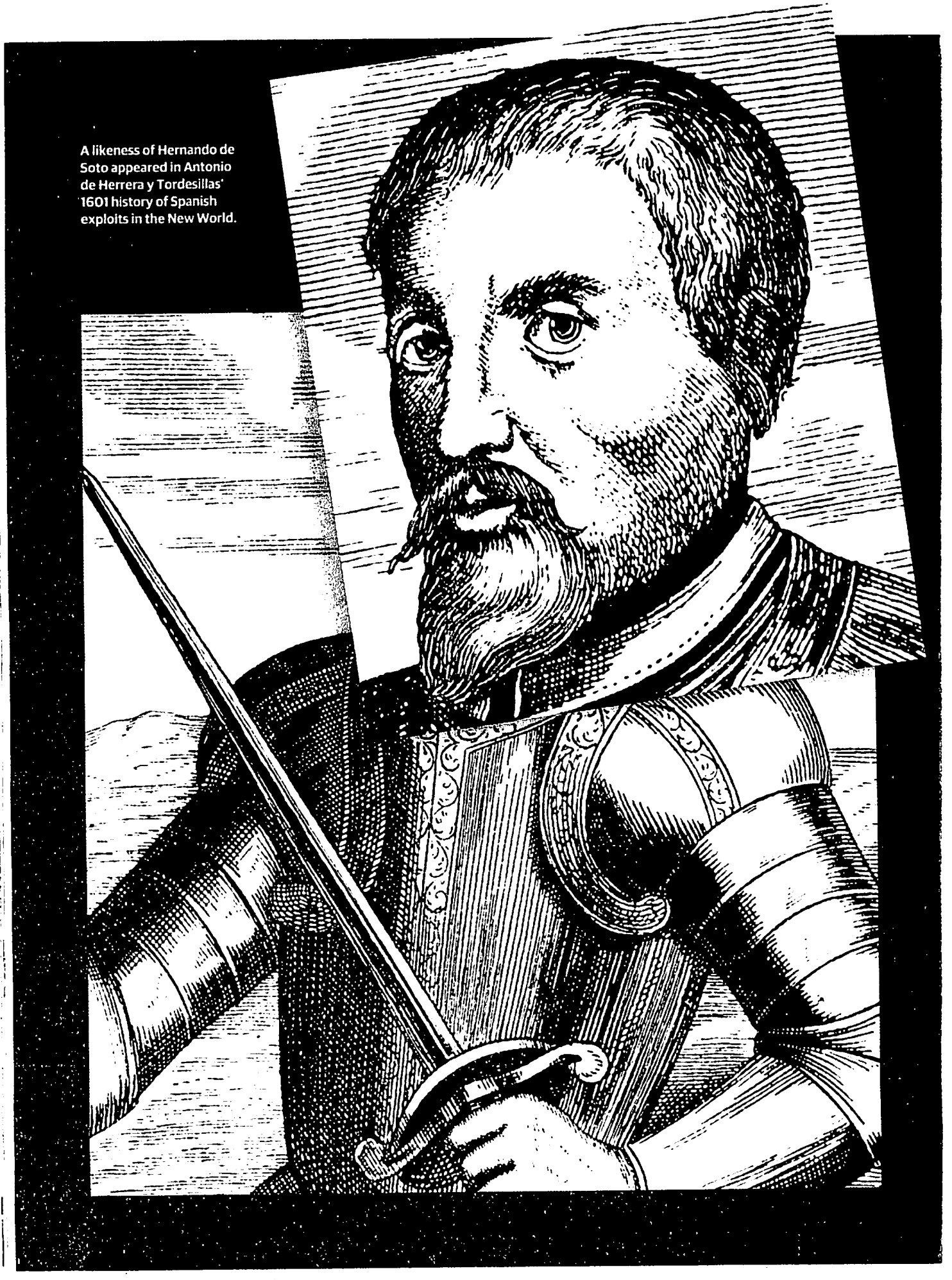


A likeness of Hernando de Soto appeared in Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas' 1601 history of Spanish exploits in the New World.

Mind of a Conquistador

What made Hernando de Soto think he could conquer thousands of Indians with just a small band of men?

