

The Battle of Chicaza: The Winter Death Camp of the Soto Army

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The Story

The Chicaza Native warriors attacked at night. The Spaniards were asleep and their sentinels, few in number, were lax in their duties. The Chicaza had spied on the defenses of the camp days before, feigning friendship. Their night attack was ferocious and effective. Weeks before, the battle at Mabila to the south had weakened the Spanish army. The night battle at Chicaza almost destroyed it.

The Spanish army had landed on the Florida peninsula over a year and half before making their second winter camp in 1540-41 at the Native town of Chicaza. The expedition was launched into the current Southeastern United States to find treasure, lay claim to territories, and subjugate the Native peoples. It did not prove to be an easy task.

In that Chicaza town, on a cold and snowy winter night, the Native army fell upon the Spaniards in their sleep. The Native town procured by the Spanish was first set ablaze by advance Native scouts with firebrands of twisted plant fibers hidden in ceramic vessels. Flaming arrows were also shot into the flammable thatched roofs of the houses in the town. Then came the main army of Native warriors that attacked from different directions.

The Spaniards were caught completely by surprise and scrambled to gather their weapons. With the town ablaze and Native warriors amongst them, the Spanish army was in danger of being annihilated. Their cherished horses were being burned alive at their tethers. Over fifty died. Even the pigs in the herd so carefully protected by the Spanish during their journeys, were killed by the fires of the burning town. Hundreds died trapped in their wooden enclosures, their burning fat spreading out from their pens. Many Spaniards, men and women, also lay dead.

Strangely, the Native army left in the midst of the battle. If they had returned that night, the Native warriors would likely have destroyed the Spanish army. If that had happened, we would not be privy to the rich pages of written documents left to us by the chroniclers of the Soto Expedition. Those documents aid us in the archeology of the Battle of Chicaza.

The Archeology

The archeological site of the Battle of Chicaza has not been found, although archeologists have looked for it for many years. The general consensus among researchers is that the site is located in east-central Mississippi.

The archeological site should be recognizable. One Soto chronicler reported that "... *they came to Chicaza, the principal settlement from which the rest of the province derives its name. This town was situated on a flat hill extending north and south between some ravines which contained little water but numerous groves of walnuts, live oaks, and oaks.*" Chicaza Town reportedly consisted of houses enclosed by a wooden stockade, likely discernable as archeological subsurface features. There should be evidence of burned structures and Spanish artifacts as well as bones and teeth of horses and pigs. There should also be another Spanish campsite within a mile or more of the main town where the Spaniards reported that they forged new weapons and other equipment for months after the battle. The location of Chicaza is a mystery of South-eastern Contact Archeology, one that needs to be solved.

Original Sources

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