EATING ONION TACOS IN ICHISI: A CROSS-CULTURAL FOOD ENCOUNTER IN PROTOHISTORIC GEORGIA

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INTRODUCTION
Examinations of the intersection of anthropological archaeology and foodways have grown in recent years into a nearly sub-disciplinary status. Like many foci in anthropological research, we might ascribe the rise of the attention given to foodways to trends observed in broader Western popular culture over the past few decades. For example, “foodies” has been part of the American lexicon since at least the early 1980s (Barr and Levy 1985), and the Food Network has been very popular since its launch in 1993. From the new “Food Studies” series proffered by AltaMira Press to the archaeological explorations of food and identity undertaken by participants in the 2006 Southern Illinois University Center for Archaeological Investigations Visiting Scholar symposium (Twiss 2007), food has taken its place amongst the likes of ceramics, lithics, architecture, and settlement patterns as a useful entry point to understanding human behavior.

There are obvious reasons why food and foodways make such powerful subjects in archaeological studies. As it is a biological necessity, food has been explored from the perspectives of nutrition and health (e.g. Wing and Brown 1979). The ability to control certain foods or food surpluses has been viewed as a tool of the sociopolitical elite and taken as a proxy for higher sociopolitical status (e.g. Ambrose et al. 2003; Rees 1997, 2002; Zeder and Arter 1996). Socio-cultural and political practices related to food, including degrees of incorporation of domesticated food sources, have recently been examined as indicators of social inequality (Cuellar 2013) and as responses to environmental changes (Scarry and Reitz 2005). Archaeologists have explored the connections between food preferences and social identities (Bush 2004; Dietler 2007; Scott 1996, 2007; Twiss 2007), as well as more mechanical/material studies of food preparation techniques (Myers 2006) and vessel attributes (Hally 1984, 1986). In recent years, considerable attention has been paid to the concept of feasting as evident in the archaeological record (Dietler and Hayden 2010).

Because of our species’ intimate relationship with food, research into food and foodways can provide a myriad of insights into cultural phenomenon, not to mention readily accessible and tangible examples to bring to our assorted professional and avocational audiences. As a case in point, I will examine a seemingly simple interaction that occurred in present-day Georgia between a group of native Southeasterners and sixteenth century Spanish soldiers. Through this very short account and some archaeological evidence, I will explore traditional foodways of the New and Old World at a critical juncture in history, and discuss how even the most humble of meals can be interpreted through a variety of analytical lenses.

EATING ONIONS IN ICHISI
In March 1540, Hernando de Soto and his army were in the province of Ichisi, located along
the Ocmulgee River below the present-day city of Macon (Hudson 1994b, 1997). Despite unknowingly having thousands of miles yet to traverse, the expedition was already facing considerable dissent in the ranks. Since landing in La Florida in May of the previous year, Soto and his men had met with considerable resistance and hardships (Hudson 1997). Promised and hoped-for riches were not forthcoming, and food was scarce (Hudson 1990). In fact, the Spanish rank-and-file only found themselves in Ichisi because of a ruse played upon them by their leader. Soto had left with a smaller contingency of cavalry from a village located somewhere in the province of Toa several days before, completing a rather arduous nighttime ride and covering some 34 miles (easily double their usual distance traveled per day) (Hudson 1997:157-158; Hudson 1990:83). As interpreted by Hudson (1997), Soto knew that his tired but suspicious soldiers would think he was after wealth they were not privy to and would follow him eventually. Regardless of whether we will ever know Soto’s exact chain of logic, this is indeed what came to pass, and the soldiers were reunited with their leader in the chiefdom of Ichisi.

The Soto expedition was large, numbering some 600 men of varying social status (noblemen to slaves), and a veritable wagon train of dogs, 240 horses, and a large herd of pigs (Hudson 1997). In spite of their numbers, they appeared to carry only minimal provisions and clearly intended to collect foodstuffs from the various peoples they would encounter (Hudson 1990). There were a number of instances documented in the accounts of the expedition of food crises determining where the Spaniards went (Hudson 1994a). Depending upon the subsistence strategies of the groups to share stores of food, or even the time of year in which they arrived in an area, the supplies they so desperately needed were often found wanting. In the previous chiefdom they found only abandoned villages and little to no food, so by the time they had traversed a section of the Ocmulgee River to the principal town of Ichisi they were once again in dire straits. Upon entering the town of Ichisi they were offered corn cakes and onions, the latter of which the Spanish accounts wax rather poetic. As Rangel (through Oviedo) reported it:

Este día salieron indios e indias a los rescebir: venian ellas vestidas de blanco, e parecian bien, e daban a los chriptianos tortillas de mahiz e unos manojes de cebolletas ni mas ni menos que las de Castilla, tan gordas como la cabeza del dedo pulgar e mas. E fue aqueste un manjar que les ayudó mucho de ahy adelante; y comíanlas con tortillas asadas y cocidas y crudas, y érales gran socorro, porque son muy buenas.