By **David Ewing Duncan**

ON A COOL OCTOBER MORNING IN 1540, the Spanish conquistador Hernando de Soto rode into Mabila, a walled town in what is now central Alabama. Short and muscular, with a clipped beard and dark eyes, de Soto was resplendent in his Renaissance armor and bristling with self-confidence. A year earlier he had embarked from Cuba carrying a writ from King Charles I of Spain and ruler of the Holy Roman Empire, to conquer *La Florida*, which is what the Spaniards called the southeastern region of North America. Since then his small army of 650 men, equipped with 240 horses, steel swords, lances, crossbows and harquebus muskets, had cut a 2,000-mile swath through several pre-Columbian kingdoms of Indians ruled by powerful chieftains who fielded bands of warriors that often numbered in the thousands. The mere sight of de Soto's heavily armed cavalry and foot soldiers was enough to cow many of these native warriors and prompt them to lay down their longbows and spears. Even the chieftain Tascalusa, whom one of the expedition chroniclers described as "lord of many lands and many peoples," surrendered without a fight and was now being carted in chains to Mabila. There he promised to provide food, women and servants to de Soto and his men.

De Soto was the quintessential conquistador—a fearless risk taker who relentlessly pursued wealth, fame and glory even when the odds seemed overwhelmingly against him. His addiction to victory in the 25 years since arriving in the Americas had fueled his success as a treasure hunter and warrior, but also would result in his downfall. The same mindset was shared by two of de Soto's Spanish contemporaries: Hernán Cortés, the conqueror of the Aztecs in Mexico, who died discredited and deeply in debt after self-financing too many failed expeditions; and Francisco Pizarro, the conqueror of the Incan Empire in Peru, who was eventually assassinated by a young rival. Other famous conquerors who refused to quit while they were ahead include Alexander the Great, Napoleon and Hitler. Like de Soto, each ignored the wisdom of consolidating his gains, and each was eventually crushed by his enemies or failed to establish a lasting empire. Even today we can see the avaricious overreaching of modern conquistadors on Wall Street and in the political arena—people with enormous intelligence, talent and bravado who try to parley one success into another and then another, until their arrogant obliviousness to danger results in catastrophe.

When de Soto rode into Mabila with a small advance guard from his army, he was confident that he was in complete command of the situation, with the local chieftain, Tascalusa, in shackles, on a packhorse at his side. It never occurred to him that Tascalusa was luring him into a trap. Instead of enjoying a few days rest, the Spaniards would soon find themselves engaged in one of the bloodiest battles ever fought between American Indians and Europeans. The battle marked the beginning of the end of his remarkable string of triumphs as a conquistador.

BY THE TIME he set out to conquer *La Florida* de Soto had already achieved outsized success in the Spanish *conquista* of the New World. This gave him a potent sense of invincibility, while also spurring him on to ever-greater risks and, he assumed, more triumphs.

From the outset, he was driven by an insatiable ambition. Born in the bleak hills of Extremadura in western

De Soto's men torture and kill Florida natives in a 1595 engraving by Theodore de Bry of Liège. De Bry and other 16th-century Protestant artists relished showing brutality perpetrated by Catholic Spaniards.

Spain, probably in 1500, as the son of an impoverished lesser noble, de Soto believed with utter certainty in his own superiority as a Spaniard, a Christian and a warrior. In part this came from Spain's recent victory over the Islamic Moors after nearly eight centuries of warfare, a signal event that unleashed legions of young Spaniards eager to seek wealth and glory through the conquest of other infidels in the Americas. Leaving home at age 14, de Soto rose rapidly even as a teenager in Panama, Spain's first mainland colony. By age 19 he was a *capitán*, having saved a Spanish squadron from ambush by mounting a surprise charge against a larger native army. Before long de Soto began to amass a personal fortune from his share of plunder and estates, and from trading slaves.

De Soto also mastered the *conquista* strategy of systematic ruthlessness to crush and subdue the natives he encountered. The 16th-century historian Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo chronicled the savage tendencies of the Spanish invaders as they fanned out in search of gold and silver as well as slaves to carry their booty and supplies. Oviedo called the early years of Panama under Governor Pedrarias Dávila the *montería infernal*, the "monstrous hunting." He said the young de Soto had been "instructed in the school of Pedrarias Dávila in the dissipation and devastation of the Indians" and "was very occupied in the hunt to kill Indians." Time and again, de Soto gave locals he had subdued two choices: Surrender and provide his army with food and scores of servants to carry their gear or face annihilation. Those who surrendered, however, didn't fare much better than those who fought back. Enslaved servants typically died from mistreatment within a few weeks, and the settlements where they were seized were devastated by the loss of able-bodied young men and women and critical food stores as well as the execution or public humiliation of rulers and religious leaders.

