

Debunking the Myth: Jesuit Texts and History and Archaeology in Baja California

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Introduction

As archaeologists employing ethnohistorical sources to structure our investigations and inform our interpretations, we must routinely wear the hat of historiographer and literary critic in order to assess the applicability and usefulness of our documentary evidence. This involves placing both writer and audience within both their local and global contexts of intention, bias and understanding. What *new* texts from *old* texts we write are, in part, dependent upon the nature of these particular historical contexts that both expand and circumscribe our inquiries.

In this paper I will be presenting a historical analysis of the ethnohistoric literature that informs my own work. The Jesuit literature of Baja California presents a particularly interesting as well as ironic corpus of writings relating to the European colonization of the 1700 kilometer-long arid peninsula that remains, archaeologically, one of the least studied regions in North America. The remarkable features of this literature, particularly manifested in a rhetorical strategy that emphasizes detailed natural history and ethnological description, are shown to stem from various political, cosmological, and philosophical debates of the late eighteenth century. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of this literature for archaeological research in Baja California.

The Pre-Jesuit Period: European Discovery and Exploration

Placing the eighteenth-century Jesuit writings of Baja California in context necessitates a discussion of the European discovery and early exploration of the peninsula, and of the singular place of California in Western cosmology.

Hernán Cortés, some thirteen years after the Conquest, was responsible for the first European discovery and exploration of the peninsula. He had been attracted to explore the western coast of New Spain in order to chart new routes to the Indies and by reports of a place called *Cihuatlán* (Nauhatl for “land of women”). In 1532 he sent the first of what would be four expeditions following the northwest coast of New Spain. In 1533, mutineers from the second voyage made landfall on the southern part of the peninsula at what is now the Bay of La Paz. Fortún Ximénez and the shore party were killed by the local *Pericúes* during an attempt to steal pearls but the survivors on board the *Concepción* would bring back the news to Cortés of their discovery and the potential for new lands and fabulous wealth. Heading the third voyage, the Conquistador himself would land at the Bahía de La Paz in May of 1535 with

a fleet of three ships and found the first European colony of Santa Cruz. This first settlement would be abandoned the following year for lack of supplies (Mathes 1989:410).

From the moment of its discovery in the early sixteenth-century Spain had been interested in securing Baja California because of its pearl oyster beds and reports of gold; but no less importantly due to its strategic position between New Spain and the Philippines and the East. The water at Cabo San Lucas was often the first replenishment after six or seven months at sea (Burrus 1984:47). Additionally, Spain was interested in controlling English and Dutch pirates operating from the peninsula's coves and bays who preyed on the Manila Galleon. But however great was Spain's recognition of the need to colonize the peninsula, its overextended empire and fiscal crises could not support a massive settlement scheme. For the next century and a half after its discovery, a series of underfunded and ill-equipped Crown-sponsored and private attempts to colonize the peninsula met with dismal failure. Permanent European settlement on the peninsula would not take place until the arrival of the Jesuits in 1697. In this respect, the history of the colonization of Baja California is one of sporadic contact rather than rapid European settlement after its initial discovery (Mathes 1989:409).

The Pre-Jesuit Period: California in Western Cosmology

The essential utopian image of California as a fantastical land of myriad natural wonders and limitless abundance is not a recent preconception; such a view dates back to the sixteenth century. The name comes from the widely popular sixteenth-century Spanish novel *Las Sergas del Virtuoso Caballero Esplandián, Hijo de Amadís de Gaula* written by Garcí Ordoñez de Montalvo and published in 1510 in Seville (Ordoñez de Montalvo 1857). In it Ordoñez describes a mythical island inhabited by Amazons and ruled by their queen, Calafia; hence California. The actual naming of California can not be attributed to a single person but the name had begun to appear in reports and maps by the early 1540's. *Las Sergas de Esplandián* was a celebrated novel and was surely known to Cortés himself or to one or more of his captains (León-Portilla 1989:38).

The cartographic history of California or how California was rendered in maps is one of the most fascinating struggles between the real and the imagined landscape in Western cosmology. When one looks at the cartographic history of California the most salient feature is the debate over whether California was an island or a peninsula (Mathes 1985). As early as the expeditions of Ulloa in 1539 and Alarcón in 1540 the peninsularity of California had been clearly established (León-Portilla 1989:167). Yet beginning in the early seventeenth century, the original literary image of California as an island recurs with increasing frequency, particularly in those maps published in northern Europe. Over one hundred maps representing California as an island were published from 1625 to as late as 1770 (Toole 1964).