This day [March 29, 1540] Indian men and women came forth to receive them. The women came clothed in white, and they made a fine appearance, and they gave to the Christians tortillas of corn and some bundles of spring onions exactly like those of Castile, as far as the tip of the thumb and more. And that was a food which helped them much from then on; and they ate them with tortillas, roasted and stewed and raw, and it was a great aid to them because they are very good [Rangel 1993:271].

I know of no direct evidence of onions found in archaeological contexts, though this is very likely a result of how they would have been consumed (i.e., boiled or eaten raw) and the unlikelihood of opportunities for preservation (see Hally 1981). It is possible that these onions were, in fact, wild garlic (Allium canadense) (Peterson 1977). Wild garlic has an onion-like flavor and occurs naturally across the Southeast. It blooms from April to July, but grows throughout the year, including forming new bulbs in winter and spring. An interesting medicinal property of wild garlic is that, eaten raw, it can be used to treat or prevent scurvy, a disease resulting from vitamin C deficiency (Angier 1978). Rangel may not have known just how accurate he was in describing the food as “a great aid to them.”

The timing of Soto’s visit to Ichisi is also interesting to consider. The month of March likely brought with it a wide variety of wild plant foods, including the onions upon which the Spanish men feasted. But the spring season was also a time of considerable food stress, as the stores of the fall and winter were largely spent and the corn upon
which they relied so heavily had only recently been planted. According to Antoine LePage DuPratz, the historic Natchez began their calendar year in March with the first new moon:

The third moon is that of the Little Corn. This month is often awaited with impatience, their harvest of the great corn never sufficing to nourish them from one harvest to another [Swanton 1946:260].

In summer, green corn ceremonies or the “busk” marked several events, including the newly available food staples (Brown 2011; Swanton 1946). For the people of Ichisi to give the Spaniards cornmeal cakes and onions in March is a curious mixture of signals possibly indicating food security (having enough corn to present to the Spanish as cornmeal cakes) and food crisis (augmenting the staple food with a newly available and possibly abundant wild food). I would be remiss if I did not also see the potential of coercion on the part of the Spanish, who could have (and often did in their conquests in the New World) take staple foods by force. We may never know why the people of Ichisi chose to feed the Spaniards as they did. How each side viewed this food offering is of considerable interest, though, and might be interpreted through what we know about historic Southeastern Native Americans and sixteenth century Spanish officers and soldiers.

**Flatbreads in Spanish Hands**

To the Spanish, we can presume that the corn cakes given to them were used as any flatbread would have been before and since the sixteenth century: as a utensil or vehicle for meats, vegetables, and any other foodstuffs offered as the primary dish. We might assume that the Spaniards were at least familiar with leavened flatbread traditions due to exposure to Moorish traditions during their centuries of control over the Iberian Peninsula. Flatbreads are a part of nearly every meal in many cultures across northern Africa, the Middle East, and southwest-central Asia (Al-Dmoor 2012), to say nothing of the leavened and unleavened flatbreads of Jewish traditions. There is also a long and rich flatbread tradition across Mediterranean Europe, including the Spanish copas (Prichep 2012). Requiring only the basic ingredients of flour, water, yeast, and salt, it is no mystery that any Old World civilization with early access to domesticated grains, not to mention millennia of interactions across and around the Mediterranean Sea, all share this tradition. Therefore, when the Spanish arrived in Ichisi in 1540, the unleavened cakes of ground maize would have been a familiar form of food to them, if made of somewhat novel materials.

