

Mission San Vicente Ferrer: An Archaeological Overview

César González

Abstract

New archaeological investigations at the Dominican mission of San Vicente Ferrer were begun in 1996. Excavations have distinguished several phases in the mission's occupation, beginning in 1780. The functions of many of its buildings have also been at least tentatively identified.

Introduction

After many difficulties that came up in the province had been overcome, came the year 1780 in which the missionaries, desirous of advancing their conquests, explored another location twenty leagues beyond the last to found the mission of San Vicente Ferrer, which was very happily accomplished although with many sudden assaults on the part of the heathen, since they are arrogant and always inclined to do evil (Sales 1956:166).

The preceding quotation tells us about the conditions that prevailed at the time of the mission's founding. They are confirmed by official documents related to the event, discovered in the archives of Universidad Autónoma de Baja California's Institute of Historical Investigations. One of these documents says:

Don Joaquín Cañense, the government's first lieutenant, has informed me through a copy of your official letter of August 26 and 27 and his responses in... concerning the inspections. You may provide him with the assistance necessary for the foundation of a mission at the place of Santa Rosalía [later San Vicente Ferrer]. As I already indicated to you in the

letter of July 11 of this year, including its manner, I ought to say that there is nothing I desire so much as that these foundations should move forward... on the lines indicated to you, and the above-mentioned location being the one that is most suitable to carry it into effect. It is appropriate to take all the measures that are conducive to that end, first of all is my... that this site of Santa Rosalía may be examined and approved anew by the missionary whom you may designate for this purpose, that second lieutenant Don José Velásquez will furnish him with a competent escort, and that first lieutenant Cañense will give the corresponding order, assuring that the founding will be timely (IIH6.5 Fundación Californias, sheet 4).

Previous Work at the Site

In general, little archaeological work has been done at Mission San Vicente. Until now the site had not been subject to a methodical study with continuity through several seasons as part of the project.

The first study was one carried out by the American geographer Peveril Meigs in the late 1920s and early 1930s. This study served as his doctoral dissertation at the University of California in 1932, and was initially published in 1935 (Meigs 1932, 1935). Meigs carried out a reconnaissance of Baja California between 1926 and 1930. From an archaeological perspective, his work consisted of a general surface reconnaissance, artifact collecting, and making of maps and sketches, as well as a detailed description of the state's Domini-

can missions. With regard to Mission San Vicente, although the work was brief, it included elements of interest for understanding the operation of mission life. The major achievement of this document is the excellent investigation of historical sources that the author carried out and made good use of to understand the site. We can see the results in his book, *The Dominican Frontier in Lower California* (Meigs 1935).

An historical study by Martin Barron (1980) has Mission San Vicente as a central subject. This work is very general and publishes photographs of artifacts recovered from the site.

A formal project was carried out at the mission in 1981, as part of a project known as "Integrated Program for Rural Development." This work was instituted by the Secretariat of Programs and Budgets, approved by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia's Commission on Historic Monuments, and directed by archaeologist Laura Cummings of INAH's Northwestern regional center. The work consisted basically of clean-up and exposure, along with a few test pits. It focused more on the protection of the mission's ruins than on comprehensive excavation. The results were summarized in the field journal and artifact catalog, from which the general report was derived.

For an historical perspective, we have the thesis of the researcher Lucila León, who analyzes San Vicente's socioeconomic situation within the Dominican mission framework. She provides us with interesting information on daily life at the mission and the circumstances that preceded it, using the historical documentary sources as tools. These have served us as a guide in some of the problems that have arisen in trying to reconstruct the social dynamics of the mission.

Methodology

In the recent archaeological work at Mission San Vicente, it was proposed as essential to use some of

the investigative tools employed by historians as aids to the archaeological methods for site recovery. The investigation and the methods used in the explorations had precedents in the work done by Cummings in 1981. She excavated a series of test pits that generally identified the layout of Structure I. Also noted was an uncontrolled excavation made by treasure hunters within what is now designated Structure II (in its southwest corner). Using prior information and in accordance with the goals specified for the historical archaeological project, a work plan was outlined that included archaeological exploration of the entire complex. Our first excavation was done in what remained of the looters' pit. The work was coordinated with a program of objectives having distinct levels, methods, and budgets.

