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De Soto's Route from Cofitachequi in Georgia to Cosa in Alabama

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Recommended Citation:

Andrews, Daniel Marshall. *De Soto's Route from Cofitachequi in Georgia to Cosa in Alabama*.
Lancaster: The New Era Printing Company, 1917. Reprinted from *American
Anthropologist*, Vol. XIX, No.1, 1917. Valdosta State University Archives and Special
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ALABAMA ANTHROPOLOGICAL SOCIETY
MONTGOMERY

Miscellaneous Papers, No. 3

DE SOTO'S ROUTE
FROM
COFITACHEQUI, IN GEORGIA,
TO
COSA, IN ALABAMA

ix

BY
DANIEL MARSHALL ANDREWS

[Reprinted from AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST, Vol. XIX, No. 1, 1917]

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DE SOTO'S ROUTE FROM COFITACHEQUI, IN GEORGIA, TO COSA, IN ALABAMA¹

By DANIEL MARSHALL ANDREWS

THIS investigation embraces that part of De Soto's wanderings, from the town of Cofitachequi to Cosa. The sites of these two places have been fairly well established: Cofitachequi on the east, at Silver Bluff, on the Savannah river, twenty-five miles by river below Augusta, Georgia; Cosa on the west, near the mouth of Talladega creek on the Coosa river, about two miles above Childersburg, Talladega county, Alabama. An effort has been made to locate the route traveled and the various town sites mentioned in the De Soto narratives.

The writer believes he has approximately located Xuala; that he has definitely located Gausili, Chiaha, Coste, Tali, Connasauga and Tasqui. He has brought to his aid in the investigation the geological and topographical knowledge of the country traversed, and his own intimate, personal familiarity with the region.

He began this study believing that the site of Chiaha was on the Tennessee river, because Professor Halbert had so located it, and he laid great store by Professor Halbert's opinion. It was only by the severest process of elimination that he finally abandoned this location, and it can not, therefore, be presumed that he began the investigation with any bias in favor of the Coosa river.

That part of De Soto's route with which we are concerned can be generalized as follows: From Cofitachequi to Chalaque (in the latter we recognize the modern word Cherokee) he marched through the coastal plain; from Chalaque to Xuala, through the Piedmont plateau; from Xuala to Gausili, through the Appalachian mountains; and from Gausili to Cosa, through or rather, down, the great Paleozoic valley, lying west of the great Cartersville fault. The

¹ Presented at a meeting of the Alabama Anthropological Society, held in Montgomery, Alabama, July 24, 1916.

descriptions of all the chroniclers confirm this generalization; and thus the scope of our investigation is narrowed to a study of this geological region in Georgia and Alabama. Referring to the geological map (fig. 6), of that part of the state of Georgia with which we are concerned, it will be seen that the northern boundary of the coastal plain extends from Columbus on the west, through Macon and Milledgeville, to Augusta on the east. The Piedmont plateau extends from the northern limit of the coastal plain to a line drawn, roughly, northeast and southwest through Franklin county, approximately parallel with the Cartersville fault. The Appalachian mountains lie, approximately, between this line and the Cartersville fault, which is a great horizontal earth movement, extending, roughly, from the corner of Georgia and the Carolinas to Esom hill, in Alabama; and ten to twenty miles west of the fault lies the great Paleozoic valley.

Again referring to the geological map: there are indicated thereon the coastal plain, the great metamorphic or crystalline region comprising the Piedmont plateau and the mountain section, and the great Paleozoic valley. Within these limits lay the route of De Soto, in Georgia.

De Soto's route, as given by the chroniclers, is represented in the accompanying table. Ranjel is the only safe guide for distances traveled in days, because he is the only one of the chroniclers who always gives the actual number of days of travel and the days lost at each town, village or camp. The others frequently give distances in days that include stops at towns of which no mention is made; therefore, in computing the rate of travel in miles per day, Ranjel's narrative has been used exclusively. Ranjel's account of the expedition has been in print only during the last ten or fifteen years; the older investigators, following the narratives of the other chroniclers, have been misled into reading too great distances into the narratives. Ranjel's spelling of place-names has also been followed throughout, except in quotations. La Vega's account of the expedition is not used, except where his statements are obviously correct, or where corroborated by one or more of the chroniclers.

