1987

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The Hernando De Soto Expedition: From Apalachee To Chiaha*

Charles Hudson
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and
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The De Soto Commission (Swanton 1939) reconstructed De Soto’s 1539-1543 route through the Southeast. In this paper we report our research on the segment of that route from northern Florida through Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina, ending at Chiaha in eastern Tennessee. We believe that our reconstruction is more accurate than that of the De Soto Commission, and that continued archaeological and documentary research into the De Soto expedition’s route will greatly enrich our understanding of southeastern Native American societies.

In recent years it has become evident to students of the aboriginal Southeast that the reconstruction of the route of Hernando De Soto’s exploration by the U.S. De Soto Expedition Commission (Swanton 1939) contains errors of interpretation. Recent examinations of portions of the Commission’s route by Brain et al. (1974), Lankford (1977), and Smith (1976) have raised doubts about it, and this has led to new research and to new reconstructions of portions of the route.

Several new kinds of evidence have made these revisions feasible, indeed necessary. Recent advances in archaeological research have provided a strong basis for new revisions, and, partly as a by-product of this research, new understandings of sixteenth-century aboriginal settlement patterns have come to light. During Swanton’s era, information on the late prehistoric Southeast was at best rudimentary, and at worst wildly erroneous, and when this information was used to amplify documentary evidence for the De Soto expedition, it simply compounded error. Additionally, recent advances in the dating of historic artifacts have made it possible to identify the artifacts carried by the sixteenth-century Spanish explorers (Brain 1975; Fairbanks 1968; Smith 1976, 1984). Moreover, there is evidence that the materials that the Indians obtained from the earliest explorers were quickly used as grave goods (Smith 1984:45). Hence, wherever these artifacts occur in aboriginal sites, it suggests that these sites were visited by Europeans, or at the very least that the sites were population centers that date to the sixteenth century.

Another source of new information is additional documents that have come to light since the Commission’s research. Especially important is a document by Juan de la Banderia, scribe for Juan Pardo’s second expedition, which has greatly amplified our understanding of Pardo’s expeditions in 1566-1568. Our recent studies based on this document (DePratter, Hudson, and Smith 1983) have enabled us to achieve a detailed reconstruction of Pardo’s route in which he visited several of the same towns visited by De Soto twenty-seven years earlier. Specifically the Bandera document has allowed us to establish probable locations for Hymahi or Aymay (Pardo’s Guiomae), Cofitachequi, Xuala (Pardo’s Joara), and Chiaha, as well as the general location of the Chisca Indians. Even though the locations of these sites are at present only probable, we expect that archaeological research will make it possible to establish one or more of them with certainty. Short of this, we feel that we now have some reference points in the interior that are more securely established than in any previous work on this part of the De Soto route.

In our reconstruction of the De Soto route [Fig.1], we have relied heavily on the account by Rodrigo Ranjel, De Soto’s secretary, and upon the account by the Gentleman of Elvas. In cases where we were doubtful about Bourne’s translation of Ranjel, we read the original, as published in Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo y Valdes’ Historia General y Natural de las Indias. The accounts of Luis Hernandez de Biedma and Garcilaso de la Vega are far less useful as evidence for locating the activities of De Soto and his men with respect to time and place, though we have used both of them as ancillary evidence.

Garcilaso is remarkably unreliable for the route from Apalachee to Chiaha, and particularly so for the segment of the route from Apalachee to Cofitachequi, where his narrative is curiously condensed. He does not even mention the chiefdoms of Capachequi (though, as will later be seen, he gives valuable details about a village that may have been the main village of Capachequi), Toa, and Ichisi. He appears to have had Ichisi in mind in his discussion of what he calls “Altapaha,” this latter word being evidently a confusion of the “Altamaha” of the other chroniclers. Moreover, when he narrates the expedition’s progress from “Altapaha” to “Cofa” (which the other chroniclers call “Ocute”) and Cofaqui, he spuriously inserts some material on the Chalaques, who were not encountered until a month later, as the expedition went from Cofitachequi northward to Xuala (Garcilaso 1962:263-271).

[66] In reconstructing the route of De Soto from Apalachee to Chiaha, our research has been guided by several generalizations. One generalization, for which there is actually much evidence in the four narratives, is that De Soto constantly used Indian guides and that he virtually always followed Indian trails. This has been accepted by researchers for many years and needs no further elaboration. We have utilized known Indian trails, such as those reconstructed by William E. Myer (1928) and Marion Hemperly (n.d.), or else we reconstructed them ourselves using old maps as evidence.

Sixteenth century Spaniards in the New World used two leagues in measuring distances: the legua comun, which was 5.57 km or 3.45 miles, and the legua legal, which was 4.19 km or 2.63 miles (Chardon 1980). Our research on the Pardo expedition indicates that they generally measured or estimated distances in terms of the legua comun. On most days, the Pardo expedition covered five leagues, though on some days only four leagues, and on rare occasions they covered six or more leagues. When distances are specified by the De Soto chroniclers, they generally fall within this range (e.g., Garcilaso 1962:329), and hence we have felt justified in using the legua comun. Like the Pardo expedition, the De Soto expedition appears to have covered about 5 leagues per day, though on some occasions more, and this was particularly the case when they were traversing an area where they could not obtain sufficient food from the Indians.

It should be noted that the De Soto commission used the legua legal in their reconstruction. Perhaps it is for this

reason that the Commission generally covered shorter distances than we on particular segments of the expedition. Unlike the De Soto Commission, we have attempted to estimate the approximate location of the expedition at the end of each day of travel. When the documents do not specifically mention a day’s distance of travel, we have estimated travel at five leagues.

This brings us to another generalization. It is clear from the narratives that De Soto’s movements were governed by two substances—precious metals and food—both of which he expected to find at centers of dense Indian population. He was searching for a high civilization, such as the one he had encountered when he was with Pizzaro in the conquest of the Incas. Like all sixteenth-century explorers, De Soto’s men lived on food that they took from the Indians along the way.

Finally, our overall research into various sixteenth-century Spanish exploratory expeditions has given us valuable insight into some Spanish conceptions of New World geography. The wealth of Mexico and Peru had been found in mountainous country. Perhaps because of this, as well as for other reasons, it is clear that for sixteenth-century Spaniards the coastal plain of the Southeast was an area to be traversed as quickly as possible. This is very clear in the Banderas document, and this premise serves as one of the cornerstones of our reconstruction of the route of De Soto.

