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Eastern Kentucky University

The Calusa and Early Spanish Settlement:
An Archaeological-Historic Analysis of Early European Contact in Southern Florida

Honors Thesis
Submitted
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the
Requirements of HON 420
Fall 2016

By
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Mentor
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ABSTRACT

The Calusa and Early Spanish Settlement:
An Archaeological-Historic Analysis of Early European Contact in Southern Florida

Rylan Cromer

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In 1513 Juan Ponce de León led an expedition force to explore the western coastline of Florida as part of a mission for the Spanish Crown to map the Gulf of Mexico and determine the capability of the area to potentially support Spanish colonization attempts. Instead, León established first contact with a powerful native society that successfully drove León and his fleet of three ships from their shores with nothing more than bows and basic dugout canoes. For nearly a century afterward, the mere presence of these people, the Calusa, was enough to limit Spanish settlement to the Eastern coastline and northern territory of Florida, only ending with the establishment of St. Augustine in the mid-17th century breaking a near century of isolation between the two. Because the Calusa never adopted Christianity, never bowed to Spanish rule, and never adopted European firearms and ideas, the Calusa are often lauded as being completely resistant to European influence. But were they really? This case study examines archaeological evidence combined with historical records in order to determine that the Calusa society was effected, if to a lesser degree, by Spanish contact and colonization, but that they were largely positively affected, including a resulting expansion to their territory and sphere of influence within the region.

Keywords: Honor's Thesis, Undergraduate Research, Calusa, History, Archaeology, Florida, Spanish, Native American, Colonization

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Acknowledgements

The endeavor to complete this study has been a long and arduous journey, one that I will not soon forget. The lessons I learned through this process shall follow me throughout the remainder of my life, and I will always be able to look back at this and remember that this study was what helped me to develop and prove to myself what I am capable of. To that end, I could not have accomplished this endeavor alone, and so my heartfelt thanks and gratitude goes out to those who helped and supported me throughout this endeavor: To my mentor, Dr. Jon Endonino, whose guidance and experience made this entire project possible; to Dr. Coleman, who provided the opportunity for me to embark on this adventure in the first-place; and to my friends and family, who supported me and encouraged me throughout, and who stayed by my side throughout all the difficulties and hard times in getting this study complete. Thanks to you all, I have finally managed to complete this grand endeavor, and now look forward to embarking on the next one.

Thank you all so very much.

Rylan Cromer

Prelude

Florida. Today known as the sunshine state, the 27th State in the Union was given its name upon the arrival of Juan Ponce de León to the region Easter Sunday, April 1513, whereupon he dubbed the “newly” discovered territory *La Pascua Florido*, which translates to The Flowering Easter, on account of the day as well as the colorful local flora. León’s mission was simple: locate new lands and potential sources of wealth in the name of the Spanish crown. León at the time had already become governor of both Eastern Hispaniola and Puerto Rico through similar expeditions, and now sought to expand his power and wealth within the Spanish crown once again. With an official charter from the Spanish crown, León set out to explore and conquer in the name of the Spanish Empire; his expedition force consisting of 3 Spanish ships, the *Santa Maria*, *Santiago*, and *San Cristobal*. After restocking in San Salvador, León and his force sailed over open waters, eventually spotted Florida in April, 1513. On May 23, León and his men disembarked in what is now the Charlotte Harbor area to continue their mission of mapping out the new territory for Spain, as well as to restock on provisions. Upon embarking to the shore, however, León and his troops were greeted not by wild, unclaimed land, as they thought, nor by

the abandoned ruins of native dwellings like they encountered further North earlier in the year. Instead, they were met by warriors from the Calusa people, the dominant native group in the area. What was possibly more surprising, to the Spaniards at least, was that the natives did not use their own language, but rather addressed León and his men in Spanish. León and his men were chased back to their ships, and the next morning proceeding to retreat after a brief skirmish with a large Calusa force in canoes. Thus, the first contact between European forces and the Calusa of Southern Florida occurred.