Counterposed with de Soto's brutal treatment of Indians was his ability to command the loyalty of his soldiers. In his 20s he played an important role in the conquest of Nicaragua, where he became a wealthy

De Soto mastered the conquista strategy of systematic ruthlessness to subdue natives

landowner and the leader of a powerful faction of men in the fractious politics of that embryonic Spanish colony. In 1531 he joined Pizarro's expeditionary force in Peru, bringing 100 of his own men from Nicaragua and serving as a strategist and captain of the vanguard in the Spanish conquest of the Incas. The loyalty of his men during the Peruvian campaign provided de Soto a strong base for his ambition as he maneuvered for political advantage over Pizarro and his brothers. This obviously caused friction during the invasion, although the Pizarros needed the headstrong young captain and his men to prevail.

In particular they depended on a tactic de Soto had perfected as a teenager in Panama that became devastatingly effective in Peru: speed and surprise. No one in the *conquista* had mastered the art of the quick and decisive thrust into the midst of an Indian band of warriors like de Soto. He did this countless times during the Inca campaign, leading a few dozen men on horseback far ahead of Pizarro's main army to rush past Incan sentries and guards who were on foot—the New World had no horses yet—moving so swiftly that the invaders could rush the headquarters of Inca generals and commanders and kill or capture them before their forces could be rallied.

Spanish coins unearthed by recent Florida hurricanes date to the time of de Soto.

Above all, de Soto's success as a conquistador was rooted in the same absolute belief in himself that he had brought with him from Spain. The best example of his towering self-confidence was the cunning manner in which he helped engineer the defeat of Inca Emperor Atahualpa. In 1532, de Soto and Pizarro led 168 Spaniards into the heart of an imperial army. They invited Atahualpa to dinner in the Andes resort town of Cajamarca, a walled city provided for the Spaniards by the Incas, and then captured the emperor in a surprise attack on his royal guard.

The Spanish held Atahualpa captive in Cajamarca for months while his subjects paid a ransom by filling a room once with gold and twice with silver. Pizarro then put the emperor to death, violating his agreement to free him once the ransom was paid, an act that de Soto opposed and that King Charles in Spain later condemned. Spearheaded by de Soto's daring thrusts forward, the expeditionary force subsequently launched a successful campaign to capture Cuzco, the Incan capital, which was taken with just a few hundred men. In 1536, when the Inca campaign was over and de Soto had a falling out with the Pizarros, he returned triumphant to Spain, needing nine ships to carry all his gold and silver. He was 36.

DE SOTO'S FATAL WEAKNESS was that he was not content with his success. He had heard rumors of fabulous wealth and great cities in the territory of *La Florida*, wild stories told by formerly shipwrecked Spaniards and others. So he set out in 1539 on the quest that proved to be his ruin.

The stories of sophisticated inland cities in *La Florida* turned out to be true. The Indians de Soto encountered as he made his way north were collectively known as the Mississippians. Dominating river valleys from the Gulf of Mexico to the Carolinas and Illinois, they had established settlements with up to several thousand people, a size comparable to all but the largest cities in Europe at the time. Over several centuries the Mississippians had developed a civilization that included a complex religion; highly developed agriculture, artistry and building; trade routes as far away as the Aztec Empire in southern Mexico; and a hierarchy of rulers, priests, merchants and artisans.

Yet these Mississippian polities were no match for de Soto and his small army. Once they had plunged into the interior, the Spaniards consistently overwhelmed the bands of native warriors they encountered, winning as much with their shrewd tactics and bravado as with their advanced weaponry. One of de Soto's most successful gambits was to take powerful chieftains hostage to gain passage through hostile territory. But he underestimated the wiliness of one proud Mississippian king. Tascalusa knew de Soto was coming and had decided to fight. He may even have formed a loose alliance with nearby kingdoms to fight the Spaniards. He realized, however, that it would be suicidal to attack de Soto directly, so he devised a strategy of deceit and surprise.

The plan unfolded when de Soto arrived in Tascalusa's capital of Atahachi in central Alabama. Expedition chroniclers describe the king as greeting the Spaniards from a balcony built into an earthen mound, surrounded by servants, including one who held a large, dyed deerskin parasol above the king that a witness described as looking like taffeta, "the colors were so perfect." This

