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RELIGION'S SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTRIBUTIONS IN CARIBBEAN ARCHAEOLOGY



The Hermitage of San Antonio de Padua de la Tuna (Spanish: Ermita de San Antonio de Padua de la Tuna) is an archeological site near the Guajataca River in Isabela, Puerto Rico that dates from 1730. Photo credit: [Ian Poellet](#) /Wikipedia



The presence of religious institutions and their expansion in the Hispanic colonies of Puerto Rico and Cuba spread significant contributions to the development of socio-cultural aspects within the new lines of research in the field of Caribbean archaeology.

Archaeological interventions have been able to reexamine the importance of religious communities at a cultural level, demonstrating a chronology of events at the level of social status and their economic prestige through material evidence. One example is the church-hermitage of **San Antonio de Padua de la Tuna**, located in the Coto neighborhood of the municipality of Isabela in Puerto Rico, with elements of a long religious tradition dating to the 5th and 6th centuries.

With ten primary burials found in the church throughout excavations carried out at the end of 1993, the burial book of San Antonio de Padua exposes different data on mortuary practices and their variants that, at that time, were distinguished by the characteristics of the spiritual and social territory. Burial books of this church date back to 1812, documenting the complexities of religious practices and their peculiarities within ecclesiastical criteria. The discovery of human remains during excavation work with the **Project of Burial of Utilities and Urban Improvements of the Historic Center (Spanish: Proyecto de Soterrado de Utilidades y Mejoras Urbanas del Centro Histórico)** of Guayama and Mayagüez in Puerto Rico was directly related to the practice of using the church atrium as a cemetery.

Architect Harry E. Alemán Crespo monitored an excavation of the trench (or Excavation Number 2) in the **Atrium of the Guayama Town Cemetery** on August 29, 2003 and discovered human bone remains that were detected 9 meters from Feature 3. Of the 11 burials detected, one was identified as an adult male who presented an intentional mutilation or alteration of his teeth as a cultural practice exclusive to the Antilles area by some groups of black slaves from Africa.

The presence of secondary burials and the postmortem impact on some of the primary burials is a sign that there was a continuous reuse of this space. Excavations at the **Los Dominicos Convent** in San Juan, Puerto Rico, revealed a large number of fragments of utilitarian containers for food preparation.

Creole ceramics showed a high level of sophistication in pottery with Indo-Hispanic and African technologies, tableware with different shapes, crafts, origins and chronologies, Spanish majolica of the Moorish type to the Bone China and White Ware of the 20th century; in addition to plates and bowls of Columbia plain majolica dated to 1490 to 1650.



In 1523, Dominican priests founded the Antiguo Convento de los Dominicos (ancient Dominican convent). It was originally a Dominican monastery that acted as a refuge from Caribe tribe invasions on the city. By 1529, more than 25 religious were already living in the monastery, and a year earlier the first Creole priest in America had been ordained there, Fray Luis Ponce de León, son of Juan Ponce de León, conquistador and first governor of the island. El Convento later served as a barracks for Spanish troops before becoming the United States Army's Caribbean Headquarters. The structure now houses the Galeria Nacional (National Gallery), which has the largest collection of Puerto Rican art from the 18th century to the 1960s. The museum is managed by the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture.
Photo credit: Flickr

The various transformations of the archaeological investigations in the third cloister of the **Santa Clara de Asís** convent in Old Havana, Cuba, established known religious purposes and the different functions these served in the daily life of those living in those places. The excavations carried out in the convent between 1959 and 2000 did not generate relevant information regarding the building's constructive changes.



One of the abandoned clusters at The Convent of Santa Clara of Assisi in Old Havana. It was the first to be erected in the city between 1638 and 1643, and except for a brief moment that it became a hospital during the British occupation in 1762, it remained a convent until 1921. After the government purchased the facility in 1923, it served as government offices and storage facilities. At this present moment, the convent is in the process of being restored and preserved; two out of the three cloisters in the complex have been partially restored. The sections of the nunnery that have been restored now accommodate the National Center for Conservation, Restoration, and Museology.

