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“I Solemnly Baptize”: Religious Conversion and Native Demography in Northern Baja California

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THE Spanish conquest and Catholic conversion of Native Americans have been studied extensively in Alta California (for recent reviews see Costello 1989, 1992; Hoover 1989; Hornbeck 1989; Walker and Johnson 1992), but this clash of cultures in Baja California has received much less attention. References to the “California missions” or to “Native Californians” usually imply missions and native peoples of Alta California, although the establishment of the Alta California missions was preceded and made possible by 70 years of missionization in the peninsula to the south (Engelhardt 1929; Gerhard 1982). Of the studies that focus on Baja California, few have addressed regional variation in culture contact (for an important exception, see Aschmann 1968a:145-233). Some studies treat specific missions as examples of more generalized patterns of Spanish colonization (e.g., Gerhard 1982) while others employ summary data from mission registers to reconstruct pre-contact native population and post-contact mortality (e.g., Meigs 1935; Cook 1937; Jackson 1981a, 1981b, 1983, 1986).

Mission records, however, contain rich demographic and social data essential for understanding the dynamics of culture contact at the regional level (Aschmann 1986:243-244). Analysis of regional dynamics is essential because—to cite one reason—mission documents cannot be used to estimate native population without assessing the extent of conversion.

Simply, if large numbers of native peoples remained outside the mission system, then the mission records incompletely reflect the total population. Since the proportion of neophytes to unconverted natives was not a constant, demographic reconstructions based on mission records require analysis of the conversion process. In the balance of this article we analyze data on conversion and demography from the baptismal registers of Mission Nuestra Santísima Señora de El Rosario de Viñadaco, Baja California (Fig. 1).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Mission Nuestra Santísima Señora de El Rosario de Viñadaco was established in 1774 and operated until 1832, one of 28 missions founded in Baja California (Engelhardt 1929). The missionary effort was entrusted originally to the Jesuits, who founded 19 missions in Baja California, beginning with Loreto in 1697 (Venegas 1929; Bayle 1933; Dunne 1952; Pícolo 1962). The Jesuits’ missionary role ended in 1768 when the order was expelled by royal decree from Spanish America. The missionary efforts passed to the Franciscan order (Priestley 1946); Junípero Serra founded Mission San Fernando de Velicatá in 1769 (Sauer and Meigs 1927:283) and used it as a base for the overland expedition to Alta California (Bolton 1971). The Franciscans founded the Mission de San Diego Alcalá (established in 1769) and twenty subsequent

