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DE SOTO AND TERRA CEIA

(Concluded)

by JOHN R. SWANTON

In connection with my work as chairman of the De Soto Expedition Commission between 1935 and 1938 I made a study of the documentary and geographical evidence regarding the location of the point where De Soto landed on the Florida coast in 1539 and the position of his first headquarters. While I was assisted to some extent by other members of the Commission, the conclusions reached were more particularly mine and I assume all responsibility for them. They were originally stated in a paper printed in "The Florida Historical Quarterly" (vol. XVI, no. 3; Jan. 1938) and were incorporated later in the "Final Report of the United States De Soto Expedition Commission" (Washington, 1939). The point where the greater part of the Spanish army was landed was believed to be Shaws Point, and the native town where he established his headquarters apparently at the Indian site on Terra Ceia Island.

However, in a recent account of archeological work on the last of these locations (*Florida Anthropological Society Publications, No. 3*, published at the University of Florida, 1951) the writer, Ripley P. Bullen, takes issue with this conclusion. I replied in a paper printed in *The Florida Historical Quarterly* (vol. XXX, no. 4; April, 1952, pages 311-316), but immediately following my article he contributed additional arguments in support of his original criticism. I understand that this was only supplementary to what he had published before and was not in reply to my article immediately preceding, but as it has not unnaturally been taken by some readers to be so intended I supply the following answer, and in it I quote his words at length so as to place everything clearly in the open.

Mr. Bullen's first argument is that Juan de Anasco who

conducted an expedition the year before De Soto set out in order to select a suitable site for the headquarters would not have chosen this one. He says:

“As McGill Bay cannot be entered by a boat drawing more than four feet of water (and then tortuously) and is itself shallower, it is reasonable to believe Anasco did not enter it. An explorer looking for a harbor would easily find the Indian site at Shaws Point, other Indian villages on both sides of the Manatee River, and other sites on Tampa Bay, but hardly the one at Terra Ceia. Hence this site does not apparently, meet the requirements of preknowledge which De Soto seemed to have.”

(p. 319)

This brings to the front what I believe to be two of his fundamental misconceptions, (1) regarding the size and draught of De Soto's vessels, and (2) regarding the depth of water in front of Ucita implied in the narratives.

1. De Soto's original fleet consisted of ships (*naos*), caravels (*caravelas*), and “*vergantines*,” a name translated “brigantines” or “pinnaces,” besides a few small boats (*bateles*). There were five or more of the first mentioned, two of the second, two of the third class, and an unspecified number of small boats. The ships were returned to Havana after they had discharged their cargoes, the caravels, or at least one of them, kept some time longer but also returned to the same port, while the “*vergantines*” and small boats were retained and used later in transporting part of the property of the expedition to the Apalachee port. Still later “*vergantines*” were sent on an exploratory voyage to the westward of that. Some caravels were very small and it has been calculated that the *Nina*, Columbus' smallest vessel, had a depth in hold of only seven feet. The “*vergantines*” were still smaller. They could accommodate a number of men but were flat-bottomed, intended for use in explorations, were particularly adapted for

service in shallow water, and it is doubtful whether they drew much more water than a large dugout canoe. Ordinances of a slightly later date specify that vessels, evidently those of the same type, were to accompany every discoverer "in order to enter inlets, cross the bars of rivers, and pass over shoals," and "thirty men and no more were to go in every 'ship.'" The name "vergantin" was used for those crude vessels De Soto's companions put together later on the bank of the Mississippi in order to escape from the country. According to Elvas, Anasco had with him in his scouting expedition in the winter of 1538-9 one caravel and two "vergantines," and with these last there is every reason to believe he could have entered either Terra Ceia Bay or McGill Bay which were canoe harbors or there would have been no Indian villages upon them. It was also in "vergantines" that the first party was sent to Ucita, and Porcallo put in charge of the town. There is every reason to believe that they were used in putting the men, animals and equipment ashore at the original landing place and they were certainly used in unloading the ships.

2. The bay in front of Ucita was shoal as indicated by the point just mentioned. Ranjel says: "Since the ships with their loads could not, on account of the shoals, proceed to where the village lay, they anchored about four leagues farther back," and, after the land forces had occupied the place we read, "during all that week the ships gradually approached the village, being unloaded little by little with boats, and in that way they took ashore all the clothes and provisions which they carried." Elvas says that "going up every day a little with the tide, the end of eight days brought them near to the town," but he does not say how near, and soon afterward all of the large vessels were sent back to Cuba. There is no evidence that any of the vessels except the "vergantines" and the smallest boats did reach Ucita. According to the Coast Survey charts the channel into McGill Bay is from 3 to 7

feet at mean low tide to which the high tide would add about a foot and a half, enough water for the type of craft we have been considering, and four hundred years ago the depth may have been greater. If they approached the town by Terra Ceia Bay the situation would have been somewhat better.