It is clear that Juan Pardo did not avoid the mountains, and neither did De Soto. De Soto had, after all, only a few years earlier participated in conquering people who lived in the Peruvian Andes, and after that adventure, no mountains in the southeastern United States could have deterred him. Indeed, it appears that De Soto purposefully entered the Appalachian mountains, probably to search for mineral wealth and high civilizations.

Although we are currently doing research on the entire De Soto route, we have limited our present discussion to a single segment of the route, from Apalachee to Chiaha. Our reconstruction of the early part of this segment resembles that of the De Soto Commission, but later it departs from it in important ways.

Regrettably, because we have not been able to pinpoint the precise location of Apalachee, we have to begin on less than firm ground. However, it can confidently be said that Apalachee was in the vicinity of present Tallahassee, Florida (Tesar 1979, 1980).

De Soto and his men wintered in Apalachee from early October, 1539 until early March, 1540. All through the winter the Apalachees kept attacking them (Ranjel 1922:80). And all through the winter De Soto kept interrogating the Indians they had captured about the location and nature of other Indian societies in the Southeast. While seeking this intelligence, they learned that they had in captivity two boys of 16 or 17 years of age who had been traveling about with Indian traders, and who claimed to possess more detailed knowledge than did others of trails into the interior (Garcilaso 1962:253). One of these boys, whom they named Marcos, was to guide them to Ocute and Cofaqui (Garcilaso 1962:280). The other, who was named Perico or Pedro, was from Yupaha, a province located to the east, which was governed by a woman to whom her subjects gave quantities of what he believed was gold (Elvas 1968:49-50). Yupaha appears to have been another name (perhaps in a Timucuan language) for Cofitachequi, or else it was the name of a group which was tributary to Cofitachequi. Yupaha may have been the Timucuan word Ybaha, which meant "Guale," or it could have meant "my home" (J.T. Milanich, personal communication, 1984). Like Marcos, Perico knew the trail from Apalachee into the interior, but in addition he also persuaded De Soto that he knew how to guide them to Cofitachequi. Later it became clear that Perico had probably never visited Cofitachequi (Elvas 1968:64), but he spoke a language that was intelligible to the Indians of Cofitachequi (Ranjel 1922:95), and he perhaps possessed knowledge of the Ayllon colony that had been founded on the coast of South Carolina or Georgia in 1526 (Biedma 1922:6710-11). Hence, it is probable that his home was somewhere on the coast of South Carolina or Georgia. In addition to his own native language, he was able to speak a Timucuan language understandable to Juan Ortiz, a Spaniard whom De Soto had rescued from captivity among the Indians, who translated everything into Spanish.

Perico appears to have possessed great powers of persuasion. When De Soto and his men showed him gold and silver jewelry and precious stones, he told them that all of this could be had in Cofitachequi. And, he added, great quantities of pearls could be had there (Garcilaso 1962:254). He also indicated to them that he knew how the gold was taken from the earth, melted, and refined (Elvas 1968:50).

When they departed Apalachee, the expedition carried enough corn to cross sixty leagues of "desert" (Elvas 1968:51). That is, De Soto did not expect to find much corn while they were crossing the coastal plain.1 On March 3, they departed Iviachica, the main town of Apalachee, and by nightfall Ranjel says they came to the river Guaucua (Ranjel 1922:82). This must have been the Ochlockonee River. Evidently, the crossing of this river was uneventful. Next they came to a river that was deep, wide, and swift. Ranjel says they reached this river on the third day after having departed Apalachee (Ranjel 1922:82), Elvas says it took four days (1968:51), while Biedma (1922:9) says it took five days. It is probable that Ranjel was traveling in an advance party of mounted soldiers led by De Soto, while Elvas and Biedma traveled with the remainder of the expedition, which on several occasions in the expedition lagged a day or more in the rear.

It is not possible to trace this initial segment of the route with a high degree of confidence, but since no large late prehistoric sites are present on the well surveyed lower Ocmulgee River area (Snow 1977), or on the upper Satilla River (Blanton 1979), we can rule out their departing from Apalachee in a northeastwardly direction. Moreover, since both large and small late prehistoric sites are known for the eastern side of Chickasawhatchee Creek, it is likely that they set out almost due north from Apalachee (Fig. 1). They probably followed the Hawthorn Trail from present Cairo to Camilla, where they turned off to follow Barnard’s Path, which led from St. Augustine to the vicinity of present Newton, Georgia,2 where they probably crossed the River of Capachequi, i.e. the Flint. This river was so wide the the best stone-thrower among them could not throw a stone across it, and it took them several days to devise a way to cross it. They built a barge in which to make a crossing and pulled it back and forth using a chain made by linking together the chains they used on their Indian slaves. Even so, the current was so strong that it broke the chain twice.
It took them until Wednesday, March 10, to get the entire party across the river. After crossing, they spent the night in a pine woods. The next day, March 11, they came to the first village of Capachequi, where they found plenty of supplies (Ranjel 1922:83). This village was probably located on the eastern side of Chickasawhatchee Creek. They continued on, probably following a trail up the eastern bank of Chickasawhatchee and Kiokee Creeks, traveling through terrain that was closely covered with bushes. They were possibly traveling through old fallow agricultural fields, or else through an area that had been repeatedly burned over. As they traveled, they saw several towns they did not enter because they were surrounded by large swamps (Biedma 1922:9). Some of these same swamps are clearly shown in the earliest survey (1819) of district #2 of original Early County. And in 1836 an important battle between a party of Creek Indians and Georgia militia took place in the swamp along Chickasawhatchee Creek. The Creeks had taken refuge on an island that was surrounded by mud and water from knee deep to waist deep (White 1854:262-264). Even though much draining has been done, these swamps are still very much in evidence in this area today.