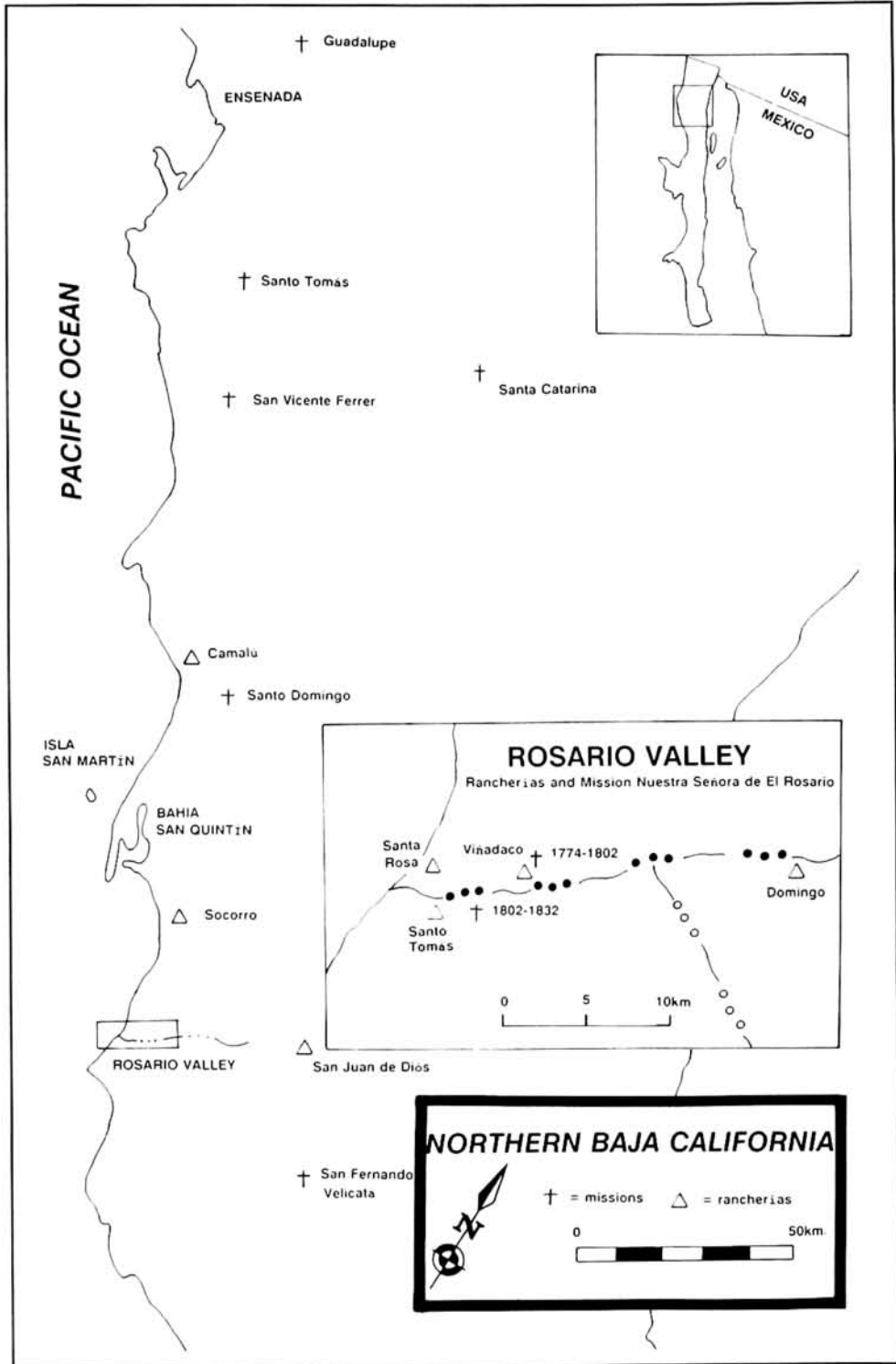


Fig. 1. Northern Baja California Missions and rancherías discussed in text.

missions in Alta California (Hornbeck and Costello 1989). This left a 300-km. gap between San Fernando Velicatá and San Diego which became the missionary arena for the Order of Dominicans (Meigs 1935).

Active throughout the New World, the Dominican order established nine new missions in northern Baja California and inherited the missions previously established by Jesuits and Franciscans on the Peninsula (Engelhardt 1929: 508-511). The last mission established by the Dominicans was Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe founded in 1834 (Meigs 1935:38) and the first was at El Rosario.

Before the establishment of the mission, there were few contacts between Native Americans and Spaniards in the El Rosario Valley. Relatively little information is available about Native American language and culture in the immediate vicinity of El Rosario, although excellent sources are available for the Cochimí to the south (e.g., Aschmann 1968) and the Kiliwa to the north (e.g., Meigs 1939; Mixco 1983). The El Rosario Valley was a linguistic frontier between the little-known Ñakipa and the Cochimí (Meigs 1939:85-86; Massey 1949; however, cf. Mixco 1983). This boundary was not rigid due to contacts between linguistic groups (Mixco 1983:2) and marriage patterns based on band exogamy (Owen 1965:677-678), producing a pattern in which—as Miguel del Barco noted in 1768—“in the territory of one nation and language, there are sometimes rancherías of the other nations and languages” (Barco 1981:17).

As elsewhere in the Peninsula, initial contacts between Native Americans and Europeans were “generally brief, extremely irregular and limited to the coastal areas” (Mathes 1989: 409). The earliest recorded accounts come from Bahía San Quintín, located 45 km. north of El Rosario and an important anchorage for early Spanish navigators. Native peoples first encountered Europeans during Juan Rodríguez

Cabrillo's 1542 voyage, although the natives may have known of Ulloa's 1539-1540 explorations of the Gulf of California (Wagner 1929: 82-83). Subsequent contacts included Cermeño's desperate and brief anchorage in December 1595 at Isla San Martín, which sits just offshore of San Quintín (Wagner 1929:162-163), and Sebastian Vizcaíno's October 1602 visit. Vizcaíno's ships anchored off Bahía San Quintín, naming it “The Bay of 11,000 Virgins,” and the expedition had limited contact with native peoples (Martín and Martínez 1947). Members of Vizcaíno's expedition noted three villages in the area, briefly traded with the inhabitants, and observed that some native women were breast-feeding two children at once, perhaps suggesting a thriving native population (Meigs 1935:18).

No recorded contacts occurred for the next 150 years. The earliest Jesuit explorers such as Consag (in 1745) and Linck (in 1766) did not enter the lower El Rosario Valley, travelling south and east of the area (Burrus 1966, 1967), but the native inhabitants of the valley almost certainly knew of the Spanish expeditions. Consag's expedition apparently stopped only 16 km. south of the El Rosario Valley, at the ranchería of Kalvalaga (Meigs 1935:8). Because of sickness, Consag and his men were unable to proceed further even when entreated by messengers from neighboring rancherías (Dunne 1952:326-331). Linck camped near the ranchería and spring at San Juan de Dios, located on an interior seasonal tributary of the El Rosario Valley (Dunne 1952:384-386). The famous 1769 Franciscan expedition (Costansó 1970; Bolton 1971) passed northeast of the El Rosario Valley, following mountain paths before passing down to the coastal plain and continuing north to Ensenada de Todos Santos and San Diego (Palóu 1966 [Vol. II]:46-48).

