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Scholars seek site of 1540 battle

Conquistadors, Indians fought and died in village lost to history

Saturday, September 30, 2006

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It was the bloodiest battle ever fought between Europeans and Native Americans on North American soil. It changed the course of history. And yet, after more than a century of theories, research and argument, the path of Spanish conquistador Hernando De Soto and the site of his watershed battle at Mabila remain mysteries buried somewhere in Alabama soil. During a conference that ends today at the University of Alabama, a team of folklorists and historians, archaeologists and linguists, geographers and geologists are once more poring over the evidence. They're using new technology and new insights in hopes of pinning down the likely location of the battle that involved De Soto's army, the towering Indian Chief Tascaluza and the Indians of Mabila. "Where in the middle of that hot steamy Alabama pasture is Mabila?" Craig Sheldon of the Alabama Archaeological Society, asked his fellow conference participants in opening remarks. "And once we find the location, that's just the beginning of the story." The names from the conflict are written on modern maps: Mobile for the descendants of the Mabila, and Tuscaloosa for the fabled chief whose Choctaw name translates to "Black Warrior," the name given to one of the state's great rivers. But there still is much uncertainty De Soto's path. Repeated efforts Several attempts have been made to pin down De Soto's four-year, 4,000-mile journey from Florida, north to the Carolinas, south into Alabama, then north and west, and finally down the Mississippi River. All have been fraught with controversy - scholarly, personal and political. Communities want to claim to be on the route for tourism and a sense of deep history. Scholars have their own pet theories and sometimes blindspots because of their particular disciplines. "We seek a less competitive and argumentative approach, trying to come to a consensus," said Vernon J. Knight, a UA anthropologist and one of the conference organizers. Hernando De Soto, born in 1500, was a lieutenant to Conquistador Francisco Pizarro during the brutal conquest of the Inca in Peru in the 1530s. He returned to Spain a rich man in 1538. He also was named governor of Cuba and given a commission to colonize North America. The next year, he landed in Florida with an army of more than 650 men and began his exploration and military campaign through the Southeast. Historians say De Soto hoped to find a rich, populous empire to subdue, loot and re-settle, like his predecessors had with the Inca and the Aztecs in Mexico. He entered Alabama from northeast Georgia in the summer of 1540. Most authorities believe he traveled parallel to the Coosa River. Near present-day Montgomery, the expedition encountered Chief Tascaluza, a giant man - "half-a-yard" taller than any of the Spaniards - richly arrayed in a feather cloak that draped to his feet. De Soto made it his practice to kidnap the local chief and take him with the army to ensure safe transit through tribal territory. Tascaluza agreed to accompany De Soto and sent word ahead to Mabila, where he promised De Soto he would provide him with bearers for his army. But Tascaluza was leading the Spaniards into a trap. Armed warriors were hidden inside the homes within the palisaded walls of the city and once De Soto's advance party was inside, the warriors attacked. The Spaniards fought their way out, regrouped on the plain surrounding the city and attacked. The battle raged all day long. More than 3,000 Indians died. Mabila was burned to the ground. The Spaniards, equipped with crossbows, swords, horses and armor, suffered far fewer casualties: 22 Spaniards dead and 148 wounded, including De Soto himself. But they lost valuable supplies, and the morale and purpose of the expedition began to unravel. The fierce resistance the Spaniards met at Mabila and the unraveling of the expedition helped sour Spain on the idea of colonizing North America. End of ruthless era The enslavement and violence that was part of the De Soto expedition ended an era of the most ruthless Spanish exploitation. Shortly after the battle, Spain outlawed Indian slavery and passed some of the first civil-rights laws concerning treatment of subject peoples. Unfortunately, De Soto's expedition left another legacy in the Southeast. Smallpox and other European diseases ravaged native populations. Four accounts of the expedition exist and new translations and more sophisticated methods of textual analysis are now available and will be used by conference-goers to ferret out new clues and correct old mistakes. Archaeologists have learned a great deal more about the Mississippian Indian culture of the time and have mapped artifact sites, helping to draw a clearer picture of civilization in that era. Archaeological evidence of the De Soto expedition is still relatively scant but his winter camp in what is now downtown Tallahassee, Fla., has been excavated. A smattering of artifacts believed to have come from De Soto's expedition has been found in Talladega County, outside Sylacauga; on the Alabama River near Montgomery; and in Tuscaloosa. The Internet is making information more widely available. One conference participant, Don Sheppard, is a fifth-generation Floridian who has poured more than a decade of time and passion into documenting the De Soto story and reconstructing the route. His Web site, [floridahistory.com](#), is a journey in and of itself, sending a visitor through various accounts of the journey and Sheppard's proposed route based on his research and exploration. He was excited by the prospects of the conference. "They're ready to find new answers," he said. "This data they've brought together is gold." Ned Jenkins of the Alabama Historical Commission said he hopes the project would end with a more unified position than that of the 1980s Alabama De Soto Commission, which closed with fierce debate. "I watched friends of mine get really mad at each other," he said. Wherever Mabila is, it ought to be easy to identify once it is found - a palisaded village on a plain in an area that was densely populated in the 16th century. The Spanish stayed at Mabila for a month licking their wounds. They burned Indian dwellings within a four-mile radius, and burning is particularly good at preserving certain things, Jenkins said. At Mabila itself, there would be the burned remains of hundreds of Indians. Fire would have cooked the clay daubing from the houses. There'd be Spanish graves and a wealth of Spanish artifacts. "I think we'll find Mabila," he said, smiling, his eyes twinkling at the prospect. E-

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