

THE HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY RELATING TO DRAKE, CERMEÑO, AND VIZCAÍNO IN MARIN COUNTY

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The first European meetings with Coast Miwok people were late in the sixteenth century on the Marin County coast near Point Reyes. The Europeans' voyages were driven by different objectives and courses. Francis Drake (1579) sought safe harbor to repair and supply the Golden Hind to complete a circumnavigation and return to fame and fortune. Sebastián Rodríguez Cermeño (1595) needed a site to build a small ship to explore the coast. Sebastián Vizcaíno (1603) returned to search for remains of Cermeño's San Agustín. Various archaeologists and agencies have investigated the Point Reyes area. Beginning in 1949, the Drake Navigators Guild has conducted most of the research regarding Drake's landing site and the other sixteenth century explorers.

The initial European face-to-face contacts with northern California indigenous people occurred in or immediately after the sixteenth century. Those contacts were initiated by mariners Francis Drake (1579), Sebastián Cermeño (1595), and Sebastián Vizcaíno (1603). Each established a short-term presence in Marin County and that location, the coastal area adjacent to Drakes Bay, has been the subject of much archaeological study.

In essence, these journeys were part of a greater context that all began when the Spanish dream of sailing west to obtain the spice, silk, and porcelain riches of Asia was unexpectedly blocked by the American continents. So, beginning in 1565, Spain began the Manila galleon run: from Acapulco, Bolivian silver shipped almost due west on an eight-week journey to Manila in the Philippines. Loading trade wares in the Philippines, they sailed north to catch westerly winds that took them near Cape Mendocino, California, which is roughly 40 degrees north latitude. From there was the delicate journey along the North American coast south to Acapulco. Then, mule trains packed the goods to the Atlantic for eventual shipping to Spain.

This non-stop run from Manilla to Acapulco was long—even four months or longer—often delayed, dangerous, and ravaged by scurvy. But this allure of riches was great and led directly to the first European visitors in Marin County—Drake, Cermeño, and Vizcaíno—all making landfall precisely in the Point Reyes area at Drakes Bay.

Driven by personal revenge, economic recompense, Protestant beliefs, and profit, Drake entered the Pacific and raided Spanish ships and towns with impunity. He pocketed almost a hundred tons of purloined treasure for himself, his crew, his investors, and his Queen. After sacking his last town in Mexico and seeking a way home, Drake sailed out to sea and north until the weather turned him east where he hoped to find the legendary Strait of Anián. Making landfall near present-day Coos Bay, Oregon, and finding no warm-water strait to the Atlantic, Drake turned south, sailing along the coast while seeking safe harbor to prepare for circumnavigation.

He found it when he arrived at what is now Drakes Bay in June 1579 with his two diminutive ships, Tello's bark and the *Golden Hind*—which needed repair. While here, he interacted with the Coast Miwok, explored the land, documented it with a plate of brass, and claimed the land for his Queen as *Nova Albion*, or New Albion. After five weeks, he abandoned Tello's bark and sailed for England. Repairing the *Golden Hind* required that it be careened. To do so, the cargo was off loaded and the ballast shifted to expose the keel. This is an important detail: during the process, four chests of Chinese porcelains were transferred directly to shore and left behind. Porcelain remnants would be excavated centuries later.

In Marin County, Drake established many firsts:

- This was the first English claim on what would become the United States of America (USA) and predated all east coast English claims, including Roanoke and Jamestown. It was also the first encroachment by the English on indigenous people's lands.

- These were the first European interactions with the Coast Miwok people, all which were friendly.
- Drake's was the first material deposit of sixteenth century goods, Ming porcelains, on North American Pacific shores north of Mexico.
- In what would become the United States, here was the first Church of England service and the use of the *Book of Common Prayer*.
- Drake's was the first use of the term *Nova Albion*—translated as New England—for the USA. The old world term “albion” is a nod to the white cliffs at Drakes Bay.
- And this circumnavigation signaled the beginning of an era of English naval dominance which would last into the twentieth century.

