

The Archaeological Study of Spanish Colonialism in the Americas

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Abstract Spanish colonial archaeology has undergone a fundamental shift since the Columbian Quincentenary due to the adoption of a bottom-up understanding of colonialism that emphasizes the analysis of local phenomena in a global context and the active ways in which people negotiated the processes set in motion by the conquest. This review examines five key research foci: culture change and identity, missionization, bioarchaeology, economics, and investigations of the colonial core. It ends with a consideration of ongoing challenges posed by the archaeology of colonialism, particularly the relationship of the individual to broader social processes and the emerging role of comparison.

Keywords Spanish colonialism · Archaeology · Identity · Missions

Introduction

Spanish colonial archaeology has undergone a fundamental shift in perspective over the last few decades, one that is invigorating the field and encouraging archaeologists to participate more fully in the broader dialogue in which historical anthropology engages. This transformation is due to two theoretical perspectives whose influence became apparent in the 1990s. First was a bottom-up understanding of colonialism that emphasizes the agency of local actors and the varied consequences of European expansion, an approach that was explicated most cogently by Wolf (1982). This was followed by a theoretical current that draws on the ideas of Bourdieu (1977) and Giddens (1984) to reframe the issue of culture change in terms of the mutually constitutive interaction of human actors and social structures, particularly with

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