As will be shown further on, forced marches were made, because

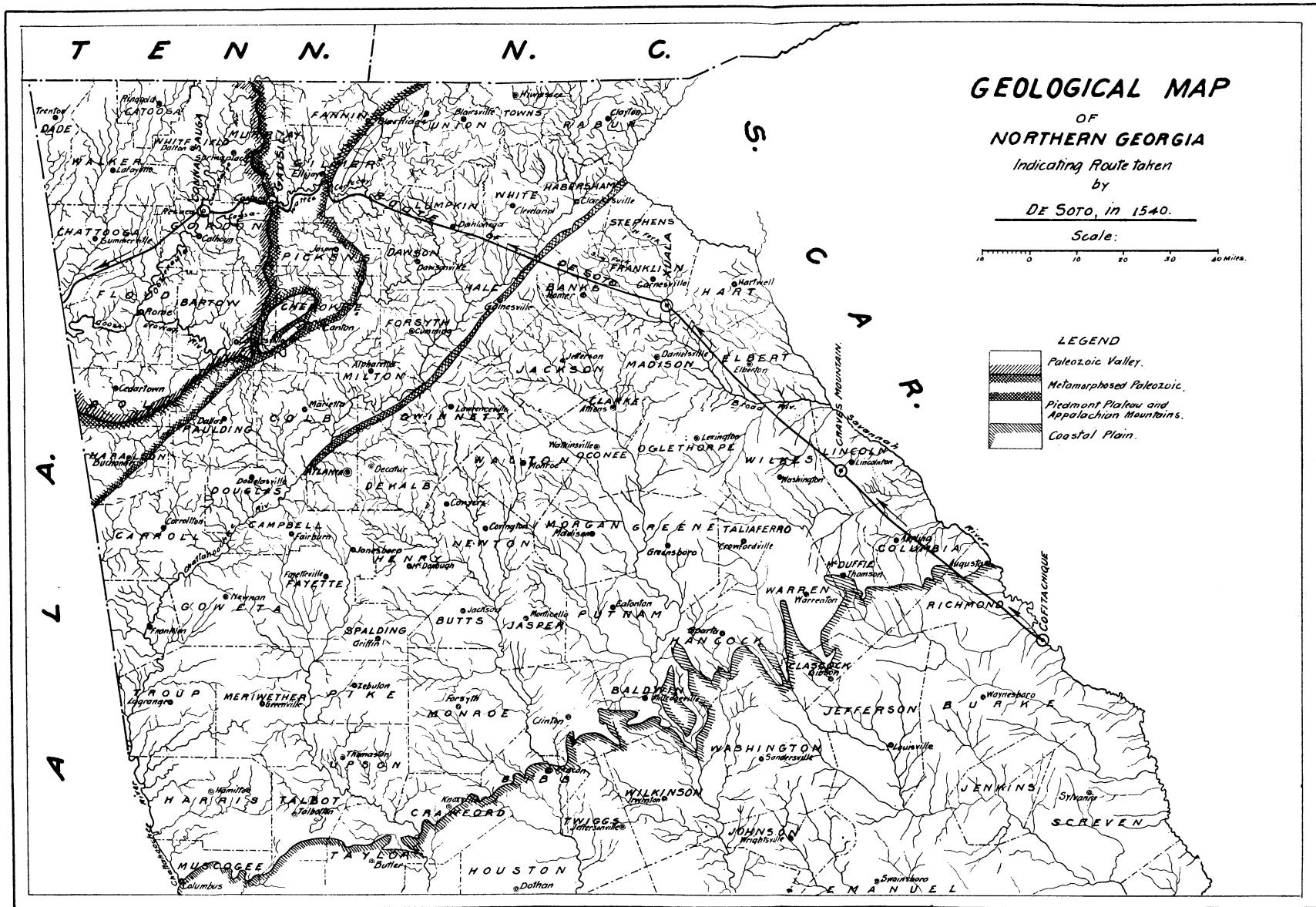


FIG. 6.