The source of this error has been traced to a map produced on the Vizcaino voyage of 1602 that subsequently fell into English hands (Burrus 1984:50). But in order to understand the how quickly and widely the island rendering was accepted, even in Spain, it is important to take into account certain concerns of the European geographical imagination. From the beginning Europe had been searching for an island. Columbus had originally been looking for the fabled island of *Cipango* (Japan), first described by Marco Polo. The intervening

continents of the Americas, the New World, were an unexpected and for many an unsatisfactory discovery, a barrier impeding access to the real riches of the Indies. Witness the myriad attempts over the succeeding centuries to find the elusive “Northwest passage” to Asia. The quest for *Cipango* would not die but simply converge with the legends of the island of Queen Calafia of *Las Sergas de Esplandián* and Cortés’ *Cihuatlán*. Thus, an island to the “right hand of the Indies” was already well entrenched in the Western imagination even before its actual discovery (Mathes 1989:409). Columbus had failed to find *Cipango* but the expectation and hope of finding an island would persist in Western cosmology for the next two hundred and fifty years. The peninsularity of Baja California would not again be demonstrated until the Jesuit Eusebio Kino’s maps were published in 1705, and even then would not be universally accepted until the early nineteenth century (Burrus 1984:51).

The Jesuit Experience: 1697–1768

For over a century and a half attempts to colonize the peninsula had met with dismal failure. It was only with the arrival of the Jesuits to the peninsula that permanent Spanish occupation would take hold. Operating from their base on the Sinaloa mainland, the first attempt was made at La Paz in April 1683 by Admiral Atondo y Antillón and the Italian Jesuit father Eusebio Francisco Kino, who would become famous for his later explorations of Sonora and southern Arizona. This site would be abandoned the same August due the endemic warfare between the local *Guaycura* and *Pericú*, clearly exacerbated by the European presence, and into which the Spanish found themselves increasingly drawn. A second attempt the following October was made further north in *Cochimí* territory at San Bruno but in May of 1685 this would also be abandoned due to the problems of supply from across the Gulf of California. Finally, in 1697, still further north on the Gulf coast, the first permanent European settlement of Nuestra Señora de Loreto was established by the Jesuit Fathers Juan María Salvatierra, Francisco María Piccolo and Juan de Ugarte (Crosby 1994:25–26; Mathes 1989:417–419).

By the time of their expulsion in 1768, the Jesuits would establish sixteen more missions in Baja California stretching from San José del Cabo in the South to Santa María de Los Angeles in the North (figure 1). In all, sixty-two Jesuits would work in Baja California. Sixteen died there (Burrus 1984:67–69). At arrival on the peninsula they ranged in age from eighteen to fifty-five, with the median age being thirty-three. The length of service in Baja California varied from two to twenty-nine years, the average service being a little over eleven years.¹

It is no exaggeration to say that the documentary legacy on Baja California left by the Jesuits in the form of diaries, correspondence, reports and books represents one of the largest and most important historical and ethnohistorical collections from the New World (Burrus 1984). It has often been remarked as unexpected and somewhat paradoxical that such a relatively small desert peninsula, sparsely populated and lacking in natural resources should possess such a corpus. In this regard, the noted Mexican historian Miguel León Portilla has remarked that “probably there are more historical documents relating to Baja California than there are Baja Californians (quoted in Mathes 1981:44).” But it is not only the size of the