Sustained contact between Spaniards and Native Americans on the Pacific Coast of northern Baja did not occur until the Dominican

order established the missions of El Rosario and Santo Domingo (Meigs 1935). The El Rosario Valley was explored in 1773 by Mora, president of the missions, who assessed the availability of water, pasturage, and potential converts in the Valley and concluded "that in all California, at least in that which I have seen, there is not a place more suitable for a mission" (Meigs 1935: 22). A site was chosen near the ranchería of Viñadaco, and construction began in the summer of 1774. The mission remained at Viñadaco until 1802 when the water source for the mission dried. The mission was relocated downstream approximately 3.5 kilometers to the southwest, and the second El Rosario mission remained in use until 1832. Sketch maps prepared by geographer Pevelev Meigs in the 1920s (Figs. 2 and 3) show the general layout of the missions, and even today significant standing architecture remains at the sites (Figs. 4 and 5).

SOURCES OF DATA

Original mission registers for El Rosario and other Dominican missions are preserved at the archive of St. Albert's College in Oakland, California.¹ Baptismal data for the El Rosario mission are recorded on 211 manuscript pages containing entries for 1,441 individuals dating between October 6, 1774 and May 30, 1832. The title page and an unknown number of pages are missing from the earliest baptismal records. The initial baptisms were entered as groups or "partidas;" the first extant baptismal record is labelled "Partida 11" indicating they were preceded by other baptisms. A marginal note written in March 1775 stated "Hasta aqui son 181," and a total of 115 people was recorded between October 6, 1774 and March 1775. This indicates that the first 10 baptismal partidas included 66 individuals (i.e., 181-115 = 66) whose entries are now missing. Jackson (1983:132-133) only analyzed the marginal entries of the preserved pages, a fact that explains the discrepancy between his data and those presented in Table 1.

Like mission registers from elsewhere in California (Johnson 1988b), the baptismal entries from the El Rosario Valley typically contain valuable information on 1) the date of the baptism, 2) the sex and age of the individual, 3) the spiritual status of the individual (e.g., gentil), 4) the person's given name, and 5) the name of the convert's godparents. (The first 193 entries, however, do not contain information on converts' ages, except for the general categories of 'adultos' and 'parvulos.')

A typical entry reads:

511

Calletana 9 On the 23 day of the month of Nov. of 75 I

solemnly baptized a Gentile Adult [female] to whom I gave the name Cayetana her godfather was Cayetano Indian of Sn. Borja whom I advised [regarding] Sp.[iritual] parenthood and signed this day and yr.

Fr. Man[ue]l Perez

The baptismal entries also may mention kin relations between converts, place of origin, and other special statuses—such as if the convert was a political leader (Capitán) or the offspring of runaways (cimarrón or zimarrón)—and whether the baptism was conducted in *articulo mortis*. In short, the baptismal data provide more than summary census data; they provide detailed information on local demography and the conversion process.

PRE-CONTACT DEMOGRAPHIC PATTERNS

As Jackson (1981:140) observed, it is difficult to document the effects of introduced disease in the absence of early censuses for native populations. Yet it is surprising that the mission registers have been under-utilized for the reconstruction of pre-contact demography. For example, Meigs (1935:59) based his estimate of native population on the number of rancherías he thought were mentioned in burial registers which he then multiplied by a rough estimate of

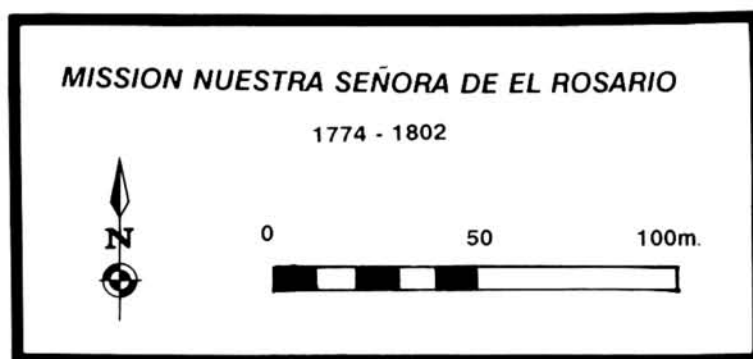
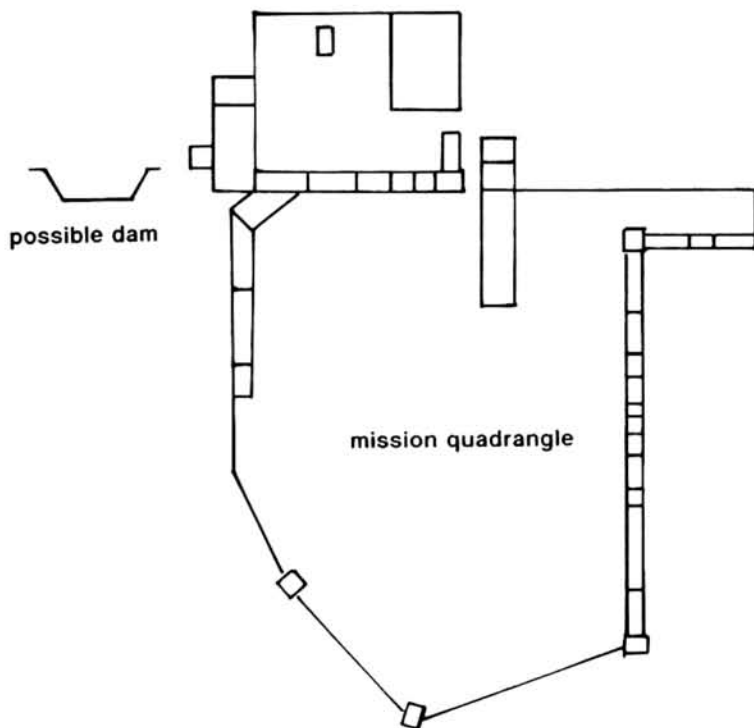


