

## Review article

# Archaeologies of colonialism in Europe's 'New World'

Charles E. Orser, Jr\*

ROBERTO VALCÁRCEL ROJAS. *Archaeology of early colonial interactions at El Chorro de Maíta, Cuba*. 2016. xv+402 pages, numerous b&w illustrations, and tables. Gainesville: University Press of Florida; 978-0-8130-6156-6 hardback \$84.95.

ROBIN A. BECK, CHRISTOPHER B. RODNING & DAVID G. MOORE (ed.). *Fort San Juan and the limits of empire: colonialism and household practice at the Barry site*. 2016. xxi+426 pages, several colour and b&w illustrations. Gainesville: University Press of Florida; 978-0-8130-6159-7 hardback \$89.95.

ANNA S. AGBE-DAVIES. *Tobacco, pipes, and race in colonial Virginia. Little tubes of mighty power*. 2015. 246 pages, numerous b&w illustrations, 16 tables. Walnut Creek (CA): Left Coast; 978-1-61132-396-2 paperback £34.95.



The spectre of European colonialism has always haunted the archaeology of the Atlantic modern world. Even the term 'New World' exposes Eurocentrism, when thousands of people had settled on the landeons before the first European ever pondered sailing westwards. The archaeological examination

of European colonialism in the 'New World' was once naively untroubled by theoretical complexity. Archaeologists, largely guided by a facile concept of acculturation, assumed that indigenous peoples, upon meeting the strange newcomers from the east, gratefully accepted every piece of material culture that the new

arrivals had to offer. Indigenous peoples were happy to have the latest European consumer goods, even though they modified some and repurposed others.

This comforting perspective was present 50 years ago when a group of North American archaeologists first met to discuss the creation of a society dedicated to a discipline they called 'historical archaeology'. Unlike the situation in Great Britain, where the contemporaneously created archaeology society could simply become a 'post-medieval' continuation of an ongoing medieval past, the North Americans had to grapple with a substantial historical disruption that included massive indigenous depopulation, transformations of the social and ecological landscapes, and colonialism. For the past several years, it has been fashionable to argue that 'prehistory' and 'history' constitute an unbroken continuum. No one can reasonably argue against the continuous flow of time, but it remains telling that colonialism has steadfastly persisted in the forefront of archaeological thought during the past 50 years, despite efforts to deny the disjunctures it perpetrated. Each of the books considered here significantly advances the intellectual growth of historical archaeology by further refining the analysis of colonialism in Europe's 'New World'.

The conduct of historical archaeology in Latin America demonstrates the field's maturity. The formal institution of the discipline with concentrated programmes of fieldwork was slow to develop in Latin America, but that situation has changed dramatically since the 1990s. Latin Americans are today making exciting archaeological contributions, with Valcárcel Rojas's book being exemplary.

His monograph concentrates on the archaeology of El Chorro de Maíta, a sixteenth-century settlement containing evidence of contact between long-term residents and Spanish newcomers. He divides the book almost equally between an analysis and

\* Department of Anthropology, Vanderbilt University, PMB 356050, 2301 Vanderbilt Place, Nashville, TN 37211, USA (Email: [charles.e.orser@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:charles.e.orser@vanderbilt.edu))

interpretation of the settlement and its artefacts, and the skeletal remains discovered at the associated cemetery.

Valcárcel Rojas provides abundant empirical evidence about the site, but his theoretical statements will probably attract considerable attention. Archaeologists with specific interests in Spanish colonialism will certainly find the book useful, but scholars interested in any expressions of European colonialism will equally find much of interest.

