

Fort San Juan: the relations between Spaniards and Natives during the 18 months the Fort San Juan lasted

Review by Ihintza Marguirault

Fort San Juan and the Limits of Empire: Colonialism and Household Practice at the Berry Site

Edited by Robin A. Beck, Christopher B. Rodning, and David G. Moore

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From 2001 to 2010 excavations were conducted. Ten years of digging, ten years of investigating and understanding, ten years on the Berry site (in nowadays Burke County, North Carolina) to demonstrate in a definitive fashion the location of the Fort San Juan built by Juan Pardo, a Spaniard explorer. Built in 1566, the Fort was completely destroyed in 1568. During the eighteen months it lasted, the relationship between Europeans and Natives from Joara went from very friendly to the complete destruction of the Spanish compound.

This book, divided in six main chapters, revolves around one main question: How did these Europeans and their Native hosts at Joara construct and maintain social relations through household practice? It is known that the Fort only lasted for eighteen months, at first the Spaniards were very welcomed, but eventually it was the very ones who welcomed them as friends that led the destruction of their Fort. The question the authors try to tackle with these excavations is to understand what happened between them. To try and give an answer to these questions, the research conducted on site has been very precise, and the various authors of this book render a detailed description of their discoveries. Maybe too detailed indeed; especially for someone who is not a professional archaeologist. Through the analysis of several elements that constituted the daily life of both the Spaniards and the Natives from Joara, such as what they ate, the material they used in housebuilding or hunting, fragments of the colonial encounter etc. the authors propose several hypotheses of the development of relations throughout these eighteen months that included Pardo's two expeditions.

In 1566, Pardo was sent with 125 soldiers on his first expedition. His task was to explore the area, to claim its lands for Spain while pacifying local Indians, and to forge an overland road from Santa Elena to the valuable silver mines in Zacatecas, Mexico (p.5) and so he built Fort San Juan at Joara. Fort San Juan was the first European settlement in the interior of what is now the United States (p.2). The relations with the Natives changed after his second expedition, and it eventually led to the complete destruction of the site by May 1568. From the 31 soldiers still garrisoned there, only one survived after escaping and hiding in the woods. Among the several factors that appear to have had a role in the Natives' decision to destroy the garrisons, two stand out: the Spaniards' demands for food and their improprieties with Native women (p.15). At first the relations between the Spaniards and the natives were based on trade, but by May 1568, the Spaniards had fewer trade-goods left for exchange. From the Spaniards perspective, it was as it should be, the natives were then subjects to the Spanish Crown, and as such they had to pay tribute or tax, in the form of food supply for the soldiers. From the Natives' perspective on the other hand, the Spaniards were no longer fulfilling their end of the exchange relationship, hence they owed them nothing. Besides, soldiers weren't allowed to have women on the compound spending the night, and several complaints had been made about their bad behavior overall. Bandera (1990a: 285) notes that Pardo "commanded him [the corporal placed in charge of Fort Santiago] in the name of His Majesty... that no one should dare bring any woman into the fort at night and that he should not depart from the command under pain of being severely punished" (p.16). This obviously led to tensions and improprieties.

The focus of the first two chapters is on setting the scene. The more historical aspects are described there, using information collected from different documents from the archives in Spain, thus told by different actors at different times and of different origins, to be able to create a first theory on where exactly Fort San Juan was built, and also on how the political relations were before, during, and after its construction, both with the Natives and with the Spanish Crown. Four contemporary accounts are generally cited (one by Pardo himself, one by a soldier and two by Pardo's notary) (p.59). Many scholars before tried to find the actual location of Fort San Juan. Previously, they believed the site of Joara may have been located near the Qualla Boundary in Swain County, North Carolina, or elsewhere in the Appalachian foothills of North Carolina or Tennessee, between Knoxville and the Catawba River. Another account, postdating the Pardo expeditions by only sixteen years, remained effectively unknown by modern researchers until the mid-1990s, even though it contained important details not mentioned in any of the remaining accounts, and helped Robin Beck and his collaborators to pin the exact location of the Fort. This account penned by a soldier, interpreter and notary Domingo González

de León forms part of a letter to the king of Spain. Perhaps in part because the letter was written in a remarkably miserable script, with numerous eccentric usages and outright grammatical errors, this document has never been used as a primary source relative to the Pardo expeditions (p.59). Nevertheless, thanks to the information it contains and to the new insight it offers, the archaeologists have turned their research to the Berry site, which is now known to be the location of Fort San Juan.