This tale stands out as being particularly unique amongst the broader story taught about the colonization of the Americas. The standard story often taught and believed by many Americans in modern times is that upon arrival to the “New World” the European colonial powers, especially the Spanish, began a practice of total slavery and systematic genocide, biologically and culturally, that left the straggling survivors of this wanton disregard for native life struggling on the verge of extinction. However, as with all other aspects of history, the true story of the developments that occurred in the cultures and societies of both Native inhabitants and European settlers as a result of contact and early communication is often more complicated than what we have come to expect when studying these historical developments. The Calusa are often heralded as the exception to rule of Spanish colonization, that because of a lack of clearly visible change in their society, they have become idealized as the epitome of Native resistance to European influence. However, what

may first appear as an unchanging culture on the surface, under closer inspection, is revealed to be the subject of subtle, yet still significant influences. While Calusa society may not have been drastically altered from its pre-Colonial form, upon closer inspection many smaller aspects of Calusa society were altered, facets that allowed the Calusa to spread and become more powerful and dominant post-contact than they had been before the arrival of León in 1513. To identify these subtle changes, it is necessary to examine the individual aspects of Calusa Society: Origins, Organizations, Material Culture, subsistence, religion, and territory.

Pre-Columbian Florida

Before a discussion can be had over the specific elements of Calusa society and the impact of Spanish contact and colonization had on those elements, it is first necessary to understand the historical groups from which the Calusa descended from. Tracing the development of the Calusa from earlier Pre-Columbian cultures is necessary to understand the aspects of Calusa society that were effected the most by Spanish colonization. The history of the development of the Calusa peoples stretches over an immense period, spanning a period of over 12,000 years in the making. In order to help make an analysis of the historical groups that preceded the Calusa, specifically

the cultural groups of Southern and Central Florida who would develop into what is today known as Caloosahatchee culture, more efficient, the groups of people examined can be divided into three distinct groups: Paleo-Indians, Archaic groups, and post Archaic groups.

The Landmass we know today as Florida first became settled by early American Indians sometime around 12,000 BP. These native groups, dubbed Paleoindians¹, were the descendants of the nomadic hunter-gatherer groups that had first come into the America's via the land bridge connecting Alaska and Siberia colloquially known as the Bering Strait. Do to the lower sea level of the time period, a result of much of the world's water still being locked away in glaciers, the ancestors of these Paleoindian groups had been able to trek across the temporary landmass connecting Eurasia and the Northern portion the Americas and, possibly due to the highly adaptive nature of their hunter-gatherer lifestyle, were able to quickly spread throughout the new world. Around 12000 BP, the descendants of those early hunter-gatherers, the Paleoindian groups mentioned earlier, began rapidly expanding and migrating southward throughout the US and into northern portions of Central America. At this point in time, the lower sea levels provided Florida with a Landmass almost twice that of the present-day state, and a much drier climate, with much lower groundwater levels, and many of the modern-day lakes, rivers, and estuaries not even existing. As a result, the Florida experienced by these early Paleoindian groups was less of the swampy wetland terrain its known for today, and more of a grassy scrubland or plains. For these early native groups, this provided both easy access to the territory, but also provided concerns, as

these earlier nomadic groups heavily relied upon collections of surface water in order to meet many of their basic needs. This led to many of these Paleoindian groups to congregate around limestone basins that served as catches of freshwater, where they would hunt, prepare, and consume their food, discarded their refuse near these freshwater basins. We know this because as glaciers began sea levels began to rise, the limestone catches became flowing rivers like the Ichetucknee and Santa Fe, as well as much larger freshwater lakes like Lake Okeechobee, resulting in a buildup of material remains (animal bones, tools, and refuse) in these locations.² Around roughly 9,000 B.C. Glacial melt as a result of a global warming trend resulted Florida becoming much wetter and warmer, while the shoreline moved inland as sea levels began to rise, resulting in Paleoindian groups in Florida, especially those in the Central and southern portions, decreasing in movement ranges and settling more around freshwater estuaries, as well as a gradual shift to fishing over hunting.

