CHAPTER 3

The Columns of (Dis)possession: Totem and Territory in French Colonial Expeditions to Florida (1562–1565)

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Abstract

Between 1562 and 1565, France attempted to establish two Huguenot colonies along the Atlantic coast of Florida. While the French initiated a process of territorial possession by placing columns at each prospective settlement, the capacity of these objects to represent iconographically French domain was impeded by interactions with other peoples whom the French encountered in Florida. The divergent religious belief systems of the Huguenot colonists and Amerindians in Florida, and the politically and religiously based ideological tensions between European Protestants and Catholics, transform the columns from markers of territorial possession into symbols of dispossession. This essay addresses the mechanisms of these transformations and the implications that such shifts in the columns’ signification had on the state of French politics and religion in both the New World and Europe.

On April 3, 1559, after more than six decades of conflict between France and Spain during the Italian Wars, representatives of Henri II of France and Philip II of Spain negotiated the Traité de Cateau-Cambrésis, which ended the wars. The treaty restored peace between the Habsburg and Valois monarchies and their respective Italian allies by imposing definitive territorial boundaries in lands long contested in Western Europe. Although both nations benefitted from the treaty, Spain became the dominant power in Italy and attained the status of an empire unsurpassed in geographical expanse and political influence on the European continent.

Despite its detailed attribution of territories to France and Spain in Europe, the treaty of peace included no articles addressing lands in the New World; instead, an oral proviso between Henri II and Philip II permitted competition for territory in the Americas (Davenport 220–221). Although in 1494 the Treaty of Tordesillas had officially divided the Americas solely between Spain and Portugal, the New World was much too vast to prevent other European nations from exploring and trading there. Moreover, by this point in the sixteenth century,
the Iberian nations reluctantly allowed other nations to stake a claim to territory in the New World, but solely in lands unoccupied by them. In 1559, the only territories that Spain could have legitimately claimed in the Americas included the West Indies, Mexico, Panama and other mainland territories of the Caribbean, and Peru. France, on the other hand, had abandoned its colonial attempts in North America a few decades earlier and was on the verge of being expelled from Brazil, a land lying east of the Tordesillas line, which Portugal considered its lawful possession. Other than lands already possessed by Spain and Portugal, the rest of the New World was essentially up for grabs.

At the time of the signing of the Traité de Cateau-Cambrésis, Florida, which was situated on the Spanish side of the meridian, was a vast and vaguely-defined region of North America that had been sighted and named by explorer Juan Ponce de León 46 years earlier. Because of Ponce's discovery of Florida, its proximity to the West Indies, which Spain had steadfastly settled by the mid-century, and the peninsula's ideal geographical location along the waters linking the New World and Europe, Spain claimed Florida at an early date. Despite sending expeditions to Florida led by Luis Vasquez de Ayllón, Panfiló de Narváez, and Hernando de Soto, Spain failed to establish colonial settlements there because of dangerous coastal waters, difficult terrain, violent weather, and conflicts with cunning and unrelenting Amerindians who defended their territory with all their might. By the mid-1540s, Spain officially abandoned its efforts for settling in Florida, which it considered unsuitable for conquest.

France took advantage of Spain's lack of an established presence in Florida soon after the Traité de Cateau-Cambrésis was signed and began planning a new series of colonial ventures in the New World. Between 1562 and 1565, the staunch Catholic King Charles IX of France, his mother Catherine de Medicis, a moderate, and Admiral Gaspard de Coligny, leader of the Huguenots (French Calvinists), sent three expeditions that aimed to establish a French colony on the Atlantic coast of Florida. Their principal aim was to establish a Huguenot refuge far from France, which would benefit French Protestants and Catholics alike at a time when religious unrest, often violent, was threatening the nation's cohesion and civil order. France also aspired to establish a permanent base close to Spanish possessions in the West Indies – a strategic location that would allow French ships to attack Spanish Plate fleets returning to Europe with gold, silver, and other American commodities along the Bahama Channel. A settlement in Florida would additionally block Spanish geopolitical expansion northward towards Canada, which France still considered its rightful possession despite relinquishing its settlements there in 1543.