

# Catalog of skeletons of nuns in ex-convent of Mexico city

## Introduction

It has been no longer than 40 years, in August 1976, when the activities to recover the ancient convent of our Lady of Expectation of Santa Paula, under Saint Jerome's rule started, with the final aim to transform it into the University of the Cloister of Sor Juana. By that time, some of the estates around the convent that used to confirm the whole area belonging to the convent were abandoned and the old buildings remained in ruins; others instead, were used as housing, or commercial offices and even a large piece of land was used as a parking lot. Some of the first excavation works were made as part of a rescue to know the characteristics of the whole area's foundation. It was the so called "calaperimetral" that was made over the pillars and walls of the Great Cloister that allowed uncovering walkways, fountains, glazed tile bathtubs, majolica, chinaware, and European pottery. These first discoveries allowed the specialists to observe how fundamental it was the restoration project but also it opened the perspective of developing a wide research project grounded on historical archaeology.

By those years, this discipline was starting to gain importance and was part of the innovations introduced thanks to procession archaeology. One of the main aspects of historic archaeology centred its attention into the information derived from depositional context that were not reflected in document archives. Finally, on 1977 the archaeological rescue programme was shaped into a formal research project. Thus, the information gathered over the many excavations that were made, would have the aim of establishing the guideline to follow along the architectural restoration project. The limits of the whole cloister were given by the urban network; on the east the ancient de las Rejas street or February 5; on the north side San Jerónimo street; by the west there was Isabel la Católica street and on the south José María Izazaga street. As the excavation was moving forward we were developing at the same time the archive research, some features were starting to elucidate meanwhile others opened new interrogations. The deepest excavation levels in some areas of the cloister reached the prehispanic layers, identified because of the presence of Aztec III pottery, in addition to the well-known Rojo Texcoco. The cartographic analysis placed the cloister and its purlieu within the Tequesquiapan neighbourhood, this pertaining to the Moyotlacalpulli during the mexica dominion.

The land levels of the XVI<sup>th</sup> century were practically demolished in order to clear out the way for further modifications over the following centuries. Hence, few features from the civil architecture survived, some spaces belonged afterwards to the household of Isabel de Barrios, just as two yards that were acquired later for its enlargement. In some previous work we proposed the running of a small temple that might have been located in the house of the founder, the same that was destroyed in 1945 to consolidate the Santiago Greenham building. This was the ancient street of Las Rejas and was most probably the gatehouse of the convent. The amplification of the convent and its ensemble during the XVII<sup>th</sup> century incorporated officially 3 yards; the Temple, dedicated to Saint Jerome since 1623, was also built at this period. We must recall that this Convent took only *criollas* women and it was envisaged as a "calzadas" convent, this meant

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that life was not carried out as a communal life. Proof of it was that nuns did not used to sleep in a common room; each one had its own accommodations. The first lodgings were located on 5 de Febrero Street, on the yards owned by the founder, where the gatehouse, the potter's wheel and the locutories were settled. This can be proved by the discovery of the rests of a locutory, clearly identified because of the prints made by the grille found under the pavement.

The following century (XVIII) was not particularly different, the population of the convent grew gradually and the Gran Claustro, the Albergues Campesinos and the Estacionamiento areas were the core of convent life. The washing place was situated on the West side, and it included eight washing trays and water well. Depending on the social position of their families or the guild that paid the dowry, the nun's apartments had at least one room, kitchen, and a small bathroom with a glazed tile bathtub. The most luxurious ones could have two levels and several rooms to lodge servants, and a small vegetable garden. It is interest to remark the identification of two big and sumptuous "placeres" that were glazed tile octagonal bathtubs and which surely shows the prosperity of its inhabitants.

The turn of the century bore witness to several and important transformations due to the easing of the religious order it was compulsory to establish a life in common. Thus, reconfiguration of the Gran Claustro into what we know now a day. Nonetheless, the political events that revolved and transformed the social life of the country along the XIX<sup>th</sup> century triggered the suppression of religious orders and its consequent secularization. The whole convent was split up, some buildings were demolished and, with them, an important part of the memory of what it used to be colonial life in Mexico. The church did not suffered demolition and it remained open for worship despite its decline since 1919. The disposition of the church is due to a specific type of architecture developed for feminine religious orders. One single nave with its transept aligned with the street axis', of which in the front of the building there are the two main entrances. The temple comprehends the confessional, the choir and usually a tribune. The confessional were located after the dividing wall of the convent and were barely communicate by its own screen. The nuns participated in the Mass from the high choir, which was isolated with a lattice.