After nightfall on March 11 they reached what was probably the main village of Capachequi. Its inhabitants had fled, abandoning the village. But in order to reach this village, they had to cross a bad swamp that had a swift current. The water came up to the girths and saddlepads of their horses (Ranjel 1922:83-84). This village was probably located at the mound site on Magnolia Plantation on Pine Island (9Du1), and they must have encountered the current in crossing Kiokee Creek. Garcilaso may in fact be describing the main town of Capachequi when he describes a village on a peninsula almost completely surrounded by a swamp, with deep mud, which came up to the middle of one’s thighs. The Indians had constructed wooden footbridges that led from the town in several directions. The town was situated on a rise, from whence they could see other villages scattered about (Garcilaso 1962:263). It was here that five Spaniards strayed away from the main encampment, when the Indians attacked, killing one and wounding at least three others (Ranjel 1922:84; Elvas 1968:52).

Capachequi was but the first of a series of Lamar cultures De Soto would encounter as he traveled through the Piedmont and Ridge and Valley provinces. These Lamar cultures are defined primarily in terms of their ceramics, which are grit-tempered with complicated stamped decorations, thickened rims, and incising. They date to between about A.D. 1400 and A.D. 1600.

The location of this population center on Chickasawhatchee Creek explains why De Soto made the difficult crossing of the Flint River, when he could have simply proceeded north without crossing any major streams. That is, he undoubtedly made the crossing on the advice of his Indian guides, who knew that shelter [68] and supplies of food could be had there.

They departed from Capachequi on March 17 and came at nightfall to "White Spring," which had a large flow of water and contained fish (Ranjel 1922:84). This was probably one of the lime-sinks or "ponds" shown in the 1826 survey of original Lee County, which lay along Fowltown Creek, Kinchafoone Creek, and Muckaloochee Creek, to the north of present Albany.

The next day, March 18, they came to the "River of Toa," which, because of its size, must have again been the Flint. Indian guides apparently named the rivers after nearby chiefdoms; therefore, it is possible that different segments of the Flint River had different names. This same nomenclatural convention probably accounts for the naming of the Catawba-Wateree-Santee River in South Carolina, which changes its name three times as it flows from the mountains to the sea. Another reason they may not have realized that the River of Toa was the same river they had crossed earlier is that this was probably the first time they had seen it again after having first crossed it ten days earlier.

The point at which they again came to the Flint River was somewhere in present Lee County. Ranjel is vague about what happened next, so that two scenarios are possible. They could have remained there at the river, spending March 19, 20 and 21 building two unsuccessful bridges out of pine poles before completing a third successful bridge with criss-crossed timbers. Then, on Monday, March 22, after all had successfully gotten to the other side, they would have on that same day had to travel a full five or six leagues to the north. Arguing against this is the fact that no nineteenth-century Indian trails crossed the Flint in Lee County (Hemperly 1982).

The other possibility, and perhaps the more likely one, is that after coming to the river they immediately proceeded up a trail paralleling the western side for two days before coming to the place where they were to cross, probably near the junction of Sumter, Macon and Dooly Counties, near the mouth of Hogcrawl Creek, where a nineteenth-century Indian trail crossed the river (Hemperly 1982). Then on Sunday, March 21, they built the three bridges. After all succeeded in crossing on Monday, they would have traveled only a short distance before camping in the open. Ranjel says that they were at this time not well organized, implying that after crossing the river they had not been reorganized for a march (Ranjel 1922:84-85). Then, the following day, on March 23, they again traveled only a short distance before arriving early in the morning at Toa, or Toalli (Elvas 1968:52), or Otoa (Biedma 1922:10). Elvas makes it clear that in going from Capachequi to Toa they had passed through an uninhabited area of several days' duration (1968:52), and they were probably short on food.

Toa was a large village that was probably near present Montezuma, Georgia. Biedma (1922:10) says that Toa was larger than any they had seen up to this point, and this presumably includes Apalachee. Several mounds are said to have been located along the Flint River near Montezuma, but none are well known archaeologically. Perhaps Toa was located at the mounds some four miles south of Montezuma (Hays 1933:18).

At midnight on March 23, De Soto and a small force of about forty cavalry abruptly pushed ahead, rapidly traveling some eighteen hours straight for a distance of twelve leagues (Ranjel 1922:85). In this extraordinary maneuver, traveling more than twice the distance he ordinarily covered in a single day, De Soto evidently intended to surprise the Indians in the next chiefdom as well as to persuade his own men that he expected to find riches ahead. At the end of the day they encountered "a bad passage of water quite deep." And although it was dark when they arrived at it, they succeeded in crossing what was probably Big Indian Creek, near present Perry, Georgia. They probably followed an old trail that lay along present Georgia Highway 224 to
Buzzard’s Roost, presently called Westlake (Marion Hemperly, personal communication). The next day, March 25, they came to the first settlement of Ichisi.9 It was on an island in the Ocmulgee River. In getting to the village, the branch of the river they crossed was very broad. They waded and swam across a good part of it. After taking some food from the village, they continued on, going northward up the west bank of the Ocmulgee River, parallelling a segment of the river that meanders through swampy country.

Many large and small Lamar sites are known to exist between the mouth of Big Indian Creek and Macon, and there are today a number of islands and cutoffs in this stretch of the river. But in this meander zone the course of the Ocmulgee River is today different than it was in 1540, so that the location of the island visited by De Soto and his men can be determined only if the course of the river can be geologically reconstructed. It is possible that this village was on an island in the Ocmulgee River near Westlake, where there is today a slough about a half a mile long, probably an old river channel (Hemperly 1982).

After raiding the village on the island for food, they traveled northward for a way, guided by Perico, past several more villages. They were probably following the old Hawkinsville Road (Hemperly 1982). In crossing one of the swamps along the way, some of the horses nearly drowned because they swam them across with their saddles on. The men crossed this swamp on a log that lay across the channel, but one, Benito Fernandez, fell off and drowned. This incident probably occurred on Echeconnee Creek at the Hawkinsville Road crossing, just past present Elberta (Marion Hemperly, personal communication).

They continued on, finally stopping at one of the villages. Here they were visited by some messengers [69] sent by the chief of the Ichisi (Ranjel 1922:86). De Soto and his men remained in this village for three days, resting and no doubt waiting for the rest of the expedition to catch up with them.

They resumed travel on March 29, still going up the west bank of the Ocmulgee, probably following what was later called Barnard’s Trail and also the River Road. It rained very hard on this day, and while [70] crossing a small stream the water rose so rapidly it put them in danger. This stream was probably Tobesofkee Creek. Then they came to a small village with abundant food, where they spent the night and the next day.