of the scarcity of food, from Cofitachequi to Chalaque, from Chalaque to Xuala, and from Xuala to Gausili. An inspection of the table of distances shows that eighteen miles was a day's travel

TABLE

Ranjel		Distance			Biedma	Elvas	La Vega
Name of Town	Location	Days	Miles	Miles per Day	Name of Town	Name of Town	Name of Town
Chalaque . . .	Near Augusta	2	36	18		Chalaque	Chalaques
At mountain	Graves Mt.	1	18	18			
Xuala	N. and S. fork Broad river	4	60	15	Xuala	Xualla	Chovala
Gausili	Carters, on Coosawattee	5	90	18	Gausili	Gausule	Gauchoula
Connasauga.	Near junction Coosawattee	1	10	10		Canasauga	
Chiaha	McCoy's island	4	50	12½	Chiaha	Chiaha	Iciaha
Coste	Woods island	5	40	8	Costehe	Coste	Acosta
Tali	Mouth of Tal- lasahatchee	1	3	3		Tali	
Tasqui	Near mouth of Choccolocco	3	20	7			
Cosa	Near mouth of Talladega Cr.	2	18	9	Cosa	Cosa	Cosa

over this part of the route, except between Graves mountain and Xuala, where the travel was fifteen miles per day. From Gausili to Connasauga food was plentiful, and a day's travel was ten miles. From Connasauga to Chiaha part of the way was mountainous—"through a desert"—therefore more than twelve miles a day were traveled. From Chiaha to Cosa the journey was through a populous country, where food was plentiful, and a day's travel was as follows: From Chiaha to Coste, eight miles; from Coste to Tali, three miles; from Tali to Tasqui, seven miles; from Tasqui to Cosa, nine miles; and, though the rate of travel may not be absolute, it is relative, and the writer considers it strong corroborative evidence of his thesis.

On Wednesday, May 13, 1540, the expedition left Cofitachequi. Ranjel says: ". . . and in two days came to the territory of Chalaque . . . and they bivouacked in a pine wood. . . ."¹

¹ *Narratives of De Soto* (Trailmakers' Series), vol. 2, 1904, p. 102.

The great pine forest that then covered the coastal plain extended fifteen to twenty miles north of the fault line at Augusta, along the Piedmont escarpment, and it was probably in this forest, near Augusta, that the camp was located. On Monday, May 17, the expedition left Chalaque and, according to Ranjel, "spent the night at a mountain."¹ This camp we can locate definitely at Graves mountain, in Lincoln county, because it is the only mountain in that whole section, and is a prominent feature of the landscape for miles around. The older investigators, as has been shown, did not have Ranjel's narrative to guide them and, therefore, missed this well-defined landmark.

To have made the distance from Cofitachequi to Graves mountain in three days, the Spaniards were forced to march between seventeen and eighteen miles a day. We learn, from the narratives, that food along this part of the route was scarce, and they were compelled to make forced marches between points of supply, which were Cofitachequi, Chalaque, Xuala, and Causili. Then, too, they were not encumbered with a large drove of hogs, as many had been killed and eaten before their arrival at Cofitachequi, to save the expedition from starvation.²

After four days' march from Graves mountain they reached Xuala. La Vega says that the expedition marched four to five leagues each day.³ The Spanish league being 2.63 of our statute miles, they therefore marched each day ten and a half to thirteen statute miles. La Vega's statement is probably near the truth, except as to forced marches. On account of the scarcity of food,⁴ they undoubtedly marched rapidly to Xuala, where food was plentiful.⁵ Four days' travel from Graves mountain to Xuala, at fifteen miles per day, would have brought them either to the junction of the north and south forks of the Broad river, in Georgia, or to the junction of the Broad and Hudson rivers, both locations being near together. Ranjel says Xuala "is a village in a plain between two

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

² *Ibid.*, p. 95, *et seq.*

³ *De Soto and Florida*, 1881, p. 374.

⁴ *Narratives of De Soto*, vol. 2, p. 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

MAP OF
GEORGIA & ALABAMA,
 Indicating Route taken by
 DE SOTO, in 1540

Scale
 0 5 10 20 30 40 Miles.

