Bonnie G. McEwan
Gregory A. Waselkov

Colonial Origins: The Archaeology of Colonialism in the Americas

Preface

From its beginnings as a scholarly discipline, historical archaeology has contributed to an ever-deepening understanding of the complex processes and repercussions of European colonization in the Americas. Because the legacies of colonialism pervade our societies and have even helped shape the consciousness of Americans in all the nations of the Western hemisphere, exploration of our colonial origins remains a vital and relevant field of study. This task has always been dominated by historians with their skills at interpreting richly nuanced first-hand accounts and unintentionally revealing reports produced by generations of drudging colonial bureaucrats. As archaeologists have repeatedly demonstrated in so many historical contexts, however, the written record is sorely biased in favor of the literate, the wealthy, and the powerful. The greatest advantage archaeologists wield is the light we can shed on the lives of those forgotten or wronged by the producers of the written record. Almost as valuable is the material nature of the record that archaeologists unearth, which by its very three-dimensionality lends itself to spatial and stylistic analyses. Descartes should have said that his elemental human, stripped to the basics, had things as well as thoughts, much to archaeologists' benefit. So, after a half-century of archaeological studies of colonialism, what have we accomplished?

For the plenary session opening the 35th annual meeting of The Society for Historical Archaeology, on 10 January 2002 in Mobile, we invited four distinguished colleagues to consider this question, each from the perspective of a different colonial realm. Three of those presentations appear in revised form in this

thematic collection of articles: Kathleen Deagan on Spanish colonialism, Marcel Moussette on French colonialism, and Kent Lightfoot on Russian colonialism. A fourth by Joanne Bowen on British colonialism could not be readied in time for inclusion here, but will appear in a later issue of this journal. As practitioners in the field will already know, and as readers of these articles will see, the nature of colonization varied through time and space according to many factors regarding the intent and approach of the colonizers and the responses and options of the colonized. Historians and archaeologists are poised, together, on the brink of a comparative colonialism that moves beyond glib generalities to a profound grasp of the different natures of colonialism in the various parts of the Americas.

Consider how far we have come already. In 1867 Francis Parkman, in *The Jesuits in North America*, coined his famous aphorism: "Spanish civilization crushed the Indian; English civilization scorned and neglected him; French civilization embraced and cherished him" (Parkman 1867[I]:131)—an oversimplification at best and, many would argue, a gross mischaracterization. Compare this to the three-volume work published a decade ago by a group of nearly 200 historians who summarized the state of their knowledge in the 2,400 pages of the *Encyclopedia of the North American Colonies* (Cooke 1993). There also exists now a daunting archaeological literature devoted to colonialism in each region of North America (Ewen 1990; Ayres 1995; Miller et al. 1996; Waselkov 1997; Dawdy 2000). Drawing parallels and contrasts among the different colonial experiences will not be easy, but archaeologists now have the database, the analytical tools, and the historical sophistication for that task. The three authors of these articles show us, in highly individual ways, how the humanistic and social scientific approaches to historical archaeology can both contribute to the twin goals of comprehending the social and intercultural complexities of individual colonies through time and of developing theoretical models that permit meaningful comparisons to be drawn.

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- BONNIE G. McEWAN
 MISSION SAN LUIS
 2021 WEST MISSION ROAD
 TALLAHASSEE, FL 32304
- GREGORY A. WASELKOV
 CENTER FOR ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDIES, HUMB 34
 UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH ALABAMA
 307 N. UNIVERSITY BLVD.
 MOBILE, AL 36688