

The Battle of Mabila: Recent Archeological Testing in the “Forks”

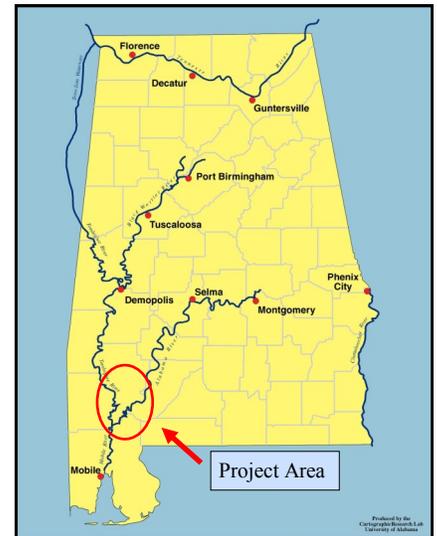
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Introduction

The largest battle ever fought between Europeans and Native peoples happened at a small town named *Mabila*. A Spanish army led by Hernando de Soto fought a Native army led by several chiefs on October 18, 1540. The battle lasted all day. Thousands fought and died. There is strong evidence that the Native town was located in Southwest Alabama. We want to find it.

To find the archeological site of the battle would provide a geographical, historical, and anthropological linchpin for studies of Native cultures and early Spanish expeditions in the current Southeastern United States during the 1500s.

To find the battle site is complicated. People have looked for it for over a hundred years. The clues to its location are few but useful.



A “Populous Region”

The Spanish wrote of a concentration of Native settlements in the area of the battle site. One member of the Soto Expedition who was a Spanish knight and the personal secretary of Soto, wrote of the populated area around Mabila. Rodrigo Ranjel stated in his account that:

(The Soto army) came to Mabila, having passed that day by several villages, which was the reason the soldiers stayed behind to forage and to scatter themselves, for the region appeared populous (Bourne 1904b:123).

Another member of the Soto Expedition, a Portuguese hidalgo, also wrote of the populated area around Mabila:

The country (around Mabila) was a rich soil, and well inhabited. Some towns were very large and were picketed about (wooden fortification walls). The people were numerous everywhere; the dwellings standing a crossbow shot or two apart (several hundred yards) (Bourne 1904a:98).

Contact Archeology Inc. has located a concentration of Native settlements dating from the time of the Soto Expedition in southern Clarke County between the Alabama and Tombigbee Rivers known as “The Forks” (Curren 1992, 1987; Fuller et al. 1984). The cluster of settlements is the largest known in the lower reaches of both river drainages. Probable 16th-Century Spanish artifacts have been found at two sites, three miles east and three miles west of the Native settlement cluster.

Archeological survey and testing in the region is currently being conducted by Contact Archeology Inc. The research logistics are complicated. The area is difficult to access due to a combination of flooding, impassible roads, and seasonal game hunting. The landowners are understanding and cooperative but it is still necessary that field research be conducted during “windows of opportunity” throughout portions of the year.

A “Beautiful Plain”

Another clue to the location of the battle site is topography or the “lay of the land.” A little more than two days march to the north of Mabila the Soto army crossed a large river at a Native town named Piachi (Bourne 1904a:89; Bourne 1904b:17). The Spanish noted rugged, hilly terrain at the river crossing and beyond (Bourne 1904b:122-123). On the morning of the third day of travel after the river crossing they reported that they entered a densely populated area before arriving at the Native town of Mabila in the morning of October 18, 1540. The Spanish reported that the area was located on a beautiful “plain” (Bourne 1904b:18; Varner and Varner 1980:353).

The current hypothesis posed by Contact Archeology Inc. is that the Spanish army crossed the Alabama River in current southern Wilcox or Monroe County and entered Clarke County. The terrain in those areas is certainly rugged and hilly.

The hypothesis further proposes that the army continued south into the flatlands of southern Clarke County and entered the areas of densely populated Native groups. The areas of flatlands are actually the floodplains of the Alabama River to the east and the Tombigbee River to the west. These environs are comprised of nutrient rich soils deposited by annual flood waters draining areas as far north as northern Alabama and northern Mississippi. The environment, based on rich soils, was ideally suited for a large population of Native peoples living off domesticated plants such corn, beans, squash, and other cultigens as well as wild plants and animals.

It is proposed that Native peoples from this highly populated area were the ones who set the deadly trap at Mabila and battled the Spaniards on that “beautiful plain” in 1540.

Conclusions

The battle site of Mabila has not been found. It is one of the most important archeological sites in the Southeastern United States, not solely due to the incredible drama surrounding it but also for its hallmark archeological footprint. The site should be evident, once it is found.

Once found, we can extrapolate from it anthropological knowledge of Native and Spanish cultures that are profoundly important concerning the first contacts of Native and European cultures. The writings of the chroniclers concerning the earliest Spanish entradas into the current United States provide us with the very first written record of the Natives of the land, the environment, and personal adventures in a strange New World.

References

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