NOTE:
 County Seats shown thus: ○

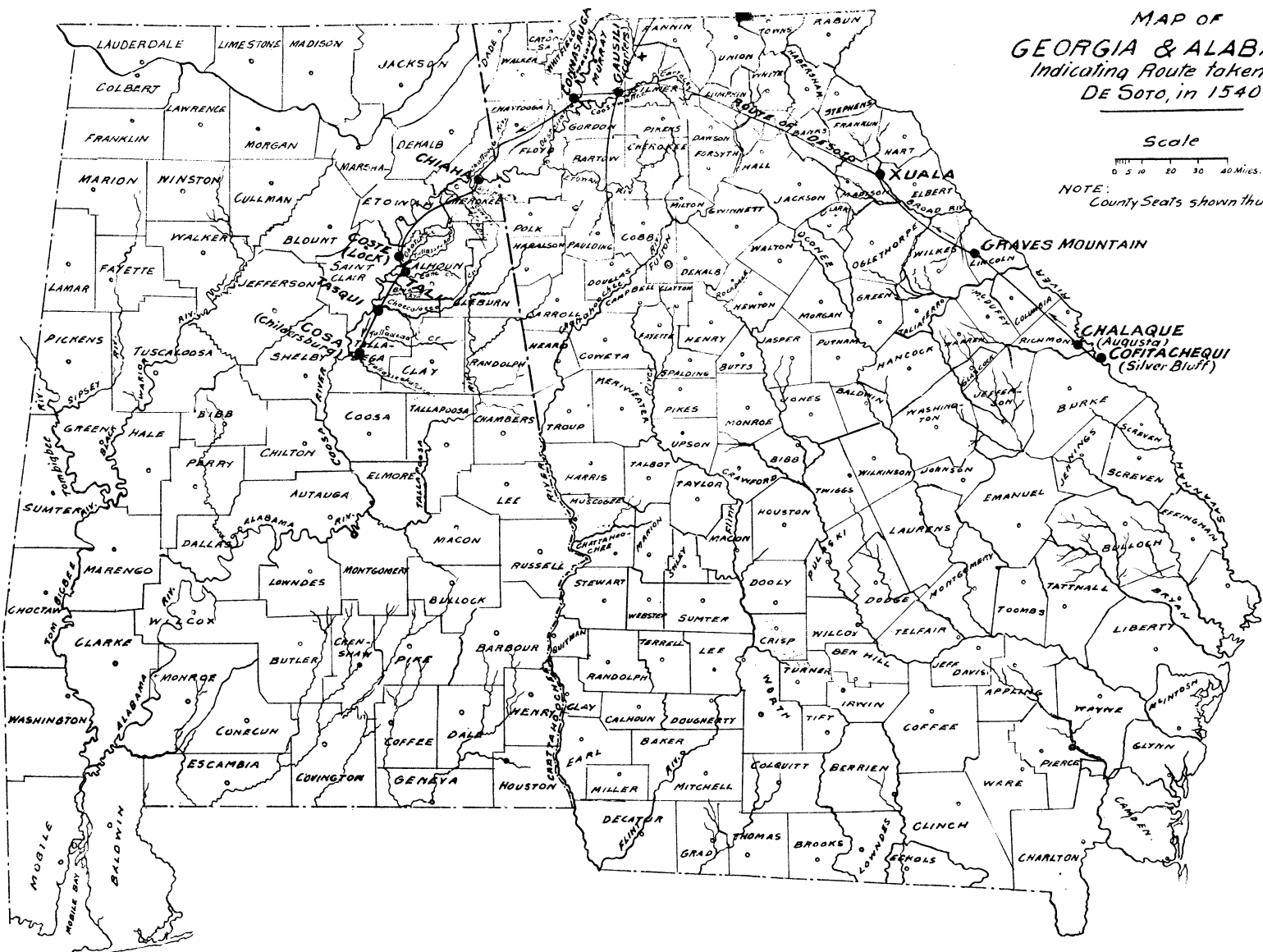


FIG. 7.

ivers.”¹ La Vega says: “Chovala . . . situated between a town and a very rapid little river.”²