Fig. 2. Plan of first site, Mission Nuestra Señora de El Rosario (redrawn and modified from Meigs 1935:Fig. 5).

105 people per ranchería. Jackson (1981a, 1981b, 1983, 1986) used data from baptismal and burial records to document the demise of native population throughout the peninsula, but not to reconstruct pre-contact demography.

The baptismal data from El Rosario allow the reconstruction of the native population in 1770, four years before the establishment of the mission (Fig. 6). Of the 1,441 baptisms recorded in mission registers, age and sex data

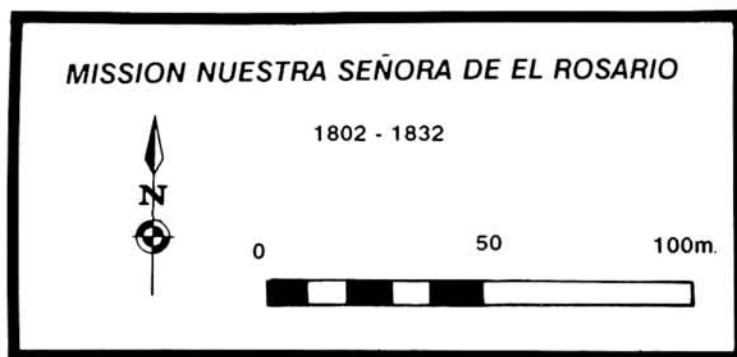
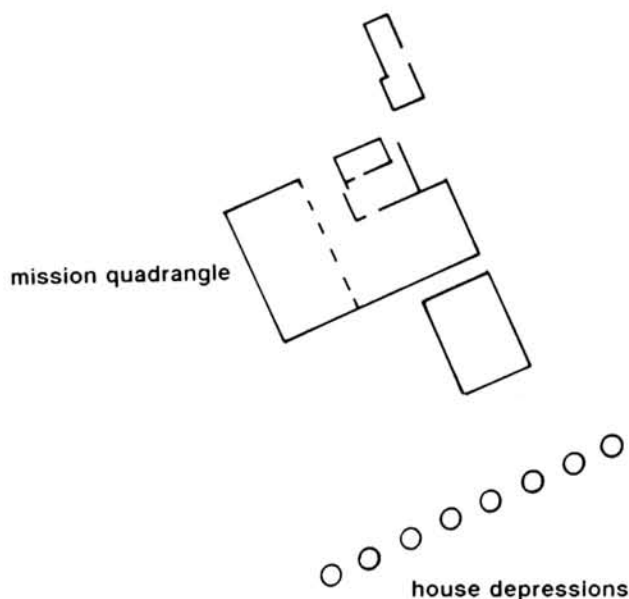


Fig. 3. Plan of second site, Mission Nuestra Señora de El Rosario (redrawn and modified from Meigs 1935:Fig. 6).

exist for 506 individuals (242 males, 264 females) who were alive in 1770. The resulting age-sex distribution is shown in the population pyramid in Figure 6. In general terms, the data suggest a growing population which experienced relatively high rates of mortality. For example, children ages 5 to 15 years are under-represented in the population pyramid for the El Rosario Valley. This probably reflects the ravages of epidemics of unidentified diseases

that are recorded for the years 1756 and 1762 in the older Franciscan missions south of El Rosario (Aschmann 1968a:186-187, 207). Similarly, there is a sharp decline among individuals over 45 years old.