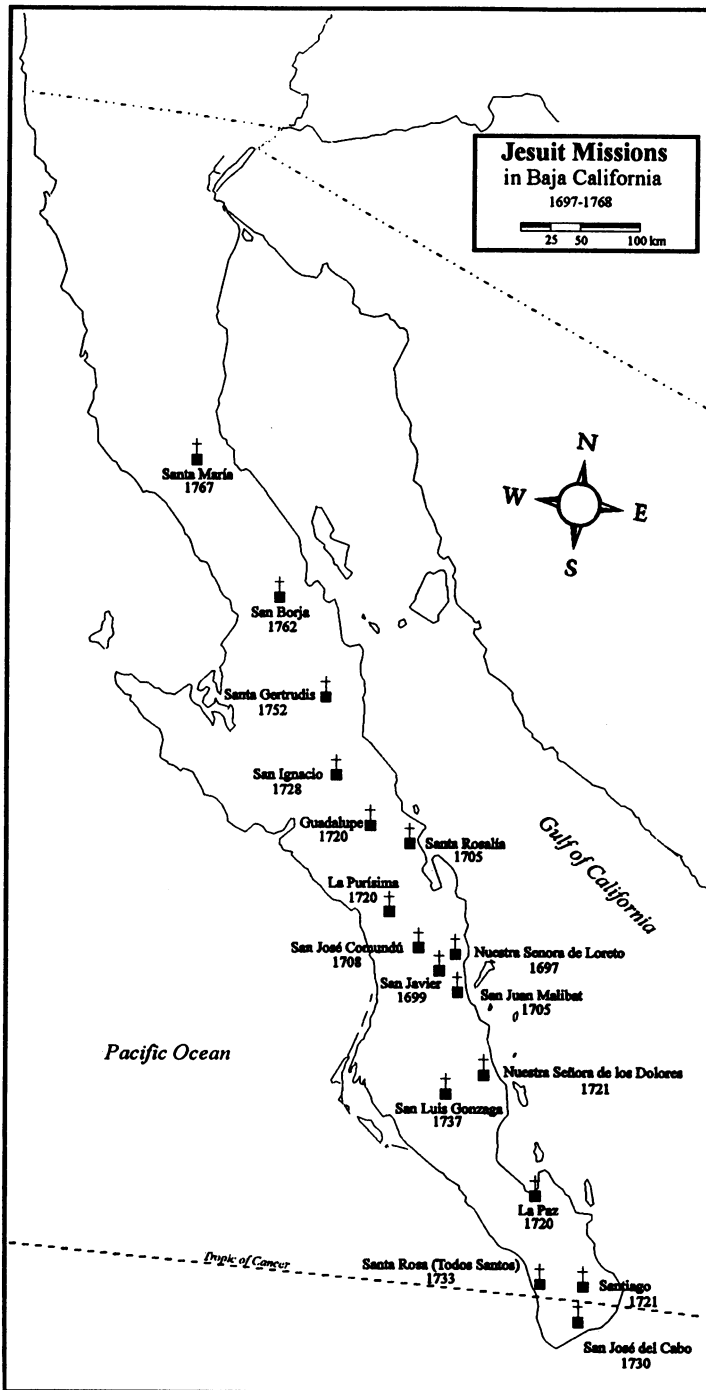


Figure 1

collection, but the richness and detail of natural historical and ethnological description that distinguishes the literature. Three of the major works that stand out are *Historia Natural y Crónica de la Antigua California* by Miguel del Barco, written during the 1770s (Barco 1988); *Noticias de la Península Americana de California* (Observations in Lower California) by Johann Jakob Baegert, first published in German in 1771 (Baegert 1942); and *Storia della California* (*Historia de la Antigua o Baja California*) by Francisco Xavier Clavijero, first published in Italian in 1789 (Clavijero 1990).² A listing of Barco's separate chapter headings gives some idea of the breadth of their coverage: animals; insects and reptiles; birds; regular trees; irregular trees; shrubs and grasses; wheat; agaves; fish; shellfish; minerals, salt and rocks; the diverse nations and languages of California; of the character and customs of the Californians and of their government in peace and war; of the ancient false religion of the Californians; of the *Cochimi* language (Barco 1988:479–480).

Why should there be such a body of work for Baja California? In part, the distinctiveness of the Jesuit literature stems from the distinctiveness of the Society of Jesus and of the Jesuit missionaries who served in California. Among the missionary orders the Society of Jesus had been both renowned for its system of colleges and feared for its tradition of independent scholarship (Baegert 1986; Crosby 1994:6–8). Of the missionaries, one of the most remarkable features is the uncommon background and international character of the Jesuits who would live, work and record their experiences in California. As a rule they were university trained from families of means. They came from Spain, Mexico, Honduras, Alsace, Croatia, Germany, Moravia, Italy, Bohemia, Austria, and Scotland. W. Michael Mathes remarks that “subsequent missionary activity in the Californias would be restricted to native subjects of the Spanish Crown of lesser intellectual stature and thus more easily subjected to civil jurisdiction (1989:421).”

