

Exploring Joara and Fort San Juan: Continuing Excavations at the Berry site, North Carolina

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Abstract

In January 1567, upon his arrival in the native town of Joara, in the upper Catawba River valley in western North Carolina, Captain Juan Pardo commanded Joara Mico to build houses for 30 of his soldiers, thus establishing Fort San Juan. Excavations at the Berry site from 2001 to 2003 identified four burned buildings. This paper reviews findings from our 2004 field season at the Berry site, during which we identified a fifth burned structure. All five structures are thought to represent houses built for the Spanish soldiers stationed at Fort San Juan. We also provide an overview of the project to date.

Paper presented at the 61st Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Archaeological Conference, St. Louis, Missouri, October 21-24, 2004.

Acknowledgements

2004 excavations at the Berry site supported by the National Geographic Society, Warren Wilson College, and the Western Piedmont Foundation.

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(Title Slide) (Title Slide) By the time that English colonists founded Jamestown in 1607, Spain's presence along the Atlantic seaboard had already spanned a period of more than eighty years. Our ongoing archaeological research at the Berry site sheds new light on the nature of the first sustained relationships between Europeans and the native people of North America during this period. (Slide map) In January 1567, Spanish Captain Juan Pardo and his expedition arrived at Joara, a large native town situated along the upper Catawba River near the base of the Appalachian mountains. Pardo renamed this town Cuenca, after his own native city in Spain. He built a fort, which he named San Juan, and manned it with thirty soldiers. Fort San Juan was to be the first and most important garrison along Pardo's proposed route from Santa Elena across the Appalachian Mountains to northern Mexico. Unlike earlier seasonal encampments, such as De Soto's winter camps, Pardo intended that Fort San Juan permanently expand the Spanish colonial frontier into the deep interior—this fort, as such, was the earliest European settlement in the interior of what is now the United States. It would last less than eighteen months before falling to the Indians.

(Slide location) Archaeological and documentary evidence indicate that the Berry site is the location of Joara and Fort San Juan. This paper summarizes our recent excavations at Berry. The 2004 field season revealed one additional burned building and several significant Spanish artifacts. We would especially like to acknowledge the National Geographic Society for their support of the 2004 fieldwork.

Slide The Berry Site, Joara, and Fort San Juan

The following describes the Berry site and the evidence for burnt structures we think were built by native people to house the Spanish soldiers stationed at Fort San Juan. (slide artifacts) We then describe the European artifacts, which we argue are consistent with our identification of this site as the location of Joara, Cuenca, and Fort San Juan.

(slide fields) Berry is situated along Upper Creek, a tributary of the Catawba River, in Burke County, North Carolina. The site covers 5 hectares and is located on the extreme northeast margin of a 75-hectare alluvial bottomland at the junction of Upper and Irish creeks. (Slide mound fill) An earthen mound is located at the north end of the site. Though once 15 feet tall, it was bulldozed in the 1960s and today measures about 70 m in diameter and rises to a height of about 1.5 m above the surrounding field.

(Slide defining Burke phase) During the sixteenth century, Joara was one of the largest native towns in the western Piedmont. It occupied both the northeastern edge of the Mississippian cultural world and the northwestern edge of the Spanish colonial frontier. (Slide settlement pattern) On the basis of settlement patterns and evidence from the Spanish documentary sources we suggest that Berry, as Joara, was the political and ritual center of a Mississippian chiefdom

(Slide site map) Our investigations at Berry have included systematic surface collections and gradiometer surveys over the entire five-hectare site. However, excavations in 1986 and 2001 to 2004 - which total over 900 m² - have focused on the area of 0.5 ha immediately north and south of the mound, where we have recovered more than 60 examples of sixteenth-century Spanish artifacts. What is more, we have now identified five burned buildings that form a compound, an oval pattern around what was possibly a courtyard area. Large pit features--from which we have recovered various sixteenth-century Spanish artifacts, as well as faunal remains and native-made Burke ceramics--occupy the spaces between buildings. We believe this compound constitutes at least a portion of the architectural remains of Fort San Juan.