Yet, the native population of the El Rosario Valley was growing in 1770, apparently rebounding from the effects of earlier epidemics. The number of children under the age of 5 ($n=98$) and the number of women of child-



Fig. 4. Ruins of the first mission quadrangle, Mission Nuestra Señora de El Rosario.

bearing age (15 - 44 years; $n=114$) represents a child:woman ratio of 860 children per 1,000 women. While the child-woman ratio is only a crude measure of fertility (Pollard et al. 1981:19-20), the ratio from El Rosario is greater than explosive growth rates experienced by Third World countries in the 1970s (e.g., Indonesia [1971], 667 per 1,000; Mexico [1974], 836 per 1,000).

The reconstructed data for 1770 suggest that while the native population of the El Rosario Valley was affected by earlier epidemics, it was not decimated until there was sustained exposure to European diseases (cf. Walker and Johnson 1992:128). Native population declined tragically after contact, but not until the establishment of Mission Nuestra Señora de El Rosario and

the reduction of Native Americans through the process of conversion.

THE CONVERSION PROCESS

The baptismal records contain important information on the process of conversion, regarding: 1) the rate of conversion, 2) the area from which converts were drawn, 3) the role of native leaders (Capitanes) in the conversion process, and 4) evidence of native resistance.

The largest number of conversions occurred immediately after the establishment of the mission at El Rosario; 72.3% ($n=557$) of all gentile conversions occurred in the first 18 months of the mission's existence. As discussed below, this high rate of conversion is different from other missions in the Californias where the

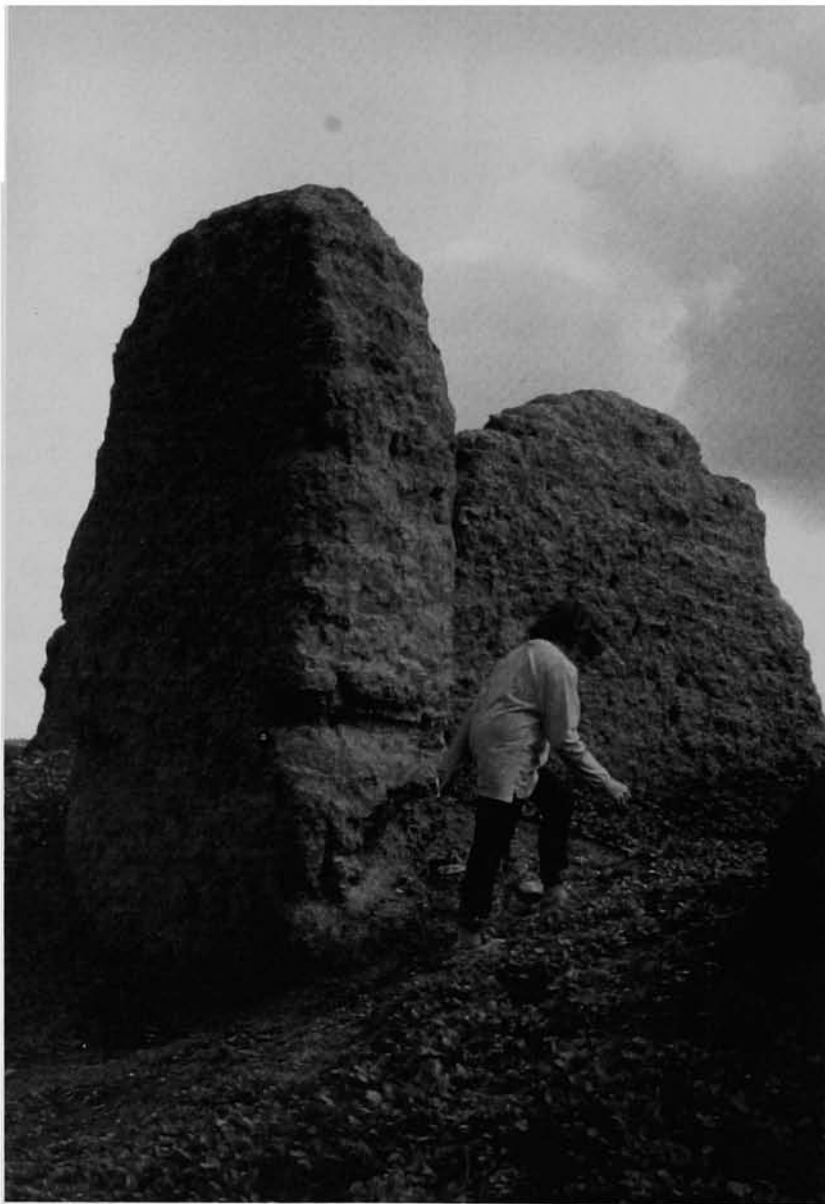


Fig. 5. Standing architecture, second mission quadrangle, Mission Nuestra Señora de El Rosario.

majority of baptisms occurred many years after a mission's founding. The converts were drawn to El Rosario from an area of approximately 2,920 km.² (Fig. 1). The core population came from the native settlements located in the lower El Rosario Valley—the rancherías of Viñadaco,