Tuesday, May 25, they left Xuala and went over a high range, and the next day they camped in a plain where they suffered from the cold, although it was the 26th of May.³ Elvas says: “From Cutifa to Xualla (is) mountainous country (more correctly, from Chalaque to Xualla); thence to Gauxule the way is over very rough and lofty ridges.”⁴ From Chalaque to Xuala the route was through the Piedmont plateau. The hilly, broken topography of this region Elvas calls mountainous; and, compared with the flat coastal plain through which they had been marching, it could well have appeared mountainous to him, particularly that section in the vicinity of Graves mountain over which they had passed. “The very rough and lofty ridges” from Xuala to Gausili are the Appalachian mountains.

La Vega says: “As soon as they left Chovala (Xuala) they struck straight for the coast and turned in the form of a curve, to arrive at the port of Achussi.”⁵ An inspection of the route, as laid down on the map of Georgia and Alabama, (fig. 7), will show that this statement by La Vega is correct.

The march of five days could have brought them to any point on the arc of a circle shown on the map of Georgia, (fig. 7), drawn with Xuala as a center. Had they reached the northern point, indicated by a cross, on the headwaters of the Connasauga river, they would still have been in the mountains; though, in marching towards the Tennessee river, they would have crossed the Connasauga, which crossing would have tallied with the description of the chronicles. But the insuperable objection to any part of the route being along the Tennessee is that Cosa could not have been reached from Tali in five days, and it would have been necessary to cross Sand mountain; while the accounts of all the chroniclers show plainly that Chiaha, Coste, Tali, and Cosa were all on the same stream, and no mention is made of a mountainous or broken country.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

² *De Soto and Florida*, 1881, p. 367.

³ *Narratives of De Soto*, p. 104.

⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 71.

⁵ *De Soto and Florida*, p. 375.

An inspection of the map shows that the arc of the circle drawn with Xuala as a center cuts the Etowah river, near Cartersville, Georgia. The location of Gausili on this stream must be rejected, because its location there and the subsequent route to Chiaha does not fit the description of the chroniclers at all. Had the route down the Etowah been followed, the site of Chiaha must have been at the present town of Rome, Georgia, and to have reached it by the route described by the chroniclers, the crossing at Connasauga must have been on the Etowah; the route, then, led over the ridge separating the valleys of the Etowah and Oostanaula rivers, thence down the Oostanaula to Chiaha; but the expedition would have entered Chiaha without crossing any stream; whereas, the chroniclers mention the crossing to the town. All the chroniclers say that Chiaha was on an island. The expedition remained at the town for about a month; the members, undoubtedly, explored the country in every direction in search of booty and pleasure; and they could not have mistaken for an island, the peninsula on which Rome is situated. Five days, the time consumed in travel from Chiaha to Coste, as located herein, was too short for the journey, when we consider the populous character of the country along the Coosa, and the abundance of food. We must, therefore, look for another route that fits all the facts as given by the chroniclers.

Let us go back to the 26th of May, when they camped in a plain in the mountains. Ranjel says: "There they crossed the river, wading up to their shins, by which later they were to depart in the brigantines they had made."¹ This stream is either the Cartecay or the Ellijay, probably the former, both tributaries of the Coosawattee river, though Ranjel evidently mistakes it for one of the tributaries of the Mississippi. They remained one day at this place, and the next day, the 28th, they passed the night in an oak grove, and the day following along a large stream, which they crossed many times.² The large stream was the Coosawattee, which they had now reached, and which they followed to Gausili. Further evidence that this stream is the Coosawattee is contained

¹ *Narratives of De Soto*, vol. 2, p. 104.

² *Ibid.*, p. 106.

in Ranjel's words, "which they crossed many times." The Coosawattee, until it reaches Carters, the site of Gausili, flows through a gorge in the mountains; at numerous places, on such a stream, the way is barred, on one side or the other, by projecting bluffs and cliffs, and, in order to pass these obstructions, the expedition had to cross the stream "many times."

The site of Gausili is at or near Carters, in Murray county, Georgia, where the Coosawattee emerges from the mountains, and is indicated on the map. The writer has stood on the deck of a steamboat, at Carters, and watched the river come tumbling down out of the mountains within a few hundred yards of where he was standing.