The site (5.44 hectares, or 13.4 acres) was divided into four large quadrants in order to limit the area of investigation (Figs. 1 and 2). Indicators observed during the surface reconnaissance were taken into account, such as differences in soil color, changes in surface relief, observed artifacts, etc. In the southeast quadrant (an area approximately 122 by 102 meters), stakes were placed to form 4 by 4 meter squares oriented to magnetic north. These squares were assigned successive numbers, together with the corresponding Cartesian coordinates.

Within the southeast quadrant, complexes A and B were identified, taking into account the relationships of the buildings as well as historical sources and the visible traces of the walls (Figs. 3 and 4). Complex A was representative of the most flourishing phase in the life of the mission.

Artifact provenience was controlled in relation to the excavation grid (4 by 4 meter), which for practical purposes was subdivided into squares of 1 by 1 meter. Depth provenience was controlled by metric levels of 20 or 30 centimeters. Strata or natural levels were followed when this was considered necessary for bet-

MISSION SAN VICENTE FERRER

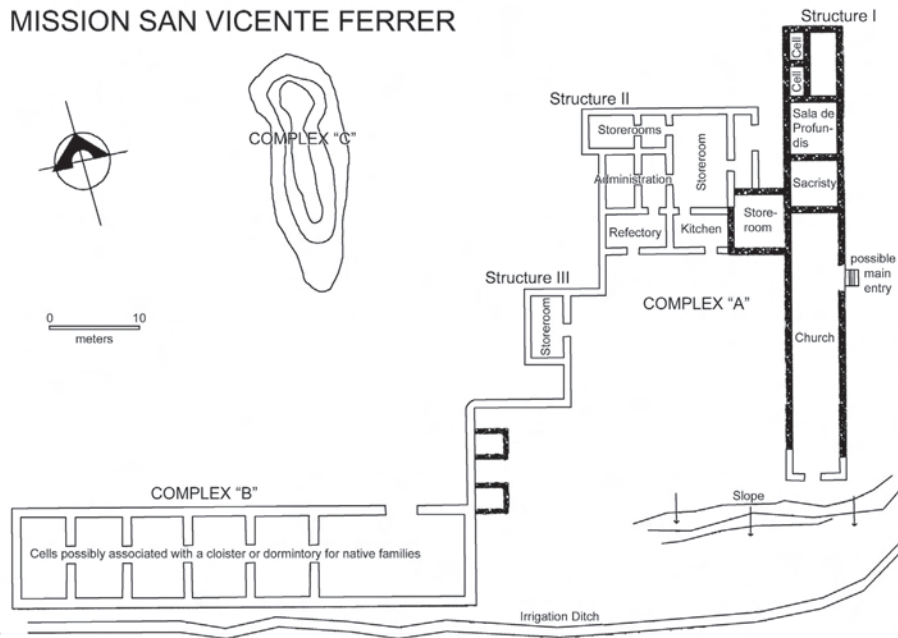


Fig. 1. Map of the mission site.



Fig. 2. Overview of the site, with INAH's interpretive walkway in the right foreground.

ter excavation control, in particular in the case of the discovery of a tamped surface or some other important element. In general, lower excavation levels were considered to be older contexts. The contexts were primary, that is, remains were not found to have been moved outside of their proper places (although some non-temporal elements may have been moved to lower stratigraphic levels by the small animals that had burrows in the mounds).

During the first phase of exploration it was possible to define the presence of walls of the various rooms that make up Structure II. Marked concentrations of archaeological materials (shell, ceramics, bone, metal) in specific areas served to reveal to us the early use of each room and of the structure as a whole, and the same was true for the other two structures. In the second phase of excavations, we were able to confirm previous evidence and establish guidelines for the general work at the site.



Fig. 3. View of a portion of Complex A, with the mission's agricultural fields in the background.



Fig. 4. View of the residential cells in Complex B.

