

# H-Net Reviews

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Charles R. Ewen, John H. Hann. *Hernando de Soto among the Apalachee: The Archaeology of the First Winter Encampment*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998. x + 256 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8130-1557-6.



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For the past several decades, Hernando de Soto's point of entry and his route through the southeastern United States in 1539-1543 has generated a considerable amount of scholarly scrutiny and an almost equal amount of popular attention. Therefore, one wondered whether anything more could be said about the event. In this case, the answer is a definitive "Yes." Charles R. Ewen and John H. Hann have crafted a unique story, not of the expedition itself, but rather of the discovery of the winter encampment, Anhaica Apalachee, where De Soto spent the winter of 1539-1540.

In this refreshing blend of historical archaeology and history, Ewen and Hann skillfully weave together the archaeology of the site with carefully selected primary documents about the event. Beginning with a concise review of the scholarly literature about the expedition and its participants, the book introduces the "sensational discovery" (pp. 27-36) of the winter encampment by archaeologist B. Calvin Jones of the Bureau of Archaeological Research in March 1987. Jones, hoping to find evidence of a late-seventeenth-century mission in the shadow of the Capitol Building in Tallahassee, went out to look at a site near the Governor Martin mansion that was threatened with development. From there on, this section reads like a suspense novel with the academics and volunteers racing to excavate the site in front of the bulldozers' blades. The first test pits yielded the usual artifacts of a Spanish colonial occupation such as olive jars, but it also contained unfamiliar, yellow ceramic material. A crucial moment came when a retired volunteer soil scientist with a metal detector discovered several early European coins. Key to dating the site was identifying peculiar iron links fused together that were later determined to be chain mail. At this moment, Jones realized that the site could

not be the mission he sought because the artifact assembly clearly dated to the sixteenth century, and the only logical alternative was that the site was De Soto's winter encampment.

What ensued was a true crisis as archaeologists, forensic anthropologists, experts in ceramics and European beads, historians, and amateur volunteers volunteered their time to conduct salvage archaeology. Fortunately, the developer, Chuck Mitchell wanted to "do the right thing" (p. 38), and the media unwittingly helped by prematurely announcing the discovery that generated a wave of public opinion in favor of preservation. Funding was especially problematic. The site was already under development, and some of the proposed residential lots were already sold to impatient investors with a "time is money" (p. 38) philosophy. Jones scrambled to find a substantial amount of funding, first to delay construction until the site could be dated accurately and later to buy out the developers' interest. The "cobbled together approach" (p. 40) bought time to find enough evidence to convince governmental agencies that the site was truly significant and continued with efforts to put together sufficient funds to purchase the property. Local business owners, private corporations, prominent Florida and national institutions, and hundreds of anonymous donors gave money and time that resulted in the preservation of 4.9 acres of the most significant portion of the tract.

Part 2 goes on to detail the archaeology of the site. When the artifacts clearly dated to the sixteenth century, the research design shifted to test the hypothesis that the location was truly De Soto's camp. The methodology of identifying the artifacts, the flotation of faunal and floral resources, the lab strategy was appropriate for the

time (1987), but the experience gained on the De Soto dig generated a new classification system for artifact assemblages organized into “functionally specific groups” (p. 58). One problem was overcoming the difficulty in excavating a site with multiple occupations. The archaeological team identified a stratigraphy with four layers, of which the pertinent layer, Zone 2, contained the artifacts that were dated conclusively to the sixteenth century. The features of the site included such items as a cooking pit, a cistern, and one “hotly debated” (p. 66) feature that some scholars believe was an example of human cremation. The artifacts included Spanish ceramics, aboriginal ceramics, coins, chain mail links, nails, and beads, all of which provided a “solid reference in the construction of chronological trends” (p. 110). Ewen concludes this section with a discussion of the popular and archaeological significance of the extraordinary discovery.

Part 3, fully half the book, was written by research historian John H. Hann of the San Luis Archaeological Site. Hann, the recognized authority on Florida Indians, is also known for his meticulous translations of Spanish colonial documents. This section presents four accounts of the expedition: the Gentleman of Elvas’s account (1557) and Garcilaso de la Vega’s account (1605), both participants in the expedition; Gonzalo Fern=ndez de Oviedo y Valdes’s history based on de Soto’s private secretary Rodrigo Ranjel’s sixteenth-century diary; and royal accountant Luys Hern=ndez de Biedma’s contemporary account that was not published until 1857.

>From these four first-hand accounts flowed many later translations. Hann criticizes previous translations for taking liberties in translating and for failing to let the readers know when such liberties were taken. One example is in the translation of the Spanish “monte” that can alternately mean mountain or forest depending on context. Hann is particularly critical of translations done

from a literary perspective; none was “made with an eye to the needs of anthropologists, archaeologists, or ethnohistorians” (p. 119). Hann notes that all of the accounts are of limited use in determining place names, but they are useful in yielding ethnohistorical information about the Apalachee people. With careful reevaluation, this information can be compared to Mission-era documentation to situate place names. Hann then provides four new translations of the pertinent passages of each work. To eliminate any ambiguity, he also provides the original text and sometimes the erroneous previous translation in his extensive notes.

Ewen concludes the book with a tongue-in-cheek epilogue that assesses the impact of the Columbus Quincennial (aptly described as Columbus bashing, p. 215) and assesses the potential for future research trends. Florida is one of the nation’s fastest-growing states, and our residents are certain to face a growing number of future crises. One such example is the Miami Circle, recently discovered on the south bank of the Miami River. As more and more pristine Florida land is threatened with development, the issues raised by Ewen and Hann are never more relevant.

Collaborations between archaeologists and historians represent a new genre in scholarship, and both disciplines will find much to like in this book. Archaeologist Ewen has avoided the tendency to render the field reports all but unintelligible to the average reader. His descriptions of the artifact assemblages are presented in a straightforward manner with ample, jargon-free explanations of technical terms. He also captures the urgency to preserve the site in clear and frequently witty prose. This eminently readable book is highly recommended for upper-division and graduate classes in Florida and southeastern history and archaeology.

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