Also noteworthy is the degree of power and autonomy granted to the Jesuits in the California mission. The unique financial and political arrangements underpinning the Jesuit mission in Baja California were unlike those of any other mission province in the New World. To begin with, they operated without royal sponsorship—all claims to funds from the royal treasury were expressly relinquished as a proviso of the Jesuits' authorization. Whereas previously Jesuit missionaries had received an annual royal stipend of 300 to 350 pesos, nearly all of the funds required for establishing and maintaining the peninsular missions and attached garrisons came from heavily solicited private donations to what became known as the Pious Fund (Burrus 1984:56; Crosby 1994:18–20). Much of the Jesuit literature, in which the often exaggerated progress of the mission enterprise was documented, was clearly motivated by the need to constantly solicit private funds and sponsors.

The authorization for the Jesuit enterprise was highly unusual in itself in that it was granted not through Royal Decree, as was customary, but rather by a special Authorization of the Viceroy of New Spain. This sole document would govern the entire Jesuit enterprise in Baja California over its seventy-year duration and would extend a heretofore unheard of degree of power and autonomy to the Jesuits—in essence granting the establishment of a theocratic colony. Whereas the success of Spanish colonization elsewhere had relied upon the effective interplay of mission, fort, and town, the colonization of the peninsula would be carried out by the religious body to the exclusion of the military and civil institutions (Burrus 1984:56). They had full control over the small protective garrisons and over the entrance of

Europeans to the peninsula. With rare exception, secular settlement was suppressed. Those non-clerical Europeans on the peninsula consisted of extremely small contingents of soldiers attached to the missions, and their immediate families, who were under the authority of the Jesuit superior.³ For example, at the time of Father Jacob Baegert's arrival in 1751 there were only sixty-two soldiers stationed on the peninsula (Baegert 1952:xviii). This was an uncommonly lopsided secular/religious power arrangement in comparison to mission provinces in the rest of the hemisphere; and within the Californias would be in sharp distinction to the later mission systems of the Franciscans and Dominicans (Mathes 1989:421).

Notwithstanding these factors, an analysis of the wider context in which these accounts were written more fully explains the prodigious output, the attention to detail, as well as the tone of the Jesuit writings. In 1767, by order of the Bourbon King Charles III, the Society of Jesus was expelled from all Spanish domains (Bangert 1986:386). The Jesuits in California would not hear of this until the following year. While many returned to the countries of their birth, the Spanish and Mexican missionaries were forced to live out their lives in exile in Italy under the protection of the Pope (Leon-Portilla 1988:xxix). The Europe they returned to was questioning not only Spanish colonial policy in the Americas and, specifically, the mission efforts of the Jesuits and other orders, but also more generally the place of the New World *vis a vis* the Old World. This was the famous debate of the *philosophes*, with the image of Rousseau's Noble Savage pitted against the exaggerated and denigrating portraits painted by de Pauw and Buffon regarding the relative inferiority of the natives, animals, plants, and climate of the New World (Keen 1990).

As was discussed earlier, a fascination with California had long been a feature of Western consciousness. In 1757, a work was published in Madrid that would freshly interject California into the ongoing *philosophe* debates. The three-volume *Noticia de la California*, attributed to the Jesuit father Miguel Venegas, was based on an official Jesuit report prepared some eighteen years before. The work would be substantially revised prior to publication by another Jesuit, Andrés Marcos Burriel (Aschmann 1966:10–11; Barco 1988). Neither Venegas nor Burriel had ever set foot in California and not surprisingly the work contains many errors and omissions of major and minor proportions. Exaggeration and falsehood would multiply in the very loose, but hugely popular, English, French and German translations of the Venegas volumes that appeared soon after the original (Baegert 1952:5–6).

It is no coincidence that all three major works cited above—those of Clavijero, Barco and Baegert—were written shortly after the Jesuit expulsion from New Spain. Clearly they were deeply disturbed by the rampant misinformation and fantastic ideas regarding California that they encountered upon returning to Europe. All three authors in their introductions state this as the principal reason for writing their works; that is, that it was their scholarly duty to present a true description of California based on the first hand experience of the Europeans who had spent not a small part of their lives there. Clavijero asks:

What should one say, for example, of Paw [sic], Robertson and other Europeans, who paint California in colors that don't become it, daring to deny the sincere description of those who, having spent so many years there, observed it so carefully?(Clavijero 1990:2; translation mine).

Equally disturbing to the Jesuits as were the popular misconceptions about California were the specific accusations regarding Jesuit conduct on the peninsula. They felt that their ignominious removal from the New World had been an outrageous and unfair act and clearly feared that history would not justly record their work in the Americas. Thus, they hoped that through their writings they simultaneously might clear the name of their order and provide a true and lasting record of their role in California. In this regard, both Clavijero and Baegert dedicate sections of their books to directly answering their accusers; Baegert in a chapter entitled "Some Questions Directed to Protestants and Particularly to Protestant Ministers" (Baegert 1952:156).