The low choir had an important significance for religious communities; it was located on the back of the church and isolated

with a spike lattice in order to keep away the intrusive ones. On the right side there was a little window where nuns received the Holy Communion and on the left side there was a little door that served as entrance of the young postulants that were to become nuns. The choir was precisely the luminal space where women held the rites of passage: they would abandon the earthly world and embrace cloister life to become wives of Christ. It was also the place where they were buried. When someone at the congregation died, the body was carefully washed up and then it was shrouded. Afterwards, a flamboyant white, blue and red flower crown lightened up its entire face and a nice bouquet on her hands embellished the body. These both represented its mystical marriage; the colour of the flowers reflected the Church ideals: white for purity, blue for Divine order and red for the love of Christ. The hands placed next to the heart and holding the bouquet, held as well a jet rosary. A procession moved the body to the centre of the choir facing to the great Altar. The cross and the altar candles that accompanied the funeral procession were displaced next to the head of the deceased and next to it, the holy water vessel with its aspergillum. The solemn death Mass ended up with a Requiem aeternadonae Domine. Et lux perpetualuceatei. Requiescatim pace. Amen. Finally, the body in its coffin was placed in the grave and covered up with lime.

In 1863, Saint Jerome's nuns abandoned the convent due to, as we have mentioned, the implementation of *Leyes de Reforma* (secularization of social and political life). The cloister was used as a military headquarter and the rest of the convent was divided and sold out, thus, beginning its decline and readjustment for different purposes.

In the archives of the Dirección de Monumentos Históricos was registered that in May 1917, the roof of the choir was seriously damaged and so its reconstruction began. The first excavations started in 1931 in search of Sor Juana remains and in 1932 the convent was declared a historical monument according to the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> articles of the Law on Protection and Conservation of Monuments and Natural Beauties, 1930. Between 1964 and 1965, Francisco de la Maza and Guillermo Rossell carried out the restoration of the choirs and started new excavations. Over six months in 1976 Romano coordinated a group of specialists from what was then the Department of Physical Anthropology of the INAH, to explore the south part of the temple and the high altar. The following stage, carried out again by Romano and Jaén between June 1978 and August 1979, went through the lower choir and finally, between July 1980 and April 1981, they explored the

area that once did Santiago Greenham.

This brief synthesis of the excavations on the ancient convent of Saint Jerome stands out its importance in the colonial world. Feminine conventual life as an important part of the whole social structure, has had many approaches; each generation had take under its responsibility the deconstruction of the factic corpus to attempt different or new ways of interpreting the past in order perhaps, to reconcile it with its own present: thus the value of Jaén, Romano and Bautista researches. This is a catalogue that not only allows us to delve into everyday life of nuns and its colonial society, but also even to recall that history is indeed part of our collective memory. The catalogue is divided in three sections; the first one corresponds to the description of 23 human bodies discovered on the graves of the lower choir, between June 1978 and August 1979. During this excavation there were identified 42 graves from which walls were covered by a layer of plaster. Due to the restoration works made between 1964 and 1965, 19 graves presented some alterations and it was not possible to rescue any bone material.

The second part concerns with the exploration and later discovery of 106 bodies under the grave's floor. Inside the coffins there were remains of lime or charcoal over the bodies. This was a common practice to speed up the process of putrefaction and avoid bad smells. As part of the funerary objects were identified remains of clothing, scissors, buckles, knives, little medals, crucifixes, pins and the wire used to make the flower crowns and the bouquets. Finally, the third part describes the finding of 84 bodies under the Santiago Greenham building, and whose space matches the first convent foundation. It is worthy to mention that 15 coffins were founded empty, probably for its relocation afterwards on the lower choir of the temple. This catalogue offers a brief description on the physical features of a total of 207 bodies, such as age, sex and diseases. This information is vital to know characteristics of the population who inhabited the convent as well as health problems that the religious community dealt with within the context of colonial society. This catalogue will be, no doubt, an important benchmark in many spheres of historical archaeology.

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## Conflict of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.