The next chapters revolve around understanding how relationships evolved between Europeans and Natives from Joara. To do so, the different excavations and recovered materials as well as remains and all the processes used on the two most different of the site's five structures are detailed, so as to be able to create theories and to try and relive the stories behind them. Thus, the focus is given to the construction materials, to what they ate and the political relations this implied, the material culture and household practice, and what they left behind, the fragments of the colonial encounter. Through the analysis of the burned remains collected on site, the archaeologists have been able to notice not only that all the buildings in the Spanish compound were not built at the same time but also a shift in the relationship between the two groups, a straining that eventually led to the burning of the compound at the fort. Indeed, as some of the constructions demonstrated features of traditional Indian house-building, it was obvious that the others were built mainly if not only by the Spaniards. Another sign of the change in relationships is the type of food recovered from these different structures. The older structure for example would hold more bear bone remains, bear being usually served on very specific occasions or for honorable guests. The more recent on the other hand would display more of deer bone remains, and hardly any bear bone remains, the Spaniards' status seems to have changed on the eyes of the Indians from Joara.

In an effort to romanticize or maybe to relieve the reading and immerse the reader deeper, some semi-fictional stories are added at the beginning of each main chapter, words that could have been spoken or thought by some of the main actors who played a role in this era and helped the archaeologists figure out the events. Even though in the first two chapters they add an ethnological vision to the reading, these parts may sound a bit odd at the beginning of the four other chapters, as they are very scientific, and thus these stories break the pace of the reading and feel a bit out of place.

The archaeologists' approach to excavations on the Berry site was based on two key components. One component was the broad horizontal exposure of large areas to reveal the site layout by stripping the plow zone with shovels and dry-screening sediments through quarter-inch hardware mesh. Another key component of their field strategy was the hand-tool excavation of intact architectural debris and floor deposits, as well as the hand-tool excavation of pit features inside and

outside of buildings, and the water-screening of all sediment deposits from architectural and feature contexts (p.87). They extensively analyzed all the elements recovered, both from the Spanish compound and from the village of Joara, resulting in a very precise and detailed knowledge of them all. They then proceeded to compare the results between these two locations but also among the different structures in the Spanish compound, noting all the similarities and differences, making the understanding of these eighteen month-long relations possible. This extensive analysis of the carbonized pieces of wood, charred macrobotanical remains recovered by flotation, as well as the different pieces of stone or metal found on site, gives an interesting insight into the way every detail of history tells a story, although it may be too detailed and long to read, it could get sooner to the point. It becomes easy to read without really paying attention to what one reads, although this does not actually detract from understanding the account. The authors of this book used all their discoveries very precisely to travel back in time and to create an account of what had most probably happened. Thus, using written documents found in archives in Spain, they created the first theories and hypothesis, and conducted excavations in the same area for ten years to be able to substantiate them. Set aside the first two chapters, the other chapters can almost be read separately, jumping from one chapter to the other without any specific order as they are organized in three main axes: house construction, house organization and food preparation and consumption.

This is a well written book overall, aimed at one specific audience, the professional archaeologist or/and academic, with a quick description of the techniques used, and a bigger time spent on the description of the discoveries. There are, however, some openings and explanations to readers unfamiliar with the subject in general, thus a willingness to get out of its field and touch a wider audience. There is this idea of a reversed crescendo, starting from a broader view of the Spanish compound to slowly 'entering' the buildings, and then into the lives of those living there, thus catching the attention of the reader, as it is, after all, a storytelling using actual materials and artefacts. Thus, even though every chapter can be read independently, it would be better to read the entire book in order, as it takes the reader in a journey to a place that no longer exists. Every aspect analyzed here eventually comes to support the same hypotheses, whether is it the house construction, the house organization or the food preparation and consumption aspect, they all corroborate the same theories.

The book is mainly focused on the Spaniards and one might find that the Natives experience is a bit left aside, probably because it is hardly ever mentioned in the recovered documents. It's interesting to see how a so-called "misunderstanding" with regards to trade relations could have evolved into such a devastating end for them. I doubt that the misunderstanding was actually a misunderstanding; I would

be surprised if the Spaniards had been very straight forward in the terms of the trade and clearly told the Natives of Joara from the very beginning that they were subjects to the Spanish Crown and thus had to pay tribute. Besides, there might be more to be discovered yet, as the site has not been completely excavated, some features might still hold elements which will shed even more light on the nature of the relationship between the Natives and the Spaniards.

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