On March 31, they crossed the “Great River” (the Ocmulgee) in canoes provided by the people of Ichisi, and they arrived at the main town of Ichisi on the same day (Ranjel 1922:88-89). Their crossing was in or near present Macon. The next day, April 1, they erected a cross on or near a mound in the village. It is clear from the narratives that Ichisi was a well organized and moderately large chiefdom. The people were able to provide food in abundance and many canoes. The main town clearly had at least one mound. We think it probable that Ichisi was at the Lamar site on the eastern side of the Ocmulgee River. Here they had reached what they had sought since leaving Apachee: the Fall Line. The name Ichisi is quite similar to “O-cheese-hatche,” the name that eighteenth-century Creek Indians applied to the Ocmulgee River (Hawkins 1848:83). At Ichisi, they first heard of Ocute, who was said to be the most powerful chief of that region.

Leaving Ichisi on April 2, the expedition probably followed a trail along the Fall Line to the northeast, probably the same as the well-known Lower Creek Trading Path of the eighteenth century (Myer 1928). They may have followed Hawkins’ Road, which ran through southern Jones County, then through Coopers in Baldwin County, crossing the Oconee River just below the mouths of Reedy Creek and Buck Creek (Marion Hemperly, personal communication). Here our route begins to diverge from that of the De Soto Commission. Traveling two days, they came to a “considerable stream” where they found some deserted cabins. They had come to the Oconee River, about which Biedma says the following:

Here we found a river that had a course not southwardly, like the rest we had passed, but eastward to the sea, where the Licentiate, Lucas de Ayllon, had come; whence we gave still more credit to what the Indian [i.e. Perico] said, and we came to believe as true all the stories that he had told us (1922:9).10

This statement is somewhat puzzling in that the upper part of the Oconee River does not flow more noticeably eastward than does the Ocmulgee, which they had already crossed. It is possible that the Indians regarded the “River of Altamaha” (i.e. the Oconee) as having been continuous with the present Altamaha River, and they may have thus regarded the Ocmulgee as a tributary. If this was the case, then the “River of Altamaha” (the Oconee) was indeed the first river they encountered that flowed into the Atlantic Ocean.

After reaching the river, some messengers came from the chief of Altamaha, and later still more Indians came from Altamaha and furnished them with canoes for the crossing (Ranjel 1922:89). They then went to the town of Altamaha, which we believe was located at the Shinholsor mound center, a few miles down the Oconee River from present Milledgeville, Georgia.11 This site is known to have a large Lamar component (Smith and Kowalewski 1980). The chief of Altamaha, whose name was Camuno, told the Spanish that he was subject to Ocute, and that he was at war with another chief named Cofitachequi. Camuno slyly asked De Soto whether he was to pay tribute to him in the future, or whether he should continue to pay to Ocute, who was described as being a great chief. De Soto tactfully said that he could continue to pay tribute to Ocute, whom he considered to be like a brother (Ranjel 1922:89-90). Later De Soto set up a cross in this town of Altamaha.

De Soto sent for Chief Ocute, who came to Altamaha to meet with the Spaniards. Then, on April 8, De Soto and Ocute departed from Altamaha. By nightfall they had reached some “cabins,” possibly near the mouth of Shoulderbone Creek, and the next day they arrived at the main village of Ocute (Garcilaso calls this province “Cofa,” p. 271). We interpret this portion of the journal as a trip up the Oconee valley to the Shoulderbone mound site, which is known to have a Lamar component. Shoulderbone is a large site, with at least five mounds. The largest of these was 12 m high, and the diameter of its base was about 55 m. Three of the mounds lie within a 2 ha area surrounded by a ditch (Jones 1873:143-146). In a previous work, Smith and Kowalewski (1980) suggested that the Shoulderbone site was the capitol of a powerful province, with several other large mound sites, including Shinholsor, subject to it. This interpretation was based on archaeological data alone, but it now appears to be substantiated by the historical
Figure 1. Proposed route of the De Soto expedition.
documentation of the De Soto expedition. Indeed, at the
time Smith and Kowalewski proposed their interpretation,
they believed that De Soto had passed far to the south of
this area. Biedma says that it was a thickly peopled
province (1922:10). De Soto set up a cross in this town,
just as he had in Ichisi and Altamaha, though at Ocute he set
the cross up in the plaza instead of on a mound (Elvas
1966:54). This may be the town in which De Soto left a
small cannon they had been carrying with them. It was
heavy, and they could see they would probably never need
to use it (Garcilaso 1962:273).

In Ocute, De Soto acquired both food and burden-bearers.
From here he departed on March 12 and went to the town of
Cofaqui (Elvas 1968:56; Ranjel 1922:91). The location of
this town is uncertain, but it is likely that it was further up
the Oconee River. Cofaqui was probably near the Dyar site,
just west of present Greensboro (Smith and Kowalewski
1980; Smith 1981). This would have entailed 6 leagues of
travel (20.7 miles, or 33.3 km), somewhat more than they
usually covered. This would have taken them to the
northwest, away from the northeastward trail they had
followed from Ichisi to Altamaha, a trail that in the
eighteenth century would be called the "Lower Creek Trading
[?1] Path." But going north would have gained them an
advantage. Here they picked up a trail that in the
eighteenth century would be called the "Hightower Trail"
("Hightower" being an anglicization of Etowah), a trail to
the Savannah River that avoided the water crossings that
could make travel difficult on the Lower Creek Trading
Path. While they were at Cofaqui an important chief named Patota
came to visit them.12 Garcilaso says that Cofaqui was the
elder brother (perhaps only in a manner of speaking) of
Ocute (whom Garcilaso calls Cofa) and Patofa was a war
leader (Garcilaso 1962:273, 278). Because elder brothers
were dominant over younger brothers among southeastern
Indians, this contradicts Ranjel, who is probably to be
trusted in saying that Ocute was the dominant chief
(1922:90).