Elvas says: "He left Gausili and, after two days' travel, arrived at Conasauga. . . . Leaving Conasauga, he marched five days through a desert."¹ Desert, as used by the chroniclers, means the absence of villages where food could be procured. From Carters (Gausili) to the crossing of the Connasauga, the remains of village sites are plentiful, and it will be observed that this part of the route is not called a desert; but the route from the Connasauga to Rome, down the Oostanaula, is also marked by the sites of many villages, and had the expedition taken this route, there would have been no mention of a desert. Ranjel says: ". . . and, since all the way from Xuala (to Chiaha) had been mountainous, and the horses were tired and thin, and the Christians were also themselves worn out, it seemed best to tarry there (at Chiaha) and rest themselves."² Now, had they marched down the Coosawattee and Oostanaula rivers, from Carters (Gausili) to Rome, the route could not have been called mountainous, because these rivers flow through a beautiful valley. Ranjel says, further: "The next day, Thursday, they went along a large stream, near the river which they had crossed in the plain where the woman chief went off. It was now very large."³ Now, if we turn to the route from Connasauga to the Chattooga river, and down that stream to Chiaha, the

¹ *Narratives of De Soto*, vol. 1, pp. 72-73.

² *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 107.

³ *Narratives of De Soto*, vol. 2, p. 106.

mystery is cleared and the route fits the description exactly. Ranjel says: "Monday, which was the last day of May, the Governor left Gausili and came with his army to an oak wood along the river, and the next day they crossed by Connasauga, and at night they slept in the open country."¹ It will be seen that De Soto "came with his army to an oak wood along *the* river," not along a river; therefore, they followed the Coosawattee to Connasauga and there left the river; because, the night following, "they slept in the open country," which means that there was no village at which they could camp; had they followed the river, villages would have been plentiful.

From Connasauga to the Chattooga river, the expedition had to cross Lavender mountain and other ridges in an uninhabited or sparsely settled country. This is Elvas' "desert" and part of Ranjel's "mountainous way." An inspection of the map of Georgia and Alabama shows that, as they approached the Coosa river along the Chattooga, the route fits exactly the description as given by Ranjel, quoted above, when he says: ". . . they went along a large stream, near the river which they had crossed in the plain. . . ."

At the point where the Coosa and the Chattooga rivers approach each other, there is a large island, near Cedar bluff, in Cherokee county, Alabama, known as McCoy's island, the largest in the Coosa above Ten Islands shoals, and on this island was probably situated Chiaha, that illusive site that has puzzled investigators for so many years. The time from Gausili to Chiaha, six days, was ample in which to make the journey.

Another significant statement, by Ranjel, points to McCoy's island as the site of Chiaha. He says: "The next day, Saturday, the Spaniards crossed one arm of the river, which was very broad, and went into Chiaha, which is on an island in the same river."² Now, there are three large islands in this vicinity, but all are near the west, or right bank, except McCoy's island, which is near the east, or left bank; therefore, to reach it, the Spaniards had to cross

¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 106.

² *Narratives of De Soto*, vol. 2, p. 107.

the arm "which was very broad." No such statement could apply to the western crossings to the other islands nearby.

McCoy's island is three thousand feet long and five hundred feet wide at the widest part. We must remember, however, that we are dealing with a description written nearly four hundred years ago, and since that time the island could have changed greatly. For example, the eastern or smaller branch of the river could have moved to the westward—such movements frequently occur—and thus have reduced the size of the island to such an extent that the site of Chiaha may now be wholly or partly on the eastern mainland.

Why did De Soto select this route to Chiaha, instead of that through the populous section bordering the Oostanaula and Coosa rivers? Because the latter was longer, and not in the direction he was at that time traveling to reach the coast. He had, also, been informed that food was plentiful at Chiaha, which proved to be true, and he decided to push forward by the shortest practicable route, which was the Indian trail between Gausili and Chiaha, part of the way along the Chattooga river. The route has been indicated, in a general way, on the map.