Our account from Georgia is not the only time the Spanish would encounter a grain or cereal-based carbohydrate as an accompaniment or offering with food in the New World. Although food historian Jeffrey Pilcher has been quoted as saying the taco was created in the eighteenth century (Friesen 2012), the many Mesoamerican regional traditions of wrapping meats, vegetables, insects, snails, small fishes, and even salt in unleavened flatbreads of ground corn predates his supposed first literary mention by many centuries. Twenty years prior to Soto’s encounter in Georgia, Bernal Diaz del Castillo documented a feast hosted in 1520 by Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortes in Coyoacan for his officers, complete with wine from a recently arrived ship from Spain and pigs brought from Cuba (Carrasco 2008). It has been presumed by some writers (e.g. Esparza 2011) that this feast also included corn flatbread supplied by the natives, which is not an unreasonable assumption given numerous descriptions of tortillas elsewhere in the narrative.

The Nahuatl-speaking Aztecs had a large focal vocabulary pertaining to what we might now call the corn tortilla, including tlaxcalli, a root of many nouns, verbs, and adjectives used to describe the production of tortillas by and for particular people under particular circumstances, and many specific types of tortillas (Karttunen 1992; Wired Humanities Projects n.d.). For instance, tlaxcalli is a flat bread made of corn meal, tlaxcalpacholi describes tortillas made of colored corn, neitlaxcalli is used to name thin and large white corn tortillas, and quauhtlaxqualli identifies thick and large white corn tortillas (Karttunen 1992; Wimmer n.d.). The word “taco” has been alternately interpreted
as a bastardization of *tlaxcalli* or merely the Spanish word for "small snack." A more interesting suggestion was brought to my attention by noted Spanish colonial ethnohistorian and archaeologist, John Worth (personal communication, April 2012). He notes, as others have, that alternate translations of the word "taco" include the nouns "plug" or "wadding to fill a hole," and the verbs "to tack" or "to plug a hole," apt descriptions for some of the heavier modern variations on this food available today. However, Worth suggests that "taco" may also be in reference to the specific wadding used in cannons of the sixteenth century. In many black powder firearms, gunpowder is placed in the barrel and followed by a patch or piece of cloth to hold and secure the shot, both of which are subsequently rammed down the barrel. Early European artillery utilized patches or plugs in breech-loaded pieces in the sixteenth century (Padfield 1974), although in slightly different ways. Padfield (1974) reports the post-firing sequence of a breech-loading piece like one recovered from Henry VIII's warship, the *Mary Rose*, which sank in 1545. First, the wedge holding the chamber in place would be hammered out and the chamber removed. Next, a piece of oakum, straw, or "junk" would be placed in the open breech end of the barrel. The shot would be placed upon this "wad," presumably to hold the shot in place while a refilled chamber was being prepared (see also Munday 1987). Arnold and Weddle (1978) note a different form of patch used in Spanish breech-loaders. Citing Vigon (1947), they note that the removable chambers would be filled three-fifths full with gunpowder, and another fifth with a wooded plug termed a *tapón* or *taco*. The plug was preferably a light wood so as to avoid excessive pressure in the chamber upon firing. An artifact recovered from a 1554 Padre Island shipwrecks (41Kn10; Artifact Number 132-14) interpreted to be a *taco* is from a branch of a tropic species, possibly *Buchenavia*, *Conocarpus*, or *Laguncularia* (Arnold and Weddle 1978).

The tortillas obtained by Spanish soldiers in Mesoamerica and probably also the Southeast, particularly when held in the hand with a dollop of whatever other food was available to them at the time, may very well have reminded them of shot in a patch or wad, just as it presumably had in the Old World. The similarities in the sizes and shapes of the cakes or tortillas and their artillery *tacos* must have made for a natural affiliation in their minds. This renaming of foods after military hardware is not without parallels; both *sopes* and *chalupas*, common items found on Mexican restaurant menus today, started out as names of types of small boats or landing craft.