Neither Ranjel nor Elvas states when they departed from
Cofaqui, but from what was later said about events occurring
on April 21, when they reached the confluence of the Broad
and Saluda Rivers, it is clear that they had traveled for nine
days (Elvas 1968:59; Ranjel 1922:94). This means that
they must have departed from Cofaqui on April 13. While at
Cofaqui, the guide Perico "began to froth at the mouth, and
threw himself on the ground as if he were possessed of the
Devil" (Elvas 1968:58). He told De Soto that from Cofaqui
it was only four days to Yupaha. The Indians of Cofaqui,
however, said that they knew of no dwellings in that
direction, and they knew of no trail, and if they went that
way they would die from lack of food (Biedma 1922:119;
Garcilaso 1962:276). They also told them that to the
northwest lay the province of Coosa, a rich province with
very large towns (Garcilaso 1962:58). The main town of the
chiefdom of Coosa was on the Coosaawatee River, just east
of Carters, Georgia, but the influence of the chief of Coosa
extended northward into Tennessee and southward into
Alabama (Hudson et al., 1983). Their being told of
the existence of Coosa at this point is consistent with our
placing Cofaqui on the upper Oconee River, because at this
point De Soto was the nearest to Coosa that he would come
until he actually passed through it, three months later.
More importantly, at the time they were told about Coosa,
they were on or near the "Hightower Trail," which led
directly to Itaba (Etowah) near Cartersville, Georgia, and
from there to the main town of Coosa.13

But, trusting Perico, they set out directly eastward
(Biedma 1922:11), following the Hightower Trail, which ran
on or near Georgia Highway 12 most of the way. They were
accompanied by Patofa and a force of his warriors, who went
along to take revenge on their enemy, Cofitachequi
(Garcilaso 1962:277). The further they traveled, the more
the trail became indistinct. According to Ranjel, on April
15 Perico no longer knew where he was, and he began again
to act as if he were possessed by the devil. On April 16
they came to a small stream, probably Butler Creek, where
they spent the night. On April 17, on the fifth day after
having left Cofaqui, they came to a very large river (un
grandisimo rio), the Savannah. Ranjel describes the stream
as being divided into two branches, wider than a long shot
from an arquebus. There were flat stones in the water where
the fords were located, but the water still came up to the
stirrups and the saddlebags of their horses, and the current
was so strong that some of the pigs they herded along as
they traveled were swept away and lost. The foot soldiers
crossed further upstream, where the river was deeper.
In order to cross the swift river, they made a line of thirty or
forty men tied together (Elvas 1968:59; Ranjel 1922:93).

In all probability, they crossed the Savannah River near
the bluff upon which Fort Moore stood. A meander zone
begins a few miles upstream, and several old channels of the
river are apparent on late eighteenth century maps. From
Ranjel's description, it is clear that they crossed the river
where an island had been formed by a cutoff. In William
Faden's map of the Augusta area in 1780, an old channel
can be seen to have been located about two miles west of Fort
Moore Bluff. When it was open, this channel would have
formed an island about two miles long. Still further west
was an old channel that in the late eighteenth century was
called Alligator Pond. When this channel was open it
would have formed an island about four or five miles long.
Either of these islands could have given the Spaniards the
impression that the river had two branches.

When Archibald Campbell visited Augusta in January of
1779, he described the channel (there was only one at this
time) of the Savannah as being not less than 200 yards
wide, 10 feet deep, and with a moderately fast current
(Cashin and Robertson 1975:26-27). It is clear that at this
depth neither mounted nor foot soldiers could have forded
the Savannah. As Ranjel implies, De Soto and his men
probably got to the other side by fording one channel,
crossing the island, and then fording the other channel.
Trails in the Southeast often crossed rivers where there were
islands because here the water was both narrower and
shallower than would otherwise have been the case.

At this point our proposed route already differs
considerably from that of the U.S. De Soto Commission.
The Commission report places Ichisi on the Flint River, and
it places Altamaha, Ocute, and Patofa (or Cofaqui) all on the
Ocmulgee. This was one reason why the Commission
placed Cofitachequi on the Savannah River. As will
presently be clear, evidence from the Pardo expeditions
show[s] that Cofitachequi was far to the northeast.

They had expected to arrive at Cofitachequi, and food,
after four days of travel, but clearly they had not. Had not
Perico been the only Indian who could translate from his
language into the Indian language spoken by Juan
Ortiz, who translated everything into Spanish, De Soto
would have thrown him to the dogs at this point (Elvas
1968:59). Now desperate, they began [72] traveling rapidly, covering seven
or eight leagues per day according to Elvas (1968:59), and
traveling rather wildly, turning from their crossing of the
Savannah River to the southeast instead of to the northeast, where they would have been able to travel without crossing any large streams. Their crossing at Fort Moore would have predisposed them to go in this direction, because it was from here that the trails went to the coast (Marion Hemperly, personal communication). Two days further they crossed another large river (otro río muy grande), which can only have been the south fork of the Edisto. The trail they took lay on or near highways 278 and 781 to present White Pond. They probably crossed the South Fork of the Edisto just below the mouth of Pond Branch, at or near the site where Guignard's bridge stood in the early nineteenth century. The next day they continued on, probably going northward and crossing the shallow North Fork of the Edisto River without comment. By nightfall they encamped by a small stream, probably on upper Black Creek or upper Twelve Mile Creek (Mills 1980).

The next day, April 21, by the end of the day, they again came to another very large river, divided into two streams, which were hard to cross (Ranjel 1922:94). They had come to the confluence of the Saluda and Broad Rivers which formed the Congaree River, near present Columbia, South Carolina. They appear to have crossed both the Saluda and the Broad, and therefore they probably crossed the latter several miles to the northwest of present Columbia. But, remarkably, there were no villages or towns here, only some fishermen's or hunter's shacks. At this point Patofa and the Indian guides were completely lost. It was here that De Soto learned that even though Patofa was at war with Cofitachequi, none of his men had ever been to Cofitachequi. Rather, they fought their war when small groups happened to encounter each other while hunting or fishing (Garcilaso 1962:284).

Being completely lost, on April 23 De Soto sent a scout up along the Broad River to the northwest, and another down the Congaree River to the southeast. On April 24, he sent a scout to the north. It rained continually, and the rivers rose alarmingly. Those who remained behind were now altogether without food, so they had to kill and butcher some of their pigs. Then, on April 25, the scout he had sent to the southeast returned and reported that he had found a town. He brought with him several Indians to serve as guides and interpreters. They were able to speak a language understood by Perico (Biedma 1922:12; Ranjel 1922:94-95). According to Garcilaso, Patofa and some of his warriors killed some of the inhabitants of this town and robbed their temple (1962:292-293).