In summary, the Jesuit agenda was simultaneously corrective, political, and nostalgic. Through their writings the Jesuits hoped to correct the exaggerations and debunk the popular mythology about California, and in the same stroke of the pen defend and memorialize their work in California. In order to accomplish these goals, the post-expulsion Jesuits would employ the rhetorical strategy of encyclopedic description of the landscape, flora, fauna, and of the aboriginal inhabitants of the peninsula. This exhaustive natural historical and ethnological description was an emerging concern of Enlightenment scholarship—which in many respects the Jesuits clearly considered themselves a part of. Such description, by sheer volume of detail, further served to establish the authors' authority. The style was purposely plain, at times Spartan. As Clavijero remarked, the "truth is more beautiful when naked (quoted in Keen 1990:293)." Their writings, therefore, can be seen as part of a deliberate, realist strategy to move California in Western cosmology from the realm of the mythological and fantastic to that of the real and the ordinary.

Of the three, it is the language of Baegert that departs from the relatively neutral tone of his peers, Barco and Clavijero (Leon-Portilla in Barco 1988:xl). Alternatively embracing Rousseau on the one hand and de Pauw on the other, his work is characterized at times by a bitter pessimism and denigration of his subject matter, as in when he writes:

[e]verything concerning California is of such little importance that it is hardly worth the trouble to take a pen and write about it. Of poor shrubs, useless thorn bushes and bare rocks, of piles of stone and sand without water and wood, of a handful of people who, besides their physical shape and ability to think, have nothing to distinguish them from animals, what shall or what can I report?(Baegert 1952:5).

Yet regardless of the stylistic differences between these works, their combined effect was to paint a particularly desolate and disconsolate image of California as compared to the prevailing picture in the European imagination. At the same time, by emphasizing the barrenness of the peninsula and "material poverty" and "primitiveness" of the native Californians, the Jesuits hoped to valorize their efforts in California and illustrate for their declaimers just how difficult their task had been.

Archaeology and History in Baja California

I have attempted to show how particular forces at work in the eighteenth century combined to produce a body of writings that in many respects we, as anthropologists and historians, are fortunate to be working with; especially by comparison to the surviving literature from Alta California. For example, in a recent project investigating the appearance of a monumental painted mural tradition in the Sierra de San Francisco, information gleaned from regional ethnohistory, overwhelmingly Jesuit accounts, is being employed in the development of models related to prehistoric aboriginal social structure, demography, resource procurement, and mobility (Gutiérrez and Hyland 1994).

While certainly useful as a source for general and direct historic analogy, it is also recognized as an extremely problematic literature. The acculturative impacts experienced by the indigenous groups as a result of both pre-Jesuit contact and the effects of the Jesuit mission system itself can not be underestimated. As some indication of the degree of pre-Jesuit contact, in the intervening 164 years between the first sighting in 1533 and 1697, the year of the establishment of the first permanent settlement at Loreto, the peninsula was visited by nineteen documented expeditions spending in all about seven years in areas occupied by the indigenous *Cochimi*, *Guaycura*, and *Pericú*. By the beginning of the Jesuit period most peninsular groups would have been familiar to a greater or lesser extent with European language, customs and material culture (Mathes 1981:44–45; 1989:409, 419–420).

Additionally, we must figure in the demographic and social devastation caused by the introduction of European diseases. For the pre-Jesuit period it is difficult to estimate the extent of disease impact. For the Jesuit period, however, it is impossible to ignore the fact that the Jesuit writings record the horrifically rapid disappearance of entire language groups due to a series of virulent epidemics that took place during the eighteenth century. It has been conservatively estimated that in the scant seventy-one years between the Jesuit arrival in 1697 and their exit in 1768 the number of indigenous Baja Californians fell precipitously from 41,500 to 7,149 (Cook 1937:18).

It is clear then, as might be argued for all ethnohistoric documentary sources, that the Jesuit literature from Baja California shares the principal quality of being not the ethnohistory of contact but rather the ethnohistory of a circumstance of protracted acculturation. Recognizing this, I would contend that documentary sources attain not only their full hermeneutic power, but their full political significance, only when referenced back to their particular historical conjunctions of time, place and person and when examined as historical process. Within the discourse of archaeological interpretation, this involves the dialectic between historical document and archaeological data. It is precisely this dialectic between source and subject that creates the critical space or rupture for addressing issues of inequality, power and resistance. In this vein I briefly present one interesting example of the way the Jesuit sources and archaeological investigation could be integrated to further explore and understand processes of accommodation to, as well as the long-lived resistance of, indigenous patterns of mobility and settlement.