(Slide Str. 3) Looking at the burned compound we see that all five of the buildings are roughly square, measuring eight to nine meters on a side, and while unusually large, were built in an overall style typical of local, Native American structures. (Slide showing outer wall edge)

Construction began with the excavation of a foundation basin, probably about 30-40 centimeters deep. Exterior wall posts were placed at an interval of about 20 cm. apart - inside of and about 20 cm from the outer edge of the basin. At least some of the walls were constructed with wattle and daub and some interior walls may have been covered with split cane matting.

(Slide Str. 5 working) The discovery of a fifth structure in this area this past summer was a surprise, as structures 1 through 4 were all detected through gradiometer surveys, but Structure 5 was not. (Slide Str. 5) This slide shows the northernmost corner of the intact remnants of Structure 5. It exhibits all of the same architectural characteristics as the other four structures.

(Slide map) Structure 5 completes a roughly oval arrangement of 5 buildings covering about 52 meters north-south and 40 meters east-west. Each of the buildings is separated from the others by about 8-12 meters of open space. The doorways to structures 1 and 3 open towards the interior of the compound, and we expect that the entryways to the other three structures probably also lead to this central plaza.

(Slide Str. 1) To date, we have only sampled the undisturbed portions of one of these burned buildings, Structure 1. (Slide) Excavations here have exposed 12 square meters of its remarkably well-preserved remains and have yielded abundant information about its construction and use histories. (Slide) Thus far we have documented carbonized posts and timbers fallen from the walls and roof, burned daub, (Slide cane) cane matting from the walls and floor, and architectural furniture such as wooden benches along the wall. (Slide Sarah) Sarah Sherwood of the University of Tennessee has taken micro-stratigraphic samples from the floor of Structure 1 and is beginning analyses that seek to reconstruct what kinds of activities took place on these surfaces. (slide Gayle) Gayle Fritz and Elizabeth Horton of Washington University are advising us on how best to excavate and analyze the well-preserved organics in this and the other burned buildings.

While the general style and construction features of Structure 1 are consistent with native techniques and technologies, (Slide square notch) some of its timbers seem to have been cut by metal tools, one having been prepared with a probable square cut notch and one (Slide v-notch) with a very deep “v” notch. Thus, while the overall organization of Structure 1 is consistent with native practices of house construction, the probable metal cut timbers suggest that Europeans worked together with native craftsmen to build this structure.

(Slide map) Our excavations suggest that all of these buildings were constructed at or about the same time, used for a short period, then destroyed by fire. We believe that the structures were intentionally burned (probably by the natives of Joara), and also intentionally buried following their collapse, perhaps at least in part to remove from view all traces of the associated events --through an act of ritual purification. It is significant in this regard that there is no evidence of intrusive postholes or other features indicating any later construction activity over these buildings.

(slide of area working) Despite the lack of intrusive postholes that positively postdate these buildings, there are numerous postholes that may be associated with the compound - including a possible palisade we exposed this summer. (slide of postholes) This slide shows the area just east of Structure 3 where at least one and possibly two lines of posts appears to potentially encircle structures 3 and 1. However, an abundance of postholes make it difficult to determine which patterns may be associated with the buildings and which may pre-date or postdate them.

Slide Sixteenth-Century Spanish Artifacts

Within the compound, we have identified a significant assemblage of sixteenth-century Spanish artifacts. The complete catalogue of historic materials from the Berry site is surprisingly small. We occasionally recover metal artifacts associated with farming activities, and we have found

two colonial period gunflints on the site. However, we have no artifactual evidence of sustained occupational components dating to the seventeenth, eighteenth, or nineteenth, centuries. The historic artifacts are (slide listing the numbers of artifacts) nearly exclusively identifiable with the sixteenth century Spanish occupation. The Spanish assemblage includes Olive Jar fragments, Mexican Red Painted pottery, Caparra Blue majolica, wrought iron nails, lead shot and sprue, brass aglets, brass bangles, miscellaneous brass fragments, an iron knife, iron wire fragments, and glass beads.

