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The Archeology of Sixteenth-Century Cross-Cultural Encounters in Point Reyes National Seashore

In the late 1500s, indigenous hunter-gatherers on the northern California coast met Spanish and English voyagers for the first time. The Coast Miwok living in the northern San Francisco Bay Area at the time were not an isolated people. They had long been in contact with other California Indian groups through complex trade networks that moved shell and other marine resources inland in exchange for obsidian, steatite (soapstone), and other goods not available on the coast. Their encounter with the sixteenth-century visitors was unprecedented, however, and foreshadowed the Spanish and Russian colonization of northern California nearly 200 years later. Archeological research at Point Reyes National Seashore is examining the implications of this series of encounters by synthesizing archeological data from terrestrial and underwater contexts, as well as bridging the divide between prehistoric and historical contexts.



Artist's view of the *San Agustín* wreck in Drakes Bay.

The *Tamál-Húye* Archeological Project focuses on intercultural interactions and processes of culture change and continuity in sixteenth-century northern California resulting from the shipwreck of the Manila galleon *San Agustín*, which occurred in *tamál-húye*, the Coast Miwok name for present-day Drakes Bay, in Point Reyes National Seashore, in 1595. The project is investigating whether this event, and the material culture introduced as a result, was a source of long-term Coast Miwok cultural change or if significant change came later with eighteenth and nineteenth century colonialism. The study examines evidence for indigenous salvage and reuse of the ship's cargo and resulting changes to local Coast Miwok cultural practices, as well as changes in regional interaction between California Indian groups.

Researchers from the National Park Service (NPS) and the University of California, Berkeley are working with partners from the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria to design a project to address anthropological questions about the cross-cultural encounters. There is growing awareness within archeology that working with descendent communities in all stages of research is not only important for cultivating good relationships, but also adds scope to the research questions and interpretations of complex data.

To carry out the project, researchers are using the holistic framework of historical anthropology, incorporating original field data from archeological excavations conducted in *tamál-húye* from the 1940s to the 1970s, historical documents, ethnography, and native oral tradition to examine how the Coast Miwok recontextualized ceramics and other introduced goods salvaged from the *San Agustín* for use in their daily practice, and whether the long-term trajectory of Coast Miwok culture changed as a result.

Sixteenth-Century Encounters at Point Reyes

During early voyages along the California coast, encounters between Europeans and Indians are documented in a rich historical record. Sixteenth-century chronicles about Alta California record the mariners' views of their interactions with indigenous people (Bolton 1916; Nauman 1999; Nuttall 1914; Sanchez 2001; Vaux 1854; Wagner 1923, 1924). These accounts come from five documented European voyages to Alta California before the eighteenth century, including four Spanish voyages and the well-known landfall by the Englishman Sir Francis Drake and his vessel the *Golden Hind*. Drake landed on the California coast during the summer of 1579, and spent five weeks preparing his ship for a long Pacific crossing and eventual return to England (Nuttall 1914; Vaux 1854). Scholars debate the precise location of the landfall, but most agree it was within the territory of Coast Miwok-speaking inhabitants of the northern Bay Area, encompassing *tamál-húye*. From an archeological perspective, however, another encounter that took place just 16 years after Drake's California stopover was more important, and resulted in one of the most intriguing cases of intercultural contact in early California history.

The Spanish Manila galleon *San Agustín*, carrying a diverse cargo of Chinese trade goods including porcelain, silk, and other luxury items, wrecked in *tamál-húye* in November 1595 while en route from the Philippines to Mexico. Spain's Manila trade, beginning in 1573, was a major artery of east-west commerce between Asia and Europe for nearly 250 years (Schurz 1939). Manila galleons, Spanish vessels constructed in Mexico or the Philippines specifically

for the trade, carried Chinese trade goods from Manila across the Pacific via a northern route that intercepted North America on the California coast, and then proceeded south to Acapulco. Sebastian Rodriguez Cermeño and an 80-member crew left the Philippines on July 5, 1595, aboard the *San Agustín*. After a four-month Pacific crossing, Cermeño reached California and anchored his vessel in a large, sheltered bay (later named Drakes Bay) to re-provision and assemble a small launch for coastal exploration. Cermeño's crew interacted with the Coast Miwok population for more than a month during this stopover, although Spanish chroniclers only documented sketchy details (Sanchez 2001; Wagner 1924). Cermeño noted the initial engagements as peaceful, writing:

"Having anchored in the said bay on the sixth of said [month], shortly an Indian of one of those living on the beach came alongside in his small boat made of grass...The said Indian was seated in the middle, and he had in his hand an oar with two blades with which he rowed with great swiftness. He came alongside our ship, where he remained talking in his language a good while without anyone understanding what he was saying. Having lured him with endearing words, he came closer to the ship and there we gave him things such as pieces of silk and blankets and other trifles, which the ship carried, and with which he returned to shore very contented" (Sanchez 2001:241-242).

