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## Stones and Bones: Catholic Responses to the 1812 Collapse of the Mission Church of Capistrano

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**stones and bones: catholic  
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church of capistrano  
karin vélez<sup>id</sup>**

## ABSTRACT

This essay delves into the 1812 collapse of the Great Stone Church at California's Mission of San Juan Capistrano and its aftermath to consider how early modern Catholics in the greater Iberian world approached the material remains of ruined churches that contained human victims. Questions explored include how Franciscan missionaries reported and reacted to the calamity, why the casualties were disproportionately Indian and female, and what survivors did with the physical remnants of broken churches. Churches that collapsed on worshippers in Arequipa, Cuzco, Lima and Lisbon prior to 1812 are mustered for comparison. Overall, a pattern emerges of Catholics separating stone from bone in these tragic situations.

**Keywords:** Franciscan, ruins, relics, Acjachemen Indians, earthquake, California.

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### Introduction: Catholics and Sudden Ruin

In the early morning of December 8, 1812 an earthquake shook the coast of Alta California, felling the bell tower of the newly built Great Stone Church at the Mission of San Juan Capistrano. The tower toppled onto the roof of the church full of Indian parishioners attending morning mass, killing forty. One can still see the ruins of the Great Stone Church today as part of the tourist circuit of the California historic site of Capistrano (Figure 1). For the residents of Capistrano in 1812, indigenous and European alike, the December earthquake was entirely new: California, though wracked by the occasional tremors, had not suffered a seismic event of this magnitude during their lifetimes or in recent memory.<sup>1</sup> But actually, there were precedents: at least five similar calamities had shaken church foundations prior to the Capistrano quake, on New World frontiers and at the heart of the Old World.

In the seventeenth century in the Spanish colonial Vice-royalty of Peru three earthquakes made headlines. On the first Friday of Lent on February 18, 1600, the ground beneath the city of Arequipa shifted two meters due to the eruption of the nearby volcano of Huaynaputina. The stone supports of the city's enormous cathedral fell on those attending mass and many other churches were destroyed. Fifty years later, on March 21, 1650, the fourth Sunday of Lent, the city of Cuzco was shaken



439

**FIG 1**  
Great Stone Church of Capistrano, California. Photograph by Bernard Gagnon, 2013, Wikimedia Commons.

by tremors that lasted only 10 minutes but knocked the bell tower of the Franciscan church onto the choir, cloister and nave, leaving bare stone ribs of vaulting to stand for several years before the space was reconstructed. In November of 1655, Lima, the capital of the Viceroyalty of Peru, was also hit with a quake that destroyed churches and buildings and killed many (Lara 2013, 139–141, 146–149).

In the eighteenth century two more seismic events wreaked still greater havoc. Lima was hammered again on October 28, 1746, at 10:30 pm. An earthquake and ensuing tsunami engulfed Lima's neighboring port city of Callao with fewer than 200 of Callao's 5–6000 residents surviving. Sixty-four of Lima's churches were damaged and the city cathedral's two towers collapsed, wrecking the building (Walker 2008, 2–8). Nine years later and across the Atlantic, on November 1, 1755, All Saints' Day by the Catholic calendar, an enormous quake rippled through Portugal's capitol city of Lisbon. It struck at 9:45 am in the middle of morning mass and "turned Lisbon's churches into death traps, their arched ceilings toppling down upon thousands of terrified worshippers" (Molesky 2016, 6). The Carmelite Church buried its morning visitors including 17 priests. The church of São Paulo also fell on its Catholic faithful, burying 16 priests. The Church of Wounds of Jesus collapsed on top of its congregation, and so the list continues (91–93). Among these ruins, what was left of Lisbon's Carmelite Church still stands today in the middle of the bustling and rebuilt capital city (Figure 2). Like Capistrano's Great Stone Church, it has been left to stand in silent memorial of what was suffered more than two centuries ago.

How did early modern Catholics in the greater Hispanic and Iberian world approach the material remains of ruined churches containing human victims? This article takes the Capistrano quake as a representative case study to answer this question. Where possible, other instances of church collapse will be brought to bear to illustrate larger patterns. To begin with, Capistrano offers a firsthand account of how some Catholics processed the sudden collapse of their church on fellow worshippers. Two Spanish Franciscans posted at the Capistrano mission submitted this brief report to their superiors soon after the quake:

On the eight day of this month [December] consecrated to the Most Pure Conception of the Most Holy Virgin, a terrible earthquake occurred while the first holy Mass was being celebrated ... in the morning. In a moment it completely destroyed the new church built of masonry (*cal y canto*). It required more than nine years to construct it, but it lasted no more than six years and three months to the day; for it was blessed on September 8, 1806. The tower tottered twice. At the second shock it fell on the portal and bore this down, causing the concrete roof to cave in as far as the transept exclusively. Forty Indians, thirty-eight adults and two children, were buried beneath the ruins, only six escaping as by a miracle. Of the whites,



441

**FIG 2**

Carmelite Church Ruins, Lisbon. Photograph by Biblioteca de Arte Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2004, Wikimedia Commons.

none were killed, though some were at the holy Mass. The worst of all is the death of those unfortunates. The mishap has left us without a church, for on account of clefts and breaks it is altogether unserviceable; and because the walls of the fallen part remain high, we dare not work and are in constant fear. (Suñer and Barona as quoted by Engelhardt [1922] 2015, 53–54)



Three elements of this description are likely jarring to modern readers: the singling out of the spared “whites,” in this case, mission personnel, the disproportionate death toll of “Indians,” and above all, the large space allotted to lamenting the loss of the “church ... of masonry.”

These themes of missionary, Indian and church at Capistrano are explored below for the new questions they raise as much as for the answers they provide. On the missionaries: How did they and later historians record this unexpected occurrence? What meanings did they assign to fallen churches? Regarding Indian fatalities: Why were certain sectors of the mission population unevenly hit by the falling building, and how have later historians addressed these disparities? How did Indian survivors and descendants at Capistrano respond to the event? Finally, most important and still most visible at sites of collapse today are the stone remnants of these sacred structures. Exactly what have Catholics done with the physical remains of broken churches, and what should we make of their actions?