By approximately 7,500-7,000 B.C. the changes in Florida's climate had resulted in the native groups living within the state to undergo significant changes in order to adapt to the new climate and topography of the state. Gone were the days in which Paleoindian hunters utilizing basic stone tools to hunt the local megafauna. Instead, the peoples living within Florida began to focus more on utilizing the freshwater rivers and estuaries, decreasing reliance on hunting and focusing on fishing and gathering plants. The distinction between these peoples and their Paleoindian ancestors were sufficient enough that archaeologists have been able to delineate them

as a new culture, dubbed Archaic culture.³ more specifically, the archaic culture can be further subdivided into two separate groups: early archaic and late archaic. During the early Archaic period, conditions in Florida were still somewhat transitional, with much a much wetter climate then that of the prior period while still being drier then modern conditions. As a result, early archaic culture still relied heavily on hunting, although the transition to relying solely on fishing had already begun. This is evidenced in sites like the one described by Milanich at Windover Pond, wherein the remains of both land based mammals (wolf teeth, deer bone, etc...) as well as marine life (shark teeth, shell remains, fish bones) were found mixed together, commonly being repurposed for tools. By 5,000 BC, the climate began shifting again, so that by 3,000 B.C. the climate and shoreline of modern Florida had developed. During this time, early Archaic culture transitioned into late archaic culture, with the transition from hunting to fishing continuing throughout. The advent of late Archaic culture in Florida saw the end nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle in Florida, as groups began settling into finite territories, seen with the establishment of permanent villages in areas around lake Okeechobee and on the coastline. The most distinct development, however, was the advent of fire-tempered clay pottery between 2,000 and 500 B.C. By 500 B.C., regional differences between groups had grown to the point that Late Archaic is considered to have ended and the period of regional cultures began. Of these, two specific regional cultures appeared in South-Central Florida: Glades culture, and, slightly later, the Caloosahatchee culture that would eventually become the Calusa peoples.

Societal Organization

One of the first aspects that must be discussed when investigating the impact of Spanish colonization on the Calusa is the Societal organization of the Calusa. The societal organization the found themselves is important when looking at the components of Calusa society effected by Spanish colonization because it helped to shape what other aspects were influenced by Spanish colonists. The Calusa existed as a complex chiefdom centered around the capital of Calos on what today is Mound Key, Florida. Here, the head of Calusa society, the Paramount Chief ruled over all of Calusa territory, with the name of the city being shared by the ruler. Underneath the paramount chief were the Nobles and Priests, who included village chiefs who were leaders of independent settlements but ultimately loyal to the chief in Calos, and the priests who served the deities of the Calusa religion. Underneath these were the average Calusa men and women, and below these were the slaves.

Originally the slaves of Calusa were other natives taken from raids by the Calusa braves on other territories, usually as a means of gathering resources or of reminding the village occupants of the power of the Calusa to ensure the continued payment of tribute to Calos. However, shortly before the arrival of León in Florida, the Calusa began to find slaves coming from native groups that had already been conquered by the Spanish. From these early foreign slaves, the Calusa leaders learned both the Spanish language, and the potential threat these foreigners could oppose, resulting

in them becoming much more hostile to Spanish presence prior to the Spanish's arrival. After Spanish colonization began, the Calusa began taking more and more Spaniards as slaves. Originally, these slaves tended to come from captured sailors from shipwrecks, like the former Calusa slave Hernando de Escalante Fontaneda, who later became one of the primary sources for the Spanish in understanding Calusa society. From 1565 onward, the Spanish sailor-slaves were supplemented by missionaries taken captive in Calusa territory while attempting to establish missions at nearby missions (more on that later.) The result of these Spanish slaves was that certain Spanish nuances, such as the abhorrence for the Palmetto berries, began to enter into the Spanish society, as well as the emergence of the Spanish language as a secondary language amongst the upper echelons of Calusa society.

