

Nuestra Señora de la Natividad del Acaray¹: A Forgotten Mission

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Abstract: The ITAIPU² Museum — Tierra Guaraní, is located in Hernandarias City in Paraguay, an historic settlement that in the early 1600 hosted one of the first guaranijesuitic missions. The existence of this mission is mostly unknown by the local population and external visitors. The archaeological surveys conducted before and during the construction of the hydroelectric dam located in this city, brought to light important archaeological evidence presumably related to this mission.

The Museum's new exhibition brings back part of this historical event, through an historical recreation of the mission, the names of the founding fathers and the troubles they underwent with the abandonment of the settlement caused by the invasion of the bandeirantes³.

With the introduction of this topic in the permanent exhibition, the Museum showcases an ignored legacy for present and future generations. Important information about this mission can be found in the Annua Letters, and other books written by jesuitic missionaries like Antonio Ruíz de Montoya and Nicolásdel Techo.

This historical revival brings new research possibilities: to identify the exact location of the mission, from which there are some evidence but no certainty, and also new information about the way of life and development of the population. This research looks forward to lead to a successful integration of the Mercosur Jesuitic-Guaraní Missions circuit, some of them who are already on the World Heritage List.

Key words: history, archeology, museology, cultural heritage, Guaraní Jesuit Missions

1. Introduction

The Mission was forgotten not only by the inhabitants of the region but also and above all by the present historiography about the jesuit topic. The general objective of this investigation was based on the attempt to demonstrate that indeed the Mission of Our Lady of the Nativity from Acaray was effectively located in this area, in the vicinity of the Museum and its location. That was a recognized fact, the problem is exactly where. So on the one hand we tried to prove this, on the other hand and no less important for the cultural identity of the place and a possible development of cultural tourism around this fact, is how ephemeral was the life of the Mission. Thirdly, it was sought to know how important this Mission was, what transcendent events occurred in it.

¹ Our Lady of the Nativity from Acaray. Acaray is a river in Hernandarias.

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² The Itaipu Dam is a hydroelectric dam on the Paraná River located on the border between Brazil and Paraguay.

³ The Bandeirantes were 17th century Portuguese settlers in Brazil and fortune hunters. This group mostly hailed from the São Paulo region, which was known as the Captaincy of São Vicente until 1709 and then as the Captaincy of São Paulo. They led expeditions called bandeiras ("flags") which penetrated the interior of Brazil far south and west of the Tordesillas Line of 1494, which officially divided the Castilian, later Spanish, (west) domain from the Portuguese (east) domain in South America.

It is worth highlighting that recovering this history would allow this city to be inserted in an International Cultural Route such as the Jesuit Missions which includes the following countries: Paraguay, Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay.

How do you recuperate this history?

Through the chronicles of the age and the archaeological investigations of the 70s and 80s, during these investigations some people realize the fact but since it is a technical enterprise (hydroelectric power dam), it goes actually unobserved. It is subsequently forgotten until the new museology is planned: in that moment the reports of the mentioned decade were read. The new museology site opens in January 2016.

Is the site identified in the archaeological investigations the real Mission of the chronicles?

Maybe so, maybe not.

2. Museological Script

In the museum whose museological script is to “A journey on the Paraná river through time and nature”. The museology is focused on a timeline, with the Paraná river as guideline. The vast regional history is depicted through museographical recreations. One of them is about Nuestra Señora de la Natividad del Acaray (Our Lady of the Nativity from Acaray).

The museology is tightly connected to the recreation telling the story of both the region and some of the findings.

3. Methodology

The bibliographic consultation, in particular the “Annual” Letters, reports very interesting data about this mission and its vicissitudes. On the other hand, books published in the days of the Colony by qualified chroniclers like Antonio Ruiz de Montoya and Nicolás del Techo allowed us to know an endless amount of data that gave light about the Mission.

Perhaps the most significant is the discovery of the archaeological site called “Ruinas Cue⁴”. This place was reported by the locals and the team of archaeologists who was conducting research in the area affected by the construction of the hydroelectric dam started a campaign on the site, this campaign that lasted six years reported data compatible with the location of the mission. Some of these findings are described below.