### **Broken Missionary: A Moderate Trauma Response**

In reconstructing the events begun December 8, 1812 at Capistrano, historians are dependent on the accounts of three Franciscans whose situations and biases should be weighed alongside the evidence. Two of them were themselves survivors of the earthquake and hailed from Spain. Francisco Suñer and José Barona jointly presided over the Capistrano mission at the time of the quake. Francisco Suñer served there from around 1809 to 1814. Suñer was the veteran missionary at the site, which perhaps explains why the incident report quoted above was in his handwriting (Engelhardt [1922] 2015, 54 n. 3, 65). He stayed at the mission for a year and a half after the church fell, helping with the recovery by performing duties such as officiating over the first post-earthquake baptism (57). But his tenure was not as long as that of his companion, José Barona.

José Barona was transferred to Capistrano in 1811 from another California mission, San Diego, where he had served for 13 years. He had only been at Capistrano for a year before the quake, but he ended up living out the rest of his life there until his death in 1831 near the age of 70 (Engelhardt [1922] 2015, 222–223, 230). It was Barona who officiated over the burials and death register directly after the catastrophe. He diligently updated the mission register with the names of the deceased, including their genders, ages and marital status. He would have known each and every victim. Barona prefaced the list with a terse, deceptively dispassionate:

I gave ecclesiastical burial in the cemetery of the church of this Mission to the following male and female adults and to a child, who died buried beneath the ruins of the said church, which was destroyed on the eighth of said month and year at the time of the first holy Mass. (54)



Barona is the focus of this section because, as will be explored further below, several of his Franciscan colleagues remarked on his nervousness at Capistrano. It seems that he may have suffered from post-traumatic stress due to the incident. His reaction, put in context alongside those of other survivors of church collapse, suggests a Catholic response to material ruin that tends to go unnoticed, overshadowed by more extreme behaviors.

Barona and Suñer come to us filtered through an eminent nineteenth-century historian of their order in California, the German-born Zephyrin Engelhardt (1851–1934). Engelhardt wrote prolifically about the 21 Spanish missions of Alta California, visiting many of them, including Capistrano, to compile his histories. His research includes sources since lost or destroyed. Engelhardt wrote in unapologetic defense of his Franciscan brethren, responding to charges from his contemporaries such as H. H. Bancroft who emphasized missionary cruelty to the Indians (Jackson and Castillo 1995, 4). Engelhardt's defensiveness and the accessibility of his writings on Capistrano partly but do not entirely explain why the collapse of its church has been presented as part of a narrative starring missionaries rather than indigenous peoples.

Engelhardt seems especially sympathetic towards José Barona, whose competence as a missionary was questioned. Four years after the quake, Franciscan superiors compiled a census and evaluation of the missionaries in the Alta California field. In that 1816 letter, Barona was appraised as “mediocre” in performance “owing to the fact that constitutionally he is unable to bear the burden” (Mariano Payeras as quoted by Geiger 1969, 129). Engelhardt shares this information but goes to great lengths to appraise Barona more kindly. He characterizes him as anxious and broken, with “unsteady” and “trembling” handwriting, unable to handle much work towards the end of his career, but he digs for a cause for this behavior (Engelhardt [1922] 2015, 222). Interestingly, Engelhardt sidesteps the most obvious producer of trauma—the earthquake that happened under Barona's watch—and instead attributes what he calls his fellow Franciscan's “mental shock” to an 1823 run-in with mission soldiers that led to physical injury and “indignity...in the presence of the Indians” (69–70, 222).

As Engelhardt himself notes, however, long before this, “as early as 1817,” five years after the quake, Barona had expressed a desire to retire from the missions. From late 1816 onwards, Barona spent most of his time convalescing at the neighboring mission of San Luis Rey, absenting himself from the Capistrano mission and allowing his new partner there, Geronimo Boscana, to preside over most of the daily work, including baptisms (Engelhardt [1922] 2015, 78). Barona's struggles are not unusual when he is considered in much broader company of thousands of Catholic survivors of church collapse, including indigenous

residents of the Capistrano mission, considered below. But his response can seem “mediocre” if considered solely alongside the ideal expected and often delivered by Franciscans and other trained Catholic missionaries in zones of disaster.

In the early modern period, missionaries and, indeed, many devout Catholics, were encouraged to process tragedy in ways that dramatically strengthened their Catholic convictions—for instance, with noteworthy penance or personal writings about catastrophe as a spiritual turning point. For instance, at the pre-1812 quake sites described above, public penance was the most common and widespread reaction reported among Catholics, with Franciscans leading the penitential charge. In Arequipa in 1600, the majority of residents “garbed themselves in the somber colors of mourning, and participated in the Christian penitential rituals” (Lara 2013, 142). The earthquake there had struck during Lent which was itself a season of penitence; this, perhaps, predisposed Catholics there to read their fallen cityscape as punishment for their sins (143). The 1650 quake of Lima also struck during Lent and resulted in massive penitential processions featuring images of Christ the Lord of Earthquakes, the Virgin of Remedies, and the clergy “in full force . . . modeling public contrition,” barefoot and with ashes on their heads (146). The Franciscans in Cuzco were noted above all other clerical participants (including Dominicans, Augustinians, Mercedarians and Jesuits) as being severe and extreme in their public repentance, billing themselves as “spiritual criminals” (146) and beating themselves as if the ruination of the whole city was due to their sins. In Lima in 1746, the Franciscans again led the charge of “blood processions” and preaching for repentance (Walker 2008, 10–12), with most residents seeing the earthquake as a sign of God’s displeasure with the city (131–155). In Lisbon in 1755, so many interpreted the earthquake as proof of God’s anger at the city that street preachers capitalized on the fear to call attention to “the moral failings of the people” (Molesky 2016, 221). The Franciscans contributed to the surge of processions with their own march of repentance through that ruined city, some walking barefoot, some with gags in their mouths, and some beating themselves (222). Yet at Capistrano, neither Barona nor Suñer reported any kind of penitential procession at all.