They called this town Hymahi or Aymay, and it was almost certainly the same as the Guimoes of the Pardo expeditions, whose chief was called Emae orata (DePratter et al. 1983). It was located near the present town of Wateree between the Congaree and Wateree Rivers, and not far from their junction. Just as he had done at Toa, De Soto and a few horsemen rode twelve leagues and reached Hymahi or Aymay in a single day, with those on foot falling short by two, three, or four leagues, depending on how exhausted they were (Elvas 1968:61; Ranjel 1922:96). Elvas' statement that Hymahi was twelve or thirteen leagues from where they crossed the river agrees with our measurements using the legua común. Mills' (1980) Atlas shows two early nineteenth-century roads going from Columbia to the junction of the Congaree and the Wateree Rivers. Even if the precise location of Hymahi can be archaeologically discovered, the evidence is probably insufficient to allow a determination of which of these trails they followed.

It is striking that Hymahi was the first Indian town De Soto had encountered since leaving the Oconee River, a distance of over 130 miles (209 km) as the crow flies, and much of it is today prime real estate. They called this the "desert of Ocute" (Elvas), and there were no clear trails going through it. Recent archaeological research confirms that this area was uninhabited in the sixteenth century (Hally 1982). Here, clearly, is something that must be explained. We suggest that this "desert of Ocute" was a large buffer zone between two antagonistic chiefdoms.

After they emptied the storehouses at Hymahi, they would then travel upriver for two days before arriving at Cofitachequi, near present Camden, South Carolina. The Mouzon map of 1775 shows a trail leading from the confluence of the Congaree and Wateree Rivers to Camden, as does Mills' (1980) Atlas. Cofitachequi was situated on the Wateree River, which Biedma believed was the River of Santa Elena, where Ayllón had had his colony (Biedma 1922:13). According to Garcilaso (1962:329), he got this information from some "mariners" who were members of the De Soto expedition, and who had possibly been members of the Ayllón colony. However, it may be doubtful that they correctly identified this river.

Departing Hymahi on April 30, De Soto again rode ahead with a small party toward Cofitachequi, the town he had been seeking since departing from Apalachee. De Soto and several other members of this party stopped short of Cofitachequi, encamping near a large river, but he sent others ahead to Cofitachequi to arrange for interpreters and canoes for crossing the river. Judging from Mills' Atlas, the only place the road from the Congaree-Wateree junction to Camden comes close to the river is on upper Spears Creek, near the town of McCaskill. By our measurements, this was a distance of about seven and a half leagues. Those who went ahead had to travel another three leagues, arriving after dark at the place where the trail crossed the river (Garcilaso 1962:296-297; Ranjel 1922:98).

The next day, May 1, De Soto arrived at the crossing [73] that lay opposite the town. If the trail they were following lay along the road shown in Mills' Atlas, this means that the main town of Cofitachequi lay between present Camden and the Wateree River. A number of prehistoric sites and mound centers are located in this area (Ferguson 1974; Stuart 1970). It is clear that Cofitachequi had become a populous place by the early 1540s, but two years before De Soto arrived disease had struck, causing great loss of life, so that several entire towns were abandoned, including the main town Talimeco. Talimeco was described as being on a bluff above a river (Garcilaso 1962:314), and this would seem to place it at the Mulberry or McDowell site. However, because so little is known about the nearby Adamson site, a definite location for Talimeco must await further archaeological research at both of these sites.

In Cofitachequi they were given food, including strips of dried venison, tanned skins, and a plentiful supply of very good salt. However, the food supply was none too plentiful in Cofitachequi because of the epidemic that had killed many people and prevented others from planting their crops (Garcilaso 1962:300, 325). After arriving at Cofitachequi, Baltasar de Gallegos took a large detachment of soldiers with him to a place called Ilapi, where there were seven cribs of corn belonging to the Chieffainess of Cofitachequi (Ranjel 1922:100). They arrived at Ilapi on May 7. Assuming that they departed on May 5, the day after all had crossed the river, this would mean that they traveled three days in getting to Ilapi, and this travel time implies that
Ilapi was probably the same as the Ylasi which Juan Pardo visited, and which was located in the vicinity of Cheraw, South Carolina. Like Gallegos, it took Pardo three days to get from this place to Cofitachequi (DePratter et al. 1983). Garcilaso (1962:325) says that this town was 12 leagues from Cofitachequi, but the actual distance is about 17 leagues, or three long days of travel.

From the Indians of Cofitachequi De Soto learned that a powerful chief, Chiaha, was located two days away, and he determined to go there. One compelling motive was that the food at Cofitachequi was quickly being depleted by the hungry men and horses (Biedma 1922:14-15). While the general movement of the expedition northward (Biedma 1922:15) from Cofitachequi is clear enough, too little information is given by the chroniclers to trace their route precisely. Ranjel says that they departed Cofitachequi on Wednesday, May 13, but because Wednesday fell on May 12, we have a choice between these two days (Ranjel 1922:102). Elvas says they departed on May 3, clearly an error (Elvas 1968:66). Perhaps this is a misprint of May 13, and if so, this suggests that they departed on May 13. When they departed, De Soto forced the Lady of Cofitachequi-----the niece of the Chiefaintness-----to go along as a hostage.

De Soto's first destination was Guaquili, which was almost certainly the same as the Guaquiri of the Pardo expedition, a town located in the vicinity of Hickory, N.C. Depending on whether De Soto departed from Cofitachequi on May 12 or 13, he reached Guaquili after five or six days of travel. From Camden to Hickory the trail distance was about 120 miles (193 km), or 34.8 leagues. This means that on this leg of their journey the party traveled 6.9 or 5.8 leagues per day. And the implication of this is that De Soto was either going ahead with a small mounted force, as he had before, or else the entire force was traveling at a faster than usual pace.

When the Pardo expedition went from Cofitachequi to Joara (i.e. De Soto’s Xuala), many towns were mentioned in between. It is clear enough that De Soto and his men went through several towns (Elvas 1968:66), but they mention only one by name, Guaquili, the last town before they reached Xuala (Ranjel 1922:103). But Ranjel does say that they came to the territory (población) of “Chalaque” two days after departing Cofitachequi, presumably arriving on May 15, i.e., after three days on the road. This “Chalaque” may be the Muskogean word cilo-kKITa, meaning “people of a different language.” From their time on the trail, this would have put them somewhere west of Charlotte, North Carolina. In Pardo’s day, this was where the town of Otari was located, and there is evidence that a linguistic boundary between Muskogean-speakers and Siouan-speakers lay in this general area.

