

Coastal Chiefdoms and the Question of Agriculture: An Ethnohistorical Overview

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Abstract

As has been aptly summarized by archaeologist David Hurst Thomas as "the Guale problem," considerable debate still exists regarding the degree to which the Indians of the Atlantic coastal zone north of St. Augustine could be characterized as sedentary agriculturalists, particularly when compared with interior groups. Influenced by early Jesuit letters, many researchers consider late-prehistoric coastal groups to have been severely limited in both agricultural productivity and settlement stability due to environmental constraints, though all groups clearly farmed during the later Franciscan mission period. This paper addresses the problem with a wide range of ethnohistorical data from early colonial sources.

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There is a widespread perception among archaeologists studying the late prehistoric inhabitants of the Atlantic coastal zone in Georgia, northeastern Florida, and southeastern South Carolina that there was something markedly different about these societies with regard to their subsistence base, settlement patterns, and social organization. When compared with the populous Mississippian agricultural chiefdoms of the interior Southeast, coastal groups such as the Guale, Mocama, and Orista-Escamazu seem remarkably underwhelming in many ways. The general paucity of corn from prehistoric archaeological sites on the coast, combined with other evidence for a heavy reliance on marine resources and wild plant foods, has been interpreted by many researchers as support for several notable early written descriptions of Indian subsistence and settlement practices, most notably by Jesuit priests who lived for a number of months among the coastal Indians in 1569 and 1570. In part because of their early date and vivid narrative, these accounts have long dominated scholarly thinking on the Guale and others. And the scholarly minimization of the importance of coastal agriculture has already taken root among the general public; along the Georgia coast today armchair history buffs commonly take it for granted that the Guale were principally transhumant hunter-gatherers who resided on the barrier islands only long enough to exploit the rich estuarine and marine resources before moving back to the interior, a model that I find difficult to even justify or explain, much less accept.

Over the years that I have been mining the original documentary sources from Spanish Florida, I have had to contrast this relatively widespread perception in both scholarly and public circles with my own understanding of these same coastal groups, which has until recently been centered on what I call the primary mission period, dating to between 1587 and 1702 for the region under consideration. During this period, the total missionized population of Guale and Mocama ranged from a high of perhaps 1600 Indians over age 12 in 1595 to a low of under 150

in 1711. Nevertheless, even at the start of the mission period these coastal chiefdoms were able to muster some 13,000 pounds of corn in annual tribute to the Spanish. Under the later system of maritime corn trade, these same provinces routinely sold 25,000 pounds of surplus corn to the Spanish, all of which was grown on the missions despite the absence of a number of laborers from these towns who worked to produce an additional crop of corn in St. Augustine. This means that each year a combined labor force of probably only a few hundred men and women were able to produce not only enough corn to supply their own families and lineages, in addition to those of the chiefs and their noble relatives and other public officials such as the local missionary, but they were also able to produce tens of thousands of pounds of additional corn for barter to Spanish ships. And I would hasten to add here that even unmissionized coastal groups such as the Orista-Escamazu were also routinely producing surplus corn and other agricultural products for sale during this same period. Spanish ships commonly visited these northern provinces to barter for corn, and early English exploratory expeditions under William Hilton and Robert Sandford in the 1660s described substantial fields of corn in this same region.

In sum view, the mission-period ethnohistorical record is quite clear. First, all coastal Indians are clearly documented to have produced substantial agricultural surpluses during the mission period, and available evidence provides clear links between agricultural crops and labor, and traditional notions of social rank and political organization at the time. Second, and as a direct consequence of the first statement, the soils around these comparatively nucleated mission villages were in fact perfectly capable of producing substantial agricultural harvests each and every year. Quite clearly, the coastal zone within the study area was actually well-suited for indigenous corn agriculture, even though arable soils are known to have been patchy, and would presumably have required shifting cultivation and other specialized techniques.