Another unspoken but expected response for Catholics after building collapse was eventual rebuilding. But at Capistrano, Barona and his mission staff lost heart after the quake, stalling building projects. One year after the quake, in 1813, they reported, ‘Nothing worthy of note has been done [this year], for we had enough to do repairing what tumbled down; and this was a great deal, not only as a consequence of the earthquake, but also as a result of the floods’ (Suñer and Barona as quoted by Engelhardt [1922] 2015, 57). To be fair, such delays in rebuilding were common at other sites of sudden church collapse inventoried here; resurgences in architecture in places noted for it, such as Lisbon, only began years after the extensive clean-up

(Molesky 2016, 7–8). Still, the decision not to rebuild the Great Stone Church of the mission is unusual enough to merit further analysis below.

Barona's hesitation to rebuild and increasing detachment from the mission are best understood within the broader spectrum of Catholic responses to crisis, with repentance at one extreme end of reaction, and doubt and abandonment of faith at the other. That other extreme is worth examining as well since it is equally demonstrated in the historical record, at Capistrano and at other locations where churches collapsed on worshippers. In Arequipa, 250 indigenous converts to Christianity committed suicide after the earthquake there. Others took the volcano and quake as a sign that an *apu*, or lord from Inka mythology, was "fighting on their side against the European invaders and the Christian god" (Lara 2013, 142). Historian Charles Walker sees the 1746 Lima earthquake-tsunami as a direct precipitant for a 1750 brutally suppressed plot among Lima's Indians of the El Cercado neighborhood to overthrow Spanish Catholic rule (Walker 2008, 160, 172–175). Across the Atlantic in Lisbon, the dissatisfaction of survivors and contemporaries with Catholicism due to the catastrophe was so great that it engendered a famous debate of the European Enlightenment. Historian Mark Molesky sums up the central questions raised: "Who, or what, was responsible for Lisbon's destruction? Was God solely to blame or had nature...played the leading role?" (322). Molesky suggests that for many in Lisbon, the vexing answer to the question was God; some of the populace tried to respond to God's wrath in kind, rejecting priests and quitting Christian practice.<sup>2</sup>

In this vein, the earthquake of Capistrano likewise appears to have precipitated at least one suicide. Historian Zephyrin Engelhardt explains:

The terrible calamity had another aftermath. It appears that Gabriel Pajomit, husband of one of the victims, Maria Dolores Cuinavan, lost his reason from either fright or grief. At all events, his lifeless body was found in the woods (*en el bosque*) and buried in the cemetery on May 8, 1813. (Engelhardt [1922] 2015, 198)

Interestingly, the friars chose to bury Gabriel Pajomit in the mission's Christian cemetery alongside the victims of the earthquake, including his wife. Suicide is considered by Catholics to be a sin. In order to give him a Catholic burial in the mission cemetery, the Franciscans must have overlooked that possible cause of death. Their choice effectively categorized Pajomit as another casualty of the quake, even though he perished five months after it.

Beyond the individual case of Pajomit, there is general agreement that there was a sharp decline in conversions to Christianity at Capistrano in the years following the quake. This is especially striking in that just before the Great Stone Church

collapsed, the numbers of conversions were impressively high, comparable to the previous heyday of mission growth from 1782–1792 (Kelsey 1989, 8). In 1812, the year of the earthquake, 94 people were baptized in the month of March alone: 36 women, 28 men, 16 boys and 14 girls (Engelhardt [1922] 2015, 179). This number dropped to 28 over the entire course of the post-earthquake year of 1813, and rose again to only 50 in 1814, undergoing a lull of two years before returning to what Franciscans considered the usual intake of new Christians in 1815 (180). Scholars and the Franciscans themselves have cited contributing factors to this drop, including overall population decline due to disease (Kelsey 1989, 21), fewer non-Christians remaining in the area (Engelhardt [1922] 2015, 180), and unpleasant labor and living conditions in the missions. In the latter case, historian Robert Jackson has highlighted a decline in agricultural productivity, standard of living and labor supply in all of the Alta California Franciscan missions in the decade of the 1810s, possibly partly a result of earthquake damage and upheaval (Jackson 1992, 400).

Five years after the earthquake a Franciscan missionary at Capistrano, Geronimo Boscana, complained about a mission Indian who adamantly refused to partake in the sacraments on his deathbed (Boscana 2009, 64).<sup>3</sup> The exchange, as reported by Boscana, is worth relating here for its direct demonstration of rejection:

In the year 1817, in the mission of St. Juan Capistrano, an Indian 35 years of age, who ... was well instructed [in Catholicism], became afflicted with a dangerous disease, and died. No persuasion on the part of his friends, or exhortations of the priests, could prevail upon him to confess, and partake of the holy sacrament ... some one exclaimed, "Why do you not confess?" "Because I will not," he replied, with anger. "If I have been deceived whilst living, I do not wish to die in delusion!" These were his last words; for soon after, he expired. (Boscana 2009, 63–64)

This man would have been 30 at the time of the earthquake. Though it is not certain whether he experienced it on site in Capistrano, the quake affected the entire region. There were likely many reasons for his rejection of Christianity after sustained instruction in the religion; Boscana does not delve into any. But it seems likely that the traumatic event of the earthquake and its repercussions in the mission community partly contributed to this Indian's decision to turn away.

There was no official Catholic Church handbook for how to best handle falling churches. Penitential processions and questioning of the Christian faith were only two poles of an array of trauma reactions exhibited by Catholic survivors. José Barona, a Franciscan who survived and recorded the event, does not appear to have either publicly repented from his sins or abandoned his religion; rather, he reported the quake as a tragic aberration, but proceeded to possibly suffer anxiety the

rest of his life because of it. Like the Great Stone Church, he was left gutted but standing. Far from meriting the “mediocre” label applied in the census, Barona’s middle-spectrum reaction to 1812 hints at how some at the mission of Capistrano had understandable trouble carrying on, as a Catholic community, after the disaster.