But to proceed. Mr. Bullen's mention of sites on Shaws Point and Manatee River seems to suggest that he supposes they were all occupied in 1538-39 and that Anasco could choose between them. But even if all of the potsherds on those sites belong to the same horizon it does not follow that all were occupied with absolute contemporaneity, and De Soto was on the lookout for an occupied site, one he could expropriate - and plunder. If the Terra Ceia site happened to be the location of the most important village of the section at that time, it might well have met De Soto's requirements - even though without our approval. The Spaniards were the judges, not ourselves. But to continue:

"If the landing was made at Shaws Point, as has been assumed for this paper, this would mean sailing or rowing from that point westward around Snead Island, northeasterly around McGill Island, and then across McGill Bay. To do this successfully and to return easily, as the narrative implies, would indicate a detailed knowledge of these waters which neither De Soto nor Arias may be presumed to have had." (p. 319)

As we do not know how thorough Anasco's examination of the region had been and do know that the Spaniards had Indians from the section with them, the force of this argument does not seem to be very great. Mr. Bullen now quotes statements from Ranjel and Elvas, and from De Soto's letter and adds that

"all clearly imply the village was located further up the bay from the landing place (*i.e.* on the same body of water) and in two cases, that the ships finally came to

anchorage 'close' to the town. Again, a glance at the map will disclose that the Terra Ceia site does not meet the requirements. There is no suggestion in the narratives that, after the first landing, the ships went west and then north around Snead Island to Terra Ceia Bay. If they did, they must have drawn less than eight feet at high tide. Also they would have encountered a 'hard' bottom while the narratives refer to a 'soft' bottom." (p. 320)

Well, the Terra Ceia site is "further up" Tampa Bay than Shaws Point. In only one quotation is it said that the ships came near the town and this by Elvas in these words:

"The seamen only remained on board, who going up every day a little with the tide, the end of eight days brought them near to the town." (Bourne, I, 22)

But how near is not stated. "Near" is not as strong a term as "close." Apparently it was assumed that De Soto's large ships drew up close to Shaws Point and that the men, horses and equipment were landed from them directly. On the contrary there is every reason to believe that the large vessels stood off and that the landings were made by means of the small craft. It was therefore not necessary for the ships to "go west and then north around Snead Island to Terra Ceia Bay." They worked on north directly toward the town. As to the nature of the sea bottom in this region there is no statement regarding it in the immediate approach to the town. "Sand" and "mud" are mentioned during the entrance of the vessels into the bay but not later. In speaking of a "hard" bottom I presume reference is made to the use of "hrd" on the charts of the Coast and Geodetic Survey, but if one examines the Survey charts covering the west coast of Florida from San Carlos Bay to Tampa inclusive he will find "hrd" used so constantly that it would be difficult to find an "sft" area at which De Soto might have approached the coast. No rock bottom seems to be indicated anywhere.

Referring to what the narratives have to say of the Ucita site, Mr. Bullen says:

“This description may be applied to the Terra Ceia site only if one assumes the Spanish omitted mentioning two burial mounds and a narrow causeway extending 400 feet in a straight line between one of these mounds and the ‘mount’ upon which De Soto was housed.” (p. 382)

But this assumes: (1) that the mounds in De Soto’s day were of the same character, and indeed practically identical with the mounds as they exist now, and (2) that the chroniclers would necessarily supply us with a detailed description of them. Ranjel and Biedma say nothing about mounds, and, if we had only their narratives, it might be objected that there were none there. Elvas speaks of only one mound, that on which the chief’s house stood, and does not say whether what he calls the “temple” was on a mound or not. We naturally think that it was but we do not know, and that was four hundred years ago. Mounds may have been built, and removed, in that interval of time.

To quote again:

“The site’s suitability as the headquarters of an army is even more questionable. It consisted essentially of a long, high, and broad shell ridge or midden which might conceivably, be large enough to accommodate De Soto’s 570 Soldiers, allowing for some crowding. However, as has been mentioned, the ground around the shell ridge is low and dotted with ponds. Extra high tides, such as accompany severe storms, sometimes pass through the shell ridge and inundate the land behind. Space for the expedition’s horses and hogs would have been limited.” (p. 322)

And still the possibility of such accommodation is not denied. As to the nature of the land around Ucita Elvas says: “The

ground about was very fenny, and encumbered with dense thicket and high trees." (Bourne, I, 23) It is altogether possible that the way in which Terra Ceia is cut off from the mainland may have been regarded as a protection from Indians of unknown force and more than doubtful disposition, and also as limiting to some extent the wanderings of the domestic animals.