In traveling through Chalaque, De Soto encountered so few people, it is possible that he was traveling up the west side of the Catawba River. Such was the case when Juan Pardo made his first entrada following a trail on the western side of the river. De Soto could have forded the river where Pardo is thought to have made his crossing. This was probably at McDonald’s Ford, a short distance above the mouth of Fishing Creek (Mills 1980, Chester District). However, none of the De Soto chroniclers mentions a river crossing, so it is also possible that they proceeded up the eastern side of the Catawba-Wateree River.

De Soto sought in vain to find the main town of Chalaque. Not finding such a town, they encamped in a pine woods, and some Indians came to visit them, bringing food and gifts. But all of the chroniclers agree that this was a very poor area for corn. And the reasons were probably two-fold: they were in Chalaque in May, when little of the past year’s corn crop would have remained, and the epidemic of the previous year would have reduced the past year’s yield. They were struck by the fact that hardly any young people were to be seen in Chalaque, and many of the old people were blind.

According to Ranjel, while encamped in the territory of Chalaque, on May 16 De Soto sent a letter by some [74] Indians to Gallegos, who was at Ilapi, telling him to come on behind him (Ranjel 1922:102-103). If Ranjel is correct about when and where this letter was sent, then seemingly it poses a problem of interpretation. If our location of Ilapi is correct, it lay over 65 miles (105 km) to the east of where De Soto was encamped. Even with swift and long-winded runners, it would have taken them a day, perhaps two, for this letter to have reached Gallegos. If he began marching when he received this letter, he would have departed from Ilapi no sooner than May 17 or 18. Yet Gallegos reached Xuala only a day after De Soto did--clearly an impossibility.

Fortunately, here is one instance in which Garcilaso can come to our aid. According to Garcilaso, when Gallegos departed Cofitachequi to go to Ilapi, De Soto gave him an order to pick up some corn there and then to proceed on and join him on the trail while he, De Soto, was going north to Chalaque. Hence, the messengers dispatched by De Soto either encountered Gallegos and his party on the move a day or two away from De Soto’s camp in Chalaque, or else the messengers missed them entirely. In any case, Garcilaso makes it plain that the Gallegos contingent reached the trail after five days of travel (about right for our locations), and when they did they saw that De Soto had preceded them. And upon seeing this, they came near to mutiny because they were afraid they might be walking into another uninhabited region like the “desert of Ocute” (Garcilaso 1962:326). They continued on to Xuala, where they arrived a day or two later than De Soto did (Garcilaso 1962:328).

After De Soto and his contingent departed from his camp in Chalaque on May 17, they traveled a day and again had to camp out in the open (“a un monte”). If our reckoning is correct, they would have been somewhere near present Lincolnton, North Carolina. The next day they reached Guaquili, where the Indians gave them corn, roasted fowl (turkeys), and a few little dogs, which they ate (Ranjel 1922:103).

They departed from Guaquili on Wednesday, May 19, and came to a region full of reeds (a un carrizal). At this point they were following a trail that ran along the upper Catawba River. On May 20 they came to a little plain, and again slept in the open. On Friday, May 21, they arrived at Xuala, a village in a plain among several rivers, almost certainly the same as Pardo’s Joara. We have located it slightly to the north of Marion, North Carolina (DePratter et al. 1983:142; Keeler 1971). According to Ranjel, they saw more evidence here that there might be gold in the vicinity of Xuala than in any place they had visited up to this point (Ranjel 1922:104). The reason for this probably is that Xuala was situated on the trade route to the Chiscas, who traded in copper, and who lived on the other side of the Blue Ridge Mountains, on the upper Nolichucky River (DePratter et al. 1983:134).
On May 25 they departed from Xuala and climbed "over a very high range," going through Swannanoa Gap and probably reaching the vicinity of present Ridgecrest, North Carolina (Ranjel 1922:104). The next day they continued on, reaching a little plain where they waded in the headwaters of the French Broad River, near present Asheville, North Carolina. Presumably they learned from the Indians that the water of this river eventually flowed into the Mississippi River (el río del Espíritu Santo). Here, although it was already late May, the weather turned very cold. And it was here that the Lady of Costiachequi escaped and presumably made her way back to her people.

The chronicles of the Juan Pardo expedition indicate that in 1567 there was in the vicinity of Asheville a small town named Tocae (DePratter et al. 1983:143). If this town existed in De Soto's day, no mention is made of it by any of the chronicles. The next day they traveled along a large stream (arroyo) which they crossed and re-crossed many times, i.e. the French Broad River. The following day, on May 29, they arrived in Guasili, which was probably located near present Marshall, North Carolina (Elvas spells it "Guaxule"). In Pardo's time, this town was called "Cauchi." Why the change in name, we are unable to explain. According to Elvas, little corn was to be had here, but they did eat several hundred of the Indian's dogs, which the Indians themselves did not eat (Elvas 1968:68). Garcilaso says there were three hundred dwellings in Guasili (probably an exaggeration), and that the chief's house was on a mound (Garcilaso 1962:335-336).

On May 31, they departed Guasili, still following along the French Broad River. The next day they passed near the town of Canasoga, but it must have been small because they slept in the open (Ranjel 1922:106). Twenty men came out from Canasoga carrying baskets of mulberries, evidently the only food they possessed (Elvas 1968:69). This town was possibly located in the vicinity of present Hot Springs, North Carolina, where there is a stretch of arable soil. Pardo does not mention a town at this location, but when he was in Cauchi (i.e., Guasili), he was visited by a chief from "Canosa aquí" (Banderas manuscript). The next day De Soto continued on, spending the night near a swamp or bog (ciénega), probably near present Del Rio, Tennessee, where the valley through which the French Broad flows widens rather abruptly, with an expanse of bottomland, and beyond which it again abruptly narrows.