Photo credit: [SamHolt6](#)/ Wikipedia

The National Center for Conservation, Restoration and Museology (Spanish: Centro Nacional de Conservación, Restauración y Museología or CENCREM) then promoted a new push aimed at the contributions of archaeological research to adapt the general interests of restoration and conservation of the building. The convent of **Nuestra Señora de Belén** in Cuba is a place of great historical and geographical importance, being located on the borders of Compostela, Luz, Picota and Acosta streets. The convent is the largest religious building within the walls of Havana, built in 1695 (with an area of 12,100 m²), and was occupied by the *Bethlemites* until 1842, then used as the Convalescence Hospital, a free school for children and as a meteorological observatory with scientific recognition worldwide.



*The former Convent of Our Lady of Bethlehem (Nuestra Señora de Belén) was constructed in 1718. It was operated by the Order of Bethlehem priests and nuns who were committed to teaching, which paid off handsomely. Later, they owned the sugar mill of San Cristóbal, which employed over 300 slaves. After that, the Jesuits took over, and it once housed the Academy of Sciences.
Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons*

The archaeological investigation consisted of an intensive excavation with artificial stratigraphy that allowed finding elements of chronological dating such as a stratum of construction filling formed by panetela bricks, island and floor tiles dated to the 18th to 20th centuries, a second stratum at a depth of 1.35 m with pottery shards, fine white pottery, ordinary glazed and unglazed ceramics, glass fragments, wine bottles, oil cans,

perfumery and pharmacy bottles, among others. In addition, six coins found in the area of the convent latrine allowed establishing a relative chronological range of 1870-1914.

The crypt of the church of the **Third Order of San Francisco de Asís** presents evidenced material on the remains of fish, such as remains of mixed debris results in terms of a justified methodology on the consumption of fish in Cuba in the aboriginal period. The consumption record of the first settlers in Cuba varied from species such as Scaridae, Sparidae, Serranidae, Balistidae, Diodontidae and Sphyraenidae and Carcharhinidae. Declared in 1982 by UNESCO as a Cultural Heritage of Humanity, the **Cabinet of Archeology** has been carrying out archaeological-architectural rescue work in the old churches of the Historic Center of Old Havana, including the convent of San Francisco de Asís.



*The **Basilica Menor (Minor Basilica) of San Francisco de Asís** (also known as the **Convento de San Francisco de Asís**) is a Catholic minor basilica and Franciscan convent located in Old Havana, Cuba.*

Its construction began in 1548 and lasted until 1591. Despite being inaugurated in 1575, it was severely damaged by storms in 1680 and 1692, as well as a cyclone that destroyed its tower in 1694. It began in its current form in 1716 and was completed about 200 years later.

Photo credit: [Eric Weingart](#) / Wikipedia

The cloisters of this convent are home to the **Museum of Religious Art (Museo de Arte Religioso)** in Cuba, where cultural material is presented in samples from the Havana school of goldsmithing, primary installation furniture, missals from the 18th and 19th centuries, and a collection of ceramics found by archaeological excavations during the

restoration process; with Spanish and Mexican majolicas from the 16th to 18th centuries, Mexican painted red ceramics and clay molds from sugar mill.

The archaeological excavation and the horizons that condition the investigations to locate the historical chronology in the Caribbean have made it possible to determine the total number of buried individuals and to count the bone materials in places institutionalized by the Church.



The Convent of San Francisco de Asís (1902) is a baroque-style religious structure situated in the square bearing its name in Old Havana. Photo credit: Wikipedia

Because of that, the significant importance of the structural solidity of these religious buildings is that they have been able to shape, over the centuries, an architectural

hierarchy through the events that occurred during the process of the Caribbean colonial invasion and their findings help to emphasize different and new lines of research.