The Jesuits had hoped to create self-sufficient agricultural settlements at each mission capable of supporting permanent year round occupation. They quickly realized, however, that at the majority of the missions this would prove an impossible goal due to the extremely limited areas on the peninsula suitable for agriculture. Baegert relates that:

[o]nly four of all the missions, and small ones at that, were able to clothe and support all of their parishioners and therefore keep them in the mission throughout the year. In all the others, the natives were divided into three or four groups, and each in turn had to come to the mission once a month. There they had to encamp for a whole week. After the week had passed, the natives returned to their native land, some three, others six, others fifteen and twenty hours from the mission (1952:120–121).

Reluctantly, the Jesuits were forced to allow the continuation of indigenous modes of subsistence and mobility. Moreover, we see that the indigenous procurement ranges were so extensive that in order to adequately administer the populations within their jurisdictions, the Jesuits would establish a system of far-flung outstations, or *visitas*, where the cleric would go to perform periodic masses, baptisms and other services (Clavijero 1990:161,164; Crosby 1994:197–200).⁴ This was especially the case for the northern missions in the more arid, central peninsula. On the basis of census figures collected in 1755, only thirteen percent of the indigenous population attached to the four northernmost missions could be considered as permanent residents at the missions, the remainder living in their home ranges.⁵ Recent archaeological research in the jurisdiction of mission San Ignacio Kadakaaman has revealed the pattern of mission-period settlement and mobility as described in the Jesuit literature (Gutiérrez and Hyland 1994). Dozens of sites dating to the mission period, as evidenced by the presence of mission ceramics and other European materials, have been recorded; including roads connecting San Ignacio to distant *visitas* as well as an unrecorded *visita*. Ironically, rather than see a dramatic and significant sedentarization of the indigenous population, it is the Jesuit system that would be forced to accommodate to, and in many ways adopt, the indigenous pattern of mobility and settlement in arid Baja California.

Conclusions

The critical examination of the context of production of ethnohistoric texts, in this case a series of texts pertaining to Baja California, is a crucial step in making the far from obvious, and often problematical, theoretical movement from documentary source to documentary evidence. In this paper, the defining aspects of the Jesuit literature—its timing, emphasis and tone—have been examined as a function of its particular social and political contexts of production during the eighteenth century. It has been shown to be a product of many factors; from the educational background of the authors and the Jesuit scholarly tradition, to the politics of the Jesuit expulsion and the place of California in a changing Western cosmology and its insertion into Enlightenment debates on the New World.

But what of the relation between Jesuit literature and archaeology? As with all documentary sources, it is flawed and deficient. It can not be taken as the ethnohistory of contact; but it is the ethnohistory of acculturation and therein lays its greatest potential. It is

through the dialectical working of the Jesuit sources and archaeological investigation, of the written and the wrought, that we will be able to write the new and necessary histories of the colonial experience in Baja California, examining both the processes of European domination and accommodation *and* indigenous resistance in the face of tragic cultural and demographic devastation.

Notes

- 1 These statistics were compiled from data contained in Decorme, *La obra de los jesuitas mexicanos durante la época colonial, 1572-1767 (Compendio histórico)* (1941).
- 2 It is important to point out that Clavijero never himself served in California. Already an eminently recognized Enlightenment scholar at the time of the Jesuit expulsion not only in New Spain but in Europe as well, Clavijero based his oeuvre on the assiduous study of Jesuit letters and documents as well as through correspondence and direct interviewing of Jesuit veterans of California exiled in Italy. Apart from the major works cited in the text, the following literature counts among the most important of the eighteenth-century Jesuit sources: Linck (1966), Kino (1964), Piccolo (1962), Salvatierra (1971), Taraval (1931) and Tirsch (1972).
- 3 At the time of Jacob Baegert's arrival in 1751 there were sixty-two soldiers stationed on the peninsula (Baegert, 1952:xviii).
- 4 A *visita* was a hinterland visiting station dependent to the main mission, or *cabecera*. The local bands, or *rancherías*, attached to a particular *visita* were known as the *pueblo de visita*.
- 5 This figure was calculated from data presented in Río (1984:141).

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