The second visit, in November 1595, was that of Cermeño, who captained the Manila galleon *San Agustín*. He stopped at Drakes Bay to begin a coastal survey, seeking harbors suitable to resupply and restore crew health after their harrowing Pacific crossing. Cermeño also interacted with the Coast Miwok, and he was there for about a month.

Preparing for coastal exploration, Cermeño began off-loading and assembling sections of a small launch he carried for close to shore sailing. Before that assembly was complete, the *San Agustín* dragged her anchors in a storm, was broken up in the surf, and became California's first shipwreck. Using the launch, the crew was able to effect a self-rescue. Significant to archaeology is that the Chinese porcelain cargo went down with the ship and remains at Drakes Bay today, where they sometimes wash ashore.

Seven years later, Vizcaino sailed in for only one day to investigate salvage possibilities of the *San Agustín* wreck. Unlike the first two visitors, Vizcaino came from the south. His brief stay was the final inquiry into this coastal area until the latter part of the eighteenth century. With the arrival of the Russians, the Spanish and, ultimately, the Americans, the lore of these earliest visitors loomed large.

Many mariners, including the notable George Davidson, continued mapping and investigating the northern California coast through the twentieth century. Many weighed in on the locations and tracks of these visitors. When land access at Point Reyes eventually opened up, archaeology of the sites answered many questions and began to add to the story. Archaeology in the Point Reyes area has been conducted for more than a century, much of it by the Drake Navigators Guild (DNG).

The first west-central California archeology, done by Max Uhle in Emeryville in 1902, was focused on the immediate San Francisco Bay area. Nels C. Nelson made a brief survey of sites on the ocean coast south from the Russian River into Tomales Bay and into Drakes Bay in 1907. Between 1911 and 1913, Jesse Peters extended his site numbering system south into the Marin County coast. Commander Stewart F. Bryant, U.S. Navy, rowed along Tomales Bay and Drakes Estero to locate sites in 1927.

Official field investigations began in 1940-1941 when the University of California (UC) sent field parties to the Point Reyes area. At this time, the region was backcountry with expansive, uncultivated space and occasional farmhouses that were serviced by poor roads (Beardsley 1954). Four principal excavations were made under the direction of Richard K. Beardsley between 1940 and 1941. Nine minor excavations were also conducted, and a site just east of Point Reyes was excavated (Beardsley 1954). The early excavations were focused on establishing Horizons and Facies—attempts to determine changes in Native American populations and activities over time. Numerous analyses were conducted on the material culture: chipped stoneware, mortars and pestles, clam shell disk beads, trade beads, and more. The first reports on the sixteenth-century porcelains come from these 1940s reports. Robert F. Heizer and his UC crews conducted archaeological excavations in 1941 (Heizer 1941), and his ethnographic studies established the Native Americans in the area as Coast Miwok (Heizer 1947).

Drake's landing in California has been celebrated by various groups since at least 1914. These groups, such as the Sir Francis Drake Association, are usually associated with the Episcopal Church because Drake's religious service is recognized as the first such Protestant service in what would become the United States.

In 1949, the DNG was formed as a multidisciplinary organization to investigate Drake's landing site evidence. Clement W. Meighan conducted excavations in 1950. As early as 1951, often in the company of Dr. Aubrey Neasham, the State Historian, the DNG conducted archaeological surveys and occasional digging.

Soon thereafter, Meighan et al. (1952) published on Drakes Bay archaeology. Adan E. Treganza from San Francisco State and his crews excavated at Drakes Bay from 1957 to 1959. In some cases, the surficial layer was removed with a bulldozer and excavation was done using the shovel-broadcast method.

