



Introduction

The Missions

California would be a wholly different place today without the imprint of Spanish culture and legacy of Indian civilization. The colonial Spanish missions that dot the coasts and foothills between Sonoma and San Diego are relics of a past that transformed California's physical and cultural landscape, and above all its native peoples.

Today cactus and Castilian roses continue to grow in mission courtyards. Wine is still sold from crops of mission grapes. Olive presses, wine cellars, and leather-tanning rooms all stand as reminders of California's first commercial industries. Weatherworn adobe bricks shaped by human hands remain from the first colonial buildings. These frontier churches and outbuildings still standing today connect modern California with a rich and traumatic history forged by European colonists and diverse native populations.

Well before the American Revolution, the kingdom of Spain's mission system was entrenched in Mexico and South America. Two centuries of imperial rule set a precedent for Spain's colonization of California. Beginning in Florida

with the settlement of St. Augustine in 1565 and continuing into Mexico, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, mission territories were the primary instruments of Spanish rule across North and South America. California missions appeared after Spanish missions were already established in the Baja Peninsula of present-day Mexico and were the logical next step of colonization.

For two and a half centuries, Spain sent soldiers and Catholic priests of several orders to the Americas to facilitate the spread of Spanish rule and Christian faith. Starting in 1769, Franciscan priests and Spanish soldiers founded twenty missions in California. The twenty-first appeared after Mexico's independence from Spain in 1823.

Indian tribes were the focus of conversion and a source of labor. Designed to sustain missionaries, soldiers, and converted native populations, each mission maintained its own network to produce food, provide shelter, and ensure military protection. Mission buildings surrounded a central church and became the early settlements of California's first towns. Today California's Spanish missions remain as both remote outposts in the coastal hills and landmarks in bustling city centers. These centers of California's colonial past not only provide retreats for Catholics and history enthusiasts, but also provoke thought and controversy on colonial treatment of native peoples and California's Hispanic heritage.

Mission buildings standing today in California are mere suggestions of the active complexes they once were. With an understanding of the society that composed these centers of Spanish colonial culture, one's imagination and historical readings can accommodate gaps of time and decay. Some missions remain in operation today as parishes. Nearly all suffer from limited funds and crumbling walls. Those open to the public require constant upkeep and funding to continue as museums. Only with sustained interest and public support can California's missions be saved and preserved for future generations.

Reminders of the Spanish mission period flourish across the lower half of today's California, from streets and districts named for the missions to city and residential buildings crafted in the Spanish colonial style. Hispanic ambiance saturates California place-names and architecture and is manifest in the adobe arcades of historic districts such as San Diego's Old Town. The vineyards of Sonoma, ranchlands of Santa Barbara, and widespread red tile roofs are all signs of the missions' economic and architectural imprint on California's coastal and inland regions.

Spanish settlers also introduced significant agricultural innovations to the state, such as cattle and horse ranches, farming tools and methods, olive cultiva-



Mission courtyard. © iStockphoto.com/Aaron Whitney.

tion, and viticulture (the cultivation of grapes for wine). California's thriving cattle trade, wine industry, and agriculture all began with the missions.

Small townships grew up around the Spanish missions all along the California coast, from San Diego to Sonoma. *El Camino Real* (the royal road), named in honor of the king of Spain, was first scratched out as a foot trail winding up the Pacific coast of Alta California. As religious settlements increased in number and substance, the route became the main land artery for settlers traveling between Mexico and California. Today, the Camino Real correlates approximately with California's Highway 101.

California's Indian civilization varied widely in language, practices, and use of resources. Spain's drive to colonize California began and drove a decline of Indian culture, independence, and population similar to that which occurred elsewhere in the Americas. The shock wave of civilization shook these civilizations and complex cultures to their roots. Mission life undermined cultural distinctions among tribes while inadvertently importing diseases that wiped out significant groups.