OCALA STAR-BANNER/LANDOV. OPPOSITE: HIP/ART RESOURCE, NY

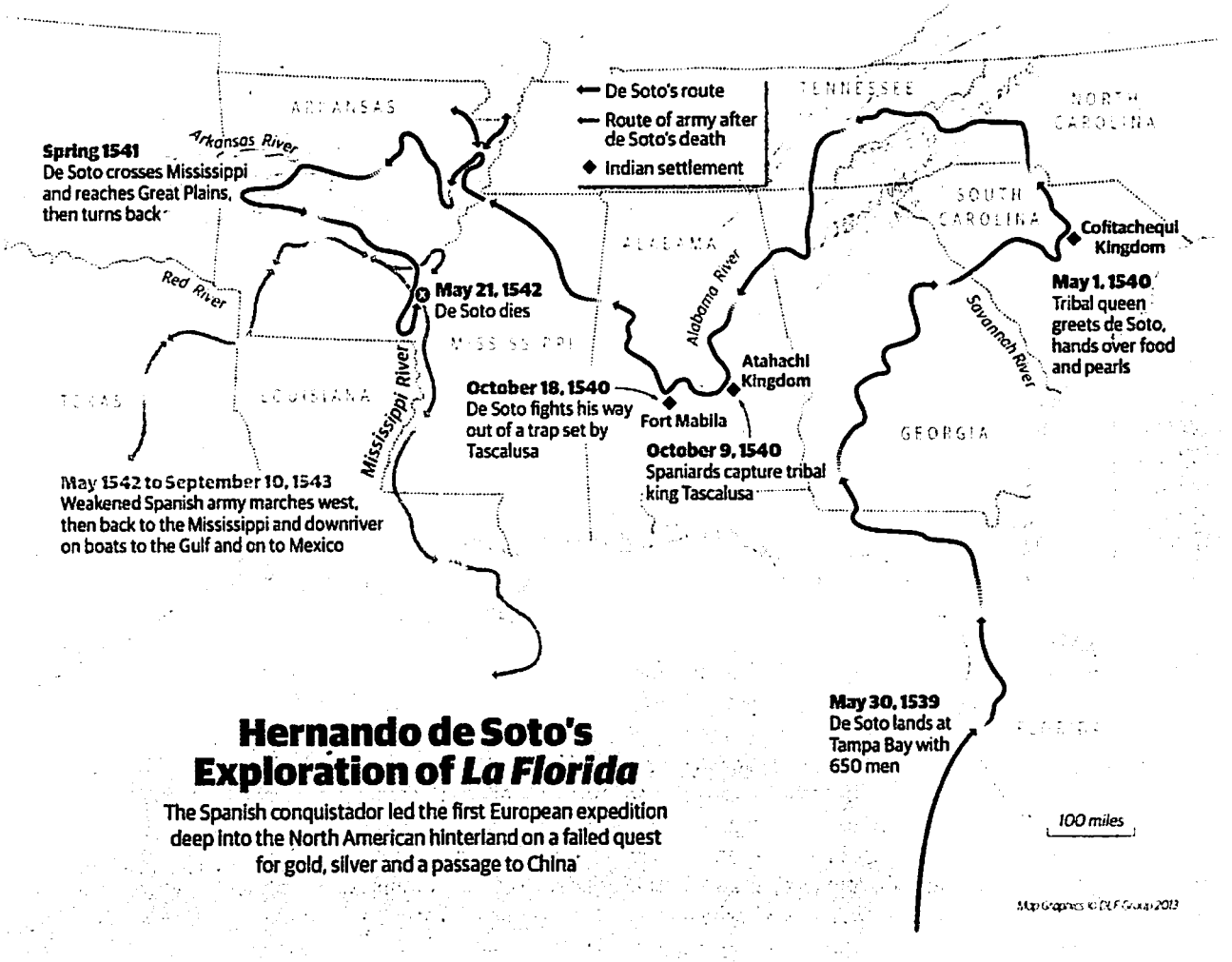
same witness said that Tascalusa was "greatly feared by his neighbors and vassals." Despite a peaceful welcome, de Soto seized the king as a guarantee that servants and supplies would be delivered to the army as promised at Mabila. He then took Tascalusa to Mabila with a vanguard force while the main Spanish army dawdled in the countryside. At one point during the march, scouts got word to de Soto that native warriors seemed to be massing at Mabila. He ignored the warning.

On October 18, 1540, de Soto and his advance group entered Mabila with Tascalusa for a morning of relaxation and revelry. A few hours later a long line of native servants arrived with the expedition's stash of weapons and equipment. Most of the army lingered behind.

That afternoon, the natives launched an ambush. Warriors hiding in wooden houses and other structures burst out and attacked de Soto and his group. Incredibly, most of the Spaniards survived and fought their way out of the town, where the alarm was sent out to the main army. As de Soto waited for his troops to come forward, the native servants broke free and carried the Spaniards' extra weapons and gear into Mabila. Tascalusa's men pulled apart de Soto's packs and triumphantly waved clothes and swords from the tops of their ramparts.