**Flatbread in the Native Southeast**

In the late Mississippian period, that period of approximately 600 years ending with the Spanish entrada of the sixteenth century, Southeastern Native Americans relied to a great extent on the intensive cultivation of maize (Hudson 1976:292-294; Swanton 1946:304-310). What we know about the specific "races" of maize or corn cultivated in the prehistoric Southeast has come to us largely from the rise of the use of flotation in archaeological excavations (Cutler and Blake 2001; Struve 1968; Yarnell et al. 1993), while our reliance on ethnographic and ethnohistoric analogies about specific corn preparation methods and the resulting dishes consumed by Southeastern Indians remains (Hally 1986; Swanton 1946:351-359). Swanton's summaries of a number of historic accounts lead me to suppose that native Southeasterners consumed their corn in three primary ways: as roasted ears, as *sofki* (also *sofkee*, or hominy) or other porridge or gruel-like dishes, and as various sorts of boiled or baked "breads." Roasting of ears occurred from the time young corn was still green through the growing season. The preparation of hominy and other gruels involved soaking maize kernels in a lye solution to loosen the hulls, which could then be separated from the kernels by mechanical manipulation (i.e., stirring whilst in the pot or drained and pounded in a mortar) and removed by then skimming the surface of the liquid or winnowing the pounded grains (Benchley 2003:127-128). In some instances, the kernels were pounded in a mortar with wood ash, with the resulting flour then sifted or winnowed prior to boiling (Myers 2006:511-514). Swanton's assembled accounts of boiled and baked breads include a number of specific preparations and dishes, sev-
eral of which are familiar to us today. For instance, the Choctaw are said to have made a tamale-like loaf or cylinder of corn flour dough, which was then wrapped in corn husks and boiled (Swanton 1946:355 after Foreman 1933:308-309). The Caddo reportedly had a dumpling made by dropping rolled balls of corn flour and water into boiling liquid until cooked, at which time the small boiled breads were allowed to dry on a stone before eating (Swanton 1946:355 after Smith 1907:18).

One type of artifact recovered from the Little Egypt (9Mu102) and King (9Fl5) sites in northwest Georgia gives us an interesting glimpse into one method of preparing cornmeal for the “tortillas” reported by Rangel and enjoyed by the Spaniards at Ichisi. At least three fragments of large vessels exhibiting unusual oxidation discoloration patterns were recovered from these sites (Hally 1983). The pattern consists of a large, circular discoloration on the exterior of a vessel fragment that would have been on its side, concave surface up, during use. Sooting, where it occurs on these fragments, suggests they were placed across rocks, logs, or other props with the deepest portion of the concave form over direct heat. The portion of the vessels directly exposed to fire are discolored but are not sooted due to the complete oxidation of volatile compounds in the fuel (Hally 1983:7, 11). Soot in the form of distilled and oxidized resins and carbon can accumulate further up the walls of the vessels away from the direct heat of the fire. Depths of these vessel fragments thus used were between 2 and 5.5 cm (Hally 1983:12). Hally interprets these unique vessel fragments to have been griddles created from broken cooking and storage vessels, possibly (though not verifiably) for the purpose of cooking corncakes as described in historic accounts. Swanton’s (1946:355-357) voluminous work records several methods for preparing corn breads or “pone,” including placing loaves of corn flour dough on preheated hearth surfaces and covered with ashes or an earthen vessel or basin and then heaped over with coals to bake them. I would suggest that the patterns of sooting and oxidation observed in the King and Little Egypt vessels are more likely to have occurred during parching of maize kernels after soaking but prior to pounding.

This process as performed by eighteenth century Louisiana Native Americans is described by DuPratz (1758) in Swanton (1946:358-359): maize kernels are partially cooked in water, dried and mixed with ashes, and then, through constant stirring to avoid burning the grains, scorched or parched in a “dish made expressly for the purpose” before being pounded in a mortar. At this point, the resulting flour could be stored for use in any number of the dishes described above and their many variations.

**FOODWAYS CONSIDERED**

If this incident was merely an interesting glimpse at two worlds at a point of irreversible historic change that would probably be enough to warrant this discussion. In this brief consideration I have demonstrated how a number of analytical lenses can be brought to bear on the event to gain new insights about Native and Spanish lifeways in the earliest years of contact. For example, archaeological evidence in the form of sooted vessel fragments can be used to explore culinary practices, like how maize kernels were processed by parching. Paleobotanical analyses of the foods (plant and animal) mentioned in explorers’ accounts can be applied to environmental reconstructions. The specific timing of the event I’ve outlined above, coupled with the foods mentioned in the brief account, can be an in-road to examining food security in middle range agricultural societies. Further studies might use other mentions of particular foodstuffs along Soto’s route to explore the different cultural constructions of just what “food” is. That is to say, the Spaniards had particular notions of what was acceptable to eat, as did the Native groups they encountered. How that picture might have changed as they moved across the Southeast would be an interesting topic to explore.

