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Martyrs of Florida

Luis Geronimo de Ore

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Early Visions of Florida

Poetry • Stories • Chronicles from an American Borderland

Luis Geronimo de Ore, Martyrs of Florida

In late 1597, five Franciscan friars were murdered and all missions burned to the ground near present day St. Catherines Island. The native war party allegedly hailed from the Guale chiefdom in that territory and was led by heir to the Guale paramount chieftancy, don Juan or Juanillo. Fray Pedro de Corpa of Tolomato had forbidden Juanillo from the practice of polygamy, something that was not uncommon to native chiefdoms before the missions had arrived. In response, the violence was blamed entirely on his rejection of the friar's request and interpreted as a rejection of Spanish intervention overall. Known from then on as "Juanillo's Revolt," the uprising killed hundreds, and is considered a precursor for future native violence. Further scholarship is needed to understand the events of 1597, including close examination of primary documents used in previous studies of the revolt.

Prolific evangelical author, Luis Geronimo de Oré recounted the uprising in Martyrs of Florida (ca. 1619). By 1595, Oré had already authored four volumes on evangelical work in the Andes. A skilled linguist, those works included a dictionary and guide to Quechua and Aymara languages. In 1611, Oré was tasked with recruiting friars for Franciscan missions in la Florida. After many delays Oré arrived in Florida in 1614 to inspect missions there but he soon left for Cuba. In 1616, he returned to Florida again and began gathering information for his next account. Interviewing witnesses, religious and otherwise, Oré also probably spoke with natives (as he had in Peru) but does not name anyone. In writing this text, Oré is actively canonizing the sacrifices of the friars, highlighting the importance of continuing the Franciscan missions. In doing so, he must portray the martyrs in opposition to the natives or "infidels," to secure the proper conclusion for his audience of evangelicals.

His 1619 account relies heavily on the captivity narrative of Florida Franciscan mission Fray Francisco de Ávila. The only friar left alive after the revolt, the narrative takes place during Ávila's ten-month imprisonment in Florida's interior pueblo of Tulufina, home to the Salchiche chiefdom. Bearing the author's motives in mind, this text can aide in understanding relationships between natives during the mission period and shed light on inter-chiefdom dynamics. Fray Ávila's original captivity narrative has since disappeared and was never found.

This text, originally translated by Maynard Geiger in 1937, was translated in corrected form in 2011 by Michael J. Francis.

Edited by Arielle Stevenson, University of South Florida St. Petersburg

Further Reading

Blair, Elliot H. and David Hurst Thomas. "The Guale Uprising of 1597: An Archeological Perspective from Mission Santa Catalina de Guale (Georgia)." *Indigenous Landscapes and Spanish Missions*. ed. Lee M. Panich and Tsim D. Schneider. Tucson: U Arizona Press, 2014. 25-41.

Mathers, Clay, Jeffrey Mitchem, and Charles M. Haecker. *Native and Spanish New Worlds: Sixteenth-Century Entradas in the American Southwest and Southeast*. Tucson: U Arizona Press, 2013.

Milanich, Jerald T. *Laboring in the Fields of the Lord: Spanish Missions and Southeastern Indians*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999.

Francis, Michael J. and Kathleen M. Kole. *Murder and Martyrdom in Spanish Florida: Don Juan and the Guale Uprising of 1597*. New York: American Museum of Natural History, 2011.

In the year 1597, two years after the first friars arrived in Guale territory, the Indians of that providence launched a rebellion. Incited by the devil, who opposes all good works, the Indians seized upon a certain incident to justify their uprising. One of the fathers would not permit a young Indian man, who was a baptized Christian and heir to the Guale chieftaincy, to have more than the one wife with whom he was married.^[1] The revolt occurred because the priest reprimanded the young man, demanding that since he was a Christian, he should behave as a Christian, and not like an infidel: and therefore, in accordance with Christian law, he should not have more than one wife, she being the one with whom he was already married.

This *cacique* and two other moral corrupt Indians who, like him, were prone to this same indecent vice, ventured into the interior among the Indian infidels; they did so without saying a word and without requesting permission as they had done in previous occasions). After a few days they returned one night with a great multitude of Indian infidels, their bodies painted and smeared with a red dye [*bija colorado*],^[2] and their heads adorned with feathers; for them, this regalia is a sign of their cruelties, marking their number of kills.

On that night they arrived neither the priest nor anyone else in the village had heard a sound; and then in the morning, on entering the priest's house, the Indians found him in prayer. With no warning, they murdered the priest with a stone hatchet, which they called a *macana* or *champi* in

the language of the Incas of Cuzco. This occurred in Tolomato, the region's principal village, and the friar they murdered was named Fray Pedro de Corpa.