4. Historical Facts

In the context of the jesuitical foundational process, the occupancy of the high Paraná region was related to the necessary communication with the Guayrá region. Diego de Boroa⁵ and Roque González de Santa Cruz⁶ undertook the organized setting of indigenous settlements, facing opposition from Spanish and creole settlers, who wanted to keep the personal service imposed to the Guaraní Indians.

The “Annual” letters inform about the date of foundation, which would be the year 1624, although, a first

⁴ Abandoned ruins.

⁵ Diego de Boroa: S. J. was born in Trujillo (Cáceres, Spain) on July 25, 1585. He joined the Society of Jesus in Toledo in 1605 and arrived in Buenos Aires in 1610. He was ordained in Santiago del Estero on September 15, 1610. In 1619 he made his last vows. He was provincial of Paraguay (1634–1640). He passed away the 19 of April of 1657.

⁶ Roque González de Santa Cruz, S.J. (17 November 1576–15 November 1628), was a Jesuit priest who was the first missionary among the Guaraní people in Paraguay. He is honored as a martyr and saint by the Catholic Church.

attempt was made in 1919. The fathers Diego de Boroa and Claudio Ruyer⁷ were in charge of this task and the organization of the new reduction, distribution, location, dimension and characteristic of buildings. He informed us that in the first year the population had to endure an epidemic of fever-possibly malaria — which reached even Father Ruyer, who had been in charge of Nativity.

4.1 First Settlement until 1624

It is important to mention that, according to the fragmented description of this mission by Father Nicolás del Techo, the settlement maintained the traditional structure of Guaraní villages, while in Iguazu the formal “reduction” system was implemented, consisting in the distribution of lots and the grouping of houses. This assumption is important in terms of understanding and analyzing the archaeological evidence.

The implication that it was difficult for the Indians to build “houses” offers some clues on the spacial materialization of the mission, for it implies a “spontaneous” settlement with a “provisory temple” as it was mentioned before.

“Four leagues sailed by the Paraná from the reduction of the Iguazu to the Nativity from Acaray, a population that although it has been given a few years has been the one that until now has had less development.”

The missionary spent a lot of time in persuasion, avoiding the threats, but the reduction did not reach stabilization because there were inconveniences to dispose of the necessary wood.

“After having exhausted the forest it was strength to look for them in the place where now this reduction has, where they passed the Father and the few that had reduced and spent in this a whole year and then had to leave them for not having the Father to give them to eat, and to be forced to attend as Superior who was of all the Parana to visit the other reductions, only went to visit and entertain them with the hope that the Lord would soon provide a minister for them.”

This proves that Ruyer was only ephemerally in charge of Nativity in 1619–1620 and that later the reduction only remained with latent life until his repopulation.

It is notorious, therefore, that in this period nothing more than a precarious settlement could exist, apart from any attempts at urban planning, with a temporary chapel and an eventual priest’s house and a meager Indian settlement. To think of more complex structures is to depart from the harsh vegetative reality of the town as it emerges from the reliable documentary evidence in the wording of which incorporates the stories of the same Father de Boroa.

4.2 Repopulation of Nativity from the Acaray and Stabilization of the Mission

The concern in the consolidation of 105 indigenous towns in the region that had the Governor Hernandarias in 1616 was also emphasized by the Governor of the Rio de la Plata Diego de Góngora.

The new Superior of the Order, Diego Mastrilli Durán, clearly had the need to consolidate the settlements achieved in the face of the latent threat of the “bandeirantes” Paulistas.

It was thus that he went to repopulate the mission of Acaray the Father Pedro Romero who went with Boroa to the village where “they had prepared a poor chozuela”, which shows that not even the house of the religious had an edifice.

So it was destined to Father Pedro Romero to repopulate the mission of Acaray who went with Boroa to the

⁷ Claudio Ruyer S. J. was born in 1582 in Champlois, France. He joined the Society of Jesus in 1612, in Naples. He arrived in Buenos Aires on February 15, 1617 and made his last vows in 1627. He was superior of the Guaraní missions (1639–1644). He died there on 22 March, 1648.

village where “we had prepared a poor chozuela”, which shows that not even the house of the religious had an edifice.