Santo Tomás and Santa Rosa—and from the village of Socorro located 30 km. north of the mission. Other converts came from the Mission of Santo Domingo 84 km. north, from a ranchería located 35 km. east at San Juan de Dios (Meigs 1935:6), and from other rancherías

Table 1
BAPTISMS AT MISSION NUESTRA SEÑORA DE EL ROSARIO (N = 1,441)

YEAR	GENTILES	NONGENTILES	YEAR	GENTILES	NONGENTILES
1774	148	0	1801	5	0
1775	409	9	1802	1	3
1776	75	22	1803	0	3
1777	13	14	1804	1	3
1778	8	20	1805	1	5
1779	5	23	1806	0	4
1780	12	14	1807	0	11
1781	8	14	1808	0	5
1782	33	13	1809	0	9
1783	8	21	1810	0	5
1784	14	16	1811	0	3
1785	15	20	1812	0	1
1786	17	21	1813	0	5
1787	24	23	1814	0	5
1788	3	23	1815	0	5
1789	17	21	1816	0	0
1790	26	7	1817	1	3
1791	22	21	1818	1	0
1792	31	26	1819	3	0
1793	7	18	1820	1	0
1794	3	12	1821	0	2
1795	24	12	1822	0	0
1796	6	5	1823	0	1
1797	8	11	--	--	--
1798	0	8	1831	2	0
1799	7	7	--	--	--
1800	3	1	1844	--	1

whose locations have not been established.²

Native leaders, or Capitanes, figured prominently in the conversion process. Based on marriage records, a Capitán named Joseph was baptized as early as September 11, 1774, although his baptismal entry is lost. The first extant baptismal record is of Francisco, an adult gentile of unspecified age baptized on October 16, 1774, who is identified as a "cap." in a marginal note. Marcolino, the Capitán of Socorro, was probably baptized on February 17,

1775, although he was not identified as a Capitán at that time. From mid-August to mid-September 1775, five Capitanes were baptized. Three Capitanes were baptized on August 28, 1775: Francisco of Accaleu, Hilario of Calamí, and Agustín of Macapá. Agustín was baptized with his four young daughters, but not his spouse. Similarly, Juan Diego, a Capitán of an unspecified village, was baptized on August 19, 1775 with two sons and a daughter, but his spouse is not recorded. There seems to be a