Again:

"Ucita is referred to several times in the narratives as a 'port.' Elvas says, 'The Cacique of Mococo came to the "port" ' and De Soto left thirty cavalry and seventy infantry at the port, with provisions for two years.' Ranzel writes, 'and there were of them forty horse and sixty foot left in guard of the village and the stuff and the harbor and of the brigantines and boats that were left.' De Biedma also states the rearguard was left in charge of the port.' McGill Bay is scarcely a 'harbor' or 'port.' If Terra Ceia Bay, in spite of its shallow entrance, should be assumed to be the 'port,' the site would seem to be in the wrong location to give protection." (p. 322-3)

The use of the word "port" is here assumed to signify what it does in the complete modern sense, as a harbor into and out of which large vessels may be constantly going. Here it is used as a general term, the point on the coast where the army had first established itself, from which and to which vessels might be sent, but not a first class harbor in our understanding of the word. After they had been unloaded the larger vessels were sent back to Cuba, as we have said, and only the "vergantines" and smaller boats retained. Moreover, by "port" the chroniclers frequently have in mind a location on Tampa Bay in general, not merely an offset from it.

The argument based on an apparent failure hitherto to find any articles at Terra Ceia definitely and probably left by the De Soto expedition I have answered already. I have pointed

out these facts: that De Soto's main army was at Ucita only a month and a half and the detachment left there for only four and a half months longer, while the entire army (except for the company just mentioned) was close to the present Tallahassee for five months, that much material should have been found as a result of the furious battle of Mabila the general location of which is known, and that some should have turned up in the Chickasaw country. But none has. Since a great deal has been made of the amount of material Garcilaso says De Soto brought to Florida, I give the entire paragraph in which the Inca's statement is made:

“The Curaca Mucozo was entertained by Juan de Anasco and the other Spaniards for four days, during which time as well as during the rest of the period that our men were in Hirrihigua, his Indians came and went like ants, never ceasing to take back to their land all that the Spaniards were unable to carry with them. And this amounted to a great deal, for there were more than twenty-five tons of cassava alone (the bread used in the islands of Santo Domingo and Cuba, and their surroundings) besides a large number of cloaks, loose coats, doublets, breeches, hose of all kinds and weights of footwear such as shoes, buskins and sandals. And of arms, there were many cuirasses, bucklers, pikes, lances, and steel helmets. Since the Governor was a man of wealth, he had brought a great abundance of each of these things in addition to such necessary supplies as sails, tackle, pitch, oakum, tallow, ropes, panniers, hampers, anchors, cables, and quantities of iron and steel. It is true that he had taken what he could of these materials with him, but much still remained; and since Mucozo was a friend, the Spaniards were pleased to have him carry away what was left. This his Indians did and were thereby made rich and happy.” (“The Florida of the Inca,” translated

and edited by John Grier Varner and Jeannette Johnson Varner; the University of Texas Press, Austin, 1951; pages 227-8)

Knowing, as everyone must who has studied first contacts between Europeans and Indians, what a consuming appetite the red men had for metal, failure to find objects of the kind on Terra Ceia signifies little, especially in view of what Garcilaso says about the activities of the Indians, and the other articles would hardly survive to our day. Moreover, if objects of this kind are so likely to be found at De Soto's first headquarters, and it was not at Terra Ceia, when we remember how many Indian sites along this coast have been opened, it is strange that no article identifiable with the De Soto expedition has turned up anywhere.

Regarding the march of De Soto's army overland from his landing place to Ucita, and the manner of its approach to the latter, Mr. Bullen says:

"It will be noted from the map that the Terra Ceia site could not have been seen from the eastern side of Terra Ceia Bay because of the mile wide bay and the intervening half mile of woods on the opposite side. The only place De Soto could have seen that site across water would be from Fletcher Point. That he could have set out from near Shaws Point, gone around the Manatee River, and happened to successfully stumble through the swamps connecting Terra Ceia Bay and Bishop Harbor to eventually reach the only place from which he could have seen the site across water, Fletcher Point, is scarcely possible. And if he had done this, he could have passed around McGill Bay which, incidentally, could never qualify as 'the roadstead of the harbor.'

"It should be noted the text does not imply a trip of twelve leagues was necessary to reach Ucita by land, merely that was the distance De Soto wandered. He did not ex-

pect to have to go such a distance to reach Ucita. Clearly he went around both the village and the roadstead."