### **Broken Indians: Removal of Bones**

In Capistrano’s death register Barona entered 39 Indians who were buried in the two days after the earthquake (another body of a married woman was found two months later in the rubble). The victims were predominantly women: 25 married, four widows, two single. The male dead included four married, three single, and one child (Engelhardt [1922] 2015, 54). Because there were so many of them and “boards were scarce,” they were not buried in wooden coffins but wrapped instead in blankets or mats. All of those “who had lost their life on that sad occasion,” including the corpse discovered later in February, were interred together in the graveyard next to the ruined church (198).

The human victims of the Capistrano quake were removed from the broken building and eventually forgotten in retellings of the event. Barona’s list of the Indian dead remained unpublished and uncirculated in the years following the quake: the death toll was reported, but individual victims were not identified. The death register of Capistrano, like that of other mission settlements, was compiled for internal use, for record-keeping purposes, not to publicly memorialize the victims but to quietly, accurately mark their exits from this world. Informatics researcher Megan Finn cautions twenty-first century readers that the obsession with reporting names of those killed in natural disasters is a recent predilection. Writing of a later earthquake in California, the 1857 Fort Tejon quake, she notes that publicity and news coverage around that event “did not extend to naming the deceased” (Finn 2013, 202). Likewise, in the months following the 1812 quake, Capistrano’s dead were remembered in print as a nameless group of Indians. In this section, the victims’ remains are revisited, first to contrast their removal from the church with ordinary Catholic practice, second, to consider the unevenness of Indian and female mortality, and third, to introduce how stone remnants of collapse came to outshine human bones at Capistrano.

After the quake, the first action taken by the survivors was to remove the human remains from the rubble of the church. While this makes sense for grieving families of any place or time, this separation of stone and human remains is counterintuitive and surprising given certain regular Catholic practices. For instance, Catholic churches are buildings that have historically been activated for Catholic believers by the bringing in of respected remains: even the smallest and humblest of chapels tended to import holy bones for validation (Freedberg 1989, 92, 112). This is still the most common and visible form of connection

between stone and bone in Catholic churches today: consecrated church buildings shelter but also gain their power from sacred bones or other physical remains of venerable Catholics.<sup>4</sup> Many churches, including those in the Americas, amassed collections of multiple remnants of saints to maximize their capacity to link Catholics to the divine. Historian William Taylor describes one instance of the skeleton of Saint Veneranda, a second-century martyr, being shipped from Rome all the way to Mexico in the late eighteenth century. Her remains were paraded publicly through crowded streets in several cities before being placed in the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Aguascalientes in 1801 (Taylor 2016, 364).<sup>5</sup>

Catholics believed so strongly in the potency that such relics brought to their places of worship that there was not only a lively trade in saints' bones, but relic theft and transferal between churches was relatively commonplace.<sup>6</sup> Nor were bones in Catholic churches exclusively saintly. By the sixteenth century, in the Americas as in Europe, many Catholics were requesting burial inside churches to be near relics. Burial within churches was at first reserved for kings, abbots or others deemed particularly holy, but the practice was soon extended to others, notwithstanding Catholic Church councils repeatedly prohibiting this and encouraging burials in cemeteries instead (Zucchi 2006, 57–58). In short, Catholic churches throughout the Iberian Atlantic were places expected to harbor human remains, saintly and otherwise; they were deemed effective as channels of access to the divine in large part because of the presence of these bones.

But in the less common situation of sudden church destruction with accompanying casualties, Catholics seemed moved to deactivate the broken place of worship instead of sanctifying it with human remains. At Capistrano, the victims' bones were extracted from the wreckage and reinterred. They have been replaced, in the emptied ruins of the Great Stone Church, with the stock phrase "Forty Indians killed." As illustrated further below, this phrase was detached from the individuals in question and universalized so that it might encompass any unsuspecting good Catholic who suddenly got snuffed out. But in 1812 in Capistrano, the victims were not any Catholic. The new symbolism for Capistrano dead obscures real and important discrepancies in mortality. Writing of the Lisbon earthquake, historian Mark Molesky comments:

For many of Lisbon's survivors, one of the shocking realities of the disaster was the sheer randomness involved in who lived and who died... The bones of aristocrats and beggars, merchants, slaves, nuns, horses, fishermen, dogs, priests, monkeys, and mules were mixed together in the ashy heap Lisbon had become ... If one looks closer, however, one sees that death was not entirely indiscriminate. (Molesky 2016, 283–284, 285)

Molesky reports that in the Lisbon disaster in 1755, more commoners died than nobles, more clergy (male or female) than any other profession, and more women died than men (186–187, 290–291). Similar inequity exists and merits attention in the case of Capistrano: more Indians died, more women died, and the casualties extended far beyond the bodies in the Great Stone Church.

What accounted for these disparities in mortality? The standard physical layout of the Catholic church and conventional, hierarchical performance of mass skewed the situation. The mission staff officiating at the service stood at the front of the church and had access to different doorways. Father-President Señan reported, “The celebrant who happened to be at the Offertory of the Mass, saved himself through the door of the vestry” (Engelhardt [1922] 2015, 55). Back in the nave of the church, the Indian parishioners ran to the closest door to them, on the left side of the church; this is where the majority of the bodies were found. The large door was apparently damaged in the first shock and they were unable to get it open. A priest at the altar reportedly called to them to come up and exit through the sacristy door, but the second shock brought the vaulted roof down on them before they could do so.<sup>7</sup>

The Franciscans at Capistrano and the Father-General of California missions all commented on the blatant disparity in deaths, with the Great Stone Church’s collapse killing only Indians and sparing Europeans.<sup>8</sup> When this statistic is left undiscussed, and unaccompanied by mention of the hundreds of surviving Catholic Indians at the mission, it risks relegating the Acjachemen Indians to the status of stone ruins, destroyed and frozen in time.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, Capistrano finds parallels in uneven mortality in other South American church collapse cases: in the quakes noted above, fewer Europeans and people of European descent were killed in every single case, just as in Lisbon the lower classes took the biggest hit from the 1755 quake.