In the beginning we tried to follow the architectural delineations of Meigs, although we are aware empirically that the geographer's observations dated from a period that was different from our situation. His interpretations of the site's architecture were made from surface evidence of the remains that existed in his time. This resulted in a series of errors in the initial calculations for our investigation, which we continued to correct as we progressed. With the knowledge acquired during the work and with evidence concerning depth, we decided to continue explorations on

the same basis. It is important to make it clear that whenever an architectural element was encountered, whatever its character, a detailed analysis was carried out to obtain as complete information as possible.

Complex A

Complex A is composed of three structures, inside of which we identified the main activities of mission life. Religious conversion was the banner for colonization in the conquest of the Californias. Its mission temples

were made into the centers of life and influence for the new communities. The priest, responsible for the mission's success or failure and for its survival, took charge of the administration of its resources, both local and imported.

Within Complex A, we found traces of the church and of the rooms that made up a religious structure during the colonial period (Structure I). Also in the complex is another building with wide enclosed spaces, limited access, and communal areas (Structure II), and it is supported by a third structure of modest dimensions, which was an integral part and played an important role in the community's development (Structure III). The arrangement of the buildings forms a quadrangle, closed on the west side with an adobe wall and reminding us of a cloister.

Structure I

Structure I (8.0 by 49.8 meters) corresponds to the church, sacristy, *sala de profundis* (prayer room), cells, etc. Only the foundations of the living rooms have survived. The uses of the different rooms forming this building were determined, first, on the basis of the descriptions by Meigs and Cummings when they worked at the site; second, by the logic of their arrangement and dimensions; third, through analogies with other mission sites in Alta California; and finally, based on the results obtained from the excavations completed for this project, which established several differences from the traditional views that had been held.

In the southwestern and southeastern part of the church, we can see evidence of the 3.2 meter high walls. Their length varies from 2.8 to 4.0 meters; in old photographs recovered during the investigations, we can see their true dimensions.

The walls form rows, one in front of another. The adobe bricks are 30 by 90 by 10 cm. The upper por-

tions have suffered thinning due to erosion and the impacts of various animals that have made small holes in all of the walls. Archaeological work in this area included three test pits, two of them 2 by 1 meter and 1 by 1 meter. These units gave us significant information about the structure, and remains were found of the foundations of the cells and the prayer room.

Excavation was done in the area inside the church. Two trenches were dug, one on the northeastern side and the other on the southeastern side. In the first, we encountered a layer of hard, reddish-brown clay at a depth of 60 cm, and in the second we located a layer at 58 cm that was similar in color and degree of compaction. Based on this, we believe that an initial floor level was involved. The maximum depth of the trenches was 150 cm.

In the test pit located in the center of the church, we found the clay layer at 62 cm, and we found a series of rocks aligned east to west at a depth of 97 cm. We were not able to determine whether this was the base of a column or an interior staircase because there was not sufficient evidence.

Recovered artifacts were rare, almost absent. This was interpreted as a consequence of the previous work at Mission San Vicente, first of all by Barron, who explored the church area and shows us in his account a series of artifacts recovered from within the limits of this structure; it is notable that almost all items are religious. Cummings subsequently excavated the same area, recovering several items, as inferred from her field notes. Another factor accounting for the absence of artifacts is the looting at the site by treasure hunters on various occasions.

Structure II

This is an important structure within the complex, composed of at least seven living areas (Fig. 5). The rooms' uses in the past were determined on the basis

of the artifacts recovered during the excavations and the spatial arrangements. We have three storerooms, two administrative rooms, one area for food preparation, and a kitchen with an adobe oven.

A raised grid for excavation was established with an orientation of $14^{\circ} 35'$. The structure was divided into 30 squares, 4 by 4 meters in size, identified by spatial coordinates and by unit numbers.