Once de Soto's main army was mustered, he attacked Mabila from four sides. For the rest of the day and into the night, his troops and the Indians fought a fierce battle. In the end the Spaniards prevailed by breaching the town's wood-and-daub walls and setting the buildings inside on fire. The conflagration killed hundreds of defenders, including Tascalusa.

IT WAS A PYRRHIC VICTORY. Some 25 Spaniards died and dozens were wounded, but more ruinous was the loss of the expedition's gear—weapons, helmets, lances, saddles, tents and clothing, without which the army's effectiveness would be greatly diminished. The flames also consumed a stash of freshwater pearls the soldiers had seized in the Carolinas—the only treasure they had discovered in *La Florida*. De



Hernando de Soto's Exploration of *La Florida*

The Spanish conquistador led the first European expedition deep into the North American hinterland on a failed quest for gold, silver and a passage to China

Soto made things worse because of his stubborn unwillingness to connect with a Spanish fleet then at anchor in nearby Mobile Bay. More than a year earlier de Soto had ordered the captain of the fleet that conveyed them from Cuba to return to the mainland and meet the expedition off the coast of Alabama. A prudent leader would have rendezvoused with this fleet and gone back to the expedition's base in Cuba to spend the winter and returned in the spring with a fresh and reequipped army. But de Soto was just the opposite—proud and rash.

Mortified that he had little treasure to show for all his troubles since landing in *La Florida*, de Soto opted to bivouac near Mabila for the winter and then press on into the interior. He spent the next two years leading his increasingly desperate expedition across another 1,500 miles, marching west to the shore of the Mississippi River, which he crossed in the spring of 1541. De Soto then pushed his army on to the eastern edge of the Great Plains. When he realized that he'd left Mississippian territory, where he thought he was most likely to find gold, he doubled back to the Mississippi River. Along the way he fought a battle with a kingdom called the Chicasa in western Mississippi and suffered through another fire that burned what remained of his army's gear.

By April the next year, the expedition was encamped on the Mississippi River just south of the Arkansas River confluence. De Soto was seriously ill with fever and faced another powerful coalition of Mississippians massing to attack from land and from large war canoes on the river. Though he was near death and his army was in tatters, de Soto had lost none of his arrogance. He demanded that the natives surrender, declaring himself a god—"the son of the sun." The local chieftain reacted with disdain, challenging de Soto to "dry up the great river." But de Soto's worsening condition prevented any response; he died soon after, on May 21. His men stuffed his body into a hollow tree and secretly dumped it in the river so the Indians wouldn't know that the supposed god had perished.

After another year of fighting and privation, 311 survivors of de Soto's army built seven medium-sized sailing vessels to make their way down the Mississippi and into the Gulf of Mexico. Finally reaching northern Mexico in September 1543, they stunned residents of a small Spanish settlement when they revealed that they were members of an expedition everyone had given up for lost.

De Soto's obsessive desire to achieve ever more victories, and his quixotic quest for more gold, had not only doomed his expedition but also played a role in the apocalyptic collapse of the Mississippian culture. De Soto's brutal tactics, including the murder or emasculation of leaders with the knowledge and authority to maintain the culture, added to the chaos in kingdoms that in the following decades were decimated by disease and probably famine. Exactly how the cultural apocalypse unfolded remains largely a mystery, because the Mississippians had no written language. However, by the time British and French settlers arrived more than a century later, descendants of these once proud kingdoms had abandoned their towns and farmland as well as the great earthen mounds that had been built in the South and upper Midwest for religious ceremonies and housing for the elites. These scattered peoples could only conjure dim memories of their illustrious past.

The pigs de Soto brought to America are descendants of the Eurasian wild boar. With offspring in at least 39 states, the wild pig is officially recognized as an invasive species.

Legacy of Destruction

There were no pigs in North America before de Soto set out to conquer *La Florida*. He brought along a small herd of swine, mainly as an emergency food supply for his men. Some were traded with natives and others escaped into the wild, where they spawned an ever-growing population of feral hogs. And, like de Soto and his men, these hogs wreak havoc wherever they go. U.S. agricultural officials estimate that there are 4 million wild hogs in America, concentrated in the South, that devour crops, spread disease, destroy plants and drive off other wildlife. It's fitting that the Spanish explorer died in what today is Arkansas, where the state university sports teams are called the Razorbacks—an Americanized term for wild boars.

David Ewing Duncan is the author of Hernando de Soto: A Savage Quest in the Americas.