When the Huaynaputina volcano erupted in 1600, while Arequipa suffered massive collateral damage from the ensuing quake and ash, the entire population of seven Indian towns near the volcano was buried alive (Lara 2013, 141). Similarly, in Lima in 1655, according to historian Jaime Lara, the earthquake disproportionately affected one sector of the populace, “the socially oppressed and economically disenfranchised,” in particular Indians and mulattos (149). The ensuing 1746 earthquake that struck that city again unequally hammered the non-white neighborhoods, including Cocharcas, Malambo and El Cercado where soon after there was an indigenous uprising (Walker 2008, 108, 160, 172–175). The situation exacerbated already existing tensions between the social classes, prompting the viceroy to crack down on post-earthquake looting for which he and other administrators “plac[ed] the blame squarely on the black or the racially mixed plebe population” (Walker 2008, 158).



For these other urban centers, one might theorize that the discrepancy in mortality was due to factors such as less sturdy construction in poorer neighborhoods, but that sidesteps the commonality that originally led to their selection for comparison with Capistrano: many of these non-white casualties were inside carefully built churches for Catholic holy day services. The improbable miracle at Capistrano in 1812 was that the officiating priests escaped (unlike many clergy in Lisbon in 1755). They did so, in part, because of the traditional hierarchical set-up of Catholic church services at this time, which tended to consist of one or two European or creole priests officiating in front of larger indigenous, black or mixed congregations (Hawkley 2012).

Women also took the bigger hit of casualties at Capistrano. Writing a century after the quake, historian Zephyrin Engelhardt wondered why there were so many more women than men among the dead. He theorized that most of those killed were mothers who “had left their children at home, and had hurried off to church because they could not have attended High Mass, which probably began at 9 or 9:30, and with the sermon would last an hour and a half, much longer than the Low Mass early in the morning” (Engelhardt [1922] 2015, 54).<sup>10</sup>

Recent statistical studies have suggested, however, that more female casualties are actually a norm for natural disasters, especially in societies where women have a lower socioeconomic status than men (Neumayer and Plümer 2007, 553–554). Historian Mark Molesky looked at five randomly chosen parishes in Lisbon in 1755 to compare death records with an eye for female victims and also noted this dynamic. He found that female deaths were a proportional and consistent majority, even accounting for Lisbon’s slightly larger female population in the mid-eighteenth century. Molesky conjectures that a contributing factor in this skewed death toll might have been that more women than men attended mass, especially among the lower classes (Molesky 2016, 290).

In the case of Capistrano, perhaps it was also true that more female indigenous neophytes attended mass than men, and perhaps a thorough demographic analysis would show that around 1812 more women than men had converted.<sup>11</sup> But there was a practical reason for a church full of women the morning of December 8th, 1812: segregated mass services (Hackel 2012). Separating and sorting women at Capistrano and other California missions may have been deemed beneficial for the salvation of women’s souls and for their physical protection, but it was often detrimental to their health.<sup>12</sup> The fall of the Great Stone Church proved to be one more brutal if unintended example of the harshness of mission life for indigenous women.

Last but not least in the under-discussed unfairness of the collapse of the Great Stone Church is the privileging of the Mission of Capistrano itself above neighboring communities. Six of the other Alta California missions had significant damage in the

same earthquake: the churches at San Gabriel and Santa Ines required years to repair; San Buenaventura, Santa Barbara, San Fernando and Santa Inés each lost several mission buildings, and at La Purísima Mission, the quake took out most of the mission complex, requiring temporary housing to be hastily erected for the Indian residents and eventually leading to the abandonment of the mission (Jackson 1992, 399, 415; Jackson and Castillo 1995, 150–166). Why was Capistrano exceptionalized among the missions and in California history in general?

First, it is important to note that this phenomenon of publicizing the damages at one site over others is not unique to Capistrano. The quake that hit Lisbon also caused significant destruction elsewhere. Across the Mediterranean, Morocco took dramatic damages, most significantly in the old city of Fez where a mosque collapsed on top of 800 Muslims at prayer (Molesky 2016, 113). Lisbon has been lionized among other such sites whose brushes with the 1755 quake pass unmentioned. That said, even at the time and at other sites affected by that quake, Lisbon was acknowledged to have taken a disproportionate blow.

As with Lisbon, it could be argued that the collapse of a stone church and the death of 40 Indian converts set the Capistrano mission apart from its neighbors that did not suffer as many casualties or as much physical damage. But Religious Studies scholar Thomas Bremer notes that there have been other forces at work on Capistrano since 1812 (Bremer 2000). The Capistrano mission has become a lynchpin in the state of California's presentation of its own history. The loss to the Capistrano mission's individual community was quickly conscripted to paint California as a place with a proud Christian past and a long history of earthquakes. As with the construction of all local histories, participation has been widespread and far exceeded the Catholic purview. Bremer observes that it was actually Protestants, not Catholics, who took the initiative to restore the Capistrano mission in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries because they felt the site conveyed Protestant virtues: for example, one of the founders of the Capistrano mission, Franciscan Junípero Serra, made an ideal hard-working, pan-denominational hero bringing enlightenment to the Indians (Bremer 2000, 430–431). Megan Finn also cites Capistrano as being central to how the state of California understood its history with earthquakes; Capistrano was the only quake recorded in writing prior to the 1846 US annexation of California (Finn 2013, 206–208).

California's written records show a gradual but striking transformation of Acjachemen bodies that goes beyond the skewed nature of Capistrano's death toll. Three articles on the subject of earthquakes in the *San Francisco Bulletin* between 1864 and 1875 illustrate the shift. None of the *Bulletin* reporters consulted Franciscan accounts. Each grouped the corpses of Capistrano's earthquake into an anonymous mass of fluctuating number

that could represent any and every Catholic who died tragically. First, in 1864, a half-century after the quake, a *Bulletin* article low-balled the body count, stating that an earthquake felled the Capistrano mission church “and killed some 20 people, most of whom were Indians” (“Former Droughts” 1864). Later that year, the same source ran a column that was only slightly more accurate: it estimated 30 to 45 dead with many injured, not mentioning that the casualties were all indigenous (“Earthquakes” 1864). By 1875, the California paper inflated the casualty count still further to “nearly a hundred people ... killed,” again omitting their Acjachemen identity (“Earthquake of 1812” 1875).