The question remains, then, as to whether the late prehistoric Guale, Mocama, and Orista-Escamazu actually did rely heavily on agricultural products, or whether the ethnohistorical portrait I have just summarized was indeed an innovation during the mission period. Since archaeological data have only managed to demonstrate the late prehistoric presence of corn on the coast, without convincingly addressing its relative contribution to the diet, I have focused my attention on the early colonial records dating to the late 16th century in an effort to develop my own answer to what David Hurst Thomas has called "The Guale Problem." And to foreshadow my own conclusions, the evidence that I have examined has convinced me beyond any shadow of a doubt that not only did the inhabitants of all coastal chiefdoms in the study area grow corn, but I would say that they grew a lot of it. So much, in fact, that I have no doubt in my mind that the Guale, Mocama, and Orista-Escamazu fall easily within the range of variation that I have previously examined for the Timucuan chiefdoms of interior Florida and south Georgia. As such, they can be unequivocally characterized as small-scale agricultural chiefdoms.

Agricultural surpluses produced using tributary labor arrangements provided the same economic glue to coastal chiefdoms that I have seen elsewhere in the Spanish Florida, and in my mind these chiefdoms simply form one regional variant of the broader phenomenon of agricultural rank societies we call the Mississippian culture. While we could and should identify individual variations all day long, in my opinion the underlying elements of agricultural chiefdoms are all there.

What I am proposing today will, from one perspective, seem quite radical. Nevertheless, the interpretations I have reached regarding these coastal chiefdoms do not, in fact, depart substantially from commonly-held perceptions regarding all late prehistoric groups in the Southeast. Indeed, my conclusions regarding the Guale and other coastal groups fall easily

within the range of variation already posited for subsistence and settlement systems within the Mississippian culture, and in this sense should come as no big surprise. The fact that sedentary agricultural chiefdoms possessed a wide range of seasonal and catastrophic options for subsistence strategies should not startle anyone present today. We simply have to re-examine all the early documentary evidence with this in mind.

In this paper I will confine my observations to that portion of the lower Atlantic coastline extending roughly between Port Royal Sound on the north and the mouth of the St. Johns River on the south, including the Orista and later Escamazu chiefdom, the Guale chiefdom, and three important Mocama chiefdoms named Sauriwa, Tacatacuru, and Guadalquini. Within this study area, the chronology of European contact, colonization, and missionization extends from 1521 to 1702, after which the region was largely abandoned. While it is impossible to review details of this chronology here, it is important to note that after several brief contacts in the 1520s, it was the decade of the 1560s that truly brought first contact to the study area. Two French colonial forts were occupied for about a year each after their establishment in 1562 and 1564, and the later Spanish towns of St. Augustine and particularly Santa Elena resulted in even more extensive contact after 1565. But despite brief missionary activity by Jesuits in 1569 and '70 and Franciscans in 1574 and '75, it was not until 1587 that the Mocama were truly missionized, followed by the Guale between 1595 and 1605.

In order to examine the question of indigenous late prehistoric agriculture, and its relative importance to the coastal chiefdoms in the study area, I will focus my discussion on the era of first European contact, and the assortment of ethnohistoric evidence that bears on this question. I should also note that my paper this morning only summarizes a much broader range of data due to time constraints. Since the earliest Spanish expeditions were temporary and extremely brief,

documentary accounts relating to the two French colonies provide the best information. Taken together, French and contemporary Spanish descriptions of the experiences of both the Charles Fort and Fort Caroline garrisons suggest to me that at least the coastal Timucuan chiefdom of Saturiwa and the Muskogean chiefdoms of Guale and Orista/Escamazu, and very likely all other chiefdoms in-between, may be characterized as indigenous agricultural chiefdoms, as noted above. In support of this interpretation, I would offer three fundamental assertions based on the ethnohistorical evidence.