With the friar dead, the Indians began [once again] to exchange women, and to engage in their lascivious and immoral practices. They ordered that the head of the dead friar be placed on a pike and erected by the boat launch beside the river. And they ordered that two Indians carry the priest's body into the woods and hide it so the Christians would not find it. That is why Fray Corpa's body has never been found.[3]

Later, the same Indians sent notice to the nearby island of Guale, ordering that the *cacique* there kill the two friars in his village. When the *cacique* learned of this, he was much aggrieved, and did not want to comply with the order. Therefore, he informed the lay brother [Fray Antonio de Badajoz], who served as interpreter of what was happening; he advised Fray Badajoz that both he and the other friar, Father Commissary [Miguel de Auñón], should flee at once to the island of San Pedro [Cumberland Id.]. The *cacique* added that he would provide them with a boat, as well as people to guide them to San Pedro, even if such assistance risked of his own life. However, the lay brother refused to believe him, and therefore chose not to advise Fray Miguel de Auñón. The *cacique* himself did not dare tell Fray Auñón either, both on account of his own shame, and because of the profound love he felt for the friar.

On the following day the *cacique* once again warned Fray Badajoz; still unable to fathom such a thing, the lay brother responded just as he did the first time. On the third day, the Indian war party arrived, and they informed the *cacique* that they had come to make certain that he killed the friars; if he refused to comply, they were going to kill him as well. The *cacique* replied that he was not about to murder the two friars; instead, he offered the Indian warriors all his possessions if they agreed to let the friars go free and then conceal the act. But the Indians responded that they had come to kill the two friars, and that they intended to carry out the task. The *cacique* then went to Fray Miguel, with tears in his eyes told him what was happening, and that he could do nothing to save them; he added that he and his subjects would go into the woods to weep for the two friars, as though they were their very own brothers.

On seeing what was unfolding, Fray Miguel and his companion began to pray in preparation for the house of their deaths. Fray Miguel said Mass, and then spent more than four hours in prayer. Then, the Indians sacked the friars' residence; they reached the lay brother and delivered a blow with the stone hatchet, or *macana*, from which he soon died. However, they did not dare approach Fray Miguel because of the respect they held for him; that is, until an Indian infidel approached Fray Miguel from behind and delivered another very heavy blow, which spilled the friar's brains.

A few days later, this same Indian infidel fell into deep despair; and with the string from his bow he hanged himself from a holm-oak tree. This caused great wonder among the Indians. The Christian Indians then buried the body [of Fray Auñón] at the foot of a very high cross, which the friar himself had erected. And six years later, when the Spaniards returned to search for his bones, they found them at the foot of the cross, just as the Indians had told them.[4]

The Indian [war party] then arrived at the nearby pueblo of Tupiqui, where Fray Blas Rodríguez resided. There, they told him: "We have come to kill you and you have no other alternative but to

die.” The priest begged them to allow him to say Mass first, and that afterwards they could do with him as they pleased. He said Mass and all the Christian women as well as some men, came to weep with him. Rodríguez then distributed his few personal possessions among them. Four hours after saying Mass, Rodríguez attempted to reason with his children, whom he had baptized and instructed in God’s law; and recognizing that they had rebelled against him, he said to them: “My children, I do not fear death, for the death of the body is inevitable; even if you are not the instrument of my death, death will certainly come. Each hour we await is arrival. In the end, we are all going to die. What weighs on my conscience is the harm you have done yourselves, and that the devil has been able to manipulate you to commit such a grave offense against your God and Creator. It also pains me that you are so ungrateful for all the work that I and the other fathers have done for you to show you the path to heaven.” With tears in his eyes, he said to them: “Look children, you still have time to cast aside this evil plot; Our Lord God is most merciful and He will forgive you.”

However, those sacrilegious people paid no attention to his council or to his tears; rather, they seized all the church relics and vestments as well as everything else the father had in his cell. Owing to his pleas and petitions, they held him alive for two days.^[5] During that time, Rodríguez prepared for his death with the greatest disposition and care possible, like a good friar and a good Christian.

When the two days passed, they struck Rodríguez with a heavy blow from a stone hatchet, which spilled his brains. And they threw his body to the vultures because the Christian Indians did not dare bury him. However, the vultures would not even approach the corpse. A dog walked toward the dead friar, but as soon as it reached Rodríguez’s body, the dog suddenly dropped dead, an even that was witnessed by all. An old Christian man secretly took the body and buried it in the woods. And because this good old man has since passed away we do not know the whereabouts of the friar’s bones.