Valcárcel Rojas accepts today's majority view that colonialism is neither straightforward nor unidirectional. Rather than understanding this stance as simply a nod towards received wisdom, he critically interrogates the daily operation of colonialism as a form of *colonial practice*—thus, rather than representing colonialism as a monolithic structural fact, he sees it as a lived, ongoing process. This too constitutes an element of today's understanding, but Valcárcel Rojas extends it by exploiting his detailed knowledge of quotidian life in Cuba amongst both *'indigènes'* and Spaniards. He proposes that indigenous resistance to Spain developed early, and observes that “The transition from a contact situation to a colonial situation was not homogeneous or synchronic” (p. 25). This statement by itself is not particularly original as it also forms part of the current doxa about European colonialism. What is significant is Valcárcel Rojas's position that resident resistance constitutes the dialectical relation of foreign domination—resistance is neither temporary nor abnormal; it is integral to colonialism itself. One of the most serious weaknesses in much of the current thinking about the archaeology of European colonialism is that by concentrating only on resistance, ethnogenesis or hybridity, archaeologists unwittingly let the colonialists off the hook far too easily. The horrors of European colonialist practice—recounted so well by de Las Casas for the Spanish, and Lionel Gatford for the English—are quietly pushed into the background. By simply vanishing, they no longer haunt the historical past or the analytical present. Instead of perpetuating this erasure, Valcárcel Roja perceives the tussle between indigenous rights and colonialist goals as a protracted struggle that existed throughout the sixteenth century. It affected every element of daily life at El Chorro de Maíta. This point, although subtle, is extremely significant because it gives the book broad appeal.

The biological impact of the European presence in their 'New World' has been well documented, and

Valcárcel Rojas's analysis supports current thinking about colonialism's epidemiological repercussions. The cemetery at the site contained both indigenous and European inhumations. This finding is perhaps to be expected, but the discovery that one of the buried individuals was of African origin introduces the multicultural messiness of colonialism's 'New World' history in fine detail. The real-life historical complexity at the site is substantiated because Valcárcel Rojas could discern no distinguishing attributes in this burial to set it apart from other 'non-local' interments. The presence of a person of African heritage complicates the simple image of Spanish colonialism as a contest between 'native' residents and foreign newcomers.

The second book reviewed here, *Fort San Juan and the limits of empire*, is a multi-authored explanation and interpretation of a settlement known by archaeologists as the Berry site. In the sixteenth century, this site was the indigenous town of Joara and the subsequently constructed Spanish fort of San Juan. This book, as does Valcárcel Rojas's, begins by mentioning Columbus and the Spanish entrance into their 'New World'. This opening sentence reflects the ineluctable need to investigate European colonialism whenever sites are discovered that have European and Native American associations. The Berry site had a considerable pre-contact history, but the authors construct their study around a specific historical event: Juan Prado's 1566–1567 *entrada* (entry) into what is now western North Carolina. Thus, the centrepiece of the book, and what establishes the colonial basis of the study, occurred right around the time the residents of El Chorro de Maíta were burying the last of their dead.

The theoretical perspective pursued by the authors of *Fort San Juan* is less courageous than that of Valcárcel Rojas. They root their analyses and interpretations around a concept of household practice. This is not Bourdieu's practice theory, however. The authors instead pursue a fairly functional reading of practice by concentrating on 'three domains of household practice'. For them, household practice involves how the residents built their houses, how they organised them socio-spatially and how they prepared and consumed foodstuffs. Given this orientation, their central question is: “how did these Spaniards and their native hosts construct and maintain social relations through household practice?” (p. 23). This is not an inconsequential query, and the excellent state of preservation allows the authors

to determine that the Spanish constructed the fort using Eurocentric concepts. Conversely, the remains of excavated structures—exhibiting a mixture of local and non-local construction practices—led the authors to adopt a mutualist perspective, wherein cooperation assumes greater relevance than turmoil. Their application of the word ‘hosts’ to describe the indigenous residents of the village reflects this usage and stands in stark contrast to Valcárcel Rojas’s more dialectical perception of daily life under colonialism.