Monday, June 28, 1540, the expedition left Chiaha. The next morning "they had much labor crossing a river which flowed with a strong current."¹ This is Spring creek, which was probably swollen by rains that so frequently occur in this region in June and July. "Wednesday they passed over a river and through a village and again over the river and slept in the open country."² The first crossing was probably a branch of Terrapin creek; the second, Terrapin creek itself.

Five days after leaving Chiaha they reached Coste. The site of this town is at the head of Woods island, a large island in the Ten Islands shoals, containing about one hundred and eighty acres. Lock, Saint Clair county, Alabama, is near its lower end. There are evidences of a large town site near the head of the island, and many aboriginal objects have been found there; and, as yet, the surface only has been touched.

¹ *Narratives of De Soto* vol. 2, p. 108.

² *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 109.

Now, for the proof that this is the site of Coste. It is just the right distance from Chiaha to have been reached in five days' travel, and this is the time given by Ranjel; it is the only large island between McCoy's and Densen's islands, the latter being twenty-two miles below. The distance from Chiaha to Densen's island is too great for five days' travel, now that the expedition was in a populous country where food was plentiful, and the table of distances shows they traveled leisurely through it. There was an Indian ford across the river at this island that was used by the early white settlers; and the writer, himself, has forded the river there, and can testify to the roughness of the bottom and the swiftness of the current. Now, hear what Ranjel has to say of this crossing, and it will be seen that his description fits exactly the conditions existing there at this day. "This village was on an island in the river, which there flows large, swift and hard to enter. And the Christians crossed the first branch with no danger to any of the soldiers, yet it was no small venture."¹ In other words, it was not a dangerous crossing; but, on account of the width (the branch they crossed being one-quarter mile wide), the swiftness of the current, and the roughness of the bottom, "it was no small venture." For "hard to enter," read "difficult of approach." The river bank at this old Indian ford is low, and the river itself is not "hard to enter"; but the approach is through a rugged, broken country, intersected in every direction by ravines and complicated with numerous outcroppings of rock ledges. "Difficult of approach" is undoubtedly the meaning of Ranjel's words.

The western arm or branch of the river is a narrow, shallow, insignificant stream, and, on leaving the island, the expedition crossed it to the west bank of the river. Ranjel says of the crossing: "Friday, July 9, the commander and his army departed from Coste and crossed the other branch of the river."² No mention is made of any difficulty in making this crossing; therefore, the "other branch of the river" was the narrow, western arm.

They passed the night on the west bank, and Ranjel says: "On

¹ *Narratives of De Soto*, vol. 2, p. 109.

² *Narratives of De Soto*, vol. 2, p. III.

the other side was Tali."¹ Elvas says: "The Christians left Coste the ninth day of July, and slept that night at Tali."² Ranjel declares that De Soto forced the Indians to take them across the river to Tali in canoes.³ Only part of one day was consumed in travel from Coste to Tali, and it is, therefore, probable that Tali was situated at the mouth of upper Tallasahatchee creek, about one mile below the crossing of the Seaboard Air Line Railway, near Lock, Saint Clair county, Alabama, and opposite the site of Fort Strother, one of General Jackson's bases on the Coosa river, during the Creek Indian War of 1812-1814.

We are now in a position to follow De Soto's course to Cosa from Chiaha. At the latter place he crossed to the east bank of the Coosa river, marched down that bank to Coste, then crossed to the west bank; marched part of one day down that bank; crossed again to the east bank at Tali; and continued down near the east bank to Cosa, where he left the river. The expedition left Tali Sunday afternoon, July 11, or Monday morning, July 12. "Monday they crossed a river and slept in the open country; Tuesday they crossed another river, and Wednesday another large river and slept at Tasqui."⁴ The "rivers" they crossed Monday and Tuesday are Cane and Blue-eye creeks, in Talladega county, that enter the Coosa river between Ten Islands shoals and Choccolocco shoals. The "large river" they crossed Wednesday is Choccolocco creek, and the site of Tasqui is on the left bank of that large stream, in Talladega county, about one mile above its junction with the Coosa river, at the "Dickinson Mill Site," in Sec. 14, T. 17 S., R. 4 E., Huntsville Meridian.