Fray Ávila was at his mission, which was where the Indians went next, with every intention to kill him. They arrived late at night; and since they found him already retired for the evening, they knocked at the door, feigning to deliver a letter from his prelate. However, because he was already filled with fear after learning that they had murdered Fray Corpa, Ávila responded that they should deliver the letter to him in the morning. But the Indians insisted that he open the door; again, he answered that the hour was late and that he would not open the door until morning. Ávila then bid them to go with God, for he was already in bed.

At that, the Indians proceeded to try to force the door open, which they managed to accomplish. Finding himself in imminent danger, the friar hid behind the door. The Indians then burst into the room to plunder the friar’s meager possessions. Because the room was dark and Indians distracted by their own greed, they did not see the friar, who managed to escape the Indians’ fury and hid in some reeds. Nevertheless, they searched for him carefully, and soon found him because he could be seen under the light of the moon. They then shot Fray Ávila with three arrows and left him for dead. One of the arrows pieced through his right hand, another struck him in the shoulder, which the third went through his thigh. An Indian then approached Ávila in order to steal his habit; feigning charity, he said to Ávila, “hand over that habit, which is covered in blood, and I will have it washed for you.”

The Indian then removed Ávila's habit and donned it himself, leaving the friar completely naked. Yet in spite of this, this particular Indian proved helpful; he was a young chief, and as such, he spared Ávila from the fury of the others. And therefore, the Indians did not kill the friar; instead, the young chief persuaded the others that they should take Ávila with them in order to subject him to a far more cruel death, or else hold him captive so that he serve them, especially since they were already willing to leave him for dead among the reeds. They then bound his arms, and the Indian guards who carried him, they took the captive to the villages of the infidels.

It is truly a remarkable thing to consider all that this friar suffered in the year of his captivity among those barbarians. There he was, naked, in a land where the winter is as harsh as that of Madrid, with no one to heal his wounds and no cloth for bandages to dress or bind them. Miraculously or mercifully, it was God who healed his injuries. After that happened, the Indians decided to burn the friar; they tied him to a wooden pole, covered in resin and surrounded with a great quantity of twigs and sticks which they had gathered for that purpose. With Ávila in this sorrowful situation, an Indian woman came forth and freed the friar from the pillar; Spanish soldiers [in St. Augustine] were holding her own son hostage, and thus she declared: "I must have this man in place of my son, for his is to have my son returned to me; if I spare him from death the governor will not order my son to be killed." With that Fray Ávila was spared death, after which he enjoyed somewhat more freedom.

Nevertheless, Fray Ávila suffered harsh persecution at the hands of the young boys, who on many occasions would leave him near death, or would choke him; they did this because Ávila had on occasions whipped the boys when he was teaching them the Christian doctrine and how to read. The Indians also made him serve as a slave in the council house; he suffered great hunger, but wherever he went, the Indians did give him something to eat because he asked for it for the love of God. They forced him to carry wood on his shoulders and they ordered him to protect their flocks and their maize fields from the ravens (jackdaws)^[6] that pilfered them.

This is but a brief eulogy of the deaths and the martyrdom of four friars and the great sufferings of Fray Ávila; therefore, I have deemed it well to include the very narrative of Fray Ávila himself, which he wrote in his own hand before he returned to Spain, and which remained in the hands of Fray Marrón. Following [Fray Marrón's] death, the account was kept in the archives at the Franciscan convent in Havana.^[7] After a brief discussion of the deaths of his companions, the narrative records the story of Fray Ávila's imprisonment and captivity, recounting his terrible sufferings in great detail.

[1] Oré is referring to Tolomato's heir don Juan or don Juanillo.

[2] Red dye, produced from the seeds of a small tree in the bixáceas family.

[3] The Spanish never found Fray Corpa's body, nor did they find his skull on a pike beside the river. Therefore, Oré's version of Corpa's murder has to be viewed with caution, as no primary documents corroborate this.

[4] Spanish discovered remains of both friars in early November of 1597 and not six years after the friars were killed. Buried in shallow graves, the Spanish marked them in order to return for exhumation later.

[5] Oré's account is the only primary source offering such details on Father Rodríguez's death. No other corroborations are available.

[6] A passerine bird in the crow family found mostly in Europe. In Florida, it would have more likely been a grackle or crow blackbird.

[7] Fray Ávila's original captivity narrative has never been located.