(slide with artifacts context) To date, Spanish artifacts have been found only at the north end of the site. Most are from plow zone contexts. However, as illustrated in this slide, it is important to emphasize that we have found Spanish artifacts in several of the pit features as well as from Structure 1. (slide fea 23) (slide Str. 1)

(pause)

The iron wire from Structure 1 is especially significant. (slide chain mail) Stan South and Chester DePratter have identified these two small pieces of twisted iron wire as links of chain mail, similar to chain mail found at the Governor Martin site. The fragments were recovered just above the floor surface and next to the wall bench. The recovery of the chain mail and the presence of what are probably metal cut timbers strongly support our view of this building as a quarters for the Pardo expedition: the cut timbers suggest that Europeans helped to build it, and the mail fragments suggest that soldiers subsequently occupied it before its destruction.

Three classes of ceramics have been found at Berry. (slide olive jar) They include 14 sherds from at least four different Olive Jars. Olive Jars are the most ubiquitous ceramics found on Spanish colonial sites in the New World, and span a period from the 1490's to the nineteenth century. We know that Pardo carried 72 liters of wine for provisions on the second expedition; that wine was almost certainly transported in Olive Jars.

(slide) We have recovered one sherd of Caparra Blue majolica, a ware that is much more temporally diagnostic than the Olive Jars. Caparra Blue is common-grade, tin-enameled earthenware. In the New World, Caparra Blue has a chronological range of 1492 to about 1600, and is known to occur in but a single form: the albarello, or drug jar. While never common, Caparra Blue majolica has been found on Caribbean sites, on sites in Mexico and Central America, at Nueva Cadiz, Venezuela, and from the southeastern United States at Santa Elena, sixteenth-century St. Augustine, and at the Governor Martin site, location of Hernando De Soto's 1539 winter encampment near present-day Tallahassee, Florida.

(slide) The Berry assemblage also includes six small sherds of what appears to be Mexican Red Painted ware, all from a single vessel of indeterminate form. Hale Smith defined this ware, and Kathy Deagan has dated it to A.D. 1550-1750. Mexican Red Painted was produced in Mexico and other production centers in the Americas. It is an unglazed coarse earthenware with smoothed surfaces, painted or burnished red, sometimes with molded or relief decoration. Molded edges are apparent on five of the sherds from the Berry site. The temporal distributions of Mexican Red Painted ware and Caparra Blue majolica overlap during the period from A.D. 1550-1600, suggesting that the assemblage of Spanish artifacts from the Berry site may be dated to a fifty-year interval consistent with Pardo's founding of Fort San Juan in January 1567.

(slide all ceramics) The total assemblage of sixteenth-century Spanish ceramics recovered from the Berry site is distinct from other collections of Spanish ceramics recorded from sites in the interior Southeast. Of those few interior sites where Spanish ceramics have been recovered, each yielded only a single sherd, each of which had been altered by native people into non-utilitarian forms such as ear spools or gaming disks. That none of the Spanish ceramics recovered at Berry exhibit such alterations suggests that these were simply disposed of as

utilitarian debris. Also, as John Worth has noted, the presence of multiple sherds from several different Olive Jars strongly suggests that these vessels were broken at the site, having arrived at Berry intact as part of a Spanish occupation. The only known site in the interior with a similar assemblage is the aforementioned Governor Martin site.

In addition to the Spanish ceramics, the Berry site has yielded examples of other artifact classes that we would expect to find at the location of Fort San Juan, including (slide – lead artifacts) lead, nails, and brass. Lead artifacts include three lead shot, one quartered lead shot, one melted shot and two pieces of lead sprue. The lead shot ranges from 11 to 13 mm, the same size as shot found at Santa Elena, and the unusual specimen of quartered shot matches 12 examples of similarly quartered shot from Santa Elena. According to Bandera's account of Pardo's second expedition, Pardo left 235 lbs of lead at Joara.

(slide – nails) We have recovered five wrought iron nails that would probably be classed as the *Barrote* type, based on measurements of length and weight. These were typically (slide – nails) used for finishing work such as flooring and other projects requiring little strength. Pardo provisioned Fort San Juan with 34 lbs of nails and, perhaps most significant, of all Pardo's forts, only San Juan was supplied with nails.

(slide – brass) We have recovered a relatively large quantity of brass. These include at least three brass aglets or lacing tips also comparable to those found at Santa Elena; (slide – brass) 9 rolled or cone-shaped pieces, and (slide – brass) 18 miscellaneous brass scrap fragments, some of which appear to come from spherical forms.