By the end of the nineteenth century there was a conspicuous change in focus from the bones that had preoccupied Capistrano’s survivors to the stones that obsessed later California residents. Emptied of its specificity—the bodies of Acjachemen quake victims removed and replaced by a universalized and variable death toll—the Great Stone Church of Capistrano could be enlisted into the project of imagining California’s past. As if to foreshadow this shift, the *San Francisco Bulletin’s* last 1875 article about Capistrano closes with a poetic interlude on the ruined Great Stone Church instead of an obituary for its victims. The journalist wrote, “The ruin to-day is one of the most venerable and interesting on the continent ... Seen by moonlight, from the hills that intervene between San Juan Capistrano and the sea, it is indescribably picturesque” (“Earthquake of 1812” 1875).

### **Broken Churches: Preserving Ruined Stones**

Even in the immediate aftermath of the quake, the Franciscans at Capistrano gave their broken church as much attention in their incident report as they did their dead parishioners. This emphasis could be viewed as indicative of the rarity and preciousness of stone edifices, literally and symbolically. Historians Robert Jackson and Edward Castillo surveyed mission architecture across all 21 Alta California missions from their inception in 1769 until their secularization in the 1840s. Over those seven decades of activity, Castillo and Edwards tallied only three churches constructed from stone out of 68 built. For comparison, 44 churches in Alta California were built of adobe or wood, and 21 of wattle and daub (Jackson and Castillo 1995, Appendix 3).

More importantly, stone is experienced by many to have a special power to connect them with the cosmic. Religious studies scholar S. Brent Plate thus devotes the first grounding chapter of his *A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects* to elucidating the spiritual potency of stone across world religions, not only Catholicism (Plate 2014, 23–59). Similarly, art historian Carolyn Dean has explained how the Inka of Peru viewed particular rocks as potentially sentient, capable of presenting the divine or ancestral on Earth (Dean 2010). Given this distinctive sacred resonance of stone in certain contexts, it makes sense that the

survivors at Capistrano – Franciscan and Acjachemen alike – might mourn the collapse of a stone edifice, and that they might do so with the same intensity that medieval Christian knights brought to the loss of their steeds in battle (Eickman 2017, 53), not viewing the destroyed objectively as equipment, but grieving them subjectively as linkages of their souls.

After removing the victims from the debris and reburying them in the mission cemetery, the residents of Capistrano slowly proceeded to clear out the stones from the center of the church, finding the last body a full two months after the quake (Engelhardt [1922] 2015, 55). Throughout this clean-up, they ceased using the Great Stone Church for any ritual activity, transferring masses and baptisms to the old chapel and, in the next year, to a newly built granary that had a large seating capacity (Jackson 1992, 414). What was left was a stone skeleton of the original building. A visitor in 1850 commented that some of the roof over the sanctuary and transverse section of the church still stood nearly four decades after the quake and was kept lit at night with lanterns (Kelsey 1989, 24). Essentially, the removal of the human remains and rubble functioned to deactivate the church as an active place of worship for the community: They turned it off. The Great Stone Church was transformed into a purposefully empty memorial of the catastrophe.<sup>13</sup>

Visitors to the Capistrano mission today can view these ruins, which are still preserved in a broken state. As one scholar notes regarding the maintenance of the site, “the aim is to be sure that this ruined building stays ruined” (Bremer 2000, 428). Lest casual visitors miss this intention, it is explicated for the interested on the website of the Mission San Juan Capistrano as part of the cherished mythology of the Great Stone Church:

The church was never rebuilt. After the disaster, the padres made no attempt at rebuilding, thereby leaving it in ruins for the entire community to remember the loss. The ruins stand today as a testament to the tragedy and the past. (Mission San Juan Capistrano 2017)

This billing is only partially accurate for the twenty-first century in that people today can also see the Mission Basilica San Juan Capistrano, a church completed in 1986 to replicate the Great Stone Church. The Basilica is both an active church and a pilgrimage center, having been designated a National Shrine in 2003 by the US National Conference of Catholic Bishops. But the lag time of rebuilding here, generations after the original Great Stone Church, is uncommon, drawing further attention to the quake survivors’ initial decision to let the ruins stand.

For over a century before the Mission Basilica was raised, the intentional ruins of the Great Stone Church stood in contrast with other case studies considered here. There was the city of Lisbon’s near-legendary rebuilding spearheaded by the Marquis de Pombal in the decades following the 1755 quake, an effort which earned the reconstructed city acclaim as “a model

of rational urban planning” and “a monument to the Enlightenment” (Brockey 2005). Though the ruined Carmelite Church was left to stand, the hundreds of other ruined church structures in the city were rebuilt, resituated or replaced. In Lima, Peru, as well, in the decades following the 1746 calamity, the majority of residents eventually perceived the event as offering them a blank slate to rebuild their city, a chance to hold a “virtual referendum on Lima” and what it could, and should, be as a cosmopolitan center (Walker 2008, 12).

At other earthquake sites in the Viceroyalty of Peru, this sort of clean-up and reconstruction stands out even more for its blending of indigenous and Christian efforts. In Arequipa in 1600, this manifested in the form of joint ritual. Shortly after the quake and eruption of Huaynaputina, residents feared that a neighboring volcano, Misti, would also explode. A mixed group of Franciscans and indigenous neophytes set out from Arequipa to climb the smoking volcano and calm it down; they threw a cross and saints’ relics into the caldera and held mass at the rim. Historian Jaime Lara notes the similarity between this warding off and the actions of a pre-Christian Inka leader, Yupanqui, who got as close as he could to the volcano’s caldera and used a sling to propel sacrificial blood up its slopes, in an attempt to stave off eruption (Lara 2013, 141–142 n. 12). Lara also highlights a shift in the iconography of St. Francis in Cuzco after the 1650 quake when indigenous artists were hired to repaint murals of St. Francis’ life in a Franciscan chapel that had been destroyed by the quake. Lara describes the emergent popularity of their flying Francis, or “birdman of Assisi,” whose image combines apocalyptic Franciscan symbolism with pre-Hispanic Inka veneration of bird-gods (155, 158–159). This conflation of old and new religious beliefs at certain places wracked by material ruin is notable.