Thrown together into the structured and unfamiliar mission environment, groups from different tribes were expected to work, sleep, and eat together in

close quarters while following orders from the missionaries and soldiers. Throughout the mission period, Indian groups coped with this upheaval in many ways—by assimilation, resistance, obedience, or adaptation.

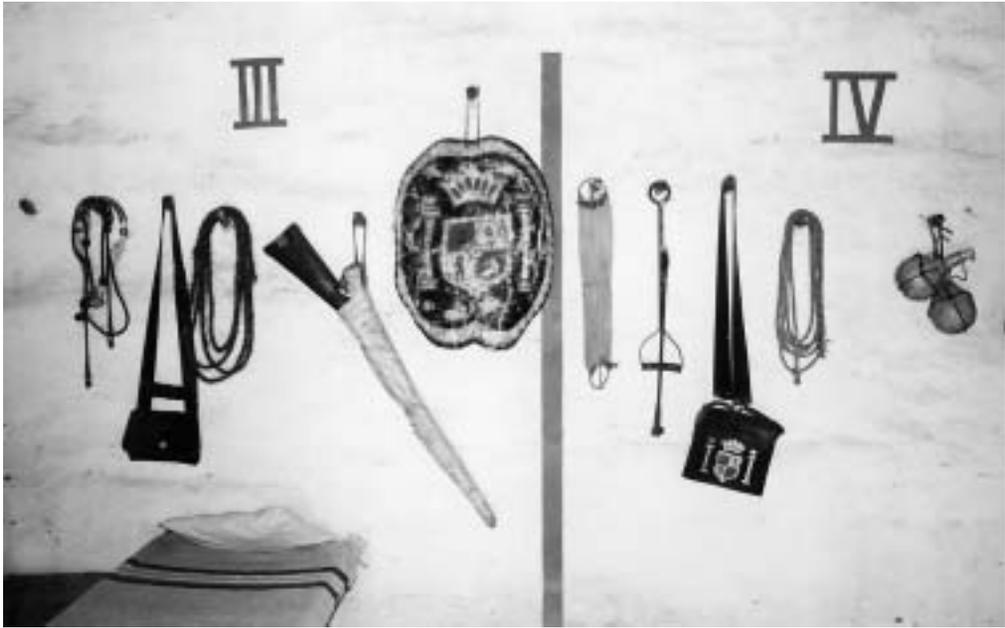
Tragically, with the imposition of Spanish Catholic ways, rich cultural differences began to blend together or disappear. The combination of Spanish and later Mexican and American colonial culture, along with sweeping epidemics of European-imported diseases, spelled the end of many Indian languages and cultures, not to mention lives. Most of the languages spoken before the arrival of the Europeans were lost before the end of the nineteenth century. Some, however, are still nurtured today by various tribal groups as part of the effort by many California tribes to continue the practice of their ancestral customs.¹ The mission Indian tribes that exist today confront their unique ancestries in different ways. Some still identify with mission culture, while others actively condemn its imposition.

About This Book

This look at California's mission story begins with the array of subcultures that occupied the coasts, plains, deserts, and mountains of California long before any European set foot on its shores. Initial interactions between Indian and Spaniard were harbingers of the approaching upheaval of the area's social and economic environment. Each mission developed a culture particular to the region, its resources, its unique Indian tribes, and the men in charge, and this culture quickly replaced centuries-old social institutions among the native peoples.

Colonial history is reflected in the period of mission occupation: Spain's decline as a world power, Mexico's growing presence in the region, and eventually America's inclusion of California as a state.

The geographic scope of this book is the coastal and inland regions of California between San Diego and Sonoma, home to the twenty-one missions of California. In this book, "California" means the area now occupied by the state of California, unless otherwise noted, while "New Spain" means the area now occupied by Mexico. Pre-mission Indians, however, used no single name for the area we know as California. During the Spanish colonial period, before establishment of the first mission in San Diego, "California" meant the great peninsula now called Baja California (lower California). During the colonial mission period, the name came to include the area from Cape San Lucas at the southern tip of the Baja Peninsula up to Puget Sound. It was then divided into *Alta* and



Armor, gun, and riding gear, La Purísima.