The evidence of the site change thus speaks to us of at least three settlements of Nativity. The first place in the land was donated by the cacique Arerapa, immediately the change to the area of greater forestation with a temporary hamlet and the latter of 1624.

We can also verify that there was in the repopulation of 1624 a previous or planned plot of the town and that the Jesuits themselves had to rest in a chozuela and a shed.

To this initiative of repopulating nativity was added the meticulous inventory that in 1627 the own Father Roque González of Santa Cruz of the evangelizing advances of the Jesuits in the region. The concern about the stability of the towns reached the metropolitan court itself and in that year of 1627 the King inquired of the Bishop of Paraguay and the Audiencia of Charcas about the state of the missions.

The panorama of the construction of the whole of the missions was not very encouraging at this time, since of the 14 towns formed by the Society of Jesus with 30,000 reduced Indians, there were in 1627 only three finished Churches and the others are of “wooden structure with straw cover”, the King provided that resources be provided for these works.

This does not mean that a small group of those Indians who in 1619 had been rendered docile were not maintained. In 1626 Diego de Boroa departed from Nativity to found Santa María la Mayor on the left bank of the Paraná at its confluence with the Iguazu, near the famous falls.

4.3 Evolution of the Acaray Reduction, Population and Characteristics

From its repopulation in 1624 the reduction grew quickly and they were in charge of the Fathers Tomás de Ureña and Juan de Porras, that grouped amount of neophytes of the region.

Thus, we know that in 1627 there were already 400 families with 1,050 baptized inhabitants, which makes it possible to estimate its population in about 1,600 to 2,000 people. Obviously, this implies a substantial change in the urban area occupied, extension of arable land and formation of a planning of economic resources that ensure the subsistence of a community of these dimensions.

The town also grew with indigenous people gathered between villages and hunters of the region. The growing threat of the region by the “bandeirantes” is already clearly spelled out in the memorial addressed by the Provincial Father of the Society of Jesus in 1629, on the occasion of his visit to the reductions of the Paraná and Uruguay.

A peculiarity indicated by Father Francisco Vazquez Trujillo was that the Indians of the reductions of Nativity and Iguazu “came out with their turbans and dresses of several feathers (because there are in those lands birds of very beautiful colors)” and the missionary said “I have brought many objects to share ...”

Having traveled the territory by river and land, Father Provincial proposed the realization of a terrestrial way to communicate the missions of Iguazu and Nativity and found that “it can be prepared very well and that with a beast could be communicated in a few hours”, and affirmed “will be a great consolation for the one and the other reduction without having to embark in so many ports”.

The Reduction of Acaray was in 1629 “full of people” and boys and girls with the same number of well-educated and educated and “up to 20” unfaithful people who were in Catechism of some Indians who call Caiguaras “that are a nation that walk always on the mountains that look like little lambs”.

These Indians — probably hunters — were picked up in the mountains by Father Juan de Porras in charge of

the Nativity mission of the Acaray, who continued in this task of widening the small group, which, like Iguazu, had 700 children, which is equivalent to a population of approximately 1.500 inhabitants in total.

Father Porras was intermittently in Nativity and Itapúa, but he died in the Reduction of the Nativity, which he helped to strengthen.

In 1631 Father Pedro Romero would make a report to the Royal Officials of Buenos Aires noting the existence at that time of twelve reductions approved by the Governors of the Rio de la Plata and Paraguay, detailing that the Nativity from Acaray was at charge at that moment of the Fathers Pedro Alvarez and Antonio Palermo, while in Iguazu were Claudio Ruyer and Andrés Gallegos.

The existence of two stable Jesuits shows another element of judgment to verify the importance of the settlement, because while one attended to the spiritual face of evangelization, the coadjutor was concerned with the material erection of the reduction, advising the Indians in both aspects buildings and agricultural tasks.

In the same year of 1631, the Bishop Fray Cristóbal de Aresti made a remarkable visit to the reductions. He traveled to Acaray for 178 leagues along the Paraguay, Tebicuarí, Parana and Iguazu rivers, “and a few leagues overland. There are very great dangers of marshes, vipers and tigers, and in rivers of great currents, jumps, mills and reefs”.