But by making these comparisons with resilience, we must take care not to stamp Capistrano’s 1812 quake response with a “mediocre” in the manner of the 1816 Franciscan superiors who evaluated a traumatized Barona. What exactly was going on at the Capistrano mission surrounding communal closure of their devastated church? The settlement’s putting a church to rest does not have to be read as a passive act of resignation or a Franciscan-led, top-down decision. In fact, in some ways, the closure of Capistrano’s Great Stone Church seems more in tune with indigenous practice in the Alta California region than it does with Catholic practice at the other sites described above.

Some of the burial practices of the Acjachemen Indians at Capistrano were recorded by Franciscan Geronimo Boscana, who arrived at the mission in 1814, shortly after the earthquake (Engelhardt [1922] 2015, 230).<sup>14</sup> Boscana wrote:

[The Indians] believed, that if the dead appeared to any one, it was for the purpose of injury ... it was the custom whenever the deceased [husbands] were burnt, to burn also the houses [of widows],

and rebuild in another direction, so that when the husbands returned [from beyond] in search of them, there would be nothing remaining to denote their existence, and thus they would escape their persecutions. The converted Indians of the present day, have the same idea. (Boscana 2009, 60–61)

Franciscans reportedly discouraged this indigenous practice of burying the houses of the dead along with other pre-Christian mourning rites such as painting themselves with black pitch and wailing loudly (Newell 2008, 417). The missionaries substituted conventional Christian burial of human remains in consecrated cemeteries, a practice they were still evidently modeling in 1812 with how they disposed of the remains of the Great Stone Church victims as honored Christian dead.

But let us track, for a moment, not the human deceased, but the house of the dead as it was traditionally handled by Acjachemen Indians. It was not reinhabited; it was buried, and ceased to be used. Closing down the houses of the dead was a gesture that allowed both living and dead to rest in peace. For the Acjachemen neophytes, many of them newly baptized, who had just lost forty of their number under a collapsed sacred house of Christianity, finding a way to put those souls to rest must have been a concern. It may have seemed grossly inappropriate to re-use the house of worship that they shared with those dead in any way, out of respect to the deceased and with hope for closure with the other world.

Too often, the entire community of the Mission of Capistrano is summed up by the Franciscan missionaries who stood as their visible spiritual head. But the Franciscans at Capistrano were outnumbered by the hundreds in 1812, by residents including not just indigenous neophytes but also Spanish soldiers and local staff. This larger community of predominantly Acjachemen converts had also contributed massive labor of nearly a decade to construct the Great Stone Church (Jackson 1992, 399; Jackson and Castillo 1995, 24–25; Vaughn 2011, 161). The structure was as much theirs as it was the Franciscans' or the Christian God's. This is not to imply that the mission was run democratically or that the population was polled for its opinion about what to do with the ruins of the Great Stone Church. It is simply to say that if a majority of Acjachemen Catholics disapproved of how the Great Stone Church was shut down after the quake, this would likely have surfaced in Franciscan records, where Boscana recorded other resistance to Franciscan teaching as noted above. There is no mention of any protest.

One can assume, then, that the Great Stone Church was symbolically put to rest by the whole community of Capistrano, missionaries and Acjachemen neophytes included. It was not literally buried in traditional Acjachemen fashion, but it was symbolically terminated. Neither did it precipitate a new building project by quake survivors or their proximate descendants as it often did in other predominantly Christian cities struck by

calamity; instead, it was replaced by other buildings used to celebrate mass. The fate of the remnant stones was not a deliberate planned memorial, as the current tourist destination would have it seem, nor was it entirely reactionary and based on wide-scale post-traumatic stress. It was a makeshift compromise among grieving survivors in one particular place and time.

It is problematic that in most analyses of the Capistrano earthquake, Franciscans along with scholars resort to citing external causes for the mission's failure to promptly rebuild a new stone church or to clear away their old one. The common refrains are that there were multiple distractions to the mission following close on the heels of the quake: flooding, epidemics that resulted in the hasty building of a new hospital in 1814, the unlikely surprise of a pirate attack in 1818 (Kelsey 1989, 21). These occurrences obviously did contribute to low initiative for new construction projects, but they deflect away from a conscious shared decision, among Catholic practitioners in Capistrano, to commemorate a tragedy in a distinctive way. Catholicism, like the pre-Christian indigenous traditions of the Acjachemen Indians, allowed for structures to be emptied and metaphorically buried alongside people. For Catholics, this was not a practice as formal as enshrinement, nor as common as a penitential procession; indeed, it stands out among the other instances of material ruin surveyed here. But its presence at Capistrano attests to its viability in Catholic communities and to the particular mixture of people residing in Alta California.

### **Conclusion: Stones Preferred to Bones**

The iconic church ruins at Capistrano have eclipsed the specific Catholic and indigenous practitioners who brought it to life, and even the Franciscans who managed and chronicled the site. Those Catholics killed in the quake have been casualties twice more after their deaths: first, they were separated from the material ruins to be reinterred elsewhere; second, they were distanced from the ruins on paper. In this way the Great Stone Church could leave them behind to become a symbol of Earthquake in general rather than Christian mortality.<sup>15</sup>

This essay began with the question: How did early modern Catholics approach the material remains of ruined churches containing human victims? A multiplicity of their responses have been explored here, but what is most evident is that at moments of extreme destruction, when consecrated stones collapsed onto living Christian faithful, Catholics often chose to physically separate stone from bone. In ordinary Catholic life, connecting old stones with dead human remains helped practitioners bring a sacred purpose to their churches. But separating stone from bone seems to have functioned inversely. When Catholics removed human bodies from church wreckage, they appeared to be rejecting the search for divine signs that seemed naturally indicated to them in other juxtapositions of stone and bone—



juxtapositions of their own human making, versus catastrophic jumbings wrought by God. This is not to say that Catholics did not find meaning in earthquakes or church destruction. It is to say that many of them chose to mark sites of tragic collapse oppositely from how they marked their regular houses of worship.

