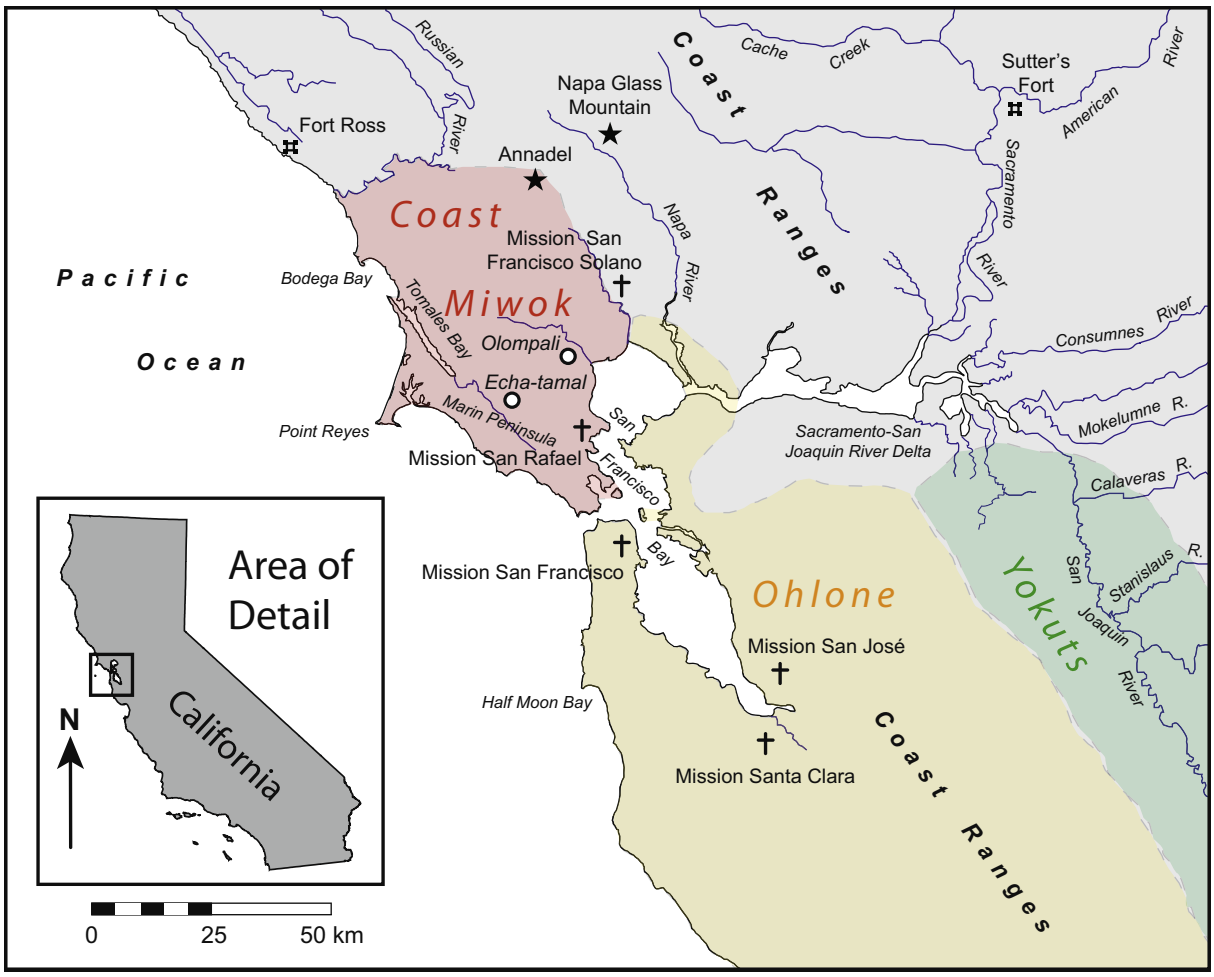

Fig. 1. Central California, with reconstructed Coast Miwok, Ohlone, and Yokuts ethnolinguistic boundaries (after Milliken, 1995), colonial settlements, and other places discussed in text.

2. Colonialism, landscapes, and autonomy

The fundamental questions of many archaeological approaches to colonialism center on the dichotomy of continuity and change within native societies. Recently, the pendulum has swung from archaeological concerns with demographic decline and acculturation to approaches that seek to understand indigenous persistence in spite of far-reaching changes wrought by colonialism (Jordan, 2008; Mitchell and Scheiber, 2010; Panich, 2013; Silliman, 2009). Within these latter studies, many recognize the intertwined nature of continuity and change, which is perhaps better modeled as "changing continuities" (Ferris, 2009). Indeed, careful reading of the archaeological and ethnohistorical records shows that even seeming discontinuities in categories such as settlement patterns or resource exploitation were structured by the internal dynamics of native societies. Archaeologists are thus poised to move beyond decades-old questions about continuity and change to consider indigenous agency and autonomy in the colonial period. As used here, autonomy refers to freedom of action within situational constraints (Jordan, 2013; Schwartz and Green, 2013). When applied to the archaeology of colonialism, an examination of autonomy de-centers static, trait-based approaches to native cultures and the concomitant scholarly focus on externally-imposed change. By countering the myth of the vanishing Indian, such studies also offer opportunities for collaboration between archaeologists and indigenous communities (Cipolla, 2013; Mrozowski et al., 2009).

A landscape approach intersects these debates by providing a venue for exploring not only the intended spatial structures of colonialism but also how native people actually experienced and used space in different contexts (Lightfoot and Martinez, 1995; Mann, 2012). Within such approaches, it is largely taken as a given that the landscape is both reflective and constitutive of environmental adaptations, social relationships, and individual and collective agency. The various ways that people construct, organize, and inhabit space thus offer multiple perspectives on lived experience in colonial settings, including the (re)production of cultural values and social identities, as well as the negotiation of colonial power structures, enculturation programs, and labor regimes (Lightfoot et al., 1998; Panich and Schneider, 2014; Wernke, 2013).

Spatially, native autonomy ranged from intra-site organization to regional settlement patterns and economic connections, to the maintenance of sites of cultural importance and commemoration (Rodning, 2009; Rubertone, 2000). At these different places in the landscape, however, agents may have pursued different strategies based on their age, gender, ethnolinguistic affiliation, or relative social status (Rodríguez-Alegría, 2010). Archaeologists therefore must be attentive to how native people exercised autonomy differentially even within one ethnolinguistic or political group. Such an approach articulates with broad developments in the archaeology of colonialism in the Americas (Cobb and De Pratter, 2012; Funari and Senatore, 2015; Hauser and Armstrong, 2012; Van Buren, 2010), and counters the traditional view of colonialism as