(slide – glass beads) As mentioned above, typical trade materials are rare in our assemblage of historic artifacts. We have recovered several glass beads from this part of the site, at least two of which are good mid-sixteenth century types.

(slide – knife) Also, in 1986, an iron knife was recovered in Burial 1, a fully extended adult male. A burial bundle with (slide – bundle) a turtle shell container, a clay elbow pipe, projectile points, and stone abraders accompanied this individual. Similar bundles have been recovered in sixteenth-century burials at the King site in northwest Georgia and at Toqua in eastern Tennessee. Pardo is specifically reported to have given eight knives to Joara Mico as gifts for his “subjects.” This knife may have been one of those gifts.

Conclusions

(slide) To conclude, archaeological and documentary evidence suggest that the Berry site is the location of Joara and the 1567-1568 garrison of Fort San Juan, the earliest European settlement in the interior of what is now the United States. (slide) Spanish ceramics, brass, and hardware recovered from the northern half-hectare of the site comprise an assemblage that is attributable to Spanish occupation rather than trade. (slide) Ongoing excavations in this same part of the site have revealed a closed compound of five burned buildings possibly surrounded by a palisade, with numerous large features spaced around the buildings. (slide) We suggest that this compound represents the material remains of Fort San Juan, and that these structures are the houses that quartered Pardo’s soldiers.

(slide) Continued research at Berry will offer unique insights into the beginnings of European colonialism in this borderland region. (slide) The arrival of the sixteenth-century expeditions under De Soto and Pardo undoubtedly altered the historical trajectories of Mississippian chiefdoms in the Catawba Valley. (slide) Moving beyond Berry, Spanish documentary sources provide a beginning point for learning more about the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century social landscape of the area, (slide) and we have begun preliminary investigations at sites that represent native villages or farmsteads contemporary with the main town and Spanish settlement at the Berry site. (slide) Ultimately, we hope to better understand

how the process of contact contributed to the apparent depopulation of the (slide) entire upper Catawba Valley by the early decades of the seventeenth century, (slide) and to the ethnogenesis of the Historic-period native peoples of the Carolina Piedmont, especially the Catawba Indians.

Thank you

Berry site 2004 Artifact Summary

Historic artifacts found during the 2004 field season included a variety of metal artifacts mostly made of brass, iron or lead. 3 pieces of lead shot were found, along with an iron tack, a brass aglet, 1 piece of melted lead, a wrought nail, 4 iron fragments, a metal button, and 51 pieces of unidentified historic metal. Non-metal historic artifacts included a blue glass bead (from Str. 1), a gunflint fragment, and 2 pieces of glass. Several pieces of historic ceramic were found, including a possible brick fragment, a Mexican Red painted potsherd, a possible Olive Jar sherd, 1 piece of thin glazed earthenware, and 3 pieces of unidentified historic ceramic.

A large variety of prehistoric artifacts were found during the 2004 field season. Lithic artifacts included 124 projectile points and projectile point fragments, 1 thermally altered projectile point, 12 hammerstones and hammerstone fragments, 61 bifaces, 4 scrapers, 1 soapstone disk, 9 soapstone pipe fragments, 1 stone pipe bowl fragment, 4 drill fragments, 8 ground stone disks, 50 cores, 273 pieces of worked soapstone, 104 worked flakes, 5,189 flakes, and 119,343.42g of fore-cracked rock. The prehistoric ceramic artifact assemblage from the 2004 field season consisted of 50,966 potsherds (including 1,746 rimsherds, 4 handles, 1 perforated sherd, and several painted sherds), 1 miniature vessel fragment, 22 ceramic disks/fragments, 31 clay beads, 126 clay pipe fragments (including 1 painted pipe stem frag.), 78 pieces of modeled clay/possible effigy fragments, approximately 1780.5g of daub. A variety of plant and animal remains were found during the 2004 excavations including a worked deer tooth,

246.9g of animal bone, 6 pieces of shell, a charred corn kernel, 1 burned seed, and approximately 1,570g of charcoal.