The visit of the Bishop was an exceptional event in the life of the settlers where he was received “with triumphal arches and capriciously adorning the Churches in the midst of songs and musical instruments”. Nicolás del Techo recalls how Bishop Aresti “wore a magnificent miter and pluvial cloak and covered with it excited the admiration of the Indians to see it so majestic”. In Acaray the Bishop healed two boys by presenting them the relics of Father Anchieta and “right there sweated the images of Mary, San Jose and San Ignacio” and “when they observed such a prodigy they were alarmed by the fathers Pedro Alvarez and Antonio de Palermo, rectors of the place, predicting something dismal and thus announcing the imminent invasion of the “bandeirantes on Guayra”.

The same Bishop Aresti was surprised by the fervor and organization of missionaries and “confessed that he saw with his eyes was infinitely superior to what had figured would find”. At the same time, there is no doubt that their presence comforted the natives, who were already threatened by the “bandeiras” of São Paulo who sought slave labor for their haciendas.

In his visit to the five reductions of this region of Upper Paraná and Uruguay confirmed more than 7,000 baptized Indians “being welcomed with the greatest joy by these poor people who had never seen any secular or ecclesiastical authority”. In Acaray it was in October of 1631 “being the Indians calm and as absent of the perils of some aggression on the part of the bandeirantes”.

An account of the inhabitants of the Nativity from Acaray during the episcopal visit pointed out that the Temple of the Reduction was “very well adorned with cleanliness and police in all parts of Spain”, but nevertheless they note that “Poverty that his lordship saw, he says he is the greatest he could imagine, because in their homes they say they do not have to cover themselves at night and thus they sleep under the sky making a little light inside the houses and their bodies”.

When the reductions of the Guairá were threatened by the raids of the “bandeirantes”, and its inhabitants forced to abandon them, Nativity receives part of that contingent of emigrants, in spite of being in a difficult time for having failed the harvests of that year.

Nativity was living the last days of its existence, and it would come as estimated by the year 1632.



Location Map

5. Archaeological Surveys from 1975 to 1981

It is important to mention that, according to the fragmented description of this mission by Father Nicolás del Techo, the settlement maintained the traditional structure of Guaraní villages, while in Santa María del Iguazu the formal “reduction” system was implemented, consisting in the distribution of lots and the grouping of houses. This assumption is important in terms of understanding and analyzing the archaeological evidence.

The findings would suggest it is the Mission or at least an area within the influence of the Mission, which had at least 3 sites in the same area. It is initially a village of “Pit Houses” with a previous occupation. A stone wall, mud and a stone floor: we only have material from the investigation and pictures.

Subsequent to the archaeological studies an archaeological protection zone was identified, which was partially respected.



Stone Floor Found

6. Other Findings

The physical findings, even if scarce, are qualitatively significant. The metals and glass necessarily belong to

the colonial period, since the Guaraníes only had stone and wooden tools.

a) Arrow blade. Archaeological collection. ITAIPU Museum-Tierra Guarani.

b) Knife blade. Archaeological collection. ITAIPU Museum-Tierra Guarani.

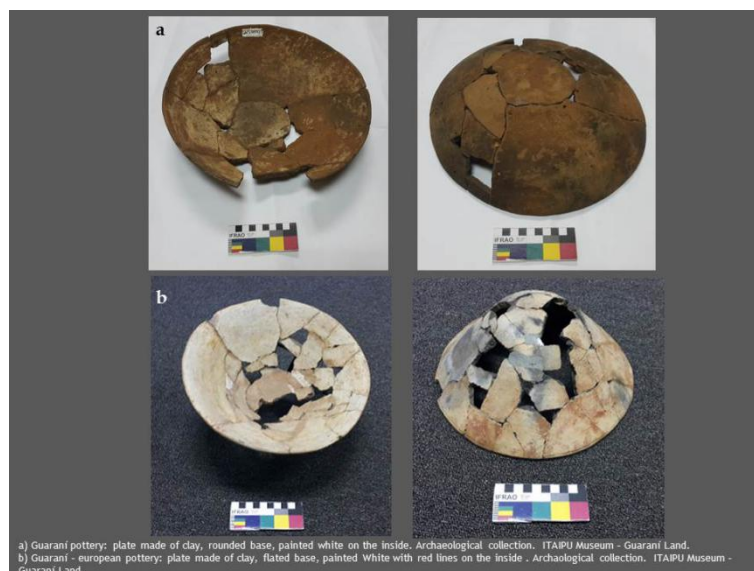
c) Glass bead. Archaeological collection. ITAIPU Museum-Tierra Guarani.

d) Medal. Archaeological collection. ITAIPU Museum-Tierra Guarani.