First, it is quite clear that at the time of first European contact in the 1560s, all coastal chiefs maintained sufficient surplus corn to be able to give or trade substantial amounts to recently-arrived colonists, and yet still maintain enough backup surplus for use in chiefly political negotiations and in planting their crops the following year. Both French garrisons bartered for large quantities of maize and beans from neighboring chiefs, including Orista-Escamazu and Guale in 1562 and '63, and Saturiwa in 1564 and '65. Not only did they already possess storehouses of maize under their own direct control, but there was a sufficiently large amount to be bartered and given to French soldiers on more than one occasion. Furthermore, during the late spring of 1565, long after chief Saturiwa had denied additional corn to French soldiers, claiming there was none to be had, he was nonetheless able to offer René de Laudonniere substantial quantities of corn as an incentive for his help in waging war against chief Outina in the riverine interior. Saturiwa was clearly hiding surplus corn from the French, and only revealed its presence for an obvious political goal.

Second, French accounts of the Fort Caroline colony make it abundantly clear that coastal groups were fully aware of annual agricultural cycles, including the timing of planting, the maturation of the annual corn crop in different locations, the timing of the harvest, and the

necessity for maintaining sufficient stores of seed corn for planting the following year. During the early summer of 1565, the Indians all along the St. Johns River were able to report on the relative ripeness of corn at various points along the valley, including at the mouth, and were very protective of their fields before harvest. Two French carpenters were even murdered during May when they picked corn from fields near the village of Atore near the mouth of the river, since the harvest would not arrive for several weeks.

Third and last, at contact, all coastal groups already possessed extensive cleared agricultural fields, and their relative importance to the Indians was demonstrated by the fact that hostile groups (both Indian and European) commonly went to the trouble to cut down cornfields as part of their strategy of warfare. During the summer of 1565, Laudonniere specifically described large fields of cultivated maize on the island of Sarabay (Big Talbot Island) and at Atore and Emoloa just inland from the mouth of the St. Johns, along with the many other fields farther upriver in the interior Timucuan country of chief Outina. And demonstrating the relative importance of these fields and crops, during the first and second coastal rebellions affecting the Guale and Orista regions in 1576 and 1597, Spanish retaliatory raids evidently focused on two primary goals in an effort to bring the Indians to submission: burning their villages and cutting down their cornfields. Since the strategy worked on both occasions, eventually bringing rebellious chiefs to the negotiating table in order to resettle their towns and fields, I can only conclude that annual corn crops and the fields used to produce them were very important resources for coastal chiefs. Had the coastal chiefdoms been characterized by the dispersed settlement patterns implied by some researchers, with only limited recourse to corn agriculture in comparison to hunting, fishing, and gathering, the Spanish reprisals should not have produced

such rapid results. The coastal Guale and Orista-Escamazu were behaving very much like sedentary agricultural chiefdoms.

What does the evidence I have just reviewed tell us? That not only was corn grown and used among the coastal Indians, but that it was also a fundamental component of both domestic subsistence and political power in coastal chiefdoms. This kind of behavior was no recent innovation among coastal groups, but rather reflected what I would argue was a centuries-old cultural adaptation for coastal chiefdoms within the broader Mississippi period world of the Southeast.

Now that we have examined some of the more the evidence for the importance of corn agriculture among coastal chiefdoms at the time of first contact, the task remains to briefly address several specific questions or challenges that might be raised to this evidence or my interpretation of it. First, what are we to make of very early accounts that refer to the coastal Indians scattering into the woods for many months during the winter, subsisting on mast crops and other gathered and hunted foods? While such accounts do exist in the form of letters from two Jesuit missionaries in Guale and Orista, and a French description from the mouth of the St. Johns River, these accounts sharply contrast with the vast body of evidence regarding the normal subsistence and settlement pattern of coastal groups in the study area. How are we to interpret these accounts in the light of other evidence?

The answer is really quite simple, and it does not require us to reject the accounts. Indeed, given the circumstances, the accounts would appear to be largely accurate, if somewhat exaggerated in the case of the Jesuit priests, whose failure in and abandonment of Spanish Florida undoubtedly soured their reports. Nevertheless, it is not a stretch to explain the observed Indian behavior if we recognize that coastal chiefdoms, like any others, were fully capable of

adapting their normal seasonal and annual routines in cases of environmental or social stress. Indeed, I would argue that Southeastern chiefdoms normally incorporated a fairly wide range of subsistence and settlement strategies within their individual environmental niches, routinely resorting to backup strategies when primary ones failed.