On Thursday, June 3, they followed a "large stream near the river which they had crossed in the plain where the woman chief went off. It was now very large."15 When we first began research on this part of the expedition, this was a most troublesome sentence. In time we came to understand that it means this: On this day they left the French Broad River and crossed over a narrow neck of land to the lower Pigeon River, which they forded and then followed a few miles to its confluence with the French Broad. It is probable that in doing this they were following a trail that lay near the [75] present day route of the Southern Railway tracks, and also U.S. Highway 25, which runs parallel to it. That is, they were no doubt following a well-established trail.

The next day, June 4, they came to a pine woods near the French Broad River. Here they were visited by Indians from Chiaha, who brought corn for them to eat. On the morning of the next day, they reached Chiaha, which was situated on an island in the French Broad River (Ranjel 1922:106-107). From our research on the Pardo expeditions, we were able to identify this as Zimmerman's Island, near present Dandridge, Tennessee (DePratter et al. 1983:145-146). Ranjel notes that all the way from Xuala they had traveled through mountains, and the horses were tired and thin, and the members of the expedition were likewise worn out.

In Chiaha, they found abundant food, and they experienced little resistance from the Indians. They remained here from June 5 until June 28, when they set out again, traveling to the southwest through the Ridge and Valley province, heading toward the main town of the province of Coosa, which they had heard about two months earlier, when they were at Coaqui, in north Georgia (Ranjel 1922:108).

We have several reasons for believing that our reconstruction of De Soto's route of exploration from Apalachee to Chiaha is more accurate than that of the U.S. De Soto Commission. The most important reason is that we have confirmation from the documentation of the Juan Pardo expedition for the location of several of the interior towns visited by De Soto. In addition, our reconstruction accords with the distribution of known archaeological sites better than the Commission's route. In particular, our location of the "desert of Ocute" falls in an area that is known to have been uninhabited in the late prehistoric period, and it is difficult or impossible to find any other area in the upper South where such a large uninhabited area could have been. Also, our reconstruction accords with the topography better than the Commission's route. Where we need swamps there are swamps, and where we need rivers there are rivers, and of the right size. Finally, we have at least two interesting and unanticipated coincidences of place names: Ichisi near O-cheese-hatchee Creek, and Altamaha on one of the two rivers which join to form the Altamaha River.

The members of the De Soto expedition were the first Europeans to explore the interior of the Southeast and to encounter the Indians who lived there. As such, the expedition was a major episode in that fateful collision of Europeans and Indians that shaped the early history of the New World. Thus, the particulars of the De Soto expedition are important for their own sake. But quite beyond these particulars, an accurate reconstruction of the route will enable us to advance greatly our understanding of the aboriginal people of the Southeast. It will provide archaeologists with more chronological precision than they now possess, and this will allow them to do more precise descriptive and comparative work. It will, for example, make it possible to establish the contemporaneity of late prehistoric archaeological assemblages near Chickasawhatchee Creek, Montezuma, Macon, the upper Oconee River, and Camden. Moreover, by combining the information in the De Soto documents with archaeological information, we can gain at least some insight into the internal structure of the Southeastern chiefdoms, as well as some understanding of the kinds of relationships which existed between chiefdoms (see Hudson et al. 1983).

To those who say that we can never be certain about our reconstructed route, we have to agree. But at the same time, one can be more confident about a reconstruction that is consistent with all the available information than about one that is not. Moreover, on the basis of our reconstruction, it is possible to do archaeological research that can provide us with additional confirmation. We have identified several specific sites between Apalachee and Chiaha that were visited by the De Soto expedition. If, upon archaeological investigation, some or all of these sites yield sixteenth-
century European artifacts, then our reconstruction gains confirmation. Moreover, any sites that were visited by De Soto deserve to be excavated extensively, because doing so will enable us to expand our understanding of the aboriginal societies of the sixteenth-century Southeast. Some parts of this archaeological research can be done by simple surveys; other parts will take many years, even decades to complete.

It is our hope that an accurate reconstruction of the De Soto route will enable us to draw a social map of the sixteenth-century Southeast. We would like to be able to locate specific, named societies and towns on specific rivers and creeks. Such a map could be used as a base line from which to move both backwards and forwards in time. That is, it may become possible for scholars to reconstruct the prehistoric antecedents of the societies that De Soto visited, as well as to reconstruct the ways in which these societies were transformed into the far different societies that existed in the eighteenth century (DePratter 1983; Smith 1984). This would put the social history of the Southeast on a new footing.

Notes

1 On the trail they followed to Ichisi (at the fall line), as measured on a map it is about 58 leagues, or about 200 miles.
2 As shown on a manuscript of early Georgia trails and roads compiled by Marion Hemperley. Barnard's Trail to St. Augustine is shown on Eleazer Early's Map of 1818.
3 Biedma calls this Acapachiqui (p. 9).
4 Manuscript map in the Georgia Surveyor-General's Office.
5 Marion Hemperley contends that Capachequi was the same as the Indian town of Chofigecia, which, in 1827, was located between Bay Branch and Chokee Creek in land lots 262 and 269, Dist. 14, Lee County.
6 Manuscript map in the Georgia Surveyor-General's Office.
7 Elvas spells this "Toalli" (p. 52). The Eleazer Early Map shows a Thlonoto Creek (now Hogcraw Creek) in this area, just north of the site where Fort Early stood.
8 Perhaps because they built two unsuccessful bridges, Biedma incorrectly remembered that they crossed two rivers before arriving at Otoa (p. 10).
9 Biedma, who evidently traveled with those who were left behind, says this segment of the journey lasted about two days (p. 10).
10 This may be evidence that Perico was from the Georgia or South Carolina coast.
11 Biedma calls it Altapaha, and confirms that it was three day's travel from Ichisi (p. 10).
12 Elvas says that they passed through the town of Cofaqui before coming to the town of Patofa (1968:56). Ranjel spells this "Tatoaf." 
13 Had they chosen to go to Coosa instead of going on to Cofitachequi, they would have traveled about 148 (238 km). With no stopovers, they could have made it in nine days.
14 This is confirmed by Biedma (p. 12), who erroneously says that it took them 13 days to reach these huts. He may have been thinking of the travel time from Cofaqui to Hymahi, a distance of fourteen days.

Acknowledgements

A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the Southeastern Archaeological Conference, New Orleans, Louisiana, November 13, 1980. Our research has been enhanced by the following, to whom we are grateful: Eugene C. Black, Jr., Leland G. Ferguson, David J. Hally, Marion Hemperley, and Jerald T. Milanich.

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