

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

The De Soto Chronicles: The Expedition of Hernando de Soto to North America in 1539-1543. Edited by Lawrence A. Clayton, Vernon James Knight, Jr., and Edward C. Moore.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/04d7g087>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 18(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Mitchem, Jeffrey M.

Publication Date

1994-06-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

The De Soto Chronicles: The Expedition of Hernando de Soto to North America in 1539–1543. Edited by Lawrence A. Clayton, Vernon James Knight, Jr., and Edward C. Moore. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993. 1,157 pages. \$50.00 cloth.

The sixteenth-century expedition of Hernando de Soto has long been of interest to ethnohistorians and archaeologists. Although de Soto's expedition failed to establish a permanent Spanish foothold in La Florida, several of the survivors wrote accounts of their experiences. These narratives include details about the distances and directions traveled by the expedition, which have been used by archaeologists and ethnohistorians to delineate the Spaniards' approximate route. The process has been taken one step further in some areas, identifying specific American Indian groups and settlements mentioned in the accounts. Subsequent archaeological research has supported these inferences and has yielded striking evidence of the consequences of European contact (most notably in Florida) to the native peoples of North America.

Previous research into the de Soto expedition has been hampered by the difficulty of locating translations of the various narratives, which were published separately by obscure presses or in small printing runs. This problem has been solved with the publication of this two-volume set.

There are four "complete" narratives of the expedition, plus a fragment of a fifth account. Three of the complete ones were written by participants in the expedition, but the fourth was based on interviews with one or more soldiers some forty to fifty years after the expedition's demise. Translations of all of these are included in this new edition, along with additional essays, annotations, translated documents, and other reference materials.

The editors assembled a distinguished group of scholars to contribute to this work and were able to defray some production costs by grants and donations from a number of scholarly organizations and government agencies. This allowed the press to publish the volumes at an affordable price, without sacrificing quality and durability.

After some preliminary notes, the first chapter is a new essay by historian Paul Hoffman. He provides a succinct summary of what is known about earlier Spanish attempts to explore and colonize the Southeast and the Caribbean, aiding the reader in putting de Soto's expedition in historical context. Hoffman then discusses the significance of the accounts for research on southeastern

American Indian groups and concludes with an important section on problems with the narratives and critiques of previous research based on them.

Hoffman's essay sets the stage for the translations of the three firsthand accounts that follow. These are the chronicles of the "Gentleman of Elvas" (a Portuguese soldier), Luys Hernandez de Biedma (the king's factor, whose job was to see that the king of Spain received his share of any wealth amassed by the expedition), and Rodrigo Rangel (de Soto's private secretary). The latter two are new translations from the Spanish; the first is reprinted from a translation originally published in 1933 by the Florida State Historical Society. The versions included here are enhanced by extensive footnotes and annotations by historian John Hann, translator John Worth, and anthropologist Charles Hudson.

Translations inevitably contain discrepancies, such as words that have several meanings or passages that are illegible in the original document. Each of these instances is highlighted and discussed in footnotes in this work. The footnotes also include information about the probable identifications of land forms, American Indian groups, and rivers mentioned in the narratives. Alternative translations of certain passages are provided as well, especially in the Elvas account. The new translations are more readable than some earlier versions, and the footnotes prove useful when using the narratives for research purposes. Having used several translations of the accounts in my own research, I can attest to the balanced and thorough coverage provided by these new versions in combination with the annotations.

Also included in this volume is the first translation of a single page of an account by Fray Sebastin de Caçete that was discovered several years ago in the General Archive of the Indies in Seville, Spain. Historian Eugene Lyon, who came upon the page while studying documents relating to later Florida history, provides the translation included here. Although the other accounts often concentrate on incidents of conflict or directions and rates of travel, the Caçete Fragment includes detailed descriptions of plants, animals, and other resources. If it is indeed part of an undiscovered complete work, researchers will anxiously anticipate the recovery of the rest of the document, which promises to enrich our knowledge of the expedition and the natural and cultural landscape of the sixteenth-century Southeast.