The *San Agustín* was driven ashore during a storm shortly after the crew's arrival in *tamá-húye* and was wrecked. The Spaniards were forced to modify the launch to accommodate the entire crew to continue to Mexico, and to abandon *San Agustín* and its cargo. After *San Agustín's* loss, interactions between the Spanish and Coast Miwok became more strained, and at least one conflict erupted over material from the wreck as both sought to salvage goods from the ship (Wagner 1924:23).

From the Coast Miwok perspective, the Spanish departure was likely just the beginning of their utilization of the shipwreck, as small-scale collecting, opportunistic salvage, or possibly systematic exploitation likely continued for some time. This sustained interaction between the Spanish sailors and Coast Miwok hunter-gatherers, and especially the indigenous people's salvage of the shipwreck, left the richest archeological record of early cross-cultural encounters in California identified to date and included a considerable quantity of European and Asian material culture from the wreck reused by Coast Miwok villagers. This month-long interaction between the *San Agustín's* crew and the Coast Miwok represents one of the earliest documented contacts between Europeans and indigenous peoples on the northern California coast, and the last recorded contact for nearly 200 years until Spanish colonialism reached the region in the late-eighteenth century. The material remnants of this fascinating interlude of California history lie buried beneath the landscape of Point Reyes National Seashore in coastal village sites and middens, and submerged offshore in the remnants of the shipwreck. The project seeks to tap both sources of data as equally significant components of the overall story, each of which is necessary to paint a complete picture of the events that transpired on the beaches of *támá-húye* in 1595.

Oral Traditions of Early Encounters

Despite the wealth of European sources documenting sixteenth-century encounters at *támá-húye*, it is important to be aware that European accounts of indigenous peoples have their own inherent biases, and researchers must critically evaluate each account to identify both personal biases of the authors and systemic bias of a European world-view (Wood 1990:82-84). European-authored sources can help reconstruct encounters from the perspective of literate, elite, Western males (Lightfoot 2005:16), but care must be used when using historical documents to identify indigenous responses to those encounters. Despite these limitations, the accounts are valuable sources because they describe certain aspects of California Indian life at the moment of contact, before significant change had taken place. In this regard, they are a vital source of information about contact-era California society.

Native oral traditions, passed down through the generations, document some Indian perceptions of the sixteenth-century interactions, and using them can help ameliorate problems identified with using historical documents. Traditional Coast Miwok or closely-related Pomo oral histories, for example, although collected after contact, nonetheless offer native perspective not found in other sources. These native narratives may be especially vital for understanding ritual and symbolic aspects of cross-cultural encounters. Each alternative source must be carefully compared and balanced against the others, and the result must be nuanced to provide the most complete picture of the past.

One native oral tradition about early European encounters in northern California comes from the Kashaya Pomo, closely related neighbors of the Coast Miwok to the north. Their story, told by elder Essie Parrish to Berkeley linguist Robert L. Oswalt in 1958, records their first perceptions of Europeans in this way:

"In the old days, before the white people came up here, there was a boat sailing on the ocean from the south. Because before that they had never seen a boat, they said, 'Our world must be coming to an end. Couldn't we do something? This big bird floating on the ocean is from somewhere, probably from up high. Let us plan a feast. Let us have a dance.' They followed its course with their eyes to see what it would do. Having done so, they promised Our Father [a feast] saying that destruction was upon them.... When they had done so, they watched [the ship] sail way up north and disappear. They thought that [the ship] had not done anything but sail northwards because of the feast they had promised. They were saying that nothing had happened to them—the big bird person had sailed northward without doing anything—because of the promise of a feast; because of that they thought it had not done anything. Consequently they held a feast and a big dance..." (Oswalt 1966:245-247).

Native perceptions of early encounters with European voyagers are the product of an indigenous cosmology, or world-view, which is very different than a European perspective. Interpreting archeological remains that resulted from the encounters needs to consider that native populations may have thought about introduced material culture in very different ways than the Europeans who were the primary consumers of the objects.