Excavation was thorough, beginning with a 2 by 2 meter square that was enlarged in a stepped manner with increases of 30 cm per step. This was done to be able to protect possible discoveries of adobe walls. Subsequently, two additional pits were excavated in the same area. The general depth in the first stage was 143 cm. Ceramic artifacts were found, including Tizon Brown, Puebla Green-on-White, and San Elizario Polychrome, among others, as well as small animal

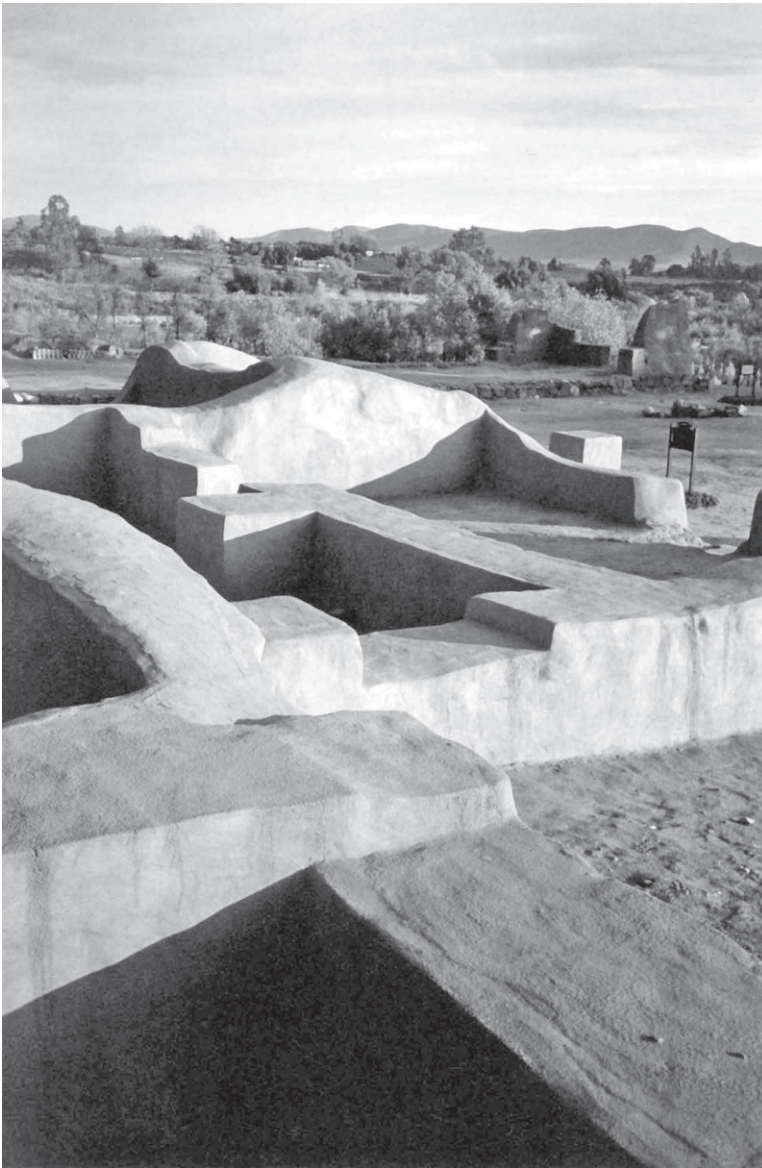


Fig. 5. View of a portion of Complex A, Structure II.

bones. The exposed room has simple interior walls, and outside walls with two interlocking courses. Next, in an adjacent area, we went down to a depth of 230 cm in the same manner. Two small habitation areas were found with stucco on the walls. The stucco was composed of a mortar of lime and sand, local materials that were used throughout the construction. We believe that these rooms were used for administration, based on their dimensions and the artifacts recovered. We found two coins at a depth of 64 cm; one has the legend “Libertad” on the front and “República Mexicana” on the back, and is dated 1887, while the other coin is older but has an indistinct inscription. In this area we also found two silver buttons, one of them with an inscription in French.

In the northwestern corner we found a living area with two meter high walls. Subsequently we discovered two more walls with a height of 2.5 meters on the western side.