The dietary transformation of the soldiers at the fort is one lens through which the authors demonstrate their conclusions. The Spanish occupied the fort for only about 18 months, and during this time, the local Native American women processed and prepared the soldiers’ food using indigenous methods and materials. The decrease in acorn shells and the increase in hickory nut shells in datable contexts suggest that the social relations between Spanish soldiers and indigenous women became closer over time as the women learned to prepare foods that the Spaniards would find palatable. They posit that the indigenous women’s efforts may have alienated and angered indigenous males, thus encouraging them to attack the Spaniards and destroy their compound. The authors see this act of violence as a clear representation of the indigenous power to challenge, and indeed to check, the advance of the sixteenth-century’s most influential international superpower. At Fort San Juan and Joara, then, violent conflict is momentary rather than protracted. This historical situation, as well as the author’s depth of analysis and intriguing interpretations, means that archaeologists will learn from this site for some time to come.

Agbe-Davies’s *Tobacco, pipes, and race in colonial Virginia* is different from the previous two books because it regards colonialism as an accepted force structuring daily existence, rather than as a subject for analysis and interpretation in itself. And, rather than investigating only a single site, she examines 4972 seventeenth-century clay smoking pipe fragments (1289 excavated from 6 structures at Jamestown, and 3683 from 5 English plantations nearby). The pipes constitute the physical embodiment of the “emerging modern world” (p. 139) because they were vital to the exponentially expanding production of tobacco during the seventeenth century. Tobacco exemplified England’s dedication to nascent globalisation, and the pipes thus became “little tubes of mighty power” (p. 171).

Agbe-Davies’s goal is simultaneously methodological and theoretical, historical and cultural, as she strives to re-centre the discussion in historical archaeology about the makers, users and meanings of decorated, seventeenth-century smoking pipes. As is true of the continuing exegesis over colonoware pottery, archaeologists disagree about the origins and meanings of decorated clay pipes: are they the products of bored or magic-inspired Europeans; of Africans recalling spiritual images from their homelands; of Native Americans expressing their clan or lineage memberships; of, or of some perplexing, multicultural hybridisation? Using an approach termed ‘critical systematics’, Agbe-Davies offers a new direction in the interpretation of the pipes. Instead of attempting to solve the ‘problem’ of the pipes’ cultural affiliation by relying on essentialised categories of group identity and a concept of material culture stasis, Agbe-Davies argues that “we might self-reflexively examine the culture (that is, social learning) of our discipline” (p. 19). This positioning leads to the use of concepts from critical race theory, with a central tenet being that race, although a fluid social construct, has real-world ramifications.

Agbe-Davies presents one of the best discussions currently available on the history of clay-pipe manufacture and analysis in historical archaeology. She uses her sample of pipe fragments to question how pipes may have moved through the multicultural social environment of seventeenth-century Virginia. This analysis is important because the region truly was a landscape of violence, both actual and symbolic, as Native American, African and English communities wrestled with shifting power relations. Agbe-Davies explores power dynamics in a unique way by turning accepted conclusions on their head. The disappearance of decorated pipes by the beginning of the eighteenth century, for instance, did not occur because white elite planters tightened their grip on artistic expression. The symbols on the pipes may in fact have been far less threatening than the production of the pipes themselves. The ownership of such pipes by “laborers rather than owners of labor” (p. 168), coupled with the paucity of contemporary comments about pipe manufacture, may indicate the total lack of planter interest. Planters may have utterly disregarded pipes because they were a source of production that they could not or did not wish to control. The hierarchical social world is therefore considerably more mutable than historical documents suggest.

Seventeenth-century Virginia, as with colonial Cuba and North Carolina, was a social world wherein foreign settlers had much less authority than they themselves thought or we today may imagine.

These books represent the excitement present in today's historical archaeologies of colonial life. Each proclaims the vitality and relevance of a discipline that, once so maligned, has now proven its anthropological and historical merit in myriad ways. These books also provide new visions for analysis

and interpretation. By examining sites and artefacts with fresh eyes and innovative insights, they expand knowledge and push into unexplored methodological and theoretical realms. Each book also demonstrates innovative ways to interpret the power, and indeed the weaknesses, of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European colonialism. As various Europeans 'discovered' new lands and attempted to control life in these foreign worlds, they quickly learned that their paths to control would never be straightforward, easy or even entirely possible.