There is ethnographic and ethnohistoric evidence to suggest that California Indians shared a common cultural belief in the polysemic nature of material culture. Everyday objects held a variety of meanings, pragmatic and ceremonial, secular and sacred. Objects signified social relations between individuals, as well as between people and the spiritual world. This aspect of Coast Miwok cultural tradition must be understood and considered in any interpretation of how introduced material culture from European voyagers was incorporated into indigenous daily practice. Incorporating foreign material culture, therefore, likely occurred in complex ways. It is likely it also varied considerably across class, gender, and age lines. Undoubtedly, not all Coast Miwok individuals perceived European outsiders or their material culture in the same ways, and this project is attempting to account for class- or gender-based differences in objects.

Previous Archeological Research at Point Reyes: Drake and Cermeño

Archeological remains offer another unique view of these engagements. Archeological excavations in Point Reyes National Seashore that took place from the 1940s-1970s unearthed important evidence of these encounters, including European and Asian artifacts from the shipwrecked Spanish galleon found in Coast Miwok village sites. These sites and artifacts illuminate a fascinating chapter in the history of Native American and European interaction. These artifacts consist mostly of fragments of Chinese porcelain plates, bowls, and other ceramic vessels, and iron spikes from the ship.

Between 1940-1951, UC Berkeley archeologists excavated, tested, or surface collected seven sites in *tamál-húye* that yielded sixteenth-century material culture from the *San Agustín* (Beardsley 1954a, 1954b; Heizer 1941; Meighan 1950, 2002; Meighan and Heizer 1952). Later, researchers from San Francisco State College (now University), Santa Rosa Junior College, and the Drakes Navigators Guild continued investigations at Point Reyes (King and Upson 1970; Treganza 1959; Treganza and King 1968; Von der Porten 1968, 1972). From the 1950s-1970s, they excavated or conducted surface collection at an additional nine sites that included sixteenth-century European and Asian material culture, bringing to at least 16 the total number of sites investigated in *tamál-húye* that contain artifacts presumed to be from the *San Agustín* shipwreck. The wreck site itself has not yet been located, although efforts to locate the ship's remains are underway by researchers from the NPS, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and UC Berkeley.

An interesting set of questions about the entanglement between the foreign voyagers and the indigenous inhabitants of *tamál-húye* revolves around introduced objects from the shipwreck. One of the project's main research questions is how the Coast Miwok may have recycled goods from *San Agustín* and integrated them into their cultural practice. Some researchers have suggested they used the ceramics for strictly utilitarian purposes such as food preparation and storage, that they collected porcelain fragments simply as curiosities, or that they experimented with using the pot sherds as raw materials for beads, pendants, or tools but quickly gave up when they found them to be unsuitable (Heizer 1941; Treganza and King 1968; Von der Porten 1968).

Others offer a different interpretation, suggesting a possible ceremonial or ritual use of the foreign materials. Based on context of the Indian's encounter with Drake, which likely occurred during an important ritual time called the Kusu ceremony, they may have collected porcelain sherds and iron spikes from *San Agustín* because they were valued as symbols of previous encounters or as objects that signified unknown worlds (Lightfoot and Simmons 1998). Local Coast Miwok groups may also have incorporated the objects into other aspects of their ritual practice, or used goods from the ship to create and maintain a unique regional identity, or possibly employed them to negotiate new social relations with neighboring groups. To address these questions, and the long-term implications, we are reconstructing the encounters as completely as possible using museum collections and original field records from the 1940-1970s excavations, historical accounts and ethnographic sources, as well as native oral traditions-an historical anthropological approach that will allow Europeans and Coast Miwok interactions during the encounter to be interpreted in the widest possible context.



Porcelain sherds from Point Reyes archaeological sites.

Methodological Approach

The project is employing a diachronic perspective to examine the long-term implications of the encounter at *tamál-húye* with European voyagers and Coast Miwok, using multiple lines of evidence such as recontextualization of material culture from the shipwreck to look for changes in key elements of cultural practice. The project strives to establish a precontact

baseline for such key cultural elements as settlement patterns, social relations and exchange networks, organization and use of space, ceremonial and mortuary practice, and material culture. The project compares key elements of Coast Miwok cultural practice before and after the wreck of the *San Agustín*, paying particular attention to change and continuity from established precontact patterns. Did the encounters or the introduced material culture contribute to changes in any of these basic elements of cultural practice? For example, did the encounters or introduced objects provoke a change in settlement patterns or exchange networks in the area surrounding the Point Reyes peninsula? Did the local inhabitants of Point Reyes use the objects to create a unique local identity?