Pedro Menendez de Aviles and his founding of St. Augustine in 1565 opened a new stage in the introduction of Spanish influence into Calusa societal organization. This new stage was the introduction of the Spanish into the Calusa's long-standing practice of political marriages. The Calusa were divided into several matrilineal-based clans that all vied for power within Calusa society. In order to keep peace and a balance of power between the individual clans, therefore, political marriage was often practiced, as the marrying off of sisters and daughters to other clans formed bonds between the clans that prevented one clan from attempting to overthrow another. Upon his arrival, and in an attempt to shore up the struggling relations between the Spanish Empire and the Calusa, Aviles decided to take part in this political marriage system by seeking and

obtaining the hand of Paramount Chief Carlos's sister in marriage, with his new Calusa wife eventually converting to Christianity and adopting the name Dona Antonia, thus introducing Spanish nobility into the families of the Calusa, although this would be short-lived as the intervention of some of Aviles's soldiers in a dispute between Felipe, Carlos's heir, and other Calusa nobles resulted in the death of Carlos, Felipe, and half of the nobles of Calos, creating a power vacuum that, once filled, increased hostilities between the two groups.

Subsistence

One of the primary aspects to Calusa society to be the most effected by Spanish colonization of Florida was their subsistence. The Calusa's diet was altered in part due to a combination of new foods introduced by Spanish settlers, the nuances of Spanish palettes, and the competition over resources. Similar to the other groups living within Central and Southern Florida, the Calusa were hunter-gathers who relied largely on fisheries as their primary source of food. These fisheries, usually set up in or around the estuaries along the Caloosahatchee river and the islands and inlets of Charlotte Harbor, provided the Calusa with access to marine life, particularly fish as well as freshwater shellfish. The estuaries were so successful in regards to food production, that they may have even served to supplant agriculture in terms of amount of food produced.⁴

Supplementing fish and shellfish in the Calusa diet were meats from smaller game animals as well as herbs such as water crescents and nuts, especially walnuts, that could easily be gathered in the Calusa's territory. Of key note, the majority of red meat consumed by the Calusa did not originate from Calusa hunters themselves, but rather were collected alongside occasionally fruit as a means of tribute from the other tribal groups and villages that the Calusa exerted control over. Rounding out the Calusa's diet was a small tuber, colloquially known as a "swamp potato", which the Calusa utilized to make a form of flatbread.

Beginning as early as 1521, the Calusa diet began to undergo several changes as a result of the emerging presence of the Spanish in Southern Florida. The first major shift that the Calusa diet underwent as a result of Spanish influence was the introduction and adoption of new food sources to supplement, and in some places, replace existing food sources. The primary food to be adopted by the Calusa after the Spanish colonization of Florida was maize. Maize, which was a key staple amongst many of the native peoples of North and Central America, had been grown somewhat on the eastern coastline of Florida, particularly along the Northeastern coast of Lake Okeechobee. However, unlike in the Northern tribal groups, maize in Central Florida had never been grown for subsistence, but rather as a solely ceremonial plant for the peoples living along the shoreline of Eastern Lake Okeechobee. The first time the fisher Calusa, therefore, came into contact with the new food was during the time period following the arrival of the Spanish settlers to the South-Eastern shore of Florida in 1521. Originally, this food subsistence was traded between the Spanish and the less hostile natives in Southern Florida and along the Southern shoreline of Lake Okeechobee. Many of these Tribal groups, however, were also tributary providers underneath the Calusa, and, according to testimony of the Calusa recorded by Britton Hammon in 1748, maize

became a readily acceptable form of tribute to the Calusa.⁵ In Calusa society, maize became the primary form of starch in Calusa diet, supplementing the bog potato, and was largely used in order to create a flour which the Calusa used to create a form of flat bread, again similar to how the potato that it replaced had been used before. The other primary form of food the Calusa readily adopted from the Spanish was alcoholic beverages, namely Spain's two key forms, wine and rum. The Calusa themselves had brewed a form of alcoholic beverage, mostly for religious purposes, using a pulp from the bark of certain trees growing within the everglades, as well as through the fermentation of certain fish. After Spanish colonization, however, the Calusa, especially the nobles, readily adopted Spanish rum as a favored drink. Originally introduced through recovered barrels from shipwrecks collected either by the Calusa themselves or by their tributary villages, After the founding of St. Augustine by Pedro Menendez de Aviles in 1565, and as part of his attempts to open up further trade between the Calusa and Spanish, rum became one of the few items the Calusa were willing to trade for with the Spanish.

