Digging Up Cultural Collisions:
Archaeologist Digs Into Sixteenth-Century America

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Tulane archaeologist Chris Rodning cleans the top of architectural debris from a burnt structure associated with the Spanish settlement at Fort San Juan, in the upper Catawba Valley, in western North Carolina. (Photo by Johanna Vasek)

Clashes between cultures intrigue Chris Rodning. As an archaeologist, Rodning explores how people from different cultures collide with each other the hard way—by digging in the dirt.

Rodning is assistant professor of anthropology at Tulane. He, 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 in this summer of 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 Captain 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, it's 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, that 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. No Spanish women were with the soldiers. Rodning surmises that native women may have formed relationships with the 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.

Rodning has been excavating at the Berry site (as the Joara-Fort San Juan area is now called) with David Moore, professor at Warren Wilson College, and Rob Beck, assistant professor at the University of Oklahoma, since 2001. The National Science Foundation and National Geographic Society have provided grants to support the research.

Merritt Sanders, a Tulane graduate student in anthropology, and Hannah Humphrey, a 2007 graduate of Tulane with a double major in anthropology and classics, participated in the dig at the Berry site this summer. Sanders is developing a dissertation topic related to work at the Berry site, and Humphrey is now working on a master's degree in anthropology through Tulane's four plus one program.

"Both Merritt and Hannah have done a terrific job," says Rodning. Rodning will return to the Berry site next summer to continue his exploration. He teaches courses on the archaeology of native cultures in North America and on culture contact between different people around the world.

Tulane anthropology graduate student Merritt Sanders holds a prism as part of the effort to map the material remnants of a burnt structure at the Berry site. (Photo by Chris Rodning)

Tulane archaeologist Chris Rodning stands on a stepladder to take a photograph of a section of a burnt structure at the Berry site.
(Photo by Lotte Govaerts)

Tulane archaeologist Chris Rodning and Elizabeth Horton (graduate student at Washington University in Saint Louis) trowel off the top of architectural debris from a burnt structure associated with the Spanish settlement at Fort San Juan in the Western Piedmont region of North Carolina. (Photo by Johanna Vasek)