The 1937 delivery of the hoax Plate of Brass to Herbert E. Bolton at the UC led to interest in Drake's landing and to other ideas about Drake's landing site (Aker and Von der Porten 2010). Of archaeological note, Robert Power, owner of the Nut Tree development in Vacaville, formed an organization called Nova Albion Explorations. In 1957, Treganza was hired to excavate at Point San Quentin on San Francisco Bay. He concluded his work without finding any telling information; namely, any evidence to indicate that the site itself experienced any presence of or contact with sixteenth-century Caucasian explorers (Treganza 1957).

In 1958, the DNG conducted small-scale excavations at sites on the Drakes Bay coast. From 1959 to 1967, San Francisco State University conducted large-scale work at Point Reyes. In 1961, the DNG developed a field archaeology course with Santa Rosa Junior College's (SRJC) Community Service program. While the class was developed and implemented with professional rules—those which had been successfully applied in other places such as England—it was primarily developed for the non-professional who desired to organize and operate under professional archaeological standards. A wide range of subjects was addressed—from those of legal concerns to esoteric topics such as Bronze Age maritime matters and the Biblical flood. Class work dealing with techniques, field practices, record creation, and record preservation was typical, and instructional methods including lectures, slide talks, and movies were regularly employed by the instructor (Von der Porten 1962).

These excavations were primarily conducted using 5 x 5 ft pits, 1/4-inch screens for excavation and 1/2-inch screens for backfill. The improving roads made access easier, the sandy middens made the work pleasant, the variety of materials, and the prehistoric and early historic problems made for interesting experiences. The report on the first year's work expressed much confidence in the efforts and results of the amateur participants. This work was among the first ventures of so-called citizen scientists in California. The DNG's archaeology at Drakes Bay was primarily intended to add to the knowledge about early European contacts, although the Indian materials also received due consideration. While much of the work was directed at experimental questions, some work was done on salvage locations where roads or dams had damaged or were threatening sites. In 1973, in conjunction with Educational Expeditions International, SRJC conducted a two-week field school and excavations at Point Reyes.

From 1979 through 1981, Clarence Shangraw and Edward Von der Porten gathered and analyzed 708 sherds from a total of 235 identified vessels (Aker and Von der Porten 2010). From San Francisco's Asian Art Museum, Shangraw separated the sherds by paste and style. Von der Porten separated the sherds by waterworn versus non-waterworn. They firmly identified 158 of Cermeño's and 77 of Drake's bowls, cups, plates, and vases (Aker and Von der Porten 2010). Shangraw and Von der Porten (1981) determined that 33 percent of the porcelains were abandoned by Francis Drake in 1579 when he offloaded his cargo to careen his ship, and 67 percent of the porcelains were lost in the wreck of Sebastián Rodríguez Cermeño's *San Agustín* in 1595.

The National Park Service employed its Submerged Cultural Resources Unit to conduct a detailed operation in 1997, one which consisted of a second stage reconnaissance that incorporated limited diving and proving (Uber 1997). In 1994, the DNG proposed to the National Park Service (NPS) that the Drake and Cermeño sites be established as a National Historic Landmark (NHL). In 2011, the proposal was heard by the NHL committee and in early 2012 it was approved by the NPS Advisory Committee. In late 2012, the site was made official by Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar. In 2013, Marco Meniketti analyzed the porcelains using x-ray fluorescence and found two distinct groups of sherds attributable to Drake and Cermeño (Meniketti 2013).

This overview highlights some of the archaeology work done at Point Reyes over the past 112 years, onshore and offshore, and its importance in California history. The early explorers established our first European contacts. They set the stage for inquiry and study for twentieth century minds.

Further archaeological opportunities exist at Point Reyes. The *San Agustín* wreck lies on the floor of Drakes Bay, but her exact location remains unknown. Remnants of Tello's bark have not been found.

Considering that the real Plate of Brass has yet to be discovered, its disposition and status remain a mystery. Our hope is that twenty-first century researchers make even more exciting discoveries.

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