Another way in which Calusa subsistence was effected by the Spanish colonization was the competition between the Spanish and Calusa over fishing grounds in the 17th and early 18th century. Early Spanish settlers, led by men such as León and later de Soto, traveled to Florida for the purpose of farmable land and searching for gold (the story of León hunting for the Fountain of Youth was only penned after his death). Florida offered neither of the two, however, and so Spanish interest in the territory decreased for the next 50 some odd years. In 1565, however, de

Aviles brought renewed interest in Florida with the establishment of St. Augustine. Part of this renewed interest saw the formation of fishing camps along the coastline, some directly manned by Spaniards but many more manned by Spanish Indians from Cuba and Puerto Rico. These fishing camps, while seasonal, relied upon many of the same fisheries as the Calusa, resulting in fierce competition over the ability to retain control over the fisheries and estuaries. In the end, this resulted in the Calusa experiencing a near famine during the early 18th, century, which, coinciding with raiding and disease from northern creeks, resulted in the decimation of the Calusa people.

Material Culture

Another key component of Calusa society to be effected by Spanish colonization of Florida was the Calusa people's material culture. Calusa material culture, particularly in terms of clothing, jewelry and ornament, and pottery were all effected by the arrival of Spanish settlers in Florida. In terms of clothing, the type of clothing typically worn varied depending on which section of Calusa territory the individual came from. In the island and coastal settlements of charlotte Harbor, the main form of clothing consisted of a simple Breechelout, primarily made from deerskin but also occasionally woven from palm. Further inland, particularly around the Western shore of Lake Okeechobee, the traditional form of dress consisted of a shawl or dress consisting of Deerskin or Spanish moss.⁶ The majority of the deerskin used to create the clothing for the Calusa came from tribute collected from tribal groups along lake Okeechobee and the southern estuaries. After the

Spanish began to become a more common presence in Florida, however, the Calusa began to readily adopt Spanish cloth over the deerskin breechclouts. The majority of this cloth was received through seizure from Spanish missionaries and captured Spanish sailors. One recorded incident from 1697, recorded the tale of four friars and a layman, missionaries to the Calusa whom, “were stripped of all but one item of their clothing between their expulsion from Calos and their arrival in the keys.”⁷ The lay youth, in particular, suffered the worst, as he later testified, that “he was left naked except for torn burlap breeches.... [which they] forced on him in exchange for his good clothes, which the Indians said they wanted because they were good for breechclouts.”⁸ Even the clothing another chief provided the monks with on their journey consisted of Spanish cloth taken from amongst the remains of a shipwreck. For the Calusa, the Spanish introduced a new form of cloth for clothing that was much easier to obtain and work with, resulting in the Calusa coming to largely rely on Spanish cloth in order to make up their clothing, even becoming a status symbol amongst the Calusa nobles.

In terms of ornamentation and jewelry, the Calusa were effected in two main forms. The first form consisted of the jewelry used by the Calusa in order to distinguish social ranking and class within the community, while the second consisted of the body painting practiced by the Calusa. For the Calusa, jewelry was the primary means of displaying the social ranking and wealth of an individual. Normally this consisted of a beaded headpiece or leg band made using beads of shell, bone, and wood. From the onset of Spanish colonization up until the final collapse of the

Calusa in the late 18th century, however, the Calusa phased out the traditional beads in favor of jewelry made from gold, most often obtained through a combination of shipwrecks as well as through some trade with the Spanish settlements such as St. Augustine after 1565. The prominence of gold in Calusa society even became so prominent that the symbol of the heir of the paramount chief's heir became a golden beaded headdress adorned with feathers, and complemented with a golden leg-band. Even further evidence comes in the form of the Calusa's wooden masks, which were used exclusively for religious ceremonies and festivals. Traditionally these masks were hand carved from ceremonial pieces of wood. However, after Spanish gold started becoming more significant in Calusa society, these ceremonial masks became more and more often adorned with gold over other more traditional decorations.