And this, of course, is precisely what happened in the case of the letters from Jesuit priests Juan Rogel and Antonio Sedeño and French colonist René de Laudonnière. Three important facts bear directly on this question. First, extremely accurate paleoclimatic information reconstructed from tree-ring data confirms contemporaneous ethnohistorical evidence for a prolonged period of below-average rainfall between about 1558 and 1570, precisely during the period when all these accounts were authored. The worst drought occurred at the end of this decade during the growing season of 1569, precisely when the short-lived Guale and Orista missions were established, and immediately preceding the only winter the Jesuits experienced among the coastal Indians.

Second, in addition to the years of drought, all these accounts were authored precisely during the initial years when newly-arrived European colonists were most in need of foodstuffs received, bartered, or taken from neighboring coastal Indians, significantly reducing any annual surpluses remaining after dry growing seasons. Laudonniere's 1565 description of winter hunting jaunts and spring famine came after his own purchase of most of the surplus from the 1564 growing season, and Jesuit letters were authored during a period of extreme dependence by the settlers of Santa Elena on local Indian food, a practice which had begun with the French soldiers at Charles Fort in 1562. Indeed, there are several direct textual references to Indian comments that they had indeed sold virtually all their surplus food during those first years, and would have to seek out other foods until spring planting.

And third, historical evidence documents a notable plague during that very same winter of 1569-70, and the fact that Guale and Orista Indians evidently blamed it on the priests might go a long way toward explaining their dispersal that first winter. If their goal was to discourage the Jesuits by leaving the villages where the mission churches were located, they succeeded completely.

What must be remembered regarding all these early accounts is that at the moment that the first resident colonists arrived in any region, local agricultural surplus production levels were still optimally suited only for Indian use. The unexpected and substantial drain on existing surpluses that was created by the arrival of European colonists would have instantly created a temporary overload on the capacity of indigenous subsistence systems to provide for the increased level of demand. Based on later accounts, it is obvious that coastal chiefdoms adapted fairly rapidly to the increased demand in the colonial era by independently intensifying their own production. But the first few years were undoubtedly leaner and more stressful than either before or afterwards. This transitional period was precisely when we find the French and Jesuit accounts that have for so long confused modern scholarship.

A second important question or challenge that might be raised is whether or not the earliest European colonists, either French or Spanish, were somehow responsible for introducing intensive agriculture to coastal Indians, substantially altering prehistoric subsistence patterns. Even if we discard all the evidence I have described above, which I believe demonstrates remarkable continuity between first contact and the later mission period, there are sound reasons to reject this hypothesis based solely on the nature of early colonial interactions between Europeans and coastal Indians.

A number of scholars have flatly stated that Franciscan missionaries actually forced the coastal mission Indians into settled lifestyles, obligating them to adopt European-style farming practices and sedentary village life. Even if we were to assume that the missionaries had the power and influence over secular Indian affairs to carry out such a plan, which I firmly believe they did not, there was not even a single coastal Indian village that had a resident missionary for more than a year or so until after 1587, and the Guale did not have resident missionaries for more than two successive growing seasons until after 1605. The handful of Jesuit and early Franciscan missionaries who stayed with the Guale and Orista-Escamazu in the late 1560s and '70s scarcely stayed long enough to even learn the Indian languages before abandoning their posts, and it seems very unlikely that their influence on aboriginal economic and sociopolitical systems was significant or long-lasting. Furthermore, after an extensive examination of early Spanish documentary accounts, including accounting records documenting rations and gifts given to visiting Indians at Santa Elena as late as 1587, it is clear that episodic native labor drafts during the sixteenth-century were used exclusively for functions related to the construction of military fortifications or other similar purposes, and not for Spanish farming, as would later characterize the mission period. Furthermore, not only were Indian laborers not employed in Spanish food production during this period, but they were also normally fed from Spanish stores of wheat flour during their stays in Santa Elena and St. Augustine, further draining local reserves of imported Spanish foodstuffs.