Ceramic findings: we can compare a precolonial plate with a colonial.

e) Guaraní pottery: plate made of clay, rounded base, painted white on the inside. Archaeological collection. ITAIPU Museum-Tierra Guarani.

f) Guaraní-European pottery: plate made of clay, flatted base, painted White with red lines on the inside. Archaeological collection. ITAIPU Museum-Tierra Guarani. Colonial because it has a base, it can stand. This implies the arrival of a fundamental piece of furniture: the table.



7. The Society of Jesus

Saint Ignacio de Loyola and Saint Francisco Javier, founders of the Society of Jesus, both canonized on March 12, 1622. The medal was found on the located site, being brought to the region after the canonization. The medal dedicated to the founders of the Society of Jesus canonized on the same day in 1622. The medal proves the Mission existed at least in the years after the canonization because the images show the letter “S.” implying the prefix “Saint”, besides the distinctive halo. Nobody would dare coin a medal like that before the official acknowledgement by the Catholic Church.

This preliminary dating of the medal coincides with the life of the Mission documented in the *Annuas*, becoming an indisputable material proof.



8. Conclusion

The findings and bibliographical research confirm the Jesuit presence in the area, but not the absolute certainty that the site in question is the mission of the chronicles, the archaeological studies carried out in the 80s were not enough to confirm it, they approached a certainty but some elements were missing to be sure.

The discovery of metals in the study area for example confirms that it is a settlement that had contact with the European culture, since the aborigines did not possess metals.

The origin of some of these metals (medal) has an eminently Jesuit character, because it represents the founders of the Company of Jesus, but because it was a movable good could move from another place to this.

Therefore the elements that reinforce the belief that this was the site are:

- The height of the place, the Jesuits and the Guaraní privileged these types of sites to establish a foundation.
- The structures found: stone slab floor according to the description of the researchers that nevertheless did not arrive until our days, these slabs are not in the archaeological collection of the museum.
- The mentioned metals: knife blades, nails and the medal.
- Ashes: also described in archaeologists' reports. The chronicles mention that the inhabitants of the Mission burned it when leaving it, would be another element in favor.

The elements that could somehow make us doubt are:

- In the site were found structures compatible with Pit houses, typical of the Ge or Kaingang⁸ culture.

Because this would not favor the confirmation of our settlement? Because the missionary experience was carried out with the Guaraní Indians and not with the Ge. However, this does not disqualify the possibility since there could have been successive occupations.

In conclusion we are closer to obtaining a certainty regarding the site than at the beginning, but it is possible that a new archaeological investigation can grant us what we are looking for. This research can help to arouse interest in the site, justifying a new campaign after more than thirty years.

9. Current Situation of the Site

The same was abandoned from the point of view of archaeological studies, A part of the site housed an electrical substation until a few years ago, has now been moved leaving the site again without occupation. The other part of the site that has not been touched is now a dense forest, as it was also apparently at the time of studies. It should be noted that this area corresponds to a restricted area because it is close to the hydroelectric dam, which from the point of view of a new study is satisfactory since in those three decades there was little or no anthropic activity.

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⁸ According to Metraux, the term caingang or kaingang began to be introduced in 1882 by Telémaco Borba as a gentilicio to designate all non-Guaraní Indians living in the Brazilian states of São Paulo, Paraná, Santa Catalina and Rio Grande do Sul, The East of Paraguay, and the Argentine provinces of Misiones, Corrientes and Norte de Entre Ríos. Linguistically and culturally they formed the southern branch of the “Ge” or “Jé”. The Guaraníes, who in later migrations occupied the same region — possibly between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries — called these biases with the name of ka’aygua (that inhabits in the mount) from where the Portuguese would have taken the term “kaingang”.