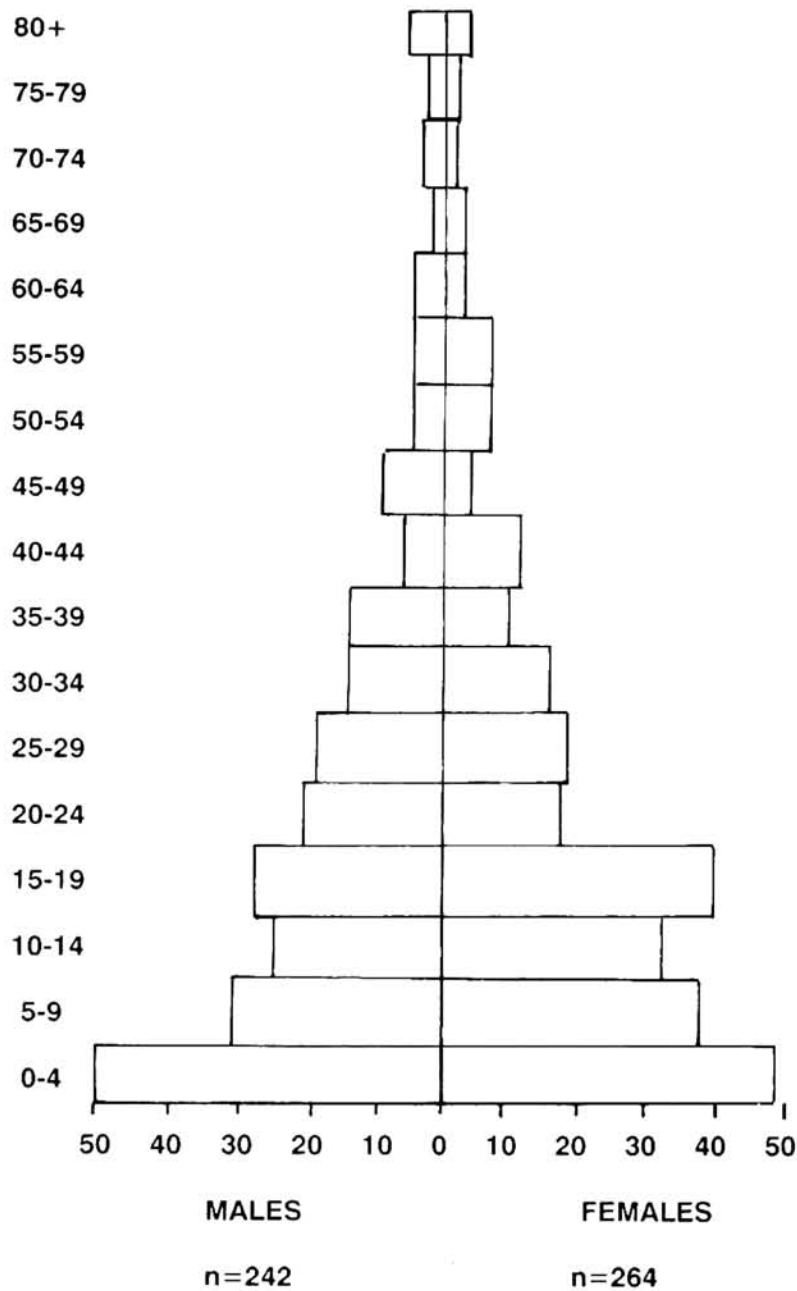


Fig. 6. Age-sex pyramid for reconstructed native populations at El Rosario in A.D. 1770.

pattern in which Christianized Capitanes brought their children to be baptized, but their spouses remain unconverted. For example, 16 months after his own baptism, Hilario, Capitán of

Calamí, brought his illegitimate son to be baptized at the mission on December 31, 1776; Hilario had fathered the child with "Theresa soltera de la Rancheria de Sto. Thomas" who

apparently was not baptized. Thus simply because a Capitán was converted did not mean that all the members of his family concurrently entered the arms of the Church.

Some Capitanes actively participated in the conversion process, raising their own children in the Church and serving as godfathers to other children. The Capitán, Domingo, is a good example. His baptism was recorded on the missing pages of the baptismal register, but his Christian marriage is recorded for July 31, 1774, the first entry in the *libro de casamientos* for El Rosario, at which time he was baptized. Only later was Domingo identified as a Capitán when he and his wife, Clara, brought their infant children to be baptized: a son on January 3, 1778, a daughter on January 14, 1778, and another son on September 21, 1780. During the next year Clara died and on November 1, 1781 Domingo married a widow, Manuela. Unfortunately, Manuela died in the next few months, and Domingo remarried again on March 31, 1782. Domingo fathered a "hijo legítimo" with his third wife, Felicidad; their son was baptized on September 3, 1782. Domingo and his wives served as godparents, but only to the newborn children of converted parents. It appears that the Dominicans only entrusted the spiritual parentage of adult gentiles to more reliable converts, such as interpreters and converts referred to as "yndios de casa."

The padres' caution may reflect their concerns with the orthodoxy of believers. The baptismal records only hint at native resistance to Catholic dogma, but beginning in 1782, a series of entries mention the baptism of children of runaway neophytes. For example:

On the second day of the Month of July of 1782 I solemnly baptized a Boy two years old [not baptized previously because his Mother had been a Runaway] the legitimate son of Thomas now dead and of Clara, of the Rancheria of San Juan de Dios of [the mission of] San Fernando [Libro de Bautismos, Baptism 831].

Similar entries in 1782 and 1783 suggest that the control of the church was not absolute. It may be that this sudden appearance of runaways reflects the terrifying death rates associated with the smallpox epidemics of 1781-1782 (Jackson 1981b:139-140).

Proselytizing shifted quickly from the conversion of gentiles to the baptism of converts' offspring, as natal baptisms began to outnumber gentile conversions in the late 1770s (Table 1). Conversion and epidemics reduced the native population to a resident mission community by 1798-1800.

MISSION-PERIOD POPULATION

Peveril Meigs' (1935) classic study of the Dominican missions of Baja California combined fieldwork and archival research to produce a historical geography of the region, which included estimates of native population. For all the value of his research, Meigs' population estimates are almost certainly overestimates based on error and erroneous assumption.

Citing a rather cursory 1770 estimate of native population, Meigs (1935:13, 133) assumed that the average ranchería contained approximately 105 residents; based on his reading of the burial registers from El Rosario, Meigs (1935:59, 113) identified 10 rancherías, and simple multiplication produced the estimate of 1,050 people. Meigs (1935:59) listed the rancherías of Rosario (Viñadaco), Santo Domingo, Santa Rosa, Socorro, Santo Tomás, Domingo, Fiel, Macopá, Agustín, and Cava, noting that these last "five rancherias were probably given the names of their Capitanes, to judge from the entries in the burial book." However, as noted above, the baptismal register indicates that Agustín was the Capitán of the ranchería of Macopá; the names refer to the toponym and leader of the same village. Further, Meigs apparently misread the entries, con-

fusing the phrase "indio de casa" with residents of a nonexistent *ranchería* named "Cava." (This is quite obvious in the marriage documents where place of origins are prefaced with the phrase "de la R[ancheri]a de" while *indios de casa* are not so designated.) Thus two of Meigs' *rancherías* are bogus, and it is probable that Fiel and Domingo were leaders of other named *rancherías*. There are eight *rancherías* listed in the baptismal records: Rosario/Viñadaco, Socorro, Santa Rosa, Santo Tomás, Accaleu, Calamí, Macapá, and San Juan de Dios (although San Juan De Dios is associated with the mission at San Fernando Velicatá). The 18th century data indicate there were seven *rancherías* in the territory of Mission Nuestra Señora de El Rosario.