Baja (upper and lower) California. Spanish settlers called Alta California *Nueva* (new) California and the peninsula *Antigua* (old) California, but by 1800, when the colonial government in Mexico City reorganized the provinces into administrative sections, the names reverted officially to Alta and Baja.² After the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, Baja California remained part of Mexico.

California's mission story is a poignant and provocative tale of American history. Students of history and culture, along with travelers and the general reader, will discover lesser-known but meaningful scenes from America's past in these pages.

Understanding the Indians of the Missions

Most of the numerous books and documents from the last two hundred years that deal with the California missions tell the story from the perspective of the European colonists, rather than of the Indians. For an understanding of the Indian perspective, primary research materials—letters, documents, and literature written and passed down by Indians who lived in the missions—are essential. Regretfully, such materials are limited in scope and are frequently based on a few written accounts of the period, secondhand reports, and oral histories.

One reason for this disparity in documentation is the low literacy rate among mission Indian populations. The purpose of missionary teachings was religious education, not the creation of a literate society. Consequently, Indians did not commonly learn to read and write Spanish.

Despite these research obstacles, a wealth of information, including that gained from recent archaeological finds, is available to illuminate the life and culture of California's Indians before the Spanish moved in. With these data, along with detailed mission records of incorporated tribal groups and their occupations, one can gain a basic understanding of the California mission Indians before, during, and after Spanish settlement. This understanding is based in part on educated conclusions, recent ethnographic and ethnohistoric research, and reasoned speculation. In the future more primary research, with the help of further archaeological and anthropological studies, may add details about these native populations, who outnumbered early colonists and soldiers by the thousands.³

Terms and Definitions

To this day controversy rages over the status and definitions of Indian cultures in the United States. How to define oneself and one's connection to one's ancestors is a sensitive and intimate topic. In part, this situation results from the relative lack of historical resources that offer the tribal peoples' own perspective during the mission colonization period.

The term "Indian" originated as a colonial construct based on Columbus's thinking he had landed in the Indies and accordingly giving that name to the islands he discovered. During Spanish colonization of California, Indians were then further historically defined as "neophytes" or "converts" in the missions, as workers in the ranchos, and as residents of the reservations.⁴

Many Native Americans still refer to themselves today as "Indians." "Native American," "Indian," or "American Indian" is commonly used when referring generally to Indians of North America or a particular region. More often, individual tribal names are used.

In California, since before European settlers and explorers arrived, native groups have been identified with specific names for their own cultural subset, village, or language groups. In some instances, this practice has led to the adoption of ethnic terms derived from original village names in mission California, such as Ohlone village.⁵

While “neophytes” and “converts” may seem preferable to earlier terms such as “natives” and “Diggers,” which we would consider derogatory, they are misleading in their assumption of a particular state of mind on the part of the Indians. The drastic change from native systems of beliefs to Christianity was extremely complex and is difficult to measure. Debates continue over how Indians were brought into the mission system. To what degree were they coerced? How often did they willingly choose mission life? Although mission Indians during the years of early contact allowed themselves to be baptized and incorporated and no longer publicly practiced many of their previous rituals, we cannot know to what extent a *spiritual* change was made. Calling the mission Indians “converts” is therefore presumptuous.

“Neophyte” presents a similar problem. Traditionally, a neophyte is a person new to the church who is undergoing the process of becoming a Catholic. Not yet baptized and confirmed, but studying Catholic doctrine, a neophyte plans to fully join the faith. Histories that refer to mission residents as “neophytes” neglect to specify whether a person is a full member of the church or is on the path to becoming so.

The terms “heathen” and “gentile,” which have been used to refer to Indians outside the mission system, are inappropriate to a balanced study of the Indian peoples.

For consistency and accuracy, the individual cultural names are used within this book when possible; the term “Indians” is used more generally. The above considerations should be kept in mind when reading this and other materials pertaining to the missions of California.