

Archaeologist *digs* 16th-century America

Clashes between cultures intrigue Chris Rodning. As an archaeologist, he explores how people from different cultures collide. And he does it the hard way—by digging in the dirt.

Rodning, an assistant professor of anthropology, along with a team of other archaeologists, has slowly and painstakingly excavated items at the site of the burnt remnants of the native town of Joara and the 16th-century Spanish settlement of Fort San Juan in western North Carolina. Items found during last summer's fieldwork—an iron scale, a piece of quartz crystal and glass beads—give him clues to how native people and Spanish explorers interacted in the mid 1500s.

“Everyday objects tell us how people live their daily lives,” says Rodning. The Spanish explorers used the iron scale to weigh provisions, such as biscuit, nails and lead shot. The Spanish kept detailed written records of supplies, indicating the scarcity of commodities.

Fort San Juan was the major interior outpost of Spanish colonists in America in the mid 16th century and the northern edge of the Spanish colony of Florida.

The Spanish conquistador Capt. Juan Pardo established Fort San Juan in 1567. The written records (Pardo was accompanied by a scribe) indicate that from 20 to 30 Spanish soldiers stayed at the fort during its existence, although at times there were more soldiers present, and hundreds of native people lived in the neighboring town of Joara.

While the historical written records provide the story of the “formal” events, items of material culture, like the scale, the quartz and the beads as well as items such as olive jars, iron nails, chain mail and aboriginal pottery, give information about mundane, everyday life.

The Spanish were searching for elusive silver and gold, but in this part of the New World, they had to settle for the less valuable quartz crystal as a gem substitute, to which they referred as “little diamonds,” says Rodning.

“The Spanish explorers were dependent on the natives for food, safety and security, and knowledge of the environment in which they were living,” says Rodning. And the native people, undoubtedly, were curious about their new neighbors and attracted to signs—such as glass beads and metal items—of their wealth and status.

People from the nearby native settlement Joara helped Pardo and his men build the five structures of Fort San Juan in seven to 10 days.

The two groups appeared to live cooperatively for a year and a half. But no Spanish women were with the soldiers. And Rodning surmises that native women may have formed relationships with the Spanish soldiers—cooking for them and doing other household activities—and that these interactions may have led to conflicts.

In the spring of 1568, the native people of Joara attacked Fort San Juan, overran it and burned it to the ground. Fort San Juan and five other forts were wiped out.

This summer, Merritt Sanders, a Tulane graduate student, and Hannah Humphrey, a 2007 graduate, participated in the dig at the Barry site (as the Joara–Fort San Juan area is now called). Rodning plans to return there next summer to continue the exploration. He has been excavating at the site with colleagues David Moore of Warren Wilson College and Rob Beck of the University of Oklahoma since 2001. The National Science Foundation and National Geographic Society have provided grants to support the research.

—Mary Ann Travis

Chris Rodning (left) and a colleague clean the top of architectural debris from a burnt structure associated with the Spanish settlement at Fort San Juan in North Carolina. They are looking for clues for understanding interactions between Spanish explorers and native people during the 1500s.