Second, Meigs argued that a very high percentage of native population remained outside of the mission system; Meigs (1935; and cited in Cook [1937:12]) suggested that on average only 40% of the native population was converted. Perhaps other regions experienced this low rate of conversion (Cook and Borah 1979:194), but the historic data suggest that native conversion was rapid and complete at El Rosario, particularly in the *rancherías* in the immediate vicinity (< 8 km.) of the mission (e.g., Viñadaco, Santa Rosa, and Santo Tomás). As noted above, native political leaders and their families were among the first converts to the mission, taking prominent roles in the church. All the *rancherías* ever mentioned in the baptismal records were contacted by February 1776, within the first 16 months of the establishment of the mission. There is no evidence that a large portion of the population of the El Rosario Valley remained outside the mission system for any length of time.

The rapid rate of conversion at El Rosario contrasts markedly with neighboring mission territories and other regions in California. At San Fernando Velicatá, the next mission south of El Rosario, some 390 individuals were bap-

tized in the first 20 months of the mission's establishment (Engelhardt 1929:602), but the high point was not reached until 1775 (Sauer and Meigs 1927:288-289), six years after the mission was founded. Mission Santo Domingo, a Dominican mission established north of El Rosario in 1775, only had five converts in the first two years of existence (Meigs 1935:135). Turning to Alta California, neophyte population at Mission Santa Barbara peaked in 1803-1804, some 18 years after the establishment of the mission in 1786 (Johnson 1989:368-369). Some inland villages less than 50 km. from Mission Santa Barbara were not missionized until 1801-1804 (Johnson 1989:370) and Chumash living on the Channel Islands were not forcibly resettled on the mainland until 1814-1816 (Johnson 1982:69-69, 100).

In short, the evidence from Mission Nuestra Señora de El Rosario indicates that the native population was converted rapidly, suggesting that the majority of the population of the lower El Rosario Valley was baptized. This inference is based on three lines of evidence. First, the mission was located a short distance from the *rancherías* of the lower El Rosario Valley (Fig. 1); in some cases the *rancherías* could be seen from the mission. Second, given that the lower El Rosario Valley was one of the best-watered and most productive environments in a large region, as Mora noted in 1773, it is reasonable to assume that it supported the highest density of native population; thus, the majority of native population probably was clustered in the *rancherías* nearest the mission at El Rosario. And finally, the evidence is clear that those *rancherías* were contacted quickly, the *Capitanes* of those *rancherías* were converted, and the number of gentile baptisms dropped sharply by the end of 1776 at which point 632 gentiles had been baptized (Table 1).

It is impossible to know precisely what percentage of the native population escaped the mission system, but the impression is that a

large majority of the population was baptized and certainly more than the 40% estimated by Meigs (1935). Thus the baptismal data may represent upwards of 75% to 90% of the total population, resulting in a tentative estimate of a maximum total population of approximately 700 to 840 people in the recorded rancherías in the El Rosario Valley and neighboring areas.

CONCLUSION

Analysis of the baptismal records from Mission Nuestra Señora de El Rosario provides new insights into the nature and consequences of culture contact in northern Baja California. First, the reconstructed demographic profile for 1770 indicates a population which was recovering from introduced diseases, diseases which affected but did not decimate the population. For the native populations of the El Rosario Valley, demographic collapse occurred only after the sustained exposure to disease caused by the establishment of the Dominican mission.

Second, the baptismal records indicate that the conversion process was rapid and successful, at least from the Dominicans' point of view. Native rancherías were contacted, Capitanes were converted, and the majority of the population was baptized within the first 18 months of the mission's establishment. This in turn suggests that the baptismal records reflect a large proportion of the native population, a population estimated at approximately 700 to 840 people.

Lacking accurate censuses, mission documents provide the best data on contact period demography in Native California. But since such records were kept for other purposes, like reporting the success of the missionizing effort, the conversion process distorts demographic data. While the baptismal data from the Dominican mission of Nuestra Santísima Señora de El Rosario suggest that the baptismal records are a relatively accurate reflection of the native population, these data also indicate the great

variation between regions in the conversion process, underscoring the need for more detailed regional studies to understand the dynamics of culture contact in both Californias.

NOTES

1. Microfilmed copies of the mission data are also available from the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Although there are a total of 1,453 baptismal entries, simple recording errors such as numbers used twice and numbers not used account for this discrepancy.

2. For example, the ranchería of Calamí probably refers to Camalú, located 90 km. north of El Rosario, or—less likely—to Calmalli located over 320 km. to the south. The rancherías of Accaleu and Macapá have not been identified.

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