Similar to the ceremonial masks, the Calusa also practiced body painting. Unlike many of the other tribal groups in Southern Florida, however, the Calusa did not practice full-blown tattooing, but rather used dyes made from local plants in order to paint intricate designs associated with Calusa spiritual beliefs upon their body. Of all the Calusa's material culture discussed, this aspect was the least effected, as it was largely only given up by the extreme minority of Calusa who chose to convert to Christianity. Nevertheless, the fact that some Calusa chose to abandon the practice, including at one point the Calusa heir Felipe, who "promised to Fr. Rogel that, once he became a Christian, he would no longer paint his body...as he was accustomed to,"⁹ shows that, even if only minorly, European religion was slowly influencing and converting the native Calusa.

Religion

While not overtly influenced in and of itself, the religion, much like the Calusa's societal organization, was a factor of Calusa society indirectly influenced by Spanish colonization as a result of the threat that colonization posed to it. The Spanish colonists and the Catholic missionaries that accompanied them posed a serious threat to the power and influence that the Calusa's religion and its practitioners, namely the priests and nobles, had over the Calusa people. The Calusa worshipped a trio of deity spirits that, divided, governed all main aspects of Calusa life. The chief of these deities governed the physical world, including the seasons and the fish spawns. The second deity governed over Human affairs, advising priests and nobles on the matters of governance and law. The third and final deity governed the sphere of war and battle, determining the victor in wars and raids as well as being responsible for determining those who would live and those who would die. Unlike Christianity, the Calusa believed that mankind possessed a three-part soul, one existing in the eye, one in the shadow, and one in the reflection. Upon a person's death, the soul in the person's eye remained with the body while the other two parts in the shadow and reflection were reincarnated as animals. Priests, using traditional rituals, could communicate and even control the remaining part of the soul. This gave priests, alongside the nobles who received the guidance of the second deity spirit, immense influence within the community, and thus became the primary force behind their authority. Christian missionaries, therefore, served to threaten the noble and priests traditional power-base, turning them completely against the idea of Christianity, and treating any Calusa who dared to attempt to convert very harshly. This is partially why the Calusa were so averse to opening trade with the Spanish: the leaders feared losing their power.

The penalty for Calusa who did attempt to convert was thus extreme. Even the family of the Paramount Chief was not immune: the dispute that resulted in some of Aviles soldiers accidentally killing Felipe and Carlos part of an attempted coup by the other nobles to remove Felipe from secession in order to prevent a Christian from attaining the Chiefdom.

Territorial Expansion

One of the aspects of Calusa life most effected by the settlement of Spanish forces in Florida was the shift in the amount of territory that the Calusa controlled. Unlike with most powerful native groups, such as the Aztecs or Incans, whose territorial control saw vast reductions just prior to total overthrow by the Spanish Empire, the Calusa of South Florida actually saw a growth of power and influence for the Calusa people. The theory of territorial growth for the Calusa was first suggested by Dr. Joseph Marquardt of Florida State University in 1983, as part of his research into the Calusa peoples between 1513 and 1763. Marquardt's theory rests largely on the fact that historical records written between the 1565 and 1675 differ in accounts of the territorial range of the Calusa, with archaeological evidence supporting this observation. During the early to mid-16th century, Spanish records noted that the Calusa controlled territory around the Charlotte Harbor area, emanating from Mound key, the site of the chief village of Calos, and extending as far south as the modern-day location of Fort Myers. By the 1650s, however, the territory accredited as being controlled by the Calusa extended as far east as Lake Okeechobee and