More than being merely a vehicle for exploring past lifeways, though, this incident is part of a long history of a multicultural food tradition that continues to evolve. For instance, early nineteenth century immigrations of Germans to Mexico brought distinctive Old World flavors, sounds, and customs to borderland traditions (Walsh 2012). *Tacos al pastor* or “shepherd style tacos” are typically pork sliced off a vertical spit, a tradi-
tion brought to the Southwest and Mesoamerica by Lebanese migrants in the 1960s (Pilcher 2012). Americans have likewise since taken their borrowed foods around the world, a phenomenon historian Pilcher (2012) describes in his work Planet Taco. As he notes, it has been American entrepreneurs and restaurateurs who have brought tacos, or the American version anyway, to places as far-flung as Australia and Amsterdam, incorporating local flavors and preferences into this very flexible food.

The history of the taco is more than a series of transformations of native New World foods to better meet Old World ideals and tastes. Food traditions are hardly static, even among the groups that see their traditional foods embraced and changed by the Western world. For example, in the Southwest, the Navajo "fry bread" tradition was born out of the staples provided by the United States Army, namely flour (wheat), sugar, salt, and lard. Today, "Indian fry bread" and "Indian tacos" are mainstays of vendors on the powwow circuit. Fry bread even appears in Native American pop culture references. That three of the four ingredients in fry bread are "Western" has no bearing whatsoever on this food's place in Native American tradition and identity.

Returning to Soto and Ichisi, we might ask what each side took away from this encounter. The answer is: likely little, at least as far as their particular food traditions at that moment are concerned. Each side was steeped in their own food taboos and foodways. Southeastern Indians encountered by Soto and his men did not take up the domestication of hogs in the immediate wake of his visits, nor did they adopt the particular religiously oriented food taboos or feast/fast days of their Spanish Catholic visitors. Native changes in subsistence patterns were to come considerably later (Pavao-Zuckerman 2007). With the possible exceptions of fruits like peaches, something that could be adapted to native palettes and serve in roles already held by the wild plum or ripe persimmon, and maybe the chickpeas that were a part of Spanish rations (Rodríguez-Salgado 1988, Kiple 2007) and not unlike their own beans in form and preparation requirements, what little if any Spanish food they might have seen or experienced would have been completely unlike that to which they were accustomed.

Likewise, the Spanish seemed to only note the familiar in the various chronicles of their expeditions. Bernal Diaz del Castillo may or may not have witnessed an early sixteenth century taco party, but he did note encountering what he thought to be onions, leeks, and garlic on the march to Tenochtitlan in 1519 (Kiple 2007:159). Flatbreads, even if only of unleavened cornmeal, were familiar to the Spanish and were able to be incorporated into their existing expectations about what constituted acceptable and palatable food. Foodstuffs foreign to the Spanish went largely unnoted and, in some instances, the lack of understanding of the significance of particular offerings had dire consequences. Soto himself was party to the execution of the ruler Atahualpa Inca at Cajamarca in northern Peru in 1532, an event which likely precipitated from the unknowing and insulting rejection of an offering of maize beer, or chicha by the Spaniards (Staller 2006:456-460). Without question, the consequences of Soto's later excursion across the Southeast were equally horrific, long-lasting, and devastating, but for one short period of time in central Georgia, the incredible changes to come were left unconsidered over a simple meal of onion tacos shared by the Spanish and the people of Ichisi.

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In 1519, vassals of Mutezuma came to Cortés and said they would be allied with him as vassals of Spain and inquired about what King Don Carlos might require in tribute. They seemed to offer anything, including gold, silver, jewels, slaves, and cloth, provided that Cortés and his men did not travel to their land. They went on that "it was very barren and lacking in all provisions and it would grieve him if [Cortés] and those who came with [him] should be in want" (Pagden 1971:69). By this point, it was well-established that the Spanish soldiers took what they wanted and could quickly overtax the provisioning abilities of the host. This is not the only reported account of a native leader feigning inadequate resources to avoid a visit from Cortés. I am certain a more complete account of the Soto expedition would find parallel accounts.

"Cereals had long been the core of the Mediterranean diet since Classical times, and certainly the more stable of the triad of grain-olive-vine that came to define the so-called "Mediterranean diet" glamorized in recent years (Garnsey 1999).

Sherman Alexie's take on the Christian "loaves and fishes" parable in his screenplay for the movie Smoke Signals (1998) is worth seeking out.

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