From this and other evidence, it becomes clear that European-influenced agricultural intensification, which definitely did occur during the primary Franciscan mission period, probably did not even begin until the late 1590s, post-dating first contact by as much as three or more decades. Three things that would later characterize the 17th-century missions were largely

absent from coastal chiefdoms during the first three decades after the Florida colony was established: resident missionaries, the annual *repartimiento* agricultural labor draft, and a substantial demand for vast quantities of surplus mission corn in St. Augustine. As a result, I believe that agricultural production prior to the mission period would have been almost wholly aboriginal in character, deriving principally from pre-existing agricultural practices with prehistoric roots.

That said, there is no question in my mind that local agricultural production in all missionized areas of Spanish Florida definitely experienced intensification during the primary mission period. But given the nature of the broader colonial economy of Spanish Florida, my impression is that this intensification was not somehow imposed by Spanish missionaries or soldiers, but rather emerged independently among the missionized chiefdoms and their unconverted neighbors. Enlightened self-interest motivated chiefs to increase local agricultural production, since credits and cash earned from Spanish maritime trading expeditions were readily converted into visible wealth in the form of exotic Spanish clothing and religious ornamentation. The church cemetery at mission Santa Catalina is full of the riches earned by Indians in the lucrative corn trade, and there is no reason to think that this was solely spurred by Franciscan insistence.

Moreover, even given the assistance of Franciscan friars, who were also able to convert their own surplus corn into church beautification projects, the only major agricultural innovation introduced by Spaniards to mission farming were iron and steel tools, which only served to increase the efficiency of laborers in clearing and cultivating fields. Neither irrigation nor fertilizers evidently played a significant role in mission farming along the coast, and thus it might simply be characterized as indigenous agriculture carried out with better tools. Nor did the crops

change substantially; although wheat and other European grains may have occasionally been planted, the primary staple grain of the missions remained corn throughout the entire colonial era.

As a final comment, the foregoing debate on indigenous coastal agriculture highlights what I believe is the need for a refinement or clarification of our operational definition of what it meant to be agricultural and sedentary for Southeastern chiefdoms during the late prehistoric period. Specifically, given that corn agriculture is by its very nature seasonal, and is furthermore contingent on annual climatic conditions, it would seem logical that all Southeastern chiefdoms relying on agricultural surpluses as a basis for the public finance of chiefly power must have incorporated a wide range of contingency strategies for a variety of circumstances, including short-term and long-term fluctuations in the natural and social environment. As has been amply demonstrated by David Anderson and others, despite their size, power, and multi-generational stability, Southeastern chiefdoms were in actuality quite tenuous political formations, and the archaeological record is replete with examples of what has been called "chiefly cycling," in which local and regional political integration ebbed and flowed during the course of the Mississippi period. Furthermore, ethnohistorical and archaeological data indicate that even under optimal circumstances, with abundant agricultural surpluses sufficient for year-round consumption, aboriginal subsistence in Southeastern chiefdoms was heavily supplemented by a wide range of wild plants and animals, all of which formed a normal part of the subsistence regime of these societies over the long-term. In this context, the short-term overload of local carrying capacity among coastal chiefdoms at the moment of first contact, and the long-term intensification of agricultural production during the Spanish colonial era, fit neatly within this broader model of flexibility and adaptation that already existed among all prehistoric chiefdoms

of the Mississippi period. The coastal chiefdoms of Guale, Mocama, and Orista-Escamazu may have been less densely-populated than other regions, and may have produced comparatively smaller agricultural surpluses, but there is no doubt in my mind that they can be called sedentary agricultural chiefdoms in the same vein as the rest of their neighbors across the Mississippi-period Southeast.