Choccolocco creek would be called a river in any other state than Alabama. Its width at the place of De Soto's crossing is two hundred feet; its depth varies from a few feet on shoals to fifteen or twenty feet in pools. There is no other stream emptying into the Coosa river, on either side between Tali and Cosa, that

¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. III.

² *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 80.

³ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. III.

⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. III.

could be called a "large river," even by the De Soto chroniclers, who named all streams rivers. Choccolocco creek is, therefore, the "large river" referred to by Ranjel.

It is clear, from the accounts given in the De Soto narratives, that the expedition marched down the Coosa river from Chiaha to Coste and Tali. Elvas says: "Then taking the Chief (of Coste) by the hand, speaking to him with kind words, drew him with some principal men away from the town. . . . He told them that they could not go thence . . . until the sick men arrived whom he had ordered to come down the river in canoes from Chiaha."¹ Biedma says: "We left, following along the banks of the river, and came to another province, called Costehe."²

From Tali to Cosa they had to follow along the general course of the Coosa, though none of the narratives, nor does La Vega, mention such a stream. Along this part of the route villages were plentiful on the numerous creeks, and the route away from the river was more direct, and probably along the trail followed by the Indians. An examination of the United States Geological topographical maps, a list of which is given at the end of this paper, will give a much clearer idea of this part of the route than can be gotten from an inspection of the small-scale map herein (fig. 7).

On Friday, July 16, 1540,³ the expedition entered Cosa. The chief, borne on a litter and surrounded by his retainers, came out to welcome De Soto. Even among savages, the rigid rules of court etiquette must be observed. La Vega says the Indians had habiliments of marten skins, which were fragrant.⁴ The fragrance of the skunk did not appear to discommode the Indian wearers,—nor the Spaniards, as for that matter, for only passing mention is made of the circumstance.

In 1915, the writer visited the site of Cosa, and walked from the mouth of Talladega creek to the mouth of Tallasahatchee creek, a distance of one mile. The site of the village is in Talladega

¹ *Narratives of De Soto* vol. 1, p. 79.

² *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 15.

³ *Narratives of De Soto* vol. 1, p. 81; vol. 2, p. 112.

⁴ *De Soto and Florida*, p. 374.

county, about three-quarters of a mile from the Coosa river, on Talladega creek, in Sec. 8, T. 20 S., R. 3 E., Huntsville Meridian, and about two miles above Childersburg, Alabama. At the mouth of the creek a ferry road has cut deep into the bank, thus exposing shell heaps buried some two feet under the surface. The depth of the shellheaps below the surface goes to show that the site is an ancient one.

It is a beautiful country, in the vicinity of old Cosa, and in the sixteenth century, covered as it was then with a grand forest of hardwoods, it must have been "good to look upon," and one can understand the pleasure it excited in the chroniclers.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: MAPS OF THE U. S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

GEORGIA-SOUTH CAROLINA. Carnesville Sheet.

(Franklin county, Ga., north and south forks of the Broad river, in Georgia, junction of the Hudson river with the Broad, and probable site of Xuala.)

GEORGIA-NORTH CAROLINA-TENNESSEE. Ellijay Quadrangle.

(Cartecay and Ellijay rivers, and their junction to form the Coosawattee.)

GEORGIA-TENNESSEE. Dalton Sheet.

(Carters, Gausili, Murray county, Ga. The Coosawattee and Conasauga rivers.)

GEORGIA-ALABAMA. Rome Quadrangle.

(The mountainous country, Elvas' "desert," between the Conasauga and Chattooga rivers.)

ALABAMA. Fort Payne Sheet.

(Coosa and Chattooga rivers; McCoy's Island, site of Chiaha, near McClelland's ferry; Spring and Terrapin creeks.)

ALABAMA. Springville Sheet.

(Continuation of the Coosa river; site of Coste, on Wood's island, near Lock Three; Tali at Francis' ferry; Tasqui, one mile above mouth of Choccolocco creek.)

ALABAMA. Talladega Sheet.

(Continuation of the Coosa river; site of Cosa about three-quarters of a mile above the mouth of Talladega creek.)