A room with walls from 0.9 to 2.0 meters high served as a kitchen; in different levels we found rocks arranged as a cooking stove, associated with ash. In the eastern part of the structure, we found a north-south alignment of walls, up to three meters high, corresponding to the main entrance into the storage areas. On the outside we uncovered a corridor formed by adobe columns 1 by 1 meter in size, indicating restricted entry into the storerooms.

In what we believe to be the storerooms were found a large quantity of artifacts, including different types of ceramics, from local Tizon Brown to Chinese and English porcelain. We also found remains of the colonial earthenware jugs that served to hold olive oil, as well as wine in the case of the California missions. We recovered wooden remains in the corners of one living area, which are probably evidence of cupboards. In contrast to other rooms in the same structure, the storerooms do not have windows, which is useful

for protecting all types of merchandise and for better preservation of the wine.

In the northern part of the structure, a 3 by 21 meter east-west perimeter trench was excavated. Two living rooms were encountered, with walls 4 meters high, 4 meters wide, and 4 meters long. Four pillars were found in the northeastern area, similar to those discussed for the western area.

During the 1998 season, one of the issues to be resolved was evidence for windows in the building’s ruins, as well as getting confirmation for the idea of an area devoted to food preparation. There would also be an effort to find more definite traces of the use of lime on the living rooms of different structures as evidence that the mission rooms were being sanitized during the smallpox epidemic in the region.

In order to confirm the excavations of the 1997 season, three 1 by 1 meter test pits were excavated in the food preparation area of Structure II. At a depth of 245 cm, we found new evidence of a whitewashed floor. Specifically in test pits 1 and 2, the artifacts that were recovered included ceramics of various types and a large amount of small animal bone associated with charcoal. Within this context we also found local ceramics, comals, ollas, etc.

On one wall of the room, we carried out the exposure of a window with a step pushed close to its interior side. In a pattern shared with the mission at Santa Barbara, we have evidence of lime on the wall. Two doors had opened out, but were closed up during the mission period with two courses of plain adobe, which distinguishes them from the walls with their double, interlocking courses.

Structure II is a key part of the mission’s Complex A. Like previous investigators, we initially thought that what was involved was a group of living rooms for the native converts. However, the archaeological evidence

is convincing that this is a complex of administrative and food preparation rooms. The importance of the structure and its location (to the east of Structure I, which was devoted to religion and the living areas for the priests) tell us how the missionaries divided their time between the activities of religious administration and the production and safeguarding of mundane matters. These mundane activities were ultimately the means of support upon which they were achieving their objectives as a religious order in the service of God and the king of Spain.

Structure III

Structure III is located within Complex A on the western side. It is the smallest in size (15 by 18 meter), and based on its size and location, we deduced that it served as a warehouse. Rough adobe floors were found at two stratigraphic levels.

The 1998 season was the most important one for this small structure. Concentrating on its recovery, we began by laying out an elevated 4 by 4 meter grid to control the excavation. The methods used and the grid designations were the same as those used in the other two structures.

At a depth of 180 cm, we encountered evidence of charcoal, and in the same stratum we found an iron key. At a depth of 190 cm we found animal bone associated with charcoal, collapsed adobe, and some sherds. On the eastern exterior of the structure, we found an adobe step.

Conclusions

In general, one may speak of at least four stages of occupation, although in reality, based on prior evidence, it could be determined that there was continuous occupation. In relation to the stratigraphy, we found evidence that two doors within Structure II had been closed off. We are unable to establish precisely the

time of these changes, although I think that the first change was carried out during the first 20 years of occupation. The second stage is identified by a correlation between stratigraphy and changes in the use of spaces within Structure III, which the artifacts indicate had changed from being an area devoted to storing grain into an area for preparing food. The third period was, in a way, a return to the old plan, which we interpret as possibly a result of an increase in production or at least an upturn in the number of inhabitants. This ought to have occurred during the first 35-40 years of the mission. We see the final stage represented by the abandonment of the mission, and this stage would immediately precede our investigations. It should be made clear that the stages established in our work are not valid for the mission as a whole. Excavations have only been carried out in one of the three complexes that comprise the mission, and we suspect that its history varied according to the area being discussed.

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