(p. 321)

The discussion here must rest mainly on what is told us in Ranjel's narrative which is as follows:

"On Trinity Sunday, June 1, 1539, this army marched by land toward the village, taking as guides four Indians that Johan de Anasco had captured when in search of the harbor; and they lost their bearings somewhat, either because the Christians failed to understand the Indians or because the latter did not tell the truth. Thereupon the Governor went ahead with some horsemen, but since they were unfamiliar with the land they wearied the horses following deer and floundering in the streams and swamps for twelve leagues till they found themselves opposite the village on the other side of the roadstead of the harbor, which they could not pass around." (Bourne, II, 55)

Elvas says that it took the army, evidently the main army, two days to reach Ucita and there can be little doubt of this because it was of course moving much more slowly than De Soto's cavalry detachment; but, although it had to pass around "great creeks which run up from the bay," nothing is said of any body of water near Ucita "which they could not pass around," nor is there mention of any such difficulty by Garcilaso. How did it happen then that, although floundering through swamps, De Soto came out on a body of water he could not pass around and yet one which seemed to have occasioned the rest of the army no difficulty? Most certainly it was not Tampa Bay nor could it have been the body of water in which his fleet was anchored, supposing that not to have been Tampa Bay, because, even if De Soto had not wandered, a circuit of twelve leagues would not have carried him around either. After entering the bay an unspecified dis-

tance the vessels were anchored four leagues back. How did De Soto perform the remarkable feat of coming blindly upon the wrong side of a body of water which apparently occasioned the rest of the army no difficulty? Perhaps Oviedo who has transmitted to us Ranjel's diary has led us astray as well as De Soto. But I think the language need not indicate physical inability to reach the village by land, only that weariness and darkness prevented them temporarily from completing the circuit. If the "harbor" of which they speak was Terra Ceia Bay they may have thought it necessary to wait for their small boats to ferry them over. But, as I have pointed out, the objection to the word "harbor" as applied to either Terra Ceia Bay or McGill Bay is based on an unnecessarily exaggerated use of the term. These bays were at least harbors for canoes or there would have been no Indian villages there, and, as has already been said, the "vergantines" of the Spaniards drew little more water. It may be added that in his letter De Soto speaks of Ucita as on an "ancon," not a "baya," and the former term was applied by the Spaniards to a very much smaller inlet than the latter.

When Ranjel writes that they came out "opposite the village on the other side of the roadstead," we naturally think that the main village confronted them, but from the character of the remains on the island it is reasonable to suppose that the population was considerable and that it exploited the whole territory to the full. That at times there were out-settlements or camps on the eastern side of Terra Ceia is indeed indicated by the shellheaps and the Kennedy mound on Mr. Bullen's map, and regarding the latter he says: "There should have been an Indian village nearby."

De Soto knew in what general direction he should march in search of that village but he became lost, travelled blindly until late at night, and all we know of the outcome is contained in the few words of Ranjel. One would naturally think

of Terra Ceia Bay as the body of water which confronted him at nightfall, but I would not be appalled if it should have been McGill. Failure of Elvas or Garcilaso to mention such an obstruction may mean merely that De Soto had sent back word which enabled the main army to avoid it.

Conclusion

Criticism adversely to the identification of the Terra Ceia site as De Soto's headquarters is largely the result, I think, of a failure to understand the kind of headquarters De Soto was looking for, what the chroniclers mean by a "port" and a "harbor," the depth of water demanded, and the draught of the only vessels said to have reached the Indian village. For instance, Mr. Bullen compares what the documents say with what he himself understands by the terms "port" and "harbor," and the sort of site he thinks they ought to have chosen. Regarding the number and type of mounds, it is too much to expect a detailed description. De Soto's men were not interested in the subject. As to the suitability of the Terra Ceia site from a consideration of the nature of the terrain, I submit that what Elvas says corresponds very well with what exists. Although Garcilaso enumerates a long list of articles landed at Ucita by De Soto, in the same paragraph he informs us that Mucozo's Indians "came and went like ants, never ceasing to take back to their land all that the Spaniards were unable to carry with them." When it is asserted that the Terra Ceia site does not "meet the requirements" laid down in the documents, it seems to me the critic is thinking of requirements which he himself has laid down.

But the documentary evidence cited by me in my earlier communication and which I need not repeat proves beyond reasonable doubt that both the landing place of De Soto and his first headquarters in Florida were on the south side of Tampa Bay between the Gulf and the entrance of Hillsboro. Within the region so circumscribed I have located sites which seem to conform with the statements of our authorities in a satisfactory manner.