Analysis is also specifically focusing on the introduced material culture from the *San Agustín* shipwreck excavated from each site. Using field records and published sources to plot the distribution of artifacts and evaluate the context and spatial associations of both introduced and indigenous materials, we are generating interpretations about how artifacts were associated with particular activities and about how they were used in daily practice. The artifact's spatial patterning, reconstructed from original excavation records and reports, will reveal if introduced artifacts were associated with specific activities or classes of indigenous artifacts that reflect particular practices. Depending on the context, patterns of activity may or may not represent new forms of cultural practice—evaluating this question is the project's ultimate goal.

From Hypotheses to Conclusions

Previous researchers have found that, when incorporating material culture introduced during cross-cultural encounters, ceremonial contexts may be more open to cultural change than everyday practice (Marshall and Maas 1997). A primary research avenue to address long-term culture change, therefore, is to focus on possible ceremonial or ritual use of introduced material culture salvaged from the *San Agustín*. Lightfoot and Simmons (1998), for example, offer a nuanced interpretation of Coast Miwok reuse of material from the *San Agustín* that differs from a strict utilitarian approach. They suggest that because of the likely ceremonial context that structured the Coast Miwok's first encounter with Europeans, they

“...probably collected porcelain sherds and iron spikes because they were valued as symbolic referents of previous encounters and as materials that signified unknown worlds. The primary purpose was not to modify them into tools or ornaments per se; rather, they were probably regarded as similar to charms...” (Lightfoot and Simmons 1998:160).

To test these ideas, the project is comparing models of ways that Coast Miwok groups may have incorporated introduced material culture into their daily practice, and any long-term implications, to expected archeological outcomes.

Salvaged Materials as Utilitarian Items

One model suggests that Coast Miwok individuals primarily used introduced artifacts for pragmatic or utilitarian purposes. New objects such as ceramic vessels may have been incorporated into existing cultural practice, resulting in no significant change to cultural practice. For example, the Coast Miwok may have used plates and bowls as food and storage containers, which they discarded as they broke. There are several archeological patterns that would support this model. Analysis of porcelain collections has been conducted to identify vessel forms and minimum number of vessels (MNV) represented by assemblages from each site. Ceramic counts are being used to compare percentages of vessel forms at each site to determine if particular forms were selected more frequently than others. A preference for selecting hollowware versus flatware vessels, for example, may indicate utilitarian incorporation of porcelain ceramics into existing foodways (Cabak and Loring 2000; Farnsworth 1996). Ideally, these results will be compared to the percentages of available vessel forms, which may be reconstructed from beach-collected porcelain sherds or from an evaluation of the wreck site. If this pragmatic model were the case, then presumably only whole ceramic vessels would have been salvaged for reuse, resulting in multiple fragments of each ceramic vessel present at each site.

The Coast Miwok may not have directly used iron spikes found in archeological contexts; rather, the spikes may have been secondarily deposited as they used timbers for fuel or for building shelters. Broken ceramics and iron spikes may have been discarded in middens with other secondary refuse. Alternatively, the Coast Miwok may have used spikes as tools or other utilitarian objects. In addition, the Coast Miwok may have used porcelain or other objects as raw material for utilitarian objects such as scrapers and projectile points. If this were the case, they may have collected broken ceramic fragments, but spatial patterning should indicate association with other raw materials for stone tools, such as obsidian, or be spatially associated with stone tool workshops.

Ceramics in Ceremonial Contexts

A different model suggests that the Coast Miwok primarily used artifacts from the *San Agustín*, in particular Chinese porcelain, in ceremonial or ritual contexts. Foreign objects may have been incorporated into Coast Miwok practice in ways consistent with their cosmology and worldviews, but that fundamentally represented new cultural practice. In this role, the ceramics may have served as indexes, or “aniconic representations,” of other worlds or deceased ancestors (Gell 1998:26); or as “historical mnemonics,” objects that served as repositories of social memory or specific events, especially for elite or restricted social groups (Joyce 2003:117).