As a result, the devout and unwitting victims killed by collapsing churches have been relegated to obscurity while the rubble of actual church buildings has been preserved. Stones have been preferred to bones when remembering collapse. In many cases, the victims' remains were quickly and efficiently excised from the rubble and set to the side. Emptied ruined churches were turned into signifiers divorced from the physical Christian bodies that had animated them until, quite literally, the moment of their mutual destruction. In this same issue of *Material Religion*, Carolyn Dean and Dana Leibsohn call attention to the mutability of the sacred in the Americas, with indigenous and occasionally Spanish Catholic peoples open to the possibility of holy sentience moving out of a destroyed ritual object, transferring its subjectivity into a new host (Dean and Leibsohn 2017). Capistrano's Great Stone Church suggests another possibility: deliberately drained of sacrality, a vacant stone shell might long retain its value.

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## notes and references

<sup>1</sup> The Franciscan Geronimo Boscana is credited with compiling one of the most comprehensive collections of the Alta California Indians' worldview while he was working at Capistrano shortly after the earthquake. In this work, *Chinigchinich*, he does not make a single reference to earthquakes; he does mention Indian oral tradition of a flood, but not of earthquakes (Boscana 2009, 45). It does seem that far smaller tremors were commonplace in the area, though, since the Capistrano Mission friars recorded that a tremor had cracked the walls of the Great Stone Church in the early days of its construc-

tion, back in 1800, and these cracks had to be repaired (Kelsey 1989, 18).

<sup>2</sup> The opening prologue to Molesky's study of the Lisbon earthquake presents Father Gabriel Malagrida, a popular and celebrated Jesuit and sort of "supra-national religious hero", as the "last victim" of the Lisbon quake. He was executed only seven years after the quake at the behest of the Marquis de Pombal. Molesky dramatically implies that Malagrida and the Jesuit Order were casualties of post-quake, trauma-infused rage against Catholicism and the Catholic God (1, 5).

<sup>3</sup> On the significance of this refusal, see Newell (2008, 429).

<sup>4</sup> Along with bones, icons and images were also deemed to have the power to connect Catholics with saints. Historian William Taylor interestingly reflects on why images were more accessible and popular than bone relics in Mexico versus Europe (Taylor 2016, 361).

<sup>5</sup> A typical European example is the Church of the Madonna of San Luca in Bologna, Italy. By 1505, their inventory included the head of St. Petronio, the heads of St. Dominic and St. Floriano, the hand of Santa Cecilia, the heads of St. Isidore and St. Proculus, and the head of St. Anne (Webb 1996, 230). The most celebrated Iberian collection of relics in the sixteenth century belonged to Philip II of Spain, who had collected nearly 7500 relics by 1598; in the New World, bishops and Franciscans, Dominicans, Jesuits and Carmelites were avid importers of European saints' relics (Taylor 2016, 362–363).

<sup>6</sup> For Mexican examples, see Taylor (2005) and Ditchfield (1993); on Europe, see Johnson (1996) and Geary (1990).

<sup>7</sup> This information is given by the Franciscan Zephyrin Engelhardt who prefaced it with "if we may give credence to an old Indian," suggesting that he acquired the details from an oral interview with a Capistrano resident ([1922] 2015, 55). Engelhardt visited the Capistrano mission in 1915, more than a century after the quake; the time elapsed rules out the possibility that he was speaking to an eyewitness to the events, and suggests that residents of Capistrano passed on their memories of the catastrophe to the next generation.

<sup>8</sup> "Of the whites, none were killed" (Suñer & Barona as quoted by Engelhardt [1922] 2015, 53–54); "No white people were killed, although a few were present at holy mass" (Señan as quoted by Engelhardt [1922] 2015, 55).

<sup>9</sup> The Mission of San Juan Capistrano has become a point of pride and solidarity for the very much alive and well descendants of the Acjachemen, in particular the Juañeno Indians. In 1981, one Juañeno political activist, Raymond Belardes, explained, "this Mission stands as a monument to the Juaneño people. This is the only thing that we have that we can look back on and say, 'Yes, our ancestors did live here, our ancestors did build this Mission'"

(Belardes as quoted by Vaughn 2011, 161). That sentiment continues to resonate today, with members of the Juañeno band fighting for their historic rights to be buried in the cemetery of the Capistrano mission – alongside the victims of the 1812 earthquake – with ceremonies that combine both Roman Catholic and traditional indigenous rituals (Levine 2010).

<sup>10</sup> I say "theorized" because what is recorded in the register for the 25 women Engelhardt speaks of is the marital status of "married," not "mother." While Engelhardt was fastidious about reporting and quoting his sources, he does not mention cross-tabulating the death registers of victims with other mission records to assess the maternal (or paternal) status of the deceased.

<sup>11</sup> Certainly this seems to be the case in terms of baptisms in 1812, the year of the earthquake. According to Engelhardt's tallies, in March 1812 just over 50% of the new baptisms at Capistrano were female (50 out of 90). However, it has also been noted that the Alta California missions were gender imbalanced, with far fewer women than men (Engelhardt [1922] 2015, 179; Jackson and Castillo 1995, 56–57).

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, recent discussion of the impact of *monjerio* dormitories at missions such as Capistrano, ostensibly built to segregate and protect unmarried girls from assault from mission soldiers, but in reality unsanitary, overcrowded and hazardous (Vaughn 2011).

<sup>13</sup> On the efficacy of stone as a memorial, see Plate (2014, 31, 35, 58).

<sup>14</sup> It is interesting to note that the same 1816 circular that evaluated Barona rather harshly as "mediocre" only rated his competent and productive new colleague, Boscana, as "above medium" (Geiger 1969, 129).

<sup>15</sup> It is perhaps this communally created "ambivalence of Mission San Juan Capistrano as a religious space" (Bremer 2000, 430) that allows it to be such a thriving site for historical tourism in the USA today.

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