as far south as the Florida Keys. Archaeological evidence suggests even further reach, as the seeds of peppers and papayas, fruits only native to Central and South America, were found among refuse piles during excavations at Mound Key, dating back to around the late 16th century. Also, utilized as evidence is the presence of Caloosahatchee culture in sites as far south as the keys dating to as early as 1565, suggesting a spread of the Calusa's native culture throughout new territories that, while not actively occupied, may have been conquered and forced into tributaries by the Calusa. The primary reasoning given behind this is twofold. The first portion argues that, as Spanish disease weakened the other native groups within the region, the Calusa, who through a combination of isolation and their Spanish slaves had built up a resistance to the more commonly transmuted diseases by the Spanish were able to remain strong and spread their dominance. The second portion of the argument states that, as other cultural groups found themselves at war with Spanish settlers, particularly in the region wherein the Belle Glades culture, another South-Floridian cultural group, were dominant, The Calusa were able to exercise a history of treaties and political marriages in order to exert increasing influence over the beleaguered groups, slowly drawing them into the Calusa's Empire as they sought protection from Spanish forces. This is possibly supported through records showing that between 1565 and 1675, the majority of the highly limited contact between the Spanish and the Calusa came in the form of armed conflict, usually resulting from either the Calusa responding to Spanish aggression against their allies and protectorates, or, vice versa, the Spanish intervening on behalf of their own native allies under assault by the Calusa, namely the tribal groups on the Eastern half of lake Okeechobee that bordered Calusa territory. Either way, the result remains the same: the presence of Spanish forces

in South Florida caused a weakening of the local tribal groups, allowing for the Calusa to move in and expand their sphere of influence to cover the majority of Southern Florida.

Conclusions

The results of this study tend to strongly indicate that the Spanish presence in Florida did have lasting influence over the development of Calusa society, although in more subtle ways than is commonly seen in interactions between European settlers and Naïve societies. The most directly affected areas of Calusa society were their subsistence and material culture, which saw widespread adoption of certain resources, such as Spanish maize, gold, and cloth, as supplements/replacements for traditional materials normally used in Calusa society. Religion and Society organization, meanwhile, were the least directly affected by a Spanish presence in Florida, but rather the threat that Spanish Catholicism posed to the power-bases for both the Calusa's nobility and priestly classes resulted in both the Calusa nobility and religion becoming much more distrustful and malicious against possible sources of Spanish influence, especially Spanish missionaries and Calusa converts, than they might have been otherwise. Finally, the Calusa were able to benefit immensely off of the weakening of other local tribal groups as a result of Spanish disease and conflict, resulting in the Calusa becoming close to a Native empire in all but name.

In the end, the Calusa's fall came not from their long suspected rivals the Spanish, but rather from other Native groups. Beginning in the late 1600s throughout the 18th century, the Calusa began to suffer from raids from Southern Georgian Native groups, namely the Creeks and Yamasee Indian tribes. These groups, through trade and contact with the British, had gained access to important traits that gave them a massive advantage over the Calusa. The first was access to British firearms, which at the time were superior to Spanish firearms, as well as other British munitions, in exchange for the sale of captives captured during these raids into Florida as slaves to work the British plantations farther north. The second advantage was that due to prolonged contact with the British, the Creeks and Yamasee had built up a natural immunity to many of the diseases that the Calusa had simply avoided by limiting contact with the Spanish. The result of this was that the Creek raiders introduced these diseases to the Calusa for the first time, resulting in massive epidemics that weakened the Calusa's might and reduced the Calusa population to as much as one quarter of the original population by 1711. This, combined with the earlier mentioned competition with Spanish fishing industry for control over the fisheries, resulted in several famines occurring in quick succession to each other, so that by 1763, only an estimated 2,000 Calusa were left alive. Ironically, it was the Spanish who attempted to save the remainder of the Calusa, as one of their last acts in 1763 before ceding the territory of Florida to Britain was to attempt a mass evacuation of many of the remaining native groups of Florida, including the remaining Calusa, to Cuba. Here, the majority of the remainder of the Calusa succumbed to more disease and famine, and the culture as a whole is considered to have gone officially extinct at this time. In the end, the Calusa, through cultural isolation that in itself was partially the result of Spanish influence, were able to bypass many of the negative aspects of European contact while taking full advantage of

some of the positive influences of the Spanish presence, were ultimately doomed by this same policy, as it prevented the Calusa from being able to adequately prepare for the consequences of conflict with other Native groups who hadn't avoided the majority of European conflict. Thus, in trying to avoid what they viewed as potential annihilation by a foreign threat, the Calusa were ultimately doomed by other native groups. In the end, this shows that, what at first may seem like a simple historical case of interaction between Europeans and Native Americans in truth is revealed to be much more complex when placed under closer scrutiny.

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