The entire second volume of the set is taken up by an updated 1935 translation (by Charmion Shelby) of the narrative of Garcilaso

de la Vega, prefaced by a short biography of Garcilaso by Frances Crowley. This longest and most florid of the de Soto chronicles is the least reliable in terms of details, as demonstrated by its disagreement with the other surviving works. The author based it on reminiscences of one or more survivors, some four to five decades after the expedition. Unfortunately, it has also been the most widely available translated de Soto narrative in the twentieth century, which has led to much confusion and disagreement among scholars trying to study the expedition. New footnotes by anthropologist Vernon Knight highlight some of the discrepancies in the Garcilaso account, as well as discussing the anthropological significance of some of the events recounted.

Translations of a number of other documents relating to the expedition are included in the first volume—both reprints of documents translated in the nineteenth century and new translations (by David Bost) of official documents from the General Archive of the Indies relating to the military career of Hernando de Soto and to legal proceedings after his death in 1542. An introductory essay by Rocío Sánchez Rubio discusses the significance and context of these documents, which include testimonies of survivors and a list of de Soto's belongings at the time of his death.

Two brief biographies of Hernando de Soto are presented, one by Paul Hoffman and the other by Rocío Sánchez Rubio. Rubio's version expresses the Spanish point of view, portraying de Soto as a heroic figure who successfully overcame great odds to conquer parts of the New World. Hoffman provides an interesting counterpoint, presenting a more impartial account of de Soto as a typical soldier of the time, who often used ruthless methods to achieve wealth and military objectives, both in North and South America. Together, these essays present a balanced, factual account of de Soto's life.

The remaining chapters in the first volume are research tools. Two sections from the 1939 De Soto Commission Report are reprinted: the chart of the expedition itinerary that compares dates and events recorded in the four complete accounts, and a list of names of American Indian settlements and individuals recorded in the narratives. There is also an extensive bibliography of de Soto studies, accompanied by an introductory essay by anthropologists Jeffrey Brain and Charles Ewen. The bibliography is exhaustive and includes the essential works from archaeology, history, and ethnohistory, as well as works of criticism or different schools of thought.

There is another useful feature in this publication. Each expedition account has a separate index, and there is an index for the supporting materials. These are especially valuable for researchers interested in specific people or places mentioned in the narratives.

It is difficult to find anything to criticize in this two-volume set. I could find no typographical errors, and the books are solidly bound and attractive. Illustrations include photographs of pertinent artifacts and accurate drawings of sixteenth-century Spanish military attire. The University of Alabama Press and the editors and contributors are to be commended for producing such a useful tool at an affordable price. But the most important aspect is the inclusion of all extant accounts in one publication, with the excellent new translations and annotations. This set is now the standard, indispensable reference for present and future scholars interested in the de Soto expedition and the initial contact between Europeans and American Indians in the Southeast.

Jeffrey M. Mitchem
Arkansas Archeological Survey

The Ethnic American Woman: Problems, Protests, Lifestyle. By Edith Blicksilver. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall-Hunt Publishing Co., 1989. 471 pages. \$29.95 cloth.

The Ethnic American Woman: Problems, Protests, Lifestyle is an anthology of writings by American women on a variety of topics and in a variety of forms. There are approximately 150 contributions, ten of which are by Native American women. Others are by women of many cultural and racial backgrounds, including Asian, African, European, and Middle Eastern. The writings have all appeared previously elsewhere. Some of the works included are excerpted from longer pieces, while others are reprinted in their entirety. The literary forms include poetry, short stories, personal narrative, interviews, speeches, and factual exposition. The fact that the contributors come from diverse origins is an obvious strength for the anthology. Unfortunately, they are also diverse in their literary abilities. Although some are writers of extraordinary skill and insight, others are not so expressive. As a