

Published: Jan 31, 2008 12:30 AM

Modified: Jan 31, 2008 05:45 AM

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Trove from Fort San Juan delights archaeologists

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RALEIGH - Archaeologists are a patient lot who count time by eons and measure progress in inches.

But even Rob Beck can't contain his excitement that word is getting out -- finally -- about a dig in Burke County that indicates Spanish explorers were in the interior of North Carolina two decades before the English attempted to settle Roanoke Island. Tonight, UNC-TV will air a half-hour documentary about the failed Fort San Juan being excavated north of Morganton.

"This is wonderful," Beck said Wednesday. "It's extraordinarily gratifying for all of us."

Beck of the University of Oklahoma, Chris Rodning of Tulane University and David Moore of Warren Wilson College were in Raleigh for an early showing of the program at the N.C. Museum of Natural Sciences. In the lobby beforehand, they arranged a temporary exhibit of pot shards and rusted metal relics found at what's known as the Berry Site over the past 20 years or so. The three archaeologists oversee annual summer excavations at the site, where they and other experts have come to think a Spanish explorer, Capt. Juan Pardo, built a fort and stationed soldiers in 1567.

Pardo had been dispatched by Pedro Menendez de Aviles, the Spanish colonial governor, to claim the interior of North America for Spain, to make Catholics of its natives and to find a route to Mexico. At the time, it was thought Mexico and its riches of silver were a week's trek past the southern Appalachian mountains.

Researchers have found documentation of Pardo's travel route and now know he went from one Indian village to another in what are now South and North Carolina and Tennessee. At a large village called Joara, north of present-day Morganton in the Appalachian foothills, Pardo and his men built a small settlement, waiting for the snow in the mountains to melt so some of them could continue their passage.

Pardo built Fort San Juan on the northern edge of the Indian village, and some of his men stayed there as long as 18 months.

Pardo left the fort -- just as John White would leave the English colonists at Roanoke Island in 1587 -- and later it was burned to the ground. Researchers say it was one of six forts Pardo established in the Southeast with a total of 120 men. All of them were destroyed, and all but one of the soldiers were killed or died.

Had the Spanish adequately funded Pardo's expedition and given him enough men to populate the settlements, Beck said, the English never would have been able to establish a permanent settlement at Jamestown, Va.

For an archaeologist, finding and interpreting the evidence of events long past is only part of the job. Another is getting the word out.

The story of what's being found at the Berry Site has trickled out, and Beck said history books are



From left, Chester DePratter of the University of South Carolina, David Moore of Warren Wilson College and Chris Rodning of Tulane University examine artifacts from the Berry Site excavation.

Staff Photos by Juli Leonard

beginning to refer to Spain's early, failed attempt to settle the interior of the New World.

Stanley South, an archaeologist who helped document Spanish settlement in South Carolina and who came to the premiere, said artifacts are voices from the past and archaeologists are interpreters.

He picked up a jagged piece of pottery from Fort San Juan.

"This stuff talks to us," he said, "and we tell the children of today and tomorrow what it says."

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