Introduced objects may have had inherent meaning by themselves, which might have led Coast Miwok individuals to collect broken ceramics from the shipwreck or the beach. Although not as easily tested archeologically, this model might be reflected in ceramic sherds from many different vessels at each site (indicating there was no preference for intact versus

broken vessels), or possibly sherds from the same vessels found at different sites in *tamá-húye*. There may also be evidence for sharing or exchange of individual, unmodified ceramic fragments, both locally and regionally. As Jones notes, "...the fragmentation of objects, the accumulation of sets of objects and the recomposition of fragmented objects are critical to the creation of social relations, since the act of breaking and sharing material culture establishes affiliation between people" (Jones 2001:101). In addition, artifacts may be spatially associated primarily in non-utilitarian or ceremonial contexts, such as burials, or possibly associated with symbolic objects associated with ceremonial practice, such as charmstones. Design motifs from ceramic vessels are also being critically examined and compared to identify frequency patterns. Designs will be compared to ethnographic literature and oral traditions to determine if salvage and selection of particular objects was dictated by cultural values, which might indicate symbolic meaning (Wilkie 2000; Wilkie and Farnsworth 1999, 2005).

Salvaged Items as Raw Material

Another associated model suggests introduced material culture may also have been used as raw materials for objects such as beads and pendants that had symbolic value. In this case, the Coast Miwok may have collected broken ceramics from the ship or beach, and a significant percentage of individual (or non-mendable) sherds may be present, but they should be found in various states of use in specific contexts—spatially, these worked objects may be primarily incorporated into workshop areas, similar to clam disc beads. Also, if transformed into culturally-appropriate trade items (such as beads), porcelain artifacts may also have been traded within established exchange networks to surrounding areas, and may be found in regional contexts outside *tamá-húye*. The project is therefore examining archeological collections and artifact inventories from other sites outside the *tamá-húye* area to determine if local Coast Miwok groups exchanged foreign material culture with other Coast Miwok or California Indian groups.

As these models suggest, it is often difficult to differentiate between "utilitarian" and "symbolic" objects in any cultural context—these categories are not mutually exclusive. From a Coast Miwok viewpoint, it is likely that objects rarely had a single meaning, but had complex, nuanced meanings that could be at once pragmatic and ritual, or pragmatic in certain circumstances and ritual in others. In their world-view, goods likely had multiple meanings, and objects introduced by Europeans such as ceramics and iron objects likely may have represented status or social connections to European outsiders in addition to their practical value. Some items that could be incorporated into previously-held categories of high-value or symbolic indigenous objects were oftentimes recontextualized into those roles. Items without previous context, but with perceived pragmatic value, such as porcelain sherds or iron spikes, were likely desired for their utilitarian value, but also held myriad culturally-constructed meanings beyond simple pragmatism.

Broader Implications of the Project

The *tamá-húye* Archeological Project is contributing to understanding how native populations adopted introduced material culture in cross-cultural encounters, and may be of interest to a wide range of both prehistoric and historical archeologists. The project is providing a unique perspective to our understanding of early intercultural engagements between indigenous populations and Europeans, and is a unique example of indigenous contact with the expanding world capitalist system. By examining the material consequences of coastal hunter-gatherer contact with European voyagers, the project is addressing the synergistic effects of early culture contact and the long-term implications of a short-term event. Utilizing museum collections from the Hearst Museum and Point Reyes National Seashore, and using the unique perspective offered by shipwrecks, the project is addressing issues of cross-cultural encounters not previously investigated in culture contact studies.

Working together in a collaborative research project, archeologists from the NPS, UC Berkeley, and tribal members from the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria are untangling the meaning behind the earliest meetings of European and California Indian on the beaches of northern California. Understanding how those events unfolded, and the long-term implications, can help communities today put those early contacts into perspective and discuss them in terms relevant to contemporary societies.

The lasting significance, and most interesting part of sixteenth-century European visits to northern California, is not what they meant to the outsiders, but what the encounters meant to the Coast Miwok inhabitants of the area and what, if any, lasting significance they had. Anthropologists studying "culture contact" are often interested in how native communities around the globe experienced the spread of European culture. But because there was no permanent colonial presence established in California for nearly two centuries after these early voyages, the real question is how the Coast Miwok metaphorically folded the Europeans and the goods they left behind into *their* cultural practice. How did the Native Americans make sense of the strangers within their own world view, how did they incorporate the objects introduced by European visitors into their daily practice, and were there any long-term implications? Using evidence from multiple sources, we are trying to piece together a picture of the past that may help us understand the importance of the one of the earliest meetings between European sailors and California Indians.

By Matthew A. Russell, NPS Submerged Resources Center Archeologist

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